

# Walking Tour of Knight Memorial Library

Providence Preservation Society

October 9, 2018

- Welcome to the Knight Memorial Library walking tour.
- This walking tour was part of a unique project that we are calling, *“Sites and Stories Explored Through Scholarship, Art and Community Engagement.”*
- We have selected five artists or artist teams to create five original artistic works that explore hidden and layered narratives of several endangered historic sites in Providence that are featured in our **2018 Most Endangered Properties** list. Artists and artist teams are working at the Paragon Mill in Olneyville, Parcel 1A on the Providence Riverfront, the Broad Street Synagogue in South Providence, and Knight Memorial Library in Elmwood/West End.
- Each artist will begin their process this year through discussion with a local scholar and a walking tour that engages the community. The resulting artistic works will provoke conversations about the meaning of place, what happens when a site tells more than one story, and what kind of reparative work can ensue when a site erases some of its narratives in favor of others.
- Since 1994, PPS has used the Most Endangered Properties program to engage the public in thinking about the future of significant historic buildings, landscapes, structures, and neighborhoods. With “Sites and Stories,” we aim to expand this engagement through the work of committed Rhode Island-based artists, involving the community in the re-building of narratives around the human beings who inhabited these important properties.
- This project is supported by the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities, the City of Providence Department of Art + Tourism and the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, through an appropriation by the Rhode Island General Assembly, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and private funders. PPS is currently seeking additional funding to support the project.

# Knight Memorial Library

- Threat: Lack of Funding
- Opened to the public in 1924
- Built to house the Elmwood Public Library Association (est. 1915).
- Dedicated to Robert Brayton Knight (1826–1912) and his wife, Josephine (1829–1911), by their children.
- Robert Knight was one of the founders, with his brother Benjamin Brayton (1813–1898), of the famed B. B. and R. Knight Co., the greatest cotton-manufacturing firm in the world at the beginning of the twentieth century and the producer of the Fruit of the Loom brand.

# Exterior features

- Designed by NY-based library architect Edward Lippincott Tilton (1861–1933), utilizes an “open” floor plan. Tilton designed many Carnegie libraries and was one of the most renowned, innovative library architects of his era.
- Italian Renaissance style
- Indiana limestone, set on a high, granite foundation.
- Copper-clad hip roof has an ornamental cresting of Grecian acroteria.
- Inside, the high-ceilinged reading and reference rooms are illuminated by large round-head windows which flank a central lobby containing the main desk.

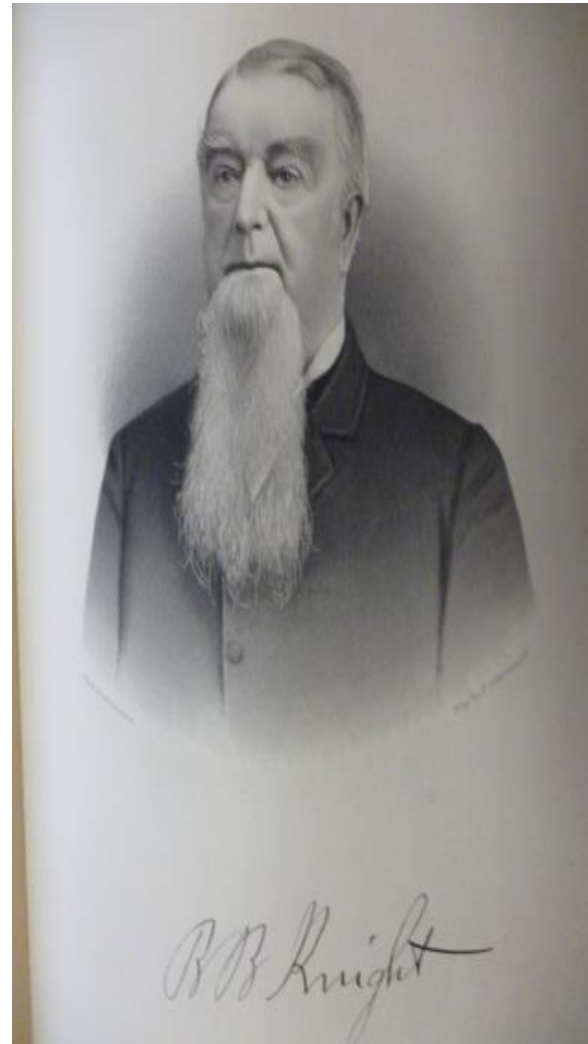
# Exterior Details

- Characteristic of the Italian Renaissance style
  - Round arched windows
  - Cornice features triglyphs
  - Quoins on the corners

# Interior Features

- Three levels of stacks constructed of cast iron support the main floor, allowing for greater circulation of library patrons in that space.
- The Beaux Arts Neoclassical interior is conceived as the columned space of a Roman atrium, with a skylight above.
- The relief sculpture over the colonnade consists of plaster casts of the Parthenon frieze.
- The coffered ceiling reflects classical models, and the building is filled with beautiful wrought-iron work, stained glass, and rich wood paneling.
- More than 17,000 square feet

Robert Brayton Knight (1826-1912) and Benjamin Brayton Knight  
Knight (1813-98)  
(from Bayles, 1891)



Robert Knight Mansion  
(1855-63)



Former site of the  
mansion, now the  
Assembly of God  
Church next to the  
library





Elmwood Avenue (south?),  
ca. 1890



# Providence Community Library System

- Largest library system in Rhode Island
- PCL formed in 2009 when Providence Public planned to close Knight and four other libraries

# Recent Plans

- July-Oct 2017 closed for urgent repairs and upgrades.
- 2017 – received \$544,000 preservation grant from Champlin Foundation
- To fund cleaning and renovations to all exterior masonry as well as repairs to the roof, guttering, cornice and skylights.
- Work is on-going

# Recent Plans

- It is not ADA accessible
- Grant in to Champlin to fund electrical work.  
To correct decades of piecemeal electrical work
- Grant received to replace lower front doors

# In Closing

- Much of the information herein is taken from the National Register Nomination which can be found at <http://www.preservation.ri.gov/register/>
- Other information is taken from a presentation created by Deborah Del Gais in 2017.
- Contact PPS at 401-831-7440 for more information.