

Posted May. 21, 2007

Downtown Pawtucket is named to National Register of Historic Places

Downtown Pawtucket has been named to the National Register of Historic Places, the R.I. Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission announced today.

"The architectural and civic character of Downtown Pawtucket is preserved in this collection of solid historic buildings," Edward F. Sanderson, the commission's executive director, said in a statement. "Downtown's historic core is important to Pawtucket's heritage, and these structures are a resource for attracting new investment and revitalization."

The district comprises 50 buildings on about 14 acres of land in the city's central business district, two blocks to the west of the Blackstone River. "With its collection of architecturally significant banks, shops, offices and civic buildings, the Downtown Pawtucket Historic District represents the city's growth as a prosperous industrial city between the Civil War and World War I," the Preservation & Heritage Commission said in its announcement.

The original village of Pawtucket included settlements on both sides of the river, the commission noted, but the east bank later was claimed by Massachusetts, only to be ceded back to Rhode Island in 1862. The reunited communities were incorporated as the Town of Pawtucket in 1874 and the City of Pawtucket in 1885.

Meanwhile, the Blackstone's 30-foot drop at Pawtucket Falls had made the region a magnet for early industrial efforts including Slater Mill, and the booming manufacturing economy attracted housing, institutional and civic buildings and commercial development.

The 1870s through 1890s, the state Preservation & Heritage Commission said, saw the replacement of horse-drawn streetcars with a street railway system, the advent of public utilities and the beginnings of a new central business district where small wood-frame shops and houses gave way to masonry structures up to five stories tall.

"The Downtown Pawtucket Historic District encompasses examples of all of these building types," the commission said.

"North of Exchange Street stand three wood-frame residences that predate Pawtucket's urban boom: two Italianate-style cottages on Grant Street and a Second Empire-style house on Montgomery Street.



PHOTO COURTESY R.I. HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

W.T. GRANT, constructed in 1934, is at 150 Main St., in the roughly 14-acre section of downtown Pawtucket that has been named to the National Register of Historic Places.



PHOTO COURTESY R.I. HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

FELDMAN FURNITURE, at 21 to 23 Summer St., is among the 50 buildings in the Downtown Pawtucket Historic District.

"Fine examples of commercial buildings include the Late Victorian-style Beswick Building (1891) and the massive Summer Street Stables (1892) with its terracotta plaque containing the biblical verse, 'How Do The Beasts Groan.'

"Municipal and institutional buildings like the Deborah Cook Sayles Memorial Library (1899-1902, designed by the Boston firm of Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson) and the Colonial Revival-style Pawtucket Boys Club (1902) embody the wealth and civic ambitions of this maturing city."

After 1910, however, downtown development began to decline as Pawtucket's textile firms began losing ground to southern competitors. Between 1910 and 1929, only 11 buildings were erected in the region, the commission said, and these "were typically smaller and less architecturally ambitious."

The trend continued through 1956, with only five more buildings constructed in the intervening 27 years, including the W.T. Grant Building on Main Street in 1934 and the Art Moderne-style DiSandro Building on High Street in 1951.

By the mid-1950s urban renewal dominated development efforts in Pawtucket and nationwide. "Efforts like the construction of Interstate 95 in 1954 to 1963 and the later Urban Renewal Project, started in 1965, cleared entire city blocks for the highway, for large-scale commercial or residential development or for parking lots," the Preservation & Heritage Commission recalled. "Apart from the preservation of Slater Mill and associated buildings, a historic preservation approach did not gain a foothold in Pawtucket until the late 1970s."

But now, the panel said, "With the creation of the Downtown Pawtucket Historic District, the city can boast of 330 properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places."

The district's nomination to the National Register was prepared by preservation consultant Kathryn J. Cavanaugh.

Listing on the Register not only honors a property for its historic character but also may bring eligibility for state or federal historic rehabilitation tax credits. Owners of private property that is so listed are free to maintain, manage or dispose of their property as they choose, subject to whatever local restrictions may apply.

The R.I. Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, as the state office for historic preservation, is responsible for reviewing and submitting nominations from across Rhode Island to the National Register of Historic Properties. Additional information is available at www.preservation.ri.gov.