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Certificate awarded Betsey Metcalf Baker in 1859 for her original bonnet. Owned by Ernest J. Baker, Westwood, Massachusetts.

someone that they could be made more quickly and cheaply out of plaster of Paris. The molders were still called whittlers.

Straw bonnet and hat making became big business, comparatively speaking, in a series of small towns in the area where Betsey Metcalf once "learned all to make bonnets." By 1869 Franklin, Massachusetts, produced "1,500,000 hats and bonnets at a value of more than \$1,000,000" according to Franklin's historian. One straw-goods merchant alone, Solomon Pratt of Mansfield, sold 15,000 bonnets, at a profit of two dollars apiece, in one season. In all the small towns, Wrentham, Franklin, Dedham, Mansfield, and the rest,

manufacturers built mansions for themselves. Wooden monstrosities of the eighteen-eighties, they stand today, many of them, replete with jigsaw ornament, bulging with bay windows, and well equipped with cupolas and porte-cochere. A cast-iron dog on a stag and a bed of cannas decorate the front lawn. All in all, they are perfect examples of the result of wealth acquired at an unfortunate architectural period. Nevertheless they have a charm all their own. The industry that brought them into being has for the most part disappeared. The old towns have gone back to sleep, but these mansions provide an eccentric and engaging touch on the village green.

Rhode Island

by David Cornel DeJong

There is this about Rhode Island, it compels one to be partisan. It is so small and concentrated that it leaves no room for neutral evaluations. In some respects it is almost too concise and purposeful; its statistics want to add up to a sense of defiance, even if it becomes wholly redundant to repeat that this, the smallest of the states, could be contained in Texas two hundred and twenty times over. Who wants to be contained that many times over in any place? On the other hand, Rhode Island flaunts the largest and most regal of state capitols, while for a state bird it chose the broad and functional red hen. So what attitude is one expected to assume?

The trouble here is that one keeps attuning appreciation to the average proportions of a state. Hence in Rhode Island it is difficult to sound expansively American. Rhode Island is more truly an historical and cultural microcosm than a state, a microcosm assailed by an important frenzy of industrialism. Of course it contains Newport, but Newport is a spectacular facet. Apart from Newport and a few outer fringes, Rhode

Island with its mere thirty-seven miles width and forty-eight miles length is in essence a city-state. Usefully speaking, Rhode Island is Providence.

Not being a native-born Rhode Islander, it is impossible for me to speak about the state with the casual and cantankerous dismay of a true native, who is apt to blame all the state's jigsaw-puzzle aspects on either politics or a predominantly foreign population. As a foreigner, it becomes imperative for me to be articulate about my love for the state, and in all cases of love it isn't enough to fall back on statistics. I feel compelled to bring emotions and a choice of intellect into play, considerably as Roger Williams himself demanded of all the state's inhabitants as free men.

Upon my arrival in Providence — over twenty-five years ago — I wasn't afflicted with the inchoate Midwestern notions (said to be clean, wide, and indefinitely handsome) that Providence was really a part of Providentown on Cape Cod, or that Rhode Island could be found somewhere upon the campus of Brown



Roger Williams Hotel, also known as The Golden Ball Inn and Mansion House. Providence. Photo courtesy of The Rhode Island Historical Society.

University. Perhaps because I was Dutch born, I already had a considerable interest in its history, culture, and industry. Its very tinyness was a challenge.

Once on my feet in Providence, I sniffed the salty air and looked with excitement at the clutter of streets which according to Midwest standards seemed intent on ending or up-ending at whim. "This is it," my sentiments said. "I like it." Yet from that very day, native Rhode Islanders have been sternly trying to prove to me that the state's clutter and irreverent defiance aren't what they ought to be and that something should be done about them.

I established myself at once in the Old Mansion House (once the Golden Ball Inn), where as a matter of course Washington had slept, where undeniably Franklin and Lafayette had dined and conceivably had danced, but which current-day Rhode Islanders left severely alone, where all the lintels and walls buckled, where only blind people (because they had no need for electricity) lived on the top floors, and where the landlord spoke with a fine Lancashire accent.

More compellingly, the Mansion House was on famous Benefit Street, with its many significant edifices, its historic corners, proud airs, patriotic

foundations, handsome houses, and fine churches, these buildings often wedged between deplorably ugly commercial structures and flanked by shattered sidewalks and silted gutters. Everything seemed to be housed on Benefit Street except conformity, yet the atmosphere was so genuinely historical that it soon became a habit for me to keep regretting that all the lore-laden premises were falling to ruin while taking not one constructive step to prevent that ruin. Instead I was asked to become indignant about the raw and contemporary life going on in so consecrated a spot.

I learned soon that here was expressed the essence of Rhode Island, the old and new confused. When the two were integrated there resulted an air of recklessness that amounted to desecration. Always the motto seemed to be procrastination, and there was ever the suggestion: Well, if you don't like what you're looking at, turn a corner, push through a hedge, climb a step or two, and what you are searching for is apt to be there. We are too busy to enshrine it.

So much for the nonce about Providence. There is always sacrosanct Newport, but everybody and his little sister talks about Newport, its grandioseness, and nowadays its jazz festival. North of Providence is Woonsocket, where more French is spoken than English, but where French élan is rare. Apart from New-

port's jazz festival, Woonsocket's Mardi Gras is just about all that's important in Rhode Island, journalistically speaking, even if Mardi Gras comes about feebly and coldly in long underwear style. On either side of the bay are Bristol and Wickford, and both tend to be gems of charm and quaintness. Crowning Narragansett Bay are the Blackstone River cities with their stacked up tenements and grim mills. Take the mixture as above and press it relatively closely along the shores of the bay and you may reach the conclusion that Rhode Island is a kind of forest-surrealistic, where smokestacks crowd upon festive beaches and Dixie-like swamps lap at backyards. You will then be surrealistically right and realistically wrong.

There is the state's aura of truculence. From the beginning it harbored the most diversified nonconformist colonists and remains the most polyglot of all the states. When we assume that Rhode Island is a city-state, we may have to agree that Providence is not its king but its dictator. As for Newport, that city is something of a dethroned king, the capital of the actual and limited island of Rhode Island. Of far greater value in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the Providence Plantations above and around it, compelling the smallest state to christen itself with the longest name of all: The State of Rhode Island



Looking down Waterman Street from Benefit Street, Providence. Water color by Joseph Partridge, ca. 1825. Photo courtesy of The Rhode Island Historical Society.

and Providence Plantations.

Yet two hundred and sixty years after Providence was founded, Rufus Choate declared: "The boundaries of Rhode Island might as well have been marked by a bramble bush on the north, on the south by a blue jay, on the west by a hive of bees at swarming time, and on the east by five hundred foxes with firebrands to their tails." And this largely because both Newport and Providence had their minds on the sea and its trade and let the devil take their hindmost

boundaries. Even so, Rhode Island was founded by Roger Williams to be "God's providence in distress." Ironically, today it is difficult anywhere in the state not to be aware of God's providence in distress, not to take any side glance or side trip and not see everywhere evidences of the city of Providence.

Keeping Providence in abeyance, however, let us start examining the state from its southwestern corner, at Westerly. It isn't far, of course, but we start with the illusion of distance

Westerly sounds west and out of bounds, when Providence stores advertise that they'll deliver anywhere in the state except Westerly. Well, Westerly has wonderful beaches, good stone quarries, and somehow doesn't belong to Connecticut.

Eastward from Westerly the fine beaches blend with modern decorum, but for diversion there are Galilee and Jerusalem to visit, where until recently one could be quite traditional if not Biblical as a fisherman. Time and fortune and speed catch up with us by the time we reach Point Judith, where nautical interests are very modern.

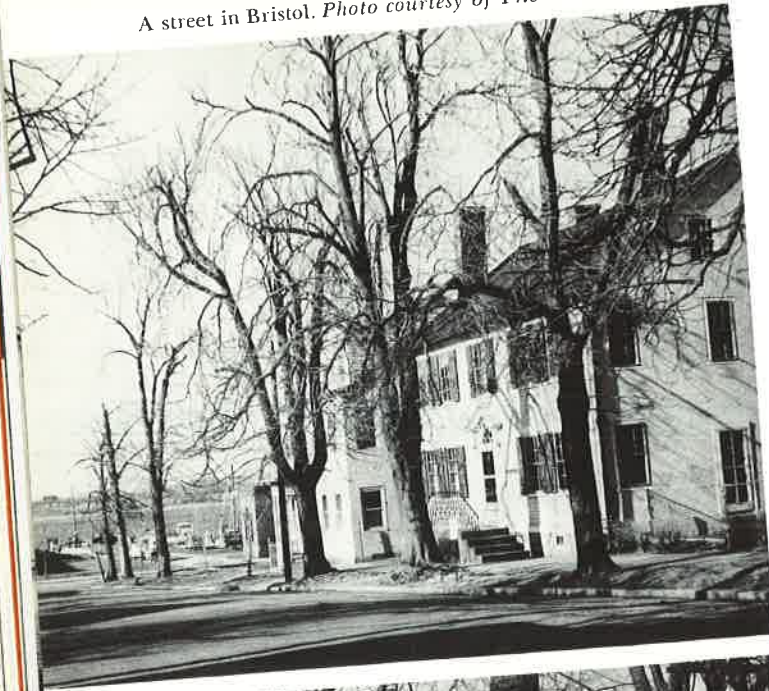
From here on the pull is north along the shores of Narragansett Bay, crossing and crisscrossing towns and villages. Rhode Island wants to make it plain to strangers that each town may contain several villages, some of which spill over into other towns, and others that aren't quite there at all. In looking for Hope, for instance, because we have heard it is incredibly charming, or Fiskeville, Arctic, Jackson, or Phenix, Arkwright, or Lippit, because they are something else, we find these villages jumbled and spilled together and part and parcel of the towns of Scituate, Cranston, Coventry, or Warwick, some of which in turn are cities, making the best of maps into a shibboleth. Geographical confusion to the contrary, it is here we can visit intact sixteenth, seventeenth,

and eighteenth century houses still being lived in. Frequently we can visit them free, or for so small a fee that we are inclined to dismiss their importance. As in Providence, we nearly have to be nudged into seeing their historical value. There is almost no self-conscious interest in Rhode Island curiosity.

We now find ourselves in that part of the state called South County. Officially there is no South County, and no one knows its boundaries. But South County is atmosphere, tranquility, and history. It has its handsome shorelines, but, apart from tiny mill villages, it keeps ignoring industry. The names of its roads evoke pastoral repose and worry. They are called Love, Hornet, Baptismal, Ministerial, Pardon Joslin, Nooseneck, Virtue, and Dugway. Along them are water mills where the famed Johnnycake meal is still being ground authentically. In the red-painted birthplace of Gilbert Stuart, the painter of George Washington's portraits, a house built in 1751, the water-powered snuff mill that ground snuff for the Stuart families is still functioning.

But we are edging northward, and all the time it becomes harder to ignore Providence. To avoid it and its claim that Rhode Island is in truth a city-state, it becomes necessary to hop the bay to its eastern shore. There the actual island of Rhode Island with its worthy Newport af-

A street in Bristol. Photo courtesy of The Rhode Island Development Council.

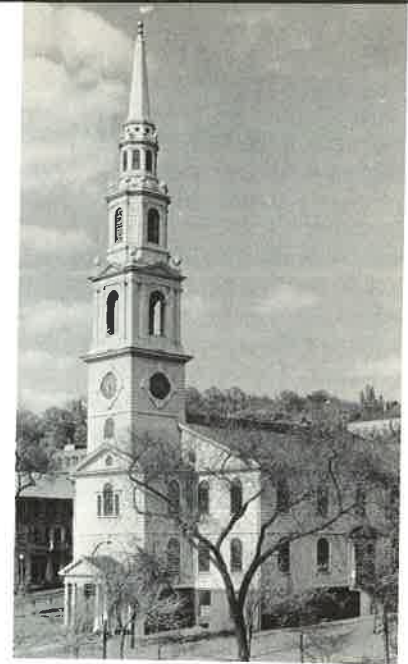


A street in Wickford. Photo courtesy of The Rhode Island Development Council.

fords the state's best farming country. Beyond it is a sliver of land hugging the Massachusetts line where there are more legends, superstitions, rattlesnakes, cogent landmarks, and historical formalities than anywhere else in the state. In the "Scunnet" country villages is a kind of life abandoned elsewhere one hundred fifty years ago. It is perfectly legitimate to allow Little Compton to bewitch you and yet to ignore its monument to the Red Hen.

Traveling northward through Tiverton, we reach nobly-processed Bristol with scores of its houses historically labeled. Then on to Warren and Barrington, but already it is evident we are once again in spilled-over Providence, no matter how aloof zoned Barrington tries to keep itself. Now, apart from the comparatively rural northwest corner of the state, there is nothing left but city, because the Blackstone Valley north of Providence comprises the world's most industrialized river basin. Here the frugal, white-trimmed Slater Mill in Pawtucket acts as a sort of historical shrine to industry. So we have still left unvisited only greater Providence.

From one of Providence's seven hills, Prospect Park, only a few blocks from downtown, the city can be seen to best advantage. If we follow the direction of the extended hand belonging to the rather be-



First Baptist Meeting House, Providence. Photo courtesy of The Rhode Island Historical Society.

nignly grotesque statue of Roger Williams, pointing inflexibly where it ought, the view is rewarding. Directly beneath our feet, in clear enamels of color, and in gullies and eddies of congestion, is the heart of the city. Around the commercial inner core are red-bricked colonial fringes, often studiously quaint, giving an air of digestible tradition-plus-modern-convenience decor. Beyond these fringes comes the more genuinely historical East Side. The enormous State House dominates the western horizon.

Directly below us, but quite invisible, flows the Providence River. It

flows concealed under five combined bridges which in collusion are supposed to add up to the widest bridge in the world, one of Rhode Island's lesser superlatives. Somewhere beneath the bridge, behind the post office, the river splits up into even narrower Woonasquatucket and Moshassuck Rivers, which everybody seems to want to hide and from which occasional foxes, raccoons, and rabbits stray to downtown streets.

From the hidden river streets climb steeply to and past Brown University. Here are numerous historic houses, noble churches, famous schools. Skirting the foot of the hill is the aforementioned Benefit Street, which should in its entirety be preserved, with admission gates at either end. It has been called the most genuinely lived-in historic street in the country. Belated attempts are being made to preserve its old houses and facades; even so it is this always near-too-lateness that gives the street as well as most of east side Providence its piquant aura and shy surprises.

On Benefit Street one comes without warning upon structures like the Old State House. One realizes almost too casually that here walked Roger Williams and his men, and here they lived with their civil and religious liberties. One is unlikely to learn that here on a May fourth, antedating by two months the National Resolution of Independence adopted by the Continental Congress, Rhode

Island declared its own precarious independence. Yet, evidences of the past, in its greatness and contrariness, are everywhere around.

Here is the incomparably lovely First Baptist Church. The John Brown House, described by John Quincy Adams as the most magnificent and elegant mansion in the country, the great Carrington House, the Athenaeum, scene of Edgar Allen Poe's truncated courtship, all are nearby. But here are also the tumbled-in doors, sidewalks like shards, alleys that descend shiftily down moldy hills, and lore and history and charm peeping bashfully across battered board fences. There is so much to ferret out on this street and much of the East Side that it becomes positively pretentious to point out this or that as worthier than those and these. Perhaps it is all for the better that one is forced to make his own discoveries and evaluations.

In all these things Providence is the essence of Rhode Island. Like the state it is filled with action and rife with contradictions and anomalies, it is crumpled and withal spirited, constantly urban, and, immediately around the corner, rural and nautical. It looks negligently on its past and prepares ruthlessly for its future. It is too small to do anything but implant upon its ruins. The state's succinct and fairly headlong motto is: Hope. In the process of living the aura of that motto

might even be reduced to comic proportions by the state bird, the Red Hen, honored a few years ago with a mammoth chicken barbecue. What

other state would eat its own state bird by way of commemoration? Or again, how functional can you get and yet remain dignified?



The Eleazer Arnold house in Lincoln. Photo courtesy of The Rhode Island Historical Society.



The John Brown House, now the property of The Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence. Photo courtesy of The Rhode Island Development Council.