

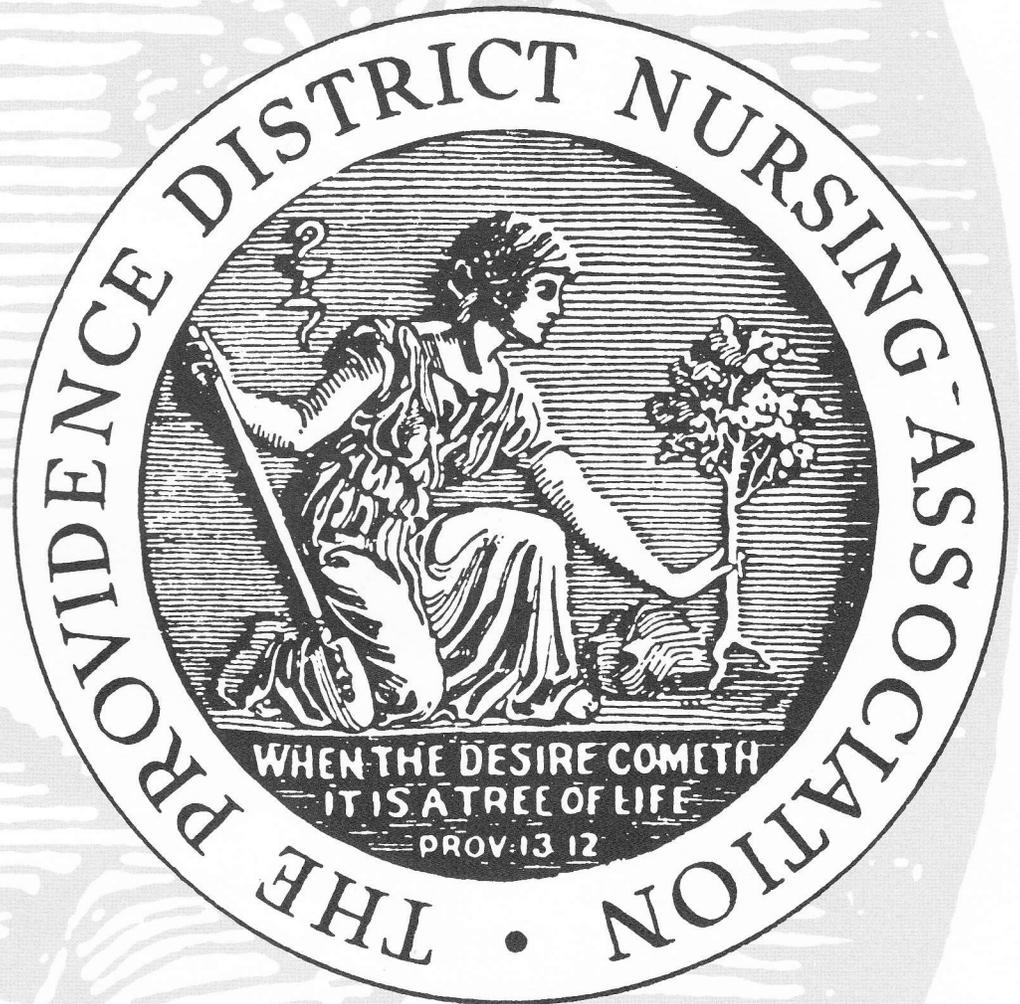
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Public Need and Public Health: The Early Years of the Providence District Nursing Association

CYNTHIA COMERY FERGUSON

Eleanor B. Green might well have chosen a life of leisure, filling her days with the pleasurable activities that occupied most affluent young women at the turn of the century. Ingrained in her family ethic, however, was the understanding that one's life should be both useful and meaningful. Green's brother, Theodore Francis Green, was elected governor of Rhode Island at the age of sixty and served in the U.S. Senate into his nineties. A liberal Democrat in what was then a solidly Republican state, Senator Green championed the causes of the underdog throughout his career.

Equally driven, Eleanor Green shared her brother's enthusiasm for improving the lot of those society too often forgot. But where Theodore Green found his platform in the political arena, Eleanor would find hers in public health.

An 1892 graduate of Wellesley College, Green got her first taste of nursing with the outbreak of the Spanish-American War. She worked tirelessly as a volunteer at Rhode Island Hospital, tending sick and wounded soldiers brought to Rhode Island aboard a steamboat chartered by Col. R. H. I. Goddard. Largely through Green's efforts and the contacts of her father, the hospital offered a short course in nursing for those who wanted to help but who lacked formal training.

With the war over, Green did not have to look far to find more suffering. In the late nineteenth century, neighborhoods of enormous wealth in Providence often abutted those of crushing poverty. Just blocks from the Greens' imposing three-story brick home at 14 John Street lay streets of overcrowded tenements, most of them housing Irish and Portuguese immigrants who worked at the nearby docks and factories.

As an emissary from the Church of the Saviour on Benefit Street, an Episcopal church that served the congested Fox Point neighborhood as well as the prosperous College Hill area, Green attempted to relieve the suffering of the sick poor. She would make frequent visits, bathing patients and doing whatever else was at her disposal, but it was quickly apparent that these efforts were woefully inadequate. Like others across the country, Green sought a more organized and permanent approach to home care.



Four decades earlier, in 1859, the first organized nonsectarian public health nursing association was founded in Liverpool, England, by William Rathbone, a merchant and member of Parliament. Following the advice of Florence Nightingale, Rathbone founded the association to provide direct in-home service by nurses who had received "systematic training."

In 1885 the Buffalo District Nursing Association (now the Visiting Nurse Association of Buffalo, New York) was founded, adopting the Liverpool model. In the decade that followed, district nursing associations were springing up in most of the country's large urban areas, including the highly regarded Henry Street Nurses Settlement (later

Eleanor B. Green enlisted the support of the local medical community to organize a district nursing program in Providence. Photo, circa 1915, courtesy of VNA of Rhode Island. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7193).

Cynthia Comery Ferguson is a Rhode Island freelance writer. This article is adapted from chapter 1 of her book A Century of Caring: VNA of Rhode Island, 1900-2000, published in 2000 under the aegis of the VNA Foundation with the support of the Rhode Island Historical Society's Newell D. Goff Institute for Ingenuity and Enterprise Studies.

renamed the Visiting Nurse Service of New York), started by Lillian Wald in lower Manhattan.

Reasons for this increased interest in district nursing varied, some of them more altruistic than others. With a greater understanding of the relationship between bacteria and disease—an understanding that grew out of the work of Pasteur and Koch in the 1870s—middle- and upper-class Americans came to see that their own well-being was greatly dependent on the health of the entire population. The advent of the germ theory brought the frightening realization that even if you lived in a clean and comfortable neighborhood, you enjoyed little protection against the diseases, many of them deadly, carried by the workers in your factory, the servants in your house, or the laborers who packed your meat.

Economics also played a role. It was widely understood in the late nineteenth century that illness was a major cause of destitution. As inadequate as public and private relief may have been at the time, it still placed a drain on the economy—one that most citizens bitterly resented. In addition, sickness took a tremendous toll on the productivity of the labor force that turn-of-the-century industrialists relied on so heavily.

But enthusiasm for public health and district nursing had other, more charitable roots as well. The social reform—or Progressive—movement gained strength and momentum in the late 1800s, particularly on the issue of “child-saving.” “By the 1890s children had captured the energy and attention of social reformers with an intensity never matched in other periods of American history,” writes Michael B. Katz in his history of welfare in America. Indeed, public health measures to reduce infant mortality and tuberculosis, and to improve the delivery of health care to children, won unprecedented support. Unlike other reform efforts, Katz maintains, public health for children—and for adults, too—quickly acquired a broad constituency for several reasons: “First, it had a clear, measurable goal: the reduction of death and disease. Second, after the discovery of the bacterial origins of infectious disease, it had a scientific basis. Third, it could draw most of its authority and resources locally. . . . Fourth, public health was not class-specific. Unlike any other major [reform measure], it served everyone.”¹

For humanitarians like Providence’s Eleanor Green, however, simply observing the misery of fellow human beings was reason enough to act. “The sight of a woman in a rear tenement, under unspeakably distressing conditions, was the starting point of the settlement,” wrote Lillian Wald about the birth of her organization in New York City.²



Immigration only exacerbated the physical suffering and misery found in most nineteenth-century cities, especially in the Northeast. Arriving with little money, and often sick, immigrants poured into Providence’s already crowded urban neighborhoods, drawn by plentiful jobs in the mills and factories. Triple-deckers designed to house a single family on each floor often held six or more families, some comprising three or four generations. Many immigrants took in boarders to help pay the rent.

Between 1865 and 1900 Providence’s population more than doubled, and it would double again by 1910, when seven out of every ten residents were foreign born. At the turn of the century, the city ranked twentieth in size among American cities.³ With a population of 175,000, it was, in fact, larger than it is today, and the city was particularly proud of its industrial strength in jewelry, textiles, and machine tools. Indeed, the names of many manufacturers in and around Providence—Gorham Silver, Corliss Steam Engines, the American Screw Company, Brown & Sharpe, and the Nicholson File Company—were familiar around the world.

Though Rhode Island's immigrants came from all over Europe and Canada, most settled in neighborhoods with others who shared their ethnic origin. In most cases they vigorously maintained their cultural and religious (largely Catholic) traditions. Some brought professional skills, but generally they were peasants with little formal education. To support themselves, family members—many of them just children—pooled their meager wages. According to a *Providence Journal* article chronicling that time, Rhode Island's heavy reliance on child labor, especially in the treacherous textile mills, was "the nasty secret" behind the state's flourishing economy.⁴

With massive increases in the population, traditional methods for keeping cities clean broke down. Streets were often littered with festering garbage, and sewer systems were hopelessly inadequate. Because many tenements in Providence lacked indoor plumbing, the city built public bathhouses in its most congested neighborhoods. The Fox Point bathhouse still stands today, boarded up, next to the elementary school on Wickenden Street.

Having tried to alleviate some of the enormous suffering she found in these distressing conditions, Eleanor Green soon saw the futility of her efforts. She investigated nearby Samaritan Societies, organizations that furnished sickroom supplies, but quickly decided this approach would prove equally insufficient. What a sick person really needed was a skilled, trained nurse, Green concluded after visiting the district nursing association in Boston and investigating others.

An accidental encounter with Dr. Halsey DeWolf at the corner of Benefit and College Streets on College Hill in the spring of 1900 brought this dream closer to reality. "Dr. DeWolf, we need a district nurse in Providence," Green, barely thirty, told the equally young but widely respected physician. Without hesitation, DeWolf agreed. Within days he had enlisted the support of Mrs. Henry F. Lippitt, whose young son was ill and under his care. Moved by DeWolf's description of another sick child, one who was desperately poor and receiving little care, Lippitt offered to pay the salary of a nurse for a six-month trial.

"It would have been easy at this point for Miss Green and Dr. DeWolf merely to have engaged a nurse who would have worked obscurely in her chosen district, proving her value only to her patients and to these two people, but no such policy was pursued," noted the author of the organization's twenty-five-year history, who stressed the significance of the early steps taken by Green and DeWolf. "Before the nurse was engaged, a committee was formed [in April 1900] and the infant project started on a secure basis."⁵

That committee had seven members: Eleanor Green, Amey Vernon, Mrs. John A. Gardner, Mrs. Henry F. Lippitt, Dr. Halsey DeWolf, Charles Morris Smith Jr., and Dr. George L. Collins.⁶ Together they drew up what today would be called a mission statement: "This Association seeks to provide trained nurses, whose duty is to visit sick persons deprived of proper care; to care for them at their homes; to give them such attention as is imperatively needed; and to instruct members of the household in the simple rules of hygiene."⁷ The committee would name the organization the Providence District Nursing Association and then hire the association's first nurse.



Ellen Kenny—described in early reports as "a woman skilled in her profession, with a strong interest in the social side of her work"—graduated from the Rhode Island Hospital nursing school in 1897. A year later she enlisted as an Army nurse, serving six months of active duty in Cuba. Now she was ready for yet another challenge. District nursing would provide it.

Kenny was assigned a district bounded by the Providence and Seekonk Rivers and Barnes Street, an area that encompassed much of Providence's East Side. It was the Fox



Nurses of the PDNA were assigned neighborhood districts, where they provided service for low-income patients. Photo, circa 1920, courtesy of VNA of Rhode Island. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7194).

Point neighborhood, however, that filled most of Kenny's days. She would receive no fee from her patients; her salary was sixty dollars a month. On 1 June 1900 Kenny set out to see her first patient—a young boy on Cent Street named Willie Dimes. Those names, it would be noted later, were indeed “symbolic of small beginnings.”⁸

Rhode Island Hospital offered the PDNA use of a tiny office in its Outpatient Building, and it was here that Kenny would begin her days from eight to nine each weekday morning, recording the previous day's visits, receiving new calls, and replenishing her supplies from a small closet that held assorted items, all of them donated, which she would loan to patients as needed. Donning a felt hat adorned with a large feather—PDNA nurses would not wear uniforms for another five years—and carrying an enormous nurse's bag stocked with everything from hot water bottles to bed linens, Kenny set out each day for the C. J. Luce Drug Store on Wickenden Street, one of several drugstores that agreed to handle calls from those requesting a nurse's assistance.

Kenny responded to all calls in her district that met the conditions later spelled out in the PDNA's first annual report: The patient must be “worthy,” a word that future members of the PDNA conceded was ambiguous and usually irrelevant. More important, the patient must be “too poor to pay for a nurse.” All patients must be under the care of a doctor, and the person sending for the district nurse must leave his or her name and

address when making the request.⁹ Initially, requests for services were taken only from doctors, but within the first year nurses also accepted calls from relatives, friends, and patients themselves.

The diseases and conditions Kenny would face on her daily rounds varied considerably. The leading causes of death in the United States in 1900 were influenza and pneumonia, tuberculosis, gastritis, diseases of the heart, cerebrovascular diseases, chronic nephritis, accidents, cancer, early childhood diseases, and diphtheria.¹⁰ Kenny would see all these and more.

In "Story of a Day's Work," included in the first annual report,¹¹ a typical day brought the district nurse first to a home where both mother and daughter were bedridden—the mother with a spinal condition and the daughter with rheumatism and dropsy. While at their home, the nurse bathed and groomed her patients, dressed bedsores, and even prepared egg-nogs for the two women.

The second call brought the nurse to a "bitterly cold" three-room flat that housed a family of ten. "The father was a shiftless man out of work three-fourths of the time," wrote the nurse. "The mother [an obstetrical case] had phlebitis, which had kept her in bed most of the time for many weeks." In addition to the newborn, there were seven children, "the oldest a girl of 13, who did most of the work for the family." After tending to her patient, the nurse tacked cardboard over broken windows so that "the room might be a little more comfortable."

The six additional calls this nurse would make that day were equally grim: a young girl with pleurisy; an elderly woman whose feet were covered with large running sores; an invalid cared for by an older sister whose only income was what she received for boarding young children in the tiny apartment; a young mother of four with tuberculosis; a young child with tuberculosis of the hip whose parents were both "addicted to the use of intoxicating drink"; and a pitiable woman confined to her bed but living alone.

As overwhelming as these conditions must have seemed to Kenny and those who followed her, the early district nurses did, in fact, have a tremendous impact on the lives of those they visited. With limited resources, the nurses helped not only the patients but also entire families through tactfully worded instruction in hygiene, child care, and nutrition, and, when appropriate, with provisions from the supply closet. In cases of tuberculosis, diphtheria, and other contagious diseases, the nurses spent considerable time teaching patients and caregivers how to prevent the further spread of the disease throughout the home and the community.

Sometimes mistaken for a door-to-door salesperson or a Protestant proselytizer, Kenny occasionally met with resistance when she knocked on the door of a new patient. Some patients disliked the prospect of a stranger telling them how to keep house or raise their children. By the second visit, however, these misgivings generally disappeared, and Kenny reported that she was almost invariably greeted with warmth and gratitude.

The trial financed by Mrs. Lippitt was clearly a success. Five months after Kenny's first visit to Willie Dimes—one month short of the original schedule—the PDNA hired its second nurse, Florence Stewart, who was assigned the district of South Providence. Still, with at least half of the city uncovered, Green and the others on the committee were far from satisfied. "The Association aims to provide such help for all the sick poor in the city," Green insisted in the first annual report, published in September 1902. "To do so, the permanent salaries of the nurses already at work must be assured, and two more nurses must be obtained. The work is a large one, and is entirely dependent upon generous vol-

untary subscriptions. But the Association after two years experience feels justified in asking interest and help from all in the city of Providence.”¹²



Convinced of the organization’s effectiveness and future potential, the PDNA formally incorporated on 19 November 1902. Six incorporators—William H. Sweetland, Halsey DeWolf, Clara T. Parsons, Eleanor B. Green, Gertrude B. Gardner, and George L. Collins—signed the articles of association, which stated that the PDNA was formed “for the purpose of providing trained nurses whose duty is to visit sick persons deprived of proper care; to care for them at their homes; to give them such attention as is imperatively needed; and to instruct members of the household in the simple rules of hygiene; all of said service to be without compensation.” All but the final statement on compensation would stand the test of time.

In less than three years the PDNA had emerged as an important resource in the community. Other organizations, impressed with its efficiency and good works, turned to the PDNA for assistance. The most notable such organization was the Providence Dispensary. Believing that the PDNA was better able to carry out its mission of providing medical advice and medicine to the city’s poor, the Providence Dispensary entered into an agreement with the PDNA in April 1903, turning over the income from its invested funds and all contributions.

Although the work of the dispensary was administered by the PDNA, it remained separate from the work of the district nurses. The city, previously divided into six dispensary districts, was reorganized into two, with a doctor overseeing each district and determining eligibility for free prescriptions. Under the auspices of the PDNA, dispensary contributors were no longer allowed to distribute cards for free prescriptions, a system that had brought abuse.

The PDNA was proud of its economic efficiency, and rightfully so. In 1903 the organization’s total budget—which covered two nurses, supplies, and all administrative expenses—was less than two thousand dollars, nearly all of which came from donations.

The following year brought further expansion for the PDNA. Winifred L. Fitzpatrick, who would remain with the association until 1941 and eventually become its second director, signed on as the PDNA’s third nurse. Fitzpatrick covered Providence’s North End, a district that included the densely populated Federal Hill, the first home of most of the city’s large Italian population. Previously in charge of the nurses in Rhode Island Hospital’s operating room, this stylish and jovial young woman embraced district nursing with unbounded enthusiasm and enormous compassion. Stocking her large nurse’s bag with every item available for the comfort of her patients—including, legend has it, a bottle of whiskey—Fitzpatrick brought cheer and relief to her many patients in the desperately poor neighborhoods within her district.

“It was so hard to gain their confidence at first,” Fitzpatrick recalled years later. “Often the patient didn’t know she needed a nurse, didn’t want one in fact. Often I had to sweep the floor, wash the dishes and the children. That seemed more like help to the mother in bed than taking care of her.” When describing the misery and neglect she and her colleagues routinely encountered in those early days, Fitzpatrick noted that “from a district nursing point of view, those were not the ‘good old days.’ Those were the bad old days.”¹³

Part of the PDNA’s early success was due to the relationships it developed with established charitable organizations and medical institutions in the city. Many, such as the Young Men’s Christian Association and the Randall Square Mission, made referrals.

Others—the North End Working Girls’ Club, Rhode Island Hospital, and, later, the Society for Organizing Charity—also provided office space and telephones. An arrangement in 1904 with Butler Hospital, one of the oldest psychiatric hospitals in the country, provided student nurses.



By 1905 the PDNA had three trained nurses and a student nurse from Butler. The association had realized its first goal—providing coverage for the entire city. But growth had brought the usual problems. The organization had outgrown its small room at Rhode Island Hospital and lacked a central headquarters; there was no central record system, and no one nurse was in charge of the others; each nurse worked independently, only occasionally meeting with the other three; the inexperienced student nurses from Butler received little, if any, supervision in the Olneyville district they covered. Administration of the PDNA had become more complex and more demanding, and it was clear that the organization needed professional leadership.

In November 1905, just days after graduating from the Newport Hospital school of nursing, Mary Sewall Gardner joined the PDNA as superintendent of nurses.¹⁴ “My only preparation for this position was five months of undergraduate experience in visiting nursing . . . under what would now be considered a modicum of haphazard supervision,” Gardner wrote years later. “I make no excuse for my presumption. I was typical of my time, and like most of my contemporaries, though lacking so appallingly in knowledge and experience, I did bring to my new work an inquiring mind and an eager enthusiasm to blaze a trail.”¹⁵

Indeed she did. Gardner saw the strengths of the PDNA—“a good and progressive board, and as fine a little group of women for nurses as could be found anywhere”—but she was also keenly aware of its shortcomings, and of her own. “By the grace of God,” she later wrote,

I realized how much there was for me to learn, and I early planned a trip, a sort of grand tour, to see the work of such organizations as already had a superintendent. . . . Looking back on that trip with the eyes of later experience, I can see many points of interest that escaped me at the time, chief among them the great degree of diversity of aim and method that I found. The germ of almost all that has since been developed in public health nursing was there, but in astonishingly varying stages of fructification. Some associations were far advanced along certain lines, but backward in others, and all were seeking independent methods of solving what were, in many instances, common problems.¹⁶

Seven years after making this “grand tour,” Mary Gardner and several other leaders in the field would address these concerns with the formation of the National Organization for Public Health Nursing.

With the appointment of a superintendent, the PDNA “passed into the second period of its development,” noted Gardner. Among her first achievements was securing space for a headquarters—a room at the Butler Exchange in downtown Providence, provided by the Society for Organizing Charity—where Gardner immediately set up a central record system and central supply closets. She also instituted weekly staff meetings and hired a fourth nurse for the Olneyville district, previously covered by the Butler students. The association continued to accept student nurses, but now these young and untested women received supervision and training.

It was time, too, for the district nurses to achieve a stronger identity in the community. Gardner proposed a uniform—a gray, street-length chambray dress with white collar and cuffs—which was adopted in 1906. A little black silk cap with a velvet bow replaced



Mary Sewall Gardner joined the PDNA as superintendent of nurses in November 1905. Photo by Bachrach, circa 1918, courtesy of VNA of Rhode Island. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7195).

the felt hats and feathers previously worn. And the enormous nurse's bag—"It was really a man's traveling bag," Fitzpatrick later conceded—gave way to a far more compact model known as the Henry Street bag. A small tray within these efficient little bags held soap, aprons, record cards, cotton, tape, alcohol, and other essentials.

"Perhaps most important," Gardner would say of her early years with the PDNA, "the Association began to take its place as one of the vigorous social agencies of the city, and to play its part for civic betterment in common with the other organizations."¹⁷ One notable organization was the city's Health Department, headed by Charles Value Chapin.

That Providence was blessed with both Gardner and Chapin, two extraordinary and influential figures in the early days of public health, was indeed remarkable. Through their writings and individual achievements, both would earn international reputations in their respective fields. Never distracted by the politics and jealousy often found between public health officials and agency directors in other cities, Gardner and Chapin consistently supported each other's efforts.

A graduate of Brown University and New York's Bellevue Hospital Medical College, Chapin served as Providence's superintendent of health from 1884 to 1931. Greatly influenced by a former professor who had a keen interest in the work of Pasteur, Chapin was eager to apply these relatively recent discoveries to his work as health superintendent. As early as 1902, in his paper "Dirt, Disease, and the Health Officer," Chapin stressed that dirt and disease are not synonymous, and that time and money should "not be spent on the abatement of unimportant nuisances, annoying chiefly to sight and smell, but on the control of significant filths that carry viable and virulent pathogens."¹⁸ His most famous paper on the subject, "The Fetish of Disinfection," published in 1906, exposed the inadequacy of fumigation and led to the discontinuance of the practice.

"We had learned that infection lay in persons, not things," Chapin wrote later.

It seemed entirely futile and absurd to employ terminal disinfection after diphtheria, unless it could be shown that all members of the household were free from the germs of the disease, and this latter measure, after a fair trial in Providence, was found impracticable. Consequently, terminal disinfection for diphtheria was abandoned in that city in 1905. This led to no untoward results. There was no general increase of the disease; in fact, there happened to be a marked decrease. . . . Terminal disinfection is costly and useless, and teaches discarded theory. The wise thing to do is to give it up and use the money for nurses for home visiting.¹⁹

The PDNA could not have asked for a more powerful or vocal advocate.

Gardner's first meeting with Chapin in 1905 was an eye-opener for the association's young, and admittedly inexperienced, superintendent of nurses. Years later she recounted the visit, in the third person, in the PDNA's twenty-five-year history:

[She felt that] having learned the principles and technique of house fumigation in her hospital she must at least make a protest against the slack methods of the Health Department in refusing to fumigate in the homes. She was most courteously met by Dr. Chapin who, after listening attentively to her appeal, gently asked if she were acquainted with the views of certain French and German authors on the subject of fumigation. Books were brought down and passages pointed to and she was at last bowed out with a dawning realization of the fact that she had been endeavoring to instruct in his own subject one of the world's experts on contact infection. It is significant of Dr. Chapin's simplicity and kindness that she felt no embarrassment at the time and has never felt any since in thinking of the interview.²⁰



From its inception the PDNA had been adamant about refusing compensation for its nursing services. This policy was at first so integral to the organization that it was included in the articles of incorporation. In 1906, however, the PDNA became con-

vinced that providing free services had unwanted consequences. "While to many this may seem a generous and desirable way of dispensing aid, it has been proved in other cities to be unwise," Gardner wrote in that year's annual report. "Many of the very poor are glad to pay a small sum, often only ten cents, for the care they receive, and it is best for them that they should do so. Also, we are able in this way to give needed care to families who would otherwise be entirely without it, because they are unable to pay the salary of a [private] nurse and are unwilling to accept of charity."²¹

Gardner often warned that "self-respecting families" might become too reliant on "help that can be had for the asking." She believed that once accustomed to charity, individuals lose both pride and a sense of responsibility. When this happens, she argued, "the payment of debt incurred is not a matter of importance" and handouts become expected.²²

But Gardner and the PDNA saw yet another benefit to a fee schedule. Home care for the middle class was a growing problem in the country. Other than the district nursing associations, few organizations provided at-home nursing. Many who could afford to pay for nursing services simply had no access to the kind of care the PDNA was providing for the poor. Gardner saw, as early as 1906, that filling this need would open up extraordinary opportunities for expansion. A decade later the PDNA would go a step further, offering an hourly nursing service. This appealed to those who could not afford—or did not require—a full-time residential nurse, but who were able to pay for more extended visits than those made by a district nurse.

The actual execution of the fee-for-service plan proved to be a challenge. Acceptance by the nurses, who were responsible not only for collecting the fees but also for setting the amount, was not total. "The more thoughtful nurses approved, but it was uphill work," Gardner conceded later.²³ Collection of the money was often difficult, and many nurses were uncomfortable with the task.

Fees were based on a family's ability to pay. The very poorest patients continued to receive free care, but most were asked to pay at least ten cents. "We are still struggling with the effects . . . of this policy," Gardner noted in 1910, "for it is hard to turn free service of any kind into service to be paid for. But I think it has been proved in every city that it is unwise and therefore detrimental to nurse even those of very moderate means without payment."²⁴ Reporting on the plan three years later, Gardner noted that services had never been withdrawn because of an unwillingness to pay.

At about the time that the PDNA instituted its fee-for-service policy, discussion of third-party payment was beginning to take place. Some argued that the ideal visiting nurse association of the future should not be a charitable agency at all, and that the entire cost of every visit should be paid in full by the patient, an insurance company, or, if necessary, a relief agency.

"If visiting nursing is to be conducted as a business proposition, noted a vice president of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company,

it should be along the lines of other business enterprises. Deserving as the workingman may be, we do not expect that the grocer or the butcher should have a varying range of prices for his commodities, and that . . . he should first ask the customer how much he is in a position to pay for them. For years to come it may be necessary to depend upon private philanthropy to help in the support of the visiting nurse association, but I believe that the ideal to be worked for is an organization which, to a very large extent, receives its support from payments made directly or indirectly by patients.²⁵

Indirect payments, he suggested, should come from employers, fraternal orders, labor unions, benevolent associations, municipalities, or insurance companies.

In 1909 Lillian Wald persuaded Metropolitan Life (now MetLife) to hire visiting nurses to care for its New York City policyholders when they were ill, arguing that providing this care would reduce the number of death benefits the insurer paid. The experiment was a success, and within a year the insurance company had entered into similar agreements with visiting nurse associations across the country. It was, in fact, the first national system of insurance coverage for home-based care.

Although the PDNA entered into an agreement with Metropolitan in 1910, Gardner saw the inherent danger of relying too heavily on third-party payments. "It would inevitably lead to the final decision as to the frequency of visits lying in the hands of the paying agency rather than in the hands of the association," Gardner warned.²⁶ Critics of today's managed-care systems would undoubtedly applaud her foresight.

In explaining the PDNA's agreement with Metropolitan, however, Gardner assured readers of the 1910 annual report that the arrangement left "the question of the necessity of nursing care, and also the duration and number of visits entirely with the District Nursing Association." She noted also that "the arrangement is of financial benefit to the [PDNA] as we are now paid in full for the visits made on policyholders."²⁷ Between 1909 and 1952, nurses nationwide would make more than one billion home visits to Metropolitan policyholders.



Tuberculosis—or consumption, as it was often called—seldom elicited the public panic or outcry that accompanied other epidemics, yet through the first decade of the twentieth century it remained the second leading cause of death in America. Like pneumonia, which with influenza was the country's top killer, tuberculosis was seen as a "constitutional" disease, and its very frequency seemed to dispel the fears of it one might expect to find.²⁸ Mortality rates from tuberculosis began to drop after Koch identified tubercle bacilli in 1882—and when the medical world gained a clearer understanding of how this bacteria is transmitted—but a fatalistic attitude toward tuberculosis persisted for several decades. District nurses routinely encountered ignorance and carelessness surrounding the disease, and all too often they saw entire families succumb to it.

In 1906, as the middle and upper classes began to understand that they were as vulnerable to this deadly disease as the working classes, interest in tuberculosis grew. Contracted when an uninfected person inhaled the airborne bacteria expelled by a coughing consumptive, tuberculosis was, in fact, becoming more democratically distributed.²⁹ In a departure from the past, the PDNA hired its first "special" nurse to work exclusively with tuberculous patients and their families.

The district nurses continued to serve tuberculosis patients who were seriously ill and needed extensive nursing. The function of the "special" nurse was primarily one of instruction in medical procedures, hygiene, nutrition, and the virtues of fresh air. When appropriate, she would arrange for a stay in a sanitarium, although space in these crowded and unpleasant facilities was generally limited. The nurse also attended a tuberculosis clinic at Rhode Island Hospital three mornings a week, where she assisted the doctors in charge.

After a six-month trial,³⁰ the recently formed Providence League for the Relief and Control of Tuberculosis assumed the expenses of all of the PDNA's tuberculosis nurses. This arrangement lasted until 1909, when the league began insisting on greater control of these special nurses. The PDNA, unwilling to relinquish this control, terminated the agreement and once again assumed financial responsibility.



Tuberculosis was often treated outdoors so that patients could benefit from the fresh air. Photo, circa 1920, courtesy of VNA of Rhode Island. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7196).

“History would seem to bear out the wisdom of this decision since other cities are now struggling under enormous difficulties to centralize work allowed under just such conditions to develop under a variety of heads,” Gardner wrote in 1924.³¹ The PDNA’s staff of tuberculosis nurses continued to grow, but never at a pace that satisfied Gardner. By 1920 the PDNA had seven tuberculosis nurses, less than half the number she believed were needed.³²

Delighted with its experience with special nurses for tuberculosis, the PDNA turned to special nurses for children. In 1907 a children’s nurse was hired for the summer months, when infant mortality was highest, and by the following year funding was found to keep her year-round. The Committee on Infant Mortality of the Providence Medical Association agreed to fund one or more children’s nurses from money it had previously used for milk stations. Discouraged by the short-term benefits of distributing milk, the committee believed that home visits and instruction would produce more permanent results.

A great advocate of fresh air, the PDNA provided a summer camp in 1907 at a farmhouse in Uxbridge, Massachusetts, for poor city children “in need of building up.”³³ Although it was deemed a success, the PDNA decided against continuing the program the following year because funds were limited.³⁴ Instead, a day camp for sick babies was established on the porch and shady lawn of a large gracious house at 66 Williams Street, just blocks from the congested Fox Point neighborhood.³⁵ Mothers brought their sick children to the camp early in the morning and retrieved them in the evening, along with enough milk for the night. The use of expensive and sophisticated equipment for the children was purposely avoided, Gardner explained, because “the whole idea of our scheme was to teach the mothers by example and demonstration what they themselves could do for their babies.”³⁶

The nurses at the baby camp did, however, adhere strictly to the latest and most fashionable “scientific theories” when caring for the infants, arguing, for example, that babies should not be picked up every time they cried, and that complex milk formulas—arduously modified for individual babies and conditions—were essential to good health. “The average mother is almost hopelessly ignorant of the proper care of her child,” lamented one of the baby nurses when interviewed by a *Providence Journal* reporter.³⁷

For the four years that the PDNA ran the baby camps, no wards for babies existed in any of the city’s hospitals. In 1912, when this was no longer the case, the PDNA decided its money would be better spent on more nurses. Increasingly the organization shifted its attention back to its original mission of at-home care and instruction.

The PDNA did, however, frequently provide assistance and advice to other organizations in the area. “There were fewer laborers in the health field and we were called on



Special nurses trained in the care of children tended to sick babies through the PDNA's summer camp program. Photo, circa 1908, courtesy of VNA of Rhode Island. RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 7197).

for every kind of help," Gardner noted. "We talked everywhere: in the public schools, at women's clubs of every type, at men's luncheons, at exhibits in the stores, in churches and at theaters, at the Cambridge Divinity School and at Brown University."³⁸ Occasionally the nurses also were asked to help administer surveys or gather data for studies conducted by the health department or local hospitals.

Gardner called the five years following her appointment a period of expansion, and indeed it was. By 1910 the city had been subdivided into five districts, served by thirteen general nurses and four student nurses.³⁹ In addition, the organization now had four tuberculosis nurses, four children's nurses, and a visiting dietitian.⁴⁰ With administrative duties expanding, Gardner appointed Winifred Fitzpatrick assistant superintendent in 1908. Two years later, having outgrown the offices in the Butler Exchange, the PDNA moved its headquarters to 55 Eddy Street, where the organization enjoyed "homelike, airy surroundings," furnished "tastefully" with donated items.⁴¹ With more room, the organization was able to hire its first clerical worker.

But expansion inevitably comes with a price tag, and the PDNA, still relying heavily on charitable donations, was always looking for ways to boost its income and recognition in the community. In 1908 the association introduced "Tag Day," which for the next two

decades would be a popular annual tradition in Providence and a significant source of funds for the PDNA. Volunteers wearing red and white arm badges stood on street corners throughout the city, gently urging motorists and pedestrians to contribute and also informing them of the many functions the association performed. The small cardboard tags donors affixed to their clothing identified them throughout the day as supporters of the PDNA. The very first Tag Day—or Donation Day—raised \$16,514.

The PDNA's Tag Day was the first of its kind in Providence, but it was a method of fund-raising used elsewhere, and it was one that had its detractors. "I believe . . . if they could see the genuine enthusiasm and honest desire to help, manifested by the great body of Providence citizens on that day, they would revise their ideas of tag days and would agree with us in feeling that a properly conducted tag day gives an opportunity for education as well as for general giving afforded by no other method of obtaining funds," argued Gardner.⁴²

The district nursing associations emerging in cities and towns throughout Rhode Island and nearby Massachusetts often turned to the PDNA, the oldest and largest of the organizations, for assistance, many relying extensively on the expertise of Gardner and Fitzpatrick. In 1910 the Rhode Island Visiting Nurses' Club was formed, largely due to Gardner's fervent desire for increased communication among the agencies, and for more universally accepted standards within the field. "Some of us became seriously worried because we realized that a body of poorly prepared and unsupervised nurses, some of whom might be without an ethical background for their work, were a dangerous element to let loose in the homes of the people and might easily jeopardize in a short time all the confidence we had been slowly building up throughout the country," Gardner explained.⁴³

The Rhode Island organization was an important first step, but what Gardner and others really wanted was a national organization. A committee was appointed by two national nursing organizations already in existence, and Lillian Wald was made chairman.⁴⁴ "[Wald's appointment] was a great thing for us, for we in the public health field were inconspicuous in general nursing affairs, and her name and backing simplified everything," said Gardner, who served as the committee's secretary.⁴⁵ By June 1912 this intense and hard-working group was ready to submit its proposal at a nurses' convention held in Chicago.

"Miss Wald's reputation and the fact that we wanted to make her our first president carried more weight than I think we realized at the time," Gardner noted. "Others [with influence] also backed us, Miss Jane Delano in particular, and almost before we knew it the deed was done, and the National Organization for Public Health Nursing came into being. . . . Certainly no group of women, and I am equally sure no group of men, ever gave themselves more vigorously to a cause than did the first officers and board of that infant organization."⁴⁶ Gardner served as chairman of the organization's first executive committee and later succeeded Wald as the organization's second president.

The women—and it was chiefly women—who were the early pioneers in public health nursing were strong, independent, and fiercely proud of their abilities. In a chatty letter to Gardner in 1914, Eleanor Green spoke effusively of her experiences at a national convention she was attending in St. Louis. A tribute to several leaders in the field, Green told Gardner, "made each of us thankful to be living in the same world with such great women. It was wonderful—and it nearly killed me outright." That same letter referred, with no hidden disdain, to the patronizing remarks of two male speakers: "Two gentlemen spoke—both as if they had been their own grandfathers: the minister still dictating to God what He should do for us, and the other telling us that a nurse should have a well-stored mind, and the keynote of her profession should be service."⁴⁷

Passages in the PDNA's early annual reports also reflect the pride these women took in their accomplishments. In the 1914 report of the board of managers, the unnamed author noted that the "wonderful organization . . . built up by Miss Gardner, Miss Fitzpatrick and the Committee for Supervision [of Nurses] consists entirely of women . . . [and] every member of the staff is a woman of high intelligence and thorough professional training."⁴⁸

While gender equality may have been of importance to these women, racial equality remained a foreign notion, just as it did throughout the culture. Included in the 1906 notes from the Committee for Supervision of Nurses was an explanation of why the organization had decided against hiring a qualified black woman: "Miss Spears, who substituted some years ago on the Children's Service, has applied for a regular position on the staff. The committee agreed that it was advisable not to engage her, as she had no unusual qualifications to compensate for her color."⁴⁹



Image from the cover of the PDNA's 1930 annual report. Courtesy of VNA of Rhode Island. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7198).

In 1915 the PDNA turned to the Providence City Council, albeit reluctantly, for financial help. "For some time we have been drawing upon our very meager surplus accumulated in past years. That surplus is nearly exhausted," noted the board of managers in its annual report. The board asked the council for a sum sufficient to cover the PDNA's "children's work," pointing out that Dr. Chapin had traced a significant decrease in infant mortality to these efforts. Arguing that similar organizations were supported by other municipalities, and that a visiting nurses' association is a service "no self-respecting, progressive community can be without," the board convinced the city to find five thousand dollars in its budget for the support of the PDNA.⁵⁰

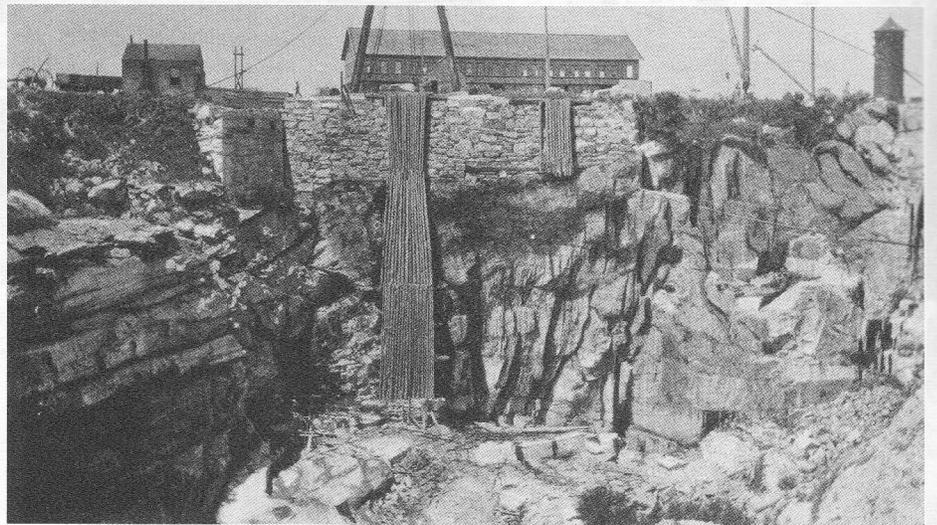
In its plea to the City Council, the board stressed the value of the association's daily functions, but another point was made as well: in the event of an epidemic or a disaster, the city would have at its disposal a fully trained organization ready to respond at a moment's notice. Just three years later, a world war, coupled with the worst flu epidemic of the century, demanded nothing less.



In 1972, after consolidating with the district nursing associations in Cranston, Johnston, and North Providence, the PDNA changed its name to Metropolitan Nursing and Health Services Association of Rhode Island. Frequently confused with the life insurance company, the organization voted in 1978 to change its name to Visiting Nurse Association of Providence, Cranston, Johnston, North Providence. Less than a decade later, the name changed again—to VNA of Rhode Island—to reflect the organization's expanded operating area.



4. Daniel B. Katz, *In the Shadow of the House: A Social History of Welfare in America*, rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 117, 147.
5. Helen Buhler-Wilkerson, *Healing at Home: Training Nurse Service of New York, 1893-1993* (New York: n.p., n.d.), 2.
6. William McKenzie Woodward and Edward F. Sanderson, *Providence: A Citywide Survey of Historic Resources* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, 1986), 59.
7. Scott MacKay and Jody McPhillips, "The Rhode Island Century," *Providence Sunday Journal*, 28 Feb. 1999, A18.
8. Mary S. Gardner, "History of Twenty-Five Years of Work," in Providence District Nursing Association [PDNA] *Annual Report, 1924, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary* (Providence, 1925), 20-21.
9. Collins served as the association's first president. Within two years he was succeeded by William H. Sweetland, who served as president for nineteen years. Sweetland was the chief justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court from 1920 to 1929.
10. PDNA, *First Annual Report, September 1st, 1902* (n.p., n.d.), 2.
11. Gardner, "History of Twenty-Five Years of Work," 21.
12. PDNA, *First Annual Report*, 9.
13. Monroe Lerner and Odin W. Anderson, *Health Progress in the United States, 1900-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 16.
14. PDNA, *First Annual Report*, 12-14.
15. *Ibid.*, 10.
16. Undated clipping from the *Providence Journal*, VNA of Rhode Island archives, Providence.
17. This title was later changed to director.
18. Mary S. Gardner, "Twenty-Five Years Ago," *Public Health Nursing* 29 (March 1937): 141.
19. *Ibid.*, 142.
20. Gardner, "History of Twenty-Five Years of Work," 23.
21. *Papers of Charles V. Chapin, M.D.* (New York: Commonwealth Fund, 1934), 3.
22. Charles V. Chapin, "Disinfection in American Cities," *The Medical Officer*, 17 Nov. 1923.
23. Gardner, "History of Twenty-Five Years of Work," 23-24.
24. PDNA, *Annual Report, November 1906* (Providence, 1906), 17-18.
25. PDNA, *Eighth Annual Report, November 1908* (Providence, 1908), 21.
26. PDNA, *Thirteenth Annual Report, November 1913* (Providence, 1913), 26.
27. PDNA, *Tenth Annual Report, November 1910* (Providence, 1910), 19.
28. PDNA, *Thirteenth Annual Report*, 28.
29. *Ibid.*, 29.
30. PDNA, *Tenth Annual Report*, 23.
31. John Duffy, "Social Impact of Disease in the Late 19th Century," *Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine* 47 (1971): 797-811.
32. Stanley M. Aronson, "The Hectic Glow of Consumption," *Providence Journal*, 8 Mar. 1999.
33. The trial was funded by Mrs. William Sewall Gardner, the stepmother of Mary Gardner.
34. Gardner, "History of Twenty-Five Years of Work," 26.
35. Gardner cited a survey conducted by C.-E. A. Winslow, of Yale University, for the Rhode Island Antituberculosis Association. PDNA, *Twentieth Annual Report, 1920* (Providence, 1920), 16.
36. The house was offered by W. H. White; a gift from Alfred M. Coats covered its expenses. The camp was supervised by Dr. Herlwyn R. Green, a brother of Eleanor B. Green.
37. The program at Uxbridge was turned over to the Society for Organizing Charity.
38. Margarethe L. Dwight and Edward Carrington offered the use of the porch and grounds at 66 Williams Street. The Edward Carrington House, a three-story brick federal house, is considered one of the city's architectural treasures.
39. PDNA, *Eighth Annual Report*, 27.
40. *Providence Sunday Journal*, 23 Aug. 1908.
41. Gardner, "History of Twenty-Five Years of Work," 30.
42. Each district was identified with a name, such as Mercy or Hope. Two of the student nurses were from Butler Hospital and two were from Rhode Island Hospital.
43. Dietitian Lydia Chace, who joined the association in 1909, often despaired that her impact was not greater. In a 1914 report, Chace noted that she was no longer "attempting to give cooking lessons in the Italian homes [because] they do not like many of our foods, and there is, of course, the possibility that I fail because I do not know enough about their native dishes." *Fourteenth Annual Report*, 39.
44. *Tenth Annual Report*, 22.
45. Gardner, "History of Twenty-Five Years of Work," 24. The PDNA discontinued Tag Day after becoming a charter member of the Providence Community Fund, now the United Way.
46. Gardner, "Twenty-Five Years Ago," 143.
47. The two organizations were Nurses' Associated Alumnae (later renamed American Nurses' Association) and American Society of Superintendents of Training Schools for Nurses (renamed National League of Nursing Education).
48. Gardner, "Twenty-Five Years Ago," 143.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Eleanor B. Green to Mary S. Gardner, 27 Apr. 1914, VNA of Rhode Island archives.
51. PDNA, *Fourteenth Annual Report, November 1914* (Providence, 1914), 17.
52. Minutes of the Committee for Supervision of Nurses, 1915-1919, p. 44, VNA of Rhode Island archives.
53. PDNA, *Fifteenth Annual Report, November 1915* (Providence, n.d.), 6.



Trouble in Labor's Eden: Labor Conflict in the Quarries of Westerly, 1871-1922

ANTHONY M. LEMENTOWICZ JR.

In February 1872 the renowned *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley remarked favorably on the initiative of the striking stonecutters of Westerly, Rhode Island, who had purchased another quarry in town and formed their own company. "Adam, expelled from Eden, did not sit down and starve because there was no one ready to hire him on his own terms; on the contrary, he went to work; and we all commend his inspiring example to all his descendants," wrote Greeley.¹ The comparison of the Scriptures' Adam and the Westerly granite worker was perhaps no more than fitting: for men who could extract masses of rock from the earth and carve it into works of art, Westerly truly seemed to be the laborer's Eden.

The town had become famous for its blue-white granite shortly after that stone was first extracted from the Crumb Quarry, near the village of Bradford, in 1834. Eleven years later stonecutter Orlando Smith made a more important granite discovery on a piece of farmland on Rhode's Hill, and he purchased the land the following year and opened Westerly's largest quarry. Over the next twenty years more granite companies were established in that area, which eventually became known as Quarry Hill, as Westerly was transformed from a quiet fishing and farming town into a major center for granite excavation and stonecutting.²

Owned by some of the wealthiest men in Westerly and other parts of New England, the quarries received orders from customers all over the nation and the world for both finished and unfinished products. Construction materials, such as paving blocks for roads and columns and slabs for buildings, were produced by the quarries, but it was such handcrafted items as monuments, headstones, tombs, and statues that were particularly renowned. The carvings of Westerly stonecutters were in great demand during the latter quarter of the nineteenth century, a time when the American culture still assigned great importance to the commemoration of the dead with majestic monuments. The silver anniversaries of Civil War battles and other war-related events further swelled the demand for the stonecutters' exquisite work.³

From the beginnings of the town's granite industry in the 1830s until the industry began its gradual decline in the second decade of the next century, work was plentiful in Westerly for unskilled and skilled workers alike. Unskilled quarrymen, who extracted the granite from the earth, were usually paid by the hour or the day; skilled stonecutters, who carved the stone into its final form, were paid either a regular wage or by the piece. Large profits for the granite companies translated into good earnings for all their employees, earnings considerably higher than those of most workers in other industries. When a company enjoyed particularly prosperous times, its prosperity was likely to be reflected in its payroll. In 1874 Westerly's New England Granite Works reported that over a five-year period, during which it received a number of large orders (including one for a monument for the Antietam National Cemetery), it had paid its workers \$1.5 million, for an average payroll of \$300,000 a year. By way of comparison, during one year in the 1870s sixty-nine granite companies in Vermont together paid their workers a total of \$394,400.⁴

About 1846 Orlando Smith opened a granite quarry in a part of Westerly later known as Quarry Hill. Negative by Albertype Company, New York, 1904. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7208).

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With quarry owners and workers prospering, Westerly became a town whose economy strongly centered on the granite industry. In 1892 approximately four thousand of the seven thousand townspeople were in some way economically dependent on that industry; no other town in Rhode Island at the time was so dependent on a single economic activity. Earning good wages, granite workers were able to own what a *Providence Journal* article described as “sensible, comfortable residences, few of them very costly, but none of them smacking of poverty.” These were mostly one-family homes, built on land with sufficient space for gardening or small-scale farming.⁵

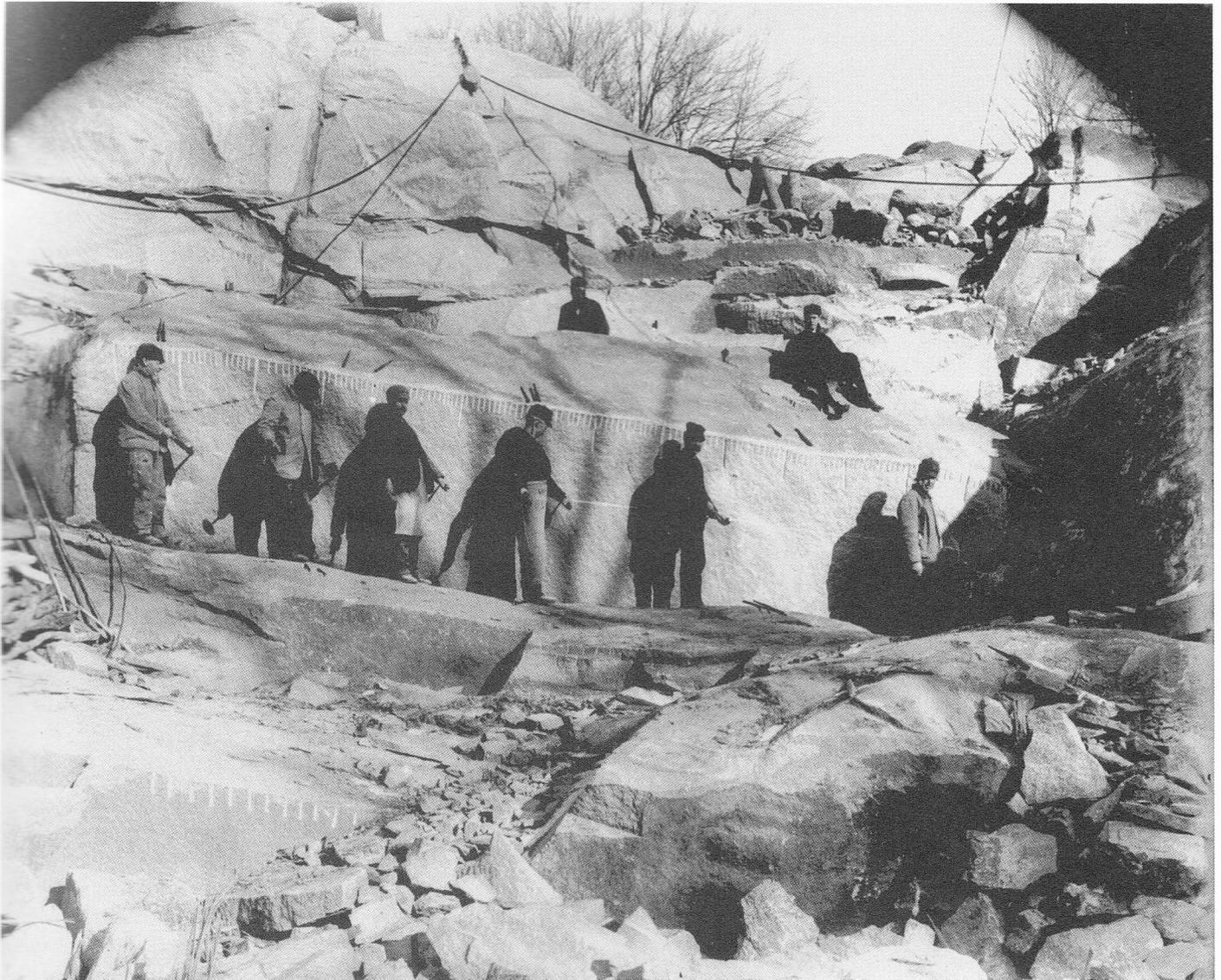
Westerly was one of the many destinations of the huddled masses of immigrants who journeyed to America to find economic opportunity and freedom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Some came to Westerly after settling in other granite centers of the United States.⁶ Though Westerly's streets were not paved with gold, they were paved with granite, which could often prove almost as good.

The Irish arrived in Westerly throughout the 1850s. Since most were unskilled, they worked mainly as quarrymen. By 1885, 18 percent of the population in Westerly were Irish-born, and the community they created on the Westerly-Pawcatuck line was showing signs of affluence. Scottish immigration to Westerly began as early as 1860 and intensified during the ensuing decade. Unlike the Irish, most of the Scottish granite workers were skilled stonemasons who had left a crowded job market in Scotland. By 1885 nearly 10 percent of the town's population was Scottish-born, with most of the new arrivals settling in the village of Bradford. (A few Scottish families, such as the Murrays and the Newalls, were able to purchase their own quarries in Westerly or elsewhere in New England, thereby attracting additional Scottish workers, many of whom traveled from quarry to quarry as freelancers.) The Finns began arriving in the 1890s, and although they did not settle in large numbers or in particular areas of the town, they too contributed to Westerly's rapidly growing foreign-born population. By 1885 the census reported that 43 percent of the population of Westerly was non-native.⁷

The immigrant group that became most identified with Westerly's granite industry were the southern Italians. Brought over by quarry owners, they began appearing in Westerly as early as the 1860s, but they did not arrive in full force until the latter part of the industry's heyday. Having left their heavily indebted farms, oppressive landlords, and profitless businesses, the largest numbers of southern Italian immigrants came to Westerly between 1900 and 1910, seeking the prosperity and comfortable living that others had found there earlier. Like the stonemasons and quarrymen who preceded them, they seem to have been relatively satisfied with the wages and the lifestyle that their work provided them. Although southern Italians have been characterized by historians as having their own distinctive brand of radicalism, there is little evidence that their arrival had any impact of a correspondingly radical nature in Westerly.⁸

Nonetheless, there was a minority among Westerly's Italian granite workers that did subscribe to a bastardized version of Italian radicalism. This group believed that the town's native-born inhabitants were greedy, ignorant, and opposed to notions of “liberty and fraternity,” and that they looked down upon Italian immigrants (as one historian puts it) as “subversives, canaille, thieves, freebooters and bad ones.” But in spite of these beliefs, the radical element rarely went beyond attending picnics where they could listen to speakers decry the oppressive nature of capitalism and raise money for the Italian Socialist Federation. Unable to convince many of their fellow workers of the usefulness of their cause, the radicals had little impact in the quarries of Westerly, even during the industry's decline in the 1920s, nor do they appear to have had much influence on the socialist movement that later spread to the industrialized parts of the state.⁹





Laborers hand-drill a side line at the Smith Granite Company. Photo, circa 1860, courtesy of Memorial & Library Association, Westerly Public Library (GE005).

Westerly's granite workers, of course, were not all economically equal. With their years of training and artistic expertise, stonecutters were the elite of the workforce. Very few workers were able to gain the level of skills necessary to become master carvers, able to turn ordinary blocks of rock into works of art. Those who did attain that level were regarded as members of a prosperous class. According to United States Census reports, during the 1860s and 1870s stonecutters in the granite industry earned an average of \$2.33 a day; in 1873 those at the New England Granite Works in Westerly earned between \$3.50 and \$5.00 a day. Westerly's stonecutters gained a national reputation for being the best in their craft, and they were compensated accordingly.¹⁰

Quarrymen and blacksmiths were less valued by quarry owners. Quarrymen could easily be replaced by other unskilled laborers; blacksmiths—the men who sharpened the tools of the stonecutters and the quarrymen—could be replaced by other blacksmiths or apprentices. When cutters decided to strike over their own particular issues, the effects were felt by all the workers. When the cutters put down their chisels, there was less need to remove granite from the quarries, and quarrymen would be sent home. Secure in their primary value to the granite companies, cutters were at times willing to use their advantageous position to gain nonwage-related concessions from their employers. This was often done at the expense of other workers.¹¹

Differing interests among the workers eventually led to the formation of four unions in the Westerly quarries, with separate unions for the stonecutters, the blacksmiths, the quarrymen, and the paving-stone cutters (who chiseled granite blocks for pavements). The stonecutters were the first to unionize, probably creating their organization as early as 1867. Little is known about why they chose to organize when they did; perhaps it was merely to create an effective collective bargaining committee. The stonecutters first made the newspapers as an organized group on 14 October 1869, when they were reported to have "stood out" from work the previous week, but to have returned after some "readjustment." This may have been the first formal protest by organized labor in the Westerly quarries.¹²

During the peak years of the industry, from 1870 to 1910, the nature of worker protests was to a great extent influenced by the industry's general prosperity. Relative to prevailing wage standards, all of Westerly's granite workers were well paid, and they appear to have been fairly well satisfied with their wages. Wages would not become a significant issue in labor unrest in Westerly until after 1910, when a number of factors were beginning to signal a radical change in the industry and the position of labor within it. Except when some noneconomic principle was involved, pay increases were almost never a central labor demand during the industry's decades of prosperity. The wages that the men received during that time in fact allowed them to establish personal bank accounts and union strike funds that could help sustain them through extended strikes. Stonecutters were in a particularly strong position when strikes occurred; since their skills were in great demand, they could easily find work elsewhere if they chose. Granite strikes in Westerly gave companies outside the town the opportunity to steal away some of the best talent in the business.¹³



The first of the three major strikes that took place during this period was reported in the local newspaper, the *Narragansett Weekly*, on 21 December 1871. The strike had been called by the Granite Cutters Association, the Westerly stonecutters' union. Some three hundred stonecutters had walked off the job at the Rhode Island Granite Works, owned by Connecticut native J. G. Batterson. The strike was not about wages but about what the strikers considered a breach of good faith: the company's violation of an agreement it had allegedly made with the union.¹⁴ The result of the strike was perhaps not what might have been expected.

When the union was formed, its constitution and bylaws had been presented to—and, according to the cutters, accepted by—Batterson's company. These contained the stipulation that no union member would work for a company that employed more than one apprentice for every ten journeymen. The cutters contended that the company had agreed to honor this stipulation in its hiring, and that it had violated the agreement on 10 December when it had hired six additional apprentices without increasing the number of its journeymen. The company neither denied nor admitted that it had made such an agreement. Expressing their outrage in a letter to the *Narragansett Weekly*, the stonecutters explained that they were aggrieved not so much at the number of apprentices that now worked for the company as at the company's breach of good faith with the union. The cutters declared, rather oddly, that it would have been more honorable for the company to have hired enough journeymen to cover the added apprentices and then, the next day, to have laid some of the journeymen off.¹⁵

News of the stonecutters' strike quickly traveled to other parts of the region. To deter potential scabs, the strikers apparently spread word that granite workers from other



Quarry apprentices posed for this group portrait about 1900. Photo courtesy of Memorial & Library Association, Westerly Public Library (GE003).

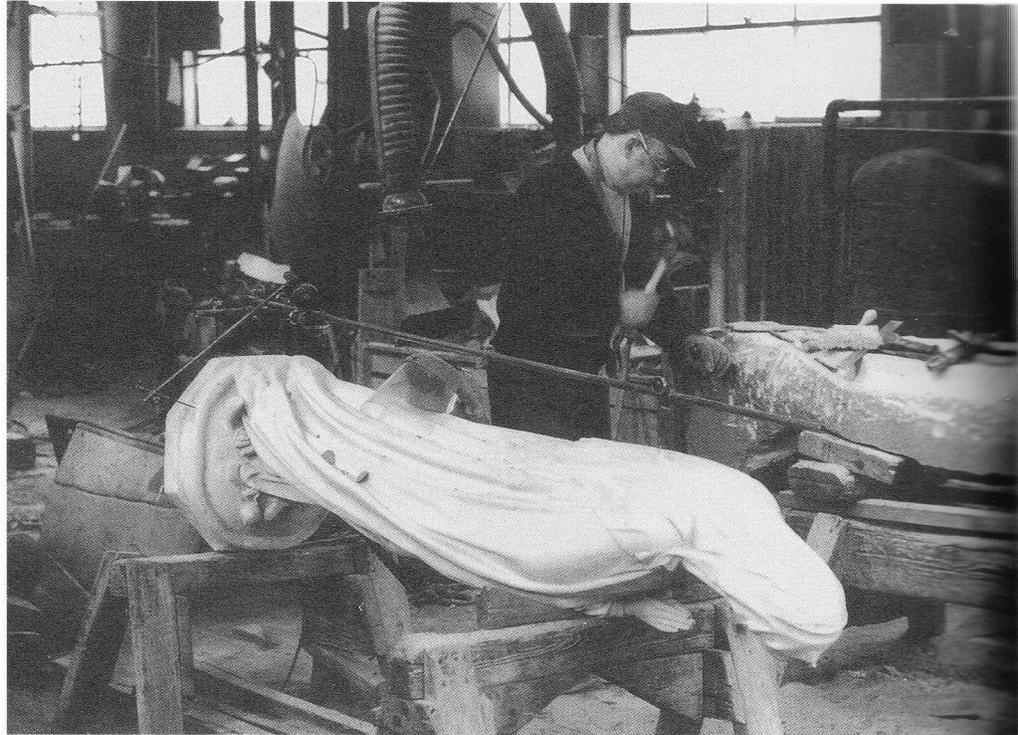
towns were to stay away from Westerly until the strike was settled. An editorial in the *Norwich (Connecticut) Bulletin* lambasted the actions of the cutters as selfish. The strike “illustrates a phase of trades-unionism . . . to prejudice intelligent people against the interests of the workingman as represented in labor reform movements,” said the paper. The strikers could choose not to work, but they did not have the right to prevent others from working. The only thing that the strike had accomplished was to make more men idle. The editorial sarcastically advised the striking stonecutters to “become their own capitalists” and open a quarry of their own, so that they could “strike against or dictate to themselves to their heart’s content.”¹⁶

The stonecutters apparently found this to be good advice. Nine or ten days after the strike began, they secured a small quarry in town and formed a cooperative, which they called the Westerly Granite Company. Using their own personal savings, together with donations from granite workers as far

away as Maine, they purchased a twelve-year lease on a quarry belonging to McGowan, McAvoy & Company for \$4,000, plus 5¢ per cubic foot of granite removed. They set their capital stock at \$10,000 and quickly bought up \$7,000 worth of it. A board of twenty-five directors was named, the necessary tools and equipment were purchased, and the men set to work. A small enterprise, the cooperative could employ only forty of the striking stonecutters, who were not given a salary but were paid by the piece. Within five or six weeks the cutters were working on over \$10,000 worth of orders.¹⁷

Ironically, the lease that the stonecutters purchased contained an agreement with J. G. Batterson’s short-line railroad company to transport their extracted granite to market. Insult was added to Batterson’s injury when one of his firm’s superintendents was hired away by the new company. In response, Batterson filed a complaint with the sheriff’s office in Westerly, claiming that the strikers had used “threatening language, calculated to lead to tumultuous and riotous conduct, with intent to commit felony, and offer violence to persons or property.” Deputies with power to arrest were appointed to police the area around Batterson’s business and home. Under a proclamation issued by Sheriff James Weeden, a number of the strikers were jailed; all but one were eventually released on bail.¹⁸ There seems to be no record that any were ever brought to trial.

Sometime in February or March 1872 Batterson filed suit against the strikers for \$50,000, charging that their strike had damaged his business. The suit would muddle through the court system for the next year and a half. Meanwhile, the Rhode Island Granite Works moved quickly to replace the striking workers with new hires from Westerly and other parts of the region. Many of these had little or no experience in stonecutting but were willing to learn. On 7 March 1872 it was reported that Batterson employed nearly a hundred apprentices, and that he planned to hire a hundred more. By this time most of the original strikers had gone to work at other Westerly quarries or had left the town altogether, leaving only twenty men still on strike.¹⁹



Stonecutter Richard Comolli works on a carving for the Bonner Monument Company. Photo, circa 1960, courtesy of Memorial & Library Association, Westerly Public Library (GE026B).

The stonecutters Batterson had sued now offered to submit the case to outside arbitration. Batterson rejected the offer, brashly countering with a proposal to have a third party determine the amount of damages that the strikers were to pay. Offended by the response, on 18 April the cutters retaliated by placing a notice in the local newspaper declaring Batterson's quarry a "scab concern" and warning their fellow craftsmen not to work there. By then the Rhode Island Granite Works was employing 350 men, with a ratio of 4 apprentices to every 5 journeyman. On 30 June, at a national meeting of granite cutters in New York City, the Westerly delegation spoke out against Batterson and denounced his suit against the strikers as unjustified. A stonecutter named O'Sullivan contended that the financial losses Batterson was claiming in fact resulted from his paying his apprentices wages that his company could not afford.²⁰

The issues between the strikers and Batterson were never settled. The Westerly Granite Company became very successful; quickly gaining the reputation of being the best quarry in the town, it became so busy that it was forced to refuse some of the orders that came flooding in. Within six months of its founding it had increased its capital stock by 50 percent. In spite of the strike, Batterson's Rhode Island Granite Works also prospered, although some of its larger projects had to be postponed because of its lack of skilled stonecutters. By February 1873 the company was employing nearly four hundred workers.²¹

As time went on, the strike began to fade into the back pages of the local newspaper. The last trace of it appeared in the *Narragansett Weekly* of 6 November 1873, which reported that Batterson's suit, which had come to be known as the "Striker's Case," had been settled out of court for an undisclosed amount, with the strikers also agreeing to pay all the costs upon withdrawal of the suit.²² Although in the end they settled the case brought against them, they never compromised their original purpose—to defend the principle of good faith between labor and management—by returning to their jobs at the Rhode Island Granite Works on Batterson's terms. In this, the stonecutters surely benefited from the favorable economic conditions the granite industry was then enjoying. Without such conditions they might never have dared to strike at all; and with their

ability to establish their own successful company or to find work at other quarries, they were able to carry on the strike to an honorable conclusion.



The two decades that followed the stonecutters' strike of 1871 saw little in the way of significant labor protest. J. G. Batterson and his stonecutters fought a few more rounds before their disputes were efficiently settled; fending off his attempts to lower their wages, in one case the cutters reached a settlement with Batterson that led to the creation of a generous profit-sharing plan.²³ Otherwise, peace prevailed in the quarries—but the harmony between labor and management would not last.

In May 1890, stonecutters ordered a general strike against all the quarries in Westerly. This time they were attempting to shorten the workday from ten to nine hours while retaining a ten-hour wage. As the eventual settlement would reveal, however, it was the length of the workday, rather than wages, that was the crucial issue. Once again the industry's flourishing economy came to the aid of striking workers: within days of the start of the strike, agents from Philadelphia arrived in Westerly offering jobs to forty strikers. Those who remained behind received strike pay from their union. No desertions from the union's ranks were ever reported.²⁴

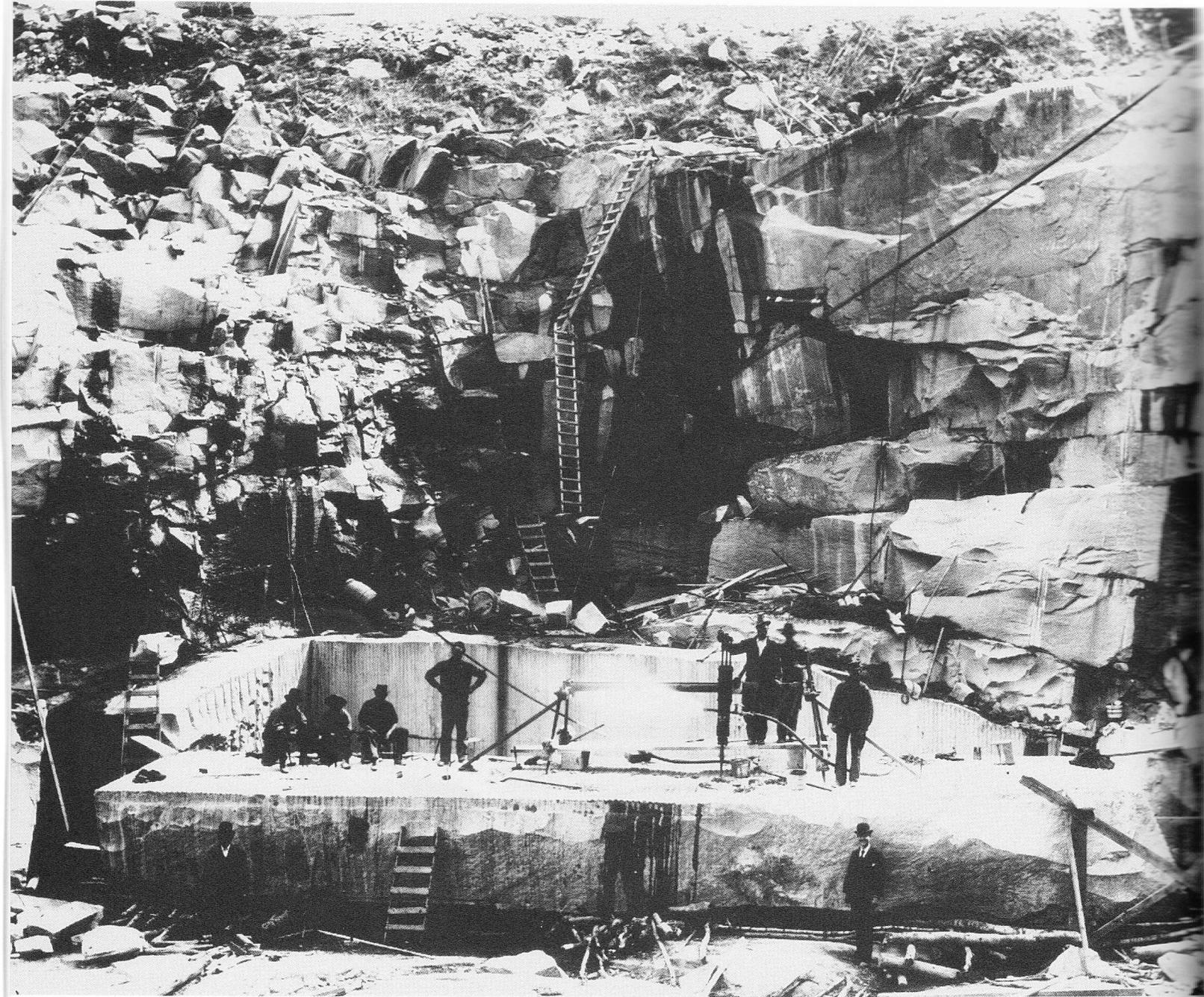
The stonecutters were originally determined to allow the blacksmiths and quarrymen to continue working, but they soon ordered the blacksmiths, who at that time belonged to the same union, to stop sharpening the quarrymen's tools (including those of the drillers, who used both hand and steam drills in their work). In any case, since no companies were willing to pay for the extraction of stone that would not be cut, the quarrymen too were idled; and with no union strike pay, and little demand for their services from outside firms, they were thrust into a financial position far worse than that of the stonecutters.²⁵

After a month and a half, and a loss of \$40,000 in wages for the month of May alone, the strike ended on 14 June. The cutters had rejected the quarry owners' first proposal, an offer of a nine-hour day with a reduction in pay of a half cent per hour, but they finally agreed to a nine-hour workday for nine hours' full pay. Except for the 110 men who had found work outside of Westerly, all the strikers returned to work on 18 June.²⁶



While the stonecutters, as highly skilled artisans, were in a good position to make demands upon their employers, quarrymen enjoyed no such advantages. Yet in January 1892 the quarrymen of the Dixon Company of Westerly threatened to strike if they did not receive the same wages for their "short days" during the winter, when limited daylight curtailed their work, as they did for their "long days" during the summer. The local quarrymen's union, still in its infancy in Westerly, supported the Dixon workers, but otherwise they received little encouragement for their audacity. Not only did the newspapers mock them; their own national union, headquartered in Quincy, Massachusetts, denied them its support.²⁷ Their demand seemed too patently unjustified to be taken seriously. Under these circumstances the Dixon quarrymen abandoned their plans to strike.

In March of that year the situation changed. This time the local quarrymen's union found the support it needed. The issue now involved the bill of prices, the contract setting wages and working conditions that workers submitted to the companies every year. This year, on 1 March, the union presented a number of companies with a bill of prices that called for wage increases of seven to nine cents a day. Unwilling to recognize the new unskilled labor union, the owners refused to accept this stipulation. Moreover, they



Quarrymen in this undated photograph used steam drills and hand drills to extract an obelisk from the Smith Granite Company's Quarry No. 1. Courtesy of Memorial & Library Association, Westerly Public Library (GE019).

insisted that bills of prices, which traditionally had been presented on 1 May, henceforth be presented on or before 1 January of each year. But the union—which had chosen to submit its bill of prices early that year to gain a negotiating advantage from a current shortage of quarried granite—believed that a 1 January presentation date was too far in advance of the quarries' busy season to give the workers any leverage in bargaining, and that agreements concluded in the spring would be more likely to guarantee that wages earned in the summer would also be earned when work was slowed by weather and limited daylight during the following winter. Quarrymen were determined not to accept the change, but the owners insisted that they needed the earlier date for more efficient bookkeeping and budgeting. More importantly, the owners declared that they would never allow workers to dictate how things would be done in their quarries. The date when bills of prices were to be submitted, and their terms agreed to, became the heart of the workers' protest.²⁸

The newspapers first reported a general strike by Westerly quarrymen on 2 April. The men were thought to have timed their strike for maximum effect, when the granite stock was in short supply. By 16 April few quarries had any new stone for the cutters to finish. Finding themselves in a financial predicament, the quarry owners responded in a way that worsened their situation: they ordered a lockout of the union quarrymen. Since the stonecutters, too, were union men, they considered themselves locked out as well, and their union joined the fray on the side of the quarrymen. By 17 May twelve hundred men were away from their jobs in Westerly.²⁹

A decisive break in the strike came in favor of the owners on 1 August, when eight men associated with the Westerly branch of the National Quarryman's Union agreed to sign individual contracts with the Smith Granite Company. The contracts included wage increases, but the men abandoned all demands for union recognition. Faced with desertion from its ranks, the quarrymen's union declared the strike off and allowed its members to return to work as individuals under the same conditions extended to the eight men at Smith Granite. About six weeks later the union worked out a compromise agreement with the owners requiring that bills of prices henceforth take effect on 1 March of each year, and that any new conditions proposed by either the union or the companies be submitted for consideration at least three months prior of that date. The stonecutters followed the quarrymen's lead in September, agreeing to the same provision.³⁰

While the granite workers can hardly be said to have achieved a victory in their 1892 strike, they did gain a measure of success in at least technically defeating the owners' demand for a 1 January submission date for bills of prices. The crux of the strike was succinctly expressed by a reporter for the *Providence Journal*: "The essence of the difficulty may be stated as a resolution of each party not to allow the other to ordain rules for the other to live up to."³¹ The granite workers could never have challenged their employers as they did unless the economic conditions of the industry, with its need for a steady supply of labor, allowed them to do so. Whether or not the workers were wise to take advantage of their opportunity is open to debate, for their strike may well have contributed to the industry's subsequent decline.



Lengthy general strikes can often hurt the industries they seek to change. The granite industry in Westerly, and in the nation as a whole, may furnish a good example of this. While strikes by the stonecutters and quarrymen may not have been the only, or even the primary, cause for the industry's decline, they were an important factor. When the granite industry was rocked by labor conflicts, orders for its products often had to be turned away, with the result that consumers increasingly sought alternative materials with which to build. During the 1890 strike, newspapers reported an expanding use of brownstone and limestone by builders as a replacement for the granite they could not purchase. These alternative materials were not only more regularly available than granite; they were also a good deal less expensive.³²

Affected also by the nation's shifting attitude toward memorializing the dead, as well as by increased competition from other granite centers with stronger financial backing, Westerly's golden age of granite gave way to a gradual decline in the second and third decades of the century. In 1921 the companies in Westerly, together with those in the country's other major granite centers, sought to stem an industrywide decline with major reductions in their prices. Some of the Westerly quarries reduced their prices so much that their products, which had been the most expensive in the country, became the least expensive. To counter the decrease in their profits, companies everywhere

sought to reduce the wages of all their workers. For Westerly's 250 stonecutters, and the 10,000 cutters throughout the nation, this would mean reductions averaging out to about a dollar a day, or a decrease in their wages of 20 to 25 percent.³³

Never before had Westerly's granite workers been forced to confront the possibility of such a wage cut. The circumstances and demands of workers thirty and fifty years before must have seemed distant indeed to the men who now faced such seemingly devastating changes in their industry and their livelihood. The conditions of the granite industry had changed radically, for both workers and their employers. In January 1922 the local newspaper in fact declared the industry dead.³⁴

Nonetheless, while granite unions elsewhere in the country were calling their members out on strike in protest of the new wage cuts, the stonecutters of Westerly at first attempted to make their situation unique: rather than merely refusing to have their pay reduced, they demanded a wage increase of one dollar a day. But they soon realized that these were different times, and what they might have demanded in previous years could not now even be dreamt of. On 1 April 1922 the Westerly branch of the Granite Cutters International Union declared a strike at all the Westerly quarries, but only for the purpose of retaining the present wage scale.³⁵

The nationwide general strike of 1922 stands in stark contrast to the strikes in Westerly and other granite centers during the late 1800s.³⁶ While quarry owners were attempting to save the future of the granite industry, workers were struggling to retain their standard of living. Neither side was completely successful. In most cases the workers settled for wages very close to original pay scales. In Westerly the cutters retained their dollar-an-hour wage but agreed to work a shorter week; quarrymen at the Sullivan Quarry settled for a seven-cents-an-hour cut in their pay. The strength of the nation's granite unions was significantly diminished during the strike. Resisting demands for a closed shop, many quarries continued operating during the strike under the "American Plan," or the open-shop system. About two thousand workers nationwide returned to the yards at their original pay scale, but as nonmembers of any union.³⁷

The owners also failed to achieve all of their objectives. The granite business could not be restored to its former state. The embattled industry would stumble through the remainder of the 1920s and be left unable to defend itself from the harsh economic conditions of the 1930s. Especially in Westerly, the granite industry became a shadow of its former self. Most of the town's quarries were sold to developers, the work sheds replaced by new homes and shopping malls, and the Westerly branch of the stonecutter's union was disbanded.³⁸ Except for granite to be crushed together with other forms of stone, no granite is quarried in Westerly today.



The legacy of the granite workers' strikes of the late 1800s is mixed. It is true that builders were forced to search for substitute materials when granite was not available during strikes in Westerly and other granite centers throughout the country, and that some of these alternatives, such as limestone, brownstone, and concrete, proved to be more cost-effective than granite and became increasingly popular choices for construction.³⁹ Nonetheless, there is insufficient evidence to prove that the strikes had a decisive impact on the decline of the industry. It can be asserted only that they were part of a number of factors that led to that decline.

On the other hand, the gains achieved by these strikes may serve to remind all workers of the benefits of solidarity in the fight for the rights of labor. One striking Westerly stonecutter put it best when he shared his vision of the future: "The day is not far distant when the working men of this country will show to the world that they have some rights that capitalists are bound to respect."⁴⁰ If this is to be the legacy of the Westerly granite workers, it may last as long as granite itself.

This Granite Manufacturers Association float appeared in a Labor Day parade in Westerly. Photo, circa 1898, courtesy of Memorial & Library Association, Westerly Public Library (GE043).



Notes

1. *Narragansett Weekly*, 1 Feb. 1872. The *Narragansett Weekly* was published in Westerly.
2. Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, *Preliminary Survey Report, Town of Westerly* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, 1978), 16; "Smith, Orlando," *The Biographical Cyclopaedia of Representative Men of Rhode Island* (Providence: National Biographical Publishing Co., 1881), 469; Isaac Smith, "The Development of the Westerly Granite Industry" (1985), 5, Westerly Granite Collection, Westerly Public Library.
3. Smith, "Development," 5.
4. *Providence Daily Journal*, 3 July, 15 May 1892; Smith, "Development," 4; Arthur Wellington Brayley, *History of the Granite Industry in New England*, vol. 1 (Boston: E. L. Grimes, 1913), 138.
5. *Providence Daily Journal*, 3 July 1892.
6. William Aho, "The Ethnic Factor in the Westerly Granite Industry" (1985), 11, Westerly Granite Collection, Westerly Public Library.
7. "Important Dates in the History of Westerly Granite" (1985), 4, Westerly Granite Collection, Westerly Public Library; Aho, "Ethnic Factor," 11-12.
8. Aho, "Ethnic Factor," 12-13; Paul Buhle, "Italian-American Radicals and Labor in Rhode Island, 1905-1930," *Radical History Review*, no. 17 (Spring 1978): 123.
9. Buhle, "Italian-American Radicals," 128-29.
10. Smith, "Development," 5; *Providence Daily Journal*, 15 May 1892; Brayley, *History*, 1:133; *Narragansett Weekly*, 20 June 1873; Aho, "Ethnic Factor," 11.
11. *Providence Daily Journal*, 23 May 1890.
12. *Narragansett Weekly*, 28 Dec. 1871, 14 Oct. 1869.
13. Smith, "Development," 6; Brayley, *History*, 1:132-33; *Providence Daily Journal*, 22 July 1892, 2 May 1890.
14. *Narragansett Weekly*, 28 Dec. 1871.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, 4 Jan. 1872.
17. *Ibid.*, 29 Feb. 1872.
18. *Ibid.*, 8 Feb. 1872; Mary Agnes Best, *The Town That Saved a State* (Westerly: Utter Company, 1943), 138.
19. *Narragansett Weekly*, 7 Mar. 1872.
20. *Ibid.*, 18 Apr., 4 July 1872.
21. *Ibid.*, 4 July, 10 Oct. 1872, 13 Feb. 1873.
22. *Ibid.*, 6 Nov. 1873.
23. *Providence Morning Star*, 9 Mar. 1886.
24. *Providence Daily Journal*, 1 May, 23 May, 8 June 1890.
25. *Ibid.*, 23 May 1890.
26. *Ibid.*, 18 June 1890.
27. *Ibid.*, 21 Jan. 1892.
28. *Ibid.*, 19 May 1892.
29. *Ibid.*, 16 Apr., 3 July 1892.
30. *Ibid.*, 16 Sept., 1 Oct. 1892.
31. *Ibid.*, 3 July 1892.
32. *Ibid.*, 16 Sept., 21 July 1892; *Westerly Sun*, 8 Jan. 1922.
33. Smith, "Development," 6; *Westerly Sun*, 8 Jan. 1922, 16 Dec. 1921.
34. *Westerly Sun*, 8 Jan. 1922.
35. *Ibid.*, 1 Jan. 1922.
36. Strikes by granite workers also occurred during that time in (among other places) Rockland and West Chelmsford, Maine; Barre, Montpelier, and Northfield, Vermont; Concord, New Hampshire; and Quincy, Massachusetts.
37. *Westerly Sun*, 16 Nov., 14 Aug. 1922.
38. "Important Dates," 4.
39. Smith, "Development," 6.
40. *Narragansett Weekly*, 29 Feb. 1872.



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was founded in 1900 in response to the health
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