



## Historic designation will help transform former produce warehouse

03:37 PM EDT on Wednesday, October 12, 2005

PROVIDENCE -- The Providence Fruit and Produce Warehouse Co. Building on Harris Avenue, once the hub of a lively provisions warehouse district, has been added to the National Register of Historic Places.

"It really is a terrific building," said Edward F. Sanderson, executive director of the state Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, said of the decrepit former market on the west side of Providence Place mall.

Carpionato Properties Inc. of Johnston bought the 4-acre parcel earlier this year from the state Department of Transportation. Now that the building is on the National Register, the company plans to redevelop it using historic tax credits.

John Kokot, executive vice president of Carpionato, said the company is not ready to reveal its plans, but he said the result will be a mixed-use development including retail. The company is also considering building a hotel on the adjacent land.

In its proposal to buy the property, Carpionato presented a plan to transform the warehouse into a Quincy Market-style destination.

Carpionato's project must be approved by the state historical commission. Both Kokot and Sanderson said they expect the exterior of the market to be preserved.

The National Register is the federal government's official list of properties considered worthy of preservation because of their historic and architectural significance.

The Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission gave this history of the building:

From 1929 to its closing in 1998, the Providence Fruit and Produce Warehouse Co. Building served as the state's most important distribution center for Rhode Island-grown and imported fresh fruits and vegetables. The building is also significant as an excellent example of utilitarian industrial architecture.

"If you look past the broken windows and a certain amount of neglect, it is a striking building," Sanderson said. "The repetition of building elements down that very long facade gives a real visual presence to it."

The two-story, flat-roofed building is made of reinforced concrete and brick in the Art Moderne style. It lost several bays and a railway tower at the east end during the construction of a Route 95 ramp in the 1980s. As a result, the east side of the building was sealed with concrete blocks. Most of the loading bays have their original metal doors. Twenty square, red-brick elevator shafts rise above the roof line along the south side of the building. The interior consists predominantly of large rooms divided by concrete-block walls.

The building was constructed in 1929 as a central location for fruit and produce merchants. Beginning in 1773, local produce dealers operated from wagons and carts along Dyer and South Water streets in the vicinity of the former Weybosset Street Bridge. This open-air market flanked Providence's commercial waterfront.

Construction of the Merchant's Cold Storage Warehouse along the train tracks north of downtown in 1894

represented the beginning of a shift from maritime delivery of perishable goods to delivery by rail.

In the 1910s, a group of produce businessmen formed the Providence Market Gardeners' Association and purchased a 4-acre tract between Promenade Street and Davis Park from the Dyer family.

The dealers operated in open-air stalls at what became known as the Governor Dyer Cooperative Market. In 1927, Frank A. Crossley and some of the remaining Market Square dealers established Providence Terminal Market Inc. to secure land and construct a market building. Providence Terminal Market arranged with the Providence Produce Warehouse Co., a subsidiary of the New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad, to erect a building on the railroad yard south of the Merchants Cold Storage Warehouse.

At the opening ceremony, national, state, local and railroad officials hailed the building as the "finest and most efficient distributing unit for perishable foods in the United States."

The \$1-million facility was designed by Emory W. Ballou, of the prominent local engineering firm of Jenks and Ballou. Rental fees varied by the number of units occupied, access to an elevator and availability of a cooling apparatus. Additional cold storage was available at Merchants Cold Storage Warehouse, which was accessible via an underground tunnel. Imported produce could arrive at the building by rail. After the goods were processed and packed, they could be loaded onto trucks for local distribution.

The produce building was in continuous use until 1998. Long-term tenants included the Tourtellot Co. and William J. Canaan Inc., each of which operated in the building for some 60 years.

In the 1990s, trucking replaced rail transport and the wholesale produce business wilted. Large supermarket chains began buying fruits and vegetables directly from growers, eliminating a significant portion of the dealers' income.

In 1998, the DOT acquired the produce building and the last vendors moved out. The DOT paid \$14 million for the parcel. The new owners, Carpionato, paid \$4.3 million.

Carpionato has developed several projects in the area, including the University Market Plaza on North Main Street, the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Warwick and a Hampton Inn in Pawtucket. The company also plans to build a 200-room Intercontinental Hotel on Kennedy Plaza.

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