



# Rhode Island History

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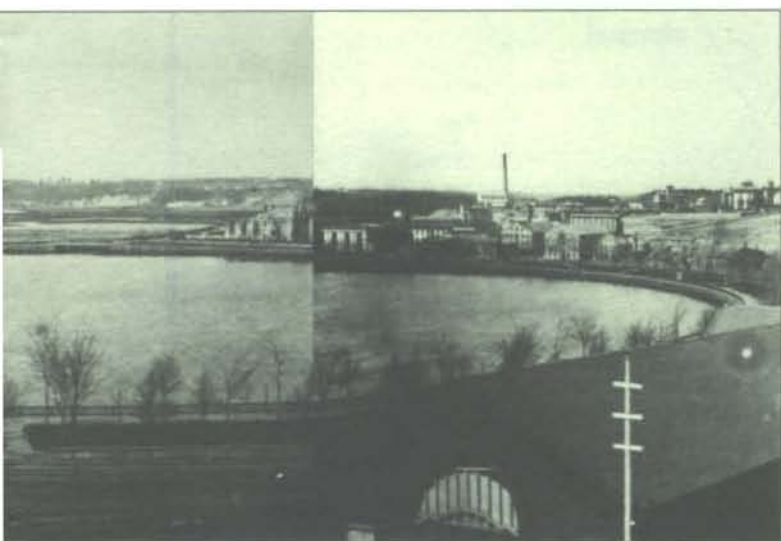




*The Providence Cove, looking westward, circa 1860. In the center is the elliptical Cove Basin, and beyond it are the unfilled marshes that would become the Cove Lands. Thomas Tefft's twin-towered Union Depot is at the left; Jefferson Plain, now the site of the state capitol, is at the right. Panorama photographed by John Gorham. RIHS Collection (RHi X32 91, RHi X32 92, RHi X32 93).*

# Filling the Providence Cove: Image in the Evolution of Urban Form

Michael Holleran



A visitor to Providence these days sees half the downtown being remade: the Capital Center project is moving rivers and train tracks, building streets and highways, changing ground levels by two stories or more. A new train station opened recently, big new buildings are almost finished, and more are on the way. This is the former Providence Cove, going through its third metamorphosis. It is doubtless the most reworked piece of land in Rhode Island and among the most reworked in North America. Its initial transformation took place in the 1840s, when railroads first entered the city center and most of the ground was made. It was transformed a second time at the end of the nineteenth century, when a park and the remaining tidal basin were destroyed to create the enormous railroad complex that has just been dismantled.

Changes in urban structure at this scale come about mainly from changes in urban function: the decline of the maritime economy, for example, or the advent and then the decline of railroads. But these forces are too big to explain the details of form they created in Providence, nor did topography deter-

mine conclusively that the Cove's blank slate would be written one way and not another. More than in most places, urban function and site acted and were distorted here through a prism of images, changes in the way people framed the question of what the Cove was and what the city was.

This paper is about the second of the Cove's three transformations, at the end of the nineteenth century. But we must begin the story before the first one, with an understanding of the Cove as Providence's founders first saw it.

## I

Between Weybosset peninsula (now Providence's downtown) and the East Side flowed the Great Salt River, today much reduced in size and called the Providence River. North of the peninsula was the Great Salt Cove, several hundred acres in extent and deep enough for full-fledged sailing ships. From the Cove's northern edge rose Jefferson Plain, a steep sand bluff above a beach (the bluff has long since been graded less steeply and is now crowned by the Rhode Island State House). Between Jefferson Plain and the East Side was a narrow tidal estuary, and a few hundred yards upstream the Moshassuck River emptied into it over a low waterfall. To the west the Cove extended for more than a mile as a broad flat valley of salt marshes, through which the Woonasquatucket River meandered.

By the last decades of the eighteenth century, Providence's town center was Market Square, at the south edge of the Cove. Maritime commerce, located mainly along South Main Street, extended up North

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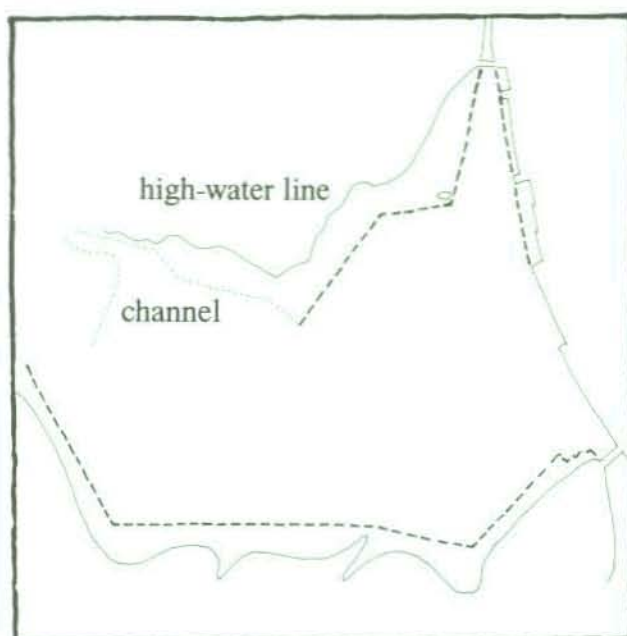


Main to use wharves in the Cove; ships were built there, and the Weybosset Bridge at Market Square could open to let them pass.<sup>1</sup>

The town regulated wharfing and filling ad hoc, if at all, until 1782, when a committee appointed to set a limit on encroachments into the Cove drew Providence's first harbor line along present-day Canal Street. The town requested that one wharf which already extended beyond the new line be cut back. In 1797 harbor lines were drawn all the way around the Cove, long before they were considered for the lower harbor.<sup>2</sup> Harbor lines imposed planned order on waterfront development and — most important in the comparatively shallow Cove — defined an area meant to be kept as open water.

The Cove waterfront saw the first appearance of another innovation in Providence's form, the frontage street. These streets served both water commerce, by making communication between wharves and warehouses easier, and land commerce, by adding street frontage. They increased public access to the shore, for practical reasons: to guard against dumping and to provide water for firefighting (the town required wharf owners to build steps into the Cove for laying hoses).<sup>3</sup> Even more than harbor lines, the streets blocked encroachment on the public waters. While frontage streets south of Market Square became starting points for further wharfing (in the broader harbors of Boston and New York, generations of frontage streets succeeded one another), in the Cove Providence permitted little of such expansion.

The Cove's transformation began when the town sought to extend this planned order by drawing harbor lines for the lower harbor. In July 1815 the town took the most far-ranging step in the waterfront's evolution: it drew a harbor line setting the head of navigation at Weybosset Bridge, below the Cove.<sup>4</sup> Land interests had triumphed over water



Cove harbor lines, 1797

interests. A new fixed span would be built at Market Square, and North Main Street warehouses would no longer be directly accessible by ship. That September the Great Gale forced the town's timetable by destroying the old bridge.<sup>5</sup> As soon as rebuilding commenced, the Cove was no longer a navigable arm of the sea, but a protected tidal lake.

But what was the Cove protected for? An 1818 painting by Alvan Fisher shows it as a placid scenic foreground for the city. People interested in the port valued the Cove as a reservoir which twice a day flushed the harbor clean. The Blackstone Canal soon gave yet another utilitarian answer. When it was constructed from Worcester to Providence between 1823 and 1828, it dammed the Cove's northeast corner as its tidewater terminal. This "Canal Basin" lasted less than twenty years and left no visible traces, yet it was an important step in the Cove's evolution.

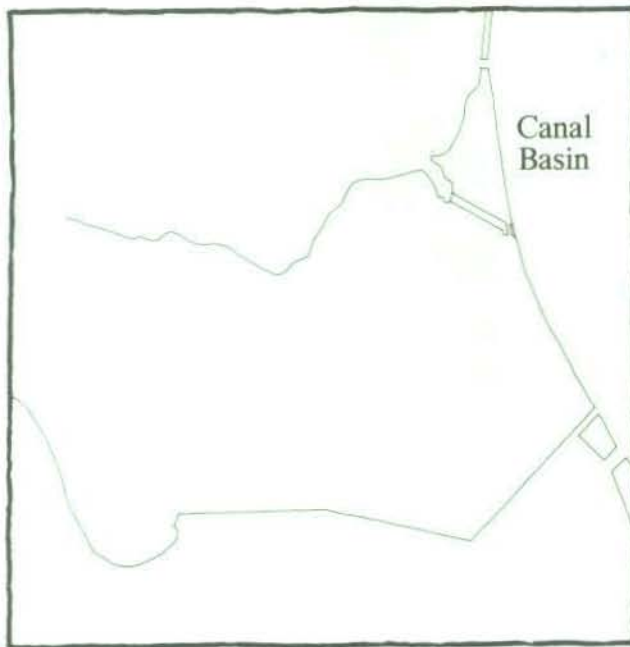
1. Henry C. Dorr, *The Planting and Growth of Providence* (Providence, 1882), 198, 223-25.

2. Providence Town Meeting Records, 6:157-58, 7:399, Providence City Archives; "A Platt of that part of the Cove above Weybossett Bridge in Providencetown which no one is considered to have an Exclusive right but containeth the Public moveable

Waters . . .," Providence city engineer's office plan 785/57 (tracing).

3. Susan G. Gibson et al., *Archaeological Resource Study, Roger Williams National Memorial* (Washington, D.C., 1979), 37.

4. Providence Town Meeting Records, 8:347. Citizens had agitated for eliminating the draw when the bridge was last replaced in 1792. Dorr, *Planting and Growth of Providence*, 224-25.



Cove Basin, 1828

Shortly after the canal opened, railroad construction began in southern New England. At first the railroads, interested mainly in connections with steamship lines, reached Providence at the southern end of the harbor, far from the Cove and the center of town. But the new Providence and Worcester Railroad (P&W), proposed in 1844 to replace the unsatisfactory Blackstone Canal, would reach the city from the north and thus had little choice but to come into downtown instead of the harbor. The Canal Basin had set a precedent of putting part of the Cove under the control of a private corporation serving this same transportation corridor. The P&W's promoters wanted to translate this precedent into dry land by constructing their terminal and yards on filled land in the Cove. The Boston and Providence (B&P) and the New York, Providence and Boston (known as the Stonington Line because for years it ran only as far as Stonington, Connecticut),



Proposed railroad and Cove ellipse, 1844

seeing the value of connecting with one another at a central location, asked to join the P&W in a common terminal.<sup>5</sup>

At some point in the design process, the curve of tracks, the bend of Cove Street, the wall of the Canal Basin, and the spit at the state prison at Jefferson Plain suggested to the railroad planners a twenty-nine-acre ellipse. Once they saw it, the ellipse became a given. Its extension across the breadth of the Cove, from the state prison to Cove Street, was suggested not by necessity or by landforms so much as by a compelling desire to see the geometrical figure closed. The self-contained integrity of the elliptical shape probably made the whole upper Cove seem unnecessary and led to abandonment of the earlier rectilinear plat in favor of filling the area at some future date.

The plan was the most controversial matter yet to come before the twelve-year-old city council. Op-

5. Welcome Arnold Greene, *The Providence Plantations for Two Hundred and Fifty Years* (Providence, 1886), 72-73. See also Robert Emlen, "The Great Gale of 1815: Artifactual Evidence of Rhode Island's First Hurricane," *Rhode Island History* 48 (1990): 51-60.

6. Providence's Union Depot, "the first major American railroad station," was among the first in the worldwide trend toward multiple-railroad terminals. Carroll L. V. Meeks, *The Railroad Station: An Architectural History* (New Haven, 1956), 69.



ponents felt that the Cove's boundaries were permanently set and neither could nor should be changed for a railroad. These citizens, and others who simply were nervous about flying cinders and exploding boilers, wanted to put the tracks and station on the Cove's far shore, alongside the state prison and "Snowtown," Providence's small community of free blacks.<sup>7</sup>

This deadlock was broken when many P&W shareholders signed a petition in 1846 urging the city council to draw up its own plans for the railroad and make it contribute to "the attractive embellishments of the city, without relying, in a matter of such importance, entirely on the plans presented by the engineers of the Worcester Rail Road Corporation, made for subserving their own exclusive purposes."<sup>8</sup> The petitioners carried the day; the depot site was granted on the condition that the railroads build a "promenade" park according to the city's instructions. The city granted not ownership but only use of the land, "and in case any part of the land hereby granted shall cease to be used for railroad purposes it shall become public land to remain open forever." The city also retained the right to lay streets across the property at any time without paying damages to the railroads.<sup>9</sup>

The P&W did not follow city specifications in building the Cove Basin. It skimped on retaining-wall foundations, leaving their weight partially supported by the muck; as a result, the Cove could never be dredged to its intended depth around the edge and the city had to build a tidal dam to keep it flooded. In time the grant's other stipulations — the city's right to use the land without compensation and its reversion to public uses — would be violated or abrogated.<sup>10</sup>

The Cove Basin and Cove Promenade, except for their western side, were finished in 1849. In 1852 the

city granted a fourth railroad, the Hartford, Providence, and Fishkill (HP&F), a plot of Cove Lands — the filled and unfilled marshes west of the basin — on the condition that it finish the basin wall and promenade. Depression bankrupted the company before it could finish, and during the winter of 1857 Providence put its unemployed to work grading Jefferson Plain into the Cove Lands.<sup>11</sup>

The Cove's two most important images were fully formed by this time, and its evolution so far was a product of the tension between them. The first was an inescapable utilitarian calculus: the Cove was "available space,"<sup>12</sup> quite a lot of it, at the center of a growing city where space was increasingly in demand; it was a blank canvas for economic and technological forces to paint on. In the eighteenth century it was available for expanding wharves and land uses around its edges, until the town limited this practice; in 1823 it was available for part of the new canal; and in the 1840s it was available for creating new land wholesale to bring railroads into the center of the city where there was otherwise no room for them. This reservoir of available space gave the city's form a degree of flexibility without which major shifts in urban function would have been even more disruptive.

The second of the Cove's images, "the distinguishing feature of Providence,"<sup>13</sup> grew from the intentions of the 1846 petitioners and the basin's early success in fulfilling them. The Cove Basin's golden years began in 1857, when the completed park made possible a walk around its whole perimeter. The city landscaped the park and ornamented it with cast-iron railings and seats. Circuses performed and holiday crowds celebrated on the shore; promenaders strolled on the promenade. Adjacent to it, Thomas Tefft's magnificent depot was a sightseeing attraction. The upstream valleys held

7. See, e.g., Roscoe to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 31 Dec. 1845, 5 Jan. 1846. On blacks at the Cove, see Janice G. Artemel, Edward J. Flanagan, and William Sandy, "Phase II Report, Providence Cove Lands Project," prepared by DeLeuw, Cather/Parsons for Federal Rail Administration (Washington, D.C., 1982), 44-47.

8. "Memorial of Z. Allen, and others," *City Council Cove Reports and Petitions* (Providence, 1846), 21.

9. *Report of the Commissioners of the Cove Lands* (Providence, 1877), appendix, 9-11, 99. Quote is from the Stonington Line grant.

10. City council committee report, 14 May 1849, in *Cove Lands*, appendix, 46-65; *Providence Journal*, 14 Feb. 1882; John Hutchins Cady, *The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence* (Providence, 1957), 118. The city in 1850 agreed to a cash settlement for the construction deficiencies. *Cove Lands*, appendix, 73.



few streets or privies to drain into the Cove; the railroads that ringed it were still small and slow enough so that they only added interest to the scene. These years of success became a baseline to which later debate referred: the Cove Basin as an ornament to the city, to be adorned and protected. The debate centered on whether this image had any relevance, or whether it had become obsolete.

For many of the older generation, the success was more than aesthetic. The Cove Basin was their tangible emblem of a vanishing world of tight-knit local community, a world where they had been in control and where they had used their control wisely. At the Cove they had forced business corporations to work the will of the community, and the plan they imposed was an elegant one that in one bold stroke had solved the sanitary problem of the tidal flats, given the city its largest park, and provided both scenic views and accessible vantage points from which to see them, all without compromising the practical aim of creating railroad facilities second to none. For people who felt this way, the Cove was more than ornamental; it was "holy water," as Mayor Thomas Doyle later remembered it.<sup>14</sup> The city owed it a duty which could not become obsolete.

A third image, not yet fully formed, was eventually decisive in resolving the conflict between the first two. This was the image of the Cove as a nuisance. Pollution was not a new problem. A few years before the Cove Basin was built, wastes from textile-printing and dyeing plants had created such odors at low tide that the city had considered a dam to keep the Cove flats submerged. Refuse dumping had been a problem around the Cove even in the 1700s.<sup>15</sup> For more than a century the Cove's pollution had been treated as an annoyance, more or less urgently to be solved depending on the season and

the tide, but always capable of solution. What was new now was the growing sense that pollution was either so vile or so intractable that it was part of the Cove's identity.

Providence's first superintendent of public health, Dr. Edwin M. Snow, examined the Moshassuck River in 1878 and found "acids and other chemicals," woolen mill wastes, "animal filth from tripe works," and other pollutants in this tributary of the Cove. In the wholesale meat district on Canal Street just above the Cove Basin, packing plants straddling the river shoveled scraps through their floors into the outgoing tide. "The aggregate impurities," said Snow, "are sufficient to convert the water of the small stream into a mass of liquid filth."<sup>16</sup>

Most serious was the human waste. When nineteenth-century observers complained of the rivers as "open sewers,"<sup>17</sup> they did not speak metaphorically. Starting in the first half of the century, privies were replaced by water closets attached to an incomplete system of storm drains. Each of these drains emptied into the nearest stream, moving and concentrating the contamination. A comprehensive sewage system begun in 1874 consolidated the flow of these scattered lines and carried it to the rivers, where the tide moved it back and forth through the center of town. Sewage silted up at the outfalls, some of them at docks around the harbor, and collected as "mud" flats in the Cove. The resulting smells, hardly imaginable today, explain the growing impulse to cover the rivers wherever possible. A sewage treatment system would not come into operation until 1900, and even then manufacturers' wastes and sewage from upstream towns kept the water filthy.<sup>18</sup>

A final image, or set of images, was the view of the Cove as a working part of some larger whole. The simplest form of this functional view saw the

11. *Cove Lands*, appendix, 110, 136; Greene, *Providence Plantations*, 86-88.

12. President James Wilson of the New York and New England Railroad, *Providence Journal*, 5 Nov. 1881.

13. Public Park Association, *Parks of Leading Cities of This Country; Their Advantages; Parks of Providence; The Cove Park, Terminal Facilities*, PPA tract no. 7 (Providence, 1887), 45. C. to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 18 Jan. 1868, called the Cove Basin the city's "only ornament due to the hand of man."

14. *Providence Journal*, 5 Nov. 1881.

15. *Providence Journal*, 22 July, 23 July, 24 July, 27 July, 28 July, 29 July 1841; Dorr, *Planting and Growth of Providence*, 143-44.

16. *City Documents*, 1878, no. 30, pp. 1-2; 1877, no. 33.

17. Edwin Snow, *City Documents*, 1877, no. 33, p. 5.

18. Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 146, 182; *Resolutions of the City Council, 1872-73*, pp. 152-53.



city as a machine, with the Cove, for example, a holding tank which kept the harbor free of silt. A newer kind of functionalism viewed the city as an organism; breezes over the Cove thus made it "the lung of the city."<sup>19</sup> Seeing the Cove this way, Dr. Snow thought it a net benefit to public health, despite his inventory of the basin's contents. But Snow would soon retire, and unfortunately for the Cove his successor, Dr. Charles V. Chapin, would lead the nation to the modern science of public health and the abandonment of such organic metaphors.<sup>20</sup>

A prelude to the Cove's second transformation began in 1867, when the rural-dominated General Assembly provoked a confrontation with the city over title to all the former Great Salt Cove.<sup>21</sup> As legislators hoped, the city eventually resolved the question by buying the state's rights (had this scheme failed, their alternate plan was to sell the Cove Basin as building lots).<sup>22</sup> Amos C. Barstow, former mayor of Providence and now a state representative, tried to use this opportunity to move the railroads north of the Cove and make the park accessible, but no definite plan was stipulated in the sale.<sup>23</sup>

The city then appointed commissioners of the Cove Lands to administer its new asset. Mayor Thomas Doyle, chairman of the commission, presented its plan in 1873. This plan was more ambitious than Barstow's, but it likewise weighted the Cove's three images in favor of civic adornment. It called for dredging the basin and using the muck to fill a narrow strip around its edge, so that new retaining walls could be built with proper foundations. All tracks would be removed from around the

promenade, and the former railroad lands would enlarge the park. The commissioners, like Barstow, felt the railroads' increasing traffic would have to move elsewhere, but they proposed a more radical relocation. A new main line would run around the back of Smith Hill to huge new passenger and freight stations covering all of the Cove Lands, approached by dead-end tracks from the west. Providence would not be a way station on a New York-to-Boston route, but a great metropolitan terminal itself.

As the commissioners began discussing their plan with the railroads, financial panic in New York inaugurated the "Great Depression" of the 1870s. Railroads were in no position to build elaborate terminals. The Cove Lands Commission continued custodianship for a few years before lapsing into inactivity, and the questions of railroads and Cove were left for better times.<sup>24</sup>

How Providence came to the decision to fill the Cove is complicated enough, even without considering why that decision was made. For this reason we will first look at the details of the story and then return to examine the competing images which in time were all that remained of the Cove.

## II

When the Cove Lands Commission delivered its stillborn plan in 1873, passenger and freight terminal improvements were clearly desirable; but as business improved at the end of the depression, such improvements became urgently, painfully necessary. This need was the starting point for all discus-

19. Public Park Association, *Sanitation: The Cove Park*, PPA tract no. 1 (Providence, 1883), 4.

20. When typhoid visited Providence in 1882, Snow pointed out that its incidence was lowest among the population living within a quarter mile of the Cove. *City Documents*, 1882, no. 24. For Chapin, see James H. Cassidy, *Charles V. Chapin and the Public Health Movement* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962) and C.V.C. to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 23 Nov. 1881, a letter by Chapin on the Cove.

21. The city had unwittingly clouded its claim to the Cove Lands by submitting its harbor lines and railroad grants to the legislature when it probably did not need to. "Opinion of John P. Knowles, City Solicitor . . .," *City Documents*, 1866-67, no. 38, pp. 4-5.

22. The city paid \$200,000 in annual installments between 1870 and 1875. *Cove Lands*, appendix, 175; *Providence Journal*, 31 May 1867, 16 Jan. 1868, 12 Apr. 1870.

23. *Providence Journal*, 18 Feb. 1868.

24. *City Documents*, 1871-72, no. 19. The other commissioners were Nelson Aldrich, later Rhode Island's famous U.S. senator; James Y. Smith, a former mayor and governor; William Binney; and Joseph J. Cooke. Even before the panic the railroads were unreceptive; they counterproposed elevating tracks on their existing alignment and expanding the old depot. *City Documents*, 1885, no. 16, pp. 3-9.

25. Speech by Charles Warren Lippitt, newly elected president of the Board of Trade, *Providence Journal*, 13 Jan. 1881; report on Republican ward meetings, *Providence Journal*, 19 Nov. 1881.

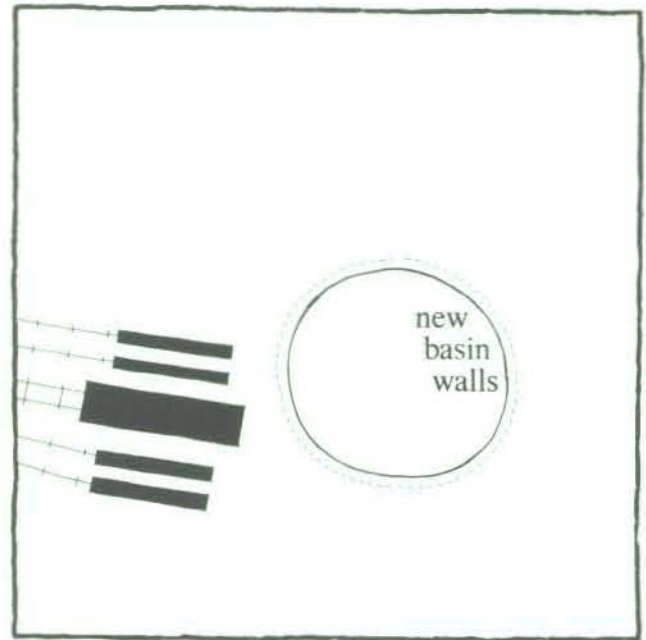


sions about the future of the Cove, and indeed of the city as a whole. By 1881 business and Republican groups agitated to put the issue on the political agenda.<sup>25</sup> As the *Providence Journal* pointed out, Union Depot had long since been outgrown:

Enter the elegant passenger station of the Boston and Providence Railroad Company in Boston [opened in 1875], and pass into the commodious train-house to take a seat in a car for Providence, and when here emerge from the car to work your way along the narrow platform between the cars to the building, and finally elbow yourself through the crowd waiting to get into the same narrow passage, to find a seat in the train you have left, and the question will naturally be asked, why has so much been done at the Boston terminus, and so little in Providence.<sup>26</sup>

As for freight, the New York and New England (NY&NE, successor to the HP&F) owned 102 acres of yards in Boston, but less than 8 acres in Providence, which hoped to compete as an eastern terminus for the system. This one railroad often had a hundred cars on sidings far from the city, waiting to be unloaded when there was room at the terminal.<sup>27</sup> Thirty years earlier a correspondent to the *Journal* called the original freight layout "more . . . than is needed by all the railroads that ever have or ever will enter the city,"<sup>28</sup> and the railroads were quick to point out the parallel: "Whatever you do or whatever you give us, the chances are that forty or fifty years hence it will not be enough."<sup>29</sup> General James Wilson, president of the NY&NE, went further: "It seems to me," he said, "that the growing business of the different railroads will soon demand all the available space within the city limits."<sup>30</sup>

The railroads at first did not all show such enthusiasm. They began to consider improvements



Cove Lands Commission plan, 1873

only after repeated prodding by the city council, and then they thought small. In August 1881 two railroads asked to buy some of the Cove Lands for a limited expansion of the existing yards and depot. A few weeks before the city council election in November, the committee considering this request called together all of the five railroads that converged at the center of the city.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps emboldened by each other, or by growing public demands, the collected lines suggested a more ambitious idea of what was "available space." "We all, I think, should like to see the Cove basin filled up," said General Wilson. "It is a nuisance at best, and it can never be anything else. You cannot erect a passenger station on the Cove that we cannot get into better than we can into the present one."<sup>32</sup> Alderman George Burnham summed

26. *Providence Journal*, 13 Sept. 1881. For a view of the Boston terminal, see Jane Holtz Kay, *Lost Boston* (Boston, 1980), 263.

27. *City Documents*, 1881, no. 8, p. 14; *Providence Journal*, 5 Nov. 1881.

28. Quoted in *Providence Journal*, 10 May 1925.

29. Vice President David Babcock of the Stonington Line, *Providence Journal*, 5 Nov. 1881.

30. *Providence Journal*, 5 Nov. 1881.

31. *Providence Journal*, 9 Aug. 1881; Mark Brennan, "Providence, Rhode Island, and the Crisis over Railroad Terminal Facilities, 1870-1890" (history honors thesis, Brown University, 1969), 34-35. The five railroads were the Boston and Providence (B&P), the Providence and Worcester (P&W), the New York, Providence and Boston (the Stonington Line, which now

extended from Providence to a connection at New London with the New Haven Railroad), the New York and New England (NY&NE), and the Providence and Springfield. The first three were natural connectors and therefore natural allies; the NY&NE was a larger but less established line, at this time making a strong effort to compete with the others; the Providence and Springfield was a local line which did not extend to Springfield. Providence's sixth railroad, the Providence, Warren and Bristol (PW&B), still terminated at the southern end of the harbor, connecting with the central depot only by horsecar.

32. *Providence Journal*, 5 Nov. 1881.



up his sense of the meeting: "It seems to be the almost unanimous opinion here that the Cove must be filled up. Why, therefore isn't it just as well to treat the Cove basin as though it was dry land and available for railroad purposes."<sup>33</sup>

A few years earlier this idea would have been met with derision, but now opinions were changing. Once and future mayor Thomas Doyle repudiated his own commission's plan and raised one of the loudest voices urging that the Cove be filled. "If he had his way," the *Journal* reported him saying at a public meeting, "he would have tracks all over the city, and business moving on."<sup>34</sup> Former governor William W. Hoppin, who in 1876 urged dredging to "make the park a beautiful promenade, while the basin itself would be used by pleasure boats,"<sup>35</sup> had since torn down his father's house to build commercial buildings, and he now recommended the same philosophy for the city as a whole: "If it is necessary for us to cut down the beautiful trees in our most spacious gardens, public and private, for the sake of our children and the future of the city," he said, "let us give the railroads these facilities."<sup>36</sup> If the city was an organism, it was increasingly seen as an economic one which needed not lungs but a new heart to pump life along its steel arteries.

The Cove smelled worse than ever. It had been dredged by the city in 1876, but it was already silted again. The run-down promenade was used mainly by tramps; the only way to get to it from downtown was to dash across busy railroad tracks. Even this route was lost when the railroads fenced the tracks to avoid liability for the fate of anyone who chanced it.<sup>37</sup> "The fact is, it is no place for a park. Nobody wants one there," explained one correspondent to the *Journal*.<sup>38</sup> If railroad men wanted the Cove for their yards, that was a sacrifice more and more people were willing to make. Railroads were pulling the city out of the depression; the "filthy Cove"<sup>39</sup> was not.

The depression weighed heavily in people's thinking. Doyle's reason for wanting railroads on the Cove was to reduce the municipal debt by selling them the land.<sup>40</sup> Such unambitious aims were likely to be disappointed: the railroads were moving their shops to the suburbs where land sold for fifteen or twenty cents per foot, making it hard to believe that they would pay downtown prices of two to five dollars. "Men are talking as if the city could make both sides of this bargain," warned former mayor Barstow.<sup>41</sup> The business community generally agreed that whatever subsidy, financial or locational, would provide the most generous facilities would in the long run help the city most.

When the common council met on 28 November 1881, it considered two resolutions to create terminal-planning commissions. One resolution concluded that "the Cove must go"; the other did not.<sup>42</sup> The council avoided the question by approving both and leaving the board of aldermen to choose between them. The aldermen passed the buck to the mayor by concurring in both resolutions. Mayor William S. Hayward appointed the same five men to both commissions, which after their election of Colonel William Goddard as chairman together became known as the Goddard Commission.<sup>43</sup>

On 17 April 1882 the Goddard Commission presented a plan showing the Cove and even the rivers entirely filled or covered. "Preliminary investigations satisfied the Commissioners that the opposition to filling the cove was very limited," said the report, "and that the great body of our citizens desired that this area should be filled in and devoted to the railroad purposes, for which it is so manifestly adapted by its natural conformation."<sup>44</sup> When they were later put on the defensive about these conclusions, the commissioners claimed instead that the city council had already decided, in creating the commission, to fill the Cove.<sup>45</sup>

33. Ibid.

34. *Providence Journal*, 12 Nov. 1881.

35. Quoted in A. C. B. [Amos Chafee Barstow] to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 22 Nov. 1881.

36. *Providence Journal*, 12 Nov. 1881.

37. *Resolutions*, 1876, p. 115; *Providence Journal*, 9 Aug., 20 Sept. 1881, 24 Jan. 1882; *Resolutions*, 1883, p. 259, 1884, pp. 375-76. The

fence may have had another tactical purpose: it was high enough to block views of the Cove from Exchange Place. Photo, RIHS, accessioned 29 Nov. 1983.

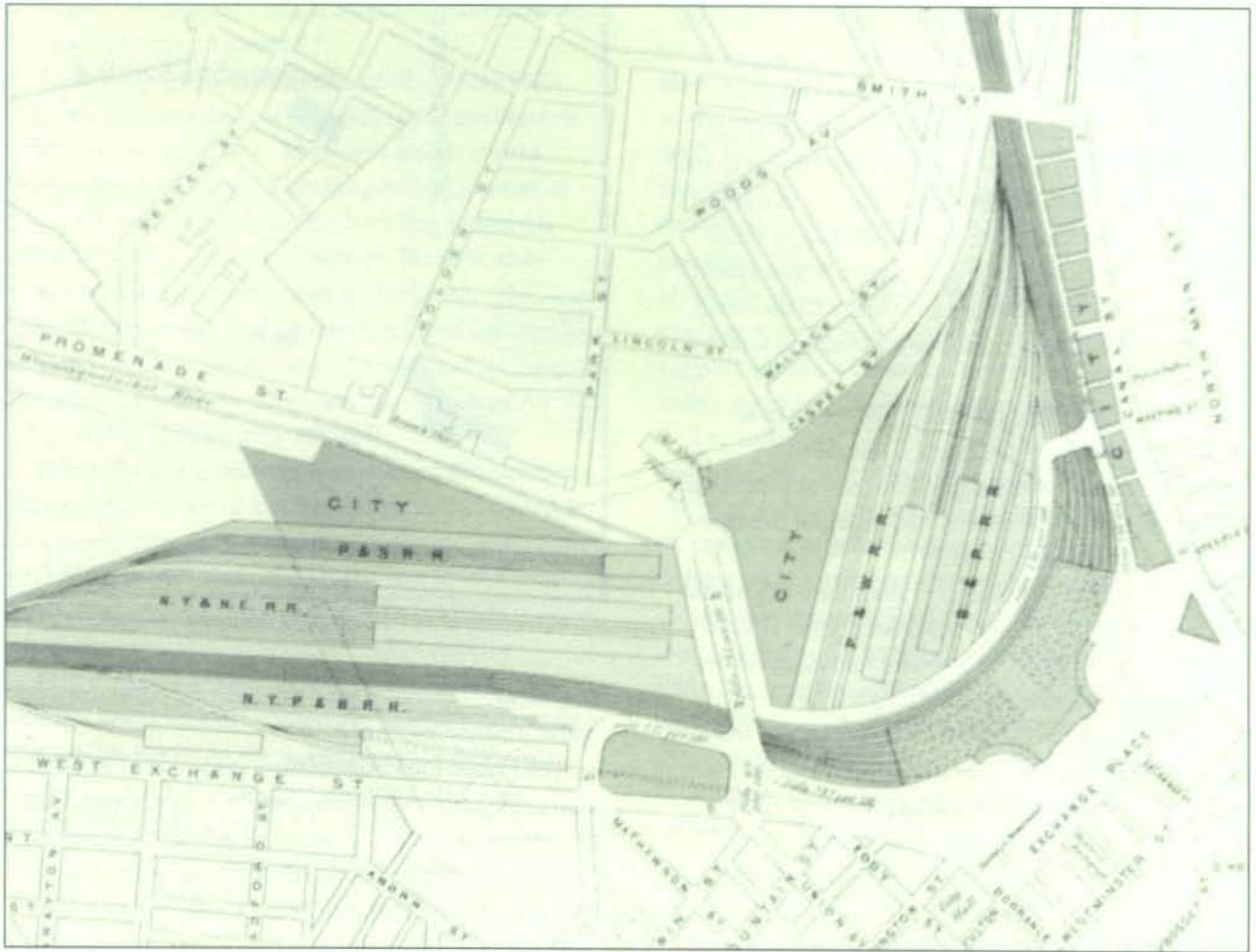
38. Blue Pointer to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 14 Mar. 1882.

39. Hoppin, *Providence Journal*, 12 Nov. 1881.

40. *Providence Journal*, 21 Dec. 1881.

41. A. C. B. to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 22 Nov. 1881.





The Goddard Commission's first plan (1882) provided a single tortuous route to Smith Hill (top of map). RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6427).

The Goddard plan would have left Smith Hill more isolated than ever, and it was from this quarter that the plan received its steadiest opposition. Smith Hill alderman William T. Nicholson, who until then had little to say on the subject, now spoke out not only for better access to his ward but also against the plan in its entirety, and in favor of preserving the Cove Basin and park.<sup>46</sup>

A "mass meeting" against the plan was called by industrialist George Corliss, former mayor Barstow,

and 43 other prominent citizens.<sup>47</sup> Of these 45, 31 lived within sight of the Cove. The residences of this group were evenly distributed between Smith Hill and the East Side, suggesting that opposition was not mainly about convenience or economics; it was about aesthetics, about what belonged, as Barstow wrote, "in sight of the beautiful homes which grace all the surrounding hills."<sup>48</sup> Governor Hoppin chastised Barstow for such elitism: "No matter, it may be inferred, about those who dwell in the valley

42. *Resolutions*, 1881, pp. 300, 304.

43. *Resolutions*, 1881, p. 314; *Providence Journal*, 15 Dec. 1881. The commissioners were William Goddard, S. S. Sprague, Robert Knight, H. E. Wellman, and Charles Warren Lippitt.

44. *City Documents*, 1882, no. 14, p. 4.

45. *City Documents*, 1883, no. 25, p. 10.

46. *Providence Journal*, 29 Apr. 1882.

47. *Providence Journal*, 28 Apr. 1882.

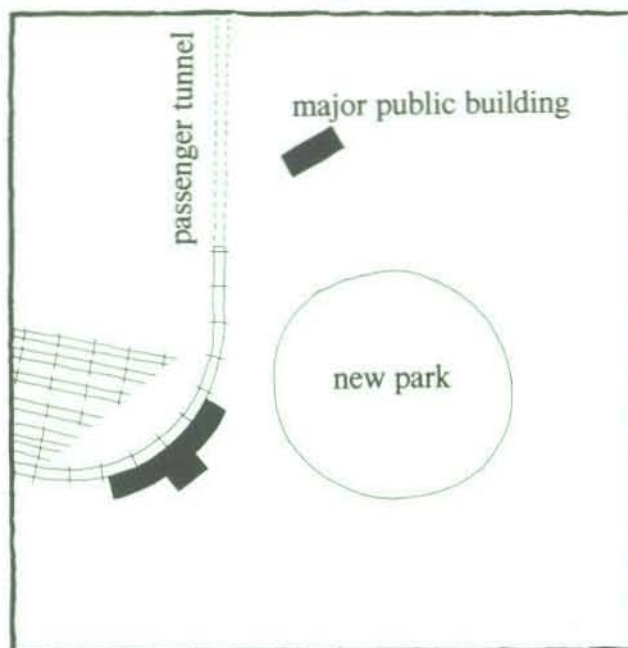
48. Information from *The Providence Directory* (Providence, 1883), mapped in Michael Holleran, "The Providence Cove: Image in the Evolution of Urban Form" (independent honors thesis, Brown University, 1979), 33; A. C. B. to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 17 Nov. 1881.



or in proximity to this death-dealing nuisance."<sup>49</sup> Of the 33 meeting callers for which the city directory lists place of employment, 24 worked within a thousand feet of the basin, many in the buildings closest to it.<sup>50</sup> This fact is perhaps less striking than that of residential distribution, since any random sampling of Providence's well-to-do might show similar workplaces, but it does indicate that spending most of the day in close proximity to the basin did not discourage people from thinking it worthy of preservation.

Although hundreds of people turned out to protest the plan, the city council the next day approved it overwhelmingly, over the objections of Nicholson and a few others, and charged the commission with carrying it out.<sup>51</sup>

Opponents of the Goddard plan now organized themselves as the Public Park Association (PPA). The nationwide parks movement had been felt in Providence for some time, although it lacked a strong institutional framework there. Under Mayor Doyle's leadership the city had set out fifteen years earlier to develop a great urban park, and by this time Roger Williams Park was well under way.<sup>52</sup> At the other end of the city the Rhode Island Historical Society had searched since the 1876 centennial for a benefactor to donate Count Rochambeau's thirty-acre Revolutionary War campsite, west of Hope Street, for a park. It found one early in 1882 in Truman Beckwith, who was at least as interested in recreation as in commemoration. When the city council approved the terminal plan, Beckwith made his offer contingent on preserving the Cove. He was



H. W. S. Cleveland plan, 1883

not, he said, going to give the city one park just so it could destroy another.<sup>53</sup>

The Public Park Association grew out of another venerable local institution, the Providence Franklin Society, which supplemented its scholarly lectures in 1881 with a talk on urban open space by Dr. Timothy Newell. The Franklin Society responded to the Goddard plan by forming a Parks Committee, which became the PPA. This group immediately began organizing meetings and issuing pamphlets promoting parks in general and the Cove park in particular. As the local arm of a nationwide movement, it brought in an out-of-town expert, Horace William Shaler Cleveland, whose landscape designs already

49. *Providence Journal*, 19 Nov. 1881.

50. *Providence Directory*.

51. *Providence Journal*, 1 May, 2 May 1882.

52. David Marshall, *The Jewel of Providence: An Illustrated History of Roger Williams Park, 1871-1961* (Providence, 1987); John S. Gilkeson, Jr., *Middle-Class Providence, 1820-1940* (Princeton, 1986), 225-35.

53. *Providence Journal*, 22 Feb., 24 Feb. 1882, 16 Apr. 1888. In a December 1881 letter to the *Journal* urging preservation of the Cove and promenade park, Beckwith wrote: "It is strange that at this late day the value of parks in a city, especially one as scantily supplied as ours, should require argument. . . . We bid fair to be known as the city without a park." H. T. B. to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 20 Dec. 1881.

54. Timothy Newell, *A Paper Read before the Providence Franklin Society, January 30, 1883* (Providence, 1883); Robert J. Taylor, "The Providence Franklin Society," *Rhode Island History* 9 (1950): 119-29. Cleveland would later design Blackstone Boulevard and parts of Swan Point Cemetery. Robert O. Jones, *Historic and Architectural Resources of the East Side, Providence: A Preliminary Report* (Providence, 1989), 53, 57-59.

55. [H. W. S. Cleveland], *Terminal Facilities: The Cove Park and the Woonasquatucket Valley*, PPA tract no. 2 (Providence, 1883). Boulevards along both sides of the Woonasquatucket valley recall Cleveland's greatest work, the comprehensive parks plan for Minneapolis, which he had presented just six weeks earlier. Norman T. Newton, *Design on the Land: The Development of Landscape Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 308-17.



included Providence's Roger Williams Park and the grounds of Butler Hospital.<sup>54</sup>

Cleveland spoke in Providence on 20 July 1883 with his own suggestion for solving the problem of railroads and the Cove. Main-line tracks would tunnel Smith Hill from a passenger station west of the basin, with a major public building across the Cove atop Jefferson Plain, perhaps the new state house which was already being discussed. The Cove Basin itself would be reshaped into a naturalistic pond of about ten acres, and the rest of its area made into parkland.<sup>55</sup> The Cove's new defenders were willing to save it by filling it.

While the parks movement opposed the Goddard plan for giving the railroads too much, the railroads themselves resisted it for giving them too little. Even with the "liberal" financial arrangements the commissioners recommended, the B&P and P&W objected to the plan's expense.<sup>56</sup> After the city council approved the plan in April 1882, the commission spent months conferring with the railroads and modifying it. At the suggestion of P&W chief engineer John Ellis, costs were cut by elevating tracks rather than streets, and the "Chinese wall" was born.<sup>57</sup> Still the B&P and P&W complained that the plan's price tag was "entirely disproportionate to their capital and business."<sup>58</sup> The commission agreed, explaining that saddling the railroads with these costs would defeat the aim of cheaper rail rates, and it explored ways of saddling the city treasury instead.

So far the commissioners worked in the apparently unanimous conviction that what was good for

Providence's railroads was good for the city. Then, on 25 April 1883, a newly chartered railroad, the New York and Boston Short Line, wrote to ask space in the terminal, and Colonel Goddard drafted a reply referring the request to "the several railroad corporations who will build and own" it.<sup>59</sup> One commission member, Charles Warren Lippitt, then president of the Board of Trade and later governor of Rhode Island, objected that no decision had been made as to who would own the completed terminal. Lippitt wanted a Union Station in fact as well as in name, open to all railroads on equal terms.

The railroads' unequal positions were a result of historical accidents shrewdly exploited. The B&P, as the second line to enter Union Depot, had had to lay its tracks past the Worcester platforms to the more distant west end of the station. From this initial inconvenience came the little railroad's most important and jealously guarded assets: sole ownership of Providence's through track and co-ownership with the P&W of the Boston-bound approaches. The competing NY&NE, which had to run west from Providence to get to Boston, requested through track rights and offered in return to pay the expenses at which the B&P and P&W were balking. No, these two insisted; they wanted a terminal that maintained their monopoly, and they wanted additional subsidies from the city so they could afford to build it.<sup>60</sup>

Most of the commissioners were skeptical of the financially shaky NY&NE and comfortable with the status quo. Comprehensive railroad improvements would not be accomplished by fighting the rail-

56. The initial offer stipulated that the city would purchase the railroads' old buildings and lend the railroads the full price of the land they would buy, at \$1.00 per foot for the Cove Basin and Promenade and \$.75 per foot for the Cove Lands. The basin would be filled at city expense, estimated at \$.33 a foot, in effect pricing it lower than the Cove Lands. These figures represented a reduction from appraisals of \$1.50 for the basin and \$.87 for the Cove Lands, given at the commission's hearings by a sympathetic committee of the Board of Trade. *City Documents*, 1882, no. 14, pp. 7, 11-13, 18-19; 1883, no. 25, p. 3; *Providence Journal*, 29 Apr. 1882. Mayor Doyle, who had been a real estate broker, thought the basin worth \$2.00-\$3.00; critics set the value as high as \$5.00. *City Documents*, 1885, no. 16, p. 10; Newell, *Paper Read before the Franklin Society*, 19.

57. *City Documents*, 1883, no. 25, pp. 4-5; reports of John Ellis to P&W superintendent N. E. Chamberlain, 25 May and 7 Sept. 1883, cited in Brennan, "Crisis over Railroad Terminal Facilities," 60-61. The term *Chinese wall* came from Philadelphia's elevated tracks.

58. "Quarterly Report of the Commission on Railroad Terminal Facilities," 2 Oct. 1882, *Resolutions*, 1882, pp. 275-76.

59. Charles Warren Lippitt, "Minority Report of the Commission on Railroad Terminal Facilities" (3 Mar. 1884), *City Documents*, 1883, no. 26, p. ix.

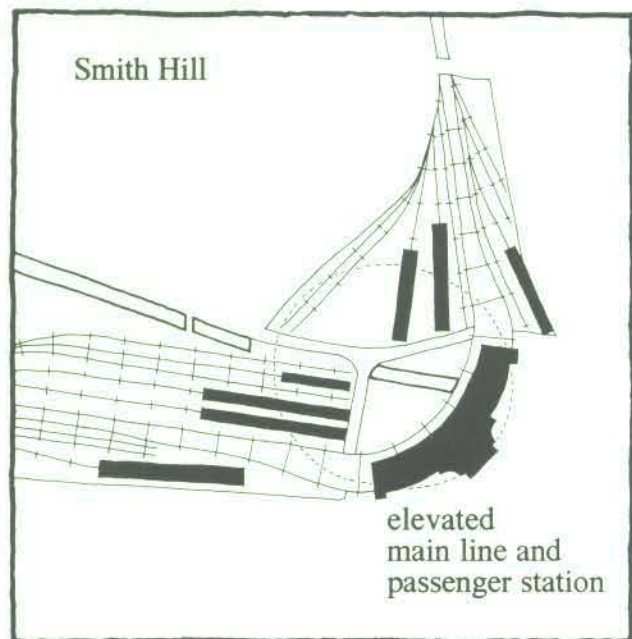
60. *City Documents*, 1883, no. 26, p. xvii.



roads, argued Goddard, and trying to shift the balance of power among them was fighting them. Critics saw darker explanations for the commissioners' behavior. One of Colonel Goddard's brothers was a director of the P&W; another was a director of the B&P. Goddard himself was on the board of the Providence, Warren and Bristol, a B&P subsidiary, and in 1884 commissioner Robert Knight would join the board of the Stonington Line. The commission, negotiating with the railroads as the city's representative, consulted not the city solicitor and city engineer but a legal and engineering staff provided by the B&P.<sup>61</sup>

The commission's majority refused even to discuss control of through tracks by anyone other than the B&P, leading Lippitt to observe ominously that "comment upon such extraordinary action by members of a commission appointed to represent the interests of Providence seems to be unnecessary."<sup>62</sup> Most of the commission's work from then on appears to have been conducted in informal sessions without Lippitt present. Goddard refused to let him see the final report unless he would agree beforehand to sign it.<sup>63</sup>

Colonel Goddard presented the new plan to the city council on 27 December 1883. He played down its modifications; tracks would bridge over streets instead of streets over tracks, but that was all. Yet the plan included two changes that others would find important: the Charles Street grade crossing would be retained in order to save money for the B&P and the P&W, and the freight yards were rearranged to give the prime building lots on Canal Street to the B&P rather than the city. On the night he presented the plan, Goddard insisted that the legislative calendar required an immediate vote, even though the lame-duck council would leave office the following week. The council waited to let



Goddard Commission's second plan, 1884

Lippitt respond briefly on 2 January 1884; then it approved the plan the next day and reappointed all the commissioners except Lippitt.<sup>64</sup> After Lippitt submitted his written minority report in March, at least one council member admitted he had not understood the plan and would have voted against it if he had.<sup>65</sup>

In the next few weeks Goddard and the B&P counsel drafted an enabling act to carry out the plan. There was a standard form for such bills, but they did not follow it. By carefully omitting certain provisions in one place and leaving them in another, they created a bill that would allow condemnation of NY&NE lands, but not the use of condemned lands to provide facilities for the NY&NE; that omitted voter approval of the city's expenses; and that omitted the normal reservation of legislative power of amendment, so that the General Assembly

61. "Majority Report of the Commission on Railroad Terminal Facilities" (27 Dec. 1883), *City Documents*, 1883, no. 25, pp. 7-8; [Charles S. Bradley], *Terminal Facilities: Proceedings, Plans, and Proposed Legislation of the Commission Stated and Considered* (Providence, 1884), 9-10, 22; NYP&B *Annual Report*, 1884; George Pierce Baker, *The Formation of the New England Railroad Systems* (Cambridge, Mass., 1937).

62. *City Documents*, 1883, no. 26, p. xviii.

63. Lippitt to Goddard, 28 Dec. 1883, Charles Warren Lippitt Papers, 64:43-47, Brown University Library.

64. *Providence Journal*, 28 Dec. 1883; Bradley, *Terminal Facilities*, 26; *Resolutions*, 1883, pp. 413-14.

65. Bradley, *Terminal Facilities*, 20 (quoting William H. Harris, a member of the 1883 common council and the 1884 General Assembly).



would not be able to compel the B&P and P&W to share their facilities with new lines. Adding insult to injury, in the section on fixing compensation, ordinarily by "three discrete disinterested persons," they omitted the word *disinterested*.<sup>66</sup> The bill's unusual nature was not obvious, and its sponsors understandably did not proclaim it. Its effect was to build the B&P and P&W monopoly quietly into law, giving these railroads powerful legal tools for the litigation that would almost certainly accompany construction of the terminal as planned.

The General Assembly hearings on the enabling act were the first official opportunity for the Goddard plan's opponents to be heard. The hearings required seventeen sessions between 6 March and 11 April. George Corliss commissioned a model to help people envision the elevated tracks. The Board of Trade adopted Lippitt's demand for a union depot. The PPA stepped up its pamphlet campaign, and on days without hearings it held "mass meetings" to keep attention focused on its views. The Goddard Commission again eliminated the Charles Street grade crossing and modified other details of the plan, but it did not retreat from the plan's outlines.<sup>67</sup>

The hearings coincided with elections for the next state legislature. Lippitt's minority report, and the monopoly it described, fed growing dissatisfaction with the Goddard Commission and its plan. "By the eighties," says historian Robert H. Wiebe, railroads "had alienated a remarkable range of Americans."<sup>68</sup> When the PPA named a "People's Park Ticket" of Republican and Democratic candidates who pledged to submit the Cove question to a city referendum, the entire ticket won, mostly by two-to-one margins. The *Evening Telegram* prematurely pronounced Goddard's "Waterloo."<sup>69</sup>

When the incumbent legislature assembled to vote on the enabling act, each member found on his

desk a lengthy pamphlet by former state Supreme Court chief justice Charles S. Bradley, detailing the bill's many irregularities. The legislators toned down the bill's most objectionable features (such as the discrimination against the NY&NE) but passed it, authorizing the city to go ahead with the Goddard plan. In deference to demands that the plan be submitted to Providence voters, however, the act would not take effect until accepted by a new city council. The council election in November would in effect be the Cove referendum.<sup>70</sup>

Candidates hedged on the controversial issue. The PPA organized more rallies and tried to name another nonpartisan "People's Ticket," but only the city's Democratic minority cooperated. Republicans instead nominated an "uncommitted" slate which pledged itself in general terms to railroad improvements. Four days before the election the P&W advertised that freight customers should plan to pick up shipments in East Providence or at the North End, because there was no room in its downtown yards.<sup>71</sup>

The 1884 election produced a majority of "uncommitted" councilmen, who then explained, to widespread dismay, that railroad improvements of course meant the Goddard plan. Truman Beckwith bitterly withdrew his offer of any parkland to the city. Thomas Doyle, once again mayor, now spoke out against the plan's "permanent barrier" of elevated tracks, and he chastised the city council for abdicating its responsibilities to a biased commission. The council ignored him and approved the Goddard plan by a large enough margin that a veto would have been futile.<sup>72</sup>

Having beaten back all opposition to their planned terminal, the commissioners set out to build it, only to face trouble from — of all quarters — the railroads. The P&W found fault with the station's

66. *Ibid.*, 52-73.

67. *Providence Journal*, 11 Mar., 7 Apr. 1884; *City Document*, 1884, no. 14, no. 15. Before the November elections Corliss also exhibited for comparison a model of the 1873 plan. Advertisement, *Providence Journal*, 21 Nov. 1884.

68. Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York, 1967), 53.

69. *Providence Evening Telegram*, 3 Apr. 1884.

70. Bradley, *Terminal Facilities*; 1884 P.L. 422.

71. Brennan, "Crisis over Railroad Terminal Facilities," 107-12; *Providence Journal*, 22 Nov. 1884.

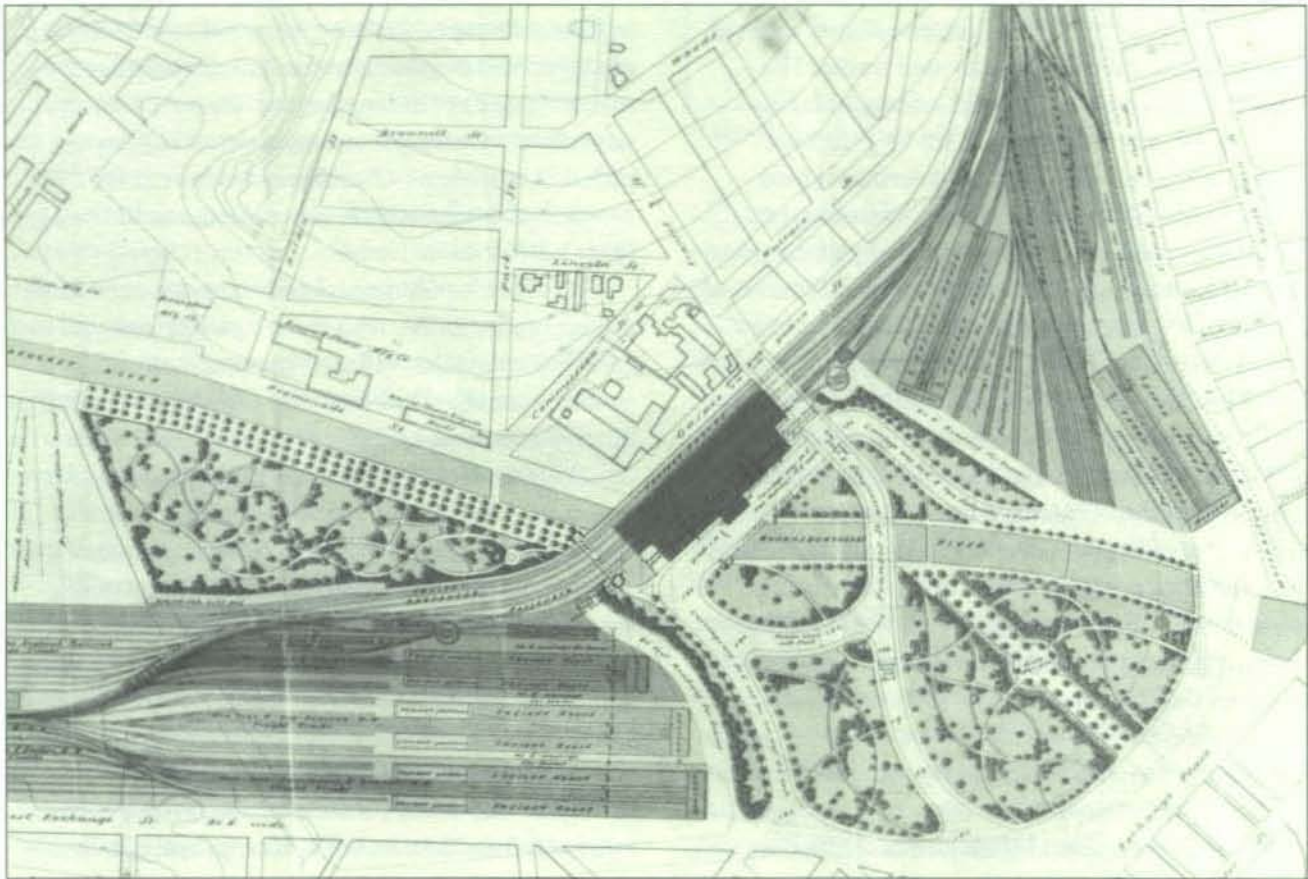
72. Brennan, "Crisis over Railroad Terminal Facilities," 112-16; *Resolutions*, 1884, p. 486; *City Documents*, 1885, no. 16, no. 18.



design, even though the architect who drew it had been hired and instructed by the company's own engineering staff. The exasperated commissioners hinted that some "insincerity" might be seen in the company's complaints.<sup>73</sup> Their suspicions were not without foundation. The P&W management was preparing for takeover by another line and apparently considered inflating the company's price by issuing a million dollars of new stock, ostensibly to finance its Providence terminal, while pursuing only minimal improvements which would cost a fraction of that.<sup>74</sup>

The P&W decided, as park advocates had warned, that land in the Cove was too valuable for freight yards. The company now bought an inexpensive tract in the city's North End and did not need so much space downtown, and it suggested to the commission that it could build its own passenger station too.<sup>75</sup> While the P&W stalled, the other railroads began independent planning as well. The Goddard Commission's enabling act, passed with such urgency three years before, would expire in 1887, and then the P&W and B&P could exercise

*The Expert Engineers' plan (1888) would have filled the Cove but kept most of its area as a downtown park. RIHS Collection (RHi X4 52).*



73. *City Documents*, 1885, no. 28, p. 6; 1886, no. 33, p. 10.

74. Samuel L. Minot, "Railroad Terminal Facilities in Providence," *Journal of the Association of Engineering Societies*, November 1890, quoted in George B. Francis, "Railroad Terminal Improvements at Providence, R.I.," *Journal of the Association of Engineering Societies* 42 (1909): 256.

75. Inaugural message of Mayor Doyle, *Providence City Manual*, 1886, p. 42; *City Documents*, 1886, no. 33, p. 7.

76. *Providence Journal*, 25 Jan. 1887.

77. *Resolutions*, 1887, p. 189; *Providence Journal*, 10 May 1887.

78. *Providence Journal*, 12 May 1887.

79. *Resolutions*, 1883, p. 142.

80. *Resolutions*, 1885, pp. 252, 928-29; 1886, pp. 432-34; *Providence Journal*, 30 May, 4 June, 5 June 1888.

81. Board of Trade resolution, 12 July 1887, in *Resolutions*, 1887, p. 271.



their own powers of eminent domain, with which the *Journal* said they proposed "to take a portion of the cove promenade, build a new track or two, cover them in with a sort of lean-to shed and let the improvement of terminal facilities go at that."<sup>76</sup>

With nothing to show for five years' work, the Goddard Commission resigned at the end of 1886. The commission's close ties to the railroads had seemed a guarantee that its plans, whatever their drawbacks, would be readily accepted and carried out. Now the city was willing to consider desperate measures. Lippitt and other businessmen asked the legislature to charter them as a private corporation empowered to build the station. The city submitted its own bill, which simply required the railroads to provide "suitable accommodations"; otherwise an independent engineer would devise a plan binding on all parties.<sup>77</sup>

No one in the city council objected to this bill's stipulation that any plan must include filling the Cove.<sup>78</sup> Keeping the basin as a body of water was less popular than ever. Preservationists might emphasize what the Cove could be, but the people of Providence could not help noticing what it was. In the spring of 1883, even as the Public Park Association was extolling its sanitary value, the board of aldermen had appointed a committee to recommend actions for "the immediate abatement of the Cove Basin nuisance, so called," and asked for a prompt report so "that these measures may be carried out before the hot weather."<sup>79</sup> Each year the council debated filling the basin, which survived only because the operation required new river alignments that had to await a definite terminal plan.<sup>80</sup> In the meantime the Board of Trade claimed that the Cove's smell was lowering downtown property values.<sup>81</sup> There might be legitimate difference of opinion as to whether the filled basin should become

freight yards or parkland, but there was no real doubt that the Cove would be filled.

When the railroads submitted their own plan in June 1887, it was thus doubly insulting: not only would it reuse the old Union Depot in exactly the jury-rigged fashion the *Journal* had warned about, but it also left the basin to remain if the city wished. A divided city council committee unenthusiastically endorsed the proposal only because the city needed terminal improvements immediately. The committee's report suggested filling the Cove as a park for Smith Hill, since it would not be accessible to anyone else.<sup>82</sup> The common council would not even allow the committee to read this report.

Embarrassed by the railroads' proposal, the city decided to ask three "expert railroad engineers" from other cities for an answer which seemed unavailable locally.<sup>83</sup> These engineers—the "Experts' Commission"—presented their plan in April 1888. No truly new plan was possible when every alternative had been so thoroughly explored; the Experts' plan was very much like one drawn by former mayor Williams S. Hayward (who appointed the Goddard Commission) after he left office in 1884, and its track alignment echoed Amos Barstow's 1868 proposal. The Experts' plan showed the passenger terminal on the far side of the Cove, with tracks along the base of Smith Hill bridged by Francis Street on an easy grade. Unlike Barstow, the engineers proposed filling the Cove Basin, using most of its area as a park on the downtown side of the station.<sup>84</sup>

The Experts' plan was the first officially sanctioned proposal to meet the approval of most PPA members. Many downtown merchants, on the other hand, were accustomed to a station in Exchange Place and had promises of one from an earlier commission, and they saw no reason to accept a

82. *City Documents*, 1887, no 26; Brennan, "Crisis over Railroad Terminal Facilities," 160-61. Brennan suggests that the railroads offered the plan "as a ploy to defeat the city's bill" in the legislature. This doubtless explains its timing, but its substance seems to be what the P&W and B&P had in mind all along.

83. *Resolutions*, 1887, pp. 321-22, 413-14. The commission, appointed by Mayor Gilbert F. Robbins, included Joseph W. Wilson of Philadelphia, chief engineer of the Pennsylvania

Railroad; Don Juan Whittemore of Milwaukee; and Alfred P. Boller of New York. NY&NE president Wilson had suggested a panel of three expert engineers as arbiters of the different railroads' requests at a City Property Committee meeting in November 1881. He specifically recommended Joseph Wilson, who had worked for the NY&NE. *Providence Journal*, 5 Nov. 1881.

84. *City Documents*, 1888, no. 15.



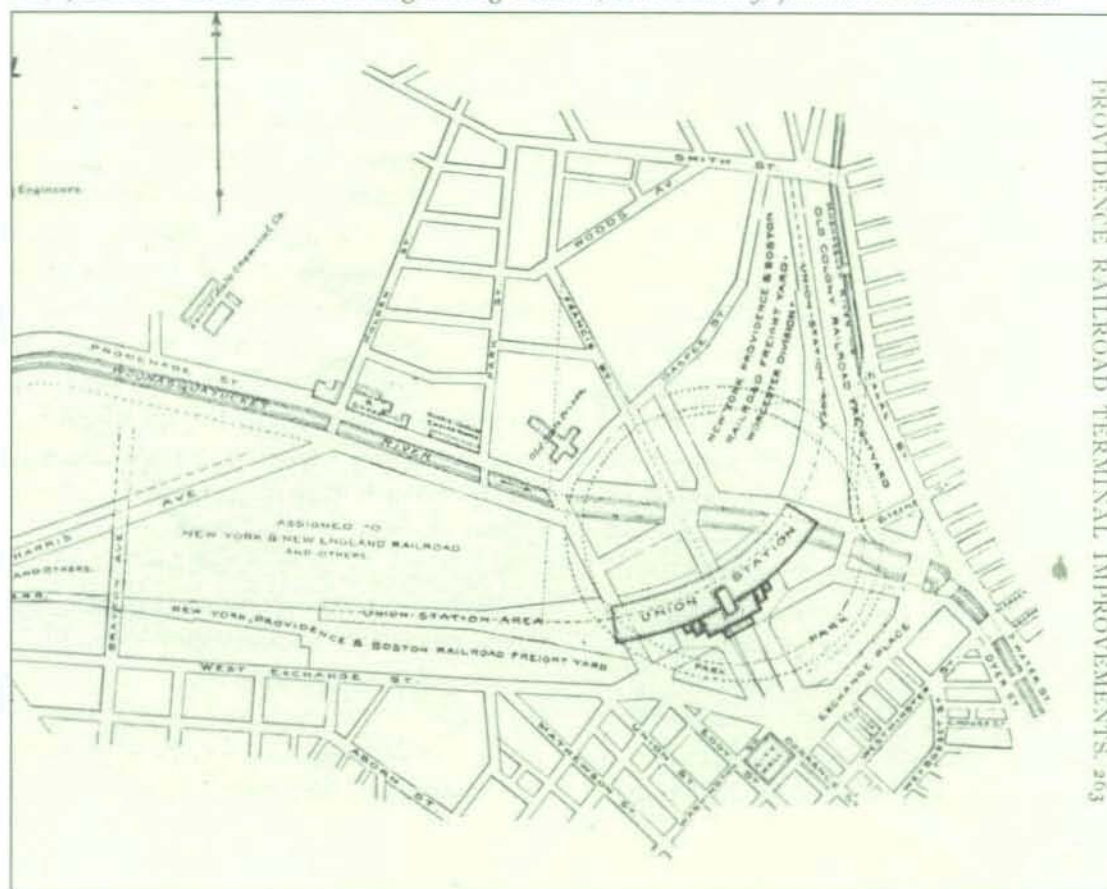
more distant location, no matter how pleasant the walk. As the months passed and these objections mounted, alternatives were suggested by businesspeople, the *Journal*, and even the Experts themselves.<sup>85</sup> Outside expertise had not proved to be the *deus ex machina* this drama needed.

The day before the Experts presented their plan, the Old Colony Railroad took over the B&P, an event that proved more significant for Providence terminal facilities than the next day's presentation. Two weeks later the Stonington Line leased the P&W. The two small railroads that had maintained

control over planning the terminal, but were unwilling or unable to build it, were replaced by two larger companies with ample cash and policies of growth by acquisition rather than monopolization. These railroads were ready to build a terminal in Providence.<sup>86</sup>

The city council sought to encourage them by contracting in September 1888 to build the Experts' proposed river channel walls through the basin.<sup>87</sup> The Cove's defenders lost their last battle when an unsympathetic state Supreme Court twice declined to enjoin the city from filling.<sup>88</sup> In December, how-

The railroads' "Plan X" (1889) modified the second Goddard plan by placing the station on an artificial hill and running Francis Street directly beneath it. From George B. Francis, "Railroad Terminal Improvements at Providence, R.I.," *Journal of the Association of Engineering Societies*, 1909. Courtesy of the Providence Athenaeum.



85. *Providence Journal*, 16 Apr., 19 Apr., 18 May, 6 June 1888; *Resolutions*, 1888, p. 241.

86. *Providence Journal*, 13 Apr., 28 Apr. 1888; *Resolutions*, 1888, pp. 207-8.

87. *Resolutions*, 1888, pp. 189-90, 292-93.

88. *Henry C. Clark et al. v. City of Providence*, 16 R.I. 337; *William G. R. Mowry v. City of Providence et al.* 16 R.I. 422.

89. *Resolutions*, 1888, pp. 405-7. The Old Colony, which had acquired the PW&B along with the B&P, was already pondering how to bring it into Union Station (the answer, twenty years later, was the East Side tunnel), and the Experts' plan made the

ever, the railroads requested a delay because they were considering building the new station much closer to downtown, immediately behind the old depot.<sup>89</sup> The city council initially stood behind the Experts' plan, but it finally accepted the railroads' "Plan 'X'" when it realized the companies were serious about carrying it out. Access to Smith Hill would be provided by extending Francis Street in a straight line directly under the center of the station. The "Chinese wall" would be softened visually, if not functionally, by an artificial knoll rising to the station entrance. In 1889 the council approved these plans and authorized selling the Cove Basin, the Cove Promenade, and the Cove Lands to the railroads.<sup>90</sup>

The city filled the Cove Basin during 1891 and 1892. Constructing foundations and laying tracks across the Cove, a project hampered by slippery substrata and complicated exchanges of land, took three years. During this time the New Haven Railroad completed its direct line from New York to Boston by taking over first the Stonington Line and then the Old Colony, and after a brief period of competition it also gained financial control over the NY&NE in 1895.<sup>91</sup> Although the terminal complex ultimately cost over six million dollars — twice as much as the state capitol — its financial problems were solved by consolidation of all of Providence's railroads into what became known as "The Monopoly."

Freight trains first used the new tracks to bypass the old depot in 1894. Work began the following year on the new station complex, beginning a long-awaited period of visible progress. On the night of 20 February 1896, old Union Depot burned in a spectacular fire. It stood in the middle of Exchange Place, partially demolished and temporarily repaired, for a year and a half before the New Haven announced that the new station was ready to open.<sup>92</sup>

The city council was surprised; where was the impressive trainshed shown on the plans? The company had decided instead to build cheaper individual platform shelters. After yearning for this new terminal for so many years, the city sued to keep it from opening: the trainshed, it said, was a condition of the railroad's land purchase. As no foundations had been laid for the original single-span design, the company complied by building an inferior shed supported by "a forest of posts." The station opened a year late, on 18 September 1898.<sup>93</sup>

### III

Providence filled its Cove because the city needed new railroad terminals and because the basin smelled. Its images as nuisance and available space grew stronger, while its image as ornament receded into memory and mockery. The railroads and their opponents implicitly agreed early that the basin could be filled because of its pollution, so most of the long fight was over allocation of the space to be created. If the details of railroad machinations and the allegations of chicanery which seemed so important at the time made any tangible difference in the end, they did so only by increasing the city's sense of desperation. Even this civic anxiety reflected a complex interplay of images of the city and its form.

Throughout the Cove dispute the images of ornament, nuisance, available space, and functioning organ were increasingly eclipsed by a more abstract fifth image: Providence's place in a nationwide hierarchy of cities. The city's residents participated in an increasingly national economy; but beyond population and other gross statistics of scale, they as yet had no sophisticated tools for appraising their place in it. Providence was approximately the twentieth largest city in the country during this

problem more difficult. *Providence Journal*, 29 Apr. 1888; Edwin P. Dawley, "The East Side Tunnel and Its Approaches, Providence, R.I.," *Journal of the Association of Engineering Societies* (1909): 293-94.

90. Francis, "Railroad Terminal Improvements," 261-67; *Resolutions*, 1888, pp. 429-31; 1889, p. 342; *City Document*, 1889, no. 20, no. 24.

91. Baker, *New England Railroad Systems*, 93-94.

92. Francis, "Railroad Terminal Improvements," 291; photograph in "Providence Pictures Album," RIHS.

93. *City Documents*, 1897, no. 25, no. 26; 1898, no. 7, p. 3.



period, but its rank was inevitably slipping as western cities grew and as Providence, unlike other American cities, failed to annex the suburbs where its growth increasingly occurred. Providence people often saw their city's status in terms of a rivalry with Boston, a view that only increased their sense of insecurity.<sup>94</sup>

A city's place in the urban hierarchy could be expressed in its form. A persistent railroad planning question was whether Providence should have a through station (one that trains can traverse without reversing direction, or even without stopping) or a head station (literally a terminal, the final stop, in which the tracks end at the platforms). Through stations were easier to build and operate. Head stations were safer, since passengers were not compelled to cross any tracks, though this advantage disappeared when passages over or under the tracks were introduced at through stations. Head stations also allowed lines of tracks to approach the hearts of large cities without cutting them in half. Head stations were generally found in the biggest cities, and for this reason Providence wanted one. Similarly, the trainshed case involved no great interests on either side — the railroad was merely cutting corners, the city perhaps trying to atone for all the other deficiencies it had allowed in the plan. Urban imagery again came to the fore here; no city with any self-esteem could allow travelers to step off their trains under mere platform shelters.<sup>95</sup>

An urban hierarchy had not always dominated the city's self-image. The early view of the Cove embodied the antithesis of this conception: the Cove was a marker of uniqueness, a symbol of the independent community of Providence. It conferred identity rather than position. As this localized view gave way to one of nationwide scope, features like the Cove Basin suffered. Unique attributes by

definition could not be weighed against one another, and thus they could not enhance a city's rank.

The Public Park Association tried to turn this set of priorities back on itself. While it was clear enough in the 1880s that Providence would never rival New York and Chicago in the number of its citizens or the volume of its trade, the PPA pointed out another hierarchy, one of municipal improvement and beauty. In this hierarchy small size would not prevent a city from rising, and excellence could well be rewarded by quantifiable growth.<sup>96</sup> If Providence could not be the biggest, it could be the most beautiful, ultimately a prouder claim.

In other ways, however, the PPA undermined the earlier view of the Cove as Providence's ornament. Its first brief pamphlet, *Sanitation: The Cove Park*, a statistical hard sell for public health, summarized other issues with an unsentimental rationality:

It is painful to hear men talk seriously of destroying the Cove Park by giving it to the railroads. They can have abundant land without it. It is exceedingly valuable. It is worth millions for business purposes and vastly more for health and ornament. Whatever amount the city may spend in retaining, improving and beautifying it, will soon be returned in increased revenue from the rise of surrounding property.<sup>97</sup>

While the PPA advocated "parks for the people," the pamphlet oozed paternalism as it asked, "Where can you take the clerk of our stores, the girl of our shops, by and by, for a daily walk to give them fresh air?" Ultimately it returned to a cold and unsympathetic logic: recreation would "renew their vitality for tomorrow's work." Its cost-benefit analysis considered "the loss of the cost of rearing a child, when the child dies." The final paragraph warned of "sickness, which will spread from the valleys and the poor, to the hills and to the rich."<sup>98</sup>

The PPA's organizers faced powerful practical arguments, and they responded in kind. Perhaps

94. See *Providence Journal*, 25 Oct. 1881, and the exchange of letters between Amos Barstow and William Hoppin in the *Providence Journal*, 19 Nov., 22 Nov., 29 Dec. 1881; 3 Jan., 6 Jan., 9 Jan., 12 Jan., 16 Jan. 1882.

95. *City Documents*, 1897, no. 25, p. 6.

96. Public Park Association, *Parks of Leading Cities*, 5, 44-49.

97. Public Park Association, *Sanitation*, 4.

98. *Ibid.*, 2-4.

99. Amasa M. Eaton, *Terminal Facilities: Speech . . . before the Joint Special Committee of the General Assembly . . . March 17, 1884* (Providence, 1884), 22-23; Public Park Association, *Interior Open Spaces in Cities: Their Advantages*, PPA tract no. 8 (Providence, 1889), 42-45; H.T.B. to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 20 Dec. 1881.

100. Letter to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 17 Feb. 1868; William Hoppin to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 19 Nov. 1881.



this seemed a necessary political tactic, and perhaps it was instinctive for reformers from the emerging professional class. Whatever the reason, they thought in the same utilitarian mode as the railroads: the Cove was available space, and they explained dispassionately why it should be available for parks rather than railroads. If the Cove was to survive, however, it would have to tap the passionate and essentially irrational affection many Providence residents still felt for it. While individual members of the PPA were willing to stand up for civic beauty and adornment, the group's doctrine sometimes made these seem superfluous, even embarrassingly old-fashioned.

At its heart the Cove controversy was a question of sanctity, specifically whether the Cove Basin was Providence's analogue of Boston's sacred Common.<sup>99</sup> For a short generation the answer was yes, but the basin was unable to acquire the historical momentum of the Common; as a body of water it could not enter the daily life of the city so directly. The PPA helped deny the Cove that sanctity through the group's willingness to sacrifice it for a new and different kind of park.

The Cove Promenade was an old kind of park, its mathematical ellipse and regular planting proudly displaying an artifice that became anathema to the parks movement's Romantic sensibilities. The succession from one aesthetic to another can be traced in the history of the Cove Basin. When it was built, pure geometry was obviously compelling. The final segment of the promenade closed the ellipse in 1857, the same year that the design competition for New York's Central Park established Frederick Law Olmsted as the prophet of the new natural aesthetic. Through the 1870s writers assumed that the Cove park was permanently laid out, and they praised purity of geometry as the best feature of its design. But in 1881 Governor Hoppin, who five years earlier

had been happy with the formal ellipse, argued in his advocacy of filling that it would require expensive rearrangement to give the basin an appropriate shape.<sup>100</sup> Amasa M. Eaton, who would later serve as president of the PPA, suggested the same year that a real park be laid out without the basin; "What 'beauty' can there ever be in such a sheet of water and mud flats, surrounded by a narrow ring of formal 'Park'?" he asked.<sup>101</sup> "The circular form," thought H. W. S. Cleveland, was "destructive of all natural effect" and "suggestive rather of a tank or cistern than a lake."<sup>102</sup> Geometry was no longer compatible with beauty, and no longer acceptable in a park.

Paradoxically, the geometry that made the basin seem expendable may also have helped it survive as long as it did. The space could not be invaded piecemeal. Until the ellipse was conceived, small sections of the Cove were filled as needed; once the ellipse was begun, there could be no deviation from its plan without causing glaring imperfections. The ellipse was thus a compelling generative idea even before it existed in fact; it was what Hans Blumenfeld has called an "urban gene."<sup>103</sup> An indication of its power in guiding development can be seen in the way the Cove was filled. Until the ellipse was begun in 1846, filling proceeded from the perimeter inward; after 1846 filling moved outward from the promenade. Before the naturalistic aesthetic took hold, plans that proposed partial filling of the basin could do so only by reworking its whole perimeter into a figure of equal geometrical purity, usually a smaller ellipse. Niles Schubarth, the engineer who laid out the ellipse in 1845, drew a terminal plan in 1887 which would have filled just enough of the basin to make it perfectly circular.<sup>104</sup>

From most angles the Cove ellipse already looked like a circle.<sup>105</sup> Its apparent focus on a central point inspired several proposals, among them one for a jet

101. A. M. E. to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 28 Nov. 1881.

102. Cleveland, *Terminal Facilities*, 9, 6.

103. Hans Blumenfeld, "Continuity and Change in Urban Form," *Journal of Urban History* 1 (1975): 131-47.

104. Public Park Association, *Parks of Leading Cities*, 52-53 and plan. Elisha H. Howard's "Compromise Plan" in 1888 included a smaller circular Cove. Francis, "Railroad Terminal Improve-

ments," 260-61. The city council's Committee on Streets made one of several proposals for a smaller ellipse. *City Documents*, 1881, no. 9, pp. 12-13.

105. An 1857 resolution of the common council referred to dredging the "Cove circle." *Proceedings of the Common Council*, 1857-58, p. 72; Cleveland, 6, 9.



of water at the center, another that the city build its new city hall on an artificial island there, connected to the promenade by four bridges.<sup>106</sup> City Hall, as it was eventually built, was modeled on Philadelphia's, and in this proposal it would have stood like Philadelphia's at the symbolic geometrical center of the city.

The Cove Basin's focal position counted heavily in the controversy over its fate. While a few die-hard industrialists were delighted by the prospect of clanging freight yards at the heart of the city, this was generally thought inappropriate, particularly for the great city Providence aspired to be.<sup>107</sup> In the years since Union Depot created Exchange Place, the city continued growing westward; would a new station north or west of the Cove again give the city

a new center? People acknowledged that this was possible but disagreed whether it was desirable. The parks movement and defenders of the Cove were eager for the center to shift; a business district growing westward could help ring the Cove park with fine buildings instead of rail yards. Landowners with investments in the old center opposed any move that might make their holdings a backwater.<sup>108</sup> Others, such as Barstow, would benefit if their lands became downtown property. With so many conflicting interests the safest move was none at all, a station on substantially the same site, reinforcing the old center.

Despite this conservative decision, Providence still faced a problem of focus in its urban form. In 1893 the state decided to build its capitol on Smith

"Providence, 1950," published in 1910 by Huger Elliott, anticipates the radial plan and reincarnated Cove of today's Capital Center. From Year-book of the Rhode Island Chapter, American Institute of Architects, 1910. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6428).



106. *Providence Journal*, 26 Nov. 1881, 9 Jan. 1882. Fascination with the center of the Cove was evident as early as 1854, when *The Advertiser* announced that the city had accepted a proposal to build an elliptical island there, featuring a sixty-foot-high Temple of Minerva containing a ballroom and an ice cream parlor. The announcement appeared in the 1 April issue. Item no. 166, Rider Scrapbook, John Hay Library, Brown University.

107. Letter to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 17 Feb. 1868; Bradley, *Terminal Facilities*, 76; Eaton, *Terminal Facilities*, 16; A. C. B. to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 22 Nov. 1881.

108. Public Park Association, *Parks of Leading Cities*, 53-55; A. C. B. to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 19 Jan. 1882; Isaac F. Battery, *Providence Journal*, 11 Nov. 1881; Eaton, *Terminal Facilities*, 16; *City Documents*, 1882, no. 14, p. 5; William Hoppin to the editor, *Providence Journal*, 29 Dec. 1881.



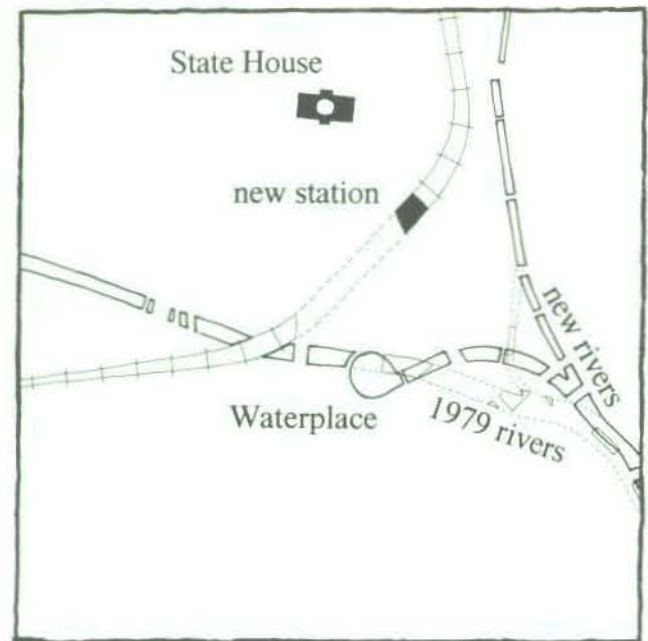
Hill, following Cleveland's ten-year-old plan even as its rationale was disappearing beneath new railroad yards. The city had to give shape to its center now that the Cove was gone.

## IV

If the life and ultimate death of the Cove were a reflection of its images, the Cove also left an after-image, a ghost that has haunted Providence's planners for a century.

The difficulty of eradicating the Cove Basin must have contributed a certain feeling of stability to the city's recast form. Surely it was now fixed for all time; no alternative could muster the intensity of support that had been required to locate Union Station, and so it would remain there. An elaborate infrastructure was cemented in place: the two levels of tracks, two levels of streets, river channels, and quarter-mile-long station complex would stay put by sheer weight.

In spite of this apparent permanence, the city center's form became malleable again almost immediately. Within a few years the downtown freight yards lost importance to better facilities elsewhere on the line.<sup>109</sup> The tension between the new State House and its unstately setting led the twenty-year-old PPA to start lobbying in 1902 for a "public garden" on the site of the Cove. In 1910 the Rhode Island chapter of the American Institute of Architects published a projection of Providence's future in which the Cove reappeared as a circular pool within a Beaux Arts composition of new buildings.<sup>110</sup> The new City Plan Commission put the problem of the State House environs at the top of its agenda in 1914, and by 1930 it had concluded that the solution was to move the railroad, a goal the city



Capital Center plan, 1985

pursued unsuccessfully throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In the mid-1970s the unofficial but popular "Interface" plan proposed reexcavating the Cove as part of a new downtown park.<sup>111</sup> Providence's waters, finally becoming cleaner, began to regain their image as an ornament to the city, only a hundred years later than the Cove's partisans had hoped.

The Capital Center design under construction includes "Waterplace," a circular tidal basin of about an acre.<sup>112</sup> Waterplace is the Cove's reincarnation, and if it is successful, it may finally put this ghost to rest. If it is not successful, the history of the Great Salt Cove ought to teach us a certain humility toward elements of urban form that evolve over periods longer than our lifetimes; in their evolution the economic and technological forces of any given period must contend with images of what the city was and what it might be.

109. Providence City Plan Commission, *Annual Report 2* (1915), 9.

110. Huger Elliott, "Providence, 1950," in *Year-book of the Rhode Island Chapter, American Institute of Architects*, 1910, p. [139]. Elliott, educated at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, was then director of the Rhode Island School of Design.

111. Providence City Plan Commission, *Annual Report 17* (1930), appendix, 13; *Interface: Providence* (Providence, 1974). A

similar proposal by architect Philemon Sturges appeared in the *Providence Journal*, 10 Aug. 1969.

112. The original design for Capital Center, by Skidmore Owings & Merrill's Washington office, shows Waterplace as a square. The plan is published in *Progressive Architecture*, January 1981, 94-95, where it received an Urban Design and Planning Award. The present design was drawn in 1984 by architect William Warner as part of his *Providence Waterfront Plan*.



# Waterfronts as a Key to City-Center Redevelopment

Chester E. Smolski

It has not been an easy path, nor has it happened at a rapid pace, but the often deteriorating downtowns of many of our urban centers are coming back as hubs of activity. Although they are still a far cry from their earlier days, when major downtowns could draw citizens from well outside the city to shop, work, and be entertained, the signs of revitalization are unmistakable and encouraging. Often these signs are found in a rediscovered resource on which the city had turned its back, a resource that has increasingly proven to be an integral part of city-center recovery. That rediscovered resource is the waterfront.

The waterfront has played a unique role in urban development in this country. It was often the waterfront that determined the location of a city because of the necessity of transferring goods between land and water. Earlier settlements in Europe and Asia were often established as political or religious centers, or they were situated on sites that could be easily defended. For these places, location on water was not deemed as necessary as it was when this country was settled.

Because of contacts with Europe, early population centers in this country, from Saint Augustine to Plymouth, sprang up along the coasts. In time, as more settlers came and moved into the interior, the rivers served as the means of movement. Population centers were established along riverfronts in places like Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Saint Louis, and at the heads of river navigation where small vessels could no longer travel, as along the fall line in the Southeast, where were established such early cities as Montgomery, Alabama; Augusta and Macon, Georgia; and Richmond, Virginia. And

when settlement moved into the Great Lakes, places such as Cleveland, Buffalo, and Chicago, with their lakefronts, and Detroit, with its riverfront connection between Lakes Erie and Huron, became focal points of activity.

Even man-made waterways — canals — played an important role in some communities. Lowell, Massachusetts, owes its early growth to location on the Merrimack River and its connecting canals, which were important to the city's industrial development. Today, after falling into disrepair and disuse, these canals have been restored and are an important part of Lowell's rebirth, though their importance now is aesthetic and historical.

Industrialization also had an impact on other waterfronts. Early industry was commonly located on rivers, both for power and for waste disposal. After passing through a mill and collecting all types of wastes, water would be discharged back into the river to continue its course past riverfronts and into estuaries and bays. In time these waterfronts became open sewers, a condition that did little to attract people to them. The Cove in downtown Providence was filled in during the last century partly as a result of its becoming such an open sewer.

As rivers, lakes, and canals served to open up interior parts of the nation during its early history, so too the railroads gave places that did not have good access to water a new importance. Some of these places — Denver, Houston, Atlanta, Nashville, and Kansas City among others — became major

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*The financial center of downtown Providence as seen from the northwest. Interstate Route 195 is shown skirting the Providence and Seekonk rivers, effectively cutting off the Fox Point neighborhood of Providence's East Side from the waterfront. Courtesy of Chester Smolski.*

urban centers. West Coast cities such as Los Angeles also owed their early growth to railroads, in this case the extension of the Southern Pacific from San Francisco and the subsequent rail expansion to the Southwest and the South.

As their lines extended into city centers and to the waterfronts, railroads also fostered the growth of cities on the water. With their presence on waterfronts adjacent to city centers, railroads helped to expand areas devoted to industrial and commercial activities centered on the waterfront. But this was a mixed blessing, for by this century the railroads had become major competitors of waterborne transport, and subsequent retreat from the waterfront was to take place.

If the railroads proved to be formidable competitors to the services of the waterfront, it was the coming of fast roads and motortrucks that fostered

ever greater competition. In many cities of the nation, moreover, the interstate highway system literally cut off the waterfront from the nearby city center, further contributing to the former's decline and abandonment. India Point Park in Providence, for example, is effectively cut off from the downtown and the Fox Point neighborhood to the north, as well as from other parts of the East Side, by Interstate Highway 195. The narrow footbridge over the highway is a small and uninviting connection to the park. For more than a decade the park was little used and subject to vandalism, and with poor maintenance it became a sad commentary and an example of the general abandonment of the waterfront.

With the intense competition from other types of transportation and the decline of shipbuilding and related industries that traditionally provided



employment to this part of the American city, the sewage-laden waterfront became the back yard of the city and was left ignored and unattended. The front yard, the place to which the city directed its attention, was inland.

Waterfronts also have been affected by the change from an industry-based American economy to one heavily oriented toward the service sector. Whereas manufactured goods often find their way to the waterfront of a river, a lake, or the ocean, from which they are shipped elsewhere, the service sector deals largely in information and sends its products over wires and cables, and for such activity waterfronts have little advantage over any other type of location.

Finally, the decline of waterfronts was hastened by natural disasters, with flooding and storms taking heavy tolls. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in Providence's harbor, where isolated pilings of former piers and wharves still dot the water surface as stark reminders of the 1938 hurricane, a storm that flooded the downtown with water levels thirteen feet above mean high tide and claimed 262 lives throughout the state.

World War II temporarily spurred waterfront interest and activity. Providence's Field's Point, for example, was chosen as the site for the Rheem Shipyard, constructed by the Walsh-Kaiser Company. As many as twenty-one thousand workers toiled here to construct sixty-four Liberty ships, but all of this activity ceased with the end of the war. Some commercial and recreational ventures were attempted at Field's Point after the war, but with little success. Although water-related and water-dependent industries continued and still dominate this area, reduced port activities have further contributed to its decline. It is ironic that this thirty-seven-acre site, located on the water with wonderful vistas of Narragansett Bay, was once considered for the city's major park (its small size and Betsey Williams's subsequent bequest of land farther south eventually led to the establishment of Roger Williams Park instead). Current efforts by developers to bring housing and open space to underused Field's Point have had little success to date.

By the early post-World War II era many cities had to contend with a derelict and underutilized

waterfront. Further, because of other pressing city needs, such as slum clearance and urban revitalization, attention was directed to city centers and neighborhoods. For example, the National Housing Act of 1949, which sought to provide "a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family," occupied the attention of cities for the twenty-five years that this urban renewal program was in operation.

An additional concern of the cities was the loss of population that most of them experienced. In increasing numbers Americans were moving to the suburbs to find space for their many children, the generation that was to become known as the "baby boomers." In time retailers left the cities to be nearer their potential customers, and the shopping mall became part of the suburban fabric. Other commercial enterprises and jobs subsequently left the cities also, and newly emerging urban clusters arose to challenge the central cities. These "urban villages" or "outer cities" include places like Tyson's Corner, Virginia — a town just outside Washington, D.C. — which is now the seventh largest retail center in the nation.

The continuing deterioration in the quality of city life served as an impetus for residents to abandon the city, just as the waterfront was abandoned. Increasing crime, poor schools, traffic, and overcrowding, together with the lack of good housing and declining neighborhoods, made it difficult for residents to commit themselves and their children to urban conditions that appeared to get worse with each passing year.

This suburban explosion of people and jobs, which has now shifted the national political power base from the cities to their fringes, has made the political leadership of cities painfully aware that they no longer can count on dominating their metropolitan areas. With some help from the federal government of the pre-Reagan era, in the form of community development funding and programs such as Urban Development Action Grants, efforts to improve city life — often including improvement to the waterfront — were made to counteract the appeal of the suburbs. These efforts continue to be made, but with limited federal resources, a legacy of the eight Reagan years of



diminishing help to housing programs and cities.

The private sector also saw opportunities for urban investment as cities turned their attention to improving their centers, many of which were connected to waterfronts that were ripe for improvement and development. As John Tunbridge observes in an article in *Revitalizing the Waterfront: International Dimensions of Dockland Redevelopment* (ed. B. S. Hoyle, D. A. Pinder, and M. S. Husain; London, 1988), "There is a wide ranging potential for urban waterfront revitalization: the withdrawal of port functions provides an exceptional opportunity to restore the historic links between the populace and the waterfront, to reclaim a heritage resource, and to exploit a prime reserve of inner-city redevelopment land."

Waterfront development and revitalization is frequently tied to city-center improvement both because of the waterfront's physical connection to the center and because of the recognition that waterfronts offer city residents and others opportunities for housing and recreation, land uses that had not formerly been possible in busy ports dominated by marine activities. Thus it was that factors which favored city-center revitalization also worked to facilitate improvement of the waterfront. In examining this connection between city-center and waterfront revitalization over the past two decades, Tunbridge calls attention to several of these factors, including changing demographics and house prices that favored city residences; a growing awareness of historical heritage and differences in quality of life; a growth in urban tourism; and an energy crisis that prompted people to reside close to their jobs in the city.

Waterfront revitalization is taking place today from Portland, Maine, to Miami, Florida, on the Atlantic Coast; from Tampa, Florida, to New Orleans, Louisiana, on the Gulf Coast; from San Diego, California, to Olympia, Washington, on the Pacific Coast; and on riverfronts from Saint Louis on the Mississippi River to Wilmington, North Carolina, on the Cape Fear River and Grand Junction, Colorado, on the Gunnison and Colorado rivers. With activities ranging from the restoration of historic structures to the recycling of buildings, from the construction of marinas to the establishment of new

commercial ventures, communities are looking to their waterfronts as new opportunities for revitalization — revitalization that will affect the waterfront, the city center, and the city.

Early efforts to reclaim the water started just over two decades ago in San Francisco when an old chocolate factory on the waterfront was recycled into a shopping complex. Ghirardelli Square continues to be a lively location for shopping and dining. The Tannery, a shopping complex, followed. Then wharves were refurbished and restored to become additional shopping centers; these included Pier 39, the most recent waterfront venture to take advantage of the magnificent vista of San Francisco Bay and the Golden Gate Bridge.

In Boston the Quincy Market opened in 1976, to be followed by the South and North Market buildings, a complex known as the Faneuil Hall Marketplace. The first successful commercial venture of its kind in a downtown, this "festival marketplace" would draw more than twelve million visitors a year in the mid-1980s, more than attended Disney World. Located on the edge of the financial district, the marketplace serves as a connection to the waterfront, which is no more than a hundred yards away. Boston's waterfront can now boast of some of the most varied attractions in the country; these include the historic vessel *Old Ironsides*, a colorful ethnic neighborhood, a hectic neighborhood marketplace, an inviting park, an aquarium, hotels, restaurants,

*Along the Boston waterfront, garden apartments face onto their own marinas and the ever-changing city skyline. Courtesy of Chester Smolski.*





shops, residences, marinas, and — a short distance from these — a working seaport, all fronting on what is claimed to be the most polluted harbor in the nation. The development of the waterfront has been so successful that the city is now in the process of removing the elevated Interstate Highway 93 in order to replace it with a depressed highway. The purpose of this ten-year project is to better connect the downtown with the waterfront, a connection that was broken in the era of highway construction.

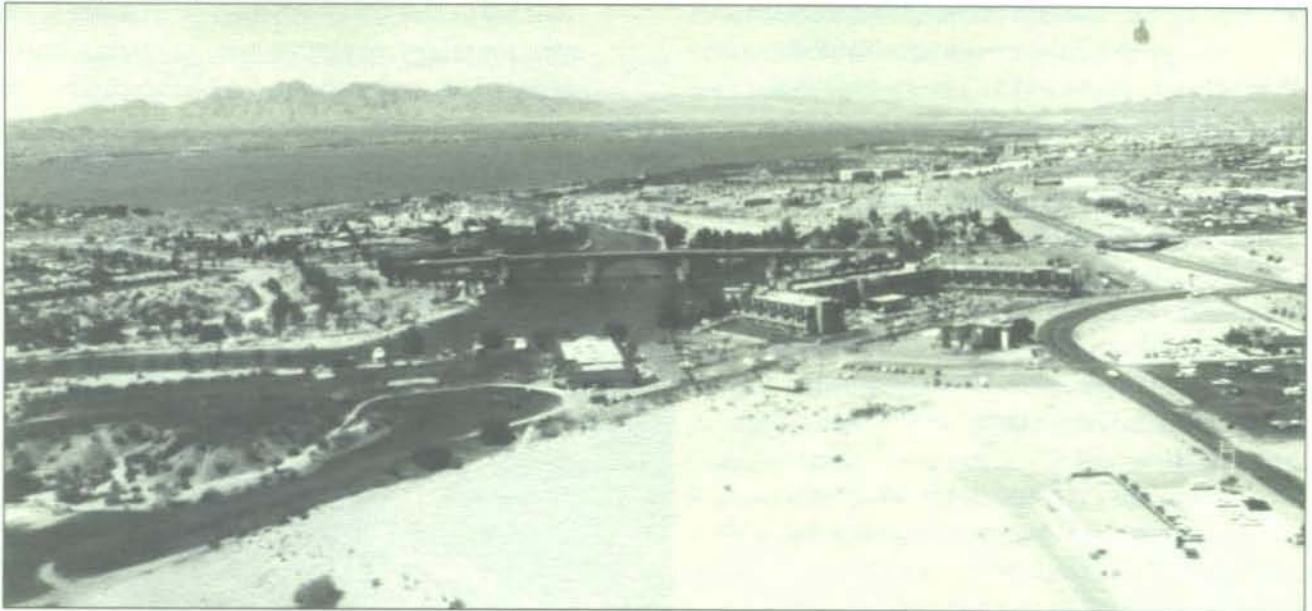
The success of the Faneuil Hall Marketplace has prompted its developer, the Rouse Company, to repeat its festival marketplaces in other locations. Of the thirteen such marketplaces that the company has developed all over the country, seven are on waterfronts. Among Rouse's more recent projects are the South Street Seaport, located near the financial district in Manhattan, with Pier 17 included in the project's final phase in 1985; Riverwalk, opened in 1986 on the east bank of the Mississippi between the Spanish Plaza and the Convention Center in New Orleans; and two Florida developments, both opened in 1987: Jacksonville Landing, on the north side of the Saint Johns River adjacent to the downtown, and Bayside, in Miami, located on Biscayne Bay next to the financial district.



*The Rouse-built Harborplace is part of the Inner Harbor development of the Baltimore waterfront. The World Trade Center overlooks the USS Constellation, one of America's oldest naval sailing vessels, and the National Aquarium, shown on the far right. Courtesy of Chester Smolski.*

Perhaps one of the company's best-known marketplaces is Harborplace, opened in 1980 as part of the Inner Harbor in Baltimore and enlarged by Rouse in 1987 with the Gallery, an additional shopping facility. Eighteen million visitors were drawn annually to Harborplace in the mid-1980s.

*The London Bridge, Arizona's second most popular tourist attraction, is adjacent to the town center of Lake Havasu City, a planned community of twenty thousand residents. Courtesy of Chester Smolski.*





The Harborplace project in Baltimore illustrates more than just another Rouse development, now so common that the term "Rousification" is applied to similar developments in cities everywhere. Waterfront and city-center revitalization often results through public or private initiative, but more commonly it is the result of private and public cooperation. The Charles Center in downtown Baltimore was proposed by private interests and approved by the city, which cleared the land. This successful office complex, with apartments, hotel, and theater, encouraged city officials and the private sector to turn their attention to the waterfront, and the Inner Harbor development was the result.

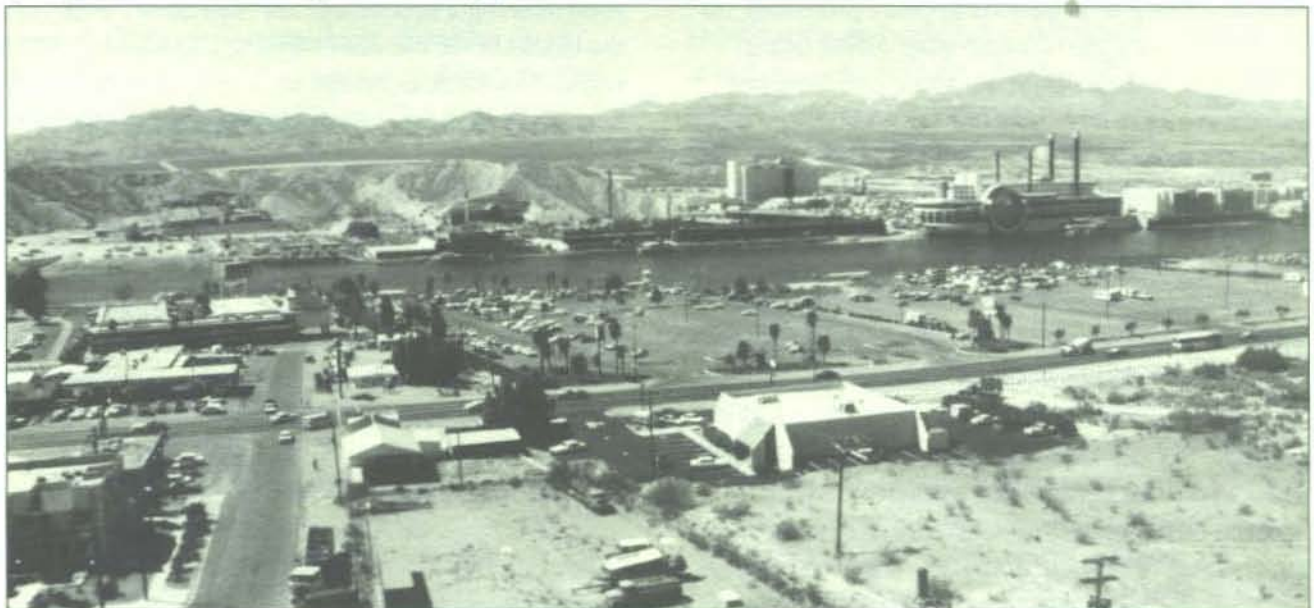
Perhaps two of the most unusual waterfront developments are private ventures along the Colorado River where it forms the border between Arizona and Nevada. Laughlin, Nevada, the site of one of these developments, is across the river from Bullhead City, Arizona, both towns fifty miles upriver from Lake Havasu City, Arizona, the site of the other development. Havasu and Bullhead are extreme examples of planned and unplanned communities: Havasu is one of the "new towns" of the 1960s, when many such communities were created, often with federal help; Bullhead is an

example of what can go wrong without planning, with its poor subdivision control and incompatible land use obvious even to the untrained eye. Currently activity in Laughlin is having a profound effect on Bullhead's waterfront as well as its own.

It was a Mr. Laughlin who bought a small bait shop in Nevada across the Colorado River from Bullhead. Recognizing that little other land was available near his site because the land was federally owned, and that there would thus be little competition, he proceeded to construct some gambling casinos there (casino gambling being legal in Nevada). At last count there were nine casinos, each with a different operator and all fronting on the river, with some housing construction nearby. The waterfront of Bullhead has also been affected, for this city of ten thousand has constructed several piers and parking lots to serve the Laughlin gamblers who are ferried across the river to the casinos, an easier route than taking the bridge farther north.

There are net benefits for both communities: Laughlin is now the third major gambling center in Nevada, after Las Vegas and Reno; Bullhead City has seen development along its riverfront, primarily based on Laughlin gambling, and residents have found many employment opportunities across the

*Parking lots and ferry slips at Bullhead City, Arizona, are used by visitors when they cross the Colorado River to patronize the casinos of Laughlin, Nevada, in the background. Courtesy of Chester Smolski.*







*From the Newport Center development in Jersey City, the view across the Hudson River is of lower Manhattan, dominated by the Port Authority-owned World Trade Center. The new Battery Park City, a mixed-use development with five thousand apartments, built on the ninety-two acres created from the fill excavated for the World Trade Center, is in the foreground. Courtesy of Chester Smolski.*

river. The long-term outlook appears promising for Laughlin, which has some housing subdivisions under way, but for Bullhead, where residents are subject to a state income tax (there is no tax in Nevada), there may be incentives to move across the river. Lower house prices in Bullhead will likely continue to make it a viable community, but it is one desperately in need of planning.

Lake Havasu City, with twenty thousand residents — about one-quarter of Mohave County's population — was founded by the McCulloch Oil Corporation (now MCO Holdings, Inc.) in the 1960s. In order to create some distinguishing feature for the town, and to make Havasu a tourist attraction, McCulloch bought the London Bridge in 1968. For approximately \$9 million, the ten thousand granite blocks of the bridge spanning the Thames (London

was planning a new bridge and was happy to sell off the blocks of the old one) were disassembled, shipped to the Arizona desert, and reassembled. Since there was no water to go under the bridge, a part of Lake Havasu (a stretch of the Colorado River impounded behind the Parker Dam) was diverted to serve that purpose. As a result of this venture, the London Bridge is the second most visited tourist attraction in Arizona (after the Grand Canyon); Lake Havasu City has a waterfront on which its downtown is based; and the town is recognized throughout much of the world.

Not all waterfronts, even in major cities, have experienced the revitalization that is now common throughout the nation. Philadelphia's Penn's Landing, a thirty-seven-acre site on the Delaware River, remains undeveloped; parking lots and



dilapidated warehouses dominate the area, which is poorly sited in relation to the central business district and cut off from it by Interstate 95. A recent proposal for development has floundered, and the developer has withdrawn his ten-year \$700 million proposal. He will also suffer a \$5 million loss for his past three-year planning effort.

Despite such setbacks, the future of urban waterfronts remains highly promising. An example of the prevailing mood exists along New Jersey's Hudson River waterfront facing New York City, just a few hundred yards distant. Currently there are twenty projects under way in the six waterfront communities stretching from Jersey City north to Fort Lee. Two of the most exciting developments are taking place in Jersey City, a place that has often been the butt of jokes about urban living conditions. The \$10 billion development anchored by Newport Center is already under way, and the \$1 billion Port Liberte development, built on canals that will have 750 boat slips, is near completion. Ferries, long gone from this area, are now being used to bring commuters to the New York City financial district. Hoboken is the first of these New Jersey communities to serve as a port for this new service.

The new optimism regarding waterfront revitalization has also come to Providence, but it has been a slow process. A local developer recently stated that the city has missed opportunities in the past and that it has been ten years behind the times in land development. He could have said the same thing about the Providence waterfront. Consider these two statements from the *Providence Journal*, the first from 1900 and the second from 1987:

That nature has done much for the city at the head of Narragansett Bay is common knowledge and that man has signally failed to make good use of as fine a harbor . . . as can be found in the world is equally obvious.

Few cling to the hope that Providence again can become a big-league port. What is still obvious . . . is that Rhode Islanders have yet to take advantage of their waterfront.

According to "The Providence Waterfront, 1636-2000," the planning document prepared by the firm of William D. Warner, Architects and Planners, for the Providence Foundation, the past two generations

have been a period of waterfront abandonment and decay. "Providence had an active waterfront for 300 years ending in the 1930s, when the last night boat to New York stopped service, and was dealt the final blow when the hurricane of 1938 destroyed many of the remaining wharves. Except for the Port of Providence, well south of the study area, the waterfront for the last 50 years has been abandoned and the amenity of its rivers forgotten."

This waterfront plan was put together over a three-year period and published in 1985. Drawing on the public for comments and suggestions, working with the public and private sectors, and incorporating all this input into the design and planning process, the firm produced an imaginative and workable plan for what the four-and-a-half-mile waterfront should be by the end of the century. The Providence Foundation, an arm of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, needs to be credited as well both for its ability to promote a working relationship between different levels of government and between the government and the private sector and for its success in obtaining funding for the study from federal, state, city, and private sources.

Combined with the Capital Center Project — a sixty-seven-acre major development under way between the State House and the old but recently rehabilitated railway station — and the relocation of the Moshassuck and Woonasquatucket rivers, the proposed waterfront development represents a continuation and integration of elements that will stretch from the waterfront to the heart of the downtown by using the city's waterways. Skeptics who could never imagine a marina on the Providence River just to the south of the Point Street Bridge may find the thought of small boats ascending the rivers to the foot of the capital even more difficult to accept, but the waterfront development plan is more than just a wish list; work is already in progress. Former doubts about the project have been replaced with a spirit of optimism that all of these ideas and plans are doable and will happen.

Already the signs of waterfront revitalization are evident. Restaurants and nightspots for entertainment predominate, but there is also housing, a marina, and shops. Old buildings are being rehabili-



tated, and parts of the Providence River are now once again uncovered. Although this exposure of the river removes Providence from the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the site of the widest bridge in the world, it offers a far greater benefit, the opportunity for residents to enjoy a long-neglected asset of their city.

With new buildings to be constructed and old buildings rehabilitated, with plans drawn up for an improved roadway system, walkways with access to the water, parks and open spaces along much of the waterfront, a community boating center, and other physical and design improvements, the future of Providence's waterfront is clearly taking shape. The seventy-five thousand people who attended the city's Fifth Annual Waterfront Festival in 1989 saw signs of these changes everywhere. For many it was the first time that they had actually been on the waterfront and were able to see it as the marvelous resource that it is, a resource that the capital city has far too long left unused.

It would seem appropriate to end on this high note concerning the future of Providence's waterfront, but as we look to the future we must also realize that the development of the waterfront does not involve only Providence. Just two hundred yards across the Seekonk River on Providence's eastern shore is another waterfront, that of East Providence, a different municipality with waterfront development plans of its own. Much of that city's waterfront is slated for industrial development. These plans do not accord with proposed developments on the Providence side of the river. Recently this conflict manifested itself in the proposal to build a coal-fired power-generating plant on the East Providence side, a proposal that brought strong opposition from Providence residents. If Providence continues to establish parks and open spaces on the Seekonk River, will these spaces face onto a jarring industrial shoreline? Should Providence work with East Providence on sharing common goals for a shared waterfront?

It is a source of amazement that in this very small state there is so little cooperation and sharing

between communities, that communities operate as though nothing exists outside of municipal boundaries. Decisions on locating industrial plants, shopping centers, and schools are made in splendid isolation, even when these facilities will have an obvious impact on nearby communities. There has been little movement toward cooperative regional efforts by local authorities to address common problems.

We have only to look to the work of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, among the wealthiest of local public agencies in the country, for an example of shared responsibility for waterfront supervision. This cooperative agency operates waterfronts in two states and the major transport facilities of a 3,900-square-mile area, an area nearly four times that of Rhode Island. Among these transport facilities are the Holland and Lincoln tunnels; four bridges, including the George Washington Bridge; four major airports, including John F. Kennedy International Airport; three industrial parks; four marine terminals; and a number of other facilities, including the World Trade Center, the PATH train, and the bus terminal on Forty-second Street in Manhattan.

This is what the Port Authority can do. In Rhode Island, on the other hand, two adjoining cities at the head of Narragansett Bay operate independently of each other and thus lose the benefits of shared responsibility for an area that both utilize and from which there is much more that could be gained. It is an area where the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts.

As Providence, like other cities blessed with a waterfront, looks to its future with a justified expectation of new vitality and the growth of its downtown and the entire city, it realizes that much of its new-found spirit can be traced to its waterfront. The development of this waterfront — in construction, preservation, and use — will require vision and creativity, but these are qualities that the city has already demonstrated in moving toward its goal of waterfront and city revitalization.