A Virtual Look Back

with Heidi Benedict, University Archivist
Roger Williams University can trace its beginnings back 100 years to its time as a branch campus of Northeastern University. Known then as the School of Commerce and Finance, it offered classes at the Providence YMCA.
Although the YMCA took control of the school and its name changed more than once over the next 50 years, classes remained in Providence.
The school with Roger Williams as its name, began in 1956. Charted first as a junior college, it offered two-year degrees in engineering, management, and accounting. A program in general studies was added later.
With about 311 day and evening students combined, classes were held at the YMCA and other locations in Providence.
And tuition was $12 per semester hour.
In 1967 the junior college was authorized by the state to offer a 4-year program and confer baccalaureate degrees. Accordingly, it dropped junior from its name and became Roger Williams College.
Now let’s take a closer look at how campus came to be here Bristol and how it has grown over the past 50 years. Before the campus was built, the land was home to Ferrycliffe Farm, known for its cows and dairy products.
Ferrycliffe Farm

PURE BRED JERSEYS
1877—1930
HERD FEDERAL ACCREDITED

GRADE A MILK and CREAM
Thanksgiving Turkeys
Poultry, Eggs
and other Farm Products

Owners
Dr. and Mrs. Halsey DeWolf

Manager
Glen E. Smith
With its waterfront views and beautiful landscape, Bristol seemed the ideal location for a new campus and so in the mid-1960s the college acquired about 60 acres of farmland from the Fulton family.
When the college opened in the fall of 1969 there were 7 buildings on the campus and about 1300 students.
However, only four of the buildings were ready when the students arrived in September.
The Administration Building, Classroom-Lecture Building, and Math-Science Building (above) were ready in September, as was the Boiler House (not shown).

The Library (left) and Dining Lounge (right) were not completed until October and November, respectively.
And the only dorm, known then simply as Residence Hall #1, wasn’t ready until the middle of the spring semester.
You can easily recognize the original buildings with their modernist architecture and stone facades.
Although the buildings serve different purposes today, all of them still stand, with the exception of the boiler house.
There are still a few faculty from our early years in Bristol here teaching today, including Professors Bob Blackburn, Ben Carr, and Mel Topf.
Residence Hall #2 opened in 1972.
In 1974, the College opened its first student union, with a cafeteria on the main level. On the lower level, students could play pool in the game room, get a bite to eat at the snack bar, and even enjoy a glass of wine or draught beer at the Rat. The bookstore and health services also shared the space.
In 1976, the college acquired a disused Nike missile site from the United States government.
The barracks were converted into special interest student housing for 46 architecture students in 1978 – and called Nike Hall.
Increased enrollment forced the college to seek off campus housing options for students over the next 10 years.
Back on the North Campus, some of the other Nike buildings, previously used for storage, were remodeled and converted into much needed space for three new engineering labs in 1979 – for our mechanical, computer, and electronics students.
That same year the college purchased Almeida Apartments on Bayview for yet more student housing. A third residence hall was finally built on campus in 1983 – called, you guessed it, Residence Hall #3. (The first 3 dorms were eventually renamed Maple, Cedar, and Willow.)
The 1980s brought many changes to the campus.
A new security and information booth was built in 1981, replacing the older shack.
The college’s first recreation center opened in 1983. From then on, commencement no longer had to be moved to an off-campus location in the event of rain, as it did in 1982.
An addition to the original recreation center was completed in 2003, featuring a swimming pool and fitness center.
The Performing Arts Center, made from two horse barns, originally located in Glocester, was the next building on campus. The two 1890s barns were dismantled and reconstructed on our campus by our own historic preservation students, under the leadership of Professor Kevin Jordan in 1984, seen on the next slide.
Roger Williams has hosted a number of concerts and special events over the years.
GLORIA STEINEM

Wednesday, Sept. 27, 1989
at 8:30 p.m. in the
Roger Williams College
Student Center

Free & Open to the Public

Co-Sponsored By:
• Minority Affairs Committee
• Contemporary Forums
• Career Services
• RWC Women’s Center

Doors open for the RWC Community at 7:45 p.m.
and to the General Public at 8:00 p.m.

For More Information Contact Scott Yonan at 253-1940 ext. 2400
When the drinking age was raised to 21 in 1985, the Rat closed its doors.
In 1986, the Mount Hope Bridge closed for construction, from March 10 - June 30.
The Bridge first opened on October 24, 1929.
At that time, it was the seventh largest bridge in the world.
Do you remember when the Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority finally dropped the 30-cent toll?

That was in April 1998.
Over the years, the college has changed its logo and seal. “Book over Water” was issued in 1986.
And today this is our logo and seal. Our signs too have changed since we first opened the campus in Bristol, as you can see on the next slide.
With the completion of the School of Architecture building in 1987, our architecture students no longer needed to be transported to and from classes at the Coggeshall School in Portsmouth.
A new library was completed in 1991, and the old library became home to the School of Business.
With a law school on the way, the board of trustees voted to rename the college Roger Williams University in 1992. Approximately 654 degrees were awarded on May 22, 1993 at our first commencement as a University.
The college purchased another 50 acres of farmland from the Fulton family in 1992, as well as the stables and farmhouse.
The Center for Student Development was completed in 1994, placing all student services under one roof for the first time.
That year another new dorm was added to the campus, Bayside Courts.
The Center for Economic and Environmental Development opened in 1997 for our biological and physical sciences departments, allowing the School of Engineering to move into the former Math-Science Building. The Center was renamed the Marine and Natural Sciences Building in 2003.
The University offered its first master’s program in Criminal Justice in 1999.

Today the University offers master's degrees in these other fields, as well.
2001 saw yet another residence hall added to the campus – Stonewall Terrace, which also serves as home to the Honors’ Program.
Even with this new dorm, the University once again had to turn to the local community for alternative housing options here at King Philip on Metacom, in Bristol, and at Founder’s Brook Motel and Suites in Portsmouth. Neither place had laundry facilities on-site.
More recently, the school acquired Baypoint in Portsmouth, after leasing it for several years. It is still used today.
In 2005, a new parking structure on North Campus was completed bringing much needed relief to those looking for parking. According to the first issue of the student newspaper, The Quill, published in December 1961, there were similar parking problems even back then in Providence.

The archives holds copies of student newspapers and yearbooks.
The Commons opened in the fall of 2006, with dining facilities and a bookstore. There was no longer a need for the former student union, and so it was razed in 2008 to make way for Global Heritage Hall – a more modern and accessible space with plenty of classrooms and faculty offices.
The entrance to our campus was redesigned in 2007, with a new gatehouse and fountain.
We’ve had a number of unique art installations over the years. Do you recall this one?
Or this 30-foot yellow sculpture entitled “Going my Way”?

It was created by artist Paul Von Ringelheim and installed in 1981 near the old guard shack I showed you earlier. It was removed in 1992.
The newest residence hall opened in 2009, along with a new Admissions and Alumni House, and Global Heritage Hall.
When the campus first opened here in Bristol, there were only 4 sports teams -- men’s baseball, men’s basketball, men’s golf, and men’s hockey. The first women’s sports team on campus was a basketball team, started in 1977, as a club team. Today there over 20 sports teams, including the men’s polo team born in 2016.

They won the intercollegiate championship the following year.
In 2016, Roger Williams University leased space at One Empire Plaza, replacing the existing Metro Center on Washington Street, in use since 1993. With twice as much space, the new building serves students in the School of Law, School of Continuing Studies, and outreach and engagement programs.
The most recent addition to the campus was about 1 year ago. The School of Engineering, Computing, and Construction Management’s new labs were completed in January of 2020.
Class of 1950

The YMCA INSTITUTE

Commencement Exercises

Thursday Evening, June 8th, 1950
at eight o'clock

Central Congregational Church
296 Angell Street
Providence, Rhode Island

Class of 1960

ROGER WILLIAMS JUNIOR COLLEGE

Commencement Exercises

Thursday Evening, June 9th, 1960
at eight o'clock

Beneficent Meeting House
300 Weybosset Street
Providence, Rhode Island

Classes of 1970

Roger Williams College

Commencement Exercises

Thursday morning, the fourth of June
at ten o'clock

The Bristol Campus Green
Bristol, Rhode Island

And now a few early commencement facts and images.
The YMCA’s 1950 commencement was held in Providence at the Central Congregational Church. Thomas B. Appelget, vice president at Brown University, delivered the commencement address to the graduating class of about 130 students.
The Junior College’s 1960 commencement was held at the Beneficent Meeting House in Providence. W. Rogers Hamel, of Raytheon, gave the commencement address to about 30 accounting, engineering, and management graduates.
The College’s first Bristol commencement was held on June 4, 1970 – James Dixon, President of Antioch College, was the main speaker. About 342 degrees were awarded that day.
Roger Williams, Alma Mater
On the shores of Mount Hope Bay
Sons and daughters hold thy treasures high
And thy guidance lights the way.

Roger Williams, Alma Mater
For the lessons you unfold
Sons and daughters promise faith, as one
In your banner, blue and gold.

Gentle breezes fan the summer air
Rippling waves caress thy shore
Many hearts have felt thy wonderment
And thy heroes live forever more.

Roger Williams, Alma Mater
Praises flow from hearts e’er true
Sons and daughters pledge eternal love
And their loyalty to you.
Here’s another fun item from The Quill – do you recall any of these places?
Thank you!

Please contact me if you have any questions or memories to share.