Providence Walks: The Jewelry District

PAST, PRESENT & FUTURE

How did Providence, Rhode Island become the "Jewelry Capital of the World"? The first steps by Nehemiah Dodge and Jabez Gorham in the late 18th century happened outside of the Jewelry District, but set the pace for what was to come. Jewelry made in Providence was going to be affordable, mass produced and based on innovative technologies, particularly electro-plating. After the Civil War, most of the state's jewelry manufacturing moved into the Jewelry District south of downtown.

Between 1830 and 1890, the industry grew from 27 companies with 280 workers to 200 firms with 7,000 employees. At the turn of the 20th century, 80 percent of all costume jewelry in the U.S. was produced in Rhode Island. Distinctive, multistory brick manufacturing buildings, with rows of tall windows, flat roofs and heavy, slow-burning wood floors appeared from the 1880s onward — such as the Champlin and Doran buildings, or the structures at Imperial Place. Concrete post and beam structures with larger windows, such as the A.T. Wall, Little Nemo or Coro buildings followed in the early 20th century.

The Great Depression of the 1930s, growing international trade, increased labor costs and safety requirements at home, led to the industry's local and global dispersion. Jewelry manufacturers began moving to "modern" single-story factories in the suburbs. Many buildings in the Jewelry District fell victim to the construction of the interstate highway in the late 1950s and early 1960s and the increased need for parking spaces close to downtown. The district was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985. The tall manufacturing buildings were converted into condominiums and the last jewelry manufacturing shop closed in 2017. Since the arrival of several educational institutions and technology firms in recent years, innovation is once again driving growth in the district.

Interstates I-195 and I-95

When President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Federal Highway Act in June of 1956, he allocated $26 billion for the construction of a 41,000-mile "National System of Interstate and Defense Highways." It promised "speedy, safe transcontinental travel" and "quick evacuation" in case of an atomic attack. Many mayors lobbied to have highways routed through their city centers in order to appropriate federal funds for urban renewal projects.

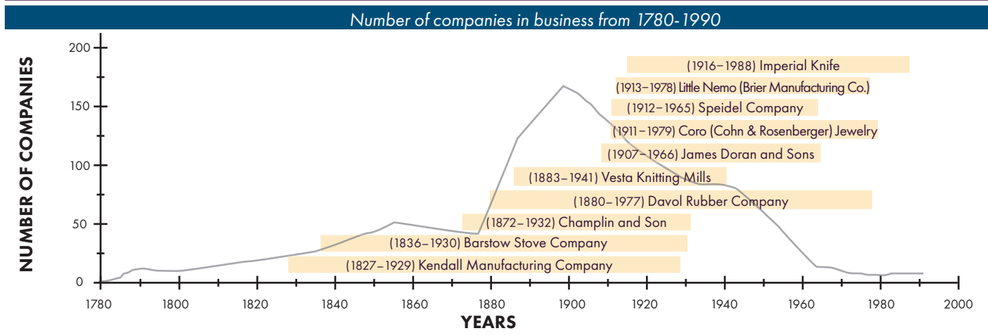
The intersection of I-95 (the major East Coast highway from Maine to Florida) and I-195 (toward Cape Cod) was placed close to downtown on the western edge of the Jewelry District between 1958 and 1964.

While speeding up traffic for travelers on the East Coast and commuters into Providence, the highway also cut a wide swath through the Jewelry District, taking down scores of industrial and residential buildings, churches, public parks and schools.

Decades later, the highway's concrete substructures showed unmistakable signs of decay. Between 2006 and 2010, the 1.6-mile stretch through the Jewelry District was moved 2,000 feet south, just outside of the Hurricane Barrier, freeing up 20 acres of prime real estate close to the historic center of the neighborhood. The I-195 Redevelopment Commission has overseen steady growth in the area, with a mix of residential, business and educational buildings. A park on the banks of the Providence River and a footbridge on the foundation of the old highway serve as a harbinger of the promising rebirth of the once vibrant neighborhood.

A MANUFACTURING HUB FOR RHODE ISLAND

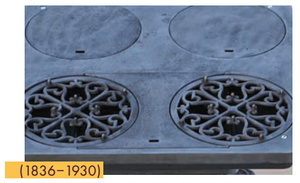
Number of companies in business from 1780-1990



COMPANY NAME & YEARS IN BUSINESS



(1827–1929)
KENDALL MANUFACTURING COMPANY: Produced soap (Soapine French Laundry Soap)



(1836–1930)
BARSTOW STOVE COMPANY: The largest stove manufacturer in New England

(1872–1932)
CHAMPLIN AND SON: Produced gold rings, gold-filled chains and wire supplies



(1907–1966)
JAMES DORAN AND SONS: A company specializing in jewelry findings (also umbrella fittings, collar buttons and tools for making collar pins)

(1880–1977)
DAVOL RUBBER COMPANY: Produced medical devices and hot water bottles composed of rubber

(1883–1941)
VESTA KNITTING MILLS: Producer of ribbed, knit underwear for women and children



(1911–1979)
CORO (COHN & ROSENBERGER) JEWELRY: Once the largest costume jewelry manufacturer in the U.S.



(1912–1965)
SPEIDEL COMPANY: Produced chains, and later, extendable bracelet watchbands ("Twist-O-Flex")



(1913–1978)
LITTLE NEMO (BRIER MANUFACTURING CO.): Second largest jewelry company in the U.S., named after a popular comic strip character



(1916–1988)
IMPERIAL KNIFE: Largest knife manufacturer in the U.S.

PROVIDENCE WALKS
The Jewelry District



Self-Guided
HISTORIC WALKING TOUR

GoPVD PROVIDENCE WARWICK CVB

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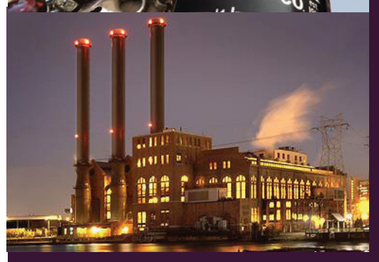




PROVIDENCE WALKS
The Jewelry District



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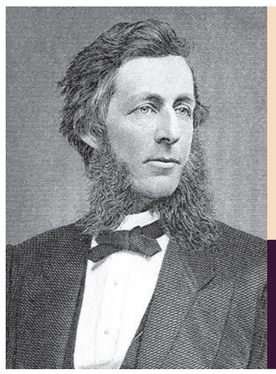
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"Design — like music, language, mathematics, art, science (curiosity) and the rest — is part of the structure of the mind ... Done by nature with blind but dazzling elegance and by us with human purpose, design is no mere cultural confection; it is in us."

- Malcolm Grear (1931–2016)

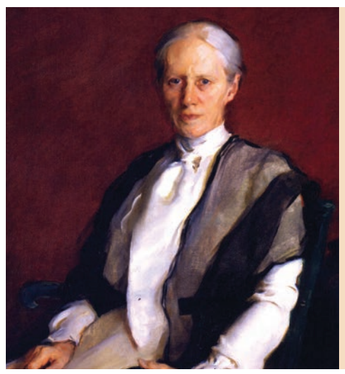
Providence Personalities



Thomas Arthur Doyle
(1827–1886)

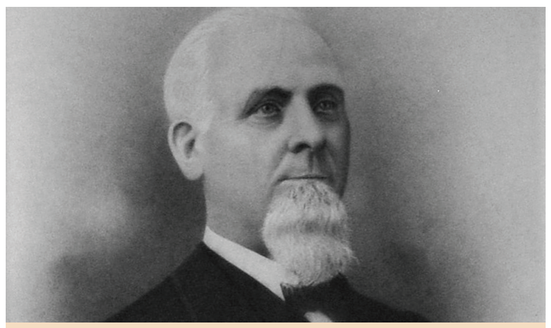
Thomas Arthur Doyle was mayor of Providence for three intervals between 1864 until his death in office in 1886. He turned Providence from a "large manufacturing village" of 54,000 inhabitants into a "little metropolis" of 120,000. He oversaw the construction of City Hall, introduced the police force and a sewer system, greatly improved the school system, and acquired the land for Roger Williams Park.

"Doyle's mayoral career was absolutely free from the taint of jobbery, dishonesty, or malfeasance and deserving of studious attention on the part of those interested in the difficult and undefined art of municipal government." Boston Advertiser, 1886



Sarah Elizabeth Doyle
(1830–1922)

Sarah Elizabeth Doyle was an educator and educational reformer, helping found the Rhode Island School of Design and Providence Athenaeum. She led the campaign to admit women to Brown University, succeeding in 1891 with the admission of the first six women, and was the first woman to receive an honorary degree from Brown University in 1894.



Stanton Browning Champlin
(1827–1895)

Champlin and Son was founded by Stanton and his son George in 1872 and produced gold rings and chains. George Champlin founded the United Wire and Supply Corporation in 1900. The family's Champlin Foundation exists to this day, having disbursed more than $600 million in charitable grants since its founding in 1932.

Nehemiah Dodge
(1769–1843)

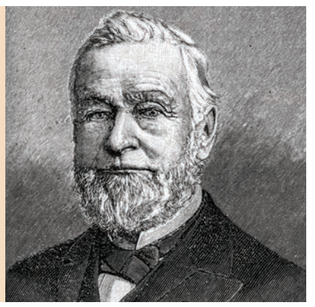
Nehemiah Dodge is often called the "father of America's jewelry industry" and Providence's first jewelry maker. His innovations in plated gold paved the way for the production of affordable jewelry for a mass market.

Jabez Gorham
(1792–1869)

Jabez Gorham, a silversmith and merchant, founded his first company in 1815 with three partners, inventing and producing a popular jewelry chain ("Gorham Chain"). In 1831 he founded his own company (initially called Gorham & Webster) to produce coin silver spoons.

Amos Chafee Barstow
(1813–1894)

Amos Chafee Barstow was a successful businessman, politician and civic leader. Founding the Barstow Stove Company in 1849, he also served as first president of the YMCA, mayor for one term and finally in 1875, President Grant appointed him to the Board of Indian Commissioners, which led to several trips to the American West.





Charlotte Perkins Gilman
(1860–1935)

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was a prominent American novelist, a feminist and activist for social reform. She wrote ad copy and designed trade cards for soap manufacturer Kendall Manufacturing Co. Her best remembered work is the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," an important milestone for feminist literature.




1

Wexford Science and Technology
Between Dyer and Richmond Streets

Wexford Science and Technology of Baltimore is responsible for a $158 million commercial development project with a 191,000-square-foot office building and a 170-room Aloft Hotel, a Mariott property. Among the tenants are Brown's 50,000-square-foot School of Professional Studies and the 66,000-square-foot Cambridge Innovation Center. The architects are Ayers Saint Gross and Ennead, which is handling the interiors of the School of Professional Studies. There is also a café and public event space.

2 195 District Park and Pedestrian Bridge
Between Dyer Street and Providence River

As part of a Jewelry District Master Plan, a new park was conceived on the western side of the Providence River — an open space that retains the memory of the former location of the I-195 highway. Following the idea of a RISD student to use the foundations of the former highway overpass in the riverbed as the substructure for a pedestrian bridge, a competition was held to identify a firm to design the bridge, subsequently leading to savings in demolition costs, while keeping a visible sign of the former highway location.



3

Little Nemo Building
222 Richmond Street

The Brier Manufacturing Company, the second largest costume jewelry maker in Providence, commissioned this building in 1928 from the architect Frank B. Perry (who would also build the Coro Building on Point Street the following year) and occupied it until the late 1970s. Its brand name "Little Nemo" was inspired by the successful comic strip by Winsor McCay from 1905 to 1926 in the *New York Herald*. Due to the success of the jewelry, Brier changed its name to the Little Nemo Manufacturing Company. The building is today occupied by Brown University's Alpert Medical School.



4

Doran-Speidel Building
70 Ship Street

James C. Doran commissioned the building in 1912 to house rental units for jewelry manufacturing next to his headquarters at 150 Chestnut Street. It was designed by Monks & Johnson, a fledgling Boston engineering firm, who adopted the structure and aesthetics introduced four years earlier at the A.T. Wall Building. The earliest tenant was the German immigrant Albert Speidel's Watch Chain Company. After WWII, Speidel shifted production from chains to extendable bracelet watchbands designed by Albert's brother Edwin. The so-called "Twist-O-Flex" design of the band was one of the first brands to be advertised on television in 1949.

A. OTHER POINT OF INTEREST

Kendall Manufacturing Company
90 Friendship Street

A parking structure for the adjacent court house today, this site long housed the headquarters of soap manufacturer Kendall Manufacturing Company. The prominent American feminist and writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935), who lived in Providence during much of her youth and enrolled in the Rhode Island School of Design in 1878, made her income with the design of trading cards and the writing of advertising for the Kendall Manufacturing Company, and its flagship product, Soapine. Her most famous work, the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," appeared in 1892 in *New England Magazine*.



5

James Doran and Sons Building
150 Chestnut Street

James C. Doran and his sons James and Joseph, who specialized in jewelry findings (also umbrella fittings, collar buttons, emblem findings, box-settings, and a joint-and-catch tool for making collar pins) commissioned the building in 1907. Most space was rented to other small jewelry companies. In 1909, an eighth floor was added and the building was expanded to the south. The load-bearing brick walls are reduced in depth as they go up, "slow burning" heavy timber beams carry the floors, and fire escapes have been added to comply with codes. The Doran family sold the building in 1966. In 1979 it was subdivided into condominiums.



6

Sarah and Thomas Doyle House
137 Chestnut Street

Thomas Doyle (1827–1886) was mayor of Providence for 18 years for three separate periods between 1864 and 1886. He built the current city hall and founded Roger Williams Park. The house at the corner of Bassett and Chestnut streets, where he lived from 1851–1869, had been built in 1825 by the mason Samuel Lewis. Doyle's sister Sarah (1830–1922), a noted educator and reformer, also lived there. She was a charter member of the corporation of the Rhode Island School of Design and served as secretary from 1877 to 1899. She successfully campaigned for the admission of women to Brown University. In the 1920s, the house was used by a small company to make jewelry supplies and fittings.



7

Hedison (Champlin) Building
116 Chestnut Street

The five-story brick building was built in 1888 for Stanton B. Champlin and his son George, manufacturers of gold rings and chains. It was large enough to provide rental space for other jewelry manufacturers as well. In 1901, the building was enlarged to the south. Stylistically, it set the stage for similar buildings nearby.



8

Irons and Russell Building
95 Chestnut Street

Charles Irons and Charles Russell, manufacturers of pins and charms, commissioned the building in 1903–04 from the prominent local architects Martin & Hall. The building consists of six stories with a flat roof, a bent-horseshoe plan, and a brick facade with "corbeled" cornices — a unified and striking exterior. The prominent brown stone entrance carries the company's name. It was one of the city's first fully electrically powered industrial structures. In 2017–18, the Providence firm Durkee, Brown, Viveiros & Werenfels turned the building into lofts, and in the process, carefully restored its historical details, such as the ornate birdcage elevator and terrazzo tiles.

B. OTHER POINT OF INTEREST

Chestnut Street Methodist Church
Corner of Clifford and Chestnut Streets

Formerly, a wooden Methodist church stood on this lot across from the Irons and Russell Building from 1820–1954. A major restoration project added a spire in 1836 (like many in New England, based on designs from a pattern book by British architect James Gibbs of 1728), but it fell victim to a storm in 1869. The congregation shrunk in the late 19th and early 20th centuries when the area became less residential and the church was torn down to make way for the I-195 highway.

9 A.T. Wall Company
162 Clifford Street

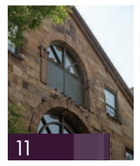
Ashbel T. Wall established a company for the production of gold-plated wire in rented quarters on Sabin Street in 1888. In 1908, Wall was ready to enlarge his operation and commissioned Bowerman Brothers of Boston to design a new manufacturing building. The four-story reinforced concrete structure with a flat roof and large windows represents an important milestone in the history of modern architecture. It is one of the earliest known examples of a reinforced concrete construction employing the mushroom-column-and-flat-slab technique. This mode of construction, developed by the American Engineer C.A.P. Turner in 1905–06 and patented in 1908, allowed for a freer floor plan than the traditional beam-and-column structure.



10

Imperial Place
Between Imperial Place, Elm and Bassett Streets

What is today called Imperial Place consists of the buildings of the former Vesta Knitting Mills and Imperial Knife Company. The Vesta Knitting Mills (originally Elba Woolen Mills) grew from 35 knitting, carding and spinning machines in 1888 to 175 knitting machines in 1908, producing women's, men's and children's underwear. That same year, Vesta built a second L-shaped factory, as an investment, to house jewelry manufacturing. In 1916, Italian immigrants Felix and Michael Mirando founded the Imperial Knife Company to produce specialized knives for jewelers. By the 1930s, it had become one of the largest pocket knife manufacturers in the world. One of its best-sellers was the Kamp-King camping knife.




11

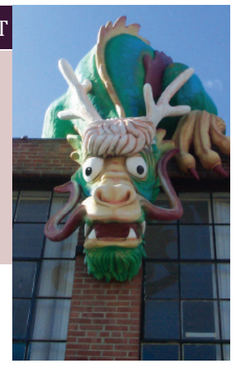
Phenix Iron Foundry
110 Elm Street

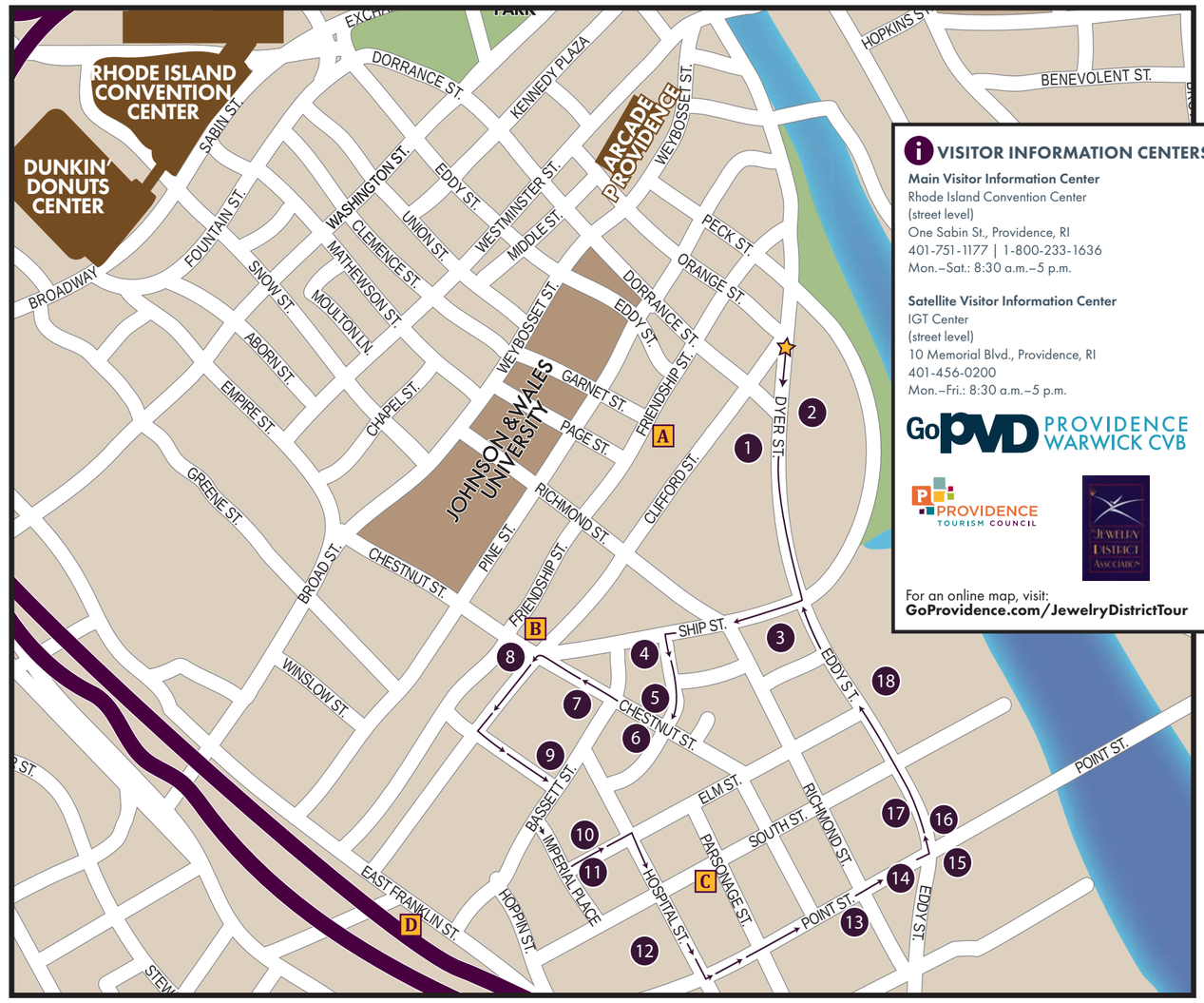
The Phenix Iron Foundry had a national monopoly on producing machines for dying, bleaching and print works, which supported the textile industry. Founded in 1830, it first had a shop on the waterfront on Elm Street, which was demolished in 1903 after having been purchased by the Narragansett Lighting Company. This machine shop of 1848 is 2 ½ stories high, with gables on both ends and heavy random-ashlar walls. Perhaps most memorable are the three round arch freight doors on each side, with heavy granite sills. The original sash windows have survived.

C. OTHER POINT OF INTEREST

Providence Children's Museum
100 South Street

The museum was founded in Pawtucket in 1977. It moved to its current South Street location 20 years later — a simple, 1926 industrial brick structure with large metal frame windows. Since then, more than 2.5 million people have visited. The 8,000-square-foot museum is full of sophisticated interactive exhibits designed by museum curators and educators.





VISITOR INFORMATION CENTERS

Main Visitor Information Center
Rhode Island Convention Center
(street level)
One Sabin St., Providence, RI
401-751-1177 | 1-800-233-1636
Mon.–Sat.: 8:30 a.m.–5 p.m.

Satellite Visitor Information Center
IGT Center
(street level)
10 Memorial Blvd., Providence, RI
401-456-0200
Mon.–Fri.: 8:30 a.m.–5 p.m.

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PROVIDENCE TOURISM COUNCIL

JEWELRY DISTRICT ASSOCIATION

For an online map, visit:
GoProvidence.com/JewelryDistrictTour



12

Coro Company Building
1 Hoppin Street

Similar to the Little Nemo Building by the same architect, Frank S. Perry, or the Doran-Speidel Building, this manufacturing complex, built in 1929, belongs to the type of reinforced concrete, pier-and-spandrel factory buildings with expansive windows. The Coro Company (founded as Cohn and Rosenberger in New York) had a branch in Providence since 1911, and subsequently became the largest manufacturer of costume jewelry in Providence in the 1950s and 1960s. After Coro closed in 1979, the structure was refurbished as a health care facility.

D. OTHER POINT OF INTEREST

Point Street Grammar School

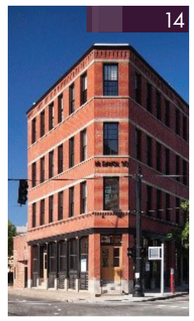
Point Street Grammar School previously stood roughly where the access ramp descends down to I-95 from West Franklin Street. It was designed by local architect Clifton A. Hall in the typical Second Empire Style (similar to City Hall at the same time) and was opened in 1874 by Mayor Thomas Doyle. It stood at the center of the growing residential portion of the neighborhood. In 1889, adjacent land was converted into Hayward Park, while dozens of houses and another school were built on land south of Maple Street. The school, the park and its neighboring buildings were demolished in 1960 to make room for the I-95 highway.



13

Barstow Stove Company
120 Point Street

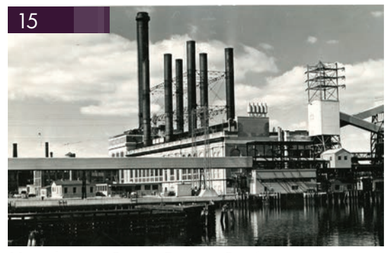
The wood and coal stoves produced by Amos Chafee Barstow in his Point Street foundry starting in 1849 were immensely successful and won several national awards, as well as a medal of merit at the 1873 Vienna World's Fair. Before the end of the century the company was the largest stove company in New England, employing 200 workers and offering 50 different kinds of stoves. The Barstow Stove Factory filled the entire 2 ½-acre plot. The three brick buildings remaining today are: the oldest, gable-roofed structure of 1849 with a clerestory monitor; east of this, a four-story structure from 1855; and a later structure at the corner of Point and Richmond streets. The company failed in 1930.



14

Simmons Building
10 Davol Square

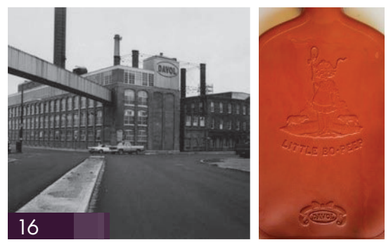
Originally the main building of the Davol Rubber Company, the Simmons Building of 1880 was named after Eban Simmons, the grandfather-in-law of Charles Davol. It is one of the most elegantly proportioned brick buildings in the Jewelry District. When the company expanded diagonally across the street, a metal conveyor belt connected the two buildings. In the 1940s, an overpass above Point and Eddy streets let motorists bypass the notoriously crowded intersection.



15

Manchester Street Power Station
40 Point Street

The power station was built in 1903–04 by the Rhode Island (later, New England) Electric Company, which supplied energy for electric street cars and trolleys in Providence at the beginning of the 20th century. The original, northern building with its stepped gable was added onto in 1913 and 1933. A major renovation in 1992 was led by William H. Warner, the architect of the downtown river relocation and Waterplace Park.



16

Davol Rubber Company
Corner of Point and Eddy Streets

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the company occupied a four-acre campus of connected brick buildings, which grew from smaller structures at the intersection of Point and Eddy streets. In contrast to its neighbors in the Jewelry District, the Davol Rubber Company was a pioneer of American rubber medical supplies. The company started at the Simmons Building across the street in 1880 and remained in that location until 1977. In 1980–82, "Davol Square" was developed into a shopping mall, which later closed in the early 1990s, followed by offices moving into the space.



17

Malcolm Grear's Studio
391–393 Eddy Street

The structure was built for a jewelry manufacturer in 1919 and enlarged in 1926 when a baking supply company moved in. Since the 1960s, it has been the studio of prominent American graphic designer Malcolm Grear (1931–2016), whose work encompassed visual identity programs, print publications, environmental design, packaging, and website design. His firm (now led by his son) is best known for visual identity work and designed logos for the Guggenheim Museum, Brown University, Vanderbilt University, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Veterans Administration.



18

South Street Landing
360 Eddy Street

The Narragansett Electric Company Power Station was built in stages between 1912 and 1952. An excellent example of early 20th-century power plant design, it burned coal to provide electrical power to the city. It was gradually replaced by the more modern nearby Manchester Street Station and was decommissioned in 1995. From 2013–17, Brown University, the University of Rhode Island (URI) and Rhode Island College (RIC) redeveloped the station into a URI/RIC nursing school and administrative offices, with a new parking structure and the River House student housing structure (architects: Spagnolo, Gisness & Associates) on its southeastern corner.

Written by **Professor Dietrich Neumann** of **Brown University** and his students, including Will Collier, Nadim Silverman, Anjoli Carroll, Charles Taylor, Luke Camery, Isabella Olea, Catherine Nguyen, Barton Bailey, Teri Minogue, Nia Gallaway, Ryan Miller, Abigail Tisch, Hannah Van, Kate Talerio, Ciprain Buxilla, Grant Menon and Ryan Walsh.