

Fred Friendly of Providence

Tony Silvia

The author, a native of Newport, grew up in Portsmouth. He earned his bachelor's degree in English at the University of Rhode Island and his master's and doctoral degrees at the University of Birmingham (in England).

Dr. Silvia began teaching journalism at URI in 1988 and served as a full professor, director of the public relations studies program, and chair of his department until 2001. Five years later he departed Kingston to become a professor of journalism and digital communication at the University of South Florida in St. Petersburg.

Dr. Silvia has extensive experience as a consumer reporter and as a news anchor at many television stations and as a correspondent, based in Atlanta, for CNN. Additionally, he has produced stories for PBS affiliates as well as for the NBC-owned station, KNSD, in San Diego. He has received three Emmy Award nominations and an Associated Press Award for best documentary. In 2008 he was named a fellow of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. Six years later, he was inducted into Kappa Tau Alpha, the nation's oldest honor society for journalism and mass communication.

The author of dozens of articles in academic and industry journals, Dr. Silvia has also written seven books about broadcasting and journalism. One of his most recent, *Robert Pierpoint: A Life at CBS News*, was published by McFarland in 2014. His new book, also for McFarland, will be *Journalists Battle Dyslexia: Decoding a Silent Disability*. It will include a portrait of Fred Friendly.

Except for its winter, Tony is still quite fond of the Ocean State. In addition to his home in Dunedin, Florida, he maintains a residence in Little Compton. Surprisingly, however, this is one of his first articles about a Rhode Island broadcaster.

It was a long journey for a young man who had troubles on virtually every level: reading, spelling, writing, speaking, and, especially math. Fred Friendly (whose given name was Ferdinand Wachenheimer), though not a native Rhode Islander in the sense that Rhode



Friendly & Morrow,
ca. 1950-55

Islanders define that term (being bred, born, lived and died here), left a lasting imprint on his adopted state. His influence on the field of journalism here came second only to the seminal impact he had on the invention of what we now call broadcast news through collaboration with the man generally credited with the title “the father of broadcast news,” Edward R. Murrow.

It started at 395 Lloyd Avenue in Providence, in the downstairs living room of the home where he and his family had moved from Brooklyn when Fred was 11 years old. The year was 1926. (Fred’s father, Samuel, who had represented his family’s business in a Fifth Avenue office, relocated to Providence to join his brothers, Jacob and Harry, whose prosperous jewelry manufacturing business, Wachenheimer Brothers, was located on Garnet Street.) It was a sad time soon thereafter, when Fred’s father died of meningitis, on June 6, 1927, leaving his mother, Therese Friendly Wachenheimer (1877-1954), with a young son (her only child) to raise alone.¹

To complicate matters, in the aftermath of her husband’s death, Therese was faced with being the advocate for a son who was big, awkward, smart, loved history, but had a stutter, and in adolescence would become known more for his athletic ability than his brains.

“I came to Providence in the sixth grade,” Fred Friendly would one day recall during a 1995 speech. “It was a tough time for



childhood home,
395 Lloyd Avenue

me. Shortly after moving to Providence, my father died suddenly and my poor mother who had faith in and hope for me, hardly knew how to deal with all my learning problems.”²

For the young Fred Friendly, three things in his life made a difference: a strong mother, a religious education, and the Providence Public Library. His mother Therese (who had been born in Oregon) defined what those in the dyslexic community would now refer to as a “warrior mother.” She stood up not only for her own child, but also for social issues. Therese (who, as a widow, never worked outside the home) was, again to use a contemporary term, a social activist. She stood for, and demonstrated in support of, women’s rights (then called the suffrage movement) and had the grit and determination to follow through on her convictions.³ No doubt the child learned from the parent. Throughout his life, Fred Friendly would stand up for the downtrodden, the oppressed, and the deserving, though forgotten, members of society.

In school he was labeled “dumb,” but he never internalized that label, nor what it stood for in a society that had no knowledge of dyslexia, a form of learning disability that variously was perceived as “lazy” or “seeing backwards” or plain troublesome. Fred was labeled all three. That didn’t make him “special” in today’s parlance; it made him troublesome, a distraction in the classroom, a “cut up,” someone whom teachers would rather avoid than engage. He was searching for his place, a niche that is hard for any young person, but especially so for someone who is dyslexic.

To add to the pain, he didn’t know he was dyslexic until, ironically, he read about the symptoms when he was in his 50’s and his wife, Ruth Mark Friendly, was a teacher. She told him about a troublesome student she had in class who she knew was smart, but couldn’t read and so, therefore, was a problem she couldn’t solve.⁴ For dyslexics, there are always problems to solve; their lives are a constant attempt to “fit in,” to solve the Rubik’s Cube that creates the fit.

He searched for his place. Reading was hard, but listening was easier. He could discern patterns in spoken speech. The words made sense when he heard them, as opposed to seeing them in static

symbols on a page. Radio was a relatively new medium in those days, the early part of the 20th century. And in Rhode Island there was one of the earliest radio stations, Providence's WEAN.⁵

Originally owned by a Providence department store called Shepard's, WEAN became one of the founding members of what was called the Yankee network. Its place in radio history is well documented and, for Fred Friendly and the history of broadcasting, it was pivotal. Fred didn't know a lot about himself as a young man, but he did know what he was good at doing.

"One thing I could do – I could speak well – and I had a good vocabulary. I used to think and wonder about how I could ever earn a living," he recalled. "We lived on Lloyd Avenue, right where Miles Avenue joins Lloyd. I would stand by the window in my bedroom, on the second floor of my home, thinking 'I could be a radio announcer – I could be on radio.'"⁶

So, the young man who had trouble reading, who had trouble adapting, whose mother was once told he should be sent to the Rhode Island School for the Deaf, found a refuge, a calling, a place, a "fit."

"I used to listen to the radio a lot and I learned a lot listening," he recalled in the 1995 speech given in Providence. "I would stand looking out onto the street with an imaginary microphone set on my radiator and I would report the goings on of the day – or what I saw happening outside – whatever came into my mind. I think that even gave me a feeling of confidence. I figured I could do something when I was older."

He tried. And he tried. WEAN was a reach for a kid who had struggled through Hope High School and aimed high for college, once telling his guidance counselor and every student who would listen that Harvard was on his radar screen and in his future. That was beyond reach. What was within reach was radio. He attended Nichols Junior College of Business Administration in Dudley, Massachusetts, for two years before the era when it granted associates' degrees, but that wasn't where his success was born – or grew.

"Then came the time to get a job. I went to WEAN. They were too big for me – they thought." Instead, they advised him to "go

north," to smaller stations in places like western Massachusetts. "But I ended up coming back to them – and I finally did get a job doing an idea that I had."⁷

That idea was a series of five-minute biographies of famous people he called, after his aunt's suggestion, "Footsteps on the Sands of Time." It would eventually become a series of record albums, but, at the time, it was a foot in the door.

"Footsteps on the Sands of Time" became a large success on a station that was searching for programming. Fred was paid the sum of \$25 per week, a good amount of money in the 1930s. More importantly, it put him on a journey that would bring him into the U.S. Army, what he would call his "Rhodes Scholarship," a meeting with a man who was, at the time, a monumental figure in radio news and would one day become the patron saint of an upstart new medium, television news. It was a medium in which both would be strangers, but to which Fred Friendly would bring Edward R. Murrow, reluctantly perhaps, but a medium in which both would be formative and, as some have suggested, would "invent."

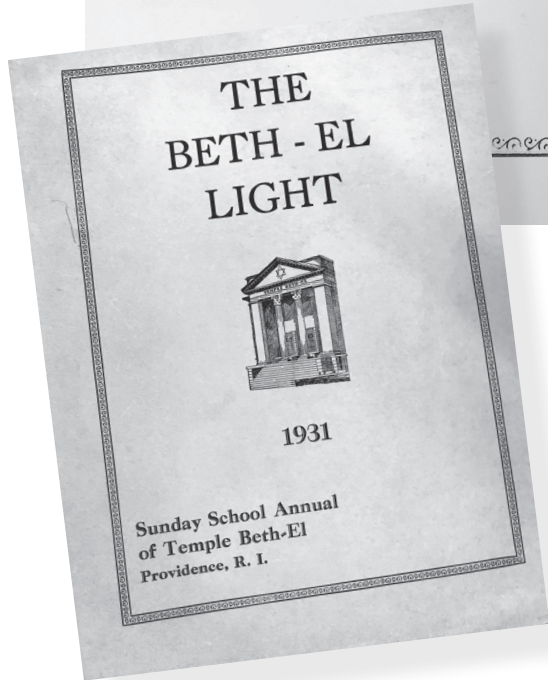
Along the way, Fred Friendly would retain his connection to Providence. For one, his radio name "Fred Friendly" came about because the manager who hired him at WEAN said Fred Wachenheimer was never going to make it as a "radio name." So came the moniker Fred Friendly, employing his mother, Therese's, maiden name. It would become the name that would go down in history as one of the pioneers of television.

Fred Friendly credited radio, yes, but also a supportive and caring single mother with his success. In addition, his Jewish upbringing was a major factor in his search for meaning. Fred had attended religious school at the Reform congregation, Sons of Israel and David, which was more commonly known, after its move in 1911 to Broad Street in South Providence, as Temple Beth-El. The Wachenheimer family had probably belonged to this congregation by 1906; Harry had been a member of the committee that planned the new building's dedication.

Fred, with 13 other young men and women, was confirmed in 1931 under Rabbi Samuel M. Gup (who served Beth-El from 1919

FERDINAND WACHENHEIMER

We can't say much about Ferdinand, because he attends class only occasionally. But any boy who can study by himself and shows his interest so is sure to get there, so here's best wishes.



Beth El Light, 1931

until 1932). This is how Fred was described in his class's yearbook: "We can't say much about Ferdinand, because he attends class only occasionally. But any boy who can study by himself and shows his interest so is sure to get

there, so here's best wishes." It is not known if Fred had become a bar mitzvah, however.

Through Beth-El, Fred might (and probably should) have gained access to the world of radio, for two of the congregation's most prominent and wealthiest members were Leon and Joseph Samuels, who owned The Outlet Company, Rhode Island's largest department store.⁸ Their Providence store began broadcasting from its own radio station, WJAR, in September 1922, only a few months after the Shepard Company, its rival on Weybosset Street, had launched WEAN. (Although the Samuels brothers were not active members of Beth-El, they were surely acquainted with the Wachenheimer family.) Rabbi William G. Braude (who succeeded

Gup in October 1932 and remained for 42 years, a Rhode Island record for longevity) would soon closely mentor the young man, who was searching for meaning and a "place." For Fred Friendly, Rabbi Braude became like a second father, a supporter, a confidante, and a friend.

He told the students at Providence's Hamilton School at Wheeler School that, in addition to his Jewish roots and upbringing, the Providence Public Library played a vital role. "I went to the Providence Public Library every day and began to read voraciously – and write. I became better and better at it just from the practice and I loved doing it."⁹ It was at the library where he found the inspiration, as well as the content, for the afore-mentioned "Footsteps on the Sands of Time" radio series that would be his point of entry to a world beyond Providence.

This new world began with his stint in the U.S. Army, where his initial assignment was slicing onions for soldiers' meals on kitchen duty but quickly progressed to a place where he was asked to give inspirational speeches to the troops, a feat at which he so excelled that the Army brass noticed and gave him the go-ahead to produce more of the "Footsteps" programs. They eventually were contracted by Jack Kapp, a record executive, and released as LP recordings.¹⁰

Enter Edward R. Murrow (1908-1965). Murrow had been the voice from the rooftops, in every American's living room during the blitzkrieg of England during World War II. He was the most trusted and revered journalist in America. Friendly, through a series of contacts, angled to meet Murrow and the two eventually did meet. It was the start of a partnership unequalled in many industries, most of all broadcast news. Murrow agreed to be the narrator on the "Footsteps" recordings, which brought both men fame and for Friendly, fortune. One narrative is that Murrow, who didn't lack for funds, gave Friendly the entire \$25,000 fee paid by the record company.

In return, Friendly became Murrow's voice, some would say his conscience, on important programs that he would go on and eventually produce, once out of the Army and on civilian soil. It was Friendly who brought Murrow to television, a medium of which

the latter was suspicious and which he variously dismissed as a “box filled with wires,” not unlike many radio “stars” of the day.

Together they produced the seminal radio program “Hear It Now,” incorporating the same approach as “Footsteps”: profiles of famous people and events in history. That led to Friendly’s pivotal role in “See It Now,” the television extension of the radio series on CBS.

They became collaborators, in the best sense, complementing each other’s talents. The famous “McCarthy program” of “See It Now” (aired on November 18, 1951), in which Murrow took on Senator Joseph McCarthy and his witch hunt for Communists, especially within the government but also the entertainment industry, made CBS executives nervous, so much so that Friendly and Murrow had to pay for their own advertising of the program after sponsors fled.¹¹

In the 2005 movie adaptation, “Good Night and Good Luck,” the focus is on Murrow, and Friendly, who produced the program and assisted in writing the script, is portrayed as a sideman to Murrow, which stretches the truth.¹² Friendly was instrumental in that program’s inception and its execution, harkening back to his mother Therese’s roots in standing up to bullying and, in this instance, despots.

Never known as an easy person to get along with as he rose in the ranks of CBS News, eventually becoming its president, a position from which he resigned on principle in protest, Fred Friendly had his supporters and his detractors. After CBS News, he assumed the Edward R. Murrow Professorship at Columbia University’s prestigious Graduate School of Journalism, a position in which he created a minority internship program and began to envision the start of what we now know as PBS. He was a visionary, a man of a hundred ideas a day, only four of which, he would admit later in life, were “any good.”¹³

The depth of Fred Friendly’s contribution to broadcast news, as in most things in one’s life, was demonstrated by the loyalty of others, beginning with Murrow. On March 17, 1957, nearly three years after his mother’s passing (and in honor of her *yahrzeit*), Fred Friendly organized a memorial for her at Temple Beth-El’s new



Murrow, Friendly & Sandburg,
ca. 1950-55

location on Providence’s East Side.¹⁴ Drawing an audience of approximately 2,500 congregants and guests, it was probably the largest event yet held at the Orchard Avenue complex, which had been dedicated in 1954.¹⁵

Among the dignitaries who attended: the poet Carl Sandburg, the actor and comedian Danny Kaye and, most notably, Edward R. Murrow. The latter seldom travelled or spoke in public, except at industry events. He made the trek out of respect for his professional cohort, Friendly. He had never even met Therese

Wachenheimer, but had enormous regard and respect for his professional partner, her son.

One account of Murrow's appearance at the Temple, widely shared, is that the famous broadcaster, who was known as a chain smoker, both on and off the air, asked for special dispensation to smoke in the sanctuary during his tribute. Rabbi Braude granted it, to some criticism, but granted it nevertheless. It may have been the power of Murrow, who was the most famous man on television in his day, but it no doubt was also in deference to Fred Friendly, a congregant and a favorite son of Temple Beth-El.¹⁶

No doubt it was also in recognition, on that day in March of 1957, that the smoke present in the Temple was a metaphor for the flame that Fred Friendly had lit in his professional life, providing light and giving meaning to issues in a world where, for him, childhood had been a dark and lonely place.

(Endnotes)

1 Background on Fred Friendly's move to Providence and his upbringing on Lloyd Avenue is found in R. Engelman, *Friendly Vision: Fred Friendly and the Rise and Fall of Television Journalism* (New York: 2009).

2 Speech given by Fred Friendly at the Hamilton School at Wheeler, Providence, April 7, 1995. Typescript retrieved from the archives of the Hamilton School at Wheeler, July, 2019.

3 "In addition to joining Beth-El's Sisterhood, Therese participated in Jewish affairs on the state and national levels. She was actively involved with Hadassah as well as the Rhode Island League of Jewish Women and the state section of the National Council of Jewish Women ...Therese was an active member of Rhode Island's League of Women Voters, Federation of Women's Clubs, and World Affairs Council." Engleman, 15. In this same chapter, Engelman goes into great detail on Therese's civic life and activism.

4 Story recounted by Ruth Mark Friendly in personal interview, June 2019. She was Friendly's second wife. His first, from Providence, was Dorothy Greene.

5 The best source for the history of Rhode Island radio stations is found in J.Rooke, *Rhode Island Radio* (Charleston, SC: 2012).

6 From Hamilton speech, p. 1 of typescript. As late as 1947, Friendly continued to list his home as 395 Lloyd Avenue in Providence directories. By 1946, however, this building had also become home to a boy who would gain prominence as both a Rhode Island lawyer and a Temple Beth-El leader. This was Melvin L. Zurier, who had been born

in 1929. Following his parents' early deaths and through his undergraduate and law school years at Harvard, he lived occasionally with his aunt and uncle, Ida Zurier Fisher and Harry Fisher, who owned the building and lived upstairs at 393 Lloyd. Melvin grew closer to his cousins, Natalie and Zelda Fisher. Eventually, the Fishers moved downstairs to 395 Lloyd, and Melvin left Providence in 1954 when he joined the Air Force's Judge Advocate General's Corps.

7 From Hamilton speech, p. 2 of typescript.

8 Samuel Chipman, *The Outlet Story, 1894-1984* (Providence: Outlet Communications, Inc., 1984) and Eleanor F. Horvitz, "The Outlet Company Story," *The Notes* (1974), 489-531.

9 From Hamilton speech, p. 2 of typescript. Friendly was most likely referring to the downtown Public Library because the Rochambeau branch at 708 Hope Street was not built until 1930.

10 Engelman's chapter two, "My Rhodes Scholarship," is the best source for the narrative of Friendly's time in the U.S. Army.

11 The Friendly-Murrow collaborative partnership, beginning with radio and continuing in television, is detailed in several Murrow biographies, including: Sperber, A.M. *Murrow: His Life and Times* (New York: 1986); Persico, J.E., *Edward R. Murrow: An American Original* (New York: 1988); and Edwards, B., *Edward R. Murrow and the Birth of Broadcast Journalism* (Hoboken, NJ: 2004).

12 Morrow was played by David Stratham, Friendly by George Clooney, who also directed and co-wrote the movie. It was nominated for five Academy Awards.

13 Engleman, chapters 19 and 20, 310-45, detail Friendly's last years, working at Columbia University and helping to found PBS.

14 Therese was buried in Beth-El's cemetery (plot N54). The inscription on her grave proclaims: "For the end of the upright man is peace." This is derived from Psalms (37:37): "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright: for the end of that man is peace."

15 Since his childhood years at Beth-El, Friendly maintained a friendship with Norman Fain, who chaired the new temple's construction committee. Decades later, the sanctuary would be named in honor of Norman and his wife, Rosalie.

16 This momentous visit is detailed in a 1957 article, "Two Distinguished Visitors: Sandburg and Murrow Captivate Audience," *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, May 18, 1957, 13.

author with Friendly, University of Rhode Island, 1995

