

To: City of Providence, Department of Planning and Development
From: Roderick Taylor, Rappaport Fellow at Harvard Kennedy School
Date: July 2024
RE: Historical Analysis of Willard Center / Upper South Providence

Executive Summary

This report provides a historical overview of the Urban League of Rhode Island (ULRI) site in Providence, Rhode Island, focusing on the redevelopment efforts from the early 1950s to the present day. It covers three distinct periods: Pre-Willard Center (Pre-1954), the Redevelopment Era (mid-1950s), and the subsequent developments from the 1960s to today.

Pre-Willard Center (Pre-1954). In the early 1950s, Upper South Providence, around the Urban League of Rhode Island (ULRI) site, was experiencing significant urban blight. The neighborhood was characterized by severely deteriorated housing, inadequate infrastructure, and various social challenges. The area, encompassing approximately 14.7 acres, was marked by substandard housing, environmental hazards, and overcrowding. The population was predominantly low-income and racially diverse, facing high rates of poverty, health issues, and “social disorganization.”

Redevelopment Era (mid-1950s). The redevelopment of the Willard Center area began in the mid-1950s as part of a comprehensive effort to address urban blight and improve living conditions. The redevelopment plans, divided into Unit One and Unit Two, aimed to provide essential community facilities, such as an elementary school, playgrounds, and a shopping center. These efforts included significant street improvements and the creation of recreational spaces for children. Despite the ambitious redevelopment plans, the process of demolition and displacement caused significant disruption in the community, displacing approximately 200 families without adequate relocation support.

Developments from the 1960s to Today. The 1960s and 1970s saw further changes, including the construction of the current ULRI building on the site of the Willard Center shopping center, which housed various community services. However, the area continued to experience challenges, including disinvestment and social unrest. The ULRI acquired the building in 1990, continuing its mission to serve the local community through economic development, educational opportunities, and civil rights advocacy. In 2012, the Edmund W. Flynn Elementary School was closed and demolished due to prolonged disinvestment. In 2022, the Providence Redevelopment Agency acquired the ULRI property with plans for a new community hub. Funded by the American Rescue Plan Act and federal support, this redevelopment aims to transform the site into a center for advocacy, recreation, and social services, reflecting a renewed commitment to the wellbeing of the Upper South Providence neighborhood.

Part I: Pre-Willard Center (Pre-1954)¹

In the early 1950s, Upper South Providence was experiencing blight and deterioration. Part I explores the state of the area before the extensive redevelopment initiatives, particularly focusing on the period leading up to 1954 when many buildings were planned to be razed to pave the way for redevelopment (see Figure II).

Existing Conditions

Housing and Infrastructure

The Upper South Providence area, located at and near the present-day Urban League of Rhode Island (ULRI) site, was characterized by severely deteriorated housing and inadequate infrastructure in the early 1950s. The area encompassed approximately 14.7 acres of densely packed residential and commercial properties. Most buildings were wooden structures, many over three stories high, constructed before 1900, with few developments built between 1900 and 1950.

Substandard housing. The majority of the residential buildings were in poor condition for the time period, marked by overcrowding, lack of maintenance, and structural deficiencies. Many buildings lacked basic amenities such as adequate sanitation facilities, inside hot water, and proper heating. The homes were often overcrowded, with multiple families living in single dwelling units due to economic constraints.

Environmental hazards. The presence of salvage yards, deteriorated commercial properties, and industrial activities within residential areas contributed to the hazardous living environment. The close proximity of these land uses resulted in significant health and safety risks for the residents. Streets were narrow and poorly maintained, contributing to traffic congestion and increasing the likelihood of accidents.

Home values. The housing market reflected its blighted conditions. Home values were significantly lower than in other parts of Providence due to the deteriorated state of the buildings and the poor living conditions. Many properties were valued far below the city average, making them affordable to low-income families but also contributing to a cycle of neglect and disinvestment.

Rent. Rent prices in the area were also low, reflecting the substandard quality of the housing. However, even these low rents were often a financial burden for the residents, who were predominantly low-income and relied heavily on public assistance. The lack of investment in property maintenance meant that even though rents were low, tenants received little value in terms of housing quality or services. Landlords, disincentivized by the low property values and rental incomes, often neglected necessary repairs and maintenance, exacerbating the cycle of decline.

Figure I: Willard Avenue Before Redevelopment, 1947



Source: Providence Public Library

Demographics

Racial and ethnic diversity. The area housed a diverse yet predominantly low-income population. According to surveys conducted during the redevelopment planning, approximately 310 families, totaling around 1,025 individuals, resided in the Willard Center area. The population was racially and ethnically diverse, with a significant portion being non-white (23 percent). The area also had a notable Jewish community, evidenced by the presence of synagogues and kosher markets.

Age distribution. The population included a mix of age groups, but there was a significant number of children and young adults. The high number of young residents underscored the need for safe recreational spaces and adequate educational facilities, which were lacking.

Social Challenges

The Willard Center area was marked by severe social pressures and challenges, which were evident from records of health, welfare, and law enforcement agencies. According to the redevelopment plans, the area exhibited high rates of “social disorganization,” including:

- **Aid to Dependent Children:** A high number of families relied on public assistance for dependent children, reflecting economic hardship.
- **Training School Admissions:** Elevated rates of admissions to training schools indicated juvenile delinquency and a lack of supportive community structures.
- **Old Age Assistance:** Many elderly residents required public assistance, highlighting the absence of adequate retirement support systems.
- **General Public Assistance:** A significant portion of the population depended on general public assistance programs, underscoring widespread poverty.
- **Health Issues:** High incidences of venereal diseases, tuberculosis, and other health problems were reported, indicating poor living conditions and limited access to healthcare.
- **Births to Unmarried or Single-Parent Households:** The area experienced a high rate of births to unmarried or single-parent households, indicating social instability and insufficient family support systems.

Reasons for Redevelopment

The motivation behind the redevelopment of the area was driven by the need to address blight and improve living conditions. The Providence Redevelopment Agency identified the area as a slum-blighted zone under the "Slum Clearance and Redevelopment Act" of 1950. The key reasons for redevelopment included:

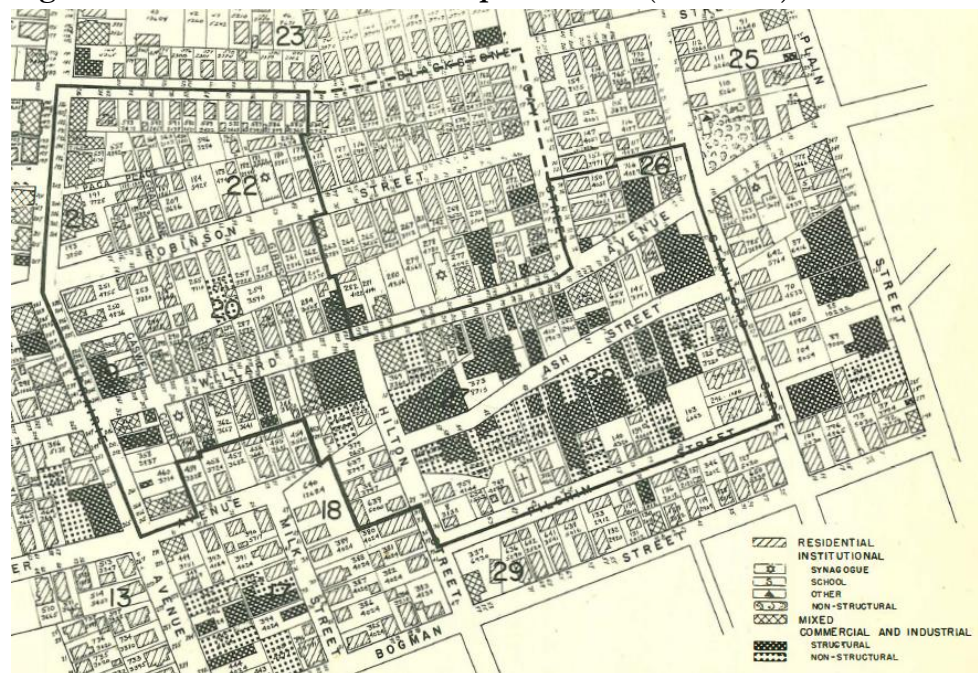
- **Substandard housing.** The vast majority of units were classified as inadequate or substandard due to their deteriorated and unsanitary conditions. These conditions posed significant health and safety risks to the residents.
- **Overcrowding.** A significant proportion of the lots did not meet the city’s minimum lot area standards, leading to crowded living conditions that exacerbated the spread of diseases and other social issues.
- **Environmental hazards.** The presence of salvage yards, deteriorated shops, and mixed land uses created hazardous and unhealthy living environments that were unsuitable for residential purposes.
- **Social pressures.** High rates of social issues, including disease, crime, and poverty, necessitated intervention to stabilize the community and improve the quality of life for its residents.

Limitations

Despite comprehensive redevelopment plans and the detailed documentation of the existing conditions in the Willard Center area, it is important to acknowledge significant limitations in the approach and perspective of the reports. **A key limitation is the redevelopment plans' tendency to view the community members not as individuals with their own unique stories, needs, and contributions, but rather as an anonymous population living in an area defined by its problems and dilapidated conditions.** For instance, the redevelopment plans state that they are "...designed to help stabilize residential values in South Providence and to improve that neighborhood as a place to live by replacing unsafe, unsanitary dwelling units and other hazardous conditions by urgently needed community facilities."² This phrasing suggests that the plans prioritize stabilizing residential values over the immediate health, safety, and wellbeing of the residents.

The focus is predominantly on the physical and social deficiencies of the area, such as substandard housing, overcrowding, and high rates of social issues like disease and poverty. While these issues are surely important and need to be addressed, the redevelopment plans lack a nuanced understanding of the residents' lives, their resilience, community networks, and the cultural and social assets that existed within the community. Further, the reports emphasize the negative aspects of the area without adequately acknowledging the strengths and positive aspects of the community, such as the presence of institutions like synagogues and local businesses that served as important hubs. **This limitation highlights the need for more inclusive and participatory approaches in urban redevelopment that involve and respect the voices and experiences of the residents.**

Figure II: Willard Center Redevelopment Area (as of 1953)



Note: The buildings located inside the black lines, including the dashed portion in the upper right, would eventually be razed and redeveloped.

Source: Willard Center Redevelopment Plans

Part II: Redevelopment (mid-1950s)

The redevelopment of the Willard Center area in was a comprehensive effort aimed at transforming a blighted neighborhood. This section details the redevelopment plans for Unit One and Unit Two, including their objectives, proposed changes, and the intended transformation of the land based on the 1953 reports.

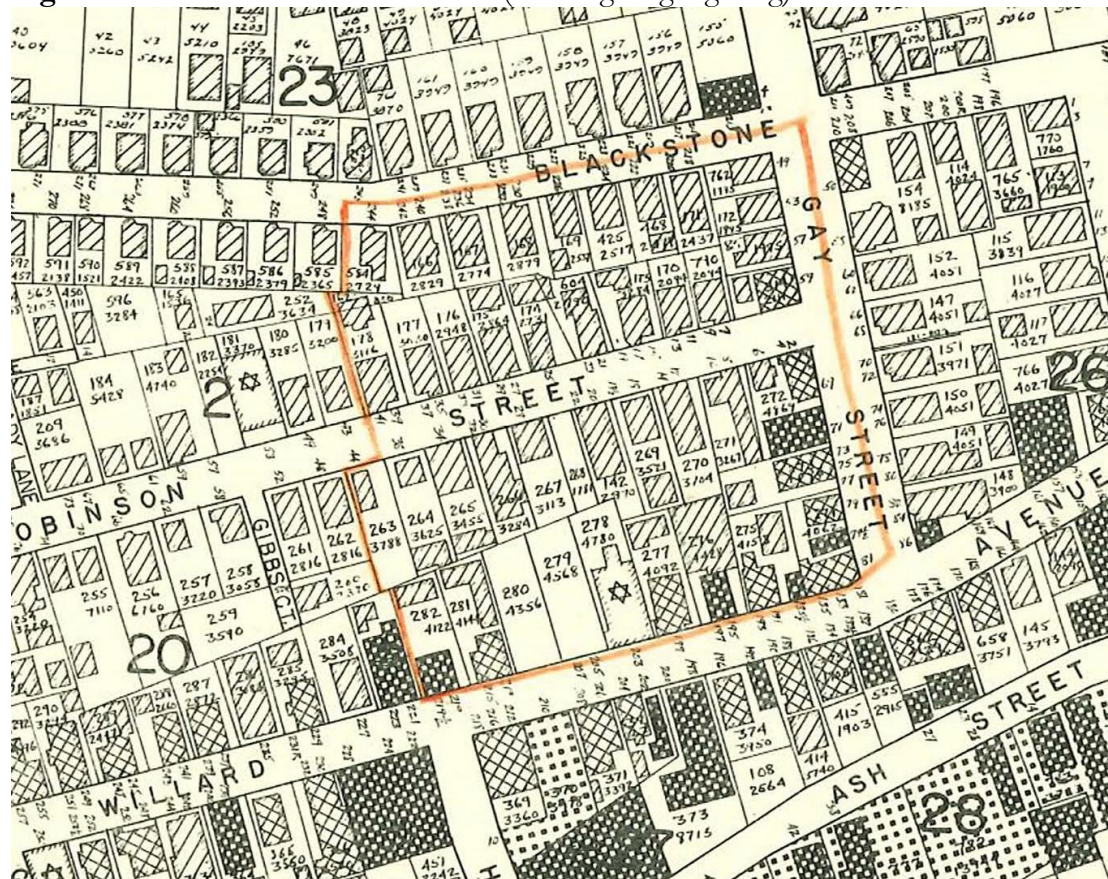
Unit One: Project Area D2-A1

Scope and Objectives

Scope. Unit One, also known as Project Area D2-A1, focused on a specific section of the Willard Center area along Willard Avenue and Gay Street (see Figure III).

Objectives. The primary goal of Unit One was to address severe blight, improve living conditions, and provide essential community facilities. Specifically, the plan aimed to establish an elementary school and provide playground and recreational areas for children.

Figure III: Willard Center Unit One (in orange highlighting)



Source: Willard Center Redevelopment Plans

Proposed Changes

Elementary school. The main component of Unit One was the construction of an elementary school. This school was intended to serve the educational needs of the community's children.

Playground and recreational areas. In addition to the elementary school, the plan included the development of playgrounds and playfields. These facilities were designed to provide safe play areas for children and youth, promoting physical activity and social interaction.

Street improvements. The plan also proposed widening and improving boundary streets to enhance traffic management and safety.

Commercial developments. Although the primary focus was on educational and recreational facilities, the plan also included the establishment of a convenience shopping center along Prairie Avenue. This development aimed to improve access to essential goods and services for the residents, enhancing the quality of life and stimulating local economic growth.

Stakeholder Engagement

Public hearings and community meetings. Conducting public hearings and community meetings was a crucial part of the plan to gather input and address community concerns.

Relocation assistance. The Family Relocation Service was tasked with assisting displaced families and businesses. Special considerations were given to the unique needs of the non-white population and local businesses, ensuring that the relocation process minimized disruption and hardship for the affected community members.

Unit Two: Project Area D2-A2

Unit Two, also known as Project Area D2-A2, covered a broader section of the Willard Center area (see Figure IV). It encompassed a net area of 450,955 square feet – a more extensive redevelopment effort compared to Unit One.

The primary goal of Unit Two was to complete the slum clearance initiated in the original Willard Center project and address the broader needs of the community. This included removing hazardous and unsanitary dwelling units, providing community facilities, and improving infrastructure.

Proposed Changes

Playground and playfield. Development of recreational facilities was a key component of Unit Two. The plan included the creation of playgrounds and playfields to replace hazardous commercial properties.

Shopping center. Establishment of a shopping center along Prairie Avenue was proposed to improve local retail options. This development aimed to provide residents with better access to essential goods and services.

Street improvements. Continuing efforts to improve traffic management and safety were a focus of Unit Two. The plan included widening and improving streets to reduce traffic congestion and create a safer environment for pedestrians and vehicles.

Stakeholder Engagement

Community outreach. Extensive community outreach was conducted to gather input and address community concerns. This included public hearings and community meetings to ensure that residents' voices were heard and their needs were considered in the redevelopment process.

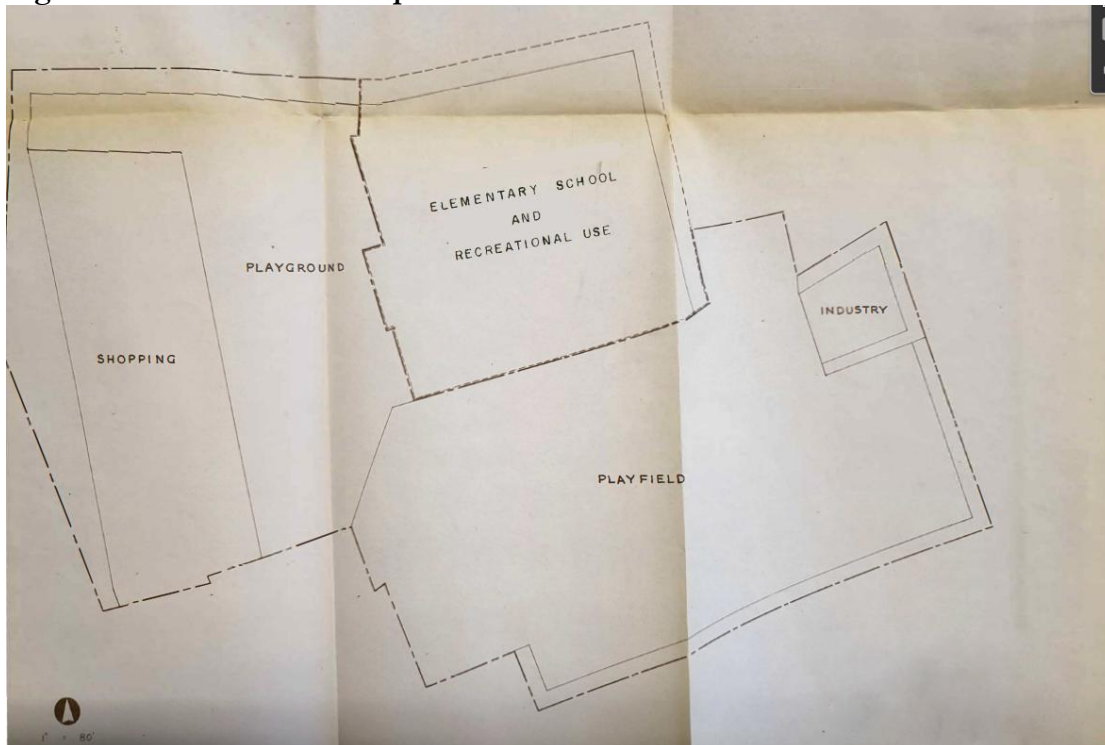
Relocation Support. Comprehensive relocation assistance was provided through the Family Relocation Service and Providence's Urban League. This support aimed to minimize disruption and hardship for displaced families and businesses.

Figure IV: Willard Center Unit Two (Project Area D2-A2)



Note: The area surrounded in red sharpie (excluding the dashed portion) is part of Unit Two.
Source: Willard Center Redevelopment Plans

Figure V: Willard Center Proposed Land Uses



Source: Based on Willard Center Redevelopment Plans

Immediate Aftermath

The redevelopment efforts for the Willard Center began in 1954. The project included demolishing dilapidated buildings and constructing new facilities such as a shopping center, Flynn Elementary School, and a park (see Figure V). However, the process of demolition and displacement caused significant disruption in the neighborhood. Approximately 200 families were displaced, leading to feelings of loss and disconnection among the residents.³

According to the Rhode Island Historical Society, "many of the businesses were able to set up shop in the newly built shopping center, but the nearly 200 families who lost their homes were forced to relocate to nearby neighborhoods."⁴ Further, there were no official plans for the relocation of the displaced families. This led to increased home values in the redeveloped area, which were often affordable only to predominately white families.⁵

From "Machine Politics and Urban Renewal in Providence, Rhode Island," we learn that the affected residents, predominantly Black and low-income families, were given little notice and inadequate resources to facilitate their relocation. The lack of proper relocation plans exacerbated the community's disruption and distress. The economic consequences of the redevelopment were profound, as displaced families faced increased rents in their new neighborhoods, often leading to financial strain and instability. The new shopping center, while providing some local jobs, did not replace the lost income for many families who had relied on the now-demolished businesses.⁶

Part III: 1960s to Today

Late 1960s. In the late 1960s, the Willard Center area experienced significant decline and disinvestment. The shopping center became a focal point for civil rights activities, including rallies and campaigns led by organizations such as the Congress of Racial Equality.⁷ This period of turmoil, marked by disturbances, violence, and arson, culminated in the demolition of the shopping center in 1970. As the Providence Preservation Society notes, "displacement, disinvestment, and decline led to disturbances, violence, and arson at or near the Willard Avenue Shopping Center beginning with the Emancipation Day freedom rally in 1966 and culminating in 1970."⁸

1970s. During the 1970s, the current building housing the Urban League of Rhode Island (ULRI) was constructed on the site of the former shopping center. This new facility housed the ULRI offices, a police substation, and a homeless shelter, supported by President Johnson's Model Cities initiative.⁹

1990. In 1990, the Urban League of Rhode Island officially acquired the building from the city. This acquisition allowed the organization to continue its mission to serve the local community more effectively. The ULRI focused on providing economic development programs, educational opportunities, and advocacy for civil rights. According to the Providence Preservation Society, "the site has served as a community anchor, supporting civil rights and economic empowerment initiatives."¹⁰

2012. The Edmund W. Flynn Elementary School, part of the initial redevelopment efforts, faced prolonged disinvestment and decline. In 2012, the school was closed and later demolished. According to the Public School Review, the school served 501 students in grades K-5 with 32 full-time teachers, indicating a student-teacher ratio of 16:1. Despite its large student body, the school's performance metrics were below state averages, with only 32% proficiency in math and 41% in reading during the 2010-11 school year.¹¹

2022. In 2022, the Providence Redevelopment Agency acquired the ULRI property (see Figure VI) with plans to demolish the existing building and redevelop the site. The city has appropriated \$1.6 million from American Rescue Plan Act funds, and U.S. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse secured another \$1 million in federal funding for site preparation, assessments, and cleanup. The redevelopment aims to transform the property into a community hub for the Upper South Providence neighborhood, incorporating space for community-based organizations and services focused on advocacy, recreation, and social services.¹²

Figure VI: ULRI Site Today



Source: City of Providence

Limitations and Future Work

This historical analysis provides a comprehensive overview of the area's transformation from the early 1950s to the present day. However, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations and outline potential directions for future research to enhance the depth and accuracy of this analysis.

Limitations

- **Desk Research Reliance:** The majority of this analysis was conducted using desk research, which primarily involved reviewing existing documents, historical records, and secondary sources. While this approach provides a broad understanding of the historical and socio-economic changes in the area, it has limitations. Desk research often relies on available data, which may not capture the full spectrum of community experiences and perspectives.
- **Lack of First-hand Accounts:** The analysis lacks direct input from the individuals and families who were affected by the redevelopment efforts. First-hand accounts and oral histories from residents who lived through the redevelopment could provide valuable insights into the personal and community impacts of these changes. Their experiences and stories would add a crucial dimension to the understanding of the area's history.
- **Limited Current Community Engagement:** This report does not extensively engage with current community members or organizations active in the area. Engaging with these stakeholders could provide a contemporary perspective on the ongoing challenges and opportunities faced by the neighborhood, as well as the effectiveness of current redevelopment initiatives.

Future Work

- **Community Interviews:** Future research should include interviews with long-term residents, displaced families, and current community members. Collecting histories will help to document personal experiences and provide a more nuanced understanding of the community's evolution.
- **Engagement with Local Organizations:** Partnering with local community organizations, such as the Urban League of Rhode Island, can facilitate access to community members and provide a platform for their voices to be heard. This engagement can also help in understanding the current needs and priorities of the community.
- **Field Research:** Conducting field research, including site visits and surveys, can provide up-to-date information on the current state of the area. This research can help to identify ongoing issues, assess the impact of recent redevelopment efforts, and gather data to inform future planning.
- **Longitudinal Studies:** Longitudinal studies that track the long-term outcomes of redevelopment initiatives can provide a more comprehensive understanding of their impacts.

By addressing these limitations and incorporating these suggestions for future work, the analysis of the ULRI site can be bolstered. This approach will ensure a more accurate and inclusive understanding of the area's history, ultimately informing more effective and equitable redevelopment efforts.

¹ Unless otherwise stated, the source of the information in this section is from the Willard Center Redevelopment Plans.

² Willard Center Redevelopment Plans

³ <https://www.rihs.org/encompass-a-digital-sourcebook-of-rhode-island-history/encompass-chapters/african-american-civil-rights-in-rhode-island/primary-sources/photograph-of-lippitt-hill-redevelopment-project/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ https://digitalcommons.providence.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=history_dissertations_theses

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https://preservation.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur406/files/pdfs_zips_downloads/resources_pdfs/2019twentiethc_ri_afam-civil-rights_report.pdf

⁸ <https://guide.ppsri.org/property/urban-league-of-rhode-island-building>

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https://preservation.ri.gov/sites/g/files/xkgbur406/files/pdfs_zips_downloads/resources_pdfs/2019twentiethc_ri_afam-civil-rights_report.pdf

¹⁰ <https://guide.ppsri.org/property/urban-league-of-rhode-island-building>

¹¹ <https://www.publicschoolreview.com/edmund-w-flynn-elementary-school-profile>

¹² <https://www.providenceri.gov/mayor-elorza-senator-whitehouse-providence-city-council-and-partners-announce-acquisition-of-and-redevelopment-investments-in-former-urban-league-of-ri-site/>