

Rhode Island African Heritage Civil Rights History



A Summary of over 300 Years of History

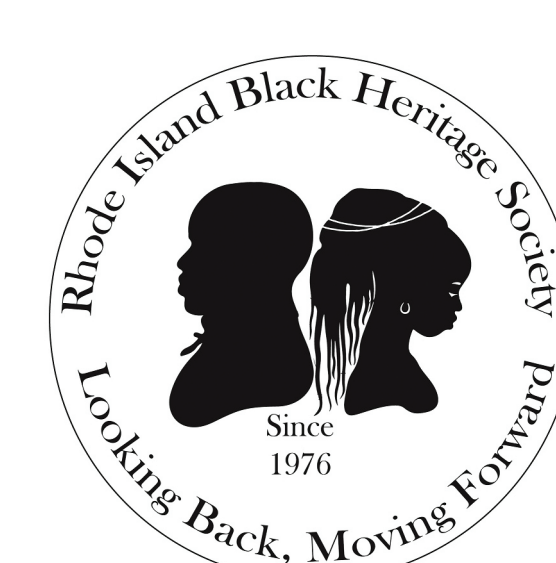
Courtesy of Brown University Archives

In 2017, the Rhode Island Historical Society, in partnership with the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society and the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, was awarded a grant from the National Park Service for a multi-phase project on African Americans' struggle for civil rights in Rhode Island: The 20th Century. The project consisted of conducting archival research, collecting oral histories, and documenting places of significance to civil rights in Rhode Island.

This collection of banners tells the story of African heritage civil rights in Rhode Island. Although the project focus is on the 20th Century, no story is complete without understanding its history. The struggle for freedom and equal rights for those of African heritage in Rhode Island began with the arrival of the first enslaved peoples from Africa.

Thank you to those who worked on this project including, Theresa Guzman Stokes and Keith Stokes of RIBHS, Sarah Zurier and Joanna Dougherty of RIHPHC, and Geralyn Ducady, Samantha Hunter, Dana Signe K. Munroe, and Michelle Chiles of RIHS.

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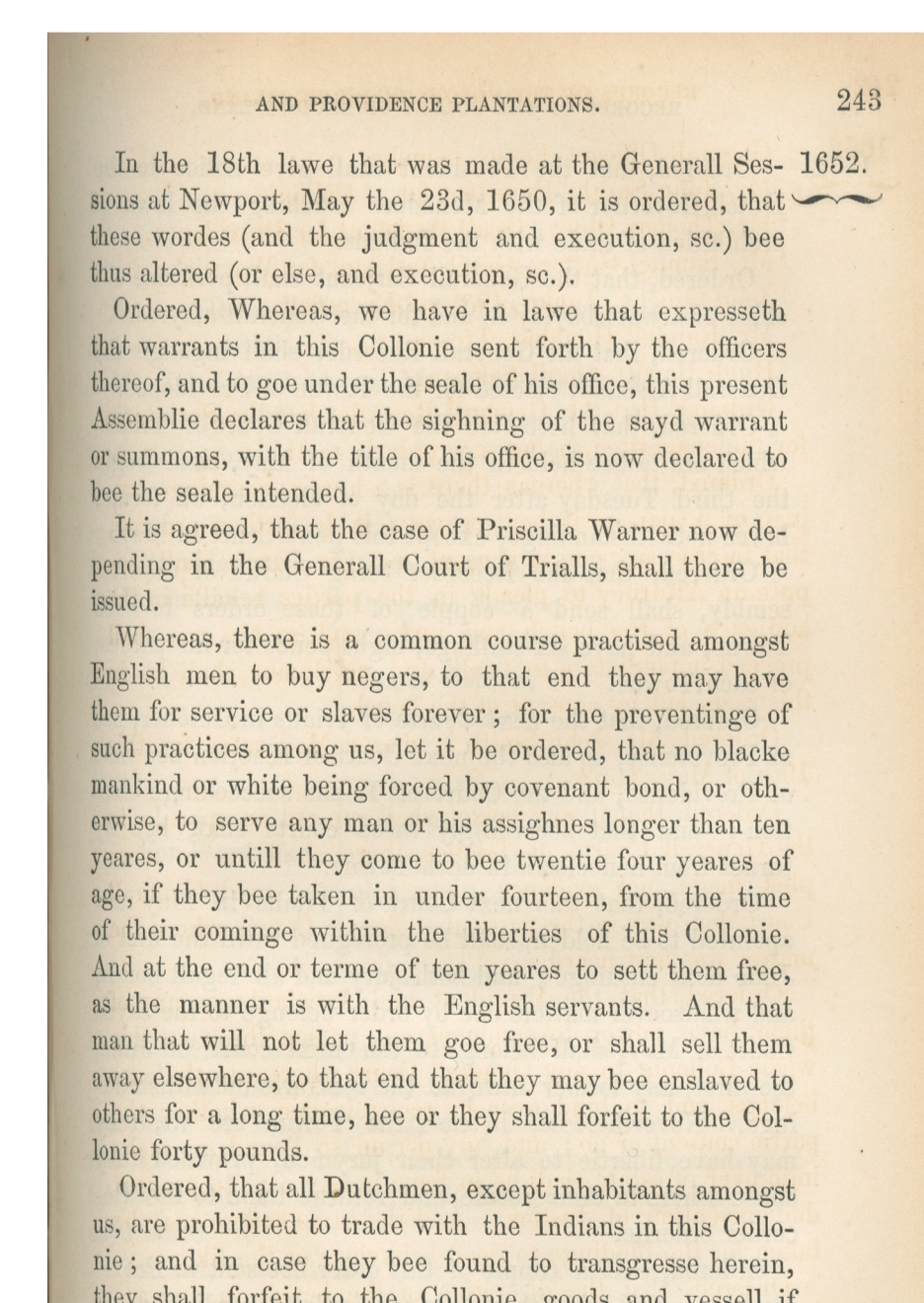
Courtesy of the Rhode Island State Archives

Early Origins of Civil Rights in Rhode Island 1652 - 1787

The first documented slave ship to arrive in the Colony of Rhode Island was the “Sea Flower” in 1696. Previously, Rhode Island enacted a law abolishing ‘negro slavery’ in 1652, but that law was largely unenforced. Despite this and the 1663 Royal Charter promoting religious freedom and toleration, colonists continued their involvement in the Transatlantic Slave Trade and in the ownership of enslaved Africans. This continued into the 18th century when enslaved Africans outnumbered white indentured servants in the colony almost eight to one. Even when Rhode Island passed the Gradual Abolition Act in 1784 and outlawed the slave trade in 1787, many found ways to circumvent the laws with little to no consequences.

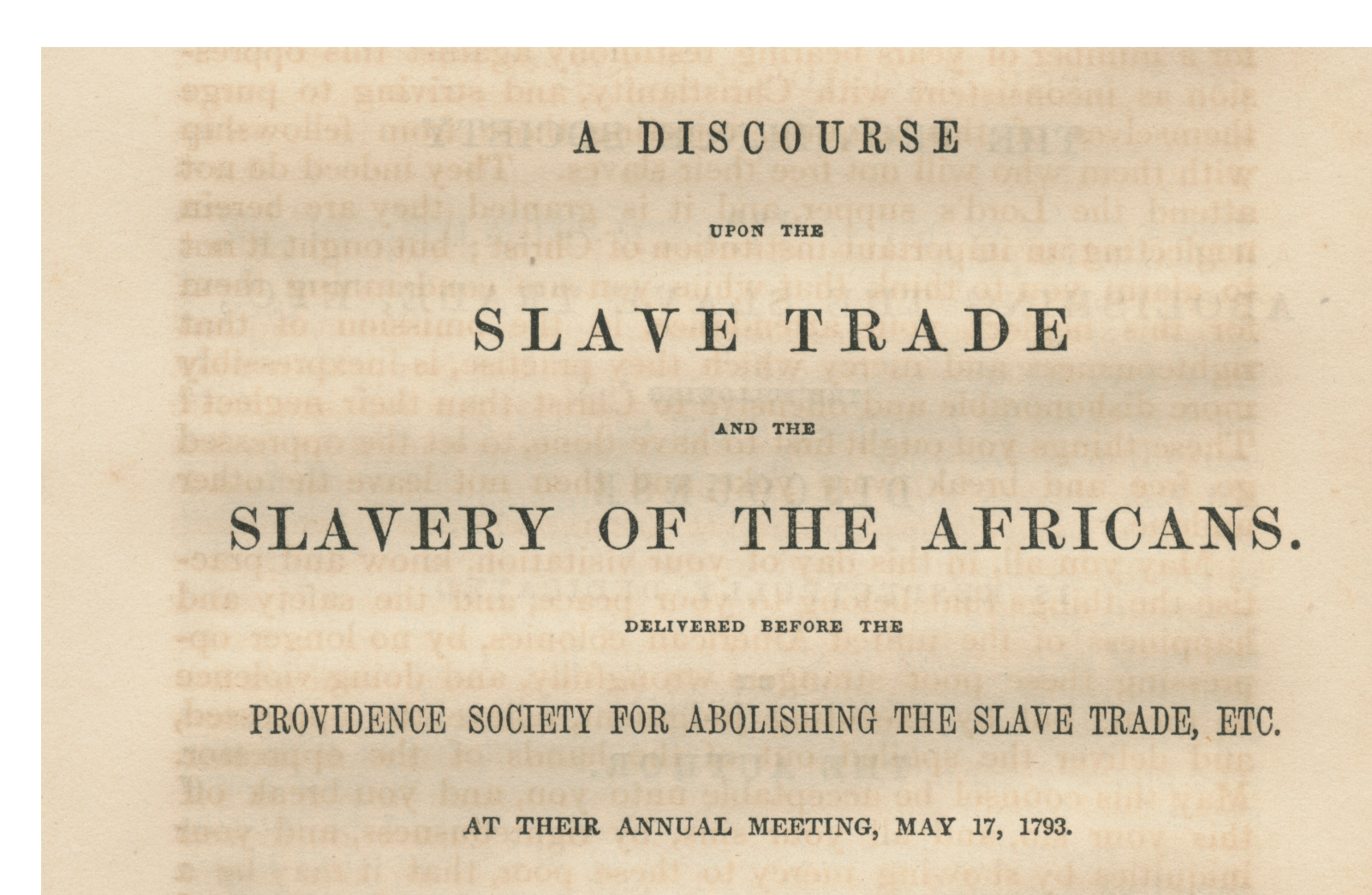
1663 Royal Charter promotes religious freedom and toleration by stating, “to hold forth a lively experiment, that a most flourishing civil state may stand and best bee maintained, and that among our English subjects. with a full libertie in religious concernments; and that true pietye rightly grounded upon gospell principles, will give the best and greatest security to sovereignty, and will lay in the hearts of men the strongest obligations to true loyaltye.”

1652 Rhode Island enacts a law abolishing slavery stating, “Whereas, there is common course practiced amongst English men to buy negers, to that end they may have them for service or slaves forever; for the preventinge of such practices among us, let it be ordered, that no black mankinde or white being forced by covenant bond, or otherwise, to serve any man or his assignes longer than ten yeares, or untill the come to bee twentie four years of age, if they bee taken under fourteen, from the time of their cominge within the liberties of this Collonie.” The law is largely unenforced.



Rhode Island Historical Society: RHI X17 3718. Rhode Island Colonial Records. Providence, RI. 1856. Printed Collection: F76 R29

1776 Reverend Samuel Hopkins of Newport publishes “A Dialogue, Concerning the Slavery of the Africans: Shewing it to be the Duty and Interest of the American Colonies to Emancipate All Their African Slaves”

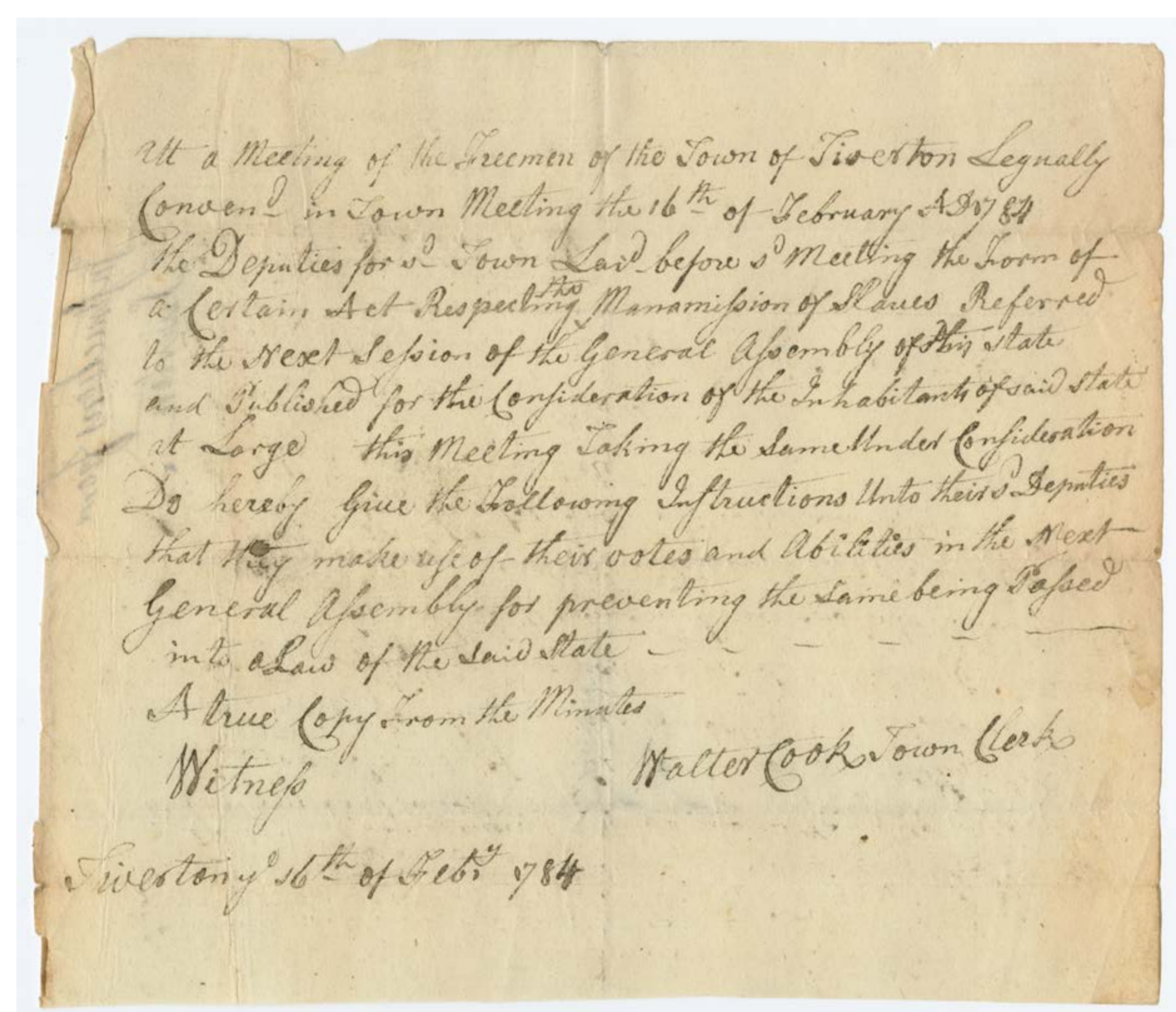


Rhode Island Historical Society: RHI X17 3717. Hopkins, Samuel. A Discourse Upon the Slave Trade. Boston, MA. 1854. Printed Collection: E446 H79



Courtesy of the Rhode Island State Archives

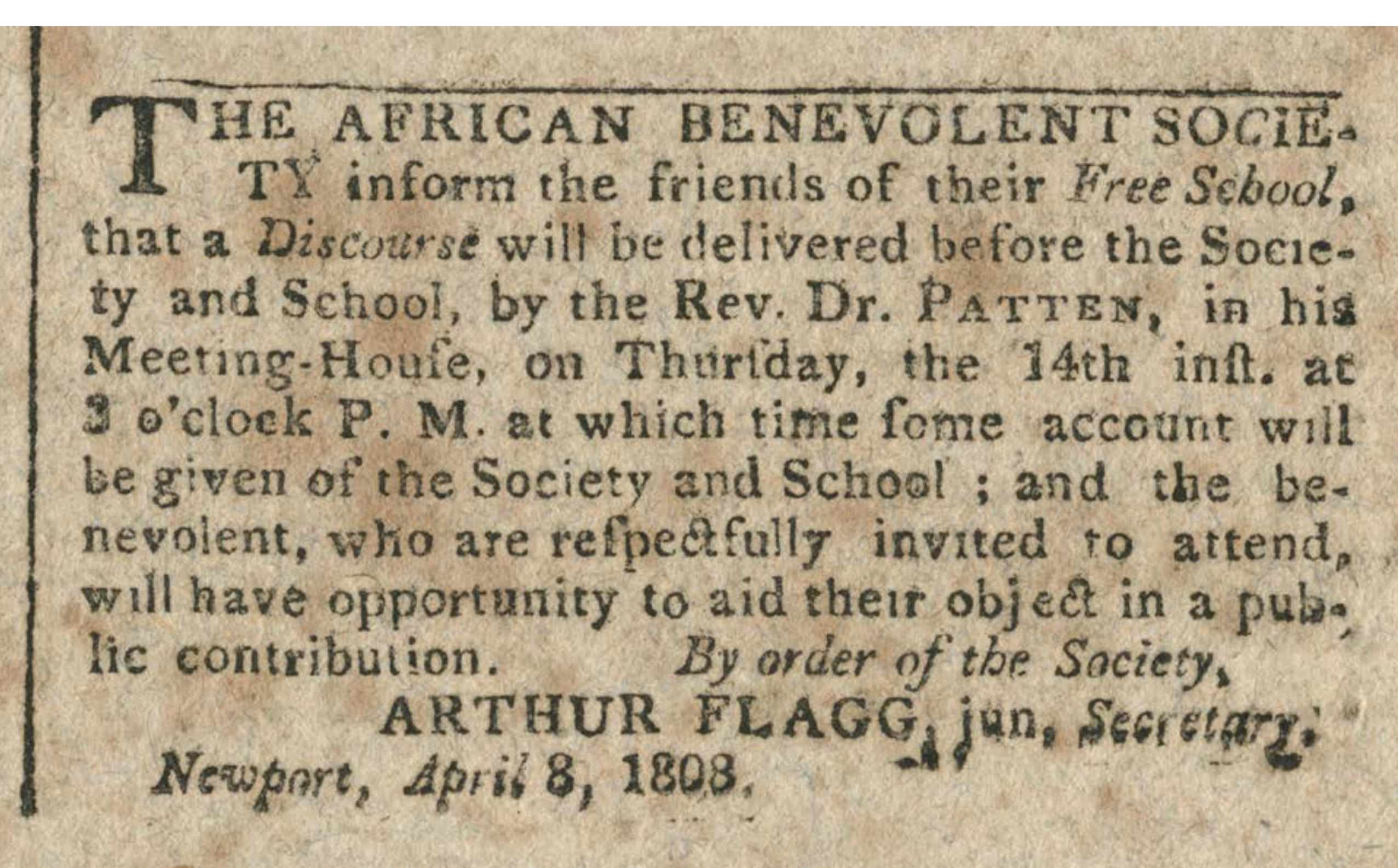
1784 Rhode Island enacted a law granting the gradual emancipation of slaves



Rhode Island Historical Society, Rhi X17 3720. Cook, Walter (town clerk). [Resolution Opposing the State Manumission Act]. Tiverton, RI, February 16, 1784. Ink on paper. MANUSCRIPT. MSS 219 - Tiverton Town Records - B1 F9.

1787 The Hiram Lodge No.3 is chartered in Providence, which became the second African heritage Lodge of Freemasonry in America.

1808 Members of the African Benevolent Society, founded in Newport and later called the Free African Union Society, organized the earliest African operated private school in America.



Rhode Island Historical Society: Newport Mercury, April 12, 1808. Newspaper Collection

Africans in America: African Self-Determination 1780 - 1808

In 1780, four years before the Rhode Island General Assembly enacted a gradual emancipation law, a group of free African men assembled in Newport to organize and charter America's first mutual aid society for Africans known as the African Benevolent Society and later the Free African Union Society. The Society's lofty mission, set the stage for the promotion of the rights of Africans to social freedom and equality, including providing funds for indigent families, a burial society (Palls and Biers) to ensure proper burials, setting moral and ethical standards for public conduct within the larger community, and most importantly, raising consciousness and funds within the African heritage community to someday return to their native Africa. In addition, the Free African Union Society established one of the nation's earliest free African private schools organized, supervised, and taught by fellow Africans. Other such benevolent societies were formed and followed suit.

First of August CELEBRATION!

LIBERTY! LIBERTY! LIBERTY!

THE ANNIVERSARY OF BRITISH WEST INDIA EMANCIPATION, which took place on the 1st day of August, 1834, will be commemorated by the Colored Citizens of Providence, and by all the Friends of Freedom. Let the neighboring cities and towns send in their delegations on that day. Let societies, schools, all unite in swelling the ranks of the Procession of Freedom. On that day let the NEBRASKA INIQUITY be discussed. On that day let the FUGITIVE SLAVE BILL receive its deserts. On that day let the Progress of Freedom be accelerated. Lay aside labor, and assemble in Nature's garden, with the blue vault of Heaven for a covering, and express how we love Liberty and hate Slavery.

Due notice will be given where the Procession will be formed, and the Grove to assemble at.

By Order of the Committee of Arrangements.

WM. H. C. STEPHENSON,
JOH. BANKS,
REV. EDWARD SCOTT,
RICHARD WATERMAN,
WM. H. HOWARD.

PROVIDENCE, July 11, 1854.

Rhode Island Black Heritage Society Archives

19th Century: Disruption & Organization 1824 - 1850

Two race riots destroyed African Heritage neighborhoods in Providence, in Hard Scrabble in 1824 and in Snowtown in 1831, demonstrating the end of slavery wasn't the end of discriminatory treatment. Despite this, members of the African heritage community continued to organize and fight for civil rights. After the Dorr Rebellion, voting rights were extended to non-landowners regardless of race in the new state constitution. This new legal precedent allowed African heritage men to participate in local and national conventions. It also resulted in wide-spread celebrations throughout the African heritage communities in Rhode Island.

1824 & 1831 race riots took place and destroyed predominately African heritage communities in Providence called Hard Scrabble and Snowtown.

100 Dollars REWARD.

At a Town Council held within and for the town of Providence, on Thursday the 22d day of September, A. D. 1831. Whereas a very serious riot occurred last evening in the north part of the town, which resulted in the death of one person by shooting, and wounding three or four others, the destruction of two houses, and the partial destruction of others, and otherwise disturbing the peace and good order of the town, therefore, in order that the persons concerned in promoting said riot may be brought to justice, and future tranquility secured to the citizens, it is resolved by the Town Council of the town of Providence, that a reward of One Hundred Dollars be paid to any person who shall give such information of the persons engaged in the aforesaid outrage as may lead to their conviction.

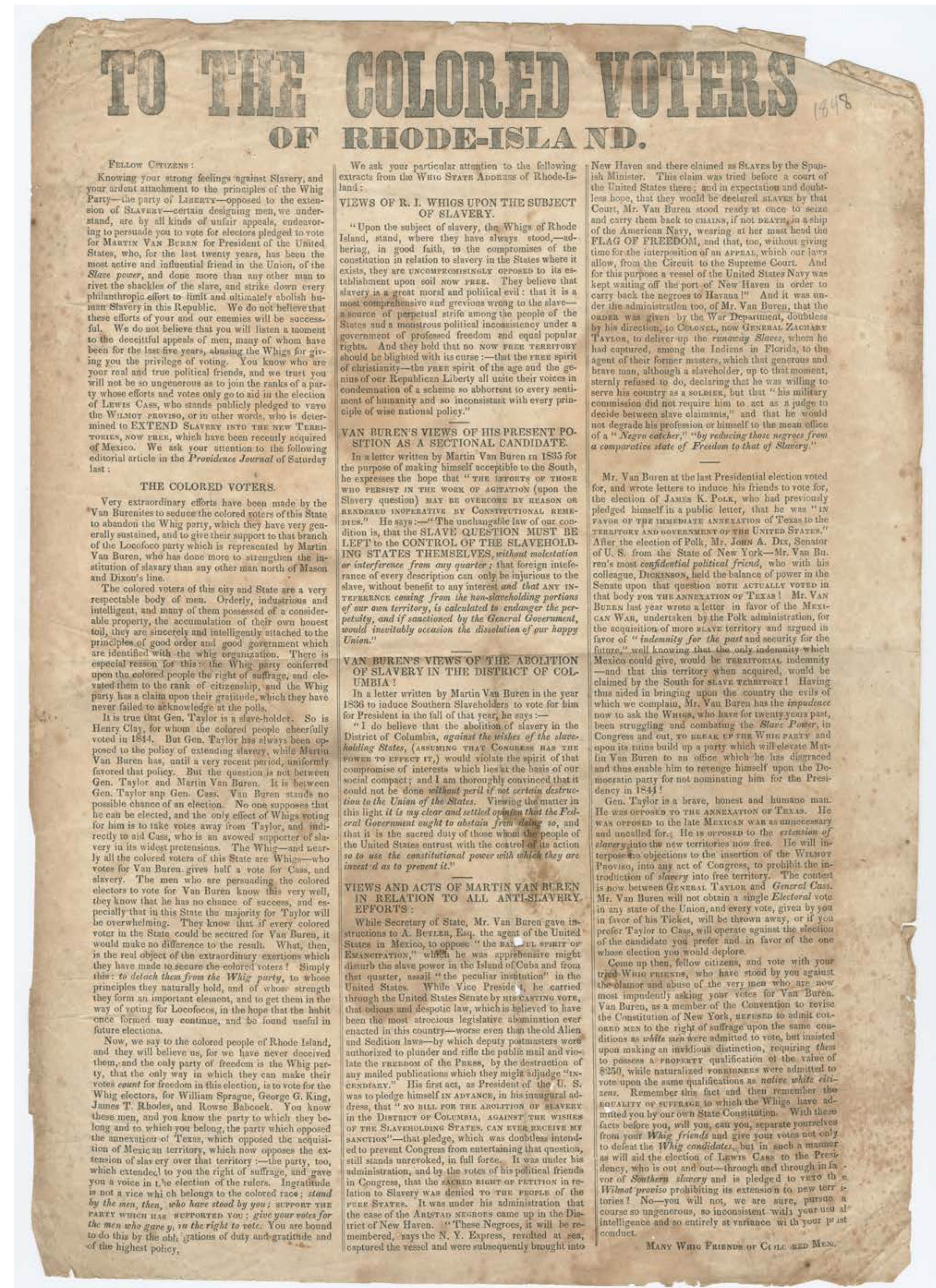
A true copy: Witness
RICHARD M. FIELD, C. Clerk.

Rhode Island Historical Society: RHI X3 6670. Town Council of Providence. 100 Dollar Reward. Providence, RI. September 22, 1831. Ink on paper. Broadside Collection: Box 1831.

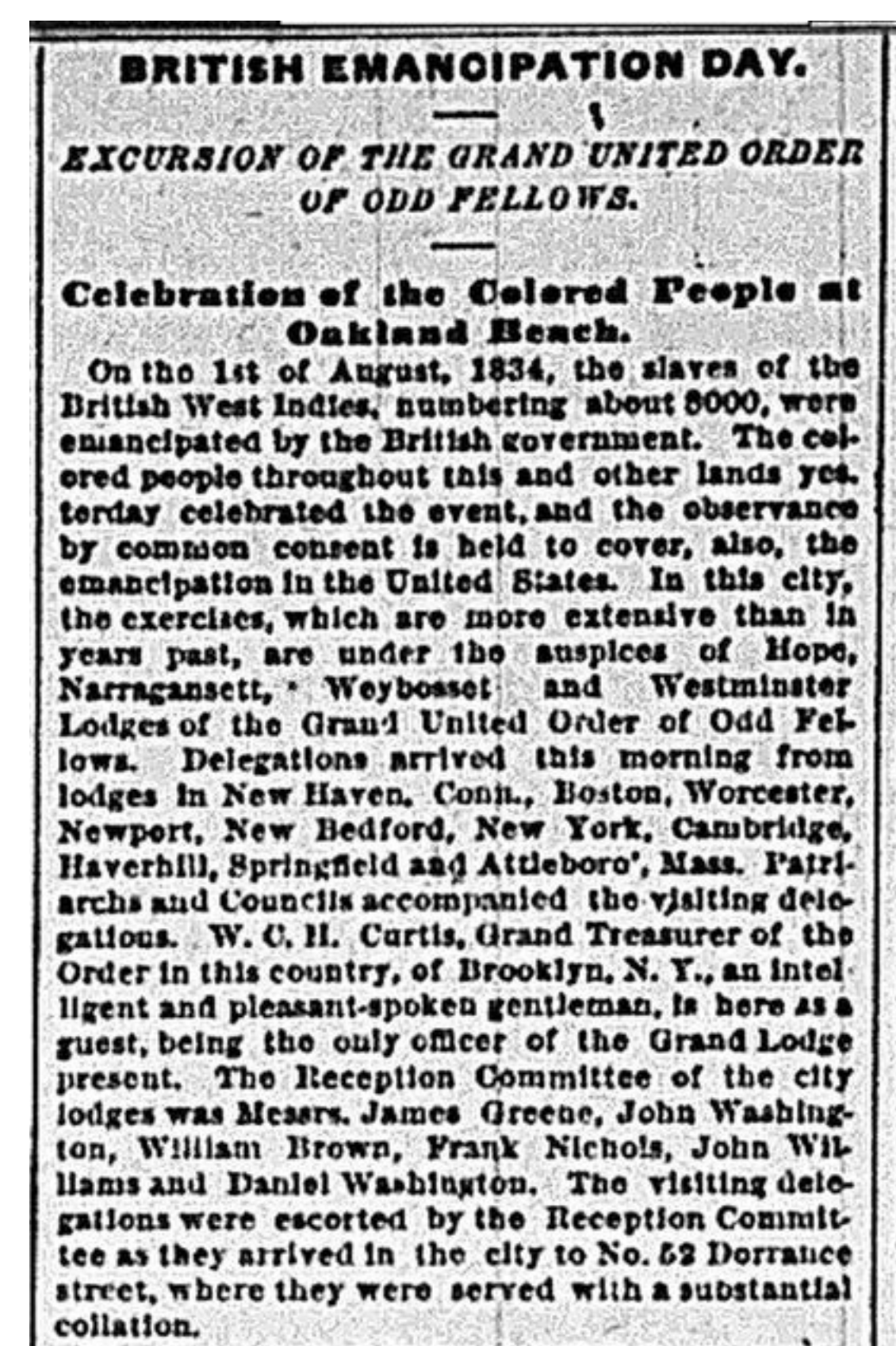
As a result of the Dorr Rebellion, the Rhode Island State Constitution was revised and ratified in 1842 giving African heritage men, among others, the right to vote, but not Native American men.

1830 Alfred Niger and George Willis of Providence represent Rhode Island in the first "American Society of Free Persons of Colour Convention" in Philadelphia, Pa.

1850 Starting in Roger Williams Park and later at Rocky Point and Crescent Park, the Rhode Island African heritage community came together annually to celebrate the British and later American Slavery Emancipations.



Rhode Island Historical Society: RHI X17 3721. To the Colored Voters of Rhode Island. Providence, RI. 1848. Ink on paper. Broadside Collection: Case 1848



"British Emancipation Day: Providence Daily Journal 2 August 1853. Copyright (c) 2018 The Providence Journal. Reproduced by permission.

CHAPTER 508.

AN ACT TO SECURE TO ALL PERSONS WITHIN THE STATE THEIR CIVIL RIGHTS. Passed April 24, 1885.

It is enacted by the General Assembly as follows :

SECTION 1. No person within the jurisdiction of this state shall be debarred from the full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations, advantages, facilities and privileges of any licensed inns, public conveyances, on land or water, or from any licensed places of public amusement, on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. None to be debarred from privileges of inns, public conveyances, etc.

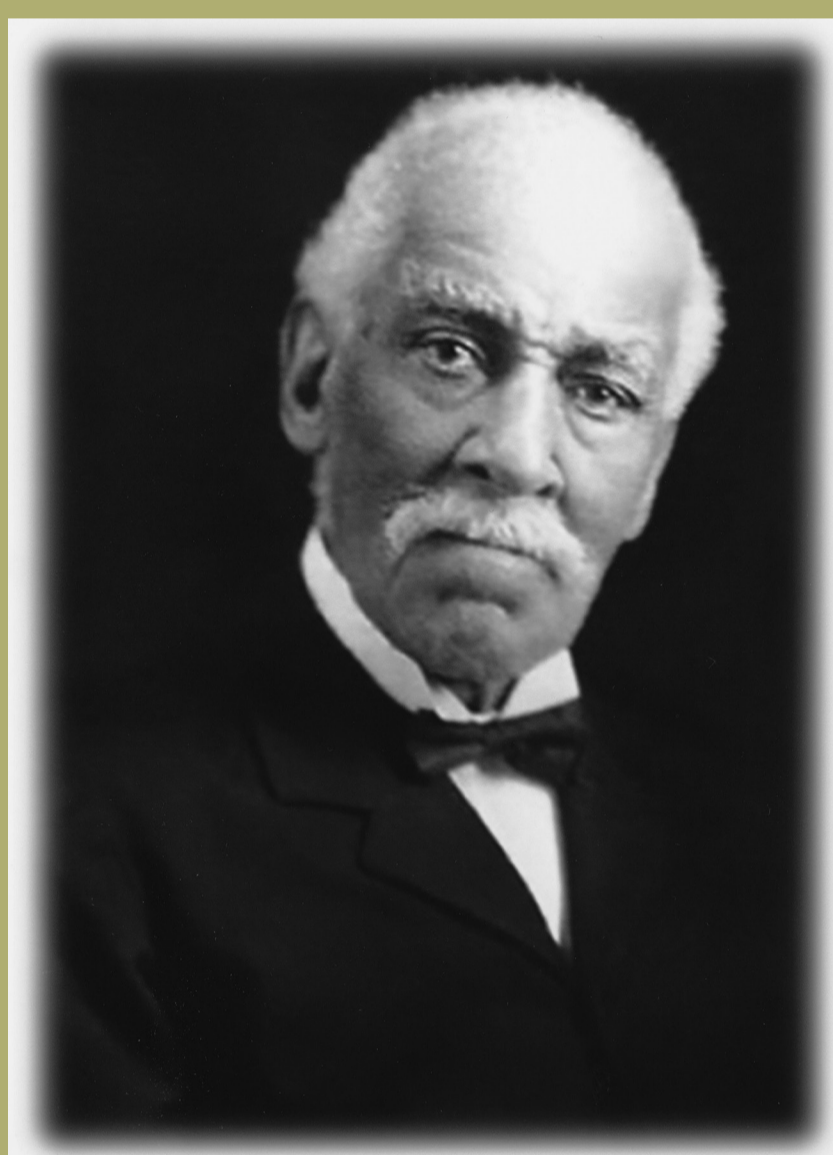
SEC. 2. Every person who shall violate the provisions of the foregoing section shall be fined not exceeding one hundred dollars. Penalty.

SEC. 3. No citizen possessing all other qualifications which are or may be prescribed by law, shall be disqualified for service as grand or petit juror in any court of this state on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude, and any officer or other person charged with any duty in the selection or summoning of jurors who shall willfully exclude or fail to summon any citizen for the causes aforesaid, shall, on conviction thereof, be fined not exceeding one hundred dollars. No exclusion from jury service.

19th Century: Separate & Unequal in Rhode Island 1866 - 1896

Rhode Island Historical Society: Rhi X17 3719. Rhode Island General Assembly Reports - Chapter 508. Providence, RI. 1885. Ink on paper. Printed Collection: KFR 15 A2 1885

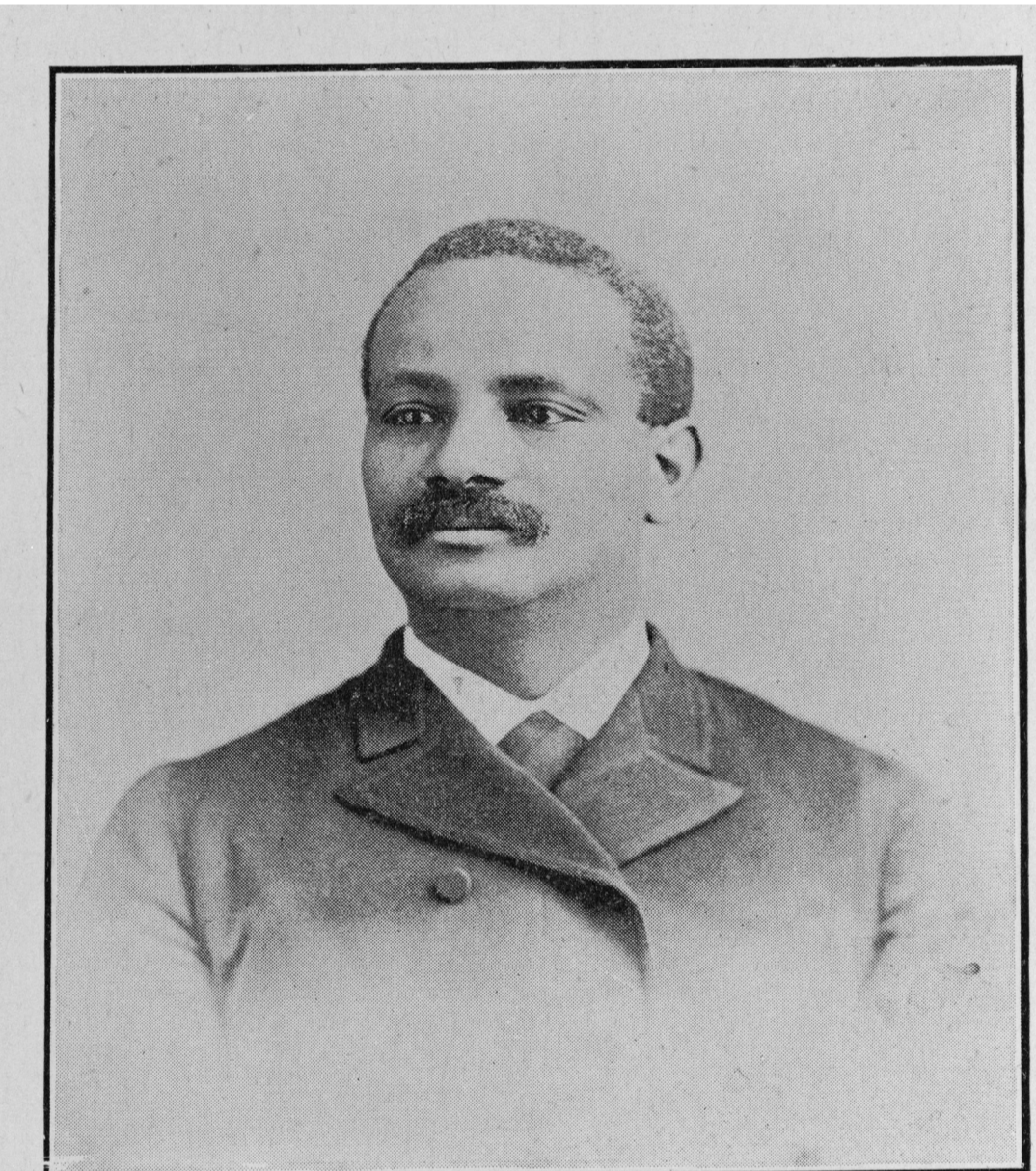
In 1883 the United States Supreme Court declared the Civil Rights Act of 1875 unconstitutional and asserted that the Fourteenth Amendment forbade states, but not citizens, from discriminating. In answer to this, the African heritage community in Rhode Island moved to preserve their hard-fought civil rights within the state. Led by Rev. Mahlon Van Horne and George T. Downing, the Rhode Island General Assembly enacted a law that secured all persons within the State their civil rights. In a second major federal setback to African heritage civil rights, the United States Supreme Court in 1896 issued *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the ruling decided that “separate but equal” facilities satisfied the Fourteenth Amendment guarantees. Rhode Island African heritage and white leaders responded immediately by enacting General Law, Chapter 277 “that all persons within the jurisdiction of this state shall be entitled to the full and equal accommodations, advantages, facilities, and privileges of any place of public accommodation, resort or amusement.” The 19th century ended with the preservation of new and dynamic civil rights for African heritage Rhode Island citizens, but the dawn of the 20th century brought a new age, marked by two world wars that redefined the fight for civil rights through access to fair employment and housing practices.



Rhode Island Black Heritage Society Archives

1866 Led by George T. Downing, the integration of public schools in Rhode Island is enacted stating, “In deciding upon applications 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.”

1885 Led by Rev. Mahlon Van Horne and George T. Downing, the Rhode Island General Assembly enacted a law that secured all persons within the State their civil rights declaring “no person within the jurisdiction of this state shall be debarred from the full and equal enjoyment of the accommodations, advantages, facilities and privileges of any licensed inns, public conveyances, on land or water, or from any licensed places of public amusement, on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.”



HON. MAHLON VAN HORNE

Rhode Island Historical Society: RHI X3 7089. Hon. Mahlon Van Horne. Newport, RI. 1901. Ink on paper. Printed Collection

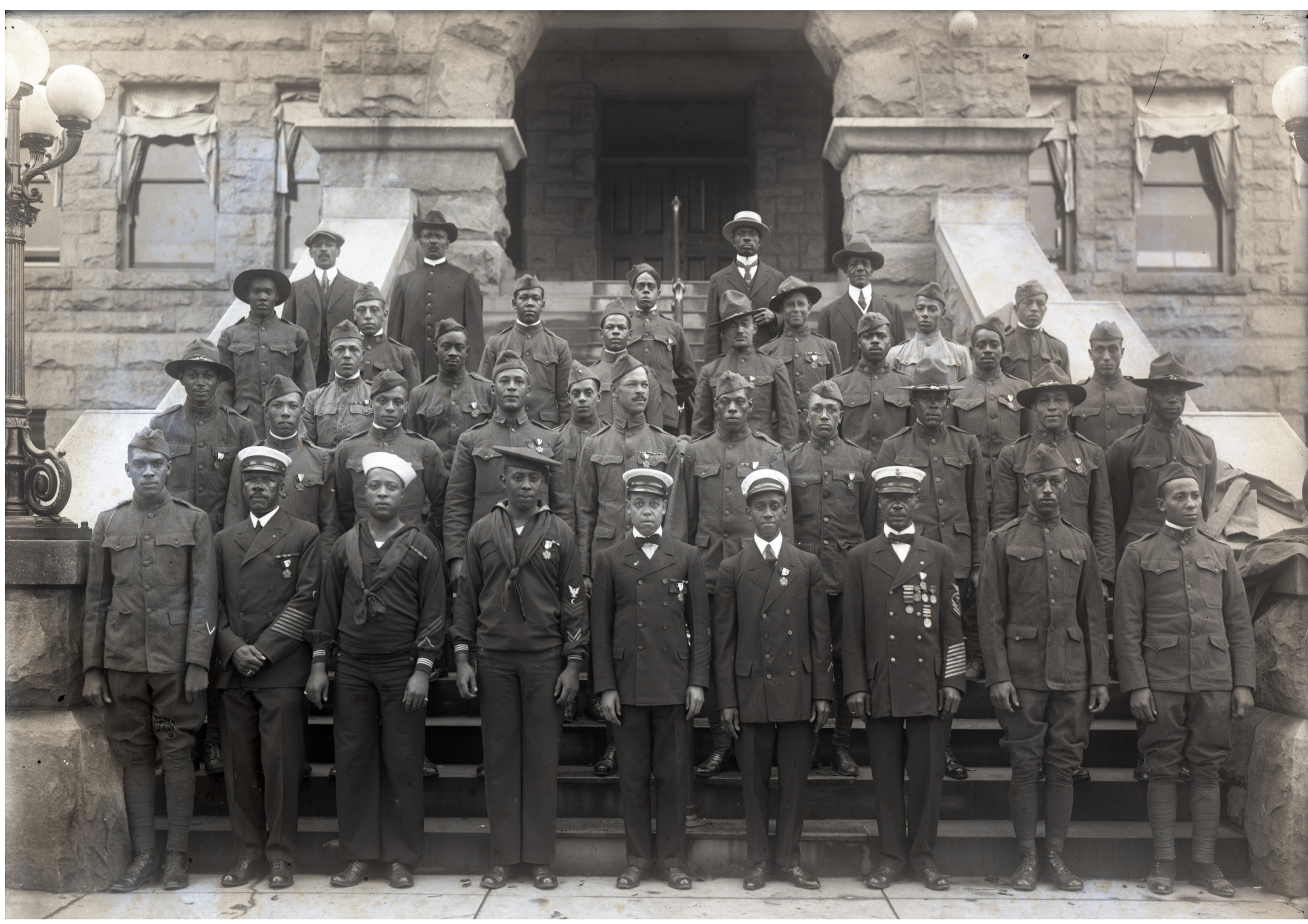
1872 Rev. Mahlon Van Horne becomes the first African heritage person elected to a Rhode Island public school board in Newport and in 1885, is elected to the General Assembly of Rhode Island.

1896 The National Association of Colored Women Clubs is organized in Washington, DC. Newport businesswoman, Mary Dickerson, organized a Rhode Island chapter and the Women’s League, Newport, R.I. The organization participated in a major political campaign advocating for Anti-Lynching Laws.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress: Executive board of Women's League, Newport, R.I. Newport Rhode Island, 1899. [?] Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/98502151/>.

The Great War Overseas & the New Civil Rights Era 1910 - 1919



Collection of the Newport Historical Society, Samuel Kerschner (photographer), [Soldiers and Sailors on the steps of Newport City Hall, ca. 1918.

At the conclusion of the 19th century, African heritage Rhode Island men and women prepared for the new century by forming a new brand of civic organizations that organized around the power of collective political action. World War I became a transformative moment for America. It propelled our still young nation into a world-wide conflict and required an unparalleled national mobilization of troops and supplies. By 1918, all Americans were asked to sacrifice for the war effort. During the course of the war, 350,000 African heritage men and women served in practically every branch of military service. The troops of color returned to their hometowns, cities, and states with high expectations of equality, employment, and respect. In its place they faced an unprecedented increase in racial tensions across America that led to the eruption of race riots across three dozen cities during the summer of 1919, which historians today refer to as "The Red Summer."

1906 John C. Minkins became editor-in-chief of the Providence News-Democrat, the first African heritage editor of a white-owned newspaper. He was an active member of the NAACP and became a national lecturer on issues of race relations in America.

1913 the Providence Branch National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was organized by prominent Civil Rights attorney Joseph G. LeCount, Dr. Julius Robinson was the first President

To Discuss Negro Problem.
"Some Phases of the Negro Problem," will be discussed at the Beneficent Congregational Church next Wednesday evening at 8 o'clock, the meeting having been arranged under the auspices of a committee which seeks to establish a branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The speakers will be Rev. Asbury Krom, John C. Minkins and Dr. Joel E. Spingarn of New York. Rabbi Nathan Stern will offer prayer. The committee in charge includes Dr. J. J. Robinson, Rev. Z. Harpign, Miss Roberta J. Dunbar, Mrs. Rev. John Higgin, James E. Dixon, William A. Heathman, A. H. Jefferson, Dr. A. L. Jackson and J. C. Minkins.

Providence Daily Journal,
1 November 1913 pg. 6

NEGROES HEAR OF WORK FOR BETTER CONDITIONS

Dr. J. E. Spingarn of New York Addresses Large Audience.
The work of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, its fight for justice and against segregation laws and discriminating ordinances, was explained to an audience of colored people, who filled the Beneficent Congregational Church last night by Dr. Joel E. Spingarn of New York.
Dr. Spingarn is the President of the New York branch of the organization and came to Providence to speak in connection with the organization of a local branch, a temporary committee having already been named. He told of the work of the New York branch and of the national organization, especially its fight against segregation laws in Washington, Baltimore, Richmond, Kansas City and other places.
The speakers, who besides Dr. Spingarn were Rev. Asbury Krom, pastor of the church, and John C. Minkins were introduced by Dr. J. J. Robinson, chairman of the temporary committee which

Providence Daily Journal,
6 November 1913 pg. 6

1918 During WWI, Mary E. Jackson of Providence, an ardent worker in the Women's Suffrage Movement, was appointed as Special Field Worker Among Colored Girls under the War Work Council for the YWCA.



Rhode Island Black Heritage Society Archive

1917 Over 1,800 African heritage citizens participated in the Negro Silent Protest Parade in Providence. The silent march was organized by the NAACP, church and community leaders from Providence, Newport, and Boston to protest violence and lynchings directed towards African heritage citizens across the country.

PROTEST PARADE BY 1000 NEGROES

March in Silence in Demonstration Against Riots.

CROWDS WATCH PROCESSION

Many of Marchers Carry Banners Bearing Inscriptions. — Little Children Take Part in Event. Delegations from Out-of-Town Swell Number in Line.

To the sound of muffled drums, more than 1000 negroes, men, women and children, marched in a "Silent Protest Parade" yesterday afternoon through the streets of the city, many of the marchers carrying banners. In an announcement to the public, the committee in charge said the parade would be held as a protest to the Waco, Memphis and East St. Louis riots, Jim Crow cars, segregation, discrimination, disenfranchisement and lynching and in memory of the honest toilers who were removing the reproach of laziness and thriftlessness hurled at the entire race.

Assembling on West Exchange street the marchers passed through Exchange street, to Westminster street, to Knight street, to Fountain street, and were dismissed on West Exchange street. The marchers were accorded every respect by the large crowds of persons on the street. The parade was silent, not a word being spoken by the marchers all along the line. It was a solemn procession, the muffled beating of five drums and the sound of feet on pavement being the only sounds.

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Among the inscriptions on the banners were: "We all have our slavers. Ours are not in line." "We were first in France. Ask Pershing." "The negro has never betrayed the flag."

Referring to the negro's part in war were the following: "1890 U. S. negroes fought in the Civil War." "12,000 of us fought with Jackson at New Orleans." "50 Rhode Island negroes fought against England in 1781." "50 negroes fought for American independence with George Washington" and "We were martyrs at Cavalry."

B. T. Montgomery acted as chief marshal. A platoon of mounted police headed the parade, followed by 20 negro boy Scouts and the members of the committee and Civil War veterans. The children's section of young girls came next, followed by the boys and then the women and men. Among the men marchers were delegations from Worcester, Boston, Pawtucket, Apponaug, New Bedford and Newport.

The children also carried banners, among the inscriptions being the following: "Give us a chance to live." "Rent us sanitary homes." "What industrial hope have these children?" and "Not alms but opportunity." The women marchers had banners, one reading "31 negroes won Carnegie medals," another "We are called lazy, and murdered when we work." Others were "So treat us that we may love our country," and "We ask no favors of negroes, but justice as men." Another was inscribed "America has lynched 5000 negroes without trial in 25 years." "There are no negroes in the Rhode Island militia. Why?" was inscribed on one and "No land that loves to lynch negroes can lead the civilized world," was written on another.

After marching silently over the route the parade dismissed on West Exchange street, the committee, women and children reviewing the men in line.

Rhode Island Historical Society: "Protest Parade by 1000 Negroes" Providence Daily Journal, 15 October 1917, p.12, Newspaper Collection.

World War II was the next major transformative event in American and Rhode Island history. As in the previous war, Rhode Island mobilized men, women, and resources to prepare for the largest war in human history. In 1939, as Rhode Island braced for possible conflict, the Providence Urban League organized under the leadership of James N. Williams. Many of the organizers of the Urban League in Rhode Island were veteran members of the NAACP and saw the Urban League as a means to secure fair employment rights. Led by the NAACP's Joseph LeCount and the Urban League's James Williams, the State of Rhode Island in 1943 published a landmark report entitled, "Report of the Commission on the Employment Problems of the Negro." This report, which included scores of documented evidence of employment discrimination faced by African heritage Rhode Island citizens across the state, directly led to enactment of the Fair Employment Practices Act in 1949.

World War II & Fair Employment 1939 - 1949

1939 the Providence Urban League is organized under the leadership of James N. Williams.



Courtesy of the Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College, Phillips Memorial Library, Special and Archival Collections

1944 Civil rights attorney Joseph LeCount and John F. Lopez, President of the Providence Branch NAACP joined Thurgood Marshall in successfully bringing suit against the Boilermakers Union to enable over 500 African American men to equally work as union members at the Kaiser Shipyard in Providence.

NEGROES AT YARD REST THEIR CASE

Court Told AFL International Union, Not Local 308, Ruled Out Ballots.

Negro workers at Walsh-Kaiser shipyard, seeking a permanent injunction to compel the AFL International Boilermakers Union to extend to them equal treatment with white workers, rested their case late yesterday before Judge Patrick P. Curran in Superior Court. Their concluding evidence included testimony that it was international union representatives and not officers of the shipyard unit, Local 308, who ruled out their votes in the local's December election of officers. Attorneys for the union and its international and local officers thereupon opened their case by presenting three motions which will be argued before Judge Curran Wednesday morning.

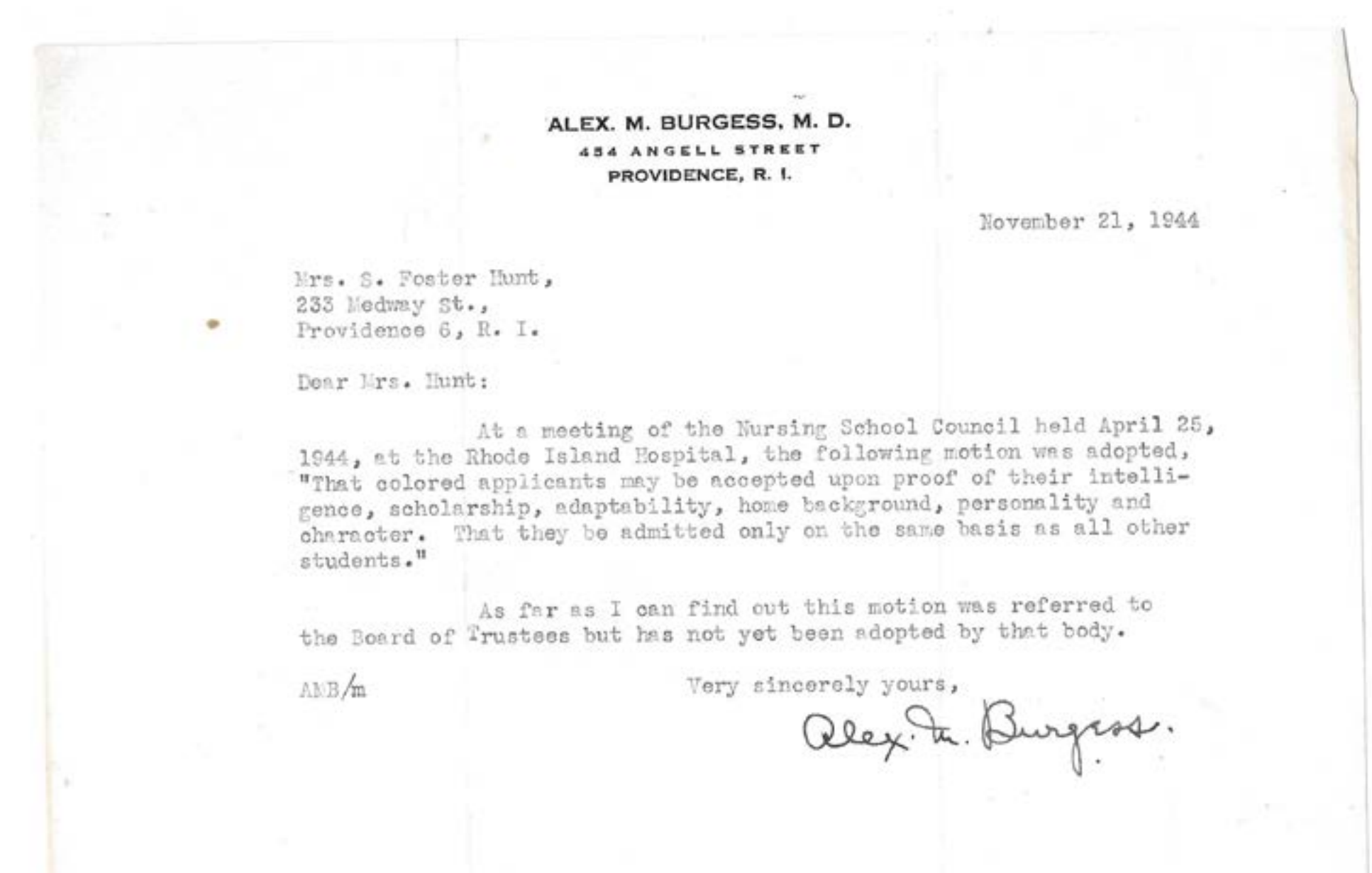
Courtesy of the Library of Congress: Fortune, Timothy Thomas, *The New York Age*, [New York N.Y.: Fortune & Peterson, to 1953]



OCTOBER 12, 1944 LAUNCHING OF U.S.S. DEVOSA WALSH-KAISER COMPANY, INC. PROVIDENCE, R.I. PHOTO: NO. V-12

Rhode Island Historical Society: RHI X17 3722. Walsh Kaiser Company. Launching of the USS Devosa. Providence, RI. October 12, 1944. Silver gelatin print. Graphics Collection: 1984.82.1 - B1.

Led by Mrs. Dorothy Hazard Witherby Hunt, the Providence Urban League in 1944 secured an agreement with the Nursing School Council at Rhode Island Hospital to accept "colored applicants" for the first time.



Courtesy of Rhode Island College, James P. Adams Library, Hunt-Williams Papers.

In 1947 the Rhode Island Council for Fair Employment Practices is organized. Leaders included Senator John Fitzgerald of Newport, James Williams of the Providence Urban League, and Joseph LaCount of the Providence NAACP.

Rhode Island enacted the Fair Employment Practices Act in 1949 that declared "to foster the employment of all individuals in this state in accordance with their fullest capacities, regardless of their race or color, religion, or country of ancestral origin, and to safeguard their right to obtain and hold employment without such discrimination."

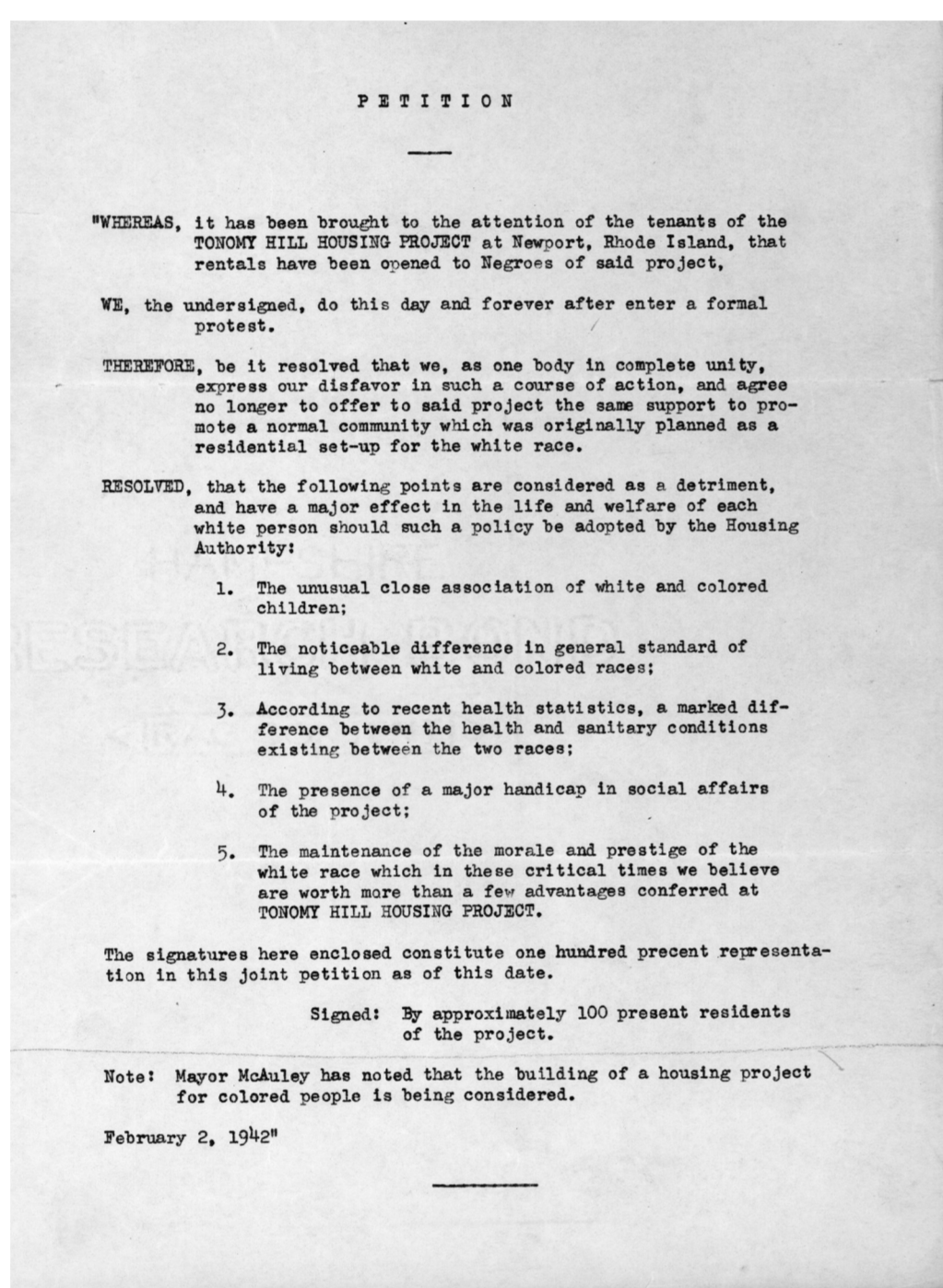


Rhode Island Historical Society, Breaking Ground, Providence, R.I. Graphics Collection: Irving Fain Photographs

Fair Housing & Urban Redevelopment 1943 - 1969

With the conclusion of WWII, veterans returned to America with hopes of securing good jobs and good housing opportunities as they led a new era of prosperity in post war America. The Housing Act of 1949 was a landmark, sweeping expansion of the federal role in the construction of public housing. The Act also provided federal funding for slum clearance programs associated with urban renewal projects in American cities. This law propelled the issue of fair housing into the center stage of civil rights efforts nationally and in Rhode Island. The Providence Urban League, along with the newly formed Rhode Island Committee Against Discrimination in Housing, received many complaints regarding the waiting time of African American residents to get into public housing in Providence.

1942 The newly built family and military housing at Tonomy Hill in Newport faced the challenge of racial integration. One hundred white residents of the public housing project signed and delivered a petition to the Newport Mayor expressing concern the project had recently opened rentals to Negroes. The petition stated five points to be considered in their objection.



Courtesy of the Urban League of Rhode Island Collection, Providence College, Phillips Memorial Library, Special and Archival Collections

An Urban League Office was established in Newport in **1956** for the purpose of "Improving the working and living conditions of non-white citizens." Their focus was the city's urban renewal efforts within Newport's West Broadway neighborhood.

1958 The Citizens United for a Fair Housing Law was organized and led by businessman Irving J. Fain. That year, they submitted legislation "that would prohibit racial and other group discrimination in the sale or rental of private houses in the state."

500 Jam House Chamber To Hear Opponents Of Fair Housing Law

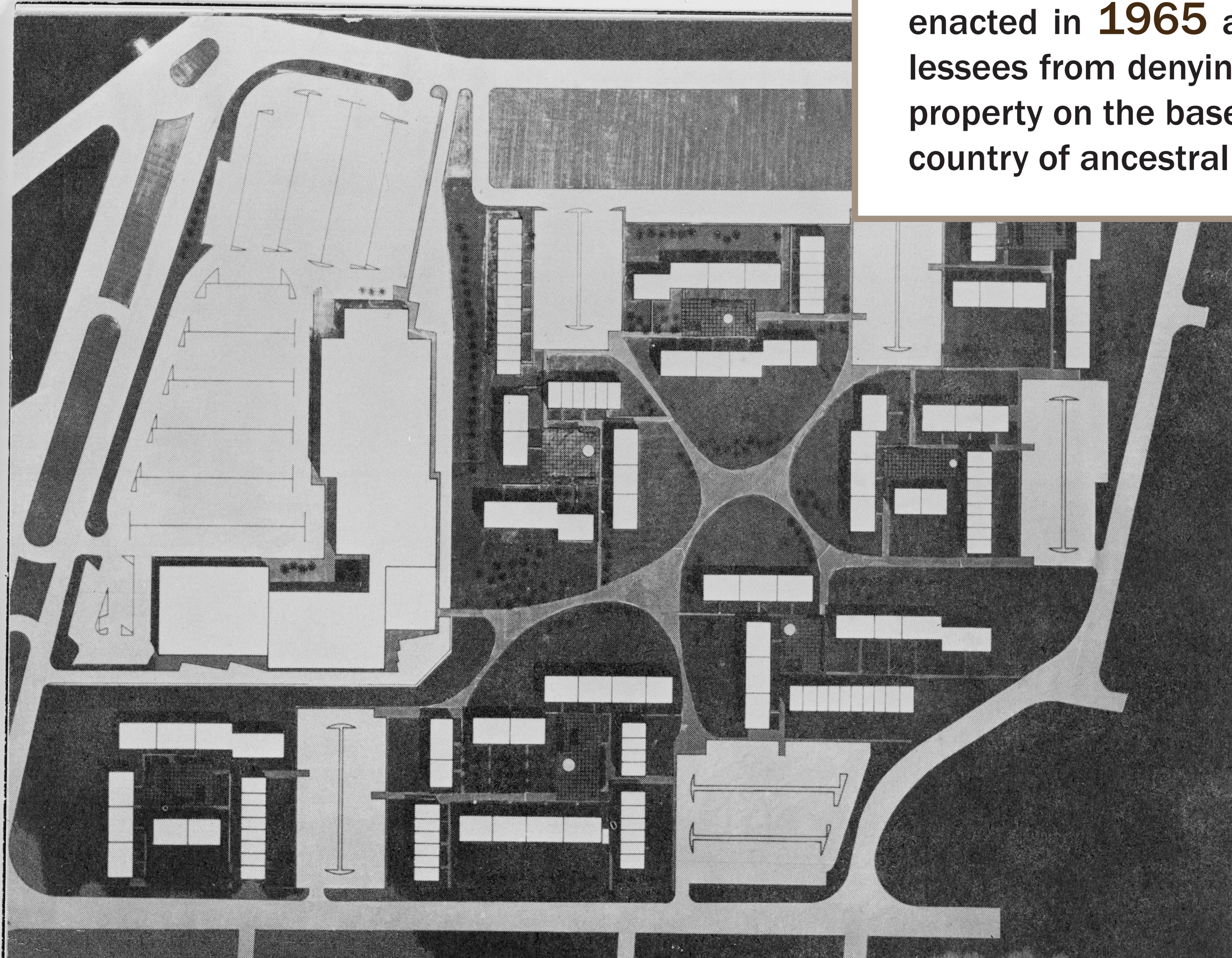
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS
PROVIDENCE — Opposition to the proposed fair housing law drew so many people to the State House last night that the hearing, scheduled in Room 311, had to be shifted to the House chamber. The chamber and galleries were jammed with speakers and spectators.

"Special to the News" The Providence Journal, 1959. Copyright (C) 2018 The Providence Journal. Reproduced by permission.

The magnitude of the opposition to fair housing was immense. In **1959** Providence attorney Robert Dresser led over 500 opponents of the Fair Housing legislation to protest at the Rhode Island State House, "a fair housing law would infringe on private property rights, legislate social progress, lower property values, and increase racial tension in the state." The points Dresser and the fair housing opponents made were chillingly similar to the 1942 petition to restrict African heritage citizens from living at the Tonomy Hill public housing project in Newport.

1963 the Providence Redevelopment Agency approved Irving Jay Fain's University Heights mix-use redevelopment plan that converted 32 acres within the Lippitt Hill neighborhood. The project was the first housing development in Rhode Island, within an urban renewal project area, that combined racial and economic integration.

The Rhode Island Fair Housing Practices Act is enacted in **1965** and prohibited owners and lessees from denying the purchase or rental of property on the bases of race, color, religion, or country of ancestral origin.



LIPPITT HILL

Rhode Island Historical Society, RHI X3 5289, Providence Redevelopment Agency, Annual Report 1963. Printed Collection: HT 177 .P9 A43 1963

Education for the Future 1967 - 1978

The 1970's started positively. The City of Providence, in 1971, was one of the earliest Northeast cities to embrace public school desegregation and the Providence School Committee presented a plan to better integrate the Senior High Schools affected by de facto segregation. This action was in great contrast to the violent response to public school integration in Boston. Possibly, the most welcome and controversial decision on Civil Rights this decade took place when the United States Supreme Court in 1978 under the "Regents of the University of California V. Bakke" upheld a landmark decision on Affirmative Action, which allowed race to be one of several factors in college admission policy. That decision not only upheld the civil rights efforts throughout the 20th century, the decade had the largest enrollment of African Americans into higher education institutions in the nation's history. African heritage citizens in Rhode Island directly benefited as they enrolled in large numbers in both public and private institutions, which led to significant social and economic advancement.

Lippitt Hill Elementary replaced two smaller Providence East Side elementary schools (one predominantly white, one predominantly black) and was consciously planned by the neighborhoods and the City to bring the two communities together. It opened in the Lippitt Hill redevelopment area in 1967. It was later re-named Martin Luther King, Jr. Elementary School.



Rhode Island Historical Society: Photograph taken by Public Archaeology Lab, Inc. for this grant, 2018

In 1966, Isadore S. Ramos became the first teacher of color at East Providence High School.

In December of 1968, Brown University students walked out of class after the University failed to make progress on demands set by students of color earlier in the year. The University president met with students and they set changes in motion to make the University more inclusive.



Rhode Island Historical Society, RHI X3 9257, [Brown University Black Student Walk Out], Providence, RI, 1969. Silver gelatin print. Graphics Collection - GB #7.

Unfinished Business

The Civil Rights Movement in America shifted the hearts, minds, and laws of our nation. In Rhode Island, the evolution of rights for all citizens is firmly rooted in the effort led by African heritage inhabitants who fought for their personal freedom in the 18th century, and for equal access to employment, housing, and education throughout the 20th century.

The challenge as we enter the 21st century is to recognize that civil rights in America and Rhode Island is still an unfinished business. Poverty, affordable housing, higher education, and criminal justice and immigration reform are issues that still impact far too many.

"I believe the day is coming is not far off, when in the commonwealth of Rhode Island, the stomping ground of soul liberty will become the home of the free and the land of the truly brave. The home of the free, where fair play in all the walks of life will be accorded."
Representative Mahlon Van Horne, 1887