

The Loyalists had a rough time

By WALLACE BROWN

ALL AMERICAN wars have had domestic opponents, and none was more divisive than the War for Independence, which would be better termed the first Civil War.

In 1780, 8,000 Americans, including Rhode Islanders, were fighting for George III while only 9,000 were fighting for George Washington. Perhaps one in five Americans actively opposed independence and up to 100,000 went into permanent exile. Proportionately far more Americans fled the American Revolution than Cubans fled the Castro Revolution, or Frenchmen fled the French Revolution.

These opponents of the Revolution were called Tories by their enemies. They called themselves Loyalists. Today their existence is at best grudgingly admitted by the American public.

Compared to such strongholds as Georgia, New York and South Carolina, Rhode Island exhibited only moderate Loyalist strength, and that largely confined to Newport. To explain the general weakness we may note that Rhode Island had long been virtually a self-governing republic, electing its own governor, feeling the weight of imperial power very lightly, and as a contemporary put it, doing "all things as if (it) were out of the dominions of

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the crown." Although Rhode Islanders had long indulged in bitter internal politics, the vast majority were agreed on the iniquity of British legislation after 1760 and most agreed that independence was a necessary step in 1776.

Newport, however, was the seat of royal officials and conservative merchants who so often led the Loyalists. The town was occupied by the British between December, 1776, and October, 1779, which provided necessary physical support and opportunities for social intercourse and trade with the forces—frequently compromising acts. Newport was in the process of losing its economic and political pre-eminence to Providence (almost barren of Loyalists) and compared with its rival was much more strategically exposed to the mighty British navy. Hence some Newporters cherished the imperial connection with increased ardor.

Two further aspects of Newport Loyalism must be mentioned. In 1764 there appeared the Newport Junto, comprised mainly of British-born Rhode Islanders, which disliked the colony's independent ways and deprecated the violent opposition to the Stamp Act. The Junto gained no popular support, but it stimulated what was to become the Loyalist party ten years later. Another stimulus was the Anglican faith centered on Trinity Church. Often in New England, the Church of England, the minority church attended by royal officials and attractive to the conservative well-to-do, played an important role in the development of Loyalism.

However, it must be stressed that even in Newport the Loyalists were

a minority even of the merchants, were usually drawn from the "better sort," and attracted little popular support. When the British evacuated Aquidneck Island, only 45 Tories went with them.

Now to turn to the experiences of various Rhode Islanders which illustrate some important themes in the history of the Loyalists.

Motivation was often a personal, subtle matter. Joseph Wanton came from a distinguished Rhode Island family and as a popularly elected governor his actions during the *Liberty* and *Gaspee* affairs had proved his patriotism. But after Lexington he shrank from the "horrors . . . of a civil war," stressed the value (especially economic) of the British connection, and was accordingly deposed by the legislature in June 1775 from the office he had held for six years. Wanton's career belies the popular legend that most Tories fa-

For Tories: 'A trotting horse and continual riding.'

vored British policies before 1776 or advocated meek submission. His Loyalism was an embarrassment to the patriots, particularly the dominant Stephen Hopkins faction of which he was a member. The result was the return to power of the rival Samuel Ward party. Wanton's sons were keen Loyalists and Joseph Junior commanded a Loyalist regiment during the war.

Other examples of leading Loyalists include the famous merchant

family, the Brentons; Thomas Vernon, a native-born royal official; Sheriff Walter Chaloner; Moses Hart, a Jewish leader (most Newport Jews were Whigs, however); Edward Thurston, a trustee of the colony; George Rome, a wealthy merchant and zealous Loyalist; and two doctors, Hallyburton and Hunter. Finally, let us remember that Peter Harrison, the foremost colonial architect, whose buildings grace Rhode Island, was a former inhabitant of Newport, who died in New Haven after the shock of Lexington.

By contrast it should be stressed that Rhode Island had a share of humble Loyalists. Examples chosen at random include Jeremiah Williams who owned a modest 30-acre farm; Thomas Cutter, a tobacconist; Charles Reak, a stationer; and Joseph Batty, a common sailor.

Connecticut's Benedict Arnold, the most notorious turncoat of the Revolution, may be matched by Rhode Island's Metcalf Bowler, an outstanding "patriot," Speaker of the Assembly, and judge, who became a spy for the British general, Sir Henry Clinton. Arnold's treachery was apparent at the time, but Bowler's was not uncovered until 1930!

Like all the other states, Rhode Island took official action against the Loyalists, forcing oaths of allegiance, passing test acts, confiscating property, banishing and deporting. As early as 1774 the *Newport Mercury* called for "a cobweb pair of breeches, a hedge-hog saddle, a hard trotting horse, and continual riding" for all Tories. Although the province escaped the intensity of internecine strife ex-

of it

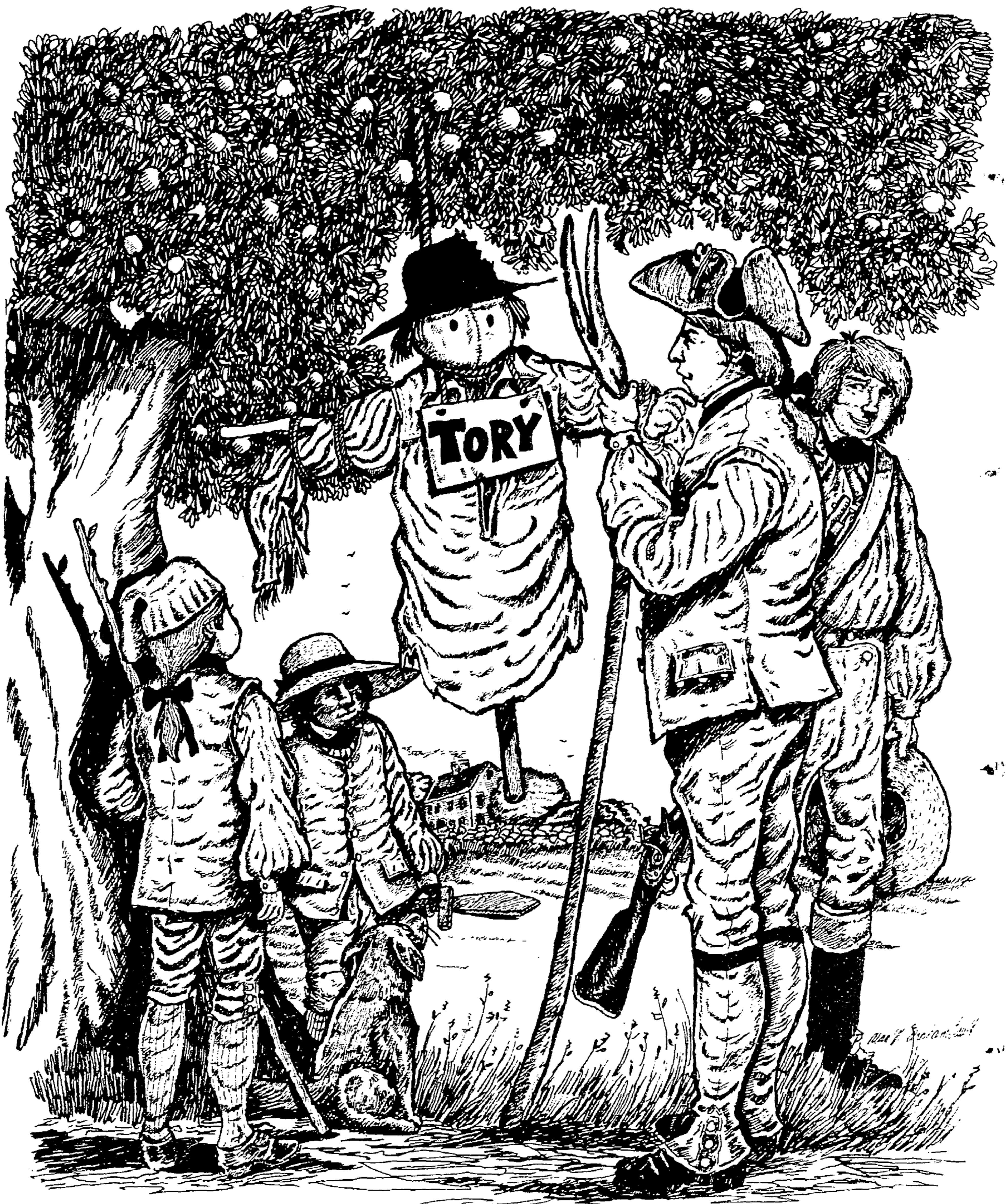
perienced in many other places, the Rhode Island Loyalists were the victims of persecution ranging from social pressure through various degrees of violence. The same year as the *Mercury's* call for strong measures, Stephen Arnold, a prominent citizen of East Greenwich, along with several neighboring Tories, was hanged and burned in effigy. I have no record of any Rhode Islander suffering the classic punishment of tarring and feathering, but there were threats of it, and Jonathan Simpson had his shop front in Providence so besmeared.

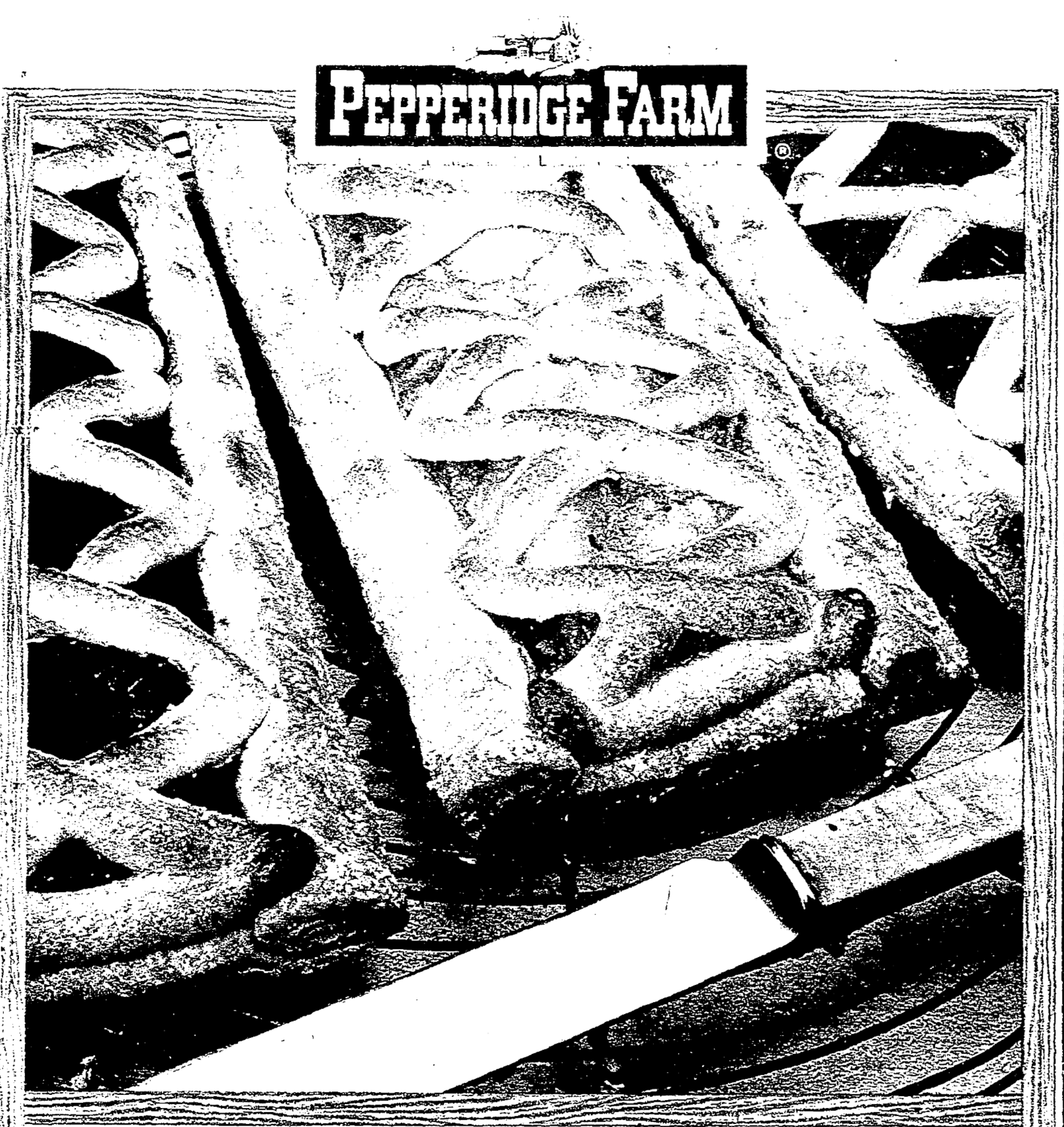
Many examples of mob violence can be given: for refusing aid to the rebels William Boone "was insulted, abused and imprisoned, his effects and property taken and sold"; Isaac Lawton was "publicly carted" for helping the British; Charles Dudley, a customs collector, was so severely attacked by unknown assailants in 1771 that he was not expected to live.

The most remarkable story of persecution came from Ebenezer Slocum concerning his parents. His father, Charles Slocum, was killed by a mob in 1778, and his mother was later pilloried, her ears cut off, and both cheeks branded. The reason for this brutal treatment appears to have been that she passed counterfeit money, which was widely available from the British.

A few prominent Rhode Island Loyalists were banished to the interior of the state during the war and quite a few more went into permanent exile abroad in such places as New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Bermuda and Great Britain. Exile involved dislocation at the very best and sometimes stark tragedy.

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LOYALISTS We were lucky

Elizabeth Ivey, whose parents had kept a Newport tavern, the *Royal Oak*, a hang-out for the British troops, fled to New York and thence sailed for Britain. Her ship was wrecked off the Scilly Islands, resulting in the drowning of her husband and two sons. She herself, heavily pregnant, struggled ashore with only her soaking clothes to her name. When she appealed to the British government for help she and her baby were lodged in a London debtor's prison.

One aspect of Loyalist suffering often forgotten is that many, including Rhode Islanders, suffered as much from British depredations as from rebel persecution. Mathew Robinson, an extreme case in Rhode Island, or anywhere else, reported that his property was damaged in turn by the Americans, the Hessians, the British, and the French—the full gamut of possibilities with the exception of the Indians!

The conclusion must be that Rhode Island was lucky. Lucky compared with Massachusetts which lost great talent by the Loyalist exodus, lucky compared with South Carolina which experienced bitter civil war, lucky compared with New York where persecution and bitterness continued even after the peace treaty of 1783. Lucky above all that Loyalism was so weak and moderate that Rhode Island underwent very little dislocation by the Revolution, a fact symbolized by the state's continued use of its colonial charter as a constitution until 1844. □

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