

Providence Union Station  
(Northeast Corridor Project)  
Exchange Terrace  
Providence  
Providence County  
Rhode Island

HABS No. RI-388

HABS  
RI,  
4-PROV,  
177-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HAER  
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175

PROVIDENCE UNION STATION  
(Northeast Corridor Project)

HABS No. RI-388

Location: Exchange Terrace, Providence, RI.  
Date of Construction: 1896-1898  
Present Owner: State of Rhode Island  
Present Use: Railroad Station  
Significance: The station complex was built as part of a massive redesign of the transportation facilities in Providence. The structures remain as monuments to the role they played in the regional rail transportation network.

Project Information: Providence Union Station will be affected by the Northeast Corridor Improvement Project of the Federal Railroad Administration. Mitigative documentation prepared by Deleuw, Cather/Parsons, Washington D.C. for the U.S. Department of Transportation, September, 1983.

For overview history and bibliography, see PROVIDENCE COVE LANDS, HAER No. RI-24. See also, UNION STATION VIADUCT, HAER No. RI-14. HAER RI, 4-PROV, 179. HAER RI, 4-PROV, 175.

Historical Information:

The Providence Union Station building complex, constructed approximately five hundred feet north of the earlier Tefft depot, was designed as part of the elevated viaduct, with Francis Street running directly underneath the main terminal building. Architects Stone, Carpenter and Willson designed the structures, which were built on pilings sunk into the recently filled Cove Basin. The main terminal building is composed of two sections: the front portion is a two-story hip-roofed structure, with its main floor at the level of the elevated tracks; the rear portion, covered by a sawtooth roof, is a one-story brick block.

There was a great deal of controversy when the station was built whether to construct a head or a through station. The

plan as adopted was a compromise, using the essential features of both to avoid the contention that a "Chinese Wall" was being built to divide the city (Droege 1915, 75). Francis Street, 110 feet wide, Gaspee Street to the east and Promenade Street on the west provided a new direct thoroughfare from the center of the city to the north.

Fourteen tracks were provided in the station, the four at each end being stub tracks. Passengers could reach the tracks from the exterior of the main building without entering the waiting room by using the stairways on either side of the structure. The station, of Renaissance style to complement the City Hall, consisted originally of five buildings symmetrically arranged about an axis, all with granite foundations, yellow-mottled brick walls and red sandstone trim. Three of these were connected to each other by colonnaded passageways, which have since been removed.

The central building is 110 feet by 220 feet and contains the waiting rooms, toilet rooms, ticket offices, and other offices.

The two-story buildings on either side are each 72 feet by 84 feet. The one on the east is for baggage and formerly had trainmen's quarters on the second story.

The building on the west was intended for a restaurant. There were two flanking structures the eastern building was used for express and freight offices, and the western housed the railroad offices.

The easternmost building is no longer standing, but the foundation remains. The total length of the group of buildings was 870 feet.

The floor of the main waiting room is of concrete with terrazzo overlay. There is an 18-inch wide Greek fret mosaic border. The room originally had a white glazed brick wainscot below plastered surfaces painted white. These were covered between 1910 and 1920 with thin wood-veneer paneling. The smoking room and women's room are finished in 2½-inch tongue-and-groove Georgia long leaf hard pine, close laid and blind nailed to strips embedded in concrete.

Passengers in the main waiting room go directly to the platforms or to the stairs leading to the subways. This room was placed two feet lower than the through platform, the difference overcome by an incline between the main waiting room and the main concourse. The subways are ten feet below track level and are reached by stairways. The train shed, once the station's most distinguishing feature, covered an area of 75,000 square feet.

In his discussion of this station, John A. Droege (1915, 78) remarked that the station is an "especially flexible and convenient through arrangement". He suggested, however, that there might have been substantial savings of heating, maintenance, and cleaning if only one building with more stories had been constructed instead of five. He praised the system of inclines to avoid stairways and said that the Providence Station "stands as a pioneer" in its use.

Implementation of the railroad plan inspired the formation of a comprehensive design scheme for central Providence (Jones 1975). Memorial Square, east of the channelized Moshassuck River and north of the Woonasquatucket, was designed as a focal point at the Canal Street intersection where the two rivers joined to form the Providence. Decorative ironwork on all the bridges remains from this period. The large open space in front of the station was proposed as a public square, with a new Federal building opposite City Hall to be built on the east, and Smith Hill was chosen as the site for a new State House. This location seemed suitable and appropriate for linking the two areas of the city, since Francis Street below the station afforded a boulevard from City Hall to the Capitol.