

COLONIAL POLITICS

Was anarchy ever

By ELMER E. CORNWELL JR.

'A DOWNRIGHT DEMOCRACY!' So Rhode Island's government was labelled in disgust by Daniel Horsmanden, Chief Justice of New York. Judge Horsmanden had been appointed by the Crown as a member of the Royal Commission to investigate and fix responsibility for the burning of the *Gaspee*. He was writing to the Colonial Secretary, the Earl of Dartmouth, in London, about the meager findings of

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the commission—and his impressions of the "licentious republic" in which he had been forced to spend time during the investigations. The colony's government, "if it deserves the name," operated in a state of anarchy, he was convinced. The governor, elected annually by vote of the freemen (a considerable novelty at the time) was "entirely controlled by the populace."

A sober examination of the facts suggests that the Chief Justice may not have been too far off the mark. Take the situation at that time: The *Gaspee* had been burned the night of June 9th, 1772. The members of the Royal Commission gathered in Newport

to conduct their investigation during the first week in January, 1773. Their arrival found the Assembly of the Colony still in session completing its December meeting, and the Superior Court (the highest court in the state at the time, short of the Assembly which acted as a court on occasion) also in session in Newport.

The Chief Justice of the Superior Court was one Stephen Hopkins. The same Stephen Hopkins was also sitting in the Assembly as a deputy from his home town of Providence. The Governor was Joseph Wanton Sr., whose election, first in 1769 and each year since, had been as the candidate of the "party" which Hopkins

had long headed, and continued to guide from his position on the bench and seat in the legislature. It also seems clear that the actual burning of the British naval vessel had been carried out by friends and business associates of Hopkins in Providence, including a nephew of the Chief Justice and three other kinsmen by marriage.

This last fact underscored the likelihood that Hopkins' court might well be requested to play a role in the *Gaspee* investigation that could prove most embarrassing. If the instigators and participants were located, the Superior Court would doubtless be asked to order their apprehension and transportation overseas for



this complicated?

prosecution. With this grim possibility in mind, Hopkins rose in his place in the Assembly and asserted that if asked, he would do no such thing, and that he would use all his authority to prevent other officers of the Colony from cooperating to the same end. (He had already found against Lieutenant William Dudingston, captain of the *Gaspee*, in an earlier case involving seizure of goods for customs purposes. The *Gaspee* was in Rhode Island waters to enforce British customs legislation.)

This tangled skein of political interrelationships may well have a faintly familiar ring to students of later Rhode Island history. The politics of the state, it seems, have always been intimate, based on friendship ties, connections, self-interest, and liberally salted with tactics that more fastidious observers like Chief Justice Horsmanden might find questionable.

In taking a look at politics in the years just before the *Gaspee* incident, we can hardly do better than to start with Hopkins. That he was the premier politician of his day in the state will hardly be challenged, save perhaps by lingering supporters of his chief rival, Samuel Ward, if there be any still around.

Stephen Hopkins was born in a section of Cranston that at the time was part of Providence, on March 7th, 1707. Most of his early life was spent in Scituate, however, to which his family moved. He himself married in 1726 and settled down as a young farmer in the town, or the area that was to become the Town of Scituate in 1731. Young Stephen, though only in his twenties, made enough of a mark among his neighbors to be chosen the first Moderator. Then a year later he was chosen Town Clerk and served in that position until he left to move to Providence in

1742. In 1735 he was elected Deputy to represent Scituate in the Assembly. This position he also held until he left the area.

One surmises from this rapid immersion in politics that it was even more true then than now, that movement into local politics was easy, and could well become a stepping stone to a state-wide political career.

William E. Foster, Hopkins' biographer—and a not unfriendly biographer, one might add—makes the point so often made of American political heroes, that his subject was a self-educated and self-made man. The self-educated part perhaps reflects less credit on Hopkins than might otherwise be the case, since it was not a matter of his being deprived by fate of a chance to take advantage of educational opportunities.

Hopkins chose to seek his fortune in Providence.

Rather, education of any formal sort was hard to come by in the colony in the early 18th century.

Foster notes that by 1649 all the New England colonies had adopted systems of compulsory education except Rhode Island. He attributes the laggard tendencies of the latter to the militant separation of church and state fostered by Roger Williams' ideas. The towns were unwilling to appropriate funds for church-connected education and there were very few other sources of educational leadership at the time.

Foster goes on to suggest that the lack of formal schooling and of a college degree did not hamper his hero, who developed a life-long love of learning and habit of reading. Hopkins was instrumental in the founding of Brown University (Rhode Island College as it then was) and in

having it relocated in Providence from Warren. How much farther might this talented man have gone, Foster wonders, beyond the distinguished career he did compile, if he had had the benefit of higher education?

Stephen Hopkins moved to Providence in 1742, apparently because he wanted the wider economic horizons the town would offer. This relocation was not, however, a move from a small rural town to the "big city" to the same degree it might have been years later. Providence too was a pretty small town. In fact, in 1708, the year after Stephen had been born, it boasted just under 1,500 souls. In 1748, six years after his return, it had 3,452 people, not quite three times the population of Scituate in the same year.

The attraction of the larger community was not its metropolitan quality (Newport with its 6,500 people in 1748 was and would remain for some time the metropolis of the colony) but its potential. In this respect it far outstripped Scituate. The only dependable transportation in those days was by water, and Providence sat at the head of a superb waterway. Scituate, by contrast, was virtually unreachable save on horseback or by ox cart: the Assembly could rarely be persuaded to pay for road construction.

In his readopted town, Hopkins became a successful merchant, associated in commercial enterprise with the Browns and other prominent families. He became a community leader, as seen in his interest in education, and in various projects to improve Providence as a market and transportation center. During his lifetime he saw his town advance rapidly as a commercial rival to Newport, and nearly catch up with it in population. Politically, he was instrumental in breaking

what had been a virtual monopoly on the government of the colony by the island city in alliance with the Narragansett territory (South County) planters, but that gets ahead of the story.

In the decades just before the Revolution, the government of Rhode Island was, with Connecticut's, unique among the colonies. Both were governed under royal charters, Rhode Island's having been granted by King Charles II in 1663. The Rhode Island charter was an exceedingly liberal document, and not just in the freedom it provided "in religious concerns."

Perhaps even more important, the state still lived under its own elected governor, deputy governor, other state officers, and ten elected "assistants" who constituted the upper house of the legislature. There was also a lower house comprising six deputies chosen from Newport, four each from Providence, Portsmouth and Warwick, and two each from every additional town carved out of the colony's territory. The state officers served one-year terms following election in May.

These were the bare structural bones on which the flesh and muscle of politics hung. What about the geography of politics? The first thing one notes is that population was very differently distributed over the territory of the colony then.

In 1748, the southern half of the state, Newport and Kings counties, was the populous part with nearly 60% of the state's people. Twenty-six years later, however, just before the Revolution, their share was down to just about an even 50%. Providence County, meanwhile, Hopkins' home area, had jumped from a shade less than 20% to almost a third.

From the standpoint of population strength alone, then, assuming a community of interests be-

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Ward was a 'Planter'

tween Kings County and the Island of Rhode Island, the southern part of the colony should have been able to wield political control. Add to sheer numbers the fact that much of the wealth and cosmopolitan sophistication of the colony also resided in the southern two counties. Newport was a prosperous, cultivated city with a merchant aristocracy and citizens of note like the great philosopher Dean Berkeley (who lived there from 1728 to 1731), and the Rev. Ezra Stiles, later president of Yale.

South County, meanwhile, was almost like a transplanted corner of the old plantation South. Ward, Hopkins' political rival, was a product of this society, having inherited both a plantation near Westerly and thriving mercantile interests in Newport. Hopkins, the northern Rhode Island small farmer turned merchant, came from a quite different part of the colony. Providence was the growing "frontier town" — more parochial and ambitious, less cultivated and refined than the communities to the south. Its hinterland of small towns in Providence County resembled it. It is hardly surprising that there should have developed a

The Ward-Hopkins split pitted north against south.

pattern of factional politics based on this geographic division.

Writing of the 1767 election, Prof. David Lovejoy notes: "The colony was split through the middle from Bristol Ferry due west, with majorities for Hopkins and Ward in towns on the north and south of that line respectively."

Some historians, noting the characteristics of the two sections, have tried to see a "class" division as the basis of factional politics: the sturdy yeoman farmers and newly successful merchants of Providence and its en-

virons versus the plantation and merchant aristocracies of the south. Others have claimed it was really a personality rivalry between Ward and Hopkins. Actually, it was probably to some extent both of these, but one suspects that regional rivalry for political power was very important too.

Newport had monopolized the government virtually since the beginning. Only one of the governors under the 1663 charter who preceded Hopkins had come from Providence County. Most of the rest who had not been born in England came from Newport. It would have been surprising if an increasingly aggressive Providence had not wanted its share of political power even if public office had been less important in tangible ways.

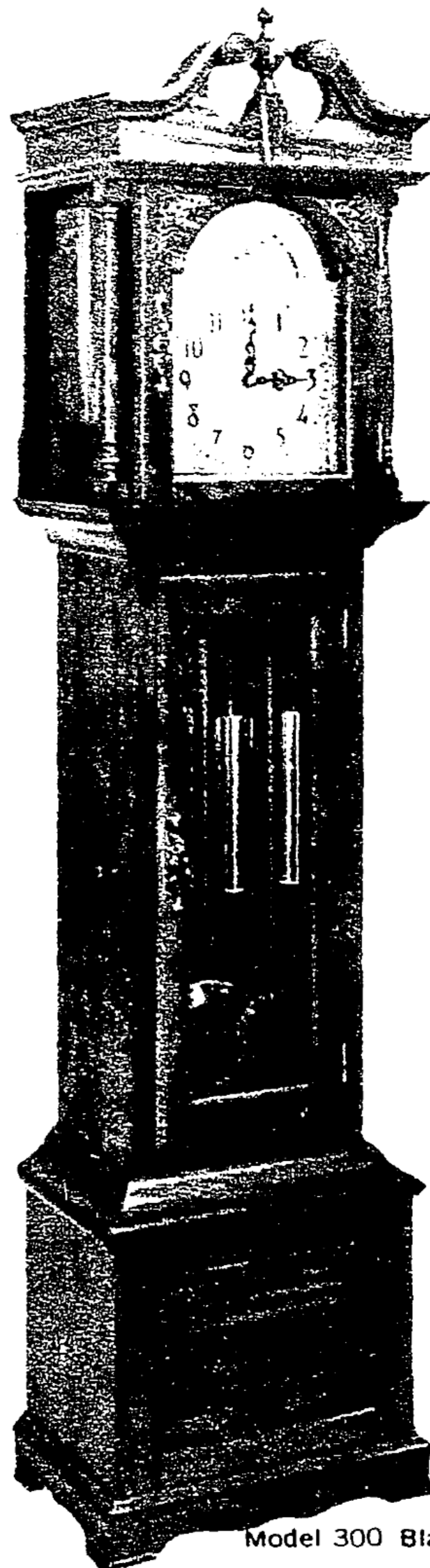
Hopkins was the natural leader of such an effort to redress the balance. He had been elected a deputy to the Assembly from his new home town a scant two years after moving there, and his name is found again in the list of Speakers of the House. He was first chosen to that office while still representing Scituate in 1738.

The elevation of Stephen Hopkins to the Chief Magistracy of the colony for his first term in 1755 launched him on a career as "party" leader and state politician which was to last two decades (and was followed by lengthy service in the Continental Congresses.)

The choice of a Providence candidate for governor seems to have been the outgrowth of a political alliance between the powerful Wanton family of Newport and the Brown family of Providence, both successful mercantile clans. The Wantons needed support in their feud with the Ward family and their allies. The potentially more powerful northern end of this Wanton-Brown axis soon became the dominant force, so that the faction or "party" Hopkins came to lead was really Provi-

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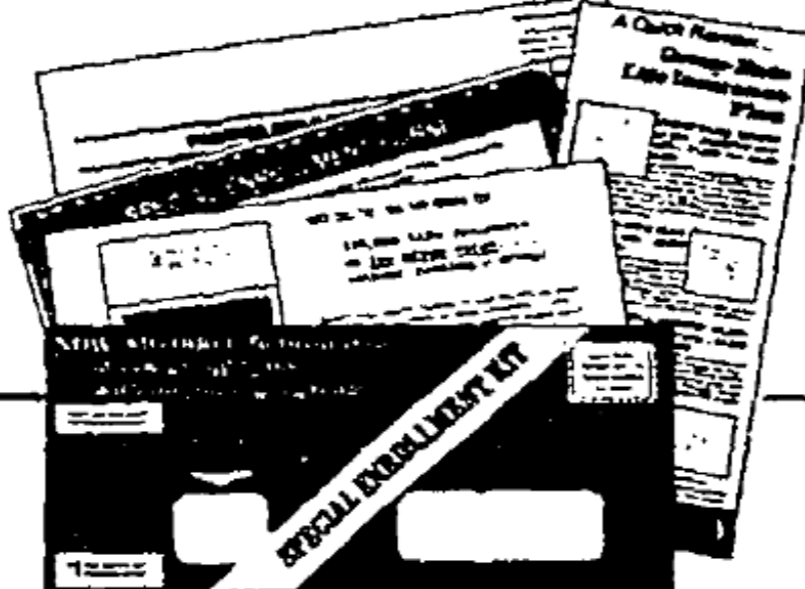
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Winners taxed losers

dence-based, though with some support in the territory of the enemy. The Ward Newport-based faction likewise could count on some northern support.

and More particularly them Who's Surcumstances does not admit their Time to the Injury of their Familys Tho for the good of the Government.

These two groups were political parties in virtually everything but name. They could hardly be parties in name, at least as we know such bodies today, since none had ever really existed up to then. Just like modern parties, however, their prime objective was to win control of the government. This meant winning a majority of the votes of the freemen. (Not all adult males could vote in those days, though property qualifications and similar restrictions probably did not disenfranchise more than a fifth.) The game was, then as now, to win the governorship, the other statewide offices, and majorities in the Assembly.

Campaigning and electioneering tactics were highly developed and bear rather embarrassing similarities to later political eras. Preparations for these annual contests began virtually as soon as the last election was over. More active work began in late February. One of the first things done was the printing of each faction's "prox," or ticket as we might call it today. (The word apparently comes from proxy. The freemen were technically supposed to vote in Newport, but in practice voted by "proxy" from their home towns.) On occasion one faction would print a fake prox to confuse its opponent's followers.

Campaigning, then as now, took money—quite a bit by the standards of the day. The well-kept records of the Browns give us an insight into this side of things for the Hopkins faction:

We the Subscribers Promise to Pay the Sums we have Severaly freely set to our Names, in such articles as may be the most Usefull in procur-ing the free Votes of the poorer sort of Freemen in this County to be De-livered in for the General Officers,

Hopkins had the largest pledge, 800 pounds, with the Brown Brothers down for 1550 pounds and twenty others of the party faithful contributing a total of 5023 pounds (admittedly in depreciated currency). As Lovejoy put it, rum, fish, and corn were used to win the "free votes" in Providence county, while "Votes in towns in the enemy's territory were purchased with cold cash."

The more specific objects of the political game that the Ward and Hopkins factions played were, as they ever have been, control over public policy and patronage. In those simpler days, aside from questions of how to deal with increasing encroachments on their freedoms by the Mother Country which found both groups in substantial agreement, the only major divisive issue was taxes. (Again, note that times have not changed very much!) In particular, what frequently happened was that the faction which had won power manipulated the as-

Patronage jobs were even more important then.

essment of taxes on the towns so that the towns of its opponents paid more than the communities of its friends. This we are less prone to do today—at least so crassly—but shifting the tax burden from one group of citizens to another is by no means unknown in our more enlightened era.

As to patronage, one must bear in mind that Rhode Island as a whole was a relatively poor colony with sparse resources. A patronage position was, therefore, just as it was to be later in the heyday of the big city machine, a sought-after supplement to one's income. And in the Rhode Island

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If it all sounds familiar, it should

of the 1760s and 1770s there were some 250 patronage jobs to which incumbents were elected by the Assembly at its May session. At least three-fifths of these were Justices of the Peace. In addition there were the five county sheriffs (then as now important cogs in the political organizations). The naval officer—or customs collector—was a real plum; and the 30 officers of the militia regiments were also elected, though these positions provided no remuneration. Few of the jobs were salaried, in fact, but most of them provided income in the form of fees that must be paid for services rendered by the office holder.

The courts were also staffed largely by patronage appointees; and in those days you did not need to be a lawyer to be a judge. Stephen Hopkins, Chief Justice of the Superior Court for a number

of terms (by annual election, note), never had studied law formally. Control of the courts was also important beyond patronage. Merchants often found themselves as litigants, and it could be quite helpful if the judge before whom your case was to be heard had been elected by your faction.

Hopkins crushed Ward in 1770.

This system of politics persisted in Rhode Island until in 1770 when the Hopkins faction administered so crushing a defeat on the Ward group that the latter never recovered. From 1772 to the outbreak of the war itself, the Hopkins prox was unopposed. But the Hopkins party found itself in trouble when it became evi-

dent that some of its foremost leaders were Tory in sympathy, and indeed Governor Joseph Wanton had to be deposed in 1775. Presumably this was acutely embarrassing to loyal patriot Hopkins who, together with Samuel Ward until his death in 1776 of smallpox, had been laboring hard for national independence.

An account of 18th century Rhode Island politics is bound to leave one with the comforting or distressing thought (according to taste) that in political matters, there is really nothing very new under the sun. It has all been thought of before, it has all happened before, or at least most of it has. Actually this conclusion is even more fully justified if one recalls that the politics we have

been examining bear a striking resemblance to the factional, patronage-supported politics of the Mother Country in the same period.

Then there is the even more obvious resemblance of 18th century Rhode Island practices with those found in the 19th and 20th centuries. (The euphemism of "payment for time" found in the Brown Brothers' pledge agreement reappears in the vocabulary of the Brayton machine in the 1890s.) The only question is whether the colonists modelled their "wicked machinations of action" (in a contemporary's phrase) on the British, and then passed them on directly to their descendants, or whether politicians in each period learned independently to solve the same problems in the same way. □



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