



Rhode Island History

Volume 44, Number 2 May 1985





Published by The Rhode Island Historical Society, 110 Benevolent Street, Providence, Rhode Island, 02906, and printed by a grant from the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Edward D. DiPrete, Governor, Susan L. Farmer, Secretary of State.

Issued Quarterly at Providence, Rhode Island, February, May, August, and November. Second class postage paid at Providence, Rhode Island.

Karl Ericson, *president*
Alden M. Anderson, *vice president*
Mrs. Edwin G. Fischer, *vice president*
M. Rachel Cunha, *secretary*
Stephen Williams, *treasurer*
Arnold Friedman, *assistant secretary*

FELLOWS OF THE SOCIETY

Carl Bridenbaugh
Sydney V. James
Antoinette F. Downing
Richard K. Showman

PUBLICATIONS COMMITTEE

Leonard I. Levin, *chairman*
Henry L. P. Beckwith, Jr.
Joel Cohen
Norman Fiering
Robert Allen Greene
Pamela Kennedy
Alan Simpson
William McKenzie Woodward

STAFF

Jonathan Sisk, *editor*
Maureen Taylor, *picture editor*
Leonard I. Levin, *copy editor*
Jean LeGwin, *designer*
Barbara M. Passman, *editorial assistant*
Allison Zieve, *editorial assistant*

The Rhode Island Historical Society assumes no responsibility for the opinions of contributors.

©1984 by The Rhode Island Historical Society

Rhode Island History

Volume 44, Number 2 May 1985

Contents

- "A Determination to Labor . . .":
Female Antislavery Activity in Rhode Island 35
DEBORAH BINGHAM VAN BROEKHOVEN
- The Providence School Board Reform Movement,
1898-1924 47
PATRICK HARSHBARGER
- From the Collections 58
ROBERT P. EMLÉN
- Book Reviews 60

Social events, such as this antislavery tea party sponsored by the Providence Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society, provided income for the movement and encouraged a sense of community among abolitionists. Courtesy of Rhode Island Historical Society Library (Rhi x3 4506).

No Compromise with Slavery!

**ANTI-SLAVERY
Tea Party.**

THE LADIES' ANTI-SLAVERY SOCIETY,

Will give a Social Tea Party, at

HOWARD ^{UPPER} HALL.

On Wednesday Eve'g Jan. 5, 1853.

The usual attractions presented on such occasions, will be fully displayed.

Friends of the Slave, Lovers of your country's freedom, come and help us!

ADMITTANCE 12 1-2 CENTS.

Tickets for Supper 37 1-2 Cents.

A. C. GAZZARA, Printer, Providence.

"A Determination to Labor . . .": Female Antislavery Activity in Rhode Island

Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven

Radical abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison freely admitted the importance of female support for the antislavery movement. In a letter to one young woman he cited the accomplishments of British female abolitionists, and sought to persuade potential female organizers that "the destiny of the slaves is in the hands of American women, and complete emancipation can never take place without their cooperation." In that same letter Garrison pleaded with women to support his growing movement: "Fully comprehending the horrible situation of the female slaves, how can they [American women] rest quietly upon their beds at night, or feel indifferent to the deliverance of those bonds? Oh, if the shrieks could reach our ears . . . we should shudder and turn pale, and make new resolutions . . . Women of New England—mothers and daughters! if I fail to awake your sympathies, and secure your aid, I may well despair of gaining the hearts and support of men."¹

If surviving records are indicative, Rhode Island women, from Baptists to Spiritualists, responded with enthusiasm to Garrison's plea. The organization of a "Ladies Anti-Slavery Society" in Providence in 1832—one year before the city's first male antislavery society—encouraged Garrison to hope for "a multitude of similar associations, not only in this but in every other part of the country."² Although several recent studies of the abolitionist movement have reexamined women's antislavery activities, the extent of their involvement is still not appreciated. As was true nationwide, in the 1830s and 1840s Rhode Island women activists sponsored public lectures, organized petition drives, and raised funds to support abolitionism. In return, these women received new knowledge and political skills and a sense of participation in a moral community. The contribution of Rhode Island women to the abolitionist movement was significant and deserves greater understanding than it has received in recent studies of Rhode Island abolitionism, which neglect women's associations or characterize one local organization as "only a female society."³

In keeping with nineteenth-century assumptions about female character, abolitionists frequently employed emotional appeals to rally women to their cause. "The Slave-Wife," the major piece in *Liberty Chimes*, published by the Providence Ladies Anti-Slavery Society in

Ms. Van Broekhoven is a member of the American Studies Department at Barrington College. An earlier version of this article was presented as part of a lecture series in conjunction with an exhibit at the Museum of Rhode Island History entitled "The Loom & the Lash: Northern Industry and Southern Slavery."

1. William Lloyd Garrison to Harriott Plummer, March 4, 1833, *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, ed. Walter M. Merrill and Louis Rochames, 6 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), I, 208–209.

2. *Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, I, 158.

3. John L. Myers, "Antislavery Agents in Rhode Island, 1835–1837," *R.I. History* XXX (1971), 24. See also his "Antislavery Agencies in Rhode Island, 1832–1835," *RIH* XXIX (1970), 82–93. Recent studies that have emphasized the major role of women in the antislavery movement include Ronald G. Walters, *The Antislavery Appeal: American Abolitionism after 1830* (Baltimore, 1977); Blanche Glassman Hersh, *The Slavery of Sex: Feminist Abolitionists in America* (Urbana, 1978); Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism 1830–1870* (New York, 1982); and Judith Wellman, "Women and Reform in Antebellum Upstate New York: A Profile of Grassroots Female Abolitionists," in Mabel E. Deutrich and Virginia C. Purdy, eds., *Clío Was a Woman: Studies in the History of American Women* (Washington, D.C., 1980), 113–127.

4. Francis Whipple Green, "The Slave-Wife," in Providence Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, *Liberty Chimes* (Providence, 1845).

5. *Ibid.*, 98.

6. *Ibid.*, 107.

7. *Ibid.*, 100.

1845, typifies this strategy. The story's chief appeal is the character of its female heroine, Clusy Davis, who, at the cost of her life, resists her master's sexual advances and remains loyal to her husband. Written by Rhode Island activist and author Frances Whipple Green, the story is presented as an authentic narrative of one female slave's suffering as recounted by her husband, Laco Ray.⁴

Laco recalls falling in love with Clusy and receiving their "benevolent" master's permission to marry. After the marriage, Laco begins to sense a coldness in his new wife and the couple drifts apart. Returning unexpectedly from an errand one day, Laco discovers the master furtively leaving their slave cabin, and understands the reason for Clusy's reserve. Yet despite repeated lashings, Clusy has resisted the master's advances. At the same time, she informs Laco that she is pregnant, assuring him that the child is his. Despite Clusy's resolve, the master's advances continue, and neither the sympathetic plantation mistress nor the Presbyterian minister who married Clusy and Laco can help. In fact, the minister advises Clusy to "submit" and the sin will be her master's not her own.⁵ Meanwhile, each week the master continues to receive communion from this same minister.

The beatings continue; Clusy grows paler and Laco more desperate. One day while Laco is working in the fields, the master ties up Clusy for another beating, during which she faints and suffers a miscarriage. When Laco discovers his dead child and nearly dead wife, they make plans to escape. Still suffering from the abuse inflicted upon her, Clusy dies while they are passing through Maryland. Still, Laco remembers, she had felt the north wind of freedom on her cheek and died confident of a heavenly reward. Laco continues to upper Canada where, when questioned about his grief, he recalls his loss. The narrative concludes with Laco urging the listener to "tell my story. . . . publish it abroad; for if any woman can hear it without a wish—a determination to labor with all her might to abolish THE SLAVERY OF WOMAN, I impeach her virtues—She is not true—she is not PURE."⁶

Like female slaves in many antislavery tracts, the light-skinned Clusy possesses the virtues that northern women most valued, piety and sexual purity. Clusy's faith, for example, remains strong throughout her ordeal. When the minister encourages submission to the master's sexual advances, Laco condemns the religion the clergyman represents. Clusy, however, concludes that the minister "is a liar . . . and the Lord Jesus Christ never sent him." At this point the narrator reminds readers that their own piety requires action: "Think of this, all ye virtuous—all ye pious women of the land; and if your virtue, your piety, are not a mere sham—are not a damning lie—give speedy help to the thousands of women—all of them your sisters in the bonds of Christianity—who are daily prostituted."⁷

Sexual purity was fundamental to the status of true womanhood, and such acknowledgments of the sexual abuse of slave women elicited strong reactions from the public. Clusy's light skin reminded readers that miscegenation had been occurring for generations in the South,

emphasizing that unlike Clusy many slave women had been violated. Many Americans, male and female, were shocked that abolitionists would even mention such scandals and joined the anti-abolitionist ranks because of this. Clusy's vulnerability, however, was also sure to engage the sympathy of women who would be alarmed not by the master's lust (sexual purity was considered to be primarily a female virtue) but by her lack of protection. Here too the narrator addresses the reader directly: "Think of it, all ye modest and virtuous women, who have husbands, and brothers and friends, and the laws, to wall around, and protect your purity."⁸ Education and literature for middle-class women abounded with moral tales of innocent young women being seduced. The result was always catastrophic to the woman, who usually went insane or died or both. The tragedy of "The Slave-Wife" is that despite her carefully retained purity, Clusy dies.

Having established a sympathetic bond between Rhode Island women and the plight of slaves like Clusy, *Liberty Chimes* then turned to ways women could transform their sympathy into action. In "What Can A Woman Do?" the author admitted that independent thought in a woman was new and often viewed with suspicion, but argued that "the thing becomes more and more common and is fast losing its strangeness."⁹ As examples of women's political effectiveness, he cited the women petitioners in Britain who helped end slavery there, the salon keepers in pre-revolutionary France who fostered revolutionary discussions in their parlors, and the influence of Christian women in the church—both as Catholic nuns or saints providing spiritual guidance and as Protestants who financed and managed church projects. Still, the practical question remained: what could women—barred from voting, legislating, and preaching—hope to accomplish? The key means of female influence, this writer and many others argued, was through the education of children. Whether formally as schoolteachers or informally as mothers, any "patient and perseverant" woman could become an "apostle" for abolition. The results, the article suggested, might be twenty, fifty, or one-hundred fold.¹⁰

While some abolitionist tactics aroused controversy, women could follow most of the advice in *Liberty Chimes* without rebelling against the notion that woman's place was the home and her major role that of mother. Advising women to exert their moral influence on the young involved nothing radical, for large numbers of new schools were established expressly to educate women to be better mothers and teachers of children. This emphasis on the mother's role as educator and transmitter of morals promoted general education for women and allowed, perhaps even required, women to learn about civic matters. As one historian has pointed out, women were considered "mothers of the republic" and as such were responsible for the training of America's future citizens and leaders who would inevitably deal with the slavery issue.¹¹ Several patriotic articles in *Liberty Chimes* noted the hateful blotch of slavery on the rising glory of America. One decidedly apocalyptic poem predicted that the country would be torn apart by suicidal destruction

8. *Ibid.*, 99.

9. Richard Hildreth, "What Can A Woman Do?" in *Liberty Chimes*, 34–40.

10. *Ibid.*, 40.

11. Linda Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, 1980).

Frontispiece: George Bourne,
*Slavery Illustrated in its Effects
 Upon Women . . .* (Boston, 1837).
 Courtesy of the Providence
 Public Library.



12. Eliza Storr, "The Bond-Woman's Prayer," in *Liberty Chimes*, 53–54. See also L. H. Price's poem "The National Destiny," in *Liberty Chimes*, 31–32.

13. *Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, I, 221.

14. For references to the formation of these associations see the *Liberator* July 7, 1832, and April 18 and Dec. 26, 1835; American Anti-Slavery Society, *Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York, 1835), 50–52; and *Proceedings of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Convention* (Providence, 1836), 15.

("The shadow of a coming wrath, just settles around her sons.") because Americans who loved liberty failed to eradicate the injustice of slavery.¹² The message was clear: if mothers were to secure the future for their children, abolitionist activity was necessary.

Whether in Providence, Boston, or upstate New York, this type of argument—by orators or writers—won many female hearts. Once persuaded of the need to take action, the next step was to join or form a female antislavery society, hundreds of which existed across the North in the 1830s and 1840s. In these associations women could educate themselves and work to win more female converts. Some women re-focused or added antislavery activities to established female associations. In Providence, for example, the Colored Female Literary Society and the Colored Female Tract Society both contributed money to Garrison's newspaper, the *Liberator*.¹³ While men at the time, and several scholars since, have described these women's groups as auxiliaries to the more dominant male antislavery societies, this label is misleading. In New England, the women's groups sometimes formed before male societies in their area. As mentioned earlier, a group of young women in Providence formed New England's first female antislavery society in June 1832. Boston ladies also organized a small group in 1832, Philadelphia a year later, and others soon followed and multiplied. Young people formed juvenile emancipation societies in Providence and Pawtucket in 1834 and another group of Providence women, initially over one hundred strong, formed a more enduring antislavery society in 1835. This group, perhaps the largest and most active in the state, pub-

lished *Liberty Chimes* and encouraged other Rhode Island women to form their own antislavery societies.¹⁴

The Kent County Female Anti-Slavery Society, also formed in 1835, was perhaps more typical of the hundreds of smaller, yet active female societies across the North. To educate themselves, their families, and friends about the evils of slavery, these women heard speakers when possible, but more often attended public readings of antislavery literature. They also raised money for abolitionist causes, particularly to support the *Liberator*, and organized several petition drives in the villages of Fiskeville, Jackson, Arkwright, Coventry, Phenix, and Washington. At the height of their activities in the 1830s, 263 women "subscribed" to the society's constitution, which made clear the association's purpose:

We believe that all men are created equal, and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights among which, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We believe that slavery . . . violates these sacred rights, is opposed to the dictates of humanity, and the precepts of Christianity, and ought therefore to be immediately abolished. . . . The object of this society shall be to effect the entire and immediate emancipation of the enslaved people of color within the jurisdiction of the United States, and to obtain for them their inalienable rights.

While these sentiments were not gender based, article one of the by-laws emphasized "the special duty" of women to help other women "to overthrow a system which exposes to outrage and criminal wrong, nearly one million of American females."¹⁵

Kent County women often drew support and ideas from other antislavery women. While male speakers were not excluded, the society's programs more often included literature by women and, occasionally, members gave antislavery speeches. The group listened to selections from such publications as *Right and Wrong in Boston*, the first annual report of the Boston Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, which included a detailed account of a riot by Boston's men "of property and standing" to an announced meeting of the women's group. Despite this opposition, the Boston women emphasized the rightness of their stand against slavery: "It was for our CHILDREN we did it . . . to preserve them 'an inheritance pure and undefiled, and that fadeth not away.'" And so the Kent County women learned of Scripture and precedent that supported their altruism. As the Boston women declared: "we cannot . . . believe that this garment of womanhood . . . debars us from the privileges or absolves us from the duties of a spiritual existence."¹⁶ This sentiment surely reinforced the Kent County women in their conviction, as stated in their constitution, that slavery was an anti-Christian institution.

The women also read Elisabeth Chandler's *An Appeal to the Ladies of the United States*, extracts from Angelina Grimké's *Appeal to the Women of the South*, and Sarah Grimké's *Appeal to the Clergy of the*



1832 Broadside. City of Providence. Courtesy of Rhode Island Historical Society Library (RHi ×3 4672).

15. Constitution of the Kent County Female Anti-Slavery Society, Kent County Female Anti-Slavery Society Records, Rhode Island Historical Society. [Hereafter cited as KFAS Recs.]

16. Minutes, March 5, 1836 and Jan. 15, 1837, KFAS Recs., and Maria Weston Chapman, *Right and Wrong in Boston, Report of the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society . . .* (Boston, 1836), 38.

17. Minutes, April 30, 1837, and Sept. 19 and Oct. 14, 1838, KFAS Recs.

18. *Ibid.*, Oct. 2, 1837. The Providence ladies statement appeared in the *Liberator*, Nov. 3, 1837, and is quoted in Keith Melder, *The Beginnings of Sisterhood: The American Women's Rights Movement, 1800-1850* (New York, 1977), 89.

19. Minutes, Sept. 9, 1837; June 25, 1837; and Aug. 2, Sept. 2, and Oct. 14, 1838, KFAS Recs.

20. *Ibid.*, July 20 and Dec. 18, 1836; May 28, 1837; and March 30, 1838.

21. Elizabeth J. Chace to Emily A. Winsor, July 27, 1837, Rhode Island Manuscripts, John Hay Library, Providence. Quoted by permission of the Brown University Library.

South. It is clear that the Kent County ladies appreciated the message of these southern sisters, for when the Congregational clergy of Connecticut wrote a public letter censuring the Grimkés for speaking to "promiscuous" (male and female) audiences, these women rallied to support both the Grimkés and Garrison, their sponsor. And despite their religious orientation, the ladies singled out the Congregational clergy for censure and emphasized their "confidence in the integrity and purity of purpose of" Garrison and his radical abolitionist newspaper.¹⁷ In doing this, the Kent County women agreed with the Providence Ladies Anti-Slavery Society which stated: "We deem the self-denying labors of the Misses Grimké worthy of all praise. . . . We totally disapprove of the late 'Clerical Protests,' regarding them as injudicious and unchristian."¹⁸

Although it seems unlikely that any Kent County women attended the first national convention of abolitionist women in 1837, they did read the report of the proceedings and respond to its request that abolitionist women concentrate their activities on petitioning to block the annexation of Texas and to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia as the most direct and effective method to publicize antislavery issues.¹⁹ If state or regional meetings were rare, letters between female societies kept the women informed and encouraged about the activities of other societies. The Kent County society received letters from the ladies of Putnam, Ohio (accompanied by a petition to circulate), the Fall River Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, and the Providence Ladies Anti-Slavery Society, which also sent books "for lending."²⁰

The Providence society seems to have developed a standard letter asking sympathetic individuals to begin a "ladies" antislavery society in their village. A copy has survived, written by Elizabeth J. Chace, the society's corresponding secretary, to Emily Winsor of Greenville in 1837 during the height of the antislavery agitation (see page 45). Chace began with a general greeting and a specific request that Winsor form an antislavery society. She then cited some reasons for this activity: the extra strength women gained through association, both locally and statewide; the immediate threat of Texas, another slave territory, being added to the Union; and finally a plea "for the downtrodden and oppressed in southern bondage and to rouse our own New England women to the discharge of their high responsibility." The letter concluded with an offering of Christian encouragement and future aid from the Providence Society: "I hope you will be enabled to do much 'through Christ strengthening you,' and that you will find many warm hearts and strong hands to cooperate with you."²¹ This type of communication not only spurred women to begin new societies, it also kept up morale, conveyed news, coordinated petition drives at crucial moments, and, above all, reinforced members' sense that abolitionist women were part of a national community dedicated to ending slavery.

While the minutes of the Kent County Anti-Slavery Society give us some sense of the activities undertaken by such societies, the publications of Providence and Pawtucket women provide an excellent

sampling of the type of literature used to educate people, particularly women, to the evils of slavery and to the virtues and methods of abolitionism. Frances Whipple Green, the most prolific antislavery writer in Providence, authored "The Slave-Wife" in *Liberty Chimes*, and edited *The Envoy: From Free Hearts to the Free* (1840), published by the Pawtucket Juvenile Emancipation Society.²² Green was typical of many reformers of the time, advocating on issues from abolitionism and Indian rights to factory reform and the extension of the franchise to unpropertied men. (She wrote a history of the Dorr War, siding with Dorr's efforts to further democracy.) Because she was active in many reform and social circles, Green was able to solicit contributions from prominent Rhode Islanders, Elizabeth Buffum Chace, Sarah Chace, Anna Weston, and Sophia Little (Newport) and from more nationally known Massachusetts and Philadelphia abolitionists. Like most of her non-abolitionist works, *The Envoy* is equalitarian in tone and argument, quite as radical as Garrison's *Liberator*. And while she addressed *The Envoy* to both mothers and fathers, the primary argument concerned slave women. Children's antislavery literature was also distributed in Rhode Island, including *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet*, which began "You are very young, tis true / But there's much you can do." It instructed children to join the crusade by pleading with slaveowners, talking with playmates about the evils of slavery, and boycotting products, like sugar, manufactured with slave labor.²³

While the success of these efforts is impossible to quantify, we do know that the petitioning and literary activity that took place in Rhode Island was extensive. The United States Congress could not deal with the volume of petitions on slavery and so enacted the gag rule, automatically tabling any such petitions, an action that did not stop petitioning, and in fact may have encouraged this activity. Thousands of petitions were sent to Washington and hundreds were directed to state governments, particularly in the North. In Rhode Island the volume of antislavery petitions, plus a good number of anti-abolitionist ones, was so large that a special committee of the state legislature was appointed to deal with them. While antislavery petitions continued to arrive, the legislature clearly did not wish to take a strong abolitionist position. In fact, when Thomas Dorr presented a resolution to accept the petitions against slave trade in the District of Columbia, it was rejected 44-7.²⁴ The issue remained alive for several years, and in October 1837 the General Assembly passed a resolution against the annexation of Texas and appointed another committee to respond to the petitions. The committee's compromise report affirmed the evil of slavery but also the sovereign rights of southern states.²⁵

Women in Rhode Island and elsewhere also provided significant financial support to maintain the movement. They organized an institution especially useful to antislavery societies: the fair or bazaar, held on a very large scale annually in Boston and Philadelphia. These fairs were grand moneymakers, often generating the greatest share of the state antislavery budget. Held during the Christmas season, the local fair was



Sophia Little, antislavery activist and a contributor to *Liberty Chimes*. Courtesy of Rhode Island Historical Society Library (RHi x3 5094).

22. Frances Whipple Green, ed., *The Envoy: From Free Hearts to the Free* (Pawtucket, 1840).

23. *The Anti-Slavery Alphabet* (Philadelphia, 1847), 3.

24. Rhode Island, House of Representatives, *House Journal*, 1836-1838 (vol. 27), Jan. 1837, #324. See also Feb. 11 and 13, May 5 and 7, June 21, 22, 23, and Oct. 1836. Rhode Island, State Senate, *Senate Journal*, 1837-1841 Rhode Island Schedules, 1836-1838, 62ff.

25. "Report of the Committee on Abolition Petitions," *Olive Leaf and Rhode Island Temperance Herald*, Feb. 12, 1840.



Elizabeth Buffum Chace (1806–1899) gained prominence in the antislavery movement and later served as president of the Rhode Island Woman Suffrage Association. This portrait appeared as the frontispiece in volume one of Elizabeth Buffum Chace, Her Life and its Environment by Lillie Buffum Chace Wyman and Arthur Crawford Wyman. Courtesy of Rhode Island Historical Society Library (RHi ×3 3388).

26. Broadside, "No Compromise with Slavery: Anti-Slavery Tea Party" (Providence, 1853).

27. See, for example, the *Liberator*, March 3, 1865.

28. American Anti-Slavery Society, *Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (1856, reprint, New York, 1972), 57–58.

29. *Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Convention*, 15.

30. "No Compromise."

31. The *Liberator*, Nov. 8, 1839, quoted in Walters, *Antislavery Appeal*, 24.

a good place to buy gifts and at the same time help the cause. Smaller towns held scaled-down versions and Providence women seemed to have combined their selling with a formal tea party and supper. The flyer for the 1853 Providence fund-raiser announced "the usual attractions presented on such occasions, will be fully displayed."²⁶ Also, because the Boston fair was well-established and nearby, some Rhode Island women supported it by sending money or items to sell.²⁷ Garrison publicly acknowledged the financial importance of these fairs, reporting at one annual meeting:

To a few energetic women in Boston, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and other places, it is due that the movement has not been . . . crippled for the want of . . . necessary resources. These have been seconded by the zealous efforts of hundreds of smaller circles in villages and towns, and particularly by the generous and unceasing effort of our friends (abroad) to supply the Fairs with merchandise. . . . The larger proportion of the sum expended annually by this society comes from this source.²⁸

Children also helped to raise money for the movement. For example, *The Envoy*, published by the Pawtucket Juvenile Emancipation Society, was intended to be both an educational tool and a fund-raiser, and one year's needlework by a group of Providence girls who met and sewed together netted almost one hundred dollars for the movement.²⁹

In addition to raising money, the fairs served other purposes as well. They were educational enterprises to which abolitionists could invite unconverted friends who might imbibe some antislavery sentiment as they sampled refreshments and shopped for gifts. And Ronald Walters has argued that the fairs were a rite of community which affirmed the unity of antislavery supporters. Working at the fair brought women into contact with other parts of the abolitionist community and allowed men and women, young and old, black and white to gather and show their united purpose. Providence women invited "Friend's of the Slave, Lovers of your country's freedom, come and help us!"³⁰ As Maria Weston Chapman, organizer of the Boston fair wrote of its benefits: "It is the moral power, springing from the exertion to raise [funds]; this increase of light, and energy, and skill, and perseverance, and christian fellowship, and devotedness to our holy enterprise,—and spiritual strength and comfort,—that we value far more than the largest sum."³¹ The evidence from their writings and contacts with sisters from Boston and elsewhere indicates that the Providence women at their tea party and supper or the Kent County women gathering signatures agreed wholeheartedly with Chapman.

Although some women's activity continued after 1840, the Rhode Island female abolitionist movement declined markedly, twenty years before the Civil War began. For example, the Kent County Female Anti-Slavery Society apparently dwindled and stopped keeping records. Some reasons seem to have been personal. The corresponding secretary for the Providence Female Anti-Slavery Society died in 1840, while the

Kent County Anti-Slavery Society secretary left to pursue missionary work in the South. But the problem was broader than the loss of a few leaders. Indeed, nationwide male support seems to have diminished at this point, and debate about the nature of this quiet period before the war continues among historians. For some the mob violence of the 1830s, generated by antagonism toward northerners who opposed slavery, led many to wonder if abolitionist's activities were stirring up a worse problem.

While little anti-abolitionist violence occurred in Rhode Island, the Dorr War may have left antislavery supporters like Green concerned, confused, or bitter at the role of local blacks in the conservative victory over the Dorr Democrats. More certainly the Dorr War focused attention on issues of more immediate concern to Rhode Islanders than slavery. As abolitionist A. Fairbanks noted in 1842: "The temperance reform and the abolition also, are all put back . . . owing to the political strife that has been waging between the Government and Dorr parties this past season."³²

Another reason that women's antislavery activities may have declined so quickly was that most still assumed that woman's place was in the home—not in politics. And while some male abolitionists had allowed women to work for the cause, largely on the grounds of expediency, many retreated from this more equalitarian stance after the violence of the 1830s. Regardless of the approval for rare and bold women like the Grimké sisters, women's place in the political arena had never been clearly established, even within abolitionist ranks. In raising funds to support organizations advocating abolitionism, enlisting popular support in the form of petition signatures, and expanding the ranks of activities by reaching and recruiting other women, female activities seem to have been responsible for much of the movement's success. Their involvement, however, required antislavery advocates to deal with a new criticism—that they were undermining the home and perhaps society by changing women's role—creating accusations that women were hindering the movement. The most radical abolitionists, like Garrison, continued to champion both abolitionism and women's rights, arguing that women were needed and had the right to speak. The more conservative abolitionists split with Garrison over this issue so that after 1840 there were two national associations and many local groups split and feuded with each other.³³

In Rhode Island many abolitionists deplored this separation and futilely urged unity for the good of the shared goal. The overall effect was that women's rights, an issue which had been clearly, though often inadvertently, raised in the antislavery crusade, was tabled. Many women after 1840 restricted their activities to less controversial support services. Fund-raising was still permissible, since women had been doing that at churches for some time, but more undeniably political participation, like public speaking and petitioning, diminished.

Some women, like Frances Whipple Green and Elizabeth Buffum Chace, refused to compromise. Since the church stood for the present

32. A. Fairbanks to Emily R. F. Winsor, Oct. 16, 1842, Rhode Island Manuscripts, John Hay Library, Providence. Quoted by permission of Brown University Library.

33. Gilbert H. Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse* (New York, 1964); Eileen Krador, *Means and Ends in American Abolitionism: Garrison and His Critics on Strategy and Tactics* (New York, 1969); and Nancy Hewitt, "The Social Origins of Women's Antislavery Politics in Western New York," in Alan Draut, ed., *Crusaders and Compromisers: Essays on the Relationship of the Antislavery Struggle to the Antebellum Party System* (Westport, Conn., 1984), 205–233.

34. Elizabeth B. Chace to Abby Wheaton Chase, Nov. 26, 1858. Reprinted in the *Liberator*.

35. Frances Whipple Green, *Shahmah in Pursuit of Freedom* (New York, 1858).

36. Joshua Leavitt, *The Emancipator*, Dec. 21, 1833, quoted in Walters, *Anti-slavery Appeal*, 102–103.

37. *The Liberator*, May 21, 1836.

order and therefore against abolitionism, Green abandoned Christian orthodoxy. Chace resigned from the Providence Meetings of Friends, the members of which, she argued, were not truly antislavery but rather apathetic in their support of the status quo. (Interestingly, Chace's husband, also a prominent radical abolitionist, never left the Quaker meeting.) Chace could not take time for other women's causes, such as raising money to restore Mount Vernon: "How can the women of this nation talk of commemorating that struggle [the Revolution], when, with their consent, and approval and aid, every sixth woman in the land is liable to be sold on the auction-block?"³⁴ And Green continued to write against prejudice on the eve of the Civil War, publishing her longest work, *Shahmah in Pursuit of Freedom* (1858), the story of an Algerian noble who comes to America to learn about "true human freedom." Of course he is appalled by slavery, and, after a series of stock adventures, leaves the United States with his bride to seek greater freedom in Brazil.³⁵

Petitioning the federal and state governments, educating themselves and their children, fundraising for national and local associations, Rhode Island's abolitionist women played a significant role in the fight against slavery. Despite the diminished visibility after 1840 of female abolitionists, most Americans continued to believe in the superior piety and moral sense of women. As one of the conservative abolitionists noted: "the influence of woman under God, is omnipotent."³⁶ In return, Rhode Island women, like female activists elsewhere, benefitted personally from their involvement as their spheres of activity, friendship, and influence broadened. Tens of thousands of American women accepted the responsibility of moral leadership, which encouraged even conservative women to expand their roles. Hundreds of women continued their reforming efforts, not just in temperance, education, or abolition, but for women's rights as well. Green campaigned for factory workers and Chace against sexual inequality. Other women, too, continued the moral campaign against slavery. As one Providence woman wrote to the *Liberator*: "If our gospel teachers will not lead us, we must lead them! Should we not blush . . . in as much as our sisters are in bonds, and we have not so much as lifted a hand to save them."³⁷

Providence
July 27th 1837

Miss Emily A. Winsor
at Greenville, Smithfield, R.I.

Dear friend,

Having had the pleasure of being informed that you are interested in the cause of truth and humanity I venture to address you a letter to respectfully entreat you to exert your influence in immediately forming a female Anti-Slavery Society in your place. Strength springs from action and actions come from being thrown in our own resources; five or six individuals only associative in this labor of love in assuming this responsibility of a society can produce effect much more than twice that number who feel no such responsibility. However small therefore the material from which you can organize let me entreat you as one united with you in this faerer cause to go on in the holy work—It will gladden the hearts of the Female Society here to know that another Sister brave is at work nearby—who will work in the might of love and the power of truth pleading in trumpet tones for the crushed and fettered.

Now is emphatically the time for the women of our country to labor, if they have the cause of the perishing at heart, if they are loving of their country they will in this time of their Nation's extreme peril put forth their energies to warn her at least from extending the boundaries of her unholy and guilty traffic.

If we are thoroughly imbued with the principles of abolitionism we shall deem it not only a duty but a privilege to engage in this labor of love. What heart would not rejoice to enter into this glorious work. To plead for the downtrodden and oppressed in southern bondage, and to rouse our own New England women to the discharge of their high responsibility.

Will not these arguments urged in love arouse the females of your town to action? We should have Societies organized and petitions going forth not only from every city but every quiet valley and peaceful plain at the North. The voices of New England women should be heard in every breeze crying

"Shall we behold unheeding,

Life's holiest feelings crushed!

When Woman's heart is bleeding,

Shall Woman's voice be hushed?"

I hope you will be enabled to do much "through Christ strengthening you," and that you will find many warm hearts and strong hands to cooperate with you. Be not discouraged though you meet with strong opposition if you stand the trial you will be all the better prepared for your duties. Our Society here will be happy to give you any advice or assistance in their power and by frequent communicating, enlist the sympathies of both in this common cause—Let us hear from you soon—And may our Heavenly Father grant that it may be such tidings as shall gladden our hearts and give us a new impetus to go on. Let me again urge you to Start a society. Think you number never [sic] so small a list.

Respectfully and truly yours
in the
Cause of Suffering

Eliza J. Chace
Cor. Sec.
P.L.A.S. Society

Miss Emily A. Winsor



*Pupils of the Slater Avenue
School circa 1905. Photo by
Frank Warren Marshall. Courtesy
of Rhode Island Historical
Society Library (RHi × 3 1165).*

The Providence School Board Reform Movement, 1898–1924

Patrick Harshbarger

In 1913 a small pamphlet entitled *Should Providence Have A Small School Commission? A Contribution To The Discussion* claimed that Providence's large ward-based school board was outdated, if not inefficient, and that wisdom dictated the city's adoption of a small, appointed school board. This pamphlet, published by the Providence Public Education Association (PPEA), a reform organization of prominent citizens, summed up the arguments of a controversy that had begun at least fifteen years earlier and was to continue for more than a decade. The school board reform controversy embroiled the city council, teachers, school committee members, concerned citizens and their organizations, and the state legislature. At stake was control of the city schools, an institution which all considered an important stabilizing influence for the industrialized and immigrant-swelled city. The school board reform movement was not unique to Providence; similar debates occurred in almost every American city. Issues included the relative merits of small and large school boards, the mode of selection of board members and the fiscal dependence of boards on city councils. Some attempts at reform failed, but most succeeded; as a result, reformers reduced the size of school boards, abolished the ward-based election of school committee members, and achieved their goals of centralization, efficiency, and nonpartisanship in school administration.

Twenty years prior to the PPEA publication, Dr. Joseph Mayer Rice, an influential educator and reformer, had toured America's urban school systems and commented on the diversity of school boards:

Boards are selected according to whims. Some are elected by the people, others are appointed, the appointing power lying in the hands of mayors, judges or councilmen, or a board of education may consist of a committee of the common council.¹

One historian has suggested that as cities grew from urban villages, they retained the patterns of the loosely structured school committee or council. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the job of operating ever larger schools became increasingly difficult for these loosely structured committees. The result was as Rice observed—a haphazard division of authority among city councils, school supervisors, and school boards.²

Reformers like Rice argued the need for a uniform system of school management, advocating small, non-ward-based school committees;

Mr. Harshbarger is currently a staff member at the Slater Mill Historic Site in Pawtucket. He graduated from Brown University in 1984.

1. Joseph M. Rice, *The Public School System of the United States*, ed. Lawrence A. Cremin (New York, 1969), 11.

2. David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Education* (Cambridge, Mass. 1974), 28–39.

3. For descriptions of these debates see Joseph M. Cronin, *The Control of Urban Schools: Perspective on the Power of Educational Reformers* (New York, 1973), 112–113, and Tyack, *One Best System*, 171.

4. Cronin, *Control of Urban Schools*, 92, 126.

5. Providence Public Education Association, *Should Providence Have A Small School Commission? A Contribution To The Discussion* (Providence, 1913), 24.

6. Tyack, *One Best System*, 127.

7. Membership information for this period is taken from Providence School Committee, *Records of the Meetings of the School Committee of Providence, 1890–*. [Hereafter cited as *Meeting Records*, [year]].

8. See *Providence Journal*, May 11, 1899, "The School System: Report of the Investigation Committee Made Public."

9. *Meeting Records*, 1901–1902, 285–288.

and, though the school board reform movement engendered fierce debate in many cities—two rival school boards existed in Chicago until the courts intervened, and the structure of New York City's board changed three times in twenty-seven years—the reformers' success was substantial.³ For example, a recent survey of fourteen representative cities showed that in 1900 seven appointed boards, four held at-large elections, one appointed only a superintendent, and two elected members by ward. By 1920 eight appointed board members by their mayors, judges, or city councils, and six elected boardmen in city-wide elections.⁴ By 1913 only four cities with populations of 100,000 or more still elected committee members by ward.⁵ In addition, between 1893 and 1913 the average school committee size dropped from 21.5 to 10.2, and by 1923 to 7.⁶

In Providence, reformers battled for over twenty-five years before achieving these goals. Between 1898 and 1924 Providence had a thirty-three member school committee consisting of three popularly elected representatives from each of the city's ten wards, the mayor, the president of the city common council, and the chairman of the common council's committee on education. School committee members typically came from Providence's middle and upper classes and included many judges, lawyers, doctors, and businessmen.⁷ The position was nonpaying, but may, at times, have been used as a political stepping stone to city council or beyond—at least, reformers believed such was the case.⁸ Except for occasional Italian or Irish names, the membership lists for the period suggest that few school committee representatives were recent immigrants. In 1917 the first woman was elected to the board and by 1924 seven of the thirty-three members were women. School committee terms ran three years, and often members held their seats for over ten years. Significantly, the Providence School Committee appeared to be a fairly homogeneous and stable organization throughout this period.

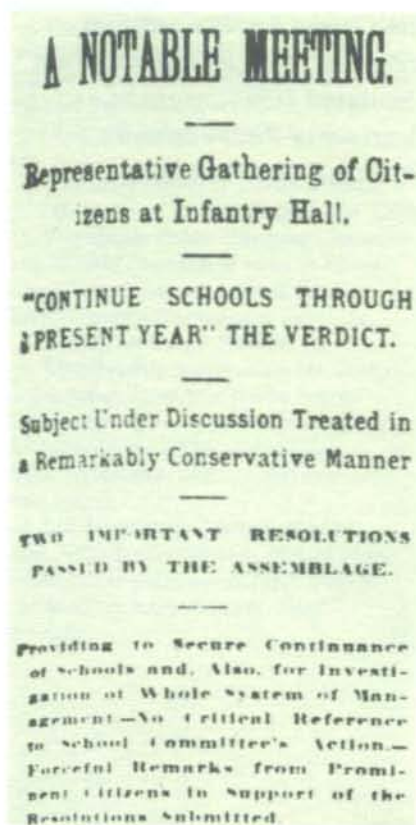
The school committee was involved in all matters concerning public education, from hiring personnel to selecting textbooks, and performed its duties in two ways: through the superintendent of schools and the board's standing committees. As executive director of the schools, the superintendent advised and oversaw teachers, disciplined students, coordinated programs between schools, and reported to the committee about the state of the education system. The board functioned through its five-member standing committees, each of which oversaw a designated area of public education. For example, in 1902 the board was divided into sixteen standing committees: annual report, accounts, apportionment, bylaws, domestic science, drawing, education of backward children, evening schools, grammar and primary schools, high schools, hygiene, music, penmanship, private schools, relations to the city council, and schoolhouses.⁹ An executive committee, chaired by the board's president, performed the board's important functions, nominating a superintendent and initiating most policy decisions.



The Oxford Street Grammar School in 1886. From Providence Illustrated (1886), plate 75. Courtesy of Rhode Island Historical Society Library (RHi ×3 5092).

There were two areas, however, over which the school committee made recommendations but did not exercise control, the school budget and construction of new buildings. The city council annually determined the amount of money to be appropriated to the schools and, through its Department of Public Works, approved all construction. This situation provided constant frustration for the school committee, which found the city council forever ignoring its recommendations for a larger school budget and construction of new schoolhouses and administrative offices.

The reform movement began in 1898 when the city council failed to appropriate all funds requested by the school committee in its annual budget. In late September, the school committee responded to a forty thousand dollar deficit in its operating funds by announcing a resolution closing all kindergartens, abolishing evening schools, suspending classes in special departments (e.g., drawing, cooking, and sewing), and "enjoining economy and curtailment of expenses in every possible



Headline from the Providence Daily Journal, October 20, 1898, describing the citizens meeting held the previous evening to protest cutbacks in many school programs. Courtesy of Rhode Island Historical Society Library (RHi x3 5097).

10. Providence School Committee, Report of the School Committee, 1890—(Providence, various publishers), 1898—1899, 6. [Hereafter cited as *Reports*, [year]].

11. See *Providence Journal*, May 11, 1899, and *Reports*, 1898—1899, 3—6.

12. *Providence Journal*, May 11, 1899.

direction."¹⁰ The public was outraged, and on October 19 a mass demonstration was held in Providence's Infantry Hall, the city's largest auditorium, to protest. Participants called upon the committee to reinstate all of the effected programs and demanded that the mayor appoint a public school investigation committee to examine existing conditions and recommend improvements. In response to public pressure, Mayor William C. Barker appointed an investigation committee, and the school committee reopened the evening schools for a shortened twenty-week term and resumed all suspended work. Nonetheless, for lack of funding, the schools closed two weeks early.¹¹

The investigation committee comprehensively surveyed the schools on topics from curricula to building upkeep. The five members of the committee were all prominent Providence citizens: Dr. James G. Vose, Congregationalist minister of the Benefit Street Church; Professor Nathaniel F. Davis, a mathematics teacher at Brown University; Sarah E. Doyle, former Providence school teacher and president of the Rhode Island Collegiate Women's Association; Cornelius S. Sweetland, president of the Providence Banking Company; and Michael J. Harson, a dealer in men's furnishings. Their report, completed in May 1899, recommended two major changes to the school system: repeal of the free textbook law, a measure which would save the schools the cost of buying books, and replacement of the "cumbersome" thirty-three member school committee with a nine member board of education to be appointed by the mayor. Three members were to be women and one was to be the chairman of the city council's committee on education. In addition, the investigators condemned the tendency of school committeemen to look more particularly toward affairs in their own wards rather than toward the whole school system, and decried the use of the school committee by certain members as a political stepping stone. An appointed committee, it was argued, would eliminate these evils. They alluded to "honest" graft on the current board, recommending a law to prohibit city government officials from selling supplies to the school department. "By such a law," they added, "much opportunity for favoritism, to use a mild word, is avoided." Furthermore, if the present system continued, the committee believed that executive power should be taken away from the school committee and "placed in the hands of educationally trained officials, who ought to be capable of selecting teachers."¹²

Overall, this report must have stuck a thorn in the school committee's side, so much of one that the board answered with a report of its own, pointing out the "regretful" errors of the investigation committee's "thorough and praise worthy" survey. In its own lengthy report, the school committee argued that while there were advantages to a small board, as much could be said in favor of a school committee elected by and responsible to the people; a large elected board insured better democracy, and a board appointed by the mayor was "quite as likely to be affected by political considerations as was the selection of

the school committee by the voters of the wards." The board members adamantly stated that the present organization of standing committees was neither burdensome, divided along political lines, or used as a means to "political preferment" in the city. Addressing favoritism, the report stated firmly: "It has never been true in this city, and is directly contrary to the present practice here, as the slightest investigation would have ascertained." In response to the suggestion that patronage played a role in the selection of teachers, the committee members were similarly appalled and angered. They noted that all candidates for teaching positions were taken from an "Approved List" of state normal school graduates ranked according to the "excellence of their work as certified by the Normal School."¹³

In all, the school committee's report served to leave in some doubt, if not to discredit, much of the investigation committee's survey. And although only a few of the investigation committee's recommendations were enacted, the school committee was forced to answer the accusations of outraged citizens and angry teachers. The 1898-1899 controversy increased awareness of apparent structural weaknesses in the management of the schools and sparked a school board reform movement in Providence.

Between 1900 and 1920, the most persistent critic of the Providence School Committee was the PPEA. Formed in 1900 and dominated by civic-minded women, clergy, and Brown University faculty, the PPEA asserted that its purpose was to guard the schools and influence them to adopt what it considered the best educational standards. Reflecting a mistrust for the "uneducated" masses, one PPEA charter publication stated that

between a school committee, elected, as many of those in our cities are, by political influences, and the community they are presumed to serve, there is a need in the present stage of our American social evolution of an interpretive body—an organization composed of citizens avowedly interested in the question of the best method of educating our children. With a large voting population unused to the meaning or significance of our schools, it is desirable, that public sentiment should be influenced by those familiar with the best educational traditions, as well as awake to the broader demands made upon our schools to-day by the complex nationality of the children to be educated into intelligent citizens of the United States.¹⁴

The PPEA attempted to carry out its policy for good education by isolating the school management system from politics, partisanship, and the influence of board members who did not share their concept of the public schools.

The PPEA realized that any alteration in the structure of Providence's school committee required amending the city charter in the Rhode Island General Assembly. In every session of the General Assembly from

13. For quotations see Providence School Committee, *Report of the Executive Committee of the School Committee In Regard to the Recommendations Contained in the Report of the Investigation Committee, June 9, 1899* (Providence, 1899), 3-6.

14. Providence Public Education Association, *Members of the Providence Public Education Association* (Providence, n.d.), 1.

15. PPEA, *Statement and Opinions In Regard to the Bill Substituting a Board of Education for the Present Cumbersome School Committee of Providence* (Providence, 1905), 5.

16. *Ibid.*, 5.

17. PPEA, *Should Providence Have A Small School Commission*, 2–28.

1902 to 1905 bills were presented for the creation of a small, unpaid, at-large, elected board of education. The PPEA supported these bills with the written endorsements of prominent educators like Andrew S. Draper, Harvard President Charles W. Eliot, and F. J. Goodenow. At a rally for the 1905 bill, PPEA supporter Sarah E. Doyle reiterated the organization's position that the conduct of the city's schools was so important as to be "placed in the hands of a few men who are actuated by the belief that our schools are worthy of the best, men who have the interests of education and the welfare of our children at heart."¹⁵

Yet, despite the support of leaders like Doyle each attempt to modify the charter failed. The 1903 bill, which came closest to passing, was approved by the House but held up in Senate committee. The PPEA felt that the reasons for this failure were merely political: the city of Providence was insufficiently represented in the Rhode Island Senate, and the Providence School Committee was unwilling either to endorse openly or reject reform. The failure of the legislation seemed to confirm the PPEA's worst fears about the incompatibility of education and politics. As supporters of the reform bills attempted to understand their failure, one PPEA member was quoted as stating, "There have been not only no worthy arguments, but no arguments at all, against the measure."¹⁶

In 1913 the PPEA continued its fight with *Should Providence Have A Small School Commission? A Contribution to the Discussion*, a well-organized and less indignant argument against the large school committee. In objective tones, this publication considered the relative merits of small versus large, paid versus unpaid, and elected versus appointed boards. The corporate board of directors provided the model for the reformers' ideal board of education. The Providence School Committee's structure was carefully compared to school boards in other American cities. The PPEA showed that for cities with populations in excess of one hundred thousand, Providence's thirty-three member school committee ranked in size second only to New York City. Reformers hoped to prove the need for reorganization before Providence fell further behind the times. In addition, the pamphlet suggested that any new school committee should be financially independent and either elected at large or appointed by the mayor, preferably the former. Businesslike efficiency, centralized organization, and a distrust for politics were the key values and tenets of reform espoused by the PPEA.¹⁷

Other factors, besides the PPEA, were calling attention to problems in public school administration. Throughout the 1900s and 1910s, the growing school budget continually caused friction between the city council and school committee. Every year from 1898 to 1913 the city council appropriated less money than the estimated school expenditures, and inevitably the school committee pleaded at midyear for an additional appropriation. The annual financial reports of the school committee became angry and blunt. The 1911–1912 report read:

The stereotyped report of inadequate funds must be made concerning the finances. The committee asked the City Council for the maintenance of the schools the sum of \$1,023,173.00. The council appropriated for their use \$900,000.¹⁸

School committee members defended these increases by citing "the natural growth of the schools and the increases of wages insisted upon by the school employees supported by public opinion, by conditions of living, and in some cases by competition of the school departments of other cities."¹⁹ An earlier historian caustically remarked that the schools had been "systematically starved by the city council by the withholding of adequate and reasonable appropriations."²⁰

In addition, the need for new schoolhouses to relieve overcrowded conditions became another source of contention between the committee and council. Between 1900 and 1920 the number of children in Providence schools increased from 25,513 to 36,730.²¹ Every school report between 1900 and 1915 pressed the city council, through its Department of Public Works, to construct new buildings. The city council was more responsive on this issue, but often a proposal for a new building or school addition needed to be recommended repeatedly before any action was taken. For instance, an administrative office building was delayed for four years before approval. Meanwhile, the superintendent kept offices in badly needed classroom space in one of the high schools, the truant officer was posted in City Hall, and the superintendent of janitors found space in a local police station.²² Like many cities of the time, Providence was facing financial difficulties. Perhaps in the council's mind the school committee's requests were extravagant. It seemed clear, however, to reformers, school board members, and some citizens that the city council's unwillingness to cooperate with the school committee was obstructing public education.

In many cities, such as Chicago, the teachers' federations effectively lobbied the state legislatures in support of school board reform bills.²³ The Public School Teachers Association of Providence, although neither as strong nor as militant as, for example, the Chicago Federation of Teachers, supported a small commission. Citing the Ohio Plan, where a small school board was elected partly at large and partly by district, one Providence teachers' publication insisted:

The tendency toward small boards is well nigh uniform and universal. If the wave is to come this way, will not the Ohio Plan give Providence the best satisfaction?²⁴

However supportive of a small board, teachers probably felt wise to keep their opinions relatively quiet. Even in Chicago, where teachers tried to join the Chicago Federation of Labor, over sixty teachers were dismissed at one time for speaking and acting against the school board.²⁵

The experience of one outspoken Providence teacher during the 1898–1899 controversy confirmed these fears. Lizzie C. Olney wrote to



Sarah E. Doyle (1830–1922), a long-time public school teacher and principal and president of the Rhode Island Women's Collegiate Association, was one of five prominent Providence citizens to serve on the public school investigation committee of 1898. Courtesy of Rhode Island Historical Society Library RHi X3 4572.

18. *Reports, 1911–12*, 5.

19. *Reports, 1907–08*, 6–7.

20. Irving Samuel Williams, "A History of Public High School of Providence" (Master's thesis, Brown University, 1941), 31.

21. *Ibid.*, 44.

22. *Meeting Records, 1909–1910*, 21.

23. Tyack, *One Best System*, 169–170.

24. "School Administration," *Public School Teachers Association of Providence, Rhode Island Bulletin No. 2* (Sept. 1906), 15.

25. Julia Wrigley, *Class Politics and Public Schools: Chicago 1900–1950* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1982), 134.

26. The following account is based upon a handwritten letter attached to the investigation committee's report at the John Hay Library, Providence.

27. See Tyack, *One Best System*, 191, 193-194.

28. George D. Strayer, *Report of the Survey of Certain Aspects of the Public School System of Providence, Rhode Island* (Providence, 1924), 10.

the *Boston Herald* to praise the investigation committee for reporting "the first truthful expression of what they [teachers] had longed to say."²⁶ Accusing the school committee of favoritism, she wrote:

Anyone who has watched the appointment of teachers during the last six or seven years knows perfectly well that those appointments have been given not to those who are capable but to those whom certain members of the committee for political reasons desire or favor. Indeed there are not a few teachers who boast of acquiring their positions in that way and of the influence they are able to exert [*sic*]. Just so long as a position on the committee serves as a stepping stone to political advancement this evil will continue.

Olney was soon dismissed; the result, she claimed, of having written the letter, which had been shown to members of the school committee but not published. In response to her inquiries, a newspaper correspondent told Olney that the letter was "rabid and libelous" and "that she should never write another." Yet, due to the very investigative report that Olney had praised, the school committee eliminated about a dozen teaching positions, including hers. After thirteen years of service in the Providence schools, she left the city.

A legislative act of the January 1924 General Assembly reorganized the school administration of Providence. Interestingly, the initiative for the action came finally from the city council, not the PPEA or another reform group. In 1923 a council committee had requested George D. Strayer of the Columbia Teachers College to survey the Providence city schools and recommend changes. Between 1910 and 1927, 181 of these surveys were completed throughout the country, and educational professionals like George Strayer could report at least a fifty percent success rate in achieving the goals set forth in their surveys. Indeed, little opposition emerged to these formidable surveys; historian David Tyack reports "few were the voices raised in public dissent that would argue with findings of the empirically and philosophically loaded guns of a professional educator."²⁷

Strayer's views were similar to those of earlier reformers; and, coming from an educational professional, gave credence to the opinions of groups like the PPEA. Stressing independence and nonpartisanship, Strayer outlined his understanding of the school committee's position in local government:

The intention is clearly to recognize education as a state function, delegated to a local body, separate and distinct from the general city government. The election of members of this body on a non-partisan ballot indicates a further desire to remove schools from the realm of municipal politics. This separateness of schools from partisan control or consideration requires that the school committee be given the very largest possible freedom in the exercise of its function.²⁸

Strayer's findings in Providence were not surprising; he recommended that the school committee consist of seven members, five elected from school districts and two elected at large. This, Strayer believed, would remove the evils of ward politics but retain a form of local control. In addition, he proposed that the city council be required to appropriate the sum of any school budget not exceeding thirty-five percent of the city's tax revenue, and that if the council failed to approve any recommended new construction, the matter would be submitted to a referendum. Strayer felt that this would solve the financial conflicts between the school committee and city council, and prevent a repeat of the 1898 financial shortfall.²⁹

If the reform in 1924 seemed sudden, it was because the political climate had changed; no opposition came from City Hall, the school committee, or the Rhode Island General Assembly. Reform of this sort was a more generally accepted measure, and no one was willing to stand up against the advice of an expert. As a result, these recommendations passed the legislature with only small alterations. In December 1924, a period of over three decades of ward-based school government had come

29. *Ibid.*, 7-16.

*Providence elementary school
graduating class circa 1905.
Courtesy of Rhode Island
Historical Society Library
(RHi ×3 5093).*



30. Tyack, *One Best System*, 127.

31. Cronin, *Control of Urban Schools*,
11.

to an end, and the views of concerned middle- and upper-class citizens, the PPEA, professional educators, and teachers prevailed.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are recalled for the reforms they brought to American society, responses to social, demographic, political, and economic changes underway. In Providence, as elsewhere, school board reformers sought structural solutions to the problems of public education. Reformers attacked partisanship, inefficiency, unprofessionalism, and the lack of centralized decision making in the large school committee. Their efforts included little criticism of the committee's policy decisions; instead, reformers denounced the processes by which the board worked. One historian has named this group "administrative progressives," men and women who "sought centralization of control and social efficiency in urban education."³⁰

Historians have been tempted to suggest that the administrative progressives restructured the school boards to keep immigrants and workers from gaining control of the schools. Joseph Cronin, for example, argues that the urban elite felt that the European immigrant, if elected to the school committee, would patronize his family and friends by giving them jobs or contracts and perpetuate old world ideals in the schools—both unacceptable to the progressives who saw the schools as institutions to Americanize the immigrants and stabilize the working classes. As the number of immigrants grew, Cronin concludes the elite "could not retain control of the city schools if they were run by boards elected at the ward level, so they changed the rules."³¹ Small, popularly elected boards would be more naturally limited to business and professional leaders in the community rather than party operatives.

Cronin is correct, the administrative progressives did want to protect the schools from the uneducated masses, but evidence from Providence suggests that the motivation to reform was much more complex than a conflict between the classes. Reformers felt that the recent immigrants were insufficiently indoctrinated in self-government to run the schools, however, there is no clear evidence to indicate that the city's elite felt their power on the school board slipping away. At the heart of the school board reform movement was a sincere belief and a utopian faith in education to preserve democracy, teach morality, Americanize the immigrant, and help the children of the city to success. The schools were a sacred institution to be protected and isolated from the "evils" of the city.

Reformers used the organization and management practices of the efficiency movement in industry and the growing respect for professionalism and expertise to centralize school policy decision making, to expurgate patronage and corruption from school politics, and to solve the ongoing financial problems of the schools. Through charter amendments like those obtained in Providence, the administrative progressives transformed this concept of educational management into law, and restructured the school boards. David Tyack has called the urban school reform movement a search for the "one best system." Reformers

presumed that their ideas and values embodied the principles for ordering the chaos they saw created by the diversification and growth of the American city. The administrative progressives were ideally minded men and women with a great faith in education, to them nothing less than the best possible system of school management would do.

From the Collections:
An Embossed Leather Cockade
by Providence Engraver William Hamlin
Robert P. Emlen

Mr. Emlen, former Associate Curator at the Rhode Island Historical Society, is the Executive Director of the Nicholas Brown Foundation for the Study of American Civilization.

1. Eugene Van Wye, "William Hamlin, Providence Engraver," *R. I. History XX* (1961), 33-44. For the recent additions see silver tammany badges and a brass belt buckle engraved "Edward Carrington" in the society's collections. The commemorative plaque is in Papers of the First Congregational Church, R. I. Historical Society.

2. Letter from Bruce Bazelton, Registrar at the William Penn Museum, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, March 29, 1982, in the files of the R. I. Historical Society.

Among recent additions to the society's museum collections is a rare cockade from an early Rhode Island military uniform. It is made of embossed leather, in a stylized representation of the elegant folded ribbons worn on the side of a cap or helmet. Though leather cockades became standard issue for certain branches and ranks of the American military by the end of the eighteenth century, almost none have survived to the present. The society's example is one of a handful known today.

In place of the brass or tin insignia used to ornament the original silk ribbon cockades, illustrative designs were stamped directly into the body of leather cockades. In this manner, the society's example is richly ornamented with the military iconography of the new nation. An American eagle holds in his beak a banner proclaiming "E Pluribus Unum," waving among thirteen stars. In his talons he clutches crossed flags; below them are an array of cannon and shot, sabres and pistols, bugles and a drum, helmets and a knapsack.

Such extensive illustration has not been recorded on other stamped leather cockades of this period. The unusual amount of ornament embossed on this one can be explained by the discovery of the words "HAMLIN" and "Providence," stamped on the left and right edges of the bottom slice. They refer to William Hamlin, self-taught artist and Providence's first engraver.

A jack of many trades, Hamlin turned his hand to a fascinating variety of work during his ninety-seven years. A 1961 checklist of his engravings lists the plates for some sixty-nine prints, to which has since been added examples of fraternal badges, a brass belt buckle, and the commemorative plaque buried in the cornerstone of Providence's First Congregational Church in 1815.¹ A further demonstration of William Hamlin's versatility as an engraver is the discovery that he also cut the steel dies that stamped this leather cockade.

The cockade has descended in the family of Rhode Island Governor William Jones, and in 1982 was given to the society, along with the Jones papers, by his great, great granddaughter. Stylistically, the cockade dates from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century,² a little late for Jones's Revolutionary War service both as an army captain in the Second Rhode Island Regiment, and as a captain of marines on

board the frigate *Providence*. But as governor of Rhode Island from 1813 to 1817, he was captain general and commander in chief of the state militia and may have acquired the uniform adornment during those war years.³

Recently photographed in high contrast, the cockade is reproduced here in full size. Although leather is a soft material to use for a detailed impression, its crisp martial images are glorious and distinct. The discovery and identification of this rather arcane piece of leather has meant a rare and valuable addition to one of the society's rich and varied collections, and an important resource for students of the military history of Rhode Island.



Leather Cockade signed by William Hamlin (1772–1869) Providence, Rhode Island, circa 1795–1815. Collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society. Gift of Clare Randall Murray, 1982.2.1. 6½" high × 4½" wide.

3. See "Notes from the Providence Veteran Citizens Historical Society," *Providence Journal*, Jan. 15, 1884, and Hon. William W. Hoppin, "Memoir of Governor William Jones," *R. I. Hist. Soc. Proceedings* (1875–76), 21–24.

Book Reviews

The Antimasonic Party in the United States, 1826-1843. By WILLIAM PRESTON VAUGHN. (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1983. x + 244 pp. \$22.00.)

The first professional historian of Antimasonry, Charles McCarthy, called the movement a "strange agitation." Until recently, historians have tended to agree. The seemingly disproportionate reaction to the 1826 abduction of William Morgan by Freemasons was, for Richard Hofstadter, a prime example of the rural reactionary movement and its "paranoid style." Over the past ten years, however, some historians have suggested that the Antimasons were not so reactionary after all. Instead, as Ronald P. Formisano and others have argued, they were a middle-class movement fighting for social and political equality.

Oddly, William Preston Vaughn's new study adds little to this discussion. Although it neatly summarizes the work of the new school of interpretation, it seems to accept without argument Hofstadter's view. Vaughn speaks almost casually of "hysteria," and sees little cause for Antimasonic fears. The main concern of the book lies elsewhere—in politics. Antimasons are presented as men primarily bent on gaining political advantage. Vaughn seems to conceive of politics as a closed system, a separate sphere. For him as for McCarthy, the real story is in the actions and interactions of party leaders. The formation of a political organization, the emergence of leaders and proposals, and party electoral successes and failures are traced in detail. He devotes separate chapters to Massachusetts, Vermont, Rhode Island, and to other states where the party was weaker, such as Ohio and New Jersey. Pennsylvania and New York, the states with the most influential parties, are discussed at greater length. William Wirt's 1832 presidential campaign and the party's decline in 1836 and 1840 also receive extended attention.

Flourishing in areas where political affairs were in disarray in the late 1820s and early 1830s, the Antimasonic party, in Vaughn's view, was driven chiefly by desire for political success. Although he notes the many purists who sought to keep the crusade from political maneuvering and never makes political advantage a sole cause, this argument pops up again and again when he discusses Antimasonic leaders. This view of politicians as primarily concerned with power fits neatly into Vaughn's main argument—what he calls "the purpose of the book." The Antimasons, he shows, were willing to side with diverse groups in order to gain political advantage and were not merely a bridge to the Whig party. New York Antimasons differed little in program, except perhaps on the bank, from the National Republicans, and they eventually absorbed the latter in the new Whig coalition; but in Massachusetts, the

majority of the Antimasonic party became Democrats, as did a substantial minority in Vermont and Rhode Island. The Antimasons then were a "flexible minority," not merely Whigs in the making.

Despite its flexibility and hunger for political success, the party failed nationally and enjoyed only temporary success on the state level. It elected several governors and dozens of national representatives but never achieved majority status for very long. Still, Antimasonry succeeded as a movement: the fraternity was severely crippled in most states where the party was active, as Vaughn shows in short sections tacked on to the end of each state study. The number of Rhode Island Masons, for example, declined by two-thirds between 1825 and 1835.

Vaughn's detailed state-by-state narrative warns historians against an oversimplified view of the party, yet its focus on party conventions, elections, and legislative activities limits its value. Although he tells this story well, Vaughn is better at reciting what happened than at explaining why it happened. Why, for example, were politicians able to gain at least temporary success by attacking Freemasons? And if the movement ended, as Vaughn argues, because the arguments no longer seemed plausible, why did so many people believe them to begin with? The answers, it seems to me, must be found outside of the book—in the deep changes of spreading Evangelical and Democratic ideas and in the creation of the first true party system. Vaughn is content to summarize the Antimasonic indictment; and, except for the story of Morgan's abduction, gives little attention to the movement's causes. Antimasonry developed in a period when new rules and boundaries were being established in politics and society; these systemic changes provide the context which gives meaning to the Antimasonic party's activities. Until such issues are confronted in our account of Antimasonry, the movement and the party will remain, as they appear in Vaughn's book, a "strange agitation." His extensive research and careful narrative lead to "thick" documentation, not "thick" description.

Brown University

STEVEN C. BULLOCK

Dissent and Conformity on Narragansett Bay: The Colonial Rhode Island Town. By BRUCE C. DANIELS. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983. xii + 137 pp. \$25.00.)

The easy assumption that Rhode Island is the exception to every generalization one can make about colonial America needs to be reexamined and at least partially modified in the wake of Bruce C. Daniels's *Dissent and Conformity on Narragansett Bay: The Colonial Rhode Island Town*. Daniels's study attempts a topical analysis of the early Rhode Island experience. His description of the colony's settlement by "four communities of outcasts" (p. 1), the formation of towns, demographic patterns, local government, poor relief, and local finance leads to the

conclusion that in many ways Rhode Island was indeed unique. The colony differed even from its closest New England neighbors in some rather fundamental ways. Its early tolerance of dissent, a practice for which it was both famous and infamous, marked the colony from the beginning as a pariah by its sister colonies. Rhode Island was, moreover, characterized by a slightly more democratic impulse; its inhabitants were more antiauthoritarian, individualistic, and politically active than most. The colony was also more urban, and relied on a better paid, relatively efficient and impersonal bureaucracy that made it more "modern" than either Connecticut or Massachusetts.

Nevertheless, Daniels assures us that "Rhode Island exhibited enough of the characteristics of its Puritan neighbor [Connecticut] to place it well within the constitutional paradigm" of the New England system, even while it "exhibited enough differences to mark itself distinctively within that paradigm" (p. 105). The differences were a matter of detail and degree, not of essence. Most of its variations from the norm indicated merely that the much maligned colony was "ahead" of its time, forced by its own curious circumstances to deal with problems and arrive at solutions that would eventually be confronted and embraced elsewhere in America. Religious freedom, for instance, would eventually become the norm, not the exception; impersonal bureaucracies would, of necessity, gradually replace the informal and somewhat irregular means of social control that characterized the towns of Massachusetts and Connecticut.

The similarities between Rhode Island, on the one hand, and Connecticut and Massachusetts, on the other (for Daniels's comparisons are confined almost exclusively to these three colonies), are not surprising. Rhode Island's settlers shared a common religious background and a geographical similarity with their New England counterparts. Its settlers carried with them a strong belief in "law and order" and a commitment to a town meeting form of government. Moreover, Rhode Island's physical proximity to the rest of New England dictated that it would work with its neighbors to solve problems of mutual defense, and that there would be a continued flow of settlers back and forth across the borders that artificially separated Rhode Island from Massachusetts and Connecticut.

Daniels's book is more suggestive than conclusive. He neatly sidesteps any effort to define precisely what he means by "New England," admitting that it is perhaps impossible to assert that there were "any such things as 'New England norms'" (p. 114). And the attempt to place a multitown study of Rhode Island within a comparative context often seems a bit forced and artificial. His generalizations concerning Rhode Island's relationship to the rest of New England are of major interest. Yet they all appear briefly, at the end of each chapter, where they are provocative but not always fully substantiated. Still, the effort to compare Rhode Island to its ideological and geographical neighbors is laudable and often modestly successful. Daniels's analysis of Rhode Island's struggle with the problems of poor relief and local finance is par-

ticularly illuminating, as it highlights some of the real differences that the colony had with its larger, more affluent, and less individualistic neighbors.

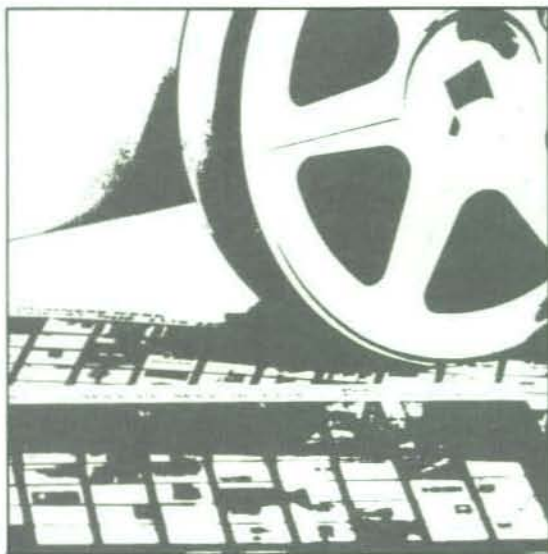
Daniels's first chapter is his weakest. It discusses Rhode Island's beginnings as a colony composed of religious extremists, all of whose leaders, at least, held "political views that provided a radical alternative to the world surrounding them." But it fails to distinguish clearly enough between Roger Williams and his followers, who established the mainland settlement of Providence, and the "Antinomian" supporters of Anne Hutchinson, who settled in Portsmouth and then Newport, on the island of Aquidneck. (It was, by the way, not Hutchinson, as Daniels asserts [p. 4], but William Coddington who led the move from Portsmouth to Newport.) Williams founded his community with the express intent of guaranteeing religious freedom or "soul liberty" to its inhabitants. The Hutchinsonians planned to establish one "true" state-supported church in Portsmouth, and were, in their own way, as committed to religious uniformity as were the Puritans of Massachusetts. They came only gradually and reluctantly to share Williams's attitudes toward the separation of church and state.

Daniels's analysis of Rhode Island's unique characteristics may need some fine-tuning. While he does admit that the rhetorical battles between Rhode Island and its neighbors often gave an exaggerated impression of the differences that really divided them, he nevertheless tends to overemphasize the role that religious dissent had in developing the colony's more unusual characteristics. At least as much importance must be attached to Rhode Island's relatively small size, its lack of a hinterland, and the proximity of most of its major towns to the sea. Daniels does not fail to discuss these factors, of course, but it is Rhode Island's religious individualism, not its physical geography, that to some extent unfairly dominates his analysis.

University of Mississippi

SHEILA L. SKEMP

This Publication is available in Microform.



University Microfilms International

Please send additional information

for _____

(name of publication)

Name _____

Institution _____

Street _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

300 North Zeeb Road
Dept. P.R.
Ann Arbor, Mi. 48106

A Gift for the Future

The Board of Trustees of the Rhode Island Historical Society would like you to consider making the Society a beneficiary when you are preparing your will. Such a bequest would help insure the Society's continuing efforts to collect, preserve, and interpret Rhode Island's rich heritage. A bequest to the Society is truly a gift to future generations of Rhode Islanders so that they may share in the Society's services and programs.

Should you desire to include the Society as a beneficiary of an unrestricted bequest when preparing your will, the following wording is suggested:

I give and bequeath to The Rhode Island Historical Society in Providence in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations _____dollars (\$ _____) for its general uses and purposes.

The Director of the Society will be happy to discuss this matter with you. Gifts to the Society via bequest are deductible from federal estate taxation.



The Rhode Island Historical Society

110 Benevolent Street, Providence, Rhode Island 02906
(401) 331-8575