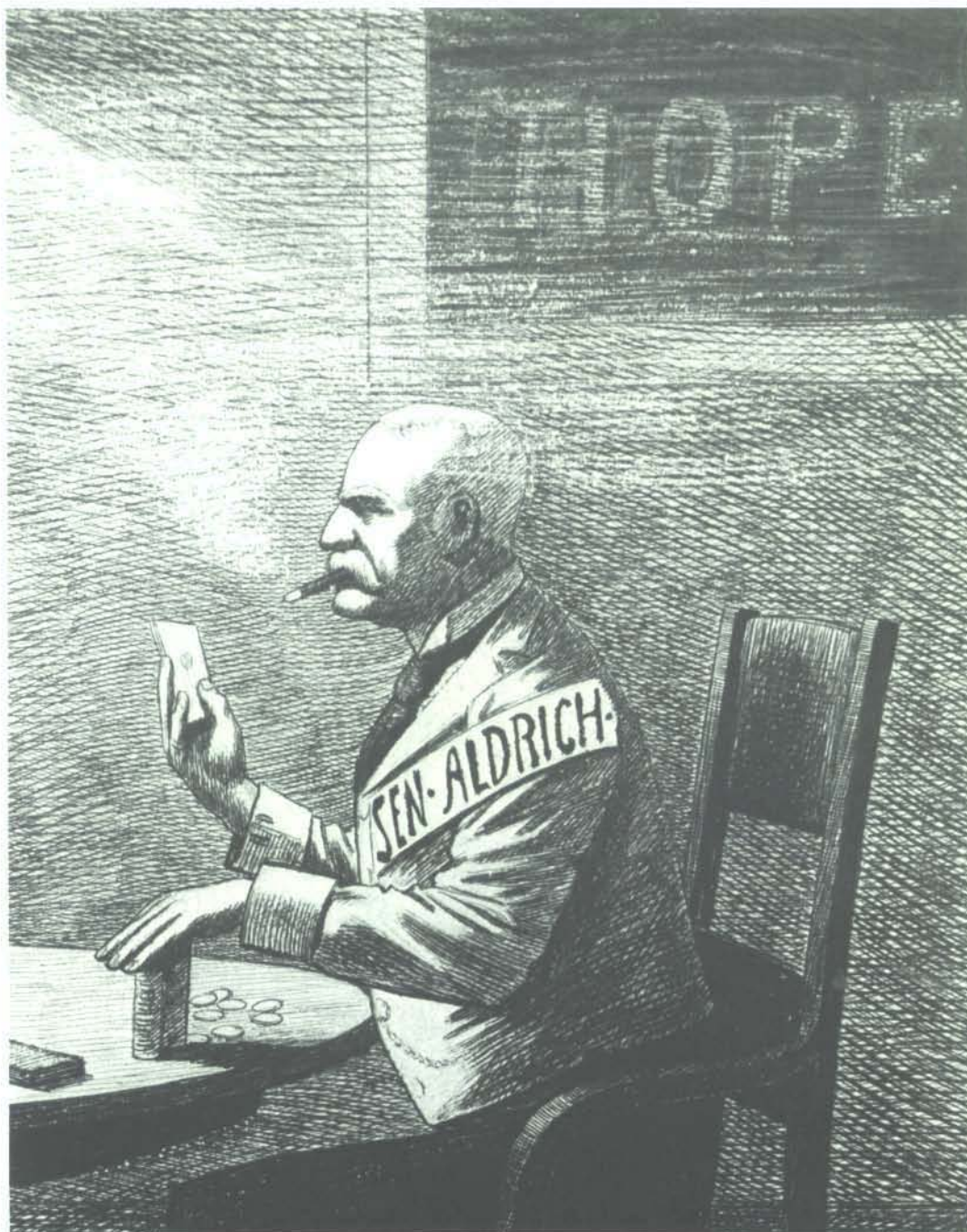


R H O D E
I S L A N D
H I S T O R Y

SUMMER 1973

Senator Nelson W. Aldrich gambled on a constituent's character and risked involvement in Sino-Japanese warfare when he introduced inventor John Wilde to Chinese officials in Washington. [Page 91]



Detail of cartoon. RIHS Graphics Collection.

R H O D E I S L A N D H I S T O R Y

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Irish gamecock Thomas P. McCoy provided Rhode Islanders with the most colorful, tumultuous and humorous display of power politics in the state's history.

Providence Journal-Bulletin photograph.

The Real McCoy in the Bloodless Revolution of 1935

Flamboyant figure — to say the least — in Rhode Island politics for two and one-half decades, Thomas P. McCoy of Pawtucket began as a reforming state representative in 1920 and steered a maverick but powerful course through an era of ethnic-saturated Democratic power politics until his death in 1945.

The popular image he left was that of an iron-willed boss, “creator of one of the most powerful and ruthless political machines ever forged” in the state. There can be no doubt that Tom McCoy was a “boss” in the fullest sense of the word — he ruled Pawtucket for twelve years, first as city auditor (1933-1936) and then as mayor (1937-1945). Like all urban leaders who fit the boss mold, McCoy craved power and once he obtained it he was literally the government of Pawtucket. While city auditor he was also comptroller and chairman of the Sinking Fund Commission, and as mayor he retained all these posts and added the chairmanship of the City Purchasing Board along with the clerkship of all City Council committees.¹ The “prince of Pawtucket” extended his grip on the city to include the School Committee (1934), Zoning Board (1935), and Police and Fire Departments (1937).² He distributed all patronage and nothing escaped his eye. Even the city Library Committee was fair game — in 1935, to fulfill a patronage promise, he relieved a qualified librarian whose family had Republican leanings.³

As Democratic city chairman Boss McCoy chose all candidates for public office. The City Council

by Matthew J. Smith*

— with his brother Ambrose majority leader and finance committee chairman — was always ready to do his bidding. The Board of Aldermen was safely Democratic and always in his pocket.⁴ On the state level McCoy controlled ten seats in the House and one in the Senate, except from 1933 to 1936 when one representative was Republican and another was chosen for a one-year term in a special election.⁵ This voting bloc — second in size to that of Providence — gave him the lever necessary for projecting his voice into state Democratic councils.

Tom McCoy’s career cannot be understood without reference to this dual role as city and would-be state leader. Using the political muscle Pawtucket gave him in the General Assembly, he made yearly forays (1934-1940) into state Democratic circles, seeking either the governorship for himself or recognition as a kingpin in party affairs. Except for 1940 — when he was able to name a spot on the state ticket — all of McCoy’s political thrusts failed, but his antics during this period provided Rhode Islanders with the most colorful, tumultuous and humorous display of power politics in the state’s history.⁶

Never fearing a fight, McCoy repeatedly squared off against Democratic leaders. In 1934 he challenged the choice of Governor Theodore Francis Green and United States Senator Peter G. Gerry for chairman of the party. In a bitter caucus, he lost to Thomas J. Kennelly, regular organization candidate. The following year saw the Irish gamecock in a bitter feud with Governor Green

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1 *Providence Journal* August 16, 1945. *Pawtucket Times* August 16, 1945, hereafter cited *Times*.

2 *Times* January 28, 1935. This term of political endearment was coined by Lt. Governor Robert E. Quinn during one of the infrequent periods of harmony he enjoyed with McCoy.

3 *Times* April 6, 1935.

4 During his twelve years in office, I have not found one instance where either City Council or Board of Aldermen questioned McCoy’s leadership or his policies.

5 *Times* August 7, 1935. *Rhode Island Manual 1933-1934*, 473.

6 Vernon C. Norton, *Common Man for the Common People, Life of Thomas P. McCoy, 1883-1945* (privately published 1946) 65-66.

over public ownership of the utility companies. Again in 1936 he attempted to wrest the gubernatorial nomination from Robert E. Quinn, calling his own convention to ratify his candidacy. The great "Race Track War of 1937" involved McCoy with an equally colorful individual, Walter O'Hara, owner of the Narragansett Race Track. Together they treated the state to a somewhat ludicrous display of political melodrama as they warred against fiery Governor Quinn, who was forced to declare the race track and its near environs under martial law before the ruckus subsided. Astoundingly, McCoy reversed field and deserted O'Hara's 1938 bid for the governorship. Instead he supported Quinn's losing effort against Republican William H. Vanderbilt. Following this election, McCoy made his last assault on the Democratic apparatus. In a futile effort to gain the state chairmanship, McCoy contested the choice of Quinn and future Governor J. Howard McGrath. Defeated at the state committee caucus but never outdone, he led his followers from the meeting chanting, "Give the State back to the Indians." His fortunes on the state scene were revived in November 1939, when it was discovered that McCoy's home phone was being tapped. A subsequent investigation and trial implicated Governor Vanderbilt in the affair and so seriously discredited the Republican in the election of 1940 that the Democrats were swept back into office. McCoy made peace with the state organization before the election, and during his remaining five years as mayor of Pawtucket he did not openly venture into state Party politics. Tom McCoy died in office in August 1945, closing an unforgettable chapter in modern Rhode Island political history.⁷

While an outline of the McCoy saga is quite entertaining and provides a glimpse of a bygone period when politics was played by hard-nosed men in a rough and tumble manner, it does not provide a serious appraisal of the man, his motives, his opposition, or the "why" of his longevity and popularity. It would be a severe oversimplification to relegate McCoy to the

historical junk-pile of corrupt, hack politicians whose only motive for holding power was self-aggrandizement. A closer examination reveals that McCoy was in the tradition of the Irish urban working-class reformers who emerged in Rhode Island at the turn of the century, and his bossism was deeply rooted in the belief that government should play a positive role in developing society's welfare.

Tom McCoy was a child of the city. His birth in 1883 predated the incorporation of his lifelong home, Pawtucket, as a city by two years. One of seven children of first-generation Irish parents, McCoy in early life was typical of working-class family circumstances that have become somewhat stereotyped in American history. His education was limited to eight years of grammar school because — as he put it — "a turn in the fortunes of my family compelled me to go to work." Beginning as a delivery boy on a milk wagon at fourteen, he went on to a position with the Union Wadding Company, a plant specializing in manufacture of materials for stuffing mattresses and furniture. During his five years with the firm he took evening courses at Brown University in English and shorthand. At twenty-one he became a conductor for the Rhode Island Company — later United Electric Railway Company — on the Providence to North Attleboro run. Remaining with the company until 1924, McCoy became a popular figure. His Irish affability gained him a post in the Carman's Union, where he developed speaking and debating skills fighting for increased compensation for his fellow employees.⁸

Initiation into politics came from an acquaintance he made while a conductor on the street railway. John J. Fitzgerald had been reform mayor of Pawtucket for three terms (1900-1903) and — when McCoy met him in 1904 — he was making an unsuccessful bid for the Democratic nomination for governor.⁹ Fitzgerald and his law partner, James H. Higgins, then mayor and future governor, were part of the urban, Irish-dominated reform wing of the party. These men, along with others of the same background, revitalized the

7 *Providence Journal* August 16, 1945. Norton, 47-67.

8 Norton, 13-16.

9 Interview with Catherine Hagan — daughter of John J. Fitzgerald — April 8, 1972.

10 John D. Bunker, "Urban Liberalism in Rhode Island, 1909-1919," *Rhode Island History* 30: 2 (May 1971) 35-51.

state party in the early twentieth century and created the only semblance of a progressive spirit the state experienced during the era. Urban liberals of the period fought for constitutional reform, woman and child welfare legislation, women's voting rights and virtually every progressive measure popular during that period of nationwide renewal. Faced with a reactionary, Republican-dominated legislature, most of their proposals were buried by an avalanche of political hypocrisy. Their victories were small and hard won. It took five years, 1909-1914, to get a fifty-four-hour work week bill enacted for women and

children.¹⁰ In this political climate McCoy — under Fitzgerald's tutelage — became involved in Pawtucket politics on the ward level, and during the years before 1920 he became an acute observer of the city's Republican machine, which duplicated the extreme conservatism of its state counterpart.

Pawtucket was the cradle of America's industrial revolution, but its development as an urban metropolis did not accelerate until after the Civil War. In 1865 the future city had a population of approximately 5,000, making it the seventh largest town in Rhode Island. Twenty years later, when its area was extended and incorporation as a city

Tom McCoy entered politics on the street cars which were the core of Main Street, Pawtucket, in this 1916 scene.

RIHS Graphics Collection.



was attained, its inhabitants numbered 22,906. This rapid growth was duplicated during the years of McCoy's childhood and early working career. By 1920 the city was second only to Providence with a population of 64,248. This urban explosion was caused by the influx of immigrants drawn to the expanding textile industry developing in the lower Blackstone River valley. Augmenting the Irish who had arrived earlier were French, Polish, Portuguese, English, Scottish and Greek groups who crowded into the tenements of Pawtucket and adjacent Central Falls, making the area an ethnic mosaic. By 1910 seventy-five per cent of the population of the city on the Blackstone was either foreign-born or sons and daughters of immigrants.¹¹

Politically, these groups were largely impotent in urban affairs due to provisions of the Bourn Amendment to the Rhode Island constitution. This measure — adopted in 1888 — prohibited city residents who did not own one hundred and thirty-four dollars of assessed property the right to vote in elections for the city council or on financial questions. With all city charters giving limited executive authority, city councils and boards of aldermen retained effective control of municipal government, and since the great majority of immigrants were of working-class circumstances, their low economic status made them observers rather than participants in the urban political process. Conversely, the old Yankee population — with whatever affluent immigrant support it could woo — controlled the local ward structure and councils and aldermen. This was true of Pawtucket where, although a few Democrats were elected mayors, power always rested in the Republican-controlled legislative branch. From 1907 to 1932 Pawtucket was tightly ruled by the Republican "triumphate of Billy, Ikey and Barney" whose machine was considered the best in the state, and it

is ironic that McCoy learned the rudiments of machine politics from observing their operation. In the campaign of 1932 McCoy and the Democrats were to tag William H. Barclay, Sr., Isaac Gill and Bernard Keenan as the "20,000,000 Dollar Gang" — a direct reference to Pawtucket's indebtedness at that time.¹²

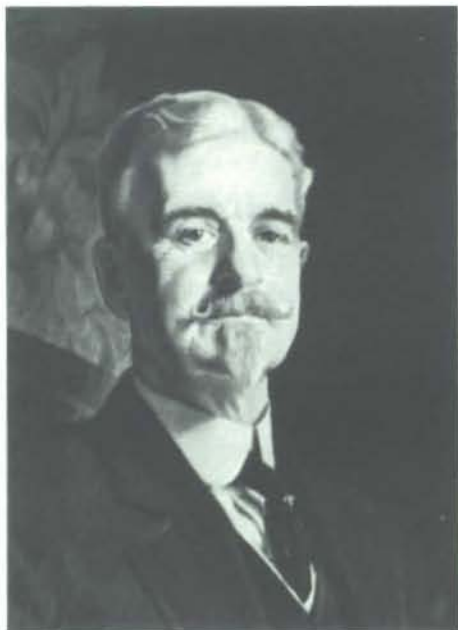
Both nationally and in Rhode Island, 1920 was a political catastrophe for Democrats. Republicans benefited from Irish resentment to Wilsonian idealism which failed to guarantee the Irish Free State, and they capitalized on the state's French vote by using their usual ploy of nominating a member of that ethnic group for the governorship. Republicans had begun the practice in 1909 and a French Republican held the governorship for twelve of the next twenty-three years. Emery J. San Souci rode into the governor's chair — a figurehead position at best — by the largest plurality in Rhode Island's history up to that time — 53,175. In the General Assembly that year the only Democrat from Pawtucket to be elected in the Republican tide was Thomas P. McCoy from the city's tenth representative district, stronghold of John J. Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald was McCoy's mentor, and the young legislator's record over the ensuing ten years indicated that he had adopted the reforming zeal of the older progressive leader.¹³

The situation urban Democrats faced in 1920 differed little from that which confronted earlier reformers during the progressive period. Power in state government rested in the "rotten borough" Senate, which guaranteed rural towns a position in the upper chamber. This grossly unfair constitutional apportionment formula gave Jamestown's population of 1,633 equality with Providence's 237,595 and, since approximately twenty-nine of the thirty-nine cities and towns were rural-oriented and Republican-dominated, the GOP was always in control of the Senate. Besides having a veto on

11 *R. I. Manual 1969-1970*, 460-461. *13th Census of the United States, 1910 Abstract with Supplement for Rhode Island* (Washington: GPO, 1913) 582.

12 *Times* January 15, 1935. Norton, 18. *Times* October 1932.

Republican Governor Emery J. San Souci contributed to 1922-24 Democratic ascendancy in the state by using militia to quell the textile strike of 1922, arousing public outrage against his regime.



Portrait in Rhode Island State House, photograph by Leo P. Reardon.

any measure presented by the more broadly apportioned House, the Senate had confirming power over every important gubernatorial appointment to eighty commissions and boards administering state government. This political and administrative stranglehold upon the commonwealth was the result of the Brayton Act of 1901, which made the governor's office little more than ceremonial. Nor was constitutional amendment a realistic avenue toward reform. Amendments had to be passed by two successive sessions of the legislature and then ratified by three-fifths of those voting in an election.¹⁴

During the hectic 1920s Democrats had to be content in a minority role pushing varied reforms with the sole hope that an issue would arouse enough sustained public opinion to force the rural oligarchs into acquiescence. An example of this type of pressure resulted from the bitter textile strike of 1922. McCoy and his fellow urban Democrats vociferously supported the workers' plea for a forty-eight-hour work week without wage reductions, and two years later he helped shepherd through the legislature a forty-eight-hour bill which became law during the brief period of Democratic ascendancy from 1922-1924 which resulted from public outrage at Governor San Souci's use of state militia to quell the strike.

The McCoy record during his decade in the General Assembly reflected belief that the state should play a positive role in the life of its citizens. He introduced the first old-age-pension bill in state history, but it failed repeatedly. His vigorous support of Woonsocket Democrat Felix Toupin in his attack upon the Peck bill was a manifestation of his awareness of the need to win the French to the Democratic standard. This Republican measure to promote expansion of the teaching of English in the schools — a result of the desire to insure "100% Americanism" — was interpreted by the Franco-American community as a threat to continuance of French as the major language in their parochial schools. This controversy was a bridge to later overtures to the French community. McCoy, Democratic floor leader by 1927, joined with Republican boss Frederick S. Peck in securing passage of the state's first inheritance tax in 1928.

The major area of McCoy's concern was constitutional reform and state reorganization. Recognizing the importance of freeing the urban vote in order to control the cities and their patronage, McCoy and his fellow Democrats succeeded in forcing initial passage of a constitutional amend-

13 *R. I. Manual 1969-1970*, 233-234. Hagan interview.

14 *R. I. Manual 1969-1970*, 461, 64-65. Erwin L. Levine, *Theodore Francis Green: Rhode Island Years, 1906-1936* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1963) 149.

ment to that effect in 1925. Although Republicans controlled the legislature, they were fearful of repetition of the famous "filibuster session of 1924," which left state government paralyzed and discredited. As minority floor leader, McCoy continued to urge passage of the amendment during the 1927 session where it secured its second passage. When it was placed on the ballot in 1928, McCoy stumped the state pleading for its adoption. Passage of the amendment was a significant step in formation of the modern Democratic party.

McCoy also had a major interest in fostering a badly needed streamlining of state government. His reorganization bill — modeled after similar measures enacted by Governors Alfred Smith in New York and Frank O. Lowden in Illinois — struck at the vitals of Republican power by eliminating the Senate's appointive power. Its chance of passage was nil, and the situation clearly illustrated that only complete constitutional reform would end senatorial oligarchy in Rhode Island. From the Democratic point of view, this could only be obtained by gaining control of both legislative branches and governorship, and for these ends they labored until 1935.¹⁵

In 1930 McCoy left the General Assembly to run for lieutenant governor on a ticket headed by Theodore Francis Green, Yankee patrician of the party. Rhode Island was beginning to feel the effects of the Depression and Democrats were confident of making a good run. McCoy was chosen for second spot on the ballot because of his nationality, but it must also be presumed that his record in the legislature and his popularity in Pawtucket — where he had been Democratic city chairman since 1925 — were also contributing factors. Green and McCoy were defeated by less than 4,000 votes of a total of 221,796 ballots cast. Following the loss McCoy set about making preparations for the 1932 state and Pawtucket elections.¹⁶

Prospects for Democratic victory in 1932 were extremely bright. The Great Depression had descended upon the state with devastating effect. The textile industry, the state's largest employer, had not shared in the prosperity of the 1920s. General decline had set in after 1923 which accelerated during the adversity of the next decade. Between 1923 and 1937 the cotton industry was virtually destroyed. During those years its number of wage earners dropped from thirty-four thousand to twelve thousand and the number of establishments from one hundred and fifty-three to thirty. This was offset somewhat by gains in the rayon and synthetic fibers division of the industry. But generally the state experienced the worst decline during the early Depression years. The total number of wage earners for all Rhode Island manufacturing in 1929 was 126,008; this figure plummeted to 92,512 in 1932; by 1939 it had climbed back to 106,089. Urban areas of the state were greatly affected. The Blackstone Valley — with the majority of its inhabitants employed in some aspect of the textile industry — was among the hardest hit.¹⁷

The Rhode Island electorate repudiated seventy years of Republican domination in 1932 by electing the entire slate of Democratic state candidates and by giving that party a large majority in the House. In the "rotten borough" Senate the Republicans were able to maintain a comfortable majority, twenty-eight to fourteen. In Pawtucket the Democrats — under McCoy's leadership — elected John F. Quinn mayor with majorities on the city council and board of aldermen. McCoy immediately assumed administrative power in the new administration through the office of city auditor. The council, under his personal control, passed an ordinance giving the auditor's office broad powers to reorganize the city's finances. Republicans had left the city on precarious financial footing and had advocated an austerity

15 Norton, 21, 23, 32.

16 Levine, 108-119. *Providence Journal Almanac 1925*, 111. *R. I. Manual 1969-1970*, 235. Norton, 38-42.

17 Kurt B. Mayer, *Economic Development and Population Growth in Rhode Island* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1953) 56-60, 62.

18 *R. I. Manual 1933-1934*, 453-461. Norton, 42.

Pawtucket city auditor McCoy chose Franco-American Albert J. Lamarre [right] as his director of public works — an alliance that was to wage a stiff battle for public utilities reform.

Providence Journal-Bulletin photograph.

program which called for increased water rates and property taxes, eliminating half the city's street lights, suspending most recreational programs and placing a ten-year moratorium on capital expenditures in order not to increase the city's debt.¹⁸

McCoy's reaction to this state of affairs was in keeping with the philosophy of earlier Irish urban reformers whose creed he had adopted when he served in the legislature. Tom McCoy believed that the state should not simply be a policeman but existed to give service and to help — it was a human thing to provide happiness for its people. He incorporated this credo into a traditional form as far as Irish politics was concerned. He created a hierarchical machine that would serve the people. To administer it he chose three able lieutenants — his brother Ambrose was his voice on the city council — Albert J. Lamarre, Franco-American, became his director of public works — and Harry C. Curvin, who succeeded him in the House, maintained his power in the General Assembly. In concert they ran Pawtucket.

Mayor Quinn was no figurehead but, with governmental power resting in council and aldermen, he was limited in exercising opposition to McCoy's control. While favoring most of the Boss's programs, he and McCoy openly broke over control of police and fire departments, the mayor wanting forces independent of political pressure and the machine desiring absolute control over appointments, promotions and favors. The struggle began in 1933 and became open political war in 1935. McCoy attempted to gain control of the police force by initiating a bill in the legislature that would give the city council full control over the department. This was not an unusual request — Providence and Central Falls had obtained similar measures earlier, and Woonsocket Democrats were attempting to wrest the same power for their city council from Mayor Felix Toupin, a Democrat who had fallen from grace with the state organization. McCoy's bill became part of a political struggle with Governor Green and was vetoed by the chief executive, but the Woonsocket bill fared much better. Green signed it into law and pushed



Toupin into the Republican party. The upshot of this tangled affair was that in 1936 John Quinn refused to be a candidate for mayor and opened the office to McCoy's candidacy.¹⁹

Before the McCoy-Quinn rupture the two worked together reasonably well on a McCoy-devised program of positive action for depressed Pawtucket. The Boss's first task was to tackle the city's strained revenue and high indebtedness problems. In the midst of the Depression McCoy launched an imaginative two-pronged attack in an effort to remedy Pawtucket's financial ills.

With many homeowners and industrial concerns unable to make regular tax payments, McCoy boldly reduced taxes and offered a discount plan for those delinquent. The Pawtucket tax rate in 1933 was \$23.50 per thousand of evaluation. McCoy discounted the rate by \$1.00 for the following year for anyone who paid taxes by December 31, 1933. In 1935 he reduced the rates again by \$1.60 for all who fulfilled their 1934 obligations on time. Delinquents who settled their tax bills were given a fifty-cent reduction on their payments. Coupling this with a \$1.00 reduction in the water rate, from \$11.00 to \$10.00, the McCoy plan was a success. Besides saving Pawtucket taxpayers approximately one-quarter-million dollars, the city collected over one-half-million dollars in delinquent taxes. This discount plan became a permanent feature of the McCoy regime. After he became mayor he reduced the tax rate again, and during his years of control Pawtucket enjoyed the state's lowest property levy.

While stimulating the revenue situation, McCoy sought to reorganize the city's bonded indebtedness by lowering its fixed yearly charges. His plan was to refund the debt with five percent interest-bearing bonds that would mature after twenty years. To put this plan into operation, he requested the General Assembly to allow Paw-

tucket to issue \$2,500,000 in bonds over a five-year period. He used these issues to pay off current obligations and fix the city's yearly payments at \$50,000. This refunding scheme tarnished McCoy's reputation after he died when Pawtucket ran into financial difficulties but, on the face of it, his program seemed justified in 1935. In that year the city was forced to pay off \$318,000 in matured bonds and \$599,000 in bonded interest charges from a total budget expenditure of \$3,143,872!

Amazingly enough, Pawtucket's budget for that year was balanced and a small surplus was anticipated. A closer look at the appropriations provides a clearer understanding of McCoy's belief in the positive role of the state. The proposed expenditures provided for an increase of \$150,000 for unemployment relief, bringing the figure to \$250,000. The Boss did not forget the people who helped to make him. The budget also provided for modernization of safety services. Funds were allotted for new radio cars for police and a radio dispatch system for both services. By purchasing a new pumper and hose truck to augment fire department equipment, he placed Pawtucket in the Class A insurance category which entitled homeowners to a discount on their property insurance. With an eye to making jobs available, McCoy found funds to implement a two-platoon fire department which city voters had approved in a 1924 referendum. By consolidating city health services into a health department, the McCoy budget allotted funds for hiring a specialist in eye, ear and nose ailments to work with three new doctors on school health problems. Significantly, he offered these new services not only to the city's public but also to parochial schools.²⁰ In sum, McCoy's programs during the early years of his machine's rule were definitely reformist in nature, and the liberal zeal he displayed helps to explain

19 *Times* February to August 1935. Difficulties between the two men had developed in 1933 and continued until 1936. The Toupin affair was a continuous news item throughout the first half of 1935.

20 *Times* March 14, 29, 1935.

Ten years after Pawtucket voters had approved establishment of a two-platoon fire department, city auditor McCoy found funds to implement the system.



Pawtucket Star.

his crusade for municipal ownership of public utilities which took place in the turbulent General Assembly session of 1935.

The power structure of the Democratic party in 1935 consisted of four major factions that had begun to develop after the turn of the century, accelerated during the 1920s, and solidified after 1930. To a large degree geographic in nature, but with plenty of leeway for personal friendships and alliances, they were constantly maneuvering for power —

The Providence combine headed by Theodore Francis Green and his law partner, ex-mayor Joseph H. Gainer — owing to Providence's tremendous Democratic vote and members in the legislature — was the most powerful. Green, wealthy East Sider, had by 1930 allied himself to this organization because of his desire for the governorship in 1932 and United States senatorial nomination in 1936. This scion of a prestigious Rhode Island family had given invaluable service to the party during its lean years, and after 1928

when he became state chairman, Green originated much of its electoral strategy. Associated with this group were smaller enclaves of Democratic power that depended upon state patronage after Green's gubernatorial victory in 1932.

Peter Goelet Gerry's faction represented the second most powerful group in the period after 1930. Gerry, wealthy Yankee with strong family ties to New York and Al Smith, was Rhode Island's first Democratic U. S. senator elected under the Seventeenth Amendment (1916). Nicknamed "Money Bags," he and Green helped finance the party during the 1920s. Defeated for reelection in 1928, Gerry lost another senatorial bid in 1930 and eagerly awaited his fifth chance in 1934. His principal voice in state politics after 1930 was J. Howard McGrath, who became state party chairman in that year. Gerry's primary aim was to return to the Senate and his support was widely distributed through the state for this purpose.

Pawtuxet Valley's organization was headed by colorful Colonel Patrick H. Quinn, a capable Irishman who had assumed leadership of the large Franco-American population in the textile center and become a kingpin in the party. He desired to maintain a voice in state affairs and his foremost goal was to forward the political fortunes of his nephew, Robert E. ("Fighting Bob") Quinn.

The Blackstone Valley axis composed of Woonsocket, Central Falls and Pawtucket — area of Irish and French domination — was a swing group in state affairs. Its most important cog was Pawtucket, but the three cities were never able to unite seriously as a single voice because of the machinations of the other three blocs.

During 1920-1933 these four groups shifted allegiances and alliances within the party, each seeking to gain its objectives, sometimes at the expense of the others. Complicating this situation after 1925 was the desire of the rapidly growing

French and Italian elements of the party for office and patronage. No adequate study has been done on either components of the party or its ethnic rivalries for this period, but it appears that the Green, Gerry, and Quinn groups had stabilized their control by the 1934 elections. At that time Gerry received the nod for the senatorial election, Green was renominated for governor, with Quinn again in second spot on the ticket. Other state candidates were also holdovers from the slate Green had composed in 1932.

For Tom McCoy this was a most unfortunate circumstance. His candidacy in 1930 projected him into state party circles, but defeat left him without a power base until he was able to build his Pawtucket machine in 1933-1934. He had expected to be renamed for lieutenant governor in 1932, but Quinn had usurped his place. McCoy was now on the outer fringe of the power structure, and this accounts for his repeated attempts to gain a voice in the years that followed. Also, it must be noted that the Democratic party had a surplus of capable Irishmen who were just as ambitious as McCoy for power. After a futile bid for the party chairmanship in 1934 — which had initially involved in an ill-fated plan Quinn who was anxious to become governor and Francis B. Condon who desired to be a U. S. senator — McCoy set about to build a broader power base which could be used to challenge the state organization. In the election of 1934 he ventured into Central Falls, where he partially upset J. Howard McGrath's control by successfully backing Ronaldo E. Lemay for the state senate. He also made overtures to his old friend from the legislature, Mayor Felix Toupin of Woonsocket, who was opposed to Green's leadership. By 1935 McCoy was anxious to reassert his position in the hierarchy.²¹

Democrats put aside intra-party squabbles after the successful election of 1934 long enough to ex-

cute the famous "bloodless revolution" of January 1, 1935. Frustrated by narrowly failing to capture the state Senate (23-19) by what appeared to be fraudulent returns in three districts, Green, Quinn, and a small group of Democrats — which included McCoy in later stages — worked out a secret plan not only to challenge the results but also to reorganize the entire state government. Democratic hopes were boosted when a supervised recount certified that a Democrat had been elected in one of the disputed races. With lightning-like speed on the first day of the new year, Lieutenant Governor Quinn opened the Senate session by appointing a committee to recount ballots in the other two districts. The Democratic-supervised count produced two more senators and control of state government. By day's end this well-engineered coup had provided for initial reorganization of state administration, swept away the Supreme Court, and eliminated offices of high sheriff of Providence County, Providence Safety Board, and finance commissioner — all Republican power bases. In one historic day Democrats had seized the long-sought prize and with high-sounding hopes launched a new phase of Rhode Island history.

McCoy profited from this successful legislative legerdemain. Although he had helped to replace ex-mayor Gainer — Green's choice for Supreme Court — with his old ally from the Assembly, Edmund W. Flynn, the governor chose the Pawtucket leader to be state budget director. Green's reasons for this appointment were clear — McCoy had proven ability in the area and he also controlled ten votes in the legislature.²¹ The romance between governor and "prince of Pawtucket" proved a bad case of infatuation, lasting four short months before the partners publicly denounced each other for dishonesty, double-dealing and corruption. What prompted this

Lieutenant Governor Quinn launched the "bloodless revolution" by opening the Senate session on January 1, 1935, with speedy appointment of a committee to recount ballots in two disputed districts.



Rhode Island Manual

political divorce is a complicated story but one that offers new insight into why the Democratic party failed to capitalize on its revolution and institute the program of reform it had promoted for so long.

General Assembly sessions that followed the historic "revolution" must be regarded as one of the low points in the party's history. Instead of following up on its initial reform impulse with a

21 Norton, 44-47. Levine, 173. *Times* November 8, 1934.

22 Levine, 173-184.

program for long-promised constitutional change and badly needed social welfare legislation, newly empowered legislators matched their Republican predecessors by indulging in a wild scramble for patronage and power. This orgy for paid positions was brought on for the most part by the monumental struggle between Green and McCoy on municipal ownership of public utilities. This issue pervaded both Assembly sessions that year and continued into the special nominating convention for the First District Congressional seat, where the question took on national overtones.

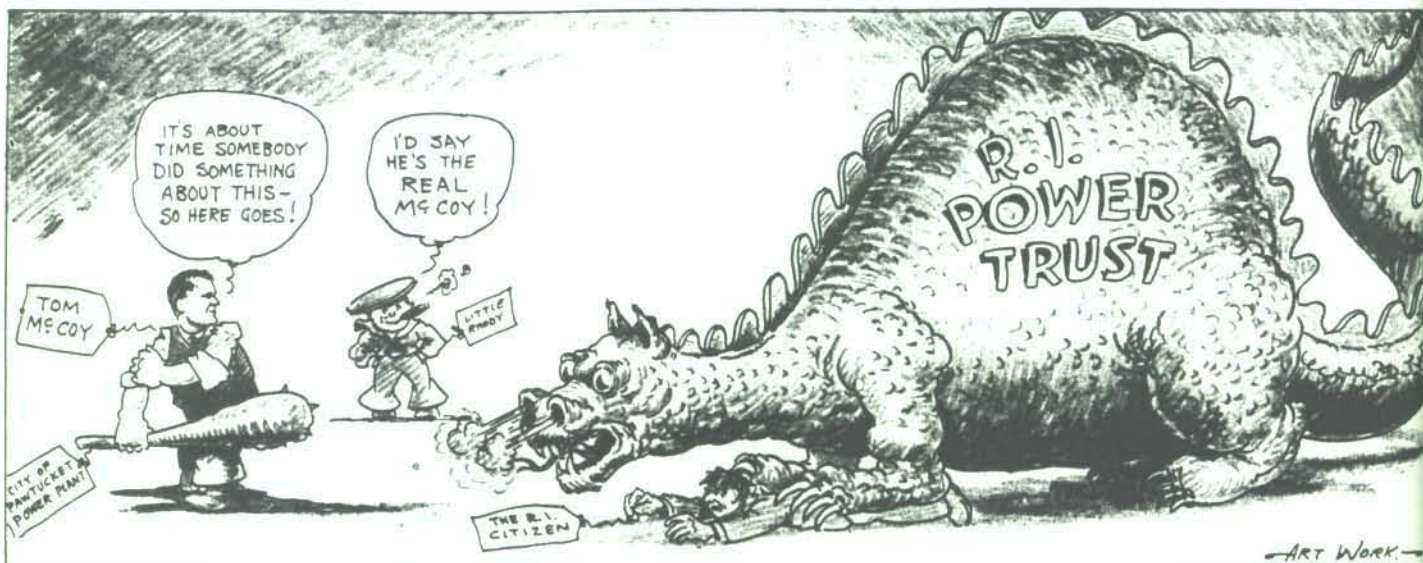
McCoy became interested in the public utility rate question through the work of Albert J. Lamarre, who was convinced that Rhode Islanders in general and residents of the Blackstone Valley in particular were being subjected to highly discriminatory rates. Upon assuming power in Pawtucket, McCoy and Lamarre sounded out the Blackstone Valley Gas and Electric Company about possible reductions in its service fees. After receiving no positive response, they increased the company's property evaluation by \$1,000,000. The following year, 1934, they did the same, acting upon the theory that if consumer rates were not reduced the residents of Pawtucket would benefit indirectly by increased tax revenue. Early in 1935 Blackstone Valley Gas and Electric, through its president David Daly, informed McCoy that the company would reduce consumer and commercial rates by \$192,000. After studying the proposal, the two urban liberals rejected the offer on the ground that

the proposed reduction reflected an overall saving of only \$74,500 to cities and towns served by the utility. This rejection was coupled with a demand that the company end its so-called discount on gas bills. This discount was attacked as really being a penalty, because consumers who did not pay within a specified time were subject to an increased rate. McCoy demanded a new proposal from the company that would reflect a real saving to consumers and threatened a court suit if the company did not comply. Daly replied that Blackstone Valley Gas and Electric Company's proposal was "a fair and honest offer," but he did not comment upon McCoy's allegation regarding the gas bill "discount" operation. With discussions stalemated, the scene shifted to the General Assembly where the question of patronage appointments for the lower chamber became interwoven in the struggle.²³

On February 7 Governor Green presented the state budget for 1935. Pausing in his remarks to pay special tribute to McCoy for his efforts, the chief executive announced that for the first time since 1928 the budget would balance without jeopardizing necessary state expenditures. The document — which McCoy had produced with the aid of Francis E. Welch — eliminated prior Republican projection of an \$831,000 deficit by bonding state road-building projects and by judiciously cutting earlier appropriations for such items as jury committee allocations. Not included in the new budget was the traditional state levy of 4.25%

Municipal ownership of public utilities became a central theme of McCoy's battling political career.

Pawtucket Star.



on city and town realty valuations — McCoy, mindful of the depressed condition of Pawtucket and its sister cities, had provided for a financial windfall of \$1,117,111 to be retained for local expenditures.²³ While the budget was an innovative piece of work, it left plenty of areas for patronage rewards to anxious Democrats, who had been waiting in spirit at least for almost eighty years for a share of the “spoils.”

The initial struggle for state positions centered around the governor's appointments to seven directorships in the state's new organizational plan. The two most important posts were commissioner of public works and director of taxation, the former having a huge appointive payroll and the latter holding power over the state utilities commission. Governor Green's choices for the posts were Charles E. McElroy, chairman of the Providence city committee and part-time clothing salesman, and Thomas A. Kennelly of Cranston, Democratic state chairman. These appointments provoked a great deal of resentment — Democratic members of the House, questioning the Senate's right to unilateral confirmation of the governor's designees, led the assault. Providence Representative James H. Kiernan — supported by the Italian representatives — demanded that the House be given a voice in the decisions. When this was denied, they openly broke with the governor and advanced Major Ernest Santingini, an engineer, for the public works post.

McCoy — not happy with the governor's appointments because they favored the Providence machine and state organization — had hoped that Lamarre would be given consideration for one of the seven directorships, especially that of the public works department. Realizing that his Pawtucket votes in House and Senate were crucial in the upcoming battle, he joined Kiernan in supporting the Santingini and Lamarre

candidacies, the former for public works director and the latter for director of taxation with its leverage over utility companies. McCoy's decision to rebel against the governor was also based upon his long-standing belief that the Democratic party had to reward its new ethnic constituencies, French and Italian, in order to avoid ruination. Harry Curvin — McCoy's lieutenant and chairman of the powerful House finance committee — put it this way to cheering House supporters:

McCoy, far from demanding all jobs in Pawtucket for the Irish, recognized the English, French and Italians as well . . . declaring the Democratic Party is composed of all of them and for that reason the Pawtucket organization is responding to the drive to substitute Santingini for McElroy and Lamarre for Kennelly.

At the base of the intense and bitter battle that was to erupt in the Senate on March 1 lay the question of utility reform and control of the Democratic party. Significantly, Green had entered into the Pawtucket utilities controversy on February 28 by conferring privately with Daly on rate reductions. Following this meeting, it was reported that Green had informed Lieutenant Governor Quinn to relay to the Democratic caucus the message that “under no circumstances” would he permit the Lamarre candidacy. When asked if this was true, Green declined to give an explanation. This development was followed on the next day by the torrid Senate confirmation debate.

The Lamarre candidacy was also closely tied to the challenge to Green's control of the party patronage apparatus. If the Lamarre-Santingini coalition was able to thwart his leadership, then the chief executive would have to compromise with McCoy and his allies in the House. McCoy fully realized that if he was able to deliver the votes of Senators Ronaldo Lemay and George Beaucage to the Republican minority, the delicate Democratic

23 Norton, 43. *Times* February 16, 23, 27, 1935.

24 *Times* February 1, 8, March 13, 1935.

majority (22-20) would be overturned and the Green appointments would be defeated. McCoy could also count upon six Democratic senators who had voiced opposition to the governor's choices, among them Luigi DePasquale, who was under tremendous pressure to back Santingini's bid for the public works post.²⁵

Governor Green and his capable assistant Edward J. Higgins were well aware of the realities of the situation as the Senate convened at 1:00 p.m. at the sounding of the gavel of Lieutenant Governor Quinn. For the next thirteen hours caucus after caucus was held in an effort to arrange Democratic solidarity on the appointments. A key figure in the chamber that long day was Cornelius C. Moore, member of the Democratic state committee and lobbyist for the Newport Gas and Light Company. The *Pawtucket Times* described his activities this way — he "talked with several senators, all of whom voted for Kennelly." At 11:30 p.m. Quinn had the clocks stopped in order to keep the session from adjourning. Finally, at 1:10 a.m., senators returned from their last caucus and the vote was taken — Kennelly 22—Lamarre 20. All dissident Democrats were satisfied and remained loyal to the governor. Ronaldo Lemay, a future employee of the new registry of motor vehicles at five thousand dollars per annum, supported Kennelly. A hungry Republican decided to repudiate his party's bigger opposition to the "bloodless revolution" and joined the Green forces. Beaucage was the only Democrat in opposition with the other nineteen Republicans. In a moment of understatement, Moore, when asked what caused the fight, said it "doubtless was over utilities." The *Times* labeled the day's work quite succinctly — "Bribe Controlled Session."

After Lamarre's defeat, McCoy went on the attack. With nine Pawtucket votes in the House and an alliance with majority leader James Kiernan

and his bloc, McCoy knew that he could stymie the governor's entire program if an accommodation on the utility issue was not made. He had introduced in rapid succession a series of bills aimed at curtailing the power of public utilities. The first, introduced by Curvin, requested that the Assembly allow Pawtucket to issue \$5,000,000 in bonds to finance a municipally owned power system. This bill placed Green on the defensive because he had called for such legislation in his inaugural message of January. Following Pawtucket's lead, West Warwick — Lieutenant Governor Quinn's home town — introduced a similar bill. The other proposals were watchdog in nature and modeled on legislation adopted in New York. They granted municipalities the right to purchase or hold land for public power plants, to compel utility companies to furnish reports on their operating expenditures and lobbying costs, and to restrict any power company from issuing stock without state approval.²⁶

Over the next month the McCoy-Green feud continued and increased in tempo as the closing days of the session approached. Early in April the governor announced that the state's utility companies had agreed to an overall reduction of \$450,000 in rates. He also agreed to the Blackstone Valley Gas and Electric Company's 10% cut, which Daly had offered McCoy. McCoy and Lamarre responded that Pawtucket would go ahead with its plans to provide a "yardstick" to prove that rates were exorbitant. They charged that Green had "betrayed the best interests of the people and had put the stamp of approval on continuing consumer exploitation."

In the legislature a stalemate had developed between the two opposing camps. The governor and Senate held up Pawtucket utilities bills and McCoy's police reorganization and reform-oriented primary bills. In the House McCoy's

25 *Times* February 8, 28, March 1, 2, 1935.

26 *Times* January 1, March 2, 14, April 6, 13, 1935.

Cornelius C. Moore continued to support opposition to McCoy within the Democratic party. A later caricature suggests his motivation.



Pawtucket Star.

forces withheld consideration of the administration's budget and amended reorganization bills. And in the middle was the constitutional convention bill — which both McCoy and the governor

wanted but for which they did not have enthusiastic senate support because of the possibility that both Republican and Democratic seats would be wiped out by a change in apportionment.

The Assembly's closing day was another marathon session. The House did not adjourn until 8:30 a.m. the following day, and Green maintained the hectic pace by convening a fruitless eleven-hour meeting of key legislators and party leaders. McCoy represented House dissidents at the conclave and apparently refused to move administration bills unless his group, the Kiernan bloc, and Italian representatives received a definite commitment on patronage. Failure of both sides to compromise ended the Assembly's legal life, with neither side obtaining its desired legislation. McCoy did make one attempt to move the municipal ownership bill but Walter Curry — House Republican minority leader and law partner of Cornelius Moore — refused immediate consideration and the bill did not come to a vote.²⁷

As a result of the legislative debacle which failed to provide a state budget, Governor Green was forced to call a special session of the legislature to meet in May. In the month that elapsed between sessions Rhode Islanders witnessed a bitter debate between Green and McCoy. Green took the offensive by firing McCoy for "not being in sympathy" with the administration. He followed up this move with a bitter attack at the annual Jefferson-Jackson Day dinner on McCoy's obstructionist tactics and patronage demands. Green then brought his case to the public with radio addresses reiterating his charges against McCoy.

Representative Kiernan came to McCoy's defense, claiming that the patronage struggle could have been settled and that those close to the governor who did not want utility reform had actually sabotaged the session. McCoy then entered the fray, threatening to expose his position in that last-night Assembly maneuvering and laying his ouster at the door of utility interests. Two huge rallies followed in Pawtucket where McCoy openly charged that the governor was afraid to break with

"Dressers, De Wolfes and Sharpes." Then McCoy matched Green's radio appeal by going to the airwaves to defend his utility reform legislation.

McCoy openly admitted that Green's legislation had been "held up" because the governor and his advisors failed to endorse passage of utility bills. Using this theme, he pounded away at utility companies for past and present outrages upon the state's consumers. Linking them to Republican interests, he criticized their lobbyists who secured favorable legislative treatment at the expense of the public. Calling for municipal ownership, McCoy repudiated charges that he and Walter O'Hara had a personal stake in the Pawtucket program, guaranteed that Pawtucket's operation would be in the best interests of all the people, and gave examples of benefits that municipal ownership brought to other localities, particularly Pasadena, California. Closing his address by sarcastically quoting Green's inaugural pledge to secure municipalization, he challenged Green in a burst of unoriginal prose:

If support of measures designed to force the utility companies of Rhode Island to grant just rates to all of the people of the state is treason to the aims and purposes of this administration, then I say to Governor Green, make the most of it.

The veracity of McCoy's position was borne out in subsequent events at the special General Assembly session. The governor failed to repeat his earlier plea for municipalization in his opening message. Instead he initiated a patronage campaign to buy support in the House and crush McCoy. Representative Vincent J. Berarducci, a McCoy supporter who played a pivotal role on the finance committee, became superintendent of the Armory of Mounted Commands. Berarducci's vote gave Green a six-to-five margin on the House committee which controlled the budget. Even Jim Kiernan — to whose aid McCoy went initially in

²⁷ *Times* April 11, 13, 15, 16, 1935.

²⁸ *Times* April 14, 16, 17, 23, May 24, 25, June 8, 1935.

As 1936 ended, three principals of the "bloodless revolution" were pictured at a feast of harmony. The degrees of jubilation are obvious.



Pawtucket Star.

January — deserted the cause for a chance to become a district court judge. Slowly McCoy's support melted away and, after the smoke had cleared, thirty-four legislators had joined the state payroll between January and May under a governor who had denounced dual office holding as a blot on democracy.²⁸

Even the defection of Berarducci and Kiernan from the McCoy camp was not enough to insure House subordination. Green was forced to deal with the Republicans. His biographer lists the bills which Green wanted and those that he traded to get Republican support. Missing from the list is any mention of municipal utilities legislation, although the governor had feigned support of the principle even while attacking McCoy. The deal Republicans accepted was ironic but deceptive. It found them supporting the budget, the reorganization bill, and three measures which reorganized superior and district courts and gave Providence

control of its police force. In return Republicans forced Green to drop his party's plans for the long-awaited constitutional convention, obtained patronage in the new state departments, and designated one of the new judgeships on superior court. Principals in the deal were McGrath and Higgins for the Democrats and "the go-between for the Republicans was [Walter] Curry's law partner," Cornelius C. Moore, Democrat and principal utilities lobbyist. Thus, McCoy's power in the House was broken and his utility reforms, along with West Warwick's plan, died, Green got his bills through the legislature and as a reward Walter Curry was named to the superior court bench. But the utilities issue still plagued the party. McCoy — intent upon embarrassing Commissioner Kennelly — repeatedly asked for a public hearing before the state utilities board on Pawtucket's reasons for wanting municipalization. Twice denied, he continued to harass the admin-

istration with repeated allusions to lobbyists who supported utility interests and to Democrats interested only in feathering their own nests instead of acting for public welfare.²⁹

The great debate over utilities finally ended with the special Congressional election to fill the seat of Representative Francis Condon, whom Green had elevated to the Supreme Court in January in a shrewd move to eliminate a possible contender for the U. S. Senate election in 1936. The seat had remained vacant during the hectic Assembly sessions until Green set August 6 for the election. A number of individuals were interested, but Green and Gainer chose Antonio Prince, the state's general treasurer, to run in the heavily French district. McCoy, after considering his options, boomed Prince's Woonsocket rival, Felix Toupin, for the post.

Before the convention it was obvious that Prince would be the nominee, so great was the regular organization's control. Even McCoy supporters chanted "It's in the bag" as the session opened. But McCoy used the meeting as a sounding board to denounce Green and utility interests. Albert Lamarre opened the barrage with a scathing denunciation of Green as a man controlled by an advisory council "on the payroll of the public utilities." McCoy followed with a speech which ridiculed the governor as a "traitor" to the principles of the Democratic party. Climaxing the attack, McCoy offered a resolution that would pledge the party's candidate to support President Roosevelt's Public Utility Holding Company Act then before Congress. He and Lamarre claimed this was necessary to redeem the party because Senator Gerry and Congressman O'Connell had refused to back the President. Cornelius Moore tried to block the resolution by having it sent to an ad hoc committee for discussion but McCoy, demanding "common decency and courtesy," was allowed one representative on the committee. After much discussion and drafting, the resolution was placed before the convention and adopted.

This was the only victory McCoy salvaged in his fight for utility reform in Rhode Island.

Compared to the convention, the ensuing campaign was anti-climactic. McCoy — in a show of independence and revenge — refused to endorse Prince until election eve and actually held back Pawtucket's support. Barely carrying Woonsocket and losing Pawtucket by a substantial margin, the Democrat went down to defeat.³⁰

Rhode Island's "bloodless revolution of 1935" was a profound step toward bringing the administration of state government into line with twentieth-century standards. It provided the people of the state, for the first time, an open and responsive legislature able to act on a backlog of reforms gathering since the Progressive era. Unfortunately, the initial response of the Democratic party to the challenge left something to be desired. The utilities reform struggle split the party and promoted a patronage grab that deterred reform spirit. Failure to call a constitutional convention tarnished the entire proceedings, and the real victims were the people of Rhode Island.

In many ways, Tom McCoy's career was just beginning in 1935. The following year he became mayor and proceeded to use New Deal programs to build a new high school, a new filtration and water plant, a new city hall, and other needed facilities. But simultaneously, as boss of Pawtucket, he presided over city government in an arbitrary way, and charges of alleged "honest graft" continued to swirl around him. An astute political animal, McCoy mixed politics and reform in an intriguing and sometimes roguish way. His fight for utilities reform in 1935 placed him in the tradition of the Irish urban reformers who had been his mentors. His use of power politics and machine rule was also the traditional form of urban politics for immigrant working-class members of American society. Any appraisal of Tom McCoy must weigh these influences before a valid historical judgment can be rendered.

29 Levine, 188, 215. *Times* April 14, June 4, 8, 11, July 8, 1935.

30 Levine, 178. *Times* July 6, 13, 26, August 1-7, 1935.

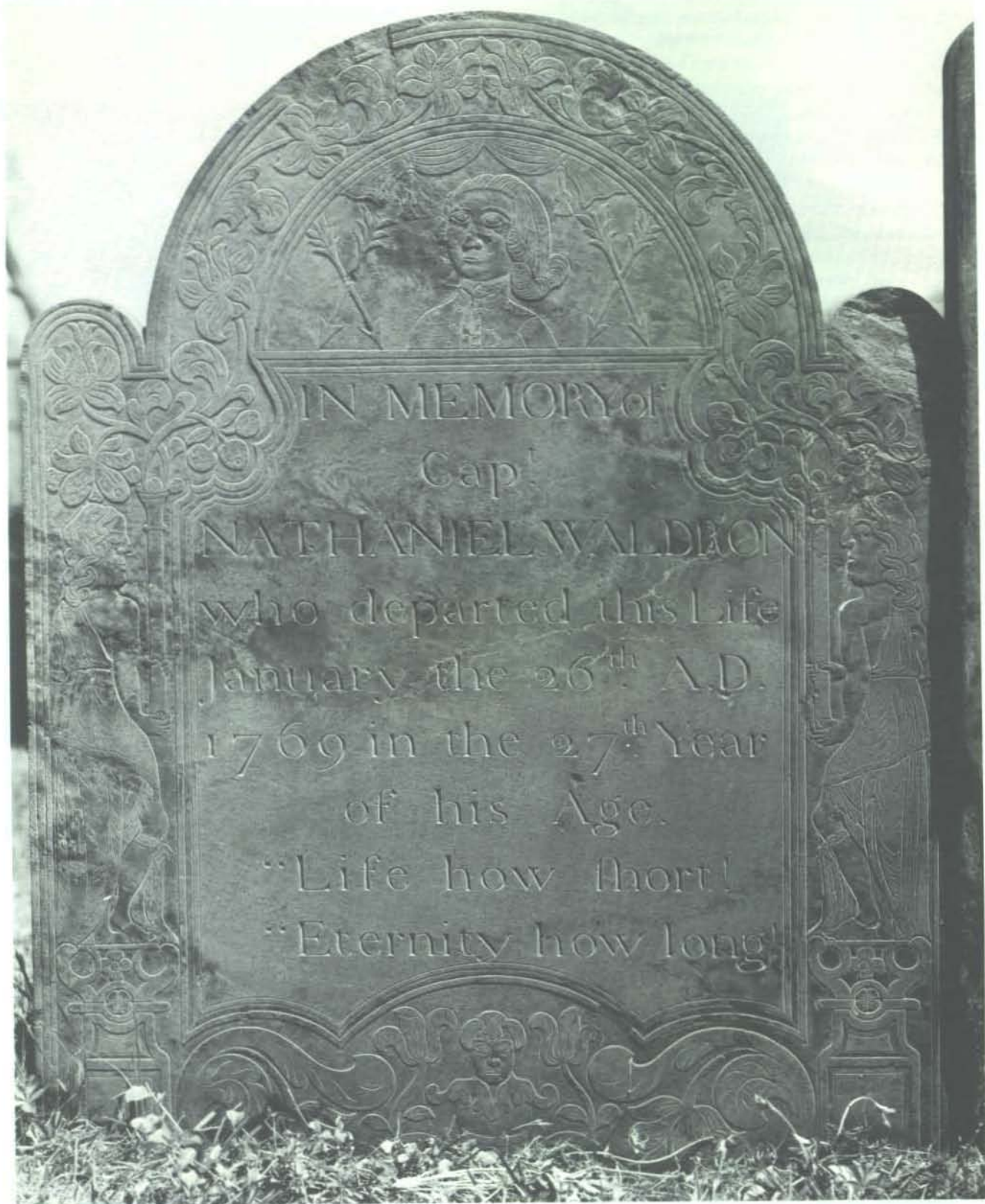
In many ways Tom McCoy's career was just beginning in 1935. Sworn in as mayor of Pawtucket by John H. Quinn, January 1937, he used New Deal programs to provide the city with needed facilities.



Providence Journal-Bulletin photograph.

Pawtucket Star.





Photograph by Allen Ludwig, RIHS Graphics Collection.

The Loved One — Funeral of George Mason of Newport

Sir

I imagine you are already acquainted with the Death of our Friend George Mason, and as distance would not permitt your attendance at his Funerall, I shall for your satisfaction, give a faithful Relation of every meterial Circumstance that happened on such a Solemn Occation.

About four o Clock yesterday in the afternoon, we began to meet together at the House, Grief being visible on every Countenance present; and a profound Silence render'd the Scene truly awfull, for my part I cannot remember I ever before experienced Grief in so Sensible a manner, as upon receiving our poor Companion in a situation so shocking to unthinking Mortals, but not to detain you any longer, I shall now Conduct him to his last residence in this World, observing by the way, the conduct of those, who honour'd his memory with their presence; of which were many of both Sexes; and as his Acquaintance was but small, I shall begin with those whom whilst living he called his Friends.

Mary Rodman, Wife of Thomas Rodman, seem'd to be very much affected, and I'm credibly Inform'd shed Tears in great abundance,

Mary Rodman her Sister, Behaved in a very Compos'd manner, and Demonstrated the Command she had over her Passions, by only looking Sorrowfull.

Anne Rodman her sister, wept most bitterly, and had it not been for the Seasonable relief of some Drops, She had in all probability fainted

transcribed by Joseph K. Ott

away, but to the utter astonishment of all sober minded People, went Gigling home, as unconcern'd as ever.

Ruth Collings behaved with great Decency, and went off with this remark, we must all go hence sooner or later.

Rebecca Collins, Remark'd what a pitty it was that Youth should be so untimely Cropt in it's bud, and Concluded she hop'd it might be a warning to all present.

Elizabeth Collins, wickedly followed the bad and Scandalous Example of the abovesd Nancy, and was heard in an hour afterwards, to hum a small ditty.

Mary Townsend, was observ'd to Comfort a Standerby, with this Seasonable Advice, that weeping would not fetch him to Life again.

Anne Bowers, wish'd him well in t'other World, and went off muttering something Concerning the Thief upon the Cross.

Phebe Bull, declar'd it was a large Burial, profess'd she was very dry, and with the rest march'd directly to their respective homes.

These are the Chief Transactions I remember, and least I prove troublesome by relating over, what I'm sensible can afford no pleasure to you, I shall Conclude, and Remain, Dear Sir,
Your most Huml Servt

Sir

You may remember in my Last I gave some Account concerning the Funeral of our Deceased Friend George Mason, and as time then would

A Newport gravestone reflects the same realistic attitude toward life and death as the letters in "The Loved One."

*In his continuing research on Rhode Island cabinetmakers, housewrights, shipwrights, related craftsmen and their work, business historian Joseph K. Ott — president of this Society since 1971 — occasionally happens upon such serendipitous findings as the above, in this instance with the help of Nino D. Scotti.

not permitt me to go intirely through; I shall in this oblige you with a Discription of the behaviour of those, who were his Male Companions, and intimate associates whilst living.

John Townsend (Son of Christopher), solemnly affirm'd in the presence of many, he never made a neater coffin in all his life before, owing to the great Regard he had for his Friend George.

Nicholas Townsend (Brother to John), much Lamented the loss of so good a Customer, and with a loud Groan pronounc'd a perfect Resignation to a Superior Power.

John Bull, made but a short stay, ask'd the Age of the Deceased, what time he Died, and was seen in an hour afterwards very Busy at work.

John Gould seem'd very Melancholly, shook his head, and said with an audible voice, who could have thought it.

Joseph Tillinghast (Son of Jonathan), wittily concluded, for all his Boasted Sence, Death trick'd him at last.

William Tweedy, shook his head, affirm'd he approv'd not of Daffys Elixir, and term'd the Doctor a Blockhead.

Nathaniel Tweedy, stiffly denied what his Brother Asserted, and boldly maintained that Chewing Tobacco occation'd his Exit, and quoted many Learned Authors to prove the same.

Sueton Grant, vow'd it seem'd like a Dream that George was Dead, and protested he saw him but a few days before, walk down the New Pavements.

Jonathan Bowers, declar'd it was a troublesome World, begg'd a Pinch of Snuff, and march'd off.

John James, made many sober Reflections, and invited severall home to partake of a Bowl of Punch.

John Quincy, M. D., of London, writing in 1720, shared William Tweedy's opinion of Daffy's Elixir. This recipe and his comment are from the third edition of his *Pharmacopoeia Officinalis & Extemporanea: or, A Compleat English Dispensatory*.

Elixir Salutis, Elixir of Health.

‘ Take Sena ʒiv. Guaiacum,
‘ Roots of Elecaupane, Liquorice,
‘ Seeds of Anise, Caraway, and Co-
‘ riander, ana ʒii. Raisins stoned
‘ ʒs. Aqua Vita ʒvi. Let them
‘ stand together four days in Infu-
‘ sion, then strain the Liquor, and
‘ keep for use.’

This has been a long time quack'd about by the name of *Daffy's Elixir*, who, as I have been inform'd, was a poor Shoe maker, or some such Mechanick: and it continues yet to be expos'd to sale in many publick places, under that title. But however by such means it has obtain'd, and notwithstanding its great Name, it is but a very ordinary Medicine; and its success in sale, besides the continual Exclamations in its favour, seems much to be owing to this, That at the same time a Person is taking a Dose of Physick, he has all the Gratification of a Cordial-Dram: for which very reason it is unfit for any but Brandy-Tiplers to take, especially in a Morning; nay,

William Richardson, concluded it could not be help'd, and that sorrows would be of no service.

Job Carr, complain'd of his Shoulder, Curs'd the edge of the Coffin, and march'd off with one of the Female attenders.

Thus Sir was Carried on the Funeral of George Mason, and in my next you may expect to have a small sketch of his Character, drawn by an Impartial Hand

I am

Dear Sir

Yours etc.

GM's Epitaph

*Here lies poor George, depriv'd of Breath,
He on the Ladies, wrote a Satire;
To be reveng'd out popt Grim Death:
And sent him — where — no matter.*

Perhaps mercifully for the memory of Mr. Mason, there is no third letter with a small sketch of his character. The letters are unsigned and undated but analysis of names mentioned leaves no doubt that writer and deceased lived in Newport. Several of the male mourners were born in the 1730s and, with the life expectancy of those times, the sad event probably occurred in the late eighteenth century. The wretched Job Carr was born in 1762, and perhaps his comparative youth may explain his actions.

The letters are in Rhode Island Historical Society Manuscripts 14:325.





Isham Collection. RIHS Graphics.

In 1894 Rhode Island business men could still remember fortunes made in early China trade, reminded by such tangible evidence as merchant Edward Carrington's handsome home.

Providence Conspiracy of 1894

by Jeffery M. Dorwart*

Rhode Island's prosperity depended traditionally upon maritime commerce. Local industry, lacking native natural resources, imported raw materials, shipping the finished products from the tiny state's excellent harbors. Merchants searched continually for new markets for their manufactures. At first colonial Rhode Islanders profited from European and West Indian trade, but by breaking away from England during the American Revolution, they were forced to look beyond these familiar commercial channels to India, Batavia, and China. China trade particularly fascinated these early businessmen, and in 1787 the Browns of Providence Plantations organized the state's first trading expedition to Canton. Though Providence's trade never approached the volume reached by Philadelphia, New York or Boston, cargoes of China porcelain, tea and silks arrived frequently in Rhode Island ports. By the 1820s, however, the state's China trade dwindled, and in 1838 the last merchantman sent by the Browns to Canton completed its voyage.¹

Rhode Islanders turned to rapidly expanding domestic markets — especially the West — for manufacturing outlets. The state's post-Civil War generation shared in the nation's tremendous industrial expansion and worked overtime to fill domestic demands.² Neither Rhode Island nor for that matter the rest of the United States paid much attention to overseas interests. But by the last

decades of the nineteenth century Americans could no longer ignore the responsibilities of their growing world power. The country became entangled more often in foreign problems, not just Caribbean and Latin American issues, but also in the Far East. Controversy in Samoa, Hawaii, the Philippines and even East Asia directed the nation's attention beyond the continent. Moreover — as the late Richard Hofstadter once suggested — late nineteenth-century domestic problems such as depression, unemployment, social and labor unrest, prompted some to turn to foreign questions to solve domestic economic ills.³

The smallest state followed the national trend. Local shipyards, munitions firms and foundries contributed to construction of a modern navy. While businessmen talked about overseas outlets for textiles and machinery — perhaps even a revival of the old China trade — the state's leading business spokesman in the 1890s, Nelson W. Aldrich, argued persistently for development of a large navy to defend American expansion into world markets. The Rhode Island senator stressed importance of neutral markets in "the East," primarily the Philippines, Java, and China.⁴

Though there were many reasons for Rhode Island's renewed interest in China during the late nineteenth century — including Southern textile competition, a growing rhetoric of empire,⁵ and local economic dislocation as a result of the Panic

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1 James B. Hedges, *Browns of Providence Plantations: Nineteenth Century* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1968) 15-29, 88-104, 148-52, 157.
2 Kurt B. Mayer and Sidney Goldstein, *Migration and Economic Development in Rhode Island* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1958) 1-16.

3 Hofstadter, "Manifest Destiny and the Philippines," in *America in Crisis*, ed. Daniel Aaron (New York: Knopf, 1952) 173-200.

4 Aldrich's views outlined in Walter LaFeber, *New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968) 235; and in Thomas J. McCormick, *China Market: America's Quest for Informal Empire, 1893-1901* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1967) 47.

5 Marilyn Blatt Young, *Rhetoric of Empire: American China Policy, 1895-1901* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

Scorning Wilde's invention, the confident Japanese soon demonstrated their naval superiority by capturing China's strongest northern naval arsenal at Port Arthur.



Engraving from *Scientific American Supplement* March 16, 1895.

of 1893⁶ — one bizarre local affair forced the state's attention to the other side of the world. This sensational incident was a conspiracy hatched in Providence by a "north end" inventor, a Chinese agent, local businessmen and Senator Nelson W. Aldrich to destroy the Japanese navy for China during the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-5.

When China and Japan declared war on August 1, 1894 the United States government urged its citizens to remain strictly neutral. Yet many Americans violated this neutrality, offering their services to the belligerents. Mercenaries, adventurers, speculators and cranks headed for the war

zone in search of profit and glory. The infestation became so troublesome that missionary-diplomat Horace N. Allen wrote from Korea to third Assistant Secretary of State William W. Rockhill — "We already have a job lot of American curios out here, and don't want the assortment added to."⁷

Nevertheless, Asian difficulties continued to stimulate get-rich schemes on the part of Americans. One of these was John Wilde, a fifty-two-year-old bankrupt inventor, residing at 111 River Street, Providence. Wilde read eagerly newspaper dispatches from Asia, and viewed the hostilities as an ideal opportunity to sell his latest invention to

6 Charles Hoffmann, *Depression of the Nineties: An Economic History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1970). Mayer and Goldstein, 10.

7 Allen to Rockhill, June 11, 1895, Rockhill Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

8 Wilde to Tateno, July 3, 1894, enclosure 1 in Dun to Gresham, Dec. 7, 1894, Despatches from United States Ministers to Japan, v. 68, Record Group 59, National Archives, hereafter cited Japan Despatches. Sakuye Takahashi, *Cases on International Law during the Sino-Japanese War* (Cambridge University Press, 1899) 52-3.

the combatants. He had been experimenting with some sort of infernal machine for several years, and though rebuffed by the United States Navy, now hoped to find an Asian buyer for his secret weapon. On July 3, 1894, Wilde contacted Japanese Minister in the United States Gozo Tateno, offering to reveal his secret to Japan, "which if known by your Government would enable them to destroy the whole Chinese fleet." Japan, confident of its naval superiority, laughed at Wilde and refused to discuss the matter.⁹

Undeterred Wilde turned next to the Chinese. This time the inventor received support from Rhode Island Senator Nelson W. Aldrich, who arranged an interview with Chinese officials in Washington. Aldrich informed Chinese Minister Yang Yu that the Providence native "comes to me with the commendation of a leading merchant of that city."¹⁰ Aldrich's introduction opened the legation's doors to Wilde. The thoroughly westernized secretary and interpreter of the Chinese legation Ching-fan Moore (also known as Chang Fang-mo) listened attentively to Wilde's plans for the destruction of the Japanese navy. Moore promised his support for the American's scheme, which would bring wealth, rank and honor to both men. At the same time Wilde discovered an unexpected ally in former Secretary of State John Watson Foster, who had his own devious designs for financial exploitation in China.¹⁰ Foster checked Wilde's credentials for the Chinese and discovered that the Rhode Islander had served briefly in the Brazilian civil war of 1894. Brazilian officials, Foster learned, had become "convinced of his honesty and possibility of his work."¹¹ Foster informed Moore that Wilde could undoubtedly do what he promised.¹²

During the latter part of September 1894 the Chinese agent slipped away to Providence "on vacation" where he met Wilde, George Cameron

John Watson Foster, former Secretary of State, obtained endorsement of Wilde's work from Brazilian officials with whom the inventor had served in that country's 1894 civil war.



Dictionary of American Portraits (New York: Dover, 1967).

(alias George Howie) — a torpedo tester at the local Hotchkiss Ordnance Company — and Major Oliver Alers of the city's Adams Express Company. Closeted in a suite at the Narragansett Hotel, Moore, Wilde and Cameron signed a so-called "Terms of Sale of Secret."¹³ Then Major Alers guided the conspirators through the big Gorham Manufacturing Company, the Hotchkiss Ordnance plant and other Providence manufacturing concerns.¹⁴

Though the plotters obtained little encouragement in the state capital, Wilde and Cameron, according to one local newspaper, "left the city in

9 Aldrich to Chinese Minister, Aug. 27, 1894, enclosure in Dun to Gresham, Dec. 7, 1894, Japan Despatches. Takahashi, 53.

10 Foster's schemes documented in Jeffery M. Dorwart, "Pigtail War: American Reaction to Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895," unpublished Ph.D. thesis (University of Massachusetts, 1970).

11 Mendonca to Foster, Sept. 5, 1894, enclosure in Dun to Gresham, Dec. 7, 1894, Japan Despatches.

12 Foster to Moore, Sept. 5, 1894, Japan Despatches. Later Mrs. Foster categorically denied that her husband knew anything about the Wilde affair, *New York Tribune* March 8, 1895.

13 Japanese legal expert Sakuye Takahashi claimed that he had seen this document. Takahashi, 54.

14 Takahashi, 56.

In Providence the three conspirators, Moore, Wilde, and Cameron signed their "Terms of Sale of Secret" in a suite at the Narragansett Hotel — traversing this hallway to the rendezvous.

RIHS Graphics Collection.



the employ of the Chinese government."¹⁵ Accompanied by Moore, they traveled to San Francisco where Chinese merchants contributed \$6,000 for their project. Wilde carried also a letter of introduction to Li Hung-chang, Governor of Chihli Province and commander of China's northern defenses. "His counsel may prove of use

to you," Chinese Minister Yang Yu wrote, "and China's navy may acquire fresh strength."¹⁶

The trio booked passage on the British steamship *Gaelic* for East Asia and arrived in Yokohama, Japan on November 2. Almost immediately Japanese officials boarded and searched the vessel for contraband but, finding only flour and apples,

15 *Evening Bulletin* (Providence) Nov. 8, 1894, 1.

16 Chinese Minister in Washington to Li Hung-chang, Sept. 29, 1894, enclosure in Dun to Gresham, Dec. 7, 1894, Japan Despatches.

17 McIvor to Uhl, Nov. 6, 1894, Despatches from U. S. Consuls in Kanagawa, v. 21, RG 59.

18 Enclosure in Dun to Gresham, Dec. 7, 1894, Japan Despatches.

19 *Lynchburg* (Virginia) *Daily Advance* Nov. 7, 1894, 1. *New York Tribune* Nov. 8, 1894, 1.

20 *New York Times* Nov. 9, 1894, 4.

21 Nov. 9, 1894, 3.

let the *Gaelic* proceed to Hong Kong.¹⁷ The conspirators had meanwhile escaped to the French mail steamer *Sydney* moored near the *Gaelic*. The *Sydney* arrived in Kobe two days later where a Japanese naval boarding party seized the three men. Allegedly the Japanese discovered a contract between Wilde and the Chinese government to make war against Japan as well as a "Guarantee" of his work. The "Guarantee" included details of how to mask torpedo boat attacks, landing of troops, and destruction of warships.¹⁸

News of the capture reached the United States several days later. The press declared in sensational headlines that this incident was a "muddle for Uncle Sam"¹⁹ and another Mason and Slidell affair, referring of course to Union seizure of two Confederate agents aboard a neutral vessel during the Civil War.²⁰ Editors speculated about American reaction, many agreeing with William Randolph Hearst's *San Francisco Examiner* that "the Japanese Government has a perfect right to hold him [Wilde] as a prisoner of war."²¹

Rhode Island's leading newspaper combine — *Providence Journal* and *Evening Bulletin* — noting the incident's point of origin, attempted a reconstruction of the plot. A reporter rushed out to the inventor's north end residence and interviewed Mrs. Wilde. Though uncommunicative about the conspiracy, she admitted meeting the Chinese agent and knew that the Chinese government had paid her husband the first installment of a large sum for his services. Next the reporter contacted Wilde's business partner — Charles A. Brown of Providence — who had invested heavily in one of the inventor's earlier schemes called the "tide mill." This mill, purportedly running many powerful machines at one time, had been constructed at Kettle Point but had been abandoned because of

design flaws and lack of funds. Asked what new invention Wilde had concocted that would "revolutionize modern warfare and spread destruction among the ranks of the Japanese," Brown denied any knowledge of the subject. Brown added, however, that Wilde was not a very good chemist. Further investigation at Hotchkiss Ordnance Company, though, disclosed that Wilde's companion George Cameron was a skilled chemist and "thoroughly understood explosives."²²

Meanwhile both Japanese and American governments quickly hushed up the affair. Hoping to maintain growing American sympathy for their country, Japanese officials released Wilde and Cameron after they had signed a confession implicating Nelson W. Aldrich, as well as pledging not to serve China's war effort.²³ On its part the United States government praised Japan's restraint. Secretary of State Walter Q. Gresham cabled that "The generous treatment of these men by the Japanese Government is regarded as a striking proof of magnanimity [sic] no less than of implied friendliness to the country of which they claimed citizenship."²⁴ Though American naval intelligence and consular officials reported later that the two conspirators had broken their parole to serve in Chinese defenses at Weihaiwei, Americans soon forgot the incident.²⁵

Rhode Islanders, however, continued to discuss the Wilde case. Stimulated by local notoriety, reporters searched unsuccessfully for further information concerning the Providence conspiracy. An interview with Major Alers revealed nothing new, and no one thought to question Senator Aldrich about his apparent complicity. Moreover, though one editor predicted that the case would raise "a nice international question," Washington's response ended such

22 *Evening Bulletin* Nov. 8, 1894, 1.

23 Enclosed in Dun to Gresham, Dec. 7, 1894, Japan Despatches.

24 Gresham to Dun, Dec. 20, 1894, Diplomatic Instructions of the Department of State 1801-1906: Japan, v. 4, RG 59.

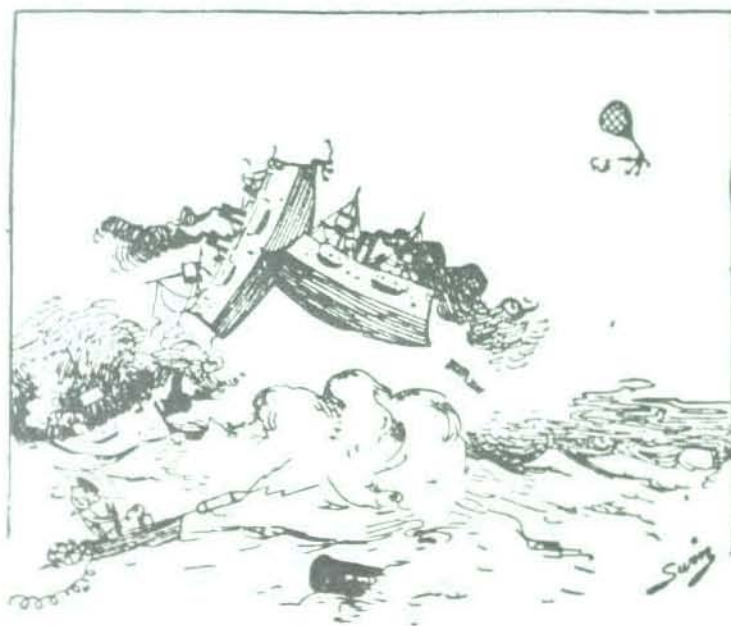
25 Read to Uhl, Feb. 9, 1895, Despatches from U. S. Consuls in Tientsin, v. 5, RG 59. Admiral Carpenter to Secretary of the Navy, Feb. 19, 1895, Area Files of Naval Records Collection: Area 10, RG 45.

concern. Finally the Providence press concluded that Wilde would receive proper treatment from the Japanese, and that the city need not worry about its son's safety.

While interest in the conspiracy faded, commentators used the immediacy of the incident to focus local attention on China and on the Sino-Japanese War. In a state which desperately searched for solutions to its economic crisis, the attempt of one native citizen to repair his shattered finances in China seemed to influence renewed discussion of the China market in Rhode Island. On the very day that news of the inventor's capture made headlines in Providence, *The Evening Bulletin* ran an editorial stressing the importance of the war to all Rhode Islanders. "It may open a new path for our commerce and it may do much to give us an ample currency founded on a substantial metallic reserve and supported by an international agreement," the editorial suggested. In fact, instead of condemning Wilde's violation of American neutrality, several weeks later another local editorial called upon other Americans to "advance American trade interests and our moral importance in Asia." Similar comments appeared during the remaining

months of the war, and when hostilities finally ended in April 1895, *The Evening Bulletin* predicted that China would now be thrown open completely to American commerce.²⁶

Certainly the Providence conspiracy of 1894 constituted a very minor — albeit intriguing — aspect of the state's history. Furthermore it was exceedingly difficult to pinpoint the extent of machinations among the local business community or even the complicity of Senator Aldrich. Perhaps the importance of recording the incident was merely the revelation of a heretofore undocumented and unpublished plot. Yet one cannot help but feel that such a case reinforces — on the local level — Richard Hofstadter's thesis that one of the motives for revived American interest in foreign activities during the late nineteenth century was the search for "psychic" safety-valves for domestic crises. Or at least the incident indicates that such minor events were catalysts to what Marilyn Blatt Young calls a growing rhetoric of empire and Thomas McCormick terms the development of American theories of informal economic empire in East Asia.



THE GREAT AERIAL DUEL IN THE ORIENT.
From a sketch by a cross-eyed witness of the conflict between the Flying Trap and the Hex Jumping Frog.

Not all American newspapers regarded the Asian conflict with complete seriousness. *The San Francisco Examiner* of October 10, 1894, expressed this view of Oriental warfare.

26 *Evening Bulletin* — Nov. 8, 1 and 8 — Nov. 9, 4 — Nov. 24, 1894, 6 — April 9, 1895, 6.

Although they earned a reputation for sobriety and decorum, members of Rhode Island's famous American Brass Band could make merry music under the leadership of noted David Wallis Reeves who, neatly bearded and braid-trimmed, centers the top row. This photograph, taken in the 1870s, is on exhibit

with some of the band's instruments and other memorabilia in John Brown House until October. The display celebrates the August concert on the John Brown House lawn by the Warwick Brass Quintet.

