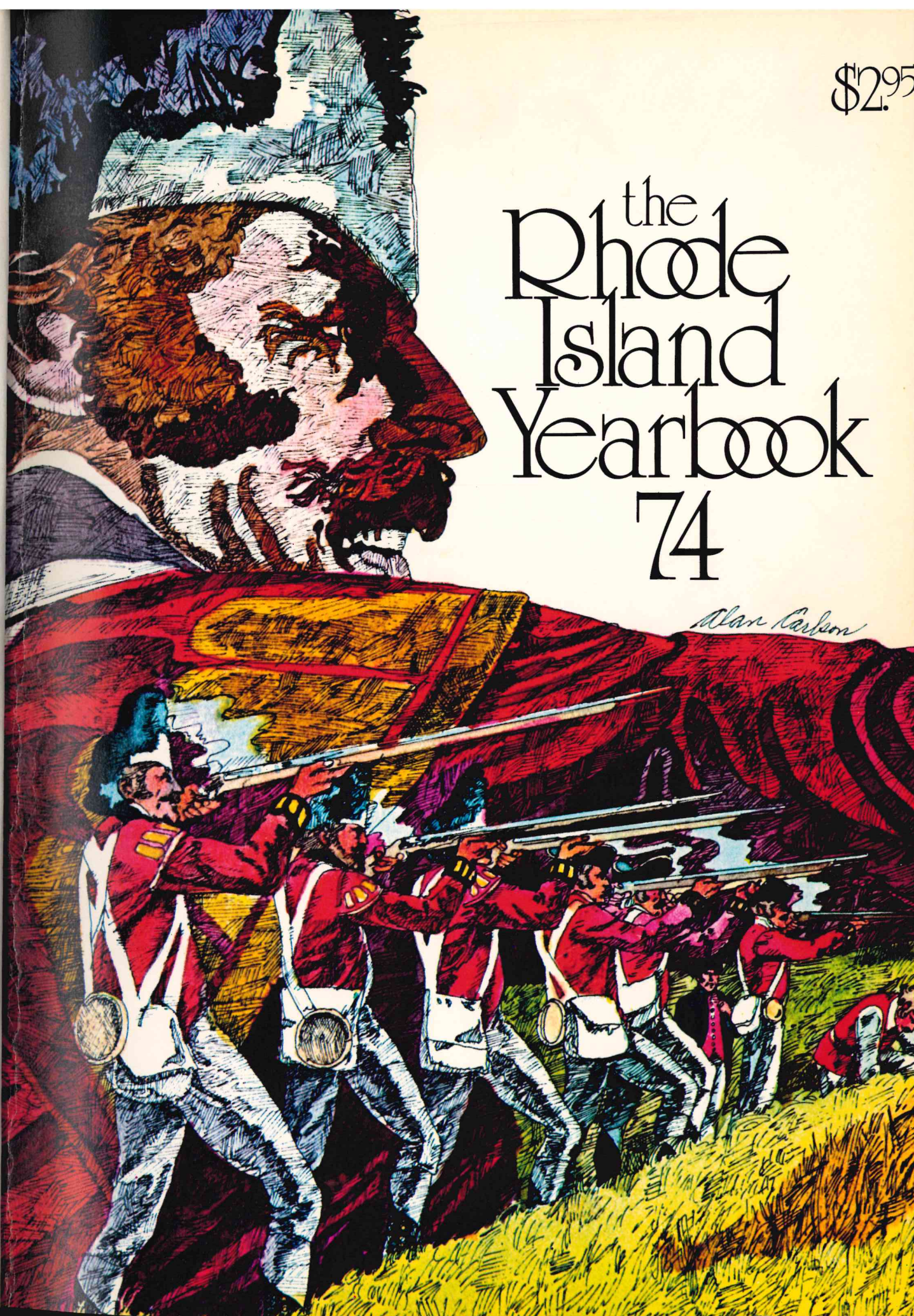
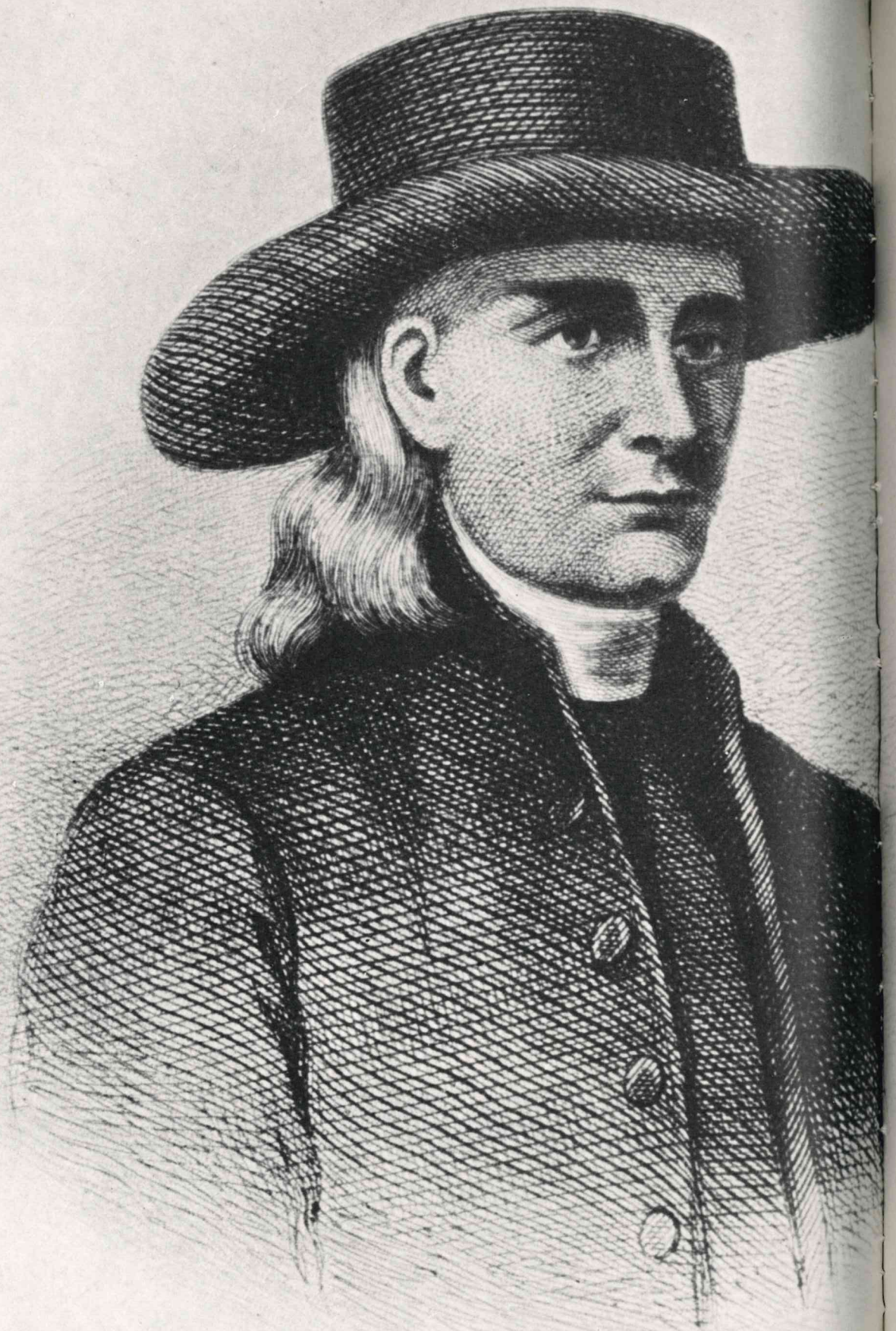


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Stephen Hopkins the Scituate Years 1708~1742

by *Barbara Sarkesian*

Most Rhode Islanders know that Stephen Hopkins was a leading citizen of Providence, Governor of Rhode Island, and especially, a Signer of the Declaration of Independence. But how many know that this distinguished man, called "*the representative Rhode Islander of the 18th century*," and "*one of America's greatest sons*," grew up in the hills of Scituate, and spent his young manhood there as a farmer, surveyor, and local politician? It's interesting to look back at this part of Stephen Hopkins' life, and see if we can detect any of the seeds of future greatness.

For years there was a difference of opinion as to where Stephen Hopkins was born. Some sources said Scituate, others said Cranston, and one even mentioned Scituate, Massachusetts. Stephen Hopkins himself, in a family record written in 1754, lists his birthplace as Cranston. Actually, he was born in that part of Providence which in 1754 was included in the territory set off under the name of Cranston, and which later, in 1868, was reannexed to Providence. An idea of the general area can best be described from old deeds. It's recorded that in 1689, Major William Hopkins, Stephen's grandfather, purchased 200 acres "*near to a place called Massapauge*." (Modern spelling: Mashapaug.) Although there's nothing today at the site to prove it, we can safely pinpoint the birthplace as in South Providence, specifically in the area of Broad, Sackett, and Hamilton Streets. Here at this Massapauge homestead, on March 7, 1707, Stephen Hopkins was born to William Hopkins, Jr. and Ruth Wilkinson Hopkins, both members of prominent early Rhode Island families.

At that time, there was great interest in the lands west of the "Seven-Mile Line," which was a boundary line extending west of Fox Point on a straight line, south to the Pawtuxet River, and north to the Blackstone River. In 1700, Ruth Wilkinson's brother Joseph received a grant of 137½ acres of land near Chapumiscook. (Modern spelling: Chopmist, the present northwest corner of Scituate.) A few years later, Joseph moved there to a farm in the heart of the forest. About 1708, William Hopkins followed with his wife Ruth and their two children, William and the infant Stephen.

All of Providence County was then just a widely-scattered collection of houses, with a population of under 1500. Scituate itself was reached only by horseback or ox cart, and once there, one found no stores, no churches, no schools, no newspapers, and no postal route. It was, in reality, a frontier town. Emigrants from the Plymouth Colony didn't arrive until 1710, giving the place their old town name of "Scituate," originally "Satuit" - Indian for "*cold running water*."

The Hopkins family settled down on a farm not far from Joseph Wilkinson's, described by one writer as "on high land, overlooking a wide extent of country." Here, in the wilderness, William began raising corn, rye, oats, and potatoes, and in their modest farmhouse, he and Ruth eventually reared 7 more children.

Since formal education was difficult to come by in the colonies in the early 18th century, young Stephen Hopkins was instructed by his mother in all subjects and in mathematics and surveying by his uncle Joseph and his grandfather, Samuel Wilkinson. This was unusual in that Quakers - Ruth and Samuel were both members of the Society of Friends - didn't believe in culture or formal learning, but rather in an inner divine light "*that lighteth every man in the world*." However, Samuel Wilkinson was not an ordinary man. Intelligent and public-spirited, he had been at various times a surveyor, a Justice of the Peace, a member of the General Assembly, and a Captain in King Philip's War. Most unusual of all is the fact that he had books circulating among his family, friends, and neighbors - books by *Shakespeare, Milton, Bunyan, Spenser, Swift, Addison* - in what may very well have been the earliest library in Rhode Island.

No doubt because of this early influence, Stephen was a conscientious student and reader, who it is said, studied books - and not incidentally, men - all his life. He was, in every sense of the word, a self-educated man. In 1785, President Manning of Brown, echoing words of John Adams, described Stephen Hopkins as being possessed of "*an uncommonly elevated genius*." This led one writer to an intriguing question: Where would his career have taken him if he had ever had formal education?

Thus, with a combination of intelligence and energy said to have been inherited from his other grandfather, Major William Hopkins, and with the gravity of his great-grandfather, Reverend William Wickenden, Stephen pursued his studies, while also helping out on the farm and doing surveying. Because of his skill as a surveyor, he was often called upon to determine boundary questions. This naturally put him in contact with other people and localities throughout the colony, something that would prove to be a valuable asset for the future.

On October 9, 1726, Stephen married Sarah Scott. Sarah's father, Sylvanus, had known the Hopkins and Wilkinson families for years. Her mother was a Jenckes, whose brother Joseph was to become Governor of Rhode Island in 1727. Stephen's father gave the young couple - (they were both 19 years old) - 70 acres of land at Chapumiscook, and they also received 90 acres from Sam-

uel Wilkinson. So, for the next few years, Stephen Hopkins settled down to be a farmer, surveyor, and a family man.

On February 20, 1730, Scituate - with the section called Chapumiscook included - was set off from Providence as a separate and distinct township. The new town was bounded on the north by Gloucester, on the east by Providence, on the south by Warwick, and on the west by Connecticut. It contained about 103 square miles, or 66,000 acres, 60,000 of which was forest. The population was around 600, or about 6 people to the square mile. At the first town meeting, held at the Angell Tavern in South Scituate, the 24-year old farmer and surveyor, Stephen Hopkins, was elected the first town moderator. Thus modestly began what was to become a 50-year career of public service, spanning the beginning, middle, and end of the 18th century.

The years immediately following Stephen Hopkins' election as Scituate town moderator were busy ones:

In 1732, he was elected town clerk, an influential position he was to hold for 10 years. The records of the town during that period are in a beautiful, legible hand, in strong contrast to the tremulous signature (due to a paralytic affliction that made it necessary for him to guide his right hand with his left) that was to appear years later on the Declaration of Independence.

Also in 1732, he was elected one of Scituate's representatives to the General Assembly. (His uncle, Joseph Wilkinson, had been the town's first representative.) And for the next 6 years, Stephen was the representative every year but one, with a new colleague each time. In this capacity, he was instrumental, in the years 1734-35, in putting the Plainfield Road through Scituate.

From 1735 to 1742, he served as President of the Scituate Town Council.

In 1736, he was elected a Justice of the Peace, and Justice of the Court of Common Pleas.

In 1737, he was engaged to revise the streets of Providence, to prepare new maps and plats of Providence estates, and to project maps of Providence and Scituate. This led to his being named Surveyor of Lands for both Providence and Scituate.

In 1739 and 1740, he was elected a Justice of the Court of Common Pleas for Providence County.

In 1741, he was once again Scituate's representative to the General Assembly, and this time was elected Speaker. In this year also, he was named Clerk of the Court of Common Pleas.

Not only were these years active ones in Stephen Hopkins' public life, but in his private life as well. At William Hopkins' death in 1738, his es-

tate had been divided between Stephen and his brother Esek. Soon afterward, however, Esek left for sea giving Stephen his share. Thus, the farm became larger and more valuable. Stephen regularly received bounties from the General Assembly for raising the heaviest crops of flax and hemp.

By 1740, Stephen and Sarah had become the parents of 7 children - Rufus, John, Ruth, Lydia, Silvanus, Simon and George - all born at the Scituate farm except the eldest, Rufus, born at the Massapauge homestead. During this period, Joseph Wilkinson's estate had flourished also, and included some 1000 acres and 15 children. A fine home he had built in the 1720's was reportedly still standing more than a century later.

But even though this was a busy, fruitful time, the Hopkins family was in a general state of upheaval. Stephen's brothers, Esek, William, Rufus, John, and Samuel, were all off to sea; his sisters, Hope and Abigail, had married and moved away; death had claimed his grandfather, Samuel Wilkinson, his mother, his father, and then in 1740, Joseph Wilkinson. It was at this point that interests of a different scope began to appeal to him more and more.

His increasing connections in Newport and Providence, and the successful nautical experiences of his brothers (not to mention a mercantile bent inherited from another great-grandfather, Captain John Whipple), had led him to the idea of purchasing vessels, and by 1740 he already had several in service. Also, as a member of the General Assembly, which in those days met in different locations - Providence, Newport, Warwick, East Greenwich, and South Kingstown - he had naturally become exposed to new people and new ideas. Most of all, though, it was the great potential of Providence that attracted him.

So, in 1742, Stephen Hopkins sold his Scituate farm and moved to "the big city." It's interesting to note that just a few years after William Hopkins' death, all the family of this man - who wanted nothing more than to be a farmer and for them to follow in his footsteps - had left the Scituate hills. and further, that within the next 40 years, William's descendants were sailing off in all directions, with as many as a dozen of them in command of vessels.

What was the Providence of 1742 like? Picture a small town of less than 4000 people, with 4 churches, 3 taverns, 1 mill, and a draw in the bridge at Weybosset, but with no town hall, no post office, no custom house, no bank, no school or college, no library, no newspaper and no paved streets. Houses and shops were on Town Street (now South Main), with nothing but fields beyond.

Stephen Hopkins bought a 2-room house at the corner of Town Street and Bank Lane (now Hopkins Street), and the following year added other rooms to it. This was to be his home for the next 43 years, until his death on July 13, 1785. In 1804, the house was moved halfway up the hill, then in 1927 to its present site at the corner of Hopkins and Benefit Streets. It was restored, and, known as the Governor Stephen Hopkins House, it is now owned by the state, and is in the custody of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America.

For these next 43 years, Stephen Hopkins was to profoundly affect the development of his town, state, and country. A list of his achievements is indeed impressive: Merchant, shipowner, community leader, business associate of the Browns and other prominent families, legislator, jurist, newspaper and library founder, pamphleteer, historian, orator, an incorporator and first chancellor of Brown University, ten times Governor of Rhode Island, member of the First and Second Continental Congresses, patriot and statesman.

Under his leadership and influence Providence became a flourishing, widely-known center of commerce and trade that rivaled Newport. Rhode Island changed from a small settlement to a vigorous colony busily involved in dealings with her sister colonies.

As for Stephen Hopkins' contribution to his country: He had worked long and hard for separate government, and his reputation as a political theorist and defender of colonial liberties had won him high regard outside Rhode Island and carried much weight. In Philadelphia he rubbed elbows with the great men of the day - Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Samuel Adams, Patrick Henry, John Jay - and on July 4, 1776, his distinguished career was culminated, at the age of 69, by his signing of the Declaration of Independence. "*My hand trembles,*" he said as he signed, "*but my heart does not.*"

George Washington visited Stephen Hopkins' Providence home twice. First, in 1776 after the evacuation of Boston, and then in 1781 when the General came to Rhode Island to meet with Rochambeau on the conduct of a coming campaign. Moses Brown was an eyewitness to this latter visit, and he wrote: "*I was sitting with him, when General Washington alone, called to see him. I sat some time viewing their simple, friendly and pleasant manner . . . these two great men met and conversed with each other on various subjects.*"

On a monument in North Burial Ground, Providence, erected by the state in 1848, there are these words by Senator Asher Robbins, which give an insight into the character of Stephen Hopkins:

"Sacred To The Memory Of
The Illustrious
STEPHEN HOPKINS
Of Revolutionary Fame
Attested By His Signature
To The Declaration
Of Our National Independence
Great In Council
From Sagacity Of Mind
Magnanimous In Sentiment
Firm In Purpose
And Good As Great
From Benevolence Of Heart
He Stood In The Front Rank Of
Statesmen And Patriots
Self-Educated
Yet Among The Most Learned Of Men
His Vast Treasury Of Useful Knowledge
His Great Retentive
And Reflective Powers
Combined With His Social Nature
Made Him The Most Interesting
Of Companions In Private Life"

An eloquent epitaph for the former farmer, surveyor, and local politician of the Scituate hills. Or, as one writer colorfully summed it up: "*Strange that out of the wilds of Scituate, there came a 'flow of soul' which could enthrall the best scholars and the highest spirits of America.*"

STEPHEN HOPKINS, A RHODE ISLAND STATESMAN
by William E. Foster, 1884

EARLY RHODE ISLAND
by William B. Weeden, 1910

"THE OLD STONE BANK" HISTORY OF RHODE ISLAND, 1929

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THE RHODE ISLANDER, "Colonial Politics - Was Anarchy Ever This Complicated?"
by Elmer Cornwell, Jr., June 4, 1972

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SCITUATE
booklet published by the Scituate Republican Town Committee

VISITOR'S BOOKLET
Governor Stephen Hopkins House