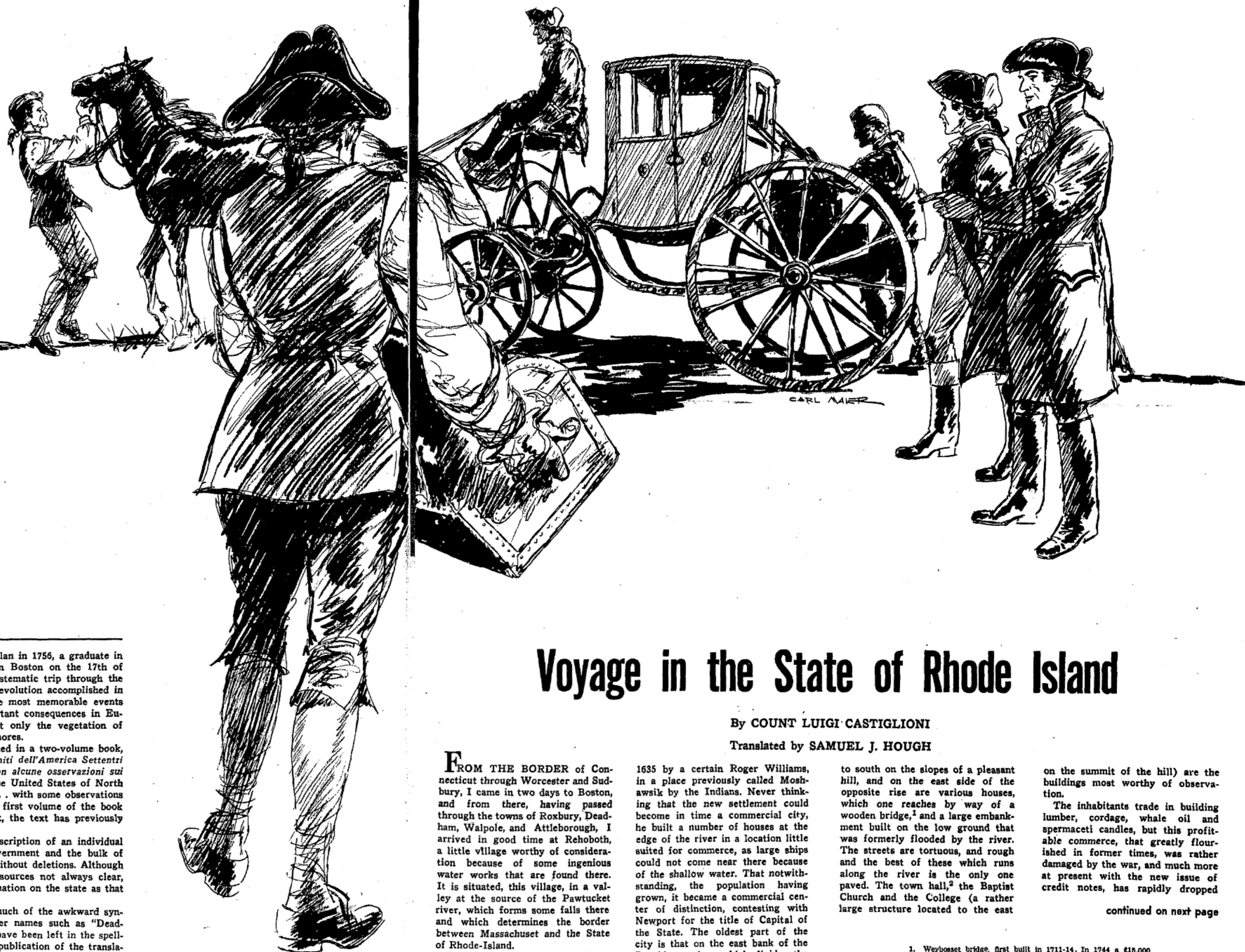


An Italian Count's Memoirs of Rhode Island in the 1780s



Voyage in the State of Rhode Island

By COUNT LUIGI CASTIGLIONI

Translated by SAMUEL J. HOUGH

COUNT LUIGI CASTIGLIONI, born in Milan in 1756, a graduate in Botany from the University of Pavia, arrived in Boston on the 17th of May, 1785. He spent the next two years in a systematic trip through the United States and Canada. Convinced that "the revolution accomplished in these last years in North America is one of the most memorable events of this century, and may, in time, produce important consequences in Europe," this young man set about to observe not only the vegetation of America, but its politics, its economics, and its mores.

The record of these observations was published in a two-volume book, printed at Milan in 1790: *Viaggio negli Stati Uniti dell'America Settentrionale fatto negli anni 1785, 1786 e 1787 . . . con alcune osservazioni sui vegetabili piu utili de quel paese.* ("Travels in the United States of North America made in the years, 1785, 1786 and 1787 . . . with some observations on the most useful plants of that country.") The first volume of the book was translated into German, but, other than that, the text has previously been available only in the original Italian edition.

This chapter on Rhode Island is the last description of an individual state, for he goes on to write of the federal government and the bulk of the volume is on botany. The text is translated without deletions. Although his information is not always accurate and his sources not always clear, Castiglioni's account is probably as full of information on the state as that of any foreign observer of the period.

The translation is a literal one, preserving much of the awkward syntax and peculiar grammar of the original. Proper names such as "Deadham," "Massachuset" and "Gulf of Narraganset" have been left in the spelling or form of the original Italian. In this first publication of the translation, certain footnotes and other extraneous material have been omitted.

FROM THE BORDER of Connecticut through Worcester and Sudbury, I came in two days to Boston, and from there, having passed through the towns of Roxbury, Deadham, Walpole, and Attleborough, I arrived in good time at Rehoboth, a little village worthy of consideration because of some ingenious water works that are found there. It is situated, this village, in a valley at the source of the Pawtucket river, which forms some falls there and which determines the border between Massachusetts and the State of Rhode-Island.

The city of Providence a little way from Rehoboth is located at 41°49' latitude and was founded in

1635 by a certain Roger Williams, in a place previously called Moshawsk by the Indians. Never thinking that the new settlement could become in time a commercial city, he built a number of houses at the edge of the river in a location little suited for commerce, as large ships could not come near there because of the shallow water. That notwithstanding, the population having grown, it became a commercial center of distinction, contesting with Newport for the title of Capital of the State. The oldest part of the city is that on the east bank of the Providence river which divides the city. This section extends from the city for about a mile, from north

to south on the slopes of a pleasant hill, and on the east side of the opposite rise are various houses, which one reaches by way of a wooden bridge,¹ and a large embankment built on the low ground that was formerly flooded by the river. The streets are tortuous, and rough and the best of these which runs along the river is the only one paved. The town hall,² the Baptist Church and the College (a rather large structure located to the east

on the summit of the hill) are the buildings most worthy of observation.

The inhabitants trade in building lumber, cordage, whale oil and spermaceti candles, but this profitable commerce, that greatly flourished in former times, was rather damaged by the war, and much more at present with the new issue of credit notes, has rapidly dropped

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1. Weybosset bridge, first built in 1711-14. In 1744 a \$15,000 appropriation was passed by the Rhode Island Assembly for the bridge and embankment. Cf. Samuel G. Arnold, *History of the State of Rhode Island* (N.Y., 1860) v. 2, pp. 43, 143, 232, 243.
 2. This is the old State House on North Main Street built in 1762.

VOYAGE continued

two-thirds in value, and produced great difficulty among the merchants. The women enjoy, with those of Newport, the reputation of being among the most beautiful in America, but are subject to losing their teeth early, like those of Boston, and die easily in youth of consumption. This terrible disease has become more common during the last few years in these parts, and it seems indubitable that in many cases it is communicated from one to another individual of the same family. Despite the slaughter that this disease causes annually the fair sex is so numerous that one counts about

seven marriageable young girls for each young man,³ and this proportion originated from the great number of men employed in sailing, and those who, to support themselves, go to live in Virginia and other southern states. The climate of Providence differs little from that of Boston, unless the cold is less intense in the winter, and the heat more stifling in the summer, for being situated, this city, among high and sandy hills. The land of the vicinity is almost sterile, but nevertheless the city is provided with meat and poultry in abundance which come from the Gulf of Narra-

ganset, and from settlements even further away. Water fowl and fish from the sea are plentiful and they commonly drink Cider as in near-by Massachusetts.

Seven miles distance from Providence towards the west there is a rich iron mine, belonging to Mr. Brown, located in a deep hollow surrounded by little hillocks on which one sees nothing but a few young shoots of western plane-trees.⁴ The land is sandy covered with large boulders on the surface, and to some depth mixed with loam, under which one finds the mines. They have dug here a deep shaft, near to which there is a steam pump to extract water. This machine was built by the brother of its present possessor with the knowledge he had obtained from books about similar machines built in Europe, making a number of changes to adapt, with great ingenuity, to the circumstances of this country. For example, the container of the boiling water and

the tube in which piston moves, are all of wood, and the furnace is made of a solid chamber of iron, ending in a conduit of the same metal, that revolves in the wooden container at some distance from the sides to reduce the danger of starting a fire. With the force of this machine the ingenious inventor imagined that he could extract minerals from the shaft, but it resulted for this operation in great loss of time, and as it could damage the not too sturdy shaft with its movement and the jolting of its wheels, it is no longer used. The ore removed from the shaft is very rich until the depth of seventy feet, but here it becomes scale and of inferior quality, other shafts have been dug some distance from the first, which already furnish better iron. The richness of this mine is such that it gives fifty per cent iron on the first fusion. . . . The morning of September 18, 1 continued the voyage to the direction of Newport, accepting the gra-

3. According to the 1792 state census there were 206 males between ages 16 and 22 and 293 females of the same age. William R. Staples, Annals of Providence, (Providence, 1858), p. 202.

4. The Cranston ore beds were owned, primarily, by John Brown, 1756-1803. The Newport shaft was built in 1793-1795, built the steam pump. For a more detailed contemporary description of the steam pump, see "The Steam Pump," in the Annals of Providence, (Providence, 1858), p. 216.

alous offer of Mr. (John) Brown to carry me in his carriage as far as the village of Bristol. Towards eleven in the morning we left Providence.

On Providence: 'The women enjoy... the reputation of being among the most beautiful in America, but are subject to losing their teeth early.'

Papa-Squash, and contains various plantations, and the other to the east, where Bristol is located. This little city was founded as an English colony in the period that the first settlements in the Gulf of Narraganset were formed, and was in former times fairly commercial, but as the land around it being not very fertile (and its situation less advantageous than that of Newport)

it lost its former luster, and is nothing more than a small and poor village.

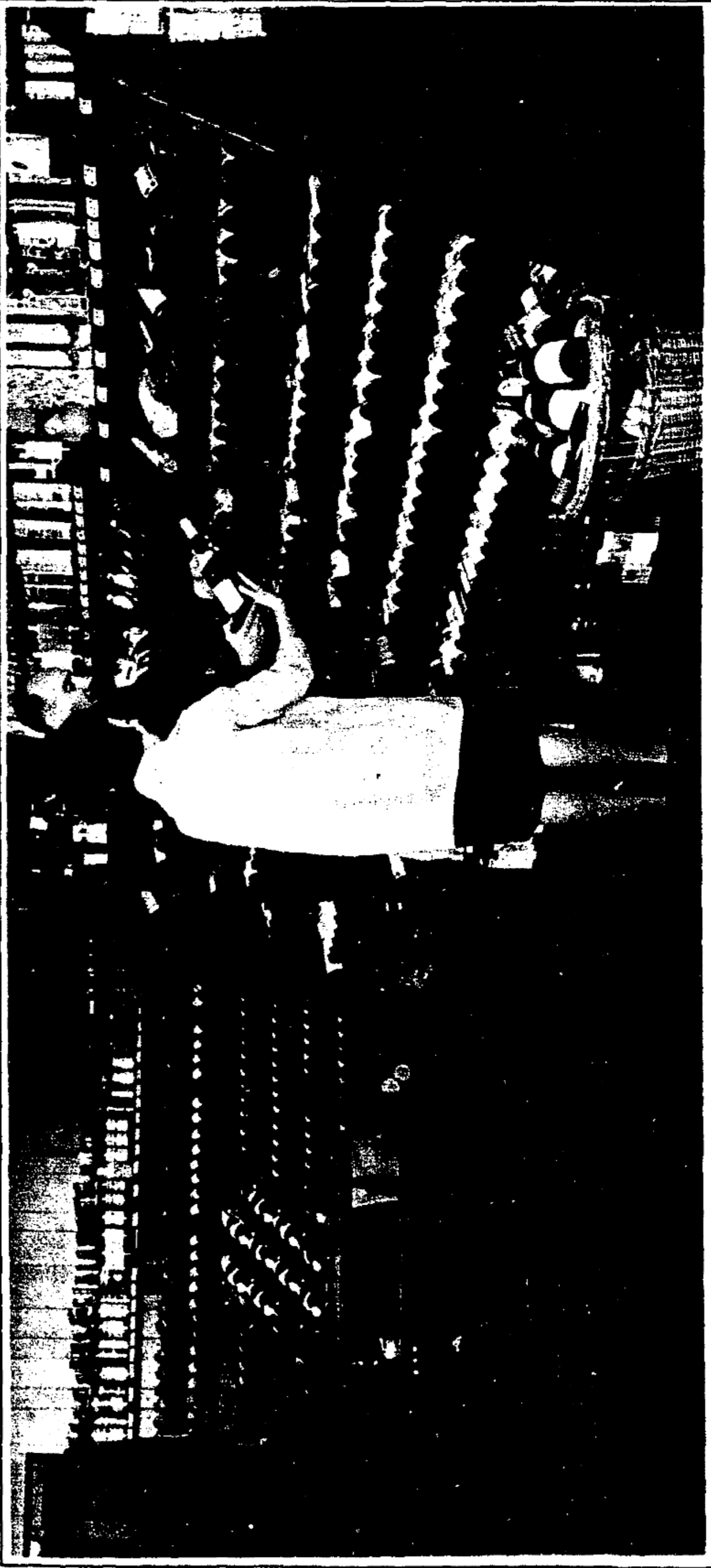
Mount Hope Bay which, like the others named above, forms part of the Gulf of Narraganset, taking its name from a mountain situated to the east of Bristol, where the colonists killed the last Sachem of the Narraganset Indians, and Papa-Squash Point, or Pops-Squash Point, named thus from Pops, child, and Squash, woman, being the place which formerly the Indian children and women took refuge in time of war.

From Bristol we toured about in the bay and in the evening went to the Point Pleasant estate belonging to Mr. Brown. The winds the next day were very strong, and contrary to our way, and the day was rather rainy, for this reason it was determined to stay, entertaining ourselves the rest of the day by fishing, in the intervals when the rain ceased. Besides various little fish

that are well known, we caught one rather curious species that goes by the name of Toad-fish. This fish is white, speckled and striped in brown. Its figure is oblong as long as it stays in water, but as soon as it is placed on land it begins to inflate so that in a few minutes it becomes perfectly round, and continually breathing air with its mouth, it produces a disgusting snort. One of these fish caught by us, reached a prodigious fullness, being bit with a rock, burst with a bang like an inflated bladder and was then inevitably thrown into the sea. A little time later we caught another small-er one of the same species, which equally as the first ballooned, but we threw this one, without examining it, back into the water, at the touch of which it shot the air from its mouth, and restored to its former shape, swam precipitously towards the bottom and disappeared. This phenomenon is common in the

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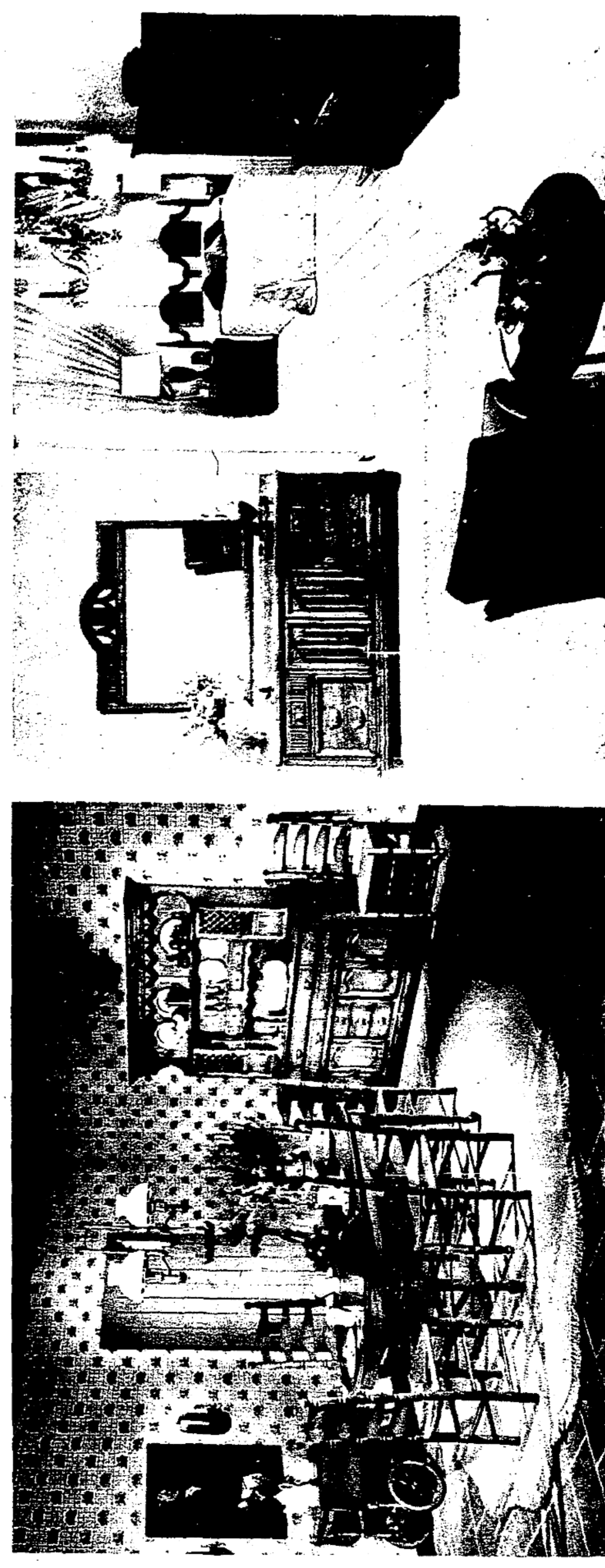
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VOYAGE continued

genus of this fish, called Orbis by the antique Romans because of their round figures and pig fish by some Italians because of the strong grunt that they produce in the rapid breath of air in the narrow fissure of the gills, as Rondelezio says. Although because of the carelessness of my companions I could not examine it diligently, I believe that the fish that we caught was that species called *Texrondon testudimeus* by Linneus, that one finds in the seas of the East Indies and of America.

The morning of the twentieth in a little sail boat we descended Bristol Bay, and leaving to the east the little island called Hog's Island, we crossed the channel that divides Papa-Squash point from Prudence Island. The water of the channel being much rougher and the wind blowing harder, my companions feared that, following a trip down to Newport, the sea would become too rough for their return, and so we went over to Prudence Island and going ashore climbed a hill on which there is located another estate of Mr. Brown,⁷ from which one enjoys a very pleasant view of the island and of the mainland that form the

On Newport: 'The inhabitants although rather poor . . . are notwithstanding very hospitable, and the women are devoted to imitate European luxury.'

Gulf of Narraganset; here as it happened we found a large sailing ship, on which in less than two hours we were taken to Newport. This city is located at 41°29' latitude in a lovely inlet of the sea, near the southernmost point in Rhode Island, on the slope of a hill, having narrow streets, but smooth and paved and the houses are nearly all wood and decrepit. The town hall is not yet finished⁸ and the Churches of the various sects are not very at-

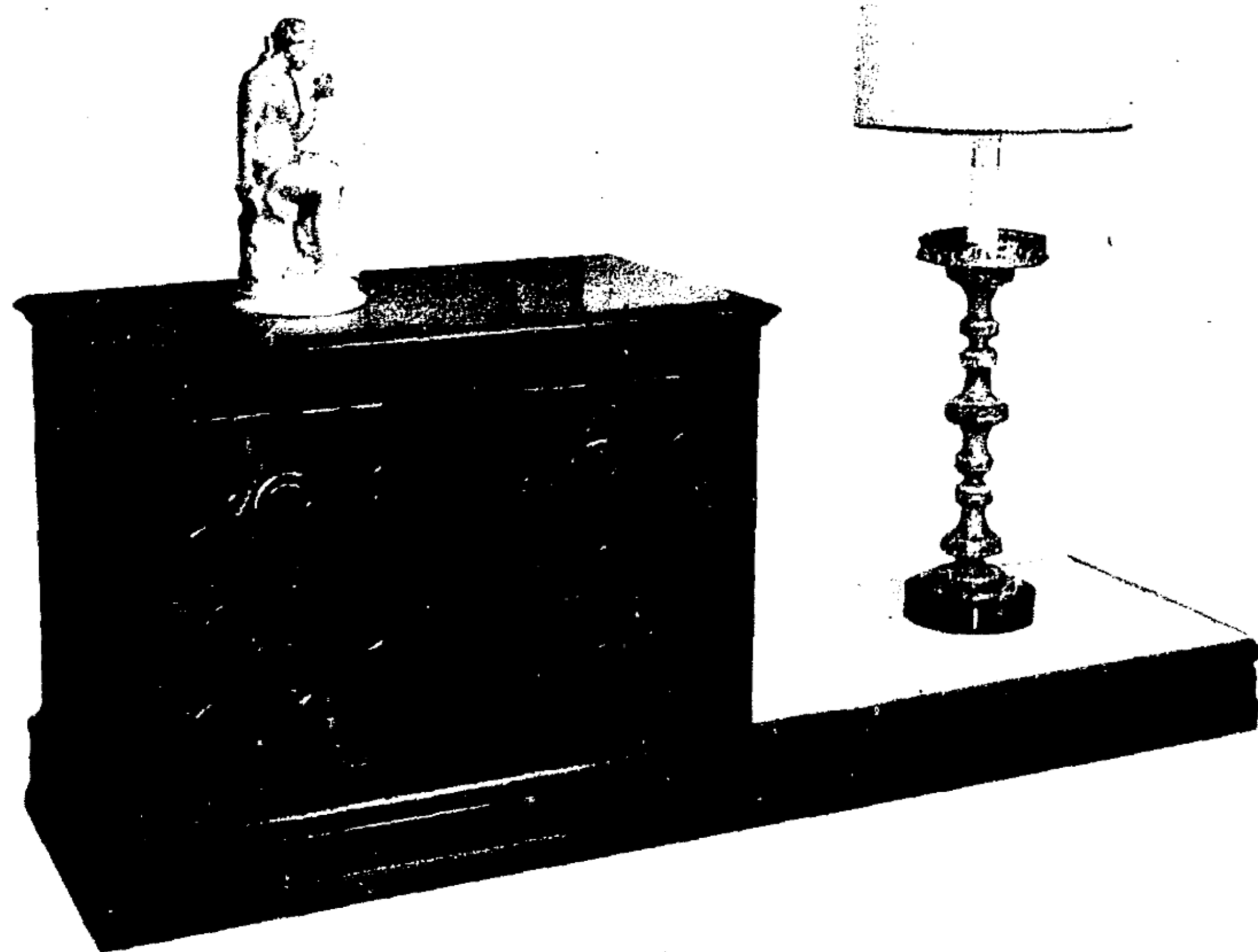
tractive. The inhabitants although rather poor because of the great losses suffered in the war, are notwithstanding very hospitable, and the women are devoted to imitate European luxury. The climate of this city is very temperate and is considered one of the most healthy in North America because the sea air makes the cold less severe and tempers the heat of summer for which reason gentlemen of the Carolinas and of other southern states

7. This was Wanton Farms, confiscated from the last royalist governor of Rhode Island, Joseph Wanton. John Brown bought it from the State in 1781. cf. Charles G. Maytum, Paragraphs on Early Prudence Island, (Providence, 1964) p. 101.
8. The state house, now called Old Colony House, was built in 1739, but used as a barracks by the English and a hospital by the French. "It was so damaged that in 1781 the courts and assembly had to meet in the synagogue. In 1784, Joseph Nightingale, Esq. Hopkins, and Daniel Mason (were) appointed to report repairs needed." Antoinette F. Downing and Vincent Scully Jr., Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island, (Cambridge, 1952) p. 58.

and the ill come to pass the hot season at Newport. This is the home of Nathaniel Green, . . . and it could boast another illustrious soldier in Benedict Arnold, if he had not sullied the fame earned by his courage, by being a traitor to his country and trying to hand over to the English Washington himself. Arnold is of one of the oldest families of the state of Rhode Island and did a profitable trade in livestock before the war. After his treason he went to England from where, perhaps also because of the little regard he was held there, he came to live in Nova Scotia, where it is said, he has again taken up his old trade.

Monday, September 25th, I returned from Newport to Providence, and then made the trip to Boston, from where I took my course to Portsmouth, and from there I returned to New York. I passed the following winter partly in this last city and partly in Philadelphia, until spring came, then I left May 16, 1787 from New York for Europe on a newly constructed Spanish brigantine called *Galveztown* which, after twenty-eight days of happy navigation, entered the Spanish port of Corunna. □

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