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CLOSE-UP ON WOONSOCKET, R.I.

Immigrant city French-Canadian heritage lends an Old-World air

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"Bienvenu à Woonsocket" reads the mural covering one side of a four-story brick building in Woonsocket's historic downtown, a reminder of this city's French-Canadian heritage. In the late 1800s whole families and even whole villages left the farms of Quebec for the factories of northern Rhode Island. Mill owners recruited the Canadians because they were hardworking and resistant to unions, believing as Roman Catholics that they owed allegiance only to God and family. A French-language daily newspaper was published in Woonsocket until 1942. Daily French-language radio broadcasts continued into the 1960s. Today the American-French Genealogical Society, located in the basement of the First Universalist Church on Earle Street, helps dozens of people each week trace their roots through its ever-expanding collection of primary documents, including more than 10,000 volumes of birth, baptism, marriage, death, and burial records from Rhode Island and Canada.

Take a walk through **Main Street's historic district**, from the Stadium Theatre at Monument Square to the Museum of Work & Culture in Market Square. Along the three-quarters of a mile or so, you'll see buildings dating from the mid-1800s, remnants of the trenches that once ran under the buildings to increase water power to the mills, and a plaque commemorating the spot where Abraham Lincoln once spoke.

The ceiling of **St. Ann Arts & Cultural Center** (82 Cumberland St., 401-356-0713, 401-767-3777, stannartctr.org) has been called the best example of fresco art in the country by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It took Italian-born Guido Nincheri eight years to complete his masterpiece in the 1940s, and he used members of the parish as models (one young woman's face appears in 40 angel medallions). Tours are offered Sundays between 1 and 4 p.m., \$5.

The **Museum of Work & Culture** (42 South Main St., 401-769-9675, rihs.org) is filled with the voices of the city's immigrant textile workers. The museum re-creates the sights and sounds of a working mill, a crowded triple-decker, a 1920s classroom, a church, and a union hall. The Lt. Georges Dubois Veterans Gallery features the Rhode Island boxcar of the Merci Train sent by France to the United States as a gesture of thanks in 1949.

You can't get more central than the family owned and operated **Woonsocket Motor Inn** (333 Clinton St., 401-762-1224 , \$60-\$68) in the city's Social Street business area, within walking distance of the library, several banks, and many restaurants.

The **Pillsbury House** is a bed-and-breakfast in an 1875 home in the upscale North End (341 Prospect St., 401-766-7983, pillsburyhouse.com , \$95-\$135). There are four guest rooms, each with a private bath.

The **Holiday Inn Express Hotel & Suites Conference Center** (194 Fortin Drive, 401-769-5000, hiexpress.com/woonsocketri , \$99-\$135) features a fitness center with an indoor pool, as well as meeting space for business travelers.

Founded in 1905, **Chan's** (267 Main St., 401-765-1900, chanseggrollsandjazz.com) is not only one of the state's oldest Chinese restaurants, it's also the region's premier spot for jazz. Owner John Chan has hosted Dizzy Gillespie, Dave McKenna, and Leon Redbone, among others. The jazz room is in a former bank space, complete with vault. This month's lineup includes Johnny A (March 22), James Montgomery (March 30), and Aztec Two-Step (March 31).

River Falls (74 South Main St., 401-235-9026, riverfallscomplex.com) is a restaurant and nightclub overlooking the white water of the Blackstone River. On a Saturday night, young people stormed the dance floor for the weekly Ultimate Dance Party, but due to the miracles of sound engineering, we heard only acoustic guitar and piano in the downstairs piano bar. The complex marries the architecture of the 1850 Falls Yarn Mill with modern features, such as dramatic lighting, a two-story display of wine bottles, and a wall covered with purple silk cushions for sound absorption.

Events for children figure prominently in the schedule for the beautifully renovated **Stadium Theatre Performing Arts Centre** (28 Monument Square, 401-762-4545, stadiumtheatre.com). Mill owner Arthur Darman built the theater in 1926 to give his workers and their families affordable cultural experiences. That's still the goal today, said Cathy Levesque-Gilbert, marketing director. The theater screens four free movies a year (next up is "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" April 13). There are plenty of offerings for adults, too, and the restored theater, with its murals, cherubs, chandeliers, and original Wurlitzer organ, is a sight to behold.

World War II Memorial State Park (Social Street, 401-762-9717, riparks.com/worldwar.htm) offers a swimming area in summer, created by the waters of the Mill River, which the city aerates as it flows through the property. (Longtime Woonsocket residents refer to the beach as the "Social Ocean.") The park is also the site of Autumnfest, the city's premier outdoor festival featuring arts and crafts, food, a midway, entertainment, and fireworks (autumnfest.org). This year's celebration will be Oct. 6-8.

The bold prints by Swarna Chitrakar of West Bengal, India, in **GiGi's Global Specialty Art and Gifts** (12 Main St., 401-765-4422, globalvillageart.com) are arresting. Owner GiGi Colson travels frequently to India, where she is involved in microcredit lending. GiGi's also has a distinctive selection of handmade jewelry, art glass, and handbags made of French silk. Colson said she likes to promote women artists "who have a story to tell and a gift to share."

Across from City Hall, Sharon Cole operates **Shaco Fashion Designs** (154 Main St., 401-769-3400, shacofashiondesigns.com). A native of Trinidad and a graduate of the Boston School of Fashion Design, Cole designs women's clothing for day and evening, specializing in plus sizes and bridal wear.

You can find one of Rhode Island's hot new chefs, according to Providence Monthly magazine, at **Vintage Restaurant** (4 South Main St., 401-765-1234, vintageri.com , dinner \$14-\$28). Brian Counihan runs the kitchen at this trendy spot in Market Square. Couches and chairs in suede earth tones invite lingering in the lounge, where live music is offered Friday and Saturday evenings. Exposed brick, polished chrome chandeliers that resemble curling ribbon, and brushed copper and chrome tabletops create an upscale look. Try the hanger steak with herb butter and truffled parmesan frites.

For something more informal, cross the street and get in line at **Ye Olde English Fish & Chips** (Market Square, 401-762-3637 , \$6.55-\$12), an institution since 1922. Steven Robinson, the fourth generation of his family to run

the restaurant, says they fry 1,800 pounds of fish a week, and on Fridays during Lent serve 125 orders of fish and chips every seven minutes.

There are several inviting quick-bite stops along Main Street: Try a dynamite sandwich, a northern Rhode Island specialty similar to a sloppy Joe, at **Main Street Cafe** (55 Main St., 401-762-4394 , dynamite \$3). Satisfy your sweet tooth with a pastry from **The Cakery**, which also serves soup, salad, and sandwiches (91 Main St., 401-767-2300 , lunch \$4-\$6).