

# The Ordeal of Governor Joseph Wanton

By ELMER E. CORNWELL JR.

ON APRIL 19, 1769, the Colony of Rhode Island elected Joseph Wanton governor. Six years later, the General Assembly deposed him. By all accounts, he was a reasonable and honorable man who happened to govern at a time when the exercise of reason could be dangerous and honor could look like treason.

Joseph Wanton was a member of a family that had long been prominent in the Newport area, supplying leaders for both the economic and political life of the flourishing seaport on Aquidneck Island. His father William had established himself as a ship-builder, and ultimately was elected governor in 1732. He died in office the following year. Joseph's son, Joseph Jr., had served as deputy governor in 1764 and 1765. Other members of the large clan also had been active. Joseph, however, seems to have devoted himself to his extensive mercantile interests until his election at the advanced age of 64.

He came to the governor's chair at a trouble time. Already there had been a long history of friction between the colonies and the Mother Country. Since much of it focused on questions of trade and the taxation of imports, merchants like Wanton, and indeed many of the political leaders of the colony, had strong feelings and vital interests.

But if these concerns were likely to produce a bond of sympathy between the new governor and the more ardent patriots, there were other influences that seemingly had the opposite tendency. Joseph Wanton was an Anglican. He did not, that is, adhere to one of the more popular religious persuasions in the Colony: the Baptists or the Congregationalists. His Anglicanism was the result of a curious historical accident.

Joseph's father, Governor William, so the story goes, who then lived in Scituate, Massachusetts, was paying court to Ruth, the beautiful daughter of Deacon John Bryant. The Bryants

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were strict Presbyterians, and the Wantons were Quakers. The Deacon opposed the match on religious grounds. William, a man of spirit and decision, finally called upon Ruth one day, and in the presence of her family made a bold proposal to "cut the knot of difficulty. I will leave the Quakers, and thou shalt leave the Presbyterians. We will both go to the Church of England and to the devil together." Ruth agreed and they were married in 1691.

Joseph, the seventh child of this union, inherited the family religious persuasion. How much this predisposed him later to the Tory cause we can only guess. That the Anglicans seemed to have such an affinity rather more than the other denominations is clear — and hardly surprising. The Church of England tied its colonial communicants more tightly to the Mother Country than did the more democratic dissenting sects, some of which were native to the American soil.

What led Joseph Wanton to join the political wars at a stage in life when most men look forward to a sedate and comfortable old age? One might spin theories about public service, sense of duty, or the like. No doubt these played their part. The most likely explanation, however, as often in politics, seems to have been more immediate and practical.

For more than a decade the colony had alternately entrusted control of her affairs to one of two political "factions" which were the political parties of their day. One of these was led by Samuel Ward of Westerly, and the other by Stephen Hopkins of Providence. Both drew support from Newport, but the Hopkins faction, with the Wantons prominent among its allies in the southern part of the colony, had done particularly well. Its leader had been governor for seven of the years since 1758. Joseph Wanton Jr. had served as deputy governor under Hopkins.

By 1768, with the threat to Rhode Island from the actions of the English Parliament looming more and more ominously on the horizon, there was a move to end the "intestine broils" of factional rivalry with a coalition. It was an ingenious if precarious arrangement. The Hopkins faction was

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to name the candidate for governor from the supporters of the rival Ward group, and the Ward people in turn would choose the deputy governor from the Hopkins cohorts. The other offices were similarly divided up.

By 1769 the troubles of the ill-starred coalition had multiplied. It had been impossible to maintain the delicate balance between the two groups. The Hopkins faction (rightly, so it appears) felt that they had been given the short end of the stick at the expense of the Ward people. As the new election approached Joseph Wanton Jr., the "boss" of the Newport section of the Hopkins faction, persuaded Hopkins and most of his Providence associates that they should support his father for governor in 1769.

In this campaign, there were dark hints that some in the Newport Hopkins group were enemies of religious liberty because of Anglican connections, or actually were Tory sympathizers. Perhaps to offset these accusations the Wanton prox (ballot) bore the motto: "American Liberty." When the votes were counted, Wanton had won overwhelmingly, displaying a popularity which for several years would outweigh any doubts as to his loyalty. After defeating Samuel Ward in 1770, Wanton faced little opposition until 1775.

The new governor took the oath in early May, 1769. He may have come to active politics late in life, but he had no difficulty fitting into his new role. One of his early actions was to reward his son with appointment to the chief patronage office in the governor's gift, that of Naval Officer (actually customs officer). But stern tests lay ahead. He had taken over the leadership of the colony's government at a fateful time indeed.

Governor Wanton had been in office but a few weeks when a revenue vessel named the *Liberty* operating in the Bay incurred the ire of the Rhode Islanders. She was boarded, her cables cut, and when she drifted ashore, she was burned, her boats were paraded through the streets and also burned.

Wanton responded to the resulting rebuke from the British government by stoutly denying that the blame lay with the colony or its officials, but rather with the abuses perpetrated by

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Crown customs officials. He did issue a proclamation calling for the arrest of those responsible for destruction of the *Liberty*. Not surprisingly, no one was brought to justice.

In 1771, the governor talked of retirement because of ill-health, but was persuaded to remain in office lest factional rivalries break out again. Before his next term expired he would have the *Gaspee* affair to deal with. This armed schooner had been sent to the Bay by the Royal Navy in March 1772, and soon made itself intensely unpopular. Governor Wanton sent the high sheriff to Lieutenant Dudingston, who commanded the vessel, demanding that the latter present his commission to the governor. This demand was refused in an insolent manner, and eventually Wanton had recourse to correspondence with Dudingston's superior, Admiral Montagu, in Boston.

The Admiral took his subordinate's side. He too showed little respect to the office of governor, and among other things told him he had no right to send his sheriff aboard one of His Majesty's vessels. To this point a thoroughly annoyed Wanton rejoined that he would "send the sheriff of this Colony at any time, and to any place within the body of it, as I shall think fit." Loyal to the Crown he might be, but he intended to take no nonsense from its officious representatives. He told the Assembly that he did not "receive instructions for the administration of my government from the King's Admiral. . . ."

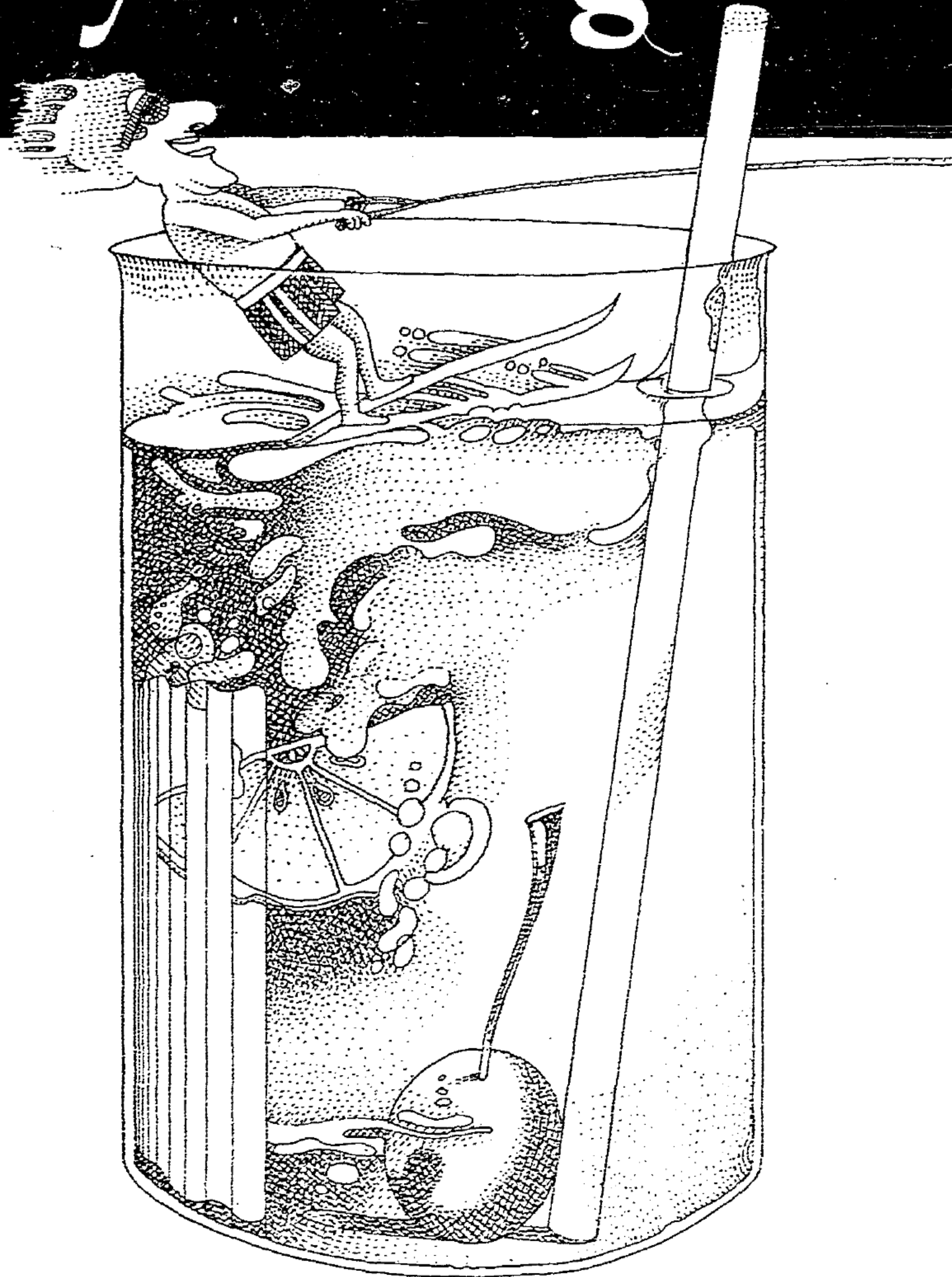
On the night of June 10, 1772, the *Gaspee* was burned by a party from Providence. The awkwardness of Governor Wanton's position in this affair is obvious. He dutifully issued a proclamation offering a reward for evidence to convict those guilty. There can hardly be the slightest doubt but that he, along with most of the rest of the population of the colony, knew perfectly well who had been involved.

This vital information almost emerged when a slave belonging to one of the participants escaped from his master and gave the British officials a list of their names. This was sent to Wanton by Admiral Montagu with instructions for the arrest of the persons named. Instead of carrying out the order, the governor sent depositions to the Admiral which purported to invalidate the slave's testimony.

In September the King appointed a royal commission to look into the matter. Governor Wanton was made

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a member, the only one from Rhode Island. This body assembled in early 1773, went through the motions of conducting an investigation, but reported no success. Wanton's associates on the commission were clearly loyalists, so one must assume the governor had a good deal to do with insuring that result.

Following this first show of open and bloody opposition to the British government, the pace of events began to quicken. Tea became the focus of the next *cause celebre*. The Boston Tea Party took place in December of 1773. Citizens meetings in Rhode Island at the start of the new year resolved that attempts to land tea here would be resisted, and pledged solidarity with the other colonies. In March of 1774 Parliament passed punitive legislation closing the port of Boston. At the same time, General Gage was instructed to assume the governorship of Massachusetts in addition to his duties as military commander in the colonies. He went to Boston supported by four regiments of British troops.

These events in our neighboring colony stirred Rhode Island to action. There was, most notably, a re-

## 'Was this the response of a Tory?'

newed interest in military preparedness. Private groups of men assembled, armed themselves, and drilled. At the fall session of the Assembly a flurry of charters were granted for military organizations in various communities in the Colony.

We can only speculate as to the state of mind of Governor Wanton while these actions crowded on one another's heels. Though he may have had misgivings about the course of events, his outward behavior and official acts showed nothing but loyalty to the colony and a determination to preserve its freedom from interference. As late as December, 1774, only four months before the climactic events at Lexington and Concord, a special session of the General Assembly ordered the cannon and stores removed from Fort George to Provi-

dence lest they fall into the hands of Captain Wallace of His Majesty's Frigate *Rose*. When Wallace demanded of the governor an explanation of this act, Wanton boldly replied that they had been removed to prevent their seizure, and that they would be used against any enemy of the colony.

Was this the response of a loyalist, a Tory? What was Joseph Wanton's position? He differed in his view of the situation, we can assume, only in degree from the position of the out-and-out patriots. He no less than they cherished the freedom the colony had long enjoyed to run its own affairs under her charter. Particularly, as a merchant, he bitterly resented commercial interference from England. There was no disagreement on that either. He hardly more than they thought of himself as an Englishman as well as an "American" and entitled to the rights Englishmen enjoyed in return for loyalty to the Crown. (Attitudes toward the ministers or to Parliament were something else again.)

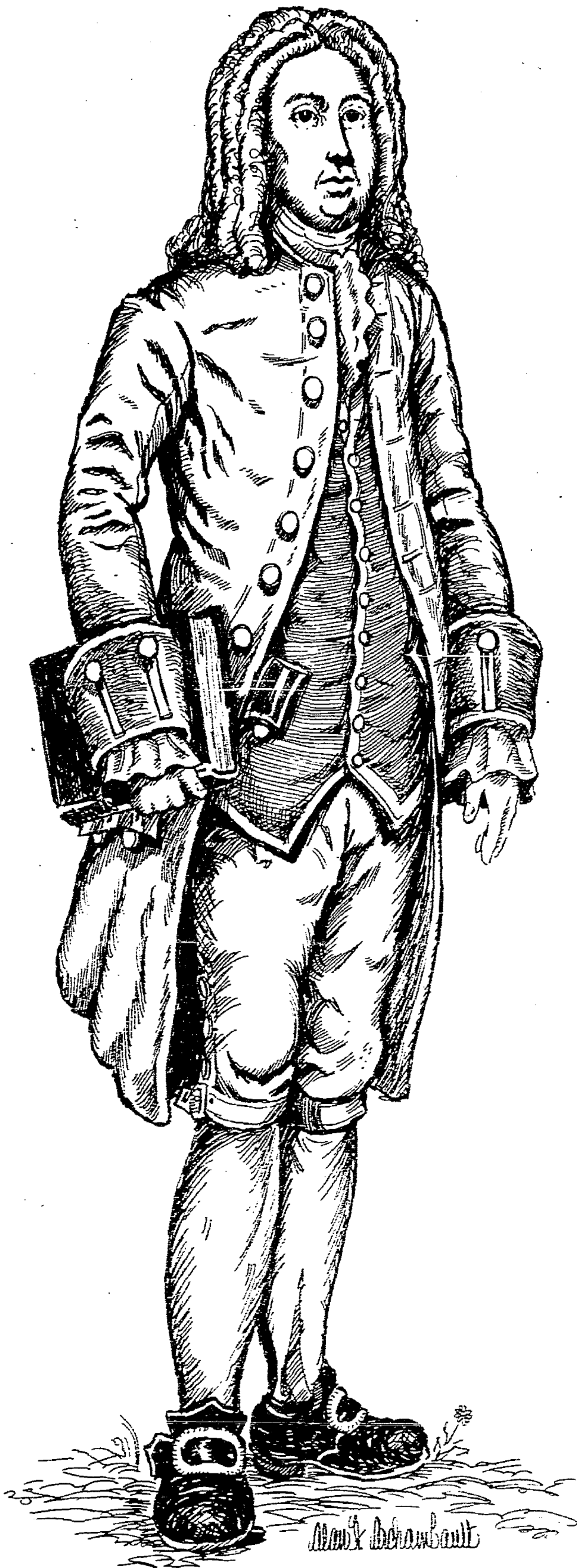
Thus he could condone and even applaud the resistance of the colony (and her fellow colonies) up to April of 1775. She was doing no more than vindicating her rights and those of her citizens. And yet he must have been apprehensive as the year 1775 began. In a few months he would be 70 years of age. Another election soon would be held. The lines between the "sons of liberty" and the "sons of tyranny" were rapidly sharpening and becoming more bitter. Toryism became a more and more vicious charge.

The year before, the governor's son Joseph had been so accused, and had lost his seat in the Assembly. As April approached, for the first time in five years, opposition to his own candidacy was organized. One group, it was announced, was "well satisfied that he was a Tory." William Greene of Warwick became the anti-Wanton candidate on a prox headed "Liberty and no Tories." The *Newport Mercury* wrote that if the people allowed themselves to be fooled by Tories, there would be no more free elections.

The governor retorted that his enemies were trying to mislead the people, and challenged anyone to produce a single instance when he had allowed any invasion of the colony's "invaluable Charter privileges."

Ballots for governor were cast, ironically, on April 19th, the very day of the Battle of Lexington. That evening the freemen of the colony learned of this battle and at the same

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time, that Joseph Wanton had been elected to his seventh term as governor.

Three days later the Assembly met and voted to raise an "army of observation" of 1,500 men "to repel any insult or violence" or to be sent to the aid of other colonies if need be. The moment of irrevocable choice had arrived both for the colonies, and in Rhode Island, for Joseph Wanton. The *Newport Mercury* was writing of the commencement of the "American Civil War."

The governor dissented from the Assembly's action as an act of war, and a violation of his oath of allegiance to the Crown. By so doing he branded himself a Tory.

He did his best to prevent the carrying out of what he was convinced was a fatal policy. He had no veto, but he refused to sign the commissions of the officers of the new "army." He

absented himself from the early May session of the Assembly at which he would otherwise have been sworn in for his new term, and the legislators, now thoroughly aroused against him, declared his office vacant.

Little heed was paid to his written statement of his views. Wanton insisted that the tie with the Mother Country was vital and must be retained, and that the colony's charter must not be lost. Quite understandably he seemed convinced that the horrors of civil war could only bring fatal consequences. He would go far in protecting the liberties of Rhode Islanders, but could not go that far.

Those bent on revolution are not tolerant of dissent, and Wanton paid the price. He did not flee to Nova Scotia as many Tories did, but saw his estates and those of his son confiscated and sold. He lived quietly during the British occupation, and was unmolested when the troops departed. In fact, he retained the respect of the citizenry.

Joseph Wanton died in Newport in 1780, at the age of 75. □

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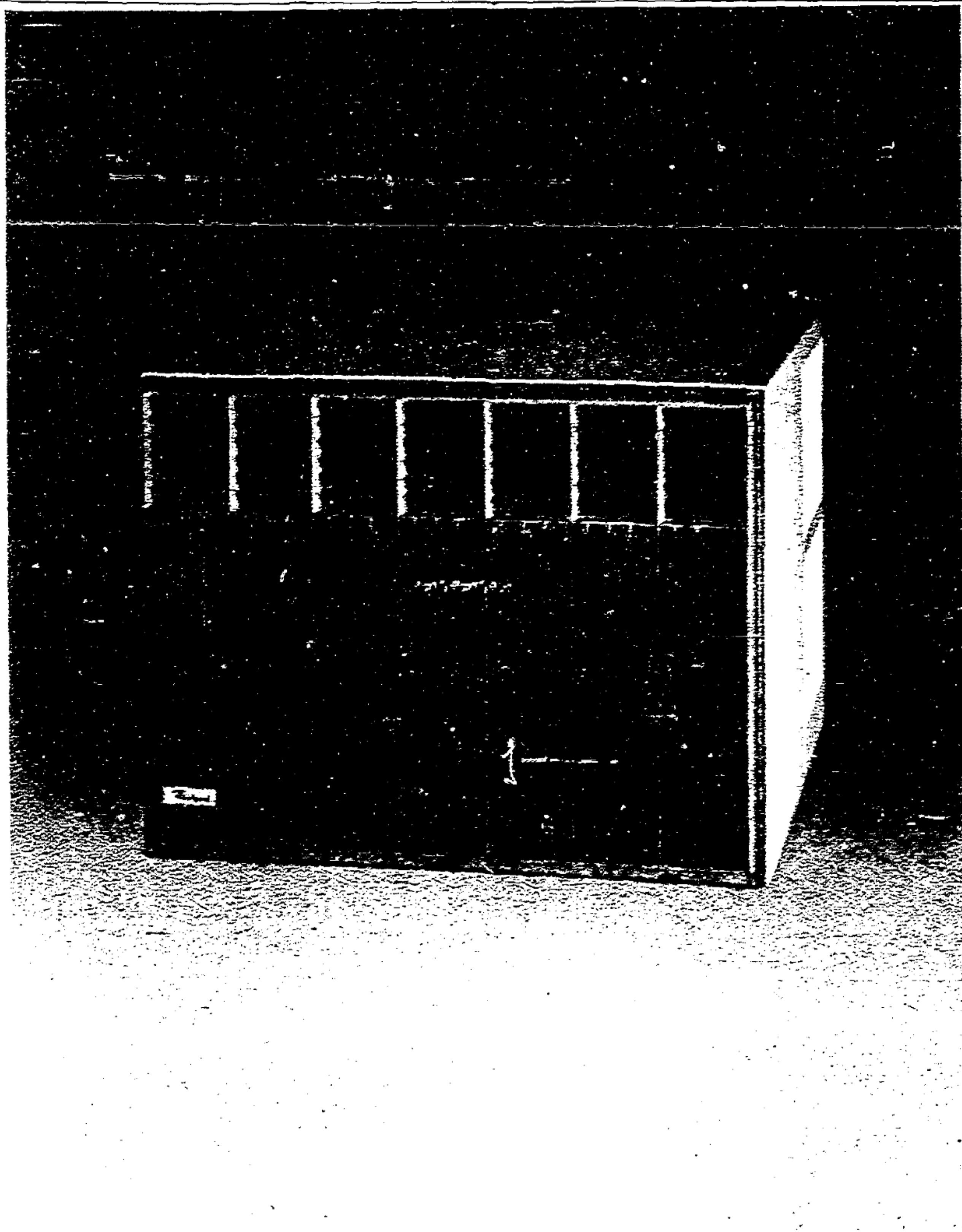
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