

“Forever and Hereafter a Body Politic”

The African Union Meeting House and Providence’s First Black Leaders

ON THE EVENING of March 9, 1819, representatives from Providence’s black community and the leaders of the city’s predominantly white churches met at the town’s First Baptist Church. On the agenda was planning for the construction of a meeting house and school specifically for the benefit of the city’s burgeoning black population. Edging close to 1,000 members by the 1820 census, Providence’s black community was about to embark on its most significant effort at self-determination since the state’s gradual emancipation law was passed in the wake of the American Revolution.¹ Communities of color all across the North had seen progress toward a more complete freedom stall in an increasingly racist swing away from Revolutionary ideals about natural rights and the brotherhood of man. Formal disenfranchisement (1822), a destructive riot (1824), and a bloody pogrom (1831) initiated by white mobs still lay in the community’s future, but on this night, the literal and figurative foundations of community consciousness would come to fruition, and the meeting house would be the physical base from which a localized black freedom struggle would be engaged.² The archives that surround this event reveal an emerging class of leaders who sought access to the levers of power in the state, leaders who would seek to harness republican ideals to advance their movement to win citizenship rights that the state government reserved solely for elite whites, and leaders who heretofore have been largely passed over by the scholarship. Some have been hiding in plain sight, and others are still obscure. A closer examination of them

and the house they built should begin to illuminate just how African Americans, even while a small fraction of Providence’s population, were able to establish activist roots necessary for advancement in an environment largely hostile to their existence.³

The African Union Meeting House, Revisited

Only recently have the few scholars who mention the African Union Meeting House posited that it was African Americans themselves who took the initiative. Before the twenty-first century, only Irving Bartlett in *From Slave to Citizen: The Story of the Negro in Rhode Island* did so, while other historians such as Julian Rammekamp, Robert Cottrol, J. Stanley Lemons, and Michael McKenna discuss the role prominent whites played in its founding—though they all note briefly the role it played in the organization of Providence’s black community. Cottrol mentions many of the leaders and rank and file by name, but they often get absorbed in his bird’s-eye statistical analysis—which, while valuable as a foundational text, perhaps merely scratches the surface of a more important development. Twenty-first-century historians Mark Schantz and Christy Clark-Pujara, especially, in *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island*, have given the black

OPPOSITE: Title-page of *A Short History of the African Union Meeting and School-House, Erected in Providence (R.I.) in the years 1819, ’20, ’21; with Rules for Its Future Government*, Providence, RI: Brown & Danforth. RIHS Collections RHIX17 3912A.

SHORT HISTORY

OF THE

African Union Meeting and School-House,

ERECTED IN PROVIDENCE (R. I.)

IN THE YEARS 1819, ’20, ’21;

WITH RULES FOR ITS FUTURE GOVERNMENT.

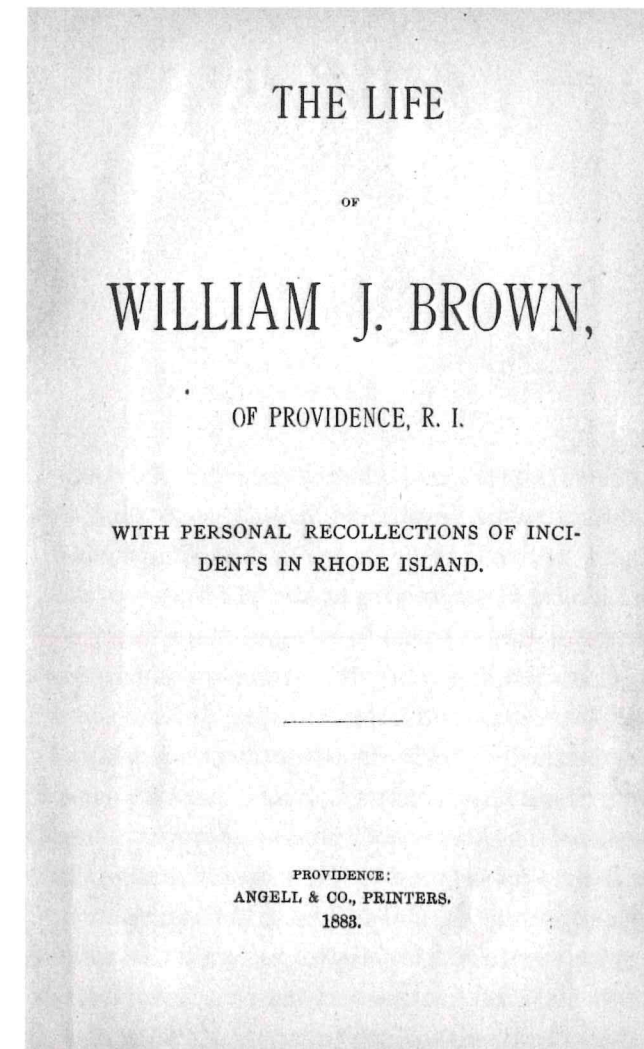
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community leadership the agency it properly deserves in founding the meeting house, and they, along with Erik Chaput, briefly discuss its centrality to the black community. None, however, have fully devoted a study to the composition of the black leadership class and how they used the meeting house as a base for their efforts at gaining a more equitable form of citizenship.⁴

The generally accepted story of the founding of the African Union Meeting House can be located in the papers of businessman, philanthropist, and abolitionist Moses Brown. *A Short History of the African Union Meeting and School-House* was compiled by Baptist minister Henry Jackson, who played a large part in securing the land Moses Brown bought for the meeting house and homilized at the plenary sessions at which the building was planned. In his rendering of the story, it was the “interesting exertions” of the white religious leaders and white women teachers—members of a “society for the instruction of the coloured part of the population”—who initiated the call for an African American religious and educational space. “The people of colour were requested to meet at the vestry of the First Baptist Church,” and “they assembled as requested,” according to Jackson. This narrative fits with the previously dominant historical trope of philanthropic whites spearheading positive change for black communities, a rendering that often blots out the “exertions” of black men and women themselves. The language of the document, at times, is overly patronizing toward the black community; the author states that it was the “slavish and gross state of ignorance of the people of colour” that influenced white benefactors to act. A brief foreword to the doc-

ument reads as follows: “The design of publishing the following pages, is to prevent any misunderstanding among the people of colour, respecting their Meeting and School-House, and thereby laying a foundation of future difficulty.”⁵ While it is true that white philanthropy often was necessary for black community institutions to get started—for example, the New York Manumission Society and its funding of black schools, which produced abolitionists and intellectuals Henry Highland Garnet, Alexander Crummell, and James McCune Smith, among others⁶—this often obscures the role that people of color played in their own liberation. The alliances that African Americans built with elite white power brokers were negotiated to be much more mutually beneficial, and black communities only offered support for them when tangible benefits were likely. These were actions of self-liberation, entered into freely and with considerable thought on the part of African American community leaders and the rank and file. Therefore, while white church elites played an important role in the formulation of the project analyzed here, a closer look at the African Americans acting on their own behalf is necessary to tell a more complete and accurate story.

There is, in fact, a primary counternarrative that shows the black community leaders advocating for themselves rather than waiting for the white leaders to act benevolently. William J. Brown, a hard worker (at times a laborer, at times a shoe repairman) of Providence’s black middle class who was able to use his thirst for education and ambition to better his community to live a moderately successful life, discusses the agency with which African Americans were able



Title-page of *The Life of William J. Brown, of Providence, R.I.; with Personal Recollections of Incidents in Rhode Island*, Providence: Angell & Co., 1883. RIHS Collections RHi X17 3913.

to push for their own church and school in his autobiography, *The Life of William J. Brown of Providence, R. I.* Whereas in *A Short History*, representatives from Providence’s community of color were requested to meet by the white church leaders, in William Brown’s telling, it was black people themselves who decided to “take measures” and discuss the feasibility of building the meeting house. It was they who took the idea to Moses Brown, who agreed to buy the land, and they who “notified the different pastors of the several churches and called a meeting in the vestry of the First Baptist Church.”⁷

The historical evidence seems to favor William Brown’s account. African Americans were increasingly relegated to balconies during church services, whether prohibited economically (due to the pew-selling system, in which pews on the floor were for the most part unaffordable for economically disadvantaged people of color) or socially (the Episcopal Church of Newport voted to ban blacks from the floor altogether).⁸ Similar circumstances led to Richard Allen’s founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia following a walkout in protest of the white church’s discriminatory practices. Additionally, mutual benefit associations administered by and catering to African Americans had been in existence since slavery and throughout the country (and the whole African diaspora), existing as economic and social safety valves in a world persistently hostile to their well-being. Black Masonic lodges, started by Prince Hall of Boston and chartered under the British order, began spreading around the Northeast in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; one in Providence was started in 1799 but lasted only a few years as several of its leaders emigrated to Africa.⁹

In many ways, the African Union Meeting House can be read as an outgrowth of this mutual benefit tradition. Early black churches were not just spaces for religious worship; African Americans of several Christian denominations were to use the meeting house, and some even continued worshipping in white churches. Warwick Sweetland and Henry Greene, both men of color and members of the planning committee, continued their membership in Providence’s First Baptist Church, and George Willis, another man of color,

served as First Baptist's sexton, worshipping there until 1840, when he joined the meeting house's successor, the Meeting Street Baptist Church.¹⁰ The African Union Meeting House also would serve as space for education and social and political activism—cultural arenas that often were heavily regulated or restricted where white people could see and hear. In 1820, most members of the planning committee also were signees of a petition to incorporate the African Society, which was not only to raise money to provide “Christian instruction” but also for its members to be “forever and hereafter a body politic.” Perhaps such an attempt to present itself as a political organization made it seem necessary for ascendant Republicans to add “white” to the voting qualification statute two years later, lest African Americans become powerful enough to ally with Federalists—an alliance crushed in New York in 1821.¹¹

Providence's First Black Leadership Class

By the 1790s, the Free African Union Society of Newport, one of the first mutual benefit societies to operate publicly, had an auxiliary unit in Providence, led by Cato Gardner, London Spears, James MacKenzie, and a Princeton-educated student of Ezra Stiles, Bristol Yamma. These men were more dedicated to exploring emigration to Africa, and they led an ultimately unsuccessful attempt at building a colony for free African Americans in Sierra Leone in 1794–95. This, coupled with a general lack of enthusiasm for the scheme among both the black community and white benefactors, caused the society to cease to function in

Providence by the early nineteenth century.¹² I mention Spears, MacKenzie, and Yamma here to draw a bit of a distinction between them and those who planned the building of the meeting house. The leaders of the late 1810s and early 1820s were more interested in building a thriving community *within* Providence, and given the relative antipathy of people of color toward emigrationism—and the more vehement opposition to colonizationist schemes¹³—by the turn of the nineteenth century, the meeting house leaders positioned themselves to become more permanent fixtures on the town's and state's social and political scene. In their decision to establish themselves as part of the fabric of Providence, they became the community's first permanent leadership class.

In that vein, perhaps the most important detail that the Moses Brown-Henry Jackson document contains is the list of names of the men who were appointed to the African Union Meeting House planning committee. Voted to the committee “by the advice of their friends,” all eighteen of these men have remained in relative obscurity in the secondary literature, but what we can piece together about them from the archives can help us understand what it meant to be a leader of an antebellum black community outside the major populations centers such as New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. According to this document, “the following was the committee appointed at this meeting, viz:

Warwick Sweetland, Abraham Gibbs, George M'Carty, George J. Smith, George C. Willis, Joshua Weeks, Derry Williams, Hodge Congdon, Nathaniel Paul, Henry Taber, Peter Waters, and Thomas Graham. To

which has since been added, *James Harris, Thomas Thompson, George W. Barrett, Henry Greene, Stephen Wolmsly, and Asa C. Goldsbury.*”¹⁴

Perhaps the most significant element that tied these men together is the fact that they were the heads of households. Cottrol delves into the importance of being the head of a household in *The Afro-Yankees: Providence's Black Community in the Antebellum Era*. When slavery was prevalent before the American Revolution, the data presented by Cottrol show, most African Americans lived in white-headed households; even after a gradual emancipation law was passed in 1784, this trend continued as African Americans continued to perform jobs in service of elite whites and children were “apprenticed” to white artisanal families (though many narratives show that apprentices of color were systematically kept as servants rather than proteges). As more free African Americans became laborers for themselves, opened their own shops, or kept up connections with wealthy white benefactors, they began moving into their own homes and taking charge of family affairs. Some were able to invest in real estate, like committee member George McCarty, who owned the land Moses Brown bought for the meeting house.¹⁵ Removing themselves from perceived dependence on whites was crucial for black men seeking a place in the American republic, whose ideology elevated to citizenship those who could independently manage a family and property.

It should be noted that the conspicuous absence of women in both Cottrol's analysis and on the committee appointed by black representatives at the March

and the public worship of Almighty GOD, in this town. In agreement with which, the people of colour were requested to meet at the vestry of the First Baptist Church, on the evening of March 9, 1819, for the purpose of considering this highly important object, and making arrangements for its accomplishment.

Accordingly, they assembled as requested, when, after solemn prayer for divine direction, and an address adapted to the occasion, by Mr. HENRY JACKSON, the meeting was opened for business. Divine Providence evidently indicated that success might attend prudent and laudable exertions, which influenced them to select twelve from their number, whom they supposed to be capable, *by the advice of their friends*, to act as a Committee in managing its concerns.

The following was the Committee appointed at this meeting, viz.:

Warwick Sweetland, Abraham Gibbs, George M'Carty, George J. Smith, George C. Willis, Joshua Weeks, Derry Williams,† Hodge Congdon, Nathaniel Paul,* Henry Taber, Peter Waters and Thomas Graham.†* To which has since been added, *James Harris, Thomas Thompson, George W. Barrett, Henry Greene, Stephen Wolmsly and Asa C. Goldsbury.*

Before commencing their operations publicly, the Committee esteemed it proper to advise with the Pastors of the respective Churches in this town, upon this important subject, and obtained the following recommendation:

“The active zeal evinced by many of the people of colour, in the town of Providence, to provide a place for the education of their children, and the public worship of GOD, is, in our opinion, exceedingly laudable, and worthy of the liberal encouragement of all good people.

NATHAN B. CROCKER, Rector of St. John's Church.

STEPHEN GANO, Pastor of the First Baptist Church.

WILLARD PRESTON, Pastor of the Pacific Congregational Church.

LUTHER BAKER, Pastor of the Second Baptist Church.

JAMES WILSON, Pastor of the Second Congregational Church.

SOLOMON SIAS, Pastor of the Methodist Church.”

* Left the Committee.

† Died since the Committee was appointed.

Page 4 of *A Short History of the African Union Meeting and School-House, Erected in Providence (R.I.) in the years 1819, '20, '21; with Rules for Its Future Government*, Providence, RI: Brown & Danforth. RIHS Collections RHI X17 3912B.

meeting is probably due to the fact that the many women who owned businesses were viewed as outsiders in the strict, masculine notion of republican respectability. Being a breadwinner for a family was the ideal trait of manhood in the republic, and projecting respectability within this gendered framework was probably on the minds of those at the meeting. Women of color such as nearby Warwick's Elleanor Eldridge, who owned a domestic service business, had to work extra hard to expand their businesses and to protect their businesses and property from fraudsters in a legal system dominated by men and may not have had the time to dedicate to the traditional household duties of an ever-present "cult of true womanhood," including child-rearing. Additionally, many businesses that black and white women owned were taverns and boarding houses, places that catered to an interracial group of clientele, and as such, these spaces were condemned as hotbeds of vice. And finally, the support of white churches in which men dominated leadership roles and surely expected that black men would do the same was crucial to the success of building the meeting house.¹⁶ The Moses Brown-Henry Jackson document fits neatly with this notion of the place of women—white women as the nurturing teachers who fostered virtue within the black community, urging the elite white men to undertake the project, and black women being entirely absent (save for Terisa McCarty, George's wife, who cosigned the deed of sale for the property).¹⁷

Aside from the fact that what these men were planning would serve as a church, the presence of black ministers Nathaniel Paul and Asa Goldsbury on this list is an important factor to note. By the 1820s, Prot-



Frontispiece of *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge*, Providence, RI: B.T. Albro, 1838. RIHS RHi X34807.

estant Christianity had become a fundamental part of republican ideology in America. This was especially true in Rhode Island, which tied its respectability to its founder, Roger Williams, and his ideas of toleration toward all Christian denominations. The religious democratization of the Second Great Awakening offered an avenue toward leadership for ministers of color, while at the same time, independent black householders chafed under the segregation they and their families were forced to endure in white churches. Consistent with a pattern spreading across Northern cities, black ministers, as leaders of the religious spaces that offered safe harbor from racism and discrimination, almost always formed an important part of black leadership in the communities they served.¹⁸

While black men across the North, including Providence, were striving to live their lives consistent with the American republic's notions of independence, gender, and religion, black community leadership differed from that of whites, especially in the field of occupation. Diving into the archives, we find, first, that occupational data in most cases is only available starting in 1824, when the first city directories were published. Therefore, it should be noted that, while probable, it is not with absolute certainty that we can say all of the men listed above were working these jobs in 1819. Even with this in mind, we can see that the committee was composed of men who held a wide variety of occupations. This fact is somewhat in line with the black "middle class" leadership taking hold in black communities across the North. In other Northern cities, prominence in black communities was determined less by occupation or income and more by the level at which one determined to contribute to the progress of the community, those who were connected with elite whites, and ministers in the emerging black churches.¹⁹ This is because, according to historian of Providence John Gilkeson, while the white "middle class" was increasingly defined by capitalism and monetary gain as a result of the Industrial Revolution, the black population, long excluded from artisan production and then from factory production, meant that the black class structure of Northern cities evolved outside of that of whites. Black men more commonly worked as odd-jobbers, such as wood sawyers or manual laborers or in the homes and yards of elite white people, taking work as it came along and remaining vulnerable to seasonal or economic fluctuation. Some black

men accumulated wealth, though the lack of access to more regular positions as artisans or operatives meant that occupation was less of a divisive force than it was becoming to their white neighbors.²⁰

It is not surprising, therefore, that four of the men on the African Union Meeting House committee were listed as laborers in at least one of the Providence directories. One, George Barrett, was listed as a "mariner." Two were ministers—Paul and Goldsbury. One, Derry Williams, was listed as a sexton. There was one "trader," McCarty, who owned the land that was sold to Moses Brown for the meeting house. George J. Smith was listed as a coachman to an elite white man. And finally, an additional seven men were not listed in any occupational directory, though we can partially understand who they were through the census records or other directories in which they appear. And so, though the evidence is fragmentary, we can begin to reconstruct the black leadership class of Providence, long overlooked in both the story of African American class development across the country and in the histories written of their own hometown.

A Closer Look

Nathaniel Paul was the Baptist minister who did much of the fundraising for the project, and he is perhaps the most well-known of everyone on this list. He was a young man in his late twenties when he took to the Baptist circuit in New England and New York, and as "agent" for this project, he was able to raise more than \$500—still far short of what was needed to get the meeting house built and put to use.²¹ This was

just the beginning of Paul's brilliant, if understudied, career; he would go on and fundraise for the Wilberforce settlement for refugee and freed slaves in Canada, tour the United Kingdom and Ireland to network with abolitionists there and raise money and awareness for its accelerating counterpart in the United States, and vocally oppose the American Colonization Society from his base in Albany. He, along with his more famous brother, Thomas Paul, also helped pave the way for later black preachers and orators who would become fixtures in the abolitionist movement—Episcopalian ministers Henry Highland Garnet and Alexander Crummell, activist and lecturer Lewis Hayden of Boston, and Frederick Douglass, to name a few.²²

While white and black ministers from neighboring churches and states "lectured" on the Sabbath, Goldsbury, a minister in training when he came to Providence, taught at the school and took care of much of the preaching in the meeting house's first two years.²³ At several points in the brief appearances he makes in the historical record, Goldsbury seems to present us with an issue that complicated and frustrated many black communities, North and South, and still exists to the present day. The first is skin color—he was described as an "octaroon," or someone with (supposedly) one-eighth African ancestry.²⁴ William J. Brown, after praising his preaching and teaching ability, makes sure to mention that his light skin made many people take him for white. In addition to the implied biological connection with whiteness, in the Brown-Jackson document, the author thought it prudent to publish testimonials by white ministers who taught him and

saw him preach. While we can expect testimonials to follow newcomers to such important positions, and black ministers were, for the most part, a relatively new phenomenon to New England so it would seem that testimonials would naturally come from white ministers, the author of the Brown-Jackson document adds that the testimonials were published for the benefit of the people of color themselves. This would seem to signal the importance of connections with elite whites in portraying respectability, even among black people themselves. While this could be read as the author speaking strictly from a white point of view, the fact that he or she was probably in touch with the black community—and that this notion seems to be backed up by William J. Brown's constant, if grudging, yearning for elite whites to support his ventures—can lead us to conclude that, in addition to ability, connection and confirmation by elite whites was at least a part of his middle class respectability; in a way, this proves that African Americans not only needed to be outstanding at their occupations (as Goldsbury probably was) but also were burdened by the need to impress people outside of the communities they sought to improve. In 1826, Goldsbury would move to New Orleans—a city in which his light skin color probably played an even more prominent role—to found the city's First African Baptist Church.²⁵ Other minister-teachers would follow in his footsteps and build upon the foundation he laid, including Jeremiah Asher and John W. Lewis, the latter who founded a short-lived boarding school for New England's youth of color in the city in the 1830s and was a regional leader in the temperance movement.²⁶

The most commonly listed occupation for the men on this list is "laborer." "Laborers" Greene and Willis epitomized the dynamism with which talented men of color often lived, as both were listed as having other professions in various city directories. Greene was listed as a machinist in 1828, a laborer in 1836, and a "[illegible] maker" in 1850. The multitude of occupations is one thing that complicates our understanding of Greene and perhaps those in a similar situation to him; machinery and the making of a certain product were probably specific trades that one would think could lead to a career, so why was Greene relegated to "laborer" status in between these jobs? One explanation may be that African Americans were systematically excluded from many regular jobs, only being hired when the white labor force dried up. Providence's William J. Brown remembers in his autobiography being rejected for a job by an employer "bitterly opposed to hiring a black boy, while there were so many white boys he could get." Additionally, valuable apprenticeships often were closed to people of color; as Brown remembers, "Other boys of my acquaintance, with little or no education, jerked up instead of being brought up, were learning trades and getting employments, and I could get nothing." Brown's profound expostulation is worth quoting in full:

It seemed singular to me at first. I soon found it was on account of my color, for no colored men except barbers had trades, and that could hardly be called a trade. The white people seemed to be combined against giving us any thing to do which would elevate us to a free and independent position. The kindest

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feelings were manifested towards us in conversation, and that was all. I was now seventeen years old, and was at a loss to know what steps to take to get a living, for if I possessed the knowledge of a Demosthenes or Cicero, or Horace, or Virgil, it would not bring to me flattering prospects for the future. To drive carriage, carry a market basket after the boss, and brush his boots, or saw wood and run errands, was as high as a colored man could rise. This seemed to be the only prospect lying in my path. Some of my associates worked for eight or ten dollars a month, but what would that small pittance be to them, settled down in life with a family to support, if they should have long continued sickness to contend with. This wouldn't suit me; I must go somewhere else to find employ.²⁷

Perhaps what Brown confronted is similar to what Greene faced: Brown had tried his hand at several different things, at various times sawing wood and accepting a job at sea, and then he eventually taught himself shoe repair (which netted him less than a fully apprenticed artisan) to make a living. Perhaps Greene taught himself machinery and the making of a specific product, but regular work eluded him, and he was forced to become a laborer and perform odd jobs to earn money during slack times.

Willis, sexton in Providence's (white) First Baptist Church and then deacon in the African Union Meeting House, serves as an example of someone who was able to parlay multiple careers into considerable wealth, a minor national role in the African American convention movement, a major role in the city's temperance

First page of "A list of names of 'colored' heads of families and the owners of their residences, June 24, 1822," Providence Town Papers, Series 3, Vol. 112, no. 0039155. RIHS Collections RHi X17 3914A.

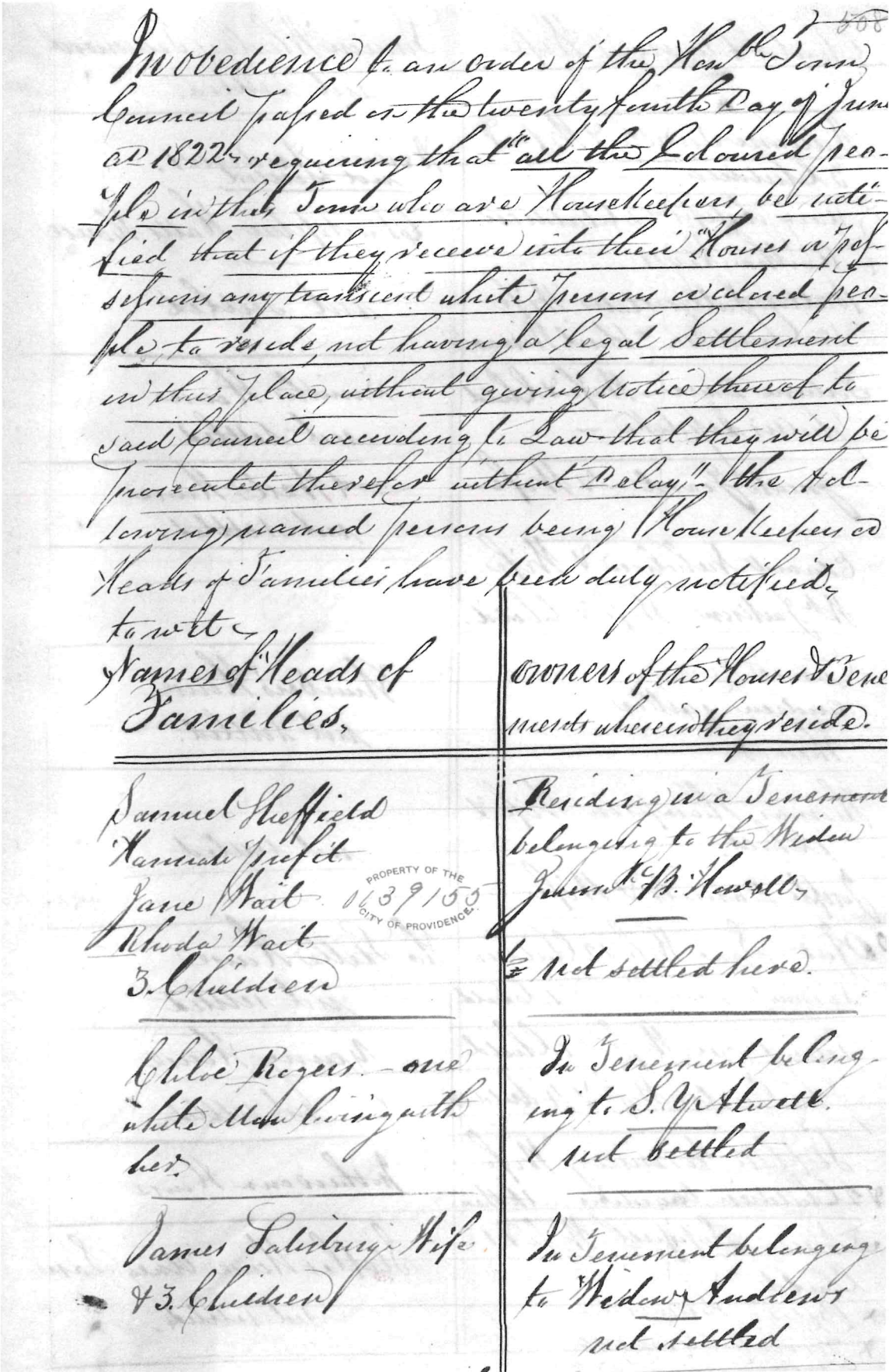
movement, and then a major role in the movement to win back the right to vote for black people in Rhode Island. According to Cottrol, he was a laborer, but in the 1840 United States Census, he is listed as having an occupation in commerce.²⁸ As both a lay church leader and someone engaged in commerce, his public role would have been able to bridge black and white worlds, as, to be successful in both, he most likely would have needed the support of white and black spiritual leaders and white and black wealth. Unlike William J. Brown and Elleanor Eldridge, who both published their life stories because they were impoverished in their later years despite having undertaken lucrative enterprises, Willis had real estate property assessed at \$700 in the City Council's 1851 tax report, a considerable sum of money for anyone at the time.²⁹

Two additional laborers according to the 1832 city directory were Warwick Sweetland and Thomas Thompson. Sweetland shows up elsewhere only in a directory of the First Baptist Church, in which he is shown to have died in 1833. Interestingly, this meant that he may have continued worshipping there despite being a committee member of the African Union Meeting House.³⁰ Thompson was listed as the owner of his own house in an 1822 survey of people of color who were heads of households, living with his wife and one child. By 1830, in his home were residing eight people of color under the age of 23, along with him and (presumably) his wife—a tall order for someone heading a household on the commonly irregular pay of a laborer. Six of the young people living with him were women; perhaps they contributed to the household income as domestic servants in others' houses or took in washing,

common occupations black women took to supplement the often meager or irregular incomes men faced in a discriminatory social and economic climate.³¹

One of the most important industries to early Providence was represented in Barrett, who was listed in the 1832 city directory as a mariner. Sailing was famously one of the most common professions among African American and Native American men in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While most people of color started as cabin boys or stewards, shipboard life afforded opportunities for upward advancement that were not available on land. With the obvious perils on the sea an ever-present reality, skill trumped race in job distribution; there were even instances of enslaved people rising to the level of captain. However, irregular work, especially during times of war and economic upheaval; the transient lifestyle; their often carefree spending of their wages; and the famous alcohol-infused behavior of sailors on land—in addition to the interracial manner in which they often caroused on land—meant that even though they were important parts of a mercantile economy, mariners often were an impoverished, unwelcome presence to the political and moral reformers of the early nineteenth century.³² Nonetheless, the presence of a mariner on the March 1819 committee is further proof that monetary status was not the most important factor of one's worthiness of respectability in the black community.

However, one aspect of Barrett's life would certainly have made him worthy of the community's respect—he was a military veteran of the War of 1812. Largely a maritime war, it is possible he was in the navy; even though African Americans were officially banned from



Charles Thomas & Wife	Samuel Wheeler's Tenement
William Smith & Wife & 3 Children ~	not settled.
Mary Phelps & 2 Children + Martha Ayer	Widow Andrews.
Britton Saltmarsh's Wife & 2 Children (blind woman)	not settled.
Fortune Dyer - Wife & Child	Christopher Hall's House
Phillis Dupdike ~	not settled.
Josiah Grant ~ & Wife	Smith's House
Edward Nicholson & Wife	not settled.
Mr. Jackson - Wife & Child.	A Webb's House
Cunnie Dady	not settled.
Andrew J. Miller	Thurber's House
Thomas	not settled.
Thomas Thompson Wife & Child.	not settled.
Joseph Daniels & Wife	The Stelle House
Osar Lane Wife & 2 Children	not settled.
Samuel Green Wife & 1 Child	Young House
Peter Dyer Wife & 1 Child	not settled.
John Curtis Wife & 4 Children	Andrews House
Stephen Hormuley Wife & 2 Children boarding with them	Staples House Alley Lane
Spica Lippitt Wife & 1 Child ~	not settled.
Betsy Spivey	
Jerviah Romero	

joining the armed forces, that law was commonly flouted for largely the same reason blacks were able to advance in the sailing profession—the necessity of skill in perilous conditions. He also had a military connection with General Edward Carrington, a leader of Rhode Island's militia during the war and in the years following and the architect of a shipping empire.³³ William J. Brown, citing this connection as the cause for Barrett's knowledge of military tactics, talks about how Barrett was the leader of the African American militia company, the African Greys, that marched in procession at the opening of the meeting house in 1821.³⁴ It also is possible that Barrett used his connection with an elite white power broker to secure his job as a "mariner," and this relationship undoubtedly enhanced the war veteran's respectability. Barrett's connection to Carrington foreshadowed the events that would play out two decades later, when African American militiamen also played a major role in suppressing the Dorr Rebellion in 1842, an act that led directly to their enfranchisement by the Whigs—who were typically elites in the Federalist tradition, anti-immigrant, and often softer on race than Democrats—in control of Rhode Island politics.

Henry Taber almost certainly was a Revolutionary War veteran, a native of Guinea on the African coast and previously enslaved to a Judge Constant Taber of Newport (his name was listed on muster rolls variously as "Henry Taybor" or "Harry Tabor or Taber"). His age may have prevented him from being listed in the city's occupational directories, which began publication in 1824, though he was listed as a laborer in war records.³⁵ At some point after earning his freedom

and his honorable discharge on June 15, 1783, Taber moved to Providence and may have used some of the \$302 he earned for his service to purchase a two-story house on Benevolent Street, valued at \$200 in 1798.³⁶ Certainly, his status as a Revolutionary War veteran, like Barrett's as a veteran of the War of 1812, would have afforded him an air of respectability in both black and white American circles. His and his comrades' legacy would be invoked in the later fight for voting rights, as, in addition to the actual military service black Providence residents would provide during the Dorr struggle, the memory of Rhode Islanders of color such as Taber serving with distinction in the Revolution was offered as evidence of their fitness for citizenship. By the late 1810s and early 1820s, his service certainly gave him standing enough to be voted to the committee.

Smith had a very close and powerful connection to an elite white Providence resident. He is listed as a coachman and part of the John Carter Brown household in the 1850 census (though he had been the head of a household himself in the previous three federal censuses). John Carter Brown was an heir to the fortune of the Brown family of merchants who had participated in the slave trade, which included Moses Brown in his pre-Quaker days. He also inherited the family passion for books and his collection was the foundation for the present-day John Carter Brown Library, a valuable space for historical research. We can surmise that Smith was John Carter Brown's personal driver, as none of the other members listed in his household were coachmen. Moses Brown was John Carter Brown's great-uncle; perhaps this connection played a role in

Henry Taber's entry in "Free and slave enlistments, December 1779," Revolutionary War military records. MSS 673 SG2, Series 1: RI Continental Troops, Subseries A: 1st Regiment, Box 1, Folder 52. RIHS Collections RHi X17 3928.

Smith's activities in support of the meeting house. Smith also appears to be a larger part of the history of personal livery service to elite whites as a marker of social status both inside and outside of black communities. In later years, the Pullman porters, black men who served whites in white-only Pullman train cars, could be considered middle class, the "aristocracy of black labor," though they often were denigrated by being called "George" (after George Pullman) and not their actual names.³⁷ Richard Wright's novel *Native Son* also quite famously delves into the paradox of livery service to whites as both middle class and degrading. Though Smith apparently did not leave behind his feelings in writing and he is silent in the historical record outside of his occupation and appointment to the committee, he does perhaps show an early manifestation of status in the white and black community that is consistent with the larger historical narrative.

McCarty has perhaps the most interesting and unorthodox story of anyone in this study. He was born on the Caribbean island of Montserrat and his surname makes him a hard person to track through the historical records; at various times, it is spelled "M'Carty," "McCarty," and "McCarthy." We can surmise the person with all these spellings is the same because in each census from 1810 to 1840, the person with that name is listed as a "free colored person" with four people in his household. McCarty owned a "refreshment" stand in the Market House, the center of Providence's economic life in the first few decades after the Revolution; making him a visible part of the community as a whole.³⁸ He also was apparently a savvy investor, having owned much—and valuable—

real estate. It was he who sold to Moses Brown for \$200 the land on which the meeting house would be built; he cosigned the deed with his wife, Terisa (also known as Maria Theresa in the record of his death in 1863).³⁹ Sixteen years after selling that lot, he advertised the sale of several lots on Meeting Street, on which stood "substantial dwellings," and he made sure it was known that his holdings were "free of encumbrances."⁴⁰ Interestingly, he is not listed on the tax roll taken in 1851, though he very clearly owned a lot of property—probably more than Willis, who was assessed a city tax. He also was active in anti-slavery circles, serving as a delegate to the New England Anti-Slavery Convention in 1836.⁴¹ It probably was the combination of his economic connections within the larger community along with his activism that helped him earn his place on the committee.

Abraham Gibbs left behind fewer records than McCarty but also rented space in the Market House.⁴² The 1820 census shows him living in Providence with a younger woman and child. In the 1822 directory of all people of color who were heads of households, Gibbs was listed as the owner of a house in which lived five people whose connection to him cannot be determined. In 1830, he was listed as living with a younger woman, a young man, and an older white woman. This last detail is tantalizing: the white woman simply may have been a boarder that the Gibbs family may have taken in for extra income or even a white immigrant domestic servant—either way, an inversion of most black-white community ties. Gibbs also was the listed author and first signer of the petition to charter the African Society, written the year after the committee was put

Return of the Names of those that are free and enlisted for the Term of 9 years
In the 2^d Company of Foot Commanded by Lieut. Burlingame, Dec^r 1779

1	Thos. Taylor - Sgt. & Jr. Surg.	4	Wm. Parks Corp. 17. 1779
2	George Popple - Sgt. Apr. 4.	5	John Dimbor Priest 20. 1779
3	James Mose - Sgt. 15.	6	Dick ^{RICHARD} Mose - Do May 22. 1779
		7	Casper - Sabins - Do - 20. 1779

Return of the Names of those that were free and enlisted During the War
In the 2^d Company of Foot Commanded by Lieut. Burlingame, Dec^r

Joseph L. Brown - Sgt.	Soney Phillips - Priest
Eleazar - Sabins - Corp.	Rubin Roberts - Do

Return of the names of those who were slaves and enlisted during the War
In the 2^d Company of Foot Commanded by Lieut. Burlingame

1	Prince Brown - Drummer	15	Samuel Lloyd
2	Capt. Garrison - Dr. 1779	16	Pero - Mosey
3	Dick - Rogers - Do.	17	Titus - Pierce
		18	Prince - Withers
4	Prince - Bucklin - Priest	19	Things - Robinson
5	Job - Burton	20	Prince - Sayles
6	Cato - Banister	21	William - Saltman
7	Officer - Barck	22	Harry - Sabor
8	Frank - Brown	23	Boften - Wilber
9	Wm. - Champlin	24	John - Wicks
10	Jack - Coddington	25	Endo - Champlin
11	Thos - Grubb	26	John - Smith
12	Pero - Grune	27	Cuff - Slade
13	Cato - W. Grune	28	Prince - Rodman
14	Antist - Gardner	29	Briffle - Arnold
15	Proffers - Gorton		
16	Prince - Ingraham		

Wm. J. Burdett

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together and signed by most members, perhaps showing that he was viewed as a leader among leaders.

Hodge Congdon was a man who never appeared in city directories and only shows up in census data for 1810, 1820, and 1830, as living with his wife and (probably) two sons. He does show up in a few narratives surrounding the meeting house, however, in ways that can tell us that he probably earned a middle-class living even if we don't know how. First, we know that after the parade through Providence for the meeting house's 1821 opening, Congdon's Benefit Street house was chosen as the place the leaders would meet to plan the celebration. And even though Congdon's wife, Jane, apparently had to earn a living as a laundress, at least as late as 1870 when she was eighty-nine years old, the Jane Congdon estate was large enough that it helped keep the meeting house's successor, the Congdon Street Baptist Church, afloat after it ran out of money in the 1870s.⁴³ Jane also owned a first-run copy of David Walker's *Appeal*, a fiery anti-slavery tract published in 1829 that helped galvanize the abolitionist movement, perhaps showing that Jane and Hodge Congdon were well connected with the larger, regional black community.⁴⁴

Finally, we have the men who left very little behind for historians. There is a James Harris buried in the mostly African American section of the North Burial Ground in Providence; he died in 1829, but his gravestone is weathered to the point of illegibility. William J. Brown mentions that Harris was involved in a protest against taxation of the African American community while it was disenfranchised, though this took place in the 1830s, which would mean the James Har-

ris who died in 1829 either is not the James Harris on the March 1819 committee or Brown was wrong in his recollection.⁴⁵ Stephen Wolmsly was found nowhere in a search of the census records (perhaps due to the spelling of his name), though he was listed as the head of a household and owner of his own house in the 1822 survey. Derry Williams, who died shortly after the committee met, was listed as a sexton for St. John's Episcopal church; his ecclesiastical employment and connection with a white parish qualified him for committee membership. Joshua Weeks was the head of a family of five who at one time rented from apparently wealthy landowner Stephen Harris⁴⁶ and may even be the same person as "Josiah Wicks," listed as the coauthor of the aforementioned petition with Gibbs.⁴⁷ Peter Waters lived with his wife and two daughters in Providence in 1820, and, along with McCarty and Gibbs, rented space in the Market House; but other than that he is absent from the historical record. Thomas Graham led a household of seven people in 1810 census but died shortly after the meeting, with the *Providence Patriot, And Columbian Phenix* noting that he was "a respectable man of color."⁴⁸

Why would these men have little or no mention in historical records? One explanation may be that one or more of them was a seaman; seamen lived notoriously transient lives, often settling temporarily in port cities. Perhaps they eluded census takers and city directory enrollers because of this. Or, perhaps as odd jobbers, men whom William J. Brown would see on city bridges waiting for work, they rented homes or rooms only temporarily, going where there was work.⁴⁹ Each of these scenarios may seem unlikely for a committee

of such stature, but in Providence's black community, these men may have had stronger connections to one another, their church, or white benefactors than their homes or jobs. Perhaps they exist somewhere in the historical record not yet mined.

The Meeting House and the Body Politic

Several of the men here and their later comrades went on to undertake important duties in the interconnected movements to improve education, project an image and consciousness of respectability, and win back the right to vote for the community of color in the city and state. In its first twenty-three years, the African Union Meeting House served as the base of operations for 1830s leaders such as barber Alfred Niger and pastor John W. Lewis. As wealth in the community increased, wealthy men such as clothier Ichabod Northup and catering manager George T. Downing would become activist leaders, though much of the subsequent leadership class still were listed as laborers or in other menial occupations.⁵⁰ Willis and McCarty, especially, represented continuity from the original committee over the next few decades, utilizing the house that they helped build as a space in which to create their justification for participation in the rights of citizenship.

After his appointment to the meeting house committee, Willis used the experience to get himself elected as a delegate to the first national African American convention in Philadelphia in 1830, traveling with Niger to represent Rhode Island's African American population. His speaking ability was touted strongly by national abolitionist leader William Lloyd

Garrison, and he was the founding head of the Colored Association of Providence for the Promotion of Temperance in 1832.⁵¹ Temperance, by the 1820s, had become a major factor in the projection of respectability through self-improvement, and Providence was a regional epicenter. Lewis, who came to the African Union Meeting House as a Baptist minister in 1835, delivered a powerful address to "the People of Color in New England" in October 1836, proclaiming that delegates from all over the region had decided, most likely in the African Union Meeting House, to form the New-England Temperance Society of Colored Persons; Willis was its vice president. In the address, Lewis was most clearly able to link temperance to the wider notion of republican claims to citizenship, stating that "the liquid poison" removed man from ownership of his own body and faculties (much like slavery did), essential characteristics of a republican citizen.⁵² On a more practical level, the temperance crusade in Providence was reflective of the defensive position of African Americans in the city after the riots of 1824 and 1831, after which authorities largely blamed the destruction of black homes on the fact that many doubled as grog shops and dance halls.⁵³

While a more forceful movement for educational integration would be undertaken later, this, too, had its roots in the African Union Meeting House. Public schooling for black children had been either inconsistently provided or, as was more often the case, not provided at all. Debates in the state and town legislatures in the 1820s and 1830s provided qualified support for separate black schools, but only one underfunded school was established in 1828. In 1838, the town finally established

a funding structure for two public schools—Meeting Street and Pond Street schools—but inferiority was guaranteed through the tax allocation structure the state inculcated and the lower teacher pay the town provided for.⁵⁴ The African Union Meeting House’s vestry would provide an effective, though tuition-supported, environment in which teachers of color or white allies were sought after vigorously. William J. Brown remembers some white teachers, including Mr. Ormsbee, who were either embarrassed by their profession or only in it for the money, while teachers of color, including committee member Goldsbury and the Reverend Jacob Perry, were remembered fondly.⁵⁵ Shortly after the meeting house’s school was founded, 125 young people of color were in attendance in the day school, and by 1830, its 60 Sunday school children made a conspicuous and—at least in the eyes of a white observer—respectable appearance in the town’s annual celebration of Sunday school children.⁵⁶ In 1835, Lewis established a private boarding school for children of color across the region, beginning with a class of 40 and attracting significant contributions from anti-slavery societies.⁵⁷ Niger coauthored the 1835 National Convention of Free People of Colour’s “Address to the American People,” which declared that education was one of the central principles around which Americans of color should rally for their inclusion in the national body politic.⁵⁸ Niger and Lewis especially were Providence’s embodiment of resistance to the pseudoscientific ideas about black intellectual inferiority percolating around the country.

Leadership’s decrying of drinking alcohol and extolling the community’s desire for education were

evidence with which African Americans could make their case for the push for enfranchisement. Willis, Niger, and McCarty chaired a meeting in the vestry of the African Union Meeting House to petition the state’s General Assembly in 1831, claiming that they were being taxed without representation and asking for either the right to vote or exemption from taxation.⁵⁹ This was not the first time they had asked for this,⁶⁰ but they based their claim on the fact that their children were unable to access the public education that their tax dollars paid for. By 1841, the General Assembly finally answered the incessant petitioning, though it was hardly the outcome they expected or desired; instead of the right to vote, people of color in Rhode Island were granted an exemption from taxes. A different group of leaders then distanced themselves from the McCarty faction, immediately petitioning the legislature to reverse course and reimpose taxes, noting how “injurious in nature and tendency” such a “benevolent” act would be in their striving for citizenship rights.⁶¹ The remarkable turn of events by the end of the next year, which, after the defeat of working class whites in the Dorr Rebellion, saw the granting of people of color the right to vote because they had shown themselves the desire to be “useful citizens” before and during the struggle.⁶² Hidden in the condescension was acknowledgement of decades of struggle that helped build the African Union Meeting House and the importance of it and its leaders in forming the African American population of Providence into a strong body politic.

In studying the African American men who constituted the first class of Providence’s leaders of color, we

of said Schools for the maintenance of which, these exactions are made & or grant them such other relief in the premises, as your Honours, may in your wisdom deem proper & they also further respectfully pray they may be heard by you in such manner as may be deemed the most proper & And as we are duly bound we ever pray

Alfred Niger
George E. Willis
George McCarty

Committee

can come to several further conclusions. One is that previous historians are correct that connections to elite whites were important to several members of the committee. The men listed above had connections with whites ecclesiastically, professionally, or politically, as discussed above, and, given the number of surnames identical to those of elite white Rhode Islanders, there may have been connections that were more intimate—

perhaps biological and perhaps with roots dating back to slavery.

We also can conclude that, despite connections to white elites and despite the narrative offered by the Moses Brown-Henry Jackson document, members of Providence’s black community more than likely came together themselves with the idea of building their own meeting house, a space that would serve as more

of a community center than just a house of worship. The William J. Brown narrative, when looked at in the context of black community organizational history, is clearly more plausible. It was on the land owned by a wealthy black man that the meeting house was built. It was mostly independent black householders—many of whom had found success in jobs that were not typically lucrative and despite white prejudice designed to keep them economically oppressed—who made up the committee and surely did not need white elites to tell them how to improve their own community. They were laborers, ministers, real estate investors, war veterans, mariners, and odd jobbers and may have filled other roles that were not picked up by the records of history. It appears to be the connections they were able to forge—with one another, their community, churches, and elite whites—that allowed them to lay the physical and cultural foundation from which they were able to build community and further connections that would pay off in the movement for citizenship rights in the ensuing decades. Some of them—Willis and McCarty in particular—played a major role themselves, while the rest, including Niger (a barber) and Lewis, paved the way for future leaders in the struggle.

As for the structure itself, by the 1830s, after just a few decades as a conglomeration of denominations,

the African Union Meeting House’s members began breaking off and forming new congregations. The Second Free Will Baptist Church, under the leadership of Lewis, split off in 1835 (though they used the meeting house until 1841, when they erected the Pond Street Baptist Church), followed by the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and the AME Zion Church in 1838. In 1840, with Willis as deacon and Asher as pastor, the remaining Calvinist Baptist members formed the Meeting Street Baptist Church and were recognized officially by the Warren Baptist Association the following year. The building whose foundation was laid in 1819 was torn down by hostile “white friends” in 1869, an eerie counterpart of the concurrent racial violence in the Reconstruction-era South. Subsequently, the parishioners built a new church elsewhere on Congdon Street. The African Union Meeting House’s legacy of fostering black self-liberation did not fade with its physical demise, however. The Congdon Street Baptist Church became a sanctuary for Brown University’s African American students during their 1968 walkout, an action that brought more black students, black faculty, and support systems to a university badly lacking a commitment to its students of color. It remains, according to the church’s website, a “radically authentic” community today.⁶³

ing of more black Christian churches that eventually moved out of the meeting house, and the later drive for public school integration. For a more complete rendering of how African Americans won back the right to vote during the Dorr Rebellion, see Erik J. Chaput, *The People’s Martyr: Thomas Wilson Dorr and His*

1842 Rhode Island Rebellion (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2013) and “Proslavery and Antislavery Politics in Rhode Island’s 1842 Dorr Rebellion” *New England Quarterly*, vol. 85, no. 4 (December 2012), 658–694; George M. Dennison, *The Dorr War: Republicanism on Trial, 1831–1861* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1976); Marvin E. Gettleman, *The Dorr Rebellion: A Study in American Radicalism, 1833–1849* (New York: Random House, 1973); and J. Stanley Lemons and Michael A. McKenna, “Re-enfranchisement of Rhode Island Negroes,” *Rhode Island History*, vol. 30, no. 1 (February 1971), 3–14. Providence African Americans and the temperance movement were documented largely through the abolitionist press, but for more on that and the churches that sprung out of the African Union Meeting House, see Mark S. Schantz, *Piety in Providence: Class Dimensions of Religious Experience in Antebellum Rhode Island* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000). The movement to integrate public schools is documented well in a later chapter of Robert J. Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees: Providence’s Black Community in the Antebellum Era* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), and Lawrence Grossman, “George T. Downing and Desegregation of Rhode Island Public Schools, 1855–1856,” *Rhode Island History*, vol. 36, no. 4 (November 1977), 99–106.

3. The foundation on which this article builds its own argument can be found in Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*; Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), and John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the Antebellum North, 1730–1830* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), the latter two of which center Rhode Island in their monographs.

4. See the above mentioned works, along with Irving H. Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen: The Story of the Negro in Rhode Island* (Providence, RI: Urban League of Providence, RI, 1954), 37, and Christy Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2016), 126–130.

5. *A Short History of the African Union Meeting and School-House, Erected in Providence (R. I.) in the Years 1819, ’20, ’21; with Rules for Its Future Government* (Providence, RI: Brown & Danforth, 1821), 2–4.

6. Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 117.

7. William J. Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown of Providence, R. I., with Personal Recollections of Incidents in Rhode Island* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2006; 1883), 24–26. It should be noted that Brown’s account was written long after the events discussed here, and he was a child when much of the subject matter here was taking place. Despite skewing parts of the chronology, much of Brown’s testimony provides a valuable eyewitness account.

8. Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 348–349.

9. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton, *In Hope of Liberty: Culture, Community, and Protest among Northern Free Blacks, 1700–1860* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 125–126, and Harry E. Davis, *A History of Freemasonry among Negroes in America*. [published under the auspices of the United States Supreme Council, Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite Freemasonry, Northern Jurisdiction, USA (Prince Hall Affiliation), 1946], 82–84.

10. J. Stanley Lemons, *Black in a White Church: Biographies of African American Members of the First Baptist Church in America* (Providence, RI: Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, 2011), Rhode Island Historical Society, and Henry Melville King and Charles Field Wilcox, *Historical Catalogue of the Members of the First Baptist Church in Providence, Rhode Island* (Providence, RI: F. H. Townsend, 1908), 45 (George Willis), 53 (Henry Greene), and 56 (Warwick Sweetland).

11. This document also can be read as an assertion of racial consciousness; using “African” in their society’s title signified both a separation from white institutions and a recognition of common ancestral roots, a notion that would be contested in the years after as “colored” would come to signify a more common Americanness among the country’s black citizens. The fact that the document’s authors refer to themselves as “people of colour” despite the moniker “African Society” may show that this was still a formative period of American racial ideology. For the text of the petition, see “Blacks, African Society of Prov., Abraham Gibbs, Josiah Wicks, et al—for charter,” *RI General Assembly—Petitions*

Failed/Withdrawn, C# 1179, Box 6 #3. For a discussion of racial consciousness, see Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), and Samuel Cornish’s article, “The Title of This Journal” in *The Colored American*, March 4, 1837, for a deeper discussion about racial identity and signifying titles such as “African,” “Colored,” “Black,” etc. For the disfranchisement of African Americans in Rhode Island and New York, which happened during the same Republican ascendancy in both states and across the country, see Christopher Malone, *Between Freedom and Bondage: Race, Party, and Voting Rights in the Antebellum North* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), chapters 2 and 4.

12. See William H. Robinson, “Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1780–1824” Faculty Publications (Providence, RI: Urban League of Rhode Island, 1976), 3–40, for correspondence between the FAUS with its Providence auxiliary, along with Robinson’s notes on some of the leaders, and George E. Brooks Jr., “The Providence African Society’s Sierra Leone Emigration Scheme, 1794–1795: Prologue to the African Colonization Movement,” *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1974), 183–202.

13. For a more nuanced discussion on emigration, whose popularity waxed and waned at different times in different communities, see Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause*, 161–171.

14. *A Short History*, 4.

15. Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 57–60.

16. For a gendered analysis of Rhode Island’s communities of color, see Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780–1860*, and Francis Harriet Whipple, *Memoirs of Eleanor Eldridge*.

17. *A Short History*, 24.

18. See Julie Winch, *Philadelphia’s Black Elite: Activism, Accommodation, and the Struggle for Autonomy, 1787–1848* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1988) for an excellent study of black ministers as leaders of communities; the beginning of black churches under community leaders Richard Allen, Absalom Jones,

and others is a useful comparison to Providence, albeit on a larger scale.

19. See Horton and Horton, *In Hope of Liberty* for the evolution of class in black communities in the North in general; Winch, *Philadelphia’s Black Elite* for the same in Philadelphia specifically; and Leslie M. Harris, *In the Shadow of Slavery, African Americans in New York City, 1626–1863* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003) for the same in New York City.

20. John S. Gilkeson Jr., *Middle-Class Providence, 1820–1940* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986). Some black men were able to earn vast wealth and influence, for example, James Forten, who owned and managed a sail-making factory in Philadelphia and became a community leader, or Paul Cuffee, who had African and Wampanoag ancestry and who owned a fleet of merchant ships, becoming a leading proponent of African colonization.

21. *A Short History*, 5; Pews, specifically to be owned by African Americans, also were to be sold to raise money. Also, see Shantz, *Piety in Providence*, 101–102.

22. For the most comprehensive looks at Nathaniel Paul’s career, see Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, and R. J. M. Blackett, *Building an Anti-Slavery Wall: Black Americans in the Atlantic Abolitionist Movement, 1830–1860*.

23. *A Short History*, 9.

24. Rev. Leandrew L. Johnson, “A Brief Historical Sketch of the Congdon Street Baptist Church of Providence, Rhode Island, 1819–1965.”

25. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Updated Edition) (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 201.

26. See Jeremiah Asher, *Incidents in the Life of the Rev. J. Asher, Pastor of the Shiloh (Coloured) Baptist Church, Philadelphia, U. S. and A Concluding Chapter of Facts Illustrating the Unrighteous Prejudice Existing in the Minds of American Citizens toward their Coloured Brethren* (London: Charles Gilpin, 1850), and Schantz, *Piety in Providence*, 172–174. Lewis’s educational and temperance activism is documented numerous times in *The Liberator* between the years 1835 and 1839.

27. Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 60–61.

28. Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 150; Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 68.

29. *A List of Persons Assessed in the City Tax, Ordered by the City Council, March 1851* (Providence, RI: H. H. Brown and Company, 1851), 94.

30. Henry Melville King and Charles Field Wilcox, *Historical Catalogue of the Members of the First Baptist Church in Providence, Rhode Island* (Providence, RI: F. H. Townsend, 1908), 56.

31. “A list of names of ‘colored’ heads of families and the owners of their residences, June 24, 1822,” Providence Town Papers, Series 3, vol. 112, no. 0039155, Rhode Island Historical Society.

32. See W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) for an in-depth discussion on black mariners and their places in communities of color throughout the country.

33. Various, *Ships and Shipmasters of Old Providence: A Brief Account of Some of the Famous Merchants, Sea Captains, and Ships of the Past, Together with Reminiscences of a Few Notable Voyages Made in Providence Ships* (Providence, RI: Providence Institution for Savings, 1920), 32–34.

34. Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 47–48.

35. Daniel M. Popek, *They “... fought bravely, but were unfortunate.” The True Story of Rhode Island’s “Black Regiment” and the Failure of Segregation in Rhode Island’s Continental Line* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2015), 277, 670–671, 1,058.

36. *U. S., Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775–1783* [database online], Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2007; *1798 Direct Tax List A and B for Providence*, Rhode Island Historical Society. Microfilm.

37. Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890–2000* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2002), 148–150.

38. *Rhode Island American*, May 2, 1815.

39. *A Short History*, 23–24.

40. Julian Rammelkamp, “The Providence Negro Community,

1820–1842” *Rhode Island History*, vol. VII, no. 1 (January 1948): 23.

41. *The Liberator*, May 14, 1836.

42. Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, *Creative Survival: The Providence Black Community in the 19th Century* (Providence, RI: RIBHS, 1976), 47.

43. Brown, *Life of William J. Brown*, 221; National Park Service’s National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet, College Hill Historic District, 2018 (section 8, page 36, n. 113).

44. Peter Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 152.

45. Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 69; Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 48.

46. *Owners and Occupants of the Lots, Houses and Shops in the Town of Providence Rhode Island in 1798*, RI GenWeb Project, <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~rigenweb/maps/1798Prov6.html>.

47. “Blacks, African Society of Prov., Abraham Gibbs, Josiah Wicks, et al—for charter” *RI General Assembly—Petitions Failed/Withdrawn*, C# 1179, Box 6 #3.

48. *Providence Patriot and Columbian Phenix*, May 17, 1820.

49. Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 50.

50. For example, four (Robert Jones, James Hazard, George Waterman, and Charles Gorham) out of the eight members of the executive committee of the Colored Association of Providence for the Promotion of Temperance were listed as “laborer” in 1836. See *The Liberator*, October 27, 1832.

51. *The Liberator*, October 13 and 27, 1832.

52. *Ibid.* May 14 and October 29, 1836, and November 9, 1838.

53. See *Hard-Scrabble Calendar, Report of the Trials of Oliver Cummins, Nathaniel G. Metcalf, Gilbert Humes and Arthur Farrier; who were indicted with six others for a riot, and for aiding in pulling down a dwelling-house, on the 18th of October, at Hard-Scrabble* (Providence, RI: 1824), which is a trial transcript in which the defense attorney for one of the white rioters blames the destruction of

Henry T. Wheeler’s house on the fact that it doubles as a dance hall; and the “Committee’s Report” in the *Providence Journal*, September 29, 1831, for the riot that month, which blamed the “natural antipathies” between blacks and whites, exacerbated by drinking and dancing.

54. Thomas B. Stockwell, *A History of Public Education in Rhode Island from 1636–1876* (Providence, RI: Providence Press Company, 1876), 169; *Providence Patriot and Columbian Phenix*, August 29 and September 29, 1821, and June 30, 1832; *Republican Herald*, May 16, 1838.

55. Brown, *Life of William J. Brown*, 48–49; Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 60–61 and 90–92.

56. *Rhode Island American*, June 7, 1830.

57. *The Liberator*, December 26, 1835, and April 2, and September 3, 1836.

58. *Minutes of the Fifth Annual Convention for the Improvement of the Free People of Colour in the United States, Held by Adjournments*,

in the Wesley Church, Philadelphia; From the First to the Fifth of June, Inclusive, 1835 (Philadelphia, PA: William P. Gibbons, 1835).

59. *1831 January, Petition for the Colored People of Rhode Island for Relief from Taxation*, Rhode Island State Archives, C# 869.

60. See the *Rhode Island American*, October 30, 1829; it mentions that the General Assembly rejected a petition of similar substance to the 1831 petition.

61. *1841 June, Petition that their Property be Taxed*, Rhode Island State Archives, C# 869.

62. *Journal of the Convention assembled to frame a constitution for the state of Rhode Island, at Newport, Sept. 12, 1842* (Providence, RI: Knowles, Anthony, & Co., 1859), 45.

63. Lemons, *Black in a White Church*; Johnson, “A Brief Historical Sketch of the Congdon Street Baptist Church of Providence, Rhode Island, 1819–1965”; *Protests and Perspectives: Students at Brown 1960s–90s*, “1968 Walkout” (<https://library.brown.edu/create/protest6090/1968-walkout/>); www.csbchurch.org/history.

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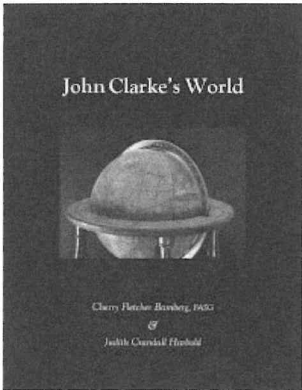
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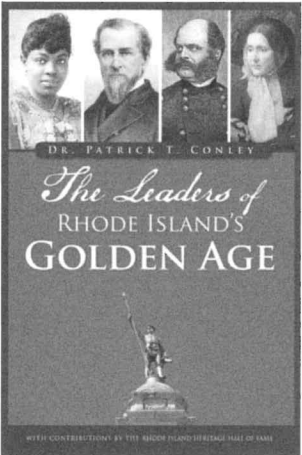
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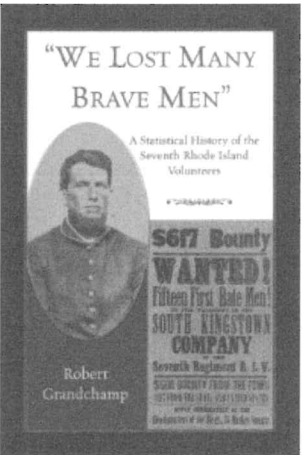
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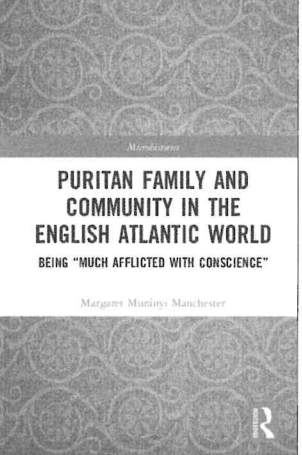
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