

II. PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL SETTING

The Southern Thames Street Neighborhood's west-sloping, harborside landscape consists of approximately one-hundred-and-thirty acres divided into a grid of narrow lots by two major north-south arteries, Thames Street and Spring Street, and by a host of cross streets running east-west up the hill from the waterfront. Due to heavy traffic, almost all thoroughfares in the neighborhood are one-way.

Historically a mostly working-class, Irish neighborhood (though dating back in its origins to the seventeenth century), the Southern Thames area flourished between 1850 and 1920. Physically, the area's building stock is overwhelmingly late nineteenth century—compact, unassuming, cohesive.

Despite this cohesiveness, the neighborhood can be conceptualized as three zones: a residential zone on both sides of Spring Street and running down to Thames Street, the Thames Street commercial corridor and the waterfront.

The waterfront is a warren of wharves, warehouses, mill buildings, open storage yards and parking lots—a clutter of large and small buildings, vacant lots and narrow alleys oriented to the harbor.

The second zone, the Thames Street commercial corridor, is lined with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century, mostly wood-frame, two-and-a-half- and three-and-a-half-story structures that wall-in the street. Thames Street has the look of an old, small-city shopping district, complete with ubiquitous plate-glass storefronts and no place to park. The buildings, many altered over the years, have a unpretentious, small-business atmosphere which is both genuine and appealing.

The third and largest zone constitutes the residential area of the neighborhood located between Thames and Spring streets—occasionally crossing Spring Street on its uphill side, pushing east as far as the rear walls of Bellevue Avenue estates—and running south, below the harbor, to Narragansett Avenue and east to Marchant Street. Covering approximately seventy acres, the residential zone includes over six hundred houses. It is characterized by row upon row of well preserved, but often neglected, small-scale

dwellings built close to one another along sparsely landscaped streets with little off-street parking. Much of the housing is of frame construction with minor architectural detailing; dwellings are one-and-a-half or two-and-a-half stories in height, predominantly gable-roofed and set gable end to the street on lots averaging 2,500 square feet. The residential area contains a few churches, schools and firehouses.

According to statistics compiled for the Newport Planning Department, approximately 50 per cent of the neighborhood's housing is in good physical condition, 47 per cent is in fair condition and 3 per cent is in very poor condition. Approximately 66 per cent of the housing is single family, 23 per cent is two family and 11 per cent is three family or greater. Renter-occupied housing is somewhat more common in this area than owner-occupied housing.

Thames Street's bustle contrasts with the quiet of the residential side streets. Increasingly tourist-oriented Thames Street is alive with hardware shops, antique dealers, jewelers, grocery stores, nautical suppliers, restaurants and so forth. The streetscape possesses a rich mixture of building periods and styles, ranging from the Newport Restoration Foundation's eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century restored houses to two- and three-story Victorian

blocks with flat, mansard or gable roofs interspersed with vernacular Colonial, Federal and Victorian houses of two or three stories, with hip or gable roofs and stores at street level—all built close to one another, abutting or very near the sidewalks. A Late Victorian armory building, church and firehouse are part of the street's fabric, as are twentieth-century gasoline stations, automobile-repair shops and nondescript commercial buildings.

Between this linear business area and Newport Harbor is a forty-four-acre section of the city's old waterfront characterized by a variety of warehouse buildings, harborside restaurants, undeveloped pockets of land and electrical and gas distribution stations set on historic eighteenth-century wharves and near impressive, early nineteenth-century stone textile mill buildings now re-used for light industry. During the summers, the wharves are busy with the coming and going of sail and motor yachts in addition to the fleets of fishing boats which are in operation all year long.

Newport's unique architectural character as a colonial seaport and Victorian resort community gained official recognition at the national level when the federal government declared much of central Newport a National Historic Landmark District. A large portion of the Southern Thames Street Neighborhood falls within this Landmark District.

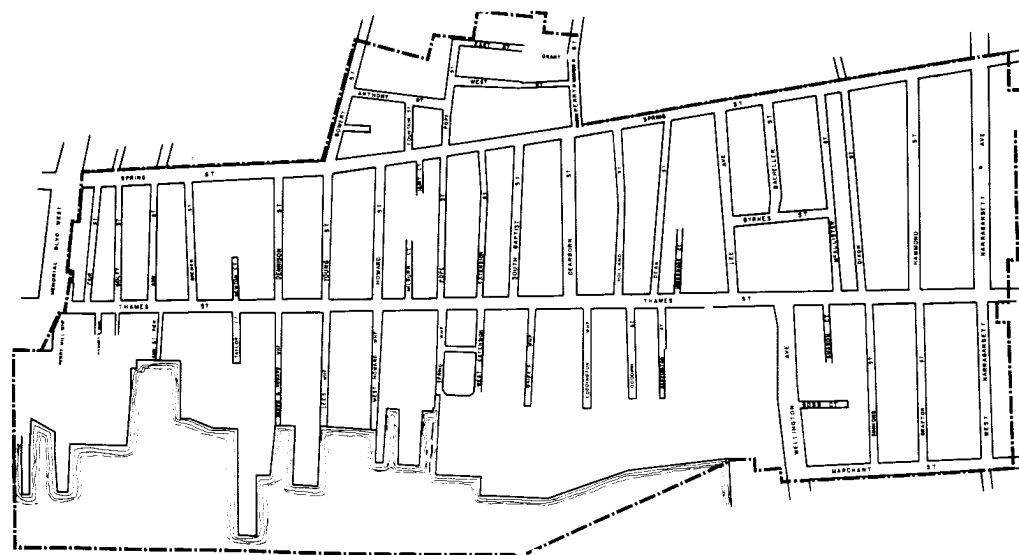


Fig. 2: Map of the Southern Thames Street Neighborhood showing boundaries of the Lower Thames Street Community Development Project Area.