

SPRAGUE BLOCK in era when Elmwood Avenue was Greenwich Street. Church at corner of street is Greenwich Street Free Baptist.

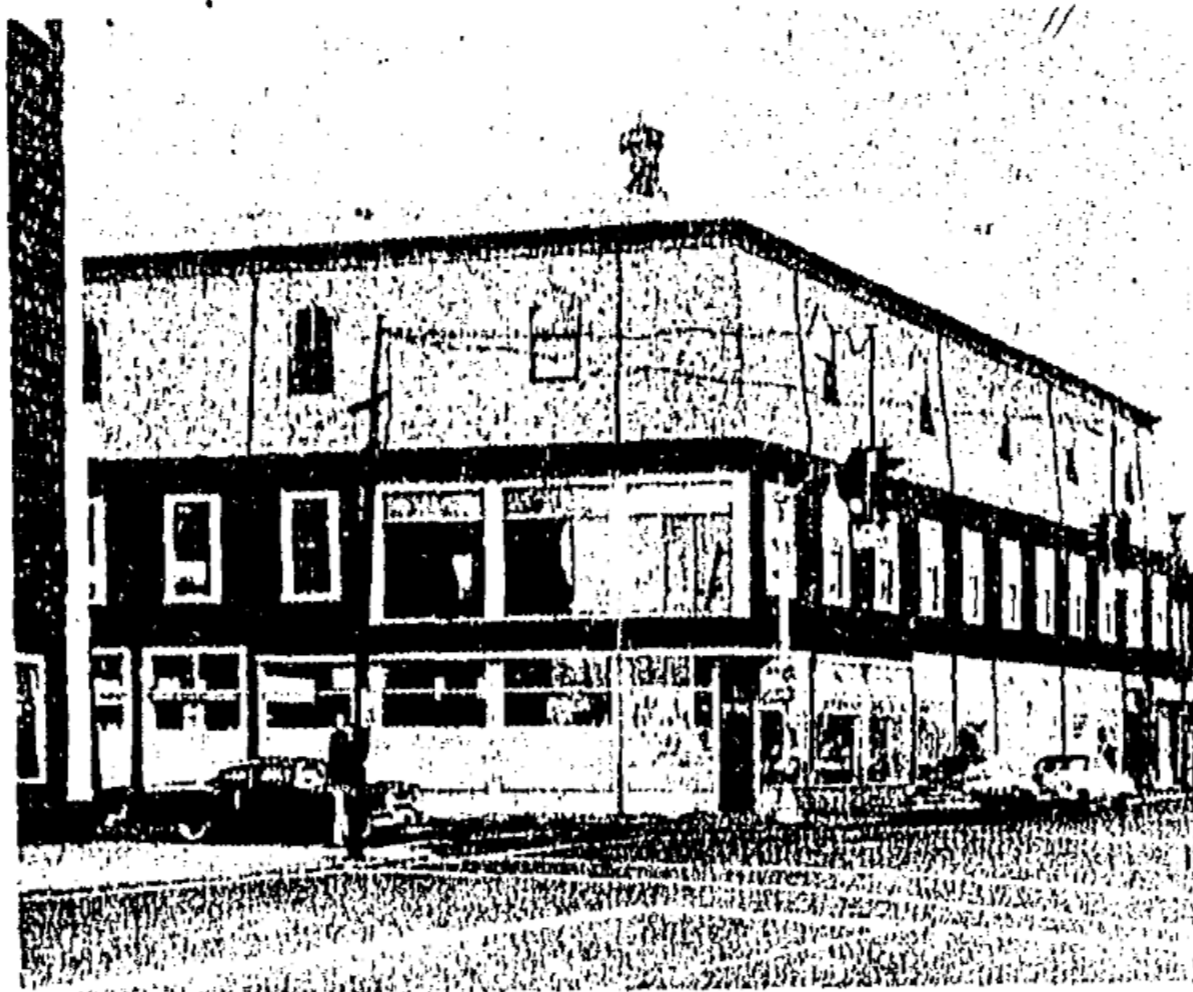
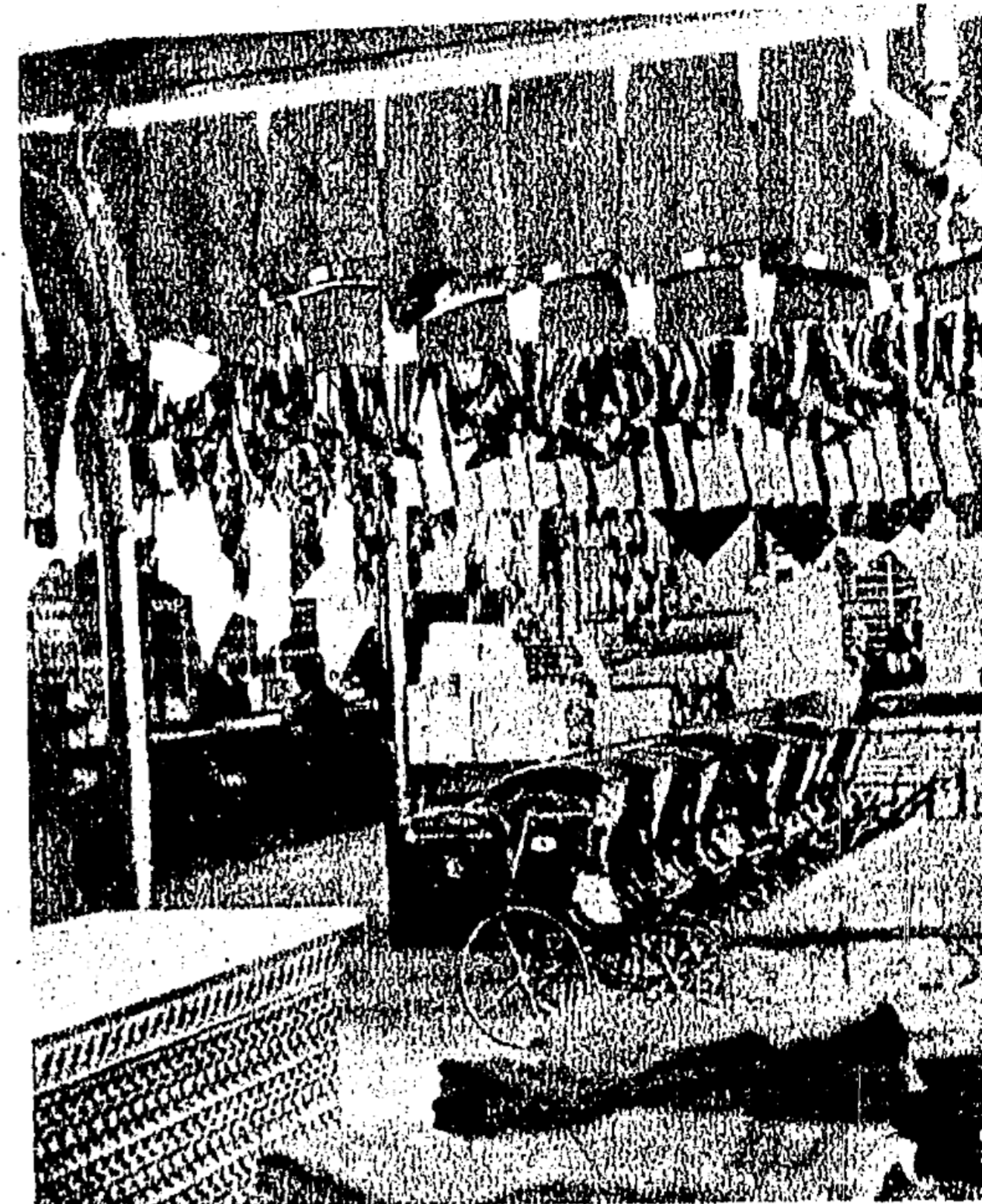


Photo by Clinton H. Gram  
SAME SCENE TODAY. Exterior of old Sprague store is not much changed. Old church now Oddfellows Temple Association building.



BOOTS and baby buggies. And work pants in which to labor to pay for said prams. And bedding. Store met all man's basic needs.



HOUSE FURNISHINGS. The ladies are looking at some fabrics spread out for their inspection. Left rear, wall papers. Foreground, chairs—cane backs and rood backs. And what but a what-not!

# Sprague's Company Store

BY ROBERT L. WHEELER

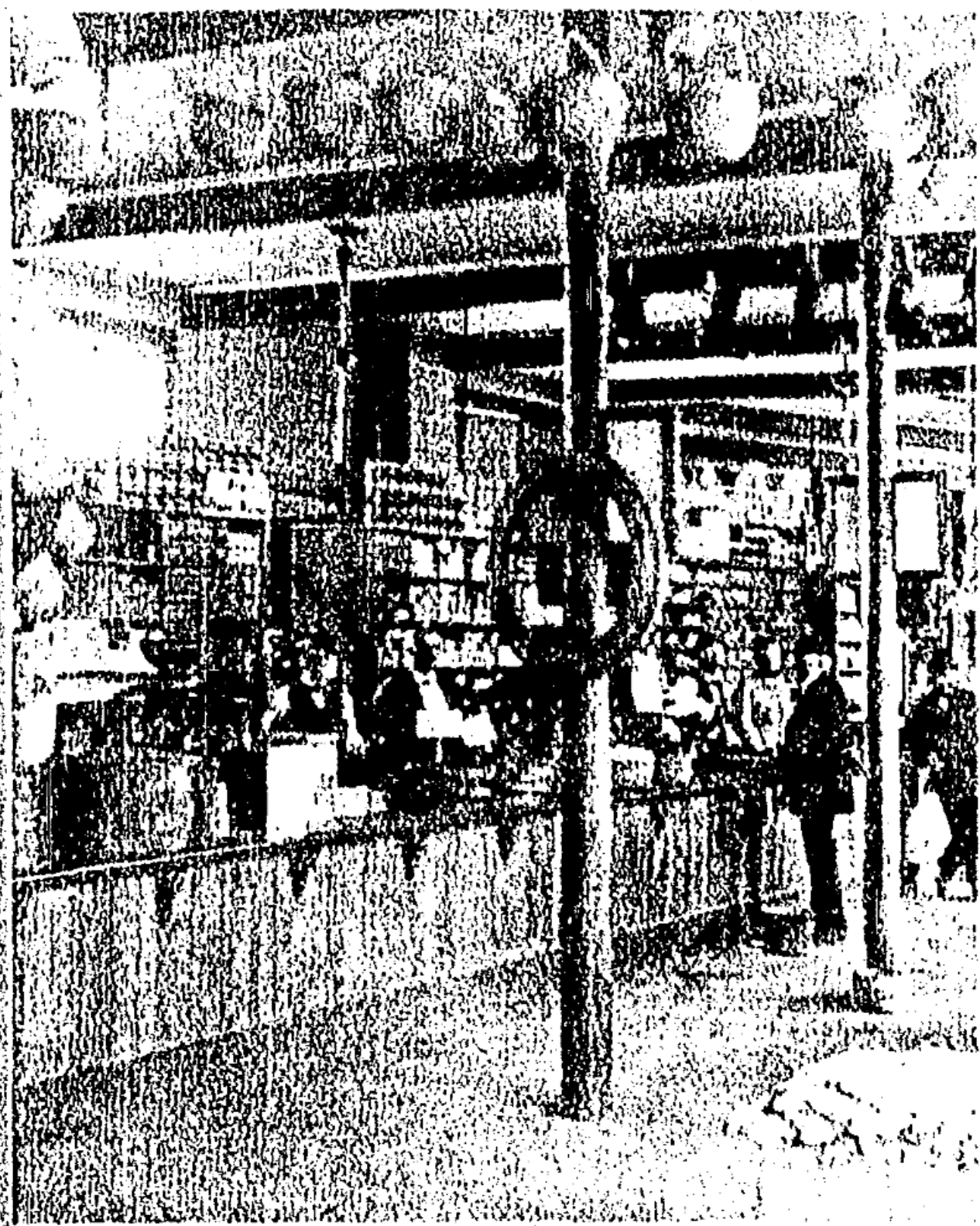
**A**T 110 ELMWOOD AVENUE, just a couple of blocks beyond Trinity Square, stands a big barn of a building with a history that goes back to the days of the Sprague industrial empire in Rhode Island. It has been many things in its time—"Co-Op," upholsterer's establishment, dance hall, etc.—but it was originally a Sprague "company store," one of the feudal emporiums which A. & W. Sprague Company (Amasa II and the Civil War governor, William) maintained wherever it had or controlled one or more factories.

The fading neighborhood tradition that "you could buy everything there from a paper of pins to a plow" is supported by these old pictures of the store in its heyday.

The photographs were brought to *The Rhode Islander* by Mrs. Josef Rais, 94 Herbert St., Chep-wanoxet, on the outskirts of East Greenwich. She had them from her father, Lionel Gibney, who died in September of 1954. They were found in a box along with a number of others, some of which are the worse for wear.

Mrs. Rais thinks that they came to her father from his grandmother, Mrs. Aseneth Bennett, of Anthony. It is also possible that he acquired them after the break-up of the East Greenwich estate of Amasa Sprague II, who died in 1904.

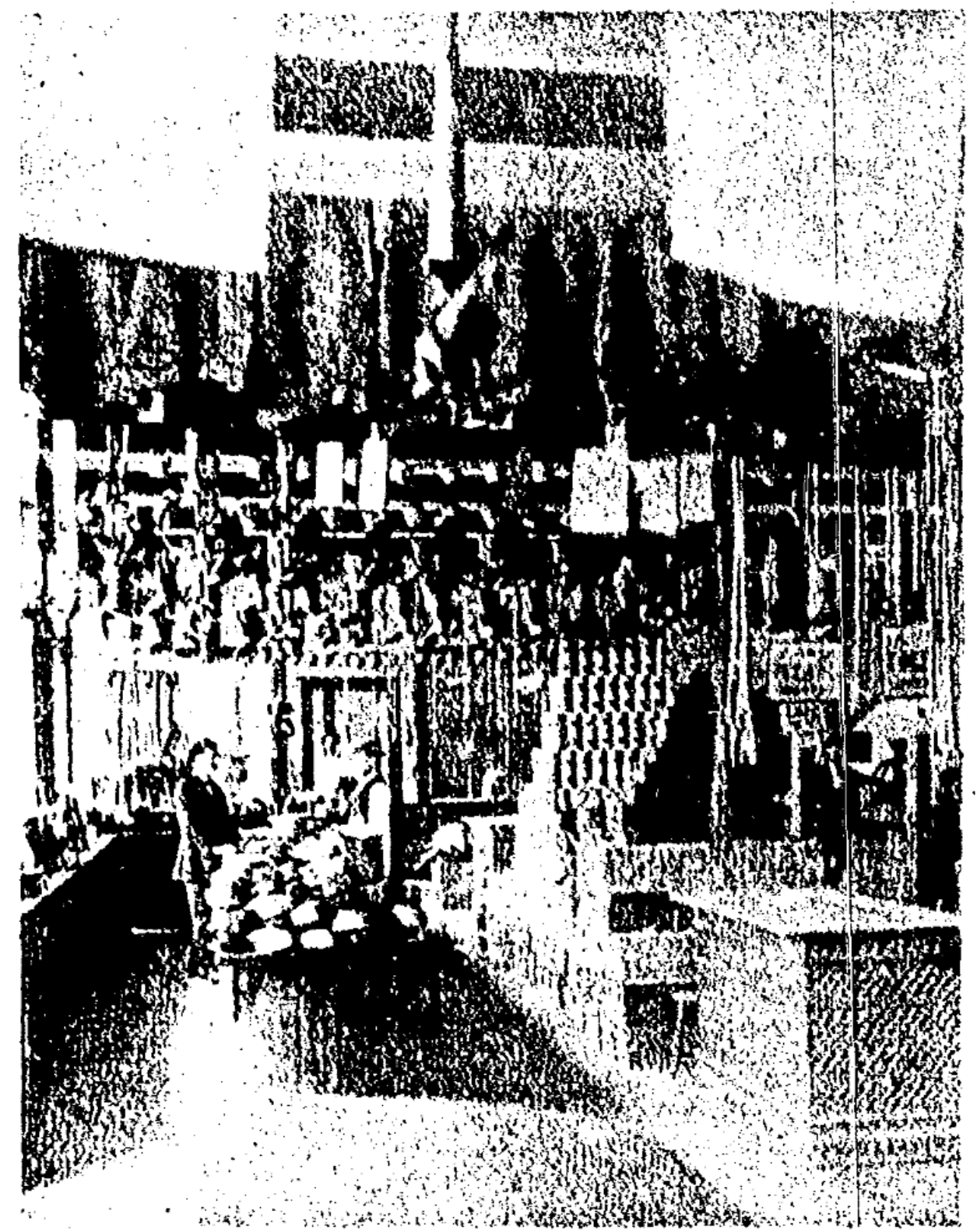
These pictures can be dated as having been taken between 1871 and 1882. Tax records at the Providence City Hall show that the property at Elmwood Avenue (then Greenwich Street) and West Friendship was first assessed to A. & W. Sprague in 1871.



GROCERIES. Note old-fashioned tin coffee and tea containers, coffee mill, eggs. Also we got some nice salt codfish in, folks!



SHAWLED LADY, possibly dedicated dry, may be in the market for bottle of Jamaica Ginger or some other old reliable tonic.



IMMENSE STOCK carried by store included everything—spades and buggy whips, men's caps and baking powder, festoon of boots.

**Pictures taken in the 1870s show emporium where a buyer could get almost anything from paper of pins to a plow**

The Spragues failed for \$2,500,000 in 1873 and in 1882 the store passed to other hands.

The basis of the Sprague fortune was the manufacture and printing of cotton goods, but, in addition to the nine textile mills they had running full tilt in the pre-Civil War period, they provided financial backing and management for a number of concerns pursuing other lines of business. Three of these concerns were located on Sprague Street, which starts directly opposite the "old Sprague store."

These firms were the Sprague Mowing Machine Company, corner of Sprague and Fuller, the Rhode Island Horseshoe Company, Sprague and Harrison, and the Perkins Sheet Iron Company, Sprague and Dexter. Their employes, many of them, lived in company-owned houses—some of which are said to be still standing—and traded on credit at the baronial emporium at the head of the street. There they exchanged most of their meager wages for the necessities of life, including work pants in which to make more money for the Spragues.

The leading Sprague Street factory was the Perkins Sheet Iron Company, whose president in 1871 was William Sprague. Its then superintendent was Charles B. Perkins, who was also superintendent or agent for the two other firms. The Perkins Sheet Iron rolled the first Russian iron ever made in this country. When the Spragues went bankrupt, its share of their \$14,000,000 indebtedness (over and above a mortgage held by the Cranston Savings Bank, Amasa Sprague, president) was \$335,000.

Charles H. Perkins (1830-1902) was a descendant



MEAT DEPARTMENT with a whole rack of hams and a noble side of beef. Bearded butcher poses with chicken, and counter displays condiments, Hubbard squashes, cheese and basket of tomatoes.

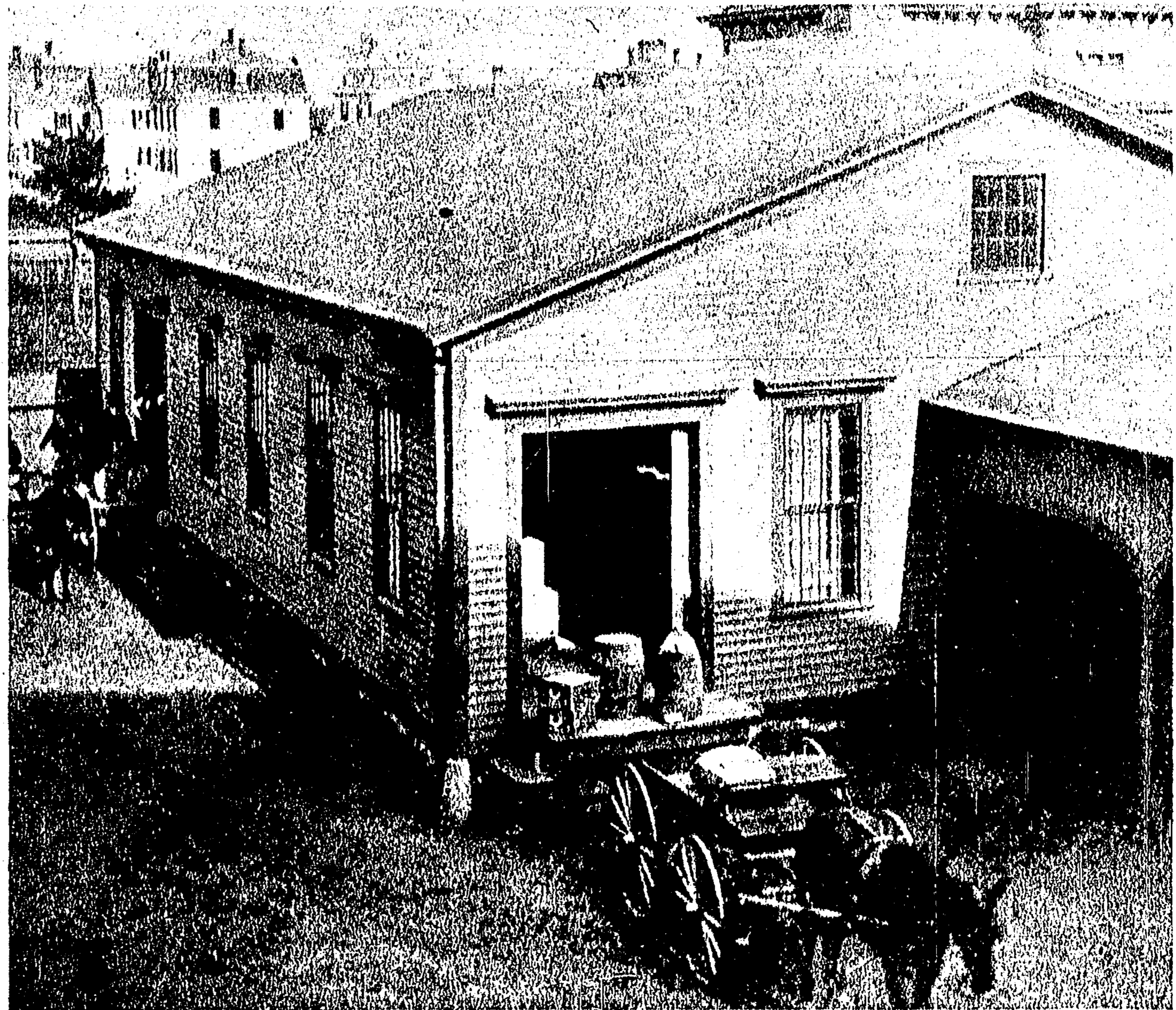
# Ingenious Perkins

of the first American Perkins (John), who came over on the ship *Lion* with Roger Williams. A native of Massachusetts, he came to Providence in 1859, Perkins was a blacksmith by trade and brought with him the horseshoe machine he invented in 1857. With it, in partnership with E. A. Cutler, he made horseshoes for the Union Army all through the Civil War. Backed by the Spragues, he started the Rhode Island Horseshoe Company in 1867 and with Richard W. Comstock and F. W. Carpenter bought it out after the Sprague failure. He also founded the Perkins Sheet Iron Company, which quickly became a Sprague satellite.

As a Sprague factotum, Perkins may well have had a hand in the management of the Sprague store, but his granddaughter, Mrs. Marlon Fritz, 70 Kirby St., Warwick, is unable to recognize him as one of the men in the old pictures.

Who took them? In the early 1870s, there were 12 Providence photographers—or "photographists" as the directories list them—all with studios on Westminster Street, from the Arcade to No. 159. Whoever he was, Alden, Chase, Coleman, Remington, Dexter, Carlisle, Hacker, Hurd, Manchester, Pearce, Thurston or Wright, he made good wet plates which preserve a moment of American life when the general store—of which the modern department store is an expansion—was in its heyday.

The old Sprague establishment was more than a "company store." The general public traded there, too. One would like to know who they were, some of these people—the woman in the shawl who is purchasing a bottle of bitters, the dapper clerks, the fine ladies in the house furnishings department, the plug-hatted man who appears and reappears. Maybe someone can identify a grandpa or grandma.



"IT WAS a country store in an urban setting," say the few who remember the old Sprague emporium. "You could buy anything from a paper of pins to a plow." Storehouse was in the rear.