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Below: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. "View of chained African slaves in cargo hold of slave ship, measuring three feet and three inches high." New York Public Library Digital Collections. Accessed February 12, 2016. <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/cd25e5e0-2658-0132-a7fd-58d385a7b928>.

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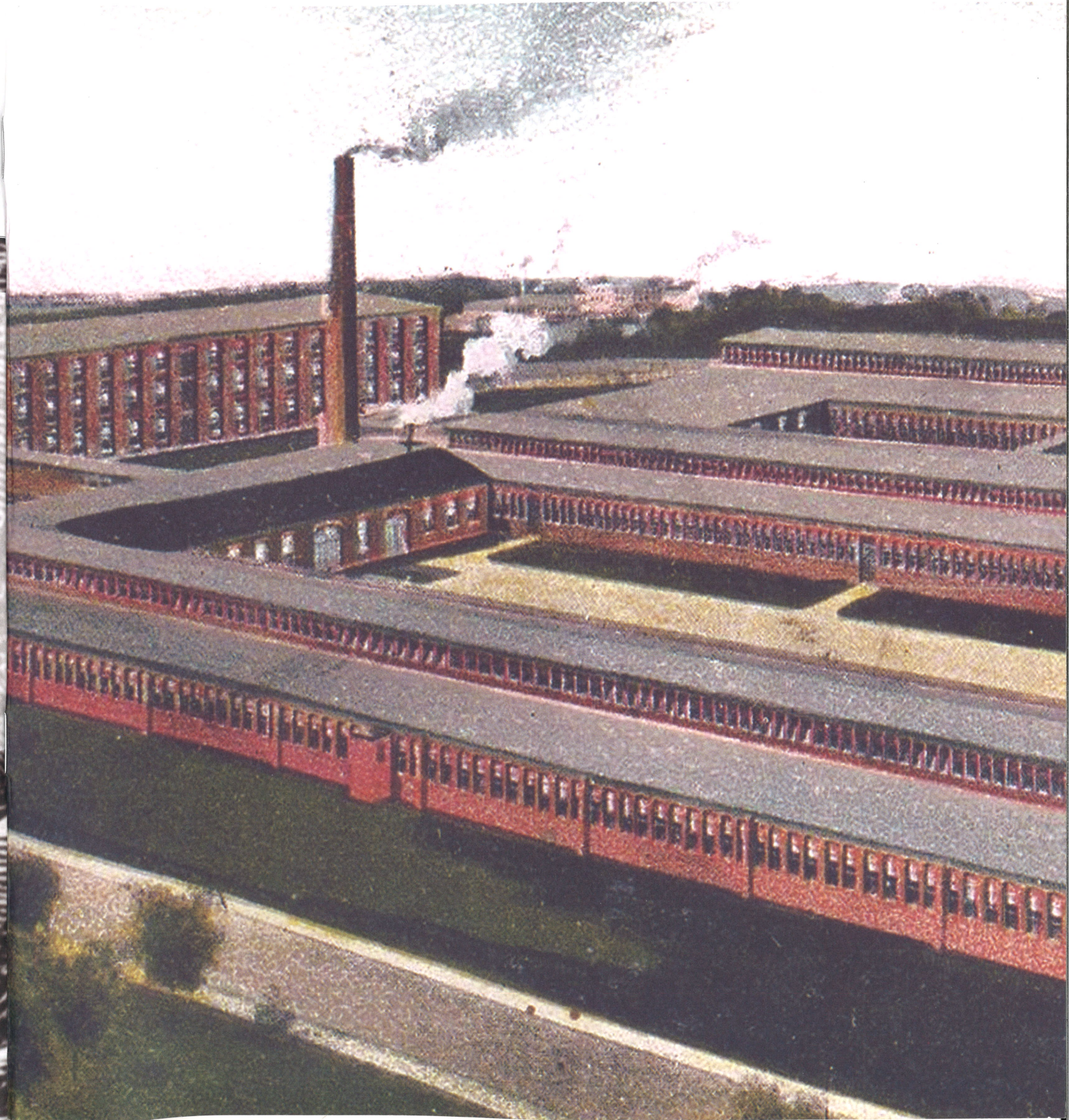
# RHODE ISLAND HISTORY

WINTER / SPRING 2016 VOLUME 74, NUMBER 1



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*A young Newport ship captain is tried and convicted for engaging in the slave trade; he is sent to prison. In the 1960s, students push for radical changes in the Brown University curriculum.*







# RHODE ISLAND HISTORY

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*On the cover:*  
Mills of the Hope Webbing Company, postcard, ca. 1907-1915. Courtesy of Hope Artiste Village.



## An Interview with Mary Tibbetts Freeman

by Elyssa Tardif

In "Live From the Archive," we pose questions to a researcher at the Rhode Island Historical Society's Mary Elizabeth Robinson Research Center to learn about exciting new finds in Rhode Island history. For this issue, we spoke with Mary Tibbetts Freeman, a doctoral candidate in the history department at Columbia University.

**ET** Please tell us about your current project.

**MTF** I'm currently working on research for my Ph.D. dissertation, which is about letter writing in the antislavery movement in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. I started out being interested in how letter writing and the postal system were the subjects of cultural fascination during this time period. There was a lot of popular concern with the emotional power of letters and the potential for anonymity in the space of the post office, the mailbag, or the sealed envelope. There were worries, for example, that anonymous suitors could seduce innocent young women through the post, resulting in scandal and dishonor.

This fascination was tied to larger trends that caused Americans to rely increasingly on letters as a means of communication. Not only was the number of Americans who were literate growing rapidly, but they were also moving and spreading out over greater distances. Families who were settled in New England for generations started to split up and move westward, first as family members moved to places like upstate New York, and then later to the Midwest and West. As families became more spread out, they started writing more and more letters to

keep in touch. Also, rates of postage became more affordable, and the infrastructure of the postal service became more robust to handle the rapidly increasing usage.

At the same time that the rate of people writing letters to one another was growing so rapidly, the United States was also reaching a crisis point over the issue of slavery. Over the course of the mid-nineteenth century, more and more Americans were swept up in the debate over slavery, culminating with the Civil War. I started to see a connection between the growing use of letter writing as a method of communication and the broadening of public debate over slavery as a national political issue. My dissertation arose from the question of how letters and letter writing could function as forms of political engagement in the issue of slavery.

Abolitionists' correspondence is a natural place to look for people using letters to engage with the issue of slavery. Most of them were literate, and many of them made a living as teachers, writers, and editors. They used letters in a variety of ways to further their cause—to articulate their views, organize as a group, report on activities in various locations, and to solicit material and emotional support. Importantly, letters provided a space for opponents of slavery to present themselves as legitimate political actors at a time when abolitionism was marginalized or excluded entirely in mainstream electoral politics.

Frontispiece of *The Envoy: From Free Hearts to the Free*, compiled by the Juvenile Emancipation Society of Pawtucket, R.I. (Pawtucket, R.I.: R. W. Potter, Printer, 1840). Rhode Island Historical Society Collection, RHi X3 6716.







Mary Tibbetts Freeman

**ET** What brought you to RIHS's Mary Elizabeth Robinson Research Center?

**MTF** I came to the Mary Elizabeth Robinson Research Center to investigate how Rhode Islanders used their correspondence to participate in the campaign against slavery in the mid-1800s. While I have looked at the correspondence of some prominent abolitionists who spoke and wrote publicly about their views to a broad audience, a central aim of my research has been to examine the correspondence of opponents of slavery who were mainly active on a local level. Not only does this aspect bring to light the antislavery activities of individuals whose voices are less prominent in the historical record, but it also shows how these historical actors relied on letters as a primary source of political information and expression. The Robinson Research Center was a great resource for me in achieving this goal, since most of its collections focus on local history and politics.

Working at the Mary Elizabeth Robinson Research Center was a great experience because there were a lot of different collections with materials relevant to my research, so I got to see a wide sampling of Rhode Islanders who corresponded about slavery. Doing historical research always feels a little bit like detective work—you find a lead in one collection that you follow up in another and so on—and I definitely left the Robinson Research Center feeling like I was able to tie up some loose ends from previous research while also finding new paths to pursue.

**ET** How does your project enhance our understanding of Rhode Island/New England history?

**MTF** Rhode Island is interesting as a state where radical antislavery views thrived alongside a deep history of investment and participation in American slavery, both through the African slave trade during the eighteenth century and the rise of cotton textile mills in the 1800s. Moses Brown is probably the best-known Rhode Island abolitionist whose papers are held by the Rhode Island Historical Society, but he was mostly active in the earlier campaign for the abolition of the slave trade. Brown died in 1836, which is really just the beginning of the period that my project focuses on, so one of the goals of my research was to identify Rhode Island activists who followed in the footsteps of Brown and other early abolitionists.

In addition to enhancing our knowledge of Rhode Island antislavery, my project looks at connections between opponents of slavery all over New England and beyond. The value of looking at how people used letters to communicate their views and participate in the movement against slavery is that you start to see how all these individuals really saw themselves as part of a larger cause. They felt entitled, and even obligated, to express their opinions about slavery at a time when it felt like the majority of people in official political channels were not listening. For many of them, writing letters to friends, family, and even strangers was their sole means of communicating these opinions.

**ET** What was the most exciting material you found in the Mary Elizabeth Robinson Research Center collections?

**MTF** It's hard to choose one item or collection—often you don't really know what materials are going to stick with you until long after you leave the archive. One collection that stands out to me now is the Joshua Winsor Family Papers, which contains a series of letters written by Sarah Pratt to Emily Winsor between 1837 and 1845. Sarah Pratt lived in Providence, and then New York, while Emily Winsor lived in Greenville, Rhode Island, but they knew each other from their school days, and it's clear from the letters that they were close friends as well as co-sympathizers in the antislavery cause.

Pratt's letters show the practical means by which correspondence could enable abolitionists to transmit information and organize as a group. For example, in an 1837 letter, Pratt confirms that she has sent petitions for Winsor to circulate and also gives a detailed account of recent business in the Providence Ladies Anti-Slavery Society. Later letters, however, also demonstrate how letter writing offered an outlet for political expression that was not available in other areas of these women's lives. In 1838, Pratt accepted a teaching position in the South, apparently much to the chagrin of most of her abolitionist friends. In her letters to Winsor, she discussed her feelings of turmoil regarding her decision, but she remained committed to go to the South until she received word from her

future employer, a slaveholder, that she would be turned away if she was an abolitionist. Pratt's boss in New York told her she would "get rid of all of [her] abolition notions" by traveling to the South, and she would ruin him if she did not. Given this ultimatum, Pratt eventually decided to stay in the North and teach in New York City.

These letters offer a microcosmic view of the intensifying conflict over slavery in the antebellum U.S. They also show how Pratt, who was accustomed to relative freedom in communicating her views about slavery in the context of the Providence Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, ran up against obstacles when she sought to voice those views elsewhere—to her male anti-abolitionist boss in New York, or to her future employer, a slaveholding Southern woman. At that point, she turned to her correspondence as a primary means of expressing her commitment to the antislavery cause. ♦

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## The House of Industry That Cost Too Much: Fiscal Conservatism in the History of American Welfare

GABRIEL LOIACONO

THIS IS THE STORY OF A HOUSE OF INDUSTRY THAT NEVER WAS. The Providence House of Industry was never more than an idea. It was not even a particularly unique idea. By 1859, when this one was almost made, Houses of Industry had existed for more than one hundred and fifty years in the English-speaking world. Such institutions were a rising trend in the northern United States that year, and the Providence House of Industry was well researched and well planned. Supporters of the institution believed it would reduce poverty in the midst of a depression, while also keeping poor relief costs down. The rationale, the construction site, the building materials, the financing details, were all laid out. What is more, this big idea had powerful backers: the mayor, the overseer of the poor, and many other prominent citizens wanted it to become a reality. ¶

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*Frequent economic collapses in the nineteenth century exacerbated the plight of the urban poor and working class. Life Sketches in the Metropolis. Our homeless poor—Early morning in Donovan Lane, near the Five Points [N.Y.] Illustration, Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper 34 (March 16, 1872), 5. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, cph3c22653.*



Nevertheless, proponents of the new House of Industry lost the argument. Opponents' arguments against a House of Industry offered rebuttals to every point that supporters made, but lingered on one in particular: the House of Industry would cost too much.

At first look, this humdrum episode in a municipal government's history seems unremarkable. On further reflection, however, the Providence House of Industry (that never was) offers a good example of something that is usually overlooked in the history of American welfare: fiscal conservatism. Efforts to avoid the expenditure of public money shaped American welfare profoundly. More than social control, more than benevolence, fiscal conservatism explains why American voters and municipal authorities made the decisions they did. Failed projects, like the Providence House of Industry "that never was," demonstrate the importance of this motivation even better than successful projects do. Fiscal conservatism may be the least compelling, least exciting explanation that could help us to understand past Americans' experience. Precisely because it is so mundane, scholars of American welfare history have often overlooked fiscal conservatism, seeing only social control, benevolence, or pauper agency as important factors in welfare history. This article will use the 1859 debate over the Providence House of Industry to show that fiscal conservatism was often the quietest but most powerful force shaping the landscape of American welfare.

The plan of a Providence House of Industry was born in the context of political, economic, and cultural crises. Providence in the 1850s was in the throes of political upheavals over slavery and immigration. Moreover, by 1857, the city was experiencing economic depression. Traditionally, historians focus on slavery as the issue dominating the politics of the 1850s. However, for many northerners, immigration seemed far more important. Opposition to immigration, or at least to immigrant political power, had grown parallel to the increasing numbers of Catholics in the country since the 1830s. In 1834, rioters sacked a convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts. In 1835, New Englander Samuel Morse began publishing accusations against Catholic immigrants in what would eventually become a book: *Foreign Conspiracy Against the Liberties of the United States. The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, allegedly an insider's account of shocking practices in a Montreal convent, was published in 1836. A generation later, the nativist movement dominated northern politics. By 1855, the American Party, aligned with elements of the splintering Whig Party, had stormed into power. Their national platform hinged on two issues: union between North and South and, above all, exclusion of immigrants from political office whenever possible. The American Party proposed that foreigners wait for a period of twenty-one years' residence in the United States before being granted citizenship. The 1856 American Party platform also advocated that no

## PLATFORM Of the American Party of R. I.

Adopted by State Council, June 19, 1855.

Whereas, by a resolution this day adopted by the State Council of Rhode Island, approving the action of our delegates in signing the platform based on the Minority Report to the Grand National Council at Philadelphia, this State Council has virtually seceded from the Order as a National Party; and

Whereas, it is proper that we still labor together for the promotion of individual and National prosperity, therefore

Resolved, That we pledge ourselves to the following

### PRINCIPLES.

1. The acknowledgment of that Almighty Being who rules over the Universe, who presides over the Councils of Nations, who conducts the affairs of men, and who, in every step by which we have advanced to the character of an independent nation has distinguished us by some token of providential agency.

2. The cultivation and development of a sentiment of profoundly intense American feeling; of passionate attachment to our country, its history and its institutions; of admiration for the pure days of our National existence; of veneration for the heroism that precipitated our Revolution; and of emulation of the virtue, wisdom and patriotism that framed our Constitution, and first successfully applied its provisions.

3. The unconditional restoration of that time-honored Agreement known as the Missouri Compromise, which was destroyed in utter disregard of the popular will; a wrong which no lapse of time can palliate, and no plea for its continuance can justify. And that we will use all constitutional means to maintain the positive guarantee of that compact, until the object for which it was enacted has been consummated by the admission of Kansas and Nebraska as Free States.

4. The rights of settlers in Territories to the free and undisturbed exercise of the elective franchise guaranteed to them by the laws under which they are organized, should be promptly protected by the National Executive whenever violated or threatened.

5. Obedience under God to the Constitution of these United States, as the supreme law of the land, sacredly obligatory upon all its parts and members; and steadfast resistance to the spirit of innovations upon its principles, however specious the pretense. Awaiting that in all doubtful or disputed points it may only be legally ascertained and expounded by the judicial power of the United States. A habit of reverential obedience to the laws, whether National, State or Municipal, until they are either repealed, or declared unconstitutional, by the proper authority.

6. A radical revision and modification of the laws regulating immigration, and the settlement of immigrants. Offering to the honest immigrant, who from the love of liberty or hatred of oppression seeks an asylum in the United States, a friendly reception and protection. But unqualifiedly condemning the transmission to our shores of felons and paupers.

7. The essential modification of the naturalization laws—the repeal by the Legislatures of the respective States, of all State laws allowing unnaturalized foreigners to vote. The repeal, without retrospective operation of all the acts of Congress making grants of land to unnaturalized foreigners. The refusal to extend the right of suffrage to all foreigners until they shall have resided in the United States twenty-one (21) years, and complied with the naturalization laws.

8. Hostility to the corrupt means, by which the leaders of parties have hitherto forced upon us, our rulers, and our political credits. Implacable enmity against the present demagogic system of rewards for political subservience, and punishment for political independence. Diagonal for the wild hunt after office which characterizes the age.

These on the one hand, on the other—

imitation of the practice of the purer days of the Republic; and admiration of the maxim "that office should seek the man and not man the office," and of the rule that the just mode of ascertaining fitness for office is the capability, the faithfulness, and the honesty of the incumbent or candidate.

9. Resistance to the aggressive policy and corrupting tendencies of the Roman Catholic Church in our country by the advancement to all political stations—executive, legislative, judicial or diplomatic—of those only who do not hold civil allegiance, directly or indirectly to any foreign power whether civil or ecclesiastical, and who are Americans by birth, education and training, thus fulfilling the maxim—Americans only shall govern America. The protection of all citizens in the legal and proper exercise of their civil and religious rights and privileges; the maintenance of the right of every man to the full unrestricted and peaceful enjoyment of his own religious opinions and worship, and a jealous resistance of all attempt by any sect, denomination or church to obtain an ascendancy over any other in the State, by means of any special privileges or exemption, by any political combination of its members, or by a division of their civil allegiance with any foreign power, potentate or ecclesiastic.

10. The reformation of the character of our National Legislature, by elevating to that dignified and responsible position, men of sober habits, of higher qualifications, purer morals, and more unselfish patriotism.

11. The restriction of executive patronage—especially in the matter of appointments to office so far as it may be permitted by the Constitution, and consistent with the public good.

12. The education of the youth of our country in schools provided by the State, which schools shall be common to all, without distinction of creed or party, and free from any influence or direction of a denominational or partisan character. And inasmuch as Christianity by the Constitutions of nearly all the States, by the decisions of most eminent judicial authorities, and by the consent of the people of America is considered an element of our political system, and as the Holy Bible is at once the source of Christianity, and the depository and fountain of all civil and religious freedom, we oppose every attempt to exclude it from the schools, thus established in the State.

13. We advocate protection to American industry and genius, against the adverse policy of foreign nations; also facilities to internal and external commerce, by the improvement of rivers and harbors.

14. The policy of the Government of the United States in its relations with foreign Governments, is to exact justice from the strongest, and do justice to the weakest;—restraining, by all the power of the Government, all its citizens from interference with the internal concerns of nations with whom we are at peace.

15. The Union of these States should be made perpetual by a faithful adherence to the principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence, and confirmed by the Constitution.

16. We believe that neither nature nor the Constitution of our country, recognize the right of man to property in man.

17. We believe that the stability of our institutions depends upon the virtue and intelligence of the people, and whereas intemperance surely tends to undermine and destroy that virtue, therefore,

Resolved, We are in favor of a legal constitutional prohibition of the traffic in all alcoholic liquors.

18. All the principles of the Order to be henceforth everywhere openly avowed; each member shall be at liberty to make known the existence of the Order, and the fact that he himself is a member; and there need be no concealment of the places of meeting of the Subordinate Councils.

E. J. NIGHTINGALE,  
Pres't of State Council of R. I.  
H. N. CLEMONS, Secretary.

In 1855, the American Party of Rhode Island adopted a platform offering "a friendly reception and protection to the honest immigrant," while "condemning the transmissions to our shores of felons and paupers." The platform also recommended that citizenship rights be granted to immigrants after twenty-one years of residence in the United States. E. J. Nightengale, Printed—Broadside, 1855, Rhode Island Historical Society Collection (RHI X3 8383).

The American Party, with its nativist platform, dominated Rhode Island politics during the 1850s. Printed—Broadside Prox 1855-1859, Rhode Island Historical Society Collection (RHI X3 8382).

## AMERICAN TICKET. —1856—



FOR GOVERNOR,  
**WILLIAM W. HOPPIN,**  
OF PROVIDENCE.  
FOR LIEUT. GOVERNOR,  
**Nicholas Brown,**  
OF WARWICK.  
FOR SECRETARY OF STATE,  
**JOHN R. BARTLETT,**  
OF PROVIDENCE.  
FOR ATTORNEY GENERAL,  
**CHARLES HART,**  
OF PROVIDENCE.  
FOR GENERAL TREASURER,  
**SAMUEL A. PARKER,**  
OF NEWPORT.

paupers (recipients of poor relief) or convicts be allowed to even land on American shores. On the strength of these convictions, eight out of thirty state governors and nearly half of the U.S. House of Representatives had the support of the American Party in 1855. Moreover, local and state governments, especially in the North, were full of newly elected favorites of the American Party. In Rhode Island, the American Party triumph was particularly emphatic. All statewide executive offices, along with fifty-three of seventy-two state representatives and twenty-six of thirty-two state senators were elected under its party banner.<sup>1</sup>

The American Party in Rhode Island did not, however, share the national party's priorities. As Michael Simoncelli has shown, the Rhode Island American Party combined anti-immigrant politics with antislavery, temperance, and concerns about the general corruption of U.S. politics. On slavery, in particular, the American Party in Rhode Island rebelled against the national party's efforts at neutrality. Where the national party emphasized the Union above slavery politics, the Rhode Island party condemned slavery in the western territories, and the institution in general. Moreover, Rhode Islanders elected to office on the American ticket seemed to place a greater priority on antislavery and temperance



SCHEDULE of the EXPENCES of the Town of PROVIDENCE,  
from August 1, 1799, to August 1, 1800. Published conformably to the Vote of the Town, September 6, 1800.

PAID Mr. Moses Lippitt, for Materials to erect a small Building at the Hospital,  
Paid for a Boat for the Health-Officer, to go on board Vessels, as Dols. repairing Ditto, 8 Dols. 99 Cts.  
Paid Well Pope, for re-laying Pavements in Water-Street,  
Paid for 41 Shares in Whipple-Hall School-House, at 10 Dols. each (9 Shares are not bought)  
Paid for letting Foyer Trees, and for hosing Ditto in Town, 27 Dols. 9 Cts. For the same at the Hospital, 19 Dols. 67 Cts.  
Paid for repairing the Well, and carting Gravel, &c. round the Brick School-House,  
Paid Samuel Arnold, on Account of an Order given the late Welcome Arnold, in Part for building the Hospital,  
Paid for putting new Leads on the Clock at the Barnhill Meeting-House,  
Paid Barnard Eddy, for repairing Engine No. 3,  
Paid Pardon Thornton's Execution against the Town, on Account of Holliman Warner's being removed to Johnston, in 1794,  
Paid Nicholas Hopkin, for ringing the Bell at the Barnhill Meeting-House, Morning, Noon and Night,  
Paid Samuel Healy, for Supplies delivered Betty Olney, from January 29, 1799, to November 1, 1799,  
Paid the Expences of January 7 and February 22, 1800, on Account of the Funeral Honours paid to the late General Washington,  
Paid for mending High-Street,  
Paid for Work done on Benevolent-Street,  
Paid Daniel Field, for Work on different Streets near Eddy's Point,  
Paid Adams and Lothrop, Stephen Harris, Benjamin and Samuel Carille, and Lemuel Field, for mending Streets in different Places,  
Paid Nathan Waldron, Jeremiah R. Howell, Williams Thayer, and John Smith, 2d, for mending the Street to College, Benefit Ditto, and sundry others,  
Paid Squire Thurber, and Benjamin Cozzins, jun. for Work on Streets at the North-End of the Town, 55 Dols. 40 Cts. Paid Lemuel Field, for Ditto Snow-  
Streets, 20 Dols.  
Paid sundry Persons, for mending Streets in different Parts of the Town,  
Paid James Burrill, jun. for the late Dr. Arnold, attending the Poor, from March 1797, to Nov. 1798,  
Paid Philip Taylor, of Little-Compton, for Board, &c. of Polly Grinnell, some Time past,  
Paid John Dorrance, Elg for Fencing Stail for the Hospital, for sundry Bills he paid against Ditto, for filling up Middle-Street, also removing Nuisances, &c.  
per Order of Town-Council,  
Paid for Materials for building the Hospital, mending the Rods, &c.  
Paid the Members of the Town-Council, for their Services at special Meetings on the Town's Bufilets, from June 1796, to June 1799, 3 Years,  
Paid the Town Watch, 6 Men each Night, from the 2d of December, 1799, to the 31st of March, 1800, 719 Dols. Paid for a Stove, Fire-Wood and Candles,  
for Ditto, 30 Dols. 44 Cts.  
Paid Amos Hawes, for taking James Drown, a poor Child, to bring up, and taking an Indenture of him,  
Paid Timothy Jones, on Account of transferring the old Records,  
Paid John Carter, for printing Advertisements, &c. for the Town, 14 Dols. 75 Cts. Paid Bennett Wheeler, for Ditto, from June 1796 to September 1799,  
75 Dols. 32 Cts.  
Paid Joseph Bates, for recording Council Schedules, Inventories, &c. per 3 Orders of the Town-Council,  
Paid William Wilkinson, for Books, &c. for the Use of the Town,  
Paid Nathan W. Jackson, for his Services as Clerk of the Council, from the 3d of June, 1799, to the 3d of June, 1800,  
Paid Ditto, for his Services as Clerk of the Town, from the 3d of June, 1799, to the 3d of June, 1800,  
Paid for the Services of the Justices of the Peace, Committee, Surveyors, Town-Sergeant, Constables, &c.  
Commissions for collecting, &c. the 18000 Dollar Tax, ordered the 29th of August, 1799,  
Interest for the Town Debt for the Year past,  
Remainder of Town-Council Orders, not particularly mentioned,  
Remainder of Overider of the Poor Orders, Ditto,  
Remainder of Expences for Fire-Engines, Ditto,  
Remainder of Expences for the Hospital, Ditto,  
Remainder of Expences for the Town,

Town-Orders.	Overider of Orders.	Repairs of Streets.	Repairs of High-ways.	Repairs of Bridges.	For the & Books of the Hospital.	Printing T. Serj. Confab. for the Town.	Sundry other Town Expences.
Dol. C.	Dol. C.	Dol. C.	Dol. C.	Dol. C.	Dol. C.	Dol. C.	Dol. C.
—	—	—	—	—	123 57	—	—
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—	—	—	—	—	—	—	410 00
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854 50	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
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Prior to 1820, care of the poor was the largest expense for the town of Providence. Schedule of Expences of the Town of Providence, September 6, 1800. Printed, Broad-sides—1800—Alden 1687. Rhode Island Historical Society Collection.

town handouts. The proposed Providence House of Industry was supposed to cut taxes and wean immigrants off poor relief; nativism was a big part of the argument for this institution.

Another critical component of the 1859 debate over the proposed House of Industry was the economy. The House of Industry would not have been a serious proposal if Providence police were not seeing a marked increase in the number of impoverished people in the streets. One of the nineteenth century's "panics" hit in the fall of 1857. Providence leaders, however, were complaining of "distress occasioned by the present depression of business" as early as 1855, and some historians suggest that the economic downturn actually began in 1854. The causes of the Panic of 1857 are difficult to pinpoint.<sup>4</sup> Its effects were clearer: a noticeable slowdown in investment, which lasted at least into 1859. Although the more agricultural South seemed to weather the panic well, banks in the north-east did not. In New York, for example, nineteen of the state's 285 banks failed, while total bank deposits plunged from eighty-nine million dollars to sixty-three million dollars. Research on the effects of this depression in Rhode Island is scarce, but contemporary accounts suggest a



DEXTER ASYLUM IN 1830.

Ebenezer Knight Dexter provided the funds to build a "poorhouse" for indigent residents of Providence. The Dexter Asylum, located at Hope and Lloyd Avenues was built in 1828. John Andrew, Engraving, 1830, Rhode Island Historical Society Collection (RHI X3 8993).

considerable drop in manufacturing and shipping, two activities central to Rhode Island's mid-century economy.<sup>5</sup>

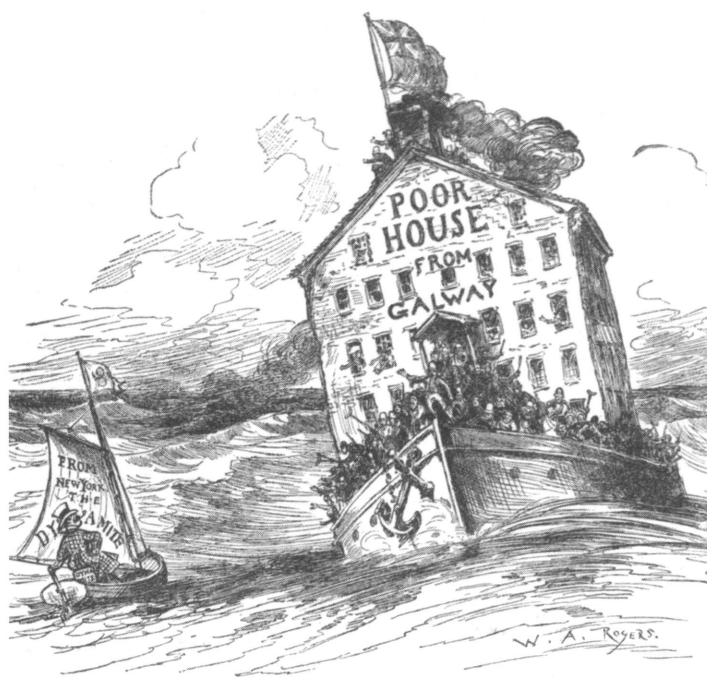
In Providence, the mayor complained in 1858 that the city was in the midst of "a commercial embarrassment, for which the annals of trade furnish no parallel," which had, "arrested every arm of industry, and checked all the avenues of exchange; and, as a natural consequence, want and destitution followed."<sup>6</sup> Statistics from this period are not reliable, but newspapers estimated 200,000 unemployed nationwide, with a million people affected by the crisis. The situation in New York and New England in particular was called "absolutely sickening."<sup>7</sup> Providence was experiencing unusually bad economic times when the House of Industry was conceived.

By 1857, though, Rhode Island had already weathered downturns over the past two centuries with a robust set of laws, called the "poor laws." The poor laws had changed a bit since 1647, but by and large they constituted the same system that was known in England as the Elizabethan Poor Law, and had been adopted wholesale by some of the earliest English settlers in the colony of Rhode Island and Providence

Plantations. The poor law mandated that local governments—towns in the case of Rhode Island—were responsible for providing food, housing, and medical care, if necessary, to anyone with a "settlement" in that town. The law of "settlement" was complicated, but essentially a property owner, his or her immediate family, and descendants, all had a settlement in the town in which the property was located. The town was legally required to assist any settled inhabitant in need. On the other hand, the town was expected to banish any *non-settled* inhabitant who fell on hard times, with the assumption that the banished resident would make her way back to her town of settlement. If she had no town of settlement, or if her hometown was across the Atlantic Ocean, that was a problem.

While never perfect, this system provided aid for thousands of needy Rhode Islanders in the colonial period, and survived the Revolution without major change. Although sometimes abused, poor laws also operated as intended, providing food for the hungry, housing for the homeless, and medical attention to those who could not afford it.<sup>8</sup> Poor relief expenses were the main expenses of any town, and thus the biggest part of a property owner's tax burden until the 1820s, when schools and roads grew in expense to match poor relief.<sup>9</sup> Local taxes were many times larger than state taxes per town, and federal taxes were very rarely collected prior to the Civil War.





W. A. Rogers' sketch in *Harpers Weekly* (April 28, 1883, p. 272) shows immigrants on a steamship that is carrying a "Poor House from Galway." The caption reads: "The balance of trade with Great Britain seems to be still against us—650 paupers arrived at Boston in the steamship Nestoria April 15th from Galway, Ireland, shipped by the British government." Wood engraving, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-118126.

The poor relief portion of local taxes was spent by an official called the Overseer of the Poor, whose job was to ensure that the settled needy received the food, clothes, housing, and medical care they needed, while also requiring that unsettled needy leave town. The Overseer of the Poor in Providence roamed the streets looking for needy residents and newcomers. Eventually, he had an office, first in the Market House and later in the Police Station.

One important change to Providence's care of the poor, however, came in 1828 when the town received a substantial gift. In that year, Providence used the bequest of wealthy merchant, Ebenezer Knight Dexter, to construct a magnificent poorhouse on the East Side of Providence, at the intersection of Hope Street and Lloyd Avenue, called the Dexter Asylum. Dexter's bequest paid for the housing of many long-term poor, and the sale of produce from the Dexter farm helped bring the overall poor relief budget down. Still, taxpayers continued to contribute to the running of the Dexter Asylum,

as well as paying for food, cash, and other necessities provided to people outside the walls of the Dexter Asylum.<sup>10</sup> As a general rule, Providence residents only went to the Dexter Asylum if their need was long-term; they would therefore cost taxpayers less money in the Asylum than in their own homes.

Meanwhile, in Britain, where Rhode Island's poor law had originated, a dramatic new innovation took place. On the heels of major political reform in 1832, the government also overhauled the 1601 Elizabethan Poor Law. This "New Poor Law" banned outdoor relief to any able-bodied person. That meant that for most British paupers, it was no longer possible to receive cash, firewood, food, or medical assistance outside of a workhouse. Reformers were very concerned that no one should receive assistance who did not work for it. They also wanted to make sure that a workhouse inmate would never enjoy better conditions inside the workhouse than he would if employed outside the workhouse. This was called the "less eligibility" principle; it is one of the major reasons historians have seen social control as central to poor relief. After all, if the government makes work at any wage preferable to welfare, the government is helping employers to control the working classes. Certainly, in Britain in the 1830s, the emphasis in poor relief changed from open-handed benevolence to distrust of the needy.<sup>11</sup> News of the British poor law reform reached the United States quickly, and surely caught the attention of Providence town fathers. By 1847, a trade group was already calling for a "house of industry," in line with the new British emphasis on paupers working more.

In 1847, the Providence Association of Mechanics and Manufacturers proposed a house of industry, and the mayor agreed. A special committee, though, concluded that it would be too expensive and serve too few people to be worth it.<sup>12</sup> In 1850, a retired industrialist turned reformer, "Shepherd Tom" Hazard toured all the towns in Rhode Island but one, and concluded that an increased number of town-owned poorhouses, combined with judicious outdoor relief,

would be both the most humane and efficient system.<sup>13</sup> Providence already had a system combining a poorhouse (the Dexter Asylum) and subsidies to impoverished residents. During the 1850s, however, members of the Providence city government increasingly frowned on "outdoor relief": the practice of giving city funds to needy people outside the poorhouse. By the early 1850s, an observer from New York witnessed Providence paupers carrying wood from one end of a yard to the other and back again, required to do meaningless work in exchange for food and shelter.<sup>14</sup> Work requirements aside, city fathers were uncomfortable with the amount of money going to the needy, and the Board of Aldermen set a cap on the amount of cash one could receive in 1854. From that year until 1872, the Overseer of the Poor was to allow ten dollars in a year to any one family, with ten additional dollars if the mayor approved.<sup>15</sup>

In 1855, a new mayor, James Smith, called for further reform. He wanted what is now called a public/private partnership, in which the city would cooperate with private charitable organizations.<sup>16</sup> In response, the Providence Aid Society, a private charity, was formed in 1855. The goals of the Providence Aid Society, according to its first annual report, were "to prevent and relieve pauperism and promote the welfare of the poor... by personal interaction with the poor, by affording aid when it is imperatively demanded; and especially by providing employment for the needy." In other words, the Society preferred to give a job instead of cash or goods, and required always that members of the Society personally get to know the recipients, in order to prevent them from pretending to need aid if they did not. In its first year, the Society reported that 325 people came to its agents for employment, 250 of whom were women. Taking careful note of the ethnic and religious backgrounds of the employment seekers, the Society found seventy-five to be "Americans or Protestants" and the rest "others," likely meaning that they were Catholics, whether foreign-born or native-born.<sup>17</sup> With the American Party at a high tide of its political power in 1855, even

this charitable society reflected a distrust of foreigners and Catholics.

Another reason the Providence Aid Society was formed in 1855 was that the city already was experiencing a period of economic contraction. Despite this economic downturn, the leaders of the Providence Aid Society continued to assert that "the large proportion of those who seek our aid," are "persons who dislike labor, and have made themselves poor by their vices."<sup>18</sup> In a contradiction, the founders of this charitable organization acknowledged that times were bad economically, but still insisted that most of the poor suffered by their own fault, regardless of the state of the economy. The Society's solution was to guard against "impostors" by insisting that families refuse to give charity at their own doors, and let the Society dole out assistance after visiting the homes of recipients. In so doing, Society officials hoped to "guard against the impositions of these vicious hordes."<sup>19</sup> In its first ten months, the Society gave aid to 3,181 people, and gave jobs, often working for the Society itself, to 216 men and women, with wages ranging from fifty cents to six dollars per week.<sup>20</sup> Still, city fathers were not satisfied with the city's poor relief policy. During the first year of the Providence Aid Society's work, the city made what Mayor James Y. Smith called a "radical change in the policy of sending persons to the Dexter Asylum," by prohibiting temporarily needy people from staying there, and thus channeling even more people towards outdoor relief, and not "indoor relief" in the city's poorhouse. That expensive and grand building would now be reserved for long-term needy people.<sup>21</sup>

A year into the Panic of 1857, city fathers felt that more major reform of poor relief was necessary. The new mayor William Rodman, who had claimed that the city was in the midst of "a commercial embarrassment, for which the annals of trade furnish no parallel," nevertheless also asserted that the economy was not the biggest threat to the city's poor relief system. He warned, in the annual organization of the government speech to his fellow members of city government, that the biggest problem was "the





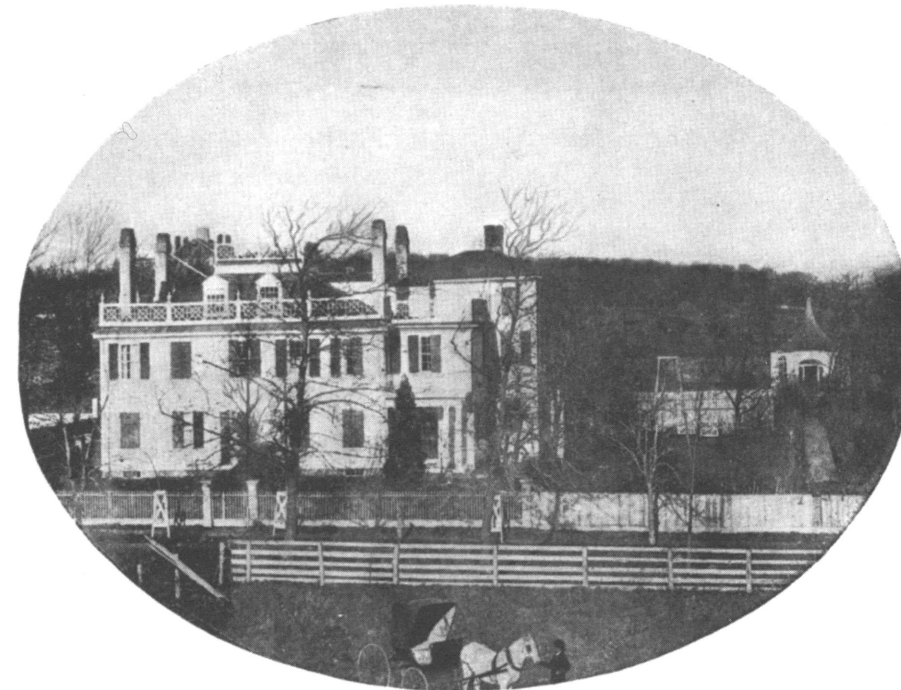
great influx of the pauper population of Europe.” He predicted that if trends continued, “we shall find ourselves like Ireland herself, where paupers are as one to five.” Listeners did not need to be reminded that most immigrants in Providence were from “Ireland herself,” and were mostly Roman Catholics. As a possible solution to this mounting problem, the mayor renewed the idea of a House of Industry.<sup>22</sup> Six months later, the mayor was backed up by the new Overseer of the Poor, George Wightman, who issued a report on the city’s poor relief. The number of Providence inhabitants asking for relief, he said, was growing fast. Most were Irish, he said. Something needed to be done, he declared, and that something was “a Work House.”<sup>23</sup>

By February 1859, a select committee of four had been commissioned to investigate whether a work house was really the solution. The select committee would settle on the term, “house of industry” which was less common than “work house,” but likely carried more positive connotations. The name suggested neither a prison nor an almshouse, but a place of work. Numerous houses of industry already existed in the United States and elsewhere. “House of Industry” was used in Britain and Ireland from the early eighteenth century. New York had a public/private “house of industry” for poor women doing seamstress work as early as 1814. Boston opened a public “house of industry” in 1823.

The House of Industry in the impoverished Five Points neighborhood in New York City is depicted on the left in this 1859 lithograph. The tall building is identified by writing in the upper left of the image. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-50729.

The influential *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley suggested a “house of industry” to teach thrift and job skills in the early 1840s. In 1848, under the auspices of an Episcopalian parish, New York had established a “House of Industry and Home for the Friendless.”

The most famous one of all was New York’s “Five Points House of Industry,” which opened in 1851 in New York’s most notorious neighborhood. This was likely the “house of industry” that resonated in the heads of Providence residents in 1859. Led by a Methodist missionary, Lewis M. Pease, the Five Points House of Industry taught, or at least gave work, in sewing, baking, shoemaking, corset-making, basket-weaving, and hat-making. Together with its neighbor and competitor, the Five Points Mission, the Five Points House of Industry also provided clothes, shoes, and food, to those who came to work there, take classes there, or attend religious services there. Its most controversial work was its religious education and its adoption services. Catholic New Yorkers charged it with stealing and selling children whose parents did not consent to give them up, and with forcing Catholics to convert to Protestantism in order to



receive assistance. In the eyes of the Protestant majority, though, the institution was seen as a success.<sup>24</sup> No doubt, the majority of the select committee in Providence thought the name “house of industry” would give a positive connotation to most Providence voters, and thereby to the Common Council and the Board of Aldermen who would have to agree to the plan. Even though the proposed Providence House of Industry would be a government-run institution, and more coercive than the Five Points House of Industry, the name suggested something more voluntary and yet on the cutting edge of charitable practice.

The four members of the select committee were pillars of the community and took their commission seriously. They studied, met, and even traveled to Albany, New York, to check out the nationally famous, and cutting-edge, Albany Penitentiary. While the Providence select committee was not contemplating a penitentiary, exactly, their proposal would resemble the Albany Penitentiary in its work requirements and hope of profitability. By April, they were ready to report back to the city. But there was one problem: they did not agree. Like a hung jury, the committee could not come to consensus, just among the four of them. It was the oldest committee member who was the holdout. The other three were convinced that the Providence House of Industry would have great potential.

John J. Stimson was a successful wine merchant and grocer, who had served on the Providence City Council. In retirement, he grew strawberries and other plants at his home on the East Side of Providence, located adjacent to the Dexter Asylum. This photograph of Stimson’s house is from the Providence City Archives.

The oldest member of the committee was John J. Stimson, a former wine merchant and grocer, who had often served on the Providence Common Council in his younger days. In 1847, he was chosen as the president of the Common Council. Now sixty-one, Stimson was most interested in gardening. An amateur gardener, his strawberries won a prize in 1859. That same year, after the select committee had done its work, his family made their second trip to Europe, an unusual expense for Americans of this period, suggesting that the wine business had been quite good to the Stimsons. His understanding of poverty in the city must have been aided by the fact that his house abutted the land of the Dexter Asylum.<sup>25</sup>

Of the four committee members, one might think that forty-eight-year-old John K. Lester would have been the holdout. Lester was the only Democrat on the committee, in a city and state that had been solidly Whig, then American Party, then Republican. He was also, quite publicly, a “free thinker” in a city government that was mostly full of more orthodox Christians. Also, Lester was the only member of the select committee who had served in the Providence



Aid Society. He was on one of the Providence Aid Society's "district committees," who oversaw the families receiving aid. However, despite his heterodox religious and political views, Lester blended in, in other ways. A storekeeper, alderman, landlord, and temperance speaker, Lester was a financial success. His sons became bookkeepers and lawyers. Like every single one of the four committee members, Lester employed live-in Irish servants. As a further marker of how he could bridge gaps despite religious and political differences, in 1859 Lester joined the horticultural society to which Stimson belonged.<sup>26</sup>

The younger men on the committee seemed much more likely to support a House of Industry. Reuben A. Guild, thirty-seven in 1859, had become a librarian at Brown University immediately after graduating from Brown, and remained at Brown for his entire career. William H. Bowen, thirty-five, ran a steamship line, probably between coastal towns in the northeast. Both Guild and Bowen were Baptists, and neither fought in the Civil War; Guild would head up the Soldiers' Families Relief Committee. Bowen was described in his draft registration card as deaf. From 1857 through the war, Guild served on the Common Council while Bowen was an alderman from 1855 through the war.<sup>27</sup>

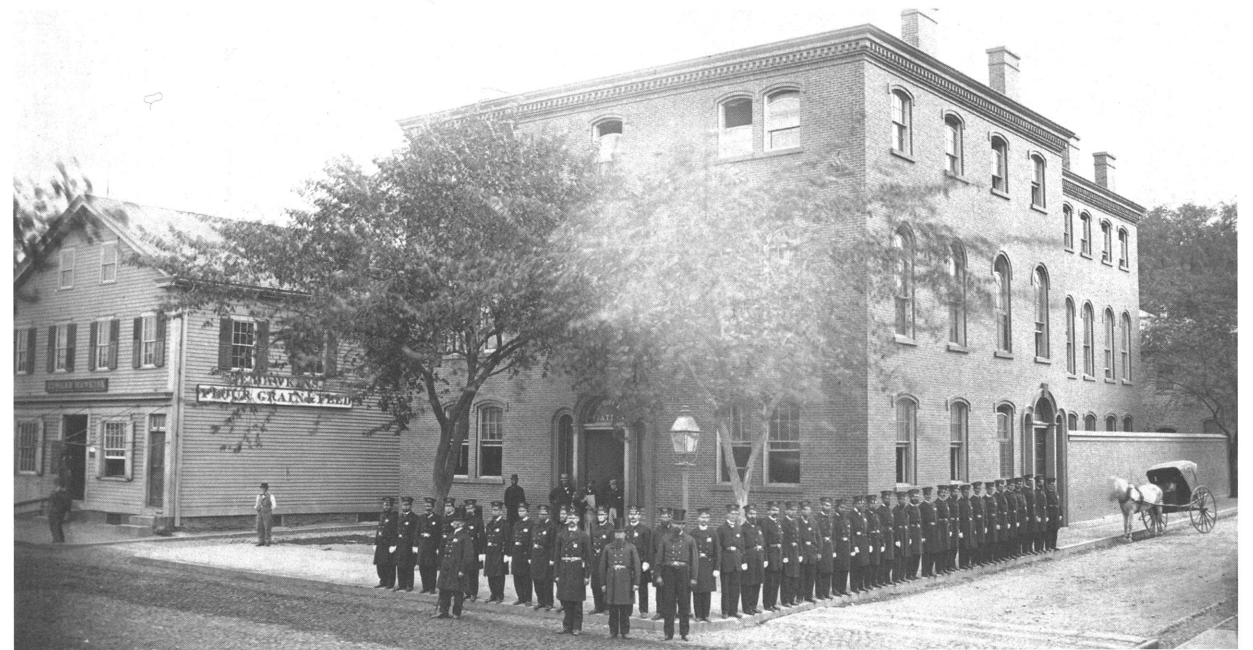
In the select committee's majority report, Lester, Guild, and Bowen made a fairly straightforward argument. First, the city was providing money, food, and/or housing to several thousand people each year. This assistance to the needy came either through the Overseer of the Poor or through the police's watch house, where drunkards, vagrants, and the homeless were allowed to sleep on a nightly basis. Second, the majority report continued, many of these several thousand people were "professional paupers." What was a pauper? As of 1843, this old word had been legally defined in Rhode Island as someone who had received public assistance in the past year, or whose wife or children had received public assistance in the past year.<sup>28</sup> By itself, the word "pauper" could carry neutral or negative connotations, depending on the context. What was a "professional pauper"? The majority described

him or her as a hitherto unacknowledged kind of petty criminal, who made a profession out of begging, whether he needed help or not. For the majority, the "professional pauper" was a thief by another name, who belonged in a penal institution. This term left no room for a neutral connotation; it was negative. The majority's third point was that a House of Industry would encourage most of the "professional paupers" to move out of Providence, and the remainder would have to work for the benefits they received. The fourth, final, and most hopeful point was that the House of Industry would pay for itself, thus dramatically reducing city expenditures for the poor, and perhaps even contributing income to the city treasury.<sup>29</sup>

The House of Industry was a plan with great potential. It promised to discourage undesirable inhabitants and to pay for itself. It depended heavily, however, on two assumptions. The first was that there were such persons as "professional paupers" for whom a penal institution was more appropriate than poor relief. The second assumption was that a House of Industry would be able to produce and sell products sufficiently to provide for itself. In support of their assumption about "professional paupers," the majority of the committee drew heavily on a recent report by the City Marshal, or chief of police. They quoted the City Marshal, William H. Hudson, as saying that,

There is a class of persons among us, who ought to be subjected to punishment different in kind and degree, from that now provided by law. In this class are comprehended not only the habitual drunkards of both sexes, the common prostitute, and the idler, but beggars also; the men and women, who, by their tales of suffering and poverty, impose upon the community.<sup>30</sup>

These words of the chief law enforcer of the city carried a great deal of weight, but he was proposing a controversial understanding of poverty. His idea, ratified by the majority report, was not just that poverty led to petty crimes like public drunkenness, vagrancy or



idling, and prostitution. That assumption was commonplace, but Hudson's assertion went further, suggesting that begging, telling "tales of suffering and poverty" was *in itself* a petty crime. While many associated poverty with crime, it was not widely accepted that poverty was a crime. Nevertheless, from the City Marshal's point of view, a beggar in the street or a homeless man coming to the police force's watch house at night, telling a tale about why he needed a place to sleep, should be considered a low-level criminal. Likewise, Marshal Hudson implied, not all but some of the mothers visiting the Overseer of the Poor's office in the morning, requesting aid for their families, were probably in the same class as the women arrested the previous night for prostitution or public drunkenness. Indeed, both the mother in the morning and the prostitute in the evening had to visit the same location, since the Overseer of the Poor's office was in a police station.

The other major assumption of the majority report was that the House of Industry would eventually pay for itself. The inmates would be so industrious, that they would operate a little city-owned factory, at least covering their own expenses. Perhaps they could even turn a profit for the city. As part of their study of the feasibility of a house of industry, the select committee had made the 330-mile round trip to Albany, New York to visit the Albany County Penitentiary.

During the mid-nineteenth century homeless in Providence could find a night's shelter at the police station or "watch houses." The city's Overseer of the Poor had his office at the police station. Albumen print, ca. 1866. Rhode Island Historical Society Collection (RHi X3 906).

This county jail had become a national model for local jails just like the "Auburn System," also in New York State, had become a national model for state penitentiaries. The four visitors from Providence, in late March of 1859, were duly impressed. They saw for themselves the main features that made Albany a national model: inmates doing profitable labor by day in clean, healthy surroundings, and retiring to solitary cells at night. On the day the Providence select committee visited the Albany County Penitentiary, the male inmates were making shoes and chairs. These shoes, chairs, and other products had made the jail self-supporting. In their report, the majority of the committee paused on this point to reflect at length. "This is remarkable when we consider the general character of its inmates," they wrote, borrowing language from a New York oversight committee to describe Albany's inmates as:

the vilest dregs of society, the rakings of the gutter and the brothel, the profligate and even the diseased—more fit for the hospital than a workhouse—destitute, half-naked, and sentenced often for a term scarcely sufficient to work off the last debauch.<sup>31</sup>



Surely, the Providence visitors thought, if Albany can turn a profit with such prisoners, then we can turn a profit with our paupers too. After all, the Albany jail superintendent, a second-generation prison warden, had achieved similar success in both New Hampshire and nearby Connecticut. As the majority put it, “the suppositions in favor of the successful [i.e. profitable] workings of a House of Industry in Providence, are not based upon mere arguments or theories.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, with nine pages of closely printed, thoughtful, carefully substantiated reasoning, the majority of the committee heartily recommended the new House of Industry, a place where “professional paupers” could be made to work in exchange for receiving charity, and where Providence taxpayers could shrink the poor relief part of the annual city budget.

The majority was very careful to spell out, in another two pages, what the proposed House of Industry would look like. It would be a massive building by the standards of the day: 13,750 square feet of floor space, about a quarter of a present-day football field. It was projected to cost about \$30,000 in 1859, a big item relative to the city’s \$506,000 budget that year, an item which would have to be paid off over the course of the next five years. The House of Industry was to be built on a large piece of land owned by the city: Field’s Point Farm, then an undeveloped property that is now the Washington Park neighborhood. It would hold one hundred inmates, seventy-five men and twenty-five women, but would have room to expand when necessary. If the city government agreed to the proposal, it would issue thirty \$1,000 bonds, payable over the next five years, for an annual cost of six thousand dollars, approximately what the city already spent annually on housing for vagrants and petty criminals. If the House of Industry were approved, and if it worked according to plan, the city could stop paying the annual six thousand dollars in just five years, and perhaps start earning money from the people it housed.<sup>33</sup>

Despite the majority’s enthusiasm, John J. Stimson refused to agree. The amateur gardener wielded a sharp pen, with which he attacked the majority report on almost every point, from an “improper or careless use of statistics,” to its misuse of the term “House of Industry,” to its disregard of the unusual economic conditions then prevailing in Providence. First, Stimson argued, the recent increase in applicants for poor relief or housing was a direct result of the Panic of 1857. These hard-working people should not be characterized as “professional paupers” and were not in long-term need, just short-term need. Second, he asserted, institutions such as the county jail, were more than able to provide healthy, humane housing to those who needed it. Third, he wrote, there ought to be a difference between a prison and a charity, but the majority report had proposed building a new prison while calling it a charity. Fourth, and most persuasive to the city’s taxpayers, Stimson insisted that building a House of Industry would *not* save the city money either in the short term or the long term, but would actually require more money than the city was currently spending on poor relief, even in hard times.<sup>34</sup>

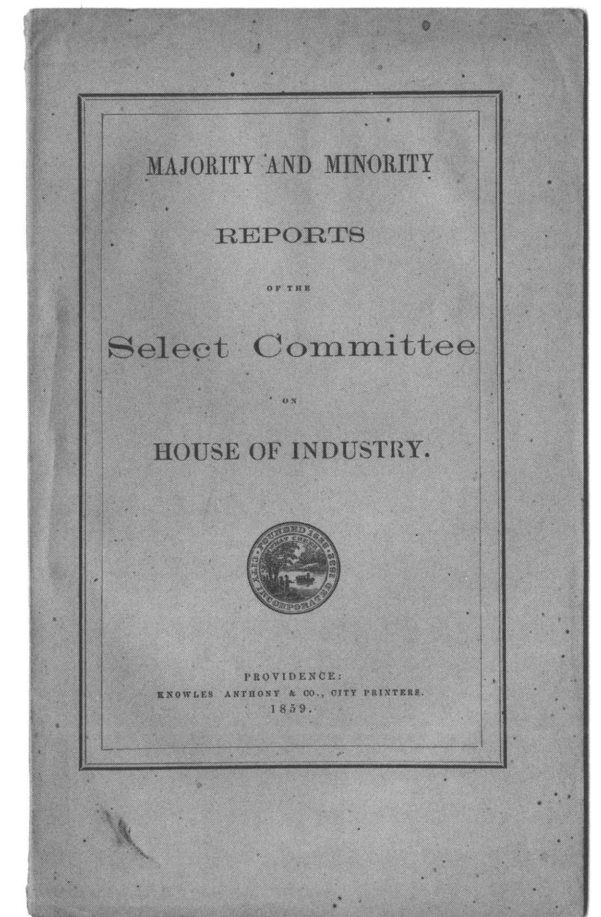
To money-conscious taxpayers at the time these statistics were the most germane part of the argument. The big question of whether or not paupers were criminals did not impact taxpayer’s pocketbooks as much as the question of how expensive this building could be. For Stimson, the costs of the proposed house of industry were underestimated in the majority report, while the temporary surge in poor relief during the Panic was unrealistically assumed to be a long-term cost. Just because thousands of city dwellers either asked for help from the Overseer of the Poor or for housing from the police did not mean that they were all “paupers and vagrants,” said Stimson. We should note, asserted Stimson, that this was “in a year when all the shops and factories of every description [sic], are suddenly brought to a stand still, and thus thousands and tens of thousands of operatives within and around the city, are

“Stimson felt it was wrong to put the poor into what amounted to a prison.”

unexpectedly thrown out of employment.” These were exceptional times, Stimson averred, and the city should be prepared to deal with bad times like the Panic of 1857. City officials and taxpayers should know, however, that they were helping people whose poverty was not permanent, nor their fault.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, Stimson seemed to have a much more sympathetic view of those in need than Bowen, Guild, and Lester did. Not once did he refer to the needy as “professional paupers.” Rather, he insisted the large number of people who wanted to sleep in the watch house...only shows what is always true in a manufacturing community, that there are a great many people who live upon their own earnings from day to day, and when by any accident they are thrown out of employment, they are left destitute until they can find another place, but it by no means follows that they are or intend to be paupers, much less vagrants, and *certainly not* criminals.<sup>36</sup>

Stimson fundamentally differed with his fellow committee members about the nature of poverty in Providence. The majority viewed the bulk of the paupers as poor by their own fault. For Stimson, the poverty of thousands of unemployed factory workers was *not* their fault. Rather, it was endemic to the factory economy. Factory workers lived from paycheck to paycheck, subject to the vicissitudes of the economy, but they were good workers who wanted to work. For him, the idea that in asking for poor relief, unemployed operatives crossed a line into criminality was absurd.



The majority and minority reports of the Providence House of Industry select committee were printed in 1859. (Majority and Minority Reports of the Select Committee on House of Industry [Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., 1859], title page photograph courtesy American Antiquarian Society).

Thus, Stimson thought it wrong to try to put the poor into what amounted to a prison. Although the majority of the committee consistently called their proposal a “House of Industry,” Stimson spurned that term. He thought it was accurately called a “House of Correction,” or simply a “prison.” Stimson complained that “our committee recommend a large and expensive prison, and call that a House of Industry, changing the name only, but leaving the system the same.... These changes of name produce confusion.” Legally, he found that two classes of institutions existed in the United States. The first, prisons, were places of forcible detention, and one could only be sent there by the judgment of a court. The second, charities, were places where people could not legally be detained against their will. While labor could be required in exchange for housing, charities were decidedly not a place for criminals, but for those in need. “These two classes cannot



be confounded in fact, and ought not to be confounded in name," he asserted. The majority proposal, however, did "confound" them.<sup>37</sup>

In practical terms, Stimson was not entirely correct that paupers could not be confined in poorhouses against their wills. Warwick's poorhouse had a written set of rules that forbade inmates from leaving. The Dexter Asylum regularly punished inmates for scaling the walls to have a look around.<sup>38</sup> Stimson was right, though, that the law did not regard paupers as criminals, and that the poorhouse was not a legal punishment. Rather, the poorhouse was an effort to aid the needy person until he or she could sustain himself or herself. Legally, there was a big distinction between paupers and criminals. Seeing this distinction blurred by his colleagues, Stimson protested. The majority report likely represented widespread opinion in the United States by conflating paupers with criminals. Amy Dru Stanley has found this identification of paupers and criminals to be quite common after the Civil War.<sup>39</sup> As Stimson's minority report showed, however, the idea was not universally held.

Using the same reports from the Overseer of the Poor and the City Marshal, Stimson argued that his colleagues on the committee had overestimated how many Providence residents would need money or lodging in the near future. He pointed out that the annual expense of feeding a growing number of lodgers in the city jail roughly equaled the expense of a warden's salary at a house of industry. Calculating the other expenses of a house of industry's staff and maintenance, Stimson argued that Providence would quickly be paying much more than it did already for poor relief. He flatly denied that the House of Industry would ever pay for itself. Having once been an inspector of the state prison himself, Stimson argued that the state prison, not a new house of industry, could accommodate any vagrants that the city could not accommodate in their watch house, and far more cheaply. The city would make up for any money it owed the state by accommodating boys from outside Providence in the Providence reform school. Stimson ended on

his strongest note: fiscal conservatism. The city, Stimson ironically suggested, would be better to board vagrants at the City Hotel than to build an expensive new building.<sup>40</sup>

For fiscal and philosophical reasons, out of respect for the working poor, who were at the mercy of a volatile economy, Stimson voted "no" on the proposed House of Industry. The rest of his committee voted "yes." These informal votes were probably cast in early April 1859, just before the select committee reported back to the city's Common Council. Only the Common Council, together with the Board of Aldermen, could decide what to do next. Having done their part, Bowen, Guild, and Lester drew up a majority report and Stimson wrote his minority report. The Common Council ordered the reports published, first in the newspapers, then in pamphlet form, to provide material for a public debate. Having planted the seeds of opposition to the House of Industry plan, Stimson visited Europe that summer. During the next local elections, in June of 1859, a new mayor, Jabez C. Knight, was elected, as the old one, William M. Rodman, stepped down. Unlike his predecessor, the new mayor made no direct references to the House of Industry in his inaugural address, referring to it only obliquely. Instead, Knight stressed that the city should be careful not to take on new debts, and that he was happy that poor relief expenses were declining a bit, as the economy finally started to improve.<sup>41</sup> These comments amounted to muted disapproval of the House of Industry plan.

National attention turned to John Brown's failed attempt to free slaves at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, the following October. Then, late one evening in January, 1860, after entertaining some friends at his house, John J. Stimson suddenly took ill and died. Despite—or perhaps partly because of—his sharp pen, Stimson was a well-liked man, with many friends. Among the heaps of praise in his obituary was one that fits with what readers can find in his minority report. "Plain, strong-minded common sense, was the leading characteristic of his mind," a friend wrote after Stimson died, "and it was



[this] in combination with other faculties, a conscience, an integrity, warm affections, and a devout heart," which made him well-liked.<sup>42</sup>

One of Stimson's legacies was his argument, printed by the city the previous spring, that a House of Industry would cost too much. Overseer George Wightman had continued to call for the House of Industry in December 1859. At the same time, however, he was finding new ways to reduce poor relief expenses. Most notably, Wightman was reviving the traditional practice of warning out poor migrants from the city.<sup>43</sup> By June 1860, the Mayor of Providence, Jabez C. Knight, was just beginning his second year, and now dropped all reference to a house of industry in his public speeches. The following year, he was quite firmly against any innovation in the city's care of its indigent. "The present system of relief seems to be an excellent one when well administered," he told his fellow city fathers, before going on to praise Overseer George Wightman for his work. It was, perhaps, bittersweet for Wightman. Mayor Knight thought Wightman did a great job as Overseer of the Poor using Providence's current resources, so he was happy to reject Wightman's strongly worded requests for a house of industry.

Still, Wightman and others could hope that the House of Industry would become reality. In early 1860, the Rhode Island General Assembly took up the question. After a few proposals and the outbreak of the Civil War, though, the idea did not get much attention in the legislature. Indeed, the war reduced unemployment in

The Dexter Asylum, at Lloyd Avenue and Hope Street, in a twentieth-century photograph. It was demolished in 1966. John Holden Greene, Historic American Buildings Survey, photograph taken after 1933. HABS, RI, 4—PROV, 131—Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

the state, and gave rise to a temporary system of poor relief aimed at soldiers' families. House of Industry supporter Reuben Guild turned his attention to helping to administer relief to soldiers' families.<sup>44</sup> Only towards the end of the war did the legislature take up the House of Industry again. It appointed a commissioner, George Willard, to tour the state and report on the condition of local poor relief. After this, momentum built, and by 1869, the General Assembly decided that the state would build an ambitious new complex of institutions in Cranston, including a "Workhouse," a "House of Correction," an "Insane Asylum," and an "Alms-house." In charge of it all would be long-time proponent of the House of Industry, George Wightman, the Providence Overseer of the Poor.

As State Superintendent of the Poor, Wightman was able to put into effect many of the ideas he had proposed in Providence while Overseer of the Poor. While Wightman supported immigration, he also took pains to point out exactly how many of the needy were foreigners, just as he had in Providence. When he could, he arranged for impoverished immigrants to be deported, sent back to their country of origin.<sup>45</sup> The State Board of Charities and Corrections, which backed Wightman up, held the same view of needy Rhode Islanders that the





View across Gaspee Street, from State Capitol grounds—Looking toward Union Passenger Station

Hempstead 1901

proponents of a House of Industry had espoused. The Board delayed opening up a state almshouse for the poor, arguing that state institutions were already helping paupers by running an insane asylum and a workhouse for petty criminals. In 1871, the board wrote that “a considerable number of the inmates of the workhouse are really paupers, and the rest are on the downward road to pauperism.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, there was no pressing need for a state charitable institution because many paupers were petty criminals already, and vice versa. This blurring of the category of pauper and criminal would not have pleased John J. Stimson and others who shared his views.

These state institutions, however, were not the House of Industry that had been proposed in Providence. While they could absorb some of the needy people in Rhode Island who had no settlement in a Rhode Island town, the state workhouse and almshouse were not intended to be a substitute for Providence’s local institutions. Indeed, from its tax revenue, Providence reimbursed Rhode Island for any paupers that Providence sent to the state almshouse, or to the state insane asylum. Only those Providence citizens convicted of a crime could be sent, at the state’s expense, to the state House of Correction or Workhouse. Providence was still expected to

Recipients of Providence charity were required to work at the Providence Charity Woodyard, located in downtown Providence. Sketch from *Providence Magazine* 28 (August 1916): 515. Rhode Island Historical Society Collection (RHI X3 8970).

provide for most of its own needy inhabitants and to deal with the day-to-day needs of its residents. For the most part, Providence’s government rejected a radical new solution like the House of Industry and continued to use tried and true remedies. For long-term paupers with roots in Providence, the city relied on the Dexter Asylum for the Poor, a self-contained poor farm that still supported itself from Ebenezer Knight Dexter’s 1820s donation. For those who needed temporary cash for food, or a place to stay for the night, the Overseer of the Poor and the police station, respectively, remained the only options.

Finally, by 1877, Providence city officials agreed to a cheap version of the House of Industry. In that year, the city established the Providence Charity Woodyard on Francis Street. Any man seeking shelter in a police station would be marched to the woodyard the next morning to work splitting and carrying firewood for an hour and a half, thus institutionalizing a practice that visitors had observed in Providence more than two decades earlier. Another hour of work would earn a hot meal.

Likewise, men asking for cash could earn fifty cents a day working in the woodyard. Overseer Wightman judged these earnings small, but he did not want the woodyard to become a regular form of employment for anyone. The woodyard remained a part of Providence’s poor relief for the next few decades.<sup>47</sup>

The Providence House of Industry never was built. What had seemed an exciting new idea in 1859 fizzled out within a couple years. This failed policy demonstrates the power of fiscal conservatism in American welfare history. As moments of silence in a musical composition help constitute the entire composition, failures in political history are an important part of the story. Ideas that never came to fruition, arguments that were never quite won, buildings that never got built also helped to shape the past and the present. The House of Industry idea was not born of benevolence so much as of disdain for the needy of Providence. Calling them “professional paupers,” the majority report clearly showed a desire to control the poor. Social control, then, is a big part of this story. But the social control argument lost. It was opposed by a more benevolent argument—Stimson’s sympathetic portrayal of the needy, along with the very practical argument of spending less public money. Don’t spend money that we don’t have to, warned Stimson. A new mayor, Jabez C. Knight, and his supporters agreed that there should be no new debts. The Providence House of Industry, then, was never constructed. Its backers were influential. Providence elites truly did want social control, a way to discipline and punish “professional paupers.” But these powerful impulses for social control were defeated, in this case. Fiscal conservatism was decisive. Sometimes, social control just costs too much. ♦

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#### ARTICLE NOTES

1. For national American Party positions, see points 5, 6, and 9 of the widely available 1856 “American Platform of Principles,” in *The True American’s Almanac and Politician’s Manual for 1857* (New York, 1857) available on the Gilder Lehrman Center website at <http://glc.yale.edu/american-platform-principles>. Accessed 28 November, 2015. For Rhode Island American party successes, see Michael A. Simoncelli, “Battling the Enemies of Liberty: the Rise and Fall of the Rhode Island Know-Nothing Party,” in *Rhode Island History* 54 (February 1996): 3.
2. Simoncelli, “Battling the Enemies of Liberty,” 3, 9–12.
3. “Platform of the American Party of R.I. Adopted by State Council June 19, 1855,” reprinted in Simoncelli, “Battling the Enemies of Liberty,” 2.
4. Complaints of “distress” are in Providence Aid Society, *First Annual Report of the Providence Aid Society* (Providence: Providence Aid Society, 1856), 5. On the beginning of the crisis in 1854, see Samuel Rezneck, *Business Depressions and Financial Panics: Essays in American Business and Economic History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1971), 103. The most dramatic event before the Panic was the sinking of the gold ship *Central America* in a hurricane on its way from Panama to New York with California gold on board. Another possible explanation for the financial crisis was a drop in American wheat prices following the end of the Crimean War in Europe. Most persuasive is that the politics of slavery had finally injured the economy. The political chaos over the question of whether Kansas and other western territories would have legal slavery in the late 1850s helped to dampen speculation in western railroads and land in this period, shaking eastern and British investors who were over-exposed by investments in western railroads and land. Specifically, political wrangling over railroad land grants between New England capitalists and Southern politicians drove down investor confidence in the worth of railroad land grants, leading to many bankruptcies. On the Crimean War, see James Huston, *The Panic of 1857 and the Coming of the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987). On the political chaos of slavery, see Charles W. Calomiris and Larry Schweikart, “The Panic of 1857: Origins, Transmission, and Containment,” in *Journal of Economic History* 51 (December 1991): 807–834 and Scott Reynolds Nelson, *A Nation of Deadbeats: An Uncommon History of America’s Financial Disasters* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), chapter 7.
5. Calomiris and Schweikart, “The Panic of 1857,” 821, 825.
6. *Organization of the Municipal Government of the City of Providence*, June 8, 1858, 2nd ed. (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., 1858), 4–11.
7. Quoted in Rezneck, *Business Depressions and Financial Panics*, 120.
8. Historians have found biases in how overseers of the poor responded to neediness in their towns. Most significantly, eighteenth-century overseers tended to warn out women



and people of color in disproportionately large numbers. See Ruth Wallis Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans: Living on the Margin in Early New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 17-20. Early nineteenth-century overseers in Providence, meanwhile, bent over backwards to use the poor laws as a means of patrolling and reducing the black population of the town. See Gabriel Loiacono, "Poor Laws and the Construction of Race in Early Republican Rhode Island," in *Journal of Policy History* 25 (April 2013): 264-287.

9. For example, in 1789, the year George Washington became president, Providence levied a tax of £400, to be divided between the town's property holders according to each taxpayer's property assessment that year. £200 of this collection would go towards poor relief; the rest would be divided among all of the other town expenses, such as bridges, highways, and previously incurred debts (Entry for 24 October 1789 in MSS Providence Town Meeting Minutes Book 7, Providence City Archives, Providence, Rhode Island). By comparison, in 1825, the costs of schools, town debt, and better roads had risen tremendously so that they all roughly equaled poor relief, which cost \$7367.35 out of a total town tax of \$30,000. By 1855, poor relief expenses had grown to \$23,900, but now they were far outstripped by streets (\$76,100), schools (\$58,500), fire (\$45,700), and police (\$41,300). (Howard Kemble Stokes, *Finances and Administration of Providence* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1903], 201)
10. For accounting of the proportion of poor relief to the rest of the town budget after the Dexter Asylum, see Stokes, *Finances and Administration of Providence*, 186-87, 218.
11. Walter I. Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America*, 6th ed. (New York: Free Press, 1999), 51-53, and David Englander, *Poverty and Poor Law Reform in 19th Century Britain, 1834-1914* (New York: Longman, 1998), 5-17.
12. *Report on the Subject of a House of Reformation Made to the City Council of Providence, February 14, 1848* (Providence: Joseph Knowles, 1848), 13-14.
13. Thomas R. Hazard, *Report on the Poor and Insane in Rhode Island* (Providence: John Knowles, 1851).
14. Franklin, "No. 15," *Letters to the Secretary of State on the Subject of Pauperism* (First published in the *Columbia Republican*, in the fall of 1853 (n.p.: n.d.). The copy of these letters I located is a pamphlet in the holdings of Duke University's library, made available online through Archives.org at <https://archive.org/details/letterstosecretaryofstate>. Accessed 28 November, 2015. The pamphlet appears to be an excerpt from New York Senate, "Document 72," Documents 1855, III (Albany, 1855). I have not been able to locate a copy either of the New York Senate Documents volume or of the *Columbia Republican* of 1853.
15. "An Ordinance Prescribing the Mode of Temporary Relief to Poor Persons," in *Charters and Ordinances of the City of Providence* (Providence, 1854), 237, quoted in Andrew Morris, "The Problem of Poverty: Public Relief and Reform in Postbellum Providence," *Rhode Island History* 56 (February 1998), 8.
16. *Organization of the Municipal Government of the City of Providence, June 4, 1855* (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., City Printers, 1855), 8.
17. *First Annual Report of the Providence Aid Society*, 6, 9.
18. *First Annual Report of the Providence Aid Society*, 5, 9-10.
19. *First Annual Report of the Providence Aid Society*, 9-10.
20. *First Annual Report of the Providence Aid Society*, 7, 9.
21. *Organization of the Municipal Government of the City of Providence, June 2, 1856* (Providence: Knowles, Anthony, & Co., 1856), 7.
22. *Organization of the Municipal Government of the City of Providence, June 8, 1858*, 2nd ed., 4-11.
23. *Semi-Annual Report of the Overseer of the Poor, with the Report of the Select Committee thereon, And Accompanying Documents; to which is added The Annual Report of the City Marshal* (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co.,

1859). For a summary and critique, see S. A. Phillips, "A Review," in *Providence Evening Press*, May 5, 1859, 2.

24. On the 1814 House of Industry in New York, see Joanna Bethune, *The Power of Faith, Exemplified in the Life and Writings of the Late Mrs. Isabella Graham* (New York: American Tract Society, 1843), 347-48. On Boston's House of Industry, see City of Boston Archives and Records Management Division, "Guide to the House of Industry records" accessible at <http://www.cityofboston.gov/archivesandrecords/guide/institutions.asp>. Accessed 28 November 2015. On the New York houses of industry after 1840, see Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The 19th-Century New York City Neighborhood That Invented Tap Dance, Stole Elections, and Became the World's Most Notorious Slum* (New York: Free Press, 2001), Chapter 8.
25. On city officials, see *Providence City Manual or Organization of the Municipal Government for the Year 1906* (Providence: Snow and Farnham, 1906), 216-63. On Stimson's career and death, see "Death of John J. Stimson," *Providence Evening Press*, 20 January 1860, 2. On third-place strawberries, see "The Horticultural Exhibition," *Providence Evening Press*, 22 June 1859, 2. On his work as a wine merchant, see the *Providence Directories* for 1826, 1830, 1838, and 1844. On Stimson's European vacation, see *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (Boston: New England Historical and Genealogical Society, 1860), 293, online at ancestry.com. Accessed 28 November 2015. On his Irish servants, see the 1850 U.S. Census return, "Schedule 1, Free Inhabitants in the 2d Ward City of Providence," 262, online at ancestry.com. Accessed 28 November 2015. On the location of his house, see Henry Frances Walling, *Map of the City of Providence, Rhode Island* (1857) online at <http://ids.lib.harvard.edu/ids/view/32685560?buttons=y>. Accessed 20 January 2016.
26. On Lester's role in the Democratic Party, see, for example, *Newport Mercury*, May 12, 1860, 2. On his religious views, see for example *Providence Evening Press*, October 9, 1869, 1. On his joining the horticultural society, see *Providence Evening Press*, July 28, 1859. On his Irish servants and his sons'

professions, see the 1865 Rhode Island census return of District 54, Ward VI, City of Providence, 111, online at ancestry.com. Accessed 28 November 2015. On his being part of the Providence Aid Society, see *First Annual Report of the Providence Aid Society*, 5.

27. For Guild, there is a short, good biographical sketch by Martha Mitchell in the *Encyclopedia Brunonia* (1993), online at: [http://www.brown.edu/Administration/News\\_Bureau/Databases/Encyclopedia/](http://www.brown.edu/Administration/News_Bureau/Databases/Encyclopedia/). Accessed 28 November 2015. Guild's Irish servant can be seen in the 1860 U.S. Census return, "Schedule 1 - Free Inhabitants in the 1st Ward Providence," 6, online at ancestry.com. Accessed 28 November 2015. His work as chair of the Soldiers' Families Relief Committee can be seen in many Civil War-era newspapers, such as *Providence Evening Press*, October 1, 1862. Bowen's steamship line is advertised in *Providence Evening Press*, April 21, 1859; while the 1860 U.S. Census return, "Schedule 1 - Free Inhabitants in 2d Ward Providence," 13, online at ancestry.com, (Accessed 28 November 2015), describes him as a flour merchant and notes his Irish servants. The *Providence Evening Press*, June 8, 1866, 2, makes clear that Bowen was a Baptist.
28. A definition of "pauper" was necessary in 1843 because the new state constitution used the term for the first time, in defining who was barred from voting under new voting guidelines. The first mention of the definition I have seen is in *Newport Mercury*, June 24, 1843, 2. The definition became part of Rhode Island statutes that year.
29. *Majority and Minority Reports on House of Industry* (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., 1859), 3-7, 11-12.
30. Quoted in *Majority and Minority Reports... on House of Industry*, 4. Emphasis in original.
31. *Majority and Minority Reports... on House of Industry*, 9-10.
32. *Majority and Minority Reports... on House of Industry*, 12.
33. *Majority and Minority Reports... on House of Industry*, 7, 13-14.
34. *Majority and Minority Reports... on House of Industry*, 16-23.
35. *Majority and Minority Reports... on House of Industry*, 16-17.

36. *Majority and Minority Reports... on House of Industry*, 21. Emphasis in original.

37. *Majority and Minority Reports... on House of Industry*, 21-22.
38. On Warwick's rules, see Hazard, *Report on the Poor and Insane*, 69-70. On punishments for inmates who left the Dexter Asylum, see "Record of Offenses at Dexter Asylum," Dexter Asylum Records, MSS 67, Series 1, Subseries 3, Item 23, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, Rhode Island.
39. Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contact: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), chapter 3.
40. *Majority and Minority Reports... on House of Industry*, 16-23.
41. "Organization of the Municipal Government," *Providence Evening Press*, June 7, 1859, 1-2.
42. "Death of John J. Stimson," *Providence Evening Press*, January 20, 1860, 2.
43. "Home Department," *Providence Evening Press*, December 13, 1859, 1.
44. See, for example, *Providence Evening Press*, September 27, 1862, 2.
45. Board of State Charities and Corrections, *Second Report of the Board of State Charities and Corrections in Rhode Island For the Year Ending December 31st, 1870* (Providence: Providence Press Company, 1871), 29-30.
46. Board of State Charities and Corrections, *Third Annual Report of the Board of State Charities and Corrections in Rhode Island, For the Year Ending December 31st, 1871* (Providence: A. Crawford Greene, 1872), 32.
47. A more in-depth description of the woodyard can be found in Morris, "The Problem of Poverty," 12-15. On the early 1850s and woodyards, see Franklin, "No. 15," *Letters to the Secretary of State on the Subject of Pauperism*.



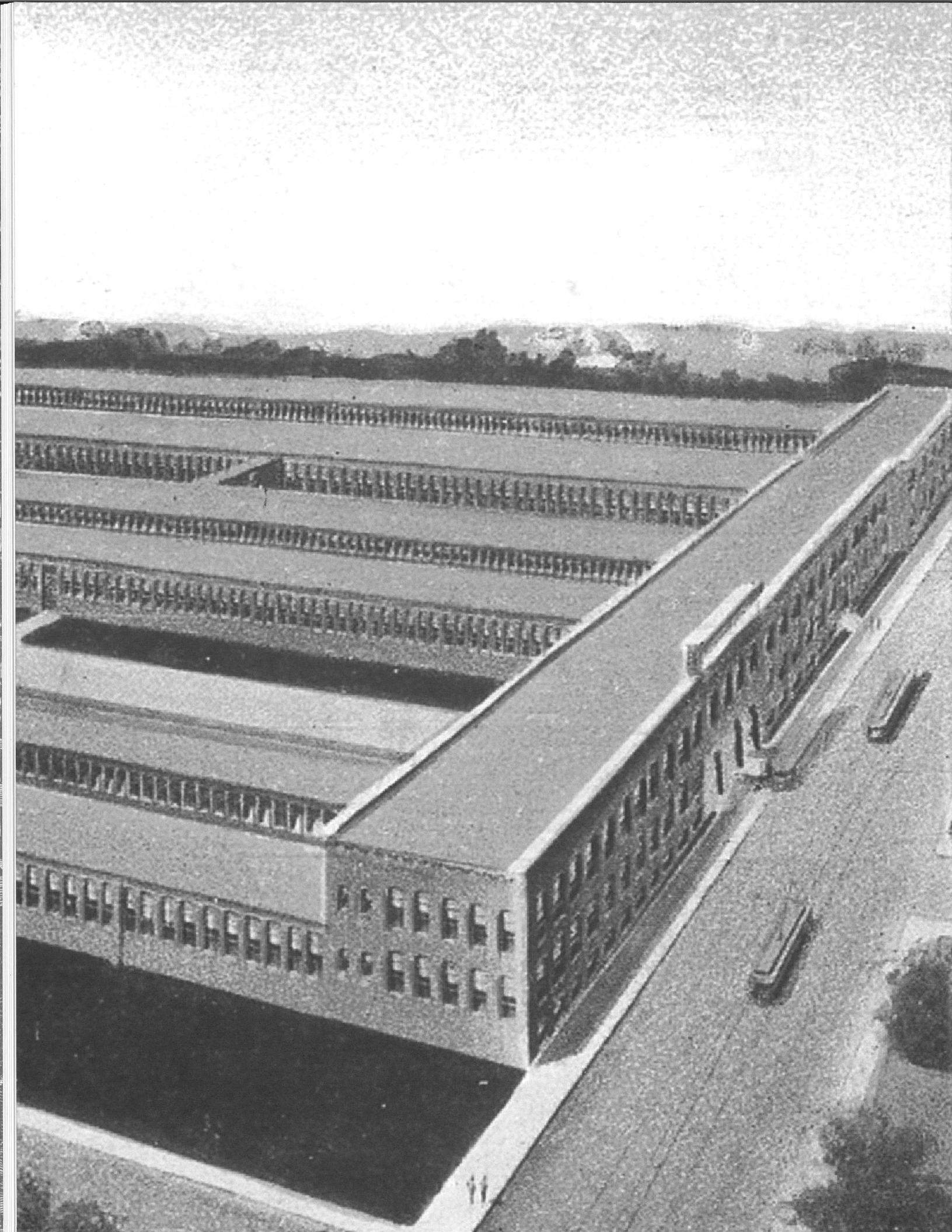
# Shoelaces and Marshmallow Bunnies: Memory, Adaptation and Reuse at Pawtucket's Hope Webbing Mill

RAINA E. FOX

WHILE THE SNOW GATHERS INTO PILES OF BROWN MUSH ON THE streets of Pawtucket on Saturday mornings in the winter, the former Hope Webbing Company Mill is blooming with energy. Rows of kale, radishes, beets, carrots, and apples stretch the length of the long hallways, extolled by smiling vendors who share samples of their wares. Booths of carefully crafted tarts, locally bottled maple syrup, and homemade hand lotion dot the passageway. Children sway to the tune of a bluegrass band, while their parents explore paintings displayed on the walls of artist studios protruding from the corridor. Today, in addition to the Winter Market, the mill is home to artist studios, living spaces, restaurants, independent shops, and the offices of non-profit organizations. ¶

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*Mills of the Hope Webbing Company, postcard, ca. 1907-1915. Courtesy of Hope Artiste Village.*





Yet only a few years ago, the Hope Webbing Company Mill, was slated for demolition, in line to become a big box store. In 2005 developers Urban Smart Growth purchased the property—in hopes of reimagining it as “a cultural destination point.”<sup>1</sup>

Hope Webbing Mill is no stranger to adaptive reuse. Erected in Pawtucket, Rhode Island in 1889 and in continuous use through the 1990s, the mill as Hope Webbing had produced bootstraps, shoelaces, zipper pulls, cotton electric tape, and during World War II, camouflage net tape and parachute harness webbing. When the owners sold the factory in the 1960s to the School House Candy Company it gained new life as workers molded chocolate bunnies, wrapped lollipops, and packaged plastic Easter baskets. After a century of adaptation and reuse, Urban Smart Growth’s reinvention of the Hope Webbing mill as Hope Artiste Village is just the latest page in the building’s longer narrative.

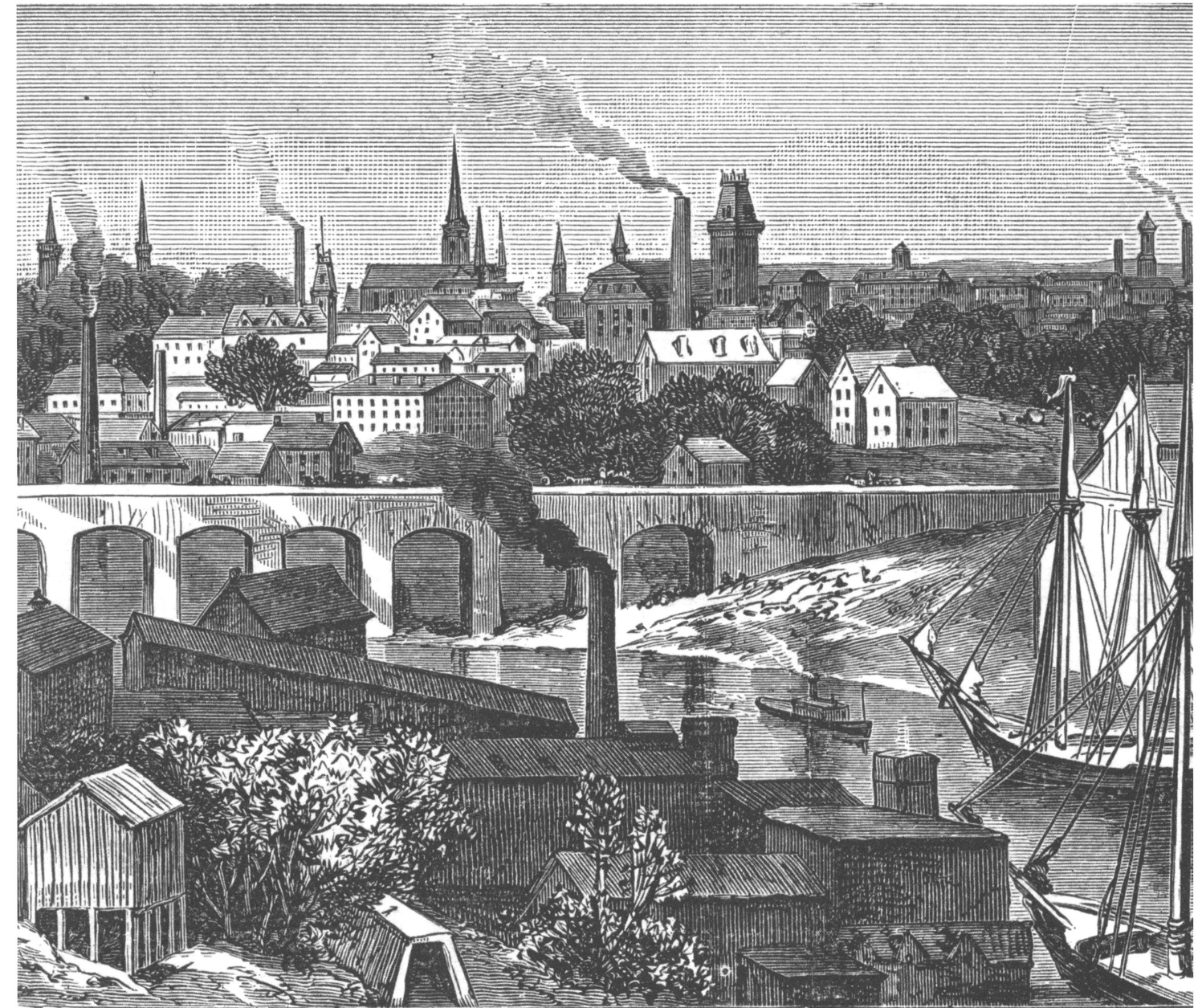
At the same time, Hope Artiste Village represents a significant departure for the building. As a manufacturing facility, the Mill was part of Pawtucket’s industrial landscape and a key player in its local economy, workforce, and social history from its construction in 1889 until it was abandoned in the late 1990s. Even today many in Pawtucket hold vivid memories of the Mill and the now faded period of industrial history it represents. Though Hope

Artiste Village does include some small scale manufacturing—Seven Stars Bakery and New Harvest Coffee, for example—the Mill’s purpose has decidedly shifted away from one solely of production. Indeed it is still in the process not only of defining itself as a “village” of businesses, residents, and events, but is negotiating a new relationship with the Pawtucket community around it. Understanding the site’s labor and community histories not only helps us to see the Hope Webbing mill’s role as part of the city’s shifting social and industrial landscape, but illuminates the importance of designing with—and sharing—site-based memory.

#### WEBBING AND DUCKPINS:

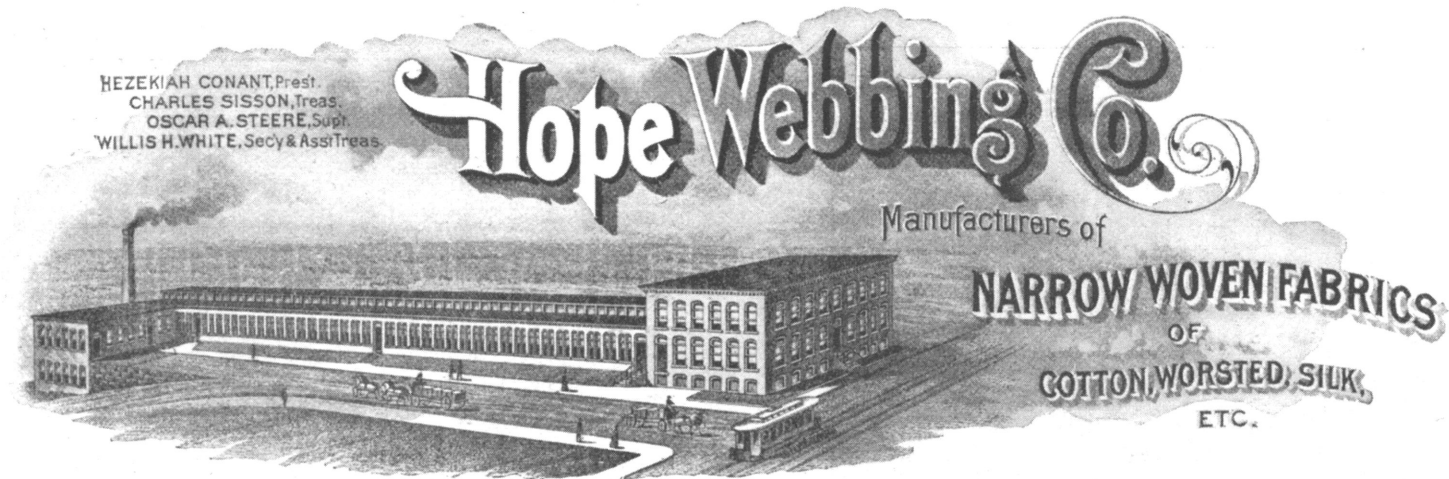
##### *The Hope Webbing Company 1889–1955*

As Hope Webbing Company, the mill’s industrial and labor histories reflect broader social and economic changes of late nineteenth to mid-twentieth-century Pawtucket and the broader United States. Founded in 1883 by Charles Sisson and Oscar Steere, Hope Webbing Company was originally a ten-loom shop on Sprague Street in Providence that made webbing (woven fabric) for boot straps.<sup>2</sup> In 1889 it expanded to fifteen workers and sixty looms, when the company constructed its new factory off Main Street in the newly chartered city of Pawtucket which was rapidly becoming more and more populated by mills.<sup>3</sup> Hope Webbing



The Hope Webbing Company was located in Pawtucket, considered to be the birthplace of the industrial revolution. This view of the city appeared in the *Providence Board of Trade Journal* in 1889 (p. 14). Rhode Island Historical Society Collection (RHi X17 2375).





Mill would be state-of-the-art, with long wings to allow maximum light and air through the many windows and a boiler house providing steam for heat and mechanical power. Built in eight major phases between 1890 and 1930, the building expanded with the company. During one phase of its expansion in 1912, the company proclaimed the Mill: “a model in every respect. The buildings are ornate, well lighted and ventilated and every convenience for successful operation has been secured. It is probably the largest webbing factory in the world.”<sup>4</sup>

By 1895, 350 men, women, and children were employed by the company, making 1,500,000 yards of products per day, including cotton, jute, worsted wool, hat bands, non-elastic webs, hose supports, and electrical machinery installation.<sup>5</sup> In 1912, there were nine hundred looms and between “1000–1200 hands” working at the mill, producing 25,000 varieties of webbing.<sup>6</sup> In 1923 the mill grew by 100,000 square feet, with 1100 looms and 1100 braiders. By World War II, the Hope Webbing Company claimed to have woven almost 2,000,000 miles of tape during its lifetime, changing with the times to produce horse blanket bindings, corset bone casing, Model T Ford clutch and brake linings, pioneering zipper tapes, electric tape, products for both World Wars, and many other forms of belting, banding, binding, braids, cords and labels.<sup>7</sup>

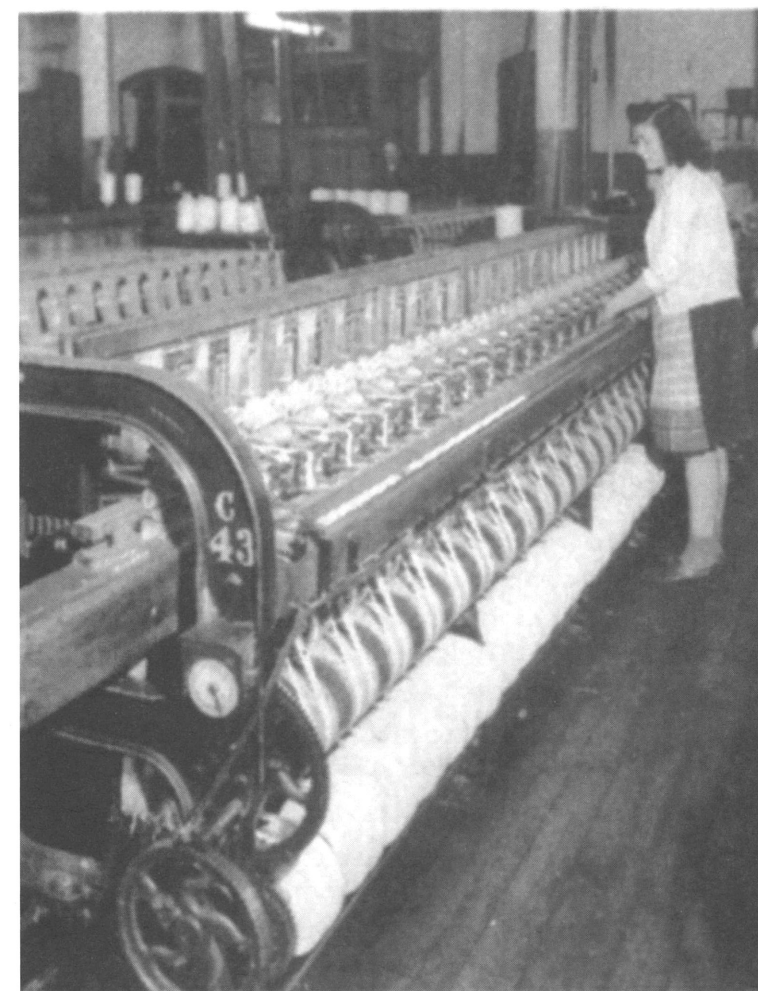
Hope Webbing Company, printed advertisement, in *Providence Journal of Commerce*, 1897, p. 333. Rhode Island Historical Society Collection (RHi X17 2372).

Working at the mill was difficult. Women, men, and children spent long hours doing monotonous and often dangerous tasks, operating heavy machinery, crawling into tight spaces, and despite the modern windows, breathing in the dust and particles of their trade, all for low wages.<sup>8</sup> While Rhode Island had passed a child labor law in 1857 that prohibited children under twelve years old from working, regulated the working hours of children under fifteen (no more than eleven hours in a day, and not before five a.m. or after 7:30 p.m.), and required that they be in school for three months in the year, adherence by factory owners was lax. During the 1906–1907 school year, for example, only 68.8 percent of students enrolled in Pawtucket schools attended.<sup>9</sup> Progressive era reformers took an interest in changing these conditions, and photographer Lewis Hine used the mills of Pawtucket as the subject for the “Child Welfare Exhibit: 1912–1913.”

Many overworked, underpaid Hope Webbing Company mill workers themselves actively organized for change, primarily as members of the Textile Workers Organizing Committee of the C.I.O., Local No. 14. In February 1913, for example, approximately four hundred workers from Hope Webbing Mill



Female employees of Hope Webbing Company, 1918. The caption notes that “all wear bloomers.” National Archives, identifier 533661.



Double Bank Tape Loom at the Hope Webbing Company Factory. *Hope: Serving All Industries*, booklet, published by Hope Webbing Company, ca. 1945. Rhode Island Historical Society Collection (RHi X17 2366).





Lewis Hine photographed children working in factories in Rhode Island. The image, "Girl at the drawing-room-frame of the weave-room, Lorraine Mills, Pawtucket, R.I." was taken in 1912, as part of a series on child labor in Rhode Island. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, hclc 02733.



Weave Shed at the Hope Webbing Company. *Hope: Serving All Industries*, booklet, published by Hope Webbing Company, ca. 1945. Rhode Island Historical Society Collection (RHi X17 2367).

went on strike, demanding an increase in wages as well as advances on their pay.<sup>10</sup> Although their application for a parade permit, which would have allowed them to play music as they marched, was denied by local police, the workers paraded down the streets of Pawtucket, "without music other than that made by some of the marchers, who sang in Polish and other foreign language[s]," carrying "the customary I.W.W. [Industrial Workers of the World] placards, including the motto, 'One for All, All for One.'"<sup>11</sup> When they reached Foresters' Hall, I.W.W. leading labor activists Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Arturo Giovannitti addressed the crowd. Hope Webbing Company's owners did not meet all the strikers' demands, but insisted that the company had "never reduced wages, as other textile mills have," and that, "[t]he employees who left work . . . will be taken back if they apply in a reasonable time."<sup>12</sup> The *Providence Journal* reported a number of other strikes at the mill, in 1916, 1935 and 1937, for instance.<sup>13</sup> These interactions reflect an ongoing labor struggle between Hope Webbing Company managers and workers. It is perhaps not surprising that

the company was enthusiastic about joining the welfare capitalism trend.

From the 1880s through the Great Depression, many companies started to offer recreational programs for their employees and other incentives like life insurance. These employer-sponsored programs became known as "welfare capitalism," offerings that were designed to provide, "a vaccine against labor unrest."<sup>14</sup> In addition to creating space for healthy leisure, management hoped that if employees felt a sense of ownership and connection to the company they would be less likely to organize against it.

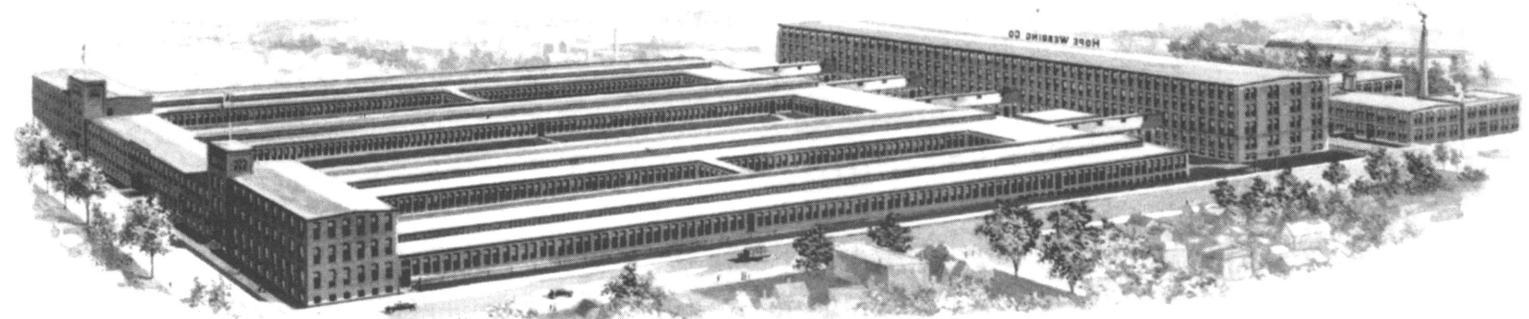
It was in this atmosphere of labor strikes and broader progressive era reformation that Hope Webbing Company began to construct spaces for recreation in the building itself, including a club room, assembly areas, and a six-lane duckpin bowling alley that remains functional today. In the 1920s, the "Hope Club," comprised





The Hope Webbing Company experienced a surge of business during World War II when it manufactured products for the armed forces. *Hope: Serving All Industries*, booklet, published by the Hope Webbing Company, ca. 1945. Rhode Island Historical Society Collection (RHi X 17 2370).

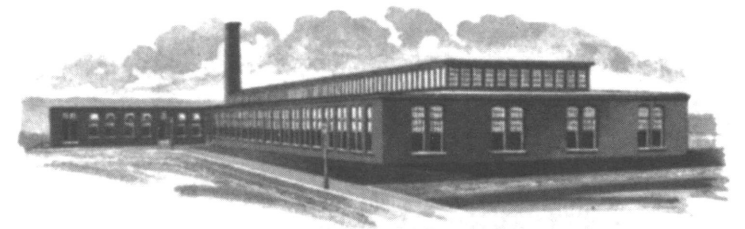
The Extensive Hope Webbing Factory had a central court between weave sheds. *Textile Age* (July, 1944) Rhode Island Historical Society Collections (RHi X17 2371).



FACTORY AT PAWTUCKET, R. I.

Hope Webbing Company, Pawtucket, R.I. *Hope: Serving All Industries*, booklet, published by Hope Webbing Company, ca. 1945. Collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society (RHi X17 2364).

Hope Webbing Company original mill in Providence. The company moved to Pawtucket where a new mill was built, in 1889. *Serving All Industries*, booklet, printed by Hope Webbing Company, ca. 1945. Collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society (RHi X17 2365).



of employees and directors of the company, hosted carnivals, speakers, athletic events, and performances. For the "Follies of 1923," the club organized a day of games such as an "obstacle race, cracker race, peanut race, cardboard race, balloon race, and barrel stave race," as well as "numerous side shows, amateur circus stunts, athletic events and dancing" for an audience of over 1,500.<sup>15</sup>

During the Depression, Hope Webbing suffered a period of lowered sales, but it gained new life during World War II. The company received a number of significant orders from the United States army, air force, and government and employed 3,380 workers during the war when it was the largest employer in Pawtucket. It claimed to be the largest thread mill in the world. Operating 1,100 weaving looms and 1,100 braiders on 600,000 square feet of floor space, the company produced war materials such as camouflage net tape, parachute harness webbing, and clothing tapes. The Company proudly proclaimed that:

The fighting man creeps through the mud and rubble of a de-mined lane outlined by tape; he operates his guns under acres of camouflage nets bound together by tape, he bails out of his distressed plane and waits with confidence for his web harness to take the impact of the opening chute; his clothing and equipment of every kind offer a veritable catalog of tapes and webbings. The company is producing, therefore, many miles per day of tapes, webbings, and sleeveings both under direct contract and with government purchasing agencies and for contractors manufacturing war material.<sup>16</sup>

With its history of woven fabrics manufacturing, Hope Webbing Company was perfectly equipped to fabricate essential products for the war, and it provided employment to many residents of Pawtucket and the surrounding area.





#### SWEETS AND HOLIDAY BASKETS:

##### *School House Candy, 1956–1998*

Despite a spike in production during World War II, Hope Webbing Company struggled to find its footing in the aftermath of the war. By 1955 the financial strain was too much. In 1956 the owners sold the mill to a New York textile operator, George A. Hovarth, who then sold it to HW Realty of Providence which was owned by the Rosen Family. Oral histories suggest that the reason for this complicated interaction was that the owners of the Hope Webbing Company Mill refused to sell to a Jewish family, so the Rosens brought in an intermediary.<sup>17</sup> HW Realty leased part of the plant back to Hope Webbing, set up manufacturing for their companies, School House Candy and Rosbro Plastics, in the preparing building, and used part of the weave shed complex as warehouse space.

By the time School House Candy expanded its operations into Hope Webbing Mill, they had been in the candy business for over forty years. In 1912, at the age of seventeen, a first-generation Jewish-American named Samuel Rosen decided to apply the \$1600 his parents had scrupulously saved for his college tuition, to start a business. Because Samuel started the company when he was under the legal age of eighteen,

The duckpin bowling alleys that Hope Webbing created for its employees at the Mill have been restored and are currently featured as a highlight of Hope Artiste Village. (Photograph by the author)

he named it E. Rosen Company, after his father Ephraim, to circumvent state laws. Initially his work consisted of candy “jobbing,” selling wholesale candy from Hershey, Wrigley, Necco, and other suppliers to area stores. Soon Samuel’s brother Herman (Hy), father, and brother-in-law Charles Rouslin joined the company and together they expanded to selling soda machines and, later, producing the candy itself. In his memoirs, Rosen describes a series of experiments—a wire stand holding rows of colorful “Dixie Pop” lollipops to look like a Christmas tree, “Uncle Hy” candy bars wrapped in amber cellophane, a folded cardboard book printed with nursery rhymes and filled with a lollipop which caught the eye of chain stores and helped turn the company into a large-scale operation. “At one time we had 300 girls working on [the cardboard books], and it was a howling success,” Rosen declared. E. Rosen Company came to specialize not only in candy but its packaging, creating holiday cards, Christmas ornaments, Easter baskets, and other trinkets to transform the simple candy into innovative holiday gifts.<sup>18</sup>



Breaktime Bowl and Bar, 2016. The Breaktime Bowl and Bar was once a six-lane duckpin bowling alley installed in the Hope Webbing Factory around 1920 in an attempt to appeal to workers and prevent them from unionizing. Photograph courtesy of Urban Smart Growth.

Despite the two factory buildings constructed in 1933 and the “School House” purchased in 1943 for storage (Charles Street Primary School, the Rosens’ own alma mater, about which Samuel wrote: “The rumor around was that I couldn’t graduate, so I had to buy it”), by the mid-1950s School House Candy needed more space.<sup>19</sup> The Hope Webbing Mill was an ideal choice. With its multiple wings, five-story preparing building, and airy spaces, E. Rosen Company was able to combine its School House Candy production and Rosbro Plastics packaging manufacturing under one roof, while still leaving a wing for the Hope Webbing Company to continue its own production.

In her book, *Elegy for a Disease: A Personal and Cultural History of Polio*, Anne Finger describes the significance of the School House Candy Company for a young person in Pawtucket in the 1950s and 1960s:

Every teenager in the Providence area in the 1960s seemed to have worked at School House Candy—even if only for a week or two. Perhaps

there were jobs in the hidden recesses of the factory that required skills—mixing the chemicals and sugars and starches that went into the candy, maintaining adequate stocks of these ingredients—but the jobs high school kids got could be learned within minutes. Probably the newer you were at the job, the more efficient you were—you had not yet been demoralized by boredom nor had you figured out how to goof off while seeming to work.<sup>20</sup>

According to Finger, workers were paid the minimum wage of \$1.60 an hour to wrap lollipops, box marshmallow bunnies, and pack plastic Easter baskets. She recalls her sister’s description of work in the factory:

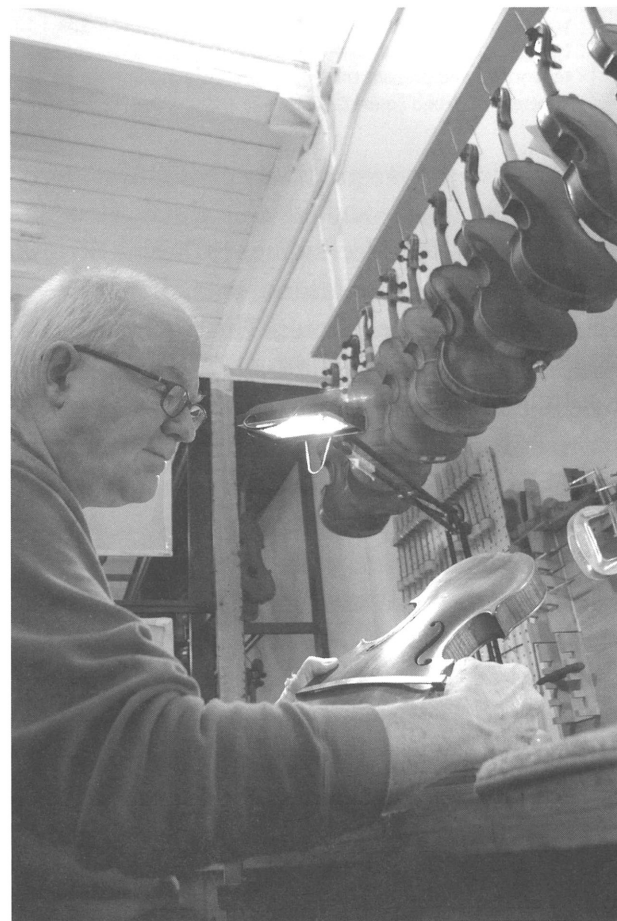
Down an endlessly turning conveyor belt would flow a river of one type of candy, perhaps lemon yellow lollipops—yellow lollipops, yellow lollipops, yellow lollipops, yellow lollipops, yellow lollipops, yellow lollipops. You stared at those yellow lollipops and thought you could never in your life be as sick of anything as you were of the sight of yellow lollipops. And then you would see that the yellow lollipops had been replaced by red lollipops. At first there would be relief. Something different to look at! And then, after a few minutes of watching red lollipops,





Wintertime Farmers Market, 2015. The Wintertime Farmers Market takes place in what were once open air courtyards between the wings of the Hope Webbing Mill, now covered and accessible year-round. Photograph courtesy of Farm Fresh Rhode Island.

McCarten Violins, LLC, Hope Artiste Village, 2016. Hope Artiste Village now includes a number of artisan enterprises, including McCarten Violins, who make and restore fine stringed instruments in what was once a factory wing for weaving. Photograph courtesy of Urban Smart Growth.



red lollipops, red lollipops, red lollipops, red lollipops, red lollipops, red lollipops coming down the conveyor belt, you would find yourself longing to see something else, anything else—even a yellow lollipop.<sup>21</sup>

Yet teenagers were not the only employees at School House Candy. People of all ages and backgrounds worked shifts as long as ten hours in a day.<sup>22</sup> The factory itself was never empty. From six a.m. until two a.m. machines whirled with life, then paused for four hours while a specialized crew cleaned and maintained the space and machinery. Constant upkeep was necessary to combat the daily accumulation of sugar, glucose, corn syrup, and other materials associated with the candy-making process. Robert Dionne, who has worked as an electrician at the mill building since the early 1990s recalls “tunneling through” piled bags of sugar and corn starch, gallons of oil and corn syrup in the corridors used as storage. After a day’s work, “sometimes you would come home, take off your clothes and throw them right in the trashcan. You would smell like corn starch and be entirely covered with it,” Dionne remembered.<sup>23</sup> While the candy was produced in the School House Candy part of the mill and an adjoining five-story building, the Rosen Company’s subsidiary Rosbro Plastics produced the holiday pumpkins, Easter bunnies and baskets, votive candle holders and other assorted plastic items sold with the candy, in a different part of the Mill.

Meanwhile, from the 1950s onward, in its branch of the building Hope Webbing continued its legacy, producing shoe laces, parachute chords, thin metal wire to sew car seats, and other forms of webbing. Yet what was once a human-powered mechanized system was replaced with equipment that ran throughout the day and night, seven days a week, with a single person attending to two to three hundred machines.

In the 1990s the mill experienced change once again. Hope Webbing left in 1995 for a more modern facility in Cumberland where the company, now called Hope Global, is located

today.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, E. Rosen Company had been operating School House Candy for ninety years and had become a leading supplier of holiday gift baskets, while making jelly beans, lollipops, hard candy, and other items for chains such as Wal-Mart and K-Mart to sell under their brand names. The Rosen Company had manufacturing plants in New Bedford and Fall River Massachusetts, as well as Central Falls and Pawtucket, employing some four hundred people at the Hope Webbing mill, but it “had run into hard times and [was] unable to pay back a \$15 million bank loan.”<sup>25</sup> Over a dozen companies competed to buy the business when it went into receivership in July 1998; Sherwood Brands won the bid for four million dollars. Though Sherwood Brands continued to operate out of the Hope Webbing mill for several years, the company ultimately moved its manufacturing to Virginia, laying off about one hundred workers.

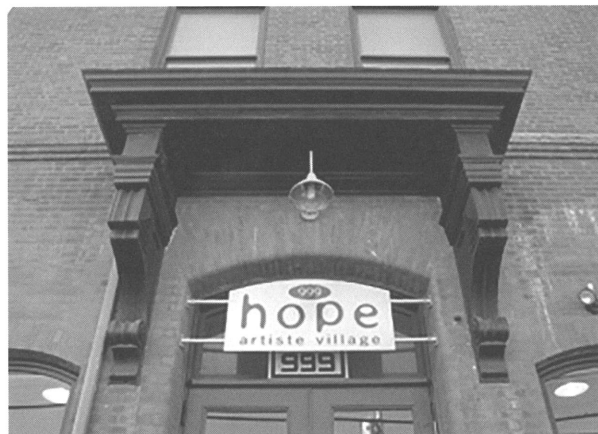
In January 2001, a court-appointed receiver, Allan M. Shine, proclaimed the Hope Webbing Mill complex in “deplorable condition.” He sought a \$46,597-a-year tax break from the city to allow Sherwood Brands to operate out of the complex and to persuade a group of investors to hold on to the property. The investors group—M & P Management agreed to pay \$900,000 for the mill complex, but in the process of closing the property in July 2004, a fire broke out in the former boiler room, plunging the mill into deeper disrepair.<sup>26</sup> When Urban Smart Growth acquired the complex in 2005, it was threatened with demolition for the erection of a big box retail store adjacent to the interstate highway, I-95.<sup>27</sup>

#### THE MILL BECOMES A VILLAGE:

##### *Hope Artiste Village 2005–2016*

Urban Smart Growth, a real estate development and management company, based in Los Angeles with an office in Rhode Island, whose mission is to “create diverse, sustainable and successful communities,” with an eye to “preserving and enhancing natural and cultural resources,” saw great potential in the tenuous Hope Webbing





Hope Artiste Village exterior entry, former entrance to Hope Webbing Company. Photograph courtesy of Urban Smart Growth.

mill. Working with a team of contractors, engineers, and architects, the company transformed the building into a mix of manufacturing spaces, offices, retail spaces, live/work studios, bar/restaurants, and music venues. It currently houses over one hundred tenants, and draws crowds to the rehabilitated duck pin bowling alley, shops, and Wintertime Farmers Market.

Urban historian Dolores Hayden argues that “as a nation, Americans are increasingly attuned to rescuing the natural qualities of places—the creeks and the live oaks. But we need to nurture the social characteristics of places too if we are to retain social history in the urban landscape, and learn to design with memory rather than against it.”<sup>28</sup> Old buildings, plazas, factories, orange groves, and the other places where we live our lives are the vessels through which we remember and interpret our histories. As a result, the value in preserving them is that they “tell current residents about the texture and pace of life in the city as previous generations experienced it, men, women, and children of every ethnic group.”<sup>29</sup> Particularly in the case of those individuals whose stories are rarely told in history books, places are the key to memories that would otherwise have no anchor. Adaptive use, therefore, is a process of negotiating one’s relation to history, as rooted in a place.

Hope Artiste Village is intentionally “designing with memory,” preserving the structured layers of history embodied in the Mill building even as it shifts interior walls to adapt the uses of space. Yet the stories preserved in its walls

of industrial history as the Hope Webbing Company Mill, labor organizing through the Textile Workers Organizing Committee, candy production as School House Candy, and the many smaller narratives of memory are largely quiet. As current owner of the building, perhaps Urban Smart Growth’s challenge will be finding ways to preserve and share the Mill’s stories while settling into its current manifestation as Hope Artiste Village, and set the stage for future iterations yet unknown.

In this way, Hope Webbing serves as a case study in a larger movement towards adaptive reuse in Pawtucket and beyond. Once the hotbed of the Industrial Revolution and still home to some companies such as Hasbro, Inc., economic change left factories abandoned throughout the city. Today in Downtown Pawtucket’s “Arts District” alone, former mills have been converted into approximately 750 residential units and live/work spaces such as Riverfront Lofts, Union Wadding and Bayley Street Lofts.<sup>30</sup> Whether this adaptation will revive or weaken the city’s economy, strengthen or displace communities, revive or absolve memories has yet to be determined. ♦

Raina Elise Fox received her M.A. in Public Humanities from Brown University in 2014, with a focus on global social justice, memory studies, and civic engagement. She has worked with art and history museums, creative non-profits, universities, historic sites, international development and community-based programs in Minneapolis, Washington D.C., Providence, Chicago, Boston, Hong Kong, India, and elsewhere. She is currently working as Programs Manager at Millennium Campus Network based in Boston, Massachusetts.

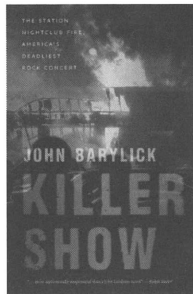
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3. Pawtucket was chartered in 1886 and elected its first Mayor, Frederick Sayles, who was a prominent manufacturer. “Pawtucket,” Daniel Coit Gilman, et. al., eds., *The New International Encyclopaedia*, vol. 13. (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1903), 827.
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11. “Mill Strikers Defy Police.”
12. “Mill Strikers Defy Police.”
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14. Ronald W. Schatz, *The Electrical Workers: A History of Labor at General Electric and Westinghouse 1923-1960* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 20.
15. “Hope Club to Give Carnival Saturday: Organization at Pawtucket Webbing Company to Present Affair in New Building, Big Attendance Expected.” *Providence Journal*, April 4, 1923.
16. “Hope Webbing Company,” *Textile Age* (July 1944): 4.
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18. Simon Rosen, “How School House Candy Started,” *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* 11 (November 1993): 388.
19. Rosen, “School House Candy,” 392–93.
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23. Author’s interview with Robert Dionne, December 9, 2013.
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# Rhode Island Book Notes

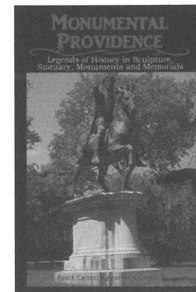
WINTER / SPRING 2016



## *Killer Show: The Station Nightclub Fire, America's Deadliest Rock Concert*

JOHN BARYLICK  
University Press of New England, 2012;  
a paperback edition was released in 2015

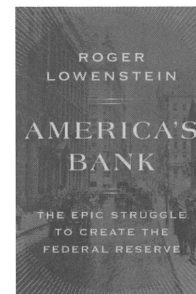
A book about the tragic fire at the Station nightclub in West Warwick that occurred on February 20, 2003. The author has served as an attorney for families of the victims of this heartbreaking tragedy.



## *Monumental Providence*

PAUL F. CARANCI AND  
HEATHER CARANCI  
Stillwater River Publications, 2015

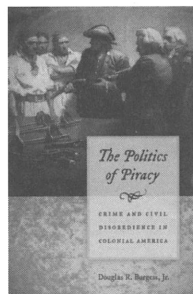
A volume on statues, monuments and memorials in public spaces in Providence.



## *America's Bank: The Epic Struggle to Create the Federal Reserve*

ROGER LOWENSTEIN  
Penguin Press, 2015

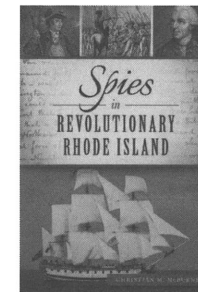
Lowenstein documents the conflicts and political strategies that led to the creation of the Federal Reserve in 1913. A principal figure in the narrative is Rhode Island's Nelson Aldrich who was a leading politician in the United States Senate during the Gilded Age.



## *The Politics of Piracy: Crime and Civil Disobedience in Colonial America*

DONALD R. BURGESS, JR.  
University Press of New England, 2015

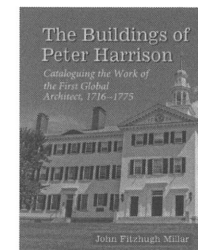
The author argues that laws concerning piracy and illegal trade had a great impact on the emergence of the independence movement in the American colonies. One chapter is titled, "A Bloody Crew of Privateers': Resistance and Rights in Rhode Island."



## *Spies in Revolutionary Rhode Island*

CHRISTIAN MCBURNEY  
Arcadia Press, 2014

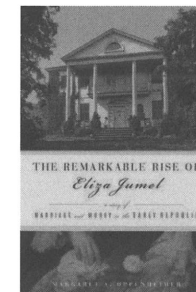
An account of both British and American spies operating in Newport and Providence during the War for Independence.



## *The Buildings of Peter Harrison: Cataloging the Work of the First Global Architect 1716-1775*

JOHN FITZHUGH MILLAR  
McFarland, 2014

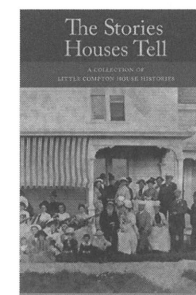
A history of the life and work of British-born architect Peter Harrison who designed the Redwood Library, the Touro Synagogue and the Brick Market building in Newport. Harrison's papers were destroyed when revolutionary sympathizers burned his house in New Haven in 1775; a companion website to the book has recreations of Harrison's architectural drawings.



## *The Remarkable Rise of Eliza Jumel: A Story of Marriage and Money in the Early Republic*

MARGARET A. OPPENHEIMER  
Chicago Review Press, 2016

A biography of Eliza Bowen Jumel, a native of Rhode Island who grew up in poverty and eventually became a wealthy, noted resident of New York City.

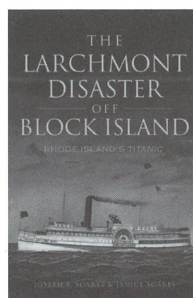


## *The Stories Houses Tell: A Collection of Little Compton House Histories*

MARJORY O'TOOLE, et. al., with an  
afterward by MARIAN PIERRE-LOUIS  
Little Compton Historical Society, 2015

Oral histories, photographs and intricate research inform the histories of a dozen historic houses and properties in Little Compton.

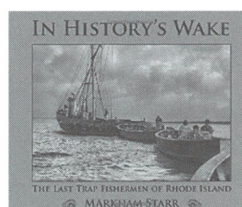




*The Larchmont Disaster off  
Block Island: Rhode Island's  
Titanic*

JOSEPH P. SOARES AND JANICE  
SOARES  
History Press, 2015

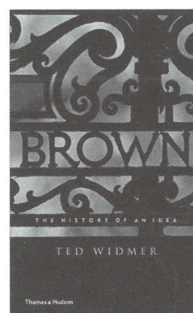
An account of the February 11, 1907 collision between two ships off Block Island. The incident is considered to be one of the most deadly maritime events in New England waters.



*In History's Wake: The  
Last Trap Fishermen of  
Rhode Island*

MARKHAM STARR  
Wesleyan University Press, 2015

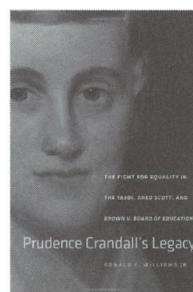
A photographic essay documenting the few remaining fishermen and women of Rhode Island who use a floating trap system. The text draws on oral histories and first-person accounts.



*Brown: The History  
of an Idea*

TED WIDMER,  
Thames & Hudson, 2015

A popular history of Brown University, written on the occasion of its 250th anniversary.



*Prudence Crandall's Legacy:  
The Fight for Equality in the  
1830s, Dred Scott and Brown  
v. Board of Education*

DONALD E. WILLIAMS,  
Wesleyan University Press, 2015

An account of the legal battles of Prudence Crandall who established a school for African-American girls at her home in Connecticut in the nineteenth century. Her first pupil was Sarah Harris, of Kingston, R.I.; other young women from Rhode Island were also pupils there.