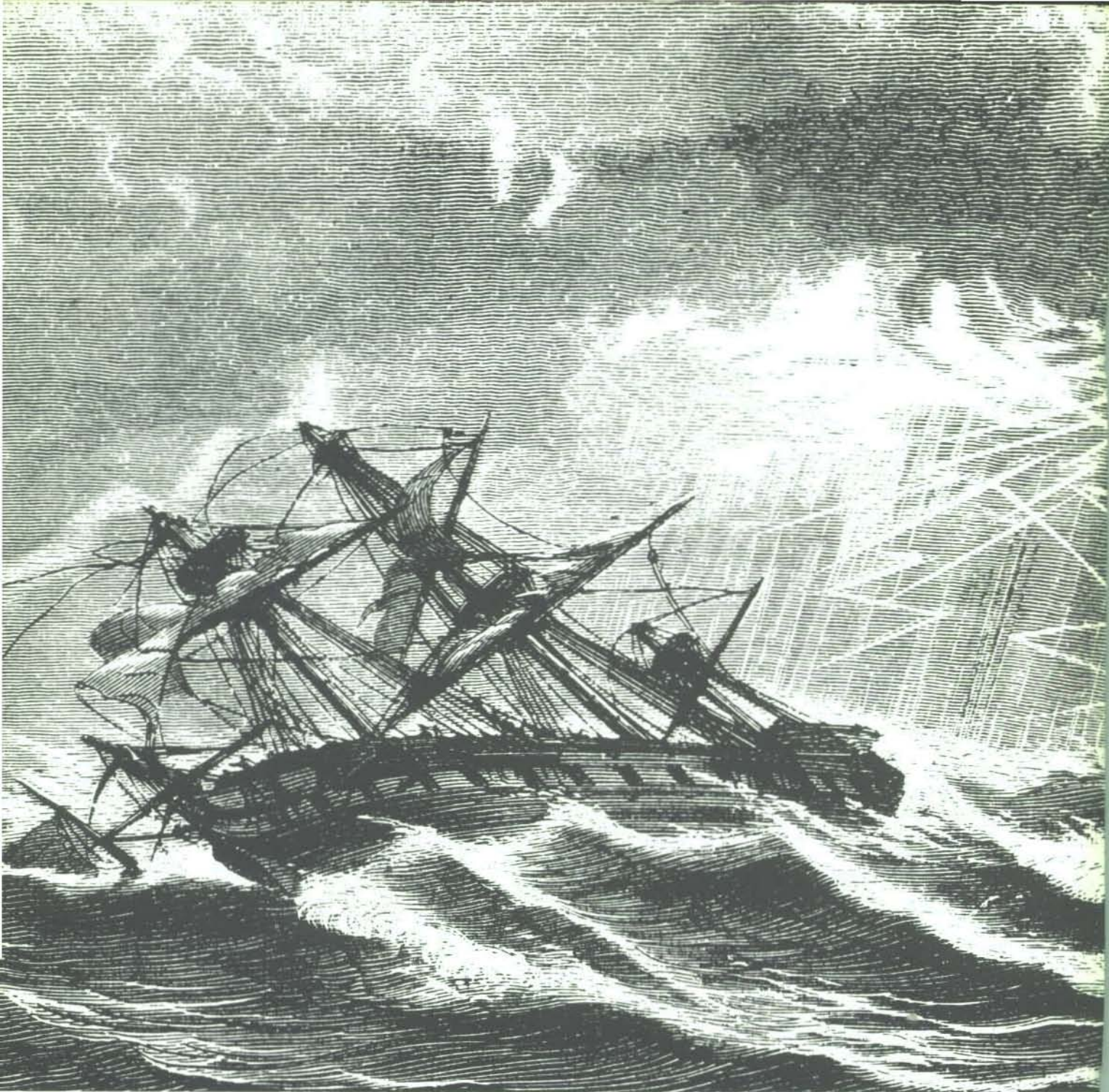


R H O D E
I S L A N D
H I S T O R Y

WINTER 1973



Detail of engraving, Scribner's Monthly, March 1871.

Between 1883 and 1902, ninety-two vessels were lost in hazardous waters around Point Judith. Such casualties brought early appeals for construction of a harbor of refuge where coastal vessels could ride out frequent dangerous storms.

R H O D E I S L A N D H I S T O R Y

Published by

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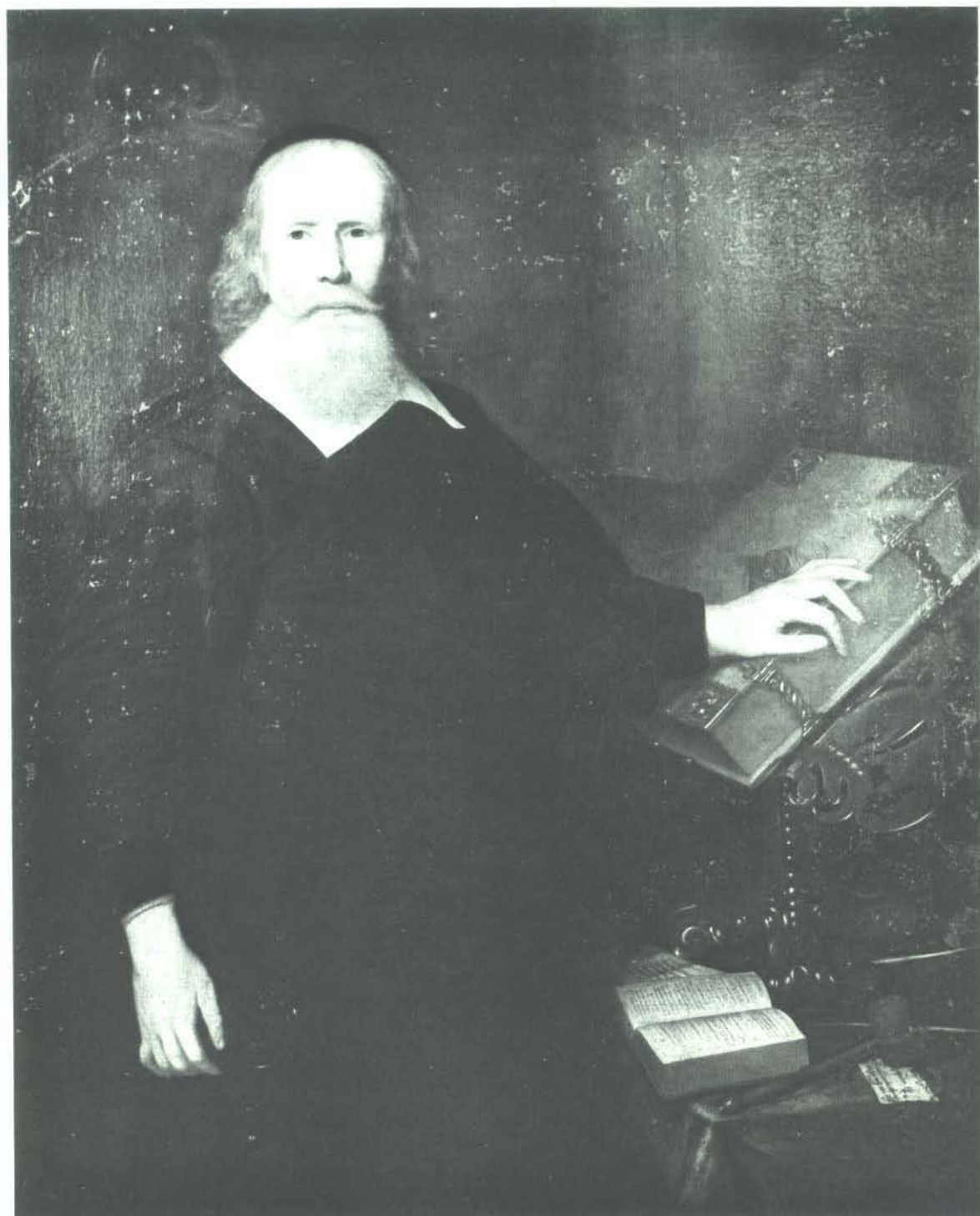
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Said to be a likeness of Dr. John Clarke, a portrait in the Redwood Library, Newport, reveals a man of appropriate "substance and piety."



Photograph courtesy Redwood Library.

Democratic Balance — Ideals of Community in Early Portsmouth

by Dennis A. O'Toole*

Among those men and women who were the first English settlers of the Island of Aquidneck in Narragansett Bay, several individuals held with passion clear opinions on the due proportions and purposes of civil society. Many had vigorously dissented from some feature of the Massachusetts-Bay colony's emerging "New England way" and by dissenting had discovered for themselves those patterns of community to which they might willingly give their full assent. The earliest days of the small plantation set among the hills and marsh lands at the northern end of Aquidneck Island were troubled not by absence of an ideal of community but by conflict of too many such ideals too uncompromisingly held.

But the ideal of community which eventually prevailed in Portsmouth — both in the minds of inhabitants and in the actual organization of the town — derived more from the task of raising a town where none before had stood than from experience of protest and emigration. Land had to be parceled out in accordance with some rule or measure, and the parceling could not wait. Civil authority had to be instituted and its powers delegated lest confusion bring an early end to their undertaking. In the process of dividing their lands and giving political order to their wilderness community settlers fashioned the way of life they came to agree was good and proper.

The principles according to which these community-shaping decisions were made were not constant from the beginning but changed and evolved. The organizational ideals of William Coddington, Anne Hutchinson, Samuel Gorton, and others less articulate,

were tried by events in the settlement's first months; some were found wanting while others proved more viable and were incorporated into the community's structure. It took fully twenty years for a settled pattern of life to take form in Portsmouth. And the pattern which at last appeared, I shall argue, was the creation of the town's commoners, of its "popularity" or "middling sort," who in their town meeting won for themselves and the next generation a town society closed, deferential and, by their own understanding, democratic.

The men who purchased Aquidneck Island from Narragansett sachems Canonicus and Miantonomi on 24 March 1638 were agents of nineteen men who formed that island's first "Bodie Politick" some three weeks previous to date of purchase.¹ These exiles and refugees from the religious and civil discords of the Bay, whose small number included such men of substance and piety as William Coddington, John Clarke, William Aspinwall, William Baulstone, John Coggeshall, and the Hutchinsons, had abandoned or had been expelled from towns and churches of Massachusetts Bay but retained their dedication to building God's kingdom in the wilderness of America.² The civil society they formed in March 1638 was to be a Bible commonwealth ruled and governed by "Jesus Christ the King of Kings & Lord of Lords and . . . all those perfect & most absolute laws of his given us in his holy word of truth . . ."³

Yet the Bible, with its myriad, frequently antipathetic commandments, admonitions, sayings and parables, was apt to prove less than a perfect guide for

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1 This and all other dates are as written by 17th-century Rhode Islanders, with March 1 the first date of their new year.

2 Darrett B. Rutman's *Winthrop's Boston: Portrait of a Puritan Town, 1630-1649* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965) 73, lists Coddington, Aspinwall, Baulstone, Coggeshall, and William Hutchinson as members of the Puritan capital's gentry before their departure in the wake of the Antinomian crisis late in 1637. Edward Hutchinson and his son Edward Jr. were similarly men of substance, and John Clarke, a man of the cloth, was university educated and of some means.

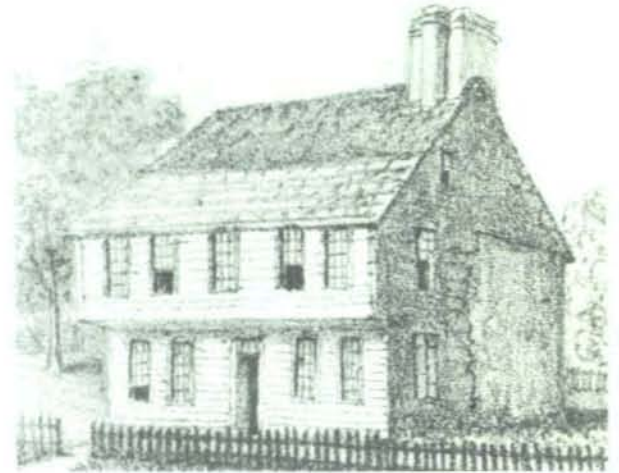
3 Records of the Island of Rhode Island, Mar. 7, 1638-Mar. 12, 1644, MS. folio vol., p. 1 (R.I. State Archives) hereafter cited Records.

Aquidneck's first planters, many of whom stubbornly insisted that every man be left free to read God's word in the light of his own conscience. If they were to become something other than a rout of Bible-scanning zealots, residents of Aquidneck would have to decide who among them would be authorized to choose and to enforce those of God's laws most fit to give direction and order to the plantation. The task of establishing and giving due recognition to civil authorities proved burdensome and difficult for the settlers during their first year on the island.

Power to govern the tiny settlement then called Pocasset during 1638 was unevenly and precariously divided between assembled freemen in general meetings and their elected magistrates, the judge and elders. The "freemen Incorporate" chose William Coddington as their judge or magistrate in March and during the next few months enacted in general meetings the acts and orders Coddington had been commissioned to execute and administer.⁴ Then in January 1638/39, acting out of apparent dissatisfaction with the division of authority first established, the freemen delegated their legislative power to the judge and chose three elders "to assist the Judge in the Execution of Justice and Judgmt. . . . And for the drawing up and determining of all such Rules & Laws as shall be according to God; wch may Conduce to the good & wellfare of the Comonweale." This act concentrated civil authority in the hands of four men—judge and three elders—and gave Pocasset's government the appearance of a centralized lay theocracy.

Yet with this centralism was mixed a full measure of antinomian individualism. For the freemen also instructed their magistrates to govern according to rules made by the freemen "when they have no Particular rule from Gods word . . ." Furthermore, judge and elders were to be "Accountable unto the Body once Every Quarter," when the assembled freemen would scan and weigh "all such Cases Actions & Rules wch have Passed threwh their [the magistrates']

William Coddington, chosen by Pocasset freemen as their chief magistrate, remained for little more than a year. His departure with a few followers "to Propagate A Plantation in the midst of the Island or Els-where" resulted in the founding of Newport, where he eventually built this house.



Detail of drawing Homes of Our Forefathers by Edwin Whitefield (Boston, 1882).

hands . . . by ye word of Christ" and repeal any which "the Body or any of them" might find contrary to their own understanding of the Lord's commandments.⁵ Freemen sought the energy and address that can be properties of centralized authority, but they were no less determined that such authority be exercised only in ways each of them judged to be in accordance with principles of a Bible commonwealth.

The striving after a controlled centrality which characterized establishment of civil authority in Pocasset also typified the conduct of the town's affairs during 1638. Records of freemen's meetings during that year show they intended that growth of their plantation be planned and controlled, not haphazard and unfocused. Any man who wished to

4 Records, p. 2.

5 Records, p. 7.

6 Records, p. 3. "Inhabitants"—most of the settlers in the first year—were independent adult males licensed to plant and expected to pay taxes whenever levied. "Freemen" were enfranchised inhabitants, given the right to vote in town meetings and to hold major offices. Early records show also a third category of "resident"—not received either inhabitant or freeman—who lived on the town's social and economic periphery. There seem to have been few "residents."

7 The roll of admitted inhabitants appears on p. 41 of Records. Dates of admission are clearly written in the margins, and the list itself is on a separate page unattached to any records of meetings of the island government. John Russell Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England*, 10v. (Providence, 1856-1865), mistakenly placed this list with the record of the meeting at Newport, October 1, 1640. This error misled other scholars into supposing that the list pertained to 1640 rather than to 1638.

settle in Pocasset had to be received an "inhabitant" by the body of freemen before he could plant in the town, and those who aspired to be enfranchised also were required to seek and receive acceptance of those already freemen.⁶ By the end of 1638 fifty-five men had been received "inhabitants" of the Island, while just six men were added to the original group of nineteen freemen and thereby became members of Pocasset's body politic.⁷

The freemen also endeavored to give Pocasset a physical as well as a governmental core or center. No man was encouraged or permitted to remove himself and his family from the town site and make his home on some isolated farm deep in the island's wooded heartland or upon its sloping southerly shores. Instead the freemen — in whom proprietorship of lands and civil authority were joined — assigned house lots, meadow lands, and planting ground about the town's center, which they ordered to be laid out at the spring between the town pond and the great cove. Instruction that a "meeting howse" be built is evidence that they also hoped their town would enjoy a spiritual unity to match its nascent governmental and physical centrality.⁸

Aquidneck records show, however, that Pocasset's experiment in controlled Christian centralism was both short-lived and for the most part unsuccessful. Almost from the first the names of men neither freemen nor inhabitants appear in the records, such as eight summoned to appear before the general meeting for having committed "a Riott of drunkenness" in September 1638. An order made 27 June 1638 — which set a fee of two shillings for every acre of land taken up in the town — is worded in such a way as to imply that the freemen also were not completely successful in limiting settlement to parcels of land handed out in or about the town center.⁹ No less abortive was their attempt to achieve at least the appearance of religious unity. The proposed meeting house was never erected, and by the summer of 1640 Pocasset still had "no

Church: there is a meeting of some men, who there teach one another, and call it Prophesie."¹⁰

These were not the shortcomings, however, which brought a sudden stop to Pocasset's experiment in controlled Christian centralism — effected on 28 April 1639 when, for reasons that remain unclear, William Coddington, the three elders, and a few other freemen and inhabitants agreed "to Propagate A Plantation in the midst of the Island or Els-where . . ." ¹¹ Shortly thereafter Coddington's party departed Pocasset for a place they named Newport. Those who remained were left without magistrates, without the official book of island records, and with but the major remnant of the now divided body of freemen — a body politic, as it were, that had lost its head and several of its members.¹²

The sundering of the island's body politic by removal of Coddington and his confederates produced a year of confusion and discord in the plantation now called Portsmouth. Thirty-one men who on 30 April 1639 put their hands to the declaration of loyalty and submission to King Charles I and his laws that was inscribed upon the first page of the new town book, in effect declared their disillusionment with the rule of King Jesus and his holy ordinances and their conviction that there could be no lawful government in Portsmouth until all residents joined in creating a new "Civill body Politicke."¹³ In their eyes the departure of the Newporters seemed a mortal wound to the original government and civil society of the island; therefore, they would seek not to repair the first body but to form another in its stead.

The failure of ten of the twelve freemen still abiding in Portsmouth to affix their signatures to the declaration and compact indicates that the greater part of the town's governing remnant considered such oaths and pledges to be unnecessary if not unlawful and wrong. These ten men could not accept the proposition that the emigration of some of their number had made void their right to dispose of their plantation's public

Its removal was not only a clever political ploy but one of several indications that the Newporters believed the government they were to establish was identical with the once unified body of Aquidneck.

8 Records, p. 3-7.

9 Records, p. 4-5.

10 Howard M. Chapin, *Documentary History of Rhode Island*, 2v. (Providence: Preston and Rounds, 1916-1919) 2:85-86.

11 Records, p. 11.

12 William Dyre of the Coddington faction — secretary of the body politic — took the book when he departed.

13 [Clarence S. Brigham] ed., *Early Records of Town of Portsmouth* (Providence: E. L. Freeman & Sons, 1901) 1-2, 4. First recorded usage of name Portsmouth is in records of monthly meeting there probably June 1639. Of the subscribers, 27 were inhabitants, 2 freemen, and 2 neither.

lands and make rules for its guidance. To have done so would have jeopardized their preeminence in Portsmouth's affairs together with their own best interests and what they took to be the best interests of the town.

The first act of Portsmouth's new body politic was to elect William Hutchinson "Ruler or Judge" and seven other men — all freemen and purchasers — to assist him in the conduct of the "publique businesse & affaires" of the town. It is not remarkable that Portsmouth's inhabitants selected their magistrates from among the few freemen who, regardless of their failure to profess allegiance to the new arrangements, were possessed of those skills and qualities which marked them as indispensable natural leaders of the town. What is remarkable about this election is evidence that twenty-nine voters who were not freemen exercised that prerogative which previously had belonged exclusively to freemen.¹⁴

Whether or not these non-freemen continued to mark their ballots and raise their hands in town meeting during the rest of 1639 cannot be determined with certainty. It is certain that monthly and quarterly meetings continued to dispose of town business over the course of that year, and with a thoroughness which indicates that the ruler and his seven advisers served in only an executive and administrative capacity. The town meeting primarily concerned itself with ordering and disposing of town lands, making several of the customarily small grants of house lots and planting ground to men it had newly received as inhabitants and to other residents not yet allotted land. Most of these parcels were apparently ordered to be laid out in such a manner as would preserve the town's geographical unity, although records for this year are too frequently obscured or obliterated to permit this point to be made unequivocally.¹⁵

However, the town meeting was not the only body which presumed to treat the town commons as its property. On 10 February 1639/40, a group of men styling themselves "the pu[rchasers]" met and made

eleven spacious grants of land. That these "purchasers" were Portsmouth's resident freemen is implicit in the identities of the eleven recipients, all but one of whom had been purchasers of the island. The size and locations of the grants lead one to believe that these men acted out of disaffection with cautious and restrictive land policies of a town meeting they no longer controlled. Typical were grants of 400 acres to William Hutchinson on the "North side of ye salt Crick at Sachua East," far down the eastern shore of the island, and William Freeborne's 140 acres "at his little meddow & soe sowth west" along Aquidneck's western shore.¹⁶ These allotments totaled in excess of 2,070 acres, were of such size and so distant from the town center as to require permanent residence of those who would farm them. Not only did Portsmouth now have two bodies acting like proprietors of the town's undivided acres — the town meeting and the freemen standing alone — but its two groups were pursuing different and conflicting policies in division of the common lands.

This potentially calamitous state of affairs was soon stopped by the freemen, ten of whom journeyed to Newport in March 1640 in hopes of being joined together in civil society with their brethren to the south. On 12 March they presented themselves at a General Court of Election at Newport, and were "readily Imbraced" and "Reunited to this Body."¹⁷ This reunion of the greater part of the island's freemen revived that body politic which had lived only in its parts since the founding of Newport in spring 1639, and returned to the freemen assembled in their General Court and in their respective town meetings both civil and proprietorial control.

The island government constituted by the freemen was, by their own definition, "a Democracie or Popular Government (that is to say) It is in the Powe of the Body of freemen orderly assembled or major Part of them to make or Constitute Just Lawes by wch they will be regulated & to depute from among them-

14 Brigham, 3. That the 31 subscribers voted is implied in the entry which records the election.

15 Brigham, 3-9. Town meeting minutes for 30 April 1639 through May 1644 are partially obliterated. Names of those who received grants and size and location of grants are not always obtainable.

16 Brigham, 8-9. A January entry records a challenge to "ye purchasers." Adam Mott — not among the original purchasers — was listed in attendance at the general meeting 2 January 1638/39, by which time he had been made a freeman.

17 Records, p. 26.

18 Records, p. 34.

19 Records, p. 26. Only freemen in general assembly, as had been the case before departure of the Newporters, were recognized to have power to enfranchise others. Freemen in town meetings did not have this power.

20 Adult male population then was an estimated 68, derived from combing all records for evidence of residence on that date. Thirty-one freemen represented 46% of the adult male population.

selves such ministers as shall see them faithfully executed between man & man."¹⁸ By this definition, what distinguishes the democratic from any other form of government is the location of legislative, electoral, and office-holding powers among a society's free members. This is a democracy of freemen — not of all men — and in practice freemen themselves, in general assembly, had power to decide whether they would be few or many.¹⁹ The list of island freemen entered 16 March 1641 shows that assembled freemen made liberal use of their power to enfranchise others. Thirty-one men of Portsmouth — almost one half the adult males then in the town and more than twice the freemen there before March 1640 — were enrolled as freemen by the beginning of 1641.²⁰ This quite rapid enfranchisement following reunion of the island's freemen is another piece of evidence which supports the supposition that some non-freemen may well have become actors in town meeting as a result of the uncertainty caused by the Newport schism of April 1639.

In Portsmouth the chief consequence of the reunion and the founding of the island government was resolution of the confusion of public authority that had troubled the town since the emigration of the Coddingtonites. Freemen in the town and they alone were empowered by the General Court to elect Portsmouth's town and island magistrates and officials, to choose men from among themselves to divide the town's common lands, to select jurors for the particular court of their town and, in general, to "have the Transaction of the affaires that shall fall wthin their owne Towne . . ."²¹ The town government, like its parent the island government, was now a freeman's democracy in which only freemen could make the laws by which they were governed and choose the men by whom they would be ruled.

From 1640 freemen in town meeting governed Portsmouth without challenge. Offices of ruler and adviser — instituted upon withdrawal of the judge and elders in April 1639 — were never filled again after

1639. Nor is there any evidence that non-freemen succeeded in exercising rights and privileges of freemen after 1640 and before 1647. The strongest proof of this is found in the list of names written in the margin of the town book beside the record of the "generall Towns meeting of the free men" 14 November 1644. Every one of the sixteen names — undoubtedly of men present and voting — can be found on the roll of island freemen of March 1641. Terminology in use after 1640 also suggests that the town meeting had become the exclusive domain of those who had been enfranchised. Meetings, like that of 14 November 1644, now were sometimes termed town meetings "off freemen" and notice of a forthcoming town meeting went to "all the free men . . ."²²

Freemen presided over Portsmouth's common lands in town meeting, choosing not to commission one or a few of their number to wield this important power as they had been authorized to do by the General Court of the island. This reluctance to delegate proprietorial authority seems to have stemmed from a noticeable uncertainty and ambivalence as to proper use of the commons. At first there was agreement that the town meeting should continue to parcel out portions of the commons to deserving inhabitants, but no consensus existed as to how much land different men should receive or where lots ought to be laid out. The great majority of allotments were from five to ten acres and were laid out to non-freemen next to or near the house lots of the town or within fences of common fields.²³ However, the freemen also made eleven other grants of fifty acres or more to men who, with only two exceptions, were freemen at the time.²⁴ Several of these "great lotts" were laid out southeastward toward Sachueast, as was Thomas Burton's 300-acre grant,²⁵ while others were placed "on ye North Side,"²⁶ presumably somewhat nearer the town proper. Seemingly the freemen believed that a small freehold in or near town was the fitting abode for men of small or middling estates, while a commodious farm some

21 Records, p. 26-39.

22 Brigham, 29-31.

23 Occasional references occur to plots located in what seem to be common fields which may have been farmed by the open field method. The "north field" and a "west field" are mentioned. In the deed between William Baulston and Samuel Hutchinson, 17 June 1658, the two exchanged parcels located "in the north feild" and "in the Tract of land Called the twenty acres," described as being in "the Comon as now it

lyith . . ." Brigham, 351-352. The method of farming these fields and the period of their open cultivation, if ever there was such a period, cannot be determined.

24 Because of obliteration of parts of early town meeting records, identities of those who received these large grants must be gotten from Records [see note 3]. See also Land Evidence, 2nd Book, No. 1, MS. folio vol., and Town Council Records, v. 2 (Town Hall, Portsmouth).

25 Brigham, 14. Records, p. 46.

26 Brigham, 13.

distance from the town center was the proper seat for any freeman. This freeman's democracy was also a freeman's proprietorship.

By winter 1644, at least a majority of Portsmouth's freemen were persuaded that what remained of the town's undivided lands ought to be held in common thereafter for the use of all. On December 23 the freemen ordered "that noe more lands shall be layd out wthin the bounds of . . . all the Common About the towne undisposed at this [day] soe to Remaineing to the town forever."²⁷ This act was an attempt to effectively close any further divisions. No longer would the town meeting help a man — be he freeman, inhabitant or resident — find his due place in its graduated society.

After just six and one-half years of settlement and growth, stabilization and balance rather than continued expansion and change had become objectives of town leaders. A community in which a few men had large, dispersed holdings while many owned lots of moderate or small proportions near the center — a democracy in which only the free governed themselves but all were privileged to hew timber and graze cattle upon common lands — was the ideal Portsmouth's freemen now acted to proclaim and protect. Their attempt to achieve a measure of stability helped bring strident discord rather than quiet. Their quest for equilibrium died aborning and was succeeded by ten years of political ferment and rapid change in the structure of their community. By the middle of the 1650s their body politic had come to include the large majority of the town's independent farmers, and they had begun to reorder its society after their own notions of welfare and right.

A student of deeds, wills, inventories, and town meeting minutes could paint a rather different picture of this period. Instead of fiery reds and oranges of

turmoil and altercation he might choose flat grays and browns of calm and stagnation to depict town life from 1644 to 1648. For no town meeting was held between 23 December 1644 and 14 November 1646; no man was received inhabitant or freeman between 23 December 1644 and 10 July 1648; just four grants of land were made between 29 August 1644 and 4 September 1648;²⁸ and the rate of new settlement — high during 1642 and 1643 — fell off in 1644 and to virtually nothing in 1645 and 1646.²⁹ Little moves in such a picture; everything holds its place and is as it was. Yet it is a crude representation, for it tells nothing of the minds and sentiments of men who lived the events portrayed nor of Portsmouth's relations with men and governments beyond its boundaries. In just these areas change occurred most rapidly after 1644, and these changes in turn soon generated significant modifications in the structure of the community.

Catalyst of these changes was the return from England of Roger Williams in September 1644, with a charter of incorporation for the English settlements about Narragansett Bay. For two and one-half years thereafter Portsmouth and the whole Island of Rhode Island debated and fell out over whether or not to cast their lot with inhabitants of Providence and Warwick in the new charter government or maintain independence as an island commonwealth. By summer 1645 two different governments — that of Providence Plantations and the island government headed by William Coddington — competed for the allegiance of Portsmouth and Newport.³⁰ Nor was the disagreement simply between Rhode Islanders — the colony of Plymouth sent one of its magistrates, Mr. John Brown, among the residents of Newport and Portsmouth, "giving them warning [as from the Court of Plymouth] not to submit unto any government that was established by virtue of a late pretended Charter . . ."³¹

27 Brigham, 32.

28 Brigham, 29-38.

29 Rate of settlement is calculated by measuring the rate at which men's names first appear. Actual date of first settlement for any residence is usually impossible to determine with certainty. It is similarly difficult to determine just when a young man becomes independent and self-supporting. Because of these difficulties, rate of settlement is only an estimate.

30 Strongest evidence for believing the new colony government had gotten a foothold on the island by late 1644 or early 1645 is in a letter to Massachusetts Bay — ". . . wee cannot but wonder that beinge Now found in the posture of Government from the same authority, unto which you & wee equally Subject, You should

desire us to forbear the Exercise of such a government. . . . Colonie of Providence Plantacons assembled at Newport 9th: 6 Mo. 1645." Chapin 1:227-9.

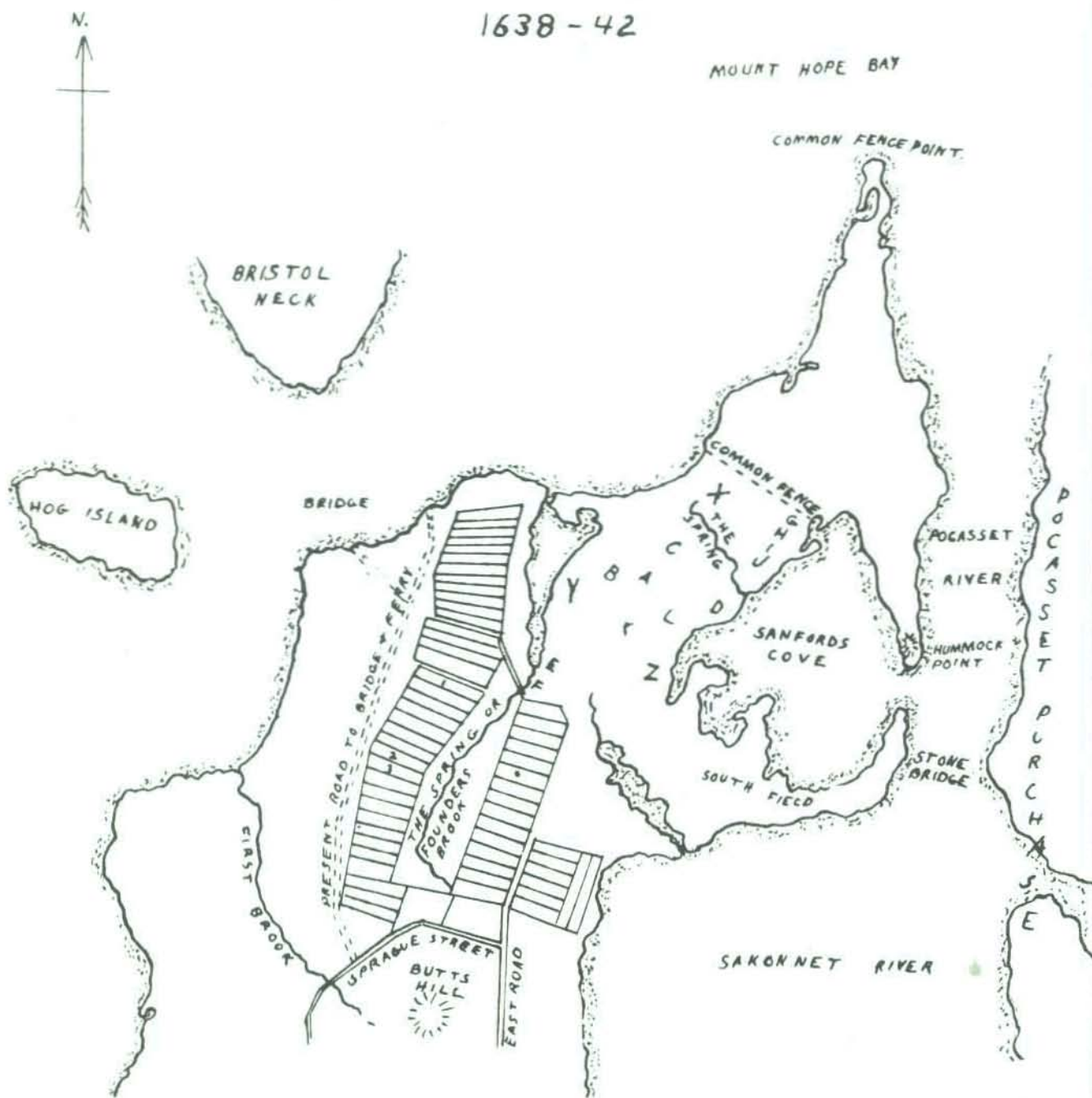
31 Samuel Gorton, *Simplicity's Defence against Seven-Headed Policy*, *Collections Rhode-Island Historical Society* 2 (Providence, 1835) 168.

"A community in which a few men had large, dispersed holdings while many owned lots of moderate or small proportions near the center . . ."

Map by Edward H. West, Rhode Island Historical Society Collections, October 1939.

PORTSMOUTH.

1638 - 42



A. WILLIAM CODDINGTON
 B. JOHN CLARKE
 C. RANDAL HOLDEN
 D. WILLIAM HUTCHINSON
 E. SAMUEL WILBORE
 F. WILLIAM BAULSTON

G. NICHOLAS EASTON
 H. EDW. HUTCHINSON SR
 I. EDW. HUTCHINSON JR
 J. JOHN SANFORD
 K. JOHN COGGESHALL
 L. WILLIAM DYRE

1. RICHARD HAWKINS
 2. PHILLIP SHERMAN
 3. SAMUEL GORTON
 X. NORTH FIELD
 Y. WEST FIELD
 Z. GREAT FIELD

EDWARD H. WEST.

because "a great part of their supposed Government is within the line of the Government of New-Plimouth."³²

William Coddington and others who felt as he did were deeply distressed at the possibility of federation of the island towns with Providence and Warwick. Coddington's letters to John Winthrop show that he struggled to prevent subordination of the island government to Providence Plantations and conspired to attach the towns to either Plymouth or Massachusetts Bay.³³ The prospect of sharing the bench of magistracy with turbulent Samuel Gorton and others of his ilk horrified Coddington, as did the likely end of an independent island society, which Coddington mistakenly considered to be his own creation and domain. Yet more than loss of governmental independence and subsequent association on equal terms with unruly schismatics, Coddington and those who followed his lead feared that the new order would produce alterations in town societies they could not tolerate.

For the patent of incorporation — with its vague but explosive summons to the "Inhabitants" of the towns of Narragansett Bay to "rule themselves . . . as by voluntary consent of all, or the greater Part of them, they shall find most suitable to their Estate and Condition. . . ."³⁴ — was read by some on the island as an invitation to remodel their communities in ways more pleasing to the "middling sort" than to their betters. When Plymouth's Mr. Brown visited in winter 1644/45, he attended "a publique meeting . . . appointed for your new magistrates and people," which had, as he put it, "a most vile end; viz, to take into consideration a new disposall of the lands formerly given out, as if some had too much and some too little, and for no respect of persons, and their estates was to bee laid aside. . . . Mr. Coddington, Mr. Brinton, &c.," Brown reported, "abhorred their course, abstained from their meetings, looked upon themselves as persons in great danger, and bemoaned their condition to divers their friends, being now

overwhelmed with cares and feares what would bee the issue of things."³⁵

"The issue of things" — at least in Portsmouth — could not have been to the liking of those who, like Coddington, possessed large holdings in land and as freemen were accustomed to exercise governmental authority and to the prestige and benefits it bestows. By mid-1650 many inhabitants had succeeded in breaking the freemen's exclusive hold on the town meeting and had embarked upon a program of land distribution which favored commoners.

The distinction between inhabitant and freeman was familiar and unambiguous during the town's first six years. Baldly stated, freemen ruled and inhabitants were ruled. By 1647 — when Portsmouth formally joined Providence Plantations and finally severed her ties with Newport and the island government — the line between freemen and inhabitants was becoming blurred as an increasingly large number of residents assumed rights and responsibilities of freemen. A "towne meetinge of the Inhabitants" held 10 July 1648 made nine residents "fremen . . . in the Choyce of theare officers and in the government . . ."; it was "the Inhabitants of this towne of Portsmouth . . ." whose "Voates concerning the [colony] lawes presented to this towne . . ." were solicited on 12 November 1650; and on 2 February 1651/52 inhabitants ordered new allotments to be made of the common lands. The town meeting, with broad civil and proprietorial powers, once the exclusive preserve of freemen, was now in the hands of those termed "the inhabitants."³⁶

The possibility remains that those now designated inhabitants were none other than freemen renamed, that they were but as old wine in new skins. The list of colony freemen in Providence Plantations in May 1655 provides information which seems to rule out this possibility.³⁷ A corrected version of this list and further records for 1655 provide names of sixty-four Portsmouth residents who were freemen of the colony and, by inference, free of their town by the end of

32 Chapin 1:225.

33 Most revealing is that of 5 August 1644, in which he states that "the trewth is, I desire to have either such alyence with yorselves or Plimouth, one or both, as might be safe for us all . . ." and then asks Winthrop to "burye what I write in deepe silence. . . ." Chapin 2:177-8.

34 Bartlett 1:145.

35 Chapin 1:225.

36 Brigham, 37-8, 47. Under the frame of government devised for Providence Plantations, freemen in their respective town meetings could vote to accept or reject all proposed colony legislation.

In 1647 Portsmouth formally joined Providence Plantations and severed her relations with Newport and the island government. Today Mount Hope Bridge arches from Portsmouth to Bristol, a link between the island and the rest of the state.



1655. These sixty-four represent almost two-thirds of an adult male population of one hundred and two then dwelling in Portsmouth.³⁸ These figures offer a striking comparison with numbers for November 1644, when twenty-three freemen comprised slightly more than one quarter of the town's eighty-two adult males.³⁹ Sometime between 1644 and 1655 the number

of free inhabitants nearly tripled and their percentage of the population of adult males more than doubled. Freemen's democracy had become decidedly more democratic than it had ever been.

It is quite difficult, unfortunately, to discover precisely when and under whose auspices this broadening of the town's body politic took place. Records of

37 Bartlett 1:299-300.

38 More precisely, freemen constituted 63%. The figure of 102 was arrived at by starting with 82 resident in 1644, adding all subsequent settlers resident in 1655, and subtracting 82 who had either died or departed by the end of 1655.

39 Freemen had declined as a percentage of adult males since the end of 1640, due to the emigration of Gorton and his company and the continued growth of adult male population during this period.

the island government for early 1644 through 1647 are missing — if indeed they were ever kept — and the same is true of records of the colony of Providence Plantations before May 1647, of William Coddington's conciliar government of the island — which held sway for only a few months in 1651 and 1652 — and of the rump assembly which appears to have made a faltering attempt to regulate the Island of Rhode Island from revocation of Coddington's government in 1652 until reestablishment of provincial government in 1654. All that can be said with confidence is that the town meeting of Portsmouth enfranchised nine men in July 1648, and that colony records contain no enfranchisements by the government of Providence Plantations from May 1647 until 1655.

There is something more that one can venture to say. Examination of the list of sixty-four Portsmouth freemen of 1655 reveals that forty-one are nowhere recorded as admitted freemen before 1655. Yet each had been enfranchised by some government before 1655, since the listing is a record of recognized freemen by that date and not of a mass enfranchisement effected by the colony government some time in 1655.⁴⁰ And of the several possible enfranchisers we can dismiss the town meeting since — with the exception of nine made free in 1648 — not one of the thirteen received inhabitants or freemen from 1645 through 1655 appears among the colony freemen of 1655.⁴¹ Apparently Portsmouth's residents still held that only freemen generally assembled could enfranchise others. This means that, assuming William Coddington had no stomach for significantly broadening the body politic on the island while he was in power, either the colony government of pre-May 1647 or the rump assembly from 1652 to 1654 enfranchised most of those recognized as freemen in 1655. And the fact that twenty-five of the forty-one Portsmouth men who had no record of enfranchisement before 1655 settled in the town before 1644, suggests that a large fraction of these non-recorded freemen were enfranchised before 1648 and most probably by the embryonic colony government.

This attempt to discover the pace at which Portsmouth's body politic expanded and the impetus behind that movement is conjectural and somewhat inconclusive. What is more certain and more important is that the number and percentage of free inhabitants increased substantially between 1644 and 1655, and that this growing body had a prompt and decisive impact upon the shape and direction of social order. In fall and winter of 1648/49, the town meeting reopened common lands to its first extensive impropriations since December 1644. During these few months the "inhabitants" made several grants which contained nearly thirty acres on the average. Recipients of these lots were men who for the most part had been resident no longer than five years; only one, William Woodell, is known to have been a freeman at the time these allotments were made.⁴²

A still more liberal provision was made on February 2, 1651/52, when the assembled "Inhabitants of Portsmouth" ordered that

*those men that are the desposers of lande in the sayd Towne . . . shall acomidate the inhabitants of the sayd towne (with lande) which want or have had a legall grant of land formerly, and that 200 acrs of land shalbe set aPt by thee sayd desposers for the acomidating any deseierabl Ptie or Pties that may be inhabitants amongst us heer after, and that then all the remainder of lande unaPPated shalbe bounded Common to the Inhabitants of this towne and their heiers for ever, and not to be dissposed of without the consent of all the Inhabitants of the sayd towne.*⁴³

This act was a broad declaration and assertion of the land policy of Portsmouth's recently expanded body politic — adequate lots for every resident adult male of independent status, to be laid out wherever convenient; encouragement to newcomers through the promise of land; and preservation of the commons for the future use of the entire town. The "inhabitants" intended to insure that every man would have land enough to meet his needs, even though he were but a plain man, a man of small parts and mean estate, a commoner.

40 The list was the result of the General Court's attempt to bring some order into the confusion brought on by Coddington's commission of government. The Court of Commissioners on 31 August 1654 ordered that "all those inhabitants in this Colonie that have been

received freemen to act in any Towne or Collonie since Mr. Coddington's commission was exhibited, shall be owned freemen of ye Collonie; and that ye names of those that are not as yett recorded, shall be brought to the next Court." Bartlett 1:280.

The disposers do not seem to have discharged their task until December 1656, when they confirmed and "made up" eleven previous grants totaling 1,140 acres and made twenty-six new allotments totaling over 600 acres.⁴⁴ This division provoked the wrath of "inhabitants" and brought in its train a series of actions and decisions which were both the culmination of much of Portsmouth's previous history and the beginning of another epoch in the community's life.

The fifteen disposers commissioned to "acomodate the inhabitants of the sayd towne (with land) which want or have had a legall grant of land formerly," were chosen from the town's best men. William Baulstone, John Sanford, John Porter, William Freeborne, and Philip Shearman were among original purchasers of the island and had frequently held the highest elective offices in governments of their town, island, and colony, while each of their ten fellow disposers had become a freeman by March 1641. It appears that they — or some others who earlier served in a like capacity — had done the bidding of the town meeting in parceling out public lands as early as September 1648.

Cooperation which seems to have characterized the relationship between disposers and town meeting until 1657 was not built upon the firm ground of shared interests and ideals, but upon what proved to be the less sure foundation of the commoners' customary deference to their social superiors. Meeting on the third and tenth of December 1656, disposers parceled out land in a manner which indicates that they could not or would not satisfy the needs and desires of Portsmouth's free inhabitants. The disposers' first concern was to confirm and — in those cases where a lot had not yet been completely laid out to its owner — "make up" several large grants made in 1639 and 1640. When they turned their attention to those "which want" land, disposers became cautious and selective. Twenty-six men received grants ranging from the 100-acre allotment to Samuel Wilbore, Jr. to six-acre parcels assigned to Richard Bulgar and John Briggs, the median grant being one of fifteen

acres.⁴⁵ Seven men who received grants of thirty acres or more, excepting William Earle and Thomas Brownell, had been resident for at least thirteen years and four of their number had received grants prior to 1656. Few of the other nineteen were newcomers. Only five of them appear for the first time after 1651, and all but one of these five were sons of founders.

The allotments quickly brought Portsmouth's political pot to a boil. The town meeting of 31 August 1657 reports, "there hath beine great Differencis Concerninge . . . the laying out of lands . . . in that Respect what quantities of lande shall be layd out and to whom. . . ." Assembled free inhabitants — seeking to redress grievances of those who protested and to restore "peace & union" — ordered abatements in those grants of thirty acres or more and a division of 200 acres of common lands "unto those that have most neede and the remainder of land then undesposed of to a perpetuall Comon to the towne ffor Ever . . ."

In November the town meeting itself made several medium-size grants, including "plantin land on hoge Island" for seven years to ten residents. These allotments reflected the reluctance of townsmen to trust distribution of land to the board of disposers. On 30 November "the Inhabitants" dismissed the disposers and put in their place "A Comittee of ffive" to distribute the 200 acres to those in need. The meeting then agreed to add 100 acres to the 200 already set aside "to inlarge, the Suply of those that want which in Respect of the largeness of their ffamilies and the Smalnes of what will Com to their parts in the 200 acres will not Suffitiantly Supply their nesesityes . . ."⁴⁶ Last act in this drama of political conflict and changing principles was played out on 10 December, when the committee of five divided the 300 acres of common land among thirty-nine of Portsmouth's neediest residents.⁴⁷

The leveling and vulgarization of an island community — the possibility of which had so haunted William Coddington and repelled Plymouth's Mr. Brown in winter 1644/45 — now seemed on the verge of realization. Those "that should have had by

41 Admissions by the town meeting in July 1648 were exceptional, since at this time no island government existed and the General Assembly of the colony did not assume responsibility of enfranchising others.

42 Brigham, 38-40.

43 Brigham, 57-8.

44 Land Evidence, 530-2.

45 Land Evidence, 94, 530-1.

46 Brigham, 77-81.

47 Land Evidence, 532.

These Judges of the 1st of Novr 1638

These names are underwritten do give solemnly
in the presence of the Lord our merciful our selves
into a Bond of Obedience and fealty with full
with our persons lives and estates unto our Lord
Charles the first by the King of England
and so all these perfect and most absolute laies
and giveth us in god's name word of truth, shall
give and give here

William Coddington
John Clarke
William Hutchinson

John Burdett
William Cypriani

Samuel Willbur
John Woster
John Benson

Edward Southamson Junr.

Thomas Savage
William Dyer

William Burborne
Philip Bourn

John Walker

Richard Carter
William Barclay
Edward Southamson Senr.

Samuel Bull-his marks

Randall Howdoo

Thomas Carter

John Johnson

John Johnson

John Johnson

From the
John T. B. 1638

the . . . Disposers agreement" more than thirty acres of land were ordered to "abate one halfe of their quantity,"⁴⁸ the disposers were somewhat ingloriously retired from their important office, and Portsmouth's neediest commoners were ordered to be allotted land not on the basis of their propertied estates or social substance but in accordance with the size of their families. Order, degree, and place were in eclipse, while equality and a flattened sameness threatened to dominate the political firmament.

The actual implementation and execution of these radical orders, however, demonstrate that the free inhabitants were guided by interests and ideals more complex and protective than those implied in their recorded commands. If intentions are discovered as much in actions as in words, then what townsmen sought in 1657 was not transformation but modification and conservation by liberal means of Portsmouth's existing social order.

If the fifteen disposers had been drawn from leading residents, so too was the committee of five which replaced them. Four — William Baulstone, John Porter, John Briggs, John Roome — freemen since 1638, were veterans of the defunct board of disposers, while the fifth — James Badcock, blacksmith — was a resident in 1642 and a freeman by 1648. This reluctance to dispense with the services of the most experienced and prominent men when the acts of such men were in great disfavor is also manifested in the several elections held during this period, in which the electorate, as they always had and always would, returned to high office not men who were their mirror images but their betters in every way.⁴⁹

Townsmen proved no less reluctant to expropriate major landholders and produce a mean equality than to do without the ruling elite. The abatements ordered were in the disposers' allotments of thirty acres or more to John Albro, William Almy, Thomas Brownell, Ralph Earle, Sr., William Earle, James Sands, and Samuel Wilbore, Jr. But a thorough search of the town records does not disclose a single clear case of actual abatement and does reveal three, perhaps four, large grants laid out after 1657 without abatements made.⁵⁰ Nor was any attempt made to prevent completion of or make abatements in any large grants disposers "made up" and confirmed on 3 December 1656.

The town meeting and the committee of five did not entirely abandon — although they did make secondary — the practice of determining the size of a man's allotment by his "parts" and worldly estate. Continued acceptance of this principle is evidenced by 45 acres assigned to John Sanford, Jr., whose claim to a grant derived not from size of family or from want of land but from his own stature and the preeminence of his deceased father,⁵¹ as well as by the disparity between grants of other men whose conditions were identical in all other regards but — presumably — that of their respective "parts."⁵²

Forty-six allotments during the latter half of 1657 demonstrate that guiding motives of the free inhabitants were to widen and preserve rather than to dismantle Portsmouth's moderately stratified social order. They strove to provide and to secure places for every needy adult male and to insure that all freeholders would thereafter enjoy in undiminished proportions the rights and benefits of commonage in

48 Brigham, 78.

49 Baulstone continued as moderator of town meeting, colony Assistant, and colony commissioner from the early 1650s through 1660s with virtually no interruption. John Sanford, Jr. and John Albro continued to be re-elected to town and colony offices after 1657 as they had been before.

Of the fifteen disposers of land grants, five were signers of Portsmouth's original compact. William Baulstone, John Sanford, John Porter, William Freeborne, and Philip Shearman had frequently held highest elective offices in governments of their town, island, and colony.

Records of the Island of Rhode Island, R. I. State Archives.

50 Samuel Wilbore, Jr. paid for 60 of his 100 acres on 21 April 1658 but he may have paid for the other 40 before or after this date. John Albro's 32 acres were confirmed 20 November 1657. William Almy's 70 acres were laid out on his behalf to Bartholomew West on 13 May 1661. Ralph Earle sold his 40 acres on 5 January 1658/59. James Sands made sale of 44 acres on 3 November 1659. Land Evidence, 76, 101, 91. Brigham, 79, 377.

51 Sanford, 25, father of 2, possessed considerable real property inherited at his father's death in 1653.

52 Daniel Wilcox, settled in 1656, unmarried, received a total of 30 acres in 1656 and 1657. Gyles Slocum, resident for 9 years, father of 7, received but 6 acres in 1657. Such disparities can only be explained if one assumes that "parts" were sometimes considered.

town lands. Those who received these grants were either heads of large families with insufficient land to meet present and future needs, or young men — either unmarried or recently wed — whose careers as independent husbandmen had yet to commence for want of land or of means to get it.⁵³

Typical of heads of sizable families was Francis Brayton, 45, resident for some fourteen years and a colony freeman since at least 1655. He was the father of four, perhaps five, but his land in December 1656 consisted of twelve acres granted in November 1643. This was probably barely able to provide his family's immediate material needs and insufficient to endow his children with the means of future subsistence. The fifteen disposers had granted him fifteen acres in December 1656, but the free inhabitants deemed this insufficient and awarded him another seven acres and planting ground for seven years on Hog Island in 1657. These grants secured the place of Brayton and his family for some time to come.⁵⁴

Circumstances of William Cadman exemplify those of younger, unestablished recipients of grants in 1657. Cadman, a blacksmith, had resided in Portsmouth for just four years before the allotments were made. He was newly married, father of one, and not known to have been a freeman in 1657. The eight-acre grant he received in December was the first he had received from the town, although he had purchased twenty acres shortly after his arrival in 1653. Cadman abided in Portsmouth for the remainder of his life and in later years served his town in colony and local offices.⁵⁵

A common characteristic of nearly every one of the grantees of 1657 — family head or unestablished young man — was a lack of the estate or "parts" necessary to guarantee their own and their children's future self-sufficiency. This chiefly distinguishes them from residents who did not receive land. Men such as Joshua Coggeshall, Thomas Hazard, and Henry Percy, resident heads of families, did not receive allotments in that year because they had already demonstrated that they possessed the means to obtain for themselves and their families adequate land.⁵⁶ Similarly, most of the young men who did not receive land were either already established on land of their own — as Robert Dennis and John Tyler — or were sons of resident landholders who already had or could soon expect a share in their fathers' adequate holdings — like Gideon Freeborne and Christopher Almy.⁵⁷ Townsmen chose to assist those of their fellows who, regardless of age or political weight, most needed assistance, and thereby greatly extended and secured the class of independent husbandmen and commoners in their community.

Having accomplished their chief aim — to underwrite by grants out of common lands the independence and future self-sufficiency of all men they and their five disposers judged to be in need of such assistance — free inhabitants became zealous in defense of the society they had so strikingly altered. During thirty years after 1657, townsmen abandoned innovation for steadfast conservatism, authorizing no new division of common lands until February 1687/88, and devoting a

53 Of 46 grantees, 18 were in the first category and 17 in the second. Little or no pertinent data could be found for 8, and 3 had backgrounds sufficiently unusual to forbid inclusion in either group.

54 John Osborne Austin, *Genealogical Dictionary of Rhode Island* (Albany, 1887) 250, and various town records cited. For heads of families, average age in 1657 was 47.5; average year of settlement 1644; 15 of the 18 were colony freemen by December 1657; all had an average of 4.5 children; their median pre-1656 holding in land was 14 acres, and their 1656-57 grants had a median size of 12.5 acres.

55 Austin, 268. For the young and unestablished, average age in 1657 was 23.6; average year of settlement 1653; just 4 of these 17 were colony freemen in 1657; 12 were either not married or just married without children, while the 5 married had an average of 2 children; their median pre-1656 land was 0 acres, and their 1656-57 grants had a median size of 8 acres.

56 Coggeshall purchased two lots totaling 120 acres before

1657, and Henry Percy two parcels totaling 28 acres in 1653 and 1654.

57 William Almy had been granted 70 acres in 1656, and townsmen no doubt felt this gave him sufficient land to make his eldest son Christopher independent if he so chose. William Freeborne, allotted a total of 167 acres since 1639, might be expected to look after the needs of his only son Gideon.

58 It was an exceptional town meeting after 1657 which did not have to deal with illegal use of timber, encroachment upon arable commons by negligent residents, or grazing sheep at wrong times of the year in wrong areas of the commons.

59 On 16 March 1685 the town meeting chose a committee to "meet with those Seven Gent the Late purchasers of the Remainders and Revertions of Rhode Island . . ." and on 2 March 1688 the inhabitants elected eight men "to make our Claimes and Rights Appear . . . unto the aforesaid Lands and all other our undivided Lands or commos . . ." Brigham, 226, 238.

large part of their energies to protecting the commons from spoliation and encroachment by some residents⁵⁸ and from seizure by more ambitious men who challenged the townsmen's claim to ownership of the commons.⁵⁹ Once they had made good their freehold and franchise, the town's husbandmen jealously guarded against all attempts to diminish the commons and their right to hew its wood, graze their cattle upon its grass, and use its waters. For them, rights of franchise, freehold, and commonage were of equal and inseparable value.

The town community which Portsmouth's free inhabitants helped mold and defend was, at least by the close of 1657, what can be described as a closed deferential democracy — democratic by definition of its own residents, who deemed a popular government one in which the enfranchised made the laws by which they were governed and elected the officials who enforced the laws — also democratic in having a large fraction of adult males eligible to vote in town meeting and in colony affairs, who owned at least a small parcel of land in their own right and enjoyed the right of commonage. By the end of 1657, commoners had fought for and won a "stake" in their community for most of their kind.

Yet Portsmouth was far from a leveled, egalitarian democracy. Inequalities of rank, privilege, and possession were not only tolerated but accepted as

natural and right if not of too great degree. The town still had its wealthy inhabitants — owners of large farms, sometimes tilled by tenants or servants — who were returned to offices of political leadership with almost monotonous regularity. No man was so humble or cowed as to suppose that these men of stature could not err or show the cloven hoof from time to time. But though the town's leaders not infrequently suffered rejection of their public policies at the hands of less elevated neighbors, their talents and eminence were rarely insulted or denied in a husbandmen's democracy balanced by due regard for men of substance and place.

Portsmouth was a closed democracy after 1657 — when townsmen closed the commons to any future impropriations, they declared an end to democratization of landholding. No longer would immigrants be welcomed with inexpensive grants of public land, or matured sons be assured of living out their lives in the town their fathers had made. A man's means or inheritance would now decide whether or not he could make his home in a community in which size of freeholds would now decline and the price of an acre inexorably rise. A closed democracy in the long run must become a society in which the distance between those who have more and those who have less steadily widens and the body politic dwindles to a dominant handful — it must become no democracy at all.

With a goodly part of my estate I have appointed my loving friends Francis Bayne
John Anthony all of the town of Portsmouth of the 17th of Oct 1690 to see the
distribution of my estate be made to my children & grand children according
to the meaning of this my last will & testament bearing my seal & signature to wit
my wife & children by their own hands or by the hands of the witnesses whereof
my hand and seal this 17th day of Oct 1690 the year of our said
six hundred and ninety the 10th
witnessed by us above
his last will & testament
James Barker and John Atherton my engaged accoupany and
testify that they saw the above said testator Francis Brayton
sign and seal the above written and heard him declare it to be

The mark of Francis J Brayton

Portsmouth Town Records, courtesy Town Clerk Arthur A. Sherman.

When Portsmouth freeman Francis Brayton placed his mark on a will October 17, 1690, his bequests included acreages purchased from other colonists. Evidently he had used early grants to advantage.

His Excellency Joseph Dudley, Governor, Province of Massachusetts Bay, whom Swansea Congregationalists petitioned May 30, 1711, for a township separate from their Baptist neighbors.



Engraving from Memorial History of Boston by Justin Winsor, v. 1 (Boston, 1880).

Barrington Congregationalists vs. Swansea Baptists, 1711

by William G. McLoughlin*

A petition purchased by the Rhode Island Historical Society at auction in Providence in 1969 is of important historical interest to Rhode Island. It offers unique insight into one of the most curious episodes in the religious history of New England. For in this document Congregationalists in the western part of Swansea, Massachusetts (an area which in 1717 became the town of Barrington) complain that they are being persecuted by Baptists who constituted the majority of inhabitants in Swansea at that time.

Almost any history of New England will inform readers that from the earliest days of its settlement the colony of Massachusetts dealt harshly with Baptists — sending them to jail — fining, whipping, and banishing them — during the first half century after the founding of the colony. Yet here is an instance where tables appear to be turned and Baptists were persecuting Puritans. How did it happen and what does this episode have to tell us about the founding of Barrington, Rhode Island?

The story is long and complicated and readers are urged to see the detailed account in Thomas W. Bicknell's *History of Barrington Rhode Island* (Providence, 1898). A variant form of this petition is printed in Bicknell, 187-189. The story in brief concerns the founding of a Baptist church in New England in 1663 by Rev. John Myles. Myles was a Baptist who — during the Cromwellian Interregnum — had founded a Baptist church in Swansea, Wales and who played a significant role in the ecclesiastical system established by Cromwell and the Long Parliament. After the return of the king, Myles was forced to flee from Wales in 1662 and along with several of his parishioners he settled in the town of Rehoboth in old Plymouth Colony. Here he began to hold Baptist services in 1663 and this brought protests not only from Congregational ministers in the colony but also from authorities in Massachusetts. In 1667 he was ordered to leave

Rehoboth but the tolerant legislators of Plymouth agreed to allow him and Baptists who worshipped with him to settle in the new town of Swansea. Here, except for a brief sojourn in Boston during King Philip's War, Myles preached until his death in 1683.

After his death Baptists in Swansea chose Samuel Luther to be their pastor. According to regulations adopted when Swansea was founded, John Myles agreed to practice open or mixed communion in the only church in town. That is, he agreed to allow both Baptists (who opposed infant baptism) and Congregationalists (who believed in the necessity of infant baptism) to be members of the church. (Fortunately Congregationalists and Baptists both agreed upon doctrines of Calvinism.) Samuel Luther continued mixed communion until about 1705 when he decided that it was unscriptural to allow persons who believed in baptizing infants to join his church. This greatly offended many people and they began to petition the legislature of Massachusetts (which gained control over the old Plymouth Colony under the charter of 1691) to have Samuel Luther expelled from his position as parish minister in Swansea.

According to ecclesiastical laws passed by the Massachusetts legislature in 1691-1692, every parish in the province was required to support by taxes a "learned, pious and orthodox minister." Samuel Luther was not "learned" by legal definition of that time because he did not know Greek and Latin (he had never attended college) nor had he studied theology. He was not considered "orthodox" by Massachusetts standards because he opposed infant baptism (an offense for which Henry Dunster had been removed from the presidency of Harvard College in 1654). But the legislature of Massachusetts was reluctant to expel him from his pulpit because the majority in Swansea were Baptists and because of the special agreement which the legislature of Plymouth had made with John Myles when it

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established Swansea for him and his followers in 1667. Baptists of Swansea claimed that under the new charter of 1691 they were not only granted "liberty of conscience" by the king but also the same rights and privileges which they had held under the Plymouth charter.

The Massachusetts legislature tried to persuade Congregationalists of Swansea to hire their own minister and establish their own church where they could have their children baptized. In 1708 Congregationalists did persuade a Harvard graduate named John Fiske (class of 1702) to help them form a church. But the selectmen of the town — Baptists all — ordered the town constable to eject Fiske as a vagabond who lacked visible means of support. Fiske left town in a huff.

In addition to complaining that there was no learned and orthodox minister to preach to them as the law required, Congregationalists — most of whom lived in the western part of town which then bordered on Narragansett Bay — complained that they were being taxed to help repair and maintain the meetinghouse of Samuel Luther where they could not in conscience worship. While there is no evidence that Baptists laid religious taxes for the salary of Luther, the town did lay taxes for the maintenance of their meetinghouse. But in this they felt justified because, as in every other New England town, the parish meetinghouse also served as the town hall. In towns where all inhabitants were of the same denomination the fact that parish church and town hall were the same building posed no difficulty. But as dissident sects arose in the eighteenth century, taxes for the meetinghouse raised perplexing questions about the separation of church and state.

As the petition on page 21 indicates, the Congregational minority in Swansea concluded in 1711 that the only way they could resolve their dilemma was to ask the legislature to divide Swansea into two parts. The western part of town — where Congregationalists were most numerous — should, they argued, be separated from the eastern part and be incorporated as a new and distinct township. Swansea, like most New England towns, was already divided into militia districts for the purpose of raising and training troops to fight Indians. It so happened that the western militia district was roughly the area in which most Congregationalists

resided. Hence petitioners suggested that the legislature make the boundary of the new town the same as that of Captain Samuel Low's military district.

Unfortunately for Congregationalists in Captain Low's district, the legislature did not think that they were sufficiently numerous or sufficiently well off to be constituted as a township in 1711. Their petition was turned down. Congregationalists then made a second attempt to hire a minister and in 1712 persuaded John Wilson (Harvard 1705) to preach to them. He was just about to form a church when he died untimely in 1713. Four years later Congregationalists again petitioned to be set off as a separate town and this time the legislature granted their petition. Thus in November 1717, Barrington was incorporated as a haven for Congregationalists from what they considered Baptist persecution.

From 1717 until 1746 Barrington was part of the province of Massachusetts Bay. But in 1746 the king settled the long-standing boundary dispute between Massachusetts and Rhode Island. As a result Barrington (along with Little Compton, Tiverton, Bristol, and Warren) became part of Rhode Island. Hence in a unique way, the petition of 1711 marks the beginning of Barrington which in 1970 celebrated its two hundredth anniversary. The reason why 1970 and not 1917 is the two hundredth anniversary is that from 1746 — when the town came under the jurisdiction of Rhode Island — until 1770, Barrington was part of the township of Warren. It therefore had two birthdates — or perhaps three: its first birthday was November 18, 1717, when it became a separate town in Massachusetts; its second was in 1746 when it became part of Rhode Island (but was immediately made part of Warren), and its third birthday was in 1770 when it was separated from Warren. But whatever its birthdate, its date of conception was May 30, 1711, when the people in "the Westward End of Swanzy" first petitioned the Massachusetts legislature to become a town.

Two small footnotes are needed here. If, as is true, Baptists of Swansea did to a certain extent persecute the Congregational minority from 1705 to 1717 by making them pay taxes to support the Baptist meetinghouse, the Congregational majority in Barrington returned the persecution from 1717 to 1735 when it taxed not only

the Baptist minority within its town limits but also the Anglican minority in order to support the Congregational church and its minister. Not until 1735 did the laws of Massachusetts give sufficient protection to dissenting minorities to save them from paying taxes to support the religion of the majority in any town.

Second, it should also be noted that Thomas Bicknell's otherwise excellent town history contains one important error. Bicknell states that the first minister of the Congregational church (now the White Church) in Barrington was the Rev. Samuel Torrey. But a closer look at the original records shows that the first pastor, ordained in 1720, was Samuel Terry (Harvard 1710).

The Petition

To his Excellency Joseph Dudley Esqr
 Captain General and Governor in Chief in and Over
 her Majestys Province of the Massachusetts Bay
 in New England, The Honobl Council And
 Representatives in General Court Assembled
 At Boston this Thirtieth Day of May
 The Petition of us the subscribers In-
 habitants in the Westward End of Swanzey
 Most Humbly Sheweth,

That among all the outward e) Externall blessings with which the god of all Mercy blesseth any people with all in this world That of the house of God Among them. The Gospell purely preached, and the Ordinances of Christs kingdom duly Administred, and Fathers and Children settled under Pastorall Watch, Care and Governmt under Pious, Learned, Orthodox Ministers being in our Esteem the Greatest. And We your Petitioners being under the Deplorable Privation thereof Do most Humbly and Earnestly petition This Honoured General Court That Some Methods may be taken (as in wisdom may be thought best) for Our Reliefe. And we being well perswaded and Assured of this Honourd Generall Courts power and Good will to help in Such Cases from their Repeated Acts of the Like Nature, Do the More Freely Open our Mallady which bespeaks Pitty and Cure. Not to Mention the Ill Circumstances (which Our different Opinion in Matters of Religion from our Neighbours) brings our Estates under in whose power

they are in all taxes (Though bad enough in it self) is Yet Little and Light compared with the bitterness we Feal at present and fear for the Future for the very mention of no Settled Minister, Learned and Orthodox, No Church of Christ Settled in Gospel Order, No Pastour to feed Christs Lambs among us; this as We believe is an uncomfortable thought unto all the Holy and Reverend Ministers of Christ that know our State. So is it a heart breaking Thought to us to think that when We are Called out of this World to Consider into what State we Leave Our posterity Exposed to a Ruinating inticement from pure Gospell and Gospell Ordnances. All which Sorrow and Misery either felt or feared if this Honoured General Court do in Mercy e) Pitty prevent by Granting us a Township According to the Limits of Captain Samuel Lows Military Company in Swanzey Thereby enabling us to Settle and Maintaine A Pious Learned, Orthodox Minister for the Good of us e) our posterity. God will be Glorified, Christs Kingdom Inlarged

And shall Oblige yor Most Humble
 Petitioners Ever to pray

Samuel Low	Joseph Chaffe
Daniel Allen	Daniel Allen Junr.
Benjn. Viall	Obadiah Bettis
Israel Peck	Elisha May
Samuel Humphry	William Corbet
Zecha. Bicknell	John Toogood
Nathanl. Peck	Samuel Guy
Josiah Turner	John Rogers
James Smith	Joshua Finney
Benjamin Cary	William Salisbury
Ebenezer Allin	William Salisbury Junr.
John Chaffe	Jonathan Phiney
Simon Davis	Ebenezer Tiffany
Thomas Turner	Thomas Tiffany
Jonathan Viall	

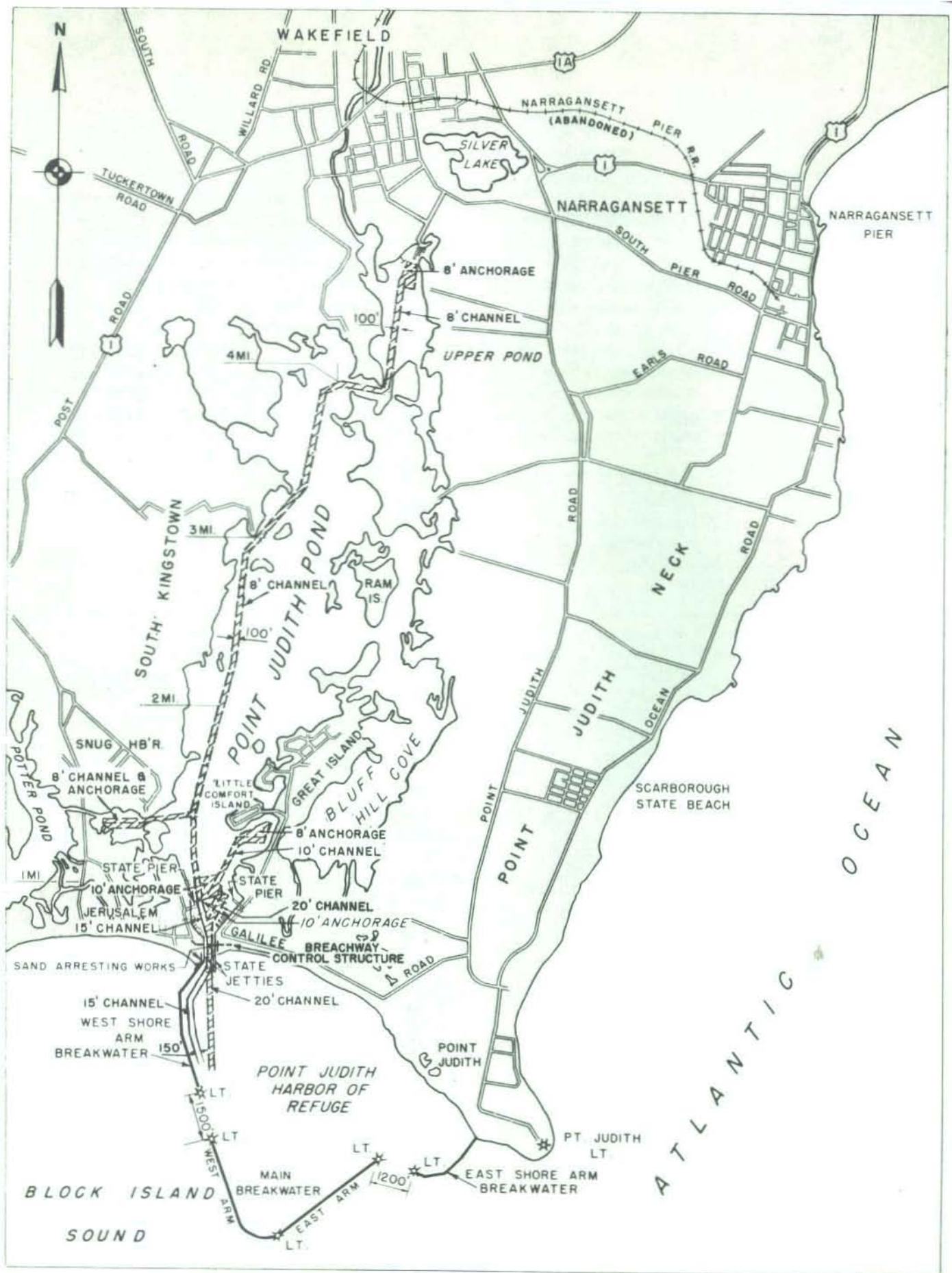
June 7: 1711

In Council

Read and Ordered

That the Selectmen of Swanzey Be served with a Copy of this Petition And that they be heard thereto upon the Second Wednesday in the Next Session of this Court if any thing they have to say against Granting the Prayer thereof.

Sent down for Concurrence Isa. Addington, Secty.



Harbor Improvements and Fishing at Point Judith

by Carl Gersuny and John J. Poggie, Jr.*

Well-known today as the leading fishing port in Rhode Island and as one of the few relatively prosperous commercial fisheries of New England, Point Judith wasn't always like that and its rise to fishing eminence represents a fascinating chronicle of man's struggle against adversity. A major part of this endeavor has been in the endless drama of taming natural environment, for to speak of Point Judith as a fishing port is to pay tribute to engineering skills which make possible the construction of artificial harbors where by nature none were formed.

Engineering works represented by the harbor of refuge and improvements in the entrance to Point Judith Pond were necessary to development of the fishing enterprise as it is now operated in the community. What kind of fishing was carried on there before the man-made harbor was built, how the works of construction came into being between 1892 and 1935, and what the impact has been on commercial fishing are our concerns.

Before harbor construction began, trap fishing and lobstering were principal activities in the area. Trap fishing had superseded hook and line fishing since the middle of the nineteenth century. After the break-water was built, a beginning was made in development of a vessel fishery, but before completion of improvements in 1935 only an "insignificant tonnage of fish and shellfish" was landed by a handful of fishermen.¹ After the state piers were built and the anchorage dredged in 1935, Point Judith surpassed other fisheries

in the state and by 1970 had progressed from insignificance to a business on the order of \$4 million per year.

Before the coming of European settlers, Indians harvested marine fauna to provide an important part of their food supply.² Early settlers followed suit. The first law on fishing was passed by the colony in 1640, the charter of 1663 granted to the king's subjects "full and free power and liberty to continue and use the trade of fishing,"³ and the 1842 state constitution reaffirmed "the rights of fishery and the privileges of the shore."

While the 1790 census for South Kingstown lists but one head of household, John Gardner, as a fisherman,⁴ fishing was nevertheless practiced as a part-time subsistence activity by many farmers in the community because it fitted into slack periods of their agricultural labors.

Shore fishery was conducted with a rather simple technology. Seine fishermen would run with their net into the water, leave it for about one hour and then pull it up on the beach. In the 1880s men could earn income of \$100 per month in this way.

Some fishermen seined menhaden from the beach, using a whale boat with four men rowing and two men throwing net over the stern. Then sixteen men were needed to haul the seine ashore. Neighbors would help in these labors in exchange for a share of the catch. Fish spotters on horseback were used. They rode along the beach and signalled the location of fish by means of flags on long poles. In that period, menhaden sold

*Associate professors of sociology and anthropology respectively at the University of Rhode Island. Research for this paper was supported by Marine Resources Committee and Sea Grant Program at URI.

Point Judith area owes its development as a fishing port to man-made changes of geography.

Map. Army Corps of Engineers, New England Division. 30 June 1970.

1 *Senate Documents*, 80th Cong., 1st Sess. [Washington: GPO, 1948], Document No. 15, p. 11.

2 Paul F. Gleeson, *Rhode Island: Development of a Democracy* (Providence: Rhode Island State Board of Education, 1957) 18.

3 John Williams Haley, "Old Stone Bank" *History of Rhode Island*, 4v. (Providence: Providence Institution for Savings, 1929-1944) 2:57.

4 U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790 — Rhode Island* [Washington: GPO, 1908] 47.

On Narrow River, Thaddeus Holberton demonstrates shore-fishery by seining. He is one of the few Rhode Island fishermen still using this method.



Photograph by the authors.

at \$1 per thousand for fertilizer and as many as 100,000 fish were caught in one haul.⁵

Seining for bass from the shore is reported from 1867 on.⁶ On October 31, 1869, George A. Griffin, Cranston Tucker, Carder Sherman, James Brown,

Charles Wright and William Sheldon caught over two tons of bass in one haul. Various fishing gangs during this period had fish houses along the beach where they slept in bunks until it was time to fish. Each gang had two boats and a seine. This type of fishing was carried

⁵ Interview with C. Foster Browning, June 25, 1970.

⁶ Earl H. Whaley, "Bass Fishing on South Beach," *Narragansett Times* January 27, 1939, 4.

on by various groups of men from the town throughout the period of construction of harbor improvements but by 1940 it had virtually ceased.

At its January 1870 session, the Rhode Island General Assembly appointed a special committee to investigate the fisheries of Narragansett Bay. The document published by this group illuminates the clash between different technologies and the displacement of less productive by more productive approaches.

The theme of the investigation was the allegation of hook and line fishermen that numerous species formerly caught in abundance in the waters of the bay had diminished or disappeared. This was attributed to increasing use of new fishing techniques. Witnesses claimed that interception of fish by traps and seines would soon lead to extinction of various species. The committee received testimony from thirty-nine witnesses of whom all but two were hook and line fishermen with a vested interest in reducing the incursions of more effective technology. These witnesses supported placing restrictions on fish-catching methods of competitors using traps and seines.

Three of the witnesses were from South Kingstown. John T. Anthony gave his occupation as farmer and stated that he engaged in hook and line fishing three months of the year. He claimed that since 1853 fish had been constantly decreasing in numbers and size, and he attributed this trend to the practice of trapping. "I think that if traps were abolished, fish would become numerous again." Jeremiah B. Whaley, an 84-year-old hook and line fisherman who had been fishing in the area since 1805, also asserted that fish traps had ruined hook and line fishery and wanted the legislature to "prohibit all kinds of trapping and seining except, perhaps, gill nets."⁷

Some seventy years later trap fishermen in their turn attributed decline of their trade to the superior effectiveness of trawling by vessel fishermen. In an interview with one of the last of the traditional shore fishermen — Captain J. E. Clark — it was reported that trap fishing was on the way out. "The reason for the decline? Capt. Clark gives that in one word — 'dragers.'"⁸ This of course tends to be the fate of every technology in the face of more productive innovations.

Here is where the importance of harbor construction becomes clear. Steamships were used in some Rhode Island fisheries long before harbor construction made possible transformation of the rowboat-and-seine fishery at Point Judith into successful vessel fishery.

Introduction of the steamship into Rhode Island fisheries took place during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The technology of power boats was available but its distribution, not surprisingly, depended on environmental factors. First and foremost of these was existence of harbor facilities.

DISTRIBUTION OF VESSELS POWERED BY STEAM

Town	Number of Steamships in Fishing Fleet	
	1885	1895
Cranston	0	1
Warren	0	2
New Shoreham	4	12
Portsmouth	1	2
Tiverton	8	11
Providence	1	3
Warwick	0	1
Newport	0	1
South Kingstown	0	0
Total	14	33

Rhode Island State Census, 1885, 590-591.

Census of Rhode Island, 1895, 865.

During this time only rowboats and sailboats were utilized by South Kingstown fishermen for tending seines, traps and pots, as well as for hook and line fishing. In 1885 these included two sailboats and 131 rowboats, while in 1895 fourteen sailboats and 131 rowboats were reported. In both census years, the number of boats used for fishing purposes far exceeds the number of persons reporting fishing as full-time occupation (36 in 1885 and 41 in 1895), indicating that much of the fishing was carried on by farmers and others in the community whose primary occupations were on land.

State census reports for 1865, 1875, 1885 and 1895 provide substantial details on fishing activities of the Point Judith area. In the 1885 report a footnote indicates that of soft shelled crabs valued at \$466,

7 *Fisheries of Narragansett Bay* (Pawtucket: Nickerson and Sibley, 1870) 53, 153-4.

8 *Providence Journal* March 17, 1940, 12.

Early lack of harbor facilities limited South Kingstown fishermen to sailboats and rowboats. Small boats could be used for menhaden seining.

Sketch from Providence Journal of Commerce, May 1897.



"a little girl ten years old collected \$89 worth." This betokens a census official with an eye for human interest and only a small scale fishery in which such a detail could be recorded.

In addition to fish consumed locally, there were several routes to more distant markets. One outlet was widely used when overnight steamship service was available from Newport to New York. Point Judith fishermen hauled their catch to Newport to be shipped on consignment to the New York fish market for sale the following morning. Another route transported wagonloads of fish to the railroad station.

Much of the fish was salted, because of rapid spoilage of fresh fish and unavailability of refrigeration. There was some use of ice, limited because of

cost. Early evidence of artificially produced ice in the community dates from 1900:

*The plant will have a capacity of twenty tons of ice per day. . . . The failure to harvest any ice here this past winter has induced Messrs. Griffin and Browning to put in the plant. . . . Herman S. Caswell of Wakefield has been engaged to have charge of the plant which will require the services of several men*⁹

Nevertheless, salting continued to be a major technique of fish preservation, with about one bushel of salt (70 lbs.) per barrel of fish (150 lbs.) being used in the process.

After the offshore breakwater was completed in 1906, some fishing vessels used the harbor of refuge as an anchorage. In 1907 a wireless station with an

9 *Narragansett Times* March 23, 1900, 5.

10 *Narragansett Times* November 22, 1907, 5.

11 *Census of Rhode Island, 1895* (Providence: E. L. Freeman, 1898) 867.

12 *Narragansett Times* February 12, 1902, 5.

antenna 200 feet tall was installed but there is no evidence that any local fishing vessels were equipped with radio in that period.¹⁰

In 1895 — when construction of the offshore breakwater had still not progressed very far — reported landings of fish at Point Judith were 300 tons. This included a reported 542,310 pounds of food fish and 63,000 pounds of fish “for guano,” the former valued at \$18,980 and the latter at \$126.¹¹

At this point the long upward climb toward big-time commercial fishing commenced. The reason for this development can be attributed in large measure to the success of various interests which had long unsuccessfully agitated for construction of two improvements at this location. The first was a harbor of refuge consisting of stone jetties and the second, improvements in the pond entrance.

Point Judith — jutting into the Atlantic at the west side of the entrance to Narragansett Bay — had long been one of the most serious hazards to coastal shipping between New York and Boston. Between 1883 and 1902, 92 vessels had been lost and these casualties motivated advocacy for construction of a refuge in which coastal vessels could ride out frequent dangerous storms.¹²

As for the pond, for a long time it had been inaccessible to fishing vessels and other shipping because of shifting sand deposits at its outlet to the sea. This gave impetus to the interests seeking the dredging of a permanent channel.

Both the local community and such shipping interests as the Maritime Association of the Port of New York supported construction of the harbor of refuge. After a series of negative recommendations

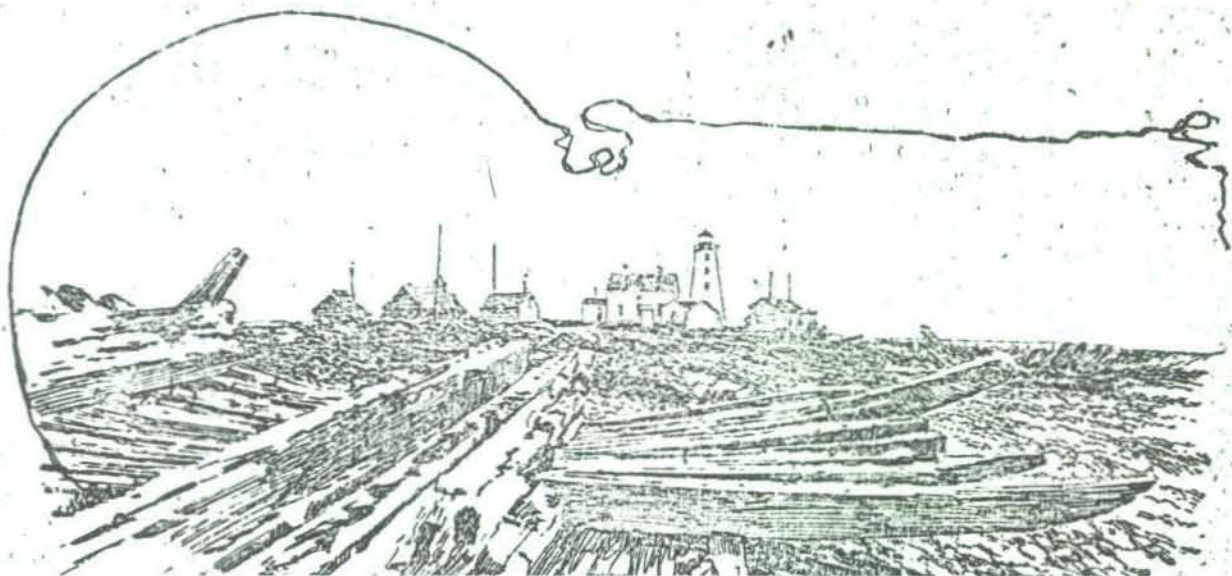


Overnight steamship service from Newport to New York attracted Point Judith fishermen who added their catches to scenes like this at Newport's Long Wharf before 1900.

Photograph courtesy Providence Public Library.

"Shore strewn with ruin," headlined the *New York Herald*, February 10, 1895, above this yellowed sketch of Point Judith light. The article blamed "congressional parsimony" for

tardiness in construction of the protective breakwater and urged appropriations for a harbor of refuge to prevent such wreckage.



From Scrapbook Point Judith Harbor Project, RIHS Library.

from the United States Army Corps of Engineers, the federal project for the harbor was adopted in 1889. The first structure to be built, from 1892 to 1906, was a V-shaped detached breakwater. During 1907-1909 the eastern shore breakwater was built and between 1912 and 1915 the western shore breakwater. A harbor entrance of 1200 feet was left between the eastern arm and the main breakwater and a 1500 foot entrance between western arm and main breakwater.¹³ Even before completion, the harbor served as a refuge for many ships. During the year which ended June 30, 1911, 513 vessels took shelter there from rough seas.¹⁴

Financing these structures by Congress was justified on grounds that a general or national interest was served. As to the improvement of the pond entrance, the Corps of Engineers maintained for many years that it was too costly and not worthwhile because of its limited and strictly local benefit.

Point Judith Pond is more pond than bay because ocean waves have deposited a barrier beach at its entrance. Through this beach there has been in the past an outlet, shifting in location and varying in width and depth. Marked changes took place in the pond during the nineteenth century. The great September gale of 1915 closed the then existing opening into Sand Hill Cove and formed a new outlet when the water level rose in the pond. While formerly vessels of five to twenty tons could enter the pond, the new entrance was filled with sand in the late 1860s and an engineer's report in 1895 indicated that the breachway then in existence could be easily forded by ox teams.

Manufacturing and fishing interests favored dredging a navigable channel from the ocean to the head of the pond in Wakefield, the former to escape high freight charges of the Providence and Stonington

13 F. W. Fogarty, "Summary of Federal Work at Point Judith Harbor, Rhode Island, 1892-1971," letter August 24, 1971.

14 *Narragansett Times* October 27, 1911, 5.

15 *House Documents*, 43d Cong., 2d Sess., *Report of the Secretary of War*, part 2 (Washington: GPO, 1874) 287.

Railroad and the latter to improve productivity of their fishery. Later the emergence of highway motor transport eliminated the support of manufacturing interests.

While these improvements were desired by various groups in South Kingstown, the Corps of Engineers did not look upon the project with favor. A long series of adverse reports preceded the actual initiation of dredging.

These negative reports must have been disheartening to local interests seeking a federal project for improvement of the pond. The first rejection in effect told residents that their idea might have merit in New York, but not in South Kingstown. In the words of General G. K. Warren of the Corps after a survey in 1873 —

... To secure any artificial enlargement of the outlet, extensive stone jetties would be required on each side to prevent the opening being filled with sand, and even these, unless of very great extent, would be of doubtful effect, for the beach is composed of shifting sand, exposed to the full force of the ocean waves.

The village of Wakefield is situated at the head of this pond; and if vessels of moderate draught could be made to reach it, the people would be much

Government derrick barges were landing stone on the "shore arm" of the breakwater September 22, 1903. Though only partially completed, the harbor structure had served as refuge for eighteen vessels in a gale the previous June.

benefitted; but the cost of making suitable works would be so great that nothing but the commerce of a great city like New York would justify the attempt. There an artificial harbor costing millions could be afforded, and only under its shelter could the beach be kept permanently open. I therefore submit no estimate for improvement.¹⁵

In another survey of 1888 Captain Thomas L. Casey wrote — "In my opinion the entrance to Point Judith Pond . . . is not worthy of improvement . . ." Even after Congress had approved the harbor of refuge — a project costing millions — improvement of the pond entrance continued to be rejected. In 1892 Congress appropriated \$7,500 to dredge the channel into the pond, but the Corps advised against spending the money appropriated.

While federal authorities continued to reject the entrance to the pond as an object of construction, rapid strides were made in building the main break-wall of the harbor of refuge. In a series of appropriations from 1890 to 1897, \$1,250,000 had been voted by Congress for this work, still far from complete but which began to protect the beach from the full force of the waves. This protection was not only desired by shipping interests seeking a place of refuge but was

Scrapbook, RIHS Library.



necessary for any improvements in the pond entrance. These massive works offshore in effect made opening of the breachway more feasible.

The scene of action then shifted from the bureaucracy of the Corps of Engineers to the popular democracy of the New England town meeting. If the federal government would not undertake the desired improvements, South Kingstown was to do so, later with state assistance.

On February 19, 1901, South Kingstown appropriated \$12,500 to open the breachway from Point Judith Pond to the ocean. On March 19, 1901, a taxpayers' town meeting there passed a resolution by vote of 49 to 37 to empower a committee consisting of William C. Clarke, William C. Greene and Carder H. Tucker to "effect the opening of a permanent breachway connecting . . . Point Judith Pond with the sea."

The meeting was the occasion for considerable debate. Henry Whaley opposed the project on grounds that it could not be finished for less than \$50,000 and because, he claimed, the breachway would kill the fishing interest. Increased salinity did in fact eliminate certain types of fishing from the pond.

N. C. Peckham voiced opposition to the undertaking because the town was already burdened with indebtedness of \$160,000 and the breachway at Block Island had cost \$250,000.

J. G. Peckham proposed an amendment to limit the expenditure for dredging to the \$12,500 already appropriated and this was accepted. Thus opening of the pond was initiated.

Part of the pond was situated in the district of Narragansett, which had split off from South Kingstown some years before the turn of the century. At a taxpayers' meeting in Narragansett called on March 18, 1901 for considering an equal contribution to the project, the committee promoting the issue consisted of J. C. Cross, E. D. Taylor and T. G. Hazard,

Part of the pond was situated in Narragansett which had split off from South Kingstown before the turn of the century.



Detail of map, Rhode Island 1874-1936, Rhode Island Boundaries, 1636-1936 by John Hutchins Gady.

Jr. The opposition prevailed. Edgar W. Watts said it would be like throwing money into the sea. Thomas T. Tucker claimed it would cost \$200,000 to open the breachway and even then it might not be permanent. Charles T. Tucker moved a resolution to appropriate \$12,500, which was defeated by a vote of 33 to 14. The meeting then voted to lease rights to the pond to South Kingstown for fifty years. Thus the project was carried on by only one of the towns in which the pond was located.¹⁶

16 *Narragansett Times* March 22, 1901, 8.

17 *Narragansett Times* March 29, 1901, 8.

18 *Twenty-ninth Annual Report of the Harbor Commissioner* (Providence: E. L. Freeman, 1905) 57.

19 Senate, 80th Cong., 1st Sess., Document No. 15, p. 9, 17.

Commercial fishermen share space with sports fishing boats and pleasure craft at Galilee state pier built in 1934-1935.

The General Assembly passed an enabling act on March 23, 1901 authorizing South Kingstown to open the breachway.¹⁷ In addition the state legislature appropriated \$10,000 in 1902 and the same amount in 1903 to augment town funds for the project. The state funds were used to build two jetties to protect the breachway. A channel seventy-five feet wide with a seven-foot depth at mean low water was constructed from the head of the pond to the sea.¹⁸ During initial improvement of the outlet and pond between 1902 and 1910, \$44,242.89 was expended by state and town on the project. One consequence of the prosecution of this work by local interests was a change in the posture of the Corps of Engineers. In the 1904 report of its chief the ongoing work was noted and — in recognition of local efforts — a federal contribution of

\$10,000 for extension of jetties or dredging was recommended.¹⁹

The most significant improvements in Point Judith Pond were not to come until the depression years 1934 and 1935, when public works were widely promoted to stimulate the economy. At that time Rhode Island spent \$227,281 in state funds and a \$77,000 grant from the Public Works Administration to build two state piers — at Galilee and Jerusalem — to dredge a 35-acre anchorage basin just inside the pond entrance and for other improvements. This massive program of improvement represents a take-off point for the growth of commercial fishing at Point Judith.

After the turn of the century, the first vessels were introduced into a previously exclusively shore fishery of rowboats and a few sailboats. Following construc-

Rhode Island Development Council.



tion of the harbor of refuge, these early vessels were brought to Point Judith but they had to be anchored outside the pond in protected waters encompassed by the rock breakwaters. Even without the state piers and anchorage basin, the initial works of construction were sufficient to permit substantial expansion of fishing activities. The increase in landings from 300 tons in 1895 to about 3000 tons in 1935 — an average annual rise of 22.5 per cent — clearly could not have occurred without the harbor of refuge. After the major construction of 1934-35, however, growth rate shot up dramatically. Increase in fish landings from about 3000 tons in 1935 to 17,000 tons in 1945 represents an average growth rate of 46.6 per cent per year, all the more remarkable since it took place first during waning years of the depression — when capital for investment in new equipment was scarce — and then during World War II with its attendant shortages of manpower and material resources. Since 1945 there has been still further increase in the catch and earnings of the Point Judith fishermen. Tonnage landed reached 50,000 in 1959, valued at about

\$2 million. While depletion of fish populations and other factors such as foreign competition reduced tonnage, price increases resulted in a 1970 production total of some 30,000 tons valued at about \$4 million.

Clearly this phenomenal growth cannot be attributed only to the harbor improvements described. Other factors enter the picture such as formation of the Point Judith Fishermen's Cooperative Association, which confers tremendous benefits to members both in marketing of fish and purchase of equipment. The leadership of a man so talented and knowledgeable as Captain J. J. Dykstra is an individual factor of major importance. Developments in technology — especially introduction of increasingly powerful marine engines and more modern gear — are also involved. However, without engineering works constructed between 1892 and 1935, none of the other factors could have entered the Point Judith picture. Man-made changes of geography in this part of Rhode Island, in the pond and its entrance as well as in the harbor of refuge, were necessary conditions for development of commercial fishing to its present state.



Point Judith Fishermen's Cooperative Association confers great benefits to members both in marketing of fish and purchase of equipment.

Rhode Island Development Council.

Rewards of one hundred and twenty-five years of persistence are viewed as historian Patrick T. Conley, Society President Joseph K. Ott, and Director Klyberg examine items from the recently acquired library and papers of Rhode Island jurist Henry Marchant, Attorney General of the colony and delegate to the Continental Congress. The Society has sought these materials of the Revolution and its aftermath since 1847.



Providence Journal-Bulletin photograph.