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Newport's Stamp Act Rioters: Another Look

Sheila Skemp

In late August 1765 a crowd at Newport, Rhode Island, embarked upon three days of riot and destruction. Its members demolished the houses of Martin Howard, Jr., and Dr. Thomas Moffatt, two outspoken supporters of the Stamp Act, and continued their rampage even after the stamp distributor, Augustus Johnston, promised to resign his post. No completely satisfactory explanation has yet been offered for the activities of the Newport crowd during the Stamp Act riots.

It is fairly easy to comprehend the arguments and motivations of the men who drew up petitions against the Sugar and Stamp acts, attended the Stamp Act Congress in New York, and wrote letters and pamphlets protesting British policy. They proclaimed their position with remarkable logic and consistency. But most people who took to the streets, burned effigies, and destroyed property never spoke directly for themselves; they left no written record to explain their activities. Only the observations of interested—and biased—onlookers remain to account for the actions of the participants in the Stamp Act riots.

A few generalizations about the concerns of the Newport rioters may safely be made. The crowd in Newport was no doubt "egged on" and at first even joined by members of the merchant community, as contemporary observer—and victim—Thomas Moffatt insisted,¹ but this does not account for the obvious selectivity, disci-

pline, and thoroughness of the crowd. The rioters surely shared the antipathy of the merchants for the Stamp Act, as historian Pauline Maier suggests, but if they had the support of the commercial elite in the beginning, they certainly lost that backing very quickly, as their activities began to take on a direction and movement of their own. The crowd may have had its own economic grievances and may have evinced some hostility toward the city's leadership, but in Newport that hostility was easily defused and directed not toward the merchant elite as a whole but toward those who supported the Stamp Act.

While a number of historians have dealt admirably with the activities of the Newport Stamp Act rioters,² another examination of the protests is nevertheless needed. A thorough study of the events that occurred in the city in late August 1765 will indicate that constitutional issues alone were not responsible for the activities of the crowd. Individuals seldom act for one reason and one reason only. Crowds are even less likely to do so.

The question then becomes, What were the motives of the Stamp Act rioters? In answering this question, it might be well to ignore the constitutional arguments that characterized so much of the Stamp Act debate in the upper reaches of Newport society, and to explore instead the other issues that concerned the ordinary members of

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1. Thomas Moffatt, Account of the Newport Riots in August 1765, Chalmers Papers Relating to Rhode Island, 1637-1785, New York Public Library, New York.

2. See, for example, Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to*

Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776 (New York, 1972); David Lovejoy, *Rhode Island Politics and the American Revolution, 1760-1776* (Providence, 1958); Edmund S. Morgan and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill, 1953).

the community.³ Scholars need to examine the specific historical and social context in which the riots took place. Evidence certainly suggests that British policy was the prime cause of most of the frustrations felt by the Stamp Act rioters, but it also suggests that British policy touched many of the rioters in different ways and to a different degree than it did their social superiors. Their suffering during and immediately after the Seven Years' War, their fears of impressment, and their insensitive treatment at the hands of men in the colony who consistently supported British policy may well have been as important to the protestors as questions of liberty and autonomy were to the merchant elite. And while they undoubtedly shared that elite's antipathy for the Stamp Act, they had additional, more concrete reasons of their own for distrusting British policy.

I

In June 1765 Newport's leaders were relatively sanguine. Samuel Hall, the printer of the *Newport Mercury*, felt no trepidation when he began a steady propaganda barrage against the Stamp Act. He published Patrick Henry's Resolves against the act, and by fall he was describing in graphic detail the riots of unemployed English workers who were being adversely affected by an American boycott of British goods. As if to make his point clearer, he also published accounts of the riots against the Stamp Act in Boston.⁴

Tension increased throughout the summer of 1765. Much of the initial antagonisms were, logically enough, directed against Augustus Johnston, who, it was rumored, had been selected as stamp

distributor in June.⁵ But it soon became apparent that two other men, Martin Howard, Jr., and Dr. Thomas Moffatt, had also been singled out as objects of reproach. Howard was an Anglican lawyer. Although he attended the Albany Conference in 1754, he was not closely involved in Newport politics. His last foray into the political scene had been in 1761, when he ran unsuccessfully for the position of attorney general.⁶ Moffatt, a Scotch physician from the University of Edinburgh, was even less inclined to subject himself to the judgment of an electorate whose abilities he did not respect. Both men were members of the infamous Newport Junto, a loyalist cabal, composed primarily of relative newcomers to the community, that supported the Sugar and Stamp acts and in 1764 had led a move to abrogate the revered Rhode Island charter.⁷

As the junto's principal spokesmen, Howard and Moffatt had written a series of letters to the *Newport Mercury* under the pseudonym "O.Z." Beginning in August 1764 they hammered away for seven months, boldly proclaiming their unpopular position and ridiculing the "stupid herd of voters" whose sense of self-importance, they thought, threatened the order and dignity of the entire colony. Howard had also written *A Letter from a Gentleman at Halifax*, which strongly and cogently outlined the main tenets of the nascent loyalist position.⁸ In fact, according to Moffatt, at least one of the protestors indicated that the Halifax Letter alone was enough to justify death to its author.⁹ Significantly, in the end it was Howard and Moffatt, not Augustus Johnston, who suffered most at the hands of the rioters.

3. For a sample of the nature of the constitutional debate taking place in the upper reaches of Newport society, see John R. Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England*, 10 vols. (Providence, 1856-1865), 6:451-52 (hereafter *RICR*); Stephen Hopkins, "Essay on the Trade of the Northern Colonies," *Newport Mercury*, 6, 13 Feb. 1764; Hopkins, *Letter to the Author of the Halifax Letter* (Newport, 1765), 8, photostat copy from the Library of Congress, John Carter Brown Library, Providence; and Martin Howard, *A Letter from a Gentleman at Halifax* (Newport, 1765). See also Bernard Bailyn, *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1765* (Cambridge, 1965).

4. *Newport Mercury*, 24 June, 26 Aug. 1765.

5. *Ibid.*, 3 June 1765. Johnston had always been well respected in Rhode Island. The town of Johnston had been named in his honor, and he was attorney general of the colony. Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, 247.

6. *RICR* 5:386; election proxies, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence (hereafter *RIHS*).

7. *RICR* 6:414

8. *Newport Mercury*, 23 Apr. 1764; Howard, *Letter*.

9. Moffatt, Account of the Newport Riots.

A
D E F E N C E
 OF THE
L E T T E R
 FROM

A Gentleman at HALIFAX,

T O

His Friend in RHODE-ISLAND.

by Martin Howard

— An undue Countenance given to a Spirit of popular
 Opposition, upon the Principles of FALSE PATRIOTISM, hath a
 fatal Tendency to loosen the Reins of Government, and to throw
 Matters into general Confusion.

AND if the common Rights of the Subject are supposed to be the
 Object in View, let it be remembered, that Liberty is never more
 in Danger than when it vergeth into Licentiousness. *Cæsar* cher-
 ished a Spirit of licentious Popularity against the Senate. *Cromwell*
 cherished the same Spirit against the Crown and Senate. Both set
 up a Tyranny of their own, subversive of true Liberty, which ever
 must be founded in Law, and supported by it.

JUDGE FOSTER. DISC. HOM.

N E W P O R T :

Printed and sold by SAMUEL HALL, on the Parade.
 M.DCC.LXV

Martin Howard defended his Letter from a Gentleman at Halifax in this pamphlet. The Halifax Letter had infuriated the citizens of Newport by outlining the loyalist position. RIHS Collection (RH X3 6226).

Howard and Moffatt heard rumors as early as August 20, 1765, that they were to be hanged in effigy along with the stamp distributor. Alarmed by the prospect of public humiliation, both men tried to head off the demonstrations, appealing to both Governor Samuel Ward and merchant Samuel Vernon, one of the "Chief Ringleaders" of the demonstrations, to "forbear proceeding any fur-

ther with their Spectacle." But Vernon indicated that he and his allies were "unalterably fixed upon it," while Ward, although he promised to help avert the protest, assured them that their fears were groundless.¹⁰

Augustus Johnston was also preparing for possible disaster. On Tuesday, the night of the twenty-sixth, two of his friends visited his home and suggested that he either resign his position or flee the town immediately. Johnston firmly rejected both suggestions. Instead, he rose early the next morning and went about town trying to rally support. While he later claimed that he received a great deal of sympathy, no one would come to his aid so long as the town's authorities received only meaningless promises from his friends to the effect that if the legal machinery was activated to help him, they "would protect him with the risque of their lives." Under the circumstances, Johnston left town so that he would not be forced to comply with "the Insolent demands of the Mob."¹¹

Elsewhere on the twenty-seventh, the day of the quarterly meeting of freeholders in Newport, the first stage of the demonstrations against the Stamp Act began in a deceptively calm manner. Effigies of Johnston, Howard, and Moffatt were carried through the main streets of town with halters around their necks, accompanied by a person in the "Character of a Hangman." The parade halted about fifty paces from the Colony House, where the crowd hastily erected gallows upon which the effigies were hanged. Cheers went up from those who gathered to watch the spectacle. The "bodies" were guarded all day by Vernon, William Ellery, and Robert Crook, all three respectable members of the merchant community. While "great Numbers" of people milled about all day, the affair proceeded with decorum.¹² Sometime between four and five o'clock that evening, a few men ceremoniously cut down the effigies and burned them, after which everyone dispersed. Symbolic violence, not attacks on

¹⁰ Ibid. Moffatt claimed that merchant William Ellery was the other "Chief Ring Leader" of the early protests. Ibid.

¹¹ Johnston to Lords Commissioners of Stamps, 31 Aug. 1765, Public Record Office (PRO), Treas. 1/439.

¹² Ibid.



In the days before the Revolution, hanging in effigy was a popular means of expressing public disdain and intimidating officials of the Crown. From American Heritage Book of the Revolution (New York, 1971).

persons or property, was the order of the day. "The whole," said the complaisant *Mercury*, "was conducted with Moderation, and no Violence [was] offered to the Persons or Property of any man."¹³

The *Mercury* failed to point out, however, that the primary targets of the demonstrators' wrath had all left town, and that even John Robinson, the customs collector, had spent the night in Newport's harbor aboard His Majesty's ship *Cygnets* as the guest of its captain, Charles Leslie.¹⁴ This, not the good will of the crowd, may well have been the reason for the relatively benign atmosphere prevailing on the night of the twenty-seventh.

Whatever the reason for the peaceful character

of the crowd on Wednesday, the mood changed the following day. The objects of the crowd's ire, no doubt hoping that the previous day's activities had put an end to the protests, returned to town. Toward dusk Robinson and Howard were met by chief agitator Samuel Crandall and a group of his followers. Both men were "attacked & Collared in the Publick Street" and scarcely escaped to their homes.¹⁵

The incident was enough to spur the rioters into more serious action. Their first target was the house of Martin Howard. About eight o'clock that night, according to Dr. Moffatt, "the Chief contrivers with some chosen Ruffians at their heels" rushed into the streets with painted faces, broadaxes, and "loud huzzas" and made their

13. Ibid; Moffatt, *Account of the Newport Riots*, *Newport Mercury*, 2 Sept. 1765.

14. Robinson to the Commissioners of the Customs, 27 Aug. 1765, PRO, Treas. 1/442.

15. Ibid. Howard, Testimony before the Parliamentary Committee on American Papers, British Museum (BM), Add. MSS, 33030 [Newcastle], f. 83. It is not clear that Crandall

was the ringleader of the Stamp Act protests in general. Howard may well have meant only that Crandall was the ringleader of the small band of persons who assaulted him and Robinson on the night of the twenty-eighth. Indeed, subsequent events indicate that Crandall's quarrel with Robinson was a private matter not directly related to the Stamp Act.

way toward Howard's house. They totally gutted the building, "stripping and plundering every apartment of every article, carrying away wearing apparel, bed and table linen in the most open, daring, and unrestrained manner breaking open his cellars, drinking, wasting and carrying off all his wine and other liquors."¹⁶ The "ruffians" then went to Moffatt's residence, where they "split down the doors of his house and committed the same acts of rage, violence, and pillage in every point and instance."¹⁷ Still they were not finished. About eleven o'clock they returned to Howard's residence, where they cleaved the doors and casements "into bits" and "cut up all the floors, hearths, and chimney pieces, leaving the house a miserable shattered shell only." The rioters then returned to Moffatt's house, where the scene was repeated.¹⁸

Meanwhile, Augustus Johnston sat nervously at home. His wife and "four small Sick Children" had fled earlier in the evening. About eight o'clock various friends informed him of the destruction of Howard's and Moffatt's property and urged him to flee immediately from the "furious Ungoverned mob." Johnston tried valiantly to persuade his friends to help him defend his house, but they insisted that his life, as well as his property, was in danger. Finally, "partly by force and partly by Persuasion," they took him to the home of Nicholas Lechmere. Johnston's friends began removing his belongings to places of safety, but not before some of the crowd's members had carried off "a great part" of his possessions.¹⁹

At last most of the crowd made their way to Johnston's residence and surrounded it, but they

left when they were promised that he would resign his position as stamp distributor the following day.²⁰ The group then marched to the customs collector's house, but again its members were easily dispersed upon hearing that Robinson was spending yet another night aboard the *Cygnets*. They were similarly dissuaded from doing much damage to the residence of Customs Comptroller John Nicoll. Toward dawn the rioters returned once more to Howard's house, where they completed what was left of their night of destruction, even chopping down all the trees planted in front of the house. Content at last with the results of the night's labor, the crowd dispersed.²¹

By Thursday morning the rioters could claim success. Moffatt and Howard fled to the *Cygnets* for protection. Johnston reluctantly resigned his post. To be sure, one person "who from his station in Life better things ought to be expected" claimed that Johnston's resignation was worthless until it was submitted to the lords of the treasury. But when Johnston affirmed his submission to the paper he had already signed, the crowd appeared satisfied.²²

Up until this point the activities of the crowd had the tacit approval of the authorities. Moffatt and Howard were loved by few and hated by many, and while there may have been some concern over the excessive destruction of both gentlemen's property, no one attempted to steer the crowd from its course. Indeed, when Johnston unofficially resigned his post, nearly everyone was pleased with the results of Wednesday night's activities.

But by midday on Thursday it had become ap-

16. Moffatt, Account of the Newport Riots. Dick Hoerder argues that in Boston the sight of the wealth the crowd encountered at Peter Oliver's residence incited the rioters to greater anger and outrage, thus propelling them to more violence. Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts* (New York, 1977), 97-110. There is no hard evidence that this was the case in Newport.

17. Moffatt, Account of the Newport Riots, *Newport Mercury*, 2 Sept. 1765.

18. Moffatt, Account of the Newport Riots.

19. Johnston to Lords Commissioners.

20. Johnston says he tried to return home, hoping that his popularity with the townspeople might help avert any attacks on his property, but his friends dissuaded him from

what they considered a foolhardy attempt. Instead, he spent the night aboard the *Cygnets* along with Robinson, who had fled there earlier in the evening, and Benjamin Wickham, who had previously been in the king's service and who also shared a house with Robinson. *Ibid.*

21. Moffatt, Account of the Newport Riots; Robinson to the Commissioners of Customs, 28 Aug. 1765.

22. *Ibid.* The man who objected to Johnston's resignation may have been Congregational minister Ezra Stiles. Capt. Charles Leslie to the Admiralty and the Admiral Lord Colville, Rhode Island, 29 and 30 August, in Joseph Ridington, ed., *Calendar of Home Office Papers of the Reign of George III, 1760 (October)-1765*, 1 (London, 1878), 611.

23. *Newport Mercury*, 2 Sept 1765; Johnston to the Lords Commissioners. In fact, Webber was English. Capt. Leslie reported that he was only twenty-one or twenty-three years old, had been in town only a few days, and "appeared" to be a deserted convict. Leslie to the Admiralty, 610, 611.

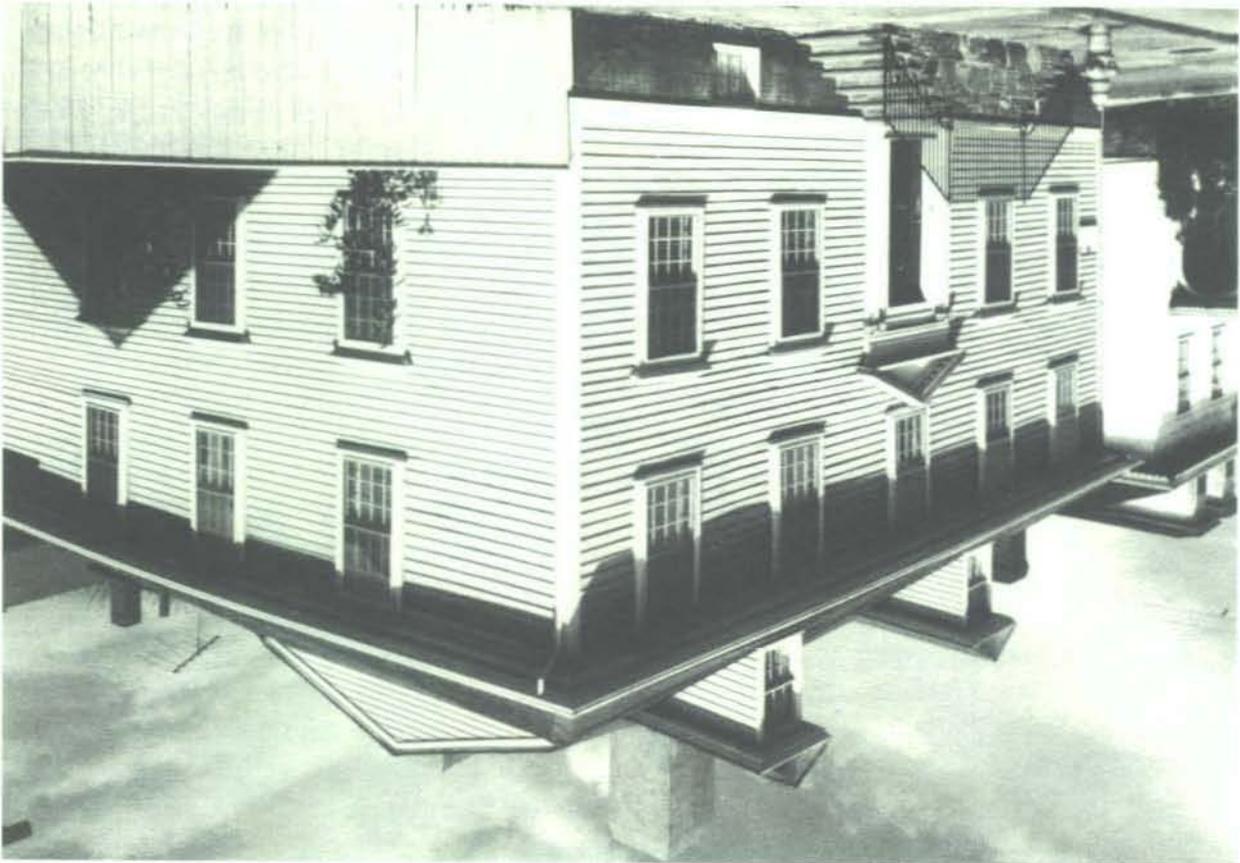
24. Johnston to Lords Commissioners. It is doubtful that Webber's claim to ties with the crowd's leaders should be taken literally, as it is highly unlikely that they would have sought out a stranger to lead the rioters' activities.

parent that the original leaders of the protest movement were losing control of the situation. Governor Ward had prudently left town for his farm in Westerly that morning, and by afternoon events had drifted into the hands of a newcomer in town, John Webber, who was described at first as a "young Irish fellow." Webber was going around town bragging about his part in Wednesday evening's festivities, urging the crowd to still more violence, and behaving in a very "insolent" manner "to several Persons, some of whom were the very people concerned in beginning the Riot."²³ In desperation, the authorities

Webber may not have been the central figure he claimed to be before his arrest, but his incarceration quickly turned him into a hero in the eyes of the crowd. Provoked by the arrest into more frenzied and violent protests, the rioters threatened to demolish the houses of his captors with the same thoroughness they had previously visited upon the residences of Moffatt

Wanted, seized Webber and carried him aboard the *Cygnet*, while Webber loudly protested that "he was betrayed by the very people who first set him to work."²⁴

Augustus Johnston was pressured to resign his position as distributor of tax stamps after the mob ransacked his house at 40 Division Street, Newport. HABS photo by Jack E. Boucher, 1969. RIHS Collection (RHI X3 6227).



NEWPORT'S STAMP ACT RIOTERS

and Howard. Only Webber's release appeased the crowd, whereupon he was immediately surrounded "amidst the shouts of Numbers of persons." But by evening the crowd had settled down, and the inhabitants of Newport spent a quiet, if uneasy, night.²⁵

The next day, however, Webber returned to the streets. The "projectors of the affair," who, Captain Leslie insisted, were "some of the principal people in the town," were badly frightened. Leslie was convinced that the original organizers of the demonstrations feared that Webber would reveal their names to the authorities if he were returned to jail, but to allow him to remain on the streets surely invited more violence.²⁶ They did what they could to defuse the situation. They "begged and prayed him to be satisfied, gave him money, and ordered him clothes, and everything he would have." Sheriff Wanton reportedly cried out in frustration, "What would you have of me? I will do everything to satisfy you; I will lay myself down and let you tread on my neck, if that will satisfy you!" In the end, some of the townsmen, led by merchant Godfrey Malbone, Jr., resolved to take charge of the situation and to "oppose force to force, if the rioters would not disperse by persuasion." The crowd was finally encouraged to go home "by the latter method," and Augustus Johnston "heroically seized" upon Webber and locked him in the town jail. Order was restored, and Governor Ward returned to a quiet and peaceful town.²⁷

Newport remained quiet until November 1, when the Stamp Act was slated to go into effect. Sheriff Wanton reported that on October 31 there was an "uneasiness appearing already in the People." He himself did not know what to expect the next day, but he obviously feared the worst.²⁸ Wanton's fears were not totally chimerical. To be sure, the "Funeral Procession for Liberty" that the authorities held on Novem-

ber 1 was well controlled and tranquil. But that same day Webber attempted to hang himself in his jail cell, and Wanton received two threatening letters demanding the prisoner's release. The following night men patrolled the streets, and when a crowd gathered, threatening to storm the Newport jail, it was dispersed. Two agitators were seized, "and instead of releasing their associate in Prison, they were forced to take up their Residence in the same Place."²⁹

With the arrest of the leaders, the effort collapsed. Johnston officially resigned his post on Christmas Day, 1765; Ward won praise for his opposition to the Stamp Act; and the little town of Newport, Rhode Island, was calm and peaceful once more.³⁰

II

Contemporary accounts of the riots are both puzzling and incomplete. They do not fully explain why the riots occurred, how the "sensible sort" so quickly lost control of them, or even who most of the participants were. Of the crowd's critics, Moffatt mentions only Vernon, Ellery, Crook, and Webber by name; Howard adds the name of Samuel Crandall. Leslie mentions the Reverend Ezra Stiles; Johnston, who was surely in a position to name names, refers directly only to Webber. None of these men indicates who took part in the riots on the night of the twenty-eighth or who continued to follow and support Webber the next day. Everyone agrees that the original instigators of the protests had lost control of events by the afternoon of the twenty-ninth. The crowd itself is contemptuously referred to simply as "ruffians," the "rabble," or the "mob."

The *Mercury* conveys a slightly different picture of the crowd's membership. While prudently naming no one but Webber, it implies that the

25. *Ibid.*

26. Leslie to the Admiralty, 610-11.

27. *Ibid.* Gov. Ward to John Robinson and others, 31 Aug. 1765, *RICR* 6:454; Johnston to Lords Commissioners.

28. Joseph Wanton, Jr., to Moses Brown, Moses Brown Papers 1:65, RIHS.

29. *Newport Mercury*, 4 Nov. 1765.

30. *Ibid.*, 30 Dec. 1765; H. Babcock to Samuel Ward, n.d., Ward MSS., box 1, p. 61, RIHS.

protestors were all lovers of liberty who were simply fighting parliamentary oppression. The paper indicates that at least in the riot's earlier stages, the participants constituted a rational crowd, not an irrational mob, and that they were, furthermore, carrying out the will of the town.

Both the *Mercury* and the objects of the rioters' wrath had an obvious interest in describing the protesters' composition in the way that they did. Moffatt and Howard were pleading their cases to English authorities in an attempt to secure reparations for their property losses. Johnston, Leslie, and Robinson wanted to justify their actions to an obviously unhappy government at home. Their accounts were plainly self-serving. Johnston's description of his brave defense of his house, wife, and "four small Sick children" and Robinson's claim that he was helpless before a group of people constituting "not a trifling Mob, but . . . a whole country inflamed to an intolerable Degree" were surely designed to win a sympathetic ear in London.³¹ The *Mercury* clearly wanted to project a positive image of the riots, for Samuel Hall was a staunch opponent of the Stamp Act and supported any attempt to secure its repeal. Consequently the paper downplayed the crowd's violence, portraying its members as steadfast patriots whose major concern was to preserve Rhode Island's revered charter liberties.

Despite the incomplete and often contradictory evidence concerning the composition of the Stamp Act rioters, a few generalizations can safely be made. Given the nature of Newport's economy, most participants derived their living directly from the sea. The rioters were, at least in the beginning, encouraged and joined by members of Newport's gentry elite, people like Vernon, Crook, and Ellery. But the bulk of the crowd's members were no doubt drawn from the "lower and middling sort"—blacks, workers, and the unemployed; craftsmen, shopkeepers, and small property owners. While derogatory appellations are typical of the descriptions colonial authori-

ties everywhere applied to local rioters, it seems clear that these men were, indeed, primarily lower and lower middle class, and thus personally unknown to the objects of their wrath; the latter were quick to name names and lay specific blame whenever they could reasonably do so, but when they described the Newport Stamp Act rioters, they could speak only in the vaguest of generalities. Moreover, this characterization is consistent with what we know about earlier riots in the city of Newport. It is also consistent with the actions of the crowd during the Stamp Act riots themselves. Particularly after Thursday, the twenty-ninth, the crowd's activities indicate that a disproportionate number of the members were drawn from the lower orders of Newport society, for once Webber assumed leadership of the movement, the "sensible sort" tried to stop further rioting. The question remains: Why were these people protesting?

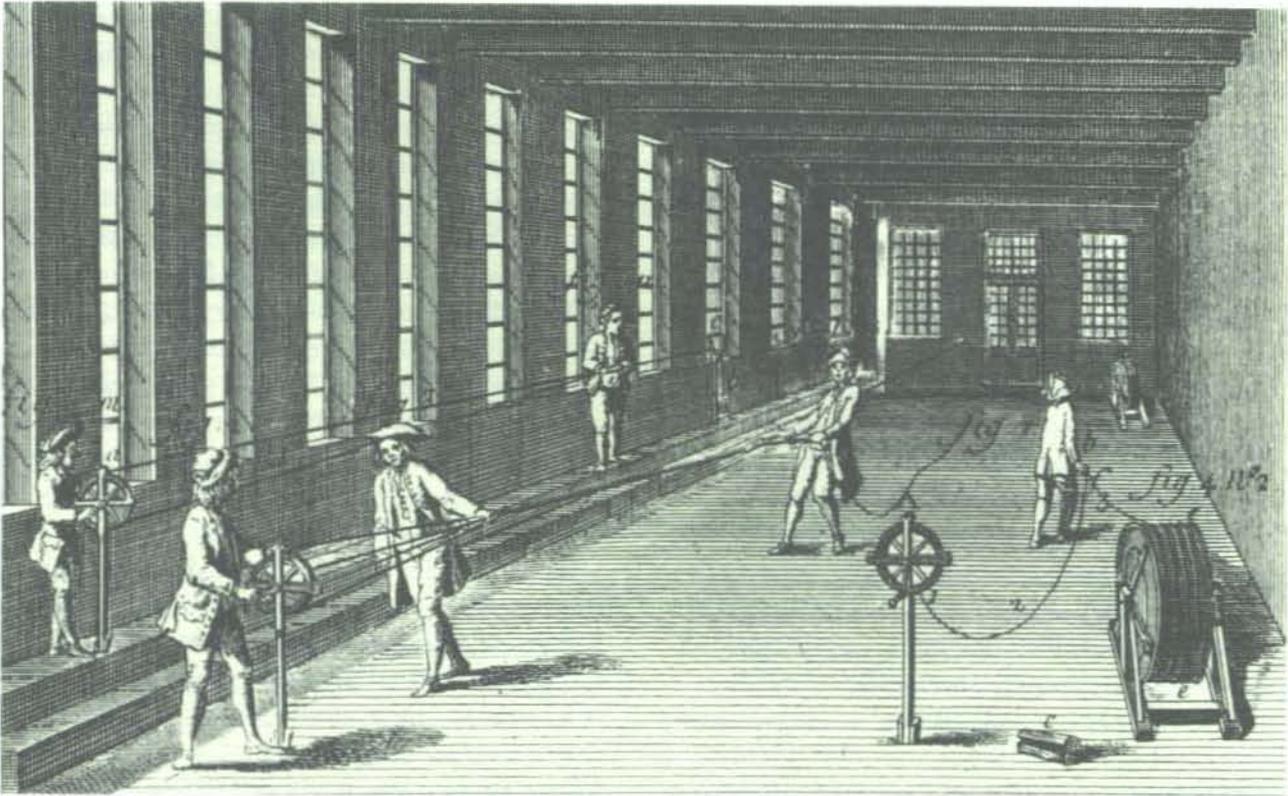
The question of motivation is a crucial one; it is also extremely difficult. The rioters, after all, never spoke for themselves, and given the nature of the evidence, any explanation of their motivations must remain highly circumstantial and inferential. Still, a number of explanations for the crowd's behavior have been offered. All of those who were the object of the crowd's attacks insisted that the example provided by Boston was at least in some way responsible for events in Newport. The disturbance at Boston, said John Robinson, "communicated the Same Spirit, to Rhode Island."³² All of them, too, saw the anti-charter sentiments of Howard and Moffatt as the main pretext for the attacks on their houses. In this sense, the constitutional debate over parliamentary authority in America was surely an issue of some importance.

Having agreed on this much, however, both witnesses and victims began to disagree. Captain Leslie linked the riots to the Presbyterians in the town.³³ Investigator John Temple, surveyor general of the Northern District of America,

31. Johnston to Lords Commissioners; Robinson to the Commissioners of Customs, 28 Aug. 1765.

32. Robinson to the Commissioners of Customs, 28 Aug. 1765.

33. Leslie to the Admiralty, 611.



Typical of wharfside businesses in Newport was the ropewalk, where hemp was twisted into rope. This manufacturing activity was strongly affected by the vagaries of the sea trade. Unemployed workers from such businesses made up the bulk of the rioters. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6228).

blamed Rhode Island's charter for the disturbances and claimed that this sort of "rebellion" would continue until the colony's charter was revoked.³⁴ Moffatt implied that the "rabble" constituted an unthinking herd, stirred up by unscrupulous merchants and egged on by liquor and Cheshire cheese, and he insisted that the "Bulk of the People . . . only Joined for Pillage."³⁵ While Johnston admitted that there were a "set of Miscreants who attended the Mob with the hopes of Plunder," he thought most of the rioters aimed at something more than merely lining their own pockets.³⁶

All of the riot's victims, whatever individual differences they may have had, paint a horrifying picture of the night of the twenty-eighth. They

describe a scene of wild debauchery and destruction, a mindless mob reeling back and forth between Moffatt's and Howard's houses, drinking more and more liquor, destroying furniture, and cleaving everything "into bits." Johnston's friends called the rioters a "furious Ungoverned mob," and in the end Johnston was forced to agree with this view.³⁷

But the picture of a mob gone mad is weakened as much by its own logic as it is by the credibility of the witnesses, for that same group of drunken "ruffians," whom hostile observers picture as so animalistic and out of control, so ready to commit "acts of rage, violence, and pillage in every point and instance," apparently became quite reasonable when it marched to

34. Mr. Temple, Surveyor General of the Northern District of America, Concerning the Riot at Rhode Island and the Disturbances at Boston, PRO, Treas. 1/442.

35. Moffatt, Account of the Newport Riots, Moffatt, Testi-

mony before the Parliamentary Committee on American Papers, BM, Add. MSS, 33030 [Newcastle], f. 80.

36. Johnston to Lords Commissioners.

37. Ibid.

Johnston's, Robinson's, and Nicoll's houses later in the evening. According to everyone's account, the crowd was turned away with relative ease. Its members were obviously capable of acting in a disciplined, purposive, and selective manner. And, more to the point, it is clear that they bore a particular grudge against Martin Howard, Jr., and Dr. Thomas Moffatt.

The *Mercury's* description of the activities of the rioters appears to offer an explanation for that grudge. Purely and simply, it assumes that the mob was protesting the enactment of the Stamp Act, and that Howard and Moffatt, two of the act's most vocal supporters, were attacked because of that support. They represented British imperial policy, and the Stamp Act rioters were protesting that policy. In this sense, the riots represented the first effort to define and defend America's constitutional rights; they were the expression of the colonial desire for liberty and autonomy.

The *Mercury's* perspective, with some refinements and modifications, has been echoed by a number of contemporary historians.³⁸ But this explanation leaves us with some unanswered questions. If the rioters shared the perspective of Newport's elite, why did the Stamp Act protests move so quickly beyond the limits envisioned by the town's leaders? Why was the Newport elite unable to control John Webber? If the goals of all classes were virtually identical, why did the crowd refuse to disperse as soon as its immediate objective, the promised resignation of Augustus Johnston as stamp distributor, was achieved? If the crowd was not a mere drunken mob, how do we explain the ferocity of its attacks on the property of Howard and Moffatt, to the point that not even a tree was left standing on Howard's lawn by the end of the night? Moreover, if the rioters were concerned primarily with constitutional issues, why did they threaten to destroy the houses

of such staunch opponents of the Stamp Act as Samuel Vernon, William Ellery, and Sheriff Joseph Wanton?

There are a number of plausible explanations for the inability of Newport's leaders to control the rioters. Lack of leadership and direction from Governor Ward surely created an atmosphere where the situation might easily have gotten out of hand. Furthermore, Webber may not have been as easily manipulated as his counterpart John MacIntosh had been in Boston, since Webber was a newcomer to the town, an outsider who was not designated by Newport's leaders to take an active part in the protests.

But other issues may have been at stake as well. To explain the character and activities of the crowd during the Stamp Act riots, one must determine whether or not its members opposed the Stamp Act for the same reasons that the merchants of the community did. It is possible that the crowd had grievances of its own against the Stamp Act in general and Martin Howard, Jr., and Dr. Moffatt in particular. While the *goals* of the Stamp Act rioters and the rest of the community were identical, their *reasons* for embracing those goals may well have been different. If such a distinction between goals and reasons can be established, many of the apparent contradictions in all of the versions of Newport's Stamp Act riots may be resolved.

A careful scrutiny of the social and economic character of postwar Newport reveals on the one hand that the rioters of August 1765 were indeed, as the *Mercury* suggests, protesting the Stamp Act: that they did see the act as inimical to their own interests, a threat, either real or potential, to their livelihood. In this sense, they surely shared the goals of the entire community. On the other hand, it becomes equally apparent that the rioters had other grievances that were linked only tenuously to the imperial struggles that so

38. For a few examples of historians who tend to support the *Mercury's* view, see especially Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis*; Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in Revolt: Urban Life in America, 1743-1776* (New York, 1955), 309-11; Pauline Maier, "Popular Uprisings and Civil Authority in Eighteenth-Century America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 2nd ser., 27

[1970]: 3-35, "Revolutionary Violence and the Relevance of History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1971): 119-35, and *From Resistance to Revolution*; and George Rudé, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848* (New York, 1964).

occupied the minds of the merchants and professional people of Newport. They were, for instance, at least as concerned with the British policy of impressment as they were with the constitutional issues surrounding the Stamp Act. Members of the middling sort, in particular, may well have resented the *junto's* attack on their growing political importance and self-esteem as much as they worried about its threat to the colony charter, and they had reason to be as disturbed by a sense of insecurity and frustrated ambition brought on by the effects of Newport's postwar depression as they were by the British threat to colonial liberties.

III

To analyze the possible motives of the Stamp Act rioters, we must understand the climate in which the crisis itself was nurtured, the climate of Newport in the mid-1760s, when inhabitants were trying to recover from the wartime dislocation of their lives and to adjust to a peacetime economy.³⁹ While the signals here are certainly mixed, a few generalizations can be made. First, wealth in the tiny seaport town of 7,500 was both highly visible and unevenly divided. Secondly, the economy was in turmoil, and no one, rich or poor, could be certain that the future held anything but financial disaster. It was, as one merchant said, "a world uncertain and strongly checker'd."⁴⁰ This uncertainty created an atmosphere of anxiety and tension. Finally, much of the blame for the difficulties facing Newport could be placed on British colonial policy, a policy explicitly and vocally supported by Martin Howard, Jr., and Dr. Thomas Moffatt.

Eighteenth-century Newport society was often noted for the "pomp and show," the "whirl and tide of fashion and frolic," that existed there.⁴¹

But beneath the veneer of gaiety, opulence, and "frolic," Newport's economy was a troubled one, for at least by 1763 the city was suffering the effects of a commercial depression that virtually dominated its economy. Coming on the heels of the Seven Years' War, which itself had caused severe dislocations in Newport's economic and social structure, disrupting both the legal and illegal trade activities of the city's merchants, the depression often spelled disaster to those who did not have the reserves to weather the storm.

Merchants as well as tradesmen were hurt by financial conditions during and after the Seven Years' War. Indeed, they were often hit first. Joseph Whipple, for instance, stunned the community when he suffered complete financial disaster in 1763 and resigned as deputy governor midway through his term the following year. A decade later Walter Chaloner, Jonathan March, John Channing, and Benjamin Tucker all petitioned the General Assembly for permission to declare bankruptcy, asserting that any efforts to pay their arrears while languishing in debtors' prison would be as if "to remove mountains & throw them into the Midst of the Sea." Jacob Roderiguez Rivera was able to avoid financial ruin only by resorting to the Solvency Act and unlimited credit. Merchant Godfrey Malbone's sons were also "losing greatly in trade," although they too managed to survive the hard times. Even Henry Collins, once referred to as the "Lorenzo de Medici of Newport,"⁴² faced economic disaster, and he was forced into bankruptcy and had to sell his property to George Rome, a member of Newport's loyalist community. Indeed, for many entrepreneurs in this period, trade conditions had taken on a nightmarish quality as the expenses of war, a severe drought in 1762, a gravely dislocated system of trade, and the chronic lack

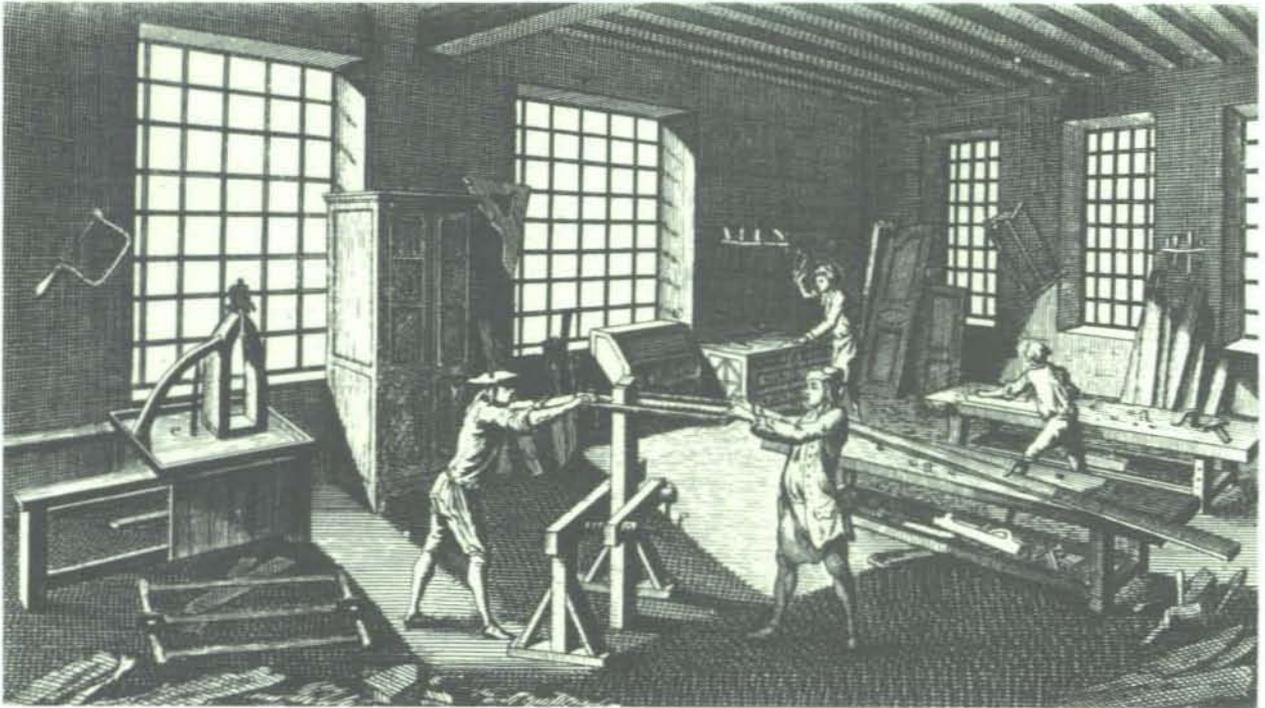
39. See Sheila Skemp, "A World Uncertain and Strongly Checker'd," in Moarten Ultee, ed., *Adapting to Conditions: War and Society in Eighteenth Century America* (Tuscaloosa, 1986), 84-103, for an analysis of the effect that the mid-eighteenth century wars had on Newport's mercantile community.

40. Roland Cotton to Samuel Vernon, 30 May 1743, Lopez and Vernon Papers, box 48, folder 3, p. 400, Newport Histori-

cal Society, Newport.

41. Samuel Ward to Anna Ward, 1 July 1765, Ward MSS, box 1, p. 55; John Reynell to Abraham Redwood, 2 Sept. 1748, *Commerce of Rhode Island, 1726-1800*, 2 vols., Massachusetts Historical Society Collections 9 and 10, sec. 7, 1:38.

42. John Callender, *A Historical Discourse of the Civil and Religious Affairs of the Colony of Rhode Island*, 2nd rev. ed. [Providence, 1838], 44n.



Newport cabinetmakers sold their work to wealthy merchants in Rhode Island, New York, and elsewhere. Both craftsmen and merchants were affected by a commercial depression after the Seven Years' War. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6229).

of specie all worked together to give the town "a most gloomy aspect."⁴³

Nevertheless, if individual merchants suffered in the 1750s and 1760s, it is true that as a class the elite remained solvent throughout the period. Indeed, the depression hit many members of the middling sort at least as hard as it hit their economic superiors.⁴⁴ Problems began even before the end of the Seven Years' War, as both the lower and middling sorts were forced to contend with the same dislocations in the commercial economy that plagued the merchants of the city. Indeed, Newport's entire social matrix was severely disrupted by the war. Deserters from the army and those who were simply fleeing military

service inundated the city, increasing the number of jobless workers there. They caroused in the taverns, gambled away the little money they had, and frequented the brothels on the waterfront.⁴⁵

The government did what it could to take care of Newport's burgeoning poor population. It authorized the town to send drifters and "stragglers" out of town summarily, or to incarcerate them in the almshouse, where they could be set to work making oakum. The town could also bind them out as apprentices, minimizing the burden on its treasury and providing cheap labor for Newport's employers.⁴⁶

Despite the best efforts of the town's leadership, conditions did not appreciably improve. As

43. Petitions of the Rhode Island Assembly, 72 vols., 9:102, State House, Providence; George Mason, *Reminiscences of Newport* (Newport, 1884), 58; Gov. Ward to Joseph Sherwood, *Governors of Rhode Island, 1723-1775*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1902), 2:336; Samuel Ward to Lords of Trade and Plantations, 19 Nov. 1765, Ward MSS., box 1, p. 59; *Newport Mercury*, 28 Feb. 1763.

44. Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis*, 283, 338.

45. Gov. Shirley to Gov. Greene, 3 May 1745, *RICR* 5:145; Charles E. Hammett, Jr., transcriber, "Henry Bull's Memoirs of Rhode Island," 2 vols. (Newport, TS 188), 1:187, RIHS.

46. *Newport Mercury*, 2 Jan., 17 Dec. 1764; 8 July 1765; *Acts and Laws of His Majesty's Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (Newport, 1744), 199, 236; Newport Town Meeting Records, Newport Historical Society [NHS], 179.

early as 1758 wood had risen to "an Extravagant Price." As one observer noted, this was particularly harmful to the poorer and middling sort, for the rich could bargain for reasonable prices "in proper Season" and were not at the mercy of those who controlled the supply. By 1760 the poorer sort could not afford more than a quarter cord of wood per winter.⁴⁷ The winter of 1760 must have caused a great deal of hardship for the marginal members of Newport society, for the city also suffered a severe pork and corn shortage that same year.⁴⁸

Although some ambitious small businessmen were hurt directly by the war,⁴⁹ the economic setbacks endured by most artisans and shopkeepers arrived by a more circuitous route. The financial difficulties of small businessmen were the result of their symbiotic relationship with commercial capital, for their prosperity was inextricably tied to the prosperity of the merchant community. When trade was depressed, their businesses were hurt. Commercial decline meant tight money and reduced buying power for all consumers. It also meant that supplies from abroad were less plentiful and that those goods brought into the harbor often sold at exorbitant prices. The commercial decline that affected merchants directly and small businessmen indirectly was, of course, largely the result of the disruption of normal trading activities during the wars with France and Spain. It was British foreign policy, then, that was ultimately to blame for many of the financial woes that so troubled the lives of the lower and middling sort in the years before the Stamp Act crisis.

The situation did not improve with war's end. With few reserves to help them weather the post-war depression, members of the lower middle class once again suffered dramatically. A perusal

of the pages of the *Mercury* in 1764 and 1765 indicates the hard times besetting the artisans and shopkeepers of Newport. In those years scarcely an issue went by without at least one announcement of a small businessman's intent to declare bankruptcy. Many, like Peter Franklin or Thomas Webber, gave up completely, sold their property, and left town.⁵⁰

As the Seven Years' War drew to a close, Newport's merchants, themselves under pressure from their creditors in London, began to demand immediate payment from shopkeepers. This forced shopkeepers to sell their goods for "ready cash" or "short credit only." As a result, money became tighter than ever, consumers bought less, and small shopkeepers, victuallers, and artisans could neither sell their goods nor pay their debts. The results were often tragic.⁵¹

During this period many Rhode Island debtors were sent to jail. Since their chances of paying their arrears were almost nonexistent there, legislation had been enacted in 1747 giving imprisoned debtors the "liberty of the yard," which often extended to the town limits, and this allowed them opportunity to earn enough money to compensate their creditors.⁵² Even so, the plight of Newport's imprisoned debtors was bleak.⁵³

Ezra Stiles unwittingly noted the desperate straits of many Newport residents when he documented the reaction of the "rabble" to a huge fire that raged near his own house, leaving thirty-five people homeless. As soon as the blaze was put out, scavengers pawed their way through the rubble, stealing any furniture and other goods that were salvable. Stiles saw their action as indicative of a lack of Christian charity, but others might have seen in it as well an indication of real necessity.⁵⁴

47. Newport Town Meeting Records, 177; *Newport Mercury*, 26 Dec. 1758; 22 Apr. 1760.

48. *Newport Mercury*, 1 Jan. 1760.

49. *RICR* 6: 161; Sidney S. Rider, "A Century of Lotteries in Rhode Island," in Sidney S. Rider, ed., *Rhode Island Historical Tracts*, 2nd ser. (Providence, 1896), 3: 12.

50. *Newport Mercury*, 13 Feb., 9 Apr. 1764. Webber was the owner of the British Coffee House and Franklin had a

small shop.

51. See *Newport Mercury*, 1763-1765, passim.

52. *Acts and Laws of His Majesty's Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (Newport, 1767), 211.

53. Samuel Hull to Samuel Ward, Dec. 1767, Ward, Account Book, loose letter, RIHS.

54. *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 2 vols., ed. Franklin B. Dexter (New York, 1901), 1: 81.

showed two witnesses: we therefore give notice, that we shall attend the Business at the House of the Widow Margaret Briggs, in said Town, on the last Wednesday of this and the ensuing Month, from three to five o'Clock, P. M.

NATHANIEL SEARLE,
JOSEPH WOOD,
THOMAS CHURCH, } Commissioners.

All Persons who have any Demands on the Estate of Mr. FRANCIS HONYMAN, late of Newport, Merchant deceased, are desired to bring in their Accounts to MARTHA HONYMAN, Executrix to the last Will and Testament of the said Francis: And all Persons that are indebted to said Estate, are desired to pay the same to the said Executrix. 93-96 Newport, April 16, 1764.

TO BE SOLD, OR LET.
A Tract of LAND lying in Middletown, measuring, by Estimation, Forty Acres; Thirty of which is Meadow Land, the Remainder good Arable or Pasture. It is well enclosed, and has every Convenience requisite for a Farm. Any Person inclining to purchase or hire the same, may be informed of the Terms by applying to the Printer hereof. 93-96 Newport, April 9, 1764.

As the Subscriber designs to leave this Colony in about a Month's Time, he desires all those who have Accounts open with him, to bring them in for Adjustment.

PETER FRANKLIN.

N. B. The said FRANKLIN has to sell, a convenient Dwelling House, with a Shop, fronting Thames-Street, near the Golden Eagle, together with a good Store, on the same Lot. 92-95

NOTICE is hereby given to the Inhabitants of the County of Newport, that have any Interest Bonds due to the Colony, that they apply to the Office, and discharge them before the 1st of May next, otherwise they may expect to have their Bonds put in Suit at the next inferior Court, to be held in said County. J. CLARKE, Gen. Treasr. Newport, March 27, 1764. 92-95

We the Subscribers being, by the Honorable Town Council of Newport, appointed Commissioners to receive and examine all the Claims of the several Creditors to the Estate of David Lutes late of Newport, Merchant, deceased, represented insolvent:—Do hereby notify the said Creditors, that Three Months is allowed by the said Town Council for them to bring in their Claims, and prove their Debts; for which Purpose we shall attend that Business at the House of Capt. John Lawton, on the Second and Third Thursdays in this and the ensuing Month, between Three and Five in the Afternoon. ISRAEL BRAYTON,
JOHN DOCKRAY,
WILLIAM RICHARDSON.

92-95

ducaten, black tatten, green Persian, black silk cordials; a good assortment of chintzes, calicoes, and stamped linens; a variety of new-fashion'd ribbons, Holland tape, wide and narrow gartering, wide and narrow bindings, silk ferret, galleons, silk and worsted cord, stay braid, black silk fringe, black and scarlet nail, black, green and pink-colour'd gimp, mens felt, cashe and leaver hats, pins, needles, &c. wide and narrow saddle lace; blue, green and cloth-colour'd fiddle fringe; a variety of saddlery ware; cabinet ditto, &c. —sd. jd. qd. 6d. 8d. 10d. and 20d. nails, brads of all sorts; 6, 8, and 14 oz. tacks; hob nails, jobents, thumb latches, plain irons, carpenters compasses, broad and narrow chisels, iron squares, H and HL hinges, chest ditto, plain and cross ward chest and cupboard locks, brass knob latches, carpenters and shoemakers hammers, awl blades, shoe tacks, pincers, nippers, and awl hafts, nail and spike gimblets; a large assortment of shoe and knee buckles, and shoe and knee chapes, coat and jacket metal buttons, coat and jacket horn ditto, knives and forks of all sorts, pen-knives, razors, scissors, taylor's sheers, snuff-boxes, screw-buttons, pewter dishes, plates, basins, porringers, spoons, quars and pint cans of the newest fashion, black-tin tea-pots and bed-pans, copper tea-kettles, wood-handle warming-pans, brass kettles, frying pans, brass skillets, English steel, powder, flint, flints, &c. —Also, choice West-India and New-England rum, molasses, brown sugar, new rice, coffee, cotton wool, rock salt, and fine white Liverpool ditto, raisins, currants, figs, nutmegs, cinnamon, cloves, mace and pepper.

At the same place may be also had, Choice botica tea, by the chest, hundred weight, or single pound; and the very best Holland & Russia duck. N. B. The above goods are to be sold as cheap for the hard money as they can be purchased in Boston, and at the lowest rate for Lawful Money bills of this colony. 92-95

Just Imported, and to be sold, by
JOHN BOURS,
At the Sign of the Golden Eagle,
Strip'd, changeable, and lead-colour'd
Luteerings;
Rich cloth-colour'd Padufoy;
Womans' brocaded and Satin Shoes;
Gold Lace;
Gold and Silver, Basket, Coat and Breast Buttons;
An Assortment of China Ware;
With a Variety of other Articles.

TO BE SOLD,
By Thomas Brenton,
At his Shop adjoining to Mr. ROBERT STEVENS, in Brenton's Row, for Cash,
Loaf, powder'd and brown Sugars,
Tea, Chocolate, Coffee, Rum, Flour, Rice, Wine, Pepper, Allspice, Nutmegs, Cloves, Mace, Indigo, and a good Assortment of Cutlery —Irish Linens, Garlets, Downjacks, Cloathing for Sailors of all sorts, —Chin, Delf and Glass Ware, and sundry other Articles, by Wholesale or Retail.

To be sold, or let for a Term of Years,
A FARM in South-Kingstown, adjoining to the Post Road and Point Judith Ponds, containing One Hundred Acres, with a good Dwelling-House, Barn, Crib, &c. with a good Orchard, consisting of upwards of Two Hundred Apple Trees; Forty Acres of fine Timber Land; and is very convenient for Fishing, Oysters, &c. —Any Person inclining to purchase or hire said Farm, may know the Terms by applying to OLIVER HAZARD, at the Ferry House in Jamestown. (91-)

Wanted, upon Interest, a Sum of MONEY, for which good Security will be given. Enquire of the Printer.

THIS is to give Notice, That all Persons indebted to Mr. HENRY COLLINS, of Newport, Rhode-Island, the Company of Messrs. COLLINS and FLAGG, and the Company of COLLINS, FLAGG, and EWING, are desired to prepare their Accounts for an immediate Adjustment; and to pay their respective Balances to the Order of the Subscriber *in full*, who alone is enabled to give full Discharges.
GEORGE ROME.

Whereas I have lately received Intelligence from General LYMAN, now residing at the City of London, that for want of proper Powers of Attorney from the Persons now Living, as well as the Executors and Administrators of those deceased; he is unable to receive the Prize-money for his Regiment, and as I have received a Form of several Powers of Attorney necessary to be sent by me, as I intend soon for England: There are therefore to Notify all the Officers that were in the Rhode-Island Regiment under my Command, at the Reduction of the Havanna, that they apply to me for such Forms of Powers of Attorney as I have received, which I shall take care to furnish them with, that all Persons concerned may have an Opportunity of being supplied with proper Forms.

N. B. All Persons that do not Conform to this method, must expect their Money will die there, as by Advice from General LYMAN, dated at London, November, 1763.

Per CHRISTOPHER HARGILL,
Lieut. Col. of the Rhode-Island Regiment

Choice French Indigo
TO BE SOLD BY
GIDEON SISSON,
By the large or small Quantities.
OAKUM
To be Sold at the WORK-HOUSE.
—Whoever has Occasion to buy, may apply to the Overseers.

NEWPORT, RHODE-ISLAND: Printed by SAMUEL HALL, near the Middle of the Parade: where Advertisements, Intelligence, &c. are requested to be left.

The 30 April 1765 edition of the Newport Mercury ran a variety of notices about bankruptcies, debtor sales, and other indications of commercial distress. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6230).

The world that confronted the lower and middling sort of Newport in the 1760s was a world that often mocked the ambitious among them, a world that did not always reward diligence and industry, shrewdness and thrift. The uncertain and often declining fortunes of the middling sort

created a situation in which its members' political grievances could be magnified and their frustrations could, in that violence-prone age, easily lead to anger and destruction.

Frustration and anger did not lead irrevocably to public attacks on the merchant class as

a whole. The participants in Newport's Stamp Act riots were never a revolutionary force. They were not levelers, nor did they wish to alter the social and economic order. Nevertheless, there were two forces that were particularly obnoxious to the members of Newport's lower and middling sort, forces that threatened both their economic position and their self-esteem. These forces became the focal point for their collective action and the scapegoats for their general frustration. One of those targets was the new and tighter imperial policy of Great Britain, a policy felt concretely by them well before the Stamp Act had even been proposed. The other was a group of loyalists composed of professional men like Thomas Moffatt, Joseph and Peter Harrison, George Rome, and Martin Howard, Jr.

IV

General dissatisfaction with economic conditions no doubt produced frustration among Newport's lower and middling sort. It may even have engendered a sense of disillusionment with Great Britain's imperial policy. But a generalized sense of unease is hardly sufficient to produce the kind of riots that occurred in Rhode Island in August 1765. At most, it could only have provided the kind of environment within which specific grievances could more easily act as the catalyst for violence. Specific grievances against Crown policy were not difficult to find in the years immediately preceding the passage of the Stamp Act.

Even before Newport's merchants began to protest the effects of the Sugar and Stamp taxes on colonial trade and to object to Parliament's attempt to tax them without due representation, the lower and middling sort were engaged in their own quarrel with British policy. Beginning as early as the War of Austrian Succession, the presence of British troops on American soil was a sporadic source of irritation to Newport inhabitants. Sailors from the king's naval vessels

were often disorderly, obnoxious, and rude. Their spending in the city's taverns and shops contributed to the colony's growing inflation. Sometimes they sought work in the town and thus increased the pressure on the tight job market. Their presence threatened to destroy the peace and order of the community. Even worse, their arrival in town often meant the forced recruitment of sailors or attempts to apprehend deserters from the king's navy. Impressment was rarely an immediate problem for merchants and lawyers, but it was often a distinct possibility for seamen as well as for laborers, craftsmen, and shopkeepers. Understandably, relations between British officers and the civilian populace rapidly deteriorated, and mobs gathered to "obstruct," "assault," and "abuse" officers who were even suspected of having impressment on their minds.⁵⁵

With the end of the Seven Years' War, the inhabitants of Newport hoped that British interference would also cease. But the king's ships were in no hurry to leave the city's harbor, and with the passage of the Sugar Act in 1764, it became clear that they would remain there indefinitely to enforce both new and old customs regulations. British sailors on shore would continue to disrupt the town, and the obnoxious policy of impressment would go on distressing an already suffering community.

Often tensions arose over a seemingly minor incident. In July 1764 a group of crew members from Captain Hill's schooner *St. John* were found guilty of "some Irregularities" while ashore in Newport, and when two of the guilty men escaped to their vessel, the enraged townspeople demanded their return so that they could be punished for their misdeeds by civil authorities. Tensions were further heightened when the *St. John* tried to retrieve one of its deserters, and a crowd around the docks immediately presumed that some of them might be impressed. A "smart skirmish" resulted, the deserter was protected by the crowd, and an officer of the *St. John* was

55. *RICR* 5:52; Andrew Stone to the Governor of Rhode Island, 1 Oct. 1743, Gertrude S. Kimball, ed., *Correspondence of the Colonial Governors of Rhode Island, 1723-1775*, 2

vols. (Boston, 1902), 1:237; Elaine Forman Crane, *A Dependent People: Newport, Rhode Island, in the Revolutionary Era* (New York, 1985), 112.

taken into custody and used as a hostage. Rumors quickly spread that the schooner intended to escape with the two guilty seamen still aboard; and when the *St. John* did indeed begin sailing from Newport harbor, trying to take refuge with the king's ship *Squirrel*, the gunner at Fort George fired on the vessel. Significantly, colony leaders countenanced the entire affair. Authorities refused to promise justice to any of the king's officers who had been abused in the fracas.⁵⁶

It was not only an occasional act of thievery or drunken high spirits that incensed Newport's lower sort, however. Much more unsettling was the British policy of impressment. Captain Smith of the *Squirrel* tried to ease tensions, promising to impress no Newport resident and indicating that no small-boat men sailing into the harbor would be molested.⁵⁷ The promise was not enough. By June 1765 the king's ship *Maidstone* was impressing everyone who was not an inhabitant of the city. The consequences of this activity were fatal to Newport's economy. Wood wharves were almost bare of fuel; neighboring vessels shunned Newport's harbor; the fish market suffered as few fishermen dared venture into the harbor. Conditions finally became so unbearable that a group of about five hundred people took one of the *Maidstone's* boats, hauled it onto the commons, and burned it.⁵⁸

While the perpetrators of the action against the *Maidstone* went unpunished, at least some members of the community publicly, if anonymously, declared their disapproval of the "measures taken by the Rabble." They were nervous because the whole incident had occurred so quickly that the "sensible sort" had been unable to prevent or even control it. They were caught in the uncomfortable position of those who could not but ap-

prove the goals of the "rabble," even while they decried its methods.⁵⁹

Governor Ward's reaction to the affair is revealing. In a letter of apology to Captain Antrobus of the *Maidstone*, Ward tried, as always, to put the riot in a favorable light. He pointed out that Newport residents were being impressed, and that the city's fishing industry was in ruins. Moreover, he insisted that the crew of the *Maidstone* had itself incited the riot by its "insolence" in trying to impress a man from a small wood boat, even to the point of following the boat into the harbor. Nevertheless, Ward expressed the "greatest uneasiness" at the "violent & scandalous Measures" of the rioters. He claimed that only "Persons of the Least Note," the "Dregs of the People and a number of Boys," were involved in the affair. It was obvious to him that the "better sort" had to learn to control the social forces that had unleashed themselves on the *Maidstone*.⁶⁰

Interestingly enough, the testimony of Thomas Moffatt to the commissioners of the customs in 1766 provides evidence to indicate that the attack on the king's ships, particularly the *St. John* incident, and the Stamp Act riots were not totally unrelated—at least not in his mind. In his statement to the commissioners, Moffatt referred, apparently without any prompting from his examiners, to the riots that had occurred in Newport in 1764, claiming "that the Parliament in Great Britain had no authority . . . in Rhode Island when [the] Forts Fired on his Majesty's Ships in 1764." Although he did admit that the question of parliamentary authority was not "agitated" until the passage of the Stamp Act, it is apparent that he believed the two issues were somehow related.⁶¹

If British officers constituted a threat to the se-

56. *Newport Mercury*, 9 July, 16 July 1764; Capt. Smith to Lord Colville, 12 July 1764, *RICR* 6:429, 430.

57. *Newport Mercury*, 7 May 1764.

58. *Ibid.*, 10 June 1765; Gov. Ward to Captain Antrobus, 12 July 1765, *RICR* 6:446–47. Governor Ward insisted that the crowd consisted mostly of "sailors, boys, and negroes," but he obviously had excellent reasons for blaming the

Maidstone incident on unimportant and unidentifiable persons.

59. *Newport Mercury*, 10 June 1765.

60. Samuel Ward to Charles Antrobus, 11 June, 19 July 1765, Ward MSS, box 1, pp. 54, 56. Again, Ward's description of the crowd must be viewed with some caution.

61. Moffatt, Testimony, 79, 80, 81.

curity of Newport's laboring class, the middling sort confronted an additional obstacle to its sense of well-being. That obstacle was the Newport Junto, which seemed to be leveling a concerted attack on the dignity and power of small property owners at the very time when they were experiencing a taste of real political importance. Throughout the 1760s Rhode Island politics was dominated by a constant struggle between the Providence faction, headed by Stephen Hopkins, and the Newport faction, led by Samuel Ward. As both groups struggled for power, election campaigns became increasingly volatile and candidates for public office had to appeal directly to the lower middle class for its vote. When elections were close, as they often were, each person's vote became extremely valuable.

At election time the ego of the average man was inflated to grandiose proportions. Each spring, complained one critic, "every voter feeling in himself some importance from all the flatteries bestowed on him by the tribunes of the people, foresakes his proper calling, becomes a member of some political club, and wastes away the season . . . at taverns and market places."⁶² Bribes to prospective voters were not uncommon, and large sums of money were habitually spent for the purpose of "debauching the health and conscience of the voter."⁶³ Candidates for public office ceased to appear as aloof and slightly unwilling servants of the public good and began actively to seek votes through advertisements in colony newspapers.⁶⁴ Members of Newport's lower middle class could not help realizing that their contribution to the political process was significant, and that winning politicians owed their success, at least in part, to them.

The importance that the lower middle class attached to its political power can be seen in its resentment of occasional attempts on the part of political leaders to avoid factional disputes. At times when acrimony became particularly

heated, the leaders of either the Ward or Hopkins faction would withdraw from the race, making some sort of arrangement whereby members of both groups would be represented in the new government. Such efforts to settle issues outside the political arena were met with marked hostility. Some decried the "insolence of those popular tribunals" in their bold-faced efforts to end party dispute by deciding for themselves the outcome of contested elections. It appeared "that two parties had for a long time contended for the government, that they at length grew tired of the quarrel and were now about to share the prize and enslave the people."⁶⁵

But now the Newport Junto, not the Ward or Hopkins faction, seemed to be intent upon "enslaving the people." Members of Newport's elite had learned to appeal to the pride of the average voter at election time, to allow him to speak at town meetings, and to encourage him to hold minor public offices at the local level. But members of the junto, most of whom were only marginally involved in colonial politics, had less reason to cater to the whims of the ordinary man. Thomas Moffatt, the "Scotch doctor," was a foreign-born resident of the town and was not involved in local politics. George Rome had arrived in the colony in 1761 and served there as the colonial agent for a number of British mercantile houses, and his connections with the British were of far greater importance to him than his ties to the colonists. Joseph and Peter Harrison were also relative newcomers to Rhode Island. Peter had alienated two of the colony's most influential families when he eloped with Elizabeth Pelham in 1746; Pelham's parents and her uncle, John Banister, vehemently opposed the match, and the Banisters and Harrisons thereafter became bitter rivals. Joseph Harrison's ties to the city were also tenuous. He had many connections with "eminent persons" in Britain, and he used those connections to obtain positions in

62. *Newport Mercury*, 23 June 1764.

63. *Itineraries and Correspondence of Ezra Stiles, 1755-1774*, ed. Franklin B. Dexter (New Haven, 1916), 103.

64. *Newport Mercury*, 22 Apr. 1760; 18 Apr. 1763; 16 Apr. 1764.

65. *Ibid.*, 23 Apr. 1764.

the king's customs service for himself and his friends.⁶⁶ With the possible exception of the extremely vocal Martin Howard, none of the junto's adherents was closely involved in the colony's affairs, and even Howard was not particularly successful in pursuing a political career in Rhode Island.⁶⁷

Alienated from the sources of power in the colony, the members of the junto had little need to flatter and cajole the members of the middling sort. To the contrary, they did everything in their power to express their utter disdain for the "stupid herd of voters"⁶⁸ and advised them to exhibit "more Moderation & Civility, more Meekness and better Manners."⁶⁹ They denigrated the ability and aspirations of the forward-looking members of the lower middle class, saying that "a devotion to speculation, study, or books is neither the proper business or duty of the generality of any people."⁷⁰ In a direct attack on the aspirations of the middling sort, they asserted that "the tyranny of a mob is more hateful than that of [a King]."⁷¹ When he first heard of the Stamp Act riots, Joseph Harrison, by then safely tucked away in London, was both shocked and disgusted. "Surely the people are distracted and infatuated," he wrote, and added that "the ministry would certainly have relieved them from those grievances they have so much complained of had they behaved with tolerable decency. But now they must expect no favor."⁷²

While it is clear that the junto did not have the power to destroy the political aspirations of the middling sort, it is equally apparent that men like Moffatt and Howard could "expect no favor" from those they had verbally abused in the past. Indeed, they had reason to expect to be the subjects of special resentment once the debate over the Stamp Act emerged. These were men who

had led the fight against the Rhode Island charter, who had steadily denigrated the ability, power, and influence of the lower middle class. These were the men who were the self-appointed apologists for an English government whose policies had become increasingly inimical to the economic and political well-being of the middling sort. They, much more than Augustus Johnston, had earned the displeasure of Newport's artisans and shopkeepers.

The lower and middling sorts, then, had reasons of their own for destroying the property of Martin Howard, Jr., and Thomas Moffatt. Although it is undeniable that the rioters were moved in part by the ideological issues surrounding the Sugar and Stamp acts, it may well have been their animosity toward the junto, both for its outspoken support of British policy and for its denigration of their virtue and dignity, that led them to react with the devastating thoroughness characterizing their attacks. Indeed, ideological issues and the hatred of the junto went hand in hand. It is easy to see how the rioters might have hated local collaborators more than they disliked Lord Grenville or the members of Parliament who supported the Stamp Act, for Grenville and his minions were but hazy figures in the minds of most Americans, while Moffatt and Howard were concrete representations of unpopular and harmful policy. The continued attacks on the virtue and dignity of the lower and middling sort by these two men were palpable examples of the apparent lack of respect that Englishmen had for their American cousins. And if the members of the junto actually obtained their proclaimed goal of revoking the Rhode Island charter, it was probable that the members of the middling sort would gain nothing and might lose a great deal when the new government was formed.

66. Wilkins Updike, *History of the Episcopal Church in Narragansett, Rhode Island* (New York, 1847), 2:78; Rhode Island Public Notary Records, 1648-1776, 8 vols., 7:509, 510, State House, Providence; Ralph E. Carpenter, Jr., *The Arts and Crafts of Newport, Rhode Island, 1640-1820* (Newport, 1954), 141; Richard Partridge to Gov. Greene, 7 Oct. 1757, Kimball, *Correspondence* 2:259; Joseph Harrison to John Temple, 12 Jan. 1765, *Bowdoin and Temple Papers*, Massachusetts

Historical Society Collections, 6th ser., 9 (1987):42, 43.

67. *RICR* 5:386; election proxies, RIHS.

68. *Newport Mercury*, 23 Apr. 1764.

69. *Ibid.*, 22 Oct. 1764.

70. *Ibid.*, 26 Nov. 1764.

71. *Ibid.*, 19 Nov. 1764.

72. Joseph Harrison to John Temple, 11 Oct. 1765, *Bowdoin and Temple Papers*, 70.

While Newport's Stamp Act rioters shared many of the views held by the merchant elite, they were not merely acting on behalf of the town's leaders. Evidence that they had special grievances and quarrels of their own with the British, as well as with Martin Howard and Thomas Moffatt, is strong. Howard and Moffatt may have provided a focus for the anger, frustrations, and helplessness felt by many members of the lower and middling sort. Perhaps they came to see *junto* spokesmen as symbolic of the repressive policies emanating from Great Britain. And for them, unlike the elite, the policy of impressment provided a more tangible example of that repression than arguments over representation and taxation, liberty, and the "rights of Englishmen."

This explanation of the Stamp Act riots suggests that the act did not serve as a primary catalyst for rebellion, but rather provided yet another

example of the hardships that average people could expect to endure as a result of British influence on their lives. Having suffered the consequences of such interference in the past, craftsmen and shopkeepers could easily believe that the Stamp Act, too, would severely disrupt their already shaky economic position. They could agree that the power to tax was the power to destroy, and that oppression that went unchallenged was likely to breed further oppression in the future. They knew this, not just because of the telling arguments printed in pamphlets and broadsides, but because they had felt it in their own lives. They were not fighting anticipated reduction of their freedom, but rather they were opposing the very real effects of British policy on their everyday lives, effects that the members of Newport's merchant elite could imagine but had only partially experienced.

A Crisis in Rhode Island Mental Health Care: The Closing of Butler Hospital in 1955

Valerie Quinney

"Butler Hospital to Close Sept. 1: State Rejects Plea"—these were the headlines in the Providence papers on 18 June 1955. Today we find it hard to believe that the thriving hospital was ever a silent, empty place, but it was just that for over a year. Selig Greenberg, the *Providence Journal* reporter who covered the closing on 1 September, walked in to find an eerie stillness in the halls. The last superintendent, Dr. Henry Babcock, sat amidst his boxes of books, packed, ready for his next job in the student health services at Harvard. All the nurses had left, and the nursing students had transferred to other psychiatric hospitals. Doctors and residents had moved to positions in other hospitals or else gone into private practice. Some patients had gone home, but most had been taken to the state institution or to McLean Hospital in Massachusetts. When the reporter asked Dr. Babcock how it felt to preside over the liquidation of such an institution as Butler Hospital, the superintendent "thought for a minute and smiled wanly, 'It's been a haunting thing, a wrenching experience.'"¹

Greenberg felt the presence of ghosts around the place, "the ghosts of the public-spirited men who in the 1840s, at a time when the mentally ill were incarcerated in dungeons and treated as criminals, conceived and carried out the revolutionary idea that kindness and understanding can help cure and rehabilitate many of the men-

tally ill."² Indeed, the history of the hospital had often been recounted with pride. Just before the middle of the nineteenth century, two entrepreneurs, Cyrus Butler and Nicholas Brown, had given money to erect a hospital "for that unhappy portion of our fellow beings who are by the visitation of Providence deprived of their reason." Brown left \$30,000 and Cyrus Butler gave \$40,000—handsome sums at the time. Butler's gift was given on condition that the amount would be matched by citizens in the community. They responded to the challenge and raised \$55,000. The donors were from all occupations and from every social class: teachers, mill workers, doctors, grocers, lawyers, and farmers. No doubt they were inspired by Dorothea Dix's plea for the humane treatment of the insane and also by the realization that mental problems do not always happen to someone else. These people made the hospital a reality.

In 1844 the trustees purchased a 114-acre tract of land along the Seekonk River and erected a beautiful neo-Gothic building. At first the hospital was called The Rhode Island Institute for the Insane; in 1846 the name was changed to Butler Hospital for the Insane. As the decades passed, gifts made it possible to acquire more land and build additional buildings. Indeed, the building process went on for nearly a century.

The first superintendent, Dr. Isaac Ray, was

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1. Selig Greenberg, "Butler, A Monument to Dedication, Devotion," *Providence Evening Bulletin*, 1 Sept. 1955.

2. *Ibid.*



Superintendent Henry H. Babcock takes a last look at the empty halls at Butler Hospital at the time of its closing on 1 September 1955. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

one of the founders of the American Psychiatric Association, and each superintendent in the hospital's history was a leader in mental health care. At the centennial celebration in 1944, Dr. Karl Menninger, of the famous Menninger Foundation, declared that "the name of Butler Hospital, that first fighting unit in the great war against fear and hate, remains in the front ranks." Hundreds of residents in psychiatry and nurses who received training at the hospital spread its fame as a center for the treatment of the mentally ill. Dr. Arthur Ruggles, the superintendent at the time of the centennial, had a national reputation in the mental health field. He was a former president of the American Psychiatric Association, and during World War II he served as a consultant to the United States government's mental

hospitals. His leadership, the hospital's fine reputation as a teaching institution, its distinguished history, and, most important, its tradition of humane and scientifically advanced treatment made Butler Hospital look strong and prosperous.

But this appearance was misleading. Since the hospital's founding, the trustees had faced an extremely difficult financial reality. What the public did not know was that nearly every year since the hospital began, its budget had shown a deficit. Although the hospital's location near elegant Blackstone Boulevard suggested that it was a rich institution caring for the rich, the truth was that Butler Hospital had always cared for people who could not pay the full costs of their treatment, as well as for those who could pay. At the beginning of the twentieth century, 70 percent of the pa-

tients did not pay their full costs, and some of them paid nothing at all. In the hospital's early history, deficits had been made up by trustees who dug into their own pockets. In 1893 sixty-four individuals known as guarantors agreed to contribute each year whatever was needed.³ This practice was discontinued in 1900, then reinstated in 1921 when postwar inflation caused an increase in the deficit.

In the mid-twentieth century, however, deficits suddenly became too large for a small group of individuals to cover. The average deficit during the Second World War (1941–1945) was \$6,039. After the war the deficits grew in amazing leaps: for the years 1946–1950 the average annual loss was \$56,019; in 1951 and 1952 it was \$73,000; and in 1954 the trustees confronted a loss of \$123,572.⁴

In that year Benjamin Sturges, a Providence lawyer and a Butler Hospital trustee, became a member of the hospital's Ways and Means Committee, which he later said could have been better named the "Keep the Hospital Afloat Committee." The committee found that the hospital was little more than half full—139 patients in a 200-bed facility—and that 53 percent of the patients were not able to pay the full costs of their care. People on the staff were leaving, but not as fast as the hospital was losing patients. At one point there was a ratio of more than two employees for every patient.⁵

Superintendent and Physician-in-Chief Henry Babcock discussed reasons for the declining patient population with the trustees. Electroconvulsive therapy shortened hospital stays, he said, and newly discovered drugs, principally thiorazine and reserpine, made it possible for patients to live at home. Another reason was the burgeoning number of psychiatrists, for many doctors who had been rapidly trained in military hospitals were now practicing in Providence. Since Butler



Modern treatment in 1944 included electroconvulsive therapy, as seen in this staged photo. Courtesy of the Butler Hospital Library.

Hospital permitted only doctors on its staff to treat patients in the hospital, other psychiatrists took their patients to the new wings of general hospitals built to care for people in crisis, and later they treated them as outpatients in their offices.⁶

In addition, labor costs were rising. Employees had obtained a forty-hour week, and the trustees had had to hire additional staff. According to Sturges, the trustees believed they would have to raise nurses' salaries, which were lower than those in other area hospitals. Other costs, such as building maintenance expenses, were rising too, and the trustees anticipated a considerable expense in the near future when they would have to replace the heating system.⁷

For several years the "Keep Afloat Committee" had wrestled with these problems. Members sought advice from superintendents of other private mental hospitals and even engaged a firm of management experts to study the hospital's situation. The committee advised the hospital administration on measures to cut costs, and

3. Walter Edwards, "To Members of the Corporation," July 1955; Daniel Blain, "The Future of Butler Hospital" (1956), IV, 8.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Benjamin Sturges, Oral History (23 July 1984), 1, 008. (The first number refers to the tape side; the second, to the

tape counter indicator.) All oral history tapes are in the archives of Butler Hospital.

6. Henry Babcock, Report of the Superintendent (n.d.; sense indicates 1955), Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 1955 volume.

7. Sturges, Oral History, 1, 097 and 242.

these recommendations were dutifully carried out. Nevertheless the deficit increased. Patient fees were already as high as the trustees deemed feasible; raising fees was out of the question. There were gifts, but the 1954 deficit had been calculated after the annual gifts were figured in. The possibility of staging a fund drive was rejected because the trustees decided, as Sturges put it, that it is "impossible to raise money for an institution that's losing money." Finally the huge deficit forced the hospital to begin spending its endowment; the trustees were very much afraid that they would "run through the unencumbered endowment," Sturges recalled.⁸

Butler Hospital was not alone in this dilemma. When Dr. Babcock traveled to Washington to see if the hospital could secure a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health, he had no luck. He found that other private mental hospitals in the country were in a similar situation. Some, such as the Pinel Institute in Oregon, the Ring Sanatorium in Arlington, Massachusetts, and the Norways Sanitarium in Ohio, were closing.

Facing a grim situation, the board of trustees believed that it had no alternative but to offer the hospital to the state in hopes that the state would continue to operate it. The offer was delivered to Governor Roberts on 15 April 1955, but the governor declined.⁹ Cost, not quality, was uppermost in state officials' minds at a time when the state had to justify every tax dollar spent. The governor's study committee estimated that the daily cost per patient would be from three to six times greater at Butler than the daily cost of keeping the same patient at the existing state institution. Their offer rejected, the trustees then decided they had no choice but to accept the inevitable: the buildings and land would have to be sold and the money used to build a wing to an existing hospital.¹⁰

It was not an easy decision to make. Hospital president Walter Edwards—an elderly gentleman of old Yankee stock, the head of the pres-

tigious law firm of Edwards and Angell, and a conscientious public servant—"had a bear by the tail and had been president long enough that he could have very gracefully retired and left it to somebody else," Sturges said, "but he wouldn't let go."¹¹

Members of the board were from families living in Rhode Island for generations, and many had fathers, grandfathers, and even great-grandfathers who had served on the hospital's board. As trustees, they felt they were responsible to the community for using the endowment to ensure continuing care of the mentally ill. Their tradition was not so much to involve the public as to serve it. They made the decision to sell on 16 June 1955.

When the newspaper printed this news, Sturges said, "all hell broke loose at once."¹² Board member Robert Goddard remarked, "I think we wrongly didn't consider that the community had a feeling about it."¹³ The board had not informed the hospital staff of the gravity of the situation, much less consulted them about the decision. Members of the Rhode Island Society for Mental Hygiene knew that an offer had been made to the state, but they were shocked when they read about the closing. They were dismayed that the board had not discussed the desperate situation and the alternatives with them before the decision was made. The society—an umbrella organization for social service groups in the state—included psychiatrists, psychologists, teachers, social workers, nurses, and ministers. The members telephoned their friends and wrote letters to the newspapers, but there was no precedent to such an event, and no one knew what to do other than to protest. The society's executive committee sought an appointment with Edwards, who said he could not meet them until July. The announcement about selling was made public on 18 June, and the society's members feared that in the two intervening weeks the hospital would be sold.

Laurie Kaldis, secretary of the society, Dr. Melvyn Johnson, a psychiatrist, and Mary May

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Providence Evening Bulletin*, 18 June 1955.

10. Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 16 June 1955.

11. Sturges, Oral History, 1, 070.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Robert Goddard, Oral History [16 Aug. 1984], 1, 045.

Blumer, director of the Volunteer Bureau of the Council of Community Services, decided to bring the matter to the attention of the Butler Hospital Corporation. Hiring a lawyer to study the bylaws with them, they found that if at least ten members petitioned the board of trustees to call a special meeting, the president would have to call one. They quickly contacted members of the corporation they knew personally and got eighteen signatures on a petition requesting a special meeting of the Butler Corporation "to discuss and act upon the decision of the Board to close Butler Hospital on September 1, 1955."¹⁴

The corporation was an honorary group of about 800 members who met annually to approve the trustees' work and to vote for whomever the trustees proposed as officers. Now a letter sent to all members called them to a different kind of action:

There is a difference of opinion as to the need of closing Butler Hospital. We wish to make sure that every means has been explored to keep Butler Hospital functioning "in its present building." We wish to think with the Trustees and not against them and to give all possible aid.¹⁵

Mary May Blumer, Dr. Melvyn Johnson, Kenneth MacColl, Norman MacLeod, and Mrs. Archibald Silverman, among others, signed this letter for the committee of "Friends of Butler Hospital." Despite the disclaimer—"We wish to think with the Trustees and not against them"—the challenge was unmistakable. An organized group was going to put up a fight against the hospital's closing.

The Friends were supported by the Rhode Island Society for Mental Hygiene. The society sent a telegram to several eminent psychiatrists informing them of the closing and asking their opinions on whether the private psychiatric hospital had a role to play in the future. The executive committee of the American Psychiatric Association replied through its secretary, Dr. William Malamud, who expressed "great regrets that

14. "History of the Friends of Butler Hospital" (submitted to the board of trustees at the annual meeting of the Butler Hospital Corporation, 21 Feb. 1957), 2-3; Melvyn Johnson,

FRIENDS OF BUTLER HOSPITAL

415 Brook Street

Providence 6, Rhode Island

July 13,
1955

To the Members of the Corporation of Butler Hospital:

Be sure to come to the special meeting of the Corporation of Butler Hospital called by the Trustees at the request of Corporation members for Monday, July 18th at 4 o'clock at the Journal Auditorium. If you cannot be present, send some expression of your feelings.

There is a difference of opinion as to the need of closing Butler Hospital. We wish to make sure that every means has been explored to keep Butler Hospital functioning "in its present building." We wish to think with the Trustees and not against them and to give all possible aid.

The American Psychiatric Association at its regional meeting June 26th expressed deep concern at the closing of Butler Hospital and offered "whatever help and assistance we can give if they desire to have it."

We have received similar expressions of co-operation from eminent authorities in the field of psychiatry.

Very sincerely yours,

Mary May Blumer
Mrs. Gammell Cross
Margarethe Dwight
Melvyn Johnson, M.D.
Kenneth Mac Coll
Norman D. MacLeod
Mrs. Albert Pilavin
Mrs. Archibald Silverman
Archibald Silverman
Mrs. Maurice K. Washburn

FOR THE COMMITTEE OF
"FRIENDS OF BUTLER HOSPITAL"

Friends of Butler Hospital rallied members of the corporation to get the trustees to reconsider the closing. Courtesy of the Butler Hospital Library.

Butler Hospital, always one of the outstanding institutions of its kind, would be closed and not be in a position to continue the highly worthwhile contributions it had made for more than a century to the care, treatment and study of mental diseases."¹⁶

Hoping to influence members of the corporation and gain support for their cause, the Friends

Oral History [22 Aug. 1984], 1, 125.

15. "History of the Friends," 3.

16. *Ibid.*

decided to hold a public forum a few days before the corporation meeting. At this forum Dr. Johnson presented a plan that the hospital could follow in the future. The new organization of services he proposed included an outpatient department, a geriatric center, an acute intensive treatment center with privileges to outside physicians, and an adolescent center for emotionally disturbed children. To obtain funds, the hospital could launch its own financial drives, participate in the United Fund, and work with Blue Cross in devising a plan to extend its benefits. Finally, Dr. Johnson pointed out the advantages of an improved public relations policy and of the establishment of a women's auxiliary. Concluding his presentation, he identified Butler Hospital's greatest strength: its provision of "a way of life in surroundings conducive to restore dignity and faith to man and the security necessary to re-establish human relationships."¹⁷

At the corporation meeting on 18 July, Walter Edwards called the decision to close "irrevocable." Twice he ignored a motion made by Mrs. Silverman to appoint a committee to work with the trustees in surveying possible alternatives to the closing. Judge Albert Baker moved that "the President be authorized to appoint a committee to consult with the Trustees on future plans for carrying on the work for which Butler Hospital was founded." This motion was a tacit acceptance of the decision to close, and it passed. Judge Baker advised the president to appoint Mrs. Silverman to the committee.¹⁸ This was no doubt intended to placate the Friends, but she proved to be the one committee member who refused to let anyone accept the closing as final.

Although the Friends had good reason to feel defeated, they worked with even greater effort. Dr. Johnson met Edwards for lunch and spent three hours presenting a program for keeping the hospital open. "Thank you, Dr. Johnson," the

president said at the end of their meeting. "It's been most illuminating, but you've done nothing to change my mind."¹⁹ Mary May Blumer met Sturges to urge him to accept an offer made by Dr. Daniel Blain, medical director of the American Psychiatric Association, to conduct a survey of the area's mental health needs. Such a survey would give the trustees information to judge whether there was a need for a private psychiatric hospital, she argued. She promised that the Friends would raise the money to pay for the survey. Sturges informed the board of the offer at its next meeting on 4 August, but the trustees voted against accepting it, for they believed that a survey would only prolong the agony.²⁰ The hospital closed on 1 September 1955.

The hospital's superintendent, Dr. Babcock, had only recently come to Butler, but he was very much concerned about the employees. Both he and the trustees made sure that all the employees who had worked for the hospital over a period of time received pensions. Dr. Babcock wrote recommendations for the younger people and assisted them in finding other jobs. The trustees gave employees vacation pay and generous severance pay. During the last months of operation Dr. Babcock had to balance staff and patients, always retaining enough staff to care for patients until they could be placed elsewhere. These matters were conscientiously attended to, but, as Sturges said, a general who carries out a successful retreat does not get much praise.²¹

While furnishings, buildings, and land were being assessed and made ready for the sale, the Friends of Butler Hospital plotted strategy and began their next course of action. The driving force was their president, Ida (Mrs. Archibald) Silverman, a woman in her sixties, known in Providence as a person who had been spectacularly successful in raising funds for Israel after the Second World War. Secretary-Treasurer Mary

17. *Ibid.*, 4.

18. *Providence Journal*, 19 July 1955; "History of the Friends," 5.

19. Johnson, *Oral History*, 1, 224.

20. Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 4 Aug. 1955; Sturges

to Blumer, 9 Aug. 1955, Mary May Blumer Working Papers and Correspondence.

21. Sturges, *Oral History*, 1, 056; Henry Babcock, "To All Employees of Butler Hospital," 17 June 1955.



One of many highly attended meetings. Courtesy of the Butler Hospital Library.

May Blumer also believed passionately in the mission of the hospital. Her emotional involvement stemmed from her earliest memories: her father had been superintendent of Butler Hospital from 1899 to 1921 and she had grown up on the grounds. She felt so outraged over the local newspaper's coverage of the Friends' campaign that she kicked the editor in his shins.²² Concerned citizens, such as Laurie Kaldis of the Rhode Island Society for Mental Hygiene, worked constantly. Local psychiatrists and physicians—Melvyn Johnson, Alex Burgess, Joel Ordaz, and Laurence Senseman among them—gave their time and effort generously to the cause. Many others, like Mrs. Paul Kenner, received little public credit, but they worked also: they met in each other's houses, wrote letters, licked stamps, telephoned, contributed money, attended public meetings, and spoke before small groups of clergy, social workers, and union members. Dr. Johnson described the situation for all of them when he said that the work he and his wife put

into the campaign to save the hospital "took two years out of our lives."²³

The Friends' main strategy centered on educating the public about mental health care and the necessity for a survey of needs and facilities in Rhode Island. Beginning in November, noted psychiatrists came to Providence to address public meetings on mental health care developments. The meetings were usually sponsored jointly by the Rhode Island Society for Mental Hygiene and the Friends of Butler Hospital. At large and small gatherings the Friends stressed that Butler Hospital had not been a facility for the rich alone, for the hospital had treated many who could pay very little or nothing at all. They also reminded people that one important measure of a community was how it took care of its sick and emotionally disturbed members.²⁴

Meanwhile, on the "Committee of Seven," the study committee the board had appointed, Mrs. Silverman stood her ground. Of the eight members (counting the president, Walter Edwards,

22. Johnson, *Oral History*, 1, 268.

23. *Ibid.*, 1, 445.

24. "History of the Friends," 6.

who sat *ex-officio*), three wanted to sell, four wavered, and Mrs. Silverman alone held out for reopening. She continued to urge the committee to recommend to the board that a survey be carried out by the American Psychiatric Association. With Mrs. Silverman insisting on accompanying him, Edwards went to Washington to consult Dr. Blain, head of the American Psychiatric Association, and Dr. Leo Bartemeier, medical director of the Seton Institute in Baltimore. Both advised Edwards to have a survey of the area's needs carried out. At first Edwards agreed, but then, on second thought, he consulted other psychiatrists, who advised against a survey and urged him to keep the "antiquated" hospital closed. The committee decided to reject the survey plans.²⁵

Both the board of trustees and the Friends of Butler Hospital began to prepare for the annual meeting of the corporation, scheduled for 16 February 1956. The Friends sent a letter to corporation members urging them to attend that meeting, and they enclosed a return postcard for members to indicate whether they were for selling the hospital or reopening. Returns were in favor of reopening the hospital, 134 to 11.²⁶ At the same time, the board sent corporation members a letter recommending the sale of the land and buildings and the use of the funds for building a short-term care facility for mental patients. The Friends then sent still another letter, offering a positive eight-point program for the reopened hospital.

Apparently the Friends decided they would need evidence of public support. "We have much to do to get an enlightened public opinion behind us," Mary May Blumer wrote Dr. Menninger, "and I can assure you we are working night and day to that end."²⁷ Blumer used free radio time to talk about the need for Butler Hospital's service to the community. The Friends placed an advertisement in the local papers, stating their views

on the hospital's closing, and they invited readers who favored reopening the hospital and who were willing to work for that goal to sign an attached coupon and mail it back. Within twenty-four hours they received 1,200 replies. People all over the state who had been cared for at the hospital, or whose family members or friends had been treated there, responded with a commitment to work.²⁸ Armed with these replies and with cogent arguments for debate, the Friends who were members of the corporation went to the annual meeting on 16 February.

This meeting turned out to be a series of clashes between those who wanted to sell and those who wanted to reopen. The chairman of the Committee of Seven reported that the members had decided that more information was needed, but he did not recommend a survey. Gaining permission to speak, Mrs. Silverman stated all the arguments against the sale and urged that the hospital be reopened, though on a small scale at first, one building at a time. Dr. Melvyn Johnson and former superintendent Dr. Arthur Ruggles spoke in favor of this plan. Dr. Johnson reminded the corporation that local hospitals already had facilities for short-term care, but the state lacked a private hospital for long-term treatment. Mary May Blumer stressed the community's support for reopening Butler. With the members of the corporation demanding more information before voting, the president adjourned the stormy session and scheduled the next meeting for 1 March.²⁹

On 27 February the Friends held a public forum at Nathan Bishop School. It was attended by four hundred people, including many members of the board of trustees. The Friends had carefully prepared for this gathering: they had sent letters to fourteen noted psychiatrists, asking their opinion on the closing. All replied with constructive ideas, and many stressed the importance of the private hospital for research and teaching and for

25. *Ibid.*, 8.

26. *Ibid.*, 9.

27. Blumer to Menninger, 12 Feb. 1956, Mary May Blumer Working Papers.

28. "History of the Friends," 9-10.

29. Corporation Record, annual meeting of the corporation, 16 Feb. 1956.

setting standards in care. The Friends presented these letters at the forum, including one from Dr. Menninger, who stated very forcefully the case for the kind of treatment Butler could offer. Dr. Menninger pointed out that people in a psychiatric hospital are not confined to bed, and therefore the rooms are relatively unimportant. What is essential, he declared, are the recreational, occupational, and socializing facilities that only a psychiatric hospital can provide.³⁰

The Friends also produced a building survey. They had persuaded the owner of a major Providence construction company, Mr. Thomas Gilbane, and a Providence physician, Dr. John Barrett, to accompany two members of the Friends—physician Alex Burgess and psychiatrist Laurence Senseman—on a tour and investigation of the hospital on 22 February. Gilbane found the buildings sound and the plumbing and heating systems old but operative. Both Gilbane and Dr. Barrett judged the wing for patients in the main building, Center House, ready for occupancy.³¹

During the two weeks between the corporation meetings of 16 February and 1 March, the trustees began to have some doubts about their previous course. At first they had seen the Friends as impractical people who wanted the hospital reopened even though there was no way to pay the bills. Sturges had been outraged by their campaign.³² Now the trustees realized that the Friends had information and plans and that there was much public support behind them. An announcement of support for the reopening by local unions had appeared in the papers, and the trustees continued to receive letters in favor of reopening from community groups, such as a local organization of clergymen. The trustees could foresee a fight at the next meeting, for the Friends had mailed corporation members a letter urging them to reject the board's recommendation to sell. The Friends had also demanded election of a new board and had enclosed their own slate of candidates.

During the board of trustees' meeting on 24 February, Walter Edwards said that he anticipated "growing division of feeling [which] will result in an impossible situation for the Board." He stated soberly that it was "extremely important that some compromise should be reached." He then informed the members of the board that he had asked Mrs. Silverman to meet with him to discuss the appointment to a nominating committee of three individuals acceptable to both the board and the "opposition." He had suggested that this committee could nominate a new slate of officers and trustees—a compromise slate—to present to the corporation. Mrs. Silverman had agreed, he said. The trustees accepted this fait accompli.³³

At the meeting of the corporation on 1 March, the "compromise slate" was elected, with Benjamin Sturges as president and John Nicholas Brown as vice president. Although a woman doctor in the audience urged the appointment of a doctor and a woman to the board, the new slate remained all lay people, white, and male, as it had always been. John Nicholas Brown said it would be against tradition to do otherwise. However, there was an attempt to have greater ethnic diversity with the nomination of Alfred Joslin, a Jew, and Andrew Quinn, an Irish-American. There were five members from the old board and five new members, but only two, Andrew Quinn and Norman MacColl, were sympathetic to the Friends, and MacColl had not been an active Friends member. The Friends were shocked. Sturges, the new president, had been outspoken in his opinion that the hospital should be sold. During the meeting Brown, who was presiding, had overridden two nominations from the floor "in a most forceful manner," according to Sturges.³⁴ Brown told the corporation that the new slate was a compromise acceptable to both sides, and the corporation voted for it.³⁵

The trustees met again on 5 March, with Sturges presiding. As they worked together, he

30. "History of the Friends," 10.

31. "History of the Friends," Addendum 3, a, b, and c.

32. Sturges, *Oral History*, 1, 410.

33. Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 24 Feb. 1956.

34. Sturges, *Oral History*, 1, 311.

35. Corporation Record, 1 Mar. 1956.

recalled, distinctions between the old and the new boards evaporated. Sturges believed that the question now facing the trustees was whether they should tell the corporation to keep the hospital or to sell it. When he reminded them that many in the community were pressing for a survey, they asked him to arrange a meeting between representatives of the board and members of the American Psychiatric Association at the association's annual convention in Chicago.³⁶ The meeting was arranged. There the psychiatrists recommended that the board make a careful survey of the area's mental health care needs. On 7 May the trustees voted to hire Dr. Blain to conduct that survey.³⁷

Blain's research design was based on a two-pronged investigation: the assessments of mental health care professionals and the assessments of physicians. Blain worked with a study committee set up by the board of trustees and with a liaison committee representing various community groups. In addition, he sought the advice of a small number of psychiatrists who had experience in solving problems faced by mental institutions in the New England area. These doctors met Blain and the study committee in five conferences throughout the summer. Although he also sent questionnaires to 5,000 physicians in the New England area, few replies were returned, and his attempt to gain information from this wider group was unsuccessful.

On 19 and 20 June, Blain held hearings in Providence. Representatives of thirty-three local organizations involved in social services answered questions put to them by Blain and by members of the liaison committee and the trustees' study committee. There were three major unmet needs that almost everyone mentioned: (1) the need for a residential treatment facility for patients who required intensive treatment and who could pay some, if not all, of the costs; (2) the need for an outpatient clinic for children and adults; and (3) the need for residential treatment facilities for adolescents and court-referred cases. The Rhode

Island Society for Mental Hygiene also stressed the need for hospital facilities geared to the gradual return of patients to the community, especially a facility that would provide day-care services for adults. Most believed that Butler Hospital could best serve the community in the future as a mental health center offering several kinds of services.³⁸

For his final report, "The Future of Butler Hospital," Blain relied chiefly on the public testimony at the hearings, on his consultants' observations and advice, and on documents presented to him by the trustees' study committee and by the Friends of Butler Hospital. In fact, his recommendations were almost exactly what the testimony at the hearings and the Friends had advised. The report, in which Blain described the modern concept of mental health care, deserves to be considered in its main points because it became a blueprint the hospital followed for the next three decades. Its ideas are now widely accepted, but they were new at the time.

Blain's report stressed the prevention of mental breakdowns. This meant that early diagnosis and treatment to prevent hospitalization had to be provided by the community. Psychiatric consultative services, good welfare services, counseling and family assistance programs, clinics, and day care had to be made available. When full-time residential care was needed, the hospitalization period had to be as short as possible. The report suggested setting up home and community resources as soon as the patient was hospitalized so that the individual could move into a manageable situation after discharge.³⁹

Blain advised Butler Hospital to provide both a day hospital and an inpatient hospital. Within the day hospital, he believed, Butler could create a unique service: it could establish a physical rehabilitation unit where emphasis would be placed on the prevention or cure of psychiatric complications resulting from physical disabilities. Blain also pointed out the need for a treatment center for emotionally disturbed children

36. Sturges, *Oral History*, I, 311.

37. Minutes of the Board of Trustees, 7 May 1956.

38. Blain, "The Future of Butler Hospital," VI, I, 2.

39. *Ibid.*, VII, 2.



This aerial view depicts the extraordinary site of the hospital on 100 acres of parklike land in Providence. Courtesy of the Butler Hospital Library.

and adolescents, as well as a facility for treatment of the aged and for research on problems of aging. Having outlined this structure of services, he challenged Butler Hospital to "find its place as a leader . . . in such a total community program."⁴⁰

Reviewing the option of selling the hospital grounds and buildings and using all the funds to build a wing to an existing hospital, Blain reminded the trustees that by throwing all resources into a small residential treatment operation, they would be unable to expand in one direction or another as community demands made themselves felt. They would thereby give up the chance for a larger and broader program that

would assist all the welfare and health efforts in the state, and they "would preclude the chance to create a nationally famous institution, a modern Mental Health Center under private auspices." He reminded them of the "extraordinary rarity of finding a hundred acres of land well within a city available for a mental hospital" and indicated that they should be aware of this "greatest possible resource." He noted that his team of psychiatrists and building experts had carried out an on-site investigation and found the buildings in good condition, although they advised repairs in the refrigeration system and eventual replacement of the heating plant.⁴¹

Dr. Blain submitted his report to the trustees

40. *Ibid.*, IX.

41. *Ibid.*, II, 1.

in September 1956, and they called corporation members and interested people in the community to a special meeting on 27 November. At that meeting John Nicholas Brown announced that the board had reversed its decision to sell, and he explained the reasons for this action. The trustees had been heartened by the community's support for the hospital, he said. They were impressed by national consideration of mental health problems and by the attention and encouragement the hospital had received from the nation's leaders in the mental health professions. They liked the new concept of a mental health center visualized in Blain's report. Finally, Brown recommended they reopen the hospital, starting in a small way at first and proceeding very carefully. This recommendation was unanimously approved by the members of the corporation.⁴²

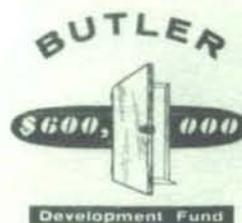
Blain had suggested a young psychiatrist at Boston Psychopathic Hospital, Dr. Robert Hyde, as the new superintendent. The trustees had already contacted Hyde, and now the corporation gave authorization to hire him and to launch a fund drive. With the new hospital definitely on its way, the Friends of Butler Hospital formally and cheerfully disbanded their organization.

Now that the decision to reopen had been made, the trustees had to raise the money to finance the opening and sustain the hospital until it became fully operative. President Benjamin Sturges believed that the hospital could not have carried out a successful drive before its closing, but now hopes were so high and so many people in the community had sought the reopening that the trustees believed that they would be able to raise the necessary amount. They planned and launched the campaign in the early spring of 1957.

The banks and corporations that Sturges contacted reported they would contribute if the trust-

ees could come up with a budget that showed a "healthy bottom line." He and Norman MacColl drew up a budget for the reopened hospital, making the best estimates that they could. "It turned out to be just about right," Sturges said.⁴³ Then he contacted individuals who he hoped would be major donors to get some idea of what they could give. After that chastening experience, the trustees settled on a goal—not the million dollars suggested by Blain, but a very realistic \$600,000.⁴⁴ Sturges took charge of the overall campaign and appointed Mary May Blumer chairman of the Residential Campaign.

THE
OPEN
DOOR...



*All subscriptions may be paid over three years and are fully tax deductible.

In 1957...
A NEW
BUTLER HEALTH CENTER

GOAL \$600,000

A volunteer worker will call on you soon to discuss your participation in this project so important to the well-being of the entire area.

Please consider carefully your investment* in establishing a modern health center to meet the needs of the mentally ill and others in the years ahead.

Mary May Blumer
Chairman
Residential Campaign

The Residential Campaign's fund-raising kit was an essential part of the door-to-door effort to help reopen the hospital as a health center.

Courtesy of the Butler Hospital Library.

42. Corporation Record, special meeting, 26 Nov. 1956; *Pawtucket Times*, 28 Nov. 1956.

43. Sturges, Oral History, 1, 464.

44. Corporation Record, Trustees' Report, 21 Feb. 1957; Sturges, Oral History, 1, 594.

Friends of Butler Hospital who had worked for the hospital's reopening now put their efforts into raising the money to sustain it. Mary May Blumer decided to contact at least 15,000 families and offer them a contract whereby they could fulfill their pledges in six installments over three tax years. She appointed two associate chairpersons and eleven division chairpersons, all women, and they set to work.⁴⁵ All the people who had ever expressed their interest in the hospital by writing letters to newspapers or signing statements were now invited to work in the campaign. Each worker came to the hospital and chose names from a list of possible donors, took a kit with pledge cards, and set out to knock on doors.⁴⁶ The work the Friends had done in educating the public about treatment of mental illness and the hospital's service to the community now brought astonishing results: much of the money was raised door-to-door.⁴⁷

Benjamin Sturges conducted a series of sponsors' dinners to which officers of corporations, small businesses, academic institutions, hospitals, and newspapers were invited. He obtained many donations, including such major gifts as \$100,000 from the Brown and Sharpe Company. The nineteen trustees not only gave to the campaign themselves but also went door-to-door and confronted friends in their homes, offices, churches, or wherever they could get the chance to talk about a donation. Alfred Joslin, Robert Goddard, and John Chafee, Sr., were outstanding contributors and workers in this drive.⁴⁸

A total of \$750,000 was raised, \$150,000 more than the goal. Butler was the only private psychiatric hospital in the country, up to that time, that had regained financial stability through a public subscription drive.⁴⁹

The corporation took an important step by renaming the buildings on the hospital grounds the Butler Health Center. Other changes were made

45. *Providence Evening Bulletin*, 22 Mar. 1957.
 46. Tema Gouse, Oral History (21 Aug. 1984), 1, 023; Blumer to volunteers, 5 Mar. 1957, Mary May Blumer Working Papers.
 47. Sturges, Oral History, 1, 594.
 48. *Ibid.*

WESTERN UNION

Send the following telegram, address in the space on back hereof, which are hereby agreed to:

To: Miss Mary May Blumer

Care of or Apt. No. Bay Hall, Butler Health Center

Street and No. Providence, Rhode Island

Date: May 9 1957

FOR VICTORY BUY WAR BONDS TODAY

Plan

This is an important fight for the welfare of mental health—not only in Rhode Island but throughout our country. I regret not being with you in person. The Butler Health Center is a most important symbol in the advancement of psychiatry. The very generous pledge of the Brown and Sharpe Company, submitted by Mr. Harry D. Sharpe, Jr., was a great challenge to this community. You and many other fine citizens accepted this challenge for the benefit of many people whom we know need psychiatric help and care. Keep up the good work!

Arthur H. Sturges, M.D.

Sender's name and address: Arthur H. Sturges, M.D.

Sender's telephone number: GR 1-3516

Both labor and management got behind the fund-raising campaign. Courtesy of the Butler Hospital Library.

as well. Sturges had agreed to be president of the board for just one year, until the future of the hospital was determined. During that year he had flown with John Chafee, Sr., to various parts of the country, meeting consultants and visiting private hospitals. He had attended evening meetings in Providence that lasted until midnight, watched over the fund drive, worked out a budget, and helped the new superintendent draw up plans for the reopening. A forty-hour week in his law office and a forty-hour week for Butler Hospital had left him longing to settle once again into his former role of trustee.⁵⁰ Alfred Joslin, a Providence lawyer (and later a renowned judge) succeeded him as president. Mrs. John Langdon, executive director of the Society for Crippled Children and Adults, and Mrs. Herbert C. Wells, Jr., a civic leader, became the first women to be appointed to the board of trustees.⁵¹ The new hospital looked forward to the future with high expectations.

49. Sturges, Oral History, 1, 594; *Providence Evening Bulletin*, 18 Feb. 1957; *Providence Journal*, 6 Mar. 1957; *Providence Evening Bulletin*, 29 Mar. 1962.
 50. Sturges, Oral History, 1, 423-594.
 51. *Providence Journal*, 22 Feb. 1957, 4.

A CRISIS IN RHODE ISLAND MENTAL HEALTH CARE



With the success of the fund drive, Butler Hospital, now Butler Health Center, returned to its mission of providing humane and scientifically advanced mental health care to the community. Courtesy of the Butler Hospital Library.

Rhode Island's Invisible Empire: A Demographic Glimpse into the Ku Klux Klan

Joseph W. Sullivan

Rhode Island's flirtation with the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s is a relatively unknown chapter in the history of our state. The image of white-hooded men gathered around a flaming cross in a remote cow pasture is, for most Rhode Islanders, evocative of the South during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. We tend to think that if the Ku Klux Klan existed here at all, it must have been a minute assortment of unskilled cranks and uneducated rubes, socially impotent and totally out of touch with the real life of the state.¹

In fact, for a brief period the Klan was a political and social force in Rhode Island claiming state legislators, town officials, a county sheriff, the state jury commissioner, and at least four police chiefs as members. Klansmen were members of respectable fraternal societies such as the Odd Fellows, the Grange, and the American Legion. Klansmen were also members of the National Guard and cunningly infiltrated three companies of a state militia unit.²

Far from being limited to unskilled occupations, the Rhode Island Klan included manufacturers, business managers, clergymen, building contractors, and dentists. Those white hoods



A detail from a Klan leaflet, showing a not-often-seen logo of the brotherhood. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6231).

concealed streetcar motormen, carpenters, machinists, firemen, and policemen. In short, the average Rhode Island Klansman was likely to be one's neighbor.

The ability of the Klan to attach itself to local seats of power was demonstrated by its influence in Smithfield, Hopkinton, and, especially, Coventry, where town policemen acted as Klan guards, intimidating news reporters and the curious.³

Joseph Sullivan is a graduate student in history at Rhode Island College.

1. For an extensive treatment of the Klan in Rhode Island, see Norman W. Smith, "The Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island," *Rhode Island History* 37 (May 1978), 35-45.

2. Captain John F. Datson of Westerly was the commander of Battery E, 243rd Coast Artillery, Rhode Island National Guard. Other Klansmen in that Westerly unit were Henry A. Kingsley, Frank C. Tate, Everett C. Lawton, and Clarence D. Stenhouse. *Providence Journal*, 6 Apr. 1928. The Klan was popular with active-duty military personnel as well. A March 1924 meeting in Newport's Perry Hotel was attended by navy

enlisted men and chaired by army lieutenant C. I. Johnson of Fort Adams. *Providence News*, 1 Mar. 1924. A dozen sailors attended the Klan meeting in Coventry Odd Fellows Hall the previous month. *Providence News*, 19 Feb. 1924. William T. Boyd, Henry N. Sullivan, and Howard J. Johnson of the Washington County Klan were members of the Coast Guard.

3. Coventry police chief William B. Longridge was an unabashed Klansman. A *Providence News* reporter was detained for several hours for scribbling down license plate numbers of autos parked at the Odd Fellows Hall. *Providence News*, 25 Feb. 1924.

The casual remark of a noted Klan officer that the Klan controlled most of the towns in Newport and Kent counties may not have been an idle boast. Despite the fact that the state Klan leadership lived in the Providence area, the Klan's major strength reposed in the smaller towns.⁴

Meetings were held often and in public. In Georgiaville, Exeter, Middletown, and Foster, the Klan brazenly burned huge crosses. An estimated 8,000 persons assembled at a monster tri-state rally in Foster in June 1924 to hear Alabama senator Tom Heflin denounce "katholics, koons and kikes."⁵ The frequency with which the Klan obtained the use of halls belonging to other fraternal societies suggests the scope of its acceptance within the ordinary community.

Between 1923 and 1928 the Ku Klux Klan was a fact of life in Rhode Island, as evidenced by the number of news stories about it. In January 1923 Imperial Wizard Hiram Evans congratulated the Westerly High School debating team for winning a debate with Providence's Classical High, in which the topic was "Is the Ku Klux Klan a menace to society?"⁶ At the end of that same year, Providence mayor Joseph Gainer learned that a Klan publication of little educational value entitled "Looseleaf Current Topics" had mysteriously been distributed in the city's high schools.⁷ In May 1924 fifteen U.S. sailors in uniform passed out Klan literature to startled diners in Providence's Waldorf Restaurant.⁸ In February 1924 four Klansmen leaving a meeting at a Dexter Street church reported their automobiles stolen; when the vehicles were later located on adjacent streets, the Providence police chalked it up to an anti-Klan prank.⁹ A January 1925 Klan

dinner dance at Rhodes-on-the-Pawtuxet was followed the next autumn by the Klan wedding of Arthur L. Edson of North Providence and Ruth E. Arnold of Johnston at Chepachet.¹⁰ For those who took their anti-Catholicism with a liberal dose of prurience, the Klan offered the lectures of Helen Jackson (alias Helen Barnowska), a prostitute and former inmate of a Detroit magdalen asylum, who thrilled her Providence audience with bogus revelations concerning her life as a nun.¹¹ During 1924 the *Providence News*, an ultra-Democratic daily, kept the Klan in the public eye by publishing stories linking the Rhode Island Klan with the Republican party and by printing the names of persons whose automobiles were parked at Klan meetings.¹²

The biggest Klan story of the decade was published on 18 March 1928, when an undercover reporter for the *Providence Journal* revealed that the Klavaliars, a paramilitary Klan organization, had dissolved and that its members had reformed into Companies E, F, and H of the state militia's First Light Infantry. Since the FLI, although part of the militia, was not a federally recognized National Guard unit, its arms and equipment were obtained from private contributors, some of whom were alleged Klan sympathizers.¹³

An alarmed General Assembly began an investigation of the militia on 28 March that eventually extended to a wholesale investigation of the statewide Klan. As the story unfolded, Rhode Islanders received their first clear look into the membership, organization, and connections of Rhode Island's Invisible Empire.

Former Klansmen paraded before the commit-

4. Clarence S. Cleasby, former Klan treasurer, to the House Militia Committee, *Providence Journal*, 4 Apr. 1928. Grand Dragon John W. Perry lived in Providence, as did the state secretary, Frederick T. Remington. The grand cyclops of Roger Williams Klavern No. 16, John A. Domin, was a street-car motorman from Edgewood. His assistant, F. E. Vaughn, was a bank guard from Providence.

5. *Providence News*, 25 June 1924.

6. *Providence News*, 13 Jan. 1923.

7. *Providence Journal*, 2 Dec. 1923.

8. *Providence News*, 21 May 1924.

9. *Providence Journal*, 2 Feb. 1924.

10. *Providence News*, 25 Jan., 27 Oct. 1924.

11. *Rhode Islander*, 12 Apr. 1927.

12. *Providence News*, 13 Feb., 28 May, 22 June, 25 June 1924.

13. Among those who allegedly contributed were industrialist Henry D. Sharpe and state finance commissioner Frederick Peck. However, the subsequent investigation cleared them of any involvement. The donated arms consisted of 250 old Springfield rifles purchased from the Pacific Arms Company of San Francisco, whose other clients included Mexican revolutionists and Chicago gangsters. The FLI's repeated requests for serviceable rifles provoked the suspicions of state adjutant general Arthur C. Cole, who kept the commander of the First Army Corps informed. Adjutant General to Commander, First Army Corps, Boston, 17 May 1927, Public Records Depository, Rhode Island Records Center.

tee eager to expose the membership. Roswell A. Calin, a Klansman-turned-investigator for the state adjutant general, cheerfully identified which FLI recruits were Klansmen. In the first week of April, the Reverend Orlo M. Brees, pastor of Niantic Baptist Church in Westerly and former secretary of the Washington County Klan, proved particularly helpful when he presented the committee with the complete roster of the South County Klan—687 names in all.¹⁴ Among the more noteworthy were those of Washington County sheriff Fred T. Mitchell, state senator Samuel R. Avery of Hopkinton, and state senator Charles S. Weaver of Richmond, who had introduced a bill in 1927 to prohibit miscegenation.

The climax of the hearing came on 6 April, when the *Rhode Islander*, a weekly news magazine, disclosed that state grand dragon John W. Perry, alleged wounded war hero and triumphal

WASP (he claimed to be a descendant of Oliver Hazard Perry), was in fact the son of Joao and Maria Pereira of Portugal. The revelation that an elitist club of white, moralistic, native-born Protestants was being led by a former altar boy of Portuguese and black ancestry who had resigned from the New London Police Department for indulging in a tryst with a married woman while on duty, and whose “war wound” was the result of a bungled suicide attempt, helped to make an already embarrassed organization appear totally ludicrous.¹⁵

Bad publicity, boredom, and ultimately the Depression contributed to the Klan's rapid decline. After a haphazard campaign on behalf of U.S. Senate candidate Peter Gerry in 1930, the Ku Klux Klan was no longer a feature in Rhode Island life.¹⁶

What sort of person was attracted to the Ku



In June 1924 about 8,000 Klan members gathered in Foster to hear Alabama's U.S. senator Thomas Heflin. In the background behind the American flag is a flaming cross. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

14. Rev. Brees's Klan background became an issue during his 1952 race for the New York Senate. *Providence Journal*, 12 Feb. 1952.

15. *Rhode Islander*, 6 Apr. 1928. Perry was tried for perjury

but acquitted the following January. *Providence Journal*, 11 Jan. 1929.

16. *Providence Journal*, 2 Nov. 1930. The *Rhode Islander* quoted the *Washington Post* as putting Rhode Island Klan

Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance

Klux Klan between 1924 and 1928? With the names disclosed during these hearings, as well as those of persons identified as having attended Klan meetings, a demographic and comparative sketch of Rhode Island Klansmen by occupation can be drawn. In addition, a geographic distribution for Washington County can be determined due to the existence of a complete county roster. Finally, a qualified and somewhat tenuous geographic picture may be suggested for Kent and Providence counties based upon partial and incomplete data.

On 10 April 1928, Greenville farmer John E. Schlemmer admitted to the House Militia Committee that the Rhode Island Klan had begun to decline the previous year because of the loss of "businessmen and men politically interested."¹⁷ A comparison of the occupations of men attending Klan meetings between February 1924 and February 1925 (table 1) with those of men identified as belonging to the Klan-dominated First Light Infantry in 1928 (table 2) seems to bear this out.¹⁸ The figures show a drop of 23 percent in the participation of those in the Business/Professional category, together with a substantial increase among the skilled occupations and a slight increase among semi- and unskilled workers within the four-year period.

The fact that semi- and unskilled (low-paid)

membership at just 174 in 1930, from a high of 21,147 five years earlier. The latter figure seems too high and may have included Connecticut, since both states were counted by the Klan as a single "realm" until about 1926. *Rhode Islander*, 7 Nov. 1930. It is unknown just when the Rhode Island Klan expired. Leaflets announcing meetings in Providence and Westerly were found scattered about the streets of Wakefield in October 1932. *Providence Journal*, 2 Nov. 1932; Klan leaflet, Verry Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society. After Perry's death in 1934, Grand Cyclops John A. Domin took up residence in Georgiaville, where the Klan-owned Grants Field was located. *New London Day*, 13 Feb. 1934; *Smithfield Town Directory*, 1934. Kenneth T. Jackson, in *The Ku Klux Klan in the City* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1967), mentions a short-lived nationwide Klan revival effort in 1939 that reestablished offices in several northern

Providence, Pawtucket and Wakefield Harboring Other Klan Gatherings and New Jersey Organizers Come Here to Prepare Hooded Order for Open Avowal of Its Presence.—Cranston Police Act to Prevent Further Gatherings.—Man Who Hired Broad Street Hall for Meeting Says He Isn't Spokesman for Klan in Rhode Island, But Won't Deny He Is a Member.

Rhode Island, cradle of religious and civil liberty, has been openly invaded by the hooded hosts of the Ku Klux Klan.

From Pawtucket to Wakefield the masked riders of the night are holding secret meetings, behind closed and bolted doors, preparing for an open assault on the free institutions of the State founded by Roger Williams as the center of freedom in thought and speech.

Rumors of the spread of the Klan to Rhode Island, long current, have taken definite shape into reality, in the form of a meeting of 150 or more members of the masked order in Odd Fellows' Hall, Broad street, Pawtucket, last night.

This was not the first time the Klan has met in that particular hall, nor is it the only place where the Klan is meeting in the State, for similar Klan "lectures" are being held at least weekly in Pawtucket, Providence and Wakefield.

Some of the automobiles which were left standing outside Odd Fellows' Hall or in Curtin's garage across the street, have been identified as being registered under the following ownership names:

Eager to expose the Klan's movements in Rhode Island, the Providence News ran numerous front-page articles revealing the organization's activities and identifying its membership. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6232).

cities, including Providence.

17. Testimony of John E. Schlemmer et al., fragment of typewritten stenographic record of committee's hearings, RIHS.

18. The limitations of this comparison deserve discussion. The reduced participation of business and professional men in the First Light Infantry may be due to factors other than a decline in interest. Business owners may simply have had less time to devote to militia duty. Moreover, comparing persons who attended Klan meetings with those actually known to have joined the Klan requires qualification. This comparison should be viewed as broadly impressionistic rather than as definitive. In these and the following tables, the occupations of Rhode Island Klansmen have been gleaned from city and town directories for 1925-1928.

KU KLUX KLAN CONTROLS THREE FIRST LIGHT INFANTRY UNITS IN PLAN TO DOMINATE MILITIA

MEMBERS OF ORDER, ARMED WITH RIFLES, HAVE MACHINE GUN

Two Enlistment Blanks Given
Prospective Recruits for
Military Organization.

COMMANDER KEPT IN DARK

workers were a minority is easily explained: being a Klansman required money. Annual dues were fifteen dollars, somewhat more than a week's wage for a well-paid industrial worker, and the rural nature of many Klan meetings necessarily required the availability of that other marvel of the Roaring Twenties, the automobile.¹⁹

A look at the top seven occupations of Rhode Island Klansmen (table 3), accounting for 30.8 percent of the known membership outside Washington County, reveals that 63 percent of those in this group worked in skilled or professional occupations. The occupational distribution for Washington County (table 4) shows that skilled workers amounted to nearly half of the Klan membership, a fact reinforcing the contention that Rhode Island's Klansmen were well within the state's socioeconomic mainstream.

Although a complete roster for Providence and Kent counties does not exist, an oblique insight into the geography of the Klan in these counties may be gained by considering the residences of FLI members (table 5).

Historically, the First Light Infantry was a Providence regiment. Though residents from other towns were free to join, most could reasonably be expected to find the trek to Providence both inconvenient and unnecessary, especially

The biggest Klan story of the decade was its alleged infiltration of the state militia. The story was broken by an investigative reporter of the Providence Journal. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin; RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6233).

when other militia organizations existed nearby.²⁰ Under normal circumstances the majority of the ranks would come from the Providence area. The presence of so many rural residents in this unit may be indicative of the Klan's strength in those places. Despite the limitations of this sampling, the FLI roster seems to suggest the Klan's disproportionate presence in the country towns: while Providence, with 49 percent of the population of the towns represented, contributed 25 percent of the FLI roster, Burrillville, Smithfield, and North Smithfield, by way of comparison, accounted for 3.1 percent of the population and 11.5 percent of the FLI ranks.

Although Washington County contained only 4.3 percent of the state's population, its Klan

19. The importance of the automobile to the Ku Klux Klan may be worth exploring. For a state with many more textile and other industrial workers than motorists, it is odd that factory workers barely outnumbered auto mechanics and garage owners. Considering Rhode Island's economic diversity in 1928, one wonders why weavers, electricians, and jewelry workers were not more in evidence. Perhaps the Klan's "Ride for God and Country" motto implicitly made auto repair a more heroic skill among night riders.

20. That Klansmen were almost exclusively canvassed for membership can be seen also in the ages of the men who enlisted despite the fact that they were too old for military duty. One such recruit, seventy-year-old East Greenwich farmer Samuel P. Essex, had to be helped up the armory steps by three women on enlistment night. Nine other recruits ranged in age from forty-nine to sixty-one. *Rhode Islander*, 30 Mar. 1928.



THE KLAN RIDES AGAIN

COMMUNISM MUST BE DESTROYED

From: J.W.Perry, Grand Dragon, Connecticut-Rhode Island.

To: TO ALL LOYAL PATRIOTS OF PROVINCE NO.2, REALM OF CONNECTICUT-RHODE ISLAND; GREETINGS:

Subject: A CALL TO PATRIOTIC SERVICE.

Esteemed Patriot:

The growth of Communism in the United States of America has caused many of our leading citizens to become pessimistic as to the future of our form of Government. In contrast to the above, I desire to quote in part the recent declaration of our Imperial Wizard, Dr.Hiram W.Evans:

" We in the Klan are opposed to all who seek to change our form of Government. COMMUNISM MUST BE DESTROYED if our form of Government is to continue. There are millions who have solemnly sworn to DEFEND AND PROTECT OUR CONSTITUTION AND GOVERNMENT. The time has come for them to FULFILL THEIR SACRED PROMISES. We believe that they believe in AMERICANISM RATHER THAN BOLSHIEVISM, but it is not enough for them to BELIEVE IN AMERICANISM, THEY MUST DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. STRONG MEN MUST STAND AND BE COUNTED."

" The Klan has been prepared for the hour that is now here. While the maintenance of our Organization is IMPORTANT, unselfish service to GOD AND COUNTRY IS ALL IMPORTANT. We shall seek and find those who have sworn to serve and SHOULDERS TO SHOULDERS WE WILL RIDE TO DEFEND CONSTITUTED AUTHORITY AGAINST CIVIL STRIFE AND REBELLION."

Therefore, the Grand Dragon of this Realm, cordially invites you to attend the following meetings, at which time our Imperial Wizard and a very prominent NATIONAL SPEAKER will show you how we shall fight this MENACE:

OCTOBER 7, 1932 (FRIDAY) - SWEDISH WORKINGMEN'S HALL, CORNER PINE AND CHESTNUT STREETS, PROVIDENCE, R.I., 8:30 P.M. MEN AND WOMEN. DR.H.W.EVANS, IMPERIAL WIZARD WILL ADDRESS THIS MEETING.

OCTOBER 12, 1932 (WEDNESDAY) - KLAVERN OF WASHINGTON COUNTY KLAN NO.12, DUNNS CORNERS, WESTERLY, R.I., 8:30 P.M. MEN AND WOMEN. DR.HAMLETT, NATIONAL SPEAKER WILL ADDRESS THIS MEETING. YOUR GUESTS ARE WELCOME AT BOTH MEETINGS. LET'S RIDE FOR GOD AND COUNTRY!

Faithfully yours,
In the Sacred Unfailing Bond,

J.W.Perry
Grand Dragon

TRAITORS TO THE CAUSE OF A TRUE AMERICANISM AND A PURE PROTESTANTISM MUST BE FERRETED OUT AND EXPOSED. RIDE FOR GOD AND COUNTRY!

.....
(TEAR OFF LOWER PORTION ON ABOVE LINE AND PRESENT IT TO EACH CLAN REALIZING COMMUNISM TO BE A MENACE TO OUR AMERICAN GOVERNMENT. I HEREBY PLEDGE MYSELF TO DEFEND MY GOVERNMENT AND ITS FREE INSTITUTIONS IF AND WHEN CALLED UPON TO DO SO.

NAME _____ STREET _____
CITY _____ STATE _____
PHONE NO. _____ AUTO _____ NO. PASS _____
KLAN NO. _____ NUMBER OF INVITED GUESTS _____

This October 1932 Klan broadside against communism reveals the general paranoia that characterized the movement's shift from racism and anti-Catholic bigotry to foreign menaces. RIHS Collection (RH X3 6234).

Table 1

Occupational Distribution of 87 Persons
Attending Klan Meetings, 1924-1925

Business/Professional Occupations: 27 (31.0%)	
Clergyman	4
Farmer	3
Salesman	3
Business manager	3
Livery stable owner	2
Contractor	2
Garage owner	2
SPCA agent	1
Town clerk	1
Postmaster	1
Attorney	1
Textile manufacturer	1
Storekeeper	1
Supply company owner	1
Printing shop owner	1
Skilled Occupations: 34 (39.1%)	
Auto mechanic	5
House painter	3
Foreman	3
Weaver	3
Machinist	2
Plumber	2
U.S. Navy seaman	1
U.S. Navy chief yeoman	1
U.S. Navy chief carpenter	1
U.S. Navy chief gunner's mate	1
U.S. Navy chief pharmacist's mate	1
U.S. Navy chief commissary steward	1
Bookkeeper	1
Printer	1
Watchmaker	1
Shoemaker	1
Die cutter	1
Trolley station agent	1
Electrician	1
Engineer	1
U.S. Army officer	1
Policeman	1
Semi- or Unskilled Occupations: 26 (29.9%)	
Clerk	9
Factory worker	5
Truck driver	3
Laborer	2
Streetcar conductor	2
Streetcar motorman	1
Expressman	1
Gardener	1
Janitor	1
Cab driver	1

Table 2

Occupational Distribution of
85 FLI Members, 1928

Business/Professional Occupations: 7 (8.2%)	
Salesman	2
Manufacturer	1
Sawmill owner	1
Garage owner	1
Farmer	1
Store manager	1
Skilled Occupations: 49 (57.6%)	
Auto mechanic	5
Factory foreman	4
Machinist	4
Weaver	4
Carpenter	3
House painter	3
Electrician	3
Printer	2
Fisherman	2
Magician	1
Loom fixer	1
Plumber	1
Meter tester	1
Plasterer	1
Collector	1
Millwright	1
Engineer	1
Assistant engineer	1
Cook	1
Engraver	1
Spinner	1
Piano tuner	1
Glass worker	1
Musician	1
Blacksmith	1
Bookkeeper	1
Streetcar mechanic	1
Florist	1
Semi- or Unskilled Occupations: 29 (34.1%)	
Factory worker	7
Laborer	4
Clerk	4
Truck driver	4
Streetcar motorman	3
Iceman	1
Expressman	1
Elevator operator	1
Janitor	1
Railway worker	1
Gardener	1
Hostler	1

RHODE ISLAND'S INVISIBLE EMPIRE

Table 3

Top Seven Occupations of Rhode Island Klansmen, 1924-1928

Unskilled: 37%	
Clerk	14
Factory worker	13
Skilled/Professional: 63%	
Automobile mechanic (includes 2 garage owners)	12
House painter	10
Foreman	8
Machinist	8
Salesman	8

Table 4

Occupational Distribution of Washington County Klansmen, 1927

Business/Professional Occupations: 117 (26.8%)	
Farmer	38
Merchant	14
Garage owner	11
Clergyman	7
Contractor	6
Salesman	5
Business manager	4
Businessman	4
Store manager	3
Truck company owner	3
Restaurant owner	2
Dentist	2
Mill manager	2
Undertaker	2
Postmaster	1
Livery stable owner	1
Physician	1
Monument company owner	1
Cemetery superintendent	1
Druggist	1
Secretary	1
Insurance agent	1
Manufacturer	1
Auto-painting shop owner	1
Bakery owner	1
Bottling plant owner	1
Sheriff	1
Boy Scouts assistant director	1

Skilled Occupations: 194 (44.4%)

Carpenter	28
Machinist	27
Weaver	14
Foreman	12
House painter	10
Auto mechanic	9
Fisherman	9
Electrician	8
Stonecutter	6
Spinner	6
Engineer	6
Blacksmith	6
Plumber	5
Mason	4
Trolley station agent	4
Lineman	4
Coast Guard seaman	3
Molder	3
Pattern maker	3
Harness maker	2
Policeman	2
Draftsman	2
Bookkeeper	2
Barber	2
Fireman	1
Loom fixer	1
Locomotive engineer	1
Bricklayer	1

Skilled Occupations: 194 (44.4%)

Box maker	1
Bicycle mechanic	1
Tinsmith	1
Dyer	1
Musician	1
Miller	1
Electrical engineer	1
Paperhanger	1
Printer	1
Watchmaker	1
Baker	1
News reporter	1
Master mechanic	1

Semi- or Unskilled Occupations: 126 (28.8%)

Laborer	31
Factory worker	30
Clerk	23
Truck driver	13
Cab driver	8
Quarry worker	7
Gardener	4
Bank teller	4
Railroad flagman	2
Railroad brakeman	1
Messenger	1
Expressman	1
Caretaker	1

Table 5
Geographical Distribution of
104 FLI Members, 1928

Providence	26
Pawtucket	18
Woonsocket	10
North Kingstown	8
Cranston	6
Burrillville	6
East Greenwich	5
Warwick	5
East Providence	5
North Smithfield	5
Coventry	3
West Warwick	2
Cumberland	1
Lincoln	1
North Providence	1
Smithfield	1
Seekonk, Mass.	1

Table 6
Geographical Distribution of
Washington County Klansmen, 1927

Place	% of Population	% of Klansmen
Charlestown	3.7	1.0
Exeter	3.9	Less than 1
Hopkinton	9.1	20.6
Narragansett	4.5	1.9
North Kingstown	14.7	12.0
Richmond	5.7	1.6
South Kingstown	20.4	12.0
Westerly	37.5	45.4

accounted for 31.2 percent of the state's Klan members.²¹ The 1927 roster of the Washington County Klan shows uneven distribution among the towns (table 6), with Hopkinton and Westerly contributing the bulk of the membership.²² One in 20 Hopkinton residents was a Klansman. The ratios for Westerly and North Kingstown were 1 in 37 and 1 in 55 respectively. Of the county's 687 Klansmen, 458, or two-thirds, lived in the towns of Westerly and Hopkinton.

By contrast, Charlestown had 12 Klan members, Richmond 11, and Exeter just 5. This dis-

parity between otherwise similar towns may be accounted for by considering the patterns of settlement. One factor that the latter towns had in common, which they did not share with the other county towns, was the lack of a village or population center. While the residents of the other towns tended to live in or near such centers, Exeter, Richmond, and Charlestown consisted of scattered farms and other rural dwellings. Where no population center exists, organizational potential is naturally limited.²³

Where Klansmen were numerous, they were also prominent in public office and in private organizations. In Hopkinton, Klansmen held eleven of the twenty-two town offices. The moderator, the chief of police, four of the five councilmen, a member of the school board, and a tax assessor were members of the Ku Klux Klan. The Westerly Klan numbered the town sergeant, two highway commissioners, and the chief of the Watch Hill Fire Department among its members.²⁴

Frequent denunciations of the Klan among fraternal societies did not prevent Westerly Freemasons from selecting Lewis R. Greene as their lodge master. Klansman John R. Oppy was an officer of the Odd Fellows, while Everett C. Lawton and Clarence D. Stenhouse occupied official posts within the Order of United American Mechanics. The master of the grange, Patrons of Husbandry, was Klansman C. Palmer Chapman of Westerly. Rhode Island's youth could expect lessons in 100 percent Americanism from Louis W. Gavitt of Hope Valley, assistant director of the Boy Scouts of America.²⁵

Quantitatively, this was the face of the Ku Klux Klan in the Ocean State in the 1920s. While this data cannot begin to explain the subtler mysteries of bigotry and the paranoia it expresses, hopefully this demographic glimpse has rendered Rhode Island's Invisible Empire more visible.

21. The state membership was reported by the *Washington Post* as 2,121 in 1927. *Rhode Islander*, 7 Nov. 1930.

22. Block Island and all nonresident Washington County Klansmen are excluded from the table, and thus the figures do not add up to 100 percent.

23. Hope Valley is the village center of Hopkinton. North Kingstown residents are distributed among the villages of Lafayette, Allenton, Wickford, and Davisville. South Kingstown

residents are concentrated in the villages of Wakefield and Peace Dale. Narragansett Pier and Saunderstown were important centers in Narragansett. Westerly more closely resembled a small city, with a built-up downtown section complete with electric streetcars.

24. *Charlestown, Hopkinton, Richmond Directory*, 1925. *Westerly Town Directory*, 1926.

25. *Ibid.*