

RHODE ISLAND  
STATE  
HISTORIC PRESERVATION  
AWARDS

1996



RHODE ISLAND  
HISTORICAL PRESERVATION  
& HERITAGE  
COMMISSION

## *Introduction*

*The Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission's annual State Historic Preservation Awards honor individuals, organizations, and projects for their contributions to the preservation of Rhode Island's historic resources.*

*The Commission has named two awards in tribute to individuals who exemplify Rhode Islanders' commitment to historic preservation. They are the highest honors which the Commission bestows.*

*Antoinette F. Downing served in the volunteer position of Commission Chairman for twenty-seven years, from 1968 to 1995, and continues to advise the Commission today as Chair Emerita. She has contributed her time, her knowledge, and, most importantly, her vision to shape Rhode Island's state historic preservation program. At the same time, she has generously lent her counsel and support to numerous organizations and projects throughout the state. In her honor, the Commission created the Antoinette F. Downing Award for Volunteer Service to Preservation.*

*Frederick C. Williamson was appointed State Historic Preservation Officer in 1969. Today, he is the dean of SHPOs, having served longer than any other in the nation. His professional expertise in government relations and his skill in promoting effective state and local government partnerships are invaluable in advancing historic preservation in Rhode Island. When Mrs. Downing retired as Chairman of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission in 1995, the Commission members elected Mr. Williamson as the new Chairman. In his honor, the Commission established the Frederick C. Williamson Award for Professional Leadership in Preservation.*

*We salute all the recipients of the 1996 State Historic Preservation Awards.*

*Antoinette F. Downing Volunteer Service Award*



Elizabeth Johnson

For more than a quarter century, Betty Johnson's dedication to collecting, interpreting, and promoting local history has benefitted countless individuals and organizations. Few have served as effectively in such broad-ranging activities.

A relentless local-history collector, Mrs. Johnson, with her late husband, John, created the Spaulding House Library, an important repository of carefully organized local material, especially abounding in historic photographs, views, and maps. She generously makes the collection and her expertise freely available to community researchers. As a private library, it is peerless.

As an interpreter of local history, Betty has researched and created oral, written, and graphic material. Her tours of Pawtucket City Hall, Pawtucket Harbor, and Slater Mill Pond bring the city's history to life. Her contribution with Susan Reed and James Wheaton to Arcadia Publishers' Pawtucket in the "Images of America" series amplified public awareness of images of Pawtucket's past.

Whether she is assisting researchers at the Spaulding House Library or leading tours, Betty's boundless enthusiasm infects everyone she meets. Both the high quality and the large volume of her volunteer work achieve professional standards. Betty's efforts represent a great gift to the community she loves, and her good example should be a model to her fellow citizens and each of us.

*Antoinette F. Downing Volunteer Service Award*



Helene Lee Tessler

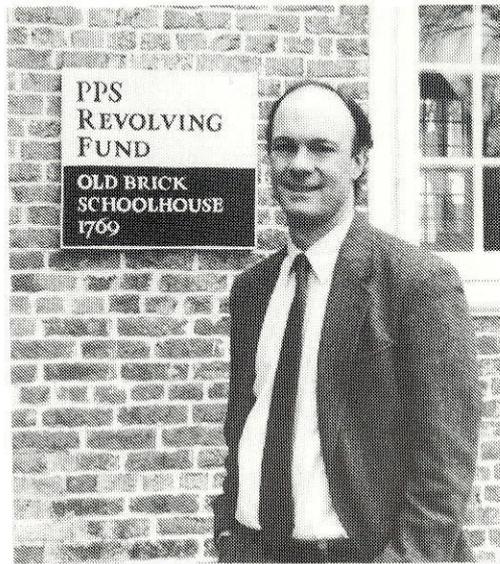
Town historian, curator, genealogist, and raconteur Helene Lee Tessler works selflessly to assimilate historic preservation into public policy and everyday life in her beloved native Bristol.

After a career in publishing, Helene returned home in 1965 and became a leader of the Bristol Historical and Preservation Society. She has led the charge to save, interpret, and promote important threatened buildings: Coggeshall Farm, as a working agricultural museum, in the 1960s; Bristol Jail, then scheduled for demolition, as the society's headquarters and museum in the 1970s; Linden Place in the 1980s; and the Bristol County Courthouse, her current project. To promote historic properties and lay the groundwork for historic-district zoning she initiated Bristol's historic marker program in the mid-1970s.

Since 1978, Helene has served the society in the dual role of curator and librarian, building collections and researching family genealogies. Her research was invaluable for the nomination of the Bristol Waterfront to the National Register of Historic Places and the development of *The Historic and Architectural Resources of Bristol, Rhode Island*, published by the RIHPHC in 1990. Historic preservation students at Roger Williams University benefit from her instruction in deed research.

Helene Tessler is an exemplary volunteer whose scholarship, wisdom, humor, political acumen, and selfless generosity have manifestly enhanced the historic character of Bristol.

## Frederick C. Williamson Professional Leadership Award



### B. Clarkson Schoettle

Under Clark Schoettle's quiet, low-key leadership, the Providence Preservation Society Revolving Fund, Inc., and inner-city property owners have dramatically demonstrated that historic preservation can bring new life to old neighborhoods. The Revolving Fund's work, particularly in the Broadway-Armory District and Elmwood-Upper South Providence, has helped community residents to create a vital, humanistic living environment.

First as architectural historian for the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation, then with the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Main Street Project, and for the last twelve years as Executive Director of the Revolving Fund, Clark has combined a broad vision of urbanism with the highest level of professional expertise, the negotiating skills of a diplomat, good humor, and all-too-uncommon common sense.

As the Revolving Fund's Executive Director, he has overseen that organization's tripling in capitalization and budget as it lent \$1.75 million in low-interest loans to homeowners, renovated 110 houses (including 21 abandoned properties), and collaborated with other non-profits developers on more than \$8 million in historic low- and moderate-income housing. Clark has also generously given of his professional knowledge by serving on the Providence Historic District Commission, on the board of Keep Providence Beautiful, and as consultant to the Providence Art Club's restoration of the Fleur-de-Lys Studios.

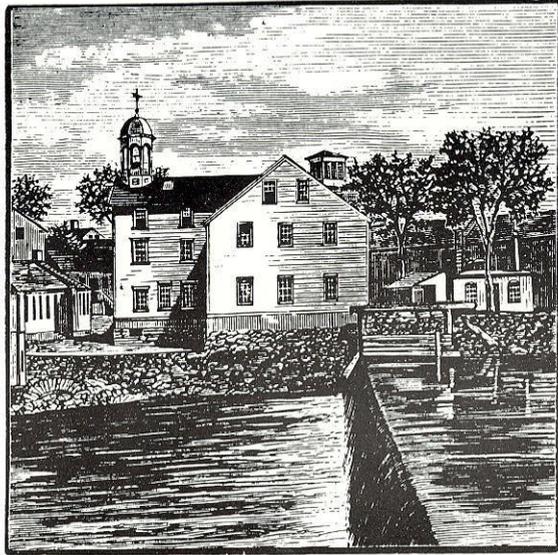
41 Whitmarsh Street  
Alfred A. Williams House



*By 1991, this stately 1889 mansion, damaged by fire and extremely deteriorated, was scheduled for demolition to provide parking for St. Joseph's Hospital. Blocked by neighborhood efforts and the Elmwood Foundation, the hospital donated the building to the Revolving Fund.*

*The superb restoration, with rescue of as much original detail as possible, typifies both the impact which a rescued building can have on a neighborhood and the meticulous care and management skills that Clark Schoettle brings to historic preservation projects.*

## *Historic Preservation Award*



Slater Mill

Seventy-five years ago, captains of American industry collaborated to save the birthplace of American industry at Slater Mill in Pawtucket. Prominent local manufacturers and national industrial leaders including Henry Ford, Harvey Firestone, William Vanderbilt and Walter Chrysler founded the Old Slater Mill Association. For three-quarters of a century the Association has been a faithful steward of this National Historic Landmark and an educator about United States' industrial history.

In 1921, the mill was a partially burned, dilapidated old wooden building almost hidden from view by surrounding mills. Since that time, the Slater Mill has been repaired and restored to house an impressive exhibit of historical textile machinery and historical archives. The Association acquired the adjacent Wilkinson Mill and developed a period-setting machine shop driven by water power, just as it was originally. At the restored Sylvanus Brown House, rescued from destruction when Interstate Highway 95 was built, the story of cottage industry is told.

Inspired by the national importance of the "Birthplace of the American Industrial Revolution," the United States Congress created the Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor in 1986, and Slater Mill is its crown jewel. Building on past success, the Old Slater Mill Association is now developing a major visitor center with expanded historical exhibits as the southern gateway to the Corridor.

## *Historic Preservation Award*



Kit Matteson Tavern

The story of the discovery, analysis, and conservation of the pre-Revolutionary Kit Matteson Tavern reveals a single family's love, understanding, and careful stewardship of an uncommon property.

Built before 1741, the building had become a tavern by the 1780s. A local gathering spot and site for town meetings, Kit's Tavern offered "Entertainment for Man and Horse" on the Old New London Turnpike for more than a century. After two hundred years, however, this rare building type had fallen on hard times.

Lucille and Dale Harter bought the isolated, abandoned, decayed tavern and seven outbuildings in 1974. With their five young children, they moved into the tavern, which had no water or utilities. With no particular background in preservation, the Harters had the insight to move slowly: researching the property's history, learning from the buildings themselves, and using historic tools to replicate missing details. While removing plaster, they discovered hand-painted beveled pine paneling in both the keeping room and the meeting room above; carefully restored, these two rooms are some of the finest examples of this rare 18th-century interior finish yet found in Rhode Island.

The Harters' meticulous conservation of the historic tavern and its outbuildings over the last twenty years admirably and appropriately equals the significance of this exceptional example of our state's rural colonial heritage.

### *Historic Preservation Award*



#### Old Kent County Courthouse

The restoration and expansion of the Old Kent County Courthouse (1804-05) in East Greenwich has provided town government with impressive new headquarters and secured the future of an important landmark.

Prominently located on Main Street, the handsome Federal structure served as one of the Rhode Island General Assembly's five rotating State Houses between 1806 and 1854. The property continued in state use as a courthouse until the courts' move to Warwick in 1974. The building housed the local Chamber of Commerce and provided meeting space until 1991, when limited use and scarce maintenance funds induced the State to board up the property.

Concerned that the abandoned courthouse would deteriorate rapidly and seriously blight the downtown area, the East Greenwich Town Council established an ad-hoc citizen committee to identify an appropriate function for the building. The committee recommended that the courthouse be restored and expanded for use as a new town hall. In 1993, East Greenwich voters approved a \$2.3 million bond referendum to fund the project, which was designed by William Kite Architects and carried out by E. W. Burman Construction.

Eighteen months later, thanks to the joint efforts of elected officials, appointed committees, design and construction professionals, and the citizens of East Greenwich, the Old Kent County Courthouse reopened its doors as the new East Greenwich Town Hall.

### *Historic Preservation Award*



#### King's County Courthouse

Originally built in 1775-76 as one of Rhode Island's regional State Houses, Kingston Free Library is a key historic monument. It was converted to library use in 1875. In 1990, the Town of South Kingstown and the Kingston Free Library Association undertook a study of the building to determine the feasibility of updating and adapting it to modern building-code requirements and user demands. The retrofit of a Revolutionary War-era building, remodeled in 1875-76, to accommodate twenty-first-century technologies was a formidable task, and some expressed doubt about the project's practicability. Happily, prevailing opinion saw the preservation of the library in this building as highly important to the village of Kingston.

The rehabilitation program specified enlarging the building to house an elevator and restrooms, reinforcing the structure to support book stacks; protecting the building with a sprinkler system; rewiring the building for current and future needs; improving energy efficiency with insulation and a new heating system; and providing accessibility for the handicapped -- all while preserving the architectural and historic character of the building. Architect Jay Litman admirably balanced the old and the new.

The result is gratifying. This historic treasure's architectural character now clearly shines through amidst the accouterments of a thoroughly modern library.

### *Historic Preservation Award*



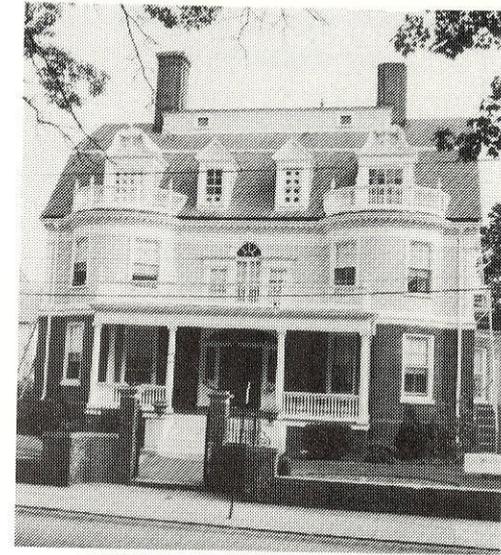
Shepard's

Founded in 1880, Shepard's Department Store was New England's largest department store in 1903, when it grew to an entire city block. With monumental arched entrances on Washington and Westminster Streets, it was once one of Downtown Providence's frequent destinations. Even before its doors were locked in 1974, however, this matron of retail had grown dowdy. Some downtown observers even called for demolition of the grand old store.

Fortunately a historic preservation tragedy was averted just before time ran out, and Shepard's has regained her architectural splendor. The State of Rhode Island hired architect David Presbrey and Gilbane Building Company to renovate the historic building for use as the University of Rhode Island's urban campus. The most eye-catching of the work is the exterior cast-iron restoration, for which DiAngelis Iron Works won an international award, and the lively paint color scheme. On the interior, modern facilities serve the building's new use.

Founder John Shepard aspired "to have for sale under one roof practically all the necessities of life as well as the luxuries." Under the same roof the university now offers its vast array of useful and valuable knowledge, and the former Shepard's Department Store is again a bustling location in Downtown Providence.

### *Historic Preservation Award*



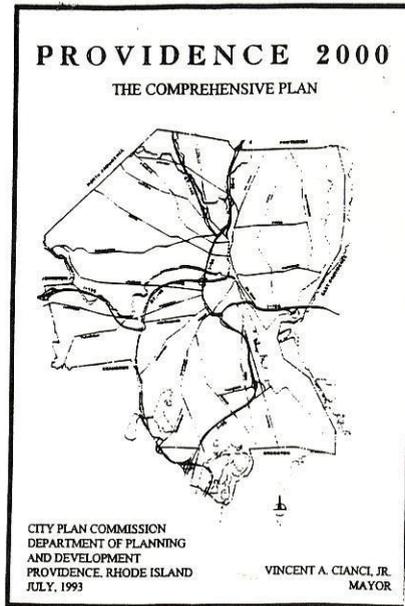
Samuel B. Conant House

Grand old houses are all too commonly converted to new commercial uses with no consideration given to the preservation of their architectural qualities. The Mansion Nursing Home in Central Falls is the outstanding exception to this trend.

The Colonial Revival-style Samuel B. Conant House, built in 1895 for a local textile manufacturer, is one of the most architecturally impressive houses in Central Falls. Converted to use as a nursing home in the 1940s, it remains in that use after nearly five decades. The Chopoorian family, which has owned the property for more than forty years, has retained the architectural grace and grandeur of the building's interior as well as its exterior -- no small feat given the expense and care required to conform to the rigid and extensive restrictions and requirements imposed by the various authorities which have jurisdiction over nursing homes.

The Chopoorians' preservation of the building's architectural character provides residents with a warm, domestic atmosphere absent in most similar institutions. The Mansion Nursing Home, indeed, exemplifies the role of historic preservation in enhancing quality of life. The recent restoration of the building's exterior further reinforces the Chopoorian family's continuing commitment to the building and its residents.

## Historic Preservation Award



### Providence Preservation Planning

The City of Providence's long-standing commitment to its historic resources reaches a new height in the adoption and implementation of *Providence 2000: The Comprehensive Plan*. The plan's process and substance are each individually remarkable, and their functional inter-relationship maximizes effectiveness.

*Providence 2000* explicitly recognizes the contribution of historic resources toward the city's financial vitality and quality of life. A well integrated plan that acknowledges complex urban relationships, it incorporates preservation policies into all seven of its elements. In addition, the city developed supplemental plans for two inner-city neighborhoods, DOWNCITY and Old Harbor, as well as a separate citywide preservation plan. *A Plan for Preservation* addresses preservation initiatives around seven specific topics: industrial properties, institutions, historic zoning districts, conservation districts, the waterfront, downtown, and issues common across the city.

The city proceeded wisely in generating and enacting its plans. From the beginning of the planning process, the city included broad segments of its citizenry in the process of identifying problems and reaching solutions. It dedicated human resources to the plans' implementation and fostered public-private partnerships toward that end. Since the plans' formal adoption in 1994, the city has aggressively followed the plans' directives and has proved that the success of good planning is in the doing.

### Photo Credits

*Elizabeth Johnson, B. Clarkson Schoettle and Shepard's: Wm McKenzie Woodward; Helene Lee Tessler: Bristol Historical & Preservation Society; 31 Whitmarsh Street: B. Clarkson Schoettle; Slater Mill: Old Slater Mill (1793 et seq.), engraving c. 1881 from Munro, Picturesque Rhode Island; Kit Matteson Tavern and Old Kent County Courthouse: Elizabeth Warren; King's County Courthouse: Virginia Hesse; Samuel B. Conant House: Albert Tavakalov, Photographer.*

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