

# RHODE ISLAND HISTORY



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Yale University Art Gallery, gift of Isaac Lothrop of Plymouth, Massachusetts

The Bermuda Group (Dean Berkeley and His Entourage)  
by John Smibert, 1729. Berkeley (right) lived in Newport  
1729-1731 while making plans to establish a college in  
Bermuda. Smibert, who accompanied Berkeley to America,  
included a self portrait (far left).

# R H O D E I S L A N D H I S T O R Y

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## THE "LAW AND ORDER" SENATORS



The Toga Gives Way to the Robe and "Rule or Ruin" is the slogan.

Providence News, June 18, 1924

*In Rhode Island as elsewhere, the Klan was a hot political issue during the 1920s. In cartoons and editorials, the Providence News attempted to link the Klan and the Republican party.*

## The Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island

by Norman W. Smith\*

By almost any measure, the twenties were eventful years in Rhode Island. Intimations of national unrest generated by post-World War I emotional collapse, as well as economic apprehensions originating in a sharp postwar recession, swirled around the state's citizens. The unsettling claims for conduct stemming from national prohibition coupled with uneven performance of Rhode Island's textile industries surely strained people's confidence in meeting new ways. Within the state, prolonged skirmishing between entrenched Republicans and ever hopeful Democrats fertilized a political acreage already seeded with mischief. Into this disturbing environment was thrust still another upsetting phenomenon, the Ku Klux Klan.

Although mention of 1920 awakens nostalgic memories of the Charleston and flappers wearing ringlets and eye makeup, one of the less welcome characteristics of the Roaring Twenties was the emergence into national prominence of a re-awakened, up-to-date version of the Klan.

The first Ku Klux Klan was a clandestine movement almost entirely confined to the states of the former Confederacy between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the twentieth century. It had as its major characteristic the exaltation of white supremacy and hence was violently anti-Negro in both its rhetoric and practice. The second Klan was largely the creation of William J. Simmons, who reestablished the masked order at Stone Mountain outside Atlanta in 1915. Simmons' spiritual offspring languished until 1920, when the promotive talents of Edward Y.

Clarke and Mrs. Elizabeth Tyler merged to give the reconstituted Klan national prominence.<sup>1</sup>

It is singular that so little is known even now of the movement which provided such extensive newspaper copy, even if it did not indeed represent that threat to democratic process alleged by its critics. There is as yet no systematic treatment of the Klan in New England. The half-dozen books on various attributes of the Klan provide few clues and less evidence of its existence in Rhode Island. Even so, they form a backdrop for pursuing the secretive and furtive Klan member through the pages of this state's history.<sup>2</sup>

What did the Klan look like in one of the most heavily urban, industrial, Roman Catholic and foreign-born populations in the United States? The following is an attempt to delineate some features of Rhode Island's courtship of the Klan fifty years ago, based—as one colleague has put it—"on the shadow of substance." Direct evidence is scant indeed, confined to a pitifully small cache of Klan materials. Corroboration derives from a reflection of Klan activity in the media of the day, a few interviews, and the official records. Within such confining circumstances one may at best establish broadly the boundaries of what and when, and in less satisfactory fashion examine the who and why of the Klan in Rhode Island during the 1920s.

Through the pages of national media one can trace the nimbus clouds of Klanstorm, now in Louisiana, now in Indiana, now in New York State, during the early months of 1923. Yet in Rhode Island journals only muted voices spoke

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occasionally to the presence of Klan forces, and then addressed them as occurring elsewhere in New England, never at home.<sup>3</sup> Even resolutions by American Legion state units and the Ancient Order of Hibernians were directed more to general outrage than to specific developments within the state's boundaries, as was the abortive attempt to pass an anti-Klan act in the January session of the General Assembly.<sup>4</sup> Not until 19 October 1923 were organizing activities within the state identified, reported by the Democratic state central committee's executive body. At that time "successful efforts" were said to be under way in Rhode Island, particularly in South County.<sup>5</sup>

From late October until the end of the year, little more was said concerning possibilities of Klan invasion of Roger Williams' homeland. On 25 November a particularly stern editorial in the *Providence Journal* noting "anonymous distribution of Klan literature in Rhode Island," deplored the existence of any organization dedicated to disruption of social order and amalgamation, and ended by stating that "hundred-per-cent Americans must set their faces resolutely against the craven practices, false logic and wicked prejudices of the uncourageous society that draws its sustenance from ignorance, illiberality and a fundamental disregard of the true doctrines of Americanism."<sup>6</sup>

At the beginning of December, Mayor Joseph Gainer drew the attention of Providence school authorities to circulation of alleged Klan propaganda within some city schools. Following staff investigation, the material proved to be a current events publication explaining aims and objectives of the Klan; its use was shortly discontinued, and supervisors and teachers alike were alerted to halt further dissemination of suspicious material.<sup>7</sup> The *Providence News* took this occasion to assert a Klan membership of 5,000 centered in the Blackstone Valley, from whence the organization hoped to infiltrate political control of the state.<sup>8</sup>

In retrospect, 1924 appears to have been the year for Klan activity and organization in Rhode Island—when it first attracted public notice, when most publicity attended its functions, when most ferment followed the very mention of its existence. Early in February, the General Assembly passed a resolution opposing the Klan, warning against the spread of its principles among Rhode

Islanders.<sup>9</sup> At about the same time there appeared the first of many news items identifying meetings allegedly connected with Klan organizational efforts. A gathering of approximately 150 men held in Odd Fellows Hall, Pawtuxet, featured the presence of several New Jersey registered automobiles. Then, as later, New Jersey auto registrations were often cited as *prima facie* evidence for participation of Klan organizers in the vicinity.<sup>10</sup>

Intimations of Klan recruitment among street-car men of the United Electric Railway Company brought rapid response from their central federated union in Providence, which resolved that it was "unalterably opposed to the Klan and its principles."<sup>11</sup> Commenting upon continued reports of organizing activity, the *Providence Visitor* took comfort from the fact that a majority of the state's citizens "recognize the danger which any slimy, snakelike organization brings to a peaceful community and their native fairness and common sense will make the growth of the Klan in this State extremely difficult."<sup>12</sup>

Toward the end of February, a meeting reputed to be a Klan recruiting session at Odd Fellows Hall in Anthony featured a dozen Navy personnel (officers and enlisted men) as well as automobiles from New Jersey, Connecticut, and parts of Rhode Island.<sup>13</sup> Presumably responding to agitation arising from publicity generated by increasing public awareness of Klan recruitment, state senator Robert Quinn of West Warwick introduced a bill purportedly directed against the Klan. Although never enacted, the bill sought to have all organizations with more than twenty members file membership rosters with the secretary of state; in addition, it would have forbidden them to circulate printed materials among any except their own members.<sup>14</sup>

Early in March, Mortimer A. Sullivan, mayor of Newport, successfully urged the city's aldermen to refuse requests for Klan meetings: "This historic city will not be allowed by its citizens to become a sewer for the filth, foulness and dirt which issue from the diseased and polluted mouths and minds of a perverted and disreputable organization or its abominable and contemptible representatives."<sup>15</sup>

Within the week, readers in East Greenwich discovered New Jersey Klan organizers living in their midst.<sup>16</sup> At approximately the same time,



Rev. Charles A. Meader, general missionary of the Episcopal Diocese of Rhode Island, speaking at Christ Chapel in Coventry, took issue with the tradition of violence often associated with the Klan. Assuming as he did that "law-abiding, self-respecting and well-regarded men" would not support criminal acts against their neighbors, he noted that meetings he had been aware of had been going on for several months without incident, and that meetings he had been invited to attend included no preaching of hatred or violence.<sup>17</sup>

April's first days were enlivened by cut-and-thrust diatribe between the Republican and Democratic state conventions. Following unanimous condemnation of the Klan in the Republican meeting, the Democratic counterpart took issue with Republican intentions, finding that "the Republican convention was not sincere in its pretended opposition to the Ku Klux Klan, but was simply angling for votes of certain peoples after having made their peace with the Klan."<sup>18</sup> Neither on this nor on later similar occasions did Republican spokesmen deign to reply.

During the second week of April an unusual exchange of views began to appear in the *Rhode Island Pendulum*. This weekly, published in East Greenwich and edited by Mrs. Fay R. Hunt, promised to bring together in debate the opinions of Morris S. Westervelt—recently identified as a Klan organizer from New Jersey—and George W. Gill—who spoke as a Catholic. Advertised as written by East Greenwich residents extremely serious in their intentions, the series of weekly letters lasted into early August, but may have generated more heat than light for avid readers. Opposing the Klan, Mr. Gill possessed substantial command of invective; Mr. Westervelt, defending, evidently commandeered much of his material from official Klan publications. Due to limited circulation, it is not certain how much Gill-Westervelt dialogue penetrated the larger world of Rhode Island social values.<sup>19</sup> On at least one occasion the *Pendulum's* public-spirited debate earned acknowledgment from the *Providence News*, which interpreted the whole affair as thinly disguised support from the very heart of "Klan country" in Rhode Island.<sup>20</sup>

Three isolated incidents in May demonstrated the variety of ways in which persons were affected

by the mysterious organization operating in their midst. Readers of the *Providence Journal* discovered that former editor of the *Providence News* John A. Hennessy had been sued for \$10,000 by Wayne H. Whitman, an attorney from Coventry. At issue was the printing of Whitman's name in the *News* on 26 February, alleging his attendance at, affiliation with, or membership in the Klan. As a result of this public accusation, Whitman contended that he had suffered "pain, humiliation and ignominy" as well as loss of business.<sup>21</sup> In a different situation, a crowd of 200 men attended a meeting in Providence at the old arsenal on Benefit Street. Police arrived in response to a tip suggesting Klan auspices; they found no one in charge and no meeting permit available. The session ended with an address by Rev. A.E. Sanderson, presumably because religious gatherings required no license.<sup>22</sup>

Later Governor William Flynn instigated an investigation of that religious meeting, culminating in his later unreserved disapproval of the masked order and the way in which the Klan conducted its affairs:

*It is to be deplored by all good citizens that this organization is attempting not only to propagate its vicious principles of racial and religious hatred in the State founded by Roger Williams upon the broad principles of religious tolerance, but is even perverting the people's property to its nefarious ends and purposes. I wish to voice my unequivocal condemnation of the aims and objects of the Ku Klux Klan and have to-day directed the Adjutant General and the Quartermaster General to prevent the future use of this or any other State Armory for any meeting of such an organization.*<sup>23</sup>

Although noted in several newspapers, partial burning of the Watchman's Industrial Institute in North Scituate on 22 May aroused little comment. The *Advance* alone saw in this incident a more sinister explanation: "From another source comes the report that the Ku Klux Klan organization, which is said to flourish in that community, may have taken this method of removing this Negro school from their midst and community."<sup>24</sup>

During June 1924, both Klan opponents and followers exhibited greater activity. The *Providence News* announced its self-appointed mission of driving the Klan from the state, presumably



planning to use unwelcome publicity and an informed public as chief weapons for this task. With continuous effort through the remainder of the summer, front page expose articles summarized documents and news of Klan activities around the nation. Throughout this period the *News* steadfastly maintained that "the Klan in Rhode Island is an adjunct of the Republican Party," its principal task being to keep Rhode Island safe by retaining political control of the country towns. This theme was repeated in various guises, but always with great emphasis, until election day in November.<sup>25</sup>

Frenetic organizing activities of the Klan barely visible in the press during early spring months suddenly surfaced in reports of a series of monstrous outdoor rallies and initiations. The first lasted all day at Foster Centre on 21 June. Crowd estimates of 8,000, even if inflated, demonstrate considerable curiosity as well as support. Autos were recognized from most of New England, including caravans from naval bases at New London and Newport. Notable Klan speakers from Connecticut and Pennsylvania were also present. Women lecturers addressed the ladies; at the conclusion of the field day and clam chowder dinner, several hundred candidates were initiated under a blazing cross. The *Providence News*, in covering the same event, estimated almost exactly half as many attending as had the *Journal*, a comparative ratio steadfastly maintained.<sup>26</sup> On 24 June, while three crosses burned near Exeter, 100 Washington County men were initiated in the presence of an estimated 1,000 visitors.<sup>27</sup> It is perhaps significant that three days later the *Providence Journal* featured a rare anti-Klan editorial, "Don't Join the Ku Klux Klan." Noting that Klan membership "has reached the proportions of a nationwide movement and just now is infecting New England," the *Journal* stated that membership in the Klan was "un-American in the highest degree, and particularly hostile to the historic spirit of Rhode Island."<sup>28</sup>

Toward the end of the month, embattled Democratic state delegations at the national convention in New York City strenuously debated whether or not to include an anti-Klan plank in the campaign platform. Rhode Island, almost alone among New England delegations, unanimously opposed the Klan. Under the leadership of Colo-

nel Patrick Quinn, anti-Klan forces worked tirelessly to insert a specific anti-Klan plank into the party platform. After much excitement of a degree unequalled in many years, anti-Klan convention forces were narrowly defeated.<sup>29</sup>

The Veterans of Foreign Wars, in their annual state convention on 28 June did include an anti-Klan resolution among items to be considered.<sup>30</sup> On June 30 the *Providence News* announced that according to reliable information approximately 5,000 Rhode Islanders had joined the Klan during the previous several months. In the opinion of the *News*, however, membership was not evenly distributed throughout the state—"No progress whatever has been made by the Klan organizers in the cities of the State or in most of the progressive towns. Their strength is mostly in the sparsely settled sections where there is a high percentage of illiteracy and where Republicanism is a religion."<sup>31</sup>

During July and August Klan presence continued to manifest itself in diverse ways. On 16 July the first issue of the *R.I. Klansman* was noted by the *Providence News*, which labelled the enterprise a "G. O. P. Organ."<sup>32</sup> On 26 July another outdoor Klan field day and initiation was held at Foster Centre, with a reputed 8,000 in attendance arriving in 2,000 autos. As in the June affair, national Klan figures were present; the final "obligation" was administered to approximately 200 candidates by Kleagle Morris S. Westervelt, organizer for Providence and Kent counties.<sup>33</sup> The following day, notice of a Klan meeting in its area appeared on the front page of the *Woonsocket Call*, concurrent with recognition that a contingent of sympathizers from Woonsocket had been at the Foster Centre rally the previous evening.<sup>34</sup>

Early in August there occurred an event almost inevitable wherever the Klan existed during those turbulent years—Lucien C. San Souci, a young newspaper reporter from Woonsocket, was allegedly branded with the letter "K" on 4 August. Vigorously denied by Kleagle Westervelt, the affair soon died out in the press.<sup>35</sup> The departure near the end of that month by Westervelt and family for a camping trip to Maine appeared to coincide with emergence of differing opinions concerning conduct of Klan affairs. When pressed to share responsibilities with other Klan officials,





*Ku Klux Klan gathering at Oaklawn Cemetery, Broad Street, on the Providence - Cranston line.*

*RIHS Library*

he evidently had demurred, stating "that for too many to be informed of the membership strength of the order in the State would be detrimental." Westervelt's successor was unknown, but the *Providence Journal* speculated that a former organizer for the area might return to take over the New Jersey resident's duties.<sup>36</sup> Later the *Providence News* reported that Westervelt had gone to Maine to help with the gubernatorial campaign there, one in which Klan support was widely publicized.<sup>37</sup>

Within three weeks of Westervelt's departure, citizens in Providence's metropolitan area were apprised of the eviction of Clarence S. Cleasby from his office on Broad Street for nonpayment of rent. Cleasby, a former secretary of the Klan in Rhode Island, had been recently appointed Kleagle for Newport and Bristol Counties.<sup>38</sup> Although the office had been leased by Westervelt through August 1, nobody ever arrived to rescue furniture or cartons of Klan materials unceremoniously deposited in the street. Those unclaimed office

contents inadvertently exposed to the public view were used frequently thereafter by the *Providence News* in its continuing effort to permanently establish links between the Klan and the state's Republican party.<sup>39</sup> One item from that windfall proved to be of enduring interest—the policy of inviting foreign-born Protestants to Klan meetings, even though under Klan rules only native-born white Protestants were eligible for membership.<sup>40</sup>

With the passage of summer, fewer outdoor sessions were reported in Rhode Island, save for one area. Reportedly having been denied use of the Frenchtown Baptist Church in East Greenwich, the Klan made arrangements in mid-September for use of a tent on a nearby Shippeetown farm; another large meeting was planned for the immediate vicinity later in the month; on this occasion women would be welcome. At the same time the *Pendulum* reported that Rev. H. Kenneth Smith, pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church in East Greenwich, would preach on



"The Ku Klux Klan as Viewed by an Alien Christian"—marking the first of several news items which would link Smith with the Klan over the next few years.<sup>41</sup>

With state and national elections only a month away, it is understandable that at least some of the Klan-oriented news in October included references to politics. Both major state political parties had officially condemned the Klan, although it was hinted that Republicans had done so reluctantly.<sup>42</sup> The Democratic state central committee had earlier activated a speaker's bureau to promote that party's dogma. Although not instructed specifically to dramatize Klan links with Republicans, speakers often explored that possibility, presumably because of its current appeal.<sup>43</sup> Considerable speculation about possibilities of Klan tickets occurred in several towns, among them Coventry.<sup>44</sup> A large outdoor rally and initiation near Chepachet Road in Greenville in Smithfield occasioned the presence of 3,000 Klansmen in regalia as well as 200 initiates; 500 autos were used to illuminate the field of honor. Here Jesse H. Metcalf was allegedly endorsed as Republican candidate for the United States Senate. In addition to massed flags, crosses, tableaux, and torches, the Grant Field meeting featured a band from Greystone, playing "Onward Christian Soldiers" as one of several selections.<sup>45</sup>

On 31 October the *Providence News* proclaimed messages for special groups among the Rhode Island electorate. One such reminder, clearly directed at French-Canadian readers, simply stated "*Le Ku Klux Klan déclare la guerre aux candidats catholiques. Il se ligue avec le parti républicain Ce qu'il imparte de faire.*" Another section of the paper addressed itself to Rhode Island's Negro community, reminding them who their real friends were.<sup>46</sup>

During the last week of October, estimated thousands of broadsides attacking the Roman Catholic Church were circulated in Providence, leading the *Providence Visitor* to employ uncommonly stern language in protest—"The publisher of this anti-Catholic breeder of hate and calumny is one Alma White of New Jersey. Judging from her publication she must be possessed of a very filthy mind, and Satan himself has taken residence in her heart. For no one but the prince of lies could gather so many and so diabolical an

assortment of calumnies."<sup>47</sup>

Election day came and went. Hopes of Democrats for sizeable gains based on Klan issues were dashed. Rather, Klan-supported candidates had been elected in many places, hence presumably constituting a political factor in the state for some time to come.<sup>48</sup> This in spite of the fact that neither numbers nor names of alleged Klan-endorsed candidates were ever given, and that no candidate publicly acknowledged Klan support. It may defy coincidence that following the election major newspaper coverage of the Klan practically ceased.

Just before the end of December, Providence police responding to a tip visited a meeting on Weybosset Street conducted by F.E. Farnsworth. Former head of the Klan in Maine and an active campaigner for Maine's governor Ralph Owen Brewster, Farnsworth claimed to have left the Klan and taken up organizational duties for the Crusaders. Evidently limited to New England, this new group was broadly Klan-like in its goals and organization but allowed female and foreign-born Protestant membership. No membership figures were ever given for the Crusaders, but they were evidently still in existence as late as April 1928.<sup>49</sup>

Early in 1925 two social events occurred in Klan circles, both with unusual features. An estimated 500 Klansmen met for an oyster supper at Anthony village in Coventry on 7 January, with coffee and cake accompanied by a "100% Klan band" together with a bevy of assorted speakers.<sup>50</sup> More ostentatious was the first public Klan dinner-dance and entertainment, held at Rhodes-on-Pawtuxet on 30 January. Sponsored by the Providence County Klanton and its women's auxiliary, an estimated 1,000 persons attended the affair which was already under attack from local Knights of Columbus units. Rev. Guy W. Holmes, pastor of Hillsgrove Methodist Episcopal Church in Warwick, acted as master of ceremonies for the event.<sup>51</sup>

Throughout the remainder of 1925 evidence of Klan activity is largely confined to pages of the *Rhode Island Pendulum*. An apparent casualty of anti-Klan hostility in his East Greenwich parish, Rev. H. Kenneth Smith was appointed in April to the Central Church in Taunton, Massachusetts. At issue in East Greenwich evidently was Smith's



invitation to Klansmen to use the church's facilities for meetings, once the onset of winter made local barns unsuitable for Klan functions.<sup>52</sup>

In July the *Pendulum* reported in some detail that a vigorous recruiting drive was currently under way, and that Klan membership had doubled during the previous six weeks. At the same time plans were announced for several hundred Rhode Islanders to attend the annual national Klan convention in Washington, D.C., during August.<sup>53</sup>

In late October a large Klan rally reminiscent of the previous year occupied a Grange hall with an estimated 900 persons present. Automobiles completely filled both sides of the road, while inside approximately fifty men and the same number of women were separately initiated.<sup>54</sup> New additions to Klan strength continued to be made throughout the year. Initiations of 100 men on two separate occasions enabled the *Pendulum's* editor to observe that "there is much less opposition to the Klan these days as at least in Kent County it is becoming the regular thing."<sup>55</sup>

Between 1925 and 1927 there was scant reference in the Rhode Island press to Klan activities, although they were still known to be continuing. An extended meeting of the Southern New England Conference of Methodist Episcopal Church in April 1926 resulted in dismissal of both Rev. Guy W. Holmes and Rev. H. Kenneth Smith. Several days of newspaper coverage retraced the involvement of both ministers with the Klan in their respective parishes, even though Klan participation was not given as the basis for ecclesiastical separation.<sup>56</sup> Later that year, joy-riding Klansmen disrupted East Greenwich on a July Saturday night; in September an estimated 2,000 persons over-subscribed a Klan-sponsored clam-bake. In late summer Rhode Islanders again participated in the annual Klan rally in Washington, D.C.<sup>57</sup>

Sometime during 1926 changes in Rhode Island Klan leadership took place. John A. Domin, a United Electric Railway Company motorman, assumed the post of Exalted Cyclops, Roger Williams Klanton No. 16. The more important position of grand dragon, also known as grand titan, realm of Connecticut-Rhode Island, fell to John W. Perry of Providence. Often addressed as "Colonel," Perry had been in the World War with

the American Expeditionary Force. He later served as a member of the New London, Connecticut police force, had been intermittently a private investigator and a Klan auditor, and then became a Klan organizer in Vermont.<sup>58</sup>

Rhode Island Klansmen in 1927 suffered legislative rejection but honored both new churches and old brothers with their distinctive presence. In February the General Assembly resoundingly defeated four bills said to have been endorsed by the Klan, intended to void nuptial contracts covering education of children, to prevent miscegenation, and to prohibit membership in societies with foreign leadership.<sup>59</sup> April graveside ceremonies for Charles Crandall of Westerly were led by Rev. O.M. Brees in full regalia, surrounded by knights and officers of the local Klan without hoods.<sup>60</sup> In June, Guy W. Holmes, a former pastor from New Bedford, reappeared in Rhode Island as rumored founder of a new church, the American People's Church, Inc. Among the incorporators were Holmes' wife and Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Cleasby, both active in Rhode Island Klandom from its inception.<sup>61</sup> In June, Colonel Perry and the Roger Williams Klan band were prominent participants at the United Protestant Church dedication in Stirling, Connecticut. Founded by Rev. Ernest C. Drake, a former Methodist pastor, the church was built in slightly more than three months; completion was celebrated by an all-day Klan rally. A crowd estimated at 10,000 congested the grounds; Grand Dragon Perry was among several Klan speakers, some having come from as far away as Florida for the occasion.<sup>62</sup> In October a crowd of 500, including seventy men and women in full regalia (masked), was led by the grand dragon, solemnizing the Chepachet funeral of Fred M. Smith of Hopkins Mills.<sup>63</sup>

In spring 1928, Rhode Islanders were made aware that the Klan had been engaged in a devious scheme designed to improve its membership. The *Providence Journal*, in an exclusive story on 17 March, revealed that nearly 200 officers and men in three companies of the First Light Infantry, Rhode Island Militia, were at the same time members of the Klan, and that recruiting for both organizations was reciprocal and concurrent.<sup>64</sup>

Throughout the following week material continued to appear, discussing probable culpability





*Nighttime Klan rally in Georgiaville, Smithfield, 1927.*

*Providence Journal, April 26, 1965*

of the unit's commander, responsibility of the state's adjutant general and attorney general for coping with an undesirable situation, and likelihood that the House militia committee would stage a full-dress inquiry.<sup>65</sup> Much of the wrangling arose from alleged connections between Republicans and the Klan; however, the committee received unanimous legislative approval on 24 March, and shortly thereafter began its hearing.<sup>66</sup>

Substantial early testimony was provided by Austin C. Barney, Klan member and cook in Troop G, Rhode Island National Guard. Barney spoke to the possibility of the scheme's being part of a national program, to the identity of two state senators on the Klan "secret" list, and to the current military membership in the Rhode Island Klan (more than 900). Senators Samuel Avery of Hopkinton and Charles Weaver of Richmond immediately issued denials of membership.<sup>67</sup> Later witnesses included Frederick T. Remington, secretary of Roger Williams Klanton No. 16; Grand Titan John W. Perry; Clarence S. Cleasby,

former kleagle of Bristol and Newport counties; John A. Domin, exalted cyclops of Roger Williams Klanton; Rev. Orio Brees, former secretary of the Klan in South County; Roswell Calin, an investigator for the attorney general's office, and various members of the First Light Infantry.<sup>68</sup> Concluded on 14 April 1927, testimony gathered throughout the three weeks' hearing contained numerous charges linking the Klan with political activity in various towns as well as with police chiefs in Warwick, East Greenwich and Coventry, and the testimony incidentally led as well to a perjury indictment for Grand Titan Perry.<sup>69</sup> The hearing's final document contained both majority and minority reports. The majority's report recognized the attorney general's opinion that nothing illegal had transpired; found that many of the Klan's witnesses had committed perjury; exonerated Adjutant General Cole and the First Light Infantry's commanding officer; concluded that Klan infiltration of chartered commands had been limited to the First Light Infantry, but noted



that Klan influence was "baneful and conducive to class feeling and bigotry." The minority report concentrated largely upon its contention that the adjutant general had withheld knowledge of Klan subversion, and had acted with insufficient speed to remedy an obviously undesirable situation.<sup>70</sup> Post-inquiry debates in the General Assembly focused upon attempts to severely curtail the chartered commands, leading to charges and counter-charges alleging the Klan's pervasiveness in all areas of Rhode Island life; no changes were made.<sup>71</sup>

Extensive publicity generated by the House hearing might have dampened the enthusiasm of potential Klan members. Such does not seem to have been the case. Neither did the arrest and subsequent release of Grand Titan Perry on \$5,000 bail prevent that indomitable leader from appearing in public during summer 1928. A Klan wedding on 23 June, where the featured speaker was Rev. Ernest Drake from Stirling, Connecticut, provided one occasion for his continued presence.

It is reported that the presiding minister at the ceremony wore full regalia; Perry's daughter was christened at the same time as the wedding in the presence of 400 guests, 100 of whom wore full costume.<sup>72</sup> More prominent was Perry's role in the well publicized visit of United States senator J. Thomas Heflin of Alabama who spoke before an estimated 10,000 persons at Grant's Field in Georgiaville in Smithfield on 1 July. Arrangements included Providence police and state police escorts, installation of amplifiers, and refreshment booths for the large crowd.<sup>73</sup> An estimated 8,000 people actually attended the meeting, which opened with prayer by Rev. Ernest Drake. Grand Titan Perry briefly welcomed the guest in a speech which compared Senator Heflin with a latter-day St. John the Baptist.<sup>74</sup> The critical *Providence News* dismissed Heflin's performance as a two-hour self-congratulatory tirade, delivered before "a group of unimportant men, some paunchy, others lean, clad in regalia which made them more than a little ridiculous, and they knew it."<sup>75</sup>

It is not possible on the present evidence to determine when the modern Klan died out in Rhode Island, or if in fact it ever entirely ceased to exist. Perry remained as grand dragon at least until 1932, having been acquitted of perjury at his

trial in January 1929. He and others participated in a Klan wedding at Rev. Mr. Drake's church in June 1930; his name appears on a notice to members of meetings scheduled for October 1932 in Providence and Westerly.<sup>76</sup>

Without attempting a definitive interpretation of the Klan's presence in Rhode Island, certain features may be noted. To the question of numbers, only the most qualified answer can be given, due to the order's secrecy, limited access to data, and dearth of surviving records. Klan recruitment started here during 1923, presumably aided by striking success of Klan organizers elsewhere in New England. Although estimates of Klan strength ranged as high as 37,000, this figure appears to have been inflated even by the standards of the time. A level of 2,500-3,000 members by the time of the Klan hearings in 1928 applied only to the Roger Williams Klanton; continued activity in southern Rhode Island during the previous years suggests that almost as many again from that area still belonged to the organization.

Although the spread of the Klan in Rhode Island probably would have occurred anyway, growing availability of private, rapid automobile transportation undoubtedly contributed to the Klan's expansion. Swift anonymity made it possible to frequent places unfavored by other forms of transportation. It was an age when few persons traveled singly, thus preserving or perhaps enhancing a feeling of group participation. Even more, mobility made possible the remarkable interstate, and even interregional, character of much Klan activity. One may speculate whether or not the evidence of automobile use contradicts the usual lower-middle class and blue-collar stereotype of Klan membership. To this point, some suggestion exists that a shift in Klan membership took place after 1925, perhaps accounting for a lower visibility and lessened mobility of the members.<sup>77</sup>

In some ways the Klan here resembled its counterparts elsewhere, similarities that were recognized at the time. The movement was essentially rural, even though some of its leadership was associated with urban areas. Some Protestant ministers evidently played an important role in supporting organizational activity, even though they may not have been members. Women constituted an important part of the movement,



even though they were relegated to auxiliary organizations. For many the attractiveness of the order presumably lay in its adoption of familiar cultural trappings for its functions, such as tent meetings, all-day outdoor rallies, oyster suppers and clambake dinners. Unlike its counterparts in other states, there was relatively little violence connected with the Klan's presence in Rhode Island, beyond a few stones thrown and names exchanged between opposing factions, particularly in 1924.

The target of Klan antipathy was, as everywhere, Catholicism, with traces of hostility toward Negroes and Jews, although one gathers that anti-Catholicism was the most prominent theme around the Narragansett Bay area. Anti-Catholicism was not new to Rhode Island, having been endemic at least from the 1830s and probably earlier. One notes in this connection as well Rhode Island's flirtation with the Know-Nothing Party in the 1850s. It goes without saying that such sentiments were frequently clothed in the most favorable light possible, stressing patriotic qualities and support of acceptable social values. Only in the beginning of the next decade is there evidence of a new foe added to the Klan's lexicon of villains—Communism.<sup>78</sup>

Without other New England studies for comparison, it is impossible to judge how different certain aspects of Klan practice in Rhode Island might have been. There are, for instance, no references to Crusaders in any of the secondary literature on the Klan, even though there was substantial awareness of the organization, its composition, and its purposes at the time. If, as stated, the Crusaders substantially had New England for their habitat, then evidence of their existence should be available in other states. How important was its work in Rhode Island is difficult to say; one plausible consequence would have been to soften anti-foreign bias in Klan dogma.

In the political arena, Democratic charges of links between Republicans and the Klan existed almost from the beginning, were persistently maintained, and were vehemently resurrected following the First Light Infantry incident. To the extent that Republican forces only formally rejected the Klan late in 1924 and seldom specifically thereafter, there was presumably a modicum of truth in the partisan allegations. The Demo-

cratic party may have been the party of the Klan in the South, but not so in certain northern states, as had already been noted nationally by 1926.<sup>79</sup>

Interestingly enough, when asked how crucial the Klan issue was to the course of politics in Rhode Island during the 1920s, two experienced, qualified political observers with first-hand knowledge (and dissimilar political allegiance) unanimously minimized its importance.<sup>80</sup>

It may be that the Klan in Rhode Island amounted to nothing more than a momentary disturbance in her even-tenored way. With almost three centuries of experience as independent men, Rhode Islanders may have rebuffed the foreign in spirit rather than the foreign in body.

- 1 William P. Randel, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Century of Infamy* (Philadelphia: Chilton Books, 1965) 184-5. Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) 181.
- 2 John M. Mecklin, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924; re-issued New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1963). Seymour M. Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970). Arnold S. Rice, *The Ku Klux Klan in American Politics* (Washington: Public Affairs Press, 1962).
- 3 *Providence Journal* 6 March, 22 January, 28 May 1923.
- 4 *Journal* 21 January, 19 July, 18 September, 4 and 18 January 1923.
- 5 *Journal* 20 October 1923.
- 6 *Journal* 25 November 1923.
- 7 *Journal* 8, 9 and 11 December 1923.
- 8 *Providence News* 10 December 1923.
- 9 *Journal* 2 February 1924. *Rhode Island Acts and Resolves, January Session 1924* (Providence: E.L. Freeman Company, 1925) 40-41.
- 10 *Journal* February 1924; *News* 13 February 1924.
- 11 *Journal* 18 February 1924; *News* 14, 15 and 18 February 1924.
- 12 *Providence Visitor* 21 February 1924.
- 13 *Journal* 26 February 1924.
- 14 *Journal* 27 February 1924.
- 15 *Journal* 2 March 1924.
- 16 *Rhode Island Pendulum* (East Greenwich) 6 March 1924.



- 17 *Journal* 10 March 1924; *News* 10 March 1924.
- 18 *Journal* 8 and 9 April 1924.
- 19 *Pendulum* 10 April 1924 and following weeks.
- 20 *Pendulum* 17 April 1924.
- 21 *Journal* 11 May 1924.
- 22 *Journal* 18 May 1924.
- 23 *Journal* 7 June 1924.
- 24 *Journal* 23 May 1924; *News* 23 May 1924; *Advance* June 1924.
- 25 *News* 7 June 1924. Subsequent installments appeared on twelve separate publication days in June. Thereafter news items were substantial and numerous but not serially designated.
- 26 *Journal* 22 June 1924; *News* 23 June 1924.
- 27 *Journal* 25 June 1924.
- 28 *Journal* 27 June 1924.
- 29 *Journal* and *News* 26-29 June 1924, passim. Harvey Almy Baker to Marion Baker, 27 June 1924, Harvey Almy Baker Papers, RIHS Library.
- 30 *Journal* 28 June 1924.
- 31 *News* 30 June 1924.
- 32 *News* 16 July 1924.
- 33 *Journal* 27 July 1924.
- 34 *Woonsocket Call* 28 July 1924.
- 35 *Journal* 6 August 1924.
- 36 *Journal* 20 August 1924.
- 37 *News* 11 September 1924.
- 38 *Journal* 20 August 1924.
- 39 *News* 7 September 1924.
- 40 *News* 8 and 9 September 1924.
- 41 *Pendulum* 18 September 1924.
- 42 *Visitor* 3 October 1924.
- 43 Mimeographed circular letter dated 26 February 1924 and signed by James E. Dunne, chairman of Democratic state central committee, Baker Papers, RIHS Library. Interview with Judge Michael DeCiantis, Providence, 13 May 1974.
- 44 *Visitor* 10 and 18 October 1924; *News* 23 October 1924.
- 45 *News* 27 October 1924.
- 46 *News* 31 October 1924.
- 47 *Visitor* 31 October 1924.
- 48 *Visitor* 7 November 1924; *News* 10 November 1924; *Pendulum* 27 November 1924.
- 49 *Journal* 30 December 1924. Testimony of Rev. Orio Brees, former secretary of the Klan in South County, before the Rhode Island House militia committee, 13 April 1928—*Journal* 14 April 1928.
- 50 *Pendulum* 8 January 1925.
- 51 *Journal* 31 January 1925.
- 52 *Pendulum* 19 March, 2 and 9 April 1925.
- 53 *Pendulum* 16 July and 3 September 1925.
- 54 *Pendulum* 22 October 1925.
- 55 *Pendulum* 10 December 1925.
- 56 *Journal* 10-13 April 1926.
- 57 *Pendulum* 22 July, 26 August, 2 and 23 September, 1926.
- 58 *Journal* 4 and 6 April 1928.
- 59 *Journal* 3 February 1927.
- 60 *Journal* 26 April 1927.
- 61 *Journal* 21 June 1927.
- 62 Interview with Mr. Clifford Marston, North Scituate, R.I., 31 July 1974; scrapbook in the possession of Mr. and Mrs. Marston.
- 63 *Journal* 16 October 1927.
- 64 *Journal* 17 March 1928.
- 65 *Journal* 18-22 March 1928.
- 66 *Journal* 23-24 March 1928.
- 67 *Journal* 28-30 March 1928.
- 68 *Journal* 31 March-14 April 1928, passim.
- 69 Testimony of John E. Schlemmer before the House militia committee, 10 April 1928, Misc. MS. (Schlemmer, John E. et al.) RIHS Library. *Journal* 13 and 14 April 1928.
- 70 *Journal* 18 and 19 April 1928. Much of the background for the Klan's infiltration of the First Light Infantry is found in the *Report of the Adjutant General* (1928). It is worth noting that the militia committee report, ordered printed and so listed in the *Acts and Resolves* for 1928, cannot be located.
- 71 *Journal* 21 April 1928.
- 72 *Journal* 24 June 1928; *News* 22 and 23 June 1928.
- 73 *Journal* 25 June, 1 July 1928.
- 74 *Journal* 2 July 1928.
- 75 *News* 2 July 1928.
- 76 *Journal* 8 and 9 January 1929. "Klan Wedding Ceremony with Parade at Oneco," Marston scrapbook. Mimeographed meeting notice from J.W. Perry, October 1932, Perry MS., RIHS Library.
- 77 Schlemmer testimony, Misc. MS (Schlemmer et al.) RIHS Library.
- 78 Larry A. Rand, "The Know-Nothing Party in Rhode Island: Religious Bigotry and Political Success," *Rhode Island History* 23: 4 (October 1964) 102-116. *Journal* 14 October 1932.
- 79 *New Republic* 10 February 1926, 311.
- 80 Interview with Judge Michael DeCiantis; off-the-record interview with a Republican town politician, 9 December 1974.



Eliza Smith, Providence Schoolmistress, anonymous, ca. 1836.

New York State Historical Association, Cooperstown



## Teaching the Three Rs — Eliza Smith, Schoolmistress

by Elizabeth Jane Townsend\*

A little girl in black, shoulders hunched over as if carrying the weight of the world, looking like a woman old before her time, she sits in a rocking chair, clasping a spray of roses, gazing solemnly out of the canvas. *Eliza Smith, Providence (R.I.) Schoolmistress* was painted circa 1836 when artisan craftsmen earned their livelihood traveling highways and byways of the United States painting the faces of its people before photography signalled the demise of this popular art form.

She grew up to be Eliza Smith, a schoolteacher who blended the "kind and loving care of the mother so that her little school seems like a pleasant home"—so reported the Johnston school committee in 1883.<sup>1</sup>

For nearly a quarter of a century Eliza Smith lived down the road from her one-room schoolhouse in Johnston. In July 1901, in the midst of a record-breaking heat wave that enveloped New England—closing down factories and felling the old and infirm—she died at seventy and was buried in the Smith family plot in Grace Church cemetery, Providence. She had no direct descendants; she willed her books and possessions including the oil portrait, to two dear spinster friends.<sup>2</sup>

Nearly fifty years after her death, the New York State Historical Association acquired her portrait for its folk art collection in Cooperstown. Eliza Smith came to share gallery space with other portraits by well known naive artists. Eliza's portrait has all the characteristics of folk painting—flatness and lack of three dimensionality—

emphasis on design and decorative treatment—absence of light and shadow—unsureness of human anatomy and form. Jean Lipman, folk art historian, noted "the clasped hands, which clearly show the sprays of moss rose were painted as a decorative afterthought with no attempt at functional rearrangement of the hands."<sup>3</sup> The combination of muted and bold colors and its perspective help make the portrait a particularly distinctive one. "Here she floats above the landscape on a magic carpet"—*Antiques* described it in 1959.<sup>4</sup> *Eliza Smith* also appeared in an earlier issue of *Antiques* and more recently in a history of portrait painting in America.

An estimated 3000 artists working from 1800-1860 in the United States devoted some of their time to portraits, many of which not signed or inscribed depict non-identifiable sitters.<sup>5</sup> For the curious museum visitor who asks about the people and personalities behind the portraits—who were they? what did they do? how did they live?—there are in most cases no answers. For Eliza Smith, however, a recent search of vital statistics, city directories, census lists, wills, church and school records has resulted in an unusual amount of information that shows her life, one in many respects representative of thousands of American women of the mid-nineteenth century who entered the teaching profession, lived out their lives, and disappeared into the anonymity of the past.

When the New York State Historical Association acquired her portrait, a note attached to it stated who Eliza was, where and when she was

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born, when the painting was done and that the artist was "the pastor of the Broad Street Christian Church." While the dates later proved erroneous, the rest of the information was essentially correct and provided the take-off point for researching Eliza Smith.<sup>6</sup>

When Eliza was born on Stewart (Stuart) Street, Providence, on April 4, 1831, Rhode Island's public school law was only three years old but by the time she was old enough to attend there were several schools including a high school with a girls' section. When Henry Barnard became Rhode Island's educational agent in 1843, the legislature authorized him "to use all legitimate means for promoting the interests of education in every town in Rhode Island."<sup>7</sup> In part he realized that objective in the School Act of 1845 establishing the district school system. Barnard further advocated teaching training institutes and female teachers. "Educate well, if you can educate only one sex, the female child," he wrote in 1848, "so that every home shall have an educated mother and above all, provide for the professional training of female teachers for upon their agency popular education must rely for a higher style of manners, morals and intellectual culture."<sup>8</sup> Six years later, in 1854, the Rhode Island State Normal School opened in central Providence with a staff of two and student body of twenty seven. Across the river on Stewart Street, Eliza Smith was twenty-three years old, single—past the conventional age for marriage—soon to determine her life's work.

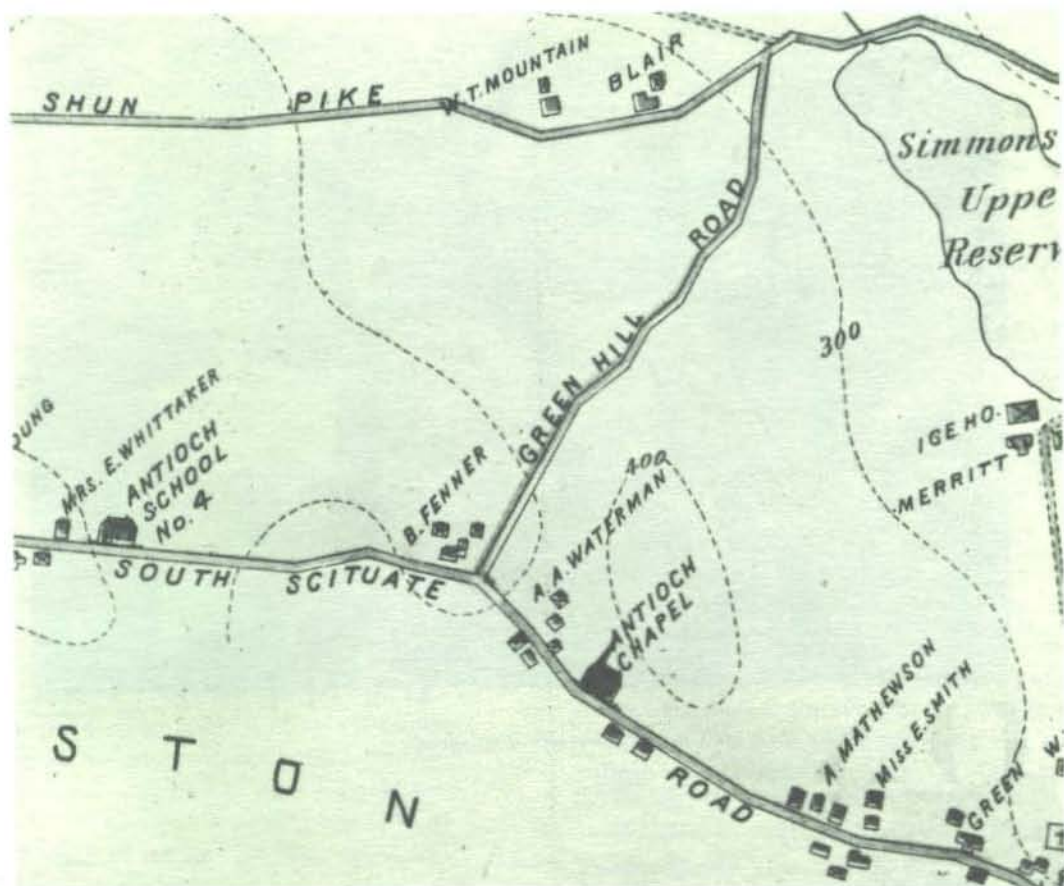
Eliza was the last child of Alanston and Eliza Guild Smith and the only one of five brothers and sisters to survive infancy. Her father, a varnish maker by trade, worked out of a three-building complex behind the Smith home. He supplied the needs of cabinet makers, carriage makers and ship builders. Certainly his trade was substantial judging from the inventory taken at his death in 1855—115 gallons of linseed oil, 125 gallons of turpentine spirits, 485 pounds of gum shellac and 50 gallons of varnish already made up.<sup>9</sup> Though probably the Smith family never experienced financial hardship, they did know sorrow from deaths of five infant children, none of whom survived past thirteen months. The family, which included two maiden aunts, Alanston's sisters Judith and Clarissa, experienced

periods of mourning in 1822, 1825, 1827, 1828, and 1829 on the death of each infant. In 1836 Eliza Guild Smith died at thirty-eight.<sup>10</sup> Now five years old, Eliza in all likelihood sat for her portrait while in mourning—that explains the black dress and the portrait's sombre mood. But bright splashes of color on the horizon and a church on a hill in the background lend a note of optimism and hope that helps relieve the portrait's overall melancholy.

Unsigned—Eliza's portrait is attributed to Elijah W. Barrows, pastor of Broad Street Christian Church in Providence, organized in 1834. Two years earlier, two itinerant ministers came to preach in Providence but "made no stop because of the cholera raging at that time."<sup>11</sup> In the fall, one of them, Elijah W. Barrows, returned and gained a following, his group continuing to meet for prayer after Barrows left to preach in another city. He returned in April 1834 and his small group began using the former chapel—the old "Tin Top"—of Richmond Street Congregational Society at Richmond and Pine, not far from the Smith home. Eliza's Aunt Judith and nineteen others "came forward" in July to officially form the Christian Church of Providence. They continued worshipping in the Tin Top until fall when they built a small chapel on the corner of Pawtuxet (Broad Street) and Fenner. Reverend Mr. Barrows remained another two years before moving on, eventually settling in Lakeville, Massachusetts.<sup>12</sup> His stay in Providence coincided with Eliza Guild Smith's death; conceivably and supporting the tradition, he painted young Eliza's portrait.

Often the naive portrait includes something descriptive of sitter or painter, something that further identifies one or both. The church and the two-storied building prominent in the background probably serve this purpose. The building could be a landmark of nineteenth-century Providence or even of Eliza's neighborhood but it has not been identified. The steepled church does not resemble the old Tin Top but could it be the Christian church's first chapel at Broad and Fenner? Unfortunately that has been destroyed and no depiction of it survives. Or was it a church Barrows remembered from his childhood in Mansfield, Connecticut? Or a vision of one he aspired to for his Providence congregation but did





Atlas of Surveys of Providence County, 1895

*Detail of a Johnston map showing Antioch School (left) and Eliza Smith's house (lower right).*

not see begun since he left before the main church was built? In 1884, three years before his death at eighty-two, he travelled from Lakeville, forty-five miles east of Providence, to join the fiftieth anniversary celebration of Broad Street Christian Church.<sup>13</sup> Records in Lakeville show Reverend Mr. Barrows preaching in Mullein Hill meeting house, teaching, and serving for many years on the school committee.<sup>14</sup> No evidence except the note attached to Eliza's portrait indicates that he may have been an artist.

Eliza's father remarried a year following his wife's death and thereafter provided for four children by his second wife in addition to his two sisters and Eliza. Stewart Street and Providence changed, the city flourished. Large federal houses on the hill overlooking the river showed an

earlier era of mercantile prosperity. Now textile manufacturing, ushered in by Samuel Slater's mill in 1790, dominated the economy. The city housed mills, factories, and more people, most of them immigrants. Alanston Smith—second generation out of Cumberland, England—saw the city grow from 11,767 in 1820 to 41,513 by 1850. Stewart Street lost its residential character. With the help of loans in part from his two sisters, he bought ten lots in nearby Cranston. Perhaps he intended to move there or perhaps it was sheer speculation. His death in July 1855 at fifty-six left the Smith household bereft of father and breadwinner. His intent in his will, written three months before, was to generously and equitably provide for Eliza and his second wife and children. He bequeathed to Eliza \$500, one mahogany



Smith family graves at Grace Church Cemetery, Providence.

*E. Jane Townsend*

bureau and two mahogany bedsteads (later evaluated at sixteen dollars) which were his first wife's. The remainder of the estate was divided among his wife and children. The will was filed and inventory taken of house and varnish shop. But claims against the estate mounted; insolvency papers were filed in September.<sup>15</sup>

For Eliza, now twenty-five and still single, the period must have been one of great uncertainty. Her father had been the family's sole means of financial support. Her sixty-two-year-old Aunt Judith soon advertised as a tailoress. Eliza found that teaching was now accessible to women and a more pleasant alternative to factory work or sewing. Rhode Island State Normal School was graduating teachers, many of them female, gaining a credible reputation.<sup>16</sup> Eliza became one of its early graduates and by 1860 she is listed as a teacher.<sup>17</sup> From 1860 to 1869 she continued to live at the Stewart Street address. In 1863 her stepmother relocated to a neighboring street, leaving Eliza with Aunt Judith, now seventy, and Aunt Clarissa, seventy-one. Next year Clarissa died and

five years later Judith.<sup>18</sup> The house was then sold. Where Eliza moved, where she taught, what she did for the next ten years, 1869 to 1879, remain unanswered questions.

We find Eliza in Johnston in 1879 — "Miss Lizzie Smith of District #10 is comparatively new with us yet gives evidence of an earnest laborer and good teacher."<sup>19</sup> A subsequent report placed Eliza Smith in District #4, Antioch district, where she remained until 1889 and retirement.<sup>20</sup>

Five miles from Providence on the Woonasquattuck and Pocasset rivers, Johnston was an agricultural area turned mill town. When Eliza taught there, the Union and Merino mills had attracted an immigrant population, particularly swelling the first school district. In a sparsely settled part of town that preserved its rural character long after the rest of Johnston became a mill town, Eliza's school was a wood frame building constructed in 1847, a typical one-room school recalled today with nostalgia. Antioch school, though, lived well beyond its time; in 1930 it was still in use heated by a stove.<sup>21</sup>



As early as 1887, the Johnston school report cited District #4's desolate location, small size, ill arrangement inside, concluding it was not a "pleasant school house," advising better blackboards and extra apparatus "if the good people would see fit to provide it". Eliza's classes were smaller than most districts in Johnston. In 1884 twenty-eight pupils were registered and eighteen was average attendance. She did not face problems of her fellow teachers in District #1 which had 347 registered with 140 average attendance, causing school officials to lament the number of truants "seen daily in the streets growing up in ignorance and idleness."

Despite her schoolhouse's poor physical condition and isolation, Eliza's teaching—on a \$300 annual salary—generally won kudos. "May the time be far distant when it shall be necessary to appoint a successor to Miss Smith," read the school report in 1883.

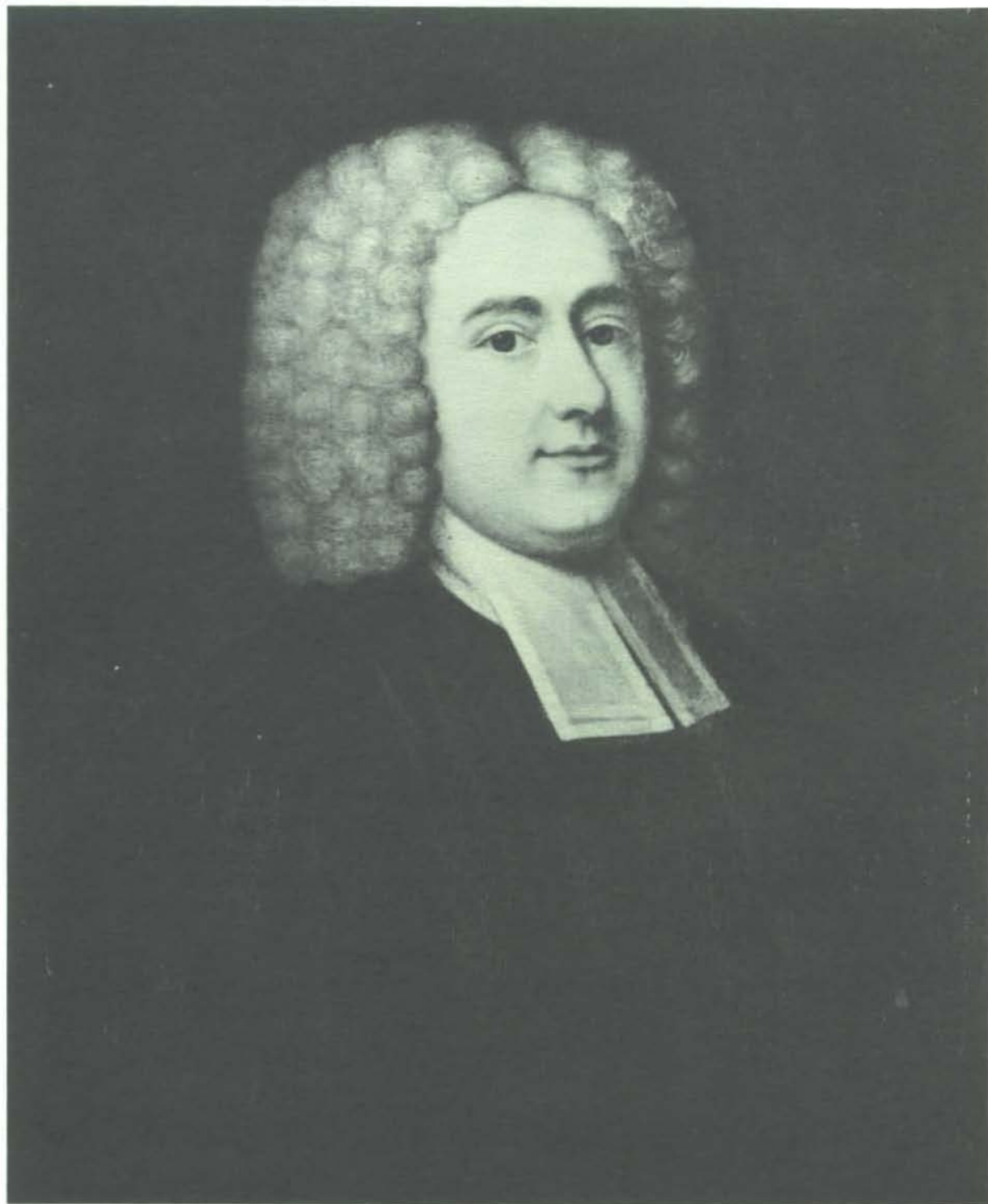
"The quiet enthusiasm of this lady, united with her gentle, Christian character, has won its way to the hearts of pupils and parents alike. Of course in such a school we must expect good teaching."

"She has become so familiar with the text book in use that she will correct a pupil even as to a punctuation mark in reading without referring to the book. Who can do better?"

By 1888, the last year her name appeared in the Johnston school reports, Eliza Smith had amassed forty-three terms of teaching; 1889 report notes a change in teachers in District #4's schoolhouse.<sup>22</sup>

Some years of retirement lay ahead for Eliza—perhaps allowing time to be active in the Broad Street church in which she remained a life member. There on July 16, 1901 her funeral brought together relatives and friends. One of them saved *Eliza Smith, Providence Schoolmistress* for posterity.<sup>23</sup>

- 1 Town of Johnston, *Report of School Committee*, 1883.
- 2 *Evening Telegram* (Providence) July 16, 1901. Johnston, Record of Wills.
- 3 Jean Lipman, *American Primitive Painting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942) 19-20.
- 4 *Antiques* (February 1959) 172; (September 1941).
- 5 Ellen Miles, ed., *Portrait Painting in America: Nineteenth Century* (New York: Main Street Press, 1977) introduction.
- 6 "Eliza Smith, Born Stuart Street, Providence, 1827. Taught for over 40 years in the schools of Johnston. Painted by the pastor of the Broad Street Christian Church, 1832." Providence death records and her gravestone corroborate her birth date.
- 7 Edwin Martin Stone, *Manual of Education: A Brief History of the Rhode Island Institute of Education* (Providence: Providence Press, 1874), 15.
- 8 Stone, 28.
- 9 Providence. Probate Records. Estate A 7453.
- 10 Grace Church Cemetery Records, Lot #463, Grace Church, Providence.
- 11 C.A. Tillinghast, *Manual of Broad Street Christian Church, Providence, R.I.* (Providence, 1902) 14-15.
- 12 Providence, *City Directory 1836/7* lists Elijah W. Barrows at 12 Cranston Street and the "Christian Society (Rev. E.W. Barrows)" at Pawtuxet Street.
- 13 Death Index, Lakeville, Massachusetts. Tillinghast, 18.
- 14 Thomas Weston, *History of the Town of Middleboro, Massachusetts* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906) 477-486.
- 15 Providence, *Alphabetical Index of the Births, Marriages, and Deaths, Recorded in Providence 1636-1850*, 324. Probate Records, Estate A 7453.
- 16 *Rhode Island Schoolmaster* 2:253 (1856-57).
- 17 *City Directory, 1860-1869. Catalog and Circular of Rhode Island State Normal School 1860*.
- 18 Providence, *Alphabetical Index, Deaths, 1851-1870* 530, 533.
- 19 Johnston, *Report of School Committee* 1879.
- 20 Johnston, *Report of School Committee* 1889.
- 21 "Survey of Public Schools of Johnston, R.I.," *R.I. Educational Circular* (1930) 12.
- 22 Johnston, *Report of School Committee* 1887, 1884, 1883, 1889.
- 23 *Providence Journal* July 16, 1901.



Massachusetts Historical Society

*George Berkeley, Dean of Derry, by John Smibert, ca. 1729.*



## George Berkeley's Newport Experience

by Sheila Skemp\*

The visit of George Berkeley, dean of Derry in Ireland, to Newport from 1729 to 1731 has been heralded as one of the cultural high points of the city's history. Since his reputation had preceded him to the New World, Newport's inhabitants were well aware that Berkeley was not an average Anglican dean. Extremely learned, he had earned an M.A. from Trinity College, Dublin, in 1707 at twenty-two. Later that year, he received a tutorship and fellowship at Trinity, and ordination in the Church of England. Well-traveled, he had by 1727 explored Rome, Sicily, Paris, Lyons, Genoa and Naples.<sup>1</sup>

Berkeley's philosophical works had been read and discussed not only in Great Britain, but on the continent and in the colonies. Before journeying to America, he had published *New Theory of Vision* (1709), *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710), *Passive Obedience* (1712), *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (1713) and *De Motu* (1721). Between 1709 and 1721, he developed his philosophy of immaterialism—a system of thought which attacked the dominant Lockean notion that all phenomena could be directly attributable to material causation. And in those years, he had been able to assert philosophical beliefs more clearly and confidently than ever he would be able to do again. While his writings did not obtain universal praise, Berkeley earned the personal love and admiration of many noted members of London and Dublin literary circles—Addison, Steele, Pope, and Swift all counted themselves in the ranks of his closest friends.<sup>2</sup>

Not surprisingly, in the years following Berkeley's departure from Newport, the community's inhabitants persistently kept the memory of his sojourn there alive. They never tired of telling stories of the dean and his "wild and chimerical notions" even after he had been long gone from their midst. Twentieth-century scholars are no less concerned with examination of Berkeley's impact upon colonial Newport, as they examine the cultural influence he and his retinue of followers had in the community. Berkeley's calculable impact on Newport was actually minimal. He willed his house—Whitehall—lands and books not to the grandees of Newport but to Yale College. Although he became a freeman in April 1729, there is no evidence that he participated in town affairs, and much to indicate that he did not. The only evidence of his regard is the organ he purchased for Trinity Church—and it took Trinity three years to locate an acceptable organist for that celebrated musical instrument.<sup>3</sup>

This does not imply that the dean's extended residence was without significance. Berkeley's impact upon the cultural development of that city may have been minimal. Newport's influence on the dean cannot be ignored so easily, for Berkeley's sojourn profoundly altered his psychology and philosophy. His experience dashed his optimistic hopes for religious and social reform, and developed within him bitter seeds of pessimism. His biographer—Alexander Campbell Fraser—recognized that Berkeley's experience in Newport seems to have "sobered, even broken him." But Fraser explains the dean's deep melancholy ex-

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clusively in terms of his disappointment over the ultimate failure of his Bermuda project. The impact of that failure was undeniably profound; but Berkeley's depression and sense of futility after 1731 can be fully understood only through an examination of his reaction to the unique moral, cultural and religious state of Newport's community.<sup>4</sup>

To fully comprehend the significance of Berkeley's Newport experience, it is necessary to understand his motives and aspirations for the New World. Why did he—cosmopolitan churchman and man of letters—sail into the bay at Newport in January 1729? Berkeley planned to found a college that would reform manners, propagate the gospel among colonists and Indians alike, and in general be an "instrument of doing good to mankind." While he hoped to locate it in Bermuda, he planned to spend a brief amount of time at Newport before heading for his ultimate destination. Here he would buy lands to serve as an investment for the Bermuda adventure; here too he would establish contact with New Englanders to supply his college with necessary provisions.<sup>5</sup>

The dean's desire for an American college was neither light nor transient. He had conceived the idea to "spend the residue of (his) days in the Island of Bermuda" as early as 1721, and he obstinately clung to it for over a decade thereafter. His plan to settle and head a college in the New World did not derive from any lust for power or desire for notoriety. That obsessive devotion can be understood only in terms of severe depression he suffered in autumn 1721, after three months in London, following five full years of extensive European travel. Appalled by what he witnessed, Berkeley saw a London filled with complex and unpredictable economic schemes and moral corruption, an England devoted to wealth and materialism while it increasingly ignored and even ridiculed the spiritual realm. The disastrous South Sea Bubble—in which so many of his friends had suffered financial ruin—symbolized to Berkeley the economic complexity and corruption that could only be eradicated by revival of religion, industry, frugality, and devotion to the public good.<sup>6</sup>

If the South Sea Bubble symbolized Europe's economic decay, the deists, atheists and free-

thinkers so prevalent in London's social circles were for Berkeley prime causes of London's selfishness, avarice and spiritual degeneracy. Freethinkers he described as "a sort of Sect which diminishes all the most valuable things, the thoughts, views and hopes of Men; all the Knowledge, Notions and Theories of the Mind they reduce to Sense; Human Nature they contract and degrade to the narrow low Standard of Animal Life, and assign us only a small pittance of Time instead of Immortality."

Freethinkers then were materialists whose narrow outlook allowed them to believe only in "the Senses, Appetites and Passions which were to be found originally in all Mankind." They accepted only those concepts and values which could be proved through the power of the human reason. They believed only in those perceptions that were products of man's sensory experience. Ironically, freethinkers pretended to attack the bigotry and bias of established religion, yet they clung stubbornly to their own narrow prejudices, refusing even to listen to opposing opinions.<sup>7</sup>

It was apparent to Berkeley that freethinkers' philosophy was responsible for corruption of morals and destruction of civil government that he claimed to see all around him. For freethinkers' materialism led them to vaunt their belief in the virtue of hedonistic self-interest, while they ridiculed those who continued to toil for the public good. They may have talked of reason and liberty, but they really advocated only "licence and a general contempt of all laws, Divine or Humane."<sup>8</sup>

Berkeley's attack on the narrow conceit of freethinkers was not uttered in the manner of a calm philosopher dispassionately examining the country's ills from a distant vantage point. It was rather a desperate plea from a man who saw that immediate and radical reform of his society was necessary if that society were not to succumb to total degradation. "The present," he moaned, "hath brought forth new and portentous villainies, not to be paralleled in our own or any other history." Those villainies moreover were so all-encompassing, that it was useless to try to combat them where they already existed. Indeed, Berkeley insisted, the seeds of destruction for the Old World were already planted, "the symptoms are so bad that . . . it is to be feared that the final period of



our State approaches."

But while Berkeley was desperate, he was not yet without hope. Europe may have displayed overwhelming evidence of moral and spiritual decay, but the same could not be said of the New World, the "Seat of Innocence" where

Nature guides and Virtue Rules,  
Where Men shall not impose for Truth and Sense  
The Pedantry of Courts and Schools.<sup>9</sup>

So Berkeley decided to go to America, a land of virtue, simplicity and innocence "where men may find in fact whatsoever the most poetical imagination can figure to itself in the golden age, on the Elysian fields." There he and his family would lead an agrarian existence, living simply and frugally. His wife, he said, anticipated a "plain farmer's life" where she would "wear stuff of her own spinning wheel." Berkeley himself vowed "from henceforth there shall never be one yard of silk bought for the use of myself, herself, or any member of our family." They would go then to "another world" where frugality was not mocked, where public service was welcomed, and where notions of London's freethinkers had not yet polluted the innocent minds of the inhabitants.<sup>10</sup>

But America was to be more than a golden refuge for the dean and his supporters; it was to be as well "the likeliest Place wherein to make up for what hath been lost in *Europe*." For Berkeley it represented the modern world's last hope for reform. Moral education was the panacea which he offered to cure the evils of the age. He planned to convert and educate both Englishmen and native Americans in the colonies, fit them for the ministry, and send them forth to reform the manners, morals and beliefs of their contemporaries. Proper education, then, would put an end to the reign of freethinkers. Christian knowledge would banish them—along with the licentiousness, poor taste and ignorance which accompanied their pernicious philosophy. In this way, pure religion would have a chance to establish itself in America, for only then would the American churches be equipped to avoid "the very Dregs and Refuse" of the English church. Only then would they be able to shun those clergymen who were "very meanly qualified both in Learning and Morals for the Discharge of their Office."<sup>11</sup>

Berkeley was under no illusions as to the difficulties he faced. Since his own college days, he

had maintained contact with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) an Anglican missionary society devoted exclusively to foreign affairs. From SPG he gained valuable information on Britain's American colonies. Forming plans for his college, he drew out several books on the Indies from Trinity College's library and corresponded extensively with experts on colonial affairs.<sup>12</sup>

His interpretation of information he gleaned from these sources convinced him that he had no time to lose if his venture was to have a chance for success. Mainland colonies were already havens of "ignorance and barbarism" and their inhabitants exhibited "a most notorious corruption of manners." They were noted as well for their "Avarice and Licentiousness, their Coldness in the Practice of Religion, and their Aversion for propagating it." To be sure, Harvard-educated Henry Newman, secretary for the SPG and one of the dean's most trusted advisors for his American project, insisted that inhabitants of Newport were less deserving of Berkeley's opprobrious treatment than were those of most other mainland cities. But Berkeley disregarded Newman's protestations. He preferred to take no unnecessary risks in his endeavor to provide his college with a pure and innocent environment. Thus he decided to locate his college on the island of Bermuda where he had been assured of the benefits of a delightful climate, abundant provisions, excellent and safe harbors, and a population composed of "a contented, plain innocent Sort of People, free from Avarice and Luxury."<sup>13</sup>

So Berkeley began his long, tortuous and in the end fruitless effort to plant seeds of virtue and wisdom in the New World. He worked for four long years on his Bermuda scheme, as he collected and inherited money (and debts!) and received the deanery of Derry in 1724 which was itself worth 1500 pounds per annum. In private subscriptions and pledges of support he was not lacking, for the dean was an excellent advocate of his own cause. His enthusiasm for his project was infectious, and it was not long before "young and old, learned and rich" were clamoring to restore America to the Golden Age.<sup>14</sup>

But Berkeley's project could not survive on private subscriptions alone. He needed financial backing from Parliament if his mission was to be





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*Whitehall, now in Middletown, was Berkeley's home while in Rhode Island. Nineteenth century lithograph by A.A. Harwood.*

successful. In his attempt to attain this backing the dean's progress was reduced and ultimately halted altogether. His Bermuda charter was accepted by King, Cabinet Council and Parliament in 1726, but this acceptance proved useless. Berkeley never managed to penetrate the delaying tactics and circumlocutions of his Majesty's government, and he quickly learned that a promise of money was not a guarantee of its actual materialization. By 1729 the dean's plans appeared to be headed for oblivion, and finally in total desperation he began his voyage across the Atlantic, hoping to impress his reluctant backers with the sheer force of his action.<sup>15</sup>

The city to which he traveled was not the "established and aristocratic society" of legend. Contemporaries may have referred to it proudly as "the Metropolitan of the colony" but Newport was in 1729 still very much a frontier community, and if "prettily built" when Berkeley first viewed it, that was probably because the town was still

predominantly rural in appearance. The town itself was not laid out in neat geometric fashion, but consisted mainly of one narrow thoroughfare, Thames Street, "narrow but straight that standing at one end of it you may see the other." In most areas, houses were still endowed with ample lots complete with orchards, gardens and even stables in the heart of town as well as on the outskirts. Dogs ran the streets; wolves were a menace; and in 1734, a child playing in the middle of a Newport street was drowned when he fell into a water-filled hollow log used for watering cattle.<sup>16</sup>

But if many European visitors saw Newport as provincial and dull, Berkeley was immediately attracted to it. He saw the town as a "distant Retreat far beyond the Verge of that great Whirlpool of Business, Faction and Pleasure which is called *the World*." It was impossible to imagine that thoughts of freethinkers had found their way to Rhode Island. It seemed even more unlikely that their principles would ever take root in the



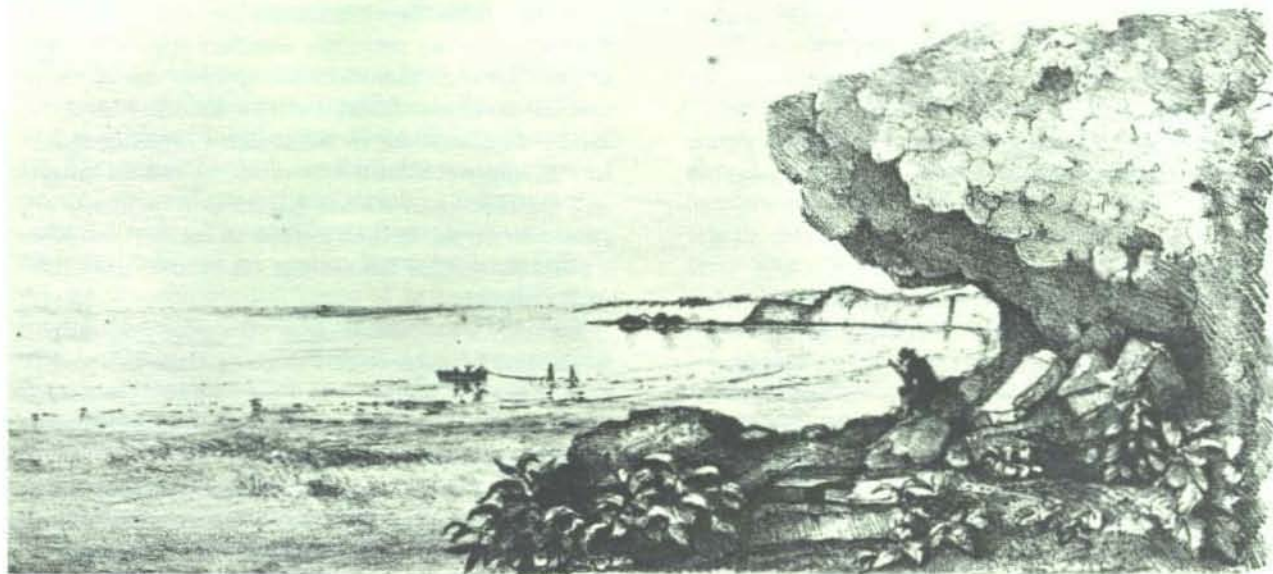
colony's virgin soil.<sup>17</sup>

*Alciphron*—written at the Hanging Rocks near Whitehall—suggests the effect that the physical beauty of Newport had upon the dean. First letters to his friends in England were euphoric: vines sprouted up “of themselves to an extraordinary size”; mellons, peaches and other fruit appeared as if by magic; summers were pleasant, while autumn was touted as the “largest and most delicious in the world.” Nor was Newport to be commended for its charm alone, but for a remarkably healthy climate as well. Berkeley's wife had been ill with “ague” when she first arrived in Rhode Island. As the dean noted with obvious pleasure, upon residing there just a short while, she found herself healthier than she had ever been in her life.<sup>18</sup>

Physically, Newport appeared to be the rural paradise of Berkeley's dreams. The town seemed to offer the very advantages that he sought in Bermuda, but it offered much more than the comfort of pleasant surroundings. It gave him as well the precious gift of solitude. After his move to Whitehall, he found time to read, to think, and

to return to his philosophical endeavors—luxuries he had not been able to indulge since he had embarked on his Bermuda project. The insistent questions of Connecticut's Samuel Johnson, who had become an Anglican while attending Yale College, and had “conceived a great opinion” of the dean after reading his *Treatise Concerning Principles of Human Knowledge*, undoubtedly served as an added catalyst to Berkeley's philosophical bent, and he found his “intercourse with a man of parts and philosophical genius” most rewarding. His pleasure in returning to a contemplative existence interrupted only by Johnson's sporadic letters and his own occasional trips into Newport was so notable that it disturbed his friend Lord Percival who remarked upon Berkeley's ability to find “agreeableness in so much solitude.” Percival worried that Berkeley was finding in his retreat a welcome escape from a “public and useful life.”<sup>19</sup>

But Percival's fears appear to have been unfounded. While Berkeley undoubtedly treasured his quiet moments at Whitehall, he never lost sight of the vision which led him to the New



*Hanging Rocks. Lithograph by A.A. Harwood.*

World. His desire to propagate his religious and moral values never abated, and thus his assessment of the spiritual character of Newport was extremely important to him. He had come to the island expecting it to be the haven of "ignorance and barbarism" he had described in his "Proposal." But his first impression of the town appeared to give the lie to his assumptions. Clergy in Newport were not "the very Dregs and Refuse" of English society. Rather they were competent, dedicated, and educated "above the common level." Among them was James Honeyman, a tireless and dedicated worker sent to Trinity Church in 1704 by the SPG. Berkeley praised Honeyman as a "person of sense & merit on all accounts, much more so than I expected to have found in this place." His contact with other SPG missionaries in New England was equally satisfactory. Whitehall quickly became their gathering place, and Berkeley held four synods there in an effort to encourage Anglican leaders in their efforts to proselytize for their faith.<sup>20</sup>

Berkeley did not limit his praise to Anglicans. Baptist John Comer, whom he entertained at least once at Whitehall, was no intellectual mediocrity, nor was rather eccentric Nathaniel Clap whose new Congregational meeting house had been raised in 1729. Harvard-educated John Callender's interest in public schools must have impressed the dean, convinced as he was that only selfless concern for public interest could halt inroads made by atheistic freethinkers on the modern world. Nicholas Eyres, who arrived in 1731 as pastor of the Six Principle Baptist church, proved to be not only well grounded in scriptural study, but proficient in languages and mathematical learning as well.<sup>21</sup>

Berkeley's initial contacts with the town's laymen were similarly encouraging. When he preached his first sermon in Trinity Church just three days after his arrival, he was gratified to discover that faithful of all sects—even Quakers—listened attentively to his message. While he was somewhat disconcerted by the "strange medley of different persuasions" that he encountered, the dean took some comfort in the fact that they all agreed that "the Church of England is second best."<sup>22</sup>

Not surprisingly, then, Berkeley saw in Newport a "more probable prospect of doing good



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*John Callender, Baptist pastor in Newport during Berkeley's stay. Portrait by Robert Foke, 1745.*

than any other part of the world." He saw so little to detract from the community's virtues that he began to wonder seriously whether it would not be preferable to introduce the golden age of virtue and innocence to inhabitants of Rhode Island rather than to those in Bermuda. Claiming that he "should not demur one moment" about situating the college in Rhode Island were it in his power to do so, Berkeley went so far as to choose a possible site for his college on Hammond Hill in Narragansett.<sup>23</sup>

Berkeley's love affair with Newport was short-lived, and he soon began to complain that his rural paradise was at best a tainted one. Newport no longer seemed to possess practical advantages it had exhibited upon his arrival there. He quickly perceived that cultural assets of the little town were notable for their breadth rather than their depth. He began to doubt the moral fiber of Newport's inhabitants, while their religious habits caused him untold anguish. Before long at



least one New England clergyman could be found to comment disparagingly upon Berkeley's "hypochondriacal disposition" as he remarked that the dean "seems tired of this country, though he has seen nothing of it."<sup>24</sup>

Berkeley's first criticisms of his Rhode Island location centered on practical problems and inconveniences. He incessantly complained about slow and untrustworthy mail service to the island, noting that letters from Europe had to be routed through Boston or Philadelphia at much risk and inconvenience. More disturbing, provisions on the island were neither so cheap nor so plentiful as he had expected, and labor costs were prohibitive. Good land in the area was also expensive; and while he could purchase uncleared acres at a relatively reasonable rate, "the clearing of them would be very expensive and require much time, and in the interim produce nothing."<sup>25</sup>

Berkeley may have been willing to try to overcome these obstacles, had he continued to be pleased with the moral and religious climate of Newport. The longer he resided there, the more convinced he became that there was nothing in the general moral character of the town which "should tempt others to make an experiment of their principles, either in religion or government." Rhode Island may not have been "old in vice" but it was fast learning to imitate and admire those very habits and principles which Berkeley had found so distressingly pervasive in London.<sup>26</sup>

The dean was convinced that he knew the primary source of Newport's problems. Even as he had laid blame for ills that beset Old England at the feet of freethinkers, so Berkeley accused Newport's avid and partisan sectarian population of culpability for degeneration of religious spirit in New England. As he saw it, Newport's sectarian rivalry was the fountainhead of two very different forms of evil. It produced on one hand the narrow and bigoted religious zealot, bent on proving the righteousness of his own cause, even if to do so meant destruction of the Christian spirit of brotherly love. It spawned on the other hand indifference to and hostility toward religion on the part of many formerly devout Christians who viewed sectarian controversies raging about them with confusion and distaste.

Berkeley could not have chosen a better spot in

which to examine effects of religious diversity upon a community. By the time of his arrival there were four Baptist meeting houses, each of which appeared determined to defend the sanctity of its peculiar habits of worship at any cost. To be sure, John Maxon's Sabbatarian Baptist church was fairly free of divisions, but John Comer's church had suffered from a split in 1724, when Mr. White, a "man of dividing principles," had led seven members from it on the pretence that the majority of that body was too Arminian. In 1729, Comer's church split again over the "necessity of the imposition of hands." The Six Principle Baptists on Farewell Street were also a contentious lot. Three times between 1721 and 1753, dissatisfied members of that congregation had left to found "purer" congregations of their own. In each case these experiments in purity were short-lived and unsuccessful.<sup>27</sup>

Newport's Congregational church had already suffered a division, though it had only been gathered in 1720. While issues surrounding that split remain unclear, it is certain that Reverend Nathaniel Clap's refusal to administer communion to his parishioners, "not of sufficient holy conversation," lay at the bottom of the controversy. Clap refused to allow John Adams, a minister called by disgruntled members, to share the pulpit with him or to minister from his meeting house.<sup>28</sup>

Berkeley himself fell prey to the acrimonious nature of Newport's faithful not long after he had arrived. Preaching at Trinity Church on Whitsunday, he abandoned his generally circumspect policy of treating only those "general points agreed on by all Christians" and instead spoke against the "spirit and delusion and enthusiasm" which characterized Newport's sectarian population. Though he claimed he had leveled his attacks "in the softest manner and with the greatest caution," he found he had given great offense to his audience, "so bigoted they in their prejudice." His fear of New England bigotry was so marked that he found himself questioning the advisability of sending his copies of Hooker and Chillingworth to the college at New Haven, lest the gift be censoriously refused by college authorities.<sup>29</sup>

Narrow bigotry in Newport's sectarians ultimately caused the dean's hopes for his project to turn to total despair. The passion with which





Newport Illustrated by George Mason, 1854.

### Trinity Church

religious partisans argued their differences with one another, the legalistic basis upon which their controversies often turned, and continued religious divisions and subdivisions over minute points totally bewildered and depressed Berkeley.

Sermons he preached there depict his growing hostility toward the town's religious scene. They show us a man beset by an increasing sense of futility and despair, forced to admit as useless all his striving against the foibles of his world. Constantly begging his audiences to "overlook petty differences," asking them to "bear one another's infirmities," he decried the fact that religion—that urged love and compassion—was becoming the basis for hate and destructiveness. "Instead of quarreling about those things wherein we differ, let us practice those things wherein we agree." As he watched religious men incessantly quibble over

minor points of doctrinal purity, he steadily emphasized to his congregations the notion of "the church invisible." Even after his return to Ireland this theme still obsessed him. Religion should not be "defined and measured by the accuracy of human reason" but instead should be "received with the humility of faith," he told SPG members. "A church which contains the fundamentals and nothing subversive of those fundamentals, is not to be set at nought by any particular member, because it may not, in every point, perhaps, correspond with his ideas, no, not though he is sure of being right."<sup>30</sup>

*Alciphron* also reflects Berkeley's distaste for religious fanatics. Indeed the work is not—as traditionally claimed—merely an attempt by the dean to combat notions of freethinkers through an epistemological proof of the existence of God. While Berkeley used his *Minute Philosopher* to make a frontal attack upon freethinkers, he used it as well to discredit and destroy philosophical and moral foundations of religious sectarians.

Berkeley had discovered in Rhode Island that atheistic freethinkers were cast from the same mold as avid and partisan sectarians. Both tended to substitute either their external observances or abstract reasoning for a sense of the absolute. Both tended to see themselves as wiser than the rest of the world. Both were fanatical in pursuit of their own ends, operating completely on private judgements or "inward light." Both were guilty of sins of false pride, narrowness and bigotry. "And surely whatever there is of silly, narrow, and uncharitable in the bigot, the same is in great measure to be imputed to the conceited ignorance and petulant profaneness of the libertine." Both narrow sectarian and freewheeling libertine could be found in any man who was "over-bearing, and positive without knowing why, laying the greatest stress on points of smallest moment, hasty to judge of the conscience, thoughts and inward views of other men, impatient of reasoning against his own opinions."<sup>31</sup>

Both sectarians and freethinkers had exalted conception of the worth of their opinions. Freethinkers were unable to admit that human reason could not comprehend the full mystery of the deity, and they tried to destroy what they could not rationally understand. Sectarians used human reason—although not admittedly—to devise for-



mulas by which God could be apprehended and worshipped, and then tried to defend those formulas as absolute, God-given truth. Neither zealots nor libertines could accept that God required only faith, not reason, from his worshippers.<sup>32</sup>

Berkeley's distrust of the validity of human reason was fundamental and uncompromising, for he had seen how stubborn and tenacious defense of their own principles had turned both freethinkers and religious zealots into narrow-minded bigots. Not wishing to follow in their footsteps, he began while in Newport to examine presuppositions of his own philosophical works. Writing to Samuel Johnson, he found himself questioning not only doctrines implicit in his earlier attempts to arrive at an understanding of basic reality, but also the youthful zest and assurance with which he had embraced them. Forced to admit that he no longer considered his principles in any light but that "they seem to be true," he added, with a touch of melancholy, "I do not therefore pretend that my books can teach truth."<sup>33</sup>

But the destructiveness of religious fanatics transcended their tendency to embroil good Christians in petty arguments over doctrinal and sacramental purity. As Berkeley saw it, sectarians tended to drive men away from the church, causing them to become so confused or disgusted by partisan rivalry that they entirely lost interest in religion. Freethinkers intentionally subverted the cause of God; sectarians did so quite unconsciously; but the end result was the same.<sup>34</sup>

Berkeley thought he saw evidence of an increasing tendency on the part of Newport inhabitants to abandon any "serious sense of religion." Many of them had already developed a "thorough indifference for all that is sacred, being equally careless of outward worship and inward principles." Some had grown so indifferent to matters of the spirit that they rather cavalierly paraded atheistic notions, apparently because they had heard that this was the fashion among English upper classes.<sup>35</sup>

Everywhere he looked, Berkeley saw signs of the indifferent attitude toward religion which seemed to be developing in Newport. While fanatics were disputing over such issues as the "laying on of hands" or the relative purity of their souls, there were many who preferred to avoid such controversy, and imitated, instead, the example of for-

mer governor Samuel Cranston. Cranston purchased a pew at Trinity Church but failed to use it, desiring instead to be a "keep-at-home Protestant." Many church members seemed more than willing to give large monetary donations to their respective churches—so long as that did not obligate them to listen to their pastor's sermons with any amount of attention or regularity. Oaths of office were not required in either town or colony. The Sabbath was violated with increasing regularity since Sunday was treated by many as an ordinary working day. Even so ardent a defender of Newport's religious diversity as John Callender showed occasional signs of distress over the growing secularization of the town, and he warned inhabitants against their "lukewarmness and indifference." Berkeley was convinced that such attitudes toward religion were direct results of sectarian rivalry in the town's churches.<sup>36</sup>

In spring 1731, Berkeley set his face toward Europe. Convinced at last that needed financial support for his college would not be forthcoming, he abandoned his project and prepared to leave with few regrets. As early as May 1730 he told friends that "upon all private accounts, I should like Derry better than New England." Once back in Ireland, he seemed reluctant even to discuss his American experience; when pressed to do so, his account of Rhode Island was "very indifferent."<sup>37</sup>

Until his death, Berkeley blamed defeat of his plans on the narrow self-interest of individuals whom he had been forced to confront in his efforts to establish an educational utopia in the New World. Mercantilists and traders selfishly feared that his college would lead to "an independency in America," and believed that "the ignorance of the Indians and the variety of sects in Plantations was England's security." Freethinkers mocked his religious and moral goals, and seemed to Berkeley to be the "principal root or source not only of opposition to (the) College, but of most other evils in this age."<sup>38</sup>

Newport sectarians had been suspicious of any plan emanating from the Anglican church, and were, in any case, too embroiled in partisan differences to realize the advantages of educational opportunities which Berkeley's college would afford. In New and Old World alike, his plans were ignored, rejected, or ridiculed, his aspira-



tions seen as "whimsical," as a "denial of human nature," as "no better than a religious frenzy." He himself was depicted as deranged. After his consecration to the see of Cloyne in 1734, it became a waggish thing to say "when the Bishop of Cloyne sets out a second time for Bermuda" as a synonym for "never."<sup>9</sup>

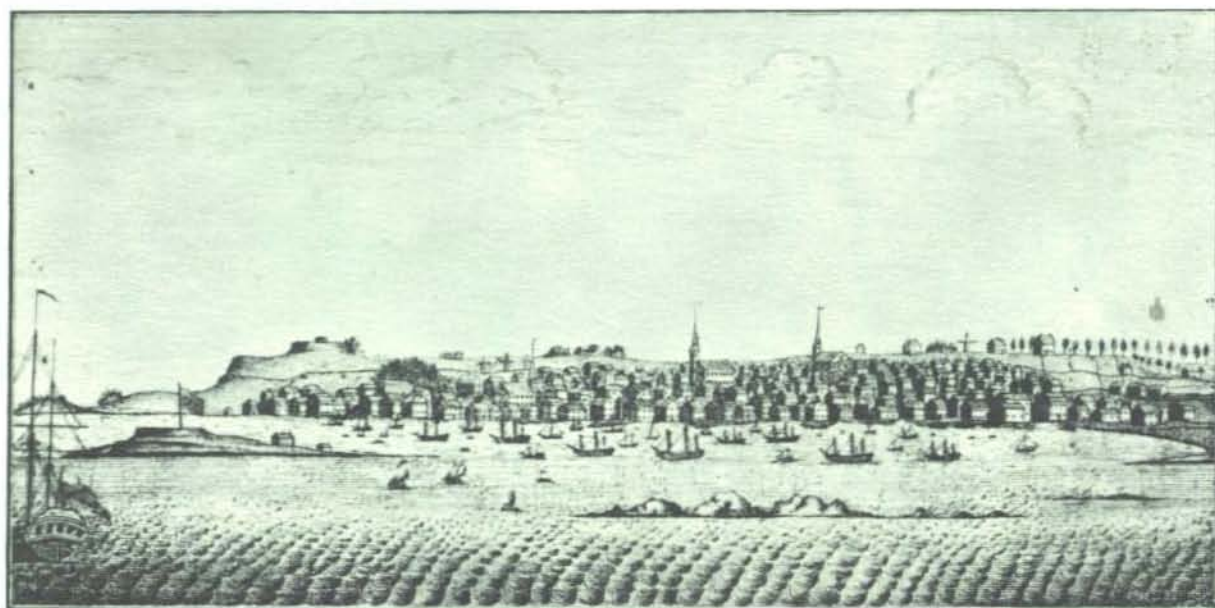
Had Berkeley's sojourn occurred in any other spot but Newport, his sense of defeat over the failure of his beloved Bermuda scheme may not have been so complete. Had he stayed in a community where sectarian struggles did not dominate the religious scene, he would not perhaps have concluded that narrowness, bigotry and conceit had already inundated the New World even as they had ruined the Old.

Berkeley's Newport experience altered his entire approach to life. Before he left Ireland for Rhode Island he had been full of love for travel and adventure. Even after he arrived in Newport, his letters depict a man brimming with enthusiasm and hope for moral reformation of the New World. At first glance, the town seemed to display all those virtues that he hoped to find in Bermuda. By the end of his stay he was bitterly convinced that even in Newport, "the Garden of New England," his plans for moral and spiritual reform were futile. He spent the rest of his days quietly, almost reclusively. Plagued by broken health and broken spirit, he devoted most of his energies to his family and a few friends. His days as a practical reformer had ended.

- 1 Benjamin Rand, *Berkeley's American Sojourn* (Cambridge, 1932) 13-14. Herbert W. Schneider, *Samuel Johnson, President of King's College*, 4v. (New York, 1895) 1:25.
- 2 Percival to GB, 26 August 1710, Rand, *Berkeley and Percival* (Cambridge, 1914) 80-81. J.M. Hone and M.M. Rossi, *Bishop Berkeley: His Life, Writings and Philosophy* (London, 1931) 118, 132. Schneider 1: 497-526. Johnson to GB, 10 September 1729, Schneider 2: 263. A.A. Luce, *Life of George Berkeley* (London, 1949) 57.
- 3 Andrew Burnaby, *Travels through North America*, ed. Rufus R. Wilson, 3d ed. (New York, 1904) 122. "Rev. George Whitefield's Account of His Visit to Rhode Island in 1740," *RIHS Collections* 16: 1 (January 1923) 10. Moses Coit Tyler, *Three Men of Letters* (New York, 1895). Three miles outside Newport in what is now Middletown, Whitehall has been restored and is maintained by the National Society of Colonial Dames in R.I. To Williams, 31 May—to Wodsworth, 31 May 1733—A.A. Luce and T.E. Jessop, eds., *Works of George Berkeley*, 9v. (New York, 1956) 8: 219. *Rhode Island Gazette* 25 October 1732. Newport, *Town Meeting Records*, 236, Newport Historical Society. *Boston New-Letter* 28 June 1733. George Champlin Mason, *Annals of Trinity Church 1698-1821* (Newport, 1890) 57-66.
- 4 Alexander Campbell Fraser, *Works of George Berkeley* 4v. (Oxford, 1871) 4 (*Life and Letters*): 348.
- 5 *Boston News-Letter* 30 January 1729. *New England Journal* 3 February 1729. To Percival, 4 March 1722/23, Luce & Jessop 8: 127. Wilkins Updike claimed that Berkeley's vessel was drawn off course, his arrival in Newport completely fortuitous, and his extended stay transpired solely because he fell in love with the little community. All evidence indicates this is totally inaccurate. *History of the Episcopal Church in Narragansett, Rhode-Island, Including Other Episcopal Churches in the State*. (New York, 1847) 395. To Prior, 7 May 1730, Luce & Jessop 8: 209.
- 6 To Percival, 4 March 1722/23, Luce & Jessop 8: 127. Swift to Lord Carteret, 3 September 1724, Fraser 4: 103. "Essay toward Preventing Ruin of Great Britain 1721," Luce & Jessop 6: 69ff.
- 7 *Alciphron or the Minute Philosopher in Seven Dialogues* (Dublin, 1755) 22, 36.
- 8 Alciphron, 19. "Essay," 70. To Newman, 29 March 1730, Luce & Jessop 8: 207.
- 9 "Essay," 84-85. "America or the Muses Refuge," Luce & Jessop 7: 370.
- 10 To Percival, 4 March 1722/23, 3 September 1728; to Prior, 12 November 1726; Luce & Jessop 8: 127, 188, 173.
- 11 "Proposal for Better Supplying Churches in our Foreign Plantations, 1725," Luce & Jessop 7: 354, 346-7. *Alciphron*, 370.
- 12 John Wild, *George Berkeley: His Life and Philosophy* (New York, 1962) 289.
- 13 "Proposal," 349, 358. To GB, 29 April 1729, W.O.B. Allen and Edmund McClure, *Two Hundred Years: The History of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1698-1898* (London, 1898) 244. "Proposal," 351.
- 14 To Percival, 4 June 1723, 5 May 1724, Luce & Jessop 8: 130, 133. Dan Dering to Percival, 5 March 1722/23, Rand, 207.
- 15 To Prior, 12 May 1726, Luce & Jessop 8: 155.
- 16 Antoinette F. Downing and Vincent J. Scully, *Architectural Heritage of Newport, Rhode Island, 1640-1915*, 2d ed. (New York, 1967) 45. Newport, *Town Meeting Records*, 97, 243. To Percival, 28 March, Luce & Jessop 8: 192. *Newport Historical Magazine* 1 (January 1881) 296. *Boston News-Letter* 27 July 1732, 17 October 1734. *Boston Gazette* 29 March 1736. *Acts*



- and *Laws Colony of Rhode Island* (Newport, 1744) RIHS Library.
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- 18 To Prior, 24 April, to Benson, 11 April, 1729, Luce & Jessop 8: 196, 194. To Percival, 3 December 1729, Rand, 261-62.
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A South-West View of Newport, engraved in 1795 by Samuel King.

### From the Collections

These fanciful drawings by Samuel Brown of Providence are three of more than two hundred done before 1852. Most of his pen and ink studies show women and men in imaginative costume. Undulating linear patterns and decorative detail are the most striking characteristics of Brown's style.





