

Walking Tour of Paragon Mill

Providence Preservation Society

September 29, 2018

- Welcome you to the Paragon Mill 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.

Earnscliffe Woolen Mill/Paragon Worsted Co. (1898 and later)

First listed on Most Endangered Properties List in 2018

25 & 39 Manton Avenue

Neighborhood: Olneyville

Threat: Demolition

Earnscliffe Woolen/Paragon Worsted Company Mill complex consists of 11 industrial buildings dating from the late 19th to the mid-20th century.

4.4 acres on the Woonasquatucket River

The word “worsted” refers to a smooth yarn spun from wool.

The 1- to 3-story brick buildings were designed to accommodate specific processing stages of textile production and then adapted and extended over time as needs changed. The original section of the oldest building was designed by George Leach and built by the Providence firm of Maguire and Penniman in 1898.

Why care?

- The building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places for its significance. Namely, that the complex represents an important connection to Providence's industrial heritage, the way people lived and worked, and the use of the Woonasquatucket River as an economic engine. It is also designated as a local Industrial and Commercial Landmark, which means that the Historic District Commission has purview over its preservation.
- Period of Significance: 1898–1956 Specific Dates: 1898, 1921
- Today, after years of attempts to find a user for it, we have a site that encompasses 115,000 square feet, ripe for rehabilitation and adaptive reuse. The scale and scope of the project make it a prime candidate for historic tax credits.
- Added to National Register in 2006, during which time Artcraft Braid - a manufacturer of many types of braiding, which purchased the Paragon Worsted plant in 1964 - was still in operation at this location. In 2006, it also housed Cathedral Art Metal, Camco Screen printing and artists' studios.

Statement of Significance

- The Earnscliffe Woolen/Paragon Worsted Company Mill Complex is the physical expression of more than sixty years of woolen and worsted spinning, weaving, and finishing in the Olneyville section of Providence, Rhode Island. Located on the Woonasquatucket River, the Olneyville area of Providence has been an industrial center since the mid-19th century.
- Rhode Island and Providence led the nation in the development and expansion of the manufacture of textiles, and Olneyville was an important center for this industry.
- With its concentration of mills constructed in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Olneyville was one of the most densely developed industrial areas in the city of Providence and an important center for worsted production. The Earnscliffe Woolen/Paragon Worsted Company Mill Complex is a useful exemplar of the manufacture of wooltextiles here.

Let's look at where we are

- First, the street name Tanyard Lane. Any ideas about why it's called that?
- The Anthony estate that included a former tannery established in the early 19th century by John Pettis. Around 1810 Pettis sold the tannery to Alfred Anthony, who improved the operation to specialize in heavy belting, and eventually enlarged it to house 100 tanning vats.
- Look at image: The 1875 Commonwealth Land Title map shows a waterpower system that included a headrace passing directly through the tannery (in roughly the location of present-day Building 3*).

*Building numbers are keyed to a map that is within the National Register Nomination. It can be found at <http://www.preservation.ri.gov/register/>

Steam Mill – Water for Processing

- Paragon Pond Dam (RIDEM No. 139), adjacent to Building 5, has a closer historical association with the Providence Dyeing Bleaching and Calendaring plant across the river.
- Although the Earnscliffe Woolen Mill (comprising Buildings 1-3, 1898-1910) was built as a steam mill, its finishing plant required process water which it drew from the Woonasquatucket

Original Building

- Built by Earnscliffe for weaving, dyeing and finishing of wool for **fine men's wear**, the earliest construction consisted of Building 1 (1898-99), which included office space, an engine-dynamo room and a small boiler house set off from the northeast corner of the building.
- Dynamo provided electric lighting!

Expansion

- This early power plant was replaced by the Second Boiler House (Building 6) between 1937 and 1950.
- Building 1 also had a central, 3-story tower, the lower two floors of which are now surrounded by 20th-century infill construction.
- Between 1926 and 1937 this building was extended more than 100' to the west (Building 1a).

Paragon Worsted era

- Earnscliffe Woolen failed in 1909
- The plant was purchased by Paragon Worsted Company of Woonsocket. The company closed its Woonsocket plant, consolidating its operations in the former Earnscliffe plant by 1911.

Expansion

- In the period from 1921 to 1939, Paragon underwent a major expansion extensions to several buildings and a few new buildings.
- Remarkable because they survived during the depression.
- The Paragon complex reached its fullest expansion between 1937 and 1950. This construction included an extension to several buildings.

Depression Era

Providence Journal, August 23, 1931.

- “The Paragon Worsted Company, located in the heart of the Olneyville district of Providence, has been running steadily, night and day, for a considerable period of years to its capacity of practically 600 workers, stopping only on Sunday, because of the law which prohibits manufacturing on that day.”

Cathedral Art

- Building 4 – now Cathedral Art – was built in in 1921 et seq.
- Originally housed M&F Worsted, a Paragon Subsidiary

Store House

- Building 9
- Paragon Worsted Store House (b/t 1926-1937)

Immigrant History

- The secretary and agent for Paragon was Arthur C. Milot, born in Yamachiche, Quebec, in 1861. Milot emigrated to the United States with his parents in 1878, finding work at a cotton mill in Taunton and learning some English.
- Moving to Woonsocket in 1889, he set up a hay, grain, and feed business. In 1904 Milot re-entered the textile business, forming a partnership with Joseph Hoyle to operate the Hoyle Bobbin Company (Pond Street, Woonsocket).
- Milot was secretary-treasurer of the company.
- With Paragon's acquisition of the Earnscliffe plant, Milot closed the Woonsocket mill, relocating to Olneyville.
- By 1919, he was the superintendent of Paragon.

Immigrant History

- Aram Milot's partner in the spinning mill, Pierre J. Fleurant, was born in Ste. Brigide, Quebec, in 1865. His family emigrated to East Douglas, Massachusetts, in 1870, removing to Woonsocket a few years later.
- At the age of eight, Fleurant went to work in the Lyman Mill. By age 23 he had established himself in real estate, and by 1908, owned eighty-seven tenements and five stores in Woonsocket's Social District.

Labor Unrest

- The early post-war years were marked by physical expansion and emergent labor strife. Fifty unorganized weavers struck the plant in February 1946 due to what they described as poor working conditions.
- After an unsuccessful CIO vote in the same year, the Textile Workers Union of America eventually organized the plant.

Closing

- Despite Paragon's post-war performance, the combination of labor trouble and southern competition eventually caused the management to close the Olneyville plant in the early 1960s. In 1963 the company sold its fabric division to Indian Head Mills (Uxbridge Division).¹⁹ Although Paragon had hoped to sell its dyeing operation to a new owner and keep that part of its Olneyville plant open, this never occurred. M&F Worsted continued to operate the spinning mill until 1964.

Where is now

- Artcraft Braid was the last textile concern to operate out of this complex, closing in late 2000s.
- Olneyville Housing Corporation purchased it in 2012 for \$1.2M.
- In 2014, estimated rehabilitation costs were \$15-32M
- The mill complex is included in Providence's 2018 Woonasquatucket Vision Plan
- The complex is most recently owned by the City of Providence.

In Closing

- Much of the information herein is taken from the National Register Nomination written by Ned Connors
- It can be found at <http://www.preservation.ri.gov/register/>
- Contact PPS at 401-831-7440 for more information.