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"The Old Stone Bank"

HALEY & SYKES CO., PROVIDENCE

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**The
Political Saviour
of Rhode Island**



Presented by

"The Old Stone Bank"

Providence, R. I.



The Political Saviour of Rhode Island

THOUGH Roger Williams will always be hailed as the foremost champion of civil and religious liberty in the days following his settlement of Providence, another vigorous opponent of Puritanism, almost forgotten now or, at best, much maligned, had a full share in the solid establishment of Rhode Island as an independent and liberal Colony. Unlike William Blackstone, who was content to pursue his theology and philosophy as a recluse, Samuel Gorton brought to his ideals a militant spirit, and spent his life waging a constant fight against those who were doing their best to undermine and disrupt the Rhode Island Colony. This "noble-minded patriot and thinker" had a "character for truth and honesty, for morality, for courtesy to all and for Christian charity." He had a great love of soul liberty with a hatred of all shams, and was feared by all religious hypocrites and tyrannical civil magistrates alike, not only for his dauntless spirit, but for his natural intelligence and his great learning, in which respect he truly ranked among the first in all the Colonies. In personal appearance he was a man of tall stature, with blue eyes, marked features and fair hair—a typical Saxon.

Samuel Gorton was born in 1592 in the town of Gorton, then adjoining but now

included within the city of Manchester, England. In this place, where generations of his forefathers had lived, he grew up and received his early education. Gorton's religious training was gained in the English Church, but his full classical and legal education he received at the hands of very competent tutors. In law and politics he understood his rights better than did Roger Williams, or the proprietors, or the elders or magistrates of the Massachusetts Colony. He did not leave home until the age of about twenty-five or thirty, being engaged in study up to that time, but in 1635 he was in business as a clothier in London. His father, also, had been a merchant in London and had amassed a considerable fortune, a fact which probably accounted for Gorton's source of private wealth while in the Colonies.

In 1636, Gorton left England for New England, bringing with him his wife, "a lady of education and refinement" and "as tenderly brought up as any man's wife in the town." Through her family, who had always provided their daughter with luxuries of every nature during her childhood, Gorton came into the possession of some choice herds of pure-bred cattle sent by them to fill the stalls of her New England home. Like others who journeyed to the New Country to escape persecution in England, he was sadly disappointed to find that the rulers of the new Colonies had set up a church government as austere as that of England.

Those in the New England Colonies at Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth who did not conform to authority were disfranchised as citizens. Gorton's arrival was at the time of the proceedings against Wheelright, the brother-in-law of Anne Hutchinson. By avoiding the attention of the magistrates, Gorton obtained a brief respite after his sea voyage, but, within two months, moved from Boston to Plymouth, intending to make the latter place his home.

He was banished from Plymouth, however, in 1638, the occasion being his defense of one of his maid servants, after she had been found guilty of smiling in church. The decree of the Massachusetts magistrates did not find favor with the people, but they had been too long accustomed to oppression in England to resist any show of authority, such as that exhibited by Governor Prence in dealing with Gorton's case. Gorton with his family left Plymouth in the dead of winter and went to the northern part of the island of Aquidneck, joining the Hutchinsons (just previously banished) at the settlement of Pocasset, known now as Portsmouth.

With his arrival, the factions of Anne Hutchinson and William Coddington, already embittered with rivalry, became worse enemies. Gorton aided the settlers in Pocasset in the drawing up of the necessary articles for local government, and then, in a later series of severe controversies with Coddington, denounced the latter and his fol-

lowers heartily for attempting to set up a government upon the island without a charter. He could not hold out against Coddington for long, because of the number of the latter's adherents, and, in 1641, went to Providence.

At Providence, Roger Williams was having a great deal of difficulty with a faction headed by William and Benedict Arnold, Massachusetts agents, who had settled in the vicinity of the Pawtuxet River. Consequently, with his reputation for attacks upon unchartered government, Gorton was not well-received. As an eccentric, he was more feared by the Arnolds than Williams himself. After a great deal of trouble, Providence split into three factions, headed respectively by the Arnolds, Roger Williams, and Samuel Gorton. The first of these three seceded from Providence in 1642 and submitted themselves to the authority of the Massachusetts Colony. Gorton, countering this decidedly hostile move, joined with some others in purchasing a section of land in the vicinity of Warwick from Miantanomi, and moved there in 1643. Here, on the shores of this new territory which they called Shawomet, the Gortonoges began to build and plant. After continued quarreling with the Arnolds, located just to the northward, the latter complained to their adopted rulers of Massachusetts, who immediately summoned the Gortonoges to appear at court in Boston. Gorton's reply was characteristically independent, and he sent a

warrant for the Arnolds to appear in Shawomet.

The Massachusetts authorities saw a splendid chance to gain a foothold in Rhode Island and win the territory for themselves. Consequently they sent a band of soldiers to Shawomet to capture Gorton and his followers. They claimed that the Indians who had deeded the land to Gorton were not subject to Miantanomi but to the Massachusetts Colony, and that Gorton was an usurper. The soldiery, by violating a truce in a brief skirmish at Shawomet, captured Gorton and his fellows and took them in triumph to Boston. All their land was confiscated and their families had to flee to friends in Providence and Portsmouth for refuge. But the religious leaders and magistrates of Massachusetts were not able to keep Gorton long in confinement. Too many people were in sympathy with him, and he succeeded in preaching his liberal doctrines from the confines of his jail. In a few months, therefore, Gorton and his followers were set free but told to get out of Massachusetts within two days.

They returned to Portsmouth. In the meantime Roger Williams had secured a charter for the "Providence Plantations" in 1643, and when the Gortons arrived at the island of Aquidneck, they appointed commissioners to act under the charter. But Coddington was still a thorn in the side of the youthful Colony. He persisted in trying to maintain his government as before, con-

stantly being a party to intrigue with the Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth Colonies. To combat this insubordination, Gorton obtained the submission of the Narragansett sachems to the English crown, and, in 1645, armed with this and his own powerful personality, set out for England to take up the Rhode Island cause against the continued aggressive policies of the Massachusetts Colonies, and to gain a more solid backing for the new charter of Roger Williams. So much was he feared because of his great learning and ability, that Winslow, a former governor of Massachusetts, was sent to England to attempt to nullify all his efforts. Gorton returned to Rhode Island triumphant, however, having completely won his case. Rhode Island was thus brought safely through her first critical period. The founding of the State was due to Roger Williams and John Clarke; its preservation to both the latter and Samuel Gorton.

Shortly after Gorton's return to Rhode Island, Coddington, who had tried to usurp the power in Rhode Island, was deposed and had to flee in disgrace. But there were many other uprisings before order was finally established in Providence and the charter became secure. Massachusetts was not one to be easily defeated in her desires, and again, in 1676, the question of the Arnolds and the Pawtuxans arose. Gorton and some of his adherents were again chosen to go to England to petition the King and argue against those envoys sent by Massachusetts.

After a long and anxious interval, the Gortonoges were successful once more. The King declared the Massachusetts charter which named the Pawtuxit and Shawomet sections as its property void. This was the crushing blow for all the Massachusetts aspirations, and the triumph of Gorton and his followers was complete. Rhode Island truly owes to them a great debt.

Throughout his life Gorton, despite his reputation as a very independent thinker and radical, was constantly in public office, serving many years in the General Assembly and in many other capacities. He was a true friend of the Quakers as opposed to Roger Williams, although he shared the latter's great friendship with the Indians. When he died, in 1677, Rhode Island lost a staunch son, a man of fearless integrity, and an invaluable defender. His last days were passed in his beloved Shawomet (now East Greenwich) near the shores of Narragansett Bay.

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