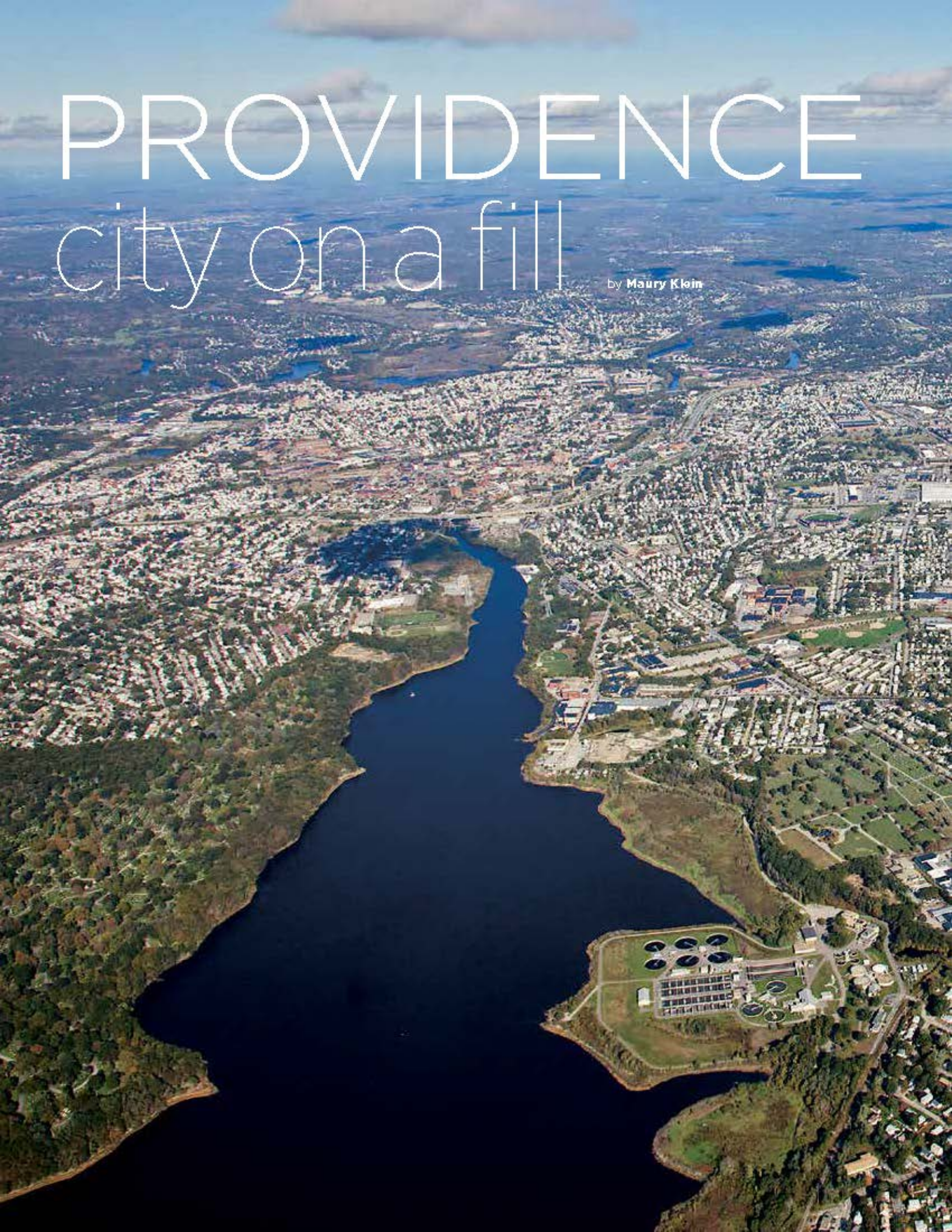


PROVIDENCE

city on a fill

by Maury Klein



WATER WAS THE LIFELINE FOR EVERY SETTLEMENT in early America. However, as villages grew into towns and then cities, some found themselves squeezed into a space that led them to expand by pushing back the sea through a process that archaeologists call "landmaking." In New England, Boston offered the most conspicuous example. When founded in 1630, it occupied a small peninsula connected to the mainland by a narrow neck. Over time, this 487-acre strip was more than doubled in size by filling in tidal flats and marshes, creating what historian Nancy S. Seasholes calls "an enormous amount of made land." And the size of neighboring Charlestown, now a part of Boston, was nearly doubled by fill.

Providence underwent this same process on a more modest scale. The land purchased by Roger Williams between 1636 and 1638 led to an early settlement at the foot of College Hill near a natural spring. Although scarcely half the size of Newport during the 1700s, the town gradually emerged as a major shipbuilding center with one of its larger facilities located in what is now the center of Kennedy Plaza. Providence sat on an estuary known as the Great Salt Cove, which was formed by the confluence of the Moshassuck and Woonasquatucket rivers into the Great Salt (now Providence) River. A shallow tidewater area, it was bounded by College Hill to the east and Jefferson Plain and Smith Hill to the north. To the west, the Woonasquatucket River meandered through a broad valley of salt marshes. South of the cove lay the Weybosset peninsula that evolved into downtown Providence.

The cove covered several hundred acres and was deep enough to accommodate sailing ships. A drawbridge connected the East Side to Weybosset Point. By the 1790s, Market Square, located at the south edge of the cove, emerged as the town center of Providence. Shipping and seafaring interests spurred the town's growth, along with the coming of textile manufacturing, bleacheries, printworks, foundries, ironworks, and machine firms. The development spurred by increased prosperity soon found itself blocked by the so-called "Seven Hills of Providence," especially Smith Hill and College Hill. One obvious solution was to create more land by filling in parts of Great Salt Cove, which began as early as 1780, for the construction of new wharves. Twelve years later, part of the cove's east side was filled, creating a new street called North Water (later Canal).

In 1782, a committee created to define a limit on encroachments into the cove drew up the city's first harbor line; 15 years later, harbor lines were extended all the way around the cove. "Harbor lines imposed

Aerial photograph by Dave Cleaveland



planned order on waterfront development,” explains Michael Holleran, who formerly taught in the architectural studies department at the Rhode Island School of Design, in a 1990 article, “and—most important in the comparatively shallow cove—defined an area meant to be kept as open water.” Another waterfront innovation, the frontage street, also blocked excess filling by increasing access to the shore. However, in July 1815, the town extended harbor lines to the lower harbor and in the process fixed the head of navigation at Weybosset, south of the cove. As Holleran observes, “Land interests had triumphed over water interests.”

The plan was to build a fixed bridge at Market Square, which meant that ships could no longer reach the warehouses on North Main Street. In September, the timetable moved unexpectedly forward when the Great Gale of 1815 destroyed the existing drawbridge and pitched ships into waterfront structures. Once the new span was completed, the cove ceased to be a navigable outlet to the sea and became instead a tidal lake. The Blackstone Canal, which opened July 1, 1828, added to this transformation by damming the cove’s northeast corner to create its tidewater terminal. Later dismissed as “the greatest fiasco in Providence business history,” the canal lost money steadily and ceased operations in 1849, but its presence affected the cove’s evolution.

To thrive economically, Providence needed efficient

The rise of railroads marked the end of Providence’s Great Salt Cove.

Photo courtesy of Rhode Island State Archives

overland transportation. Existing roads fell far short of meeting this need, as did the Blackstone Canal. By 1840, the apparent solution emerged in the form of railroads, which the city soon viewed as a primary weapon in its efforts to compete with Boston. Already, in 1835, the Boston and Providence Railroad had opened its line between the two cities. Two years later another railroad, the New York, Providence and Boston (known as the Stonington line), connected New York with Providence. Both lines reached the city at the southern end of the harbor, well below the cove and the center of town. However, in 1844, a third project, the Providence and Worcester Railroad (P&W), proposed replacing the Blackstone Canal with a railroad that of necessity would enter downtown from the north. For this to happen, the road’s promoters wanted to construct a terminal and yards on land created by filling part of the cove.

A bitter debate ensued in the city council as the other two railroads, seeing the virtue of a central interchange, asked to join the P&W in a joint terminal. In 1846, the council agreed to let the P&W reduce the cove to an elliptical basin, provided it built a promenade park around it. The cove was, as Holleran

observes, “‘available space,’ quite a lot of it, at the center of a growing city where space was increasingly in demand.” It was also “an ornament to the city, to be adorned and protected”—and a smelly nuisance, especially at low tide, from refuse, sewage, and industrial waste that grew viler over the years.

Most of the basin and promenade were completed by 1849. Three years later, the council granted another railroad cove land in the marshes west of the basin if the company agreed to complete the basin wall and promenade. By 1857, the basin entered what Holleran calls its “golden years” when the city landscaped the completed park and decked it out with cast-iron railings and seats. The handsome railroad depot, designed by Thomas A. Tefft, also pleased strolling sightseers. But the stench from human and industrial waste worsened as both the population and number of factories grew. A clash between the rural-dominated General Assembly and the city over control of the cove led to the city buying the state’s interest for \$200,000 in 1870 and gaining full authority over the lands.

As other railroads sought entry to the cove lands, pressure increased to fill more of the cove. “If it is necessary for us to cut down the beautiful trees in our most spacious gardens, public and private, for the sake of our children and the future of the city,” declared former governor William W. Hoppin in 1881, “let us give the railroads these facilities.”

Many opposed this attitude. A newly formed group, the Public Parks Association, fought the railroads’ effort to acquire the rest of the cove lands but conceded that pollution justified filling the cove. The two sides disagreed only over whether the land should be used for a park or railroad facilities. A commission appointed in 1881 produced a plan favoring the railroads that aroused a storm of controversy; it resigned in 1886 after five years of frustrating effort. The railroads put forward another plan that, slightly modified, finally won city council approval in 1889. The council sold the remaining cove lands to the railroads, and filling of the basin began in 1891.

The city sold about 41 acres to the newly consolidated New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad. Large segments of the rivers were covered and retaining walls completed in 1892, creating channels for the two converging rivers. The promenade was eliminated and its three river bridges removed. The railroad chose the cheaper plan of elevating tracks rather than streets and placed the new depot and approach tracks on an embankment with street and highway traffic underneath, creating a barrier between the city’s center and lands to the north that became known as the “Chinese Wall.” New streets, including Francis, Gaspee, and Promenade, were built to provide north-south access, and two freight yards were constructed.



The Rhode Island Company was one of a number of railroads that changed the Providence landscape. Photo courtesy of Rhode Island State Archives

The cove had ceased to exist, buried beneath rail facilities even as the state decided in 1893 to build its capitol on Smith Hill. Within a few years, the rail facilities lost their importance, and pollution of the rivers grew steadily worse. Downtown Providence, dismissed as “the world’s widest bridge,” remained partitioned by the Chinese Wall until the advent of the Northeast Railroad Corridor project in 1981 set in motion its complete transformation. The freight yards were removed, the tracks relocated, and a new train station built. A new development district, the Capital Center, utilized the vacated cove lands stretching from the capitol to Kennedy Plaza. The three rivers were uncovered, a dozen new bridges constructed, and traffic rerouted. Eleven acres of new pedestrian parks went up along the Providence River, connecting downtown to the East Side for the first time since the days of the Great Salt Cove.

Like the city’s railroad age, the Providence Renaissance arose atop the cove that had once been the lifeline of the city’s earliest days.