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AND
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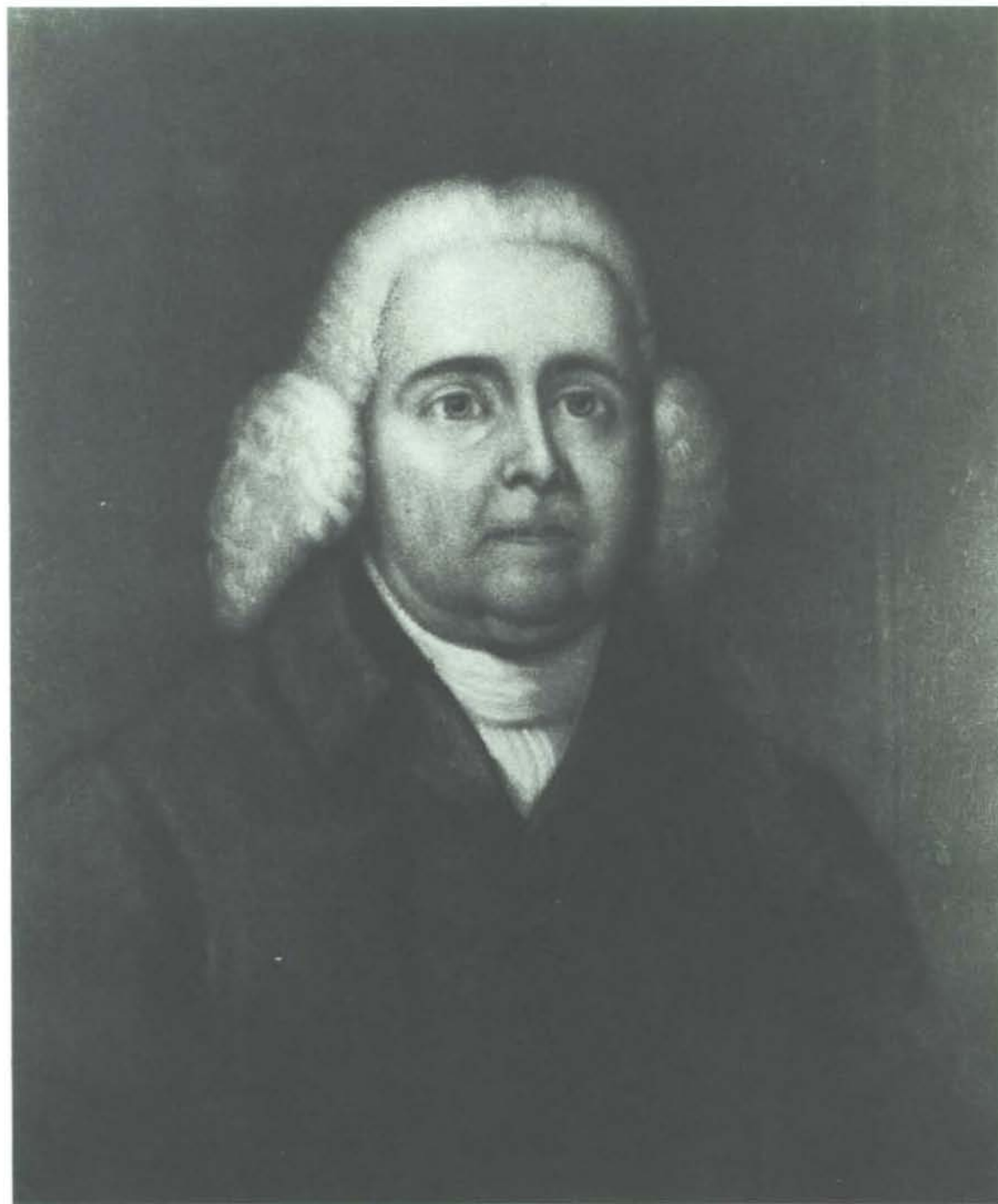
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*Digest of laws printed by James Franklin in 1730 provided the
graceful early version of Rhode Island's seal centering the
cover.*

Isaac Backus, source of much of New England's early religious history, was acquainted with Ebenezer Ward and added to continuing interest in the Cumberland affair by engaging in debate over it. His papers and writings contain many documents and other material relating to the Cumberland perfectionists.



Free Love, Immortalism, and Perfectionism in Cumberland, Rhode Island 1748-1768

by William G. McLoughlin*

As Ebenezer Ward of Cumberland lay in prison in Providence in the early summer of 1749, he must have been puzzled by the mysterious ways of God. He was not only a wealthy but a pious man, well-respected until then in his community. He had been leading a number of his neighbors in weekly prayers and exhortations in his home for over a year. They were about to form a church and call a pastor who would preach a more pure form of the Gospel than prevailed in the existing churches. Now his religious friends were in total confusion and disorder, and he was being sued by his son-in-law for alienating the affections of his daughter Molly. He had allowed his daughter, while her husband, Joseph Bennet, was at sea, to live with another man — though as he told a friend, he believed this man “and his daughter meant no harm lodging together for they lay with the Bible between them.”

What was more, Ward thought he had not only a good spiritual case to make for permitting his daughter to live with a man more in harmony with her, he could also cite extenuating circumstances. For one thing his daughter, a very pious girl, was “subject to fits.” For another, it was her husband who first suggested that the marriage was improper. Ward had witnesses who could testify that Bennet had surprised a group of neighbors one night more than a year before by telling them that “Ward’s daughter was not his wife and that he had no more right to lie with her than any other woman.” Ward had protested against this and urged Bennet to reconsider. He had perhaps been wrong to insist, after their marriage in 1745 — when Molly was only six-

teen — that the couple should live with him, and if that was the cause of Bennet’s discontent, Ward said they might move into a home of their own. In fact, if Bennet “would provide a place suitable anywhere within ten miles, he [Ward] was willing his daughter should go with him and that he would furnish her with things suitable to keep house and if he [Bennet] would get a good maid or nurse to be constantly with her . . . he would pay her [the nurse] yearly himself.” What was more, he would give his daughter one thousand pounds for her comfort (though this may have been a figure of speech to express his extreme concern for her welfare).¹

But Joseph Bennet (or Bennett) had not taken this offer. Instead he had squandered what funds he did have and then taken ship and gone to sea. Hearing nothing from him for many months, Ward and his neighbors assumed that the ship had been lost. Only then had Ward allowed his daughter to move into Solomon Finney’s home and even then he had extracted a promise from the two that they would sleep with a Bible between them in order to prevent any carnal relations. The arrangement was to be a purely spiritual one. Molly and Solomon had convinced Ebenezer Ward, and themselves, that they were spiritual soulmates.

Bennet had returned and finding his wife with another man (by her father’s permission), he demanded an explanation. Ward tried to mollify him, said he was glad to find Bennet alive, that he would make his daughter return to him and renewed his offer to support Molly and Bennet (and provide a nurse for her) if Bennet would promise to live within

*Author of *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition* and editor of *Isaac Backus on Church, State and Calvinism: Pamphlets, 1754-1789*. Mr. McLoughlin is Professor of History at Brown.

1 See appendix 1. Unless otherwise noted, all documents quoted are from diaries and papers of Isaac Backus at Andover Newton Theological School, Newton Centre, Massachusetts.

ten miles of her father's home. But Bennet would not be mollified. He threatened to go to law. Ward was convinced that Bennet was a scamp who wanted to bring suit simply to obtain more money from him which he would promptly spend. So when Bennet swore out charges against Ward early in 1749 for alienation of affections and had him imprisoned, Ward obtained legal counsel and prepared to defend himself. But just as the case was about to come to trial, Ward's daughter confessed that she was pregnant. The father of her child could be no one but Solomon Finney (or Phinney), her spiritual soulmate. This "took all the heart" from old Ebenezer Ward. And it convinced Bennet that he should sue for divorce — an action which at that time could only be granted by an act of the Rhode Island General Assembly.

Such were the facts as Ward and his friends saw them. A pious, if over-protective father, had let himself be too easily misled by his daughter and her soulmate (or they had trusted too much in their own self-restraint). Bennet's story, of course, was rather different. As he told the General Assembly in his petition for divorce in August 1749, it was Ebenezer Ward who had first "imbibed and cherished certain wicked and strange tenets and principles" regarding spiritual marriage. And it was Ward who "did then Suggest unto the said Molly, his Daughter, your Petitioner's Wife, that your Petitioner was in an unconverted State and Condition and that it was Sinful for her to Cohabit with your petitioner as her Husband." Molly had heeded her father. Ward then compelled Bennet to leave his house and no sooner was he gone than "he, the said Ebenezer, together with one Solomon Finney, a person of like Pernicious and Evil Principles, did Conspire to Seduce the said Molly."²

The General Assembly believed Bennet's side of the story, no doubt because of the clear evidence of adulterous carnal relations. Ward and Finney were fined and Bennet got his divorce in October 1749. Despite all the evidence we have about this incident, it is still impossible to tell what role Molly Ward

The Hon. William Greene, Esq., of Warwick was governor of the colony and head of the general assembly that granted Joseph Bennett his divorce.



State House. Photograph by Leo P. Reardon.

Bennet played. We have no statement, direct or indirect, from her. Was she the innocent tool of her father? Was she the injured and mistreated wife of Bennet? Was she a giddy religious zealot? Or was she perhaps a rather self-willed hypochondriac who wanted to find a way to live with her lover and who used the religious ferment of the times to deceive the others — and perhaps herself?

It was fortunate for Ward (and the spiritual soulmates) that he was sued when he was, for had the case taken place a month later, he would have been subject to far more than a fine. In October 1749, the same legislative session which granted Bennet his divorce also passed a new law "Against Adultery, Polygamy, and Unlawfully Marrying Persons; and

² See appendix 2 for this and other documents from Rhode Island State Archives relating to the divorce case of Joseph Bennet.

On the last Wednesday of October 1749, the general assembly of the "English Colony of Rhode-Island" passed this law.

paying . . . inc.

An ACT against Adultery, Polygamy, and unlawfully marrying Persons ; and for the Relief of such Persons as are injured by the Breach of Marriage Covenants.

BE IT ENACTED by the General Assembly, and by the Authority thereof, It is Enacted, That if any Man or Woman in this Colony, shall commit the Crime of Adultery, and be thereof lawfully convicted before the Court of Assize in the County where the Crime shall be committed, every such Person shall be punished, by being set publickly on the Gallows in the Day-time, with a Rope about his or her Neck, for the Space of one Hour ; and in his or her Return from the Gallows to the Goal, shall be publickly whipped on his or her naked Body, not exceeding thirty Stripes ; and that such Person or Persons shall stand committed to the Goal of the County wherein convicted, until he or she shall pay all Costs of Prosecution.

And be it further Enacted by the Authority aforesaid, That if any Man or Woman in this Colony, having a Husband or Wife alive, shall marry another Woman or Man, and be thereof lawfully convicted, in Manner as aforesaid, the Person or Persons so offending, shall suffer the same Pains and Punishment, as in case of Adultery.

And be it further Enacted by the Authority aforesaid, That if any Officer or Minister in this Colony, having lawfull Authority to marry, shall refuse to marry any Man or Woman that he knows hath a Wife or Husband within his

Facsimile No. 27. Rhode Island Acts and Resolves by J. Harry Bongartz.

for the Relief of Such Persons as Are Injured by the Breach of Marriage Covenants." According to this law (which seems like a throwback to days of Hester Prynne and Puritan Massachusetts), any person convicted of breach of the marriage contract "shall be punished by being set publickly on the Gallows in the day Time with a Rope about their Neck for the space of One hour and in their return from the Gallows to the Gaol shall be publickly whipped on their Naked Body not exceeding Thirty Stripes . . ."

If this had been all there was to the affair, it would have remained simply a matter of local scandal, of not particular interest to historians. As it turned out, the incident had far wider ramifications. It not only disrupted Ward's incipient church in Cumberland, but it disrupted churches for miles around. Many other couples followed the example of Molly and Solomon. For twenty years the issue reverberated in ecclesiastical disputes in northeastern Rhode Island and southeastern Massachusetts. It affected churches

in Cumberland, Attleborough, Norton, Easton, Middleborough and Taunton. Dozens of families and several ministers were caught up in scandals over the next twenty years. It is more than likely that the Rhode Island law against breaches of marriage covenants was a direct response to the rapid spread of spiritual wifery in this period.

What is more, the Ward-Bennet incident became a subject for discussion in half a dozen tracts and books in the eighteenth century — Joseph Fish in Norwich, Connecticut and Isaac Backus in Middleborough, Massachusetts engaged in acrimonious debate over it — Ebenezer Frothingham in Middletown, Connecticut made a cause celebre out of it in one of his tracts — subsequent local historians like William L. Chaffin, John Daggett, and George F. Clark also felt obliged to rehash the matter late in the nineteenth century in their town histories.

But psycho-historians and anthropologists of the past ten years have thrown the most light on such incidents. Ronald Knox, Norman Cohn, Geoffrey Nuttall, Kai T. Erikson, Weston LaBarre and E. J. Hobsbawm have found many periods in history when members of Christian churches have rebelled against marriage laws and other well established patterns of social and moral behavior. It is a recurrent phenomenon in western religious history. The incident in Cumberland can be adequately explained only in terms of these broader patterns of religious behavior. Any study of the documents in this case reveals at once that it was directly related to that astounding outburst of religious excitement in the years 1734-1755 which is known as the first great awakening, and any student of this awakening can cite a dozen or more similar incidents of sexually aberrant behavior in other parts of New England.³ What is more, these "free love" movements, generally described as "perfectionism," have cropped up in later great awakenings in American history — particularly after the second great awakening which produced the Mormon movement, the Brimfield "bundling," and the Oneida community.

Nor is sexual experimentation the only eccentric aspect of such episodes. Many perfectionist groups — including the one to which Ward, Bennet, Finney and their friends in southeastern New England belonged — also considered themselves free from all mortal illness and hence "immortal." (The Christian Science movement is not unrelated to this aspect of the religious experience.) Some "immortalists" in the Ward-Finney circle declared that as a result of their religious conversion they were so perfect that they were no longer capable of sin. This is too far-ranging a subject to be summarized in a short article, but a brief look at some other aspects of the Cumberland perfectionist or immortalist movement in the 1740s and 1750s will help place it in perspective. For despite frequent mention of this group in contemporary and later literature, no one has ever looked closely at all the documents and tried to make sense out of it — at least perfectionist sense.

The Cumberland perfectionists — I shall so call them though they included many people who lived in Easton, Norton, Attleborough, and Taunton — were part of what historians call the "New Light" movement in the great awakening. That is, they felt that as the result of the work of God and the Holy Spirit in their hearts they had undergone religious experiences which gave them "new light" into the truth of the Gospel and the mysterious will of God concerning them, their souls, the world in which they lived, and the spiritual world. This is of course characteristic of all new religious movements; it justifies pious leaders of such movements in their effort to reform or rebel against restrictions, formality, spiritual deadness of the existing religion. Which is simply a way of saying that most religions tend to become lifeless from time to time and fail to meet emotional needs of their members. The new lights in America in 1730 to 1760 were not unlike Wesleyan Methodists in England in the same years who disliked the corruption, formality, and spiritual torpor of the established Church of England and who sought through prayer, fasting, revival meetings,

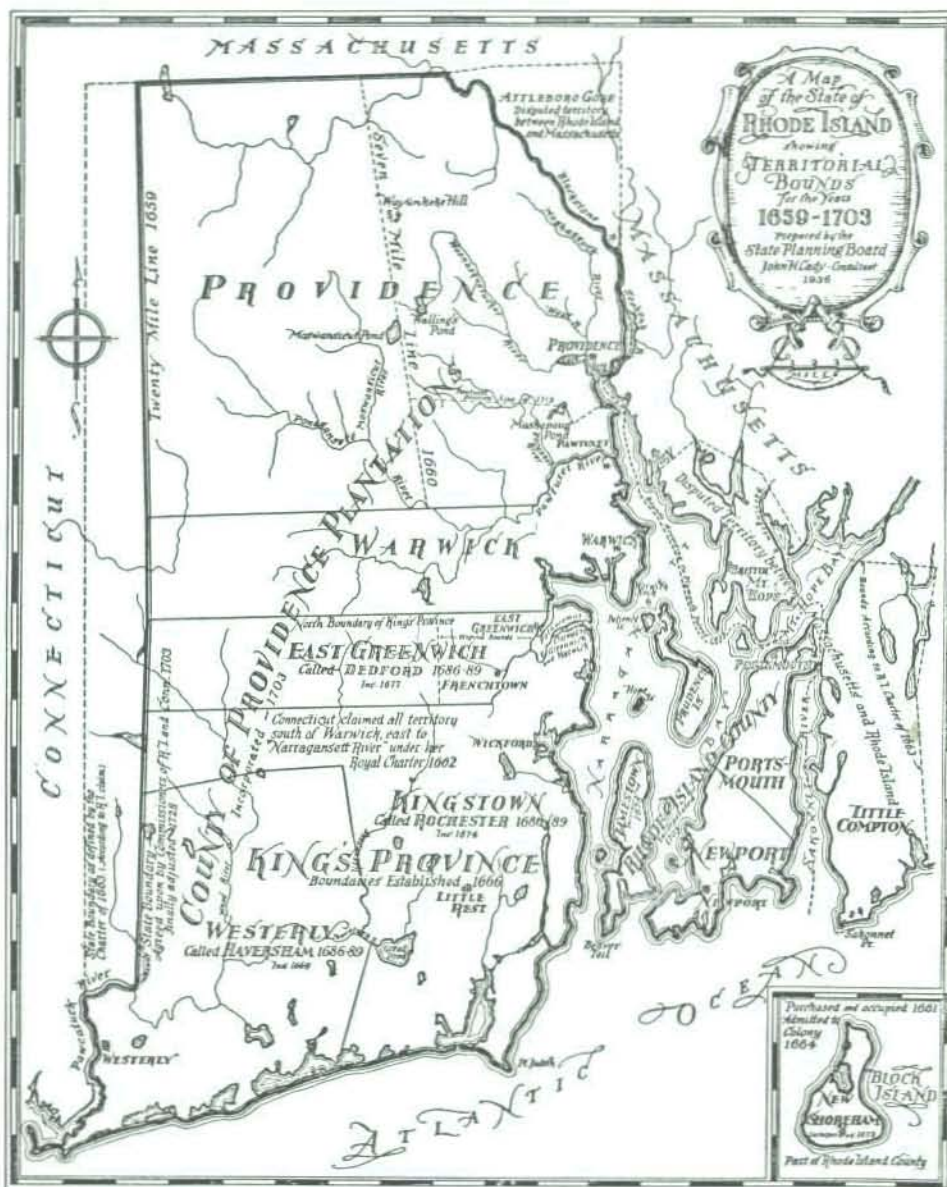
³ C.C. Geen in *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740-1800* (New Haven, 1962) 200-203.

hymn-singing and other means to bring new spiritual life into their churches.

In New England established churches were Congregational — remnants of the old Puritan theocracy. Inhabitants of Rhode Island did not have an established church but until 1748 the eastern side of Narragansett Bay was in dispute between Massachusetts and Rhode Island and most inhabitants there were considered to be inhabitants of Massachusetts

and subject to its laws. So people in Cumberland shared with new lights to the east of them that spiritual rebellion against established churches which became known as the new light movement. Most of the new lights did not want to destroy old churches or the established system; they simply wanted to put new fervor into it. (Similarly, John Wesley had no intention of splitting from the Anglican Church and founding the Methodist Episcopal Church when he

As residents of disputed Attleborough Gore in the northeast corner of the colony, Cumberland people shared with Massachusetts neighbors the spiritual rebellion of the new light movement.



started his spiritual movement in the 1730s.) But ministers of established churches, as well as secular authorities, frowned upon many of the views and much of the behavior of the new lights — for new lights were highly critical of their ministers and in many places tried to remove them from office and install more zealous preachers. Religious zeal spilled over into very bitter quarrels about doctrine, church government, and ritual. By the end of the 1740s many fervent new lights were ready to conclude that it was impossible for them to reform established churches from within so they would have to leave and start new churches. The favorite text of these radical new lights was 2 Corinthians 6:17 — “Come out from among them and be ye separate” — from which they were called “come-outers” or “separates.” In Cumberland, Attleboro, Easton, Norton, and Middleborough there were come-outers who left their old Congregational churches and formed separate churches where they could have preachers more in harmony with the new spiritual fervor of the times. (We are seeing much of the same spirit moving today in the charismatic movement, the Pentecostals, the Jesus People. But I’ll come back to that.)

The separates in Norton — to which many of the Ward-Finney group later belonged — started a new church in February 1747, and stated the following reasons for leaving their old church:

1. *Because that they did not particularly examine those admitted to their communion as they ought to do.*
2. *Because they did not hold a gospel discipline.*
3. *They deny the fellowship of the saints.*
4. *Their settling ministers by way of salary.*
5. *By their allowing of half-way members.*

All of which particulars we look upon to be contrary to the rules that Christ and his apostles practised . . . Then the Lord put it into our hearts to [look to] him for direction, and we set ourselves to seek the Lord by prayers.⁴

And after “a day of solemn fasting and prayer for the accession of his Holy Spirit to direct us in the way

he would have us to walk in,” they concluded that they must come out from the old church and form a new one.

The next step was to set forth the principles upon which they would join together. And here we must pay particularly close attention to the words they used. For these people were Calvinists and they chose their words carefully to prove that they were acting in strict accord with the Bible, literally interpreted. Yet their friends and minister in the church they were leaving insisted that their actions and beliefs were not strictly orthodox or according to the Bible. We need not quote all seventeen of their articles of faith nor all of the nine articles defining their views about church organization. But we do need to select for consideration those which old lights or conservatives found most objectionable (I have indicated the important phrases in roman type):

1. *We believe that there is one only living and true God who is a spirit; of himself from all eternity to all eternity unchangeably the same; infinitely holy, wise, omnipotent, just, merciful and gracious, omniscient, true, and faithful God; filling all places and not included in any place; essentially happy in the possession of his own glorious perfections.*
3. *That the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the word of God, wherein he hath given us a perfect rule of faith and practice.*
4. *That God hath, for the manifestation of his glorious perfections ordained whatsoever comes to pass.*
12. *That we are of the number that was chosen from eternity in Christ; and that he hath come and obeyed and suffered, arose and ascended, and doth ever plead before God the Father for us; which he hath given us to believe by sending the holy spirit to convince us . . .*
13. *That the life of religion consist [in] the knowledge of God and a conformity to him in the inner man; which necessarily produces an external conformity to his laws.*

⁴ These and other records from the Norton separate church are quoted in George F. Clark, *History of the Town of Norton, Massachusetts* (Boston, 1859) 443-456.

14. *That all doubting in a believer is sinful, being contrary to the commands of God, hurtful to the soul, and a hindrance to the performance of duty.*

The words in roman type indicate the stress these pietists placed upon perfectionism; reliance upon the Holy Spirit for inner direction; belief in a literal Bible to which the Christian must conform; absolute faith; and the necessity for external conformity to internal convictions of divine duty. Of course it takes strong faith to stand up against the established order and declare one's independence from it. Such absolute conviction is necessary if one is to bear sacrifices, scorn, even civil punishment for one's deeply held beliefs. But by the same token this reliance upon an inward spiritual power which comes directly from God can lead to extremely radical behavior when it is divorced from any other means of authority or control. In most of the separate churches control over inner spiritual prompting was asserted by three means: first, testing all inward feelings against the written word of God; second, by requiring that individuals submit their own inner prompting to the regulation and common wisdom of all the brethren (or "saints"); and third, in the case of conflict or disharmony, by relying for help and guidance from brethren and ministers of other nearby churches who might be called upon to give counsel and advice.

Nevertheless, even these checks might not suffice. In the case of most of the perfectionist or immortalist groups the individuals concerned have such strong convictions of the necessity of following the divine promptings they feel in their hearts that they refuse to heed any of these restrictions. They ignore the advice and counsel of spiritual brethren and leaders. Such people are termed "antinomians" — *nomos* being the Greek word for law, an antinomian is someone who acts against all law, though the individual insists that he or she is acting according to God's law within his or her heart. The most common means by which an antinomian justifies himself or herself is to find a literal text or phrase in the Bible

which seems to justify the action, thereby conceding at least the validity of the first rule of control.

Unfortunately "the Devil can quote Scripture to his purpose" and one of the most obvious bits of Scripture to which an antinomian can turn is the command of Christ himself to his apostles in Matthew 5:48, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." The text most popular among those who would leave their earthly spouses for spiritual soulmates is 2 Corinthians 6:14, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers." Clearly it was this text which Bennet claimed Ebenezer Ward had used to persuade Molly to leave him, since Bennet had not been converted to radical new light views.

There are two other aspects of radical new light or perfectionist religious thought which we need to consider before we turn to the documents. First is the concept of "the new covenant" and second "the improvement of gifts." By the new covenant a new light meant that God's covenant with Abraham and the Jews in the Old Testament had been superseded by His covenant with Christ and the Christians in the New Testament. This was especially important in regard to the ordinance of baptism because while baptism by water is a New Testament practice, the Puritans had justified baptism of infants (who cannot profess to a belief in Christ) on the basis of the Old Testament ritual of circumcision. Many radical new lights or separates — intent upon living up to the literal word of God — were surprised that they could find no instance in the New Testament where Jesus commanded baptism of infants or where the Apostles practiced it. As one might expect, many of these separates consequently concluded that their infant baptism in their old churches was not valid and that they should not baptize infants in their new churches. The New Testament covenant seemed to be much more clear in commanding that only persons who publicly professed their belief in Christ were fit subjects of baptism.

As for improvement of gifts, this related to Biblical texts that spoke of various gifts or privileges or

talents given to certain men and women by the Holy Ghost. The twelfth chapter of First Corinthians is a favorite source: "Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit . . . For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit . . . And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues . . . covet earnestly the best gifts." In throwing off the yoke of old churches and ministers, radical come-outers had to rely upon the Holy Spirit to provide them with new preachers and apostles. Not surprisingly the separate church in Norton mentioned this aspect in its articles of faith and practice: "That all the gifts and graces that are bestowed upon any of the members [of the church] are to be improved by them for the good of the whole."

Usually anyone who thought he had a gift of prophesying or preaching was allowed to exercise (i.e., improve) it. It was up to the church members to select the one who had the best "gifts" to be their preacher. But even after a preacher or minister was chosen, other members of the church were still permitted to exercise their individual gifts, for new lights believed in the priesthood of all believers. Here again was a broad area in which perfectionism could cause considerable disturbance to good gospel order in a community. Ebenezer Ward had for some years exercised his gift of preaching and prayer in his home and might well have been chosen minister of a new light church in Cumberland had he not got into trouble over his daughter. Even so, he did frequently exercise the right to baptize as did others in his group, including John Finney Jr., brother of Solomon. It became a question of considerable importance whether men who had such perfectionist views as these were proper persons to perform the sacred ordinance of baptism and whether their baptisms were in fact valid. Many of the less radical

new light churches not only refused to accept persons baptized by Ward and Finney as members but even refused to have Christian fellowship with more radical new light churches which did accept them as members.

Many of the documents in relationship to the Cumberland perfectionists are located among the papers and in the writings of Rev. Isaac Backus who, though born in Norwich, Connecticut, became a new light or separate minister in Middleborough, Massachusetts in 1748. Three years later he gave up the practice of infant baptism though for five years more he admitted to his church both those who continued to believe in infant baptism and those who were opposed to it (this was known as the policy of "open communion" and was necessary in order to accommodate the diversity of opinion on this subject among the separates). After 1756, Backus joined a growing number of separates who turned to "closed communion" principles, refusing to allow "infant baptizers" in his church or have fellowship with any church which followed the practice of infant baptism. In his famous history of the Separate-Baptist movement, written at the end of the eighteenth century, Backus wrote as follows:

The Baptist church in Taunton was first gathered in Norton. Mr. William Carpenter was ordained the pastor of a Separate Church there, September 7, 1748 . . . Some of the members of that church, especially they who lived in Easton, had run into the most delusive notions that could be conceived of; even so as to forsake their lawful wives and husbands and to take others, and they got so far as to declare themselves to be perfect and immortal, or that the resurrection was past already, as some did in the Apostolic Age. II Tim. ii. 18.⁵

This text refers to an early church which contained some erroneous members who said that Christ had already returned to earth, in the Spirit, and had designated those who would never die from those who were doomed to hell. Many perfectionists took

5. Isaac Backus, *History of New England with Particular Reference to the Denomination of Christians Called Baptists*, ed. David Weston (Newton, 1871) 2: 446. Original edition published in three volumes in 1777, 1784, and 1796.

the view that they were among those who would never die, utilizing another text — which most learned theologians said applied only to the *souls* of the elect and not to their earthly bodies — John 11:25-26 — “Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live; And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.” Ergo, immortalists!

Let us turn now to some of the documents which deal with the Cumberland perfectionist movement of the 1740s and 1750s to see how its members — friends of Ebenezer Ward and John and Solomon Finney — described and justified the behavior which their neighbors (and the courts) found so “pernicious.” One of the first of these is a reference in the diary of Isaac Backus under January 16, 1748/49: “I went to Cumberland where the false Spirit has ben working very Powerfully and Some have ben led into awfull Erours. And glory to god he gave me Clearness in laying open the Difference between the true and false Spirit and it was blest to Several of the hearers.” To Backus it was a “false Spirit,” but obviously to Ward and his friends it was the true Spirit of God. Sometime later Backus went to Attleboro and talked to his friend, Elihu Daggett. “He told me how he see[s] this error trying to creap into the Church to make the Spirit the rule instead of the word.” To Backus and Daggett the perfectionists were clearly antinomians who made their inward belief rather than the revealed word of God (rightly interpreted) their rule for action.

Samuel Bartlet of Cumberland stated that he had heard Molly Bennet say on July 11, 1749 “that Solomon Finney and she was man and wife Externally [internally] but not Externally.” That is, they were spiritual soulmates but (she implied) they had no carnal knowledge of each other: “She said that they was man and wife in the sight of the Lord and it was made known to them that it was so.”⁶ The only way this kind of internal marriage, made in

heaven, could be “made known to them,” of course, was through the Holy Spirit. Referring back then to rules 12 and 13 of the separate church in Norton, we can imagine that Molly Bennet did not need to be persuaded by her earthly father to leave the unconverted Bennet and live with Solomon Finney, for God “hath given us to believe by sending the holy spirit to convince us” and “the life of religion consists [in] the knowledge of God and a conformity to him in the inner man; which necessarily produces an external conformity to his laws.” Conservative new lights, like Isaac Backus, might and did argue that this simply meant that men should conform to God’s explicit laws, such as the Ten Commandments, in their external lives if they were really inwardly Christians in their faith. But who was to tell which other spiritual laws required conformity? If Backus accepted conformity to “be ye separate” why did he not accept “be ye not unequally yoked”? Should the saints, those who never doubted that they were of the number chosen from eternity to live with Christ in heaven, be obliged to obey the statute laws passed by unconverted (perhaps wicked) men (such as marriage laws or laws to pay taxes to corrupt established churches)? Must not true believers obey a higher law? “Be ye not unequally yoked with unbelievers.”

American history has had little respect for this kind of Bible exegesis when it is applied to marriage, immortalism, perfectionism, and faith healing, but it has sometimes had great respect for the higher law doctrine when it has been applied to social reform — notably activities of our Revolutionary leaders, abolitionists, opponents of segregation, and conscientious objectors to war. Apart from these “exceptions,” however, the general view of Christians holds that only extreme radical fringe groups indulge in such bizarre behavior as to put a higher law above the law of the land.

But it is worth noting that some old lights among the established churches also got caught up in perfectionism during the great awakening, most notably

⁶ Bartlet’s affidavit is quoted in appendix 2.

the wife of Rev. Solomon Prentice of Grafton. Prentice was a minister of the established (Congregational) church but his wife fell under the spell of an immortalist in that town named Shadrach Ireland in 1752 and, according to Ezra Stiles, "She used to lie with Ireland as her spiritual Husband."⁷ Unlike Joseph Bennet, however, Solomon Prentice stuck with his wife. The townspeople could not tolerate this and forced him to leave town. He and his wife came to Easton where Sarah Prentice continued her eccentric behavior, even inviting some perfectionists and Baptists to meet in her husband's home. Isaac Backus met her one day in June 1752 when she was visiting in Attleboro, and "she declar'd that this night 2 months ago, she passed thro' a change in her Body Equivalent to Death; so that she had been intirely free from any disorder in her Body or Corruption in her Soul ever Since; and expected she ever sho'd be so; and that her body wo'd never see Corruption but wo'd live here 'till Christs personal coming."⁸

Four years later Backus wrote to his brother Elijah, in Norwich, "Mr. Eaton, minister [of the established Congregational church] at Braintree is Put down [dismissed] for having to do with his neighbour's wife." Backus claimed there were many similar cases of adultery among other respectable ministers: "I think this is Plainly one of the Signes of Christs Coming when iniquity abounds and ye love of many waxes cold."

Let us turn now to the second aspect of the perfectionist problem, the right to improve one's gifts. Ebenezer Ward and John Finney Jr. assumed the right to baptize and to conduct communion services though neither was ever ordained either by a group of their own followers or by any ministerial authority. A number of members of the separate churches in Easton and Norton preferred to attend the preaching of these men to that of their own ministers, and a council was held on March 5 and 6 by these ministers to decide what should be done about these wayward church members. As Backus tells it,

John Finney junr. had then got the chief lead of the church and the design of this council (at which I was

present) was to examine him and others about their principles which the agrieved were disatesfied with and they had much labour upon what he had held and acted about marriage and he [Finney] confessed that he was wrong in openly approving of his brother Solomon's having Ward's daughter as he did, and in other things of that nature.

But he was not ready to confess any error in his (or Ward's) assuming the right to baptize and administer communion.

Finney held forth that when a man is called to preach the gospel by the Spirit of God, he has a right to administer baptism and the [Lord's] supper before he is ordained by the church; and on the day he was baptized, he was at a loss for any administrator, for he feared, he said, that Ebenezer Ward was corrupt in principles and knew he was in practice, but those words came into his mind with power, "Go with him nothing doubting for I have sent him," which removed all his scruples and he went directly into the water with him and was baptized [by Ward] and then he [Finney] immediately baptized his father [John Finney Sr.].

There are three distinct issues at stake here. First, was Ward a proper person to baptize Finney; second, was Finney truly hearing the voice of God when he sought guidance; and third, was he right to baptize his father (and later others) after his baptism by Ward?

These were not easy questions to answer. Many learned theologians and orthodox Christians before and since have contended that in certain circumstances even a layman may perform baptism. It has been even more widely held that if a person is once given the right to perform religious rites, the fact that that person becomes personally corrupt in no way invalidates any rites he may have performed while still in office. There were many new lights who believed that even a baptism performed by an unorthodox man, like Ward or Finney, if it was performed "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost" was of such sanctity that it could not be revoked; that it would be an insult to the

7 Ezra Stiles, *Extracts from the Itineraries*, ed. F. B. Dexter (New Haven, 1916) 418. Backus, 2:462.

8 Quoted in J. M. Bumsted, "Presbyterianism in 18th Century Massachusetts: The Formation of a Church at Easton, 1752," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 46:4 (December 1968) 251.

Trinity to seek a second baptism. Even many who had been baptized as infants in the spiritually corrupt and dead Congregational churches were fearful of being re-baptized as adults when they came under "the new covenant" of separate-Baptist preaching.

It is not surprising then that radical new light churches had a great deal of difficulty dealing with such pietistic believers. Take the case of Daniel Niles who moved from Easton to Middleborough in 1757 and sought admission to Isaac Backus's separate-Baptist church:

July 8, 1757, the Church took into consideration the case of Mr. Daniel Niles of Easton who wants to join with us, which is as follows, viz. He was baptized by Ebenezer Ward (a man of very bad principles and practices in many respects) who professed that he was called to God as John the Baptist was, to Baptize, tho' he had not been neither baptized nor ordained himself. He [Ward] coming to Easton and Mr. Niles being convinced before [that time] of his duty of being baptized and not knowing but said Ward had good right to baptize — submitted to ye ordinance by his administration and now, because he acted honestly in himself in ye affair, therefore he holds his baptism to be valid, notwithstanding what he since learns of the character of the administrator. But it appeared to the Church [members] that inasmuch as there was no evidence that said Ward was either internally or externally authorized to baptize and had himself been a great scandal to religion, the integrity of the other's [Niles'] heart was not sufficient to make the baptism good, and also for us to allow it to be so tended to open a door to disorder and confusion in the church, therefore they could not admit him.

Some years later, in 1764, John Finney Sr.'s baptism by his son was challenged by the separate church in Norton.

Mr. Finney [Sr.] declared that he believed that his son John was called of God to teach and baptize, and that he went into the water with him in obedience to God's command; tho' at the same time he [Finney Jr.] was not ordained, and many knew that he held then

several gross errors. And Mr. Finney [Sr.]'s wife now in her relation said that she had no view as to the administrator [of baptism] 'till she went into the water and being questioned upon it, she said that if persons did but obey the command of God in baptism, their baptism was good if the devil had been the administrator.

The insistence of John Finney's parents that even baptism by the devil was valid in certain circumstances may have been prompted by another aspect of their case. For according to Backus, "In June, 1753, John Woodward was put into Newport jail for counterfeiting dollars and he turned King's evidence and accused John Finney (Jr.) and others of having a hand therein, and Finney was afraid and kept out of the way till September after, when he was taken and was imprisoned and punished at Taunton, from whence after some time he broke jail and run off into New York government and having been sometime in the army [in the French and Indian War] we heard that he came and died at Grafton in March, 1759."

It was hard on those of great and undoubting faith when their leaders proved false. But even this shock seldom shakes all believers in a movement. Having made the serious commitments which perfectionist faith requires, the true believer usually burns too many bridges (personal, social, and psychological) to enable him or her to retreat again. So they "tough it out."

John Finney Jr. had been unsound on more than baptism and communion. Prior to his counterfeiting he had also imbibed the new covenant view of marriage from the Cumberland perfectionists. Backus recalled a meeting on June 24, 1751, at elder Carpenter's [church in Norton] when John Finney [Jr.] made a public declaration wherein it was then observed to them that he plainly represented the union betwixt man and wife to be in the new covenant or a spiritual union and also that Christians ought to marry in the church without any regard to Babylon, as he called rulers in the State, and that what was not so acted was to be done away [with]; soon after which he led off a great part of the

[Norton] church from elder Carpenter [into perfectionism]. . . . And it is well known that the affair of Solomon Finney's taking Bennets wife and having of it countenanced by a pretence of new covenant marriage and that of John Finney and others taking their wives before religious meetings without the cognizance of civil authority and living with them, as such, was all before any of those baptisms by Ward, Finney, and their associates.

Now here we must look more closely at another aspect of this rebellion against established civil authority. The Puritans, in reaction against corruptions in the Church of England, decreed when they came to New England that no one could be married in a church by a minister. Perhaps they also feared that their ministers might not be legally accepted as officials of the Church of England (though they claimed not to have separated from that Church, merely to be purifying it). Hence all marriages in New England were for many years legal only if performed by a justice of the peace or some other secular authority. Later the Puritans, being better established and believing that under the Toleration Act of 1689 they were legally entitled to perform marriages, permitted anyone to be married either by a secular authority or by a "duly ordained minister."

This meant that dissenters from Congregational churches — Baptists, separates, or separate-Baptists — were discriminated against. Their ministers were not "duly ordained" according to Massachusetts law. Perfectionists were perhaps extreme in their reliance upon the inward, or internal, call to preach, their emphasis upon inner guidance by the Holy Spirit, and their belief in their immortality. But they had a real grievance in regard to marriage. And while it is no defense of those who left duly married spouses for spiritual soulmates, there is some reason to sympathize with the attempt of others "to take their wives before religious meetings." They were in fact simply saying that they thought a marriage performed before a dissenting church was as legal as any performed before a justice of the peace or an

established minister. Quakers had won this right long before. Later all dissenting ministers were given this right. But in 1748 to 1768 perfectionists may have had some grounds for their reliance upon a higher law than that of Babylon. At least it is an understandable protest in this respect.

It is not clear when perfectionism died out in southeastern New England, but there were still instances of it as late as 1768 — not to mention Jemima Wilkinson and later the adherents to Shakerism. Backus's old friend, Elihu Daggett of Attleboro, became pastor of a Baptist church there in 1765. Three years later Backus noted in his diary, "Several in his church have been ensnared this year with antinomian notions so as not to be content with their own wives. In particular Jedidiah Freeman (whose wife had played the harlot) has laid some claim to elder Daggett's daughter and she to him, and Wm. Atwell (who was not of the church) has left his wife and gone after Patience Freeman, a young woman of the church . . ."

One other point may be made about these perfectionists. This has to do with the first of their articles of faith, in which they refer to God as "filling all places and not included in any place." An anthropologist at Brown University who has been studying recent utopian experiments, notably the communes of the 1960s, has argued that any great awakening or important revival of religion in American history seems to include or contain attempts to redefine the nature of God or reinterpret the meaning of the word "God."⁹ Professor David Buchdahl describes the counter-culture of the 1960s and its communes this way:

We can now understand that the death of God does not mean the disappearance of the sacred, the 'wholly other,' but the transformation of the form in which the sacred is found and worshipped. The counter-culture, and especially the rural communes, are a theater of this transformation, and different substitutions compete for men's faith. The demonic and the occult reappear with all their ancient threats and attractions, along with more hopeful designs.

9 David Buchdahl, "American Realities: Anthropological Reflections from the Counter-Culture," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1974, ch. 2.

Jemima Wilkinson, born 1752 in Cumberland, became acquainted with the new light movement in her youth. As Public Universal Friend she founded a sect that disintegrated soon after her death in 1819.



Memoir of Jemima Wilkinson . . . (Bath, N. Y., 1844)

God's death was a destruction of a religious idol, and while other idols have come to replace Him, they have transformed the location of the sacred and revived its power. God the father, creator of the universe, has been transformed into Creation, the

Mother earth — Spirit has taken the place of Deity as the religious object.

Different manifestations of "the Spirit" in contemporary culture — the new attraction of charismatic cults, of pentecostal and holiness movements,

"American culture bears the imprint of a particular conception of God . . . mediated through Protestants like Calvin . . .



Beginnings of New England by John Fiske (Boston & N. Y., 1898).

of Zen Buddhism and transcendental meditation — clearly indicate that we are today in the grip of a new great awakening. Buchdahl argues that in this religious awakening we are changing our conception of God in America and "A change in the conception of God is a cultural event of some magnitude." In many respects the great awakening of 1735-1760 also concerned a changing conception of God. From the old Puritan Jehovah and the theocratic priesthood who upheld his iron laws of predestination, original sin, total depravity, and hellfire, the American people in the 1740s began a redefinition which put man's direct personal relationship to God as the central and only meaningful relationship.

Buchdahl states that "American culture bears the imprint of a particular conception of God, the God of

. . . Cotton Mather . . .



New England Historical & Genealogical Register, v. 6, (Boston, 1852).

. . . and Billy Graham."



Courtesy Providence Journal-Bulletin.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, mediated through Protestants like Calvin, Cotton Mather and Billy Graham. The counter-culture represents an elaboration of reality independent from that notion." If the old Puritan conception of the power of God was represented in elaborate legal codes enforced by civil authority, there has also been "in the West another and quite different conception of God, one in which God is understood as a substance that permeated the entire Creation, including man and the natural world — a sacred spirit perhaps, of the stuff of the universe, or even the universe itself." Buchdahl finds this view expressed in the natural theology of eighteenth-century deism — as a reaction against Calvinism — and in the pantheism of Wordsworth and the Romantic transcendentalists — as a reaction against the moralistic evangelicalism of the Victorian era. But, he cautions, this conception of God is not simply pantheism, "It is not exactly Nature itself, but a more diffuse idea of Spirit which exists as a vital force within it and unites all of nature's manifestations. From this perspective, it can be seen that the counter-culture is only a specific manifestation of a recurring theme in western history, a theme which is sustained by the potential diversity of interpretations which a cultural system will always yield. It is the most recent attempt to find meaning in an immanent God and to worship this Being in all its varied forms. . . . In such a view, God as a transcendent creator has no special place. Divinity is everywhere."

Buchdahl would not of course find the Cumberland perfectionists and the separates of Attleboro, Norton, Easton, and Taunton to be similar in precise particulars to the counter-culture of today — though spiritual marriage is common again. He would undoubtedly find their God more transcendent than immanent. Yet he would agree, I think, that they were antinomians, not Puritans, that they found God in the Spirit rather than in any particular code — civil or ecclesiastical — and most of all he would find them part of the counter-culture of their day. For these perfectionists the spirit of God was everywhere and available to all men; what's more it was radically

at odds with the prevailing laws and institutions which claimed to speak so authoritatively about right and wrong. It opened the way for new interpretations of life and of eternity.

In 1774 Isaac Backus went to Philadelphia to attend the First Continental Congress. While there he pleaded with the incipient Revolutionary leaders to heed the voice of radical new lights like himself and to free them from paying religious taxes to support the established Congregational churches of New England — where the separates and separate-Baptists could not in conscience worship. On his way home from Philadelphia on October 27 he stopped off in Greenwich, Connecticut. To his surprise he met there the aged leader of the Cumberland perfectionists: "Mr. Ebenezer Ward met me here, who formerly lived in Attleborough and in Cumberland whose daughter parted from her husband. He now appears to be a steady, solid man." Ward had become a respected Baptist preacher, his past eccentricities forgotten. He preached regularly in various churches in New York and New Jersey and while the date of his death is unknown, he was last seen in Columbia, Ohio, in 1795, where Rev. David Barrows said he was 87 years old, in ill health, and preparing for death: "I was called upon to write Elder Ward's last will and testament. I felt happy to oblige the old saint . . . after it was done, he seemed composed and observed that nothing remained but to wait his Lord's call."¹⁰ There is no reason to believe he did not die in good spirits.

About the last days of Molly Bennet, Joseph Bennet, and Solomon Finney we know little, except that Molly and Solomon were married in Norton in 1750. She died in 1760. Her son, Ebenezer Ward Finney, born in 1755, lived with his grandfather in Greenwich, served in the Revolutionary Army, went to Rensselaer, New York, and from there founded Finneytown, Ohio, in 1798. His descendants are not honorable members of the sons and daughters of the American Revolution — a revolution which in many respects had its beginnings in the new light movement of the 1740s.

10 Virginia R. Cummins, "Finneytown, Origin and First Families," *Bulletin Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio* 11:4 (October 1953) 331-341. I wish to thank Catherine F. MacDougal of Norton, Massachusetts for this and other helpful genealogical material relating to the Ward and Finney families.

Appendix I [Ebenezer Ward's Story]

Nov'r. 1768

These are to certifie all christian people to whom it may concern: That we, the subscribers, having heard from Mr. Gano's copy [of Isaac Backus's *A Fish Caught in His Own Net*] that Mr. Backus has inserted in his piece to the public that Ebenezer Ward took his daughter away from her husband, Bennet and in the event was forced to leave his country: the which is so false we think it our duty to declare something of what we know concerning that matter.

That in the year 1748 we were near neighbours to the said Ward and that Josiah Streeter and his wife (that some years ago wrote a few lines on that account) lived in the house with us; the said Bennet lived in the house with his father in law. And as he sat discoursing one evening, to our great surprize he told us said Ward's daughter was not his wife and that he had no more right to lie with her than any other woman. Whereupon we discoursed with him a great deal, told him he was deluded, which was the first time we ever heard of such discourse from any mortal. And not long after he made his uneasiness known to some other[s]. And when said Ward came to know about the matter he was very uneasy.

And inasmuch as he then preacht constantly to a great number of people at his own house, he thought proper to call a number of the brethren and nieghbours to come to his house to discourse with his son Bennet in order to know what the matter was. And we were both there and a considerable number of people and we discoursed a great deal with said Bennet in order to know what the matter was.

He did not care to say much but discovered a good deal of uneasiness and seemed to incline to go away. But we discoursed so much with him to the contrary that he said at last if he could have his wife and live some where else, he thought he would; whereupon said Ward told him that if he would provide a place sutable any where within ten miles, he was willing his daughter should go with him and that he would furnish her with things sutable to keep house, and if he would get a good maid or nurse to be constantly with her, as she was a person subject to fits, he would pay her yearly himself, and that he would give her £1000 for her comfort.

But, however, he [Bennet] did not provide any place, and after some time he would go away and disposed of what he had. And as near as we can remember, toward the latter part of winter he went off. We heard he went to sea and was lost.

And about this time there was a considerable discourse about marrying in the new covenant, and this Bennet's wife was of the opinion she had not got the right husband and that

one [Solomon] Finney was made for her. The first time this was made known was at a conference meeting which was very surprizing. But said Ward gave his daughter no fellowship in any such thing.

After that it was noised about that she was a going to have said Finney. And about that time said Bennet came home from sea and heard the news and came to Attleboro, as it was in his way to where his wife lived, and brought a number of the brethren with him. And a great number of people met together and among the rest I myself was there and not my wife. And among their discourse I heard said Ward declare his willingness that his daughter should life with said Bennet and that he would do for her as he had offered before he [Bennet] went away.

Much more might be said that is true, but we hope this may suffice to satesfie all christian whom it may concern, and that said Ward lived there about seven years afterwards.

Joseph Fisher &

Witness our hands

Rebeckah Fisher

The above I copied from the original in said Ward's hands on October 28, 1774, at James Philips's in Greenwich, Connecticut, and Ward informed me that, as above, he opposed Bennet's motion and his daughter's also for some time till, as he exprest it, their church seemed to be stoped in their travel. And fearing he should stand in their way, he one Lordsday came out publicly and declared his willingness that Finney should have his daughter and that Bennet should have another woman. Upon which Bennet went the next week to Providence and entered a complaint against him and had him imprisoned, and afterward petitioned the Rhode Island General Assembly for a divorce. And as they [Ward and his daughter] were about to make defense against it, his daughter was found to be with child by Finney, which took all heart from them to make any defense, and he obtained his end.

Deacon Joshua Everett of Attleborough has since assured me that when he and other brethren went and laboured with Ward he said he believed Phinney and his daughter meant no harm lodging together for they lay with the Bible between them.

Witness, Isaac Backus

Granted quickly by the assembly, Joseph Bennett's plea for divorce has been preserved in Rhode Island archives for 225 years.

Appendix 2 [Joseph Bennet's Story]

Colony of Rhode Island: To the Honorable the Great
Assembly of the Colony of Rhode
Island to be held at Newport in and
for said Colony on the third Monday
of August, A.D. 1749

The Petition of Joseph Bennett of Cumberland in the County
of Providence, Labourer, Humbly Sheweth,

That your Petitioner was married unto Molly Ward, the
daughter of Ebenezer Ward of Said Cumberland, and did
Cohabit with her at the House of the said Ebenezer Ward until
some time in the month of February, A.D. 1747 when the said
Ebenezer Ward, having Imbibed and Cherished Certain
Wicked and Strange Tenets and Principles Destructive to
Government and against the Matrimonial laws and rights of

the English Nation, did then Suggest unto the said Molly, his
Daughter, being your Petitioner's Wife, that your Petitioner
was in an unconverted State and Condition and that it was
Sinful for her to Cohabit with your petitioner as her Husband,
and your petitioner's wife attending unto the Wicked and evil
Counsel and advice of the said Ebenezer Ward, he the said
Ebenezer, together with one Solomon Finney, a person of like
Pernicious and Evil Principles, did Conspire to Seduce the said
Molly, the wife of your Petitioner, to leave him, and to that
end the said Ebenezer did first compel your Petitioner to leave
his House and did keep your petitioner's wife still there, and as
soon as your Petitioner was gone, the said Ebenezer did pro-
cure the said Molly, his Daughter, to Deliver herself to the said
Solomon Finney to be his wife in a most profane and Impious

Colony of Rhode Island To the Hon^{ble} the Great Assembly of the Colony of
Rhode Island to be held at Newport in and for said Colony on
the third Monday of August A.D. 1749
The Petition of Joseph Bennett of Cumberland in the
County of Providence Labourer Humbly Sheweth
That your Petitioner was married unto Molly Ward the daughter of Ebenezer
Ward of Said Cumberland and did Cohabit with her at the House of the said
Ebenezer Ward until some time in the month of February 1747 when
the said Ebenezer Ward having Imbibed and Cherished Certain Wicked and
Strange Tenets and Principles Destructive to Government and against the
Matrimonial laws and rights of the English Nation did then Suggest unto
the said Molly his Daughter and your Petitioner's wife that your Petitioner
was in an unconverted State and Condition and that it was Sinful for her
to Cohabit with your petitioner as her Husband, and that your petitioner's wife
attending unto the Wicked and evil Counsel and advice of the said Ebenezer
he the said Ebenezer together with one Solomon Finney a person of like
Pernicious and Evil principles did Conspire to Seduce the said Molly the
wife of your Petitioner to leave him and to that end the said Ebenezer did
first Compel your Petitioner to leave his House and did keep your petitioner's
wife still there and as soon as your Petitioner was gone the said Ebenezer
did procure the said Molly his Daughter to Deliver herself up to the
said Solomon Finney to be his wife in a most profane & Impious manner
and afterwards viz: in June last past the said Molly your Petitioner's wife

manner and afterward, viz. in June last past, the said Molly, your Petitioner's wife, did receive the said Solomon to her bed and Company and hath ever since cohabited with him in an Adulterous manner, of all which Evil acts the said Solomon and Ebenezer hath in a fair Tryal been lawfully Convicted and fined for the same.

And now your petitioner Humbly prays that your Honors in Justice to him would divorce him from the said Molly by

Declaring the Marriage Between your petitioner and the said Molly to be Utterly Dissolved and Void and that the said Molly be served with a Copy of the Petition and Cited to appear before your Honours at your next Sitting to Shew Cause, if any she hath, why this petition should not be Granted, and your petitioner, as in Duty Bound, shall ever pray,

Joseph Bennett

did receive the said Solomon to her bed and Company and hath ever since cohabited with him in an Adulterous manner of all which Evil acts the said Solomon and Ebenezer hath in a fair Tryal been lawfully Convicted and fined for the same

And now your petitioner Humbly prays that your Honours in Justice to him would divorce him from the said Molly by Declaring the Marriage Between your petitioner and the said Molly to be Utterly Dissolved and Void and that the said Molly be served with a Copy of this Petition and Cited to appear before your Honours at your next Sitting to Shew Cause if any she hath why this petition should not be Granted and if petitioner is in Duty Bound shall ever pray Joseph Bennett

Octob^r 27th 1749 To the House of Mag^{rs}

W^{ch} Resolved that this Petition be granted & that an Act be drawn up accordingly

Witness my hand
Ben^d Lyndon Esq.

In the House of Mag^{rs} Oct^r 27th 1749

Read & considered with
Ben^d Lyndon Esq.

Providence, September 4 A.D. 1749

I serv'd the within Named Molly Bennet, the Wife of Joseph Bennet, with a copy of the within Petition and cited her to be and appear at the time and Place above mentioned

Jonathan Ormesby
Deputy Sheriff



Samuel Bartlet of Cumberland, being of lawfull age and Engaged according to Law testefith and saith

that on the Eleventh Day of July, A.D. 1749, I, being at the House of Mr. Daniel Peck in Cumberland and Molley Bennet, wife of Joseph bennet was there and sundry other persons, and I hear Molley say that Solomon Finney and she was man and wife Externally but not Externally and further this Deponent Saith that a few Days after, Moley was at my House and I asked Her what she meant by telling Squier Lapom that finney and she was man and wife, and she said that they was man and wife in the sight of the Lord and it was made known to them that it was so, and further saith not.

Samuel Bartlet
Cumberland, October the twentyeth A.D. 1749
Israel Whipple, Just. Peace



Rough draft of Act divorcing Joseph Bennet and his wife

S.[outh] K.[ington] October, 1749

At the General Assembly, etc.

Whereas Joseph Bennett of Cumberland in the County of Providence, Laborer, represented unto the Assembly, that he married Molly Ward, daughter of Ebenezer Ward of said Cumberland, and did cohabit with her at the House of her said Father till some time in the month of February A.D. 1747 when the said Ebenezer Ward, having imbibed and cherished certain wicked and strange tenets and principles destructive to government and against the matrimonial laws and rights of the English Nation did then suggest unto the said Molly, his daughter, being then the said Joseph's wife, that he, the said Joseph, was in an unconverted State and Condition, and that it was sinful for her to cohabit with him as her lawful husband, and the said Molly, attending to the wicked and evil council and advice of the said Ebenezer, he the said Ebenezer, together with one Solomon Finney, a person of like pernicious and evil principles did conspire to seduce the said Molly, the said Joseph's wife, to leave him and to that end the said Ebenezer did first compel the said Joseph to leave his house and did keep his wife still there and as soon as the said Joseph was gone the said Ebenezer did procure to said Molly to deliver herself up to the said Solomon Finney to be his wife in a most profane and impious manner and afterwards, to wit in June last, the said Molly did receive the said Solomon to her Bed and Company and hath ever since cohabited with him in an adulterous manner, of all which Evil acts the said Solomon and Ebenezer have, on a fair trial, been lawfully convicted and fined for the same, and thereupon the said Joseph Bennett prayed the Assembly to divorce him from the said Molly by declaring the marriage between them to be utterly dissolved and void.

All and every whereof being manifestly made to appear, this Assembly do vote and Enact, and it is hereby voted and enacted, that the said Joseph Bennet be, and he is hereby, divorced from the said Molly, and the Marriage between them is hereby declared and made null and void.

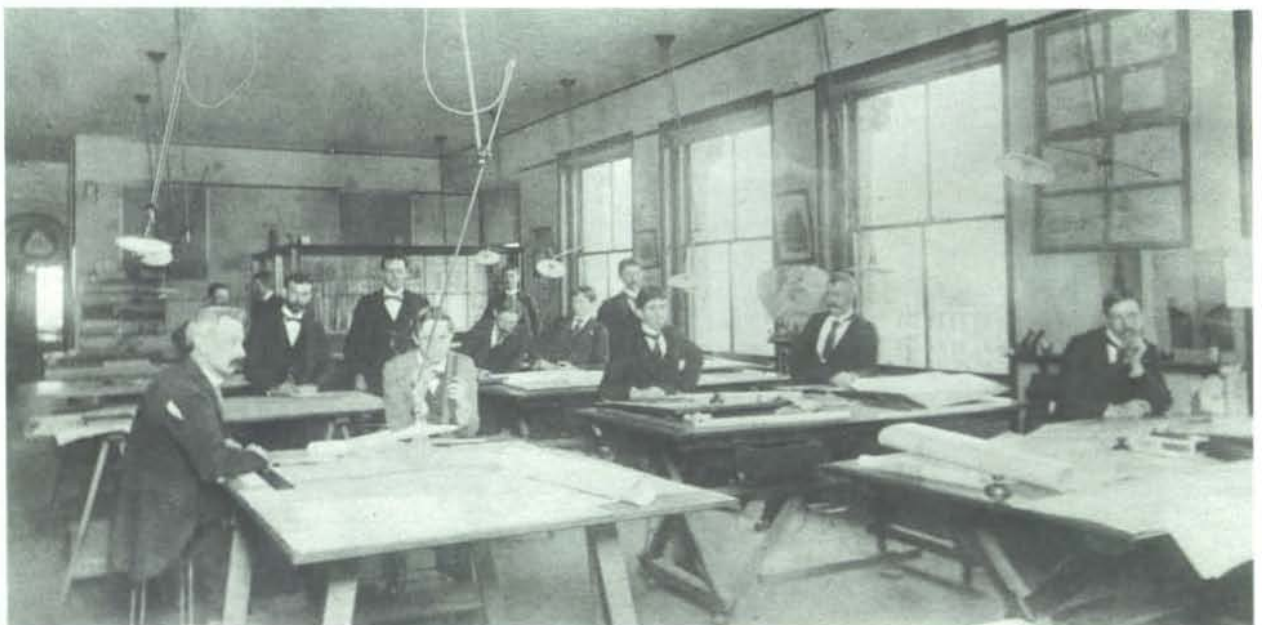
In quantity and variety, Alfred Stone (left), Charles E. Carpenter (right) and Edmund R. Willson (center) had the

greatest effect on architecture of late nineteenth-century Providence.



Their well populated drafting room shows architectural evidence of occupying eighth-floor space in the old Industrial Trust Building at 49 Westminster Street. The partners re-

modeled the structure in 1892 raising it to a height of eight stories from the four-story original.



Providence Architecture 1859-1908 Stone, Carpenter and Willson

by Ronald J. Onorato*

The last half of the nineteenth century represented one of the most prosperous and active periods in Providence's architectural history. By the 1860s, architects could build upon a tradition from earlier decades that included such talents as Russell Warren, James Bucklin, John Holden Greene and Thomas Tefft. Designs of these men became basic models on which later architects could depend for inspiration. Among more notable edifices were many colonial houses on the East Side, the Providence Athenaeum, the Arcade, and Old Union Station.

Toward the middle of the century many of the city's important commissions began to go not just to successful individuals but to architectural firms. Walker & Gould, Gould & Angell, Hoppin & Ely, and Stone, Carpenter & Willson are only several of many partnerships designing buildings in Providence or its metropolitan area in the closing decades of the century.¹

If we utilize yardsticks of quantity and variety to gauge performance of these firms, we quickly realize that either individually or as a firm Alfred Stone, Charles E. Carpenter and Edmund R. Willson had the greatest effect on architecture during this era. Surveying the half century from Alfred Stone's arrival in Providence in 1859 to his death in 1908, we note the wide range of styles and functions of buildings designed by him or his firm. Notable among important public commissions were Providence County Courthouse (1877, destroyed

1930) — Central Police Station (1893) — New York, New Haven & Hartford Railroad Station complex (1899) — and especially Providence Public Library (1900). Add to these projects many private houses, large and small, school buildings, institutions, and commercial blocks — as well as the firm's general interest in civic planning — and one begins to sense the impact that Stone and partners held over cultural and architectural developments of late nineteenth-century Providence.

A survey of the firm's buildings, with accounts of partners' backgrounds and analysis of the environment within which they designed will provide us with a more complete understanding of their stature as an important professional office. While many facts and dates were culled from local journals, guidebooks and historical files, this is the first attempt to give an overview of the Stone, Carpenter & Willson years coupled with as much documentable information as possible.

Senior partner Alfred Stone — born East Machias, Maine in 1834 — received his early education as well as some training in survey techniques in Salem, Massachusetts and began formal work in architecture at Robert Connors Art School in Salem, before starting out on a number of apprenticeships with Boston architects in 1852.² He began with Towle & Foster but was also employed by Washburn & Brown, S. S. Woodcock, and Arthur Delevan Gilman during the early 1850s.³ Although there is

*Coordinator of circulating exhibitions, New York Cultural Center, and currently a doctoral candidate in the department of Art, Brown University. Mr. Onorato wishes to acknowledge permission of the R. I. chapter, American Institute of Architects, to use its files in the RIHS Library.

1 Best survey on local architecture — John Hutchins Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development of Providence* (Providence, 1957) — reveals that Stone's partnership with Carpenter is among the earliest of two-men offices. Only the combined efforts of Warren and Bucklin in 1828 on the two facades of the Arcade represent any important corporate work before Stone & Carpenter opens in 1873.

2 *Providence Journal* Sept. 5, 1908. Norman M. Isham, "Alfred Stone," *Proceedings Rhode Island Historical Society* 1908-1909, 52-54.

3 Since Gilman had an early interest in colonial buildings, he may have had the most lasting effect on Stone. Vincent J. Scully Jr., *Shingle Style and Stick Style*, rev. ed. (New Haven, 1971) 22 on earliest architects involved with colonial revival.

some evidence of independent practice for several years in Boston, little is known about Stone until he arrived in Providence and began working at the youthful age of 24 in March 1859 with Alpheus C. Morse, already established as a prominent local figure.⁴

One of Stone's first significant commissions soon after he left Morse's office in 1864 to establish his own practice — the mansion built for Civil War general and governor Ambrose Burnside — was completed in 1866. Its site on Benefit Street placed it in the center of the city's oldest district, surrounded by many notable examples of colonial and early nineteenth-century domestic architecture. Later in his career, it is certainly these surroundings which affect the firm's most influential phase, neo-colonial revival. This early house exhibits several distinct features characteristic of the firm's later designs while demonstrating in unusual conception the innovative abilities of the young architect.

The Burnside house is built on an irregular lot facing Benefit Street, making an acute angle at the corner of Planet Street and sloping down the steep hill away from the main thoroughfare. Stone managed to contend with this site by rejecting the traditional entrance facade and concentrating his efforts on a corner of the edifice. A large, curving tower focuses attention on this corner elevation and the amount of detail and articulation at this angle places the other facades in positions of secondary importance. The entry ensemble can only be seen in entirety from the corner itself and is not visible from the main street.⁵

This innovative treatment of elevation is further complicated by Stone's obsession with combinations of visually pleasing elements and practical features. Thus the Moorish entry canopy, accentuating the curve of the tower and delineating the main access to the building, also screens direct sunlight from the main drawing room. Stone's placement of this main entrance may also have been dictated as much by

practical as by aesthetic considerations. By placing the entry on the Planet Street side and tucking it behind the bulge of the tower, Stone affords a modicum of privacy to the interior of the building. It would have been difficult, however, for horse-drawn vehicles and visitors to negotiate the steep, curving slope of the side street and thus the seemingly innovative elevated entrance design which affords actual access only from the main street must have taken this into account.

Reasons for this interesting and somewhat unorthodox Burnside design may of course be partly explained by Stone's ability to deal with an unusual site but it surely reflected as well the sense of freedom from academic conventions noted in other young architects of the 1860s.⁶ Other designs from this early phase of Stone's career further emphasize these fluid and eclectic aspects of his work. Such institutional designs as Thayer Street Grammar School and the gate house complex for Swan Point Cemetery were among the earliest of Stone's designs.⁷ The latter — completed in 1868 — consisted of several wooden structures all maintaining the scale and feeling of a private house but utilizing crockets, pointed windows and other "Gothic" details. The former — designed in 1866-67 — was a large brick edifice constructed with block-like simplicity that allowed for relatively wide expanses of unbroken wall planes punctuated with windows in a variety of shapes.

This planar conception is repeated throughout Stone's career and may be seen in a wide variety of designs from the Grammar School and side facades of the Burnside house to later works such as South Main Street Fire Station and Ladd Observatory.⁸ Such construction may suggest the ease with which the firm eventually adopted the neo-colonial mode with its emphasis on simplified, planar expanses of wall for its main design vehicle in the 1890s.

Not long after these first important commissions were erected, Stone took Charles E. Carpenter into his office, eventually establishing a partnership in

4 Morse is best known for large houses on the East Side such as William G. Angell house at 30 Benefit Street (1869) or Thomas Hoppin house at 383 Benefit Street (1853).

5 Stone used here the standard porch and overly large windows so typical of earlier domestic architecture. Interest in voids that can articulate a facade — such as porches, entries and windows — surely goes back to traditional writings of A. J. Downing, good summary of whose domestic axioms can be found in Scully.

Another interesting detail of the present facade is the bay window on Benefit Street. Although amazing in details, it does not seem to relate well to the rest of the facade. The interior room does harmonize with such a projection and this may suggest some large projection on original designs of Stone later replaced with this classicizing bay — almost a perfect copy of windows on Richard Norman Shaw's New Zealand Chambers, London, 1871-72. This design — published by *Building News* in 1873 — could have been known to the designer of the Benefit Street bay, who may have been Stone renovating his own design. New Zealand Chambers design is reproduced in Scully.

Burnside mansion, familiar Benefit Street landmark, presents architect Stone's solution to problems of a steeply sloping corner site.



Photograph by Laurence E. Tilley.

1873 which marked the beginning of the firm's second era. The years between 1873 and 1885 — when Willson joined the office — saw the scope of the firm's interests broaden to include commercial buildings as well as private and institutional design.

One of the first buildings designed by Stone & Carpenter, Cheapside Block — dating from 1874 and still standing on North Main Street — is a four-storied brick building with stone details and a cast-iron store front on the street level. The eclectic

detailing of the facade extends only a few feet along the sides of the building, a common economical practice for commercial buildings.

Brickwork decoration of the Cheapside design is another characteristic of the firm's developing architectural vocabulary affording both surface patterns and color contrasts for a wide variety of buildings. It is used as early as the Burnside carriage house on Planet Street but appears also on Brown University's Slater Hall — like Cheapside nominally a Gothic

6 Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture of H. H. Richardson and His Times*, rev. ed. (Boston: M. I. T. Press, 1966) 34.

7 Former is illustrated by a line engraving in *Illustrated Handbook of the City of Providence* (Providence, 1876) 34. Latter is illustrated in John Hutchins Cady, *Swan Point Cemetery: Centennial History* (Providence, 1947), as are Anthony Memorial and Swan Point Office Building, both by Stone and his firm.

8 The station is a cube of brick walls with veneer of heavier stone rustication on facade and other walls almost completely devoid of surface treatment with little ornament or fenestrations. The observatory — designed late 1880s, completed 1891 — utilizes several typical features from the firm's building vocabulary: large planar brick walls, arched windows, circular windows (popular throughout the history of Providence architecture, probably stemming from days when ship carpenters doubled as house builders), sandstone ornamentation, wide expanses of unadorned brick on every facade.

This remnant of Tefft's Canal Street structure, caught just before its demolition, shows the surface detail that may have inspired some of Stone & Carpenter's designs.



Photograph by Laurence E. Tilley.

Revival design — on small buildings done for Rhode Island Hospital and on South Main Street Fire Station, all still extant.⁹ Use of this relatively typical late-nineteenth-century detailing may have derived from local work of an earlier Providence architect, Thomas Tefft. The small section of Tefft's Union Station complex that stood until recently on Canal Street demonstrated how much of his architectural style was adopted by Stone and used throughout later years of the century.¹⁰

Stone & Carpenter's work was extremely varied during the 70s by commissions for private, commercial, and institutional buildings in every part of the city and its growing metropolitan area. Commercial projects included the Wheaton & Anthony Building, the Benjamin H. Gladding Block and many others in the business district on both sides of the Providence River. Houses included the stick-styled J. B. Barnaby house at Broadway and Sutton Streets from 1875, the row houses at Lloyd and Brown Streets of 1877 and many more private buildings on the prosperous East Side. The most impressive commission came toward

the middle of the decade when they were chosen to design Providence County Court House for the corner of Benefit and College Streets, completed in 1877 from plans drawn in 1875.¹¹

Demolished in the 1930s, this large edifice was situated on another awkward corner site with the slope of College Street creating a design problem not unlike that of the Burnside house only a few blocks away on Benefit Street. Here however the partners were involved with a much larger project, a public building to accommodate large numbers of people every day. Instead of concentration on corner elevation as Stone had done in the Burnside design, the two men divided interest between the main entrance on Benefit Street and a large secondary entrance on College Street.

It should be emphasized that development of two facades on the Court House did not disregard the corner but again used two exposed views to best advantage of the design. Looking at the design of the corner view, one can easily see the full vocabulary of forms used by the firm during the 70s and 80s. Just as

9 Slater Hall, fine example of a four-storied brick building, combines planar brickwork, intricately carved capitals, short columns surrounding the porch, and curiously sloping window sills — another practical design feature that probably allowed for drainage — all affording a relatively complex overall conception. Built in 1879, it is now used as a dormitory.

10 See Anita Glass, "Early Victorian Architecture on College Hill," unpublished master's thesis (Brown University 1960), for a more extensive study of Tefft's designs on the East Side. In the 1860s and 1870s Union Station must have been the most impressive edifice in the entire area both in size and visual effect. For more on Providence architecture during the nineteenth century see Osmund Overby, "Architecture of College Hill," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (Yale University 1963).

sculptural treatment of the Burnside building can only be appreciated from the corner of that lot, the only full view of the Court House design was from the angle that allowed both facades and entrances to be seen simultaneously.

At this time Stone became increasingly interested in establishing a state chapter of the American Institute of Architects. He wrote to George C. Mason Jr. — Newport architect — discussing that possibility and methods for dealing with selection of officers and members.¹² Stone had already been associated with the national organization for several years and was the only living Rhode Island architect listed in its ranks in 1872. By the end of 1875 he and several fellow professionals set up the Rhode Island chapter with Alpheus Morse president and Stone vice president. Interested in national architectural affairs, Stone addressed annual AIA national conventions on a number of occasions and in 1880 served on a committee with New York architect Richard Upjohn, one of many such organizational activities involving him with nationally prominent architects. During the 1870s the firm began to figure prominently in civic affairs. All partners were eventually involved with several public commissions, civic agencies and social organizations dealing with everything from fire safety standards to the choice of the Rhode Island Pavilion design for the Columbian Exposition in 1893.

After completion of the Court House, the next important project was alteration in 1881 of the Goddard house at Brown and George Streets. Built in the 1830s, this residence marked a transitional period between colonial and classical revival styles. As an addition to the original back of the house Stone & Carpenter designed a large wing that now appears on the left side of the main entrance on Brown Street. Alterations made to match the existing classicizing vocabulary included a Corinthian entry porch and even duplication of window and chimney details. Although Edmund R. Willson is usually credited with motivation of colonial and classical revivals for

which the firm is justifiably noted, it is significant that this first attempt was accomplished the year before Willson arrived in Providence. Admittedly only the matching of an addition to an already extant building, this renovation design with successful integration of an earlier vocabulary at least implies that Stone and Carpenter had some interest in historical styles.

Edmund Willson joined Stone & Carpenter upon his return from Europe in 1882 but did not become a full partner until 1885. The firm had been occupied with design of the Esther A. Baker house finished in 1882, still standing at Hope and Manning Streets, one of the finest examples in Providence of the then fashionable Queen Anne style. Stone and his partners were working with a corner lot as in so many of their most notable designs. Very typical of its style — display of a wide range of materials including stone, slate, wood and shingles — prominence of screened porches — use of multi-paned windows — the Baker house does not resolve the corner site with any sense of visual success. Instead it runs into many of the problems mentioned by at least one contemporary critic¹³ — problems dealing mainly with relatively confused, incoherent piling up of picturesque details by architects who designed in this style. Here the designer tried to deal with two distinct facades by creating a focus on the angle where they would merge, while still maintaining a visual interest in each of the separate entrance areas. Unfortunately, this corner focus on the Baker house dominates either of the two entryways and in fact it is not visually clear where the main entrance of the house is situated. In overall vocabulary and in particular details, the house overcomes this facade confusion.

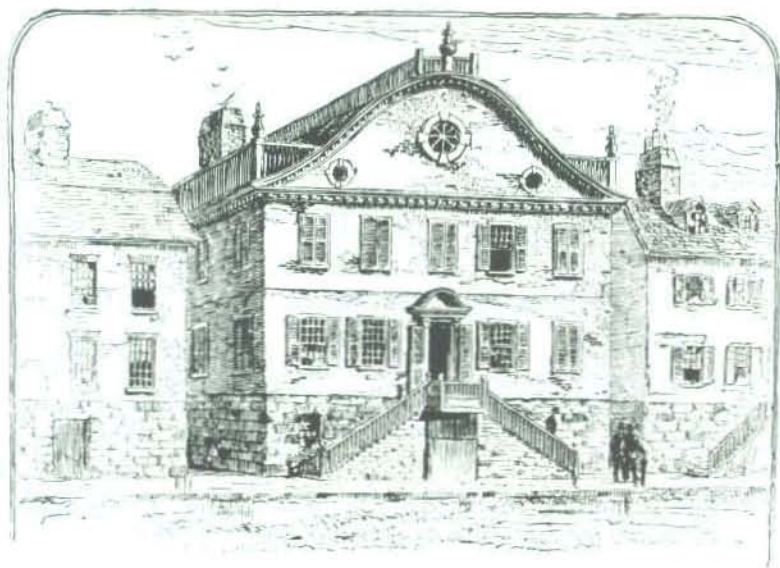
While several works finished around this time — such as the Goddard addition and Fleur-de-Lys studio on Thomas Street — reveal historical design features, it is admittedly with the partnership of Willson that all three architects began to plunge into a variety of historical and traditional styles. Through

11 Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, ch. 13. Copies of Court House plans, RIHS Library.

12 Stone to Mason, August 1, 1875. AIA files, RIHS Library.

13 Montgomery Schuyler, *American Architecture and Other Writings* (New York, 1892), in the essay "Concerning Queen Anne."

Sketch of Joseph Brown house on South Main Street built in 1774 indicates the original entrance, now altered to street level.



Providence Plantations for 250 Years by Welcome Arnold Greene (1886).

the next two decades and into the new century, they continued to dominate the Providence scene, designing many of their most famous works with colonial, classical or Renaissance revival vocabulary.

The firm seemed particularly well suited to be major local innovators of the colonial revival. We have noted before the early interest (1844) in colonial buildings of Arthur Delevan Gilman, one of Stone's Boston mentors. As first president of the national AIA, Richard Upjohn talked in 1869 on "Colonial Architecture of New York and the New England States."¹⁴ As precursors of the neo-colonial movement, their acquaintance with Stone should suggest the basis for the firm's historical interests.

The partnership's designs appeared regularly in the major journal associated with the historicism movement, *American Architect and Building News*.¹⁵ Published projects show a great variety of styles from

Queen-Anne private houses to more traditional idioms of the Romanesque State Prison at Howard — Sawyer Memorial Ward of Butler Hospital with its medieval turrets and fenestrations — and Renaissance inspired forms used on the Union Trust Building.¹⁶

This ideal environment for development of historicism and especially of the neo-colonial idiom was enhanced by arrival of the youngest partner, Willson, from the *Ecole des Beaux Arts*, Parisian institution that encouraged use of precedent, traditional modes of architectural design.¹⁷ Multiple personal and professional inputs reveal Stone, Carpenter & Willson as one of the significant offices of revival design in the country. Its national prestige can be inferred both from circumstantial connections mentioned above and from designs produced during the 1880s and 1890s.

¹⁴ Scully, 23.

¹⁵ Scully, 34.

¹⁶ Among other designs published — Lyman Gymnasium — Fleur-de-Lys Studio — G. M. Smith house — Ladd Observatory — and that submitted for the State House which placed third behind McKim, Mead & White and Shepley, Ruten & Coolidge of New York and Boston respectively.

¹⁷ The *Ecole* was the place for architects to be taught the "value of precedents," Scully, 50. William Jordy, *American Buildings and Their Architects*, v.3 (New York, Doubleday, 1972) on Beaux Arts design and American culture, 344-349.

Snapshot of the Taft house at 154 Hope Street taken soon after its completion reveals details derived from Joseph Brown house.



RIHS Graphics Collection.

With an extensive colonial tradition at hand, patrons in Providence took naturally to the neo-colonial style. As an idiom that emphasized simplicity in details and intimacy of scale, the colonial revival was particularly suited for the smaller private house. During the 1880s, the Knapp house at 217 Hope Street and the Smith house at 165 Hope Street both exemplified this trend toward simplified design coupled with traditional motifs such as the Corinthian porch on the latter.

Specific borrowings from local sources can be found on several Stone, Carpenter & Willson designs including the house at 112 Benevolent Street (1890) no longer extant, and the Taft house at 154 Hope Street (1895). John Hutchins Cady suggested that these derive from earlier edifices — works of John Holden Greene for the Benevolent Street design — and the Joseph Brown house on South Main Street, source for the curved gable on the Taft house. Other buildings within this style are private homes at 37



A. E. Club Album, RIHS Graphics Collection.

Youngest partner Edmund R. Willson, Beaux Arts trained, contributed to the firm's interest in neo-colonial design.

Cooke Street and 144 Meeting Street, the latter of some interest since — unlike any of the above — it is constructed with wood siding and built with a vertical and decidedly non-colonial set of proportions.

Perhaps the firm's most famous colonial revival is the Pendleton house on Benefit Street (1904) in an early republican style with large, planar expanses of brick and a Palladian window above the classicizing porch. This particular combination is found on many earlier Providence houses, especially in the entrance ensemble of the well known John Brown House (1786) which differs only in details. Common to both is the peculiar way the entire Palladian motif fits within a recess in the brick facade with a similar

arched feature flanked by curving wooden or brick sections that converge toward the keystone. The Pendleton house — now part of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design — is not totally successful in reviving the earlier style since it seems extreme in rectilinear, planar composition and much too heavy in horizontality.

Almost as well known as colonial revival and an offshoot of it, the classical revival work of Stone, Carpenter & Willson gave the city some of its most monumental buildings — Central Police Station (1893) and Union Station Complex (1898). These had several common features including monumental scale and colossal piers or attached pilasters defining portions of facades. Large arched windows and a coffered interior ceiling add to suggestion of the antique on the main passenger station building of the complex which — despite its major importance as a

late-nineteenth-century building — is in shoddy disrepair. Still another revival project was the remodeling of Old Stone Bank — formerly Providence Institution for Savings — on South Main Street. The older rectangular edifice was extensively enlarged in 1898 when Stone and partners added the large dome, Corinthian portico and other classical details to the heavy gray stone walls. As on earlier renovations, they utilized the extant portion of the building as a guideline for their own work.¹⁸

In the third category of revival designs were Renaissance inspired buildings — Union Trust Company at Westminster and Dorrance Streets (1901) and the better known Providence Public Library on Washington Street (1900).¹⁹ While these buildings are also large and grandiose in conception, what distinguishes them from the classical idiom is mostly a matter of details.

An early photograph of Union Station Complex illustrates transportation modes of the late nineteenth century.

RIHS Graphics Collection.



Washington Street view of the Providence Public Library.*RIHS Graphics Collection.*

Perhaps the building for which the firm is most remembered is the Public Library now somewhat hidden by a mid-1950s extension. While typical of this particular phase of Stone, Carpenter & Willson's production, the library bears an obvious resemblance to Boston Public Library — designed by McKim, Mead & White, 1888-1895, with McKim as principal architect on this particular commission.²⁰ While the Providence facade is directly derived from the Boston building, there are some differences between the two designs in details and more importantly in overall visual effect that have never been clarified.

The Boston library's front is very flat and smooth with a series of arched openings extending between corner brickwork, while the Providence building appears to have a much more sculptured facade, partly due to use of a regularized rustication on

ground level and extensive use of balustrades and applied piers between arched openings. Much of this modulation results from the building's position, set back and above street level with a double set of curving steps rising to meet a triple-arched portico which projects slightly from the rest of the facade. However much it derives from the Boston design, the Providence firm demonstrated their own talents by playing variations on a theme. The smaller scale coupled with increased surface treatment on the facade allows the building to stand as an independent work with a distinctly modeled and highly articulated visual effect. Providence's library was successful not because it derived from a different source than the McKim design but because it was built as a variation of that already successful work, with its own innovations in both aesthetic and practical senses.

18 Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 125.

19 For more on the library's design, dedication, and impact on the city — Cady, 186-7. *New Building of Providence Public Library* (Providence, 1901). William E. Foster, "Providence Public Library," *Library Journal* May 1900, 228-232.

20 Jordy, 314-375.

This was the last work of importance designed by the firm but several other projects in the late 1890s and early 1900s reflected still another offshoot of the revivalist craze, specifically buildings done from English Renaissance prototypes instead of more popular Italianate models. The most notable of these designs are on the campus of Brown University. Pembroke Hall (1896), a small academic building, is perfectly suited for use of English Renaissance revival as opposed to more grandiose and monumental forms of Italian derivations. This significant design was followed by Sayles Gymnasium (1907) but here English influence was one of separate details — such as roof tiles or timber doors and windows — more than an evocation of actual English Renaissance building in style, scale and overall conception.

This English Renaissance “revival” — if it may be categorized as such — and specifically Sayles Gymnasium — were the last creative productions of the firm before Alfred Stone’s death on September 4, 1908. Almost two years earlier Willson had died in Petersham, Massachusetts. These deaths marked an end to almost fifty continual years of service to the city by Stone or his partners but their presence is felt even today through more than 120 buildings, additions and projects still standing in Providence and vicinity. If we look at certain key monuments — such as the Goddard addition of 1881 — the partners may deserve to be cited among American innovators of revival styles that prevailed from the 1880s into the twentieth century.

In an introductory study such as this it would have been desirable to provide a convenient and understandable method for looking at the full half century of the firm’s productivity, but such an overview is not feasible. Working in a variety of styles, Stone, Carpenter & Willson never settled on a single vocabulary for any appreciable length of time. From the 1880s to the end of their careers there was increased application of revival ideals, but a great variety of sub-styles and idiosyncrasies manifested itself in their finished buildings. Further complication is provided by their designs that fall outside the mainstream of the revivalist movement and seem old-fashioned and *retardataire*. The YMCA building

on Jackson Street, now destroyed, was built in a medieval Romanesque idiom more suited to mid-century than to the year of its completion in 1889.

Can this eclecticism be easily explained? It would seem that part of the problem lay in the firm’s inability to work in certain styles, where their efforts seemed to be only awkward adaptations of other architects or other styles. This is particularly confirmed by one of their major commissions, the Court House at College and Benefit Streets.

Perhaps their location in Providence also encouraged a conglomerate approach to design. Surely many of the wealthier patrons in the capital city desired to keep abreast of current modes of architecture in the more sophisticated taste-making centers of New York, Newport and Boston.

Whatever the reasons behind their eclectic designs, Stone, Carpenter & Willson changed the visible features of Providence both in the buildings they designed and in their continual concern with municipal planning and other urban problems present even in the latest part of the past century, such as traffic and allocation of park areas.²¹

After Willson’s death, the firm took on a new partner, Walter G. Sheldon, who had previously worked as a draftsman for them. The new letterhead of Stone, Carpenter & Sheldon appeared in 1907 and this office continued to work under that name even after the death of Stone in 1908. It was clear that the combined loss of Stone and Willson weakened the firm’s reputation and abilities — the majority of commissions after 1908 were for smaller, private buildings or only renovative work.²²

In more active days — particularly with the major civic commissions of the 1880s and 1890s — Stone, Carpenter & Willson proved to be the most prolific, influential and professional architectural force in the city. By helping to provide Providence with a variety of buildings in many of the current styles and especially by bringing the revival idiom to the city at such an early date and then fully developing it in all manifestations, these men not only established the standard of design in their own time but influenced the tone of architectural development in Providence for many succeeding decades.

21 Stone’s accomplishments have been listed in *Alfred Stone 1834-1908, Noted Architect, Able Counsellor, Far Sighted Civic Leader* (Providence, 1925) — a small pamphlet probably prepared by the Metropolitan Parks Commission — and in AIA files.

22 AIA files, correspondence files of firm, and author’s complete list of Stone, Carpenter & Willson buildings, RIHS Library.



Historian, educator, poet, musician, family chronicler, Caroline Hazard — pictured here during her 1899-1910 presidency of Wellesley College — was a Rhode Islander of many achievements. Some of them are illustrated currently at the Society's Library, 121 Hope Street, Providence, in a display of published works and photographs from its collections.