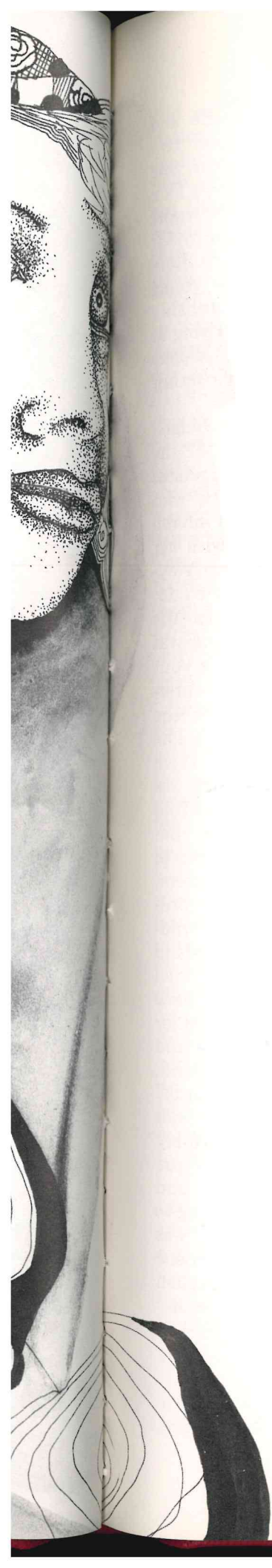


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Herodias Hicks Rhode Island's Independent Woman

By Martha R. McPartland

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The seventeenth century was not the era of the independent woman. Most women of the time were dependent on their menfolk, leaving to them the decisions and following meekly along. Of course, there were exceptions and New England has its share of women like Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer who, very definitely, were women of independent thought and strong will, especially in regard to religious conviction.

Illustration by Meryl Freidman

One whose ideals were, perhaps, not as lofty as her forerunners, but equally determined and independent, was a girl who came to this country in 1637 and whose rather fitting name was Herodias Hicks. She was born Herodias Long in England about 1623 and little of her background is known, but she came to Rhode Island and raised hob with the genealogy of families in Newport, Portsmouth and Pettaquamscutt. In court notices, where her name was to appear often, she claimed that upon the death of her father she was sent, by her mother, to London, where she married John Hicks in St. Faith's Church, a chapel in old St. Paul's. At the time of her marriage she was about fourteen years of age and she and her new husband soon set out for New England, arriving in Weymouth, Massachusetts in 1637. A year later they settled in Newport, Rhode Island where John was made a freeman in 1640. In 1643 he was haled before the court for wife-beating and about that time he left Newport. Herodias later said that he "went away to the Dutch," meaning to New Netherland, carrying most of her estate which her mother had sent to her. He also took their three children — a fact which Herodias neglected to mention to the court! Actually, John Hicks went to Long Island which was then part of New Netherland and he became one of the original settlers of Flushing, Long Island. He held several municipal offices there and was considered a solid citizen until his death in 1672.

Meanwhile Herodias was living with George Gardiner of Newport. Whether she went to live with him before John Hicks left is a moot question, but in 1643 she sued for divorce from John Hicks and he, in turn, later divorced her in New Netherland under Dutch law. The magistrates in Newport at this time were, apparently, a bit shaky as to the particulars of the English laws pertaining to divorce and resultantly the language of the petition and the hearing is so obscure and difficult that it is almost impossible to interpret. Both Herodias and John re-married later, so presumably they were divorced.

Somewhere along her way Herodias had become a fervent Quaker and was an ardent follower of George Fox, the well-known Quaker preacher. Although Herodias was not married to George Gardiner in a civil ceremony she was certainly his common-law wife. It was also sworn in court by Robert Stanton, a Newport Quaker, that "one night at his house both of them did say before him and his wife that they did take the other as man and wife." This did constitute and follow the rite of a Quaker marriage.

George Gardiner was a freeman of Newport in 1639. He was a hard-working young man in the employment of William Coddington and records

confirm his status as a good citizen. He and Herodias had seven children, five boys and two girls, in the twenty years they lived together. She was fired with zeal for the cause of George Fox and on March 11, 1658 she walked from Newport to Weymouth, Massachusetts to bear testimony for the Quakers. She was accompanied by Mary Stanton, daughter of Robert Stanton. Mary, a young girl at that time, helped to carry the baby (probably Rebecca Gardiner), on that long trek. Arriving at Weymouth, Herodias gave witness for the Quakers and was whipped ten strokes by order of Governor John Endicott of Massachusetts.

George Bishop in his book *New England Judged by the Spirit of the Lord*, an indictment of the Puritans first published in London in 1661, relates the incident: "Horred Gardner is the next, who being the mother of many children, and an inhabitant of Newport in Rhode Island, came with her babe sucking at her breast from thence to Weymouth where having finished what she had to do, and her testimony from the Lord, unto which the witness of God answered in the people, she was hurried by the baser sort to Boston, before your Governor, John Endicott, who after he had entertained her with much abusive language, and the girl that came with her, to help bear her child, he committed them both to prison, and ordered them to be whipp'd with ten lashes a piece, which was cruelly laid on their naked bodies, with a three-fold knotted whip of cords, and then they were continued for the space of fourteen days longer in prison, from their friends who could not visit them. The woman came a very sore journey, and (according to man) hardly accomplishable, through a wilderness of about sixty miles between Rhode Island and Boston; and being kept up, after your cruel usage of their bodies, might have died, but you have no consideration of this, or of them, tho the mother had of you, who after the savage inhumane and bloody execution on her of your cruelty aforesaid, kneeled down, and prayed the Lord to forgive you."

By 1664 Herodias had tired of George Gardiner and petitioned the Rhode Island General Assembly for a separation from him, saying part, to excuse herself: "I, not being brought up to labour, and young, knew not what to do to have something to live, haveing noe friend; in which straight I was drawn by George Gardiner to consent to him soe fare as I did, for my maintainance, yett with much oppression of spiritt, judging him not to be my husband, never being married to him according to the law of the place." Thus did Herodias so easily throw aside her Quaker convictions.

The General Assembly took a dim view of Herodias and George and, in pretty explicit language,

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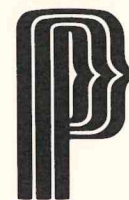
said so and fined each of them twenty pounds, stating that: "the aforesaid Gardiner and Hored are hereby straightly required that from henceforth they presume not to lead soe scandolose a life, lest they feel the extremest penalty that either is or shall be provided in such cases." The Assembly then preceeded to re-enact the Act of 1647 pertaining to such cases.

Evidently the eyes of Herodias had already begun to wander, for at the same session of the General Assembly, Margaret Porter, wife of John Porter was suing him for non-support of herself and her daughter. John Porter was one of the original owners of the Pettaquamscutt Purchase and a man of some importance in Portsmouth, being a magistrate there. The Pettaquamscutt lands were purchased in 1657 from three chief Sachems of the Narragansett Indians by Samuel Wilbor, John Hull, Samuel Wilson, Thomas Mumford and John Porter. These five men acquired a sizable chunk of the Narragansett Country, fifteen miles long and about seven miles wide, including all of what is now South Kingstown, part of North Kingstown, Narragansett and Exeter, Rhode Island. The purchase price was sixteen pounds.

Shortly after Margaret Porter's petition to the General Assembly, she and John Porter were divorced and our girl, Herodias, married him. Most of the land Porter owned at Pettaquamscutt later was deeded by gift to the sons of Herodias, namely: William, Benoni, Henry, George and Nicholas Gardiner and to John Watson, who was the son-in-law of Herodias. This promise of security in land for her sons was doubtless the main reason for Herodias leaving George Gardiner. In the various recorded outbursts of her, usually before the Rhode Island General Assembly, her character shows through quite clearly. She was an ambitious and determined woman, with great pride in her five sons. As she herself had grasped and held her place in the community, so did she grasp and hold all she could get for her sons. Records do not speak of her appearance, but without doubt she must have been personable and attractive to men, using her charm to further her ambition.

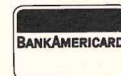
So Rhode Island's independent woman, Herodias Long-Hicks-Gardiner-Porter, charged through the annals of the State of Rhode Island, pursuing her own course regardless of law, of morals and, apparently, of public opinion, but nonetheless emerging in history and genealogy as the matriarch of a highly respectable and civic-minded family.

Hero-
guage,



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