

## communityprofile



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A few of the 100 braziers of WaterFire, an art installation set in the Providence River and Waterplace Park, light up Providence's renewed downtown area.

**Phoenix of the East** Residents of Providence, Rhode Island have revived the city's heart in a big way. Along the way, they have built on its academic and industrial heritage to achieve new cultural and economic prominence.

By Eileen Lockwood

IF YOU HAD A DOLLAR FOR EVERY WORD written in recent years about Providence, you could almost pay for the massive makeover the city has undergone in the last 20 years. Once the leader of America's most industrialized state, Providence fell into decay when factories went south. Now it's the renaissance wonder of the Northeast.

Rhode Island's capital and largest city has made its way into publications as prominent as *Money* magazine and as unlikely as an Egyptian daily newspaper. *Money* cited it as the best place to live in

the Northeast. *The Cassandra Report*, a predictor of youth trends, called it "a hip place to be."

Long-time residents are still pinching themselves. Others re-rooted here within the last 15 years are marveling at the changes in the city they now call home.

Robert B. Klein, MD, who recently arrived from Texas to take over the Hasbro Children's Hospital Asthma and Allergy Center, is one of the most excited. "I've never experienced anything as wonderful as Providence in my life!" he exclaims. "And it comes with a great cultural renaissance that's attracting more and more people to the area."

Anthony Caldamone, MD, a Rhode Island native, came back in 1986 after residencies in three other cities and a four-year stint in Cleveland. He says that when he left Providence he had no intention of returning. "If I'd asked my wife if we'd ever be back she'd say, 'Hell, no!'" he recalls. "In 1975 there was no reason to go downtown. All the action was in the suburbs."

Now there are lots of good reasons to go downtown. This 366-year-old port city has been on the transplant table for 20 years, undergoing the urban equivalent of heart, liver, and kidney transplants all at once. Now, with major rejuvenating

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Private sailboats are reflected in the glassy water of Tiverton, in southeastern Rhode Island.

### POPULATION

Rhode Island: 1,048,319  
City of Providence: 173,618

### CLIMATE

Annual rainfall: 41.7 inches  
Annual snowfall: 40 inches  
(it's been more like 20 inches in the last few years)  
Average high/low temperatures:  
January: 36°/19°  
July: 82°/63°

### TRANSPORTATION

AIRPORT: T.F. Green Airport  
BUS: Bonanza Bus Lines  
RIPTA, in state  
Boston Express to Boston  
INTERSTATES: Interstate 95 north to Boston (50 miles), southwest through Connecticut coastal cities to New York (161 miles), then all the way to Miami. US 24 and

state Route 114 southeast to Newport (32 miles). Interstate 195 southeast to Cape Cod. In summer a ferry goes to Newport, located at the south end of Aquidneck Island.

### COST OF LIVING:

Not indexed  
Average home price: \$128,900  
Median household income: \$53,200 (Rhode Island)

complete, downtown, a.k.a. the [Capital Center](#), is an urban dream coming true.

### A city evolves

The state capitol looks down from its north-side perch onto a circular pool, fountain, and amphitheater in Waterplace Park once occupied by a grimy rail yard. An immense new shopping mall (1.35 million square feet) in Federal Revival style straddles the river near the capitol. In winter, skaters flock to a 14,000-square-foot rink near City Hall.

A glassy Citizens Bank Building presides over the Y-shaped confluence of three rivers. The Woonasquattuck from the west joins the Moshassuck from the north to form the Providence, which divides the city into two distinct areas as it flows into Narragansett Bay. Stylistic new bridges span the water, and walkways follow the flow, edged with flowers, shrubs, and lawns.

On the east side, some 500 historic homes and buildings make it look almost like Williamsburg on a hill. So many National Register designees line one street—Benefit Street—that the Providence Preservation Society subtitled it the Mile of History. The Society's work in the 1950s helped save these priceless examples of early American architecture.

The flat west side is where industry and commerce grew up. In the mid-1800s factories producing textiles, metals, and machinery were called the “five great industrial wonders of the world.” Proud Rhode Islanders today actually cite their state as the birthplace of America's industrial revolution, kicked off in 1790 by one Samuel Slater, who devised the first water-powered cotton mill in nearby Pawtucket.

When a later Providence inventor devised a new metals technique—electroplating—he laid the groundwork for the wildly successful costume jewelry industry. The Jewelry District at the city's south end became home to such nationally known jewelry lines as Monet, Coro, Trifari, and Speidel (remember the

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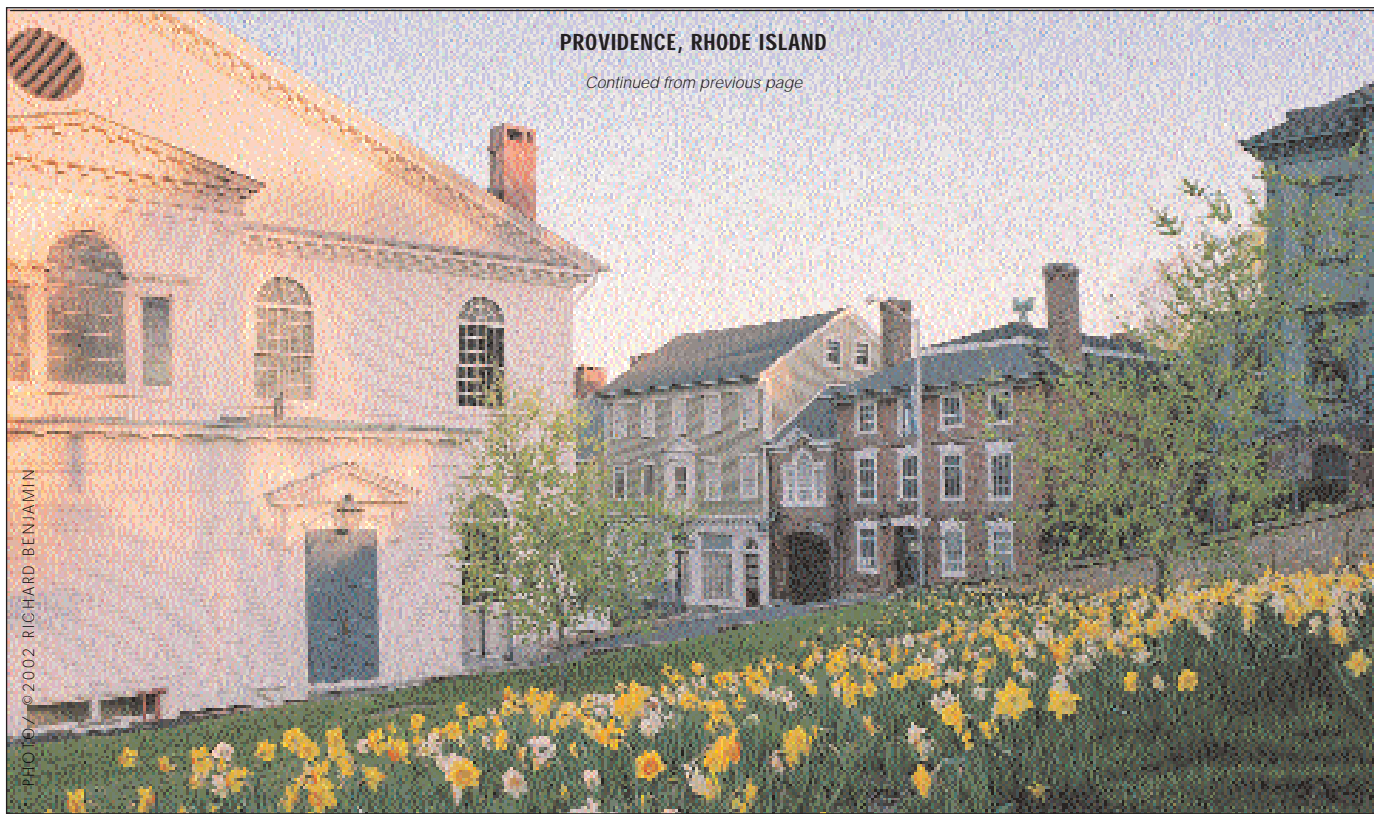


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ABOVE, The First Baptist Church in America, built in 1755, stands over Thomas Street. The Providence Art Club buildings are in the center. The church (to the left) was founded by Roger Williams in 1638. BELOW, the

Temple to Music is in Roger Williams Park, south of downtown. AT THE BOTTOM, Brown University's "front campus." The center building served as a hospital during the Revolutionary War.



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stretch watchbands?). The Gorham Manufacturing Company became the world's largest producer of silverware.

The Civil War gave another major boost to the economy. Rhode Island volunteers far exceeded every federal troop quota, while state woolen mills made big profits supplying uniforms and blankets, all produced using locally manufactured sewing machines. Guns and sabers, cannons and ship engines came from other Providence foundries.

The manufacturing frenzy created jobs by the thousands, attracting droves of European and French Canadian immigrants. Their cultural diversity still enriches the city. Soon their stories will enliven the massive new [Heritage Harbor Museum](#), expected to open in mid-2004 in a former power plant on the lower Providence River.

Heritage Harbor is proof that, as Rodney King might say, "we can all get along." Eighteen ethnic and historical

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organizations have worked together with the state historical society to create a complete representation of the state's history—maritime, economic, and social.

“Rhode Island is one of only three states without state history museums,” says Albert T. Klyberg, the museum and program director. “Now we’re going to showcase all the different traditions here.” With many outreach programs, the museum also will fill an educational gap since there is no official textbook of statewide history.

Industrial history in the northeast took a turn for the worse early in the 20th century. Factories began moving south as owners learned about lower operating costs there, and Rhode Island became another kind of leader—one of the first states to slide into the Great Depression.

But not before Providence had benefited for many years from the largess of the great manufacturers, especially the Brown family, which was involved in three major companies. They donated the land and early buildings for the university eventually named for them. Then, in 1847, they made a \$30,000 bequest for the city's first hospital. However, naming rights for the hospital went to real estate developer Cyrus Butler, who gave \$40,000.

### Ambition in medicine

Possibly America's first mental hospital, Butler set standards for humane treatment of the insane in a clean and safe environment and acknowledged their legal rights. Over the years, in spite of frequent money crunches, [Butler hospital](#) has kept up with, and sometimes initiated, current care philosophies. Now one of seven teaching hospitals affiliated with the Brown Medical School, it has mounted several research projects in such areas as body dysmorphic disorder, depression, smoking cessation, and obsessive-compulsive behavior.

Butler is one of Providence's two special-

ty health-care servers not found in many American cities. The second, [Women & Infants' Hospital](#), which dates back to 1884, delivers almost 9,000 babies a year and is the seventh largest obstetrical service in the U.S. It, too, has expanded its original mission to include research projects and other areas of care for women and infants from new tests for newborn hearing and Down Syndrome detection to prenatal diagnosis, women's surgery, and behavioral health.

An 1857 bequest from Moses Brown Ives established [Rhode Island Hospital](#), now the unquestioned grande dame of Rhode Island health care with 719 beds. As a major teaching hospital—and the largest in the state—it incorporates many of the latest care techniques, including laparoscopic and gamma knife surgery and ongoing research projects. Its emergency room, with a Level 1 trauma designation, serves the whole state and is the largest in all of New England, treating 80,000 patients a year. A soon-to-be-built upgraded facility will handle 110,000.

Rhode Island Hospital's most recent triumph came when four-year-old Matthew Bentley became the youngest patient ever to be treated with intraoperative radiation therapy (INTRABEAM) to prevent brain lesion recurrence. The procedure was done at its pediatric affiliate, [Hasbro Children's Hospital](#).

Of all the donor-financed institutions, though, [Miriam Hospital](#) is the most intriguing. In 1926, at a time when Jewish doctors weren't always welcome at other hospitals, the Jewish women of Rhode Island banded together, going door-to-door collecting funds in “pushke” (donation boxes) for a hospital in which some of their sons could practice—and no patients would be discriminated against. Today it's a 247-bed institution and a major Brown teaching affiliate with 31 medical and sur-

gical specialties. Among its unusual specialties is the Travelers' Medicine Program, a one-stop place for immunizations against almost every one of the preventable diseases everywhere in the world. Along with only 44 other U.S. hospitals, Miriam Hospital recently received the Magnet Award for excellence in nursing.

Kathleen C. Hittner, MD, an anesthesiologist and now Miriam's president and CEO, is also proud of a startup center for women's cardiac care. “Half of the women over 50 develop cardiac disease and die of it,” she says, “but by the time it actually presents, it's in a more advanced state than in the average man. We want to identify women in the community who have cardiac disease and don't recognize it.”

Hittner herself moved to Providence in 1979 and is another cheerleader for the city. “The city is small enough for me, particularly as a woman, to make a difference,” she believes, and she passes her enthusiasm on. “I interview a lot of people for jobs, and I always tell them this is a very comfortable city to live in,” as opposed to Washington, DC, for instance, “where I never saw anyone I knew at the grocery store.”

### Rising from the ashes

With all of its impressive history and tradition, today's downtown paradise not so very long ago was dismissed as “a no-man's-land tangle of roads, parking lots, and buried waterways.” A traffic monstrosity known as “Suicide Circle” was Guinness-verified as the world's widest bridge. Its lack of visual appeal was mercifully not mentioned in the book of world records.

“In San Francisco, they're building replicas of mill structures to house artists and software designers,” said local preservationist Raphael Lyon a few years ago. “In Providence there are so many old mills that people don't always appreciate them.”

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That's changed, too. At least one decrepit mill section has found new life, transformed into living and working places for painters, sculptors, glass artists, textile designers, and others. The artists, who are exempted from income and sales taxes, are plentiful thanks in part to the presence of the renowned Rhode Island School of Design and the Ivy League's Brown University. Providence claims more artists per capita than any other American city.

The same could almost be said about restaurants, thanks, says Caldamone, to the presence of Johnson & Wales University. This world-class culinary institution changed its curriculum from secretarial to cooking skills in the late 1970s, spurring a revolution in fine dining in tandem with the city's own re-emergence from a downtown dead zone. "It's difficult to keep up with all the good restaurants," says Caldamone. One popular restaurant, Three Steeple Street, is housed in one of the city's earliest industrial buildings, Congdon and Carpenter. With nine colleges and universities in Providence, it makes a good claim as number one in the U.S. in college students per capita also, so the restaurants have plenty of patrons.

Once the only time for night shopping, Thursday now brings throngs of people downtown once a month for tours of 24 "art spots," complete with music, food, and free transportation aboard the ArTrolley. Theater lovers are lured by Broadway shows at the [Providence Performing Arts Center](#), a 1927 landmark movie theater grandly renovated in 1977. It is now part of an Arts & Entertainment District, as is the Veterans Memorial Auditorium where the [Rhode Island Philharmonic](#) performs. Equity actors present new and old "classics" at the Tony-Award-winning [Trinity Repertory Company](#). The [Perishable Theater](#) aims for

the less conventional, with drama, comedy, and improv by local actors.

But Providence's undisputed cultural sensation happens about 20 nights a year when black-clad boaters glide from Waterplace Park into the Providence River, lighting the 100 braziers of WaterFire, an art installation set in the river and the lake at Waterplace Park. Each event sparks a huge late-night block party with food and music, sometimes provided by the [Providence Mandolin Orchestra](#).

### Designing the makeover

Plans for Providence's \$3-billion-some new look began in the late 1970s when government leaders admitted the downtown of their state capital was an urban dead zone. A main culprit was the so-called "Chinese Wall," an elevated railroad that virtually cut the business district in half. Besides being an eyesore, the rails were wasting valuable commercial land.

The solution: Move the tracks underground.

Auto traffic was a disaster, too. Why not rip out the ugly bridges, reroute the rivers, and build a four-lane highway which would link Interstates 95 and 195 by sweeping along the north-south Providence and the east-west Woonasquatucket?

By the time the dramatic makeover began in 1982, it had been endorsed and supported by two governors, the Providence Foundation, a Chamber of Commerce offshoot, several private organizations, and the always-ebullient mayor, Vincent A. (Buddy) Cianci, Jr.

Cianci, currently the longest-serving mayor of a major American city, spearheaded some of the projects, promoted the rest, and became the city's most colorful cheerleader. "A mayor can't be a social worker anymore," he says. "You have to be a risk taker and an entrepreneur."

A few years ago, Cianci invited Hollywood filmmakers who were alumni of colleges in Providence to a giant bash at a Los Angeles hotel. "I expected about 50 to show up," he says. "Instead we got 400." His new film commission has racked up seven major films—and counting. And as a result, America was introduced to the fictitious "Sydney Hansen, MD," on the TV show "Providence."

One of the most compelling actors in the renaissance drama was veteran architect William D. Warner, who still has the "wine-soaked napkin" from the Blue Point Restaurant and Pub with a sketch he and colleagues drew up for relocating the rivers, building attractive bridges, and beautifying the rivers' shores. He was an admirer of Baltimore's Harborplace project and the Paseo del Río reclamation in San Antonio. "While tearing up the city, why not do it right?" he asked the various planning commissions.

Federal funds paid for most of the highway changes, but Warner's plan was a hard sell until project leaders learned of new legislation that opened Washington floodgates for river and walkway projects to be considered part of highway renovation projects.

### A self-determined foundation

The architectural scope of all this renovation might amaze Providence's indomitable founder, Roger Williams, but its spirit would not. In 1636, the Anglican priest, now the American hero of all free thinkers, made his way to the swampy peninsula on Narragansett Bay after an 11th-hour escape from deportation and certain execution in England. He'd gotten into trouble with the Puritans because of his ideas that they should make a clean break from the Church of England, that the first four commandments were off limits for civil courts, that taxes shouldn't

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pay clergymen's salaries, and that English charter companies had no right to take away Indian lands. (He paid the Narragansetts for his Rhode Island real estate.) Klyberg, of the Heritage Harbor Museum, remembers, with a chuckle, a favorite Williams quote: "Enforced religion stinks in the nostrils of God."

None of the above set well in Massachusetts, but Williams' "soul liberty" principles became part of the Rhode Island colony charter and later inspired the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Keeping his legacy alive in Providence are a hospital, a university, innumerable businesses, and two parks are named for Williams. Holding its own on the downtown skyline is the 185-foot steeple of The First Baptist Church in America (it's open for Sunday tours), built in 1775 but founded by Williams in 1638, not far from where his little band of followers first settled.

The spirit sparked by his quest for religious freedom lives on, according to Klein, who comments, "It seems like a lot of people come here who are very open minded."

After teaching 18 years at Dartmouth and spending another eight as a professor and chairman of pediatrics at the University of Texas School of Medicine, Klein and his wife moved to Providence last fall. In addition to his practice at Hasbro Children's Hospital, the pediatric arm of Rhode Island Hospital, he's now a professor at Brown University Medical School, which he says is a "phenomenal institution."

Although the university was founded in 1764 and experimented with medical schools as early as 1811, its "finished version" opened in 1971. As a newcomer to the field, it broke new ground in medical education, establishing an eight-year competency-based program with a seamless connection between undergraduate and

medical schools. Accepted as university freshmen, which eliminates the pressure of reapplying to other schools, students are encouraged to study "whatever makes them human" in the first four years, with a blessing on courses from art and music to history and philosophy.

Caldamone is one of 151 medical professors who are Brown alumni. A pediatric urologist also affiliated with Rhode Island Hospital, he was in the first graduating class. You'd expect a limited number of patients for such a narrow specialty, and this was somewhat true at one time, agrees Caldamone. "A manpower survey 10 or 15 years ago said it takes a million population to support one doctor with my specialty," he says, "but the specialty has grown, and the kinds of things it treats have expanded. Now the base is down to half or three-quarters of a million population per pediatric urologist, and there are two-and-a-half of us in Providence."

Caldamone says he keeps patients in Providence who used to have to leave town for care. "When I came back here in 1986, 75 per cent of pure pediatric cases went to Boston. Now the efflux has stopped. The only reason most patients go to Boston is for a second opinion." And Boston specialists reciprocate. "We have a nice relationship with them," adds Caldamone.

There are other reasons that Rhode Islanders patronize hometown physicians. "This is a very unique place. Because we are such a small state, people can't imagine going anywhere out of state," jokes Nancy Cawley, the media relations officer at Lifespan, the group that owns Rhode Island Hospital, several other state facilities, as well as [New England Medical Center in Boston](#).

You might also expect that Brown alumni would have a clamp on Rhode Island medical jobs, but it isn't so. Some 90 per cent of approximately 3,800 practicing

physicians in the state are graduates of other schools. And, thanks in part to the increasing population attracted by the revitalization, there's room for more.

Most new arrivals, especially from the Midwest, will get sticker shock when they see the price of housing, Caldamone admits. But it's still significantly less expensive than Boston prices. Some Boston companies have relocated here, too, such as Fidelity Investments, which recently opened a regional operating center for 2,500 employees. Providence's location along the Boston-New York corridor has also helped attract software and Internet firms.

With a lion's share of civic dreams fulfilled, Providence's go-getters are not letting up. Relocating Interstate 195, which forms its own Chinese wall, cutting off mid-downtown from the Jewelry District and the harbor, is still a work in progress. Downtown lovers are starting to move into the renovated old Jewelry District mills, but more restoration and people are needed. Architect Warner and others look forward to the day when riverwalks on both sides extend all the way from their current settings to the harbor itself and eastward to a fourth river, the Seekonk, with a complement of more parks on the bay.

And they're eager for the opening of the Heritage Harbor Museum, not as a lone river-edge sentinel but as the unifying leader in yet another green area they're calling Narragansett Landing.

"Poor little Rhode Island," as an old song lampooned it, was the "smallest of the 48"—before Alaska and Hawaii made it 50. Still, its square mileage adds up to a patriotic number: 1,776. It's a reminder that important things can come in small packages. ■

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