

A Place... of history, elegance and purpose

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 Library and its early contemporaries remain, 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.



Providence Public Library • 225 Washington Street • Providence, RI 02903
www.provlib.org



Opening Our Doors

*Share our storied history...
experience our restored
elegance...celebrate our
enduring purpose*

A Library Built for the Ages

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.



John Nicholas Brown

*"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 its public
institutions, and will
receive the unstinted
gratitude of its citizens."*

William E. Foster, 1898



Renaissance Building

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 intricate frieze that runs around the building features individually carved cherub heads – each one unique.

Classical proportioning...Renaissance artistry... Beaux-Arts attention to detail

The Providence Public Library building is a prime example of turn-of-the-century American architecture. Its architects Stone, Carpenter & Willson created a library of elegant proportion and delightful detail. It traces its architectural pedigree to the Sansovino's library in Venice and the Libraire de Ste. Genevieve in Paris, and still further back, the Italian palaces of the Renaissance period.

The building materials were selected for their beauty and durability; the effect was compelling. An impressive double stairway and a triple archway announced the entrance, where many a patron has paused to admire the elaborate decoration flanking the great front doors.



"The Providence Public Library is a subtle, masterful refinement of its era's emblematic architecture."

William McKenzie Woodward, 1988

Intricate 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 floret adornments to rich-toned, marble-paved flooring.



A grand marble staircase ascends from the foyer; striking iron work elegantly incorporates the Library's initials.

Striking Elegance

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

Its considerable presence and refined elegance are a symbol of pride for the City of Providence and State of Rhode Island, while its distinctive interiors represent its greater purpose, quietly but unequivocally declaring its role as a temple to the aspirations of a learned people.

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.

Making the Marble

Through a process called Scagliola, devised by Italian monks in the 15th century, skeins of colored silk are soaked in a special cement and then removed. Once colored, the cement is applied to the walls and columns and finally, polished. The resulting "Pavanazzo" lasts for centuries, as it has in the churches of Italy.



A New Chapter



Honoring, restoring, preserving, sharing...this elegant symbol of hope, inspiration and knowledge

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.

In turn, Rhode Islanders' use of the Library as an extraordinary venue for their significant events ensures its preservation as a vital statewide asset and provider of important services and resources for all.

Among the Library's magnificent spaces are:

The stately, marble-paved **Grand Hall**...with its lower level fashioned as a formal **Garden Courtyard**, provides guests with a magnificent indoor garden setting in the heart of the City, reminiscent of 19th century classical European estate gardens. The hall's original arched clerestory windows and skylights create a dramatic light-filled space.

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 beautifully appointed Trustees Room is also available to bridal and other parties.

