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Rhode Island History

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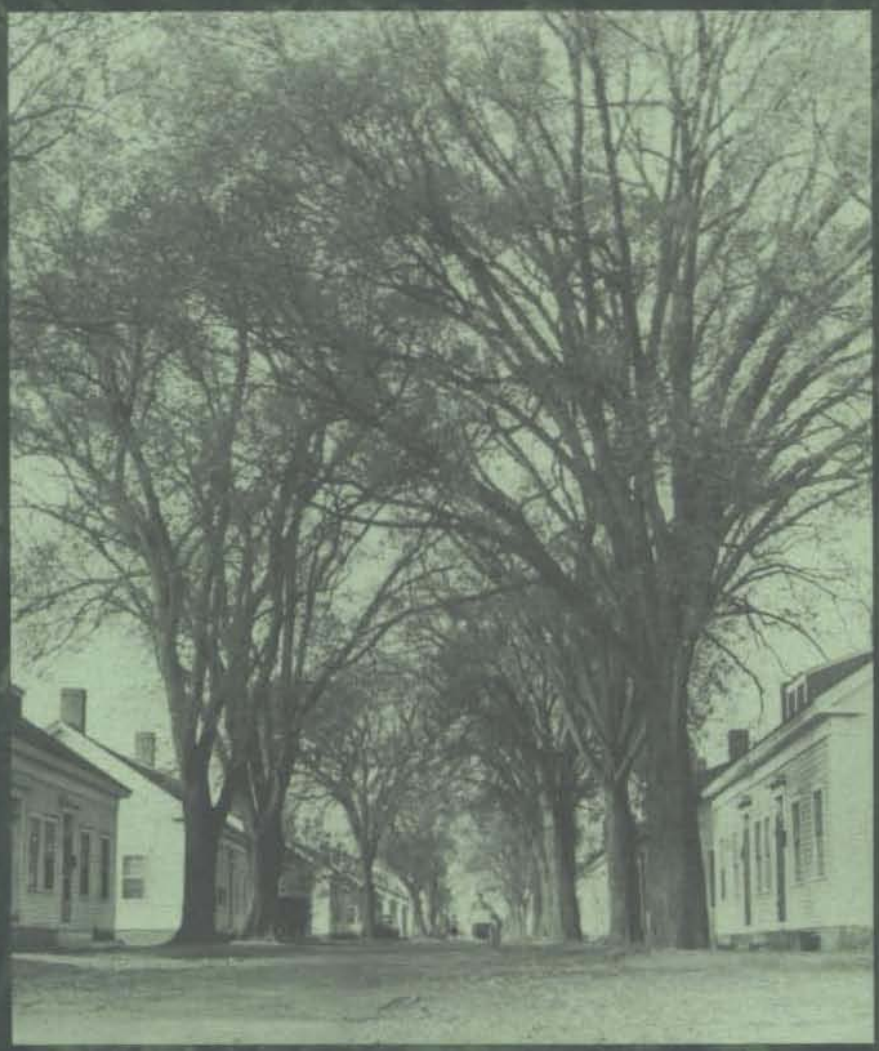

VANISHING RHODE ISLAND

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Introduction

PAUL M. BUHLE

This double issue of Rhode Island History is devoted to recovering fading memories. "Memory," writes the critic John Berger, analyzing the use of photographs, "implies a certain act of redemption. What is remembered has been saved from nothingness," for simple recognition contains the justice of "being remembered," while "being forgotten" is intimately close to condemnation.[1] Almost independently of the photographer's conscious intent, photographs bring a living record of the past into the life of the present, establishing a fragmentary but very real consciousness of continuity. Like oral history, although starting from different premises, they recuperate a feeling for what has been drastically altered. They also suggest what the surviving tokens of a vanished world may tell us about ourselves.[2]

Urban historian George Lipsitz helpfully complicates our view of memory, explaining that "the mixture of sensations and images in a world excite us not so much because they are fundamentally new, but because they remind us of something familiar but threatened by forgetting."[3] It is, he says, as if we wish to open up historical wounds again in an effort to reconcile different parts of ourselves. Among many simultaneously self-caricaturing and self-affirming Rhode Island jokes, the most telling is about the directions given to an out-of-state motorist: "Turn Left at where the old ____ used to be."

The immediate joke is on the visitor, since he or she cannot possibly recognize something that does not exist anymore. But more importantly, the joke is also a pained recognition that something essential will be lost if we allow ourselves to forget the vanished or abandoned brewery, movie theater, mill, or meadow; it is as if the images of the scene, including ourselves in the scene, simply cannot be put away without giving up some precious part of ourselves as well. Raymond Williams rightly insists that the "old village or the old backstreet" is significant not so much in itself but rather for the "perception and affirmation of a world in which one is not necessarily a stranger and an agent, but can be a member, a discoverer, in a shared source of life."[4] In the modern world these feelings are increasingly hard to come by, and we take our solace where we can. Whatever the reasons, many of us have staked a psychological claim upon the relics left behind, and upon the vanished scenes, with a tenacity that can mystify outsiders.

An odd physical disjuncture may help "explain" the sources of the mentality, on one level at least. Although the changes that have taken place are by no means unique to Rhode Island, the remarkable degree of the state's observable diversity —offering early eighteenth- to late twentieth-century artifacts (and some spectacular wilderness to boot) within any given few miles—has undoubtedly piqued our collective historical sensitivity. Seen from another angle: the Indian names of towns and villages and especially bodies of water remain at one layer of history; the later use of the space by inhabitants into the early twentieth century is at a second layer; the present status of that space occupies yet a third layer. Each layer is distinct, and all are equally "real" in Einstein's continuing current of history.

Paul Buhle, a Rhode Island-based historian, is the author or editor of more than a dozen books, including the pictorial *History of Rhode Island Working People* (with Gail Sansbury and Scott Molloy) and the biographical *C. L. R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary*.

Children fishing along a brook, Clayville, circa 1929. Photo by Wilfred Stone. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6039).

But no one who has been dazzled by the beauty of the sea, or drawn to the curious corners of urban, village, or rural ruins, will be entirely satisfied with such a simple and rational explanation. To try again: Rhode Island, an early settled and swiftly industrialized state, lost its nineteenth- and early twentieth-century character considerably more slowly than did much of the rest of the nation. An economic dynamo for just a moment, as history goes, it created a major American metropolis while it also cultivated its beautiful shores for genteel East Coast vacationers. It placed itself upon the national map.

The "heroic era" left behind a wealth of architecturally diverse structures, forgotten by much of America but still in use for work or play by Rhode Islanders themselves. The steady decline of textiles, the state's mainstay industry, reinforced a long-term pattern of young people leaving behind a provincial and class-ridden society without many opportunities (just as their forebears had left Europe, and for similar reasons). The earlier decline of farming and wood harvesting in rural districts, returning much of the countryside to virtual wilderness, had a parallel effect. In the ocean resort towns those opulent symbols of leisure, the giant hotels, shrunk down to a few beautiful white elephants, and the vacation trade attracted a new clientele. Rhode Island thus entered the twentieth century with ghosts aplenty, and they lent an eeriness as well as a special fascination for high times past.

Only by the 1950s, with the vast increase in automobile use and the rapid growth of the suburbs, did these ghosts retreat entirely to the margins. Interspersed with older development, the changes took place less dramatically in Rhode Island than in many other states. In suburban Warwick and West Warwick, scattered mill villages and factory complexes like Pontiac and Arctic survived as monuments to history; the state economy perennially sagged, robbing expansion of its impetus; and urban redevelopment, with its crash programs of demolition and rebuilding, came to Rhode Island only after historical preservation ideas had caught on sufficiently to keep large sections of Providence from being thoughtlessly sacrificed.

A certain habit of mind had long since grown among Rhode Islanders of all classes and descriptions. If (as the old saying goes) Staten Island is in a different time zone from Manhattan, Rhode Island had willy-nilly come to share some of that same quality: it had become an "island" of slower change and perhaps deeper memories than the ethnic-shifting neighborhoods and thriving suburban zones of, say, Chicago, Detroit, Houston, or Los Angeles.

There are other, less clearly economic reasons for Rhode Island's special feeling. For instance, South County, whose rolling hills are said to resemble sections of North Carolina, and Newport, whose connections to the South through society and commerce have been numerous, both arguably took on some of the characteristic "southern" flavor within American culture. The state's beauty seemed wildly in excess of potential productive value; it appeared to exist as a languorous memory of some vanished carefree childhood.[5] The southern shoreline from Narragansett to Watch Hill became a playground for the leisured classes, and not for them alone. Rhode Island tempted (and still does) permanent or partial escapees from the greater metropolitan rat race.

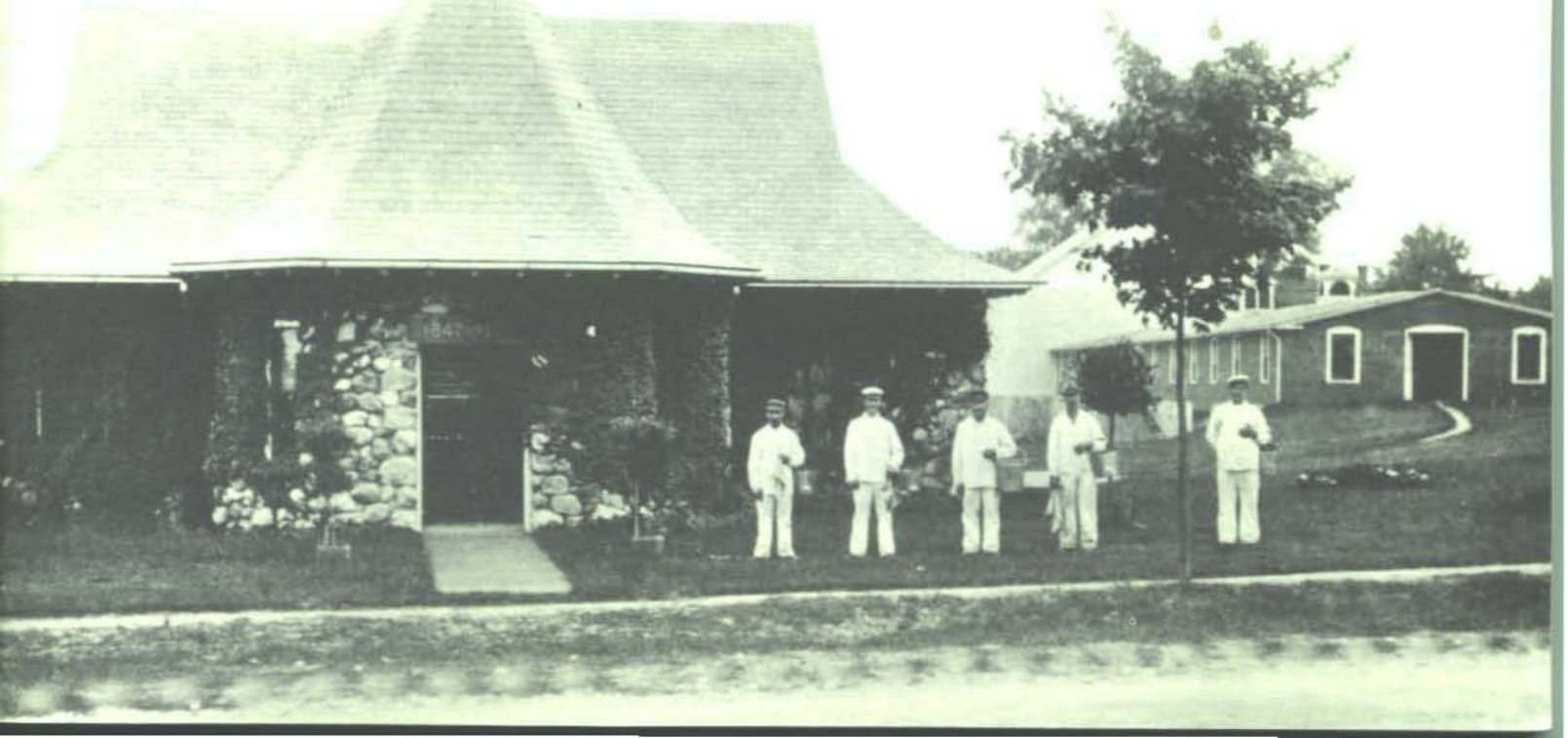
After 1960, however, change hurtled forward at accelerating rates, suddenly threatening much of the state's unique qualities. The countryside, whether working farms or rejuvenated forest, now grew closer and all too often fell to the developer's blueprint and the construction crew's heavy machinery, transformed into sprawling suburbs. Places like the Fruit Hill section of Providence (and its

western neighbor, the Apple Valley of Smithfield, now threatened with a similar fate) increasingly saw their descriptive names become mere real estate titles. Dozens of recognizable communities, long admired for their picturesque countryside and mill districts, had their surviving farms, Grange halls, and old-time factories swallowed up or obliterated entirely for developments and corporate headquarters. Urban renewal and shifting retail patterns meanwhile displaced familiar urban neighborhood commercial scenes, like the once grand downtown department stores of Pawtucket, for suburban shopping centers and neighborhood strip malls dependent on automobile traffic. Public transportation and services dwindled into a shrinking resource for the aged and the impoverished, further cutting off sources of the old life.

This double expansion climaxed during the 1970s and 1980s. An eradication of green space, large by Rhode Island standards, seemed even larger because of intensive house building along the road frontage even in heretofore remote rural areas and because the penetration of hitherto insular villages in South County and the northwestern countryside splintered the familiar architectural cohesion with modern housing developments and garish highway connectors.

Yet such a delineation is too simple and schematic. Older Rhode Island did not become an endangered species at any one particular point. Early housing developments, especially of individual homes planted in the woods or amid farmland, often did not seem like suburbs until the older setting had largely faded away. Pockets of previous dwellings and landscape remained and still remain for local reasons, and because of preservationists' growing vigilance. State purchase has also saved thousands of acres, mostly in parklands. A similar preservationist process prevails in many neighborhoods and downtowns, safeguarded by old or new ethnic cohesion and by a continuation—or, on occasion, a revival—of pedestrian or bicycle traffic, especially on weekends.

Old Rhode Island is still present. Focus a glance at one point, blink an eye at the surrounding visual context, and a sense of continuity returns. But know that almost every preserved space presents a history of continuing contestation, a dispute over ends and means, that would hardly have seemed necessary or even imaginable two generations ago.



Hazard-Weeden Dairy Company, 524 Academy Avenue, Providence, circa 1920. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 4768).

As the photographs collected here reveal so clearly, memory calls up varied associations, especially (but not only) to those who recognize some vanished element related to their own past. Walter Benjamin puts it more poetically: "The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses."[6] Our memories seem to drift to a now nonexistent meadow; or they tend to take shape in recycled locations, like the Hope Theatre in Providence, which became the Cinerama theater and, in a drastic physical transformation, a CVS drugstore and Ray's Home Entertainment Center (figure 1); or they may encompass various stages of existence, as in downtown Pawtucket (figures 2 and 3).

Figure 1
Hope Theatre, Hope Street, Providence, 1928. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

Figure 1a
Ray's Home Entertainment Center, Hope Street, Providence, 1992. Photo by Mari Jo Buhle. Courtesy of Paul Buhle.

A similar principle of "radial" or multiple meanings can be said to be in operation for most city streets and country lanes. As the architectural critic Bernard Rudofsky puts it, "A town is not the result of a design program; it is the reflection of a way of life" where the "anonymous" structures loom as large as any single architectural monument.[7] Architecture, the most ancient of all arts, here repeats its age-old role of accommodating its residents by tactile familiarity, by habit.[8]

The look of "Vanishing Rhode Island" is intended, within this small space, to replicate the identity of Rhode Island itself. The subject of the state's identity has been frequently discussed, although perhaps never sharply enough debated. Represented by the photographer, the unique visual character of the state was naturally framed by its mill villages, its urban centers, its extraordinary coastline resorts, and its "swamp Yankee" farm districts. No one could call it the New England of calendar art, like fabled craggy Maine or New Hampshire; but neither did any other existing label fit.

In any case, consideration of how conscious the photographers were of a quality of "Rhode Islandness" begs the question of artistic intentionality. We can say flatly that the majority of photographs displayed here reveal little beyond local pride—in the architecture, the business, the family, or the nature scene—or the civil servant's obligation to document a site destined for physical transformation. Local or traveling independent craftsmen and souvenir-company photographers meant to sell a favorable image of a street, a park, or a noted building. They framed their work, consciously and unconsciously, with the choice of location, with the use of light and angle. If the eminent aestheticist Bernard Berenson once wished that art history could be stripped of artists' names, and Jean-Paul Sartre argued similarly that photography renders technique invisible by erasing the distinction between the photo and the object itself, then our stereographers from the 1850s to our postcard photographers from the 1890s to the 1920s and later may have been America's most characteristic (and most accessible) artists.[9]

Figure 2
Downtown Pawtucket, 1960. Courtesy of the Pawtucket Planning Commission.

Figure 3
Downtown Pawtucket, 1980. Courtesy of the Pawtucket Planning Commission.

Figure 4
Women in a textile spooling and warping room, Lonsdale, 1912. Photo by Lewis Hine. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 5472).

The majority of photos (unfortunately, from this writer's viewpoint) omit people. The photos were almost certainly shot, by tradition, early in the morning, both to take advantage of the best light and probably also to avoid the confusion of pedestrians and traffic. Commercial and bucolic scenes alike, whether of "scenery" or mill and urban architectural extravaganzas, could easily have been shot for possible reproduction as postcards. Most such cards traveled within Rhode Island; they were often the only means of casual communication between mill villagers with few accessible telephones. Yet postcard art may also have been the major means by which non-Rhode Islanders gained glimpses of the state.

The "anonymous" frame has more virtues and more complexity than might appear at first glance. In contrast, some of the most famous Rhode Island community photos, those taken by famed reformist Lewis Hine at the turn of the century to expose the damaging effects of industrial work upon child laborers, are extraordinary in their own way (figure 4), but they have nothing in them

Figure 5
View of Westerly along the Pawcatuck Canal, n.d. Courtesy of the Westerly Public Library.

peculiar to Rhode Island. Hine was not much interested in the local qualities of exploitation and stunted lives, and for that reason (as photographic critics have noted) his purposeful observation tells us little beyond the face, the hands, and the industrial backdrop of the subjects.[10] The straightforward Rhode Island photographers tell us things about a landscape precisely through its particulars, as a characteristically Rhode Island scene of the Pawcatuck Canal at Westerly around the turn of the century does so well (figure 5). We see here, I think, natural surroundings making their claims upon human intervention, softening the outlines through water and foliage. We will see this juxtaposition dozens of times again in the photographs.

Nineteenth-century photographers, says historian Alan Trachtenberg, believed that they saw the world through "a new kind of reading, a new kind of library."[11] They held that the photograph had achieved a division of image from reality by capturing an objective truth in an uncertain and ever-changing world. Civil War photographers offered almost unendurable details of death and suffering; portrait studios provided a distinctly different service, capturing the paying subject before youth's blush or maturity's dignity had fled into old age. Noted urban photographers, like our anonymous Rhode Island photo artists, might have turned to the city at a certain angle or at a certain hour for lighting effects, but in contrast to the landscape painter, they did not "invent" details to fill out a theme.

Figure 6
Night view of downtown Providence from College Hill, 1938-1940. Photo by Charlotte Estey. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1729).

Figure 7
Pedestrians on Francis Street, Providence, 1940. Photo by Jack Delano. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6597).

Figure 8
Girls in their confirmation dresses in front of 36 Wickenden Street, Providence, 1950-1952. Photo by Charlotte Estey. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6081).

The twentieth-century photographer stands on other grounds, as a significant minority of the post-1930 photos shown here clearly reveal. In Alfred Steiglitz's famed New York "291" studio and his magazine, *Camera Work*, the city acquired an almost expressionist animation with a uniquely modern form of beauty. Steiglitz aesthetically detached that perspective from the ambitions of the city's men of power, who saw the rising towers and the accelerating mobility of transport only as proof of commercial triumph. As observed by Steiglitz, along with many poets and artists, the city in fact had a life of its own. We see this lyric view expressed in the upbeat impression of Providence by night, 1940 (figure 6).

We also see photojournalism of a different kind. Jack Delano's remarkable Works Progress Administration shots of Depression-era Providence already show an aging city tattered at the edges (figure 7). America's other great Depression-era photographers—Dorothea Lange, Margaret Bourke-White, and others—added a renewed emphasis upon people, especially the masses of ordinary people. But no artists of this school worked with Rhode Island themes. One can only imagine the results if the Photo League, best known for its documentary projects and its collective effort, had taken on Rhode Island as it did poor sections of New York City from the 1930s to the 1950s, or if league successor Milton Rogovin's work on "the forgotten ones" from the late 1950s onward had included Providence, Pawtucket, Central Falls, or Woonsocket.[12] Some of the most beautiful pictures in this collection, those by the talented (and now sadly neglected) *Providence Journal* photographer Charlotte Estey, show a like sensitivity to human subjects and to the city of Providence in the 1950s (figure 8).

Much other photography from the 1920s onward in this collection was consciously inspired by purposes close to my own: to capture the "feel" of a scene and, sometimes, its people before the moment slips away. Such inspiration is apparent in the work of a second *Journal* photographer, the indefatigable Wilfred Stone, who from 1920 to the 1950s shot rural and village scenes, as in this photo of proud women in the kitchen of the Knightsville Congregational Church (figure 9). Indeed, Stone is the most represented photographer in this collection. The Providence Camera Club's treatment of its subjects in 1951 faithfully reflects a compulsive urban documentation—at just the right moment (figure 10). The relatively current photos included here continue this documentation, but they focus rather more narrowly on odd corners of the past still intact or refurbished, on nature scenes and rehabs.

Figure 9
Knightsville Congregational Church, 1930. Photo by Wilfred Stone. Courtesy of the Cranston Historical Society.

A few final words on method and intent. Although a majority of the materials reproduced involve buildings, or street scenes with buildings featured prominently, this photostudy is em-phatically not an architectural history; such work is better done by others, and little of truly representative quality could be accomplished here anyway. The present study is, rather, a reading of photographic resources at a scattering of photo archives. The selection has been influenced, if not always shaped, by two intentions: to show the great changes that have taken place since Rhode Island's high-prestige era, and to capture as many scenes as possible from living memory, i.e., from about 1920 forward.

Space limitations have been forbidding. Now, however, I hope to draw a larger public into helping me collect pictures for the next stage: a large-scale work with hundreds of photos. What you see here is a beginning, a working model. It is also an appeal for assistance to all the existing photo archives, so that historic snapshots tucked away in attics may be salvaged and restored rather than lost once and for all.

My reading of photographs has been greatly influenced by certain social critics. I am in deep debt, intellectually, to the famed architectural commentator and urban critic Lewis Mumford. Much of my characterization goes against the grain of Mumford's early twentieth-century pessimism by seeking to demonstrate how and why Providence and Rhode Island generally seemed not to fall victim, until very recent decades, to the processes Mumford articulately described in *Sticks and Stones, Culture of the Cities*, and other works. If in the end Rhode Island's specialness could not itself be protected from tides more furious and final than those of the Hurricane of 1938, many possibilities remained along the way and still remain for protection of precious places, both planned and unplanned, grand and vernacular.

Figure 10
Westminster Street, Providence, looking west from Eddy Street, 1951. Photo by Allan B. McCoy, Camera Club of the Providence Engineering Society, Historical Records Project. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6625).

Notes

1. John Berger, "Uses of Photography," in *About Looking* (New York, 1980), 57.
2. Alessandro Portelli's classic volume on oral history, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Popular Culture* (Albany, N.Y., 1991), explains the functions of time and meaning in oral history.
3. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis, 1990), 269.
4. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York, 1973), 298.
5. See Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London, 1990), for a valuable interpretation of the South's "meaning" to the national audience for blackface minstrelsy.
6. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969), 237.
7. Bernard Rudofsky, *Streets for People: A Primer for Americans* (New York, 1969), 21.
8. Benjamin, *"The Work of Art,"* 240.
9. Bernard Berenson, *Aesthetics and History in the Visual Arts* (New York, 1948), 192; Flint Schier, *Deeper into Pictures: An Essay on Pictorial Representation* (Cambridge, England, 1968), 12-13. I wish to acknowledge the technical discussion of postcard history in Sue Maden's excellent *Greetings from Jamestown, Rhode Island: Picture Post Card Views, 1900-1950* (Jamestown, 1988).
10. See Stephen Victor, *Lewis Hine's Photography and Reform in Rhode Island* (Pawtucket, 1982), reprinted from *Rhode Island History* 41 (1982): 35-53.
11. Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York, 1988), 18.
12. Mel Rosenthal, "Photography," in Mari Jo Buhle et al., *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (New York, 1990), 577-78.


NORTH SCITUATE 348
APRIL 30 1916 J. R. HESS

In Another Age

In 1880 an elderly resident of Providence, recalling the city of his youth, annotated an old set of sketches and watercolors of preindustrial Providence, made more than a half century earlier. These pictures were said to represent accurately what no camera could have captured. The process of imagination that they embodied would henceforth be called art, because by the late nineteenth century the Rhode Island photographer was already busy with mechanical documentation, a different kind of process, albeit one shaped in its own way by artistic sensibilities.

A glance backward to that time through selected photographs immediately suggests the natural and architectural treasures we have lost. It also suggests how completely the characteristic urban-industrial life that dominates Rhode Island already dominated and even created the public perception of the surrounding environment a century ago.[1]

Consider, briefly, the sources of that era's optimism. The economic value of Rhode Island factory goods tripled between the Civil War and 1900, yielding fortunes hitherto unimaginable. The state led the nation in the manufacture of worsted wools and ranked among the top five cotton producers, to say nothing of its production of fine silverware, machine tools, and other goods. Electrical power and modern transit came to Providence in the 1880s and spread from there throughout the state. For municipal showcases, no state anywhere could top Newport, watering hole of the ultrarich, of celebrated personalities and notable artists.[2]

Not at all surprisingly, the Rhode Island of the turn-of-the-century photograph was "constructed" to elaborate the optimistic view of mechanical progress and of undiminished natural beauty of seaside and countryside. The city had impressive business sections, interesting architecture, and lively neighborhoods, with parks and other spots of repose. The village, farm, lake, bay, and ocean provided material for so many artists, poets, and travel guides in no small part because of the city's relative proximity, as well as the state's proximity to heavily populated areas of the East Coast. Nature, inside and outside the city, offered surcease or temporary psychic release from the world of commerce, and it provided source materials for limitless meditation.

By the late nineteenth century, Rhode Island, like many other states, began taking great public pride in its unique "features." Several handy guides were published, profusely illustrated with sketches and photos. *Pleasant Places in Rhode Island and How to Reach Them* and *Trolley Trips: Places of Interest on the Car Routes out of Providence*, for instance, provided detailed advice from the seasoned traveler on how to enjoy sites of extraordinary, spirit-rejuvenating beauty, all within an hour or two of downtown Providence by train or trolley.[3] Local pride was rightly spurred by the state's budding park system, which offered

View of North Scituate, 1916, before condemnation for the Scituate Reservoir. Photo by John Hess. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6596).

the public inexpensive pleasures. Newspapers also fairly resonated with the craze of the state's self-discovery. A Providence daily could hail spectacular scenery

> within six miles of the State House . . . [beauty which] is literally in the heart of the wilds, while it is scarcely beyond the threshold of the city. From the hilltop above its mysterious glen called Quinsnicket, the night sky reflects in a yellow glow the lights of Providence and Pawtucket like the illumined clouds above twin craters; and to the westward one may watch for the white streamer that sets the distant woods aglow as the flashlight of a Woonsocket [electric] car passes like a comet.[4]

The woods might have been alluring, but water, as nearly always in Rhode Island, provided the key to the most common themes of holiday, nature scene, and early industrial life. To a distinguished museum director, viewing the state's map as an artwork, Rhode Island is "an outspread hand reaching down Narragansett Bay to the open ocean."[5] If it is, then the inland rivers are the veins. Photographers followed in the path of the nineteenth-century painters who regarded water as a source of redemption and whose "luminist" or Barbizon-tinted landscapes offered homage to God's presence within the natural world.[6] On the other hand, merchants and manufacturers saw water as the strategic location and chief natural resource of Rhode Island, and rightly so. Industry's connection to the state's waterways and countryside gave Rhode Island its most distinctive nineteenth-century feature: the mill village.

In *Rhode Island: An Inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Sites*, Gary Kulik notes that the "brilliant technological beginnings" in the state created the economic basis for its extraordinary concentration of early production facilities. Rooted in the textile economy (supplemented, especially in Providence, along other manufacturing lines), this bold beginning was indeed an economic miracle. Yet economics cannot altogether explain why the "wide brick-pier mill, with its near-flat roof, segmental-arch windows, and general lack of architectural embellishment," in Kulik's concise phrase, should have been such a lasting architectural triumph.[7] The rhythm of elements that have since vanished, like the lighting and ventilation required before the availability of more artificial means, certainly adds to our pleasure. But there is something more, something that the mill operative, the superintendent, and even the factory owner could only have felt, not fully grasped, at the time.

In much of North America the race to achieve growth was notoriously heedless of other considerations. Lewis Mumford says plainly that "where industrialism took root, the traditions of architecture were disregarded."[8] The case of Rhode Island puts this maxim in a different light. The distinguished architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock, looking back upon the nineteenth century as the state's golden architectural years, saw that the mills reached near-perfect functionalism by expressing a combination of boldness and simplicity of design wholly appropriate to their surroundings.[9] A few mill barons, but only a few, built an environment self-consciously for this end.

In using Rhode Island as an example of achievement reached early (and then for the most part abandoned), Hitchcock created a small revolution in U.S. architectural history, but he missed a major opportunity to draw a larger connection between architectural design and social history. For all their long hours and low pay, and even their use of child labor, the paternalistic mills succeeded in their own terms because they found their niche in the contemporary environment, both human and natural. Hedley Smith describes a slightly imaginary but well-remembered Rhode Island mill village of his childhood:

> Briardale is in the bottom of a long valley, with a bit of a river running through it and the big red mill and the rows of white wooden mill houses rising row and after up the side of the hill. Almost where the last row of houses ended, the trees began, real woods . . . all a blaze of colour, scarlet, yellow, russet and saffron, with the stretches of fir and pine like a solid dark shadow woven among them. The pond above the mill dam was as still as a mirror, and flashed back the colours of the big beeches and maples like a blazing fire.[10]

Anyone who has been through a purposefully or inadvertently preserved mill town in a farming valley knows the feeling of Rhode Island's enchanted kingdom. Once collectively large, that kingdom has now been reduced to byways; and yet here and there we can see the remnants of sometimes elaborate spatial schemes. In its insularity and collectivity (usually reinforced by mutual religious and ethnic ties), the mill village was *ours*; its memory is indissoluble from any distinct or unique Rhode Island identity.

The "great city," Providence, and its smaller but (in their day) scarcely less dynamic counterparts, Pawtucket and Woonsocket, are only less distinctively Rhode Island. Here the swift, dominating technological changes could be seen all around: the city belonged to the machine, and to the crowds of urban inhabitants. By the last years of the nineteenth century the electric light had replaced the gas lamp and the electric trolley had pushed the horse-drawn vehicle into the background. (The internal-combustion engine would soon make the horse cart a curiosity.) Drawing to itself a bewildering complexity of people and plans, the city already had many faces.

Rhode Island's critical location between Boston and New York, reached by rail or water, as well as its extraordinary economic vitality, had long made Providence a gateway to southern New England. Its downtown was a monument to transportation, at increasing speeds, of people and of goods. But Providence was much more than that. The center of a city-state in an emerging American empire, it was an international city of remarkable potential.

Beyond the city and around the mill towns, the rural village and the countryside loomed. In some ways these were the most characteristic of New England scenes and were recognized as such long before. Mumford insists, only somewhat rhetorically, on asking whether "there has never been a more complete and intelligent partnership between the earth and man than existed, for a little while, in the old New England village."[11] He means the village of the eighteenth (more than the nineteenth) century, marked at its center by a meetinghouse, a school, and lines of elm trees, all plainly functional no less than picturesque, and all expressing the needs of the inhabitants for a combination of rural life and social contact.

This early farming-district village was in many respects self-sufficient, as no later village could be. But its form or physical framework, including its pastoral background and variety of architectures, continued to survive until well into the twentieth century. Known to some of the world's great landscape painters as a North American Eden, Rhode Island retained some of the most starkly beautiful farmland on the continent, with nature scenes and villages that even in relatively recent memory rivaled those of England for picturesqueness. "A Home by the Sea," the famous canvas by Worthington Whittredge (who painted at least seven versions of this Rhode Island scene during the 1870s and 1880s), already expresses nostalgia for simpler days now passing away.[12]

Village and rural scenes at the turn of the century speak volumes about Rhode Island's persisting legacies. Nothing could surpass the reminiscent quality of the South County mill village of Bradford (figure 11) or of the Sprague Bridge over the Narrow River (figure 12). These speak to us immediately of another century, as they probably already did by the early 1900s. Likewise, Wickford's Main Street in the 1880s or 1890s (figure 13) exerts a deep sense of quietude.

The mill village and the mill, because of their impressive mechanization (and because so many of the structures remain), seem more a part of our world, but only to a degree. The Spring Lake Mill of Coventry (figure 14), the Centerville Mill of Warwick (figure 15), and, above all, the Slatersville mill village of North Smithfield (figure 16) nevertheless show a side of life based upon an insularity already becoming impossible by the turn of the century. As the sheet music for "Down by the Old Mill Stream" kept the half-mythical images alive through generations of amateur musicians and their audiences, romantic suggestions of simpler times prevailed over the harsher realities of mill life.

Figure 11
Grade crossing at Niantic, Bradford, circa 1910. Courtesy of the Westerly Public Library.

Figure 12
Covered bridge at Narrow River, Narragansett, circa 1910. Courtesy of the Pettaquamscutt Historical Society and the Wilking Studio.

Figure 13
Main Street, Wickford, circa 1885. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6595).

Figure 14
Spring Lake Mill, Coventry, 1904.
RIHS Collection (RHi X3 138).

Figure 15
Centerville Mill, (West) Warwick, 1875.
RIHS Collection (RHi X3 5195).

Figure 16
Slatersville, 1904. RIHS Collection
(RHi X3 5439).

By contrast, all-too-real urban bodies of water had come, in many cases, already to be seen as a nuisance. In the early 1890s Providence residents had lost their final opportunity to gaze at the Cove Basin (figure 17). Such an expanse of water downtown had given the city a potentially unique character, with an almost Amsterdam-like sense of visible canals. But manufacturers' pollution of the water, together with inadequate city sewage treatment, had turned the Cove foul-smelling and reduced public resistance to filling it. Still, contemporary guidebooks pointed to such spots as Mount Pleasant, Mount Neutaconkanut (in Johnston), and Tockwotton Heights as possessing wonderful views of the bay—as if the presence of the water had retained its visual wonder by receding into the distance.

The aerial perspective from Providence's Christian Science Church (figure 18) shows clearly how close the water nevertheless intruded, just beyond the impressive buildings of the East Side. With the Cove filled and the Providence River covered at Market Square, the remaining section of the river (figure 19) still served for secondary transport. Drawing an unfavorable comparison with French manufacturing cities, a local magazine complained in 1914 that the Providence waterfront was blighted

Figure 17
View of the Providence Cove, looking northwest, circa 1880. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6599).

Figure 18
View of the Providence River from the dome of the Christian Science Church on Prospect Street, Providence, 1909. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6600).

Figure 19
View of the Providence River and harbor, looking south from the Banigan Building, Providence, 1909. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1457).

Figure 20
Exchange Place, Providence, circa 1880. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 376).

Figure 21
The New York, Providence, and Boston Freight House on Canal Street, Providence, circa 1890. Photo by P. A. Willemin. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6606).

by "glaring billboards" and a "general aspect of slovenliness."[13] Not for almost three-quarters of a century would planners envision renewed use of the waterfront as a key to a coherent urban revival.

Within the city itself, everything depended upon the lineal descendant of ocean and canal transport: the increasingly rapid movement, of people as much as goods, across ever-larger stretches of land. Surface transportation, indeed, tells the most dynamic pictorial story of the age. The essence of downtown Providence in the late nineteenth century, the original Union Passenger Depot (figure 20), built in 1848 from plans by the famed Thomas Tefft, was massive in physical scope and significance. Behind it, the loading dock revealed the human scale of commerce (figure 21).

The line of trolleys on Westminster Street, circa 1900-1905, almost speaks for itself in the combination of city crowd and mechanical efficiency (figure 22). The bustling center of transportation, captured wonderfully in the motion and the locomotion of Exchange Place, had transformed the downtown (figure 23). The contemporary grandeur of downtown could be measured, on one hand, by its almost constant rebuilding (figure 24) and, on the other, by the calm, sculptured expanse of its almost bucolic-looking teachers' college, later a University of Rhode Island campus and now unhappily slated for demolition (figure 25).

The past, however, continually revealed itself behind the looming urban avenues; thus a cobblestoned alleyway, a remnant of the early nineteenth-century city, might suddenly come into sight (figure 26). In what we will come to recognize

Figure 22
Trolley cars on Westminster Street, Providence, circa 1905. Photo by Frank Warren Marshall. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1905).

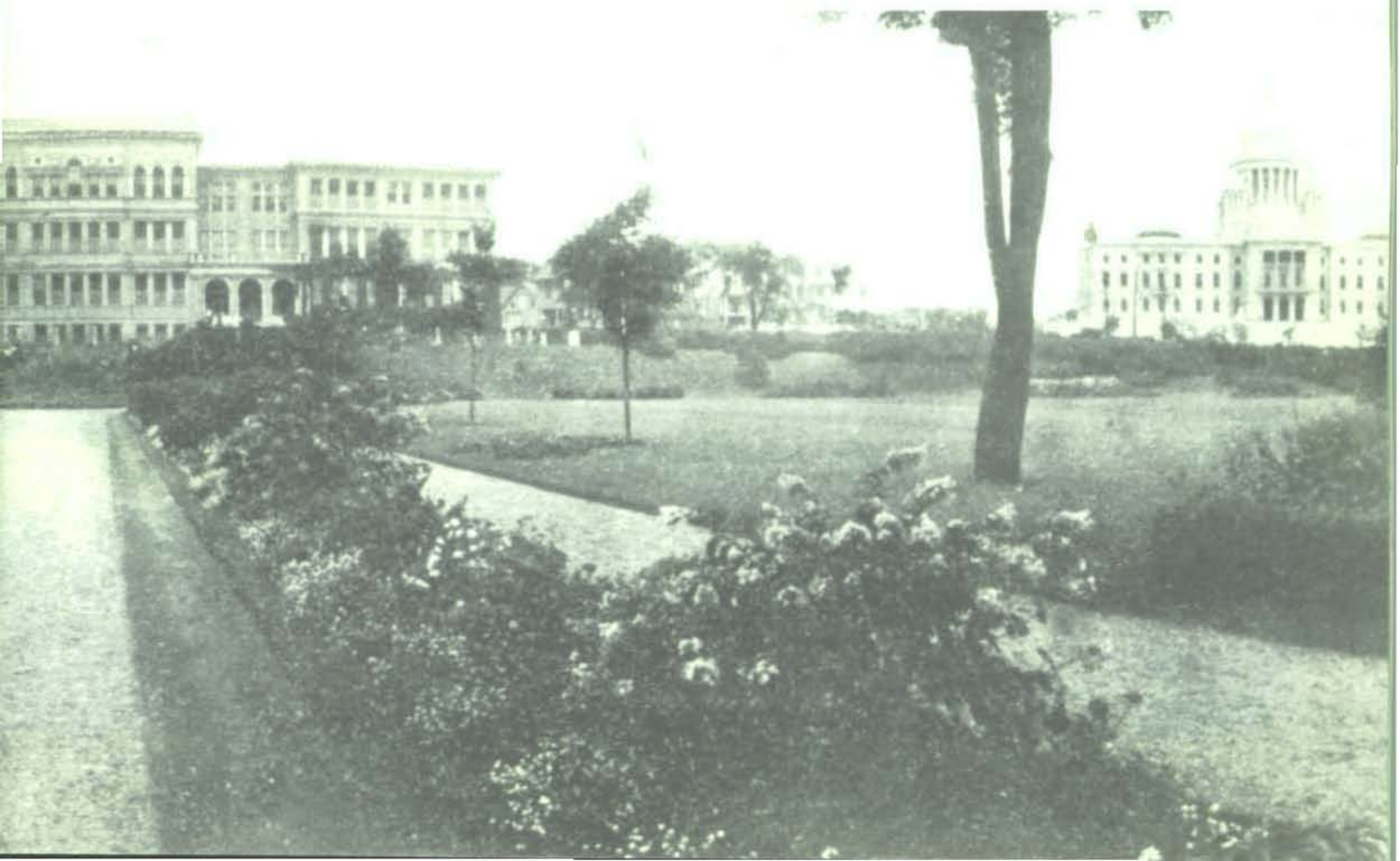
Figure 23
Exchange Place, Providence, circa 1918. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6601).

Figure 24
Providence Public Works Department widening Empire Street, circa 1900. RIHS Collection (Rhi X3 6607).

Figure 25
Halftone panoramic view of the Rhode Island Normal School, circa 1905. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1187).

Figure 26
Rear of the Arnold Block, 54 North Main Street, Providence, 1912; demolished in 1913 for the extension of Waterman Street. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6608).

as a characteristic paradox, the acceleration of urban intensity actually highlighted the "oldness" of Rhode Island as a civic virtue. Preservationists, little organized and unheeded but nevertheless vocal in the arts community and in certain circles of high society, raised the ideals of British poet-preservationist William Morris to denounce the developer's wrecking ball and the newer commercial ugliness that often followed.[14]



Beyond the commercial centers grew the neighborhoods, with smaller-scale buildings and room for larger green spaces. Arteries like Plainfield Street (figure 27) could boast of their own rapid growth, with neighborhood stores and, in some cases, leafy trees and fine homes. Federal Hill's Acorn Street (figure 28) was typical of the most intense neighborhood development in its population-heavy combination of faces and ethnic legacies sometimes jostling uncomfortably together.

Neighboring towns experienced a similar burst of growth, muted by the surviving countryside. The Pawtuxet Valley, a mixture of mill villages and farms, prompted growing commercial districts like "downtown" Cranston. Here a Loutit "What Cheer" Laundry proclaimed the rise of service industries (figure 29), while in neighborhood backstreets such as this one in Phenix, village life with its little rituals continued (figure 30). In the Blackstone Valley, Pawtucket—arguably America's first historic industrial district—remained near its apex as a manufacturing and commercial metropolis. From one side, its grandeur lay in the mills that dominated the landscape (figure 31); from another, its bustling streets and high-profile department store, Shartenberg's, showed Pawtucket to be a real commercial rival to Providence (figure 32). Just a few miles away lay the little industrial suburb of Valley Falls (figure 33), and beyond that the state's northernmost villages, culminating in Woonsocket, the city and factory complex on the Blackstone River (figure 34).

Figure 27
View along Plainfield Street, Providence, circa 1918. RIHS Collection.

Figure 28
Acorn Street, Providence, circa 1920. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

Figure 29
Louttit's Home Hand Laundry, Federal and Cross streets, Cranston, circa 1900. Courtesy of the Cranston Historical Society.

Figure 30
A Fourth of July parade passing Alfred Biggs House, Phenix Avenue, Cranston, 1920. Courtesy of the Cranston Historical Society.

Figure 31
Slater Mill and surrounding buildings, Pawtucket, 1886-1900. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 2467).

Figure 32
Main Street, Pawtucket, 1916. Photo taken for the Slater Trust Company. James L. Wheaton Collection, courtesy of the Spaulding House Research Library, Pawtucket.

Figure 33
Postcard view of the Valley Falls Mill, Cumberland. Courtesy of Paul Buhle.

Figure 34
View from the Main Street Bridge, Woonsocket, circa 1906. Photo by Wilfred Stone. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6610).

Figure 35
Strand Theater, Washington and Union streets, Providence, circa 1919. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 2758).

Figure 36
Interior view of the Majestic Theater, Washington and Empire streets, Providence, n.d. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 402).

Figure 37
Hotel and dining hall at Silver Spring, East Providence, circa 1890. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1091).

As the cities located labor and commerce, they also made possible organized leisure. Each urban area had its monuments to the popular desires for escape and casual entertainment. Like the famed Woonsocket Opera House, the Strand Theater in Providence (figure 35) brought people in at all waking hours, both for films and for the live entertainment that had already become—and would remain despite all other changes—a Rhode Island tradition. Inside the theaters dreamy landscapes unfolded, the work of skilled and imaginative technicians like those of Providence's Majestic Theater (figure 36).

By now, large areas of the state, especially those located along waterways, had become extensions of the city's need of leisure in a different way—as the sometimes exquisitely planned and executed sites of temporary escape or "outings,"

Figure 38
Vanity Fair amusement park, East Providence, circa 1900. RIHS Collection (Rhi X3 6628).

Figure 39
Rhode Island Yacht Club, Edgewood, circa 1910. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 5347).

Figure 40
Root beer stand at Rocky Point, 1910. Harrington Collection, RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6577).

which could be as short as an afternoon or as long as a summer month. This was the "Ocean State" Rhode Island that many millions of visitors in the coming decades would celebrate, and with good reason. Pleasures awaited for both the (upper) classes and the masses.

Thus the shore dinner, a multiple-course seafood meal, cried out for the tourist. From 1885 the Shore Transportation Company ran steamships along the resort route. In easy access from Providence's East Side lay such East Providence sites as the dining hall at Silver Spring (figure 37) and that apex of amusement parks, Vanity Fair (figure 38). Not much further from the city hub were the Rhode Island Yacht Club in Edgewood (figure 39) and the Midway at Rocky Point (figure 40).

The traveler with more time to spare could easily reach Narragansett Pier (figure 41), with its splendid Grand Casino, or Newport, with its artistic appeals obvious in a local print shop (figure 42) and its typically fabulous lounging spots like Bateman's Hotel (figure 43). Westerly boasted the elegant Watch Hill House (figure 44).

As we look at these pictures, it is tempting to say, "*This* is Rhode Island," as opposed to all the other possiblilities. Indeed, it may well be that quintessential Rhode Island from which we derive most of our remaining sense of certainty about our collective self. It is, at the very least, the shadow that remains just behind us as we move forward through the twentieth century.

Figure 41
Swimmers at Narragansett Pier, circa 1925. Photo by the Albertype Company, Brooklyn, New York. RIHS Collection (RHi A334 102).

Figure 42
Charles Hammett's Bookstore and Stationery Shop, Thames Street, Newport, circa 1890. Collection of the Newport Historical Society.

Figure 43
Lawn tennis at Bateman's Hotel, Ocean Drive, Newport, n.d. Photo by Clarence Stanhope. Collection of the Newport Historical Society.

Figure 44
Watch Hill House, Watch Hill, circa 1890. RIHS Collection.

Notes

1. I have passed over the stereographer, that maker of dual photos for use with a hand-held viewer, because I wish to begin closer to the present.
2. William McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History* (New York, 1978), chap. 5.
3. I am grateful to Barton St. Armand for lending me these rare volumes, published by the Providence Journal Company in 1893 and 1901 respectively.
4. "The Louisquisset Region: A Beauty Spot in the Heart of the Wilds, Yet But Six Miles from the State House," *Providence Sunday Tribune*, 16 July 1907 (clipping in State Archives).
5. John Wilmerding, "Under Chastened Light: The Landscape of Rhode Island," in Robert G. Workman, *The Eden of America: Rhode Island Landscapes, 1820-1920* (Providence, 1986), 13. This volume includes some of the RISD museum's incomparable collection of paintings of Rhode Island scenes.
6. I am in debt to the pioneering research of Catherine Little Bert and L. J. McElroy into the painters around the Providence Art Club and A.E. Club from the 1880s to about 1920. The dark, dreamy nature landscapes of these painters gave way, in a small but spectacular late development, to a Providence "Ashcan School" style; both styles were perfectly consistent with the themes of this essay. I hope to utilize some of these paintings, along with other sketchwork and nonphotograhic material, in the larger-format book to come.
7. Gary Kulik, Introduction, *Rhode Island: An Inventory of Historic Engineering and Industrial Sites*, directed by Gary Kulik (Washington, D.C., 1978).
8. Lewis Mumford, *Sticks and Stones: A Study of American Architecture and Civilization*, rev. ed. (New York, 1955), 76.
9. Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Rhode Island Architecture* (Providence, 1939).
10. Hedley Smith, *The Yankee Yorkshireman* (Detroit, 1970), 58.
11. Mumford, *Sticks and Stones*, 29.
12. Workman, *Eden of America*, 52.
13. Caption to "Providence—View at Crawford Street Bridge," *Providence Magazine*, November 1914, 726.
14. Lecture by L. J. McElroy at the Rhode Island Historical Society, September 1991, to be documented in a future issue of *Sketches: An Art Journal*. The importance of the "arts-and-crafts" movement for Providence can best be measured not in its success or (mostly) failure to halt demolitions but rather in the legacy it left to future preservationists.

Metropolitan Dynamics, 1920-1950

A majority of Rhode Islanders had become city dwellers twenty or thirty years before most Americans, but by 1920 they shared basic experiences with urbanites elsewhere. A previously unthinkable degree of geographical and occupational mobility broke down many—if by no means all—remnants of insularity seemingly all at once. Meanwhile the building and restyling plans of the metropolis surged forward. As the photographs suggest, it was the least uniquely Rhode Island moment of modern city life.

Optimistic prospects brought these factors together, despite the gradual decline of the textile economy and the extreme severity of the Depression. Immigrants from Europe and elsewhere settled into a life somewhere between self-identity and assimilation. Many blue-collar families hoped that their children would graduate from high school and even go on to college or professional school. The Depression ruined many of these dreams for one generation, but World War II savings and the G.I. Bill made them possible for another. The emerging middle classes eagerly put their stamp upon a stylistic "sophistication" taking shape. Thanks to the success of unionization, hundreds of thousands of factory workers joined with the middle class in the consumer market for the new wares, from consumer durables to sport shirts.[1] Symptomatically, roads were widened for the growing stream of auto traffic, whose harmful side effects were hidden for a time in the eagerness of individuals and families for material improvement.

At this moment of collective self-discovery and accommodation to change, Providence became the photojournalist's city, and to a lesser extent the government photographer's work space. In tune with the technical improvements of the camera, photos entered into the scene more intimately, rubbing shoulders with the passersby and capturing changing expressions of the immigrant state's sudden emergence into mass culture. The best of these photos, in that sense, offer an equivalent of the moving-picture camera's subjectivity. The older style of commercial photos and the state's documentary photos seem now strangely awkward by comparison. The city is the future, as Raymond Williams reads the contemporary literary images, and at many moments that future is overwhelmingly seductive.[2]

And yet an underlying suggestion of continuities seems never quite absent from the photos taken. Perhaps the very degree of change in the prosperous 1920s, and just as likely the reminders of old conflicts during the bitterly depressed 1930s, prompted some photographers to capture shadows of the past looming within the present. Americans in general discovered nostalgia during the Depression. Many Hollywood films of the era show a longing for the bygone simplicity of the 1890s, while strikingly contrary images—vivid in so many opening shots of 1930s and 1940s movies, with New York City as the place where the protagonist will struggle to overcome obstacles—nevertheless connect familiar themes of family and tradition to the excitement of accelerated change.[3]

Figure 45
Open-air market at Spruce Street and Balboa Avenue, Federal Hill, Providence, 1937. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

Rhode Island became, ideally, a place where past and future meet. This was a claim made for any number of other states and cities of the time, but it seems especially convincing here. Providence, wrote John Williams Haley (the self-styled "Rhode Island Historian") in the 1931 *Providence Illustrated Guide*, was best known for its "quiet charm," a quality he attributed to physical location. It had

> something of the refreshing mean between the super-urbanity of many a larger city and the provinciality of the average town. It has its skyscrapers but they are not dominant. The population of slightly more than 250,000 has its homes, for the most part, on the slopes and crests of the half-circle of hills which hold the civic center and business district in their common palm. . . . The remarkable proximity between the residential and business districts [contrasts with] their subtle segregation. The hills accomplish this.[4]

In this generally elegiac guidebook, Haley made a valuable point: the accumulating ills that choked many urban centers fairly early in the twentieth century were significantly mitigated in Rhode Island's major cities by geography, topography, and tradition. A look at the photos tends to confirm the self-conscious grandeur of the downtown, the metropolitan stylishness of both the interiors and the exteriors; yet there is an intimate feel as well, a familiarity across neighborhoods and a sense of personal safety that would be steadily lost in subsequent eras. Even as Providence and Rhode Island were overtaken by the rapid expansion of midwestern and western cities and of more lucrative regional economies, the pace of economic and population growth here permitted an adaptation at many levels. As a modern American or international urban center, this was Providence's prestige heyday, and arguably the heyday of its cohesive communities as well.[5]

Figure 46
Trolley on North Main Street, Providence, inbound from Pawtucket, n.d. Courtesy of F. H. Williams and Scott Molloy.

As could now be appreciated more completely, the earlier period had laid down successful patterns, including housing that lasted for generations. Improvements in transportation, neighborhoods, and even commercial design tended to smooth out many of the rough edges. If, as two architectural historians keenly attuned to Rhode Island argue, this was also the critical lost moment when the older genius for building failed and no plan was set in place for the implications of the automobile and the street patterns growing up at random, then the availability of space and the modest degree of expansion here constrained and for a time disguised the damage.[6]

Anecdotally, East Sider Michael Fink remembers his parents' house, a "little gabled mock-Tudor" built in 1936 above Hope Street upon the remnants of a farm, with a few cows and horses and a miniature apple orchard still surviving. A stone's throw from an admirable public transportation system and a short walk from the capital, these rural tokens showed how long urban development was taking to sweep away the past, and how much of it yet remained, a cushion against meaner urban times to come.[7]

We start with a symbol: the streetcar lines running down North Main Street in Providence about 1936 (figure 46). Energy-efficient, clean, capable of moving masses of passengers quickly with comfort, the trolley had another great virtue; it emphasized the use of the boulevard. Although the very growth of the surrounding city deprived a locus such as Blackstone Boulevard of its trolley access to rolling parks and country atmosphere (H. P. Lovecraft swore that he would dream, regularly, of being on the open trolley going down Blackstone Boulevard in the 1890s), the boulevard's survival in another district epitomized the City

Figure 47
Industrial Trust Building, Exchange Place, Providence, circa 1929. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 2752).

Figure 48
View of downtown Providence, 1930s. Courtesy of the Providence City Archives.

Beautiful movement. So long as the streetcars and the boulevards remained intact, urban density and growing private automobile traffic were offset by a "natural" and "public" zone, thriving near the heart of the metropolis.

"Every morning and evening," Haley wrote, "brings the flow and counter-flow of workers to office buildings and factories, like streams pouring into a central pool and then strangely reversing their courses to flow back to their sources."[8] According to oral histories, the streetcars that came in from the villages brought ever larger numbers of secretaries, who shared a community of friends and the prospect of acquaintances at downtown locations like the Industrial Trust Company Building; the largest of the skyscrapers for decades and arguably the most stylish ever built, that structure is seen here with the original surroundings that lent it the contrast required for absolute grandeur (figure 47). A streetcar arrived downtown from Pawtucket every few minutes, and the streets were filled with activity, as the camera shows (figure 48).

Figure 49
Hon Fong Chinese Restaurant, Washington Street, Providence, n.d. Courtesy of John Eng-Wong.

Figure 50
Crowd under the marquee of Loew's Ocean State Theater, Providence, 1928. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1983).

Figure 51
Holiday shoppers on Westminster Street, Providence, 1940. Photo by Jack Delano. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6598).

Figure 52
Jones Lunch Company lunchroom, 194 Washington Street, Providence, 1918-1920. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1182).

Both on weekdays and weekends, downtown shopping and entertainment were now far more common affairs than they had been, made possible by convenient transportation and more money to spend (at least in the 1920s, and again in the 1940s). Friends came along or were met downtown; and a day of shopping made the high point of a week. For lunch or supper, cosmopolitan treats were offered in Providence's since-vanished Chinatown, which included the Hon Fong Restaurant on Washington Street (figure 49), a compact group of other restaurants and shops, and even a nightclub. Theaters beckoned, like Loew's Ocean State, captured here in 1928 (figure 50). For a more uninhibited party crowd, Providence offered live music and innumerable bars, as recorded by Works Progress Administration photographer Jack Delano (Figure 51).

Interiors, more mutable than exteriors, exhibited the wide variety of influences of Art Deco, from the jazzy Jones Lunch at Aborn and Washington streets (figure 52) to the more refined beauty shops (figure 53). The outermost limits of the self-conscious sophistication enjoyed by the middle classes may be found in the design of restaurants, this one in the Biltmore Hotel (figure 54).[9] The inexpensive shoe shop at Westminster and Weybosset offered in its windows spectacular "wings" of motion, linked to the storefront itself, right down to the lines on the paving, a modernistic tribute to the motion of the window-shopping walker downtown (figure 55).

Figure 53
Hairdresser's salon (possibly in the Biltmore Hotel), Providence, circa 1948. Photo by Raymond Ball. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6611).

Figure 54
Interior of a modern restaurant, Providence, 1939. Photo by Raymond Ball. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6612).

Figure 55
Traveler Shoes, Westminster Street, Providence, circa 1954. Photo by Raymond Ball. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6613).

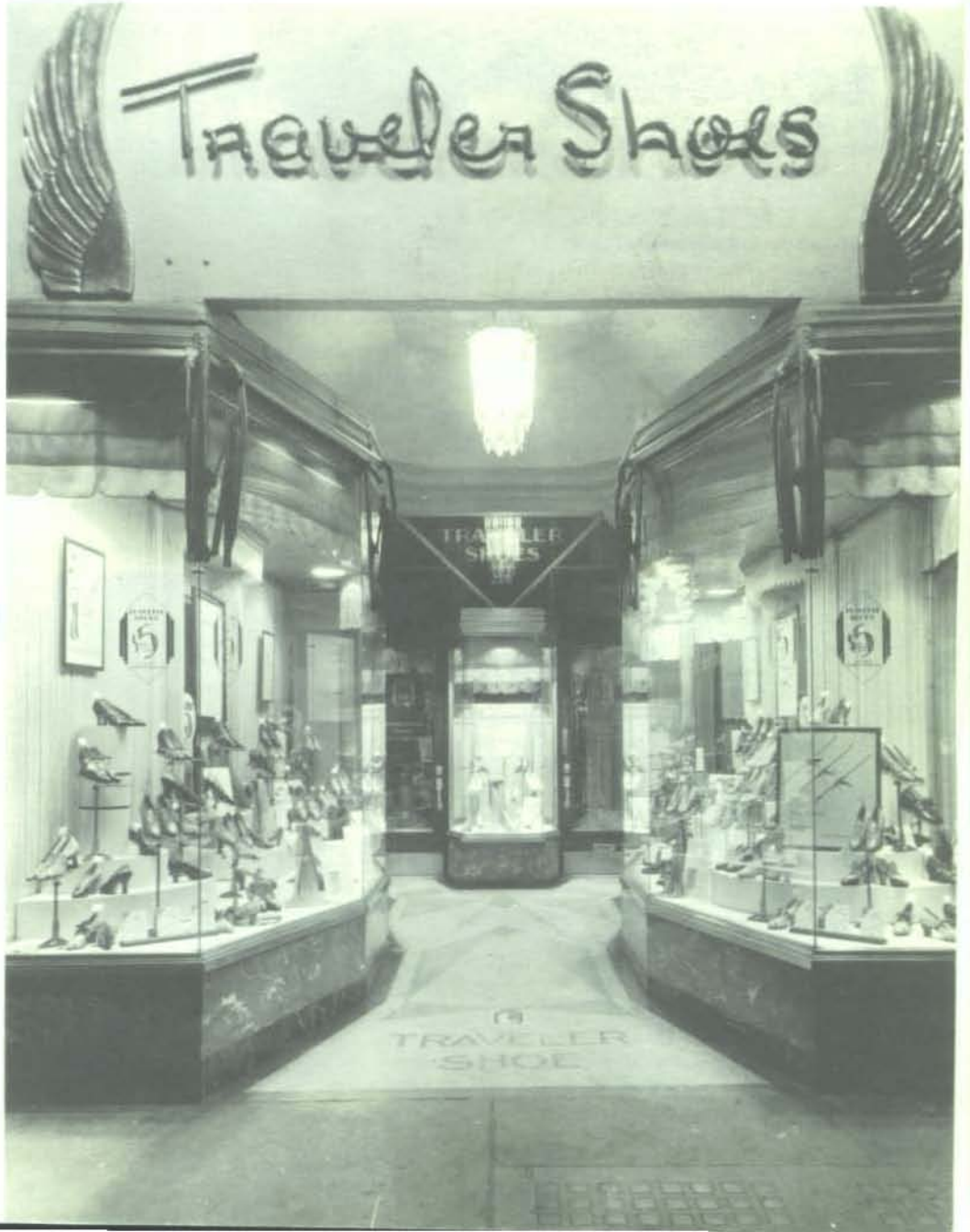


Figure 56
Two views of Elmwood Avenue, 1920 and 1930. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

Figure 57
Men unloading bananas from a railroad car on the Crawford Street Bridge, Providence, 1933. Photo by Wilfred Stone. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6614).

The neighborhoods, meanwhile, fleshed themselves out. Elmwood Avenue, seen here literally "in process" during the 1930s, is shown yielding its overhanging branches to a widening of traffic (figure 56). Federal Hill's open-air market at Spruce Street and Balboa Avenue, captured in 1937, revealed a mixture of old buildings and new clothes, "Little Italy" in changing times (figure 45, page 92).

Not far from the newer institutions and buildings, an older world of factories and warehouses offered reminders of how much of the city's hidden side had changed scarcely at all. At the Crawford Street Bridge, men unloaded bananas from a New York-New Haven Railroad car in 1933 (figure 57). A panorama of Aborn Street truck depots, seen from LaSalle Square (figure 58), differed from earlier times only in its trucks and signs. Inside storefronts the older, unassimilated generations continued their lives with small adaptations (figure 59).

Figure 58
Trucks on Aborn Street, Providence, circa 1948. Courtesy of the Providence City Archives.

Figure 59
Pea picking on Federal Hill, Providence, circa 1930. Photo courtesy of the Echo.

Figure 60
The Red Hat Cafe, Woonsocket, 1940. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

Figure 61
Thames Street, Newport, looking north from Washington Square, 1951. Photo by Thomas Read, Camera Club of the Providence Engineering Society. Historical Records Project. RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 2946).

Rhode Island's other major industrial cities experienced one last burst of expansive optimism. Unionization, then the war economy and the postwar consumer spending binge, put more money into the hands of ordinary people and local merchants. In a Woonsocket commercial neighborhood, we can see the essence of blue-collar Rhode Island life during the 1930s (figure 60). Fed by wartime prosperity of good times and heavy spending, Newport's honky-tonk Thames Street looked raffishly upbeat, utterly unlike the upscale city of later decades (figure 61).

Symptomatic of the new, the Hillsgrove Airport lounge (figure 62) was modern and comfortable. It belied the misery of war that its temporary inhabitants would soon experience or had already experienced. Later it welcomed home America's veterans (enlisted ones, at any rate) with all the metaphorical strength of the globe at the center of the picture: they had won the war and the world was theirs. Or so it seemed in optimistic 1945.

Figure 62
Enlisted personnel lounge, Hillsgrove Airport, Warwick, 1944. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6615).

Notes

1. See Paul Buhle, ed., *Working Lives: An Oral History of Rhode Island Labor* (Providence, 1987), for a different but congruent picture of these times; in the present visual overview the reader will miss the fierce contest for labor organization, including the Textile General Strike of 1934. This strike, and the rise of the New Deal-oriented Democratic party, were arguably the most decisive and memorable events of the day. Retired Cranston Print Works executive Douglas Martland impressed on me the consumer craving during the late 1940s for colors and flashy styles, and the ways in which these correlated with the new mobility of the work force. Interview, 1986, Rhode Island Labor History Project, Rhode Island Historical Society.
2. Williams, *The City and the Country*, 297.
3. See, for instance, Edward McSorley's Irish-American working-class memoir *Our Own Kind* (New York, 1946) and the more middle-class John T. Winterich's *Another Day, Another Dollar* (Philadelphia, 1947). By contrast, Thornton Wilder's *Theophilus North* (New York, 1973), depicting a small WASPish world with Irish servants, unchanged and unchangeable, seems almost outside Rhode Island entirely; "the only thing people talk about in Newport is each other," as one character says.
4. John Williams Haley, *Providence Illustrated Guide: A Handbook for Residents and Visitors* (Providence, 1931), 9, 11.
5. Nothing quite makes this point for me as well as the testimony of a neighborhood policeman, Sam Raponi, in Buhle, *Working Lives*, 44-45, 71.
6. John Buchard and Albert Bush-Brown, *The Architecture of America: A Social and Cultural History* (Boston, 1961), 300-301.
7. Michael Fink, "Living Ecologically in the City," *ASRI Report*, July-August 1989.
8. Haley, *Providence Illustrated Guide*, 10.
9. I am grateful to Dr. Robert P. Davis for identifying this location for me.

Beyond the City, 1920-1960

The relation between city and country, always dynamic, shifted so dramatically between the 1920s and the 1950s that only the accelerating pace afterwards has disguised the significance of the earlier change. Growing urban sophistication and the participation of greater and greater numbers and types of people in it accentuated, by contrast, an idea of the rural just at the moment when rural insularity was declining precipitously.

This idea was, of course, partly an illusion, and it is disputed by many of the Rhode Island images presented here. The automobile and even the airplane changed the look of the countryside in crucial ways, including the way it was viewed by the camera. Photographs sharpened and no doubt exaggerated the duality of the out-of-Providence image, between picturesque countryside and the proudly thriving small town, exurb, or (in a very major issue for Rhode Islanders) U.S. naval facility. As surviving countryside grew less like the city or even its immediate surroundings, the town or suburb grew more citylike.

An element of the change in images may be simply traced to the economics of reproduction. Abundant postcard photography of beaches and Newport mansions continued, but the variety of other nonurban scenes seemed to drop precipitously. The popularity of heavily stylized linen-finish cards, more expensive to produce than their predecessors, accelerated the reduction of the photographic inventory. Besides the shores, it was mainly prestige scenes like Roger Williams Park, Brown University, churches, giant factories, and other much-used institutions like the Narragansett Race Track that commanded commercial-level attention. The vernacular roadside architecture that preceded the massive standardization of restaurants, gas stations, and the like became in effect the self-promotional substitute for the once-famous landscapes.

Intentionally or not, the amateur, the artistic-minded photographer, and the documentarian took up the slack, covering the tracts of countryside still beyond total urban domination, yet reshaped subtly or unsubtly by automobile access. Many adopted the "view from the road" perspective, sometimes literally intended to prepare for roadway improvement but more often simply to take in the scene as did the average passerby (who was a motorist, not a local pedestrian). Even a minimal artistry could show the deep beauty surviving this penetration. Although the main street of a village may have been recently widened, for instance, with trees on either side paying the price, the scene might yet very much retain its village character, at least for the time being. Practically throughout the western part of the state, and in plenty of other pockets as well, rural charm had hardly been diminished. An "artistic" shot could easily evoke an already-vanished era. In scattered spots where the mills survived, the era had not vanished at all, despite the modest advances of physical mobility.

Rhode Islanders with a little leisure and a car (their own or borrowed) could enjoy themselves picnicking, swimming, or just walking in this world, as if the state offered them a vast park. With increasing numbers of city dwellers on daylong

excursions by car, the fading trolley, or, increasingly, the chartered bus, the state felt smaller. Those who could regularly afford such excursions discovered a Rhode Island—actually good-sized for the state's actual population—that their parents had hardly known.

The contradiction of private ownership and public use, often discussed by conservationists and state officials in recent years, seemed scarcely apparent up to this point except in the state's few exclusive resorts. As the Department of Environmental Management's most influential chief, Robert Bendick, observed to an interviewer in the *New Yorker*, the problem was simply not perceived for a long time:

> In Rhode Island, as in most Eastern states, most of the land has always been privately owned, but in our state no one ever felt the lack of the national parks we didn't have, or the national forests and other large public holdings. . . . Because, according to our own code of the countryside, an informal, unwritten tradition that was nevertheless widely acknowledged and accepted around the state, the owners of the farms and forests and shorelines of Rhode Island gave their neighbors the use of these places, so that private property functioned—very discreetly—as public open space. This tradition was perhaps a holdover from ancient land-use customs of common ownership and public access which the first European settlers in Rhode Island brought with them.[1]

It may be too much to claim, but the photographs here seem to bear the marks of these enormous privileges. In a time when rural and small-town families casually knew the minute details of a little brook or a particular stand of trees, the same brook or trees were accessible to almost any passerby willing to take the trouble to look at them.

Figure 63
Canoeing on the Ten Mile River at Hunt's Mills, East Providence, circa 1915. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6616).

Figure 64
Boating on the Pawtuxet River, circa 1900. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6617).

Figure 65
Girls gathering flowers, Greenwich Village, Smithfield, circa 1934. Photo by Raymond Ball. RIHS Collection. (RHi X3 6618).

Figure 66
Narragansett Indians in front of the Old Stone Church, Charlestown, August 1925. Photo by Avery Lord. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 2746).

In the long-gone 1920s one did not have to go far from Providence, or even own an automobile or charter a bus, to get entirely and expeditiously away from the urban scene. "To the east of the city," wrote Haley, "is the beautiful Ten Mile River with its surrounding scenery of pastoral charm."[2] Streetcars crossed the Seekonk River to Rumford or Phillipsdale, where canoes could be rented to pass through miles of woods with vistas of peninsula, fields, and farmhouses—"so many," according to an earlier guidebook, that "there is scant room to take them all in"[3] (figure 63). To the south, by streetcar from Broad Street, lay the Pawtuxet River Reservation, where landscape painters still practiced their craft, and where pleasure seekers could pick up their rowboats near the already-famous Rhodes Hall, rebuilt after a fire in 1915, and travel a waterway surrounded by what seemed a slice of sylvan wilderness (figure 64).

Around and beyond the distant streetcar lines lay more fields, lakes, and hills, often looking untouched by any industrialism save the occasional tractor and the overhead electrical lines (figure 65). This scene could be practically anywhere in rural Rhode Island, from South County or Block Island or Little Compton to Cumberland or Burrillville. Here and there Native American communities continued to survive, as the Narragansetts proudly showed a photographer at the Old Stone Church in Charlestown (figure 66).

Figure 67
Barn dance, Scituate, circa 1925. Photo by Wilfred Stone. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 4631).

Figure 68
Union Chapel congregation, Prudence Island, 1940. Photo by Wilfred Stone. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6619).

Figure 69
Glocester farmhouse, circa 1900. Photo from Farms for Sale, *1900. Courtesy of Richard Greenwood.*

Out there, at least for many residents, nineteenth-century traditions persisted like the commonplace Yankee names, as Wilfred Stone's photo of a Scituate barn dance suggests (figure 67). Not just a physical insularity in the bay but a psychic insularity as well seems to wall off Stone's Prudence Islanders (figure 68) from modern times. So alien to the urban eye did these scenes seem to Providence horror-fictionist H. P. Lovecraft that he imagined deep and "unwholesome" mysteries in decayed farmhouses, the widespread abandonment of land, and its return to woods. His fantasies of horror borrowed heavily from the local-color writers of the late nineteenth century, several of the best of whom portrayed

rural New England as drained of its former youthful vigor and surviving as a tantalizing shadow glimmering in some odd light. And indeed, just the sight of a peculiar rural dwelling, this one in Glocester, could evoke a sense of mystery (figure 69).

The truth was more mundane, but it was also generally more cheerful. The State Bureau of Information's *Book of Rhode Island* could rightly boast in 1930 of the adaptation made by local farmers to the competition of mass-scale agriculture in the midwestern and western states. Rhode Island farms produced for the home market, including the cities, summer colonies, and summer camps. Perishables like milk, eggs, field and garden vegetables, and fruit found ready retailers, and produce stands dotted the state roads. Acres of flint corn, the variety originally grown by the Indians, found their way into jonnycakes. Five hundred apiaries made honey. "Spreads" like the Hillside Farms in Oaklawn (figure 70) flourished. Small-town life in farming districts often remained hale and hearty, with social institutions still intact, like the Juvenile Grange that Wilfred Stone captured in rural Warwick (figure 71). Improvements such as those accomplished by the road work of the Works Progress Administration in Cumberland (figure 72) made rural life easier without apparently diminishing its picturesqueness.

Figure 70
Hillside Farms, Oaklawn, Cranston, circa 1950. Courtesy of the Cranston Historical Society.

Figure 71
Children at the Juvenile Grange, Warwick, circa 1930. Photo by Wilfred Stone. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6620).

Figure 72
WPA Project No. 551: regrading and building a retaining wall along Old Angell Road, Cumberland, 1936. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6621).

Figure 73
Postcard view of Spring Lake Beach, Glendale, n.d. Courtesy of the Burrillville Historical and Preservation Society.

Figure 74
Kid Blair's Showboat Cafe, Lake Tiogue, Coventry, circa 1940. Courtesy of the Pawtuxet Valley Preservation and Historical Society.

Figure 75
A French Canadian parade in Arctic, circa 1925. Courtesy of the Pawtuxet Valley Preservation and Historical Society.

Figure 76
Peacedale Mill workers, 1932. Courtesy of the Pettaquamscutt Historical Society.

Figure 77
Postcard view along Cottage Street, Mapleville, 1920. Courtesy of the Burrillville Historical and Preservation Society.

As modern times arrived with shorter hours of labor and a modicum of leisure and spending cash, small-town and rural folk themselves increasingly enjoyed their own countryside and lakeside scenes. In the northwest corner of the state, which boasted of some of Rhode Island's prettiest spots, a place like Spring Lake in Glendale promised visitors a delightful afternoon, and summer residents in their tiny screened cottages a restful week or more (figure 73). On Lake Tiogue in Coventry, folks spent their leisure at Kid Blair's Showboat (figure 74).

It now seems hard to believe how the mill town, its historic downturn accelerated by the Depression, often held together through cutbacks and a brief wartime prosperity to a slow decline. In Artic the intensely French Canadian community continued with its own language institutions, its own church-sponsored theater, and even its own parades, as in this 1920s shot (figure 75). Similarly, in front of the scenic, castle-like Peacedale Mills, operatives look out at us from 1932 as if the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had joined (figure 76). A South County resident once keenly remarked that as late as the 1970s many abandoned mills stood unchanged years after their closing, as if a shift had vanished but might suddenly return.[4] Change in the surrounding society did not, in fact, always work against the physical uniqueness of a mill town, as the case of Mapleville shows (figure 77).

Figure 78
Aerial view of Harrisville, circa 1927. Courtesy of the Burrillville Historical and Preservation Society.

Figure 79
Mill housing, Harrisville, circa 1935. Courtesy of the Burrillville Historical and Preservation Society.

Figure 80
Simmonsville Road, Johnston, 1948. Photo by the Rhode Island Department of Transportation. Clarence Hussey Collection, courtesy of the Rhode Island State Archives.

Figure 81
Main Street, Wickford, looking west, 1951. Photo by A. J. Viera, Camera Club of the Providence Engineering Society, Historical Records Project. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6622).

By the later 1920s the last of the utopian or visionary mill barons, Austin T. Levy, literally set his sights, through commissioned aerial photography (figure 78), on the grand goal of reengineering the typical mill town. Levy reorganized large parts of Harrisville by eradicating tenements, converting Victorian buildings, and audaciously constructing Caribbean-style cement and stucco dwellings for his foremen's families, these last well spaced (like the rest of his buildings) and supplied with apple trees for children to climb (figure 79).

Closer in "on the pike" or access road to the cities, formerly insular villages like Johnston's Simmonsville (figure 80) retained a semicountry character for early commuters. Small cities, long famed for their quaintness and their remove from the urban pace, quickly grew more cluttered with the marks of commerce, but they also became more lively. Prosperous middle classes could transport themselves to Providence, while a summer place came into easy commuting distance for weekend drivers. Wickford, for instance (figure 81), balanced old and new with an ease that disarmed the inhabitants against often brutal changes to come.

Especially during the summer, the automobile also meant access to the Ocean State's recreation sites. Now middle classes and upper working classes could enjoy a version of the once-genteel extended vacation of earlier days. Long before massive airplane traffic to Europe and to developed Caribbean properties, summer ease meant a week or two in one of the dozens of cabin cottages on a lake or the bay, or in a hotel at the seashore. Those unable to afford such luxuries could at least take a weekend bus trip or a drive for a day of fun.

Figure 82
Narragansett Parkway, Warwick Downs, 1920s. Photo by the Rhode Island Department of Transportation. Clarence Hussey Collection, courtesy of the Rhode Island State Archives.

Figure 83
Oakland Beach, circa 1924. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

Imagine, then, Narragansett Parkway at Warwick Downs, a thrilling if hectic thoroughfare shared with thousands of other motorists (figure 82). Or picture the drive to Oakland Beach in Warwick, where earlier the grandest hotel near Providence had catered to vacationers, and where the roller coaster coexisted with the quiet beauty of woods and water (figure 83).

A further drive south might lead to the fantasy (or fantasy-vernacular) architecture of vacation village Earl's Court in Narragansett (figure 84) or the cottage colony of Roy Carpenter's Beach in Matunuck (figure 85). For those with less cash, Rocky Point—reached, after the middle 1940s, by bus rather than streetcar—remained almost the same place that many of their parents had enjoyed (figure 86, page 114).

Figure 84
Earl's Court, Narragansett, with houses on Gibson Avenue in the background, n.d. Photo by the Detroit Publishing Company. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 2504).

Figure 85
Roy Carpenter's Beach, Matunuck, circa 1950. Collection of the Rhode Island Audubon Society, courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

Nothing captured the seaside ambience better than the commercial vacation architecture of the clam shack, like this one near the Stone Bridge in Tiverton (figure 87). During the 1940s and 1950s dozens of these shacks served up the greasy, tasty, and (by today's standards) amazingly inexpensive fried seafood that the vacationer associated with summer.

For casual visitors, these carefree scenes overshadowed another less picturesque one. By the early 1940s Rhode Island had regained a smattering of its earlier national seaside fame, but this time as a center of military-related activity. From Newport to Providence the sailor's leave became synonymous with a Rhode Island social life of dancing to live music, with dining and drinking. The presence of service personnel was evidenced too by the architectural appearance of barracks (figure 88), supremely flat and functional. On the other hand, the protection of American waters during the tense and heroic 1940s made the illumination of the waters at Portsmouth (figure 89) a thrilling sight to visitors and residents alike. Much later the benefits of a continued military presence in peacetime would be weighed against the social costs, among which were toxic chemical spills and the diversion of state resources, including a precious skilled work force.

Figure 86
Ferris wheel at Rocky Point Park, Warwick, 1918. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1140).

Figure 87
Clam bar, North Tiverton, circa 1950. Photo by the Rhode Island Department of Transportation. Courtesy of the Rhode Island State Archives.

Figure 88
Postcard view of the Quonset Point enlisted men's barracks, circa 1945. Courtesy of Paul Buhle.

As we look back, it seems remarkable that the farms, resorts, commuter villages, and naval facilities were not perceived as competing views of the future. Within this tiny state, space somehow never seemed at a particular premium until it grew suddenly scarce. We forget how far away the rush of bulldozers seemed in 1945. In Britain, the conversion of historic farmland into housing tracts was largely prohibited by law; these laws, which reflected the same European traditions of common use that Bendick describes, were supported by a coalition of political parties from right to left. If Rhode Island had had such legal protections in the years from the 1940s through the 1980s, it might have intelligently managed a continuing mix of land uses and thus retained the Little Eden that had for so long seemed the common legacy of Rhode Islanders. Instead, the balance of prosperity and beauty was lost, and the legacy was reduced more severely than anyone could have guessed.

Figure 89
Middletown Destroyer Base, circa 1944. Collection of the Newport Historical Society.

Notes

1. Quoted in Tony Hiss, "Reflections: Encountering the Countryside," pt. 1, *New Yorker*, 21 Aug. 1989, 58.
2. Haley, *Providence Illustrated Guide*, 130.
3. *Trolley Trips: Places of Interest on the Car Routes out of Providence* (Providence, 1901), 42.
4. I wish to credit Joanne Melish, a graduate student in American civilization at Brown and a longtime resident of South County, with this acute observation.

Beloved Wounds and Survivals, 1950-Present

In a finely etched short story by Christopher La Farge—brother of famed Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Oliver La Farge, and himself perhaps the best-known Rhode Island fiction writer of the 1940s and 1950s—an East Side matron returns to her old cottage home in a blue-collar neighborhood. A short visit with the current tenant, a young housewife, weighs heavily upon the mind of the protagonist afterward.[1] This is a succinct, if metaphorical, presentation of Rhode Island's uneasiness toward its own past. A desire to forget, to push away the sense of self, to wipe out (or pave over) painful memories of family poverty and ethnic obscurity, often seems to blur the perception of historical resources. The old American trait of going west and starting over recoils against the place where the nation's industrial culture began, turning old habits of self-contempt into patterns of unnecessary destruction.

Despite various setbacks, the Rhode Island of recent decades has been the most prosperous in history. But with that materialistic success has come a tendency toward the visual blandness that disguises—if it does not actually eradicate—any sense of the state's special character. The obliteration of countryside for houses and condos that could easily be placed in Mississippi or Arizona continues to promote automobile traffic and further reduce prospects for long-term urban recovery, working against recycling and other determined efforts to conserve and rebuild. Have growing fashionability, high real estate values, and lucrative housing projects foredoomed any coherent sense of past, any continuation of present or future self? And who, if anyone, cares?

Figure 90
View along the Blackstone Canal towpath, looking north at Martin's Way, Lincoln, circa 1970. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6623).

Figure 93
Westminster Street, Providence, looking west from Union Street, 1951. Photo by Allan B. McCoy, Camera Club of the Providence Engineering Society, Historical Records Project. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 5452).

A dirt road alongside a wooden bridge—as it happens, across the Blackstone Canal—with no particular hint to date the photograph: this is anonymous Rhode Island (figure 90), hidden behind a billboard, down the highway from a suburban tract, off to the side of ostensible progress.[2] The path leads, one can easily imagine, to another time and place still waiting rediscovery. Sometimes such a path is marked; more often it is not marked at all. Like old urban streets where the trolley tracks show through, it allows a glimpse at one particular angle that shuts out contemporary references, offering the willing observer a sort of *Twilight Zone* sensation. This is not some untouched natural idyll or eighteenth-century architectural masterpiece, both of which we have an urgent need to preserve. It is, instead, all around us; it is vernacular and Rhode Islandish.

Preservation, the opposite of destruction, is as real as Colt State Park and the thousands of other acres accorded public status in the last few decades by state bond issues. *New Yorker* journalist Tony Hiss cites Robert Bendick's exhilarating thought that the preservation of recreational lands close to home both saves these lands and relieves pressure upon heavily stressed national parks like the preserved districts in the Adirondacks and Yellowstone National Park. Urban

observer William H. Whyte argues that the earliest 10 percent of development is the most demoralizing for inhabitants and visitors: suddenly the landscape has lost its character, a quaintness and beauty steeped in tradition. But discovery of hidden treasures, a few blocks of preserved or restored space, can have the opposite effect; people intuitively recognize the virtues of such a space, and they want to be there at least long enough to remind themselves of something that gives them a feeling of rootedness and a sense of perspective.[3]

A contradiction lurks here. As far back as two centuries ago, the Romantics detected a duality in the sources of their inspiration. Nature moved them, but so did ruins, which bespoke some life lived and lost. For many rather offbeat visitors and equally offbeat residents (the writer counts himself one of the latter), our own ruins—the old mill buildings, the faded dime store, even the abandoned drive-in theater—are inescapable elements not only of the panorama of the state but, for that matter, of universal human experience, and their trail of disappointments seems as precious as vaunted accomplishments. Understandably, other residents and visitors find the same ruins depressing and dangerous, a prediction of destruction rather than of renewal.

Yet the duality and the conflict of views are more apparent than real. The pleasant and instructive sensation of being part of a somehow familiar scene is, to quote cultural historian George Lipsitz again, "threatened by forgetting." But it is redeemed after all by remembering, even if what we remember is not something we personally experienced. Both nature and the aging city or tumbledown farmhouse alike remind us of a missing part of our collective selves. In this regard, the world of the folktale offers us an important insight. As scholars note, the hero or heroine of the folktale embarks upon a moral journey in which blind instinct must be trusted instead of reason; it is the "shadow soul" within that becomes the guide. If such a journey is to be successful, the hurtful and the bad cannot be put away as if they were a "problem" with a "solution."[4] In our case, the hurtful and the bad include generations of low wages and stunted lives, and to abandon the memory of these would be the true escapism, more harmful by far than romanticizing a neighborhood or a factory that most inhabitants sought to flee. The alternative to such escapism is choosing to live in history, rehabilitating memories in their physical form.

With the economic decline of Providence and Rhode Island after the boom of the World War II years and the immediate postwar prosperity, the mills closed down one by one. Jewelry and the military-related industries, high points of surviving manufacture, offered no adequate replacement. Employment figures got better or worse, but in many parts of the state time seemed almost to stand still. Or, rather, time rushed onward and left these places behind, as if to confirm them as anomalies in the new and shiny world breathlessly described in contemporary advertising. Providence itself suffered spectacularly; from 1950 to 1960 it lost a larger proportion of its population—nearly 40 percent—than any other American metropolis. "Parking," laconically remarked Rhode Island memoirist (and *New Yorker* journalist) John T. Winterich a few years earlier, "seems to have become Providence's major industry."[5]

Photojournalism documents this story, a most eloquent tale about ruins and life among them. We see ornate doorways, institutional rococo, staircases appearing to materialize from some nineteenth-century novel, commercial signs that could easily be transferred to a "recreated" village museum, and funny little patches of still-vacant land, with children laughing against the backdrop of neighborhoods scheduled for demolition. The physical makings of what William Saroyan called

"the human comedy" reign here, as distant from the idealized picture-window suburb of the Eisenhower era as anything could be. It was that kind of city and state, and in many spots it still is, as master cartoonist Don Bousquet reminds us often enough. Many later photos, more self-consciously perhaps, continue to trace this peculiar self-reflection, part self-love and part self-contempt.

The latest era of photography often seeks out the more picturesque remnant, especially the threatened one. Like wildlife photographers or anthropologists intent on performing the near-impossible task of saving an endangered species or people by making their beauty more accessible, these photographers point to catastrophic change. Or they aim at those areas bypassed by the process, and at those restored through some happy if exceptional confluence of public and private interest.

More clearly in the present than at any previous time, photography's limitations become evident. The world is (at least) three dimensional, and the human brain records subjective states that the camera can never see. Recent photographs are obviously unequal to the complexity of the Rhode Island we see with our own eyes, and the present selection would remain inadequate if it were a hundred times larger. But the value of the photograph, however limited its view, is to set the brain working along unpredictable lines. Unlike the camera and unlike the computer, Lewis Mumford used to say, the brain is inherently an open system.

Figure 91
Natick Mill fire, July 1941. Courtesy of the Pawtuxet Valley Preservation and Historical Society.

To begin with an older image: the world on fire, seen more than metaphorically in the Natick Mill conflagration of July 1941 (figure 91, page 119). The world was already on fire, and the older society almost destroyed, but Rhode Islanders hardly knew how much had changed in their own backyard until most of the mills closed during the 1950s. By the time people looked around, the changes had already become irreversible.

Figure 92
Middle and Eddy streets, Providence, 1951. Photo by Allan B. McCoy. Camera Club of the Providence Engineering Society, Historical Records Project. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6624).

Figure 94
Roosevelt Avenue, Pawtucket, looking south, 1953. Courtesy of Slater Mill and Historic Site.

Figure 95
Woonsocket street, circa 1960. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

Dozens of documentary photographs by the Providence Camera Club capture, again and again, the aging Rhode Island city at a dreadfully memorable point, just before urban renewal's "monumentalism" (the replacement of rundown but varied architecture with parking spaces and a few large edifices) had recklessly cleared away large chunks of city history. Like the Chicago streets in Nelson Algren's novels—yielding themselves without defense or disguise to the erosions of declining fortune—the avenues of these photos offer clues to the city as a profoundly lived space, with varied and numerous hints of generations passed before.

At this moment the mission of the Providence Preservation Society took shape. After decades of mostly private and individual effort, saving single historical buildings one at a time, the city's need for large-scale programs became urgent. Or, perhaps it would be better to say, the constituency for that kind of effort appeared just as the need became greatest. Ironically, beloved Brown University's threatened destruction of housing districts in the East Side galvanized a group of preservationists, who to their surprise found sympathy and support from some city planners and from officials of the National Park Service. The abstraction of a national construction-and-renewal blueprint, unsuited to the particulars of a small and history-rich state, began to break down under scrutiny. From these apparently modest beginnings, a larger vision and project emerged.

Here is a small selection of what the camera found in 1951. At Middle and Eddy streets (figure 92) we see a decayed Art Deco home-cooking restaurant, with a pool hall (still open?) upstairs. We can almost taste the meat stews and smell

Figure 96
Louis Jordan and his band performing at the Celebrity Club, Providence, 1951. RIHS Collection (RHi HA251 17).

Figure 97
Lippitt Hill, Providence, 1960. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

Figure 98
320 South Main Street, Providence, 1950-1952. Photo by Charlotte Estey. RIHS Collection (RHi E79 634).

the cigarette smoke. At nearby Westminster and Union, Shepard's famous department store still had decades of existence ahead before bankruptcy would threaten demolition of the historic building—but the darkness of the coming era had, so to speak, already visually descended (figure 93, page 116). This was life in a city old by American standards.

Around the state's aging urban areas and industrial villages, abundant images of this kind proliferated. The Blackstone Valley was a virtual set piece in the story. Downtown Pawtucket, as seen by an anonymous artist in 1953, seems not so much in decline as frozen in time (figure 94). No major city suffered quite as intensely, first from the closing of the mills, then from the gouging of some of its most picturesque neighborhoods by the construction of Route 95, and finally from the virtual shutdown of its historic commercial zones. In 1960s Woonsocket, victim of far less destructive energy, young people are shown against a background that still seems ancient by American standards (figure 95).

But it was Providence where the urban images of an earlier age survived just long enough to overlap with the new diversities and multicultural promise of the age ahead. The inside of Providence's fabled Celebrity Club (ranked by *Metronome* magazine as the fourth-best jazz club in North America) reminds us of the 1950s, that era of music and social change, when visiting musical greats included Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald, and audiences and dancing couples broke down the racial barriers (figure 96). Outside the Celebrity Club, on Lippitt Hill, the notably integrated neighborhood fell victim to massive misplanning, with its modest white and black working-class housing, small businesses, and bars and clubs suffering from the fatal disadvantage of occupying low-cost space adjacent to downtown. A tract that now holds the Marriott Hotel and the Star Plaza was cleared, leaving behind only memories (figure 97).

Photographer Charlotte Estey investigated the multiracial urban scene of 1950s South Main and Wickenden streets more consciously than any other Rhode Island artist. In her shot of 320 South Main (figure 98), the building—with its wide steps and "Rooms" sign—looks as if it has been hiding a world of broken and luckless lodgers. When Estey turned the corner, she discovered the innocent and the dangerous almost side by side. By her own annotation, "36 Wickenden Street,

Figure 99
Girls in their confirmation dresses in front of 36 Wickenden Street, Providence, 1950-1952. Photo by Charlotte Estey. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6081).

Figure 100
76 Wickenden Street, Providence, 1950-1952. Photo by Charlotte Estey. RIHS Collection (RHi E79 887).

Figure 101
A religious procession on Willard Avenue, Providence, 1955. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association.

Girls in Confirmation Dresses" (figure 99) was only two blocks from 76 Wickenden, in an area known as " 'Hell's Kitchen,' hang-out of sailors whose ships anchored in the river" (figure 100). This was the final era of a major presence of Cape Verdeans on the East Side, before various economic changes eased them out.

The Jewish South Side might be remembered differently by the camera, as a cramped space abandoned with joy—if only the old-timers did not, to this day, retain such warm memories of life there. A neighborhood already on the verge of extinction in 1951, it is seen here at its old heart, Willard Avenue, where a religious procession files past Melzer's Shopping Center (figure 101). The modesty and compactness of the community, with its many mom-and-pop stores, is striking. The presence of automobiles notwithstanding, this is a street for walking, shopping for a few items daily, and meeting friends along the way. In the new suburban neighborhoods where many in this neighborhood were destined, the formal ethnic organizations continue and sometimes even thrive; yet the particular sense of proximity

and intimacy of ethnic neighborhood life cannot be reconstructed. Life in the suburbs might be better materially, but for former South Side inhabitants life has not likely seemed so close again. The sense of proximity continues, of course, among the new ethnic groups squeezed into the old neighborhoods, but the relaxed streetlife of past decades has vanished, for many reasons.

The physical tracings of the city outlast, at least in some districts, even the heaviest blows of worsening conditions and misguided urban engineering. From the roof of the Imperial Knife Company at Hospital and Bassett streets, in what has been renamed the Jewelry District, one could easily see in 1950 houses that have since vanished (figure 102). Yet the Imperial building itself is now a condo-minium, and many other structures have also outlasted the rampages of the wrecking ball. The skyline and the urban ambience present a continuity here that reminds us of photos from 1890 or even 1860.

So do many other scenes around the state. Olneyville, at the Woonsaquatucket River, seems a piece of almost timeless Rhode Island (figure 103). By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the timelessness of the nature scene had become suddenly more precious. An Audubon Society photographer inscribed on the reverse of a photo

Figure 102
Intersection of Hospital and Eddy streets, Providence, circa 1950. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6228).

Figure 103
View along the Woonasquatucket River, Olneyville, circa 1970. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6627).

Figure 104
Trustom Pond, Charlestown, circa 1960. Photo by Nate Sock. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Audubon Society.

Figure 105
View from the Pawtuxet Bridge, Route 2, Warwick, 1966. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Audubon Society.

(figure 104) his own anxious impression of such a setting: "One of our last coastal scenes of escape from the . . . pressures of modern living, Trustom Pond is still unspoiled. . . . How long will this beauty be preserved for future generations?"[6] Like dozens of other precious natural sites, the pond is happily still nearly intact.

By way of contrast, try to imagine the relative peacefulness of the setting and the survival of wildlife within semiurban conditions in a view from the Pawtuxet Bridge at Route 2 in 1965 (figure 105). Today the Warwick Mall would stand in the background of this view; of the scene depicted, it is hard to imagine that anything now survives.

In contrast again, the historic market building at 68 Hudson Street in Providence's Armory District (figure 106) has been restored astonishingly, with the assistance of the Providence Preservation Society's Revolving Fund. Can nature be restored as well? The task of recreating ecosystems is daunting, but the state's hopes for a future as beautiful and environmentally sustainable as its past rest upon that prospect.

Figure 106
68 Hudson Street, Providence, 1990. Courtesy of the Providence Preservation Society Revolving Fund.

Figure 107
Warren waterfront, 1975. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

Most of Rhode Island today remains somewhere between pristine purity and mechanical-natural devastation, scarred by history and, even more, by the inclination to wipe out history. A typical 1970s shot of Warren, with seagulls resting watchfully on an old wooden dockside structure (figure 107), shows us a scene that can still be found in dozens of spots along the East or West Bay. Equally emblematic of our trace memories are our old friends the textile mills and mill ruins (figure108).

A wooden bridge in Berkeley—one of the last standing in the state—has somehow managed to survive generations of foot, bicycle, and automobile traffic (figure 109). Metaphorically speaking, it is a bridge between our past, our present, and (I like to think) our future.

Figure 108
Atlantic Mills, Olneyville, 1975. Photo by Richard Quinney. Courtesy of Richard Quinney.

Figure 109
Wooden bridge at Berkeley, 1942. Photo by the Rhode Island Department of Transportation. Clarence Hussey Collection, courtesy of the Rhode Island State Archives.

Notes

1. Christopher La Farge, "Auburn Revisited," in *The Wilsons* (New York, 1941). Older Rhode Islanders reading or hearing about this story usually have no trouble discerning the phenomenon as a characteristic experience out of their own recollection. I wish to acknowledge the Rhode Island Literary Legacy project of 1969, sponsored by the Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities, for introducing me to this text and bringing it into the classroom.
2. Actually, this is a towpath of the old Blackstone Canal, leading exactly where it should: to the interpretive center of the Blackstone River State Park.
3. Hiss, "Reflections," 66.
4. Ursula Le Guin, "The Child and the Shadow," in *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Susan Wood (New York, 1979), 62-67.
5. John T. Winterich, *Another Day, Another Dollar*, 186.
6. Comments handwritten by photographer Nate Sock.

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Publication Note

This is an excellent study, well researched and very valuable to the cause of Rhode Island preservation. I wish to urge sympathetic readers to take part in the process of expanding upon this work by providing more photos and more details of vanished or vanishing scenes and of successful efforts at maintaining the state's historic districts and picturesque landscapes. I look forward to the author's fuller study, which will have room for a historical examination of the triangular relationship among the National Park Service, local planners, and preservationists, a relationship crucial to the progress so far achieved.

ANTOINETTE F. DOWNING

Antoinette Downing, a fellow of the Rhode Island Historical Society, was chairman of both the Providence Historic District Commission and the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission. She has also been a trustee of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and a consultant to the Providence Preservation Society since its beginnings.

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Design Studio Inc.

Vanishing Pawtucket, 1959

I am with you in Pawtucket.
My greatest fear as I sneaked a smoke
With the black-leather-jacketed boys
At the White Tower on the Main Street Bridge
Was that someone who knew my mother
Was sitting on one of the buses lined up at the light
To spy me standing there: cigarette dangling,
Blue uniform skirt rolled knee-high,
Black turtleneck sweater hiding school insignia,
Mouth smeared with white glossy lipstick,
Eyes outlined in kohl like a baby owl;
I was the beatnik of Pawtucket.
I had read *Howl*: "I'm with you in Rockland."

I am with you in Pawtucket.

Where are they now—the boys who swam
At the Limerock Quarry, their skin like porcelain
In the milky waters; or the dusty boys
Of Sunset Stables who always copped a feel at the dismount?

Where is Little Lucille who would skate with me
Those long afternoons at the Blue Pond?
Where is Roland with the red sweater,
The white '51 Ford with fairy fringe, and the dazzling smile?

Or sweet Eleanor who would walk with me
Through the dappled shade of Dunnell's Lane
To swim in the Prospect Heights Pond on those hot days
Filled with polio fears and paper dolls on my porch?

And where are you—that boy who met me in the back lots
Behind Rhode Island Avenue and showed me
The broken-walled reservoir where you looked for arrowheads
And the barrel yards where we found paraffin?

That's right—I married you for a while;
Our son called last night.
So where am I, who would sit with my Brontë novels
And dream of writing my own idylls of romance?

I am with you in Pawtucket.

Let's meet for a first and last chance reunion.
Start at the White Tower, walk up Main to Shartenberg's,
Go to the Windsor for a drink and end up at the Leroy
For a late show—or better still
Go on up Broad to Warner's Dance Hall.
"Harlem Nocturne" is playing, sweet blue sax
Papering the world with longing,
The mirror ball spangling a speckled light
All over me in my pink and white gingham dress
With the spaghetti straps and tender strawberries
Spilling over the bodice; your cheek
Pressed against mine—This is our song," you say,
This will always be our song.

NORMA JENCKES