RHODE ISLAND HISTORY

The Old State House, Providence, about 1870, presently headquarters of the Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission and the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission and party to a recent controversy as to whether the general assembly was in session there or in the Old Colony House, Newport, when the May 4 resolution was passed in 1776.

RHODE ISLAND HISTORY

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COLONY OF RHODE-ISLAND, &c.

IN GENERAL ASSEMBLY, May Seffion, 1776.

An Act repealing an Act, intituled, "An Act for the more effectual fecuring to His Majefty the Allegiance of His Subjects in this his Colony and Dominion of Rhode-Ifland and Providence Plantations;" and altering the Form of Commiffions, of all Writs and Proceffes in the Courts, and of the Oaths prefcribed by Law.

WHEREAS in all States, exifting by Compact, Protection and Allegiance are reciprocal, the latter being only due in Confequence of the former: And whereas GEORGE the Third, King of Great-Britain, forgetting his Dignity, regardless of the Compact moft folemnly entered into, ratified and confirmed, to the Inhabitants of this Colony, by His illuftrious Anceftors, and till of late fully recognized by Him—and entirely departing from the Duties and Character of a good King, inftead of protecting, is endeavouring to deftroy the good People of this Colony, and of all the United Colonies, by fending Fleets and Armies to America, to confifcate our Property, and fpread Fire, Sword and Defolation, throughout our Country, in order to compel us to fubmit to the moft debafing and deteftable Tyranny; whereby we are obliged by Neceffity, and it becomes our higheft Duty, to ufe every Means, with which God and Nature have furnifhed us, in Support of our invaluable Rights and Privileges; to oppofe that Power which is exerted only for our Deftruction.

Be it therefore Enacted by this General Affembly, and by the Authority thereof it is Enacted, That an Act intituled, "An Act for the more effectual fecuring to His Majefty the Allegiance of His Subjects in this His Colony and Dominion of Rhode-Ifland and Providence Plantations," be and the fame is hereby repealed.

And be it further Enacted by this General Affembly, and by the Authority thereof it is Enacted, That in all Commiffions for Officers, civil and military, and in all Writs and Proceffes in Law, whether original, judicial or executory, civil or criminal, wherever the Name and Authority of the faid King is made Ufe of, the fame fhall be omitted, and in the Room thereof the Name and Authority of the Governor and Company of this Colony fhall be fubftituted, in the following Words, to wit: "The Governor and Company of the Englifh Colony of Rhode-Ifland and Providence Plantations:" That all fuch Commiffions, Writs and Proceffes, fhall be otherwife of the fame Form and Tenor as they heretofore were: That the Courts of Law be no longer intitled nor confidered as the King's Courts: And that no Inftrument in Writing, of any Nature or Kind, whether public or private, fhall in the Date thereof mention the Year of the faid King's Reign: Provided neverthelefs, That nothing in this Act contained fhall render void or vitiate any Commiffion, Writ, Procefs or Inftrument, heretofore made or executed, on Account of the Name and Authority of the faid King being therein inferted.

And be it further Enacted by the Authority aforefaid, That the Oaths or Engagements to be adminiftered to the Officers appointed in this Colony fhall be as follow, to wit:

General Officers.

"You _____ being by the free Vote of the Freemen of this Colony of Rhode-Ifland and Providence Plantations elected unto the Place of _____ do folemnly engage to be true and faithful unto this faid Colony and in your faid Office equal Juftice to do unto all Perfons, poor and rich, within this Jurifdiction, to the utmoft of your Skill and Judgment, without Partiality, according to the Laws eftablifhed, or that may be eftablifhed, by the General Affembly of this Colony as well in Matters Military as civil: And this Engagement you make and give upon the Peril of the Penalty of Perjury."

Deputies.

"You _____ being chofen to the Place of a Deputy, to fit in the General Affembly, do folemnly engage, that you will be true and faithful to this Colony of Rhode-Ifland and Providence Plantations; and that you will do equal Right and Juftice to all Perfons who fhall appeal unto you for your Judgment in their refpective Cafes, according to the Laws eftablifhed, or that may be eftablifhed, by the General Affembly of this faid Colony: And this Engagement you make and give upon the Peril of the Penalty of Perjury."

Judges of the Superior Court.

"You _____ being by the General Affembly of this Colony chofen to the Place of a Juftice of the Superior Court of Judicature, Court of Affize and General Gaol-Delivery, in and throughout the Colony, do folemnly engage to be true and faithful to this faid Colony, and to execute the Office unto which you are chofen as aforefaid with Fidelity, to the beft of your Skill and Knowledge, according to the Laws eftablifhed, or that may be eftablifhed, by the General Affembly of this faid Colony: And this Engagement you make and give upon the Peril of the Penalty of Perjury."

[Public Notaries, Clerks of the Superior and Inferior Courts, Juftices of the Inferior Courts, and Sheriffs, to take the fame Oath as the Juftices of the Superior Court, mutatis mutandis.]

Grand Jurors.

"You A. B. being of the Grand Inqueft, on the Behalf of the Governor and Company of the Englifh Colony of Rhode-Ifland and Providence Plantations, do hereby promife and engage to make a true Return to this Court of all fuch Bills as fhall be prefented to you, or fuch Breakers of Law as fhall come to your Knowledge: And this Engagement you make and give upon the Peril of the Penalty of Perjury."

Petit Jurors in civil Cafes.

"You A. B. being of this Jury of Trials, fhall well and truly try the Iffue of this Cafe, and all Cafes that fhall be committed unto you from this Court, between the Parties, Plaintiff and Defendant, according to Law and Evidence; and to keep together until you agree of a Verdict in the Cafe or Cafes committed to you, and make true Return of the Verdict or Verdicts unto this Court; and to keep your own and Fellow's Secrets: And this Engagement you make and give upon the Peril of the Penalty of Perjury."

Petit Jurors in criminal Cafes.

"You A. B. being of this Jury of Trials, fhall well and truly try, and true Deliverance make, between the Governor and Company of the Englifh Colony of Rhode-Ifland and Providence Plantations, and the Prifoner at the Bar, according to Law and Evidence, and to keep together until you are agreed of a Verdict or Verdicts, in the Cafe or Cafes that fhall be committed to you from this Court, and to keep your own and Fellow's Secrets: And this Engagement you make and give upon the Peril of the Penalty of Perjury."

Town Officers.

"You A. B. do hereby folemnly engage to be true and faithful unto this Colony of Rhode-Ifland and Providence Plantations, and that you will well and truly, according to the Laws eftablifhed, or that may be eftablifhed, by the General Affembly of faid Colony, execute the Office of _____ for the enfuing Year, or until another be engaged in your Room, or you be legally difcharged therefrom: And this Engagement you make and give upon the Peril of the Penalty of Perjury."

Military commiffioned Officers.

"You A. B. being by the General Affembly chofen and elected unto the Place and Office of _____ do folemnly fwear to be true and faithful unto this Colony of Rhode-Ifland and Providence Plantations, and to the Authority therein eftablifhed by the General Affembly: And you do alfo further engage well and truly to execute the Office of _____ to which you are elected according to your Commiffion; and to perform and obferve all the Laws made and provided for the Support and well ordering the Militia, without Partiality; and that you will obferve and follow fuch Orders and Inftructions as you fhall from Time to Time receive from your Superiors. So help you God."

Clerk of a Company of Militia.

"You A. B. do folemnly fwear well and truly to perform and execute the Office of Clerk of the Company, or Trained Band, under the Command of C. D. to the utmoft of your Skill and Ability, without Partiality, according to the Laws of this Colony which relate to your Office. So help you God."

A true Copy: Witnefs,

Henry Ward, Sec'y.

A copy of the May 4 resolution in broadside form showing the revealing substitution of the written word "state" for the printed word "colony," an alteration probably made late in July 1776.

Act for All Reasons —
Revolutionary Politics and May 4, 1776

*by Glenn W. LaFantasie**

On the morning of May 4, 1884, James S. Slater, town clerk of Smithfield and resident of Slatersville, hung the United States flag from the porch of his home and announced that he considered the day a holiday. An antiquarian of local repute, Slater had completed some prodigious research in historical documents; he had decided that without the shadow of a doubt Rhode Island had been the first colony to declare its independence from Great Britain on May 4, 1776. The day, in Slater's opinion, deserved celebration and he began a one-man campaign to rescue May 4 from oblivion.[1]

Although he became the object of jokes and ridicule, Slater continued to display banners and bunting on his home every May 4. Obsessed with the notion that the action of May 4 had been unjustly ignored, he took his story of the day to the local press. As his crusade gained attention and support throughout the state, it also drew considerable criticism from annalists who believed that Rhode Island's action — two months before the Declaration of Independence — was nothing more than a political maneuver of small import. Sidney S. Rider, prolific writer of Rhode Island history and publisher of a pugnacious review, said that "Rhode Island never made any Declaration of Independence."[2] But Rider's protest produced fewer ripples than a pebble tossed into Narragansett Bay. Slater dismissed the protest and continued to spread the word about the colony's declaration of independence.[3]

Slater's efforts finally paid off when he won enough support to convince the General Assembly of the merit in some kind of statewide recognition. In 1908 the assembly complied with a special act that officially designated May 4 Rhode Island Independence Day.[4] Slater, without modesty, accepted the honorific title — "Father of Rhode Island Independence Day."[5]

Daughters of the American Revolution in 1913 gave their blessings to the day and erected a plaque in the assembly room of the Old State House to memorialize "the act constituting Rhode Island the first free and independent republic in America and asserting her absolute independence of England."[6] For the D.A.R. there was no question about what had happened on May 4, 1776.

The public seemed to agree. The Slater-D.A.R. interpretation of what had occurred on May 4 gradually became an acknowledged and accepted part of history. Celebrations large and small have honored the day since 1909. The traditional historical account of May 4 — molded for the most part by the campaign and legacy of James S. Slater — has been so persuasive, and in many ways so appealing, that it has now gone virtually unchallenged for generations. Only recently have historians begun to reassess the traditional interpretation. Despite recent scholarship, the traditional version continues to perpetuate itself in the historical literature.[7]

A closer look at the historical record shows that the general assembly purposefully avoided declaring independence on May 4, 1776. More important, the action taken by the assembly in no way severed the colony's ties with the British empire or with the governing authority of Parliament. On the other hand, the assembly *did* renounce the colony's allegiance to King George III. But the difference between a renunciation of allegiance and a declaration of independence is crucial.

There is no question that Rhode Island leaders

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MAY 4, 1776
THE HOUSE OF DEPUTIES IN THIS ROOM PASSED
THE HOUSE OF MAGISTRATES THE SAME DATE
CONCURRING—THE ACT CONSTITUTING RHODE
ISLAND THE FIRST FREE AND INDEPENDENT
REPUBLIC IN AMERICA AND ASSERTING HER
ABSOLUTE INDEPENDENCE OF ENGLAND,
TWO MONTHS BEFORE THE DECLARATION
OF INDEPENDENCE IN PHILADELPHIA.

TO COMMEMORATE THE EVENT THIS TABLET IS PLACED BY
RHODE ISLAND INDEPENDENCE CHAPTER
DAUGHTERS OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION
MAY 4, 1915

D.A.R. plaque in the assembly room of the Old State House memorializing Rhode Island's early act of independence against the government of George III.

Courtesy Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission

strongly favored independence in spring 1776. Stephen Hopkins and Samuel Ward, delegates to the Continental Congress, advocated a move toward independence. "I want nothing more but am ready to declare Ourselves independent," proclaimed Ward as early as November 1775. Nathanael Greene also believed that policies of Great Britain forced the colonies closer "to the necessity of making a declaration of independence." He thought the only way of preserving colonial rights was by breaking the connection with England. In a letter to Ward, Greene recommended "from the Sincerity of my Heart, ready at all times to bleed in my Country's Cause, a Declaration of Independence."[8] About the same time Thomas Paine's radical pamphlet *Common Sense* was published. Soon advertised by Rhode Island's two printers, it eventually helped to convert many from a moderate course to the cause of independence. The influence of *Common Sense* was remarkable and many colonists were aware that it operated "most powerfully in the minds of the

people." Delegate Ward remarked that Paine's writings had considerable impact on citizens of Philadelphia.[9]

Delegates to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia realized that public sentiment throughout the colonies grew quickly in favor of an act of independence. Francis Lightfoot Lee of Virginia observed that action on the question was not far off. John Adams asked the Massachusetts General Court why it had not yet given "positive Instructions to your own delegates, to promote Independency." As debate in Congress moved closer to decision, Stephen Hopkins wrote home requesting precise instructions about how he should vote.[10] He assumed that the general assembly, ready to convene in its spring session, would answer his query and authorize his actions.

When the general assembly met on May 1, 1776, its first order of business was defense of the colony and selection of military officers. Although actual combat had not taken place within borders of the colony, Rhode Islanders feared an invasion

by British forces who had recently evacuated Boston. Eccentric — some called him drunk — Colonel Henry Babcock reported to Governor Nicholas Cooke that "there are now seven square rigd vessels standing in for Newport and must beg you would immediately order one thousand men to our assistance." Babcock may have over-reacted, but his sighting of British ships appears not to have been a hallucination, and his fears were typical of many at the time. Apprehension was so real that the assembly had switched its meeting place for the spring session from Newport to Providence.[11] Safe from reach of marauding British ships, the assembly proceeded to plan defenses. A measure was passed for procuring shovels to be used in preparation of earthworks and other fortifications. Militia companies and regiments were reorganized to provide adequate protection in individual communities. The assembly voted to construct a fort at Beavertail Point on Conanicut Island. It elected officers and granted commissions. It posted lookouts at strategic points to watch for impending approach of enemy troops.[12]

Despite extensive military schemes and precautions executed in support of armed rebellion, assembly members were still all too aware and somewhat self-conscious of their position as colonial subjects of the crown. On May 4, when the question of independence was at last brought to the floor, members needed no reminder that legally and technically they were officers of a colony that remained part of the British empire, that they were required to swear individual and personal allegiance to King George III.

By early 1776 this oath of allegiance made little sense. One colonist, after listing a set of charges against the king, believed the monarch had forfeited "the allegiance of his subjects" by having broken "Charters solemnly granted by his predecessors." No man, the patriot concluded, could endure such treatment by a king "and still propose to continue his subject." Those who could, only "betray the most important interests of their country." Assembly members also recognized the absurdity of vowing allegiance to the king and at the same time maintaining a state of overt rebellion.[13] Besides manning local defenses, Rhode Island troops had already taken up arms against the king's regulars: they had garrisoned siege

lines around Boston since spring 1775, marched with Benedict Arnold to Quebec, stormed that impregnable fortress-city, and attacked British vessels on the high seas. There seemed no greater irony, no superior hypocrisy, than the mandatory oath of allegiance to the king by officials of the insurgent colony.

Records do not reveal how the matter concerning oaths came to be introduced in the House of Deputies, the lower house. Other documents of the period indicate that the subject caused "a debate," but details of arguments are not known, nor is it clear if the assembly considered questions of allegiance and independence at the same time.[14]

In any event, the general assembly decided to abolish the traditionally required oaths. On Saturday, May 4, it voted to repeal the "Act for the more effectual securing of His Majesty the Allegiance of His Subjects in this His Colony and Dominion of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations." This action — so often called a declaration of independence — was actually renunciation of allegiance.[15]

Governor Cooke sent a copy of the act with a letter to Thomas Cushing of Massachusetts. "The enclosed act passed the upper house unanimously, and the lower house by a vast majority; there being upwards of sixty members present, and only six votes against it." One historian suspects that the six dissenting votes "might well have been cast by the deputies of Newport."[16] If Newport delegates did take a stand against the renunciation act — records are again silent on this point — it would have been no surprise. Newport "from the start harbored pro-British officials and merchants."[17]

But what of independence? Hopkins had sought a definitive statement regarding independence, yet the act for renunciation of allegiance never even mentioned the word. After considering what kind of instruction it should send to Hopkins, the assembly hedged and chose to dodge a conclusive answer to the question.

Cooke, in a letter to Hopkins, told why the assembly had not passed a declaration of independence — "Dependency is a Word of so equivocal a Meaning, and hath been used for such ill purposes, and Independency with many honest and ignorant people carrying the Idea of eternal War-

fare, the Committee thought it best to avoid making Use of either of them." Cooke outlined how the lower house, after passing renunciation of allegiance, voted to take a poll of "the Sense of the Inhabitants at large upon the Question of Independency." The upper house opposed a canvassing of constituents, pointing out that while popular feeling favored independence, many of the individual towns did not. A visitor to Rhode Island at the time noted "that 22 towns in the Government were for Independency."[18]

Cooke explained to Hopkins that the upper house wished to avoid "the Appearance of Division that would be injurious to the Common Cause." Besides, the upper house anticipated a discussion of independence in Congress and it assumed that a decision by public referendum in Rhode Island would take too long. Instead, said Cooke, the upper house concurred with renunciation of allegiance and with instructions to the delegates in the Continental Congress, both of which had been passed by the lower house.[19]

Assembly instructions to Hopkins and William Ellery — Samuel Ward had died on March 26; Ellery was elected to replace him — were just as vague on independence. Afraid that a general declaration of independence by the united colonies might threaten rights and freedoms of Rhode Island its general assembly only authorized Hopkins and Ellery to support "the most proper measures for promoting and confirming the strictest union and confederation between the said United Colonies" and to exert their "utmost abilities in carrying on this just and necessary war, in which we are engaged against cruel and unnatural Enemies, in the most vigorous manner, until peace shall be restored to the said Colonies, and their rights and liberties secured upon a solid and permanent basis." The instructions included an important caution: "Taking greatest care to secure to this colony, in the strongest and most perfect manner, its present established form, and all the powers of government, so far as relate to its internal police and conduct of our own affairs, civil and religious." In other words, the assembly warned its delegates to make no deals or pacts with the other colonies that would jeopardize Rhode Island's autonomy. Like the renunciation act, instructions made no direct mention of independence and granted no authority to vote in

favor of it.[20]

Cooke, however, with little difficulty hopped a narrow syllogistic stream of thought and interpreted assembly votes on both renunciation and delegates' instructions as an enthusiastic nod for Hopkins and Ellery to vote for independence if the occasion presented itself in Congress. In his letter to Hopkins, the governor encouraged the two delegates to regard acts of the assembly as prescriptions in support of independence. The delegates should not "entertain a Doubt of the Sense of the General Assembly." Cooke also informed George Washington that the colony's congressional delegates were "instructed and authorized to join with any prince, state, or potentate for the security of the colonies; and to adopt any measures that may be thought prudent and effectual."[21]

Stephen Hopkins seemed to understand what Cooke meant. He wrote to the governor and mildly scolded him for avoiding "a direct answer to my queries concerning dependence or independence." Nevertheless, Hopkins agreed that there was "little room to doubt what is the opinion of the Colony I came from."[22]

Although Cooke and Hopkins understood the May 4 action as "a sense of the Assembly," some members of the legislative body apparently did not. Incomplete as the historical records are, they at least disclose that the six deputies who voted against the renunciation act did not oppose the assembly's instructions to Hopkins and Ellery. Cooke reported that these instructions "passed both Houses *nemine contradicente*."[23] The two measures were enacted separately. Presumably the six dissenters saw nothing in the instructions with which to argue as they had seen in renunciation of allegiance. If these wayward six believed that independence was the issue at stake in the vote for the renunciation act, or even if for some reason they could not in good conscience acquiesce in the repeal of allegiance, the dissenters thought otherwise about the vote for the instructions to Hopkins and Ellery. Cooke's syllogistic hop actually may have been a leap.

Whether or not the assembly meant the renunciation of allegiance and the instructions to the delegates as symbols of the colony's support for independence, as Cooke and Hopkins reasoned, these measures did not truly sever Rhode Island

from the British empire or from the prime governing authority of Parliament. The renunciation of allegiance ordered the name and authority of the king to be omitted and struck from all commissions, writs and oaths prescribed by law. In place of the king's name would appear "The Governor and Company of the *English* Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations."[24] Nothing in the act proclaimed the colony sovereign or independent. In fact, Rhode Island continued to refer to itself as an English colony until July 18, 1776 when its general assembly ratified the Declaration of Independence.[25]

Curiously enough, the act of allegiance that the assembly repealed in order to renounce its allegiance did not in any way provide for a mandatory oath of loyalty. The act revoked on May 4 had been originally passed in 1756, first year of the French and Indian War, as a test oath to be administered to persons suspected of disloyalty to the king. The 1756 act stipulated that any Rhode Islander who questioned the authority of "the Kings and Queens of Great Britain," or of Parliament to "make laws and statutes of sufficient force and validity" to govern the empire, would receive "the penalty of a praemunire."[26] This act, for the most part obsolete by 1776, was the law repealed on May 4.

The general assembly chose to revoke what it called an "act of allegiance" that in fact was nothing more than an act to punish unfaithful subjects of the crown. Like a legislature composed of alchemists, the assembly searched for a golden law that came the closest to resembling an act of allegiance. The 1756 act was the best they could find.

This suggests even more that the assembly clearly recognized the difference between an act of renunciation and a declaration of independence, and that it took action only after carefully calculating and planning a move. Its political action on May 4 was just as precise and specific as the military measures it had passed earlier in the spring session. Once the assembly had assessed the political realities, once it had judged the configuration on the chessboard, the legislature decided that the king was a convenient target and relatively expendable. For many reasons, a renunciation of allegiance, rather than an outright declaration of independence, satisfied the assembly's

desire and the necessity to make a political statement.

It is not unreasonable to assume that the assembly weighed its action with exactness and forethought. Faced with the necessity of answering Hopkins' query, confronted with an irksome oath of allegiance, and aware of the climate of opinion that favored independence throughout the colonies, the assembly realized that the time had come for a stroke of policy of some kind. Other colonies had already taken decisive steps indirectly related to the question of independence. South Carolina had made a circuitous move toward independence on March 23, 1776 when its provincial congress authorized its delegates in Philadelphia to approve any measure "necessary for the defense, security, interest, or welfare of this colony in particular, and of America in general." Then, on March 26, the colony adopted its own constitution, paving the way for independent governments in each of the colonies. North Carolina on April 12, 1776 unanimously empowered its delegates to "concur with the delegates of other colonies in declaring independency." Massachusetts on May 1 enacted a resolution that replaced the name and "stile of the king of Great Britain" with the name of the "Government and people of the Massachusetts Bay, in New England" on all civil commissions, writs and processes of law.[27] It is possible that word of these measures reached Rhode Island before its general assembly met on May 4.[28]

Though Rhode Island's act of renunciation did not differ in kind — no colony as yet had mandated its delegates to vote for independence — it did differ markedly in degree. Rhode Island was the first colony to renounce allegiance to King George III. As a result of its long tradition of autonomy and in keeping with its history as a maverick, renunciation was phrased in language of protest that no colony had dared to officially adopt.

The act on May 4 was the logical result of the colony's sustained defense of rights that its colonists believed were guaranteed by the charter of 1663, granted by Charles II. The liberal charter that served to increase self-government in the colonial period also buttressed the colony's rebellious spirit in years leading up to revolution. Rhode Islanders, contends one historian, "were convinced affairs had come to such a state that

revolution was the *only* way to preserve their self-governing colony." Before 1776, they were utterly convinced that Parliament had violated the revered charter by imposing unconstitutional taxes. Their general assembly on May 4 brought this argument one step further. George III had also broken "the Compact most solemnly entered into, ratified and confirmed to the Inhabitants of this Colony by his illustrious Ancestors."[29] Inhabitants shifted the direction of their protest from Parliament to George III — a change that can be attributed to the impact and incitement of Thomas Paine's writings.

Common Sense circulated throughout Rhode Island in the months before May 1776. Paine aimed his piercing prose at George III, the "royal brute of Great Britain." His invective was among the first to direct hostility toward the king and to accuse him of sole culpability for tyrannical policies of England. Protest here and in other colonies previously had been leveled at Parliament or the king's ministers.[30] The Continental Congress had rationalized armed resistance as the only means to convince the king to "forbid a licentious ministry." The notion of a corrupt ministry, rather than a corrupt monarch, had been the foundation in England of opposition to constituted government. The effects of this belief in ministerial conspiracy "not only was symptomatic of the rising intensity of the Americans' revolutionary fever, but it also formed for the Americans the only frame of mind with which they could justify and explain their revolution."[31] But Paine's writings altered the frame of mind, diverted the current in the flood of protest, so that the king became the center, the perpetrator, of conspiracy and despotism.

Paine's powerful — though not particularly logical — ventilation convinced many Americans that time was ripe to sever ties with England. George III, as much a symbol as real head of empire, became the target for colonial grievances. Because the king, in the minds of most colonists, was father of the country, source of "Paternal Care and Tenderness," it became necessary for Paine to undermine the basis of this relationship. One historian writes: "Only one thing freed a man from his father's grip: death. Without consciously admitting it, even to himself, Thomas Paine went to work on George III with murder in

Cyclopedia of American Literature by *Duyckinck*

Thomas Paine (1737-1809), patriot, pamphleteer and democratic reformer in an age of revolution.

his mind and heart."[32]

Paine reasoned that fundamental evils in the constitution of England were remnants of two ancient tyrannies: "monarchial tyranny in the person of the King and aristocratical tyranny in the person of the peers." By 1776 colonists could only agree. Protests against policies of Parliament and abuses of ministers had not convinced the king of necessity for change. Additional protest directed toward persons of the peers was doomed to fail. Rhode Islanders now believed that injustices they had been forced to suffer came not only from a corrupt ministry but also from a "bloodthirsty King."[33]

Renunciation of allegiance forcefully asserted that George III, "forgetting his dignity," had defied the charter of 1663 and had wandered from "duties and Character of a good king." Instead of protecting Rhode Island, George III had endeavored "to destroy the good people of this Colony, and of all the united Colonies by sending Fleets

and Armies to America to confiscate our property and spread Fire, Sword and Desolation throughout our Country." Hence, the assembly believed that its highest duty was "to use every means, with which God and Nature have furnished us, in support of our invaluable rights, and privileges; to oppose that Power which is exerted only for our destruction." The act concluded with a repeal of the allegiance of the king's subjects "in this His Colony."[34] The decision to strike the name of George III from all official documents and to abrogate the oath of allegiance effectively removed the king's presence from the colony. Two symbols of the monarch did remain for a time: the king's arms from the Colony House in Providence and a crown from the Crown Coffee House were burned only after Rhode Island ratified the Declaration of Independence.[35]

Renunciation of allegiance was a bold step — unlike any other in the colonies. It was also a clever maneuver. Its careful composition — forceful, yet vague — left plenty of room for interpretation of its meaning and intent. To the governing authority in England the act could be read as an emphatic expression of opposition to the king's policies and support for colonial rights and liberties. But the act's identification of Rhode Island as an English colony diminished its impact as a document of protest, even to the point of suggesting that the colony might be disposed to reconciliation if the rights of the charter of 1663 could be ensured. Samuel Greene Arnold, writing in the nineteenth century, believed that Rhode Island patriots in early 1776 "opposed the oppressive measures of the King, [but] hoped and labored for conciliation."[36] To voters and to their delegates in the Continental Congress, the act purportedly answered the question of independence and supported the popular movement without really saying so.[37] The general assembly appears to have accepted Thomas Paine's arguments (short of independence), translated them into political action that fit the colony's tradition of autonomy, and decided that it could remove the cancer of monarchy that had diseased the body politic without killing the body itself.

For very practical reasons the assembly sidestepped the question of independence. Yet by couching repeal of allegiance in language that echoed Paine's attack on the English monarch,

the assembly embraced the cornerstone of Paine's ideology — a fierce espousal of the establishment of government based upon principles of republicanism. Englishmen of the eighteenth century defined a republic in terms of what it was not, that is, "in contradistinction to the despotic form, which makes the good of the sovereign, or of one man, the only object of the government." Thus, during the 1770s, disenchantment with monarchy was the principal component of republicanism. In *Common Sense* Paine stabbed at the heart of the system that oppressed America — tyranny perpetuated by the constitution of England. Malignancy of hereditary rule, said he, had corrupted the system. It was "the republican and not the monarchial part of the constitution of England which Englishmen glory in, viz. the liberty of choosing an house of commons from out of their own body." The monarch "hath poisoned the republic, the crown hath engrossed the commons."[38]

Some colonists, such as John Adams, agreed with Paine on the question of independence but rejected his constitutional arguments.[39] Here the opinion was reversed. The assembly avoided declaring independence for practical reasons but accepted Paine's constitutional views. Disillusioned with the monarch, it invoked a theory of republicanism by placing it within the context of a political act. Undoubtedly it assumed that exorcising the king would serve to restore rights granted in the charter of 1663, purge England's constitution of its impurity, and devise the means for reinstating balance in Great Britain's government. Thus Rhode Island was able to remain an English colony and at the same time enjoy its sovereignty by simply denying the power of the king, without declaring independence.

If the assembly did base renunciation upon a theory of latent republicanism, it did not by the same token create a republic. The May 4 act was merely an expression of desire, not in itself a constitution that legally ordained that desire. Movements for independence and republicanism in colonial America were neither mutually exclusive nor completely intertwined. The two movements were not combined into a political act until adoption of the Declaration of Independence.[40]

Shallow, inaccurate and parochial claims that acts of May 4 constituted a declaration of independence fall short of explaining the real signifi-

cance of Rhode Island's action. The subtlety and meaning of the May 4 decisions can only be understood by examining them within the context of the political and ideological milieu that existed in the spring of 1776. Though the measures passed by the general assembly were ambiguous, and though extant historical records are scarce and thin, they at least indicate some possibilities, even some probabilities, about what may have moved the legislature to act as it did. The assembly's May 4 actions comprised elements that simultaneously appear assertive and contradictory, conservative and revolutionary. But this does not at all diminish their importance as part of the transformation of ideas, arguments and opinions that shaped the revolutionary ideology during the months before the Declaration of Independence.

James Slater and his followers were not wrong in trying to promote May 4. The day deserves celebration. Although Rhode Island's renunciation of allegiance was not a declaration of independence, it most assuredly was a declaration of individuality.

1 *Providence Journal* August 13, 1905; May 16, 1909; May 25, 1913; May 3, 1914; November 12, 1915.

2 *Book Notes* 25: 22 (October 31, 1908) 169.

3 *Woonsocket Evening Call* November 12, 1915. Slater did not work alone in promoting May 4. Charles Warren Lippitt, *Rhode Island Declaration of Independence: An Address* (Providence: Freeman, 1907). Thomas W. Bicknell, ed., *Rhode Island Declaration of Independence, May 4, 1776: Addresses*, 2nd ed. (Providence: R. I. Citizens Historical Association, 1908?).

4 Passed on May 26, 1908, the act stipulated that the day should "nowise be construed a holiday." *Acts Resolves General Assembly January Session 1908* (Providence: Secretary of State, 1908) 277-279. The day became a holiday in 1936. *Acts Resolves January Session 1936* (Providence: Secretary of State, 1936) 8-9.

5 *Providence Journal* May 2, 1926.

6 *Providence Journal* May 6, 1913. Rider thought that "the language on the tablet is false." *Book Notes* 30: 10 (May 10, 1913) 77-78. The plaque may still be seen in the Old State House.

7 Recent studies that question the traditional account include Joel A. Cohen, "Rhode Island and the American Revolution: A Selective Socio-Political Analysis" (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Connecticut 1967) 75-77; Patrick T. Conley, "Revolution's Impact on Rhode Island," *Rhode Island History* 34: 4 (November 1975) 121-122. The traditional interpretation is followed in Albert T. Klyberg, "Toward a Rhode Island History," *Rhode Island History* 34: 1 (February 1975) 27; Sidney V. James, *Colonial Rhode Island* (New York: Scribner's, 1975) 349-350.

8 Ward to Henry Ward, Philadelphia, November 2, 1775, Bernhard Knollenberg, ed., *Correspondence of Governor Samuel Ward, May 1775 - March 1776* (Providence: RIHS, 1952) 116. Greene to Jacob Greene, Prospect-Hill, December 20, 1775, Peter Force, comp., *American Archives*, 4th ser., 6v. (Washington, 1834-1846) 4: 367-368. Greene to Ward, Camp on Prospect Hill, January 4, 1776, Knollenberg, 166-167.

9 *Providence Gazette* February 17, 1776. *Newport Mercury* March 18, 1776. Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) 75. *Newport Mercury* April 8, 1776. Ward to Henry Ward, Philadelphia, February 19, 1776, Knollenberg, 192-193.

10 Lee to Landon Carter, Philadelphia, April 9, 1776, Edmund C. Burnett, ed., *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress*, 8v. (Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1921-1936) 1: 416-417. Adams to James Warren, Philadelphia, April 16, 1776, Burnett, 424. Hopkins wrote on April 8, 1776. Governor Nicholas Cooke later referred to Hopkins' letter, but a copy has never been found. William R. Staples, *Rhode Island in the Continental Congress* (Providence, 1870) 69.

11 Babcock to Cooke, April 6, 1776, Babcock Papers, RIHS Library. *Newport Mercury* April 29, 1776. *Providence Gazette* May 4, 1776. Recent studies solve the minor controversy regarding location of the assembly. Pamela Kennedy, "Rhode Island's May 4th Declaration," memorandum in files of the R. I. Historical Preservation Commission, Providence. *Newport Daily News* July 24, 1975 summarizes research of Patrick T. Conley on location. Supporting data and photostated documents in files of Bicentennial Commission, Providence.

12 John Russell Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England*, 10v. (Providence, 1856-1865) 7: 510-521.

13 *Newport Mercury* April 29, 1776. Staples, 66.
David O. Lovejoy, *Rhode Island Politics and the
American Revolution, 1760-1776* (Providence: Brown
University Press, 1958) 192.

14 Cooke to Stephen Hopkins, Providence, May 7, 1776,
Matt B. Jones, "Revolutionary Correspondence of
Governor Nicholas Cooke, 1775-1781," *Proceedings
American Antiquarian Society*, new series, 36: 2
(October 1926) 323. Governor of Rhode Island to General
Washington, Providence, May 6, 1776, Bartlett, 7: 545.

15 Bartlett, 7: 522-523.

16 Bartlett, 7: 545. Lovejoy, 192.

17 Jackson Turner Main, *Sovereign States, 1775-1783*
(New York: New Viewpoints, 1973) 283. Cohen, 50-60.

18 Jones, 323-324. William Rogers, "Journal of Visits to
Rhode Island, April 17, 1776," *RIHS Collections* 32: 4
(October 1939) 124. There were 28 towns in 1776. The
provincial congress of Massachusetts and the
Connecticut Assembly both turned to their towns for
decisions on independence. Force, 4: 698 ff. Philip
Davidson, *Propaganda and the American Revolution*
(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press,
1941) 62.

19 Jones, 323-324.

20 Bartlett, 7: 526-527. Staples, 71-74. Lovejoy, 192-193.

21 Jones, 324. Bartlett, 7: 545.

22 Bartlett, 7: 527.

23 Jones, 323. Bartlett, 7: 545.

24 Italics mine. Bartlett, 7: 522-523.

25 William Bradford, deputy-governor, did not believe
the assembly's decisions necessitated a change in lexicons
when, on May 4, he signed a receipt for three hundred
pounds "for which I am accountable to the Colony."
Providence, May 4, 1776, Peck MSS., RIHS Library.

26 Bartlett, 5: 554-556.

27 John Richard Alden, *The South in the American
Revolution, 1763-1789* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State
University Press, 1957) 210-211. Merrill Jensen,
*Founding of a Nation: A History of the American
Revolution, 1763-1776* (New York: Oxford University
Press, 1968) 677-679. *Acts and Resolves Province of
Massachusetts Bay* (Boston: Wright and Potter, 1886) 5:
484-485.

28 *Newport Mercury* April 22, 1776 reported South
Carolina's action. By May 1 news of steps taken in the
two Carolinas had reached Philadelphia. Edmund Cody
Burnett, *The Continental Congress* (New York:
Macmillan, 1941) 155.

29 Lovejoy, 184. Cohen, 28-29, 69. Bartlett, 7: 522.

30 Philip S. Foner, ed., *Complete Writings of Thomas
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Gazette* March 23, 1776. Lovejoy, passim.

31 Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American
Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press,
1967) 126, 125. Gordon S. Wood, *Creation of the
American Republic, 1776-1787* (New York: Norton,
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32 Thomas Fleming, *1776: Year of Illusions* (New York:
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1776," *Journal of American History* 60: 2 (September
1973) 294-308.

33 Foner, *Writings*, 1: 7. *Providence Gazette*
March 23, 1776.

34 Bartlett, 7: 522-523.

35 *Providence Gazette* July 27, 1776.

36 *History of the State of Rhode Island and Providence
Plantations*, 2v. (New York: Appleton, 1859-1860)
2: 373.

37 Summarizing peculiarities and contradictions, one
leading student concludes: "Paradoxically Rhode
Islanders seem to have been both revolutionaries and
conservatives." Peter J. Coleman, *Transformation of
Rhode Island: 1790-1860* (Providence: Brown Univer-
sity Press, 1969) 218.

38 Foner, *Writings*, 1: 369, 16. Pauline Maier, *From
Resistance to Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1974) 288.

39 Bailyn, 288.

40 For an insightful discussion of republican ideology in
revolutionary America see Maier, 287-296.
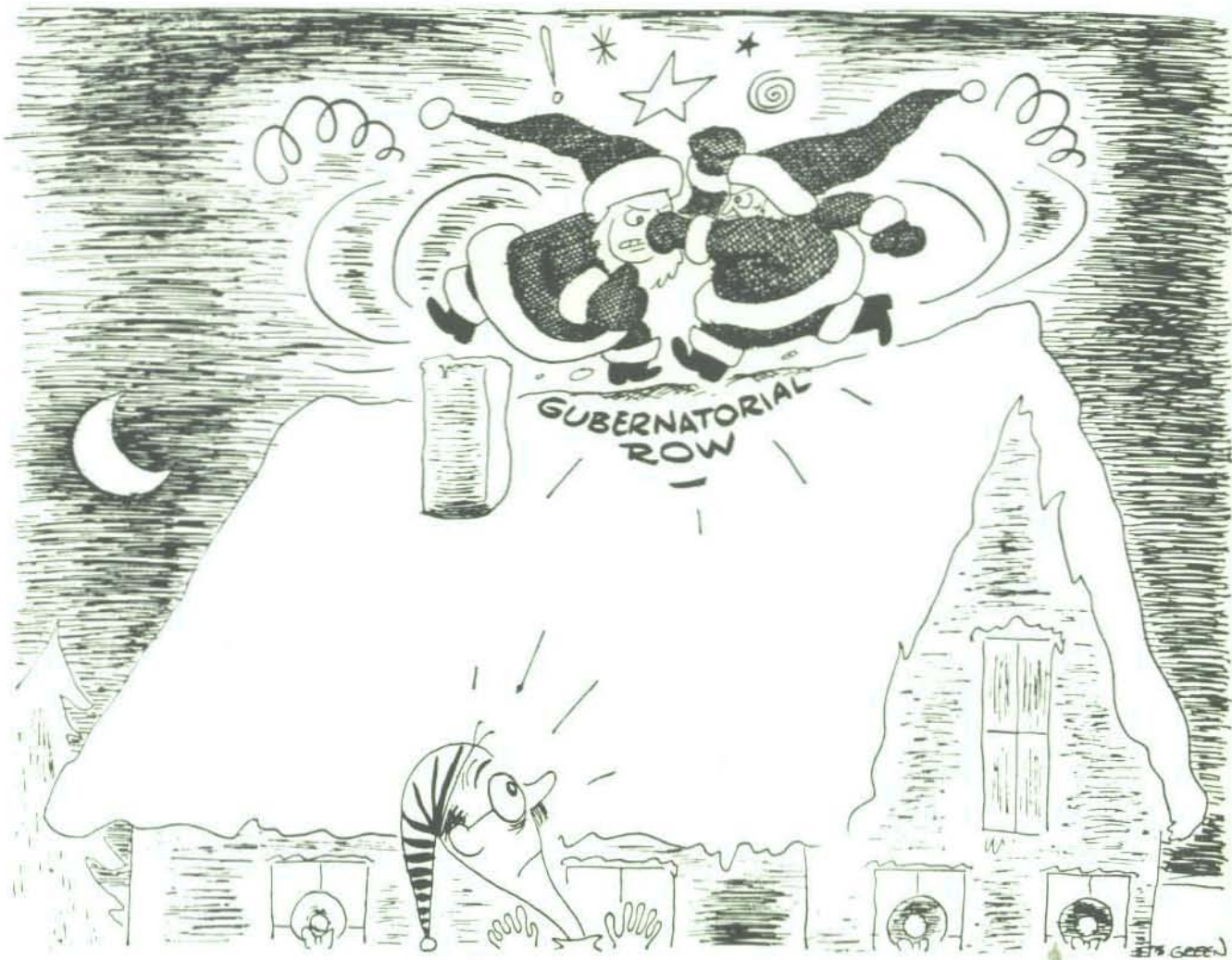
**When Out on the Roof There Arose Such a Clatter,
I Sprang from My Bed to See What Was the Matter.**

*Politics took on a seasonal theme during the "long count"
election of 1956 in the gubernatorial race between Dennis
J. Roberts and Christopher Del Sesto, the outcome decided
in Democrat Roberts' favor several months after the No-
vember vote.*

Rhode Island Politics 1956-1964: Party Realignment

*by Matthew J. Smith**

Study of state political structures received scholarly impetus from V. O. Key's classic work, *Southern Politics*. Key used three models — multifactional, dominant faction and bifactional — to classify one-party states of Dixie. Following Key's lead, David Fenton used different paradigms to categorize midwestern states and Duane Lockard attempted to analyze the six-state New England region during the mid-1950s. The focal point of these studies was the post-1932 period and roughly the first decade following the close of World War II. In the case of Rhode Island, Lockard's commentary closed with the gubernatorial election of 1956, in many ways a turning point in the state's political history. Ensuing years saw a resurgent Republican party regain control of the executive branch and reestablish two-party competition for a number of general offices. The Democratic machine dominating Rhode Island politics since 1932 began to falter. Although Democrats regained the governorship in 1968, they have continually faced stiff competition for control of the executive.

The turnabout in Democratic party fortunes can be traced to a number of factors and events which reshaped political balance. Elements of this story are complex, but they shed new light on patterns of state political development and in several aspects reinforce the traditional cyclical interpretation of ways in which American parties gain and lose power.

Rhode Island's modern political development has been somewhat unique in comparison to that of her sister New England states and in general to that of the other forty-four members of the Union. These irregularities of evolution are due to basically conservative political leadership in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and to smallness, leading to what one prominent scholar has termed the "politics of intimacy," which fostered a parochial inbred power structure in both political parties.

Rhode Island did not experience any type of political, social or economic reform movement during the so-called progressive era. While the rest of the nation, including the South — except on racial matters — was penetrated by the spirit of change, this state was bound to a system of boss-controlled Republican government in which a rural-dominated and grossly malapportioned legislature held sway over a hapless executive branch which was at best ceremonial.[1]

The Democratic election victory in 1932 and the famous "bloodless revolution of 1935" gave that party control of the state senate and ushered in a new era of Rhode Island politics. For the first time in the twentieth century the urban ethnic electorate — over eighty per cent of the state's population — had a voice in governmental affairs. Triumphant Democrats reorganized the archaic state government into a departmental system, expanded executive power to include personnel appointments and budget making, and eliminated Republican control of the judicial system. By the

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close of 1935 the entire fabric of state government had been rewoven by Democratic reforms which shape the state's development to the present day.

Over the next two decades Democratic leaders were quick to adopt New Deal and Fair Deal programs and were in the forefront promoting labor, social, and other progressive legislation for the state's workingmen. But they were in some cases reluctant, and in others unsuccessful, at reforming political machinery. In 1936 the party's call for a long promised constitutional convention was defeated at the polls. This setback guaranteed continuance of the malapportioned state senate until the Supreme Court's *Baker v. Carr* decision of 1962 — in Rhode Island, *Reynolds v. Sims* — mandated the one man-one vote rule and ended apportionment inequities. After 1936 Democrats resorted to limited conventions for specific constitutional changes but never sought a total revision of the basic document until the Supreme Court's decision, which was the catalyst for an ill-fated convention which met in 1964. Solidly Democratic in delegate strength, this convention deliberated, bickered, and ultimately botched its mandate by taking four long years to produce a document which voters overwhelmingly rejected in 1968.

While constitutional change failed, other reforms also lagged. The General Assembly, with Democratic control in the House and rural Republican domination in the senate, resisted any attempt to reorganize its outmoded committee structure and legislative conflicts of interest continued. A long discussed primary law was not adopted until 1947, a conservative statute labeling a voter for a twenty-six month period as a member of either major party. Rhode Island became the forty-seventh state to provide a primary system.[2]

The retarded nature of Rhode Island's political evolution had a profound impact on both parties. GOP control in the pre-1935 period rested with a rural, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant hierarchy whose economic and social philosophy had definite pro-business and anti-immigrant overtones. With the exception of token acceptance of the French-Canadian community, Republicans failed to revamp their image until the mid-1950s. Democrats who emerged in leadership roles after 1935 rode the crest of anti-Republican attitudes created by the great depression and reinforced by the liberal New Deal. This generation of Democratic leaders engaged in what one author has called the "politics of revenge." While wrapping themselves in the mantle of national reform programs, they continued a high-powered patronage program featuring dual office-holding among state legislators and accommodation with business interests.[3] In place of the rural Republican political apparatus Democrats instituted an urban-based brand of machine politics through which a small coalition of leaders maintained a tight grip until the gubernatorial election of 1956, when the party's electoral hegemony was jarred and then broken in the subsequent election.

In the post-1936 period the leadership in both parties remained fairly static. Democratic officeholders in the top echelons were young and ambitious. With the exception of Senator Theodore Francis Green they were Irish. McGraths, Quinns, Fogartys and Robertses jockeyed for the governorship with the hope of advancing to national offices. J. Howard McGrath, elected governor in 1940, advanced rapidly, but in his haste to become senator in 1946 he left the door open to an Italo-American, lieutenant governor John O. Pastore, who claimed the governor's chair from McGrath's political ally, Dennis J. Roberts, mayor of Providence. Pastore duplicated this feat in 1949 and became senator when McGrath advanced to attorney general in the Truman administration. This move finally cleared the path for Roberts to run for governor in 1950.

But the decade of the 1940s had been costly for Democrats. The political ascendancy of Pastore and the phenomenal longevity of Green had created a bottleneck on the party's ladder of advancement. This impasse was reflected all along the state ticket where non-Irish members of the party's ethnic coalition eagerly awaited their turn to move up. Furthermore, the predicament extended to the new generation of Democratic leaders on the local level, who found themselves virtually without access to higher office.

The advancement bottleneck on the lower level was also due to the size of the state. Rhode Island is virtually a city-state, with Providence — at least until the late 1960s — the major ingredient in Democratic victories. Other urban areas were satellites of the central city and, acting in political

Senator Theodore Francis Green cutting the cake at a reception, June 17, 1956, honoring him as the oldest member ever to serve in the U.S. Senate — 88 years, 8 months, 15 days.

unison with Providence, they constituted an impregnable bastion. Throughout the forties and into the fifties the party was ruled by this urban coalition to which Roberts fell heir in 1950. There was virtually no area in the state where a separate political base could be formed by an ambitious candidate. Unless a candidate was approved by party leaders, he could not enter its small governing circle or be picked to join its "ticket." In short, the Democratic political hierarchy resembled the Republican oligarchy of the pre-1935 era.

Republican leaders did not have to worry about a bottleneck occurring among their state office holders, for from 1932 to 1958 they elected only two, in 1940.[4] Their stagnation of another sort was the result of the GOP's failure to recognize political facts of life in Rhode Island. In a state whose population was over sixty per cent ethnic in origin and over eighty per cent urban in life style, Republican leadership was overwhelmingly

Yankee and rural in its caste. Its Yankee establishment was the result of a sharp economic and social class dichotomy unique to Rhode Island's development. The rural nature of the party rested in its last bastion of strength — the state senate — where gerrymandered districts allowed small-town leaders to exert an inordinate amount of leverage over nominations to the state ticket.[5] Again, the state's smallness worked in reverse for Republicans seeking access to party councils. The fledgling urban GOP was largely populated by ethnics who, in the case of the more prosperous Italian and French-Canadian elements, had pre-1935 Republican ties during the period the party had controlled the cities. Leadership in urban areas gravitated to ethnics such as Christopher Del Sesto or Felix Toupin, who had once been Democrats but were unable to find advancement in that party. Since few Republican inroads were made in the cities, their urban cohorts had small voice in GOP affairs.

Between 1932 and 1956, and possibly to the present, it could be argued that Rhode Island was basically a strong one-party state. Although Republicans gained the governorship in 1940, 1958, 1962, 1964 and 1966 elections, their victories did not reflect a strong grassroots party movement, but rather opportunistic triumphs over a sometimes divided (1938), sometimes tarnished (1938, 1958, 1962), or sometimes disorganized (1966) Democratic party. Other Republican electoral victories were either in the rural-dominated state senate or with the popular President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Even control of the state senate seesawed back and forth until 1958 when Democrats gained control. Election statistics for the period reflect a pattern of this sort, but it is also clear that since 1956 the Republican party regained the ability to compete and win elections for the state's general offices. This turnabout in the electorate's voting habits, from solid Democratic margins to competitive two-party runoffs for major offices, can be traced to events within both parties during a crucial eight-year period, 1956-64.

The Roberts-Del Sesto race for governor in 1956 was a watershed for electoral changes of the next decade. Their bitter battle unleashed a tide of political undercurrents which rocked Democratic party structure and refocused Republican election strategy. Among more important trends were the

following: a fracturing of Democratic unity as witnessed by emergence of the primary election as a vehicle for expression of discontent: resurgence of ethnic politics in both parties; lessening of the urban Democratic voting base; and loss of other traditional supportive groups.

Dennis J. Roberts seemed destined to become a United States senator. An Irish Catholic with natural leadership qualities, he had starred in football in high school and college, gone on to law school, and in 1934 had been elected to the state senate from Providence. By 1938 he was state party chairman allied to J. Howard McGrath, a leading Democrat. In 1940 Roberts wrested the nomination for mayor from powerful city treasurer Walter Fitzpatrick and, with the aid of Frank Rao, ousted Republican incumbent John Collins.[6] During the next ten years as mayor he built the reputation of being an able and progressive administrator and an adept political leader. Although unable to move up to governorship in 1946, Roberts' future still looked bright. Theodore Francis Green was eighty-three in 1950 when Roberts was endorsed without opposition for governor and easily beat Eugene J. Lachapelle in the general election, and it seemed highly likely that Green would soon retire. Roberts moved quickly to consolidate his power. In 1951 Frank Rao became state party chairman and his reign was marked by tight party discipline and allegiance to Roberts.[7]

But dreams of 1950 quickly became realities of 1956. Green had not stepped down from the United States Senate in 1954 when his term expired, and two years later his zest for Washington had not diminished. There was a logjam in the upper echelons of the party, and Roberts was forced to run for governor for the fourth time.

His rival in 1956 was a Democrat turned Republican, Christopher Del Sesto, who had earlier served as a Democratic appointee to highly responsible positions in state government. Del Sesto's disenchantment with Democrats came in 1944 when McGrath and others had vetoed his candidacy for lieutenant governor in favor of John O. Pastore.[8] He subsequently joined the GOP and ran a losing campaign for mayor of Providence in 1952. But Del Sesto's road to the Republican nomination was not easy. After being denied the GOP nomination for governor by the rural "old guard" in 1954, Del Sesto won endorsement in 1956 and became the first Republican Italo-American candidate for governor of Rhode Island.

Del Sesto's candidacy was a significant change in Republican strategy, which had made ethnic matches by pitting an Irishman against John Pastore in 1946 and by endorsing French-Canadian candidates in 1948 through 1952 elections, possibly in an effort to revive their pre-1932 alliance with that ethnic group. John G. Murphy in 1946 and Raoul Archambault, Jr., in 1952 had run reasonably well, but the GOP had not been able to pierce the New Deal Democratic ethnic coalition.[9] Their endorsement of Del Sesto was in a way the last possible alternative Republicans could offer to break tripartite Democratic alliances.

Del Sesto's nomination was also a victory for the GOP's urban-liberal wing. The feud between more progressive city Republicans and the rural senatorial clique had been simmering since 1953, when the Republican state central committee had openly criticized their party counterparts in the senate for obstructionism and for dealing with Democrats.[10] Senator George D. Greenhalgh of Glocester, leader of the group, and his state chairman, Herbert B. Carkin of Warwick, were able to prevent Del Sesto's candidacy in 1954. But two years later Del Sesto gained endorsement with the aid of William T. Broomhead of Barrington and strong Italo-American support from Providence.[11]

The "long count" election of 1956 resulted in a tainted Roberts victory when the state supreme court invalidated absentee and shut-in ballots cast prior to election day on the grounds of a constitutional amendment specifying that all votes of this type be cast on the polling day. While the victory was costly to Roberts' image, a close examination of the election reveals that other significant factors were at work in 1956 having important long-term effects on the state's political life.

Ethnicity played a crucial role in the election for both Republicans and Democrats. Although ethnic politics was a way of life in Rhode Island — both parties had been systematically balancing tickets with French, Irish, Italian, and Yankee candidates since 1936 — this was the first post-1935 contest in which sizable defections occurred statewide. No doubt, Del Sesto's totals were enhanced by the presidential year turnout and the

Eisenhower triumph in Rhode Island, but the
Roberts-Dean J. Lewis runoff in 1954 was the
largest off-year vote in the state's history until
that time and almost matched the turnout in 1958.

Comparison of Roberts' 1954 vote with that of
1956 in the Italian Federal Hill area of Provi-
dence, and examination of Roberts-Del Sesto re-
turns from communities with sizable Italian pop-
ulations, both reveal a dramatic swing to the
Italo-American. During the campaign it was felt
that Del Sesto's ethnic origins would hurt him
with Yankee Republicans said to be reluctant to
endorse an Italian. But returns from three rock-
ribbed rural Republican towns — Foster, Glocce-
ter, Exeter — show no vote cutting when results
are compared to Yankee William T. Broomhead's
totals. In short, it appears Del Sesto picked up
important Italian Democratic votes and retained
traditional GOP strength — there was no ethnic
backlash.[12]

Evidence represented in voting returns of this
election are buttressed by campaign events. From
late September until November, newspapers and
airways were filled with stories and appeals about
and to Italian voters. Roberts never injected na-
tionality into his remarks, but the Democratic
candidate for secretary of state John A. Notte Jr.
did so unsparingly. He called Del Sesto a figure-
head, implying that the Republican party had
never been friendly to the Italian. "If the Republi-
cans thought they could win, they would never
have put up Del Sesto." Notte also announced
that a Democratic poll showed Roberts winning
by a three to one margin in the thirteenth ward,
"heart of the biggest Italian-American district in
Rhode Island." In the campaign's final week
Notte addressed radio messages to his fellow Ital-
ians praising Roberts' work on the American
committee on Italian migration to revise the
quota system and noting his award from the
Italian government of Grand Officer of the Order
of Merit.[13]

Other Democrats of Italian extraction con-
tinued the assault upon Del Sesto. When Assistant
Attorney General Francis J. Fazzano learned that
the GOP candidate was going to spend a day in
Natick, a predominantly Italian area of West
Warwick, he sneered, "He never knew where Na-
tick was until he became a candidate." This was
the pattern of attack by many others, and for

*A true candidate's handshake. Christopher Del Sesto cam-
paigning on Federal Hill several days before the 1956
gubernatorial election.*

Democrats their ethnic wooing ended with a mas-
sive rally on Federal Hill at which Senator John
O. Pastore flailed away at Del Sesto and the Re-
publican party.

Republicans were far from outdone. Del Sesto
concentrated his campaign in predominantly Ital-
ian areas of the state. His only Providence head-
quarters were in Italian-populated wards. He
challenged Roberts to campaign in Westerly or on
Federal Hill, where Democrats had had bitter pri-
mary battles. Del Sesto's own visit to the "Hill"
five days before the election was portrayed in a
full page layout of pictures featuring the candi-
date conversing in Italian with a local woman
shopper.[14]

Ethnic strategies of both candidates in 1956 ig-
nited an intense series of primaries and elections
during the next eight years and beyond. In 1958
Roberts again faced Del Sesto with much the
same type of campaign. Del Sesto's vote in the
various districts and towns remained virtually the

Claiming Race on Federal Hill

Providence Journal, *November 5, 1956*

*Ethnic-oriented politics and strategies surfaced dramatical-
ly in the 1956 gubernatorial campaign, as this editorial
cartoon incisively points out.*

same, only this time the Republican won. Two
years later Democrats nominated John A. Notte,
Jr. to head a ticket that included Edward P.
Gallogly in the second spot. The Notte-Del Sesto
race clearly indicates a return by Italo-Americans
to Democratic ranks, and Notte's pluralities in
1962 against Yankee John H. Chafee offer further
evidence. The persistence of ethnicity as a factor
in elections can be seen as late as 1970 when an
Italian Republican challenged a Jewish Demo-
crat.[15]

Besides creating ethnic antagonisms, the
Roberts win in 1956 intensified the logjam within
the party. Before Democratic endorsements that
year Roberts had to dissuade West Warwick chief-
tain Michael DeCiantis from challenging him for
the nomination and, in order to pacify Secretary
of State Armand Coté's desires, the lieutenant
governor's spot was given to the popular French-
man against the advice of Italian leaders.[16] This

patchwork compromise did not work. Coté was
quick to understand the precarious position of the
governor due to his "victory" over Del Sesto, and
within a year rumors of a primary challenge were
in the air.

Armand Coté's political career in state politics
was the result of J. Howard McGrath's desire to
unite the Democratic party in the 1940 election.
In order to pacify Thomas P. McCoy, political
sachem of Pawtucket and a constant thorn in the
side of the governing coalition of the party,
McGrath offered McCoy the opportunity to name
two spots on the state ticket.[17] For one of these
positions, secretary of state, McCoy chose Coté, an
obscure first-term schoolcommitteeman from
Pawtucket. From this fortuitous start Coté
emerged as the top party vote getter by the 1950s.
While it is difficult to determine Coté's motiva-
tions in 1958, it would be reasonably correct to
assume that personal ambition coupled with the

ethnic desire to have a Franco-American lead the party after two decades of Irish domination were factors in his determinations.

In order to challenge Roberts in 1958, Coté was forced to take the primary route because the Democratic state committee, the endorsing instrument, remained strongly in Roberts' control. A primary was at that time an untested method in Rhode Island politics; a primary law had been adopted in 1947 and, after a brief flurry of activity in both parties the following year, it had fallen into disuse on the state level as an instrument of change in party politics. There is little doubt that the rigid hierarchy of both parties which "anointed" candidates for the ticket contributed to this situation. Especially in the Democratic party, where victors of 1935 were very visible and active, party rank and file were quite docile about the decision-making process. It is ironic that by 1958 the rigidity remained and had created a situation with which party leaders were unable to cope.

The Roberts-Coté battle during summer 1958 was the first serious primary in the state's history. Coté and his capable campaign manager, Walter Kane of Smithfield, put challengers into the field for every state office except general treasurer, but the major race was for the top office and subsequent control of the Democratic party. The election could be classified as "crude" in the sense that the media was used to a small degree, reflecting the somewhat unsophisticated nature of Democratic campaigning and almost total reliance upon the concept of party "organization." With regard to issues, Coté relied upon criticisms of the governor that Del Sesto had leveled two years earlier and upon the theme that a change was needed. Unlike the 1956 election, little mention was made openly of nationality, but the Roberts camp made special efforts in Woonsocket to hold the French-Canadian vote. Roberts' ally in that city was Kevin Coleman, a highly respected reform mayor.[18]

Tuesday, September 17, was a gloomy, rainy day as Democrats went to the polls. Surprisingly, Coté held a three hundred vote lead statewide before returns from Providence were counted. But that lead was shattered by an organization vote of two to one for the governor in his home city. The challenger ran very well in the Blackstone and Pawtuxet valleys, French-Canadian strongholds,

carrying Pawtucket, Lincoln, Cumberland, Central Falls and West Warwick. His major disappointment was Woonsocket; although he carried the city by a 4,015 to 3,718 vote, the margin was far less than expected. Overall, Coté garnered almost 44 per cent of the vote and 50.4 per cent outside of Providence.

Roberts' fifth campaign for governor was a rematch of the 1956 affair. Del Sesto, after initial refusal, had again decided to be a candidate when his choice for state party chairman, William T. Broomhead, was selected to replace the Greenhalgh-Carkin combine. The day after the primary Del Sesto said that the results of the Democratic squabble forecast "a Republican landslide of unprecedented proportions."[19] While his rhetorical prognosis was far from correct, the GOP candidate's narrow 6,230 vote plurality was dependent in part on the Democratic rupture of the previous September.

Journalists have attributed the GOP victory to a revenge-minded public, aroused by the "vote steal" of 1956, forcing retribution upon Roberts and his cronies. There is probably much to this idea, particularly among that group of voters highly interested in and aware of state affairs. But further analysis of election returns indicates that Roberts' strength dropped sufficiently in Coté strongholds so that in conjunction with the "long count" issue of 1956, the defection of Franco-Americans from the Democratic party cost the governor a fifth term. Contrasting Roberts-Del Sesto totals for 1956 and 1958 shows that the Del Sesto vote in Italian areas remained fairly static or declined slightly in terms of percentage. Comparing areas of Coté strength against returns for the two candidates in each election indicates that Del Sesto's vote picked up significantly or remained approximately the same in a low turnout year, while Roberts' support and his margins dropped in every community. It appears that Democrats in those areas either abstained from voting or moved into the GOP column in sufficient numbers to maintain Del Sesto's totals. While results are not conclusive, the Roberts-Coté split may have been the key ingredient in Republican victory.[20]

The Coté primary had several long term important implications. The hegemony of the Roberts-Rao organization was fractured and would be

Dennis J. Roberts at a news conference after his primary loss to Claiborne Pell for the Democratic senatorial nomination in 1960.

eliminated in 1960. With Roberts' defeat in the senatorial primary of that year, the state organization that had existed since 1935 was unable to regroup under strong leadership and declined rapidly. John A. Notte Jr. and John G. McWeeney, who emerged in 1960 as governor and state chairman respectively, were unable to cope with the new political environment.

Keystone of the political scene, at least for Democrats, was the primary election. Between 1958 and 1964 elections the endorsed party candidate for governor faced serious challenges for the nomination. In each case the party's endorsement went to an individual from Providence opposed by candidates outside the party hierarchy. Although in every case except Clairborne Pell's in 1960 the state organization was victorious, each race further weakened it. This process stopped not for lack of ambitious men but for emergence of an extremely popular Republican governor in 1962. The ascendancy of John H. Chafee made the

Democratic nomination decidedly less popular. Even after his defeat in 1968, the Republican party had gained a new credibility, making Democratic endorsement no longer the major step to the governorship.

It is likely that primary campaigns among Democrats will continue for major offices. Upon the death of Congressman John E. Fogarty in 1967 a major free-for-all ensued for the endorsement, with Providence forces losing out to a newcomer from suburban Warwick, Robert O. Tiernan. Even defeat of the Providence "machine's" candidate for the congressional nomination did not forestall a primary race — former governor John A. Notte Jr., hoping to capitalize on the heavy concentration of Italo-Americans in the district, contested the nomination in a primary and lost in a very close election.

The state Democratic organization of the post-1935 era, while priding itself on political acumen, was myopic in understanding fundamental changes occurring in Rhode Island society. Within two decades, 1950-1970, Providence and its sister cities experienced significant emigration to suburban communities. There is little doubt that Providence's substantial decreases are reflected politically in Democratic gains in Warwick, Cranston, Johnston, and some South County communities. General Assembly delegations from suburban communities provide an accurate measure of this phenomenon. Beginning in 1956 and perhaps even earlier, Democratic strength in the malapportioned state senate began to increase. By 1958 the senate had gone Democratic (23-20), and this trend continued, receiving further impetus from court-mandated reapportionment in 1966 elections. Power in the state organization began to drift away from Providence's control as newcomers became aware of their influence. It is not surprising that the present governor and state chairman are from suburban areas.[21]

The party hierarchy of the forties and fifties was also very complacent about extending organizational influence and control into suburban communities. Democratic victories in those areas were due not to an organization master plan but rather to diligence of local candidates who benefited from the population influx. Suburban Democratic parties that emerged were not bound by patronage or other loyalties to the state organiza-

tion. Their rank and file, without constraints or viewpoints of traditional party leadership, developed an autonomous status which further weakened the state organization.

This political evolution produced new allegiances and power bases which emerged in the mid-sixties. Warwick provides the best example of this changing political environment. Traditionally Yankee in population and politics, this city was the recipient of substantial numbers of Irish-American Providence residents in the post-World War II period. Following the pattern of the Democratic surge of the thirties, a Yankee Democrat, Horace Hobbs, was elected mayor in 1960. Warwick's first Democratic senator in the modern era was an Irishman, Robert O. Tiernan, whose family had migrated from Providence in the fifties. The city's next mayor, Philip W. Noel, of French-Canadian and Italian extraction, became governor in 1972. Its General Assembly delegation presently consists of four Irish-American Democrats, all formerly from Providence, in the senate and six representatives of either Italian or Irish extraction in the House.[22]

Eclipse of the state Democratic party and its subsequent realignment occurred during a period in which the Republican party was undergoing an image overhaul and program modernization equally as significant to the state's political life. This metamorphosis was aided externally by emigration from Democratic cities and by a softening of organized labor's stance toward the GOP. These factors, in combination with internal changes in the party, led to a Republican resurgence in the sixties.

While it is difficult to measure, exodus to the suburbs by urban Democrats aided the GOP to the degree that party allegiance was not constrained by tight organizational control found in city organizations. It is highly likely that the ex-urbanites retained their party identification, but it was not reinforced or pressured due to relatively new and loosely structured suburban democratic organizations. This circumstance made the newcomers susceptible to Republican overtures, provided that the candidate was attractive and moderate in his views.

Also aiding the GOP was the political "divorce" which terminated the long-lived marriage between organized labor and the Democratic par-

ty. Their squabbles began in the early fifties, were encouraged by the emergence of Republican Christopher Del Sesto in 1956, and smoldered during Roberts' fourth term from 1956 to 1958. With Del Sesto's victory in 1958 AFL-CIO leaders found that the GOP governor was not opposed to labor goals. His defeat two years later by John A. Notte Jr. seemed to revive the long-standing romance with Democrats, but within twenty-four months labor abandoned the Democratic party for an independent posture. A headline summed up union feelings — "R. I. Labor Charges Democratic Betrayal." Thomas F. Policastro, AFL-CIO president, charged the Notte administration with self-interest legislation to protect "race tracks and insurance companies." Further, labor leaders were highly annoyed at Notte's withdrawal of support for a state income tax and other legislation. The importance of the split between traditional allies is difficult to measure in terms of its effect upon voting behavior because it is generally conceded that the impact of a union endorsement waned in the fifties. But in the vital area of finances the union disillusionment had an important impact on Democrats. By withholding funds from the state ticket in 1962 labor made its displeasure felt.[23]

By 1962 the state GOP was a revamped party no longer carrying the image of a rural-dominated conservative organization. The election of 1956 began a reversal of the trend of Republican domination in the state senate, occurring ironically while the party was making a very creditable run for the governorship. Although carrying the senate that year by twenty-three to seventeen, Democrats took the seats in Tiverton and Lincoln and ran very well in Burrillville, Coventry, East Greenwich, Exeter, Jamestown, Portsmouth and Westerly. The combined Republican margin in those towns was approximately 1100 votes.[24]

Two years later Democrats gained control of the upper branch by twenty-three to twenty with notable victories in Coventry, Burrillville and Jamestown. This trend continued in the Kennedy election of 1960. The Democratic margin was twenty-eight to sixteen with notable victories in Warwick and Glocester, both Republican bastions in the modern era. The effect of this turnabout was clear. The rural Republican "old guard" had

lost its power and subsequently its bargaining position in state GOP councils.

Augmenting this significant development was the activity of Christopher Del Sesto. In 1957 he removed Herbert Carkin as state party chairman against the wishes of George Greenhalgh, leader of the senatorial clique. Del Sesto's nominee, William T. Broomhead of Barrington, presented a youthful, more liberal image. A measure of the importance of this change was seen in the following year when Greenhalgh declined to run for the senate, thus depriving the rural wing of its most forceful leader. Broomhead's six-year tenure was marked by Del Sesto's 1958 win and the upset victory of John H. Chafee in 1962. Del Sesto's gubernatorial term provided the GOP with state-wide patronage for the first time since 1939, to further strengthen the party.

By 1962 Republicans had rebuilt their organization to the degree that the party experienced its first real primary for a gubernatorial nomination. On the surface the bitter battle between John H. Chafee and Louis V. Jackvony Jr. appeared to be a traditional test between rural and urban wings of the party, but a close examination of the state convention and subsequent primary reveals that both candidates shared important support from rural Republican leaders. If anything, the primary appears to have been first and foremost an ethnic clash between Yankee and Italian elements in the GOP with urban-rural configuration a secondary consideration.

Competition for the Republican gubernatorial nomination began very early. In December 1961 two leading candidates, John H. Chafee of Warwick, house minority leader, and Louis V. Jackvony Jr. of Providence, director of the Department of Business Regulation in the Del Sesto administration, were both actively courting members of the GOP state central committee. Mentioned as possible contenders were former governor Del Sesto, Republican state chairman Broomhead, and Joseph H. O'Donnell Jr., a North Smithfield businessman whose father had been a party stalwart in that town.

As the June 6 endorsement date neared, the Jackvony-Chafee rivalry grew more intense amidst dinner meetings to woo delegates and formal openings of staffed campaign headquarters by both candidates. A poll of state committee members in mid-June showed none of the candidates having the fifty-seven votes necessary for victory but speculated that Chafee had forty-two, Jackvony forty-one, Broomhead ten, and O'Donnell three, with the remaining seventeen unwilling to make their choices known. Tension began to mount when Del Sesto withdrew his name three days before the meeting and publicly endorsed Chafee. One day later Broomhead dropped out, leaving his ten pledges free to support any of the other candidates.[25]

The endorsement meeting at the new Colony Motor Inn in Cranston — a bitter five and one-half hour battle — took three ballots to decide upon a nominee for governor, with the emotionally spent 113-member body adjourning without choosing candidates for other state offices. On the first ballot Jackvony led with fifty-five to fifty-two for Chafee and five for O'Donnell. One vote was not cast on the first two ballots. On the second tally Chafee picked up two votes from each contender, giving him fifty-six to Jackvony's fifty-three and O'Donnell's three. In the climactic third ballot, after O'Donnell withdrew and released his supporters, Chafee went over the top with fifty-nine and Jackvony netted fifty-four. Amidst booing, cheering, and hissing, Chafee accepted the endorsement but Jackvony bitterly denounced the vote as unrepresentative and vowed a primary fight in remarks tinged with anti-Yankee animosity: "The Republican Party is in the unfortunate position of being the party that carries the mantle that it is not interested in the welfare of the ordinary citizen. He [Chafee] is the image of the conservative rich man who is not good for the people." This was to be Jackvony's theme throughout the primary campaign — portraying himself as the candidate of the "little man" vs. the candidate of the rich man.

Reconstructing the state central committee vote is difficult because it was a secret ballot, but from newspaper reports and subsequent events in the campaign it appears that the votes for the two candidates split along the following lines. Chafee carried Barrington, Burrillville, Charlestown, Coventry, East Greenwich, Exeter, Glocester, Hopkinton, Jamestown, Lincoln, Little Compton, Middletown, North Kingstown and South Kingstown. Added to these were two votes from Pawtucket and others from Providence and his

Louis V. Jackvony speaking to the press after his defeat by John H. Chafee in the contest to be Republican standard-bearer in 1962.

the son of the conservative Republican leader in northern Rhode Island.
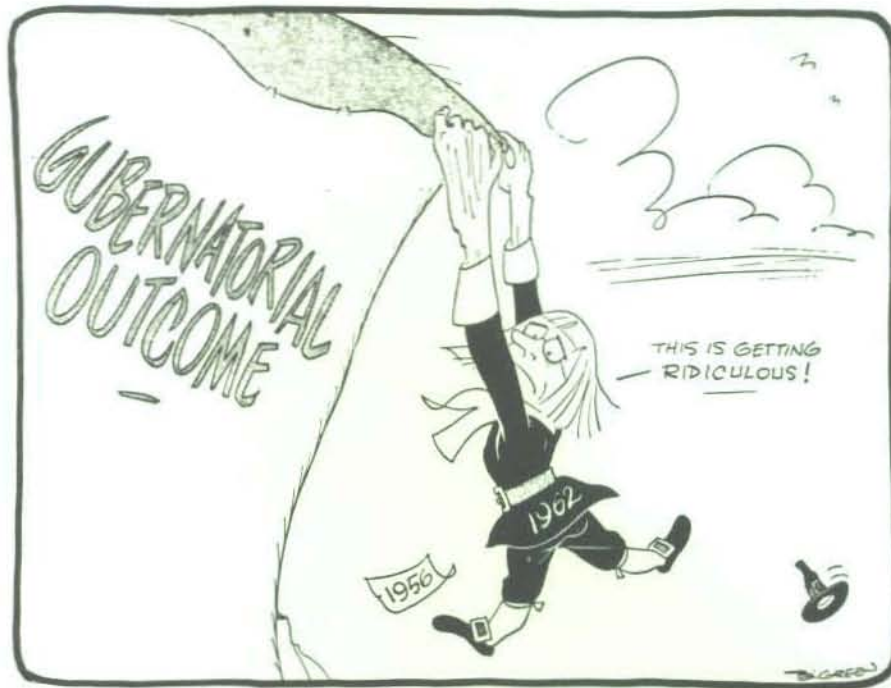
Chafee's campaign aides and town leaders cannot be easily identified with old-line senatorial leadership. His campaign manager, Representative John Conley of East Providence, was a liberal urban Republican who had helped plan Chafee strategy as early as 1961. Probably most important was the support given to the endorsed candidate by Christopher Del Sesto and William Broomhead, GOP leaders who had broken the rural hegemony in the party six years earlier.

Results of the September 11 primary bear out the thesis that the battle was along ethnic lines rather than urban liberal versus rural conservative ideology. Chafee carried the urban centers of Providence, Pawtucket, Warwick, Westerly and Cranston while losing Central Falls by only four votes. Jackvony's strength came from Italo-American areas of Providence, Cranston, West Warwick and Warren. In almost every other area he ran poorly. Chafee's sweep was complete.

An examination of vote returns in Providence shows the extent of the ethnic split. Wards 1, 2 and 9 with large Yankee elements gave Chafee overwhelming pluralities while wards 4, 5 and 13 showed a strong preference for the Italian-American Jackvony. This trend can be seen in Cranston and other urban areas.

A factor in the turnout affecting Jackvony's Italo-American support was the fact that Democratic governor John A. Notte Jr. faced strong primary opposition from Kevin Coleman of Woonsocket. Due to prior legislation that mandated for the first time a same-day primary for both parties, Italian voters' ethnic allegiances were torn, and the vast majority opted for Democrat Notte whose victory was won with Providence's strong organization vote. This circumstance was somewhat offset by loss of Yankee Republican voters who had in 1960 voted in the Democratic primary for Claiborne Pell over Dennis Roberts, thus losing their right to vote in a Republican primary for twenty-six months. Estimates of this loss run from 4,000 to 40,000 with knowledgeable observers setting the figure at 12,000.[26]

John Chafee went on to prove Jackvony's "can't win" label wrong, even in the face of the Italo-American's failure to support the GOP ticket. His

home city of Warwick. Jackvony's support came from Providence, Cranston, Newport, East Providence, Westerly and Woonsocket with significant rural support in Narragansett, Tiverton, West Greenwich and Scituate.

While it is obvious that the bulk of Chafee's support came from the rural towns, it is highly doubtful that the split between him and Jackvony was strictly on the basis of the traditional rural conservative vs. urban liberal axis. Rather, it appears that among the so-called "senatorial clique" Jackvony had a definite edge in support. Such stalwarts as George M. Westlake and E. Rex Coman both of Narragansett, Sam S. Tourtellot of Scituate, George D. Lewis of Tiverton, Romeo D. Asselin of Warren, George M. Leuth Jr. of Foster, and Louis E. Perreault of Richmond were all in the Jackvony camp. Former gubernatorial candidate of the Greenhalgh-Carkin combine, Dean J. Lewis, headed the challenger's campaign in Newport. Jackvony's campaign manager, William R. Halliwell Jr. of North Smithfield, was

Another Cliff-Hanger

Providence Journal, *November 8, 1962*

*Reminiscent of the "long count" election of 1956, the 1962 gubernatorial race was
decided 24 days after the November voting because of legal battles and a controversy
over absentee ballots which also had plagued the earlier contest.*

victory ushered in a six-year Republican hold on
the executive branch, beginning another political
cycle.

State politics entered a new phase with the
Chafee victory. Although Democrats were compla-
cent about regaining the governorship in 1964 —
most viewed the 1962 election as an aberration —
they again experienced a primary and an internal
fight for control of the state chairmanship and for
nominations to state offices, further weakening
party structure. In the general election their can-
didate for governor was resoundingly beaten by
the popular Chafee. In the eight years since 1956
the Democratic party had unintentionally lost
unity of purpose, leading to resurgence of the
GOP and enabling Republicans to seize the exe-
cutive branch and regain credibility with voters.

Democratic leadership in 1956 was unable to
clear the logjam for advancement to federal
offices. Ethnic elements of the party's governing
coalition therefore resorted to the primary election

as a means of gaining power and advancement. This
led to a series of ethnic primary conflicts which
shook party discipline. After the emergence of
Republican Christopher Del Sesto, a new, more in-
tense round of ethnic politics developed which
split the Democratic coalition.

Besides the primary election and intense ethni-
city of the period, the Democratic party failed to
develop a new strategy to meet the changing nature
of Rhode Island society. Wedded to a "Maginot
Line" mentality concerning the cities, leaders
were negligent in cultivating a suburban organi-
zation under state party auspices. They relied in-
stead upon the false notion that the GOP would
never be a threat because the electorate was over-
whelmingly Democratic.

This dream was not thoroughly dispelled until
the debacle of 1964, and by that time it was too
late to crush a Republican party that had used the
politics of "personality" to leapfrog over Democra-
tic organizational politics.

1 John D. Buenker, "Urban Liberalism in Rhode Island, 1909-1919," *Rhode Island History* 30: 2 (May 1971) 35-51.

2 Duane Lockard, *New England State Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959) 188.

3 Matthew J. Smith, "The Real McCoy in the Bloodless Revolution of 1935," *Rhode Island History* 32: 3 (August 1973) 80-85.

4 *Manual with Rules and Orders for Use of the General Assembly of the State of Rhode Island 1973-1974* (Providence: Secretary of State, 1973) 204, 214, hereafter cited *R. I. Manual.*

5 Lockard, 177-196.

6 Oral interview with Judge Robert E. Quinn, 11 March 1974, Archives, Providence College.

7 *Journal-Bulletin Almanac 1952* (Providence: Providence Journal Company, 1951) 253.

8 Oral interview with Edward J. Higgins, 15 January 1974, Archives, Providence College. Mr. Higgins participated in the famous Gettysburg conference between Green, McGrath, and Roberts and confirmed Roberts' choice of Pastore.

9 *R. I. Manual* 1945-46, 216-217; 1947-48, 218-219.

10 Lockard, 181-182.

11 *Providence Journal* 25 June, 1954, p.8.

12 *R. I. Manual* 1955-56, 244, 241-242; 1957-58, 246, 243-244. *Providence Journal* 28 October 1956, p.3.

13 *Providence Journal* 20 October 1956, p.12. Roberts Papers, Archives, Providence College.

14 *Providence Journal* 26 October, p. 2; 30 October, p. 22; 1 November 1956, p. 16.

15 Board of Elections, *Official Count of Ballots Cast* 1958, pp. 99, 105; 1960, pp. 114, 121; 1962, pp. 100, 105. *R. I. Manual* 1969-1970, 271; 1971-1972, 276.

16 *Providence Journal* 8 August 1956, p. 6.

17 Smith, 67.

18 Roberts Papers. *Providence Journal* August-September 1958.

19 *Providence Journal* 18 September 1958, p. 8.

20 *Official Count* 1956, p. 27; 1958, pp. 5, 6, 27.

21 *Journal-Bulletin Almanac* 1975, p. 176.

22 *R. I. Manual* 1973-74, 565-602.

23 *Providence Journal* 5 April 1962, p. 1. Jay Selwyn Goodman, *Democrats and Labor in Rhode Island, 1952-1962: Changes in the Old Alliance* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1967) 31-36; 106-110.

24 *Journal-Bulletin Almanac* 1957, pp. 257-260.

25 *Providence Journal* 21 December 1961, p. 6; 12 April, p. 10; 20 June 1962, p. 8. *Sunday Journal* 1 July 1962, p. N35.

26 *Providence Journal* 27 June, pp. 1, 4-7; 24 August, p. 16; 12 September 1962, pp. 1, 8-9.
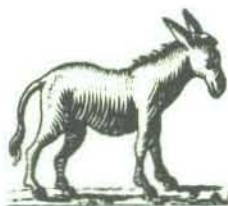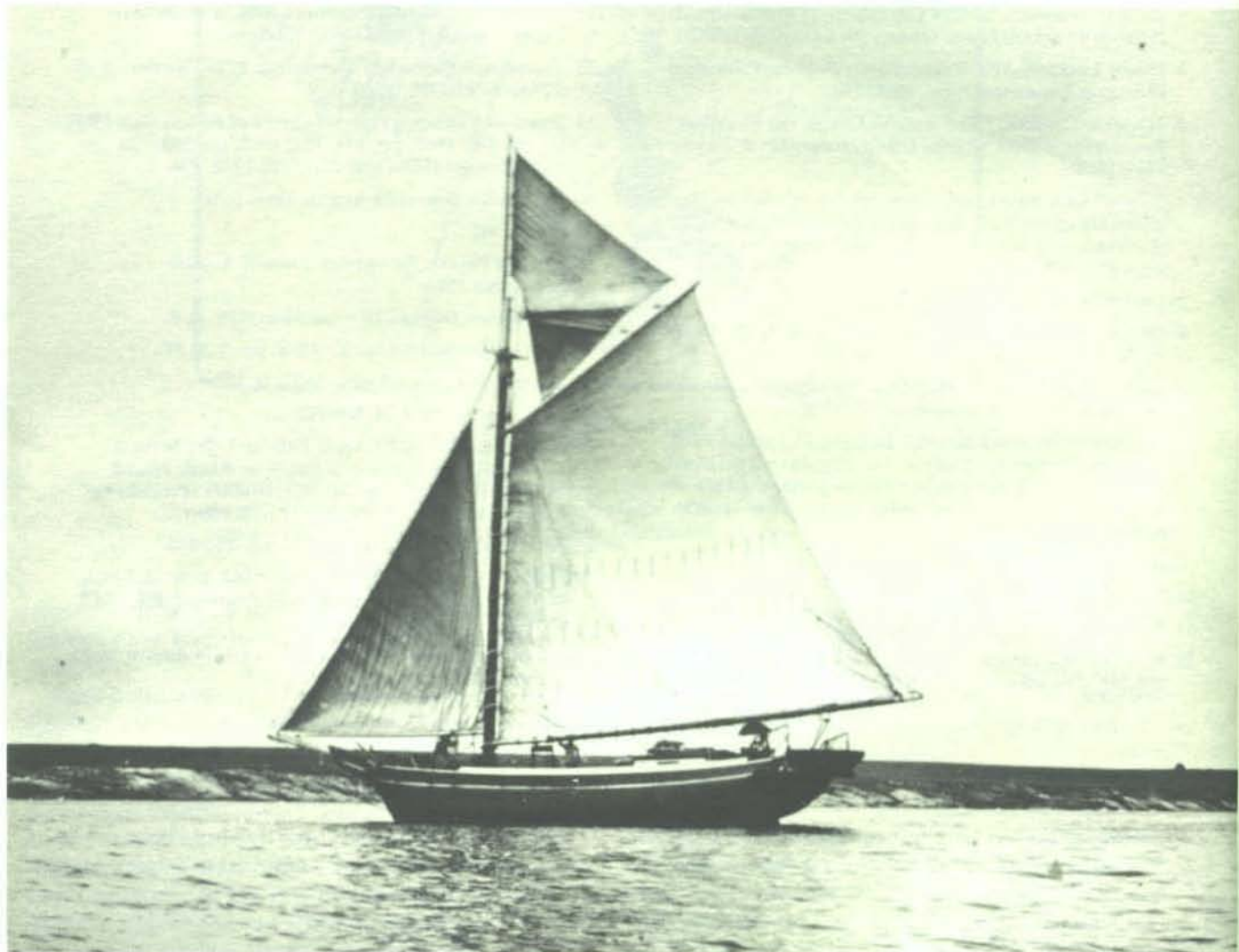
A coasting sloop of the type that plied the waters of Narragansett Bay in the early 19th century.

Early Nineteenth-Century Merchant Sail in Rhode Island

*by Laura Smith Saunders**

Two bridges span lower Narragansett Bay today, bearing their burdens of twentieth-century vehicles high above the water. Not so long ago, steam powered ferryboats covered the same route, carrying automobiles, freight and passengers, providing a now obsolete means of transportation across the Bay.

Early in the nineteenth century, before bridges and ferries, literally hundreds of sailing vessels dotted the waters around Newport, up the Providence River and Mount Hope Bay toward Fall River and Taunton. Mass-produced motors and petroleum consumption played no part in the economics of that earlier day. Clumsy land vehicles and dirt roads were not advantageous for transportation of heavy cargoes, particularly in muddy seasons.

Vessels designed for coastal freighting in this period were not usually large; the amount of cargo in any given port was often small. While the smaller fore-and-aft rigged sloop or schooner of forty to seventy feet was able to enter a port such as Wickford or South Ferry, and to load or unload her cargo easily, a larger ship was forced to anchor offshore and wait for a lighter to convey freight to a dock — a more expensive procedure. Cargoes from foreign ports were usually landed at ports of entry such as Providence and Newport, then transferred to smaller coasters, to be delivered along with domestic merchandise to towns along the coast. Shoal draft sloops and schooners fitted with centerboards proved handy for river and bay use. Such

small coasting vessels were nevertheless stout seaworthy craft, capable of long voyages. Many Rhode Island-built merchant sloops, manned by Rhode Island crews, coasted down the eastern seaboard to the West Indies and the Gulf, spending winters there trading from port to port. The sloop rig, popular in the first quarter of the century, gradually gave way to the schooner rig, since the lighter sails of a schooner required less manpower to maneuver than the huge sail and long boom of a large sloop.

It was customary for coasting craft to be owned by a group of local tradesmen who shared profits of a voyage. Captains often held shares in their vessels, as did shipwrights. Goods were sometimes shipped by the public to specific consignees, and freightage paid to the owners. Ships' documents for Newport in the 1820s turn up some familiar Rhode Island names as owners of coasting sloops and schooners. Watson, Robinson, Hazard, Potter, Gardiner, Saunders, Knowles, Spink, Reynolds and Baker are among those on ownership records for vessels embarking from South County ports in the early 1800s. Cargoes from this area included products of great plantations in the Narragansett country — cheese, onions, potatoes, apples, horses, and sheep. After textile mills came into existence, a shift to manufactured goods was apparent in freight lists. Cargoes of cotton for the mills were brought back by coasters from the south, along with the usual rum and molasses.

Built in North Kingstown in 1822, the packet

*Mrs. John A. Saunders and her husband, of Wilbraham, Massachusetts, have been doing research for several years on nineteenth-century coastal freighting vessels from Narragansett Bay.
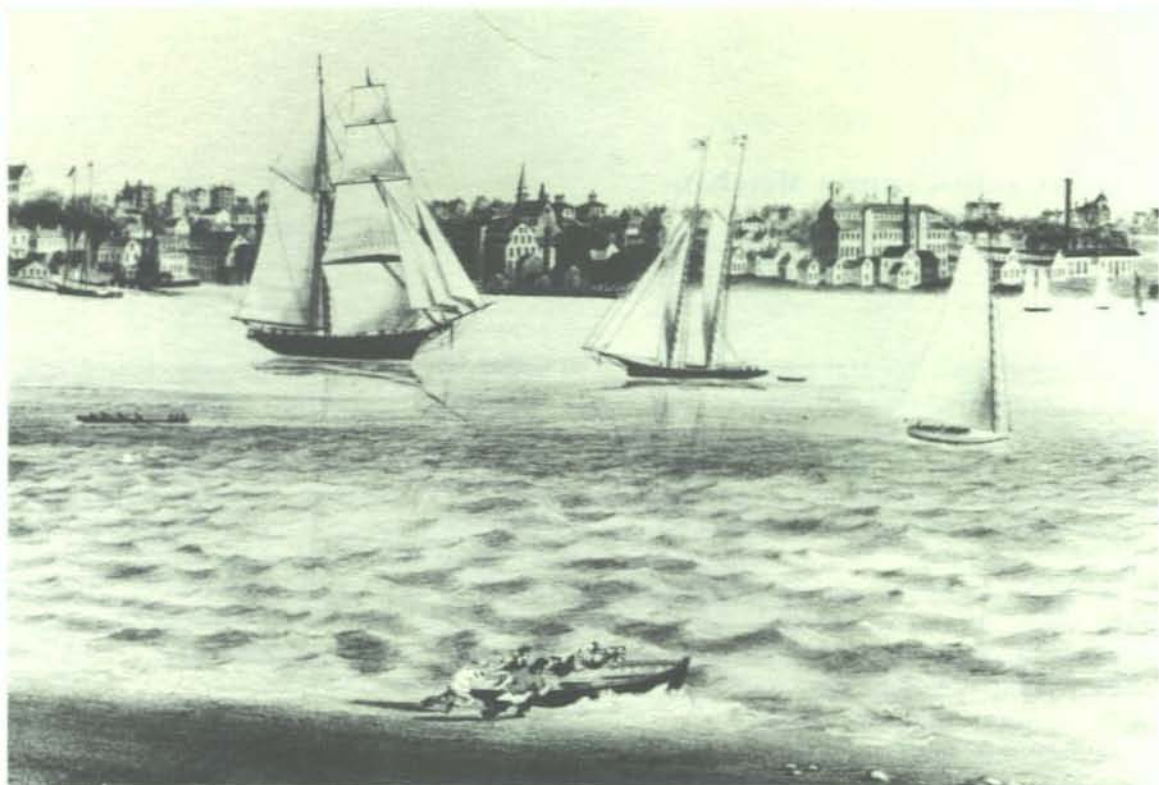
Newport Harbor and the merchant sailing ships that populated that port before the age of steam. Detail from a lithograph by J.P. Newell, "Newport, R.I. View from Fort Wolcott, Goat Island," about 1860.

Albany is a good example of a local trading sloop. She was framed near the head of the Petta-quamscutt River — below the mill pond at the Gilbert Stuart house — by her designer and build-er Captain John Aldrich Saunders. Famed "Nailer Tom" Hazard remarked in his diary, December 1, 1822, "I am informed that John Aldrich Saunders carried his Packet below the Stone Bridge in Nar-row River." Presumably the Albany's mast was stepped below the bridge, somewhere near the mouth of the Pettaquamscutt, otherwise known as Narrow River. A craft of seventy-five tons, old measurement, she measured sixty-one feet eight inches by twenty feet seven inches by seven feet one inch, with one deck, one mast, a square stern, and a billethead. Enrolled and licensed for the

coasting trade in Newport by her owners Henry Bull, William Lovie, Isaac Sherman, Thomas J. Peckham, Charles M. Thurston, merchants, and William Vars, mariner — all of Newport — the *Albany* probably carried a crew of three or four men in addition to her captain. William Vars was captain for a number of years, followed by John Vars. Her regular route lay between Providence, Newport and New York. Her manifests are found in great numbers at the Federal Records Center, and they give a good cross section of activities of Rhode Island citizens at the time — what they ate, what they drank, what they wore, what they used for building materials, how they heated their homes, what they used for domestic goods and furnishings.

Following is a sampling of what captain, crew and sloop sailed with and what they brought back —

Sloop *Albany*, Master, William Vars, January 1, 1824 from Providence to Newport.

	Shipper	*Consignee*
200 barrels flour	William Vars, Newport	William Vars, Newport
10 tubs butter	" " "	" " "
7 barrels meal	" " "	" " "
500 lbs. flax	" " ",	" " "
40 hogsheads		
molasses	Henry Bull, Newport	H. Robinson, New York
1000 staves	" " "	" " " "

Sloop *Albany*, Master, William Vars, November 25, 1824 from Newport to New York.

	Shipper	*Consignee*
60 tons iron	J. Potter, Newport	William Vars, Newport
40 casks whale oil	C. G. Champlin, Newport	" " "
5 hogsheads rum	Henry Bull, Newport	" " "
Country Produce	William Vars, Newport	" " "

(Apparently Captain Vars undertook to sell the whole cargo himself, on the open market.)

Sloop *Albany*, Master, William Vars, May 17, 1827 from New York to Newport.

	Shipper	*Consignee*
200 barrels cement	Austin Tailer, New York	Col. Totten, Newport
8 hogsheads		
West Indian Rum	C. M. Thurston, Newport	C. M. Thurston, Newport
20 chests tea	" " " "	" " " "
20 boxes oranges	" " " "	" " " "
20 boxes sugar	" " " "	" " " "
10 casks of wine	" " " "	" " " "

(Colonel Totten of the Army Corps of Engineers was in the midst of a major reconstruction of Fort Adams at the time, hence the cement.)

Sloop *Albany*, John Vars, Master, December 19, 1828, from Newport to Providence.

	Shipper	*Consignee*
49 barrels gin	Wm. Vernon Co., New York	G. S. Rathbone, Providence
Country Produce	Wm. Vars, Newport	Wm. Vars, Newport

Occasionally the *Albany* departed from her regular packet schedule and sailed to other ports —

Sloop *Albany*, William Vars, Master, February 15, 1826 from Boston to Newport.

	Shipper	*Consignee*
350 'dryd' hides	G. Hall, Newport	G. Hall, Newport
16 casks wine	D. P. Thacher, Boston	Wm. Blodgett, Providence
6 pieces iron		
castings	" " " "	" " "
2 6 lb. guns	D. Munroe, Bristol	" " "
Country Produce	Wm. Vars, Newport	Wm. Vars, Newport

Sloop *Albany*, John Vars, Master, April 3, 1828 from Newport to Philadelphia.

	Shipper	*Consignee*
9 hogsheads		
New England Rum	Henry Bull, Newport	Wm. Vars, Newport
Country Produce	Wm. Vars, Newport	" " "

(Although no longer active as sailing master, Captain William Vars appears to have gone on this and other voyages as supercargo.)

Early in her career, on January 31, 1824, we find that the *Albany* and Captain William Vars sailed over to Block Island to pick up a cargo of "old rigging" and other articles of merchandise taken from the sloop *Sabine*, wrecked on the island. Winter storms took their toll of trading craft, and some never returned from their voyages.

The *Albany* is only one example of Rhode Island's small coasting vessels. Ships documents and manifests for smaller merchant vessels are sketchy indeed, as custom house records for vessels under twenty tons do not contain complete measurements, and manifests were not always turned in for local coasting voyages. The *Albany* was unusual in the completeness of her records and the quantity of her manifests.

The story of Rhode Island's coasting trade is not confined to ships and cargoes; human experience is of significance as well. There were challenges to be met by captain and crew facing a northeaster or hurricane. The success of a voyage depended not only on the crew, but on the skills of the shipwright in the design and construction of the vessel, on the cordage maker for providing rigging that would stand up under rigorous conditions, on the sailmaker who took pride in his work. Aesthetics was satisfied by the craftsman who carved the figurehead or billethead. William Avery Baker — naval architect, maritime historian and designer of *Mayflower II* — quotes Carl Bridenbaugh's *Colonial Craftsman:* "For a ship built in a large colonial town — Newport, Rhode Island — the captain superintending her construction carried eighty-three different accounts for services and supplies. There were twenty-three separate crafts involved in her building." The maritime community of the early nineteenth century displayed a more personal interrelationship than does our massive transportation industry of the twentieth century.

The day of the coasters has come and gone; no longer do their sails dot the bays and rivers; no longer are cargoes of sugar, tea, iron, granite, crockery, rum and molasses delivered at Wickford, Barrington, Taunton, East Greenwich, and the romantic old port of South Ferry. Now sails on the Bay are those of pleasure craft, and cargoes are carried from city to town by trucks. Yet we wonder, despite our technological progress, if the future of man and his environment will not bring the need

for a second look at wind-propelled craft. If ever there should be a place for commercial sail again, surely it will not be the same, as we cannot turn backward completely, but there may be something to be learned from those waterborne workhorses of days gone by.

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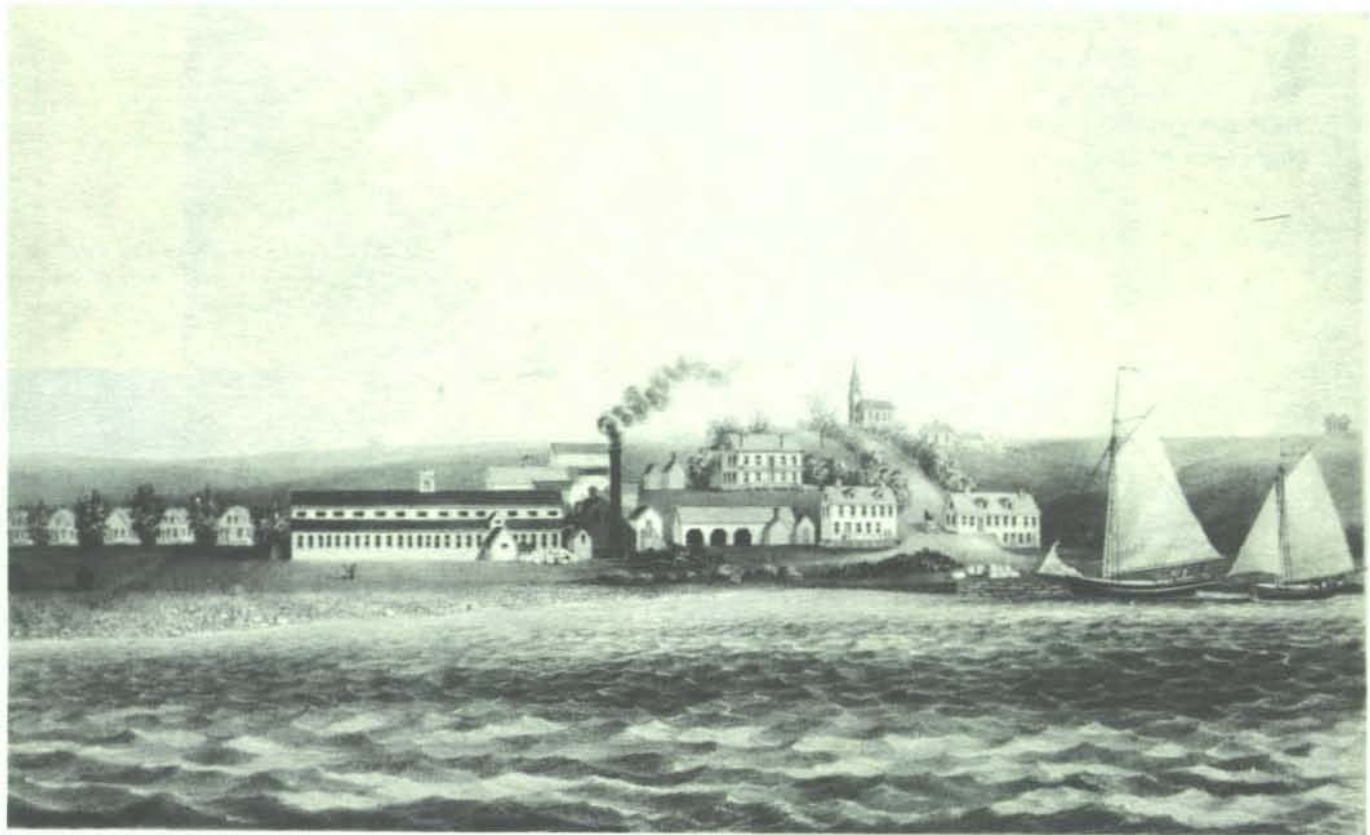
Coasting sloops nearing the port of South Ferry. Lithograph by J.P. Newell, "Narragansett Village, South Ferry South Kingston, R.I.," about 1860.

From the Collections

At the end of each issue, we plan to present a
sampling of images from the Rhode Island His-
torical Society's Graphics Collection — a single
outstanding image or a group of images that rep-
resent the best in our collection of photographs,
prints, drawings, cartoons, trade cards, broadsides,
architectural drawings, and other non-print
materials. Photographs and other visual media
have a language of their own. We will try to
show you new ways of seeing and looking. We
hope you enjoy our selections. On these two
pages — a photographic paean to summer.

*Tennis for one and all. Who won? The young boy with
notepad might know in the cyanotype (blue print) photo-
graph from the Cady Collection, about 1890.*

Off Nayatt Point, R.I., about 1895, a good breeze and a small boat. Early Kodak snapshot.