The year was 1900. It was Rhode Island’s Gilded Age...flourishing with industrialization, urbanization, cultural pluralism and the country’s largest steam engine factory. The goal in this prosperous time...to establish a free public library in Providence to provide for the intellectual and information needs of all Rhode Islanders and to erect a building befitting this noble purpose. Philanthropists lead the way…

The Providence Public Library differs from public libraries in most American cities in being privately governed and supported, but it serves the people in the best “public” sense of the word.

The vision became a reality thanks to a $268,000 gift from philanthropist John Nicholas Brown.

A Library Built for the Ages

“By this most noble gift, Mr. Brown has made it possible to have a fit and worthy building for one of the most widely influential of public institutions, and will receive the unstinted gratitude of its citizens.”

William E. Foster, 1898

A Place…

Providence in the late 1800s was undergoing a construction boom of sorts. The ornate, soaring buildings signaled great hope and confidence in the City and its people. On one hill, the Rhode Island State House; on another, the Providence Public Library; in the City proper, the Providence City Hall, and to the west the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul.

Today, the libraries and public spaces are more permanent reminders, and much as they did in the past, these buildings call to our greater nature – inspiring, educating and enhancing the quality of life for those who visit.

Opening Our Doors

Share our storied history, experience our restored elegance...celebrate our enduring purpose.
The Providence Public Library building opened in March 1900 and had a total cost of $387,000. It is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

Initiative architecture represents the Gilded Age

The building is a richly articulated, two-story, granite-and-brick sheathed structure of Venetian Renaissance inspiration with Indiana limestone trimmings and a low, copper-clad hip roof. It is set back from Washington Street on a high terrace with a sweeping double stair and balustrade leading to a triple entrance centered on the 13-bay façade; the first story is rusticated and the tall, round-arch second story windows are framed with Corinthian pilasters.

Classical detailing and artistry abound, from intricately hand-carved floralty adornments to rich-toned, marble-paved flooring. The Renaissance Providence Public Library building opened in March 1900 and had a total cost of $387,000. It is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Providence Public Library is a subtle, elegant embodiment of an era’s celebrative architecture.

Building’s splendor speaks to its benefactors’ inspired and generous spirit.

The Library’s Grand Staircase and Hall comprise the most striking architectural interior features. The stair risers are of Sienna and the treads of Comblanchien marble. The walls, pillars and pilasters are of a composition known as Scagliola.

Providence Public Library is honoring and renewing the spirit of our unique and historic building so it continues to inspire and uplift those seeking lifelong learning and opportunities to gather with community. In sharing our elegantly restored spaces in new ways with downtown Providence visitors, we are sure those coming for corporate meetings, exhibitions, receptions, weddings and other personal and community celebrations will be captivated by the Library’s distinctive architecture and striking details.

Among the Library’s magnificent spaces are:

- The stately, marble-paved Grand Hall
- The Providence Journal Rhode Island Room...a traditional library reference and research room, houses and displays the Library’s unique Rhode Island Collection and offers a formal space for an elegant dinner or luncheon.
- The Ship Room...richly appointed and nautically-themed in a nod to our Ocean State, a room in which celebrants enjoy a showcase of the Library’s Brownell Collection of Atlantic Coast Ship Models and other rarities from the PPL Special Collections.

The building’s splendor speaks to its benefactors’ inspired and generous spirit.

In its grandeur and refined elegance it served as a symbol of pride for the City of Providence and State of Rhode Island, while its distinctive interior space in purpose, quiet but unmistakably achieving its role as a subtle expression of a shared purpose. The Library’s Grand Staircase and Hall comprise the most striking architectural interior features. The stair risers are of Sienna and the treads of Comblanchien marble. The walls, pillars and pilasters are of a composition known as Scagliola.

The second floor corridor is an imposing and artistic scene, east to west – from the Special Collections to the formal Trustees Room.

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