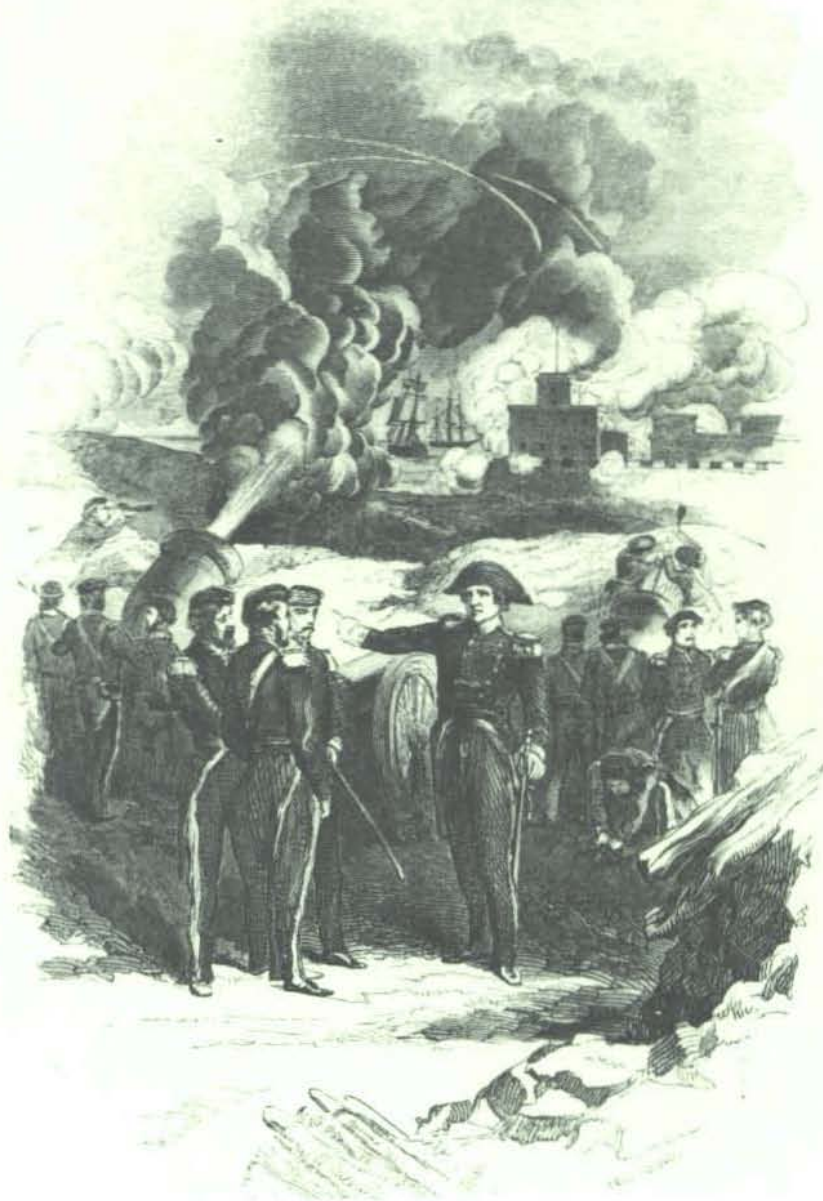


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A History of the United States by Benson J. Lossing, 1867

The Bombardment of Vera Cruz. While Rhode Island troops fought in the Mexican War, Rhode Islanders at home struggled with the moral issues of patriotism, pacifism, and manifest destiny.

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Scattered to the Winds of Heaven — Narragansett Indians 1676-1880

by Paul R. Campbell and Glenn W. LaFantasie*

Voltaire wrote that all ancient histories are only fables that men have agreed to admit as true. Despite an endless array of known facts, dates and events, history is still nothing more than our perception of the past rather than a reconstruction of it. How we perceive history is influenced more by our times, our prejudices, our personal beliefs than by the actual happenings that occurred hundreds of years ago.¹

Our understanding of history is at the same time colored by myths — persistent specters that refuse to go away. We have all come to believe in certain truths about our past, yet these truths are often the accepted fables of which Voltaire spoke. Perceived by us as truths, these myths die hard. We are chagrined to hear that Lincoln despised the nickname "Abe," that the Continental Congress did not sign the Declaration of Independence in a grand ceremony on July 4, 1776, or that Roger Williams may not have really greeted the Indians of Rhode Island with the words "What Cheer, Netop."²

In fact, the history of the Narragansett Indians of Rhode Island is especially laden with legends and myths that refuse to die. Roger Williams himself understood the significance of myths that in the seventeenth century were already becoming accepted truths about the natives of New England. In 1643, Williams published perhaps the first anthropological study of Indians, in an attempt to promote an understanding of native customs and traditions. "I resolved . . . to cast those Materialls into this Key, pleasant and profitable for All, but specially for my friends residing

in those parts." And with modesty, yet purpose, he noted "I know what gross mis-takes my selfe and others have run into."³

Yet the myths sustained themselves and in large part still form the basis of our understanding of the Narragansett Indians. Interestingly, however, a peculiar kind of mythology has been built around the Narragansetts, for it is a dual mythology, two separate myths that parallel each other, yet are so very different from each other. For the sake of convenience, we have labeled them the "white man's myth" and the "red man's myth."

The first — the white man's myth — appears most often in historical writings, old and new. This myth describes how Roger Williams first befriended the Narragansetts, how the Indians in turn displayed an undying friendship for early Rhode Island settlers. Then, according to the myth, the noble savages came to resent white encroachments on their lands and loss of their autonomy. Finally, in 1675, the Narragansetts became allies of King Philip, the great Wampanoag sachem, and fought a desperate war to preserve their way of life. But all the odds were against them. At the Great Swamp Fight that took place in present-day South Kingstown in December 1675, a military force of Puritans from Plymouth, Massachusetts Bay, and Connecticut, surprised the Narragansetts and exterminated nearly their entire population. By the summer 1676, so says the myth, the Narragansetts were no more — they had been wiped off the face of New England.⁴

This myth's popularity is understandable because

*Historical research consultants, Paul Campbell and Glenn LaFantasie have slightly modified their essay from a paper read before the Rhode Island Historical Society on March 19, 1978.



Collection of the authors

Nineteenth-century engraving of the Great Swamp Fight.

in most respects it was the version whites believed in the seventeenth century. Puritan accounts of the Great Swamp Fight all emphasized the total victory won by English forces. Later historians, relying on these Puritan writings, accepted them at face value.⁵

While this white man's myth gained acceptance, a counter myth grew among a different segment of New England — its Indian population. For those people who could trace their ancestry back to natives who first inhabited Rhode Island, for those who knew they *were* Indians, the white man's myth made little sense. A counter myth rose to explain the dichotomy.

According to the red man's myth the Narragansetts were not exterminated by Puritans at the Great Swamp massacre. Indians surprised in the fort were women and children who were brutally murdered by whites. The red man's myth claims that Narragansett warriors and the largest part of the Indian population were away from the fort.⁶ Thus the Narragansetts survived King Philip's War and eventually became the dominant people comprising the Indian community in Charlestown, Rhode Island. This community then carried on traditions and customs of the Narragan-

setts, and although many Indians were later forced to intermarry with black slaves, and although whites forced Indians to partially assimilate into white society, the traditions of the Narragansett tribe persisted and remained virtually intact throughout the following three hundred years of history.⁷

Like any myths, both of these versions of history contain elements of fact and actual experience. Both draw on a semblance of historical events to provide explanations of what occurred — explanations that fit the cultural orientation for whites, on one hand, for Indians on the other. But also like any myths, these versions paint history with a broad brush, epic portraits that are metaphors for the accepted reality of two separate worlds, red and white.

Unsurprisingly, neither of these myths can stand alone as adequate explanations of the history of Narragansett Indians. Indians did not vanish from Rhode Island. This fact of course comes as no revelation for the approximately 1300 people of Indian descent in the state. Obviously what happened to the Narragansetts cannot be adequately explained by the white man's myth of the vanishing Indian. At the same time local

Indian history is far more complex, far more intricate, than those elements emphasized in the red man's myth. For if the Narragansetts did not vanish, it at least seems clear to us that they *did* become invisible, lost to historians who assumed they had vanished, lost even to Indians whose traditions could not explain the peculiar invisibility of their forebears.

What follows is our perception of Narragansett Indian history from 1676 to 1880. By necessity this history is an overview, a brief sketch that presents only general patterns. Consequently, there are some gaping holes — people, places and events that together would form a more complete historical scenario. Still, we hope our brush, though broad, creates a portrait free from myths of the past.

The effects of King Philip's War were far-reaching. It forever ended any chance of Indian dominance in New England. For red man as well as white the war had been catastrophic. Rebellious Indians however had paid a much higher price in human lives. Famine, disease and English musket and pike had reduced once-powerful tribes to fugitive bands of scattered remnants.⁸

Without benefit of census figures it is virtually impossible to know how many Indians remained. Certainly the Narragansetts had felt the brunt of English wrath. By summer 1676 not one Narragansett chief sachem remained alive. Canonchet, young son of Miantonomi, had been captured and executed by a group of Pequots, Mohegans, and Niantics in April.⁹ Pessicus, the sagacious elder statesman, had been caught in ambush two months later and killed by a group of Mohawks.¹⁰

The tragedy continued in July when squaw sachem Matantuck — called by Major John Talcott an "old piece of venum" — was shot to death attempting to seek refuge in a Rhode Island swamp.¹¹ Quanopen survived military campaigns against the English but was subsequently captured, tried and executed at Newport Common on August 24.¹² Perhaps an irony of history, two of the four Narragansett chief sachems met their untimely ends at the hands of Indians. The once powerful Narragansetts had become a beleaguered group of desperate refugees.

The conclusion of hostilities did little to alleviate the chronic suffering that was to be the legacy of this defeated people. With their towns

reduced to charred ruins and their fields fallow, mere survival became an arduous task. Many who survived the war may have perished later of starvation or exposure. Even worse, the Indians still faced threats of retribution by the victorious English. Through "God's Providence" whites had defeated "the heathen horde" and as victors the English believed that the vanquished must be held accountable for their crimes.¹³ Narragansetts and their confederates had broken a solemn covenant and — having previously submitted themselves as subjects to the king of England — they had committed an act of rebellion.¹⁴

English magistrates then were faced with the prospect of dealing with large numbers of Indian prisoners of war. For captured Narragansetts, alternatives were not pleasant. Indians crowded in Rhode Island jails faced banishment, enslavement, or execution. Transcripts of a court martial held in Newport in August 1676 reveal that a number of Narragansetts were executed for alleged war crimes.¹⁵

On August 24, an Indian named Chuff, apparently wounded several days before by Providence men, staggered into that battle-scarred town placing himself at the mercy of the town's inhabitants. Embittered townspeople were apparently in no mood for pleas of humanitarianism. The town "cried for justice against him threatening to kill him if ye authority did not . . . Roger Williams caused the drum to beat, ye Town Council and Council of War called, all cried for justice and execution, ye council of War gave sentence and he was shot to death, to ye great satisfaction of ye town." Such was the climate of the times.¹⁶

Indian slavery had been banned by an act of the General Assembly in March 1676.¹⁷ But as with most Rhode Island laws, the act was difficult, if not impossible, to enforce. Roger Williams voiced no opposition to those who wished to sell Rhode Island Indians into slavery — he encouraged the practice. He became a member of a group of Providence men whose sole purpose was the sale of Indian prisoners.¹⁸ To circumvent the law prohibiting Indian slavery, Williams and his accomplices merely transported boatloads of captured Indians to the eastern shore of Narragansett Bay — to Plymouth Colony and Massachusetts Bay where the sale of red men continued to flourish.¹⁹

Providence men were also quick to find a loophole in the anti-slave law that allowed them to sell Narragansett Indians to Rhode Islanders. Captive Indians were placed in categories according to age and a sliding scale of involuntary servitude was devised. For example, all Indian children under five years of age were required to do twenty-five years of service; thirty-year-olds were compelled to serve seven years.²⁰ Although servitude was limited it was still regarded as a form of slavery for the simple reason that Indians were sold against their will. Despite restrictions on time of servitude and the ban on Indian slavery, by 1700 some Indians had become permanently indentured in Rhode Island. Even as late as 1774, census figures reveal that more than one-third of the Indians residing in the colony lived with white families.²¹

Even if they were spared from varied forms of punitive justice meted out by local officials, surviving Rhode Island Indians also faced more general effects of a deep-rooted prejudice against them. The war had convinced many English that the only good Indian was a dead one. In 1681 Benjamin Hernden was tried by the General Assembly for shooting at an unidentified Indian because the Indian refused to stand still upon Hernden's command. Hernden claimed he was justified for taking a shot at the Indian because the Indian also carried a gun. Hernden went unpunished, but the Assembly did pass an act imploring Rhode Islanders to "behave themselves." Like other kinds of legislation, this act could hardly be enforced.²²

The toll taken by the war and reprisals that followed all served to decimate the Narragansett population and scatter survivors. Some, of course, were able to elude their English pursuers and found refuge with remnant Pequots in Connecticut or among other bands of Indians scattered throughout various parts of New England and even as far away as Canada.²³

There was however an oasis here in Rhode Island — a place of sanctuary where remnant groups of Narragansetts could live in relative tranquility. This aboriginal oasis, as we style it, was situated in what now comprises the towns of Charlestown and Westerly. These were the lands of Ninigret, sachem of the Niantics. He had effectively — and wisely — maintained a neutral

stance during King Philip's War. By war's end Ninigret's band of Niantics was perhaps the largest remaining indigenous group of Indians left in southern New England.²⁴

Close cultural and hereditary ties made it easy for Narragansetts to blend in with their Niantic neighbors, consequently escaping detection by vengeful Englishmen. Additional refugees — Wampanoags, Nipmucks, Pequots, and others — also filtered into the Charlestown area.²⁵

By the end of the seventeenth century the surviving Indian population in what was then called Narragansett country was an aggregate of peoples. Eastern Niantics living in this area then formed the foundation of a new Indian community composed of a myriad of remnant tribal groups. By a gradual, almost imperceptible process, these became known as Narragansett Indians. This evolution is evidenced in deeds executed by Ninigret II during the first decade of the eighteenth century. In several deeds he called himself "sachem of the Narragansett Country," and in others he assumed the title sachem "of the Narragansett Indians."²⁶ Since these Indians lived in the Narragansett country it was assumed, especially by whites, that they in fact were Narragansett Indians. For whatever reason, the designation Niantic generally disappeared after 1700. For the colonists these Indians had become Narragansetts — and their descendants are called Narragansetts today.

Ninigret died around 1679. He was succeeded by his daughter Wuenquesh, who may have died as early as 1686.²⁷ Upon her death her step-brother Ninigret II became chief sachem.²⁸

Despite attempts by Ninigret I to insure the autonomy of the Niantics, the remnant Indians after King Philip's War were now controlled by desires and policies of the English. Certainly the Rhode Island legislature made no distinction between Niantic and Narragansett. Laws prohibiting group meetings, restrictions against carrying firearms, and curfews applied to all Indians.²⁹

One policy that Indians could no longer resist was the English desire for more land. The war had, in general, opened the gates for a mad dash to the so-called vacant lands. During the 1690s and early 1700s Ninigret II began to succumb to tantalizing offers from Englishmen to purchase portions of his lands in the Westerly and Charles-

town areas. Payment he received from these sales may have been used to help support Indians within his jurisdiction.³⁰

More settlers moving into southern Rhode Island inevitably began to shrink the lands of Ninigret. The son of Ninigret I soon discovered that English expansion could not be stopped. Ninigret II faced three problems. Rhode Islanders eyed with interest lands in the southern portion of the colony. Connecticut wanted its slice of the Indian pie. Involved in a long and bitter boundary dispute with Rhode Island, it continued to assert jurisdiction over the Narragansett country. To make matters worse, a private group of land speculators known as the Atherton Company claimed ownership of the Narragansett country by virtue of a mortgage and subsequent foreclosure executed in 1662.³¹

Perhaps realizing that he might lose everything, Ninigret decided to choose the least of three evils — the colony of Rhode Island. In 1705 the Narragansett sachem asked the colony to assist him in his affairs.³² The legislature quickly seized this opportunity by appointing a committee to consider Ninigret's request and to survey his Indian lands. The assembly-appointed committee — in a stroke of genius or cunning — convinced Ninigret to transfer title of 135,000 acres of land to the colony.³³

Ninigret II quitclaimed those "vacant" lands to the colony on March 28, 1709. He received no payment, although under terms of the deed he retained an eight square mile area of "reserved land." This reservation as it came to be called, comprised much of the area of present-day Charlestown. The legislature also promised protection from claims of Connecticut and the Atherton men. In addition, no remaining Indian land could be sold without approval of the General Assembly.³⁴

Without paying a shilling, the assembly had obtained title to the bulk of Indian lands left in Rhode Island. For the Narragansetts, signing that 1709 deed marked acceleration of the continuing downward trend begun by King Philip's War. Shorn of the greater part of their lands, they had also symbolically quitclaimed the last semblance of self-determination and political autonomy. Indian affairs would become more and more directly controlled by the legislature. When Nini-



Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, gift of Mr. Robert Winthrop

Portrait of Ninigret II, Son of Ninigret I, Chief of the Niantic Indians, ca. 1681 (detail). Formerly titled Ninigret, Sachem of the Niantics, this painting is now thought to be a portrait of Ninigret II.

gret II attempted to sell portions of his lands between 1709 and 1713, lawmakers quickly intervened and declared the sales null and void.³⁵

The assembly appointed a committee in 1717 to oversee the sachem's lands and gave its members exclusive power to evict any person in possession of Ninigret's lands against his interest. A year later the assembly granted that committee authority to lease parcels of Indian lands for terms not exceeding fourteen years.³⁶

It is difficult to determine the sincerity of Rhode Island's colonial legislators in dealing with Indian problems. Yet certainly governmental supervision of the Indian population compared favorably to that of any other New England colony.

Increased numbers of English settlers moving into South County had a telling effect on Indians residing there. Ninigret II told visiting missionary Reverend Experience Mayhew in 1713 that Rhode Island Indians were so in debt and impoverished that many were forced to live with the English and pursue English ways. In a revealing remark Ninigret noted that his Indians "did not care for him," an unmistakable sign that his power was waning. Reverend James MacSparran at the Narragansett church in 1723 observed that only about two hundred Indians resided in Narragansett country.³⁷ Indians indeed were beginning to scatter once again.

Sometime during the first week of January 1723 Ninigret II died. A newspaper account of the funeral reported that he died of intoxication after consuming two gallons of rum at one sitting.³⁸ Most likely, Ninigret died a tired, aged man — a chief who had lost his lands, his power, and his people.

No longer a people in the sense of having a unified culture and a centralized authority, Narragansetts were then a group of individuals trying to survive in a white world. Isolation — or rather the lack of it — worked against Indian hopes of maintaining any degree of cultural continuity. In the seventeenth century, Indians of South County had been able to maintain autonomy by sheer geographic isolation. Then and increasingly so as the eighteenth century progressed, white Rhode Islanders began to move into South County lands in large numbers. By 1730 four whites for every Indian resided in King's County (later Washing-

ton County, popularly known as South County). By 1783 whites outnumbered Indians twenty to one.³⁹

Indians also began to embrace the religion of their white neighbors. In 1722 Doctor MacSparran reported that his congregation of Anglicans included twelve Indian and black servants. Twenty years later Reverend James Honeyman boasted that more than seventy Negroes and Indians were attending regular services at his Trinity Church in Newport.⁴⁰

As early as 1727 Charles Augustus Ninigret, successor to his deceased father Ninigret II expressed interest in erecting a church on the reservation grounds in Charlestown. He set aside a twenty acre lot but it took almost twenty years before his desire became reality. Before 1750 a structure already on the church lot had been converted into a church, probably the one demolished in 1859 to make way for the present Indian church in Charlestown.⁴¹

By 1730 new problems began to plague Charlestown's already beleaguered Indians. Despite the legislature's supervision, Indian lands continued to shrink. Sale of land was necessary as a source of income. The sachems did not work and did not tax their followers. Alternate sources of income — leasing of Indian land and sale of lumber from the cedar swamp — proved wholly inadequate in the face of rising debts by increasingly extravagant sachems.⁴²

The most chronic problems affecting the Narragansetts after 1730 were internal divisions that spawned divisive factionalism. During Ninigret II's reign Indians began to lose confidence in their sachems. They had good reason. New leaders lacked the ability or wisdom of Ninigret I. Fortunes of the Niantic royal family began a steady decline culminating in the drunken extravagances of Thomas Ninigret in the 1760s. While his people shivered in drafty lean-tos, King Tom, as he was called, sat in his palatial home designing plans for his yacht.

Problems inherent in weak leadership compounded a power struggle among royal family members. The dispute begun in 1735 resulted in a lengthy court battle not resolved until 1760. War among the royal families erupted with Charles Augustus' death in 1735. Shortly after, Charles' widow Kate attempted to seat her infant son

Charles Jr. as sachem, but George Augustus Ninigret, a brother of Charles, also claimed succession.⁴³

Supporters of George asserted that Kate was not of royal blood and that the marriage between Charles and Kate had not been approved by the tribe. Charles Jr., an illegitimate child, could therefore make no claim. George's death in 1746 only intensified the fight for his wife claimed succession for her son Tom. The family quarrel continued unabated until 1760 when Charles Jr. gave up his right in exchange for £500 sterling and 300 acres of land; he had enlisted in the colonial army and would not return.⁴⁴

Squabbles among the Ninigrets dealt a mortal wound to the Niantic monarchy. Internal dissension and abuse of power naturally led to widespread discontent among Charlestown's Indians. This social and political malaise gradually evolved into a movement to overthrow its royal family. The nucleus of this group emerged around 1740 and initially camped under the banner of George Ninigret; members were often referred to as his councilors.⁴⁵ Continuing royal family divisions and accession to the throne of an infant king — Tom — afforded them the opportunity to consolidate their power.

They were, it seems, awaiting a golden opportunity to evict the royal family from its exalted position of power. They did not have long to wait. King Tom Ninigret, described by contemporaries as a "large fleshy man," had an uncommon appetite for strong drink and a free hand with money. He was said to have been a confirmed drunkard during his later years. Educated in England, he was not a man who accepted second best. When it came time to build a house, he contracted master craftsmen to create a palace. Designed by an architect in England, much of the two-and-one-half-story structure was constructed in Newport, hauled across Narragansett Bay, and assembled on his estate in Charlestown. His expenses on the palace alone exceeded £60,000.⁴⁶

Faced with overwhelming debts and burdened by legal fees from more than twenty lawsuits, Thomas Ninigret in August 1759 petitioned the General Assembly to allow the sale of lands to pay his debts. The lawmakers responded with an act specifying that "all the laws . . . passed in this colony to restrict or prohibit the native Indians . . .

from selling and disposing of their estates, be, and they are hereby repealed." This act in effect gave Ninigret carte blanche to sell any and all lands with no restrictions. He quickly took advantage of this ill-conceived legislation.⁴⁷

Huge tracts of land were sold. Before long much of the Indian population in Charlestown had completely lost faith in their sachem. In June 1763 a large group of Narragansetts complained to the assembly that Ninigret was "spending everything he can," and warned that if the sale of land continued, they as a people "were in danger of perishing." The legislators, realizing their mistake, promptly ordered all sales of Indian lands stopped.⁴⁸

The insurgent council now had their golden opportunity. In a bold move they attempted to wrest control of Indian land from King Tom, claiming that the land belonged to the tribe not to the sachem. The insurgents even hired a lawyer, Matthew Robinson, to represent them in their fight against their sachem. Despite the assembly's prohibition, irrepressible King Tom continued to sell land — more than 3,200 acres between 1759 and 1765. During the 1760s both the Narragansett Indians and American colonists were having exasperating problems with their respective royal families.⁴⁹

The insurgents decided to take matters into their own hands in April 1766. At a meeting of more than one hundred Indians it was voted "never more to regard you (King Tom) as our sachem, disavowing you as King." The Narragansetts had, it seemed, declared their independence from royal domination a full decade before the thirteen English colonies.⁵⁰

Their resolution by no means ended the controversy. In certain respects it made matters worse, for now a new group — the insurgent council — claimed authority to sell land. The political upheaval created a chaotic situation that would span more than two decades. King Tom's death in November 1769 did little to simmer the boiling pot of political anarchy. Before his body was cold, Tom's sister Esther was laying claim to the throne. Despite council protests, she was crowned early in 1770 and to confuse matters even more — she appointed her own royal council to assist her.⁵¹

Also in 1770 the assembly — under leadership

of Stephen Hopkins — intervened in an effort to settle differences between the sparring groups. Again the legislature passed an act prohibiting sale of Indian lands "on any pretense, whatever." Factional haggling however continued.⁵²

But at this time an escape for impoverished Narragansetts opened. English missionaries to the tribe in the first half of the eighteenth century had made important strides in conversions to Christianity. The Narragansetts also had been deeply affected by the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 40s. Indians trained in religion began to spread the gospel among their own people. Certainly the most famous of these native missionaries, Samson Occum, Connecticut Mohegan, attained an international reputation for christianizing efforts among the Six Iroquois Nations, and he conducted numerous missions among the Oneidas of central New York during the 1760s.⁵³

Occum had higher aspirations. His formula for successful mission could be summed up in the principle of conversion of Christian example. To accomplish this conversion among the Oneidas, he suggested that they donate a portion of their lands for settlement by christianized eastern Indians. He hoped that these settlers, by their exemplary life, would help plant the seed of Christianity among western tribes. The Oneidas accepted Occum's proposal.⁵⁴

During spring 1773 New England Indians met at Mohegan, Connecticut to consider the Oneida plan. Mohegans, Pequots, Farmingtons, western Niantics, as well as Narragansetts all agreed "to Seek a Country for our Brethren." The exodus from Narragansett began the following spring. Many undoubtedly were anxious to rid themselves of the chronic suffering and privations that had become a part of their miserable existence on the Charlestown reservation. The prospect of a free parcel of land, removed from greedy incursions of land hungry whites, was a temptation that few could resist. A significant body of Narragansetts made the trek to new homes on the banks of Lake Oneida. There they joined with other New England Indians to form a new community — in Brothertown, New York. These Indians later became known collectively as the Brothertown Indians.⁵⁵

The Narragansetts who chose to remain in Charlestown could not count on the General

Assembly for help in resolving their problems — Rhode Islanders were busy fighting their own dispute. Actually very little is known about Charlestown's Indians during the revolutionary years. We do know that many Indians served in the Continental army and that Queen Esther died sometime in 1777. Her young son George apparently ruled for a short time but was killed in a freak accident. George's death sounded the knell for the Niantic royal family. The sachemship was no more.⁵⁶

The demise of the royal Ninigrets did not end factionalism splintering the Narragansetts. The so-called King's Council attempted to become an authority unto itself. The insurgent council, after fighting royal authority for twenty years, now became known as the Tribes Party.⁵⁷

By the late 1780s, the situation had become intolerable. In December 1788 both factions, having reached a frustrating impasse, admitted their inability to control their own affairs. They made desperate appeal to the assembly to appoint a committee to make regulations and determine all disputes. The action that followed was decisive. The legislature created a four-man committee with full power "to make such rules and regulations among them (the Narragansetts) as will tend to promote their happiness and welfare." The rules were to be "binding and conclusive upon the said tribe, the Councils and individuals thereof." The assembly had assumed complete control over the Narragansetts' affairs.⁵⁸

In the 1790s the assembly continued to exert control over the Narragansetts who were in no condition to resist this ever increasing domination. By 1792, when the assembly passed new comprehensive legislation governing the Indian community in Charlestown, the Narragansetts were obliged to follow detailed regulations that specified and defined the role and powers of the tribal council, qualifications and procedures for electing the council, and the authority of a committee of whites which assumed the task of overseeing all aspects of policy and politics.⁵⁹ In June 1792, the assembly went further and created the office of treasurer of the Narragansett Indians — again a white man appointed by the assembly — empowered to act in conjunction with the Indian council. But, more important, the council could not act without the treasurer's approval in all

matters.⁶⁰

To some this usurpation of authority by the assembly might appear callous — another example of white man's oppression of Indians. Yet, when viewed within the context of the times, and considering the condition of the Narragansetts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, this governmental regulation can be understood from a different perspective.

Political factionalism had virtually stagnated Indian attempts to govern themselves. Just as factionalism had helped to destroy the famous Iroquois confederacy in New York in the 1780s, leaving the Iroquois vulnerable to white domination, so too had factionalism left the Narragansetts floundering.⁶¹

But unlike the Iroquois, the Narragansetts by 1790 had already undergone numerous cultural and societal changes. Christianity had now brought them into the fold of white man's society. Moreover, Indians in Rhode Island were beginning to work their way into the white marketplace. Although small farming was still a mainstay, more and more Indians were following trades and livelihoods not traditionally Indian. Some were sawyers, others stonemasons and carpenters, others depended upon work as day laborers on neighboring white farms, and others worked as indentured or domestic servants.⁶²

Such changes, coupled with rampant internal political factionalism, led the assembly to believe that Narragansetts were on their way toward entering the mainstream of white society. Regulations passed in the 1790s were aimed at helping Indians along — to quicken the pace of assimilation.

But these regulations did not by any means impose a strict policy of coerced assimilation. Instead, the assembly displayed a degree of respect for Indian traditions and customs. They framed the regulations around existing institutions that had come to play an important role in the Narragansett community. The Indian council — although so recently caught in the quagmire of disunity — was not abolished. Instead, the assembly regulations helped to perpetuate the council by overseeing its activities. In this way the assembly acted as a benefactor rather than a detractor of Indian political structure.

Even good intentions did not guarantee good

and equitable policy. Although many Narragansetts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries may have found work, many members of the community were left without sources of income. Debtors and paupers increased. From 1800 to 1830 — in the advent of the industrial revolution and rising capitalism — Narragansetts did not partake in benefits of the manufacturing age.⁶³ This reality revealed the hypocrisy of white desires to assimilate Indians into general society. On one hand some whites in the early nineteenth century wanted people of color, red and black, to find a meaningful place in American society.⁶⁴ On the other, whites also kept Indians and blacks from entering the mainstream by adhering to bellicose theories on racial inferiority of non-white peoples.⁶⁵

The assembly continued to offer Narragansetts a helping hand. In 1811, it enacted legislation, first passed in 1718, that prohibited Indians from being sued for debt.⁶⁶ It also took action to help individual Indians. Thomas Cummoche of Charlestown had been imprisoned for debt in 1810. He petitioned the legislature in hope that he might further explain his case. The assembly took interest in Cummoche's plight, voted to release him from jail, giving him a chance to plead his case as well as work to undo his debt.⁶⁷

Despite legislative action, the Indians' economic situation grew worse. The Narragansett lands in Charlestown continued to shrink in size as the Indian council sold more land to whites. Land sales had become the only means to gain quick and steady income. The assembly — trying to give the Narragansetts as free a hand as possible — continued to approve land sales.⁶⁸

The Indian council, as a result of its role in land transactions, became tainted with the malaise of corruption. In 1813 forty Narragansetts charged the council with selling land and squandering money. In a petition to the assembly, they complained that the council, after receiving payments for land, were using profits to buy "spirit(ou)s liquors." "We are not," said these dissenters, "willing to Sell our Land to pay Such Expenses."⁶⁹

Others, led by Tobias Ross and Narragansett minister Moses Stanton, accused the state-appointed treasurer Joseph Stanton of conspiring with the Indian council to sell lands and pocket

the proceeds. Ross stated at one point that Stanton had, without explanation, simply dispossessed him of his land.⁷⁰

When the assembly heard these charges, the legislators adopted measures that only prolonged a solution. They formed a committee to study the situation in June 1813. By October it had failed to accomplish anything. So the Indians asked that it be reappointed, and the assembly happily agreed. Members of this reappointed committee proved to be masters of an old dance step — one forward, one back. At last, in June 1816, another assembly committee — appointed the previous February — announced it had settled all disputes, including accounts of the treasurer, and that the Indians owed Stanton about twenty-two dollars. Within a year the Indians repeated their allegations against Stanton. So the assembly — with no great ingenuity — appointed another investigatory committee. Undoubtedly this situation could have continued forever, as Stanton probably hoped it would. In 1817 they appointed another committee "to settle the accounts of Joseph Stanton . . . and make report of his doings." By May 1818 — with the entire situation obviously out of hand — they appointed another committee because the latest had failed to report. This one finally submitted its report but — characteristically — avoided any mention of charges against Joseph Stanton. Worse, the committee declared that the Narragansetts owed Stanton \$172.⁷¹

To the assembly's credit, the legislators knew something was amiss. There is no record of what further investigation may have been conducted, what new information may have come to light. Although they authorized payment of the money owed Stanton, the legislators also took definitive action by voting to abolish the position of treasurer — and succeeded in unemploying Joseph Stanton.⁷²

But they could not so easily solve the affairs of the Narragansetts. Land still remained the most formidable problem. Squabbles over land ownership continued with whites and Indians claiming various parcels.⁷³ Indian indebtedness rankled South County merchants who had allowed Narragansetts to buy on credit, but who could not by law bring Indians to court to collect debts.⁷⁴

An assembly committee headed by Doctor Dan King of Charlestown in June 1832 recommended

drastic action. King noted that the Indian population had dwindled, their lands had decreased, and the council could no longer govern their affairs. In essence King's committee recommended abolishing the Narragansetts and their remnant political structure. King also recommended that the assembly nullify the law that prohibited Indians from being sued for debt.⁷⁵

A prime reason for King's recommendation he did not mention in his report. A number of Indians owed him money and he had already let it be known that he wanted to be paid. King had organized a group of physicians from South County in 1823 and together they petitioned the assembly, airing complaints about Indians not paying doctors' bills. King stated that "dictates of humanity" necessitated providing numerous medical services to Indians. But it was clear that Narragansetts were ungrateful for these "favours" as he called them. King intimated that unless doctors were paid, these favors would cease. He said in effect that not only was the era of house calls over, but that the situation might also necessitate some revisions in the Hippocratic oath.⁷⁶ Now in 1832 the same man reported the reasons why the Narragansetts should be dissolved — a report of foregone conclusions.

King's report created a storm of controversy. Elisha R. Potter, Jr. — who would later write the first comprehensive history of the Narragansetts — told his father that the report was "a rather shabby concern."⁷⁷ The Narragansetts themselves, led by Daniel Sekater, replied to the report in a series of petitions to the assembly in 1832. The Indians challenged King's findings and asserted their capability of handling their own affairs.⁷⁸ Siding with the Indians — in itself a repudiation of King's report — the assembly decided to take no action and maintain status quo.

In Charlestown that may have assured Indian cohesion for the time being, but it did not improve the quality and conditions of Indian life. Faced with few opportunities for improving their lot, many Narragansetts in the 1830s — as did many whites — looked west for a chance to start a new life. The Menominee Indians in 1832 had ceded about 500,000 acres in Wisconsin to the United States. Opened for settlement by the Brothertown Indians of New York, these Wisconsin lands became a haven for Narragansetts in



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Charlestown, August 9, 1925. The Narragansetts' complex history is suggested in this scene in front of the stone church. Photograph by Avery Lord.

1830s. Early in the 1840s, Moses Stanton, the Indian preacher, organized a grand exodus of Narragansetts to Wisconsin. They sold their land in Rhode Island — giving them a stake for the journey west — and finally joined their brethren in Wisconsin's Green Bay area.⁷⁹ Although life in Wisconsin at first proved arduous, the transplanted Narragansetts worked diligently to build a new life on the frontier.⁸⁰ For the most part they prospered and became prominent members of the community — one Narragansett descendant even ran for election as a candidate to Congress.⁸¹

For those who stayed in Rhode Island, life remained much the same. Although the assembly in 1840 created the office of commissioner of the Narragansett Indians, land sales and controversies

still plagued Indian affairs.⁸² The assembly also directly sought to provide money for the Indian school in Charlestown, although in the long run it was ill-attended, mismanaged, and the quality of instruction by white teachers left much to be desired.⁸³

In 1859 the Indians did succeed in constructing a new church — the stone edifice that stands today in Charlestown. Under new regulations passed by the assembly, the Indian council assumed a greater role in handling internal affairs such as leasing land, licensing timber cutting, and providing for poor Indians.⁸⁴

Slowly life began to improve but that meant also that the community was becoming more and more indistinguishable as an Indian community.

Values and lifestyles continued to change. In 1862 the Indian commissioner reported that "a manifest improvement is believed to have taken place within the last twenty-five years." He observed that comfortable houses were replacing ramshackle huts that had once been the norm, that many Indians could read and write, that the people were industrious and hard-working, and that "a majority of them have no lack of the necessities of life." But the commissioner also observed that the Narragansett population continued to decrease and he estimated that it comprised "not more than two hundred persons." More important, he reported that "not all of these reside upon Indian land, or in the town of Charlestown."⁸⁵ Sheer survival and improvement had created some new realities — many Indians began to leave Charlestown to find domiciles and employment in other southern New England locations.

While such developments seemed in a way to revitalize the Narragansetts, and while the assembly appeared more willing to allow Indians who remained in Charlestown increased authority, a movement was beginning to form and to gain greater acceptance among white Rhode Islanders — to detribalize the Narragansetts, to abolish remaining vestiges of Indian organization.

In Rhode Island, as throughout the entire nation, whites believed that the best way — the only way — to bring Indians into the mainstream of American life was to abolish tribal organizations and allow Indians to act as individuals within the general society. Although white racial beliefs had not changed, emancipation of slaves with the granting of citizenship to blacks after the Civil War was seen as a model for incorporation of non-white peoples into American society. As blacks had been granted this opportunity for personal achievement, it was thought, so too should Indians have the same opportunities. The point was made succinctly by T. J. Morgan, commissioner of Indian Affairs for the federal government. "Citizenship," he said, ". . . necessarily looks toward the entire destruction of the tribal relation."⁸⁶ In Rhode Island, as early as 1832, Dan King and others agreed.

The Narragansetts, however, did not. In response to repeated attempts by the assembly to detribalize the Indians — first in 1852, later in

1859 and 1866 — Narragansetts fought vigorously to retain their separate identity and structure. One unidentified leader in 1866 reacted adamantly. "We are now weak," he admitted, ". . . (but we) will not give over while an inch of our territory remains to us, and until the members of our tribe are beneath the soil, or are scattered to the winds of heaven."⁸⁷

The most eloquent defense of Narragansett rights came from Samuel Rodman, one of their leaders, in a memorial to the assembly: "We do not wish to be citizens. For we know we cannot be so in the full acceptance of that term . . . And, notwithstanding the deprivations under which we labor, we are attached to our homes. It is the birth-place of our mothers. It is the last gift of our fathers; and there rest the bones of our ancestors . . . We do not wish to leave it; but we desire to be 'let alone,' so that when our days of degradation upon earth shall come to an end, our dust may mingle with that of our kindred who have passed . . . to that better land above, where tribes and classes are alike unknown."⁸⁸

But the tide of white opinion precluded any understanding of the significance of Rodman's sentiments. Moreover, the issue was complicated by lack of Indian agreement about detribalization.

In 1879, the assembly again pushed for detribalization, this time more forcefully than ever. The evidence is sketchy, but it is quite possible that the Narragansetts themselves may have requested such legislation.⁸⁹ Some Indians now believed it was time to gain full rights of citizenship; others still considered detribalization a scheme to cheat them out of their land.

But after a series of public hearings held in 1879, the Indian council agreed to sell their remaining 922 acres to the State of Rhode Island.⁹⁰ The council also agreed to a provision that would detribalize the Narragansetts. Members of the tribe would divide \$5,000 — the price paid by the state for purchase of the lands.⁹¹

It seems that most Indians were convinced this offer by the state was fair and equitable.⁹² In May 1880 the council signed a quitclaim deed to the lands, and after another set of hearings to determine the actual membership of the Narragansetts, the state distributed shares of the \$5,000 to the recognized descendants or members of the Narragansett Indians.⁹³

State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.

NARRAGANSETT TRIBE OF INDIANS,
 REPORT
 OF THE
 COMMITTEE OF INVESTIGATION;
 A HISTORICAL SKETCH,
 AND
 EVIDENCE TAKEN,
 MADE TO THE
 HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES,
 AT ITS
 JANUARY SESSION, A. D. 1880.

PROVIDENCE:
 E. L. FREEMAN & CO., PRINTERS TO THE STATE,
 1880.

RIHS Library

Title page of the 1880 report recommending detribalization.

Actually Narragansett acquiescence to detribalization was a pragmatic decision that made sense in 1880. Common lands provided little income for the benefit of the community as a whole.⁹⁴ Giving up special status as Indians meant little in the practical sphere. For the majority, detribalization brought no great changes to their lives. Indians by 1880 owned property, either in Charlestown or in other towns in southern New England, were taxed as regular citizens, and some even voted in local municipal elections.⁹⁵ The Indian school had become a local fiasco and citizenship meant that all children could without hindrance attend local district schools, as many Indian children did

before 1880. Narragansetts, including members of the council, voiced no concern in 1880 over the loss of tradition that would necessarily follow the reality of detribalization.

After 1880, when Indians had a chance to think about what had happened, what detribalization had really meant, some had second thoughts. Thus detribalization of the Narragansetts became an emotionally charged issue. Some leveled accusations of fraud and corruption against the assembly. One allegation stated that whites coaxed the council into signing the 1880 deed by first getting its members drunk.⁹⁶ Others later accused the assembly of altering the deed after it was signed.⁹⁷ But our research has revealed no evidence to substantiate these and other accusations.

We do not see assembly members instrumental in detribalization as evil white men determined to strangle the last remaining life out of the Narragansetts. Nor do we see council members, nor those who willingly accepted their share of the \$5,000, as traitors to the Indian cause, turncoats who sold out for the lowest price possible. Instead, these were merely people of their times. Perhaps the one condemnation that can be leveled equally upon both red and white is that they shared a hearty belief in pragmatism and a regrettable lack of foresight. But to expect these people to have acted as we might act today would ask too much.

Seven years later in 1887 Congress would pass the General Allotment Act, better known as the Dawes Act, which began a systematic policy to abolish Indian tribal structures in the western United States. Historians observe that the Dawes Act was fully supported and actually the result of the desires of white reformers, so-called friends of Indians who believed that detribalization would help Indians, would offer them a chance for individual survival.⁹⁸ Their motives were sincere, although now in retrospect we can judge that they may have been misguided.

Even if well-intentioned, the policies and practices adopted in relations with Indians in Rhode Island and throughout the United States were based upon a lack of knowledge, a deep and profound misunderstanding of the nature of Indian custom and tradition. Ignorance rather than enlightenment guided white politicians.

Nelson W. Aldrich, Rhode Island's famous Senator, embarrassingly revealed the extent of white confusion about local Indian history. At the dedication ceremony held at Fort Ninigret in Charlestown in 1884, as much a dedication of the state park as funeral rites for recently detribalized Narragansetts, Senator Aldrich was invited to deliver a stirring oration on the "noble and brave savages" who had occupied the fort in the seventeenth century. Accordingly Aldrich had prepared some perfunctory remarks for the occasion but, on the train from Providence, the secretary of the Rhode Island Historical Society showed him a pamphlet that, in Aldrich's mind, proved conclusively that Fort Ninigret was a Dutch, not an Indian, bastion. Unsettled by this bit of information, Aldrich offered a few obligatory platitudes about how much Rhode Island owed the Narragansetts, but he also implied that he was not quite sure why all these people had gathered to honor Indians among the ruins of a Dutch fort.⁹⁹

Nevertheless, Gideon Ammons, president of the last Indian council and a signer of the 1880 deed, had far more significant things to say that day — "Our tribe now has no legal existence, and no person can be found to represent the Indian race. The change is so great, I feel sorry to think of it."¹⁰⁰

Changes were indeed great. The people had been dispersed — scattered to the winds of heaven — to use the prophetic words of the Indian leader against detribalization in 1866. By 1880 the council noted that only eighty-one Narragansetts lived in the Charlestown area.¹⁰¹ But in 1883, when detribalization was completed, 324 people were recognized as having valid lineal connections to the Narragansetts. Most lived in various towns throughout Rhode Island, many in Connecticut, others in Massachusetts.¹⁰² Significantly, a considerable number not recognized in 1883, lived in New York and Wisconsin, and others in Michigan, Kansas, and North Dakota.¹⁰³ Diffusion had cast Narragansett descendants to far places. Many stayed in Rhode Island but, like any group of people, Indian or white, their personal identity to their heritage and traditions has — since 1880 — been sometimes strong, sometimes tenuous.

For most Rhode Islanders, even for most historians, Narragansett history has, in another sense, become scattered to the winds of heaven. So

long have we relied on myths of history that the passage of time threatens to cloud our perception of the past. Even as we attempt to reverse this tendency, as we grope for a fuller knowledge of the Narragansetts, our efforts must ride the same wind that not only may have cast Indians to distant places, but also sent adrift the sources of history which tell their story.

Around the turn of the century, James N. Arnold — a Rhode Island historian then gathering materials on the Narragansetts — complained that documents and sources relating to Indian history in Rhode Island were largely inaccessible and located in distant repositories.¹⁰⁴ In the course of his research, he had sought documents in the state archives, in local town halls in South County, others in collections of the Connecticut State Library in Hartford, and even some in the New York State Archives in Albany. Arnold actually knew only a small fraction of these widely scattered sources. We have learned about sources located in many other places — the Massachusetts State Archives, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston Public Library, Dartmouth College Library, American Philosophical Library in Philadelphia, National Archives, Library of Congress, Public Record Office in London, Thomas Gilcrease Institute in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Closer to home Arnold missed such sources as manuscript collections at the Rhode Island Historical Society Library, John Carter Brown and John Hay libraries, and diverse governmental documents now in the Rhode Island State Records Center.

Arnold hoped that many sources could one day be collected in one place to help historians in research, a desire — now some seventy years later — that we also share. Perhaps the recently announced project of the Narragansett Tribe of Indians, Inc., to locate and collect documents pertaining to their history will eventually accomplish this goal.¹⁰⁵

As Indian descendants in Rhode Island now turn more toward understanding their heritage, as we all seek a wider understanding of Indian history in Rhode Island, we would hope that the winds of the past will change direction and bring us all closer to grasping the meaning and significance of the continued presence of Indian peoples within American society.

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- 76 Petition to General Assembly, October 22, 1823, Narragansett Indian Miscellaneous Petitions, state archives. See also Petition to General Assembly, October 14, 1823, Narragansett Indian Petitions, state archives.
- 77 To Elisha R. Potter, Sr., February 11, 1833, Potter Papers, RIHS Library.
- 78 Narragansett Indians, 86, 89, 91, state archives.
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- 84 Acts and Resolves of the Rhode Island General Assembly, October 1849, 3; *Report of Committee on Indian Tribe* (Providence, 1852).
- 85 Acts and Resolves of the Rhode Island General Assembly, May 1862, 67, 68.
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- 87 John Russell Bartlett, ed., "Rhode Island Miscellany," VI, 27-29. These "miscellany" volumes are scrapbooks of unidentified newspaper clippings in RIHS Library.
- 88 Samuel Rodman, *Memorial; To the Honorable General Assembly of the State of Rhode Island, January Session, A.D., 1867* (n.p., n.d.).
- 89 For conflicting evidence see *Committee Report, 1880*, 4, 24, 64. Ethnohistorian Ethel Boissevain believes Narragansetts requested detribalization. "The Detribalization of the Narragansett Indians: A Case Study," *Ethnohistory*, III (1956) 241.
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- 94 *Committee Report, 1880*, 36, 85, 56.
- 95 *Valuation of the Property in the Town of Charlestown, October, 1856* (Wakefield, R. I., 1856) 3-7, and real property assessments for subsequent years 1857-1880; *Committee Report, 1880*, 37, 43.
- 96 Boissevain, *The Narragansett People*, 70.
- 97 *Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Indian Affairs of the United States Senate in Relation to Certain Claims of the Montauk, Shinnecock, Narragansett, and Mohegan Indians* (Washington, D. C., 1900) 103-104.
- 98 Washburn, 243.
- 99 *Fourth Annual Report (1884)*, 31. Recent archaeological evidence confirms that Fort Ninigret was an aboriginal fortification. Susan N. Mayer, "Niantic-European Contact at Fort Ninigret, Rhode Island," paper presented at the forty-second annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, April 1977.
- 100 *Fourth Annual Report (1884)*, 34.
- 101 Commission Report, 1880, 91.
- 102 *Westerly Narragansett Weekly* March 3, 1881.
- 103 Washington Gardner to (William A. Jones), January 3, 1908, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Letters Received, 1881-1907, Record Group 75, National Archives; Regina Flannery, *An Analysis of Coastal Algonquian Culture*, Catholic University of America Anthropological Series, No. 7 (Washington, D. C., 1939) 112; C. J. Rhoads to Van Sickle Adjustment Service, Inc., March 12, 1932, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Central Files, 1907, 1939, Record Group 75, National Archives.
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RIHS Library

Music Hall, Westminister Street, Providence. Eleanor Marx spoke here in 1886, sponsored by Rhode Island's Central Labor Union.

Eleanor Marx in Providence

by Carl Gersuny*

Youngest daughter of Karl Marx — and protagonist of a monumental modern biography — Eleanor Marx visited Providence on October 22, 1886 for a speaking engagement together with her companion Edward Aveling and socialist Reichstag deputy Wilhelm Liebknecht. They had come to the United States at the invitation of the socialistic Labor Party for an extensive tour.¹

The socialistic Labor Party in the United States constituted at that time "a German colony, a branch of the German social democracy" with but two English-speaking members on its national executive committee.² In the Providence area the organization consisted of two German-speaking groups, one with a hall on Eiswald Street (renamed Avery Street in 1908) in Olneyville and one on Branch Avenue near the North Providence line in Wanskuck. At these clubs, German socialists "combined the propaganda of socialism with a large amount of good fellowship, and the original socialistic sections, as the local organizations were called, were carried on after the plan of the German turnvereins where families assembled, beer drinking was indulged in moderately, musical and dramatic entertainments were given, and conversation and sociability prevailed."³ Socialistic Labor Party sections represented themselves in Rhode Island's Central Labor Union, and their delegates to that body were described as "sober and intelligent men, among the best labor workers in the state."⁴

One of the main purposes of the tour to forty-six cities and towns in the United States by Eleanor Marx and Aveling was to present prominent

English-speaking advocates of socialism to American audiences in order to extend the organization beyond the confines of German immigrant groups which were its main constituency in Providence as elsewhere. The *Providence Journal* heralded this impending visit to the city as a declaration of war — "They are plain outspoken Socialists who advocate seizing and confiscating all property, peaceably if they can, forcibly if they must. This may sound very well in a comfortable, well-lighted hall, but to carry it out in practice would require a long war against the bravest and best elements of the civilized world. Rhode Island would not be found wanting in furnishing her quota in defence of all that is worth living for."⁵

In a different vein, *The Evening Telegram* reported that "Mrs. Edward Aveling (formerly Elenor Marx) is the daughter of Karl Marx, author of "Das Capital" and founder of scientific socialism. Elenor Aveling has received a thorough liberal education and has always been associated with learned people of advanced ideas. She is ably fitted to assist her husband in his literary and scientific pursuits."⁶ In an age when "living together" was less readily countenanced than today, public knowledge that Aveling was not her husband would have added an element of scandal to political controversy surrounding the tour.

For that scheduled Friday evening meeting, the local sponsoring group — Rhode Island's Central Labor Union — had engaged Music Hall on Westminster Street. For a half hour before the start of festivities, Charles L. Kenyon played organ selections while the audience assembled.

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One account estimated attendance at "about a thousand persons." Another assessed "respectable in size and quality, an audience of working men and women, just the kind that the lecturers were anxious to have." A third described attendance as "fairly good."⁷

Escorted to the stage at 8:15 p.m., speakers met officers of the Central Labor Union and guests — Reverend T. Edwin Brown, pastor of First Baptist Church, who had just published an anti-socialist book — James Jefferson, Providence barber and "well-known colored advocate of social reform and equality" — Thomas Robinson, justice of the peace in Pawtucket.⁸

Chairman John Francis Smith, radical Providence printer and lecturer, evoked amusement when he announced that Governor Wetmore and city clerk Joslin had sent their regrets. He "deplored the error of confounding Socialism with disreputable theories and read a warm, sympathetic letter from Rev. Father Burns, who was only prevented from attending by his more sacred duties at the Cathedral."⁹ Father Burns, who served in the Roman Catholic diocese of Providence from 1885 to 1889, expressed warm sympathy for the audience and the sponsors of the meeting, but not for the views of the speakers. He wrote that "the difficulty lies not so much in ascertaining the rights of labor or the rights of capital, but in presenting a remedy that will secure the rights of both, while at the same time not involving any radical or sudden change in existing institutions."¹⁰

After completing preliminaries, chairman Smith introduced Aveling who opened his address by seeking to exculpate his hosts — people must not think that "just because the labor union officers had invited them to Providence and were present on the platform that they endorsed the speakers' doctrines. No, but like the fairminded men they were, they were there to give a fair hearing to what the lecturers had to say." As for the attack in the *Journal* that preceded their arrival, he "regretted, for the *Journal's* sake, that the paper had not waited to hear him before it had made such an ignoramus of itself." He disassociated himself and his friends from anarchism by saying that socialism "is no advocate of bombs and incendiarism. Its weapons are reason and education (Cheers)."¹¹ Despite obvious disdain for

anarchism he nevertheless urged a new trial for anarchists recently convicted in connection with the Haymarket affair in Chicago.

Aveling spoke on the injustice of the system of wage-labor because "wages today are less than the value of the labor for which they are given." He also assailed the practice of paying interest on bank deposits as rooted in the system of partly unpaid labor. He went on to predict that there "will be in the United States a labor party that will be neither Democratic nor Republican (applause). Long enough have you been fooled by the politicians; long enough have you been the dog wagged by the political tail." His concluding comment — "A new order of things will come. I stood at Concord where the nation of freemen first struck off the shackles; and I believe I shall live to see the same thing again with the weapons of speech, reason and intelligence."¹²

At Aveling's conclusion, Smith introduced his companion — "next to the great pleasure of listening to Karl Marx would be that of hearing Karl Marx's daughter."

Eleanor Marx began by evoking Disraeli's imagery of two nations, and argued that these two — one consisting of those "who do not work and who possess the wealth," and the other of "men and women who labor and possess nothing" — cannot continue to coexist but must "become the nation that both produces and possesses." Factory workers are not more free in the United States than in Europe, she argued, and singled out child labor and conditions under which women worked in factories for particular condemnation. "As the color line in the South was being wiped out, so in the North class lines should be wiped away. Just as the people put slavery out of existence so would they combat the present system of wages. She asked them to remember and join hands, for in many there was strength. They were many; the capitalists were few." Quoting Wendell Phillips on the need to free northern white slaves just as southern black slaves had been freed, she stressed "the necessity of organizing politically on an independent basis for the purpose of carrying out the ideas of the socialists." After her, Liebknecht spoke, first briefly in English and then in German, listened to with much interest, and the points frequently applauded by the Germans present.¹³

Following the event, the local press published a variety of assessments, the *Journal's* under the heading "Socialistic Nonsense," while the *Telegram* referred to "stirring addresses in support of Socialistic theory." *The People*, a weekly, whose report was entitled "A Clear Explanation of the Aims of Socialism," gave the most extensive coverage — not inconsistent with its ownership, for it had been founded in 1885 by about 170 stockholders, "nearly all working people and the majority of them members of the order of the Knights of Labor." Some time later Rhode Island's Central Labor Union adopted the paper as its official organ.¹⁴

On this tour Eleanor Marx was undoubtedly cast in a role subordinate to Aveling's and the *Morning Star* put her down with the comment that her remarks "seemed more like a set speech covering the points her husband had spoken upon than anything else."¹⁵ With improved visual acuity that comes from hindsight, she may be viewed as most notable of the three visitors, but that was not apparent to contemporaries. One letter to editors of the *Journal*, signed by "one who does not own real estate" who claimed to have been at the Music Hall meeting, charged that there are "some people who like to travel to see a part of this great world at other people's or societies' expenses, but in reality they don't care about people's grievances. That is just what I think about Dr. Aveling and Mr. Liebknecht. It is a pity that our Constitution does not prohibit such people to set foot on our soil."

That writer either thought it not objectionable for Eleanor Marx to visit this country — in contrast to his objection to the others — or he did not think her worthy of notice. Four days later a letter from a writer signing himself "Discretion" appeared, stating that "I don't believe in socialism, but I do hold that remarks such as he who does not own real estate makes are absurd."¹⁶

At conclusion of the speaking tour, expenses for which Aveling billed his hosts — the socialistic Labor Party — stirred up a furor on both sides of the Atlantic. Outcome of the dispute was inconclusive, but Aveling's reputation for being unscrupulous in money matters persisted.

As for Eleanor Marx, after her return to England she occupied herself during eleven years as an activist in socialist and trade union causes and

in literary pursuits that included translating Ibsen's plays into English. In 1898 at forty-three she committed suicide some months after Aveling had gone to the Chelsea Register Office in London under an assumed name to marry another woman.¹⁷ Eleanor Marx's visit to Providence is perhaps only an obscure footnote among nineteenth-century Rhode Island events, but it serves to illuminate a bygone age as well as to identify one of the myriad of links between local chronicle and the broader context of world history.

1 Yvonne Kapp, *Eleanor Marx*, 2v. (New York: Pantheon, 1976).

2 Richard T. Ely, *The Labor Movement in America* (New York: Crowell, 1886) 276.

3 *Providence Journal*, April 22, 1906, sec. 4, p. 3.

4 *The People* Nov. 6, 1886, p. 4.

5 Oct. 21, 1886, p. 4.

6 Oct. 21, 1886, p. 1.

7 *The People* Oct. 30, 1886, p. 2. *Telegram* Oct. 23, 1886, p. 6. *Journal* Oct. 23, 1886, p. 8.

8 *The People* Oct. 30, 1886, p. 2. Brown's book — *Studies in Modern Socialism and Labor Problems* (New York: Appleton, 1886). He was invited to share the platform despite an earlier critique of his bias — "Dr. Brown is neither philosophical nor fair and has evidently confounded all the various schools of socialism in one confused jumble, then he has taken their worst features out of which to construct an imaginary socialist, whom he immediately proceeds to demolish. No such socialism as Dr. Brown depicts exists anywhere, even under the light of the moon, much less in the broad sunlight of the nineteenth century" (*The People*, December 5, 1885, p. 2).

9 *Telegram* Oct. 23, 1886, p. 6. Rev. Charles J. Burns, *Freedom of Religious Worship* (Providence: E. A. Johnson, 1887).

10 *The People* Oct. 30, 1886, p. 2.

11 *Telegram* Oct. 23, 1886, p. 6.

12 *Journal* Oct. 23, 1886, p. 8.

13 *The People* Oct. 30, 1886, p. 7.

14 *Journal* Oct. 25, 1886, p. 4. *Telegram* Oct. 23, 1886, p. 6. *The People* Dec. 5, 1885, p. 2; Jan. 7, 1888, p. 1.

15 Oct. 23, 1886, p. 3.

16 *Journal* Oct. 28, 1886, p. 8; Nov. 1, 1886, p. 8.

17 Kapp, 171ff; 677ff.

POLITICAL *Meeting.*

A meeting of the **WHIG PARTY** of the County of Washington will be holden at the **STATE HOUSE**, at South-Kingstown, on **WEDNESDAY EVENING**, August 11, 1847, at half past seven o'clock.

SAMUEL AMES, Esq., General **GREENE** and others will address the meeting.

A general attendance is requested.

Rhode Island and the Mexican War

by David L. Paulhus*

Although historians have paid ample attention to Rhode Island's participation in the American Revolution, the Civil War, and to a lesser extent, the War of 1812, few have focused on the state's history during the war with Mexico. Covering the period from 1846 to 1848, the war occurred in a time marked by the economic and political upheaval often characterized as Manifest Destiny. Perhaps more important to the Rhode Island setting was the war's chronological proximity to the Dorr Rebellion (1844) that had convulsed traditional state politics, leaving bitter feelings between parties for the remainder of the decade.

The Mexican War excited a vigorous debate among Rhode Islanders from all walks of life, including not only politicians and editors, but also farmers and clergymen. Emotions ran rampant during the war, with its supporters labelling the opposition "tories," likening them to Tories of the American Revolution. Dissenters objected to the war in strong terms, calling it cruel, unjust and immoral. Their opposition, stemming largely from the war's controversial origins, intensified with growing awareness of the territorial aspirations of President James K. Polk and what they termed the "slave power" forces of the increasingly southern-oriented Democratic party.

Debate largely centered around the responsibility for the opening of hostilities. The Whig party asserted that the conflict resulted from the annexation of Texas in 1845, thereby embroiling the United States in a heated boundary controversy with Mexico. Those who held this view contended that President Polk had left Mexico no choice but war when he had ordered General

Zachary Taylor's army into the disputed territory in early 1846. When Mexico attacked these forces in late April, Polk claimed that Americans had been killed on their own soil and urged a speedy repulsion of the invaders.¹

Congressional Democrats blunted a potentially strong opposition to a declaration of war through a series of measures restricting debate. The majority party forced Congress to vote on the simple questions of supplies and reinforcements for General Taylor's army, thereby leaving a choice between accepting war or abandoning the troops in Mexico. Henry Y. Cranston (Whig) of Rhode Island was one of fourteen representatives dissenting from the resolution that virtually declared war. The other representative, Lemuel Arnold (Whig), voted in favor of war, as did Whig Senator James F. Simmons. Whig Senator Albert C. Greene was absent.²

News of battles along the Mexican border brought immediate reactions from Whig editors in Rhode Island. In May the *Providence Daily Journal* and *Providence Daily Transcript* both criticized the chief executive for his folly in handling Mexican affairs. Despite their allegations, they exercised great care to express support for national goals, urging citizens to volunteer in order to assure successful termination of the conflict.³

Rhode Island Democrats were unimpressed by Whig protestations of patriotism. The *Providence Daily Gazette* assailed the *Journal* for censuring Polk, saying "It breathes *Toryism* throughout, and is nothing more or less than an attempt to defeat its own country, and glorify Mexico!"⁴ The

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Republican Herald charged Whig newspapers with unrighteous and malicious abuse of the President that betrayed "a meanness too contemptible to be met with argument or facts."⁵ Even the independent *Pawtucket Gazette and Chronicle* accused the opposition of adopting "a course calculated to bring defeat and disgrace upon their own government and country."⁶

Democratic journalists reserved their harshest criticism for Henry Cranston. On May 20, 1846 the *Republican Herald* castigated the representative for his negative vote on the war bill: "Mr. Cranston voted, virtually and in effect, to desert our little army upon the southwestern frontier of Texas. He voted to leave them at the mercy of half-civilized Mexicans, to be cut to pieces or taken prisoners. He voted to starve them to death." Furthermore, Mr. Cranston was "unworthy of the land which gave him birth — of the food that sustains him — of the banner of freedom that waves over him."

This practice, questioning the patriotism of all at variance with administration policies virtually evolved into a war hawk strategy, essentially "my country right or wrong". The *Transcript and Chronicle's* editor Joseph Pitman embodied that spirit. Despite his own belief that Polk had started the war, he urged Rhode Islanders to volunteer for duty in Mexico. Pitman later proved his sincerity by leading the state's company into battle.⁷

Journal editor Henry B. Anthony decried the growth of that sentiment, describing it as "frothy patriotism" and defending his right to express indignation at those who started the war. Even Anthony, however, pledged to render loyal service and support to the nation.⁸ Although many Rhode Islanders objected to the war in principle, the state with near unanimity pledged loyal support even before news of Taylor's victories at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma (May 8 and 9) arrived late in May. At those battles Brevet Major Charles Larnard became the first of many Rhode Islanders cited for meritorious service in Mexico.⁹

Taylor's successes prompted predictions of a speedy victory. Both Democratic and Whig newspapers hailed the victories as a step closer to peace. In its June resolutions, the General Assembly praised the general and his troops for their triumphs which "have added a new lustre to the



Biographical Cyclopaedia of Representative Men of Rhode Island, 1881

Henry Y. Cranston was one of fourteen U.S. representatives dissenting from the resolution that virtually declared war on Mexico in 1846.

American name."¹⁰

Pro-war spirit gradually diminished during the summer. Rhode Island's Chief Justice Job Durfee not only attacked President Polk for his role in beginning the conflict, but assailed Congress as well for failing to frustrate Polk's initiatives. Anti-war spokesmen proceeded beyond Durfee's criticism of the war's unjust origins to the further question of war aims. The extent of territorial indemnity to be sought from Mexico and whether or not to allow slavery in that territory became focal points of discussion. A *Transcript and Chronicle* correspondent under the pen name of "Peace" believed that the United States had embarked on a war of conquest and spoliation which could only be terminated by a congressional refusal to approve supplies. The *Journal* asserted that southerners wanted to push into Mexican territory to annex further slave lands.¹¹

Apart from such indications of dissent, many Rhode Island newspapers still viewed the war in nationalistic terms. The *Woonsocket Patriot*, which had previously censured Polk for starting the war, and the *Gazette and Chronicle* both clamored for acquisition of California as a possible indemnity. The *Gazette* shared that wish, defending also the recent American invasion of New Mexico.¹²

In August introduction into Congress of the Wilmot Proviso — prohibiting slavery in any territory acquired during the war — threatened the most troublesome issue. In Mexico, Taylor's advance slowed considerably. His only major victory came in September at Monterrey, a battle in which Major John R. Vinton, a Rhode Island native, distinguished himself.¹³

By fall many Rhode Island editors were dissatisfied with the war's progress. They asserted that more aggressive measures were required to "conquer a peace". Others expressed disenchantment for opposite reasons. The *Journal* reiterated its view that the war had developed into a simple conquest of slave territory. The *Patriot* believed that the situation warranted peace through diplomatic action.¹⁴

Discontent over the war continued to escalate. In November the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society reprimanded both parties for "joining to carry on that infamous and cruel contest." The following month Joseph Pitman railed at Polk for his abusive tactics, which branded all who opposed his war policies as traitors. Pitman defended the right of conscientious objection, comparing Polk's attitude to that of European dictators.¹⁵

On Christmas day a contributor to the *Gazette and Chronicle* assailed the war effort, stating that "the reasons assigned for the present war are repugnant to our better feelings, and are to be considered no less than an outrage upon every humane Christian sensibility." The anti-war letter concluded that "every Mexican citizen killed by our troops upon his own soil is murdered, and that all who aid and abet in the transactions are partakers of the guilt."

The advent of 1847 brought increased criticism of the administration's performance. A correspondent of the *Gazette and Chronicle* fully concurred in Pitman's reproach of Polk, suggesting that the

President's attacks on Whig patriotism were designed to divert attention from his own illegal conduct. The *Patriot* reported circulation of an anti-war petition which grieved for our "distracted and oppressed neighbor Mexico."¹⁶

Part of the religious community also registered its protest. In January 1847 Congregational minister E. B. Hall argued that the war was "unnecessary, unwise, and unjust, if not wholly criminal." It could only accomplish evil. The following month Reverend James N. Granger, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Providence, said that "the Mexican War has been forced upon us with all its horrors of robbery and bloodshed, and with its large prospective extension of slavery on a soil hitherto untainted by that curse."¹⁷

In its annual resolutions the General Assembly found occasion to disapprove of the war. While praising the gallantry of the soldiers in Mexico, they condemned "the waste of treasure and life which has hitherto attended a contest waged to no valuable end; which with ordinary discretion on the part of our executive might have been avoided with honor." The resolutions passed after a substantial debate by a vote of 30 to 22. The final margin would have been wider except for a number of Whigs who voted "nay" because the resolutions were insufficiently condemnatory.

The *Journal* continued its editorial opposition, wondering how the country could extricate itself from the war. The nation had become so anxious about the possible consequences of the Wilmot Proviso that even if Mexico were conquered there appeared to be no possible grounds for domestic consensus. The *Patriot* urged northern Democrats and Whigs to unite against extending slavery into any prospective territory.¹⁸

The pro-war press reacted sharply to such criticism. The *Gazette and Chronicle* asserted that anti-war forces were actually prolonging the conflict by giving Mexico hope for victory. The *Republican Herald* charged Reverend Mr. Hall with "clerical Toryism", asking if he desired the "surrender of our army, and the delivery of the President into the hands of the Mexicans." The war hawks propounded that all who professed anti-war sentiment were giving aid and comfort to the enemy and were therefore traitors.

Dissenters, perhaps hypocritically, usually accompanied anti-war statements with expressions

of loyalty and support. In this way they evaded the administration's charges of treason. The General Assembly, shortly after passing anti-war resolutions, appropriated twenty-five hundred dollars for raising a company of troops. Rhode Island became the first New England state to provide its quota of soldiers, raising four companies, though only one was mustered into service. By March 1847 the Rhode Island company departed for Mexico, even before the full organization of the Massachusetts regiment.¹⁹

The initial conduct of Senator James F. Simmons provided another example of temporarily suspended principles in the face of administration pressure. He had opposed the Democrats' preemptive tactics prior to the declaration of war, yet he had voted with the majority in favor of war as well as supporting further war measures. Finally in February 1847 when the Three Million Bill — authorizing an appropriation of that sum of money to be used in an effort to terminate the war — appeared in the Senate without the Wilmot Proviso, Simmons had enough. He declared that "if the war was unjust, he ought not to vote for any measure that was intended to support such a war."

It appears that Rhode Island's congressmen took their cue from Simmons. When the Three Million Bill came to vote on March 1, 1847, Albert C. Greene joined him in an unsuccessful bid to defeat the measure. Lemuel Arnold and Henry Cranston both supported an attempt to reinsert the Wilmot Proviso, finally voting against the bill as it passed in the House minus the proviso. The state's congressmen were firmly on record as opposing the war.²⁰

Within the state, another voice cried out against unquestioning support of the war. Beginning early in February 1847 several letters appeared in the *Journal* under the pen name "Investigator." His first letter decried continuance of a war in which the United States was the needless aggressor. Later in the month, he suggested that most Americans opposed the war as "it conflicts with their long established habits of peace, with their avowed recognition of the principles of religion."

"Investigator" asserted in March that if all who opposed the war effort were traitors, the chief executive headed that list by virtue of his "pass"

allowing former Mexican president Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna to slip through the American blockade. In his final letter he asked why the United States was in possession of half of Mexico when it was the avowed national policy to simply "conquer a peace."²¹

In contrast to the disharmony in Rhode Island, military prosecution of the war intensified. The United States had already occupied Mexico's northern provinces as well as New Mexico and California. The navy had blockaded Mexican ports. In February 1847 General Taylor triumphed in a major battle at Buena Vista. During the following month General Winfield Scott assumed command of American forces in Mexico and landed his army at Vera Cruz, intending to march upon Mexico City from that point.

A Rhode Island participant in this invasion, John R. Vinton — a West Point graduate cited at Monterrey for gallant and meritorious conduct — wrote to his mother from the outskirts of Vera Cruz: "My confidence in the overruling providence of God is unqualified. So that I may go to the field of action fully assured that whatever may befall me will be for the best. I feel proud to serve my country in this her time of appeal; and should even the worst — death itself — be my lot, I shall meet it cheerfully." On March 22, 1847 Major Vinton was killed in action at Vera Cruz.

Another Rhode Island officer played an instrumental part in the Vera Cruz invasion. Just prior to the assault, Commodore Matthew C. Perry replaced David Conner as commander of the Gulf squadron. Perry brought more assertive leadership to the fleet, staging several incursions into Mexican rivers, most notably at Tabasco, where he captured the city even before the main body of troops arrived. An ardent expansionist who viewed the war as a means to acquire a strip of land upon which to build a canal, Perry brought to the command aggressiveness that greatly facilitated land operations.²²

In Rhode Island, elections to the General Assembly took place in early April. Although the election did not serve as a referendum on the Mexican War, the *Republican Herald* took occasion to accuse Whig protesters of treasonous conduct. Its attack focused primarily on Speaker of the House Robert Cranston, who was running for his brother's seat in Congress. The *Journal*



Courtesy U.S. Naval Academy Museum

Commodore Matthew C. Perry commanded the Gulf Squadron during the invasion of Vera Cruz. Portrait by William Sidney Mount.

praised Cranston's anti-war posture, pleading for a Whig victory. Whigs won the election, adding also to their majorities in each house.

Word of the victories at Buena Vista and Vera Cruz, reaching Rhode Island in April and May, brought differing reactions. The *Republican Herald* wondered why Mexico continued to fight in view of the certainty of defeat. The *Gazette and Chronicle* suggested that the United States would be forced to take and hold military possession of Mexico until she agreed to just terms. The *Journal* assumed a more pessimistic tone, questioning the value of victories, since they apparently brought the nation no closer to peace. The newspaper wondered how peace would eventuate since a Mexican capitulation would set off a revolution. Even if Mexico could surrender, the United States

would face severe internal disagreement upon the terms to be demanded. The *Patriot* wished to know when it would end, asking what would happen if troops reached Mexico City and found no government capable of making peace.²³

Disenchantment with continuation of war persisted through summer 1847. The *Journal* chastised Polk for his choice of officers, his poorly conducted peace efforts, and made great capital of the "pass" that he issued to Santa Anna, allowing him to return to Mexico, and subsequently to lead her army in battle. The Whig newspaper also assailed Polk for placing a tremendous financial burden on the national treasury.

At its annual convention, the Rhode Island Peace Society — formed in 1818 by Moses Brown and a number of other Quakers — adopted a series of resolutions condemning the war's origins, designs, and inevitable results, concluding with a demand for immediate termination. The anti-war press shared that hope, but doubted that peace was imminent. The *Patriot* defended the inalienable right to guess of those who were predicting a speedy peace.²⁴

Perhaps the most poignant criticism came from Francis Wayland, president of Brown University. While never specifically mentioning the war, Wayland asked, "What shall we say when this iniquitous passion for territory is gratified at the expense of indiscriminate slaughter? Can we conceive of a more diabolical wickedness, than a war waged in the name of national robbery? Was authority ever given by this people to their rulers to prosecute a war for conquest, or for glory, or to extend slavery, or to restrict it?" He called for all just men to fearlessly express their indignation in such cases.

The *Republican Herald* rankled at such talk. Its editor assailed Wayland as a typical Whig preacher of Toryism. Throughout the summer, the newspaper had sought to defend Polk against such condemnation by diverting blame to the Whigs. It contended that the opposition's efforts were responsible for failure to secure a just peace. The *Gazette and Chronicle* expressed a similar contention, asserting that Mexico derived tenacity from its anticipation of victory by the American peace movement.²⁵

Both sides claimed public support for their views and prepared to test their strength in the



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Providence Daily Journal editor Henry B. Anthony, later governor and U.S. senator from Rhode Island, expressed disapproval of the war from its beginning.

western district's congressional election. Wilkins Updike (Whig) and Benjamin Thurston (Democrat) had battled to no decision in April as another Whig, Lemuel Arnold, the incumbent, and Lauriston Hall (Liberty) had drawn enough votes to preclude a majority. The *Republican Herald* believed that Thurston's election was vital to continued prosecution of the war, while the *Journal* termed Updike's election crucial to the anti-war effort. The Whig organ expressed grave concern that internal division among Whigs might result in Updike's defeat. Consequently, although Thurston won the election in late August by sixty-five votes, it was impossible to evaluate the election's significance in terms of war support.²⁶

While politicians were battling it out in Rhode Island, her troops spent the summer fighting Mexicans. In early June, at a time when the New England regiment was not even fully organized, the Rhode Island company — attached to General Scott's forces a short time earlier — led an attack on the Puerta National Bridge. In late August, as Company A of the Ninth New England Regiment, they participated in major battles at Contreras and Churubusco, suffering five wounded. Among those decorated for heroism, John Slocum of Providence, second in command of the company, won promotion to brevet captain.

Shortly after these victories, Scott proclaimed an armistice, hoping to avert inevitable bloodshed involved in a drive to the capital. Despairing of peace, two weeks later he set out for Mexico City. Company A saw action all the way as Mexicans valiantly attempted to halt the invasion. On September 13, 1847 Scott's army forged inside the gates of Chapultepec and stormed into the "halls of the Montezumas." Two days later, Santa Anna resigned, leaving the United States embroiled in a war against a nation with no leader and no means with which to fight, yet still determined not to surrender.²⁷

Amazed by Mexican obstinacy, the *Republican Herald* and the *Gazette and Chronicle* suggested that Mexico be placed under martial law and made to suffer the consequences of her stubbornness until she agreed to suitable terms. The *Journal* acknowledged that some sort of armed peace appeared necessary, but warned about increasing territorial ambitions.

Four days later the *Journal* abandoned its previous policy by which criticism of the war was accompanied by expressions of support. "We are now avowedly engaged in a war of conquest. We are fighting — so much is avowed — for half the Mexican territory. We are in reality — and this will soon be avowed — fighting for the whole of Mexico." The newspaper urged Congress to cut off all funds until the President provided satisfactory explanations. From this point forward the *Journal* refused to countenance the war and its territorial aggrandizement, saying, "The less we have of Mexican territory the better. There is none of it, except the harbor of San Francisco, that can be of any use to us."²⁸

During the last two months of 1847, some Rhode Islanders engaged in a passionate discussion concerning the citizen's duty to support his country. The issue was raised in the *Gazette and Chronicle* by a writer under the pseudonym "Our Country Right of Wrong, Still Our Country." He believed that even though the war was wicked, it remained the duty of every citizen to advance its successful prosecution. A week later, another citizen disputed this doctrine, stating that moral law must be superior to human law. Furthermore, he was irritated by the constant use of infamous epithets against those who would not assist their nation in the commission of wicked acts.

Others joined in the discussion, mostly in favor of the doctrine. Arguments intensified, "you cannot oppose the administration without strengthening the enemy, who has unsheathed his sword against your kindred. A traitor is he who will not gladly defend his own country." Even this failed to dissuade the opposition, which insisted that men could not be allowed to commit moral injustices in the name of national honor.²⁹

Although this discussion of "our country right or wrong" only appeared late in 1847, it had been a critical issue throughout the war. War hawks had sought to deny dissenters' right to speak out against the war, branding them as traitors for their opposition. At first, anti-war forces succumbed to pressure, adopting a moderate course in which expressions of dissent were accompanied by statements of loyalty and support.

Nationally the minority party, Whigs — with their anti-war ideals — had predominated in Rhode Island throughout the war, yet from the beginning, citizens had paid their taxes, militia-men had enlisted in the army, and the General Assembly had praised the soldiery and appropriated funds for the war. With few exceptions, the state's congressmen had voted in favor of supplies for the war and editors had overcome objections in principle to the war and urged its vigorous prosecution. Only extremist groups like the abolitionists had absolutely refused to support the effort.

As war lingered on with its increasing territorial conquests opposition grew in volatility, indicated by statements of Senator Simmons, "Investigator," Francis Wayland, and others. By 1847's end anti-war sentiment was at its sharpest.

The *Journal* had decidedly rejected acquisition of Mexican territory and a dissenter had given no quarter in his stance against "our country, right or wrong."

In its January 1848 resolutions, the General Assembly sharply criticized Polk for involving the nation in a degrading war which could have been avoided by a moderate course on his part. It refused to accept the conquest and occupation of Mexico, urging "a spirit of moderation and equity towards a sister Republic" that involved "discarding all purposes of conquest and occupation, or of extorting from Mexico a territorial indemnity."

Rhode Island's senators also protested against further war measures. Speaking in January 1848 on the Ten Regiments Bill — providing additional troops for the war — John H. Clarke, a Whig who had succeeded Simmons, stated that dismemberment of Mexico, itself an evil, had given way to an even greater evil — subjugation. He felt that additional troops could be employed only in this task, asking, "To whom can you restore the whole or any part of Mexico? Take it and you must keep it." Clarke believed that annexing Mexico would result in infusion of "Mexican leprosy" into the American system. Senator Greene shared this view and cautioned against the rise of an all-Mexico movement, which had as its goal absorption of all of Mexico into United States territory.

On February 2, 1848 Nicholas Trist, American commissioner in Mexico, signed the treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which ceded New Mexico and California to the United States. The Senate ratified the treaty in March. There remained only traditional resolutions of thanks to the soldiery for their meritorious service.³⁰

Many Rhode Islanders had had objections to the Mexican War from its inception, questioning Polk's justifications and suspecting that the war was merely a plot to extend slavery. Despite these objections in principle, the state had nearly unanimously pledged its loyal support, embodying the slogan "my country, right or wrong." As the war progressed, disenchantment developed among those whose "support" rested on national loyalty rather than genuine belief in war aims. Before the war ended, militant anti-war stances had been expressed by the state's congressmen, the

General Assembly, the *Providence Daily Journal*, and a number of citizens. These anti-war voices were undoubtedly pleased by news of peace. The ordeal was over.

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- 2 *Congressional Globe*, 29th Congress, 1st Session, 795-804.
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- 5 May 16, 1846.
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- 7 *Providence Daily Transcript and Chronicle*, May 15, 23, 1846.
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- 10 *Providence Daily Journal*, May 28, 1846; *Providence Daily Gazette*, May 18, 20, 30, 1846; *Republican Herald*, May 30, 1846. *Rhode Island Acts and Resolves* June 1846, 57-8.
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- 12 *Woonsocket Patriot*, June 26, 1846; *Pawtucket Gazette and Chronicle*, July 17, 1846; *Providence Daily Gazette*, June 8, 1846.
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- 14 *Pawtucket Gazette and Chronicle*, Oct. 2, 9, 1846; *Providence Daily Gazette*, Oct. 15, 20, 1846; *Providence Daily Journal*, Oct. 8, 1846; *Woonsocket Patriot*, Sept. 11, 1846.
- 15 *Liberator*, Nov. 27, 1846; *Providence Daily Transcript and Chronicle*, Dec. 12, 1846.
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- 17 *Providence Daily Journal*, Jan. 22, Feb. 8, 1847.
- 18 *Rhode Island Acts and Resolves*, Jan. 1847, 62-4; *Providence Daily Journal*, Jan. 7, 23, 1847; *Woonsocket Patriot*, Jan. 15, 1847.
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- 30 *Rhode Island Acts and Resolves*, Jan. 1848, 66-8. *Congressional Globe*, 30th Congress, 1st Session, 242-4, 379-381. *Rhode Island Acts and Resolves*, May 1848, 12.

From the Collections

A prize-winning team from the Providence Ice Company, ca. 1915-1920.

