

# European Invasion

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**T**HE constant arrival of immigrants to Rhode Island in the nineteenth century contributed significantly to the rapid industrial expansion and growing wealth of the state. However, the impact of the newcomers, alien to the Anglo-Saxon Protestants who held the social, economic, and political leadership, created difficult problems and had important and lasting effects.

During the 1830's Rhode Island became the home of numerous Irish people escaping from economic and political oppression. When the failure of the potato crop in Ireland, 1846, reduced the peasants to starvation, the ties that held them to the land were broken. Over a million Irish fled to America, the most destitute enduring the voyage in the holds of empty fishing boats and lumber vessels. Large numbers of these new arrivals joined their countrymen in Rhode Island. In 1850 16% of Rhode Island's 147,500 residents were foreigners, and 70% of the newcomers were Irish. Employed at first in jobs along the waterfront and in the construction of canals, railroads, and factories, the Irish soon entered the mills and became the most important source of labor for the growing cotton industry. The rise in the number of factory workers from approximately 16,500 in 1840 to over 32,000 twenty years later was to a large extent made possible by the immigrants from Ireland.

After 1860 the Irish no longer came in large numbers, but an additional source of labor for the postwar industrial boom was provided by the French Canadians. Forced by rising population to supplement the meager earnings from their few acres, Quebec farmers sought employment in the factories of New England. Some were transients, but most of those entering Rhode Island became permanent residents and supplied the operatives for the mills of the Pawtuxet and Blackstone valleys.

Industrialization and immigration were accompanied by the rapid growth of cities. In 1860 slightly over one-third of Rhode Island's citizens lived in rural areas; by 1880 their number was reduced to 18%. During the same twenty-year period, 1860-80, the population rose from 174,600 to 276,500. In 1875 one-half the people in the state were either born abroad or had foreign parents.

After 1890 the French Canadians were superseded by the Italians as the leading immigrant group entering Rhode Island. Peasants from the Neapolitan provinces, whose tiny patches of land dwindled as the birth rate rose and who were oppressed by burdensome taxes, emigrated to America. In Rhode Island they were employed at the unskilled work formerly done by the earlier arrivals or took up farms abandoned by the Yankees.

Although the Irish, French Canadians, and Italians were the largest immigrant groups, other nationalities contributed to the cosmopolitan population. Prominent in all the industrial centers were the English, who were almost half as numerous as the Irish in Providence, 1890. Germans ranked third in the foreign-born population of Newport and Providence, and Scots and Swedes were also numerous. Other representatives of the "new immigration" (besides the Italians) were the Portuguese from the Azores and the Cape Verde Islands, the Russian Jews, and the Armenians. In 1875 the *Journal* noted that the Chinaman "in alpaca coat and flowing pantaloons" had arrived in Providence.

By 1910, as the great period of migration drew to a close, the Anglo-Saxon Protestants were a small minority in the total population of 543,000. Almost seven out of every ten people in the state were of foreign descent.

The industrial expansion, however, had been initiated and, for the most part, managed by native Rhode Island entrepreneurs. The new arrivals, often illiterate and



unfamiliar with English, were obliged to work where they could and to accept the wages offered. Those dissatisfied with \$340 per year (the average paid by the Harris Company in 1889) and the twelve-hour day could easily be replaced. The columns of the *Providence Journal* reveal the misery of large numbers of peasants thrust into a ruthlessly competitive industrial society. The extent of Irish suffering in a winter of unemployment "comes into sharp relief against the pitiful attempt to keep up appearances." Their dwellings "[are] absolutely bare of comfortable things, rooms into which the snow sifts as if in mockery of the feeble fire."<sup>1</sup> As a result of the failure of the Bristol Rubber Works, many of the operatives were unable to pay for their food or shelter during the winter of 1887-88.

The concentration of large numbers of immigrants created new problems. In 1869 Rhode Island had the highest illiteracy rate north of the Mason-Dixon Line,<sup>2</sup> and in Providence the death rate was higher than average.<sup>3</sup>

If there was suffering, there was also opportunity. Thomas Davis, a native of Kilkenny, Ireland, entered the jewelry business and was one of the state's most articulate opponents of slavery in the 1850's. Aram J. Pothier, a French Canadian, became one of Rhode Island's leading industrialists, represented Woonsocket in the General Assembly, and later served as governor (1909-15 and 1925-28). Patrick J. McCarthy, whose parents had died on an immigrant ship, graduated from Harvard Law School in 1880. Among the early Irish-Americans to achieve eminence as lawyers were Charles E. Gorman, a leader in the attempt to broaden the suffrage and Edwin D. McGuinness, the first Catholic to be nominated for state office, 1887. These and many others of foreign birth and ancestry made significant contributions to Rhode Island.

In general, however, everything seemed to emphasize the differences between the Yankees and the immigrants. The foreign workingmen had little in common with their employers, and the natives in the country towns looked suspiciously on the industrial centers teeming with aliens. Conservative Protestants were alarmed lest government be taken over by Catholics, laborers, and aggressive Irishmen. During the Dorr Rebellion, 1841-42, posters distributed by the Whigs warned that the extension of the suffrage would place the institutions of the state under the control of the Pope. Henry B. Anthony, editor of the *Providence Journal* and a

<sup>1</sup> *The Providence Journal*, January 30, 1877.

<sup>2</sup> *The Evening Telegram*, April 24, 1889.

<sup>3</sup> *The Providence Journal*, November 17, 1879.





leading spokesman for law and order, stated the theme he was to repeat for forty years: that the farmers who marched to rescue the legal government when Dorr made his last effort were the most trustworthy guardians of democracy.<sup>4</sup> The Constitution of 1842 reflected the thinking of conservative Rhode Islanders.<sup>5</sup> Their attachment to the principles of limited suffrage and faith in the rural legislator – an inheritance from colonial days – was strengthened by Dorr's forcible attempt to broaden the suffrage and also by the influx of Irish immigrants.

The rapid expansion of industry after the Civil War, accompanied by the arrival of more immigrants, the growth of the cities, and rural decline, gave new significance to the conservative view that limited suffrage and the political ascendancy of the country towns were essential to the maintenance of stable institutions and orderly government.



Henry B. Anthony

In the years following the Civil War, Anthony, who had become United States Senator in 1858, established his leadership in the dominant Republican party. The influential editor did not achieve power unchallenged. In 1864 he was reelected to the Senate after a bitter controversy with Governor James Y. Smith. Thomas Davis (see above) accused Anthony of employing "a corps of subterranean friends, ready, adroit, and unscrupulous . . ." while simultaneously appealing to serious-minded citizens through the columns of the *Journal*.<sup>6</sup> The Senator retaliated with a statement that Davis belonged "to that class of citizens . . . who came upon us uninvited, and upon whose departure there is no restraint."<sup>7</sup>

As the party in power after the Civil War, the Republicans, who inherited conservative Whig principles and the Know-Nothing prejudice against foreigners, became increasingly identified with opposition to universal suffrage. Yankees among the Democrats tended towards the same point of view, but by the mid-eighties the Irish were rapidly becoming the most numerous element in the party. That reform could be delayed so long was due mainly to the efforts of Senator Anthony and his political ally Charles R. Brayton, who managed the Republican organization in the state. Brayton was able to take advantage of the increasingly unrepresentative legislature by cultivating the loyalty of the political leaders in the small towns. His system also included the judicious purchase of votes in both city and country. Although there were complaints about these methods, the Republicans could count on the support of manufacturers who regarded the protective tariff as essential to their prosperity, and of conservatives who feared government by irresponsible Irishmen. General Brayton usually supported candidates for Congress who had the respect of the business community. Among them was Nelson W. Aldrich, champion of protection, who was elected to the House of Representatives, 1878, and entered the Senate, 1881, following the death of General Burnside.

By the 1880's the naturalized citizens were increasingly aware of their civil disabilities. At that time native Rhode Islanders who believed in the principle of democracy joined leaders representing those of foreign birth and ancestry to form the Equal Rights Association. The campaign for equal suffrage gained strength from accompanying demands for a ten-hour law to protect the factory workers.

The Republicans also faced criticism from the advocates of prohibition within their own party. Although General Brayton and the politicians found the saloon-

<sup>4</sup> *The Providence Journal*, October 22, 1842.

<sup>5</sup> The Constitution of 1842 provided that citizens owning real estate in the value of \$134 could vote for all civil officers and on all issues. Native-born citizens were exempt from the property qualification if they had lived in the state two years, registered annually, and paid a poll tax of \$1. Registry voters could not vote for the city council in Providence or upon any proposal for raising or appropriating funds. These provisions disfranchised the majority of the urban laborers. Rural control of the legislature was secured by assigning towns and cities a specific number of representatives, a system which gave the advantage to the country towns.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Davis, *Rhode Island Politics and Journalism, a Letter from Thomas Davis to Hon. Henry B. Anthony, U. S. Senator* (1866), p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.



keepers, many of whom were Irish, valuable friends, high-minded citizens deplored the evil of drunkenness. The Republican legislature, anxious to placate the temperance faction, passed a prohibitory amendment to the constitution which was to be submitted to the people, April 1886. The dispute over the influence of the liquor interest on the attorney general resulted in a personal feud between two Republican contestants for that office. Both the Democrats and Prohibitionists nominated Colonel Edwin Metcalf, a strong temperance man and advocate of suffrage extension, for attorney general. Metcalf was elected, and the prohibitory amendment was approved by citizens of all parties who wanted to put an end to the liquor interest in politics.

In spite of the rebuke to the machine, the voters elected a Republican legislature to insure the return of Nelson W. Aldrich to the Senate. After electing Aldrich, the General Assembly created the office of chief of the state police to enforce prohibition and selected Charles R. Brayton for the position. This scandal, known as the "May Deal," enabled the Democrats to win the support of independents and also of the *Journal*. The next year they elected their first governor, and won control of the lower house of the legislature. The Republican Senate, realizing that failure to extend the suffrage would cost them the next election, agreed to submit the Bourn Amendment (repealing the property qualification for voting) to a popular referendum. The amendment was adopted but did not go into effect until after the state and national elections of 1888.

The passage of the Bourn Amendment enabled the Democrats to win a plurality of votes for the governorship from 1889-91. However, the presence of a third party, the Prohibitionist, on the ballot, and the constitutional requirement for a majority to elect, enabled the Republican candidate to win the office by the vote of the General Assembly except for the year 1890. The Democrats failed in 1892, as independents and even some Democrats voted Republican to keep Aldrich in the Senate. The *Journal* commenting on the outcome, noted that the factionalism and scrambling for office that characterized the Democrats contributed to their inability to retain independent support.

In 1893 — the year of the financial panic and resulting depression — the state government broke down completely over disputed elections. While the politicians of both parties attempted to outwit each other and to control the legislature, the unemployed — Irish, Armenians, Portuguese, and Italians — stood in line for work or charity.

A combination of local and national circumstances (including the long depression, which was inevitably associated with the Democrat administration in Washington) worked to the advantage of the Republicans. Moreover, neither Brayton nor the financial interests who supported him were prepared to surrender. By diligent effort and unrivaled political acumen the General maintained his control over the unrepresentative legislature. In the absence of an effective opposition after 1893, the General Assembly proceeded to grant valuable concessions to great public service corporations — including the Aldrich street railway interests.

The failure of the Bourn Amendment to bring about a decisive shift in the political balance of power was a disappointment to Rhode Islanders of foreign birth and ancestry. The majority of them were Democratic in their sympathies, and the recurring defeat of their candidates towards the end of the century obliged them to resume their long struggle for the position to which their numbers entitled them. Success awaited them in the first half of the twentieth century, when they were to play leading roles in both political parties and in the social and economic life of the state.

*Note:* Most of the statistics in this article are from Kurt B. Mayer, *Economic Development and Population Growth in Rhode Island* (Providence, 1953).



Charles R. Brayton



Senator Nelson W. Aldrich.