

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

(Type all entries - complete applicable sections)

STATE: Rhode Island
COUNTY: Providence
FOR NPS USE ONLY
ENTRY DATE FEB 20 1975

1. NAME

COMMON: Custom House Historic District
AND/OR HISTORIC:

2. LOCATION

STREET AND NUMBER: See Continuation Sheet 1 <i>bounded by Westminster, Exchange, Dyer, Pine and Peck Sts.</i>			
CITY OR TOWN: Providence		CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT: Edward Beard - 2	
STATE: Rhode Island	CODE: 44	COUNTY: Providence	CODE: 007

3. CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY (Check One)	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> District <input type="checkbox"/> Building <input type="checkbox"/> Site <input type="checkbox"/> Structure <input type="checkbox"/> Object <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Both	<input type="checkbox"/> Public <input type="checkbox"/> Private <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Both	Public Acquisition: <input type="checkbox"/> In Process <input type="checkbox"/> Being Considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Occupied <input type="checkbox"/> Unoccupied <input type="checkbox"/> Preservation work in progress
PRESENT USE (Check One or More as Appropriate)			
<input type="checkbox"/> Agricultural <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commercial <input type="checkbox"/> Educational <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Government <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial <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 (Specify) _____ _____ _____

4. OWNER OF PROPERTY

OWNER'S NAME: Various multiple
STREET AND NUMBER:
CITY OR TOWN:
STATE:
CODE:

5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.: Providence City Hall
STREET AND NUMBER: Dorrance and Washington Streets
CITY OR TOWN: Providence
STATE: Rhode Island
CODE: 44

6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE OF SURVEY: Interface - Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission Survey
DATE OF SURVEY: in progress <input type="checkbox"/> Federal <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> State <input type="checkbox"/> County <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Local
DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission
STREET AND NUMBER: 52 Power Street
CITY OR TOWN: Providence
STATE: Rhode Island
CODE: 44

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

STATE:
COUNTY:
ENTRY NUMBER: FEB 20 1975
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FOR NPS USE ONLY

7. DESCRIPTION

CONDITION	(Check One)					
	<input type="checkbox"/> Excellent	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Good	<input type="checkbox"/> Fair	<input type="checkbox"/> Deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> Ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> Unexposed
	(Check One)			(Check One)		
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Altered	<input type="checkbox"/> Unaltered	<input type="checkbox"/> Moved	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Original Site		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (if known) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

Eight compactly-grouped late nineteenth and early twentieth century office buildings along Weybosset and Custom House Streets in downtown Providence form the nucleus of the Custom House Historic District. The Custom House (#1 on the site plan) designed by Ammi B. Young and erected in 1857, a severe grey granite Renaissance Revival style structure, is the focal point of this core area. It is already on the National Register. The bounds of the district encompass eight buildings and six parking areas adjacent to the core area, protecting that core area and bringing within the district several noteworthy buildings (see site plan). Thus, the Custom House Historic District incorporates the city's most famous commercial building, the Greek Revival style Arcade of 1828 (#2, and also on the Register).

Due to the irregular street pattern of the area, the arrangement of the buildings within the proposed district is exciting. They form terminal elements at the end of narrow side streets and are brought into ever-changing view as one walks along the curving east end of Weybosset Street. The Turks Head Building (#9) functions as both a terminal and transitional element -- closing a vista and, by its curving face, directing the eye around to new vistas down two principal thoroughfares.

With the exception of the Arcade, the Bank of North America Building (#3), built about 1855, is the oldest building in the proposed district. It is a narrow four story brownstone-faced brick structure designed by Thomas Tefft, an important local architect. The facade, articulated in the manner of a Florentine Renaissance palace, originally had a heavily rusticated first story which contrasted with the smooth upper stories and gave the building desirable mass at the base. Above the ground floor, belt courses at the level of the window sills punctuate the smooth surfaces; quoined corners and a heavy, modillioned cornice above a frieze containing the legend "Bank of North America" provide further contrast and interest. The ground floor was remodelled in 1906 by Frederick Field when the present iron columns and large plate glass windows were installed. The three upper stories, although intact, are now obscured by fire escapes and the brownstone has been painted a buff color. Despite these alterations, the Bank of North America Building is still an imposing structure.

The Blackstone Block (#4), a brick four story office building built c.1861, is the work of James C. Bucklin, a Providence builder-architect. Handled in a vernacular version of the Renaissance Revival style, the design may have been based on a drawing by Tefft with whom Bucklin was closely associated. Brownstone belt courses and rusticated window caps trim the facade. The cornice, lighter than that of the Bank of North America, has simple brackets instead of the classical modillions of the earlier building. The multi-paned windows of the ground floor, though not original, produce an effect sufficiently dense visually to avoid the awkward bareness of the Bank's remodelled store front.

See Continuation Sheet 1

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD (Check One or More as Appropriate)

<input type="checkbox"/> Pre-Columbian	<input type="checkbox"/> 16th Century	<input type="checkbox"/> 18th Century	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 20th Century
<input type="checkbox"/> 15th Century	<input type="checkbox"/> 17th Century	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 19th Century	

SPECIFIC DATE(S) (If Applicable and Known)

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE (Check One or More as Appropriate)

<input type="checkbox"/> Aboriginal	<input type="checkbox"/> Education	<input type="checkbox"/> Political	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Urban Planning
<input type="checkbox"/> Prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> Engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> Religion/Philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify)
<input type="checkbox"/> Historic	<input type="checkbox"/> Industry		<u>Social History</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> Invention	<input type="checkbox"/> Science	_____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> Landscape Architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> Sculpture	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Art	<input type="checkbox"/> Literature	<input type="checkbox"/> Social/Humanitarian	_____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> Military	<input type="checkbox"/> Theater	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Communications	<input type="checkbox"/> Music	<input type="checkbox"/> Transportation	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> Conservation			_____

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

The Custom House Historic District gives witness to important aspects of the economic, architectural and social history of Providence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

By the era of the American Revolution, Providence was becoming the economic hub of Rhode Island. In the late eighteenth century Rhode Island prosperity was based on maritime commerce. In the nineteenth century, when industrialism replaced trade as the principal economic activity, the port of Providence remained an important transportation center through which raw materials were brought into Rhode Island and manufactured goods taken to out of state markets. The Providence Custom House symbolizes this aspect of Providence history. Although Rhode Island's nineteenth century industrial activity was distributed across the countryside, taking advantage of rural water power sites, industries were also located in the city and control of rural industrial activity was centered here too -- through direct ownership and by reliance on Providence banks, insurance companies, cotton and wool brokers, mill supply houses, law firms, and the like. Since the latter half of the nineteenth century the Custom House Historic District and adjacent sections of downtown Providence have housed the state's major financial institutions, insurance companies, law offices, real estate brokers and "intown" offices of outlying mills.

The architecture of these buildings is closely related to economic history in several ways. For example, increased land costs in the downtown area promoted construction of taller buildings. Technological advances like the introduction of the passenger elevator and steel frame construction made greatly increased building heights feasible. The prosperity of Providence firms and individual entrepreneurs permitted them to indulge in construction of the impressive facade architecture these buildings exemplify. With the exception of the Blackstone Block, the buildings forming the nucleus of the Customs House Historic District are representative of the most sophisticated efforts of local architects and are characteristic of work by well known Boston and New York firms. They illustrate the transformation from the severe Renaissance Revival style of the 1850's, through the exuberant High Victorian Gothic, to the classicism which typified large office buildings

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

1. Bayles, Richard M.: History of Providence County (W.W. Preston & Co., New York, 1891), Vol. 1, pp. 682-684.
2. The Biographical Cyclopedia of Representative Men of Rhode Island (Providence National Publishing Company, Providence, 1881) p.554.
3. Cady, John H.: The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence (Akerman Standard Press, Providence 1957)
4. Grossman, Elizabeth G.: The Victorian Commercial Architecture of Downtown Providence. Unpublished Master's Thesis, Brown University, 1973.
5. Thomson's Illustrated Handbook of Providence (Providence, 1876)

(See Continuation Sheet 5)

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING A RECTANGLE LOCATING THE PROPERTY			O R	LATITUDE AND LONGITUDE COORDINATES DEFINING THE CENTER POINT OF A PROPERTY OF LESS THAN TEN ACRES		
CORNER	LATITUDE	LONGITUDE		LATITUDE	LONGITUDE	
	Degrees Minutes Seconds	Degrees Minutes Seconds		Degrees Minutes Seconds	Degrees Minutes Seconds	
NW	° ' "	° ' "		° ' "	° ' "	
NE	° ' "	SEE CONTINUATION SHEET 5		° ' "	° ' "	
SE	° ' "	° ' "		° ' "	° ' "	
SW	° ' "	° ' "		° ' "	° ' "	

APPROXIMATE ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY: 24

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

STATE:	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11. FORM PREPARED BY

NAME AND TITLE: David Chase, Survey Coordinator

ORGANIZATION: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission DATE: January, 1975

STREET AND NUMBER: 52 Power Street

CITY OR TOWN: Providence STATE: Rhode Island CODE: 44

12. STATE LIAISON OFFICER CERTIFICATION

As the designated State Liaison 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. The recommended level of significance of this nomination is:

National State Local

Name: Frank E. Williams

Title: State Historic Preservation Officer

Date: January 23, 1975

NATIONAL REGISTER VERIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register.

AR Martensen
Director, Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation

Date: 2/20/75

ATTEST:

Ronald M. Greenberg
Keeper of The National Register

Date: 2/20/75

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
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(Continuation Sheet) - 1

STATE		Rhode Island
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ENTRY NUMBER	DATE	
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(Number all entries)

2. Location

The bounds of the district are as follows: Starting at the intersection of Pine and Peck Streets, the boundary follows the midline of Peck Street to Weybosset Street and, crossing Weybosset Street, it follows the north-west lot line of 75 Weybosset Street and then that of the Arcade to Westminster Street; there the boundary turns north along the midline of Westminster Street to Exchange Street where it runs east along the midline of Exchange to Dyer Street; the boundary continues down Dyer Street to its intersection with Pine Street, and follows the midline of Pine Street to the starting point.

7. Description

The Equitable Building built in 1872 is one of the first examples in Providence of the use of cast iron. The building is attributed to William R. Walker, a local architect of considerable stature. The cast iron facade was manufactured by the Builder's Iron Foundry of Providence. Set at the corner of Weybosset and Custom House Streets, the building's two principal 4½ story elevations are joined by an angled corner bay set diagonally to the mass of the structure and calculated to present a facade which is viewed frontally as one moves west along Weybosset Street. The basement and first story levels are articulated by engaged columns with foliated capitals set on high pedestals. Large plate glass windows fill the interstices. The upper stories of the facades are composed of double windows embellished with engaged colonnettes and a series of moulded and flat surfaces receding to the plane of the sash. Above each window a tympanum contains trefoil panels. Bold foliated bosses are affixed to the pilasters between the windows. This layered articulation is both highly plastic and light, due to the large window surfaces allowed by the use of cast iron. Until recently the Equitable Building's ornamental facades have been subdued by an overall coat of grey paint. Now it is being re-painted in brilliant and contrasting hues.

The Wilcox Building (#6), designed by Edwin O. Howland, dates from 1875. It is one of the city's first office buildings in the polychromatic High Victorian Gothic style. This L-shaped structure, built around the Equitable Building, has facades on Weybosset and Custom House Streets. The brick facades are trimmed with stone and their regular fenestration serves as a pattern from which a complex decorative scheme is elaborated. The ground floor of the Weybosset Street elevation is arcaded; the voussoirs of its segmental arches are alternate blocks of pudding stone and grey granite. The capitals of the piers and polished granite columns are richly carved with foliage, flowers and birds. More abstract motifs embellish the stone belt courses and fancifully shaped window caps of the upper stories. The Weybosset Street facade is accented by a slight projection of the two right hand window bays, terminated by a fake gable

See Continuation Sheet 2

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7. Description (continued)

rising above the otherwise flat roofline. "The Wilcox Building" is inscribed above the third story windows of this tower-like projection.

For the Custom House Street elevation a less riotous decorative scheme is carried out in tesselated brickwork, and carved stone trim. Here the store fronts are cast iron, and are well preserved. The legend "The Wilcox Building" also appears on this facade.

32 Custom House Street (#7), a second building erected in 1875, is now known as the Real Estate Title Insurance Building. It too is a stone trimmed brick building in the High Victorian Gothic style. Its ornamentation is more architectonic than that of the Wilcox Building, relying upon contrasts of material, texture, and color to create a strongly accented, but well integrated facade. The bronze ground floor elevation, constructed in the early twentieth century, is also well designed. Framed by a massive rope moulding, its multi-paned double windows form a visually effective base for the masonry wall above.

The Banigan Building built in 1896 (#8, subsequently known as the Grosvenor and now as the AMICA Building) institutes a new scale and technology in Providence commercial buildings. Ten and a half stories high, it is the first tall building in the city, and is of fireproof steel frame construction. Designed by Winslow and Bigelow of Boston, the quality of its granite exterior walls attests to the craftsmanship of the contractor, Norcross Brothers, and demonstrates a return to classical precedent and Renaissance models for inspiration. The half story basement is treated as a foundation, the wall plane slightly projected and capped with a moulded watertable. The first and second stories are rusticated. The smooth surface of the walls above the second story is enlivened by moulded belt courses between the sixth and seventh and the ninth and tenth stories. A massive overhanging copper Florentine cornice completes the exterior. Like the other decorative accents, it contributes to the Banigan Building's marked horizontality.

Last of the buildings erected in the core area of the Custom House Historic District is the seventeen story Turks Head Building (#9) dating from 1913. Howells and Stokes of New York were responsible for its design. The granite trimmed white brick exterior employs the classical column approach -- base, shaft, capital -- to solve the problem of articulating the exterior of a tall office building. The lower three floors -- the "base" -- form a colossal blind arcade with engaged polished granite columns surmounted by a wide frieze. The fourth through twelfth stories constitute the "shaft" element -- its verticality emphasized by tall recessed windows. The shorter windows of the thirteenth story, linked by paneled interspaces, and the modillioned cornice serve as the "capital."

See Continuation Sheet 3

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7. Description (continued)

Called the Turks Head Building for a colonial structure so-named once on this site, the name is commemorated by a grotesque "turk's head" in high relief in the frieze on the rounded end of the building.

The district includes two other late nineteenth century office buildings outside the core area: 75 Weybosset Street (#10, c.1865) and the Hall Building (#11, 1876). 75 Weybosset Street is a small three story brick building, but three window bays wide, faced with an unusually ornate pudding stone facade of vaguely Jacobean inspiration. The five story brick Hall Building is less pretentious. Ornamental treatment is restricted to continuous bands of brownstone (now painted white) formed by the window lintels. Both buildings have obtrusive modern store fronts. Completing the building inventory of the district are five twentieth century buildings. Three of these are stone-trimmed brick neo-Federal structures: The Providence National Bank Building (#12, 1929/1950, now the Industrial National Bank Trust Department) designed by Howe and Church of Providence; the "Old Colony House" (#13, 1927, headquarters of the Old Colony Cooperative Bank) designed by Thomas H. James of Boston; and 61 Weybosset Street (#14, c.1945)^{^c}. At 102 Westminster Street is the Mee Hong Restaurant (#15) with two story "art deco" facade and beside it, at 110 Westminster Street, an office of the First Federal Savings and Loan Association (#16) with an all glass facade characteristic of the 1960's.^{^c}

Buildings in the Customs House Historic District are in good to excellent condition, with the exception of the Wilcox Building, the interior of which was seriously damaged by fire in January, 1975. Apart from some altered store fronts, the buildings are otherwise well preserved. All function essentially in the capacity for which they were intended.

8. Significance (continued)

of the late 1890's and early years of the twentieth century. Together they are the best integrated and best preserved assemblage of office buildings in the state.

Functionally and visually these buildings manifest Providence's role as the "metropolis" of Rhode Island. The sort of business activity they house, their compact siting and scale, and their expensive exterior articulation constitute the quintessential "big city" image. Indeed, though never so tall as office buildings in New York or sections of Boston, structures here produce the same looming, canyon-like spatial effects.

Less obvious, but quite as significant, are phenomena of late nineteenth century social history which these buildings reflect. The Wilcox Building is a product of that admixture of egotism and community pride

See Continuation Sheet 4

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8. Significance (continued)

prevalent in the "Age of Progress." Dutee Wilcox came to Providence from Massachusetts in 1850. He was sixteen, and set to work as a jeweler's apprentice. Nine years later he invented an improved shirt stud and, with a partner, established a company to manufacture it. The firm soon did an annual business in excess of \$100,000. Eventually Wilcox was sole owner of the business. He became a man of affairs in Providence, serving as a director of the Board of Trade and various banks, a member of the school committee, alderman, and a promoter of the YMCA. The business block he built, blazoned as it was with the Wilcox name, was glowingly described in a biography written in 1881:

In 1875 Mr. Wilcox erected one of the most magnificent and costly business buildings in Rhode Island.... It is a building of which the citizens of Providence may justly feel proud, and fittingly represents the character, talents, and tastes of the owner, and indicates the public spirit and liberality of one who has chosen in this manner to exhibit his deep interest in all that may improve and adorn his adopted city.

The Horatio Alger syndrome as a common late nineteenth century social phenomenon is more dramatically portrayed in the history of the man who built what was Rhode Island's largest office building: Joseph Banigan. Born in Ireland, his family came to the United States during the great migration of 1847. At the age of nine Banigan had a job in a Providence screw and hinge factory. Later he was apprenticed in the jewelry industry and as a journeyman, invented a machine for the production of "cork screw gold" used extensively in the manufacture of coral jewelry. In the 1860's Banigan established himself in the infant rubber goods industry, and in 1867 he organized the Woonsocket Rubber Company which became the world's largest manufacturer of rubber shoes and boots. In the 1890's much of the rubber goods industry was organized into a combine and Joseph Banigan, whose holdings were valued at \$4,200,000, became its first president and general manager, serving from 1893 to 1896. In the latter year he withdrew from the company, sold his holdings, and built the Banigan Building.

Joseph Banigan played the role of the beneficent tycoon to the full, giving liberal donations to churches and libraries and building homes for single working girls. He received recognition for his charitable activities from Pope Leo XIII: the Banigan family became accepted in Providence society. In short, Joseph Banigan, the poor immigrant boy, by dint of hard work and considerable talent, became a success. The Banigan Building symbolizes that success and stands as a monument to Joseph Banigan's rise from obscure poverty to wealth and social prominence.

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(Number all entries)

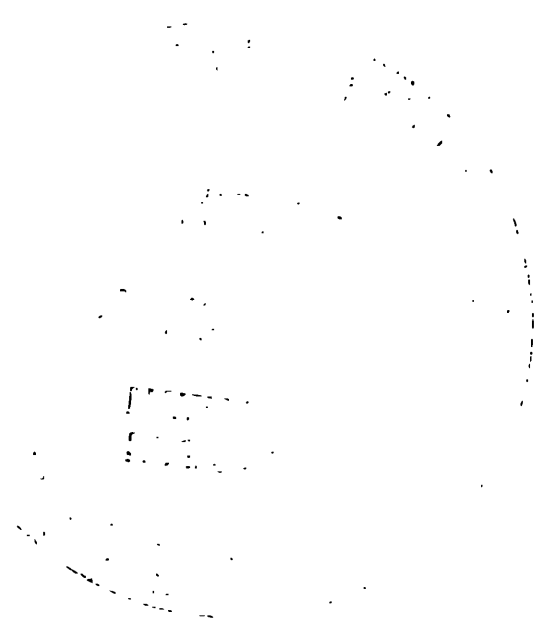
9. Major Bibliographical References

6. American Architect and Building News, Vol 1, p. 359,
November 4, 1876.

7. Providence Journal, July 1, 1876.

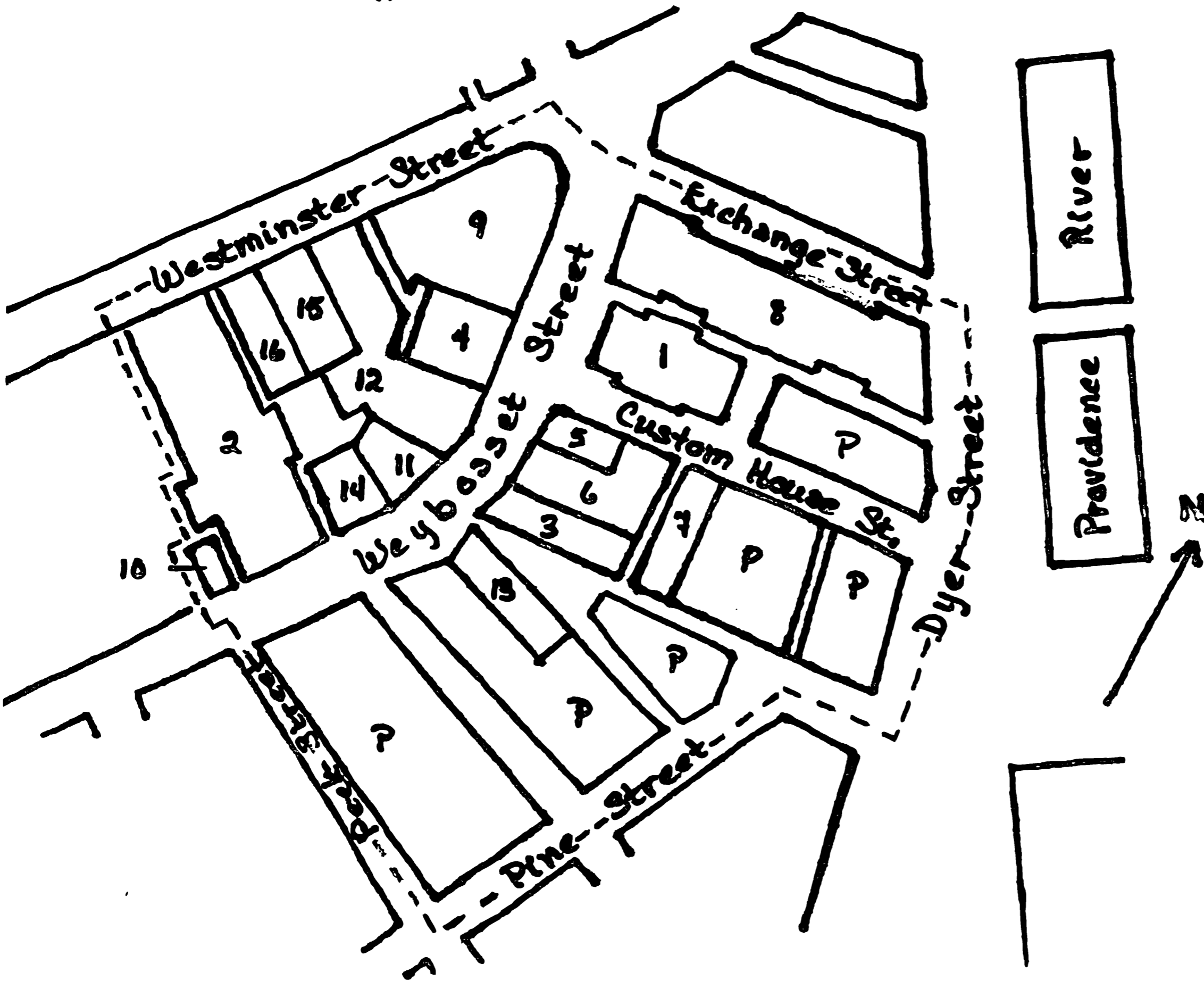
10. Geographical Data

NW A	19	299740	4632900
NE B	19	299950	4632900
SE C	19	299950	4632710
SW D	19	299730	4632720



Custom House Historic District

Site Plan



1. Custom House, 1857
2. Providence Arcade, 1828
3. Bank of North America Building, 1855
4. Blackstone Block, c. 1861
5. Equitable Building, 1872
6. Wilcox Building, 1875
7. 32 Custom House St., 1875
8. Banigan Building, 1896
9. Turks Head Building, 1913
10. 75 Weybosset Street, 1896
11. Hall Building, 1876
12. Providence National Bank Building (Industrial National Bank Trust Department), 1929/1950
13. "Old Colony House," Old Colony Cooperative Bank, 1927
14. 61 Weybosset Street, c. 1945
15. 102 Westminster Street, c. 1950
16. 110 Westminster Street, c. 1960

"P" Parking Area

--- Boundary of District