

COLOR GUARD of Varnum Continentals in Revolutionary buff-and-blue, enters Newport State House (1954) as escort to Cincinnati. Right, Judge Mortimer Sullivan, Newport.



# Named for a Plowman

## The Society of the Cincinnati in R.I. will again observe the Glorious Fourth

STORY BY ROBERT L. WHEELER

*"Weep not, my child," the veteran said, "I bow to Heaven's high will;  
But quickly from yon antlers bring the sword of Bunker Hill!"*

MEMBERS of the Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations have always been great ones for tradition. For 50 years prior to 1927 the post-prandial doings at the annual meetings of the Society held every Fourth of July in Newport were not considered complete until a certain gentleman rose from his seat and sang *The Sword of Bunker Hill* to a good loud piano accompaniment, with the rest of the Cincinnati humming the repeat line and gazing sternly through the smoke of their Havanas.

When he died his son took over the musical-patriotic chore of ordering the Sword to be fetched from Yon Antlers. And when the son passed on someone else filled his place. Thus are the Cincinnati reminded of their proved descent from the officers of the Rhode Island Continental Line, some of whom were at Saratoga Barracks in Schuylerville, N.Y., on June 24, 1783, the day some important news came up the Hudson from the cantonments of Washington's army at Newburgh.

The news was that on May 10 Major General Knox, Washington's Chief of Artillery; Baron Steuben, his Prussian drillmaster; and other officers of the Continental forces awaiting disbandment, had formed a Society. . . .

*To perpetuate as well the remembrance of this vast event as the mutual friendships which have been formed under the pressure of common danger, and, in many cases, cemented by the blood of the parties.*

The officers at Schuylerville were men who knew their classical history. They didn't have to have it explained to them that Cincinnati was the Roman farmer who left his plow in the furrow to go to war and went back to the plow when the fighting was over.

They at once got together and formed a temporary unit which was formally organized as the Rhode Island Society of the Cincinnati on Dec. 17, 1783, in the old State House on Benefit Street.

By that time all the Rhode Island Cincinnati the British hadn't killed were home from the wars. Major General Nathanael Greene came in full uniform, wearing the sash you can still see encased at the Varnum House in East Greenwich. Brigadier General James Mitchell Varnum was there, too, and Bold Barton who kidnaped Prescott, and Abe Whipple who

boarded and burned the *Gaspee*. And many other lean and weary men who had seen fighting all the way from Long Island to the trenches at Yorktown.

Greene presided at the first meeting of the Rhode Island Cincinnati and became their first president. The Society had 83 original members.

These original Cincinnati transmitted their membership, by oldest male lineal descendant or collaterally, to the 57 hereditary members and eight honorary Cincinnati comprising the Rhode Island Society which meets tomorrow in Newport. In 1956 they will be hosts to the Triennial Convention of the national Society of the Cincinnati. Their president is Lt. Col. Howard V. Allen of East Greenwich.

The national Order of the Cincinnati had a stormy childhood. From the very first, the hereditary succession feature of the Newburgh "Institution" aroused a tempest of criticism. There were many people in the Thirteen triumphantly rebellious colonies who feared and hated the aristocratic principle as a McCarthyite fears and hates communism. They saw in the Cincinnati something they were sure was going to develop into a hereditary aristocracy, and the fact that Washington was the first President-





LAFAYETTE, who headed French branch of Cincinnati, gave this punch bowl to his comrade, Brig. Gen. James Mitchell Varnum.



SASH AND SWORD of two original Cincinnati, Greene and Varnum.



OFFICIAL BADGE of Cincinnati, adopted by the Society in 1783.



ANOTHER VARNUM, William H., came clear from Colorado in 1954, to be sworn in as member by Lt. Col. Howard V. Allen, president.

SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI continued

## They Marched, They Rode and They Hobbled

General in no way lessened their forebodings. Wasn't Washington himself an aristocrat?

In 1784 the first Meeting of the Society repealed the hereditary succession clause and adopted an amended "Institution." The new Institution, however, had to be ratified by the state societies. Three voted for the changes, three opposed them, and the other eight first ratified and then rescinded them. Among the latter was the Rhode Island Society.

A later meeting of the national Society voted that it remain as instituted, hereditary clause and all. Thanks to retention of this feature, the Rhode Island membership now includes a Swedish noble, Mans Christen, Count von Stednik of Stockholm, and a titular French marquis, Pedro Claudio Du Quesne, of Havana, Cuba. The count's ancestor, an original member, was wounded at the siege of Savannah in 1779. The Marquis Du Quesne is descended from Rear Admiral Du Quesne of the French Navy. The Newburgh Institution recognized as members all officers of the French forces serving with the American Army and gave them the right to organize a French Society, of which Lafayette was a prominent and active member.

The Rhode Island Society of the Cincinnati was incorporated in 1814 under the laws of this state. Up through the early 1830's its annual meetings on Independence Day were held alternately in Providence and Newport. Invariably the Cincinnati were escorted to the place of meeting by honor guards of young militiamen who were probably a bit awed by the men of Trenton and Monmouth.

In the early 1800's the Cincinnati still marched with the swing of veterans. And then they rode in carriages. And finally they neither marched nor rode but were just a few old men who hobbled to an office or to somebody's home for a few quiet toasts to time-mellowed memories of a hard war. These men were good wood and long-lived. For half a century very few hereditary members were admitted to the

Rhode Island Society. The last original member, Capt. Daniel Singer Dexter, died in 1852.

On July 4, 1832, nine Cincinnati—seven original members, one hereditary member and one honorary Cincinnatus—met in Providence and voted to dissolve the Rhode Island Society. This they were legally unable to do, inasmuch as it took 13 Cincinnati to make a quorum. The laws of Rhode Island are precise and minute as to the method of dissolving a corporation and the nine Cincinnati who met in the office of Secretary Coles Hoppin had no right to do what they did, although it looked like a sensible idea at the time. A new industrial America was a-borning and the War of the Revolution was just something that happened a long time ago. That border ruffian Andy Jackson was in the White House and what was he when *We* crossed the Delaware? Just a backwoods brat! The Rhode Island Cincinnati decided the time had come to call it quits.

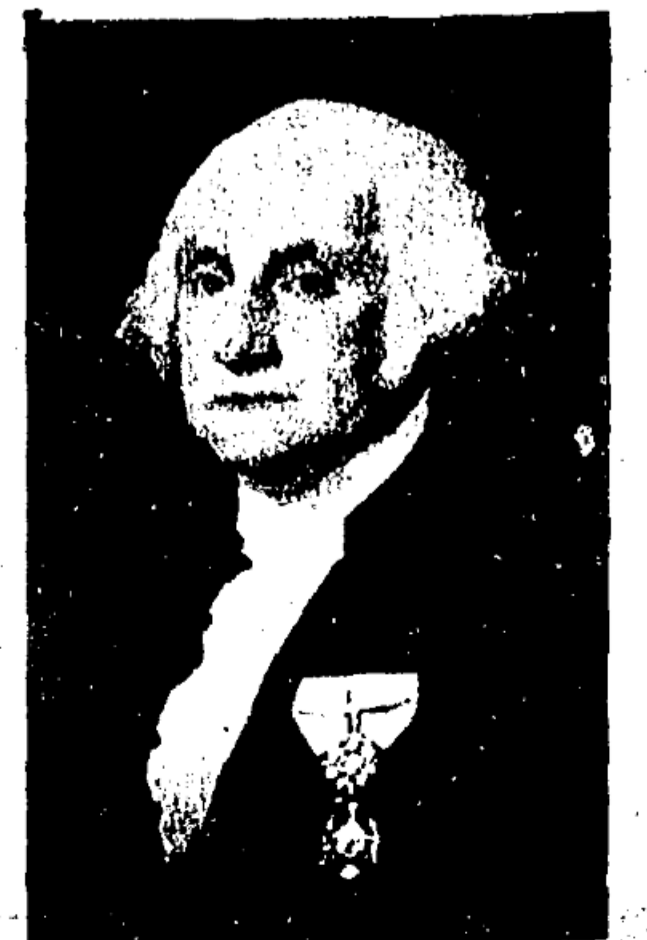
Their unwittingly ineffectual gesture made no end of trouble. After Secretary Hoppin died in 1850 his son, William Jones Hoppin, took possession of the books and records of the Rhode Island Society and refused to give them up until 1877, when he was threatened with proceedings in replevin by Dr. Amos Perry, librarian of the Rhode Island Historical Society, who was then engaged in an ultimately successful attempt to get the Society going again after 40-odd moribund years.

In 1875 William Jones Hoppin instigated a petition to the Rhode Island General Assembly to have the Rhode Island Society of the Cincinnati dissolved, on the ground that it had not met regularly since 1835.

His reasons for this action are obscure. Doctor Perry always had a notion that at some time or other Hoppin might have made application to join the Society and been turned down because he and some other "propositus" claimed descent from the same Revolutionary officer and the other was given precedence over him. The fine points of hereditary succession can cause precisely that kind of a beezele.

Hoppin's attempt to have the Society dissolved failed. In 1878 a bill was enacted confirming the Rhode Island Society of the Cincinnati in all its rights and privileges under the Institution of 1783 and the laws of the state. In 1881 it was admitted to full membership in the national Society in Charleston, S.C. And ever since then it has met regularly every Fourth of July, just as it will meet tomorrow in Newport. There isn't a chance in the world that somebody won't sing *The Sword of Bunker Hill*, or that the Cincinnati won't join in the chorus. They'd sing it if they knew an H-bomb was going to drop on Newport the next minute. Besides the president, Lt. Col. Howard V. Allen, the officers of the Rhode Island Society are Charles Howland Russell, vice president; Edward Winsor, secretary; Major Louis Livingston Lorillard, assistant secretary; Robert Lippitt Knight, treasurer; Brenton Greene Meader, assistant treasurer; and the Rev. DeWolf Perry, chaplain.

Pictures by Edward C. Hanson, and from the Journal-Bulletin Library and the Collection of Colonel Allen.



COVER PICTURE. Washington as Society's first President General is depicted wearing eagle in gold with setting of diamonds and emeralds. This insigne has been transmitted to his successors. Below, left, Cincinnatus. He left his plow in the furrow.