

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY
RECEIVED MAY 23 1979
DATE ENTERED JUN 18 1979

SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN *HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS*
TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC "Shakspeare Hall"*(Sprague-Knight Building)

AND/OR COMMON Ballou, Johnson and Nichols

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER 128 Dorrance Street

CITY, TOWN Providence VICINITY OF 2 - Rep. Edward P. Beard

STATE Rhode Island CODE 44 COUNTY Providence CODE 007

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL
<input type="checkbox"/> SITE	PUBLIC ACQUISITION	ACCESSIBLE	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY
			<input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
			<input type="checkbox"/> PARK
			<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
			<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
			<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
			<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
			<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER:

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME Dorrance Associates

STREET & NUMBER 73B Charles Street

CITY, TOWN Providence VICINITY OF STATE Rhode Island

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC. Providence City Hall

STREET & NUMBER 25 Dorrance Street

CITY, TOWN Providence STATE Rhode Island

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE Interface: Providence

DATE 1975 FEDERAL STATE COUNTY LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission

CITY, TOWN Providence STATE Rhode Island

* Indicates preferred name

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Built in 1838, the Sprague-Knight Building is a six-story masonry structure whose form has evolved with changing use of the building from a theatre to a light-industrial and warehouse building.

The original theatre building, designed in the Greek Revival style by the prominent Providence architect James Bucklin, was a three-and-a-half-story stone edifice, approximately sixty feet wide and one hundred feet deep, fronting on Dorrance Street. The exterior was stuccoed and pointed in imitation of granite. Large pilasters above a one-story granite basement defined the five-bay facade; these elements remain. The original interior, including an elaborate decorative scheme based on the signs of the Zodiac, was destroyed in 1844 by a fire which left only the exterior walls standing.

Following this conflagration, the structure was rebuilt and probably assumed much of its present form: the exterior walls were raised to six stories, the interior industrial space was established, and the loading bays at each floor on the facade were opened.

Sometime late in the nineteenth century the brick, five-story section at the rear became part of the building. Structural evidence suggests that this portion was a four-and-a-half-story, gable-roof building independent of the theatre building before the two were integrated into one. The last stage in the building's evolution was the raising of this section to five full stories and the construction of its shed roof.

The interior is open space, broken only by supporting cast-iron columns and a brick bearing wall which traverses the building's width at approximately its midpoint.

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES

1838, and 1860's

BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Sprague-Knight Building, constructed in 1838 as "Shakspeare Hall" and converted to use as a textile manufactory by the 1860s, played a significant role in Providence's theatrical and industrial history. Its change in use over time reflects the growth and change in Providence's economic history.

The early history of drama in Providence was erratic. Theatrical productions were common as early as the mid-eighteenth century, but no permanent theatre was built. By the late 1830s, Providence had been without any theatre for quite some time, "although the need of one was seriously felt. Accordingly a number of public-spirited gentlemen decided to erect...one that should be a credit to the city for its appearance and capacity."¹

"Shakspeare Hall" opened to an enthusiastic house on 29 October 1838 with performances of "The Soldier's Daughter" and "A Pleasant Neighbor" preceded by "an elegant prologue" written by Providence's premier poetess, Sarah Helen Whitman. Its success, in spite of performances by nationally known actors, was short lived, however: by the mid-1840s, the theatre's novelty had worn off, and growing objections from the nearby Second Baptist Church precipitated the theatre's closing in 1844.

The same year, Dr. Dionysus Lardner converted the building to a planetarium and conducted lectures on astronomy. His activities were cut short in October of 1844 when an extensive fire virtually destroyed the building leaving only its exterior walls standing.

By the 1850s neighborhood land use began to change. Shipping activity had become firmly established on the west side of the Providence River, with wharves and warehouses at the end of Dorrance

¹Charles Blake, An Historical Account of the Providence Stage (Providence: George H. Whitney, 1868), p. 222.

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Blake, Charles. An Historical Account of the Providence Stage.
Providence: George H. Whitney, 1868.

Providence Journal. 25 October 1844.

Williard, George O. History of the Providence Stage (1762-1891).
Providence: The Rhode Island News Company, 1891

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY less than an acre

UTM REFERENCES

A	1,9	2,9,9,8,4,0	4,6,3,2,6,4,0	B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Plat 20, Lot 193
Providence Tax Assessor's Records

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

William McKenzie Woodward

ORGANIZATION

R.I. Historical Preservation Commission

DATE

August 1978

STREET & NUMBER

150 Benefit Street

TELEPHONE

401-277-2678

CITY OR TOWN

Providence

STATE

Rhode Island

12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

Thomas P. Williamson

TITLE

State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE

May 17, 1979

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

Charles Adams

DATE

6/18/79

ATTEST:

Maria Mae Dwyer

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

6/18/79

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

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CONTINUATION SHEET

1

ITEM NUMBER 8

PAGE 2

and Custom House -- then Long Wharf -- Streets. Providence's industrialization had also prompted the construction of industrial buildings in this area southeast of Pine Street. The area became less well suited to theatres and auditoriums, which began to rise in the commercial center of Providence, around Westminster Street and Exchange Place. The gutted theatre building, no longer attractive as theatre space, was easily adaptable to commercial/industrial use, by virtue of its sound exterior walls and open interior space.

The building had been recycled for wholesale merchandizing by the mid-1850s, but industrial activity soon followed: the seller included "all belting, shafting, and gearing in the building"¹ in the sales agreement with the A & W Sprague Manufacturing Company in 1863.

Sprague Manufacturing Company, the preeminent textile manufacturer in mid-nineteenth-century Rhode Island, purchased the building probably as a warehouse for some phase of its cotton production. The Spragues were early practitioners of vertical integration -- then uncommon in the textile industry -- and their success depended on maintaining a large stock of materials. The company declared bankruptcy in the panic of 1873. Like other properties owned by the company, the warehouse was involved in litigation during the 1870s and 1880s. It was finally sold to B.B. & R. Knight Manufacturing Company in 1890 for use as a cotton-goods warehouse.

Ballou, Johnston and Nichols, hard goods wholesalers, purchased the building from the Knights in 1922, having leased the building since 1903. The firm continued to use the building primarily as warehouse space, before selling it in 1977.

Current plans call for the rehabilitation of the building as office space. This change in use will continue the building's traditional response to changing land-use patterns in the area, for the State of Rhode Island has recently selected an adjacent vacant site for the construction of a state court building.

As a building with a varied history that chronicles the growth and change of Providence's downtown -- and especially that of the

¹Land Records, City of Providence, Deed Book 166, Page 151.

See Continuation Sheet 2

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CONTINUATION SHEET 2 ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 3

warehouse district, an important part of specialization and diversification of land use in the downtown -- the Sprauge-Knight Building is an important structure which merits inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.