

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*  
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

**1 NAME**

HISTORIC "Shakspeare Hall"\*/Sprague-Knight Building

AND/OR COMMON

Ballou, Johnson and Nichols

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER 128 Dorrance Street

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Providence

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

2 - Rep. Edward P. Beard

STATE

Rhode Island

VICINITY OF  
CODE

44

COUNTY

Providence

CODE

007

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE	
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL	<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC ACQUISITION	<input type="checkbox"/> ACCESSIBLE	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME Dorrance Associates

STREET &amp; NUMBER

73B Charles Street

CITY, TOWN

Providence

VICINITY OF

STATE

Rhode Island

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Providence City Hall

STREET &amp; NUMBER

25 Dorrance Street

CITY, TOWN

Providence

STATE

Rhode Island

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE Interface: Providence

DATE 1975

FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission

CITY, TOWN

Providence

STATE

Rhode Island

\* Indicates preferred name

# 7 DESCRIPTION

## CONDITION

EXCELLENT  
 GOOD  
 FAIR

DETERIORATED  
 RUINS  
 UNEXPOSED

## CHECK ONE

UNALTERED  
 ALTERED

## CHECK ONE

ORIGINAL SITE  
 MOVED DATE \_\_\_\_\_

### DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Built in 1838, the Sprague-Knight Building is a six-story masonry structure whose form has evolved with changing use of the building from a theatre to a light-industrial and warehouse building.

The original theatre building, designed in the Greek Revival style by the prominent Providence architect James Bucklin, was a three-and-a-half-story stone edifice, approximately sixty feet wide and one hundred feet deep, fronting on Dorrance Street. The exterior was stuccoed and pointed in imitation of granite. Large pilasters above a one-story granite basement defined the five-bay facade; these elements remain. The original interior, including an elaborate decorative scheme based on the signs of the Zodiac, was destroyed in 1844 by a fire which left only the exterior walls standing.

Following this conflagration, the structure was rebuilt and probably assumed much of its present form: the exterior walls were raised to six stories, the interior industrial space was established, and the loading bays at each floor on the facade were opened.

Sometime late in the nineteenth century the brick, five-story section at the rear became part of the building. Structural evidence suggests that this portion was a four-and-a-half-story, gable-roof building independent of the theatre building before the two were integrated into one. The last stage in the building's evolution was the raising of this section to five full stories and the construction of its shed roof.

The interior is open space, broken only by supporting cast-iron columns and a brick bearing wall which traverses the building's width at approximately its midpoint.

# 8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW				
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> THEATER	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)	
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION			

SPECIFIC DATES

1838, and 1860's

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Sprague-Knight Building, constructed in 1838 as "Shakspeare Hall" and converted to use as a textile manufactory by the 1860s, played a significant role in Providence's theatrical and industrial history. Its change in use over time reflects the growth and change in Providence's economic history.

The early history of drama in Providence was erratic. Theatrical productions were common as early as the mid-eighteenth century, but no permanent theatre was built. By the late 1830s, Providence had been without any theatre for quite some time, "although the need of one was seriously felt. Accordingly a number of public-spirited gentlemen decided to erect...one that should be a credit to the city for its appearance and capacity."<sup>1</sup>

"Shakspeare Hall" opened to an enthusiastic house on 29 October 1838 with performances of "The Soldier's Daughter" and "A Pleasant Neighbor" preceded by "an elegant prologue" written by Providence's premier poetess, Sarah Helen Whitman. Its success, in spite of performances by nationally known actors, was short lived, however: by the mid-1840s, the theatre's novelty had worn off, and growing objections from the nearby Second Baptist Church precipitated the theatre's closing in 1844.

The same year, Dr. Dionysus Lardner converted the building to a planetarium and conducted lectures on astronomy. His activities were cut short in October of 1844 when an extensive fire virtually destroyed the building leaving only its exterior walls standing.

By the 1850s neighborhood land use began to change. Shipping activity had become firmly established on the west side of the Providence River, with wharves and warehouses at the end of Dorrance

<sup>1</sup>Charles Blake, An Historical Account of the Providence Stage (Providence: George H. Whitney, 1868), p. 222.

See Continuation Sheet 1

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CONTINUATION SHEET

1

ITEM NUMBER 8

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and Custom House -- then Long Wharf -- Streets. Providence's industrialization had also prompted the construction of industrial buildings in this area southeast of Pine Street. The area became less well suited to theatres and auditoriums, which began to rise in the commercial center of Providence, around Westminster Street and Exchange Place. The gutted theatre building, no longer attractive as theatre space, was easily adaptable to commercial/industrial use, by virtue of its sound exterior walls and open interior space.

The building had been recycled for wholesale merchandizing by the mid-1850s, but industrial activity soon followed: the seller included "all belting, shafting, and gearing in the building"<sup>1</sup> in the sales agreement with the A & W Sprague Manufacturing Company in 1863.

Sprague Manufacturing Company, the preeminent textile manufacturer in mid-nineteenth-century Rhode Island, purchased the building probably as a warehouse for some phase of its cotton production. The Spragues were early practitioners of vertical integration -- then uncommon in the textile industry -- and their success depended on maintaining a large stock of materials. The company declared bankruptcy in the panic of 1873. Like other properties owned by the company, the warehouse was involved in litigation during the 1870s and 1880s. It was finally sold to B.B. & R. Knight Manufacturing Company in 1890 for use as a cotton-goods warehouse.

Ballou, Johnston and Nichols, hard goods wholesalers, purchased the building from the Knights in 1922, having leased the building since 1903. The firm continued to use the building primarily as warehouse space, before selling it in 1977.

Current plans call for the rehabilitation of the building as office space. This change in use will continue the building's traditional response to changing land-use patterns in the area, for the State of Rhode Island has recently selected an adjacent vacant site for the construction of a state court building.

As a building with a varied history that chronicles the growth and change of Providence's downtown -- and especially that of the

<sup>1</sup>Land Records, City of Providence, Deed Book 166, Page 151.

See Continuation Sheet 2

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warehouse district, an important part of specialization and diversification of land use in the downtown -- the Sprauge-Knight Building is an important structure which merits inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

### 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Blake, Charles. An Historical Account of the Providence Stage.  
Providence: George H. Whitney, 1868.

Providence Journal. 25 October 1844.

Williard, George O. History of the Providence Stage (1762-1891).  
Providence: The Rhode Island News Company, 1891

### 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY less than an acre

UTM REFERENCES

A	1 9	2 9 9 8 4 0	4 6 3 2 6 4 0	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Plat 20, Lot 193  
Providence Tax Assessor's Records

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES:

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

### 11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

William McKenzie Woodward

ORGANIZATION

R.I. Historical Preservation Commission

DATE

August 1978

STREET & NUMBER

150 Benefit Street

TELEPHONE

401-277-2678

CITY OR TOWN

Providence

STATE

Rhode Island

### 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

*William P. Williams*

TITLE

State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE

May 17, 1979

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

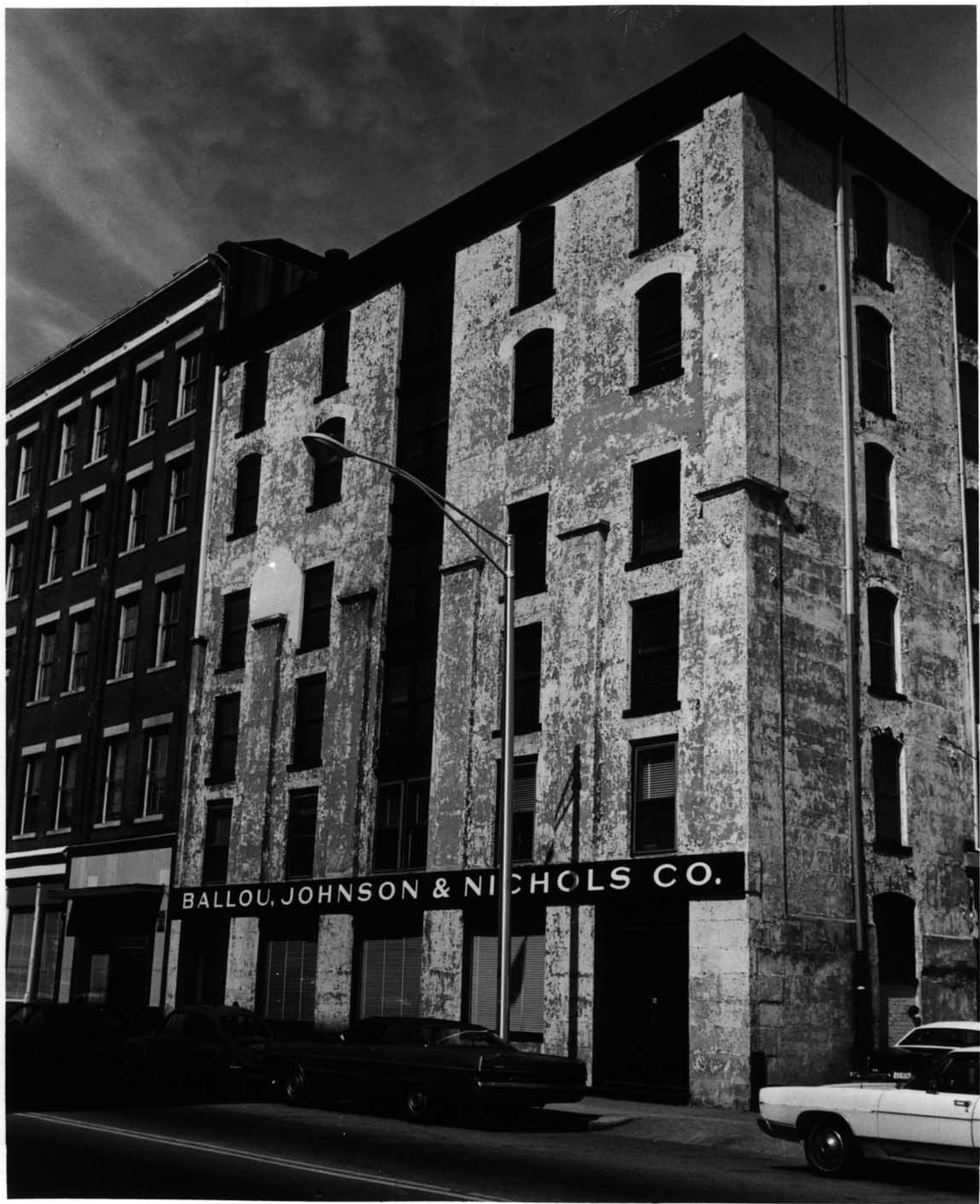
DATE

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER



BALLOU, JOHNSON & NICHOLS CO.

SHAKSPEARE HALL  
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

Photographer: Larry Gould

Date: March 1978

Negative: Rhode Island Historical Preservation  
Commission

Facade

#1





SHAKSPEARE HALL  
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

Photographer: Larry Gould

Date: March 1978

Negative: Rhode Island Historical Preservation  
Commission

View to the north

#2



SHAKSPEARE HALL  
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

Photographer: Larry Gould

Date: March 1978

Negative: Rhode Island Historical Preservation  
Commission

Typical interior, view to south

#3



SHAKSPEARE HALL  
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

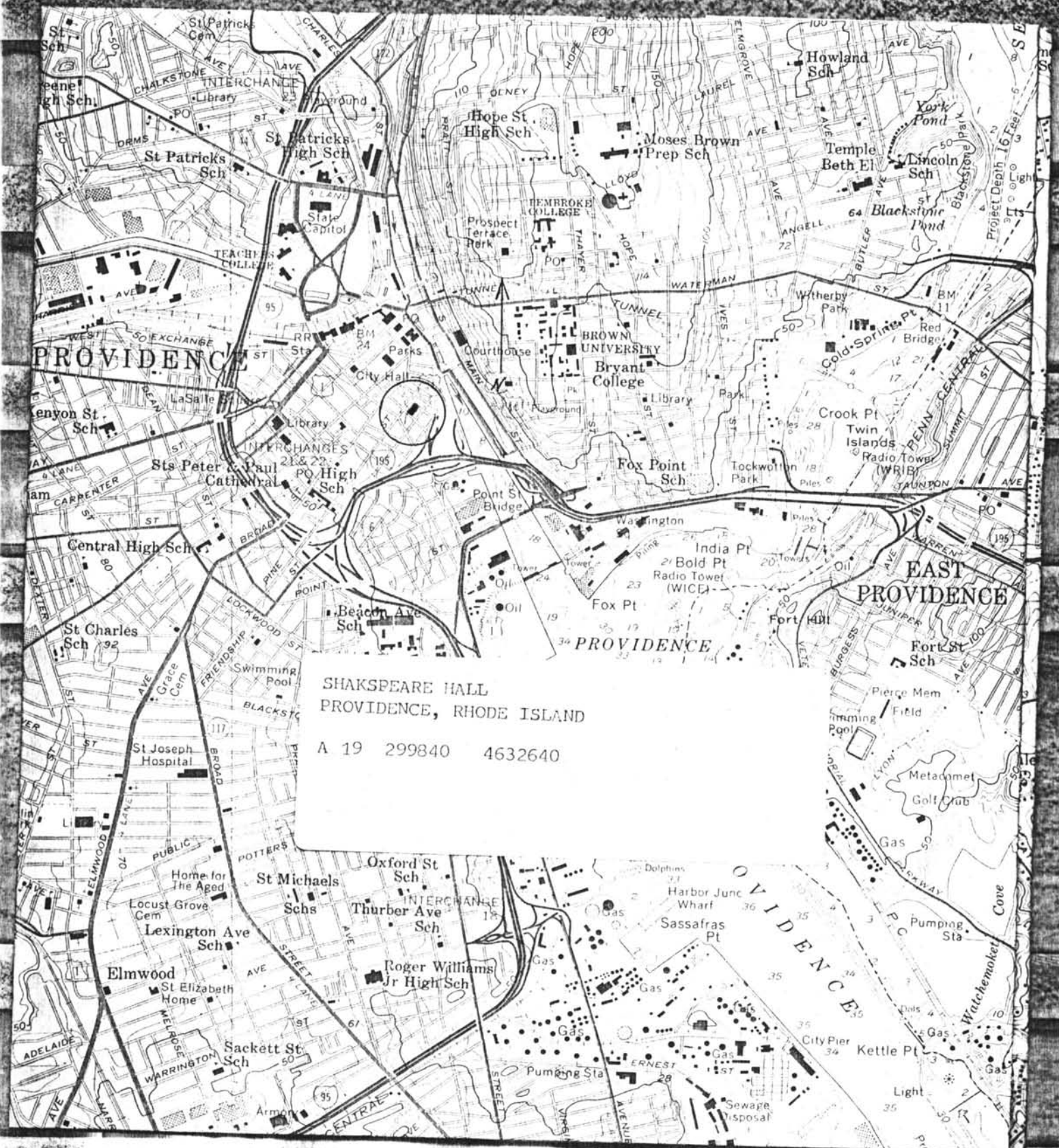
Photographer: Larry Gould

Date; March 1978

Negative: Rhode Island Historical Preservation  
Commission

Interior, fourth floor

#4



SHAKSPEARE HALL  
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND

A 19 299840 4632640