

# The microcosm that is Rhode Island

## Commentary

CHESTER E. SMOLSKI

val any McMansions being built today; the home of the major source of drinking water in the state; it draws national attention every 4th of July because of its parade; a cemetery in which only veterans are buried; and on and on it goes. Almost any Rhode Islander could identify Warwick, Jamestown, Pawtucket, Westerly, Providence, Newport, Scituate, Bristol and Exeter as those cities and towns where these features are found.

Perhaps not as familiar but still known to some residents are Nooseneck (West Greenwich), Rice City (Coventry), Chepachet (Glocester), Primrose (North Smithfield), Moscow (Hopkinton)

and another approximately 100 "places" with which residents identify but are not cities and towns. The official state map identifies these places which can be confusing to non-residents and residents alike.

The other binding characteristic that provides us with a good sense of our state is a newspaper that has statewide distribution. And even though there are different regional editions, major stories throughout the state will find their way into the paper. Thus, stories about Burrillville or West Warwick or Little Compton bring a mental image of that community and a familiarity that brings events closer to home. Someone in Providence, for example, reading about people or an event in North Smithfield, could possibly identify and picture the location of an event, something that a Boston resident reading about an event in Pittsfield, one of the 351 cities and towns in the state, would not likely be able to do.

This familiarity of cities and towns in Rhode Island results, of course, from our small size. Located within this county-sized state of 1,214 square miles, are eight cities and 31 towns, ranging in size from 62 square miles (Coventry) to one square mile (Central Falls). Like a small town where "everyone knows everyone," Rhode Island has this same small town ambiance. People know about things that would be overlooked in larger areas, but here small events can get major press coverage.

Is this bad? On the contrary, this small size and small town atmosphere is perhaps one of the outstanding characteristics and strengths of the state.

Small size and small communities make Rhode Island unique and familiar, characteristics that some might say are disadvantages but, on balance, these characteristics are what make this small state a better place in which to live.

*Chester E. Smolski, professor of geography (retired), Rhode Island College*

I have visited, walked or driven in every city and town in the state of Rhode Island. Of course, just about any other resident of our small state could say the same thing. But this gives us an advantage that almost no other state can claim: knowing or at least being familiar with the entire state and having a mental image of almost every community.

A congested Bald Hill Road; a serene view of the ocean at Beaver Tail; a very old mill on the Blackstone that heralded the Industrial Revolution; a lovely Wilcox Park in the center of town; a McKim, Mead and White designed capitol with the second largest unsupported dome in the world; a Bellevue Avenue with "summer cottages" that would ri-