

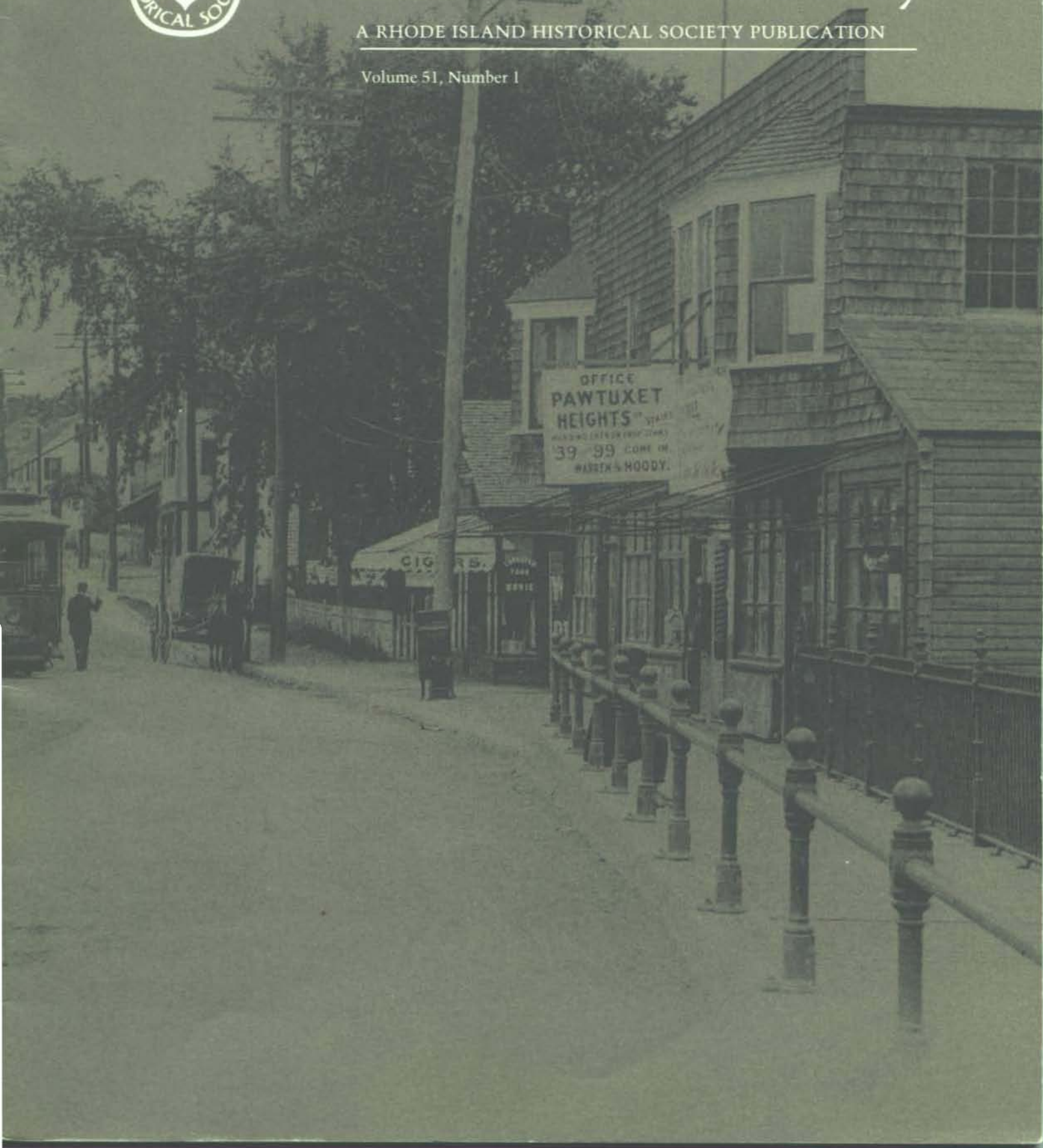


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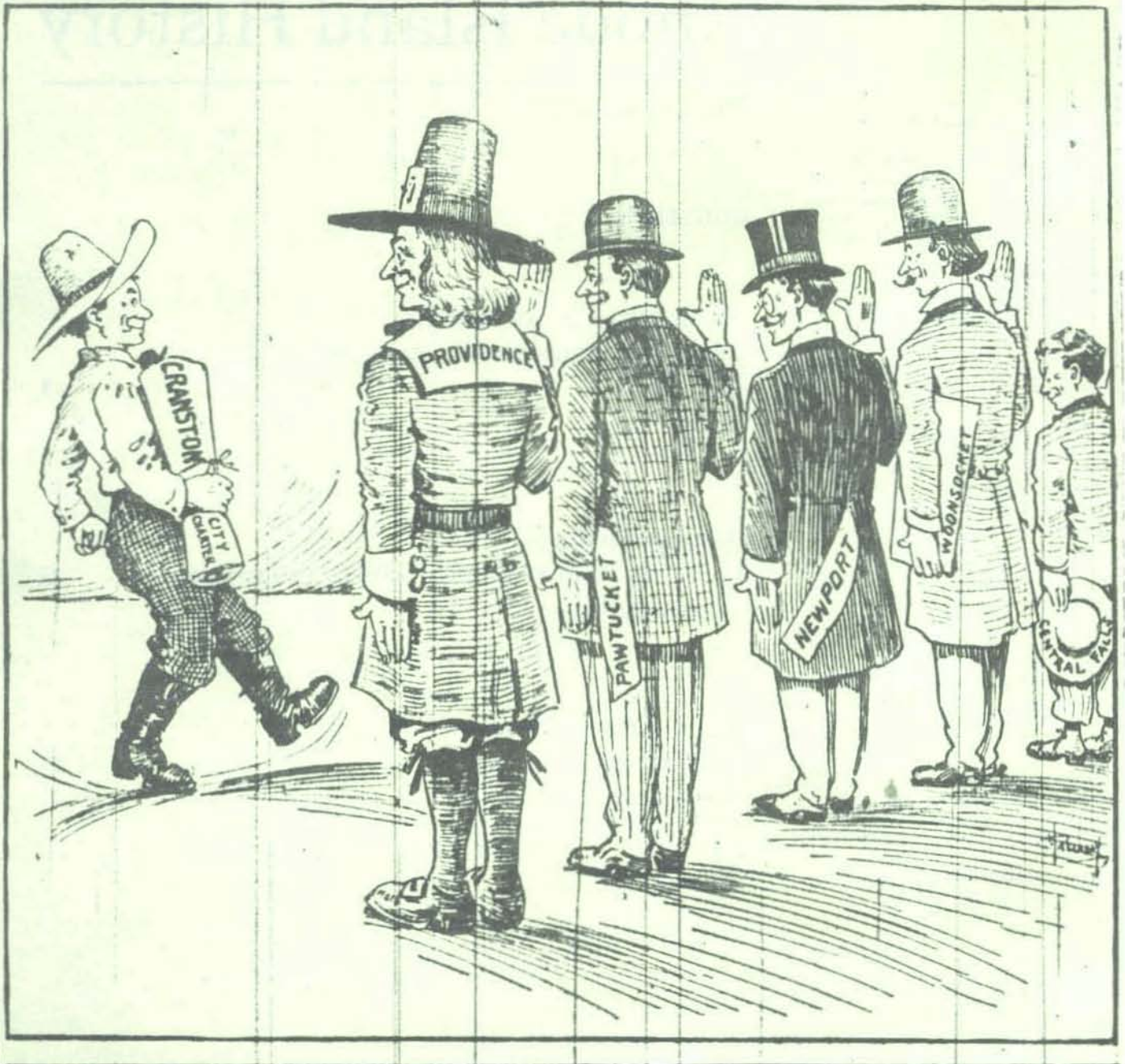
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YOUNG CRANSTON TAKES HIS PLACE AMONG THE CITIES



Cartoon from the Providence Daily Journal,
19 April 1910. RIHS Collection (Mfilm).

Becoming a City of Homes: The Suburbanization of Cranston, 1850-1910

PETER BALDWIN

In April 1910 the *Providence Daily Journal* printed a cartoon showing Cranston, represented by a farmer, taking its place among Rhode Island's cities, represented mostly by dapper urban gentlemen.¹ The town's adoption of a city charter that year may well have struck Rhode Islanders as odd. Cranston certainly did not look like a city; its western section still had a number of farms, as suggested by the cartoon, while its northeastern section was filled with suburban homes. The people who lived in the new houses did much of their shopping in Providence, for the new development had failed to provide Cranston with a true downtown. Cranston's industries employed only a fraction of the local working population, who relied instead on jobs in Providence. Although the cartoonist was right to see Cranston as strangely different from older Rhode Island cities, a commuter rather than a farmer would have made a more appropriate symbol.

Cranston had become what its boosters called "a city of homes," a residential suburb declaring itself permanently separate from the metropolitan center. Its adoption of a city charter marked the end of the first phase of Providence's suburban growth.

This growth had begun in the mid-nineteenth century, when a scruffy fringe of working-class housing and unpleasant industry, mingled with a few remaining farms and country homes for the wealthy, had arisen on the edge of the city. Where these areas happened to sprawl across the city line, they were eventually annexed by Providence. South Providence and Elmwood broke away from Cranston in favor of annexation in 1868. Unlike residents of the more rural areas of Cranston, many of the people who lived in these two neighborhoods worked in Providence and saw their neighborhoods as an extension of the city. When these neighborhoods developed urban problems, the natural solution seemed to be union with Providence, for the city could provide the municipal services that were needed.

The growing industrial city soon pushed into the diminished town of Cranston once again. By the 1890s and early 1900s reliable and inexpensive commuter transit had allowed more people to move into new residential neighborhoods beyond the Providence city limits. These neighborhoods were more attractive than the earlier suburban hodgepodge and more affordable than the country homes of the wealthy. The streetcar had created a larger and more distinct suburban residential belt to replace the blurry boundary between Providence and the countryside.

This time Cranston suburbanites wanted a way of life that was neither rural nor urban. The town government had begun offering many basic city services in those areas, services that developers found crucial to their attempt to attract home buyers. To protect these services from budget cutting by frugal farmers and mill workers, the developers and their political allies worked for fifteen years to bring

Peter Baldwin is a graduate student in history at Brown University.

about Cranston's incorporation as a city, and their efforts came to fruition in 1910. The change was controversial at first, but it was soon accepted even by the political opposition.

The acceptance of city government involved more than just a political change; it meant a new outlook on the relationship between Providence and its surroundings. Those who lived in Cranston now envisioned it as a residential town distinct from both countryside and urban center. Suburban development was no longer seen as a transitional stage between rural and urban life; instead it was thought of as the creation of something distinct and enduring.



Like many New England towns, Cranston in 1868 was a somewhat arbitrary governmental district containing several distinct villages. Originally part of Providence, the town had split off from the city in 1754, but it had never developed a unifying center of its own.² By the 1860s there were striking differences not just among the villages but between the suburban northeastern corner of town and the much larger remainder. The latter area had commercial ties to Providence, but the suburban area had a much closer relationship with the city.

The rural part of Cranston was one of the state's leading agricultural areas. As in other towns near Providence, many farmers there were engaged in specialized commercial farming, producing milk, vegetables, eggs, and meat for the urban market. On some farms teenage or adult children supplemented the family income with factory jobs in the mill villages.³

In the north-central part of this area was Spragueville, the largest of Cranston's mill villages, with 1,389 people in 1865. This was the site of the A. & W. Sprague Company's Cranston Print Works, which employed over 2,000 people in the printing and finishing of cotton cloth. The village was also known as Cranston Print Works Village, and many of its people lived in company housing. Sprague employees lived elsewhere throughout Cranston as well, and some probably commuted from Providence on the horse-drawn railroad that the Sprague family had opened in 1865.⁴ Smaller villages included Fiskeville and Pawtuxet, each with mills, and Knightsville, a rural commercial center.⁵

Table 1, based on a sample from the 1865 Rhode Island census schedules, shows 36 percent of the men of nonsuburban Cranston engaged in agriculture. Despite the mostly rural character of the area, however, industry employed as large a proportion of the men there as in Cranston's combined suburban areas. But there was one important difference: rural Cranston's industrial workers had jobs close to home. About two-thirds worked at the print works, and most of these lived in Spragueville.⁶

South Providence and Elmwood—the areas of Cranston that would soon be annexed to Providence—had a very different character. Rather than being isolated villages in the midst of farmland, these two growing suburbs blended indistinguishably into the city. South Providence roughly corresponded to what is now the area of Providence south of Dudley Street and east of Broad; Elmwood was the area between South Providence and what is now the Cranston city line.⁷

Easy commuting contributed to the development of these two suburban neighborhoods. Residents could ride to downtown Providence quickly and cheaply on horse-drawn streetcars, which had started service in 1865. Spragueville residents could also ride streetcars to Providence, but getting there from other parts of Cranston was more costly and inconvenient. Except for those who could afford their own horse and carriage, travel from outlying areas involved taking a stage-coach or a train.⁸

Table 1
Occupational Categories of Men by Place of
Residence, 1865

OCCUPATION	NONSUBURBAN		SOUTH PROVIDENCE	COMBINED	
	CRANSTON	ELMWOOD		SUBURBS	PROVIDENCE
Farming	23%	2%	3%	2%	*
Farm labor	13%	10%	*	3%	*
Industrial labor	31%	18%	35%	29%	27%
Other manual work	27%	46%	51%	49%	36%
Nonmanual work	6%	24%	12%	16%	37%
Total	100%	100%	101%^b	99%^b	100%
<i>Number sampled</i>	270	97	197	294	200

SOURCE: Rhode Island census schedules, 1865.

NOTE: A single sample was taken of male wage earners in all parts of Cranston, and the sample was then broken down by area. For details of the sampling method, see an earlier version of this article, "The Suburban Vision," at the RIHS Library.

* Less than 1%.

^b Percentages do not add up to 100% because of rounding.

Many of the residents of South Providence appear to have worked in Providence's jewelry and silverware factories, machine shops, and other industrial plants. Elmwood had a significant middle class, part of which was also employed in the city.⁹ This middle-class population was much larger than nonsuburban Cranston's, though it was not nearly as large as that in Providence, as table 1 shows. The two suburban neighborhoods also had a sizable nonindustrial manual work force, including many common laborers. This group was proportionately much larger there than in either rural Cranston or Providence. South Providence, especially, may have served as a reservoir of building tradesmen and unskilled workers for the city.

Table 2 shows another difference between Cranston's suburban and rural populations: men living in the suburbs were much less likely to have roots in the town than men living in the rural area. In rural Cranston only 20 percent of men in the sample were born in the town, but in the two suburban neighborhoods the proportion was even smaller—5 percent in Elmwood and 3 percent in South

Table 2
Birthplace of Male Wage Earners by Place of
Residence, 1865

BIRTHPLACE	NONSUBURBAN		SOUTH PROVIDENCE	COMBINED	
	CRANSTON	ELMWOOD		SUBURBS	PROVIDENCE
Cranston	20%	5%	3%	4%	—
Providence	5%	13%	9%	11%	21%
Other R.I.	21%	22%	16%	18%	17%
Other U.S.	11%	26%	20%	22%	29%
Total native	57%	66%	48%	54%^a	66%^a
Foreign	43%	34%	52%	46%	34%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
<i>Number sampled</i>	270	97	197	294	200

SOURCE: Rhode Island census schedules, 1865.

NOTE: The individuals sampled are the same as those in table 1.

^a Discrepancy of total is due to rounding of percentages above.



Andrews-Cornell Farm, Burlingame Road, western Cranston, circa 1918. Courtesy of the Cranston Historical Society.

Providence. Native sons were outnumbered by Providence-born men in both neighborhoods, another indication of the suburban link with the city. Overall, except for Providence itself, Cranston was the Rhode Island town with the most Providence natives: 22 percent of its American-born residents were born in the city, counting women and children.¹⁰

Elmwood, with 1,655 people in 1865, was on its way towards becoming a prosperous residential neighborhood. Other than a cotton mill on Daboll Street, there was little industry there. "Ours is a place of beauty and healthiness," wrote one resident in an 1868 letter to the *Providence Daily Journal*. "People of taste and observation are discovering it."¹¹ Wealthy Providence men had been building country homes in Elmwood as early as the 1790s. Developers in the mid-1800s consciously worked to attract more of the affluent classes, planting trees, laying out broad streets, and controlling the placement of houses through deed restrictions. Nevertheless, land in Elmwood was plentiful and cheap, and many modest houses were built there.¹²

Not as much had been done to attract the elite to South Providence. Developers there often sold lots on an installment plan, allowing some workers to own their own homes. Immigrants and their families dominated the area, which had a population of 3,491 in 1865.¹³ Of the South Providence wage earners in table 2, 52 percent were of foreign birth. Most of these were Irish.

South Providence's industries made it a less attractive neighborhood than Elmwood. According to the *Providence Morning Herald*, it was the site of "foul piggeries, slaughter houses, bone boiling institutions, &c." The worst area was Dogtown, immediately south of the Providence city line, where the slaughterhouses were concentrated. South Providence also had a bleachery, an iron foundry, and a woolen mill. A number of residents worked on the waterfront. There were middle-class commuters living in South Providence, but proportionally far fewer than in Elmwood.¹⁴

Despite pockets of squalor, the *Providence Daily Journal* believed that the Elmwood and South Providence area was worth annexing. "For the most part," said the *Journal*, "it is well laid out in wide streets and avenues, and is altogether an attractive and handsome suburb."¹⁵

Several local historians have described the 1868 annexation as motivated by local politics and ethnic prejudice rather than by the residents' need for city services. One writes:

By 1868, the size of the Irish settlement in Dogtown was large enough so that the native, agrarian, Republican Party-dominated political structure of the town of Cranston . . . became concerned about the increasing political power of the immigrants. Since the Irish overwhelmingly supported the Democratic Party, it was feared that eventually they might be strong enough to elect a Democrat as the town's only senator to the state legislature.

Cranston therefore ceded the land, "ensuring the continuation of Republican Party rule and representation in Cranston," the writer concludes.¹⁶

But this explanation seems to be mistaken. Voting results for the 1850s and 1860s show that Cranston was a Democratic stronghold, one of the few in Rhode Island. It had never elected a Republican state senator. Nor was it only South Providence that voted Democratic; in fact, the rural western voting district had often run up larger Democratic majorities than the predominantly suburban eastern district. After the annexation Cranston remained staunchly Democratic until the election of its first Republican state senator in 1884.¹⁷

It is also an exaggeration to suggest, as at least two local historians do, that the northeastern part of Cranston was dominated by the Irish and the rest of the town by Yankee farmers.¹⁸ There were indeed many Irish in South Providence, but there was also a heavy Irish concentration in Spragueville, and Irish residents were scattered throughout the town. Of the table 2 sample for rural Cranston, 43 percent were foreign-born, and most of these were Irish. That is very close to the 46 percent foreign-born component in the combined suburban parts of Cranston.

Further, it was the suburban area that wanted to be annexed to Providence as early as 1854, and it was the rural area that prevented that move until 1868. The motives for annexation must be sought in suburban preferences, not in rural politics.

Annexation had first been raised as an issue as early as 1825, when the northeastern corner of Cranston was still rural. At that time Providence tried to acquire territory there, including a potential site for a quarantine hospital at Field's Point, but Cranstonians showed no interest in the city's proposal.¹⁹ The town did give serious consideration to annexation proposals in 1854 and 1867, though it finally rejected them in both cases.

As a result of rapid industrial growth, Providence was booming throughout the mid-nineteenth century, and its developed area spilled across the city's boundaries deep into what was then North Providence and Cranston.²⁰ During these years Cranston's population was increasingly rapidly; between 1850 and 1865 it

more than doubled, reaching a total of 9,177 in 1865, the fastest growth rate in the state.²¹ Both in 1854 and in 1867, proposals that Providence annex northeastern Cranston were favored by those in that area and overwhelmingly opposed by those in the more rural western section of town. Despite the defeat of the 1867 annexation referendum, reported the *Providence Evening Press*, "the inhabitants in that portion which it is proposed to annex are nearly unanimous in favor of becoming 'part and parcel' of the city."²²

By the time of the 1867 vote, Providence had such basic city services as street lighting, sewers, a fire alarm system, a fire department of 117 men, and a police force of about 100. Mayor Thomas A. Doyle had launched an ambitious program of improvements; the fire and police departments were expanding, new sewers were being installed, and an improved municipal water system was planned.²³

Cranston did not have services like these, a shortcoming that was proving increasingly serious. Firefighting was not the responsibility of the town government. When fire destroyed a large cotton mill in Cranston in March 1867, people worked to save a small adjacent building by covering its roof with wet carpets from the millowner's house. In May of that year a "force of men" was unsuccessful in trying to put out a fire that destroyed a Cranston tavern.²⁴

The town government was having trouble protecting the quality of life in the suburban areas. In 1852 the town council had heard protests from residents that "the bussiness of slawtering cattelle and the keeping of hogs in considerable quantity in the northeasterly part of this town have become a nuisance." Slaughterhouses and hog pens continued to plague the area for the next fifteen years, despite the town's efforts at prohibition, regulation, and licensing. Residents complained repeatedly about the smell, but to no avail. At one point the town's board of health even admitted that its orders were being ignored.²⁵

It is unclear whether crime was on the rise in Cranston in 1867 and 1868, but there were a number of incidents that were reported in the Providence newspapers, including muggings and burglars chloroforming people in their beds (though not fatally). In March 1868 the *Providence Evening Press* referred to a house in South Providence that was "occupied by known thieves, pickpockets and cracksmen." After looting broke out at a mill fire in Cranston in July 1867, the *Evening Press* called for the creation of a "fire police" to control crowds in the future. At this time the town had only ten constables and eighteen special constables.²⁶

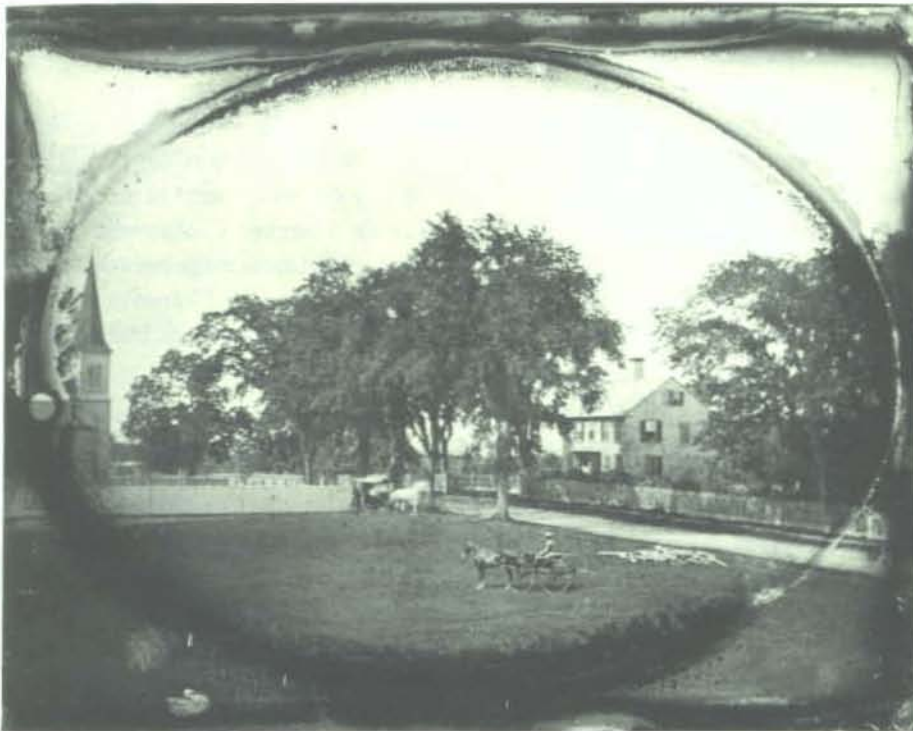
The inadequacy of police protection in the growing town became a more serious problem in late 1867 and early 1868, especially in the Dogtown neighborhood. In June 1867 Providence had passed a tough new liquor ordinance requiring tavern keepers to secure licenses costing at least two hundred dollars. Even with these licenses they were not allowed to sell liquor on Sundays or to women at any time, and a number of license applications were denied altogether.²⁷ To avoid the new law, some tavern keepers moved across the city line, bringing their disorderly clientele with them. In October the *Evening Press* reported that

the south part of the city is very much annoyed Sundays by the open rum shops which are permitted on the border a short distance over the city line in Cranston. Some of the most notorious persons who formerly kept dens on Plane street are now to be found in Cranston dealing out their fiery liquids Sundays. Large numbers resort there from the city and return at night crazed by rum. . . . Last Sunday, and Sunday before last, there were regular fights in Cranston contiguous to these rum holes. Next Sunday, another is arranged, which is to take place at Dogtown, between the denizens of that classic locality, and persons from this city who are in the habit of resorting there. It would seem that such

notorious haunts which are in operation Sunday after Sunday might be reached by the authorities of Cranston, and probably would be, did the town have a police, or officers detached for patrol duty, whose business it should be to look after such things.²⁸

Cranston officials were well aware of the problems, but a solution eluded them. In November 1867 the Cranston Town Council passed an ordinance to control intoxication and vagrancy and agreed to arrange with Providence to jail violators there. In April 1868 the council appointed four special constables to patrol South Providence on Sundays. But despite these efforts demon rum remained troublesome until the 1868 annexation.²⁹

The suburban need for annexation was obvious, declared the *Providence Morning Herald* in May 1868; "Certainly the government of the city is more efficient than



This rare daguerreotype view of Cranston shows William Daboll's home on Elmwood Avenue, circa 1850. RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 6959).

the one by which [the Cranston suburbs] are now ruled, while the number of their residents whose places of business are in Providence, is so great that the financial interests of the city and these suburbs is identical." The suburban area's "addition to the city will extend to it the benefit of a fire department, police force, [and] clean and well lighted streets," said the *Providence Daily Journal*.³⁰

Cranstonians approved the proposed annexation on 21 May 1868. There was little suspense in the vote, with residents "considering the question as already settled," reported the *Providence Evening Press*. The town's eastern district voted 352 to 124 in favor of the proposal; the few who bothered to vote in the western district also supported the change, 74 to 27.³¹

The annexation also needed Providence's approval. Since it seemed so clearly to benefit the suburban area, Mayor Doyle felt obliged to assure his councilmen that it would benefit the city as well. "Although at the time of union it may seem to be more favorable to the part annexed, yet in reality the larger community derives the greater benefit," Doyle said, and he predicted that "when brought under our municipal regulations [the new area] will rapidly increase in value." The city needed more waterfront and more land for industrial growth, and a park could be built at Field's Point, said Doyle. The council approved the annexation after much debate, and the General Assembly voted final approval on 10 June.³²

As a result of the annexation, the *Providence Morning Herald* observed, "the town of Cranston becomes more distinctively a farming community, and is relieved of the large expenses incident to the quasi city character of the territory annexed." The annexation cost Cranston about 6,000 residents, leaving it with only 4,822 people by the time of the U.S. census of 1870. In return for the ceded territory, Cranston received fifty thousand dollars from Providence. In addition, the town was able to reduce its limited services, cutting nearly two-thirds of the men from its constabulary, and it lowered its tax rate from \$.90 per \$100 in assessed property in 1868 to \$.75 in 1869.³³

Providence immediately set to work improving the annexed territory. Mayor Doyle visited the area in July, smelled the slaughterhouses, and apparently promised a reporter he would solve the problem. At least some of the slaughterhouses moved to Pawtucket that same year. Under Doyle's leadership the city also put up street signs and planned other street improvements, as well as an extension of the fire alarm system. More importantly, the Providence police were able to reestablish law and order. "The open sale of liquor, which has been carried on extensively Sundays, was not to be seen, and there was much less drunkenness and rowdiness than usual," reported the *Providence Evening Press*.³⁴

Annexation was proving an immediate success, benefiting virtually everyone. Some believed that more of Cranston's territory would be annexed in the future. Commenting on Doyle's annexation proclamation of 12 June 1868, the *Providence Morning Herald* declared that the annexation was "to be followed, we suppose, by the like supremacy over 'all parts that thereunto adjacent lie.'"³⁵



The *Morning Herald's* prediction was frustrated by a change in thought among suburbanites. Before the 1868 annexation residents of South Providence and Elmwood had been like city dwellers without city services, mired in an undesirable situation they longed to correct. By the 1890s, however, Cranstonians were beginning to see suburban life not as an inferior transitional stage between rural and urban living but as a permanent and desirable alternative. Cranston was not to become a ward of Providence, nor to rival it, local editor Thomas S. Hammond wrote proudly in 1895:

Cranston is to be a city of homes. The conditions of its existence and growth are widely different from those of any other city and town in Rhode Island. We are—and we are to remain, no matter how nearly the most sanguine hopes of growth are realized—a community of neighbors, a collection of adjoining homesteads.³⁶

Cranston's rural character had not lasted long after the annexation. Providence was in a period of tremendous industrial and commercial growth, and this growth spurred Cranston's development as a bedroom community. Between 1865 and 1900 the population of Providence more than tripled, reaching 176,000 by the turn of the century. The acquisition of large chunks of territory—from North Providence in 1873 and 1874 and Johnston in 1898, as well as from Cranston—contributed to this increase.³⁷ Development soon sprawled across the line from Providence into Cranston again, pushing the town's population to 10,575 by 1895, more than had lived in Cranston before the 1868 annexation. Then, during the next fifteen years, Cranston's population exploded, reaching 21,107 in 1910.³⁸

Industrial development and employment did not match population growth in Cranston. "There has been little successful manufacturing done in town aside from that carried on at the Cranston Print Works," wrote Richard M. Bayles in an 1891 local history. The print works was hardly a model of success; during a severe national depression that had started in 1873, the Spragues were unable to pay their debts and saw their manufacturing empire collapse. In 1888 the vacant print works was reopened by B. B. & R. Knight, but the factory employed only two hundred people in 1891, a fraction of the work force twenty years before. Although some new enterprises had been established by the early 1890s, they were small. Factories employing a total of a few hundred people produced woolen goods, jewelry, safes, and beer. Other employers between 1890 and 1910 included a stable for streetcar horses, and later a trolley barn, in Arlington and vegetable farms in the central part of town. At least a few dozen jobs were created in the 1870s and 1880s by the opening of the state prison, poorhouse, and insane asylum at Howard.³⁹

By 1910 the town still had no significant commercial center and no bank, theater, bookstore, or department store. Lawyers and other professionals living in Cranston tended to have their offices in Providence. There were a few businesses scattered around town, but people generally did most of their shopping in the city. Most retail advertisements in the local newspaper were for Providence stores.⁴⁰ Agriculture accounted for a much smaller part of the local work force in 1905 than it had in 1865. Instead, there was a sharp increase in white-collar and nonindustrial blue-collar workers, as a comparison of tables 1 and 3 shows. Most of the 1,222 white-collar employees and 1,838 industrial workers listed in the 1905 state census report apparently commuted to out-of-town jobs, since there was relatively little employment available in Cranston.

"Cranston seems destined to be a home rather than a manufacturing town," wrote local historian J. Earl Clauson in 1904. Developers had begun building new

Table 3
Occupational Categories by Place of
Residence, 1905

OCCUPATION	PROVIDENCE	CRANSTON	EDGEWOOD (1910 SAMPLE)
Farming	*	4%	*
Farm labor	*	7%	3%
Industrial labor	35%	34%	27%
Other manual work	38%	34%	17%
Nonmanual work	26%	22%	53%
Total	99%	101%^b	100%
<i>Number categorized</i>	63,371	5,480	109

SOURCES: *Advance Sheets of the 1905 Rhode Island Census*; U.S. census schedules, 1910.

NOTE: The 1905 figures were compiled from partially tabulated data in the *Advance Sheets*, pp. 128-36, 176-96. The 1910 figures for Edgewood represent a sample from the U.S. census schedules. For details of the sampling method, see "The Suburban Vision."

* Less than 1%.

^b Percentages do not add up to 100% because of rounding.

suburban neighborhoods in the 1870s—Oaklawn on the western railroad line, Auburn on the eastern railroad line near Roger Williams Park. By 1910 each of these neighborhoods had a mix of blue-collar and white-collar workers. Pawtuxet remained a sleepy mill village, although with a larger middle class than it had previously had. Knightsville and Cranston Print Works Village were almost solidly blue-collar. The newer neighborhoods of Arlington and Eden Park housed blue-collar workers as well as businessmen, while Edgewood, Meshanticut Park, and Wayland Park sought a more affluent image.⁴¹

The developer of Meshanticut Park, John M. Dean, included a twenty-acre landscaped park in his project. He and other developers also tried to boost the prestige of their neighborhoods through deed restrictions, which might set minimum costs for house construction or forbid the use of the land for any "immoral purpose commonly considered a nuisance in cities." According to the *Cranston City Times*, "even if there are no specific provisions in the deeds . . . there is always an understanding that the selling of lots shall be conducted in a manner conducive to the gathering together of settlers who will be agreeable to each other and each promote the [neighborhood's] general idea."⁴²

Though most suburban homes were densely clustered, almost all were single-family or two-family houses with yards, an improvement over housing in central Providence. In choosing names for the new streets and neighborhoods, developers tried to promote images of a healthy, leafy refuge from the city; besides the major developments mentioned above, there were subdivisions named Hygeia Park, Shady Nook, Oakhurst, and Chestnut Hill. In their advertising, however, developers also emphasized such urban amenities as city water, gas, and streetcar lines. Suburban home owners would have the best of both worlds.⁴³

Commuting to Providence was easy, even from deep within Cranston. Electric trolleys were introduced in the 1890s, and more routes were soon added. By 1906 every home in eastern Cranston was within a few blocks of a trolley line. Trolleys ran on all major streets into the city, serving parts of Cranston as far south as the Warwick town line. By 1909 a crosstown trolley route along Park Avenue allowed people to travel from one end of town to the other without having to go through Providence. Trains provided convenient commuter transportation as well. Automobile travel was also becoming common; by 1908 there were 3,500 cars registered in the state, and by 1910 chauffeurs were common in affluent Edgewood. According to a newspaper article of that year, Park Avenue was "much frequented by automobiles."⁴⁴

By 1895 new neighborhoods and old villages were merging into a splotchy and haphazard grid of streets along the Providence city line. Most of the lots there were still vacant, however, awaiting the flood of new suburbanites who would arrive in the next fifteen years.⁴⁵

Cranston's town government was paying much more attention to city services by the 1890s than it had in the 1860s, weakening local interest in further annexation by Providence.⁴⁶ In the 1890s and early 1900s the town widened and rebuilt many of its major thoroughfares. "Cranston has as lively an interest in the subject of good roads as any town in the state, or in New England," declared Thomas Hammond in 1895 (although he did not draw an explicit contrast, he had noted a week before that "if [Providence] had properly cared for her streets and other public works there would not be so much money needed to rescue them from their poor condition now"). In 1904 J. Earl Clauson was able to claim that "Cranston can boast of better streets than any [other] town in Rhode Island."⁴⁷

Besides their considerable expenditures for roads, Cranston's budgets in the 1890s included money for street lighting and a police department. Firefighting was still done by volunteers, but by 1909 the town was helping to support five volunteer fire companies and was installing a fire alarm system, and it was paying for fire hydrants on mains connected with the Providence water system. Cranston also paid for the operation of four public libraries and for garbage removal everywhere except Knightsville and the sparsely developed western half of town.⁴⁸

These services were defended by town officials and leaders of the local Republican party, many of whom were involved in real estate development. But the services also depended on the willingness of supporters to attend annual town meetings and vote down angry people who wanted lower taxes. Describing the meetings as unpleasant gatherings of four hundred or five hundred men, an 1895 editorial in the *Providence News* argued that "the town has simply outgrown the antiquated system. . . . The financial town meetings have become simply a struggling, wrangling, yelling, axe-grinding crowd, and it may be truthfully said that today the town of Cranston has no responsible government, so far as management of its finances are concerned."⁴⁹

The *News* editorial appeared as Cranston residents were preparing to vote on the adoption of a city charter. This charter would eliminate the town meeting and put financial decisions in the hands of a city council. In another editorial on the subject, this one in the first issue of the proleptically named *Cranston City Times*, editor Thomas Hammond observed that "the controlling motive for the change from a town to a city form of government is a desire on the part of a very large proportion of the people for a more orderly conduct of the town's business." Hammond's editorial laid out the basic arguments that charter advocates would make over the next fifteen years: the charter would render government businesslike, promote growth, and block further annexation by Providence.⁵⁰

"The more perfect organization and orderly methods have become an absolute necessity, if Cranston is to maintain its autonomy and continue its growth," wrote Hammond.

There is civic pride also; a desire to foster the rapid growth of a community that has shown unmistakable signs of attaining to large importance and population in the very near future. We do not wish to lose our individuality. We know very well we may be subjected to the risk at no distant day. We do not wish to lose ourselves in a large city.

Hammond also argued that the city of Cranston would exemplify "some of those advanced ideas about municipal government that have of late attracted

Farm workers sort produce at the Budlong Truck Farm on Pontiac Avenue. Courtesy of the Cranston Historical Society.



such extended and favorable notice," and he contrasted these progressive ideas with big-city corruption in Chicago and New York. Providence's government, he wrote two weeks later, is "very unbusinesslike."⁵¹

Although mayors were chosen by a broad electorate, the state constitution permitted only substantial taxpayers to vote for city council members. Opponents of the proposed charter suspected that it represented a plot to disenfranchise "registry voters," the third of the Cranston electorate that failed to meet the property requirement. Hammond had no sympathy for such arguments. "There are few registry voters but could easily qualify as property voters, the required holding of real estate is so ridiculously small and the opportunities to acquire it in Cranston are so plentiful," he wrote, adding that workingmen spent more on tobacco than they would on house lots.⁵²

The city charter was defeated in a referendum on 14 May 1895, partly by registry voters and partly by farmers who feared that city government would mean costly services and higher taxes. There was strong opposition in the rural part of town and in Cranston Print Works Village, the areas least like suburban residential neighborhoods. The townwide vote was close, however: 414 to 390. In Edgewood and Auburn, the *Evening Telegram* reported the next day, four-fifths of the voters supported the charter. "They are pining against the restraints to progress that they claim the west end of town is putting upon them," the *Telegram* explained. "They seem to rest under the impression that they are not getting full return for the taxes they contribute."⁵³

"The city boomers are, of course, very much disappointed," said the *Providence Daily Journal*, using the popular term for the charter advocates. "Some wanted to take the vote cast as the basis for a petition to set off Auburn, Arlington and Edgewood as a district apart from the other sections, inasmuch as their sympathies seem so much dissimilar and their desires so antagonistic. Others wanted to settle the matter immediately by applying for annexation to Providence." The *Journal* attributed the charter's defeat to interest in annexation, particularly in Arlington.⁵⁴

Annexationists and advocates of a city charter were deadlocked. When city boomers again tried to pass a city charter in 1904, voters rejected it overwhelmingly, 868-376. All of the town's five voting districts were opposed, with the largest negative margin recorded in Knightsville and Arlington and the smallest in Edgewood. Opposition by registry voters again helped defeat the charter, the *Evening Telegram* reported, but "the real reason, as it was heard yesterday, was the desire of the residents of the thickly settled parts of the town to become a part of the city of Providence."⁵⁵ Nevertheless, annexationists were unable to bring their own proposal to a vote.

If the city charter advocates were unable to break the deadlock, it was not for want of effort. After the 1895 vote the *Telegram* had reported that "the full Republican ring machine was in operation" on behalf of the charter, and the newspaper went on to accuse Republican leaders of fraud and intimidation.⁵⁶ The Republican city boomers were in fact waging a determined campaign in support of a charter, which they saw as the best way to ensure continued local spending for the roads and schools that were making Cranston attractive to suburban home buyers.

These men faced equally determined opposition. During Cranston's final years of town meetings, this opposition was headed by an aggressive lawyer named Edward M. Sullivan. Sullivan was a Democrat, at a time when nearly every officeholder in Cranston was a Republican. He had been born at Cranston Print Works Village in 1875, the son of a stonemason, and he was politically allied with the town's working-class interests.⁵⁷

Sullivan crusaded against high taxes and excessive spending. At the annual town meeting in 1907, for example, he tried unsuccessfully to reduce expenditures for roads, police, and new school buildings. In 1908 he succeeded in limiting spending so strictly that by winter the town was obviously running out of money. When the town council convened a special financial meeting on 6 February 1909, Sullivan and his supporters packed the hall and voted to adjourn before any further spending was authorized. Two days later the school committee closed the schools for lack of funds, precipitating a crisis, and on 24 February voters met again and approved enough extra money to keep the schools open through the end of the school year. Undaunted, Sullivan and his supporters took control of the town financial meeting in April and reduced spending for roads.⁵⁸

The school closing galvanized the city boomers into action once again. In January 1910, at a secret meeting in Providence, about forty Cranston property owners decided to make another attempt at a city charter. This time, using new tactics, they would prevail.⁵⁹

In 1895 and 1904 city charter advocates had first won state approval for a charter and then sought ratification by Cranston voters. Now, however, they proposed giving voters no say in the matter; Cranston would be made a city solely on the initiative of the General Assembly. The legislature had a duty to save Cranston from its more irresponsible people, they argued. Abandoning all efforts to curry public favor, they openly invoked the need to defend property interests. Former Cranston state representative Zenas W. Bliss, who had been elected lieutenant governor in 1909, bewailed the ruin of the town's roads. Representative Richard W. Jennings, who had taken Bliss's legislative seat, told the House of Representatives about deteriorating services and rhetorically wondered "who can estimate to what degree such a condition of affairs has deterred capitalists and homeseekers from settling in town."⁶⁰ Hammond took up the refrain:

The citizens can not but realize that under a city form of government, Cranston will grow faster. . . . People of means will feel safer and more ready to come among us and build their homes. They will realize that their children will have the best of school privileges and that the roads will be looked after better.⁶¹

Land records and other documents indicate that Cranston's growth rate was of personal concern to many of the city boomers. Bliss himself had dabbled in real estate in partnership with another boomer, Cranston town clerk Daniel D. Waterman, on a thirty-acre tract near Knightsville and on a nearby subdivision to be called South Olneyville.⁶² Town Council president John M. Dean, whom the Republicans would run as their candidate for Cranston's first mayor, sold lots in Meshanticut Park and Wayland Park.⁶³ Joseph A. Latham, the town engineer who had been a leader in the fight for a charter in 1895 and who opened the secret meeting in 1910, sold house lots in Edgewood and West Arlington.⁶⁴ William H. Hall, a former state senator from Cranston who urged legislative approval of the 1910 charter, was described in a 1908 biographical sketch as "one of the oldest and most successful real estate dealers and brokers in Providence" and an early developer of Edgewood.⁶⁵ Harry T. Bodwell, who served as clerk of the secret meeting and had passed petitions for the city charter in 1909, was in partnership with Dean in developing part of Meshanticut Park and a subdivision near Knightsville.⁶⁶ James A. Budlong II, who had also passed petitions for the charter in 1909, had a share in at least two major subdivisions, one north of Knightsville and the other in Auburn; his family, which had been prominent in Republican politics, was among the town's largest developers, selling dozens of lots in Eden Park and elsewhere.⁶⁷

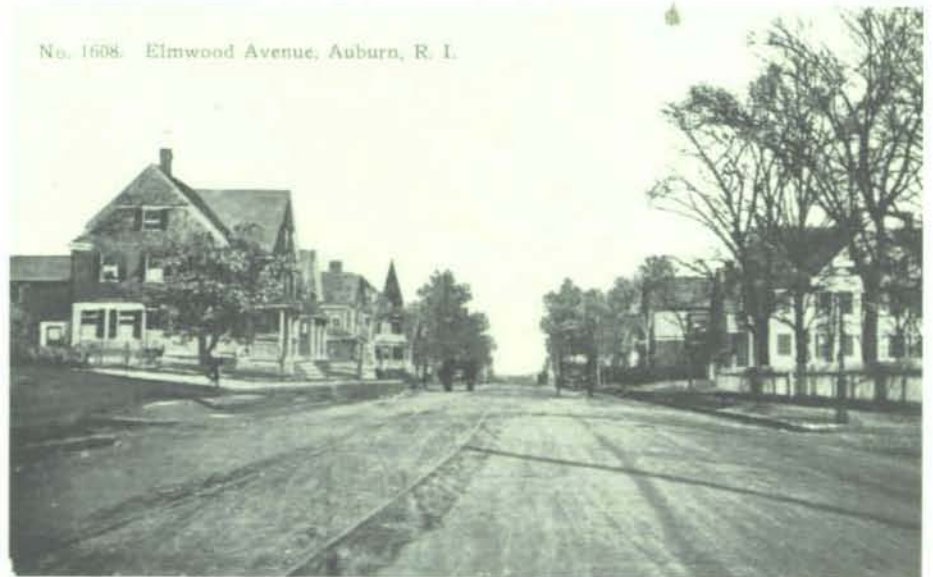
Some Democratic legislators questioned why the city boomers wanted to avoid a local referendum on the charter. Bliss assured them that the charter had support, at least among the better class of people. According to the *Providence Daily Journal*, "he declared that two-thirds of the taxable property in the town was in favor of such action."⁶⁸

The bill incorporating Cranston as a city was quickly passed by both houses of the overwhelmingly Republican legislature and signed into law on 10 March 1910 by Governor Aram J. Pothier. The action was taken in time to prevent the holding of the annual town meeting.⁶⁹

But the city boomers were soon stunned by what seemed to be a crushing setback. In the April election Edward Sullivan, that threat to suburban property interests, won control of the city government that was supposed to prompt his political demise. Democrats also won a majority in the council and thus took control of city spending.⁷⁰ Sullivan won the mayoralty by turning the election into a referendum on the Republicans' underhanded way of securing the charter. In numerous and lengthy letters to Providence newspapers, he and his supporters attacked the city boomers' sneaky tactics.⁷¹

Some of Sullivan's supporters had also resurrected the old idea of annexing all of Cranston to Providence. "If we are to become a city, let us do so with the assurance we will have some of those things a city should have and does have. In other words, go into Providence, where we get fire, police, highways and sewer systems that are no experiment at a [lower] cost," wrote one supporter. But annexation was a dying issue. Sullivan himself, who had backed annexation in 1904, scrupulously avoided the subject in 1910. This seems to have been a wise political move. Although there was clearly much public annoyance with the Republicans' tactics, there was also a surprising amount of resignation among opponents of independent cityhood, the *Evening Tribune* reported. In 1904 there had been support for annexation in middle-class Edgewood and Pawtuxet, where some residents saw it as a way to maintain and improve local services. By 1910, however, most people in the middle-class suburban areas hoped either that Cranston would secure a city charter or that their own areas might split off from the rest of Cranston to form a new town.⁷²

No. 1608. Elmwood Avenue, Auburn, R. I.



Postcard view of homes on Elmwood Avenue, Auburn, circa 1920. RIHS Collection (RHi X4 33).

As an alternative to annexation by Providence, the proposed city charter may well have gained middle-class support through the prospect that Cranston could have both city services *and* low taxes. In 1909-10 the tax rate in Cranston was \$1.30 per \$100 of assessed property value; in Providence it was \$1.65. Despite Cranston's low tax rate, the Cranston schools were able to spend more money per student than the schools in any other Rhode Island town except Newport. The advocates of improved services had in fact sought to raise the Cranston tax rate only as high as \$1.40.⁷³

Considerations of political power may also have played a part in middle-class support for the charter. Cranston's middle-class voters had controlled municipal government until Sullivan became a serious obstacle in 1908, and they expected that the city charter would allow them to regain their dominance. Included in an annexation to Providence, of course, they would exercise no such power.⁷⁴

Demographic changes may have been another factor contributing to diminished interest in annexation. By 1905 Cranston's middle class had become nearly as large, proportionally, as Providence's (see table 3); in some of the rapidly growing suburban areas it was much larger. Cranston no longer had to feel like the poorer cousin of Providence.⁷⁵

For all these reasons, most likely, middle-class Cranstonians were now adopting the city boomers' ideas, even if they did not agree with the boomers' political tactics. Their acceptance of a separate suburban destiny may be seen in developments as momentous as the fading support for annexation and as mundane as the choice of a name for a new Cranston social group: the Over the Line Club.⁷⁶

Sullivan was not oblivious to this shift. In his inaugural address of 2 May 1910, he took the uncharacteristic role of a moderate politician. Accepting the city charter as a *fait accompli*, he proposed building a new school, improving roads, and handling municipal finances in a more businesslike way. "Let us co-operate as citizens of Cranston actuated by civic pride," he said, for "such co-operation will go far to ultimately make Cranston a model city."⁷⁷ In victory, Sullivan had finally accepted the suburban outlook of his adversaries.



The city boomers were only a little ahead of their time in pressing their vision of a city of homes. Cranstonians were coming to appreciate the suburban way of life as a desirable alternative to life in Providence; but as much as they valued the suburban lifestyle, they needed services that only cities had provided in the past. Unlike their predecessors in 1868, however, they saw that they could improve local services by incorporating Cranston as a city, and that they could have these services at a lower tax rate than what they would pay if they annexed themselves to Providence. Although motivated by self-interest, the city boomers helped lead their fellow townspeople to this realization. That Cranstonians let the city charter stand, and that Cranston remains to this day an independent community, shows that the suburban public finally came to share that vision.

Cranston's cession of its suburban areas to Providence in 1868 was the first in a series of nineteenth-century territorial expansions for Rhode Island's capital. Cranston's decision to become a city inaugurated another local trend, that of avoiding such annexations. Except for Johnston's cession of a tiny piece of land in 1919, no Providence suburb allowed annexation after 1910. Perhaps because of less fractious local politics, however, most suburban areas found that they did not have to go as far as Cranston and incorporate themselves as cities; they were able to provide adequate services for their residents while retaining town forms of government.⁷⁸

The story of Cranston and its relationship to Providence has become typical throughout the older urban areas of the United States. Since the late nineteenth century, most established suburban areas have no longer voluntarily annexed themselves to cities; instead they have contrived to provide needed services on their own. Class differences between suburbs and cities, which played no more than a minor part in Cranston's debates on annexation, have strengthened this trend, as has a growing sense that urban problems are unsolvable.⁷⁹ But the roots of the change lie elsewhere: fundamental to the modern conception of suburbia is the desire for a way of life that is neither rural nor urban, a desire that was strongly evident when Cranston chose to become a city of homes.



School children and their teachers during recess at the newly built Eden Park School, circa 1897. Photo by the General Photo Company, Providence. Courtesy of the Cranston Historical Society.

Notes

1. *Providence Daily Journal*, 19 Apr. 1910.
2. Robert Eliot Freeman, *Cranston, Rhode Island* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, 1980), 3, 4, 11.
3. Kurt B. Mayer, *Economic Development and Population Growth in Rhode Island* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1953), 40; J. Earl Clauson, *Cranston: A Historical Sketch* (Providence: T. S. Hammond, 1904), 31; Edwin M. Snow, *Report upon the Census of Rhode Island, 1865* (Providence: Providence Press Co., 1867), 54-61, and *Report upon the Census of Rhode Island, 1875* (Providence: Providence Press Co., 1877), 82-95; Rhode Island census schedules, 1865.
4. Snow, *Census, 1865*, xxii; Freeman, *Cranston*, 19-20; census schedules, 1865; John Hutchins Cady, *The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence, 1636-1950* (Providence: Akerman Standard Press, 1957), 133; Samuel Henry Rosenberg, "A History of Street Railways in Rhode Island" (M.A. thesis, University of Rhode Island, 1962), 6-7.
5. *Atlas of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (Providence: D. G. Beers & Co., 1870); *The Providence Directory for the Year 1868* (Providence: Sampson, Davenport & Co., 1868); *Census, 1865*, xx, xxi, xxix-xx; census schedules, 1865.
6. Census schedules, 1865.
7. *Atlas of Rhode Island*.
8. Robert O. Christensen, *Elmwood, Providence* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, 1979), 7-8; William McKenzie Woodward and Edward F. Sanderson, *Providence: A Citywide Survey of Historic Resources* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, 1986), 38-39; Leslie J. Vollmert, *South Providence, Providence* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, 1978), 16-17, 19, 22; D. Scott Molloy, *Rhode Island Transit Album* (Cambridge, Mass.: Boston Street Railway Association, 1978), 4; Rosenberg, "Street Railways," 3, 17; *Atlas of Rhode Island*; Clauson, *Cranston*, 3; Freeman, *Cranston*, 22.
9. In the South Providence sample, 15 of the 69 industrial workers were jewelry workers and 16 were machinists. Census schedules, 1865; *Providence Directory for 1868*. Some of the middle-class men can actually be traced to jobs in Providence. Other jobs, such as clerking, were unlikely to be available in significant numbers in Cranston.
10. Census schedules, 1865; Snow, *Census, 1865*, 5, 8. By 1875, after Cranston had ceded Elmwood and South Providence to the city, that proportion had dropped to 13 percent. Snow, *Census, 1865*, 5, 8.
11. Snow, *Census, 1865*, xx; Woodward and Sanderson, *Providence*, 38; *Providence Directory for 1868*; *Providence Daily Journal*, 8 May 1868.
12. Christensen, *Elmwood*, 5, 9, 10; Woodward and Sanderson, *Providence*, 11.
13. Vollmert, *South Providence*, 16; Snow, *Census, 1865*, xxii.
14. *Providence Morning Herald*, 16 July 1868; Woodward and Sanderson, *Providence*, 53; Vollmert, *South Providence*, 16, 19; *Providence Directory for 1868*; census schedules, 1865.
15. *Providence Daily Journal*, 21 May 1868.
16. Vollmert, *South Providence*, 17. See also Freeman, *Cranston*, 22; Christensen, *Elmwood*, 7; David Marshall, *The Jewel of Providence: An Illustrated History of Roger Williams Park, 1871-1961* (Providence: Providence Parks Department, 1987), 9.
17. *Providence Daily Journal*, 3 Apr. 1851, 8 Apr. 1852, 7-8 Apr. 1853, 6 Apr. 1854, 5 Apr. 1855, 3 Apr. 1856, 2 Apr. 1857, 8 Apr. 1858, 7 Apr. 1859, 5 Apr. 1860, 4 Apr. 1861, 3 Apr. 1862, 2 Apr. 1863, 7 Apr. 1864, 6 Apr. 1865, 5 Apr. 1866, 2 Apr. 1868, 8 Apr. 1869, 7 Apr. 1870, 6 Apr. 1871, 4 Apr. 1872, 3 Apr. 1873, 2 Apr. 1874, 8 Apr. 1875, 6 Apr. 1876, 5 Apr. 1877, 4 Apr. 1878, 3 Apr. 1879, 8 Apr. 1880, 7 Apr. 1881, 6 Apr. 1882, 5 Apr. 1883, 3 Apr. 1884; *Providence Evening Press*, 4 Apr. 1867. See also Richard M. Bayles, ed., *History of Providence County, Rhode Island* (New York: W. W. Preston, 1891), 776.
18. Freeman, *Cranston*, 22; Marshall, *Jewel of Providence*, 9.
19. Clauson, *Cranston*, 31; Samuel B. Cushing, *Map of the City of Providence: from actual survey by Cushing and Walling* (Providence: Gladding & Proud, 1849).
20. William G. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1978), 123-25; Mayer, *Economic Development*, 41; Snow, *Census, 1865*, xxxiii; Henry F. Walling, *Map of Providence County, Rhode Island* (Providence: G. C. Brown, 1851); Cushing, *Map of Providence*.
21. Snow, *Census, 1875*, xxxiii.
22. Clauson, *Cranston*, 34; Cranston Town Council Records, 9:377, 385; *Providence Evening Press*, 21 May 1867.
23. On street lighting, Welcome Arnold Greene, *The Providence Plantations for Two Hundred and Fifty Years* (Providence: J. A. & R. A. Reid, 1886), 119. On sewers, *ibid.*, 96. On fire alarm system, *ibid.*, 89. On size of fire department in 1867, *ibid.*, 122. On size of police force ca. 1868, *ibid.*, 115. On expansion of fire department, *ibid.*, 122. On expansion of police force, *ibid.*, 115-16. On sewer improvements, *Providence Daily Journal*, 2 July 1867; John S. Gilkeson, Jr., *Middle-Class Providence, 1820-1940* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), 85. On water, *Providence Evening Press*, 13, 14 Apr. 1868; *Providence Daily Journal*, 2 June 1868.
24. The limited services provided by the 1867 town budget are listed in Cranston Town Council Records, 9:365. On fires, *Providence Evening Press*, 16 Mar. 1867; *Rhode Island Country Journal*, 8 May 1867; Clauson, *Cranston*, 47.
25. Cranston Town Council Records, 5:413-14, 7:36, 358-59, 9:257-59, 263-64.
26. *Providence Evening Press*, 21 June, 5 Oct., 9 Nov., 13 Dec. 1867; 3, 4 Jan. 1868; 16 July 1867. On constables, Cranston Town Council Records, 9:415-16, 448.
27. *Providence Daily Journal*, 4 June 1867; *Providence Evening Press*, 2, 6 July, 7 Aug. 1867.
28. *Providence Evening Press*, 8 Oct. 1867; see also 21 Oct. 1867.
29. Cranston Town Council Records, 9:423, 435, 10:78; *Providence Evening Press*, 15, 29 June 1868; *Providence Morning Herald*, 23 June 1868.
30. *Providence Morning Herald*, 21 May 1868; *Providence Daily Journal*, 21 May 1868.
31. *Providence Evening Press*, 19 May 1868; Cranston Town Council Records, 10:87. Differing vote counts are given in the press.
32. *Providence Daily Journal*, 8, 26 May 1868; *Providence Evening Press*, 11 June 1868.
33. Snow, *Census, 1875*, xxxviii, xxxiii; *Providence Daily Journal*, 26 May 1868; Cranston Town Council Records, 10:103; *List of Persons and Corporations Assessed in the Town of Cranston for*

- the Year 1868 (Providence: Noah D. Payne, 1868); *List of Persons and Corporations Assessed in the Town of Cranston for the Year 1869* (Providence: Hammond, Angell & Co., 1869).
34. On slaughterhouses, *Providence Morning Herald*, 16 July 1868; Woodward and Sanderson, *Providence*, 34. On street signs, *Providence Evening Press*, 27 July 1868. On fire alarm, *Providence Morning Herald*, 29 June 1868. On police, *Providence Evening Press*, 15 June 1868; see also 29 June 1868.
35. *Providence Morning Herald*, 15 June 1868. The date of the proclamation is in *Providence Evening Press*, 13 June 1868.
36. *Cranston City Times*, 21 May 1895; see also 7 May 1895. For comments on Providence, see 14 May 1895.
37. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island*, 165; Gilkeson, *Middle-Class Providence*, 99; Rhode Island Bureau of Industrial Statistics, *Advance Sheets of the 1905 Rhode Island Census*, pt. 4 of Annual Report for 1906 (Providence: E. L. Freeman, 1907), 18; *Atlas of Rhode Island*; Snow, *Census, 1875*, xxxvi; Mayer, *Economic Development*, 53.
38. *Advance Sheets*, 18; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Abstract of the 14th Census of the United States, 1920* (Washington, D.C., 1923), 56; U.S. census schedules, 1910.
39. Bayles, *Providence County*, 753-54, 756, 758, 761, 763; Freeman, *Cranston*, 21, 32, 37-38, 40-41; Clauson, *Cranston*, 46-47; *Advance Sheets*, 132, 134, 136.
40. *The Cranston Directory*, 1911 (Providence: Sampson & Murdock Co., 1910); *The Providence Directory and Rhode Island Business Directory*, no. 70, for the year commencing May 1, 1910 (Providence Sampson & Murdock Co., 1910); advertising in the April 1910 issues of the *Cranston City Times*.
41. Clauson, *Cranston*, 45; Freeman, *Cranston*, 23-24, 26-29; U.S. census schedules, 1910.
42. Freeman, *Cranston*, 29; Cranston Record of Deeds, e.g., 109:156, 184, 204, 228, 316, 111:516, 518-20, 527; first quotation from Cranston Record of Deeds, 116:167; *Cranston City Times*, 7 May 1895.
43. Cranston Plat Books, 4A:17, 5:36, 6:1, 49, 52, 7:34, 39; see, e.g., advertisement for Eden Park, *Providence Evening Telegram*, 11 May 1895.
44. On the coming of the trolleys and their advantages, Freeman, *Cranston*, 22; Rosenberg, "Street Railways," 21-22. Trolley routes are shown on *Map of the Metropolitan District of Providence Plantations* (Boston: George H. Walker & Co., 1906) and *Map of the Metropolitan District of Providence Plantations* (Boston: Walker Lith. & Pub. Co., 1909). In a letter in the *Providence Daily Journal*, 13 Feb. 1910, a booster of Meshanticut Park called attention to the convenient schedules and comfort of the railroad. On cars, Woodward and Sanderson, *Providence*, 61; U.S. census schedules, 1910, *Providence Evening Tribune*, 13 March 1910.
45. *New Topographical Atlas of Survey of Providence County, Rhode Island* (Philadelphia: Everts & Richards, 1895); J. A. Latham, *Eden Park, Pontiac Avenue, Cranston R.I.* (Boston: George H. Walker & Co., 1895).
46. Cranston had made small cessions of territory in 1873, 1887, and 1892 to let Providence create and expand Roger Williams Park. However, this involved little sacrifice, since it appears that few people, if any, lived there. Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 130; Marshall, *Jewel of Providence*, 5; Woodward and Sanderson, 34-35; *Atlas of Rhode Island*.
47. *Cranston City Times*, 21, 14 May 1895; Clauson, *Cranston*, 44.
48. *Report of the Town Treasurer of the Town of Cranston, R.I., for the Year Ending April 15, 1895* (Providence: Rhode Island Printing Co., 1895); advertisement for Eden Park, *Evening Telegram*, 11 May 1895; *One Hundred and Fifty-Fourth Annual Report of the Town Treasurer and Other Town Officers of the Town of Cranston, R.I., for the Year Ending April 19, 1909* (Providence: T. S. Hammond, 1909); *Cranston City Times*, 21 Apr. 1909, 14 June 1910.
49. *Providence News*, 9 May 1895.
50. *Cranston City Times*, 7 May 1895.
51. *Cranston City Times*, 7, 21 May 1895.
52. *Evening Telegram*, 20 Apr. 1895. On reason for voting restrictions, letter from Richard W. Jennings, *Evening Tribune*, 20 March 1910; the minimum property requirement at that time was two hundred dollars. On approximate number of registry voters, *Providence Journal Almanac*, 1904 (Providence: Providence Journal Co., 1904). Hammond quotation, *Cranston City Times*, 21 May 1895.
53. On reason for farmers' opposition, *Providence News*, 30 Apr. 1895, quoted in *Cranston City Times*, 7 May 1895. On registry voters' opposition and voting results, *Evening Telegram*, 14, 15 May 1895.
54. *Providence Daily Journal*, 15 May 1895.
55. *Evening Telegram*, 7 June 1904.
56. *Evening Telegram*, 15 May 1895.
57. Sullivan was described as an "indiscreet broiler" with "a lot of brass" in the *Evening Tribune* of 7 Mar. 1910. The *Cranston City Times* criticized him for threatening people in its 17 Apr. 1907 issue and for "intemperate speech" in its 3 Nov. 1910 issue. Sullivan's birthdate, early career, and father's occupation appear in Charles Carroll, *Rhode Island: Three Centuries of Democracy* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1932), 3:110. His birthplace is given in Freeman, *Cranston*, 44.
58. *Cranston City Times*, 17 Apr. 1907, 22 Apr. 1908, 20 Jan., 10, 24 Feb., 21 Apr. 1909; *Providence Journal Almanac*, 1910.
59. *Cranston City Times*, 31 Mar. 1909, 3 Feb. 1910.
60. Procedure of previous elections, *Evening Telegram*, 15 Apr. 1895; *Cranston City Times*, 16 Mar. 1904. Comments by politicians, *Providence Daily Journal*, 26 Feb. (Jennings), 2 March 1910 (Bliss); *Evening Tribune*, 11 Feb. 1910.
61. *Cranston City Times*, 10 Mar. 1910.
62. Cranston Record of Deeds, 112:124, 116:169, 377; Cranston Plat Books, 4A:9.
63. See, e.g., Cranston Record of Deeds, 109:228, 110:306, 112:552, 116:167.
64. *Evening Telegram*, 16 Apr. 1895; *Cranston City Times*, 24 Mar. 1909, 3 Feb. 1910; Cranston Record of Deeds, e.g., 110:430, 112:188, 266.
65. *Representative Men and Old Families of Rhode Island* (Chicago: J. H. Beers & Co., 1908), 1:980-81; *Providence Daily Journal*, 3 Apr. 1884; *Evening Tribune*, 11 Feb. 1910.
66. *Cranston City Times*, 3 Feb. 1910, 24 Mar. 1909; Cranston Record of Deeds, 111:309, Cranston Plat Books, 7:37; Cranston Record of Deeds, 115:84, Cranston Plat Books, 7:33.
67. *Cranston City Times*, 24 Mar. 1909; Cranston Record of Deeds, 111:437, 446, 448, 457. On the Budlongs' political

- involvement, *Providence Journal Almanac*, e.g., 1887, 1905; *Evening Telegram*, 15 May 1895. Cranston Record of Deeds, vol. 109, is almost entirely filled with Budlong sales.
68. *Providence Daily Journal*, 2 Mar. 1910. See 3 Mar. 1910 for Democratic suspicion.
69. *Providence Daily Journal*, 5, 9, 11 Mar. 1910. Republicans held 29 of 38 seats in the state Senate and 62 of 72 in the House of Representatives. *Providence Journal Almanac*, 1910. On Pothier's approval, *Evening Tribune*, 20 Apr. 1910. See also *Cranston City Times*, 3 Nov. 1910.
70. *Evening Tribune*, 20 Apr. 1910.
71. Letters in *Providence Daily Journal*, 6, 13, 27 Feb., 6, 13, 20 Mar. 1910; letters in *Evening Tribune*, 6 Feb., 6, 13, 27 Mar. 1910. Analysis of vote, *Evening Tribune*, 20 Apr. 1910; *Providence Daily Journal*, 20 Apr. 1910.
72. On Democrats' positions on annexation, *Providence Daily Journal*, 13 Feb. 1910; see also letter by Frank E. Searll of Eden Park, 27 Feb. 1910. On Sullivan's earlier position, *Cranston City Times*, 2 Mar. 1904. On resignation about cityhood, *Evening Tribune*, 6 Feb. 1910. On support for annexation in 1904, *Evening Telegram*, 7 June 1904. On Edgewood's desire for services, *Evening Tribune*, 13 Mar. 1910, letter. On splitting off from Cranston, *Cranston City Times*, 28 Apr. 1909; *Providence Daily Journal*, 2, 5 Mar. 1910; *Evening Tribune*, 20 Feb. 1910. On effect of charter on chances for annexation, letter from Richard W. Jennings, *Evening Tribune*, 20 Mar. 1910. Voting results seem to confirm middle-class support for the city charter. In the mayoral election, Dean won majorities in middle-class Edgewood and Pawtuxet, while Sullivan won the election with the support of less prosperous Arlington and Cranston Print Works Village. *Cranston City Times*, 21 Apr. 1910. Some separatists in the middle-class areas also supported Sullivan. *Providence Daily Journal*, 19, 20 Apr. 1910, letter on 24 Apr. 1910.
73. On tax rates, *Cranston City Times*, 21 Apr. 1909; *Providence Journal Almanac*, 1910. On school spending, *24th Report of the Commissioner of Industrial Statistics* (Providence, E. L. Freeman Co., 1911), 99. Cranston residents were aware their schools were a bargain. *Cranston City Times*, 10 Mar. 1909. On advocacy of \$1.40 tax rate, *Cranston City Times*, 14 Apr. 1909.
74. The *Evening Tribune* of 13 Mar. 1910 referred to "the cabal which runs the town from the Edgewood-Pawtuxet end" under the town government. On middle-class surprise at the loss of political power, *Providence Daily Journal*, 13 Mar., 1 May 1910; *Evening Tribune*, 20 Apr. 1910.
75. On rapid growth, *Cranston City Times*, 22 Apr. 1908; *Evening Tribune*, 2 Mar. 1910; comments by William Hall.
76. *Evening Tribune*, 10 Mar. 1910.
77. *Cranston City Manual, or Organization of the City Government from May 2, 1910 to Jan. 2, 1911* (Providence: Providence Press, 1911), 28-32.
78. Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 130; Ralph S. Mohr, *Governors for Three Hundred Years, 1638-1959, Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*, rev. ed. (Providence: Oxford Press, 1959), 37.
79. Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 153-55.



Providence Housing Authority inspectors survey a neighborhood slated for redevelopment. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

Housing the Poor: The Early Years of Public Housing in Providence

NORMA LASALLE DAOUST

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Sailing schedule of the Fabre Line, circa 1918. Between 1911 and 1934 the Fabre Line transported thousands of immigrants to Providence from Italy and Portugal. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6832).

Norma LaSalle Daoust is a professor of history at the Community College of Rhode Island. She wishes to thank Dr. Bruce M. Stave of the University of Connecticut for his comments and suggestions on this essay.

One of the major problems confronting American urban dwellers during the Depression decade was the lack of adequate housing. Throughout the 1930s residential construction plummeted and existing structures fell into disrepair. In response to these conditions, the federal government during the administrations of Franklin Roosevelt devoted significant portions of its New Deal program to housing. Not only did the government try to prevent further foreclosures and help workers purchase homes, but under the United States Housing Authority it embarked on an agenda aimed at providing decent shelter for low-income people, an effort that was to have a visible impact on the urban landscape; as one study points out, "the single most important group of federal policies and programs that had a direct effect on the physical environment of urban neighborhoods is embodied in the federal government's housing program."¹

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that federal New Deal plans were sometimes transformed on the local level.² Providence, especially in its implementation of a public housing authority, provided a good example of this process. When we consider how the city's housing program was realized in the neighborhoods, which groups benefited most, and to what extent the program in its early years reached its goal of aiding those most in need of adequate housing, we can see that local forces were clearly at work.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, Providence—like Philadelphia, but unlike Boston, New York, or Chicago—was known as a city of homes. Except for a few isolated cases, there were no huge tenement buildings with a score or more of families crowded into small apartments. Most people in Providence lived in detached houses containing two or three families. With the advent of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, however, the city became more crowded. By the 1920s the typical housing unit contained fewer rooms than in 1900. Inner-city neighborhoods had been evacuated by the middle class, and houses built a generation earlier for one family were converted into small apartments.

By the 1930s districts such as the waterfront of Portuguese Fox Point, the black-inhabited West End, the Jewish neighborhood of the North End, and Italian Federal Hill were overcrowded and run down. Although these neighborhoods were free of the worst abuses of the big cities, such as cellar apartments and severe congestion, they contained a number of tenements (usually housing three to five families) in need of major repair. Exposing the shoddy condition of some of the larger tenements in Federal Hill, a local newspaper, the *Italian Review*, placed the blame not on the residents but on the landlords, who simply wanted to make as large a profit as possible, and on city officials, who ignored the problem.

Stairways are dingy looking, and one often has to light a match if he wishes to ascend without injury. Some of these six tenement houses have reached a stage that a blind man would be able to label them as "pig pens." These conditions exist mostly in houses owned by people of means, who on account of having attained a comfortable sum, have isolated themselves or moved away from the

people of their community. . . . Health conditions in our community have reached a point where they should be thoroughly investigated by the health authorities of the city.³

A Department of Commerce census in 1934 found that one-third of the city's residents were ill-housed.⁴

Civic leaders had shown an interest in the problem of substandard housing well before the New Deal. Providence in fact claimed to be a pioneer in slum clearance, for in the early 1900s wealthy civic-minded reformers in the city had formed the Improved Tenement Corporation. Using private financing, in 1906 this organization built or renovated three tenements, which were then rented to low-income families. However, because of a loss of interest on the part of its supporters, coupled with inadequate funds, the corporation was liquidated in 1921.⁵

The Depression decade saw a reduction of home ownership, increased evictions for nonpayment of rent, and a further deterioration of already substandard units, as landlords lacked the funds for repairs. As early as 1930 the Roman Catholic diocesan paper, the *Providence Visitor*, published an editorial calling for the city to provide decent housing for the poor.⁶ Four years later the Rhode Island State Planning Board urged the city to clean up the expanding slum located between the lower part of South Main Street and Wickenden Street on the edge of Fox Point, an area it cited as unsanitary and a fire hazard.⁷ By the early years of the 1930s, over twenty thousand Providence families lived in substandard conditions.⁸

Anticipating that Congress would pass a federal housing act, in 1935 the Rhode Island General Assembly enacted the Housing Authorities Law, which empowered local authorities "to enter into contracts for financial assistance with the Federal Government and others to undertake programs to provide sorely-needed decent, safe, and sanitary dwellings for families of low income."⁹ It was not until 1937, however, that Congress passed an act establishing a housing authority that would provide financial aid to local public housing agencies and assist them in the construction of low-rent housing and slum clearance.

During the spring of 1938 Governor Robert Quinn met with four Rhode Island mayors, including Providence's James Dunne, to explain the provisions of this act. The federal government, he said, would advance up to 90 percent of the cost of each project as a loan to be repaid in sixty years. Legally, none of the costs would fall upon a city, because the Rhode Island Housing Authorities Law of 1935 stated that bonds and obligations issued for such a project "shall not be a debt of any city or municipality."¹⁰

For over a year the city council argued whether Providence should take advantage of the program. Two Democrats on the board of aldermen joined with the Republicans to defeat the proposal, fearing it would raise taxes because of the added sewer and water connections that would be necessary for housing projects.¹¹ In his 1938 campaign the Republican mayoral candidate, John Collins, made the lack of public housing a major issue. True to his campaign promise, in July 1939 Mayor Collins pressured the council into creating the Providence Housing Authority to cooperate with federal authorities in undertaking a program for clearing blighted areas and erecting low-income housing. "The battle for slum clearance is finally won," exulted the *Italian Echo*.¹² But the newspaper's joy was premature; the battle, in reality, had just begun, and Italians were not (as the *Echo* hoped they would be) the major beneficiaries of the program.



Public housing in Providence was first delayed until well into 1939 while city officials waited for Congress to consider a new bill to continue funding the activities of the United States Housing Authority.¹³ Delay was also caused by contention within the city over the site of the first project. The inspector of public buildings reported that since mid-1933 his demolition program had rid Providence of over six hundred buildings, and that very few replacements had been constructed. In his estimation, the section of the city most in need of slum clearance and public housing was the South Main-Wickenden Street area of lower Fox Point.¹⁴ However, a number of council members and the Providence Housing Authority had other ideas for a site.

Leaders of the city's black community were also interested in public housing, since many of the demolished homes had been occupied by blacks. This demolition program had resulted in a serious shortage of suitable housing that blacks could afford. Gas stations and empty lots now replaced many of the houses on the streets of the West End where blacks lived, including Coddington, A, Dodge, and Bank streets.¹⁵ No new homes had been erected on these streets since the start of the Depression, and thus the only homes available to blacks there were those abandoned by lower-class whites who had migrated to better areas. "A great many of the tenements and flats occupied by Negroes," reported William Wiley in the

Passengers on the SS Canada await their first look at America at the port of Providence, 1921. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.



Providence column of the *Boston Chronicle*, "are actually unfit for human beings to live in."¹⁶ Of the 1,852 nonwhite households in the city in 1940, over 400 were in housing units in need of major repairs, only half of which had full bath facilities. In response to such conditions, in November 1939 local black leaders formed the Joint Committee on Housing for Negroes to lobby for a project to be built in one of Providence's black neighborhoods. Though they recognized that their plea might be ignored, they hoped that they would at least be given assurances that blacks would receive a good share of the units in any project built.¹⁷

The petition of the black leaders was only partially answered. In May 1940 the Providence Housing Authority announced that it had selected two overwhelmingly white neighborhoods for projects. The first project, Chad Brown, was to be located north of the capitol; the second, Roger Williams, was to be in South Providence. A survey map released by the authority revealed that there was just as much or even worse blight in downtown, Fox Point, and Federal Hill, but these sections were not considered suitable for public housing. The authority explained that it had searched for a vacant site for the first development, Chad Brown, and discovered "the utter impossibility of locating a project in the Federal Hill section because of the obvious inability to relocate families who would have to be evacuated for demolition."¹⁸ Because tenement construction had been at a standstill during the Depression years, very few vacancies existed. The land for Chad Brown, the authority noted, had in recent years been used as a dump, and only five houses were located on the 13.4-acre parcel. The project would offer better housing for those in the surrounding neighborhood, an area of considerable blight. In addition, the site was only a single transportation fare from downtown.¹⁹ As for the Roger Williams project, the authority emphasized that the South Providence land was in one of the most densely populated areas of the city, with seventy-five people per acre, and it noted that this second project would be constructed close to a new junior high school.

Although the federal authorities approved the two projects on the condition that eligible black families not be excluded from either development, the Providence Housing Authority designated all 312 units of Chad Brown (opened in 1942) for white families only, and it set aside 30 of the 744 units in Roger Williams (completed in 1943) for black occupants.²⁰ Rents were to range from fifteen dollars to twenty-one dollars a month. If the authority had allocated units by population proportions, blacks would have received no more than 25 units, since they made up only 2.4 percent of the city's population. However, the need for decent housing was greater among blacks than among whites. Providence blacks, like those in most other cities, had to pay more than whites for inferior accommodations.²¹

The problem that next confronted black leaders was that of rent levels. In the 1936 state census it was revealed that although nonwhites made up 2.4 percent of the populace, they accounted for 6.6 percent of the city's total relief population. Very few blacks, complained the *Providence Chronicle*, would have sufficient income to pay the rents set by the authority, and while the paper admitted that there would be no difficulty in filling the units allotted to black families with those who could afford those rents, "decent homes will still be unavailable for a very large group who need them badly."²²

The Providence Housing Authority was not totally deaf to the plea of the city's blacks. Early in 1941 plans were announced for Coddington Court, a 120-unit all-black project to be built in the West End. As for the thirty-nine structures to be demolished, the authority reported that "not a single dwelling, physically capable of meeting minimum housing conditions, was found on the site."²³



The dilapidated houses in this May 1941 photo were demolished to make way for the Roger Williams housing project. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

The *Providence Chronicle* opposed the designation of the project "for negroes," citing the fact that some white families had to move to make way for Codding Court, and that some black families were relocated from the site of Roger Williams. The paper argued that these families should all be given a chance to return to their former neighborhoods. There were some black families residing near Chad Brown, although only whites were allowed into that project. Black leaders feared that designating Codding Court for blacks might conceivably lead to other public housing projects being permanently closed to nonwhites.²⁴

Ignoring such arguments, the Providence Housing Authority proceeded with its plans. In July 1941 sixty black families were moved from the thirty-nine buildings on Booth, Lester, Dodge, A, and Codding streets in preparation for the Codding Court project. The eviction of the families was easily accomplished, but the erection of Codding Court was another story altogether. When the bids for the project were opened, all three were at least 30 percent higher than what Chad Brown and Roger Williams had cost. The authority then decided to postpone Codding Court until the federal government named Providence a defense area, a designation that would allow the project to be given priority in obtaining building materials. Meanwhile, vandalism plagued the site; by the end of 1941 it was described as "the worst eyesore in the city."²⁵ Andrew Bell, a black funeral director, complained that "those sixty families were turned out unnecessarily and their houses left to rot."²⁶

Federal authorities designated the city a defense area late in December 1941, but the construction of Codding Court was put off until after the war. Instead, housing was erected in North Kingstown and Newport for defense industry workers. When the Providence Urban League appealed to the United States Housing Authority, again citing the dire need for adequate housing for the city's black population, the agency suggested a course of action: because the Codding Court project had been indefinitely postponed, and because 16 percent of the present applicants for public housing were nonwhites and only 2.8 percent of Providence's

public housing dwelling units were allotted to blacks, the Urban League should press for an additional 120 units for blacks in the Roger Williams project. "Either this type of allocation, based on housing need, should be followed," advised Frank Horn, the chief racial relations officer of the United States Housing Authority, "or, better-yet, all developments should be open for occupancy by eligible war workers regardless of race."²⁷



The new Roger Williams project, January 1944. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

Following the federal agency's advice, the Providence Urban League appealed for additional units to be set aside for black families in Roger Williams, but the chairman of the Providence Housing Authority saw the time as inopportune to press the issue in light of the war effort.²⁸ Years later the Urban League reported that "even during the war years, when Negro workers came to Providence to work in the shipyard and other war industries, the small quota of 48 units for Negroes was maintained."²⁹ As late as 1948 only 4 percent of the 1,056 units in Roger Williams were occupied by black families, who were segregated in a separate building, and there were no black families at all in Chad Brown.³⁰

The wartime emergency undercut the original purpose of the housing program by dictating that defense workers receive preference in the newly constructed projects. By mid-1943 only 23 percent of the tenants at Chad Brown and Roger

Williams were classified as low income, paying rents of seventeen dollars to thirty dollars a month; the other 77 percent were war-industry workers, whose rents ranged from thirty-one dollars to forty-seven dollars a month.³¹ In 1943 the Providence Housing Authority reported that 32.6 percent of the city's residents were living in inadequate housing, a proportion not significantly different from that in 1934. "Little progress was recorded during the past decade in improving living conditions among low-income groups," the authority admitted.³² Real help for families of limited means would have to wait until after the war.

The particular problems faced by blacks, however, continued well after the war was over. In 1951 the Providence City Council adopted a resolution opposing racial discrimination or segregation in public housing, but for many years this resolution had little practical effect. The state did not become involved until 1957, when Governor Dennis J. Roberts announced an end to segregation in the projects. Segregation was still the norm at that time, and nonwhite families living in the city's public housing were described as being "colonized in miniature ghettos."³³ In 1958 Coddling Court (finally opened in 1951) was 97 percent nonwhite; Roger Williams was 18.1 percent, and Chad Brown 18.9 percent, nonwhite. The newer Hartford Park and Manton Heights projects were 0.9 percent and 0.3 percent nonwhite respectively.³⁴



An investigation into the early history of public housing in Rhode Island's capital reveals the limitations of a New Deal policy and shows how a federal program can be transformed on the local level. Housing projects erected in Providence failed to help some of the city's neediest residents because the rents were beyond their means. During the war years housing that was designed for the poor was often inhabited by skilled workers who by no measure could be described as needy. In spite of federal dictates the projects were racially segregated; like New Deal housing programs in other cities, the Providence effort helped to institutionalize the ghetto when local authorities set racial quotas and built separate housing for blacks.³⁵



Prospective tenants at the recently completed Coddling Court project, 1951. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.



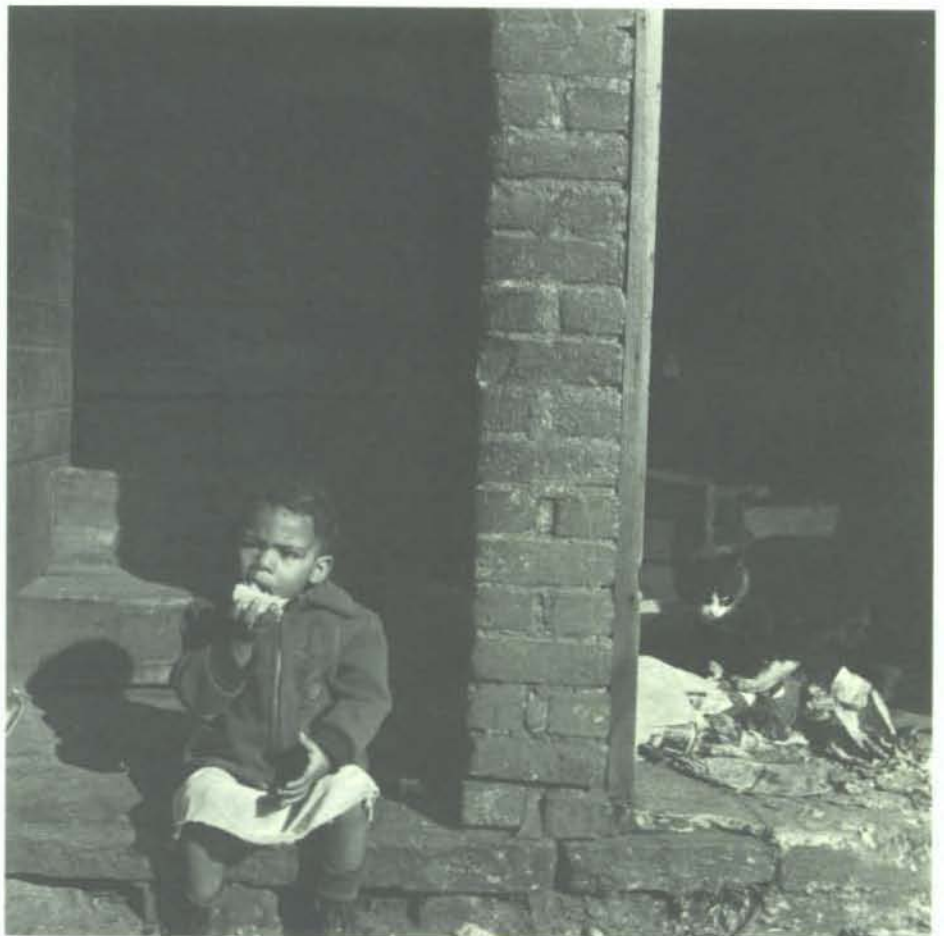
New tenants enjoy their spacious living room in the Hartford Park housing project, January 1955. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

Nor did the early years of the public housing program completely solve the problem of inadequate housing for the city's low-income whites; the Italians of Federal Hill never got a public housing project, nor did the Portuguese of Fox Point.³⁶

The Providence Housing Authority had hoped that the projects would serve as an effective launching ground for economic mobility, but this proved not to be the case. The creation of a better physical environment in the inner city did not necessarily help the poor to earn their way out of poverty, and by the 1960s such developments as Chad Brown, Roger Williams, and Codding Court had deteriorated to such an extent that only those most desperate for shelter wished to live there.

At present these early efforts at public housing have led to a variety of results. Having recently undergone a complete renovation, Chad Brown reflects the best current hopes of the city's public housing advocates. Codding Court, while still occupied, appears bleak and in need of repair. Roger Williams Homes is almost completely abandoned and awaiting demolition, a symbol of the despair over public housing that was prevalent during the seventies.

Racial quotas for residents were abandoned in the 1950s, but few whites remained as the buildings decayed, and the projects became increasingly populated by blacks in each succeeding decade. Thus Providence's blacks finally became a majority among the tenants in public housing, but only because whites no longer wanted to live there. According to Barton Bernstein, the public housing program of the New Deal years was "limited in scope, unfortunate in results, and led to the consolidation of ghettos."³⁷ This is a conclusion clearly applicable to the history of public housing in Providence.



A young boy sits on the steps of his Wickenden Street apartment building in Fox Point, circa 1955. Photo by Charlotte Estey. RIHS Collection (RH1 E79 964).

Notes

1. Sandra Perlman Schoenberg and Patricia L. Rosenbaum, *Neighborhoods That Work* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1980), 15.
2. For example, Charles Trout concluded that South Boston's Old Harbor Village, built under the Public Works Administration's Housing Division—an agency for constructing units for low-income families—mainly helped Irish residents, most of whom were not truly poor. Charles Trout, *Boston: The Great Depression and the New Deal* (New York, 1977), 33.
3. *Italian Review*, 19 Dec. 1925, 39.
4. Providence Housing Authority, *Third Annual Report for the Year Ending July 10, 1942*, 1.
5. *Providence Journal*, 30 July 1935, sec. 5, p. 1.
6. "A Serious Problem," *Providence Visitor*, 12 Sept. 1930, 4.
7. Rhode Island State Planning Board, *Report of the Rhode Island State Planning Board, December 9, 1934-March 29, 1935*.
8. Providence Housing Authority, *Second Annual Report for the Year Ending July 10, 1941*, 1.
9. Providence Housing Authority, *Seventeenth Annual Report for the Year Ending June 30, 1956*, 1.
10. *Providence Journal*, 30 Apr. 1938, 1; Providence Governmental Research Bureau, *Report*, no. 52 (May 1939).
11. *Boston Chronicle*, 10 Dec. 1938, 4. During the thirties the *Boston Chronicle*, a black newspaper, carried a news column about Providence blacks written by William Wiley. In 1939 Wiley started his own black paper, the *Providence Chronicle*, and his column in the *Boston Chronicle* was discontinued.
12. *Italian Echo*, 17 July 1939, 5.
13. *Providence Journal*, 4 Aug. 1939, 1.
14. Minutes of the Joint Special Committee on Housing and Slum Clearance, 2 Feb. 1938, Office of the Providence City Clerk.
15. *Boston Chronicle*, 26 Mar. 1938, 4.
16. *Boston Chronicle*, 26 Feb. 1938, 4.
17. George L. Turville, "The Negro in Providence, 1940" (survey commissioned by the Providence Urban League, typescript), 21, Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *Providence Chronicle*, 11 Nov. 1939, 1.
18. Providence Housing Authority, *Second Annual Report*, 2.
19. Providence Housing Authority, *Third Annual Report*, 2; *Providence Journal*, 8 May 1940, 1.
20. Frank Horn, chief racial relations officer of the United States Housing Authority, to James Williams, executive secretary of the Providence Urban League, 10 Sept. 1942, Providence Urban League Papers, RG 1, box 2, folder 58, Providence College Archives.
21. *Providence Chronicle*, 11 Nov. 1939, 6.
22. *Providence Chronicle*, 27 Apr. 1940, 6.
23. Providence Housing Authority, *Second Annual Report*, 1.
24. *Providence Chronicle*, 30 Aug. 1941, 6.
25. *Providence Journal*, 4 Dec. 1941, 1.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Horn to Williams, 10 Sept. 1942.
28. David J. Barry, chairman of the Providence Housing Authority, to Mrs. S. Foster Hunt, president of the Providence Urban League, 28 Sept. 1942, Providence Urban League Papers, RG 1, box 2, folder 58.
29. Untitled typescript report, August 1952, Providence Urban League Papers, RG 1, box 2, folder 59.
30. Andrew Bell, president of the Providence Urban League, to Mayor Dennis J. Roberts, 10 June 1948, Providence Urban League Papers, RG 1, box 2, folder 58.
31. Providence Housing Authority, *Fourth Annual Report for the Year Ending July 10, 1943*, 2. The rents for low-income residents had been increased by two to nine dollars from the levels set in 1939.
32. *Ibid.*
33. "Report of the Racial Patterns of Occupancy in Public Housing Projects in Providence, Rhode Island, 1955-7," Providence Urban League Papers, RG 1, box 2, folder 60; *Providence Journal*, 16 Dec. 1959, 4.
34. *Providence Journal*, 16 Dec. 1959, 4.
35. See Christopher Wye, "The New Deal and the Negro Community: Toward a Broader Conceptualization," *Journal of American History* 59 (1972): 635-37.
36. As in Boston, politics as well as ethnic power may have played a role in locating the earliest projects either in Irish neighborhoods or in multiethnic neighborhoods with a large Irish populace. See Trout, *Boston*, 154. For a detailed investigation of ethnic politics and the ethnic composition of Providence's neighborhoods during these years, see Norma LaSalle Daoust, "The Perils of Providence: Rhode Island's Capital City during the Depression and New Deal" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Connecticut, 1982).
37. Barton J. Bernstein, "The New Deal: The Conservative Achievements of Liberal Reform," in *Toward a New Past: Dissenting Essays in American History*, ed. Barton J. Bernstein (New York, 1969), 278.



Clinton Lamson (wearing glasses) is seated at the rear desk in the office of the Lamson Oil Company at the 10 Dorrance Street Wharf, Providence, circa 1920. Courtesy of Lowell Lisker.

Rhode Island Miscellany

The Lamson Oil Story

LOWELL S. LISKER

Clinton Booth Lamson was a man of vision. Long before there was a Route 95, and when Providence had trolley cars, cobblestone streets, and open touring cars, he saw a rare business opportunity in the sale and distribution of oil and gasoline for the growing automobile market, and he went on to create an innovative company that became a local leader in that field.

Lamson was born in Woonsocket on 19 September 1893, the son of Solomon Eugene and Addey Lucinda (Booth) Lamson. He attended local elementary and high schools and worked at various jobs, during which time he developed an expertise in the use of core oil in metal casting. Then, with financial backing from an uncle, he purchased the works of the failing Providence Oil Company on Providence's old Dorrance Wharf and founded the Lamson Oil Company in 1919.

Initially, Lamson Oil was a supplier of lubricating oils to the textile industry, with Lamson himself personally blending the lubricants he sold. Later the company would become Rhode Island's largest independent distributor of gasoline and one of New England's largest retail distributors of fuel oil; but when the twenty-six-year-old Lamson founded the company, neither gasoline nor fuel oil was a major factor in the American economy.

Within three months Lamson found himself short of working capital. To remedy this problem, he incorporated his business and increased its capitalization to \$10,000. This amount was raised to \$100,000 in the spring of 1921, and a year later to \$250,000.

Although his textile customers were leaving New England, Lamson continued to receive orders for his "Cupene" cup grease, his "Gearene" gear oil, and the other lubricants he produced. But he knew that the future of his company was not with lubricating oils but with another product—gasoline.

At a site on Allens Avenue, Lamson buried a tank for gasoline storage. It had a capacity of twenty thousand gallons, a tremendous quantity for the time. Then he struck a deal with the Richfield Oil Company of New York, a marketing subsidiary of Richfield Oil of California, whereby gasoline would be shipped by railroad car from Bayonne, New Jersey, to Providence. Later Richfield would build a deepwater terminal at Field's Point to accommodate tankers carrying gasoline and fuel oil directly from California.

The automobile was rapidly proving itself to be a practical and reliable means of transportation, and not just a toy for the wealthy. In 1913 the first drive-in gasoline station had been built in Pittsburgh. In 1915 Eddie Rickenbacker had set a world's record at Narragansett Park Speedway, completing a 100-mile run in 1 hour, 29 minutes, 24 seconds. When Clinton Lamson went into the petroleum business in 1919, there were no route numbers to guide motorists on cross-country travel, but there were 7 million passenger cars registered in the United States; by 1929 that number would increase to almost 24 million.



View of the company's Allens Avenue operations taken from the roof of the Atlas Terminal, circa 1930. The city dump is in the background. The building on the left, the D. W. Flint Oil Company, was eventually taken over by Lamson. Courtesy of Lowell Lisker.

Lowell Lisker is the chief engineer of the American Insulated Wire Corporation in Pawtucket.



One of Lamson's drive-up ramps for oil changes and greasing, 1921. The brick building in the background is still standing at Eddy and Marengo streets, Providence. Courtesy of Lowell Lisker.

Franklin Auto Supply, Franklin and Broad streets, Providence, 1921. This was one of Lamson's early outlets for gasoline and oil. The YMCA building is in the background. Courtesy of Lowell Lisker.

Lamson sold his gasoline, under the name "Nun-Bet-Er," through an increasing chain of dealer outlets. His signs and curbside pumps were seen throughout Providence, across the state, and along the roads of southern New England. He constructed drive-in service stations that allowed the motorist to pull out of traffic, rather than fill up at curbside or wait at a blacksmith shop while an attendant strained gasoline through a funnel. The drive-up ramps Lamson devised for greasing, oil changes, and repairs were considered much safer than the open pits then in use for these services. With their tiled roofs, some of Lamson's early service stations had a distinctly California look about them, possibly from a standard design from Richfield Oil of California.

Lamson's gasoline pumps—considered automatic in their day, since they operated with compressed air and did away with hand-cranking—dispensed millions of gallons of gasoline (at thirty-four cents a gallon, without tax) throughout New England. As early as 1923 the Lamson Oil Company had ten salesmen on the road, and a fleet of three tanker trucks with a combined capacity of three thousand gallons.

The later 1920s saw many big oil companies combine their production facilities and product outlets into large unified organizations. It was during this period that



Richfield Oil bought a controlling interest in Lamson Oil. Although Clinton Lamson did not want to sell his company, he had no choice: Richfield demanded payment of past-due bills, and rather than go bankrupt, Lamson sold out in 1929. The former president then continued to serve the company in other executive capacities until 1937, when he purchased Lamson Oil back from Richfield and once again became its president.

Despite his growing infirmity, Lamson continued to head the company until his death in 1946 from multiple sclerosis. For the last eight years of his life he was severely handicapped, unable even to lift a telephone receiver; yet he was at his desk every working day, assisted by a secretary who would turn the pages of his correspondence.

Lamson was succeeded as the company's president by Reid T. Westmoreland, who had come to Providence as Lamson Oil's secretary-treasurer in 1938 after having been associated with Richfield for eight years. Westmoreland served as president until Lamson Oil was again sold to Richfield on 1 December 1959, and he remained with the company as its general manager until 1961, when he resigned to pursue other interests. During his years with Lamson Oil its volume of gasoline, fuel oils,



Lamson Oil blended and sold various lubricants for the textile and auto industries. Courtesy of Lowell Lisker.



This curbside filling station was located in the Sarudi Building at Atwells Avenue and Brayton Street, Providence. Courtesy of Lowell Lisker.

Right
A drive-in filling station at the corner of Broad Street and Adelaide Avenue, Providence. Courtesy of Lowell Lisker.

Far right
This "California-style" station stood at the corner of Elmwood and Woodman streets, Providence. Courtesy of Lowell Lisker.



and lubricants increased fivefold, and the firm distributed its products throughout Rhode Island and southeastern Massachusetts with a fleet of trucks and 125 stations.

In later years the Richfield Corporation would be sold to the Sinclair Refining Company, and the Lamson name would disappear. The Warren Companies bought the remnants of the Lamson Oil Company and now occupy Lamson's former buildings at 355-375 Allens Avenue and on Warren Way.

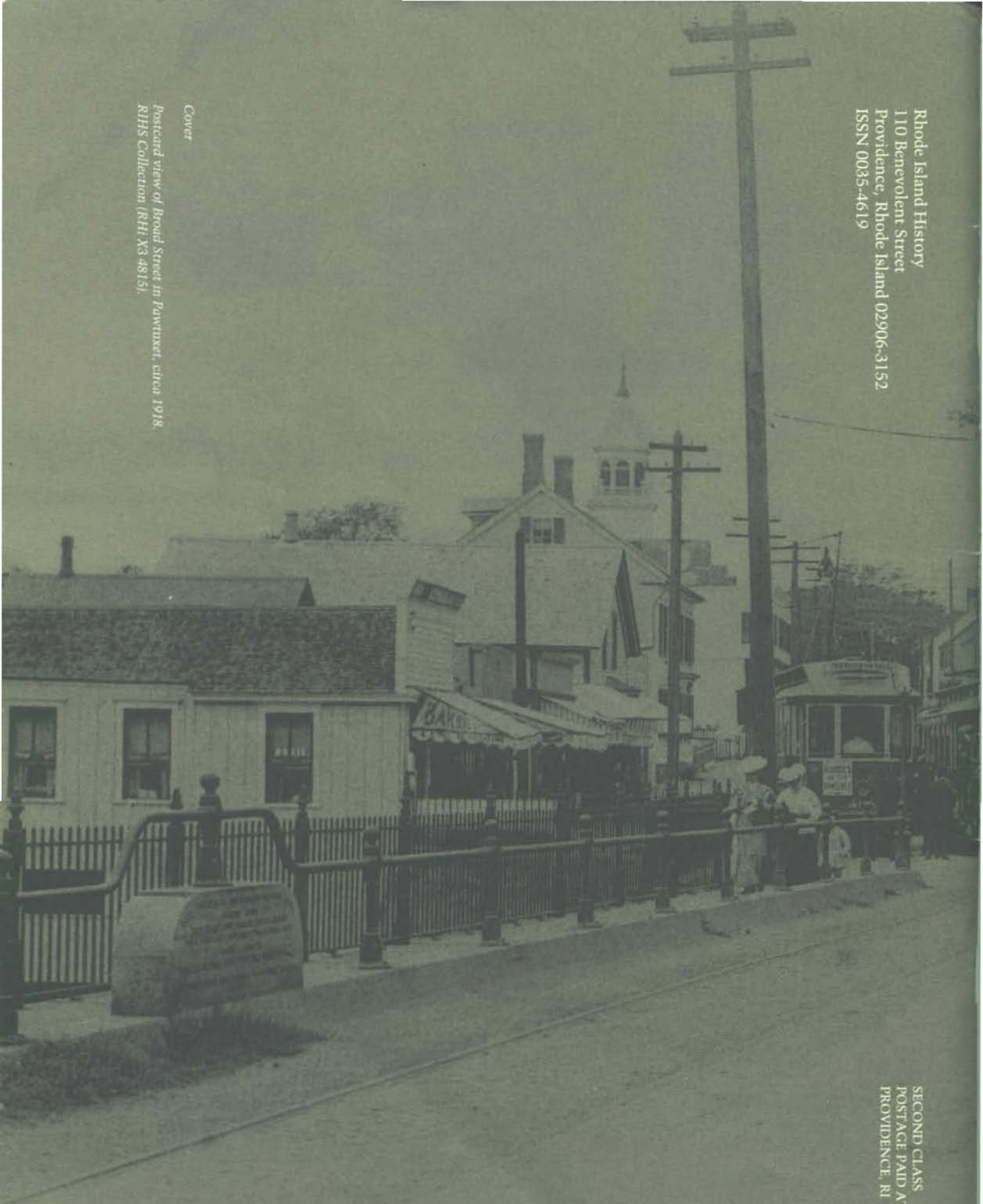
Lamson Oil Company salesmen and truck drivers at the 10 Dorrance Street Wharf, circa 1920. Courtesy of Lowell Lisker.



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Postcard view of Broad Street in Pawtuxet, circa 1918.
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