



# Rhode Island History

Volume 45, Number 2

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## An Invitation

The articles that usually appear in the pages of RHODE ISLAND HISTORY constitute the individual building blocks of research which slowly add to our understanding of the Rhode Island experience. This issue, however, is somewhat different. When Professor McLoughlin first submitted his "Ten Turning Points in Rhode Island's History" and Professor Lemons agreed to offer his own list, we saw an opportunity to address the most basic questions historians and readers ask: who are we and where have we been? That the issue in which these articles appear will be published during Rhode Island's 350th anniversary was so much the better.

Each of our authors has brought to the task considerable experience in historical research, and each has looked with honesty and candor at Rhode Island's achievements and failures. In the pages that follow, readers will discover that Professors McLoughlin and Lemons agree on the significance of some turning points and disagree on others. They even offer differing definitions of the concept of a turning point.

Likewise, readers may find themselves anxious for the opportunity to contribute their own refinements and additions to the consideration of Rhode Island's most significant turning points. With this in mind, we invite our readers to submit short essays offering alternative turning points for publication in a future issue of RHODE ISLAND HISTORY. We ask only that contributors limit their essays to five hundred words or less and submit them by 1 November 1986 to the Editor at the Society.

The occasion of the 350th anniversary of Roger Williams's solitary journey from the Massachusetts Bay Colony to establish the outcast community of Providence will be marked in countless ways during 1986. We hope that amid the fireworks and festivals this special issue will help satisfy the need to reflect on who we are and where we've been, and that the future publication of readers' insights into Rhode Island's turning points may continue that reflection after the celebration has ended.



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*On 24 November 1663,  
the freemen of Providence  
Plantations and Rhode Island  
met at Newport to receive the  
royal charter from Charles II.  
This engraving depicts Captain  
George Baxter, just returned  
from England, presenting the  
charter to that assemblage. RIHS  
Collection (RHi X3 5419).*

# Ten Turning Points in Rhode Island History

William G. McLoughlin

Anyone who tries to delineate the important turning points in anything is probably in for trouble. Whatever points one chooses are going to reveal more about one's own view of history (or sports, or politics, or whatever) than anything else, and the choices are bound to be debatable. It is worse than trying to pick an all-star football team. So I do this with considerable hesitation. The problem would become even more difficult if I were asked to rank-order these ten turning points, and I am not going to do that. I am simply going to present them in chronological order. But first, let me say something about how I chose them.

What is a "historical turning point"? When I started to write this, I sat down and listed all the important events in Rhode Island history that came to mind. Then I divided the list into four different categories: political, social/cultural, economic, and technological. I limited the list to the fifteen most important events in each of the four categories (see Appendix 1). Only then was I able to find some pattern in the carpet of our history. I had to be careful about dating each event. It seems to me that if we are looking for major "turning points," we could not really find a single event, day, or probably even a year which would constitute, in and of itself, a major watershed in the history of a state as complex as this. For example, consider the American Revolution as a major turning point; would you date its impact with the beginning of the Stamp Act Crisis in 1765? the burning of the Gaspee in 1772? the first shots at Lexington and Concord in 1775? the Declaration of Independence in 1776? or the full eight years of the war ending with the Treaty of Paris in 1783? So I decided, in most cases, to choose a group of years for the turning points rather than a single year—times during which I felt that the people of Rhode Island shifted from one important position to another.

Second, I decided that the date at which something first started is not really so important as that date when it had a major impact upon the state as a whole. For example, it is clear that the conflict between capital and labor has had a major impact on Rhode Island's economy, but it is much less important to know the date of the first labor strike or the date the first trade union was founded than to know that point when the labor movement had gained sufficient power to bargain effectively with management. Similarly, it is less important to know when the first feminist raised her voice to demand equal rights for women than to know when the state legislature considered the womens' movement

William G. McLoughlin, Professor of History at Brown University, has received the John Nicholas Brown award for distinguished contributions to Rhode Island history. Among his many publications is *Rhode Island: A History*, in the States and the Nation series published in conjunction with the national Bicentennial. "Ten Turning Points in Rhode Island History" was delivered originally as the opening address to the Rhode Island Leadership Conference, 25 January 1984. It has been revised for publication.

sufficiently important to ratify the Equal Rights amendment. In both of these cases, (labor and women), more than a century passed between the movement's beginning and its significant impact on the state. These significant impact dates rather than starting points are the focus of this article.

Third, there are a number of events, which, at the time they occurred, seemed to many people to be of major importance. Though these events produced a great deal of concern, anger, and turmoil, in retrospect, they did not turn out to be so momentous. One good example is the Prohibition amendment of 1918. Rhode Islanders fought bitterly against that amendment and ours was one of two states in the Union that never ratified it. Rhode Islanders also developed a highly profitable rum-running and bootlegging traffic in protest against Prohibition, but in the long run, we can see that this fourteen-year experiment in total abstinence failed. It had no lasting effect on the nation or this state except perhaps to demonstrate that laws can't change mores. But that is not the kind of turning point that I want to discuss, so Prohibition did not make my list. The same can be said of the Nineteenth Amendment which gave women the right to vote. The Nineteenth Amendment did not have any measureable impact on the history of Rhode Island, however much it may have done for the psychological and political improvement of the status of women.

This brings me to a fourth point I had to consider: to choose only turning points significant for the people of Rhode Island or include those important for the nation as a whole? In some cases, these are impossible to separate. The Civil War, for example, or even World War I, certainly had a major impact both on the state and country. But were they really turning points in Rhode Island's history in any significant way? Did they alter the direction in which we were moving or the way we lived? Certainly we can say that both wars gave tremendous boosts to the state's industrial economy, but I do not think we can say that either one drastically, or significantly, altered the course in which the state was moving and continued to move. These wars were not turning points or watersheds in the history of Rhode Island itself, however much they altered the nation as a whole.

Fifth, although it should go without saying, a major turning point can be for good or evil, for the benefit or detriment of the state. Americans are, on the whole, so optimistic, so forward-looking, so imbued with the idea of progress onward and upward, that they do not like to think that there have been any major steps backward or even sideward in our state and national history. But we have to be honest about this; there certainly have been major setbacks in the progress of the United States and of Rhode Island from time to time, and no historian worth his salt would fail to mention these.

Finally, when I came to the last cut and began to look at the four lists of political, cultural, economic, and technological turning points, I was struck that a number of these cut across all four areas, and certainly many combined two or three of them. This made my task a lot easier, for obviously any turning point that affected most or all of the major

aspects of the state's history certainly deserved to be included among the final list of important turning points.

Having given the criteria and the logic behind my choices, let me now proceed to offer my list of the ten major turning points in Rhode Island history.

### Turning Point 1

#### *The Charter of 1663*

When King Charles II granted a charter to Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, he ended not only a generation of bickering among the rival towns and leaders around Narragansett Bay and gave the colony the name which it still bears, but he finally brought political unity, order, and stability to the area. The charter enabled Rhode Islanders to get down to the business of coastal trade, the West Indian trade, and the rum-molasses-and-slave trade with Africa (the so-called triangular trade) which provided the colony's economic prosperity for the following century.

I was tempted to start with 1636, but it seems to me that the founding of this colony was so tenuous and unstable that it cannot really be called a turning point. Not until the colony gained political legitimacy and a unified form of government in 1663 did Roger Williams's "livelie experiment" become effective. Harassed on all sides by the powerful Puritan colonies of Massachusetts, Plymouth, and Connecticut, Rhode Island finally won the right to exist on its own terms under the guarantee of royal protection which the king's charter brought in 1663. The fact that the charter remained the basic political law of Rhode Island until 1843, indicates its importance and contribution.

Furthermore, only when political unity was obtained did the bickering between Providence, Newport, Warwick, and Cranston stop. Only then did people feel that the colony would last, and only then were more Englishmen willing to move here and invest their money and energies to make the colony prosper.

### Turning Point 2

#### *The American Revolution, 1776–1783*

The Revolution freed Rhode Island from imperial control. National independence, of course, also created a lot of problems for the little state, but it was at last released from the restrictions that parliament and the king had continually placed upon its trade and government. Free trade, with all its risks and hopes, became at last a reality, and Rhode Islanders rose magnificently to the challenge, starting first with the Baltic trade to Germany and Russia, then pursuing the China trade which brought the first real wealth to the state as a whole.

In choosing this turning point, I had to slight some other very important dates between 1663 and 1776. These include 1676 when the

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*Newport, July 6, 1764.*

Just imported in the Sloop *Elizabeth*,  
from *Africa*, and to be sold, by  
**John Miller,**  
At his Houfe, or Store ;  
**A Number of healthy**  
Negro Boys and Girls.  
Likewise to be sold,—*Tillock's* and *Kip-*  
*pen's* Snuff, by the Cask or Dozen.

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*Legitimized by the charter of 1663, Rhode Islanders in the eighteenth century developed a diverse and prosperous economy based on oceanic trade including, as the above advertisement indicates, extensive involvement in the triangular slave trade with Africa and the West Indies. From the Providence Gazette, 28 July 1764. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 5421).*

Indians made their last desperate attempt to claim their right to this land which the Europeans had invaded and stolen from them. Though Rhode Island had a pretty good record of dealing honestly and peacefully with the Wampanoags and Narrangansetts, the colony inevitably was caught up in the struggle with the Native Americans, and the Great Swamp Fight of 1675, which ended forever the power of Indians in New England, took place in Rhode Island. Before that victory was won the Indians burned to the ground every town on the mainland, only Aquidneck Island escaped devastation.

I also passed over the year 1747 when the king finally settled the disputed borders of Rhode Island, adding the towns of Cumberland, Barrington, Bristol, Tiverton, and Little Compton to the colony on its eastern shore and establishing its western boundary with Connecticut. This was another important step in the state's stability and growth but it was not, I think, really a turning point.

In addition, I have slighted all of the events associated with the growth of religious diversity in the colony: the founding of America's first Baptist church in 1638, the coming of Quakers and Jews, the start of Anglican and Congregational churches, and the great religious revival of the 1740s. These seem natural consequences of previous decisions.

### Turning Point 3

1815

The War of 1812 forced Rhode Islanders to make the important decision to invest their capital in the growing manufacturing businesses and to turn their attention away from the shipping trade. The war seemed to me more important as a turning point than the founding of Slater's Mill in 1790, for no one knew then whether it was worth risking money in the textile business. By 1815, it was clear that textiles were here to stay. With the transfer of capital investment from shipping into the manufacture of cotton thread, cloth, wool, worsteds, webbing, as well as into production of machine tools and jewelry, Rhode Island took off on its long history of industrial prosperity.

One might also argue that in 1815 Providence finally replaced Newport as the state's financial, business, and shipping center. Newport, formerly the most important city in the colony and one of the most prosperous in British North America, had tried valiantly to revitalize its trade after the British occupation during the war. It never succeeded. By 1815, it was clear that Providence's harbor would be the center for shipping raw cotton and wool into the mills and manufactured textiles from them. Manufacturing with waterpower required the rivers and streams of the mainland. The island of Aquidneck could not provide these sources.

You will note that I have skipped 1790, when Rhode Island became the last of the original states to join the Union by ratifying the constitution—a date that many historians would have placed before 1815. It





*This detail from Alvan Fisher's "Providence from Across the Cove" (1819) captures the town in the era when it surpassed Newport as Rhode Island's most prominent urban center. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 285).*

is arguable that joining the Union was essential to the young state's future growth and economic prosperity and, therefore, 1790 should be considered a major turning point. Its omission is based on what seems to me the inevitability of this decision. Rhode Island's urban and commercial leadership had always favored ratification. The so-called Country party and paper money interests led by the farmers had the votes to delay ratification for three years, but in the end they too realized that Rhode Island's economic growth required joining the Union. The tiny state simply could not go it alone. It wasn't in the cards.

I also seriously considered 1784 as a major turning point, the year in which Rhode Island freed its slaves and faced up to the true meaning of the Declaration of Independence's statement that "all men are created equal." But while this is a date of major symbolic importance, it would be hard to see it as a major turning point. Slavery had already lost its economic validity with the decline of South County agriculture and trade.

#### Turning Point 4

##### *The 1840s*

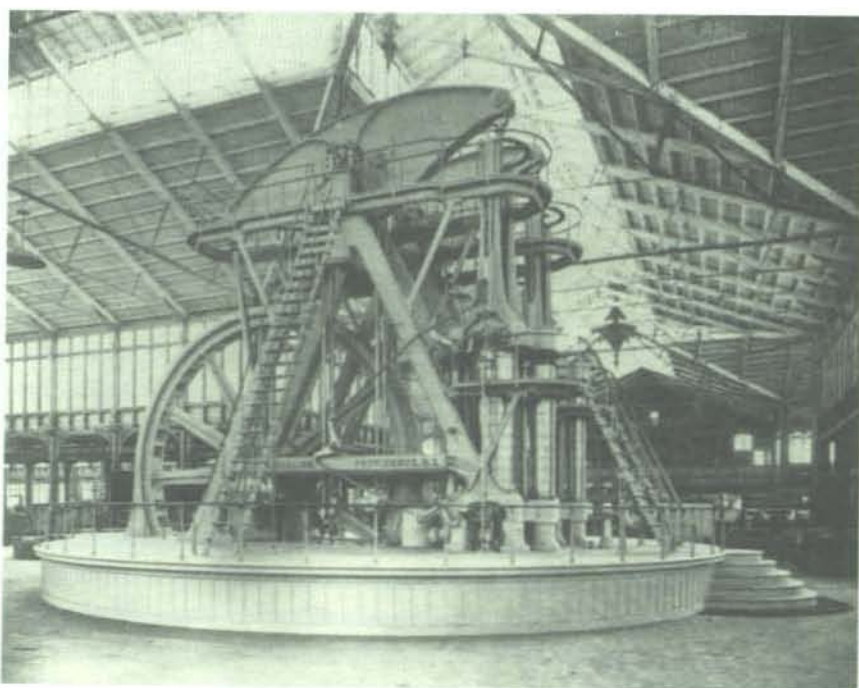
So many things took place in the early 1840s that I do not want to choose any one of them. Instead I would emphasize a fortuitous combination of important political, economic, and cultural events in that decade. Most Rhode Islanders will think first of the Dorr War in 1842, which, although it failed, nonetheless significantly changed the suffrage system and finally replaced the 1663 charter with the state's first constitution in 1843. The new state constitution did not solve all of

Rhode Island's political problems, but it provided sufficient reform to lay the political base for the state's rising manufacturing system and for the dominance of the Whig and Republican parties which controlled the state for the next century.

The economic fact of major importance in the early 1840s was the enormous influx of cheap labor from Ireland, providing the manpower, womanpower, and childpower for the tremendous growth in the textile business in following years. And then, of cultural significance, the coming of the Irish brought the first serious clashes between the old Yankee Protestants and new Roman Catholic forces. These reached a peak of infamy at the end of the decade with the Know-Nothing movement and continued to be a source of tension for the next century. The Irish, like most later immigrant groups, tended to vote with the Democratic party while the Yankees voted Republican. So in addition to religious and class divisions, the early 1840s brought the beginning of that long political division of Rhode Island's electorate which caused so much friction and anguish in the century which lay ahead.

Finally, of course, the 1840s are an important turning point in the state's technological development. In this decade steam power finally replaced waterpower in the factories, and the Corliss steam engine, invented by a Rhode Islander and manufactured here, was the key to that important transformation. Steam power required coal, and coal became a major shipping import along with cotton and immigrants. With steam power the railroad replaced the horse and wagon as the major source of inland transportation, and the steamboat rapidly replaced the clipper ship. The 1840s also brought the successful invention of the telegraph, enabling Rhode Islanders to keep in constant touch with the stock market, the fluctuations in the price of cotton, and their many customers at home and abroad.

*At the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, the Corliss engine which powered the exhibits in the main hall publicized Rhode Island's leading role in technology and manufacturing. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 5422).*



## Turning Point 5

*1900: The Peak of Manufacturing Prosperity*

I have, of course, omitted the Civil War, and military historians will not take kindly to that. Rhode Islanders suffered a great loss of life in that war (many of the casualties being Irish workers or Yankee farm boys too poor to pay for substitutes in the draft). Rhode Island also produced a war hero in General Ambrose E. Burnside, and its industry, particularly textiles and metals, experienced enormous growth in providing material for the Union Army. But by and large, the Civil War confirmed rather than changed the direction in which Rhode Island was moving politically, economically, culturally, or technologically. If any-



*In decline since the American Revolution, Newport rebounded in the late nineteenth century as a resort for some of America's wealthiest Society families. Its increasing popularity among less wealthy "excursionists" inspired this edition of the popular "Puck" cartoons. Lithograph by J. S. Pughe, 1897. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 5420).*

thing, the war brought overconfidence in the production of textiles and a fatal tendency toward overinvestment in that field. When viewed within this long-term perspective, the Civil War may have exerted a deleterious influence on the business mentality of Rhode Island's leaders.

But surely the peak of manufacturing prosperity constitutes a significant Rhode Island turning point, and it can be argued that after 1900 it has been all downhill for this state, although the decline was at first so slow that few saw it coming. It might be argued that the years 1890 to 1910 constitute a kind of plateau in the state's economic and political history rather than a sharp ridge between economic growth and decline.

So many things were going on at the turn of the century that I don't think anyone could fail to see this as a critical period in the state's history. For example, 1900 may well have been the peak year for the city of Newport's rebirth as a playground for the rich; some of its most famous "cottages" were then being built, and this was the height of the glamorous parties of New York's famous "four hundred" members of high

society. In 1900 Rhode Islanders first began to install telephones and electric streetcars replaced horse-drawn ones. Most important, it was the year when Rhode Island businessmen made major investments in gas and electric power: Marsden Perry revolutionized the state's banking system; Senator Nelson Aldrich directed the nation's tariff laws; and the state's Republican political boss, Charles Brayton, brought the dominant Republican party to its peak of corruption. And finally, the census of 1900 revealed that for the first time Rhode Island had a Roman Catholic majority and that the foreign born outnumbered the native born—a portentous event, the consequences of which Boss Brayton's political manipulations managed to stave off for another generation.

## Turning Point 6

### *The 1920s*

If one must pick a date when the leaders of Rhode Island finally recognized that the state's textile industry was doomed to failure, it would certainly have to be the early 1920s. World War I had given a temporary boost to the ailing textile business, but competition from southern textile operations had been mounting for twenty years. World War I did far more to boost textile manufacturing in the South than in New England. In addition, the early 1920s brought some of the most bitter labor strikes in the state's history. There had been strikes before, of course, but never on such a major scale. The trade union movement was at last beginning to capture the support of the working class—a natural consequence of the declining stability of the textile and other manufacturing interests. As the power and profits of management weakened, the power of labor rose. Or, to put it another way, as profits decreased, the workers were asked to take more cutbacks and their need for union protection rose. (We can see exactly the same syndrome taking place around the nation today as a result of foreign competition.)

Several other important features of Rhode Island life make the early twenties important. Congress approved the first immigration restriction laws in 1922, cutting off the supply of cheap labor from Europe. This benefited New England workers as they competed for scarce job opportunities, but it had long-range consequences as management increasingly automated their plants to control labor costs.

The early 1920s saw the end of steamboat shipping in and out of the port of Providence. As factories closed, the need for cotton, wool, and coal declined. As immigration stopped, the need for passenger transport declined. As railroads came to dominate the transportation system and became faster and more efficient with electric and diesel engines, the use of overnight steamboats to transport people from Providence and Fall River to New York City declined.

Finally, the early 1920s saw the first great "Red Scare," the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island, and the bitter Al Smith campaign in 1928, all of which produced a new level of anti-Catholic bigotry

and heightened tensions between faltering Republicans and the rising Democrats.

### Turning Point 7

1935

To Rhode Islanders 1935 is a symbolic date and represents much that came before and after it. It is known best for the famous "Green Revolution" in which Governor Theodore Francis Green finally led the state's Democratic party to total victory over the entrenched Republicans. In the long run, it replaced one-party rule and party patronage by the Republicans for the same kind of single-party patronage system by the Democrats. Symbolically, it was far more important to the foreign-born, Roman Catholics, and labor unions. The Democrats were the party of these three groups, by and large. Its victory represented the final triumph of the new immigrant over the old Yankee hegemony which had ruled the state for three hundred years. Now at last the workingman could use politics to help him in his fight with management to secure passage of unemployment benefits, workman's compensation, minimum hours and wage bills, and dozens of other means to equalize the struggle between capital and labor. This struggle led to the major triumph of trade unionism (following passage of the Wagner Act by Congress in 1935). Of course, labor came to power just as the Depression dealt the final blow to the textile and many other manufacturing industries in the state. The ability of the Democrats to redress the long imbalance between workers and management thus arrived too late.



*The decline of Rhode Island's textile industry, exacerbated by the Depression, greatly intensified hostility between millworkers and management. Confrontations during the Great Textile Strike of 1934, like this one between strikers and national guardsmen, left one dead and many injured. Photograph courtesy of Providence Journal Company.*

The Green Revolution marked the rise of the Catholic church to new prominence in Rhode Island affairs. The church had previously had to devote most of its energy to helping the foreign-born to survive, to obtain education in parochial schools, to build churches to maintain the faith, and to provide aid to the needy through its charitable organizations. But after 1935, the church entered into new and cordial relations with the legislature and the style of Rhode Island life changed dramatically.

Equally important, Governor Green had close ties with Franklin D. Roosevelt. With the beginning of what we now call the welfare state or the mixed economy, the federal government began to play an ever-increasing role in helping the state get through its financial crisis. The Depression caused hardship everywhere, but in Rhode Island tough times became permanent and, since 1935, the state has survived essentially through federal grants of one kind or another.

### Turning Point 8

#### *1945: Postwar Rhode Island*

As usual, war provided a temporary boost to Rhode Island's economy. All around Narragansett Bay the navy established large bases which pumped into the state's faltering economy annually millions of dollars in direct and indirect aid. Because the navy remained in Rhode Island after the war, because Harry Truman's "Fair Deal" policies carried on Roosevelt's New Deal politics, and because labor unions continued to grow and keep wages high (especially in the new service or white-collar jobs like school teaching and public employment), Rhode Island did not experience the same kind of slump after World War II that it suffered after World War I. The welfare state had greatly benefited the working class, and one reason I have chosen the year 1945 is because it was in the immediate postwar era that the tremendous exodus from the city to the suburbs began to take place in Rhode Island, as in every metropolitan area in the country. Suburban housing developments and shopping malls also marked the decline of the cities.

The workingman's postwar prosperity together with the new highway system and the tremendous real estate boom on the outskirts of urban areas enabled almost all Rhode Islanders to afford a car. To most, this brought within reach a better home with a cleaner environment and higher-quality schools for their children. The burgeoning suburbs of East Providence, Barrington, and Bristol on the east side of the bay and Cranston, Warwick, Johnston, and West Warwick on the west marked the successful rise of the immigrant, or his children, out of the slums and into what they now thought of as middle-class respectability. Some even could afford to send their children to college and a few began to vote Republican, although most remained loyal to the party which had brought them power and an improved standard of living. Rhode Island became, after 1945, a blue-collar state with white-collar perspectives and ambitions, a significant change in lifestyle and point of view.

This is not to say that Rhode Island prospered in the postwar era, but it was surviving. Its agricultural life had all but disappeared and the fishing industry suffered, but there was a new interest in banking, insurance, and tourism. The state renamed itself "the Ocean State" about this time in order to emphasize its advantages as a summer resort, and a tremendous effort to preserve its architectural heritage contributed to the growth of tourism. The postwar years offered a temporary euphoria which could not last because no new economic base had really been established. Tourism simply could not replace textiles and manufacturing. Only the jewelry industry seemed to thrive, largely because it was not unionized.

### Turning Point 9

1973

Americans as a whole may remember 1973 for the Watergate scandal and President Nixon's near impeachment, but Rhode Islanders will always remember Nixon for removing the navy from Narragansett Bay and plunging the state into its worst economic slump since 1929. Thousands of jobs disappeared overnight and millions of dollars of military expenditure in the state disappeared as well. Unemployment reached new peaks, far above the national average; as a result taxes increased as well.

In addition and at the very same time, the energy crisis hit the nation as the oil supply temporarily dried up, resulting in a tremendous increase in the price of energy which the state's surviving industries could ill afford. Worse, the combination of higher taxes and higher energy costs, plus the continuing benefits which the state was forced to pay to keep the unemployed from starving, made Rhode Island increasingly unattractive to new business—a problem which has yet to be solved. The hope that offshore oil drilling might provide new industry and cheaper energy failed to materialize; in 1973, labor unions found themselves engaged in a major fight with environmentalists who feared that offshore oil wells would ruin beaches and put an end to tourism, the state's last hope.

In 1973, Rhode Islanders first became aware of the serious dangers of pollution which was further undermining the advantages of Narragansett Bay and summer tourism. The ailing fishing industry was told that large parts of the bay were off-limits to shell fishing. An organization called "Save the Bay" began a major effort to stop the remaining industrial concerns from contributing further to water and soil pollution, adding a new expense to business investment. With oil increasingly expensive, the state lowered its restrictions on burning cheap coal and found itself battling the problem of air pollution. The ancient and broken-down sewage systems of the cities around the bay, especially Providence, produced further damage to the harbor. While the suburbs grew, the cities decayed. Rhode Island even had a short spell of black

rioting in its inner-city schools and slums. However, the state rose to that occasion; it passed a fair-housing law and integrated its public schools with a minimum of friction compared to most other large cities.

### Turning Point 10

1986

As you may have noted, in my estimation since 1920 Rhode Island has experienced a major crisis every decade. The 1980s are no exception. One might say that each of these crises is simply a continuation or worsening of the steady decline in the state's economy, or, if you want to take a broader perspective, the result of the gradual shift of wealth, industrial growth, and political power in the United States from the northeastern sector to the Sunbelt sector in the South and West. Long-range or short-range, the state's problems remain deeply entrenched. Some believe that the election of President Reagan (which carried Republicans back to power in Rhode Island) has already begun to turn around the state's economy and produce a "better climate for business." Unemployment has decreased, but so has the ability of most blue-collar workers to earn a living wage. Inflation has declined but the number of poor and homeless has increased. The state has had some small budgetary surpluses, but its big development programs and highway improvements are still funded by federal grants which dictate the direction of spending.

This year seems to me to be a turning point for a number of reasons. One of the long-run results of economic decline has been the loss of the brightest young people from the state—the college graduates who have moved elsewhere to find jobs that will match their hard-earned skills and high hopes. At the same time, the giant steps which medical care has taken over the past decade, in Rhode Island as elsewhere, have increased the average lifespan. The net result is that the average Rhode Islander is getting healthier but the median age of the population is getting older and older. More and more of the state's dollars and the individual's income is going into the increasing costs of caring for the elderly. This is not a source of revenue but of increasing drain upon the limited resources of Rhode Islanders, and there seems no way to avoid it.

In addition, a new wave of immigration has brought to the state a large group of Spanish-speaking and Asian people who, unlike the immigrants in the past, do not find jobs from expanding industries. They work in declining industries with little future for their own rise to better jobs or incomes. The costs of helping these newcomers is an additional drain on the state's economy. It is not clear that they will ever become the kind of homeowners and taxpayers who expanded the suburbs in former generations; the state lacks the opportunities they need.



Finally, the "runaway shop" and the increasing competition from foreign nations, whose cheap labor is undercutting every sector of the American economy, are hurting what little industry is left—particularly the once-thriving jewelry industry. As in the 1920s, union workers are being asked to sacrifice their hard-won benefits in order to help management keep alive dying businesses. Worst of all, it seems to me, there is today an increasingly visible and growing gap between the rich and poor. Those with money buy fancy condominiums on the rapidly disappearing shorefront property or fashionable urban and suburban developments, while thousands of persons who considered themselves middle class are slipping down the ladders to incomes below the national average, even when husbands and wives both work to support the family.

On the positive side, efforts to renovate downtown and waterfront areas in Providence and rising concern to improve the state's school systems indicate that Rhode Islanders are aware of the need to improve the state's image. Newport still bustles with tourists. There may be possibilities for a new two-party system in the state as internal bickering continues to weaken the Democratic machine. The insurance and banking industries seem to be thriving; two banks have built skyscrapers in Providence and more are expected from downtown redevelopment. Providence's population has stopped declining, though whether poor immigrants or rich yuppies have caused this is unclear. There are signs that realtors and developers from the Boston area have begun to see Rhode Island as a part of their megalopolis, and this may improve real estate values near the highways.

Nevertheless, Rhode Island's situation seems pretty desperate if one thinks of its industrial decline, its limited tax base, its increasing environmental crises (which have all but killed our fisheries), its high energy costs, and the deteriorating relations between capital and labor as a result of all these tensions. Workers who voted Republican expected to see business improve, not to have labor unions weakened and welfare benefits cut off. One cannot help wondering whether the main source of economic survival does not depend on the national military budget to keep Electric Boat afloat and may return more naval ships to Newport. More than ever we are dependent on Washington, D.C. despite the so-called "New Federalism." The huge national deficit may force further serious cutbacks in federal aid to the state in the next decade, and if aid from Washington falters, Rhode Island will face a very serious setback in its economy.

On the other hand, we can point to certain advantages shared by Rhode Islanders. We have done our best to live up to the democratic ideals of the nation, to make this a place of individual liberty, religious freedom, and racial and sexual equality. We still have good parks and beaches despite the mounting pollution. The possibility of attracting new industry certainly indicates the state's commitment to its motto "Hope." Everybody is willing to pull together. The heart of Rhode Island still beats proudly as it enters the 350th year.

Historians are not prophets. They have no greater powers of clairvoyance than anyone else. I have simply tried to present some idea of the ups and downs of the smallest state in the Union. It may seem that twentieth-century Rhode Island has had more than its share of downs, but history is long-sighted. During the great paper-money crisis of the 1780s, most Americans thought Rhode Islanders were out of their minds and doomed to perpetual chaos. Yet from that "critical period" came the creative foresight and energy that produced the state's halcyon era of prosperity in the nineteenth century. If we did it once, we can do it again. We are an ingenious, imaginative, and resolute people. And we hang together. We are survivors.

## Appendix 1 Sixty Rhode Island Turning Points

### Political

- 1636 Indian cession, religious liberty
- 1663 RI charter unites colony
- 1676 Indians defeated in King Philip's War
- 1689 Glorious Revolution, Gov. Andros expelled
- 1747 King settles RI border dispute
- 1776 Revolution begins, Newport occupied
- 1790 RI joins the Union
- 1812 RI opposes "Madison's War"
- 1842-43 Dorr War, new constitution
- 1861-65 Civil War
- 1900 Aldrich-Brayton political corruption, tariff
- 1917-19 World War I, Prohibition, woman suffrage
- 1935 Democrats take over the legislature
- 1972 ERA passed in RI, abortion law problems
- 1980 Republican party revives

### Economic

- 1660s Coastal trading starts
- 1720s Paper money improves trade
- 1775 Triangular trade—rum, molasses, slaves
- 1776 Revolution ends control of trade
- 1792 China/Indian trade starts, Providence tops Newport
- 1815 Capital shifted from trade to manufactures
- 1840 Cheap labor from Ireland arrives, railroad and steamboats improve transportation
- 1900 Peak of textile industry, farms decline, banks expand, urbanization advances
- 1922 Southern mills hurt RI textiles; labor strikes
- 1929 Stockmarket crash, Depression begins
- 1935 New Deal brings labor and welfare laws and federal aid to states
- 1945 Naval bases, decline of cities and railroad
- 1952 State pushes tourism, fishing industry declines, jewelry manufacturing grows
- 1973 Energy crisis, pollution concern, urban renewal
- 1980 Inflation, foreign competition, lottery

### Social/Cultural

- 1638 First Baptist church in America, Ann Hutchinson
- 1657 Quakers arrive
- 1677 Jews come to RI
- 1758 First newspaper (*Newport Mercury*)
- 1764 First college
- 1784 RI frees its slaves
- 1840 Public schools, Irish immigration, parochial schools
- 1880 French-Canadians and Portuguese arriving
- 1900 Italian immigration, Catholic majority, Newport "Society"
- 1922 Immigration restricted, emergence of Ku Klux Klan
- 1935 Workers organize, unemployment, horse racing starts
- 1965 Rise of suburbs, community colleges
- 1968 Fair housing, school desegregation, historic preservation
- 1975 Schools decline, environmental concerns increase
- 1980 Hispanic and Asian immigration

### Technological

- 1792 Slater's Mill, Textile manufacturing
- 1814 Precious metal industry starts
- 1815 Clipper ships to India and China
- 1840s Steam power replaces water power
- 1845 Railroads, steamboat, telegraph
- 1890 Telephone, rubber, streetcars
- 1900 Electric lights, gas and power companies
- 1910 First autos
- 1928 Radio, airmail, talking pictures, skyscrapers
- 1935 Rayon and nylon replace cotton and wool
- 1945 TV alters media and advertising
- 1973 Energy crisis & offshore drilling
- 1980 Improved medical care
- 1983 Computer era starts in RI
- 1984 Medical transplants



A birdseye view of B. B. & R. Knight's expansive Pontiac mills and mill community in 1889 symbolizes the growth of Rhode Island's textile industry in the nineteenth century. The closing of Pontiac mill in 1970 also tells an important Rhode Island story, the deindustrialization of the twentieth century. Lithograph by O. H. Bailey & Co., Boston. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 5102).

# Rhode Island's Ten Turning Points: A Second Appraisal

J. Stanley Lemons

Selecting *the* ten turning points in the history of anything is a wonderful exercise, especially if one can pick from a past as rich as that of Rhode Island. The events that I chose are not like an all-star list, but represent changing directions on a journey. You start at a point and arrive at crossroads and forks in the road, and the turns change the path and direction. I have assumed that Rhode Island's founding was a beginning rather than a turning point. Once Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson, William Coddington, and Samuel Gorton had established the four original towns, the journey had begun. The decisive events that occurred subsequently are the subject of this essay.

The concept of a "turning point" does not adequately describe some of the things that happened: for example, the turn to oceanic commerce by Rhode Islanders in the eighteenth century took several decades. Likewise, the turn to industry covered more decades. For this list I chose an event which is representative of the larger, continuing process of deindustrialization in the twentieth century. The disappearance of B. B. & R. Knight Company, the textile giant, is cited as an example of the decline of manufacturing; but it alone was not a turning point. Sometimes the consideration of a turning point forced me to indulge in counterfactual speculation. To consider an event as having made a significant difference caused me to wonder what would have been the consequence if the turn had not been taken. For example, what if Rhode Island had not developed manufacturing in the early nineteenth century? But, when you plunge into "if" history, one guess may be as good as another.

## Turning Point 1

### *The Charter of 1663*

The first significant event was the acquisition of the charter of 1663 from King Charles II. One might protest that Roger Williams's 1644 charter ought to stand first. While one may make a case for the earlier charter's significance, the relative importance of the two documents was akin to that of the Articles of Confederation and the United States Constitution. The second was more important in both cases. Williams's charter was barely accepted even in Rhode Island during its duration, and its validity ended when the restored monarch, Charles II, voided all

J. Stanley Lemons is Associate Professor of History at Rhode Island College and coauthor of *Rhode Island: The Independent State* (1982). He also wrote *The Woman Citizen: Social Feminism in the 1920s* (1973), edited and authored *Aspects of the Black Experience* (1975), and was cocreator of "Providence: A Century of Greatness, 1832-1932," an award-winning multi-image history of Providence first shown at the Museum of Rhode Island History in 1980. He is a consultant to the Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities project "Rhode Island Legacy," and coauthor of the introduction to the Providence 350's commemorative book, *The Vision of Providence* (1986).

parliamentary actions of the Interregnum. Both charters sought to establish Rhode Island's legal existence and defend its territory against the neighboring colonies of Plymouth, Connecticut, and Massachusetts Bay. While neither charter deterred our neighbors from continuous efforts to dismember the "sewer of New England," the charter of 1663 gave greater definition to the powers of the colony's government and a clearer framework for its construction. In addition, it mentioned definite boundaries (while the charter of 1644 did not), and it remained Rhode Island's constitution until 1842.

No one should forget that John Clarke's language in the 1663 charter gave royal approval and protection to the "livelie experiment," and enshrined the principles of Roger Williams. The free church, which became a model for a larger, free society, was protected by those principles. This most liberal of charters had many, many consequences, among which was the decision by the Philadelphia Baptist Association to plant in Rhode Island a college which became Brown University.

The charter of 1663 established a governmental framework that drew the feuding towns of Rhode Island into a single government; and while the principal power remained in local towns, the charter made it possible to create a more powerful central authority. It allowed for the evolution of a more unified provincial government which was able to respond to the opportunities and challenges of the eighteenth century. Moreover, the charter allowed Rhode Island to be the freest, most independent, self-governing colony in British North America. It allowed Rhode Islanders to select all of their own officials and to pass any law not contrary to parliamentary acts.

Would Rhode Island have survived as a separate entity without the charter? I think the answer is clearly, "No." Even with the charter, its survival was problematic for several decades. Our New England neighbors used fraud, bribery, and the circumstances of war to attempt to dismember Rhode Island or have its charter revoked. The tangle of fraudulent claims and law suits was not settled until the 1720s. Rhode Island even disappeared into the Dominion of New England in the 1680s, only to reemerge after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. King James II had sought to merge all the New England colonies with New York and New Jersey into a single, large, *manageable* colony, but the effort collapsed when he was chased from the throne. Without the 1663 charter, Rhode Island could easily have shared the fate of Plymouth, which was merged with Massachusetts Bay. In a large measure, Rhode Island's survival depended upon the second decisive development on my list—the election of Samuel Cranston to twenty-nine terms as governor from 1698 to 1727.

## Turning Point 2

### *Samuel Cranston's Governorship*

Samuel Cranston came to office at a critical juncture. The storms battering Rhode Island were reaching a dangerous level, and he deflected,

defused, and disarmed the elements. Opponents of the charter, both internal and external, mounted their greatest efforts to have it revoked, but Cranston's shrewd actions defeated them. Sometimes he followed a policy of creative noncompliance. For example, during Queen Anne's War (1702-13), when Joseph Dudley, royal governor of Massachusetts, attempted to take command of Rhode Island's militia (which he had the legal authority to do), Cranston refused to accept Dudley's commission. But, then, Cranston dispatched soldiers under officers commissioned by Rhode Island to serve with Dudley. Likewise, Dudley tried to block the issuance of Rhode Island's commissions to privateers and tried to refuse the legitimacy of the awarding of prizes by Rhode Island's Admiralty Court. Nevertheless, Cranston issued the commissions and his admiralty courts awarded the prizes, and he dutifully reserved one-tenth of the prize money for the Queen. Only Dudley could complain about the results. Other times he found a solution which disarmed critics. When the Privy Council threatened to void both Rhode Island and Connecticut's charters over the protracted boundary disputes, Cranston convinced Connecticut to settle, and the threat subsided. When the Privy Council became concerned about the disarray of the Rhode Island court system and sought to use this as a reason to attack the charter, Cranston had the laws codified for the first time and reformed the courts. When Rhode Island was threatened because of its reputation for hospitality to pirates, Cranston's ostentatious response included the condemnation and execution of twenty-six pirates in July 1723.

The actions needed to defend the colony's integrity involved an evolution of the government to make the colony more governable within itself. Cranston presided over the process of drawing power from the towns to the General Assembly. It asserted its power to tax, issued paper money, and enacted laws to promote commerce. Not by coincidence these reforms eased the way to enter the growing empire of oceanic commerce. Many of the new laws favored commercial interests and stimulated their activities. Even the issuance of privateering commissions promoted seafaring enterprises, and Rhode Islanders became extremely clever at using letters of marque, flags of truce, and plain old smuggling to gain capital and turn a profit.

### Turning Point 3

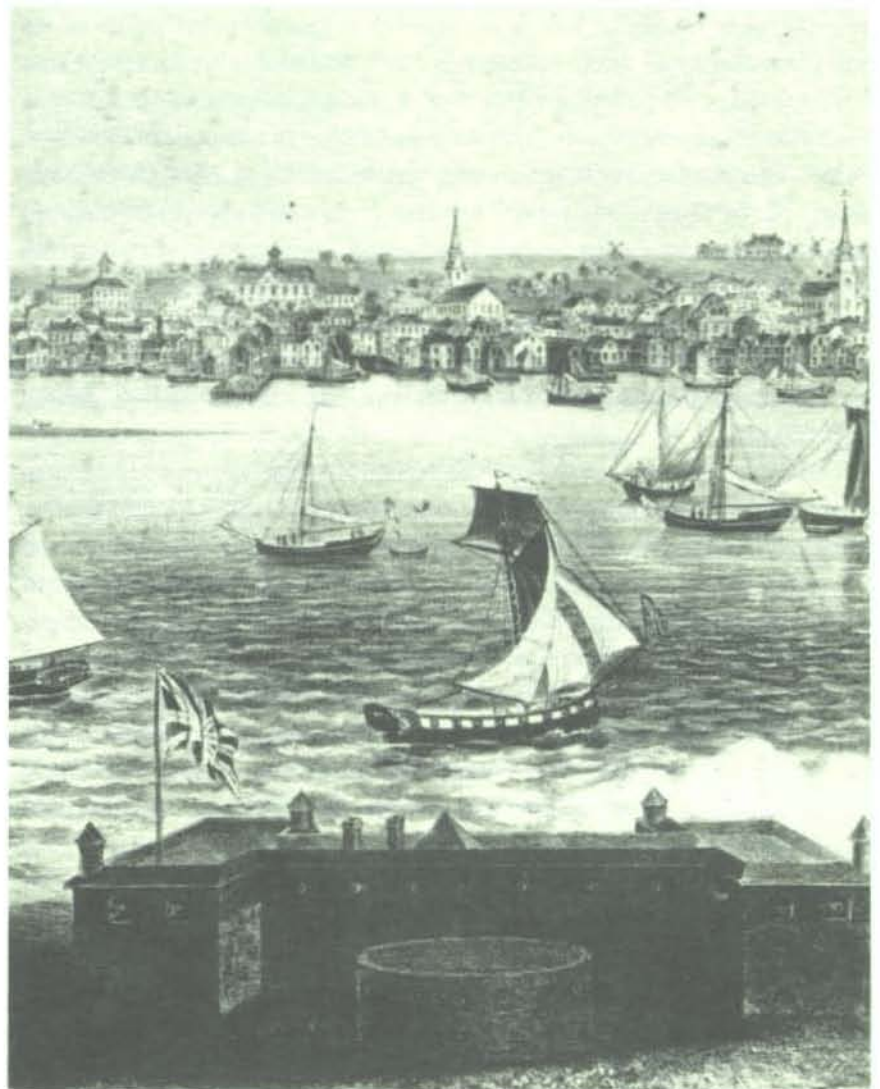
#### *Oceanic Commerce*

We might remind ourselves that Rhode Island had no direct trade with England in the seventeenth century. Not a ship sailed from Rhode Island to England during that time, and only a modest coastal trade had developed by the 1690s. Providence was recovering from its burning during King Philip's War (1675-76), and Newport's "fleet" consisted of a few small vessels and a few dozen sailors. The imperial wars of the 1690s and early 1700s brought opportunities at sea, and by 1720 Newport had emerged as a significant trading center. It had had only four or

five vessels in 1681, but counted 120 vessels trading throughout the Empire, Africa, and (illegally) French and Spanish possessions in 1740. Oceanic commerce made Newport the most cosmopolitan town in New England and the fifth largest town in the British colonies on the eve of the American Revolution.

A price had to be paid for this entry into the greater British Empire: expanding oceanic trade brought Rhode Island out of its protective obscurity and into increasing conflict with the imperial rules regarding trade. This led to Rhode Island's growing dissatisfaction with the king and parliament, as well as the charge by one royal governor of Massachusetts that Rhode Island was no more part of the British Empire than were the pirate-controlled Bahama Islands.

*J. P. Newell's lithograph "Newport, R.I. in 1730" captures that town during its era as a leading center for trade and Rhode Island's largest urban community. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 994).*



Oceanic commerce, culminating in the China Trade after 1786, offered Rhode Islanders their first opportunities to accumulate substantial fortunes. Although the economy would eventually shift away from oceanic commerce, it left a legacy of art, architecture, history, and society. On the other hand, the pursuit of wealth on the ocean carried



Rhode Islanders into some desperate and despicable enterprises. Rhode Island captains became notorious for their illegal trading activities, including treasonable trading with the enemy during the wars against France and Spain. Rhode Islanders became also the principal American slave traders. The marginal and even unsavory nature of Rhode Island's participation in oceanic commerce shaped and reinforced the opportunistic and independent bent of its people.

### Turning Point 4

#### *Joining the Union*

The independent, even ornery character of Rhode Island was displayed in the haste with which it rebelled against British authority in the Revolutionary era and in the reluctance even to consider the Constitution. The rejection of a stronger national government led the state out of the Union in 1789 and 1790. Rhode Islanders were so opposed to increasing the central power of government that they refused to send a delegate to the Constitutional Convention in 1787, rejected calls for a state ratifying convention eleven times, and submitted the Constitution instead to a popular referendum where it was trounced 2,708–237! As a result, the new United States government was up and running with George Washington as president without Rhode Island's having anything to say about it. Even the Bill of Rights had been written and submitted for ratification without our participation.

Eventually the United States Congress began to consider economic coercion and to treat Rhode Island like a foreign country, and commercial and nationalist elements in Newport and Providence talked of seceding from the state. Rhode Island finally held a state ratifying convention in May 1790 where delegates narrowly approved the Constitution. What would Rhode Island's future have held had it failed to join the Union? Would it have continued as an independent enclave? This is not inconceivable in a world of Liechtensteins, San Marinos, Macaos, Andorras, Monacos, and island states. Or would it have disintegrated, its pieces absorbed by Massachusetts and Connecticut? For certain, excluded from the great common market that was the United States, Rhode Island would not have become an industrial state in the nineteenth century.

### Turning Point 5

#### *The Turn to Industry*

Despite the revival of oceanic commerce after the American Revolution, various individuals recognized that shipping was not the answer to the state's economic difficulties. Rather than see Rhode Island stagnate or sink into economic decay, they turned to other enterprises and

investments. A major step along the new road was taken when Moses Brown engaged Samuel Slater in 1789; in December 1790 Slater successfully spun cotton yarn on a waterpowered machine. Their success led others to imitate them; and by 1815 Rhode Island counted one hundred mills in twenty-one towns.

As manufacturing advanced, oceanic commerce declined. Many of those most involved in shipping redirected their investments to industry, including Rowland Hazard, Brown & Ives, and Edward Carrington. Industrialization was a hard process; between 1790 and 1860, 90 percent of the industrialists in Rhode Island went bankrupt. But, many replaced each fallen company. Like a magnet the state attracted inventive, enterprising people who accelerated industrial development and waves of immigrants who performed the labor. As a result, Rhode Island became America's first urban, industrial state.

Without manufacturing Rhode Island certainly would have been a very different society. It would have become a pool of rural, Yankee poverty; a backwater from which its ambitious and enterprising people would have departed for the West or anywhere offering better opportunities. Without industry and opportunity, the state would have held little attraction to the swarms of immigrants. Still, Narragansett Bay and Aquidneck Island would have evolved as resorts for the well-off.

## Turning Point 6

### *The Dorr War*

The Dorr War was a culminating point for political, social, ethnic, and religious tensions that built up as a consequence of industrial and urban development. Everything had changed except the state's governing constitution, the charter of 1663. Only Rhode Island and Connecticut had clung to their colonial charters after the Revolution, but even Connecticut adopted a new instrument in 1817. The dominant political power in Rhode Island, the landowning freeholders, refused to budge despite the fact that Rhode Island evolved from the most to the least democratic state between 1780 and 1840. Calls for reform started in the 1790s and were repeated every decade. The malapportionment of seats in the General Assembly was more than matched by the increasing proportions of the disenfranchised. The state became increasingly urban and industrialized, but the freeholders resisted change. Worse, from the perspective of this Yankee elite, Rhode Island towns were beginning to fill with Irish Catholic immigrants. The freeholders feared not only the loss of political power, but also religious and cultural submergence.

Not until the suffrage movement held the extralegal People's Convention in 1841 and wrote an overwhelmingly approved constitution did the landowners begin to undertake some reforms. When the landowners' version of a constitution was rejected in a referendum and the suffrage supporters attempted to impose their popularly approved constitution, the situation flared into the "Dorr War." Although the suf-



*Image of Thomas W. Dorr from a cigar box lid for Gov. Dorr cigars. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 566).*

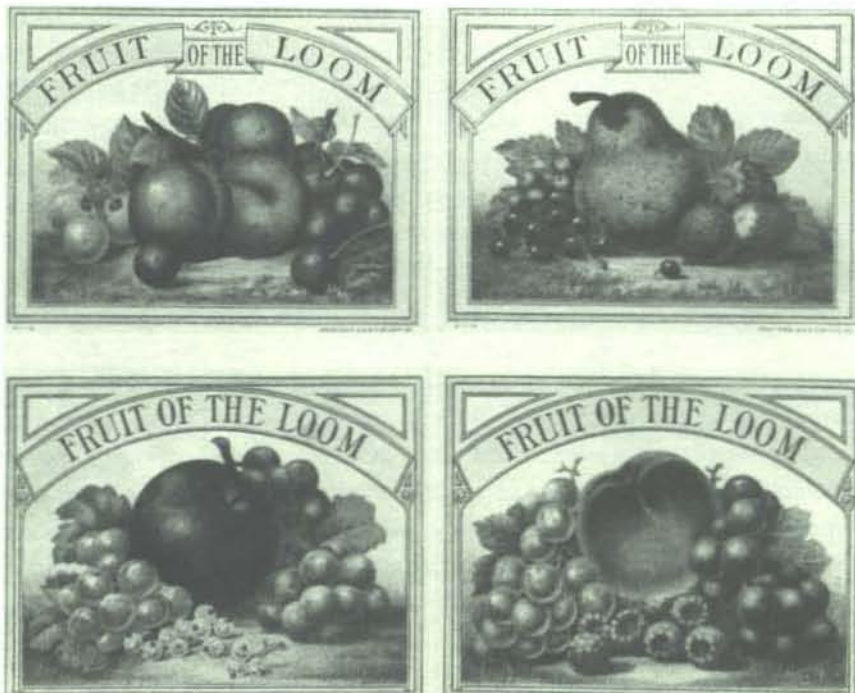
frage party was defeated, some of the changes that they sought were achieved. Though amended many times, the constitution drafted and ratified in 1842 continues in effect. It is of interest to observe that the conservative Law-and-Order constitution enfranchised blacks, something that the suffrage party had opposed. On the other hand, the 1842 Constitution discriminated against the foreign-born (read: Irish Catholics), promoting class and religious divisions that have vexed Rhode Island ever since.

### Turning Point 7

#### *The Exodus of B. B. & R. Knight Company*

A decisive "turn" for Rhode Island in the twentieth century has been its deindustrialization; but like those evolutionary developments in the state's economy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the loss of industry cannot be pinpointed to a particular day or year. Yet, it has deeply affected nearly everything else in the state. Rhode Island has suffered a decline in manufacturing and industrial jobs fairly steadily since the 1920s. The evidence of this stands all over the state in empty and recycled mills and factories. The disappearance of the B. B. & R. Knight Company is my representative example of the process of deindustrialization.

Two native Rhode Islanders, the brothers Benjamin and Robert Knight, formed the partnership of B. B. & R. Knight Company when they bought a small mill in Pontiac in 1852. By the 1890s it had become the largest cotton textile empire in America; its Natick Mill was said to be the single largest mill in America. The company came to own



*B. B. & R. Knight's familiar Fruit of the Loom labels. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 5423).*

eighteen mills, including fifteen mill villages, and employed more than ten thousand workers operating five hundred thousand spindles and over eleven thousand looms. They developed the trademark, "Fruit of the Loom," in 1856. After the death of the brothers, ownership and management passed to Robert's sons, Webster and C. Prescott Knight. The company remained vigorous, and quality standards remained high to the point that the Knights sold the empire to F. K. Rupprecht, president of the Consolidated Textile Company of New York, for approximately twenty million dollars in September 1920. The sons had just rebuilt the Royal Mill at Riverpoint which had been destroyed in a fire in 1919.

Perhaps the Knight boys knew something, because B. B. & R. Knight, Incorporated (as it was now called) began to crumble almost immediately. The new owners lost nearly a million dollars in 1921 and suffered even greater losses in the textile strike of 1922. The strike forced them to shut down several mills for a time. The corporation sold off some of the mills in 1922, but losses continued. In 1924 it lost more than four million dollars, and the bondholders forced B. B. & R. Knight, Incorporated into bankruptcy by June 1925. The bondholders then reorganized the company into the B. B. & R. Knight Corporation and scaled down its size to just eight mills in Rhode Island. They sold off stores, farms, and tenement houses; but real estate losses and maintenance costs for idle mills devoured the operating profits earned by its active mills. Then the Great Depression struck a fatal blow. In 1935 the trustees voted to close the remaining mills: the Royal and Valley Queen Mills at Riverpoint, Arctic Mill, and Natick Mill. Only the Pontiac Print Works remained of the once-mighty empire in Rhode Island. A further reorganization produced the Fruit of the Loom Corporation with headquarters in New York, which continued to operate the print works until 1966 when it was sold to Allied Textile Printers, Inc., of Paterson, New Jersey. So, by 1966, B. B. & R. Knight and Fruit of the Loom were gone; and even the Pontiac Print Works closed in 1970. One Monday morning in March, Pontiac Print Works, Incorporated abruptly announced the plant's closing at week's end.

What happened to cotton textiles happened to woolens, rubber, and foundries and the metal trades; and even the jewelry industry seems to be declining. By the 1980s the number of industrial workers was nearly 20 percent less than the state had had in 1945. The disappearance of "blue collar" jobs has forced many workers to take service employment, and caused the young to migrate again. One consequence is that Rhode Island has the second highest percentage of elderly in the nation. Another is that wage levels tend to be lower than anywhere else in the East. While government on all levels and defense-related companies are the largest employers, considerable effort has been expended in the past decade to make the state attractive to medical and scientific research, "white collar" and "pink collar" occupations, and high-tech industries.

## Turning Point 8

### *The Revolution of 1935*

In the middle of the Depression, the Democratic party finally broke the Republican party's grip on all branches of the state government and returned control of Providence's patronage to the Democratic-run city hall. Then they turned with a vengeance to making Rhode Island a Democratic-dominated state. The old Yankee, Republican establishment deserved its fate; to delay and deny the rise of Democratic power it had used every trick in the book, including amending the state constitution. One-party rule had made Rhode Island a rock-ribbed Republican state from the Civil War to the 1920s. But, by 1928 the Republican tide was fast running out as new constitutional amendments forced upon them changed the legislative apportionment and relaxed suffrage requirements. The distress of the Depression accelerated the Democratic take-over as people blamed the Republicans for economic conditions. Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal drew voters to his party on every level. The Democratic party in Rhode Island was nearly a textbook example of the New Deal coalition, an alliance of ethnics, blacks, labor unions, blue collar workers, Roman Catholics, liberal intellectuals, and city political bosses and machines. The only groups missing from Rhode Island's new Democratic coalition were Southern Democrats and farmers.

Unfortunately, the Revolution gave Rhode Islanders another forty years of one-party domination and the politics of gratification. All of the pent-up antagonisms had to be served, and the various elements of the coalition had to be gratified. Much of what the partners in the coalition wanted had to do with life in an urban, industrial state; but the state they captured was in the process of deindustrializing and moving to the suburbs. Patronage politics resulted in a patina of scandal throughout state and local governments; every board and commission seemed to be staffed by someone's political appointee. One symptom of the system was evident in the Rhode Island Housing and Mortgage Finance Corporation (RIHMFC) scandals in 1985 when it was revealed that political friends received preference, and political leaders thought nothing of telephoning RIHMFC on behalf of clients. Among the general public, the long-term effect of such scandals is a cynicism that assumes all politicians are essentially crooked and that even carefully considered and needed reforms are just more political boodle. In addition to their fear of increased taxation, many voters regarded the "Greenhouse Compact" to be just another patronage raid by the politicians.

*This view of construction of the Rhode Island State House captures part of the downtown area as it appeared at the turn of the century. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 4862).*



### Turning Point 9

#### *The Historic Preservation Movement*

Rhode Island's towns suffered through several decades of decay until the mid-1950s, and the older parts of many towns were in deplorable condition, ripe for demolition and "development." A national movement for urban renewal promoted slum clearance, and local officials drew up plans for the renewal of dilapidated areas. In addition, the construction of Interstate 95 in the mid-1950s cut a swath through Providence and Pawtucket, mostly through older neighborhoods. But, it was not just public programs that threatened historic structures. In Providence, Brown University swept away several blocks of historic houses in its postwar expansion to create more dormitory space, jolting many

*A view of Benefit Street before the historic preservation movement. Photograph courtesy of the Providence Preservation Society.*



complacent East Siders into an awareness of the high price of progress.

In Newport the intervention of Katharine Urquhart Warren saved Hunter House from the wreckers in 1945. Next she joined other society figures to launch the Preservation Society of Newport County whose mission was to preserve the great mansions that were threatened with vivisection or removal. It was an upper class effort to keep Bellevue Avenue from becoming a street of apartment houses. This effort later broadened to embrace the larger preservation movement whose center and inspiration was in Providence.

After helping with a citywide historic survey in Newport, Antoinette Downing was asked in 1953 to prepare a survey so historic houses in Providence could be saved during the interstate construction project. She found that urban renewal projects were planned for the oldest part of Providence which would lead to the bulldozing of the upper Benefit Street area. She secured funds from federal housing authorities, seized upon the newly aroused concern of East Siders, and founded the Providence Preservation Society in 1956. The Society's efforts saved the historic College Hill area and made the neighborhood a showcase which now attracts thousands to the annual Festival of Historic Houses.

In 1963 Governor John Chafee appointed Downing to head the newly created Rhode Island Historic Preservation Commission. Since then the agency has made historic surveys of most of the towns and neighborhoods in the state and served as a watchdog over historic properties, saving many from destruction and mutilation. The passage of favorable tax laws stimulated renovation, recycling, and preservation; and the growing awareness of the utility, charm, and irreplaceable character of historic structures produced marked results across the state. Preservation commissions and historic districts appeared in many places, and their work has enhanced the quality of life in Rhode Island. In Newport during the 1960s and 1970s, Operation Clapboard and the Newport Restoration Foundation transformed whole sections of the town. In



*A recent photograph of the same Benefit Street view. Photograph courtesy of the Providence Preservation Society.*

Providence, the Preservation Society's interest expanded to include the Downtown Commercial District, the old Armory District, Broadway, Fox Point, and Elmwood. One now finds their historic markers in many parts of the city, and signs of restoration are evident in many places. Once the process of preservation started, individuals bought and restored historic structures, and this process of gentrification has refurbished many decaying neighborhoods. Of course, these changes are not welcomed by everyone, especially those displaced by the new urban gentry. Urban restoration nearly always means the removal of the poor and the breakup of ethnic neighborhoods. Nevertheless, as "quality of life" becomes a major point in the promotion of the state, the preservation movement has played a major role in making Rhode Island an increasingly attractive state.

## Turning Point 10

### *Fractures in the Democratic Party*

In the mid-1970s the Democratic party experienced a series of fractures whose consequences are still incomplete. Already they have produced the first Republican victory in a United States Senate race since 1930, the first Republican mayoral win in Providence since 1938, the first congressional seat to be won by a Republican since 1938, and a weakening Democratic grip on the state's general offices to the point that Republicans were elected governor, attorney general, and secretary of state in 1984.

Democratic dominance had become so pronounced by the mid-1960s that Rhode Island had the least interparty competition of any state in New England. In all but a handful of districts, nomination in the Democratic primary assured election. Moreover, Democratic party leadership and follower-loyalty were so powerful that 70 percent of the endorsed candidates went unopposed in the primaries and the few challengers had only one chance in seven of upsetting an endorsed candidate.

This domination of the nomination process was challenged in 1971-72 by the New Democratic Coalition (NDC), a group that first formed to support the presidential bid by Senator Eugene McCarthy in 1968. The party regulars supported Edmund Muskie or Hubert Humphrey, but the NDC, supporting George McGovern, challenged the selection process and demanded reforms. McGovern swept the presidential primary in May, but because NDC had not had the time to field a slate of names for the delegate seats that they won, state Democratic party chairman Lawrence McGarry attempted to fill the slate with regulars who would be bound to McGovern only on the first ballot at the national convention. The NDC had to go to court to stop McGarry, and an angry McGarry refused to support McGovern's candidacy. The regulars abandoned McGovern and tended to local races instead. Richard Nixon carried Rhode Island; but for that to happen, the percentage swing be-



tween 1968 and 1972 from Democratic to Republican votes for president was the largest in the entire nation.

This wave of insurgency was considerably less important than the disruptions that racked the party between 1973 and 1976. The alliance of Mayor Joseph Doorley and Public Works Director Lawrence McGarry had dominated Providence politics since 1964, but it disintegrated in 1973 when McGarry shifted his support to an old friend, Francis Brown, who had been waiting nearly ten years for a chance to run for mayor. "Mr. Democrat," McGarry, had been chairman of the city party since 1966, was chairman also of the state party in 1972, and as director of the Providence Department of Public Works controlled the great patronage job barrel. He used his patronage muscle to bestow the party endorsement on Brown, but Doorley narrowly won the primary in a bitterly contested race. McGarry and other factional leaders, such as Ronald Glanz and Anthony Bucci, threw their support behind the Republican challenger, Vincent "Buddy" Cianci, who won the general election in November 1974.

The Providence split quickly spread beyond the city limits. Mayor Eugene McCaffrey of Warwick headed an effort called "Suburbanites for Doorley" which included Salvatore Mancini of North Providence and the mayor of Pawtucket. After the loss in Providence, a battle ensued for the chairmanship of the city Democratic party, pitting McGarry against Francis Darigan. McGarry's replacement as state party chairman, Charles Reilly, sided with Darigan, who captured the city chairmanship in January 1975. McGarry's Independent Democrats tried to retaliate against suburban opponents by backing challengers against them. McGarry supported the unsuccessful efforts of John Ricci against Mancini in North Providence and Charles Donovan against McCaffrey in Warwick. McGarry's alliance with Cianci in Providence provoked the legal counsel to the state Democratic committee to declare that there was no room in the party for McGarry. However, McGarry had the pleasure of seeing Edward Beard overwhelm McCaffrey in the 1976 Congressional primary and force the resignation of state party chairman Reilly, who had been handpicked by Governor Noel in 1973. McGarry revelled at the end of Noel's political career in 1976, dismissing him as "a handsome zero, worth nothing." Francis Darigan denounced McGarry as a traitor, but Darigan was forced out of the chairmanship of the city party in January 1979 and replaced by Anthony Bucci, one of the Independent Democrats of the mid-1970s!

If the Providence situation were not enough, the state organization was vexed by the maverick candidacy of Edward Beard, who pummelled the regulars and built his own power. Beard, a bitter enemy of Governor Noel, upset a sitting Congressman, Robert O. Tiernan, in the Democratic primary in 1974. This enmity led the Noel-led regulars to deny Beard the party's endorsement again in 1976 despite Beard's now being an incumbent Congressman. Beard smashed his opponents in the primary and forced the resignation of state chairman Reilly two days later. Unless Reilly resigned, Beard threatened to withhold active support from the ticket, except for United States Senate candidate Richard

Lorber, a political novice who upset Governor Noel, the endorsed choice to replace retiring Senator John O. Pastore. Noel declared bitterly that Lorber was not the sort of person that should be elected to the Senate. Lorber, in turn, lost to John Chafee, who was the first Republican to win a Senate race in Rhode Island in forty-six years!

Still, a third outsider, Anthony Solomon, defeated an endorsed regular for treasurer and began building his faction for the day when he would seek the governorship. That opportunity came in 1984 when he again upset the endorsed favorite, Warwick Mayor Joseph Walsh, in a bitter primary, only to lose to the Republican candidate, Cranston Mayor Edward DiPrete. Congressman Beard increasingly threw his weight around, trying to dictate to both the state party and city organizations. Never the regulars' favorite, they probably gave a sigh of relief when Beard's popularity declined and he lost to Republican Claudine Schneider in 1980.

Political fortunes are unpredictable, and the tides of change can flow almost before the observer is aware. The weakening of the Democratic party may be more apparent than real, only a temporary situation. One has to remember that the party maintains a wide margin in both houses of the legislature and a hefty lead in voter registration. The Republicans may squander their chances just as Mayor Cianci's administration fell under the weight of personal and political corruption. The Democrats may produce some candidates as attractive as the Republican stars and may use the majority-party advantage to recapture lost ground. Yet, the self-inflicted wounds have come at a particularly bad moment because they have weakened the party organization at the very time when the national trend toward voter independence and split-ticket voting is sweeping into Rhode Island. As voters slough their traditional party loyalties, the trend to independence and splitting tickets may seep down to the less visible contests for the General Assembly and city government.

The reader will note that most of the "turning points" discussed here were political or economic in character. One might have selected some great social change, such as immigration, or some religious change, such as the rise of Catholicism in Rhode Island. But I have sought to relate and incorporate these fundamental changes in the economic and political processes. As tempting as it is to make predictions, the historian has no special license to see the future. One may hope for the sort of economic development that will provide increased opportunity for our people while preserving and enhancing the quality of life about which we like to boast. One may hope for an improvement in the political processes and in the quality of governance. One may be certain that Rhode Island's struggle since the seventeenth century to create a productive economy will have to go on. Without most of the necessary natural resources for industry, without great population, territory, or political and economic hinterland, this small state will have to do as Rhode Islanders for 350 years have done, and that is to be imaginative and work hard.

## Book Review

*Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry* By BARBARA M. TUCKER. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984. 268 pp. \$29.95)

The emergence in the 1790s of the textile industry in Rhode Island and Massachusetts signaled the start of a transition from an entrenched agricultural or preindustrial society to a mature industrial society driven more and more by the marketplace. Not surprisingly, enduring characteristics and values of one era and materializing features of the next intruded on one another. Recently, scholars have begun to examine the complex relationships that appeared during this era of early industrialization. Barbara M. Tucker's *Samuel Slater and the Origins of the American Textile Industry, 1790-1860* makes an important contribution by exploring "the persistence of traditional culture amid the rapid technological and economic changes of the early Industrial Revolution in New England" (p. 15). More specifically, Tucker explains what she perceives to be a mutually supportive union between management practices and preindustrial values as it first appeared in the mills and mill communities of Samuel Slater and later spread beyond.

The result is a somewhat uneven three-part presentation offering valuable insights at each stage yet lacking an overarching consistency of logic and documentation necessary to deal with both Samuel Slater and the nascent textile industry. In Part One, covering the period from 1790 to 1800, Tucker sees Slater's first decade in Pawtucket as a time of "experimentation" while he adjusted his British experience to American realities. This picture of Slater, taken from Almy and Brown correspondence, shows him harassed by his partners, William Almy and the Browns, and anxiously seeking independence. Slater emerged from his ten-year learning stint fully aware of "the strength of patriarchy in America" and prepared to organize his factory system "to accommodate it" (p. 86). In a further broadening of this theme, we are told in Part Two that "the force of tradition" became a cornerstone of communities built by Slater after 1800 in Webster, Massachusetts, and Slatersville, Rhode Island. Tucker contends that the Slater "system" evolved from Slater's conscious melding of new technology and factory-oriented manufacturing practices with preindustrial values embodied in the traditional roles and patterns of authority and family, the non-threatening character of the rural village setting, the church as an essential source of internal self-discipline, and the small mill under family control. This system continued into the 1830s or as long as managerial objectives and traditional values were in harmony.

In the final section based on extensive research in the records of Slater companies, Tucker shows leadership transferred to Slater's sons upon his death in 1835. Horatio Nelson Slater became the new "architect" and, with family support, introduced new technology, reorganized Slater companies, and updated marketing and managerial practices including the development of an advanced cost accounting system. In the process, the family unit was replaced by the autonomous worker tied to a wage economy. Tucker then concludes by considering the findings of historians such as Jonathan Prude whose study, *The Coming of Industrial Order* (1983), also examines industrialization in southcentral Massachusetts between 1810 and 1860. For Prude, the small mill society exhibited a growing class consciousness that resulted in subtle yet identifiable tensions. Tucker disagrees on this important point believing instead that the potential for class struggle was "blunted by cultural factors" (p. 254).

We are indebted to Barbara Tucker for her reminder that culture and tradition were integral parts of the mill society. This book is necessary reading for those interested in family studies, business history, and the evolution of the early American textile industry. Tucker's assumptions are in line with conclusions of Thomas C. Cochran, Anthony F. C. Wallace, and others who have found culture vital to understanding industrialization. To support her broad thesis, however, she must show that tradition and culture were dominating forces in Slater's mill societies and that Slater was committed to building on the past to avoid the adverse impact of change. Unfortunately in neither case is there enough documentation for her argument. Tucker tends to make sweeping claims based on insufficient evidence. For example, child labor was crucial to mill operation, but this does not prove that heads of households had much to say about terms of employment as Tucker contends. Furthermore, a critical discussion of the nature and strength of patriarchy in Slater's factory "colonies" is subtly vague. And, especially in Part Two, factual support is drawn from later periods (the 1830s and 1840s) to explain developments twenty years earlier; the results are unconvincing. Beyond this, Slater's role in creating the town of Webster, Massachusetts, from sections of Dudley and Oxford receives no mention although both "traditional" communities were enraged. Moreover, little effort is made to compare Webster to other presumably similar mill communities.

To suggest, as Tucker does, that Slater consciously constructed his mill "colonies" on past values goes too far. Without solid evidence, preferably from Slater's correspondence, the claim that he intended to "construct a bridge to the past" (p. 139) is difficult to accept. In the process of discussing Slater's motives, however, this book does add depth to conservative interpretations of the "Father of American Manufactures," as George S. White called him in 1836, by noting that Slater eventually was hampered by his traditional or preindustrial values. Accepted also is the longstanding belief that Slater spurned technical innovation once his system was established resulting eventually in his

decline. This position has to be questioned; in fact, it now can be argued that Slater did not oppose improvements such as the power loom. In all probability the cost factor connected with innovation and mill building, a consideration which Tucker summarily rejects, had a great deal to do with many decisions. Actually we are shown too little of Slater after 1800 to understand his motives.

These differences and concerns, however, do not undercut Tucker's assumption that culture and tradition were primary supports of the mill village and therefore crucial to our understanding of that society. What they do suggest is the extent of the task remaining. Because of Tucker's valuable contribution, this undertaking has become more manageable.

*Nichols College*

JAMES L. CONRAD, JR.

*Frank Evans Seagrave  
(1860–1934). Photograph  
Courtesy of Skyscrapers Inc.*



## *Rhode Island Miscellany*

### Stardust Memories: Frank Evans Seagrave and Halley's Comet—1910

David A. Huestis

As Halley's comet passes in the skies overhead, it is appropriate to recall the comet's last appearance in 1910. At that time one ninety-four year old Providence man who remembered the fear caused by the comet's 1835 visit told the *Providence Journal* that "astronomy has made great strides since those days and people are not superstitious." But seventy-six years ago the impending spectacle did arouse concern and fear among the public. During the autumn of 1909 prophets and doomsayers predicted dire earthly calamities because of the forthcoming celestial event. Some of the general public feared the comet would hit the earth; others were convinced that flammable cyanogen gas discovered in its tail would extinguish all life on our planet. In Rhode Island, the public turned to Frank Evans Seagrave, a highly skilled amateur astronomer, for answers to their fears. Though his contributions are overlooked among astronomers and his name now obscure to the public, Frank Seagrave stood in the forefront of the astronomical world when Halley's comet last visited our skies.

Born 29 March 1860, the son of Mary Greene (Evans) and George Augustus Seagrave of Providence, young Frank's interest in astronomy was awakened by an eclipse of the moon on 26 October 1874. His father, president of the Weybosset Bank, soon purchased an eight-and-one-quarter inch Alvan Clarke refractor for his son's sixteenth birthday. From an observatory built to house the instrument, Seagrave would observe a myriad of objects in the years ahead: the sun, variable stars, comets, novae, asteroids, and, of course, the planets. In addition, he also was invited to participate in three solar eclipse expeditions.

In 1906, as Halley's comet was making its way through the outer reaches of the solar system, Seagrave discovered an old observation of the comet in a German magazine and began at once to work out its ephemeris. When a German astronomer recovered the comet, Seagrave's calculations proved to be quite exact. Telegrams and letters from prestigious astronomers from around the world congratulated Seagrave for his important contribution.

However, Seagrave soon discovered that his computations contained some error. Using more current observations, he recalculated Halley's

David A. Huestis is the past historian for Skyscrapers, Inc., The Amateur Astronomical Society of Rhode Island. All quotations appearing in this article are from the *Providence Journal* and *Providence Sunday Journal* from November 1909 to May 1910.

orbit and made a startling discovery. On 18 May 1910 the earth would pass through the tail of Halley's comet. Seagrave predicted:

The comet's tail will sweep as a gigantic streamer across the night sky and will appear as a magnificent aurora. If the tail is 10,000 miles broad it will sweep practically over half of the sky . . . the comet will be right on the earth's plane at that date, and the tail, repelled from the sun, will stream in toward us and will be readily observed in the night sky.

In May, newspaper articles reported on, and in some cases encouraged, these fears. "What if" scenarios began to surface. Some writers, astronomers among them, fed to the public stories on the consequences of Halley's comet colliding with the earth. Others described it ominously as a "seething mass of flames." And of course astrologers had a field day.

As Halley's comet neared the earth, the local press frequently consulted Seagrave for reports and comments on its actions and even queries on the possibility that the earth would be destroyed by colliding with the comet. Seagrave made every effort to comfort the public commenting, "There seems to me to be absolutely no reason for fear of the comet. The comet is twice as far away now as it was in 1066 and no harm was done to the earth then." According to some press reports though, many people continued to believe that the end of the world was at hand. Some people, too nervous to sleep, remained awake all night.

The discovery of cyanogen gas in Halley's tail heightened the public's concern. News reports describing the gas exaggerated its possible effects on the human population far out of proportion. Though the cyanogen gas was extremely tenuous and difficult to detect, the damage had already been done. Some people were panicking. In fact one prominent Providence businessman, insisting that any conscientious man belonged at home with his family, refused an invitation to spend the night of 18 May at Seagrave's observatory when the comet's tail would sweep over the earth.

Frank Seagrave, too, waited anxiously for the comet's tail, then twenty million miles long and one million miles wide, to intercept the earth at 10:50 P.M. He was cautious in predicting what could be seen:

I do not see how anything more spectacular can occur than the appearance of bands of light across the skies. It would be fine if we could have showers of meteors such as have occurred at various times in history, but I think that we can expect nothing of the sort. If we were going to pass through the comet's tail at a point several miles nearer the head than we are we might have some beautiful shooting stars, but the gases of the tail are so thin and unsubstantial that such phenomena are not to be expected. But you can't tell what will happen: nobody knows. Everything anyone says is the merest guesswork.

After the passing of very black storm clouds, Providence's early evening sky of 18 May featured "one of the most gorgeous sunsets ever



seen here." Many people attributed an eerie "orange golden glow" cast across the city to the atmospheric effect of the comet. Seagrave responded, "It would not be reasonable to suppose that something which was coming on us several million miles away of such rarity as the comet's tail is believed to be, could affect the weather conditions here in the least." Later in the evening, Providence residents throughout the city waited outside for something to happen at the appointed hour of the earth's passage through Halley's tail. Providence at the time was wrapped in a hazy fog, again attributed by some to the comet, while others "in the vicinity of the Great Bridge, catching a whiff of the familiar 'Providence smell,' were certain that they were able to trace the cyanogen gas of the comet's tail." "What I would like to see," Frank Seagrave stated "would be an exhibition which would appear as the most vivid and beautiful aurora ever witnessed." The fog prevented Rhode Islanders from receiving a clear view of the night sky, but even on the following night, when Halley's tail should have been observable, the only spectacle visible was an aurora caused by unusual solar activity. Of course everyone at first mistook the aurora for Halley's tail. However, Seagrave's observations indicated that the tail "bent backward and got by us." Further study by Seagrave and others revealed that the tail had split and the earth had passed without incident through the leading branch.

During the evening of the twentieth, the aurora reappeared and a halo surrounded the moon. Seagrave had to deny again that either event was related to Halley's Comet, unobservable because of clouds obscuring the western horizon. Comet observers were "getting reconciled to their fate, and confidently voice the opinion that they will have to live another 76 years and then move elsewhere if they expect to see the comet."

Finally on 26 May, a full week after perihelion, Seagrave and Providence saw the comet in the western sky. It had a thirty degree tail that stretched to the south, shining brightly against a black sky. To the unaided eye, the comet's head looked like a large dim and hazy star, while the narrow tail splashed up in the dusky sky. It posed no threat to earth or its inhabitants. As the comet sank below the horizon, Frank Seagrave lamented:

There is something pathetic to me in the departure of the comet. To-day the whole world is worked up over the comet's visit. But soon it will fade so that the naked eye cannot perceive it. We astronomers will keep it in sight, though, until almost New Year's. But when it fades out entirely—and this is what seems so pathetic—it will not be seen again by the eye of man until nearly every human being now living is dead. There will be a few children who will live to see it again, but in 1986, when it makes its next appearance, it will be as new to the generation then living as it has been to the people to-day.