



## THE NEGRO IN RHODE ISLAND

# From slavery to community

If I am not for myself,  
Who is for me?  
If I am for myself alone,  
What am I?  
If not now,  
When?

— Hillel

*This account of the Negroes' history in Rhode Island is a collaborative effort by CHARLES H. DURANT 3rd., SORAYA MOORE, ARLINE R. KIVEN and BRADFORD F. SWAN.*

THERE IS A regrettable tendency on the part of many Rhode Islanders to discuss current black-white confrontations as isolated events of the Sixties. This is at best a nursery-rhyme approach to the historical process. What some call the "black problem" is an outgrowth of area slavery, migration, urbanization, increasing self-consciousness, and increasing alienation.

The factor of community, which is central to our understanding of the black-white situation, is analyzed on the basis of black decision-makers of the past and their success or failure in being able to relate to the white power structure. The factor of control is approached from the standpoint of the revolution in the use of words. Emphasis is placed on the quest for identity on the part of black men who have been denied an acceptable image of themselves by the larger societies' unilateral acceptance of stereotyped terms and meanings.

A community is a body of people sharing common expectations and common obligations. Real community is based on reciprocity of emotion and relations between individuals sharing a common vision of the possibilities and potentialities of man. The basic fact of race relations in Rhode Island is that white people and blacks do not belong to the same community. White people, with a few ex-

ceptions, do not feel that they have qualified moral obligations to blacks, in self-defense, return compliment. It all began, of course long time ago.

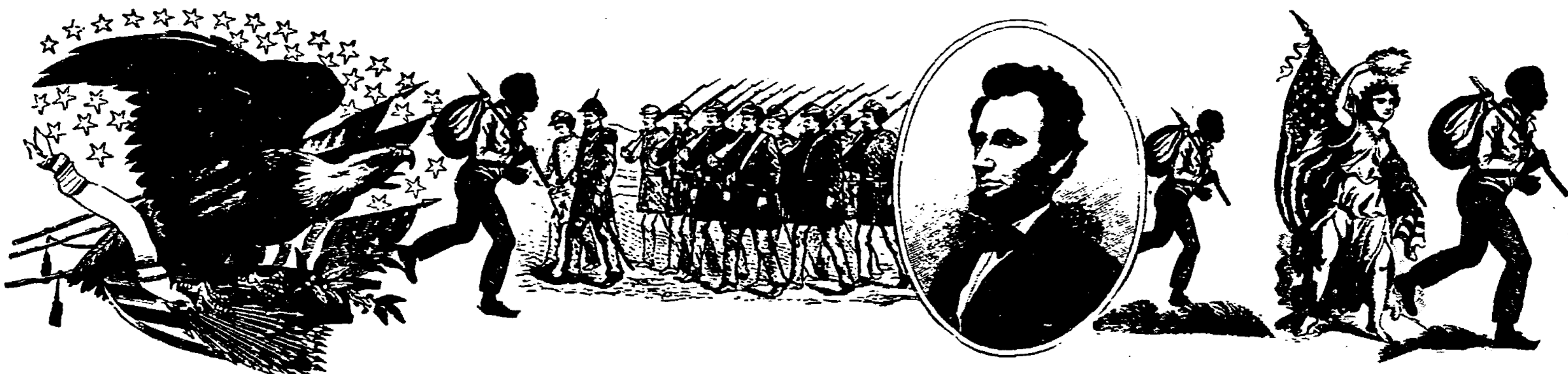
### I — SLAVERY

HISTORIANS generally agree that slavery was introduced in Rhode Island when the brig *Sflower* came to Newport in 1677.

The Narragansett Country in southern Rhode Island was clearly marked by the institution of slavery, and by 1750 Newport had become the leading slave market on the Atlantic coast, with Bristol ranked second, and Charleston, South Carolina, third.

Rhode Island slaves generally followed a set route which became known as the Triangular Trade in the Eighteenth Century. Taking a cargo of rum from the local distilleries in Newport (there were more than 25 there) slave traders would sail to the coast of Africa where they bartered with native chieftains and exchanged the rum for slaves. This human cargo was taken to the West Indies and there some slaves were exchanged for molasses, which was brought home as the raw material for making Rhode Island rum, along with the remaining blacks.

Puritan merchants, many from especially prominent families, found the slave trade a most lucrative form of commerce. Much of the wealth, politics, and culture of New England can be attributed to this trade. Although the internal slave trade was comparatively smaller than that of





Southern states, there was still the effect of institutionally accepted slavery, which brought about tragedy in the black family, annihilated one's personality, and confined him to a lower order of humanity.

Although the Puritans went to the greatest lengths to safeguard the integrity of their own families, they were unable or unwilling to extend the same protection to the slave family. On too many occasions Puritan love of money proved stronger than respect for domestic ties.

Slave owners often justified their actions on the highest spiritual grounds. Slavery, they maintained, was established by the law of God in Israel and, since they regarded themselves as the elect of God, New Englanders looked upon the enslavement of Indians and blacks as a sacred privilege which Divine Providence was pleased to grant His chosen people. Under this divine edict not only could a devout Rhode Island elder engage in the slave trade but he could also rejoice that "an overruling Providence had been pleased to bring to this land of freedom another cargo of benighted heathens to enjoy the blessings of a Gospel dispensation."

The black population was very dense in South Kingstown. Consequently, a strict slave code was enacted, not unlike the "Black Codes" of the South, to lessen the threat of slave uprisings.

Yet, in 1774, primarily because of Quaker influence, the General Assembly of Rhode Island passed an act prohibiting the importation of blacks into the colony.

Four years later, in 1778, in the midst of the Revolutionary War, the cause of freedom in Rhode Island appeared all but lost. For two and a half years Rhode Islanders had been fighting for their independence, and by February, 1778, they were confronted by the dismal fact that their forces were depleted and that Newport and much of the state was in British hands.

## II — WAR

**D**ESPERATELY in need of more soldiers, the General Assembly passed an act providing for the enlistment of slaves into the militia. Up to £120 was to be paid to the master or mistress of each slave enlisted and every slave thus purchased was "to be immediately discharged from the service of his master or mistress and be absolutely free, as though he had never been encumbered with any kind of servitude or slavery."

Less than two months after the passage of this act the first black regiment was formed and was receiving daily instruction in the art of war under its Rhode Island commander, James M. Varnum. More than 210 men served in this black regiment.

The regiment played a heroic role in the war and disproved assertions that the slave was lazy and could do nothing but sing. Probably the most famous exploit of Rhode Island's celebrated black regiment was performed in the Battle of Rhode Island. On August 24, 1778, the black soldiers three times threw back the charges of

Hessian mercenaries. According to tradition, on the day following this disastrous defeat the Hessian colonel applied for a new assignment, fearing rebellion among his own troops because of the losses they had suffered.

The black regiment continued to serve, and suffered heavy losses in the Battle of Point Bridge, New York, on May 13, 1781. After America had won her independence the people of Rhode Island could not easily forget their debt to the blacks. They remembered the stories of valor in those fateful hours during the Battle of Rhode Island, and for those short of memory Bristol Rhodes, a black who had left an arm and a leg on the battlefield of Yorktown, was a constant reminder that sacrifices for freedom had been made by men of all complexions.

## III — ABOLITION

**I**N FEBRUARY, 1784, a Rhode Island law was passed providing for the gradual abolition of slavery in this state. Under its provisions all children born into slavery after March 1, 1784, were declared free and the responsibility of their education was to be borne by the master involved.

The last act regarding the slave issue was passed in 1787. By this act the slave trade in the state was abolished and so was slave trading with the West Indies. The law provided for a fine of £100 for each person imported and a fine of £1,000 for the ship engaged in the traffic.

Commendable as this legislation was, it still left much to be desired. For

instance, persons held in slavery prior to 1784 were not benefited by its provisions. As a result, slavery lingered for some years after 1784. It is estimated that in 1810 there were 108 slaves in Newport, and ten years later there were 47. The last known slave in Rhode Island, James Howland, died in Jamestown on January 3, 1859, the 100th anniversary of his birth.

## IV — OPPRESSION

**T**HE YEARS between 1784 and 1820 were a period of transition for blacks in Rhode Island. During these years the number of free blacks in the state increased while the number of slaves decreased. Economically the status of the free blacks was inferior to that of the slaves. Whereas in slavery every type of employment was open to them, in freedom, faced with the combined competition of slaves, indentured servants, and free white workmen, the freedmen were confined largely to domestic service.

Prejudice also contributed to their economic difficulties. A few blacks found work on the farms, on trading and whaling vessels, or in menial jobs, but only in the face of mounting hostility on the part of white workmen who, after the Emancipation Proclamation, often showed their antagonism by insulting and beating blacks and in riots against them.

This hostility received dramatic emphasis in the Providence riots of 1824 and 1831.

The first disturbance, known as the Hard Scrabble riot, took place on the

►19



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## HISTORY

# 'Getting it together' began in the 19th century

low ground beyond the old cemetery on North Main Street. The violence was touched off on an October evening when "a sort of battle royal took place between considerable parties of whites and blacks, in consequence of an attempt of the former to maintain the inside walk as they strolled through the town." (In other words, the whites tried to make the blacks get off the sidewalk and take to the gutter.)

The following morning a notice was posted on the bridge calling for a mob to assemble that night. Between four and five hundred persons responded to this call. The mob descended upon Hard Scrabble "and in the short space of four or five hours leveled it with the ground."

After the houses had been destroyed the rioters turned their attention to the household goods which remained, and it is reported that many of these belongings were carted off to Pawtucket where they were sold at auction.

How the residents of Hard Scrabble survived is not known, but perhaps some of them followed the example of one man who pulled the roof of his

demolished house over the cellar hole, where he lived through the winter.

The second disturbance is commonly referred to as the Snow Town incident. It flared up abruptly on the evening of September 21, 1831. The specific cause of the riot is somewhat obscure. Apparently five sailors had "a row with darkies" at the foot of Olney Street. A crowd of about a hundred persons assembled and the sailors, with this mob at their heels, advanced up Olney's Lane into the black section. A gun was fired from one of the dwellings at the invaders, and one of the sailors was shot and killed. Word of the shooting spread rapidly through the town and within a half-hour a still larger mob charged into Snow Town, which suffered the loss of many houses and damage to many others.

These two riots were typical of the tensions existing between the freed blacks and white workmen. Frequently forced into idleness because of their inability to find work, the freedmen were often stigmatized as a lazy and dissolute class. Socially, too, the freedmen faced discrimination.

In the towns they were largely confined to the alleys, near the docks and along the river fronts. They were not generally permitted to send their children to the public schools, and on certain occasions they were forbidden to appear in public places. Like the slaves, they were segregated in the churches and were buried in a separate corner of the graveyard.

## V — COMMUNITY

**T**HE PERIOD from 1820 to 1840 saw the emergence of a black community within the state.

Probably the first attempt made by Rhode Island blacks to organize for their own improvement occurred at the home of Abraham Casey in Newport on November 10, 1780, when Newport Gardner, Prince Almy, Lyman Keith, and others established the African Union Society.

The purpose of this organization was to promote the welfare of the black community by providing a record of births, deaths, and marriages (often a better record than that kept by the

town); by helping to apprentice Negroes; and by assisting members in times of distress. Crippled most of the time by a lack of funds, the Society was probably most important for the moral influence it exercised over its members.

"We beseech you to reflect," the Society stated, "that it is by your good conduct alone that you can refute the objections which have been made against you as rational and moral creatures..."

The African Union Society may also be responsible for the custom observed by Newport blacks of gathering every fourth Thursday in April for a Thanksgiving service. Newport Gardner, a leader in the Society, wrote the 1791 proclamation in which he called upon his fellows to give thanks that "Almighty God has of late been pleased to raise up many to compassionate and befriend poor Africans."

The first formal attempt to educate black children in this state was made by the Rev. Marmaduke Brown, rector of Trinity Church in Newport. In October, 1763, he opened a school for

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STOMACH  
CAN  
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## HISTORY

# Laying the foundations of self-assertion

black children at the corner of Division and Mary streets in Newport. This school, accommodating about 30 pupils, was among the first to be established in America for the exclusive benefit of black children.

As conditions improved after the close of the Revolutionary War the more progressive members of the black race saw the need for better educational facilities for black children. On December 21, 1807, a number of blacks met in the evening at the home of Newport Gardner on Pope Street in Newport. They came together to discuss ways and means of opening and conducting a school for black children in Newport. The meeting was adjourned until January 1, 1808, when it was reconvened at the same address with a much larger attendance. At this second meeting those present organized themselves into the African Benevolent Society with the sole purpose of opening and maintaining a school for the black children.

A constitution was adopted, which provided for officers (a board of nine directors, five of whom should be black) and fixed the yearly fee at 50 cents. Newport Gardner was elected president and Isaac Rice secretary.

Steps were taken immediately to put the old schoolhouse, abandoned in 1799, in good order. This required considerable expense, but it was met when the African Union Society of Newport voted at its March meeting to merge with the new society and turn all its assets into the treasury.

By October 10, 1808, the schoolhouse in Newport was ready for occupancy and was formally opened with Newport Gardner and Patience D'Lyma as teachers. The school continued to run until the city of Newport took over the education of black children at mid-century.

With the exception of these two Newport organizations, however, and the founding of Hiram Lodge No. 3 in 1799, said to be the second oldest black chapter in Masonic history, little had been done toward building a black community.

But the time was fast approaching when the black populace would create its own institutions.

The opening of the African Union Meeting House in Providence in 1820 was the symbol of a new day for religious services. In June, 1820, the first worship service was held in this meeting house.

In 1824 the black citizens of Newport, led by the African Benevolent Society, purchased a lot at the corner of Church and Division streets and erected there the first black church in that part of the state. The Rev. Jacob C. Perry, a native of Narragansett, became the first pastor of this Colored Union Church.

Between 1820 and 1840 several other black churches were opened. In 1835 the Fourth Baptist Meeting House in Newport was established. In 1837 the African Methodist Episcopal Church appeared in Providence. In 1830 a splinter group from the African Union Meeting House organized a Free Will Baptist Church, commonly called the Pond Street Baptist Church; it is now known as the Second Free Will Baptist Church.

Similar steps were taken in founding schools. In 1836 the Rev. J. W. Lewis, a black minister in Providence, established the New England Union Academy, which offered such courses as history, botany, bookkeeping, and natural philosophy.

The city of Providence voted in 1838 to support two schools, one on Meeting Street and the other on Pond Street, solely for the use of black children.

Also, several social societies were established during this period. William Brown recalled that in the 1820s the Mutual Relief Society and the Young Men's Union Funds Society were organized in Providence; the former was a social club for the young men. In 1832 the Providence Temperance Society was founded at a time when the temperance movement was gaining in popularity all over the country. This society at one time had as many as 200 members.

## VI — SUFFRAGE

UNLIKE most other states, Rhode Island did not frame a new constitution after the Revolutionary War but continued to operate under

the colonial charter of 1663. As a result a large number of Rhode Island citizens found themselves deprived of the right to vote. These men were brought together by the common purpose of winning the right to vote and they formed the Suffrage Party. They were opposed by the anti-suffrage or Legal Party, composed primarily of men of property and their oldest sons, who possessed the right to vote under the 1663 Charter and were thus able to maintain themselves in power.

By the summer of 1841 the dispute between the two parties had become extremely bitter and the members of the Suffrage Party, under the leadership of the fiery and idealistic Thomas Wilson Dorr, began planning to call a convention to frame a new constitution. In the midst of these preparations they were faced with the question of whether their program would include black as well as white citizens, for the blacks had long been ineligible to vote.

At a meeting of the Suffrage Party in Providence on September 27, 1841, nominations were sought for the office of treasurer. Two reports were brought in by the executive committee. The majority report favored Alfred Niger for the office; the minority report favored Thomas Greene. Acting upon a suggestion from the floor that Mr. Niger was a black, the Suffragists voted not to receive the majority report and the meeting fell into confusion.

Disputes over the question of black suffrage continually arose. In the end, however, despite the opposition of Dorr himself, the delegates to the Suffrage Party convention voted 46 to 18 to retain the word "white" in the clause in their proposed constitution defining the qualifications for voting.

The dispute between the two parties became extremely vehement and in February, 1842, to appease the Dorr-ites and prevent a possible outbreak of violence, the Legal Party had its own convention. It, too, voted to deprive blacks of the right to vote.

Acting in accordance with their constitution the Suffragists elected their own candidates to office and declared theirs to be the legal government of the state. The existing govern-

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**HISTORY**

**Finding a voice**

ment, dominated by the Legal Party, declared martial law, called out the militia, and sought to crush the "rebellion" by force of arms.

In this critical period, it appeared that the black citizens were drawn into the ranks of the Legal Party. William Brown, a leader in the black community, estimated that more than 200 blacks in Providence alone enlisted in the militia. What effect this had on the outcome of the struggle is uncertain, but what is known is that Dorr and his supporters were crushed.

No sooner were the Suffragists defeated than the Legal Party, now firmly in control of the state, pushed through a new constitution on November 18, 1842, which allowed blacks to vote.

The role played by the blacks in the Dorr Rebellion has more than ordinary significance. During the decades between 1820 and 1840 the blacks forged the links of a definite community structure and by 1841 the black community represented a force for which rival politicians were forced to compete.

contended that the establishment of separate schools for black children "wars against the principles of the state."

In March, 1859, the Committee on Education reported to the General Assembly on a petition signed by Isaac Rice and 338 other citizens, protesting the segregation of schools.

Downing's fear was realized in 1865 when the majority of the Committee on Education brought in a report which required each town to admit blacks to public schools or to provide them with separate schools, "equal in appointments, instruction and grades to other public schools in the same town or city."

Blacks again brought the protest petition before the General Assembly in 1866. The Committee on Education at last brought in a report which asserted that segregated schools, contrary to the spirit of the state constitution, had been established "by a prejudice stronger than the constitution and stronger than justice." The Committee therefore recommended that the petitioners' request be granted and that separate schools for black children be abolished. Complying with this report, the General Assembly on March 7, 1866, wrote the following sentence into the statute books:

**VII — CIVIL RIGHTS**

**P**ROBABLY the most famous black in the state during the last half of the 19th Century and the man most responsible for abolishing segregated schools was George Downing. Choosing to make his home in Rhode Island, he came from New York to Providence in 1850. A struggle evolved when the Newport schools refused to admit his children as students. The issue was fairly drawn between public and segregated education in the state, and the injured minority was assured of vigorous, intelligent leadership.

The city had previously taken on the responsibility of educating the black children. At best, however, it was a hesitant step in the direction of equal citizenship, for the two races of children were separated.

George Downing published a broadside putting the black position before the public. Maintaining that public schools were state institutions supported by taxation and that blacks were citizens of the state, taxed in common with other citizens, Downing

"In deciding upon the application for admission to any school in this State, maintained wholly or in part at the public expense, no distinction shall be made on account of the race or color of the applicant."

A continuation of this momentum came on March 23, 1881, when Rhode Island repealed a 1701 act and recognized for the first time a marriage between a white and a black citizen. In 1885, another civil rights law was passed, according to which no person was to be denied the facilities of any licensed place of public amusement "on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude." The act also made it an offense to disqualify any citizen from jury service on account of color.

On January 12, 1914, the original meeting of the Providence Branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was held in Odd Fellows Hall on North Main Street. And in the summer of 1939 a landmark was passed in the his-

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tory of the black man in Rhode Island with the founding of the Providence Urban League. Organized on an inter-racial basis, the League pledged itself to improve the economic, social, and cultural conditions of blacks and to promote inter-racial understanding and cooperation in Providence.

Then came the Rhode Island Commission Against Discrimination (now Commission on Human Rights) which was established in 1952, and the Providence Human Relations Commission in September of 1963.

The most recent landmark of the black community is the establishment of the Afro-American Art Center in December, 1968, which seeks to stimulate greater esthetic interests in individuals from impoverished neighborhoods and contribute to self-development.

## EPILOGUE

**N**O LONGER does the black believe that white is always right. The black community, in the person of its

most gifted members, is moving within itself and taking a more objective stance toward American culture. It is beginning to redefine itself and of necessity to redefine the white man.

This is a desperately serious business, an attempt to grasp from the white man's books and his images and myths a lost and devalued part of ourselves. What black citizens of Rhode Island are doing, at best, is wrestling the black image from white control. The black image in Rhode Island, as it is elsewhere across the nation, is basically a contrast conception, one part of the familiar dichotomies of good-evil, clean-dirty, white-black. In the past, some blacks attempted to define themselves by becoming counter-contrast conceptions, by becoming in short, opposite blacks, opposite, that is, to what white men said blacks were.

The strategy is now being abandoned by those of influence who say that white Americans can no longer tell them who they are, and where they came from and where they should want to go. Refusing to be bound by

the white man's definitions, they contend that the black is not a white man with black skin, but simply a man, undefined, unpredictable, free.

Seen within this context the black-white crisis which many individuals in this state have been involved in recently becomes an act of affirmation, a creative leap into being, a leap directly related to the crises of culture in the heart of not only this nation but the world as well.

In the historically direct circumstances of fear and trembling, in blood and suffering, the black man in Rhode Island has retained a certain dark joy, a zest for life, a creative capacity for meeting adversity and transcending it, that is beautiful and meaningful.

It was this that undoubtedly inspired W.E.B. DuBois to say that there was something strange and holy about the ghetto's Saturday-night. He was not talking about race, nor a romanticized ghetto. He was trying to get at the terrible aliveness of that night. He was talking not about blacks

but about life: good and bad, preachers and prostitutes, gin and champagne, tragedy and triumph, having and not having, giving and taking, losing and winning — LIFE.

Today, black Rhode Islanders are daring to ask the question "Not free from what, but free for what?" Today they are not only attacking racism but hypocrisy, black and white. They are not only demanding respect but are seeking a society open to all for the creative possibilities in man. They are demanding integration but they are thinking beyond integration, and saying: "Not integration, but transformation, with the personal conviction that the darkness is light enough." □

Much of the information in this account comes from the following sources: *Negroes on the Island of Rhode Island*, by Charles A. Battle (June 14, 1932); *From Slave to Citizen — The Story of the Negro in Rhode Island*, by Irving H. Bartlett (1954), and articles appearing in the *Providence Journal* and the *Evening Bulletin*.

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