

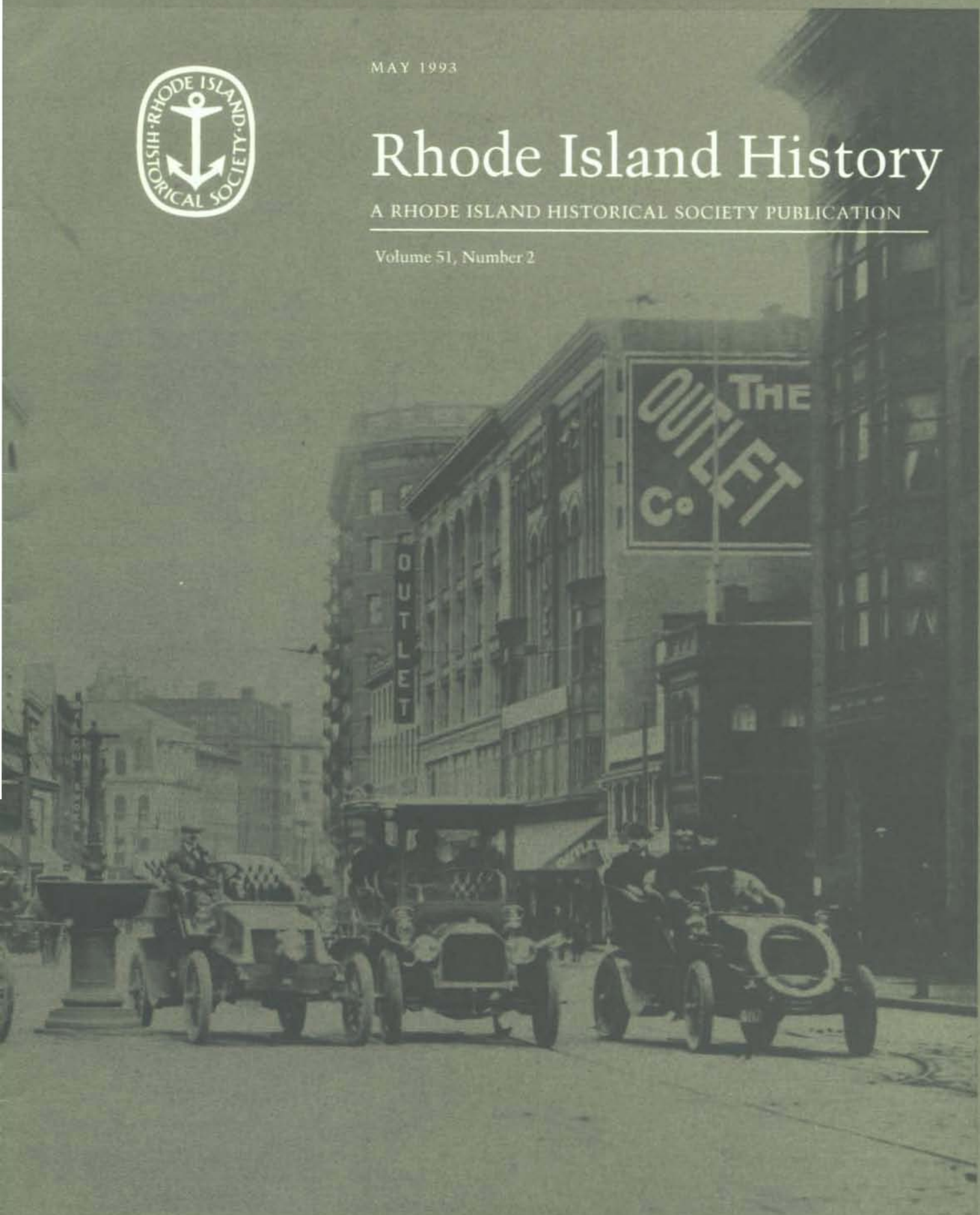


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WILLIAM G. MCLOUGHLIN



Photo by John Foraste/Brown University

William G. McLoughlin, 1922–1992

Providence: The Confident Years, 1890-1920

WILLIAM G. MCLOUGHLIN

The people who lived in Providence from 1890 to 1920 were confident, optimistic, and hopeful, and they had every reason to be. In those thirty years the population almost doubled, increasing from 130,000 to 238,000, and the value of the city's capital investments and manufactures, its property values, and its money in banks, trust companies, and insurance companies available for investment more than tripled. In addition, Providence had developed from a city of wood to a city of concrete and marble; from an overgrown town dominated by church steeples to a modern city dominated by skyscrapers; from a community fueled by coal, operating on steam power, lighted by gas lamps, and cooking on coal stoves to a city fueled by oil, operating on electric power, lighted by electric lights, and "cooking with gas." In short, between 1890 and 1920 Providence moved out of the horse-and-buggy era and into the era of the automobile, forever leaving behind its cobblestoned streets, its horse-drawn streetcars, and its horse fountains, just as it exchanged its quill pens for fountain pens, hand-copying for typewriters, carpet sweepers for vacuum cleaners, corsets for girdles, mounted police for motorcycle cops, and livery stables for gas stations. Some of us may question the benefits of these changes today, but during the Confident Years no one doubted that modern technology was rapidly leading the city and the nation into the millennium.

Like the rest of New England, Providence owed its growth and prosperity to the foresight and business skill of its captains of industry, particularly those in textile manufacturing. In 1890 Rhode Island was preparing to celebrate the centennial of the beginning of cotton manufacturing in America, an industry born at the old Slater Mill in Pawtucket. Cotton was king in New England, as it was in the South, and the shrewd millowners and managers who had built the textile mills of Providence were the dominant element in the city and the state. Sharing their governing power were those who produced machinery, jewelry, silverware, steam engines, tools, and hundreds of other manufactured goods. It was boasted in those years that "Providence manufactures everything from a carpet tack to a locomotive," and the boast was true. Providence's factories were big not only by Rhode Island and New England standards; they included some of the largest firms of their kind in the whole nation. In 1893 Providence had the largest cotton manufacturing plant in America, the largest worsted and woolen firm, the largest steam engine firm, the largest sterling silver company, and the largest manufacturers of wire, of files, and of screws.

In 1912 the *Board of Trade Journal* reported that "Rhode Island stands second in per capita wealth of all the United States."¹

What Rhode Islander has not a feeling of pride [said the *Board of Trade Journal* in 1898] upon reading that, in proportion to her area, Rhode Island is the most important industrial State in the Union and is the most densely populated? For many years Rhode Island has held this enviable position and

The late William McLoughlin was a professor of history at Brown University. This article was presented as a lecture at the Rhode Island Historical Society on 9 January 1979.



High-rise buildings were beginning to dominate the skyline of downtown Providence when a photographer named Winslow shot this photo of Westminster Street in 1906. RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 6983).

according to the recent report of the [Federal] Commissioner of Industrial Statistics, she is fully holding her own in this race and destined for a long time to retain her position.³

The Providence Board of Trade had been founded in 1868 and was made up of the leading citizens of the city. Members paid one hundred dollars a year to be able to visit a large room in the old Market House at the foot of College Hill, where a clerk rapidly wrote upon a display board the latest facts and figures as they came over a special telegraph service to the board's office: "quotations of stocks and oil [prices] from New York; cotton from New York and the Southern markets and Liverpool, and of provisions from New York and Chicago; also weather from all points" were all available this way, the *Board of Trade Journal* proudly reported. The board also had available the latest shipping news, stock quotations from several exchanges, and a variety of other data, placing the city at the very center of American and world commerce. If the population for the whole of Greater Providence had been included in the census figures for 1895, the city would have ranked as the tenth largest in the nation.³ And as one of the largest cities in the United States, Providence was also one of the major cities of the world—at least as modern businessmen measured importance.

The members of the Board of Trade paid one-eighth of the city's taxes, and their names read like a list of the oldest and best families from the social register. The board's president was J. U. Starkweather; officers included Frederick Grennell, Orin Westcott, and Freeman Little. Among the directors during these years were names that still ring bells in Providence—Metcalf, Brown, Nicholson, Colt, Chapin, Trowbridge, Lippitt, Goff, Nightingale, Merriman, Rhodes, Pearce, Barton, Hinckley, Banigan, Littlefield, and Knight. Many of these people could trace their ancestry back to the city's founders. Almost all of them had ancestors who were here before the Revolution; they belonged to the Sons of the American Revolution, as their wives belonged to the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Colonial Dames.

When we speak of Providence in these Confident Years, we are really referring to this dominant class of old, native-born families, people who described themselves as of "good Anglo-Saxon stock" and who looked askance—at least socially—at those who were of different origins. But it is only fair to say that even among the fast-growing immigrant groups who were filling the city and providing the hard, manual labor that kept the mills and factories humming, there was also a sense of confidence and optimism. One reason why Providence drew so many of the poor from other countries of the world was that it clearly seemed to be a place of opportunity for those willing to work. This was the era when the American Dream—the success myth, the concept of equal opportunity for everyone to rise in the world through hard work, thrift, honesty, and piety—seemed to make sense.

Ignoring the advantages that native birth and membership in old families provided, Rhode Islanders proudly proclaimed the truth of the Reverend Horatio Alger's novels. "We believe," said the *Board of Trade Journal*, "it is an accepted truth that man is entitled to all that he can rightfully obtain of this world's goods, whether it be in hard cash, social position or rational enjoyment."⁴ "Some of our most successful manufacturers began their life-work in the mills when scarcely past the kindergarten age."⁵ In Providence the most important living example of the truth of this myth was Robert Knight, the

Members of the old native-born families, the city's governing class, filled the boardroom of every textile mill, factory, and bank in Providence. They joined exclusive clubs, attended lectures, and built hospitals, while their wives organized benevolent and reform organizations, founded museums, and educated the immigrants. Detail from the twenty-fifth anniversary group portrait of the Pomham Club, 4 June 1912. Anonymous photographer. RIHS Collection [RHi X3 6985].



founder and head of the largest cotton products manufacturing firm in the world. This company was known as B. B. and R. Knight, and its trademark was Fruit of the Loom. According to the *Board of Trade Journal*, in 1906 the plants owned by Robert Knight contained 11,000 looms and 500,000 spindles and employed "fully one-half of the 25,000 inhabitants of the Pawtuxet Valley where [his] principal mills [were] located."

The son of a Warwick farmer, Knight was born in 1826. When he was eight years old, he went to work as a tier boy at the Cranston Print Works, mixing dyes for calicoes. At the age of ten he was earning seventy-five cents a week at a sixty-hour-a-week job at a cotton mill in Coventry. By 1846 he was employed as a clerk at John H. Clarke's cotton factory in Pontiac, receiving eight dollars a month, or two dollars a week, plus his board. In that year he borrowed money from his uncle, a well-to-do grocer in Providence, and he and his brother went into the textile business for themselves. By 1906 Robert Knight was a millionaire many times over. He was the living embodiment of the American success myth, for his life story seemed to prove that anyone could rise from tier boy to corporation president, from poverty to wealth, in this great nation of free enterprise and rugged individualism. Knight himself believed the myth implicitly. "To succeed in life it is only necessary for a young man to learn how to apply himself to his work," he said when he was interviewed on his eightieth birthday in 1906. "There is plenty of room for every one [to succeed] if he makes the most of every opportunity that presents itself."⁶

But the world of 1906 was rather different from that of 1846, and few who came to work in Robert Knight's mills from Italy, Quebec, Ireland, Portugal, or Poland ever rose to be millionaires no matter how much they applied themselves. Even if an opportunity had presented itself to an immigrant mill worker—which it almost never did—the lack of a rich uncle in Providence with money to lend for a business partnership would have been a major obstacle to success. Nevertheless, even in the mill towns, immigrants felt that they were better off than they would have been if they had stayed at home. Eventually these new non-Anglo-Saxon, non-native-born people would take control of Providence and the state of Rhode Island away from the old families; but this would not happen before much of the confidence had gone out of the business community.



To appreciate what Providence became during its Confident Years, we should remember what it had been earlier, when its skyline was dominated by church steeples because there were no elevators to carry people to the tops of higher buildings; when there were no telephone lines or electric trolley wires; when more of the buildings were of wood than of concrete; when the harbor had more sailing ships than steamships; when children could play in the streets without fear of being hit by automobiles; when homes had hitching posts in front of them and no garages or car ports beside them; when open-air markets, street peddlers, and small shops had not given way to department stores and shopping malls; when an open tidal cove provided swimming and fishing in the very center of the city; when women wore bustles, long skirts, and flowered hats while men carried canes and sported sideburns, long whiskers, and bowlers.

By the dawn of the Confident Years, Providence had become a substantial modern city. In 1889 its streets were lighted by gas or by naphtha and gasoline;



Through a prevailing combination of entrepreneurship, design acumen, and a large skilled labor force, Providence became one of the nation's major manufacturing cities during its Confident Years of 1890 to 1920. Providence Journal photographer John R. Hess captured a management meeting; RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6425). Anonymous photographers photographed the drafting room of the architectural firm of Stone, Carpenter, and Willison and the casting room of the Gorham Manufacturing Company; RIHS Collection (RHi X3 992, RHi X3 6984).



Life in Providence was often very different from what the city's immigrants had known. Seen in these four photographs, all shot by unidentified photographers, the contrast between vitality and isolation leaves a haunting image. Waterman Street from the steeple of the First Baptist Church, 1908; RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6986). Mrs. Lippitt with her children and nursemaid, 1893; RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6987). A woman in Exchange Place, 1906; RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6988). An Italian colony along Spruce Street, 1903; RIHS Collection (RHi X3 4662).



it had thirty-one banks, 130 insurance companies, and two hundred jewelry firms; it had ninety Protestant churches and fourteen Roman Catholic churches, with Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians—in that order—the most numerous denominations.⁷ No fewer than four daily newspapers and twenty-six weeklies and monthlies were published in the city.



Most of Providence's rich, governing class lived on the East Side, where the sharp 16 percent incline of College Hill prevented the easy spread of factories, mills, and city streets. Here were elaborate Victorian, Queen Anne, Renaissance, Gothic, and Neocolonial homes, with neat front lawns, formal gardens, wrought-iron fences, fancy carriage houses, and carefully enclosed backyards where nursemaids tended the children. Elsewhere in the city were neighborhoods of a different kind, with crowded streets and two- and three-family houses with no front lawns, no gardens, and no nursemaids.

Yet Providence was not a crowded or an ugly city. "To one accustomed to such dense masses of population as are to be found in New York and Chicago," wrote an outside observer as late as 1910, "Providence does not seem particularly crowded. Large parts of the city indeed have more the appearance of a populous town than of a busy manufacturing community of 200,000."⁸ "Large parts of Providence today closely resemble some old-world city," said the

president of Brown University in 1909, "and with their walled gardens, their shaded walks, and their quaint colonial architecture, breathe the air and at times reproduce the manners of Bishop Berkeley and the Marquis de Lafayette."⁹ But there were noticeable changes taking place even on the East Side [known politically at the First Ward]:

The first ward includes not only the largest number of the most attractive and costly residences, many of them set in large grounds, but on its western and southern fringe quarters which, already poverty-stricken and uninviting, not only tend to become less attractive year by year but which are also increasingly crowded and repressed. . . . One sees in all parts of this ward the subdivision of estates, the steady appropriation of vacant lots, the erection of double-houses and small apartment residences.¹⁰

Even in a city spread out over $18\frac{1}{2}$ square miles, progress meant increasing population and increasing land values, and therefore increasing sales of land to make room for new homes or tenements. Nevertheless, even in 1900, 14,512 (or almost 60 percent) of the 25,204 dwellings in Providence were one-family homes, 8,622 were two-family homes, and 1,313 were three-family homes; of the remaining dwellings, there were only 85 tenement houses holding six families, 2 with ten families, and 7 with eleven families or more.¹¹



Providence's middle class enjoyed a remarkable improvement in its standard of living during these years, an improvement brought about both by increasing wealth and by technological advancement. Whereas wealthier homes had live-in maids and butlers who took care of the household chores, families of more moderate means were now obtaining new household appliances that increased the ease and comfort of their lives: the coal stove and gas range replaced the old fireplace and wood-burning stove; the vacuum cleaner ("air cleaning") replaced the broom and the carpet sweeper; gas lamps gave way to electric lights; and phonograph records, stereopticons, and magic lanterns supplemented the piano and the home organ. New sewing

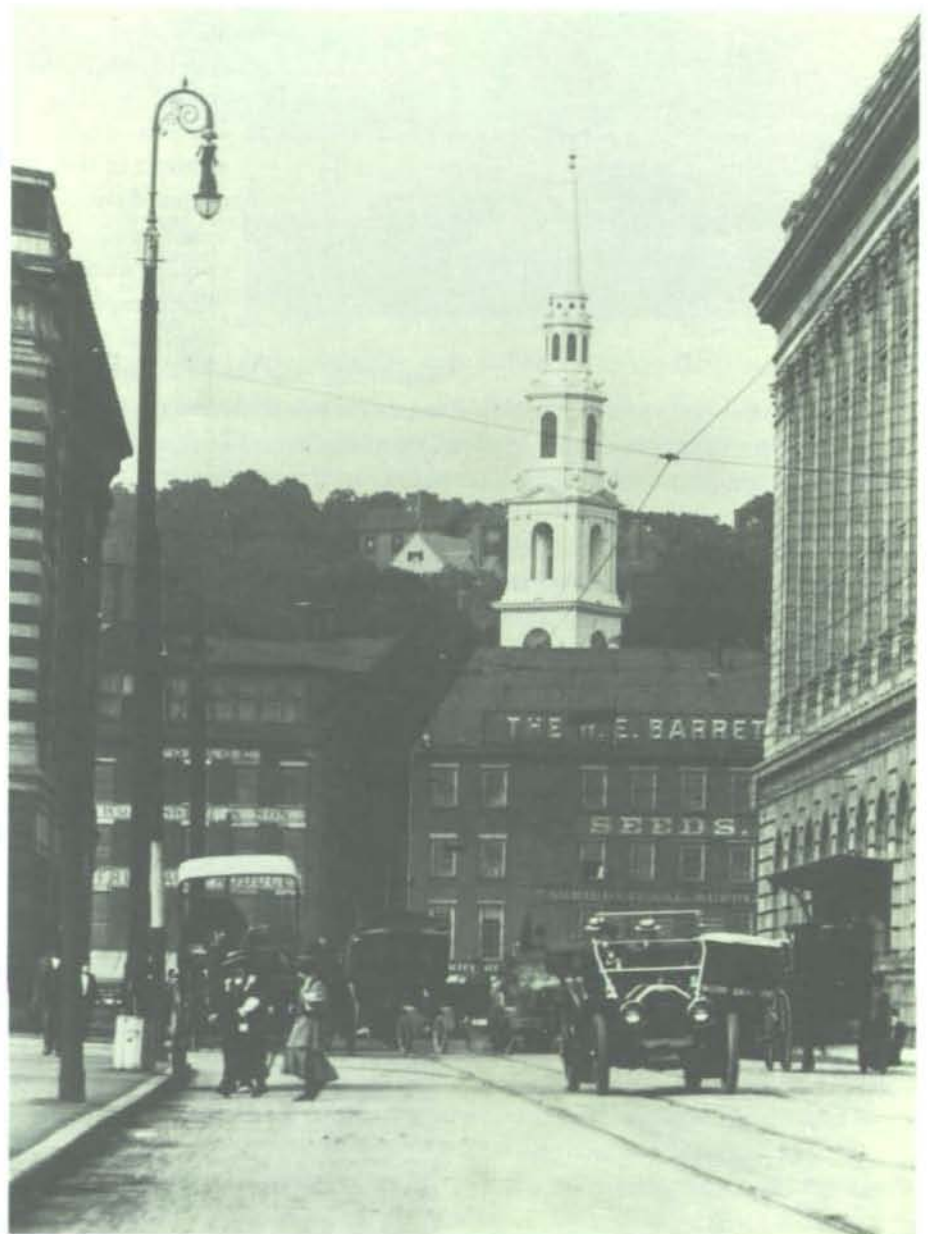
machines, new clothes-washing devices, new hot-air furnaces, and new hot-water boilers all added to the comforts of middle-class homes in these years. The manufacture of conveniences for the middle-class housewife was a major source of the prosperity of the city's mills, factories, shops, and department



stores. These comforts came more slowly to lower-middle-class families, but gradually they began making their way into their homes as well.

In 1889 the *Board of Trade Journal* offered its readers this glowing description of Providence:

The city of Providence, situated at the head of Narragansett Bay, entered through a harbor not excelled by any on the Atlantic Seaboard, with railroad terminal facilities affording close and direct connection with all parts of the world, with its healthy sea breezes and salubrious climate, its well-regulated sanitary laws, clean streets, an abundant supply of pure water, its low death rate—a city well-governed and amply protected by the most efficient fire and police departments, its great number of churches, its educational opportunities, consisting of public and private schools, a free public library, Brown University and Friends School; its great banking capital and many charitable institutions—with all these combined, we shall try to prove that this city is more desirable for a place of residence and for business purposes than any other.¹²



A blend of the old and new is apparent in this view looking east along Washington Street towards Canal Street. Photo by Frank Warren Marshall. RIHS Collection (RH X3 6989).

"Providence has the finest climate north of Cape Charles," said the *Journal* in 1890. "No city on the coast has better facilities for summer recreation and no city has a better average of comfort of life."¹³ Five years later the *Journal* summarized the city's benefits in another panegyric:

Providence, built like Rome upon its seven hills, fanned by gentle breezes from the ocean, with its freedom from serious epidemics, its great wealth, large banking facilities, large and varied industries, its nearness to other great commercial centres, its society, schools, churches, beautiful surroundings and splendid streets, is not excelled by any other city in the U.S. for residence and business purposes.¹⁴

Rhode Island businessmen were fond of referring to Providence as "the Queen City of New England" or "the Center of Northern Industry" or "the Southern Gateway of New England." Their rivalry with Boston was intense in these years, and they frequently insisted that Providence could and should outstrip that city as the hub of the universe. One reason why they felt confident that Providence could overtake Boston as a commercial and business center was that Providence had a better harbor, a hundred miles closer to the cotton and coal centers to the south, a hundred miles closer to New York and the Panama Canal, less treacherous and better protected, and not requiring a dangerous journey around Cape Cod for access. [Even the digging of the Welland Canal in 1914, which made that journey unnecessary for much of Boston's shipping, did not convince them that Boston was bound to remain on top.] "Why does cotton from New Orleans and Galveston come to Providence only via Boston," asked one businessman in 1900, "when it could come directly into our port at a greater saving in shipping costs?" Furthermore, said the Board of Trade, "It should be the duty of every citizen of Providence to aid in turning all of the inland freight of New England destined for the South or Southwest to our docks and here transferred to the vessels" that would take it southward.¹⁵

Although the business and commercial leaders of Providence fretted over the declining traffic into and out of the harbor, this traffic was by no means small in these years. According to figures reported by the *Board of Trade Journal*, in 1890 the state imported 203,000 bales of cotton, 129,000 bales of wool, 1,050,000 tons of coal, 65,000 tons of iron and steel, 80,000 feet of lumber, 174,569 barrels of lubricating oil for machinery, and 200 tons of crude rubber. Much of this came to the city by rail, but a good deal arrived via the docks. While most of the ships that went in and out of the harbor were engaged in the American coastal trade rather than foreign trade, the number of arrivals and departures was surprising. In 1889 Providence harbor received 381 vessels, including 123 steamers, 46 steam tugs, 1 steam yacht, 117 sailing schooners, 6 sloops, 81 barges, 1 foreign brig, and 6 foreign schooners. It is significant that steam-powered vessels outnumbered sailing ships by only 170 to 130 in 1889; in subsequent years the proportion of steamers to sailing ships would steadily increase. The kinds of goods that Providence imported, however, did not change. Coal for heat and power remained the largest import during this period, followed by cotton and wool, lumber, and iron and steel. But before the Confident Years were over, oil imports rapidly rose to equal those of coal as the diesel engine replaced the coal-heated steam engine.¹⁶

While the harbor had no ocean liners arriving on a regular basis until after 1910, it had a large number of passenger ships doing local and coastal business. Most of these were side-wheelers powered by coal-heated steam engines, though twin-propeller vessels gradually replaced the side-wheelers

Graced with a mild climate and a good natural harbor, Providence was promoted for both its economic and its recreational benefits. View of the Providence River, circa 1895; photo by Leander Baker, RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6990). Sailing off Field's Point, circa 1900; anonymous photographer, RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1094).



after 1910. In the first decade of the twentieth century, no less than seven steamship lines had vessels leaving the city daily to carry passengers up and down the East Coast: the Providence-Stonington Line, the Narragansett Bay Line, the Joy Line, and the Enterprise Line all took passengers to New York City for fares as low as \$1.50; the Boston-Philadelphia Line stopped regularly



in Providence; the Providence-Norfolk-Baltimore Line carried mostly freight to Maryland and Virginia; and the Clyde Line went as far south as Wilmington, North Carolina. In addition, there were three local steamship lines carrying over 1,250,000 passengers a year to various spots around Narragansett Bay: the Providence-Fall River-Newport Steamboat Company, the Seaconnet Steamship Line, and the New Shoreham Line, which ran to Block Island. It was on these three lines that most people from Providence took advantage of the growing number of seaside resorts, amusement parks, and beaches for their summer recreation.

Business leaders were constantly trying to induce the city, the state, and the federal government to help improve the harbor's facilities. Proposals included

the widening, straightening, and dredging of the twenty-five-foot channel, the installation of better harbor lights, the purchase of fireboats, and, especially, the construction of bigger and more efficient freight-handling docks and wharves. The hopes for a larger harbor traffic, however, were not matched by the realities over the years.

Three reasons were usually given for the inability of the port of Providence to compete effectively with Boston: first, not enough money was spent on harbor improvement; second, rail connections between Providence and the western hinterlands were inadequate; third, and most important, the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad seemed to have a stranglehold on the transportation system of the city. Not only did the New Haven Railroad control all rail traffic to New York, but it also owned two of the largest steamship lines and controlled Providence's trolley system. The New Haven did not want the competition of a western railroad or of another freight or passenger line to New York or elsewhere along the coast. In part the stranglehold of the railroad can be laid to the political machinations of bankers and politicians allied with Rhode Island senator Nelson W. Aldrich and the Republican political machine that ran the city and the state.¹⁷ In part, however, it was simply faster, more efficient, and therefore cheaper to ship goods (except for such bulky products as coal, iron, and timber) by rail than by water. It was also cheaper for most cotton sellers to send cotton in bulk to Boston and then by rail back down to Providence than to arrange separate wholesale contracts for Providence alone. Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, and Vermont had better rail connections with Boston than with Providence, and most of the textile mills using raw wool and cotton in New England were north of Rhode Island.

The railroad had come to Providence in the first half of the nineteenth century, but the interest of the railroad in local transport within the city did not begin until the advent of the electric trolley car in 1892. The first trolley tracks had been laid in Providence in the 1860s, and the first trolleys were pulled by horses. Although they carried some freight from the railroad and the docks to the various factories and back, they were mostly used to carry local passenger to and from work. But horsecars were slow, and by 1890 the trolley companies were beginning to experiment with cable cars. Then came the electric power revolution, and the great era of the electric trolley came with it. In 1893 the *Board of Trade Journal* noted that

the electric railroad [i.e., trolley car] is no longer an experiment. It has passed its crude conditions and as an established, if but new, factor in public service, its future development is among the certainties that anticipate history. . . . It is threading the streets with steel, and cob-webbing the air with wires. It is adding suburban towns to the city centers and radiating the arteries of rapid transit from congested districts, beyond the fringes of smoke and noise to rural scenes, where, in purer air and sweeter surroundings our thousands of toilers can enjoy home and health. . . . Hence its marvelous expansion and its consequent attractiveness to capital and enterprise.¹⁸

This lyrical paean to the electric trolley ignored some of its less pleasant features—the din of iron wheels on iron rails; the danger to pedestrians, wagons, and carriages; the inconvenience of straphanging at rush hours; and the problem of transfer tickets and the six-cent fare.

The *Journal* also did not mention that one of the aspects of the trolley business which made it so attractive to capital and enterprise was that it ran on a public franchise granted through the goodwill of a pliant city council and

state legislature, which showed more concern for the profits of the investors than for the interests of the city. In fact, the state took the power of streetcar franchises from Providence and handed them out as a monopoly to a company that would be bought out by the New Haven Railroad in 1902. The franchises were granted for twenty years at a shockingly low rate of payment to the city. Investors' profits were high, but it was generally agreed that the trolleys were efficient.¹⁹ In 1889 Providence had one horsecar line, one cable car line, and 63 miles of track; by 1912 it had 81.56 miles of track and 435 electric trolley cars carrying 251,672 passengers a day.

The trolley lines not only crisscrossed the central city but rapidly moved out to the neighboring towns. By 1900 the interurban trolley had reached Fall River, Taunton, and Narragansett. Ten years later one could travel by trolley to Woonsocket, Worcester, Chepachet, Pascoag, and the Attleboros. If the railroad connected Providence to Boston and Washington, the trolley connected it to the smaller towns and cities within a fifty-mile radius. By 1910 there were 960 miles of trolley tracks in Rhode Island.

It is interesting that the man who controlled the trolley car company, Marsden J. Perry, also controlled both the electric company that provided the trolleys' power and the gas company that brought light and cooking facilities to the growing suburbs. Muckrakers of the day in fact called Perry "the man who owned Rhode Island," for he also ran the Union Trust Company, which supplied much of the capital for these enterprises.²⁰ Perry might be called "the man who built Rhode Island" as well, for as the streetcar lines expanded, they made possible the development of new homes and neighborhoods. This development meant prosperous times for contractors, bricklayers, carpenters, electricians, painters, and gardeners, as well as for local storekeepers and the providers of various local services. It was a prosperity that offered many young men the opportunity to raise their station in the world.

Then as now, jobs, construction, and, of course, profits and wages were the real measure of prosperity. Marsden Perry unfortunately had sufficient political power to prevent the streetcar conductors from gaining a decent wage, and in 1902 he managed to use the police and the city council to break a major strike by the streetcar workers' union, which was seeking a ten-hour day.²¹ But the amount of building that went on during these years provided more jobs than the immigrants could fill. The immigrants built the railroads, the trolley lines, and the many new public and office buildings of the time, making this the greatest construction era in Providence history. It was during these years too that some immigrant contractors, through their control of the immigrant labor supply, began to make their way up the ladder of free enterprise, eventually becoming almost as rich as the textile magnates. Their names, now well known, were not Anglo-Saxon, and they and their families did not at first belong to the clubs of the governing class.



"Civic improvement," or "public service," became the watchword of Providence businessmen at the end of the nineteenth century. One of the first acts of civic improvement was the decision to fill in the Cove Basin at the center of the city so that a new railroad terminal could be built there to replace the old Union Depot, which stood just to the south in Exchange Place. The city began the difficult and expensive job in 1890.²² The *Board of Trade Journal* supported the project—"The Cove Basin, once 'a thing of beauty and a joy forever,' but of late years a useless and expensive tract of mud and dirty water



First used by merchant traders and then by the railroads, Market Square became the transportation center of Providence, and its waterfront bustled with activity. View of freight yard along Canal Street, circa 1890; photo by P. A. Willemin, RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 6606). Head of navigation, Crawford Street Bridge, circa 1880; anonymous photographer, RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 1180). Day-trippers waiting to embark on the steamer Mount Hope, 1906; anonymous photographer, RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 6992).

exhaling offensive odors, is fast becoming a thing of the past," it observed after the work had begun—but it could also wax nostalgic over a disappearing city landmark:

Its vast area is being rapidly filled in. . . . No longer can we sit on its mossy banks, or hang our feet over the surrounding walls and tempt the frisky shiner with the luscious easter worm; never again can we refresh our tired bodies by a swim in "Sandy Bottom"; we turned away with tears in our eyes as we left the scenes of our youthful days. We had the satisfaction of knowing that the long and vexed question of improved railroad terminal facilities is rapidly approaching culmination.²³

Explaining progress in such romantic terms seems typical of the businessmen of the period. A later observer, John Hutchins Cady, took a very different view of the matter:

In permitting the railroads to run their tracks at grade for a distance of seven miles through the city, the City Council not only created a new impediment to highway circulation, but sanctioned a development which led, inevitably, to a widespread area of slums. In approving the terminal development plan . . . by which a viaduct was erected and freight yards established near the civic center [of the city] the Council effectively blocked any plan for integrating the State House approaches with Exchange Place.²⁴

As Cady noted, the city was also remiss in another area during this period: it failed to control the pollution of its rivers and harbor. The Board of Trade finally acknowledged this price of progress in 1910, but only when it became evident that the harbor was fast losing its supply of edible fresh oysters.²⁵

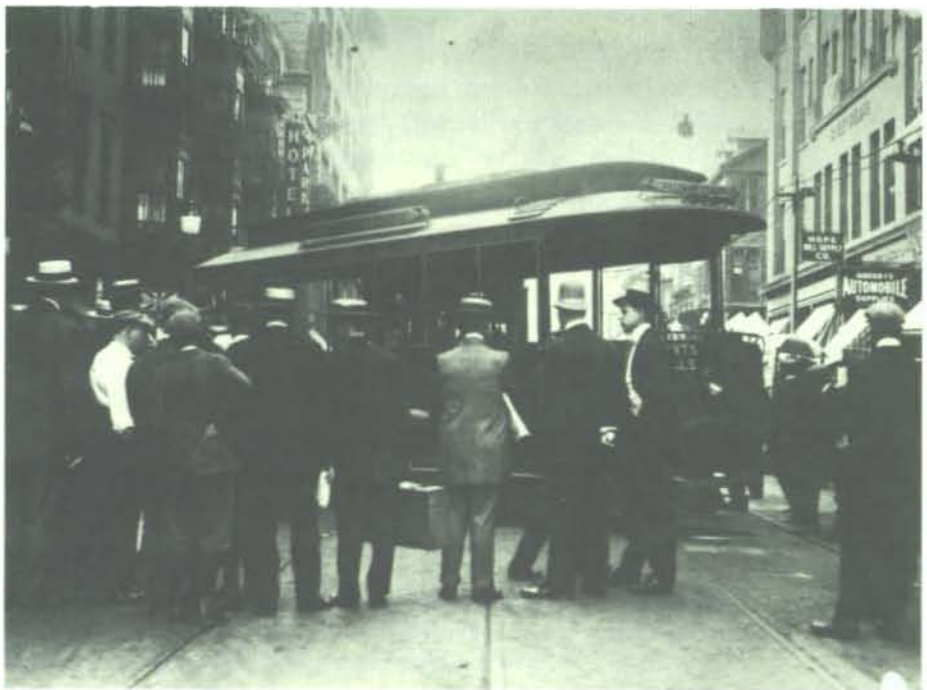
The Cove Basin was finally filled in by 1896, the year the old railroad terminal burned down, but it took two more years to build the new terminal. During these years a number of iron bridges were constructed across the Woonasquatucket, Moshassuck, and Providence rivers to accommodate trolley cars and railroads, and in 1895 the city also built the Red Bridge over the Seekonk River. The bridges over the Providence River at the center of the city were connected in such a way as to enable the Chamber of Commerce to claim that they were all one bridge, 1,147 feet wide. Guidebooks described it as "the widest bridge in the world."²⁶

But it was not the railroads, the trolleys, or the bridges that provided the image for Providence's civic pride and growth in these years. That image came, rather, from the many costly new buildings that went up year after year—schools, churches, offices, and civic buildings. The accompanying list includes only some of the more notable products of this tremendous building boom. Of these, the crowning symbol of the era's confidence and pride was the new State House, designed by the renowned architectural firm of McKim, Mead, and White and built on the crest of Smith Hill overlooking the center of the city. Topping this huge edifice is a fifty-foot unsupported marble dome that is said to be the second largest in the world.

SOME NEW BUILDINGS IN PROVIDENCE, 1890-1913

1890	Church of the Messiah
1891	Home for Aged Men
1892	Waterman Building, Rhode Island School of Design
1893	St. Maria's Home for working girls Central Congregational Church
1894	St. Joseph's Hospital
1895	Police station State Normal School (Rhode Island College of Education) Mathewson Street Methodist Church School for the Deaf
1895-1904	State House
1896	Banigan (now Amica) Building
1896-98	Union Station
1897	Classical High School
1898	Hope High School Butler Hospital

1900	Providence Public Library Rhode Island Hospital
1901	Fire station
1901-3	Union Trust Building
1905	YWCA for working girls Federal Building
1908	Christian Science Church
1910	Charles V. Chapin Hospital John Hay Library, Brown University
1911	Temple Beth El
1913	YMCA Turk's Head Building



The introduction of a comprehensive system of trolley lines transformed Providence into a modern city. For just a few cents passengers could travel from downtown to virtually any city, town, or village in Rhode Island. Market Square, 1892; photo by Leander Baker, RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6993). Commuters waiting to board the Rumford trolley on Washington Street, 1915; photo by Frank Warren Marshall, RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1909).

Photographer Frank Warren Marshall captured this scene of a rainy afternoon in downtown Providence, 1901. Marsden Perry's Union Trust Building is under construction in the background. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1515).



Where did the money for all these new buildings come from? It came from the profits of enterprise, from the willingness of the voters to pay taxes, from the willingness of banks to make the necessary loans. For churches, the YMCA/YWCA, private schools, and charitable institutions, it came from private subscriptions. For public schools, the police station, the fire station, and the State House, it came from public taxes. Businessmen themselves paid for office buildings. But one way or another, the money ultimately came from business enterprise and the labor of the workingman. Economically, Providence was booming; in the words of the *Board of Trade Journal*, these were years of "unparalleled prosperity."²⁷ In 1901 Providence's 1,933 firms had a combined capital investment of \$83 million.²⁸ In 1904 the city produced \$200 million in manufactured goods, including \$40 million in woolens and worsteds, \$26 million in cotton goods, \$1.5 million in silk, \$17 million in jewelry and silver, \$13 million in machines, \$10 million in rubber goods, and \$5 million in electrical supplies.²⁹

By 1912 Providence had four high schools, seventeen grammar schools, 30,371 students, 1,044 teachers, 369 policemen, 325 firemen, and a population of

230,000. What did the city's residents do with their leisure time? They went to theaters; they went to movies; they went to beaches; they went to amusement parks; they went to public parks. Although there were beaches even within the city limits of Providence in those days, the main swimming areas were the beaches of Newport and Narragansett. While the rich vacationed in Watch Hill and Newport and cruised in yachts made by the Herreshoffs, the poor went to the new amusement parks—Rocky Point, Crescent Park, Boyden Heights, Vanity Fair—that were giving the bay a reputation as “the Coney Island of New England.” Most of these places could be reached by trolley for ten cents.³⁰

For a nickel a Providence resident could take a trolley to one of the public parks within the city itself. The Public Park Association had been formed in 1883 by a group of two hundred civic-minded citizens, and by dint of constant effort it had gradually made the city park-conscious. By the turn of the century there was much interest in beautifying Providence by parks, malls, and boulevards lined with trees, shrubs, and flowers, usually with a statue or a fountain as a centerpiece. In 1901 the city formed the Board of Park Commissioners, and in 1904 the state established the Metropolitan Park District Commission. Through these efforts Roger Williams Park was increased from its original 100 acres in 1886 to 462 acres by 1910, and Davis Park was created in 1891, Tockwotton Park in 1896, and Neutaconkanut Park in 1904. Between 1900 and 1910 the city added 90 acres of parks; by 1910 there were thirty-one parks covering a total of 640 acres.³¹

The Board of Trade was as enthusiastic about this beautification of the city as it was about the city's industrial progress:

The congregating of people in cities at a much faster rate than ever before known in the world's history, has brought about new conditions which demand relief from over-crowding. . . . Parks are no longer considered luxuries by any well-informed person, but are recognized as necessities for the health and moral well-being of every community and essential to the property of a modern city. If a city is not attractive it will not acquire [the] wealth and population that would otherwise come to it. . . . The pleasant scenes of nature and the playgrounds of the people . . . will presently be destroyed and forever obliterated except for public action to preserve them.³²

The businessmen supported a proposal to raise \$200,000 for parks in a city referendum in the spring of 1906, and they favored approving a \$250,000 budget for the Metropolitan Park District in a statewide referendum that fall.

“Compared with those of the average city,” said the *Board of Trade Journal*,

the possibilities are superb for a park system [in Providence] wonderfully varied and fine. . . .

There are active men yet living who remember when Providence was a village and cows roamed over the stubby meadows from Steward St. to Pawtuxet interrupted only by a few stonewalls and rail fences. Even when Betsey Williams gave her farm to the people about 30 years or so ago, they hesitated in its acceptance because it was “so far beyond any possible use.” . . .

Without fresh air and happy surroundings, the two greatest factors for efficiency of labor and a contented people, the industries of Providence . . . would inevitably decline.³³

The Metropolitan Park Commission recommended that the parks be linked together by spacious boulevards:

The general plan proposed provides for a series of wide boulevards, well planted trees and hardy shrubs, extending from the centre of Providence to the encircling ring of the proposed park system. . . .

[The plan] provides opportunities for enjoyment to the laboring man and his family unsurpassed by any that the riches of the millionaire can secure. It would attract many visitors. It would draw a leisure class of aesthetic tastes that raises the character of the community by its presence. . . . Experience everywhere goes to show that well-selected parks are almost invariably a good financial investment. . . .

[The eighteen miles of planned boulevards] would develop much real estate and provide many miles of splendid sites for the building of fine residences. . . .

[The people of Providence have] the choice of a city grandly beautiful and picturesque, or one shockingly ugly and ill-arranged.³⁴

One of the most important improvements brought about by the City Beautiful movement was the rearrangement of Exchange Place, then considered the civic center of Providence. When the old Union Depot was replaced by the new railroad station in 1898, the city covered the area with cobblestone and granite, but otherwise the only adornment there was the Soldiers and Sailors Monument (erected in 1877) and the General Burnside statue (erected in 1887). Beginning in 1906, however, the Public Park Association began to urge that the center of "the city beautiful" be given a more parklike atmosphere. In that year both the Soldiers and Sailors Monument and the Burnside statue were moved, the latter to join the Bajnotti Fountain in the new park south of the railroad station. Two years later a series of circular gardens was added to an extended mall in front of City Hall, and a comfort station and trolley terminal were erected in 1914.³⁵

An enormous number of private clubs, beneficial societies, lodges, athletic clubs, and country clubs flourished in Providence during these years. "Secret Beneficial Societies abound in sufficient numbers to suit the demands of all," said the *Board of Trade Journal* in 1895. The *Journal* referred specifically to the Masonic Temple (40 lodges), the Odd Fellows (33 lodges), the Knights of Pythias, the Knights Templar, the Elks, and the Foresters; in all, reported the *Journal*, there were 282 fraternal societies in the city. There were also exclusive clubs for the wealthy, including, in the metropolitan area, the Union Club, the Hope Club, the West Side Club, the Providence Country Club, the Agawam Hunt Club, the Squantum Club, the Pomham Club, and the Providence Athletic Club. There were boat and yacht clubs; there were the Providence Art Club, the Talma Dramatic Club, the Arion Choral Society, the Players Club, the Calumet Club; and there were the patriotic organizations—the Daughters of the American Revolution, the Sons of the American Revolution, the Colonial Dames, the Mayflower Descendants, the Society of Colonial Wars, the Society of Puritans. Brown University had its fraternities. In 1909 the Catholic Club was formed, and later came the many lodges of the Knights of Columbus. There were also a variety of Hibernian societies and other immigrant organizations. When businessmen supplemented yachting with golf after 1910, many of the country clubs added golf courses. Money and leisure abounded in the Confident Years.

One development of major proportions at the turn of the century was the advent of the telephone. In 1892 the city council granted a monopoly of the telephone business to the Providence Telephone Company, with the understanding that it would lay all its inner-city telephone wire underground. There were only five thousand telephone subscribers in 1895, but by 1903 the hundred women employed as switchboard operators were handling 49,500 calls a day.

The city's department stores, which gradually replaced the small specialty shops during these years, were the prime movers behind the annual Old Home Week celebration that took place every spring. Erecting elaborate arches and other festive decorations, the sponsors of Old Home Week arranged parades, balloon ascensions, and a week-long schedule of sporting events—crew races on the river, auto races, bicycle races, motor boat races—all to bring shoppers to downtown Providence.

Meanwhile the harbor called for renewed attention as steamships became larger and larger and the city's commercial leaders sought the kind of docking facilities that would attract the burgeoning ocean-liner business. The first step in this process was taken when Senator Nelson Aldrich got the federal River and Harbor Commission to come to Providence in 1904 to look over the

Providence carried out a vigorous bridge-building program between 1892 and 1897. This photograph, taken by an unidentified photographer in 1893, shows the reconstruction of the retaining walls along the Providence River at its convergence with the Woonasquatucket and Moshassuck rivers. RIHS Collection (RIHS X3 6994).



facilities and make recommendations.³⁶ The state itself voted a half million dollars as its share toward financing harbor improvements. With Aldrich's help, the city received a large grant to dredge the harbor to a depth of thirty feet, to make it six hundred feet wide, and to straighten the channel by cutting off part of Field's Point and Sassafras Point. Then the city was persuaded to improve its municipal wharf, and in 1912 the state began constructing a state pier, which it completed in 1914.³⁷ Partly as a result of these improvements, harbor tonnage reached a total of three million tons in 1912, and in 1911 the Fabre Line inaugurated the first transoceanic service between Providence and the Azores, Portugal, and Marseilles. In 1918 and 1919 the line landed fourteen thousand passengers in Providence. At last, it seemed, the city might really become "the Gateway to New England"! In 1920 the three-smokestack luxury liner SS *Providence* made its maiden voyage to the city.

One dream that failed to materialize in these years was the creation of a railroad that would link Providence to northern New England and Montreal. A proposal to bring the Vermont Central Railroad down through Webster, Massachusetts, and into Providence from the west was agreed to by the Grand Trunk Line of Canada, which controlled the Vermont Central, and the laying of the track began in 1911.³⁸ But just when the new route seemed to be nearing completion, the officers of the Grand Trunk Line made a deal with the



City residents could spend their leisure hours at the beach, the amusement park, or the movie theater, all accessible by trolley, ferry, or car. Providence was the home of many silent film companies, the most prominent of which, the Eastern Film Company, produced feature films at its Elmwood Avenue studios from 1914 to 1917. The studio shot shown here was taken on location during the filming of *The Minister* in 1915. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6995). An unidentified photographer captured the busy scene at the Rocky Point amusement park's ferry dock in 1915. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6996). Bathers try the water in this photo by Winslow, circa 1895. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6997).



New Haven Railroad, which felt threatened by the prospect of competition with its transport monopoly, and the Providence-to-Montreal line was never completed.³⁹

By 1916 Providence had sixteen theaters. Some of these housed repertory drama companies, some presented operas or musicals, some had vaudeville, and some offered burlesque. But the old-fashioned stage presentations at Keith's, the Empire, the Imperial, the Providence Opera House, and the Showboat were fast being displaced by motion pictures. After the Nickel Theater became the city's first full-time movie house in 1906, a number of other such theaters were erected as well: the Scenic Temple (1906), the Bijou (1908), the Casino (1910), the Emery (1914), Fay's (1916), the Majestic (or Schubert) (1916), the Strand (1916), and the Modern (1917). The Albee (1919) was built immediately after the war. In these early days one could see the Keystone Cops or Charlie Chaplin for a nickel. Interestingly, the new motion-picture houses were built even more lavishly than the old repertory drama and opera houses.⁴⁰

But the most important event of the prewar years was the coming of the automobile. The first automobile ever seen in Providence appeared in 1898; built and owned by A. T. Cross, this steam-driven vehicle created a sensation as its four-horsepower engine propelled it through the streets at ten miles an hour. But autos were still a curiosity in 1900, when the first cars were purchased in the city by R. L. Lippitt and C. P. Knight. In that year W. P. Mather founded the Rhode Island Automobile Club and started organizing races. By 1910 Fournier's "Red Devil" and Winton's "Bullet" reached speeds in excess of a mile a minute, covering one mile in 53.4 seconds and ten miles in 9 minutes and 13 seconds respectively.

In 1901 the Milwaukee Automobile Surrey, powered by steam, was described in the *Board of Trade Journal* as "the ideal carriage for summer resorters doing business in the city." By 1904 the James Brown Machine Company was making a gasoline-driven motorcar called the Cameron, which had a single-cylinder, air-cooled engine with the power of six horses.⁴¹ In 1907 the Nock Auto Company erected the city's first garage for repairing automobiles. The first Providence auto show took place that same year. Declaring that a revolution in transport was under way, in June 1908 the *Board of Trade Journal* devoted an entire issue to the motorcar. As of that date there were 1,500 car owners in Rhode Island, with 3,500 vehicles registered (as required by state law in 1904). Thirty-five car dealers were doing business in Providence. Although gasoline-propelled autos would prove to be the wave of the future, Stanley steamers and electric cars were still giving them stiff competition. "There are more Stanley steamers in use today in Rhode Island than any one make of gasoline cars," the *Journal* reported.⁴²

Soon there was a demand for an easier way to get up College Hill by auto, and plans were devised for the building of viaducts to create a less precipitous grade. One viaduct was designed to go up Waterman Street and another up Benevolent Street, but neither was ever built.⁴³ These viaducts were favored more by the trolley company than by auto owners, and the public was generally opposed to them. The trolley problem was finally solved when the East Side Tunnel, running from South Main to Thayer Street, was completed in 1914. The railroad, meanwhile, had solved the same problem in 1908 by digging the "East Side Bore," a 5,080-foot tunnel by which trains could proceed through the hill from downtown to a bridge over the Seekonk

River, from where they could go north to Boston, east to Fall River, or south to Bristol.

By 1911 downtown traffic was so congested that policemen had to be placed on duty to unsnarl it. To cope with the problem, new methods of traffic control were developed, including the replacement of mounted police by motorcycle police.⁴⁴ By 1920 the automobile had revolutionized Providence. In 1900 there had been eighty-three livery stables and three hundred private stables or carriage houses; by 1920 homes were being built with garages instead of carriage houses, and the livery stable had been replaced by the gas station. Between 1911 and 1920 the fire companies converted all their horse-drawn fire engines into gasoline-powered trucks, and the hospitals, after some hesitation, decided to change from horse-drawn to gas-powered ambulances.

Having driven out the horse, the automobile then proceeded to drive out the electric trolley. In 1914 there were fleets of jitneys (taxis and autobuses) which could go places trolleys did not go, delivering you right from your door to your destination. The trolley company complained, and for a time political pressure drove the jitneys out of business. But private ownership of cars could not be stopped, and by 1919 the trolley car company went bankrupt.⁴⁵ Although it lingered on until the 1930s, it was never healthy again.



World War I had little impact on Providence at first; in 1914 it all seemed very far away. In 1916, however, a big Preparedness Day ceremony was staged on the City Hall steps by those who believed that the nation would sooner or later be drawn into the conflict. When the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917, the city mobilized for action with great speed and patriotic fervor. During that year Providence bought \$68 million in Liberty bonds and gave another \$2 million to war relief via the Red Cross, the YMCA, and the Boston Ambulance Fund. A boiler shop was established by the government at Field's Point; the Lord Steamship Company received a contract to construct a fleet of twenty ships; local rubber companies began making tires for army trucks. With thousands of Rhode Island men volunteering or being drafted into the army, insurance companies in the city offered special low rates to soldiers.

The war boom created a great housing shortage in Providence as ten thousand new workers entered the city. German U-boats were spotted off the Rhode Island coast and vigilance mounted.⁴⁶ Everyone was encouraged to save food and to plant vegetable gardens wherever land was available; to conserve food for the war effort, the Providence police commissioner ordered all saloons to stop serving free lunches.⁴⁷ In 1918 Teddy Roosevelt came to the city and joined Billy Sunday, who was conducting a great revival crusade downtown, in raising money for bonds to "Lick the Hun."⁴⁸ In one of the sorrier episodes of the war years, some of the city's superpatriots concluded that Karl Muck, the conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, was a German and therefore should not be allowed to perform in Providence. The managers of the BSO insisted that Muck was Swiss, but the superpatriots were unconvinced. The *Board of Trade Journal* recommended that Herr Muck and his orchestra stay in Boston and practice playing the national anthem.⁴⁹

Such xenophobia did not end with the war. Providence's immigrants—especially those who belonged to labor unions—were subjected to considerable suspicion and hostility. Speaking in Providence in 1920 during his campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, General Leonard Wood attacked



By 1910 the success of the Public Park Association's beautification efforts could be seen in the attractive parks and boulevards throughout the city. Leander Baker recorded a peaceful afternoon at Roger Williams Park, circa 1895; RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 6998). A view along Broadway was included in a twelve-part series of booklets entitled *Providence Illustrated*, by H. R. Page and Company, 1891; RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 6999). Recent design changes appear in an anonymous photographer's 1908 photo of Exchange Place; RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 6601).

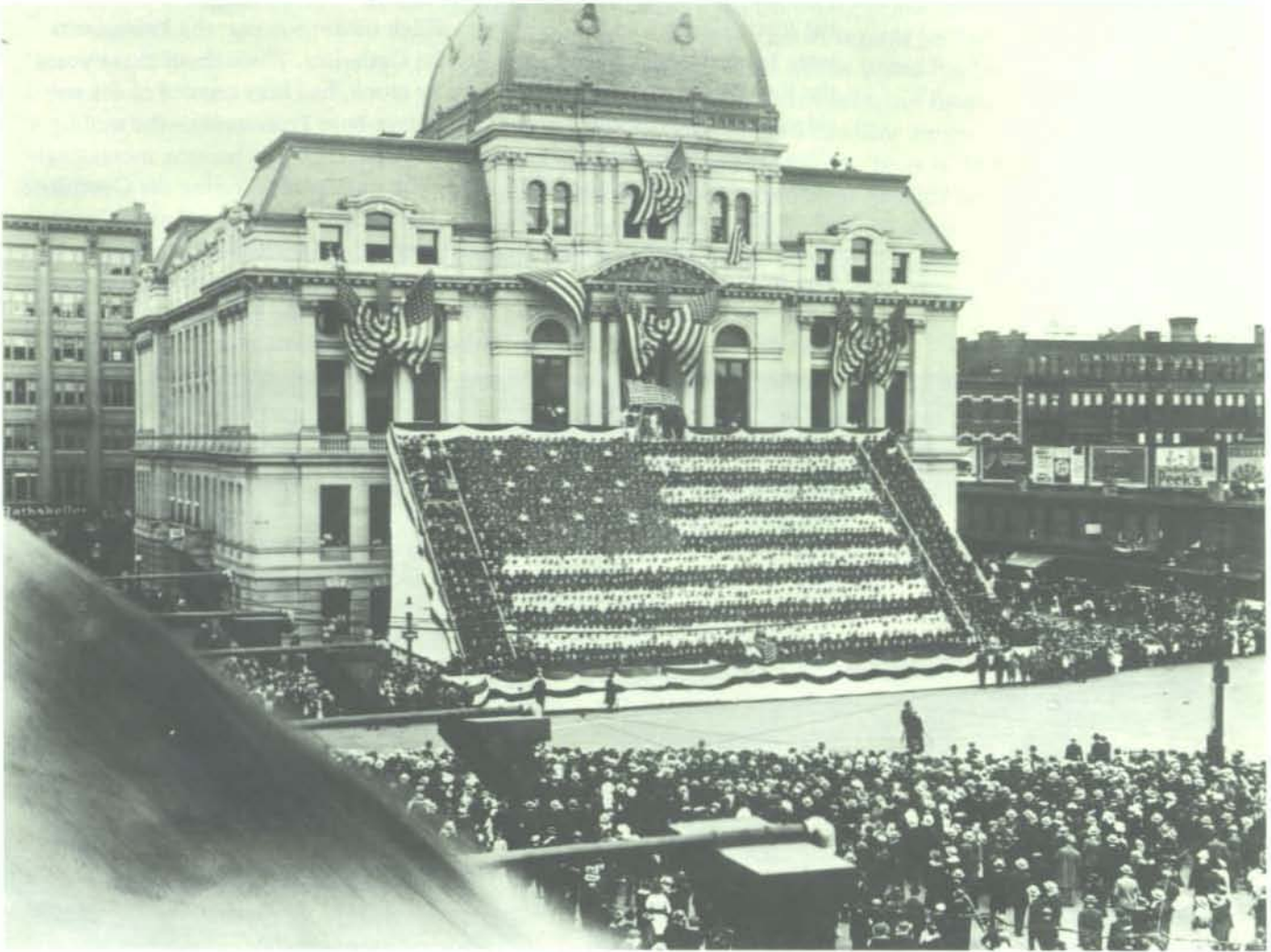
the League of Nations and stressed the danger of Bolshevism and anarchism among the foreigners in America. The *Journal* summarized Wood's speech in a headline: "There is Room for but One Language in America—that of Washington, Lincoln, and Roosevelt.—Loose-fibred Internationalism Means Death.—Stand for Law and Order, 'Shoot or Ship,' the S.O.S. When Applied to Dangerous Aliens." "There is no room here for the red flag [of Bolshevism]," Wood declared.⁵⁰

The Chamber of Commerce, which had organized a "War Council" in 1918, decided it should interview all immigrants settling in the city to see if they were willing to assimilate to 100 percent Americanism. The members of the self-appointed committee did not speak the language of the immigrants and often intimidated and harassed them. To cope with this situation, residents of Fox Point formed an organization called The Sons of Portugal, which offered to assist Portuguese immigrants who were facing the committee's interrogations.

World War I did nothing to weaken the city's confidence and optimism; in fact, the successful war effort seemed to confirm the conviction that Providence was the greatest center of industry in the nation and that its resources were vital to the nation's future. Yet there were changes taking place, some of which would reshape the city's future significantly. Certain changes received due notice at the time: in 1920 women gained the right to vote;⁵¹ the electrified railroad replaced the old steam locomotive; the airplane, so useful in the war, showed signs of being about to change the face of transportation yet another time;⁵² and petroleum companies developed the first big tank farms around the edge of the harbor.

Most businessmen greeted the arrival of the oil tankers as a sign of the port's improvement. But something had happened to the City Beautiful movement, and the establishment of oil storage tanks along some of the last scenic





Celebrations and parades of all kinds were common during the city's Confident Years. Painters and wallpaper-hangers display their float in the 1916 Labor Day parade; still frame from Labor Day Parade, produced by Coronet Films, Providence, 1916; RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7000). Schoolchildren form a "human flag" on the steps of City Hall on Preparedness Day, 3 June 1916; anonymous photographer, RIHS Collection (RHi X3 355).

shoreline near the city was allowed to develop without complaint. The city needed oil for power and heat, and the tank farms seemed to give Narragansett Bay an edge over Boston harbor at last. "Despite War Drawbacks," proclaimed a *Board of Trade Journal* headline in 1918, "More Than 3,200,000 Tons of Freight Arrived Here by Water in Twelve Months.—Providence Will Soon be the Most Important Oil-Distributing Port on the North Atlantic Coast."⁵³ After 1920 oil imports replaced coal as the major tonnage for the port of Providence.

The census of 1920 revealed something that the people of Providence could scarcely believe; "Something wrong somewhere," commented the *Board of Trade Journal* about the statistics.⁵⁴ What the census showed was that Providence was losing population to the suburbs. The city's growth had peaked in 1915 with a figure of 248,000; in 1920, according to the census, only 238,000 people lived in the city. Considering the overcrowding of the war years, this decline seemed hard to believe. But the census map clearly showed what was happening: the population of the city was declining while the population of the surrounding suburbs was growing. It proved to be a sign of things to come.⁵⁵

Something else changed drastically in Providence during the Confident Years, and this change would in turn produce further major changes after 1920.

Between 1890 and 1920 the native-born were slowly being outnumbered by the foreign-born and their children, which meant too that the Protestants were being outnumbered by the Roman Catholics. Throughout these years the Republican machine, by hook or by crook, had kept control of the political system safely in the hands of the native-born Protestants—the middle class—both in the city and in the state. After 1920 this became increasingly difficult, and early in the 1930s it became impossible. During the Confident Years no one foresaw how radically the ethnic changes would alter the nature of the state, but the immigrants were beginning to make their presence felt. The turning point in the ethnic makeup of the city was revealed as early as 1905, when a religious census showed that while the Protestants had eighty-nine churches and the Roman Catholics only twenty, there were 102,358 baptized Catholics and only 88,303 Protestants, of whom just 24,267 were church members.⁵⁶

One sign of the city's continued optimism after the war was the construction of the new Hospital Trust Building in 1918; another was the plan for a million-dollar Veterans Memorial Auditorium; still another was the decision to erect a nineteen-story downtown hotel, the Biltmore, at a cost of five million dollars. Yet, although the people of Providence did not know it, the era was to come to an end in the 1920s. While that decade was a time of prosperity for most Americans, it was the time when Rhode Island ceased to be a center of the textile industry; and with the failure of the textile industry came the economic failure of the state. Throughout the Confident Years the state's economy had appeared to be sufficiently diversified to weather any storm, but the appearance was deceptive. In the 1920s Rhode Island paid the price for its overinvestment in a single industry.

The failure of textile production in Rhode Island was part of the industry's general decline throughout New England. Why did this decline occur? Most economic historians argue that it had simply become cheaper to produce textiles in the South, for New England had to bear higher energy costs, the extra expense of importing cotton from the South, and an increasing cost of labor. Millowners claimed that New England's textile mills had ceased to be competitive because labor unions had forced the workers' wages too high. The southern textile mills, on the other hand, were not unionized.

Evidence seems to indicate that the balance of textile production actually shifted from the North to the South before the Confident Years had ended. It is ironic that much of the capital that enabled the South to build its new and more modern mills to compete with New England's came from New England investors. As the northern mills prospered, northern investors looked for places to invest their dividends and profits, and the South seemed to provide the answer. In 1880 the South produced only one-sixteenth of the nation's cotton goods; by 1910 its share had risen to almost one-third, and by 1923 to nearly half. While expenditures exceeded earnings in Rhode Island's textile mills from 1926 to 1933, the southern mills continued to grow and prosper, even after the Great Crash of 1929.⁵⁷

Although this dramatic shift caught some Rhode Islanders by surprise, the state had not been completely blind to the threat its industries faced from the South. As early as 1890 the *Board of Trade Journal* had noted that "since 1883 not less than one hundred million dollars of Northern money has been sent into one Southern State alone for investment." Three years later the

Journal noted that "it is not necessary to ask why the port of Providence has dropped from the head of the list as regards its shipping. . . . A large percentage of the money made here in Rhode Island has been sent abroad to the West and South. . . . This constant drain upon our finances [has brought us] far down the list."⁵⁸ In 1898, under a headline announcing "The Cotton Crisis in New England," the *Journal* blamed the increasing competition from southern mills upon such factors as "the longer daylight hours," the "lower cost of wages," the lower cost of living, and the "absence of labor unions and the freedom of politics from labor agitation" in the South.⁵⁹ All of these arguments were to be repeated endlessly after 1920.



Industrial Trust Company employees enjoy a day of games and fellowship at their annual company outing in 1920. Unidentified photographer. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7001).

"Is the business life of New England at stake?" asked the *Journal* in 1904.

Does the sword of Damocles hang over its head? These questions are not idle thoughts. . . .

. . . For years we have faced [the] relative decline [of textiles]; we have seen Southern consumption increase in ten years from 600,000 bales to 1,900,000 bales, while New England has stood still [at 2 million bales, the same as in 1891]. We have seen the Dwight, the Merrimac, the Massachusetts Company and other great corporations for a generation or more the pride of New England, build great mills in Alabama, Georgia, and other Southern states, and now we face a new crisis greater than any of the past.⁶⁰

"New England can save itself [if we will] awaken to our danger," said the *Journal* in 1904. "We must be prepared to re-equip with modern machinery every mill that is not up to date. . . . We must, if necessary, forego dividends for a while and thus stop the Southward trend of cotton manufacturing." But

who in New England was prepared to "forego dividends" during those years? And so, along with others in the region, the textile magnates of Providence enjoyed the Confident Years by ignoring all the signs of the era's impending demise. But, after all, what had they to lose? Why forego dividends in Rhode Island when they could earn better ones in Alabama and Georgia? Those with money were confident that one way or another the free enterprise system would work for them—and it did.

Still, Rhode Islanders can look back with some gratitude upon those who led the state and the city through those Confident Years. To them we owe many of our finest public buildings, boulevards, parks, and monuments. Their generation was the first to recognize the importance of Providence's colonial heritage and the value of historical preservation. In no other era was the middle class so prosperous and the city so free of crime. Never before—or since—were there so many good hotels, theaters, restaurants, and amusement parks. For all the faults of the era, it was not a bad time in which to live. It is doubtful that even more foresight by the governing class could have saved the state from economic decline, a decline shared by all the states of New England. The years from 1890 to 1920 saw Providence and Rhode Island at the peak of their industrial wealth and power, and there was nowhere to go from there but down. But it was fun while it lasted.

Notes

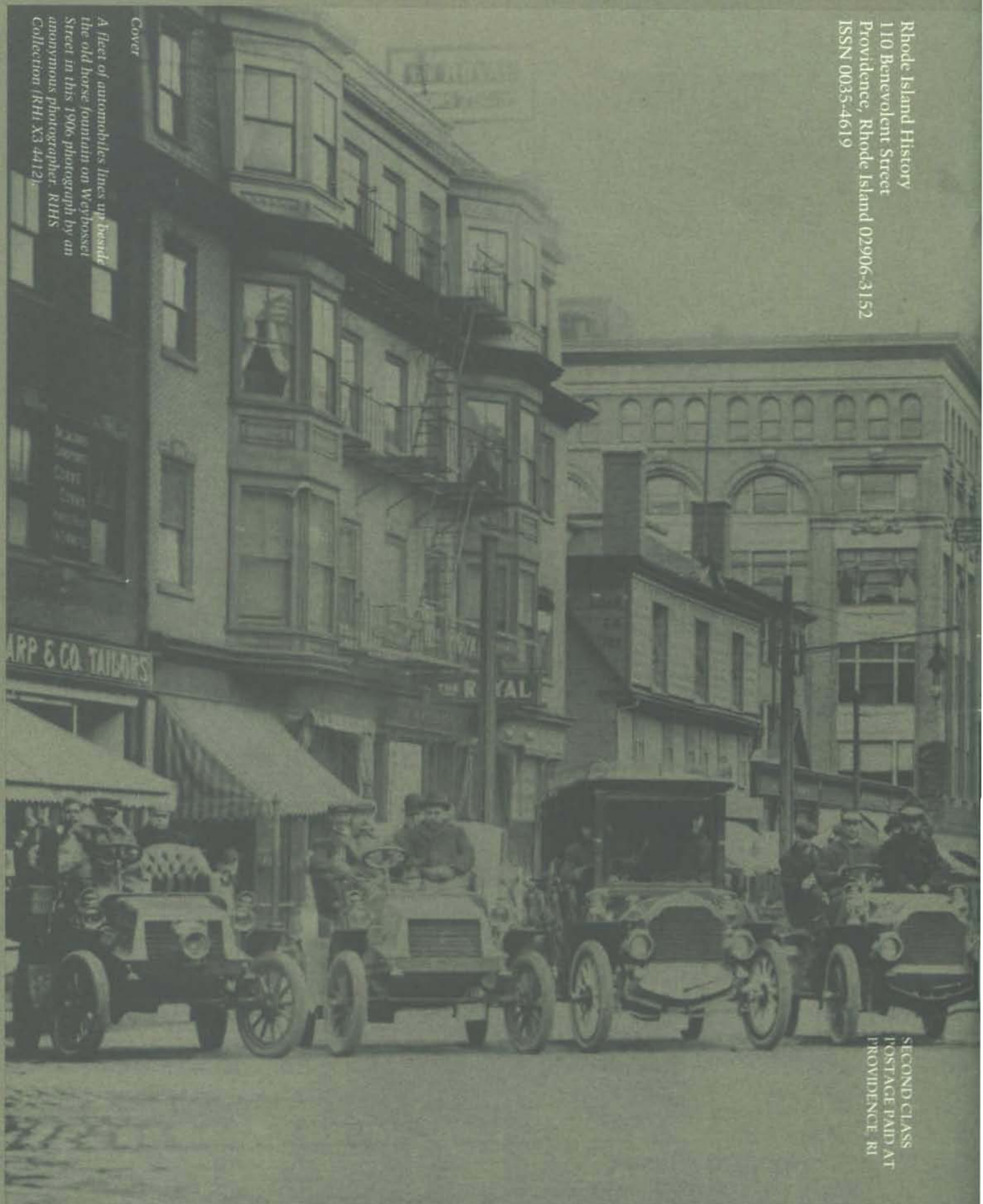
1. *Board of Trade Journal*, 1912, p. 502 (hereafter cited as *BTJ*). This periodical, also variously known as the *Providence Journal of Commerce*, the *Providence Board of Trade Journal*, and the *Providence Magazine*, is an invaluable source of information about the era. The *Journal* appeared monthly beginning in 1889. Its pages are numbered consecutively for each year.
2. *BTJ*, 1898, p. 332.
3. *BTJ*, 1895, p. 475.
4. *BTJ*, 1889, p. 1.
5. *BTJ*, 1908, p. 289.
6. *BTJ*, 1909, p. 16.
7. The *Board of Trade Journal*, 1895, p. 473, presented the following statistical breakdown of churches by denomination: Roman Catholic, 16; Baptist, 16; Methodist, 14; Episcopal, 13; Congregational, 9; "Colored Methodist," 7; Presbyterian, 4; Free Baptist, 4; Unitarian, 4; Universalist, 3; Miscellaneous, 25. The *Journal's* tabulation in 1914 (p. 557) showed 20 Roman Catholic churches with 102,358 members and 89 Protestant churches with 88,303 members (including 27 Baptist churches with 18,776 members, 19 Methodist churches with 9,303 members, 14 Episcopal churches with 18,828 members, 13 Congregational churches with 8,292 members, 4 Presbyterian churches with 2,461 members, and 12 miscellaneous churches with 7,636 members). Also included in the tabulation were 9 Hebrew congregations with 7,974 members and 1,396 members (mostly Armenian) of Greek Orthodox churches. The *Journal* commented on the fact that Catholics now outnumbered Protestants: "There is in Providence a kind of arrested spiritual development—religion seems hampered by the past. . . . There is undoubtedly great moral reserve; but there is also a great moral inertia. . . . The prevailing impulse is to do simply what is necessary and leave the future to look out for itself. It is the cautiousness of conservatism, and yet it may also result from a failure to realize the vast changes now going on in a community which has in the past been largely homogeneous and thoroughly American" (p. 560). Obviously speaking as a Protestant to Protestants, the editor ignored the great diversity that had existed in the city for many decades prior to 1914. For an interesting article in this same vein, see William Kirk, ed., *A Modern City: Providence, Rhode Island, and Its Activities* (Chicago, 1909), 319-48.
8. Kirk, *A Modern City*, 44.
9. *Ibid.*, 6.
10. *Ibid.*, 138.
11. *Ibid.*, 44. Of course, looked at in a different way, these figures reveal that of 39,236 families living in Providence in 1900, only 14,512 lived in one-family dwellings; 17,244 lived in two-family houses, and 3,939 lived in three-family houses.
12. *BTJ*, 1889, p. 2.
13. *BTJ*, 1890, p. 140.
14. *BTJ*, 1895, p. 475.
15. *BTJ*, 1900, p. 520; 1893, p. 68.
16. It is worth noting that the Corliss Engine Company was making diesel engines in Providence as early as 1902. *BTJ*, 1902, p. 170.
17. For the political machinations of Aldrich and Charles R. "Boss" Brayton, his political henchman, at the turn of the century, see Jerome L. Sternstein, "Nelson W. Aldrich" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brown University, 1968), and Lincoln Steffens, "Rhode Island: A State for Sale," *McClure's Magazine* 24 (1905): 338-53.
18. *BTJ*, 1893, p. 39.
19. See Kirk, *A Modern City*, 200.
20. The best study of Perry's career is Robert F. Fall, "Marsden J. Perry: The Man Who Owned Rhode Island" (honors thesis, Brown University, 1964).
21. The best account of this famous strike and the way it was broken is Scott Molloy, "Rhode Island Communities and the 1902 Carmen's Strike," *Radical History Review*, no. 17 (1978): 75-98.
22. An excellent discussion of the Cove Basin, with maps, can be found in John Hutchins Cady, *The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence, 1636-1950* (Providence, 1957), 115, 116, 117, 123, 136, 147, 163, 165, 179.
23. *BTJ*, 1890, p. 12.
24. Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 197.
25. *BTJ*, 1910, p. 470; 1911, pp. 39, 183.
26. There is an excellent map of the bridge in Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 145.
27. *BTJ*, 1906, p. 220.
28. *BTJ*, 1901, p. 369.
29. *BTJ*, 1904, p. 433.
30. It was in these years that Charles I. D. Looft achieved a national reputation for carving merry-go-round animals in his shop in East Providence. For a good account of that town's amusement parks during this era, see Joseph Conforti, *Our Heritage: A History of East Providence* (White Plains, N.Y., 1976), 127-35.
31. In addition to its parks, the city also began developing playgrounds for children after 1906.
32. *BTJ*, 1906, p. 215.
33. *Ibid.*, 216-17.
34. *Ibid.*, 218.
35. The Weybosset Street comfort station went up (or down, since it was underground) in 1913.
36. *BTJ*, 1904, p. 307.
37. *BTJ*, 1915, p. 37.
38. *BTJ*, 1911, p. 306.
39. The company established to build the Grand Trunk Line into Providence was called the Southern New England Railroad. Completion of the new line was expected in 1913. Late in 1912, however, the *Board of Trade Journal* reported that President Chamberlain of the Grand Trunk Line said the plan had been suspended because of "stringency in the European money market," but that it was in fact discovered that "a traffic agreement between the New York, New Haven and Hartford Railroad and the Grand Trunk Line [had been reached] which would obviate the necessity" for a second line into Providence. 1912, p. 461.
40. See Roger Brett, *Temples of Illusion* (Providence, 1976), a valuable history of the theater in Rhode Island. By 1920 Providence had twenty-seven theaters, most of them showing movies.
41. *BTJ*, 1901, p. 188; 1904, p. 106.
42. *BTJ*, 1908, p. 227.
43. See Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 214. Discussions of an "easy-grade" viaduct, with illustrations, appear in *BTJ*, 1911, pp. 161-63, 216. Proposals for a subway system in Providence were discussed in the *Journal* in 1914 [pp. 221-24].

44. *BTJ*, 1915, p. 381.
45. In 1918 the *Board of Trade Journal* noted that the trolley company had sustained a deficit of \$410,501 for the first eleven months of the preceding year (p. 25), and it called upon the city to take control of local mass transit lines. Later the same thing was to happen with the railroads. When the profits went out of a private enterprise, businessmen somehow expected it to be bailed out by the taxpayers.
46. In December 1917 the "War Council" established by the Chamber of Commerce demanded that Brown University register all of its foreign students and make sure that none of them were German agents. *BTJ*, 1918, p. 17.
47. *Ibid.*, 25.
48. See the cartoon of Sunday and Roosevelt in the *Providence Daily Journal*, 18 Oct. 1918.
49. *BTJ*, 1918, p. 26.
50. *BTJ*, 1920, p. 15.
51. *Ibid.*, 515.
52. *Ibid.*, 417.
53. *BTJ*, 1918, p. 9.
54. *BTJ*, 1920, p. 415.
55. *Ibid.*, 488.
56. See Kirk, *A Modern City*, pp. 324-25.
57. For a discussion of the declining textile industry and the rise of textile unions during these years, see Edmund J. Brock, *The Background and Recent Status of Collective Bargaining in the Cotton Industry of Rhode Island* (Washington, D.C., 1942).
58. *BTJ*, 1893, p. 41.
59. *BTJ*, 1898, p. 78.
60. *BTJ*, 1904, p. 305.

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Cover

A fleet of automobiles lines up beside
the old horse fountain on Weybosset
Street in this 1906 photograph by an
anonymous photographer. RHS
Collection (RH1 X3 4412).



SECOND CLASS
POSTAGE PAID AT
PROVIDENCE, RI