



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

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**ELMWOOD'S INDUSTRIAL INCUBATOR:
BRAITSCH FACTORY LISTED ON THE NATIONAL REGISTER**

A factory in Providence's Elmwood neighborhood has received federal recognition for its contributions to the history of industry. Edward F. Sanderson, Executive Director of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, announced that the National Park Service has added the William J. Braitsch and Company Plant 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 in 1892, the Braitsch Plant is significant for its physical expression of the evolution of Providence's silversmith trade from small-scale artisanry to large-scale manufacture.

The William J. Braitsch and Company Plant occupies a .7-acre lot at the corner of Potters Avenue and Melrose Street in Elmwood. Erected in 1892, the main building is a brick, three-story, pier-and-spandrel structure. A one-story, brick boiler/engine house with a brick stack (also 1892) is attached to its east elevation. A free-standing concrete-block dry cleaning building, erected ca. 1950, stands northeast of the boiler/engine house.

Born and raised in New York City, William J. Braitsch (1863-1951) trained as a silver chaser, a highly-skilled process of forming and applying design to precious metal. While employed by Tiffany and Company, he completed a program in Form Drawing at Cooper Union and received two awards for silver chasing in 1878 and 1879. By 1887, Braitsch and partner John Hearn had relocated to downtown Providence to manufacture silver and gold cane and umbrella heads as well as the wooden walking sticks to which the heads were affixed.

In 1891, the partners purchased land at the corner of Potters Avenue and Melrose Street and erected a two-story, wood-frame industrial building (no longer extant). The following year, the partners undertook the construction of the brick, three-story industrial building and attached power house that held a Corliss steam engine. With its workforce of 135 designers and industrial operatives, the company was described in an 1892 *Board of Trade Journal* article as "the largest cane factory in the United States."

The market for silver novelties and accessories expanded dramatically in the late 19th century. The discovery of huge silver deposits made silver widely available as a material for luxury accessories. Between 1850 and 1900 production of silver in the United States increased

by about 1500%, and the price of silver fell from \$1.32 to \$.61 per ounce. Victorian fashion sensibilities yielded a huge national market for stylish accessories such as the silver- and gold-headed walking canes and umbrella handles fabricated at the Braitsch plant.

In 1893, Hearn and Braitsch dissolved their partnership, and William J. Braitsch and Company took over the plant. Business was in stark decline in the depression years of the 1890s. Difficult economic conditions likely prompted changes in Americans' taste for elaborate walking canes and umbrellas. By the early 20th century, men's style had shifted from Victorian excess to a more relaxed and understated comfort. Braitsch diversified his line, offering "silver toiletries," along with cane- and umbrella heads, to stay current with changing fashion sensibilities. Despite his efforts, William J. Braitsch and Company went out of business in 1915.

As early as 1896, Braitsch had begun leasing portions of the plant to other industrial tenants. These included the Whitten Cycle Manufacturing Company, George F. Greene and Co. (manufacturing jewelers), Stevens and Company (optical goods), Stevens Printing, and Butman and Tucker (commercial laundry). Butman and Tucker was eventually subsumed by a new corporation, Colonial Laundry. The new firm came to occupy the entire plant. Around 1940, Colonial Laundry modified the original façade to move the main entrance to the middle bay of the building. An elaborate Colonial Revival-style entrance opened to new office space also designed in the Colonial Revival style.

In 1948, Colonial Laundry purchased the property and erected a free-standing, concrete block dry cleaning building within a few years. In 1965, the plant was purchased by Fairdeal Manufacturing Company and adapted for jewelry manufacture. Fairdeal leased space within the building to related companies, including Syl-Den Polishing Company and United Plating. Substantial concrete footings on the third floor and steel reinforcements on the timber columns and beams of the first and second floors are likely associated with the structural requirements of this heavy third-floor loading. Paul Calenda acquired the property in 1987.

The National Register nomination for the Braitsch Plant was prepared by preservation consultant Ned Connors. RIHPHC's Executive Director Edward Sanderson commented, "Over the last century, businesses at the Braitsch factory demonstrated flexibility and diversification to stay afloat in changing economic times. Today, the factory is poised for redevelopment again, and it shows that adaptive reuse of historic buildings is never out-of-date."

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.

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