

Walking

PROVIDENCE, RI

Tour

**Walking Tour of
Churches on
College Hill.**

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Providence

If you think architectural design is a type of puzzle with rules that constantly change over time, this guide will be your key to unlocking clues to these elements that make a building church-like. On this walking tour of churches and libraries from three different centuries, you will be walking along streets that date to the founding of the settlement of Providence.

Just sixteen years after the landing of the Mayflower at Plymouth, Massachusetts, Roger Williams founded a new settlement in what would become the colony of Rhode Island. This settlement was named Providence for the act of God that Williams believed led him to the east side of the Seekonk River in 1636.

Williams, a thirty year old Oxford educated minister, had been banished from the Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth colonies for his “newe and dangerous opinions against the authorities”. Of the thirteen original colonies, only Rhode Island was founded with the determination that “soul liberty,” or freedom of worship, would apply to all people, of all denominations, and of all beliefs. The novelty of Williams’ idea was that he advocated there could be no peace on earth until all men granted each other the freedom of their consciences. The danger the orthodox Puritans, as well as the Church of England, saw in Williams’ beliefs was that, in addition to the difficulty of suddenly having to espouse a lenient behavior, it also required unconditional separation of church and state. In that era, both notions were entirely unimaginable to most Puritans.

In such a climate of not only freedom from persecution, but also freedom to choose, change, and construct one’s own beliefs, the Rhode Island colony more than any other attracted religious refugees of all denominations. It was as if the settlements had advertised “Dissenters Welcomed.” At liberty to worship, congregations were also free to build their houses of worship.

Existing physical evidence of a tolerant attitude that endured for centuries is the variety of places of worship in a multitude of architectural styles ornamenting Rhode Island’s cities and towns. Each one, in its own way, tells you it is a religious building. But sometimes, you will be surprised to learn, a design your eye recognizes as a “church,” is not.

Providence 1790



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First Baptist Church

75 North Main Street. 1775, timber frame, wood. *Joseph Brown, designer.*

This is the Baptists' third church building in Providence, and the oldest in the country. A

transitional structure, this is a traditional meeting house combined with a London church style steeple. Brown, a "gentleman architect," copied the five-stage steeple design

from detailed drawing in James Gibbs' "Book of Architecture," published in England in 1728. As much a landmark 200 years ago as it is today, the religious symbolism of the 185 foot steeple is sometimes secondary to its usefulness as a navigational aid by sea or by land.



Laurence E. Tilley

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Memorial Hall, Rhode Island School of Design

Formerly, *Central Congregational Church*. 226 Benefit Street. 1853-1856, brownstone-faced brick. *Thomas A. Tefft, architect.*

With almost no exterior modifications, the Rhode Island School of Design has adapted the former Central Congregational Church for reuse

as a mailroom and snack bar. The twin towers were damaged and later removed as a result of the Great Hurricane of 1938. The triple-rounded arch entrance, and the tall rounded arch windows are clues to the building's original religious function.

Romanesque designs are characteristically solid, heavy, and usually symmetrical. Builders felt the mass and weight of the sturdy masonry was a good allegory for the importance of a spiritual foundation and permanence.

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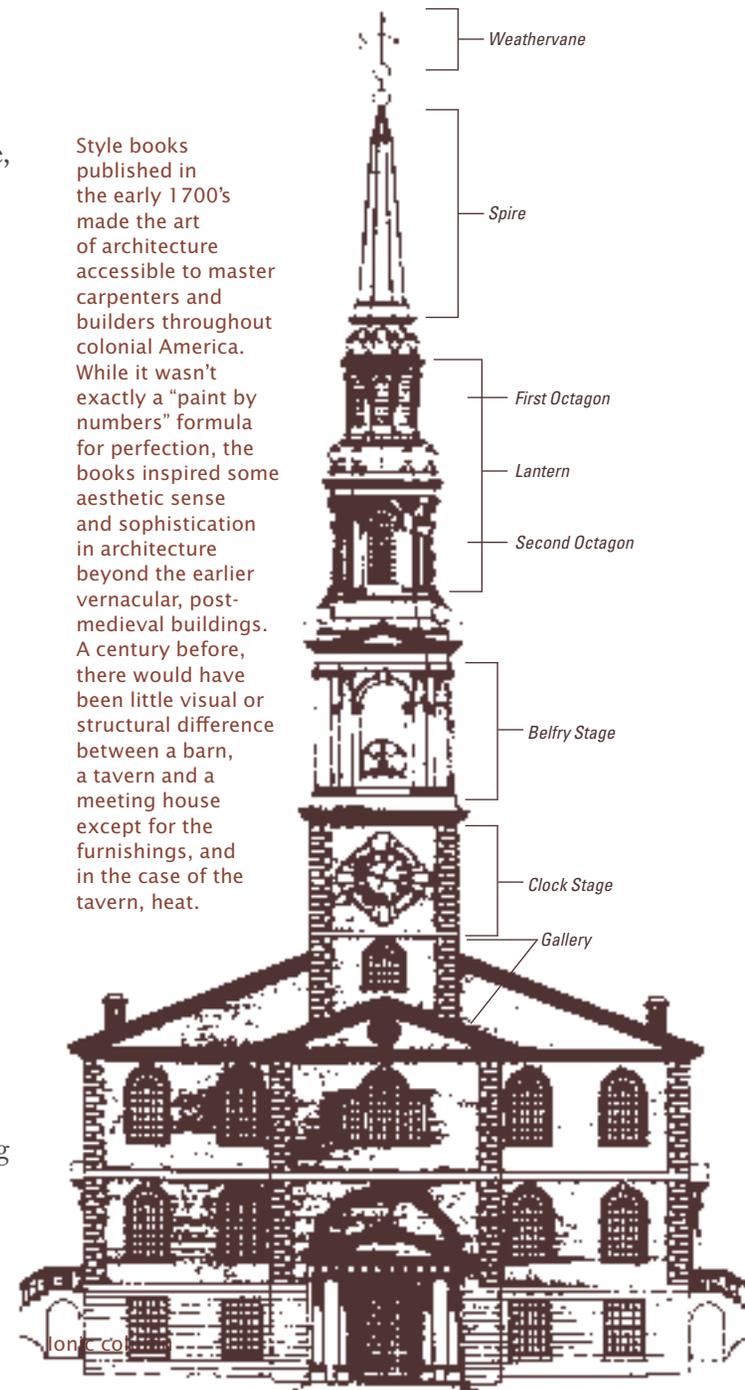
First Unitarian Church

Formerly, *First Congregational Church*. 301 Benefit Street. 1816, granite. *John Holden Green, architect.*

This church was the third built by the congregation in Providence. A characteristic of the Baroque style, originally from the late-Renaissance, is the use of harmonious, yet richly three-dimensional forms. Under the huge classical pediment on the façade beneath the tower, Greene placed an enormous Gothic round-headed, three part lancet (pointed arch) window. He then flanked the window with four colossal columns also in a classical design. Finally, Federal style finials and decorations were added on every corner and edge, nearly all the way up to the sky.

The visual effect of the combination of architectural elements is so dramatic that the building is awe inspiring.

Style books published in the early 1700's made the art of architecture accessible to master carpenters and builders throughout colonial America. While it wasn't exactly a "paint by numbers" formula for perfection, the books inspired some aesthetic sense and sophistication in architecture beyond the earlier vernacular, post-medieval buildings. A century before, there would have been little visual or structural difference between a barn, a tavern and a meeting house except for the furnishings, and in the case of the tavern, heat.



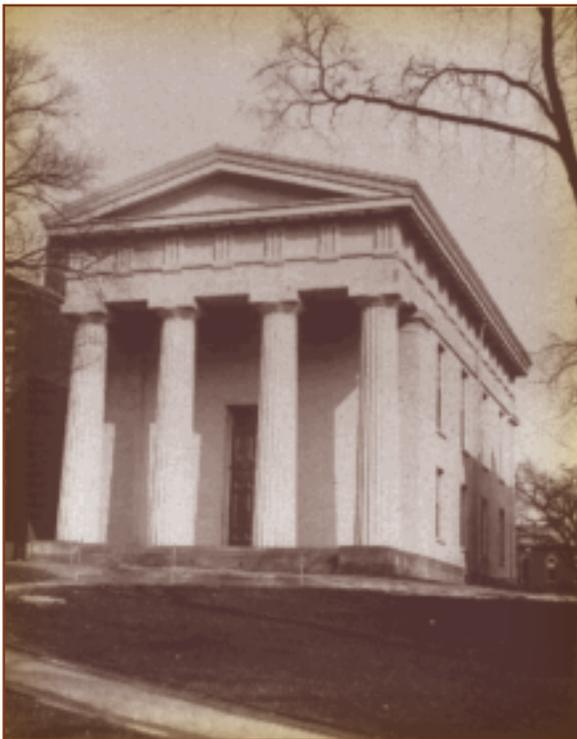
Walking Tour continued

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Manning Hall, Brown University

1834, stucco rubblestone.
James Bucklin, architect.

This Greek revival style building originally housed a library downstairs and a chapel upstairs. Used commercially to the extent that the style eventually was ridiculed by taste makers in the mid-1800s, today the best of the Greek revival buildings are among the most powerful designs on the landscape. Stand next to one of the Doric columns in the deep shadow underneath the portico of Manning Hall. You feel the permanence and strength of the forms.



The Rhode Island Historical Society

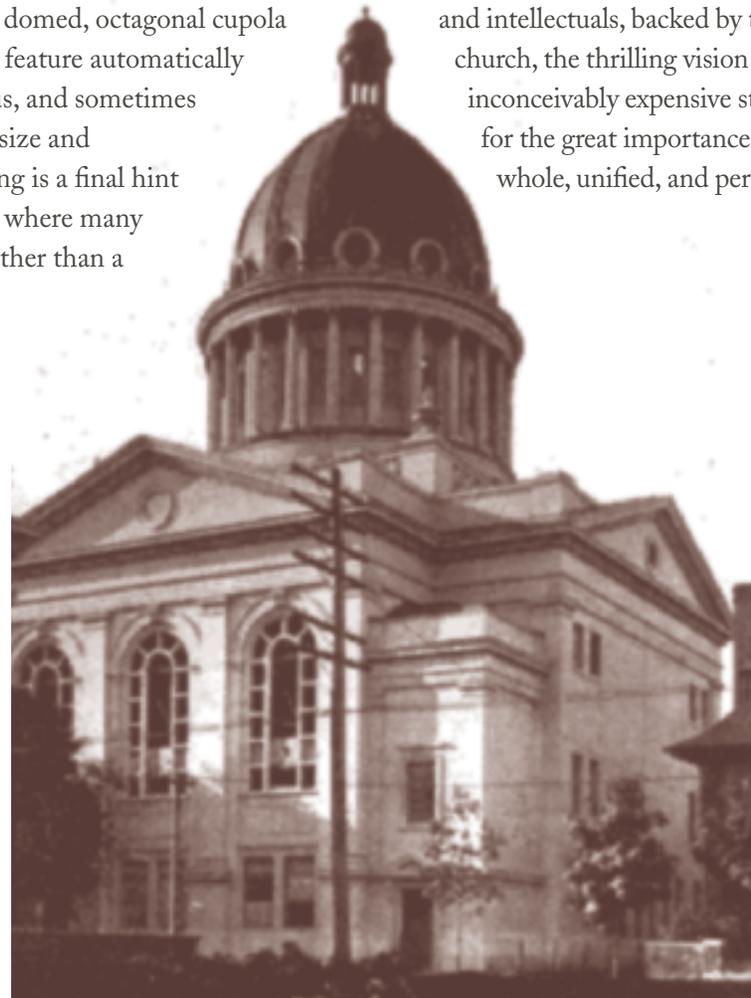
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Robinson Hall, Brown University

Formerly, University Library.
64 Waterman Street. 1875–1876,

polychrome masonry. Walk and Gould, architects.

Built as the university library, Robinson Hall looks for all the world as if it should have a sacred function. What first makes you see this as a church? The “pointy-ness” of the High Victorian Gothic design and decoration immediately catches the eye. The colorful stonework and festivity of the decorations on Robinson Hall give it the look of a site of celebration. The domed, octagonal cupola is another architectural feature automatically associated with religious, and sometimes official, buildings. The size and symmetry of the building is a final hint that it might be a place where many people gather inside, rather than a private residence.



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First Church of Christ Scientist

71 Prospect Street. 1906–1913, brick and limestone with terra cotta trim. Hoppin and

Field, architects.

This basilica-sized, copper-clad Renaissance-style dome and the State House dome are landmarks on the city’s skyline. During the Italian Renaissance in the 15th and 16th centuries, proportioned and measured buildings aspired to total refinement and complete perfection of detail. Built by a collaboration of architects, scientists, mathematicians, and intellectuals, backed by the wealth of the church, the thrilling vision of a flawless and inconceivably expensive structure was a symbol for the great importance and influence of a whole, unified, and perfect churchdom.

Walking Tour continued

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Congdon Street Baptist Church

15 Congdon Street. 1874, wood frame.

C. F. Wilcox, architect.

This church is an important site in the city's African American religious history, beginning with the congregation from the African Union Meeting House, which stood on Meeting Street. The Italianate style, inspired by 16th century sources from the Tuscan hill towns surrounding Florence and later interpreted by an English sensibility, produced simply, strong, and typically asymmetrical designs. The easily recognized details are heavy framing, bold trim, and decoratively capped windows and doors set against a plain background surface. Following close after the decline of popularity for Greek revival designs, Italianate buildings must have seemed enjoyably picturesque, and substantially less laden with meaning and portent.

Return by walking down South Court Street. On your way, you will pass the Old State House, 1762, on the right-hand side. At the foot of the hill, turn right on North Main Street.



