

FROM SLAVE
TO CITIZEN

*The Story of the
Negro in Rhode Island*

BY
IRVING H. BARTLETT

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Foreword by

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FOREWORD

IN some ways the history of the Negro in Rhode Island is an epitome of the history of the Negro in America; in others it is a story apart. Yet during the greater part of its course this story attracted the attention of professional historians not at all. Doubtless much valuable material perished unnoticed, and of the available accounts some were written by men whose chief interest and emphasis were bestowed upon related subjects (Quakerism, franchise, war, property rights, and the like) rather than upon the story of the Negro in Rhode Island. For these and other reasons an important and fascinating tale has waited long to be told.

Professor Bartlett has not been at all daunted by these difficulties, though he has not failed to recognize them. Somebody had to make a beginning at integrating what had been told well and full in parts, scrappily in others, and in certain details, quite neglected. To this task Dr. Bartlett has modestly but optimistically applied himself, and as will be seen from the following pages, with much success. Where his evidence is incomplete, or may seem to point in more than one direction, he is cautious, but not vague or confused, and he never fails to see the wood for the trees.

Fortunate in discovery and investigation of sources, he has shown judgment in weighing them and skill in compounding from them a highly coherent and highly readable narrative. He has, indeed, made a beginning, but he has done much more; he has provided a substantial and reliable account which will be indispensable to students of race relations.

BEN C. CLOUGH

Acknowledgments

SPONSORED by the Urban League of Greater Providence, the preparation of this historical sketch has been a community project. Research in the period from 1850 was materially aided by the generosity of Mrs. Joseph Bland, who allowed me to consult her collection of news clippings. Mr. Clarkson Collins, III, was of great assistance in directing me to important sources of information in the Rhode Island Historical Society. The librarians at the Providence Public Library and the John Hay Library at Brown University supplied material for illustrations. Mr. Francis B. Keeney, Jr., kindly turned over to me the results of his own research on the legislative history of the Negro in Rhode Island. I have profited from conversations with Mr. James N. Rhea, Mr. Joseph E. Brown, Mr. John C. Minkins, Mr. William A. Heathman, and Dr. Carl R. Gross. Mr. William P. H. Freeman was most helpful, and Miss Reberta J. Dunbar graciously shared her own knowledge of local history with me. The suggestions of Mr. Ben C. Clough and Mr. Mack Thompson were most helpful, while Mr. James N. Williams steered the project past many obstacles. The project could not have been completed without the aid of my wife Virginia Bartlett.

Whatever errors of fact or judgment the work may disclose are my own responsibility.

July, 1954

I.H.B.

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CHAPTER I

Slavery in Rhode Island

IN the summer of 1676, the colonists in Rhode Island found themselves faced with a peculiar problem. They had just emerged triumphant from the bloodiest Indian war since the planting of the settlements in New England. King Philip, leader of the savages, had been killed in a swamp near Mt. Hope; and while his dismembered body hung swaying from the branches of a tree, the people of Rhode Island sought for some less barbarous way of disposing of the vanquished Indian warriors then herded into the little village of Providence. On August 14, a committee, headed by Roger Williams, was appointed for the purpose of disposing of the prisoners. Pursuant to the recommendations of this committee, the Indians were sold into bondage, the average price being thirty-two shillings or the equivalent of twelve bushels of corn.

It is significant that Roger Williams, more devoted to the cause of freedom than any other New Englander of his time, should have seen fit to sanction the selling of human beings into slavery, for it indicates that in the seventeenth century slavery was accepted by almost everyone as a necessary part of the social pattern.

Precisely when Negro slavery was introduced in Rhode Island is difficult to discern; it has been established, however, that the first slave trade vessel to touch the shores of this colony was the brig *Seaflower*, which stopped at Newport in 1696 to sell four Negroes from a cargo numbering 47. By 1750 the promise of profits to be gained by trading in Negroes had brought Rhode Island merchants and sea captains into competition with those of Salem and Boston, and three vessels outfitted for the slave trade sailed out of Newport harbor bound for the African coast. By 1723 participation in the slave trade accounted for such an important part of Rhode Island's commercial life that she was able to remit forty thousand pounds sterling annually to Britain in taxes.

Rhode Island slavers generally followed a set route which later became famous as the "Triangular Trade." Taking a cargo of rum from local distilleries (there were over 18 distilleries in Newport in the eighteenth century), they sailed from their home port to the coast

Tuesday August 12th 1766. This day the following Persons took
 a pleasant ride out to Portsmouth are as follows Vizt

Boston Vose

Loingo Stevens & Phyllis Lyndon

Nigton Ligon & Wife

Prime Thornton do

Caesar Lyndon & Sarah hearing

Necessaries for Support of Nature are as fol-
 lows Vizt.

To a Pigg to roast	£8. 10. 0
To for mast paid for house Room	1. 4. 0
To Wine	3. 12. 0
To Bread	1. 8. 0
To Rum	2. 10. 0
To green Corn 60/ Limes for punch 20/	4. 0. 0
To Sugar	2. 4. 0
To Butter	1. 0. 0
To Tea 10/ Coffee 15/	2. 15. 0
To 1 pint Rum for killing Pigg	0. 10. 0
	<hr/>
	33. 13. 0

6. 12
 6. 12
 6. 12
 6. 12
 33. 13. 0
 12. 0
 33. 13. 0

£33. 13. 0 } £21. 18. 0
 2. 15. 0
 8. 10

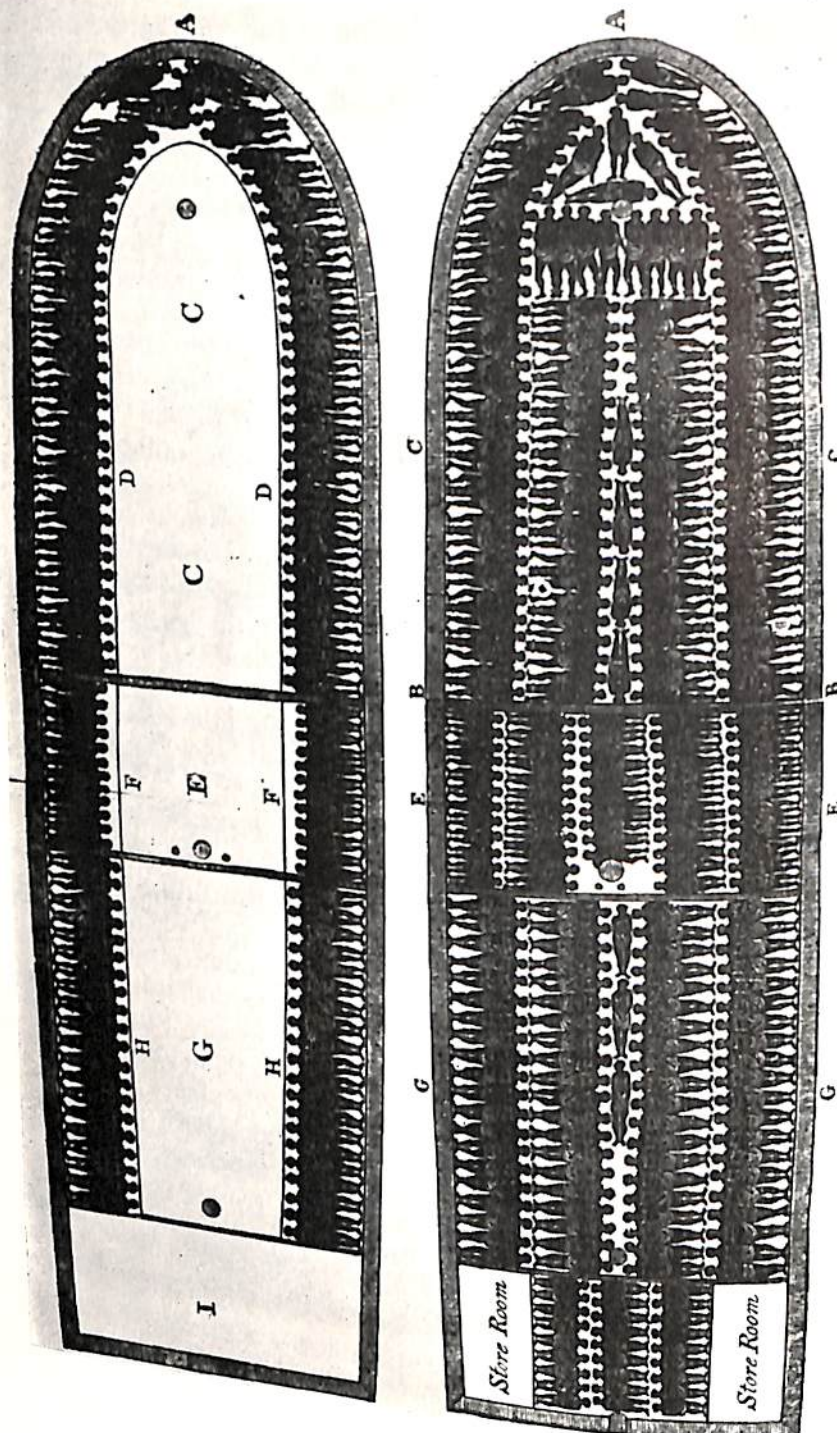
On August 12, 1766, a group of Negro slaves held a picnic at Portsmouth. The
 event is recorded in the diary of Caesar Lyndon as shown above.
 Copied from the original in The Rhode Island Historical Society

of Africa, where they bartered with thirsty native chieftains and ex-
 changed rum for Negroes. This human cargo was taken to the islands
 of the West Indies and exchanged for molasses, which in turn was
 brought back as the raw material for Rhode Island rum.

Until 1736 Rhode Islanders engaged in the slave trade were almost
 exclusively confined to Newport. But in that year James Brown, a
 Providence merchant, sent the sloop Mary to Africa for Negroes. From
 that point until the end of the century, the slave traffic in Rhode Island
 flourished increasingly, and many of the colony's first families began to
 draw wealth from it. The names of the vessels usually belied the pur-
 pose to which they were put. Who would have thought that between
 the decks of the *Charming Polly* and *Jolly Bachelor* there was a space
 less than four feet high where wretched cargoes of human flesh were
 stored? None of us today can comprehend the suffering endured by the
 African captives thus transported to America. The mortality rate, how-
 ever, was mercifully high, and when the inhuman conditions of the
 slave ships did not do the job, the Negroes frequently did it themselves.
 Thus in 1765 the slave ship *Sally*, owned by Nicholas Brown and Com-
 pany, lost 109 of a total cargo of 167 Negroes. In the log of the *Sally*
 one finds frequent entries such as this: "1 garl Slave Dyed," or "woman
 Slave hanged her Self between Decks." Occasionally the Negroes would
 rebel, but their endeavors to fight free were usually in vain. "Slaves
 Rose on us," wrote the master of the *Sally*, "was obliged to fire on them
 and Destroyed 8 and Several more wounded badly. . . ."

During the years of the American Revolution, when most colonies
 curtailed their slave commerce, Rhode Island's part in the trade
 reached its highest point. There was a saying that "an Ethiopian could
 as soon change his skin as a Newport merchant could be induced to
 change so lucrative a trade as that in slaves for the slow profits of any
 manufacturing."² Many of those who participated in the business prob-
 ably justified it after the fashion of the Newport elder who, having
 subsidized many successful voyages, always returned thanks on the Sun-
 day after a slaver returned "that an overruling Providence had been
 pleased to bring to this land of freedom another cargo of benighted
 heathen to enjoy the blessing of a Gospel dispensation."³ Unfortu-
 nately the piety of the Newport elder was all too frequently combined

¹James B. Hedges, *The Browns of Providence Plantations, Colonial Years* (Cam-
 bridge, Massachusetts, 1952), pp. 77-79.
²Elizabeth Donnan, "The New England Slave Trade After the Revolution," *New
 England Quarterly* (April 1930), Vol. 3, p. 255.
³William Weeden, "The Early African Slave Trade in New England," *Proceedings
 of the American Antiquarian Society* (October 1887), p. 122.



The above diagrams show how Negroes were quartered in a typical slave trade ship. Copied from the original in The Providence Public Library.

with the business ethics of the Bristol slave trader who advised his men to "make yr cheaf trade with the Blacks and little or none with the white people . . . worter yr Rum as much as possible and sell as much by the short measurer as you can."

Rhode Island figured prominently in the slave trade well into the first decade of the nineteenth century. It is estimated that of approximately forty thousand slaves brought into Charleston, South Carolina, between 1804-1807, over eight thousand were carried in Rhode Island ships. Even after the passage of a federal law in 1808 prohibiting the slave trade, business was carried on quite openly by ships out of Bristol, where a common remark of departing seamen was that they were off to "catch some black birds."

Some of Rhode Island's greatest fortunes were built with the money of the slave traffic. But for all the pious mouthings about the "bringing of a Gospel dispensation to the heathen," there were those who could not rub the guilt from their memories. Such a man was the Bristol slave trader, who in later life "sometimes had to put down his morning cup of coffee because he seemed to see blood on the surface of it, and when he saw it he remembered his throwing a slave with small pox out of a boat, and chopping off his hands with an axe when he tried to pull himself back over the gunwale."

In 1700 there were probably not more than one thousand Negroes in all of New England. During the ensuing decades this number increased, keeping pace with the rapidly expanding slave trade, so that by 1730 Rhode Island alone had 1,648 Negroes. By 1755 there were 4,697 Negroes in Rhode Island, amounting to more than eleven percent of the total population of the colony. During these years, when almost every Negro in the colony was a slave, the colored population was to be found chiefly in Newport and South County. In 1708, 220 out of a total of 426 Negroes in the state were reported living in Newport. By 1755 Newport counted 1,234 Negroes. During this year, when the plantations were in their heyday, one out of every three persons living in South County was a Negro; and in Charlestown there were 418 Negroes to 712 whites.

That part of Rhode Island most clearly marked by the institution of slavery was the Narragansett country of southern Rhode Island. By

¹William Weeden, *Early Rhode Island, A Social History of the People* (New York 1910), p. 190.
²M. A. DeWolfe Howe, *Bristol, Rhode Island, A Town Biography* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1930), p. 66.

1718 most of the manual labor in this section was done by slaves, and the largest owner was probably Rowland Robinson with nine. By 1730 slaveholding operations had increased considerably, and an estimated one thousand slaves were working on Narragansett farms. Eight years later George Hazard was said to own four Negro men valued at 440 pounds and one Negro woman valued at ninety pounds. As slaveholding became more extensive, the value of a good Negro slave was increased. In 1750 Governor Robinson owned twenty slaves, one of whom was said to be worth five hundred pounds. The southern part of Rhode Island at this time was distinguished for its large farms or plantations. Most of the estates varied in size from five to ten square miles. Robert Hazard, one of the most successful plantation owners, held seventeen thousand acres and grazed four thousand sheep. The plantations were worked by Negroes and Indians, and prosperous farmers were said to keep about an equal number of slaves and horses. Negro women were usually kept in the dairies. Each female slave on Robert Hazard's plantation was in charge of twelve cows and expected to make twelve cheeses daily.

Life in the Narragansett country resembled the plantation life in Virginia more than the typical rural existence in New England. Narragansett farmers, like the southern plantation owners, kept large households. Robert Hazard once congratulated himself for having reduced his household to seventy "in parlor and kitchen." The Rhode Island slaveholder, like the Southerner, sought to exploit the leisure time which slave labor provided for the cultivation of a graceful social life. The gentlemen raced their famous pacers on the beach where Narragansett Pier is now located. Every house worth its salt had a ballroom; and during the Christmas celebrations (a season of austerity throughout most of New England), the gentlemen of Narragansett, wiggged and powdered, outfitted in scarlet coats, lace ruffles and silk stockings, escorted their ladies, handsomely dressed in brocade and high-heeled shoes, their hair cushioned high, to dance the minuet at celebrations which frequently moved from mansion to mansion and lasted several days. Such an aristocracy needed servants, and it was customary for every member of a family to have his own servant. One rarely rode unattended by a Negro, indispensable for opening gates and caring for the horses.

Most of the Negro slaves imported by the colony came from Africa by way of the West Indies. Those who helped subsidize slave trade

¹George Mason, "Old Plantation Life in Rhode Island" *New England Magazine* (February 1900), vol. 21, pp. 735-740.

ventures frequently took their profits in human merchandise. They would keep the best for servants and field hands, selling the remainder. Rowland Robinson, a large landholder in South County, is said to have taken twenty-eight Negroes as his share of one profitable trip. Most of the transactions over Negroes took place in Newport, where slave markets were located at the corner of Mill and Spring Streets, and at the corner of North Baptist and Thames Streets. In other parts of the state, the local tavern was usually the clearing house for slaves. The Crown Coffee House, located opposite the Court House in Providence, was frequently used for this purpose.

In the plantation country in the southern part of Rhode Island, Negro and Indian blood began to mix, almost from the beginning. The reasons for this are fairly obvious. Indians, like Negroes, were frequently held in slavery. They both were relegated to the role of menial laborers and occupied a similar social position. Moreover, as the eighteenth century progressed and some masters began to free their Negroes, they were looked upon as good husbands by Indian women who had been brought up in a civilization in which women did all the drudgery. Consequently, more than one Indian woman purchased a Negro's freedom that he might marry and support her.

The first law in Rhode Island which pertained to slavery was passed in 1652 and limited involuntary servitude to a period of ten years. Although the statute soon became a dead letter, that some slaveholders felt morally bound by it probably accounts for the fact that a number of free Negroes were to be found in Rhode Island by the middle of the eighteenth century. Some of these were surprisingly prosperous. For example, a Boston paper reported in 1735 that a Negro couple, having saved between two and three hundred pounds, had recently sailed from Newport to return to Africa where their savings would make them rich. A free Negro at this time was usually possessed of good earning power. This was true not only because of the labor shortage which existed throughout the colonies, but also because slaves in New England were frequently skilled in one of the trades. Thus, a typical advertisement in the Newport *Mercury* would read, "To be sold, A Lusty Negro Fellow, between 40 and 50 years of age, a Hatter by trade and a complete workman for fine and coarse Hats."¹

Numerous cases were reported of free Negroes in Rhode Island, who, long before the Revolution, left sizeable estates at their death.

¹This announcement, originally appearing in 1759, was reprinted in *The Providence Journal*, July 1, 1887.

Jack Howard left 145 pounds in 1745; John Read died in 1753 leaving 100 pounds to his dependents. In 1769 Emmanuel "Manna" Bernon passed away leaving a house, lot, and personal property valued at 539 pounds. Since 1736 Bernon had operated an oyster house on Town Street in Providence near the Custom House, successfully competing with the eating places run by white men. Ironically enough, at least one Negro in Rhode Island was successful enough to be a slave holder in his own right. Tom Walmsley, a man of Indian and Negro blood, who lived in South County, was the owner of the Negro Tom Com-mock who worked as a sailor for his master.

Two of the most famous Negro slaves in Rhode Island were Newport Gardner and Caesar Lyndon. Newport Gardner, whose African name was Occramer Marycoo, came to Newport on a slave ship in 1760 when he was fourteen years of age. He was purchased by Caleb Gardner, who soon noticed the boy's mental alacrity and musical talent. While still a slave he was allowed to open a singing school. The school was successful, catering to some of the most aristocratic ladies in town, and from his share of the profits, Newport helped to buy his own freedom. A zealous friend of his own people, Newport spent freely of whatever he had to help the cause of others. He was a member of Samuel Hopkins' church, and together with Hopkins a devotee of the African Colonization movement. A familiar sight to townspeople of Newport was the Negro music master and former slave walking through the streets arm in arm with the great Calvinist preacher, engaged in earnest conversation over the plight of the black people in America. Finally, in 1823, then an old man nearing his eightieth year, Newport Gardner sailed out of Boston Harbor leading a little band of followers back to Africa. Although he had come to know personal success, he had been unable to find a future for his people in America. "I go to set an example to the youth of my race," he said. "I go to encourage the young. They can never be elevated here. I have tried it for sixty years—it is in vain."

The only information we have of Caesar Lyndon is that gleaned from the diary and account books which now repose in the Rhode Island Historical Society. The property of a Rhode Island governor, Caesar acted as business agent for his master. He also carried on small banking transactions in his own right. "Lent Mrs. Sarah Robinson (an Indian or Mollatto) 1 pistarene," he recorded in his diary on August 9, 1766. His financial ventures were apparently successful, for he was

¹George Mason, *Reminiscences of Newport* (Newport 1884), p. 158.

able to purchase for his own adornment such elegant articles as silver knee and shoe buckles, each costing about ten pounds. That slaves were sometimes allowed to have their own parties and social gatherings can be seen from the following entry in Caesar Lyndon's account book:

Tuesday August 12th 1766. This day the following persons took a pleasant ride out to Portsmouth as follows

Viz
 Boston Vose
 Lingo Stephens and Phylis Lyndon
 Nepton Sipsion and Wife
 Prince Thurston
 Caesar Lyndon and Sarah Searing
 Necessaries bot for ye Support of Nature are as follows

Viz			
To a pigg to roast	8	10	0
To so much paid for house room	7	4	0
To Wine	3	12	0
To Bread	1	8	0
To Rum	2	10	0
To Green Corn 70 Limes for Punch 20	4	10	0
To Sugar	2	4	0
To Butter	1	0	0
To Tea 40 Coffee 15	2	15	0
To 1 pint Rum for killing Pigg	0	10	0
	33	13	0

Presumably this lavish barbecue in the country was a great success, much enjoyed by Caesar and his friends. The picnic may have been the beginning of a romance, for not quite a year later Caesar Lyndon reported that he had "finished painting Sarah Searings bed chamber after he had before this morning white wash'd the same." A few weeks later the following entry appears: "Tuesday evening Oct 6 Caesar L. and Sarah S. were lawfully Married by the Rev. Doctor Ezra Stiles."

The annual celebration in which all Negro participated was "Lecture Day." Held on the third Saturday in June, this affair was a kind of festival which included a sumptuous banquet, athletic contests, and dancing. The high point of the day was the election of a Negro governor. The office was considered a great honor, and competition for it was carried on by both slaves and masters, the latter dressing up their Negroes in ornate finery to enhance their own prestige. Consequently, the Negro governorship was an expensive office. The story is told that when Elisha Potter's slave was elected to the office, Mr. Potter, a prominent figure in Rhode Island politics,

decided that either he or his slave would have to "retire" to private life. The Negro, of course, took the hint and relinquished his office. Those elected on these occasions filled more than honorary positions. They were frequently called upon to settle disputes between Negroes or to try charges brought against any Negro by another Negro or a white person. The punishment meted out by these courts was usually by bastinado, the number of strokes ordered by the sentence being administered by a Negro "high sheriff" or "magistrate."

Most of the historians of Rhode Island have mentioned these election celebrations. They are usually treated as another charming custom of old Rhode Island, further evidence of the benevolent paternalism which characterized slavery in the colony. In this connection, the story is sometimes told of the Negro woman, Abigail, imported by Rowland Robinson, who was so happy with her situation in South County that she had her only son brought over from Africa to become a slave. Now it is true certainly, as Caesar Lyndon's diary shows, that slavery in Rhode Island did allow Negroes to live surprisingly normal lives. There was undoubtedly a great difference between the institution as practiced here and the large scale operations which came to be associated with slavery in the South. Nevertheless one should keep in mind the simple truth that until the time of the American Revolution, the overwhelming majority of Negroes in Rhode Island, were not officially recognized as human beings.

There were more Negroes in proportion to white persons in Rhode Island than in any other New England colony. Rhode Island slaveholders responded to the potential threat which this situation presented by enacting a slave code not unlike the "Black Codes" of the South. This code was particularly stringent in South Kingstown where the Negro population was most dense. If any Negro slave was caught in the house of a free Negro, both were to be whipped. No outdoor gatherings of Negroes were allowed, and no Negro could own livestock of any kind under threat of thirty-one lashes. Rhode Islanders were apparently apprehensive lest slave insurrections be plotted under cover of activity billed as social entertainment. In 1750 they passed a law which provided that any white householder who allowed any slave to enjoy "dancing, gaming, or any other diversion whatsoever" should be punished by a fine of fifty pounds or one month in jail. If a free Negro was found guilty of such a crime, he was dispossessed and sold back into slavery. In Newport, slaves found in the streets after nine p.m. were shut in a cage until morning, then to receive ten stripes unless redeemed by their masters.

Being considered as property and having no rights of their own, slaves were naturally punished privately according to the tempers of their masters. In 1770 the Rhode Island Friends expelled a woman member for "encouraging the unmerciful whipping or beating of her negro man servant, he being stripped naked and hanged up by the hands in his masters house." The following entry appears in the journal of Dr. James MacSparran, a prominent Episcopal minister in Narragansett.

Aug. 29, 1751. I got up this morning early, and finding Hannibal had been out . . . I stript and gave him a few lashes till he begged. As Harry was untying him, my poor passionate dear (Mrs. MacSparran) saying I had not given him eno., gave him a lash or two, upon which he ran.

Hannibal was finally found and secured, so the doctor wrote, with "Pothooks put about his neck." A few days later the Negro was again beaten; he again ran away and was returned by one of MacSparran's parishioners, together with a plea that he be more lenient to his slave.

Early in the nineteenth century, William Ellery Channing, the great Unitarian minister and abolitionist, made the point that one of the most evil effects of slavery was the moral deterioration it worked on slave owners who exercised complete and arbitrary power over their human property. Perhaps this power is illustrated by the Rhode Island Quakeress who beat her Negro to death, and by the severities of the Reverend Mr. MacSparran and the "poor passionate dear" to whom he was wed. There is another story, related in the *Recollections* of Thomas Hazard which makes the same point. A runaway slave in Narragansett returned to his master, was stripped of his clothes, tied to a stake in a marsh and left overnight to the mercy of the mosquitoes.

When the public punishment of a slave was called for, it was frequently executed in such a manner as to strike fear into the hearts of all his fellows. On June 13, 1727, an Indian by the name of Peter, the property of Jacob Mott of Portsmouth, fired a bullet through his master's hat. The court finding no motive to kill but "only an intent of mischief" turned the case over to the General Assembly, which ordered that the culprit "be branded in the forehead with the letter R with a hot iron, and be publickly whipped at a cart's tail throughout all the most public corners and places of the town of Newport." In Kingston a slave killed his master's wife. He escaped and committed

¹Lorenzo Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England 1620-1776* (New York 1942), p. 233.

suicide, but the Assembly determined that the punishment be inflicted on the dead body, ordering "that his head, legs, and arms be cut from his body, and hung up in some public place, near the town, to public view, and his body to be burnt to ashes, that it may, if it please God, be something a terror to others from perpetration of the like barbarity for the future."

The flogging and the branding and the bloody executions served notice that the horrors of the slave ships were not left at the shores of Newport Harbor; and as the eighteenth century progressed, thoughtful men began to ponder this "dispensation" which had so much of depravity about it.

CHAPTER II

The Early Abolition Movement

AS pointed out in the last chapter, a number of Negroes in Rhode Island secured their freedom before the middle of the eighteenth century. Most of these early manumissions occurred upon the death of the master or as the result of a contract between master and slave. In 1694, William Hawkins of Providence agreed to free "Jack" provided the latter served him for twenty-six years. Eight years later William Randall, another Providence slave owner, freed Peter Palmer for "good and faithful service." In 1708 Richard Arnold, also of Providence, left a provision in his will to the effect that his Negro, Toby, should be freed at the age of twenty-five and supplied with "two suits . . . a good narrow axe, a broad hoe, and a sithe with tackling fitt for mowing and twenty shillings in money."¹ If a master died without heirs and without making any provision for his slaves, they automatically became the property of the town. As the eighteenth century progressed, the townspeople began to doubt the justice of keeping such persons on bondage. In 1774, for example, Jacob Shoemaker died, leaving the town of Providence his six Negroes, four of whom were children. The Town Council, voting that it was "unbecoming to the character of freedom to enslave the said Negroes," decided to free the adults and bind the children out for service.

Actions such as those above noted undoubtedly helped to swell the number of free Negroes in eighteenth century Rhode Island, but the real work of abolishing slavery in the state was not done in such a haphazard manner. It was accomplished by the efforts of men who personally felt the guilt of slavery and were driven to do away with it. Ironically, one of the biggest slave holders in New England, Robert Hazard, sired the first Rhode Island abolitionist. The story is told that in 1742, shortly after the marriage of his son Tom, Mr. Hazard wanted to give the newlyweds a farm, together with sufficient slaves to work it. Happy enough over this prospect, young Tom Hazard went to Connecticut to buy cattle for his farm. Arriving on Sunday he was forced to postpone his business with the Calvinist deacon from whom he desired to buy the cattle. He stayed over the Sabbath with the deacon,

¹Lorenzo Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England 1620-1776* (New York 1942), p. 293.

however, and fell into a long religious discussion with that gentleman. Coming from a part of Rhode Island noted for its strong Quaker sentiment, it was natural for the younger man to introduce Quakerism into the discussion. "Quakers," announced the deacon soberly, "are not Christian people . . . they hold their fellow men to slavery." This condemnation apparently caused Tom Hazard to reflect seriously on his own future. At length convinced of its truth, he returned home a staunch abolitionist and refused to accept the slaves which his father offered him.

Twenty years after Thomas Hazard refused to take up property in human beings, another famous Rhode Islander had his eyes opened to the evils of the practice. Moses Brown was one of the most successful business men in Rhode Island. Deeply religious by nature, the Providence merchant had long grieved over his part in a slave-trading venture many years before. One day in November, 1773, having visited his wife's grave where he meditated long and prayerfully "to know what the Divine will was concerning him," Moses Brown felt himself called to free his Negroes. He saw his slaves with his "spiritual eyes" as clearly as he saw his departed wife, "and it was given me as clearly to understand that the sacrifice that was called for my hand was to give them their liberty."² On November 10, 1773, Moses Brown signed a deed freeing all of his slaves. Of those freed, six were given one acre plots on Moses' farm, while the other four were able to support themselves through their trades. From that time forward, Moses Brown became the most powerful opponent of slavery in Rhode Island.

Fortunately the abolition of slavery in Rhode Island did not depend solely on the isolated efforts of men like Moses Brown and Thomas Hazard. Whatever merit there may have been in the Connecticut deacon's jibe at the Quakers in 1742, it can be asserted in all confidence that no group did more in the latter half of the eighteenth century to free Negroes in Rhode Island than the Quakers. From that day in 1757 when Richard Smith presented a paper opposed to slavery before a meeting of Friends in South Kingstown until the passage of an abolition bill in 1784, the Quakers became increasingly militant in their opposition to the institution which kept Negroes in bondage. Their hostility to slavery received a great impetus when the famous American Quaker, John Woolman, visited the colony in 1760. Finding

¹Caroline Hazard, *Thomas Hazard* (Boston 1893), p. 43.

²William Johnston, "Slavery in Rhode Island 1755-1776." *Publications of the Rhode Island Historical Society* (July 1894), p. 163.

a large group of Negroes imported from Africa being offered for sale by a Friend, Woolman urged Rhode Island Quakers to disassociate themselves from such a practice by sponsoring legislation to prohibit the slave trade. The local body of Friends responded to Woolman's counsel in their next yearly meeting by forbidding their members to engage in the slave trade, and by directing them to treat their slaves "with tenderness and give those that are young, at least so much learning that they be capable of reading."¹ Individual slaveholders among the Friends soon discovered that their brethren were in earnest in their antagonism to slavery. In 1765 Joshua Rathbun, a prominent Quaker, was expelled for having participated in the purchase and sale of a Negro slave. Six years later the Friends announced that any of their members who did not free their slaves could "expect to be denied membership."² This announcement apparently had the desired effect, for on June 28, 1773, a committee of Quakers reported that in Rhode Island none were "held as Slaves by Friends."³ In this connection it should be pointed out that it was in 1773, shortly before he became a Quaker, that Moses Brown freed his Negroes. His desire to associate with the Friends undoubtedly assisted him in making this decision.

In 1774, primarily because of Quaker influence, the General Assembly of Rhode Island passed an act prohibiting the importation of Negroes into the colony. Although the enactment of this legislation was an important victory for those who considered slaveholding a sin, it was also greatly influenced by the growing sentiment for independence in America. As early as 1768, a writer in the *Providence Gazette*, insisting that freedom was the inalienable right of every man, attacked the colonists for their inconsistency in complaining of the denial of their natural rights by Britain while keeping slaves themselves. If this argument fell on deaf ears, the shot that killed the runaway Negro slave, Crispus Attucks, in the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770, was heard by colonists everywhere; and many began to ponder that paradox through which a bondsman gave his life for the freedom of his masters. It is not surprising, therefore, that the lawmakers of Rhode Island should have introduced the act against the importation of Negroes with an allusion to their own struggle for freedom. "Whereas, the inhabitants of America are generally engaged in the preservation of their own rights . . . those who are desirous of enjoy-

¹Lorenzo Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England 1620-1776* (New York 1942), p. 239.

²Caroline Hazard, *Thomas Hazard* (Boston 1893), p. 176.

³*Ibid.*

ing all the advantages of liberty themselves, should be willing to extend personal liberty to others."

Four years later the cause of Freedom in Rhode Island appeared all but lost. For two years Rhode Islanders had battled with their fellow Americans in the War for Independence. By February, 1778, they were confronted with the dismal fact that their troops were depleted, while Newport and the greater part of the state were in British hands. Desperately in need of additional soldiers, the General Assembly passed an act providing for the enlistment of slaves into the militia. Up to 120 pounds was to be paid to the master of each slave enlisted, and every slave thus purchased was to be "immediately discharged from the service of his master or mistress, and be absolutely FREE, as though he had never been encumbered with any kind of servitude or slavery." Despite the protests of a group of slaveholders that the purchasing of slaves to be employed in the fight for freedom was "wholly inconsistent with the principles of liberty . . . for which we are so ardently contending," the legislation became effective; men like Titus Pierce, Africa Burk, Cuff Greene, Caesar Updike, Bachus Hazard, and Priamus Brown took their places in the ranks beside their former masters.

The exact number of Negroes enlisted into the revolutionary forces from Rhode Island is not known. In any event there were enough to form a regiment which played a heroic role in the war. Probably the most famous exploit of Rhode Island's celebrated "Black Regiment" was in the Battle of Rhode Island, when on August 24, 1778, the Negro soldiers three times threw back the charges of the Hessian mercenaries on the slopes beyond Newport. According to tradition, on the day following this disaster, the Hessian colonel, fearing rebellion among his own troops for the disastrous losses they had suffered, applied for a new assignment. In a later engagement near Points Bridge, New York, when the Rhode Island commander Colonel Christopher Greene was ambushed and killed, his Negro soldiers battled fiercely in his defense, suffering terrible casualties themselves. Perhaps the most gruelling experience of Rhode Island's Negro troops occurred when a part of the regiment was attached to a body of New York troops for a surprise attack on the British post at Oswego on Lake Ontario. American strategy in this undertaking was not successful, and the attack never materialized. But the long winter march to the shores of the lake was a terrible ordeal for the Negro soldiers from Rhode Island, many of whom were frostbitten and crippled for life.

After America had secured her independence, the people of Rhode Island could not easily forget their debt to the Negroes of the colony. They remembered the stories of Negro valor in those fateful hours during the Battle of Rhode Island, and they recalled that it was a former slave who guided Colonel Barton of the Rhode Island militia to his capture of the British General Prescott in Newport. For those of short memory, the name of Bristol Rhodes, a Negro who left an arm and leg upon the battlefields of Yorktown, was enough to remind them that the sacrifices for freedom had been made by men of all complexions.

In February, 1784, the people of Rhode Island took steps to express their appreciation for the part the Negroes had played in the Revolution by passing a law which provided for the gradual abolition of slavery in the state. Under the provisions of this law, all children born into slavery after March 1, 1784, were declared free, the responsibility for their education to be borne by the master involved. The act of 1784 was due in great measure to the combined efforts of Rhode Island religious leaders. The Quaker Moses Brown, the Baptist James Manning, the Calvinist Samuel Hopkins, hopelessly divided over matters of theology, found common ground in their hatred of slavery. They did not cease their efforts with the passage of the 1784 bill, but continued to work for a more stringent law prohibiting the slave trade, which legislation was finally passed in 1787. In 1790 these men were instrumental in founding the first Providence anti-slavery society, an organization somewhat awesomely named the "Providence Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, for the relief of Persons unlawfully held in Bondage, and for Improving the Conditions of the African Race."

The thirty-six years between 1784 and 1820 mark a period of transition for the Negroes of Rhode Island. During this time the number of slaves steadily decreased while the number of free Negroes in the state increased proportionately. In 1810, for example, there were 108 slaves in Newport; by 1820 this number had declined to 47. By 1808 almost any Negro could secure his freedom merely by applying for it. Naturally, most of the slaves were eager to gain their freedom, although there were a few of the older ones, as the grandson of a slave once held by the Brown family later recalled, "who declared their masters had been eating their flesh and now they were going to stick to them and suck their bones."

In 1794 Moses Brown received a letter from a friend requesting

him to assist in the case of one Caesar Brown, a Negro, said to have been tricked out of his property by a white man. Caesar Brown was probably one of Moses' former slaves. The property which he lost may have been the property which Moses had given him at the time of his manumission. In any event, the adventures of Caesar Brown as related by letters and scattered references in the Moses Brown papers suggest the extent to which Rhode Island Negroes depended on the guidance of others during the first years of their freedom. On October 27, 1800, Moses Brown wrote to William Buffum, asking him to procure a house "at a reasonable rent" for Caesar so that he could work out for wages "and be well-used." In the event that Caesar should be unable to pay the rent by reason of sickness or other accident, "in that case," wrote Mr. Brown, "I shall be willing to do something toward it." Caesar was apparently located at a place in Cumberland, but within a month Moses Brown was again involved in his affairs, receiving the following letter on November 26, 1800.

Mr. Brown Ceser is left me and my tou children without Vittels or drink he sase you must maintain him and he is a coming and if you take him you must take Bowth the Children he has gave the house up and if you Dont assist me I shall be Turn out adoors and if you will let me live in the house til Spring I shall be glad . . .

Jeney the Wife of Ceser
The issue drawn by this domestic dispute was apparently resolved without Moses' intervention, because he wrote the following terse comment on the back of the letter: "She being the agressor I hear the neighborhood ordered her to do better and he returned." The following year Moses put Caesar to work in his mill in Pawtucket, giving him and his wife a house near the mill. The house was not exactly to Jeney's liking, however, and Samuel Slater reported to his employer that "Caesar's wife wishes to have stairs fixed up on the outside otherwise she cannot consent to stay here." The last mention of Caesar Brown to be found in the Moses Brown Papers is dated April 25, 1812. On this date Caesar received a letter from one Wheeler Martin on behalf of "The Widow Abigail Packard" asking seventeen dollars back rent for the use of her house. Prompt payment, Caesar was assured, "will prevent a suit or any further cost." This letter was referred to Moses Brown, who wrote that "Caesar and Jeney hired the house by ye month and Caesar sayed he paid for the 2 mo he lived in it and was drove off by his wife by her striking at him with a club he was poor and refused to pay more and that Jeney must be looked to for her rent."

Peggy Harrison was another of Moses Brown's former servants who continued to look to him for assistance. Writing to him from Boston in October, 1804, she reported on the progress of religion among her people there. "As there is now a probability of having preaching among us if there can be a little preparation made for it," she concluded, "and you think fit to send me a little money so that I can give in my mite I shall be very thankful." In the years following there were several other letters from Peggy Harrison to Moses Brown, each of them making a request for a small amount of money, once because "the times is so hard"—another time because "my husban he is old." Finally on April 15, 1811, Ann Harrison informed Moses Brown that her mother had died. "She was very willing to die and go to the Lord above," wrote her daughter, "and she desired me when dieing to let you know of our distresses." Peggy Harrison was to be buried by a society of colored people in Boston, and Brown was asked to defer the costs. "I hope you will not think that it is our fault," wrote her daughter, "if you will please to let us have some money to pay the expences of the burying and the debts she owed."

The incidents concerning Caesar Brown and Peggy Harrison illustrate what was probably a general truth about the status of free Negroes in Rhode Island at the turn of the nineteenth century. Trained in slavery, they found it difficult to take up immediately the responsibilities of free, independent citizens. They turned naturally for help to those in whose custody they had been. This period of paternalism was an inevitable sequel to slavery, a necessary prologue to the establishment of a free Negro community in the state.

Moses Brown, of course, was far more than a kindly slaveholder concerned for the welfare of his former servants. As previously pointed out, he was one of the leaders in the abolition movement. When the abolition of slavery in Rhode Island was secured, however, Moses Brown did not rest content, but persisted in his efforts to improve the condition of the colored people in the state. If a Negro was in need of legal advice, if he wanted a job, if he was soliciting funds for some charity, or if he was a fugitive seeking protection, he was invariably referred to Moses Brown. Perhaps the greatest philanthropist in America at this time, Moses took time from his many business interests to honor every request with his personal attention. If a neighbor would free his slave, Moses would accept the responsibility for maintaining the freedman until he could support himself. If a Rhode Island Negro was captured and sold into slavery in another state, Moses

would attempt to right that wrong. Refugees from the South more than once were sheltered by Brown and his associates in the anti-slavery movement. On June 24, 1792, Thomas Hazard wrote to Moses from New Bedford saying that he was sending a fugitive family of four Negroes to Providence. "We wish the utmost secrecy to be preserved," he advised, "that no person may know the cause of their being there." But no matter what measures were taken to insure secrecy, Moses Brown's reputation was well-known. Thus in 1793, when a slaveholder of North Carolina sent an agent to Rhode Island to recover a family of Negroes, the agent, a Captain Martin, was sent directly to Moses Brown as the man "known to have a *commanding influence* in this business." Needless to say, Captain Martin went back to North Carolina empty-handed.

On June 6, 1776, a Newport Negro of some education, John Quarmine, wrote a letter thanking Moses Brown for his "boundless benevolence . . . with regard to the unforfeited rights of the poor unhappy Africans of this providence," and commending him to the future blessings "by Him who has promised to remember the merciful at the great reconing day." In later days men of good will everywhere would come to join in this tribute, and the following generations of colored people in Rhode Island, their progress blocked by almost impassable barriers of ignorance and prejudice, would never know a friend more zealous for their cause than the Quaker Moses Brown.

CHAPTER III*

Discrimination Against the Free Negro

IN 1790 there were 48 slaves living in Providence and 427 free Negroes. During the next few decades, the free colored population increased steadily, totaling 1,414 in 1825, at which time there were but four elderly slaves held in the city. It would be a great mistake, however, to conclude from the previous chapter that Moses Brown acted for a majority of his fellows in attempting to improve the conditions of his colored neighbors. In Providence as elsewhere, race prejudice was not abolished with slavery, nor were those practices useful in keeping Negroes at the lowest level of society erased.

Commenting on the hostility toward Providence Negroes in the early years of the nineteenth century, William Brown, a prominent leader in the colored community, wrote that "It was thought a disgrace to plead a colored man's cause, or aid in getting his rights as a citizen, or to teach their children in schools." In the economic struggle especially, the prospect was very discouraging. "To drive a carriage, carry a market basket after the boss, and brush his boots, or saw wood and run errands, was as high as a colored man could rise." This was the recollection of Mr. Brown, and he spoke from personal experience, having been turned away from countless shops because their owners were unwilling to take a Negro apprentice. It was considered presumptuous for a colored person to seek anything but the most menial kind of employment.

Not only was it difficult for Negroes in Providence to achieve even modest economic success, but even if this were attained there was always a threat of loss to unscrupulous individuals who stood ready to exploit the unfavorable social position which Negroes held. Thus, William Brown reported numerous attempts on the part of his employers to trick him out of part of his wages. Such scheming was probably based on the reasoning that colored workers were either too stupid to realize that they were being cheated, or too timid to protest if they did discover it. This reasoning was doubtless reinforced by the knowl-

*This chapter originally appeared without substantial alteration as "The Free Negro in Providence, Rhode Island," *Negro History Bulletin* (Dec. 1950).

edge that Negro rights were not zealously guarded by the law. It was because of this laxity that Florence Eldridge was duped out of the ownership of her property through the chicanery of a white man who held a mortgage on the property. This industrious and prosperous Negro lady, who had managed to save enough from her wages as a whitewasher to purchase real estate holdings valued at about \$4000, had left Providence for a short time in order to recuperate from an illness. While she was gone a rumor circulated to the effect that she had died. Without further verification of this story, the man who held the mortgage had the property offered for sale at public auction, where it was sold for a price much below its true value. The fact that the sale was not advertised as fully as the law required suggested to some of Florence's friends the possibility of collusion between the sheriff and the anxious mortgagee. In any event, the unfortunate lady returned to Providence to find that her property had been taken from her.

That such high-handed steps were taken against one who was held in high esteem throughout the community shows clearly enough that other Negroes, not held in such regard, must have been even more open to plunder from their white neighbors.

The economic exploitation of Negroes was but one manifestation of the prejudice against them which was reflected in most of their social activity with whites. In Providence, as in other New England cities, it was customary for Negroes to occupy separate seats in the gallery when attending church. This tended to reduce church attendance on their part, for many of them were "opposed to going to churches and sitting in pigeon holes." In the field of education Negroes were also neglected. In 1821, in the document which deeded to the colored community a tract of land to be used for the construction of a school and meeting house, Moses Brown remarked his regret that Providence had not before that time made provision "for the education of the rising generation of the people of colour."

If we may believe the account of a Negro resident in Providence during this period, the Negro citizens of the town were not only discriminated against in the larger matters of religion, employment and education; they were also forced to submit to petty persecution on the city streets. There is said to have been a place on the north side of Market Square called "scamp's corner" where the town loafers held court. A favorite recreation of those who frequented scamp's corner was to insult the passing Negroes. This sport was at its best on the sabbath when the scamps could busy themselves with "knocking off

men's hats and pulling off ladies' shawls and often following them as they passed to and from church." Apparently, it was not unusual for Negroes to be assaulted by whites in the streets. The story is told of two Negro couples, who in the course of an evening stroll, found that they were followed by two white youths, "who ordered them off the street or they would knock them off." The women moved off the sidewalk into the street, but the men remained where they were and a fight ensued. A crowd quickly assembled and the cry was heard to "take these niggers to jail." Only the timely intercession of a white man who was acquainted with one of the Negroes prevented this action.

The evidence presented thus far suggests that Providence Negroes during this period were forced to make their way in a decidedly hostile community. This hostility received dramatic emphasis in the Providence riots of 1824 and 1831.

By 1824 Providence had come to assume the pattern of a segregated city and the center of the colored population had begun to move from the waterfront area of South Main Street to a section of town called "Hard Scrabble" or "Addison Hollow" located in the low ground beyond the old cemetery on North Main Street. Hard Scrabble was described by a local newspaper as "a small hamlet, situated at the northern suburb of town, populated principally by blacks who located themselves on that quarter to avoid any intercourse or correspondence with their hostile neighbors."

Apparently the Hard Scrabble riot was the culmination of a long series of bickerings between the residents of the Negro settlement and the whites in the city. The violence was touched off on an evening in October, 1824, when "a sort of battle royal took place between considerable parties of whites and blacks, in consequence of an attempt of the former to maintain the inside walk in their perigrinations through the town." On the following morning a notice appeared on the bridge calling for a mob to assemble that night. Between four and five hundred persons responded to this call, whereupon the mob descended upon Hard Scrabble, "and in the short space of four or five hours, levelled it with the ground." After the houses were destroyed, rioters turned their attention to the household goods which remained, and it is reported that many of these belongings were carted off to Pawtucket where they were sold at auction. What happened to the residents of Hard Scrabble is not known, but perhaps some of them followed the example of their neighbor who pulled the roof of his demolished house over the cellar where he lived through the winter.

Hard-Scrabble Calendar.

REPORT

OF THE TRIALS OF

Oliver Cummins, Nathaniel G. Metcalf, Gilbert Humes and Arthur Farrier;

WHO WERE INDICTED WITH SIX OTHERS FOR A

RIOT,

And for aiding in pulling down a Dwelling-House, on the 18th of October, at

HARD-SCRABBLE.

PROVIDENCE:
Printed for the Purchaser.

1824.

This anonymous pamphlet is practically the only source of information for the Providence riots in 1824.
Copied from the original in The John Hay Library, Brown University

After this example of mob violence, four white men were apprehended and brought to trial in the Providence Courts. The account of the trial is revealing. According to testimony, forty or fifty white men took part in the destruction of the Negroes' houses before an estimated crowd of one thousand interested spectators. Apparently there was no attempt made to stop the destruction. The testimony of the town watchman was recorded as follows:

... He went there with Mr. Mann his file leader and they did not think it prudent or proper to interfere. Considered he was doing his duty by going there and keeping as still as possible.

The tactics of the counsel for the defense are reminiscent of Rebecca West's descriptions of the famous Greenville lynching trial of 1947. It was contended that the injured party received no more than that it deserved, for the Negro section had been a blotch on the face of the fair city of Providence.

It was the resort of the most corrupt part of the black population, who supported their debaucheries and riots by carrying thither the plunder of their masters and pawning it for a participation in these disgusting scenes.

When the town council refused to correct this monstrous situation, "the populace at length took it into their hands and destroyed this sink of vice; and there was not a sober citizen in the town who could regret it." In his final appeal to the jury, the defense attorney sought to make this point more convincing by appealing to the sense of humor of the jurors.

Gentlemen of the Jury . . . the renowned city of Hard Scrabble lies buried in its magnificent ruins! Like the ancient Babylon, it has fallen with all its graven images, its tables of impure oblation, its idolatrous rites and sacrifices, and my client stands here charged with having invaded this classic ground and torn down its altars and its beautiful temples.

It is much to be regretted that among the thirty or forty witnesses the Attorney General has examined, some of them have not explained the etymology of this name. Perhaps after all it is only meant as descriptive of the *shuffling* which is practiced there in the graceful evolutions of the dance, or the zig zag movements of Pomp and Phyllis, when engaged in treading the *minuet de la court*. But be that as it may, we must all agree the destruction of this place is a benefit to the morals of the community.

With this noble statement, delivered, we may assume, to the accompaniment of snickers from the jury and spectators, the trial was brought to a speedy close. Of the four defendants, two were acquitted outright. The remaining two, whose guilt was clearly apparent from all of the evidence assembled, and who did not enjoy the advantage of their fellow defendants in having a white witness contradict damaging testimony from a Negro, were found guilty. The jury strongly recommended mercy, however, and finally, due to a legal technicality, this judgment was quashed and all four men were freed.

For some reason, with the exception of the single article previously mentioned, this entire incident escaped mention in the local papers. Either they chose to ignore it, or the destruction of a few Negro shacks was not considered newsworthy. The only other comment which had any relevance to this affair appeared in an editorial in the *Providence Gazette* five days after the riot. Although the recent example of violence was not mentioned, the editor invited the attention of his readers to the onerous burden which the Negro population was placing upon the community. He noted with approbation a recent action of the town council to conduct a census of the Negroes of Providence with the express intent of discovering those "addicted to idle and dissolute habits." The editor made it clear that these "undesirable" individuals would be unceremoniously ushered out of the town.

The Hard-Scrabble riot only served to intensify the tension existing between Negroes and whites in Providence. The white citizens of the town continued to chafe under what was apparently considered to be the burden of an objectionable Negro population. Hard-Scrabble was replaced by "Snow Town," a community at the west end of town near the mouth of the Providence-Worcester canal, in the vicinity of Olney Lane. Although this section was occupied mostly by Negroes, it housed most of the places of entertainment which catered to the sailor trade, and the buildings and properties used for this purpose were frequently rented at high rates from white landlords who made their own residence in a more respectable part of town. Snow Town did not enjoy a savory reputation in Providence, and the fact that it became identified as a retreat for "outlawed Negroes and abandoned whites" did not improve the relationships between the two races. The following statement, descriptive of Snow Town appeared in one of the Providence papers in 1826:

Here it is that the scum of the town and the out-scourings of creation, nightly assemble to riot and debauch, and in the midst of their bachanalian revels,

the whole neighborhood is kept in a constant state of inquietude and alarm—A viler place never yet existed, and compared with it, St. Giles of London, is a school of morality.

The resentment which the white community of Providence harbored for the colored population in Snow Town flared up abruptly on the evening of September 21, 1831. The specific cause behind this series of riots is somewhat obscure. The local committee which later issued a report on the riots maintained that on the evening in question five sailors set out "on a cruise" to the southern part of town. At the foot of Olney Street they met a group of steamboat men who were carrying clubs and who claimed to have had "a row with the darkies." It was proposed that the two groups combine forces and invade Snow Town. By this time a crowd of about one hundred persons had assembled, and the sailors, with the mob at their heels, advanced up Olney Lane into the Negro section. The crowd came to an abrupt halt when a gun was discharged from one of the Negro dwellings, but the sailors continued up the lane. Another shot was fired, and a Negro appeared, holding a gun on the sailors, and demanded that they keep away. When the invaders hesitated in their retreat, the Negro threatened to fire. One of the sailors is said to have replied, "Fire and be damned." He was shot and killed on the spot. Word of this spread rapidly through the town, and within a half hour a large mob descended upon Snow Town, which suffered the loss of two of its houses and damage to many others.

The *Providence Journal*, in its report on the cause of the riot, merely stated that it grew out of "an altercation" between sailors and Negroes at "some houses of ill fame on Olney's lane occupied by blacks." Whatever the specific cause, it is clear in this case as in that of Hard-Scrabble, that a mob could be raised quickly and easily in Providence for the purpose of ravaging a Negro settlement.

On the following evening a mob assembled early to continue the work of the previous night. The sheriff and deputies who attempted to disperse the mob received nothing but "stones and brickbats" for their trouble. The governor was also at hand, and although he received milder treatment than that extended to the local authorities, he was hardly given the respectful attention to which he was accustomed, for it is reported that, "No personal insult or injury was offered to the governor other than a total disregard of his orders."

Exhortation having proved too puny a weapon to restrain the mob, authorities decided upon a show of force, and the militia was

requisitioned. Twenty-five members of the First Light Infantry were marched to Olney Lane, where they were greeted by such a fusilade of stones that they promptly turned about and marched away again, leaving the mob to pursue its work without interruption.

Despite the generally ineffectual efforts of the authorities in pacifying the rioters, several prisoners were taken on the second day of the riot. On the third day the mob gave priority to the task of freeing these prisoners. The following message was found posted in the town:

Notice

All persons ho are in favor of liberating those men ho are confined within the Walls of the Providence Jail are Requested to make due preparation, and govern themselves accordingly.

N B—No quarters shone.

The prisoners were released after having been examined, but the mob which had formed to rescue them was not easily dispersed, "and much persuasion from some of their own gang was required to convince the most ferocious, that *all* the prisoners had been discharged." That evening the rioters continued to work at the destruction of Snow Town, demolishing eight houses in Olney Lane.

On the evening of September 24th, the last day of the riot, two companies of militia were assembled to disperse the mob which had gathered on "Smith's Bridge along the road leading westerly" and which was engaged in destroying the houses to the south of this street. The militia was marched from Main Street to the hill at Smith Street. The march was accomplished with great difficulty since the soldiers were severely pelted with stones. The militia gained momentary control, however, and the Justice of the Peace read a proclamation to the effect that those members of the mob who did not disperse would be considered as rioters and could be fired upon by the militia according to the provisions of the riot act. But the great crowd was not to be subdued with words. "The shouts and stones were renewed, and exclamations, 'fire and be damned,' were heard from all directions." One company of militia returned down the hill where it was cut off and surrounded by the crowd at the bridge. The intent of the rioters was apparently to destroy whatever sought to prevent them from wrecking every building in Snow Town. When the assault against the soldiers became so severe as to endanger their lives, the captain in charge ordered his troops to fire. A scattered blast into the crowd halted the violence instantly, and the riot was put down as suddenly as it had started.

The committee which investigated the riot reported that the action of the militia was justified as "strictly in defense of their lives." Four of the rioters were killed and fourteen others wounded, while approximately eighteen houses were destroyed in Snow Town and in Olney Lane. Apparently no attempt was made to separate the casualties according to race, but it appears that the totals of dead and wounded refer to white men who were fired upon by the militia, while the property damage resulted from the mob's raging in the Negro district.

The fact that the riot was finally broken should not be interpreted to mean that the authorities were motivated by a desire to see justice extended to the Negro population of Providence. It appears accurate to say that the violence was finally subdued, not because it represented an illegal invasion of the rights of a minority group, but rather because it was an "open and lawless attack upon private property—in open and professed defiance of the magistrates." In this connection it should be remembered that many of the important property owners in the Negro district were white men. After the violence had subsided, the official investigating committee did not hesitate to express a note of sympathy with the rioters. The committee pointed out that Snow Town had long been considered a nuisance by the respectable citizens of the town, and that when the town authorities refrained from acting, "It was thought that magistrates who could not afford a remedy for the damage done not to prevent its forcible abatement." In assessing the damage done by the mob, the committee did not feel that any "respectable" houses had been destroyed. One of the local papers believed that the source of the trouble lay in the fact that the "blacks" had been unusually bold for the last few weeks." This editorial, written with heavy sarcasm, is reminiscent of the defense attorney's speech in the Hard-Scrabble trial.

This neat and beautiful village has thus become one mass of ruin and its virtuous and orderly citizens deprived of their dwelling places, and reduced to poverty and distress. The mob made but little noise and were expeditious and scientific in the performance of their arduous duties. Not one reputable dwelling was attacked.

The study of Negro-white relationships in Providence during the early decades of the nineteenth century yields certain significant conclusions. Discrimination against the Providence Negro invaded both the church and the schoolroom. It was particularly apparent as a factor in frustrating his attempts at economic advancement. Conse-

quently, the Negro community was forced to occupy an undesirable part of town where its members sought to earn a living in whatever way they could. Such conditions naturally fostered the development of crime and vice, and the hostile white citizens were quick to identify these activities with the Negroes. That a feeling of active hostility governed the actions of the white citizens toward the Negro is demonstrated not only by the individual acts of prejudice and persecution previously noted, but also by the fact that great numbers of the white citizens in Providence were apparently eager to find an excuse to riot against the Negro population. The "free" Negro was beginning to find out that even in Rhode Island, freedom implied insecurity rather than equality.

CHAPTER IV

The Developing Negro Community

THE common experience of persecution usually works to bind the members of a minority group closer together. This was particularly true of Negroes in Rhode Island in the first half of the nineteenth century. The period from 1820 until 1840 saw the emergence of a colored community within the state.

Probably the first attempt which Rhode Island Negroes made to organize for their own improvement occurred at the home of Abraham Casey in Newport on November 10, 1780, when Newport Gardner, Prince Almy, Lyman Keith, and others established the African Union Society. The purpose of this organization was to promote the welfare of the colored community by providing a record of births, deaths, and marriages; by helping to apprentice Negroes; and by assisting members in time of distress. Crippled most of the time by a lack of funds, the society was probably important for the moral influence it exercised over its members. "We beseech you to reflect that it is by your good conduct alone," counselled the founders in their constitution, "that you can refute the objections which have been made against you as rational and moral creatures . . ." The African Union Society may also have been responsible for the custom observed by Newport Negroes on the fourth Thursday of every April when they gathered together in a Thanksgiving service. A leader of the society, Newport Gardner, wrote the Proclamation for 1791, calling upon all his fellows to give thanks that "Almighty God has of late been pleased to raise up many to compassionate and befriend the poor Africans."

In 1808 the African Union Society merged with the African Benevolent Society, an organization established under the leadership of Newport Gardner to provide a school in Newport, "the object of which is the free instruction of all the colored people of the town who are inclined to attend." This school with Gardner and Patience D'Lyra as its first teachers, continued in operation until the city opened a colored school in 1842.

¹In preparing this chapter, I have been greatly helped by Julian Rammelkamp, "The Providence Negro Community, 1820-1840," *Rhode Island History* (January 1948), pp. 20-33.

With these exceptions, however, and the founding in Providence in 1799 of Hiram Lodge Number Three, said to be "the second oldest Negro chapter in Masonic history,"¹ Rhode Island Negroes had created little in the way of a community structure before 1820. Possessed of no churches of their own, their ardor somewhat chilled by the prospects of fellowship in the segregated congregations available to them, only one out of every twelve Negroes was a church member in Providence. Deprived of school facilities, Negro parents were forced to raise their children in ignorance or accept the bounty of private charities.

The time was fast approaching, however, when the colored population would create its own institutions. The opening of the African Union Meeting House in Providence in 1820 was a symbol of this new day. About 1816 a group of Providence ladies started a school for colored children in the west end of town. Two Sunday schools were also begun, leading to a plan for a regular meeting place for the education of colored children "and the public worship of Almighty God." A mass meeting was held, and with the support of all the ministers in town, the people of color in Providence undertook to find funds sufficient for the project. Raising about five hundred dollars among themselves, they also received contributions from colored communities in Boston, Hartford, Baltimore, and New Haven. The largest single contribution was made by Moses Brown, who purchased a lot for the building on the east side in the vicinity of Meeting and Congdon Streets. The lot was deeded "for a school . . . and also for a Meeting House for Divine Worship, for the people of color . . . and for no other use, but for the said people of color forever." Religious services were to be open to "all Christian professors" and not restricted to any sect. The bequest was made, according to the words of the aging philanthropist, with the conviction "that Almighty God our Heavenly Father 'hath made of one blood all nations of men'."

In June, 1820, the first worship service was held in the meeting house. Although the building was still unfinished, unpainted, and without pews, a Sunday school class was started which quickly numbered two hundred members. Finally on August 31, 1821, the grand opening was held. According to the reports, a great number of the Negroes in Providence and the outlying areas assembled on this occasion, together with "many of the gentlemen and ladies of this town" who had taken an interest in the project. The African Greys, a colored military society, marched smartly through the streets of Providence to

¹Julian Rammelkamp, "The Providence Negro Community." *Rhode Island History* (January 1948), p. 27.

celebrate the day, and the doors of the African Union Meeting and School House in Rhode Island were officially opened.

In a pamphlet published to commemorate this occasion, a group of colored leaders in Providence thanked their many white friends for helping with the undertaking. Not everyone had been a friend, however, and the authors of the pamphlet were forced to admit that they had struggled against "a violent opposition, who would, and have wished, like the southern slave-holders, to keep them in ignorance." The colored population was not above criticism, but as these writers maintained, one could hardly expect miracles from a group whose members were denied "the common privileges of our citizens."

The successful completion of the meeting house in Providence apparently gave Rhode Island Negroes the encouragement they were seeking. In 1824, the colored citizens of Newport led by the African Benevolent Society, purchased a lot on the corner of Church and Division Streets, there erecting the first Negro church in that part of the state. Reverend Jacob C. Perry, a native of Narragansett, served as the first pastor of this, the Colored Union Church. During the period between 1820 and 1840, several other Negro churches were established. In 1835 the Fourth Baptist Meeting House in Newport was organized by Negroes. In 1837 the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church appeared in Providence, followed a year later by the African Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1840 a splinter group from the African Union Meeting House organized a Free Will Baptist Church (now known as the Pond Street Baptist Church). The colored citizens were quick to support their churches. In Providence, for example, only one out of every twelve Negroes was a member of a church in 1820; by 1840 one of every six was a member of some church.

Similar progress was made in education. Although the schoolroom in the Providence Meeting House operated sporadically because of the difficulty in getting funds and hiring competent teachers, the move was definitely underway to provide more educational opportunities for colored children. In 1836 the Reverend J. W. Lewis, a Negro minister in Providence, established the New England Union Academy, offering such courses as history, botany, bookkeeping, and natural philosophy. Tuition, unfortunately too dear for most students, was only three dollars each quarter. In 1838 a milestone was passed when the city of Providence voted to support two schools, one on Meeting Street, the other on Pond Street, solely for the use of colored children. By 1840 the illiteracy rate among Providence Negroes is said to have decreased to about fifty percent.

Another indication that the Negro community in the state was becoming self-sufficient during this period is found in the creation of several social societies. William Brown recalled that in the 1820's the Mutual Relief Society and the Young Men's Union Funds Society were organized in Providence, the former as a social club for the young men. In 1832 the Providence Temperance Society came into existence. Established at a time when the temperance movement was gaining in popularity all over the country, this organization counted as many as two hundred members at one time.

The advances thus made by the colored population in the area of religion, education, and recreation did not occur without parallel progress on the economic level. A few Negroes gradually found a place in the trades, and others became modestly successful in small enterprises. William Brown was finally able to support himself as a boot-maker. The whitewasher Florence Eldridge, with real estate holdings valued at \$4000, was a substantial property holder. A refreshment stand owner, George McCarthy, was able to offer several Meeting Street lots for sale by 1835. By 1839 the names of other Negroes, such as James Hazard and Edward Barnes, clothier and grocer respectively, began to appear on the city tax lists. Altogether Negro real estate holdings in Providence from 1822 to 1839 increased from ten to fifty thousand dollars. Another indication of the growing economic independence of the colored community may be seen in the rise of home owners. By 1839 this proportion had increased so that over two-thirds of the Negroes in Providence lived in houses which they themselves owned.

The accumulation of property by Negroes during this period was not overlooked by Providence politicians, who soon urged that more Negroes be included in the tax rolls. This proposal brought an immediate protest from the members of the colored community, who argued that they were denied the vote and should not be taxed without representation. The Negroes, under the leadership of George Willis, George McCarthy, and Edward Barnes, took their case to the General Assembly where the prospect of allowing colored citizens to vote proved so alarming to many of the representatives that the tax issue was quickly dropped. This incident, however, foreshadowed things to come. The Rhode Island Negro community was ready to demand political rights, and wise men must have realized that in the period of fierce contention then overtaking Rhode Island politics, the Negro vote would have to be considered.

CHAPTER V*

Negro Suffrage and Dorr's Rebellion

BY far the most explosive issue in nineteenth century Rhode Island politics involved the extension of suffrage. Unlike most other states, the people of Rhode Island did not frame a new constitution after the Revolution but continued to operate under their old colonial charter. Since the terms of this charter restricted the franchise to men of property, as the nineteenth century progressed and a large laboring population came into existence, great numbers of Rhode Island citizens found themselves deprived of the right to vote. Inevitably these men were brought together by a common purpose into a political organization, the Suffrage Party. They were opposed by the anti-suffrage, or Legal Party, composed primarily of men of property who possessed the right to vote under the constitution and were thus enabled to maintain themselves in power.

By the summer of 1841 the dispute between the two parties had become extremely bitter and the members of the Suffrage Party, under the leadership of the fiery and idealistic Thomas Dorr, confronted by the refusal of their opponents to broaden the franchise, began plans to call a convention for the purpose of framing a new constitution. In the midst of these preparations, a new issue appeared which threatened to divide the Suffragists. They were forced to decide whether or not their program was intended to include Negro as well as white citizens.

Negroes in Rhode Island had been made ineligible as voters by a law passed in 1822. The Suffragists, however, did not come to grips with the problem of Negro suffrage until it was forced upon them. At a meeting of the Suffrage Party held in Providence on September 27, 1841, nominations were asked for the office of treasurer. Two reports were brought in by the executive committee, the majority favoring Alfred Niger, the minority Thomas Greene. Acting upon a suggestion from the floor that Mr. Niger was a Negro, the Suffragists voted not to receive the majority report and the meeting immediately fell into confusion. Mr. Field, the man who was instrumental in bringing in

*This chapter originally appeared without substantial alteration as "The Inconsistency of Thomas Dorr," *The New England Social Studies Bulletin*, (May 1954).

Niger's nomination, finally rose to explain his action. His opposition to Negro suffrage was well-known, he said, and he brought the subject to the floor only "in order that it might be finally decided upon by the Association." In other words, Field wanted to know how many pro-Negro men were in his party; or as another member put it, "How many 'wolves in sheep's clothing' were among them." Those present at the meeting reluctantly went on record by voting against Niger, but there was considerable dissatisfaction about the whole incident and a feeling that Field and his followers had been wrong in bringing up an issue which could only hurt their cause.

The question of Negro suffrage continued to haunt the Suffrage Party. Exasperated by their failure to liberalize the provisions of the existing constitution, the Suffragists had, in July 1841, issued a call for a constitutional convention. Negroes were allowed to elect delegates to the convention, but whether or not the constitution to be framed would allow Negroes to vote remained unresolved. At a meeting of the convention at the State House in Providence on October 8, 1841, Thomas Dorr presented for the delegates' consideration a petition signed by several Negro leaders asking that the Suffragists include in their constitution a provision giving Negroes the right to vote. In the ensuing debate several delegates maintained that if the suffragists were to be known as "the People's Party" they should make the Negroes' cause their own. If only white citizens were allowed to vote, argued Benjamin Arnold, the word white would become "a dagger in the bosom of our own cause." A delegate from Portsmouth, warning that his constituents would go against the proposed constitution unless the word white was stricken out, hoped that it "would not be stained *black* by the word *white*." On the other hand, those opposed to Negro suffrage argued that such a move would lose the party many voters. The people were not ready to be placed on an equal political footing with Negroes. Why, they asked, should the delegates sacrifice the rights of 15,000 disenfranchised whites for the sake of a few hundred colored people? In the end, despite the opposition of Thomas Dorr, this kind of reasoning won out, and the delegates voted 46 to 18 to retain the word white in that clause in their proposed constitution pertaining to the qualifications for suffrage.

The Legal Party was quick to realize that the Dorrites were left vulnerable by their treatment of the Negro question. A series of articles appeared in the *Providence Journal*, chiding them on this account. The author of these articles, writing under the pseudonym

"Town Born," took pains to point out that although the Suffragists made a show of allowing Negroes to participate in the election of delegates to their convention, the election was so arranged that only "a few of the lighter colored" actually did vote, and at least one "respectable colored man" was turned away from the polls. Their equivocal attitude toward Negro suffrage was satirized in a manner calculated to alienate Negroes and abolitionists. "You cannot be helped now," the Suffrage Party was quoted as telling the Negroes in the state, "but you have everything to expect from this movement hereafter . . . know then your friends. Be united and wait." The implication was that if the Negroes and their friends waited for the Suffragists to act for them, they would wait forever.

Although the entire proceedings of the Suffrage Party were carried on without the authority of the existing government, the Constitution drawn up by its Convention was accepted by a majority of the people in Rhode Island in December, 1841. During the following months the Suffrage Party contended that its constitution should be accepted as the legal constitution in the state. The dispute between the two parties became extremely vehement, and in February, 1842, to appease the Dorrites and to prevent a possible outbreak of violence, the Legal Party held its own constitutional convention. Like their opponents, the anti-suffrage men were soon forced to deal with the question of Negro suffrage, and they disposed of the matter in similar fashion. The issue was debated and the result was that the Legalists, taking the cue from their opposition, voted to deprive Negroes of the ballot. The Legal Party brought its *Freeman's Constitution* before the people, who proceeded to reject it by a margin of 676 votes. According to one report, "some voted against it because the colored people were not placed on the same platform with the white men." The members of the Legal Party had discovered that it was one thing to criticize their opponents for mishandling the touchy Negro question and quite another thing to meet it successfully themselves.

By May, 1842, the political situation in Rhode Island bore all the earmarks of a civil war. Acting in accordance with their constitution, the Suffragists elected their own candidates to office and declared theirs to be the legal government of the state. The existing government, dominated by the Legal Party, declared martial law, called out the militia, and sought to crush the "rebellion" by force of arms.

¹James T. Adams, "Disfranchisement of Negroes in New England," *American Historical Review* (October 1924), vol. 30, p. 545.

In this critical period, it appears that the colored community was drawn into the ranks of the Legal Party. William Brown, a leader in the Negro community, estimated that over two hundred Negroes in Providence alone enlisted in the militia. What effect this had on the outcome of the struggle is uncertain. What is certain is that the Negroes had joined with the victorious side, for the superior force mustered by the Legal Party quickly put Dorr and his supporters to rout.

No sooner were the Suffragists defeated, than they began to complain that the "aristocrats" in the Legal Party had bought the support of the Negro community. This accusation appeared to have some basis in fact when, in November, 1842, the Legal Party, then firmly in control of the state, pushed through a new constitution extending the franchise to Negroes. The constitution was eagerly accepted by the colored citizens, who voted for it in great numbers. A less happy result for the Negroes was the increased hostility of the members of the defeated party. William Brown recalled that after the new constitution was put into effect, a prominent white citizen who had supported Dorr asked him if he had voted for the constitution. When Brown answered that he had, the man became enraged and threatened him, shouting "Your wool will grow closer to your skull than it does now before you vote again."

The role played by the Negro population in the Dorr Rebellion has more than ordinary significance. During the two decades between 1820 and 1840, Negroes in the state were completing the process of their emancipation by forging the links of a definite community structure. In their establishment of colored churches and societies and in their growing economic independence, they revealed that they were prepared to take an active part in community affairs. By 1841 the colored community represented a force for which rival politicians were forced to compete. It would be too much to say that Dorr was defeated because his party refused to include the Negro cause with its own mission, but this was surely an important contributing factor. In this case, ironically enough, the more conservative party gained the support of the Negroes and in return made the ballot in Rhode Island available to men without distinction of color.

The truth seems to be that the Suffrage Party was confronted with a dilemma. Although consistency demanded that they support Negro suffrage, Dorr's followers were realistic enough to know that this course would alienate great numbers of their supporters. Their estimate of

the situation was probably correct. The great Negro abolitionist Frederick A. Douglass, who was sent to Rhode Island to speak against the People's Constitution, found this a difficult assignment. "The majority of the people were evidently with the new constitution," he wrote, "even the word *white* in it chimed well with the popular prejudice against the colored race, and it first helped to make the movement popular."

Winning their right to the ballot was an important victory for Rhode Island Negroes in their struggle for equal citizenship. Such a victory in 1842, however, was not gracefully acknowledged by the white community. It served only to underscore the fact that prejudice against color remained a powerful force in the state.

CHAPTER VI

Civil War Years

DURING the years from 1840 to 1860, the attention of most Americans was riveted on the dispute between the Northern and Southern states. Negroes in Rhode Island, along with their fellows throughout the North, were more concerned with this issue than others, not only because of their emotional involvement with the enslaved Negroes in the South, but also because most of their friends in the North were numbered in the ranks of the abolitionists. In 1833, for example, the members of the Providence Anti-Slavery Society issued a clear call for the people of their state to get behind the Negro in his struggle for equal rights. Insisting that their colored neighbors had "as good a right to the privileges and immunities of American citizens, as any other class of our inhabitants," the abolitionists contended that Negroes with equal qualifications should have equal privileges. If equal qualifications did not exist, they urged that facilities be afforded for their attainment and that "all laws derogatory to them as rational and moral beings, ought to be repealed."

Coming as it did not long after the riots of 1831 and at a time when prejudice against the Negro in Rhode Island was very strong, this statement, although encouraging to the colored community, did not represent the attitude of the state as a whole. Feeling against the abolitionists was frequently as intense as that against the free Negro. At a Newport town meeting in 1835, a petition was drawn up urging the Rhode Island General Assembly to pass a gag law curtailing their right to free expression. According to the famous abolitionist paper of William Lloyd Garrison, the citizens of Newport supported this petition unanimously, "for no man could have opposed . . . except at the risk of his safety . . . Freedom of speech was not tolerated then—it is not tolerated now. It would be almost as hazardous to deliver an anti-slavery lecture in Newport as in Charleston or Richmond." It was a matter of pride with Garrison that Newport, being what it was, should look on him with disfavor. "Such a man as Garrison, with all his independent hypocrisy, would never be tolerated here," wrote the Newport *Republican*. "He could not even get the boys to follow him, unless to pelt him with rotten eggs."

Despite the hostility extended to the abolitionists, it appears that a steady stream of runaway slaves flowed through Rhode Island during the forties and fifties. By 1849, for example, the pastor of the Pond Street Church felt obliged to print an open letter in the Providence papers requesting funds for his church. The reason given for this need was that the Pond Street Church operated "one of the prominent branches of the *Underground Rail Road*" and had helped over sixteen Negroes in the preceding few months. In 1850 the Providence *Journal* estimated that there were several hundred escaped slaves living in Providence.

By far the most famous of the escaped slaves who passed through Rhode Island was Frederick Douglass. Landing in Newport in 1838, Douglass was befriended by the Quakers and soon found a home in New Bedford. His experience there was probably typical of the experience of escaped slaves living in Rhode Island. He found that although he was treated as a man and not a slave, he still bore the heavy burden of his color. There was plenty of work for Negroes in New Bedford, but it was always common labor. Douglass had been a skilled ship fitter in the South, but when he attempted to pursue his trade in New Bedford, the entire crew of white workers on the job with him threatened to quit. George Henry, another Negro who fled from the South about this time, reported a similar experience in Providence. He had captained ships in the South, but in Providence he was forced to ship out as a steward or stay on shore and work at manual labor. Although Douglass had become a famous personage before the Civil War, he found Rhode Island hospitality contradictory. He reported that he was treated courteously enough by the abolitionists of the state, but at the same time, while traveling on the railroad bound for Stonington, he was "several times dragged from the cars for the *crime* of being colored."

The passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in September, 1850, aroused the colored population in the state as nothing had before. This legislation, which made it a federal offense for anyone to aid an escaped slave, was a threat to every Negro in the North. Recognizing the danger, the colored citizens of Providence held a mass meeting on September 24, pledging themselves to "sacrifice our lives and our all upon the altar of protection to our wives, our children, and our fellow sufferers in common with us." Recalling that Negroes in their state had fought in the Revolution, they looked to "the great moral arm of Rhode Island as a refuge from the storm which now threatens our

social habitations . . ." Numerous meetings were called to protest the passage of this act, and the countless speeches sometimes proved irritating to those who wanted action. "While we are speaking here," cried a man in the gallery of Zion Chapel before an estimated crowd of 1500 Negroes, "the fugitive slaves are fleeing from the city, from their families and their friends, and if liberty is worth fighting for, it is worth fighting for here." Responding to this sentiment, the Negroes in Newport organized a vigilance association "to be on the lookout, both for the panting fugitive and also for the oppressor when he shall make his approach."

The resentment excited by the Fugitive Slave Law was not restricted to Negroes and abolitionists. Once the security of the colored neighborhood was threatened by a force outside the state, the people of Rhode Island found themselves more willing to speak in its defense. "Not a few of them," wrote the *Providence Journal* of the fugitive slaves and their descendents living in the city, "are men who have been here for many years, who have married and raised families here, acquired property and paid taxes, have borne arms in the public defense, and fulfilled all the duties of good citizens."

During the ten years preceding the Civil War, men began to speak for or against the free Negro according to their own political prejudices. The abolitionists and the Republicans supported the Negro cause, while the Democrats attacked Negroes and abolitionists with the same breath. A good example of the hostility with which one party looked on the colored population may be found in two editorials which appeared in the *Providence Daily Post* in December 1858. The editors of the *Post* began by insisting that they had no prejudice against color. "Dark complexioned men for all we know, are quite as good as light complexioned men." As if to prove their tolerance, the editors pointed to Edward Scott, a successful Providence minister, and George Downing, a prosperous Newport business man, as examples of Negroes who should be held in esteem. But the point which the writers sought to make was that these men were "very far above the mass of colored people." The reason for this, they concluded, was not that prejudice blocked the path for Negroes, but that they were simply incapable of elevating themselves. "If the mass of colored people possessed . . . intellectual ability or energy of character or anything approaching to it, the whole of what we call prejudice against color would disappear almost instantly." Therefore, agitation for "Negro rights" and against "prejudice" was misguided,

and Negroes who encouraged it were letting themselves be used as "the tools of unprincipled political partisans."

The colored citizens of Providence who had been battling prejudice all of their lives were not likely to be convinced by an argument which asserted that their depressed condition in the community was of their own making, and they called a public meeting to register their objections to the editorial. The *Post* retaliated with an insulting article which associated "the mustachioed, brass buttoned, brainless class" of Negroes, "the men of resolutions and froth," with the Republicans. It was useless to hope for anything good from this group. "We might write for their benefit from now until doomsday, without being able to get an idea through their wool: they are 'niggers'."

Nothing that the editors of the *Post* wrote, however, could arrest the course of history then moving relentlessly toward the Emancipation Proclamation and the battlefields of Antietam and Gettysburg.

It was inevitable that Rhode Island, remembering the gallant role of her famous "Black Regiment" during the Revolutionary War, should send colored troops to the field in the Civil War. In the summer of 1862, General Sprague ordered the enlistment of a Negro regiment. This call received considerable publicity in newspapers throughout the North, and it was said to be appropriate that Rhode Island should be among the first states to place Negroes in the field against the "slavocracy."

There is no question but that the colored population in the state was happy at the prospect of joining the war against slavery. At a mass meeting in Providence, the colored citizens resolved that they would "cheerfully respond to the call of Governor Sprague." One of those present at the meeting probably expressed the majority opinion when he declared, "I should rather lose my life than have the Southern Confederacy reign over me."

Nevertheless, there was a vast difference between the situation which brought Rhode Island Negroes into the War for Independence and that which existed during the Civil War. In the former instance they were slaves sold into military service; in the latter they were to volunteer as free citizens. As citizens they were anxious to be taken into the army on an equal basis with other soldiers. Disturbed at the reports that the policy of the Union Army would be to use Negroes as laborers and not soldiers, Providence Negroes supported the call for troops with some reservations. "If colored volunteers in the north should be accepted as citizens and soldiers, in short, as men," they

predicted that "nearly all the colored men in Rhode Island would volunteer who could." This assurance was not forthcoming, and the plans for a Negro regiment in the summer of 1862 were not fulfilled.

The following summer, however, when it became clear that Negroes were wanted as soldiers, Governor Smith issued a call for a colored company. This action prompted the *Daily Post* to sneer that "if Lincoln, Beecher, and Sprague go on their wild goose chase for five years after Negroes they will never raise a single company." As usual, the *Post* was as misinformed as it was contemptuous, and in the autumn of 1863, the Fourteenth Heavy Artillery Regiment, 1800 strong, steamed out of Narragansett Bay enroute to New Orleans.¹

Arriving at New Orleans, the Fourteenth Regiment moved upstream 120 miles to Plaquemine, a little town a few miles below Baton Rouge, there taking up garrison duty. Although the regiment participated in no battles except for a few skirmishes with enemy patrols, it was forced to cope with considerable guerilla activity. The people of Louisiana did not relish being guarded by Negro troops. On one occasion some members of the regiment were taken prisoners by Confederate troops and summarily executed. On the whole, however, malaria proved far more deadly than southern bullets, and hundreds of colored soldiers were thus sent to swampy graves by the shores of the Mississippi. In reading the history of the regiment, one feels that these men were burdened with an unheroic, dreary, dangerous, and necessary duty. That they performed this duty well is attested by the fact that they were honored by a commendation from General Sherman before they returned to Rhode Island.

As the soldiers of the Fourteenth Heavy Artillery Regiment were mustered out at Portsmouth in November, 1865, they were met by a representative of the Rhode Island Association of Freedmen, who offered his service to help them find employment within the state. This organization, supported by private contributions, was designed to help relocate in Rhode Island some of the thousands of freed southern slaves. On September 19, 1864, the agent for the Association reported that during the previous three months eighty-five freedmen had been "placed in good situations in various parts of the state." In March of the following year, an employment office was opened to

¹It should be noted that although the largest single group of these soldiers came from Rhode Island, there were also included in the regiment Negroes from "eight states of the Union, besides several rebel states, Cuba, Hayti, and the isles of the Caribbean Sea." Edwin Stone, *Rhode Island in the Rebellion* (Providence 1864) p. 363.

assist freedmen, and within two months 210 freedmen were reported to have been satisfactorily placed through this agency. All of this took money, and the record book of the Association reveals that this money came from varied sources. The students at Brown University are listed as contributing fourteen dollars and fifty cents; an A. G. Wheeler gives 75 cents, \$104 dollars are obtained from a "Juvenile Musicale," and Seth Paddleford (a frequent contributor) gives fifty dollars. The agent's disbursements are listed on the opposite page and include such entries as "Rations for 24 Freedmen at 40 Cents," medicine, and "cash for freedmen." Every contribution helped, large or little, and ultimately the people in Rhode Island could be proud that of about five thousand Negroes sent North by federal authorities, approximately nine hundred were located in Rhode Island.

The Rhode Island Association of Freedmen existed but a few years and has long since been forgotten. Nevertheless, it did a yeoman work, and the idealistic citizens who supported it gave evidence that Rhode Island Negroes in the post-war years could expect to receive greater encouragement in their struggle for equal citizenship.

CHAPTER VII

The Crusade for Equal Rights in Education

IN the eighteenth century primary responsibility for the Negro's education rested with the individual slave owner. The examples of men like Newport Gardner and Caesar Lyndon indicate that some slaves were allowed to receive the basis of a good education. A more common experience was probably that of "Cudge," the servant of Noah Brown, who was allowed to get only enough schooling in the slack winter months to learn to read and write.

Probably the first formal effort to offer educational facilities for colored children occurred in 1763 when the Reverend Mr. Marmaduke Brown opened a school for Negroes on the corner of Division and Mary Streets in Newport. The school was coeducational, equipped to train fifteen boys and fifteen girls in the trades and domestic arts. Apparently blessed with sufficient financial backing from an English benevolent society, Mr. Brown's school was less fortunate in attracting students, and the *Newport Mercury* reported in March, 1773, that the project would probably be given up because of the difficulty in getting Negroes to attend. This situation is readily understandable. The few free Negroes in Newport at this time had no leisure for education, and most masters could find better use for their property than to let it sit idle in a school room.

That there was little provision made for the education of Negroes before 1800 is explained by the fact that there were no public schools in the state before that time. In 1800, however, the General Assembly passed a law providing that each town establish at least one school "for the instruction of all the white citizens of said town between the ages of six and twenty years." Thus the Rhode Island school system was created by legislation which officially relieved the towns of the responsibility for educating the colored population.

Fortunately the Negroes themselves were willing to take up this burden. On October 10, 1808, the African Union Society in Newport opened a school for colored children with Newport Gardner as teacher. The following year the Women's Auxiliary of the African

Benevolent Society opened a night school for adults. The establishment of these schools by a people reared in slavery was no ordinary achievement. It required great sacrifices and bore eloquent testimony to their zeal for education. The two Negro women who could remember being carried to Newport by slave ship probably spoke for many of their friends when they wrote, "Some of them say that they are willing to go without some of the necessities of life that this school may be obtained."

In Providence there was little attempt at an organized effort to provide education for Negroes before the construction of the African Union Meeting House in 1820. This school, which charged but one and a half dollars per quarter for tuition and could afford to pay its first teacher only fifteen dollars a month, was in trouble almost from the start. As early as July, 1820, Moses Brown was advised that the school could not last beyond September without additional funds and that those interested in continuing this project should persuade the city to support the school. To what extent this object was attained in the 1820's is not clear. The Meeting Street School, opened to colored children in 1828, may have been partially supported by the city. In any event, the teacher of this school is said to have received the much more respectable salary of four hundred dollars per year.

The difficulties which made the early schools for colored children operate sporadically were not confined to money. Negro teachers were hard to find, and white teachers frequently considered it an insult to be offered a colored class. William Brown, for example, was roundly berated by one of his teachers for presuming to speak to him on the street. This kind of student-teacher relationship, hardly designed to inspire a zest for learning among the colored young people, had become so notorious at the Meeting Street School by 1836 that a committee was appointed to investigate the situation.

On September 7, 1838, the city of Providence formally acknowledged its responsibility for educating the Negro population by authorizing the establishment of two schools to be "maintained exclusively for the instruction of colored children." The old Meeting Street School was to be continued under city supervision, and a new school was to be established on Pond Street. Newport followed suit by establishing a city school for colored children in 1842.

The opening of public schools for Negroes was a landmark for the progress of Rhode Island Negroes, for it indicated that the colored

¹Charles Battle, *Negroes on the Island of Rhode Island* (Newport 1932), p. 19.

population was a part of the community and entitled to the opportunities of a free education. At best, however, it was a hesitant step in the direction of equal citizenship, affirming as it did the desirability of segregating the children of the two races.¹ The final phase in the struggle for equal rights in education was not to be completed until all the schools of the state were opened to Negroes on an equal basis with white children.

That the colored citizens in the State were not prepared to accept the establishment of a segregated school system is indicative of the progress which their leaders had made in attaining positions of security and prestige in the community. An example of the resourceful and economically successful Negro who rose to prominence in the years surrounding the Civil War is Benjamin Burton. Born in Darien, Connecticut, in 1826, Burton moved to Newport in 1845. After working for four years as a teamster, he left for the gold rush country of California. Successful in his endeavors in the West, Burton returned to Newport in the early '50's and opened his own express business. Confronted with more than ordinary difficulties ("His horses were frequently injured, harness often cut, wagons sometimes badly damaged"),² he became a leader in this field and later operated a bus line.

Two other Negro leaders, more intimately connected with the campaign for equal school rights, were Isaac Rice and George Henry. Isaac Rice was born in Narragansett in 1792. He moved to Newport as a boy and became a charter member of the Colored Union Church. A highly successful gardener, Rice was responsible for planting the trees in Touro Park. He was also a successful caterer, conducting a "fashionable establishment" on Cotton Court. An ardent abolitionist and a friend of Frederick Douglass, his house on the corner of William and Thomas Streets in Newport is said to have served as a station for the Underground Railway. George Henry was not a native of Rhode Island. He came to Providence from the South where he had held a position of some prestige as the captain of a small coastal sailing vessel. Forced to accept more menial employment in Providence, he worked as a whitewasher and served as the sexton of St. Stephen's

¹Separate schools for Negroes were set up in Providence, Bristol, and Newport. In rural areas, colored children apparently attended the same schools as white children. The author of the *Jonny-Cake Papers*, for example, recalled having attended school in Narragansett "with black Suke Watson on one side of me and 'Shepherd Tom' (Boston, 1915), p. 8.
²Charles Battle, *Negroes on the Island of Rhode Island* (Newport 1932). See the list of biographical sketches in rear of pamphlet.

Church for twenty-five years. Although denied the advantage of a formal education in his youth, Henry was apparently possessed of a rugged self-confidence and a great fund of common sense. His foresight in purchasing real estate on the east side and his courage in fighting racial discrimination made him one of the most prosperous and well-known colored citizens in Providence before his death at the turn of the century.

Probably the most famous Negro in the state during the last half of the nineteenth century, and the man most responsible for abolishing segregated schools, was George Downing. George Thomas Downing was born in New York in 1819. By the time he reached his twenty-sixth year he had established himself in a highly successful catering business on Broadway, serving New York's exclusive "four hundred." Having opened a summer place in Newport four years earlier, Downing moved to Providence in 1850. By 1860 his business had proved so profitable that he was able to finance the construction of a block of business buildings in that city. In 1865 Downey was asked to take over the restaurant serving the House of Representatives in Washington. By nature vigorous and independent, he conducted a lifelong campaign for equal rights for colored citizens. As a boy of fourteen he had organized a "literary society" which resolved, on one occasion, not to celebrate the fourth of July because it was "a perfect mockery" to Negroes.¹ Not tempted to complacency by his own success, the man did not let the fire of his youthful idealism cool. An active abolitionist and a friend of many Washington officials, Downing once refused the offer of an introduction to President Filmore because, as he said, he was unwilling to touch the hand that had signed the Fugitive Slave Law. Senator Charles Sumner counted Downing among his intimate friends, and Downing was at the great abolitionist's bedside when he died. It was indeed fortunate for the colored people of Rhode Island that George Downing chose to make his home in their state, for on that day when the Newport schools refused to admit his children as students the issue was fairly drawn between public and segregated education in the state, and the injured minority was assured of vigorous, intelligent leadership in the coming struggle.

On February 25, 1857, the *Providence Journal* carried an article giving notice of the move on foot to abolish separate schools for white and colored children. The *Journal* went on record as opposing any change. Schools were designed for the purpose of educating, "not to

¹S. A. M. Washington, *George Thomas Downing* (Newport 1910), p. 7.

establish or deny any social rights." If segregation were abolished, attendance would decrease; white children would not sit beside Negroes, and colored children would refuse to go where they were not wanted. The existing situation was satisfactory, warned the *Journal*, and it was best to let well enough alone.

Taking advantage of the *Journal's* article, George Downing quickly published a broadside putting the colored position before the public. Maintaining that public schools were state institutions supported by taxation, and that Negroes were citizens of the state, taxed in common with other citizens, Downing contended that the establishment of separate schools for colored children "wars against the principles of the state." To say that separate schools provided equal educational opportunity was to talk nonsense. Downing thought that the inferior facilities of the Pond and Meeting Street schools proved his point. Making it clear that this campaign was not an attempt to force social equality upon his white neighbors, Downing closed his argument with a call for action and a warning to politicians. "The colored people of today have different ideas and feelings from those they had twenty years ago. We wish our children to be educated with higher ideas, with a nobler dignity. . . . We will struggle accordingly and mark our friends. This, with us, is a test matter. Politically, those for us will be our friends; those against us we must know."

The prophecy that Rhode Island politicians would have to reckon with the campaign against separate schools was soon fulfilled, but it appears that the first casualty was on Downing's side. In the spring of 1858 the Providence School Committee moved to deny an outstanding Negro student admission to the high school. This act apparently had political overtones, and all candidates for public office were immediately solicited for their opinions. A candidate for the General Assembly, Mr. A. C. Barstow, was bold enough to assert that all children should have equal opportunity for education. Recognizing the unpopularity of this position, Mr. Barstow, on May 10, 1858, published an open letter declaring his intention to withdraw from the political race rather than jeopardize the chances of those running with him.

The school issue demonstrated that many Negro "supporters" were fair weather friends and caused some of the colored leaders to suspect they were wanted only as political tools. "Indeed, we are in the hands of highway robbers," protested one writer, "who now take, in their kindness, only our money and our votes . . . We can no longer be bribed or coerced into silence. We charge you, be men, and yield us

our rights and privileges, or relieve us of the taxes and burdens which you now impose upon us."

Throughout 1858 colored leaders kept up their agitation for equal school rights. In January, 1859, George Downing sent a petition to the governor, attempting to show that it was uneconomical for the state to support segregated schools. On February 29, a group of colored ministers sent a letter to the *Providence Journal* setting forth their position on this issue. The *Journal* refrained from publishing the letter, and it was sent to the *Daily Post*. Attempting to refute the argument that if colored schools were abolished colored churches should also be abolished, the ministers pointed out that all were welcome in their churches and that the colored population had organized its own churches only because Negroes were not welcome in white churches. The *Post* took this opportunity to warn that Negro churches, which could not exist without the financial support of white citizens might well be hurt by such talk from their pastors.

The fact that the *Republican Journal*, as well as the *Democratic Post*, was a persistent defender of segregation gives an indication of the powerful opposition the Negroes were up against, for the Negroes and the Republicans had often been found in the same political company heretofore.

In March, 1859, the Committee on Education reported to the General Assembly on a petition signed by Isaac Rice and 338 other citizens. Although the majority of the committee found no fault with the existing school system, colored leaders may have found some encouragement in the minority report which declared that the state constitution recognized no racial distinctions ("It refers always to *men and citizens*, never to races and classes."), and that colored children deserved equal rights, "whether in the same or in separate schools." The minority on the committee therefore recommended that competent Negro students be admitted to high school and that separate schools of a lower level be made to provide equal facilities.

Quick to commend the General Assembly for refusing the petition, the *Providence Journal* asserted that local colored people had not raised the issue. It was rather the business of "newcomers and agitators," men who sought "position and influence for themselves rather than to promote the true interest of their race."

George Henry, Isaac Rice, and George Downing were not newcomers, however, and neither was Samuel Wolcott. Wolcott was a white man, a member of the Providence School Committee, who

favored equal rights for Negroes. On March 29, 1859, he published a letter in the *Journal* setting forth his position. He did not seek to destroy the colored schools but sought repeal of those laws which forced Negroes to go out of their way to attend such schools. The important thing was that Negro and white children be given the same opportunities. "I would not trample on the equal rights of the humblest citizen, white or black," he announced, "to save our whole school system from dissolution."

Feeling against the "agitators" at this point ran high, and the editors of the *Journal* did not attempt to hide their bitterness toward Wolcott, whom they accused of favoring the destruction of the whole school system "rather than that one little nigger boy should be compelled to go to the school that has been assigned to him." Another disturber of the peace, George Henry, was informed that the time had come for him to drop the issue. "You had better leave the field," warned one of the men for whom he worked, "or you will lose your bread and butter, and the d—d (sic) niggers won't thank you for it afterwards."

During the following five years the school issue in Rhode Island was obscured by the more pressing peril of the Civil War. Recognizing, however, that the war against slavery would make Northerners more conscious of their obligation toward the Negro citizen, colored leaders in the state again put a petition before the General Assembly. In 1864 the Committee on Education brought in a report showing that the existing educational system worked a great hardship on Negroes. In Providence, for example, colored students were specifically denied entrance to the high school, and they were frequently forced to travel great distances to attend the one grammar school available to them. Consequently many Negroes had been forced to the great expense of educating their children away from home. Taking these factors into account, and believing that in the last four years racial prejudice had been substantially lessened, the Committee voted unanimously that the state cease to recognize "two grades of citizens" by law and grant the petitioners' request. Whatever elation colored leaders may have felt over this action soon turned to despair, however, for the General Assembly quickly tabled the report.

The following year, when it became evident that the Assembly would accept a compromise measure guaranteeing Negroes equal facilities in separate schools, George Downing sent a petition to the governor. Reminding him that the colored people had "stood at your legis-

THE COLORED SCHOOL QUESTION.

Having said: To wit: of a father, who have his own children, in my opinion for possibly addressing you. You are now to decide whether the rights and feelings of my God-given little ones shall be cared for in your mind, or whether they shall grow up in your midst with manly and unmanly, and with dependent, degraded feelings. A great responsibility is devolved. I know that you have it in your heart to do the right thing. If the progress going on all around us in the land; by the love you cherish for your children as a parent; by the love you have for the State; by the prayer to us honest men, from an honest heart, as you would have your State relieved of its bad, hateful lingering relic; by the prayer to us honest men, from an honest heart that will be manly, that will be fully redemptive to the State, allow me most freely, most liberally to appeal to you: to all that is good, pure, and just in your nature; to extend you not to regard the monthly offerings against color which was triumphant when slavery was triumphant,—which should die with slavery. Disregard it; do in the matter, what your heart and head tell you is just. Fear not the law and cry now as usual, with a view to distant justice; it will submit to law and order in Rhode Island as a similar blatant policy established in Massachusetts under like circumstances. Believe the State of transience, expensive agitation.

We have now to see your legislators halt bounding justice for ten long years. Though every child will all this time; though every one with the conviction of being the subjects of injustice; though every subject of being treated as a single person. We have waited patiently for justice. We believe that it will be given into us now: that it has been received into this General Assembly to which to us its beautiful, elevating features.

One case is simple. Being acknowledged by the Constitution of the State as citizens and as equals, the fact of one being colored is not to be allowed in the Constitution to have any weight in judging of our rights and privileges as well as our duties, should any local authority in the State be allowed to discriminate between us and other citizens in the matter of education because of our color, simply to gratify a prejudice which existed to favor slavery? This is the question. Is not such a distinction injustice; does it not amount to a civil incorporation?

You have two reports before you. Both of them fully concede that we have just cause of complaint; that something should be done. One gives as a basis, the other a cause. We say this with no unkind feeling. Allow us to explain the reasons to enjoy superior educational facilities is within our power if we have the means and will to do so. It is with you to say whether we shall be unjustly prohibited in the State to be provided with all that is good, pure, and just in your nature; to extend you not to regard the monthly offerings against color which was triumphant when slavery was triumphant,—which should die with slavery. Disregard it; do in the matter, what your heart and head tell you is just. Fear not the law and cry now as usual, with a view to distant justice; it will submit to law and order in Rhode Island as a similar blatant policy established in Massachusetts under like circumstances. Believe the State of transience, expensive agitation.

If local authorities should not be good which under the law proposed by the majority report, and should establish the required schools, which we are now to do, whether they have or not this preferable alternative in the law will be added, simply to gratify a prejudice which existed to favor slavery? This is the question. Is not such a distinction injustice; does it not amount to a civil incorporation?

You have two reports before you. Both of them fully concede that we have just cause of complaint; that something should be done. One gives as a basis, the other a cause. We say this with no unkind feeling. Allow us to explain the reasons to enjoy superior educational facilities is within our power if we have the means and will to do so. It is with you to say whether we shall be unjustly prohibited in the State to be provided with all that is good, pure, and just in your nature; to extend you not to regard the monthly offerings against color which was triumphant when slavery was triumphant,—which should die with slavery. Disregard it; do in the matter, what your heart and head tell you is just. Fear not the law and cry now as usual, with a view to distant justice; it will submit to law and order in Rhode Island as a similar blatant policy established in Massachusetts under like circumstances. Believe the State of transience, expensive agitation.

with every expression which I will not stop to mention; and speaking of uneducated children we would have to be read annually in addition to all the others, at least five thousand dollars for principal teachers. For the colored schools, to be as good as the others, need have as good teachers as the others, who command the highest salaries. But if the colored children go into the present schools of their district the expense will be as great as the present expense. Notice that the present schools are accommodate all of them. We protest against this proposition as to tax-payers.

The Government at Washington; the Western States, which have been disagreed with think here on their own looks, are repeating them rapidly. Rhode Island is free from the danger, shall it now on the proposition of the majority proposal, let her take name by enacting for the first time in her history, a pro-slavery, black law, making a distinction among its citizens?

The Constitution of the State says that:—It shall be the duty of the General Assembly to extend to the people the advantages and opportunities of education, without regard to color. Therefore we appeal to you, in view of your constitutional obligation "to extend" to every "in so, a part of the people, the advantages and opportunities of education. We are not accused of doing; the local authorities do as they please with as I appeal in the name of education. I am identified with, they who will in every way that may be in their power, justly and otherwise, be grateful for justice at your hands.

NEWPORT, February 20, 1865.

GEO. T. DOWNING.

We, the undersigned, colored citizens of the city of Newport, having seen approved a Commission by the colored people to urge their petition in behalf of equal and unpermitted school rights, do endorse the above letter, and further protest against the majority report. It will not satisfy us.

SILAS RICKENSON,
JAMES PALMER,
THOMAS YOUNG,
CHAS. HARRIS,
JEFFERSON MORRISON,
JOHN ELLIAR,
CHAS. MELAVILLAR,
ISAAC BUCK,
BARNEY G. BRYANT,
BENJAMIN BURRILL,
COLLINS BURRILL,
ABRAHAM BURE.

George Downing and his supporters sent the above petition to the governor of Rhode Island in 1865 as part of their campaign to abolish segregated schools in the state. Copied from the original in The John Hay Library, Brown University

lative halls beseeching for justice for ten years." Downing again pointed out that a segregated school system was more expensive for the taxpayers than a democratic school system. He made it clear that the colored citizens of Rhode Island would not accept any educational system built on the "separate but equal" theory of race relations.

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

Despite this setback, the Negro leaders must have realized that their hour of victory was near, for they were rapidly picking up support in important places. The minority report of The Committee on Education in 1865 amounted to a vote of confidence in the justice of their cause. Moreover, the "Twentieth Annual Report on the Public Schools in Rhode Island," issued in 1865, gave them encouragement. This report admitted that the colored school in Bristol was hopelessly below standard. Because Negro children were said to be imitative and in need of good models to copy, and because there were not enough Negroes in Bristol to drag down the level of the public schools, the recommendation was made to abolish the colored school. This recommendation, however unenlightened the reasoning behind it, showed that the defenders of segregation were beginning to break ranks.

By 1865 it was no longer political suicide to support the Negro cause on the school issue. On February 28 Representative Weeden from Westerly delivered an impressive speech before the General Assembly, demanding that the colored citizens be given their rights. Maintaining that the argument for segregation rested on a belief in the natural inferiority of the Negro, Weeden took up the various racial theories then popular and attempted to prove that there was nothing in the Negroes' nature or physical organization which should "deprive them of their citizenship or consign them to a separate place in our statutes." Pointing out that four million Negroes would be freed by the Civil War, Weeden asserted that the school issue was not a local matter; it posed an issue of fundamental importance to the nation. Americans must decide whether the freed men were to be educated as citizens or "held in a position of caste degradation and ignorance."

Encouraged by such sentiments, the Negroes again brought their petition before the General Assembly in 1866. Dominated by the personality of Representative Weeden, the Committee on Education

at last brought in a report which asserted that segregated schools, contrary to the spirit of the state constitution, had been established "by a prejudice stronger than the constitution, and stronger than justice." The Committee, therefore, recommended that the petitioners' plea be granted and that separate schools for colored children be abolished. Complying with this report, the General Assembly, on March 7, 1866, wrote the following sentence into the statute books: "In deciding upon application for admission to any school in this State, maintained wholly or in part at the public expense, no distinction shall be made on account of the race or color of the applicant."

With the destruction of a segregated school system, the Negro in Rhode Island had won his greatest victory in the struggle for equal citizenship. It is true that the victory was gained at a time when the Civil War experience caused the tides of racial prejudices to recede. Time, however, did not win the day for the Negroes. They owed their victory to a decade of determined effort, to courageous and intelligent leaders who were convinced that freedom without equality of opportunity was meaningless, and that equality of opportunity was worth fighting for.

CHAPTER VIII

Changes in a New Century

THE second decade following the Civil War witnessed a sharp increase in the colored population in Rhode Island. In 1865 the census listed 4,087 Negroes; by 1910 this number had increased to 7,529. The state census director in 1875 was correct in attributing the growing colored population to immigration from the South and not to natural increase. He was mistaken, however, as later events have proved, when he maintained that without the aid of immigration, Negro population in the North was not self-existing, and that it was, therefore, "not philanthropy, but positive inhumanity to the race" to encourage Negroes to leave the southern states for New England. The truth of the matter was that the northern Negro was in no danger of extinction and that the prospects of life in the North were much more to be preferred than a fearful existence eked out under the reign of lynch law in the South. The majority of Negroes who emigrated to Rhode Island came from the upper South. Out of a sample of 643 adults living in Newport between 1890 and 1900, 358 came from Maryland or Virginia.

The colored population was not the only group to rapidly increase its number during this period. While thousands of Negroes were moving north, thousands of Europeans were coming west across the Atlantic. As early as 1865 the number of foreign born in Rhode Island was almost ten times as great as the number of Negroes. Although both started on the same social and economic level, the Negro had, at the outset, many obvious advantages over the European. He was an American, familiar with the language and customs of this country, and on the whole he had the benefit of a better education. In 1875, for example, the illiteracy rate of Negroes over fifteen years old was 13.3 percent as compared to 55.97 percent for the Irish and 24.32 percent for French Canadians.

Unfortunately there are no statistics available to indicate the economic progress of Rhode Island Negroes during the last half of the nineteenth century. It is probably safe to assume that the situation did not vary greatly from the pattern set in the pre-Civil War period. There were a few successful men like Downing, Henry, and Rice, but

the majority were employed as laborers and servants. This, at least, was the situation in Newport in 1903, when four ministers, one dentist, one doctor, and one public school teacher made up the colored community's contribution to the professional class. The first detailed statement of the Rhode Island Negro's economic status is to be found in the breakdown of the occupations given by the 1910 census, a sample of which is given below.

<i>Occupations</i>	<i>Total Males Employed</i>	<i>Negro Males Employed</i>	<i>Foreign-born Whites Employed</i>
Farmers	3679	27	720
Apprentices	1276	3	239
Carpenters	6152	15	3255
Machinists	8576	19	3726
Spinners (cotton)	1475	925
Weavers (cotton)	4140	1	2967
Teamsters	3546	217	1253
Stevedores	472	193	194
Mail Carriers	346	4	39
Delivery men	2833	149	889
Laborers	4317	370	2600
Police	563	3	124
Civil engineers	296	16
Clergymen	533	16	191
Dentists	250	4	33
Designers	303	1	120
Draftsmen	434	1	72
Lawyers	464	4	42
Physicians	749	4	129
Teachers	405	1	84
Janitors	930	174	343
Servants	1629	258	703
Clerical	7684	42	1225
TOTAL (including other occupations not listed) ..	180,962	3,347	79,713

The table above reveals the extent to which the Rhode Island Negro was assimilated into the urban population, and the extent to which he was employed in the less desirable occupations. His representation in the trades was conspicuously low. Out of a total of almost 15,000 males employed as carpenters and machinists in the state, only

thirty-four were Negroes. Even more significant, of 1276 apprentices, only three were Negroes. Colored workers were practically without representation in the cotton mills and filled but forty-two of 7,684 clerical positions. Only three policemen and four mail carriers in the state were Negro. Although twelve Negroes were employed in the professions as doctors, dentists, and lawyers, only one of the 3347 males employed was located as a teacher in the public schools. The one occupation in which Negroes appeared to have enjoyed an advantage was stevedoring. Most of them were located as teamsters, delivery men, laborers, janitors and servants. The situation among colored women workers was much the same. Of 2059 women employed, 1506 worked as laundresses or servants. Only 14 were located in clerical positions out of a total of 5000 women so employed in the state; and out of approximately 17,000 women employed in Rhode Island textile mills, only 36 were Negroes.

These figures taken from the 1910 census reports disclose a picture which was not substantially altered until the Second World War. The average colored worker was unskilled and poorly paid. His depressed economic situation had, of course, many social ramifications. It should have been more closely noted by the sociologist who discovered that the juvenile crime rate for Negroes in Rhode Island in 1910 was greater than that of whites, and by the health officers who pointed out that the Negro death rate in the state had been almost twice as high as that of the whites since 1855. Another significant factor to be deduced from these tables is that despite his initial advantages, the Rhode Island Negro was being outstripped by his European-born neighbor in the struggle for economic success. The reason was simple; the European immigrant was blessed with a light complexion.

Nevertheless, it must be said that the Negro in Rhode Island after the Civil War found himself living in a more friendly community than had been his lot in the past. In Westerly, for example, Frederick Douglass was practically hooted off the lecture platform before the war, and the white citizen who dared to appear in public with the Negro leader was condemned for his "abominable" behavior. In 1873 when Douglass again visited the city, he was put up at the best hotel and received courteously by everyone.

One incident, however, does not tell the story of the whole community. Spokesmen for the Negro population from the 1870's until the 1950's, like those who came before them, have been forced to

channel a great amount of their energies into the continuing battle for equal citizenship.

In 1701 the General Assembly of Rhode Island, under the title, "An Act to prevent Clandestine Marriages," declared that anyone "joining in marriage a Negro, Indian or mulatto with any white person" was to be fined two hundred dollars and that such a marriage was to be void. Although it has not been shown that anyone was ever convicted under this legislation, it remained on the statute books until 1881, and Negro leaders in the state properly regarded it as an insult to the members of the colored population. George Henry published a pamphlet in 1870 attacking the injustice of the legislation, but it was not until eleven years later that a bill to repeal the law appeared in the General Assembly. When the matter was finally brought up for debate, those speaking for repeal of the old law urged that it was "a relic of slavery" which disfigured the statute books and was contrary to the Bill of Rights and the liberal traditions of Rhode Island. Those opposed to repeal were equally articulate. They condemned the proposed legislation as an "unjust law"—unjust "because it offends the long-existing and bitter prejudices of a very large part of the community, and . . . attempts to obtain for the colored people what it is not the province of law to secure for anyone, namely—Social Equality. . . ." The bill for repeal passed the House and was referred to the Senate, where it was passed by the relatively narrow margin of eight votes. On March 23, 1881, Rhode Island recognized for the first time a marriage between a white and colored citizen.

Four years later the first civil rights law was passed in Rhode Island. According to this legislation no person was to be denied the facilities of any licensed inn, public conveyance, or licensed place of public amusement "on account of race, color or previous condition of servitude." The act also made it an offense to disqualify any citizen for jury service on account of color. The penalty for violation of the act was a fine, not to exceed one hundred dollars. The state representative who had been unwilling to lift the ban on intermarriage because he thought this was an attempt to enforce "social equality" by law was probably an indignant opponent of the civil rights measure. His fears, however, were groundless, for the Rhode Island Negro was a long way from attaining such equality at the turn of the century.

There had been progress, of course. Julius Mitchell, a Providence attorney who came to Rhode Island from South Carolina about 1900, was amazed at the equality he found here. He believed discrimination

against Negroes to be no greater than that against other minority groups, and he reported that he had been accepted in the city's best hotels and restaurants. Another newcomer to the city, however, Dr. E. H. McDonald, pastor of the Olney Street Baptist Church, found Providence more hostile to Negroes than the cities he had known in the Mid-West. He noted that Negroes were unable to live outside of the "colored sections" of town. Contrary to Mr. Mitchell's opinion, Dr. McDonald felt that Providence Negroes were afraid to enter the city's restaurants without advance assurance that they would be served, and he admitted, despite his own position of leadership in the community, that he frequently went without lunch rather than risk embarrassment in an unknown restaurant.

Perhaps Mr. Mitchell and Dr. McDonald were both right. In the early part of the twentieth century, when race riots were sweeping through many American cities, Providence undoubtedly appeared to many Negroes as a desirable place in which to live. At the same time, the attitude predominating among the white citizens of the state is probably illustrated by the experience of the directors of the Newport YMCA who were "obliged largely for social reasons, to shut out the colored people" because "they found that by admitting them, the social gatherings . . . might become semi-negro parties."

In August, 1904, the white citizens in the little town of Statesboro, Georgia, laid waste the colored section of the town, burning alive two Negroes accused of murdering a white man. Two years later violence erupted in Atlanta. Goaded into action by the inflammatory articles of a racist press, a furious mob attacked every Negro who dared to appear on the streets, destroying and looting the property of Negroes at random. This pattern of racial violence was not limited to the South, but spread throughout the North to Springfield, Illinois, Greensburg, Indiana, and many other cities.

Even in Rhode Island the latent hostility of the white community toward its colored citizens threatened to flare into violence. On the evening of July 4, 1913, an argument arose between a group of sailors and some Negroes on Newport Beach. During the ensuing fracas a shot was fired and a random bullet killed a boy in the surrounding crowd. Police captured the Negro suspected of firing the shot, but not until a mob had gathered demanding the Negro's life. According to the newspaper report, the action of the police in guarding the Negro infuriated the mob. "Bricks were hurled at the police, sticks were thrown and cries of 'Lynch him' were evident on all sides.

Women were infuriated and screeched themselves hoarse. . . . Children scurried around and brought back stones and bricks for the older ones to throw." The mob, now thousands strong, stormed the police station in Market Square and was dispersed only after the reserves had been called into service.

Happily, the orderly process of the law was not subverted in Rhode Island. Elsewhere in the nation it was a different story. During the first fourteen years of the hopeful new century, the long arm of "Judge Lynch," ranging far beyond the Mason-Dixon line, had put to death 1100 Negro citizens in America.

Desperate for some means of ending the outrages upon their people, Negro leaders took measures to organize themselves on a national scale. In June, 1905, a group of prominent men, under the leadership of W. E. B. DuBois, met at Niagara Falls, Canada, where they agreed to a series of resolutions condemning those who had unleashed racial terrorism in the South. The Niagara Movement quickly spread over the country and one of the first local branches appeared in Providence sometime in 1905, headed by two ministers, the Reverend Mr. Byron of Newport and the Reverend Mr. J. L. Davis of Providence.

On the national scene the Niagara Movement was replaced by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1910. On January 12, 1914, the original meeting of the Providence branch of the NAACP was held in the Odd Fellow's Hall on North Main Street. Twenty-three members were present, and the first officers to be elected were Dr. Julius J. Robinson as president, Miss Reberta J. Dunbar, secretary, and Mr. William P. H. Freeman, treasurer.

The establishment of the Niagara Movement and the NAACP in Rhode Island ushered in the modern era in the struggle for equal citizenship. Negro leaders recognized that they were part of a national movement, working not only to improve opportunities for the people in their own state, but also as a part of the national campaign to protest the violent examples of racial discrimination then sweeping America. In this connection, the members of the Providence branch of the NAACP worked as pioneers, when, in the summer of 1917, they staged the first protest parade held in New England. Designed to protest the terrible riots which had recently occurred in Waco, Memphis, and East St. Louis, the demonstration drew more than 1200 participants coming from the surrounding towns of Newport, New Bedford, and Fall River. The procession of men, women, and chil-

dren, marching silent behind muffled drums, filed down Fountain Street and into the Mall before thousands of spectators—a mute testimony to the crime against color in America.

In the meantime, while the NAACP was fighting to secure democracy at home, thousands of Negroes were fighting for democracy in Europe. Although Rhode Island Negroes had no military organization of their own, they were well represented in the 367th Infantry, a regiment in the famous 92nd Division, the only all-Negro division in World War I. In keeping with the tradition which went back to the revolution, the soldiers from Rhode Island earned honor in the war, and the colors of their regiment were decorated by the French high command.

One day in September, 1918, on the St. Die sector of the western front, the Germans scattered a circular behind the lines of the 92nd Division in the hope of inducing the Negro troops to lay down their arms. Emphasizing the extent of racial prejudice in America, the circular urged the soldiers not to waste their lives fighting for a "democracy" in which they could aspire to be no better than "second-class citizens."

Although the soldiers were not taken in by the German propaganda, many of them may have pondered it after the war, when they had again taken up their lives on this side of the Atlantic. For they discovered that although they had braved equally the risk of death in battle, victory in the struggle for equal citizenship at home remained elusive.

CHAPTER IX

The Continuing Struggle

BY the first decade of this century the Negro population in a large part of America had become urbanized. Recognizing that this shift in the traditional population pattern created a new set of social and economic problems, Negro leaders meeting in New York in 1910 organized the National Urban League. In the years that followed, branches of the Urban League sprang up in many of the larger cities throughout the nation. The purpose of the League was to assist Negroes with such problems of city living as employment and housing to the end that they might be fully integrated into the life of their community.

In the summer of 1939 a landmark was passed in the history of the Negro in Rhode Island with the founding of the Providence Urban League. Organized on an inter-racial basis, the League pledged itself to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of Negroes and to promote inter-racial understanding and co-operation in Providence. The first board meeting was attended in August 1939 by twenty-seven interested Negro and white citizens. In September of the following year, with the appointment of James N. Williams as Executive Secretary, the permanent offices of the Providence Urban League were opened on Westminster Street.

Rhode Island was still struggling to pull herself out of the depression in 1940. Although economic conditions of the Negroes were usually depressed even in good times, the years from 1930 until 1940 were especially hard, for Negroes were the first to be fired in lean years and the last to be reemployed when business began to gain.

Anyone who thinks that time unaided heals all social ills should ponder the census reports for Rhode Island from 1900 until 1940. During this period of almost half a century Negroes in the state made practically no progress in the economic sphere. Although the four census reports make use of different categories of employment, the general pattern is clear. In 1910 approximately forty per cent of all Negroes employed were working as teamsters, laborers, janitors, servants or delivery men. With the exception of a single employee, Negroes were not represented in the skilled labor force in the state's

textile industries. A total of less than four per cent of all Negroes employed were working as skilled mechanics or in clerical positions. The report for 1920 shows no significant progress except in textiles where Negroes now held 124 jobs (3.4 per cent of the Negro working force). As the nation's prosperity began to fade, however, this gain was quickly cut back, so that by 1930 only sixty-seven skilled or semi-skilled workers were employed in textiles. By 1930 approximately sixty per cent of all male Negro workers were listed as unskilled laborers of one type or another. And by 1940, fifty-eight per cent of all Negro workers in the state were still employed as laborers, janitors or watchmen. In fact, the statistics indicate that menial jobs were almost solely in the province of Negroes. Of the total number of males employed in 1940, only thirteen per cent held jobs as laborers, domestics, janitors, watchmen, etc., while sixty-two per cent of all Negro males were employed in one of these categories. With respect to female labor the contrast is even more striking. Over eighty-nine per cent of all Negro women employed, as compared to nineteen per cent of the total female labor force, were engaged as domestics or charwomen.

In April, 1941, the General Assembly authorized the creation of a commission to study the employment problems of the Negro in Rhode Island. The report of this commission, published in May, 1943, provides a valuable source of information about the economic condition of the colored community in the state. It is based on a study of 1721 Negroes representing 358 families distributed throughout the state, a sample of more than ten per cent of Rhode Island's Negro population at that time.

One of the myths which the commission attempted to dispel was that meager employment opportunities for the Negro citizen are usually a reflection of his inferior educational background and training. Of those included in the survey, over ten per cent had some college training, over thirty-five per cent had a high school education or better, and over eighty-six per cent had better than eight years of formal schooling. In other words, Negroes in the state appeared to have taken advantage of their educational opportunities. The commission also discovered a grave discrepancy between the kind of jobs for which Negroes were trained and the jobs they actually held. Of fifty-eight persons claiming professional training, twenty-six were unemployed or working in unskilled capacities; only fourteen of forty-one persons with clerical training actually held clerical jobs. Despite the fact that the national defense effort demanded the most efficient use of

the labor force, over eighty-three per cent of the Negroes included in this study were employed as unskilled labor. Reflecting this situation, Negro income was found to be substantially lower than that of other workers. The average weekly earning for industrial workers in the state in 1942 was \$33.43; the average wage for the Negroes covered by this study was \$19.85.

One important aspect of this study of Negro employment involved the attitude of Negroes toward their economic opportunities in the state. Members of 358 families were asked to account for the difficulties the colored worker faced in securing satisfactory employment. In almost every interview the words "racial discrimination" or "they won't hire Negroes" came up again and again. The comments varied from a bitter comparison of Rhode Island with Mississippi to the ironic confession of a Negro housewife who admitted that her husband had no difficulty about employment because he "passed as an Italian." These and similar anecdotes (the high school honor graduate who was forced to scrub floors while her classmates took pleasant office jobs) suggest the story behind the statistics—a story which cannot be told except in terms of personal frustration and humiliation.

Beginning in 1942 the Providence Urban League geared its organization to mobilize Negroes for greater participation in the war effort. Working in close cooperation with the United States Employment Service for Rhode Island, the League assisted in placing 1525 Negro workers in jobs in 1942. Although over eighty per cent of these placements were in the unskilled labor field, it was apparent that the defense industries were beginning to open new areas to Negro employment.

In 1943 the Providence Urban League was advised that Negro workers in Providence shipyards were being discriminated against by the International Boilermakers Union. Cooperating with the NAACP the League investigated these complaints and the two organizations were successful in securing an injunction against the union. The case attracted national attention because it marked the first time that this union's policy of segregation had been successfully challenged.

Throughout the war years all of those connected with the Urban League worked diligently for broader employment opportunities for Negroes in the state. Although considerable progress was made in some areas (the Rhode Island Hospital agreed to include Negroes in its training program in 1944), the struggle was far from won. Remarkable the fact that progress had been made, the secretary of the

League in his annual report for 1946 took pains to point out that "Ignorance prevails in the community against regarding the true state of race relations and the status of minority groups."

Perhaps the most important function of the local branches of the NAACP and Urban League in the last ten years has been their work in keeping the public informed of the progress and problems of the Negro community.

In April 1948, for example, an attempt was made to set aside separate lavatory facilities for Negro and white workers at Lincoln Downs race track. This was an obvious attempt on the part of employees from the South to put "Jim Crow" to work in Rhode Island. It was challenged almost immediately. Providence's weekly Negro newspaper, the *Chronicle*, printed a bitter editorial entitled "Lincoln Downs Georgia." At the same time the Urban League and the NAACP lodged a formal protest with the State Racing Commission. As a result, the "white" and "colored" signs at the track quickly disappeared. But this happy consequence came about only after the aggressive work of watchdog organizations like the *Chronicle*, the Urban League and the NAACP.

One of the most vexatious stumbling blocks on the way to mutual understanding between Negro and white citizens has been the fact that over the years a substantial number of Americans have been persuaded by one or more of the many myths which are supposed to describe the real character of the Negro people. Although careful investigations in recent years have destroyed the scientific basis of all of the many alleged natural psychological differences between the "races," this fact has not yet penetrated the public mind. Among the toughest myths to banish has been that of the Negro as a "criminal type." The truth of the matter is, of course, that Negroes are no more inclined to crime than any other people. However, largely because of poor police methods and inaccurate newspaper reporting, the public is frequently led to believe that the words "Negro" and "crime" are synonymous.

An example taken from recent local history will make this point clearer. In the summer of 1945 a wave of robberies and assaults swept over Providence. In several of these cases Negroes were alleged to have been the assailants, and this fact was prominently reported in the local press. The result was a growing tendency among people in Providence to blame their colored neighbors for something which a small group of Negroes may or may not have done. Obviously this

kind of reporting hurt the cause of Negro-white relationships in the state, and it was vigorously criticized on this account by the Urban League.

Some two years later an incident occurred which showed this criticism to be fully justified. In July 1947 the *Providence Journal* printed an article headlined "SIX NEGROES SLUG WOMAN, ROB MAN." The article went on to describe the attack in some detail, and the assailants were described as six Negro youths between seventeen and twenty-one years of age. After the Urban League protested that Negroes were being blamed for this incident without adequate supporting evidence, the police re-examined the two principals in the case. Under close questioning the man and woman concerned admitted that the whole story was a hoax. This was duly reported to the press and the truthful version of the affair was printed the next day.

Once again a serious blow to the prestige of the colored community in the state was narrowly averted—but only because an aggressive organization like the Urban League insisted upon it.

The story that has been told in these pages is a part of history. It is a story of a community within a community—a story of the attempts of one part of the population to engage on a more equitable basis in the pursuit of happiness. This is not to suggest, however, that the struggle is something isolated in the past. For it goes on today as it did a century ago.

Because of the absence of racial violence in Rhode Island and the fact that outward manifestations of discrimination are not glaringly apparent, there is a tendency on the part of some to think of the "Negro problem" as the peculiar property of the South or of Northern cities like Chicago with huge Negro populations. In truth, however, what is referred to as the "Negro problem" is an American problem and a national problem. Victory in the struggle for equal rights for Negro citizens is just as necessary and important in Rhode Island today as it is in Alabama, Georgia or any other state.

It is true that the Negro community in Rhode Island is relatively small. It is true that Negroes in Rhode Island are allowed to make a better life for themselves than in most other states. But it is also true that in Rhode Island today Negro citizens are confronted with the same ugly conditions which in other parts of the country have erupted in racial violence.

Take, for example, the problem of Negro housing (a problem which in recent years helped to bring about the frightening race riots

in Cicero, Illinois). In 1950 ninety-five per cent of Providence's Negro population was located within thirteen of the city's thirty-seven census tracts. Moreover, a special survey conducted by the Bureau of Census in 1950 indicated that over seventy-three per cent of all dwellings occupied by non-whites in the city were sub-standard (characterized by general dilapidation, lack of flush toilet, bath or hot running water). Although precise figures are not available, it appears that the average rent paid by Negro tenants for this kind of housing is almost identical with the average rent for the city as a whole.

If anything, the housing situation for Negroes in Rhode Island has become more serious over the last ten years. Between 1940 and 1950 the non-white population in Providence increased from 6,388 to 8,304. Approximately seventy-five per cent of this 2,000 person increase has taken place in the Camp Street area, a district already heavily populated by Negroes and characterized by sub-standard dwellings. This picture of a growing Negro population in Providence makes it clear that the pressure for improved housing facilities open to colored occupancy will continue to rise in the immediate future.

The pattern of segregation existing in Providence with respect to private housing for Negro citizens is also followed in the city's public housing projects. In a survey conducted by the Urban League in 1952, it was discovered that 180 Negro families were living in Providence's four public housing projects. Although the Housing Authority has denied that a policy of segregation was followed, the League discovered that in one project there were no Negro tenants, while a second project was almost exclusively (110 out of 118 units) occupied by Negroes. With respect to each of the remaining two projects, the survey concluded that "certain wings of the project have been reserved solely for Negro occupants."

Now it is obvious that segregation in Providence is not protected by law, for Rhode Island has one of the most liberal anti-discrimination laws in the country. It appears equally obvious that the threat of violence is not an important factor here in keeping the non-white population within the bounds of segregation. To understand why segregation exists in this state, it is necessary to appreciate the ambivalent attitude of the average citizen toward the problem. In a recent survey of opinion, representatives from 228 families in a typical middle class residential district in Providence were asked to express themselves on the problem of Negro Housing. Over eighty per cent of those interviewed thought that something should be done to improve the

poor housing conditions of colored families, but approximately half of these same people admitted that they and their neighbors would object to having Negro families move into their own neighborhood.

It can be said with some assurance that this equivocal attitude probably represents the public opinion not only in Rhode Island but also throughout the country in those areas where Negro and white citizens are supposed to be living together in harmony. In Rhode Island, at least, the principal enemy for those who want to push on with the struggle for equal citizenship is not the ignorant vigilante or the hooded klansman but the forces of apathy and apprehension in the public mind.

It is a long time in years from 1696, when the brig *Seaflower* sold its cargo of slaves in Newport, to the establishment of the Rhode Island Commission Against Discrimination in 1952. It is a long time in lives from the little band of Negroes who met to organize the African Union Society in 1780, to the professionally trained staff of the Providence Urban League. Yet the same ideal which inspired Moses Brown and Newport Gardner to labor for the "elevation of the people of color" in the eighteenth century is today kept alive by those who are fighting to abolish discrimination in housing and industry. Great progress has been made, but not without struggle. This struggle continues; it will always enlist the support of those who believe that there can be no middle ground between slavery and citizenship.

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