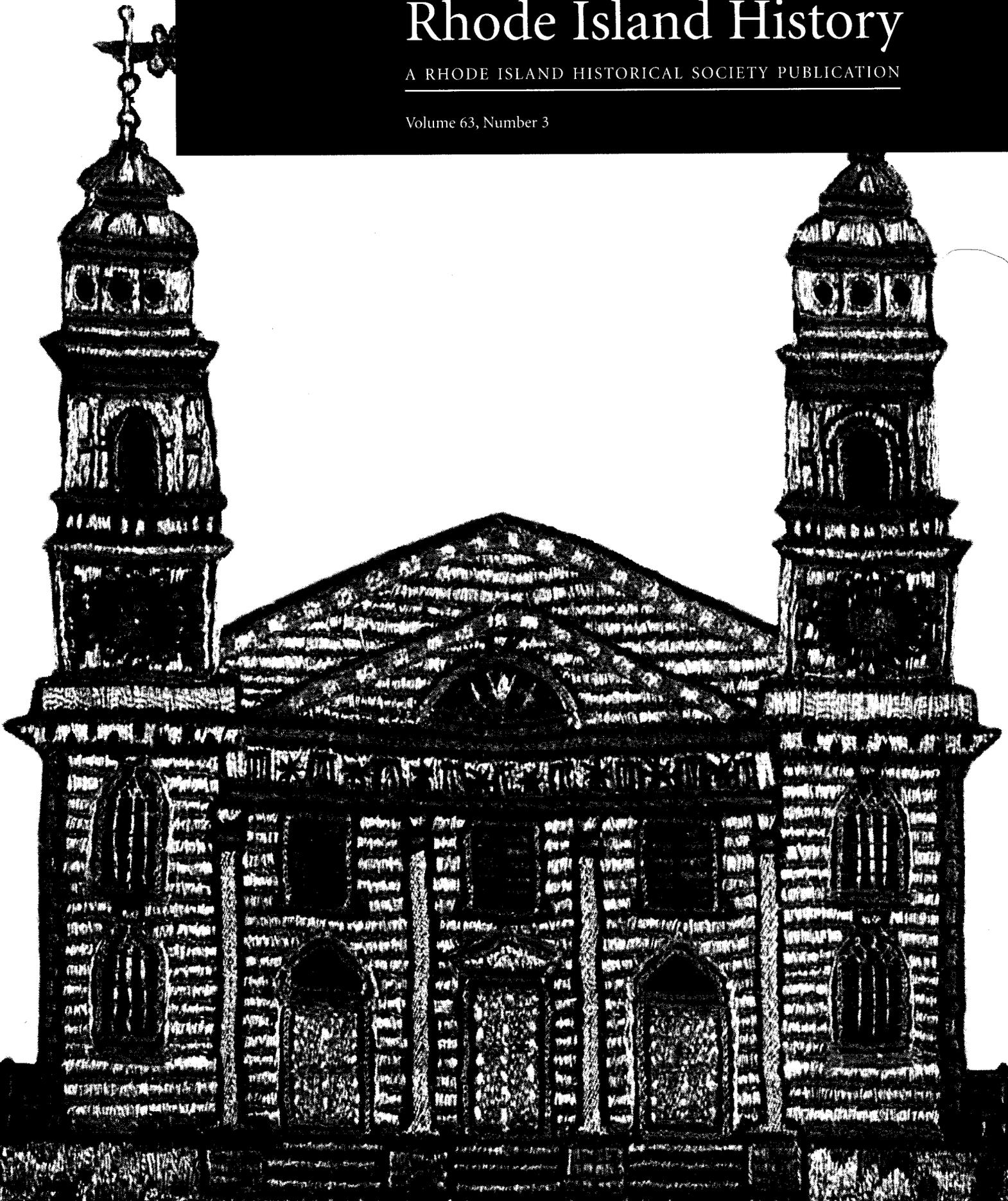


FALL 2005

Rhode Island History

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Built in 1795, the First Congregational Church was one of Providence's most prominent buildings until it was burned down by a deranged man, Peleg Gifford, in 1814. RIHS Collection (RH1 X5 86).

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Volume 63, Number 3

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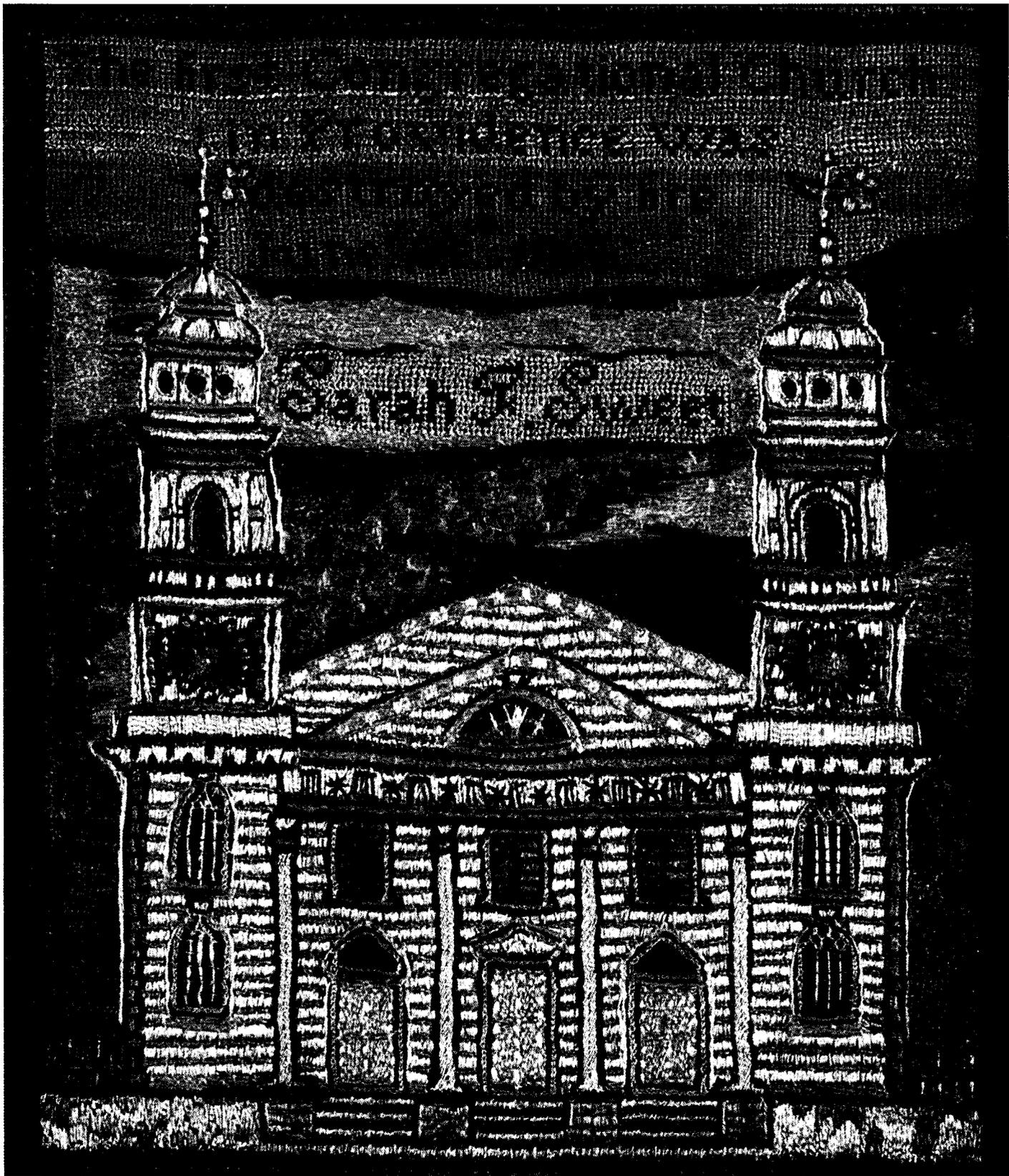
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Peleg Gifford's Tale

CHERRY FLETCHER BAMBERG

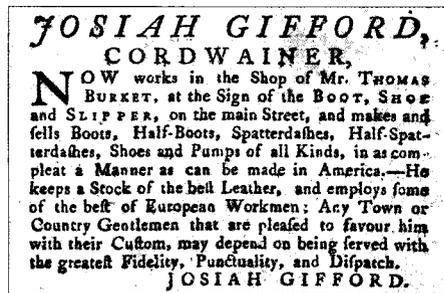
The story of Peleg Gifford is one of the more fascinating and tragic tales in the history of Providence. An enterprising, well-educated young man from a prosperous family, he descended into madness before he was thirty, becoming a pariah in Providence society. He spent decades in close confinement in a cage at the workhouse, in jail, and in Dexter Asylum before dying in Butler Hospital for the Insane. Although a single act of his insanity—the burning of the First Congregational Church of Providence—is well known, surprisingly little has been written about Peleg or his family. This article will attempt to set forth what is known and to frame the questions that remain unanswered.

Register Dexter Asylum

Peleg Gifford's father, Josiah Gifford, was born in East Greenwich; Peleg's mother, Marcy (Mathewson) Gifford, in Warwick.¹ Both Josiah and Marcy lost their fathers as young children and grew up, like many children of the day, with stepfathers. Abused and neglected by her mother and stepfather, Marcy became a ward of her mother's cousin, Nicholas Bragg, for a few years and then of her paternal uncle, Francis Mathewson.² She and Josiah probably married around 1770, had their first child in 1771, and spent their married life in Providence. Aided by employees and apprentices, Josiah made shoes and boots at first in the shop of Thomas Burket and later in his own shop.³ Beginning in 1774 he used his profits to purchase a series of houses and lots on the East Side of Providence, and later he invested in Rhode Island's booming shipping trade.⁴ Josiah Gifford also served in the town's militia company, and his grave is said to have been marked with a flag denoting service in the Revolution.⁵

The couple's large family eventually included at least eleven children. Peleg, their second or third child, was born in Providence just before the Revolutionary War.⁶ He was educated to be a merchant rather than a shoemaker like his father, and judging by his exquisitely kept journal of his voyages to the Far East, he must have been well schooled in penmanship and navigation.⁷ Letters at the end of his journal also show a fine command of social niceties and even an occasional spark of charm. He would be described in 1806, at the age of thirty-three, as 5 feet 11 1/2 inches—relatively tall for the period—with blue eyes, brown hair, and a fair complexion.⁸

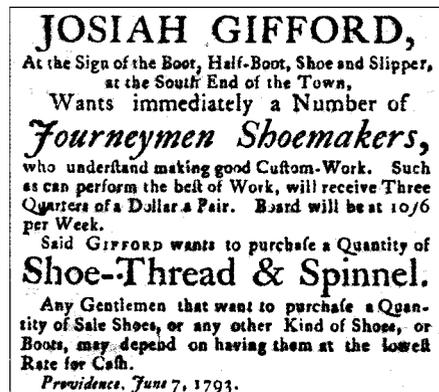
Even in an era of large families, the Gifford home bustled with an unusually large number of people—children and journeymen shoemakers—as shown in the censuses of



Above & right: Peleg Gifford's father was a prosperous shoemaker. Advertisements in the Providence Gazette and Country Journal, 23 May 1772 and 15 June 1793. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7843, 7844).

Cherry Fletcher Bamberg is the author and/or editor of a number of books and articles on Rhode Island genealogy and history. She is the editor of Rhode Island Roots, the quarterly journal of the Rhode Island Genealogical Society.

Left: This tribute to Providence's First Congregational Church was embroidered by school-girl Sarah Foster Sweet about 1818. A student at Mary Balch's school on George Street, Sarah probably worked from an engraving of the building and added her own legend at the top. RIHS Collection (RHi X5 86).



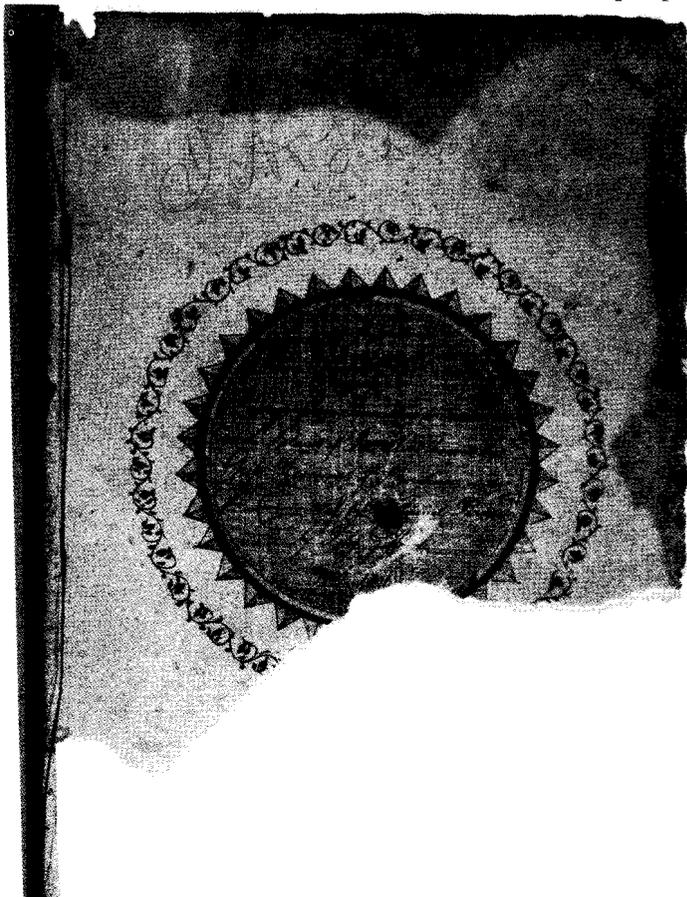
1774 and 1776 (ten and eleven respectively).⁹ Not only did Peleg have a large, prosperous immediate family, but he grew up surrounded by other relatives. His maternal aunt, Sarah (Mathewson) Gifford, had married the paternal uncle for whom he was named, the trader Peleg Gifford, and according to these two censuses they lived next door, or perhaps in the same house. His maternal uncle, the shoemaker Charles Coggeshall, was his father's apprentice while Peleg was a boy and never lived more than a few blocks away.¹⁰ Another maternal uncle, Pearce Coggeshall, a mariner, also lived in Providence in the 1790s. Yet another maternal uncle, shoemaker Nicholas Mathewson, briefly lived in Providence, among other towns around the state, before settling his family in Cranston in the mid-1790s.¹¹

The early promise of security proved illusory for Peleg. Painful circumstances made him the head of a much-depleted family in his early twenties: his father died suddenly "of a mortal illness" in Providence in 1795 at the age of 47, his brother Henry died in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1796 at the age of 22, and his mother, 48, and four siblings—John, 18, Samuel, 11, Maria, 9, and Louisa, 4—all died in a yellow fever epidemic in Providence in August and September of 1797.¹² The extended family was also diminished. By 1793 Peleg's aunt Sarah Gifford was dead, and her husband had disappeared.¹³ Pearce Coggeshall, to whom Peleg appears to have been close, was usually away on long voyages, though he did not move out of Providence until 1801. Charles Coggeshall lent Peleg money, but the relationship became so strained that Peleg was ultimately imprisoned for his failure to repay the debt. Nicholas Mathewson was himself in desperate financial straits as a result of illness, and he was in jail as an insolvent debtor in 1800.¹⁴ The protective family circle was broken beyond repair.

Peleg may have been at sea when the yellow fever epidemic struck his family, since he had obtained a seamen's protection certificate in April 1797.¹⁵ Such certificates, proof of citizenship to protect American mariners from impressments by foreign ships, were usually obtained shortly before a voyage, especially one to foreign ports. As the only surviving son, Peleg returned to Providence and assumed the administration of both his parents' estates on 5 November 1797 and the guardianship of his three younger sisters—Eliza, 19, Sally, about 15, and Ann Marcy, 9—in early 1798.¹⁶ He apparently also supported his own young family; although dates and details are uncertain, he seems to have had a wife and two or more children during his twenties.

Peleg obtained additional seamen's protection certificates at the Providence Customs House in May 1799, August 1805, and December 1809, but these dates refer only to his service on ships registered in Providence.¹⁷ He was, in fact, at sea more often than the dates would suggest. His journal shows that from November 1800 to August 1801 he sailed on the ship *Resource* on a voyage to Batavia (Jakarta).¹⁸ Although one might assume from his journal, with its meticulous notations of nautical data and weather, that Peleg served on the crew in some capacity, he in fact sailed as a merchant rather than as a mariner.¹⁹ On 5 November 1800 Providence merchant William Fairchild Megee wrote to Ponqua, a Chinese merchant in Canton, instructing him to extend to Capt. Nathaniel Pearce, Mr. Abourn, Mr. Burrows, and Peleg Gifford a line of credit from \$20,000 to \$40,000 so that they could fill the *Resource* with six hundred chests of tea, a vast quantity of nankeen (a cotton cloth), and silks worth \$5,000.²⁰

The cover of Peleg Gifford's journal of his voyage to Batavia, 1800-1801, on the Resource. Peleg's elegant handwriting, consistent throughout the entries of nautical data during the voyage, deteriorated in copies of letters at the end, which were written after Peleg began suffering episodes of mental illness. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7841).



白身白治十一个月五日

李頂送還款一那官回客一者未机料上好之朋交唯送原机
 花族
 未道重十八个月未机茅盾策者那官帶呂送还
 季相世燕春百相熊春登一百相小種十布未五千呂銀
 朋友那官一相春布網蘭向知言相上好女春季相行張打

An undated letter from William F. Megee to Ponqua, a Chinese merchant, making arrangements for stocking the ship *Resource* with Chinese goods. The letter, probably an American translation from Megee's English, is in unidiomatic Cantonese. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7845).

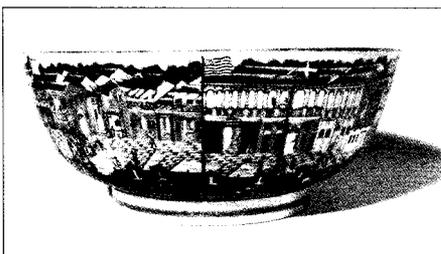
Peleg left again on the *Resource* in May 1802, this time for Manila and Canton, having prudently insured his "adventure on board Ship *Resource*" for \$1,200 with the Providence Insurance Company.²¹ Although a drunken escapade in Manila in November 1802 almost led to his being put off the ship, he was able to complete the voyage. Records kept by William F. Megee, who was the vessel's captain on this voyage, include an invoice of goods shipped by Peleg from Canton on the *Resource* on 25 February 1803, his personal goods marked "P.G." and boxes for other people marked "I.P.," "H.," and "O.D." Valued at \$1,106.62, these goods included umbrellas, china, silks, portraits, horsewhips, and delicacies such as oranges, sweetmeats, coffee, and tea, as well as—ominously, in light of his later arson—many boxes of "tinder works" for himself.²²

Between voyages Peleg lived in Providence, at first as a tenant in the comfortable Benevolent Street home belonging to the heirs of Josiah Gifford and later in his own home.²³ According to 1798 tax records, the two-story wooden house on Benevolent Street was thirty-six feet by twenty-two feet and well lit by fifteen large windows. It was probably still furnished with the mahogany furniture, feather beds, looking glasses, and pictures that had been there in his parents' day, as well as with items brought back from his own voyages.²⁴ As a freeman of Providence, Peleg Gifford voted in the fourteenth congressional election in August 1798.²⁵ The 1800 U.S. Census shows him as the head of a household of one man aged 16 to 26 (himself), one girl under 10 (probably his daughter Maria), one girl 10 to 16 (probably his sister Ann Marcy), one woman 16 to 26 (probably his wife Rebecca), and one woman over 45 (possibly his widowed grandmother Comfort Coggeshall).²⁶ This census was the only one on which he would ever be listed by name.

Register's Deserter's Asylum

Right: Whampoa Reach, China. Western traders were required to anchor here and engage a Chinese pilot to ferry them upriver to the commercial establishments at Canton. Painting by an anonymous Chinese artist, ca. 1805-10. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 3033).

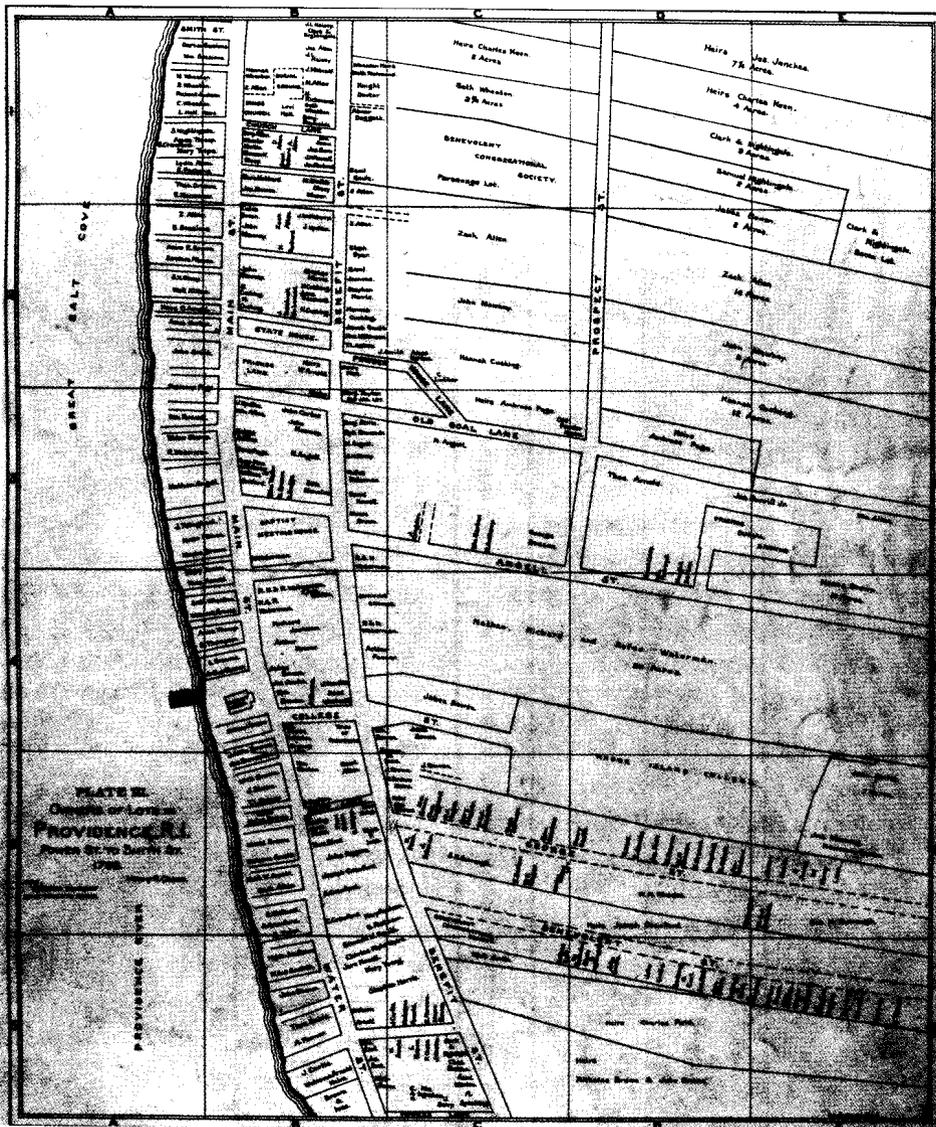
This porcelain punch bowl, made in China ca. 1787-1793, shows the river in Canton on one side and the "hongs," or business establishments, on the other. RIHS Collection RHi X4 267.



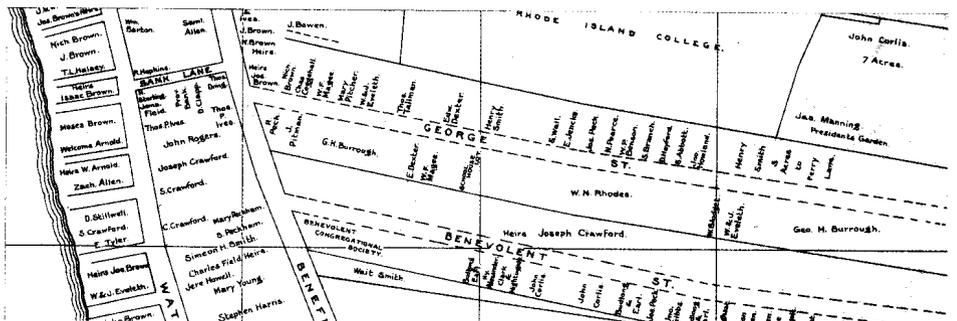
On 4 September 1800 Peleg Gifford, merchant, bought a house on the north side of George Street, abutting what is now Brown University, from William P. R. Benson for the considerable sum of eleven hundred dollars.²⁷ Tax records from 1798 show that the

house (which was then still unfinished) was a two-story wooden structure, like the house in which Peleg had previously lived, but at thirty-six feet by twenty-eight feet it was somewhat larger.²⁸ Peleg paid Providence taxes due on the estate of Josiah Gifford in 1797 and 1798 and taxes in his own name from 1799 through 1804.²⁹ He also kept up membership in Providence's First Congregational Church, to which his parents had belonged; between 1802 and 1804 he paid a three-dollar annual tax on pew 117 in the church's gallery in the name of "the heirs of Josiah Gifford."³⁰

Despite these modest accomplishments, apparently the first steps in building a new life of prosperity and achievement, all was not well in Peleg's life. His finances were distinctly shaky. When on 14 May 1802, shortly before his second voyage on the *Resource*, he met with John Corlis, his major creditor, they agreed that Peleg owed Corlis two debts, one of \$1,195.50, which was to be repaid on 14 September 1803, and another of \$1,222.48.³¹ A highly successful voyage might have earned Peleg enough to pay these debts, but deeper and more personal problems emerged. The first sign of serious trouble occurred in Manila 14 November 1802, when his behavior brought an indignant letter from the ship's captain.³²



Henry R. Chace's map of Providence lot owners in 1798 (shown here with George Street detail). Working in the early twentieth century, Chace used tax records and deeds to reconstruct each street in the town. On George Street, the lot labeled "W. P. Benson" was the one Peleg Gifford bought in 1800. "N. Pearce," immediately to the west, was Nathaniel Pearce, captain of the *Resource* in 1800-1801. "W. F. Megee," near Benefit Street, was William Fairchild Megee, captain of the *Resource* in 1803. Megee's neighbor to the west was Peleg's uncle Charles Coggeshall. The lot marked "Benevolent Congregational Society" two blocks south of George Street was the site of the First Congregational Church, which Peleg later burned down. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7842).



Mr. Peleg Gifford

The promises you have so often made to me that I should never see you Any More in Liquor, you have not Kept up to; your Conduct onboard the Resource the night before last and yesterday when you came onshore in flogging my Coachman I cannot put up with any longer for you drank out one [*illegible*] bottle of Gin the night you was onboard the Ship and Kept the [*illegible*] up all night with a Continual uproar in the Consequence of which I have no further Employ for you Either on shore or on board the Resource therefore I wish you to Seeke some other Employ for yourself. if you can Git a passage home to America with Capt. Barnard I will pay him for your Passage and I think you can Git a Birth onboard of Capt. Harwill to Bengall where you may make some money: if you ever Make out your Account against me I can settle it here.

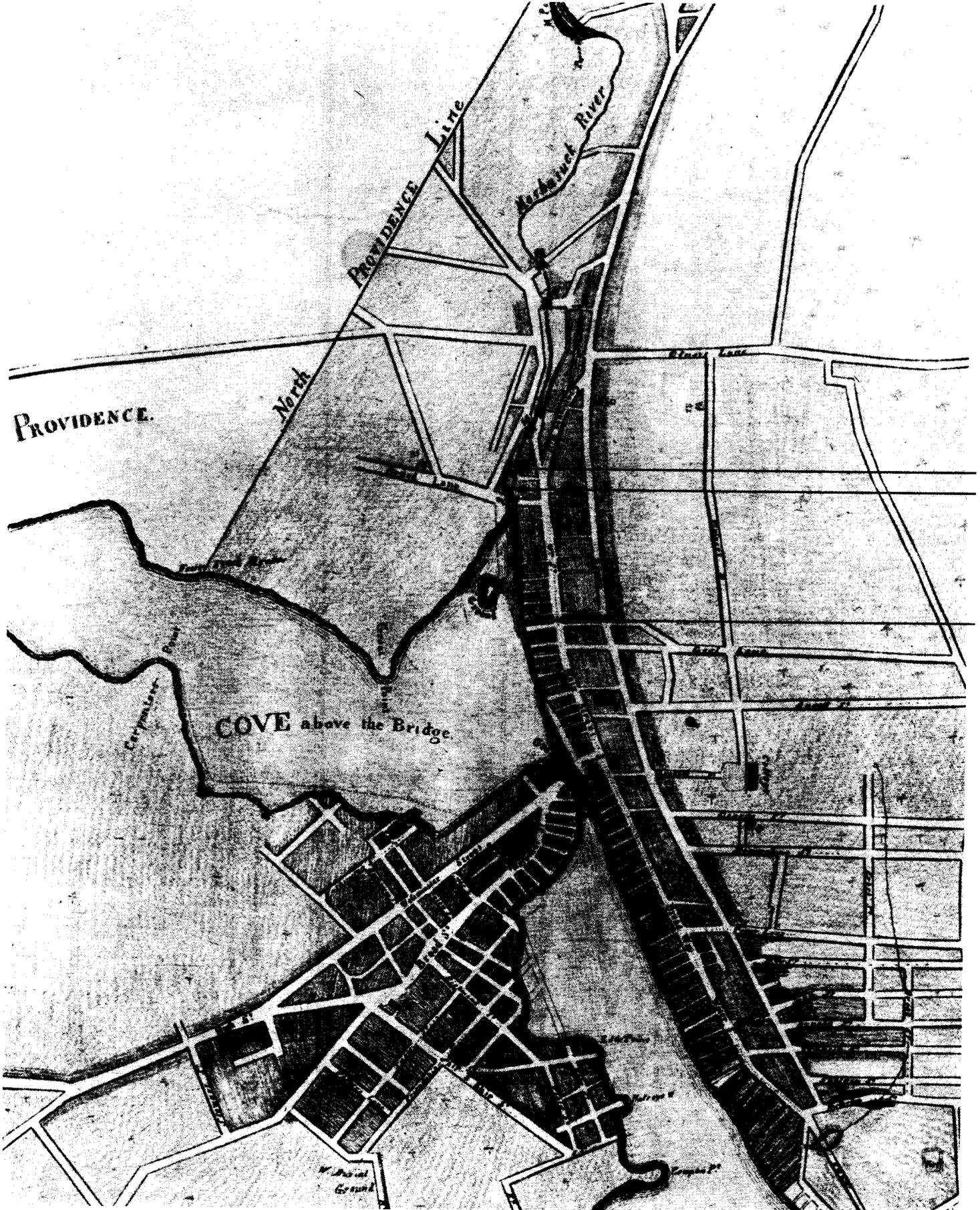
I Remain your Humble Servant
William F. Megee

In August 1803, not long after returning from his second voyage on the *Resource* and about a month before his large debt to John Corlis was due, Peleg Gifford began to suffer from the bouts of serious mental illness that would plague him for the rest of his life. The pertinent records, mainly Providence Town Council resolutions, offer no detailed descriptions of his illness; there is only the council's judgment that he was often "insane of mind" and "an unsuitable person to be at large," and comments about the "great disturbance and annoyance of the Inhabitants" he caused. The formulaic nature of these remarks does not reveal much about Peleg's condition. Diagnosis of his illness is not something that this author, who is no psychiatrist, wishes to attempt. Yet it may be significant that mental problems had occurred in the previous generation of his mother's family: Peleg's maternal uncle, Isaac Mathewson, needed a guardian all his life, and at one point was likely chained to the wall of the Warwick workhouse after threatening to kill other inmates.³³ Unlike his uncle, however, Peleg was literate and, for intervals, financially astute; he seems to have alternated between periods of lucidity and periods of disorderly, threatening, and sometimes violent behavior. His condition may have been exacerbated by alcohol, as it was in Manila. When looking for a job in 1806, he made a point of mentioning that "I have abandoned all Spirituous Liquors."³⁴

Unable to understand or control his behavior, on 13 August 1803 the Providence Town Council ordered him confined to his own house (presumably the house on George Street) and the next day ordered his keepers "not to suffer him by any means whatever to go at large."³⁵ On 26 August 1803 the council declared Peleg to be insane and issued orders for his apprehension and confinement in a cage at the workhouse until further notice.³⁶ The fifty-year-old workhouse, at the corner of Smith and Charles Streets, was not a pleasant place. Writing in 1843, William R. Staples, an early historian of Providence, described it in Dickensian terms: "A long, low brick building that [workhouse] was, which promised little to the poor unfortunate beings who were compelled to inhabit it. To those who recollect it, it can be associated with no feelings of pride, for the provision made there for the poor, nor with any fear it would increase the evils of pauperism. Some of the paupers of Providence continued to exist in it, until the erection of the Dexter Asylum in 1828. Long before that it had become a place rather of punishment than relief."³⁷

One might wonder why the council would send an apparently deranged person who was by no means a pauper to the workhouse. The answer is that there were few public buildings of any sort in Providence, and there was no facility at all on the local, town, or state level for mentally ill people. There was no treatment; there was only confinement, as ordered by town officials.

Register Decester Asylum



PROVIDENCE.

North

PROVIDENCE LINE

PROVIDENCE RIVER

COVE above the Bridge

W. David Grant

Elm Lane

B
A
C

On 1 September 1803, just days after the town council had declared him insane and ordered him confined in the workhouse, Peleg appeared before the council, promised “to conduct himself soberly and steadily,” and succeeded in convincing the councilmen that he should be released.³⁸ It was the first act of a drama that was to be replayed many times. Five days later, horrified at the “very disorderly and outrageous manner” of Peleg’s conduct since his release, the council again judged him insane and once again ordered him confined in the workhouse.³⁹ This time the order proved difficult to enforce. On 16 September, with Peleg still at large, the council issued a second order for his apprehension and commitment. He must have been captured and held briefly, for on 19 September the council received word that Peleg had again escaped—apparently not for the first time—from the workhouse.⁴⁰

On 26 September 1803 Peleg pledged his home on George Street as surety that he would keep the peace toward the citizens of the state, particularly toward Thomas Cooke of Providence.⁴¹ Who this Thomas Cooke was and how he had earned the enmity of Peleg Gifford have not been discovered. (The very low tax—\$1.80—that Cooke paid in Providence that year suggests that he was not among the more affluent citizens of the town.)⁴² The next day Peleg paid eighteen dollars to John Lassell for the “further expence of keeping him” so that he could get “things belonging to him in the Bridewell.”⁴³ Built in 1796 behind the old workhouse, the “Bridewell,” where Peleg would spend much time over the years, was described by William Staples as “a small stone building, thirty-two feet by fourteen, ten feet high, intended for the detention and punishment of the lowest order of criminals.”⁴⁴ The name derived from a similar institution in the Bridewell section of London. Council records frequently make no distinction between the workhouse and the Bridewell, and it is not always clear in which building Peleg was kept at any given time.

Peleg’s troubles cascaded. At the December 1803 term of the Providence Court of Common Pleas, Peleg Gifford, “gentleman alias trader,” defaulted when sued by David Cobb of Boston for a \$220 note given at Boston and was ordered to repay the debt and court costs. Peleg did manage to settle his debt to John Corlis just before that case was called.⁴⁵ On 30 December 1803 Peleg sold his property on George Street to William Fairchild Megee for three thousand dollars.⁴⁶ The sale appears to indicate forfeiture of Peleg’s September bond to keep the peace, but it also provided the money needed to pay Corlis. Peleg would never again own his own home.

Behind these legal documents lay a confusing tangle of personal and professional relationships. John Corlis, a wealthy Providence merchant with extensive property on the East Side, was an important figure in the town’s maritime commerce and civic life. He owned wholly or in part many ships that sailed from Providence in the 1790s and early 1800s,⁴⁷ and he was a major investor in the voyages of the *Resource* on which Peleg sailed. Through his wife, mother, and sisters, Corlis was connected to some of the most prominent families of Providence—the Browns, the Russells, the Nightingales, and the Bowens.⁴⁸ Although they might have met as businessmen or as neighbors, there was also a more personal connection between Corlis and Peleg: Corlis was the man in whose household Rebecca Cummings had lived for some eight years before she went to live with Peleg, either as his legal or common-law wife, around 1798.⁴⁹ The two men would certainly have met during that time. Court records make it clear that Corlis had trusted the young merchant with unusually large sums at Peleg’s “special request and insistence,” and he sued at the December 1803 session of the Providence County Court of Common Pleas when Peleg refused to pay or acknowledge these debts when they came due during his first recorded episode of mental illness.⁵⁰

The Providence workhouse (A), where Peleg Gifford spent much time between 1803 and 1828, was built in 1753 at the intersection of Smith and Charles Streets, just north of the Great Salt Cove. Next to it was the newer Bridewell (B), built in 1796, in the words of Judge William Staples, “for the detention and punishment of the lowest order of criminals.” Peleg also spent a year (July 1808-July 1809) incarcerated in the Providence County Jail (C) for debt. Detail from an 1803 map by Daniel Anthony. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 4548).

William F. Megee had a long-standing relationship with Gifford and Corlis. Megee appears in shipping documents as co-owner with Corlis of at least one ship, and he was the captain of the *Resource* on its voyage to Canton in late 1802 and 1803, during which he wrote letters to Corlis regularly.⁵¹ Like Corlis, Megee was a wealthy man of Peleg's father's generation.⁵² His outraged letter of dismissal to Peleg in Manila, while stern, showed elements of concern for the troublesome man, advising him on how to get back to America and offering to pay his passage. Megee owned property near the Giffords, and he appears to have been consolidating his holdings. Was he helping Peleg with the purchase of the George Street house, or was he taking advantage of Peleg's misfortune? Probably both. With the purchase of the house, Megee may have assumed some responsibility for supporting Peleg. On 21 January 1805 the Providence Town Council told Megee that "if any monies are due from him to Peleg Gifford," he should advance no more than what the family needed for immediate use, and he could do so without asking the council's permission. On 11 February 1805 the council directed Megee to pay \$15.00 to Peleg's "order in favour of George Robinson" for an outstanding debt, and to pay Peleg's board at the rate of \$1.50 per week until the beginning of April and \$1.00 per week after that until further notice.⁵³

Providence Town Council records show that from the late summer of 1803 to the early summer of 1814, Peleg was repeatedly confined during violent episodes, usually in the workhouse, and subsequently released.⁵⁴ He did not immediately lose his civil rights as a consequence of his illness. When not confined, he was occasionally assigned a keeper, but never a legal guardian. In April 1805 he witnessed a petition to the General Assembly.⁵⁵ From July 1808 to July 1809 he was imprisoned for debt, a crime for which a "non compos mentis" citizen would not have been liable.⁵⁶

Register Deceit Asylum

During periods of lucidity Peleg was sometimes able to go to sea. His longest known absence from Rhode Island began on 21 August 1805, when he set out as a passenger on the schooner *Charlotte*, belonging to George DeWolf and Henry Bradford of Bristol, bound to the "Isles de Loss" (Ile de Los, off Conakry, Guinea) on the Slave Coast of West Africa. Peleg recounted this voyage in a letter, dated 7 July 1806 and copied into his journal, that he wrote to Boston merchant Benjamin Curtis. Although the letter is not always entirely coherent, it does offer a revealing glimpse into the ugly world of competing slavers.

"My Intentions," Peleg wrote, "were When I left home to find My Uncle Pearce Coggeshall Whom has Resided for some Years in that Country [probably Guinea, as the whole Slave Coast was then called]. He is Very Eager for me to come & See him." The ship was heavily armed; two "six-pounders" (cannons firing six-pound balls) had been added to the usual complement of four four-pounders in expectation of conflict. According to Peleg, the captain, John Sabin, claimed that "his orders were to Receive 10 slaves of you [Curtis] Which you had Cheated him out of the Voyage before," and then proceed "to Leeward for Trade." The *Charlotte* fell in with a brigantine from Boston under the command of a Captain Gray, who had two of Curtis's blacks ("Grometers") onboard. Sabin swore that "he'd be damned if he did not take those two Grometers." For reasons that are unexplained in the letter, a dispute arose onboard the *Charlotte*, and Gray took a Mr. Smith, a passenger on the *Charlotte*, onto his ship. Peleg asked to leave the ship also, but Captain Sabin denied his request.

I Begged Capt. Sabin to permit me to Depart, his Answer was no I should Go to Leward with him Where I Could make something & not be Entic'd away by that Lying Fellow as he Termed Gray & of Course we parted and I was Compelled to his Order (Although a Passenger) the same as Smith was. We bore away for the Galeanas & after making it, now down to Cape Coast with

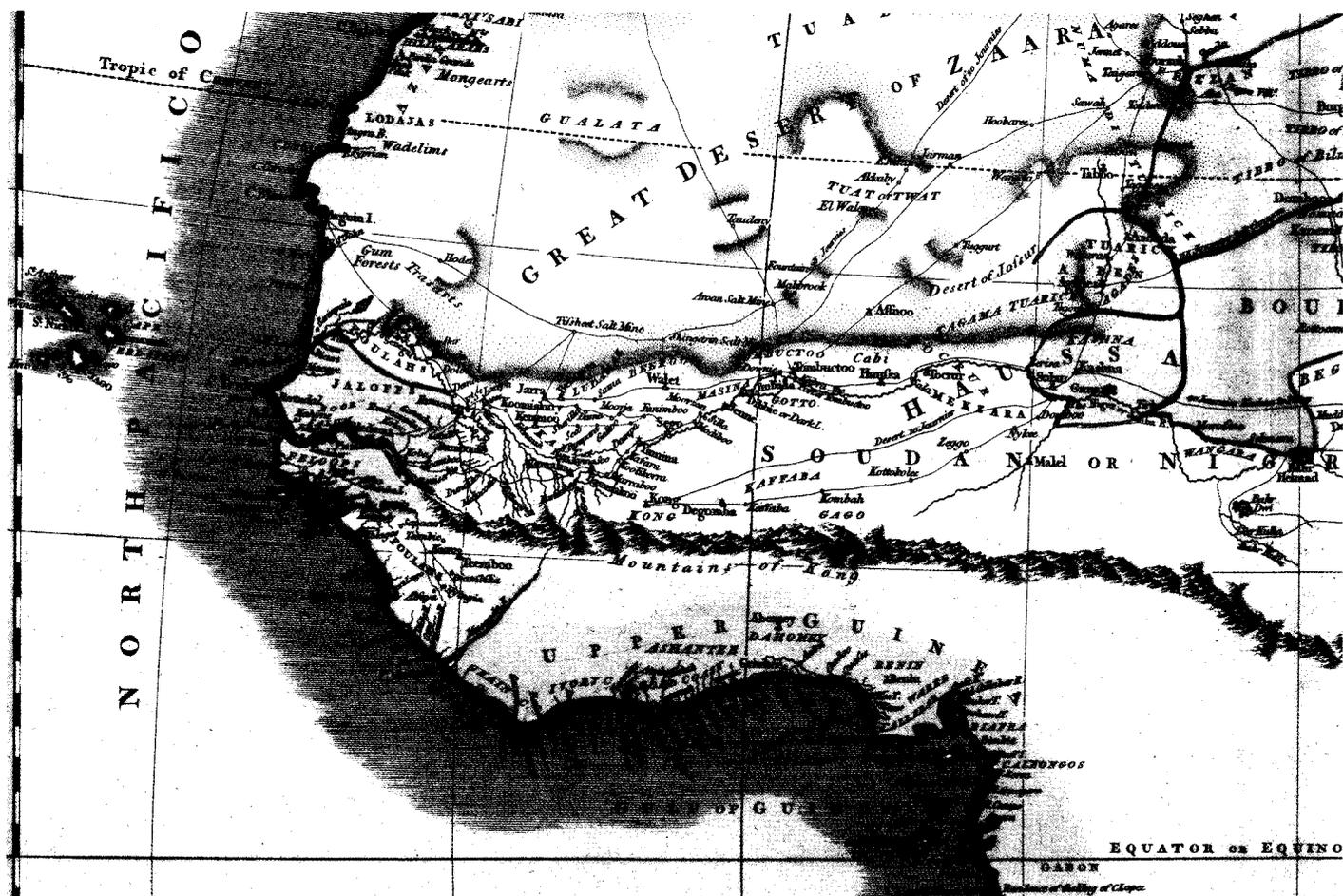


About the same age as Peleg Gifford, George DeWolf was a vastly wealthier and more powerful man. He was one of the owners of the schooner *Charlotte*, on which Peleg sailed to Africa in 1805. RIHS Collection (RHHi X3 7542).

Making no or little Trade. We then Desposed of 9000 Gallo[ns] Rum @ 12 months Credit to Collins & Field, the Latter [torn] of the Castle payable in Prime Slaves at 180 Gallo[ns]. [torn] thought proper to leave him [Sabin] at Anamoboc & take passage with Captain Samuel Phillips to the Havanas, whither We arrived safe & from there with Capt. Kelly to Bristol.

There was somewhat more to Peleg's story than he saw fit to include in this letter. In fact, Peleg seems to have taken the captain's advice to "make something" the only way possible in that part of the world: he personally bought five slaves and traded liquor and tobacco to the Fantees, a tribe in what is now Ghana. His accounts, recorded in the unnumbered pages at the end of his journal, show the dates in January 1806, types of slaves (two men, one "Prime" woman, one female, and one slave of unspecified gender), and the goods traded for them, usually rum, cloth, coffee, and gold. The transactions were far from simple. In all but one case there were twelve different items traded, with a total value ranging from £4 8s. to £8. What happened to these slaves is unknown, but they were probably traded away in Africa, perhaps to pay for his passage to Havana.

The part of West Africa to which Peleg sailed on the *Charlotte* is shown in this detail from "A New Map of Africa from the Latest Authorities by John Cary, Engraver, 1805." Harvard Map Collection (2375.1805), Harvard College Library, Cambridge, Mass.



By purely commercial standards of the day, the voyage of the *Charlotte* was a success—it ultimately delivered 212 slaves in Havana⁵⁷—but from Peleg's perspective the voyage was a disaster. Not only did he fail to find his uncle Pearce Coggeshall, but he ended up in Havana penniless, unemployed, and desperate. A rather garbled note written in Havana at the end of his journal reveals his frame of mind: "On the 16th May 1806 I signed with Capt. Samuel Kelly of the Sloop Morning Star Belonging to Bristol Rhode Island for my Passage to America through the Influence of Capt Cahoon of Providence from Philadelphia [illegible]... What our fate will be God only Knows. I have not a cent

in the World to help myself with but am Dependent on my friends.”⁵⁸ One might imagine that this impoverished traveler worked his way back to Bristol on the ship, but he did not. Captain Kelly’s manifest of the *Morning Star*, dated 4 June 1806 at Bristol, lists a cargo of eleven hogsheads of molasses, fifteen boxes of brown sugar, sweetmeats in pots and boxes, and “One Passenger Peleg Gifford With One Sea Chest and Trunk, Wearing Apparel.”⁵⁹

For the rest of 1806 Peleg Gifford stayed in Providence, writing letters to his father’s creditors and attempting to secure justice (money, work, restoration of his reputation, punishment of Captain Sabin) from the owners of the *Charlotte*. He had not been exaggerating his financial woes. On 30 July 1808 Peleg Gifford, “Mariner Alias Trader,” was committed to the Providence County jail as a state prisoner for failing to repay a debt of one hundred dollars to his uncle Charles Coggeshall, and he was not released until 31 July 1809.⁶⁰ The Providence County jail—built in 1753, the same year as the workhouse, at the corner of Canal and Haymarket Streets in Providence⁶¹—was an even more miserable place than the workhouse, so damp and polluted that prisoners often died of “jail fever” there.

Although his crime was not a violent one, the Providence Town Council considered Peleg a menace to public safety. Noting at its 3 July 1809 meeting that he was about to be released from jail, the council judged him to be “insane and a dangerous Person to be at Liberty” and ordered him to a cage at the workhouse.⁶² Yet despite its misgivings the council gave him a month’s pass to work in late August 1809, and he may have gone to sea again briefly in December 1809.⁶³ In any case, he was in the workhouse in early January 1810, for the council’s records show that he had escaped from his captivity there by the tenth of that month. Worried about the safety of the town’s citizens, the council ordered that an iron cage eight feet by six feet by six feet three inches high be constructed in the Bridewell to hold him, but on 22 January 1810 Peleg was still at large.⁶⁴

For a brief period there was no more trouble, but that lull may have resulted from Peleg’s absence rather than any improvement in his mental health. At its 23 May 1811 meeting, the town council noted that Peleg “has again returned” to Providence and was “in the Streets of the same,” and it again ordered him committed to a cage at the workhouse. Once again the cage failed to hold him; by 16 August 1811 he had escaped once more.⁶⁵ On 13 June 1814 the council tried a new—and spectacularly unsuccessful—method of dealing with the chronic problem that Peleg posed: it released him into the custody of Joseph K. Potter, who “pledged himself to return said Gifford to his Confinement when it appears that he is relapsed into Insanity as to render it dangerous for him to go at large.”⁶⁶

Register Deserter Asylum

How long this pattern of commitment and release (or escape) might have continued is unknown, for in the early hours of 14 June 1814 Peleg Gifford committed an act that impelled civic authorities to take definitive action: he deliberately burned down the church of Providence’s First Congregational Society by leaving a lighted candle in one of its columns. The church, a beautiful East Side architectural landmark built at great expense just nineteen years earlier, was located about two blocks from the Gifford home on Benevolent Street where Peleg had lived in happier days. His parents, who had been members of the society, were buried in the church burial ground with his brothers and sisters who had died before 1803.⁶⁷

The dramatic event was widely reported in the press. The account in the 18 June 1814 issue of the weekly *Providence Gazette and Country Journal* was fairly typical of the coverage:

FIRE

On Tuesday morning last, between the hours of three and four, the inhabitants of this town were alarmed by the cry of fire. It proved to be the large and elegant Church, belonging to the Benevolent Congregational Society, which, notwithstanding the animated exertions of the citizens, was entirely consumed. A part of the organ, the clock, and some other articles, were preserved. There is no doubt it was occasioned by an incendiary [illegible line] . . . and had it not been for the favourable shower of continued rain, it is to be supposed his diabolical wishes might have been gratified. We are sorry to state that Mr. Edes, the worthy Pastor, was injured, though not seriously, by the fall of a piece of lumber.

Since writing the above, two men have been taken up and confined, who are strongly suspected of being the incendiaries.

The newspaper also reported the response of the church's members when they met on the day after the fire. After passing a resolution thanking the people who had formed the bucket brigade, they organized a committee to assign seats in Providence's town house (their former church building that was now lent back to them by the town council until they could rebuild)⁶⁸ and set their first meeting there for 9 A.M. the following morning.

The Providence Town Council met on the morning of 14 June, just hours after the fire, and "taking into Consideration respecting the various Reports of [illegible] relative to Peleg Gifford," it declared that it was "dangerous to the security and peace of the Town to suffer him to go at large." James Hammond, the constable, was directed to apprehend Peleg and commit him to the cage in the workhouse.⁶⁹

To determine exactly what had happened, the Providence Town Meeting ordered that depositions be taken from fourteen witnesses. These were Henry Mathewson, Joseph K. Potter, William Crapon, Levi Millard, Capt. Warner, James Hammond, Capt. Jenckes, Sally Howland, Pardon Mason, William Wilkinson, Benjamin Boles, Mr. Mills, Samuel Thurber, and Peter Grinnell. Two of these people were Peleg's relatives, some were acquaintances, and others were accidental witnesses to conversations or events. The depositions have fortunately been preserved in the manuscript collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society.⁷⁰

Henry Mathewson, Peleg's first cousin, testified in his deposition that his unnamed sister (either Alice Crawford [Mathewson] King or Marcy Gifford [Mathewson] Potter, both of Cranston) had observed Peleg Gifford preparing to go into Providence with his tinder and matches, and that Peleg had told her he would set fire to the meetinghouse and "Not all the Devils in Hell could put it out."⁷¹ William Crapon stated that Peleg was "very abusive" the night he was put into the Bridewell [presumably 7 June 1814] and "threatened then to set fire to the town when he got out." Whether Crapon had some role in the incarceration or was simply a bystander is not known. Levi Millard, whose relationship to Peleg is also unknown, testified "that he had heard him [Peleg Gifford] say he don't know to the number of one hundred times that he would burn all the Meeting Houses in town." Pardon Mason, the father-in-law of Peleg's younger sister, Ann Marcy (Gifford) Mason, had heard that Peleg had been "wild" for about three weeks after several months of "civil behavior." According to Mason's testimony, Ann Marcy had "observed that [her brother] was not quite right and was not fit to let out." Apparently Peleg had been at Mason's house during the hours before the fire (which took place about 3:20 A.M.), since Mason told of family speculation that Peleg might have taken a candle from a lantern in the house.⁷² Peter Grinnell, a casual acquaintance of Peleg's, testified that shortly after the fire "Peleg Gifford said dam the Meeting House they ought to be burnt, and pointing to the Baptist Meeting House said that would go next and advised to keep a good look out."⁷³ A possible accomplice, a mulatto named Thomas Williams, was mentioned by several witnesses, but Peleg, who damned himself with his own angry words, undoubtedly bore primary responsibility for the arson.

Despite the dramatic nature of the crime, the records are otherwise skimpy. The resolution that produced the depositions does not appear in the Providence Town Meeting's records. To the modern observer it would appear that the Providence Town Council bore considerable responsibility for releasing Peleg Gifford, even into the custody of a responsible citizen, on the day before the fire, but its members seem to have had little interest in discussing the matter.

The First Unitarian Church of Providence. This building replaced the one that Peleg Gifford burned down. Although the architectural details are accurate, the depiction of the site is not: the church was set not on an uninhabited plain but on a steep slope with houses all around it. Engraving, n.d. RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 4887).



No one had died in the fire, no neighboring buildings had burned, and the town was spared, thanks largely to the rain. The church was rebuilt in a design by John Holden Greene that is generally considered even more distinguished than the first. Some views of Providence can be dated before or after 1814 by the presence of the older or the newer church building.

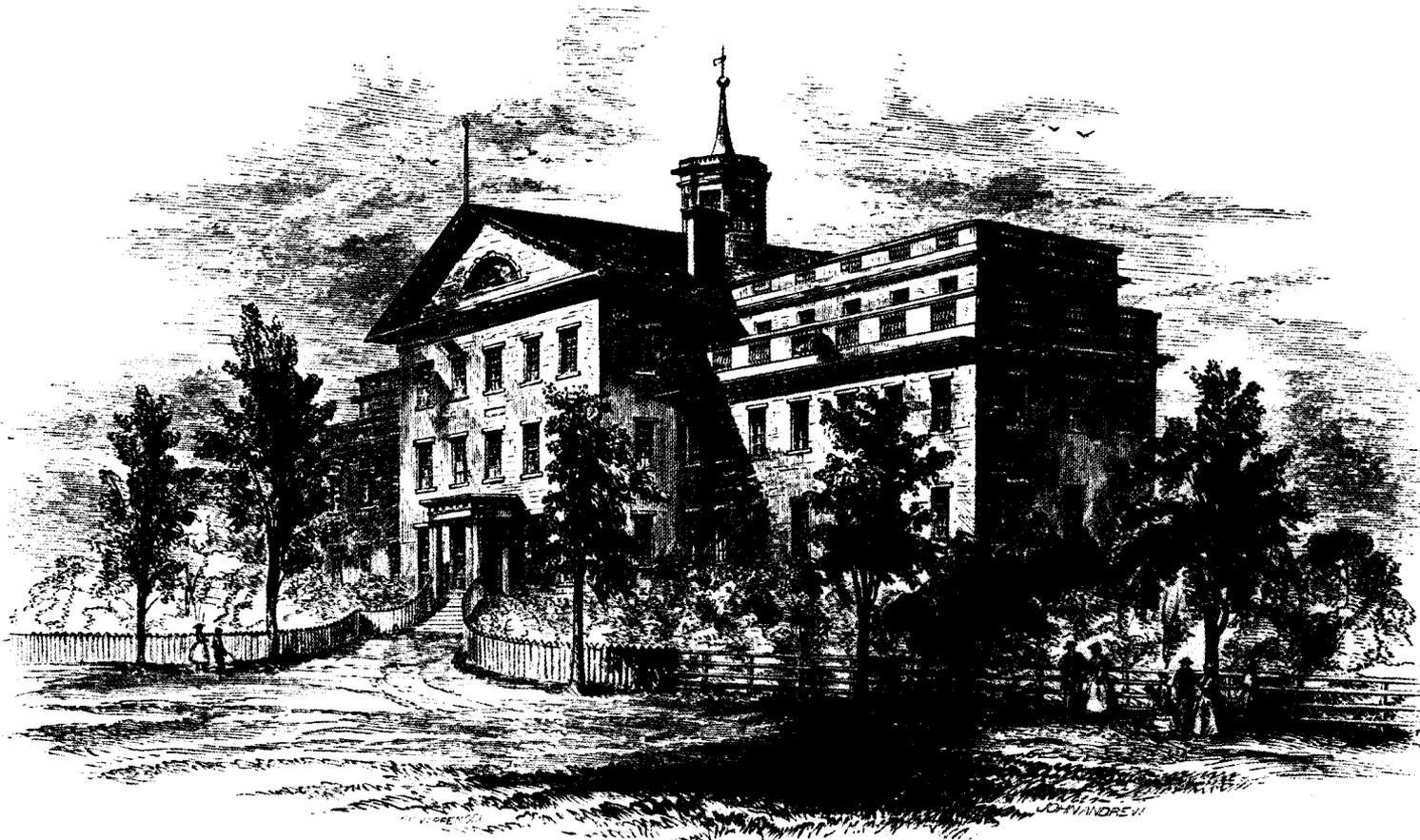
Although the fire is usually mentioned in historical accounts of the new edifice, now called the First Unitarian Church of Providence, the event is not always described as arson, and the name of the arsonist has been curiously absent from such accounts. In 1843 William Staples wrote that the old church “was destroyed by fire the morning of the 14th of June 1814.”⁷⁴ Margaret Bingham Stillwell, whose 1945 book *The Pageant of Benefit Street* contains her charming drawing of the new church, said merely that “The Church burned . . . in 1814 and the new one was built the following year.”⁷⁵ Speaking on the history of the First Unitarian Church at a meeting of the Rhode Island Historical Society in 1956, Helen C. Robinson referred to the arsonist simply as “an insane man.”⁷⁶ Welcome Arnold Greene’s huge 1886 tome, *The Providence Plantations for Two Hundred and Fifty Years*, written when some Providence residents who had witnessed the fire were still living, has a curious version of the story, obviously wrong in certain respects but likely containing a kernel of truth at the conclusion. “On June 14, 1814,” Greene wrote, “the first destruction of a meeting-house by fire in the town took place, and the First Congregational Church on Benefit Street was destroyed. It was supposed that the fire was caused by an imbecile, who wished to see what kind of a sight the two steeples would make burning and falling to the ground. A reward was offered for the detection of the incendiary, but no one was ever punished for it, though if the people of that day were to be believed, there was no doubt as to who did the deed.”⁷⁷

The episode of course became part of the Mathewson/Gifford family lore. The Bible of Peleg’s maternal uncle, Nicholas Mathewson, once at the Rhode Island Historical Society’s library, contained a note by the donor, Henry Howard: “The family record on page 677 and 678 was written by Peleg Gifford a relative of the Mathewsons who became insane and

while so, set fire to and destroyed the church edifice which stood where the present Unitarian Church, corner of Benefit and Benevolent Streets now stands.”⁷⁸

Register Deserter Asylum

After his appalling act Peleg Gifford was locked up in one place or another in Providence for the rest of his life, not as a convicted criminal but as a madman. He spent fourteen



Dexter Asylum. Although it was a larger, more modern building in a more salubrious setting than the Providence workhouse, Dexter Asylum housed the same mixed population of the poor and the insane as its predecessor. Engraving, ca. 1860. RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 5196).

years at the workhouse with only one further escape, noted in the town council records of 25 November 1814.⁷⁹ The man who had sailed thousands of miles around the world to the Far East and Africa was now probably lucky to catch so much as an occasional glimpse of Providence's Great Salt Cove.

Time of admission.	Names of persons	their trades or occupations	by whose order sent to the asylum	their names or designations	date of their admission	Remarks
1828	1. Peleg Gifford	Merchant	Owner of the	Peleg Gifford	July 30	Admitted to the Dexter Asylum
	2. William C. Warner	"	"	"	"	"
	3. Benjamin Scarle	"	"	"	"	"
	4. Benjamin Burr	"	"	"	"	"
	5. Countess Lamson	"	"	"	"	"
	6. George Freeman	13 years	"	"	"	"

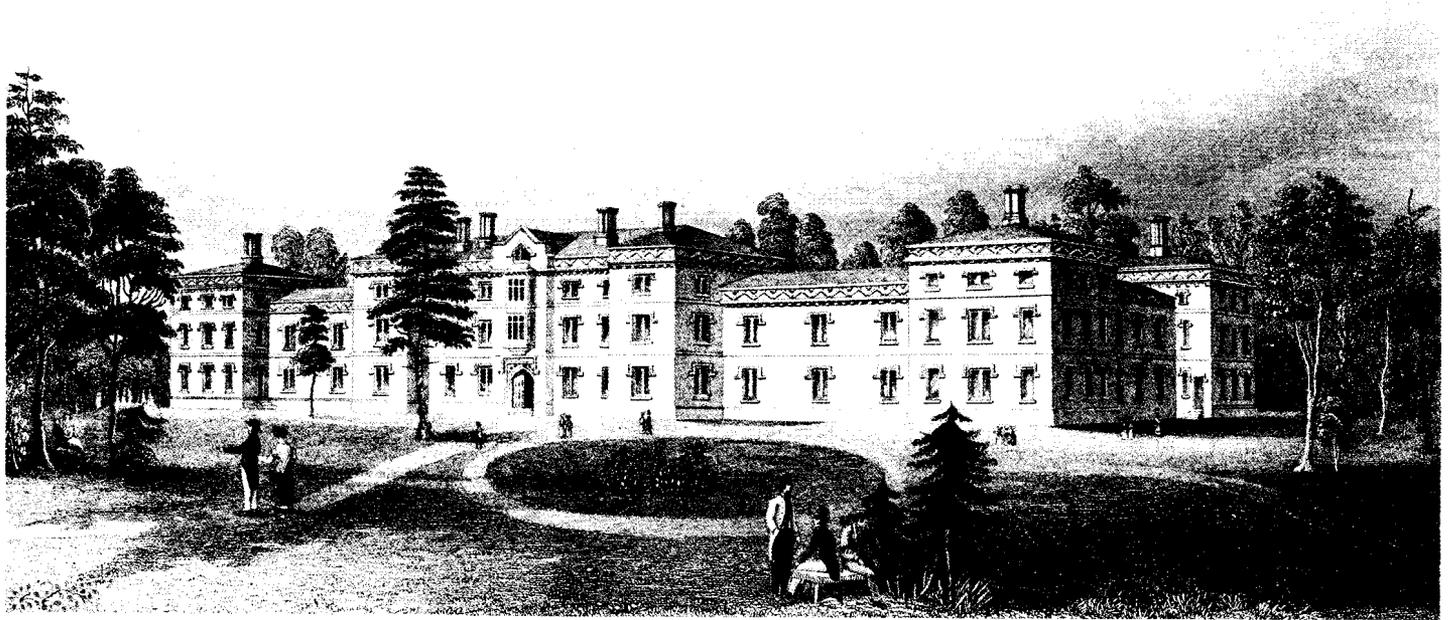
Peleg played no further part in the events of his city and state, except for the rather dubious distinction of his role in the opening of two new institutions, Dexter Asylum and Butler Hospital for the Insane. When Dexter Asylum opened its doors on 30 July 1828 to "receive inmates from 'Old Workhouse,' the most of which were deranged," Peleg's name was the very first on the list.⁸⁰ Built after Knight Dexter left the city of Providence a large donation of money and land for the support of the poor in his will, the huge new institution on Hope Street was set on many acres of higher, healthier land than

Peleg Gifford's name was the first recorded in the register of Dexter Asylum inmates. A notation indicates that Peleg was later transferred to Butler Hospital. RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 7840).

the workhouse occupied. Although the asylum significantly improved the living conditions of Providence's poor and insane, the combination of the two groups was far from ideal for either, as William Staples pointed out in his 1843 *Annals of the Town of Providence*: "In an institution, the main design of which is to provide for the wants of the poor, little can be done toward improving the condition of the insane. They can be

1829.
Sent to the Butler Asylum Dec 1/29

kept there, but if more is looked for it will be looked for in vain.”⁸¹ Staples’s sentiments reflect the growing “Moral Treatment” movement of the time, with its new concern for humane treatment of the insane. While many of the asylum’s residents worked in the building or on the asylum farm, Dexter records describe Peleg Gifford as insane and show no occupational activity for him.



Butler Hospital for the Insane. Although the building appears similar to Dexter Asylum, Butler Hospital was built exclusively for the treatment of the mentally ill. Silver print, ca. 1850. RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 98).

Peleg was released to Butler Hospital for the Insane on 1 December 1847, the very first day the hospital began to admit patients.⁸² As Rhode Island’s first institution exclusively for the mentally ill, Butler certainly provided care better suited to his condition—compassionate attendants, ready access to the beautifully landscaped grounds, and a clean, modern building—but Peleg was already near the end of his long and unhappy life when it opened. Dexter Asylum records and his death certificate show that he was at Butler from its opening until his death, but all of the hospital’s patient records are sealed for reasons of privacy and offer no public information about his final years.

Peleg’s wife, Rebecca Cummings, is an enigmatic figure in this story, posing several difficult questions. Who was she? Was she, in fact, his legal wife? What happened to her and her children after Peleg’s illness became serious? Providence Town Council records offer her version of some of the answers. On 6 March 1809, five months before Peleg was released from jail in Providence, the council examined her as to her origins and relationship to Peleg.⁸³ Testifying under her maiden name, Rebecca Cummings said that she had been born in Milton, Massachusetts, but had left there at the age of eleven to go to Boston with her mother. She later came to Providence, she said, where she lived with her Aunt Crawford for a year and then with the family of John Corlis for eight years. Attempts to identify her family or “Aunt Crawford” and to understand what she was doing in the Corlis household have so far proved fruitless.⁸⁴

Did she marry Peleg Gifford? Standard genealogical sources suggest that she did. Certainly a marriage on 17 January 1798 in Boston was registered in that town's vital records; both the *United States Chronicle* (published in Providence) and the *Providence Gazette* reported the marriage, in the words of the former, of "Peleg Gifford, merchant, of this town and Rebecca Cummings, of and at Boston."⁸⁵ From the legal point of view, it is notable that she signed away her dower rights as "Rebeckah Gifford" when Peleg sold property in 1803.⁸⁶ Yet Rebecca flatly denied being married to Peleg when questioned by the town council. She insisted, instead, that "she was regularly Published to the said Gifford but no marriage Ceremony was ever performed."⁸⁷ Was she lying then or when she signed away her dower rights? She had lived with Peleg, Rebecca said, about eleven years (although given the amount of time that he was at sea or incarcerated between 1798 and 1809, they could not have spent much time together), and she had borne him two children—Maria, about ten, and John, about seven.⁸⁸

While the whole truth has not been established, it seems likely that Peleg and Rebecca were in fact married. We know that there were many unmarried couples living together in Providence at the time, but probably few of them among respectable, churchgoing East Side merchants such as Peleg was in 1798. Perhaps it was the prospect that she might be declared legally and financially responsible for her unmanageable husband that made Rebecca desperate enough to deny her marriage, a denial that made her children appear to be illegitimate.

Having testified before the Providence Town Council, her one moment in the spotlight, Rebecca disappears from surviving records, whether into death, another marriage, another household, or another state is unknown. Nothing more has yet been learned about Peleg's children, Maria and John, not even the surname that they used. When Peleg Gifford died at Butler Hospital on 30 November 1853, having outlived all but one of his siblings, there was no one who knew him well enough to furnish his parents' names for the death certificate.⁸⁹

Notes

1. Marcy's birth was not registered in Warwick town records, but she was remembered in the will of her father, Henry Mathewson of Warwick, who died in 1756. Warwick Wills, 2:345-47, Warwick City Hall. Josiah's birth on 18 May 1748 was registered in East Greenwich. James N. Arnold, *Vital Record of Rhode Island, 1636-1850* (Providence: Narragansett Historical Publishing Co., 1891-1912), vol. 1, pt. 2, p. 118.
2. See Cherry Fletcher Bamberg, *Elder John Gorton and the Six Principle Baptist Church of East Greenwich, Rhode Island* (Greenville, R.I.: Rhode Island Genealogical Society, 2001), 463-65, for details of Marcy's early life. A more comprehensive study by the same author, "Comfort Coggeshall and Her Children," is being prepared for the *New England Historic and Genealogical Register* (hereafter cited as *NEHG Register*) and will include much information on Marcy's complicated family as well as on Josiah Gifford, whose family was closely connected with hers. A limited study of Josiah Gifford's genealogy can be found in Almon E. Daniel and Maclean W. McLean, "William Gifford of Sandwich, Mass. (D. 1687)," ed. Anne Border Harding, *NEHG Register* 133 (July 1979): 211-12.
3. *Providence Gazette and Country Journal*, 30 May 1772, p. 4, and 15 June 1793, p. 4.
4. *Ship Registers and Enrollments of Providence, Rhode Island, 1773-1936* (Providence: WPA, 1941), 1:629; 2:859, 861, 862 (numbers refer to individual ships rather than to pages); Providence Deeds, 20/1:211; 20/2:515; 21:82; 25:595, Providence City Hall.
5. Joseph J. Smith, *Civil and Military List of Rhode Island* (Providence: Preston & Rounds Co., 1900), 1:515, 522, 537. Information on the flag is from Mrs. Howard Hilton, "History and Record of Burial Grounds, 1722-1943," typescript, p. 81, First Congregational Society Records, MSS 419, Rhode Island Historical Society [RIHS]). The title "Capt." on Josiah Gifford's gravestone and on those of his family members was derived from military rather than maritime service.
6. The birth order is tentative. Since Josiah and Marcy did not register the births of their children in Providence records, the family has been reconstructed from gravestone records with additions from death notices in contemporary newspapers. There is conflicting evidence about Peleg's date of birth. When he died on 30 November 1853, he was believed by authorities at Butler Hospital to be seventy-six, suggesting a birth year around 1777. Rhode Island Vital Records, Deaths, 53:898. Information on his seamen's protection certificates, provided by Peleg himself, varies from 1773 to 1778. Maureen A. Taylor, ed., *Register of Seamen's Protection Certificates from the Providence, Rhode Island, Custom District, 1796-1870* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1995), 106. Examination of the original register of protections shows that one date has been mistakenly copied in the published version: 6 Dec. 1809 in the original appears in the source above as 6 Dec. 1806, thus further confusing the calculation. See Seamen's Protection Registers, U.S. Customs House Records, Providence, MSS 28, ser. 14, subseries A, vol. 4 (1806-28) (hereafter cited as Seamen's Protection Registers, vol. 4), p. 26, RIHS. On the other hand, Peleg bought rights in his father's estate from his brother Henry Gifford in August 1795, which one would expect only of a man of the legal age of twenty-one. Providence Deeds, 25:76. It is this author's belief that he was probably born in late 1773.
7. Peleg Gifford, "Journal of a Voyage from Providence to Batavia in the Island of Java on Board the Ship Resource, 1800-1801," MSS 828, 628 RE, RIHS. The title of the journal is somewhat misleading, as it describes only the first section. The journal also contains the record of a second voyage in 1802 and about twenty pages of letters and other records at the end.
8. Seamen's Protection Registers, vol. 4, p. 26.
9. Cherry Fletcher Bamberg, "The 1774 Census of Rhode Island: Providence," *Rhode Island Roots* 31, no. 2 (June 2005): 73; "1776 Census of Providence, Rhode Island," *NEHG Register* 159 (April 2005): 54.
10. Coggeshall's apprenticeship was arranged by the Warwick Town Council. Warwick Town Council Records, 1771-1800 (labeled "Vol. 1" on spine, though there is an earlier volume on microfilm), p. 26, Warwick City Hall. The location of his shop on George Street, between those of Nicholas Brown and William F. Megee, can be seen in Henry Chace, *Owners and Occupants of the Lots, Houses and Shops in the Town of Providence, Rhode Island, in 1798* (1914; reprint, Salem, Mass.: Higginson Books, n.d.), 12, plate 3, C5.
11. Pearce Coggeshall paid modest taxes on personal property only (and none on real estate) at Providence from at least 1794 to 1800. Tax Records for the Town of Providence, 1778-1843 (hereafter cited as Providence Town Tax Records), MSS 214, subgroup 10, box 2 (1794-99) and box 3 (1800-1804), RIHS. Nicholas Mathewson became a freeman of Cranston in 1795. Cranston Town Meeting Records, 2 (1789-1820): 48, microfilm, New England Historic and Genealogical Society.
12. Josiah Gifford died at Providence on 11 July 1795 and was buried in Providence Historic

- Cemetery 21, the First Congregational Church's cemetery, which was moved almost completely to the Swan Point Cemetery in 1848. Hilton, "Burial Grounds," 81. The *Providence Gazette* of 13 August 1796 reported the death of Henry Gifford in his twenty-third year at Charleston, South Carolina. Arnold, *Vital Record*, 13:419. On 23 September 1797 the *Gazette* reported the deaths of the unnamed widow of Josiah Gifford, three of his children, and a servant; in its next issue, 30 September, the paper supplied the names and noted the death of a fourth child. Arnold, *Vital Record*, 13:418. A Boston newspaper, the *Columbian Centinel*, reported the yellow fever deaths in its issue of 11 October 1797, p. 2. There are said to have been thirty-six deaths in all in this outbreak, mostly in the south end of town. William R. Staples, *Annals of the Town of Providence from Its First Settlement to the Organization of the City Government in June, 1832* (Providence: Knowles & Vose, 843), 368.
13. The death of Sarah Gifford was reported in the *United States Chronicle*, a Providence newspaper. Arnold, *Vital Record*, 15:505. Her husband, Peleg, was nowhere to be found when Josiah Gifford sued for bills due on goods delivered to her. *Josiah Gifford v. Peleg Gifford*, file papers, Providence County Court of Common Pleas, July term 1793, C:437, Judicial Archives, Supreme Court Judicial Records Center, Pawtucket.
14. Petitions to the General Assembly, vol. 33 (1800-1801), no. 58, Rhode Island State Archives.
15. Taylor, *Seamen's Protection Certificates*, 106.
16. His mother, Marcy Gifford, had been the administratrix of his father's estate, a task that fell to Peleg when she died in 1797. The personal estate, valued at \$2,340, was insufficient to meet its debts, and it was necessary to sell some lots in Providence to pay creditors. Petitions to the General Assembly, vol. 32 (1799-1800), no. 4A; Providence Deeds, 25:595-96. In December 1799 Peleg sued Samuel Godfrey, mariner, for a note due Josiah's estate. *Peleg Gifford v. Samuel Godfrey*, Providence County Court of Common Pleas, December term 1799, G:214-15, Judicial Archives. According to letters copied into blank pages at the end of his journal of voyages on the *Resource*, he was still trying to collect money owed the estate in 1806. Peleg was appointed guardian for his sisters Eliza and Sally Gifford in 1798. Providence Town Council Records, 7 (1785-97): 216, Providence City Hall.
17. Taylor, *Seamen's Protection Certificates*, 106.
18. Built in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1795, the *Resource* was an enormous three-masted ship of over 423 tons, almost 110 feet long and almost 30 feet wide. *Ship Registers and Enrollments*, 1:2901.
19. For this reason Peleg's name is not among those of the vessel's thirty-six returned seamen listed in the required papers filed by the captain when the *Resource* returned to Providence on 27 August 1801. U.S. Customs House Papers, Providence, MSS 28, subgroup 1, ser. 18, subseries D, box 1, folder 6 (July-August 1801), RIHS.
20. Nightingale-Jenckes Papers, MSS 588, subgroup 4: William F. Megee (hereafter cited as William F. Megee Papers), box 6, 1798-1800 folder, RIHS.
21. His policy, no. 1036, was taken out 14 May 1802. William F. Megee Papers, box 6, 1802 folder. The policy cost 8 percent (\$96) and had a 10 percent deductible clause.
22. William F. Megee Papers, box 7, Ship Resource and Eliza Accounts folder, Resource Accounts 1802-3, p. 43.
23. Providence Direct Tax, 1798, Schedule A, 126, RIHS; Providence Deeds, 28:102.
24. An inventory of Josiah Gifford's estate is in Providence Probate Records. Wills, Administrations, Guardianships, 7 (1785-1797): 780-82.
25. Providence Town Meeting Records, 7 (1783-1804): 441, Providence City Hall.
26. 1800 U.S. Census, Providence County, R.I. (Providence), National Archives and Records Administration microfilm, ser. M32, roll 45, p. 229. The identifications are tentative.
27. Providence Deeds, 28:102.
28. Providence Direct Tax, 1798, Schedule A, 116.
29. Providence Town Tax Records, boxes 2 and 3.
30. Pews, 1760-1819, in First Congregational Society Records, MSS 419, box 11. Since the church's surviving records are scattered, Peleg may well have been a member for a longer period.
31. Providence County Court of Common Pleas, December term 1803, J:195-97, Judicial Archives.
32. William F. Megee Papers, box 6, 1802 folder.
33. Warwick Town Council Records, 1771-1800, pp. 93-94, 114.
34. Copy of letter to Benjamin Curtis, 30 July 1806, at end of Gifford, "Journal."
35. Providence Town Council Records, 8 (1800-1806): 283-284.
36. *Ibid.*, 283-84, 296.
37. Staples, *Town of Providence*, 195.
38. Providence Town Council Records, 8:299.
39. *Ibid.*, 299, 302, 309, 311.
40. *Ibid.*, 309-311.
41. Providence Deeds, 29:81.
42. Providence Town Tax Records, box 3, 1803 folder.
43. Lassell's name and the explanation of the payment appear not in the Providence Town Council Records at Providence City Hall but in the Providence Town Council Minutes, MSS 214, subgroup 9, RIHS.
44. Staples, *Town of Providence*, 195.
45. *David Cobb v. Peleg Gifford, John Corlis v. Peleg Gifford*, Providence County Court of Common Pleas, December term 1803, J:195-97, 304-5, Judicial Archives.
46. Providence Deeds, 29:113.
47. *Ship Registers and Enrollments*, 1: 386, 652, 931, 1094, 1148, 1320, 1479, 1595, 1628, 1669, 1811, 2038, 2214, 2220, 2240, 2445, 2844, 2901, 3266, 3282.
48. Corlis is said to have been born 3 Jan. 1767 to George and Waitstill (Rhodes) (Brown) Corlis; he married Susan Condy Russell, daughter of Joseph Russell, on 25 Feb. 1790; and he died in Paris, Kentucky, in 1839. William Waterman Chapin, "Genealogy of the Corlis Family," typescript, Providence, 1912, pp. 1-3, RIHS. According to the same source, his sister Sarah married Dr. William Bowen, and another sister, Elizabeth, married Joseph Nightingale.
49. Testimony by Rebecca Cummings, Providence Town Council Records, 9A (1806-13): 222.
50. Providence County Court of Common Pleas, December term 1803, J:195-97, Judicial Archives.
51. William F. Megee Papers, box 7, Ship Resource and Eliza Accounts folder.
52. The relative financial positions of Peleg Gifford, John Corlis, and William Megee are indicated by the taxes they paid to Providence in 1803: Peleg paid 2.88, Corlis \$32.40, and Megee \$38.25. Providence Town Tax Records, box 3, 1803 folder.
53. Providence Town Council Records, 8:424, 429.

Notes continued

54. *Ibid.*, 283-84, 296, 299, 302, 309-11, 314, 424, 429; 9A (1806-13): 237, 247, 281, 283, 356, 381-82; 9B (1813-19): 30, 35-37, 99.
55. Fleet Hull, an illiterate mariner, petitioned the General Assembly to be released from prison, where he had served eight years for assault on Jabez Whipple. Petitions to the General Assembly, vol. 36 (1805-6), no. 23.
56. Prison Records, 1789-1980, C no. 490, box 17, July 1808-February 1810 volume, p. 7, Rhode Island State Archives.
57. Jay Coughtry, *The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1700-1807* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981), 279.
58. From the content and nearly illegible handwriting, this note appears to have been written during a period of extreme agitation and despair. The lack of a salutation and the name of a recipient suggests that it may have been a journal entry rather than a letter.
59. Manifest of the *Morning Star*, U.S. Custom House Papers, Bristol, R.I., MSS 28, subgroup 2, box 3, Manifests-Inward-Foreign, 1806, RIHS. Compared to the *Resource*, the *Morning Star* was a tiny ship; the manifest shows that it was only 58 tons and 34 feet long.
60. Prison Records, 1789-1980, C no. 490, box 17, July 1808-February 1810 volume, p. 7.
61. John Hutchins Cady, *The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence, 1636-1950* (Providence: The Author, 1957), 35.
62. Providence Town Council Records, 9A:237.
63. *Ibid.*, 247. He obtained a seamen's protection certificate at Providence in December, clearly with the intention of going to sea. Seamen's Protection Registers, vol. 4, p. 26.
64. Providence Town Council Records, 9A:281, 283.
65. *Ibid.*, 281, 283, 356, 381.
66. *Ibid.*, 9B (1813-18): 35-36.
67. Hilton, "Burial Grounds," p. 81.
68. The Congregational Society had given its earlier meetinghouse to the town when the building that Peleg later burned was erected in 1795. Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 85.
69. Providence Town Council Records, 9B (1813-18): 37.
70. Papers respecting Peleg Gifford's burning of the meeting house, Town Meeting Files, Misc. MSS, G-276, RIHS. The connection between Peleg and his deranged uncle, although not recorded in the testimony, did not escape the clerk, who doodled designs and the name "Isaak Mathewson" on a blank page.
71. Henry Mathewson was the son of Peleg's maternal uncle, Nicholas Mathewson. Josephine K. Short, transcriber, "Mathewson Family Bible" typescript, 4:34, Rhode Island Bible Records, RIHS. Almost exactly the same age as his cousin Peleg, Henry Mathewson was a daring Providence sea captain who became wealthy in the maritime trade. See Earl C. Tanner, "The Voyage of the *Mercury*," *Rhode Island History* 10 (1951): 33-44, 69-79.
72. In 1798 Pardon Mason lived in what is now downtown Providence, then called the part west of the river, on Richmond Lane. Chace, *Owners and Occupants*, 18, plate 11, A5.
73. For a brief biographical sketch of Peter Grinnell, see Richard M. Bayles, ed., *History of Providence County, Rhode Island* (New York: W. W. Preston & Co., 1891), 1:603-4.
74. Staples, *Town of Providence*, 439.
75. Margaret Bingham Stillwell, *The Pageant of Benefit Street Down through the Years* (Providence: The Author, 1945), 52.
76. Helen C. Robinson, "'Damnable Good Works': A Brief History of the First Unitarian Church of Providence, R.I." (talk for a meeting of the Rhode Island Historical Society, 1956, rev. 1972), First Congregational Society Records, MSS 419, box 11.
77. Welcome Arnold Greene, *The Providence Plantations for Two Hundred and Fifty Years* (Providence: J. A. & R. A. Reid, 1886), 72.
78. "Mathewson Family Bible," 4:34.
79. Providence Town Council Records, 9B:99.
80. Register of Inmates, 1828-68, Dexter Asylum Records, MSS 67, ser. 1, subseries 1, p. 1, RIHS.
81. Staples, *Town of Providence*, 395.
82. His Dexter Asylum record notes incorrectly that Peleg had been at the asylum for twenty years and five months. There is some ambiguous evidence that he was out of the asylum for short periods. His primary admission record notes that he left without leave on 10 May 1829, and there is a second admission record for him on 8 September 1836. Register of Inmates, 1828-68, Dexter Asylum Records, pp. 1, 31. If he did leave briefly, the absences were apparently not long enough to be included in the calculation of time he spent in the asylum.
83. Providence Town Council Records, 9A:222.
84. Some details of this testimony suggest an interesting parallel with the testimony of a Joseph Cummings, "transient person," who had been examined by the Providence Town Council on 24 Oct. 1803. *Ibid.*, 8:327-28. Joseph said that he had been born at Milton, Massachusetts, where his father owned property, but had moved to Boston when he was ten and had been apprenticed to a cabinetmaker there. He said that he had married a woman named Mary Mann in Boston, that they had an eight-month-old child named Rebeckah, and that he was in Providence preparing for a voyage on the ship *John Jay*. Joseph Cummings and his family were warned out (i.e., ordered to leave Providence) by the town council, but Cummings did not leave immediately; he obtained a seamen's protection certificate at Providence on 14 Nov. 1803. The certificate shows that he was twenty-four, born in Milton, Massachusetts, and light in complexion. Taylor, *Seamen's Protection Certificates*, 73. The correspondence of the surname, place of birth, residence in Boston during childhood, and name Rebeckah suggests that Joseph may have been a brother or other close relative of Rebecca Cummings. No conclusive proof of this possibility has yet been found.
85. Edward W. McGlenen, comp., *Boston Marriages from 1700-1809* (Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1977), 2:470. The newspaper reports can be found in Arnold, *Vital Record*, 15:88, 16:61.
86. Providence Deeds, 29:113.
87. Providence Town Council Records, 9A:222.
88. *Ibid.* The children's first names may have been chosen in memory of two of Peleg's siblings who died in 1797. There may also have been another child. Begging the owners of the *Charlotte* for justice after his disastrous voyage on that vessel, Peleg wrote, "I have a family of three children & at present Unemployed & not a Shoe to their feet Nor no means to Obtain them." Copy of a letter to George DeWolf and Henry Bradford, written at Providence, 12 Nov. 1806, at end of Gifford, "Journal." It is possible that Peleg was exaggerating or that he was including his youngest sister in the count. In June 1809 Rebecca Cummings testified before the Providence Town Council that she had two children by Peleg.
89. Rhode Island Vital Records, Deaths, 53:898.

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