

FOR NPS USE ONLY

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DATE ENTERED

**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

First Universalist Church

AND/OR COMMON

First Universalist Church

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER

250 Washington Street

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Providence

VICINITY OF

#2 Rep. Edward Beard

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

STATE

Rhode Island

CODE

44

COUNTY

Providence

CODE

007

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

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

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

First Universalist Church of Providence

STREET & NUMBER

250 Washington Street

CITY, TOWN

Providence

VICINITY OF

STATE

Rhode Island 02903

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Providence City Hall

STREET & NUMBER

Dorrance Street at Washington Street

CITY, TOWN

Providence

STATE

Rhode Island 02903

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE

Interface Survey

DATE

1975

FEDERAL  STATE  COUNTY  LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

Mayor's Office for Community Development - 44 Washington Street

CITY, TOWN

Providence

STATE

Rhode Island

## 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED      DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

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

The angular and somewhat austere, yet picturesque, Gothic Revival First Universalist Church stands on a constricted corner site on the fringe of Providence's downtown business district. It was built in 1871-1872 from the designs of Edwin L. Howland, a Rhode Island architect of whom relatively little is known. Faced in hard red brick and sparsely decorated -- chiefly around window openings -- with smooth-cut tan and brown stone, the Church is set upon a high basement and is covered by steep, cross-gabled slate roofs. While appearing asymmetrical in composition because of its corner tower and spire and certain other features, the main body of the church follows the traditional ground plan of a nave or auditorium (running east-west and preceded by a vestibule-stair-hallway) with projecting transepts and a shallow chancel.

The entrance (east) front is on Greene Street and has as its central feature the high gable end of the nave, which, above two very small pointed-arch windows at basement level, has a set of five joined pointed-arch windows separated by short reddish marble columns with foliate capitals. These capitals are the only real carving on the whole exterior. Above these windows a belt course of tan stone stretches across the facade, and above this is a large pointed-arch opening containing two tall, pointed windows and a roundel. Still higher, near the peak of the gable, is a round window with, at either side and much lower, two small round recesses filled by stone incised with crosses. A modest stone plinth at the apex of the nave gable carries a metal cross.

At the northeast corner of this facade arises a projected tower with stepped buttresses at its angles and carrying a steeple; it has north and east portals, reached by steps in its base. A shorter and narrower tower, with only a small niche in its base, flanks the nave to the south; beyond this is a half-gabled extension which contains another portal with a small, almost triangular pointed-arch window above. This rather imaginative and varied facade treatment quite disguises the simple interior plan which lies behind it.

The church was apparently designed to be viewed chiefly from the northeast, where the belfry tower and spire occur. This prominent corner feature has triple pointed-arch windows in the first stage above the entrance doors. Above these windows are round windows with large stone voussoirs. In openings still further above -- where, by chamfering, the dimensions of the tower are reduced -- are paired Gothic louvered belfry openings with a roundel. Above these windows a band of stone bosses runs around the base of a steep, slate-covered "extinguisher" spire pierced by four narrow, hooded dormers and topped by a cross. The minor tower southerly on the Greene Street front is a somewhat pencil-like edition of the one just described and has no window openings except for narrow dormer slits in its peaked roof.

(See continuation sheet #1)

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NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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West of the asymmetrical Greene Street frontage and vestibule area, the building assumes a much more regular and conventional form in both plan and elevation. Above the large, paired basement windows on either side are the three wide and buttressed bays of the nave, each containing a large pointed-arch window of colored glass. The nave has a clerestory, with three sets of small, paired, pointed-arch windows above the larger openings. West of the three bays of the nave are the gabled transept projections, buttressed at their corners and part-way up their centers. Each transept is pierced by a large rose window whose thick tracery contains a central circular window bordered by eight smaller ones. In the peaks of the transept gables are small, nearly triangular, pointed-arch windows like those in the clerestory. The buttressed chancel continues the roof gable and clerestory of the nave for a short distance, terminating at the west with a large pointed-arch stained glass window with windows on two levels laterally below the clerestory.

Internally the church continues, in the main, the same angular severity and restraint of ornament seen on the exterior, though decorative colored accents, foliated column capitals, and the rich light from the stained glass windows somewhat soften this effect.

The front vestibule at street level is served by three double-leaf doors with Gothic transom lights, two doors in the basement of the northeast tower and one at the south end of the Greene Street (east) front. The vestibule has a panelled wainscot of dark wood, with painted plaster above. Within it, twin stairs of ten steps each rise to a landing platform; they have a solid panelled rail with monumental newel posts carrying heavy, angular, carved finials rather like dormered pyramids at their beginnings. At landing level the angle newels have knobbed tops; up from this level are three steps to a passage from which three doors open into the church auditorium. At street level there are also subsidiary stairs leading to the ground-floor meeting rooms below the auditorium, and inconspicuous side stairs lead from the passage to a balcony overlooking the auditorium.

The main church has a cruciform, three-aisle plan, the principal seating space being under the high-gabled nave roof with its clerestory, the remainder in the lower side areas, in the transepts, and in an eastern balcony. The nave is divided into three bays defined laterally by pointed-arch openings carried on brown-painted, clustered columns of wood (probably encasing cast-iron piers) which have foliate capitals of plaster picked out in modest colors and gilt. A plain wainscot of dark-stained, grooved vertical boarding surrounds the church's interior,

(See continuation sheet #2)

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and walls above are of buff-beige plaster. At the transepts the arched arcading stops, and the tall openings to them are of angular or gable shape. The chancel, however, is enframed by a proscenium-like pointed arch with mouldings. Timber roof trusses, more ornamental than necessary, occur in the bays of the nave, also in its side areas and the transepts; these trusses are supported by small corbels and have some quatrefoil openwork at their apexes. Pews filling the church are simple and of very dark wood, their ends having pointed-arch panels. The front of the eastern balcony or gallery is panelled similarly.

The major adornment of the interior is to be seen in the chancel and its flanks. The shallow chancel is enframed by a tall and wide Gothic arch which, in a space between its mouldings, has a biblical quotation lettered on it in gold. The chancel has, within, a high dark-wood wainscot of pointed-arch panelling across whose top marches a regiment of trefoil "acroteria." Above this wainscot, walls are plastered. In the west wall above the altar table a large stained glass window illustrates the life of Christ. A low rail of carved, pierced Gothic style woodwork separates the chancel from the nave. The chancel furnishings, which were all installed at one time as a gift, include several large and handsome Eastlake Gothic settees and chairs for dignitaries of the vestry. Slightly forward of the chancel proper, to the left, are a simple panelled wooden lectern and a gray marble baptismal font. To the right, reached by a stair, is a high, octagonal, wineglass pulpit, its front panel featuring a high-relief carving of Christ as the Good Shepherd; flanking panels have emblematic reliefs. To the left of the chancel are large arched wall openings for display of the organ pipes, which have quietly-colored stencilling upon them and thus form an additional adornment to this end of the church. A railed portion of the south transept is arranged to seat the choir. A door in the north wall of the chancel opens into a small sacristy, which features the convenience of a gray marble wash basin.

Mention should be made of the stained glass windows which give a warmth to this otherwise relatively severe interior. That in the chancel has been described. The roundels of the large rose windows of the transepts display scenes, personages, and emblems of Christian history. The large nave windows and small clerestory windows have only abstract patterns.

The ground story of the church has cast iron columns with simple capitals to support the auditorium above, and contains a number of well-lighted and spacious meeting and office rooms. There is a basement below this.

(See continuation sheet #3)

# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM

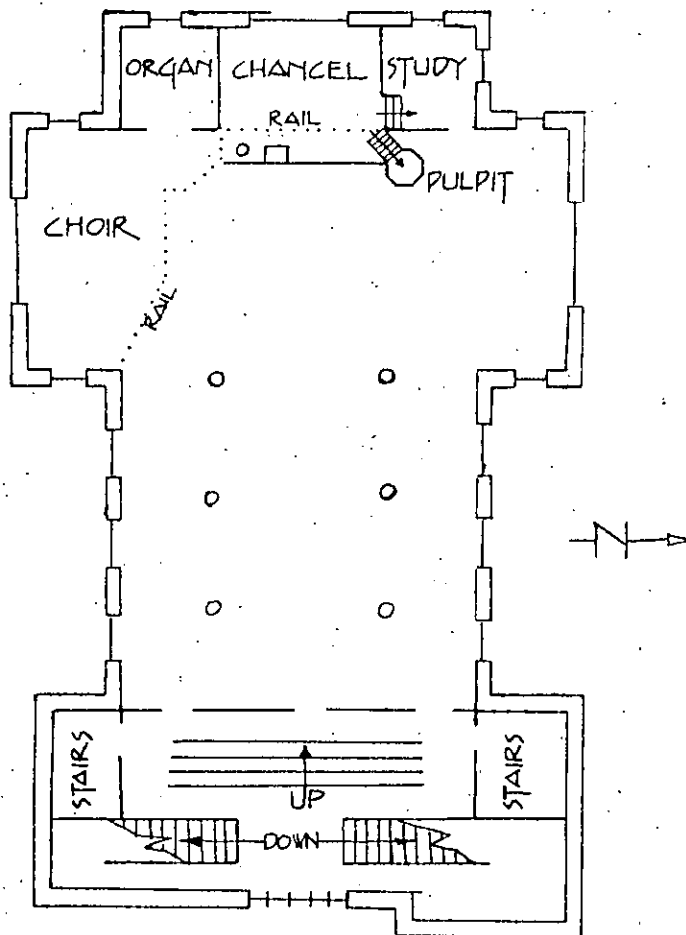
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The church has had proper exterior maintenance, without apparent alteration, and was refurbished inside in 1957 with no changes to its 1872 appearance except for the placement of well-chosen pendant lighting fixtures.



MAIN FLOOR  
NOT TO SCALE

# 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 checked="" 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 checked="" 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 type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES

1872

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

Edwin L. Howland

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The significance of the First Universalist Church in Providence is twofold. As the third home of the First Universalist Society of Providence, founded in 1821, it has served as a focus for that society's services of worship and social outreach programs since its completion in 1872. The Church is architecturally significant as the work of Rhode Island architect Edwin L. Howland, as a handsome example of post Civil War Gothic Revival building in Rhode Island, and as a survivor of what was, in 1872, and is no longer, an upper middle class residential neighborhood.

The First Universalist Church, though somewhat hemmed-in by newer high-rise structures, nevertheless remains an eye-catching landmark in Providence's Weybosset Hill area and is one of the few remaining ecclesiastical buildings in the central city where once there were many. The Greek Revival style Beneficent Congregational Church, Richard Upjohn's "decorated" Gothic Grace Church of 1845-1846, the Romanesque Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul of 1878, and the All Saints Memorial Church on Westminster Street all remain in the downtown area; but the Universalist Church differs considerably from its neighbors and is therefore a landmark in local architectural history in its own right. It was executed in a rather "stripped" Gothic style similar to that advocated by the English art critic and historian, John Ruskin: that is to say, that its beauty is supposed to come primarily from its form and proportions and from its building materials rather than from a surface elaboration of ornamental details. Such theories would have been especially suitable for the simple forms of worship and ritual favored by Universalists, Unitarians, and Congregationalists, and may have been taken into consideration by both the building committee for the church and its architect, Edwin L. Howland. As a product of the Gothic Revival the Church owes more to Ruskin than to Pugin and seems to proclaim that it houses non-Anglican Protestantism.

The First Universalist Church is one of Edwin L. Howland's best-known and best-preserved works. Howland, a Rhode Island architect of considerable merit, was born in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, June 5, 1838 and died young, June 28, 1876, in nearby New Bedford, Massachusetts, in the middle of what was said to be a career of great promise. He began his professional life in the office of Russell Warren of Providence

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in the 1840's, subsequently studying under the direction of William T. Hallet and Calvert Vane (Vaux?) in New York. He returned to Providence in 1864, where he practiced by himself for a few years. Thereafter he was associated with Mr. James Murphy until June, 1871, when he opened his own office in the Atlantic Building, continuing to work there until his death. A founding member of the Rhode Island chapter of the American Institute of Architects, Howland designed many substantial buildings, most of which no longer survive or do so in heavily-altered condition. Among his known works, in addition to the First Universalist Church, were the Federal Street Grammar School of 1868 (demolished), the Church of the Second Universalist Society, the Pilgrim Church on Harrison Street (now a warehouse), the Church of the Mediator on Cranston Street of 1869 (now a warehouse), St. Peter's-by-the-Sea in Narragansett, the Durfee Building on Dyer Street, and the Wilcox Building of 1875 (still standing at the corner of Custom House and Weybosset Streets, though seriously damaged by fire in January, 1975). The Wilcox Building, one of Providence's first large office buildings designed in the polychromatic High Victorian Gothic style, and as such, one of the key buildings in the Custom House Historic District (entered on the National Register in 1975), was Edwin L. Howland's last building.

In one hundred and four years the Universalist Church has been fortunate not to suffer, externally or internally, any disfigurement due to enlargement or redecoration, or any mutilation in the way of removal of its exterior and interior features. It has lived on very well in a surrounding quite changed from its original prosperous residential one; and its congregation, though dwindled as a result of this circumstance, is a devoted one and strives to maintain it well.

This is the third edifice to be occupied by the First Universalist Society of Providence, a durable body organized formally April 10, 1821, as a result of the endeavors of Reverend John Murray, "the Father of Universalism in America," who had been preaching his then-new doctrine and adding adherents since 1785. Money was, apparently, swiftly raised by this new religious group, made up largely of merchants and small proprietors; and in 1822 a dignified, two-story, gabled building with a Bullfinch-like belfry was erected at the corner of Westminster and Union Streets. This Universalist Chapel was destroyed by fire May 23, 1825. The congregation quickly financed and constructed a new and larger building of brick later the same year. This building, as well as the first, was designed by accomplished Rhode Island carpenter-architect John Holden Greenwho was also a member of the Universalist Society.

(See continuation sheet #5)

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The second edifice featured a frontal tower with a belfry and spire reminiscent of the First Baptist Meeting House and was rather conservatively designed. It remained in use for just over forty-five years, until the westward expansion of mercantile interests and the need for office and retail space in what was then becoming "downtown," produced a very high offer for the church property. This offer was accepted and the second First Universalist Church building was razed in 1872.

The congregation bought a new lot farther west, where the Weybosset Hill section and its extensions were still a quiet upper class residential precinct. There, at Greene and Washington Streets, the present church was built at a total cost of \$133,491.00 for land, construction, and furnishings. First services were held in December, 1872. Except for necessary improvements in utilities, electrification, and a change from the old fashioned pumping system for operation of the organ, it remains as when dedicated.

In over one hundred years the surroundings have not remained "as when dedicated." Residences on Weybosset Hill first became converted into apartments, rooming houses, or inexpensive commercial premises, and finally subsided into either slums or derelict open lots. After this came some improvement in the way of large, twentieth century buildings, such as those nearby for the Providence Public Library, and the YWCA. In 1964, the City of Providence began the Weybosset Hill Redevelopment Project in the areas surrounding the Church. As part of this revitalization effort, two large, high-rise, luxury apartment structures across Washington Street have recently been opened and the Church is once again near a residential area, albeit one which is radically different in character than when it was built.

Such changes in the surrounding neighborhood have resulted in changes in the membership and activities of the First Universalist Church. The members, once concentrated in nearby residential neighborhoods of Providence, are scattered throughout metropolitan Providence and its suburbs. The evolution of the church's neighborhood is also manifested in the congregation's changing roles and services. Reflecting its long history of involvement in social reform movements (an early minister, William Balch, was an ardent supporter of the Dorrites in the 1840s, for example), the First Universalist Church is now contemplating a modification of its role to serve the particular urban needs of its surroundings.

(See continuation sheet #6)



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The church, in the 1870's and in the 1970's, takes an important place in Providence's architectural, religious, and community history and surely deserves prime consideration and aid, if necessary, in the city's plans for improvement of the Weybosset Hill section.

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Obituary notice of Edwin L. Howland, in Minutes of Rhode Island Chapter of American Institute of Architects, American Architect and Building News, November 4, 1876.

Withey, Henry F. and Withey, Elsie Rathburn. Biographical Dictionary of American Architect. Los Angeles, California: 1970.

## 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Cady, John Hutchins. The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence, 1636-1950. Providence, Rhode Island: 1957.  
First Universalist Society, Providence, Rhode Island. The Centennial Book of the First Universalist Society ... April 10, 1921.  
Providence: 1921.

(See continuation sheet #7)

## 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY Less than one acre

UTM REFERENCES

A	1,9	2,99	1,9,0	4,6	3,2	4,9,0	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING					ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C							D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

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

Richard B. Harrington, Consultant

ORGANIZATION

Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission Feb., 1977

STREET & NUMBER

150 Benefit Street

TELEPHONE

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

TITLE State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE February 23, 1977

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



First Universalist Church  
250 Washington Street  
Providence, Rhode Island

Warren Jagger, Photographer      March, 1977  
Negative: Rhode Island Historical Preservation  
Commission

View from the northeast, showing Greene Street-  
Washington Street corner of the Church with  
corner tower and spire.

#1



**FIRST UNIVERSALIST CHURCH,**

COR. OF GREENE & WASHINGTON ST'S. PROV. R. I.

First Universalist Church  
250 Washington Street  
Providence, Rhode Island

Photographer Unknown      Date Unknown  
Negative: Graphics Collection of the Rhode  
Island Historical Society

Late 19th century view of the Church.









First Universalist Church

19 . 299190 . 4632490

PROVIDENCE

H. J. [unclear]