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# PROVIDENCE

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Rhody Gem

## The Valley

HOW CLEANING UP  
THE WOONY HELPED  
TRANSFORM A CITY  
NEIGHBORHOOD INTO AN  
INDUSTRIAL ARTS HUB

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BY KAREN GRECO

# Take Me to the River

**HOW THE CLEAN-UP OF THE WOONASQUATUCKET HELPED TRANSFORM  
A BLIGHTED NEIGHBORHOOD INTO AN INDUSTRIAL ARTS HUB**



Photo courtesy of the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council

Paddle tours on the  
Woonasquatucket River run  
through September

"I have a dream," Jill Davidson, Development Director of the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council, confides with a wide smile. Her gaze moves to the Woonasquatucket River just across Kinsley Avenue. "In it, people are in inner tubes, floating down the Woony through the Valley and into downtown Providence."

On this muggy Saturday, sitting on marble slabs in front of the Farm Fresh Rhode Island headquarters, her vision is like lemonade for the soul.

To tell the story of Providence's Valley neighborhood, you have to first tell the story of the river that runs through it.



**“We talked to local activists, to the neighborhood, to find out what they wanted. It was green spaces, transportation, a safe place for their kids to play.”**

**- JILL DAVIDSON**, Development Director of the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council



Photos courtesy of the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council

The Woonasquatucket River Greenway links Providence, Johnston, and North Smithfield



## THE WOONASQUATUCKET RIVER

bisects Providence, running through Olneyville Square all the way through downtown Providence and out to the bay. A narrow river with a swift current, it was an ideal power source for the burgeoning mill industries that drove Rhode Island's industrial revolution. Steam power's introduction in the early 20th century solidified the river as an economic driver for the neighborhoods it traversed.

When Providence's industrial tides changed, a depleted and polluted Woono was left in their wake. The once bustling neighborhoods at its banks became burned out shells of capitalism.

"The river was a dumping ground," says Davidson. She describes the Valley neighborhood of the 1990s and early aughts as one of burned-out buildings with industrial trash scattered throughout the lots. "We talked to local activists, to the neighborhood, to find out what they wanted. It was green spaces, transportation, a safe place for their kids to play."

Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council formed in the early 1990s to clean up the river, which runs from Glocester to Narragansett Bay. With financial assistance from the federal and state government, they began an ambitious plan to turn a blighted area into an eco-conscious neighborhood where industry could thrive beside residential homes.

This proved transformative for the Valley.

"It took us almost 20 years to get through our environmental clean-up and to fix up the building to maximize our space," explains Howie Sneider, Executive Director of The Steel Yard. A neighborhood pioneer, the industrial arts center purchased the old Providence Iron and Steel Company building in 2002.

But, it was the past three years, Sneider explains, that the neighborhood experienced a dramatic shift. The City's ambitious Woonasquatucket Vision Plan, which included money from the Environmental Protection Agency to clean up brownfield sites in the Woonasquatucket corridor, spearheaded this transformation.

"Cleaning up the river gave the neighborhood economic leverage," explains Davidson of the Watershed Council. "People were willing to invest in the neighborhood."

After the troubling attempts of real estate developers in the early to mid-aughts to gentrify the area with luxury lofts, which brought protests from artists and neighborhood activists, today investment in the Valley is slow and mindful, with non-profits leading the charge.

One recent investment includes the opening of Farm Fresh Rhode Island's 60,000-square-foot food hub. Built on a brownfield site where a burned out factory once was, Farm Fresh worked with the Watershed Council not only on remediation of the site but also on the landscaping that includes the storm water management on the grounds, so that polluted runoff does not enter the river.

Farm Fresh hosts a year-round indoor farmers market on Saturdays and also serves as a distribution hub for their popular delivery service Market Mobile, which brings produce and related items direct to consumers' homes twice a week. In the coming months, local food makers will begin moving into new production facilities within the building, leased at below-market rents, that also serve as small retail spots.



Along with volunteers, WRWC River Rangers work on projects that sustain, improve, and expand the Greenway and its parks





"Historically, this is an industrial neighborhood," says Leigh Vincola, Director of Advancement for Farm Fresh Rhode Island. "Agriculture is part of a new, green industry, one that fits into the history of the neighborhood."

"We came into the neighborhood in a very thoughtful and intentional way. We want to be a resource for food access for families in the neighborhood, while also providing jobs for local residents," Vincola continues. "There's a strong arts community there and we integrate with them."

This community of artists relies on the affordable industrial space to create their work. A number of pioneering artist collaboratives – like The Wurks, Ajay Land Co, Nicholson File Art Studios – took over the empty mill buildings, turning them into studios and shop spaces for industrial artists. A loose collective has formed between these diverse neighboring businesses, where they all meet regularly to talk about individual plans so they can promote each other's events and lend support.

Neighborhood revitalization comes with a cost, and issues surrounding gentrification loom in the background. With Olneyville, the neighborhood with the highest crime rate in the city, abutting the Valley, more needs to be done to address inequities within the neighborhood as well as the Providence community at large.

"There is a fear of displacement in the neighborhood," admits the Steel Yard's Sneider. "Small businesses and artists feel the risk of gentrification."

"The Valley is unique because it has been less residential and more of an industrial/maker neighborhood," says Jennifer Hawkins, executive director of ONE Neighborhood Builders, a community development organization. "The conversations are less around displacing residents as it is businesses who, all of a sudden, their noise or the fumes from their work become a problem for newcomers. It's about balancing adaptive reuse with what's been here all along."



Photography by Nick DelGiudice



# The Role of Eagle Square

BY STEVE TRIEDMAN

In the early 1990s, the City of Providence identified the Valley section, a once thriving manufacturing area that had become an abandoned disaster zone, as a new opportunity. The plan called for a supermarket and retail at Eagle Square that would serve as the catalyst for revitalization of the area. However, there was little interest, and artists and squatters had taken over many of the buildings.

Fort Thunder, a vibrant place full of many artists and bands, as well as a weekend flea market, housed in a second-floor warehouse of a pre-Civil War former textile factory, drew many students and young artists to the area from 1995-2001. But,

there were three major problems. First, no one was interested in investing money in the area; second, it was a very high crime area; and, third, many of the buildings were considered dangerous fire traps.

When the City finally got a developer interested, he initially wanted to tear down Eagle Square, and a war between the artists, musicians, squatters, and eventually Providence Preservation Society began. When the battle was over, a compromise saved four of the mill buildings and an investment of \$36,000,000 in retail, office, and residential complex was made. As a condition of the compromise, rentable artist studios and work/display spaces were incorporated into the project.

Long-time residents of Olneyville have benefitted from Eagle Square's retail component and Eagle Square became the catalyst for revitalization of the Valley neighborhood with hundreds of millions of dollars invested in Monohasset Mill, the Steel Yard, the Plant, Firehouse 13, Rising Sun Mills, Calender Mills, and Alco. A fragile balance between gentrification, development, and the need for affordable housing remains, anchored by the United Way on the southern end of the street and the Steel Yard and the Waterplace Art Center in the north.

But what's impossible to ignore is the impressive positive growth of this once neglected part of Providence.



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**- LEIGH VINCOLA,**  
Director of Advancement for  
Farm Fresh Rhode Island





In addition to exhibits such as Mary Beth Meehan's recent *Eye to Eye*, WaterFire Arts Center provides opportunities. Young students from the Manton Avenue Project (MAP), helped by funding from United Way at the southern end of Valley Street, worked on a summer project with the Wilbury Theatre, currently housed at the Center, where it was curated and presented to the public for two weeks in August.

Bird's-eye view of the reception for *Eye to Eye Photographs and Projects* by Mary Beth Meehan, which ran at WaterFire Arts Center on Valley Street through August 22





Photos by Matthew TW Huang,  
courtesy of WaterFire Arts Center

Not just for exhibits:  
weddings, trade shows,  
and more can all be held at  
WaterFire Arts Center

WaterFire Arts Center built their beautiful new space with exactly that in mind. While best known for their eponymous annual summer blockbuster that turns downtown's waterfront into a blazing arts destination, the organization's office and storage spaces were in the Valley. With deep roots already planted in the neighborhood, the decision to create their state-of-the-art arts production complex was done mindfully.

"We'll only continue to exist if the community wants us. How do we build for the next 25 years? We need the community's buy-in," says Laura Duclos, their Director of Creative Services. Building community-centered events was the impetus behind their

Thursday TroopTop nights. Through a partnership with neighboring restaurant Troop, they offer cocktails and snacks on their rooftop while community DJs spin music.

This partnership helps introduce the neighborhood to the work happening at the arts center. One Thursday, there's an artist doing live painting outside. Another features a more traditional gallery show. While each event is unique, it all serves to bring art to an underserved audience in an accessible and welcoming space. "We want people to enjoy where we live. Participate, walk, bike, bring people into the neighborhood," says Duclos. "This is about enriching people's lives."



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Down in the Valley

The Industrious Spirit Company makes its home on Sims Avenue



Photography by Nick DelGiudice

With the river as the connector, once the construction on the aqueduct and the bike path is complete, the vision of a Providence arts corridor will be fully realized.

As the Valley becomes a destination for arts lovers, and as the continued river clean-up invites investment dollars from real estate developers, maintaining the delicate ecosystem between residents, artists, and commerce is imperative. But so is the need for locally owned enterprises that energize the neighborhood.

“The densification by adding properties like Farm Fresh and the Steel Yard, the Valley enlivened a ghost town. It brought commerce and people to support locally owned businesses,” Hawkins from One Neighborhood Builders points out. Along with artists and arts organizations, those businesses include Revival Brewing Company, The Industrious Spirit Co, and the Garden of Eve Caribbean Cuisine.

“The Watershed did a Herculean job of restoring the river,” continues Hawkins. “The river is a place-making feature. It connects the community.” PM