

World War I Monument
Intersection of Canal, Washington,
Kennedy and Angell Streets
Providence
Providence County
Rhode Island

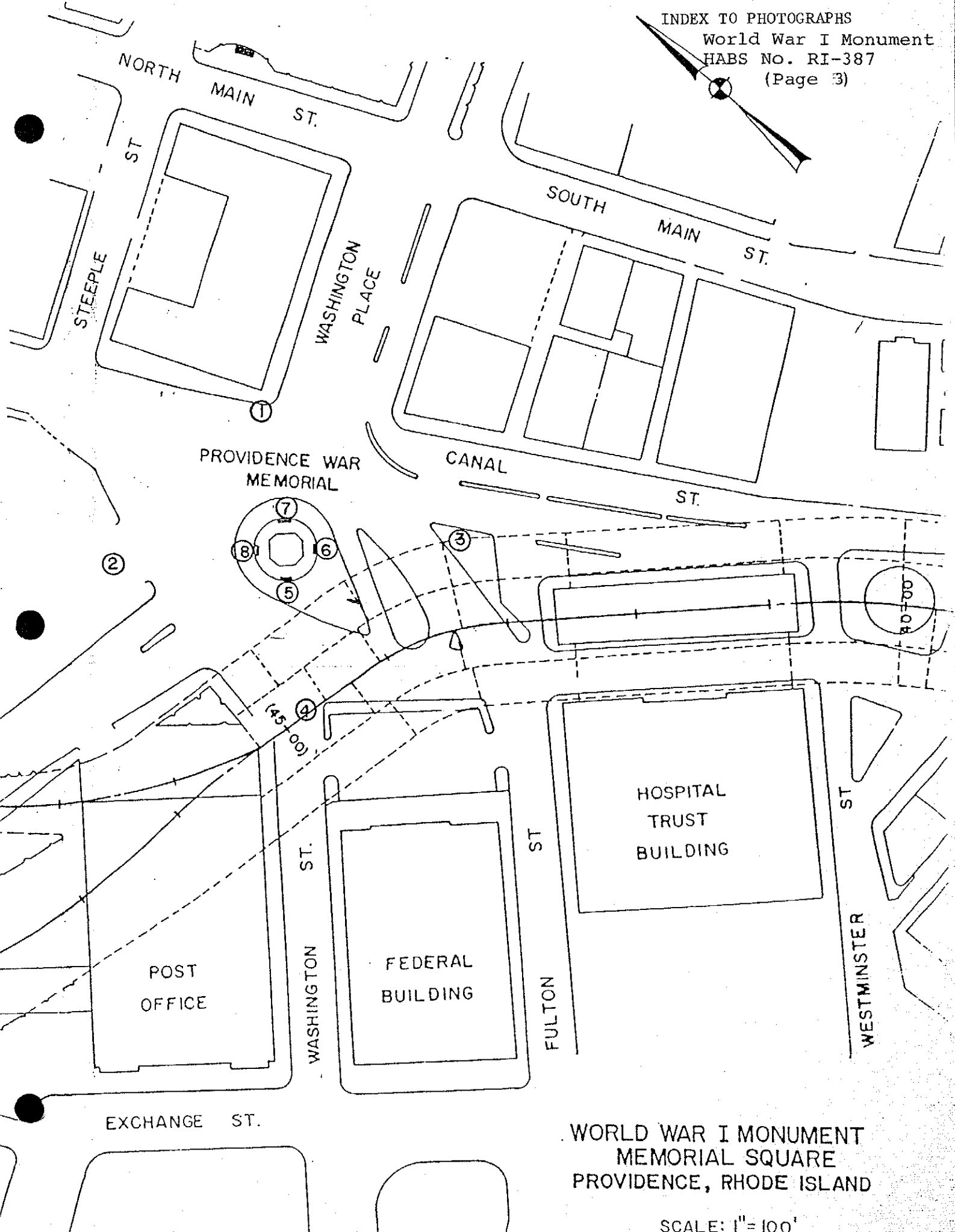
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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
MID-ATLANTIC REGION, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA 19106



WORLD WAR I MONUMENT
 MEMORIAL SQUARE
 PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

SCALE: 1" = 100'

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. RI-387

WORLD WAR I MONUMENT

Location: Memorial Square
Intersection of Canal, Washington, Kennedy and Angell
Streets
Providence
Providence County
Rhode Island
USGS Providence Quadrangle
Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates: 46.29980,46331

Present Owner: City of Providence

Present Use: Monument

Statement of Significance:

The World War I Monument (1929), designed by noted architect Paul P. Cret and sculpted by Carl P. Jennewein, reflects the late 1920's popularity of Greek Revivalism in the use of a Doric column as the principal form. In addition, the radial symmetry exhibited at the base of monument demonstrates the concern with spatial organization and exterior architectural relationships put forward by students of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. The monument's association with World War I, an event that transcends local or regional significance, and its function as the symbolic axis of downtown Providence, highlights its importance as a landmark of national significance.

Current Physical Context:

Presently, the World War I Monument is a contributing element of the Downtown Providence Historic District in Rhode Island (Woodward and Sanderson 1986:200). Situated 300 feet southeast of where the Woonasquatucket and Moshassuck Rivers merge to form the Providence, the monument occupies an open space created by the bridge deck constructed over the rivers in 1908. Despite the congested traffic conditions which characterized the former Post Office Square, it was hoped that the monument could improve the visual quality of the area. Following the dedication of the monument, the plaza was renamed Memorial Square.

Through time, the major change in the area has been the increase in vehicular traffic with the popularity of the automobile. The monument occupies the center of a rotary which channels the travelers who enter or leave downtown Providence. Because of the heavy weaving and merging traffic movements in the area, Memorial Square is now frequently referred to as "Suicide Circle". Nonetheless, the World War I Memorial's axial position in the cities' downtown reinforces the concept of Providence's citizens united against the foe in a struggle to preserve freedom.

The monument is framed by buildings on Kennedy Plaza and those at the foot of College Hill to the east. Roughly to the northwest lies another important example of Beaux-Arts architecture, the Rhode Island State House (1885-1904), designed by McKim, Mead and White. The monument faces the head of Narragansett Bay, as though maintaining a dialogue with our allies in Europe by way of the route taken by ships in the Providence Harbor.

The height of the World War I Memorial draws ones attention upward, serving to highlight church spires on College Hill and elevated office buildings of the downtown area (Grossman 1986). The columnar form was chosen by the architect, Paul Cret, specifically for this site plan. It was selected in part due to the fact that it would "...permit the free movement of vehicular traffic." (Providence Journal, June 28, 1927). The area has changed somewhat in the fifty-eight years since the monument was erected; for example, elevated train tracks once traversed Canal Street and blocked the vista of the monument from this direction and a small train station and kiosk preceded the present day gas station between Francis and Canal Streets. Otherwise, the area is still very similar to the original setting.

Historical Context within the Community:

The World War I Monument was dedicated on the eleventh anniversary of the Armistice on November 11, 1929; probably the most celebrated Armistice Day in the history of Providence. Parades, speeches and ceremony took place amid throngs of people crowding Memorial Square. Although over a decade had passed since the conclusion of the "Great War" and less than two weeks had passed since "Black Tuesday", the issues represented by the World War I Monument were still imbued with a sense of immediacy. The scale of this important memorial in downtown Providence reflects the enormity of the conflict in Rhode Islander's minds.

After the United States declared war on April 6, 1917, Providence men were active in the Army, Navy and Marine Corps. Rhode Islanders fought as part of the 1st through 5th Divisions of the Regular Army, the 76th, 78th and 82nd Divisions of the National Army, and the 55th and 66th Artillery Regiments. The 26th (New England) Division of the National Guard was also very active during 1918 in the Aisne-Marne region of France (Samson 1930:10). Of the approximately 12,000 Providence men who served in the armed services, roughly 220 were killed in action and 400 wounded.

The key offensives in which Americans participated are inscribed on the memorial. The German Friedensturm, or peace offensive, in July of 1918 was intended to continue their advance to Paris and resulted in pushing the battle line from the Aisne to the Marne River (Marshall 1964:287). Allied counter offensives resulted in regaining this territory by September. On September 12, 1918, Saint Mihiel was the location of a quick and decisive American victory. Although our forces expected the same results two weeks later at Meuse-Argonne, fighting lasted over six weeks and there were heavy casualties on both sides. This intense battle marked a turning point in the war and by November, the Armistice was signed. World War I similarly marked a turning point in history, forever changing European political systems and their boundaries, setting the stage for World War II and introducing the United States as a major force in world events.

Specific History of the Monument:

Initial planning for the World War I Monument was begun December 5, 1918 with the appointment of a City Council committee. Early discussions focused upon the desire for a functional versus a nonfunctional memorial and the amount of funding necessary for such an endeavor. Eventually, the cost of a functional memorial such as an auditorium, school or library proved prohibitive and the originally proposed figure of \$2,000,000 was reduced to \$300,000.

Siting of the monument was another critical issue. Two favored locations were downtown Providence and Roger Williams Park. Many veterans' groups opposed any location outside the center of the city. Yet the prime spots in the downtown area had to compete with commercial interests, traffic problems and a multitude of other monuments. The United League of Women Voters recommended Post Office Square to the City Council early in 1926, and support for this site led to the Council and Alderman's agreement to this site on December 2, 1926.

Various design proposals were considered, including an arch, an auditorium, a "temple of sacrifice", and a "fine pylon" or "noole shaft" (Jordy and Monkhouse 1982:56). In March of 1927, a design competition was held that attracted ninety-four entries and was judged in accordance with the American Institute of Architects rules. During the first stage of the competition (March 3 and 4, 1927), fifty-six drawings were evaluated by three jurors: Louis Ayers of York and Sawyer, New York; William Emerson, the Vice President of the American Institute of Architects and the head of the Department of Architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; and A. A. Weinman, a New York sculptor. Three of the best designs were selected to be considered in the next stage of the competition and a group of three second place winners each received a one hundred dollar prize. The three winners whose designs would receive further consideration included Perry, Shaw and Hepburn (Boston), Paul Cret (Philadelphia) as well as Clark and Arms (New York).

In the final stage of the competition, six additional architects of nationally recognized standing were invited to submit designs. The Monument Committee, made up of Alderman Sol S. Bromson, Councilman George H. Herssey, John R. M. Orpen, Robert J. Scowcroft, Peter F. Reilly, veterans James A. Doherty and John J. McGrane judged this part of the competition and the City Council made the final decision. Henry H. Kendall acted as an architectural advisor to the committee. The six architects invited to submit plans were: Joseph H. Freedlander (New York); Raymond Hood (New York); Harold Van Buren Magonigle (New York); Parker, Thomas and Rice (Boston); Thomas J. Hill Pierce (Providence) and John Russel Pope (New York). Paul Cret's design was unanimously approved by the City Council and the Memorial Committee.

Designer Paul Philippe Cret (1876-1945) was a noted Beaux-Arts architect who was affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania throughout most of his career. Civic buildings and memorials are a genre that dominates his work (Swales 1928(11):704). Clearly recognized by his contemporaries for his achievements, his many awards included an honorary A.M. degree at Brown University in 1929, the Bok fund prize in 1937 and a gold medal from the American Institute of Architects in 1938 (White 1973:41). Besides the World War I Memorial, his other commissions in Providence included preparing the Brown University campus plan, designing the Brown Stadium (with Gavin Haddon), and consulting with the Narragansett Electric Company on their power plant.

The sculptor with whom Cret collaborated was Carl Paul Jennewin (born 1890). He was born in Germany and emigrated to the United States in 1907. The carvings were executed by M. Fiorato and Micandro Bettine, among others. Janet deCoux designed several figures on the frieze and incorporated her own self portrait into one of the figures. Gorham Manufacturing was responsible for casting the plaster model (now in the Providence City Hall Archives) as well as the four bronze plaques at the monument's base.

Even after the design was settled upon, siting remained an issue. It was apparent that in order to accommodate Cret's monument in Post Office Square either the river or the trolley tracks would have to be relocated. Due to the fact that relocation of the trolley track would prove less expensive, this was the option endorsed by the City Council. The engineering department at Brown University studied the area to determine what type of footing would be required to support the monument. Borings were obtained that indicated the existence of hard-pan at 35-40 feet below the surface.

Groundbreaking for the monument's construction took place on December 7, 1927. The following day, an article in the Providence Journal in no way minimized the importance of the event: "...marking actual commencement on a project which for more than eight years proved one of the knottiest problems with which the city has ever dealt" (Providence Journal Bulletin 12/8/27:5). Subsequently the foundation was excavated and the piles were driven by the Charles B. Maguire Company (low bidder at \$9845).

A New York contracting firm, Young and French Company, erected the monument. The Rockport Granite Company of Maine supplied the Moose-A-Bec red granite despite severe criticism from the Rhode Island Granite Cutting Union whose members touted the use of local Westerly stone. The accepted bid for the materials and the monument's construction was \$203,000.

Construction of the concrete base for the Memorial was initiated on June 7, 1928. Meanwhile, the granite block from which the "Victory" figure would be carved was roughed out at the Rockport Granite Company in Maine. By January 8, 1929, the finished twenty-three ton granite statue was raised to the top of the fluted shaft despite blustery winter winds. Many people gathered in the square to witness this event.

On January 25, 1929, a time capsule was placed in the southwest side of the monument base. A copper box containing newspapers, documents, photographs and a 1919 penny was intended to record the history of the World War I Monument for future generations. By October of 1929, the finishing touches were still being put on the memorial as all of the inscriptions were carved in situ.

Finished, the monument stands 115 feet high (the shaft is 75' in height and 11' in diameter) with a base extending out eighty feet. Concrete poured in place and iron pins brace an essentially hollow shaft of masonry and mortar construction. The monument is composed of over 542 masonry blocks or roughly 16,000 cubic feet of granite.

Physical Description of the Monument:

Cret's tall, fluted, Doric column surmounted by a human figure has corollaries in Robert Mill's Washington Monument (Baltimore, Maryland) dating to 1829 and in John Russell Pope's Meuse-Argonne Memorial (Montfaucon, France) dating to 1927 (Grossman 1980:72). The Beaux-Arts influence can be seen in the monument's axial and symmetrical plan as well as in the use of sculptural decoration and iconography inspired by that of antiquity (McMichael 1983: 42). That architectural tastes in the late twenties changed as a result of the effect of the war on Americans' idealism is demonstrated by the realistic portrayal of military emblems and weaponry at the base of the memorial.

The inscriptions on the base of the monument strike a balance between expressing a desire for peace and a feeling of responsibility for protecting democratic ideals. They were suggested by former Brown University President William H.P. Faunce (Samson 1930:12). The inscription on the southeast face is as follows:

"By this memorial the City of Providence commemorates the loyal courage and fidelity of all her citizens who served in the World War whose high example still summons us to love and serve our country."

On the northeast side is inscribed:

"So nigh is grandeur to our dust,
So near is God to man.
When duty whispers low, 'Thou must'
The youth replies, 'I can'." - Emerson.

The text on the southwest side is from Abraham Lincoln's 1865 inaugural address:

"...Let us strive on.... to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations." - Lincoln.

Lastly, on the northwest face, is an excerpt from Woodrow Wilson's speech before a special session of Congress on April 2, 1917:

"But the right is more precious than peace and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts --for Democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their government." - Woodrow Wilson.

The monument commemorates and memorializes both Providence citizens who died in the war and those who returned as veterans.

At the top of radial staircases (oriented toward the interstitial points of the cardinal directions) around the base of the monument, are four bronze plaques. They depict a destroyer; a machine gun, rifles and a trench soldier's tin hat; a cannon and tank; and an airplace-- representing the Navy, Infantry, Artillery and Air Service, respectively. At eye-level on the vertical surfaces between the inscriptions described above are emblems of the Army and Air Service, Navy, Marine Corps and the World War I Victory Medal carved in bas-relief.

A frieze, also in bas-relief, wraps around the base of the imposing granite shaft. On the northwest and southeast sides are the state and city seals respectively. Classical female figures symbolizing the virtues exemplified by Providence citizens in the service of their country are shown (Gratitude, Justice, Sacrifice, Liberty, Glory, Memory, Faith, Love, Hope, Courage). The principal battles of the war inscribed above the frieze are: Meuse-Argonne, Aisne-Marne and Saint-Mihiel.

Above the frieze, the column is fluted. The long vertical striations in combination with a band of stars are reminiscent of the stars and stripes (Freeman and Lasky 1980:47). Surmounting the column is a statue of a female figure signifying peace and/or victory. Perhaps she is also meant to recall the community of women awaiting the soldier's return home (such as the "Gold Star Mothers"- mothers who lost sons in the war).

Sources of Information:

Information about the World War I Monument can be obtained through the offices of H2L2 Architects and Planners, 714 Market Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (215-925-5300). Their holdings include the original construction drawings of the monument. Historic photographs of the monument are on file in the Providence Public Library, 150 Empire Street, Providence, Rhode Island (401-521-7722) as part of the Rhode Island Index. Additional information is available in newspaper articles published in the Providence Journal Bulletin primarily between the years 1918 and 1929. A plaster cast of the monument is part of the collection stored in the archives of Providence City Hall, Kennedy Plaza, Providence, Rhode Island (401-421-7742). Interviews have not been conducted in the course of researching the World War I Monument. There are no other likely sources of information which have not yet been investigated, or supplemental material on the memorial.

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Project Information

The World War I Monument will be moved as part of the River Relocation Project. This project involves the relocation of the Woonasquatucket and Mosshasuck Rivers in downtown Providence, the construction of walkways along the rivers and landscaping of adjacent public recreation areas. The project is a joint effort between the State of Rhode Island and the City of Providence. Mitigation of impacts to the World War I Monument, a contributing element to the Downtown Providence Historic District, will be implemented in accordance with a Memorandum of Agreement executed in August 1985, among the State Historic Preservation Office, the Rhode Island Department of Transportation, the Department of Planning and Development of Providence and the Governor of Rhode Island.

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Date: March 3, 1987

Transmitted to the Library of Congress in February, 1988 by HABS historian Holly K. Chamberlain.