

Providence Preservation Society  
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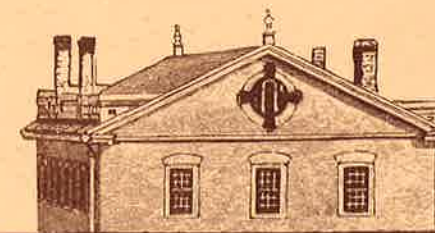


1956 - 1981



25th Anniversary

Providence Preservation Society



Book 1312  
copy 1



Text: William McKenzie Woodward  
Historian, Providence Preservation Society

Cover: (from top, left to right)  
Cathedral of St. John (1811); John Holden Green,  
architect; 275 North Main Street  
City Hall (1874-78); Samuel F.J. Thayer, architect;  
25 Dorrance Street  
Phoenix Building (c. 1860), demolished, 151 Westminster  
Street  
John McAuslan House (c. 1880), demolished,  
544 Elmwood Avenue  
Brick Market House (1773), Market Square  
Philips Lead Building (1832), 231 South Main Street

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*The Providence Preservation Society is dedicated to the principle that the evidence of the past is an asset for the future. We realize that in order to protect our significant architectural legacy we must accept the responsibilities as well as the privileges which come with living in an old city. This Society is therefore organized for the encouragement of protecting, improving, and making proper use of our historic sites and buildings.*

— Charter Statement, 1956



**T**his simple statement, endorsed by more than 150 charter members of the Society at its organizational meeting on 20 February 1956, represented a new attitude toward preservation. Until the development of Colonial Williamsburg in the 1920s, preservation concerns had focused primarily on individual examples of early, architecturally significant structures closely linked to historically important figures. While Williamsburg presents a whole colonial town, it does so as a museum piece. Efforts to integrate preservation into the planning and development of an urban community were scarce until the mid-twentieth century, and the founders of the Society were among the first nationally to recognize the legacy of the past on such a large scale - and the import of its loss.

In the quarter century since its founding, the Providence Preservation Society has achieved much of its goal of saving the legacy of College Hill, expanded its role as an educational and advocacy organization, and moved toward becoming a truly citywide institution.





Jenckes Street, 1950s



Jenckes Street, 1970s

The western slope of College Hill, overlooking the Providence River, was the site of the first European settlement in the state and remained the civic, commercial, and residential center of Providence for the city's first two centuries. As the city grew in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Benefit Street and its side streets were gradually abandoned. By the mid-1950s, the area between Brown University and Downtown faced an uncertain future. In 1950, Brown had cleared two city blocks to build Wriston Quadrangle; only seven of the houses on this site were moved and saved. A few years later, Brown demolished eleven more houses for the construction of West Quadrangle. And by early 1956, city planners had nearly completed plans for the Lippitt Hill Urban Renewal program, calling for the demolition of structures on Benefit Street from North Main to Church Street.

On 11 February 1956, George L. Miner, President of the Rhode Island Historical Society, issued an invitation to a meeting on 20 February to discuss "the preservation of historic buildings of Old Providence." John Nicholas Brown, chairman and moderator of the meeting, stressed the importance of College Hill as an historic document of value to the present and future; its preservation should not be a "sentimental antiquarian or archaeological project," but one that would return an important part of the city to economic stability. John Maxon, Director of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, called for quick action: "Time is running out. In fact, it's about five minutes of twelve." John Hutchins Cady, the Society's first Historian, outlined the importance of the legacy represented by the buildings on College Hill, and Antoinette Downing, the authority on Rhode Island architecture, called for proper planning to redeem these buildings, which had withstood the onslaught of time remarkably well. The future of the Society and of College Hill lay in the strength of a strong citizens' group, and organization began immediately.

The Organization Committee, chaired by John Nicholas Brown, included Thomas A. Appleget, Beatrice O. Chace, Antoinette F. Downing, George L.

Miner and William M. Sloan. Its duties included preparation of incorporation papers for the General Assembly, a constitution and by-laws, and a slate of officers for the first annual meeting; the committee also accepted memberships in the Society. The Society held its first annual meeting at the John Brown House on 23 May 1956, where members heard the proposed by-laws and elected officers: Mrs. William Slater Allen, President, and John Nicholas Brown, Chairman of the Board of Trustees. The General Assembly granted the Society a charter in June 1956.

While the Lippitt Hill component of the East Side Urban Renewal project called for extensive demolition, the Providence Redevelopment Agency had prepared an alternative proposal calling for the restoration of buildings in the area. Federal money was not available for restoration or rehabilitation in 1956, but the Housing Act of 1954 allowed federal funds for renewal in residential areas under the Demonstration Grant program, provided a strong citizens' group could demonstrate



John Nicholas Brown, Antoinette Downing and Washington Irving present a citation to Howard P. Brelsford, Superintendent of State Buildings, for cleaning of the State House and planting trees



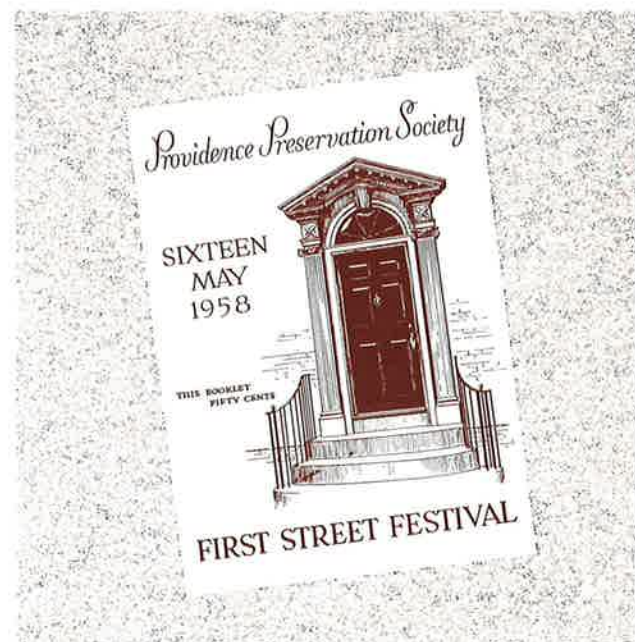
methods for restoration and renewal applicable elsewhere. Donald H. Graham, Executive Director of the Redevelopment Agency, had pledged the Agency's aid in working with the Society to restore College Hill. In December 1956 the City Plan Commission presented a preliminary proposal for the restoration of College Hill to the City Council, asking the Council for permission to apply for almost \$50,000 in federal aid to draft a master plan for the area under the Demonstration Grant program; the council approved the application—one of the first of its kind in the country—contingent upon a one-for-two match by the Society.

By the spring of 1957, the Society had raised its share of more than \$20,000, and the grant was awarded. By June of that year, Blair Associates, the private consulting firm hired by the Society to prepare the study, had begun work on the eighteen-month survey and evaluation of College Hill. The study area coincided with the first division of land in the 1636 Providence settlement, bounded by the Providence River, Olney Street, Hope Street and Wickenden Street. The Society made periodic reports concerning methodology, findings, and preliminary recommendations to its members, the City Plan Commission and East Side residents during the study period.

Support for the Society's activities came early, quick, and from many quarters. Richard Howland, President of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, visited Providence often to give advice to the Society, providing a broad context for action. The Trust initiated and reinforced connections among the Society and similar groups—in Charleston, in Savannah, in Philadelphia—to encourage mutually effective solutions to community preservation. John Codman at the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities lent his technical expertise in organizing and coordinating restoration activity. Their help gave almost immediate results: Mrs. Allen was off to cities across the country to compare notes with other preservation groups. Witty tours of Benefit Street with Florence Parker Simister, perched on the tailgate of a station wagon, became a popular educational event. Miss Margarethe Dwight agreed to deed the important Sullivan Dorr House (1809; John

Holden Greene, architect) to the Society in December 1956, reserving its use for the remainder of her life; this acquisition gave the Society control over one of the most significant early houses on Benefit Street.

Within the first year of its existence, the Society organized its Consultant Bureau to advise homeowners on proper rehabilitation of old houses. This corps of volunteers provided information on interior and exterior restoration, including paint color, furniture, wall treatments, window coverings, and lighting fixtures as well as the introduction of modern kitchen and bath facilities into early buildings.



The Society held the first of its major public events in the spring of 1958. The First Street Festival on 16 May 1958 opened to the public nineteen private dwellings on Williams, John, Arnold, Transit, and Thayer Streets. Like subsequent Society-sponsored events, the Street Festival served to raise money for the Society, to educate the public and to celebrate the city's historical legacy.

In April 1958, *Look* magazine named Providence one of the nine winners nationwide of its Community Home Achievement Award for outstanding progress in the improvement of residential areas. Among the more traditional urban redevelopment projects in the city, the Society's innovative work toward saving historic residences received notice.



56 Benefit Street, 1958

The landmark College Hill demonstration study report appeared in May 1959. More than two hundred pages long, the report outlined existing conditions, explained survey techniques, and recommended future changes to College Hill in a twenty-five year plan. The immediate program for action included nine major points: (1) an organization to guide the development of the plans; (2) a federally assisted urban renewal program; (3) a tourist trail along Benefit Street; (4) a national historic park at the site of Roger Williams Spring; (5) historic zoning regulations; (6) aids to private investment activities; (7) institutional activities; (8) city agency and city regulatory programs; and (9) publicity, education, and information programs. While not every

specific recommendation of the College Hill Report reached fruition, each of these broad points in the program for action was realized, with several solely supported by the Society.

The Society and the City Plan Commission publicized the College Hill Report heavily in the summer and fall of 1959, and the General Assembly passed state enabling legislation that year. On the Society's initiative, Frederick R. Lippitt had drafted legislation for the Providence Historic District Commission by October 1959, based on model legislation recommended in the report, for approval by the City Council and ratification by the General Assembly. Providence adopted historic district zoning on 5 August 1960, and the seven-member commission was sworn in on 13 September 1960, with Antoinette F. Downing as Chairman.

The Society had met at the John Brown House, or the offices of the Counting House Corporation at 50 South Main Street, headquarters for the Society since its formation. John Nicholas Brown had equipped the Society's office at 50 South Main Street since 1956, but the organization's growth required more spacious quarters. In October 1959 the City agreed to lease the Brick School House at 24 Meeting Street to the Society for a nominal annual rent. While the building needed substantial repairs and considerable restoration, the Society took possession and moved to its new headquarters in December 1959. Restoration and building improvements have since continued as an ongoing project, with the Consultant Bureau providing its expertise in adaptive reuse.

During its first six years, the Society realized signal progress. The College Hill report—the Society's first project—had been completed and widely acclaimed by planners, preservationists, and the American Institute of Architects; several of its recommendations were already in place, including historic district zoning. The Society had acquired its first property, the Sullivan Dorr House, and a \$7,000 grant—awarded in April 1960—made restoration of the house's Corné murals possible. Membership had grown to 800, and the Society was ensconced—if not entirely comfortably—in its new headquarters.



The Society's organizational phase closed at the Annual Meeting in 1962 when Mrs. Allen stepped down as President of the Society to be replaced by Washington Irving. The Society entered a period of consolidation, refining its commitment to the College Hill report proposals and expanding its role as an educational, informational, and promotional institution. Major components of this period included aid for and recognition of restoration work, increased educational and touring programs, fund-raising activities to support growing outreach activities, and involvement as the co-developer of South Main Street.

As private investment increased in the houses along Benefit Street, the Consultant Bureau headed by

Barbara Gwynne, found itself increasingly busy advising new owners on proper treatment of their eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century houses. Restored buildings were researched - adding to the resource library at Society headquarters - and awarded markers for proper restoration work: the annual awards dinners, held in June 1961 at the Arsenal on Benefit Street and in November 1963 at the Casino in Roger Williams Park, served further to emphasize the city's heritage by highlighting historically important buildings. The Street Festivals, begun in 1958, continued as a popular project, and the guidebooks for each provided informative descriptions and histories of each property included. In 1962, the Society spotlighted the north Benefit Street area, including nearly twenty buildings derelict at the time work on the College Hill report began.



Street Festival, 1962

The Fall lecture series, begun in 1958, continued to be oversubscribed. "Walks and Talks" and day-to-day tours of College Hill provided an ongoing educational effort, supported by the flyer, *A Mile of History*, first published in 1960.

While the well-orchestrated Street Festivals begun in 1958 raised money for the Society, neither they nor membership dues could provide sufficient funds for capital expenditures for the programs of a growing organization. The first of these major fund-raising activities, in 1959, had been the Silver Ball, at The Breakers in Newport, sponsored by Gorham for the Preservation Society of Newport County and the Providence Preservation Society. A dance at the State House in May 1964, during Rhode Island Heritage Week, supported further development of the "Mile of History" on College Hill; the first ball ever held at the State House, it was extremely successful. A second equally successful dance, the Court Ball, was held in November 1969 at the Providence County Court House. Joseph K. Ott, Jr. organized two auctions—in October 1967 and May 1969—to provide substantial revenue for the Society's programs. Such activities both established precedents for the scale and quality of fund-raising events and celebrated significant structures.

In October 1964 the Providence Redevelopment Agency gave the Society the chance to act as preferred developer of the South Main Street portion of the East Side renewal project, provided the Society form a working corporation, find financial backing, and follow procedures required of a developer. Following the recommendation of the College Hill Report, the Society took the initiative in identifying the importance of this area and proposed its course of revitalization, suggesting a mix of retail, professional, and residential use in rehabilitated old buildings and new structures.

Joining forces with Edward Sulzberger of the New York real estate firm Nassoit-Sulzberger & Co. (later Sulzberger-Rolfe), in March 1965 the Society proposed a \$10-million plan for the redevelopment of the area, including the rehabilitation of warehouse buildings and the construction of new commercial and residential structures. The Society had formed a separate entity,



320 South Main Street, 1969

the Providence Preservation Development Corporation, in November 1964, to comply with the Redevelopment Agency's guidelines. The collaboration between Sulzberger and the Society promoted the preservation and growth in economic vitality of this previously blighted area and reinforced the Society's credentials in planning and review. This project by 1981 represented an \$11 million investment.

The Society sold the Sullivan Dorr House in 1969, with covenants to ensure its preservation. The proceeds of this sale, like those of fund-raising activities, helped to support the Society's activities.



Leadership changed again in the late 1960s. Frederic L. Chase, who had been a vice-president of the Society for several years, assumed the duties of Executive Director in March 1967. Washington Irving died on 25 November 1968, and Frank Mauran III was elected his successor at the Annual Meeting in April 1969.

The early 1970s witnessed a continuation of fund-raising and educational events. Successfully combining the two, Eleanore Monahan began the international trips in 1971, with guided lectures focusing on the architecture and decorative arts of Britain, France, Italy and Austria. The Consultant Bureau opened a shop in the Brick School House in 1971, and the following year the Society sponsored the first of four annual Holiday Shops held in October. The first series of the biennial street festivals ended after May 1971, but the following year a festival organized around the extant work of John Holden Greene gave a focus to the city's early nineteenth-century architectural heritage.



William J. Murtagh of the National Trust, Mrs. William Slater Allen, and Alexander J. Wall, President of Old Sturbridge Village, speakers at a preservation seminar at Sturbridge, May 1967

Providence Journal Bulletin



The major project undertaken in the early 1970s was the Society's venture into the real estate market with the purchase and moving of the Irreproachable Beneficial Association House on North Main Street to 18 Halsey Street, as part of the Society's effort to renovate the northern end of Benefit Street, particularly the St. Dunstan's School site.

The rapidly rising cost of moving buildings, the economic stagnation of the times and the consequent length of time the Society was forced to hold the property ultimately made this venture financially unsuccessful for the Society, though the project spurred development of the area by relocating an appropriate dwelling that would have been otherwise lost; since this move, three more houses have been moved into the area and several more rehabilitated.

As the Society approached its twentieth anniversary, it began to emerge as a citywide organization. The momentum established in the Benefit and Main Street areas had virtually ensured the successful realization of the College Hill proposal. Further, the focus on urban renewal concepts of the 1950s gave way to revitalization projects that worked within the context of established neighborhoods – a concept pioneered by the College Hill report – after the passage of the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974.

Several activities in early 1975 set a precedent for the expansion of the Society's role to embrace citywide activities. Soon after his inauguration as Mayor of Providence, Vincent A. Cianci, Jr. appointed Frank Mauran, President of the Society, to a task force on the restoration of City Hall. Also in January 1975, the Society and the Rhode Island Historical Society collaborated on the first of now-annual winter forums with lectures and discussions on broad-based topics in Providence history, a program organized largely through the efforts of Deborah Dunning, the Society's coordinator of educational programs. During the spring of 1975, the Society held an open house at City Hall to focus on that building's – and Downtown's – importance as part of a broader city celebration. In May, the Planning and Architectural Review Committee was formed to provide guidance on projects in the city's historic areas.

Deborah Dunning, former member of the Board of Trustees, replaced Frederic Chase as Executive Director in July 1975. Under her leadership, the Society became more visible citywide in the late 1970s.

Ms Dunning quickly expanded publicity of the Society's activities. By 1976, the Society sponsored its "Looking Up Downtown" program with a brochure and walking tour to emphasize the heritage of the central business district. In October, the "Old Buildings, New Uses" festival featured recycled buildings Downtown, in Randall Square, and on College Hill. During the fall of 1975, the Society led nearly 2500 individuals on tours of the city. The Society's newsletter took on a new format as PPS NEWS to give broader coverage of preservation efforts throughout the city.



Deborah Dunning and Frank Mauran at a meeting of the Providence Redevelopment Agency, 1978

Active involvement in neighborhoods citywide began to emerge strongly in 1976. The Providence Neighborhood Conference in the Spring brought together for the first time representatives of all areas of the city. Organized by Antoinette Downing – since 1968 Chairman of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission – the conference established the bases of cooperation among neighborhood groups spread throughout the city. As part of the conference, the Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities awarded the Society a grant for a city awareness program. By the summer, the Society had received its first grant through the Community Development program to provide markers free of charge to owners of historic houses in neighborhoods eligible for these funds. Since that first grant, over two hundred houses have been awarded markers. And by January 1977, the Society had added a Coordinator of Neighborhood Projects, Joan Rich, to provide a much-needed link among city residents involved in neighborhood conservation efforts, many for the first time.



Lillian Cumming became President of the Society at the Annual Meeting in 1977. To consolidate the Society's achievements and to set a course for future growth, she established the Society's first Long Range Planning Committee. Led by John B. Henderson, the committee included Mrs. Timothy T. More, Edmund C. Bennett, David Chase, Mrs. Bancroft Littlefield, H. LeBaron Preston, Mrs. Cumming and Ms. Dunning. Its primary recommendation, adopted by the Board of Trustees, was the formal commitment by the Society to citywide support in four areas: education, neighborhood assistance, rehabilitation projects, and planning and design review.



Lillian J. Cumming, 1980



Mrs. James Field, Mrs. William M. Sloan, Mrs. Alfred B. VanLiew, Mrs. Bruce Sundlun and Mrs. Avery Seaman prepare for the Biltmore Ball, 1979

Special events in the late 1970s were more citywide in scope. The Union Station event in May 1977, attended by nearly 1300, focused on that recently refurbished complex, to call attention both to the hitherto-ignored structure and to the uncertainty of its future. The Ocean State Performing Arts Center event the following year brought 2500 into that theatre, then facing an uncertain future, to draw attention to its cultural and architectural importance. Frances S. Sloan organized the major fund-raising event of the decade, the Biltmore Ball. The first large function in the dramatically renovated downtown hotel, the ball attracted national attention for its magnitude: not only did it celebrate the first-class rehabilitation of a former white elephant in a declining downtown, but it also raised nearly \$100,000 to support the Society's activities.



Party at Ocean State Performing Arts Center, 1978



Commensurate with the goals established by the Long Range Planning Committee, the Society dramatically expanded its role in education and tourism. A Coordinator of Education and Tourism, Carol Hagglund, joined the staff in September 1978. This full-time position encouraged better training of tour guides, expansion of educational programs and booklets, and coordination with the Greater Providence Convention and Visitor's Bureau. The street festival was revived in 1980, expanded in scope and publicity to attract a national audience; the 1980 Festival was a sellout. The Society also increased its publications. Self-guided walking tour booklets covered Elmwood (1979), Broadway (1980), and Benefit Street (1980).

As the Society's first quarter-century comes to a close, two major projects reflect its achievements and ambitions. The College Hill Improvement Plan, unveiled in 1978, provided a culmination of work begun in 1957 on the College Hill study and represented the ongoing cooperation between the Society and the City of Providence. Headed by John S. Cumming, the project provided a resurfaced Benefit Street, repaved portions of sidewalk with brick, modern street lights and signs the length of Benefit Street with late nineteenth-century reproduction fixtures, and over 100 trees. The \$750,000 project depended on funds provided by the City, Community Development funds, and \$125,000 raised by the Society from private individuals and institutions.

As one project approaches an end, another begins: in January 1980, the Providence Preservation Society Revolving Fund, Incorporated, came into being. The result of nearly two years of study, the Revolving Fund looked primarily beyond the College Hill area to other historic neighborhoods of the city. Under the leadership of its first president, Ronald Kutrieb, this separate entity purchased in October 1980 its first property for rehabilitation, a derelict house at 103 Parade Street in the West End. With the support of the West Broadway Project Area Committee and the Rhode Island Foundation, the Fund plans to begin work on the house in the Spring of 1981.

While the novelty of the attitude expressed in the Charter Statement of 1956 perhaps has worn off, its validity has well stood the test of time, as the Providence Preservation Society has moved from a small band of concerned East Side residents to a broadly based and involved citywide organization. The dedication to these ideals has sustained the Society throughout its history as each project ends and another begins.



Joan Rich