

# Overview of bristol, rhode island



## Silva 1

Thousands upon thousands of cities and towns blanket this beautiful planet. Many different cities and towns are indeed interesting subjects for study and analysis. One particular town in general possesses many characteristics that help to build what this planet is. Bristol, Rhode Island definitely is a magnificent town to visit, live, or study. Why Bristol? Bristol, Rhode Island and its unique history, culture and other geographic characteristics make it a wonderful place to live.

To understand the Bristol of today, one must critically analyze the history of the area. Bristol has a long, rich history—a history that dates back over 1000 years. Around the year 1000, Vikings from Iceland are believed to have landed on the shores of what is today Mount Hope Bay (Almy 8). This is the first recorded contact from the outside perimeter of the world to Bristol. Many believe that the name “ Mount Hope” has been passed down from these Vikings to the indigenous Amerindians of the region. The Amerindians ultimately passed the name onto the first English settlers (Almy 8). The first European settler to make his home in the Mount Hope Lands was John Gorham. Gorham was granted 100 acres of land by the Plymouth colony, and has been given credit to be the official founder of Bristol. Much of the surrounding time saw little English settlement. However, much of the time was devoted to a series of conflicts between Amerindians and English settlers. The most notable conflict was the King Phillips War (1675-1676). The Amerindians were subsequently crushed by the English settlers and Amerindian control over the lands was lost forever. The Mount Hope Lands were now under full control of the Plymouth Colony and not the Amerindians

( Funk & Wagnall's 358). The colonial administrators took little time in making attempts to develop the area, and in 1680 the process of settlement took a momentous step. Four proprietors bought a tract of land (what is now Bristol). At this time the relative location of Bristol was as follows: The Mount Hope Lands lied between present day Taunton and the Mount Hope Bay on the East and the Narragansett Bay on the west; the land also extended from Bristol Ferry some 6 miles from the north (Almy 8). The Proprietors took their land and broke it up, selling portions to other English settlers. The following year, 1681, the first town meeting was held and a decision was reached about the future name of the Mount Hope Lands. The settlers saw the opportunities that were before them and they chose to name the Mount Hope Lands after the seaport city of Bristol, England in the hopes that one day, Bristol of the New World would emulate the success of Bristol, England ( Funk & Wagnall's 358).

Bristol finally had a name and a mass a settlers that would plant the seed and develop the area to what it is today. It is important to understand at this particular point in history the town of Bristol was under the auspice of the Plymouth Colony, which today is present day Massachusetts. The surrounding areas, most notably Taunton, made attempts to diminish the role of Bristol within the colony; therefore, Bristol attempted to remove itself from the Plymouth Colony and chose to be annexed by the colony of Rhode Island. At a town meeting in 1747, Bristol decided to officially break away from Plymouth Colony, and Rhode Island was there to take the potential seaport. Bristol was now part of Rhode Island (Almy 9). Bristol, as it is known today, came into existence.

To better understand the Bristol of today, two important aspects of Bristol's history must be understood. The history of industry and the history of immigration helped to shape Bristol immensely. From 1680 until about 1830 the town of Bristol was engaged in commerce and agriculture. Everything from onions to slaves was exported from this busy seaport all around the world (Almy 9). A new industry sprang up in 1832 as ships were sent out in search of whales on the Pacific Coast—whaling was successfully profitable for nearly 10 years. At about the same time the Industrial Revolution took hold in Bristol. Distilleries, gristmills, tanneries, and shipbuilding sprung up all over Bristol to support the commerce she engaged in (DiGati 15). The industrial age dominated Bristol for the remainder of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but today Bristol is not engaged as heavily in manufacturing as it once was. A general shift, nationwide, has been to service industries.

Another important historical aspect that has shaped Bristol is immigration. Several ethnic groups have come to Bristol throughout the years. The history of immigration in Bristol is necessary to understand the demographic composition of present day Bristol. In 1846 a massive potato famine struck Ireland, which led many Irish to flee their homeland and immigrate to the United States. Some of these immigrants ended up in Bristol, and by 1852 there were hundreds of Irish residing in Bristol. The Irish brought with them many new cultural traits; among those was their religion—Roman Catholicism. In response to the Irish presence in Bristol, the first Roman Catholic Church was built in Bristol in 1855. However, industry in Bristol was growing faster than the workforce, and a massive campaign was launched to

recruit cheap foreign labor, or more specifically the Italians. The Italians were the second major wave of immigrants to reach Bristol; a high concentration immigrated around the 1880s (DiGati 16). The third major migration to reach Bristol is the most important, and the reason why today half the total population is from Portuguese ancestry and 20% of the homes still speak the Portuguese language (Census 1990). The Portuguese influx into Bristol has been steady and constant throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and exploded immensely during the late 1970s as volcanic eruptions created havoc among the Azorean Islands (DiGati 16). The Portuguese, like other ethnic groups, brought a culture that is clearly evident today in Bristol.

Unfortunately, there is a dark side to Bristol's history that must be mentioned. Bristol actively, and openly engaged in the trading of slaves. Between the years of 1804 and 1807, 8, 238 slaves were delivered to be sold by Rhode Island ships (DiGati 15). How could Bristol engage in this enterprise? The answer is money.

Today Bristol is a prominent town in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, and serves as the seat of Bristol County in Rhode Island. Located on a peninsula between Narragansett and Mount Hope Bays, Bristol is about 12 miles southeast of Providence and 12 miles north of Newport. With a population of 22, 000, Bristol is easily accessible from Route 114 or Route 136 via Route 195, and from the Mount Hope Bridge via Route 24 (<http://www.town.bristol.ri.us/about1.htm>). To the west of Bristol's border is the Narragansett Bay, which gives Bristol excellent access to the Atlantic Ocean.

The demographics of Bristol help to create a diverse town. Census data reveals many changes and patterns of certain demographics within Bristol. Population demographics revealed by the 1960 census give keen insight into the town of Bristol during the 1960s. The total population of Bristol in 1960 was 14, 570; of this total a mere 26 were nonwhite who inhabited Bristol (1960 Census). The African American population in Bristol at that time was virtually nonexistent. In terms of the minority presence in Bristol, nothing has changed over the years. From 1960 to 1990 the population of Bristol has grown to 21, 624 persons; of this number a mere 60 are from African decent (1990 Census). A great disparity exists between the population of whites and blacks in Bristol. Statements made by minorities in Bristol gives insight into the reasons why this disparity exists. There is a feeling that opportunities are available, but, perhaps, the property is too expensive for minorities to afford to buy. Donald Isom, a concerned resident of Bristol, stated, “ Property is expensive in Bristol, and minorities just can’t afford it.” Hopefully as wages for minorities increase, property will become more affordable for minorities in Bristol.

Another interesting demographic characteristic that has remained intact over the years is the relative stability of the ethnic composition in the town of Bristol. In 1960 the total number of foreign born residing in Bristol was 2, 367; of this total 1, 476 were Portuguese; a distant second were the Italians, which had 474 foreign born residents in Bristol (1960 Census). At the present time, little has changed in the ethnic composition of Bristol. According to the 1960 Census, 9, 146 declared Portuguese ancestry—nearly half of the total population of Bristol; again the Italians were a distant second with 4, 768

declaring Italian ancestry. These statistics leave little doubt that the Portuguese are a dominant factor in the population of Bristol. The impact of the Portuguese on Bristol can also be seen by the language grouping in the area. A whopping 4, 554 persons speak Portuguese at home, which constitutes 20% of the total population. The Portuguese have been able to preserve their culture in Bristol; the language data clearly explains this.

Bristol is getting old these days. The population of Bristol has been growing gradually older throughout the years. In 1960, 10% of the total population was ages 65 or older. As of 1990 the proportion has doubled to nearly 20% (1960 & 1990 Census). The aging of Bristol can be attributed to improved medical treatments since 1960. The proportion of men to women in Bristol has remained the same since 1960, equally divided between men and women (1960 & 1990 Census).

Income statistics in Bristol raise questions about equality in the town. A great disparity exists between men and women and their average yearly income. However, the gap in income has closed somewhat since 1960. In 1960, the average male, working full time, earned approximately \$3, 846 per year, while the average woman earned less than half that total—a mere \$1, 828 dollars (1960 Census). By 1990 the gap had closed significantly, but not enough to merit full equality. The median income of a female working full time was \$18, 402, while the median income of a male working full time was \$27, 422 (1990 Census). Although the situation has improved, there is a long way to go, not only for Bristol but also for the rest of the country. The disparity between wages is not a problem just for Bristol, but it's a problem that faces the nation as a whole. Sandra Pereira, an employee of Coastal

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Medical in Bristol, stated her concerns on this matter, “ Men are the ones who own most of the businesses [in Bristol] and they hire other males and pay them the big money. More women have to get better educated and take an active role in business, and hopefully [women] will make more money than men.”

Housing statistics reveal interesting traits in Bristol. In 1960 there were 4, 284 homes in Bristol, and 3832 of them were occupied. The owner occupied 3, 326 homes or 86. 8%, while the remaining 506 homes were rented (Census 1960). Obviously, as of 1960, a great number of Bristolians owned a home, compared to those who rented. Things have changed in the modern Bristol. By 1990 the homes in Bristol grew from 4, 284 in 1960 to a staggering 7, 959. The owner occupied 4, 863 housing units, while 2, 592 units were rented (1990 Census). Although the proportion of renters has changed since 1960, there is still a greater majority of those who own homes compared to those who rent.

What is life like today in Bristol? The answer to the question depends upon the person who is answering the question. The question: “ What do you like/dislike about Bristol and Why?” met different answers from different people. A young teen living in Bristol, answered the question with a resounding “ No!” “ There isn’t anything exciting to do in this town.” His answer is perhaps a little harsh, but it does have some validity. There is Colt State Park, but the beach there is not a major tourist attraction. It is a park where families can have cookouts, but nothing overly exciting. There are museums and historical houses that can be visited, but again nothing compares to an amusement park or a mall, which Bristol has neither. Most of

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the younger people yearned for something of that magnitude in Bristol. When the question was posed to older people different answers were acquired. Sandra Pereira a town resident in her mid forties proclaimed, “ I really love Bristol because it is a quiet, close community.” An African American in his early 20s answered, “ Bristol would be a better place if more opportunities are made available to all races.” One major complaint that seemed to plague most residents was the horrible traffic that engulfs Bristol. Congestion is most common among routes 114 and 136. These are the two main roads that go through Bristol, and these are the two roads that are most congested with traffic. One possible solution to this problem would be converting route 136 into a four-lane road to ease traffic congestion. However, local government cannot solve this particular issue. Route 136 is a state road; therefore it must be augmented by the state. As of today the traffic problem is in a state of gridlock between Bristolians and the State of Rhode Island.

Another issue that faces Bristol is the after effects of Bristol/Warren regionalization. For the past 6 years the Bristol and Warren school departments have been merged in the hopes of saving money. Students from Bristol are bussed to certain schools in Warren, while students from Warren are bussed to certain schools in Bristol. This new system has been in effect for over 6 years, and complaints are rising from Bristol. The Bristol/Warren School Committee was promised funds from the state, but the new governor reneged on that proposal. Now Bristol has swallowed much of the debt inherited from the Warren School Department. Property taxes have also increased when they were supposed to decrease. Anger and frustration

are themes of school committee meetings. “ Residents of Bristol and Warren must work together to do what is best for the education of our young people. We must cooperate or we will suffer,” stated Thomas Scuba, member of the Bristol/Warren School Committee. The issue is a hot one and definitely needs cooperation for it to succeed. Regionalization is too far along to reverse, so it must be dealt with.

Bristol, indeed, is a great place to live, work, and recreate. Violent crime is virtually nonexistent in Bristol, and the community seems more like a family than anything else. This is best seen by the massive 4<sup>th</sup> of July Parade that engulfs Bristol each year. The oldest continuous independence parade in the country attracted 250, 000 people to Bristol last year (<http://www.town.bristol.ri.us/hmepage.htm>). Colt State Park and many museums make Bristol a fun and cultural place to live in and visit. Jobs are widely available in Bristol. Manufacturing of machines, the fishing industry, and the service industry make Bristol an easy place to find a job. There is, undoubtedly, room for improvement in the town of Bristol. Opportunities must be available for minorities and women must earn a wage equal to that of men.

In an interview with a longtime resident of Bristol, many emotions were uncovered. Maria Menezes, an immigrant into Bristol in 1944, has seen Bristol go through many changes. She has first hand knowledge of Bristol’s changing from a manufacturing powerhouse—dominated by mills, and factories—to the service economy of today. “ It’s bad that plants closed, but I still love my home—Bristol.” Throughout her life she has loved Bristol, and it is understandable why.

I have great faith in the future of Bristol. Bristol has a rich history, and dynamic ambiance. Certain problems within Bristol need to be addressed. More funds should be made available to decrease traffic and make roads more efficient. The state of animosity between Warren and Bristol over regionalization must also be dealt with. The two sides ought to come together, put aside their differences and do what is best for the both of them. If that means separation—so be it. There is no doubt that Bristol will work through these problems and continue to progress. All in all, I look forward to the future and success of the town of Bristol.