



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

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## 1. Name of Property

historic name: South Providence Branch, Providence Public Library

other name/site number: \_\_\_\_\_

## 2. Location

street & number: 455 Prairie Avenue

not for publication: N/A

city/town: Providence vicinity: N/A

state: RI county: Providence code: 007 zip code: 02905

## 3. Classification

Ownership of Property: private

Category of Property: building

Number of Resources within Property:

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	_____	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0

Name of related multiple property listing: Branch Buildings of the Providence Public Library, RI, 1926-1932

Property name South Prov. Branch, Prov. Public Library, Prov. Cty., RI

**4. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination      request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets      does not meet the National Register Criteria.

     See continuation sheet.

Frederick R. Williamson  
Signature of certifying official

1/29/98  
Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property      meets      does not meet the National Register criteria.

     See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

**5. National Park Service Certification**

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register      See continuation sheet.
- determined eligible for the National Register      See continuation sheet.
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register

other (explain):     

Edson R. Beal

3-5-98

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

**6. Function or Use**

Historic: EDUCATION

Sub: Library

Current: EDUCATION

Sub: Library

Property name South Prov. Branch, Prov. Public Library, Prov. Cty., RI

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification:

LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY  
REVIVALS/Colonial Revival

Other Description: \_\_\_\_\_

Materials: foundation BRICK roof Slate  
walls BRICK other \_\_\_\_\_

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

X See continuation sheet.

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties: \_\_\_\_\_

Applicable National Register Criteria: A & C

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): \_\_\_\_\_

Areas of Significance: EDUCATION  
SOCIAL HISTORY  
ARCHITECTURE

Period(s) of Significance: 1930

Significant Dates: 1930

Significant Person(s): N/A

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: A Howe, Wallis E.  
B Rathbone, C.K.

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

X See continuation sheet.

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### Description

The South Providence Branch of the Providence Public Library (PPL) at 441 Prairie Avenue was the first branch erected under an agreement between the City of Providence and the PPL, whereby the site, construction, and equipment were paid for from the PPL's endowment, but the yearly municipal appropriation was increased by \$10,000. Designed by Wallis E. Howe, the branch is a one-story Colonial Revival building of Harvard brick with limestone trim, measuring 90' x 50' with a 32' x 14' wing containing the reference room and basement stair hall. The building is situated on a lot facing both Prairie Avenue and Croyland Road, giving approach from two streets. The site is adjacent to St. Michael's Church and Rectory in a neighborhood containing primarily two- and three-family houses.

Wallis Howe altered his original prototype design to appropriately fit the narrow site when the South Providence branch was constructed in 1930. The design was turned gable end to the street, forcing Howe to create a building with a double focus, the side facing the street and the side housing the main entrance. Three granite steps lead to a granite platform on the south elevation. The entrance door is centered within a projecting gabled pavilion and capped by a projecting curved limestone pediment supported by concrete pilasters with a leaded glass transom just above the door. "South Providence Branch Library" is inscribed in the limestone above the glass transom. Directly above the entrance is the PPL seal carved in stone inscribed with the motto "Enlightenment." Two windows flank the entrance and feature limestone keystones. The railing on the platform is currently missing and has been replaced by a makeshift wooden railing. The original four panel front door has been replaced by a metal door. Exterior lights shown flanking the entrance in early photographs have been removed.

On both sides of the main entrance are three windows featuring limestone keystones; basement windows are located on axis with those above. A brick belt course circles around the building separating the raised basement from the main floor. The east and west elevations are identical in their composition; both narrow street elevations feature tall, arched casement windows, flanking a brick chimney. One window punctuates each wall of the rear wing.

The three part interior retains its original configuration and darkly stained woodwork. The entrance vestibule leads to a central hall/delivery room consisting of a wood charge desk and the librarian's office defined by wood and glass partitions. Wood bookshelves separate the adult reading

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room to the west and the children's reading room to the east. Wood and glass partitions originally used above the shelving have been removed. Open wood bookshelves line the walls with space for 12,000 books. Fireplaces (non-functioning) with wood surrounds exist on both the east and west walls. Window seats which flanked the fireplaces were removed when a new heating system was installed. The vaulted ceiling has been covered by a dropped acoustical tile ceiling and fluorescent lights have been installed. There is some evidence that the original ceiling was marbled.

A door next to the reference room leads to the basement which is dominated by a large community room seating 125. The basement also contains storage space for 8,000 books, shipping and book repair room, conference room, heating plant, and rest rooms. It is entered from enclosed interior stairs or an exterior entrance on the west side of the building. The basement is simply detailed reflecting its utilitarian function.

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### Significance

The branch libraries of the Providence Public Library, including the South Providence Branch, are historically significant for their role in the history of education in Providence and for their association with the history of the city's several immigrant communities. In addition, each branch is significant in the city's architectural history as a good example of its building type. Designed by prominent Providence architect Wallis E. Howe and built by contractor C.K. Rathbone in 1930, the South Providence Branch of the PPL is a one-story Colonial Revival building that continues to serve as a branch library. Under the terms of an agreement with the City of Providence, the annual appropriation to the PPL was increased by \$10,000 with the construction of this branch. The library retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, and association. It meets the requirements for registration under criteria A and C for its educational and architectural significance as more fully described in the multiple property submission "Branch Buildings of the Providence Public Library, Rhode Island, 1926-1932."

In 1921 the South Providence Community Club began collecting books for a public library. Letters were sent to residents of that part of the city, to established libraries, and to local organizations soliciting donations of any books in fair or good condition. Approximately 1,500 volumes were collected and in 1922 the South Providence Community Library was established in a small room in the Oxford Street Grammar School; it was open two days each week. A few months later, at the request of the Club, the library was taken over by the PPL as a sub-branch.

In 1924 the sub-branch moved to the Sixth Ward Room at the corner of Public and Burnside Streets where the hours of service were expanded to five days each week. Its second floor location was made even more inconvenient because the library had to close whenever the ward room was needed. During the presidential election year of 1928, the branch had to be closed on seven different days, because of caucuses or elections being held in the Ward Room.

By 1926 there were nearly 3,000 registered patrons and circulation reached about 45,000. South Providence needed its own branch building to provide more space, a community room, and the separation of adult and juvenile readers. Land adjacent to St. Michael's Church was acquired in 1929 and construction of the South Providence Branch was completed in 1930. The new building officially opened to the public on January 20, 1930. A

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Neighborhood Advisory Committee was formed to maintain close contact with the community.

The building and book collection sustained fire damage on March 9, 1970, when approximately 2,000 books were lost. Residents of the neighborhood demonstrated their commitment to the library. Within a day, the Mothers of the South Side Boys' Club met with concerned citizens ready to help. By March 12, 1970 the Department of State Library Services loaned a bookmobile so the branch could continue to serve the community while repairs were made.

The branch continues a tradition of community outreach and maintains close contact with the residents of South Providence. An educational and cultural resource for people of all ages and nationalities, it remains a widely used resource. The interior and exterior of the South Providence Branch are reminders of its significant historical association.

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**9. Major Bibliographical References**

See continuation sheet.

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other -- Specify Repository: Providence Public Library

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of Property: less than one

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
A	<u>19</u>	<u>299430</u>	<u>4630400</u>	B	_____	_____
C	_____	_____	_____	D	_____	_____

See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description:  See continuation sheet.

Plat 48, Lots 659, 660, 695, 696

Boundary Justification:  See continuation sheet.

The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the 1930 South Providence Branch Library.

**11. Form Prepared By**

Name/Title: Jean Douglas, Consultant

Organization: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: April 1997

Street & Number: 79 Rumstick Road Telephone: 401-245-1804

City or Town: Barrington State: RI ZIP: 02806



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## **Major Bibliographical References**

Sherman, Clarence E. The Service of the Providence Public Library to the Community. Providence: Livermore & Knight Co., 1926.

"The South Providence Branch Dedication." Books for All 5 (February 1930): 34-35.