

Appendix A

Narrative of Individual Buildings & Current Assessments

Providence Community Library began operation on July 1, 2009, when it assumed responsibility for the nine branch libraries that had been part of the Providence Public Library system. Providence Public Library itself began in 1878 as a non-profit corporation formed by private donors. By the turn of the century, PPL began to receive yearly allocations from the city of Providence to help defray operating expenses, and soon after this it began taking over small neighborhood libraries that had been established by a number of community groups throughout the city, providing these branches with professional library staff and increasing the size of their book collections.

With a substantial bequest from Lyra Brown Nickerson in 1917, PPL embarked upon an ambitious branch library building campaign in the 1920s. Over the next fifty years, in addition to operating a number of branch libraries, PPL also maintained numerous sub-branches and stations and also deposit stations in the city's public schools and hospitals, as well as a bookmobile, reaching a maximum of thirty-one branches, sub-branches and stations by 1941. Nineteen of these facilities were branches, of which eleven were located in schools.¹

By the postwar period, PPL had begun a contraction of this far-flung system, closing the sub-branches and stations and ending its role within the school system. Eventually, only nine library branches remained. The PPL board repeatedly warned City leaders and patrons that further closures might be required in order to balance the budget and in 2008 the board announced that up to five branches would be closed the following year unless the City provided PPL with a substantial increase in funding. Given the City's own fiscal straits, such an increase seemed unlikely, if not impossible. At this point, a group of library patrons formed a new non-profit, Providence Community Library, and petitioned the City to transfer its library funding to it. In the spring of 2009, the Mayor agreed to do so, and PCL took over the nine branches that summer.

Although PPL had embarked on a capital repairs campaign in the late 1990s to address the facilities problems at all of its library branches, only Rochambeau and South Providence Libraries were actually renovated. Perhaps in the expectation that eventually the other branches would also be upgraded, PPL postponed dealing with serious facilities issues at the other six libraries that it owned. This delay resulted in the closure of Washington Park Library when building contractors discovered serious structural problems there in 2006.

Meanwhile, other libraries, especially Smith Hill, Knight Memorial, and Wanskuck branches continued their slide into decay. Below is a brief history of each library, supplemented by an overview of each building's condition, including recent capital improvements that have taken place in each of the libraries and/or a discussion of the building's current capital needs.

¹ The eight non-school branches were the neighborhood libraries that would remain part of the PPL system for the rest of the century, minus the Olneyville library facility that was upgraded to full-branch status in 1946.

History of Individual Buildings

Fox Point Library

- Background:

Fox Point Library has occupied many different homes—and had many names—since it was first opened by the Society of Organizing Charities in their rental space in the old Tillinghast House at 403 South Main Street in late 1912. A month or two later, a contract was signed between PPL and the Society to have the library designated a PPL sub-branch with the Society staffing and maintaining the facility and PPL providing the books. PPL upgraded the library to a full branch in 1917. When it was moved to a new location at the corner of Brook and Transit Streets in 1925, the South Main Street Branch was renamed the Brook Street Branch.

Later on, PPL relocated it at 121 Hope Street where it became the Tockwotton Branch. It remained in that location until 1963, when PPL sold the building to RI Historical Society. After a year with only bookmobile service for Fox Point patrons, the branch moved into a renovated bath house owned by the City and leased to PPL for one dollar a year. The facility at 511 Wickenden Street was renamed the Fox Point Branch. In 1975 PPL leased the basement of the Fox Point Boys and Girls Club and moved the branch to these slightly larger quarters, where it remains today.

- Current Assessment:

While a long-term goal is to find city-owned property in the Fox Point neighborhood into which to relocate this library, in the short term the current space is useable. Within the last couple of years the Boys and Girls Club has allowed the library to use the community room in the back for library programs and events, which has made it possible to move these programs out of the main reading room. This community room has been recarpeted and painted. The rugs have been cleaned throughout the library. The WiFi has been redone, and the wiring has been upgraded to enable the installation of a G-Tech computer lab.² There is an elevator from the main floor down to the library level, which has been recently repaired, making the library handicap accessible. The primary problem with this facility is that it is too small. A long-term PCL facilities goal must be to find another, more suitable space for this library.

Knight Memorial Library

- Background:

A group of Elmwood mothers formed the Elmwood Public Library Association and raised the money to open a library in 1915 in a small room above a local fire station. The library was too small to meet the needs of patrons in the neighborhood, and the children of Robert Brayton Knight, founder of the Fruit of the Loom Company, built the current Knight Memorial Library in 1924 as a “memorial to their parents and a place for the Elmwood library to make itself a home.” The Knights spared few expenses

² The electrical systems at all PCL libraries have been upgraded as G-Tech labs have been installed. However, Knight Memorial’s electrical system needs much more extensive upgrading throughout the building; the only PCL library still awaiting a G-Tech lab is South Providence.

in constructing this library. Among its many architectural features are its monumental entrance stairway, massive bronze front doors, columns with Ionic capitals in the “main Delivery Room.” reproduction “panathenaic procession from the frieze of the Parthenon,” leaded glass with famous printers’ marks, library board room “inclosed [sic] in walls of Circassian walnut paneling and leaded glass bearing symbolic figures,” and basement “Story-Telling Room with a fireplace surrounded by Mother Goose tiles copied from Walter Crane’s illustrations.”³

Knight Memorial Library remained a privately operated public library until 1962, when management of the library was assumed by the Providence Public Library. In 1995, Knight Memorial Library Association officially merged with Providence Public Library; thereupon, Knight Memorial Library became a full PPL branch in the PPL system of neighborhood libraries.⁴

- Current Assessment:

Some problems at Knight Memorial have been addressed: The black iron pipe behind the bookshelves in the Community Room has been replaced, and the bookshelves have been rebuilt. The main drain from the building to the street has been replaced. The roof has been replaced and resealed, and the entrance stairs have been rebuilt. However, Knight Memorial still needs considerable work. It needs a complete electrical upgrade to replace dated and insufficient electrical wiring. It lacks air conditioning, which causes hazardous air quality and results in its closure for a number of days each summer. It is not ADA compliant in terms of general accessibility and also with regard to its restrooms. The years of water damage have marred the interior of the building, which now needs attention.

Mount Pleasant Library

- Background:

Mount Pleasant Library, PPL’s first library branch (1921), moved into its present quarters on Academy Avenue in 1949. Although PPL had planned to move the branch from its second-floor location into a purpose-built library building as early as the 1920s, the Great Depression and World War II postponed this project. By the time PPL built the new branch, construction costs had risen, which “dictated economy of construction, resulting in a functional type of building, plain on the outside and without partition on the main floor inside,” according to then-PPL Director Clarence E. Sherman. The basement included a small community room, a staff room, and storage space.⁵ With expansion of library usage in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood in the 1950s and 1960s, the first-floor space was found to be inadequate and PPL built an addition in 1968. As no basement was dug beneath this new section, the addition doubled the dimensions of the main floor but added no additional rooms downstairs.

³ “The Providence Libraries: Branches of Free Public Institution Give Neighborhood Centers Untold Advantages in Circulation of Books,” *Providence Sunday Journal Magazine*, January 4, 1931: 4-5. Crane was a celebrated nineteenth-century British illustrator of children’s books.

⁴ Lilli Avenia, Kevin Crace, and Ming-Yi Wong, “KML Report: A Reference Document for Preservation Planning,” Second Draft, March 27, 2010, pp. 4, 7. Additional information provided by Deborah Del Gais in correspondence with the author, May 9, 2011.

⁵ “New Mt. Pleasant Library Formally Opened to Public,” *Providence Journal*, June 29, 1949: 5.

- Current Assessment:

In the years that followed, there have been few renovations to this library. Although it is air-conditioned, this library clearly needs some work—most importantly, an upgrade to ADA-compliance to render the basement restrooms and community room accessible to all patrons; refurbishing of the community room, with new carpets and lighting; and remodeling of the staff rooms and the staff and patron restrooms—in general this building is in fairly good condition. It was doubled in size with the 1968 annex, and it has air conditioning, although the AC system needs upgrading. New wiring has made it possible to situate a children’s computer lab in the remodeled children’s section in the back corner of the main floor, with adult computers located in the front, and a reading nook for adults installed in this front section. This building clearly needs further renovations, but its needs are less pressing than those of some of the other buildings in the PCL system.

Olneyville Library

- Background:

The Olneyville Free Library Association founded a library in the Olneyville section of the city in 1875. In 1920, the Association merged with PPL, with the two organizations sharing the cost of library operation and maintenance. In 1946, the Association was “formally absorbed” into the PPL system, which meant that it “henceforth will be operated as a fully dependent branch of the city-wide institution.”⁶ For many years PPL maintained this branch at 12 Olneyville Square but closed the facility in 1981. After eight years of lobbying by area residents and their elected representatives, PPL reopened the Olneyville Branch in 1990 in a former branch of the Rhode Island Hospital Trust, at 1 Olneyville Square. This building, still the home of the library today, was completed early in 1931. For a bank branch, the building was relatively imposing, as the façade was brick with limestone trim, carved brackets in the gable, and a clock “placed in a setting of limestone mouldings with swags at either side.” There was a workroom, staff restroom and locker rooms in the basement; a director’s room on the mezzanine level; and the main banking floor on the first floor. The ceilings were finished with “acousticalotex” to cut down on noise, the flooring on the first floor was comprised of “old-fashioned stone flagging in variegated colors,” and the lighting fixtures were “of Colonial design, manufactured of wrought iron and brass.”⁷

- Current Assessment:

PPL made a few renovations before opening the Olneyville branch in its new quarters, “including additional structural support to accommodate the weight of book stacks and modifications for handicapped access.”⁸ PCL has upgraded the fire suppression system, recaulked the front window panes, remodeled the staff kitchen/lounge area, replaced the sump pumps in the basement, and

⁶ Roberta B. Thayer, “Olneyville ‘People’s University’ Becomes Branch of City System,” *Providence Journal*, March 25, 1946: 11.

⁷ “Bank Branch Opened,” *Providence Journal*, January 20, 1931: 16.

⁸ “Olneyville to get branch of library,” *Providence Journal*, April 17, 1989: E1.

doubled the number of public computers, mainly by transforming the old reference room into a children's lab; furthermore, the air conditioning system is in the process of being repaired. The PCL maintenance crew has replaced the old interior lighting fixtures with new, energy-efficient ones and installed new LED lights outside the building on the front.⁹ However, the lack of a proper drain system in the basement continues to cause unacceptable levels of water to accumulate and contributes to mold and compromised air quality. Additionally, the facility is too small to fully meet patron needs for services and programming. Given the library's location on the traffic-congested Olneyville Square, it is difficult to access either by foot or by car. A long-term PCL facilities goal must be to find another, more suitable space for this library.

Rochambeau Library

- Background:

Rochambeau Library opened in 1930, one of the four branch libraries constructed during PPL's branch building campaign during this period, the others being Wanskuck, Smith Hill and South Providence Libraries. First established as a children's library by the Monday Morning Musical Club and named the Elodie Farnum Memorial Library in memory of a gifted child violinist who died young, the library was renamed the Rochambeau Branch of Providence Public Library when it moved from space in the Rochambeau School to its new location on Hope Street. As described in a 1929 issue of PPL's monthly newsletter:

The structure will be of brick in Rhode Island Colonial style. . .75 feet long and 56 feet wide. On the main floor there will be reading rooms for adults and children, a reference room, a delivery room, and the librarian's office. In the basement, provisions are being made for a Community Room. . . a book storage room; a packing and repairing room; rest rooms for the staff; boiler room, etc.¹⁰

- Current Assessment:

In 2003 Rochambeau Library underwent extensive renovations undertaken by Dimeo Construction, adding a two-story glass and brick extension that doubled the library's size to 18,000 square feet. The *Providence Journal* noted that: "In addition to adding a new handicap-accessible main entrance, the project includes establishment of an adult reading room and a young adult area on the main floor and classrooms, a conference room and a multipurpose community room on the lower level. . ." When the library reopened, it had new lighting, furniture, flooring, and electrical and mechanical systems. According to the *Journal*, "The centerpiece attraction is the creation of the second-floor Isenberg Family Children's Library at Rochambeau, which will have a special section for preschoolers and toddlers."¹¹

⁹ LED exterior lighting has also been installed at Wanskuck, Mount Pleasant and Washington Park libraries.

¹⁰ *Books for All*, Volume 4, Issue 10, December 1929: 314.

¹¹ Karen A. Davis, "Long-Overdue Renovation--\$5.1 million makeover doubles size of Rochambeau Library, Providence Journal-Bulletin, October 16, 2003: C-01.

Smith Hill Library

- Background:

The PPL trustees built the library's fourth branch in 1932 on property on Candace Street purchased in 1930 by PPL. The new Smith Hill Library replaced the North End Branch that had occupied rented space at 49 Orms Street since 1911. In its report on the dedication of the new building, the *Providence Journal* printed a description of the library:

The one-story building, facing Candace street, is of brick exterior except for sandstone facing brought from George Washington county, Va., to commemorate the Washington Bicentennial. All interior metal is either chrome nickel, aluminum or stainless steel, and woodwork is imported Philippine mahogany, arranged in a simple semi-modernistic style. A large fireplace faces the Candace street entrance, flanked on each side by benches and entrances to the two main reading and reference rooms.

In the basement is a comfortable room available for public functions which are not religious, political or commercial in nature. It is equipped with a speakers' platform, and adequate seating arrangements.¹²

- Current Assessment:

Since construction in 1930, Smith Hill Library has undergone few renovations, and over the years, the roof has fallen into disrepair and leaks during rainstorms, compromising the building's integrity. Additionally, the walls badly need repointing and also leak in wet weather, leading to further deterioration of the structural integrity of the building. The building is not ADA-compliant, as there is no elevator to the restrooms or community room on the lower level. While most of these problems are currently being addressed in a major construction project taking place this summer, the funding does not include the cost of installing air conditioning, and in past summers the staff has been forced to close the library regularly during hot weather.

South Providence Library

- Background:

South Providence Branch opened in January of 1930 on Prairie Avenue near Oxford Street. This library began as a small community library organized by the South Providence Community Club in 1923 and housed in a small room at the Oxford Street Grammar school. Soon afterward, it became part of PPL and moved to the Sixth Ward Room on Burnside Street. With the opening of the new library building in 1930, the community finally had a modern library with a separate circulation room, an adult reading

¹² "Smith Hill Branch Library Dedicated," *Providence Journal*, September 29, 1932: 5.

room, a children's reading room, and a reference room, as well as shelving for 12,000 books. The building was designed by Clark & Howe, and the general contractor was C. K. Rathbone.¹³

- Current Assessment:

In 2003, PPL undertook a \$3.2 million renovation and expansion of the now-seventy-year-old library building, restoring the exterior, and installing an elevator. The basement overhaul featured the inclusion of a new community room as well as a computer lab with space for twenty computers. The main floor of the library was recarpeted, the drop-ceilings added after a fire in 1970 were removed to display the library's original high ceilings. The library was extensively rewired, modern lighting was installed, and the air conditioning was installed. A glass-enclosed atrium was constructed in front of the original entry to the library, and the children's section was enlarged by the inclusion of a glass addition on the Prairie Avenue side of the building. As a result of these renovations, South Providence Library was doubled in size.

Wanskuck Library

- Background:

Wanskuck Library first opened in 1910 in a building provided rent-free by the Wanskuck Company. In 1928, PPL constructed a new branch library building on Veasie Street designed by Howe & Church and constructed by the Balchin Construction Company.¹⁴ One of the features of the building was its front windows: "On either side of the entrance are provided 'show-windows,' which can be lighted at night, in which are placed new books, added from time to time, designed to advertise the resources of the library to passers-by."¹⁵ The building today is much the same as it was when it was first constructed, although it now has central air conditioning as well as a half-floor lift from the front entrance to the main reading room level.

- Current Assessment:

Constructed at the same time that Smith Hill Library was built and very similar in style, building materials, and layout, Wanskuck Library faces much the same problems as Smith Hill. See the Smith Hill Library "Current Assessment" section for specifics.

Washington Park Library

- Background:

Providence Public Library opened a branch in the Washington Park section of the city in the 1950s, moving the neighborhood's library services down the street from cramped quarters in the basement of the Broad Street Elementary School. Although a branch building in Washington Park had been part of

¹³ "Library Branch Opens Tomorrow," *Providence Journal* (January 19, 1930): 12.

¹⁴ "Dedication on the New Wanskuck Branch Building," *Books for All: A Bulletin Issued by the Providence Public Library*, Volume 3, No. 10 (December 1928): 402-03.

¹⁵ See above.

PPL's original master plan conceived in 1927, this branch building, like the one in Mount Pleasant, was not opened until the postwar era. The City of Providence donated the former Hose 18 Fire Station to PPL for use as the library in 1950, and the library was restored and remodeled in time to open in December of 1956.¹⁶ In order to transform the building from a fire house to a library, PPL removed its towers and dormer windows and replaced the roof. In addition, according to the *Providence Journal*, the "two big, arched doorways through which fire apparatus used to roll were eliminated, one being replaced by a suitable modern entrance and the other giving way to a big picture window. . .expected to 'bring the library closer to the public' as it passes by." Other renovations included new windows on the sides of the building, light wood shelving to produce a "bright and cheering interior," and overhead lighting.¹⁷

In January of 2006, PPL trustees abruptly voted to "close the branch indefinitely after building contractors revealed that its 'structural integrity may be further compromised [during the current winter] due to long-term water damage.'"¹⁸ After a hurried search for a new location for the branch, minimal library services were established in a former Benny's store, a building hardly in better shape than the now-shuttered library building.

- Current Assessment:

Community outcry prompted city officials to spend city funds to renovate the building. The updates included "installing a new roof, repointing exterior brickwork, upgrading electrical systems and a restroom, installing a new entrance, fire-alarm system and carpeting and applying a fresh coat of paint for interior walls."¹⁹ The refurbished library reopened in March of 2009 after the building's ownership had reverted to the City.

Some problems remain after the 2008-09 renovations: the air conditioning system is too small for the space and a larger system needs to be installed; the gutters and drains need upgrading. Although funds were set aside for renovating the upstairs as well as the ground floor, the cost of adding an elevator and providing for a second exit from the upper floor proved to be too great and no work was completed on the second floor during the 2008-09 project. PCL hopes eventually to undertake the renovation of the second floor sometime in the future.

¹⁶ F. Charles Taylor, "Sorry—No Brass Pole," *Library Journal* (December 1, 1957): 3047.

¹⁷ "New Washington Park Library Ready to Open," *Providence Journal*, December 10, 1956: 14.

¹⁸ Karen A. Davis, "Structural worries close library," *Providence Journal* (January 12, 2006): C.01.

¹⁹ Philip Marcelo, "Washington Park library reopens after major renovations," *Providence Journal* (March 27, 2009): B.3.