Lovecraft’s Providence, real and unreal

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This week marks the 123rd birthday of H.P. Lovecraft. He was born Aug. 20, 1890, in Providence. He is the writer of horror tales who lived almost entirely in this city, where a major celebration of his life and work begins today.

Lovecraft’s gravestone reads “I am Providence.” Many of his stories are set here; others partake of the city’s essence — in decay during his life. He died in 1937. On Sunday I read “The Shadow Over Innsmouth,” written in 1927, about a young antiquarian who, on his way to Arkham, Mass., decides to stop to see a largely abandoned old seaport, Innsmouth, whose features may bring Providence to mind.

I entered the story as a virginal Lovecraftian, having read a biography of the man but none of his stories. I had read at least two of his long letters to the editor of The Providence Journal. One, which ran on March 20, 1929, was about the brick Row, a string of warehouses built in the early 1800s along the waterfront, between College Hill and downtown. They were to be demolished to make way for a records annex after the completion of a new courthouse already rising across South Main Street.

Having in mind the design of the new courthouse, which he liked, he wrote, “The harmony with the old brick row facing the water will be complete, since these genuine survivors of the Georgian era will set the keynote for the soaring tiers of neo-Georgian gables above them, forming an ideal starting point for the eye and the imagination, and bridging the years between the early maritime Providence and the modern metropolis.”

But the warehouses were in decay and, in spite of Lovecraft’s campaign they did not survive. Nor was the annex ever built. For years the site was a small, neglected park; today it is Memorial Park, completed in 1996.

I mention the Brick Row because Lovecraft would wander late at night around the most desiccated precincts of the city, which included the waterfront and even Benefit Street. Most people today don’t realize that “Providence’s Mile of History” was once a slum, and a candidate for clearance under urban renewal in the 1950s and ’60s. Yes, Providence was shabby. A passage from “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” might have been lifted from Lovecraft’s macabre peregrinations. I hasten to add that Lovecraft was married for two years; his ex-wife called him an “adequately excellent lover.”

Of his trembling initial exploration of Innsmouth, Lovecraft’s protagonist writes, “Re-crossing the gorge on the Main Street bridge, I struck a region of utter desertion which somehow made me shudder. Collapsing huddles of gambrel roofs formed a jagged and fantastic skyline, above which rose the ghoulish, decapitated steeple of an ancient church. Some houses along Main Street were tenanted, but most were tightly boarded up. Down unpaved side streets I saw the black, gaping windows of deserted hovels, many of which leaned at perilous and incredible angles through the sinking of part of the foundations. Those windows stared so spectrally that it took courage to turn eastward toward the waterfront.”

The passage contains a lot of what literary experts call foreshadowing, and I do not want to give away the plot or its horrors. I will add, however, that even more intriguing than this description of dilapidation — exaggerating, no doubt, the decay he saw and regretted in Providence — is the protagonist’s eventual attempt to escape from Innsmouth. Lovecraft unfolds a riveting description, nine pages long, of the antiquarian’s panicky flight, sneaking block by block through the city. It might be the most extraordinary passage of literary urbanism in the annals of fiction, horror or otherwise.

But did anxiety and decrepitude reflect how one who so loved Providence truly saw it?

“[The golden light of late afternoon gave the ancient roofs and decrepit chimneys an air of mystic loveliness and peace,” reports Lovecraft’s protagonist. Ah! That’s better! Time and light paint a venerable patina on the old architecture. You can still feel it abundantly in this city today. That’s what makes it great.

Although my inclinations as a reader tend to lure me away from the supernatural, I emerged from “Innsmouth” with a heightened respect for Lovecraft’s abilities as a writer. Still, from this week’s celebration, I hope to learn more about the intersection of Lovecraft and Providence, and maybe (to ramp up the suspense) write about it next week. Meanwhile, the conference’s lectures, panels, tours, parties, art exhibits and other events are listed at its website, www.necronomicon-providence.com.

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Account: 8266PW (16107)
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Innsmouth is the fictional location of H.P. Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Over Innsmouth.”