



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS
HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

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**HOUSING HISTORY:
PAWTUCKET'S PROSPECT HEIGHTS LISTED ON NATIONAL REGISTER**

A public housing complex has received federal recognition for its contributions to social history and the history of community planning/development in Pawtucket. Edward F. Sanderson, Executive Director of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, announced that the National Park Service has added Prospect Heights to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is the Federal Government's official list of properties throughout the United States whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation. Built by the Pawtucket Housing Authority (PHA) between 1941 and 1942, the Prospect Heights Housing Project is significant as Pawtucket's first and only New Deal-era, federally-funded public housing project.

Prospect Heights comprises 36 brick and concrete block buildings set on a 21-acre lot at the intersection of Prospect Street and Beverage Hill Avenue in Pawtucket. There are 35 two-story row house apartments and one single-story Administration Building that houses offices, a community room, a laundry, and a maintenance facility. Most of the buildings are oriented parallel to one another, so as to maximize the penetration of sunlight and the movement of air into each of the 310 original dwelling units.

In the spirit of a cost-efficient "functional modernism," minimal decorative treatments on the row houses were limited to chevron-motif, cast-concrete bands over exterior doorways and the placement of alternating brown-glazed brick and square concrete corner blocks in the door surround. Interior floors (1st and 2nd floor) are concrete with a tile surface in the kitchen-dining area. The first floor ceilings are concrete; the second floor ceilings are plastered. The apartments ranged in size from 3½ rooms (1 bedroom) to 6½ rooms (4 bedrooms).

When the Great Depression hit Pawtucket, the city reeled from massive unemployment and a severe shortage of decent, affordable housing for low-income residents. In 1941, the Pawtucket Housing Authority became the first housing authority in Rhode Island to secure a 60-year U.S. Housing Authority loan, which was used to develop Prospect Heights on a former industrial site. This large complex of multi-family apartment buildings, with income and other eligibility criteria for residents, would introduce a new type of housing in Pawtucket.

Architect John F. O'Malley (1885-ca. 1950) of Pawtucket was a longtime associate of Pawtucket Mayor Thomas P. McCoy and had designed several high-profile public projects in Pawtucket, including City Hall (1933-35) and Pawtucket West High School (1938-39). Construction got underway at Prospect Heights in the spring of 1941. By the fall, PHA was taking applications from potential renters, with rents were adjusted according to income. For instance, monthly rent for a 3½-room unit ranged from \$18 to \$23 based on an annual family income of from \$1,200 to \$1,300. The *Evening Times* reported that rent would include “private bath, hot and cold water, gas stoves, steam heat, electric refrigerators, electric lights, playgrounds and kitchen cabinets. Gas, water and electricity will be provided 24 hours a day.”

On March 23, 1942, the first tenants moved in to four of the completed row houses. A *Times* writer interviewed Charles Connors as his family moved into Unit 40, a 4½-room apartment. Connors, an operative at a riverfront textile finishing plant, had been given a day off. “We’re lucky to get one of these apartments,” he said, “they have all the modern conveniences, plenty of closet space and what’s most important, plenty of fresh air.”

For 74 years, Prospect Heights has provided affordable shelter to thousands of the city’s citizens. The Pawtucket Housing Authority recently collaborated with current tenants to collect information on the history of the complex, revealing its significant place in Pawtucket’s social history. Current plans call for historic rehabilitation at Prospect Heights, which will extend its service to the Pawtucket community while preserving its newly-recognized historic character

The National Register nomination for Prospect Heights was prepared by preservation consultant Ned Connors. RIHPHC’s Executive Director Edward Sanderson commented, “At Prospect Heights, in 1941, the housing authority addressed the need for affordable housing through modern design. Today we recognize the historical significance of that commitment by adding Prospect Heights to the National Register of Historic Places.”

Pawtucket Mayor Donald R. Grebien added, “The City is both honored and pleased that the Prospect Heights unique place in the proud history of Pawtucket is being recognized with its nomination to the National Register. We are pleased about the recognition of its significance in the history of Pawtucket.”

In addition to honoring a property for its contribution to local, state, or national history, listing on the National Register provides additional benefits. It results in special consideration during the planning of Federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for Federal and Rhode Island tax benefits for historic rehabilitation projects. Owners of private property listed on the National Register are free to maintain, manage, or dispose of their property as they choose. As the state office for historic preservation, the Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission is responsible for reviewing and submitting Rhode Island nominations to the National Register.