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PREVIEW

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**Lives of quiet desperation: Community and polity in New  
England over four centuries: The cases of Portsmouth and  
Foster, Rhode Island**

**Ferraro, William Michael, Ph.D.**

**Brown University, 1991**

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PREVIEW

Lives of Quiet Desperation: Community and Polity in New England  
Over Four Centuries: The Cases of Portsmouth and Foster, Rhode Island

by

William Michael Ferraro

A.B., Georgetown University, 1982

A.M., Brown University, 1983

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of  
American Civilization at Brown University

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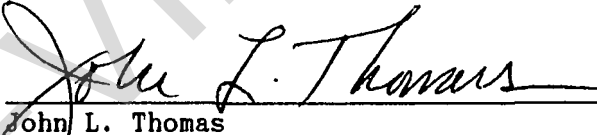
This dissertation by William Michael Ferraro  
is accepted in its present form by the  
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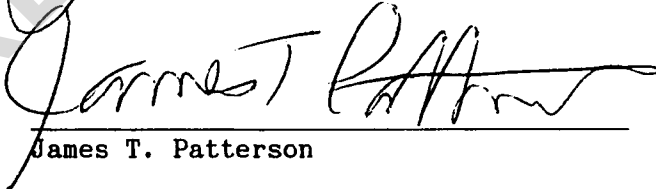
  
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Date 5/1/91

  
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PREVIEW

## VITA

William Michael Ferraro was born on August 20, 1960 at Corning, New York. He graduated as the valedictorian of the Class of 1978 at South River High School (New Jersey). He received his A.B. in American Studies from Georgetown University in 1982, earning membership in Phi Beta Kappa and Alpha Sigma Nu and graduating *summa cum laude*. His undergraduate thesis on the National Anthem Act of 1931 won the Morris Medal for best historical essay. Since receiving his A.M. in American Civilization from Brown University in 1983, he has secured research grants from the Rhode Island Historical Association and New Jersey Historical Commission and a National Historical Records and Publications Commission Fellowship in Historical Editing at The Salmon P. Chase Papers, Department of History, Claremont Graduate School. He has presented several papers and published "An Interpretation of Hawthorne and the American Character," *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 85 (Spring 1986), 165-75; "Twentieth-Century Rhode Island Town Government History," *Rhode Island History*, 46 (November 1988), 136-54; and "Biography of a Morris Canal Village: Bowerstown, Washington Township, Warren County, New Jersey, 1820-1940," *Canal History and Technology Proceedings*, Volume VIII, Easton, Pennsylvania: Center for Canal History and Technology, March 1989, 3-73. His teaching has ranged from the American legislative tradition to reform history to sports. His current position is Assistant Editor with The Salmon P. Chase Papers.

## PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The New England town and town meeting hold a firm place in American cultural mythology. This study strives to uncover the reality behind this facade and explore how and why popular participation in local New England government has changed since the seventeenth century. Probing this evolution of town meeting government in two Rhode Island towns has entailed consideration of many concerns--education, welfare, roads, agriculture, business, police, state and federal relations, partisanship, recreation, ethnicity, religion, gender--and led to the conclusion that political practices in all periods sought in a fundamental way to conserve the integrity and power of the local community. Such a goal makes appropriate the Thoreau-inspired title: "Lives of Quiet Desperation."

Portsmouth and Foster, Rhode Island, were chosen for close examination because each town experienced economic fluctuations, periods of immigration, technological advances, and new cultural attitudes through time without having exceptional or idiosyncratic events or circumstances isolate the paths of their local political histories. Agriculture dominated the economic life of both towns until the early part of the twentieth century, and the populations varied little in number until the 1930s. Portsmouth, the second town incorporated in Rhode Island, began in 1638 on Aquidneck Island, and being a town along the principal travel route between the mainland and Newport, it always stood astride the main avenues of activity in Rhode Island. Foster, incorporated as a town in 1781, sits inland along Rhode Island's western border with Connecticut. Despite being roughly within the orbit of Providence, easily the principal

city in Rhode Island since the start of the nineteenth century, Foster was relatively detached from the center of activity in Rhode Island. Given their contrasting geographic positions within the state, the virtually parallel political development of the two towns over the centuries strongly suggests the predominance of broad cultural trends and widely impinging national events as initiators of change at the local level.

\* \* \*

My dissertation director, Professor Elmer E. Cornwell, and readers, Professors John L. Thomas and James T. Patterson, all played important roles in my completion of this project. Professor Cornwell, drawing upon his wide acquaintance with Rhode Island politics and government, suggested Portsmouth and Foster as suitable for this study. He did not lead me astray at the start, and his support was unflagging. Professor Thomas constantly reminded me to think about narrative and style and write a manuscript that was history as well as political science. Writing challenges all interdisciplinary scholars, and I thank him for his guidance in this regard. Professor Patterson in a very real sense saved the entire project at an early stage of writing by asking me to rethink in a comprehensive manner the structure and goals of the study. His firmness at that time helped me bring order to chaos. Each professor showed patience as I slowly produced draft and commented on each section with care. Their suggestions inevitably improved the manuscript. I appreciate their advice and take full responsibility for remaining shortcomings.

I owe a large professional debt to my senior editors at The Salmon P. Chase Papers, Department of History, Claremont Graduate School--Jim

McClure, Leigh Johnsen, and John Niven. Association with them has made me a more careful, perceptive, and precise historian. I offer particular thanks to Jim and Leigh for helping me manage the demands of full-time editorial work with writing a dissertation.

This study simply would not have been possible without the cooperation of town officials in Portsmouth and Foster, Rhode Island. No researcher could ask for or obtain better working conditions than those granted me by Foster Town Clerk Heidi Colwell and Portsmouth Town Clerk Carol Zinno and their respective staff and associates. Librarians at Foster Center Library, Tyler Free Library, Moosup Valley, and the Portsmouth Free Public Library also merit thanks for their unfailing cordiality.

The nearly six years required for completion of this dissertation found me residing at three different places--Rhode Island, New Jersey, and California. The Rockefeller Library at Brown University and Honnold Library at the Claremont Colleges provided reference support for the beginning and final stages of the study. For the crucial middle period, I was able to use the resources of the David Bishop Skillman Library at Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania, which maintains a very generous policy toward outside scholars. To all library personnel, and especially those affiliated with the David Bishop Skillman Library, thanks.

I came to Rhode Island in the fall of 1982 with no knowledge of the state and wound up writing a dissertation on what in many respects has become an adopted home. I was made to feel at home in Rhode Island first by Rheta Martin, a Newport native who was secretary of the American Civilization Program at the time. She has since retired but remains a

friend. Besides introducing me to Rhode Island, Rheta helped me negotiate the administrative hurdles confronting all Brown graduate students. Sybil Mazor, the current American Civilization administrator, has proved equally adept in this capacity and always has kept me in mind though I often have been out of sight. I cannot properly express my full appreciation of Rheta's or Sybil's interest and help.

Meeting people and making new friends was perhaps the most rewarding part of my years spent as a graduate student. I am privileged to know many professors, administrators, graduate students, and undergraduates from Brown. I thank them all for helping me pursue my education, and at this time mention Bruce Rosenberg, Carol Frost, Todd Gernes, and his wife, Linda, Louise Newman, Kevin Gaines, and Joanne Melish, only because their assistance or hospitality directly facilitated the completion of my dissertation.

Special mention must be made, too, of the Honorable Robert F. Arrigan, and his wife, Joan. We met through our mutual association with Georgetown University and have since become close friends. The ever-ready hospitality of the Arrigans allowed me to visit Rhode Island at my convenience and be most productive during my stay. I thank them for their kindness. The nuns (Franciscan Missionaries of Mary) at Fruit Hill, North Providence, who I came to know through my friendship with the Arrigans and my older brother's marriage to Maureen Quigley, a niece of Sister Collette Corriveau, helped sustain me with their prayers. Such support cannot be overestimated.

My final and greatest thanks must be reserved for my parents Theodore L. and Marilyn Ferraro, and my brothers Ted and John. My family

has given me the opportunity to obtain an education unimagined by my grandparents and always have stood behind my efforts. I completed my dissertation largely upon the faith, courage, and love nurtured within the circle of my family. There are no greater gifts, and it is these, rather than sheer knowledge, that I wish to pass on to my niece Elizabeth Mary and all in the next generations.

W. M. F.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### The Imperative of Rhode Island Local Government and Founding the Politics of Portsmouth and Foster, Rhode Island

. . . the towns . . . were little *nuclei*, little corporations, . . . narrow, self-centered, and dictatorial; each, through the circumstances of its origins, a protest against external authority . . .<sup>1</sup>

Rhode Island towns knew neither of the maxims "one for all" or "all for one"; the Rhode Island slogan might more accurately be phrased "every town for itself."<sup>2</sup>

The earliest towns in Rhode Island formed under inhospitable conditions. The initial settlers had been banished from Puritan Massachusetts or were members of religious splinter groups who had worn out their welcome in other places. Those who founded towns in Rhode Island lacked fundamental agreement on a religious and social ideal around which they could build a community in the time-honored manner. Neighboring colonists looked aghast upon the separation between church and town in Rhode Island and regularly harassed the nonconformists throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by disturbing their territorial arrangements and meddling in internal affairs. Rhode Island was the edge of the seventeenth-century frontier, and uncertain relations with Indians threatened the new settlements. Wilderness conditions challenged the

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<sup>1</sup>Irving B. Richman, *Rhode Island: Its Making and Its Meaning*, second ed. (n.pl.: Putnam, 1902), pp. 314-15.

<sup>2</sup>Charles Carroll, *Rhode Island: Three Centuries of Democracy* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing, 1932), II, 823.

efforts of the immigrants to wrest the necessities of life from the land and sea and build the foundations of a lasting economy and future wealth.<sup>3</sup>

These unfavorable conditions led the founders of towns in Rhode Island to construct local governments capable of independent operation. Self-contained local governments provided the people in each town with a defense against encroachers and served as a focal point around which the originally ill-defined communities took shape. Reliance upon local modes of government and an obsession with local autonomy in Rhode Island was not a departure from English precedents, or even the practice in forsaken Massachusetts; but in Rhode Island, the walls separating each town and its government from the outside were raised with sturdier materials and greater zest and guarded with the most jealous eyes.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>See William E. Foster, *Town Government in Rhode Island*, Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, ed. Herbert B. Adams, 4th ser. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1886), pp. 24-25; Carl Bridenbaugh, "The New England Town: A Way of Life," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 56 (1947), 19; Bruce C. Daniels, *Dissent and Conformity on Narragansett Bay: The Colonial Rhode Island Town* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1983), p. 1; William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), I, 8; George H. Kellner and J. Stanley Lemons, *Rhode Island: The Independent State* (Woodlands Hills, California: Windsor, 1982), p. 11; Charles M. Andrews, *The Settlements*, Vol. II of *The Colonial Period of American History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936), pp. 17, 23; Charles M. Andrews, *Our Earliest Colonial Settlements: Their Diversities of Origin and Later Characteristics* (1933; rpt. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1966), pp. 90, 92, 101; and Dennis Allen O'Toole, "Exiles, Refugees, and Rogues: The Quest for Civil Order in the Towns and Colony of Providence Plantations, 1636-1654," Diss. Brown University 1973, pp. 118-19.

<sup>4</sup>Comments on the commitment to local government in early Rhode Island towns may be found in Foster, p. 35; William B. Weedon, *Economic and Social History of New England, 1620-1789* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1890), I, 48; Prescott O. Clarke, *Rhode Island and Providence Plantations: A Short Historical and Statistical Compilation . . .* (Providence: E. A. Johnson, 1885), p. 7; Bruce C. Daniels, "Contrasting Colony-Town Relations in the Founding of Connecticut and Rhode Island:

Experience, rather than a blueprint, guided the development of the first town governments in Rhode Island.<sup>5</sup> The initial government in

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Prior to the Charters of 1662 and 1663," *The Connecticut Historical Society Bulletin*, 38 (1973), 61; Richman, *Rhode Island: Making*, pp. 309-310; and Daniels, *Dissent and Conformity*, pp. 5-6. T.H. Breen, in "Persistent Localism: English Social Change and the Shaping of New England Institutions," *The William & Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 32 (1975), 3-28, elucidates the spirit of localism in England at the time of emigration to America. Decisions by the Massachusetts General Court in March, 1635/36, to give towns in the colony the power to dispose of common property, order local affairs, and choose their own particular officers indicate that recognition of town autonomy in Massachusetts preceded settlement in Rhode Island. Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, "A Meaning for Turner's Frontier: Part II: The Southwest Frontier and New England," *Political Science Quarterly*, 69 (1954), 590.

<sup>5</sup>The origins of local government institutions in New England captivated a group of American historians in the late nineteenth century. A debate ensued between those who felt that New England town institutions had sprung to life as "survivals" of ancient communities and those who maintained that "indigenous" influences like terrain, economics, and contemporary political and religious beliefs played a larger structuring role. For examples of "survival" interpretations, see Herbert B. Adams, "The Germanic Origins of New England Towns," in *Local Institutions*, Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, 1st ser., ed. Herbert B. Adams (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1883); Edward A. Freeman, "An Introduction to American Institutional History," in *Local Institutions*; Foster; and James K. Hosmer, "Samuel Adams, the Man of the Town Meeting," in *Institutions and Economics*, Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, 2nd ser., ed. Herbert B. Adams (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1884). For examples of the "indigenous" side of the debate see Edward Channing, "Town and County Government in the English Colonies of North America," in *Institutions and Economics*; Enoch A. Bryan, *The Mark in Europe and America: A Review of the Discussion on Early Land Tenure* (Boston: Ginn, 1893); and Charles Francis Adams, "A Study of Church and Town Government," in *Three Episodes of Massachusetts History* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin, 1892), pp. 581-1009. Nativist biases, ulterior political interests--and as T. J. Jackson Lears has suggested in *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon, 1981)--a commitment to their times' pervasive intellectual concern with restoring "antimodern" beliefs and values in American culture, circumscribe the product of these historians. More complete summaries of this scholarship may be found in John F. Sly, *Town Government in Massachusetts (1620-1930)* (1930; rpt. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon, 1967), chp. 3, and Perry D. Westbrook, *The New England Town in Fact and Fiction* (East Brunswick, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1982), chp. 8.

Providence, founded by Roger Williams and compatriots in the spring of 1636 as the first permanent white settlement in Rhode Island, amounted to no more than a fortnightly gathering of the masters of families to consult about their common peace, watch, and planting. Williams noted in a letter that 'mutual consent . . . finished all matters with speed and peace.' Providence's householders, who according to Williams disdained 'the face of magistracy,' created only two public officers between the founding of the town in 1636 and 1640--a treasurer selected from their number monthly and a clerk chosen at each town meeting to record the proceedings. Williams, a strict adherent of vigorous civil government which advanced the public good and castigated vice, watched with dismay as this undifferentiated government proved inadequate to the task of ordering a growing community containing residents split between worldly ambitions and other-worldly aspirations.<sup>6</sup>

The town government in Providence assumed greater structure in July, 1640, when the householders agreed to a ruling instrument known as "The Combination" which created a system of arbitration for adjudicating civil suits between individuals and instituted a five-man board of 'desposers' entrusted 'with despossall of Landes, and also of the Towne Stock, and all General things.' The Combination brought into existence executive and judicial branches of government and eased the burden on householders for local governance, but the new arrangement left considerable power in the hands of each householder and final authority in the decision of the

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<sup>6</sup>Richman, *Rhode Island: Making*, pp. 94, 96-97. On Williams's displeasure with the earliest form of government in Providence, see Andrews, *Earliest Colonial Settlements*, p. 98; and Daniels, *Dissent and Conformity*, pp. 5-6.

General Meeting. Any man who questioned a decision of the disposers could bring the matter before a General Meeting for reevaluation, and if the matter were sufficiently urgent, he could order the clerk to call a special gathering of the householders. In all, the twelve articles of The Combination framed goals for the local government in Providence and established channels for reducing friction among the residents without substantially curtailing individual access to power. The new arrangement of government also promoted community identity and corporate sensibility.<sup>7</sup>

A structure of local government similar to that which evolved in Providence emerged in due time in the other Rhode Island towns. In all cases, an assemblage of enfranchised residents--the town meeting--exercised final authority in local political affairs and leadership in social and economic concerns. The people in each town expressed their will on local matters directly through their town meeting and addressed the forum of the colony through representatives elected in these same town assemblies. The people who comprised the town meetings created a panel of administrators--the town council--so that the citizens as a body did

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<sup>7</sup>Howard M. Chapin, *Being the History of the Towns of Providence and Warwick to 1649 and of the Colony to 1647*, Vol. I of *Documentary History of Rhode Island* (Providence: Preston and Rounds, 1916), pp. 110-15. Indication of a corporate sense in the townspeople of Providence before the enactment of The Combination may be seen in the action of the householders assembled in a General Meeting in the latter part of 1637 that forbade anyone from selling his field lot to "any person but . . . an Inhabitant without consent of the Towne." The articles in The Combination most notable for their promotion of communal integrity were five and twelve: "Agre 5: That all the whole inhabetance to combined orselves to assist any man in the pursuite of any partye delinquent with all or best Endeavours to atach him . . . ." "Agre 12: That Every man that hath not paid in his purchase mony for this plantation, shall make up his 10s to be 30s Equall with the first purchasers: and for all that are Received Townes men hereafter to pay the like sum of mony to a Towne stock." Chapin, I, 43, 113-14.