

# PROVIDENCE

## MONTHLY

### Throwback Providence: Photographs from the Past Come Back to Life

Your #tbt posts got nothing on *Retro Providence*

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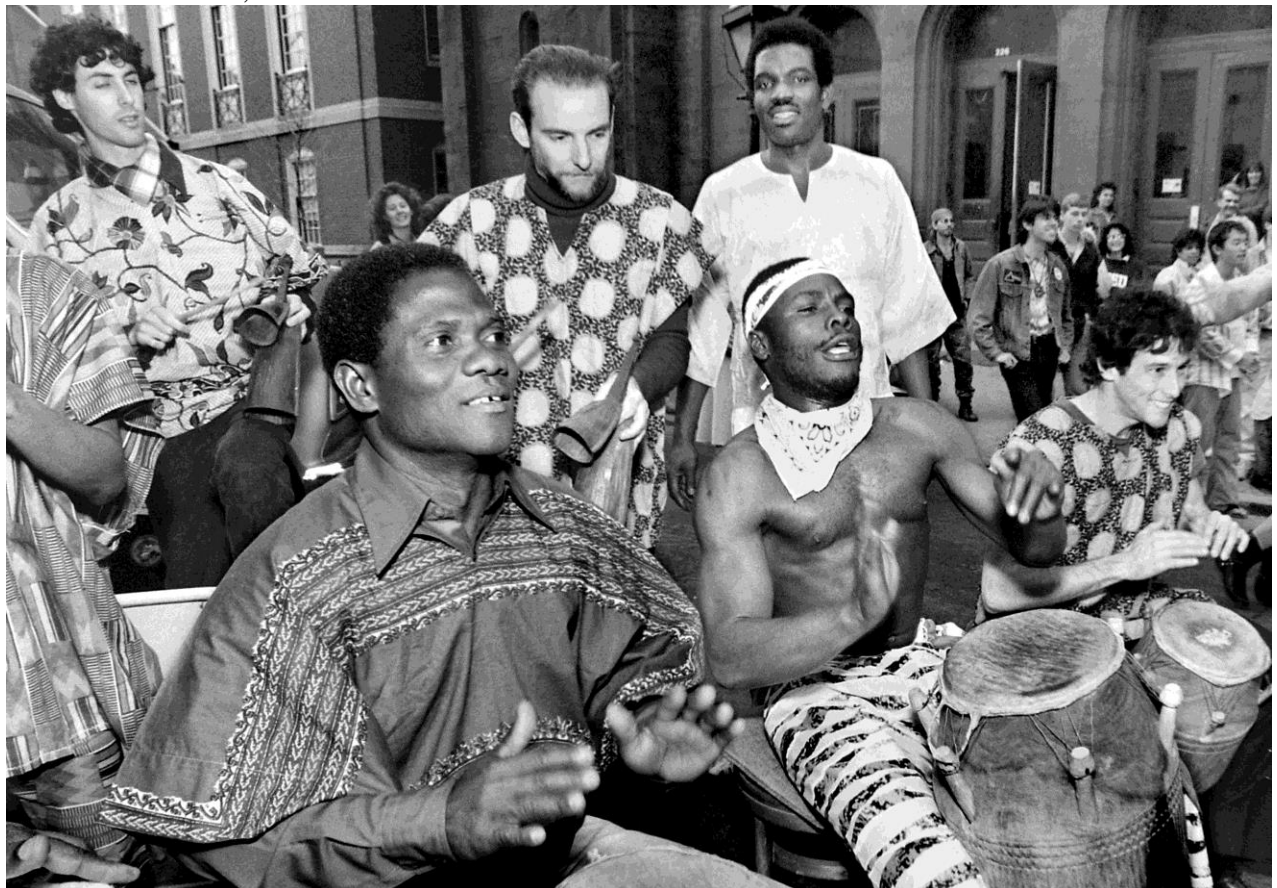


Photo Courtesy of Tom Chambers/Providence City Archive

By Amanda M. Grosvenor

Those who've lived in Providence for a while can tell you that quite a bit has changed since 1985 when Tom Chambers first started working as the official mayoral and city photographer. Now, with sponsorship from the City Archives department, Tom is exhibiting *Retro Providence: 1985-*

1990, a “time capsule” of 60 photographs taken of city life during the six years he held the position.

A native of Texas, Tom found he needed a fresh start in life following the painful passing of his mother in 1983, so he moved to Rhode Island. His first job here was as part-time university photographer and photo department manager for URI. Although he enjoyed the position, the pay was minimal so he took up freelancing, eventually meeting Mayor Paolino on an assignment. The mayor and his team liked Tom’s work so much that they offered him a full-time position. He trailed the mayor and snapped photos at all major events, from ribbon cuttings to celebrations to handshakes. During these moments, Tom would also point his camera outwards into the crowds.

“I’ve had a lifelong love of history, and I lived all over America growing up,” he says. “I had also always enjoyed the documentation aspect of recording history. The next logical step for me was to find a camera and start using it.”

The city photographer position was high profile and helped Tom to achieve other opportunities after he left Providence in 1990, when Paolino lost the gubernatorial election. He went on to join the Peace Corps in Zimbabwe and later taught at Zhaoqing University in China. He still takes some pictures but focuses mainly on other visual mediums these days, such as abstraction and digital art.

Tom’s Providence stint was before the days of digital photography, and most documentation of this nature tends to end up in city archives collecting dust. He decided he did not want such a fate for his images, so he reached out to Caleb Horton, Deputy City Archivist at Providence City Hall, and pitched the idea of a retrospective exhibit. Caleb enthusiastically approved, and in June of this year, Tom flew back to Providence for the first time in 30 years and spent four days wading through hundreds of images to curate 60 highlights.

His favorite was taken in 1986 during the 350th anniversary celebration of Rhode Island’s founding. Tom caught a shot of a reenactor dressed as Roger Williams standing on Roger Williams Landing at Gano Street Park, dramatically silhouetted by the sun. He hopes that many who visit the exhibit will be able to pick out familiar faces in the prints.

“Something that means a lot to me is that there’s a possibility people could attend the show and find themselves or someone they know in photos from 30 years ago,” he says. “At many historical shows, the people being photographed and the photographers are long gone. What’s exciting about this one is that many are still around.”

### ***Retro Providence: 1985-1990***

On display through December 14  
City Archives, Providence City Hall  
25 Dorrance Street  
[TomChambers.com](http://TomChambers.com)