

A WALK THROUGH DOWNTOWN

PROVIDENCE

SASHA PINTO

STORIES OF SELECTED
HISTORIC BUILDINGS





ARCHEOLOGY OF COLLEGE HILL

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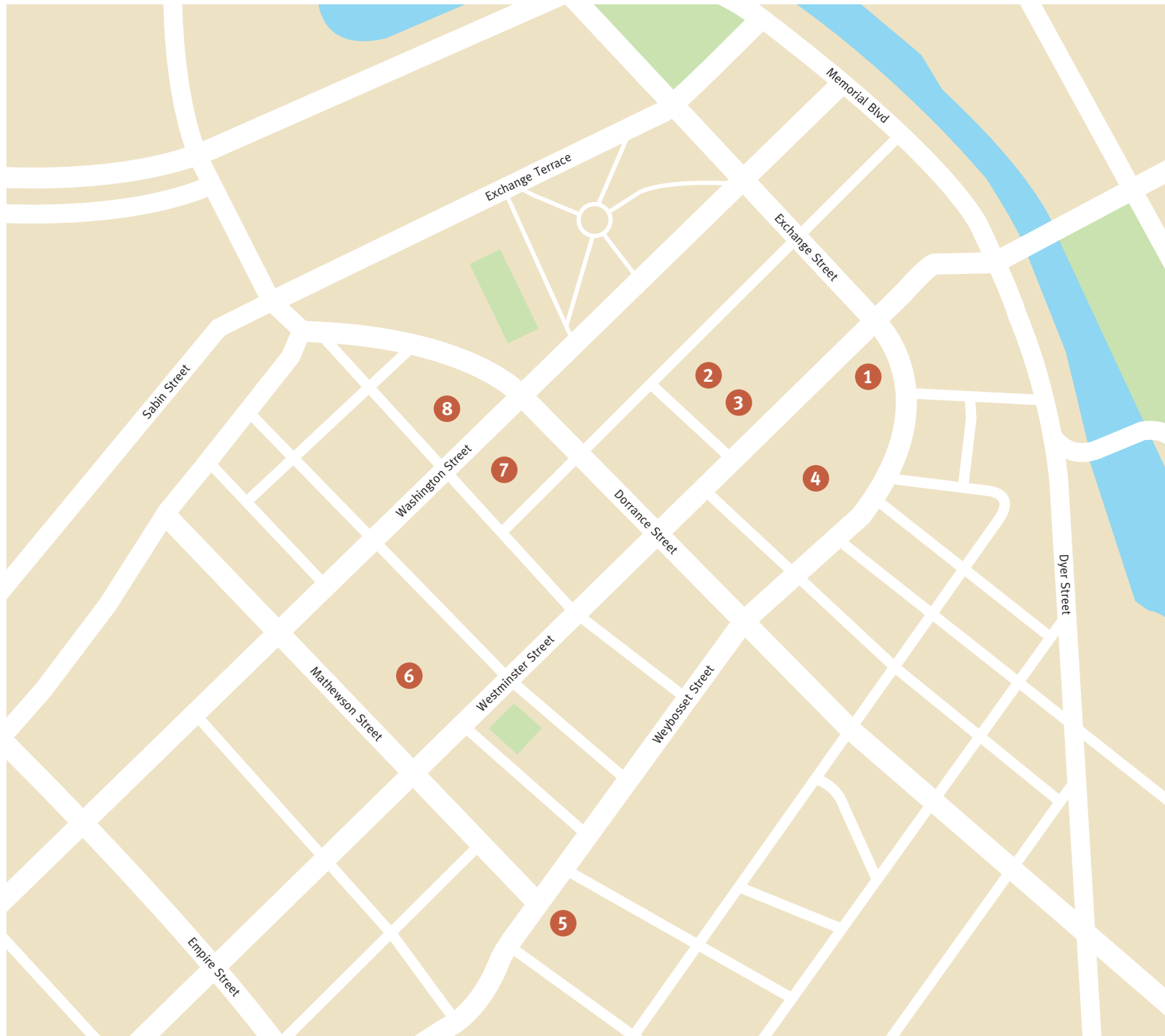
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PROVIDENCE

RHODE ISLAND

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Early lithograph showing an empty neighborhood. Courtesy of the RI Historical Society

The Arcade

DATE OF COMPLETION: 1828

65 WEYBOSSET STREET & 130 WESTMINSTER STREET

The Providence Arcade was ahead of its time. In 1828, it was the first major commercial building to venture across the Providence River. It was also the third glass arcade ever erected in the country—the others being New York and Philadelphia—and the only arcade of the four built to survive. It was once also one of Providence's most endangered buildings that today serves as a shining example of a historic building given new life after sitting vacant for years. So, how did it happen?

Cyrus Butler, the original builder and proprietor of the Arcade in 1828 (in conjunction with the Arcade Corporation) was a wealthy merchant, philanthropist, and owner of the famous barque *George and William* that “did an immense business in the Russian trade...going South and load with cotton for Russia, bringing linen, salt petre, iron, hemp and canvas duck” (Bayles).

After a fire destroyed 40 shops on South Water Street in 1801, Butler made a commercial venture and speculated on the construction of an elaborate shopping Arcade located some distance from Market Square and the popular “Cheapside” shopping district along North Main Street.

The architects designing the structure, Russel Warren and James Bucklin, gave the Arcade the appearance of a monumental Greek temple, in the style of the European glassed-roof arcades that were popular in London at the Burlington Arcade (1818) and in Paris. The Providence Arcade was essentially a long, indoor glassed street, spanning the block between Westminster Street and Weybosset Street; a wide central walkway ran through the center of the building with a great



Weybosset Street facade with simple parapet. Courtesy of Providence Public Library

skylight overhead admitting a flood of light over the building's gracious cast iron balustrades and railings.

At the exterior street sides of the Arcade, six colossal Ionic columns, three feet in diameter and over twenty feet high, supported a simple parapet attributed to Bucklin on the Weybosset side, and an austere pediment by Warren on the West-minster side. Teams of oxen dragged each column five miles from a quarry in Johnson RI on a huge cart constructed specifically for this purpose. At the time, these columns were the largest monoliths ever created in the country (Berman).

The Providence Arcade provided a sense of civic pride to the community and was an aesthetic triumph, but it was not always a commercial success. An early litho-graph of the Arcade shows a deserted neighborhood without attached or nearby buildings so not only was the remote location of the Arcade risky, the concept of a building with multiple shops and business under one roof was unfamiliar to people in early 19th century America.

Tenants were slow in filling the three floors of the ornate structure, earning Arcade the moniker, “Butler’s Folly.” One can only speculate why locals failed to support this convenient new manner of shopping; it was given a strong endorsement in the Providence Gazette in an April 1827 letter to the editor that extolled its virtues, comparing it to the “genteel arcades” in Europe, exclaiming:

“The ladies who now go a “Shopping” have to contend with wind, dust, or rain, and frequently are obliged to step off the side walks to pass by stones, timers laid there by masons and carpenters... If by chance they meet a hog or a chimney sweeper on our sidewalks, they must give way for them or receive a dark rub” (Gazette).

Perhaps an initial deterrent may have been the distance from other shops, combined with the small size of shops themselves within the arcade; or the growing preference for the spacious department stores that were cropping up at the end of the nineteenth century like Shepard’s. The Providence Athenaeum initially occupied a number of the Arcade’s storefronts and when they departed the building in 1838, many additional shops were left vacant (National Register, Arcade).

The completion of the highly successful Butler Exchange building in 1872, directly across from the Arcade’s Westminster Street façade, changed the fortunes of the Arcade. Butler Exchange attracted large crowds of shoppers into the district and City Hall had also established itself into its new downtown edifice in 1870, filling the area with civil servants and citizens. Shortly after these events, ninety percent of the Arcade shops were rented (Ibid.) and by 1898, the Arcade was

surrounded by a strong retail community including a dry goods store, a large tailoring business, Taber Watch and Jewelry, the thriving Barstow Carpet trade, a dental parlor, and a busy storefront selling emigration tickets to Ireland (Bayles).

Over the decades that ensued, however, low occupancy would always plague the Arcade. The building narrowly escaped demolition in 1944, saved only by its purchase by the Rhode Island Association for the Blind as an investment, strictly to keep it going. By the 1970s however, it was crippled by the poor economy of Providence and only a few shops remained. The building experienced a temporary renewal after it was renovated in the 1980s and administered briefly



Early Arcade interior. Courtesy of City Archives.

by Johnson & Wales University around 2003 as a part of their commitment to downtown investment.

Granoff Associates, progressive owners of several important spaces in Providence, purchased the building next and shuttered it in 2007 while they sought a creative new use and economic future for the Arcade. They commenced an \$8 million renovation in 2008 and reopened the Arcade in 2013 to great acclaim as a mixed-use retail/residential space. Fourteen retail shops and restaurants are located on the ground floor while the upper two stories have been renovated into 48 fully-furnished one-bedroom and studio micro-lofts of 225-450 square feet each; the units promptly sold-out with a waitlist of thousands from graduate students to retirees.

Small scale living is a wider trend across the U.S. where affordable housing, especially for young professionals starting out, is a problem. The Arcade's micro-lofts not only address this problem but are bringing new life and commerce to Providence's central business district in the form of patrons for the city's downtown restaurants, theaters, and shops—all just a short stroll from the Arcade.

And how fitting: In 1828, the Arcade was an innovator when it introduced a new



concept in covered indoor shopping to Providence and it is an innovator again today, bringing a pioneer-ing new residential-retail concept to downtown Providence.

Micro-loft apartments.
Courtesy of The Arcade
Providence.



The iconic Shepard's clock on Westminster Street. Courtesy of RI Historical Society

Now: University of Rhode Island, College of Continuing Education

Then: The Shepard and Company Department Store

YEAR OF COMPLETION: 1880 - YEAR OF CLOSING: 1974

259 WESTMINSTER STREET

“Meet me at the Shepard’s clock.” The Shepard and Company Department store was a retail phenomenon that became a Providence institution until the day it closed its doors in 1974, and a rendezvous at the Shepard’s clock on Westminster Street was an iconic meeting place for generations of locals.

Prior to Shepard’s arrival from Boston to Providence in 1880, a modest clothing shop, Mackee, Edwards & Company did business on this location from a small Italianate building but closed down after a fire (National Register, Shepard). In its place, John Shepard opened Shepard and Company and began rapidly expanding through the acquisition of four adjacent buildings (a jeweler, druggist, and dry goods shop), adding new stories on top of them, as well as the constructing of a new building. Over the course of its twenty year expansion, Shepard’s obliterated three city streets and transformed a previously four block area of town into one massive retail space with large corner entrances that lured customers through its doors.

By October 1903, Shepard and Company had expanded to nearly seven acres of shopping from its original 6,400 square feet in 1880. The population of Providence was rapidly increasing during this period and Shepard’s helped meet the

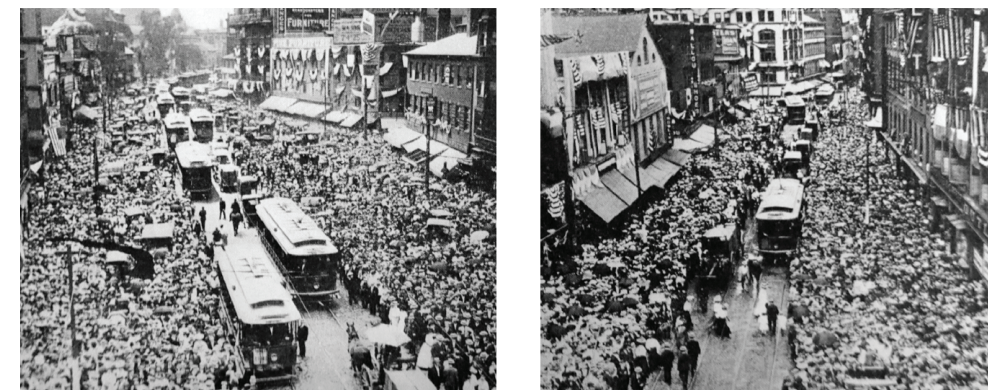
needs of the city's consumers, while those consumers helped make Shepard's a merchandising powerhouse. And in the process, the store led the growth of the entire downtown area and paved the way for the relocation of other retail operations to the burgeoning far end of Westminster Street during the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. John Shepard's approach to retailing was "to have for sale under the one roof practically all the necessities of life, as well as the luxuries" (Stores 71).

Moreover, shoppers loved the conveniences of Shepard's—women could leave their children at a nursery with a trained nurse while they shopped or relaxed in a resting room complete with letter writing materials, and then mail their notes at the store's post office. Shepard's also featured the unique innovation of a "first class" restaurant, the Wellington, which opened in 1901 and included two private dining rooms. Touting itself on par with the great hotel restaurants of New York and Boston, the Wellington was accessed via a private circular driveway cut into the building (now removed) and featured sumptuous cuisine, décor, clusters of lamps, plush carpets, and papier-mache wall ornamentation (Wellington). Additionally, the store offered a regular restaurant and the Shepard's Tearoom that opened in 1920 in an adjacent building connected to the main store by an enclosed pedestrian bridge. The Tearoom was a Providence landmark and hometown favorite until its shuttering in 1974, with generations of locals fondly recalling their lunches at the Tearoom.

Another distinctive feature attracting people to Shepard's was its "Main Aisle," which was a covered thoroughfare that ran down the center store between Westminster and Washington streets (Stores, 145), paved with marble tiles and lined with rich displays of the store's finest merchandise. Advertisements in local newspaper encouraged readers to visits its displays and "use it in going from street to street," reminiscent of the concept behind the nearby covered Arcade with its glass-topped "street" running between Westminster and Weybosset.

James Shepard also instituted a unique merchandising model, insisting that Shepard's was not a department store but a "collection of stores, each more complete in itself than the small separate store" referred to as "stores within a store." There were more than 80 "stores" within Shepard's selling everything from meat to millinery, all individually managed and paying a proportional fee for rent, lights, and heat (Story of 23).

This type of economy of scale was a part of widespread trend across the country that was pushing out the small specialty shops in favor of the large department store that shoppers seemed to prefer, as evidenced by Shepard's acquisition and incorporation of the four smaller shops on Westminster Street as it expanded its footprint. Functioning like a self-sufficient village, the Shepard Company employed 1,500 persons and operated its own laundry, ice making and refrigeration plant, bakery, and printing press. Additionally, John Shepard III, son of the owner and an early aficionado of broadcasting, launched Rhode Island's first radio station WEAN from the store the early 1920s (Stores 146).



Shoppers on Weybosset Street on a holiday, 1909. Left: looking West, Right: looking east (note the outlet store at right). Courtesy of Providence City Archives.

Shepard's introduced unique marketing techniques included motor car delivery of packages so shoppers could return home via trolley unencumbered by shopping bags and Shepard's placed the first front-page, near-full page advertisement in a Providence newspaper in 1881, which drove curious shoppers into the store and inspired competitors to follow suit. The advertisement's message opens an intriguing window into the mindset of late 19th century New England shoppers: despite Shepard's reputation for "luxuries," Providence shoppers were apparently looking for bargains. The ad copy promised "The Greatest Number of Bona Fide Bargains Ever Given at One Time by any House in America," as well as the far-reaching claim, "We are prepared to sell BLANKETS at figures low enough to compete with the world," and ended with a personal note of gratitude effusing, "We wish to thank the ladies of Providence and vicinity and extend our appreciation of their liberal patronage during our comparatively short residence among them" (Ibid.).

The turn of the twentieth century saw the rise of department stores around the country and Shepard's, one of New England's largest by 1903, was a part of this trend. Moreover, Shepard's was not the only successful department in Providence—the city had become a shopping mecca, home to stores that would soon spread across the nation including the Outlet (which also occupied a full city block), and Cherry and Webb, in addition to the local O'Gorman Company, Callender, McAuslan & Troup, and Gladdings. Gladdings was another Providence institution, opening in 1813 as Gladdings Dry Goods on Cheapside (North Main Street), following the trend west in 1878 to the Butler Exchange and finally to Westminster Street in 1891 where it transformed into a department store, eventually acquired by Shepard's.

The success of these numerous downtown retailers was likely because they followed the model of the Shepard Company, which was "one of the first big stores to break away from the rut of having just a few lines of goods" (Stores 145).

Shepard's also represented a different era in management/employee relations, with myriad newspaper articles referencing the warm connection between owner John Shepard and later, his son, with store staff. Management organized clubs and hosted annual dances, outings, and clambakes for staff. In 1914, they decided to close the store on Saturday nights to give staff the night off; in 1915, they initiated a \$1,000 death benefit.

In 1965, Shepard's owned every major department store on the block and built another enclosed pedestrian walkway across Clemence Street so shoppers could easily access Cherry and Webb and Gladding's from the Shepard Company. The walkway remains today but the shops are all gone.

In 1970, the founding family of Shepard's sold its interest and by 1974, the store was bankrupt and closed its doors. Shepard's was a victim of the nationwide development of suburban malls and society's choice of cars as their preferred mode of transportation, sealing the fate of all the major stores in downtown Providence, which closed by the 1980s.

The Shepard building stood vacant for almost twenty years and in 1990 the Providence Preservation Society instigated an investigation for potential uses that led to the University of Rhode Island selecting it as the new location for its continuing education program, in anticipation of the loss of its home to the Providence Place shopping center.

Accordingly, in an odd circle of concurrences that would seem to underline the important role of shopping in Providence society, the university lost its home to the latest fad in shopping meccas, The Providence Place, and ended up moving into the city's original shopping mecca, Shepard's, which had fallen victim to the latest shopping trend of its day, the suburban mall.



In 1936, it was said that Shepard Company kept "pace step by step with the growth, prosperity and -development of Rhode Island," and, in a poetic sense, the same could be said of the Shepard's building today. Once accommodating bustling shoppers, the space has been transformed to accommodate bustling university students—the new inhabitants of downtown Providence—who are bringing a renewed vibrancy and relevancy to downtown Providence (Rhode 80).

The Providence Daily Journal.

WEDNESDAY MORNING, FEBRUARY 7, 1931. NUMBER 22

HOSIERY, UNDERWEAR & GLOVES.

25¢ PER PAIR

Kid Gloves

\$1 50 per Pair.

SILKS.

\$1 Black Silk

\$1 25.

Dress Goods.

The Providence Daily Journal.

SHEPARD & COMPANY.

Grand Opening, Monday, Feb. 7th, 1931.

The Greatest Number of Home Fashions Ever Given at One Time by any Store in America.

A Complete New Stock in Each of the Three Following Departments:

a. All of our departments opened by our Public Parade, every article will be found there as represented.

LADIES' & MISSES' COTTON UNDERWEAR

CORSETS.

NEW DEPARTURE.

HOUSEKEEPING GOODS, BLANKETS AND QUILTS.

EXTRAORDINARY BARGAINS!

Chemises & Drawers.

CORSET COVERS AND NIGHT ROBES.

\$1 Black Silk

INFANTS' AND MEN'S DRESSES.

MILKIN LAIN CLOTHED GOODS.

CORSETS.

AN IMMENSE BARGAIN!

Merino Corsets, Great Value.

IN SECRECY AND BLACK.

PILLOW SHAMS IN LARGE VARIETY

GENTS' FURNISHINGS!

IMMENSE QUANTITY OF SHIRTS.

BONAWAZA SHIRT!

WINDSOR TIES

WINNOR TIES

COLLARS AT \$1 00 PER DOZEN.

Four Ply all Linen Cuffs, Three Pair For 50 cents.

ANTIQUE LACE CURTAINS.

Lace Bed Spreads,

Lambrequins,

Pillow Shams,

Tidies, &c., &c.,

A CARD.



Butler Exchange sometime between 1916-1925. Photo: Westminster Lofts.

Butler Exchange

Erected on the site of the present Industrial National Trust Building

DATE OF COMPLETION: 1873 - DATE OF DEMOLITION: 1925

55 EXCHANGE PLACE OR 111 WESTMINSTER STREET

This magnificent structure would likely still exist today had a devastating fire not destroyed it in 1925. On its site however rose what is perhaps Providence's most iconic building, the Industrial Trust "Superman" building, but prior to that day, the Butler Exchange played an significant role in the development of the downtown Providence as a place of interest to the local population.

When construction on the Butler Exchange began 1871, the area we know today as downtown was only a cluster of small wooden and brick residences with commercial operations on the ground floors; the key retail shopping districts were across the river on North and South Main streets. The arrival of Cyrus Butler's downtown shopping Arcade in 1828 was the first effort to shift the retail district, but Arcade languished in tenants and shoppers earning it the name, "Butler's Folly" (National Register, Downtown).

But a new Butler project was about to take off. Cyrus Butler's father, Samuel, had deeded a plot of land on Exchange Place (now Kennedy Plaza) to his heirs, and on this prime real estate, within sight of the new celebrated City Hall under construction, they built the Butler Exchange that would be responsible for shifting retail traffic across the river and into the present downtown (Industrial). And coincidentally, the new building was located directly across Westminster Street from the Arcade.

An 1871 Providence Journal article describes the demolition of the wooden buildings across the Arcade to clear ground for an "extensive and beautiful new



Transfer of State Battle Flags, Butler Exchange, 1903. Photo: RI Department of State archives.

block,” which would “undoubtedly be the largest and finest edifice for business purposes in the city” with shops on the ground floor and a combination of shops and offices on the other three stories (The Butler).

Upon completion in 1873, the Butler Exchange was the largest building in Providence and its splendid French-inspired Empire Revivalist architecture and two-story mansard roof may even have influenced the elaborate Empire Revival design style of City Hall being built at the same time.

The Butler Exchange bolstered Providence’s reputation as a walkable city for retail and business. Union Passenger Depot was only fifty yards away, allowing passengers to disembark the train or arrive by trolley car and easily stroll to Butler Exchange for shopping or business. People could enter the building via the Exchange Place (Kennedy Plaza) side, shop their way through the building and

depart via the Westminster Street door to find themselves directly in front of the Providence Arcade with still more shops.

Dropping her children off at one of the two dozen music teachers in the building, an Edwardian lady might stroll the Butler Exchange all day and emerge hours later with a full wardrobe and makeover. Shops included tailors and the renowned dressmaking sisters of Tirocchi Gowns, a furrier, milliner, purse manufacturer, a manicurist, masseuse, two hairdressers and seven shoemakers. A proper Edwardian lady might spend a few hours at the Providence Ladies’ Sanitary Gymnasium, which was also an tenant, or while away the time at the first Providence Public Library on the second floor, but the library would move to its own building in 1900 (Libes).

Butler Exchange, with its plethora of proper storefronts, provided new opportunities for women to make their own money in public for the first time instead of performing traditional piecework at home. The 1911 Providence City Directory listed over 800 women as dressmakers and with the growth of a consolidated downtown shopping district, many would soon be able to rent shops of their own for easy access to customers (Libes).

Young people also starting filled the building around 1907 for classes at the Rhode Island Commercial School owned by Jacob Butler and one of Bryant and Stratton’s chief competitors until Jacob’s purchased it and merged the two schools in the Butler Exchange. Both schools’ names are emblazoned on the exterior of the building in later photographs.

The Butler Exchange was a glorious building that shifted the dynamics of consumerism and women’s patterns in society both as shoppers and as workers. And the Industrial Trust Building that rose subsequently in this location during the zenith of the Roaring 20s brought with it yet another dynamic reflection of its changing times.



City Hall atrium and staircase. Photo: City of Providence

Providence City Hall

DATE OF COMPLETION: 1874 | 25 DORRANCE STREET

Since this magnificent structure opened its doors in 1874, Providence City Hall has weathered the test of time, remaining virtually unchanged in both its form and function as the seat of the government over the last 144 years.

Prior to its construction, Providence's civic center had been located in the overcrowded Market House on the east side of the river and there had been much debate about where to build the new seat of government. Half of the aldermen lived on the east side of the river and half on the west, causing a 30-year debate about the location of the new civic building (Golcheski). In fact, a history of Providence published in 1891 calls the issue "one of the most bitter and protracted controversies ever known in this community" (History). More space was required so in an effort to keep the city government in Market House, the butchers were first expelled from their retail spot on the ground floor and then the Freemasons were evicted from their third floor base in 1797, both highly unpopular decisions (Ibid.).

A move was inevitable, however, and it was also a crucial step in fulfilling the aspirations of the flourishing city: a grand, new City Hall was the architectural masterpiece necessary to announce that Providence had indeed arrived.

Designed by Boston architect, Samuel J.F. Thayer, the new City Hall's elaborate Second Empire Baroque design scheme had been influenced by Napoleon III's civic redevelopment of Paris in the style of Louis XIV that had been taking place almost contemporaneously during the 1850s and 1860s (Woodward, Guide). As a city in 1874, Providence was highly prosperous with a large population, thriving mills and factories, a busy waterfront, bustling merchants, and mansions



City Hall circa 1900. Photo: City Archives

lining its residential streets, so it comes as little surprise that city elders chose this ambitious style of architecture to represent their city's government. With its imposing scale and palatial entrance, visitors could not help but be impressed upon gazing at City Hall.

Remarkably, it is also one of the oldest downtown building whose form has been virtually unaltered since its construction and whose function remains equally unchanged. Civil servants and citizens still use the building today in the same manner as their counterparts at the turn of the nineteenth century, walking the

same grand stair hall, climbing the flight of marble stairs surrounded by wooden balconies bathed in sunlight from the massive Mansard-roofed skylight dome overhead to reach various offices to pay bills, obtain permits, or other acts of officialdom. The City Council and Alderman's Chambers are especially evocative of the past with their original furniture and 1870s Neo-Grec stenciled décor, affording the same impression and experience to citizens today as they did when the cornerstone of the building was set on June 24, 1875.

Given the new position of the City Hall inland on the west side of the river, the civic center of the city had officially shifted away from the river and the commercial heart would soon follow. And from this point forward, the major advancements in downtown Providence would take place in the environs of City Hall on the Weybosset side of the river.

City Hall has also played a major role in the ceremonial lives of the citizenry. With its grand façade overlooking a large plaza, citizens have flocked to its steps for every major event in their lives whether welcoming or sending off soldiers, watching parades, or gathering to hear prominent leaders from Abraham Lincoln on February 28, 1860 to President Teddy Roosevelt on August 23, 1902, Harry Truman in 1948, or Senator John F. Kennedy on November 7, 1960, just days away from his presidential victory (Providence).

While Providence City Hall is one of the country's best preserved municipal examples of a Second Empire Baroque structure—surpassed only by that of Philadelphia's City Hall—it was almost lost. In 1959, its demolition was approved as a part of the master "Downtown Providence 1970s" plan that the city had adopted. But thanks to intensive lobbying effected by the Providence Preservation Society, when Mayor Vincent (Buddy) Cianci, Jr. took office in 1975, he made the consequential decision to save and restore City Hall instead of demolishing it (McKenzie, Guide).



Photo: Providence Warwick Convention & Visitors Bureau

Turks Head Building

DATE OF COMPLETION: 1913

11 WEYBOSSET STREET OR 76 WESTMINSTER STREET

How this elegant corner of downtown came to be known as Turk's Head is a matter of debate.

In 1740, Jacob Whitman settled in Providence and set up a blacksmith shop. Five years later, he purchased from Amaziah and Neriah Waterman a part of their salt marsh lying west of Weybosset Bridge and built his house on one side of the dirt track that is now Weybosset Street and his blacksmith shop on the other. According to one account, he expanded his business to include the production of iron work for ships and through his connection with ship captains, obtained the carved figurehead of a Turk from the old ship "Sultan," which he mounted on a high post outside of his shop (Narragansett).

An 1854 edition of the Providence Journal, however, reports the story differently. According to that account, Whitman continued to purchase land in the area of his new Weybosset home until he had accumulated a substantial block. Then in 1753, he built an ornamental, gambrel-roofed building in the angle of Broad (now Weybosset) and Westminster street and opened a country trading store on the ground floor that sold a variety of goods, including a brisk business in Turks Island Salt. It is for that reason, the writer speculates, that Whitman mounted the Turk's head on the post outside his store (The Turk's).

In early America, merchants used symbolic figures at their places of business, not street numbers, to denote their location and Whitman's shop was thereafter referred to as at "the Sign of the Turk's Head." All accounts of the story concur that the original Turk's head remained on the pole until it was lost during the gale



Whitman Block at Turk's Head intersection sometime between 1872 -1912. Notice the Butler Exchange erected in 1872 visible to the right. Photo: Providence City Archives

of 1815. Curiously, however, the corner was known to subsequent generations of Providence residents as Turk's Head even though an actual Turk's head had not been seen there for 100 years—not until the present office building was erected in 1913 with its stone bust of a turbaned, mustached Ottoman above the door. Therefore, how did Jacob Whitman's brick home and trading store (or was it a blacksmith shop?) on the corner of Weybosset and Westminster end up as a striking skyscraper bearing a Turk's head?

The Providence Journal article had been correct in stating Whitman had been accumulating land. He eventually erected a block of handsome brick family residences on his corner that became known as the Whitman Block. An advertisement in the Providence Gazette on May 25, 1811 for an estate for sale attested

to the beauty of its neighborhood describing it as “situated...opposite the elegant Block of Brick Buildings erected and owned by Mr. Jacob Whitman” (Narragansett). By 1887, however, the area was becoming commercial: a personal account of the neighborhood read before the Rhode Island Veterans Citizen Historical Association noted that the lower story of Whitman Block buildings was now “much improved by nice fronts for offices and shops which in its early structure would have made it a greater wonder” (Arnold 120), as the photo below verifies.

The offices and shops the speaker refers to, however, were most likely along the lines of services such as insurance, since fashionable shops had started moving west along Weybosset and Westminster streets to the vogue retail district south of Dorrance (National Register, Historic District).



Turk's Head Building, RI's first skyscraper, rising above Exchange Place (now Kennedy Plaza) in 1920. Photo: Providence Journal Archives

the handsome 1913 skyscraper we see today. The Turk's Head building constituted the last privately financed, large-scale, speculative office building erected downtown—the same year the federal income tax was instituted, eating away at the vast fortunes that financed such ventures (Ibid.).

Tax records indicate that in 1845, the Whitman Block had already been sold to John Brown and Nicholas and Ann Brown (A List), who purchased it as an investment (Woodward, Providence 242). The Brown Land Company then razed the attractive brick residences and erected in its place

The elegant curved building of granite and buff brick, designed to fit precisely within the rounded V-shaped plot where Weybosset and Westminster streets meet, is strongly reminiscent of New York City's renowned Flatiron Building (1902) that would have been known to the New York architectural firm of Howells & Stokes that designed the Turk's Head Building. The similarity was likely intentional, serving again to spotlight Providence's emerging position as one of America's foremost cities. At seventeen stories, Turk's Head was also the tallest building in Providence until the Biltmore Hotel stripped it of the distinction a few years later in 1922 (Woodward, Guide 81).

Turk's Head Building was constructed specifically to house professional offices and today, some 100+ years later, it is functioning in exactly the same manner. When retailing moved out of the area, Turk's Head became known as the Financial District of downtown thanks in part to the strength of this building and its tenants. In fact, the Providence Business News reported in 2013 that Turk's Head Building is known for the longevity of its occupants with at least two tenants—an investment firm and law firm—having operated in the building for over a century (Souza).

As Rhode Island's first skyscraper, Turk's Head Building not only helped established the financial district but also launched Providence into the era of skyscrapers.

Following page: Turk's Head corner then and now. Notice the 3-story white Custom's House visible in both photographs on the left. Photo (above), Providence City Archives





Vintage postcard circa 1940. Courtesy of Biltmore Hotel Archives

Biltmore Hotel

DATE OF COMPLETION: 1922 | 11 DORRANCE STREET

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, Providence had everything going for it. The second largest city in New England, in 1912 it had the highest per capita income in the nation (Coren), it dominated in manufacturing and milling, its harbors were major hubs, its downtown flourished with opulent theaters, its department stores were exceptional in size and variety, and it would soon have New England's tallest skyscraper with the Metropolitan Life building. But Providence had one major shortcoming holding it back: the lack of a modern and impressive hotel like those in New York City (Ibid.), which would attract conventions, topnotch businessmen, and well-heeled leisure travellers to Providence. And the city's Chamber of Commerce was determined to change that fact.

In an ambitious and unprecedented move, the Chamber took it upon itself to finance the construction of a new luxury hotel by selling shares of preferred stock to the local business community. And Providence looked to New York as its role model, contacting the two most prestigious hotel companies in the city, E.M. Statler of Statler (Hilton) Hotels, and John McE. Bowman of Bowman-Biltmore Hotels. There was even excited speculation that each hotelier might build a new property in Providence—one on the “Butts Block” on Exchange Place and the other to replace the aging Narragansett Hotel on Dorrance Street (Second), but Statler withdrew and Bowman was awarded the contract (Mr. John).

The Butts Block was an ideal site: a short stroll from Union Station where guests would arrive by rail, it was flanked by a park, upscale theaters, and stores. And it was a block prime for razing: a 1915 photograph reveals a shabby, two-story brick structure topped with billboards and a warren of automobile-oriented storefronts—a testament to the emerging importance of the automobile.



When the Biltmore Hotel was completed in June 1922, it was the tallest building in the city with nineteen stories and one of the last major structures erected downtown due to the start of declining economic conditions. The New York firm of Warren and Wetmore, architects of Grand Central Station had been selected to provide prestige to the project and their design was restrained and “modern” compared to the city’s ornate of nineteenth century building. But it dazzled the public with every convenience from phones and private bathrooms in guest rooms to a ballroom, multiple dining rooms, and a rooftop garden with chickens. Curiously, the reception was on the second floor while the ground floor housed shops for the public and a passageway from the street through the hotel.

The Biltmore became the place to be, hosting politicians and movie stars; renowned big bands played in the ballroom, the dance floor was turned into a swimming pool for Esther Williams and a skating rink for Sonya Henie. And the major proclaimed Providence would now take her rightful place in the first rank

of leading American cities, put on the map in capital letters” (Opening).

But it didn’t happen. By the time the Biltmore opened in 1922, the tides had already started shifting for Providence. The arrival of the automobile in the 1920s marked the beginning of the end of the streetcars and Providence as a walking city; the trains at the hotel’s doorstep would be less relevant, and the fabric of downtown changed as buildings came down for parking lots. The population of Providence migrated to the suburbs with their cars, a new Interstate highway strangled the central business district, cutting it off from neighborhoods, and the population dwindled by 40 percent.

The Biltmore survived but just barely, and when it was shuttered in 1975 for lack of a payment to the gas company, its spectacular fall loomed large over the city, representing Providence’s economic demise, empty neighborhoods, and obsolete buildings (Leaze xxiv). But in a show of civic pride—not unlike the pride that created the hotel in 1922—a group of business leaders came up with a plan to not only revived the Biltmore, but to save downtown through the relocation of the railroad tracks, highway, and city’s rivers (Leaze xx).

The hotel reopened with great fanfare again in 1979 and has weathered the vicissitudes of new managements and economic fluctuation since then...but there is no better symbol of Providence than the Biltmore as the embodiment of the 20th century history of downtown Providence itself: its rise and its fall, and then against all odds – its stunning rise again. *

* Concepts and lines in this chapter have been drawn from my Building Biography on the Biltmore Hotel submitted to Archaeology of College Hill on October 19, 2018. *



Now: Providence Performing Arts Center

Then: Loew's State Theater

DATE OF COMPLETION: OCTOBER 6, 1928

220 WEYBOSSET STREET

At the end of the 19th century, Providence residents enjoyed an unusually rich and profuse theater life, yet in the 18th century, their Puritanical forefathers had banned all theater.

During the pre-Revolutionary Providence of the mid-1760s, an act had been passed prohibiting theatrical amusements, which lasted for about forty years. After the law ceased to be enforced in 1793, a first cautious play was staged at the Court House under the guide of "Moral Dialogues" (Pieroth), and a year later a group of wealthy citizens banded together and subscribed to build the city's first theater on the corner of Westminster and Mathewson streets. The more straight-laced citizens refused to patronize the theater but the majority of the Providence townspeople were keen for amusements and the city developed into a lively center for the dramatic arts (Haley).

That first theatre ended up being purchased by Grace Church in 1832 and converted to its present-day place of worship, but a second theater opened in 1840, followed by the Providence Opera House in 1871. By the turn of the 20th century, Providence boasted a remarkable number of opulent theaters featuring live shows, Shakespeare, opera, vaudeville and burlesque (Kirk 253), and in the span of ten years between 1910 and 1920, six lavish theaters were erected. Motion pictures had become the rage and the majority of Providence's theaters could accommodate both live and film performances.

Left: Photo: Loew's State Theater historical images

Fortuitously, the city's most glorious theater still stands today, the Providence Performing Arts Center, built in 1928 as the Loew's State Theater at the height of the nationwide motion picture building activity. Fourteen buildings were razed to construct the block-wide theater, including the 1909 Bullocks Theatre, one of the first motion picture houses in the city and the Gaiety Theatre, a movie house that opened in 1914 (National Register, Loew's). As a city on the move, replacing and modernizing aging facilities was a recurrent theme throughout Providence. When the block was razed, however, two small buildings were oddly left standing at the corners of the Weybosset street block and still flank the theater to this day; one can only speculate why the owners did not sell to Loews.

Another unusual element of the design by today's standards: building permits indicate the theater would include an "office building structure" on the Weybosset Street frontage, as well as storefronts on the ground floors of Weybosset and Pine streets (Loew's Theatre). Apparently theater owners were looking to bring in rental revenue but it is hard to imagine a showstopper theater today renting out its ground and upper floors. An early photograph reveals a very ordinary shoe shop and candy store to the right and left of the theater's grand entrance with their uninviting signboards affixed to the theater's ornate terracotta façade. Additionally, in the theater's upper story windows, a furniture company's name and advertisements can be seen behind and around the theater's elaborate vertical marquee.

The theater's entrance doorways, ticket offices, and marquee were also placed off-center in the building's façade; an explanation could be that, being a walking city, the theater owners wanted the marquee to be visible to pedestrians on the major nearby intersection of Mathewson Street that terminated at the theater, which prompted the unusual off-center design (Ibid.).

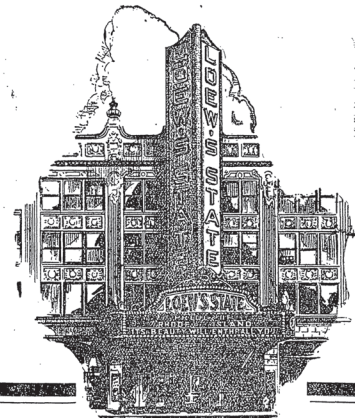
Nevertheless, the theater was intended to wow the public, and the New York City architectural firm selected for the project was considered the premier



Storefronts flank the off-center entrance of the theater c. 1940. Photo courtesy of the Providence Warwick Convention & Visitors Bureau.

designers of movie palaces in their day, C. W. & George Rapp (Woodward, Guide), another indication of Providence's aspirations of being a city on the rise. From its inception, the owners proclaimed that Loew's State Theatre would include many of the elaborate features found only in movie palaces of New York City. The Providence Loew's would be the largest theater ever built in southern New England and the fifth Loew's theater built in New England with the other four located in Boston (Ibid.).

The restrained exterior belies the extraordinary display of sumptuous detail



TRULY A PALACE OF SPLENDOR!

IMAGINE a theatre so magnificent, so costly, so different, so far exceeding anything that has ever been done anywhere in Providence that there is **NOTHING** for you to compare it with!

Imagine the years of planning for this magnificent new showplace! Imagine all the luxury, comfort and dazzling beauty of color and ornamentation that you ever dreamed of in a theatre—and you're still miles shy of what you're going to see in the new **LOEW'S STATE THEATRE**, which will formally open on **SATURDAY, OCTOBER 6th**.

The first program presented in your new theatre will be headed by **WILLIAM HAINES** in "EXCESS BAGGAGE", a **METRO MOVIE TONE SOUND PICTURE** with **JOSEPHINE DUNN** AND **RICARDO CORTEZ**.

That famous **VAUDEVILLE TEAM**, known as "The Pennant Winning Battery of Songland," **VAN AND SCHENCK** and **THE CAPITOLLANS**, stage band at the **CAPITOL** theatre, **N. Y. C.** will be **SEEN AND HEARD** in **METRO MOVIE TONE**.

JOSEPH STOVES at the console of the **Mighty \$100,000 MORTON PIPE ORGAN** will furnish a musical setting fitting as an ideal background with the beautiful atmosphere of this **SHRINE OF MOTION PICTURES**. And other **LOEW** novelties will go to make up a **NEVER TO BE FORGOTTEN PROGRAM**—**AN ENTERTAINMENT FIT FOR A KING IN A THEATRE THAT OUTRANKS THE PALACE OF ANY MONARCH**.

Opens—Saturday—October 6th
Weybosset at Richmond St.

LOEW'S STATE
THEATRE

*Advertisement in
the Providence
Journal drumming
up excitement for
the grand opening,
1 Oct. 1928.*

on the interior, with theater patrons experiencing ever-grander spaces as they proceeded to their seats. Daily newspaper advertisements appearing the week of the theater's opening hyped the event, and on October 7, 1928, the Providence Journal reported that over 14,000 people visited the 3,800 seat theater between the hours of 10 o'clock in the morning and 11 o'clock in the evening to marvel at its magnificence. Visitors were awestruck not only by the richness of the marble, bronze, gilded figures, miles of red and gold drapery and carpeting, crystal chandeliers, Art Deco wall fixtures, towering Chinese vases, the stately stairway, and 65-foot saucer-domed ceiling, but also by the red and green macaw—the Loew's house mascot—that sat perched on the balcony, oblivious to the multitudes (14,000).

For theater-goers, entering the space to attend a performance or motion picture was an extraordinary experience in itself, adding to the excitement of the show. As Loew founder Marcus Loew once declared, "His tickets were to theaters rather than to movies" (New Loew's). At intermission, men would retire to the sophisticated smoking room while women would relax in the elegant ladies lounge. Moreover, no expense was spared in outfitting the theater with the most advanced technical equipment and lighting, as well as behind stage facilities including two large chorus rooms, an orchestra room, an animal room, screening preview room, a hydraulically-operated orchestra pit, stage elevators, an organ lift, and more—facilities any opera house would be jealous of and few could afford (The National Register, Loew's). In the roaring late 1920s in Providence, it seemed the sky was the limit.

And as people's entertainment interests changed over the decades, Loew's kept pace, serving as the locus for a long and varied succession of entertainment forms. Beginning with live performances and motion pictures for which the theater was designed in the 1920s, it moved to vaudeville in the 1930s, then concerts, opera, and films in the 1940s. Live concerts were the primary focus from the 1950s through the 1970s, including renowned rock bands.

Habits and lifestyles were changing however, and with the popularity of television combined with modern movie theaters being built in suburbs closer to home, Loew's—or Palace Concert Theater as it was called in the '70s—fell on hard times. In 1971, the theater was purchased by B. A. Dario and by 1976, he had closed the space and filed for a permit to demolish the structure. Thanks to the involvement of then-mayor Vincent A. “Buddy” Cianci and the Providence Preservation Society, however, the building was rescued.

Reborn as the Providence Performing Arts Center in 1982, the theater has led the cultural renaissance of downtown Providence offering Broadway shows, Rhode Island Philharmonic performances, comedy and dance performances. It has been painstakingly renovated to its original splendor and stands today, as it did in 1928, as the largest and most glorious theater in southern New England.

Indeed, the Providence Performing Arts Center, like the finest movie palaces in the world, can best be described in the words of prominent architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner, as “gorgeous and juicy” again (Sanderson 112).

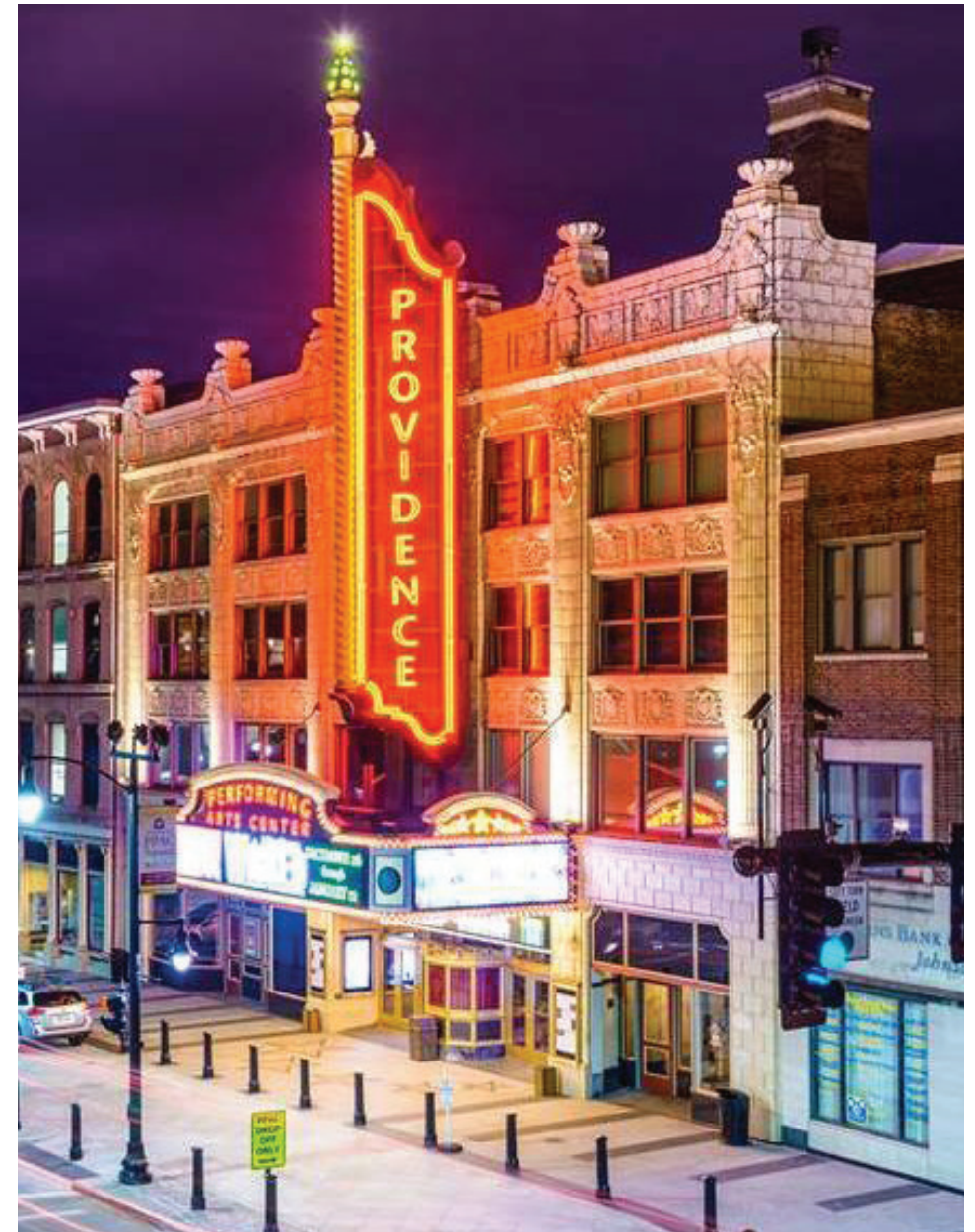


Photo: Providence Performing Arts



Industrial Trust Building

DATE OF COMPLETION: OCTOBER 1, 1928

111 WESTMINSTER STREET

Affectionately, albeit inaccurately, referred to as the Superman Building thanks to its resemblance to the Daily Planet building from the 1950s Superman television series, the tallest building in Rhode Island, the Industrial Trust Building, has only one full-time employee: an engineer employed to keep the building operational for a hoped-for renaissance one day (Barry). The Industrial Trust Building's last tenant, the Bank of America (formerly Fleet Bank), moved out on April 12, 2013.

In its glory days, the skyscraper was home to one of Rhode Island's greatest business success stories, the Fleet Bank, which grew to be the ninth largest bank in America. Merging with Shawmut Bank in 1995, the bank was eventually acquired by Bank of America in 1998 and remained the sole tenant in the Industrial Trust Building until 2013, when its headquarters was moved to Boston. Given the bank had occupied the building in some capacity for the prior 85 years, it was an alarming departure, and the 26-story building has remained empty ever since.

It is hard to overstate the importance of this iconic building in the history of Providence. Between the two world wars, Providence was booming and this ambitious skyscraper symbolized the moment when the city was poised on the brink of being one of America's leading cities. A prominent New York City architect was selected to design the new building, and he chose the modern Art Deco style and employed the distinctive "step back" devices on the upper stories—required by zoning laws in New York City to provide light and air to streets below—which created the building's celebrated profile on the Providence skyline. The Industrial Trust Building was a bold statement, proclaiming Providence as a city of tomorrow with its tagline, "A Business Building for Building Business" (Ibid).



Industrial Trust Building lobby, flower arrangements changed daily. Photo: Save Superman

Providence's financial industry was taking off and in its heyday, the building was home to thousands of employees who forged into the downtown streets every day, pulsing life into its economy. And the building itself pulsed with life, with pneumatic tubes pumping cash between floors (Pacitti). From the fabled leather-walled penthouse Gondola Room, fashioned to resemble the interior of the dirigible Her Majesty's Airship No. 1 (Kalunian), to the richly appointed executive offices on the top floors, bank managers could gaze upon the textile mills, factories, metal machinery and jewelry manufacturers, and extensive railroad network ringing Providence that had propelled the city into the powerhouse that it was at the time.

The skyscraper was built not only for the executive conducting high-level intra-banking deals, but also for regular citizens who were welcomed into the monumental banking hall, approached from either of the narrow ends and considered one of the city's most dramatic sequential experiences (McKenzie). Extravagant flower arrangements were changed daily in this splendid hall where people performed their everyday banking needs or travelled deep in the bowels of the building to deposit their valuables in the walls lined with rows of gleaming safety deposit boxes, many of which were oversized to accommodate the



precious Oriental carpets. Advertisements in the 1928 Providence Journal newspapers boasted of "Separate Elevators to the Trust Department" where eleven conference rooms were available for the discussion of personal business (Advertisement 1928).

It is estimated that the cost to restore the building to a useable state—including elevators, heating, air conditioning, and electrical—would be \$60- \$100 million. Citizens Bank,

Image: Providence City Archives

PayPal and Hasbro all considered and rejected the building; Hasbro even proposed tearing it down and building a new “Hasbro Tower” in its location (Fenton).

A full renovation of the structure for a new adaptive use would require a close collaboration between the developer, preservationists and the government, as a historic amount of tax credits and state aid would be required—which has not been forthcoming thus far. With a glut of office space existing in downtown Providence and shortage of housing units, as of this writing /December 2018ff many have suggested the best use of the building would be the conversion of apartment units, which would also serve to spark the growth of downtown businesses to service the influx of new residents. One can only hope that will be the situation someday soon. After all, “Hope” is the motto of Rhode Island (Barry).

Image: Providence Journal, September 25, 1928

THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 25, 1928

Completed October First

**Work For
Four Hundred
and Forty-six
Rhode Island Men**

Give an honest and well-earned wage to the men who are building the new Industrial Trust Building. The new building will be completed on October first and will be ready for tenants to move in. The new building will be a tribute to the speed and efficiency with which they completed their task.

On October first customers of the Industrial Trust Company can begin to do their banking business in the new building—and on the same day offices will be ready for tenants to move in.

Today the new building is an accomplished fact—a tribute to the speed and efficiency with which they completed their task.

INDUSTRIAL TRUST COMPANY

Member of Federal Reserve System

Five PROVIDENCE OFFICES

40 WESTMINSTER ST. — 61 WESTMINSTER ST.
500 STATE ST. — 200 ATWELL AVENUE
147 BROAD ST. — 200 ATWELL AVENUE

PROVIDENCE WASHINGTON NEWARK
BOSTON BIRMINGHAM PHOENIX
SPRINGFIELD WASHINGTON WASHINGTON

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