Rhode Island Women: Profiles of Changing Social Values

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by Sharon Hartman Strom

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RHODE ISLAND COMMITTEE FOR THE HUMANITIES

THE RHODE ISLAND COMMITTEE FOR THE HUMANITIES
86 WEYBOSSET STREET PROVIDENCE 02903
TELEPHONE 401-521-6150

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Introduction

At a recent symposium on the "Evolution of the American Woman" at the Library of Congress, Margaret Mead said that American women throughout our history have been independent, competent, efficient, and willing to stand on their own feet. These traits have characterized Rhode Island women from the Ocean State's days as an outpost of religious freedom to the troubling times of the 1970's.

The Colonial and Revolutionary Years

One of Rhode Island's first heroines was Mary Barrett Dyer. In 1633 she married a fellow Puritan in London and soon left for Massachusetts with her family. A follower of Puritan maverick Anne Hutchinson, Mary Dyer walked out of the Boston Puritan church arm in arm with Hutchinson on the day she was excommunicated. The Dyers were also excommunicated and banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony. They settled in Newport. On a trip to England with Roger Williams in 1652 Mary was converted to Quakerism and spent the next eight years attempting to achieve religious tolerance for her faith in the New England colonies. She was expelled from New Haven and imprisoned in Boston, where Quakerism was a crime punishable by death. She returned to Boston twice more to "look the bloody laws in the face." In 1660 she was sentenced to be hanged and went to the gallows upholding her faith: "In obedience to the will of the Lord I came," she said, "and in His will I abide faithful to the death."

All of the early American colonies were chronically short of labor, and in the eighteenth century women were pressed into every occupation. They delivered most of the babies, argued cases in court, ran taverns and boarding houses, and as widows often took over their husbands' businesses. Several of these widows were known throughout the colonies for their expertise. Sarah Updike Goddard of Providence and her son William began the first paper in the city, the Providence *Gazette and Country Journal,* with an initial investment of 300 pounds. When William Goddard moved to New York, Sarah Goddard and her daughter Mary edited and

printed the *Gazette* until William sold the Providence printing shop —over Sarah's objections—in 1768. During the Revolution Mary Goddard became the first postmistress in the United States.

Sarah Updike Goddard and her daughter Mary were ardent supporters of the American patriot cause, and hundreds of other women in Rhode Island supported the Revolution. In 1766 some Rhode Island women organized the Daughters of Liberty in Newport and Providence to boycott British goods until the Stamp Act was repealed. Since women were excluded from military service, most made their contributions to the cause by taking over the labors of men. Anna Aldrich cared for her children and "during the summer of 1777 . . . hoed corn and potatoes, raked hay, pulled flax, milked cows, made butter and cheese, mended the fences on the farm, raised three or four hundred weight of pork, fatted a 'beef creature,' and did the work on the farm generally—whatever her husband would have done had he been at home."

Women in the Nineteenth Century: Exceptions and The Rule

Many Rhode Island women in the nineteenth century continued to be known in their communities for their abilities and brave spirits. In 1833 Elleanor Eldridge, daughter of an Indian mother and a former slave father, successfully argued the case of her brother George in Providence court. She had no formal schooling or legal education but had acquired $4,000 worth of property holdings upon her death in 1840.

Idawalley Zoradia Lewis took over her father's duties as lighthouse keeper on Lime Rock in Newport harbor after he suffered a stroke in the 1850's. Each day she strengthened her arms as she rowed her sister and brothers to the mainland to school. In 1859 she made her first rescue when she plucked four men out of the waves after their boat capsized. Although she rescued more than half a dozen others and became known from coast to coast, the federal government did not make her the official lighthouse keeper of Lime Rock until 1879.

Annie Smith Peck attended Dr. Stockbridge's School for Young Ladies in Providence and graduated from Rhode Island State Normal School in 1872. Unhappy as a high school teacher, she decided to enroll at the University of Michigan, where she studied

Greek and received high honors; later she taught Latin at Smith College. But her real love was mountain climbing. In 1895 she climbed the Matterhorn and was the first person—male or female—to ascend several peaks in South America. When she reached the top of Mount Huascaran in Peru she planted a "Votes for Women" flag and always considered her mountain climbing a means of " 'helping the cause' by doing what one woman might to show the equality of the sexes."

But these women were exceptions. The position of most women in the nineteenth century became more and more difficult as the opportunities of the colonial period disappeared. Male physicians drove women out of the medical field by professionalizing medicine and closing medical schools to women. Male lawyers did the same. Victorian culture demanded that women stay at home, nurture their children, and wear bone-crushing corsets and cumbersome dresses.

Moreover, the distance between the middle and working classes widened in the nineteenth century, and women who were forced to earn a living found that their tiny salaries would not permit them to lead the lives of proper ladies. The Rhode Island Report of Industrial Statistics in 1889 found that most employed women still worked as domestic servants, cotton mill operatives and woolen mill workers. Their average wage was $5.51 a week. More than 90% contributed their earnings to their families and considered their incomes crucial in the purchase of food, housing and fuel. Women could expect to earn from one-third to one-half as much as men for the same work. Children, who could enter the mills at the age of 10, were paid even less. Women, who had no representation in the state government, understood their exploitation but could do little about it. As one woman weaver said: "We see with sorrow children employed that are almost babies, the greed of the corporations setting aside all thought of the terrible effects of their system . . . In all branches of trade women are not paid equal pay for equal work . . . After working all day many women stay up late at night to do cleaning and washing. There is no denying the fact that the conditions are growing harder each year."

Wages in the mills remained largely stationary in the nineteenth century as more and more immigrants—first the British, then the Irish, the Italians, Eastern Europeans, French Candadians and Portuguese came to provide an ever increasing supply of cheap

labor. Many a Rhode Island grandmother should point with pride to the endurance and stamina she displayed in her years in the mills.

Wages for professional women workers, who comprised about 5% of the total female work force in 1890, were not much higher. Stenographers, bookkeepers and clerks could expect to earn the most, between $7.00 and $11.00 a week, but these wages were still not high enough to support a person living alone or providing for others. Teachers were among the most underpaid female workers of the nineteenth century; since this occupation was one of the only respectable jobs available to middle class women it was flooded with applicants. The average teacher in Rhode Island in 1890 earned about $6.30 a week, just slightly more than the average factory worker. As late as the 1920's male high school teachers in Providence earned almost $300 to $400 a year more than their female counterparts and in most communities women teachers lost their jobs when they married. The Woonsocket School Committee's fiat was typical: "Should a female teacher marry, her place shall thereupon become vacant."

Women had few resources with which to fight unequal wages and oppressive working conditions. Most women worked between the ages of 15 and 25 and then left the job market for marriage. Although they often went on strike they usually failed because they were easily replaced and were not paid enough to establish an adequate strike fund. Nonetheless, women factory workers in Pawtucket were the first in the nation ever to go on strike, in 1824, in protest against wage cuts and longer working hours. There were nine strikes in the Rhode Island textile industry in 1889; every one failed. Women found that unions were run by men and were not interested in meeting women's needs or making issues of their demands. When the Knights of Labor was organized in Rhode Island in 1885, three thousand women joined in the hope of getting some assistance: "Finding, however, that they were receiving no benefits and could render but little if any assistance in the struggle for increased wages, they took but little interest in the meetings, seldom attending them, and finally many absented themselves altogether." The major unions in Rhode Island have continued to be largely uninterested in working women's needs to the present day.

Social reformers and government agencies did become interested in the plight of working women and children, who were

often lumped together in factory legislation and minimum wage laws. In 1893 the state legislature raised the legal working age of children from 10 to 12 and appointed two factory inspectors—one of whom was to be a woman—to investigate working conditions, wages and hours in Rhode Island industries. As late as 1922, however, the legal work week in Rhode Island was still 54 hours; in 1923 it became 48 hours for women and minors.

Changes in the Lives of Middle Class Women

The nineteenth century was a time of great paradox for women. While working class women were being exploited in mills and ladies were confined to the home, more and more women were receiving educations, learning to control the size of their families, and joining organizations of every kind. In communities throughout Rhode Island middle and upper class women organized to end prostitution, care for the poor, promote temperance, and raise the age of consent; the age of consent was 10 years in 1889, was raised to 14 that year, and to 16 in 1894. Women agitated to improve conditions for female prisoners and succeeded in getting the first police matron in the country hired in Providence in 1881.

By the 1890's the laws were still a patchwork of some rights gained and numerous inequities. With the exception of being able to vote for members of their local school committees, women did not have the franchise in Rhode Island. Attempting to procure an abortion was punishable by imprisonment for from one to seven years. Women were forbidden to buy liquor in Rhode Island or be "drunk on the premises." Any mother who attempted to conceal the birth of a bastard child could be imprisoned for ten months or fined $500. A wife could not do business on her own account or be legally bound by any contract. However, married women had obtained control over their property and earnings.

As the heiresses to substantial estates, some Rhode Island women used their fortunes to assist the people of the state. Betsey Williams, a descendent of Roger Williams, left the city of Providence 100 acres of land, which became the heart of Roger Williams Park, the largest municipal park in Rhode Island. Caroline Hazard, greatgranddaughter of the founder of the Peacedale Woolen Mills, was active in welfare work for mill children as a young woman and continued the family tradition of endowing the community of

Peacedale with support for its public buildings after she became the president of Wellesley.

By the late nineteenth century important changes were occuring in the quality of education for women in Rhode Island that would have a dramatic effect on the consciousness of middle and upper class women. When a public high school was approved by the City Council of Providence in 1839 it was open to both boys and girls, but there were three separate departments: one for boys not preparing to enter college; a classical course for boys going to college; and a girls' department, offering ". . . a finished education for women." In the 1880's an informal movement began to open Brown University to women, at that time the only university in the state. Sarah E. Doyle, principal of the Girls' High School of Providence, arranged for four young women to take the classical course at Providence High School and in 1887 they petitioned for admission to Brown. They were turned down. However, by 1891 prominent women of Providence and sympathetic male administrators at Brown succeeded in establishing a "Women's College" at Brown, and in 1892 all the university degrees and graduate courses were open to women. Rhode Island State College, a public institution of higher learning, was open to women from the beginning and in 1894 the first women graduated from both Brown and Rhode Island State.

Feminist Stirrings

Like feminists in other parts of the country, Rhode Island women largely focused on obtaining the right to vote as a means of gaining power. The Rhode Island Woman Suffrage Association was founded in 1868 and from 1870 to 1899 Elizabeth Buffam Chace was its president. Born in Providence to a wealthy Quaker family whose home was a station on the underground railroad, Elizabeth Chace was first an active antislavery worker. Like many other women reformers of her generation she saw a direct connection between the oppression of Afro-Americans and women. In 1877 she resigned from the Rhode Island Woman's Club because of its refusal to admit a black woman. Afro-American women organized their own clubs and in 1913 the Rhode Island Union of Colored Women's Clubs, with Mary E. Jackson of Providence as president, endorsed woman suffrage. The Union was the only large group of club women in Rhode Island to endorse votes for women until 1920.

The Rhode Island suffrage movement began in the 1870's with the highest of hopes: "The records show a remarkable degree of energy, zeal and activity, in this new undertaking; all inexperienced as the women were, in Parlimentary proceedings. They were inspired by an earnest purpose and a high sense of duty. There was . . . a strong faith in the early triumph of the principles they advocated. They could not believe that Rhode Island men could long disregard the conscientious appeals for justice of the wives, mothers and daughters of the State. And they thought that the wise and good among Rhode Island women, would surely join their ranks, when they understood the principles on which the Association was founded. This faith stamped itself on all their proceedings, one of the two women who started the movement, being heard to say, 'In five years, women will vote in Rhode Island.' "

Of course these early expectations were naive. The struggle for the vote in Rhode Island would last for fifty years, and thousands of women would lend their efforts to the cause before it triumphed. In the early years suffragists presented petitions to the legislature, appeared before hearings on Capitol Hill, and gave lectures throughout the state. But the suffrage cause was dealt a dramatic setback in 1887 when a state referendum to amend the constitution and give women the vote failed by a margin of more than three to one.

It was left to a new generation of women, largely those who graduated from college in the nineties and the first years of the twentieth century, to produce the tactics and determination that would lead to a successful suffrage movement. Sara MacCormack Algeo of Barrington was a typical new-line suffragist. She graduated from Boston University, taught school, went to Europe with a friend, married, and then received a Master's degree in sociology from Brown in 1911. Though she was asked to stay on for a Ph.D. she declined in order to devote herself on a full time basis to the suffrage cause and then the Equal Rights Amendment. To women who used household responsibilities as an excuse for not joining the cause she argued, "Housework and bridge carried to excess can prove deadly opiates to the feminine intellect." Between 1910 and 1915 suffragists all over the country launched ever more aggressive tactics to push for the vote for women. They lectured in the streets, then unheard of for respectable women, marched in huge parades, sold the suffrage newspaper on street corners, and

worked to defeat political candidates opposed to woman suffrage. In 1915 Ingeborg Kinstedt and Maria Kindberg set off from Providence to San Francisco by automobile as a publicity stunt to attract attention to the suffrage cause. The Providence *Journal* reported that Kinstedt, who was the mechanic, ". . . changed tires twelve times during the journey. She tightened screws, cleaned spark plugs, oiled the engine, and repaired broken connections . . . Once the tools were stolen, and meeting with a blow-out twenty miles from the nearest garage, she managed to change tires without a jack or screw driver."

The assertive new tactics of the suffragists worked; in 1917 women in Rhode Island were given the right to vote for presidential electors. In 1918 both the Democratic and Republican parties put suffrage planks in their state platforms, and when the nineteenth amendment was voted on in Congress, the entire Rhode Island delegation voted in favor. The Rhode Island legislature ratified the amendment on January 6, 1920.

Women in Rhode Island after 1920

The aftermath of the suffrage movement in Rhode Island was largely disappointing, as it was elsewhere in the country. A small percentage of suffragists stayed in feminist organizations like the Rhode Island Women's Party, which worked, unsuccessfully, for the passage of an Equal Rights Amendment. It had faded into oblivion by the 1930's. The League of Women Voters, which took the place of the Rhode Island Woman Suffrage Association, largely engaged in educational work, not feminist activity. Political parties quickly caught on to the fact that women voters did not on the average vote much differently than men. A Women's Bureau Report of the early 1920's reported that women workers had lost ground during World War I because of inflation, and the mills, the largest employer of women in Rhode Island, found themselves in a long-lasting depression. Secretarial work soon met the fate of teaching in the nineteenth century; by the 1930's there were so many eligible clerical workers that their salaries were about the same as those for factory workers. The number of married women workers increased substantially during World War II and has continued to grow. But like their counterparts throughout the country, Rhode Island women are likely to earn half as much as men for equivalent work, and there is every evidence that unemployment and poverty among fe-

male heads of households has increased substantially in the last few years. But as current day women in Rhode Island seeking to make changes in women's lives, we can look backward for inspiration to a rich history made by proud, competent, and enduring women.

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The author would like to acknowledge with thanks the assistance of the Rhode Island Historical Society, and in particular Nancy F. Chudacoff, for helping to locate some of the materials used in this study. One quickly learns, in looking through manuscripts and printed records, that native-born white women, like their male counterparts, are far more adequately represented in our historical archives than Native-Americans, Afro-Americans and immigrants. If you have any diaries, letters, records or accounts pertaining to the history of these women in Rhode Island, consider donating them to an historical repository in Rhode Island.

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