

The Demographics of the Reservoir Triangle

Oral History and Community Memory

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Introduction

After the Gorham Manufacturing Company was built on Adelaide Avenue in 1889, the employees of the company built houses between Reservoir Avenue and Mashapaug Pond. These silversmiths and jewelry specialists created the basis for a residential neighborhood around the factory area. Despite the current vacancy of the Gorham site and its environmental controversies, the area had a relatively high 57% owner occupancy rate in 2000.¹ This paper roughly sketches how the demographics of this residential area changed over time, in terms of the house occupancy, property owners and their occupations, age groups, and race and ethnicity.

Sources and limitations

My original area of focus was the Crescent Street neighborhood on the east side of the pond. The area, also known as the "**Reservoir Triangle**," is located at the southwestern edge of the city of Providence, bordered by the city of Cranston (see map 1). I had to expand the geographic location I was looking into, however, as different sources marked different boundaries for their research focus. I have provided the sources and their areas of focus for each time period, 1890-1960 and 2000-2010.

Using the Providence House Directory stored at the City Archives, it was possible to find the names and occupations of each house-owner within the Crescent Street neighborhood. In order to match the individuals with their occupations from 1935, however, cross-referencing was necessary for each individual entry, which I was unable to complete within our timeframe. The accompanying Excel spreadsheet (in another file) provides some information on where the residents worked, but it is incomplete and not representative of the whole neighborhood. It should be treated more as qualitative information, providing a fragmented view of the occupants living there from 1890-1960, rather than statistical data.

For a more comprehensive picture of the area, the manuscript Census registers would be available on microfilm for 1900, 1910, 1920 and 1930 at the NARA regional office in Waltham, Massachusetts (<http://www.archives.gov/northeast/boston/index.html>). The 1890 records burned before they could be microfilmed, and the 1940 records are not yet publicly available.² The Rhode Island State Archives may have a state population

¹ "Reservoir in Depth: Background," The Providence Plan. Accessed October 6, 2011, http://local.provplan.org/profiles/res_bk.html

² Holly Snyder, curator of American Historical Collections at the John Hay Library, informed me about

census as well. On the other hand, the 2000-2010 census data is accessible online and provides extensive information for the census tract containing Mashapaug pond. Noting these limitations on the immediately available sources, I begin with the 1850-1950 time period for tracking the changes and trends in the demographics of the area.

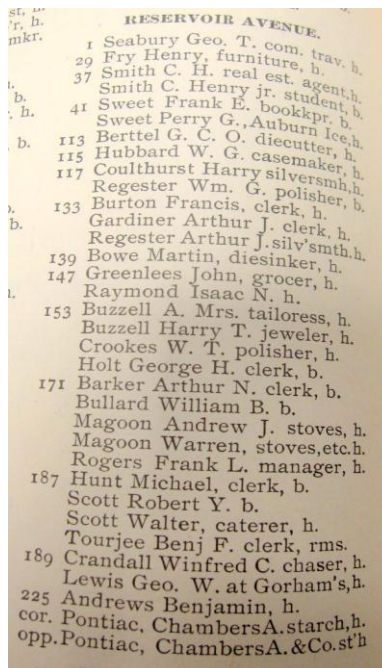
1850-1950

Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, June 1979. *Elmwood, Providence: Statewide Historical Preservation Report P-P-3*. 1979.

Report giving an overview of the socio-economic changes in the Elmwood survey area, which covers "the west Elmwood neighborhood; two nearby sections of Providence's West End; and the Reservoir section surrounding Mashaug Pond." It provides a history of the immigrant population who moved into the area, and gradually became integrated into the local community.

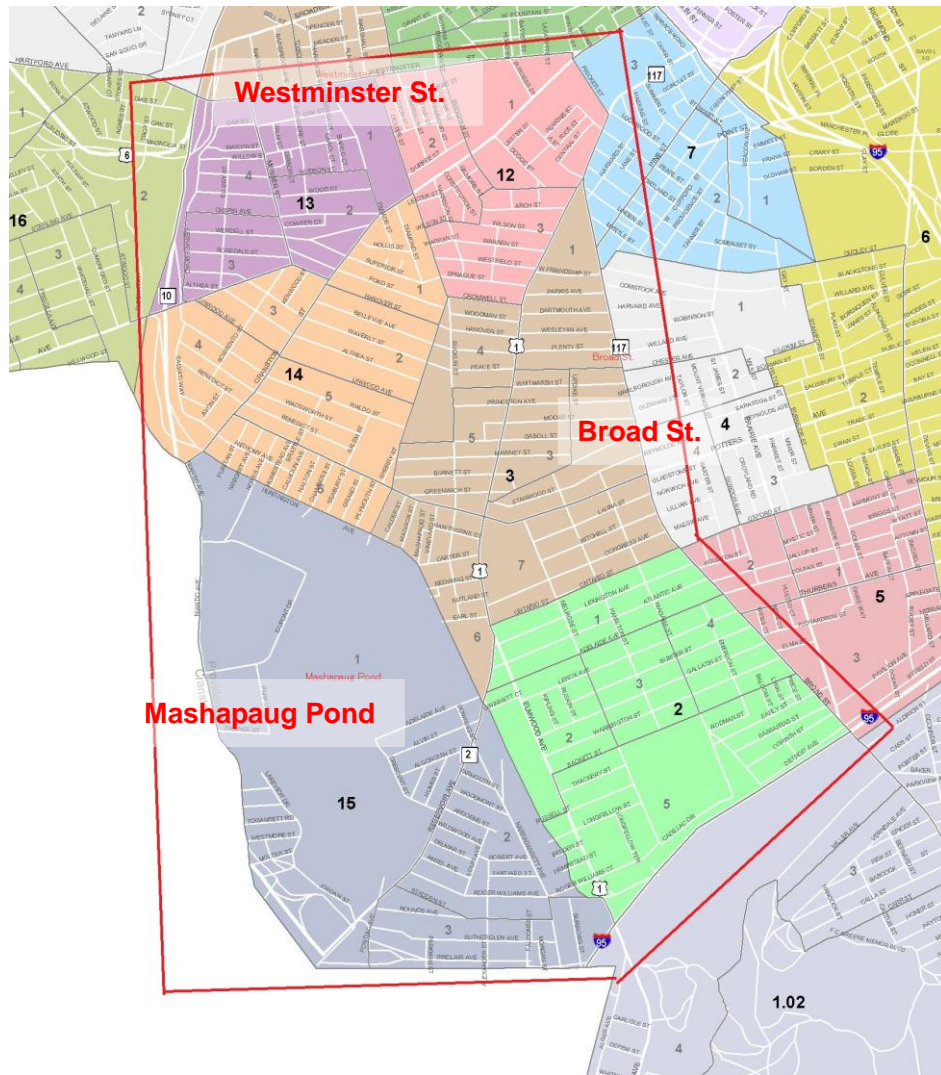
Sampson, Murdock, & Co. *Providence House Directory and Family Address Book*.

Street-level directory for Adelaide Avenue, Downing street, Alvin Street, Algonquin Street, Crescent Street, Sibley Street, Humes Street, Reservoir Avenue. Lists house occupants and their occupations, but primarily becomes a phone book from 1935. The accompanying Excel spreadsheet provides a look into the occupations of the people living within this smaller Reservoir Triangle area.



Example of page from House Directory before 1935.

these sources.



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Map 1: 1979 Elmwood Survey Area⁴

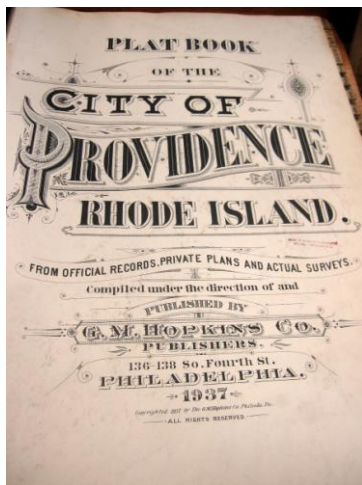
The 1979 report describes the Elmwood area as "primarily a racially mixed middle and working-class residential area containing pockets of light industry and commercial development. Largely a neighborhood of one-and two- family houses built between 1865 and 1930, it was originally established as an **upper- and middle-class suburb**...The reservoir section, closely related historically to Elmwood and West Elmwood, is a neighborhood principally of one- and two-family, early twentieth century homes. It also contains, however, the Huntington Expressway Industrial Complex." "Native Yankees," the descendants of old New England families, were the largest ethnic group in the Elmwood area around the 1850s to 1900. These "Yankee residents" were predominantly of the middle class, working as "carpenters, masons, house painters, and

³ Elmwood 1979 report, 11.

⁴ "Census tracts and block groups." The Providence Plan, accessed October 9, 2011, <http://provplan.org/data-and-information/basic-maps>.

others involved in the building trades: jewelers and other craftsmen; and grocers and shopkeepers. Those who were factory workers often held the most skilled jobs.”⁵

Upper-class developments began around the 1850s, when the "Yankee commercial, financial, and industrial upper class" began moving from downtown to the suburbs of Elmwood, with its upper-middle-class character. These residents were "typically wholesalers and retailers; real-estate, commodity, and investment brokers; insurance agents; professional and managerial people; and building contractors." In the 1880s, Adelaide Avenue alone contained the residences of "six manufacturing jewelers, two gold and silver refiners, and one silverware manufacturer."⁶ The first available House Directory from 1895 lists all the house-owners in the area as silversmiths, jeweler, modeler, and enameleer.⁷ Although not explicitly stated, these residents may have been Gorham workers based on their specialization. Businesses such as auto-dealers thrived on Reservoir Avenue since 1935, while many technical specialists in the metal, silver, and machinery lived on Crescent, Adelaide, and Downing.⁸



1937 Atlas, showing the Reservoir Triangle area.

The immigrant population, over time, contributed to this population of craftsmen in the Reservoir Triangle as well. **From around 1910**, the upper-class Yankee population of Elmwood became stagnant, due to the established residents of two and three family houses that prevented further upper-class area development. The children of the

⁵ Elmwood 1979 report, 11.

⁶ Ibid..

⁷ Sampson, Murdock, & Co. *Providence House Directory and Family Address Book*.

⁸ Sampson, Murdock, & Co. *Providence House Directory and Family Address Book*.

residents decided to move out of the area, and the Irish, Germans, Jews, and Swede population was growing as well.

Many of Elmwood's **Germans** were skilled artisans often working in the jewelry shops, and the opening of the Gorham plant stimulated the growth of the German population in the area, as the plant employed skilled German craftsmen. After WWI, however, the small German community did not have new immigrants coming in, and "soon lost its cultural identity."⁹ The **Jewish** community was small in the Elmwood area, mostly grocers, peddlers, variety and clothing store owners, and tailors. In the area around Mashapaug pond, a Jewish cemetery was established on Reservoir Avenue in 1849. By 1920, however, the second-generation Jewish migrated into the area from the established Jewish community in South Providence. They had extensive real-estate investments in the area. By 1951, there were 1,859 Jewish in southern Elmwood.¹⁰ The **Irish** settled in the Elmwood area aorund the 1850s. On the south along the rest side of Mashapaug Pond was a predominantly Irish neighborhood. From the 1850s-1900s, the Irish in the area were often laborers with low economic status, taking jobs such as bricklayers and teamster. By 1945, the report surmises that they were the largest ethnic group in Elmwood. By 1870 a small **black** community was established as well, and a **French-Canadian** community between 1861 and 1914, which grew rapidly in the 1890s.¹¹

2000-2010

"Providence Neighborhood Profiles: Reservoir." The Providence Plan. http://local.provplan.org/profiles/res_main.html

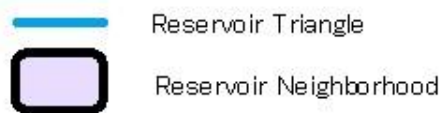
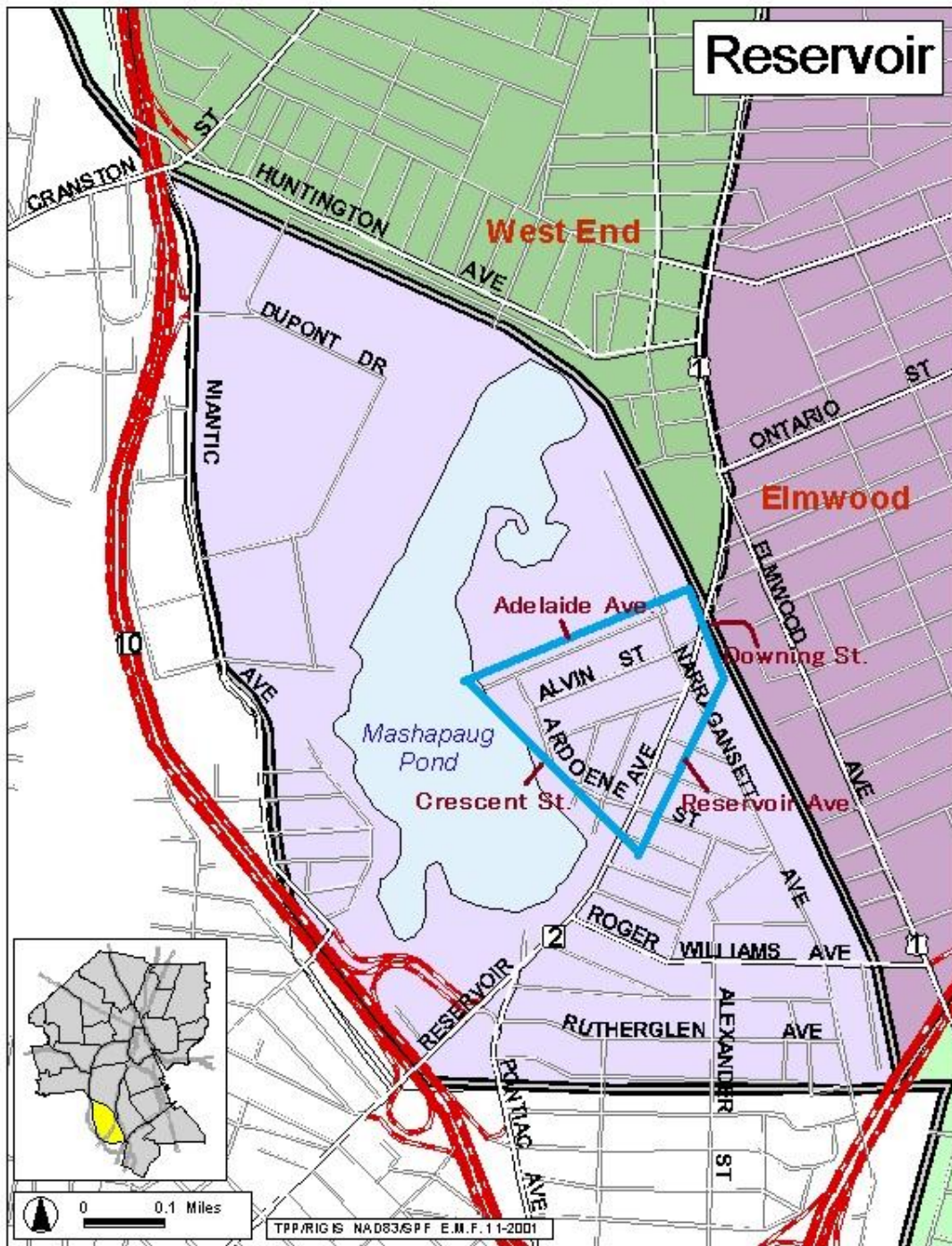
"Census 2010 Redistricting Data by Neighborhood." The Providence Plan. <http://provplan.org/data-and-information/map-entry/census-2010-redistricting-data>

Block-level census data for the "Reservoir" neighborhood/Census Tract 15. This data was gathered from Providence Neighborhood Profiles generated by Providence Plan (provplan.org), a joint effort of the City of Providence and the State of Rhode Island to provide data analysis for the public. The "Neighborhood Profiles" is currently still based on census 2000 data, but the new "**RI Community Profiles**," based on the census 2010 data, will be launched **November 2011**.

⁹ Ibid., 14.

¹⁰ Ibid., 15

¹¹ Ibid., 16



Map 2: Comparison of the “Reservoir Neighborhood” used for analysis at Provplan.org, and the “Reservoir Triangle,” the original focus of my research.¹²

¹² “Providence Neighborhood Profile,” The Providence Plan. Accessed October 7, 2011,

[Race/Ethnicity] (See Map 3)

The 2010 census reported **2,994 residents** living in the Reservoir neighborhood, a mere 1.1 percent rise from 2000, compared to the 16.4 percent rise between 1990 and 2000. Despite this stability in overall population, there are notable changes in the population by ethnicity. **In the past 20 years, the non-white share of the population increased from 25.7 percent in 1990, 59.5 percent in 2000, to 71.7 percent in 2010.**

Change in population by race/ethnicity

	2000	2010	% change
Non-Hispanic White	1201	848	29.4(-)
Hispanic or Latino	669	1224	83(+)
Non-Hispanic Asian	450	411	8.7(-)
Non-Hispanic Black	451	380	16(-)

The Hispanic population is currently larger than any other demographic in the neighborhood. This is a trend that is not unique to the Reservoir neighborhood, but also to the city of Providence as a whole.¹³ Conversely, while non-Hispanic Blacks and non-Hispanic Asians were growing in population at a citywide average (Blacks: 1,296 to 23,299; Asians: 857 to 11,241), there is a declining trend in the Reservoir neighborhood.

[Housing Units]

The total number of housing units saw an increase by 24 units, with 1084 in 2000 and 1108 in 2010. At the same time, vacant housing units increased by 24 units as well, from 41 to 65.

[Age]

The population of youth under 18 years old has declined by 12.9 percent, from 850 in the year 2000 to 740 in 2010. They now make up 24.7 percent of the population.

17 of the 25 neighborhoods in Providence showed a decline in their youth population as

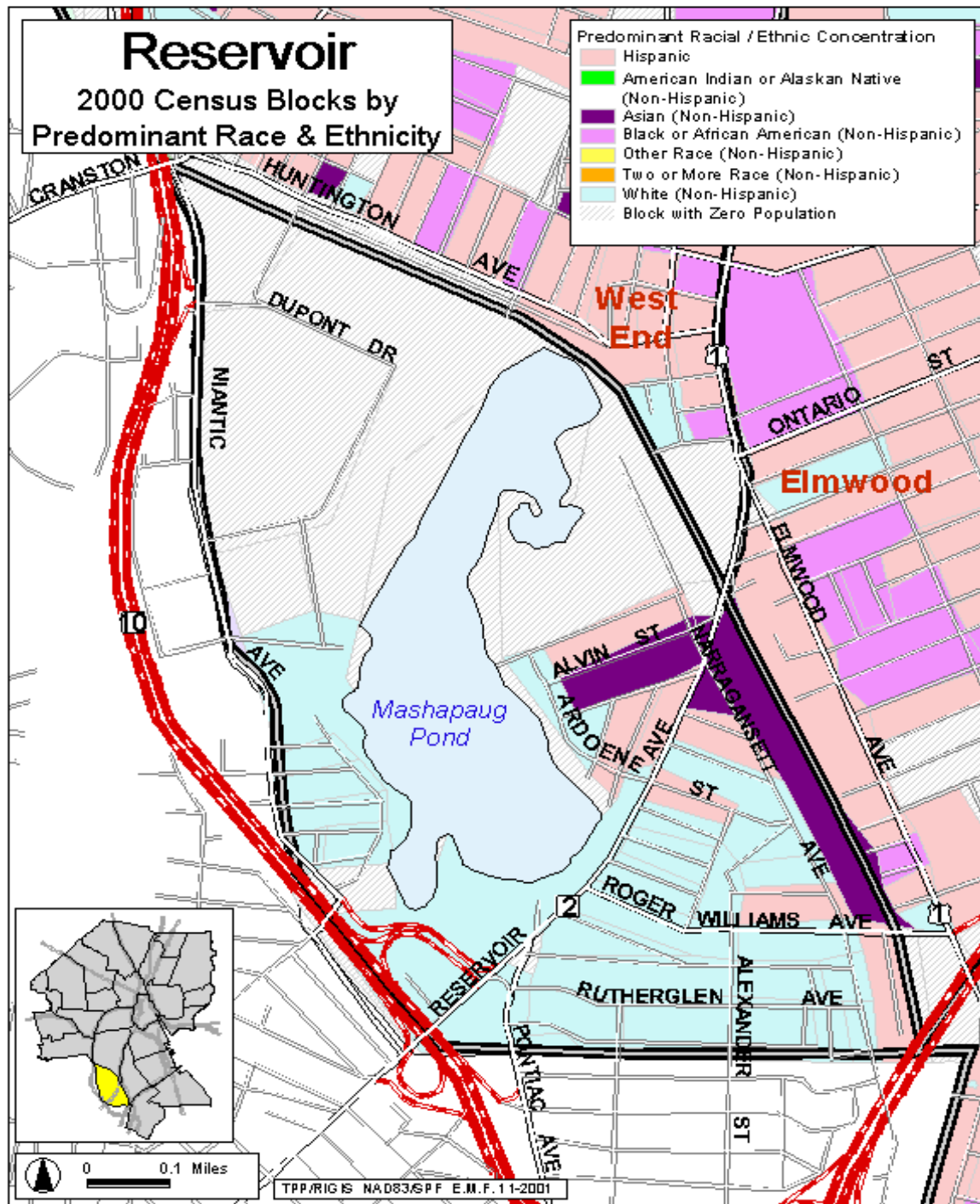
http://local.provplan.org/profiles/res_main.html.

¹³ “April 5, 2011 News: The Providence Plan Releases Census 2010 Information and Maps,” accessed October 7,

<http://provplan.org/news/updates/the-providence-plan-releases-census-2010-information-and-maps/>.

“In terms of changing demographics, The Providence Plan’s analysis shows that the City’s 2.5% growth over the past decade was primarily driven by an increase in the number of people who identify themselves as Hispanic or Latino. According to Census 2010 data, there are now 67,835 Hispanic people in Providence – an increase of 15,689 since 2000 (30%). Another trend that has continued to hold over the past few decades has been the reduction in non-Hispanic Whites. Citywide, the non-Hispanic White population dropped from 79,451 to 66,910 – a 16% reduction from 2000 and a 40% reduction from 1990...With these changes, Hispanics now make up the largest cohort of residents in Providence.”

well, reflecting the citywide 8.1 percent decrease from 2000.



Map 3: Distribution of residents by ethnicity, based on census 2000 data.¹⁴

¹⁴ “Diversity Map (Reservoir).” The Providence Plan, Accessed October 7, 2011, http://local.provplan.org/profiles/maprks/res_div.gif. In the 2000 data, the Hispanic population is still outweighed by the white population.

Bibliography

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“Census 2010 Redistricting Data by Neighborhood.” The Providence Plan. Accessed October 8, 2011,

<http://provplan.org/data-and-information/map-entry/census-2010-redistricting-data>

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[City Hall Archives]

Platbook of the City of Rhode Island.

Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, June 1979. *Elmwood, Providence: Statewide Historical Preservation Report P-P-3*. 1979.

Sampson, Murdock, & Co. *Providence House Directory and Family Address Book*.