

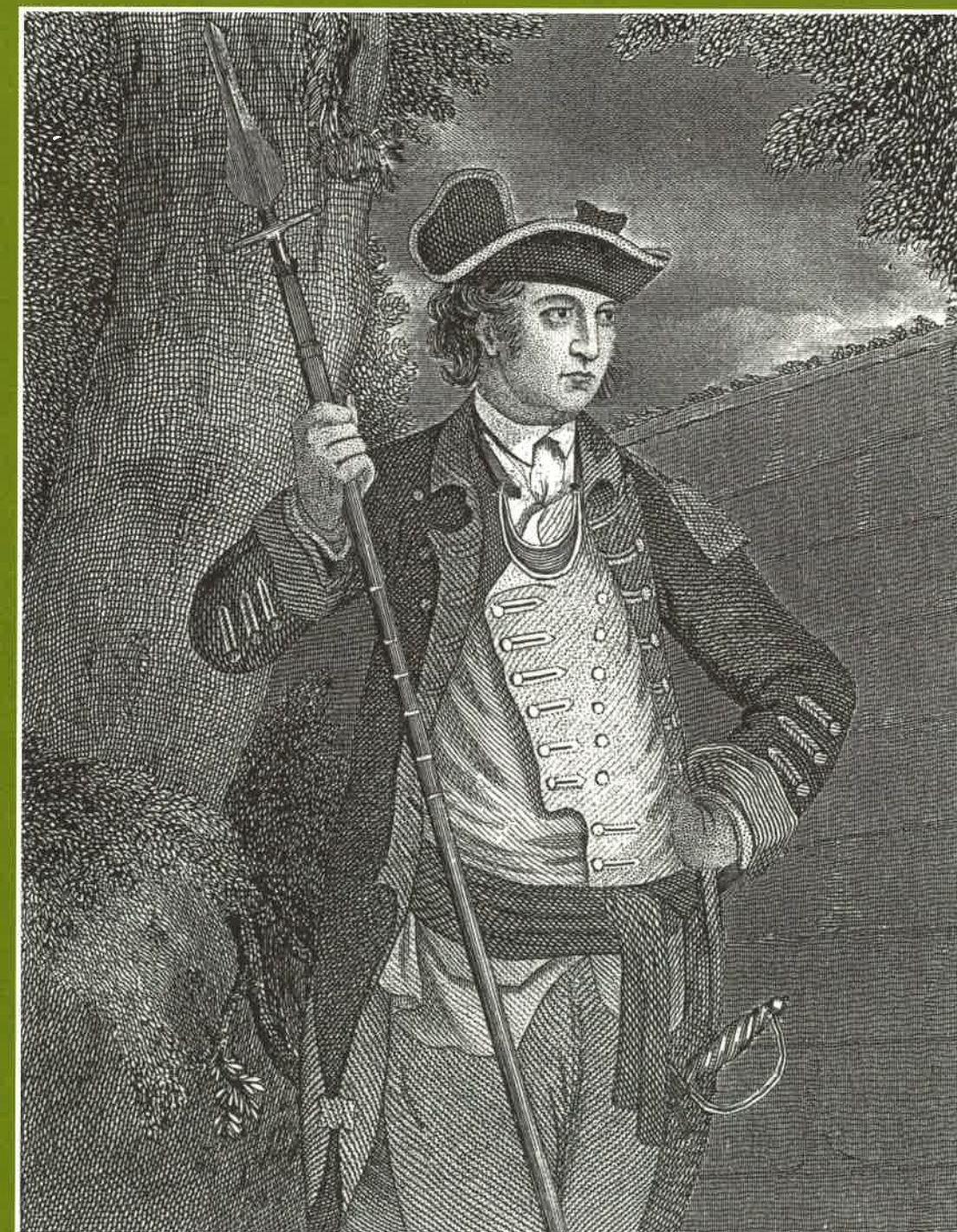
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# Rhode Island History

SUMMER/FALL 2011 VOLUME 69, NUMBER 2



## COVER

Major General John Sullivan commanded the American troops in the Rhode Island theater of war during the Rhode Island Campaign of 1778. Engraving from the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, April 1853; RIHS Collection (RHI X3 613).



# Rhode Island History

SUMMER/FALL 2011    VOLUME 69, NUMBER 2

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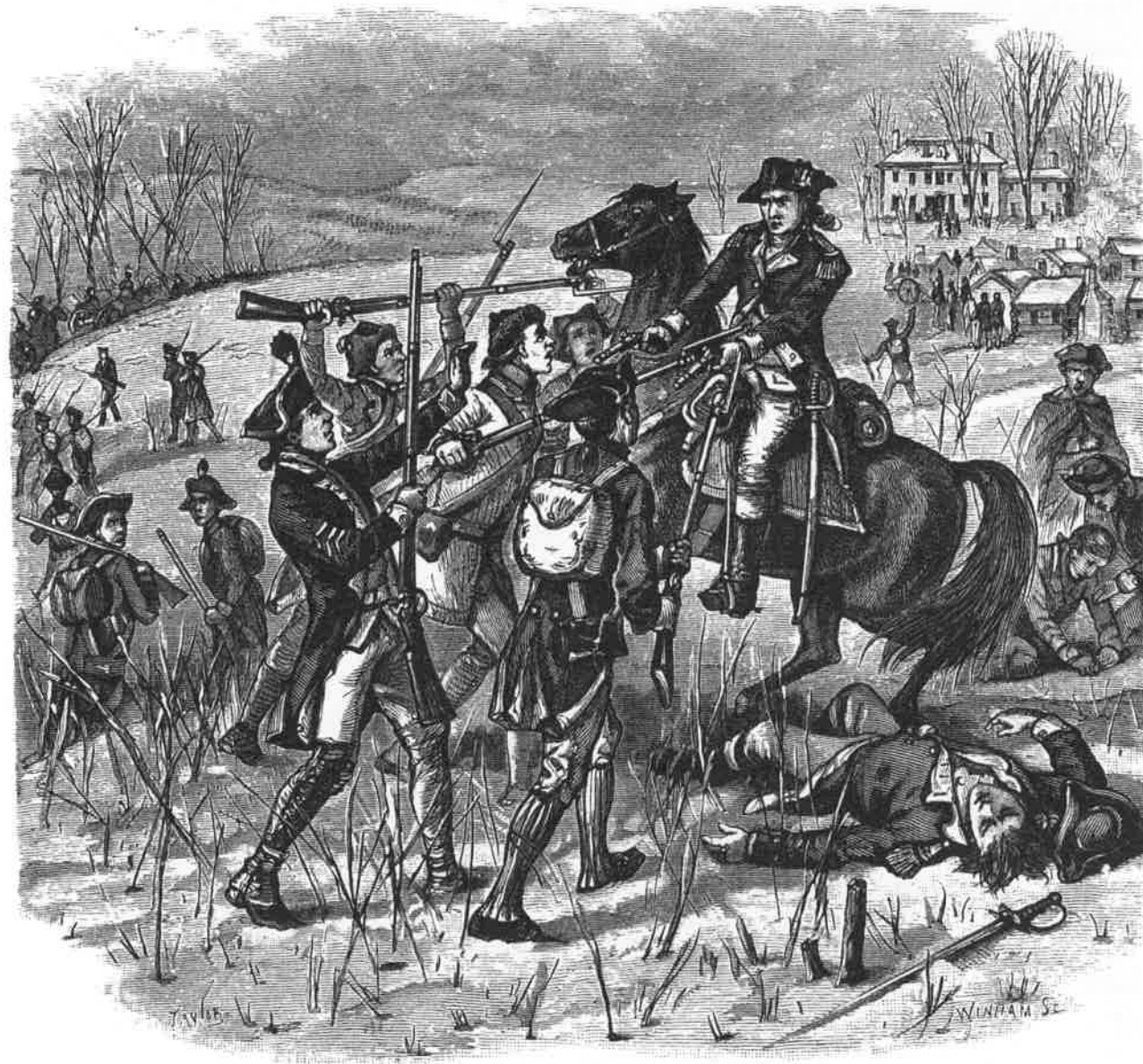
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Mutiny of the Pennsylvania Line.

The mutinies in the Rhode Island theater of war in 1778 and 1779 foreshadowed more serious incidents among the American forces, such as the mutiny of Pennsylvania Continental soldiers in 1781. Engraving by Edmund Winham from a drawing by James E. Taylor, ca. 1881; New York Public Library Collections.

## Mutiny!

*American Mutinies in the Rhode Island Theater of War, September 1778-July 1779*

CHRISTIAN M. MCBURNEY

There is a popular belief that those who filled the ranks of the Continental army in the American Revolutionary War suffered hardships and defeats by the British with stoic fortitude, prevailing in the end owing to their patriotic virtue. As a number of historians have noted, however, the truth was much less tidy. The Continental army was rampant with misconduct, including disobedience to officers, theft of food, desertions, and occasionally even mutinies.<sup>1</sup>

As explained by historian Charles Neimeyer, the problem of mutinies essentially involved an unwritten compact between the rank-and-file soldiers on the one hand and the Continental army and government on the other. By enlisting, a formerly independent civilian agreed to accept the authority of his officers, to temporarily relinquish his civil rights, and to be subject to corporal punishment (typically whipping) if he violated regulations, as by stealing food from civilians or military stores, getting drunk on duty, being absent without leave, or deserting his unit. He also could face the death penalty for such offenses as desertion to the enemy or mutiny. In return for giving up his civil rights, the soldier expected to be paid his full wages on time, to be supplied with adequate food and clothing, and to be provided with decent shelter. The soldier might particularly be in need of his wages if he had a wife and children to support. When the Continental army and government failed to fulfill its side of the agreement, which it did with regularity throughout the war, rank-and-file soldiers became increasingly less willing to tolerate the situation.<sup>2</sup>

Of all possible offenses that could undermine the Continental army's effectiveness, mutiny was among the most serious, and mutinies did occur in the Continental army. Most studies of mutinies in

the American Revolutionary War focus on a rash of incidents in 1780 and early 1781, particularly by the Pennsylvania Continental line;<sup>3</sup> but there is another story to be told. From September 1778 through July 1779, at least nine mutinies erupted in the Rhode Island theater of war, a number exceeding that of all other such incidents during this time in all other theaters of war combined.<sup>4</sup> Occurring in seven different regiments, these mutinies were the precursors to the more serious mutinies in Washington's main army that followed in the next two years. Because the court martial record of the July 1779 mutiny in the Second Rhode Island Regiment of Continentals has survived, this incident can be most fully studied.

RHODE ISLAND BECAME a theater of war after seven thousand British, Hessian, and Tory troops under General Henry Clinton sailed from New York City in a huge fleet of warships and transport vessels and occupied the key seaport city of Newport on December 7, 1776. American patriot forces confined the British to Aquidneck and Conanicut Islands from that time to the fall of 1779, when the British evacuated the two islands. The Americans mounted three expeditions to oust the enemy from Newport before that evacuation, but each one ended in failure.

The last expedition, called the Rhode Island Campaign or Sullivan's expedition, was the most ambitious. In late July 1778 a powerful French fleet under the command of Admiral Comte d'Estaing joined forces with twenty-five hundred Continental troops from Washington's main army and troops from New England state and militia regiments in an operation against the British garrison in Newport. When British vice admiral Viscount Richard Howe arrived from

New York City with a fleet outside Narragansett Bay on August 10, d'Estaing ordered his stronger fleet to close upon the British ships, but just as the battle was about to begin, a fierce storm broke out that forced both fleets to disengage and ride out the storm for the next three days. With his ships more damaged by the storm than those of the British, d'Estaing informed the American commander, Major General John Sullivan, that he would take his fleet to Boston for repairs and would not be able to participate further in the expedition against Newport.

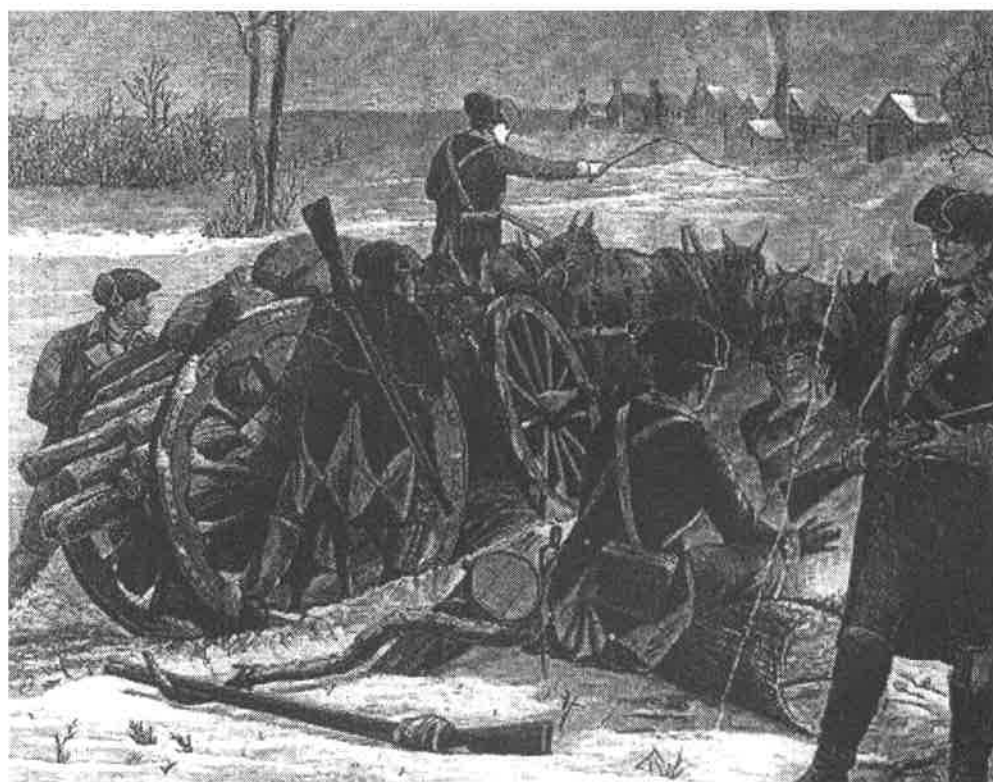
When Sullivan received this news, his troops had landed on Aquidneck Island and were facing strong defensive fortifications just outside Newport. Recognizing that a frontal assault was impractical, Sullivan decided to wait in the hope that the French fleet would return to assist him, but on August 28 he received word that General Clinton was on his way from Long Island with a fleet of ships and four thousand troops with the aim of trapping the American army on Aquidneck. Sullivan then ordered his men to retreat at night to the northern part of the island. The next morning, hoping to catch Sullivan's army exposed as it retreated, British major general Robert Pigot ordered detachments of his troops up the island's East and West Roads. But the American troops, with most of the fighting done by Continentals, repelled the British, Hessian, and Tory attackers, and the next night they made good their evacuation from the island.

American army officers and soldiers alike were angry at what they saw as d'Estaing's abandoning them at a crucial time in their operation, and they

were disappointed that their effort to oust the British from Newport had failed. Yet they could also take pride in having fought well against the enemy's troops and escaping from Aquidneck Island with their army intact in what has come to be called the Battle of Rhode Island. After their training during the winter at Valley Forge, the Continentals once again proved that they were developing into an effective fighting force.<sup>5</sup>

Following this battle Sullivan feared a possible invasion of Providence and other ports around Narragansett Bay by British forces from Newport. Such an invasion, it was realized, could be a prelude to an attack on Boston as well. Most of the short-term militia had returned home, and only a few of the longer-term New England state regiments remained in the Rhode Island theater. Washington agreed to permit the nine Continental regiments that had participated in the Rhode Island Campaign to stay

Continental soldiers at their Valley Forge encampment in the winter of 1777-1778. Engraving by Julian Scott, *Harper's Weekly*, January 27, 1877; Library of Congress.



and be assigned to stations around the bay to defend against a British incursion.

THE CHARGE OF MUTINY was no small matter; the punishment could be death. The Continental Congress and each state enacted articles of war that were based on the British model, which in turn was derived from the practices of the ancient Roman army. The state-enacted articles of war tended to be less severe than those adopted for the Continental army; for example, Rhode Island and Massachusetts limited floggings to thirty-nine lashes, whereas the Continental army set the maximum number of lashes at one hundred and prescribed the death penalty for a much greater number of offenses. But in every instance, articles of war considered mutiny a capital offense.<sup>6</sup>

Before a soldier could be hanged for mutiny, he had to be convicted by a general court martial, and the court's sentence had to be approved by the general commanding the department.<sup>7</sup> General courts martial (as opposed to regimental courts martial, which handled lesser crimes) consisted of thirteen generals and other officers serving as both judges and jurors, with one officer selected as a judge advocate, responsible for fairly presenting both sides of a case. Decisions were made by majority vote, except that a death sentence required a two-thirds vote.<sup>8</sup>

There was only one reported mutiny in the Rhode Island theater of war prior to the fall of 1778, and it was a minor affair; indeed, it was more of an offense against civil authority than a case of military disobedience, and it involved only one soldier. In August 1777 Griffin Spencer, a thirty-six-year-old former seaman from East Greenwich in Colonel Robert Elliott's Rhode Island Artillery Regiment, was charged with bypassing the chain of command by submitting a petition to the state's General Assembly complaining about the conditions to which soldiers were being subjected. If a soldier had a complaint, he was to convey it to his immediate superior rather than bypass the chain of command by complaining directly to his regiment's colonel, his

army's general, or government authorities. The Rhode Island House of Deputies, "considering this paper [the petition] as a high indignity upon the supreme legislature of this State and as an attempt to wreak disaffection and mutiny in this Army," recommended to Colonel Elliott that the petition's author be subject to a court martial for mutiny.<sup>9</sup> The officers of the court martial board felt they could not issue Spencer the ultimate punishment, the death penalty, since he had showed his petition to his company commander, Captain Ebenezer Adams, who did not object to it. But Spencer was convicted and sentenced to receive a whipping of "thirty-nine lashes on his naked back to deter others from attempting to execute mutiny."<sup>10</sup>

In the fall of 1778 mutiny was in the air in the Rhode Island theater. Why was it that mutinies among American troops occurred there so frequently in late 1778 and 1779? In general, the Rhode Island situation resulted from a combination of factors: a severe food shortage, increased competition for food, a breakdown in the Continental military supply chain, continued depreciation of the currency, the failure of the states to accept increased taxation and thereby increase aid to Continental forces, and the presence of Continental regiments in or near their home states and close to their suffering families.

Mutinies were triggered by both national and local conditions. The main national cause of mutinies was the Continental Congress's failure to establish an effective financial structure to pay for the massive expenses of war. In short, the Continental Congress did not sufficiently tax the states and citizens of the new country, and neither were the citizens sufficiently taxed by the states. Although the rebellion against Britain was originally based on Britain's attempt to tax the American colonies without representation, when the colonies became states and elected representatives to their own Continental Congress, they were not willing to tax themselves. Many Americans did not want to authorize their own central government to impose taxes on them any more than they had wanted

to permit the British government in London to assert that power. But this was surely no way to run a war. Were it not for loans extended to America by France, the American war effort would likely have collapsed entirely. As a result of America's poor revenue-raising structure, its soldiers suffered: the Continental Congress was constantly behind in payments of salaries to Continental troops and in funding for food, clothing, and other supplies.

The worst problem was inflation. Inflationary pressures had already been caused by the British navy's disruption of American trade and the demand for food and supplies for the American armies. But the inflation was exacerbated by the Continental Congress's failure to levy adequate taxes while it printed more and more money, promoting rampant increases in prices of key goods and, correspondingly, what contemporaries called "depreciation" in the value of the Continental currency. In January 1778, for instance, \$152 Continental equaled \$100 specie (silver), a ratio that kept increasing; by March 1780 it had skyrocketed to \$3,954 Continental to \$100 specie.<sup>11</sup>

Continental soldiers were on fixed salaries, and rampant inflation meant that with those salaries they could not provide much additional food, clothing, or other assistance either for themselves or for their families. While accepting the risk of sacrificing their own lives, Continental soldiers were required to live apart from their families and leave work through which they might better provide for their families' sustenance and comfort. Yet the Continental Congress consistently failed to provide adequately for the new nation's soldiers. "The radical cure for depreciation is taxation," wrote Rhode Island Continental Congress delegate William Ellery, but few other legislators heeded such thinking.<sup>12</sup>

Why did mutinies occur in the American army but rarely in the British and Hessian army? After all, in the winter of 1778-79 the British and Hessian soldiers in Newport suffered from severe food and fuel shortages, yet no mutinies are known to have resulted from those

conditions. While it is true that the British typically supplied their troops with more and better food than the Continental commissaries were able to do for the Continental army, perhaps the main reason that there were more mutinies in the American army than in the British army was the difference between the social structures in Great Britain and the German principalities on one hand and the social structure in the United States on the other. Great Britain had a stratified social structure, and gentlemen demanded deference from those they deemed hierarchically beneath them; thus common soldiers in the British army were under a strict discipline enforced by officers (typically "gentlemen") by whippings and other harsh punishments. The social structure in German principalities was perhaps even more stratified and rigid, and it was reflected in the strict discipline in the Hessian regiments. By contrast, the egalitarianism and independent spirit of American society extended into the Continental army, making British and Hessian strictness impossible to enforce, although Continental army officers sometimes tried to do so. When common American soldiers saw injustice, they were often not reluctant to express their outrage. Moreover, many corporals and sergeants in the Continental forces, including the Second Rhode Island Regiment, were Irish immigrants who had resisted the tyranny of British oppression in Ireland, and they were not about to submit quietly to what they perceived as injustice in the Continental army.

The only recorded mutiny during the British occupation of Newport in fact involved American Loyalist troops. The King's American Regiment, commanded by Colonel Edward Fanning and consisting mostly of New York Tories, had a number of men whose two-year enlistments were to expire by December 1778, but who were not being released from service. On the morning of December 12 the regiment paraded in front of Fanning's Newport house, with the men whose terms had expired demanding a discharge. The demand was finally agreed to, but the leaders of the mutiny were ordered to be punished.<sup>13</sup>

A PRIME CAUSE OF the rash of mutinies in the Rhode Island theater of war in late 1778 and 1779 was the severe shortage of food in the theater, which raised prices for what available food there was. With local farms never producing enough food to feed the population of Rhode Island even before the war, the colony had depended on imports from other colonies to supply what was needed, and such imports were severely restricted by the British naval blockade prior to the Rhode Island Campaign in the summer of 1778. In addition, an enormous effort was made to feed the American army during Sullivan's expedition against Newport, and food stocks were depleted even further after the Battle of Rhode Island by the approximately ten thousand sailors and soldiers from d'Estaing's French fleet who were stationed in Boston until their departure in November 1778. Rhode Island governor William Greene saw still other causes for the food shortage: most of the state's men had been called into military service for Sullivan's expedition during harvest time, the storm of August 11-13 had flattened many crops, and there had been a drought that summer.<sup>14</sup> Greene further complained that despite the low food supplies, Providence was dealing with about a thousand additional people in the city who had been allowed by British commanders to flee Newport, "the greatest part of whom depend on charity" and had to be fed by the state.<sup>15</sup>

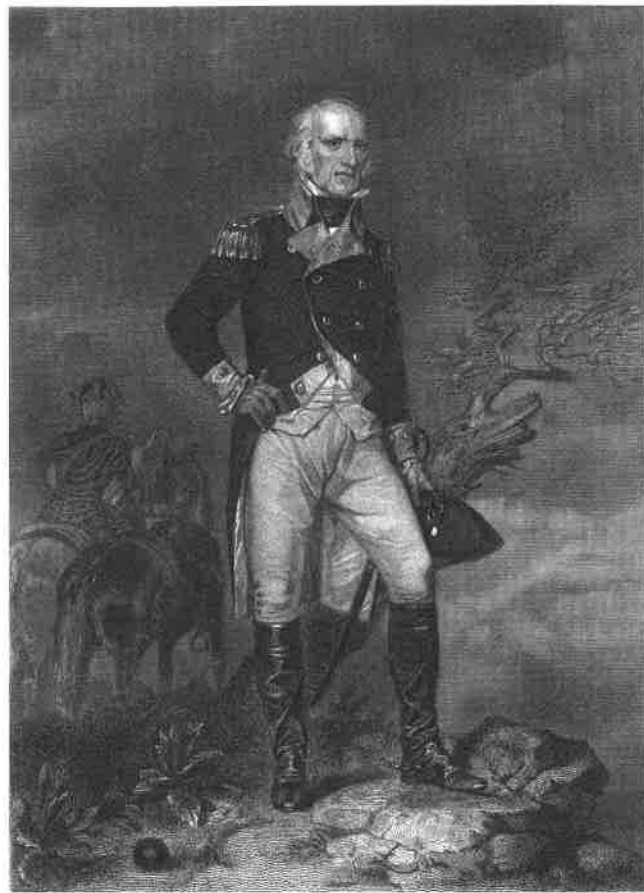
By the beginning of September 1778, thousands of American soldiers had been in the Rhode Island theater for about a month, consuming much of the available food supply and driving up the price of what remained. Other than fish, wrote a Connecticut officer a few days after the end of the Aquidneck expedition, "every other article is excessively dear," and the officers found it "impossible to support [themselves] decently."<sup>16</sup> If officers were having difficulty supporting themselves, then it was surely even worse for lower-paid rank-and-file soldiers. Officers in the Rhode Island theater could frequently obtain decent food as guests of well-to-do civilians, but rank-and-file soldiers did not have that option.

To make matters worse, neighboring states were keeping their food and not allowing any to be sent to Rhode Island. Connecticut's embargo especially vexed Rhode Island's leaders. Ostensibly the embargo was designed to prevent "monopolist" businessmen from taking advantage of higher prices, but it nonetheless smacked of state protectionism to insure an adequate food supply for Connecticut citizens. Emphasizing that Providence's poor and the refugees from Newport who had no means of subsistence faced starvation, in January 1779 Rhode Island officials pleaded for Connecticut to repeal its embargo, or at least allow for some grain to be sold to Rhode Island.<sup>17</sup>

Continental quartermaster Colonel Jeremiah Wadsworth and his aide Peter Colt, both based in Connecticut, were responsible for providing supplies to Continental troops. Since they had to send supplies to both Washington's main army outside New York City and to Sullivan's (and later Horatio Gates's) army based in Providence, their resources were strained. Because the Rhode Island theater of war was of less importance, it received less of their attention and supplies. Soldiers in Continental regiments based in Connecticut suffered as well, becoming so frustrated with food and clothing shortages and depreciated pay that in late December 1778 they threatened to march to Hartford to demand that the Connecticut legislature address their grievances.<sup>18</sup>

Still, food was far more plentiful in Connecticut, with its many bountiful farms, than it was in Rhode Island. In early November 1778 General Ezekiel Cornell, in charge of American troops in Tiverton, informed Sullivan that his troops had received bread or flour on only two of the previous five days, rice on two other days, and nothing at all on the other day. "You may depend on the influence of the officers of all ranks to keep the camp quiet," Cornell wrote ominously, "although our situation at present appears alarming."<sup>19</sup> In late November Brigadier General John Stark informed Sullivan that the commissaries at Providence and North Kingstown had no flour





Brigadier General John Stark, commander of a brigade of Continental regiments in the Rhode Island theater during 1779. Print from a drawing by Alonzo Chappel, ca. 1862; author's collection.

remaining.<sup>20</sup> When Sullivan sent one of his agents into Connecticut to purchase food for his troops, a charge of violating Connecticut's embargo was filed against the quartermaster in a Connecticut court. Then, when Peter Colt failed to respond in a timely manner to an urgent appeal by Sullivan for food, Sullivan requested that Colt be subject to a court martial.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to an acute shortage of food in the Rhode Island theater, another local factor that led to mutinies among Rhode Island soldiers was their presence in their home state. The Rhode Island state government had often agreed to supplement the soldiers' depreciated Continental pay with food allowances and other benefits, and it was now failing to do so. With the state's government close by and

witnessing their privations, the soldiers were especially incensed that it was not complying with its promises.<sup>22</sup> The soldiers' frustration was further increased when they could personally see the wartime hardship their nearby families were experiencing and recognized their own inability to offer them any assistance.

The condition of the officers and rank-and-file soldiers in the Rhode Island theater was most eloquently described by Major Ebenezer Huntington, the acting commander of Webb's Additional Continental Regiment, most of whose men hailed from Connecticut. On December 21, 1778, Huntington wrote a letter from his regiment's camp at Warren, Rhode Island, to his father, Jabez Huntington, a leader in the Connecticut General Assembly and a member of that state's board of war. "I now think it high time and inform you that we (the Connecticut officers at this post) wait most anxiously to know what you will do in your next session," the letter began. "For your conduct in some measure will regulate ours. If you do anything spiritedly, we may remain in service, but if you do not, I believe the greater part of the Col. Webb's Regiment will resign, and I don't know but two-thirds of the men." After that warning, Huntington went on to describe the problem of rising prices and fixed wages:

Almost two years have passed, where we have been buoyed up with promises at loose ends by the people in general. If you intend to feed us any longer with promises, you must, at least, have some formality in passing them. Procrastination is dangerous, and more so at this time than usual, we doubt the willingness of our countrymen to assist us. You cannot blame us. Our money is gone, and our friends are few or none who will lend us money. Indeed, we think hard that our wages are not made, at least, so good as to support us. The bare idea of fifty dollars per month is nothing and my wages not more, it will scarcely support me a week, in addition to the ration I draw. Notwithstanding the money is so much depreciated, almost everyone is lending a helping hand while the loss falls almost entirely on the Army, who serve at fixed wages, and who ought not to suffer in the least by the depreciation of the currency. You resolved in your last session that the soldier's family should be supplied, whether they sent money or not, but it is not done.



Major Ebenezer Huntington, temporary commander of Webb's Additional Regiment of Connecticut Continentals. *Letters Written by Ebenezer Huntington during the American Revolution* (C. F. Heartman, 1914), frontispiece.

Huntington was greatly affected by letters in which family members of soldiers described their desperate plights:

Not a day passes [without] some soldier, with tears in his eyes, hand[ing] me a letter to read from his wife painting forth the distresses of his family in such strains as these: "I am without bread & cannot get any. The Committee will not supply me. My children will starve, or if they do not, they must freeze. We have no wood, neither can we get any. *Pray come home.*" These applications affect me. My ears are *not* neither *shall* they be shut to such complaints. They are injurious, they wound my feeling, and while I have tongue or pen, I will busy myself to stir up my countrymen to act like *men* who have all at stake, and not think to enrich themselves, by the distresses of their brave countrymen in the field. It has been practiced too long. Don't drive us to despair, we are now on the brink. Depend upon it, we cannot put up with such treatment any longer. Spare yourselves by rewarding the brave."<sup>23</sup>

PROBLEMS AROSE ALMOST immediately after the Battle of Rhode Island ended. On the evening of September 2, 1778, a great disorder was reported among the soldiers of General John Glover's brigade, consisting of Continental regiments from Massachusetts then stationed in Bristol County, Rhode Island. The incident was serious enough for Glover to condemn it as "mutinous behavior." Measures were taken to tighten discipline in the brigade, including requirements that rolls be called twice a day and officers not be permitted to leave camp, but these measures were not effective. Within a few days three men in Bigelow's Regiment of Continentals from Massachusetts were sent to the brigade jail for "endeavoring to raise a mutiny." "Mutiny is a crime of the most dangerous nature and ought to be punished in a most exemplary manner," Glover wrote in his brigade orders on September 7, 1778. "But the General having received a petition from the offenders, in which it appears they are fully sensible of their errors, for which they acknowledge it would be just to punish them, at the same time plead[ing] the disgrace it would bring on their families . . . the General forgives them."<sup>24</sup>



Brigadier General John Glover, commander of a brigade of Continental regiments. Engraving by H. B. Hall from a pencil drawing by John Trumbull, 1794; author's collection.



never seen the American army in the Rhode Island theater in a worse condition, and that the situation was causing him more anxiety than any other matter in his public service.<sup>32</sup> Bowen's anxiety was justified; on January 28 a portion of the troops in Webb's and the Second Rhode Island Regiments staged a brief mutiny at their camp in Warren, Rhode Island.<sup>33</sup>

By that time the rank-and-file soldiers in the two regiments had become upset that their wages and money for rum were not being paid on a monthly basis, as had been promised, and they were further frustrated at the spiraling inflation that made it difficult for them to supply their nearby Rhode Island and Connecticut families with bread. According to a report that the Second Rhode Island Regiment's commander, Colonel Israel Angell, later filed with Sullivan, the soldiers felt that "they could no longer be silent witnesses to the sufferings of their families and connections, without showing to their officers and countrymen that they were aggrieved and wanted redress."<sup>34</sup> It appears that two corporals of the Second Rhode Island Regiment organized the mutiny.<sup>35</sup>

In the afternoon of January 28, some soldiers from Webb's Regiment mutinied by "turning out under arms" without orders from their officers to do so, and their officers dispersed them with "some difficulty."<sup>36</sup> That evening, around eight o'clock, about ninety soldiers from Webb's Regiment again "paraded" under arms without permission, marching to barracks where soldiers of the Second Rhode Island Regiment were quartered. There, a portion of the Second Rhode Island Regiment, about forty soldiers, joined them in marching under arms without orders. After General James Mitchell Varnum told the demonstrators that he sympathized with their plight and that officers were suffering from the same conditions, the soldiers returned to their barracks. Because they did not engage in violent conduct and had not marched off the grounds, Colonel Angell recommended to General Sullivan that no one be punished for the incident. Angell warned, however, that should "a spirit of mutiny



Brigadier General James Mitchell Varnum, commander of a brigade of Continental regiments during the Rhode Island Campaign and late 1778. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 2018).

... again appear in the Regiment, we are resolved to punish it with every mark of severity."<sup>37</sup> At roll call the next morning, Angell whipped four of his soldiers for robbing a corporal who had informed the regiment's officers about the planned mutiny.<sup>38</sup>

Learning of Varnum's effort to quell the mutiny at Warren peacefully, General Washington, at his camp outside New York City, responded like a scolding father. Washington warned Varnum in a letter that the "mutinous spirit which some corps have lately discovered" must be "extinguished by every means in our power." He further advised that "soldiers are restrained, more by fear, than by argument" and more "by severe and well-timed examples" of punishment against the principal offenders than "by cool and lenient measures."<sup>39</sup> In another letter in the same vein, Washington advised Sullivan that the officers of the

Continental regiments in the Rhode Island theater should set a good example and not stir up their men by complaining about the depreciation of the currency or the shortage of provisions.<sup>40</sup>

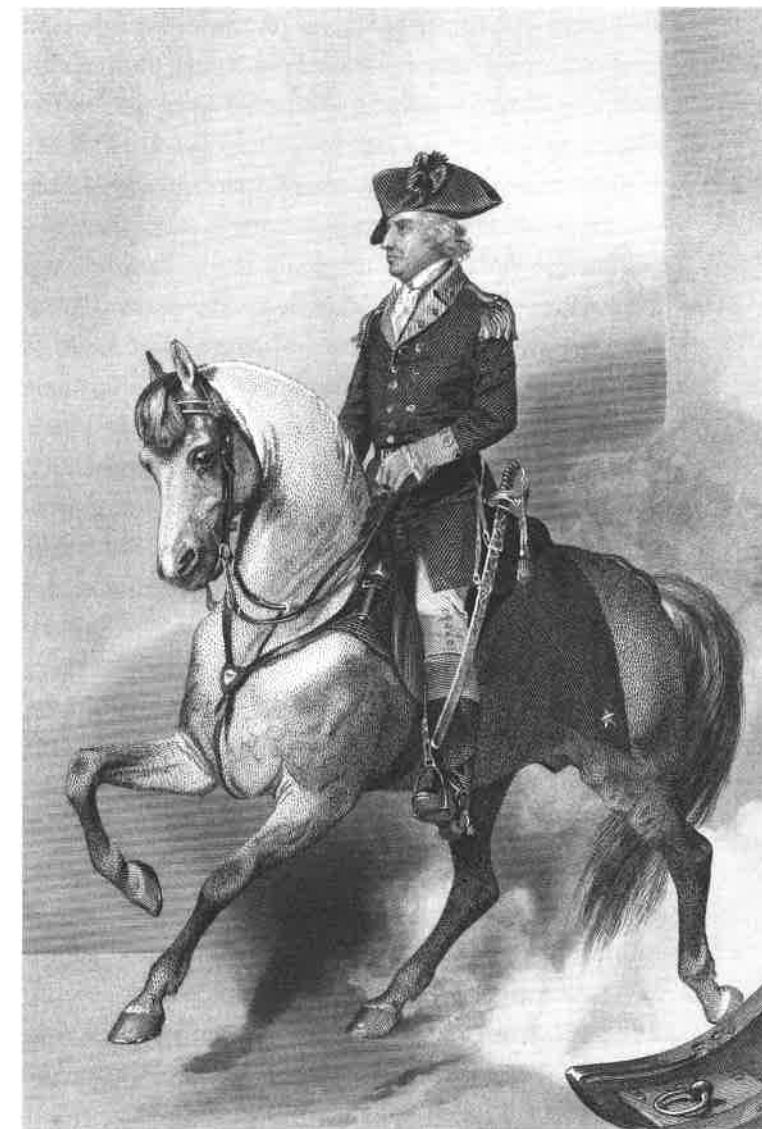
The mutiny by the Continental troops at Warren spurred a similar incident in Colonel John Topham's Second Rhode Island State Regiment a few days later at Tiverton. While Topham was personally attempting to quell the mutineers, some apparently made stabbing motions at him with their bayonets. Of the thirteen sergeants and one corporal who were then tried in a court martial on February 2, two of the sergeants and the corporal, the presumed ringleaders, received death sentences; each of the others was sentenced to have his rank reduced and to receive one hundred lashes. Sullivan subsequently complained about "the amazing pains" he had taken "to make every corps in this army comfortable and the exertions of the officers to obtain for the soldiers an adequate satisfaction for the services and that all the officers have been at least equal sufferers with their soldiers in defending their country" and have also suffered from "the depreciation of money and other causes." Sullivan was particularly vexed by "the ungenerous and unparalleled conduct" of the accused sergeants and corporal, "who without complaining to their officers or saying a word to them upon the subject of grievances should cause a whole regiment to rise in opposition to their officers."<sup>41</sup>

A Baptist minister in Tiverton, Peleg Burroughs, took up the cause of the three condemned men and tried to persuade Sullivan to spare their lives. In a letter to Sullivan, Burroughs argued that the men should be pardoned on the grounds that they were young, no blood had been shed, it was their first offense, and "the prisoners now appear deeply sensible of their folly" and were "very humble and penitent."<sup>42</sup> Burroughs met and prayed with the men, who were under guard at Howland's Ferry, and he suggesting that they prepare for death by repenting before God.<sup>43</sup> He also buttonholed General Ezekiel Cornell, who petitioned Sullivan for a pardon. After once delaying

the date of the executions, Sullivan finally reversed the convicted men's sentences, but not before denouncing the mutiny one more time in general orders, warning that this would be the last time he would pardon men convicted of mutiny.<sup>44</sup>

Sullivan departed the Rhode Island theater in late March 1779, and when Major General Horatio Gates assumed the department's command shortly afterwards, he found the military situation quiet but provisions scarce. Turning his attention to what he

Major General Horatio Gates succeeded John Sullivan as commander of the American forces in the Rhode Island theater in April 1779. Print from a drawing by Alonzo Chappel, ca. 1862; author's collection.





viewed as corruption in the purchase and sale of war supplies by agents in Providence, Gates complained of artificially high prices brought on by price rigging, and he particularly excoriated "our extortioners" who "are so fond of counting their thousands."<sup>45</sup> But although there was some fraud and theft of military supplies, the culprit that contributed most to the misery of the soldiers was Congress, which continued to refuse to tax Americans sufficiently to pay for the war.

Bad food, lack of food, inflation, and late pay continued to plague the troops in the Rhode Island theater. On the evening of April 23, 1779, in their camp in Warren, soldiers in the Second Rhode Island Regiment staged a second mutiny. Sergeant Jeremiah Greenman described the episode in his diary: "This evening about 10 o'clock p.m. the bigger part of the Regiment turned out in mutiny under arms. They paraded and took command of the artillery where they stayed about two hours. Getting no answer from the Colonel [Israel Angell] to satisfy them, they pushed off for Providence. They marched within two miles of the ferry where they halted and sent a messenger to General Gates. General Glover came to them. Some encouragement being given them, they returned back to Warren in the morning at 9 a.m. and disbanded. They informed us that they had sent a committee to Providence to make a proper complaint." The committee returned from Providence later in the day on April 24 with news that the salaries owed to the soldiers would be paid by May 1. "The Regiment when paraded at roll call this evening behaved as well as heretofore," Greenman added in his diary, but "two of the mutineers deserted," fearful of reprisals.<sup>46</sup>

Shortly after this mutiny Gates sent a letter to General William Heath in Boston, requesting an immediate shipment of food. "There have been two mutinies these few days since," Gates wrote. "I dread the consequences of another."<sup>47</sup> Heath immediately complied with Gates's request, and for a brief time the emergency passed; but Gates continued to worry about food supplies.

On May 3, Captain Asa Waterman, a Rhode Island commissary officer, wrote that he had met with Gates, who "informed me of the distressed condition this Department is in for want of flour. The troops are very uneasy and constantly mutinizing for want of bread, and request I would do everything in my power to see them supplied."<sup>48</sup> On May 15 Gates wrote to the Continental quartermasters in Connecticut, Jeremiah Wadsworth and Peter Colt, with another urgent request for food. Gates explained that he had quelled the two mutinies by promising that "the Army would be immediately supplied," but that "[a]t this and the other posts in our neighborhood, the stores are this day, quite empty! You must feel for me, as a patriot and an officer."<sup>49</sup> Gates had written to John Jay in the Continental Congress on May 4, demanding that Congress send him \$600,000 to buy food for his troops, and he wrote to Washington as well on the same matter. He eventually received favorable replies from both men, but owing in part to the slow delivery of mail, these did not arrive before the summer.<sup>50</sup>

Writing on May 3, 1779, from Tiverton to his brother, a brigadier general in the Continental army, Major Huntington described the problem of fixed wages and rising prices in stark terms:

I receive \$80 in wages and subsistence monthly, and since at this post have spent it weekly. We have been without bread or rice more than five days out of seven, for these three weeks past, and the prospect remains as fair as it has been. Excuse me in giving you a list of prices, or amount current. Potatoes, \$24 per bushel; eggs, \$18 per dozen; veal, five shillings per pound and that to be bought but seldom; butter \$18 dollars per pound and that more seldom than veal; oysters and fish not to be purchased at present; nor have been for this fortnight past; rum, \$2 dollars per gill. The provision we draw has been chiefly salt beef, and that alone without bread or potatoes is tedious.

It appears to me that unless the Army is better supplied, you had better disband them now, rather than fill the Regiment. I have been as unwilling to hear trifling complaints as any persons, but had my feelings been hardened with steel, they would have been softened by the too just and repeated complaints of those who seldom murmur. If the fault lies at the door of any individual, deliver him to us for a sacrifice, as

it would be more acceptable to us, if we must be starved, first to imbrue our hands in blood of him who brought us to it. If it is the depreciation of money, you are all alike guilty, and ought to be slaves to all eternity to those who dare contend for freedom. Notwithstanding the currency is bad or worse than nothing, the whole department are in arrears for six months, and one brigade for seven. Hitherto, the Regiment has been kept together but I dare not be answerable till tomorrow morning.

For privates, who earned only \$4 a month, the problems were even more acute.

Huntington noted the suffering of civilians as well as of soldiers, and the failure of the state of Rhode Island to address the problems: "The whole part of the country are starving for want of bread. They have been driven to the necessity of grinding flaxseed and oats together for bread. Is it not possible for the State to do something else besides promises? Promises cannot feed or clothe a man always. Performance is sometimes necessary to make a man believe you intend to perform."<sup>51</sup>

In addition to the soldiers' pay being late and almost worthless, another problem was the unequal treatment of regiments within the same brigade. In early July 1779, regimental commanders Colonel Joseph Vose and Colonel William Shepard warned their brigade commander in Providence, General John Glover, of "great uneasiness and complaints" because of back pay from 1777 being paid to Bigelow's and Wigglesworth's Regiments while the troops in their own regiments in the same brigade had not been paid. On behalf of the noncommissioned officers and privates of their regiments, Vose and Shepard asked that their men be awarded their back pay as well.<sup>52</sup>

CONTINENTAL RANK-AND-FILE SOLDIERS had clear reasons for complaint, yet they were limited in how they could bring their complaints to the attention of their officers. The soldiers were permitted to complain only to a lower-level officer, who could then either attempt to deal with the complaint himself or discuss it with the colonel of the regiment. No rank-and-file soldier

was permitted to speak directly, or submit a petition, to the colonel of his regiment or to any general. Any breach of this prohibition was considered mutinous behavior. Under these circumstances, what followed was often a sort of ritual dance. Rank-and-file soldiers would attempt to communicate directly with their commanding colonel or general, either by petition or by direct talks, with a small group representing the men, and officers would then try to identify a single leader of the mutiny in order to punish him as an example to the others, usually by jailing him, subjecting him to a court martial, and condemning him to death. The man thus made an example of was typically the man who submitted the petition or the man identified as the mutiny's organizer. Rank-and-file soldiers would try to hide the identity of their leader and claim that all of the men acted in concert, and that no one man should be singled out and punished. If that claim was not accepted, the men might mutiny again and seek to force the release of their jailed comrade by protesting or, if necessary, by force.

This kind of ritual was enacted in the most serious mutiny in the Rhode Island theater, which occurred in the Second Rhode Island Regiment in late July 1779. The regiment was then stationed at Barber's Heights in North Kingstown, overlooking Narragansett Bay. Upon first seeing the tents pitched on this campsite, Sergeant Greenman noted that the site was "a very pleasant situation in plain sight of Newport and the movements of the enemy."<sup>53</sup> But many of the 275 or so privates and noncommissioned officers continued to be upset by their failure to be paid, their poor living conditions, and the failure of the Rhode Island government to make state's stores available to them as it had promised. The sergeants also suspected that some of the officers were hoarding more than their proper share of the food supplies.<sup>54</sup>

This time the regiment's sergeants, who had stayed out of the earlier mutinies, began to organize a protest. First, two-thirds of them gauged what the reaction of the officers would be by ripping the bindings of their

own hats, contrary to orders. The reaction was swift and potentially harsh; the sergeants were ordered to return the bindings to their hats by the next morning or be reduced in rank.<sup>55</sup>

Undeterred, Sergeants John Dodge, Job Sheldon, and Dennis Hogan went to the tent of a literate soldier, Private Stephen Hazard, and persuaded him to draft a petition setting forth their complaints, with a threat of another mutiny at the end of the petition.<sup>56</sup> The sergeants then persuaded a private, Benjamin Twitchell, to present the petition to Colonel Angell. For a private to speak directly to the colonel or present a petition (particularly one as incendiary as this one) was prohibited, as all the men knew, but on Saturday, July 24, Twitchell nonetheless courageously gave the petition to Angell.<sup>57</sup> The officers of the regiment responded with two courses of action: First, they told the complaining soldiers that they sympathized with the complaints and would make every effort to have the men's overdue accounts settled at an upcoming meeting of the Rhode Island Council of War, scheduled for August 2. Second, for submitting a mutinous petition to Colonel Angell, Twitchell was arrested, carried to East Greenwich, and confined in jail, with the prospect of a court martial trial for mutiny and a possible death sentence.<sup>58</sup>

Despite the assurances that the officers had given them, the regiment's sergeants, corporals, and privates remained uneasy. They wanted the commander of the Rhode Island theater, General Gates, to personally listen to their complaints and how they had been, as they put it, "abused." In addition, they wanted to persuade Gates to free Twitchell; some even threatened to release Twitchell by force.<sup>59</sup> Why, the men thought, should Twitchell be jailed, and perhaps hanged, when all of the men were equally guilty? Many years later Samuel Smith, who as a teenager had joined the regiment as a drummer or fifer, recalled that "We were determined to rescue the prisoner, who was innocent of any crime on behalf of his fellow soldiers. We were determined to a man to lose our lives or rescue our brother."<sup>60</sup>

The sergeants then began to organize a more brazen protest. After a number of meetings of small groups were held in the soldiers' tents, it was agreed on July 27 that at 8 A.M. on the morning of Thursday, July 29, the regiment's drummers would beat the "long roll," which was the signal for the men to gather on the parade ground in formation. It was also agreed that after forming, the men would march to East Greenwich to meet Gates in order to state their complaints and to persuade him to free Twitchell from jail.<sup>61</sup>

The sergeants attempted to persuade Private George Milliman, of Barrington, to take a leading role in the planned effort. Although he was only nineteen or twenty years old, Milliman had served in the army for more than two years, having enlisted in May 1777, and he was a natural leader who enjoyed the respect of many of the other privates. He was not an instigator of the earlier two mutinies, but he had come to the notice of the regiment's officers during those mutinies when he organized the men into platoons and led them in marching around the camp.<sup>62</sup> Milliman was wary of taking a leadership role in the upcoming mutiny, however, for he feared that his participation in the previous mutinies would make it more likely that he would be tried at a court martial, with his life at stake. In addition, he was bitter at the sergeants for failing to join the mutiny of January 1779. When the sergeants and rank-and-file soldiers asked him if he would participate in this mutiny, Milliman flatly refused.<sup>63</sup> This thwarted the sergeants' plan to use Milliman as a scapegoat who would deflect culpability from themselves for what was being planned.

When Lieutenant Colonel Jeremiah Olney, writing in his tent, heard the long roll beating the morning of July 29, he knew it was not by his order. Olney immediately grabbed his hat and sword and ran to the parade ground. By then about fifty soldiers, including eight sergeants, had gathered in parade formation, and more continued to join them. Olney attempted to disperse the drummers by making threatening motions with his sword, and he demanded that the



Lieutenant Colonel Jeremiah Olney, Second Rhode Island Regiment of Continentals. RIHS Collection (RHi X17 562).

drum major tell him who had given the order to beat the long roll. Seeking to prevent the officers from singling out a ringleader, the drum major responded, "the whole regiment." Seeing this as an impertinent answer, Olney brought down his sword onto the drum major's head, causing the man to flee for his life.<sup>64</sup>

At this crucial point the emotional Milliman made a fateful decision. When he saw Olney strike the drum major, Milliman yelled out, "look at that fellow cutting the drummers. We can't suffer it. Dam'n your bloods, charge your bayonets and keep the officers off."<sup>65</sup> Milliman cocked his gun and pointed it at Olney, who ran to the other side of the assembled men; Milliman then ordered the rear ranks to face outwards and fix their bayonets, and the men did so. When the beleaguered Olney asked the sergeants "who commanded the men," they responded that they were all commanders. At this point Olney realized that it would be "imprudent" for him to use force,

and he backed off. Trying to reason with the mutinous soldiers, he told them that they would probably receive their pay and state stores in the following week. Finally he urged the men to return to their tents, but to no avail.<sup>66</sup>

Asserting his leadership, Milliman ordered a party of men to stand guard over an artillery piece so that the officers could not use it against the mutineers. Then, at the request of Sergeant Dodge, he went with a column of men to the quarter-guard, whose duty it was to guard the regiment's two prisoners, and he persuaded the guards to join the mutiny.<sup>67</sup> After the soldiers paraded around the camp for a while, Sergeant Sheldon led them outside the camp's gates toward East Greenwich, about six miles away, where they hoped to free Twitchell.<sup>68</sup> At this point the mutineers numbered about two hundred soldiers; another hundred men of the regiment were either on assignment elsewhere on the southern Rhode Island coast or had decided not to participate in the mutiny.<sup>69</sup> About one mile from the camp, Sergeant Noah Chafee ordered the marchers to halt and load their weapons. Chafee told one of the advance guard that if he met any person in the road, he was to fire upon him and to fire again.<sup>70</sup>

As soon as the march began, Olney ordered Major Simeon Thayer (who in June 1778 had lost an eye fighting in the Battle of Monmouth in New Jersey) to ride to East Greenwich to inform Colonel Christopher Greene of the mutiny. Greene commanded the First Rhode Island Regiment, whose rank and file consisted of African American soldiers from Rhode Island, most of whom had been slaves and had enlisted with the promise of gaining their emancipation. Perhaps because they did not want to risk their opportunity for freedom, the black soldiers were not mutinous.

While African Americans were allowed to enlist in small numbers, they were not always treated with the same dignity as white soldiers. On March 1, 1778, when stationed at a camp at Warwick, Noah Robinson, in Colonel John Daggett's militia regiment from Bristol County, Massachusetts, wrote in his diary that in the afternoon "a black fellow came and made





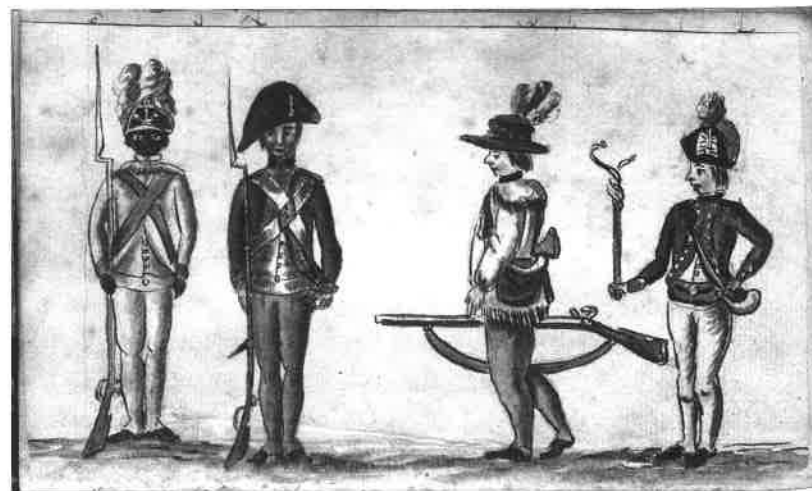
Colonel Christopher Greene, commander of the First Rhode Island Regiment of Continentals. Painting, ca. 1780, Brown University; RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1936).

his complaint of Corporal William Cole's striking him." The "black fellow" probably was a recruit in Colonel Christopher Greene's First Rhode Island Regiment, which was stationed in the area. Taking the matter seriously, Colonel Daggett ordered Corporal Cole to be arrested and placed under guard, an appropriate response when one soldier physically struck another without good reason. A number of soldiers in Cole's company, apparently indignant that a white man would be arrested for striking a black man, refused to permit Corporal Cole to be seized. This near mutiny enraged Daggett, who took the drastic step of confining the soldiers who blocked Cole's arrest and placing Cole and another corporal in irons. Two days later, at General Ezekiel Cornell's orders, the corporals' handcuffs were removed and the two men were discharged, ending the affair.<sup>71</sup>

Race relations again became an issue when the mutineers of the all-white Second Rhode Island Regiment were marching to East Greenwich. Anticipating the opposition that the marchers might face, Milliman was heard to say during the march that he was "determined" that his men would "force their way through the black Regiment."<sup>72</sup> Samuel Smith recalled the scene a bit differently, writing in his memoirs that an officer warned the mutineers that "he had one black regiment . . . which we had to pass, who would cut us to pieces. The answer from our leader was: 'We do not fear you, with all your black boys! The prisoner we will have, at the risk of our lives!'"<sup>73</sup> Also waiting in East Greenwich to oppose the marchers were the Kentish Guards (an independent company organized in that town) and the local militia.<sup>74</sup>

After Thayer informed Greene of the mutiny, both men, along with Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Ward, the son of a former Rhode Island governor, rode out to meet the mutineers. When the small party of officers came upon the marching soldiers near Updike's Newtown (Wickford), about two and one-half miles from the Barber's Heights campsite, Greene had Ward ride up to the disaffected men and order them to halt. The marchers' advance guard complied with Ward's order, but when Ward rode

The soldier at the left, depicted as a private in the First Rhode Island Regiment, wears a cap featuring the emblem of the state. Watercolor by Jean-Baptiste-Antoine de Verger, a French officer in Rochambeau's army at the Battle of Yorktown; Anne S. K. Brown Military Collection, John Hay Library, Brown University.



to the main body of mutineers, Milliman ran forward and called for the advance guard to continue marching, which it immediately did. Upon returning to Colonel Greene, Ward was again directed to try to get the marchers to halt. Ward rode back, and this time, after pleading for several minutes, he finally persuaded the mutineers to stop their march, at least temporarily.<sup>75</sup>

Ward informed the soldiers that Colonel Greene refused to talk with them as long as they were under arms, but that the men could appoint a delegation to speak with Greene. Five sergeants were quickly chosen and met with Greene, but he could not satisfy their demands for pay, food, and Twitchell's release and pardon. The colonel did say that the delegation could speak with Governor Greene, who lived near East Greenwich, but some of the sergeants responded, "we don't want to see Governor Greene, General Gates is the man we want to see." After about five minutes Milliman stepped forward and called for the sergeants to rejoin the main body of mutineers, which they did, and the soldiers continued towards East Greenwich.<sup>76</sup>

After they had gone another half mile, Governor Greene rode up with a small party, and the marchers halted, most of them willing to hear what he had to say. Riding with the governor was Major Thayer, a veteran officer whom Samuel Smith said the regiment had always trusted to carry complaints of the soldiers to Colonel Angell and "settle questions and restore peace."<sup>77</sup> When Governor Greene began to address the mutineers, Thayer rode among them and directed them to order their arms (i.e., put their guns on the ground in a nonthreatening position) out of respect to the governor. Only about half the men complied with this command. Milliman then spoke up again: "damn your bloods, shoulder your pieces, what do you order your pieces for that fellow for." Approaching Milliman, Thayer took out his pistol, cocked it, and threatened to blow the private's brains out.<sup>78</sup> Perhaps attempting to cock his musket, Milliman responded that he would fire back if Thayer fired and did not



Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Ward Jr., First Rhode Island Regiment of Continentals. Engraving by J. C. Buttre from a painting by Ann Hall, ca. 1826; RIHS Collection (RHi X17 560).

kill him. At this point Governor Greene asked Thayer not to fire, and when Thayer brought his gun down, Milliman returned to the ranks.<sup>79</sup>

Governor Greene then told the men that they were "foolish" for marching as they had, but that he would do everything in his power for them. Some of the sergeants replied that if the governor would pardon the mutineers and free Twitchell, they would all return to their campsite. In response, Greene declared that he would do everything that the state could do, but that he had no authority to pardon them or free Twitchell.<sup>80</sup>

Brigadier General John Stark, who had been sent to meet the mutineers at the request of Gates, then arrived and said that he would speak to the men after Thayer ordered them to put their arms on the ground. As a strong personality and a hero of the Battle of Bennington, which had led to the surrender of General

Burgoyne's British army at Saratoga, Stark commanded great respect among rank-and-file soldiers, and when Thayer ordered the men to ground their muskets and march away from them, this time they complied. Stark then asked the men why they had left their stations, and he was told by several sergeants that the men wanted their pay and believed that they had been wronged. Stark responded that the soldiers had not presented their complaints in a proper manner, but that he would see that their "real grievances" were "redressed," and he offered to allow a delegation of the mutineers to meet with Gates in East Greenwich. Accepting the offer, the soldiers appointed a seven-man delegation, consisting mostly of the sergeants but also including Milliman, and Thayer then marched the remainder of the mutineers back to their campsite in North Kingstown, ending the mutiny.<sup>81</sup> Once they had aired their grievances to Governor Greene and General Stark, the soldiers who had mutinied were evidently not willing to attack civilian authorities or continue to breach military discipline.<sup>82</sup>

Sergeant Greenman had been on patrol, leading a small party of soldiers at South Ferry, when he received word of the mutiny. He was ordered to march his men back to Barber's Heights, where he met Captain William Humphrey and a few soldiers who had not mutinied, and Humphrey, Greenman, and the loyal soldiers immediately set out to help quash the insurrection. Shortly before they reached the mutineers, however, they learned that their mutinous fellow soldiers were in fact marching back to camp, and they themselves turned around and marched back as well.<sup>83</sup>

When the mutineers arrived back at the Barber's Heights camp, all but one were pardoned by their officers and "marched through the colors" in a show of loyalty.<sup>84</sup> The one exception was Private Milliman, whom the officers decided to charge with mutiny. Milliman was immediately led off in irons under guard to the Providence jail.<sup>85</sup> Despite the clear evidence that the sergeants had organized the mutiny and that Sergeants Dodge and Sheldon had been the primary

instigators, the officers focused on Milliman, perhaps because of his participation in prior mutinies, the officers' unwillingness to lose the services of valuable sergeants, and the fact that Milliman had cocked his musket and leveled it at Lieutenant Colonel Olney. In any event, the sergeants' plan to evade punishment for the mutiny proved successful.

Private Benjamin Twitchell was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death for presenting the soldiers' petition to Colonel Angell, but he was immediately pardoned by General Stark.<sup>86</sup> One other private involved in the mutiny was sentenced to receive a whipping of one hundred lashes "on his naked back."<sup>87</sup>

Meanwhile, perhaps as a result of the soldiers' delegation meeting with Horatio Gates, the Rhode Island Council of War ordered on August 4, 1779, that the sum of £14,001 be paid to the troops of the Second Rhode Island Regiment for what they were owed.<sup>88</sup> In addition, in its August 1779 session the state's General Assembly conceded that "from the distressed situation of this state" and rising prices, it had been unable to supply Rhode Island's Continental troops with extra food and supplies on a timely basis. The Assembly voted to end its system of allowances and instead to simply pay monthly wages to the Continental troops as a supplement to what they were owed from the Continental army.<sup>89</sup>

GEORGE MILLIMAN'S COURT MARTIAL was held in Providence, with Colonel Henry Jackson presiding and twelve officers serving as judges. The proceedings were conducted from August 4 through August 7, 1779. Sixteen witnesses were examined, including officers, sergeants, and privates.<sup>90</sup> On August 10 the court unanimously agreed that Milliman was guilty of ordering the men to fire on Lieutenant Colonel Olney when he was dispersing the drummers. The court further found that Milliman was guilty of persuading the quarter-guard to join the mutiny, despite persuasive evidence that he had been directed to do so by Sergeant Dodge. The court concluded that Milliman

had violated the Articles of War and "so sentence him to be shot to death," and it recommended to General Gates that Milliman be executed in front of the Second Rhode Island Regiment. With Milliman confined in the Providence jail after the verdict, Gates approved the death sentence in his orders the next day.<sup>91</sup>

As was usual in such cases, petitions were submitted to the commanding general to spare the life of the sentenced man. "I have never been backward in the hour of danger to expose my life in the defense of my country," Milliman declared in his own petition.<sup>92</sup> Milliman's wife, Elizabeth, sent a heartfelt plea to Gates to spare her husband's life, informing him that she was pregnant with Milliman's child (the Millimans had been married on June 19, a few weeks prior to the mutiny).<sup>93</sup> Seven or eight women from Providence, including two members of the Olney family who were likely related to Lieutenant Colonel Olney, also submitted a petition to Gates asking him to spare Milliman's life.<sup>94</sup>

On the other hand, Colonel Angell, Lieutenant Colonel Olney, and Major Thayer wrote to Gates urging him not to grant Milliman a pardon, as they wanted Milliman's death to serve as a deterrent to any further mutinies in his regiment. "To use the inflicting punishments of any kind upon offenders is always painful," these experienced officers said, "but since the good of the service and support of discipline so essentially depends upon it, we are frequently reduced to the disagreeable necessity of seeing it put into execution!"<sup>95</sup>

Milliman was to be executed on August 20, but on that date, "in consequence of [Milliman's] humble petition," Gates issued an order to defer the execution one week; and on August 29 and September 11 he again issued orders deferring the date of the execution.<sup>96</sup> On September 28 Gates ordered that Milliman's execution be deferred until October 11.<sup>97</sup>

In a letter dated September 25, 1779, Gates sought orders on how to handle Milliman's case from the commander in chief of the Continental army, George

Washington. Along with a copy of the court martial proceedings he sent to Washington, Gates summarized his reasons for suspending Milliman's execution:

1st. The principal cause of the mutiny in this corps was its State's delaying to supply the Regiment with such State stores as they solemnly engaged, and repeatedly promised to the men.

2ndly. Officers have divided amongst themselves a quantity of State stores, of which the men had no part, as appears on the face of the proceedings, the officers thinking the quantity insufficient to be shared with the men. When the soldiers feel, they do not reason. Those of Colonel Angell's Regiment saw their officers supplied; and they were not. The trifling quantity issued by their State commissary aggravated their sufferings, and exasperated them the more.

3rdly. The prisoner has the best of characters for bravery, and good conduct in every action; is but nineteen years of age; very illiterate; and has no more than three months to serve.<sup>98</sup>

Gates then made a thoughtful point: "I am conscious, sir, that discipline is the soul of the Army; but soldiery, composed of freemen, armed in the defense of their natural rights, should not be treated with that cruel severity so often and so wantonly practiced in Royal armies." Gates was apparently trying to play both sides of the issue, not wanting responsibility for either authorizing Milliman's execution or pardoning him. Reading between the lines, one might conclude that Gates wanted to spare Milliman's life.

Washington refused to give even an opinion on the matter. In an October 2 letter he turned the responsibility for Milliman's fate back to Gates, telling him that this was a case that "you are fully authorized to determine" and that "from your situation and knowledge of circumstances," Gates was in a better position to render the final decision in the matter.<sup>99</sup>

With the soldiers of the Second Rhode Island Regiment apparently sobered by the receipt of their back pay and their awareness that Milliman's fate was hanging in the balance, Gates and other Continental troops had something else to occupy their minds by the time Milliman's next execution date arrived on October 11: a large British fleet had arrived at Newport, reportedly to evacuate the British, Hessian,



and Tory troops. Ultimately Gates decided to spare Milliman's life in this, the last episode of mutiny in the Rhode Island theater of war.<sup>100</sup> However, Milliman was forced to languish in jail for several more months, until February 1780.<sup>101</sup>

When the sixty-one-year-old Milliman filed an application for a veteran's pension in 1820, he stated that he had finished his three-year term of service and was discharged in February 1780, that he had then moved to Vermont and in May 1780 had received a lieutenant's commission in that state's militia, and that he had five children, aged four to fourteen (he had remarried, probably after the death of his first wife).<sup>102</sup> There is reliable evidence, however, that Milliman did not tell the complete truth in his pension application, for records indicate that in March 1780, after his release from jail, he deserted the regiment.<sup>103</sup> There is also evidence that he reenlisted in the Second Rhode Island Regiment around May 1780, perhaps taking a bounty for his reenlistment, and that on June 12, 1780, he deserted the regiment for good.<sup>104</sup> Rather than organizing another mutiny with his fellow soldiers to protest their continued mistreatment by the American military and government, Milliman may this time have deserted as an individual form of protest.

IN ENDING HIS EXAMINATION of mutinies during the American Revolution, James Kirby Martin asked a probing question: Why did Continental officers

never effectively unite with rank-and-file soldiers and thereby put maximum pressure on civilian authorities to improve support of the army? After all, noted Martin, the officers also "came to resent civilian indifference, ineptitude, and greed; and they too were dismayed over society's inability to treat them with respect."<sup>105</sup> These feelings are evident in Major Huntington's letters quoted above.

According to Martin, the reason why the officers and their subordinates did not join together was a matter of class, hierarchy, and rank. Common persons at the time were expected to be deferential to their social betters; in the military, clear distinctions of rank were considered a key to maintaining a disciplined fighting force. The mostly "gentlemen" officers were also careful not to allow the rank-and-file too much power because that power might be used against the officers' place in society as well. In addition, it seems likely that the officers, as proper gentlemen, had a particularly strong sense of duty and patriotism that made them less likely to participate in such extreme unlawful acts as mutinies. It should be recognized, however, that in the end, both soldiers and officers of the Continental army were willing to make personal sacrifices to insure that the country would gain its independence from England, even if many civilians in the country did not sacrifice nearly as much.

*For more information and educational materials on this subject, see under Education at [www.rihs.org](http://www.rihs.org).*

## Notes

1. See, e.g., Charles Patrick Neimeyer, *America Goes to War: A Social History of the Continental Army* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1997), 13-58; Charles Royster, *Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 295-310.
2. See Neimeyer, *America Goes to War*, 132-33.
3. See *ibid.*, 147-50; Royster, *Revolutionary People at War*, 295-306; John A. Nagy, *Rebellion in the Ranks: Mutinies of the American Revolution* (Yardley, Pa.: Westholme, 2007), 77-166.
4. See Nagy, *Rebellion in the Ranks*, app. A, 297-98. Nagy's book is the most complete analysis of mutinies in the American Revolution, but not surprisingly the book does not discuss or list all of the mutinies in the relatively unimportant Rhode Island theater. Nagy lists the following mutinies in the Rhode Island theater in 1778 and 1779: January 28, 1779, Warren, R.I., Second R.I. Regiment; April 23, 1779, Warren, R.I., Second R.I. Regiment; July 19, 1779, Camp Barber's Heights, R.I., Second R.I. Regiment; July 29, 1779, Camp Barber's Heights, R.I., Second R.I. Regiment. Nagy does not list the mutinies in Glover's Brigade or in Smith's, Jackson's, and Vose's Regiments in late 1778, nor does he list the mutiny in Colonel John Topham's First R.I. State Regiment about January 30, 1779. (He also does not list the mutiny of Loyalists in the King's American Regiment in Newport on December 12, 1778.) Further, Nagy did not have the benefit of seeing the detailed George Milliman court martial records discussed below.
5. For the Rhode Island campaign and the Battle of Rhode Island, see Christian M. McBurney, *The Rhode Island Campaign: The First Joint French and American Operation of the Revolutionary War* (Yardley, Penn.: Westholme, 2011), and Paul F. Dearden, *The Rhode Island Campaign of 1778: Inauspicious Dawn of Alliance* (Providence: Bicentennial Foundation, 1980).
6. Harry M. Ward, *George Washington's Enforcers: Policing the Continental Army* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), 31-35.
7. The Rhode Island theater was its own department; the rest of New England was called the Eastern Department.
8. Ward, *George Washington's Enforcers*, 39-41.
9. Journal of the House of Deputies, Aug. 23, 1777, Rhode Island State Archives.
10. Proceedings of a General Court Martial Held at Warwick, Aug. 27th, 28th, and 29th, 1777, MSS 9003, vol. 3, p. 18, Rhode Island Historical Society (RIHS).
11. For an excellent discussion of the economic woes of southeastern New England in 1778 and 1779 and the impact of the monetary crisis, see Richard Buel, *Dear Liberty: Connecticut Mobilization for the Revolutionary War* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1980), 159-68, 200-202.
12. "All their [the enemy's] dependence is upon the depreciation of our money," Ellery wrote in a letter to Rhode Island's Governor Greene. "It is the great duty of every state to avert that mighty evil. The radical cure for depreciation is taxation. I don't doubt but what our states will apply the remedy as far as it is in their power." William Ellery to William Greene, Dec. 14, 1779, *Rhode Island in the Continental Congress*, ed. William R. Staples (Providence: Providence Press Co., 1870), 267.

13. Diary entry, Dec. 12, 1778, in Fleet S. Greene, "Newport in the Hands of the British: A Diary of the Revolution," *The Historical Magazine* 4 (1860):135. The following report appeared in the *Providence Gazette*: "We are informed that Fanning's Regiment of Tories, notwithstanding the term of their enlistment is expired, are compelled to remain in the British tyrant's service. The whole regiment lately mutinied, and laid down their arms, which they could not be made to resume but by the exercise of great severity. This regiment consists chiefly of deluded persons who went into New York to be protected, where they were obliged to enlist." Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman in the Southern Part of This State, Dec. 14, 1778, *Providence Gazette*, Dec. 19, 1778.
14. William Greene to Jonathan Trumbull, January 1779, "Trumbull Papers," *Massachusetts Historical Society Collections*, 7th ser., 2 (1902):340-44; William Greene to General Assembly of Connecticut, Oct. 31, 1779, John R. Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England* (Providence: A. C. Greene & Bros., 1863), 8:479; William Greene to Jonathan Trumbull, Jan. 21, 1779, Bartlett, *Colony of Rhode Island*, 499-500.
15. William Greene to Jonathan Trumbull, January 1779.
16. John Palsgrove Wyllys to George Wyllys, Sept. 5, 1778, "Wyllys Papers," *Connecticut Historical Society Collections* 21 (1924): 464.
17. See William Greene to Jonathan Trumbull, January 1779, 343-45; William Greene to William Ellery and John Collins, Jan. 7, 1779, *Rhode Island in the Continental Congress*, 209.
18. Nagy, *Rebellion in the Ranks*, 35-38. The commander of the brigade that almost mutinied was Jedidiah Huntington, whose brother Ebenezer Huntington was serving in the Rhode Island theater.
19. Ezekiel Cornell to John Sullivan, Nov. 4, 1778, *Letters and Papers of Major-General John Sullivan, Continental Army*, ed. Otis G. Hammond (Concord, N.H.: New Hampshire Historical Society, 1939), 2:420-21.
20. John Stark to John Sullivan, Nov. 28, 1778, *ibid.*, 2:447.
21. Charles P. Whittemore, *A General of the Revolution: John Sullivan of New Hampshire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 114-15; John Sullivan to Peter Colt, Nov. 10, 1778, Sullivan, *Letters and Papers*, 2:426-28; John Sullivan to Jonathan Trumbull, Feb. 17, 1779, *ibid.*, 2:514-15. In his letter to Trumbull, the outraged Sullivan asked that Sullivan's agent be protected from prosecution. Nathanael Greene, who had led the Quartermaster Department, criticized Sullivan's actions: "General Sullivan I find has turned lawyer again," Greene wrote to one of the Connecticut commissary agents. "I wonder what fee he had." Whittemore, *General of the Revolution*, 114-15. Sullivan's biographer, Whittemore, shares Greene's view in this matter, but it appears that Sullivan's letters to Connecticut quartermasters for urgent assistance were ignored or misplaced.
22. In January 1779, when a Connecticut regiment of Continentals was in its own home state and experiencing a temporary shortage of food, in part because of winter conditions, its soldiers felt much the same as Rhode Island soldiers did: "We were now in our own State," a private in the Connecticut regiment recalled, "and were determined that if our officers would not see some of our grievances redressed, the State should." *A Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier: Some of the Adventures, Dangers, and Sufferings of Joseph Plumb Martin* (New York: Signet Classic, 2001), 130.
23. Ebenezer Huntington to Jedidiah Huntington, Dec. 21, 1778, *Letters Written by Ebenezer Huntington during the American Revolution* (New York: C. F. Heartman, 1914), 77-78.
24. Brigade Orders, Sept. 7, 1778, in "A Memoir of Gen. John Glover," ed. William P. Upham, *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 5 (June 1863): 105, 126-27.
25. Regimental Orders, Sept. 19, 1778, in Lt. Col. William S. Smith's Orderly Book, Jackson's Regiment of Continentals, Revolutionary War Papers, RG 93, M853, microfilm roll #5, no. 32, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
26. General Orders, Sept. 23, 1778, in Capt. Simon Larnd's Orderly Book, Col. William Shepherd's Continental Regiment, Early American Orderly Books #70, microfilm reel #6, New York Historical Society (NYHS).
27. General Orders, Sept. 29, 1778, Capt. Simon Larnd's Orderly Book.
28. John Sullivan to George Washington, Sept. 4, 1778, Sullivan, *Letters and Papers*, 2:302-3.
29. General Orders, Dec. 5, 6, and 7, 1778, Capt. Simon Larnd's Orderly Book.
30. Diary entries, Dec. 7 and 19, 1778, in Ebenezer Wild, "Diary," *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings*, 2nd ser., 6 (October 1890): 119-20.
31. Diary entry, Jan. 1-31, 1779, in Jeremiah Greenman, *Diary of a Common Soldier in the American Revolution, 1775-1783*, ed. Robert C. Bray and Paul E. Bushnell (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1978), 133.
32. Jabez. Bowen to William Greene, Jan. 10, 1779, in Letters to the Governor, II, Rhode Island State Archives.
33. Diary entry, Jan. 28, 1779, in *Diary of Colonel Israel Angell, Commanding the Second Rhode Island Continental Regiment during the American Revolution, 1778-1781*, ed. Edward Field (Providence: Preston & Rounds, 1899), 47-48. Sergeant Jeremiah Greenman mentioned the mutiny in his diary: "Part of the Regiment this evening paraded under arms under pretense of getting their rights. Soon dispersed by the General on parade." Diary entry, Jan. 1-31, 1779, *Diary of a Common Soldier*, 133.
34. Israel Angell, Jeremiah Olney, and Simeon Thayer to John Sullivan, Mar. 3, 1779, Sullivan, *Letters and Papers*, 2:525-27.
35. Petition of George Milliman to Major General Gates, Aug. 17, 1779, in Horatio Gates Papers, NYHS.
36. Diary entry, Jan. 28, 1779, *Diary of Colonel Israel Angell*, 47-48.
37. Israel Angell to John Sullivan, Mar. 3, 1779, Sullivan, *Letters and Papers*, 2:525-27. See also diary entry, Jan. 28, 1779, in *Diary of Colonel Israel Angell*, 47-48, and diary entry, Jan. 1-31, 1779, Greenman, *Diary of a Common Soldier*, 133.
38. Diary entry, Jan. 29, 1779, *Diary of Colonel Israel Angell*, 48.
39. George Washington to James Varnum, Feb. 14, 1779, in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745-1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1936), 14:112-13.
40. George Washington to John Sullivan, Feb. 14, 1779, *Writings of George Washington*, 110-11.
41. General Order, Jan. 31, 1779, in Capt. Ebenezer Adams's Orderly Book, Col. Elliott's Rhode Island Artillery Company, Special Collections, University of Rhode Island Library (typed manuscript from original); see also General Orders, Jan. 31, 1779, and Feb. 2, 1779 (approving sentences), in Zabadiel Carew Clark's Orderly Book, Capt. Thomas Carlisle's Company of Col. Robert Elliott's State Regiment of Artillery, Revolutionary War Papers, box 2, folder 143, RIHS.
42. Peleg Burroughs to John Sullivan, Feb. 12, 1779, in *Peleg Burroughs's Journal, 1778-1798: The Tiverton R.I. Years of the Humbly Bold Baptist Minister*, ed. Ruth W. Sherman (Warwick: Rhode Island Genealogical Society, 1981), 42-43.
43. Diary entries, Feb. 15 and 16, 1779, *Peleg Burroughs's Journal*, 43-44.
44. General Order, Feb. 17, 1779, in Capt. Ebenezer Adams's Orderly Book.
45. Samuel White Patterson, *Horatio Gates, Defender of American Liberties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), 294-95.
46. Diary entry, April 23, 1779, *Diary of a Common Soldier*, 135.
47. Horatio Gates to William Heath, April 30, 1779, in Horatio Gates Papers. We have no record of the second mutiny that Gates referred to.
48. Asa Waterman to Peter Colt, May 3, 1779, in Edward Field, *Revolutionary Defenses in Rhode Island: An Historical Account of the Fortifications and Beacons Erected during the American Revolution* (Providence: Preston & Rounds, 1896), 35.
49. Horatio Gates to Jeremiah Wadsworth or P. Colt, May 15, 1779, Horatio Gates Papers.
50. Paul David Nelson, *General Horatio Gates: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 211.
51. Ebenezer Huntington to Jedidiah Huntington, May 3, 1779, *Letters Written by Ebenezer Huntington*, 80-81.
52. William Shepard and Joseph Vose to John Glover, July 7, 1779, *A Salute to Courage: The American Revolution as Seen through Writings of Wartime Officers in the Continental Army and Navy*, ed. Dennis P. Ryan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 157.
53. Diary entry, June 28, 1779, *Diary of a Common Soldier*, 136-37.
54. Testimony of Sergeant Job Sheldon, Aug. 6, 1779, in Court Martial of George Milliman Proceedings, Horatio Gates Papers. When Sergeant Sheldon made this accusation during these court martial proceedings, Lieutenant Colonel Olney interrupted Sheldon's testimony to claim that while the officers handed out the state's supplies of food, what remained after that was much less than the officers' proper share.
55. Diary entry, July 19, 1779, *Diary of Colonel Israel Angell*, 66.
56. Testimony of Corporal Robert Harrison and Private Stephen Hazard, Aug. 6-7, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman.
57. Diary entry, July 25, 1779, *Diary of Colonel Israel Angell*, 67 ("Yesterday I received a mutinous paper from one of the soldiers written by one Hazard and brought by one Twitchell").
58. Testimony of Corporal Robert Harrison and Private Stephen Hazard, Aug. 6-7, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman.
59. Testimony of Sergeant Job Sheldon, Sergeant John Dodge, and Private Stephen Hazard, Aug. 6-7, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman.
60. Samuel Smith Recollections, in "Memoirs of the Life of Samuel Smith: Being an Extract from a Journal Written by Himself from 1776-1786," ed. Charles I. Bushnell, in *Crumbs for Antiquarians* (New York: 1860), 1:17. Smith does not expressly



- state that he joined the Second Rhode Island Regiment, but his presence at the battles of Red Bank, Morristown, and Rhode Island and his service in 1779 in the Rhode Island theater match the assignments of that regiment. In addition, Smith is listed as a drummer or fifer in William Potter's Company Muster Roll, July 1778 (taken Aug. 21, 1778, Camp on Rhode Island), Second Rhode Island Regiment Muster Rolls, 1777-80, Revolutionary War Muster Rolls, Rhode Island, reel #10, National Archives.
61. Testimony of Sergeant John Dodge, Aug. 6, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman.
  62. Petition of George Milliman to Major General Gates.
  63. Testimony of Sergeant John Dodge, Sergeant Alexander Stewart, and Corporal Robert Harrison, Aug. 6, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman.
  64. Testimony of Lieutenant Colonel Jeremiah Olney and Major Simeon Thayer, Aug. 4, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman.
  65. Testimony of Lieutenant Colonel Jeremiah Olney, Aug. 4, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman.
  66. Testimony of Major Simeon Thayer, Ensign Roger Wheaton, and Dr. Elias Cornelius, Aug. 4, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman.
  67. Testimony of Ensign Roger Wheaton, Private John Bellingham, Private William Champlin, and Private Benjamin Jenkins, Aug. 4 and 7, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman. Ensign Wheaton testified that it was Milliman who took away the guard, despite Wheaton's warning about the consequences of doing so. Privates Bellingham, Champlin, and Jenkins testified that Sergeant Dodge was responsible for that action, which seems to have been a credible assertion.
  68. Testimony of Sergeant John Dodge, Private Stephen Hazard, Private John Bellingham, and Private Benjamin Jenkins, Aug. 6-7, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman.
  69. On July 24, 1779, the regiment had 300 men on duty, with the following not in the camp at Barber's Heights: 9 sick absent, 1 sick in camp, 9 on command, 26 at South Ferry, 20 at Point Judith haymaking, 13 at Point Judith on detachment, 10 at Updike's Newtown, 2 at Warren, 3 at Sakonnet Point with a boat, 1 after deserters, 1 with Col. Silas Talbot, 2 at Providence, 2 since dead. Weekly Returns for the Second Rhode Island Regiment, May 14, 1779-April 27, 1782, Revolutionary War Papers, box 1, folder 60, RIHS.
  70. Testimony of Corporal Robert Harrison, Aug. 7, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman.
  71. Diary entries, March 1-4, 1778, Noah Robinson Diary, RIHS.
  72. Testimony of Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Ward, Aug. 4, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman.
  73. Samuel Smith Recollections, *Crumbs for Antiquarians*, 1:18.
  74. A few days after the mutiny, Colonel Christopher Greene issued the following in his brigade orders: "East Greenwich. July 31, 1779. The commanding officer of this post returns his most sincere thanks to the Kentish Guards and militia of this town, who turned out with so becoming a spirit to assist in quelling the mutiny which happened among the troops on Barber's Heights on the 29th instant. The officers and soldiers under his immediate command are justly entitled to his most cordial thanks on that occasion." Christopher Greene Orders, July 31, 1779, Revolutionary War Papers, Rhode Island Continentals, Misc. 1777-1780, box 2, folder 6, RIHS.
  75. Testimony of Major Simeon Thayer, Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Ward, Sergeant Job Sheldon, Sergeant John Dodge, and Sergeant Alexander Stewart, Aug. 4 and 6, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman.
  76. Ibid.
  77. Samuel Smith Recollections, *Crumbs for Antiquarians*, 1:17.
  78. Testimony of Major Simeon Thayer and Lieutenant Colonel Samuel Ward, Aug. 4, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman.
  79. Testimony of Major Simeon Thayer and Sergeant John Dodge, Aug. 4 and 6, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman.
  80. Ibid.
  81. Testimony of Major Simeon Thayer and Private Stephen Hazard, Aug. 4 and 7, 1779, Court Martial of George Milliman.
  82. The mutineers probably felt the same as Connecticut Continentals did the next year when the latter staged a brief mutiny. Private Joseph Martin, one of the soldiers, wrote in his diary that the Connecticut mutineers came back to submit to military discipline because they were "unwilling to desert the cause of our country when in distress." James Kirby Martin, "A 'Most Undisciplined, Profligate Crew': Protest and Defiance in the Continental Ranks, 1776-1783," in *Arms and Independence: The Military Character of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Press, 1984), 119, 133-34.
  83. Diary entry, July 29, 1779, *Diary of a Common Soldier*, 137-38.
  84. Jeremiah Greenman went back to South Ferry after the mutiny and did not return to the Barber's Heights camp until August 1, when he probably heard about the mutineers being pardoned and marching through colors, "except one—George Milliman by name. He was sent to Providence." Ibid., Aug. 1, 1779, 138.
  85. Diary entry, July 31, 1779, *Diary of Colonel Israel Angell*, 69.
  86. General Order, Aug. 8, 1779, in James Webb's Orderly Book, Col. Henry Sherburne's Regiment, Revolutionary War Papers, box 2, folder 1, RIHS.
  87. Brigade Orders, Aug. 8, 1779, in Jeremiah Putnam's Orderly Book, Col. Nathan Tyler's Massachusetts State Regiment, "Revolutionary Orderly Book of Capt. Jeremiah Putnam," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 46 (1910): 333, 341-42; William S. Smith's Orderly Book.
  88. Rhode Island Council of War Order, Aug. 4, 1779, Military Papers of the Revolutionary War, microfilm reel #12, Rhode Island State Archives.
  89. Bartlett, *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, 8:579-80. However, supplemental pay was not granted to any soldier "who hath been heretofore a slave, and became free in consequence of his enlisting into the service." Ibid., 580. While this limitation was unfair, perhaps the General Assembly felt that it did not want to incur financial burdens with respect to the service of slaves in addition to the promissory notes the state had to pay the masters of the slaves who enlisted in the First Rhode Island Regiment.
  90. Court Martial of George Milliman, Aug. 4-7, 1779.
  91. General Orders, Aug. 11, 1779, in Capt. William Allen's Orderly Book, Col. Israel Angell's Second Rhode Island Regiment, in Louise L. Lovell, *Israel Angell: Colonel of the Second Rhode Island Regiment* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1921), appendix II, 269; Jeremiah Putnam's Orderly Book, 46:333, 342; William S. Smith's Orderly Book.
  92. Petition of George Milliman to Major General Gates.
  93. Elizabeth Milliman to Horatio Gates, Aug. 21, 1779, Horatio Gates Papers; "Married: Mr. George Milleman [sic], of East Greenwich, to Miss Elizabeth Tripp, of Barrington," *Providence Gazette*, June 19, 1779.
  94. Betty Bowen, Lydia Clark, Deborah Olney, Joey Russell, Betty Scott, Betsy Cha[illegible], Nancy Olney and Rebecca [illegible] to Horatio Gates, Aug. 30, 1779, Horatio Gates Papers.
  95. Israel Angell, Jeremiah Olney, and Simeon Thayer to Horatio Gates, Aug. 20, 1779, in *A Salute to Courage*, 166-67.
  96. General Orders, Aug. 20, Aug. 29, and Sept. 11, 1779, in Capt. Jeremiah Putnam's Orderly Book 46:333, 343-44. 347; James Webb's Orderly Book.
  97. General Orders, Sept. 28, 1779, in Capt. William Allen's Orderly Book, appendix II, 272; "Revolutionary Orderly Book of Capt. Jeremiah Putnam," Col. Nathan Tyler's Massachusetts State Regiment, *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 47 (1911): 41, 42; James Webb's Orderly Book.
  98. Horatio Gates to George Washington, Sept. 25, 1779, Horatio Gates Papers. (Gates mistakenly wrote "John Milligan" for George Milliman's name.)
  99. George Washington to Horatio Gates, Oct. 2, 1779, in *Writings of George Washington*, 16:390. Washington returned the court martial proceedings to Gates as well.
  100. Gates moved Milliman's execution date back another week on November 7, but apparently there was no official order pardoning Milliman, General Order, Nov. 7, 1779, James Webb's Orderly Book.
  101. Compiled Service Records of Soldiers Who Served in the American Army during the Revolutionary War, Rhode Island, 2nd Regiment (M-N), RG M881, National Archives, in which Milliman is listed as a "prisoner at Providence" from November 1779 to February 1780.
  102. George Milliman Revolutionary War Pension Application, National Archives.
  103. Compiled Service Records.
  104. See Records of Military Service and Operations, List of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island Troops, 1776-1783, RG M853, microfilm roll #14, National Archives (George Milliman; Private; Enlisted May 10, 1777; Deserted 12 June 1780).
  105. Martin, "A 'Most Undisciplined, Profligate Crew,'" 137.

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This woodcut portrait of Elleanor Eldridge appeared as the frontispiece of Frances Whipple's *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* (Providence, 1838). RIHS Collection (RHi X3 4807).

## A Web of Iniquity?

*Race, Gender, Foreclosure, and Respectability in Antebellum Rhode Island*

JANE LANCASTER

*The whole affair from beginning to end in all its connexions and bearings was a web of iniquity. It was a wanton outrage upon the simplest and most evident principles of justice. But the subject of this wrong, or rather this accumulation of wrongs, was a woman, and therefore weak—a colored woman and therefore contemptible. No man would ever have been treated so; and if a white woman had been the subject of such wrongs, the whole town—nay, the whole country, would have been indignant: and the actors would have been held up to the contempt they deserve!*

—FRANCES WHIPPLE,  
*Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge*

The “web of iniquity” described with such indignation by Frances Whipple in 1838 was the tale of Elleanor Eldridge, a free black Rhode Island woman who, after a series of unfortunate events, lost her home and thereby her savings. As told in *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge*, the story features a virtuous and hard-working black heroine, beset and swindled by mercenary white men and befriended by benevolent white women.<sup>1</sup>

Eldridge’s misfortunes were not unique: with its rapid transition to a market economy, the Age of Jackson saw many bankruptcies and financial embarrassments. The publication of a book about the problems of a woman of color was, however, unusual, and its contemporary popularity perhaps surprising: its Providence publisher, B. T. Albro, issued no fewer than eight printings in a decade.<sup>2</sup> Its popularity continued to the end of the century, when the *Memoirs* and its sequel, *Elleanor’s Second Book*, were among the six books by or about African American women that were

placed in the library of the Women’s Pavilion at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.<sup>3</sup>

The *Memoirs* provides an extraordinary amount of biographical detail, but tracing Eldridge’s life is nonetheless challenging. Elleanor Eldridge never married, she had no children, and although her shaky signature survives on an occasional legal document, she was probably illiterate, leaving no letters or diaries. She might have died in obscurity and poverty had not a group of white women, led by Frances Whipple (1805–1878), decided to help her. To raise cash for Eldridge, Whipple authored *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge*, which she published anonymously in 1838.<sup>4</sup> A tiny, pocket-sized book with fewer than one hundred pages of text, the *Memoirs* was priced at fifty cents, and Eldridge and others sold it to abolitionist and other sympathetic groups on the East Coast from Boston to Philadelphia. It was one of the first memoirs of a free black woman, and it became a popular success.<sup>5</sup> It is not known how many copies were printed, but an average edition before the advent of power presses (which had only recently arrived in Providence and which publisher B. T. Albro may not have had access to) was one thousand copies, so the figure of thirty thousand copies sold, as claimed in *Elleanor’s Second Book*, may have been an exaggeration. With the *Memoirs* finding a receptive audience, it rapidly went into reprints and was soon followed by *Elleanor’s Second Book*.<sup>6</sup> These efforts allowed Eldridge to buy back her house, which she had lost to a creditor.

*Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* speaks to the intersections of gender, race, and power: Whipple had both a feminist and an antiracist agenda, and her preface additionally clarifies her third motive: to



hold Eldridge up as a role model to her community in the aftermath of racial disturbances in Providence. Whipple trusted that her book would “subserve a very important purpose, in bringing forward, and setting before the colored population, an example of industry and untiring perseverance, every way worthy their regard and earnest attention.”<sup>7</sup>

Eldridge’s agenda is equally clear: in telling her story to Whipple, Eldridge wanted to arouse sympathy for herself and gain financial support. Having been involved in a series of costly law suits, she needed to pay her legal fees and buy back her house. Together, she and Whipple constructed a narrative to tell the story each wanted told. Although legal archives reveal numerous inconsistencies between the *Memoirs* and existing documentary evidence, these records nevertheless prove that Eldridge was not in any way the product of Whipple’s literary imagination, as a recent volume has suggested.<sup>8</sup> Neither was she simply a victim of unscrupulous men, as Whipple would have us believe; “has [Eldridge] not the right to call on the people for redress?” Whipple asked in the introduction to the second edition of the *Memoirs* in 1843, at the height of the Dorr controversy. It is clear that each woman shaped the story to serve her own ends, although their purposes were different—Eldridge’s motive being financial, Whipple’s being very complex and including issues of political and racial injustice.

ELDRIDGE’S FEMALE SUPPORTERS were a socially mixed group, though they shared some characteristics. All were white, though their gender limited the economic advantages their race might otherwise have brought them. Nineteen women are named in full, and four more with initials, in the *Memoirs* and in *Elleanor’s Second Book*. Of the thirteen who can be identified, most came from old and established Protestant families; some were self-supporting, and many were widows.<sup>9</sup> Only three were married. Seven who are identifiable as widows ranged in age from twenty-seven to eighty-three, with most in their forties. One



Catherine Read Williams, the Providence author of books of history, poetry, and fiction, was one of Elleanor Eldridge’s supporters. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 4475).

of the widows, Anna Arnold, may have had a special sympathy for Eldridge’s plight; as administratrix of her late husband’s estate, she had been involved in a lengthy dispute over mortgaged property, with the case heard in the United States Circuit Court in 1834.<sup>10</sup> Apart from Frances Whipple, the best-known of the women was Catherine Read Williams (1787-1872), a published author who had fled with her two-year-old daughter from an abusive marriage.<sup>11</sup> Two women known to be married were wives of artisans—a shoemaker and a paperhanger. One woman, Anna T. Lockwood (1813-1895), was young and single, though she was to marry a widower in early 1839. Only one woman was identifiably from among the elite: eighty-three-year-old widow Sarah Olney, the daughter of Governor Nicholas Cooke. Half of the women lived

on the East Side of Providence, half on the West Side. This was not an upper-class group, but a set of women who knew economic hardships and sympathized with Eldridge’s efforts to provide for her old age, however patronizing their way of expressing their sympathy might have been.

Like Williams, Whipple was a professional writer, and like many of the women, she was not financially secure; she had been self-supporting since her late teens, first as a botany teacher and later as an “editress.” She was a reformer through and through, working for temperance, the abolition of slavery, and the rights of women. In the early 1840s she was a strong supporter of Thomas Dorr in his efforts to widen the Rhode Island franchise. She published poetry and articles in the abolitionist newspaper *Liberator*, which was founded by William Lloyd Garrison in 1831. The *Liberator’s* advocacy of immediate emancipation was an unpopular position, far too radical even for most antislavery workers, who preferred gradual emancipation combined with a voluntary return to Africa for freed slaves. Whipple’s story of Elleanor Eldridge was thus told through a reformist lens by an author who favored immediate abolition and was appealing to her fellow women to achieve it.<sup>12</sup>

WHIPPLE’S STORY WAS ALSO INTENDED to show how freed slaves could become productive members of society, and her account of an African family kidnapped into slavery was meant to arouse abolitionist anger and sympathy. According to the *Memoirs*, Elleanor Eldridge’s father was African-born and was kidnapped as a child with his parents and siblings from the coast of West Africa some time in the middle of the eighteenth century. It is possible that he might have been one of the four young slaves brought to Rhode Island on the notorious slave ship *Sally* in 1764, though the story that the family stayed together might contradict this.<sup>13</sup> Family legends told of her grandfather boarding a ship to trade tobacco for “flannels and worsted bindings of gay and various colors,” accompanied by his wife and

four young children. Handing out refreshments and small gifts, the traders they encountered persuaded the family to linger on board and then, pretending to demonstrate the wonders of the ship’s sails and machinery, weighed anchor and put out to sea. The father tried to jump overboard when he realized what was happening, but he and his family were soon chained and stowed below with other captives, and they were sold into slavery—though they do seem to have remained together—when they arrived in Rhode Island. The father was given the name Dick Eldridge, and his children were given the names Phillis, Dick, George, and Robin. Robin (or Robert) became Elleanor’s father.<sup>14</sup>

Rhode Island was an important center of the American slave trade, with nearly one thousand voyages to Africa originating in its ports and more than one hundred thousand Africans—one-sixth of the total imported to British North America—passing through Newport or Bristol. Some enslaved Africans in Rhode Island worked in distilling rum (which, ironically, was used in the trade that brought other Africans into slavery), while others labored on the large-scale plantations west of Narragansett Bay.

The Eldridge men were slaves until 1778, when Robin Eldridge and his two brothers volunteered for the First Rhode Island Battalion, the only all-black unit to fight in the American War of Independence. To recruit for this unit, the Rhode Island General Assembly purchased slaves, offering their owners £65 to £120 per slave and setting the slaves free if they agreed to serve in this “Black Regiment.” Approximately 140 male slaves were thus emancipated.<sup>15</sup>

Before the outbreak of the war, Robin Eldridge had met and married a free woman of color named Hannah Prophet, who was either a daughter or granddaughter of Mary Fuller, a Narragansett Indian woman. Fuller (who, according to Whipple, died in 1780 at the advanced age of 102) had purchased a black slave named Thomas Prophet, freed him, and then married him. Her action was not uncommon at

the time in Rhode Island, where landholding among the Native Americans was matriarchal, and where women did most of the agricultural work.<sup>16</sup> Writing in the 1870s, African American shoemaker William Brown described how his grandmother “purchased her husband from the white people, in order to change her mode of living.” Brown maintained that Indian men found agricultural labor demeaning: “they thought they did their part hunting and procuring game.” Meanwhile, he wrote, Indian women noticed that black men worked in the fields and lived in solidly built houses, and feeling “anxious to change their position in life,” the women “resorted to making purchases.” The Indian men were not happy about this, but as Brown noted, “The treatment the Indian women received from the husbands they had purchased was so satisfactory that others were encouraged to follow their example, notwithstanding every effort was made to prevent such a union.”<sup>17</sup>

Robin Eldridge and his wife Hannah lived near Greene’s Fulling Mill in the Apponaug section of Warwick. What Eldridge did for a living is not known, but he purchased some land and built a small house on it, where his nine children (five of whom survived) were born. Elleanor was the last of seven successive daughters. Her half brother George, some six years her junior, would be the cause of both pleasure and problems for Elleanor.<sup>18</sup>

THERE ARE NO RECORDS of Eldridge’s birth, though the *Memoirs* states precisely that she was born on March 26, 1785. Her death on June 24, 1862, is recorded in Providence’s vital records, and her death certificate states she was born in Warwick, Rhode Island, the daughter of Robert and Hannah Eldridge.<sup>19</sup> Beginning in 1829 her name appears in Providence tax records as one of the wealthiest “Persons of Color” in the town.<sup>20</sup> According to the *Memoirs*, she was an enterprising and hard-working businesswoman and a mistress of many trades—a weaver, a dairywoman, a cook, a nursemaid, a house painter, and a soap boiler. Legal records show

she was also a doughty fighter in the courts, both for herself and for her family. There are no images of her apart from a woodcut as the frontispiece of the *Memoirs* showing a round-faced, curly-haired woman, draped in a simple shawl and holding a whitewashing brush. There are some descriptive glimpses of her in the books: she was tall, energetic, fond of dancing in her youth, liked to dress stylishly, and was an early riser; she was house-proud, loved her garden, and was loyal to her family; she was a good worker, employers hiring her time and again. Above all, she was frugal, claiming to save a hundred dollars a year after paying all her expenses—this at a time when many working people earned two or three dollars a week.

When Eldridge moved to Providence in 1815, she joined the town’s free black community. In the mid-eighteenth century Rhode Island had been home to 4,697 slaves, who made up 11.5 percent of the population, the highest proportion in New England. By the time of Eldridge’s birth in 1785, some had been manumitted by their owners, and others (including Eldridge’s father and uncles) had been freed as a reward for military service. The state’s gradual emancipation act passed by the General Assembly in 1784 had no immediate effect; most slaves stayed in bondage, and their children were effectively indentured servants who had to serve their mother’s owner until they reached adulthood. Freedom was slow in coming. In 1820 there were still 47 slaves in Newport and 4 in Providence. The death of the last Rhode Island slave, a centenarian resident of Jamestown, was noted in 1859.<sup>21</sup>

In 1790 the first federal census recorded 59,466 free blacks in the United States, almost half of whom, 27,109, lived north of the Mason-Dixon Line. Every ten years thereafter the census revealed an increase in the number until on the eve of the Civil War there were almost a half million free blacks, with approximately 45 percent of them residing in the North. Most blacks, North and South, lived in cities, and the adult Eldridge was no exception. Although she was born in a small Rhode Island community, she moved to Providence at

the age of thirty, where she became one of the 865 free blacks living there. By the time she was sixty-five this number had almost doubled to 1,499, but by then the population of Providence had more than trebled, making “persons of color” a decreasing minority.<sup>22</sup>

Like many Rhode Island free blacks, Eldridge was of mixed African American and Native American ancestry, and like most black women she worked for her living. She certainly did not typify the nineteenth-century (white) trope of “True Womanhood,” an ideal composed of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Despite Whipple’s suggestion that Eldridge was pious, there is little evidence that she was a churchgoing woman; she was anything but submissive; and her unmarried state largely precluded domesticity. Her boldness in using the legal system, which she did repeatedly, further contradicted the conventional model of womanhood. Unlike the majority of her female contemporaries of color, she was not primarily a domestic servant, but instead ran her own house-painting business and prospered sufficiently to invest in real estate. Like all women, white or black, she had no right to vote, and like all women, white or black, she would have no right to own property if she married.<sup>23</sup> Eldridge had little in the way of formal education; there were no public schools in Rhode Island during her childhood, and she started work at the age of ten (perhaps a little later than the young girls who were employed with their families in Samuel Slater’s newly founded cotton mills in Pawtucket).

Elleanor Eldridge was born free, of free parents, a year after Rhode Island passed its gradual emancipation act, a statute that promised much more than it actually delivered. Emancipation of Rhode Island’s slaves was indeed gradual; no slave was actually set free by the act.<sup>24</sup>

HANNAH ELDRIDGE WASHED for several white families, doing the strenuous boiling and scrubbing, starching and wringing, that made up eighteenth-century washdays. She could not afford to take time off to nurse her children, and so she took her latest baby with her

to work. Elleanor was named after the daughter of one of the families that Hannah worked for, the Bakers of Warwick. Soon after Hannah Eldridge died, the *Memoirs* says, Elleanor Baker called on Robin Eldridge to offer work to his ten-year-old daughter, Elleanor. Perhaps Elleanor’s memory was faulty when she related her life to Frances Whipple; perhaps there was a longer interval between her mother’s death and the job with the Bakers, for if the Rhode Island vital records are accurate, Hannah Eldridge died in 1790, when Elleanor was five or six years old. According to the *Memoirs*, Robin Eldridge gave his consent to his daughter’s working for the Bakers but thought she would not remain in that job for more than a week. Young Elleanor, however, struck a bargain: she “fixed her price at 25 cents a week and agreed to work for one year.”<sup>25</sup>

Eldridge recalled that she worked at a variety of tasks during that year; she drove the cows to pasture, she collected eggs from the hens and the wild turkeys, and she fed the pigs and horses. The following year, at age eleven (or six), her wages were increased to forty cents a week. She stayed with the Bakers for almost six years, despite Elleanor Baker’s marriage and subsequent relocation. Like white “help” at the time, many of whom were young girls training with relatives in preparation for running their own households, Eldridge learned the many skills necessary to domestic production, but unlike that white help she also learned marketable skills such as weaving, which was then normally a man’s job. By the time she was sixteen, she could weave damask, make bed covers and mattress ticking, and weave carpets.<sup>26</sup>

In March 1800 she left the Bakers to work for Benjamin Greene at nearby Warwick Neck. A retired sea captain, a local selectman, and a member of one of the wealthiest families in the state, Greene, then in his seventies, had recently remarried. After a year working for the Greens as a spinner, Eldridge became their dairywoman. She made cheese of such a high quality, she told Whipple with pride, that each year “it was distinguished by a *premium*.”<sup>27</sup>

In 1803 or 1804, when she was eighteen years old, Eldridge started an off-and-on courtship with her "cousin" Christopher G—. Although no further information about him is known, it is possible that his parents were among the Greene family's slaves. Like many African American men, he found it difficult to find a job (most land-based occupations were reserved for white men), and so in 1805 he went to sea. According to the *Memoirs*, over the next few years he sent Elleanor occasional letters, which she carried with her and later kept in a trunk with her clothes and other precious possessions. The first letter quoted in the *Memoirs*, dated Newport, March 27, 1805, is suspiciously pious and smacks of editorializing by Whipple. In it Christopher G— remarks that he had "lately" been "to the white Election," where he was "astonished and disgusted" by the behavior he saw; "I think the white people ought to be very careful what they do, and try to set good examples for us to follow."<sup>28</sup> He (or Whipple) then added a sentence that accords well with Whipple's views on fashion, both for blacks and for whites: "I am glad that you my dear cousin, do not, like some of your companions, attempt to follow all the extravagant fashions of the white people." After sailing for the West Indies in August 1805, over the next few years Christopher G— endured many hardships, being pressed into service at least twice by the Royal Navy and later released, and he spent time in Dublin, Ireland, and Archangel, Russia. Finally, in about 1812, came the news that he had died at sea.<sup>29</sup>

Eldridge, who was twenty-seven by this time, never married, later telling Whipple that she had "determined to profit by the advice of an aunt, who told her never to marry, because it involved such SUCH A WASTE OF TIME! For, said she, 'while my young mistress was courting and marrying, I knit five pairs of stockings.'"<sup>30</sup> Whipple, who was thirty-four and unmarried when she wrote the *Memoirs*, was not entirely convinced by this explanation, and other possibilities are clear; the economic position of black males was inferior to that of black women, and the existing property laws denied

economic independence to married women. Together with most states of the Union, Rhode Island still operated under the English common law of coverture, which assumed that the husband and wife were legally one person and suspended the wife's independent existence. Every action a married woman performed was under the protection and cover of her husband. Only widows and unmarried women over the age of twenty-one had the right to make contracts and to hold property in their own names. There were also demographic reasons why black women often remained unmarried: put simply, there was a shortage of black men, who were more likely than women to leave town in search of work and who died earlier than their womenfolk. As historian James Oliver Horton has pointed out, the decision of some black women to stay single was "unconventional," but "it was a realistic response to the gender imbalance among urban free blacks."<sup>31</sup>

ELLEANOR ELDRIDGE HAD MEANWHILE become an integral part of the African American community. While she was still living with the Greenes, her brother George was elected the "African governor" of Warwick for three successive years, and she told Whipple that she had sat proudly at his side during the election festivities. The Negro Election Day in Rhode Island customarily took place on the third Saturday of June, but the years of George Eldridge's governorship are not known. As he was born in 1791 or 1792, it is logical to assume he was at least in his teens before achieving this honor. This suggests the elections took place towards the end of his sister's time with the Greenes, who may have helped finance the festivities.<sup>32</sup>

The Negro elections were a part of New England black community life for almost a century. Many whites viewed them, as Whipple did in writing the *Memoirs*, as simply "imitation" of white practices,<sup>33</sup> but they were much more subtle than mere emulation. The elections contained elements of African and Native American cultures as well as critiques of white behavior and pretensions, and they were of vital importance in the

forging of a new African American identity. The earliest record of a New England Negro Election Day is from the 1740s; the latest is from the 1850s. As the supply of newly arrived Africans dwindled with the (official) ending of the international slave trade in 1808, and as emancipation progressed, the custom died out. For two or three generations, however, it was an important factor in combining African, Native, and Anglo cultural practices and in the shaping of ideas about work, politics, and protest. The form of the elections varied from place to place and over time, but besides the election of a "Negro governor," they usually included parades, games, eating, drinking, and dancing, with elements of role reversal. The considerable expense of these revelries was often borne by white owners (if the blacks were slaves) or employers (if the blacks were free). A story, contemporary with the Eldridges' participation, involves a South Kingstown politician, Elisha Reynolds Potter, whose slave John was elected Negro governor. Potter told him that one of them would have to quit politics or both would be ruined. John took the hint and resigned his governorship.<sup>34</sup>

In Newport, the town with Rhode Island's largest African American population in the late eighteenth century, the Negro governors had a quasi-judicial function, appointing black magistrates who adjudicated some cases involving members of the local black community. The governor was elected by ballot, with every man who owned a pig entitled to vote. Elections were also held in the villages of the state's agricultural Washington County, on whose plantations many of Rhode Island's slaves lived. The participants there were described as dressing in borrowed finery and assuming the relative rank of their owners. Writing in the 1840s, Washington County lawyer and historian Wilkins Updike believed it "was degrading to the reputation of the owner if his slave appeared in inferior apparel," and he described participants in the elections sporting cocked hats and pomaded and powdered hair and riding their owners' best Narragansett pacers.<sup>35</sup> Enslaved Native Americans also participated in the

elections. Voting was public, as all voting was at the time; male supporters of the various candidates lined up, and the man with the longest line was declared the winner. The new Negro governor then sat at the top of a banquet table with his female consort to his left and the defeated candidates to his right. After toasts and feasting, the afternoon was spent in dancing, games of quoits, and athletic exercises.<sup>36</sup>

By the time Elleanor Eldridge was involved in the elections, they were shifting toward a more public parade of racial pride and even defiance. Whipple's description centers on Eldridge's clothes, which were, of course, an important marker of status, but to assume that her role was purely decorative seriously oversimplifies her contribution. As Whipple wrote, "Elleanor stood among her people in the very highest niche of the aristocracy." When she accompanied her brother, she "dressed in such style as became the sister of 'His Excellency.'" The fabrics Whipple described were expensive; they included a lilac silk, a sky-blue silk, and "a nice worked cambric," always "with the proper garniture of ribbons, ornaments, laces &c."<sup>37</sup> It is unlikely that Eldridge could have afforded to purchase silk gowns out of her wages as a dairymaid, however good her cheese-making skills might have been; it is more likely that these garments were castoffs from her employer's wife or daughters, perhaps given as gifts reflecting the family's concern that their servant should make a suitably grand appearance. In any case, even if the gowns were gifts intended to demonstrate the generosity of her patrons or to celebrate the superior status of their servant in representing them, the subtlety of the garments' colors and the sophistication of the fabrics enabled Eldridge to give dignity to her role. Dressed in tasteful pastels, Elleanor Eldridge was well on her way to becoming a "Black Yankee" and a member of the black middle class. Such a status reinforced Whipple's indignation at her treatment by white men and echoed the fears of her middle-class white female supporters who felt the precariousness of their position as widows or wives of artisans.<sup>38</sup>



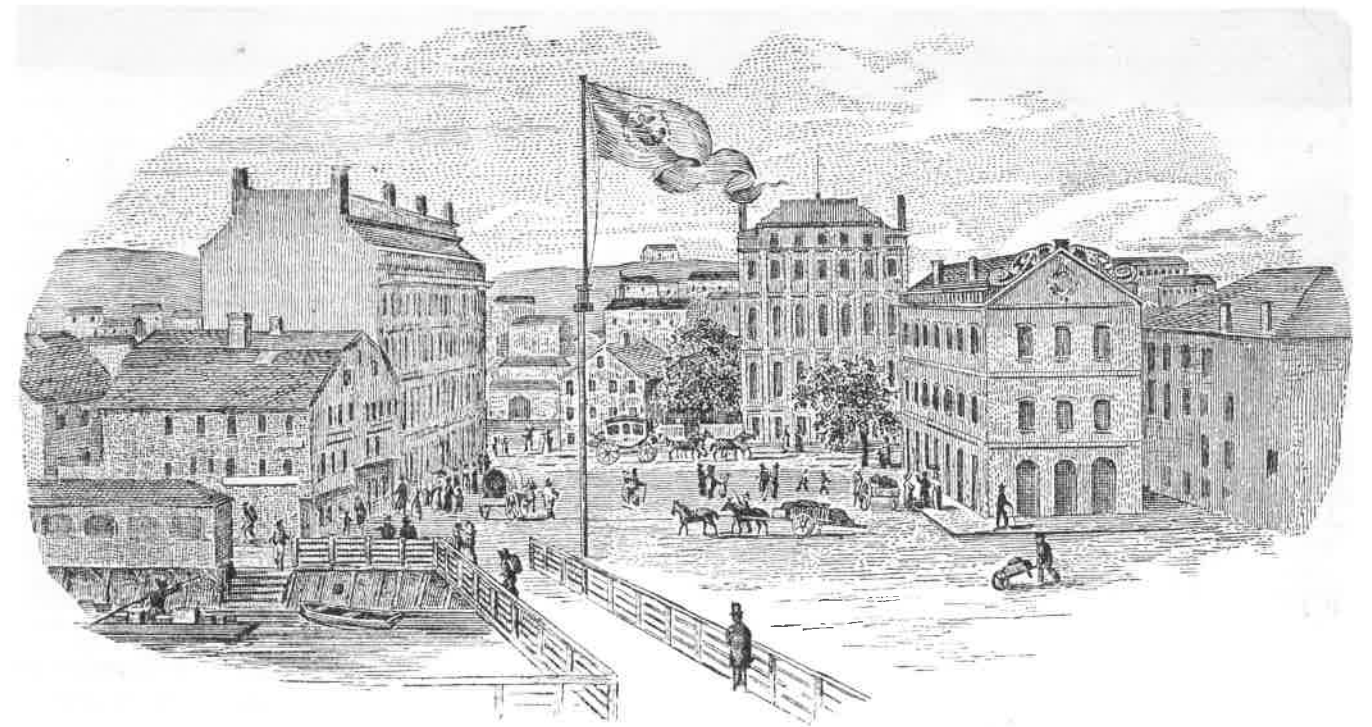
WHEN HER FATHER DIED IN 1804 without leaving a will, Eldridge went to the probate court to obtain “letters of administration” that would enable her to administer his small estate. As she was only nineteen years old, she could not sign a legal document—twenty-one was the age of majority—and so she had to get a signature from her eldest (unmarried) sister, who had moved to live with an aunt in western Massachusetts. In early September 1804 Eldridge therefore set out to walk the 170 miles to North Adams. She could have paid to travel in a coach; according to the *Memoirs* she had about sixty dollars in savings, and this she “carefully concealed about her person,” since a young black woman traveling alone might have seemed an easy target for robbers and swindlers. With the inns she passed on the way unlikely to have welcomed her as a paying guest, she “solicited the kind charities of those among whom she passed,” presumably local black families, which were few and far between. She did, however, manage to earn a day at a short-staffed inn by offering her services there, “acquitting herself of her duties in a very superior style.” Five days after she left Warwick she arrived in North Adams, much to the surprise of her sister, who killed a “good fat turkey” and invited all the cousins to dinner. The cold weather then setting in, Eldridge stayed in Massachusetts through that winter, working as a weaver for two local families, the Browns and the Bennetts, who were presumably white. It would seem that there was a lively black community in North Adams, for the *Memoirs* says that she was “a belle” who attended many balls and parties and “made quite a sensation among the colored beaux of Adams.”<sup>39</sup>

Returning to Benjamin Greene the following spring, she left his dairy and went back to his weaving room. She stayed with the Greenes until 1812, when she was twenty-seven years old, and she then returned home to live with her eldest sister Lettise and her younger siblings. Later that year the two Eldridge sisters went into business, using the skills they had accumulated over the previous two decades: they contracted to

weave, spin, and wash for white families; they acted as sick nurses; and they also boiled fat and lye to make “large quantities” of soap, which they took to market in Providence. They also bought and sold items on commission for neighbors and friends. They worked very long hours, but their free time was their own; rather than being at the beck and call of employers, they went home to their family and community at the end of the day. Such insistence on “living out” was a growing trend among northern free blacks, but it was a cause of great concern among the white servant-keeping classes who feared a loss of control over their employees.<sup>40</sup>

The Eldridge sisters chose a bad time to go into business: times were hard in states dependent on maritime trade during the War of 1812. International commerce slowed to a virtual standstill, with only intermittent coastal trade remaining; ships were tied up, sailors were out of work, and merchants were short of goods to sell. Rhode Island’s black community, poorer than most, was especially hard hit. The Eldridges scrambled to make a living, but by the time the war ended in 1815, it was clear that hand weaving and spinning were becoming things of the past. Cotton and woolen mills were springing up all over the state, and the new machines could produce cloth much more quickly and more cheaply than the nimblest of fingers. Operating under the “Rhode Island system,” whereby fathers employed their own children, the mills refused to employ people of color, and so there was no way that Elleanor could transfer her skills to an industrial site.<sup>41</sup> She therefore decided to learn yet another trade, that of whitewashing, wallpapering, and house painting. At age thirty she left Lettise behind and moved to Providence to live with another sister whom Whipple did not name; perhaps she was Sallie Eldridge, who was five years older and, like Elleanor, unmarried.<sup>42</sup>

Elleanor painted and whitewashed houses for the next two decades, normally working at her trade for nine or ten months of the year. Providence winters can be very cold, so rather than working outdoors in the



The hub of Providence's commercial activity during Elleanor Eldridge's lifetime, Market Square experienced considerable development between 1824 (top) and the late 1840s (bottom). RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6408 and 4199).



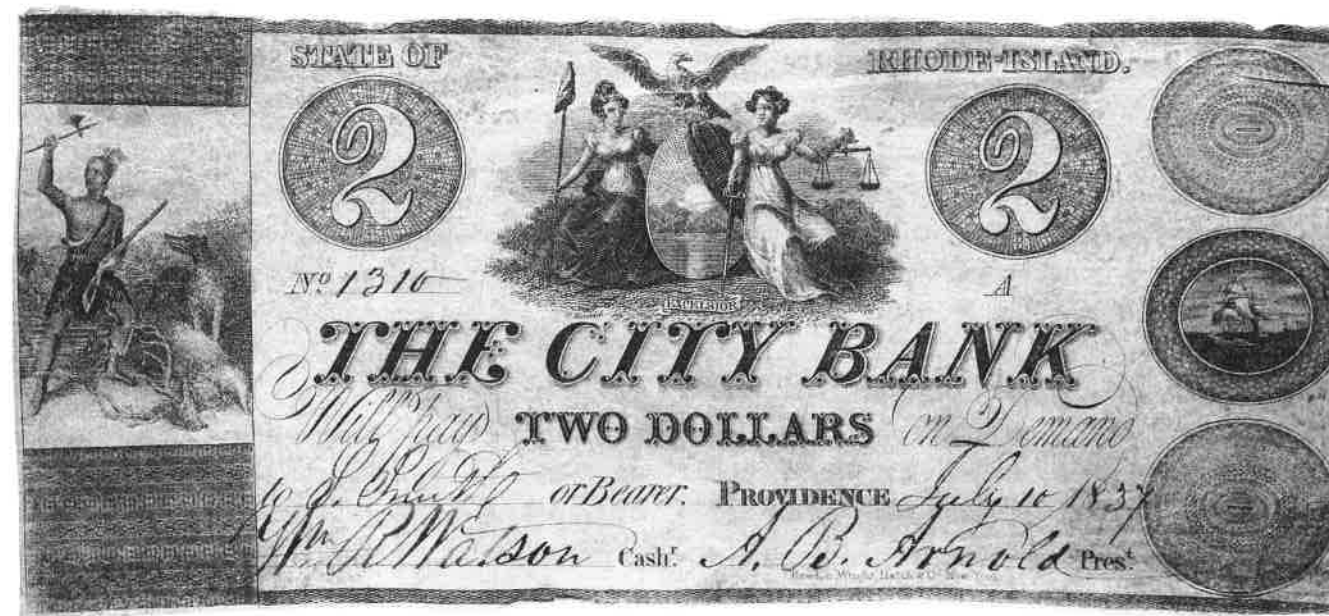
bleakest months of the year, she “engaged herself for high wages, in some private family, hotel or boarding house.” Among the wealthy white people she worked for were a Mr. Jackson (probably Charles), an attorney; Gravenor Taft, a preceptor in one of Providence’s public schools; Davis Dyer, a grocer and commission merchant; and John Matthewson, secretary of the Washington Insurance Company, who paid her two dollars a week plus her keep, a remarkably high wage for the time. “Elleanor has always lived with good people,” Whipple remarked, emphasizing Eldridge’s respectability and good connections.<sup>43</sup>

In the early 1820s Eldridge spent two winters in New York, working for an otherwise unidentified Miss Jane C—. Though Miss C—’s generosity was much praised by Whipple, the working conditions in her kitchen were less than ideal, and Elleanor caught a “malignant fever of the typhus kind.” A nurse was engaged, two physicians were consulted, and the suffering servant was plied with “every delicacy that gives comfort to the chamber of the sick.” To Whipple’s amazement (and probably to Eldridge’s also), the benevolent Miss C— not only paid all her servant’s medical expenses; she also “paid her the full amount of her wages for the whole time as if she had always been in actual service.” Eldridge returned to Providence in April of 1824 or 1825, where she stayed with Miss C—’s father for a while, then convalesced with her own family in Warwick.<sup>44</sup>

By 1826 ELDRIDGE HAD SAVED about \$600, and she started investing in real estate. She was not the only black investor in town; in that year fellow African Americans owned \$10,000 worth of real property in Providence, by 1830 the sum had risen to \$18,000, and estimates of the total owned in 1839 range from \$35,000 to \$50,000.<sup>45</sup> According to Whipple, Eldridge paid \$100 in cash for a lot she bought on Providence’s Spring Street.<sup>46</sup> It was not in the area where most blacks lived, but in a recently developed area in the southern part of the town where absentee white landlords owned

most of the neighboring lots. There Eldridge built a house costing her \$1,700, borrowing most of the money required. At this point the story gets a little complicated, for many of the details in the *Memoirs* do not match information on the title deeds lodged in Providence City Archives and on the legal papers deposited elsewhere in Rhode Island. Perhaps Whipple was simplifying her account for effect, or perhaps Eldridge did not, or did not choose to, remember the details accurately. Both parties had reasons to fudge financial matters in the story: Eldridge wanted to appear the wronged party, and Whipple wanted to make her an unflawed heroine while emphasizing the fallibility of male officials. It seems clear, however, that Eldridge meant to pay for the house through renting it, and she had several tenants who paid her a total of \$150 a year. Her tenants were people of color; although perhaps half of Providence’s twelve hundred or so African Americans lived in their own homes, there was nevertheless a steady demand for rental property.<sup>47</sup>

Eldridge’s transactions over the next dozen years, most of which involved borrowing money, were complex. Sometimes she took out mortgages on her property, and at other times she issued promissory notes with her property as collateral. She never borrowed directly from banks; the banking system at the time was relatively undeveloped, and as a laboring woman of color, she (like many poor people, black and white, male and female) had to rely on less formal ways of borrowing money. As economic historian Naomi Lamoreaux has shown, most Providence banks of the Jacksonian era were vehicles whereby merchants made loans to themselves and to each other.<sup>48</sup> Eldridge was outside this circle, so she went to private individuals of the middling and wealthy sort, who lent her sums ranging from \$200 to \$1,500 between 1826 and 1835. These loans would have been purely business transactions; the lenders may have been (but were not necessarily) former employers or people who knew her. Adding two wings to her own house in the late 1820s, Eldridge moved into one and rented the other. By this time the house, with four chimneys, was quite



The many banks in antebellum Providence tended to make loans to their shareholders and to each other, but not to borrowers like Elleanor Eldridge. Note issued by City Bank; RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6409).

a large structure.<sup>49</sup> Lacking the necessary money when she then decided to buy two more lots, she borrowed \$240 at the high rate of 10 percent interest “from a gentleman in Warwick” named George Carder (perhaps the father of Miss Jane C—?) on the understanding that the term of the loan was indefinite as long as she renewed the note and paid the interest annually.<sup>50</sup>

In 1829 Elleanor Eldridge, with her name variously spelled, started to appear in the Providence city tax books, which, conveniently for modern investigators, separated out “People of Color” onto a page of their own.<sup>51</sup> By 1835 she was the largest landowner in the Providence black community. By investing in real estate, Eldridge was trying to provide for her old age, when she would be unable to continue the strenuous job of whitewashing houses. She had no children to support her, and she was too independent to accept charity. Her property holdings fluctuated, and in 1836 and 1837—the two years when her financial problems came to a head—her name does not appear on the Providence tax lists at all. The fluctuations were

caused partly by family problems, partly by a national financial panic, and partly by greed and bad faith on the part of her creditors. In addition, although neither she nor Whipple wanted to emphasize the fact, some of Eldridge’s problems were of her own making: she was undeniably overextended at times, and if for any reason she was unable to keep up the high interest payments, she was likely to be sued by her creditors.

Eldridge’s position as a black capitalist was problematic, as race relations in the United States were complicated in the wake of southern slave uprisings. The position of free blacks was made difficult by the activities of the American Colonization Society, founded in 1816 to urge the return of free African Americans to Africa. While some free black men and women (including some Rhode Islanders) did leave for Africa, others echoed the fears of David Walker, a southern-born free black man, whose 1829 *Appeal* passionately criticized, among many other aspects of American race relations, the “colonization” movement. Walker charged that the movement was

a plot by slaveholders to remove potential leaders of the black community, “that our more miserable brethren may be the better secured in ignorance and wretchedness, to work their farms and dig their mines, and thus go on enriching the Christians with their blood and groans.”<sup>52</sup>

White anxieties were exacerbated by failed slaved uprisings in the South, such as those led by Denmark Vesey in 1822 and Nat Turner’s in 1831. In September 1831, a month after the latter bloody episode in Virginia, rioting broke out in Providence when two groups of white seamen, apparently looking for trouble, advanced on Snow Town, Providence’s main black residential area. The riot was over three days later, but not before the militia was called out, four people were dead, and approximately eighteen houses in Snow Town were demolished. Although Eldridge’s property was in another part of the town, the rising hostility against blacks must have been alarming to her.<sup>53</sup>

ELDRIDGE’S FINANCIAL AND LEGAL problems were long-standing. They seem to have begun in late 1831, when she defaulted on a loan of \$94 from a William Smith, who took her to court. The legal system was frequently used to register debts. She was ordered to pay \$57.45 plus costs of \$4.57.<sup>54</sup> According to the *Memoirs*, Eldridge was recovering from a second and very serious bout of typhus in the fall of 1831, and this could be why she was unable to repay her loan from Smith. Fearing that she might not survive another attack of typhus, she decided to pay a short visit to her relatives in western Massachusetts prior to her usual winter’s stint as a house servant in Providence, and she set off with her brother George in October. She recalled the first day of the trip as “invigorating,” but the second and third days left her exhausted, so they decided to rest for the night at Angell’s Inn in Hadley, Massachusetts. It is interesting to speculate what kind of inn this was, for public accommodations for people of color were rare; racial consciousness and segregation were growing apace. When her brother tapped on her door the next

morning, she called out that she felt too ill to continue, so George Eldridge arranged for them to stay on. Two men from Providence who happened to be staying at the inn overheard George’s conversation with the landlady, and as they knew Elleanor by reputation, they remarked on her illness when they returned to Providence. The story of her condition grew and became magnified until everyone believed she had died.<sup>55</sup>

The Eldridges meanwhile resumed their journey and spent a pleasant few weeks in North Adams, weeks that grew to months when George Eldridge started courting a cousin named in the *Memoirs* as Ruth Jacobs.<sup>56</sup> According to the *Memoirs*, his previous marriage had collapsed after the sudden death of three of his four young children, apparently poisoned by some plant they had eaten while out playing; cemetery records suggest that these deaths had occurred a decade earlier, in August 1821.<sup>57</sup> The *Memoirs* also state that his former “matrimonial connection” had been an unhappy one.<sup>58</sup> George persuaded his sister to stay in North Adams for the winter, and he found work there chopping wood.

When Elleanor and George Eldridge returned to Providence, together with Ruth Jacobs, early the next spring, Elleanor was dismayed to learn that her neighbors believed she had died. Worse, she discovered that her property was legally attached for an unpaid debt, and it would soon be sold. Early the next day following her return, according to the *Memoirs*, she traveled to Warwick, where she met with John Carder, who had inherited the \$240 mortgage from his brother George. According to Whipple’s account, they met in George Eldridge’s house, and in the presence of four other persons—George Eldridge, his fiancée Ruth, and the Eldridge cousins Jeremiah and Lucy Prophet—Carder told Elleanor he had believed she was dead and was simply trying to secure his money, but “I am glad you have returned, safe and well; and though I want the money, I will never distress you for it.”<sup>59</sup>

This seems to have been a very dramatic scene, but it has major chronological problems, as George Carder

was apparently alive and presumably well in the spring of 1832: cemetery records say that he did not die until June 25, 1834.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps Whipple got the story wrong, or perhaps Eldridge misled her. According to the *Memoirs*, Eldridge told John Carder that she would try to raise a hundred dollars in part payment in April, but she failed to do this, although she continued to pay the interest.<sup>61</sup> A winter without work had depleted her savings, and in addition there was a pressing family problem that needed her attention. The problem involved her brother George.

On April 12, 1832, not long after the alleged meeting at George Eldridge’s house, George was accused of stabbing Samuel Gorton—a white man who was a descendant of Warwick founder Samuel Gorton and a relative of the Greenes—“with intent to kill and rob him.” (Whipple’s account says that Eldridge was accused of “having horse-whipped, and of otherwise barbarously treating” Gorton.)<sup>62</sup> Unless he posted bail of \$500, the recently married George (described in court documents as both a “yeoman” and a “man of color”) would be held in jail until the case was heard in the Rhode Island Court of General Sessions. According to Whipple, Elleanor acted with speed and panache: Whipple describes her as sending a message to the livery stable “for the handsomest horse and chaise it afforded,” since she was “determined to go [to the Kent County Courthouse, twenty miles away in East Greenwich] in a style accordant with the dignity of her mission.”<sup>63</sup> George Carder (now fully alive) gave her a \$500 mortgage on her property so that she could post bail for her brother, who was promptly released from jail.<sup>64</sup>

Elleanor’s appearance in court when the case was finally heard in August 1833 seems to have been a memorable occasion. According to *Elleanor’s Second Book*, a “benevolent and interested friend” happened to be in the courthouse when the case was first heard, and he furnished a report of what happened: “The name of Elleanor Eldridge was called. ‘Here, sir!’ was the prompt reply. ‘Do you, Elleanor Eldridge,’ said the crier, ‘recognize in the sum of five hundred dollars, for

the appearance of George Eldridge, at this Court, to be holden &c. &c.’ ‘Yes sir! and for five times that sum, if it is necessary!’ replied Ellen in tones so clear and loud, as seemed to electrify the whole court.”<sup>65</sup> The court records give a much more prosaic version: George Carder was named as the person providing bail for George.<sup>66</sup> The state eventually called more than two dozen witnesses, many of whom were black, with Elleanor Eldridge apparently acting as her brother’s lawyer. Although the case was delayed several times, George Eldridge was ultimately acquitted. According to the *Memoirs*, “Ellen managed this case entirely; and on account of it was subjected to considerable cost and trouble; but [as she told Whipple] she never regretted having engaged in it, and would freely have expended much more, had it been necessary to effect her purpose.”<sup>67</sup>

ELLEANOR RETURNED TO HER wallpapering, white-washing, and frugal mode of living after her brother was acquitted. By April 1834, she said, she had saved \$1,100, and assisted by an \$800 loan, she proceeded to buy her house outright. This, in retrospect, may have been a little reckless, for the following year her earnings were much reduced when a cholera epidemic in Providence encouraged many of her wealthier clients to flee the city. During the summer of 1835 Eldridge’s finances recovered somewhat when a woman named only as Mrs. T—engaged her as a nurse for her sickly daughter. The three of them traveled thirty miles or so to Pomfret, Connecticut, where, according to the *Memoirs*, they stayed for two months.<sup>68</sup>

On her return to Providence, Eldridge was dismayed to discover that John Carder had attached and sold her house in order to recover the original \$240 loaned to her by his late brother some ten years earlier. Whipple maintained that the sale had been conducted in an almost indecent hurry—after all, according to this account, Eldridge had been out of town for only two months—but court documents suggest a somewhat different scenario. The records include a note, signed by Elleanor Eldridge in February 1834, promising to



pay George Carder \$376, plus interest, on demand. This is accompanied by a writ issued by John Carder on January 20, 1835, demanding \$800 damages from Eldridge, charging that she had not kept promises made to his brother and to himself. On the back of the writ is a declaration by the deputy sheriff, William Brayton Mann, stating that he had been unable to find Eldridge and had instead attached her property on Spring Street, leaving copies of the writ with her tenants and the city clerk.<sup>69</sup> The sheriff's declaration was also dated January 20, 1835.

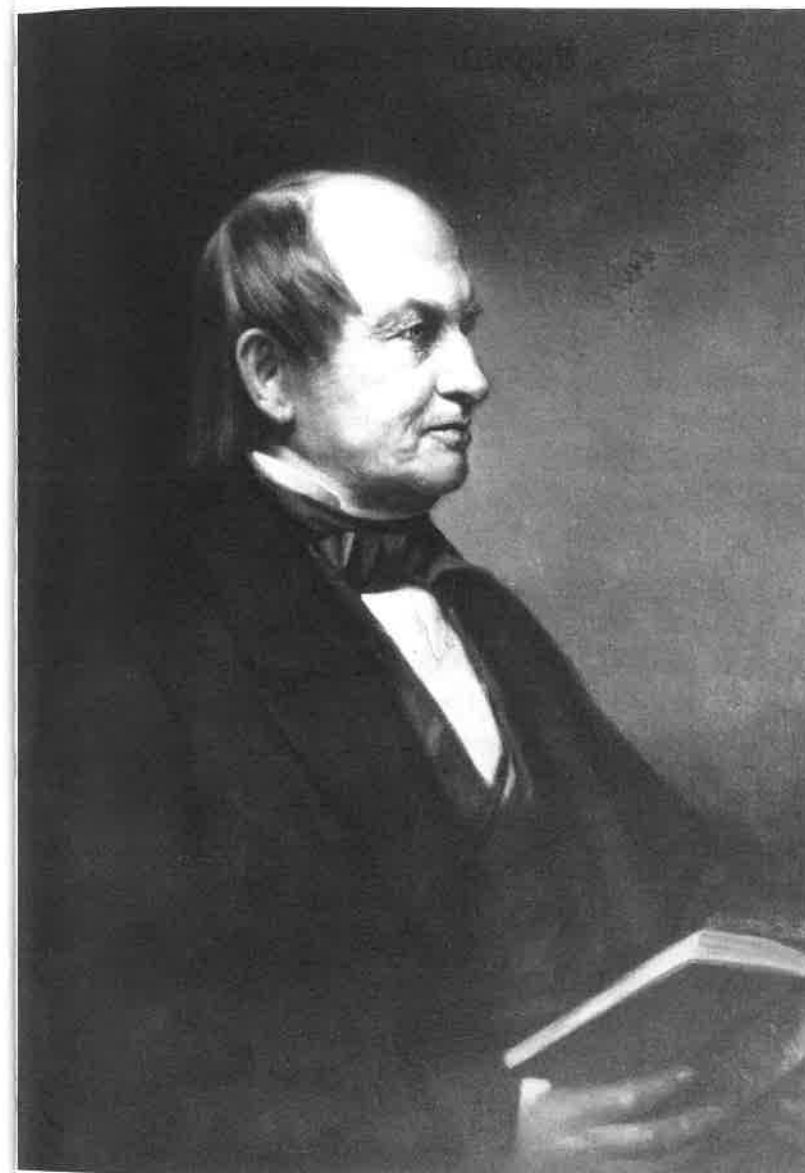
A third document, dated January 26, 1835, is a formal complaint against Elleanor, on the back of which, written in a different hand, is a statement of the resolution of the case. Elleanor kept her property, but she was ordered to pay \$405.96 plus \$6.49 in costs; she did not do so, and on September 12, 1835, the property, with a taxable value of \$4,000, was sold to the highest bidder. The purchaser was a white Providence baker named Benjamin Balch, who repaid Carder and another creditor and obtained the property for a little under \$1,700.<sup>70</sup>

It is clear that Whipple omitted some details of this episode and exaggerated others in order to make her case that Elleanor Eldridge had been mistreated. Equally clearly, Eldridge herself omitted some information in order to win sympathy. Nevertheless, there were moral if not legal problems with the sale of her house to Balch. When Eldridge visited the house, where "it seemed the spirit of Ruin had been walking abroad," she discovered that Balch had evicted her tenants on a week's notice (which he had a legal right to do) and demolished the house's two wings that she had added. According to Whipple, who was stressing the racial elements of the story, "many of [the tenants], being unable to procure tenements, were compelled to find shelter in barns and out-houses, or even in the woods. But *they were colored people*—So thought he, who so unceremoniously ejected them from their comfortable homes." Whipple then added a sentence dripping with italicized sarcasm: "and he is not only a *professed* friend to their race, but 'an honorable man.'"<sup>71</sup>

Eldridge was not friendless. Mrs. T—, her employer in Connecticut, loaned Elleanor her horse and chaise and advised her to go straight to Warwick to see John Carder. Carder's excuse, according to a scornful Whipple, was that his lawyer had advised him to do what he had done, and he was very sorry about it. But that apology did not help Elleanor get her property back.<sup>72</sup>

After some thought, Eldridge went to the top of the legal profession and consulted a relative of her former employers, Albert C. Greene. He was the Rhode Island attorney general, a post he was to fill from 1825 to 1843.<sup>73</sup> Greene advised her to bring a case of trespass and ejectment against Balch, which she did in April 1836. Ejectment was a common-law remedy for establishing title to land and for securing damages if the defendant had been trespassing on it. The summons issued by the court commanded the Providence sheriff to bring "Benjamin Balch, Baker, alias gentleman" to answer Eldridge's complaint that he "with force and arms has broken & entered the Ptff.'s close in said Providence." Eldridge claimed \$3,000 in damages. When the case was heard in January 1837 in the Court of Common Pleas, Eldridge argued that the sale had been illegal because it was conducted without the proper legal formalities, since there was no proper advertisement of the sale.<sup>74</sup> Rhode Island law stated that if real estate was attached to satisfy a debt, notice of the sale was to be posted in three public places for ten days prior to the auction, and if the defendant was out of state, the case should be deferred until the next court term, and notices should be posted "for the space of three months at least" prior to the final sale.<sup>75</sup>

The deputy sheriff was called to give evidence. "When the oath was administered," Whipple wrote, "the sheriff appeared strangely agitated, and many, then present in the court, even the judge, thought it was the perturbation of guilt," though she did not say on what evidence she based the judge's thoughts. The sheriff claimed, however, that he had put up notice of the sale in three public places, one of which he named as Manchester's tavern. It is difficult to prove a negative,



Albert Collins Greene, Rhode Island's attorney general from 1825 to 1843. RIHS Collection (RHi X17 561).

and although three men were prepared to testify that they had never seen such a notice, the judge found that the "oaths of common men" could not be taken against the sheriff and decided against Eldridge.<sup>76</sup>

Nothing daunted, Eldridge hired two private investigators "whom she fee'd liberally" to check the local newspapers and ask whether anyone had seen the alleged notices. The investigators could provide no

information that would help her. She next prepared to sue the sheriff for perjury, but at this point, according to Whipple, Benjamin Balch offered to sell her back her property for \$2,100 and two years' rent, which would give him a return of almost 25 percent on his investment. She reluctantly agreed to Balch's offer and set about looking for the money required, although 1837 was not a good time to find loans: America was in the grip of a financial crisis that would see more than six hundred banks fail, almost forty thousand Americans declare themselves bankrupt, and almost all New England's textile mills close their doors. Nevertheless Eldridge found the money "within six weeks," and the Providence deed books show her taking out loans amounting to \$2,400 to repay the promissory notes she had issued the previous year. In the meantime Balch had declared that he was tired of waiting for the money from Eldridge and demanded a further \$200, which she managed to scrape together and finally paid. The whole sad matter might have been forgotten but for the efforts of Whipple and her friends.<sup>77</sup>

*MEMOIRS OF ELLEANOR ELDRIDGE* was published in 1838, and Eldridge went on the road to sell the book. This, of course, was an unwomanly thing to do; females were not supposed to speak in public places to "promiscuous" (mixed) audiences. (It was at this time that Quaker abolitionists Sarah and Angelina Grimké were creating an uproar in Massachusetts, where they were the first women to address the state legislature).<sup>78</sup> According to *Elleanor's Second Book*, Eldridge sold about nineteen hundred copies of the *Memoirs* in her travels up and down the East Coast. "I went to Boston and found a great many kind friends there, very kind indeed," she told Whipple. She was certainly in contact with the abolitionist *Liberator*, in whose Boston offices the book was available. "There I sold about three hundred books; and they furnished me with letters to the most respectable colored people, and other friends in New York. I went to New York and sold a great many more books, and got more letters to

the colored and white friends, in Philadelphia. When I came back to Providence, I went to Newport, Fall River, Nantucket, Bristol and Warren; and had very good luck, very good luck indeed."<sup>79</sup>

But Eldridge's luck was not quite complete, as she and Benjamin Balch were still in court. In August 1838, according to court records, she rented her house to him for three months. Perhaps this was when she was on the road, selling her book. He did not leave the house after the three-month rental had expired, however, nor did he pay her the rent that was due, and in December 1838 she sued him for \$50, which he claimed he had never promised to pay. The case was adjourned to May 1839, by which time Balch had changed his story, and the court ordered him to pay Eldridge \$50 plus \$8.09 costs. Balch appealed, and (according to Whipple) the sheriff suggested that Balch might sue Eldridge for the storage of some of her furniture; if she was unwilling or unable to pay, Balch could sell her furniture to regain his costs. A list of the items Balch proposed to sell included an iron oven lid, three chairs, three grates, and two cupboards, property totaling \$36.75. Charging Balch with failing to keep his promises and damaging the house, Eldridge now demanded that he pay her \$60.<sup>80</sup> Finally, in Whipple's account, "a gentleman who had the management of her business" met with Balch and arranged a settlement. The terms of that settlement are unclear, but Balch had the last word, as he took some of the fire grates with him when he finally left the house. Eldridge claimed to be much more upset, however, by Balch's removal of all her best plants from the garden, a "delicate" sentiment that delighted Frances Whipple.<sup>81</sup>

The rest of Elleanor Eldridge's life was relatively uneventful. She bought the plot next to her house in 1847, and it is to be hoped that during the last decades of her life she was able to peacefully enjoy her garden, her home, and the elegant sofa there that had been given to her by the generous Mrs. T.—<sup>82</sup> On June 24, 1862, Eldridge died of consumption at the age of seventy-six, leaving her property to her numerous nephews and

nieces who were scattered all over the United States from Buffalo to San Francisco. The relatives sold it in May 1863 to Samuel B. Durfee, Providence's surveyor of highways, for a total of \$4,500.<sup>83</sup>

WHIPPLE ENDED THE *MEMOIRS* with a rhetorical flourish that spoke to issues of gender. Women—by implication, white women—were upholders of morality and should be benevolent supporters of their less fortunate sisters, she said. "Are there none to feel for [Elleanor Eldridge]? Are there none to sustain, and encourage her? Thank God!—there are already a few—a few benevolent, and noble-minded women, who dare come forward and publicly *defend the right* and *denounce the wrong*."<sup>84</sup>

Neither Eldridge nor Whipple was willing to ascribe racism to the basic structure of American society or suggest that it was embedded in Jacksonian America; they shared an optimistic understanding of American society as reformed and redeemed by the Revolution. Racism, per se, was to them less socially relevant than dishonest people, especially dishonest men.

The story of Elleanor Eldridge, whitewasher and litigant, nevertheless illustrates the interconnections between race, class, and gender, and between business and benevolence, in the early nineteenth century. It is a chapter in the history of property foreclosure prior to a fully developed banking system, a demonstration of the complexities of life in Jacksonian America for those who were neither white nor male, and an illustration of how the struggles of black people occasionally galvanized whites, especially women, into action on issues of social justice.

Elleanor Eldridge was not a product of Frances Whipple's imagination, nor was she simply a victim, as Whipple suggests. With both women shaping the story to serve their own ends, their collaboration confronted and challenged the "web of iniquity" surrounding an ambitious black woman.

*For more information and educational materials on this subject, see under Education at [www.rihs.org](http://www.rihs.org).*

## Notes

1. Frances Whipple, *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* (Providence: B. T. Albro, 1838). All citations to the *Memoirs* are to the reprinted 1843 2nd edition (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971). There is an increasing scholarly interest in Eldridge; see, e.g., Sonja L. Lanehart, ed., *African American Women's Language: Discourse, Education and Identity* (Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), and Tiya Miles et al., eds., *Crossing Waters: Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).
2. The eight nineteenth-century printings were produced by B. T. Albro in 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, 1842, 1843, 1845, and 1847.
3. See Amina Gautier, "African American Women's Writings in the Women's Building Library," in Sarah Wadsworth, ed., "The Women's Building Library of the World's Columbian Exposition," *Libraries and Culture: A Journal of Library History* 41 (winter 2006): 55-81.
4. Sometimes there is confusion about the identity of Frances Whipple, whose name changed according to her marital status. She was born Frances Harriet Whipple in 1805; she married Charles Green in 1842 and became known for a while as Fanny Green, though the couple divorced after a year; and she married Col. William C. McDougal in San Francisco in 1862 and adopted his name (which, oddly, she spelled as McDougall). She also wrote under several pen names, including Frances Harriet, Ann Page, Jennie Lee, and "a Rhode Islander." She died in 1878. See Sarah C. O'Dowd, *A Rhode Island Original: Frances Harriet Whipple Green*

*McDougall* (Hanover N.H.: University Press of New England, 2004).

5. It was preceded only by *The Life and Religious Experiences of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady*, published in 1836. See Frances Smith Foster, "Adding Color and Contour to Early American Self-Portraits: Autobiographical Writings of Afro-American Women," in Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *Black Women in U.S. History*, vol. 4 (New York: Carlson, 1994), 23-38.

6. *Elleanor's Second Book* (Providence: B. T. Albro, 1839) was reprinted four times and was reissued by General Books (New York) in 2009.

7. *Memoirs*, 3.

8. The entry on Eldridge in Jessie Carney Smith, ed., *Notable Black American Women* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1992), 319, reads "Uncertainty exists as to whether Eldridge actually lived, or whether she was a product of Frances McDougall's literary imagination."

9. The fact that several of the women were listed in the *Providence City Directory* for 1838 means they were heads of households, and except when they can be otherwise identified, they were almost certainly widows or adult single women. Where possible, the names of Eldridge's female supporters have been cross-referenced with the Rhode Island Historic Cemeteries database (<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~rigenweb/cemetery/>; accessed March 1, 2010). These women were Mary B. Annable (1806-1832), wife of Jeremiah, shoemaker, 132 North Main; Anna Arnold, widow of Thomas Arnold, 183 South Main; Amey E. Arnold; Mrs. E. G. Chandler (1793-1877), widow, 183 South Main; Mrs. Harriet Chandler; Mrs. H. Cushing

(1785-1852), wife of Henry, paper-hanger, 68 Westminster, Aborn St.; A[my] G[reene] Dorrance, widow, 9 Westminster; Mary Earle (1770-1853), a Quaker; Elizabeth Elliott, 82 High Street, widow of Francis (1780-1821); Mary Gladding; Anna T. Lockwood, age 25, single (1813-1895), married widower James Dennis in January 1839, daughter of Benoni, surveyor, who lived at corner of Friendship and Chestnut; D. B. Lockwood; Sarah Olney 1775-1843, widow, daughter of Gov. Nicholas Cooke, Olney St.; Abby Thurber (1811-1856), widow, 172 North Main; Harriet Lee Truesdell, wife of Thomas, grocer, 32 Market, 104 Westminster; Nancy Webb (1794-1875), 105 North Main, widow; Frances Harriet Whipple; C. R. Williams.

10. Charles Sumner, *Reports of Cases Argued in the Circuit Court of the United States for the First Circuit* (Hilliard, Gray & Co., 1837), 108-31.

11. Catherine Read Williams's popular account of the trial of the Reverend Ephraim K. Avery for the murder of Sarah Maria Cornell in Fall River in December 1832 was edited by Patricia Caldwell and republished in 1993 as *Fall River: An Authentic Narrative* by Oxford University Press.

12. For Whipple, see O'Dowd, *A Rhode Island Original* and "Frances Whipple and the Wampanoag: A Nineteenth-Century New England Factory Magazine," *Rhode Island History* 59 (2001): 67-84. Whipple's contributions to the *Liberator* were a poem, "An Address to Prudence Crandall" (August 10, 1833); "An Appeal to the Daughters of America," urging women to support the emancipation of slaves (June 21, 1834); and an article, "An Appeal to American Women," similarly urging support for emancipation (May 21, 1834). References to Elleanor's book appeared in the *Liberator* in late November and December 1838. Copies of this book were available for sale at the *Liberator's* office at 25 Cornhill, Boston.

13. For an account of the 1764 voyage of the slave ship *Sally*, see *Slavery*

and *Justice: The Report of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice* (Providence: Brown University, 2006).

14. *Memoirs*, 15-19.

15. William G. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 106. The figures given in George Cantor, *Historic Landmarks of Black America* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), xvii, differ slightly: according to Cantor, the regiment comprised 125 blacks, 95 of them slaves.

16. *Memoirs*, 23; Randall M. Miller and John David Smith, eds., *Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery* (New York: Greenwood, 1988), 523.

17. William J. Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown of Providence, R.I., with Personal Recollections of Incidents in R.I.* (Providence: Angell & Co., 1883), 10-11. This book was reprinted by Books for Libraries in 1971, and a new edition, with an introduction by Joanne Pope Melish and a preface by Rosalind C. Wiggins, was published by the University Press of New England in 2006. Brown was related to the Prophet family, and so the grandmother he referred to may have been the same Mary Fuller, though she would be at least his great-grandmother.

18. The Apponaug fulling mill was originally built in 1697 to prepare and strengthen woolen cloth. It was purchased early in the eighteenth century by Samuel Greene, who made such a success of the business that for some time the village of Apponaug was known as Fulling Mill. Don D'Amato, *Warwick's Villages and Historic Places* (<http://www.warwickri.gov/heritage/damatoshistory/apponaug3.htm>; accessed April 18, 2008). According to *Index to Vital Records of Rhode Island, Deaths 1853-1900*, vol. 1, no. 3, Elleanor's parents were Robert and Hannah and George's parents were Robin and Betsey, née Eldridge. That George was a half brother six years younger than Elleanor suggests that her mother did indeed die when Elleanor was five years old (see below).

19. *Index to Vital Records of Rhode Island*, vol. 1, no. 3, Deaths 1853-1900.

20. The printed Providence tax records conveniently listed "persons of color" in a separate section of the volume.

21. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island*, 106. The last slave may have been James Howland of Jamestown, who died on January 3, 1859, at the age of 100.

22. The figures are from Randall M. Miller et al., *Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), 259-61, and *The State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations Manual* (Providence: Secretary of State, 1987), 722-24. The population of Providence was 11,767 in 1820 and 41,513 in 1850.

23. A law permitting married women to own property was passed in Rhode Island in 1853.

24. In addition, as historian Joanne Pope Melish has shown, some masters were not averse to altering documents to "prove" that a child was born to a slave mother before 1784 and thus was not covered by the provisions of the act. Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 90-92.

25. *Memoirs*, 24.

26. *Ibid.*, 26-33.

27. *Ibid.*, 33; italics in original. Dairy-ing was one of the major sources of income for South County farmers. According to Lorenzo Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942; reprint, Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennicat Press, 1966), 106, twenty-four Negro women worked in Robert Hazard's South Kingstown dairy, where they were required to make "from twelve to twenty-four huge cakes of cheese daily."

28. James Fenner of Rhode Island (1771-1846) won a U.S. Senate seat as a Democratic-Republican in 1804; the Rhode Island electors that year

voted in the Electoral College for the Federalist Charles Pinckney, who lost the presidential election to Thomas Jefferson.

29. Many people are described as "cousin" in the *Memoirs*, but the actual relationships have not been determined. *Memoirs*, 43, 47-48, 54-55, 59-60, 62.

30. *Ibid.* 98.

31. William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (London: 1765), 442; James Oliver Horton, "Freedom's Yoke: Gender Conventions among Antebellum Free Blacks," in Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *Black Women in U.S. History*, vol. 2 (New York: Carlson, 1990), 67-68.

32. *Memoirs*, 35-36.

33. *Ibid.*, 35.

34. Wilkins Updike, *History of the Episcopal Church in Narragansett, Rhode Island* (New York: 1847), 1:214, quoted in Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England*, 251. Potter served as a U.S. representative from 1796 to 1797 and from 1809 to 1815.

35. Updike, *History*, 1:177-79, quoted in Shane White, "It was a Proud Day": African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741-1834," *Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (June 1994), 22. Also in Kenneth W. Goings and Raymond A. Mohl, eds., *The New African American Urban History* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1996). A less critical account occurs in *The History of Washington and Kent Counties, Rhode Island*, by J. R. Cole (New York, 1889), <http://www.rootsweb.com/~rigenweb/kingstown1.html>.

36. Whether the pig requirement is a tongue-in-cheek reference to the property qualifications for white male suffrage has not been determined. See Joseph P. Reidy, "Negro Election Day and Black Community Life in New England, 1750-1860," *Marxist Perspectives* 1 (fall 1978): 103. Thomas Williams Bicknell, *The History of the*

*State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (New York: American Historical Society 1920), 2:485, quoted in White, "Proud Day," 19.

37. *Memoirs*, 35-36; cambric was a thin cotton or linen fabric.

38. White, "Proud Day," 13-50. See also William D. Pierson, "A Resistance Too Civilized to Notice" and "African-American Festive Style," in Gena Dagel Caponi, ed., *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); William D. Pierson, *Black Yankees: The Development of an Afro-American Sub-culture in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

39. *Memoirs*, 50-55.

40. *Ibid.*, 63. One white middle-class reaction to servants "living out" was the forming of organizations such as the (short-lived) Providence Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants, which tried in the early 1830s to regulate servants' behavior by financial incentives. See Jane Lancaster, "Encouraging Faithful Servants: Race, Deviance, and Social Control in Providence," *Rhode Island History* 51 (1993): 71-87.

41. McLoughlin, *History*, 114-24.

42. *Index to Vital Records of Rhode Island*, vol. 1, no. 3, Deaths 1863-1900.

43. *Memoirs*, 65; italics in original. Biographical information from the *Providence Directory* (Providence: Brown & Danforth, 1824) and the Rhode Island Cemetery Transcription Project at the Rhode Island Historical Society. Gravenor Taft is misspelled Governor in the *Memoirs*. He graduated from Brown University (then named Rhode Island College) in 1800, was a teacher in Providence, and died in 1838; Charles Jackson was a member of Brown's class of 1817. *Historical Catalogue of Brown University, 1764-1904* (published by the University, 1905), 89, 122.

44. *Memoirs*, 66; italics in original.

45. Julian Rammelkamp, "The Providence Negro Community, 1820-42," *Rhode Island History* 7 (1948): 22-23. See also the lists of taxable property in the Providence tax books.

46. On the other hand, the deed of purchase, dated May 18, 1826, says that Elleanor Eldridge, "Single Woman of Colour," paid \$320 for the lot, which included a one-story building. Providence Deeds, book 53, 230, City Archives, Providence City Hall.

47. Rammelkamp, "The Providence Negro Community," 23; J. Stanley Lemons and Michael A. McKenna, "Re-enfranchisement of Rhode Island Negroes," *Rhode Island History* 30 (1971): 6.

48. See Naomi R. Lamoreaux and Christopher Glaisek, "Vehicles of Privilege or Mobility? Banks in Providence, Rhode Island, during the Age of Jackson," *Business History Review* 65 (autumn 1991): 502-27.

49. According to a mortgage on the property taken out by Elleanor Eldridge in 1835 (Providence Deeds, book 68, 52), her house was 24 feet wide and 48 feet deep.

50. *Memoirs*, 69.

51. She was Ellen Eldred in 1829-30, Ellen Elfred from 1831-33, Elleanor Eldridge in 1834, and Eleanor Eldridge in 1835, 1838-1840, 1842, and 1844-1862. Her name does not appear in 1836, 1837, 1841, 1842, or 1843. Whipple spelled Elleanor with two l's throughout the *Memoirs*. See Providence tax books, 1829-1862.

52. David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles, to the Colored Citizens of the World*, rev. ed., introduction by Sean Wilentz (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), article 4.

53. Irving Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen: The Story of the Negro in Rhode Island* (Providence: Urban League, 1954), 31-33. There has never been any suggestion that this disturbance was connected with David Walker's



- 1829 *Appeal*, which urged all black Americans to rise up against slavery, although the pamphlet caused outrage among white southerners.
54. *Smith v. Eldridge*, Rhode Island Court of Common Pleas, Providence County (subsequently CCP), November 1831. The key case in the loss of Eldridge's property was *Carder v. Eldridge*, CCP, May 1834.
55. *Memoirs*, 71-73. Efforts to discover information about Angell's Inn have been unsuccessful.
56. *Ibid.*, 73-74.
57. *Index to Vital Records of Rhode Island* lists a Ruth Eldridge (1815-1869) as a daughter of Samuel and Phebe James. According to the Rhode Island Cemetery Database, three children with the surname Eldred died in August 1821 and were buried in the same North Kingstown burial ground (<http://www.rootsweb.com/~rigenweb/cemetery/index.html>; accessed April 18, 2008).
58. *Memoirs*, 73.
59. *Ibid.*, 77; italics in original.
60. According to the Rhode Island Cemetery Database, George Carder was born in 1766 and died on June 25, 1834. He was buried in Warwick.
61. *Memoirs*, 79-81.
62. *Ibid.*, 95.
63. *Ibid.*, 96.
64. *State of Rhode Island v. George Eldridge*, Rhode Island Court of General Sessions of the Peace, Kent County, August 1833, Judicial Archives, Supreme Court Judicial Records Center, Pawtucket.
65. *Elleanor's Second Book*, 9-10.
66. *State of Rhode Island v. George Eldridge*.
67. *Memoirs*, 96-97; *State of Rhode Island v. George Eldridge*.
68. *Memoirs*, 80-82.
69. The tenants were named as Richard Harris, Mary Francis, Phebe Lip-  
pett, Governor Jones, Lusanna Mott, Catherine Waterman, Betsey Randall, Joseph Robinson, Isaac Robinson, and John Low. See *Carder v. Eldridge*, CCP, May 1835.
70. According to the document, "Real estate attached by Dft. found to have returned into the State before the time at which the writ on which the attachment was returnable, court order judge for Ptf. 2d day. Ex Gr. June 4, 1835." *Carder v. Eldridge*, CCP, May 1835; Providence Deeds book 66, 390; book 65, 53. Balch's total purchase price was thus \$1,693.96.
71. *Memoirs*, 85; italics in original. See Howard P. Chudacoff and Theodore C. Hirt, "Social Turmoil and Governmental Reform in Providence," *Rhode Island History* 31 (1972): 29-30, and Lancaster, "Encouraging Faithful Domestic Servants," 75-76.
72. *Memoirs*, 85.
73. Albert C. Greene (1792-1863) served in Rhode Island government for many years, and as a Whig in the United States Senate from 1845 to 1851.
74. *Memoirs*, 86.
75. *Public Laws of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (Providence. 1822), 156-57.
76. *Memoirs*, 86-87.
77. *Ibid.*, 87-89; Providence Deed Book 72, 246, 247, 248; Deed Book 73, 4.
78. See Edward T. James et al., eds., *Notable American Women, 1607-1950* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1971), 2:98.
79. *Elleanor's Second Book*, 14. Although "friends" is not capitalized in the text, it is possible she was referring to members of the Society of Friends, the Quakers. If an average edition in the 1830s was one thousand books, the total of nineteen hundred sold in the first year and a half is quite possible.
80. Court of Common Pleas (1789-1893) Supreme Court, Common Pleas Division, Providence County, Case Files, May 1839, *Eldridge v. Balch*.
81. *Memoirs*, 89; *Elleanor's Second Book*, 12.
82. *Elleanor's Second Book*, 13.
83. Providence Deed Books 106, 33; 164, 82; 165, 339, 393; 166, 35; 169, 309. Samuel B. Durfee may have been related to Elisha Durfee, who owned property immediately to the east of Eldridge's land, according to her suit against Benjamin Balch in November 1836 (*Eldridge v. Balch*, CCP, November 1836).
84. *Memoirs*, 91; italics in original.
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