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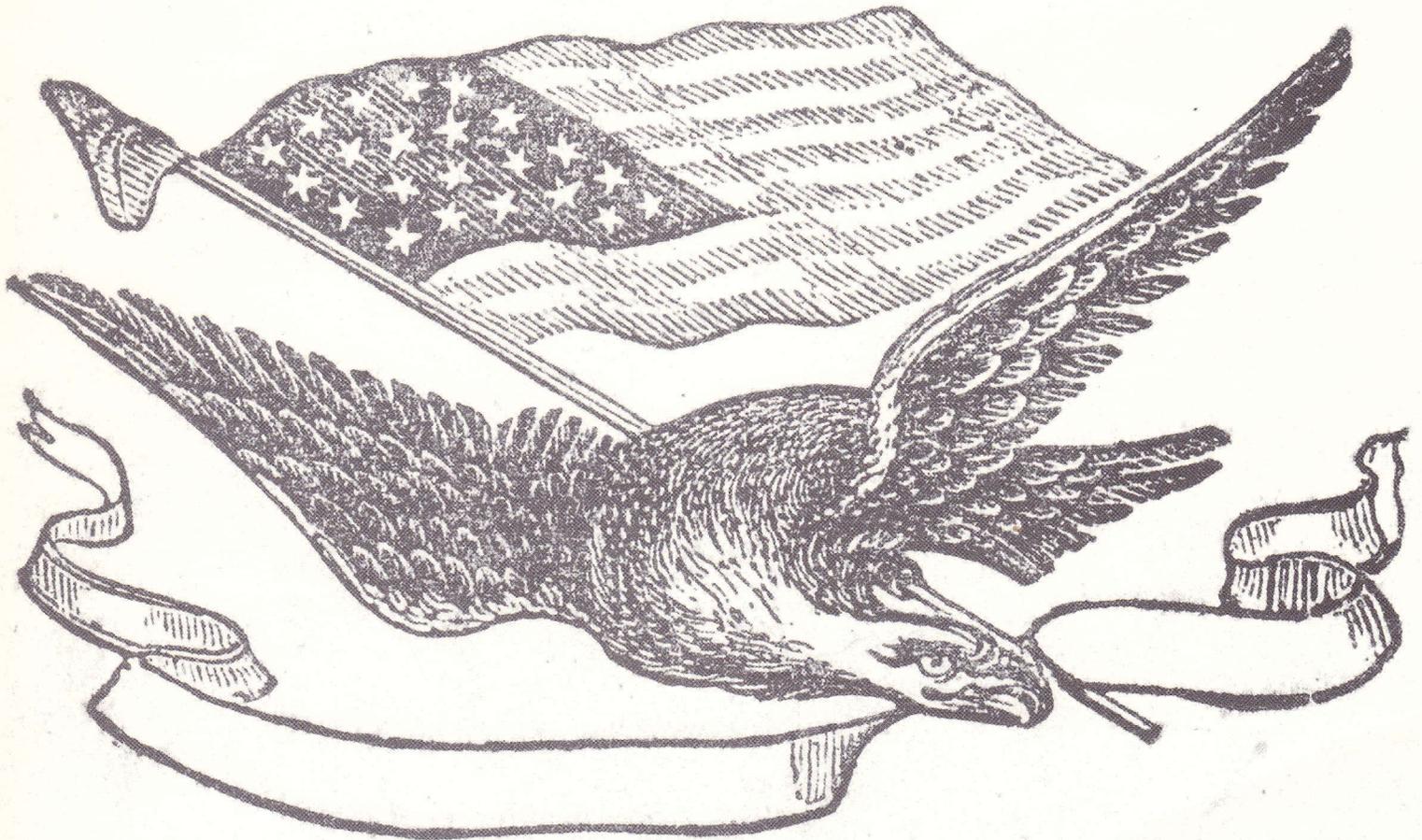
Rhode Island History

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FOR GOVERNOR,

WILLIAM W HOPPIN

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CARL GERSUNY

PLATFORM

Of the American Party of R. I.

Adopted by State Council, June 19, 1855.

Whereas, by a resolution this day adopted by the State Council of Rhode Island, approving the action of our delegates in signing the platform based on the Minority Report to the Grand National Council at Philadelphia, this State Council has virtually seceded from the Order as a National Party; and

Whereas, it is proper that we still labor together for the promotion of individual and National prosperity, therefore

Resolved, That we pledge ourselves to the following

PRINCIPLES.

1. The acknowledgment of that Almighty Being who rules over the Universe, who presides over the Councils of Nations, who conducts the affairs of men, and who, in every step by which we have advanced to the character of an independent nation has distinguished us by some token of providential agency.

2. The cultivation and development of a sentiment of profoundly intense American feeling; of passionate attachment to our country, its history and its institutions; of admiration for the purer days of our National existence; of veneration for the heroism that precipitated our Revolution; and of emulation of the virtue, wisdom and patriotism that framed our Constitution, and first successfully applied its provisions.

3. The unconditional restoration of that time-honored Agreement known as the Missouri Compromise, which was destroyed in utter disregard of the popular will; a wrong which no lapse of time can palliate, and no plea for its continuance can justify. And that we will use all constitutional means to maintain the positive guarantee of that compact, until the object for which it was enacted has been consummated by the admission of Kansas and Nebraska as Free States.

4. The rights of settlers in Territories to the free and undisturbed exercise of the elective franchise guaranteed to them by the laws under which they are organized, should be promptly protected by the National Executive whenever violated or threatened.

5. Obedience under God to the Constitution of these United States, as the supreme law of the land, sacredly obligatory upon all its parts and members; and steadfast resistance to the spirit of innovations upon its principles, however specious the pretences.—Avowing that in all doubtful or disputed points it may only be legally ascertained and expounded by the judicial power of the United States. A habit of reverential obedience to the laws, whether National, State or Municipal, until they are either repealed, or declared unconstitutional, by the proper authority.

6. A radical revision and modification of the laws regulating immigration, and the settlement of immigrants. Offering to the honest immigrant, who from the love of liberty or hatred of oppression seeks an asylum in the United States, a friendly reception and protection. But unqualifiedly condemning the transmission to our shores of felons and paupers.

7. The essential modification of the naturalization laws—the repeal by the Legislatures of the respective States, of all State laws allowing unnaturalized foreigners to vote. The repeal, without retroactive operation of all the acts of Congress making grants of land to unnaturalized foreigners. The refusal to extend the right of suffrage to all foreigners until they shall have resided in the United States twenty-one (21) years, and complied with the naturalization laws.

8. Hostility to the corrupt means, by which the leaders of parties have hitherto forced upon us, our rulers, and our political creeds. Implacable enmity against the present demoralizing system of rewards for political subserviency, and punishment for political independence. Disgust for the wild hunt after office which characterizes the age.

imitation of the practice of the purer days of the Republic; and admiration of the maxim "that office should seek the man and not man the office," and of the rule that the just mode of ascertaining fitness for office is the capability, the faithfulness, and the honesty of the incumbent or candidate.

9. Resistance to the aggressive policy and corrupting tendencies of the Roman Catholic Church in our country by the advancement to all political stations—executive, legislative, judicial or diplomatic—of those only who do not hold civil allegiance, directly or indirectly to any foreign power whether civil or ecclesiastical, and who are Americans by birth, education and training, thus fulfilling the maxim—*Americans only shall govern America.* The protection of all citizens in the legal and proper exercise of their civil and religious rights and privileges; the maintenance of the right of every man to the full unrestricted and peaceful enjoyment of his own religious opinions and worship, and a jealous resistance of all attempt by any sect, denomination or church to obtain an ascendancy over any other in the State, by means of any special privileges or exemption, by any political combination of its members, or by a division of their civil allegiance with any foreign power, potentate or ecclesiastic.

10. The reformation of the character of our National Legislature, by elevating to that dignified and responsible position, men of sober habits, of higher qualifications, purer morals, and more unselfish patriotism.

11. The restriction of executive patronage—especially in the matter of appointments to office so far as it may be permitted by the Constitution, and consistent with the public good.

12. The education of the youth of our country in schools provided by the State;—which schools shall be common to all, without distinction of creed or party, and free from any influence or direction of a denominational or partisan character. And inasmuch as Christianity by the Constitutions of nearly all the States; by the decisions of most eminent judicial authorities; and by the consent of the people of America is considered an element of our political system, and as the Holy Bible is at once the source of Christianity, and the depository and fountain of all civil and religious freedom, we oppose every attempt to exclude it from the schools, thus established in the States.

13. We advocate protection to American industry and genius, against the adverse policy of foreign nations; also facilities to internal and external commerce, by the improvement of rivers and harbors.

14. The policy of the Government of the United States, in its relations with foreign Governments, is to exact justice from the strongest, and do justice to the weakest;—restraining, by all the power of the Government, all its citizens from interference with the internal concerns of nations with whom we are at peace.

15. The Union of these States should be made perpetual by a faithful adherence to the principles embodied in the Declaration of Independence, and confirmed by the Constitution.

16. We believe that neither nature nor the Constitution of our country, recognize the right of man to property in man.

17. We believe that the stability of our institutions depends upon the virtue and intelligence of the people, and whereas intemperance surely tends to undermine and destroy that virtue, therefore,

Resolved, We are in favor of a legal constitutional prohibition of the traffic in all alcoholic liquors.

18. All the principles of the Order to be henceforth everywhere openly avowed; each member shall be at liberty to make known the existence of the Order, and the fact that he himself is a member; and there need be no concealment of the places of meeting of the Subordinate Councils.

E. J. NIGHTINGALE,
Pres't of State Council of R. I.

Battling the Enemies of Liberty: The Rise and Fall of the Rhode Island Know-Nothing Party

MICHAEL A. SIMONCELLI

On 5 April 1855 the *Providence Daily Journal* remarked, without a hint of excitement or surprise, that “the election passed off quietly, the result being a foregone conclusion.”¹ This “foregone conclusion” was the resounding electoral victory of the Rhode Island American, or Know-Nothing, party. As in other states across the nation in 1855, the Know-Nothing victory was indisputable: the Rhode Island Know-Nothings captured all of the state’s executive positions and held large majorities in the General Assembly’s House of Representatives (53 to 19) and Senate (26 to 6).² Only a year later, however, the dominance of Know-Nothingism abruptly ended. Faced with intraparty divisions over slavery on the national level and a rising Republican organization on the local level, Rhode Island Know-Nothingism succumbed to the emerging sectional tide.

Historically, Know-Nothingism’s short stint in Rhode Island has been viewed as the temporary triumph of religious bigotry and anti-Catholicism during a period of party breakdown and political realignment. But this interpretation is only partly true, for in focusing on the party’s anti-Catholic rhetoric, it neglects the Know-Nothings’ considerable ideological diversity.³ Recent studies of Know-Nothingism in the North have in fact shown, beyond the differences of individual historians, that the national Know-Nothing party was motivated by a number of factors in addition to anti-Catholicism.⁴

Like Know-Nothings in other parts of the country, the Rhode Island Know-Nothings concerned themselves with a wide range of political issues. They combined a virulent strain of cultural nativism with some of the more noble reform causes of the day: temperance, antipartyism/anti-political-corruption, and opposition to slavery. The Know-Nothings sought to do more than bar Irish and German Catholic immigrants from political society; they sought to cleanse the body politic of its most conspicuous ills. On a pragmatic level, this combination of reform causes served as a potent electoral mix. The Know-Nothings’ adoption of these causes generated an ideological front that brought together a coalition of disaffected Democrats, homeless Whigs, Free-Soilers, and temperance advocates. This coalition assumed political power during the transition from the second (Whig-Democrat) to the third (Democrat-Republican) party system.

Absent from the rhetoric of the Rhode Island Know-Nothings, however, was the economic nativism that was so prevalent in Massachusetts during this period. Through their party’s rhetoric and membership, the Massachusetts Know-Nothings established a strong link with the state’s working class. The Rhode Island Know-Nothings, on the other hand, eschewed an emphasis on economic nativism and drew members from across class lines, with a significant portion of the party membership coming from the middle and upper classes.⁵

Platform of Rhode Island’s American party, adopted in June 1855. Broadside, 1855. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8383).

Michael Simoncelli is a graduate student in history at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia.

As Rhode Island's 1856 elections approached, the Know-Nothings' electoral prospects seemed limitless on both the national and state levels. National intra-party strife and increased sectional tensions, however, dashed the hopes of a continued Know-Nothing hegemony in the state. Although the party attempted to enact its reform agenda, the consequences of the Kansas-Nebraska debate, in the form of "bleeding Kansas" and "bleeding Sumner," galvanized support for the antislavery Republicans. With many antislavery men among their ranks, the Know-Nothings first fused with, and then were absorbed into, the Republican party. By 1857 the Republican party's single-minded emphasis on the evils of slavery overshadowed the Know-Nothings and their concern with broader cultural concerns, especially temperance and anti-Catholicism, and the Republicans became the most formidable political force in Rhode Island.

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Recently historians have been unable to reach a consensus on the socioeconomic character of the Know-Nothing movement. One historian of the movement argues that the Know-Nothings were poor and middle-class men who "suffered

most from the traumatic economic changes of the decade." In contrast, another student of Know-Nothingism remarks that the "Know-Nothings were usually not poorer than other citizens."⁶ For Rhode Island Know-Nothingism, the latter characterization seems to apply. Economically, the Rhode Island Know-Nothings—both rank-and-file and legislative members—either equaled or surpassed their non-Know-Nothing contemporaries.⁷

In the 1850s, as in the previous decade, the foreign-born population in Rhode Island increased dramatically. In Providence, for example, the immigrant population totaled a minuscule 1,005 in 1835; by 1845 it had jumped to 5,955, and by 1855, when Know-Nothingism was flourishing in Rhode Island, it totaled 13,232, or 28 percent of the city's population. Further, if those born of foreign parentage are included with the immigrants in the calculations, the 1855 total jumps to 41 percent. But despite the influx of foreign-born unskilled workers, the Rhode Island Know-Nothings failed to draw those most directly affected: native unskilled workers. The Providence lodge drew its members principally from the skilled, merchant, and white-collar occupations, with only a small representation from the ranks of unskilled labor. In 1855,

41 percent of the Providence population, but only 7 percent of the Providence Know-Nothing membership, were unskilled (see table 1).⁸

The skilled-worker/merchant/middle-class origins of Rhode Island Know-Nothingism are further apparent in the amount of taxes assessed on those who joined the lodge and those who did not. Residents of Providence in 1855 paid taxes if they owned at least one hundred dollars of either real or personal property. During this era some 55 percent of those eligible for Know-Nothing membership—native-born white males—fell below this threshold, while only about 37

Table 1
Occupations of Providence Residents and Know-Nothing Rank and File

	PROVIDENCE RESIDENTS ^a	KNOW-NOTHINGS ^b
Merchants and manufacturers	8%	21%
White-collar workers	7%	24%
Skilled workers	39%	41%
Unskilled workers	41%	7%
Professionals	3%	4%
Farmers and gardeners	1%	1%

SOURCES: Membership list in Records of the Know-Nothings, 19 May 1854-5 May 1856, Rhode Island Historical Society; *Providence Directory of 1854* (Providence, 1854); *Providence Directory of 1855-1856* (Providence, 1856); Edwin M. Snow, *Census of the City of Providence, Taken in July 1855* (Providence, 1856).

^a Computations for this category were based on occupational figures in *Census of the City of Providence*, which counted women and children as well as men in arriving at its totals.

^b Computations for Know-Nothing members were based on a mechanically selected sample of 86 of the 434 legible names on the party's membership list. The occupations of 2 of the selected members could not be determined.

Table 2
Taxes Paid by Native-Born Adult White Male Providence Residents and by Know-Nothing Rank and File

	NATIVE-BORN ADULT WHITE MALE PROVIDENCE RESIDENTS ^a	KNOW-NOTHING RANK AND FILE ^b
\$0	55.9%	37.2%
\$1-\$25	28.5%	38.3%
\$25-\$100	10.2%	16.3%
\$100-\$300	3.6%	4.6%
\$300-\$500	0.7%	2.4%
\$500+	1.1%	1.2%

SOURCES: Membership list, Records of the Know-Nothings; Snow, *Census of the City of Providence*; *Providence Tax Book, 1853-1860* (Providence, 1853-1860).

^a Computations for this category were based on 12,012 men over the age of 20 listed in *Census of the City of Providence*.

^b Computations for Know-Nothing members were based on the same sample used in table 1.

Table 3
Characteristics of Know-Nothing and Non-Know-Nothing Rhode Island Legislators, 1854-1856

	NON-KNOW-NOTHINGS ^a	KNOW-NOTHINGS ^b
Average age	46.1 years	44.2 years
Average property holdings (real and personal)	\$12,832.84	\$10,832.50
Percentage identified as merchants, farmers, or skilled workers	Merchants: 20% Farmers: 41% Skilled workers: 18%	Merchants: 26% Farmers: 29% Skilled workers: 24%
Percentage with no legislative experience	77%	78%

SOURCES: *Acts and Resolves of the General Assembly of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, May 1850-May 1857*; Manuscript Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Rhode Island; Manuscript Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Rhode Island.

^a This category includes a random sampling of about 50% of the legislators in the General Assembly in 1854 and 1856.

^b This category includes all Know-Nothing legislators in the 1855 General Assembly who appear in the 1850 or 1860 federal census. The 1860 census, which lists both real and personal property, was the preferred source; the 1850 census lists only real property.

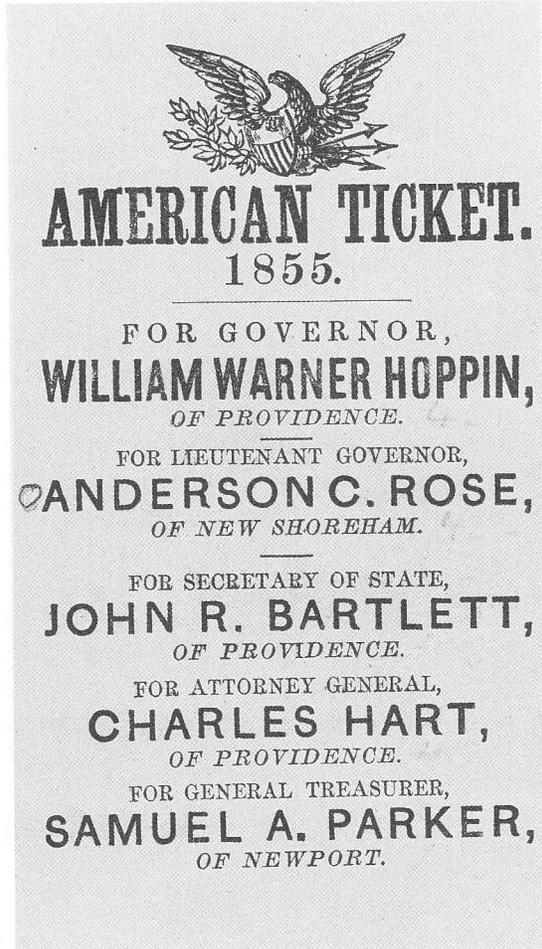
percent of the Know-Nothing's rank-and-file failed to own that much property. The relative wealth of the Providence Know-Nothings is further reflected by the fact that the proportion of party members was higher than that of the city's native-born male population through the various levels of taxation (see table 2). The occupations and the amount of taxes paid by the Rhode Island Know-Nothing rank-and-file indicate that economic nativism and fear of competition from immigrant workers were not significant motivations for Know-Nothing membership. On the contrary, those who felt the pain of economic competition—the poor and unskilled—largely failed to become active Know-Nothing party members in Rhode Island.⁹

Historians have contended that the men the Know-Nothings sent to legislatures in other states were younger, less wealthy, and less experienced in legislative matters than their contemporaries.¹⁰ However, the men elected to the Rhode Island General Assembly on the Know-Nothing ticket in 1855 did not conform to this characterization. Although the Know-Nothing legislators were *slightly* younger and less wealthy than the other legislators in the Assembly during the mid-1850s, they did not represent a fundamentally different class of men. Like the Assembly's Whigs, Democrats, and Free-Soilers, the Know-Nothings legislators, on the average, were between forty-four and forty-six years of age, owned over ten thousand dollars in real and personal property, were merchants, skilled artisans, or farmers, and had little experience in state legislative matters (see table 3).¹¹

Consequently, if social class and economics failed to *directly* influence Know-Nothing membership in Rhode Island, as they did in Massachusetts, ideological factors undoubtedly played a crucial part in the Know-Nothing party's rise in membership and electoral success. Contrary to the emphases of previous historians of Rhode Island Know-Nothingism, the ideology of the party took on a complexity that transcended simplistic anti-Catholicism. Beyond specific ideological issues, the Know-Nothings' primary ideological emphasis was on "republicanism." Although the republicanism of the late eighteenth century had become more a revered ideal than a viable political force by the mid-1850s, its paranoid fixations on the danger of conspiracies and corruption became a prominent feature of Know-Nothing rhetoric. Whether Know-Nothing editors or pamphleteers were discussing temperance or immigration, they usually laced their arguments with references to dark conspiracies in a manner reminiscent of the Revolutionary era. Typical was the warning in a popular pamphlet of the day: "IF THE LIBERTIES OF AMERICA ARE EVER DESTROYED IT WILL BE BY ROMANISH PRIESTS." Know-Nothings also attacked the "Slave Power"—a sup-

portant feature of Know-Nothing rhetoric. Whether Know-Nothing editors or pamphleteers were discussing temperance or immigration, they usually laced their arguments with references to dark conspiracies in a manner reminiscent of the Revolutionary era. Typical was the warning in a popular pamphlet of the day: "IF THE LIBERTIES OF AMERICA ARE EVER DESTROYED IT WILL BE BY ROMANISH PRIESTS." Know-Nothings also attacked the "Slave Power"—a sup-

posed conspiracy of powerful Southern slaveholders determined to spread slavery throughout the country—as “recreant to the demands of liberty,” and they celebrated the temperance crusade as recalling a bygone republican era when “a glorious work [was] done by . . . dissuading the use of strong drink.” The




AMERICAN TICKET.
 1855.
 FOR GOVERNOR,
WILLIAM WARNER HOPPIN,
 OF PROVIDENCE.
 FOR LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR,
ANDERSON C. ROSE,
 OF NEW SHOREHAM.
 FOR SECRETARY OF STATE,
JOHN R. BARTLETT,
 OF PROVIDENCE.
 FOR ATTORNEY GENERAL,
CHARLES HART,
 OF PROVIDENCE.
 FOR GENERAL TREASURER,
SAMUEL A. PARKER,
 OF NEWPORT.

The Rhode Island American party's 1855 ticket. Broadside, 1855. RIHS Collection (RH X3 8379).

emphasis on republicanism allowed the Know-Nothings to bring together the issues of antipartyism, opposition to slavery, temperance, and anti-Catholicism to support a powerful electoral coalition. The relationship between republicanism and the multi-faceted Know-Nothing ideology was succinctly stated by an editor in the pro-Know-Nothing *Providence Tribune*: “The true American principles of policy are Anti-Popery, Anti-Slavery, and Anti-Intemperance and upon this platform let us battle the enemies of liberty.”¹²

One of the most important elements in the Know-Nothings’ broad-based ideology, and the one frequently stressed by historians, was anti-Catholicism. To the Know-Nothings the surge of Catholic immigration represented a palpable threat to both American institutions

and Protestant culture. “Your country is filled with the secret emissaries of foreign despots, the jesuit priesthood of Rome,” proclaimed one anti-Catholic tract. Nativist newspapers echoed similar sentiments, warning against “the rapid strides of a power hostile to our free institutions.” Believing that Catholics harbored insidious designs to destroy the bulwark of American freedom, the public school system, Know-Nothings decried the “vice . . . [and] its attendant wretchedness” that accompanied the establishment of sectarian Catholic schools and lamented the removal of the Protestant Bible from schools to satisfy Catholic “conscientious objectors.”¹³

Although older historical studies have focused on the fervent anti-Catholicism of the Know-Nothings, temperance, opposition to slavery, and antipartyism were equally important in the party’s ideology. As vexing as the growing Catholic population was, the proliferation of grogshops, the manipulation of votes by corrupt party managers, and the increasingly aggressive maneuvers of the Slave Power were of equal concern to the Know-Nothings. To many Know-Nothings the issues of temperance and anti-Catholicism were indistinguishable, for “the foreign population, or at least the Catholic portion of it, is wedded to

rum.”¹⁴ The Know-Nothings’ identification with the temperance crusade was so strong that many antiliquor luminaries joined Know-Nothing lodges, and some were elected to office as Know-Nothings. For example, Clement Webster, the editor of the *Temperance Advocate*, one-time editor of the pro-Know-Nothing *Providence Tribune*, temperance lecturer, and Sons of Temperance officer, was an early initiate of the Providence Know-Nothing organization. The Reverend R. H. Conklin, another respected temperance lecturer and member of the Sons of Temperance, also joined the Providence lodge. William W. Hoppin, Benjamin T. Eames, Josiah Seagrave, and Samuel Peckham, all of whom were nominated on an independent temperance ticket in 1854, gained elective office as Know-Nothings in 1855.¹⁵

To Know-Nothing editors, politicians, and voters alike, a similar link existed between Catholics and the corruption of party politics. Many Know-Nothings sought a return to an era without parties, to a political system in which the office would seek the man and not the man the office. At the root of the current political corruption, many Know-Nothings believed, were self-interested Yankee politicians and easily purchased immigrant votes.¹⁶ “Our larger cities have for years been the polluted cauldrons of the vilest iniquities, the suffrage of foreigners being used by trading politicians to advance their personal interests,” the *Providence Tribune* declared.¹⁷

As temperance and antipartyism came together under the umbrella of Know-Nothing republicanism, the boisterous New England antislavery sentiment, aroused by the controversial Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, also became part of the Know-Nothing ideology. Much to the chagrin of politicians who hoped to repress debate on the divisive issue of slavery, northern outrage was ubiquitous after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and thus the Know-Nothings could not hope to avoid this highly charged issue. But Rhode Island’s Know-Nothings did not endorse antislavery principles merely as a matter of political calculation; to many Know-Nothings the insatiable demands of the Slave Power seemed undeniably similar to the dark schemes of Romanism.¹⁸

“The American Party,” the *Providence Tribune* explained, “had its origins, or at least the beginning of its triumphs, in the pro-slavery tendency of the old parties.” Opposition to slavery also usually coincided with anti-Catholicism in Know-Nothing rhetoric, because “a very large proportion of the Catholics of this country are in favor of rum and slavery.”¹⁹ But Know-Nothing antipathy to slavery was not simply a reaction to proslavery opinion among Catholics. The aggressive nature of the Slave Power and its designs to destroy the Union for the preservation of its peculiar institution also fit neatly into the Know-Nothings’ preoccupation with conspiracies. Antislavery sentiment permeated the party from newspaper editors to the rank and file. In February 1854, before the Know-Nothings formed a lodge in the state, a petition opposing the Kansas-Nebraska Act was signed by fifteen hundred people; of these, some 25 percent eventually joined the Providence Know-Nothing lodge. Many Know-Nothing editors and elected officials—including William Hoppin, Robert Knight, Henry L. Bowen, Clement Webster, and Isaac Brown—became officers of the antislavery Anti-Nebraska convention of 1854 and the Kansas League, an organization that provided financial assistance to free-soil settlers moving to Kansas in the 1850s.²⁰

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It is true, as historians of the Know-Nothing movement in Rhode Island have argued, that Know-Nothing ideology and its accompanying rhetoric often served only as an instrument for gaining political power. As one historian put it, the Know-Nothings "did not attempt to go to the radical extreme to which the legislature of Massachusetts had gone, nor did they retain control of the offices long enough to undertake and accomplish any great measure."²¹ The observation that the Know-Nothings' brief tenure in office hampered their ability to enact important legislation is undoubtedly correct; but there is a good deal more to be said about the Know-Nothings' attempts to make good on their campaign promises and affect reform in the direction of "the radical extreme."

Following the lead of the national American party, the Massachusetts Know-Nothing party moved toward that radical extreme by attempting (unsuccessfully) to enact a twenty-one-year naturalization amendment to the state constitution. Know-Nothings were afraid that recently naturalized immigrants would vote as a single bloc under the control of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, which would use its electoral power to destroy the republic. The proposed amendment was intended to thwart the church's infernal design by withholding citizenship and its attendant privileges (e.g., voting) from immigrants until they had resided in the United States for twenty-one years. In the thinking of many Know-Nothings, twenty-one years would allow an immigrant to embrace republican principles, throw off the yoke of papal domination, and become properly Americanized.²²

Rhode Island Know-Nothings also attempted to fulfill a campaign pledge by limiting the political power of Catholics through the passage of a twenty-one-year naturalization amendment. At the beginning of the January 1856 legislative session, two senators, William Pirce of Johnston and Charles Dennison of Westerly, proposed an amendment to the Rhode Island state constitution declaring that "no person shall be entitled to the privileges of an elector in this State, who had not been a resident of the United States for the period of twenty-one years." Supported by the national Know-Nothing organization, the amendment took the first step toward passage when it sailed through the Senate by a vote of 18-7 and the House by a margin of 47-15. But for many Know-Nothings the amendment proved to be little more than ideological window dressing; in the next legislative session the Know-Nothing-dominated American-Republican majority, seeking to concentrate its efforts on the issue of slavery, let the amendment die in committee. Know-Nothing politicians quickly backed away from the divisive measure once the public's anti-immigrant sentiment had waned and opposition to slavery had come to dominate Rhode Island politics.²³

The Know-Nothings made more tangible legislative progress on the issues of temperance and slavery. To bolster its enforcement, they amended a prohibitory liquor law that the state had enacted in 1852. This law, modeled on one passed in Maine in 1851 by temperance zealot Neal Dow and his allies, prohibited the sale of liquor except at certain times by licensed dealers, and for medicinal and industrial uses only. Much to the dismay of temperance advocates, the law proved difficult to enforce because of numerous procedural problems. The Know-Nothings' amendment sought to resolve these problems by requiring the accused to "produce *prima facie* evidence" that entitled them to sell liquor.²⁴

The Know-Nothing majority in the General Assembly also did its best to deal forthrightly with the issue of slavery. Whereas Whigs and Democrats frequently

repressed debate on slavery to preserve party accord, the Know-Nothings passed stern antislavery resolves to show their disgust with the aggressions of the Slave Power in the battle-scarred Kansas territory. In a legislative report on the events in Kansas, the Know-Nothing majority stated "that in the contest between liberty and slavery upon the soil of Kansas [*sic*], it is the duty of the free States to resist this new aggression of the slave power, by all legal and constitutional means." Although the national party hoped to restrict the slavery

debate to preserve sectional harmony, the Rhode Island Know-Nothing party eschewed these instructions and actively pushed antislavery resolves through the state Assembly.²⁵

Though not wholly successful in converting their party's ideological imperatives into legislation (the problem of political corruption was not addressed at all), Rhode Island's Know-Nothing legislators did take steps toward carrying out their promised agenda on immigrants, temperance, and slavery. Yet these issues occupied only a small portion of the Know-Nothings' legislative rule. Outside the ideologically charged issues they debated in the Assembly, the Know-Nothings differed little from the typical legislators of the mid-1850s. Like the Whig legislature that preceded it, the Know-Nothing-dominated legislature devoted most of its efforts to the more mundane activities of appropriating funds, incorporating banks and businesses, and regulating fisheries and the militia. Further, the Know-Nothings' nonideological legislation differed little in its class bias from the previous Assembly's legislation. While the Know-Nothings who dominated the Massachusetts legislature satisfied their

working-class constituency by financing public schools and abolishing imprisonment for debt, and often refused to incorporate businesses and railroads, no such working-class partiality existed in Rhode Island. Continuing the Whig practice of readily incorporating businesses and banks, the middle- and upper-class Know-Nothings in the Assembly showed no interest in passing legislation that would displease the state's financial elite (see table 4).²⁶

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As the 1856 Rhode Island state elections approached, Know-Nothing reelection seemed certain. By late 1855 the Whigs had all but disappeared, the Democrats were generally discredited by the national party's proslavery proclivities, and the Know-Nothings were completely in control of the state legislature. But the dramatic national events of 1856, which made slavery extension the most important issue in the upcoming Rhode Island elections, tempered the Know-Nothings' optimism.

By the time the election came about, the violence between "free-soil" settlers and "border ruffians" (proslavery settlers) in the Kansas territory moved slavery extension into the electoral limelight. On 4 March 1856 the *Providence Tribune* carried an advertisement calling for a Republican convention to be

Table 4
Legislative Activity in the General Assembly in 1854, 1855, and 1856

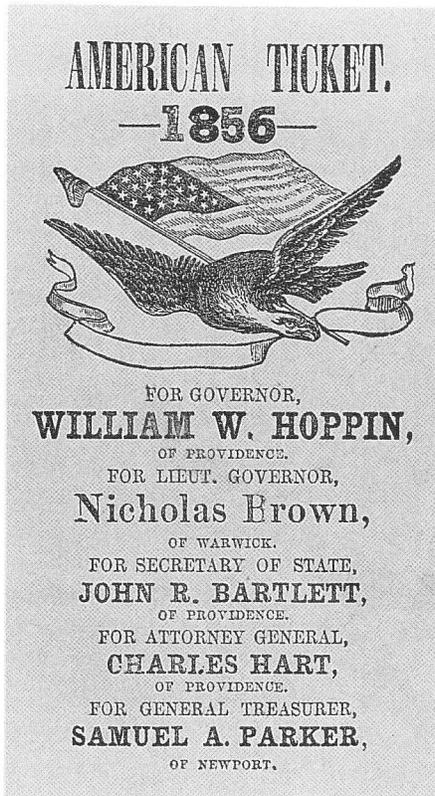
	WHIG LEGISLATURE ^a	KNOW-NOTHING LEGISLATURE ^b	AMERICAN- REPUBLICAN LEGISLATURE ^c
Acts passed	68	50	33
Resolutions passed	46	47	59
Banks incorporated	14	7	8
Insurance companies incorporated	2	2	3
Miscellaneous companies incorporated	11	8	8

SOURCES: *Acts and Resolves*, May-June 1854, October 1854, January 1855, May 1855, January 1856, May 1856, January 1857.

^a May 1854-January 1855. The greater number of actions taken in this Assembly may be due to its meeting in four separate sessions rather than the usual two.

^b May 1855-January 1856.

^c May 1856-January 1857.



The Rhode Island American party's 1856 ticket. Broadside, 1856. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8382).

convened by all “who are opposed to the aggressions of the Slave Power, as developed through the present Federal Administration, in the repeal of the Missouri Compromise—the forcible establishment of territorial government in Kansas by the ‘border ruffians’ of Missouri—the displacement of Governor Reeder to make room for a supple tool of the slavery propagandists . . . and who are in favor of an honest and vigorous enforcement of laws prohibiting the liquor traffic.”²⁷

The establishment of a party on antislavery and temperance principles obviously presented a direct challenge to Know-Nothing electoral hegemony. Further, although some historians have contended that the early Republican party catered to anti-Catholic sentiments to draw Know-Nothing votes, the new Rhode Island Republican party did not.²⁸ This is not to say that some did not try to push the party toward an embrace of nativism. The *Providence Journal* reported that “one section [of the state’s Republican party] proposed the slavery question ‘pure and simple.’ The other desired a due admixture of rum and popery.”²⁹ But despite the debate between these two factions over the party’s ideological focus, the Rhode Island Republicans’ platform devoted most of its resolutions (with one protemperance resolve) to the slavery issue, with no reference to the issue of anti-Catholicism.³⁰

The formation of the Republican party was not the only source of the Know-Nothings’ woes. On both the national and local levels the Know-Nothings encountered heightened factionalism. Locally, a self-described pro-Know-Nothing journal, the *American Citizen*, challenged the Know-Nothing amalgam of antislavery, anti-Catholic, and temperance ideology. The editors of the newspaper believed that Rhode Island Know-Nothingism should purge itself of the superfluous antislavery and temperance issues in order to solely “combat the political aims of the Papal hierarchy.”³¹ Although the paper ran for only two weeks (from 14 May to 29 May 1855) and attracted only a small following, it did illustrate the ideological friction within Rhode Island Know-Nothingism.

The fissures in Know-Nothing unity were increased by the party’s fractious 1855 national convention. There, proslavery southern Know-Nothings pushed through the infamous Section 12 of the national Know-Nothing platform, declaring that “the National Council has deemed it the best guarantee of common justice and of future peace, to abide by and maintain the existing laws on the subject of Slavery, as final and conclusive settlement of the subject.”³² The passage of this measure, considered abhorrent by antislavery forces in the party, precipitated an exodus of many northern delegates from the convention. The Rhode Island Know-Nothings, who held strong antislavery beliefs, seceded from the national Know-Nothing council and added a strong antislavery plank to their platform: “We believe that neither nature nor the Constitution of our country, recognize the right of man to property in man.”³³

Thus by the time of the 1856 state elections the Rhode Island Know-Nothing party faced some ideological disagreement over the slavery issue,³⁴ an abrupt separation from the national organization, and an electoral challenge from the antislavery Republican party. Because of the increased attention given to the slavery issue, the once-powerful Know-Nothings were forced to form a fusion ticket with the upstart Republicans. This fusion, however, ran no deeper than the electoral ticket. The Know-Nothings and the Republicans held separate

Table 5
Vote for Lieutenant Governor in 1856 and 1857

1856		1857	
Nicholas Brown (KN)	7,882	Thomas G. Turner (R)	5,781
Duncan C. Pell (D)	7,227	Isaac Hall (D)	5,126
Sylvester Robinson (R)	1,306	Stephen G. Mason (KN)	3,816

SOURCES: Charles Carroll, *Rhode Island: Three Centuries of Democracy* (New York, 1932), 1:591; Edward Field, *State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations at the End of the Century: A History* (Boston, 1902), 1:367.

conventions and wrote separate platforms, with the Republicans' platform emphasizing slavery and the Know-Nothings placing their usual emphasis on slavery, nativism, temperance, and antipartyism. When the votes were counted, the results showed that the public—though willing to vote for a fusion ticket—was still behind Know-Nothingism: in the only executive contest in which the Know-Nothings and the Republicans did not unite, the lieutenant governor's race, the Know-Nothing candidate resoundingly defeated his Republican rival (see table 5).³⁵

Aside from the curious disagreement between the Know-Nothings and the Republicans over a candidate for lieutenant governor, the "American-Republican" ticket (as

the local papers called it) won huge majorities in both legislative houses and swept the executive offices. Yet, if the lieutenant governor's race indicated the voters' preference for Know-Nothingism, the men who composed the American-Republican legislature took a decidedly Republican course once in office. The most obvious example of this change of path was their open repudiation of nativism. Whereas the sincerity of the Know-Nothings' support for the nativist cause had been dubious before, during the 1856-57 legislative session the Know-Nothings' lack of commitment to that cause became clear. With the twenty-one-year naturalization amendment set to be placed on the winter ballot for approval or rejection by the voters, an American-Republican-dominated House-Senate committee on constitutional amendments decided "that the third article [the twenty-one-year naturalization amendment] of said amendments is not recommended for the approval of this General Assembly, a majority of the said Committee being opposed to such approval."³⁶ Significantly, of the eight committee members, three were Know-Nothing holdovers from the previous legislature and the remaining five were newcomers. If the Americans-Republicans had been firmly behind the nativist agenda, the amendment would surely have been passed by the Assembly and placed before the voters for ratification.

The failure of the naturalization amendment, in fact, marked the complete takeover of the Know-Nothings by the Republicans. In the state elections of 1857 the fusion group retained its "American-Republican" label, but in terms of ideology and in public opinion, the Republicans were the dominant component. Once again the Republicans and the Know-Nothings could not agree on a candidate for lieutenant governor; but whereas the vote for lieutenant governor had revealed the Republicans' weakness in 1856, in 1857 it showed the Republican ascendancy in the state. In a close race with the Democratic candidate, the Republican edged out his rival by only 655 votes, but he handily outpolled his Know-Nothing opponent by almost 2,000 votes (see table 5). In the rise of Republicanism in Rhode Island, the Know-Nothing movement proved to be a halfway house on the road to Republicanism for many Whigs, Democrats, and Free-Soilers. Of thirty-one Know-Nothing senators and representatives whose party affiliations can be tracked from 1854 through 1856, thirty moved from the Whig, Democratic, and Free-Soil parties in 1854 to Know-Nothingism in 1855 to American-Republicanism in 1856. One Democrat had a brief stint with Know-Nothingism and then returned to the Democratic party (see table 6).

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Table 6
Changes in Party Affiliation of 31 Know-Nothing Legislators, 1854-1856

Party Affiliation			NUMBER OF LEGISLATORS
1854	1855	1856	
Whig	Know-Nothing	American-Republican	20
Democrat	Know-Nothing	American-Republican	9
Free-Soil	Know-Nothing	American-Republican	1
Democrat	Know-Nothing	Democrat	1

SOURCES: *Acts and Resolves*, May-June 1854, May 1855, May 1856;
Providence Daily Journal, 3 Apr. 1856; *Providence Plaindealer*,
6 Apr. 1855.

The Rhode Island Know-Nothing party, overall, was an exceedingly complex movement, and it played a critical role in the tumultuous Rhode Island politics of the 1850s. Eschewing the economic nativism so prevalent in other states, the party's rank and file and legislative delegations drew their members from across class lines, including among them some of the state's economic elite.³⁷ Further, the ideology of the organization was more complex than the straightforward anti-Catholicism that has been identified and discussed by other Rhode Island historians.

Although anti-Catholicism was a significant element in this ideology, it was accompanied by support for the potent causes of temperance, antipartyism, and opposition to slavery. Equally important was the "republican" veneer that the Know-Nothings gave to the expression of their beliefs. It was this blend of "republican" rhetoric and ideological diversity that propelled the Know-Nothings to political success. Once in power, however, the party did relatively little to achieve its stated goals. Although Know-Nothing legislators laid the groundwork for anti-Catholic and temperance

POLITICAL NOTICE!

A MEETING OF THE FRIENDS OF

FILLMORE

AND

DONELSON

AND MEMBERS OF THE

NATIONAL AMERICAN PARTY

In favor of their Election, will be held in

WESTMINSTER HALL,

THIS EVENING,

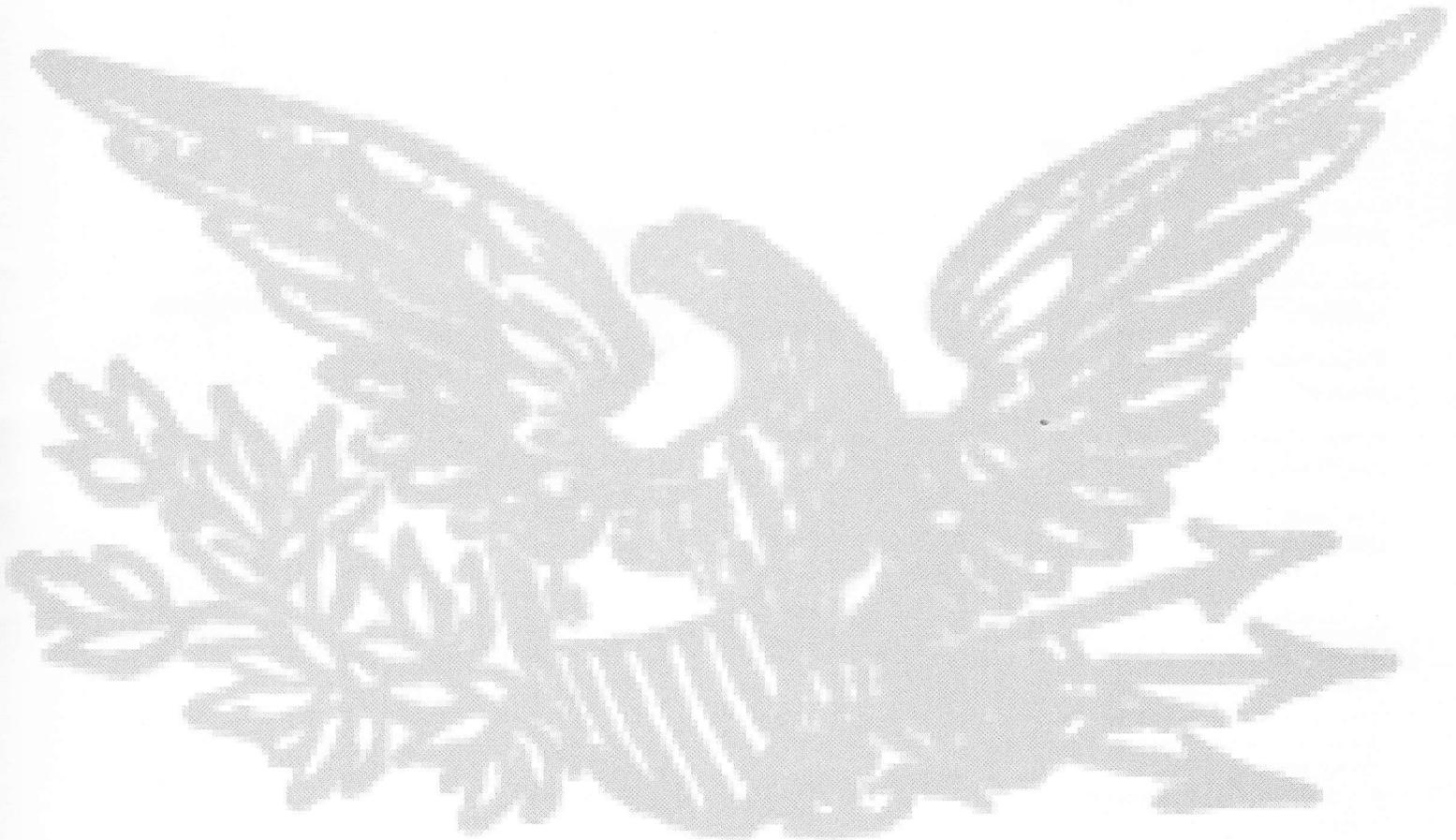
For the purpose of organizing a CLUB, and to take such other action in relation to the COMING CAMPAIGN as may be deemed advisable.

Providence, Thursday, July 10, 1856.

Millard Fillmore, the Know-Nothings' presidential candidate in 1856, drew only 8 percent of the Rhode Island vote. *Broadside*, 1856.
RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8387)

legislation, their record in the Assembly ultimately did not differ much from that of the legislators they had replaced.

By 1856 the political winds had begun to change in Rhode Island. In 1856 and 1857, after the caning of Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner on the floor of the U.S. Senate and the dramatic sack of Lawrence, Kansas, by the "border ruffians," it became increasingly obvious that the Republicans' ideology, with its strict emphasis on the slavery issue, had superseded Know-Nothingism. The absorption of Know-Nothingism by the Republicans was achieved without the slightest appeal to nativist sentiment. The party's disinclination to espouse nativism was revealed in a pamphlet in which party leaders described the Republican party as "precisely a union of Whigs, Democrats, Liberty men, Americans [Know-Nothings], Conservatives, and Radicals who believe the greatest evil of the country comes from slavery . . . no man is required to give up his peculiar views [e.g., nativism], but to hold them subordinate for the sake of [party] union."³⁸



Appendix: The 1855 General Assembly

<i>Name</i>	<i>Party</i> ^a	<i>Age</i>	<i>Real Property</i> ^b	<i>Personal Property</i> ^c	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Party</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Real Property</i>	<i>Personal Property</i>	<i>Occupation</i>
<u>SENATE</u>											
Benjamin Martin Barrington	KN	44	\$ 4,500	\$ 800	Farmer	Charles Lewis New Shoreham	KN	48	\$ 0	\$ NA	Minister
William P. Munro Bristol	KN	39	0	NA	Seaman	Anderson Rose New Shoreham	KN		No record		
Stephen Eddy Burrillville	KN	53	2,100	3,000	Farmer	Joseph Anthony Newport	KN	55	4,100	3,400	Farmer
William Foster Charlestown	KN	32	0	1,500	Farmer	Henry Sweet North Kingstown	KN	49	18,500	12,000	Manufacturer
Lawton Johnson Coventry	FS	48	1,600	0	Machinist	Jonathan Kenyon North Providence	KN	43	10,700	2,700	Farmer
William Gorton Cranston	KN	36	0	NA	Laborer	John G. Childs Portsmouth	KN	49	9,000	2,000	NA
John Boyden Cumberland	KN	46	3,200	1,000	Minister	Benjamin T. Eames Providence	KN	36	0	NA	Attorney
Caleb Alvord East Greenwich	KN		No record			Halsey P. Clarke Richmond	KN	36	750	1,000	Clerk
John G. Sweet Exeter	KN	53	4,500	1,500	Farmer	Issac Saunders Scituate	KN	46	20,200	0	NA
Richard Howard Foster	W	62	1,300	490	Farmer	Stephen Mason Smithfield	FS	44	8,800	3,000	Manufacturer
Smith Peckham Glocester	D	54	2,400	1,600	Gentleman	John S. Clarke South Kingstown	KN	38	19,000	3,000	Farmer
Lester Crandall Hopkinton	KN	59	13,000	500	Manufacturer	Oliver Chace Tiverton	D	43	150,000	25,000	Manufacturer
Oliver Armstrong Jamestown	NP	44	0	NA	Mason	Benjamin Barton Warren	KN	57	4,000	1,000	Farmer
William Pirce Johnston	KN		No record			William Brayton Warwick	KN	39	3,100	12,500	U.S. representative
Nathaniel Church Little Compton	KN	53	7,000	0	Farmer	Warren Straight West Greenwich	KN	45	200	1,600	Carpenter
John Gould Middletown	KN	34	1,800	1,000	Farmer	Charles Dennison Westerly	KN		No record		

SOURCES: *Acts and Resolves of the General Assembly of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*, May 1855; Manuscript Census, Seventh Census of the United States, 1850, Rhode Island; Manuscript Census, Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Rhode Island.

^a KN = Know-Nothing; FS = Free-Soil; W = Whig; D = Democratic; NP = no party.

^b Data in this column was drawn from the 1860 census (which includes figures for real and personal property) for all legislators listed there; for those legislators not listed in that census, the 1850 census (which includes figures for real property only) was consulted. Some legislators do not appear in either census.

^c NA (not available) in this column indicates that that legislator was not listed in the 1860 census, and that the amount of his personal property could therefore not be determined.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Party^a</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Real Property</i>	<i>Personal Property</i>	<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Name</i>	<i>Party^a</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Real Property</i>	<i>Personal Property</i>	<i>Occupation</i>
Benjamin Whitman North Providence	KN	47	\$ 0	\$ 0	Mechanic	Ansel Holman Smithfield	KN	46	\$ 0	\$ 100	NA
George Manchester Portsmouth	KN	30	2,000	200	Carpenter	Charles Moies Smithfield	KN	45	51,000	25,000	Manufacturer
Welcome Angell Providence	KN	58	5,900	0	Mulemaker	Henry Pearce Smithfield	KN	41	0	NA	Manufacturer
Theodore Cook Providence	FS		No record			Nathaniel Spaulding Smithfield	KN	51	2,000	200	Farmer
Walter Danforth Providence	KN	67	54,000	0	NA	Jeremiah Young Smithfield	KN	54	0	NA	Farmer
Joseph Gilmore Providence	KN	55	9,400	1,500	Master mason	Augustus Durfee South Kingstown	KN	36	0	0	Clergyman
Thomas Jenckes Providence	KN	36	39,000	70,000	Attorney	Daniel Rodman South Kingstown	KN	49	10,000	13,000	Manufacturer
Oliver Johnson Providence	KN	29	0	0	Carpenter	Stephen Fellows Tiverton	NP	39	3,000	0	NA
Suchet Mauran Providence	KN	41	8,000	28,000	Merchant	John Sargeant Tiverton	KN	44	1,600	0	Merchant
Charles Parkhurst Providence	KN	24	2,000	0	Attorney	Benjamin Seabury Tiverton	KN	35	3,700	3,000	NA
Josiah Seagrave Providence	KN		No record			William Baker Warren	KN	37	0	0	Merchant
Josiah Simmons Providence	KN	45	6,000	2,000	Grocer	Charles Smith Warren	KN	24	0	0	Jeweler
Albert Sprague Providence	KN	50	10,000	2,000	Merchant	William Corey Warwick	KN	35	0	0	Master bleacher
Samuel Wheaton Providence	KN	47	0	NA	Merchant	John G. Needham Warwick	KN	53	0	800	Physician
Simeon Babcock Richmond	KN	53	0	NA	Carpenter	George Niles Warwick	KN	33	0	NA	NA
Henry Hierlihy Scituate	KN		No record			Charles Northup Warwick	KN	30	0	500	Merchant
Arthur Randall Scituate	KN	56	0	NA	Farmer	Benjamin T. Gorton West Greenwich	D	47	2,000	500	Farmer
Daniel T. Eddy Smithfield	KN		No record			John G. Weeden Westerly	KN		No record		

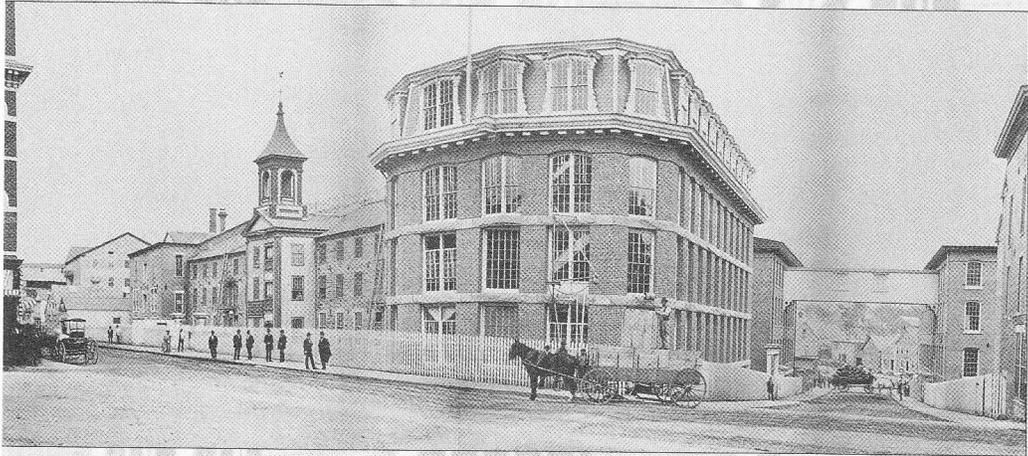
Notes

1. Quoted in Larry Anthony Rand, "The Know-Nothing Party in Rhode Island: Religious Bigotry and Political Success," *Rhode Island History* 23 (October 1964): 112.
2. Because of the collapse of the Jacksonian party system in the early 1850s, party affiliations in Rhode Island and across the nation were quite fluid. On 10 April 1855 the *Providence Daily Journal* reported that the Know-Nothings had captured the legislative seats in every Rhode Island city and town except Foster and Glocester, but the newspaper identified individual legislators only as Whigs, Democrats, or Free-Soilers. Know-Nothing party affiliation was determined for the present study by an examination of the roll-call vote on the centerpiece of the Know-Nothing legislative agenda, the constitutional amendment requiring a twenty-one-year naturalization period before an immigrant could gain the right to vote in Rhode Island elections. A "yes" vote on this amendment was the best indication of Know-Nothing party affiliation. For the seven senators and ten representatives who did not vote, the *Journal's* general classification was followed and the legislators were labeled Know-Nothings. The legislative vote appears in *Acts and Resolves of the General Assembly of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*, January 1856.
3. The historiography of the Rhode Island Know-Nothing party is quite limited. Only three studies of the party have been published, and they present similar interpretations. For the most part, these studies characterize the Know-Nothing movement as strictly anti-Catholic, and they fail to consider the other ideological issues of the day: temperance, slavery, and antipartyism. See Charles Stickney, "Know-Nothingism in Rhode Island," *Publications of the Rhode Island Historical Society*, 1894, pp. 243-57; John Michael Ray, "Anti-Catholicism and Know-Nothingism in Rhode Island," *American Ecclesiastical Review* 148 (January-June 1963): 27-38; Rand, "Know-Nothing Party in Rhode Island," 102-16.
4. The Know-Nothing party and its role in the politics of the 1850s have received increased attention with the rise of the so-called "ethnocultural" interpretation of antebellum politics. In an effort to show how local factors such as temperance, antipartyism, and anti-Catholicism contributed to the rise of the Republican party, many of these historians have explored the Know-Nothing party and its relationship to the Republicans. Overall, these historians have found that the Know-Nothings were affected by a variety of ideological and socioeconomic factors in addition to anti-Catholicism. For example, Michael F. Holt, in "The Politics of Impatience: The Origins of Know-Nothingism," *Journal of American History* 60 (December 1973): 309-31, finds that Know-Nothings were influenced by numerous ideological factors and by the social and economic dislocation that accompanied the emergence of industrial America. Many of Holt's arguments are echoed in Ronald Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York, 1983), 331-40. The most recent study of northern Know-Nothingism, Tyler Anbinder's *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know-Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York, 1992), argues that the Know-Nothings' rise was facilitated by ideological factors, but not by economic dislocation.
5. For a discussion of the Massachusetts Know-Nothings and economic nativism, see Formisano, *Transformation of Political Culture*, 331-40. On the other hand, Anbinder asserts in *Nativism and Slavery*, 34-43, that the argument that Know-Nothings were motivated by economic nativism is largely unfounded.
6. Holt, "Politics of Impatience," 328-29; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 37.
7. The socioeconomic basis of Know-Nothingism nevertheless remains an enigma to historians of antebellum politics. Because the Know-Nothings conducted their proceedings in secret and kept few records, constructing accurate socioeconomic profiles has been difficult. Fortunately for the historian of Rhode Island politics, a membership and minute book for a Providence Know-Nothing lodge exists. This document is especially valuable because the Providence lodge appears to have served as the power behind the state's Know-Nothing organization. The lodge, denoted as "subordinate council number one" by the council of the state's American party, was the first (and possibly the only) such lodge formed in Rhode Island, and its members were the force behind the party's electoral success. The lodge was so important that the party's candidate for lieutenant governor in 1855, Anderson Rose, traveled from his home in New Shoreham to attend its meetings. The prominence of the Providence council undoubtedly guaranteed that party members in other parts of the state would follow its lead in determining the kind of men who would be admitted into the order

Notes continued

- and nominated to run under the party banner. There is actually no hard evidence that other lodges were founded outside Providence. The minute and membership book is found in Records of the Know-Nothings, 19 May 1854-5 May 1856, Manuscripts Division, Rhode Island Historical Society (RIHS).
8. The Rhode Island economy was prospering in 1855, and it would not suffer a downturn until the depression of 1857. The growth of the economy dampened the prospects for economic nativism by creating a demand for labor rather than increasing competition for jobs between native and foreign-born workers. See Peter J. Coleman, *The Transformation of Rhode Island, 1790-1860* (Providence, 1963), 108-60, 200-204.
 9. Many of the same conclusions about the Know-Nothings and economic nativism are reached in Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, chap. 2.
 10. See, e.g., Holt, "Politics of Impatience," 319, and Formisano, *Transformation of Political Culture*, 331-32.
 11. Anbinder draws many of the same conclusions in regard to other states in *Nativism and Slavery*, 127-35.
 12. [Thomas R. Hazard], *A Constitutional Manual for the National American Party, in which is examined the Question of Negro Slavery in Connexion with the Constitution of the United States, By a Northern Man with American Principles* (Providence, 1856), 1; *Providence Tribune*, 24 Apr., 24 Mar., 28 Apr. 1855. Republicanism is examined in Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 118-22; Jean H. Baker, "From Belief into Culture: Republicanism in the Antebellum North," *American Quarterly* 36 (Fall 1985): 532-50; Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, 1978), 156, 162-65, 172; Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *Journal of American History* 79 (June 1992): 11-38; Robert E. Shallope, "Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of Republicanism in American Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 29 (January 1972): 49-80, and "Republicanism and Early American Historiography," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 39 (July 1982): 334-56; Major Wilson, "Republicanism and the Idea of Party in the Jacksonian Period," *Journal of the Early Republic* 8 (Winter 1988): 419-42; Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1969), 46-124.
 13. Hazard, *A Constitutional Manual*, 1; *Providence American Citizen*, 16 May 1855; *Providence Tribune*, 4 Jan. 1854. See also *Providence Tribune*, 23 Sept. 1854; 23 Jan., 9 May, 27 Aug., 14 Oct. 1854; 28 Feb., 24 Mar. 1855; *American Citizen*, 16, 17, 24 May 1855; *Providence Plaindealer*, 26, 28 Apr. 1855. The Know-Nothings' proposal to deal with the threat of Catholics is embodied in Section 9, "Platform of the Rhode Island American Party, from the Minority Report of the Philadelphia Convention, adopted by the party June 19, 1855," Graphics Division, RIHS.
 14. *Providence Tribune*, 14 Mar. 1855.
 15. *Providence Tribune*, 5 Apr. 1854, 14, 16 Mar. 1855; Laurence K. Raber, "The Transformation of the Republican Party in Rhode Island" (M.A. thesis, University of Rhode Island, 1965), 31, 63. The Know-Nothings pledged to combat the flow of liquor in Section 17, "Platform of the Rhode Island American Party." For the Know-Nothings and the temperance movement on the national level, see Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 43-44, 144-45; William Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York, 1987), 98-99, 137-38; Ian R. Tyrrell, *Sobering Up: From Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America, 1800-1860* (Westport, Conn., 1979), 252-89.
 16. In Robert A. Wheeler, "Fifth Ward Irish"—Immigrant Mobility in Providence, 1850-1870," *Rhode Island History* 32 (May 1973): 53-61, the author finds that "fraudulent Irish votes were relatively easy to buy."
 17. *Providence Tribune*, 24 Mar. 1855. See also *Providence Tribune*, 6 Mar., 21 Aug. 1854, 26 Apr. 1855. The Know-Nothings incorporated antipartyism into Sections 8, 10, and 11, "Platform of the Rhode Island American Party." The antipartyism of the time is discussed in Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 122-26; Formisano, *Transformation of Political Culture*, 335; Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 163-69; Holt, "Politics of Impatience," 314-22; Paul Kleppner, *The Third Electoral System, 1853-1892: Parties, Voters, and Political Cultures* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979), 70-86. Another explanation for the strong antipathy toward parties among Know-Nothings was the sizable Whig contingent that joined the party after 1854. Historically, Whigs had been strongly opposed to organized parties, and by virtue of their sheer numbers among the Know-Nothings some of this sentiment could have found its way into the party's rhetoric. For more on the Whigs and antipartyism, see Formisano, *The Birth of Mass Political Parties, Michigan, 1827-1861* (Princeton, 1969), 249-50, and "Political Character, Antipartyism, and the Second Party System," *American Quarterly* 21 (Winter 1969): 683-709.
 18. Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 44-47, 99-100, 162-219; Larry Gara, "Slavery and the Slave Power: A Crucial Distinction," *Civil War History* 15 (March 1969): 5-18; Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 99-100; Holt, *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 171-73.
 19. *Providence Tribune*, 12, 13 Dec. 1854.
 20. The petition opposing the Kansas-Nebraska Act appears in the *Providence Tribune*, 18 Feb. 1854. For more on Know-Nothing opposition to slavery, see *Providence Tribune*, 21 Aug., 14, 19 Oct., 12, 13, 19 Dec. 1854; 15 Jan., 19, 23, 26, 28 Feb., 1, 12, 23 Mar., 24, 28 Apr., 23 June, 3 July 1855. Antislavery sentiment was incorporated into Sections 3, 4, and 17, "Platform of the Rhode Island American Party."
 21. Rand, "Know-Nothing Party in Rhode Island," 116. See also Stickney, "Know-Nothingism in Rhode Island," and Ray, "Anti-Catholicism and Know-Nothingism in Rhode Island."
 22. Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 137-39; Dale Baum, "Know-Nothingism and the Republican Majority in Massachusetts: The Political Realignment of the 1850s," *Journal of American History* 64 (March 1978): 959-86, and *The Civil War Party System: The Case of Massachusetts, 1848-1876* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1984), 31, 43-48; William Gienapp, "Nativism and the Creation of a Republican Majority in the North before the Civil War," *Journal of American History* 72 (December 1985): 529-59.
 23. *Acts and Resolves*, January 1856, January 1857; Edward Field, *State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations at the End of the Century: A History* (Boston, 1902), 1:366-67. See also *Journal of the House*, January 1856, and *Journal of the Senate*, January 1856, Rhode Island State Archives, Providence.
 24. *Acts and Resolves*, May 1852, January 1853, May 1855; *Journal of the House*, May 1855; *Journal of the Senate*, May 1855; Patrick T. Conley and Matthew J. Smith, *Catholicism in Rhode Island: The Formative Era* (Providence, 1976), 66-68, 79. Local officials frequently cited the procedural problems of the law as the most significant obstacle to convictions in the name of temperance; see, for example,

- James Y. Smith, "Address to the City Council, 1856," James Y. Smith Papers, Manuscripts Division, RIHS.
25. *Acts and Resolves*, January 1856; Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 155-57; Field, *State of Rhode Island*, 1:355, 364-65.
 26. For the economic biases of the Massachusetts Know-Nothings, see Formisano, *Transformation of Political Culture*, 331-40.
 27. *Providence Tribune*, 4 Mar. 1856.
 28. On the origins of the Republican party, historians have been divided between those who emphasize the Republicans' strict antislavery stance and those who believe that nativism and temperance were equally important to the rise of the party. For the former view, see Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 246-78; Baum, *Civil War Party System*, 24-54, and "Know-Nothingism and the Republican Majority in Massachusetts," 959-86; Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York, 1970), 226-60; David Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861* (New York, 1976), 248-61. For the latter view, see Formisano, *Birth of Mass Political Parties*, 284-88; Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 104, 365-67, 415-16, 418-23, and "Nativism and the Creation of a Republican Majority," 529-59; Michael F. Holt, *Forging a Majority: The Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848-1860* (New Haven, Conn., 1969), 222, and *Political Crisis of the 1850s*, 171-80, 212-13; Joel Silbey, "The Undisguised Connection: Know-Nothings into Republicans, New York as a Test Case," in *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics before the Civil War* (New York, 1985), 127-65.
 29. *Providence Daily Journal*, 21 Feb. 1856.
 30. For the 1856 Republican platform, see *Providence Tribune*, 13 Mar. 1856, and *Providence Daily Journal*, 13 Mar. 1856.
 31. *Providence American Citizen*, 17 May 1855.
 32. Quoted in Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 167.
 33. Section 16, "Platform of the Rhode Island American Party." Moreover, the firm support of the antislavery movement among the Rhode Island Know-Nothings caused them to be the first Know-Nothing state council to leave the national organization. Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 173-74. For the details of the national Know-Nothing convention of 1855, see Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, 166-74, and Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 227-30.
 34. Although the Rhode Island Know-Nothing council seceded from the national party, some Rhode Island Know-Nothings maintained ties with the proslavery national organization. In 1856, when the proslavery Know-Nothings and the antislavery "Northern Americans" held separate conventions, Rhode Island's four-member delegation split, with three delegates attending the antislavery convention and one attending the national, or proslavery, convention. But despite the party's small group of hardcore nativists, a majority of the Rhode Island Know-Nothing party was firmly antislavery. A list of the delegates at the two conventions is in Michael F. Holt, "The Antimasonic and Know-Nothing Parties," in *History of U.S. Political Parties*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (New York, 1973), 1:722-35.
 35. *Providence Daily Journal*, 19 Mar. 1856; *Providence Tribune*, 13 Mar. 1856.
 36. *Providence Daily Journal*, 3 Apr. 1856; *Acts and Resolves*, May 1856, January 1857.
 37. Among the members of the Providence lodge, for example, were John Larchar, James Y. Smith, Suchet Mauran, Samuel Richmond, and William H. Bishop, all possessed of over \$30,000 in real and personal property; see *Providence Tax Book*, 1853-1860 (Providence, 1853-1860). For the economic elites in the Know-Nothing General Assembly, see the appendix to this article.
 38. "An Address of the Rhode Island State Republican Committee to the Electors of Rhode Island" (1859), 5-6, RIHS.



A Unionless General Strike: The Rhode Island Ten-Hour Movement of 1873

CARL GERSUNY

In the spring of 1873 the Rhode Island branch of the New England Ten-Hour Association—an ephemeral social movement of which no discernible trace remains except for contemporaneous newspaper accounts—undertook a campaign to reduce the hours of work in the state’s textile mills to sixty per week. After petitioning employers in vain for shorter hours, the leaders of the movement put forward a schedule of working hours to supersede the sixty-six-hour schedule instituted by the companies. The new schedule was to be implemented by direct action of the mill workers. The demand for a reduction in work time, accompanied by a corresponding reduction in pay, was a modest one, but it posed a bold challenge to managerial authority, and it was met with remorseless resistance and reprisals. In the face of the dismissal of activists, threats of eviction from company housing, refusal of credit at grocery stores, and lack of adequate strike funds, the strike collapsed after twenty-three days.

Although unsuccessful, the 1873 strike deserves to be remembered as a noble effort in the century-long struggle for shorter hours of work in the United States. Along with increasing wages, reducing work time ranked at the top of the American labor agenda from the 1820s to the 1930s. Seemingly interminable hours of drudgery in the emergent factory system created a burden that cried out for amelioration. As David Zonderman points out, “Workers knew that the hours of labor were more than a matter of minutes and time on a clock. The struggle to regulate the work day was yet another test of power and control in the workplace.”¹ During the depression of the 1930s, efforts to legislate a thirty-hour week failed; and in the post-World War II era and into the early 1970s, the call for a thirty-hour week for forty hours’ pay would be articulated only on the fringes of the labor movement. In effect, the struggle for shorter hours was ended by the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938. The May 1873 Rhode Island strike is thus situated squarely in the middle of the historical period in which this issue was played out.

Lippitt Woolen Company Mill, Woonsocket, circa 1875. Photo by J. H. Beal, albumen print. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1287).

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To justify the notion of a unionless general strike, it may be useful to examine the distinction between social movements and formal organizations. As Lewis Killian observes, “The genesis of social movements . . . is rooted in human frustration.”² In an effort to reduce frustration—e.g., discontent over excessive work time—movements like the Ten-Hour Association spring up. This happens with the emergence of leaders who articulate an alternative vision that challenges the status quo and who engage the support of followers in efforts to implement that vision. Such movements pursue their agenda with little of what passes for organized structure. Social movements disappear for two basic reasons: if they succeed, they become bureaucratized as formal organizations with hierarchic authority structures and elaborate record-keeping and accounting systems; if they fail, they fade away until the source of discontent that produced them

demands satisfaction again. Thus we can speak of the labor movement and of organized labor as different entities. They may overlap, but one can exist without the other. The Rhode Island branch of the New England Ten-Hour Association was part of the labor movement of the 1870s, but it was not part of organized labor.

Apart from contemporaneous newspaper reports preserved on microfilm, the source material about the events of May 1873 can be counted on the fingers of one hand. In the Providence City Archives there is an order from Mayor Thomas A. Doyle directing the chief of police to send twelve police officers and a sergeant to Woonsocket for strike duty, and there is a report by the mayor that the North Providence police chief had acknowledged this assistance. In the Slater Company Papers at Harvard University's Baker Library, a vast archival collection equivalent to thirteen hundred volumes, there are two letters mentioning the strike.³ And in the Lippitt Papers at the Rhode Island Historical Society there are the Lippitt Woolen Company's production records documenting an 88 percent drop in output for May 1873 compared to the output of the preceding month.

As an evidentiary base for the telling of this story, the surviving Rhode Island newspapers leave a great deal to be desired, since they were uniformly hostile toward the ten-hour movement and made no clear-cut distinction between antilabor editorial opinion and fact in their reports. But fortunately a balance can be struck, because the *Boston Herald* and the *Boston Daily Advertiser* both

relied on special correspondents in Providence who were favorably disposed toward the strikers, and the *Workingman's Advocate*, a Chicago weekly whose name denotes its sympathies, reprinted items from the *Lawrence Journal*, a Massachusetts labor reform paper.⁴

With respect to press bias, one of the movement's leaders told an interviewer for the *Boston Herald* (30 April)⁵ that "the Providence papers have greatly underrated the intelligence of the labor reformers of Rhode Island and have taken refuge under the banner of capital, thereby endeavoring to obstruct our progress. But we have some bright intellects in our ranks and can do our own journalizing." On occasion the movement's "own journalizing" has to be treated with caution as well. The assertions that the New England Ten-Hour Association had 30,000 members in Rhode Island (*Boston Herald*, 30 April) and that "twenty-thousand mill operatives, more or less, celebrated May day by working only ten hours" (*Boston Daily Advertiser*, 5 May) strain one's credulity. The 1870 federal census reported a total of 19,555 operatives in the state's cotton and woolen mills. The 1875 state census counted 25,312, of whom 4,551 were children under the age of fifteen.⁶ The number of operatives in 1873 must have been in the range of 20,000 to 25,000, and neither the claim of 30,000 members nor that of 20,000 strikers seems believable. A more credible and creditable figure appeared in the *Workingman's Advocate* (10 May), when "Operative" complained that "for some inexplicable cause only about 6,000 operatives have, up to the present writing, ceased work."

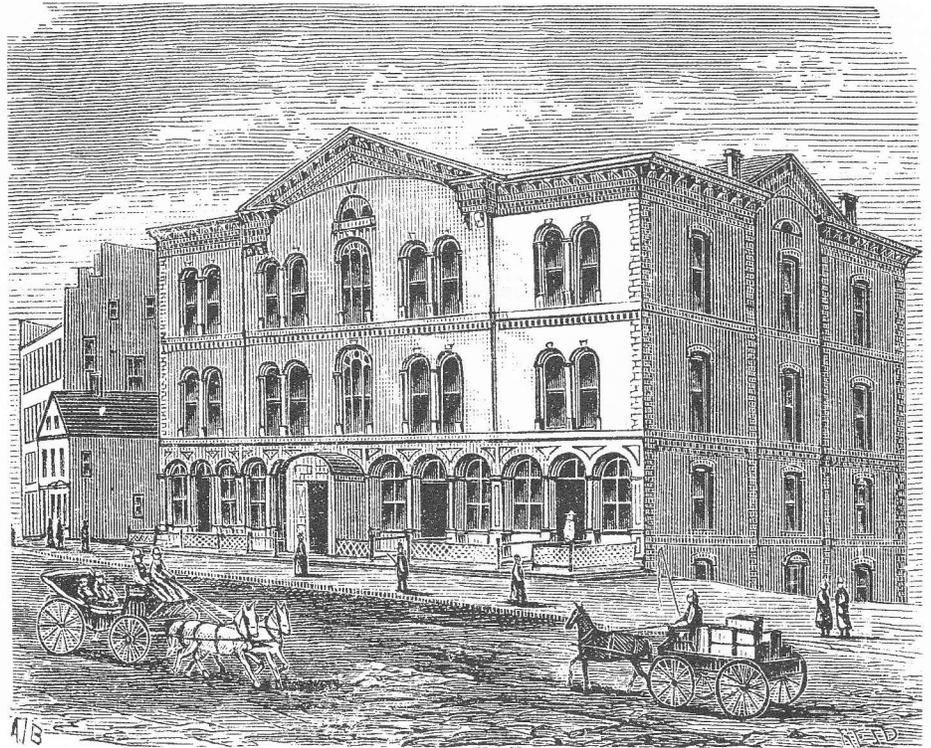
Output of the Lippitt Woolen Company, April-June 1873

Month	WOVEN			FINISHED		
	Pieces	Yards	Weight [lb]	Pieces	Yards	Weight [lb]
April	940	40,415	62,339	819	32,127	47,190
May	192	7,869	12,683	95	3,675	5,662
June	733	30,086	47,680	677	25,511	38,927

SOURCE: Lippitt Woolen Company goods ledger, Lippitt Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society.



Preparations for the May 1873 action included a state convention held on 16 March in the office of the *New England Register*, a labor reform newspaper, at 125 Broad Street in Providence. To secure a reduction in work time, the delegates agreed on a tactic of getting their supporters to leave the mills at the end of ten hours of work. Unless employers acceded to the association's demands by 1 May, those demands were to be accomplished by direct action. (*Workingman's Advocate*, 20 March)



Harris Block, Woonsocket, circa 1880. Wood engraving by A. L. B. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 709).

On 14 April a meeting of the ten-hour movement drew an overflow crowd to Harris Hall in Woonsocket. The meeting, chaired by F. C. Birtles, heard a report from James Austin, who said that the mill superintendents had agreed that ten hours was “enough for a day’s work” but had insisted that the ten-hour day would put them at a competitive disadvantage unless the shorter hours were adopted on a nationwide basis. The workers would have to “take the matter into their own hands,” Austin declared. After a performance by the Ten-Hour Singers, a resolution was introduced:

WHEREAS, we the factory operatives of Woonsocket and vicinity having petitioned our employers in vain for a reduction in the hours of labor, and believing by sad experience the present eleven hour system to be injurious physically and morally to the most robust, as well as to the most delicate constitutions, of men, women and children who operate the machinery of all manufacturing establishments throughout the land, and believing that self-preservation is the first law of nature; we deem it to be a duty we owe ourselves, our families and the constituent manhood of the country, to do all in our power to counteract the evils of excessive labor; therefore

RESOLVED, That we adopt the recommendation of the State Central Committee of the convention delegates held in Providence, March 16, 1873, and pledge ourselves to work no more than ten hours per day, or sixty hours per week, on and after the first day of May next.

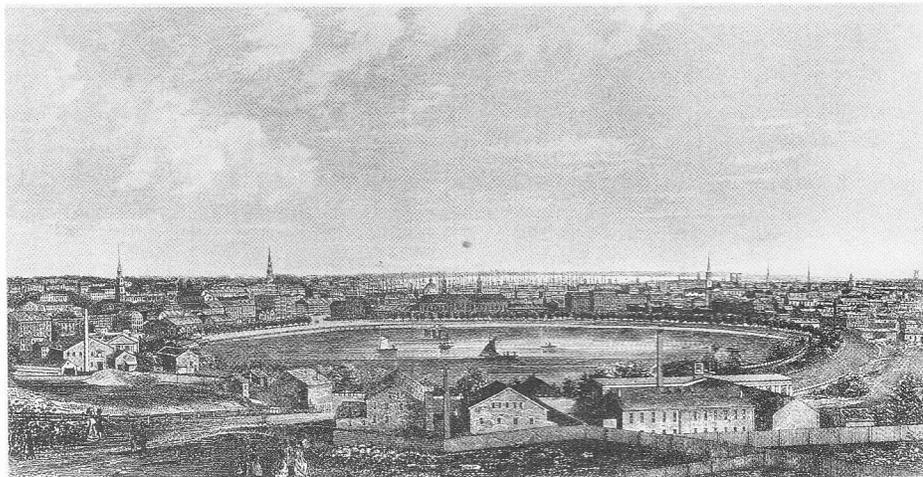
RESOLVED, That we give our employers due notice of such intentions by sending them a copy of these resolutions.

The resolution was seconded by the Honorable Nathan T. Verry and supported by English- and French-speaking participants at the meeting, and it was then adopted by unanimous vote. (*Providence Morning Star*, 16 April)

On 26 April a mass meeting was held on the Cove Promenade in Providence. It was chaired by Simon Morgan, the president of the Ten-Hour Association. Morgan introduced J. W. Pollitt, who “in an earnest speech alluded to the ruinous effects of concentrated capital. The long hours of labor which operatives are compelled to spend in the mills and workshops are . . . the greatest injustice [said Pollitt], and these over-worked men, women and children should not be debarred from the pure air and blessed sunshine; should not be deprived of a chance to become educated.” A resolution was passed, and then a torch-light parade was formed to march around the city to the association’s headquarters on Broad Street. Behind the parade marshals were a twenty-piece band of the Rhode Island Guards Battalion, a color guard with an American flag bearing the motto “United We Stand,” and several hundred men. The Lonsdale Cornet Band brought up the rear. (*Providence Morning Star*, 28 April)

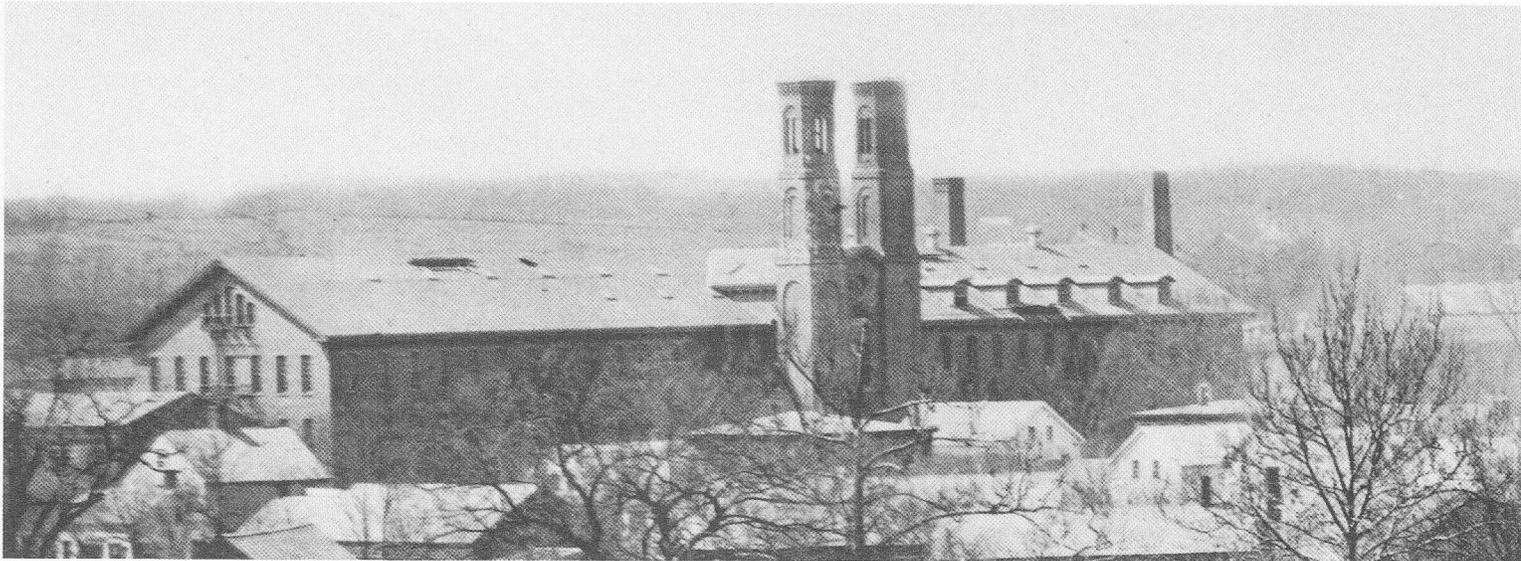
On the day preceding the strike the *Boston Herald* (30 April) described the members of the ten-hour movement as “intelligent, capable operatives—men and women who know their business, who are steady in their lives, industrious, saving and good citizens. They work now eleven and twelve hours a day, in hot, unwholesome rooms, shut out by their long hours of labor from much that is pleasant in life, and exhausting their bodies by such a daily course.” Asked by the newspaper’s special correspondent how the strike was to be set in motion, one of the leaders replied, “Simply by leaving work on May day at the time fixed by the association. We adopted a time table recently providing that we would commence work at half-past 6 o’clock A.M., take forty-five minutes for dinner and stop the machinery at 6 o’clock P.M. the first five days of the week, while on Saturday we would leave off at 12:45 P.M., making a total of sixty hours’ work per week.” The key word here was *simply*, for there was nothing simple in such a challenge to managerial authority.

Charles Magnus and Company, looking south toward the Cove Basin, Providence, circa 1868. Steel engraving. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1198).



The *Providence Morning Star* (1 May) reported that on the eve of the strike a demonstration in Olneyville, with band music and speeches by the movement’s leaders, was attended by two thousand to three thousand persons. An account of the beginning of the strike in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* (2 May) quoted Simon Morgan as saying that a “reduction of hours of labor without a corre-

sponding reduction in pay is not expected or asked for. A *pro rata* reduction in pay will be cheerfully accepted." According to the paper, Morgan further stated that "he will not countenance violence or extreme measures of any sort. The strikers were told that whatever happened, they must be peaceful and respectful; that if they are locked out of their mills they should go quietly to their homes, and if locked in when their ten hours' work was done, they should remain quiet until the doors were opened."



Atlantic Delaine Mills, Olneyville, Providence, circa 1866. Albumen print. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8376).

The strike got under way on 1 May, as planned. The mills' management responded quickly. At the Atlantic Delaine Mills in Olneyville, "the several overseers were instructed to inquire of the help if they intended to keep on at work eleven hours a day, as per agreement, or intended to stop work at 6 o'clock &c.," the *Providence Daily Journal* (2 May) reported. "Those who announced an intention to stop work were quietly settled with and discharged, and told that the company would not pay them then to stay there and spread discontent among the other operatives." When the managers and overseers left the Atlantic Delaine mills after 6:30 that evening, they were "severally followed, hooted at and offensive epithets applied, but not harmed. Mr. H. W. Jordan, overseer of one of the weaving rooms, while accompanying some of his frightened weavers home for their protection, was pretty thoroughly stoned but not hit, and at one time the crowd made a rush for him, but patting his hand on his revolver, he ordered them to stand back and they obeyed." (According to an account in the 10 May *Workingman's Advocate*, he drew his weapon and pointed it at the crowd.) The women "are as earnest as their male companions" in support of the cause, said the *Journal*. The paper reported that only twenty-five men and women left the Atlantic Delaine Mills at 6 o'clock, but the *Providence Morning Herald* (2 May) put the number at about three hundred.

The strike was considered important news even beyond the region, and it was given front-page coverage by the *New York Times* on 2 May:

In Pawtucket, the operatives of the Slater Mills have been locked out all day, the managers announcing their determination to keep them out until they are ready to work on the old basis. The mill managers and superintendents do not seem

inclined, as a rule, to deal harshly with the strikers . . . believing that the movement is in great measure involuntary, joined by the operatives to a considerable extent because of fear or bad advice of meddling leaders. . . . The leaders will not be taken back.

“Strikers who reside in the corporation dwelling houses have received notice that they will be obliged to quit the tenements and seek dwelling places elsewhere if they persist in the strike,” said the *Providence Morning Star* on 3 May. The paper went on to observe that “a large proportion of the operatives engaged in the strike are women and children who are employed as weavers and spinners, and it is alleged that they have been too easily led into this movement and that they are not credited with possessing proper judgment.”

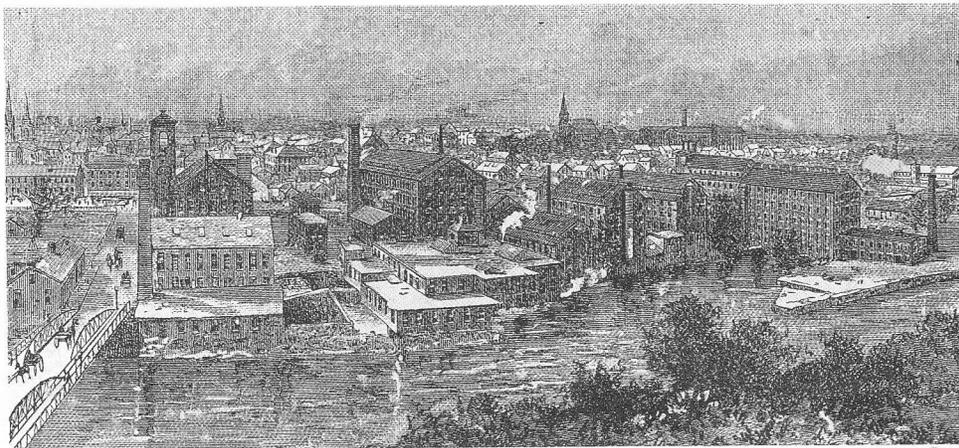
The *Providence Morning Herald* of 3 May noted that

great police preparations were made in Olneyville for an expected outbreak but the services of the police were not needed to any great extent. Sheriff Holden and Captain Ayer with twenty-five of the police force of this city were present in Olneyville at an early hour, together with Chief of Police Howard of North Providence with about 40 men. When the time arrived for ringing in the operatives into the Delaine Mills, a crowd collected in the streets and some of the young women indulged in some boisterous action, resulting in the arrest of two of them for reveling. . . . The afternoon was as quiet as a Sabbath in the country.

The *Herald* also reported that sixteen mills in Woonsocket were shut by the strike and that all the mills except the haircloth and woolen mills on Central Street were closed in Central Falls.

The enemies of labor were inclined to understate the extent of the strike and the friends of labor to overstate it. On 3 May the *Providence Daily Journal* dis-

A view of the riverfront in Central Falls, circa 1870. Wood engraving. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8375).



puted as “materially erroneous” the report in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* of the previous day that “twenty-thousand mill operatives, more or less, celebrated May-day by working only ten hours. . . . So far is this from the truth, that the only strikes occurred in Woonsocket, Olneyville and in two or three other villages.” Insisting that it was not antilabor, the *Journal* concluded with the assertion that “there has never been a day when the JOURNAL was not the advocate of the workingman’s rights; there

has never been in it a word intended to interfere with, or detract from his best interests.”

Reporting from Pawtucket, the *Providence Evening Bulletin* of 6 May found that

the existence of the strike becomes more apparent every day. In many of the mills the busy wheels are still and stalwart men who can ill afford to lose their earnings are seen in groups about the streets. . . . Some of the mills . . . are glad to suspend operations until the market has a more favorable tendency. The strikers seem without definite aim or plans for the future and have not the remotest idea of what may happen if the strike should be protracted. There is no organization or “union” among them, and there is no common fund from which to draw assistance, and it is probable that the thing will die out of itself in a very short time.

The strikers' lack of a union apparently pleased the paper's editors, but it was bad news for the supporters of the ten-hour movement. The weakness of the market, on the eve of a major economic downturn, did not bode well for the strikers. According to the *New York Times* (6 May), shopkeepers in mill neighborhoods "were talking of temporarily closing to avoid giving further risky credit."

Payday at the Atlantic Delaine Mills was covered by the 9 May *Boston Daily Advertiser*:

An extra force of police is present in Olneyville to prevent riotous proceedings, but there have been none that can be attributed to the strikers. Most of the operatives presented themselves at the counting room of the mills during the day . . . and demanded their pay, but none of them got it except the non-strikers and some of the smaller children, the latter being considered too young to be responsible for their course, and without influence on the strike.

In another account of payday in Olneyville, the 9 May *Providence Morning Star* mentioned the presence of twenty police officers from Providence and twenty-four from North Providence "to oversee the nonstrikers payday." The *Star* also noted the appearance of signs bearing the slogan "Bread or Blood" posted near the Atlantic Delaine Mills. Well-attended meetings of strikers were reported in Central Falls, Warren, and Providence. At a meeting in Dyerville, Providence, Simon Morgan condemned the withholding of strikers' pay and promised that "the best legal talent in the country would be engaged to get the wages owed to strikers." The meeting also heard speeches by two other leaders of the movement, J. W. Pollitt and Jonathan Biltcliffe, in which they denounced the oppression of working people.

A letter signed "Operative," with a Providence dateline, was printed in the *Workingman's Advocate* on 10 May. Mentioning the arrests of women for "yelling and cheering," the letter went on to say that "the only wonder is that more are not arrested, for the people of this place have no sympathy for working people and [since] they [the working people] do not enjoy the power of universal suffrage, the Nabobs of the place care little about them."

On 12 May the *Providence Morning Herald* reprinted from the *Boston Sunday Herald* parts of a long letter from Providence concerning the ten-hour movement in Rhode Island. The letter presented an optimistic picture of the strike:

The association claims that the movement for ten hours, so far, is a success, inasmuch as it has attracted public attention and sympathy, and has been the first combined effort ever made by the mill operatives of Rhode Island to break down the caste feeling which employers have striven for years, to sustain; that it has been a success because it has shown the mill owners that they do not own their help, body and soul; and that it is also a success because it has, in fact, forced the mills to stop for lack of help to run them, and will force employers to suspend business unless they give in to the demand; that it must go on because the operatives are for it heartily.⁷

This rosy assessment may have been intended to give encouragement to the movement's supporters, but it overlooked the reality of the matter: with the mills shut down, the owners were better placed to starve the workers into submission than vice versa.

The writer went on to outline the tactic chosen by the movement's leadership for implementation in case of a prolonged impasse. It was surely one of the most fanciful ideas ever advanced within a labor movement: the workers would

withdraw their savings-bank deposits to “force the manufacturers to terms.” According to the leaders’ estimate, one-third of the \$43 million on deposit in Rhode Island banks belonged to mill operatives. But even if that estimate was accurate—a doubtful proposition, since it would have meant that operatives had average savings of about \$600 each, a princely sum in 1873—it seems highly unlikely that these affluent workers could have been persuaded to make the necessary withdrawals.

Another dubious course of action mentioned in the letter was the refusal of outside financial assistance for the strikers. “The leaders have had encouraging offers of money aid from other trades—the moulders, carpenters, blacksmiths, jewellers, etc.—but have declined the generous assistance. These trade associations proposed to devote a quarter of a dollar a member for the purpose, but though the offer is heartily appreciated it is thought the operatives will have no need of going outside their own association for funds.”

On 13 May, Providence mayor Thomas Doyle ordered that twelve police officers and a sergeant be sent to Woonsocket.⁸ Policing the strike there was easy duty. The 14 May *Providence Morning Star* reported from Woonsocket that “a posse of thirteen policemen with the High Sheriff of Providence and a Deputy arrived on the 12:30 train this afternoon and proceeded to the Woonsocket Company mill in Bernon. With the exception of a crowd there is . . . no indication of special excitement.” Toward the end of the week the *Woonsocket Patriot* (16 May) indicated that the dispatch of the posse had been unnecessary: “Contrary to various rumors . . . there have been no disturbances, nor any disposition to injure person or property. . . . The guardians of the peace came, but found nothing to do, and returned in the evening.”



Providence mayor Thomas A. Doyle, circa 1865. Engraving by F. T. Stuart. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8373).

A commentary reflecting the activists’ perception of the strike after its first two weeks appeared in the *Lawrence Journal* on 17 May and was reprinted in the 24 May *Workingman’s Advocate*:

The operatives of Rhode Island have again and again sought interviews with their employers in order to come to terms with them in regard to the reduction of hours of labor. In many cases an interview was positively refused, the wishes of the operatives treated with contempt. In fact, the lordly mill-owners would not condescend to those whose labor produced all they possess, as men, as equals, as children of a common father. No, these breadwinners were looked upon merely as slaves, and as to hours of labor not to be consulted. The operatives at last resolved that they would no longer be dictated to by a few men, who had grown rich from the labor of others. They resolved that after the first of May they would give but ten hours as a day’s labor. . . . The first of May came, and in most cases the factory owners struck and refused admittance to their operatives when they presented themselves at the gates the next morning.

On the plea that the operatives had not worked a fortnight’s notice, the factory owners of Olneyville refused to pay them their wages at the regular pay day. . . . Police were stationed to protect the thieves and prevent the operatives from taking the money due them. A night or two later a crowd collected near the residence of the Superintendent of the mill and raised the cry of “Bread or Blood.” . . . Let the factory-lords beware or they may rouse the sleeping tiger and the cry of “Bread or Blood” may have stern and terrible meaning.

Weighing in on the opposite side, the *Providence Daily Journal* of 17 May printed an unsigned attack on the ten-hour movement:

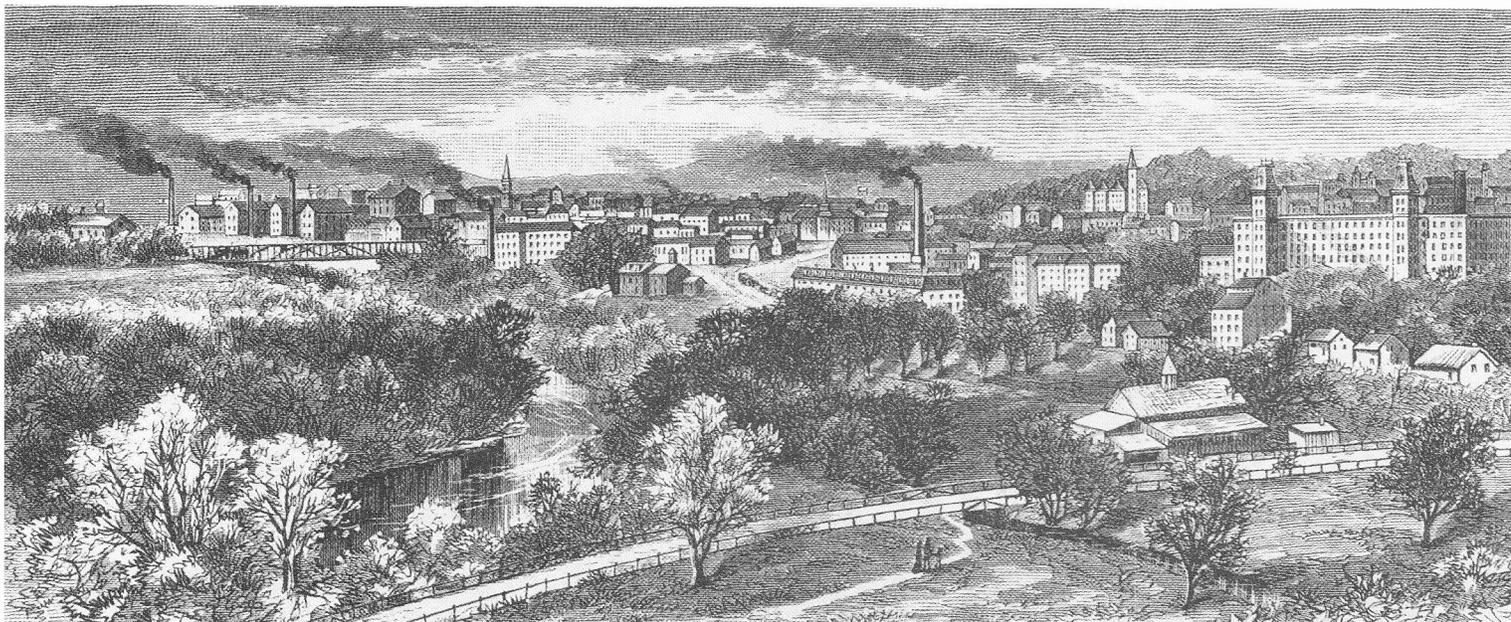
STRIKES.—At this moment, hundreds and thousands of working men, women, boys and girls, who depend entirely on their hands for support are lying idle, brought into this condition of idleness by the noisy, unwise and wicked tongues of one or more lazy men who hope to live without work by feeding on the wages of those they make uneasy and discontented. But idleness is not the worst part of this movement. It demoralizes the laboring classes and in its proportion influences society at large. Mills and factories are stopped and the tide of trade is turned into other channels; foreign markets and manufactures are stimulated by it; suffering comes to families who depend on daily toil for bread, habits of industry give place to habits of idleness, men hang around saloons . . . and girls are driven to sin for food and clothing. . . . There is also another feature of strikes as they are and have been conducted, which points to consequences which workingmen themselves do not foresee. They are led to look upon their employers as enemies and task masters, and themselves as slaves.



Time was now beginning to run out for the strikers. Reporting on a strikers' meeting in Olneyville, the *Providence Morning Star* (17 May) found that "enthusiasm was at a low ebb. . . . A majority of the strikers are anxious to return to their places, as they are tired and disgusted at the useless strike and have had enough of it." The story related the experience of a striker who asked Simon Morgan for financial assistance and instead was given a printed card with which to go from door to door and solicit donations. Questioned by a reporter, Morgan said he was going to Fall River "to consult with leaders in relation to the collection of funds." The reference to Fall River suggests that the Rhode Island movement may have been a spin-off of a movement in Massachusetts, but no trace of such a movement has been found.

By the end of the third week of the strike, leaders were becoming increasingly beset with problems stemming from the lack of funds. From Woonsocket the *Evening Bulletin* of 21 May reported "a gathering of disaffected operatives" at which "Mr. James Austin, the janitor of Harris Institute, was haranguing the crowd upon the duty of self-sacrifice." Austin added, however, that funds had started to come in, and that they would be disbursed at the Exchange Block the next morning.

Cotton and woolen mills in Woonsocket, circa 1870. Engraving. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8374).



A circular dated 20 May, delivered to the counting rooms of the Woonsocket mills and reprinted in the 21 May *Providence Morning Star*, signaled the impending end of the strike:

To the Proprietors of the Cotton and Woolen Mills of Woonsocket and Vicinity: Having learned that you are willing and desirous, even as ourselves, for the adoption of a uniform, general, universal or national ten hours system of labor throughout the whole United States, we, your operatives, hereby heartily and cordially greet you.

We would wish to disabuse your minds if possible, that by our recent movement we ever had any but good will towards you, or any other than sincere good wishes for your prosperity and success, but rather that we most earnestly and truthfully believed, that ten hours service was and is enough for a regular, constant daily laborer. We believe it for health, we believe it for intelligence, we believe it for justice and humanity sake. [But pending the enactment of national ten-hour legislation] we would respectfully inform you that we will, with entire good will and fraternal feelings, resume our work with your permission on a basis of sixty-three (63) hours a week.

The deferential, even obsequious tone of this document poignantly reflects the disparity in power between the textile moguls and the unionless workers, who had virtually no rights in a market-driven system.

The bitter end came after twenty-three days, when a committee of the movement's leaders concluded that it was not possible to bring the manufacturers to terms because of insufficient participation in the strike by the operatives. The lack of participation was attributed to the millowners' threat to evict strikers from company-owned housing and the merchants' unwillingness to extend credit to the strikers, as well as to the dismissal of activists at the mills. The committee recommended that operatives return to work under the old work schedules and then continue agitating for a ten-hour day. (*Providence Daily Journal*, 26 May) The *Workingman's Advocate* of 31 May marked the end of the strike with a terse notice that "the Rhode Island strike may be regarded as ended, the ten hour committee having recommended the operatives return to work."

The *Providence Daily Journal* took a parting shot at the strike leaders on 30 May. Under a Woonsocket dateline, it lamented the twenty-three days' wages lost by the town's strikers, about \$100,000 "worse than burnt up in this village, and this amount they can never make up." After denying any desire to foment ethnic hostilities, the writer of this piece went on to do just that:

We cannot help asking ourselves how it is, that the Irish population in particular, who have told us so much of the oppression and tyranny of England practiced toward them in their native land, should, when they come to this free country, allow themselves to be led by a few of these same Englishmen who cannot leave behind them when they come to this better land, the terribly bitter spirit of the Trades Unions, whose practice has been more tyrannical than that of any existing government on earth.

It need hardly be pointed out that the English labor activists in the 1873 Rhode Island ten-hour movement had been subjected to the oppression and tyranny of the same class of Englishmen from whose tender mercies the Irish immigrants had fled.

Some of the active participants in the ten-hour movement were subsequently blacklisted by millowners. Two of the movement's leaders, Simon Morgan and

Jonathan Biltcliffe, came to public notice again in 1875, when they helped lead a major strike in Fall River. Biltcliffe, by then seventy-three years old, was later arrested for vagrancy while soliciting funds in Newport for blacklisted casualties of that strike.⁹



Although the Rhode Island ten-hour movement of 1873 did not achieve its stated objective, the mill workers and the activists who galvanized them did not pursue their goal in vain. They stood up to powerful adversaries, part of whose mythology was the self-serving claim that the employment relationship was not adversarial. Launching their strike on the eve of the 1870s depression, the workers had the deck further stacked against them, and a federalism that made it easy to play off workers in one state against those in other states increased the daunting odds they faced. The mill operatives of 1873 had a hard row to hoe; but in sacrificing in a good cause, they helped keep the issue alive until its ultimate success.

Notes

1. David Zonderman, *Aspirations and Anxieties: New England Workers and the Mechanized Factory System, 1815-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 234.
2. Lewis Killian, "Social Movements," in *Handbook of Modern Sociology*, ed. Robert E. L. Faris (Chicago, Rand McNally, 1964), 433.
3. "Owing to the present disturbed state of labor in this vicinity, we consider it judicious to wait a few days before making any change in our present scale of prices," S. Slater, Jr., wrote to S. Slater and Sons on 2 May 1873. On 9 May, Slater informed the company that the mills "are stopped by the strike." Slater Company Papers, 146:96, 128, Baker Library, Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration.
4. A diligent search failed to turn up any of the May 1873 issues of the *Lawrence Journal*.
5. Contemporaneous newspaper accounts from 1873 are referenced in the text by day and month.
6. Edwin M. Snow, *Report upon the Census of Rhode Island, 1875* (Providence: Providence Press Co., 1877), cvi, cxi.
7. "Women operatives are enthusiastic in the movement, and encourage the faint-hearted men," the writer added later in the letter.
8. Thomas A. Doyle to the Chief of Police, Police Orders, 28 Feb. 1866-27 July 1875, p. 385, Providence City Archives, Providence City Hall.
9. Philip T. Silvia, *The Spindle City: Labor, Politics, and Religion in Fall River, Massachusetts, 1870-1905* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1973), 82, 87, 93-94.

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*Detail from a Rhode Island American party broad-
side, 1856. RIHS Collection (RHI X3 8382).*