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# Another Pattern of Urban Living: Multifamily Housing in Providence, 1890-1930

Patricia Raub

Historians have recently begun to reexamine common perceptions of American urban housing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For too long, as these scholars have observed, we have equated urban housing "with slums and ghettos, overcrowding and filth, disease and despair—a pathological blight infecting the whole urban organism."<sup>1</sup> Such an image is largely a product of scholarly focus upon the tenements of New York and Chicago, which social reformers of the time examined in detail and denounced in lurid prose, and of a consequent neglect of other cities' patterns. As historians have begun to analyze urban housing data nationally, they have found that the predominant urban house type was not the slum tenement but the single-family house—the "normal method of housing" working class and middle class alike.<sup>2</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, simply to abandon our picture of the crowded, decaying tenement as the typical urban residence and replace it with that of the single-family detached home. While the latter might be a more accurate representation of most urban housing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was no more characteristic of many urban families' experience than was the tenement. As we reassess the history of our urban housing, we must examine it in its variety as well as in its broader patterns.

In the Northeast, for example, urban families

frequently lived in two- or three-family detached houses. Two-family dwellings were built in cities and towns throughout the region from the middle of the nineteenth century through the first quarter of the twentieth century. Three-family houses, often called triple-deckers, were constructed in the same urban industrial centers from the late nineteenth century into the 1930s. These were regional housing trends, trends not typical of most American cities.

As statistics indicate, Providence was one of the places where these trends were evident. Compared to other large cities of the period, Providence had a relatively small stock of single-family houses. In 1890 only half of Providence's dwellings were one-family structures; among the twenty-eight largest cities at the time, only New York had a lower percentage of single-family house (table 1). Providence's share of two-family houses, on the other hand, was unusually high: over 40 percent of the city's houses were two-family dwellings, a significantly greater proportion of such structures than was to be found in any of America's other big cities. Even though less than 10 percent of the city's dwellings were intended to house three or more families, Providence was eighth highest among the nation's largest cities in this category. Of the city's houses accommodating three or more families, over half were three-family dwellings and most of the rest were four-family houses (table 2).

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1. Robert G. Barrows, "Beyond the Tenement: Patterns of American Urban Housing, 1870-1970," *Journal of Urban History* 9 (August 1983): 396.

2. Lawrence Veiller, *Housing Reform: A Hand-Book for Practical Use in American Cities* (New York, 1910), as quoted in Barrows, "Beyond the Tenement," 402; Lloyd Rodwin, *Housing*

*and Economic Progress: A Study of the Housing Experience of Boston's Middle-Income Families* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 39; Roger D. Simon, "The City-Building Process: Housing and Services in New Milwaukee Neighborhoods, 1880-1910," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 68 (July 1978): 57; Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *Streetcar Suburbs: The Process of Growth in Boston, 1870-1900* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962; reprint, New York, 1969), 43.

Table 1  
Types of Dwellings in Cities with  
100,000 or More People in 1890

City	% of One-Family Dwellings	% of Two-Family Dwellings	% of Three-or-More- Family Dwellings
New York*	45.9	11.3	42.8
Providence	49.6	40.8	9.6
Brooklyn	51.2	23.2	25.6
Newark	58.8	25.7	15.5
Boston	59.0	23.8	17.2
Jersey City	60.3	20.9	18.8
Chicago	60.4	22.5	17.1
Cincinnati	60.6	18.6	20.8
St. Louis	66.9	24.2	8.9
Buffalo	74.6	17.8	7.6
Minneapolis	76.2	20.1	3.7
Allegheny	78.9	17.6	3.5
Milwaukee	79.1	17.0	3.9
Louisville	79.5	14.3	6.2
St. Paul	82.6	14.4	3.0
Pittsburgh	83.5	13.6	2.9
Baltimore	83.6	13.8	2.7
Cleveland	83.9	13.2	2.9
Detroit	88.4	9.7	1.9
Kansas City	88.6	8.9	2.5
Washington	89.2	9.0	1.8
Rochester	89.8	8.2	2.0
Omaha	91.3	7.1	1.6
New Orleans	91.4	6.4	2.2
San Francisco	92.0	6.1	1.9
Denver	92.8	5.9	1.3
Philadelphia	92.8	5.7	1.5
Indianapolis	94.0	4.8	1.2
Average	76.6	15.2	8.3

SOURCE: Jules Tygiel, "Housing in Late Nineteenth-Century American Cities: Suggestions for Research," *Historical Methods* 12 (Spring 1979), 89.

\*New York includes only the boroughs of Manhattan and the Bronx.

By 1930 the proportion of single-family homes within the city had increased only slightly, to 54.5 percent of all dwelling places (table 3). While the percentage of two-family structures had fallen to 29.1 percent, that of structures holding three or

3. *Fifteenth Census of the United States, Population*, 6:72. The 1930 census does not provide separate figures for triple-deckers, as it lumps all structures housing three or more families in the same category, thus making it impossible to determine the proportion of three-family houses within the stock of houses built to accommodate three or more families. This information, however, is retroactively provided, in an indirect way, by the 1940 census. The latter census counted 69,735 dwelling units, defined as the living quarters occupied by one household, and

more families had risen to 16.4 percent, indicating an increase in triple-decker construction in the first third of the century. By 1930 approximately 60 percent of all families living in housing for three or more families in Providence were living in three-family structures.<sup>3</sup> In 1930, as in 1890, housing patterns in Providence were not representative of those in most American cities: Providence's proportion of single-family houses was significantly lower, and its proportion of two- and three-family houses significantly higher, than the average for the nation's other large cities.

When we turn from housing composition to the distribution of families within each housing type, the prevalence of multifamily housing in Providence is even more striking. In 1890 and 1930 the proportion of Providence families living in single-family housing was approximately half the national average among the nation's largest cities, while the proportion of Providence families living in two-family houses was about twice the national urban average (tables 4 and 5). In 1890 the proportion of Providence families living in structures accommodating three or more families was close to the national urban average, but by 1930 it was signifi-

Table 2  
Types of Dwellings in Providence in 1890

Type of Dwelling	Number	Percentage
One-Family	8,754	49.6
Two-Family	7,194	40.8
Three-Family	961	5.4
Four-Family	551	3.1
Five-to-Nine-Family	177	1.0
Ten-or-More-Family	2	0.0
Total	17,639	100.00

SOURCE: *Eleventh Census of the United States*, 1:960.

indicated that only 3.9 percent of these dwelling units were built after 1930. This census reported that in 1940 approximately 60 percent of all Providence dwelling units in structures accommodating three or more families were in three-family houses. *Sixteenth Census of the United States, Housing*, vol. 2, pt. 3, p. 509. Given the decrease in housing construction during the Depression, one assumes that approximately the same proportion of families lived in triple-deckers in 1930 as well.

Table 3

Types of Dwellings in New England Cities with 100,000 or More People in 1930

City	% of One-Family Dwellings	% of Two-Family Dwellings	% of Three-or-More-Family Dwellings
Boston	49.5	25.5	25.0
Bridgeport	56.7	29.7	13.6
Cambridge	61.0	24.0	15.0
Fall River	47.6	25.8	26.6
Hartford	47.7	26.9	25.4
Lowell	76.3	16.8	6.8
Lynn	64.5	22.0	13.5
New Bedford	58.7	25.1	16.2
New Haven	64.2	25.2	10.6
Providence	54.5	29.1	16.4
Somerville	43.1	43.5	13.4
Springfield	63.7	25.8	10.5
Worcester	53.4	19.4	27.2
Regional Average	57.0	26.0	16.9
National Average	80.2	13.4	6.4

SOURCE: *Fifteenth Census of the United States, Population, 6:72.*

cantly higher than the national average.

Providence, then, provides us with an urban housing pattern in which the majority of the city's families lived neither in tenements nor in single-family detached houses. It was a pattern not common to American cities nationwide, but it was one repeated throughout much of the industrial Northeast during this period. While the proportion of families in New England cities living in single-family houses was well below the national average, the proportion of families living in multifamily houses was significantly above the average.<sup>4</sup> A closer examination of Providence's multifamily dwellings, therefore, enables us to expand our understanding of an urban housing type which was more common than heretofore recognized. This article will attempt to trace developments in

4. The 1890 census is the first to provide information regarding the types of housing occupied by urban families; such information is again included in the 1900 census. After 1900 the census reports do not offer statistics on housing type again until 1930. The 1890 and 1900 reports give figures on housing type for the twenty-eight U.S. cities which then had 100,000 or more people, but Boston and Providence were the only two New

Table 4

Families in Each Type of Dwelling in Cities with 100,000 or More People in 1890

City	% of Families in One-Family Dwellings	% of Families in Two-family Dwellings	% of Families in Three-or-More-Family Dwellings
New York*	12.0	5.9	82.1
Brooklyn	24.7	22.3	53.0
Providence	29.9	49.2	20.9
Cincinnati	32.0	19.5	48.5
Jersey City	32.5	22.5	45.0
Boston	34.6	27.9	37.5
Chicago	35.0	26.2	38.8
Newark	35.2	30.8	34.0
St. Louis	44.4	32.1	23.5
Buffalo	54.1	25.8	20.1
Minneapolis	58.6	30.8	10.6
Louisville	60.3	21.6	18.1
Allegheny	62.7	28.0	9.3
Milwaukee	62.7	26.9	10.4
St. Paul	67.1	23.4	9.5
Pittsburgh	69.1	22.5	8.4
Cleveland	69.3	21.8	8.9
Baltimore	69.5	23.0	7.5
Kansas City	76.7	15.5	7.8
Detroit	77.4	17.1	5.5
Washington	78.7	15.8	5.5
Rochester	78.8	14.3	6.9
New Orleans	80.9	11.3	7.8
Omaha	82.0	12.7	5.3
San Francisco	82.7	10.9	6.4
Philadelphia	84.6	10.5	4.9
Denver	84.7	10.7	4.6
Indianapolis	86.2	8.7	5.1
Average	59.5	21.0	19.6

SOURCE: Tygiel, "Housing," 90.

\*New York includes only the boroughs of Manhattan and the Bronx.

Providence housing during the period from 1890 to 1930 by addressing the following questions: What local and regional factors encouraged the building of two- and three-family dwellings? How were multifamily houses constructed, and how did the two- and three-decker forms evolve? What patterns of

England cities in this category; it is therefore impossible to ascertain regional New England housing patterns during this period. The housing tables in the 1930 report, however, included thirteen New England cities among the ninety-three cities with populations over 100,000. Thus 1930 is the earliest date for which it is possible to offer valid observations regarding regional housing trends in New England.

Table 5  
Families in Each Type of Dwelling  
in New England Cities with  
100,000 or More People in 1930

City	% of One-Family Dwellings	% of Two-family Dwellings	% of Three-or-More- Family Dwellings
Boston	24.6	25.3	50.1
Bridgeport	33.2	34.8	32.0
Cambridge	33.4	26.3	40.4
Fall River	25.1	27.2	47.8
Hartford	25.1	27.2	47.8
Lowell	55.6	24.6	19.8
Lynn	38.4	26.2	35.4
New Bedford	35.9	30.7	33.5
New Haven	40.1	31.4	28.5
Providence	32.2	34.4	33.3
Somerville	24.0	48.6	27.4
Springfield	37.7	30.6	31.7
Worcester	28.8	20.9	50.3
Regional Average	33.4	29.9	36.8
National Average	62.9	18.0	19.1

SOURCE: *Fifteenth Census, Population*, 6:72.

home ownership and tenancy can we discern? What were the day-to-day experiences of those who lived in two- and three-family houses during this time?

Like many northern industrial cities, Providence prospered as a manufacturing center throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth century. Established manufacturers expanded existing plants, and scores of entrepreneurs built factories to house new ventures. The city's population grew rapidly, as the Irish and then the Swedes, French Canadians, Italians, Russian Jews, Portuguese, and other immigrants streamed into Providence to work in the textile factories, the foundries and machine shops, the jewelry shops, and the other industries employing local labor.<sup>5</sup> Between 1865 and 1920 the city's population more than quadrupled, rising from 51,691 to 237,595, with the bulk of the increase

from immigration. By 1910 seven out of every ten Providence residents were foreign-born.<sup>6</sup>

The continuing influx of immigrants stimulated housing construction. Between 1865 and 1920 the number of dwellings increased over fivefold, from 6,773 in 1865 to 35,634 in 1920.<sup>7</sup> At first the majority of the new structures were located in neighborhoods within walking distance of the many factories scattered throughout the city: in Olneyville, Smith Hill, Wanskuck Village, the North End, and Federal Hill. With the introduction and extension of horsecar and then streetcar lines, residential development began to take place in neighborhoods more distant from the centers of industry, such as Mount Pleasant, Elmhurst, South Providence, Elmwood, the West End, and Silver Lake.

The quickening of dwelling construction during this period was, of course, not unique to Providence. Analyzing housing-start statistics, Robert G. Barrows concludes that construction nationwide "was . . . rather substantial between 1890 and 1930 and, despite the annual fluctuations and occasional drastic variation, fairly steady."<sup>8</sup> Yet, while Providence builders, like their counterparts in other cities, were busily increasing the city's housing stock, they were doing so by constructing two- and three-family houses instead of the single-family houses being built elsewhere.

Why was the pattern different in Providence? Roger A. Roberge's study of triple-decker construction in Worcester, Massachusetts, and Sam Bass Warner, Jr.'s account of Boston's growth in the late nineteenth century may provide part of the answer. In Worcester, as in Providence, "industry was localized," Roberge writes; "a pedestrian journey to work was the rule and some form of multi-family dwelling units on restricted lots of land was the optimal residential solution."<sup>9</sup> As land within walking distance of the factories was expensive, Roberge remarks, "averaging in 1890 as much as thirty to forty per cent of the total cost of building a three-decker," building multifamily homes permit-

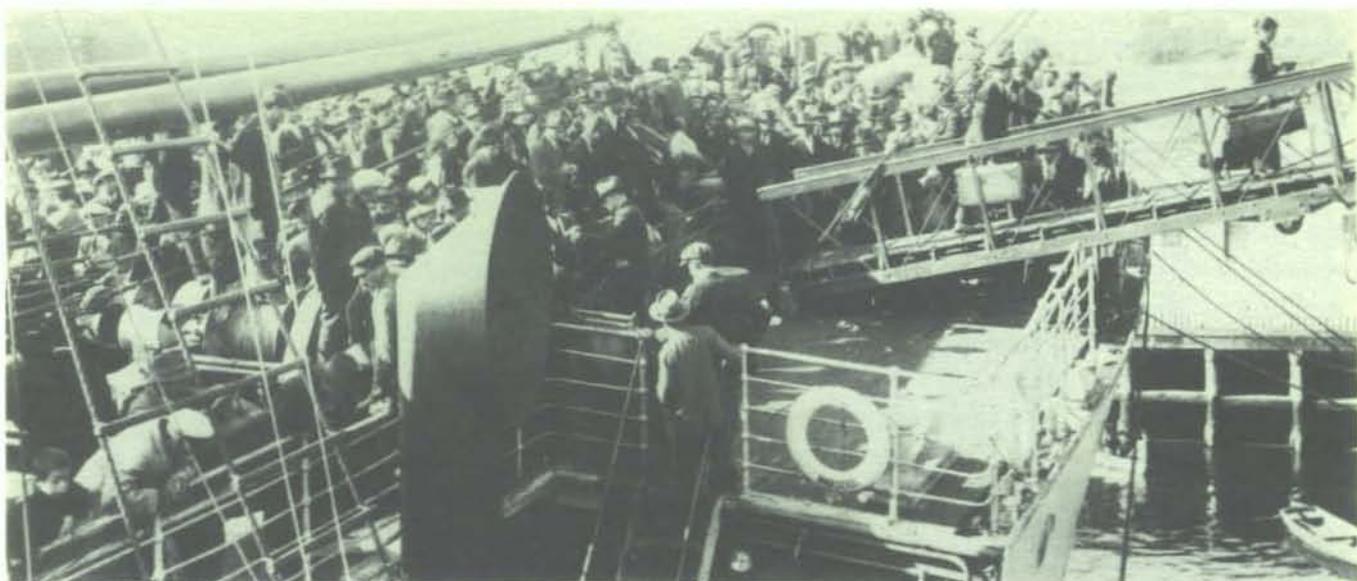
5. By 1910 there were 1,933 business firms in Providence. Wm McKenzie Woodward and Edward F. Sanderson, *Providence: A Citywide Survey of Historic Resources* (Providence, 1986), 56.

6. *Ibid.*, 61.

7. *Ibid.*, 59.

8. Barrows, "Beyond the Tenement," 399.

9. Roger A. Roberge, "The Three-Decker: Structural Correlate of Worcester's Industrial Revolution" (M.A. thesis, Clark



Before the Depression and the immigration quotas, the Fabre Line brought thousands of immigrants to Providence from the Mediterranean and the Portuguese islands. This 1924 photograph shows new arrivals disembarking from the *Asia* at the old State Pier. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

ted their owners to recover some of the construction costs through tenants' rent.<sup>10</sup> In his study of the "streetcar suburbs" of Boston, Warner arrives at a similar conclusion, finding that land values were higher in the areas closest to factory districts and to streetcar lines. "In order to meet this [land] cost," he writes, "multiple dwellings, or very small single houses, had to be resorted to. The jamming together of houses on small narrow lots characterized [the lower middle class's] building. Its principal architectural forms were the two-family house and the three-decker."<sup>11</sup> Thus residential patterns were influenced by industrial location and the existing transportation networks.

In 1916 John Ihlder, a prominent housing expert who was then the field secretary of the National Housing Association, conducted a study of Providence housing at the request of city leaders. In the

course of the study, Ihlder and his assistants interviewed local real estate men. According to Ihlder, the respondents agreed that the two-family house was the most profitable housing type to construct, as the initial cost of land, foundations, and roof was little higher than that for a single-family dwelling. Moreover, as the two-family house was often owner-occupied, it was likely to be treated with care and to require fewer repairs than would a structure owned by an absentee landlord.<sup>12</sup> By this reasoning, one might expect that the real estate community would find the three-family house to be an even better investment.

Like the majority of planners, architects, and reformers of the day, however, Ihlder deplored the construction of tenements, a housing category that included triple-deckers.<sup>13</sup> Thus, citing the testimony of a single realtor, he asserts that the initial

University, 1955), as quoted in Marilyn W. Spear, "Worcester's Three-Deckers," *Worcester People and Places* 6 (Worcester, Mass. 1977), 12.

10. Roberge, as quoted in Spear, *Worcester People and Places*, 13.

11. Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs*, 57.

12. John Ihlder, *The Houses of Providence: A Study of Present Conditions and Tendencies* (Providence, 1916), 60-61.

13. *Ibid.* For a discussion of middle-class prejudice against urban tenements, see Gwendolyn Wright, *Building the American Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981; reprint, 1983), 114-34.

savings in erecting the triple-decker were more than outweighed by such later costs as income lost through the difficulty of keeping all three floors rented at once. "Moreover," he claims, with no supporting evidence, "the common use of parts of the building by several families and that intangible something in the attitude of a family toward a dwelling which it shares with several others, results in larger repair bills and more rapid depreciation."<sup>14</sup> That Ihlder's conclusions were not shared by local builders is evident in Ihlder's own statistics: from 1911 to 1915, builders erected 770 single-family houses, 672 two-family houses, and 760 triple-deckers.<sup>15</sup>

For Providence, then, it appears that two- and three-family houses better satisfied a local need for intensive use of relatively expensive house lots than did single-family houses. As in Worcester, working- and lower-middle-class families in Providence could afford to purchase two- or three-family houses, for "multi-family units permitted owners to split costs either by providing relatives with compatible tenements or by earning extra income renting to non-family tenants."<sup>16</sup>

If a multifamily dwelling was more cost-effective than a single-family house, why did builders not construct more large apartment buildings? Perhaps the most important factor militating against wholesale construction of large tenement houses was the relative decentralization of the city's industries. If there had been a single factory district, it would have greatly increased the value of lots within walking distance and encouraged the construction of apartment buildings. If factories had been spread evenly throughout the urban landscape, land values would have been fairly uniform, as all lots would have been within walking distance of the workplace. In such a circumstance, we can assume that the single-family house would have been the preferred residential form. In Providence, however, most factories were spread across the city in a limited number of areas, with plants located along

the Woonasquatucket, Moshassuck, and West rivers as well as south of the business district on the east and west banks of the Providence River. Housing lot values were therefore neither so high as they would have been had the city's industry been concentrated in a single district nor so low as they would have been had industry been completely decentralized; and thus the partial decentralization of the city's factories encouraged the construction of two- and three-family housing.

Demographic as well as geographic factors discouraged the widespread construction of apartment buildings in Providence. During the period under investigation, the city's population growth was never so rapid as to prevent local builders from keeping up with the demand by constructing one- to three-family houses. Between 1890 and 1930 the number of dwellings per capita in Providence remained relatively stable, with an average of 1.63 families per dwelling (table 6).

Material considerations prompting the construction of two- and three-family detached houses in Providence were reinforced by more subjective factors. One assumes that Providence families were not altogether untouched by the national preference for single-family detached housing, an ideal promoted by magazine and newspaper writers, popular

Table 6  
Number of Dwellings and Families in Providence,  
1890-1930

Date	Population	Number of Families	Number of Dwellings	Number of Families per Dwelling
1890	132,146	29,242	17,639	1.66
1900	175,597	39,236	25,204	1.56
1910	224,326	49,129	28,705	1.71
1920	237,595	54,726*	35,634*	1.54
1930	252,981	61,371	36,319	1.69

SOURCES: *Thirteenth Census of the United States, Population, 1;1289*; *Fifteenth Census, Population, 6:71*.

\*Includes institutions, etc.

14. Ihlder, *Houses of Providence*, 61.

15. *Ibid.*, 31.

16. Roberge, as quoted in Spear, *Worcester People and Places*, 13.



*A variety of architectural details may be seen in these two-family houses on Elmwood Avenue. Such homes were usually owner-occupied. Photo circa 1913, RIHS Collection (RHi M397 18).*

novelists, and, by the 1920s, magazine advertisements. Small multifamily dwellings closely resembled one-family homes, and thus they permitted their inhabitants a "compromise—between aspirations for a single-family residence and the need to pack as many people as possible into a small place."<sup>17</sup>

Once small multifamily dwellings had been accepted in the city, further two- and three-family house construction seemed to gain a momentum of its own. In his study of urban working-class housing in Victorian England, M. J. Daunton discusses the tendency toward "rigidity" in physical form and suggests that one factor inhibiting change is that of

the "creation of a 'custom of living in tenements.'" According to Daunton, "Any physical environment will create a particular life-style, a cultural definition of housing form."<sup>18</sup> Thus, people who had grown up in Providence neighborhoods of two- or three-family dwellings looked for similar housing once they had married and were ready to set up housekeeping on their own. Warner locates this tendency toward housing-form rigidity in the builders themselves, who, being small contractors "without any formal training in architecture or subdivision, and hard pressed by lack of capital, . . . sought safety by repeating the popular."<sup>19</sup> "No special regulatory body was needed to tell most build-

17. Douglas Johnson, "Worcester's Ordinary Landscape," *Clark Now* 11 (Fall/Winter 1981), 8.

18. M. J. Daunton, *House and Home in the Victorian City:*

*Working-Class Housing, 1850-1914* (London, 1983), 88.

19. Warner, *Streetcar Suburbs*, 130.

ers what was appropriate," Warner observes, "the other houses in the area presented them with models. Thus, in the years between substantial shifts in transportation or architectural style neighborhoods continued building in uniform patterns."<sup>20</sup>

Providence's housing, like Worcester's and Boston's, was constructed by a multitude of small independent builders. In 1916 John Ihlder observed that "Providence is a city built house by house. There are here no large operators who develop big tracts by building scores of houses at once." Most builders erected one or two houses at a time. "During the past five years," says Ihlder, "there have been only thirteen instances of three houses, nine instances of four, three instances of five, and four instances of six, built as one operation." Ihlder does refer to one contractor who had come to Providence from New York, built "one considerable group of triple-deckers," and then departed "hastily."<sup>21</sup> He may be speaking of Harry Weiss, who built a complex of twenty-two triple-deckers and apartment buildings at the corner of Broad Street and Thurbers Avenue between 1908 and 1910.<sup>22</sup> In the 1920s several other contractors built modest colonies of triple-deckers. Among them was Benjamin Rakatansky, who constructed sixteen identical dwellings in South Providence between Gordon Avenue and Croyland Road.<sup>23</sup> Rakatansky's foreman, his uncle Morris, supervised approximately two dozen workmen during the project. The Rakatanskys developed a primitive form of prefabrication: they erected a table saw at the building site, laid all the planking and studs on the table, and pulled the electric saw along a track to cut all lumber of each length at the same time.<sup>24</sup>

Benjamin Rakatansky's triple-deckers, like most multifamily homes of the time, were built on speculation: only when they were completed or

near completion were they purchased by those who would occupy them. Rakatansky, like his peers, was self-taught; and like most local builders of the period, he lived in a triple-decker himself at the time that he was building similar structures in South Providence and in the North End. Thus, familiarity with the multifamily housing form, combined with the need to produce readily marketable houses, disposed Rakatansky and other builders to copy prevailing house forms with little variation. Local contractors measured the dimensions of a building lot and then visited a lumberyard to consult its planbooks, asking an employee, "Do you have any plans of a three-decker house that would fit on a fifty-by-one hundred lot? A fifty-by-eighty lot? Do you have anything that goes on a corner?"<sup>25</sup>

What were the architectural characteristics of multifamily houses? When builders reproduced the houses with which they were familiar, what did they build? Both the two- and three-family Providence house was, typically, a detached wooden dwelling with an end gable, cross gable, or hipped roof, and with front and, often, side bay windows. Each family occupied one entire floor, and each family unit had virtually the same floor plan as the apartment(s) above or below it. Mid-nineteenth-century two-family houses had a single front entrance used by downstairs and upstairs occupants alike. By the late nineteenth century, builders had begun to provide two front entrances, one for each apartment, thus providing occupants with more privacy. The typical early-twentieth-century triple-decker also had two front entrances, one for the first-floor tenant and a second which the second- and third-floor tenants shared. The triple-decker was usually built with a three-story front bay window as well as with a three-story front porch with access from all three floors.<sup>26</sup>

The nineteenth-century two-family house, like

20. *Ibid.*, 76.

21. Ihlder, *Houses of Providence*, 59.

22. Woodward and Sanderson, *Providence*, 152.

23. Leslie J. Vollmert, *South Providence* (Providence, 1978),

41.

24. Ira Rakatansky, interviewed by the author, 7 Feb. 1988.

25. Rakatansky interview. In actuality, most building lots in Providence in this period were 40 feet wide by 80 to 100 feet deep.

26. Woodward and Sanderson, *Providence*, 83-84, 87.



*Triple-deckers, like this one on Elmwood Avenue, were usually built on deep, narrow lots, with their gable end facing the street. Photo circa 1913, RIHS Collection (RHi M397 13).*

the later triple-decker, had a deep, narrow floor-plan, reflecting the shape of the lot upon which it was usually constructed. In the most cheaply built multifamily homes, parlor and kitchen were located along one side of each apartment, while two bedrooms were situated along the other. Larger and more expensive houses contained a dining room, a pantry, and a third bedroom.<sup>27</sup> These latter houses not only contained more rooms than did the more cheaply built structures but were also constructed from higher-quality materials and featured the latest in exterior and interior design. Such houses typically had front and side bays and stained glass as well as leaded windows; they were also finished with hardwood floors, carved woodwork, ornamental fireplaces, and other embellishments more characteristic of the better single-family homes of the period.

Until the 1920s the middle-class multifamily house also offered its occupants more modern conveniences than did the typical working-class dwelling. In 1911, British Board of Trade investigators observed that most older two-family houses "offer little in the way of general conveniences. The old homes seldom have baths and usually the 'toilet' is in the cellar. A faucet and sink are as a rule provided in the kitchen."<sup>28</sup> Although electricity was available in Providence from the early 1880s, at the turn of the century the typical multifamily home still relied upon gas for illumination. Most multifamily houses were heated by a coal stove in the kitchen, sometimes supplemented by a parlor stove in larger dwellings. In plumbing, lighting, and heating, working-class housing lagged behind middle-class housing, which offered full bathrooms, electric lighting, and central heating by 1890.<sup>29</sup>

Sometimes the more spacious and elaborately finished houses were custom-designed. In such cases the house was built not on speculation but at the request of the future occupant, a middle-class businessman or professional who wanted a better-quality and more personalized dwelling than the usual two- or three-family structure offered. Charles C. Mackey, for example, a South Providence businessman who was a charter member of the Rhode Island Elks and, for a time, commodore of the Bay Spring Yacht Club, bought three lots at 324-26 Elmwood Avenue around 1918 because he "had always admired Elmwood Avenue, and those three lots were supposedly the best on the street." Mackey selected a Mr. Ecklin, who had been constructing houses in Elmwood and South Providence, to build a two-family home for him. Mr. and Mrs. Mackey told Ecklin what they wanted, plans were drawn up, and construction began upon a multifamily home that held its own in a then-prestigious neighborhood.<sup>30</sup>

\* \* \*

27. *Ibid.*, 87.

28. British Board of Trade, "Cost of Living in American Towns: Report of an Enquiry of the Board of Trade into Working Class Rents, Housing, and Retail Prices, together with the Rates of Wages in Certain Occupations in the Principal Industrial Towns of the United States of America," *House of Commons Sessional Papers* 88 (1911), 366.

29. Ruby Winnerman, interviewed by the author, 3 May 1988; Woodward and Sanderson, *Providence*, 79.

30. Charles C. Mackey, Jr., interviewed by James Keegan, 25 Oct. 1987. Some of the persons whose experiences are discussed in this paper were interviewed by members of a class on the history of Providence architecture that I taught at Providence College in the fall of 1987; others I interviewed myself.

Who were the people who bought two- and three-family homes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? What reasons did they have for purchasing these houses? First of all, we must acknowledge that homeowners were in the minority in Providence—a typical urban phenomenon during this period.<sup>31</sup> In 1890 one out of every five Providence families lived in a house which it owned; by 1930 the proportion of homeowners had increased significantly, to approximately one out of every three families.<sup>32</sup> Still, the majority of Providence families rented their homes. In a cost-of-living survey of American cities and towns conducted in 1911, British Board of Trade investigators observed that the relatively low level of home ownership in Providence was not surprising, for “in a city where the tenement system prevails, and where two or more families to one house is accordingly the general rule, it is obvious that it is possible for only a certain proportion of families to own their own dwellings.”<sup>33</sup>

Even though home ownership was the exception rather than the rule, it was not a practice limited to middle-class householders. According to the British Board of Trade, “It is a common form of investment for a workman to buy or build a two or three-family house and to occupy one of the tenements and let the others.”<sup>34</sup> In a recent study of the Pekin Street Historic District, a multifamily neighborhood in Providence’s Smith Hill developed in the late

nineteenth century, William McKenzie Woodward found that approximately 40 percent of the area’s predominately two-family dwellings were occupied by their builders upon completion and that several of these owner-occupants owned one or more other dwellings nearby. With information provided in street directories, Woodward determined that homeowners in the neighborhood were predominately workmen, mostly machinists, carpenters, laborers, jewelers, and stonecutters, although lower-middle-class workers, mainly small merchants, also owned houses in the area.<sup>35</sup> A roughly analogous pattern could also be found in South Providence, Olneyville, Federal Hill, and much of the rest of Smith Hill. In other neighborhoods, however, such as Elmwood, Elmhurst, and the Oakland Avenue section of Smith Hill, the proportion of middle-class homeowners was substantially higher.<sup>36</sup>

Given, then, that both middle-class and working-class people bought two- and three-family homes, why did they do so? Did middle-class and working-class homeowners have similar or different reasons for purchasing their homes? In her study of family patterns among Italian and Jewish immigrants in Providence in the early twentieth century, Judith Smith has observed that “various historians have argued recently that the meaning of home ownership for working-class families was related to family concerns for stability rather than social mobility and a rise in status,” the latter being

31. In 1900, for example, homeowners were in the minority in all large American cities. See Jules Tygiel, “Housing in Late Nineteenth-Century American Cities: Suggestions for Research,” *Historical Methods* 12 (Spring 1979), 91.

32. In 1890, 20.7 percent of Providence homes were owned by their occupants and 79.3 percent were rented. *Thirteenth Census of the United States, Population*, 1:1314. Census figures for 1930 show 32.2 percent of Providence homes as owned and 66.8 percent as rented. See statistics in *Fifteenth Census, Population*, 6:57. As the census defined a home as the living quarters of one family, the number or proportion of owned or rented homes is approximately equal to the number or proportion of home-owning or renting families.

33. British Board of Trade, “Cost of Living,” 366.

34. *Ibid.*

35. William McKenzie Woodward, *National Register*

Nomination for Pekin Street Historical District (15 Nov. 1983); manuscript on file at Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission. The home ownership pattern in this neighborhood is similar to that found among homeowners in Pittsburgh in the early twentieth century, where a mix of white-collar workers (mainly petty proprietors and shopkeepers), skilled workers, and unskilled workers owned their own homes. See John Bodnar, Roger Simon, and Michael P. Weber, *Lives of Their Own: Blacks, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900–1960* (Urbana, Ill., 1982), 157–79.

36. It is important to underline the fact that residence patterns in Providence, like those in other industrial cities of the period, cannot be attributed to class alone. Ethnicity, as Olivier Zunz has shown in his study of Detroit, plays at least as great a role in the organization of urban neighborhoods as does economic status. Immigrants or the children of immigrants were as

concerns more characteristic of middle-class families.<sup>37</sup> Interviews with men and women whose families bought houses in Providence in the early decades of the century indicate that such differences by class often existed. Nevertheless, as we shall see, these interviews also reveal that these broad class distinctions should not be overemphasized: both working-class and middle-class householders bought their houses for a variety of reasons, and their motives often cut across class lines.

For some working-class families, stability meant enabling the nuclear family to survive as a unit. As an extreme example, Rosetta McCoy, an Irish immigrant, was left with seven children to care for when her husband died. She sold the single-family house she had shared with her husband, and with the proceeds she built a two-family house near Wanskuck Mill in 1917-18, renting out the second floor for income. The three eldest children all worked at Lorraine Mills for a time; the four youngest went to school until they were fourteen, at which point they went to work at Wanskuck Mill. The tenant's rent and the children's wages enabled Mrs. McCoy to keep her family together.<sup>38</sup>

For many working-class families, stability meant being able to provide homes for extended family members. Smith has found that the "exigencies of migration and the dominant multiple-family architecture and crowded street plans of settlement areas facilitated family linkages" among first-generation immigrants to Providence.<sup>39</sup> Newcomers found temporary housing with family members already settled in the city. Immigrants who had been forced to leave parents or children behind in Europe combined households with relatives whose nuclear family networks were similarly incomplete.<sup>40</sup> Even intact immigrant families who were

well established in American society often purchased multifamily houses in order to live together. By sharing a common residence, they were able to maintain the ethnic traditions and life-style of their country of origin.

For a number of immigrant families, some historians have argued, the eagerness to purchase a home in America originated in values instilled in the old country. As John Bodnar, Roger Simon, and Michael P. Weber have observed of Polish and Italian immigrants to Pittsburgh in the early twentieth century, "Homeowning was not a value that would-be Americanizers and middle-class reformers needed to impose upon immigrant newcomers. It was a primary goal for families who decided to remain in America permanently. The Polish and Italian immigrants came from traditional agricultural areas where status derived from landowning."<sup>41</sup>

While some ethnic groups became homeowners by choice, others did so from necessity. Working-class Jewish families often had difficulty finding landlords willing to rent housing to them; therefore they purchased multifamily dwellings to house themselves and to rent to other Jews.<sup>42</sup> One suspects that other first-generation immigrants bought two- and three-family houses for similar reasons, especially in the earliest stages of a group's settlement in the city, when that group had not yet become heavily concentrated in any district or neighborhood.

For the working class, then, home ownership was generally an instrument for achieving or maintaining family stability, with two- and three-family houses serving both as income-producing property and as a means to permit family members to live together. For the middle class, on the other

likely to live near friends and relatives as they were to move into neighborhoods with others of the same socioeconomic level. See Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920* (Chicago, 1982). See also Judith Smith, *Family Connections: A History of Italian and Jewish Immigrant Lives in Providence, Rhode Island, 1900-1940* (Albany, N.Y., 1985).

37. Smith, *Family Connections*, 203.

38. Lillian McCoy St. John, interviewed by Joanne Landolfi, 23 Oct. 1988.

39. Smith, *Family Connections*, 104.

40. *Ibid.*, 98-102.

41. Bodnar, Simon, and Weber, *Lives of Their Own*, 153.

42. Mania Kleinburd Baghdadi, "'Community' and the Providence Jew in the Early Twentieth Century," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* 6 [November 1971], 70.

hand, home owning was more likely to be motivated by the desire for social mobility. John and Eva Solomon, second-generation immigrants from eastern Europe, bought a triple-decker on Prospect Hill on the East Side in 1919, two years after the house was built. Mr. Solomon owned a haberdashery in Randall Square. With the rent from two tenants supplementing the income from his business, the family was able to keep all three daughters in school through high school, send the youngest to college, employ a live-in maid, and pursue a cultured life-style that included regular symphony and theater attendance. Solomon lost his business during the Depression and was forced to take a job as a salesman at Kennedy's, a men's clothing store. Nevertheless, their rental income enabled the Solomons to continue to maintain a bourgeois life-style, to afford their "priorities of a close family, a home in a good neighborhood, lovely furnishings, good food, music, art, and fine clothing," even though they were forced to husband their resources more carefully.<sup>43</sup>

While the Depression compelled the Solomons to cut back on their expenditures, it facilitated Sam Labush's purchase of two triple-deckers on Jewett Street in Smith Hill. Both Labush and his wife were Russian immigrants. Although he had worked as a cigar maker when he first arrived in America, and his wife had worked as a seamstress, Sam Labush was clearly anxious to better himself, and he started a series of small businesses to accomplish that aim. At the time that he bought the houses on Jewett Street, he had established a beverage company, producing soda and seltzer water. Owning income-producing properties was part of his strategy for achieving upward mobility. As the youngest of his three daughters later observed, her father "purchased two homes as an investment, because that was the style in those days. You lived in the type of house that kind of paid for your rent, so you were

getting income and you were getting [housing] virtually rent-free."<sup>44</sup> Both of the Jewett Street dwellings bought by Labush had recently been completed, but they had remained unoccupied because few at that time could afford to buy new homes. The \$5,500 that Labush paid to acquire both houses was a considerable reduction from the prices prevailing throughout the twenties.<sup>45</sup>

With the assistance of the additional income, the Labushes were able to provide their children with greater educational opportunities than they themselves had enjoyed: one daughter attended Pembroke, one went to nursing school, and the third enrolled at Bryant College. Sam Labush could afford to buy his father's "more luxurious" triple-decker on Eaton Street in Elmhurst when the older man died in 1942—and to hire a decorator to remodel it. Soon after, the family had a summer house built at Narragansett Pier.

Although the ownership of multifamily houses frequently enabled middle-class families to afford more luxuries than working-class homeowners could hope to enjoy, the differences between middle-class and working-class motives for purchasing homes should not be overemphasized. Like middle-class families, some working-class families used their rental income to provide their children with further education. However, while middle-class families were able to send their children to college, most working-class families used their additional income to permit their children to finish high school. Anna and Andrew M. were Russian immigrants who settled in Providence in 1915. Andrew was an "all-around handyman, capable and willing. Rough carpentry, painting, plumbing, roofing—he could do it all." With money saved from these jobs and with help from relatives, the couple managed a down payment on a soon-to-be-abandoned schoolhouse in the old North End on Scott Street. Andrew converted the square clap-

43. Fredda Solomon Heyman, interviewed by Gail Solomon, 3 Nov. 1987.

44. Selma L. Goldman, interviewed by the author, 28 Nov. 1987.

45. Judging from classified advertisements in the *Providence Sunday Journal*, most three-deckers were sold at prices ranging

from about \$6,500 to \$10,500 in the late 1920s, although "very high grade" models could cost much more: according to an advertisement appearing on 18 Aug. 1929, a three-family house in Elmwood had cost about \$35,000 to build and was priced at \$27,000 for resale.

board building into four apartments of six rooms each. With three rents supplementing the family's income, Andrew and Anna were not only able to pay their bills; their three children went to local public schools and graduated from high school, quite an accomplishment at a time when most children of working-class families, like the McCoys, left school at fourteen.<sup>46</sup>

Like multifamily-home owners of the working class, those of the middle class were able to provide relatives with a place to live. When a daughter or son married, the new couple often lived for a time in an apartment in the family house before buying a home of their own. When an elderly man or woman died, the surviving spouse often moved to a separate apartment in a son's or daughter's house, or a son or daughter and his or her family would move into a vacant tenement in the older person's house. "In those days," as Benjamin Rakatansky's son recalled, "families all lived together"—working-class and middle-class alike.

When we shift our attention from owners to tenants, we find, as we have seen, that those who rented apartments in multifamily houses frequently were relatives of those who owned the dwellings. Judith Smith found that over two-thirds of a sample of Italian property owners in Providence and approximately half of the Jewish property owners sampled had relatives at the same address in both 1915 and 1935.<sup>47</sup> For relatives and nonrelatives alike, as Bodnar, Simon, and Weber demonstrate in their study of Pittsburgh, home ownership and, conversely, tenancy were commonly a function of one's stage in the life cycle. Young couples rented accommodations until they had saved enough money to buy a house of their own. Once their children had grown, married, and left to form their own households, the couple often sold their house and moved to an apartment in a dwelling owned by one of their offspring, whose family cared for them in their declining years. When an elderly wife or husband

died, the survivor might give up his or her separate apartment to board with a son's or daughter's family.<sup>48</sup>

This pattern was characteristic of Providence families in the early twentieth century. In case after case, a young couple set up housekeeping in a rented apartment only to move to a home of their own as soon as they could afford to do so. Benjamin Rakatansky and his family lived above his parents' flat until his contracting business began to prosper in the late 1920s, at which time he built a "palatial" single-family house on Shaw Avenue in Cranston and moved his family out of South Providence in a big green Packard. Mrs. Keegan, Charles Mackey's daughter, remained in the Mackey family home for nearly a quarter century after her marriage, but eventually she and her husband bought a one-family home outside the Elmwood neighborhood in 1951. The Keegans' move, a part of the nationwide postwar migration to the suburbs, was prompted by the first signs of a change in Elmwood's character from prosperous streetcar suburb to physically deteriorating inner-city district. As their son described their motivation, "They decided that the neighborhood was going downhill, and they also wanted a single-family house."

Many Providence homeowners rented apartments to their parents or boarded them in their own flats, for just as young couples often lived in their parents' homes early in their marital life, so their parents might move in with them later on. Soon after Eric Johnson and his wife bought their two-family house on Pekin Street, they invited Mrs. Johnson's parents to occupy the floor above them.<sup>49</sup> Sam Labush's daughter recalled that although her own grandparents did not live with her family, several of her friends had "single grandparents, and they would sleep in the kitchen."

Tenancy was not always a function of one's life-cycle stage, for some families were never able to

46. Mrs. Anna M., interviewed by Joseph D. Reilly, fall 1987. The Scott Street building—as well as the street itself—was demolished in the 1960s in the course of the city's urban redevelopment program.

47. Smith, *Family Connections*, 101. As her sample is extremely small, these figures can only be suggestive.

48. Bodnar, Simon, and Weber, *Lives of Their Own*, 156-57.

49. Eric Johnson, interviewed by the author, 6 Nov. 1987.



An open-air market on Federal Hill, 1925. Deep community ties often developed among the residents of Providence's densely populated neighborhoods. Courtesy of the Providence Journal-Bulletin.

afford to buy a house and thus remained renters permanently. Many of those with meager resources were first-generation immigrant workers. Eric Johnson's father, for example, was a Swedish immigrant who arrived in Providence as a young man around 1910. He found work at Brown and Sharpe and later started an ice business in the late 1920s. As Eric Johnson later recalled, "My parents rented. They didn't have nothing. Even when we had the ice business, there was a lot of people who owed them money that never paid. When the Depression came, only city and railroad workers had money. My parents never bought a house. They couldn't afford it."<sup>50</sup>

For homeowner or tenant, for middle-class or working-class family, what was it like to live in a multifamily house in a neighborhood of multi-

family houses? What daily experiences did occupants of multifamily homes have in common, experiences that those who lived in single-family houses in neighborhoods of single-family houses did not share?

For one thing, an apartment in a two- or three-family house in the early twentieth century did not isolate its occupants from those outside the apartment's walls. Multifamily-house dwellers were linked with a wider society by the very fact that others lived above or below them. Unlike those who lived in single-family dwellings, whose lawns separated them from their nearest neighbors, members of households in multifamily homes found their neighbors in the same house with them. Given the fact that these in-house neighbors were often relatives, the close proximity of other households probably seemed more or less natural to most

50. Fortunately, rent payments took a relatively small bite out of the weekly wage packet. In 1904 the U.S. Bureau of Labor estimated that 18.12 percent of the average American family's budget was spent on rent. By far the greatest expense for families at the time was food, the purchase of which consumed 43.13 percent of the average family's income. *Bulletin of the U.S. Bureau of Labor*, no. 54 (September 1904), 1149. An investiga-

tion by the U.S. Department of Labor and the National War Labor Board in 1918-19 showed that Providence families spent an average of 42 percent of their income on food and only 12 percent on rent, with actual rents ranging from \$11 a month for families earning under \$900 a year to \$17 a month for families earning at least \$2,500 a year. "Cost of Living in the United States," *Bulletin of the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics* (May

families who lived that way.

Sometimes such living patterns could produce undesirable results: at worst, the nearness of parents or siblings exacerbated tensions, and families who might have been able to maintain a pretense of amiability had they lived apart found that propinquity bred hostility and resentment. More often, however, the arrangement provided practical and emotional support for all involved, especially women, who were able to share household chores, cooking, and child care. As most women did not work once they had married, multiple-family housing often enabled them to have someone to keep them company during the day while the men were away. Hazel McIntosh recalled that she and her mother, who lived above her, talked with one another every day, even though "some days I never saw my mother. I'd sit at the bottom [of the back stairs]; she'd sit at the top. We'd talk back and forth. I found that even after she died I was going out in the hall for a while. And I said, 'What am I doing?'"

In most cases, one assumes, the adjustment to sharing the house with nonrelatives was nearly as easy. The tenant (or, conversely, the landlord) was likely to be someone known personally to the family: a relative, a neighbor, or a friend at work, as many vacancies were filled by word of mouth. Since the family's circle of acquaintances was primarily limited to those of the same ethnic and religious background, new occupants generally had the same life-style and values as the other inhabitants of the house. Whenever new tenants could not be found through personal inquiry, the landlord put a sign in the window, announcing a vacancy to passersby. "You didn't have to screen tenants," one landlady recalled; "they were very honest in those days." Yet she remembered one family that moved out without paying the rent.<sup>51</sup> Perhaps a greater problem was the relatively rapid turnover in tenants. One study

of geographical mobility in Providence in the first two decades of the century found that according to city directories, only 11.7 percent of ninety-four heads of households born in Rhode Island of native-born parents and only 3.1 percent of ninety-eight immigrant Jewish heads of households were still at the same addresses in 1920 as they were in 1900.<sup>52</sup>

By definition, the multifamily house offered less privacy than the single-family home. The occupants of two- and three-family dwellings were linked in a network of interactions that did not impinge upon those families who lived alone. Those who lived in multifamily houses shared a common yard, sometimes consisting only of "bare earth, packed hard by many feet, the only play space of scores of children whose homes are in surrounding tenements," and sometimes planted with grape vines, small vegetable gardens, or grass and flowers by one or more of the residents.<sup>53</sup>

Inhabitants of multifamily houses, one assumes, were more aware of those living around them than were occupants of single-family houses, as the density of people living in a neighborhood of multifamily structures tended to be higher than the density in a neighborhood of single-family detached housing. Through their kitchen and bedroom windows they could watch (and, in warm weather, hear) their next-door neighbors, whose own windows were often no more than twenty feet away.<sup>54</sup> From their parlor windows and their front porches they could observe activity on the street, as well as the comings and goings of those living across from them. In the Tortolani household, after the noon meal on Saturdays the men "would remain in the kitchen area and talk or play cards while the women would position themselves in chairs that had been carefully set up in the master bedroom. These chairs were strategically placed in front of the windows so that the women could take in and observe afternoon weddings at the Holy Ghost

1924), 53. These figures may reflect the short-lived prosperity directly following the First World War. By the 1920s, one Smith Hill resident recalled, people in her neighborhood usually spent one-quarter of their income on rent, which averaged \$20 to \$35 a month. Hazel McIntosh, interviewed by the author, 5 Nov. 1987.

51. McIntosh interview.

52. Alice Goldstein, "Mobility of Natives and Jews in

Providence, 1900-1920," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* 8 (November 1979), 84.

53. Ihlder, *Houses of Providence*, 27-29.

54. Contractors sometimes built as many as nine triple-deckers per acre. Chester E. Smolski, *Providence Journal*, 20 Mar. 1977.



*Some multifamily housing had commercial establishments on the first floor. This is a view along Plainfield Street in 1913. RIHS Collection (RHi M397 11).*

Church across the street. This was known as the Saturday afternoon 'Wedding Watch.'<sup>55</sup> In the summer the front steps of a house provided an even better vantage point. The view from an upper-story porch enabled family members to observe and comment upon the people below; sitting on the front stoop, on the other hand, brought them into direct contact with their neighbors, who often stopped to talk as they walked past.

Most of those interviewed for this study recalled neighborhood relationships as warm and supportive, with their neighbors ready to help in times of need. These neighborhood ties could be quite strong, for neighbors often had much in common. Frequently they were members of the same ethnic group; although no district in the city was ever occupied solely by people of one nationality, there were areas with heavy concentrations of Irish,

French Canadian, Swedish, Italian, Russian, and Portuguese residents. Community bonds were also strengthened by religion, as well as by work. In many neighborhoods the majority of the residents were employed at the same factory—at Brown and Sharpe in Smith Hill, for example, or at Wanskuck Mill in North Providence's Wanskuck Village. Ardis Cameron has shown in her study of the 1912 strike of immigrant textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts, that persons living in an ethnically heterogeneous and densely populated neighborhood, sharing "collective living arrangements" and working in the same factories, were able to build "informal community networks" that contributed to "the formation of working-class consciousness, worker militancy, and communal cohesion."<sup>56</sup> It seems likely that similar networks, serving similar purposes, existed in multifamily working-class

55. Allan Tortolani, interviewed by Nancy K. Saccoia, 27 Oct. 1988.

56. Ardis Cameron, "Bread and Roses Revisited: Women's

Culture and Working-Class Activism in the Lawrence Strike of 1912," in *Women, Work, and Protest: A Century of U.S. Women's Labor History*, ed. Ruth Milkman (Boston, 1985), 55.



*After the Second World War, mass production and federally backed mortgages opened the way for increased construction of single-family homes. New suburban developments sprang up throughout Rhode Island, shifting the major housing markets away from the urban centers. Photo by H. Raymond Ball, RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6239).*

neighborhoods in other cities of the northeast, including Providence.

Life in Providence's multifamily dwellings did not always run smoothly. Relatives forced to share crowded quarters often quarreled with one another. Some tenants and landlords viewed each other with suspicion and hostility. Neighbors sometimes shunned those whose ethnicity or religion was different from their own. Yet, on balance, two- and three-family houses satisfied their occupants' needs. By letting part of a dwelling to tenants, multifamily-home owners acquired additional income. By renting apartments within the same house, extended-family members were able to live together in such a way that they could offer mutual assistance and companionship and yet retreat at times to the relative privacy of separate flats. Providence residents seem to have accepted the multifamily house without question as the "normal" method of housing. Married couples setting up housekeeping on their own in the 1920s and 1930s moved into two- or three-family houses just as their parents had done a generation earlier.

By the time their children struck out on their

own in the 1940s and 1950s, however, multifamily living was no longer the prevailing pattern. By the early 1930s two- and three-decker house construction came to a halt, never to be resumed. Its cessation was due, in the short term, to the Depression and to a continuing prejudice against such structures among city officials: in 1923 the city passed its first building code, which acted upon John Ihlder's criticisms of triple-dwellers by restricting their construction. In the longer term, the shift in mode of transportation from foot and streetcar to private automobile gradually decentralized industries and residential neighborhoods throughout the urban landscape. As land values became more nearly uniform, the economic advantages of building two- and three-family houses on small lots decreased. People who had grown up in two- and three-decker neighborhoods in Smith Hill, Olneyville, Elmwood, South Providence, or Federal Hill moved to single-family houses in newly developed residential tracts outside the city limits, in the surrounding towns of Cranston, Warwick, Johnston, and Smithfield. This exodus to the suburbs marked the decline of a regional housing pattern that had spanned nearly three-quarters of a century.



# Commercial Progress versus Local Rights: Turnpike Building in Northwestern Rhode Island in the 1790s

Daniel P. Jones

As an important first stage in the transportation revolution of the early nineteenth century, the turnpike era of the 1790s and early 1800s laid the foundations for the nation's original secondary-road system and facilitated the creation of regional market economies. It remains largely forgotten, however, that many Americans initially opposed these efforts to improve local transport. Unlike modern turnpikes, which offer travelers completely new roads built and maintained by governmental agencies, the turnpikes of the early republic often merely straightened and improved existing roads under the ownership of private corporations. The establishment of these turnpikes frequently resulted in clashes between their owners, who maintained commercial interests that would profit from improved transportation, and local residents, who cared relatively little about road quality and who long remained resentful of the turnpikers' privately held privileges.

Perhaps nowhere did this collision between turnpike promoters and opponents occur more dramatically than in northwestern Rhode Island. While the proponents of turnpikes eventually prevailed—by 1815 the area was crisscrossed by seven such roads<sup>1</sup>—in the 1790s the turnpike movement was held at bay by a spirited opposition, an opposition that entirely prevented the establishment of several proposed pikes and continually hampered and harassed the operation of the few that gained incorporation from the state General Assembly. The turnpike revolution did not arise as a unani-

mous movement in favor of transportation improvement, but was rather an outgrowth of an extended conflict between the friends of commercial progress and those who favored the preservation of traditional customs and local rights.

Many of the earliest Rhode Island turnpikes were established to meet the needs of the commercial leaders of Providence. Like most enterprising urban merchants of the early American republic, these men sought to take advantage of the economic resources of their city's surrounding hinterland. Providence merchants had already tried to exploit this rural marketplace in the colonial period, but owing to the essentially subsistence nature of the region's economy, they had had limited success. After the Revolution and the economic crisis of the 1780s, renewed prosperity led the city's elite to redouble its efforts at capturing the countryside's economic, if not its political, allegiance. British occupation during the war had devastated the city of Newport, and Providence's merchants quickly took advantage of its rival's demise to become the state's leading port, and, indeed, the second largest in New England. They reacted to the end of imperial mercantilist restrictions by charting new trade routes to Europe, Latin America, and the Far East. Total tonnage at Providence doubled between 1790 and 1820, as did the city's population.

Although the carrying trade made up much of this commerce, Providence's merchants also looked to the surrounding countryside as a market for imported goods, as well as a source of food and lum-

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1. These were the Providence and Norwich Turnpike (now Route 14), the Rhode Island and Connecticut Turnpike (Route

101), the West Gloucester and Gloucester turnpikes (Route 44), the Foster and Scituate Turnpike (Route 6), the Foster and Scituate Central Turnpike (Central Pike), and the Providence and Douglas Turnpike (Douglas Pike).

ber for the urban populace. The population of the rural hinterland continued to grow after the Revolution: in northwestern Rhode Island alone it jumped by over a third between 1782 and 1800, reaching a total of about 11,400, and growth was even more rapid in the adjacent communities of eastern Connecticut and central Massachusetts.<sup>2</sup> To help tap this growing market, the merchants of Providence, like their counterparts elsewhere in the country, began rebuilding major roads through the means of turnpike companies. Beginning in the 1790s, the merchants played a leading role in constructing a series of turnpike roads radiating north and west from the city and extending through the Rhode Island countryside towards adjacent Connecticut and Massachusetts. Partly as a result of these enterprising schemes, the Browns and their fellow merchants, as Timothy Dwight admiringly observed in 1810, had "engrossed, to a considerable extent, the custom, and produce, of the neighboring regions of Massachusetts and Connecticut."<sup>3</sup>

The merchants of Providence resorted to turnpike improvements largely because the existing system for building highways was inadequate for the needs of a modern commercial economy. The statutory provisions for road repair then in effect reflected the localistic orientation long prevalent in America. Typical of provisions for road maintenance throughout America in the eighteenth century, state regulations divided each town into upwards of twenty districts for the purpose of repairing all public highways. An overseer of the highways, elected annually by the town meeting, was responsible for the proper condition of the roads in his district. Once or twice each year he was authorized to call forth the labor of all the men necessary for repairing the district's highways, with each man required to work a full day or two every year.

In theory, since a fair proportion of the labor force was thereby reserved for road repair, the highways should have been kept in good condition, but in practice it was exceedingly difficult to enforce the provisions of the law. Like most local officials, highway overseers served without remuneration and therefore had little incentive, beyond their own economic interests and sense of social standing, to fulfill the dictates of the law. Fines were instituted for nonperformance of duties, but as everywhere in local government, their collection depended on the energies and concerns of private individuals; there were no attorneys general or other local officials responsible for suing negligent officers of the highways. In 1794 the General Assembly created a potentially more flexible system by passing an act that gave towns the option of supporting road repairs through taxation.<sup>4</sup> Since inhabitants could "pay" their taxes with their labor instead of in cash, however, this reform probably had little impact on the area's highways: the vast majority of the northwest's cash-poor residents no doubt continued to work on roads in the traditional manner. Besides, the imposition of taxes did nothing to solve the more general problem of enforcement.

Even if roads were repaired, they did not necessarily fulfill the needs of long-distance commercial travel. Since road repair was organized on the level of very small individual districts, its progress was dictated by the needs of the local citizenry, not by the cosmopolitan concerns of seaport merchants. In northwestern Rhode Island, roads that led to the local mill or meetinghouse might take precedence over those that headed straight to nearby marketplaces. In any case, subdivision of road authority meant that the repair of major highways was highly uncoordinated and uneven. The result was a patchwork system of highways, with countless bends and

2. Peter J. Coleman, *The Transformation of Rhode Island, 1790-1860* (Providence, 1969), 9-11, 21, 38-70, 225.

3. Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York* (New Haven, 1821), 2: 35-36.

4. *The Public Laws of the State of Rhode Island . . . 1798* (Providence, 1798), 384-90. Both Foster and Glocester, the towns for which records still exist for this period, adopted the 1794

option of assessing highway taxes on their inhabitants. For highway laws of other colonies or states, see Philip E. Taylor, "The Turnpike Era in New England" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1934), 34-39, and Bernard Bush, comp., *Laws of the Royal Colony of New Jersey, 1760-1769*, New Jersey Archives, 3rd ser. (Trenton, 1982), 4: 36-49.



*A bustling scene along an English country road, reproduced from an eighteenth-century engraving by Bowles & Carver, London. The English system of chartered turnpike companies provided a model that American merchants were quick to adopt. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6243).*

twists to suit local needs without regard for the concerns of regional commerce.<sup>5</sup>

To remedy this unsatisfactory situation, Rhode Island merchants, like those elsewhere in the country, adopted the English innovation of the chartered turnpike company. As in the case of other early American corporations, such as banks and insurance companies, turnpike companies were created by petitioning the state legislature for permission to form a joint stock corporation. The typical turnpike charter—they varied little from case to case—allowed investors to pool their resources through the purchase of stock certificates, and then to expend this capital in repairing and straightening an existing road. The company was

given both the right of eminent domain for purchasing extra parcels of land where necessary and, of course, the right to charge a toll at gates erected approximately ten miles apart. The charter specifically enumerated the company's toll rates and also exempted local travelers on their way to church, a neighbor's field, or the nearby mill. Finally, the turnpike was required to revert to a public road as soon as the stockholders earned a 12 percent return on their investment. Though the rights and powers of turnpike companies were thus narrowly restricted in some ways, merchants all along the Atlantic seaboard quickly seized on what appeared to be a sure method for engrossing the trade of their respective hinterlands.<sup>6</sup> In New England, 33 char-

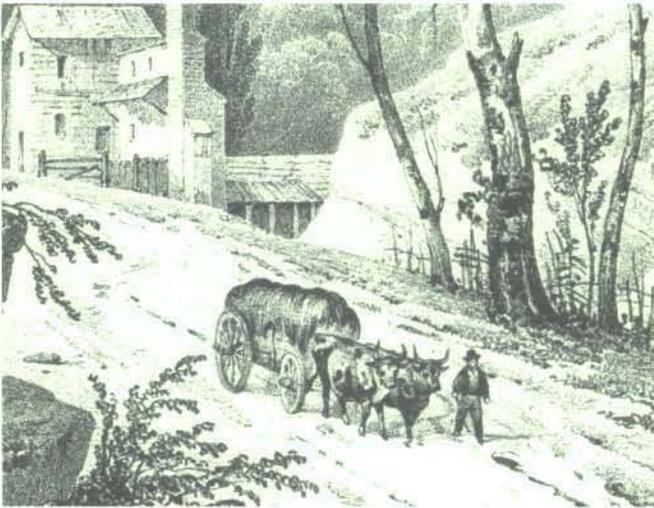
5. Taylor, "Turnpike Era," 71–75.

6. In financial terms the turnpikes were mostly failures; very

few of them earned the maximum 12 percent return on investment.

ters were issued in the 1790s, with over 130 to follow in the next ten years.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately for the merchants, the farmers through whose lands the new turnpikes ran did not share their entrepreneurial enthusiasm. Since they were only marginally connected to a market economy, most New England farmers had little need for the improvements necessary to serve the long-distance transportation needs of coastal merchants. One of the farmers' principal exports was cattle, and these could be easily transported in herds over the poorest of roads. The fall harvest season, moreover, was soon followed by winter snows, which allowed for much easier transport by means of sleds.<sup>8</sup> Cattle and sleds, as well as the farmers' typical two-wheeled cart, were all charged tolls by the turnpike companies. Though the farmers' trips were short, they were also more frequent than those of merchants, whose large and heavy wagons were the vehicles that most required improved highways.<sup>9</sup> The farmers were thus effectively subsidiz-



*Detail of an 1828 engraving (reprinted by Gregg Press, Ridgewood, N.J., 1968). RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6242).*

ing the creation of roads for which they had little use. At the very least, turnpikes were an irksome nuisance for a rural population that had little cash to spare for passage through tollgates.

More fundamentally, however, farmers resented the turnpikes as an invasion of their traditional rights and liberties. In a culture that associated rights with long-held customs, the intrusion of tollgates onto formerly public highways was seen as a tyrannical affront to common liberties. The farmers also disliked the assumption by the turnpike companies of the right of eminent domain, a right that had formerly resided with local town governments. Earlier in the century the Greene and Brown family iron manufacturers had obtained needed exemptions from local fishway regulators by appealing over their heads to the General Assembly. Now the merchants were following a similar route in gaining control over the upkeep of local highways. The farmers were all the more annoyed because turnpike charters replaced local authorities with private, profit-making corporations and thus violated the farmers' own traditions of neighborhood interchange and cooperation.

Finally, rural suspicions of mercantile designs were heightened in the 1790s by the impact of republican ideals and the social upheavals of the Revolutionary era. The agrarian response to turnpikes took place against the backdrop a decade earlier of Shays's Rebellion in Massachusetts and Rhode Island's own Country party turmoil. Indeed, the success of the Country party, which enacted a series of debt-relief measures in response to backwoods demands, suggests that Rhode Island's farmers were more audacious and powerful than their neighbors elsewhere in New England. Although federalist victories in 1790 resulted in the withdrawal of the backwoods yeomanry from statewide politics, the peculiarly Rhode Island-like disdain for deferential politics that the farmers had already demonstrated did not bode well for the

7. Taylor, "Turnpike Era," 135-50, 208.

8. Probate inventories from the 1780s reveal that 12 percent of sampled farmers owned sleds, a remarkable figure when one considers that only 38 percent owned vehicles of any kind

whatsoever.

9. Records of the Scituate Turnpike Company show that in 1798, small wagons and carts outnumbered large vehicles by a ratio of 6 to 1. See Taylor, "Turnpike Era," 115-18.

merchants' assault on traditional highway regulation. While turnpikes aroused rural hostility throughout New England, they met with special bitterness in Rhode Island. In seeking to defend local authority and customary rights against the advance of turnpike monopolies, northwestern Rhode Island farmers would use a variety of legal, quasi-legal, and sometimes violently illegal tactics.

This is not to say, of course, that rural Rhode Islanders were completely unanimous in their defense of local customs at the expense of transportation improvements. Indeed, the first turnpike company in Rhode Island was formed by a group of men who lived along the Providence-Killingly road on both sides of the Connecticut state line. In February 1794 the legislature chartered the Gloucester Turnpike Society, which was allowed to improve that portion of the road that extended westward from the village of Chepachet to the state line.<sup>10</sup> The experience of this company, however, suggests that its incorporators did not receive much support from the neighboring farmers. While Gloucester yeomanry did not succeed in completely thwarting the aims of the turnpike company, they certainly did their best to make turnpiking an onerous and unprofitable form of investment.

There is little doubt that the road was in deplorable condition. Two years earlier some of the town's leading men, including Solomon and Thomas Owen, unsuccessfully petitioned the legislature for a lottery to raise money for highway repairs. They observed that "the great Country Road . . . is extremely rough and bad, for about six or Seven Miles to the Eastward of [the] Connecticut Line."<sup>11</sup> But support for a lottery, which was a completely voluntary enterprise, did not translate into support for the coercive measures of a turnpike charter. It is not known whether the townspeople publicly opposed the incorporation of the Gloucester Turnpike Company, but since its charter restricted the placement of tollgates to within four miles of the state line—a very sparsely populated area—its



*Detail of an 1828 engraving (reprinted by Gregg Press, Ridgewood, N.J., 1968). RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6241).*

inconvenience was probably not serious enough to warrant opposition by the Gloucester town meeting.

Instead, the townspeople chose to express their hostility towards the turnpike builders by adopting a policy of noncooperation and financial harassment. On 28 August 1798 the town meeting voted that "All persons living on the Turnpike Road in this town where Proprietors of said Turnpike are obligated to keep said Road in Repair [should] . . . work out the Whole of their taxes on other roads." The corporation was thus deprived of the benefits of traditional highway regulations. The town meeting was making it clear that the turnpike directors, having circumvented the town's authority, were not to receive the town's assistance in the form of free road repairs.

The town also resorted to the quasi-legal practice of double taxation. In a petition to the legislature in 1798, the company directors complained that in the preceding four years the town had taxed their property over \$57 a year, "out of all proportion" to its actual value. Claiming that their physical property—that is, the tollgate and toll keeper's house—was worth only \$250, the directors concluded that the town was assessing the

10. *Acts and Resolutions of the Rhode Island General Assembly, October 1794*, 8. Of the six charter members, three lived in Gloucester and three lived in Connecticut (see U.S.

census of 1800).

11. *Acts and Resolutions, February 1792*, 14.

company's capital stock as well, and thus their stock was being taxed twice: once in the form of the personal property of individual shareholders, once as the joint property of the corporation. The directors asked the legislature for exemption from taxes on both their physical property and their capital stock. They further requested the right "to sell liquor free from any license money to be paid to the Town Council of said Town of Gloucester."<sup>12</sup> The town responded with a spirited reply that instructed its representatives "to oppose Every Paragraph of said Petition."<sup>13</sup> Two years later the Assembly finally settled this disagreement, rejecting the town's claimed right to impose double taxation on turnpike stock—given the political influences wielded by coastal merchants, who wished to protect their own interests in bank and turnpike stock, it was inconceivable that the legislature would decide to the contrary—but denying the company's request for exemption from local property taxes and liquor license fees.<sup>14</sup> A compromise appears to have been struck, thus ending the bitter dispute.

The town successfully resisted efforts to turnpike the remainder of the Providence-Killingly road. In 1799 twenty-four inhabitants of the towns of Gloucester, Scituate, and Johnston petitioned the Assembly for a turnpike charter to cover that part of the road "lying between Tripptown bridge [near Providence] and Cepatchet [*sic*] Bridge." The petitioners included some of the wealthiest inhabitants of each town, including the ironmasters Daniel and Thomas Owen, and Daniel Manton, the wealthiest person listed in the Johnston town tax roll of 1782.<sup>15</sup> But in spite of the social prominence of the turnpike advocates, the Gloucester town meeting once again rejected the needs of modern commerce in favor of securing the town from a threat to its local authority. Instead of contenting themselves with merely harassing the turnpikers, the townspeople now voted on 16 April 1799 to oppose altogether their request for a new and expanded

charter. On this occasion the Assembly acceded completely to the town's request, dismissing the petition for turnpike privileges in June of the following year.

The yeomanry were not as successful in thwarting the turnpikers' aims in the case of the Providence and Norwich Turnpike Society, though they struggled tenaciously to impede that company's efforts along every step of the way. The Assembly chartered the turnpike company in October 1794 after receiving petitions from inhabitants of Rhode Island and eastern Connecticut. The fifteen Rhode Island petitioners consisted chiefly of the Providence merchant elite, including John Innes Clark and Nicholas and John Brown, the town's three

RATES OF TOLL	
For a Waggon Cart or ox Sled? Cis not exceeding 4 Cattle	10
A Team of more than 4 Cattle	15
A Sley with more than 1 Horse	12
A Sley with 1 Horse	6
A Coach Chariot or Phaeton	40
A Chaise Chair or Sulkey	20
A Horse and Waggon	6
A Person and Horse	5
Horses and Mules in droves per head	2
Neat Cattle in droves per head	1
Swine in droves for every fifteen	10
For any timber less than fifteen each	1
Sheep and Swine shoats	5

This sign announced tolls on the Putnam Pike.  
RIHS Collection (RHi X3 2512).

12. Petitions to the General Assembly, vol. 32, no. 80.

13. Gloucester Town Meeting Records, 3 June 1799.

14. *Acts and Resolutions*, October 1798, 3; *Acts and*

*Resolutions*, February 1800, 11.

15. Petitions, vol. 33, pt. 2, no. 17; Johnston town tax information in Jay Mack Holbrook, *Rhode Island 1782 Census*

wealthiest men. The charter granted the company the right to turnpike the existing post road to Norwich, a road that ran from Providence along the path of the present Route 14, passing southwest through Cranston, Johnston, Scituate, Foster, and the northwest corner of Coventry before entering Connecticut to link up with a turnpike sponsored by that state's mercantile community. The charter allowed the company to raise \$6,000 in capital stock and receive a return on investment by establishing a tollgate within nine miles of the Connecticut border, a location somewhere in the town of Scituate.

Included among the original petitioners were John Waterman of Johnston and William Battey of Scituate, two of the wealthier members of their respective towns; but Waterman's and Battey's support for the new turnpike was obviously not shared by the great majority of their neighbors. In the spring of 1795 the town meetings of Coventry, Scituate, and Foster instructed their deputies to seek the complete repeal of the company's charter. By then, however, it was too late to revoke the turnpikers' privileges; and in any case the political influence of the Providence elite undoubtedly exceeded that of the backcountry farmers. The Assembly dismissed the towns' request without further comment.<sup>16</sup>

Having failed to stop the turnpike in the legislature, the towns along its path resorted to the same tactics of noncooperation and harassment used earlier by the town of Gloucester. On 12 June 1797 the Foster town meeting voted to "apportion the two Districts that have heretofore bin on the Post road among the other districts in Said town." Jealousy over the loss of their traditional authority led towns and local highway supervisors to actually obstruct the work of the turnpike company. In 1799 the company wrote to the Coventry Town Council, accusing Philip Bowen, an overseer of the highways,

of having damaged their road. Instead of chastising the obstreperous overseer, the council voted on 1 July to "protect the said Philip Bowen in the Lawfull Discharge of his Duty as an officer of the Town of Coventry."

Residents of the towns did their best to evade payment of turnpike tolls, occasionally even resorting to violence and intimidation. Charles Angell, the turnpike's toll keeper, was in a decidedly unenviable position; he needed to follow company orders, but at the same time he had to try to mollify the enraged local citizenry. In July 1801 Angell admitted to the company that "I have not charged any toles to any persons that I should be afraid to trust with my Property for them sums."<sup>17</sup> Apparently Angell was afraid that charging tolls might result in the destruction of his tollgate and house by disgruntled local travelers. Eventually, out of a desire "to conciliate the minds of the Neighbors," the company adopted a lenient policy towards toll collection: the company directors would occasionally order that the tollgate be opened during the spring, when weather conditions made roads everywhere nearly impassable, and the company also allowed the toll keeper to let "the people of the Neighborhood . . . pass, when it was not convenient [for them] to pay on credit." Unfortunately for the company, the local yeomanry, who were ever eager to turn a temporary policy into a customary right, only reacted all the more vehemently when the gates were once again closed. This misunderstanding, as the company reported in 1807, "has lately brot on some altercations at the gates."<sup>18</sup> Collecting turnpike tolls from Rhode Island farmers was certainly a hazardous occupation.

In the midst of all this contention, the company was able to make very little progress in actually improving the road. Partly because of local outlawry, the company's toll receipts always fell far

(Oxford, Mass., 1979).

16. Petitions, vol. 28, no 128; *Acts and Resolutions*, October 1794, 13; *Acts and Resolutions*, January 1795, 3, 10; Foster Town Meeting Minutes, 15 Apr. 1795. For the relative wealth of John Waterman and William Battey, see Johnston town tax data in Holbrook, *Rhode Island 1782 Census*, and Scituate tax list of

1783, RIHS.

17. Charles Angell to Jabez Bowen, 28 July 1801, in Providence and Norwich Turnpike Society MSS, John Hay Library, Brown University, Providence.

18. Turnpike Society to John Harris, 15 Apr. 1802, Providence and Norwich Turnpike Society MSS.

short of its expenditures for improvements. More importantly, constructing a superior road simply took much more money than the corporation had ever anticipated. By 1797 the turnpike company had already spent at least \$7,500 on construction costs, well over the original \$6,000 raised by the sale of stock.<sup>19</sup> In order to salvage their investment, the turnpikers introduced into the legislature a variety of cost-saving and revenue-enhancing schemes, almost all of which were successfully opposed by northwestern Rhode Island farmers. On several occasions the turnpike society attempted to amend its charter provisions in order to increase tollgate receipts. In 1795 it successfully petitioned the legislature for the right to move its tollgate from nine to eleven miles from the Connecticut border, thus increasing the number of residents who would have to pay a toll on the way to the Providence market. But when the company returned four years later, asking that its gate be moved three miles closer to Providence, the rural towns mounted a successful opposition. In their counterpetition to the Assembly, signed by 218 residents of Foster and Scituate, the farmers complained of being "very much Burdened . . . By reason of having our Post road stopped up By a turnpike Gate." Should the toll be moved still closer to Providence, they feared that "instead of public highways open and free for the accomodation of the good Citizens of this State . . . [the highways] may and will be connected to the purpose of private gain and emolument." The Assembly agreed with the counterpetition and dismissed the company's request in June 1799.<sup>20</sup>

In 1801 the company again asked for financial relief, on this occasion by simply requesting whatever the legislature "sees fit." A committee was appointed to investigate the turnpike, and its report, issued in 1803, was severely critical of the company. Noting that the turnpike road is "in a bad

state and wanting great repairs," the committee concluded that "the said Company have no prospect of ever realizing any profit on the capital by them expended." According to the report, which the Assembly fully accepted, "any further privileges extended to said company . . . would be an injury to [the nearby] inhabitants."<sup>21</sup> In spite of the considerable political influence of its stockholders, the company was thus unable to significantly amend the financial provisions of its original charter.

In addition to its attempts to increase its revenues, the turnpike company turned to statutory amendments aimed at reducing its costs. As a solution to its financial difficulties, the company sought, ironically, a return to the traditional method for repairing highways: using the labor of local inhabitants. In 1797 Colonel John Waterman, a charter member of the turnpike society and one of its rural agents, circulated a petition among farmers who lived along the Providence-to-Norwich road. The petition requested that the Assembly pass an act requiring the rural towns to expend highway taxes and labor on the road, just as they had before the road was turnpiked. As an inducement to sign the petition, Colonel Waterman promised that all who "did their duty on the turnpike Road as they formerly did should be Exempt from paying pikedge."<sup>22</sup> As presented to the legislature, the petition contained signatures only from residents of Johnston and Cranston; originally the document had also included the more western towns of Scituate, Foster, and Coventry, but the names of those towns were later crossed out, a change suggesting that Waterman had failed to gather support from their citizens. At any rate, the Assembly passed the requested act three years later, over the protests of the Johnston town meeting.<sup>23</sup>

The company's strategy had cleverly succeeded in weakening the rural opposition by dividing it

19. Accounts of company with James Gordon for repairing road, 1795-1797, Brown Papers, box P-T9PN, John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence.

20. *Acts and Resolutions, January 1795*, 10.

21. Petitions, vol. 32, pt. 2, no. 58; *Legislative Charters*, vol. 2, no. 31, Rhode Island State Archives, Providence.

22. Petitions, vol. 32, no. 45; vol. 33, no. 49.

23. *Acts and Resolutions, February 1800*, 11. According to company records, in April 1799 representatives of the town of Scituate approached the society's directors, offering to contribute a portion of the town's highway taxes or labor in return for free turnpike passage by all its citizens. No record exists of any further history to this initiative. See Documents, 1 Apr. 1799, Providence and Norwich Turnpike Society MSS.

between the turnpike's immediate neighbors on the one hand and the remainder of the local population on the other. However, the company then overplayed its hand, as it proceeded to interpret the new law in a way that the turnpike's rural neighbors could not have anticipated. The statute called for

the Town-Council and Surveyors of the towns of Johnston and Cranston . . . to cause a just proportion of highway taxes and highway labour to be expended and done in and upon the said turnpike road, by the inhabitants living upon or near the same who usually paid taxes or laboured upon the said road before the charter of incorporation was granted to the turnpike company.

If interpreted at all literally, the statute's language essentially directed a return to local provision for and control of repairs along the turnpike highway. The company interpreted the act rather differently. Instead of trusting the "Town-Council and Surveyors" to supervise repair work, as the act directed, the turnpike society employed Colonel Waterman as its local foreman, and Waterman proceeded to order local residents to work for him alone. Even more sinisterly, the company may have reneged on its promise of pikage exemption for those who lived near the road (as it was passed, the legislative act made absolutely no mention of granting free access to the turnpike). Although in the short run the company would gain some free repair work from its interpretation of the statute's provisions, in the long run an angry rural reaction to the turnpikers' duplicity would lead it to regret its machinations.

The turnpike company did not foresee the heated reaction of one Barzillai Knight, a Cranston cooper who had signed Colonel Waterman's petition and who, as a local highway overseer, was especially offended by the company's actions. By this time the merchants who ran the company must have been impressed by the stubbornness and irascibility of the rural opposition; but even when judged by the standards of his neighbors, Barzillai Knight was an unusually cantankerous sort. Like

many others in northwestern Rhode Island, he had belonged to the Six-Principle Baptist sect, having joined the Johnston church in 1780, but he was dismissed by the church three years later for "his ongospel conduct."<sup>24</sup> Knight's business contacts with the merchants of Providence, though perhaps infrequent, tended to be decidedly unpleasant; twice during the 1790s he was sued for debts by his Providence creditors, one of whom was John Innes Clark, the town's second leading merchant and a charter member of the turnpike society.<sup>25</sup> In sum, Barzillai Knight was no friend to the Providence gentry, and he was a prickly man to cross.

Having been tricked, with his neighbors, into a bad bargain with the company, Knight was doubly offended: as a private citizen, he was of course angered by a promise broken; as a local highway official, he resented having his authority circumvented by Colonel Waterman, the company's agent. Knight quickly acted in his capacity as highway surveyor to exact a sort of petty revenge on the turnpike's promoters. As it happened, Colonel Waterman owned land along the highway's path, as did Jabez Bowen, Providence's wealthiest doctor and another charter member of the turnpike society. Since they were local landowners, Waterman and Bowen were required, under the provisions of preexisting highway regulations, to either work on the nearby roads or hire laborers in their stead. As the highway surveyor for the turnpike district, Knight ignored the recently passed legislative act and ordered Bowen, Waterman, and other local residents to work not on the turnpike road but on an altogether different piece of highway. Along with a few others, Bowen and Waterman defied his order and chose instead to work on the turnpike, where Waterman was the foreman. Knight responded by turning to the town authorities, who issued warrants of distress to seize "their goods and chattels."<sup>26</sup> No doubt to their astonishment and outrage, these two worthy gentlemen thus found their property threatened by a rural artisan of only medi-

24. Record book of the General Six-Principle Baptist Church of Johnston, 5 Apr. 1783, RIHS.

25. Providence County Court of Common Pleas, index to

defendants, 1785-1810, Providence College Archives.

26. Petitions, vol. 33, pt. 2, no. 42.

ocre social standing.<sup>27</sup>

In the meantime, the towns of Johnston and Cranston were pressing their opposition to the turnpike company's new statutory privilege. As a joint committee, formed to petition the legislature, complained,

the said Towns view it as a heavy grievance to them that any Individuals thereof should be compelled to expend their proportion of the Highway Taxes or Labour upon said Road and thereby take so much money or labour from the Funds or general property of said Towns and place it in the funds and to the profits of said Turnpike Company.<sup>28</sup>

Clearly the towns saw their rural traditions of local autonomy and neighborhood cooperation violated by the statute's provisions. To the citizens of Cranston and Johnston, the repair of highways, like so many other aspects of their culture, should properly have depended upon a system of local interchange and cooperation, mediated by a traditional framework of laws and customs. The turnpike company's new privileges represented a threatening innovation, one that replaced local authority and community involvement with outside control and private pecuniary gain.

On a more individual level, Caleb Remington, Barzillai Knight's counterpart as the turnpike road's highway surveyor in Johnston, was deeply offended by the company's usurpation of his local authority. "It was out of My power to git any worke from the Men it was porportioned to," he wrote; "thea [they] Told me the Turnpike Company Tolde them if thea would work on that Rode [i.e., the turnpike] thea would Bare them Harmlyss and therefore thea should not work under Me."<sup>29</sup> Using their statutory privileges, the turnpike officials believed that they could legally protect their workers from the penal-

ties of local highway regulations (they obviously had not anticipated the spirited response of Barzillai Knight in Cranston). More importantly, in terms of social standing, Caleb Remington was a farmer of only average wealth and was thus no match for his rival supervisor, Colonel Waterman, the town's wealthiest citizen.<sup>30</sup> Remington certainly was powerless to command the allegiance of his usual crew of workers, overawed as they were by the social prominence of the town's local grandee. In his crude attempt at written communication, Remington was thus voicing the resentment of a rural people whose social order and traditional freedoms were being undermined by a powerful set of commercially minded men.

As the upshot of this bitterly fought dispute, the turnpike company directors lost everything that they had temporarily gained through their tactical cleverness and social prominence. In February 1801, only one year after the enactment of the statute, the company's offensive privileges were completely repealed by the General Assembly.<sup>31</sup> In the case of Barzillai Knight's particular conflict with turnpike officials, Jabez Bowen petitioned the Assembly to seek relief from prosecution by the town of Cranston for back payment of taxes.<sup>32</sup> But by this time the legislature was weary of the company's endless financial troubles and political schemes, and it offered him little support. Bowen was thus forced to settle the matter out of court; in return for a payment of twenty-five dollars, the town agreed to drop its suit for taxes "assessed on the Inhabitants that live on the Turnpike Road."<sup>33</sup> It was a victory for Knight, but his creditors more than balanced the score: at least ten times within the next eight years, Knight was hauled into court for nonpayment of debts, until in 1809 he was forced to petition the legislature for relief as an insolvent debtor.<sup>34</sup> Other-

27. In 1787 Barzillai Knight paid a Cranston town tax of £1.3, placing him in the middle of the tax list (see Cranston tax list of 1787, RIHS).

28. Petitions, vol. 33, no. 49.

29. Ibid.

30. Remington's tax payment of £1.1 in 1782 was slightly less than the town median of £1.5. For Johnston tax data, see

Holbrook, *Rhode Island 1782 Census*.

31. *Acts and Resolutions, February 1801*, 20.

32. Petitions, vol. 33, pt. 2, no. 42.

33. Agreement between the town of Cranston and Jabez Bowen, 2 Mar. 1802, Documents, Providence and Norwich Turnpike Society MSS.

34. Providence Court of Common Pleas, index to defendants,

wise, the only thing gained by the turnpike company as a result of this sorry affair was the continued ill will of the state's rural population.

By the turn of the century the struggle between turnpikers and the state's rural northwest had ground down to a stalemate. Except in the case of the politically powerful Providence and Norwich Turnpike Society, the farmers were able to defeat petitions for charters that threatened to close long sections of public highways. The Gloucester turnpike, running between Chepachet and Connecticut, was too short to be particularly troublesome; the local population was therefore content merely to protest its operation through occasional acts of harassment. Turnpike advocates were not, of course, devoid of rural allies. As the Gloucester turnpike case demonstrated, there were a few local inhabitants wealthy enough to see the advantages of promoting commercial expansion. In spite of their social prominence, however, these turnpike advocates were consistently overruled at local town meetings. The Gloucester and the Providence and Norwich societies—the two turnpike companies that obtained charters by 1800—were able to preserve their original privileges, but they soon ran into financial difficulties, thanks in part to the intransigence of a hostile local population.

Although turnpike development sparked rural resistance throughout New England, opposition appears to have been particularly fierce among Rhode Island's backcountry farmers. In Connecticut, controversies over turnpikes centered largely on the issue of responsibility for bridge construction and repair. Most turnpike charters issued in that state actually required that the individual towns bear the responsibility for the upkeep of bridges along the highway's path. But while the towns frequently objected to having to share the turnpike's burdens, opposition to turnpikes per se was not particularly widespread.<sup>35</sup> In Rhode Island, which lacked Connecticut's notoriously sober and hardworking population, it was inconceivable that a

legislative charter would foist the onerous task of bridge construction onto the shoulders of an already-angered rural population.

The particular vehemence with which Rhode Island's rural yeomanry resisted the intrusion of corporate turnpiking was noted by contemporary travelers. When the British observer Henry Bradshaw Fearon, passing through the town of Scituate in 1819, commented to a local laborer that the area's "roads were bad," the Rhode Islander informed him of the prevalent attitude toward turnpikes: "Roads, I guess, are unpopular in this State: we think . . . that they are invasions of our liberties: we were mightily roiled when they [the turnpikes] were first cut, and we always spoiled them in the night."<sup>36</sup> Rhode Islanders did not stop short of vandalism in their attacks on this perceived threat to their freedom. Timothy Dwight also noted the abysmal condition of northwestern Rhode Island's roads, and he elaborated on the alleged conflict between turnpikes and popular liberty. Dwight was traveling through Rhode Island just as the Providence and Norwich Turnpike Society was unsuccessfully petitioning the legislature for various forms of financial aid. According to Dwight, the society's legislative opponents rejected its request because, in their view,

turnpikes, and the establishment of religious worship, had their origin in Great Britain: the government of which was a monarchy, and the inhabitants slaves . . . ; the people of Massachusetts and Connecticut were obliged by law to support ministers and pay the fare of turnpikes, and were therefore slaves also.

"Free born Rhode-Islanders," the turnpike opponents concluded, "ought never to submit to be priest-ridden, nor to pay for the privileges of travelling on the highway."<sup>36</sup>

Bizarre as this analogy between religion and highways may seem, it nevertheless touches on a crucial element in the culture and political economy of rural Rhode Island. Turnpikes and established churches *are* similar in that they both seek

1785-1810, Petitions, vol. 39, pt. 2, no. 59.

35. Taylor, "Turnpike Era," 115-21.

36. Henry Bradshaw Fearon, *Sketches of America*, 2nd ed. (London, 1818), 1: 96.

to promote social interconnections through legal coercion, thus threatening local autonomy and freedom. Rhode Islanders knew that the establishment of religion in neighboring states had already compromised the independence of local communities. In orthodox New England, the omnipresence of Harvard- and Yale-educated clergymen, together with a creeping trend towards Presbyterianism, was creating binding ties between rural communities and the urban, educated, and commercial elites. Rhode Islanders believed that their neighbors to the north and west were "slaves" for having relinquished local freedom and autonomy under the guidance of an educated clergy.

In Rhode Island, on the other hand, an autonomous rural culture was able to develop in the absence of overarching and homogenizing central institutions. Largely inert and unreflective for most of the eighteenth century, northwestern Rhode Islanders were suddenly made aware of the distinctly localistic nature of their culture by the economic, political, and religious conflicts of the Revolutionary era. It was this self-conscious commitment to the preservation of local autonomy that fueled the rural northwest's tenacious response to the ambitions of those who would turn the public roads into turnpikes.

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37. Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, 2:37-38.

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