

**REFLECTIONS FROM THE BACK STREETS
OF A RENAISSANCE CITY**



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THE VIEW FROM SOUTH PROVIDENCE

**A PUBLICATION OF THE AFRICAN AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES
PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND**

AAF/PSC 466 URBAN PROBLEMS

THE BACKSTREETS OF A RENAISSANCE CITY

Historic South Providence was an extension of Downtown. It was an integral part of the economy of the state and its residential sections reflected this. Several ethnic groups (Irish, Italians, and Jews) settled in South Providence and their architectural and organizational contributions remain.

None of this is true for today's South Providence. Separated from the city of Providence and by I-95 and the loss of any economic base, South Providence's new ethnic immigrants have settled in the properties left behind and inherited a new economy of drugs and violence.

How did all this happen?

The History of South Providence

Geographically located at the southern part of Providence Rhode Island, the South Side Providence community has played a major role in maintain the state of Rhode Island's economy during the 1800s throughout the early 1900s. According to sources from Wikipedia.org "prior to the 1850s the South Side Providence region had been used primarily as farm land, which created a backbone for both the city's and state's economy".

Lower South Providence is located along the west side of the Providence River, south of Downtown Providence with Broad Street to the west, Public Street and Upper South Providence to the North, and interstate 95 to the south. While many feel that “South Providence” is cohesive whole made up of Upper and Lower South Providence, Lower South Providence is markedly different in that it does not have nearly as many institutional building and spaces as Upper South Providence. Lower South Providence also contains a large parcel open land.

Like Upper South Providence, the Lower South was part of Roger Williams; original land purchase in 1736 and remained farmland into the 18th century. It belonged to Cranston between 1754 and 1868. In response to the introduction of the horse-drawn trolley in 1879 the area developed into the first major streetcar suburb with intense speculative housing development. The closeness to Narragansett Bay to led to intense speculative housing development as well.

By the 1870s, Upper South Providence was a predominantly a rental community of two-family houses. Single family homes existed in fewer numbers and were usually more elaborate and pretentious than the earlier ones of the 1860s. In the late 1880s, there was a large scale speculative subdivision. These newly completed homes were easier to finance because they were being sold on a monthly plan rather than a lump sum. In 1879, the first horse car line opened on Broad Street, making the nearby land more valuable as the development of both Upper and Lower South Providence began to take off.

Construction in the 1870s and 1880s was limited to the middle and upper-class single-family housing. When the trolley line was electrified in 1892, it meant faster transportation, encouraging middle-class homeowners to move and settle to newly

In addition, the PHA manages 245 scattered site homes, and administrates a Section 8 Program to more than 2,500 households.

The 1960s brought changes in federal policy that diminished PHA operating funds, and the combination of reduced resources, and aging housing stock, and a population with greater social service needs strained the PHA's ability to meet its mission. Properties fell into despair, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) declared a PHA "troubled" housing agency.

As a result of suburbanization in the 1950s the general level of prosperity sank in South Providence, leading to an increase in cheaper rental housing, and the subdivision of former one-family homes into multifamily houses. Today many abandoned buildings and lots can be found in area. One of the most conspicuous urban designs in the area was the 1943 construction of the Roger Williams Housing Projects, which after 15 successful years suffered from a lack of funds for appropriate maintenance and in 1991 all but two buildings were demolished. Now a new social housing project is planned to go up in the area.

According to the 1990 census, 4,733 persons lived in Upper South Providence, an increase of 30.8 percent from 1980. African Americans accounted for 43 percent of the population in 1990, a drop from 51.4 percent in 1980. About one in five residents in 1990 was Hispanic and 6.9 percent were Asian. Nearly one in five South Providence residents (18.9%) was foreign born. More than half of all residents of age 25 or older had a high school degree in 1990. Professional services and manufacturing were the leading sources of employment in 1990 for Upper South Providence residents, accounting for 29.9 percent and 27.4 percent of jobs among employed persons. The unemployment rate, in

Production Leaves

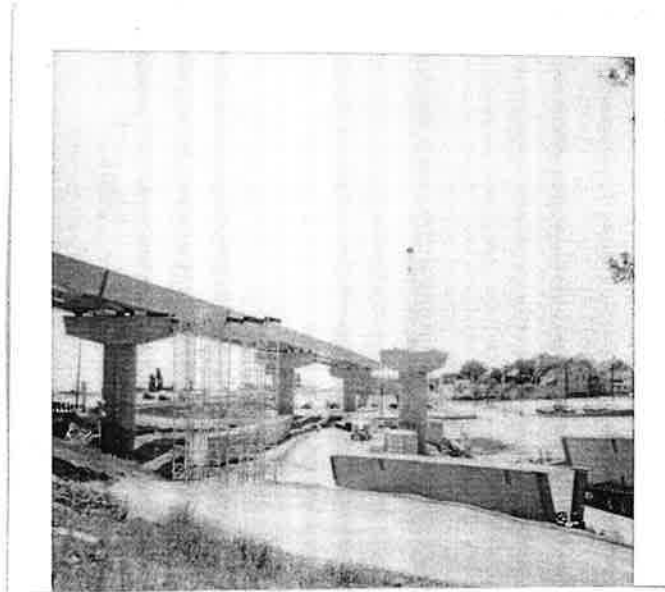


The most debilitating development for South Providence has been the lost of its productive base which gave life to the earlier ethnic communities. Having work is essential not simply for income, but for establishing a sense of individual worth.

Gone are the days when you were sure to find a job in the community. Mills coffee is a Rhode Island institution, with South Providence connections for three-quarters of a century. Founded by Thomas H. Mills, the company moved to 157 Thurbers Avenue, near Eddy, in the early thirties. After three decades of operation between the Wonder Bar and Conley's Ice Cream Parlor (served the company's gourmet coffee), Kenny Mills moved his coffee-roasting company to 1058 Broad Street, opposite Sackett Street.

In 1874, Joseph Davol (1837-1909) and Emery Perkins (1837-1909) and Emery Perkins founded Providence's first major rubber manufactory, a firm that assumed the name Davol Rubber Company 10 years after its creation. From a single plant on the South of Providence Point Street from Eddy Street to the bridge, construction and then enlarging several three-four story brick buildings. The company produced an extensive

I-95: The Road Divides



After South Providence lost its productive value, as a result of the departure of major manufacturing establishments the construction of Interstate 95 completely separated the area from downtown. This ensured the containment of “visible blight” in a concentrated area thus making South Providence’s problems less urgent to the rest of the City.

In the early to late 1960’s there were many people “in the way of progress”. I-95, the “pie in the sky” for upwardly mobile urbanite Rhode Islanders, demonstrated in its fullest, that the working class and poor were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Where once neighborhood’s boasted of their ethnic diversity and pride, when feasts and parades were annually celebrated along with the sharing of one’s culture at its finest, now the highway had priority. But there was a problem. Many residents of the South Side of Providence were in the way of progress. The I-95 Project tremendously affected many families. Residents were forced to sell their homes. People were mad and

Environmentalism and Rats



Many older urban areas suffer environmentally because of the dramatic changes they have been subjected to over the years industrially and structurally. Particularly, the abandonment by industries, the spread of enterprises into residential areas have contributed to physical deterioration.

The closing and demolition of bakeries and breweries particularly Narragansett Brewery and Wonder Bread Bakeries (located on Eddy Street) contributed to the environmental decay of South Providence. However, the area has also battled with issues such as trash on the streets, in the parking lots, and over 2,000 vacant lots.

Project GREEN was created out of response to the environmental urban disfigurement which has continually plagued the South Side communities of Providence. This project focuses upon bringing neighbors together to win permanent solutions to the crisis of illegal dumping, abandoned land and absentee ownership. These

Crossroads, a social service agency in the community which addresses homelessness, though based on a noble idea of providing shelters for homeless women and children, ironically has made homelessness an integral part of the community.

Alternatives

Having already discussed the current issues plaguing the area of South Providence, now the discussion is going to reflect what some of the alternatives could be. For example, as far as the neglect in the area of development goes, instead of having developers going in and buying land and building on it, if the City could work with these developers and/or pay them to build double or triple family houses to sell at lower prices, thereby the issue of affordable housing may be somewhat addressed.

Hospital expansion has taken up much residential space in the area. While this maybe an inevitable consequence of growth, it is not unreasonable to demand that hospitals give back to the communities in the form of care and follow- up treatment.

According to The Rhode Island Family Life Center Organization "one in every twenty-five working aged men in South Providence are currently incarcerated (2003). Moreover this same organization stated that adult males living in South Providence are 45 times more likely to be incarcerated than males from College Hill or Blackstone. Clearly there exists a major disparity between individuals in South Providence and other parts of the City. However, one can predict that because South Providence is perceived as such a bad area by police they are more apt to deal with residents in ways that one would

area. One of the major alternatives which can be tried is the establishment of committees which would be concerned with questions of development. These committees would be made up of community members and would be run by them. These committees would be able to hold City and State government accountable for their actions. If taxes from South Providence went back into the community to clean up the area and to create affordable housing (which the City would not neglect, as it has done with numerous housing projects), not only would people feel safer in their homes, but they would also have reason to take pride in the City and would work to keep it clean and safe for all.

The area of South Providence has been neglected for a substantial amount of time. This neglect is beginning to push inhabitants out of the area. The only way that this can be stopped is if we as a community stand up and take action, which means getting involved and making those in power hear our voices. However, until this happen the future for the poor and working class for South Providence looks bleak.

In conclusion we believe the solution to South Providence community issues should be based on having the community and government work together. For many years, the government has placed the responsibility of finding a solution solely on the community residents, which is a wrong approach. Many of these individuals are hard working individuals, but are unable change governmental policies alone. Rather than neglecting their needs, the government needs to design policies that embrace the community's needs.

The South Side Providence community is going through a renaissance period. Though they have made progress over the years, there is still room for improvement. The South Side Providence community has been in a hole since the 1970s, early 1980s. We

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