

# For Providence, another era of greatness?

Providence has come a long way from just 20 years ago when a visitor coming into the city by rail would find sprayed across the walls of the nearly empty Union Station such epithets as "Providence is the pits" and "Welcome to dead city." And it was. I know because I lived there.

This sad state of the capital city was reflected in its almost complete abandonment by residents fleeing to the suburbs after World War II. From its peak in 1940, the city's population of 253,504, representing 36 percent of the state's population, dropped steadily by nearly 97,000 in 1980 to a low of 156,804, or 16 percent of the state's total. This represented an average loss of just over 2,400 people for each of the forty years.

The effects were devastating: House prices dropped (even on the East Side), schools were closed and buildings abandoned, neighborhoods became deserted, jobs were lost and retailing left, especially in the city center. To see a Saturday night movie at that time in the rehabilitated Loew's State Cin-

ema, today's Providence Performing Arts Center, was an unusual experience: sitting with 50 other people in the 3,000 seat theater was eerie, as was being the only pedestrians on the street during the walk back to the car. Well, at least free parking was available, both on the street and in deserted parking lots.

Like many other cities in the nation, the future looked bleak for what should have been the showcase city of the state because of its size, history, businesses, industries and function as the state's capital.

This period was a major retreat from a previous era when Providence was known throughout the world as one of the major industrial cities of this nation. In fact, the century from 1832 when Providence was incorporated as a city until the early stages of the Great Depression in 1932, has been signaled by historians as Providence's "Century of Greatness."

This driving force of industry

was not lost on the Providence Board of Trade which proclaimed to the world in 1915 that "Providence is the first city in the country in

the manufacture of woollens and worsted, jewelry and silverware... She has the world's largest tool factory, file factory, engine factory, screw factory and silverware factory..." These factories, called the "Five Industrial Wonders of the World" were, respectively, Brown and Sharpe, Nicholson File, Corliss Steam Engine, American Screw and Gorham Silver. Providence's era of greatness was based on industry, now a declining activity both here and in the rest of the nation.

Providing services is the principal activity of workers today, whether this be in the health fields, tourist activities or computer consulting. And high tech industries are, of course, the activity sought by most places, a very different type of manufacturing from that of textiles or jewelry.

Providence is well positioned as a service center; for now the one-year old Providence Place Mall has again made retailing a major function of the city. This is combined with the city's leadership in the state in a variety of other functions, including the following: health services, with all major hospitals;

education, with eight colleges and universities, among them three satellite campuses; cultural pursuits, such as art galleries, theater, museums, cinema, orchestras; principal religious center, including the oldest Baptist church in the nation-, courts and legal profession, with ancillary activities', banking and financial center, and, finally, home of state government

Today, one of these major service "Industries" is tourism, and with Providence's history, architecture and restoration, this activity should continue to grow, with free television exposure coming from the Gravity Games and the "Providence" series, both enhancing the image of the city. The executive producer of the Games said it well: "I love this city. It's clean, It's lively, it's historically interesting and, best of all, it's compact enough to be easy to work around." And he might have added, to walk around.

Recent terrorist activities could impact upon American cities but, given the hope that this will not happen, the future of Rhode Island's capital city looks good, and perhaps even great, such that it might even rival that 100 year period of years ago.

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## Commentary

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