

RHODE ISLAND HISTORY



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Chicago Bears 6 - Professional Football - Braves Field, Boston - Dec. 9, 1925

Courtesy Peter A. Laudati, Jr.

What was a football game back in the 1920s without a raccoon coat? Here it's professional football, December 9, 1925, the Providence Steam Roller 9 - Chicago Bears 6. Members of both teams and their supporters line up for the photographer in this detail from a panoramic photograph. The Providence club went on to win a NFL championship in 1928.

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mation. Articles appearing in this journal are abstracted
and indexed in *Historical Abstracts* and *America: History
and Life*.

READ!

An appeal from a colored man whose Father fought in the Revolution.

Some look to Political power; we disdain doing so, so long as your hearts and consciences may be reached.

The Constitution and Laws of the State, proscribe no man on account of his color. Then where is the right obtained to proscribe us on account of our color?

Is it not an infringement of our rights; proscribing us; to say that we shall not be permitted to enter certain schools because we are colored; to refuse us admission to the High School altogether?

If our rights in this matter may be disregarded to satisfy prejudices, may not any or all of our rights be, to gratify similar prejudices?

Should not parties that would gratify their prejudices against poor white or poor colored children, support Private Schools for that purpose, and let the Public schools owned by all, be for all? We pay for all Public schools and have equal rights therein, as co and joint owners thereof.

A Foreigner, the moment he places his foot on our soil to reside, has a right to free, equal and *unproscribed* educational advantages, though he has not paid a farthing to the State—this right a pauper is secured in, but the colored man is denied this right; though a native born American, a citizen, a good law-abiding one, though a tax payer, though a descendant of those who fought for the country's independence: aye! against the fathers of those who now seek our shore in poverty and to some extent in crime. Yes, such a Foreigner can walk into any of your Public schools—and I, yes I, whose father fought with *Washington*, am driven from their doors. It being admitted that law and justice is with us; the much denounced assertion of *Judge Taney* must be adopted by those who would deny us our right, *viz* that though this be our right; you as white men are not bound to respect it, and will rather respect an unjust prejudice.

In being educated a part, by the State, the idea of separate interest is created; colored men are not induced to enquire into, and lay hold in common for the common good; our children are taught lessons of timidity and depression; that they are not so good as others, which is calculated to dampen and to depress their aspirations. This we know from experience; *and it has a large hold on our minds*. We sometimes ask ourselves has God forsaken us.

Though we vote men into every office, though we may be Governors; though we select those that make the laws, yet we are proscribed in being educated.

Every one of these despised Caste schools into which colored children are forced, are poor, very poor schools as compared to those around them. Yet they are maintained at a shameful expense. *The scholars in the colored Grammar school of this city, have for the last year, each cost the State \$50. Had they been distributed as they ought to have been, they would not have cost \$10 each!* and there would not have been more than from three to five in each school, except in perhaps one or two schools, where there would have been a few more.

They have been maintained in the schools of the surrounding States with good results. A great deal more opposition manifested itself in Boston, previous to the change than has been here, but when the change took place all worked well.

We know that a secret and a desperate opposition is at work against us, but when any one whispers anything into your ear, do us the kindness to allow us to explain before you suffer it to effect your convictions and our interests. Give justice a trial in this matter, then if you will proscribe us. Grant us our reasonable lawful wish, and you shall have our lasting gratitude. The State shall have no truer sons, either in peace or war.

ICHABOD NORTHUP.

Providence, Feb, 1859.

RHIS Library

Ichabod Northup's plea, printed in broadside form, emphasizes the issues that George T. Downing took up in his crusade to desegregate Rhode Island's public schools in the 19th century.

George T. Downing and Desegregation of Rhode Island Public Schools, 1855-1866

by Lawrence Grossman*

Organized struggle to outlaw racial discrimination in Rhode Island public education began after neighboring Massachusetts first legislated against separate schools. When the Bay state enacted desegregation law in spring 1855, George T. Downing, a black caterer then living in Providence, wrote to Charles Sumner — United States senator from Massachusetts — who had in 1849 provided legal counsel in a suit against the city of Boston that, though unsuccessful, had led directly to legislative triumph in 1855. Downing identified the cause of racial justice in the North with Sumner's senatorial opposition to southern slavery: "One evidence 'that there is a North,' may be given by that North's doing honorably and justly by a class of its citizens heretofore proscribed: this I am proud to say your noble Massachusetts is engaged in: the work goes bravely on. Still there is much yet to be done." Downing wanted abolition of segregated schools in Rhode Island as well. He explained to Sumner that Rhode Island laws said nothing about the subject, and indeed black children through most of the state attended regular public schools with whites. Only Providence, Newport, and Bristol — where most blacks lived — maintained distinct "colored schools" by local ordinance. "This I desire to destroy." Fulfilling that pledge, Downing became in the course of the next decade what the major authority on Rhode Island blacks calls "the most famous Negro in the state and the man most responsible for abolishing separate schools."¹

Although this prominent nineteenth-century black leader participated in all the ideological and practical controversies affecting the race, his-

torians have not given him due attention. Downing's involvement in the school battle was just one dramatic episode in a long and productive life, but it illuminates much about the man. Who was George T. Downing, how did the fight for mixed schools fit into his general approach to the race question, and in what way did he impress his personal style on the movement?

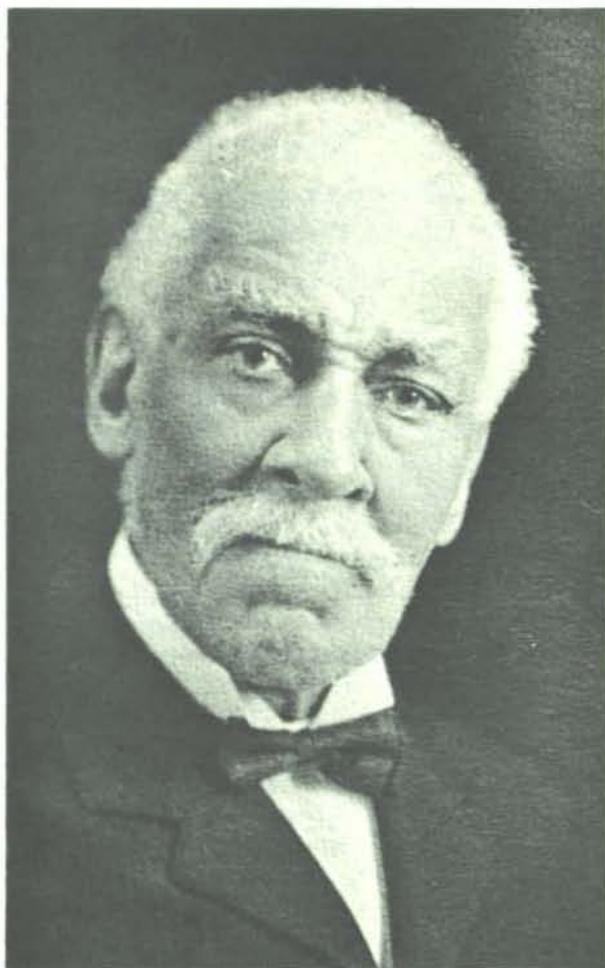
Perhaps the only black spokesman of his day not a "self-made" man, Downing, second-generation member of the northern black bourgeoisie, never experienced poverty, much less slavery. His father, Thomas Downing, was born in Accomac County, Virginia in 1791 to a slave woman. Her owner, who probably fathered Thomas, freed both mother and child, and then paid for the boy's education. Thomas came north to fight in the War of 1812, and then set up a successful oyster house and catering establishment in the commercial district of downtown New York. Rising to become one of the richest blacks in New York, he enjoyed cordial relations with prominent antebellum white politicians and businessmen who patronized his restaurant. Society leader Philip Hone, describing in his famous diary the lavish Boz Ball held for Charles Dickens in 1842, noted that refreshments "were farmed out to Downing, the great man of oysters, who received \$2,200." Democratic politician Samuel J. Tilden reminisced in 1869 about eating "at Downing's in Broad Street, . . . the tables of our respected and respectable colored friend who then was the Delmonico of New York." Blacks esteemed Thomas Downing because white favor did not keep him from involvement in the cause of his own race; they knew

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him as "large-hearted, public-spirited and a racial abolitionist." A man of great personal dignity, Downing on two occasions refused to leave streetcars when ordered by racist conductors, the first time getting thrown off, and the second time forcing the conductor to back down.²

George Thomas Downing, his eldest son, born in 1819, grew up in a unique environment, and one can appreciate the tensions of his early years. Coming to know the social lions of New York who visited his father's restaurant, and enjoying material luxuries that few other black children of his time dreamt of, he was part of the black elite. Yet out on the street George was just another black boy subject to what one of his contemporaries at the Mulberry Street Colored School called "the ever-present, ever-crushing Negro-hate" of early nineteenth-century New York. Downing later recalled the regular stoning of black children by white gangs, and also remembered the feeling of humiliation when a classmate was "locked up in a recitation room to produce a composition on a given subject, that the incredulity of the visitors might be satisfied; they doubting the capacity of a colored boy to produce a composition."³

George T. Downing's mature outlook on life was rooted in these childhood experiences. That his family had "made it" in material terms induced the younger Downing to swallow whole the acquisitive values of middle-class America. He told fellow blacks to rise through hard work and business enterprise, and his advice to his own sons echoed Horatio Alger. Dismissing skin color as irrelevant, Downing aspired to the status of a refined, well-bred American gentleman, and sought no association with lower classes of either race. His respect for distinctions of class rather than those of race was explicit: "There are social bars which each and every individual has the right to erect to keep out all with whom he does not desire familiar intercourse." But the desire to build a biracial elitist fellowship collided with the fact of American racism. No matter how respectable a black man like Downing might be, white prejudice repeatedly frustrated his social ambitions. Therefore, far from inducing complacency, Downing's enjoyment of partial white acceptance made him all the more insistent on total acceptance. He became a doctrinaire integrationist.⁴



Courtesy Rhode Island Black Heritage Society

George T. Downing

Hardly a tactful man, Downing could not remain silent if he suspected the slightest degree of discrimination against blacks, and this forthrightness would cost him money and popularity over the years. In 1869 he lamented: "I believe that I would have been a millionaire today had I bowed to prejudice." Eight years later Downing attributed setbacks in business and politics to his being "a martyr to the cause, too independent in daring to cross and criticize prejudices." White racism was not Downing's only enemy. His hope for full participation in American life was equally threatened by black nationalism, and he consistently opposed voluntary as well as forced segregation of blacks from whites. The only Negro leader of his

age who — even in times of greatest despair — would never consider black separatism or African colonization, to the end of his life Downing advocated an alternative plan manifestly designed to end racial strife, but also serving the latent function of easing his own status anxieties: blacks should disappear into America's genetic melting pot through racial amalgamation. He acted out his own doctrine in 1841 when he married Serena De Grasse, whose mother was white and whose wealthy father had been born in India.⁵

Downing's good fortune in Rhode Island after his marriage reinforced his positive feelings about America while sharpening his desire for full acceptance in it. In 1846, at twenty-seven, he opened a summer branch of his father's restaurant in Newport, soon to become America's most fashionable resort city. Four years later he started a catering business in Providence and in the summer of 1855, with capital borrowed from his father, Downing built a luxury hotel in Newport, Sea Girt House, that attracted a distinguished rich white clientele. Energetic, resourceful, ambitious, the younger Downing was becoming in Rhode Island what his father was in New York — a man of some wealth and a satellite of upper-crust white society.⁶

This then was the man who wrote to Senator Sumner in 1855 about Rhode Island schools. Downing's desire for integration reflected his rejection of racial separation in all phases of life, including his children's education. He also included a suggestion indicating keen insight into white upper-class mentality. Downing asked for Sumner's aid. As a prominent, respectable northern political leader, the senator might be able to influence power brokers of Providence: "You are aware that a certain class in the city of Providence rule it. This is generally so in cities, but particularly so in this city. This class, the wealthy, send their children to private schools, more so even than in Boston. This class are your associates and would favour your sympathy in the matter, if for no nobler reason, because not affected thereby." The pro-segregationist charge that rich parents of private school students wish to force integration on poor whites prevailed in the nineteenth century as it does in the twentieth. It was especially relevant to Rhode Island which still had a property qualification for foreign-born citizens wish-

ing to vote, thus disfranchising lower-class immigrants likely to use the public schools. But only a black like Downing who felt comfortable in high white society could have so brazenly suggested such an appeal to the wealthy. Indeed, a bit ashamed of himself, he added "I would not rest an argument upon this, yet would feel justified in allowing it to aid in effecting the just and desired."

Downing did not take public action until 1857 when with a few friends he initiated a propaganda campaign, financed out of his own pocket, against segregated education. Through the press, at public meetings, and in pamphlet form, Downing argued his case. He charged that black schools were inferior to white counterparts in their threadbare facilities, mediocre teachers, and stunted curricula. Downing would not even accept separate schools if they were equal, because blacks paid taxes like other Rhode Islanders, and therefore deserved the same, not equivalent, educational benefits as whites. He went on to cite many statements by prominent Bostonians on the success of desegregation there. Characteristically, he also made a blatant appeal to the state's white elite with a history lesson — Rhode Island blacks had proven their eminent respectability by siding with conservatives in the Dorr Rebellion of 1841 against those whites who wanted to broaden the suffrage. Because of such responsible behavior blacks had been given manhood suffrage still

Boyd's Newport Directory 1856-7

GEORGE T. DOWNING,

(LATE OF 3 BROAD ST., NEW YORK,)

PROPRIETOR OF THE

SEA-GIRT HOUSE,

DOWNING'S BLOCK, SOUTH Touro ST.,

Nearly opposite Old Stone Mill Park,

NEWPORT, R. I.

ACCOMMODATIONS FOR GENTLEMEN BOARDERS.

DINNERS AND GAME SUPPERS,

Also, CONFECTIONERY, together with FRENCH and other
MADE DISHES for FAMILIES.

Pic Nics and Sailing Parties

Served in neatly furnished private parlors, or sent to order.

Music, etc., Supplied to Cottages.

denied the foreign-born. So he invoked the memory of a traditional alliance between Rhode Island blacks and wealthy whites who ran the state.⁷

Downing drew up a petition demanding that the legislature bar separate schools. He collected signatures and had the document presented in the house of representatives, which laid it over to next session. In January 1858 Downing testified for the petition at a meeting of the house committee on education and provoked immediate denunciation from whites favoring status quo. For the time being neither a call for justice nor a class appeal to the white elite was effective. The *Providence Daily Journal*, Republican and strongly anti-slavery, editorialized that the question of black rights was irrelevant to education. Each town in the state should make its own school arrangements based upon local expediency. Both races in Providence, Newport, and Bristol favored segregation because black schools were good, and everyone knew that if blacks inundated white schools, white parents would remove their children, especially their daughters. Parents would also stop voting school taxes, bringing public education to an end. The *Journal* believed that agitation for mixed schools was engineered by "busy meddlers," a euphemism for Downing. A special meeting of the Providence school board echoed the paper's views. In February a majority report of the education committee upheld the old system, while one dissenter, an abolitionist, favored the petition. A representative moved "that it was inexpedient to legislate upon the question," which motion passed without roll call vote.⁸

At the next session in 1859 came what Downing called "the tug of war." After two years of agitation, the school issue became the cause of "more feeling, commotion and general interest" than almost anything else. The course of debate in the house of representatives indicated that a floor vote would be close, until pro-segregation forces unveiled a petition signed by forty-five Providence blacks against outlawing separate schools. Though there would be charges that many of the signatures were forged or obtained on false pretenses, this petition damaged the mixed school position by strengthening doubts about whether Downing spoke for Rhode Island blacks. What then occurred in the house is best described by Downing, writing in the third person:

The next move was for Lysander Flagg, Chairman of the Committee on Education, to get up and abuse Mr. Downing in a most shameful manner, attacking his motives, charging him with misrepresentation, and the like, to such an extent as to elicit expressions of shame and cowardice — one member suggesting that the gentleman would be more circumspect in his speech, only he was aware that Mr. Downing was not permitted to reply. There sat Mr. Downing within the bar, enjoying a seat with the reporters at the reporters' table, with the eyes of every member on him, willing to pay money for the privilege to be heard. More than once did the hopeful thought come to him: "I will yet be in such a position in this House, that I may reply to Mr. Flagg, shall he, like me, then be honored with membership."

Downing's personal aspirations are as evident in this account as is his delight in being the center of white attention. After Flagg's two hour diatribe, the consensus of the house was that "as there seemed to be a difference of opinion among the colored people, and as Mr. Downing should be allowed an opportunity to reply to the attack made upon him," the question would be referred to a special five man committee. Though the *Providence Daily Journal* still grumbled that blacks "born and brought up here" liked segregation, and only "newcomers and agitators," that is Downing, wanted a change, at the end of May the special committee recommended an end to separate schools, but the house adjourned without acting.⁹

Before the 1860 legislative session Downing sought help from the organized abolitionist movement. Its leading New England organ, the *Liberator*, had been sympathetic in its reporting of Downing's battle, and the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Association had officially supported him. Nevertheless, Downing complained in a letter to William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the *Liberator*, that "we have not received much assistance" from abolitionists "in the way of remarks and public identity with the movement." There followed a progress report. Downing felt that a majority of the legislature favored desegregation, but feared to challenge the arch-segregationists of Providence. But Downing's biggest complaint, triggered by the surprise petition of the previous March, was about his fellow blacks, and here his sense of



George T. Downing (seated, center) and his family.

Courtesy Rhode Island Black Heritage Society

elitism is blatant: "The parties to be benefitted have been so educated, are so ignorant as to their interest on this subject, with some exceptions, as not to feel aright, or the independence or the necessity for sacrifices in the matter: hence they will not act as they should: many who with us feel a dependence upon those they must oppose in taking an active part in this matter." Downing could not imagine any black favoring separate schools in good faith.¹⁰

The next few years were discouraging. The issue came up in the house in 1860, old arguments flew back and forth and the house postponed consideration, this time by only two votes. Matters connected with the secession crisis prevented legislative attention to schools in 1861, and some consciences were surely soothed when the Providence school committee resolved to improve physical conditions in black schools. Downing moved to Boston when the Civil War began, and the

Liberator reported that "his children daily rejoice in the fact, that the dewdrops of knowledge are dispensed without regard to accidental differences of complexion." Since Downing still owned property in Rhode Island, he would be heard from again.¹¹

By 1864, when the legislature next took up the issue, public opinion had shifted. As segregationists repeated their praise for local control of education, a new weapon was available to proponents of mixed schools. The North was no longer merely fighting secession, but also freeing slaves, and blacks were serving with distinction in the Union army. Reflecting the new spirit, an anonymous letter to the *Providence Daily Journal* argued that whites should treat "the children of those fathers, whom, black as they may be, we send to the battlefield to combat with slaveholders upon slave soil, as our equals." The house education committee reported a bill forbidding any lo-

cality from separating the races in public schools, but members from the three segregating cities filibustered the measure to death. The necessity for a filibuster proved that a majority favored the bill, and in January 1865 the Providence City Council made a desperate effort to stave off desegregation by authorizing construction of six new "colored schools." Since there had been only two such schools before, this move would presumably show the legislature a real desire to afford excellent, if separate, education for blacks. One dissenting councilman, William Binney, would have none of this charade in the age of emancipation. Formerly a segregationist, he now believed that "nationally we have reached a point when expediency in our dealings with the colored man must be discarded; we have learned in this great crisis that there is no distinction in the rights of citizenship."¹²

Downing reentered the picture in 1865 with a letter to the *Journal*. He demanded integration "because it is right, because it is contrary to the letter and spirit of our Constitution to have it otherwise." In Downing's opinion all prejudice against blacks emanated from slavery. Since the Union army and the proposed thirteenth amendment were in the process of wiping out that institution, equal rights for northern blacks was the only conceivable answer to charges of inconsistency sure to come from former slaveowners. In this letter Downing also betrayed, in somewhat involuted style, his respect for white values and a degree of outright snobbery toward fellow blacks. "We believe that by contact in the public schools with the refinement and culture, spurred by inspired effort, enjoyed by the dominant class thereof, our children will catch the emotion."

The majority of the education committee in 1865 recommended a bill giving each locality the option of integrated or separate-but-equal schools, while a minority report, citing "the great events of the time" and the success of integration in Boston, asked for an end to segregation.¹³ Downing now prepared a petition, signed by himself and some other blacks, addressed to the governor, James Y. Smith, requesting his influence against the majority report. Repeating the argument that all race distinctions stemmed from and must die with slavery, Downing stressed the impracticability of an honest separate-but-equal arrangement because of the huge expenditures necessary to upgrade

black schools. With tongues in cheeks, the petitioners protested against this "as taxpayers." They raised a more basic issue — that up to now Rhode Island law had been silent on the subject, and three cities had segregated on their own. The majority report, if passed, would place on the state's statute books for the first time "a pro-slavery, black law" allowing discrimination between the races.¹⁴

Meanwhile, the house took up the minority integrationist report first. Despite a petition against it signed by Thomas A. Doyle, mayor of Providence and "other highly respectable and influential citizens," and in the face of some parliamentary tricks by opponents, the house passed the measure by three votes. But the state senate amended the bill to allow localities to segregate, and then postponed consideration by two votes as the session ended. When Downing heard that the governor had abetted this move he was furious. Since state elections were coming up in April, Downing published an "Address to Negro Voters" in which he and three other blacks refused to back the governor for reelection. They urged members of the race to support for governor and lieutenant governor two white politicians — Edward Harris of Cumberland and Rowland Hazard of South Kingstown — who favored desegregation of schools. Though this had no effect on the election, it indicated that Downing perceived the utility of a black voting bloc promoting the race's interests while remaining independent of party affiliation.¹⁵

In the fall of 1865 segregation began to crumble of its own weight. Bristol's colored school was notoriously below standard and on the verge of closing. The new chairman of Newport's school committee — Thomas Wentworth Higginson, a close friend of Downing and an abolitionist who had commanded black troops during the war — led Newport to end separate schools. Only Providence continued recalcitrant, but the legislative session of 1866 assured the cause of equal rights. Eleven years after Downing wrote to Sumner, both houses with little debate, overwhelmingly voted to outlaw separate schools in the state, and ended the era of legal segregation in Rhode Island education.¹⁶

Though the change in attitudes brought by the war gave the final blow to caste schools, Downing's years of energetic leadership laid the essential basis for desegregation. Without his efforts

the state's blacks would have had to wait longer for an end to separate education. George T. Downing — a self-consciously elite black man impelled to fight segregation by an amalgamationist racial philosophy and his own status concerns — well served the cause of racial equality in Rhode Island.

- 1 Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) 143-49. Downing to Sumner, May 28, 1855, Sumner Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University. Carleton Mabee, *Black Freedom: The Non-violent Abolitionists From 1830 through the Civil War* (New York: Macmillan, 1970) 163. Irving H. Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen: The Story of the Negro in Rhode Island* (Providence: Urban League, 1954) 53.
- 2 His only biography, by his daughter, is hagiographic and unreliable on details. S.A.M. Washington, *George Thomas Downing: Sketch of his Life and Times* (Newport: Milne Printery, 1910). *New York Times*, April 12, 1866. *Old Anti-Slavery Days: Proceedings of the Commemorative Meeting held by the Danvers Historical Society, April 2, 1893* (Danvers: Mirror Print, 1893) 123. Allan Nevins, ed., *The Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1936) 587. Clipping enclosed in Nelson Waterbury to Samuel J. Tilden, February 19, 1869, Box 8, Tilden Papers, New York Public Library. Daniel Alexander Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (Nashville: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1888) 46. Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969) 107, 123, 171. *Colored American* (New York), January 16, 1841. *New York Times*, September 26, 1855.
- 3 Samuel Ringgold Ward, *Autobiography of a Fugitive Slave* (London: John Snow, 1855) 28. William J. Simmons, ed., *Men of Mark* (Cleveland: George M. Rewell, 1887) 1004. *Liberator* (Boston), August 19, 1859. Upon completing the black elementary school, Downing attended a private "classical" high school.
- 4 *Liberator*, August 19, 1859; Downing to Philip Downing, April 23, 1871, August 3, 1880; to Philip and Peter Downing, February 5, 1875, Downing Papers, owned by Rev. H. DeGrasse Asbury. *New York Times*, November 23, 1877.
- 5 *New York Independent*, November 11, 1869; Downing to John Jay, March 5, 1877, Jay Papers, Columbia University. *Liberator*, May 11, 1849, April 4, 1851, August 19, 1859; *New York Tribune*, April 13, 1860; *New York Times*, November 23, 1877. Joel Schor, *Henry Highland Garnet: A Voice of Black Radicalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1977) 19, 145. On the De Grasse family see William C. Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution* (Boston: Wallcut, 1855) 316-18, and *New York Tribune*, November 22, 1891.
- 6 Charles A. Battle, *Negroes in the Island of Rhode Island*. (Newport: n.p., 1932) 32; *Liberator*, July 20, 1855.
- 7 *Providence Daily Journal*, February 25, 1857; *Liberator*, February 20, 27, April 17, December 25, 1857; Downing and others, *Will the General Assembly Put Down Caste Schools?* (Providence: n.p., 1857). J. Stanley Lemons and Michael A. McKenna, "Re-enfranchisement of Rhode Island Negroes," *Rhode Island History* 30:1 (Winter 1971) 3-13.
- 8 *Providence Daily Journal*, April 17, 1857, January 23, 26, February 3, May 29, 1858; *Liberator*, January 29, 1858.
- 9 The preceding description of the 1859 drama is from an article signed "Philo" in *Douglass' Monthly* (Rochester), April 1859, transparently the work of Downing himself. A sketchier account is in *Providence Daily Journal*, March 4, 5, 9; March 29, June 3, 6, 1859.
- 10 *Liberator*, April 8, 29, 1859. Downing to Garrison, October 3, 1859, Garrison Papers, Boston Public Library.
- 11 *Providence Daily Journal*, February 1-3, 1860; February 16, 1861; *Liberator*, February 24, 1860; June 7, 1861.
- 12 *Providence Daily Journal*, March 5, 11, 12, 26, 28, 1864; January 10, 1865.
- 13 *Providence Daily Journal*, February 9, 17, 1865.
- 14 Downing and others, "The Colored School Question," February 20, 1865, original in John Hay Library, Brown University, facsimile in Bartlett, 57.
- 15 *Providence Daily Journal*, March 1-4, 10, 11, April 4, 1865.
- 16 Bartlett, 58; *Liberator*, September 15, 29, 1865; Tilden G. Edelstein, *Strange Enthusiasm: A Life of Thomas Wentworth Higginson* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968) 299; *Providence Daily Journal*, February 14, March 1, 8, 1866.

SHIPPING HORSES wanted.



NICHOLAS BROWN,
and COMPANY,
Want to buy immedi-
ately, a few likely SURINAM HORSES.

Providence Gazette

Nicholas Brown and Company advertised in the Providence Gazette January 7, 1764 for horses to trade with the Dutch colony of Surinam on the northeast coast of South America. Rhode Islanders had been trading horses and other goods with the Dutch since 1704. Probably the horses shipped were Narragansett Pacers, a breed specially raised in Rhode Island's Narragansett country.

Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam

by Robert W. Kenny*

In 1948 the City Art Museum of St. Louis purchased the painting *Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam*. Removal of that canvas from Rhode Island to the Midwest was a source of regret to some and perhaps relief to other citizens, for artist John Greenwood had captured for posterity a memorable bacchanalia of Rhode Islanders who — by the long arm of coincidence — found themselves in port in the Dutch colony of Surinam sometime during the late 1750s. Most participants in that gala would later hold prominent positions in the civil and military history of His Majesty's colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations and during the American Revolution. Identification of the revelers is part of the tradition of the Jenckeses, a family distinguished in the life of Rhode Island for generations. Until its sale to the City Art Museum, that picture had always been in the possession of John Jenckes' descendents, who sold it with great reluctance. Aside from its value as a work of art, associational interest makes *Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam* a provocative study. It is the purpose of this paper to examine if it were possible or probable that all or some Newport and Providence merchants and mariners, traditionally identified, could have been in Surinam at the time Greenwood depicted them in such Hogarthian attitudes.

John Greenwood was born in Boston on December 7, 1727. His father Samuel was a prosperous merchant and his uncle Isaac a professor at Harvard. In 1742 John was apprenticed to Thomas Johnston, engraver, printer, designer of grave stones, and painter of fire buckets, ships,

and portraits. Greenwood did an engraving of Yale College and about 1747 his first mezzotint — the first by an American artist. His subject was a servant, Anne Arnold, more familiarly known as Jersey Nanny. That print is now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Its publication line reads: "Printed by J. Turner for J. Buck and sold by him at the Spectacles in Queen Street, Boston." Its advertisement appeared in the *Boston Gazette* on December 20, 1748. More important is the notation *Greenwood ad vivum pinxit et fecit*. Beneath the portrait are the lines:

*Nature her various Skill displays
In thousand Shapes, a thousand ways;
Tho' one Form differs from another,
She's still of all the common Mother:
Then, Ladies, let not pride resist her,
But own that Nanny is your Sister.*

Their author, if indeed he was Greenwood, anticipated by more than a century Mr. Kipling's remark that "the Colonel's lady and Judy O'Grady are sisters under the skin."

Turning to portraiture, Greenwood painted prominent merchants, ship captains, clergymen, and family groups. Alan Burroughs maintained that Greenwood was not particularly skillful but believed him the most popular portrait painter between Smibert and Copley. He painted his subjects against ornate backgrounds which suggested their affluence. His son wrote: "His company was sought. His fame was not confined to his own town, but extended all over America."¹

In 1752, when he was twenty-five, Greenwood left Boston for Surinam where he carried on his profes-

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sion with considerable success. The *Dictionary of National Biography* account — prepared from papers of Doctor Isaac J. Greenwood — states that while in Surinam he painted 113 portraits and was paid 8,025 guilders. In May 1758 Greenwood left for Amsterdam to perfect his skill in mezzotinting. In Holland he moved in artistic circles, did a number of portraits, and studied under Elgersma. After a sojourn in Paris, he moved to London in 1764. There he was well received, invited by artists to their annual dinner at the Turks Head, and in that year exhibited two pictures — *View of Boston, N.E.* and *Portrait of a Gentleman*. Although he did rather well by his painting he eventually became an art auctioneer. At the request of the Earl of Bute he journeyed in 1771 to Holland and France buying both collections and individual paintings. A portrait of Greenwood done by W. Pether shows, symbolically, an artist's palette with brushes and an auctioneer's hammer. He died in Margate in 1792.

The crucial years of Greenwood's life in so far as we are concerned were 1752-1758 — the period of his residence in Surinam. Investigation of the lives of those allegedly portrayed in Greenwood's picture is to ascertain if they were, possibly or probably, in the area during the time of his residence. From the realism of the picture it is possible that the event might well have been deeply etched in his brain. Were those depicted actually there on the big night, or did Greenwood fill in the picture with faces of Rhode Island worthies he had met from time to time during his six years in the Dutch colony? The balance of this paper will consist of some convincing evidence and some plausible conjectures.

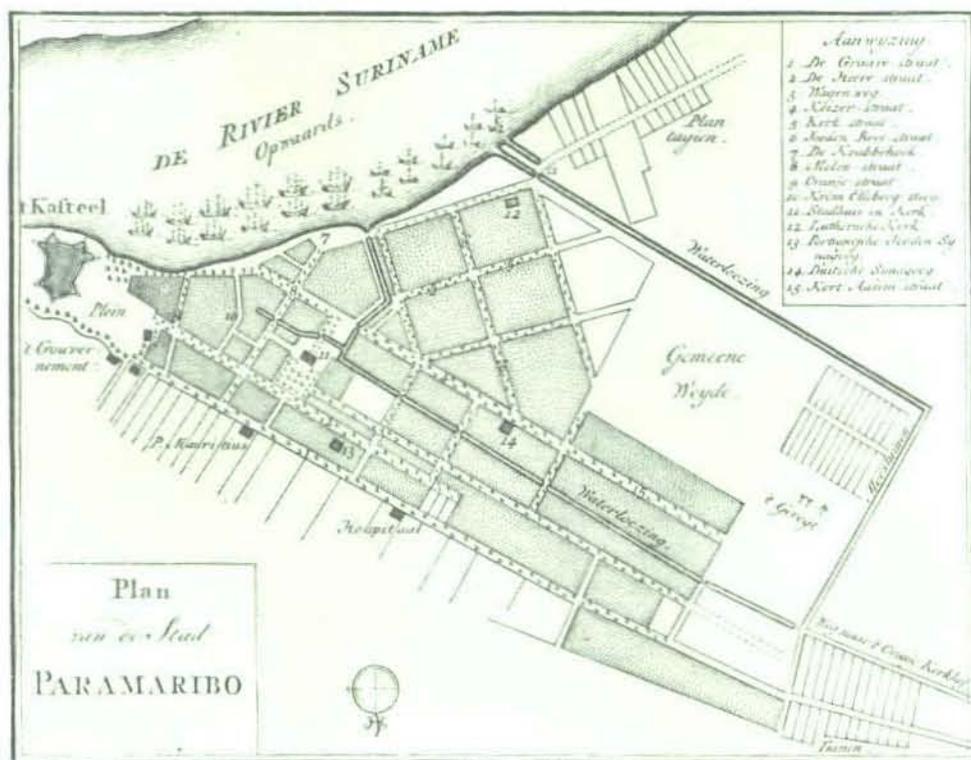
What would have brought these Rhode Islanders to this Dutch port in 1752-1758? Trade. Rhode Island towns, principally Newport and Providence, had for years carried on a thriving trade, legal and illegal, with English, French, Spanish, and Dutch colonies in the West Indies and the ports of northern South America. As early as 1707 Governor Crowe of the Barbadoes complained to the Board of Trade in London: "It would be some help to this Island if the Trade between New England and Surinam were obstructed, for if I be rightly informed, great quantities of Rum, Sugar and molasses go in return for horses, flower and other Provisions."²

It will be recalled that from May 1756 until February 1763 Great Britain and France were intermittently at war in Europe, North America, on the high seas, and in the West Indies — the struggle known in America as the French and Indian War and in Europe as the Seven Year's War. Although war was not declared until 1756 hostile acts were committed on the high seas and in the West Indies as early as 1754. French West Indian colonies were not self-sustaining; they produced sugar, coffee, and indigo for export and imported staple goods from the mother country. Two years before war was declared a British blockade was disrupting this intercourse between France and her colonies. If the blockade was effective colonists would suffer for food, and it would make refitting of French naval vessels and privateers impossible in their West Indian ports. North American English colonies — Rhode Island chief among them — took advantage of the situation and sold staple provisions, lumber, and horses to the islands, taking in return at very advantageous rates sugar and molasses.

Once war was declared, trading with the French was illegal for English colonials, and penalties were severe. However, trading continued with the neutral Dutch. Richard Pares indicates how ingenious colonial traders exploited Dutch neutrality —

*The restriction could not be complete without control of all exports from the King's dominions to neutral as well as enemy countries. This was particularly necessary to the West Indies, for the North Americans had long established a trade with the French through the Dutch and Danish islands. The legal right of the government to prevent it was doubtful. To restrain trade with the enemy was one thing, but to interfere with English property which was not demonstrably designed for his ports was another.*³

In an attempt to plug this loophole the Board of Trade in London on October 6, 1756 ordered colonial governors to lay an embargo on all colonial ships with cargoes of provisions unless they were consigned to another British colony. Rhode Island, which Pares refers to as "the Home of all Abuses," paid little or no attention to these orders. Lord Loudon, British commander in America, wrote to William Pitt that Rhode Island traders were "a lawless set of smugglers, who con-



Courtesy John Carter Brown Library, Brown University

A 1769 plan of the city of Paramaribo, the major port of destination in Surinam for Rhode Island goods, shows two elements which underscore the importance of this city as a center of trade for the Dutch — the ships in the harbor and the fort on the far left. Inset from "Landkaart van de Volkplantingen Suriname en Bebbice" in Isaac Tirion, *Nieuwe en Beknopte Hand-Atlas*, Amsterdam [1769].

tinually supply the enemy with what provisions they want, and bring their goods in barter for them." Despite penalties the highly profitable trade flourished in the late 1750s.⁴

An ingenious device for carrying on this trade with a semblance of legality was by means of flags of truce. Rhode Island and Pennsylvania were most active in this subterfuge. The owner of a flag of truce vessel undertook, under oath, to transport French prisoners of war, generally seamen, to a French port in the West Indies there to be exchanged for British prisoners. Port Louis, Guadeloupe in the Leeward Islands was much used. This soon became a racket, for despite a law forbidding carrying merchandise on these exchange voyages, flags of truce vessels sometimes left Rhode Island with as few as two or three prisoners, but with substantial cargoes which were sold at premium prices. Admiral Knowles

of the Royal Navy wrote: "The Northern Colonies used to buy French Prisoners at a great Price of one another for a Pretence to go to the French Islands that he had at length been obliged to threaten the French Government that he would send to England all French Prisoners if they delivered any English to Northern Flags of Truce."⁵

On one occasion Governor Hopkins refused a flag of truce license to a ship owner who had gone to Boston to buy French prisoners, there being none available at the time in either Providence or Newport. According to Governor Shirley of Massachusetts, no great friend of Rhode Island, over sixty flags of truce, laden with cargo, sailed from Rhode Island ports in the sixteen months previous to 1758. Governor Clinton of New York sold Spanish and French prisoners at so many pistoles per head. The business had gotten so out of hand that in 1759 Governor

Hopkins at the strong urging of William Pitt refused to grant any more flags of truce.

It has been noted that Rhode Island's trade with Surinam was of long standing — a nuisance to the British as early as 1707. That Surinam, a Dutch port and neutral, had great advantages for colonial merchants was made even more clear during the French and Indian War. In 1755 Daniel Jenckes, who may have been at the Surinam carousal, was one of a committee of five appointed by the Rhode Island Assembly to draft a bill prohibiting export of food or war materials to any French port in North America. One sentence in the bill is significant: "Provisions shall be landed within his Majesty's dominions and *nowhere else* unless at Surranam, Esquebo or Berberties."⁶

The Dutch government had opened trade with English merchants in 1704. The agreement stipulated that part of each cargo was draft horses for use on the sugar plantations. Rhode Island's Narragansett country raised sturdy work animals, and they, with the somewhat inferior Rhode Island tobacco, lumber, and provisions were staples of trade used in obtaining cargoes of molasses and sugar at the Dutch port. Once the war started the Dutch transshipped Yankee provisions to the French islands. This highly profitable trade was threatened by the British "Rule of 1756" which held that a neutral power could not in war time legally engage in a trade forbidden in peace. Normally the Dutch did not trade with French West Indian islands, and their vessels were thus subject to capture by the Royal Navy. The chance for handsome profits kept the trade flourishing. Under pressure from Governor Shirley and Lord Loudon, however, the Rhode Island Assembly in January 1757 forbade "exportation from any port or place within this colony to any Dutch or neutral port."⁷ This is one of the laws Pares probably had in mind when he stated that "Rhode Island passed laws which would have had excellent results had they been enforced and obeyed."

Trading with the enemy using flags of truce, and trading with a neutral nation, the Dutch, for transshipping provisions to the French have been noted. Our Rhode Island ancestors had still another device to turn an honest pound during war-time. Privateering.

A privateer is an armed vessel, owned and

manned by private persons, commissioned by the government, authorizing the owners to use it against hostile nations, particularly in the capture of merchant shipping. The commissions, called letters of marque, were issued by the Admiralty or by colonial governors when authorized by the Admiralty. Privateering was very popular with Rhode Island merchants and mariners. In the War of the Spanish Succession, 1701-1713, Captain William Wanton of Portsmouth, first Rhode Island privateer, was commissioned on June 25, 1702 to operate against the French in the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. He returned to Newport in September with three captured ships, one of them a French privateer, and all loaded with fish. During King George's War (1739-1748) the governor of the colony was authorized by the king to issue "letters of Marque and Reprisal to any of our loving subjects." The governor, in turn, authorized the captain "to set forth in a hostile manner the said vessel under his command and therewith by force of arms to apprehend, seize and take the ships, vessels and goods belonging to Spain or France and bring them into a Court of Admiralty for condemnation."⁸ Nearly 180 privateers were commissioned in Rhode Island between 1702 and the outbreak of revolution. Some distinguished colonial families engaged in this lucrative but dangerous enterprise: Browns, Malbones, Ellerys, Updikes, Ayraults, Jenckeses, and Hopkinsons. Fortunes were made and lost. Richard Partridge, a Quaker, the colony's agent in London, reported to the king in 1757 "that it is well known that the Colony aforsd is extremely obnoxious to the French and much an object of their Resentmt on acct of the great Mischief done to their Trade during the last War by Rhd Privateers of which they fitted out more than any other of the Northern Colonys."⁹ It is a fair assumption that privateers preying on French shipping in the West Indies would frequently put into Surinam, a neutral port during 1754-1758.

Given the political situation at the time there is good reason to believe that Rhode Island mariners engaged in privateering, flags of truce, or trading with a neutral nation would make frequent use of the Dutch port. It should be noted that obtaining a cargo at Surinam could be a time-consuming business. There were no warehouses where a return cargo could be readily obtained. A captain or

supercargo frequently had to search out a planter, supply him with wood for barrels and wait for delivery of sugar and molasses at the port. This makes quite probable that our shipmasters could all be in port for some time awaiting cargoes. What evidence is there that those lusty souls limned by Greenwood were there?

It is believed that John Jenckes purchased *Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam*; certainly until its sale to the City Art Museum it was never out of the possession of his direct descendents. For most of two centuries the picture hung in the Jenckes homestead on Smithfield Road, North Providence, where Jenckes' descendents live at this time. From 1819 until 1858 the painting was in the Brookline, Massachusetts home of Mary Jenckes Wild (Mrs. Charles Wild). While there it underwent an unfortunate restoration by a local sign and carriage painter. On June 6, 1878 Edward A. Wild, brother-in-law of Mrs. Wild, put in writing the family tradition about the personages represented in Greenwood's painting. Wild's note "The Old Jenckes Picture" is the starting point of this enquiry.¹⁰

The painting measures approximately 38x75 inches. In this relatively small area are twenty-two figures, only ten of whom have been identified. John Jenckes is shown in the right background holding a candle to light the way for Greenwood who is steadying himself at the doorway as he vomits. In the right foreground Nicholas Power of Providence is giving a dancing lesson to young Godfrey Malbone of Newport. Seated at a round table, in varying degrees of consciousness, are seven men. At the left of the table is a man drinking from a raised bowl observed by a gentleman holding a long pipe in his right hand. Neither of these worthies has been identified. Moving clockwise the next figure, dressed in gray, wearing a Quaker type hat is Captain Nicholas Cooke of Newport. A long stemmed pipe is faintly seen in his left hand. He is chatting with Captain Esek Hopkins, a famous privateersman who holds a wine glass in his left hand and is ignoring the sleeping figure on his left said to be his brother Stephen Hopkins. To the left of Stephen Hopkins sits a blue-coated sleeper thought to be Joseph Wanton of Newport who is about to be bathed in punch, while at the same time Captain Ambrose Page of Providence vomits

into the sleeper's pocket. Two figures, by tradition Dutchmen, may be noted. One seated on a chest, lower right, seems to be nursing a leg, hurt perhaps in the evening's gait. A second Dutchman, dressed in gray, holding a bottle and glass is standing behind the sleeping Wanton. A tradition in the family holds that the gentleman at the table with his back to the viewer is Daniel Jenckes, father of John. With nine Rhode Island revellers conjecturally identified, let us examine what is known of their whereabouts in the 1750s to see if they could possibly have been in Surinam at the time of the party.

It seems probable that the party occurred after the declaration of war in 1756 rather than earlier. Trade then was riskier but profits were also greater. The oldest celebrant at the party would have been Daniel Jenckes, about 56 in 1758, senior partner of the firm of Daniel Jenckes and Son who had traded with Surinam and the West Indies for many years. Daniel Jenckes was for some years a justice of the Court of Common Pleas; in 1764 one of the original trustees of Rhode Island College, now Brown University; and a generous contributor to the building in 1775 of the First Baptist Meeting House, oldest Baptist church in North America. He represented Providence in the General Assembly from 1743 until 1757. Significantly, perhaps, he did not stand for election that year but was elected in 1758 and served continuously until 1771. In 1755 he was on an Assembly committee to pay the Rhode Island troops sent to Cape Breton, and he also helped draft a bill prohibiting shipment of provisions to any French port in North America, the bill previously mentioned, which specifically permitted trading with Surinam. In 1757 Daniel Jenckes and Son billed the Assembly for 8 pounds, 50 shillings for boarding French prisoners of war, and 50 pounds "for Carrying an Old Frenchman to Antigua and home again in the sloop *Kinnicut*," a flag of truce.¹¹ Whether the Frenchman was so old and militarily useless that French officials in Antigua would not swap him for an able-bodied Englishman, or whether Daniel Jenckes and Son wanted to hold him to make legal another voyage will never be known. The receipt for payment of these bills was signed by John Jenckes who probably was on the voyage. The Assembly records also show that Daniel Jenckes in



"Sea Captains Carousing in Surinam" by John Greenwood, 1755.



Courtesy The St. Louis Museum of Art

1757 was on a committee to examine all flag of truce ships leaving Rhode Island to assure that no cargo beyond that necessary to feed prisoners and crews was carried. This might seem to be setting the fox to guard the chickens. Noting that Daniel Jenckes was not a member of the Assembly from May 1757 until the following year, there is a possibility that he could have voyaged to the West Indies and Surinam and been back in time for reelection in May 1758. It seems fairly certain that John Jenckes was in Surinam; his father could possibly also have been.

The gentleman on the far side of the table wearing a tricorne hat and blue coat with red facing is said to be Esek Hopkins, first commander-in-chief of the Continental Navy, one of Rhode Island's famous Revolutionary figures. Born in Scituate, then part of Providence, on April 26, 1718, Esek would have been about 40 when Greenwood painted the picture. One of nine children, four of whom "followed the sea," he shipped as a "raw hand" on his brother William's vessel to Surinam in 1738. He soon got a command of his own and with his brothers Stephen and William was associated for many years with Providence and Newport merchants who desired shares in ships commanded by him. At one time in the 1760s the Hopkins family owned or shared ownership of sixteen vessels.¹² In 1741 he married Desire Burroughs, daughter of a merchant and sea captain, and lived in Newport for about ten years. In 1752 he moved to Providence and soon was on a committee to "have care of the school house and appoint a teacher for said house." With him on this committee was Nicholas Cooke, also a Surinam partygoer. On the declaration of war in 1756, Newport and Providence merchants hastened to fit out vessels as privateers. The brigantine *Providence* — owned by Nicholas and John Brown, Nicholas Bowen, Ambrose Page, and Esek Hopkins — made three successful voyages during 1756-58 with Hopkins as the master. In January 1756 *Providence* captured its first prize which Hopkins gallantly renamed *Desire* in honor of his wife. The business and litigation of *Providence's* captures was handled by John Brown, then only twenty years old. It is interesting that *Desire's* first voyage under her Providence owners was to Surinam.¹³ The hunting ground of these privateers

was in the Caribbean and the West Indies and it is entirely possible that on one or more of these voyages Esek Hopkins could have put in at Surinam for provisions and possibly a cargo to bring back to Rhode Island.¹⁴

On Esek's left in the Greenwood picture, according to Jenckes family tradition, sleeps, head in hand, Stephen Hopkins. Stephen was born on March 7, 1707, the only one of five sons of William and Ruth Hopkins who did not "follow the sea." In his early years a farmer and surveyor, he was active in town affairs, representing Scituate in the General Assembly from 1732 until 1742. In 1736 he was elected a justice of the Court of Common Pleas. In 1740 he joined Esek in his business ventures and two years later moved to Providence where he lived in a modest house on South Main Street (the house stands today removed to a nearby location). Hopkins was elected governor of the colony in 1755 and 1756. His successor William Greene died in office and in March 1758 Hopkins was elected to fill Greene's unexpired term and continued in office until May 1762. He attended the Albany Convention in 1754, became friendly with Benjamin Franklin, and returned to Rhode Island an enthusiastic supporter of Franklin's plan for a colonial union. Hopkins was the first chancellor of Rhode Island College and a signer of the Declaration of Independence.¹⁵

One of his successful ventures with Esek was a partnership in the privateer *Reprisal* which made several profitable forays against French shipping during 1745-1746. In the 1750s Hopkins carried on an acrimonious political feud with Samuel Ward, a former governor who looked after Newport interests in the General Assembly as Hopkins looked after those of Providence and the northern towns of the state. Out of this ill feeling came a slander suit. Hopkins sued Ward and the case was heard in Worcester in September 1757. Hopkins lost, but the trial clearly shows that he was in Rhode Island or Massachusetts at least until September 1757. As he was elected governor in March 1758 this allows only five months for him to have voyaged to Surinam and back. As a candidate for office in all probability he would have stayed in Rhode Island soliciting support. It appears that the Jenckes tradition identifying Stephen Hopkins as one of the revellers is wrong. It does seem, however, that brother William Hopkins, a mariner

and privateersman could have been in Surinam at this time. It is conjecture but it seems more probable than that Stephen Hopkins was there.

The gentleman in quaker gray holding a long stemmed pipe and chatting with Esek Hopkins is said to be Nicholas Cooke, born in Providence on February 3, 1717 and died there 1782. Early in life he went to sea, was an able captain and usually a part owner of vessels he commanded. Later he came ashore, established a rope manufactory and did ship repairs. He also operated a distillery and was a considerable landowner in Massachusetts and Connecticut as well as in Rhode Island. Cooke was deputy governor in 1768, 1769, and again in 1775. After Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775 the Rhode Island Assembly authorized the raising of an "Army of Observation" for defense of the colony. Governor Joseph Wanton, himself perhaps a member of the Surinam party, refused to sign the act and was suspended from office by the Assembly. Nicholas Cooke was elected to fill his place in November 1775, held office for three years and voluntarily retired to private life. As governor on May 4, 1776 he signed the renunciation of allegiance to George III voted that day by the General Assembly exactly two months before the Continental Congress declared our independence from Great Britain. Cooke was a trustee of Rhode Island College from 1766 until his death.¹⁶

Maritime Papers in the Rhode Island Archives show Nicholas Cooke part owner on two occasions of vessels named *Providence*. Only the sloop of that name concerns us, bonded on November 1, 1757 with Nicholas Cooke and Ambrose Page as owners and "to proceed hence to Port Louise on Hispaniola in the West Indies, as a Flag of Truce with a number of Prisoners. Subjects of the French King who have been brought into this country since the Commencement of the Present War with France, and from thence to bring such and so many British Subjects as are Prisoners in the said Port Louis as he carried with him, if there to be had in Exchange for the Prisoners whom he carried in the said Sloop."

As Daniel Jenckes and son John were carrying prisoners in *Kinnicut*, so too were Nicholas Cooke and Ambrose Page in *Providence*. Cooke billed the colony "for Board of French Prisoners (on Ship) £64:5:16 and Carrying Frenchmen to

West Indies £100:10," and further noted, "They want admitted to land the Frenchmen at Barbadoes, was obliged to pay his passage to Antigua." This added four pounds to the bill. Thus there is evidence that a vessel owned by Cooke and Page was in the vicinity of Surinam and may well have stopped there to pick up cargo for the voyage home, despite the fact that this was forbidden in the bond.

Shown by Greenwood vomiting into the pocket of sleeping Joseph Wanton, Ambrose Page was a prominent and well-to-do Providence merchant, ship owner, shipmaster, and incidentally brother-in-law of John Jenckes. He died on December 29, 1791 aged 68. This date was found on the inside cover of *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity* by Robert Barclay, printed by James Franklin in Newport in 1729. This rare book, a defense of the Quakers, was used rather than the Bible as a repository for vital statistics of the Page family. It would appear that Ambrose Page was born in 1723 and would have been about 35 years of age at the time of the Surinam party. Like many a young Rhode Islander he turned to the sea, during the 1750s as master of the sloop *Sarah*, brig *Greyhound*, and sloop *George*, all of Providence.¹⁷ In November 1757, as noted, he was a partner of Nicholas Cooke and others in ownership of the *Providence* bonded to proceed with prisoners to Hispaniola. What is more probable than that such a vessel, after discharging French prisoners, and possibly taking aboard an equal number of Englishmen would then proceed to Surinam for a return cargo of sugar and molasses for Providence? Cooke and Page both had a substantial financial interest in this voyage; it adds to the likelihood of their presence in Surinam on that boisterous evening. Page was later owner or part owner of half a dozen privateers during the Revolution. After the war he appears mostly to have been in the coastal trade.

On the right side of his painting Greenwood shows a gentleman in a light blue coat giving a dancing lesson to a teenage boy. Traditionally the teenager has been identified as Godfrey Malbone of Newport and his instructor as Nicholas Power of Providence. I believe it is Malbone who is the instructor and Power the pupil.

Both families were prominent as ship owners and merchants in the West Indies trade. The

Malbone family came from Virginia to Newport sometime after 1700. Colonel Malbone, as the elder Godfrey was called, became a merchant and ship owner trading chiefly in sugar, rum, molasses, and slaves. For a time he was prosperous, had a fine town house on Thames Street and also a country seat at Tammany Hill a few miles outside Newport. During the Spanish War, 1739-1748, better known as the War of Jenkins' Ear, Colonel Malbone, with partners, frequently Browns and Wantons, had seven privateers in action. On the whole these were prosperous ventures, but Malbone took his losses too. On December 24, 1745 two new privateers, chiefly owned by Malbone, each mounting twenty-four guns and each manned by 200 men left Newport, encountered a hurricane, and neither was heard from again. Over 400 lives were lost and 200 Newport women were widowed.¹⁸

Colonel Malbone had three sons — only Godfrey Junior concerns us. He had been educated at Queens College, Oxford. Malbone Papers in the Newport Historical Society contain a letter from Edward Scott in Newport to Godfrey Malbone Junior in London telling of the loss of the two ships in the great gale of December 1745 and of his father's precarious financial condition. Young Godfrey is told to discontinue his law studies at the Inns of Court and return immediately to Newport. Return he did and entered the family business. A vessel was named after him the *Young Godfrey*, and in 1756 he was part owner of the privateer *Othello* whose bond he signed August 26, 1756. The Maritime Papers indicate that he and his father also owned the privateer *Maggott* licensed in November 1758. In that year Malbone would have been thirty-four; this could well have been the age of the gentleman dancing master in the blue coat. The privateering activity of the Malbone family makes it entirely possible that Godfrey Malbone could have been on a family vessel preying on French shipping and later in Surinam awaiting cargo. That the Malbones had an interest in the area is certain for in August 1759 Godfrey applied for a flag of truce to Cayenne to try and collect from "a Mr. Metijen who at the outbreaking of the War had in his hands their absolute property of about twenty thousand livres which they have not been able to collect." Cayenne is very close to Surinam.

If the dancing master is indeed Godfrey

Malbone Jr. it is quite possible that his young pupil could have been Nicholas Power of Providence. The Power family came from Massachusetts Bay colony in 1639. By tradition the eldest son in each generation was named Nicholas. The first Nicholas, follower of political and religious radical Samuel Gorton, was tried for heresy and sedition in Boston in 1643 but dismissed with an admonition. In Providence he purchased a lot on the southeast corner of what is now Power and South Main Streets. Merchant and at one time town constable and surveyor of highways, he died in 1657. The second Nicholas was killed in the Great Swamp Fight of King Philip's War fought in West Kingston on December 19, 1675. The third Nicholas was a merchant and holder of several town offices. The fourth Nicholas, birth date unknown, rum distiller and merchant, died in Surinam on February 27, 1744. By his wife Anne Tillinghast he had a son, born April 5, 1742, the fifth Nicholas, who like his forebears was a merchant, distiller, and rope maker. At the time of the Surinam party he would have been about sixteen; the young man being instructed in dancing could well have been that age. In another ten years this Nicholas Power, in partnership with John and Nicholas Brown, and commanding one of their vessels, was in the Surinam trade. Life was not all dancing for Nicholas Power, however. In 1774 he directed the lottery which raised £2,000 to help build the Meeting House for the First Baptist Society, and in 1775 he was charged to prepare six field pieces for defense of the colony. Finally in 1781 he "manumitted and set free his negro man Prince."¹⁹

It is traditionally believed that the somnolent gentleman in the blue coat seated next to Stephen Hopkins, unconscious of the indignities he is undergoing, is Joseph Wanton of Newport. The Wanton family, originally from Boston, played a distinguished role in the political and commercial life of Rhode Island in the eighteenth century. No less than four Wantons, including Joseph, were governors. The family enterprises included shipbuilding, merchandising and, when times permitted, privateering. Joseph Wanton, son of Governor Joseph Wanton, was born on August 15, 1705 and would have been about fifty-three at the time of the party. This age is consistent with the figure portrayed by Greenwood. John Russell

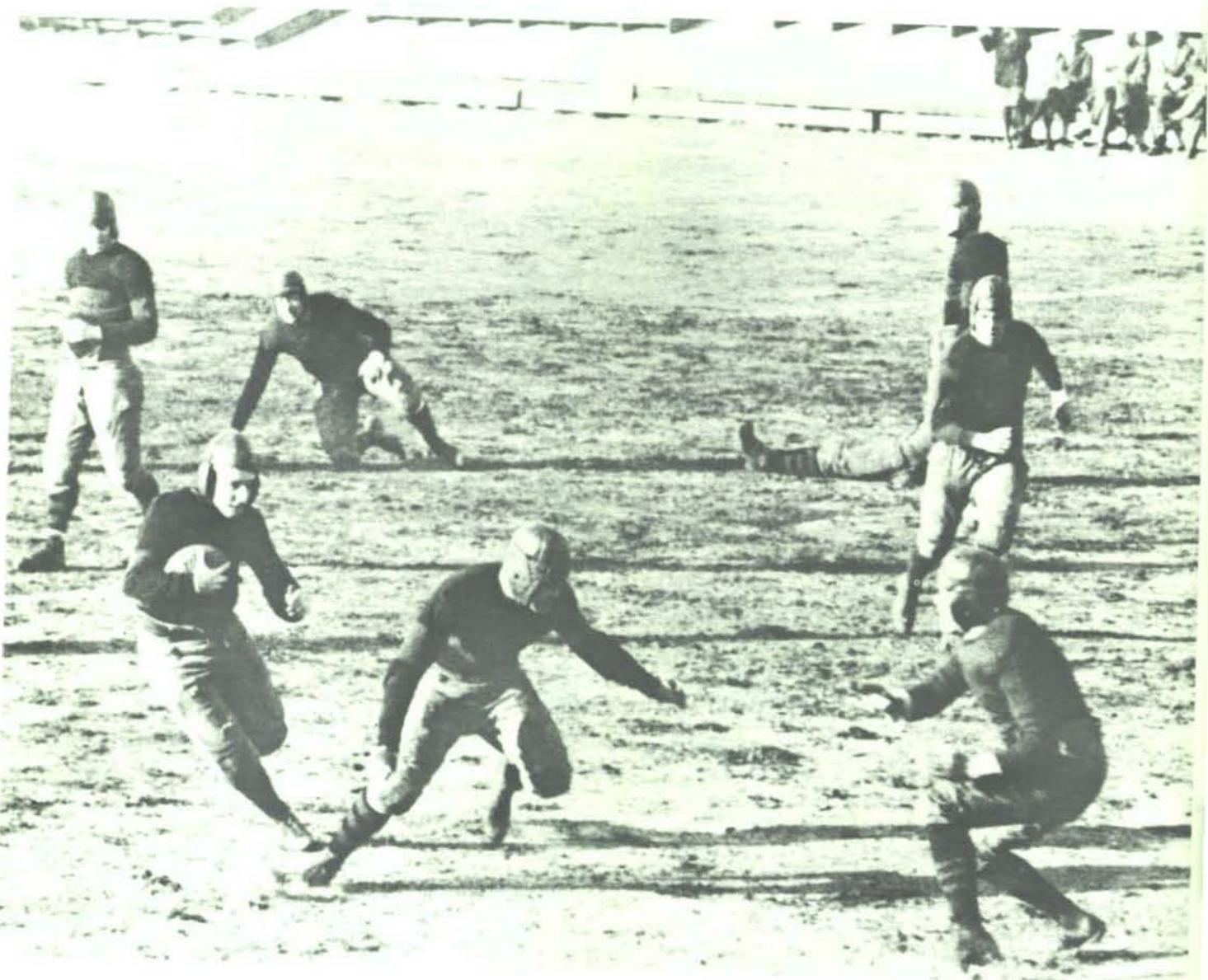
Bartlett, historian of the Wantons, described Joseph as an opulent merchant. Opulence in Newport derived from maritime trade and Wantons dealt extensively in fish, meat, lumber, horses, and spermaceti candles, trading to various West Indian ports, bringing home the usual sugar and molasses.

With the outbreak of the French and Indian War the Wantons were active in privateering. Between 1756 and 1758 Joseph Wanton Jr., Joseph's son, was licensed as part owner of three privateers: the brig *Defiance*, the snow *Africa*, and the brigantine *Scorpion*. Metcalf Bowler and Robert Goddard were part owner of the *Defiance*. Joseph Wanton Jr. would have been only twenty-eight in 1758 so obviously he could not be the middle-aged sleeper in Greenwood's painting. Whether his father was there is entirely speculation. Trade was brisk and he might very well have been there looking after family interests. Joseph was first elected governor in 1769 and continued in office for six years. During this time he was also one of a court of admiralty to enquire into the burning of the revenue cutter *Gaspee*. In a sense he was forced to carry water on both shoulders; he had some sympathy for the patriot cause but as governor he was sworn to uphold the laws. When the colony voted to raise an Army of Observation, Wanton refused to sign the bill authorizing this, was suspended in June 1775 and deposed on October 31, 1775. Wanton's sons, Joseph Jr. and William, were loyalists who left Newport on the departure of the British in October 1779, and their property was confiscated. The ex-governor was not molested by either the British or the natives. He died in 1780.²⁰

The sketches of the partygoers, although incomplete, do indicate that all of them were energetic traders, voyaging continuously between Rhode Island and West Indian islands and Surinam, that during early years of the French and Indian War their flag of truce voyages and privateering enterprises make abundantly clear that they could well have, by the long arm of coincidence, been all at Surinam to be made posthumously famous by the brush of Greenwood. I am conscious that I have not absolute proof but I am reminded at this point of Thoreau's laconic entry in his *Journal* on November 11, 1850:

"Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk."

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- 12 Robert Grieve, "Sea Trade and Its Development," in Edward Field, ed., *State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations at the End of the Century*, 3v. (Boston: Mason, 1902) 2: 422.
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RIHS Library

Football looked like a different sport in the 1920s. Players went onto the field without the array of protective equipment that shields today's gridiron heroes. But the point of the game is still the same. Here a player on the Steam Roller carries the ball while a teammate sets up to block the opponents.

Rhode Island's Pro Football Champions — 1928 Providence Steam Roller

by John G. Hogrogian*

Rhode Island sits squarely in the shadow of Boston as far as major-league professional sports are concerned. Ocean State residents generally take a rooting interest in the Red Sox, Patriots, Celtics, and Bruins. But almost half a century ago, in 1928, Rhode Island had its own National Football League champions, Providence Steam Roller. The story of that team is the story of an era of professional football much different from that of today.

In the roaring twenties, the American public found a host of popular heroes in its sporting greats. Standing with Charles Lindbergh on the pedestal of unalloyed admiration were such men as baseball player Babe Ruth, boxer Jack Dempsey, and tennis player Bill Tilden. College football players also shared this adulation, with Red Grange of Illinois, Ernie Nevers of Stanford, and the Four Horsemen of Notre Dame national figures because of their gridiron exploits. College football was an immensely popular spectator sport, with teams such as Notre Dame, Stanford, Yale, and Dartmouth drawing huge followings both in person and through newspapers and newsreels.

In stark contrast professional football was struggling to survive, a neglected stepchild in the sports boom. The National Football League was entering only its ninth season in fall 1928, and instead of roaring crowds in huge metropolitan stadia, small, intimate audiences on mostly smaller fields viewed the league's contests. Pro football held the same place in 1928 that pro

track and field holds today, a fledgling professional sport living in the shadow of a popular collegiate version. College stars had national reputations; professional stars either had local followings or labored in obscurity.

Ten clubs formed the field for the 1928 NFL race. The New York Giants (1927 champions), Green Bay Packers, Chicago Bears, and Chicago (now St. Louis) Cardinals all competed then and still compete today. Other big-city clubs in the running were the New York Yankees, Detroit Wolverines, and Frankford Yellowjackets who played in a suburb of Philadelphia. Completing the pack were Pottsville (Pa.) Maroons, Dayton Triangles, and Providence Steam Roller, representatives of smaller cities that still could compete in a sport struggling to achieve a big-league image. League membership had fluctuated through the NFL's nine-year history, hitting a peak of twenty-two in 1926 and a new low of ten in 1928. Some teams ran stable operations but others had run on financial reefs and dropped out. College stars often steered clear of pro ball after graduation and sought more secure employment.

Presiding over that precarious young NFL was Joe Carr, league president, who had gained executive experience in minor-league baseball. To him goes much of the credit for keeping the NFL alive through its lean years before World War II. Although he did much to tighten up the circuit, Carr put up with extremely loose scheduling practices in the 1920s. Instead of being fixed in the league office, the schedule was drawn up

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among the teams themselves. This decentralization resulted in teams playing different numbers of games; in 1928 the weak Chicago Cardinals scheduled only six league contests, while Frankford arranged a high of sixteen games. Yellow-jackets' unusual schedule resulted in part from a city law preventing professional sports events on Sundays. Thus the team played all its home games on Saturdays and usually traveled to the home of opponents to play a second game on Sundays. While Frankford played home-and-away doubleheaders, Green Bay Packers set up an unusual thirteen-game slate which started with four straight home games and ended with five straight road games. The Chicago Bears arranged for ten home and only three road games, one of them a trip across town to play the Cardinals. In addition to league games, teams frequently scheduled matches against non-league pro teams during the season. With only one division and no standardized schedule, the league championship was awarded on the basis of winning percentage. Squabbles sometimes broke out over this criterion of championship, with titles in 1920, 1921, 1924 and 1925 hotly contested in post-season squabbles.

Not only the NFL but also football itself had a different look in 1928 from what it has today. One-platoon, sixty-minute football was still the rule, with the league roster of eighteen men an indication of conservative use of substitutes and unfeasibility of specialists. Teams generally lined up in the single-wing formation, a deployment best suited for short yardage power plays. Only the Chicago Bears used the T-formation, and they used a conservative tight-T which also lent itself mainly to inside running plays. Neither single-wing nor basic T were good formations out of which to pass; football tacticians generally saved the aerial attack for third-and-long situations and for desperation catch-up drives. The best-known football stars in America were runners like half-back Red Grange and fullback Ernie Nevers; the era of the star passing quarterback would not dawn until the 1940s.

In 1928 the NFL had a New England outpost in Providence's Steam Roller. Organized as a professional team in 1916, the Steam Roller had played a schedule of games mostly against New England teams such as New London before joining the NFL for the 1925 season. In three

league seasons from 1925 through 1927, the team had a combined 19-17-3 record and continued to play several games a year against non-league New England rivals. Three men shared ownership and management — Charles Coppen, James E. Dooley, and Peter Laudati. Coppen wore many hats; in addition to serving as general manager of the Steam Roller, he had a budding law practice and wrote a regular sports column for the *Providence Journal*. Coppen had been sports editor of the *Journal*, but his involvement in the Steam Roller and in managing boxers led to his giving up that position. Dooley, also an attorney, was commonly addressed as "Judge." He had succeeded Willis J. Knowles, a murder victim, as judge of the Eighth District Court in 1916 and served in that post for a year before resigning; the title nevertheless stuck to him for life. A strong advocate for legal wagering on horse racing in Rhode Island, he would become president of Narragansett Park racetrack in 1938 and hold that office until his death in 1960. Laudati came to Rhode Island from his native Italy at a young age and developed a lucrative real estate business with large holdings in Florida. He also became Providence's leading sports promoter. In addition to staging baseball, boxing, soccer, and dog racing in Providence and neighboring cities in the state, Laudati also built in 1925 the Cycledrome, an outdoor stadium on North Main Street for bicycle racing, a spectator sport much in vogue in the 1920s. The man who managed bicycle racing for Laudati, Charles Turville, is often mentioned as a part-owner of the Steam Roller and even appears in the team's official picture, but he had no financial or managerial role in the football club.

Located near the Providence-Pawtucket city line on the site now occupied by E.M. Loew movie drive-in, the Cycledrome, home for the Steam Roller, seated approximately 10,000 spectators in an oval of bleachers surrounding a wooden banked cycle track. Steeply banked around turns and flatter on straightaways, this track enclosed just enough ground to fit a football field, with some slight problems. Equipped with seats and a bench for players on each straightaway, the track ran so close to sidelines that players tackled near boundary lines frequently caromed into front rows of seats. One end zone extended a regulation ten yards, but the other stretched only five yards



Courtesy Peter A. Laudati, Jr.

Players and owners of the 1928 NFL champion Providence Steam Roller. Upper row, left to right: "Pop" Williams, Orland Smith, Charles B. Coppen, James E. Dooley, Peter A. Laudati, Charles Turville, Curly Oden, Jim Jackson. Center row: Norman Garvey, Frank Hanny, Al Haddon, Clyde Smith, Jim Conzelman, coach, Milt Rhenquist, Jim Laird, John Spellman. Bottom row: Jinks Simmons, Abe Wilson, Bill Cronin, Butter Fleischman, Gus Sonnenberg, George Wilson, Jack Cronin.

before the banked track cut across it. The Cycle-drome had an intimate ambiance, so that all seats, priced at one, one-fifty, and two dollars, were actually good seats from which to view a football game. Dressing quarters for players were less agreeable; that used by home players had been built with a couple of bicycle racers in mind, so that a football team of eighteen men found the room cramped, with only two showers at their

disposal. But even that beat accommodations for visiting teams, who had no dressing room at all. Players for the guest team had to dress at their hotel, come to the stadium, then return in uniform to the hotel to shower and change. The place had a simple scoreboard, a no-frills press box, and a small area for parking, more than adequate for the number of cars on the road in 1928.

Players assembled for their first practice of the year on Monday, September 17, under direction of player/coach Jimmy Conzelman. The Steam Roller had played mediocre football in their first two NFL seasons, but posted a strong 8-5-1 record in 1927 in Conzelman's first year in Providence. Only thirty years old, Conzelman had played in the NFL with a number of teams ever since the inaugural campaign of 1920. He had a good reputation as a tactician and inspirational leader, and he came to Providence after the Detroit club of which he was both coach and owner folded in debt after the 1926 season. For his per game salary of \$292, Conzelman not only coached the team, but also played quarterback in the single-wing formation. Since the ball was usually hiked to the left halfback in this formation, the quarterback's duties included calling the plays, blocking, and receiving passes, but infrequently passing or running with the ball.

Practices were held daily from 11:00 to 1:00, and a practice game was played on Sunday, September 23, against Warlow Athletic Club of Long Island. The Steam Roller won 48-0 and turned their attention to their opening league game against New York Yankees on the 30th. Coach Conzelman released several players and came up with an eighteen-man roster to enter the NFL season. Star and glamor player, halfback George Wilson, nicknamed "Wildcat," had earned a national reputation as an All-American in 1925 at University of Washington and had joined the Steam Roller the previous season. Wildcat played tailback in the single-wing and did much of the team's running and passing. He ran powerfully and passed well in an era when passing was a secondary skill; indeed the 1928 football was thicker around the middle (much like a rugby ball of today) and thus more difficult to pass accurately. He earned his nickname by spirited play on defense. His only fault was moodiness, but that was not enough to prevent the Steam Roller from paying him \$375 per game, an exorbitant sum for an era in which most pro players received from \$100 to \$150 per game.

In the backfield corps with Wilson were Conzelman, whose best playing skill was as a pass receiver; Curly Oden, a slightly-built local favorite from Brown University who had played with the Steam Roller since 1922 and who shone

as kick returner and pass receiver; "Pop" Williams, a rookie from Connecticut Agricultural College; Jim Simmons, who came to Providence that year from Cleveland's NFL team, which folded after the 1927 campaign; and Bill and Jack Cronin, brothers who had starred for Boston College. Jack also taught and coached at LaSalle Academy, fitting his Steam Roller practices into an extended lunch break each day.

Linemen featured two wrestlers and two all-Pros new to the team. Gus Sonnenberg and John Spellman competed frequently in professional wrestling matches in the area. Sonnenberg had starred in football during collegiate days at Dartmouth, had journeyed to the midwest, and played pro ball with Conzelman in Detroit, accompanying him to Providence in 1927. Spellman had a local following from his days at Brown University, and he had reached wrestling heights by winning the gold medal, in the light-heavyweight division, at the 1924 Paris Olympics. One measure of the toughness of both was that Sonnenberg never wore a helmet and Spellman rarely did; leather headpieces without face guards were optional protection in the 1920s.

Clyde Smith and Milt Rehnquist both wore helmets and brought glowing reputations for line play with them to Providence that year; like halfback Jim Simmons, they came from remains of Cleveland's defunct club. Weighing only about 180, Smith won 1927 All-Pro honors at center for his accurate hiking on offense and aggressively mobile line-backing on defense. Rehnquist carried 230 solidly packed pounds on his six-foot frame, making him the largest man on the squad. Other linemen were Norm Harvey and Duke Hanny, veteran ends who had more skills as blockers and defenders than as pass receivers; Orland Smith, Brown alumnus attending medical school at Boston University during the week; Jack Fleischman, stubby 5'6" guard; Jim Laird, veteran of many seasons; Abe Wilson, whose primary asset was that he was George Wilson's brother; and a man who played under the name of Perry Jackson. Conzelman had heard of a star lineman by that name playing at Southwest State University in Oklahoma in 1927 and sent him a telegram offering a tryout with the Steam Roller. Jackson unfortunately was ill that summer and in no shape to play football, so his friend and team-

mate, Arnold Shockley, showed up in Providence under the name of Jackson. Shockley made the team and played three years under the assumed name. The real Jackson, meanwhile, tried out with Steam Roller in 1929 under the name of Arnold Shockley, was cut, and played one season under his buddy's name with a pro team in Boston.

Players from the New England area generally had living quarters, but those from the Midwest had to find places to stay during the season. Conzelman, Clyde Smith, Rehnquist, "Jackson," Simmons, and a few others rented rooms in the home of Pearce Johnson on High Service Avenue in North Providence. Johnson had helped found the Steam Roller in 1916, performed services like caring for equipment, and later ran the team after it dropped out of NFL and returned to local independent ball in the 1930s. Johnson's mother kept the players under her roof well-fed until she was killed by a streetcar the day after Thanksgiving. Steam Roller players also ate many a meal served by Pete Laudati's wife Madeline. Although Jack Cronin and Orland Smith had extensive activities besides football, most players held no outside employment during the season.

With the eighteen-man roster set, Conzelman and his men turned their efforts towards unseating New York's Giants as NFL titlists. The Steam Roller faced a schedule of 11 league games, eight at home and three on the road, plus two non-league contests against Pere Marquette, a strong independent pro team from Boston. They would not meet the Chicago Bears or Cardinals, but would clash with NFL's seven other clubs.

Temperatures hovered around fifty September 30, 1928, a drizzly, overcast Sunday. On that autumnal afternoon, the Steam Roller faced their first league opponent. About 5,000 assembled in the Cycledrome by kickoff time of 2:30 to see the home team take on New York's Yankees, who had had Red Grange, the nation's most famous player, in their lineup the year before. He was sitting out this season with a bad knee and in his place the club had signed another well known All-American back, Gibby Welch of the University of Pittsburgh. Yankees of course arrived at the field already in their gear, and the crowd applauded as the Steam Roller ran onto the field in black jerseys with yellow stripes around the sleeves and

large numbers on the backs (each player received one jersey and expected to make it last the entire season). The Steam Roller band, a thirty-piece unit that did no marching, played the national anthem from the bleachers, and the game began.

With only one pre-season contest against a semipro club to go on, Conzelman did not know how his team would fare against the Yankees. The game's first half established Steam Roller's character for the season. Its players shone on defense, completely foiling Welch and the New York offense, while the Providence team controlled the ball on offense with strong power running and an occasional pass by Wildcat Wilson to backs Conzelman and Simmons (the single-wing as deployed by Conzelman used ends primarily for blocking and only infrequently for pass receiving). The first half ended 20-7 in favor of Providence and, after the band played during halftime intermission, the two clubs returned to battle through a scoreless second half. The Steam Roller chalked up 234 yards on offense during the game, while the Yankees gained a mere fifty-four yards, scoring only on an interception return by Welch. Pop Williams starred with his ball-carrying, scoring two of the winning touchdowns, while the *Providence Journal* singled out wrestler Sonnenberg for his fine play in the line. Peter Laudati, every inch the sports enthusiast, held the pole of the first down marker, as he would at every home game.

During the following week, the team held its usual daily practice around midday, preparing for a visit by the Frankford Yellowjackets on Sunday. The Yellowjackets had begun their season with victories on both the Saturday and Sunday before and brought a tough, well-regarded squad to Providence. A crowd of 8,000 saw the Steam Roller drop a disappointing 10-6 decision to its visitors. The Steam Roller led 6-0 after three quarters, but the Yellowjackets scored their points in the final fifteen minutes.

Next Sunday's game against the Dayton Triangles provided an easy opportunity to get back into a winning habit. A charter member of the NFL, the Triangles played all their games on the road and had an offense so anemic that their chief tactic was to punt the ball on second or third down and hope that their opponents fumbled (the Triangles would score nine points in their seven

games that season). The Steam Roller, as expected, had little trouble winning 28-0. The only disappointing note of the afternoon — halfback Jim Simmons suffered a dislocated left shoulder.

On Tuesday night, Sonnenberg and Spellman both won pro wrestling matches at Arcadia Ballroom in downtown Providence. On Sunday afternoon, Arcadia would be equipped with a Western Union wire to receive a play-by-play account of the Steam Roller's game at New York's Yankee Stadium. Fans in Providence could pay 50 cents to hear the game announced either at Arcadia or at The Empire Theater. Some other fans accompanied the team on the Saturday night Fall River Line boat that pulled into New York in time for the team to check into a hotel for a good night's sleep. Next afternoon, Conzelman and company stepped onto the glamorous turf of Yankee Stadium, then only six years old and the home of Babe Ruth and other Bronx Bombers. Football Yankees, however, shared none of the aura surrounding the baseball club, and a crowd of 8,000 fans filled less than twenty per cent of the seats. Star back Gibby Welch had led New Yorkers to an upset victory over Frankford the previous weekend, but he could not gain much against the Steam Roller defense in this rematch. Return of an interception for a touchdown by Duke Hanny late in the final period gave Providence a 12-6 triumph, but the price of victory was loss of Conzelman as a player. In the fourth quarter, running out for a pass, he tried to change direction, his spikes caught in turf and he severely tore knee cartilage. Monday's *Journal* complimented Welch for a valiant effort in defeat and praised the Providence defense, singling out Spellman, Orland Smith, and Abe Wilson for work in the line and applauding linebacking of Clyde Smith and Al Hadden, a hard-working fullback acquired during the week from the Chicago Bears. The Steam Roller would play every Sunday at the Cycle-drome for the rest of that season.

But a 3-1 record did not hide injury problems in the Providence backfield. With the Pottsville Maroons coming the following Sunday (October 28), Simmons was out with his injured shoulder while Conzelman was hospitalized to repair his knee; he would not play again that season and would never regain his full playing skills. Wildcat Wilson took over as acting coach and devised

a backfield alignment of himself and Williams at the halfbacks, Oden at quarterback, and Hadden at fullback, with the Cronin brothers in reserve. This combination played well against the Maroons, a tough outfit from the coal-mining district of eastern Pennsylvania. Before a crowd of 8,000 the Steam Roller took the opening kickoff, drove 73 yards to a touchdown, and stayed ahead all through the 13-6 contest.

Now 4-1, the Steam Roller's next opponent — Detroit's Wolverines — had rung up a 3-0 record with a high-scoring attack built around tailback Benny Friedman, NFL's most famous player. A consensus All-American at University of Michigan in 1926, Friedman pioneered extensive use of the forward pass as a standard offensive weapon. He never hesitated to call his own number to pass the ball, usually slinging the bulbous pigskin to his receiver with exceptional accuracy. Additional skills as runner, place-kicker, and defensive back added to the box-office lure of his name. Interest in the upcoming visit of Friedman led Charlie Copen to install 500 extra temporary seats to accommodate an expected overflow crowd. Threat of rain held attendance down to 8,500 to see the confrontation. The Wolverines arrived in town a weary team, having played in Frankford on Saturday and suffered a 25-7 beating on a muddy field. The Steam Roller was boosted by the presence of Conzelman, who came out of the hospital on Thursday to coach from the sidelines on crutches. Providence's linemen rushed Friedman hard and nullified Detroit's passing attack; a touchdown pass from Wilson to Williams made the home team 7-0 victors. The Yellowjackets meanwhile were held to a scoreless tie by the Giants in New York, throwing the NFL race into a deadlock between Frankford (5-1-1) and Providence (5-1-0).

The Steam Roller had a more mellow weekend in store as the team played Saturday and Sunday games against Pere Marquette, a non-league team from Boston. With many former Boston College and Holy Cross players, Pere Marquette had shut out a string of local opponents, but lost to the Yellowjackets 14-0 in their only meeting with an NFL club. Nevertheless, the series was billed for the "New England championship." Saturday's meeting at Braves Field in Boston was won by Providence 14-7, and 6,000 saw the Steam Roller take an easy 20-0 decision on Sunday at home; the

only blot on the weekend was a hip injury suffered on Sunday by Pop Williams. While the two Providence victories did not count in NFL standings, the Yellowjackets beat Pottsville both Saturday and Sunday to move into sole possession of first place.

The top spot would pivot around results of next weekend, November 17-18, for the Steam Roller and Yellowjackets would play on Saturday in Frankford and Sunday in Providence. Despite their October loss to the Yellowjackets and injuries in the backfield, the Steam Roller rode the crest of a four-game winning streak (six including the Pere Marquette games) into that weekend. Coach Conzelman and his squad took a Friday afternoon train to Philadelphia, stayed overnight at the Hotel Adelphia, traveling by train Saturday morning to the simple stadium in the suburb of Frankford. A full house of 15,000 fans turned out to watch the confrontation between the seasoned Yellowjackets and the up-and-coming Steam Roller. Both clubs prided themselves on tough forward lines and stubborn defenses, so the first half turned into a bitterly fought scoreless duel. Both teams exchanged touchdowns in the second half for a 6-6 tie and many bruises to show for their troubles.

After relaxing for a few hours, both teams boarded sleeping cars on a midnight train to Providence. The Yellowjackets played weekend doubleheaders as a rule, but Roller players most likely felt the wear-and-tear of extended action. They had played two games that previous weekend, battled the first-place club to a tie on Saturday, and spent the night in a speeding sleeping car. To make matters worse, fullback Al Hadden's knee, injured in Frankford, stiffened up overnight. With Conzelman and Williams sidelined altogether, Simmons and Hadden able to play only sparingly, the backfield of Wilson, Oden, and two Cronins had to play almost the entire game. Rain threatened to drench the Cycle-drome, but an overflow crowd of approximately 11,000 showed up at the new starting time of 2:15 (days were growing shorter, and there were no lights) to root for their local favorites. Early in the game the Rollers scored on a Wilson-to-Oden pass and, when the final gun sounded, the scoreboard still read 6-0. Providence had rolled into first place in the NFL.

That perch at the head of the standings made the visit of New York's Giants next Sunday, November 25, a much anticipated event. Although they held only a mediocre 4-3-2 record for that season, the Giants were defending NFL champions and a popular attraction around the league. Complacency and dissension had dulled New York's performance that year, but it still featured a very strong forward line including end Cal Hubbard — considered today one of the best linemen ever — and tackle Century Milstead. All-American several years before at Yale. Another Yale All-American on New York's roster was half-back Bruce Caldwell, sensation of the 1927 college season.

Caldwell was honored by a committee of notables from his home town, Ashton, Rhode Island, in a five-minute ceremony just before the opening kickoff. After seeing Caldwell presented with a traveling bag, the record crowd of approximately 13,000 bundled up in early winter cold and snow flurries to watch the teams clash. Fans could readily see that the Giants no longer had championship edge. Jack Cronin's two touchdowns and Sonnenberg's kick of a 28-yard field goal left the crowd content with a hometown victory, 16-0. Messrs. Coppen, Dooley, and Laudati realized a tidy \$4,467 profit, as the game's financial report shows. The Giants proceeded from this defeat to lose their final three contests of the season and sink into the bottom half of the league.

Providence's *Journal* trumpeted the likelihood of an NFL championship, pointing out that the Roller had only two games left on the schedule, both against weaker opponents. The team would travel to Pottsville for a Thanksgiving Day contest and then conclude the season on Sunday at home against the Green Bay Packers. Boarding a train on Wednesday afternoon in Providence, eighteen players stayed that night in a Philadelphia hotel and in the morning traveled about sixty miles northwest to Pottsville, a small city in the anthracite coal-mining region. In that stark setting of rock and stripped ground, miners patronized their football team in large numbers; the Maroons' best fullback, Tony Latone, had worked in mines as an adolescent until showing an aptitude for running and tackling. Latone was one of three Pottsville players who had no college experience, a number high even for those early years

— STEAM ROLLER SONG —

Words and music by Don Jackson

*Steam Roller Roll, Roll, Roll
Across their Goal, Goal, Goal,
For while the band is playin', Stands are swayin'
Fans are sayin' "ROLL, STEAM ROLLER"*

*Through their line,
Around the end! That's fine!*

*And, now to swell the score, one touchdown more
So Roll, Roll, Roll!*

RHS Library

*Words to a song that kept the Steam Roller club rolling
along during their championship season of 1928.*

of NFL. The Maroons played a bruising style of football but, although they had contended for the league championship in 1925 and 1926, they had slipped into a tailender's status in 1928. Providence players did not take them lightly, however, because the Maroons were most difficult to beat on their home field and were coming off a 26-0 upset over Green Bay on Sunday, a game played in blinding snow, leaving the field a muddy mess for that Thanksgiving Contest. With overcast skies threatening more precipitation, 10,000 fans jammed Pottsville's small stadium to view a defensive battle. Mud made footing unsure and offenses erratic. Jack Cronin's touchdown in mire and Sonnenberg's extra point on place kick gave the Steam Roller a 7-0 victory.

Back in Providence that afternoon, football fans celebrated Brown's 16-13 victory over Colgate, closing out a very successful season. Only a loss

to unbeaten Yale kept the Ivy League title out of Providence.

The city's professional team, however, had a championship full in its sights as it arrived home by train that night. With their record at 8-1-1, the Steam Roller could wrap up NFL's crown with a tie or a victory against the Green Bay Packers on Sunday; second-place Yellowjackets stood at 9-2-2 with three games left to play and could not catch up without help from the Packers. Providence's players came into this contest somewhat worn down by Pottsville and only two days of rest after it. Jack Cronin, for instance, had a broken nose to care for. For help he approached Jack MacKinnon, trainer at Brown, who rigged up a primitive face mask for him that somewhat resembled a horse's blinders over his nose. With this device attached to his helmet, Cronin could play against Green Bay.

Packers' players also had reason for fatigue, concluding a three-week trip to the East. They had beaten the Giants 7-0 in the Polo Grounds on November 18, had been soundly thrashed in Pottsville 26-0 on November 25, and had dropped a rugged 2-0 game in Frankford on Thanksgiving. They brought a 5-4-2 record into this contest along with one of NFL's best backs, halfback Verne Lewellen. A good runner, defender, and the league's premier punter, Lewellen also was a lawyer who had just been elected district attorney for Brown County, of which little Green Bay was a part.

Regardless of the Packer's strengths, the crowd of 10,500 at the Cycledrome had every reason to expect their local powerhouse to clinch the NFL title. Both teams blew scoring opportunities in the opening quarter. Packers broke the ice in the third quarter on a 30-yard touchdown pass from Lewellen to Marks; the extra point made the score 7-0. The Steam Roller drove seventy-two yards in eleven plays, with a 23-yard pass from Wilson to Oden scoring the touchdown. Gus Sonnenberg added the extra point with a place kick. The game ended at 7-7, making the Steam Roller champion of NFL. The Yellowjackets lost 28-6 to the Chicago Bears that day, making their two remaining games academic exercises in a concluded title chase. The Steam Roller finished its season with an 8-1-2 league record, two non-league victories, and the highest honor in the world of professional football.

Unlike today's super bowl winners, Steam Roller players picked up no huge bonus checks for their success. As befitted the low-key, unestablished state of pro football, team members simply received their normal pay for the final game. But there was one reward, a victory banquet at the Biltmore Hotel on Tuesday evening at 6:30, where the entire team, a delegation of city and state officials, and approximately 200 paying fans celebrated the successful season. Each player received a gold watch as a memento of the season, and the team presented a loving cup to its most valuable player. Players themselves voted to decide that, settling upon their popular, good-natured coach despite the knee injury which had sidelined him for the bulk of the schedule. In a short speech, Conzelman praised his team's morale, saying that "there had not been a cross word

between any two of the players in three months, on or off the field." A variety of speakers took the floor, but farsighted words of the state's attorney general, Charles P. Sisson, most deserve reprinting:

I've seen the Roller play and talked with other men who have seen them in action, and I want to say to you in all seriousness, in my opinion professional football as played by the Steam Roller is really better football than we see on our college gridirons. I think it is harder football, and I think it is cleaner football. Every man on the Roller is a college man. He knows what a sportsmanlike game is, and he carries into professional football all the fine ethical principles that he might have gathered in college, and with it he has gained the maturity that comes to older men. The type of football you play may act as a stimulus to college and younger teams' football. I think the day is coming when pro football, if it follows the example set by Roller, will take its place with baseball as the great national professional sport.

This undoubtedly was bravado before a chosen audience of partisans, but his final prediction, so preposterous in the face of pro football's relative poverty and obscurity in 1928, did come true in approximately thirty years. After the banquet ended, the Steam Roller disbanded with players scattering to their homes and other pursuits.

Winter 1928-29 was a time for relishing achievements of the past season. Charlie Coppen, Pete Laudati, and Judge Dooley had sizeable profits to reflect upon, products of unprecedented enthusiasm which Providence fans showed as the team picked up momentum with important victories in November. Five players gained All-League honors when the NFL issued its official honor roll on December 23, naming Wildcat Wilson and Clyde Smith to its first team, and placing Curly Oden, Milt Rehnquist, and Gus Sonnenberg on its second team. Sonnenberg reached the top half of the ladder in his other sport on January 4, 1929, before 20,000 fans in the new Boston Garden, where he beat Strangler Lewis in two straight falls to capture professional wrestling's world heavy-weight championship.

All this affluence did the Steam Roller no good in 1929. Sonnenberg stayed out of football to make better money defending his wrestling title, Oden quit to take a job with an insurance com-

pany in Boston, and Clyde Smith decided to stay in his native Missouri as a coach. Conzelman didn't fully recover from his knee injury, Rehnquist missed the first portion of the schedule because of illness, and Wildcat Wilson — his salary raised to \$600 per game — played with a complacency that turned him into a run-of-the-mill back. The 1929 Steam Roller turned in a limp 4-6-2 record, while fans who kept turnstiles spinning during the previous season stayed away in droves. When the Depression gripped the nation, not even a title contender could have cured the sick gate. At the conclusion of the 1931 season, the three partners gave up and turned their franchise back to the NFL. Barely surviving Depression's depths, the NFL in 1932 fielded three teams in New York (Giants, Brooklyn Dodgers, Staten Island Stapletons), two in Chicago (Bears and Cardinals), Boston Braves (now Washington Redskins), Green Bay Packers, and Portsmouth (Ohio) Spartans (now Detroit Lions). Things would improve in 1933, and never again did the NFL have so shaky a foundation as in 1932.

Providence, no longer on the NFL circuit, continued to have post-collegiate football. Pearce Johnson, one of its original founders, organized a semipro version of the Steam Roller to play small-scale local teams in 1932. Off and on through 1964, the Providence Steam Roller played independent and minor-league pro football. The Cycledrome continued to host cycling and football until the city closed it down on November 8, 1934, citing the decrepit and dangerous conditions of its bleachers. As owner of the property, Pete Laudati turned this administrative misfortune to his advantage by leveling the stadium and building on its site an E.M. Loew drive-in movie theater. Opened in 1937, second of its kind in the nation, this drive-in still operates.

Of the players on the 1928 squad, only Conzelman had any extended connection with pro football. Although he finished his playing career in 1929, he grew in stature as a coach, leading the Chicago Cardinals for many years and taking them to the NFL championship in 1947. Other players left pro football long before it started enjoying its salad days after World War II. Five men connected with the 1928 Steam Roller still live in Rhode Island. Jack Cronin coached LaSalle Academy from 1927 through 1972, turning out several

powerhouse clubs and compiling a 274-120-19 record over forty-five seasons. Like Cronin, Curly Oden is now retired, having served the state as an investigator for many years. Orland Smith, who paid his way through medical school with pro football earnings, has had a distinguished career as a prominent physician. Pearce Johnson still lives in the same house in North Providence in which the Steam Roller players lived in 1928, and Peter Laudati, now 91 years of age, had retired and left his real estate business in the hands of Pete, Jr. These gentlemen can tell tales of pro football before television made it a national Sunday fixture and before New England Patriots were needed or created to represent this northeastern corner of the country.



From the Collections

We end with a sample of 19th-century chromolithograph advertising cards relating to Rhode Island businesses. Eye-catching, sentimental, witty, the cards were promotional devices for products and services and were given away by manufacturers and retailers to their customers. Children and adults collected the colorful cards, often pasting them into albums.

