

Historic considerations of the district

The City of Providence Department of Art, Culture + Tourism recognizes the deep history of this land as a cultural meeting ground between indigenous people, then European settlers, enslaved Africans and free blacks, and later immigrants who came to work on the waterfront, and today refugees and new arrivals from across the globe. The site is stained by the imaginary of the slave trade and the real history of human chattel slavery, as well as violent removal and assimilation of Indigenous lifeways and people to enrich white European settlers, and later coalitions of pro-growth capitalists. The reclaimed 195 land (made available as a result of the relocation of Interstate 95) is connected to a half-century history of pathbreaking investment in the downtown cultural economy and life, but it was a site of entrepreneurial investment and creativity long before. Looking ahead, all models of projected sea level rise demonstrate that the site will be impacted.

Indigenous Lifeways and History:

- Southern New England's Pequot, Wampanoag, and Narragansett were migratory and their **economies were based on agriculture and hunting, fishing and gathering**. They moved with yearly cycles to established places to best exploit seasonal resources:
 - Indigenous people harvested fish and shellfish, trapped ducks and geese, hunted, and gathered plant foods.
 - They burned large areas to create meadows to attract deer for meat and to open fields for planting maize, beans, and squash. Fire-resistant trees such as oak, hickory and chestnut produced a fall nut harvest.
 - Their settlements were never very large, but in winter they gathered inland in sheltered valleys. There several families lived in longhouses built like wigwams.
 - They relied on fresh shellfish, stored food, and hunting to survive the cold, lean months.
- Weybosset Street was a site where **three important Indian trails met**, one coming down from the north, the second up from the southeast Mount Hope region called the Wampanoag Trail, and the third up from Connecticut in the southwest called the Pequot Trail.
- **Roger Williams** spent a lifetime trying to forge closer ties with the Wampanoag and the Narragansett tribes. The Narragansett deeded him the land for Providence and, with the Wampanoag, helped the colony in its early months.
- The **Weybosset Bridge**—originally known as the **Muddy Bridge**—was a sturdy expanse eighteen-feet wide with a creaking draw in the middle that was the town's first public enterprise, operated for a time by Roger Williams himself, and connecting the east and west sides of the Great Salt Cove. It served mainly to carry droves of cattle and hogs that farmers brought to town for slaughter.
- Adjacent to the Weybosset Bridge public art mural "Still Here" by Gaia (commissioned in 2018 by The Avenue Concept) commemorates the Narragansett people's ongoing relationship to the land, plants and animals around the basin.

Rhode Island's Slave Economy and Market Square:

- Wealthy families in 18th century Rhode Island were heavily dependent on the **slave trade** as a major source of capital.
- Merchants from Rhode Island mounted more than a thousand slave ship voyages carrying over 100,000 Africans into New World slavery.
- Directly across the bridge at the foot of Prospect Hill stood **Market Square**, an open common that was crowded during the day with carts, loose livestock, and shoppers seeking produce. Stalls lined the "cheapside," where artisans and tinkers sold housewares and handicrafts.
- Many, including some university professors, believe that Market Square, by the Providence River, was a **slave market** where prominent Providence families including the Browns and those in their employ sold enslaved Africans. Many more believe that the Brown mansions had **tunnels** through which slaves were herded in secret from the wharves below. (*New Yorker*, Sept 12, 2005)

Industrialization:

- Providence **has a strategic location** 35 miles north of open ocean, with many waterways and tributaries connecting its port with its hinterlands.
- In 1790 the first textile mill in America opened on the Blackstone River in Pawtucket where inexpensive clothing was made from cotton harvested by enslaved Africans in the south.
- Between 1790 and 1960 nearly 300 **textile mills** opened in Rhode Island; many along the Moshassuck River, the Woonasquatucket River, and the West River - all of which feed into the Providence River that leads from the cove out to the bay.
- Seril Dodge and his nephew Nehemiah Dodge started the **manufacture of jewelry** in Providence in 1794. By 1890, there were more than 200 firms with almost 7,000 workers in Providence.

Early 20th Century Immigrant Life:

- Prized as crew for whalers, **Cape Verdeans**, often called the first willing African immigrants in Providence, followed seafaring trades back to New England as the whaling industry declined at the end of the 19th century.
- As non-English speaking immigrants with little or no education, Cape Verdeans filled the need for unskilled labor in Rhode Island as **longshoremen**, domestics, cooks and factory workers in manufacturing, textile mills, and the jewelry industry.
- The Cape Verdean community of Fox Point settled near the waterfront and the Port of Providence in **tenements** stretching along South Main Street and Wickenden Street.
- Once a **bustling port** for loose cargo-lumber, coal, and scrap iron, most of the men from "the Point" worked the boats as proud members of Local 1329 of the I.L.A. (the International Longshoremen's Association).

Deindustrialization, White Flight and Urban Renewal:

- By the 1920s Providence's **industrial machine began to falter** as employers left the state to access cheaper labor in the US south.
- Between 1929 and 1931, employment in Providence's **textile industry declined** by 40%, in the jewelry industry by 47%, and in the base metal industry by 38%.

- By the end of the 1950s Providence experienced intense **urban decay**, much of it abetted by **newly built I-195 and I-95 highways** that cut through its industrial and commercial core in the service of expanding suburbs.
- The **population of Providence declined** 16.6% between 1950 and 1960, the second largest drop experienced by any American city at the time. By 1970 it had dropped by another 13.7%

Historic Preservation and Gentrification:

- John Nicholas Brown (descendent of slaver and Brown University founder John and industrial pioneer Moses) called the first meeting of the **Providence Preservation Society** (PPS) in 1956.
- PPS partnered with the City to solicit \$50,000 from HUD to fund the **College Hill Plan**, a blueprint for preservation-based residential development in the City.
- Public and private financing sped the **gentrification** of Benefit Street, a section populated mostly by African American and Cape Verdean homeowners.

The Downtown Renaissance:

- **Eight separate but related construction projects** were realized in Providence between 1981 and 2000.
- The \$169 million **Capital Center** project incorporated the railroad and river relocations; the construction of the new Providence Station rail depot; the construction of a new highway interchange with I-95; and the construction of Waterplace Park.
- Redevelopment of downtown followed **huge public and private investments** in the moving of the river and the development of the Waterplace park, as well as Providence Performing Arts Center, several new hotels, a new convention center, and the Providence Place Mall.
- Artist Barnaby Evans installed the first **WaterFire** in 1994. Since 1996, the nonprofit organization, in partnership with the City of Providence, has played a significant role in defining Providence as a global cultural tourism destination that attracts an estimated one million visitors annually.

I-195 Relocation // Iway:

- Twenty years ago, the Providence Foundation and the City of Providence requested that the Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT) relocate the alignment of Interstate 195 through Providence, which physically isolated Downtown from both the Jewelry District and much of the waterfront.
- In 1997, RIDOT agreed to relocate the freeway viaduct to the south along a similar alignment as the Providence Hurricane Barrier.
- The **Iway** was a \$610 million project by RIDOT to relocate the Interstate 195 and Interstate 95 intersection. The reconstruction and demolition were completed in spring 2013.
- The project freed up approximately 20 acres in Downtown Providence and the Jewelry District and involved **renovating India Point Park**.
- The I-195 Redevelopment District (the “District”) and its governing Commission were created in late 2011 to serve as the responsible authority for the sale, marketing, and

oversight of land made available as a result of the relocation of Interstate 195. The District will sunset in 2031.

- A key outcome of the I-195 relocation was the creation of two new waterfront parks along the Providence River, connected by a new 50-foot (15 m)-wide pedestrian bridge built on the granite piers of the current I-195 river crossing. A new park comprising of approximately 7 acres of green space opened in 2020.
- An iconic new **Michael Van Leesten Pedestrian Bridge**, designed by inFORM studio, built on former highway pilings opened in summer 2019.
- **Riverwalk improvements** on the Providence Innovation District Park and along Point Street are ongoing.
- The Providence Innovation District Park sits along a **rapid transit corridor** connecting the train station to the hospitals.
- A **46-story residential tower** is in pre-development adjacent to the Providence Innovation District Park.

Extreme Weather and Sea Level Rise caused by Climate Change:

- The first gale of the twentieth century, dubbed the “**Great New England Hurricane**,” landed in Providence on September 21, 1938, flooding the city’s downtown.
- The most recent hurricane to land in downtown Providence (**Carol**) did so on August 31, 1954.
- The **Fox Point hurricane barrier** was constructed by the US Army Corps of Engineers between 1960 and 1966 to protect the low-lying downtown area of the city from damaging storm surge and floods associated with hurricanes and other major storm events.
- The Fox Point Hurricane Barrier was used to stop surges in January 1978, 1984 (Gloria), 1991 (Bob) and 2012 (Sandy).
- The sea level around Providence has risen by **5 inches since 1956**. Its speed of rise has accelerated over the last ten years and is now **rising by over an inch every 8 years**.
- Downtown Providence is at risk of significant damage from **3 feet of sea-level rise in the next 100 years**.