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*Thomas Wilson Dorr, "optimistic democrat," from an early
daguerreotype in the possession of the Mauran family.*

Courtesy Mr. Frank Mauran, III.



From an 1881 booklet listing "Officers of the Church, Sunday School and Societies connected with the Church, and Committees for Special Church Work" comes this familiar scene.

The Relevance of Congregational Christianity: Barrington Congregational Church, 1717-1967

by William G. McLoughlin*

When Edmund Burke said on the eve of the American Revolution that the temper of the colonies was inspired by "the protestantism of Protestantism and the dissidence of dissent," he was correct. For America as a nation and a culture has been largely shaped by its Protestant heritage. And insofar as the United States today is the archetype of all modern-industrial societies, the dominant nation not only in the West but in the world, the relevance of Protestant Christianity to our culture may well reflect its relevance to the world of the future. It is frequently said these days that we are living in "a post-Christian era." We are certainly living in a world where Christianity is a minority religion and where the most explosive forces at work are the anti-Christian ideologies of Communism and nationalism. The central problem regarding the relevance of Christianity may well be whether its future is indissolubly bound to the continued world dominance of the United States. Or, to put it another way, whether Christianity is a transcendent or a culture religion.

This is a question which only the historian of the future can answer. Yet in microcosm, the history of the Barrington Congregational Church may provide a clue. A church which can trace its origins back over two hundred and fifty years in the New World is a church which has every right to say that it grew up with the country.¹ In addition, a church which was founded under the religious system of the Massachusetts Bay Colony can certainly claim an intimate relation with those aspects of Puritanism which did so much to shape

the institutions of the United States. And finally, as a Congregational church, a church which practiced democratic control of all its own affairs including its doctrinal beliefs by majority vote of the members, it has a valid claim to representing the will of the people in its actions.

What did the members of this democratically run church in a democratically run land consider the role of Christianity to be in their lives? How did they relate their religious doctrines and ethics to the secular life of their community? How did these doctrines and values alter over the centuries in order to adapt to the manifold social, economic, political, and intellectual changes which took place? How did the church respond to the increasing pluralism of America, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when later immigrants from other parts of Europe brought new religious institutions and principles into the community? To what extent has this church, as a representative of the Puritan tradition, remained in touch with its times? In short, what is and has been the relevance of the congregational form of Christianity to America as a civilization from 1717 to 1967?

Since a good historian always begins at the beginning, I shall start by trying to throw a little light upon the date when this church began. Although 1717 is the date traditionally given, it is not the only date which has been given. There are at least five other dates worth considering. The earliest of these is the year 1663 when the Rev. John Myles settled in the town of Rehoboth, Massachusetts, and began conducting worship among a

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¹ This sketch is a revised version of an address delivered at the 250th anniversary celebration of the church on November 19, 1967.

few residents.² But while the Barrington Congregational Church ultimately resulted from this beginning, there is no good reason to consider that church the mother of this. Myles' church, if it was really a church and not just a loose group of informal worshippers in 1663, was a Baptist church and as such it was ordered to be discontinued and banished from the town of Rehoboth in 1667. In October of that year the group of Baptists who had worshipped with Myles began to worship in the newly created town of Swansea, because in forming this church they permitted Congregationalists (who believed in infant baptism) to join with them as equal members, there are those who argue that the year 1667 was really the founding date of the Barrington church. Some weight is given to this claim by the fact that the meetinghouse, built at about this time in Swansea, was actually within the present boundaries of the town of Barrington, though it was another half century before Barrington became a town.³

But I am not inclined to accept this date any more than the date of 1663, because the Swansea church was still essentially a Baptist church led by a Baptist minister and, when John Myles died in 1683 his successor, Elder Samuel Luther, was chosen by the church members without fulfilling any of those requirements which orthodox Congregationalists considered essential and which the laws of Massachusetts required of all official town or parish ministers. In the first place he was not an educated man; in the second, he was ordained by the laymen of the church and not by neighboring Congregational clergymen; and in the third place he held even more strictly than John Myles to the principle of adult baptism by immersion.⁴ This became evident about the year 1705 when Luther decided that he would no longer baptize children by sprinkling and would no longer admit to communion anyone who had not been baptized by immersion as an adult. Some of the Congregationalists

who belonged to the church complained to the county court in 1707 and demanded that the authorities see that the town of Swansea hire a truly qualified Congregational minister to serve them. After all, he claimed to be the legal or official minister of Swansea. The court referred the matter to the legislature, but the legislature did nothing.⁵ So in December 1708, the Congregationalists (most of whom lived in the western part of Swansea in what is now Barrington) persuaded a Harvard graduate named John Fiske (class of 1702) who had been preaching in Attleborough to come and preach to them. But the selectmen of the town of Swansea, who were all Baptists, ordered the constable to eject Fiske from the town as a vagabond who lacked visible means of support.⁶ Some have dated the beginning of the Barrington church from the year 1708 (and some say that as early as 1700 the Congregationalists had been holding separate worship together rather than attend Luther's church which was moved that year from Tyler's Point to North Swansea). But since Fiske did not remain in town for more than a few months and there is no record of any church having been formed at this time, the date 1708 seems equally unacceptable. It should be added that the Congregationalists took the matter of Fiske's arrest to court and won their case. But Fiske evidently did not feel that he was sufficiently welcome in Swansea to stay around.

Three years later twenty-nine Congregationalists in west Swansea petitioned the legislature and asked to have their section of the town set off from Swansea as a new town.⁷ Seventy-eight Baptists petitioned against it and the effort failed. The legislature, however, encouraged the Congregationalists to form their own church in Swansea and hire their own minister. And in 1712 they did this. The man they asked to preach to them was John Wilson, a descendant of the famous John Wilson who had been pastor of the first Congregational Church in Boston in John Winthrop's

2 The best secondary sources on the origins and history of this church are Henry M. King, *Rev. John Myles* (Providence, 1905); Richard LeB. Bowen, *Early Rehoboth*, 4v. (Boston, 1945-1950); O. O. Wright, *History of Swansea* (Swansea, 1917); Isaac Backus, *History of New England with Particular Reference to the Baptists*, ed. David Weston, 2v. (Newton, 1871); Thomas W. Bicknell, *A History of Barrington* (Providence, 1898). These sources do not always agree as to dates and other details and I have, wherever possible, used original sources such as Massachusetts State Archives (Boston), records of the Bristol County Courthouse (Taunton),

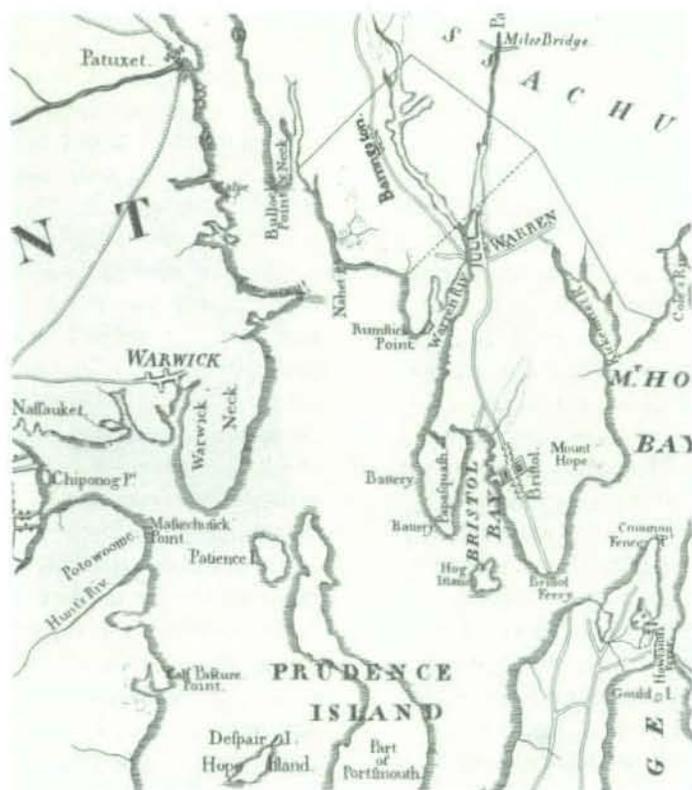
records of Swansea Baptist Church (at Brown University), records of the Barrington Congregational Church (at the church), town meeting records of Barrington and Swansea (at town clerks' offices).

3 For discussions of exact location of the early meeting houses see Bicknell, pp. 123-125, 130-132, 210-217, 469-471.

4 The best discussion of ecclesiastical law of Massachusetts and religious controversies in Swansea and Rehoboth in these years is in Susan M. Reed, *Church and State in Massachusetts, 1691-1740* (Urbana, 1914).

In 1717, as a result of the Congregationalists' petitions, the town of Barrington was finally created.

Detail adapted from *A Map of the State of Rhode Island...* by Caleb Harris (Providence, 1795).



day. This John Wilson was a graduate of the class of 1705 at Harvard and had been teaching school in Mendon.⁵ He seems to have been well-liked by the Congregationalists and they may have started building a meetinghouse for him at that time, but unfortunately he died suddenly in 1713. Although the meetinghouse was completed, there is no record of any other

preacher's coming to preach there prior to 1718. So it is a moot point as to whether the year 1712 may be taken as the founding date of the Barrington church.

As a result of numerous petitions by the Congregationalists who lived in the western part of Swansea the town of Barrington was finally created in 1717 and the Congregationalists at once set about finding a minister

5 Many of the petitions concerning the Congregationalists' discontent with Elder Luther after 1705 are to be found in Massachusetts Archives, see esp. vol. XI, 383; CXIII, 596-617. See also Bristol County Court records, General Sessions of the Peace, I: 28, 36; II: 121, 133, 150-151, 155; Swansea Town Meeting Records, I: 32-84; and Bicknell, pp. 184-186.

6 Bristol County Court Records, General Sessions of the Peace, II: 150, 151, 155.

7 The Rhode Island Historical Society recently obtained a MS. copy of this petition. See also the variants of it in Massachusetts Archives, CXIII: 596-599, 613-617 and in Bicknell, pp. 187-193.

8 See Clifford K. Shipton, *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*, 14v. (Cambridge, 1873-1968), V: 300-301; Bicknell mistakenly refers to him as James Wilson, p. 201.

for the town. Now that they had the legal machinery of a town and parish behind them, it was much easier to find a minister.⁹ For now they could lay taxes upon all inhabitants of the town to pay the salary of the minister and the upkeep on the meetinghouse. The man they chose was Samuel Terry, a graduate of Harvard in the class of 1710. He had previously preached for a time in Hebron, Connecticut. The date of his being called to this church was April 21, 1718. The date of his ordination was November 1720.¹⁰ These are about all the facts available about the beginning of this church, and anyone is free to choose his own founding date from among the many which have been suggested. Certainly the year 1717 is as appropriate as any, though a purist would probably choose the date of 1712 when the church was first constituted and began to act as a congregation in formulating church policy, i.e., choosing a minister and erecting a meetinghouse.

In the town of Barrington, Massachusetts, in the year 1717, no one asked if this church was relevant. Its relevance was assumed in principle and guaranteed by law. Massachusetts was then a Bible Commonwealth. Its rulers believed that Church and State were "coordinate" institutions, each ordained by God, to see that His will was done throughout the boundaries of the colony. No one then had any doubts about what the will of God was. It was defined in Scripture, expounded in the *Institutes* of John Calvin, codified in the Westminster Confession of Faith, and embodied into the laws of Massachusetts Bay in the Cambridge Platform and an elaborate system of ecclesiastical statutes. These statutes not only required that every town at all times be provided with a meetinghouse and an "able, learned, and orthodox" minister, but they defined just how he was to be chosen, how he was to be paid, and how the inhabitants of every town were to behave so as to heed his preaching. Church attendance was required of all inhabitants; social behavior was regulated to protect the sanctity of the Sabbath and to prevent the taking of the Lord's name in vain. Men being totally depraved and subjects of Satan until they

had experienced the grace of God, laws were strictly enforced to keep their wicked passions in check and to save them from temptations which might ensnare them in erroneous behavior or heretical thinking. The stocks and the whipping post were public reminders of the extent to which the civil magistrate was ready to go to uphold his responsibility as a "nursing father" to the church and a terror to evil doers.

Even in 1717, almost a century after the first settlement in New England, there was only very limited toleration for dissent from the established Puritan way of life. The founders of the Congregational church in Barrington saw nothing wrong with requiring the twenty Baptist families who lived there to pay religious taxes to keep the Congregational meetinghouse in repair and pay the salary of the Congregational minister. Baptists, Quakers, and Episcopalians could worship in their own misguided ways if they wished; they might have that much liberty of conscience. But they must acknowledge through their taxes that the Congregational church was the one established by law to inculcate and sustain the spiritual and moral values of the community.¹¹ (The rationale was not unlike that used today to require Romans Catholics to support public schools even though they may maintain that in conscience they cannot send their children to such schools.) It is significant that in 1717 this was not known as the Congregational Church of Barrington but as *the* Church of Christ in Barrington. All other sects were dissenters from this true church and their presence was suffered only as a necessary evil because the King no longer allowed the Puritans to banish those who differed from them in religion. It is ironic that this Puritan church eventually found itself within the boundaries of the state founded by Roger Williams.

Unfortunately we must begin our history of this church by pointing out a fact which its previous historians have tactfully neglected to mention. That is that the Congregationalists who had complained so bitterly about the way Elder Luther and the Baptists of Swansea had infringed upon their rights of conscience,

9 For the act incorporating the town see the *Acts and Resolves of the Province of Massachusetts Bay* (Boston, 1869-1922), IX: 563.

10 Shipton-Sibley, V: 542-543; Bicknell mistakenly refers to him as Samuel Terrey, pp. 202-204.

11 For a good discussion of Massachusetts laws regarding the established (Congregational) churches see Susan Reed.

12 See Barrington Town Records, I: 3 (April 2, 1718); Bristol County Court Records, General Sessions of the Peace, III: 63; Bicknell, pp. 247-248.

*Stocks and whipping post were a public reminder of the civil magistrate's accepted responsibility as a "nursing father" to the church and a terror to evil doers. The artist shows an "evil doer" in the stocks near the early Barrington Meeting House in an illustration from Thomas W. Bicknell's *Sowams* (New Haven, 1908).*



now turned upon the Baptist minority in Barrington and proceeded to ignore their claims of conscience. When the first tax was laid in 1718 to pay the salary of Samuel Terry, twenty-one Baptists living in the town protested that it was unfair to tax them since they attended Samuel Luther's church and supported him.¹² The town ignored their petition and decided to make an example of one of them. He was arrested in 1719 for refusing to pay his tax and sent to jail. He paid under protest and then sued the constable for false arrest. The court decided against him, and thereafter the Baptists were required to pay taxes to support Congregationalism until the year 1728.¹³ At that time, again under pressure from the King, the legislature voted that Baptists, Quakers, and Anglicans could be exempted from paying to support Congregationalism if they provided a certificate saying they were bona fide

members of a church of their own persuasion and paid to support it.

There are also records which indicate that in the years 1729 to 1734 a number of Episcopalians who lived in Barrington but attended churches of their denomination in Bristol and Providence were taxed to support the Congregational church in Barrington and when they refused to pay such a tax their property was distrained and sold at auction by the constable to pay it.¹⁴ These Episcopalians petitioned the King for assistance through the auspices of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. Their complaints were answered by the passage of a new Massachusetts law in 1735 granting broader toleration to Episcopalians.¹⁵

The ministers who led the Barrington Congregational Church in the eighteenth century were all Harvard graduates. They were all good, if moderate, Calvinists. And all of them appear to have deplored the results of the Great Awakening of the 1740s and the revival fervor of men like Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. To a Harvard man, the emotionalism of revival meetings was a disgusting form of religious enthusiasm. The Rev. Solomon Townsend (Harvard, 1735) who was pastor of the Barrington church when the revival occurred, signed a statement (with other anti-revival pastors in the area) which read, "It appeareth to us that the Devil with all his cunning could not take a more direct step to overthrow these churches, hurt religion and souls of men," than George Whitefield has taken.¹⁶

What Townsend opposed in Whitefield was the tendency of his preaching "to strike the passions," "to insinuate that unconverted ministers could do little or no good to souls," to say that "most of your ministers are unconverted," and to urge the people "to separate from them and seek better help" from fanatical revival preachers. Perhaps Townsend and his colleagues were particularly peeved because Whitefield singled out their alma mater as the den of iniquity from which false and unconverted preachers were sent out to lead souls to

13 Bristol Superior Court Records, session of April 1719, p. 176; Barrington Town Records, I: 8 (February 4, 1719/20); Bicknell, pp. 203-204.

14 For a group of affidavits certifying that Anglican communicants in Barrington and Rehoboth were being taxed and distrained in 1731 even though they attended Anglican services regularly in Bristol or Providence see

microfilm of records of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts at Lamont Library, Harvard University; originals are in Fulham Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, England, V: 65-66.

15 See Susan Reed, pp. 183-189.

16 Shipton-Sibley, IX: 585-587.

Revivalist George Whitefield whose emotional fervor was denounced by the Rev. Solomon Townsend.

Engraving by Daggett and Ely from a portrait by Hone, *Memoirs of Rev. George Whitefield* by John Gillies (Middletown, 1837).



hell. Townsend may have had a soft spot in his heart for Harvard because the college gave him his degree despite the fact that he was once fined ten shillings as an undergraduate for playing at cards and dice and despite the fact that he was once made to confess publicly that he was "prodigiously and scandalously slothfull and negligent in his studies."¹⁷ It is often the worst undergraduates who turn into the most loyal alumni. At any rate, the Barrington church members seem to have agreed with Townsend and to have

preferred his moderate "Old Light" Calvinism to the more strict evangelical Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards and the New Lights. Barrington then, and for most of its history, never worried about being fifty years or so behind the times. They were still praising their old pastor when he passed away in 1796 on the eve of the Second Great Awakening, which the church also found deplorable.

We have only one extant sermon preached by any minister of this church in the eighteenth century (by Solomon Townsend in 1771) and that does not shed much light on its history.¹⁸ But we do know that the church and its pastors followed the moderate position of those churches which practiced the Halfway Covenant, allowing persons of good behavior and moral character to join the church even if they had not experienced a crisis conversion.¹⁹ From their opposition to New Light enthusiasm we may infer that they preferred order and stability to zeal and excitement. Undoubtedly, like most other Congregational churches in these years, the churchgoers were assigned to pews in terms of their wealth and social rank in the community, so that a man could always measure his social standing by his nearness to the pulpit on Sunday mornings. Since religious taxes to support the church were laid proportionately, the rich felt they had the right to the best pews.

Barrington did not have more than one hundred families in it during the eighteenth century. In 1776 the population was about six hundred of whom twenty-two were slaves or black apprentices. Like most New England communities it was predominantly an agricultural economy with a small fishing, shipbuilding, and coastal trade. Even the Revolution did not greatly shake the town, though its inhabitants lived in constant fear that the British, who had occupied Newport in 1777, might move up the bay and attack them at any time.

Nor did the transfer of the town from the jurisdiction of Massachusetts to that of Rhode Island in 1747 produce any significant alterations in its way of life. There is even some evidence that the town continued

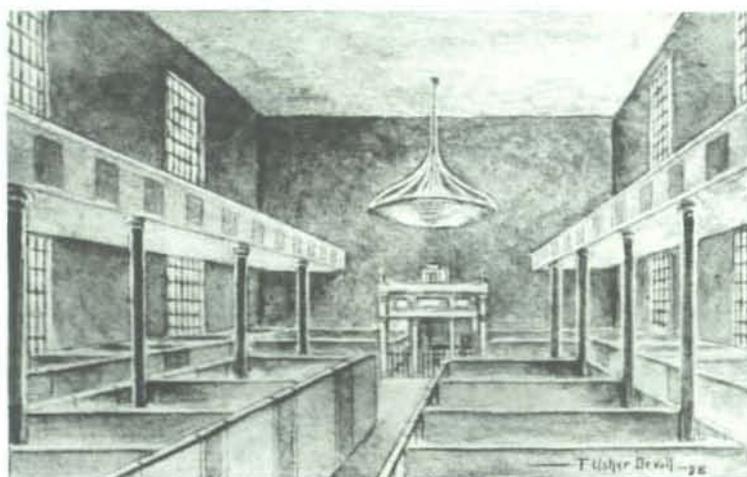
17 Bicknell, pp. 225-228.

18 Solomon Townsend, *A Sermon Preached in Dr. Stiles's Meeting* (Newport, 1771).

19 For these and other details concerning the church's creed and practices see Barrington church records and miscellaneous papers.

"... a man could always measure his social standing by his nearness to the pulpit on Sunday mornings" in this old Congregational Meeting-house.

Drawing from Sowams . . . by Thomas W. Bicknell (New Haven, 1908).



to practice the customary Massachusetts system of voting public tax money to support the Congregational meetinghouse and minister until the year 1797 (although non-Congregationalists were no longer required to pay).²⁰ Political boundaries do not change social mores.

In the eighteenth century there was no question of the relevance of Congregational Christianity to the town, for the church, the congregation and the town formed a single, closely integrated unit. There were no other places of worship and no conflicting creeds. Even the Baptists were Calvinists. Calvinism was not an easy creed and the God of Calvinism was neither easy to love or to obey. But its tenets were well suited to the temper of life in a rural, seacoast New England town. Even had the law not required it, most people would have attended the town service every Sunday and the Thursday evening lecture.

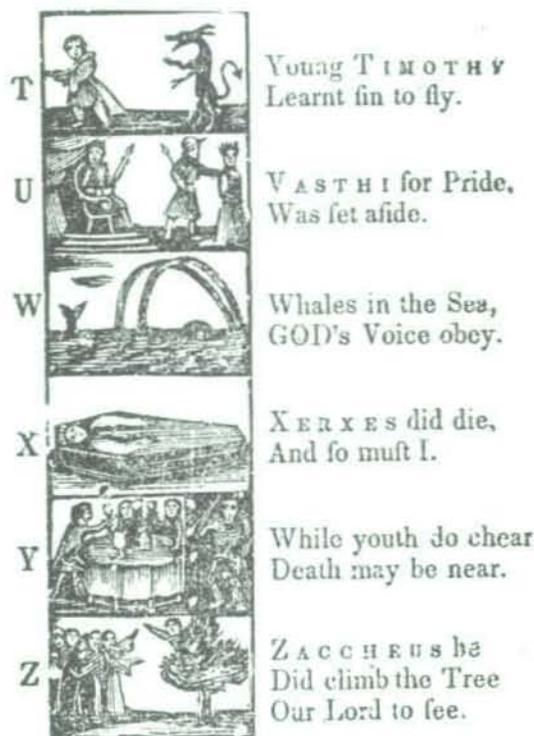
By common agreement the chief end of man was to glorify God. Belief in the sovereignty of God, the

predestination of the elect, and the total depravity of the unregenerate was accepted without question. The Bible said these things were so and the most learned men of the times could prove it to any doubter. The most important event in anyone's life was the moment when he received assurance from God that he was among the elect and that he would spend eternity in heaven rather than hell. Since God alone was responsible for saving souls, there was no jealousy of those favored few whom He, through his arbitrary grace, designated to be His church. But the proof of visible sainthood had to be tested to the satisfaction of the minister and the other visible saints in an oral examination. The principal criterion for sainthood was the Biblical one, "By their fruits ye shall know them," and in that small community it was hard for a man to hide anything about his life from his neighbors.

The church was the heart and soul of the community. Its members were bound by a covenant with God to walk together in His ways, "lovingly

²⁰ See Bicknell, pp. 432-434. Since compulsory religious taxation could not be practiced in Rhode Island the sums levied by the town for the support of the church were obviously assessed only upon the members of the congregation.

School children learned religion with their ABC's from *The New England Primer*. This page is from a Boston imprint of 1777.



watching over one another and watchfully avoiding sinful stumbling blocks and contention and whatever has any tendency to violate our peace and hurt our charity and bring strife and division . . . as becomes a people whom the Lord has bound up together in a bundle of life."²¹ Church members who committed a sin were subject to censure and excommunication if they failed to confess and repent publicly. Since excommunication meant deprivation of the right to take communion with God and abandonment to Satan, there were few who did not repent and confess.

The congregation too had an important part to play in the life of the church, and in those days virtually everyone who lived in the town constituted the congregation, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, black and white. It was the right and duty of the congregation to have a concurrent voice in the choice or dismissal of a pastor since it was the congregation which paid the taxes for his support. It was the congregation which chose and paid the schoolmasters. The schools themselves were essentially parochial schools, taught by schoolmasters whose orthodoxy had to be certified by the town's minister. The school children learned religion with their ABC's from "In Adam's fall we sinned all" to "Zacchaeus he, did climb a tree, our Lord to see." The shorter catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith was taught to children in the school, the church, and the home, and the minister frequently tested youngsters of all ages to make sure that they had learned its Calvinistic doctrines.

Although the secular affairs of the town were kept separate, so as to maintain the independent autonomy of the church, it was symbolic that even here the coordinate nature of church and state was indicated by the fact that the meetinghouse for worship also served as the town hall for secular business.

Anyone today who walks through the old graveyard of the town with its slate tombstones engraved with winged skulls, hour glasses, and scythes, will quickly be convinced (if he reads their epitaphs) that the Calvinist's main attention was focused upon his place in the next world to which the church directed him. If Calvinism was a stern creed so was the life they lived. Farming was hard and subject to the hazards of nature; fishing and shipping were dangerous; money and labor were scarce. The whole family had to work together from dawn to dusk just to make ends meet. Health was precarious, accidents were common, doctors were few, and medicine was in its infancy. No man, woman or child went through life without experiencing pain not once, but many times. The mortality rate was high and the psychic strains were as great as the

21 See first pages of Barrington Congregational Church records.

During the 1800s the focus of Barrington Congregational Church "became increasingly this-worldly." A church picnic at Stanley's Grove in the late 1880s suggests the members' interest in modes and manners of the time.

Photograph from Bicknell Collection, RIHS Library.

physical; epidemics periodically swept away whole generations in one family.

But if it was not an easy life, it was a well-structured and well-ordered one. The laws of the land, the social and moral code of the community, and the teachings of the one true church each complemented and re-enforced one another. Everyone knew his place in the town and in the church, and whatever the crises and mysteries of life a firm and steady faith in the justice and mercy of God sustained young and old, knitting them together in communion and community. It was a theocentric society more than able to meet the difficulties of this world because of its belief in the world to come.

But during the second century of its history, the nineteenth century, the Barrington Congregational Church, like most American churches, went through a strange metamorphosis. Its focus became increasingly this-worldly or anthropocentric. It gradually lost its sense of community. And most important it lost much, though not all, of that transcendent quality which had maintained a dynamic tension between Christ and culture. Thomas Jefferson called his election in 1800 "the second American Revolution." It marked more than the death of the Federalist Party. It marked the end of that carefully structured social system which had divided society into upper and lower orders. It

transformed the old Calvinistic ethic of stewardship into the gospel of wealth and the success myth. It created a fluid, flexible, fluctuating, mobile social system where the individual replaced the community as the most important unit in the commonwealth. Instead of order, harmony, stability and corporate-Christian state, America became an atomistic society in which progress, change, expansion, and laissez-faire were the touch-stones of the pursuit of happiness. It was a society in which Calvinism and the older Puritan way of life were out-of-date. And in this new climate Congregational Christianity had to struggle to maintain not only its relevance but its meaning.

It is probably not significant that the pastor who brought the Barrington church into the nineteenth century was a Brown graduate. The church did not turn to Harvard after Solomon Townsend's death for a simple reason. Harvard had by then become the stronghold of Unitarianism, and the Barrington church remained Trinitarian and, to a certain extent, Calvinistic throughout most of the century. During that century the church had a hectic time of it. It was often without a pastor; quarreling vehemently with those it did get, it ordained a total of eleven different pastors between 1798 and 1899. They came from Brown, Yale, Dartmouth, Williams, Princeton, and places unknown to the record. Samuel Watson, the Brown-educated



pastor chosen in 1798, was the last of the Old Light Calvinists.²² He was also probably the last minister who did not mind having a glass of wine or rum with his friends. After he left, the church got caught up in the temperance movement and did not rest until the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment banished John Barleycorn and demon rum from the nation. It may be noted too that it was under the aegis of Samuel Watson that the church applied for and received permission to conduct a lottery so that it could raise funds for the building in which it still worships.²³ But after Watson's departure the sin of gambling became as heinous as the sin of drinking.

Though Watson technically brought the church into the nineteenth century, it was really his successor in 1818, Luther Wright, who started the church on its new path of Evangelical Calvinism which it was to follow for the next 120 years. While the church by no means repudiated Calvinism, it gradually began to redefine it. This can be seen in the many efforts of the church to revise its covenant and articles of faith during the nineteenth century. The fact that under Luther Wright's preaching the church experienced its first revival, which led to the addition of 88 new members in one year, indicates that the Evangelical mood of the Second Great Awakening had some impact upon this church. The new articles of faith which Luther Wright persuaded the church to adopt in 1817 seemed to de-emphasize the doctrine of predestination, but the reluctance of the church to abandon the famous five points of Calvinism can be seen in the articles of faith adopted in 1842 and 1852.²⁴

The principal differences between the Calvinism of the eighteenth century and the Evangelicalism of the nineteenth were in regard to freedom of the will. Evangelical Calvinists admitted that men had some part to play in their own salvation; they emphasized the Biblical text, "Whosoever will shall be saved." They came to believe that protracted revival meetings led by professional revivalists were one of the means by which God hoped to save souls in large numbers and thereby make the United States a truly Christian nation. They believed that God wanted soul-saving

evangelists and missionaries to travel throughout the world preaching to the heathen in order to hasten the coming of the millennium. And perhaps most significant of all, they ceased to emphasize the distinctions among denominations and the heresies of all churches but their own, and instead they emphasized the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith which all denominations held in common — namely the miraculous birth, death, and resurrection of Christ, and his imminent Second Coming.

This shift in emphasis is well illustrated in the articles of faith adopted by the church in 1852 which state, "We believe all who are true Christians and have been regularly baptized of whatever evangelical denomination, should hold fellowship with each other at the Sacramental table." In short, the church gave up its exclusive faith in Calvinistic doctrines as the test of orthodoxy and adopted a policy of open communion with all Christians who claimed to have experienced conversion. By the 1880s Methodists and Baptists were being admitted to the church by letters of dismission.

Nevertheless it must also be pointed out that the articles of faith adopted in 1842 and 1852 stressed a continued belief in predestination, in original sin, and in total depravity — at least in theory. And the fact that the church chose a Princeton graduate as its pastor in 1874 indicates that it also had no truck with Darwinism and the higher criticism of the Bible. Until well into the twentieth century the Barrington Congregational Church practiced an evangelicalism which it called Calvinism, but which by 1900 was known as "the old-time religion." Having been led by Luther Wright to abandon its earlier opposition to revivalism, it experienced a long series of periodic revivals throughout the century and came to accept them as the basic purpose and function of the church. At times the church even employed or supported professional evangelists to assist its pastor in more efficient campaigns of soul-saving than he was thought to be capable of.

This was typical of most rural churches in nineteenth-century America, and Barrington remained throughout that century essentially a small rural town.

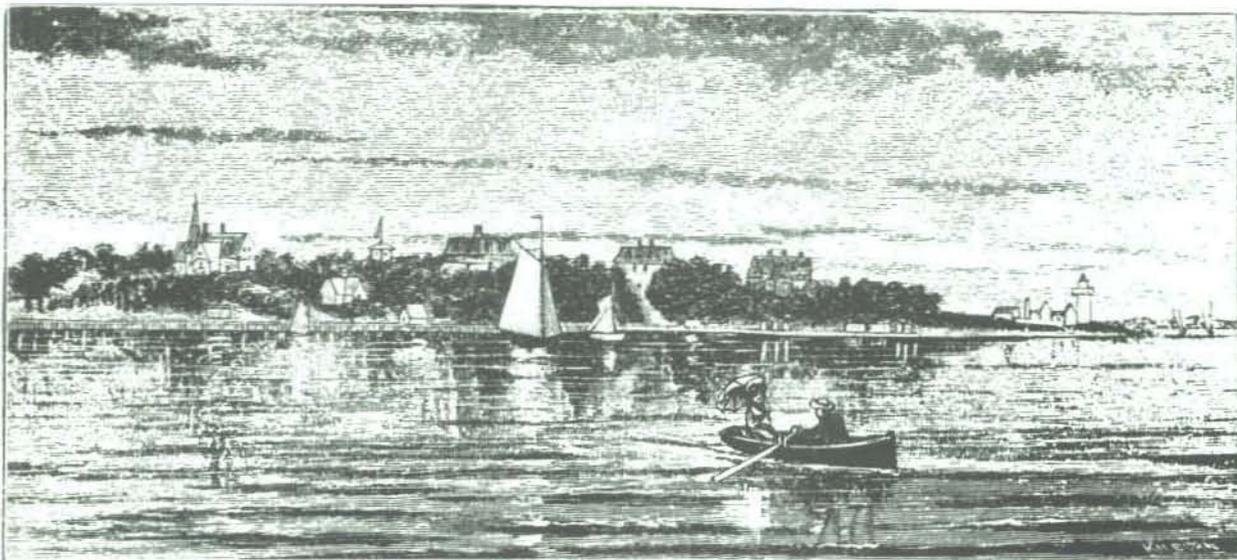
22 These ministers and their problems are all described in Bicknell, pp. 199-241.

23 Lotteries had previously been conducted by the church in 1772 and 1798. Bicknell, p. 436-437.

24 See records and miscellaneous papers of Barrington Congregational Church and Society.

After 1872, summer tourists made Barrington something of a resort area.

Engraving from Picturesque Rhode Island by Wilfred H. Munro (Providence, 1881).



Its population increased from roughly 650 persons in 1800 to 1,135 in 1900.²⁵ Despite the establishment of a large brick factory in 1847, and the coming of the railroad in 1855, the town remained isolated from the industrial revolution which transformed most of Rhode Island in these years. No major textile mill was established here; the shipbuilding and fishing industries died down rather than expanded. The principal new source of wealth and enterprise in the town came from the summer tourists who made the town something of a resort area after the building of the Nayatt Hotel in 1872. It is significant that when the Rev. Norman Plass was induced to become pastor here in 1896, he stated that he had accepted because, having only recently recovered from a long illness, he "desired the quiet of a country charge."²⁶

The various quarrels which rent the church from time to time were typical of those which most small New England churches with conservative evangelical ministers faced in these years. The principal quarrels

were over the small salary of the minister and the stinginess with which it was paid. It is no secret that the first minister of that century received the princely sum of \$250 a year and the last one, hired in 1899, received \$800 per year. Yet in a rural town of this size even this limited amount of cash was hard to raise, and in depression years it often fell in arrears. There were other quarrels concerning the care and expense of the parsonage, the treatment of the minister's wife, and the changes in ritual or church discipline over the years. The Dorr Rebellion, which split families throughout Rhode Island in the 1830s and forties was of course over the extension of the suffrage, and the trouble it caused this church was not related to religion.

Despite its troubles, however, the church continued to grow. All of the pastors agreed with the remarks made by the Rev. Thomas Noyes in his sermon at the ordination of Luther Wright in 1817; the minister's "business," he said, "is to dispense the word of life to perishing sinners, to open the glorious plan, state the

25 For population statistics see Bicknell, p. 523.

26 See Plass's letter of resignation dated December 18, 1898, in miscellaneous papers of Barrington Congregational Church.

precious terms of salvation and beseech sinners, in Christ's stead, to accept the offers of mercy. It is their duty, their privilege, their glory, to preach a crucified Savior as the only foundation of hope . . . Their employment is to plead the cause of God and truth . . . They will seek therefore to allure by the love of Christ, persuade by his arguments, or alarm by the threatenings of his gospel.²⁷ In other words, they were to save souls by promises of heaven or threats of hellfire, but their main business was to save souls.

Besides producing the first evangelical revival in Barrington in 1820, Luther Wright also introduced the church to two of its primary nineteenth-century interests – Sunday schools and missionary endeavor. His successors increasingly involved the church in evangelistic and missionary work, moral reform activities, and charities. Beginning in 1853 the church records indicate a growing number of donations by the church to evangelical enterprises and missionary societies. Simply to list these will indicate their scope and variety: the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, the Woman's Board of Foreign Missions, the American and Foreign Christian Union, the American Tract Society, the American Home Mission Society, the Bible and Tract Society, the American Education Society, the African Aid Society. Beginning in 1844 a Ladies Sewing Circle was formed to raise money for missionaries and in 1873 the Social Workers Society and Women's Foreign Missionary Society succeeded it. One of the most cherished enterprises of this church from 1874 until the 1920s was the support of Dr. Harriet Parker's missionary hospital in Madras, India.²⁸

In addition to promoting soul winning throughout America and the world, the church raised money to support the American Sunday School Union, the Congregational Church Building Society, and the Christian Endeavor movement. In the 1880s it raised money for Thanksgiving baskets for the poor. In 1886 it gave money to the Rhode Island Hospital. After 1870 it sent delegates to YMCA and temperance conventions and joined the Rhode Island Temperance Union. By

the end of the century it was supporting the Women's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League.

Equally typical of evangelical church activity, and equally misguided, was the amount of money this church and others devoted to missionary work in what were called euphemistically "nominal Christian lands," by which was meant Roman Catholic countries in Europe. The Barrington Congregational Church seems to have been as interested in saving the French from the Pope as the Africans from witch-doctors.

But while the church gained vitality in some respects from its activist pursuit of moral reform and soul winning, it lost vitality in other ways. For example, after 1850 the church virtually ceased to exercise any spiritual discipline over its own members. Only three cases of censure and excommunication occurred in the half century between 1850 and 1900 and it was unheard of after that date. Obviously the old sense of a covenant of visible saints dedicated to maintaining a pure church faded away. Each individual was left to look after his own moral welfare. It was more important to reform and save the world than to keep the church itself pure. Perhaps this may have been the result of a greater sense of charity and unwillingness to sit in judgment on others. In part it may have resulted from the increasing size of the church, which grew from 78 members in 1817 to about 200 in 1900. But it gave the impression that the church cared less for the saved than the unsaved and that its corporate unity was better suited for fund-raising than for Christian fellowship.

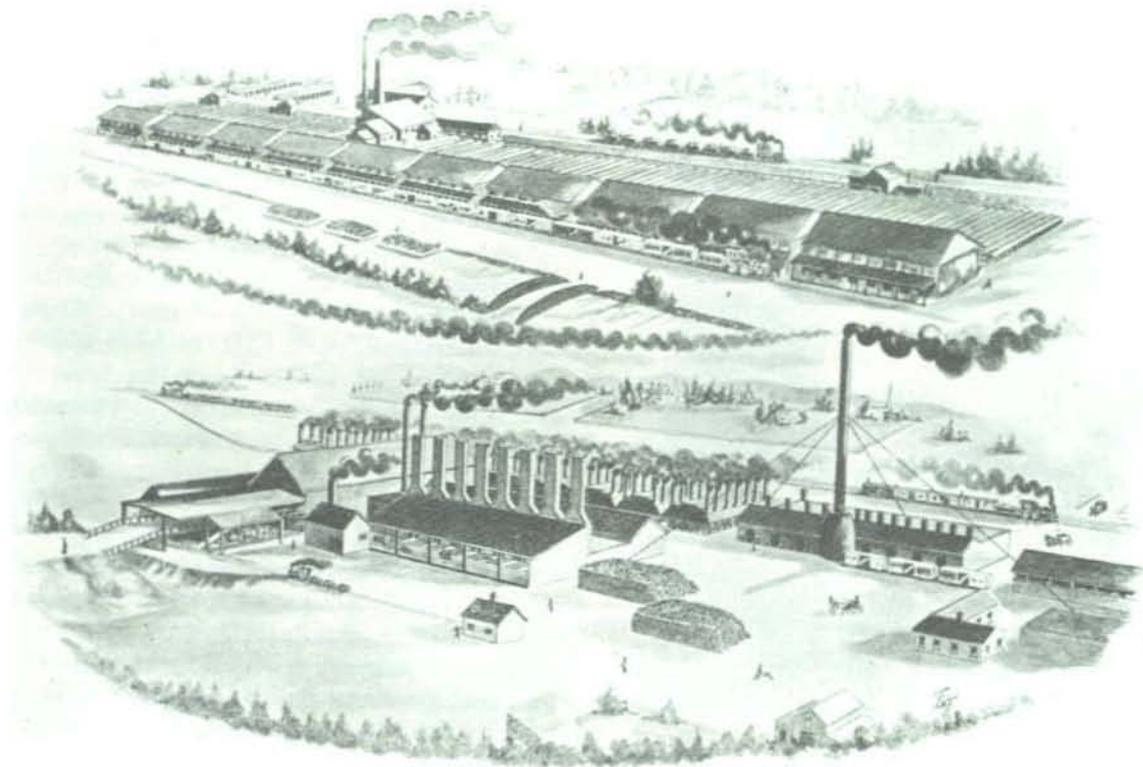
During this same period the church suffered serious losses in terms of its integral relationship with the town. For one thing the meetinghouse ceased to serve as the town hall after 1856, thereby breaking the last link between church and state. But more important the congregation of the church ceased to coincide with the total population of the town. In 1858 St. John's Episcopal Church was formed and ten years later a Methodist Church was founded. At the same time the founding of the brick factory brought in a large number

27 Thomas Noyes, *A Sermon Preached at Barrington, R.I., January 28, 1817* (Providence, 1817).

28 Barrington church papers contain many references to these activities including the annual donations for each, and are the source for the following references.

Barrington's brick factory signalled the community's transformation into "a pluralistic society."

Sketch from Rhode Island Industries, 1636-1904 (Providence, 1904).



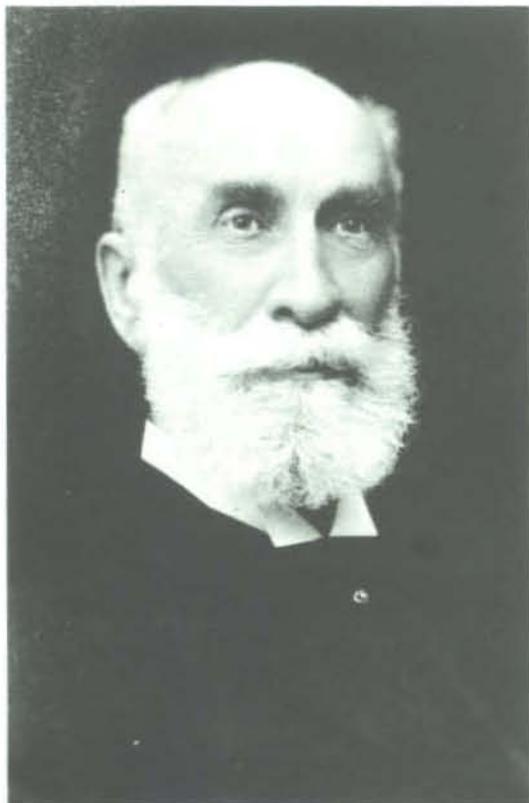
of French Canadians who were Roman Catholics and who shared none of the old values of the church and town. Barrington had at last become a pluralistic society. When the town began to attract Italian immigrants in the 1890s the Barrington Congregational Church tried to attract these "nominal Christians" into its fold. The records of the church's Sunday school for 1894 note that "Early in the month of March a class was formed in the school, with brother Kendall teacher, known as the Italian class. For a time all went well but

they soon abandoned the School and the problem how to reach this class of people effectually still remains a serious and complex one."²⁹ One suspects that the Italian parents had the mistaken notion that the Sunday school was a place where their children would be taught English, and when they found that they were being inculcated with Protestantism, they drew back in horror.

At the same time that the church faced the problem of pluralism it also faced the problem of transiency.

²⁹ Sunday School records.

Thomas Williams Bicknell, author.



The stable rural community began to break up. Many old families died out or moved away. New members came and went. By the end of the century the ministers were finding it difficult to become acquainted with their flock. Some new members never came to church. Others came too seldom to make themselves known. When the deacons looked into the question of absentees, they found that many listed as members had moved away years ago.

The increasing mobility of the community, the fluidity of its membership, and the loss of homogeneity in the town produced a sense of malaise among the old

Yankee families who had been the mainstay of the church and the town for almost two centuries. As they saw the old social order slipping away they sought to find ways to preserve it. It was in the declining years of the century that patriotic societies, historical societies, and genealogical societies began to proliferate throughout New England. Barrington had more than its share of these. One old Yankee, a leading member of the church, Thomas W. Bicknell, collected all the materials he could find about the origins of the church and town to write its 600-page formal history. It is of course a eulogy of the Yankee founders and revolutionary heroes. It served to solidify the image of the church as an old Yankee stronghold, thereby helping to perpetuate the cleavages which existed. By 1900 the church was well on its way to being a middle-class church. Bicknell maintained in his book, which was published in 1898, that Barrington "has become a suburban town and most of the business people of the town transact their various enterprises in Providence."

But while the town may have taken on some of the aspects of a bedroom suburb by 1898, the Barrington Congregational Church continued to reflect the views of rural New England. It showed little interest in the Social Gospel movement and none in Modernism or Liberal Protestantism. It continued to expound the evangelical doctrines of the old-time religion until late in the 1930s. Although it did not descend into the depths of the Fundamentalist movement, its pastors during the first third of the twentieth century seemed content to preach the same doctrines and pursue the same course as their nineteenth-century predecessors. The dominating figure in the church in this period was Deacon Frederick Church who had been chosen to this post in 1874; he was still thinking in the same terms in the year 1937.

Probably the most significant new action undertaken by the church in these years was its effort to help Negro education in the South. Like most northern churches it was aroused by the plight of the freed slaves after 1865 to send aid to the South. Prior to 1900 this had consisted primarily of annual barrels of clothing, food,

and supplies. But in the twentieth century it began to send contributions to three Negro schools, Cotton Valley School in Alabama, Pleasant Valley Academy in Tennessee, and Tillotson College in Austin, Texas. The church also expressed its dislike for the action taken by President Woodrow Wilson in 1913 when he ordered the segregation of all Negro employees in the federal government. The church sent an official letter to the President protesting against this.

But by and large the moral reform and missionary interests of the church followed the same lines prior to 1937 that they had throughout the nineteenth century. Foreign missionary efforts were aided in India, China, Africa, France, and Alaska, and home missionary work received annual gifts. The church devoted a considerable part of its time to the prohibition movement, giving special support to the efforts of the Anti-Saloon League in its successful fight for a constitutional amendment. And of course it did its best to prevent the increasing secularization of the Sabbath by opposing the legalization of Sunday baseball in 1917 and Sunday movies in 1923.

World War I had the baneful effect upon this church which it did on most churches in America. It produced an hysterical wave of patriotic fervor which finally culminated in the long movement to equate the future of Christianity with the destiny of the United States of America. A statement in the church records notes that one Sunday evening in 1917 an address on Home Missions was given by Mrs. Cornelius H. Patton, president of the Massachusetts and Rhode Island Home Mission Association. She stated that "the underlying principles of the women of missionary societies are loyalty, faith and patriotism . . ." A year later on May 30, 1918, the church voted to "declare its loyalty to the great moral aims of our nation in this national struggle, as they have been set forth by the President." For too many Americans it is still true that to be a good Christian is to be a good patriot and vice versa. This form of Congregational Christian relevancy was a far cry from the Puritans' errand into the wilderness, though to some it seemed a logical consequence.

The church continued to worry about Christianizing or Americanizing the Italians in Barrington during the early years of the century. The Rev. Alfred W. Budd noted upon his resignation from the pastorate in 1911: "The Italian problem which has been much upon my heart and mind remained unsolved. I could wish that the citizens of Barrington might see it as a work involving future citizens as well as putting forth efforts for their Christianizing."³⁰ A year later the Standing Committee of the Church decided, "It was thought advisable to have an Italian resident of Providence come down and talk with our church people to consult with the Italians of the town to ascertain if they desire some effort to be made for them along educational and social lines." Evidently the Italians expressed no interest in being evangelically educated or "Christianized," and the matter received no further attention.

Meanwhile some changes were taking place within the church itself. In 1890, after a five-year debate, the church agreed to use responsive readings in the services. In 1903 the Thursday evening meetings were dropped for lack of attendance, and about this time the Sunday afternoon services were abandoned, leaving church attendance at one hour per week. In 1904 a concession was made to the microbe discoveries of Louis Pasteur and the church voted to use individual communion cups instead of the old communal vessel. To raise money for the higher salary of the minister (which in 1911 was up to \$1000 a year) the church began to charge annual rent for the pews, a practice which continued until 1942. And in 1926 the church added a professional director of education to relieve the pastor of the task of running the Sunday school.

Still the mobility of the members kept the church in a state of flux and under the last of the Evangelical ministers, the Rev. A. Lincoln Bean, the average church attendance fell to about 35 persons a week, fluctuating between a low of twenty and a high of 200 (at Christmas). Few young people joined the church during his ministry from 1921 to 1937, but his was the fate of most churches during the Jazz Age and the

30 Budd's letter of resignation, dated February 18, 1911.

Depression Era. Most of H. L. Mencken's jibes at Christianity were directed precisely at churches like this one. Nevertheless, upon the retirement of Mr. Bean in 1937, the venerable and faithful deacon, Fred Church, said in praise of his ministry:

I congratulate you in an era when many a religious leader and pastor has condoned the modernistic idea of humanism, thereby robbing the Son of God of his Deity, his redemptive power, making him only a good man . . . that you have never . . . created a doubt in any of the minds of your flock of the reality of the evangelistic note, but your messages have ever rang true the Gospel message . . . [and] your opposition to the liquor traffic has been well known.³¹

With the hiring of the Rev. John Kettelle as pastor in 1937, the Barrington Congregational Church entered into a new era. For Kettelle was obviously and frankly a Liberal Protestant, a Modernist. Missionary activity declined and the temperance movement was all but forgotten. The church joined the Rhode Island Council of Churches in 1938 and the Federal Council of Churches in 1941. A social action committee was formed and the aid to Southern Negro schools increased. The membership of the church grew, keeping pace with that of the town. The population of Barrington jumped from 5500 in 1937 to 8500 by the time Kettelle left the church in 1952. It was in this era that the town really became a suburban bedroom-town and Kettelle found it increasingly difficult to know how to preach to the heterogeneous congregation which filled his church each Sunday. "The chief obstacle to the preaching of religion in this church," he wrote in 1939, "is the chaotic condition of our corporate religious thinking . . . The personal philosophies, spiritual backgrounds, and religious experience of the individuals of its congregation are so diverse that they hear not one but 50 or 75 different sermons from the pulpit each Sunday. This condition, . . . in the extreme extent to which it exists in Barrington, constitutes a serious barrier to the formation of a real community."³²

While Kettelle was describing here a situation which suburban pastors everywhere faced in these years,

The Rev. John D. Kettelle ushered the Barrington Congregational Church into a new era.

Photograph, courtesy Mrs. John D. Kettelle, Sr.



he was also talking about what we now call the post-Christian era or "the suburban captivity of the church." The church membership figures and church attendance figures in the United States had never been so high in its history and yet never before had those who attended shown such biblical illiteracy and theological ignorance. It was impossible for the minister to communicate with his flock because they did not understand what he was saying. The covenanted com-

31 Deacon Church's farewell address to the Rev. A. L. Bean, February 26, 1937.

32 See pastor's Annual Report for 1939.

munity had declined to a mere state of atomistic togetherness.

During the past seventeen years these problems have increased as the stupendous growth of the town and the church have increased. From 1952 to 1969 the population of the town almost doubled, being now roughly 17,000. The membership of the church has more than trebled, from 250 to almost 800 members. And of course the annual budget of the church has increased even faster, being now at least five times as high as it was in 1952. The physical plant of the church has also had to be augmented to meet this influx. The church itself was enlarged, the parish house was added, and the professional staff followed the usual lines of Parkinson's law. The church has become very much like a big business corporation, a bureaucracy for servicing the needs of a variegated clientele. Membership in the church came to be defined primarily in terms of the willingness to share in bearing its financial costs. The church and the congregation were now virtually indistinguishable. The terms of communion, though still defined in traditional forms of Christian orthodoxy, were a less significant indication of the shared beliefs of the communicants than their educational, professional, and social status. Newcomers to Barrington tended to choose this church rather than another not because of its covenant or articles of faith, nor even because of the spiritual message from the pulpit, but because it was the best place for them and their children to meet people with the same interests in business, sports, social clubs, and community affairs. The church itself was more easily defined as a social organization than a religious one. The creed which had been the vital center of the church in 1771 was now barely discernible as its outward trimmings.

If by "the relevance of Congregational Christianity" one means that a church such as this should be thriving in terms of membership, income, and activities, there is no question but that the Barrington Congregational Church is relevant to its members. It obviously fulfills many important needs and functions for them or they would not support it so generously. That is one thing certain about Congregational

Christianity — it would cease to exist without a congregation, and in many rural towns the old Congregational churches have ceased to exist.

If by "relevance" one means that a church such as this should have an impact or influence upon its community, here too the Barrington Congregational Church would meet the test. It has a power for good and for evil in the affairs of the town which it probably is scarcely aware of. Insofar as it does exercise that power, it is a very significant force in the life of the town. The difficulty is that the church tends to use its power only upon the least controversial issues. Its middle-class constituency is too content with its lot to wish to rock the ship of state very much. And somehow the principle of separation of Church and State has come to mean that the Church should have nothing to say about the State.

In summing up where the Barrington Congregational Church stands today it will help to consider three statements made by three of the more recent ministers regarding the relevance of Congregational Christianity. One of these was written thirty years ago, one twenty years ago, and one very recently. The differences among them are striking and tell us much about the changing nature of this church.

The pastor of thirty years ago, the last of the Evangelicals, thought of Christianity primarily in terms of the direct, experiential relationship between God and the individual soul: "The Word of God," he wrote, "is powerful for the comforting of saints and the warning and convicting and converting of sinners. A praying congregation would give power to the preacher." When the Rev. A. Lincoln Bean wrote that, he was pleading for "a praying congregation."³³ That his conception of the relevance of Christianity was no longer meaningful can be seen in the fact that these words were addressed to a regular Sunday congregation of thirty to forty persons out of a total potential attendance of over two hundred. Those who prayed together stayed together, but there were not many of them.

The pastor of twenty years ago wrote in time of war. He was explaining to his deacons and standing

33 See pastor's Annual Report (undated but probably for 1934).

Committee why he had accepted the post as head of the Barrington Council of Defense. Why should a minister accept a job not only of a civilian nature but one which had quasi-military functions? Because, he said, "the salvation of civilization depends on the vindication of true Christian character and the Christian way of life. That means that as a Christian church we have first to see to the building of our own character, then to the character of our community, and our work is not done until the principles of love, mercy, forgiveness, and righteousness are built into the very fabric of the world. . . . I consider the path of Christian duty is the way of *service to the common good*, and by way of exemplifying this principle I have responded to the request of that Barrington Town Council that I serve as Chairman of the Barrington Council of Defense."³⁴ Having taken

this step, it is not surprising that shortly thereafter this minister asked for a leave of absence and served two years as a chaplain in the United States Navy. For him the path of Christian duty was to serve the common good, if necessary by laying down his own life. "The life of Christian service" was the essence of the Liberal Protestant tradition, and the congregation responded to it with enthusiasm. But unfortunately the result of World War II was even more disillusioning than that of World War I. The atom bomb, Hiroshima, the Cold War, the Korean War, the Joseph McCarthy hysteria over internal subversion and more recently the Vietnam War and the Black Revolution have cast a pall over the optimistic faith in progress which had inspired Americans throughout most of their history. The message of Liberal Protestantism, its belief in the

Barrington Congregational Church today.



salvation of civilization through Christian service and character-building, sounded strangely out of place in the world of the Cold War and "the balance of terror."

It is not surprising, therefore, that Christianity has taken a very different turn in the past twenty years. Influenced by existentialism and the dialectical theology of Karl Barth, recent theologians have preached a theology of crisis and paradox for an age of crisis and paradox. And the essence of this new theology, this neo-orthodoxy, has been to try to return some sense of the mystery and transcendence of Christian faith to a church which has somehow become ensnared in the relativistic coils of culture. The new orthodoxy has asked Christians to see that their religion is not simply a straight and simple path, onward and upward, toward the inevitable millenium. It has asked them to recognize that Christianity is relevant to an era of crisis, terror, and imminent catastrophe — that in fact it may be more relevant to an age of anxiety than to an age of prosperity.

I do not know when the ministers of the Barrington Congregational Church returned to the wearing of the black gown and the Geneva bands in the pulpit, but I understand the purpose of it. Its purpose is to distinguish the role of the pastor as the minister of God from his role as factotum of the congregation — to set him before his congregation not as an embodiment of service to the community or to this civilization or way of life, but as an embodiment of a man called by God to present a transcendent message to erring men.

"The church's assigned task," reads this last statement by one of its ministers, "has always been the effort of coping with the limits and mysteries of death, fulfillment, vocation, marriage, guilt, meaning and birth (the very core problems of man)." And these core problems, these crises which all men face "have corresponded exactly with the seven sacraments of the Christian church for fifteen hundred years: unction, eucharist, office, marriage, confession, confirmation, and baptism. Sacrament means mystery. This is and has almost always been the unique calling of the

church and its only reason for being . . . Our goal in all the church is that we be enabled to cope with these crises [these mysteries] with faith, hope, and love." And our means for achieving this are "exorcism and inspiriting."³⁵

This may seem like a long distance from the position of the Puritan founders of Congregational Christianity. To them the purpose of the Reformation was to get rid of at least five of these sacraments, and they saw most of the "exorcism and inspiriting" of the Church of Rome as little more than superstition. Yet this is to take that quotation too literally. What it means, I think, would be perfectly clear to most Puritans. And that is, that there are more things in heaven and earth than will ever be solved by science, education, and social reform. What it means is that existence itself is a mystery beyond the reason of man to comprehend. The God of the Puritans was a God of mystery, awe, terror, and judgment. He was also a God of mercy, grace, compassion, and love. But how and why He meted out these attributes to his creatures no one could say. Salvation was "the peace that passeth understanding." The doctrines of Calvinism, now so meaningless to us, the images of Christian revelation, now empty symbols for us, were what gave meaning and peace to the founders of this church.

The essence of Congregational Christianity is its faith that "where two or three are gathered together" there it will be possible for them to face the mystery of human existence with courage, hope, and charity. The relevance of Congregational Christianity is that it does not require a large bureaucratic structure, or an institutionalized tradition, to do this. Institutions are created to preserve truth, but they tend to petrify it. Congregational Christianity is anti-institutional. It is the effort of two or three gathered together to seek the truth that will make them free regardless of institutions, creeds, cultures, and ideologies. It is in the preservation of this *search* that the Barrington Congregational Church has maintained its vitality for 250 years.

34 See pastor's Annual Report for 1942.

35 Charles McCollough, "The Purpose of Adult Studies," in a pamphlet entitled *Adult Studies 1967-1968*, published by the church.

Antislavery Agencies in Rhode Island, 1832-1835

by John L. Myers*

Rhode Islanders have long been acknowledged to have played a prominent role in the early antislavery movement. James F. Reilly in a 1951 study at Brown University concluded that antislavery sentiment had existed in the colony virtually from its establishment and that the institution of slavery became a subject of public dispute as early as 1760, a part of the growing national movement against human bondage, particularly among American Quakers. By 1774 Moses Brown helped persuade the Rhode Island Assembly to forbid future importation of slaves. Ten years later a second act of the legislature provided for gradual abolition; all Negroes born of slave parents after March 1, 1784, were to be free, males when they reached the age of 21, females at the age of 18. The Providence Society for Abolishing the Slave Trade was organized in the 1780s; within a year it had broadened its objectives to include the end of slavery itself. Slavery was a reality to the Rhode Islander of the eighteenth century. Bond and free Negroes were concentrated in the southern towns — Newport, North and South Kingstown, Warwick, Bristol, Portsmouth, and Jamestown. King's (now Washington) County in the mid-eighteenth century had over 1,000 slaves. There were 958 slaves in the state in 1790, but only 108 in 1810.¹

In spite of this eighteenth-century progress against apathy and concentrated economic opposition, antislavery sentiment in Rhode Island, as elsewhere in the North, did not develop steadily in the early years of the nineteenth century. By 1804 the Providence society ceased its group persuasion. The state had some slaves as late as 1842. The legislature in 1822 denied the franchise to those blacks who had not yet exercised that privilege, a limitation that remained in force until the 1842 convention returned to the former political equality between races. The participation of its shipping interests in the illegal slave trade is the reason

frequently given for the state's procrastination in not taking a stronger stand against slavery and racial inequality, but one only needs to remember that to Americans of the early nineteenth century slavery was a racial system — Negroes comprised seven per cent of the state's interest; Americans often believed that the institution was a proper one for racial adjustment.²

In January 1832 a small group led by William Lloyd Garrison organized the first American society to advocate immediate emancipation of slavery. Less than two years later the American Anti-Slavery Society was established under New York leadership. By mid-1837 over 1,000 auxiliaries with an estimated 100,000 members had affiliated themselves with the national organization; by March 1838 the movement was supporting six weekly and three semi-monthly newspapers and was receiving favorable treatment from many other editors. Furthermore, the publications of the antislavery press and membership in antislavery societies were inadequate indicators of the opposition to slavery and the determination to bring about its termination for, by the middle of 1837, people in many localities in the nation had accepted abolition principles and were thoroughly convinced of the sinfulness of the institution of slavery but were not yet willing to register their aversion by means of the ballot or by overt action which would benefit the slave or interdict his master.

How did this great change in public sentiment against slavery occur? Experienced in the methods of operation of other humanitarian and reform societies and of the revivals of Charles Grandison Finney, the leaders of the antislavery movement naturally utilized similar techniques. They believed slaveholding to be sinful and the existence of the institution of slavery poisonous to the future of the nation. Quickly perceiving that the South would not listen to their arguments — perhaps

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1 James F. Reilly, "Moses Brown and the Rhode Island Antislavery Movement" (unpublished Master's thesis, Department of History, Brown University, 1951), pp. 18, 21, 25, 29-30, 42. Dwight L. Dumond, *Antislavery, the Crusade for Freedom in America* (Ann Arbor, 1961), pp. 46-50, 121, 376. William D. Johnston, "Slavery in Rhode Island, 1755-1776," *Publications of the Rhode Island Historical Society*, II: 2 [July 1894], 127.

2 Reilly, p. 56. Dumond, p. 121.

William Lloyd Garrison.



could not and retain its way of life — they attempted to influence it in what limited ways they could, but primarily they sought to free their own section from its responsibility for living at peace with sin by calling upon Northerners to recognize their complicity, by forcing upon them a discussion about slavery and the political and moral responses a Northerner could make to his expected antipathy to its principles and conditions. Garrison wrote in 1833:

"Nothing is more obvious than that the success of our cause must depend mainly upon the employment of able and devoted Agents, whose time and talents

*must be entirely occupied in its propagation. We must recollect that our business is emphatically with the people: it is their will which is to be consulted, enlightened and secured. The Liberator, The Abolitionist, The Emancipator, The Genius of Universal Emancipation [antislavery publications], may do much — may reach the eyes and change the opinions of a multitude. But four energetic Agents would, in my opinion, effect more in one year than these periodicals alone can do in five."*³

Studies of various states confirm that the paid and appointed lecturing agent was the vital ingredient in spawning and reviving antislavery sentiment and marshaling it in such a way as to convert others and effect policy. For example, 300 new antislavery auxiliaries were organized between the annual meetings of the American Anti-Slavery Society in May 1835 and May 1836; over half were in New York and Ohio, states to which the society had assigned most of its best agents. On the other hand, only 26 were established in Pennsylvania, three in New Jersey, four in Connecticut, and those three did not have a state society.

Connecticut and New Jersey had been given almost no agency attention and Pennsylvania had received little. In contrast, a year later after Pennsylvania had been the recipient of a well-staffed and organized effort, it accounted for 93 of the 1,006 auxiliaries in the nation, a number exceeded only by three other states. Antislavery financial support within its borders increased and public officials and church bodies were required to acknowledge the growing abolition sentiment.⁴

Rhode Island was also a recipient of this agency attention. Because of its small size and location between the centers of abolition direction in New York City and Boston, however, the efforts in the state were too frequently an off-shoot of organized lecturing campaigns elsewhere, often damaged by controversies and jealousies between the Massachusetts and national societies, and were poorly reported.

Two sets of statistics need to be borne in mind while examining this effort to change the attitudes of the people of Rhode Island in the 1830s. The first is

3 Gilbert H. Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York, 1933), *passim*. *Liberator*, July 13, 1833.

4 John L. Myers, "The Beginning of Anti-Slavery Agencies in New York State, 1833-1836," *New York History*, XLIII (April 1962), 149-181; "Antislavery Activities of Five Lane Seminary Boys in 1835-1836," *Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio Bulletin*, XXI (April 1963), 95-111; "The Early Antislavery Agency System in

Pennsylvania, 1833-1837," *Pennsylvania History*, XXI (January 1964), 62-86; "The Major Effort of National Anti-Slavery Agents in New York State," *New York History*, XLVI (April 1965), 162-186; "The Beginning of Antislavery Agencies in Vermont, 1832-1836," *Vermont History*, XXXVI (Summer 1968), 126-141.

Arnold Buffum, a founder and first president of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, was the first agent of the movement to lecture in Rhode Island, his native state.

Portrait from Elizabeth Buffum Chace . . . by Lillie Buffum Chace Wyman and Arthur Crawford Wyman, v. 1 (Boston, 1914).



population. The state had 108,837 people according to the 1840 census. Providence was the only large community, numbering 23,172. Smithfield had 9,534; Newport 8,333; Warwick 6,726; Cumberland was the only other town above 5,000. The Providence City Directory of 1836 reported a census of 19,277, of whom 1,223 were colored. Second, since the antislavery crusade of the 1830s saw itself as a quasi-religious movement, church statistics are also helpful. In many

states the Calvinist denominations, particularly the Presbyterian, were the backbone of the antislavery movement. Rhode Island had no Presbyterian congregations. In 1829 it had only eleven Congregational churches; these included 1,050 members according to an 1833 report. Five of these congregations were in Providence in 1831. Quakers were more numerous, with 1,339 adherents in 1836. There were three Unitarian churches, two in Providence, one in Newport, by 1835. In 1829 five Episcopal congregations, at Bristol, Providence, Newport, Pawtucket, and Wickford, embraced 563 members; 1829-1838 was a period of growth of that denomination within the state, but none of its pastors were active in antislavery labors. In 1825 forty-four Baptist churches had a membership of 3,887; by 1840 the number had increased to 6,411. Seventeen Free Will Baptist congregations were reported in 1841. The 1830s also were a decade of tremendous growth of Methodist churches and the beginning of the Christian denomination.⁵

The first agent of the militant antislavery movement to lecture in Rhode Island was Arnold Buffum. A hatter, inventor, sheep raiser, and land speculator, Buffum was interested in temperance as well as slavery. His father, William Buffum of Smithfield, had been a member of the Rhode Island Society for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery. Arnold was a delegate to that organization's convention in 1824 and talked with many of the English abolition leaders on an 1826 voyage abroad. He was converted to immediatism by Garrison's *Liberator* and became a founder and first President of the New England Anti-Slavery Society. When the occasional lectures by its members in the Boston vicinity did not seem to be accomplishing much for the abolition cause, Garrison proposed that the society appoint a fulltime agent for three months. A ballot was taken to designate the representative and Buffum was chosen. The Board of Managers agreed to

5 Henry S. Burrage, *A History of the Baptists in New England* (Philadelphia, 1894), p. 229. Edward Field, ed., *State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations at the End of the Century, a History*, 3v. (Boston, 1902), II, 103-210 *passim*. *Providence Directory, Containing Names of the Inhabitants, Their Occupations, Places of Business, and Dwelling Houses . . .* (Providence, 1836), 132, 142.

pay him \$100 and his travel expenses for three months. When his assignment was subsequently renewed, he had to support himself by his own collections. Quaker meeting houses were soon closed to him and he was subsequently disowned for his abolition lecturing. The New England Yearly Meeting adopted a rule that none of its meeting houses could be used except for Quaker religious purposes. When he could not obtain a Baptist or Unitarian church, he rented a small hall. His success was not great. A "pleasant speaker," he lacked the exciting qualities of a C. C. Burleigh or a Henry B. Stanton. He drew sparse audiences and slim collections. In part this was because the opposition to abolition was not yet organized.⁶

Buffum began his agency July 7, 8 and 9, 1832, in New Bedford and Fairhaven, Massachusetts. Crossing into Rhode Island, he lectured at Newport on the eleventh. He reported that the Baptist minister had responded openly to his appeals, but that the weather had been bad and attendance at the scheduled meeting poor. He could obtain no place in which to lecture in Warren. Claiming all the ministers in Bristol were supporters of the American Colonization Society, which sought to send free Negroes to Africa and were unwilling to announce from the pulpit his visit, he was forced to hold his meeting in a public hall. He arrived in Providence on Saturday, July 14, spoke in the Baptist meeting house in Pawtucket that day and twice in Providence on July 15, the second time to the Negro congregation. Fall River heard him on July 18 and 19, Pawtucket at the Fourth Baptist meeting house on July 21, and the north end of Providence at 5:30 and Pawtucket at 7:30 on July 22. At the latter city he completed the conversion to antislavery of colonization-advocate Ray Potter who for a short time became a leader of antislavery opinion in the state and who was subsequently appointed one of the American Anti-Slavery Society's agents. Buffum was at Smithfield on

Seal of the American Colonization Society.



July 25. By the end of the month he had finished his Rhode Island excursion with speeches at Blackstone, Woonsocket Falls, and Slatersville.⁷

In Massachusetts Buffum made what he termed a "head-attack" against colonization, beginning in Uxbridge and continuing during most of August and early September in the central part of the state. The differences between these two movements, each concerned with the future of the Negro in America, was fundamental. The Garrisonians asserted that they had to destroy colonization support in the nation before the antislavery movement could achieve its objectives. Henry B. Stanton, in an address before the American Anti-Slavery Society, explained the difference in outlook. The abolitionists granted the existence of race prejudice in the nation; during its predominance,

6 Lillie Buffum Chace Wyman and Arthur C. Wyman, *Elizabeth Buffum Chace, 1806-1899, Her Life and Its Environment*, 2v. (Boston, 1914), I, 7, 21, 30. Elizabeth Buffum Chace, *Anti-Slavery Reminiscences* (Central Falls, 1891), pp. 8, 11, 21. New England Anti-Slavery Society Records 1832 [Boston Public Library], June 25 and June 23 meetings of Board of Managers. Henry Wilson, *History of the Rise and Fall of Slave-Power in America*, 3v. (Boston, 1875-1877), I, 224. Oliver Johnson, *William Lloyd Garrison and His Times* (Boston, 1880), pp. 94-96.

Liberator, June 30, 1832. *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, January 1833. Buffum's activities are recorded in issues of *Liberator* and in William Lloyd Garrison Papers [Boston Public Library].

7 Buffum to Garrison, July 16, 1832; Garrison to Henry E. Benson, July 7 and 21, 1832, Garrison Papers. New England Anti-Slavery Society Records 1832, June 25 meeting. *Liberator*, September 1 and 8, 1832; July 5, 1834. *Pawtucket Chronicle*, July 13, 1832. *Rhode Island American and Gazette*, July 24, 1832.

blacks could not improve their position. But in contrast to the colonizationists Stanton asserted, antislavery adherents affirmed that the prejudice could be conquered by reason and by Christianity, while the colonizationists sought to escape from the problem by sending Negroes to Africa. Colonization agents began to answer Buffum's lectures. The attempt of the New England agent to belittle the abolitionist provided excellent ammunition for a master propagandist like Garrison. Stopping an evening en route to Providence, Buffum returned to Newport for one lecture the second week of September, but he reported that he found almost no interest in his subject. He quickly proceeded to Massachusetts.⁸

Garrison was anxious for an agency himself. Interested in several reforms in the 1820s, he had inevitably come to examine the question of slavery. He first sought a solution to the end of the institution in colonization, but by the 1830s he had become the most effective assassin of that society. In 1831 he established *The Liberator* in Boston with the intention of leading an antislavery crusade. After several abortive meetings to get a militant abolition organization created, he became a founder, corresponding secretary, and the personification of the New England Anti-Slavery Society. Full of enthusiasm which had been engendered at the second annual convention of the People of Color, June 4-15, he sought financial support for a lecturing tour. Unable to secure the money elsewhere, Garrison persuaded his colleagues in Boston to appoint him to a three-months agency at \$100 plus expenses; he began his services the second week of September.⁹

Garrison toured eastern and central Massachusetts, northern Rhode Island, and southeastern Maine, beginning with a speech in the Worcester Town Hall on September 5. He then departed for his only Rhode Island agency appearance to deliver five addresses in four days in Providence, three to blacks, to aid colored people in the formation of a temperance society. He claimed he won the support of Moses Brown. His

addresses on Sunday evening, September 9, in Mr. Wilson's meeting house for two hours, and Wednesday evening, September 12, caused most response in the press: one letter-to-the-editor revealed the writer had been brought to reconsider his support of slavery; a second in the same newspaper showed outrage against Garrison. The editor of the publication agreed with Garrison's description of slave conditions, but opposed immediatism and continued to favor colonization.¹⁰

Although Buffum's first appointment as agent expired October 1, he continued his service until the society decided at its October 29 meeting officially to redesignate him as its representative, providing that he secure his own support from contributions which he collected. During early October he was confined for two weeks by an injury, but upon his recovery he undertook his work again. He first visited Providence, meeting Simon S. Jocelyn, a Congregational pastor who worked with the Negroes of New Haven. They attended the session of the recently-organized colored temperance society and visited Moses Brown. Buffum's primary object seems to have been to lay the foundations for the formation of the city's auxiliary antislavery society. He then departed for Massachusetts. Funds were limiting what could be undertaken. Nevertheless, the society's official organ, *The Abolitionist*, could boast in its first issue of 1833 that through the efforts of the New England Anti-Slavery Society in its first year of operation, "more public addresses on the subject of slavery and appeals in behalf of the contemned [*sic*] free people of color, have been made in New England . . . than were elicited for forty years prior to its organization."¹¹

Buffum was reappointed agent for another three months in January 1833, but his service was sporadic and never in Rhode Island. On July 25 he received another commission and after some speaking engagements in Massachusetts, he appeared on August 13, 1833, for an address at his home in Smithfield. He

8 Buffum to Garrison, August 31, 1832, Garrison Papers. *First Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York, 1834), 23. *Liberator*, September 1, 8, 15, and 22, 1832. *Pawtucket Chronicle*, September 7, 1832.

9 Wendell P. Garrison and Francis J. Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison, 1805-1879, the Story of His Life Told by His Children*, 4v. (New York, 1885-1889), I, 283-288, 313. New England Anti-Slavery Society Records

1832, August 27 meeting. Garrison to Robert Purvis, June 22, 1832, Garrison Papers. *Liberator*, June 30, September 8 and 15, 1832.

10 Garrison, I, 288-290. *Liberator*, September 15, October 13, et passim October 6 to November 10, 1832. *Microcosm and Weekly American*, September 8, 1832. *Providence Daily Journal*, September 8, 1832. *Rhode Island American and Gazette*, September 11, 14, and 18, 1832.

"Mr. Wilson's meeting house" now known as the Beneficent Congregational Church.

Early sketch in pencil and crayon, RIHS Library.



asserted that he had the support of that community's Congregational pastor. His agency took him as far north as Massachusetts and as far south as Wilmington, Delaware. It was concluded October 31 in Providence.¹²

The accomplishments of Buffum, Garrison, and two other agents, Oliver Johnson and Orson Murray, in northern New England, were considerably limited when compared with those of later lecturers. Monetarily, they were a liability. The total of regional auxiliaries which could be credited to their efforts must have been under ten and even some of those had a limited life and weak strength. The number of new antislavery adherents was not large. The New England

Anti-Slavery Society board of managers could not seem to get its agency program organized and financed. On the other hand, the public had been made aware of the determination of some Americans to attack the institution of slavery, the colonization movement had been wounded and its principles assailed, important contacts with like-thinkers had been made in many communities and outside moral support for later organization shown to exist.¹³

One famous auxiliary which was at least in part a product of agency activity was the Providence Anti-Slavery Society, founded with only twelve men present on June 7, 1833, but numbering approximately 60

11 New England Anti-Slavery Society Records 1832, October 29 meeting. *Liberator*, October 27, 1832. *Abolitionist*, January 1833, 2.

12 New England Anti-Slavery Society Records 1832, January 3, 1833 meeting. New England Anti-Slavery Society Second Record Book [Boston Public Library], 264. *Liberator*, August 31; *et passim* September and October, November 16, 1833.

13 *Second Annual Report of the Board of Managers of the New England Anti-Slavery Society* [Boston, 1834], 30.

adherents a year later. It declared that one of its intentions as soon as it was able was "to send out living agents to cry aloud and spare not." By July 4 it was holding its first public meetings, with addresses by the Rev. Thomas Williams in Providence and Pawtucket. Samuel J. May, a leader of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, spoke at the first quarterly meeting in the Congregational meeting house on September 13 and then Williams, George Bourne, and C. C. Burleigh were featured speakers at the first annual meeting on November 8 in Mechanics Hall. Without outside speakers at other times, the society continued its sessions in October and December 1833 through winter and spring 1834. Its October meeting was held in the Union school room, that in December in the new hall of Whipple's Building, in April in the Pacific meeting house, in May in the Richmond Street meeting house. Thereafter, its regular meetings during summer and fall 1834 were at Union Hall, at the rear of the Universalist Chapel. It was also zealous in the distribution of antislavery tracts.¹⁴

The Pawtucket Anti-Slavery Society came into existence at approximately the same time. On Monday, December 23, 1833, Ray Potter laid the foundation for the organizational meeting with an address to "a large and attentive audience." The auxiliary was established on January 10, 1834, with about thirty citizens signing its constitution. By May its membership had increased to about seventy, one-third of whom were women.¹⁵

At approximately the same time, December 4, 1833, the American Anti-Slavery Society was organized. Its executive committee quickly established the standing committee on agencies. The latter formulated instructions for agents, directed the organization's secretary for domestic correspondence to oversee operations, and decided to appoint four men, two of whom, Samuel J. May and Amos Phelps, would serve in New England. Their task was "to arouse the public mind by addresses

and lectures and to enlighten and convert individuals by private interviews." This essentially remained the task of the antislavery agent thereafter. The Society would pay \$8 a week plus traveling expenses, the compensation usually allotted by the Bible and Tract societies to their agents. When none of the four men would accept appointment, the committee designated local agents to serve whenever and wherever they could, receiving only travel expenses. It appointed eleven men, nine of whom were ministers and two of whom, Thomas Williams of Providence and Ray Potter of Pawtucket, were residents of what is today Rhode Island.¹⁶

Ray Potter, a former colonizationist, was a founder of the American, Rhode Island, and Pawtucket Anti-Slavery societies and the bulwark of abolition in the state almost from the beginning of the movement. He was the first vice president of the Providence Anti-Slavery Society, first corresponding secretary of the Pawtucket group, and a manager of the national organization. Bookkeeper, clerk, schoolteacher, writer, pastor, he was a man of tremendous energy and conviction. Born and reared a Baptist, he left that denomination to become an architect of the Free Will Baptist movement in Rhode Island. Primarily responsible for the formation of the congregation in Pawtucket, which became the largest in the state outside Providence, he served as pastor for fifteen years without pay, living by collections made for him of about \$100 a year. Half of this, he reported one time, went for rent. He never knew where other support might be obtained. In spite of his family responsibilities, he was constantly engaged in reform causes. He was imprisoned in 1818 for opposition to militia drills. He was an advocate of the Anti-Masonic cause. In 1835 he edited and published a monthly pamphlet, *The Pure Testimony*, which embodied intense theological controversy, particularly against the Methodists. He

14 *Report and Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the Providence Anti-Slavery Society* (Providence, 1833), 3-12. *Liberator*, July 5, 1834. *Providence Daily Journal*, September 13, 1833; March 31, April 7 and 12, May 19, 1834. *Rhode Island Country Journal*, *passim* October 1833 to November 1834. *Providence Daily News*, May 19, 1834.

15 *Pawtucket Chronicle*, December 27, 1833; January 10, 17, 31, and May 9, 1834. *Liberator*, July 5, 1834.

16 American Anti-Slavery Society Agency Committee Minutes (Boston Public Library), meetings of December 16, 1833 and January 14, 1834. Elizur Wright, Jr., to Phelps, December 31, 1833, Amos A. Phelps Papers (Boston Public Library). Gilbert H. Barnes and Dwight L. Dumond, eds., *Letters of Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke Weld, and Sarah Grimke, 1822-1844*, 2v. (New York, 1934), I, 121, 128-130. *First Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society*, 40-41.

Ray Potter's anti-slavery sentiments are reflected in the contents of his 1835 publication.

VOL. I. PAWTUCKET, JANUARY, 1835. NO. 1.		
THE		
PURE TESTIMONY.		
EDITED AND PUBLISHED BY RAY POTTER, PAWTUCKET, R. I.		
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PAWTUCKET.		
R. E. POTTER.....PRINTER.		
1835.		

explained the tardiness of two months' publication by disclosing that he had personally assumed the debt of \$4,000 of his congregation for purchase of its meeting house. His travels, going without meals, in addition to

his family and church cares, had been time-consuming, but had then secured nearly \$3,000.¹⁷

Potter delivered three antislavery addresses to increasingly larger audiences in Pawtucket. After the third speech, the society was organized. He also spoke and formed another society at Phenix Village, Warwick. Later he spoke at Sutton, Millbury, and Uxbridge, Massachusetts, adding more than fifty signatures to the latter's antislavery constitution.¹⁸

The Rev. Thomas Williams was born in Pomfret, Connecticut, November 5, 1779. He attended Williams College for several years, departing because of ill health. Graduated from Yale in 1800, he served as a teacher three years and was then licensed as a pastor by the Windham County Congregational Association. After three missionary tours, he began to preach at the Pacific Congregational Church in Providence in 1807. Popular with Brown University students, Williams increased the size of his congregation. Among other pastorates, before he settled permanently in East Greenwich in 1843, were Foxboro, Attleboro, and Hebronville, Massachusetts, and Barrington, Rhode Island. He was married and had seven children. Described as an earnest and forceful preacher, he was quick at repartee. He published 24 sermons and treatises, among them *The Practice of American Slavery Tried by the Principles of American Liberty*, a sermon which in 1833, an early date in the antislavery crusade, advocated immediate and universal emancipation.¹⁹

Williams was away from Providence when his appointment papers arrived, designating him as agent beginning January 22. He began his service on March 6, soon after he returned. He immediately proceeded to Massachusetts where he lectured and assisted in the organization of antislavery societies which ranged from seventy to 116 members in Foxboro, Wrentham, and Franklin. In Rhode Island he spoke for the already

17 Ray Potter to Brown, March 14, 1818 and November 1820, Moses Brown Papers (RIHS Library). Amos A. Phelps, *Lectures on Slavery and its Remedy* (Boston, 1834), pp. v-x. *Report and Proceedings of the First Annual Meeting of the Providence Anti-Slavery Society*, 12. *Pawtucket Chronicle*, January 31, 1834. *Rhode Island Country Journal*, December 27, 1833. Field, II, 103. *Liberator*, July 5, 1834. *Pure Testimony*, passim 1835. RIHS Library has an excellent collection of Potter's *Pure Testimony*.

18 *First Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society*, 40-42. *Liberator*, January 4, 1834. *Pawtucket Chronicle*, December 27, 1833; January 10 and 17, 1834. *Emancipator*, January 21 and April 29, 1834.

19 *Biographical Cyclopaedia of Representative Men of Rhode Island* (Providence, 1881), pp. 192-193. *Rhode Island Philanthropist*, July 17, 1883. *Microcosm and Weekly American*, December 29, 1832. *Providence Directory*, 1832, 127.

existing society in Pawtucket and at Barrington, Little Compton, Tiverton, and Bristol. He reported that the foundations had been laid for societies in those communities. In other towns he visited influential citizens and distributed antislavery publications. He opened a series of at least three lectures in Providence on April 7.²⁰

A third agent to appear in Rhode Island at this time was Samuel J. May. May was a Unitarian clergyman then living in Brooklyn, Connecticut, and a founder of the New England Anti-Slavery Society. One of Garrison's close friends, he was able to escape much of the bitterness that passed between the New York and Boston groups. The *Herald of Freedom* characterized him as "sound, discriminating, fearless," and "an eloquent and powerful speaker." His activities were under the auspices of both the New England and American Anti-Slavery societies. In late March and early April 1834 he spoke in Massachusetts and Connecticut, and at Pawtucket in the First Baptist meeting house on Monday, March 31. His lectures lasted about an hour-and-a-half.²¹

One of the effective methods of antislavery operation was the scheduling of a number of annual, quarterly, and special meetings during May and June to take advantage of the availability of the lecturers who would be attending meetings of abolition and other reform societies in New York and Boston. Rhode Island usually benefited from this. On a lesser scale this began with the first anniversary of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1834. The New England Anti-Slavery Convention assembled in Boston for its first meeting on May 27, 1834. May was its presiding officer; he lectured in his agency capacity for approximately five weeks before and after that conclave, his expenses defrayed by friends in the communities which he visited. Included were appearances in Providence May 19 in the Richmond Street meeting house before an audience

Samuel J. May, leader of the New England Anti-Slavery Society, spoke at the first quarterly meeting of the Providence society.

Portrait from William Lloyd Garrison... The Story of His Life told by his children, v. 1 (N.Y., 1885).



estimated between 700 and 800, and June 13 with Charles Stuart.²²

Stuart was a British citizen, a retired captain of the East India Company's forces who had a large land grant near Lake Simcoe, Ontario, and a former teacher in Utica, New York, in the 1820s. He undertook

20 *Emancipator*, April 22, 1834. *First Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society*, 40-41. *Providence Journal*, April 7 and 12, 1834.

21 Thomas J. Mumford, ed., *Memoir of Samuel Joseph May* (Boston, 1873). *Emancipator*, April 22, 1834. *Providence Journal*, March 31, 1834. *Pawtucket Chronicle*,

March 28, 1834. *Herald of Freedom*, March 7, 1835. *First Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society*, 40-41.

22 *Emancipator*, May 27, 1834. *Liberator*, May 24, 1834. *Providence Daily News*, May 19, 1834. Samuel J. May, *Some Recollections of Our Anti-Slavery Conflict* (Boston, 1869), pp. 140-141.

distributions of tracts and Bibles and lectured about temperance. Becoming a follower of Charles Grandison Finney, he served for a time in the evangelist's band. In 1829 he returned to England to participate as an agent in its antislavery movement. In many ways he became the most important link between the abolition activities of the two nations. He was also author of some of the most effective anti-colonization pamphlets. Stuart arrived in the United States shortly before the annual meeting of the American Anti-Slavery Society. He was commissioned and immediately put to work. He lectured in Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire in May and June 1834, arriving in Pawtucket on June 13, speaking once on that evening in the First Baptist meeting house and twice on June 15. While still not agreeing with abolition doctrine, the editor of the *Pawtucket Chronicle* credited Stuart with "good sense," "plain and forceful reasoning," and sincerity. On Monday evening, June 16 and Tuesday, afternoon, June 17 the Englishman spoke in Newport. After a time in Connecticut, he returned to Providence the beginning of July, remained about a week, including an afternoon address July 4 in the Westminster Congregational meeting house; he was joined in speaking on the latter occasion by May, John Blain, and another paid lecturer, Amos Phelps.²³

Potter, as a locally commissioned agent, was also lecturing during this period. In addition to assisting Stuart in Pawtucket, Potter spoke June 16 in Warwick and June 18 in Fall River, Massachusetts.²⁴

The other participant of the British agency system who was also commissioned in the United States and who served in Rhode Island in the 1830s was George Thompson. Born in 1804 and apprenticed early in life, Thompson won local success while lecturing in the vicinity of his home. He proposed to become an antislavery speaker by presenting himself at the antislavery office in London. He was accepted initially for

Controversial Britisher George Thompson.

Photograph from Elizabeth Buffum Chace... by Lillie Buffum Chace Wyman and Arthur Crawford Wyman, v. 1 (Boston, 1914).



three months, then for the completion of the drive that brought emancipation. He was so successful that Henry Brougham credited him as being the man most responsible for the abolition of slavery in the Empire. In the United States at the invitation of Garrison, Thompson served under the auspices of both the Massachusetts and the American Anti-Slavery societies.²⁵

Thompson's initial activities were confined to northern New England in October and early November

23 *First Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society*, 16. Benjamin P. Thomas, *Theodore Weld, Crusader for Freedom* (New Brunswick, 1950), pp. 16-17. Barnes and Dumond, 1, 22-28, 151. *Appleton's Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 6v. (New York, 1888-1889), V, 728. Weld to Mrs. Miller, June 30, 1888, Theodore D. Weld Papers (William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, Michigan). *Report of the Agency Committee of the Anti-Slavery Society* (London, 1832), 20-22. *Liberator*, May 24, June 21, 1834. *Emancipator*, July 1 and 8, 1834. *New York Evangelist*, July 5, 1834. *Pawtucket Chronicle*, July 13, June 20, 1834; February 6, 1835. *Rhode Island*

Country Journal, June 27, 1834. *Penny Post*, June 28, 1834.

24 *Emancipator*, July 1, 1834. Potter to Garrison, June 18, 1834, Garrison Papers.

25 May, pp. 109-113. Benjamin C. Bacon to Elizur Wright, Jr., July 25, 1834, New England Anti-Slavery Society Letter Book (Boston Public Library). New England Anti-Slavery Society Second Record Book, 284. *Proceedings of the American Anti-Slavery Society at its Third Decade, Held in the City of Philadelphia, Dec. 3d and 4th, 1863* (New York, 1864), p. 119.

1834. Returning from constant lecturing to Boston to rest, he then headed southward to meet three lecturing engagements in Providence and one on Thanksgiving afternoon, November 27, in the Pawtucket Baptist church. The second Providence meeting was held in the Pine Street Baptist meeting house, the other two at the Richmond Street meeting house. At the first Providence meeting on November 19 the audience was small; between 700 and 800 people attended the second evening; the last gathering on the evening of November 21 numbered between 1,200 and 1,500 people. Potter reported that Thompson was surrounded at his lodgings in Pawtucket by people who wanted to speak with him. On the other hand, the newspapers increased their attacks upon him. As a foreigner, he, of all the early antislavery lecturers, had aroused press ire. May later maintained that, with the exception of an unsuccessful attempt to disturb a meeting in Worcester, Massachusetts, he had met no molestation in summer and autumn 1834. Thompson's appearance aroused the nation.²⁶

As he continued his labors in Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania, Thompson did not return to Providence again until Wednesday, March 11. He spoke in the Methodist meeting house to what abolition newspapers termed "a full audience." At the end of March on his return from Connecticut lectures in company of May and Garrison, Thompson stayed for a time in Providence, but apparently made no public addresses. Another appearance on April 14 at the Pine Street meeting house to what he estimated was between 700 and 800 ladies and 150 men resulted in the formation of a ladies' antislavery society of 106 members and contributions of \$100 to the abolition cause.²⁷

Besides the occasional efforts of Ray Potter, individuals attending conventions, and New Englanders who could conveniently deliver an address, the first lecturing agent for Rhode Island was Samuel L. Gould, employed by the Providence Anti-Slavery Society in

the spring of 1835. After beginning his labors April 12 at the Baptist meeting house in Olneyville, a few miles north of Providence, Gould spoke on April 14 to a small group in Pawtucket, the following evening to another audience in Apponaug and on April 16 to a number of influential people in a private home in the latter town. On Friday, April 17 and Saturday, April 18 he lectured in East Greenwich. At Wickford, which initially displayed little interest or sympathy for his cause, after lectures for three successive evenings, first in the Episcopalian and then in the Baptist churches, he reported he made great progress. Following three speeches in Kingston, he proceeded to Westerly to deliver three addresses and then lecture on his return towards Providence. He was surprised at the favorable response he received and asserted that the people of the state had not become abolitionist because so little effort had been made to convince them. He probably continued to the second week in May, permitting him to arrive in New York City in time to attend the sessions of the American Anti-Slavery Society, May 12.²⁸

When the executive committee of the American Anti-Slavery Society issued its second annual report in May 1835, it named nine men whom it had employed during all or part of the previous year in its expanding operations. Except for the several lectures by Stuart, Thompson, and May in Providence and Pawtucket, little had been done during the year in Rhode Island. Yet the agents, Theodore Weld and Amos Phelps, in addition to Stuart, Thompson, and May, had been employed for long periods of time. Amos Phelps, Congregational pastor of Boston and Connecticut, who had lectured mostly in Maine, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts in 1834, was to have been the first representative of the agency committee assigned to Rhode Island. In January 1835 the committee directed him to the interior of New York State until May, but a month later, after reviewing a request for his services from the Providence Anti-Slavery Society, including an offer of \$50 towards his pay, the committee decided

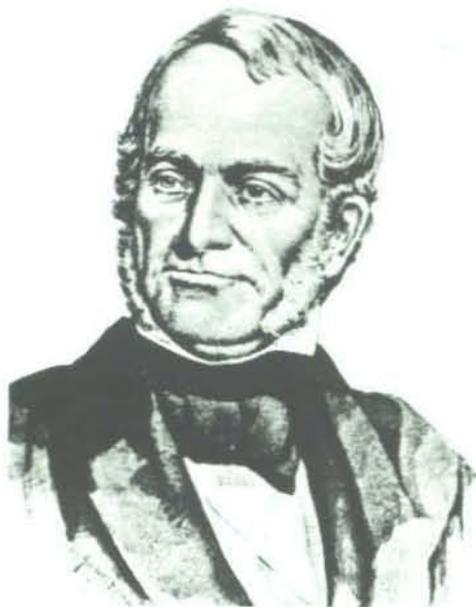
26 George Thompson to Robert Purvis, November 10, 1834, Garrison Papers (copy). Benjamin C. Bacon to Amos Farnsworth, November 28, 1834, New England Anti-Slavery Society Letter Book. May, pp. 120, 141, 144. *Liberator*, November 29, December 6, 1834. *Massachusetts Spy*, December 10, 1834. *Pawtucket Chronicle*, November 21, 1834. *Rhode Island Country Journal*, November 21, 1834. *Providence Daily Journal*, November 19, 20, 27, 1834; February 6, 1835.

27 Garrison to Henry Benson, March 30, 1835, Garrison Papers. *Liberator*, March 28, April 18 and 25, 1835. *Emancipator*, March 24, May 26, 1835. *Providence Journal*, April 13, 1835.

28 *Emancipator*, May 5, 1835. *Liberator*, May 2, 1835. *Second Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York, 1835), 24.

Ex-slaveholder James G. Birney.

Portrait from Dictionary of American Portraits (Dover Publications, Inc., 1967).



that he might work in Rhode Island after the May anniversary meetings and suggested to him that he locate his family with that transfer in mind. However, after talking with him, the committee changed its plans and left Rhode Island without an agent.²⁹

Immediately following the national convention, those enroute to Boston again delivered several addresses in Rhode Island. James G. Birney, ex-slaveholder, agent of the national society, subsequently publisher of a Cincinnati antislavery newspaper, corresponding secretary of the American Anti-Slavery Society, and twice candidate of the Liberty Party for the Presidency

of the nation, spoke in the Congregational church in Providence on Wednesday, May 20. The following day Birney and William Goodell, former editor of the *Investigator* in Providence, and of the *Genius of Temperance* and *The Emancipator* in New York City, a lecturing agent, visited the school for colored females and, joined by Theodore S. Wright, colored New York City clergyman, and Henry B. Stanton, spoke at an evening antislavery meeting in the Pine Street church. The same group appeared in Pawtucket on May 22. The *Chronicle* called Birney's "sentiments mild, language persuasive." Stanton was characterized as a "fine orator." Wright impressed the audience with a description of the progress of blacks in New York City. Stanton also delivered an address at the Phenix meeting house in Warwick.³⁰

Rhode Island, which had seemed ready to listen to the antislavery message, like other areas was responding to the endeavors of occasional lecturers, but needed a more organized program, and certainly a state antislavery society, before it could become an important factor in the abolition camp. Robust state societies already existed by summer 1835 in Massachusetts, Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire, and Ohio. Over 200 auxiliaries had been formed in the nation. Membership by March 1835 was estimated at 7,500. On the other hand by June 1835, when that more organized effort was about to begin, the foundations had been laid. Hundreds of Rhode Islanders, particularly in the Providence area, had heard antislavery addresses from Buffum, Potter, Williams, May, Stuart, Thompson, and Gould. Seminal societies had been established and nourished in Pawtucket and Providence. Propaganda in the form of newspaper articles and pamphlets had been distributed. Future lecturers would be building upon an established base. The right of discussion of a controversial topic had been forced into public consideration. Most important, some Rhode Islanders were now firmly convinced of the sinfulness of slavery and of their duty to do something to give energy to their convictions.³¹

29 *Second Annual Report* (above), 47. American Anti-Slavery Society Agency Committee Minutes, meetings of January 22 and February 17, 1835. Elizur Wright, Jr., to Phelps, February 9, 1835, Phelps Papers.

30 William Birney, *James G. Birney and His Times* (New York, 1890), p. 178. Betty Fladeland, *James Gillespie Birney, Slaveholder to Abolitionist* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1955). In *Memoriam William Goodell, Born in*

Coventry, N.Y., October 25th, 1792, Died in Jamesville, Wis., February 14th, 1878 [Chicago, 1879], pp. 6-25. *Liberator*, May 30, June 6, July 4, 1835; May 12, 1837. *Providence Journal*, May 20, 1835. *Emancipator*, June 2, 1835. *Pawtucket Chronicle*, May 22 and 29, 1835.

31 *Second Annual Report* (above), 37. *Anti-Slavery Record*, March 1835, 31-32.

Optimistic Democrat: Thomas W. Dorr and the Case of Luther vs. Borden

by C. Peter Magrath*

"I say that I had a perfect right to do all that I did"
(Dorr in a letter to Nathan Clifford, January 12, 1848).

Eighteen forty-two was a tumultuous year in Rhode Island's history, for this was the year of the Dorr War or, more accurately, the Dorr Rebellion.¹ It marked the culmination of the effort by Thomas Wilson Dorr and his Rhode Island Suffrage Association to take over and reform the state government. Ever since the 1820s political discontent had been growing in the state because a rigid constitutional structure severely limited the suffrage to freeholders owning property valued at \$134 and apportioned legislative seats so as to under-represent grossly the expanding urban towns in the northern part of the state.² By 1840 those towns that were growing in population had 2,590 residents per representative; those whose population was static had 1,074 residents per representative; and those whose population was actually declining fared even better — 665 residents per representative. Providence, which contained one-sixth of the state's population and contributed two-thirds of its tax revenue, elected only one-twentieth of the membership in the House of Representatives. Similarly, it is estimated that by 1841 only 40 per cent of the adult males in the state were freemen eligible to vote.³

These features of the Rhode Island political system inhered in the state's Charter Government Constitution whose origin was the charter granted in 1663 by King Charles II. The 1663 constitution was rigid in two respects: it established a fixed reapportionment system, and it provided that only freemen could vote. To be sure, the General Assembly specified the qualifications for freeman status, but these had traditionally been set to include a property qualification. When industrializa-

tion and immigration ballooned the state's population during the second and third decade of the nineteenth century, and as the impulses of Jacksonian democracy made themselves felt, the enfranchised freemen and their legislative representatives — the only ones authorized under the Charter Constitution to make changes in the political structure — reacted conservatively. They feared the influence of the urban areas, of workingman radicalism, and of Catholicism as represented in the substantial influx of Irish immigrants. Repeatedly in the twenties and thirties, in 1821, 1822, 1824, and 1834-35, various attempts to draft a new constitution were either defeated by a vote of the freemen or by the inability of constitutional conventions to muster a quorum.

During the late 1830s leadership of the constitutional reform movement passed to Thomas Wilson Dorr, a Providence attorney and Democratic state legislator. Dorr himself, an ex-Whig, was an Episcopalian, a freeman, and a moderate reformer; many of his followers were well-to-do and socially prominent. Not until the reformers' attempts at peaceful change through the existing constitutional structure had been completely frustrated, did they decide to bypass the Charter regime and take matters in their own hands.⁴ In 1841 they sponsored a People's Convention that drafted a constitution adjusting legislative representation to the new realities of population distribution, expanding the suffrage to include all adult white males, and strengthening guarantees of individual liberty. The People's Constitution, as the Dorrites called it, was approved by a vote of nearly 14,000, including 8,984 nonfreemen. Elections for executive officers and a legislative assembly under its authority were held in

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1 Although dated, the best study is still Arthur May Mowry, *The Dorr War* (Providence: Preston & Rounds Co., 1901). Peter J. Coleman, *The Transformation of Rhode Island*

1790-1860 (Providence: Brown University Press, 1963), ch. 6, is invaluable in providing an analysis of Rhode Island's economy and society during the first half of the nineteenth century. With the exception of an incomplete and laudatory memoir published in 1859, Dan King, *The Life and Times of Thomas Wilson Dorr* (Boston), there have been to date no biographies of the Rhode Island suffrage leader.

In the 1840 Providence Directory, Thomas W. Dorr is listed as residing at 60 Benefit Street, then the address of the Sullivan Dorr Mansion.

Photograph, RIHS Library.



April 1842; to no one's surprise Dorr was overwhelmingly elected governor.

Meanwhile, the Charter Government forces were not idle either. A Law and Order group, primarily Whig in its political complexion, persuaded the General Assembly to sponsor a Freemen's Convention. This convention drafted a document liberalizing the

suffrage and increasing the urban legislative representation but, when it was submitted to a ratification vote, the Freemen's Constitution failed to gain approval by the narrow margin of 8,013 yes votes to 8,689 no votes. Dorr had asked his supporters among the freemen to vote no on the ground that this document was still too anti-republican; their votes, when combined with the more extreme and uncompromising defenders of the old Charter Constitution, apparently made the difference.⁵

The Charter Government's General Assembly also reacted by passing a law making it a treasonable offense to support or participate in the government established by the People's Constitution. Providing such stiff penalties as the possibility of life imprisonment, it was promptly labelled the "Algerine Law" by the Dorrists. As a prosuffrage newspaper put it: "The *Dey* of Algiers has had his *day*; and Rhode Island is the last place in which the arbitrary doctrines of this ex-potentate can be revived with success or impunity."⁶ There were other maneuvers too. The Charter Governor, Samuel Ward King, urgently corresponded with President John Tyler during the early months of 1842, trying to persuade him to commit federal militia for the defense of the Charter regime. A congressional act of 1795 provided that in the case of armed insurrection against the government of a state, "it shall be lawful for the President of the United States, on application of the legislature of such State or of the executive (when the legislature cannot be convened), to call forth such numbers of the militia of any other State or States . . . as he may judge sufficient to suppress such insurrection." Tyler, an ambiguous Democrat with a states' right orientation, had been elected Vice President on a Whig ticket led by William Henry Harrison, who died shortly after taking office. Despite Governor King's prodding (he sent the President six letters between April and June), Tyler responded cautiously, refusing to commit federal aid in advance of an actual violent

2 Freemanship could also be secured by owning property with an annual rental value of \$7; in addition, the eldest son of a freeman also automatically acquired that status. Because Rhode Island was such a tiny state, the opportunities available to nonfreemen for obtaining land were limited. Many of the freemen resisted an expansion of the suffrage by refusing to sell any parts of their land.

3 Statistics from Coleman, p. 256, 259 note, 270.

4 This point of view is developed in a recent article by Robert L. Ciaburri, who is working on a modern study of the controversy. See his "The Dorr Rebellion in Rhode Island: The Moderate Phase," *Rhode Island History*, v. 26 (July 1967), 73-87.

5 Mowry, pp. 124-125.

6 *ibid.*, p. 134.

The Dey of Algiers whose reputation for despotism was invoked by Dorr forces to stigmatize the Charter Government's "Algerine Law."



outbreak. But he did say that, should there be an insurrection "against the government of Rhode Island," he would honor a request for aid. Although refusing to involve himself, as he wrote King on April 11, 1842, in the debate over the "real or supposed defects of the existing government" or to serve as an "armed arbitrator," Tyler's words clearly recognized the legality of the Charter Government:

"It will be my duty . . . to respect the requisitions of that government which has been recognized as the

*existing government of the State through all time past until I shall be advised in regular manner that it has been altered and abolished and another substituted in its place by legal and peaceable proceedings adopted and pursued by the authorities and people of the State."*⁷

Dorr, however, pushed on. On May 3 and 4, 1842, his government, with its popularly elected assembly, convened in an unfinished Providence building intended to be a foundry. Surprisingly, the Dorrites did not attempt to take control of the State House which, though locked, was empty. Indeed, they even reconfirmed the existing Charter Government courts and judges as their own. Dorr's General Assembly then adjourned, supposedly for two months, and the Charter Government reentered the scene, holding a short session at Newport and issuing warrants for the arrest of Dorr and the representatives elected under the People's Constitution. On May 17 Dorr and a small army tried unsuccessfully, in a bloodless episode marked by a comedy of errors, to seize the Providence city arsenal. The General Assembly anticipated a final effort by the Dorrites, and on June 25 it passed legislation placing the state under martial law; Governor King gave it effect by issuing a proclamation warning "all persons against any intercourse or connexion with the traitor Thomas Wilson Dorr, or his deluded adherents, now assembled in arms against the laws and authorities of this State." The Dorrites were warned "immediately to throw down their arms and disperse that peace and order may be restored to our suffering community."⁸ Dorr, however, tried again, and on June 28 another small army that he had gathered near Chepachet was routed at Acote's Hill by the state militia without a real fight. The People's Governor fled the state in disgrace; his movement was finished.

The Law and Order forces, which included a sizable fraction of anti-Dorr Democrats allied with its Whig majority, now responded by convening yet another constitutional convention. It produced a document extending the suffrage, regardless of property holdings,

⁷ James D. Richardson, *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, IV (1908), 291-92.

⁸ Mowry, p. 226.

⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 290-91.

to all native-born male citizens with two years of residence in the state and reapportioning the House of Representatives so as to reflect substantially the increased population of the larger cities and towns. [Each town was awarded one, and only one, senator in the upper legislative chamber, a clear bid for support in the smaller communities.] This constitution won the approval of the state's freemen in November 1842, despite a boycott of the referendum ordered by Dorr from his temporary exile in New Hampshire, and it quickly acquired *de facto* legitimacy. The Dorrites could not deny that the new constitution enfranchised most of the state's voters and gave them an opportunity to win control of the government through the ballot box. Accordingly, the suffrage leaders and the Rhode Island Democratic party convention advised their followers to register. In the April 1843 election for governor, which was won by a Law and Order Democrat, 16,520 votes were cast, nearly double all previous totals.⁹

If Dorr's Rebellion was at an end, the constitutional controversy surrounding it was only beginning.¹⁰ In the debacle that destroyed Dorr's reformist dreams there occurred a little incident at Warren, Rhode Island. Though mundane and trivial, it eventually led to a classic philosophical discussion of the nature of popular government and to a memorable decision by the United States Supreme Court. On the night of June 29, 1842, an armed state militiaman by the name of Luther M. Borden, along with eight comrades, rudely broke into the private home of a shoemaker, roused his mother from sleep, and searched — fruitlessly — for the owner. The intended quarry was a Dorrite by the name of Martin Luther. He had served as Warren town moderator under the People's Constitution, received votes for local and state office under that constitution, and participated in the May attack on the Providence arsenal. The militiamen, acting under the authority of the martial law declared by the Charter Government, had explicit orders to

Ridicule was a weapon for both sides of the suffrage controversy. When Governor King offered a five-thousand-dollar reward for Dorr's capture, Dorrites pictured their leader's escape from ineffectual assailants.

Woodcut from a broadside (Providence, 1842), RIHS Library.



arrest Luther who was erroneously believed to be at home. Luther was actually hiding out in nearby Swansea, Massachusetts, where he enjoyed the shelter of an abode known by the name of Cornell's Tavern. A few months later, Luther, who remained in Massachusetts until April of the following year, filed a trespass action against Borden and the other militiamen in the United States Circuit Court having jurisdiction over Rhode Island.¹¹ [Soon after Luther returned to Rhode Island. He was arrested and tried for participating in the Dorr Government; found guilty, he was

¹⁰ One aspect of the controversy, which is beyond the scope of this article, turns on its relationship to the slavery issue that by the 1840s was increasingly drawing other political questions into its vortex. President Tyler's recognition of the Charter Government opened a congressional dispute over the power of the federal government to recognize rival state governments under Article IV of the Constitution, which guarantees each state a republican form of government (the so-called Guaranty Clause) and over the content of "republican" government. The real issue in Congress was not the fate

of Thomas Dorr's rebellion or President Tyler's reactions, but slavery as it affected incumbent Southern state governments and territories applying for admission to the Union. For a discussion see Michael A. Conron, "Law, Politics, and Chief Justice Taney: A Reconsideration of the Luther v. Borden Decision," *American Journal of Legal History*, XI [1967], 381-83.

¹¹ Mahlon H. Hellerich, "The Luther Cases in the Lower Courts," *Rhode Island History*, v. 21 [April 1952], 36; Mowry, pp. 231-32.

Last half-page (actual size) of Dorr's three-page smuggled letter of November 19, 1844, to Walter S. Burges refers to the Luther case.

Courtesy Brown University Library.

Perhaps you might add to your note, that
 the great question of popular sovereignty, involved
 in my case, will be tried in that of Mr Luther,
 and repeat the fact, that I had no opportunity
 of consulting my counsel before I came here.
 yours as ever
 D.

Of course I have no answer to make to the
 enclosed note.

imprisoned for six months and fined \$500 and court costs.) By claiming a residence in Massachusetts, Luther was able to have his case heard in a federal court, thereby assuring that the profound issues it raised would eventually be passed upon by the United States Supreme Court.

In form, the case of *Luther v. Borden* was a rather routine trespass action — a group of men had broken into a house and were being sued for damages. In reality, it presented all of the constitutional and political issues that had erupted in Dorr's Rebellion. The reason was simple. Borden and the other militiamen defended their breaking and entering into Luther's house, which ordinarily would have been a

clear case of actionable trespass, by asserting that their extraordinary actions were covered by the martial law proclaimed to put down the armed insurrection against the established government of Rhode Island. Since Luther was aiding and abetting this insurrection, the military order to arrest him constituted a valid defense of their action; Borden and the militiamen had not acted unlawfully. Luther, however, argued that the militiamen were without authority to act as they did, for the Charter Government had been replaced by the Dorr Government created under the People's Constitution — Rhode Island's only legitimate popular government. In short, Luther's innocuous-seeming trespass action was potentially a vehicle for challenging

12 Dorr to Burges, Nov. 12, 1844, emphasis in the original. See also Dorr to Burges, Nov. 1 and 19, 1844. All manuscript letters cited in this article are from the Thomas Wilson Dorr Papers, John Hay Library of Brown University. Dorr's judgment that his treason case did not raise the proper issues proved correct. While imprisoned he filed a petition for a writ of habeas corpus with the federal Supreme Court, but it unanimously concluded that it lacked jurisdiction to issue the writ. *Ex parte Dorr*, 3 How. 103 (1845). Later, in *Dorr v. Rhode Island*, an unreported case, he also appealed the treason verdict through a writ of error to the Supreme Court. This case was always secondary in his mind, for

he doubted that the treason verdict appeal could succeed unless the People's Constitution was first upheld in *Luther v. Borden*. When the *Luther* appeal failed, he instructed his attorney to ask the Supreme Court for a dismissal of the treason case. Dorr to Hallett, Jan. 12, Nov. 27, and Dec. 13, 1848; Jan. 9 and Sept. 6, 1849. Hallett to Dorr, Nov. 11 and Dec. 9, 1848. Accounts of the Dorr treason trial may be found in two booklets, copies of which are in the Dorr Papers: Joseph S. Pitman, *Report of the Trial of Thomas Wilson Dorr for Treason Against the State of Rhode Island* (Boston, 1844) and George Turner and Walter S. Burges (eds.), *Report of the Trial of Thomas Wilson Dorr for Treason* (Providence, 1844). See also Mowry, ch. 19.

the legality of the 1842 Charter Government and for retroactively vindicating the People's Constitution and the justice of Dorr's cause. Put another way, *Luther v. Borden* provided Dorr and his followers an opportunity to win in court what they had so ignominiously lost at the Providence arsenal and at Acote's Hill in the spring of 1842.

Dorr himself certainly viewed the case in this light, and he stage-managed the litigation until its conclusion in 1849. He had returned to Rhode Island in October 1843, and the next year, following a treason trial before the state Supreme Court, was sentenced to life imprisonment at hard labor. Writing a smuggled letter on a tiny piece of paper and in miniscule script from the state prison in Providence to a political ally, Walter S. Burges, Dorr commented that "the great question of sovereignty" could not really be presented effectively in his own treason case. But, he implored, "it can be and is fully & perfectly in the case of *Luther*; which I must urge my friends to push forward & sustain with all their might. For God's sake do not let that case fall through!"¹² On his part, the obscure Warren shoemaker probably derived a measure of gratification from the potential significance of his suit against Borden. The Dorr Papers contain a warm letter of encouragement sent in 1844 by Martin Luther, then serving his six-month jail sentence for violating the Algerine Law, to the similarly imprisoned People's Governor. Signing himself "yours in friendship and the cause of right," he declared that he could serve the cause most usefully in prison, and that "if some half dozen more should be found guilty it would help the party more than any other thing that can be done in Rhode Island."¹³ "This fear of prisons," he told his leader, "has been one great cause of our troubles, and it is time

some of us shook off the sin of cowardice and came up with you to the help of the Lord"—a passage that Dorr approvingly underlined.¹³ (As a matter of fact, although the Charter Government made numerous arrests following the rout in June 1842 at Acote's Hill, it created few political martyrs to serve as living reminders of the People's cause. Approximately only forty Dorrists were still in confinement after July, and their prison terms were relatively short. Even Dorr, the rebellion's leader, was a free man by the summer of 1845.) Subsequently, Luther designated Dorr to serve as his principal attorney in the litigation.¹⁴

The case of *Luther v. Borden*, which also included a related suit brought by Luther's mother, Rachel, was tried in the federal Circuit Court during its November 1843 term. Martin Luther was well represented by two leading Dorrists attorneys, Samuel Y. Atwell and Benjamin F. Hallett of Boston.¹⁵ There was no suspense as to what the results would be in this court. The sympathies of the two presiding judges, Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story and Federal District Judge John Pitman, were unequivocally with the claims made on behalf of the Charter Government. Judge Pitman was a Law and Order man who in 1842 had written a pamphlet prophesying that "licentiousness and anarchy" would result if majorities were unfettered. He insisted that "the right of reform is to be exercised in conformity with the fundamental laws of the State and the rights of government, and if a portion of the people, under the pretense of reform, violate their allegiance to the government, and set up a government upon their own authority, this is rebellion and treason, and it is the duty of the government to put it down."¹⁶ Story had applauded Pitman's views, commenting that "if ever there was a case that called upon a judge to

13 Martin Luther to Dorr, March 28, 1844.

14 Luther to Dorr, Dec. 22 and 30, 1845; March 1, 1847. On the arrests that followed the rebellion's collapse, see Mowry, ch. 18.

15 Hallett, who was also a newspaper editor and Democratic party politician, deserves a few words of introduction. He frequently appeared in litigation, such as the Luther case, in which he could argue his theories

of individual rights. Besides the Dorr cause, his initial political affiliations were with the radical Antimasons in Massachusetts and with the Jacksonian Democrats. But the slavery issue and considerations of party advantage cooled his radicalism. He ended his political career as a Doughface supporter of Presidents Pierce (who appointed him federal district attorney in Boston) and Buchanan. *Dictionary of American Biography*, VIII (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), 154-55.

16 Quoted in Mowry, pp. 86-87.

write and speak openly and publicly, it was the very case then before you." Republican government, the Supreme Court Justice added, would be worthless "if an unauthorized body may thus make, promulgate, and compel obedience to a constitution at its own mere will and pleasure."¹⁷

Judges Pitman and Story were scarcely impartial jurists in the *Luther* case, but their prejudices were probably of little significance. Both sides wanted the dispute to go to the United States Supreme Court, and they had agreed that the Circuit Court would accept Borden's justification that his actions had been taken in pursuance of the legitimate commands of the Charter Government. Justice Story complied with a formal ruling to this effect, and the jury accordingly brought in a verdict of not guilty. This cleared the way for an appeal that, early in 1844, was docketed with the Supreme Court.¹⁸

Luther's attorneys for the appeal were, in addition to Hallett, George Turner of Rhode Island, who had helped represent Dorr at his treason trial. Two nationally prominent Democrats also joined the case, Nathan Clifford of Maine, who was President Polk's Attorney General when the case was finally argued and decided by the Supreme Court,¹⁹ and Robert J. Walker of Mississippi, a leading party politician who was also in Polk's Cabinet as Secretary of the Treasury. Despite Martin Luther's plea that he personally argue the case before the Court—"Mr. Turner has only thought[t] of the case as any other lawyer would think; you have thought upon it with feelings"²⁰—Dorr, whose health was not good, preferred to direct the case as best he could from his Providence home.

That he did so is confirmed in the Dorr Papers. They contain a memorandum written by Dorr entitled, "Martin Luther v. L. M. Borden & others, Jan. 1847," which lists various points to be made in the case, and numerous communications between Dorr, Clifford, and Hallett discussing legal strategy. Writing to Clifford, who joined the appeal in its later stages, Dorr explained that "the brief for Martin Luther as printed by Mr. Hallett, has grown out of the researches of

Mr. Turner & himself [with the aid of our documents of 1842, '44, &c] and of a full consultation held by both of them with me a year ago, Mr. H. making notes for the additions to his first brief which were thought desirable." In this letter Dorr went on to state his theory of the issue in *Luther v. Borden*.

*"Martin Luther and his friends desire that his case should be placed on the high ground of Popular Sovereignty; and that the main stress should not be on the minor point, that in R. Island there was no prescribed mode of proceeding to amend the government, and therefore the People here were at liberty to frame a government in such mode of proceeding as they deemed expedient. We contend for their absolute sovereignty over all Constitutions and prescribed modes of amendment, with the limitations only that are established in the Constitution of the United States. The establishment of any mode of convenience, for amending a Constitution through the action of the Legislature, cannot impair the general unalienated & inalienable right of the People at large to make alterations in their organic laws in any other mode, which they may deem expedient; Constitutions and plans of government not being barriers against Popular Sovereignty, by the theory of our institutions, but forms of expressing, protecting & securing the Rights of the People, intended to remain in use until the People shall otherwise indicate and direct."*²¹

As for the limitations imposed on the people's constituent power by the federal Constitution, Dorr's memorandum of 1847 took the position that there were only two: "1. The Constitution must be republican. 2. The People must proceed without 'domestic violence,' or 'insurrection.'" He of course denied that the suffrage movement had created any such situation; in his mind, the insurrectionists were associated with the Charter Government.

Dorr, as his correspondence emphasizes, remained thoroughly convinced of the righteousness of his cause. Thus, early in 1845, he refused an amnesty offered by the General Assembly on condition that he swear an oath of loyalty to the 1843 constitution. He was still,

17 Story to Pitman, Feb. 10, 1842, in William W. Story [ed.], *Life and Letters of Joseph Story*, II (Boston: Little and Brown, 1851), 416.

18 Hellerich, 39.

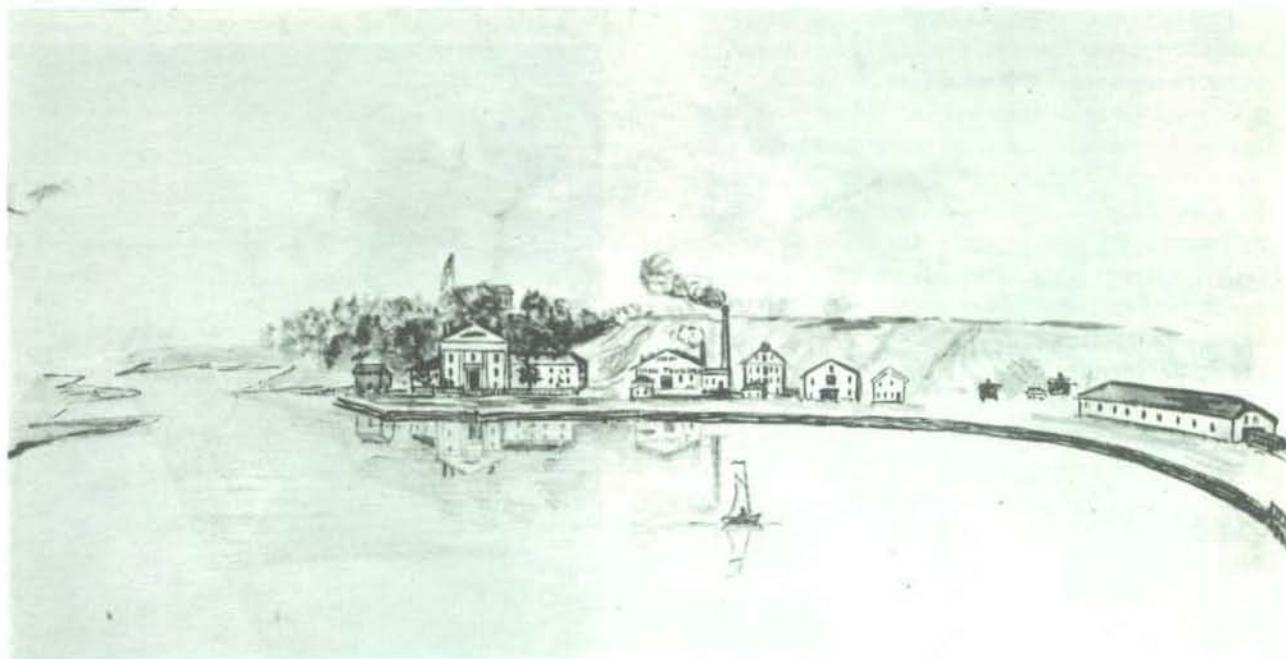
19 Clifford later served a long tenure on the Supreme Court, from 1858 to 1881.

20 Luther to Dorr, Dec. 30, 1845.

21 Dorr to Clifford, Jan. 24, 1848, emphasis in original.

Rhode Island State Prison as it appeared when Dorr occupied a cell.

Sketch by William S. Hoyt from Samuel W. Brown Scrapbook, RIHS Library.



he believed, Rhode Island's legal governor, and the only binding constitution he recognized was the People's Constitution. (A Democratic-controlled assembly, however, pardoned him later that year; in 1851 his full political rights were restored and, in 1854, a few months before his death, the Assembly ordered the verdict of treason expunged from the state's judicial records.)

The Assembly, however, subsequently requested an opinion from the Rhode Island Supreme Court on the constitutionality of the legislative annulment of the treason verdict. It responded by unanimously declaring the annulment to violate the 1842 constitution with an opinion that is a paean to the separation of powers doctrine and the power of judicial review. The act, it said, was an "exercise by the General Assembly of

supreme judicial power" in conflict with the judiciary's "final and conclusive" duty "in all free constitutional governments to decide upon the constitutionality of laws passed by the legislature." The judges delicately noted that "the defendant" was now free and possessed all his rights; had this not been the situation "we should doubt the propriety of giving an opinion upon the constitutionality of an act "to reverse and annul the treason verdict. The question was purely theoretical, and the Court's theory reflects a rather delicious irony. One of Dorr's complaints against the old constitutional structure had been that the judiciary was ultimately subservient to the legislature, which often reversed legislative judgments. The Court's opinion, written under a constitution which the

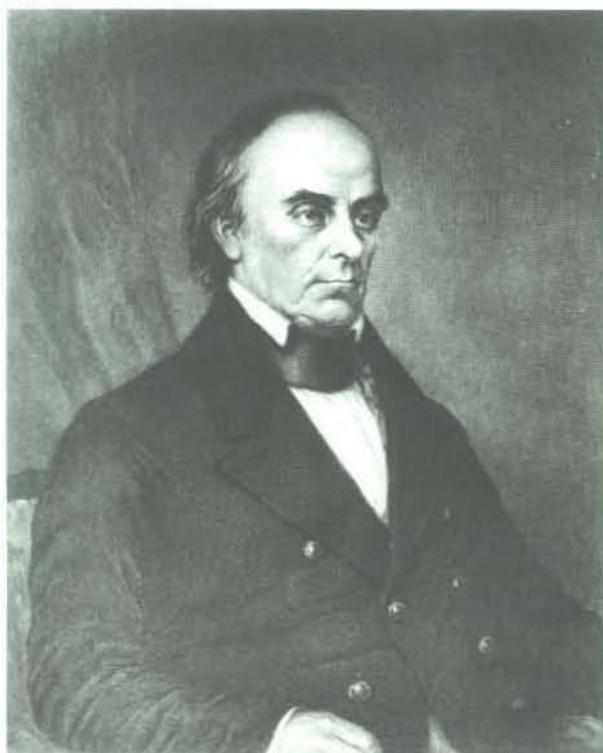
People's Governor did not recognize, now unequivocally affirmed the principle of an independent judiciary — by deciding that, legally and officially, Dorr could not escape the brand of a treason judgment.²²

This abiding conviction of the legal rightness and moral justness of his cause explains Dorr's interest in pursuing the *Luther v. Borden* case. To be sure, a Supreme Court decision upholding Luther's suit against Borden and thus recognizing the Dorr Government as the state's valid government in 1842 would have had little practical effect. Dorr's cause, while it still enjoyed *pro forma* support among the Rhode Island Democrats, was organizationally shattered after the events of 1842. Indeed, Dorr and his by then small band of active supporters could hardly finance the costs of the *Luther* litigation.²³ Furthermore, despite the harsh comments that the Dorr loyalists directed against the state's "Tories" and "Algerines," their cause had been largely rendered irrelevant by the suffrage reforms inaugurated under the new 1842 constitution. By the mid-forties the Charter Government, no less than the People's Constitution, had become obsolete issues. Under these circumstances, a Supreme Court decision recognizing the legitimacy of Dorr's Government would have simply been unenforceable. It would not, however, have been meaningless. A favorable judicial decision would have vindicated Dorr and perhaps encouraged him to try a comeback in Rhode Island's politics. Moreover, the litigation, with its ensuing briefs and oral arguments that could be reported in the press and published in pamphlets, provided Dorr another opportunity to set his cause again before the people, for whose "unalienated" sovereignty he so doggedly contended.

Initially, at least, Dorr was confident of an ultimate judicial victory, perhaps because the Supreme Court of the 1840s was dominated by judges who had been Jacksonian Democrats; its Chief Justice, Roger B. Taney, had of course been one of President Jackson's most influential advisers. Benjamin Hallett and George Turner were, however, generally pessimistic, and their pessimism was heightened by the fact that Daniel

Daniel Webster.

Engraving by H. W. Smith from painting by A. G. Hoyt in *The Works of Daniel Webster*, v. 1 (Boston, 1872).



Webster was to appear, with John Whipple of Rhode Island, as the principal counsel defending Borden and the Charter Government. Webster was then at the height of his political career and Hallett, for one, had little stomach for crossing forensic swords with the godlike Daniel. As he explained to Walter S. Burges:

*"I am sure that Govr. Dorr and yourself must concur with me in the folly of the position for me to take as closing counsel to Webster. With Whipple or any other man in R. I. I would not hesitate — but the moral effect must be looked at and if the cause rests on me & Turner alone that moral effect will crush it and us too!"*²⁴

22 Opinion of the Supreme Court, 3, *R.I. Reports* (1854), 299-311.

23 Hallett to Dorr, Feb. 11, Nov. 11, 1848, and Jan. 8, 1849; Dorr to Hallett, Nov. 27, 1848, Sept. 6, 1849.

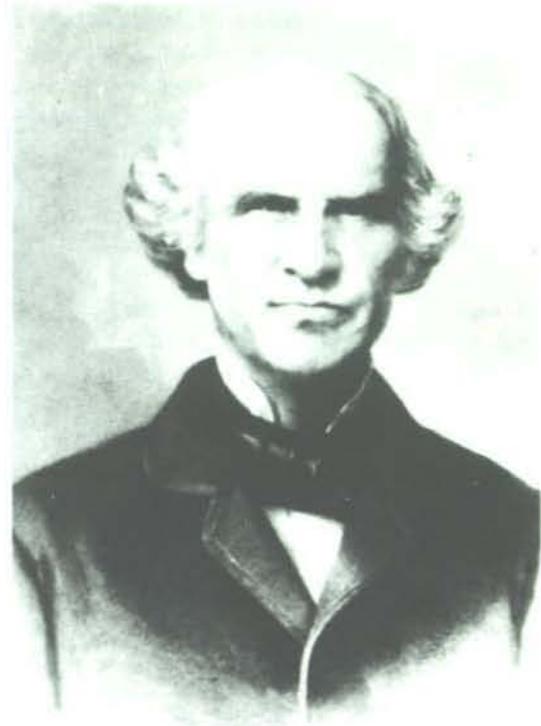
24 Hallett to Burges, Jan. 19, 1847.

Hallett hoped that particularly Robert J. Walker or, alternatively, Nathan Clifford could be persuaded to participate in the oral argument; as it turned out, Walker's name appeared on Luther's brief, but the actual oral argument was made by Hallett and, to a lesser extent, by Clifford. Dorr's reaction to Hallett's apprehensions reveals much about the man's faith in his cause and the role he assigned to *Luther v. Borden*. Early in 1847 Dorr sent Hallett and Turner an evaluation of the prospects and the Court's probable line-up. The letter deserves extensive quotation:

"Your letter leaves it still an uncertainty whether Mr. Walker will appear at all at the trial: and, if no other desirable arrangement can be made, it will be left to you to buckle on your armor, and enter the arena without assistance, trusting in the potency of a great and righteous cause to sustain you against all the assaults of the great federal Algerine Dragon himself. Even Mr. Webster's acknowledged power cannot sustain him in a cause, which, as appears by your statement of the points of the opposing counsel, rests mainly on the principle, that in this country the sovereignty is vested in the government and not in the people. You are to be envied in your duty and privilege of assailing Mr. Webster, or any other man who shall occupy an old, exploded Tory ground like this.

"The reasons for going on with the argument of the case at the present time are well understood by you, and need not be enlarged upon. Our friends are impatient. Their enemies are taunting them with a want of confidence in the case. The delay injures us here politically. The Court is full, excepting the absence of a Judge who is opposed to us. The concurrence of 5 Judges is necessary to give the case against us. The worst we have to expect under present appearances is an equal division of the Court, 4 and 4. If Nelson be now 'conservative,' he has altered his mind since the summer of 1845, when, in a conversation with a citizen of this State, not a lawyer, he expressed his entire approbation of the proceedings of the R. Island Suffrage party. We may rely then I think on Woodbury, Nelson, Grier & Catron. With the addition of Daniel we have

John Whipple of Rhode Island.



the decision in our favor What we might gain by the appointment of a successor to McKinley we should be very likely to lose by the absence of some friendly Judge.

"If the Supreme Court of the U States shall decide this case against us, they will damage themselves vastly more than they will the great right of reserved sovereignty in the People. The question will once more enter the political fields, and lead eventually to the expurgation of life Judges from the constitution.

"Nothing should prevent you from bringing the case to final argument at the present time. We are opposed to any arrangement for an argument in writing, and desire that our cause, in all its proportions, should be held up to the fullest scrutiny in open Court; where we

also wish to have exhibited the unmitigated sentiments of the Algerine Tory party, by the authority of its greatest expositor.

*"Go on then, with or without the aid, which you have been seeking; and we cannot doubt, from the preparations which we know to be made by you, that you will render ample justice to the cause, and acquire an honorable distinction in vindicating it."*²⁵

This letter was written three years after the case had been docketed with the Supreme Court; the Court had already postponed scheduled arguments twice and it did so again in the spring term of 1847. The long delay, which was not unusual in the nineteenth century, was a consequence of unfilled vacancies on the bench and absences due to illness.²⁶ *Luther v. Borden* was of such obvious significance that the Court was apparently reluctant to decide it at reduced strength. As the presidential election of 1848 approached, the Court may have been influenced to a further delay because the case was widely perceived as involving a conflict between Democratic and Whig political principles.²⁷ Although the Court's decision was not announced till 1849, following the election won by the Whig ticket of Taylor and Fillmore, the oral argument finally took place in January 1848. The argument, in the grand tradition of nineteenth-century Supreme Court hearings on cases of great public interest, lasted for six days. With Daniel Webster, the most dramatic Whig spokesman, and the Democratic Administration's Attorney General Nathan Clifford, on opposite sides, the Rhode Island case was a political event.

The principal brief for Luther was presented by Benjamin Hallett who challenged the legitimacy of the Charter Government (and hence of the actions by Borden and the other militiamen) with Dorr's theory of an inalienable popular sovereignty. It was, Hallett declared, a fundamental principle of the American system of government "that government is instituted by the people, and for the benefit, protection, and security of the people, nation, or community . . . and

when any government shall be found inadequate or contrary to these purposes, a majority of the community hath an indubitable, inalienable, and indefeasible right to reform, alter, or abolish the same, in such manner as shall be judged most conducive to the public weal." Under "the institution of American liberty" the sovereign rights of the people empowered them to change peacefully their form of government—"in such way and manner as the people may for themselves determine"—and those who resisted them were the culpable party.²⁸

Hallett's oral argument expanded on these points and attempted a difficult distinction between what he labelled a "change of government" and "the right of revolution in the common and European acceptation of the term." Although conceding that the latter were forbidden by the federal Constitution because they involved force and insurrection, he placed the Dorr movement in the category of peaceful change permitted by the Constitution. He argued that there was a right "peaceably to change government," if done by a majority:

*"Not by first attacking the existing government or overturning the laws, and then making a constitution, as in the revolution of '76, but by first adopting peaceably a new organic law, establishing the fundamental principles on which the government shall be conducted, the officers chosen, and the laws enacted. In order to do this, the concurrence of the old government is convenient and desirable, but not indispensable."*²⁹

More specifically, Hallett claimed that the People's Constitution superseded the Charter Constitution since it had been adopted by a majority of the state's adult male voters. He took three days to argue these points, quoting copiously from an array of historical documents and American and European legal and political writers. It was a legal tour de force, and it overwhelmed the Supreme Court Reporter, Benjamin C. Howard, who frankly commented in the subsequent

25 Dorr to Hallett and Turner, Feb. 2, 1847.

26 Charles Warren, *The Supreme Court in United States History*, II (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1926),

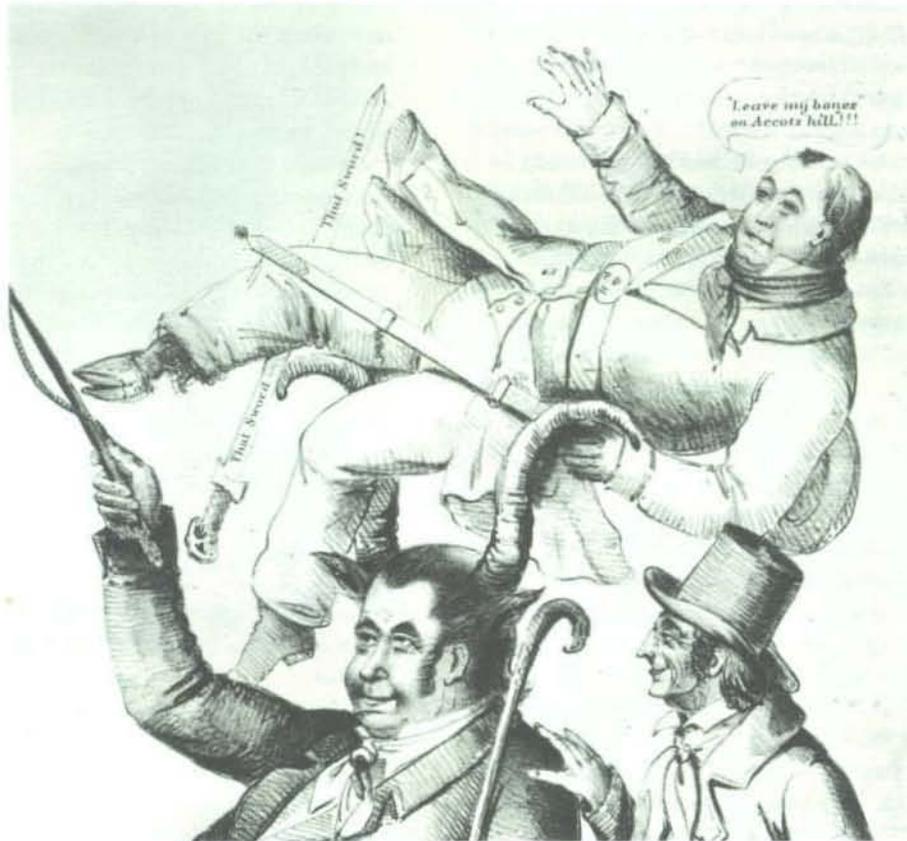
188. Three judges were nevertheless absent when the case was finally decided.

27 See newspaper comments, *ibid.*, 187-195.

As emphasized in this detail from a cartoon of the time, the slavery issue plagued Dorr's party. Hoisted on the horns of his 1843 gubernatorial opponent James Fenner, Dorr exhibits one cloven hoof, explained in a paragraph of the cartoon: "Trial by Jury for Escaped Slaves" known to be unconstitutional. And tending to dissolve the Union.

Surreptitiously inserted in the Suffrage Constitution... By one of the publishing committee. Thereby disclosing the CLOVEN FOOT of Contraband Abolition design..."

Detail of a lithograph. Thayer & Company (Boston, 1843).



28 Report of Briefs and Arguments, *Luther v. Borden*, 7 How. 1, 19-20 (1849). One difficulty in asserting so absolute a doctrine was its implication for the all-consuming slavery issue. Obviously, from the perspective of the South absolute popular sovereignty wedded to a definition of "the people" that really included all persons challenged the very legitimacy of the slave state governments. Hallett's brief, which was addressed to a Court that included five Southerners, sidestepped the problem by taking a states' rights position as to how "the people" should be defined, and his oral argument reiterated this theme. He argued that popular sovereignty applied to all citizens, but not persons incompetent to form contracts — children, women, idiots, insane people, strangers and, in the Southern states, slaves, because "by the laws of the community in which they are found, they are incapable of making contracts." He further commented [emphasis in the original] that "the attempt to alarm the South on this point is absurd," for "it is not necessary in order to sustain the relation of slavery in the States where it exists, to limit the rights of a majority of a free people, and make them the subjects of a minority." Popular sovereignty, in short, was for citizens only, and in the

South slaves could not be citizens. Benjamin F. Hallett, *The Right of the People to Establish Forms of Government* (Boston, 1848), pp. 51-52. This position understandably made the People's Governor uneasy. Writing to Clifford on January 24, 1848, he had this to say on the prickly issue:

"All that is said in the present brief on the subject of slavery may not command assent. Our front towards opponents in the slave States is clear & well defined. The People in every State, within the limitations of the National Constitution, are competent to the making and altering of their forms of government. Here, having no slaves, we had no difficulty as to who were the People. When any question of sovereignty shall arise in a slave State, such State will settle for itself who are its People. If we were inhabitants of Virginia and such a question should arise, we should have no hesitation, I presume, in saying without touching the justice or rightfulness of slavery, that the slaves were in fact no part of the sovereign body, and were in a condition of pupillage and incapacity disqualifying them from any participation in political power."

29 Hallett, *Right of the People*, p. 29.

report of the case that he was "at a loss how to give even a skelton of the argument . . . which extended over a great variety of matter."³⁰ "Whether I did well or not," Hallett wrote to Dorr, "is for others to say. I know I did it faithfully, and every point was made that could be made . . . I had all the attention from the Court I could desire. Every point of reference was taken by them."³¹

But Webster's argument was also impressive, as even Hallett conceded in reporting to Dorr. Despite its "broad fallacy on the face," it "was of course deemed powerful because it came from Mr. Webster. It was an admirable forensic and Mr. W. laid himself out to do his greatest."³² As Secretary of State in 1842 Webster had advised President Tyler in his handling of the Rhode Island crisis, and he now pursued a brilliant strategy in the *Luther v. Borden* case. Fully admitting that the people were sovereign, he insisted that this sovereignty had to assert itself through the forms of law and the mechanics of representative government. Constitutions, too, could and often should be changed, but the changes could not be decreed by self-appointed bodies:

"Is it not obvious enough that men cannot get together and count themselves, and say they are so many hundreds and so many thousands, and judge of their own qualifications, and call themselves the people, and set up a government! Why, another set of men, forty miles off, on the same day, with the same propriety, and as good qualifications, and in as large numbers, may meet and set up another government; one may meet at Newport and another at Chepachet, and both may call themselves the people. What is this but anarchy! What liberty is there here but a tumultuary, tempestuous, violent, stormy liberty, a sort of South American liberty, without power except in its spasms, a liberty supported by arms to-day, crushed by arms to-morrow. Is that our liberty!"³³

The Charter Government, Webster insisted, was the duly constituted government of the state, and it could be changed only through processes initiated by its own

authorities — as, he noted, had occurred with the adoption of the 1842 constitution. Dorr's movement, therefore, was extra-legal, and it raised the danger of domestic violence that the federal Constitution and the congressional act of 1795 specifically provided against. Webster emphasized that the federal government, acting through President Tyler, had unequivocally recognized the legitimacy of the Charter Government and pledged to support it with federal troops should actual violence erupt. In addition, the courts of Rhode Island, in Dorr's treason trial, had similarly confirmed the absolute legitimacy of the Charter regime. As a consequence, Webster told the Supreme Court that it simply lacked jurisdiction to upset these determinations by the federal government and the courts of the state. To support Luther's suit against Borden, the Court would have to endorse the Dorr position that the People's Constitution had replaced the Charter Constitution by virtue of its having been adopted by a majority of the people. But the judges, he pointed out, could reach such a conclusion only by investigating the number of citizens living in Rhode Island in 1841, determining how many attended the meetings that selected the People's Convention delegates, and then proving, by sworn testimony, the voting qualifications of those who selected delegates and who participated in the referendum on the People's Constitution. In addition, the judges would have to verify the accuracy of the ballot counts. "It is enough," Webster commented, "to state such a proposition to show its absurdity."³⁴

Finally, leaving no point uncovered, Webster made — in devastating fashion — the pragmatic argument that there was really no Dorr Government to be recognized judicially, even if the judges were inclined to pass on the contending claims:

"... I say that there is no evidence offered, nor has any distinct allegation been made, that there was an actual government established and put in operation to displace the Charter government, even for a single day.

the time; that the force used by him was exercised in defense of the constitution and laws, and not against them; that he who opposed the constituted authorities was not Mr. Dorr, but Governor King, and that it was he who should have been indicted, and tried, and sentenced. This is rather an important mistake, to be sure, if it be a mistake. 'Change places,' cries poor Lear, 'change places, and handy-dandy, which is the justice and which the thief?' So our learned opponents say, 'change places, and handy-dandy, which is the governor

30 7 How. 1, 21.

31 Hallett to Dorr, Feb. 11, 1848.

32 *ibid.*

33 *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster*, XI [Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1903], 226. Even at a distance of more than one hundred years Webster's rhetorical skills excite admiration. Consider this excerpt:

"It is alleged that Mr. Dorr, instead of being a traitor or insurrectionist, was the real governor of the State at

Benjamin F. Hallett.

Portrait from *History of Cape Cod*, by Frederick Freeman, v. 2 (Boston, 1858).



*That is evident enough. You find the whole embraced in those two days, the 3d and 4th of May. The French revolution was thought to be somewhat rapid. That took three days. But this work was accomplished in two. It is all there, and what is it! Its birth, its whole life, and its death were accomplished in forty-eight hours . . . It never performed one single act of government. It never did a thing in the world! All was patriotism, and all was paper; and with patriotism and with paper it went out on the 4th of May, admitting itself to be, as all must regard it, a contemptible sham!"*³⁵

and which the rebel!" *ibid.*, 218-219. The record of Webster's oral argument in *Luther v. Borden* is the most complete and reliable of his famous arguments before the Supreme Court. For a recent discussion and evaluation see Maurice G. Baxter, *Daniel Webster @ The Supreme Court* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1966), pp. 58-64.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 238.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 240.

Democratic and Whig newspapers took predictably opposite views of Webster's argument. The Democratic *Boston Post* called it "infamous" and "worthy of a monarchist and a despiser of everything democratic or republican." "If," the *Post* continued, "it was made in consideration of a fee, it reflects discredit and dishonor on the man who can be hired to embrace and enforce dogmas that are only calculated to oppress, debase and enslave a free people. If it embraces the real opinion of the man, they are entitled, with their author, to popular execration." The Whig press saw it differently. The *New York Tribune's* correspondent reported that "Mr. Webster demolished what was left of Dorrism. His argument was alike brilliant and profound . . . it is, perhaps, the best exposition of constitutional liberty ever made."³⁶

Security surrounding the Supreme Court's proceedings was far laxer than it is today, and by February the press was reporting that the decision would go against the Dorr claims. With apparent access to inside information, newspapers told their readers that the decision would be grounded in the proposition that the federal judiciary had to defer to the judgment of the Rhode Island courts and to the political recognition given the Charter government by President Tyler.³⁷ Dorr himself was forewarned by friends that the decision would go against Luther's suit. Shortly after the argument Hallett sent Dorr what proved to be an accurate appraisal of how the Supreme Court judges would vote, also informing him that the decision would not be announced until the subsequent term. "I will be happily disappointed," he wrote, "if they do not undertake to evade a decision by holding that it is a political & local question, which they cannot interfere with, & that they cant go behind the existing Govt & the decision of the State Courts."³⁸

Dorr, an eternally optimistic believer in popular democracy, took comfort in the fact that the merits of his cause had been fully presented and that there could be yet another appeal—"to the grand tribunal

³⁶ Quoted in Warren, 188-190.

³⁷ *ibid.*, 192-193.

³⁸ Hallett to Dorr, Feb. 11, 1848; a similar prediction of the Court's response is contained in a letter to Dorr from one of his ardent congressional supporters, New Hampshire Representative Edmund Burke, March 6 and May 22, 1848. See also Hallett to Dorr, Nov. 11, 1848.

of public opinion." "I have confidence," he wrote a friend, that it "will not only vindicate the right of sovereignty, but dethrone the bench of life-judges; who, it is well understood, lose all their democracy both of opinion and sentiment in that unsafe elevation."³⁹ "Our cause," he told another supporter, "cannot be damaged by the Tory judges of the Supreme Court of the U.S." This bravado, however, lost much of its force in the face of the fact that the Court of the late 1840s was dominated, not by conservative Whigs, but by Jacksonian Democratic judges — a point that did not escape public commentary. "Dorrism," the Whig *New York Tribune* accurately predicted, was about to be condemned by a Court "composed of eight Loco-Foco and only one Whig. Judge Taney, the friend and disciple of Jackson, is to be, it is said, its Executor. What will Loco-Focoism say to that?"⁴⁰

The Supreme Court's decision was announced by Chief Justice Taney in January 1849, in an opinion that closely followed the main points of Webster's argument. Noting that the Dorr Government had never really exercised authority and that the consequence of upholding Luther's suit would be to void retroactively all actions taken under the authority of the Charter Government in 1841 and 1842, Taney took the position that in the American states it had always been accepted that the "political department" of government, not the judiciary, passed on the validity of constitutions and their amendments. Dorr's treason trial before the Rhode Island Supreme Court, a court operating under the established and legally recognized government of the new 1842 constitution, had conclusively ruled that in 1841-42 the Charter Government represented the legitimate state authority. Not only did the federal courts customarily follow the state courts on such questions, but Taney, echoing Webster's argument, pointed out that there was no practical way for the federal courts to determine whether the voters who allegedly adopted the People's Constitution actually represented a popular majority or were properly qualified to vote.

Chief Justice Taney drew further strong support for his opinion from Article IV of the Federal Constitution,

which guarantees to each state a republican form of government and pledges to protect them from domestic violence. This provision, he contended, placed the responsibility for deciding conflicts between rival claimants to a state's government upon the political — the legislative and executive — branches of the federal government. Congress could determine which of two factions constituted a state's established government by deciding whose representatives to seat in the House and Senate. Taney pointed out that since the Dorr Government never tried to send representatives and senators to Congress there had been no opportunity for a congressional decision, but nonetheless "the right to decide is placed there, and not in the courts." Taney also stressed the fact that President Tyler, acting in pursuance of the 1795 anti-insurrection law, had recognized Governor King, and hence the Charter Government, as the rightful authority of Rhode Island by promising to supply federal militia if serious disorders should erupt. (Even Dorr, it bears noting, had to concede that the President had intervened on the side of the Charter Government; in one letter he referred bitterly to "the atrocity of Tyler's military intervention in the affairs of this State."⁴¹ Surely, Taney continued, a federal Circuit Court could not intervene effectively in such a dispute while it was raging. How, then, should the court conclude that the President had recognized the wrong party, could federal judges order the discharge of persons arrested or detained by the federal forces or the forces of the government recognized by the President? "If," he observed, "the judicial power extends so far, the guarantee contained in the Constitution of the United States is a guarantee of anarchy, and not of order. Yet if this right does not reside in the courts when the conflict is raging, if the judicial power is at that time bound to follow the decision of the political, it must be equally bound when the contest is over."⁴²

A subsidiary issue strongly urged by Luther's counsel was that the Charter Government, even if deemed legitimate, had exceeded its authority in proclaiming the martial law that justified the house-breaking activities of Borden and the other state

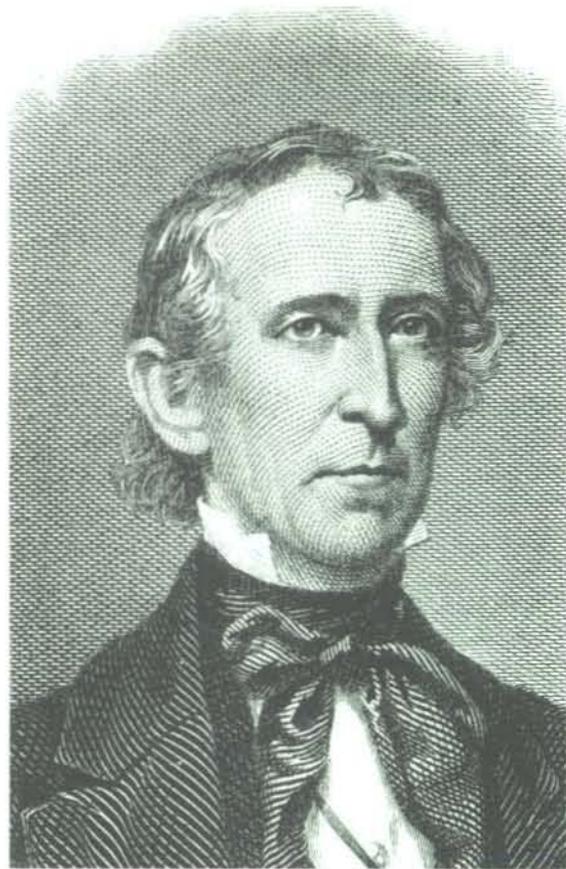
39 Dorr to Burke, April 8, 1848.

40 Quoted in Warren, 193.

41 Dorr to Clifford, Jan. 24, 1848.

42 Taney quoted from *Luther v. Borden*, 7 How. 1, 43 [1849].

President John Tyler.



militiamen. Taney rejected this contention, noting that martial law had been proclaimed for only a temporary period during the crisis. The states, he declared, could use force to put down military threats so long as it did not exceed the necessities of the circumstances, a condition that had been met in the Rhode Island case. Finally, the Chief Justice concluded with a paragraph that has stood as a classic statement of the doctrine of political questions in American constitutional law:

"Much of the argument on the part of the plaintiff turned upon political rights and political questions,

*upon which the court has been urged to express an opinion. We decline doing so. The high power has been conferred on this court of passing judgment upon the acts of the State sovereignties, and of the legislative and executive branches of the federal government, and of determining whether they are beyond the limits of power marked out for them respectively by the Constitution of the United States. This tribunal, therefore, should be the last to overstep the boundaries which limit its own jurisdiction. And while it should always be ready to meet any question confided to it by the Constitution, it is equally its duty not to pass beyond its appropriate sphere of action, and to take care not to involve itself in discussions which properly belong to other forums. No one, we believe, has ever doubted the proposition, that, according to the institutions of this country, the sovereignty in every State resides in the people of the State, and that they may alter and change their form of government at their own pleasure. But whether they have changed it or not by abolishing an old government, and establishing a new one in its place, is a question to be settled by the political power. And when that power has decided, the courts are bound to take notice of its decision, and to follow it."*⁴³

This doctrine had had its ups and downs in the years since 1849, most recently when the Warren Court of the 1960s reversed earlier judicial statements by concluding that questions of legislative apportionment do not fall within its proscriptions and may therefore be decided by the federal courts.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the basic constitutional doctrine of *Luther v. Borden* — certain kinds of questions are so exclusively political that the Constitution commits their resolution to the nonjudicial branches of government — has endured. Federal courts, for example, do not challenge congressional and presidential determinations in foreign affairs, and they do not pass upon questions involving disputes as to whether congressional laws or constitutional amendments have been enacted according to proper forms.

The Supreme Court's decision was by a five-to-one majority, for three of the judges, Catron, Daniel, and

⁴³ *ibid.*, 46-47. A recent and provocative article suggests that Taney's celebrated opinion was far more political than its doctrine of political questions superficially implies. Conron, 377-88.

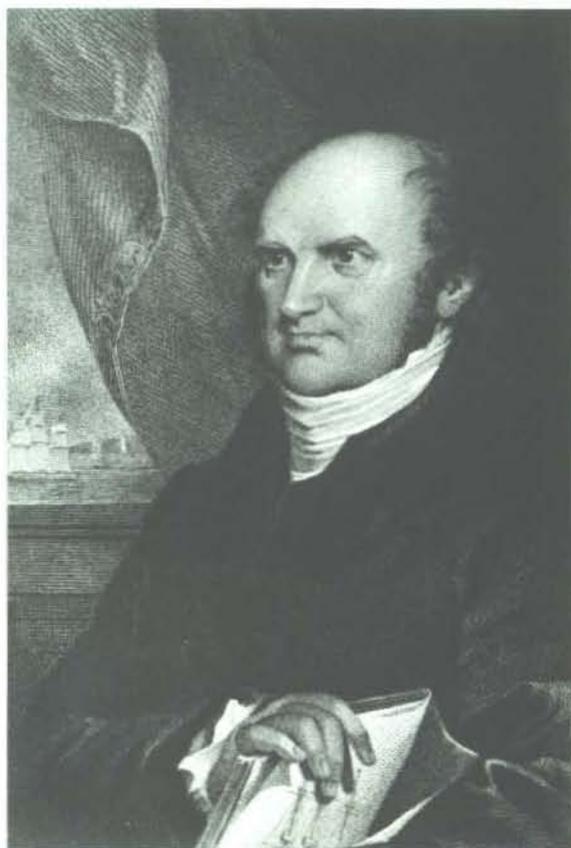
⁴⁴ *Baker v. Carr*, 369 U.S. 186 (1962), and subsequent reapportionment cases, especially *Wesberry v. Sanders*, 376 U.S. 1 (1964), and *Reynolds v. Sims*, 377 U.S. 533 (1964).

McKinley, were absent due to illness and other causes. Their presence would not have changed the results, even though Catron reportedly favored the Dorr claims.⁴⁵ The sole dissenter, Levi Woodbury of New Hampshire, undoubtedly found himself in a difficult situation. A leading Democratic politician, Woodbury had endorsed the Dorr cause while serving in the Senate at the height of the controversy in 1841 and 1842.⁴⁶ He remained sympathetic and, indeed, in 1845, only one month prior to his appointment to the Supreme Court by President Polk, was invited to attend a "Liberation Fete" in Rhode Island for Dorr, who had just been released from prison. Although unable to join "the democracy of Rhode Island in that public celebration," Woodbury rejoiced "that Mr. Dorr is again in the enjoyment of that liberty — for which he has made so many sacrifices and endured so much suffering & reproach."⁴⁷ Hallett and other observers of *Luther v. Borden* had correctly predicted that Woodbury would vote on the Dorr side,⁴⁸ but he did so on relatively narrow grounds. In a very long and complex opinion Justice Woodbury took the position that Luther's suit should be sustained because Rhode Island had exceeded its authority in declaring martial law. But on the basic conflict between the rival governments Woodbury followed Taney's statement that this was "a mere political question." "Constitutions and laws," he explained, "precede the judiciary, and we act only under and after them, and as to disputed rights beneath them, rather than disputed points in making them."⁴⁹

Woodbury's opinion, which historians and legal commentators have neglected in favor of Taney's classic declaration, is noteworthy for a sophisticated and realistic discussion of popular sovereignty and rights. Although emphasizing there could be no judicial redress in situations such as the Rhode Island one, Woodbury claimed that the aggrieved parties nevertheless had some alternatives. They could first try conventional political action — the use of the ballot box, the petitioning of the legislature and executive, the proposing of constitutional amendments and

Levi Woodbury.

Portrait drawn and engraved by J. B. Longacre. The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans, v. 2 (Philadelphia, 1835).



conventions. If these failed or were forbidden by the public authorities, and the people's suffering was "intolerable," then "in extreme cases" they would have to act extralegally, "as did Hampden and Washington." Where strong majorities favored the reform the legislature would probably respond, and there would be little violence. Where the legislative representation was of a completely unresponsive "character," and the

45 Warren, 193.

46 Ciaburri, 81-83.

47 Woodbury to William Simmons, "Secretary of the Liberation Committee," Aug. 26, 1845.

48 Hallett to Dorr, Feb. 11, 1848; Edmund Burke to Dorr, May 22, 1848.

49 *Luther v. Borden*, 7 How. 1, 51-52.

50 *ibid.*, 55.

popular cause was turned back, Woodbury suggested that as a practical matter there would be few harsh reprisals if large numbers of people had favored the change. He concluded his analysis of the problem of popular discontent and conservative government with some shrewd observations:

"[Changes demanded and supported by large majorities] will usually be allowed to go into peaceful consummation. But when not so allowed, or when they are attempted by small or doubtful majorities, it must be conceded that it will be at their peril, as they will usually be resisted by those in power by means of prosecutions, and sometimes by violence, and, unless crowned by success, and thus subsequently ratified, they will often be punished as rebellious or treasonable.

"If the majorities, however, in favor of changes happen to be large, and still those in power refuse to yield to them, as in the English revolution of 1688, or in our own of 1776, the popular movement will generally succeed, though it be only by a union of physical with moral strength; and when triumphant, it will, as on those occasions, confirm by subsequent forms of law what may have begun without them."⁵⁰

In fact, Woodbury's analysis was a fair description of what had happened in Rhode Island. The suffrage forces had been turned back by an unrepresentative government, and Dorr paid the price of being convicted as a traitor. But the Rhode Island Suffrage Party had demonstrated impressive support in 1841 and 1842 and, ultimately, if reluctantly, the Charter Government acquiesced in the suffrage and reapportionment reforms that were promulgated by the new constitution of 1842. There had been, moreover, no serious violence in the state and, with the exception of the brief imprisonment of Dorr and a handful of his supporters, few reprisals against the reformers.

Dorr reacted to the Supreme Court's decision, which he had expected, with equanimity. For one thing, he felt that Daniel Webster's argument conceded too much in its emphasis on the sovereign powers of the people, even though the great Whig constitutionalist

insisted that this sovereign power had to be expressed through the established legal forms. As Dorr saw it, Rhode Island's "Algerines and Whigs" were dismayed by the "discovery that he attributes too much to government! and that by his admission too much can be done here upon a change in the legislature from Algerine to democratic."⁵¹ For another, Hallett's argument had been published in pamphlet form and his defense of the Dorr Government had been publicized in the New England Democratic press. The Court's refusal to pass on the merits of the rival governments' claims enabled the Dorrites to argue that the legitimacy of the People's Constitution had not been disproven. Dorr phrased the argument this way:

"The Whig statement of the grounds taken by the Sup. Court of the U.S. in their decision of the Luther cases, does not warrant the exultation of our opponents upon the supposed judicial overthrow of the Rhode Island cause. The first point of the Court, which includes all the rest, is that the act of sovereignty, which the People of this State claim to have performed, is a political and not a legal subject. The Court decline to give their opinion upon the R.I. Question for this reason. They regard the government in fact as the government in right, so far as they are concerned."⁵²

Similarly, Aaron White, a lawyer who had served in the suffrage cause, assured Dorr that, as even "intelligent Algerines" would admit, "this decision of the Court is based entirely, not on the old principles of Law & Order, but on your principles of 'popular sovereignty.'"⁵³ "Your view," White continued, "of what would have been the result of *successful* force in behalf of the People's Constitution is certainly correct & no one can say that you did not do your part to make that force successful."

Thomas Wilson Dorr undoubtedly agreed. "Impossibility and despair," he once commented, "are words not to be found in the dictionary of a democrat." A somewhat quixotic figure who richly deserves a scholarly biography, Dorr never wavered in believing his cause just and his People's Constitution legitimate. By the early eighteen fifties he acknowledged

51 Dorr to Clifford, Feb. 8, 1848; to Hallett, Feb. 8, 1848.

52 Dorr to Hallett, Jan. 15, 1849.

53 White to Dorr, Feb. 17, 1849. The point was well taken. As the extract quoted above shows, Chief Justice Taney's

opinion, in a rather casual obiter dictum, paid at least lip service to Dorr's theory of popular sovereignty by declaring that "the sovereignty in every State resides in the people of the State" and "they may alter and change their form of government at their pleasure."

that "politically, my days are numbered."⁵⁴ But he continued to follow public issues closely, and his correspondence is filled with wide-ranging discussions of national politics and on such topics as slavery and the death penalty, both of which he hoped to see abolished. Nor had the fires of emotion burned out in the People's Governor: Webster, he acidly remarked in one letter, was "this most detestable of all our political hypocrites."⁵⁵ Dorr also retained a lively interest in European developments. Rejoicing in the revolutions of 1848, he described the French Revolution of 1848 as "sublime" ("the finest revolution ever made by any people").⁵⁶ To his Rhode Island opponents of 1841-42 Dorr may have been a wild-eyed Loco Foco, but he was no social or economic radical. He held no brief for the doctrines of communism and socialism, which were attracting attention, commenting in one letter that "they have presented themselves in an anti-Christian array, & deserve to fail."⁵⁷ When the democratic revolutions that briefly swept Europe in 1848 faltered, Dorr was saddened, but could still avow himself "deeply interested in all that concerns democracy & humanity, in a position of comparative solitude." Despite, he wrote a friend, the approaching "inevitable hour" of death, he was "cheerfully willing to commit my memory to the democracy of my country."⁵⁸ He died on December 27, 1854, at the age of forty-nine.

Perhaps the best and most appropriate final glimpse of Thomas Wilson Dorr is provided by an entry in a diary-like ledger that he used to record the deaths of friends, miscellaneous occurrences, and political events. Among the notations for 1851 is this one:

*T. W. Dorr restored to political and civil rights, by Gen. Assembly, May 9 '51
No special oath of allegiance — no oath taken. Algerines backed out.
A proof of the efficacy of never giving up in a good cause. Wait, & your enemies will come to you.⁵⁹*

Attesting to Dorr's popular following in his own time were such items as this sketch from the cover of a cigar box.



To a man with this kind of faith in the righteousness of his cause — a democrat whose dictionary did not contain such words as "despair" and "impossibility" — the events of 1842, and the decision in *Luther v. Borden* were but temporary disappointments. And, in fact, modern American constitutionalism confirms those democratic provisions which Dorr fought for during his lifetime. The ballot box is open to all adult persons, without regard to their property or wealth, their race, or their sex. And the Supreme Court, still staffed with the life judges that Dorr opposed, has ruled, notwithstanding *Luther v. Borden* and its doctrine of political questions, that the Constitution of the United States authorizes the judiciary to require the apportionment of state legislatures on a basis of popular equality — "one man, one vote." Who is to say that, in the perspective of history, Thomas Wilson Dorr's ideals have not come closer to fruition?

54 Dorr to Edmund Burke, Dec. 10, 1851.

55 *ibid.*

56 Dorr to John L. O'Sullivan, March 30, 1848.

57 Dorr to William S. Wait, April 16, 1851.

58 Dorr to Edmund Burke, Dec. 10, 1851.

59 Dorr Papers, Miscellaneous, 1849-52.

Black Settlement House, East Greenwich, 1902-1914

by Jeffrey A. Hess*

Few people in East Greenwich, Rhode Island, remember Neighborhood Cottage, and still fewer recall that it was first opened as a mission for the town's Negro population. This is perhaps not surprising. Today there are virtually no Negroes living in East Greenwich, and the Town's shore front, once called "Scaloptown" and given over to a squatter colony of indigent blacks, is now a tangle of bait stores and boat docks.¹ Yet the story of Neighborhood Cottage deserves to be told, especially since it is more than an interesting bit of local history. During the first decade of this century, the Cottage was one of a handful of settlement houses in the United States working exclusively or primarily for Negroes. According to contemporary standards of settlement work, its program and methods were highly enlightened — but even its founder, Mrs. William L. Hodgman, admitted that the work failed.² While this failure may be partially explained by circumstances which made the Cottage unique among settlement houses, I believe that it was at least equally the result of the very methods it prided itself on adopting. To a certain extent, therefore, the failure of Neighborhood Cottage must be seen as the failure of the settlement house movement to understand the American racial dynamic over which it sought to preside. But before we turn to the story of Neighborhood Cottage, it would be valuable for us to examine first the black settlement house movement of which it was a part.

The existence of a black settlement house was not in itself contradictory to the goal of ethnic assimilation espoused by the leaders of the settlement house movement. A settlement was almost always designed to serve its immediate neighborhood, and if that neighborhood were populated by, let us say, Italians,

then for all practical purposes the settlement was an "Italian house." In the same way, it was possible for "Negro houses" to arise. Usually, however, a settlement's neighborhood was less homogeneous. If not all settlements were, like Hull House, surrounded by peoples of eighteen different nationalities, it was still common for one to serve a variety of ethnic groups. Many centers welcomed such heterogeneity, and one leader of the movement maintained it better enabled a house to realize its aim of "Americanizing" a neighborhood:

... [Settlement work] particularly contrives how to bring into working relations persons of different nationalities and religions who live all about the settlement. Such close-range service is ... involved with the fundamental problems that in large part determine the positive upbuilding of the bone and sinew of our industrial and political citizenship ...³

By 1910 most of the black settlement houses were located in northern industrial cities in which the Afro-American population was still relatively small and not yet walled into the clearly defined ghettos that after World War I came increasingly to characterize northern urban life. Negroes therefore were often members of a multi-ethnic community, and some settlements, especially those founded by Mrs. Quincy Agassiz Shaw in the Boston area, made a concerted effort to serve both their white and black neighbors.⁴ Others tried but failed. Flanner Guild in Indianapolis, for example, at first served both whites and blacks but, as a spokesman for the house explained, "It was found inexpedient to have colored and white children attending the same institution."⁵ A Boston colleague was more explicit: "White people would keep away from any place except a church where it was known that

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1 In 1965, out of a total population of 8,228, there were nineteen Negroes officially residing in East Greenwich. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Special Census of Rhode Island*, October 1, 1965, p. 68.

2 Mrs. Albert Harkness, personal interview, April 24, 1969. Mrs. Harkness is the daughter of Mrs. William L. Hodgman and was herself active in the affairs of Neighborhood Cottage.

3 Robert A. Woods, "Settlement Expansion," *Charities and the Commons*, XVII (1906), 228.

4 Allen F. Davis, *Spearheads for Reform* (New York, 1967), p. 95.

5 Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy, eds., *Handbook of Settlements* (New York, 1911), p. 83; hereafter cited *Handbook*.

A post card of the 1920s.

Courtesy East Greenwich Free Library.

Fish Wharves, Scallop Town, East Greenwich, R. I.



colored people resorted."⁶ Thus, as Robert Woods and Albert Kennedy, both residents of Boston's South End House, concisely put it: "Large groups of colored people in a neighborhood predominately white may force a settlement, against its inclination, to choose between the two."⁷ Occasionally, as in the case of Flanner Guild, the house was given over exclusively to the black population; more often, however, Negroes were excluded. Either way, the choice seems not always to have been an easy one for the settlement to make, and it occasionally placed it in a rather awkward position,

since the workers usually continued to pay homage to the ideal of "brotherhood."⁸ East Side House in New York City offers a classic illustration of the discrepancy between ideology and action characterizing those settlements refusing to serve blacks. One issue of its weekly bulletin began with a long panegyric on brotherhood, stating in part: "People object to the doctrine of brotherhood because of what they call its unpleasant consequences. As a principle [they say] it is all right. Practically it is all wrong . . . Does any doubt that the practice of brotherhood will yield blessed

6 Davis, p. 95.

7 Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy, *Settlement Horizon* (New York, 1922), p. 337; hereafter cited *Settlement Horizon*. Some settlements seem to have worked out a compromise position which did not entail actually choosing between either race. A later settlement in Philadelphia, for example, simply divided its classes "on racial lines," while in several centers in New Jersey, Negroes and whites used the same house facilities, but on separate days. Occasionally, as in the case of Kingsley House, Pittsburgh, in 1919, a settlement would turn its plant over to a Negro group if its neighborhood became increasingly black, and then relocate in a white section. J. J. Woofter, ed., *Negro Problems in Cities* (New York, 1928), p. 251. Interracial Committee of the N.J. Conference of Social Work, *The Negro in New Jersey* (1932), p. 50. *Handbook*, p. 51, n. 4.

8 Settlements in southern and border states were spared such indecision and embarrassment since they adhered to a segregationist policy. As one center in Kansas City, Mo.,

announced: ". . . All but Negroes are received into our classes." *Handbook*, p. 150.

9 *East Side House Bulletin*, II (January 24, 1906), 2-3.

10 *Settlement Horizon*, p. 337.

11 Davis, p. 95.

12 *Handbook*, pp. 272, 210, 121-122.

13 *Handbook*, pp. 97, 30, 39, 287, 50, 298, 8. Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto* (New York, 1966), pp. 56-57.

14 These black settlement houses are: Calhoun Colored School and Settlement (Lowndes Co., Ala.); Elizabeth Russell Settlement (Tuskegee, Ala.); Colored Social Settlement (D.C.); Charles Sumner Settlement, Emanuel Settlement, Frederick Douglass Center, Institutional Church and Social Settlement, Negro Fellowship League, and Wendell Phillips Settlement (Chicago); Flanner Guild (Indianapolis); Carrolltown House (Baltimore); Robert Gould Shaw House (Boston);

results? Let him try . . . and see." With an irony that must surely have been unintentional, the editor inserted immediately after this stirring discussion the following house news item:

At its last meeting the question of admitting a colored boy to membership in the House was brought before the Council. Two votes were taken — one on the principle, the other on the expediency of the step. The Council voted unanimously in favor of the principle involved, but split on the question of expediency. The negative vote was 5 to 2.⁹

When a settlement decided to bar Negroes from membership, it occasionally followed the advice of Woods and Kennedy that "the soundest practice is to establish a separate branch, where special forms of work fitted to the needs of colored people . . . [can be] carried on."¹⁰ Such a procedure, when settlements could afford it, seemed like a perfect compromise, for it had "the dual purpose of serving the Negro population and keeping them away from the main settlements."¹¹ In 1892 in Philadelphia the College Settlement helped start a Negro house which was reorganized in 1900 as Starr Center; in 1906 in New York City the Henry Street Settlement opened the Stillman Branch for Colored People; and in 1908 in Boston the South End House sponsored the Robert Gould Shaw House "to promote a center for social work among the colored people of the South End."¹²

Not all black settlements, however, originated as branches of larger white houses. Organized charity associations in Baltimore and the District of Columbia helped start black settlements; churches, often

Episcopalian in denomination, founded others, as in Chicago and Rhode Island; and individual whites, such as Celia Parker Woolley in Chicago, were also active in promoting settlement houses for Negroes. But apart from the sponsorship of whites, Afro-Americans also founded several centers in both North and South for members of their own race. In 1890 Mrs. Janie Porter Barrett, a Hampton graduate, established Locust Street Social Settlement in Hampton, Virginia; in 1897 Mrs. Victoria Earle Mathews started the White Rose Working Girls' Home in New York City; and in the same year Mrs. Booker T. Washington opened the Elizabeth Russell Settlement in Tuskegee, Alabama.¹³

Considering the diverse circumstances under which black settlements were established, it is perhaps incorrect to speak of a "black settlement house movement" as something distinct from the larger settlement house movement that swept across the country during the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, by 1910, out of the four hundred settlement houses in the United States, at least twenty-two catered either exclusively or primarily to the needs of Negroes.¹⁴ While the activities of these centers did not differ greatly from those of white institutions, over half maintained day care centers or kindergartens, and almost all strongly emphasized self-help and industrial training. In the words of Mrs. Fannie Emanuel, head worker at Emanuel Settlement in Chicago: "... We help people to help themselves by securing work and fitting them for it."¹⁵

But if the origins and activities of black settlement work appear to conform to those of settlement work in general, there was still an awareness on the part of

Civic League Neighborhood House (Englewood, N.J.); Colored Social Center (Buffalo); Lincoln Settlement, St. Cyprian's, Stillman Branch for Colored People of the Henry Street Settlement, and White Rose Working Girls' Home (New York City); Eighth Ward Settlement and Starr Center (Philadelphia); Neighborhood Cottage (East Greenwich, R.I.); and Locust Street Settlement (Hampton, Va.). *Handbook*; Osofsky, pp. 56-57; and Allan H. Spear, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto* (Chicago, 1967), pp. 95-96, 105-106.

Two important points should be made. First, the list mentions only black settlement houses that were in operation during 1910. Several black settlements had already gone out of existence by that date and many more were to be established later. Secondly, it counts only those organizations that either clearly identified themselves or were identified by others as social settlements. This fact makes the black settlement house movement look much smaller than it was, for many black churches (and far more often than their white counterparts) doubled as settlement houses without

calling themselves such. On the latter point see Fannie Barrier Williams, "Social Bonds in the 'Black Belt' of Chicago," *Charities and the Commons*, XV (Oct. 7, 1905), 41-42; Spear, pp. 95-96, 103.

- 15 *Handbook*, p. 47. Industrial education was by no means confined solely to black settlement work. Robert Woods argued that it would have as beneficial an effect among immigrants in the North as Booker T. Washington proclaimed it had had among Negroes in the South: "We nearly all look upon industrial education as a means of overcoming racial disadvantages and prejudice at the South. It will have the same value at the North. Every social worker knows that boys and girls of certain races are handicapped in the employment market. When these . . . have the resources of skill which the employer so greatly desires, questions of nationality are going to fade into the background . . ." "Industrial Education from the Social Worker's Standpoint," *Charities and the Commons*, XIX (Oct. 5, 1907), 855.

Although Scalloptown's actual beginnings are unknown, clippings from Leslie's Weekly of November 10, 1877, indicate an economic reason for the name.

"General view of Scalloptown, East Greenwich, and the fishing-grounds."



those engaged in it that it constituted a unique branch of social work, and the need to develop a suitable program to answer its uniqueness was felt at an early date. In 1908, Mrs. Sarah Collins Fernandis, a Hampton graduate and a settlement and organized charity worker in the District of Columbia, urged that "... in this incipient stage a general plan for colored settlement work ... be worked out, such a plan as will reach social conditions peculiarly racial."¹⁶ Later, after Mrs. Fernandis had become head resident of Neighborhood Cottage she elaborated further her ideas on black settlement work. In part she said:

If we succeed here in East Greenwich, I am confident it will be an example that will encourage settlement work for negroes throughout the North, as well as the South. But the work, to accomplish the best results must be under the immediate direction of colored

*people. The shiftless negroes need one of their own race as an inspiration to show what colored people can accomplish ... The personal influence that can be exerted by the settlement worker is fully as valuable as the instruction that is given.*¹⁷

Almost all of the black settlement houses in 1910 were situated either in large northern industrial cities or in southern rural communities. Neighborhood Cottage, however, was an exception. Although East Greenwich was termed "urban" by census takers, its total population in 1905 was only 3,218 and farming was a major occupation.¹⁸ But in a sense Neighborhood Cottage was not located in East Greenwich at all, but in "Scalloptown," which as far as many citizens of the town proper were concerned could (and preferably should) have been situated miles away. While there were a few poor whites living in Scalloptown, most of

16 Sarah Collins Fernandis, "Social Settlement Work among Colored People," *Charities and the Commons*, XXI (Nov. 21, 1908), 302; see also "The Color Line in Social Work," *Charities and the Commons*, XIV (April-Sept. 1905), 645. In late 1909 or early 1910, Mrs. Fernandis contacted a number of black settlement houses "suggesting a conference of workers in colored settlements of the country." However, the meeting seems never to have been held. Fernandis, "Hampton's

Relation to the Constructive Needs of the Negro," *Southern Workman*, XXXIX (April 1910), 204.

17 *Providence Sunday Journal*, June 6, 1909; hereafter cited *Journal*.

18 R. I. Bureau of Industrial Statistics, *Advance Sheets of the 1905 Rhode Island State Census* (Providence, 1907), pp. 26, 68-71.

19 *Handbook*, p. 287; *Journal*, June 6, 1909.

"Interior of a scallop shanty — 'cutting scallops' for the market."



its inhabitants were blacks "showing a decided strain of Indian blood." A contemporary description of the quarter is furnished by a Providence newspaper reporter:

*A little row of squalid shanties on squatter territory along the shore, where no one knows the ownership of the land, the settlement is cut off from the rest of the town by the high bluff back of it. For generations it had been left to its own devices, aside from the boat and fish houses, and the iniquity which existed there was never measured.*¹⁹

One of the first activities of the settlement house was to undertake a census of the colony, and the results appear to show that the black population formed a kind of large, extended family: "The settlement numbers 15 families, so called, though family lines in Scallop-

town are less rigid than elsewhere, and it was a complicated task to sort out the relationships of the 80 individuals."²⁰ Only eight of the families could be "legally so classified," and there were twenty-six children in the community. Although there was generally "little contact between the town and shore people," "there was a forced school attendance of a few children," and in 1910 twelve black children between the ages of six and fourteen years were attending the East Greenwich public school system.²¹

From the standpoint of the white citizens of the city, housing and sanitation conditions in Scalloptown were extremely poor. The dwellings were mostly wooden shacks, and "surface drainage, the promiscuous throwing of garbage around the buildings and contaminated wells are listed as some of the dangers to

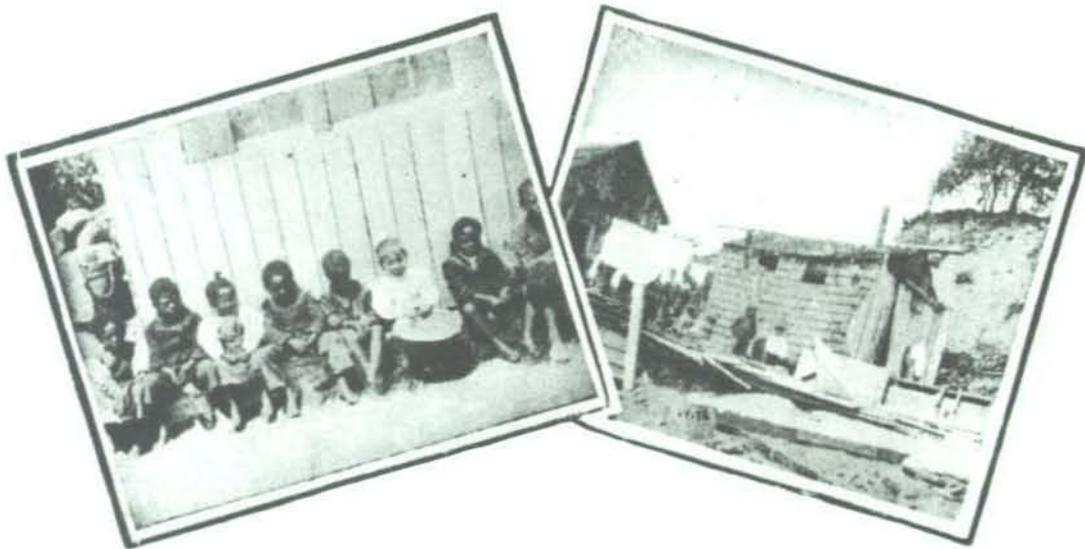
20 *Journal*, June 6, 1909. Further evidence for the idea that the black community in East Greenwich was organized on an extended family basis is given by census information. By looking through the censuses from 1820 to 1905, one can trace the growth of several families; it is obvious that the black population was heavily interrelated. [Many of the East Greenwich censuses are in RIHS Library and at State Record Center, Providence]. Although the newspaper account, presumably relying on information furnished by

Mrs. Fernandis, places the population of Scalloptown at eighty individuals, she elsewhere fixes the number at seventy. Fernandis, "Colored Settlement Work," *Charities and the Commons*, XX (July 18, 1908), 507. The poor whites in the area appear not to have been included in the census, and their number is unknown.

21 *Journal*, June 6, 1909. Fernandis, "Colored Settlement Work," 507. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States* (Washington, D.C. 1913), III, p. 631.

A postcard of "Scalloptown [sic] Views, East Greenwich, R.I." shows scenes of early 1900s.

Courtesy East Greenwich Free Library.



life." One building of four rooms was found to contain eighteen occupants and, at one time, an old woman known as "Granny Robinson" had twenty-eight people living in her house. Since the inhabitants of Scalloptown were squatters, they paid no rent, and they had little income. They earned some money fishing and clamming, but as one contemporary observer commented, "... They live on anything they can pick up." By town standards, "regular" employment was virtually unknown in Scalloptown.²²

No one seems to know exactly how or when Scalloptown came into existence. According to Mrs. Fernandis, who presumably was relying on town tradition, Scalloptown had always been an isolated enclave populated by indolent blacks who were content to live a from-hand-to-mouth existence:

Many years ago there drifted to the shore of an inlet where there was good fishing, a few colored people who

squatted there in miserable huts under the shelter of the hills upon which a thriving town was growing. They were the offspring mostly of the emancipated slaves of early New England times.

Isolated thus, and left to form their standards unaided, they lived there in careless license, picking up a precarious living, but never in danger of actual starvation. Clams, eels, and other seafood were close and abundant. Never touching the interests of the town in any close way they became more and more an outside, neglected community.²³

Since it was common for colonial New England towns to segregate their free blacks in waterfront areas, Mrs. Fernandis is probably correct in assuming the antiquity of Scalloptown.²⁴ However, other parts of her account are clearly incorrect. The 1850 Census was the first in Rhode Island to furnish occupational data, and it reveals that in that year all the black males in East

22 *Journal*, June 6, 1909. Mrs. Albert Harkness. *Rhode Island Pendulum*, May 9, 1912; hereafter cited *Pendulum*.

23 Fernandis, "Colored Settlement Work," 507.

24 Lorenzo J. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1966), p. 311.

Greenwich between the ages of sixteen and sixty-five were gainfully employed, and evidently they earned enough to support their families, for only one woman in the black community was working. Furthermore, two of the families were worth five hundred dollars or more in real estate. These statistics would definitely seem to refute the idea that Scaloptowners had always lived in isolated, careless license.²⁵ The 1880 Census gives a similarly industrious picture. In thirty years the black population in East Greenwich had increased from forty-one to one hundred seventeen and, with only a single exception, all the black males between the ages of sixteen and sixty-five had occupations. Unlike thirty years before, however, almost an equal number of black women were now also reported to be working. Perhaps this situation is partially explained by the fact that employment for the men had become less steady; during that year, nine of the twenty-two men employed were out of work for four or more months.²⁶

Since East Greenwich blacks had been gainfully employed in the past, one may well wonder why Mrs. Fernandis painted such a slothful picture of the early inhabitants of Scaloptown. The answer seems to be that she assumed that the conditions she found in Scaloptown in 1908 were those which had always existed. The 1905 Census leaves little doubt that unemployment was widespread among the East Greenwich black population at that time: of the forty-six men between the ages of sixteen and sixty-five, only half had occupations, and only a handful of the women were working.²⁷ Not all of the East Greenwich blacks resided in Scaloptown, but most of the unemployed most probably did live there since, as squatters, they would not have to pay any rent.

When one compares the census returns for 1880 with those for 1905, it is obvious that the economic condition of East Greenwich blacks had drastically deteriorated. While it is possible to attribute this decline to the

laziness of the Scaloptowners, as Mrs. Fernandis tended to do, I believe that the economic history of East Greenwich yields a far better answer.

	1895	1905
Total Population	3,096	3,218
Black Population	120	123
Total Employed	1,248	977
Agriculture	225	195
Manufacturing and Mechanics	577	480 ²⁸

As this table indicates, the job market in East Greenwich had shrunk considerably from 1895 to 1905, even though the town's population had increased. Employment opportunities must therefore have been very limited, especially for the unskilled labor which the black community provided. The ever present racial discrimination in hiring, coupled with the prevailing hard times, goes far, I believe, to explain why so many Scaloptowners were unemployed. There was, as a contemporary noted, "small demand in East Greenwich for the labor of Scaloptowners."²⁹

Generally the people of East Greenwich regarded Scaloptown with either good-natured contempt or calm indifference. As the local newspaper cheerfully asserted at the beginning of the century, "The life in Scaloptown is a good illustration of the fact that wealth and marble halls are not absolutely necessary to perfect happiness."³⁰ If the townspeople had little to do with Scaloptown, there was still one fact about the quarter of which they were thoroughly convinced; it was perhaps most succinctly stated by a state charity worker who called the area "the filthiest, most immoral, and least civilized settlement in Rhode Island."³¹ The town newspaper was in agreement with this verdict. Proclaiming in an editorial that "'Scaloptown' is a day-and-night reproach to those who have money and influence in this town," it added:

The poet Virgil said that "the descent to Hell was easy" and in modern terms we might substitute the

25 Census 1850, MS., v. 8, pp. 113-169 (RIHS Library).

26 Tenth Census, 1880, MS., v. 1, pp. 168-191 (RIHS Library).

27 East Greenwich Census Returns for 1905 (State Record Center).

28 *Census of Rhode Island, 1895* (Providence, 1898), pp. 2, 139, 426-427. *Advance Sheets of 1905 Rhode Island State Census, Part 4* (Providence, 1907), pp. 18, 33, 68-70.

East Greenwich Census Returns for 1905 (examination of these has shown that the published figure for the East Greenwich black population in 1905 is in error; the statistic in the above table is the correct one).

29 *Journal*, June 6, 1909.

30 *Pendulum*, October 24, 1901.

31 *Journal*, June 6, 1909.

euphonious synonym "Scaloptown." All roads lead down to that unique city famous once for its shell fishery and now an offense against every sense of civic beauty and utility.³²

Mrs. Fernandis was equally critical of the "striking conditions of lawlessness" which made Scaloptown "a mighty fine place for badness."³³ Yet significantly "crimes of violence" were "rare." The immorality of the area seemed limited to drunkenness, vagrancy, idleness, theft, and "lewdness."³⁴

It was in response to the immorality and unsanitary conditions in Scaloptown that Mrs. William L. Hodgman and a group of ladies, who "composed some of the most cultured and resourceful people of the town," petitioned Rev. William Worthington of St. Luke's Episcopal Church to help found a mission for the town's black squatter colony. Mr. Worthington agreed, and on October 18, 1902, "a small attractive center for classes and religious services" was opened on Queen Street in East Greenwich, not far from the shore. The mission was named "St. Luke's Cottage" and little is known about its history. After about two years of service, the work was reported to be in "prosperous condition": "Baptisms, 10; Sunday-school, 30; boys' club, 20; girls' club, 28." In 1908 it was decided to reorganize the work along settlement house lines. One reason for this decision was the belief that a non-sectarian settlement house would more easily gain the support of the other churches in the city and of the community in general. On March 1, 1908, the new settlement house was opened with Mrs. Sarah Collins Fernandis as head resident.³⁵

Mrs. Fernandis came to Scaloptown with an impressive background in missionary, organized charity, and settlement work. After graduating from Hampton

Sarah Collins Fernandis.

From The Providence Sunday Journal, June 4, 1909.



Institute in 1882, she spent several years in the South engaged in missionary work, and in 1903 she became head resident of the Colored Social Settlement in southwest Washington, D.C. While with the Washington center, Mrs. Fernandis showed the influence of her

32 *Pendulum*, Sept. 19, 1912.

33 *Handbook*, p. 287. *Journal*, June 6, 1909.

34 *Journal*, June 6, 1909. Mrs. Harkness disagrees with the idea that violence was rare in Scaloptown and says that the townspeople, especially at the turn of the century, felt it was unsafe to be near the area after dark. Miss Martha R. McPartland, the town historian, supports this view. She writes: "As a little girl, the first joke I recall recognizing as such was when a young uncle of mine asked, 'Hear about the fellow down in Scaloptown?', making a cutting sound with his mouth and drawing his forefinger across his throat from ear to ear. 'Throat cut?' every one asked breathlessly. 'Nope, dirty neck!' said my clever uncle. That gives you an idea of

the popular conception of the area called Scaloptown—a place where a slit throat was an expected development." *History of East Greenwich, Rhode Island, 1677-1960* (East Greenwich, 1960), pp. 186-187.

While the townspeople may have expected such bloodthirsty behavior on the shore, it does not in fact seem to have been the rule. I have looked through almost all extant back issues of the *Pendulum* from 1900 to 1920 and found no cases of murder and very few of assault. It is, of course, quite possible that the town constable did not overly concern himself with shore affairs; unfortunately his weekly reports for this period are no longer in existence. I have, however, come across one occurrence of criminality in Scaloptown which definitely triggered a town scandal: "A Trio of Human

Hampton education by her persistent encouragement of moral uplift, self-help, and industrial training. Her attitudes are clearly presented in a story she tells of "a young woman [who] recently applied for charitable assistance. Slovenly and indolent, it was plain her greatest need was assistance to self help."³⁶

Upon taking up residence at St. Luke's Cottage, Mrs. Fernandis determined to employ those methods she had found useful in her previous work. When queried about the aims of the Cottage, she replied that they were "to foster self help and self activity. The effort has been to work with rather than for the people. They have been encouraged to follow the now popular method of Hampton Institute, 'learning by doing.'"³⁷ Mrs. Fernandis looked upon Scaloptown as a kind of test for the Hampton method, which at that time had the general approval of those engaged in black settlement work. In appraising conditions in Scaloptown, she wrote:

*Industrial capability and opportunity seem the key to the economic situation. Better housing and improved standards of living would easily follow these. Welded into a progressive community of their own race, the chances would be greatly in their favor. The whole situation is one which makes the possibilities of settlement work an interesting question, and the results at East Greenwich of social significance.*³⁸

In her first year at the Cottage, Mrs. Fernandis started a kindergarten, a day nursery, a stamp savings bank, a reading and game room open four evenings a week, a small circulating library, and classes in sewing, cooking, chair caning, basket weaving, and singing. She also opened the town's first free clinic, arranged for health lectures, and attempted to find employment for those who desired it. In addition, the center housed

religious services and a Sunday school. At the end of her first year, Mrs. Fernandis was able to report that despite "the size of the group and the strength of the prevailing demoralizing conditions, seventy-five percent of the settlement are enrolled in one or more of the various activities . . . and it can be said that during the year a number of individuals, representing one-tenth of the group, have been brought up to and are now maintaining higher moral and living standards."³⁹

Heartened by Mrs. Fernandis' energy and apparent success, the Board of Managers of St. Luke's Cottage decided to expand the facilities of the center. Mrs. Hodgman purchased for the use of the organization a house that was still nearer to the shore on London and Long Streets, and the settlement was then reorganized in May 1910 as "Neighborhood Cottage Association." But as the work continued, it became apparent that the initial successes were either short-lived or illusory. After three years as resident, Mrs. Fernandis was forced to report in November 1911 that "the civic betterment of the settlement neighborhood has been among the earliest aims of the work, but the results are not satisfying, and conditions still prevail which must needs bring about a degraded citizenship and a weakened community life." To improve the work of the Cottage, she recommended that the public school system take over the kindergarten at the settlement, that several of the children "be removed from their surroundings" and "placed in educational institutions provided for their race," and finally that the city investigate the activities of several of the men of Scaloptown. At this time she also submitted her resignation effective March 1912.⁴⁰ The exact reasons for her departure are unknown, but it

Hyanas Perpetrate Dastardly Deeds on the Shores of Greenwich Bay." Although the exact details of the affair were "too filthy for public printing and almost beyond belief," the crime seems not to have been, at least not in the accepted sense, "violent" in nature. Interestingly, the newspaper account goes on to state: "The surprising feature of the occurrence is the fact that all the foul turkey buzzards concerned and mixed up in the filthy affair were white . . ." *Pendulum*, July 27, 1899. McPartland, pp. 186-187.

35 Mrs. Albert Harkness. *Handbook*, p. 287. Fernandis, "Colored Settlement Work," 507. *Journal of Proceedings of the One Hundred and Fifteenth Annual Session of*

the Rhode Island Episcopal Convention, May 16, 1905, p. 100.

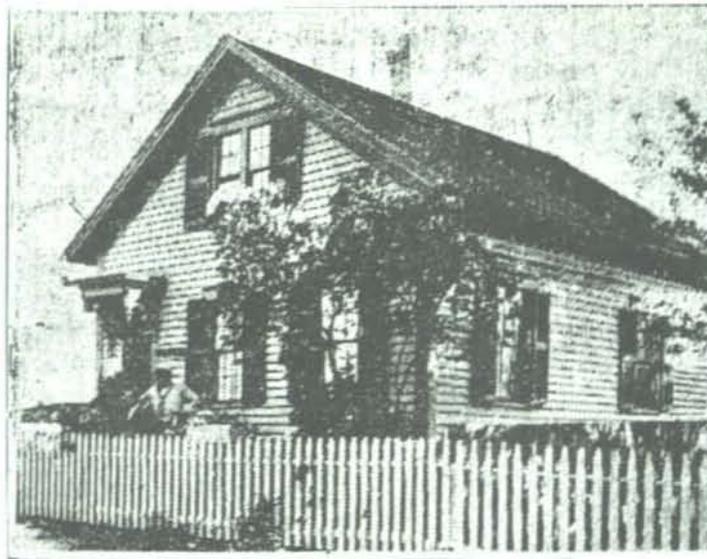
36 *What Hampton Graduates Are Doing* (Hampton, Va., 1904?), p. 26. Fernandis, "A Colored Social Settlement in South Washington," *Charities and the Commons*, XV (Oct. 7, 1905), 1-6; "In the Making," *Charities and the Commons*, XXVIII (Sept. 14, 1908), 204. *Handbook*, pp. 30-31.

37 *Handbook*, p. 287.

38 Fernandis, "Colored Settlement Work," 507.

39 *Journal*, June 6, 1906

40 *Pendulum*, November 16, 1911.

*St. Luke's Cottage.*From *The Providence Sunday Journal*, June 4, 1909.

seems plausible that her dissatisfaction with the results of the work was at least partially responsible.

The Board of Managers acted immediately on two of Mrs. Fernandis' suggestions. Two girls were placed in "most excellent homes" in Providence and two more were enrolled in black schools in the South. But the attempt to have the city sponsor the settlement kindergarten failed, even though East Greenwich was at that time without one. The records of the School Committee reveal that "... the clerk was directed to advise the Secretary [of Neighborhood Cottage] that we have no funds available for the purpose. Also that should there be in the future a demand for a kindergarten it should be open to all pupils who wish to attend and in a location more convenient for them than the Cottage."⁴¹

In September 1912, the Cottage secured a white

social worker, Miss Mary Evans, to replace Mrs.

Fernandis as head worker. Miss Evans had previously done social work in Philadelphia and New York City, but she stayed in East Greenwich only until February 1913, when she left for settlement work in Boston.⁴²

The departure of Miss Evans seems to mark a turning-point in the history of both Neighborhood Cottage and Scalloptown. Since the Board was unable to find a suitable replacement for Miss Evans, the ladies decided to run the various activities themselves. Perhaps it was the first-hand experience of the frustrations involved in settlement work that led the Board to revise its thinking about Scalloptown, or perhaps it was simply the fact that after six years of missionary work and five more of advanced settlement activity, Scalloptown had still not noticeably improved its way of life. Whatever the

41 *Pendulum*, Dec. 18, 1913. *Records of the School Committee, Town of East Greenwich, Rhode Island*, Feb. 6, 1912, p. 138; March 5, 1912, p. 140.

42 *Pendulum*, February 20, 1913

43 *Pendulum*, March 13 and December 18, 1913.

44 *Pendulum*, March 19, 1914.

reasons, the ladies decided that "conditions on the shore could never be greatly improved until the people were compelled to leave the shacks they were living in." Scalloptown was no longer to be reformed, it was to be removed. In March 1913, a month after Miss Evans' departure, Neighborhood Cottage purchased two of the shacks on the shore and destroyed them and, as the Board later declared, "With these two houses gone it seemed as if we were going to see the beginning of the end of Scalloptown."⁴³ But the total abolition of Scalloptown required greater resources than the Board itself could muster and, therefore, the ladies of Neighborhood Cottage decided to enter into the always fascinating world of small town politics.

While Neighborhood Cottage struggled to reform Scalloptown, East Greenwich experienced two political upheavals. The first occurred in May 1912 when the town newspaper, *The Rhode Island Pendulum*, changed hands. The new editor, a temperance man with Bull Moose sympathies, soon made it known that he meant to "clean up" the Town Council: "Shall the people of East Greenwich have the power to guide the affairs of the town or shall a few Rum-Sellers or Politicians manipulate the destinies of this fair town?"⁴⁴ The second event of unusual political significance occurred in June 1913 when Mr. James Freeman, a reform candidate, won by a narrow margin a seat on the Town Council. The stage was set for a power struggle, and the ladies of Neighborhood Cottage were to provide an issue: the future of Scalloptown.

On October 30, 1913, Mrs. Hodgman and several of the members of the Board of the Cottage petitioned the Town Council to investigate conditions in Scalloptown. At the meeting, Mrs. Hodgman said in part: "We want the Town Council to take care of the wrong living and to clean up the huts. The people there live in a state of misery and degradation. The work we want to do is to

help the children out of their condition and to keep the place in a better shape, but it is impossible to do it alone. Three or four girls should be taken away to some institutions." The petition was strongly seconded by Councilman Freeman, and it was voted "that the Town Council as a body do this day investigate the conditions that are reported by the representatives of Neighborhood Cottage, to exist on the shore."⁴⁵

Although the investigation was quickly begun and quickly completed, its findings were variously interpreted. According to the *Pendulum*, the Council had "found conditions even worse than related." By this time, however, the conservative faction in the town had established an opposition press called *The Kent County News*, and it strongly disagreed with the *Pendulum*:

... *The inspection of that much discussed district . . . revealed none of the disgraceful features of life that have been attributed to the neighborhood in question . . . It would appear that the slums of no place are better under control than those of East Greenwich.*

And in its next issue it added: "The investigation . . . has proven beyond all doubt that while there is poverty and squalor enough to remove, there are no evidences of the terrible forms of vice which have been reported."⁴⁶

Whatever the conditions actually were in Scalloptown, on November 28, 1913, the Town Council voted to condemn the buildings occupied by fourteen people because "by reason of the want of cleanliness the same have become and constitute a cause of nuisance to the public . . ." It was further voted that eviction notices be served and that the residents vacate the premises by April 1, 1914.⁴⁷ The Council's decision seemed to be a clear victory for the reformers and the *Pendulum* exulted: "Scalloptown will soon be a thing of the past. The liquor traffic will lose one of its allies. The cleaning of Scalloptown will lead to other civic improvements."

45 *Pendulum*, Nov. 6, 1913. *Records of the Town Council of East Greenwich*, XII, Oct. 30, 1913; hereafter cited *Town Council*.

46 *Pendulum*, Nov. 6, 1913. *Kent County News*, Nov. 7 and 14, 1913; hereafter cited *News*.

47 *Town Council*, November 28, 1913.

The News, however, was not to accept defeat quietly. While it had previously pointed out that Rhode Island law gave squatters legal title to their land after ten years residence, it now raised a few other troublesome technicalities:

We question whether the Council has the right to declare the homes of those poor colored citizens a nuisance and a menace to public health, in the absence of any official report from the regularly accredited health officer. We also question whether or not the people can be legitimately removed, in case such a report be made . . . [,] provided they clean up the health endangering conditions.⁴⁸

Neighborhood Cottage appeared to have succeeded in its plan to abolish Scalloptown; however, it soon realized that victory brought responsibilities. At the annual Board meeting in December 1913, the Secretary reported:

We realize that poor as these shacks are, they have been homes to the people and when they have been ordered out there still remains the problem of getting them into better surroundings. In trying to solve our problem which for many years has been such a tremendous task we have never wanted to throw these people into another community and so put the responsibility onto other shoulders. It is our problem for us to solve and Neighborhood Cottage appeals to the Town Council and all those interested in the improvement of East Greenwich to help these people find new homes.⁴⁹

Acting almost immediately on these sentiments, members of the Cottage met with representatives of the Council to try to work out some plan for the future of the evicted Scalloptowners. But the first meeting of this "Shore Committee" was unproductive, and no future ones were scheduled.⁵⁰ Despite its best intentions, the Board of the Cottage was to witness what it had sought to avoid. Since new housing was not made available, the evicted Scalloptowners began to drift away from East Greenwich to nearby communities. And at least one neighboring town took measures to guard itself against the possibility of an invasion by East Greenwich blacks. In March 1914, Warwick, apparently taking a legal cue from East Greenwich, evicted a number of

Scalloptowners from the city on the grounds that they constituted a "nuisance to the public."⁵¹

As April 1, 1914, the date set for eviction, approached, Neighborhood Cottage and its allies seemed unaware of the reversal in events that was about to take place. On March 30, the Town Council called a special meeting to hear the arguments of two out-of-town lawyers who had come to East Greenwich to represent the interests of "certain taxpayers who had objected to the eviction." Arguing that the eviction proceedings had a weak foundation in law, they asserted that the Town Council could be held personally responsible for any damages. Mrs. Hodgman's husband, himself a lawyer, was present at the meeting and debated the matter, but the Council prudently voted to take "no action against any of the occupants of certain buildings in Scalloptown." The reformers had lost the battle, and in June 1914, Mr. Freeman was overwhelmingly defeated for re-election to the Council. Shortly afterwards, its purpose evidently fulfilled, the News sold out to the *Pendulum*.⁵²

Although Scalloptown had been granted a last minute reprieve and was to remain in existence until the Great Hurricane of 1938 swept away the last of the squatter shacks, the threat of eviction had almost the same effect as that of an actual eviction. Less than a month after the eviction order was passed by the Council, Neighborhood Cottage reported that "since several of the colored families with young children have moved away within the last few months, we have thought it advisable to give up several of the classes." This cutback in settlement activity for the black population was carried further at a Board meeting in May 1914, when "the future of Neighborhood Cottage was very thoroughly discussed." At that time it was voted "that the work . . . be reorganized to include all the people in the neighborhood, not working exclusively for Scallop Town." It was also stated that "the Board of Managers feels that it has done its utmost for the people on the shore and now leaves it in the hands of the Town Council to better living conditions in that vicinity."⁵³ With the passage of these resolutions, the history of Neighborhood Cottage as a black settlement

48 *Pendulum*, Dec. 11, 1913. *News*, Nov. 14 and Dec. 5, 1913.

49 *Pendulum*, December 18, 1913.

50 *Town Council*, Dec. 26, 1913. *Pendulum*, Jan. 1, 1914. *News*, Jan. 2, 1914.

51 *Pawtuxet Valley Times*, March 11, 1914. *News*, March 13, 1914.

52 *Pendulum*, April 2 and June 18, 1914. *Town Council*, March 30, 1914. *News*, August 1914.

53 *Pendulum*, December 18, 1913; May 7, 1914.

54 U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States* (Washington, D.C., 1922), III, p. 917.

55 *Records of the School Committee*, Oct. 6, 1919, p. 132.

house came to an end. Although in the next few years the Cottage, which continued in existence until 1927, kept on serving the Negro community, that community was fast vanishing. By 1920 there were only twenty-eight blacks left in East Greenwich.⁵⁴ In reorganizing itself, the Cottage evidently expected to gain wider community support, and its expectations were partially realized. In 1915 and 1916, it launched its first public fund-raising drives and the results were moderately successful. And in 1919, the East Greenwich School Committee, apparently convinced that the Cottage's location had now become "convenient" enough, voted to incorporate the settlement's kindergarten into the public school system.⁵⁵

Before we can properly evaluate the success of Neighborhood Cottage, we must first examine the response it evoked among the people it sought to serve, for this perhaps more than anything else is an index to a settlement's success. The first resident, Mrs. Fernandis, recognized that it would take time for Scaloptown to accept the settlement, and it appears that the men of the community were at first particularly suspicious of the center's intentions.⁵⁶ After the first year, however, she thought that the Cottage had succeeded in establishing good relations with its neighborhood, but her judgment turned out to be premature. An advertisement that ran in the town newspaper for four months in 1911 is particularly helpful in assessing the relationship between the Cottage and the shore people. It called for "a strong young colored woman" to do "housecleaning — work by day or week" at the settlement.⁵⁷ After three years of activity which had strongly emphasized industrial education in "home-making" for women, the Cottage appears not to have established the close, informal relationship with its neighborhood which would have made such advertising unnecessary. When Mrs. Fernandis submitted her resignation in October 1911, the secretary of the Neighborhood Cottage Association praised her work by declaring, "She has labored indefatigably among an unresponsive people."⁵⁸

Recognizing that the success or failure of an individual settlement house often rests upon such

intangibilities as the resident's personality and intelligence, I believe that an analysis of the program adopted by Neighborhood Cottage may still have relevance to the experience of other black settlements, especially when one considers that Mrs. Fernandis championed a method that was upheld with equal loyalty by many of her colleagues.

To simplify matters, let us assume that Mrs. Fernandis was correct in believing that the "Hampton method" was the key to Scaloptown's economic and social betterment because it would have fostered a higher standard of living which in turn would have led to greater acceptance by the townspeople.⁵⁹ Even if this supposition had been true, the way in which she applied the Hampton method seems to have been basically self-defeating. She translated "vocational training" into classes in sewing, cooking, basket weaving, and chair caning — none of which would appear to offer, at least for the men, much of an economic future in a town where farming and textile manufacturing were the primary trades, and especially in a neighborhood where most of the people supported themselves by fishing and clamming. Mrs. Fernandis was not being perverse in her selection of such activities. She was only trying to implement the program she had used for many years at the South Washington Settlement and which had the support of many other settlement workers among Negroes. Indeed, as late as 1922, Woods and Kennedy declared that "among the most useful forms of practical [settlement] work [for Negroes] are . . . classes in sewing, cobbling, and chair caning."⁶⁰

As originally conceived, the Hampton idea of vocational training was not limited to any specific activities. Instead it was a highly pragmatic method which was intended not only to teach industrial discipline but also to accomplish something of economic value — one has only to think of Booker T. Washington's brick-making at Tuskegee. In this sense, it was in perfect harmony with the settlement spirit, which, according to Lillian Wald, the founder of Henry Street Settlement, was "flexible . . . not committed to any fixed program . . . allowing opportunity for

56 *Journal*, June 6, 1909.

57 *Pendulum*, September 14-December 14, 1911.

58 *Pendulum*, November 16, 1911.

59 It is necessary to point out, however, that black economic success has not always led to white acceptance. As Leon Litwack has observed, ". . . Economic improvement might incur even greater hostility and

suspicion" because ". . . those who rose above depravity failed to fit the stereotype and somehow seemed abnormal, even menacing." *North of Slavery* (Chicago, 1969), p. 103. For a general criticism of the Hampton-Tuskegee line, see Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power* (New York, 1967), pp. 122-145.

60 *Settlement Horizon*, p. 337.

experimentation."⁶¹ In actual practice, however, industrial education for Negroes was usually institutionalized into specific types of training that were considered to be "good for Negroes." Since chair caning obviously lacked direct economic utility, the reason for its popularity among settlement workers for Negroes must lie elsewhere. Perhaps the answer is supplied by the head resident of Boston's Robert Gould Shaw House, Miss Augusta P. Eaton, who in a speech at Neighborhood Cottage in 1912 stated:

*That industrial work is necessary for them [Negroes] is a question no one could oppose. Those minds often deficient must be patiently trained in this way before they can be made receptive for the higher training which must follow later on.*⁶²

Since programs of industrial education were often predicated on the assumption of Negro social and intellectual inferiority, it is perhaps no wonder that true vocational training was sacrificed for such activities as basket weaving and chair caning, which evidently were conceived of as "character building" and mental therapy. While such a program doubtless spared the settlement worker the embarrassment of training a Negro for a trade from which he most probably would have been excluded anyway, the time would still seem to have been better spent formulating and implementing vocational programs which, in the case of Neighborhood Cottage, would have had greater relevance to conditions existing on the shore and in East Greenwich.

The failure of the settlement work in Scalloptown cannot be assigned solely to the lack of an imaginative yet realistic program of industrial education. A far more important reason for the Cottage's lack of success, I believe, is the prevalence of a basic attitude toward the Negro which settlement workers, white and black, usually held. But before this idea can be fully developed, it is necessary to say something about the settlement movement's attitude toward ethnic groups.

In England, where the settlement idea was first conceived, the aim of the work was primarily to mediate between the interests of different social and economic classes. In the United States, however, the

settlement was not as concerned with class structure as it was with ethnic relationships. As colonies of foreign-speaking immigrants sprouted and mushroomed in industrial centers at the turn of the century, many Americans became increasingly convinced that the immigrant posed a threat to traditional American culture and democracy, and the settlement house movement in this country was established largely to eliminate such a possibility. Early in the movement's history, settlement workers concluded that it was not enough simply to find the immigrant a job, it was also necessary to "Americanize" him, which in practical terms meant teaching him English and imbuing him with the country's accepted middle-class mores. Such a task was not easy, and most "settlement workers appreciated the fact that for many immigrants the process of Americanization was harsh, and often meant ripping out beliefs of a lifetime.⁶³ To soften the demoralizing effects of "culture shock," workers usually tried to maintain the immigrant's ethnic pride by showing interest in his cultural heritage. They also attempted, as far as it was possible, to respect and to utilize for their own purposes the various folkways, family patterns, and institutions which the immigrant had brought with him.

But if settlement workers were able to accept a certain amount of cultural relativity in their attempts to Americanize the immigrant, they completely failed to do so with the Negro. The problem was that they did not believe that the Negro had any culture, or at least not one that could possibly aid him in the process of assimilation. While they recognized that Afro-Americans did have a certain life style of their own, they saw it only as the pernicious and immoral aftereffects of slavery which would have to be uprooted if Americanization were to succeed. Even as enlightened a social thinker as Jane Addams shared these opinions. In her comparison of the Americanization process for the Italian immigrant and the Negro, she wrote:

The Italian parents represent the social traditions which have been worked out during centuries and although such customs often become a deterrent to

61 Lillian Wald, *The House on Henry Street* (New York, 1915), p. 106.

62 Augusta P. Eaton, "Neighborhood Impressions," unpublished typed MS. in possession of Mrs. Albert Harkness, p. 6.

63 Davis, p. 89.

*progress through the very bigotry of their adherents, nevertheless it is largely through a modification of these customs and manners that alien groups are assimilated into American life. The civilizations in Africa are even older than those in Italy and naturally tribal life everywhere has its own traditions and taboos which control the relations between the sexes and between parents and children. But of course these were broken up during the period of chattel slavery . . . It was inevitable that the traditions were lost and that customs had to be built up anew. It gives an American community less justification for withholding from a colony of colored people those restraints and customs which can only be communicated through social understanding.*⁶⁴

In most cases the only black cultural heritage that settlement workers encouraged was in the form of Negro spirituals. And it seems that they did so as much to cater to their own sentimentality as to foster black ethnic pride. It is to be feared that too many workers would have readily agreed with Miss Eaton when she said:

*And their voices — who could but be moved by the pathos of the old plantation melodies sung by the genuine Darkie. When the old home is alluded to, the tears in the voice cannot but have a response in the mist which gathers in the listener's eyes. What is more inspiring than a good old Methodist hymn sung by a chorus in the full swing of the ancient tunes.*⁶⁵

Neighborhood Cottage, I believe, offers a good illustration of a settlement's tendency to ignore or to be blind to the cultural and institutional life of a black community by attempting to impose on it, from the outside, white middle-class mores. In dealing with immigrant groups, a settlement tried to preserve as a stabilizing influence the traditional, ethnic family patterns. The Cottage, however, did not make this attempt because it did not believe that there was any wholesome family life in Scalloptown. As proof it pointed to the facts that only half of the marriages were "legal," that "family lines . . . are less rigid than elsewhere," and that "it was a difficult task to sort out the relationships . . ." Such facts, however, are not

proof that the shore colony lacked a socially satisfying family life, but they do unquestionably demonstrate that it did not conform to the standards of middle-class society. Other facts indicate that family organization in Scalloptown played a significant role in serving the needs and mediating between the interests of the inhabitants: isolated from the town, and apparently without any "formal" social institutions, the Scallop-towners still seemed to have managed to live in peace with one another — despite poverty and crowded housing conditions. The Cottage was dedicated to the "Hampton method," but it seems never to have encouraged cooperative economic activity in the black community, even though such activity may possibly have already existed. The extended family organization of the colony and its ability to maintain, feed, clothe, and shelter a fairly large population, even during a period of hard times and without "regular" employment, seem evidence that there were among its members at least some informal patterns of economic cooperation.

Instead of working through social patterns which existed in and served the needs of Scalloptown, Neighborhood Cottage virtually declared war on the community. It condemned its family life as immoral, attempted to place its children in institutions, and introduced classes in sewing, cooking, basket weaving, and chair caning as desirable vocational pursuits. However, the crowning absurdity came when the children, whose grandfathers had lived as freedmen in the North, were taught by the town singing teacher the "old plantation melodies."⁶⁶ It is perhaps not to be wondered that Scalloptown resisted such reformation. This is not to deny that such activities as the kindergarten and free clinic were of benefit to the community and that further educational and health facilities were most probably needed. But a settlement failed when it became simply a charity organization. Its aim, as Mrs. Fernandis herself had explained, was "to work with rather than for the people." Unable to accept Scalloptown on its own terms and unable to reform it, Neighborhood Cottage had no other choice than to try to abolish it.

64 Jane Addams, *The Social Thought of Jane Addams*, ed. Christopher Lasch (New York, 1965), pp. 206-207.

65 Eaton, p. 2.

66 *Pendulum*, February 29, 1912.

DIRECTOR'S NEWSLETTER

Although our Society has not been involved with historic house preservation to the same impressive extent as either the Newport County Preservation Society or the Providence Preservation Society, our interest and concern for saving historic houses and buildings dates back to the earliest decades of the last century. In 1834 the Trustees of The Rhode Island Historical Society attempted to raise funds to save Governor Coddington's house in Newport from demolition. Unfortunately, all they were able to save was a single casement window of leaded panes. A few years later the Society was more successful, calling the attention of Yale College to the dilapidated condition of Dean Berkeley's Middletown farm, Whitehall, which the college owned. The building was saved and survives today. Similarly in this century, several efforts have been made under the Society's auspices to compile an accurate inventory of Rhode Island's buildings and sites, many of which now bear distinctive bronze markers. With the signing of a contract with the State Historical Preservation Commission this November to sponsor the work of the Commission's staff, our Society will renew its preservation efforts on a scale greater than ever before.

The Preservation Commission, established by law in 1968, is charged with identifying sites, buildings, and

areas of archaeological and historical significance and also with developing a state-wide preservation plan. To prepare this inventory and the plan the Commission is conducting a town-by-town survey of sites and buildings. Other programs of the Commission include the Rhode Island Clearinghouse, a placement bureau of historic architecture; the examination of preservation legislation; and coordination of the Historic American Buildings Survey Programs in Rhode Island. The Commission is the official body which nominates Rhode Island buildings and sites to the National Register of Historic Places, maintained by the U.S. National Park Service. Not only do these sites obtain a degree of protection when they are placed on the Register, but they become eligible for matching funds from the Park Service. Since the inception of the Commission's work our Society has made significant contributions through the research facilities of our Library; we look forward now to even closer ties as the Commission's staff technically becomes part of our own.

In a mixture of both joy and relief we learned recently from Senator Pastore's office that the Society was the recipient of a \$10,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities for our Rhode Island Film Archive. Aside from the generous gifts of film from the television stations and private collectors the

Stephen Hopkins' silver teapot contributes to our understanding of life in the 18th century.



grant is the first monetary support outside our own small resources. The money will enable us to catalog much of the film on hand and help us share our findings and cataloging system with other historical agencies and researchers. This archive solely devoted to Rhode Island's local history is the first of its kind in the nation. Mrs. Kathleen Karr has joined the staff to conduct this work for us.

A number of bequests have recently enriched our holdings at John Brown House. From the estate of the late Mrs. Ralph Hamilton we received portraits of Mr. and Mrs. William Pabodie painted in 1813 by a yet unknown Rhode Island artist. Also from Mrs. Hamilton came a very fine Aubusson rug, now on display in John Brown's dining room. Other bequests include a copper luster pitcher and blown three-mold flip glass, descended in the Durfee family to Miss Mary E. Rowe of Poultney, Vermont, as well as a bust and a portrait of former Governor Emery J. San Souci by the Rhode Island artist Duphiney from the estate of Miss Mary Louisa San Souci.

Among gifts recently received were two spectacular pieces of silver from Mrs. William C. Crolius of South Kingstown. A porringer belonging to Mary Wanton is one of six known porringers made by John Coney of Boston before 1705. The other piece is an inverted pear-shaped teapot which belonged to Stephen Hopkins, Rhode Island signer of the Declaration of Independence. It also was made by a Boston silversmith, I. Clark. Suffice it to say both these objects have a new place of honor among our collections.

The complex world of John Brown and his family has continued to be the subject of our intense interest as even more documents have come to life. Mr. Henry A. L. Brown has deposited with us more John Brown letters recently discovered among the records of the Francis and Willing Company as well as several hundred documents concerning the Conawego Canal of Pennsylvania in which John Brown had a major interest. Other John Brown letters have come from

Mrs. Elizabeth Brown Holton along with twenty-five volumes of John Francis' library; Mr. Francis H. Brown, Jr., has deposited a similar number of books. Since our last report, Mr. Norman Herreshoff has deposited over 2000 documents of the Herreshoff family, containing additional John Brown letters to his children and notebooks covered with eighteenth-century wallpaper which may be some of the missing patterns in the John Brown House restoration.

As many members who are frequent patrons of our Library know, we are very proud of our manuscript holdings and conduct a comprehensive modern program of library conservation and preservation. Assisting us in this effort for many years against this silent crisis has been the National Society of the Daughters of Founders and Patriots. Under their sponsorship fourteen volumes of Moses Brown Papers, each volume containing over two hundred documents, have been unbound, deacidified, strengthened, repaired, and placed in acid-free folders. Through their generosity a magnificent Rhode Island heritage has been preserved. We are further grateful that a new, similar project has been undertaken by the Rhode Island Society of the Cincinnati; they are assisting us in the restoration of three volumes of Jeremiah Olney's Papers, a great but dilapidated source of Revolutionary War documentation.

A fair amount of time this summer was spent by the Society's staff in preparing a new brochure about the Society's facilities and resources. It will be used this fall and winter in an effort to double the number of members in the next year and a half; copies will be sent to all present members in the hope they will pass it along to a friend not now a member. We hope, too, that members will avail themselves of lectures, the Library, and visits to John Brown House. In families where there are two or more members, use of the family membership category of fifteen dollars will result in fewer instances of duplicate mail arrivals of our publications and announcements.