



Map courtesy Providence City Archives

TIME, SPACE AND TRAFFIC TRIANGLES

New Context for Columbus Square

TRACI PICARD



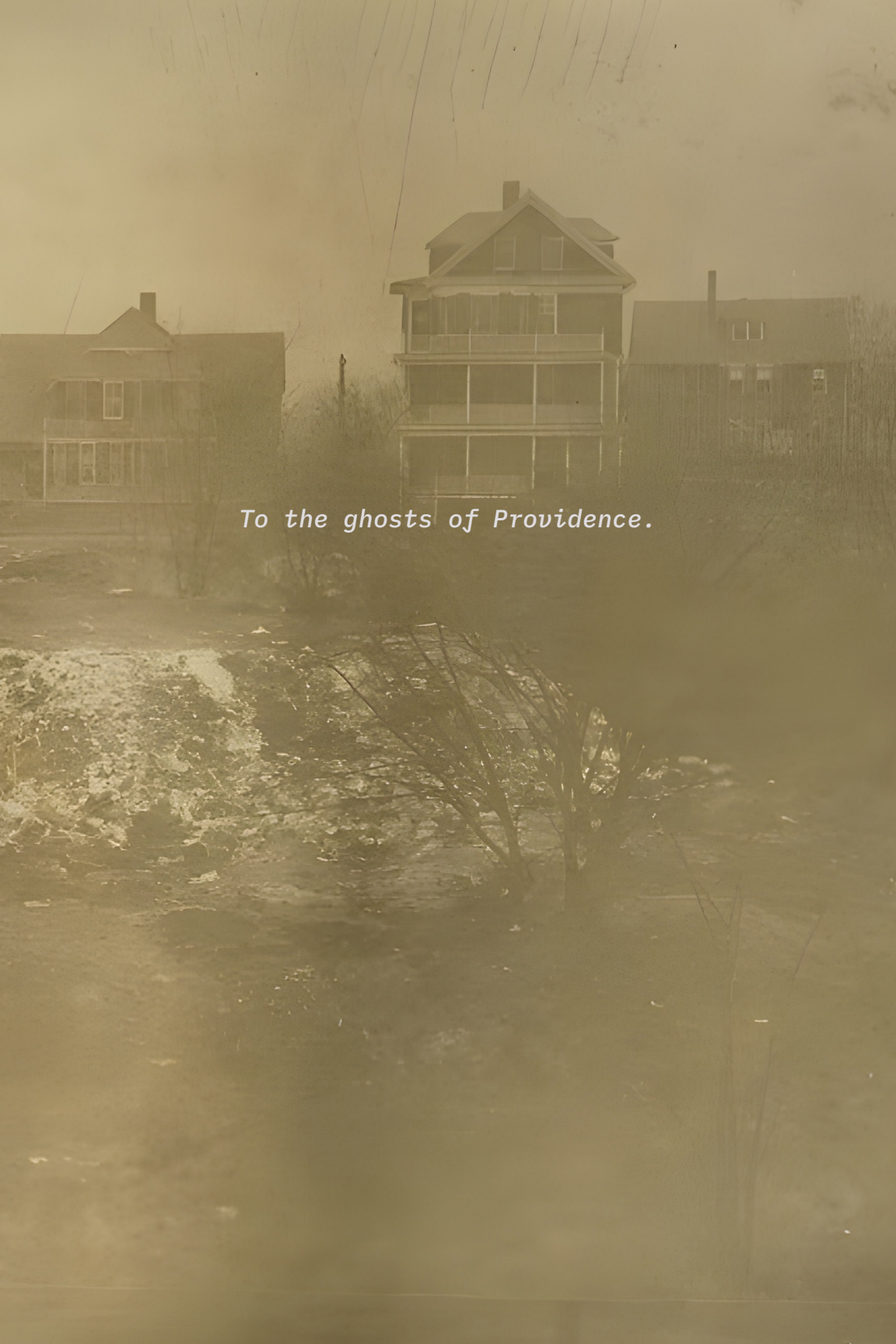
*Reservoir Avenue dumps by Lewis Hines,
courtesy of Library of Congress*



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produced as part of a residency at the
Providence Commemoration Lab.

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To the ghosts of Providence.



A Re-Examination of Columbus Square

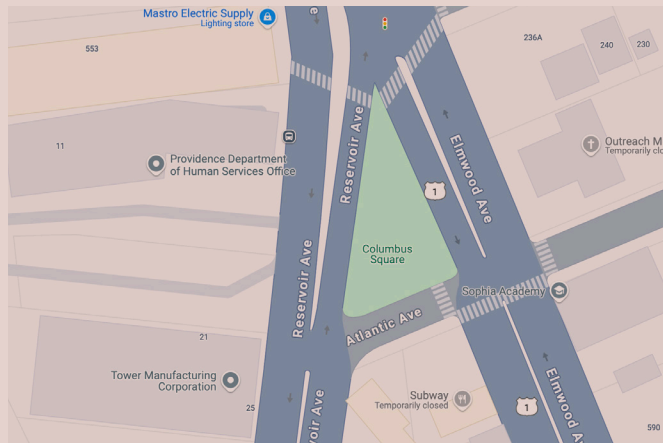
BY TRACI PICARD

*Drawing of Columbus from The Gorham
Collection, courtesy of John Hay Library*

Meet Columbus Square

At the intersection of Elmwood and Reservoir Avenues Providence's third smallest park begins to wake up. A sparrow perches on an empty pedestal, preening her feathers as the sun rises over the Walgreens parking lot. Sycamore leaves reach towards the day's new light. A young man on a moped puts toward his home, tired after a night out with friends. Car traffic, never actually absent from Elmwood Ave, picks up and the day's first bus passengers wait blearily for their ride to work. An early dog walker and his canine companion pass through the Square on their way to Mashapaug Pond. An Amtrak train headed to New York City rolls past on the train tracks. Another day has dawned on Columbus Square¹.

This place is a crossroads, something historically known in many different cultures as a place of storytelling and magic, as well as trade and danger. It is anchored into the neighborhood by the weight of its name, and the energy of countless people who have passed by and exchanged energy with the history commemorated here. This makes it a great place to consider how a tiny traffic triangle is part of the vast network of public memory; connected to global history by its name, and by the statue which stood here for over a century.



View of the Former Columbus Square on Google Maps

¹ I am choosing to call the place by the name Columbus Square in this essay. I respect others' choice to refer to it by other names, but for the purpose of my argument, this is what makes sense to me.

The small scrap of land is called a square, considered a park, and closely resembles a traffic island. Named in honor of Christopher Columbus, the “square” featured a bronze likeness of the Genoese explorer credited with “discovering” America, arms raised, pointing, forever², into the distance. “Land, ho!” Or, perhaps, “Veo la tierra!”

“Gestures are the true archives of the city.”

*Certeau, Giard et Mayol,
The Practice of Everyday Life*



*From the Gorham Collection,
courtesy of John Hay Library*

But there is no such person as Christopher Columbus. Or, rather, there both is and is not. A Genoese called Cristofa Colombo, or something similar, did live in the second half of the 15th century, and was a real historical actor. But the mythological character of “Christopher Columbus” is more a vessel for 400 years of colonial narrative than an accurately portrayed person. And yet, while much ink has been spilled to uphold these stories, the issue of his “voyages of discovery” remains an unresolved rupture in the foundation of American identity today.

These commemorative acts, the naming and the hoisting, have marked the little paean to pavement, connecting it forever to the 15th century explorer, connecting us all to his mythology, and to centuries of actions and ideas stretching well beyond this site. The connection is inherently an international story, a global story, one which brings people together, and breaks us apart.

“The figure of Columbus stands 6 “8” high and 4”6” wide and deep; the base is 5’3” by 5’4”. The explorer is caught in mid-stride, his left foot stepping off the base. In his left hand he holds a globe; his right arm is raised, his index finger pointing, as if giving an order or sighting land.”

*National Register of Historic Places Report,
Elmwood*

The city of Providence itself has a history³ which provides context to this place. For a very long time, this area was the homelands of the Narragansett

² Or so it was thought

³ This is an extremely condensed version

Indians, and allied tribes⁴. Beginning in 1636, with the arrival of English colonist Roger Williams, Providence became the center⁵ of a new British colony called Rhode Island and Providence Plantations. The square sits amongst the historic Pondlands, long graced with several bodies of water, untold numbers of wild plants and animals, and a gathering place for Indigenous families. The air was fresh and the free-flowing water was clean, but this has all changed.

After a period of colonization and conflict which included two wars waged against the Narragansett and allied peoples, early Providence settled into a maritime economy, based in large part on the business of slavery and deeply connected to the islands of the Caribbean⁶. As the trans-Atlantic slave trade wound slowly to a close, local merchants embraced new opportunities to fuel economic growth, essentially sparking the American Industrial Revolution in nearby Pawtucket. These economic pursuits led to significant effects on people and the environment.

Over time, Providence grew into a very diverse place with a booming economy closely connected to the textile industry, jewelry making, arts and education. These industries, as well as economic and social distress overseas and an increase in mobility, led to significant waves of migration, population growth and associated urban development. But the boom did not last; most of these businesses are

gone now, leaving empty buildings and industrial-scale pollution in their wake.

“Erik B. Christiansen says that there is a hunger for something unifying in the neighborhood, a function that, for some, the Columbus statue served in the past. He notes that while it is not the Committee’s purpose today to determine what that should be, it is important to note that there is a shared desire for something inclusive, and the Columbus Statue is not it....He calls the Columbus statue an icon to the cause of expansion and conquest valorized there and asks whether our community holds different values than our 1893 predecessors or a different vision of the future.”

Commemorative Works Commission Hearing

Columbus Square, today, doesn’t seem like the kind of place you’d spend a year thinking about. In fact, the most common response this writer has gotten when the subject comes up is “I’ve never really thought about that place at all.” It is easy to ignore, easy to pass by. And yet, for others, it is the site of significant emotion. There are people who fiercely defend Columbus and his presence in our shared public space. There are others who despise him, and cannot abide even one more moment of that pointing finger. Over the centuries, he has moved from man to myth, thanks to a deliberate process of narrative creation.

We all live with a narrative inheritance; the mental baggage of the stories we

4 For more details on the Indigenous history of RI, please see Tomaquag museum, *Native Providence* by Patricia Rubertone and scholarship and storytelling by Indigenous people, such as Mack Scott.

5 Pardon me while I ignore Newport for the sake of flow

6 In short, the slave trade plus provisioning plantations and importing their sugar and molasses

were taught. “The world we have,” according to author John Greene, “is a product of all the worlds we used to share.” The mythologizing of Columbus on New England soil began in earnest in the late 1700s, drastically increased throughout the 1800s, and cemented itself into our educational system in the 1900s. Some of us grew up singing songs in praise of Columbus, marching in parades meant to honor him, and reading books such as *“Into the Unknown West,”* which positions Columbus as a true hero, facing insult and danger and “savage peoples” in order to spread Christianity and serve “his” people.

Author Frank Mundell, known for writing over twenty books about heroism⁷ for young people, dispensed with facts, making claims such as “No one dreamt that the world was round” in 1492, and alleging that “he [Columbus] was tall, well-formed, muscular, and dignified in his manner.” No one today knows what Columbus looked like, but we do know that our bronze heroes must play the part. Mundell claimed that Columbus “penetrated unknown regions”, the oft-hidden metaphor of sexual force clear as day here. His dramatic construction of heroism—individual, physically robust, masculine—burns belief into our minds, making the questioning of stories nearly impossible.

“This is where the statue of Columbus should be, Columbus Square, as it has been all of my years!”

Community member Hilding Munson

The truth of the man is rather more boring than the two polarized extremes; he was a sailor, with a bit more skill than average, and a heap more greed, who built on the work of others, sailed alongside others, and left his work for others to complete. The most intense work of cultural mythology here has been to turn the collective power of history into an individual story. Rarely does any individual deserve all of the credit, or all of the blame, for creating major global change. The problem is, it is much harder to tell a myth about collaboration; it is much more complicated to build a temple to teamwork.

“The unveiling ceremony began on November 8, 1893. A procession formed at the Elmwood Clubhouse at the corner of Burnett Street and Elmwood Ave. ‘under the escort of Reeves’s American Band and a chorus of over 300 children’ from the Elmwood Grammar and Point Street School. A platoon of police from the 7th Station, belonging to a precinct from the neighborhood, also participated in the march...This was followed by a lengthy oration on the merits of art in public spaces that remind the public of historical figures who ‘merited the honor paid [to] them,’ and concluded that the statue ‘stands on this conspicuous site to be a witness of things that uplift and clear the hearts of men, and to be an inspiring object lesson for years to come.’ The oration concluded with a singing of ‘America’ and ‘My Country, ‘Tis of Thee’ by all attending.”

City Archivist Caleb Horton, Archivist’s Report for Commemorative Works Commission

7 Mundell has his own idea of what heroism means, one which is not universally accepted

The man we call Columbus committed significant violent acts. He was not a neutral figure; he “claimed” people and land for himself, and for the Spanish monarchs who employed him. He hurt others, and allowed his team to hurt others, too. The exploration and colonization of lands outside of Europe was already happening, but the 1492 voyage accelerated this work, extended the range, and it had consequences. Some historians like to explain historic behavior with the phrase “he was a person of his time.” But times are complicated, and there is no one way to experience—or to remember—a time period. Historian Lisa Hellman says “Even at one time, or within one culture, it is not certain that people share the same worldview or ideals.” It is necessary to acknowledge that there are many aspects to the story of colonization, some of which are truly devastating, and to understand that many do not consider Columbus to be a hero. This problematic legacy was understood in the time he lived and, by some, through all of the eras since.

“Joseph Gizzarelli says he has a petition with 2,755 signatures calling for the removal of the statue. Speaking on behalf of signatories, including Italian Americans who do not exalt Columbus, he supports removal and deaccession.”

Commemorative Works Commission Hearing

COLUMBUS!!

BARTHOLDI'S MAGNIFICENT
Solid Silver Statue
 MADE BY THE
GORHAM COMPANY.

Free Exhibition and Unveiling
 —AT—
MUSIC HALL - - WEDNESDAY EVENING, MAY 31.

The Gorham Manufacturing Company has kindly consented to allow this great work of art to be shown to the people of Providence for one evening. There will be speaking and the presentation of a matter of special interest to all Providence people.
FREE TO ALL AND ALL INVITED!

... statue is a
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AMERICA.
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Advertising materials courtesy of
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The History of the Square and its Environs

“Stephanie Fortunato summarizes several years of email correspondence, concluding that concerned stakeholders speak to various concerns about Christopher Columbus and his historical, social, cultural and environmental legacy, including his attachment to the Chicago Exposition; Gorham’s role in Elmwood; and consideration of the Columbus statue as an art object.”

Commemorative Works Commission Hearing

The square sits right in the heart of Elmwood, a neighborhood of Providence which was developed in the mid-1800s and soon afterwards anchored by industry. Although the 1979 *National Register Nomination* says “All of Elmwood was originally an agricultural adjunct of Providence,” the word *originally* seems inadequate. But for decades previous to the 19th century wave of development, privately owned farms had dotted the land, and a small community of people clustered around Mashapaug Pond. There was diversity in the pondside community. A number of families were descended from Indigenous folks and formerly enslaved people⁸, and all enjoyed the air and water of the area. This changed when Gorham Silver bought 36 acres and set up shop immediately next to Mashapaug Pond.

This decorative arts business, with roots in making silver spoons from Mexican silver coins, went through a

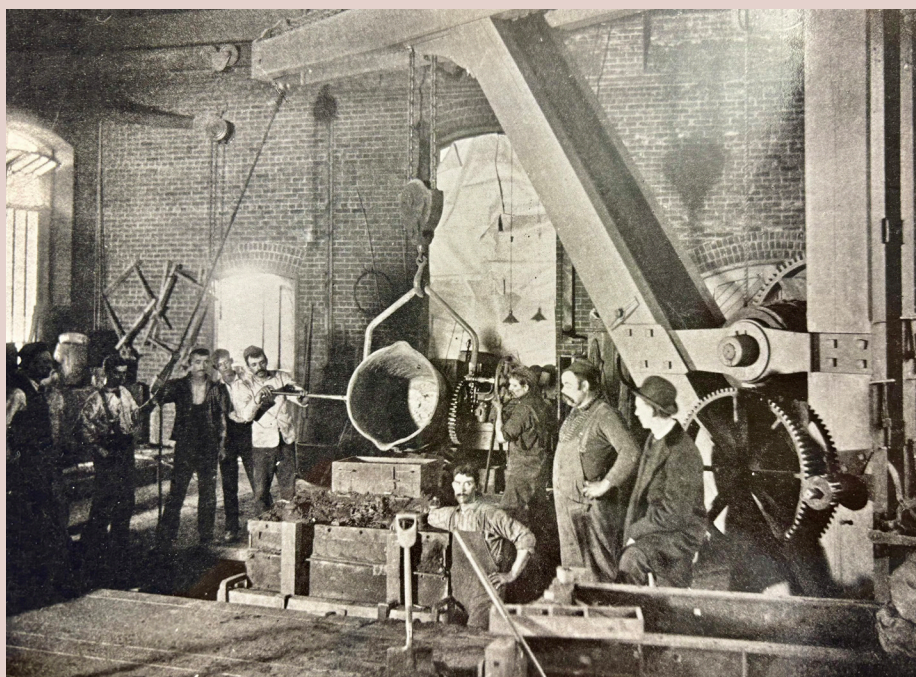
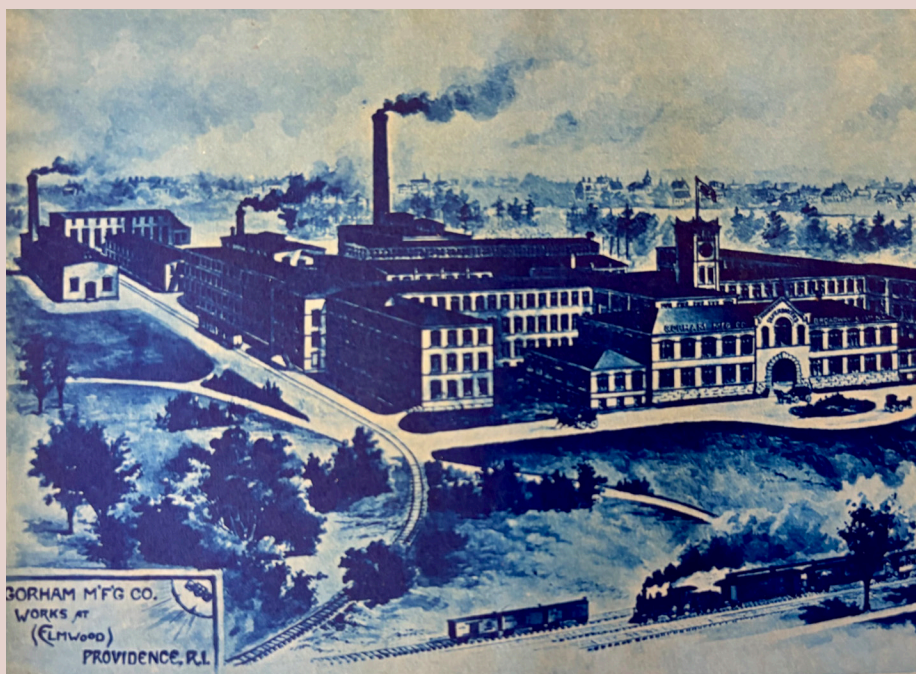
huge amount of silver extracted from mines. We cannot consider the history of Gorham without also considering the distant sites of extraction which supported the silver industry. Their artisans produced a range of beautiful and luxurious items⁹ with devastating side effects for the local people who had to live with the environmental pollution this generated. By locals, we might consider those local to the Gorham site as well as the miners and their communities, connected forever by a shared legacy of extraction and pollution. Multiple waste-generating businesses followed suit, less well known today than Gorham, such as Elmwood Cotton Mills, Elmwood Mills¹⁰, Sprague Mowing Machine Company, the Mechanical Fabric Company, as well as jewelry manufacturing, breweries and enamel producers. Together they profoundly damaged the water, air and soil.

More homes were built nearby to serve both the workers and owners of these new businesses, segregated by class. Those to one side of the Square were mainly decadent mansions; large, ornate and made to communicate wealth. Those to the other side were more likely working-class housing, including triple-deckers, boarding houses and tenements set near the train tracks. Each building is a layer-cake of lives lived, collective histories stacked up, hopes and dreams soaked into the brick and wood like rainwater.

⁸ For more on this, see *Native Providence*

⁹ Not everything Gorham made was objectively beautiful. For example, see their spoons commemorating Robert E. Lee, and celebrating cotton.

¹⁰ *Shoelaces*



*From the Gorham Collection,
courtesy of John Hay Library*

"On my first trip to explore Mashapaug Pond, I was struck by the difficulty of finding it. This 77-acre kettle pond is located behind two shopping malls, three obscure city parks, a large industrial park and a string of private homes on its southeast and southwest shores. I kept a road map in my pocket as I attempted to ride my bike around the pond."

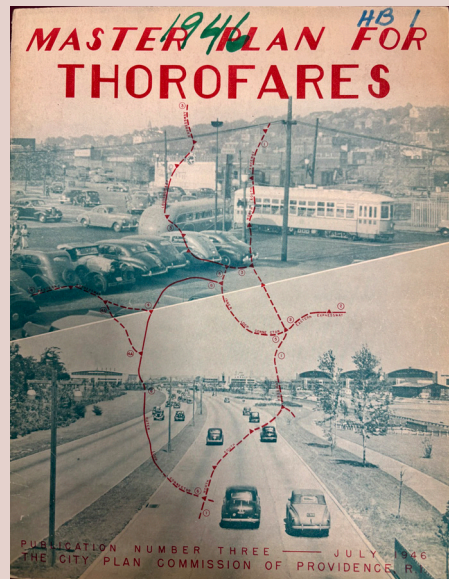
Holly Ewald, UPP Arts

In the 1920s, the road known as Elmwood Ave was converted to Interstate 1, connecting the town of Fort Kent in Maine to Key West, Florida. The road itself was widened, Elm trees removed, trolleys and transit were discouraged, and businesses meant to serve this pass-through population sprang up all around the Square. The US Department of Agriculture praised this project in 1927, claiming that "US Route No. 1 is a Highway of History." This is true, although maybe not in the way they meant it.

The highway-ness of this space resonates today. It can be felt in the crossability of Elmwood Ave, the sense that it was designed for cars without much consideration for the pedestrian. The road acts as a barrier more than a connector, and more than a few people seem to mutter a prayer before stepping out into the street. HOOOONK!

In mid-century Providence there was a shift towards an especially high concentration of car-centric businesses here, and this automobile mania changed the neighborhood forever.

In 1942, there were sixteen "gas and oil service stations" on Elmwood Ave alone, with many more adjacent.¹¹ The strangely useless Huntington Expressway and its attendant industrial complex destroyed yet more acres of housing¹² and community space. And then, the larger and more convenient Interstate 95 came along, leaving many Route 1 businesses to languish, never to recover.



Master Plan for Thorofares courtesy of Providence City Archives

"The city is a stage for a war of narratives."

*Certeau, Giard et Mayol,
The Practice of Everyday Life*

Public memory is not just a series of isolated events. It is not a list. It is a set of questions, a path winding through

¹¹ 1942 Providence Directory

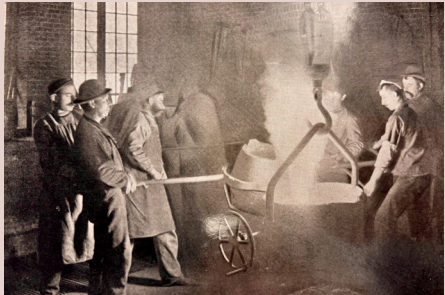
¹² Primarily occupied by low income folks, people of color and immigrants

everyday life and labor, a shared anchor which holds us together. It is also fallible, subject to human error. It is framed as fragile, a hothouse flower in need of so much care. But memory can be resilient, can ebb and flow, can cross boundaries. It lives within us all, and can't be controlled with statues or songs, despite great effort to do so.

Why was the square named after Columbus, and why was his statue hoisted up above this neighborhood? Some say it was the Italians and their civic pride, which is indeed part of the story of Columbus' mythology in America. However, in the 1890s, this neighborhood had little to no Italian or Italian-American population.¹³ Early Elmwood was populated in large part by English Protestants, as well as German immigrant workers. The Elmwood Club, built in the 1880s at 344 Elmwood Ave, was intended as a "social center for upper-class, Yankee Elmwood until 1910".¹⁴ In fact, by the mid-1920s, the local Ku Klux Klan chapter had set up their headquarters at Altair Hall on the corner of Elmwood Ave and Friendship Street¹⁵. So, clearly not a space particularly welcoming to Catholics¹⁶.

It was local industrialists, mill owners and landlords who got together, formed a very short-lived civic organization and donated this little trapezoid to the City of Providence. At the same time, Gorham Silver had produced a solid silver Columbus

statue, designed by French sculptor Frederic Augusto Bartholdi¹⁷ for the purpose of promoting the company at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago¹⁸. Upon the statue's return from Chicago, Gorham workers melted him down and produced a bronze copy, which this mysterious civic group erected in their new park.



*From the Gorham Collection,
courtesy of John Hay Library*

¹³ According to the 1896 Providence House Directory, of which I did a thorough analysis

¹⁴ Elmwood Preservation Report

¹⁵ Report of Adjutant General. The Adjutant General's Office March 20, 1928.

¹⁶ If one were to read local churches as an archive, there are Baptist, Lutheran and Methodist nearby.

¹⁷ Bartholdi b. France 1834-1904, best known for designing the Statue of Liberty

¹⁸ While exploring the Columbian Exposition is beyond the scope, it is worth your looking into



“Do you support the vandalism of that statue, as your tweet seems to indicate?” asked Gene Valicenti.

“You know, I do,” said Kerwin. “And I think the statue should be removed... I think healthy civil disobedience is really good for our society...”

“Really?” asked Valicenti, all but clutching his pearls.

“When you go out your door today and turn right and turn left, everything you see sprang from Columbus,” said Valicenti. “So to deny Columbus is to deny everything that sprang from him.””

Steve Ahlquist, Uprise RI October 17, 2019, quoting WPRO news reporter Gene Valicenti and Providence Ward 12 Representative Katherine Kerwin

Found image sourced via Reddit

This event itself was full of fanfare, which continued periodically for about a century, with parades and celebrations regularly passing through the traffic-island-turned-park. According to Providence City Archivist Caleb Horton, “A Mr. Joseph J. Cook, [was] the first contributor to the subscription fund.” It had been his idea to name the square after Columbus, perhaps along with his associates. “The unveiling ceremony began on November 8, 1893. A procession formed at the Elmwood Clubhouse at the corner of Burnett Street and Elmwood Ave under the escort of Reeves’s American Band and a chorus of over 300 children.” The organizers hoped to instill a sort of civic pride in the local residents, simultaneously bestowing the American hero upon us, and promoting the industry which built their homes and decorated their lovely wives.

These events had a masculine tone, featuring significant symbolism of war and the military, priests and popes, as well as people often referred to in the newspaper as “dignitaries”. Parades of weaponry and force, as well as an annual “schoolboy race” and sports matches were all connected to the commemoration of the man, his square and his day.

Eventually, the journalistic tone of Columbus Day shifted more towards the Italians. Immigrants faced serious negative bias, and in the face of that, his “discoveries” became, for many, a matter

of national pride.¹⁹ In 1935, a dinner was held to celebrate Benito Mussolini, the Italian fascist leader. “Mussolini was called ‘a modern Christopher Columbus who is carrying the torch into foreign fields as Columbus did 443 years ago.’”²⁰ The metaphor speaks volumes.

The neighborhood ebbed and flowed, the demographics and cultural landscape changing with the times. Funeral directors came and went, a symbol of the local demographics, including Boyce Brothers, Ira McKenzie, Carpenter-Jenks, Ray O. Page and Thomas Toye and Sons. In 1924, the Sisters of the Holy Cross and Passion built their first mission²¹ at 315 Elmwood Ave. which included St. Gabriel’s Hostel, an Irish Catholic “home for working girls”²². Several Chinese-owned laundries appeared in the mid-1930s, and the number of boarding houses increased over the decades. Retail spaces opened up; the local Internal Revenue Service (IRS) office occupied 544 Elmwood ave in the mid-1960s.

“April Brown says that the statue has been polarizing, citing her own grandmother’s propensity to curse it as she passed it. Brown says the statue not only causes harm to individual people offended by what Columbus represents, but it causes harm to the community because strangers come in to protest it and their presence requires police vigilance.”

Commemorative Works Commission Hearing

19 Of course not all Italian-Americans support Columbus; they have as much diversity of opinion as people of any other lineage, and many speak out against Columbus today.

20 Mussolini Called Columbus of 1935, Providence Sunday Journal, October 10, 1935

21 St. Mary’s Catholic School band, known as “Babe Ruth’s Own”, played at their opening

22 <https://passionistarchives.org/when-women-preach-the-passion-of-jesus-passionist-sisters-in-the-united-states-1924-1994/>

And so the statue stood through these changes, pointing and promoting, lingering and looming. Columbus was a bronze ghost, and the misdeeds he enabled haunted all who passed by, until the early 2000s when one or more activists splashed the statue with red paint, and wrote “rapist” on his plinth. This was by no means the first act of resistance against Columbus and his commemoration, as there is a significant history of native groups, community activists and historians resisting the Columbus myth. But he has only become the widely acknowledged centerpiece of a culturally divided country in the past few decades, increasingly a symbol for one’s stance on colonization, slavery, sexual assault, patriotism, morality and “Western civilization”.

Questions arise from this activism, as well as opportunities. We might examine what this history means to us today, and we might think about where commemoration fits into the learning process. We can do that together, and we can tell our own stories. Commemorative works can ask questions, such as what of the many who could not survive colonization, who were murdered or sickened, stolen or abused? What of the land, the water, without which we cannot live?

“[Loren] Spears shared a statement from the National Congress of American Indians that says the organization ‘does not acknowledge Christopher Columbus as a hero.’”

Commemorative Works Commission Hearing

Humans love heroes, and we love villains. We are wired for story, and because of this Columbus becomes the cultural frontman for everything: discovery, empire, religious fervor, royalty, murder, slavery. And also because of this, a Genoese sailor is given credit for founding America. He is put on pedestal after pedestal, across this country and others, frozen in silver and bronze. His name, or more accurately the Anglicized name we foisted upon him, was given to towns and cities, countries and rivers and universities, even a national holiday, spoken widely every day, invoking his memory over and over again.

“What statue can bear the enormous representational burden of depicting a man who has meant so many different things to different people in different times?”

Rahul Rao, The Psychic Lives of Statues

Do we, today, believe that centuries of mythology don’t apply to us? Myth is one of the deepest forces driving human thinking, relevant across nearly all cultures, drawing us in like a moth to flame. Have we somehow escaped this primal force, this magnetic pole, the thing that makes us human, in order to coolly assess a facts-based history, free from myth? Unlikely.

There is no post-myth²³ present. Yes, science and technology have changed the way modern people view many things, but some still deny the existence of bacteria, or the roundness of Earth. Entanglement with mythology exists on a spectrum, and people are more affected or less affected. But none of us live outside of it.

23 Note that this author recognizes value in story and myth; it is not inherently bad.

“Translating, naming and classifying are operations that are part of the process of colonization and intricate parts of the process of ‘othering’, i.e. of turning the Native population into ‘the other’ and the object of European rule.”

Heike Paul, The Myths That Made America

And there is no present free from our past. Voices speaking on behalf of those harmed by history are not a special interest group. Those who highlight their ancestors’ experiences and struggles have every right to be heard. This square is public, therefore it is everyone’s land, collectively shepherded by all of us, for the people of the future.

How can we heal our shared past?

All of history, of course, is a set of contradictions. Humans are rarely entirely good or entirely evil, and we all exist on a spectrum and sometimes cause harm, even without meaning to. But some people, by their radiating actions, cause more harm than others. Some of the arguments against Columbus fail to communicate this. “He didn’t even set foot in Rhode Island!” “Italy didn’t even exist when he was born!” “Indigenous people sometimes argued amongst themselves!” Many arguments for and against Columbus are reductionist, failing to give us the *substance* needed to re-think the legacy of this person, and of our commemorative acts.

Perhaps the vast amount of work done by academics, community activists and artists can help us to get free from some of the emotion that blocks accountability for this man and

his cohort. We can use this work to translate the mythology into dialogue, and move towards healing. He is long gone from this earth, and cannot be made to answer for his actions. He can, however, be a catalyst for change today; a catalyst for the participatory dismantling of harmful myths and a catalyst for a more transparent history-making process.

Naming this little traffic triangle after such a hyper-mythologized figure connected Providence to the full story of colonization, to the vast international network of places commemorating Columbus and to the many peoples and lands affected by his actions. It was intended to claim the glory of Columbus, but by doing so they claimed his full legacy. That decision has put us squarely into the stream of history, and local residents are now paying the bill for an action taken so long ago. The park called Columbus Square centered the story of “discovery”, but deferred responsibility for healing the harm it caused. For, of course, no one can claim the brave acts of another without also owning their misdeeds. Defenders can’t say “it was a long time ago” or “it wasn’t me” when faced with frustrated descendants of those harmed, while simultaneously building our founding narrative and our national identity on this harm. *We must be honest.*

“We hope that through future projects, we can better reflect the collective memory of our beautiful city in these landmarks.”

Providence Mayor Jorge Elorza

The statue is now gone from this location.²⁴ After much heated debate, a plywood “cage” and even police protection failed to stop residents from voicing their feelings, the City of Providence chose to remove him from the Square and speed him away to an “undisclosed location”. Later, the statue was sold to former Providence Mayor and real estate mogul Joseph Paolino, who then placed it in front of the Johnston Town Hall, arguing as many do that he is a symbol of Italian-American pride. Of course, this is not universally true, and does absolutely nothing to grapple with the issues attached to the commemoration of Columbus. But there it stands.

“As the statue was lifted on a flatbed truck, the crowd cheered.”

Uprise RI, editorial, October 16, 2021

After the statue is gone, what are we left with here? What is worth protecting? The square itself remains, and it is situated in a neighborhood which still feels the effects of the past. Elmwood Ave and its environs, where Babe Ruth once played ball, where Joseph Brown, Civil War veteran and first Black postal worker in Rhode Island delivered mail, where a mulberry-based silk farm was attempted, where the artist Nancy Elizabeth Prophet lived are all vibrating with history for us to explore.

Ghosts remain, not of the ectoplasmic variety, but of the human subconscious. The echoes of our shared past haunt us, but it does not have to be this way. These ghosts of the American past keep popping up in new disguises.

By naming the harm done to people and land, by acknowledging the complexity of our past, we have the opportunity to set this heavy, haunted baggage down and move forward together.

Conclusion: What is the work of History?

“All monuments are efforts, in their own way, to stop time.”

Sanford Levinson, Written in Stone

Historic memory exists outside of control; it comes from people and cannot be imposed upon without their consent. History is an interpretation, or rather many interpretations, often vying for attention. More information comes out, new evidence is found, additional voices are heard, and each person chooses to accept this or to hold onto their previous interpretation. The stories we tell have changed many, many times. Hundreds of statues have come down, well before our current era, and thousands of history books have been written and discarded. It is our misunderstanding of how history is made that allows us to think that change is erasure. The removal is itself history in the making, and it has happened all over the world.

“And [the statue] had had 24-hour police presence for weeks, and plywood all boarding it up ... and then it was taken down.”

Artist Lu Heintz

24 Providence’s Commemorative Works Committee voted to remove the statue from the Columbus Square site in February 2021

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The elevation of Columbus in America was part of a project of national identity creation, and can't be separated from past movements of nationalism, assimilation, exclusion, eugenics and even violence which happened alongside it. It happened, we experienced it, and now some are ready to move forward differently. Statues, books, archival materials, art and actions which celebrate and critique Columbus and his voyages are with us now, whether he looms above us in the public squares or not.

Columbus' 1493 letter was a celebration of possession and extraction, something the statue's merchant funders could relate to, and the value the piece promoted. This is one entry point into understanding the ways that 1492 and its aftermath still resonate across the world.

Commemoration and memory continue to play out in our communities, not just with this one historical figure, but with so many images in our landscape. The Commemoration Lab has charged the participants with identifying opportunities for dialogue and change, and creating new tools to spark this work.

My sincerest wish is for openness and dialogue, for listening and reimagining. There is room here for change, and we can do it together. In *Repentance and Repair*, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg says "You have to normalize honesty, to create a culture of continuous improvement." We can continue to talk about how history connects us, and divides us. How it lives inside of us. And so it is with this site, and beyond.



*Photo of former Gorham Silver site by Erik
Gould, courtesy of Providence City Archives*

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The idea that taking down plaques or statues “erases” history is based on the idea that history is a one-way road, going from “the past” to “the future”, with a linear model of growth. But history is a process, one which reaches backward, inches forward and stacks upon itself. Anything stacked up can topple, as any kid with a set of blocks can attest. Art historian Erin Thompson reminds us that “ultimately you can’t control public memory by controlling monuments.”

The commemoration of Columbus and his voyages has never, ever been universally embraced. There have always been voices speaking up for the people and land who were harmed, and they will not be silenced. This work does not prescribe to readers how you should feel about Columbus, this square, or the neighborhood around it. But I do advocate for context, for looking at the big picture and for the value of evidence over slogans in history.



Speculative Snapshots

*A Creative Exploration of the
Columbus Square Area*

BY TRACI PICARD

*View of Mashapaug Pond
Photo by Rachel Maeve*

Introduction

What does it do to us, as humans, to be surrounded by water, which we need to survive, which many of us are naturally drawn to, which makes up our cells and gives us all life, but to be effectively cut off from it? Between physical barriers to access, private property, train tracks, a thick layer of pavement and centuries of pollution, we have inherited a built environment burdened with disconnection. Most of us don't know how to talk about it, feel about it or change it.

For some, there is a deep sadness and anger at this situation. For others, it is not consciously considered at all. But some thread of feeling still lives in our subconscious, some knowledge of the earth, the soil, the water, the life beneath us. And a sense of grief lives inside of us, the knowledge of something lost, of land damaged, of connections severed.

In Providence, water is often treated like an uninvited guest-only noticed when it is out of place. The idea of our water as a shared "natural resource" rarely comes up in polite conversation. But ignore it or not, this still has an effect upon people, to live our whole lives within a narrative of pollution.

We may hear that people, places and things are wanted or unwanted, welcome or unwelcome. This is presented as a binary. Urban land itself is framed as "ruined", different from other land, marked as if with The Scarlet Letter, as if it has to pay for its sins.

The plants which thrive among urban pollution are dirty, undeserving... weeds. The city birds are not majestic enough to matter, the mammals are "pests" or "roadkill", and the insects are all out to get us.

But the "sins" of this history of environmental destruction are human, and it is we who have to face the situation, and fix it.

How can we heal from this? Not just heal the water and land physically, but heal our relationship to it, heal that grief, mend the divide, and reimagine the way we see urban nature, and care for it?

The constant battle is exhausting, and *it does not have to be this way*. We can consider the history of this land and this water, to understand how this happened and why.

Choices were made.

We don't have to continue playing out the same story.

Because all land, all water is equally deserving of our care and attention. An imagined wilderness is not more deserving of our care than a vacant lot in the city. A mountain stream is not more deserving of our care than Mashapaug Pond. A pretty flower is not more worthy than the "weed" which helps pull up heavy metals or fixes Nitrogen in the soil. And our collective inability to shift this mindset has consequences beyond personal relationships.

Centuries of filling in and paving over has often left water with

nowhere to go. A certain degree of flooding is natural, but our reckless re-shaping of land is not, and the major floods that result carry all that we have dumped back to us; eroding, revealing, un-burying.

Both literally and metaphorically.

So these pieces are here to speculate.

These pieces are here to call the Square a crossroads, and to remind us that crossroads have long been considered sites of magic and power.

These pieces are here to ask what if.

What if?

What if we had not made the choice to pollute the land and water? The first time, the next time, the 31st time, and every other time after that?

What if policy-makers had prioritized future generations, their health and access?

What if companies were not allowed to solely own and control the natural resources which once belonged to everyone?

What if the decision-makers had to face the consequences of their own pollution, had to eat the weird fish, had to breathe in that smoky air?

What if the fish were part of the decision making?

What if there were more magic in the world than we can imagine?

What if we could see a history that is not visible today?

What if there were portals which we could pass through, to take us outside of the material world and into another way of being?

Imagining alone may not fix everything, but there is no way to fix anything if we cannot imagine.

PART ONE
Grief Floating Free



Walgreens opposite the Square. Photo by Traci Picard

Imagine yourself floating, high above the city and its sensual input. Free, loose-limbed and relaxed. But distantly, very distantly, you hear something that catches your attention. Float down a little, gently, towards a little island in the sea of pavement. It is called Columbus Square, or it was anyway, for a blip on the human timeline. A hundred years? One fifty? And now there are people here, vibrant and colorful, singing. Chanting. Taking up space on this little highway oasis, as cars and trucks speed by, swerving and honking. From your bird's eye view you can see the patterns that circle the little space: stop, go; red, yellow, green; honk and yell; speed up, slow down, turn; crossing, bikes, pedestrians, strollers, wheelchairs; moving on and off the buses, pulling in and out of the parking lots.

A murmur of prayer as they run across those busy four lanes.

Amidst this is a gathering; people have gathered between these patterns and pavements, but why? Drift closer and closer and closer still, until you can hear the songs, smell the sage and incense, feel the slight breeze generated by dancing and clapping. But you feel something else, now that you have come so close, now that you have left the safety of the skies to listen and observe.

Grief.

Grief, pain, rage, sadness at the transformation of a free land, at the shackling of waves of people, at the displacement and the epidemics, at the creation of a narrative and of social and legal systems which stratified and separated the people and the earth. This is good, that is bad.

Pain and sadness simmer at the pollution and harm done to this square, to the area surrounding it, and the waterways which once provided sustenance to so many. The people are working through that pain and grief together, a ritual of performance art, a practice of acknowledgement and communion, a recognition of this history which we hold in ourselves, deep in our DNA, in our bodies and bones, in our stories and our hearts. The artists are making space, making community, with the goal of healing.

From your safe distance you have learned that healing rarely happens all at once; it is a process, one which looks different for different people. But it is clear that this is important. You can see the emotion shining out from the faces of those who gathered here. You can feel the care vibrating upwards and outwards, taking strength from what we all know is under our feet, even if we've forgotten. And here, a dancer is channeling that source, winding her way through the square, shaking the beads and ruffles in faith that this matters, in faith that those assembled are all on this journey with her. For a moment she's closed her eyes, and the surroundings melt away. What traffic? What honking? What hateful rhetoric, yelled out of a pickup truck, what sea of impervious pavement surrounding us, what what what?

It is there but it is not, as every iteration of this place is stacked up, all of those who have passed through have left a trace, the plants, the animals, the people, the water, every element, every artifact.

Their trace remains.

This is a collective act of noticing and observation, a practice of memory, a celebration of steps taken to free the space. No longer does the statue of Christopher Columbus, cast in bronze, stare down from his pedestal. In the empty space, children play. They plant flowers, they offer prayers. There is no hierarchy of practice here; all have brought what moves them, all have brought their energy and their hope.

Convened and held by three artists who labored this moment into being, the group eventually disperses. In the darkness quickly falling onto the little square, you float down and offer something of your own. Just a moment, but now you, too, have left a trace; you, too, have become a part of this square's history. You take a quick peek at what's been left behind; the flowers and stones, a scrap of paper with notes and a few shoe prints in the road sand. You touch them gently, an exchange of energy. And then you move along; it's time to rest for the night.

PART TWO
Wallace and the Portal



Beaver in the water. Public domain image

Wallace stepped onto the bus and there she was again, red shoes tapping, no music playing, not really, not here, maybe somewhere. Carol, on her way home from work. Their triple-deckers faced each other across Elmwood Ave; noisy, hot, honking and buzzing, heat emanating off the pavement in Summer, heatwaves burning up the space between the apartment she shared with 3 other Secretarial students and the place he lived with Uncle Johnny.

Wallace tried to appear fine. He *was* fine. His pants were on fire, but no one ever died of that. Had they? Act normal.

"Hi, Carol."

Her eyes bored into him like the hot poker he used at work. Was she looking at his dirty fingernails? His messy workday hair? His empty lunchpail, swinging at the end of his arm like a beacon?

"Hello."

Wallace suddenly became painfully aware that they were not alone, that they were in fact on a bus and rapidly approaching their stop. Columbus Square. A park...kind of...he pulled the cord.

"Stop requested."

In contrast to most workdays, when Wallace followed Carol off the bus without fanfare and they each went their separate ways, Carol glanced back at him while exiting, an unusual glint in her eye. Wallace tried to act cool, but found himself unable to look away, and followed her a few steps across the pavement to the statue which loomed over the Square. A shiny bronze likeness of Christopher Columbus, supposedly, always pointing, pointing, pointing forever into the distance.

"Look at that bird," Columbus says, "flying overhead."

Still silent, Carol stomped her red shoe on a tiny platform; one foot by one foot, an area of paving stones just a little different from those around. How had he never noticed this before? Again, she knocked. And again. Three times, and Wallace felt a slight shift in the air.

The Sycamore leaves rustled, where they had been still.

Is this a thing? Am I imagining it? Does Carol control the wind?

She then pressed gently on a commemorative plaque made to honor great men, and a small door opened into a stairway. That look again; Carol seemed to peer deeply into him, and she smiled.

Without checking to see if Wallace would follow, she headed down the stairs.

Wallace lived a lifetime of doubt in a moment. Is Carol a demon? A fairy? Could anyone see them? Was he going to get Cholera in the sewer? But lust is a powerful motivation, not to mention curiosity, and he pushed himself into the magical stairway before he lost his chance. It quickly and quietly closed above his head, and he stood there for a moment, letting his eyes adjust to the dim light.

"Crap, I am still holding my empty lunch pail."

And Carol spoke for the first time, "set it down, Wallace, along with all of your preconceptions about the Square."

After the confusion comes the transformation.

Wallace saw wave upon wave of water, pond after pond. Benedict Pond, Spectacle Pond, Duck Pond, Long Pond. Water, clear and clean. Carol took a small cup from her bag, scooped into the shimmering waters and drank.

"It's sacred, Wallace. It's clean, it's magical, it's still here."

In theory, Wallace knew that his neighborhood was once half water, and that these ponds had been filled up by garbage, one pile at a time, jars and pails and rags and bones; ashes and thrice-darned socks and phone books and carburetors, one after another until they displaced the waters and built new land.

It never occurred to him what that meant—displaced the waters?

He thought it just went away, of course.

"Water does not go away," Carol told him, reading correctly his look of confusion. "Displacement, in this case, means that it was driven underground. Driven out of sight, driven out of public memory. But not gone. Water cannot be eliminated. It just shifts shape, shifts space, shifts dimensions."

Luckily, Wallace had no time to consider the implications of all of this. When your alluring neighbor with red shoes on invites you into a magical portal, you just go with it, Okay? You just let yourself change and grow. When you learn of a new, magical dimension you can fight it, or you can thank your lucky stars, and enter fully into this reality, unarmed, open, curious.

And so he did.

Wallace was surrounded by water. Flowing, trickling, burbling and seeping. Water was displaced, and somehow found a way to continue on. How was this possible? How had he lived just a few yards away for 6.5 years, but never knew this? How had he walked these streets so many times, but it never occurred to him to wonder what was below the concrete, what was hidden by the pavement? *Damn.*

A wave of discomfort washed over Wallace as his brain adjusted—and more questions flooded in. How, exactly, did Carol know about this? He asked her as much, but she just smiled. "Who cares, Wallace? What matters is, what are you going to do now?"

Without giving it much thought, he turned towards Underground Long Pond. Shedding his work uniform, he stepped into the water. Sandy bottom, clear all the way to his toes, he dove gently in, moving, swimming, becoming one with the water.

"A body of water," he thought. A body, like our bodies. A being, like we are beings.

An energy exchange.

Blessedly, Carol joined him. She swam like an otter, with a natural comfort and grace. After a few turns around and across, she stopped nearby, treading water.

"Why did you invite me down here?" Wallace asked.

"I didn't. The water did."

"And you speak for the water?"

"Kind of.."

A moment of silence ensues. Wallace and Carol just look at each other, quietly, in their underwear, under dusky light, treading water in a pond, a magical pond displaced from their neighborhood, which they had entered through a magical portal.

"Wallace," Carol said, "the water wants you. It loves you. *It is you.* The water has been waiting for you. And so have I."

There are moments in life when things shift; when narratives are broken; when new realities poke through.

Wallace was not ready, but then he was.

He had spent his whole life burdened with a relationship to the water surrounding him that he did not choose. That he would never have chosen. The water was called dangerous, dirty, poisoned, polluted...you must stay away. Our shared heritage was now this poison water, this dirty water, with no solution proposed. But the longing remained.

The cool breeze which came across Mashapaug Pond on an August afternoon never went away. The salty sea air and the brackish river remained. Wallace still sat, watching ducks and geese, turtles and minnows. The memory of Benedict Pond lingered, even as it was filled in, added onto the fantasy of immersion in the Bay, the promise of someday eating a local oyster or paddling a canoe lived on. The return of Ospreys, of eelgrass, the elusive joy of a human relationship with water.

He knew that they could not live down here, and that they had to go back up, and live out their lives. They had to work, and ride the bus, and wash the dishes, and make the bed. They had to read the newspaper, and pay the bills, and take out the trash. But now they could do these things together, with knowledge of this water, with access to this water, with relationship to this water.

Wallace accepted. This knowledge was a burden, and a gift.

"I accept your offer, Carol."

He took her hand, and they moved back to the shore of the pond. Together, they dressed and walked back to the stairs. Wallace was pleasantly surprised to find that his lunch pail was still where he left it, the magical stairs still leading up to the portal.

They exited back into the magic hour, honking and all, as the Big Red M lit up above the square like a beacon.

Toot! Toot! The train rolled past, and another poor soul was being unloaded at Tommy's Funeral Home across the way.

Reality.

They walked their two blocks South together, Carol crossing Elmwood towards her house with a "see you tomorrow, Wallace."

See you tomorrow, indeed, my love.

See you tomorrow, indeed.

PART THREE

The Old Gods



Tree LC organized by artist Lu Heintz with the Providence Neighborhood Planting Program, inviting the community to tend to the Sycamore trees at the Square. Photo by Traci Picard

I was curled up underground, snuggled into soil between the worms and the rats, when something interrupted my rest. A whole crew of people, modern people, shoveling into my soil. Here amongst the Sycamore roots they dug down, fluffing up the compacted dirt and removing the human detritus accumulated in the Square.

I had almost forgotten that the Square was up there, sealed up as it is. The old bronze guy came down, and that was the last time I remember feeling so many people. Not seeing exactly, as my sight has dimmed over the centuries, but feeling the presence, the vibrations, and hearing the voices. I still remember the day they put him on a pedestal, workers from the nearby plant. “Who the hell is this guy?” we asked, those of us still left on the land. We’d been driven underground, as the open space around us was developed, chopped up, bought and sold, paved and flattened. Ah, that was not a good time.

The water spirits are gone for good, as nothing but a few bacteria have been able to survive in the Pond. There are a few in the wind, although they don’t come around as much as they used to. And us Earth guys, well, we are waiting.

Have I gotten off topic? Sorry, I am 43,000 years old. These people, ages 2 to 84, putting their hands in the dirt. These people, interacting with the trees. These people, peering at the Square with care and concern. I feel their resistance, their hope, their love for all that grows. What does it feel like to be loved? How do plants survive unnoticed, sprayed, paved over, removed? They just keep going.

But those who remember know that it has not always been like this. Before the pedestal came. Before the work bell began to sound. Before the train tracks were routed through the streambed. Life force was here.

It is still; no person can ever truly kill the seed's will to survive.

The roots sit below, waiting.

Longing for interactions like these; longing for a little girl to put her little hands into the soil. Longing for someone to remember; to say this Square matters.

Longing to stop the endless roll of asphalt; covering everything like a plague of locusts, like a flood, separating us from the living world.

The digging is a prayer, it is a renewal. The pedestal has been freed, and I can come out at night to dance on it.

You children have called me forth; OK, just a tiny bit, but once the unleashing begins, we get a little momentum. We grow. We unfurl, like flags across the sky.

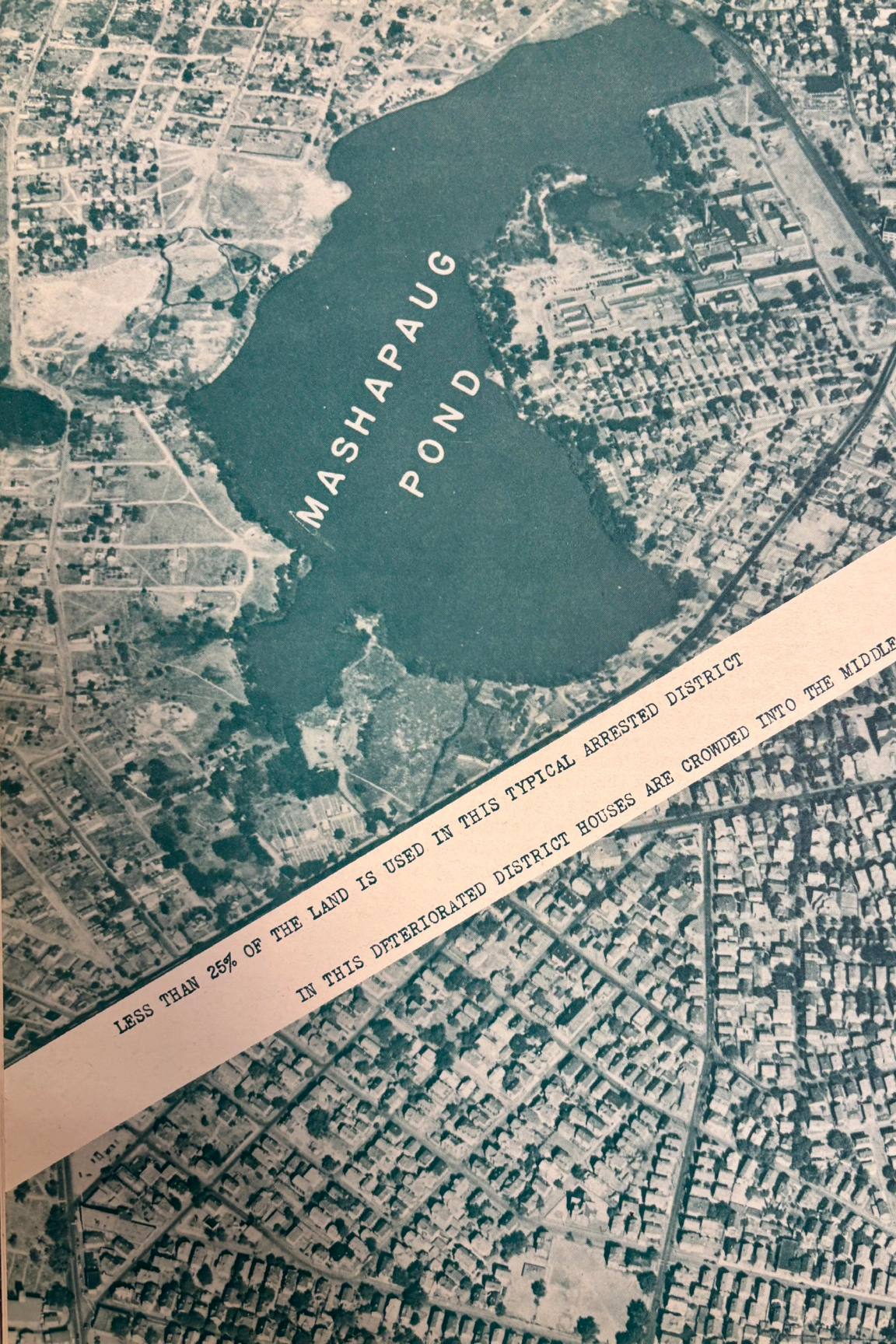
I have to return to my little burrow, but now I go with hope. As a nice young man with a pole saw cares for the Sycamores, he hears a sigh. I am with you, young man. I am here for this restoration.

Thank you.

Conclusion

One fine day, the people decided to replace the fallen bronze statue with a dream house. Built from bones and twigs, crocheted squares and twisted fibers, woven reeds and the pen used to sign West Elmwood's death certificate, they stacked and wove like birds, using a little Providence clay to hold it all together.

Of course, they didn't have permission, and did not comply with building codes or zoning laws, because it was their little secret. They built a house of repair, with room for healing and reflection, and a space to rest. Cycles of decay and renewal continued around the dream house. It may not be the renewal we envisioned, but the plants and animals, the soil and water have their dreams, as well.

An aerial photograph showing Mashapaug Pond in the center. The pond is dark and irregularly shaped. To the left and top-left, there are open fields and some scattered buildings. To the right and bottom, there is a dense urban area with many small, closely packed houses and a grid-like street pattern. A road or railway line runs along the right side of the pond. The text 'MASHAPPAUG POND' is written in large, white, sans-serif capital letters across the pond.

MASHAPPAUG POND

LESS THAN 25% OF THE LAND IS USED IN THIS TYPICAL ARRESTED DISTRICT

IN THIS DETERIORATED DISTRICT HOUSES ARE CROWDED INTO THE MIDDLE

Acknowledgements

*“All of us have special ones who have loved us into being.
Would you just take, along with me, 10 seconds to think of the
people who have helped you become who you are.”*

— Mr Rogers

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*The Elmwood neighborhood.
Photo by Traci Picard*



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