

# STORIES FROM THE ARCHIVES

By Suzanne E. Shapiro,  
PVH Historian  
pvharchives@pvh.com

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Corporate responsibility has long been a fundamental PVH commitment, and the desire to do right by our workers and surrounding communities goes back to the origins of our brands. The epitome of this spirit is the remarkable 1887 establishment of the Warner's Seaside Institute, an education and recreation facility built for the betterment of women workers 130 years ago—a time when the industry shared little of this concern. Read on for the full, inspiring story!



A Warner's trade card from 1882. In this period, the factory produced about 7000 corsets a day.

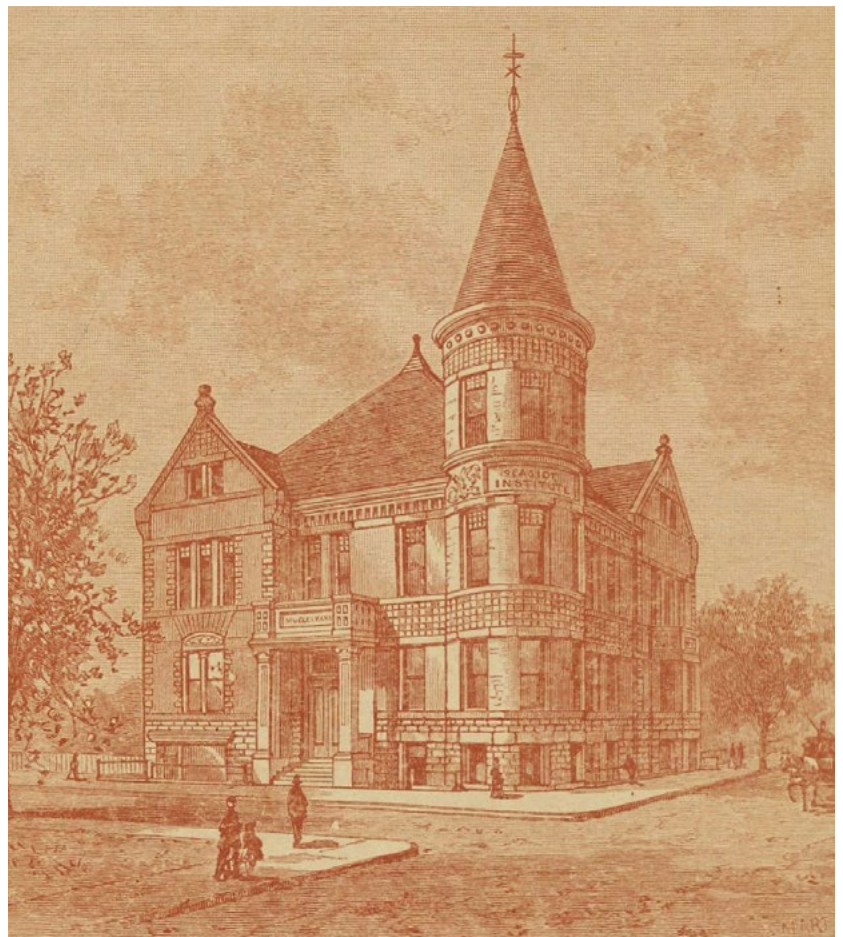


Illustration of Institute exterior, 1891. Deemed worthy of preservation, the distinctive granite/brownstone building was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982.

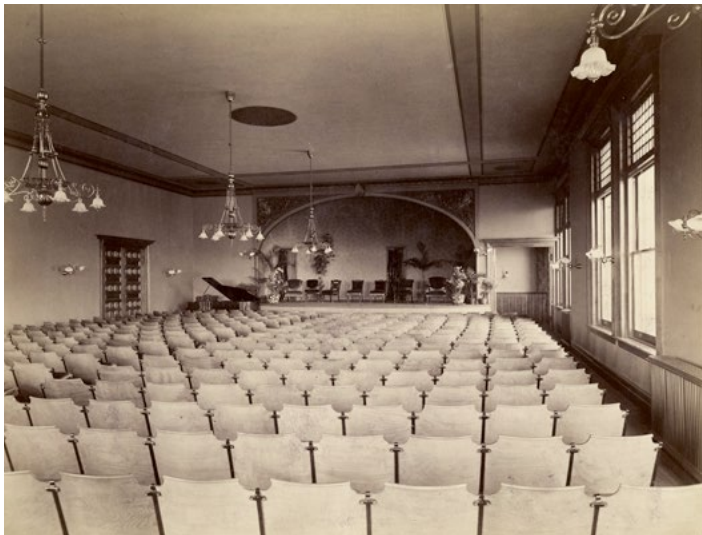
Regard for the welfare of women led to the development of the *Warner's* corset in 1874. Two physician brothers from rural New York state, Dr. I. DeVer Warner and Dr. Lucien C. Warner, came to conclude that the poor health of many of their female patients had to do with their constricting, oppressive corsetry. The enterprising Warner brothers set out to reverse this bodily harm, designing a new, improved "health corset" that quickly found commercial success. In 1876, they built a factory in the industrial coastal city of Bridgeport, Connecticut, taking unusual care to provide bright and airy workrooms for their employees through the narrow construction of their buildings.

As early as 1882, The Warner Brothers Co. told the press of its intention to build a special center for the education and enjoyment of their mostly female workers, realizing this goal within five years. *The New York Times* reported that \$60,000 (roughly \$1.6 million in today's dollars) went towards the stately, three-story building with finely trimmed interiors, stylish furnishings, and a host of amenities: lecture and concert hall; library and reading rooms; classrooms; parlor; restaurant and kitchen; bathing rooms; and a sewing room, where the women could work on their own projects.

The brothers, duly proud, initiated an opening ceremony on November 10, 1887 that caught considerable media attention. First Lady Frances Folsom Cleveland agreed to dedicate the building and hold a reception line for the 1,000-plus working women that were invited, shaking hands with each as Dr. I. DeVer Warner presented them one by one. Reporters observed the event's uplifting reversal of class norms: wealthy Bridgeport society was excluded, saving the moment for the women and girls who dressed their best for the occasion and showed barely containable joy. Invited to co-host the proceedings, the massively popular author and



Seen at the end of the entry hall, the stained glass window with three allegorical female figures included a memorial inscription to the Warners' mother Lydia, who passed away the previous year.



Lecture and concert hall, where the dedication program was staged



The library included classic and popular literature, textbooks, and 30 magazines.

*Harper's Weekly* chronicled the Institute opening with a full spread of illustrations. Another notable guest was P.T. Barnum, showman and former Bridgeport mayor.



DR. L. D. WARNER MAKING THE DEDICATORY ADDRESS



EXTERIOR OF THE HOME



RECEPTION OF WORKING-WOMEN BY MRS. CLEVELAND.—FROM SKETCHES BY W. P. BOYDILL.  
OPENING OF THE WARNER SEASIDE INSTITUTE AT BRIDGEPORT, CONNECTICUT.—[SEE PAGE 816.]

humorist Mark Twain had to send his regrets, nonetheless praising the “superb benefaction in Bridgeport to those fortunate women” in a letter to the first lady.

Dr. I. D. Warner’s remarks emphasized the unprecedented nature of their undertaking: “In establishing this institute we have had no model and no experience of similar enterprise for our guidance...our object is to contribute to the enjoyment and welfare of the 1,100 women in our employ.” He spoke of the institute’s many privileges including evening classes, a library starting with 1,000 volumes, low-cost meals, hot baths, and weekly music/speaker entertainment.

Yet Warner Brothers’ ethical and compassionate business model did not end there. The company established a volunteer fire department in 1886 (occupying their own space in the Seaside Institute) to promote worker safety a full 25 years before the disastrous 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire spurred industrial reform. Longtime workers testified about the superior working conditions and fair pay. The *Times* even reported on how Dr. I. D. Warner, who “never does anything by halves” gave all the workers a holiday and a small gift in celebration of his son’s wedding.

A good neighbor to the community, Warner’s permitted area organizations to rent Seaside Institute spaces for a nominal clean-up fee. The local newspaper commented that thousands of civic events had been held there, and with the U.S. entry into World War I, Warner’s turned the building over to Red Cross volunteer efforts.

The Institute remained in operation for more than 40 years, and beloved services like the company library continued for decades beyond. Today, we can more fully appreciate the progressive impact of Warner’s early vision. With parallels to PVH’s CR program and focus on its people, from PVH U programming to worker safety initiatives and the support of global causes like the UN Women’s Empowerment Principles, we can be proud to have that trailblazing conviction in our DNA!



As the honorary dedicator of the Institute, Frances Folsom Cleveland was an especially admired first lady. Married the previous year to President Grover Cleveland while in office and followed for her fashion choices, she would have been just 23 at the ceremony, a peer in age to many of the workers.

## To All a Happy New Year

The organization at Warner Bros. invites girls and women to consider the opportunities which the plant affords for dignified work, under as clean and pleasant surroundings as are to be found at home.

The training and development of successful operators has had much attention during the past months and all plans are ready to make smooth the way of the beginner. Come and talk it over.

**THE WARNER BROS. CO.**

Seaside Institute

In the early 20th century, *Warner's* classified ads continued to show an unusually benevolent spirit, promising paid training and inviting applicants to “come in and talk it over.”