

NewEnglandTravelPlanner.com by Tom Brosnahan—Providence Walking Tour

This 2-hour walk (not including stops) begins at Kennedy Plaza in the center of Providence, and ends on College Hill at Prospect Terrace, with a fine view of the city.

The Providence Preservation Society (tel 401-831-7440, info@ppsri.org), 21 Meeting Street offers self-guided walking-tour booklets of historical areas in the city.

Areas include Benefit Street, with its restored 18th- and 19th-century houses, the downtown section with its 19th- and 20th-century architecture, the waterfront, Brown University, and three Victorian neighborhoods named Armory District, Elmwood, and Broadway.

Providence Walking Tour

The walk is best done on weekends when there is less traffic. Avoid walking during the morning and evening rush hours.

1. Kennedy Plaza, in the center of Providence. Shady trees and benches make the plaza an oasis in the middle of the city, and an equestrian statue of General Ambrose Burnside, the Civil War officer whose long side whiskers were the first "sideburns," watches over the eastern end of the plaza. At the western end is:

2. City Hall, an agreeable Second Empire building completed in 1878 (go inside to see a wall display of other entries in the competition for the city hall design).

3. The Arcade, at 130 Westminster Street (map), looks like an imaginative bit of urban renewal, but is in fact the creation of Russell Warren and James Bucklin, who designed the building in 1827. For a century and a half some of Providence's better shops have operated in the Arcade. There are three levels of shops topped by a roof of glass panes; one modern addition to the Arcade is an elevator to take shoppers to the upper floors.

Decorative cast-iron balustrades and stairways recall the Arcade's early 19th-century construction. Look at both facades—on Westminster Street and on Weybosset—which clearly show that each architect had his own idea of how the exterior should look. With two facades, each got his chance to do what he wanted.

Walk through the Arcade from Westminster Street to Weybosset Street, and turn right. Look for the golden dome which marks Providence's historic:

4. Round Top Church, officially known as the Beneficent Congregational Meetinghouse. It got its popular name because of its dome, which is a departure from the usual New England church spire. Finished in 1810, it was influenced by the classical revival then going on in Europe. The interior is as pleasant to look at as the exterior: besides the gracious New England meetinghouse furnishings, the Round Top Church has a crystal chandelier consisting of almost 6,000 pieces. (Enter by the door on the side, around to the right.)

Now head northeast down Weybosset, past the Arcade, to the intersection of this street with Westminster and Exchange. Walk two more blocks east and you will cross the Providence River to the foot of College Hill.

The hill is the prettiest section of the city, its streets lined with 18th- and 19th-century houses, most of which have been well preserved or restored and many of which bear plaques, put up by the Providence Preservation Society, giving the builder's name and the date of construction. At the bottom of College Hill, on South Main Street between Thomas and Waterman streets, take a stroll past the:

5. First Baptist Meetinghouse. Roger Williams founded the first Baptist congregation in the New World in 1638, but this building dates from 1775. The architect was Joseph Brown, and the steeple—designed from a plate in James Gibbs's Book of Architecture representing suggested steeples for St. Martin-in-the-Fields in London—rises to a height of 185 feet. It's one of the outstanding churches in New England.

Between November and March the church is open daily, but guides are available only by appointment. The front door of the church will probably be locked, so go around to the right to the side (office) door.

To the left of the church, at 7 Thomas Street, is a fantastic old building with half-timbering and stucco bas-reliefs on its facade. This is Sidney Burleigh's:

6. "Fleur de Lys" House, built by this Providence artist in 1885 (the date is in the stucco). Thomas Street might be called "Artists' Row," because very near Burleigh's house is the Providence Art Club, at no. 11. The club has changing shows exhibited in its galleries. The club also runs the Dodge House at 10 Thomas Street, which has contemporary shows from September through May.

At the intersection of Waterman and Benefit streets, turn right and go south on Benefit for a block to the:

7. RISD Museum. The Rhode Island School of Design or RISD, (known in Providence as "RIZZ-dee") is one of the country's best art, architecture, and design schools. Founded in 1877, it shares College Hill with Brown University.

You can also visit the:

8. Bayard Ewing Building, 231 South Main Street, which houses RISD's architectural division. Exhibits here change frequently, and feature architectural and industrial design.

Also up here on College Hill is Brown University (tel 401-863-1000), a member of the Ivy League and the seventh-oldest university in the country. Founded in 1764, Brown's first building was:

9. University Hall, used as a barracks for colonial and French soldiers during the American Revolution. It's now a National Historic Landmark. To get to it, walk up the hill (east) on Waterman Street, cross Prospect Street, and turn into the gates on your right. If you want a full, free tour of the beautiful and historic campus, find your way to the College Admission Office, one block from University Hall at the corner of Prospect and Angell streets.

There are several other historical buildings on College Hill. The Rhode Island Historical Society operates both the:

10. John Brown House and the:

11. Museum of Rhode Island History, in the Aldrich House, a Federal-style mansion (1822) at 110 Benevolent St. Changing exhibitions highlight various aspects of Rhode Island's history and citizens.

Prospect Street is so named because it passes near:

12. Prospect Terrace (go to Cushing Street and turn left). From the Terrace, a small park, you can see downtown Providence and the State House, along with a famous but—pardon me—rather wooden statue of the founder, Roger Williams. His grave is here as well.

Trees have grown up below and block a bit of the perspective, but the view is still panoramic and impressive.