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Figure 1. 50" x 40 1/4", Martin Johnson Heade (1819–1904), ca. 1856–1857. Courtesy of Rhode Island Historical Society.



Images of Moses Brown

Nina Zannieri

In 1981 the Rhode Island Historical Society acquired a portrait of Moses Brown (1738–1836) painted by the noted nineteenth-century artist Martin Johnson Heade. In the portrait Brown is seated in an upholstered Windsor chair at his writing table, against a stylized background (fig. 1). A search for the source of this posthumous portrait disclosed an interesting connection between this formal likeness and several of the other known images of Brown. As more images came to light there emerged a seeming contradiction between the very existence of several portraits of Moses Brown and the traditionally held notion that Brown, in accordance with his Quaker beliefs, refused to have his portrait painted.¹

Further investigation, however, helped to reconcile the contradiction: it became clear that the few portraits made during Brown's lifetime were taken surreptitiously and became the sources for those done after his death. Even though many of them were created as copies, each has special qualities that are the natural result of changes in medium, creative whim on the part of each different artist, or the wishes of the person for whom the copy was made.

The earliest known images of Moses Brown are three closely related watercolor portraits. One of these watercolors (fig. 2) was recently discovered in London, at the Library of the Religious Society of Friends, where it has been since 1844.² With the portrait is the letter that originally accompanied it, written in 1823 by Brown's daughter-in-law, Dorcas Brown, to Thomas Thompson, a Quaker scholar:

it was obtained without his knowledge—or suspicion, an acquaintance of mine—took a young man there—who has a little skill—and while he was engaged in conversation—and probably reading—to prolong the time—sketched the outlines—and afterwards saw him twice at meeting—it is a pretty good representation—but not perfect—his manner of sitting is natural but the countenance is not exactly so—it would not be compatible with the feelings of my honoured father—to have this done—but I think it admissible to have something of a resemblance of the outward form or appearance—of those we Love when their Bodies may be mouldering in the dust.³

Her comments confirm the old Quaker's desire not to be captured in a portrait and point out the difficulties created by his reluctance. Unfortunately, she did not reveal the name of the young artist who had

Ms. Zannieri is acting curator of the Rhode Island Historical Society. This article is based upon an exhibit also entitled "Images of Moses Brown," which was mounted at the Museum of Rhode Island History at Aldrich House and which ran from May 1981 to May 1982.

1. Mack Thompson, *Moses Brown: The Reluctant Reformer* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1962), 289.

2. Norman Penney to Rayner W. Kelsey, June 14, 1918, Archives, Moses Brown School, Providence, R.I.

3. Dorcas Brown to Thomas Thompson, Aug. 31, 1823. The original letter is in the Gibson Manuscript Collection, Library of the Religious Society of Friends, London (Gibson, Vol. I, 41). This material is taken from a partial transcription of that letter by Norman Penney, Austin MSS, 13, "Personal," Quaker Archives, Rhode Island Historical Society.

Figure 2. Watercolor on paper, 4" x 5", signed "— P." (possibly Joseph Partridge), ca. 1823. Photograph courtesy of the Library Committee of the Religious Society of Friends, London.



4. Barbara Mason, Library of the Religious Society of Friends, personal communication. I have not examined the actual painting, and I am grateful to Barbara Mason and her colleagues for their assistance in this matter.

5. Dorcas Brown to Thomas Thompson, Aug. 31, 1823, Austin MSS, 13, "Personal," R.I. Hist. Soc.

6. Rayner W. Kelsey, *Centennial History of Moses Brown School, 1819–1919* (Providence, R.I., 1919), 35.

7. Dorcas Brown to Thomas Thompson, Aug. 31, 1823, Austin MSS, 13, "Personal," R.I. Hist. Soc.

Painted the portrait, nor did she mention exactly when the events described in the letter took place. The only clue to the identity of the artist is the single legible initial "— P.," printed in the lower right hand corner of the portrait.⁴

The most unusual feature of this portrait, one that distinguishes it from all other known images, is the white covering over Brown's otherwise typical black, broad-brimmed, Quaker hat. In a postscript to her letter, Dorcas Brown called attention to his hat: "Thou will observe his Hat is covered with white linnen which he wears in warm weather."⁵ It has been suggested that Brown, who suffered from rheumatism, vertigo, insomnia, fevers and fainting spells during much of his life, "wore white linen on his hat in summer to deflect the sun's rays."⁶ This in turn suggests that the portrait was painted during the summer, probably in 1823.

Possibly the most compelling aspect of this particular image is also revealed in Dorcas Brown's letter: "I ventured one day to hold it [the portrait] before him—and asked if he knew who it resembled—he smiled—and inquired 'where I got it'—I replied that 'I was not at liberty to tell'—and it passed off pleasantly."⁷ Given Moses Brown's feelings about portraits, it seems likely that this image was the only likeness of himself that he ever saw or whose existence he ever suspected.



Figure 3. Watercolor on paper, 5" x 5", attributed to Joseph Partridge (1792–ca. 1833), ca. 1822–1823. Photograph courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library.

His reaction seems to have been that of a rather kindly elderly man who, though aware of his relatives' desire to have a keepsake portrait, was neither impressed with his own looks nor with the need to have them recorded.

Dorcas Brown's letter also contains a reference to a copy of the picture that she planned to keep as a "precious memento."⁸ This reference helps to explain the existence of the two other watercolor portraits of Brown. One is the well-known and often-reproduced painting, traditionally attributed to Joseph Partridge, and now in the collection of the John Carter Brown Library (fig. 3). The third watercolor portrait, recently discovered, shows Moses Brown reading a newspaper and is signed "J. Partridge, 1823" (fig. 4).⁹ In all probability, Joseph Partridge, who resided in Providence and painted landscapes and miniature portraits in watercolor from December 1821 until February 1824, was the artist responsible for all three watercolor images of Moses Brown—one original and two copies.¹⁰

All three of the watercolor portraits show a marked consistency of style. The setting is the same. Brown is seated in a comb-backed Windsor chair at his writing desk, with his back to the window. He is dressed

8. *Ibid.*

9. I would like to acknowledge the generosity of Arthur B. and Sybil B. Kern for bringing this important portrait to my attention and for sharing their information on Joseph Partridge. The Kerns have recently completed a manuscript for publication on the life and works of Joseph Partridge.

10. The earliest reference to Partridge in Providence is an advertisement that appeared in the *Providence Gazette*, Dec. 26, 1821. It announced that the artist would be teaching watercolor drawing and would execute "correct miniatures taken either from the living or dead subject."

identically, wearing a simple, tan, high-collared frock coat with matching waistcoat. Even the treatment of the subject's face is the same, right down to the wart on the end of his nose.

A close examination of these portraits, however, does reveal a few significant differences. Only in the Friends' Library image (fig. 2) is the white linen hat cover included and is Brown's hair long and unkempt. Another notable difference is that he is seated in front of the desk and window, instead of between the desk and window as he is in the other images, and there is no wallpaper border running along the inside of the window. The other Partridges (fig. 3 and fig. 4) more closely resemble each other, although in figure 3, Brown is reading an issue of the *Rhode Island American*.

The differences that exist in the Friends Library's watercolor portrait (fig. 2) and the description of how it was painted suggest that it was the first one executed by Partridge. It may have been a kind of working sketch that was improved and altered in the subsequent copies. It is clear, for instance, that Brown's hair was neaten up, the hat cover was removed and a more pleasing shape was given to the hat brim in the later versions. It also seems logical that the location of the desk, under the window where natural light would have been available, is in fact what the young artist saw when he was brought in to do the initial sketch (the desk is crowded with writing materials as if Brown had ac-

Figure 4. Watercolor on paper, 4" x 5", signed "J. Partridge, 1823." Private collection.



tually been interrupted at work) and that he moved the desk in the later versions to balance the picture. Possibly Brown's relatives regarded the original watercolor as a less polished rendering, which might explain why Dorcas Brown was willing to send it to Thomas Thompson while deciding to retain a "copy" for herself and the other members of Brown's family.

On August 1, 1833, the first in a series of advertisements for "LIKE-NESES" rendered by William Henry Brown appeared in the *Providence Daily Journal*. The artist invited the citizens of Providence to call at his room to "examine the Likenesses of several gentlemen of this City, which he has taken from memory, after a casual glance at the original."¹¹ One of the images on view in his room might well have been the silhouette of Moses Brown (fig. 5), now in the collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society. The silhouette, though unsigned, contains many of the stylistic and technical devices for which William Henry Brown is noted: the figure faces right, it is embellished with shading and an india ink ground, and the image is finely cut and of high quality. In fact, this artist is known for his silhouettes of men, particularly elderly men.¹²

As the only full-length image of Moses Brown, this silhouette adds dimension to our understanding of how he might have looked towards the end of his life. He appears as a rather portly gentleman of ninety-five years, stooped with age and rheumatism, yet still out and about, seemingly unwilling to neglect his various social, religious, and political duties. The image aptly illustrates the following observation made by Stephen Gould in a letter to Thomas Thompson: "Brown attended all the sittings of the [Friends] Meeting and came to committees tho' so much unwell with the Rheumatism as to render a crutch necessary for him to walk."¹³ No doubt on one of these occasions—a trip to the Friends Meeting or a trudge up College Hill—William Henry Brown was able to catch the necessary "casual glance at the original" from which he later cut the silhouette.

In July of 1836, another attempt was made to capture Moses Brown's likeness in a portrait. Family tradition credits William Jenkins Harris, step-grandson of Moses Brown, with sketching the elderly man from a hiding spot in the bushes outside Brown's library window.¹⁴ The best recounting of this story comes from a letter written in 1887 by James Greene, William J. Harris's cousin:

Moses Brown's antipathy to leaving a portrait of himself was well known, and one day, so my recollection of the story is, when my cousin Wm was at his house, the subject came up and the venerable old gentleman became a little annoyed at the persistent urging of his family to lay aside his objections to having his portrait painted, and fled away from them to his library and seated himself before a window. My cousing accidentally observed the favorable position he had unwittingly assumed, and concealing himself among the shrubbery, made the sketch.¹⁵



Figure 5. Cut black paper silhouette with india ink wash on light paper ground, 12 1/4" x 7 5/8". Attributed to William Henry Brown (1808–1882), ca. 1833. Courtesy of Rhode Island Historical Society (RHi x3 4060).

11. *Providence Daily Journal*, Aug. 1–8, 10, 1833. A shorter advertisement announcing Mr. Brown's relocation to the second floor of the building on Main and College streets appeared in the *Providence Daily Journal*, Aug. 12, 13, 15, 19, 21, 1833.

12. Alice Van Leer Carrick, commenting on William Henry Brown's silhouettes of men, noted that "Brown's men are unsurpassed." She also believed that, in her opinion, "Brown was at his best when he cut shades of kindly old men." Alice Van Leer Carrick, *Shades of Our Ancestors* (Boston, 1928), 150, 159.

13. Stephen Gould to Thomas Thompson, June 20, 1823, Austin MSS, 20, "General," Quaker Archives, R.I. Hist. Soc.

14. William Jenkins Harris, son of Ebenezer Bates Harris and Sarah Lockwood Harris, was the grandson of Phebe Waterman Lockwood Brown, Moses Brown's third wife. Harris Chart, Rhode Island Historical Society Genealogical Charts, Vol. I, and Genealogy of the William Harris Family, R.I. Hist. Soc.

15. James Greene to Augustine Jones, Sept. 17, 1887, Austin MSS, "General," Quaker Archives, R.I. Hist. Soc.

16. Clifford Monahan noted the similarity between the Harris sketch and the William Henry Brown silhouette in "Silhouette Exhibition," *Rhode Island History*, IX (1949), 27.

It is evident from his sketch (fig. 6) that William J. Harris relied upon the earlier likenesses of his step-grandfather by Joseph Partridge and William Henry Brown. Even if luck had provided him with an opportunity to begin his sketch, he had to borrow from the work of more skilled artists in order to complete his likeness of Brown. The similarity in the setting (the subject at his desk by the window) makes the sketch seem like a clumsy copy of one of the Partridge watercolor likenesses done in profile. The William Henry Brown silhouette of Moses Brown in turn seems to have influenced Harris's treatment of the face, resulting in the almost caricaturish quality of the nose and chin in the finished drawing.¹⁶

Although an amateur effort, the Harris sketch became the source for a very popular engraving of Moses Brown (fig. 7) which was used frequently as an illustration in books and magazine articles. The steel plate was engraved between 1836 and 1839 by Thomas Pollock, who was employed for a short time by H. A. Hidden & Company, the Provi-

Figure 6. Watercolor and pencil sketch on paper, $4\frac{3}{4}'' \times 3\frac{3}{4}''$, William Jenkins Harris (1808–1893), ca. 1836. Bequest of Julia D. and Franklin R. Cushman. Courtesy of Rhode Island Historical Society (RHi x3 4059).



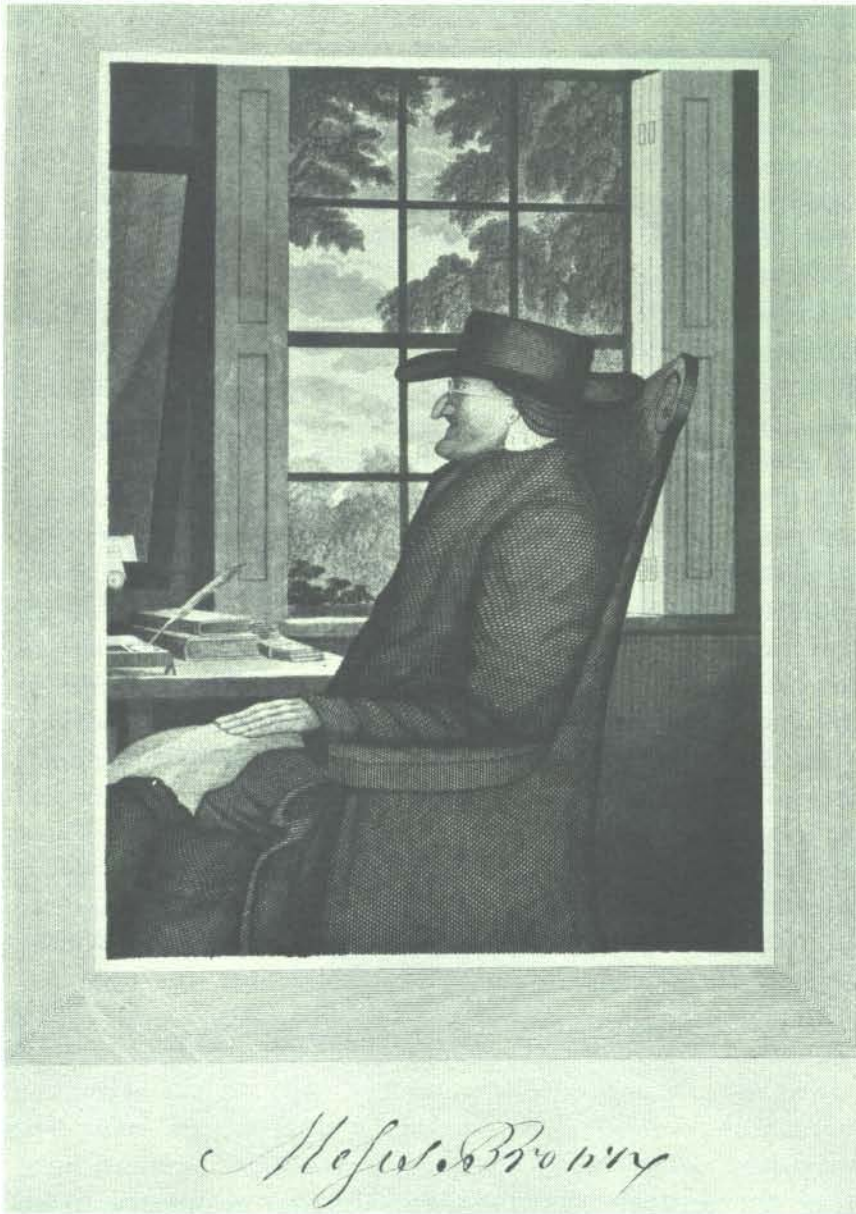


Figure 7. Steel plate engraving, 12" x 9", Thomas Pollock (engraver), ca. 1836–1839. Gift of George W. Davis. Courtesy of Rhode Island Historical Society.

dence printing and engraving firm.¹⁷ Pollock's engraving was in turn the source for the formal oil portrait of Moses Brown painted by Martin Johnson Heade (fig. 1). While the Harris sketch is generally cited as the source for the portrait,¹⁸ it is obvious that the engraving (fig. 7) and the oil portrait share certain details that do not appear in the sketch. They both show Brown, almost in a full figure pose, seated in a draped Windsor chair, against detailed—though different—backgrounds.

Martin Johnson Heade, painting in Providence from 1856 to 1858, was commissioned by John Russell Bartlett to paint five portraits, all of prominent Rhode Islanders, of which four were to be presented to Brown University. The set of four paintings included likenesses of Esek Hopkins, Abraham Whipple, and Henry Wheaton, as well as the por-

17. A steel plate, thought to be the original Pollock plate, is in the Archives of the Moses Brown School, Providence. I am grateful to Frank E. Fuller, Archivist, Moses Brown School, for bringing it to my attention.

18. Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr., *The Life and Works of Martin Johnson Heade* (New Haven, Conn., 1975), 18, 217.



Figure 8. Comb-backed Windsor chair, Philadelphia, ca. 1765. This photograph from the exhibition "Images of Moses Brown" recreates the setting that appears in many of the portraits. Bequest of Julia D. and Franklin R. Cushman. Courtesy Rhode Island Historical Society.

19. *Ibid.*, 18.

20. The inscription on the back of the Harris sketch states that it was the source for a portrait by John Good. To date no additional information has been discovered to confirm this statement. The inscription probably dates from 1944, when the image was given to the Rhode Island Historical Society.

21. Eleanor B. Monahan, "Catalog of the Rhode Island Historical Society Furniture Collection, #61. Windsor Chair" *R.I. History*, XIX (1960), 26–27.

22. *Ibid.*

23. Nancy Goyne Evans, Registrar, Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, personal communication.

24. *Paintings in oil and water colours by early and modern painters, collected by Rush C. Hawkins, cataloged by C. H. Collins Baker, and deposited at the Annmary Brown Memorial at Providence* (London, 1913), 73–74.

25. Theodore Bolton and George C. Groce, Jr., "John Wesley Jarvis: An Account of His Life and First Catalog of His Work," *Art Quarterly*, I (1938), 307–309.

trait of Moses Brown. Portraits make up only a small proportion of the total works painted by Heade, who is known primarily for his landscapes. The portraits he did were for the most part uninspired; in most instances, he merely copied other artists' renderings. Heade's portrait of Moses Brown, however, is considered by Theodore Stebbins to be the "most successful" of those commissioned for Brown University because "Heade had no formal painting to duplicate . . . which gave him the freedom to work on his own."¹⁹

A copy of the Heade oil portrait of Brown, by an unknown artist, currently hangs in the front lobby of the Moses Brown School.²⁰ Compositionally it is identical to the Heade painting; the artist's inferior abilities, however, are evident in his treatment of the subject's hands and his poor use of color.

In the Heade portrait, as in many of the other images, Moses Brown is shown sitting in what has been traditionally called his favorite Windsor chair (fig. 8).²¹ In the Partridge watercolors, the chair is not covered, while in the Harris sketch, the Pollock engraving, and the Heade portrait, the same chair appears upholstered with a padded cloth. Brown's more advanced age at the time of the later images might account for this difference. An examination of the Windsor chair once owned by Moses Brown, and now in the collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society, reveals that at some point he "had the legs cut down, the saddle removed, and the whole frame upholstered"²² (a series of tack holes run along the underside of each arm of the chair where the drape was at one time attached). These changes would have made the chair more comfortable and warmer. Apparently this kind of alteration of Windsor chairs was not uncommon in the nineteenth century.²³

Another group of images of Moses Brown has been identified, and while they form a distinctly different group from those already discussed, they are themselves closely related. The first, an oil painting, now in the collection of the Annmary Brown Memorial, dates from about 1824, and it is the earliest formal portrait of Moses Brown (fig. 9). The catalogue of paintings for the Annmary Brown Memorial attributes this portrait to John Wesley Jarvis, a New York artist, but it is not a particularly strong attribution.²⁴ For one thing, Jarvis's lack of stylistic consistency makes it difficult to identify his work; for another, the artist was not known to have worked in Rhode Island.²⁵ The sole basis for the attribution appears to be information provided by the painting's previous owners, Colonel and Mrs. Rush C. Hawkins, and since Mrs. Hawkins was a relative of Moses Brown, she might well have been passing on information which had come down through the family.²⁶

What is clear, though, is that the portrait attributed to Jarvis was the source for a late nineteenth-century steel plate engraving of Moses Brown by John Angel James Wilcox, a Boston engraver (fig. 10).²⁷ The new engraving was considered a better likeness than the earlier engraving by Pollock. It was more appropriate to the tastes of the time and was applauded for its less severe treatment of Brown's nose and chin,

which threatened "to meet" in the Pollock engraving (fig. 7).²⁸ In fact, Augustine Jones, who often lectured on the life of Moses Brown, believed that the Moses Brown School should have a copy of the image, and in 1904 he presented a large framed photograph of the engraving to the school.²⁹

The last portrait of Moses Brown (fig. 11), commissioned in 1907 by Obadiah Brown Hadwen, was painted by Henry E. Kinney of Worcester, Massachusetts.³⁰ Hadwen recalled that the portrait was done "from an engraving I think emanating from the Friends School."³¹ He was probably referring to a version of the Wilcox engraving, either the large photograph given to the school by Jones or a smaller print. In any event, the resemblance between the engraving (fig. 10) and the Kinney portrait (fig. 11) is clear, though Kinney's treatment of the subject's facial expression has altered it somewhat, giving it a warmth not evident in the engraving. Obadiah Hadwen, who was also related to Brown, claimed that his recollection of Moses Brown was quite clear: "I was about twelve years of age when he died, very often saw him in my boyhood, and regard the painting as very good indeed."³²

In the final analysis, one might be tempted to ask which of all the images most closely resembles Moses Brown. It would seem that the ones done during his life, though created without the benefit of a sit-

26. *Paintings, Annmary Brown Memorial*, 73–74. The painting is also referred to as "an oil painting, owned by Col. Rush Hawkins . . . said to be by a famous artist, John Wesley Jarvis, painted in 1824." Augustine Jones to Rayner W. Kelsey, June 20, 1918, Austin MSS, 20, "General," Quaker Archives, R.I. Hist. Soc.

27. A steel plate, thought to be the original Wilcox plate, is in the Archives of the Moses Brown School, Providence. I am grateful to Mr. Fuller for bringing it to my attention.

28. Augustine Jones to Rayner W. Kelsey, June 20, 1918, Austin MSS, 20, "General," Quaker Archives, R.I. Hist. Soc.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Obadiah Brown Hadwen to Clarence P. Brigham, September 17, 1907, R.I. Hist. Soc. Museum, Collections File (1907.6.1).

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*

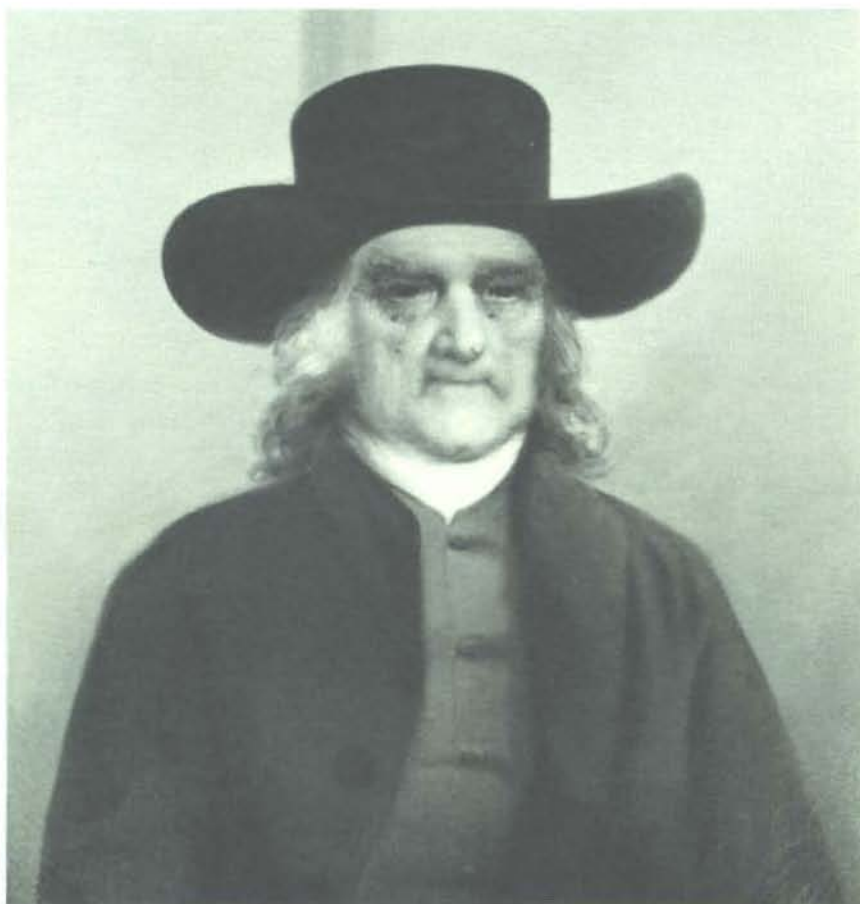


Figure 9. Oil on canvas, 26 1/4" x 21 1/4", attributed to John Wesley Jarvis (1780–1840), ca. 1824. Photograph courtesy of the Annmary Brown Memorial, Brown University.

33. Stephen Gould to Thomas Thompson, April 14, 1823, Austin MSS, 20, "General," Quaker Archives, R.I. Hist. Soc.

34. Thompson, *Moses Brown*, 281.

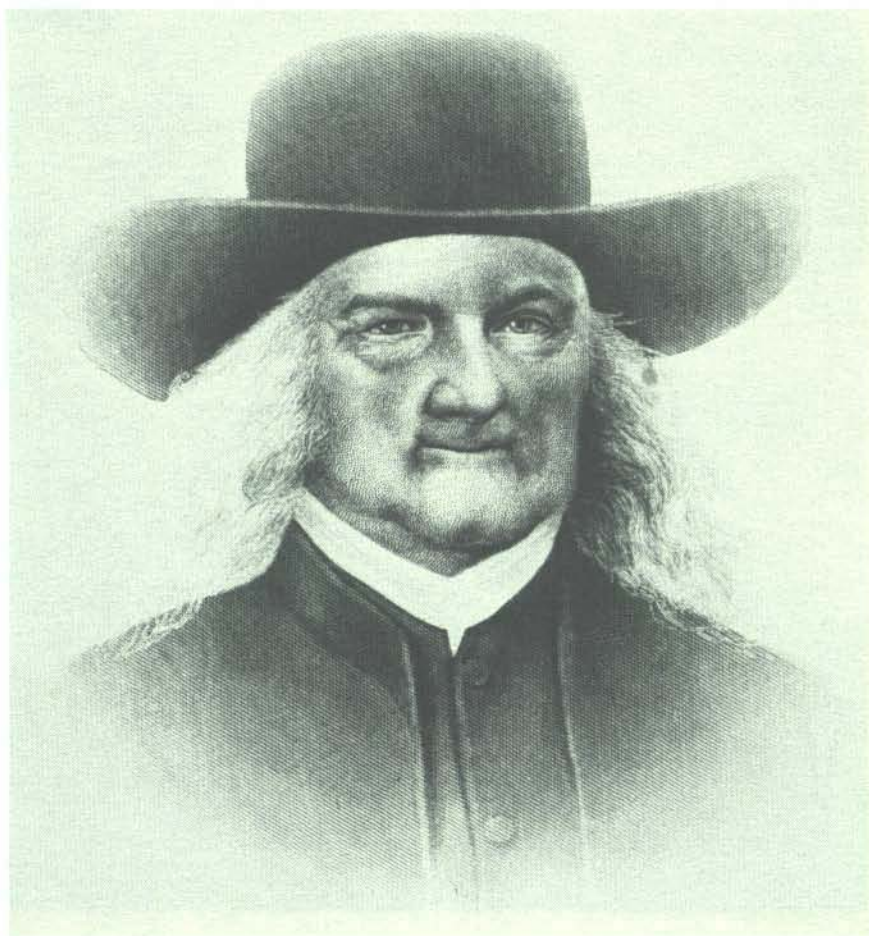
35. Kelsey, *Centennial History*, 35.

ting by the subject, would be the most accurate likenesses, particularly given the propensity for relatives to encourage the use of artistic license in posthumous portraits. But the only obvious alteration which is evident in all the posthumous portraits is their failure to record the wart on the end of his nose.

This particular feature, described as being red and "as large as a small cherry," apparently troubled Brown, not out of vanity but because it ached.³³ However, when he was advised to have it removed, Brown decided it would be best to leave it alone.³⁴ The wart appears clearly in the Partridge watercolors and in the Jarvis portrait. In the Harris sketch and the sketch taken from it, the wart is hinted at as Brown seems to be wearing some sort of nose protector, possibly to keep his spectacles from irritating it. Only in the William Henry Brown silhouette is the wart missing (yet the hawk-like nose given to the subject is certainly no more becoming).

The wart, "happily obliterated in the standard portraits," does not appear in any of the later portraits.³⁵ In fact, examination of the Heade portrait under an ultraviolet light revealed that the nose was originally longer, similar to the way it was presented in the silhouette. Possibly someone thought that Brown deserved to be more attractive in such a formal portrait and had the nose bobbed.

Figure 10. Steel plate engraving, 9³/₄" x 6¹/₄". John Angel James Wilcox (engraver), ca. 1856–1890. Photograph courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society (RHi x3 2765).



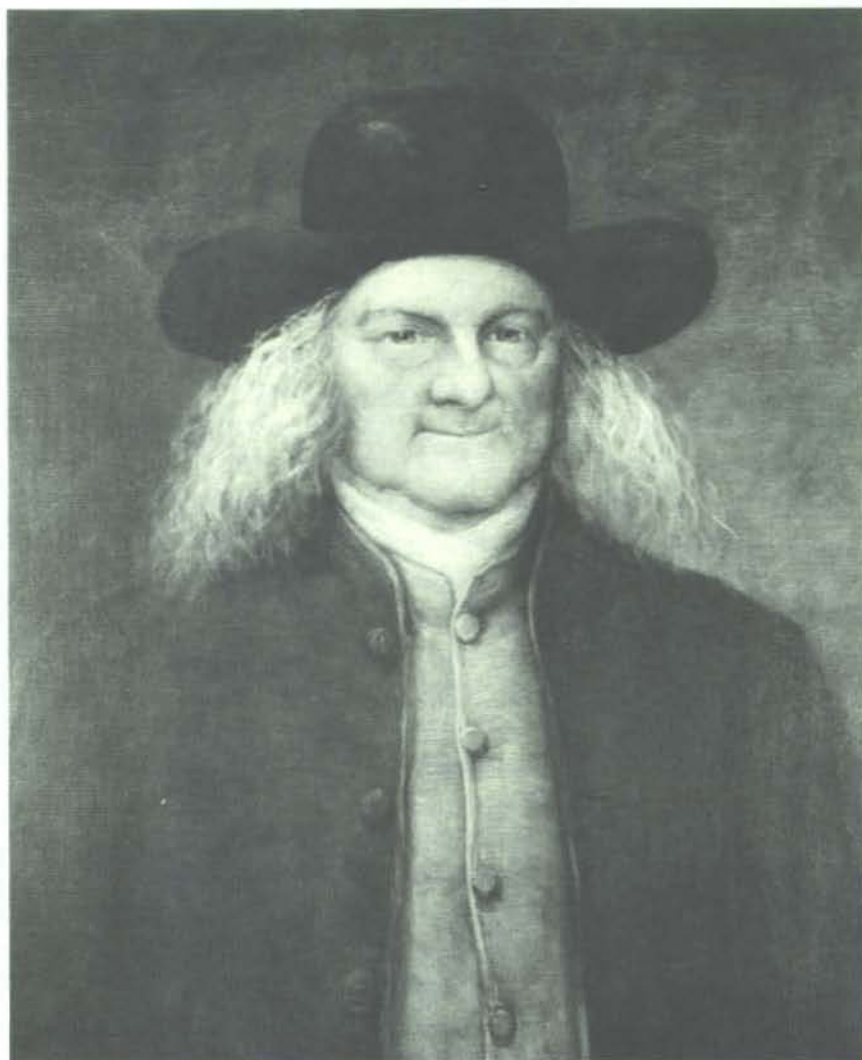


Figure 11. Oil on canvas, $31\frac{1}{2}'' \times 26\frac{1}{2}''$, Henry E. Kinney (1866/7–1954), 1907. Gift of Obadiah Brown Hadwen. Courtesy of Rhode Island Historical Society (RHi x3 3128).

It was probably just the sort of fuss that Moses Brown had hoped to avoid by refusing to sit for a portrait. It seems, though, that Brown's great popularity during his long, full life, and his place in the history of Rhode Island as a Quaker leader, businessman, and reformer and philanthropist, almost dictated that somewhere along the line an image would be created, whether he approved of it or not. In fact from the number of portraits that survive, it appears that the ingenuity of his admirers often triumphed over his reticence.

Impoverished Politics: The New Deal's Impact on City Government in Providence, Rhode Island

David L. Davies

Mr. Davies is Chief of Research and Evaluation for the City of Providence's Department of Planning and Urban Development. He wishes to thank James T. Patterson for his valuable comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

Before the Great Depression, the last hope of the destitute, disabled, and unemployed in Providence was either the compassion of the City Council or private charity. Life-sustaining food, fuel, clothing, and shelter were local governmental responsibilities. Poor relief was a serious charge in ordinary times and an awesome burden as the Great Depression deepened. That burden would have surely tested the resiliency and responsiveness of municipal institutions, the level of government closest to taxpayers' daily lives. The Depression dramatically altered many institutions of American life, and Providence city government might have evolved into something very different if local officials had directed social welfare efforts. The New Deal, by emphasizing the federal role in welfare, prevented such a test. As it happened, the similarities between the conduct and ethics of Providence government in 1929 and 1939 are more striking than the differences.

The Great Depression did not force major change in the city's governance, in large part because state and federal programs minimized the policymaking role of local officials in relief, the major issue of the decade. City-appointed officials became a relatively unimportant extension of a larger administrative apparatus. Local officials returned, with the onset of New Deal programs, to perennial political preoccupations—ethnic and personal rivalries.

The city's officials did not protest this subordination. They did not demand primary responsibilities in looking after their poor and unemployed, or, for that matter, any new responsibility at all. Councilmen reacted to the emergency of the first years of the Depression with impassioned rhetoric and a willingness to tackle difficult economic and political issues. After the 1932 election that brought Franklin D. Roosevelt and Governor Theodore Francis Green to power, however, local officials quickly disappeared from public debate and official correspondence on welfare issues (at least they are silent in the surviving public records). City taxpayers retained a large and increasing responsibility for underwriting the local share of welfare costs throughout the 1930s. Their local elected officials, however, did not direct expenditure of those local dollars. State and federal officials assumed the responsibil-

ity for directing welfare expenditures. Local officials, moreover, delayed political accountability for relief costs by using the expedient of long-term borrowing. The poor benefited from new standards for social work administration introduced by state and federal bureaucrats and by sizable federal relief expenditures. But if every benefit has a cost, the poor family's gain was Providence's loss: the city government missed the opportunity of a century to rise above "business as usual."

Providence in 1930 was the second largest city in New England with a population of 253,000 inhabitants. The capital city of the smallest and most densely populated state, Providence contained almost 40 percent of Rhode Island's population. The city's population was far from homogeneous. About 70 percent were either foreign-born or of foreign-born parents, 26 percent of whom originated in England or Ireland and 21 percent in Italy. Other ethnic groups included Armenians, French Canadians, Germans, Greeks, Lithuanians, Poles, Portuguese, Russians, Swedes, and Syrians, while blacks comprised 2 percent of the citizenry.

On the eve of the Depression, Providence's government was, by all appearances, already a weak and unstable institution, ill-prepared for a major crisis. A weak mayor and strong council form of government confined the mayor to presiding over council meetings and wielding occasional tie-breaking votes. A bicameral council of thirteen aldermen and thirty-nine councilmen controlled the city administration. Department heads reported to this legislative body of fifty-two members, not to a single individual. (No other American city of 200,000 to 500,000 residents had a larger council; Minneapolis was the second largest with twenty-six.) An absence of discipline within the political parties and ever-present ethnic rivalries compounded the diffusion of authority. The mayor was a Democrat; the governor and General Assembly were solidly Republican. The city's antiquated accounting system provided little control over expenditures. The city's economy relied on jewelry, metalworking, and textiles. Jewelry firms did not prosper in hard times, and textile mills had been migrating south for many years. In 1929, Providence seemed poised for disaster.

Most of Providence's councilmen were nominal Democrats. Amendment XX to the state's constitution, adopted on November 6, 1928, had finally eliminated property qualifications for city voters, and Democratic strength in poorer and more ethnic wards asserted itself at the next opportunity—the election held in November 1930. In that election, Democrats gained a majority for the first time in both the Board of Aldermen and the Common Council.

As in many other northeastern cities, the Irish dominated city politics. Once Democrats controlled patronage, the roster of choice city jobs became a collection of Irish surnames. Italo-Americans, however, were a more vocal and aggressive political force in Providence than in other cities in the region. Italians were active in both parties, with

1. *Providence Journal*, Sept. 13, 1930. "Jakey" was American slang for a ginger-flavored intoxicant from the Caribbean.

2. *Ibid.*, Nov. 12, 1931.

3. *Ibid.*, Dec. 30, 1930; *Records of the Providence Board of Aldermen*, XXXIII, 254-255.

4. *Providence Journal*, Dec. 2, 1930.

5. *Providence Magazine*, Nov. 1931, 358.

6. Brown University Bureau of Business Research, *Brown Business Service*, VIII (Dec. 14, 1931), Report 5, 22. The bureau determined that families of five required \$10.25 weekly for subsistence. Brown University Bureau of Business Research, Fact Finding Committee, Governor's Conference on Employment and Relief, *Employment and Unemployment in Rhode Island*, Report No. II (June 13, 1932), 1.

power concentrated in only two of the city's thirteen wards. In Wards 13 and 4, Italo-Americans controlled all offices and ward committees.

With a cumbersome government, ethnic divisions, mature economy, and unstable political parties, Providence entered the Great Depression. Almost from the beginning, city officials and private agencies spoke freely of "crisis." In September 1930, Alderman C. Walter Pabodie, chairman of the Special Committee on Conditions at Dexter Asylum, warned that a large number of "jakey" cases taxed the city's poor fund to the limit. (The limit in this case was \$10,000 owed to the state for institutional care of derelicts fond of Jamaican ginger spirits.)¹ As months went by, however, the unprecedented seriousness of the crisis became apparent.

The Community Fund and Family Welfare Society received the first flood of victims; the latter delivered services to 4,000 families in 1931 as opposed to 500 to 600 in "normal times."² Civic leaders and private agencies formed the Providence Emergency Unemployment Committee to coordinate efforts and provide relief with jobs, funded by private subscriptions, that paid fifteen dollars a week. It was not until July 1931, however, that the committee's head publicly acknowledged the limits of private responsibility for relief. By that time, the total number of "outdoor relief" recipients had increased almost threefold from the 3,610 recipients of November 1929.

Reacting to the growing unemployment, the City Council reflected traditional approaches to charity. In December 1930, the council requested that all city employees donate 2 percent of their wages to the Milk and Fuel Fund from which the director of public aid was to purchase milk, bread, and coal for needy families.³ Along with volunteerism, residency requirements also revealed the city's traditional approach to charity. The city sought to take care of its own, but only its own. The council found that a recent ordinance requiring all city workers to be qualified electors had thrown 100 municipal employees out of work. It struggled to retain current city employees while imposing some sort of residency requirement. Councilman William Lovett expressed concern that outsiders might have jobs while citizens were being thrown onto relief.⁴

City politicians also joined in other voluntary schemes to provide for unfortunates. The City Council formed a special Milk Fund Football Committee to oversee a benefit game between Providence College and Rhode Island State College at Brown Stadium. Reporting that tickets were selling rapidly, Sol Bromson, a Republican alderman from affluent Ward 2, encouraged fans to "attend the game—Root for your favorite—and thus make sure that the needy and unemployed of Providence will have food and fuel during the dark days of winter."⁵ Cooperative efforts and charitable impulses seemed adequate remedies to some. Analysts at the Brown University Bureau of Business Research recognized in 1931, however, the growing severity of conditions: "Relief has obviously been merely supplementary; families of five do not live on \$16 a month."⁶

As business did not revive, the City Council struggled with the realities of the deepening depression. The number of poor, dependent, or jobless assisted by the city almost tripled between 1930 and 1931, from 545 to 1,490. In 1932 the number more than tripled again, this time to 5,335.⁷ Providence's goal was to provide for relief needs until such time as the state could supply additional assistance. Proclaiming a "keep your self-respect policy," Mayor James E. Dunne implied that the problem was still manageable at the local level: "We are going to attempt by close supervision and through use of any additional appropriations the finance committee can make out of the reserve fund to care for our problem until more money is made available by the state."⁸ By the fall of 1931, both the city and state were reassessing their respective roles. Having spent \$307,000 for outdoor aid in fiscal 1930, the chairman of the city's Finance Committee, Peter F. Reilly, hoped to provide for increasing relief rolls through the conservative expedient of departmental fund transfers (shifting line items in the regular operating budget). In any event, Reilly did "not intend to let anyone go hungry in Providence," but "if it is given out that a huge sum has been appropriated for public aid, there will be crowds of people asking for help who perhaps do not really need it. The problems must be handled in [a] scientific manner."⁹

As in other states, municipal officials waited for leadership from the State House in the form of outright grants of interest-free loans. That kind of relief was not forthcoming in Rhode Island under Republican Governor Norman S. Case. Providence Democrats and Republicans, therefore, called a truce and unanimously passed a resolution for unprecedented tax-anticipation loans. Democrat Frank Duffy introduced the necessary resolution and Republican Sol Bromson moved passage. When the object was locally funded relief, the council's resolve was bipartisan.

Local politicians did disagree on the specifics of some relief issues, but they compromised as conditions worsened. In March 1931, city officials split on whether municipal departments would cooperate with efforts of private citizens to provide relief and hire the Providence Emergency Unemployment Committee's workers who were earning fifteen dollars per week. The committee had money for more than 1,000 short-term jobs, but it lacked the necessary employers. The committee asked the city to create temporary positions in municipal departments. After consulting with union representatives, a minority in the Board of Aldermen and a majority in the Common Council decided to approve jobs that paid prevailing wages, even if that meant fewer hours for each worker. Republicans and a few Democrats, including the mayor, wanted to provide jobs at the lower rate paid to those on private relief. They insisted that half a loaf was better than none. The majority Democrats, however, were sensitive to rumors of a plot to reduce wages everywhere, with city departments in the vanguard. They continued to insist on prevailing wages, and, as a result, blocked the funding of any



James E. Dunne (1882–1942). This photograph was taken in 1919, when Dunne was serving as a councilman from Ward 3. He was elected Mayor of Providence in 1927, an office he held until 1938. From Providence City Manual, 1919.

7. Providence Governmental Research Bureau (PGRB), *Newsletter*, Dec. 1938, No. 45.

8. *Providence Journal*, Oct. 5, 1932.

9. *Ibid.*, Sept. 28, 1931.

10. *Ibid.*, Mar. 18, 1931.

11. *Ibid.*, Apr. 17, 1932, Sept. 30, 1937.

12. *Ibid.*, Nov. 14, 1931.

13. *Ibid.*, Sept. 22, 1931.

14. *Cleveland News*, Dec. 7, 1931 (in the files of the President's Organization on Unemployment Relief, RG 73, National Archives, Washington, D.C.).

15. *Providence Journal*, Dec. 9, 1931.

jobs. Council President Lovett explained his insistence on prevailing wages: "We are 100 percent in favor of putting them to work, but under American hours of labor and American conditions . . . is it fair to tell men they must work 44 hours for \$15? This is a progressive country. Are we going back to the days of slavery?"¹⁰ Yet one year later, in April 1932, these same councilmen, anticipating a \$1,000,000 budget deficit, joined in a unanimous vote to reduce city wages by 10 percent.¹¹

By November 1931, the City Council approved its own plan for employing 550 men on public works. Rush Sturges, the Republican alderman from affluent Ward 1, insisted that the men should receive the prevailing wage—fifty-two cents per hour—for common labor. Sturges also pointed out: "These figures are not important, but the principle is. These men should not be made to feel they are working as city wards. It is the only way they can keep their self-respect. They should not be made to work with slave drivers standing over them and paying them about 20 cents an hour."¹²

Within a few months of each other, a labor Democrat and a staunch Republican had stood up for higher relief wages, both having invoked the image of wage slavery. The 550-job plan, financed entirely by city appropriations, passed both chambers unanimously. The council's evolution into a governing entity that created and implemented social policy thereby reached its zenith. Almost as if the council itself recognized that this level of responsibility was a little frightening, the relief debate—as expressed in the public record—quickly evaporated. The council routinely approved funding over the next few years, without controversy and virtually without comment in the official proceedings or in the local press.

Gradual state and federal advances into social programming prompted the city's retreat. A bipartisan consensus on relief objectives also existed at the state level. J. Howard McGrath, state chairman of the Democratic party, supported Republican Governor Case's program of 3 percent state relief loans, "reserving the right to make constructive criticism."¹³ Despite some bickering, the General Assembly unanimously approved Case's program. In Ohio, a state where urban-rural conflict and entrenched conservatism hindered relief, a Cleveland newspaper commended Rhode Island: "The expeditious action evidently was made possible by political harmony and agreement as to methods. Though it might be criticized as giving the executive too much control of legislation, it certainly represents the quick work befitting emergencies."¹⁴

Not all of Rhode Island's local governments, however, appreciated the opportunity to borrow money from the state at 3 percent interest. The Providence City Council resolved to spurn such aid and to rely instead on the city's resources. Alderman Burke pointed out that whereas Providence, up to December 1931, had appropriated \$620,000 for relief work, the state had appropriated nothing.¹⁵ Frederick Peck, the State Finance Commissioner and a Republican, indicated in March 1932 that

only ten cities and towns had taken advantage of the program and that only two more had indicated their intention to do so: "This would seem to indicate that many of the towns have no serious unemployment problem and are perfectly able to finance their own requirements without assistance from the state."¹⁶ [Providence eventually borrowed \$1,000,000 from the state in 1932, a year in which the city's unemployed climbed to over one-third of the work force.]¹⁷

Theodore Francis Green, running ahead of Roosevelt, unseated Case in 1932. Green promptly proposed a \$6,000,000 aid plan for cities and towns to meet relief needs. The plan would cancel \$2,500,000 in relief loans already extended to localities and provide an additional \$3,000,000 out of state funds. The program ran counter to Republican doctrine that state aid should be business-like and well within conservative debt limitations. Doctrine or no, Republicans lined up in support of the essentials of Green's plan. The secretary of the Republican City Committee in Providence expressed support for the plan at the first public hearing. After some minor compromising, the bill sped through the General Assembly without a dissenting vote.

Economic conditions alone did not bring about these consensus, bipartisan positions, either at the state or local level. Other sections of the country had far more serious economic problems accompanied by bitter ideological and political divisions. Industrial production and employment in Rhode Island and Providence followed national trends, bottoming out earlier and deeper in 1932. The largest manufacturing decline was in textiles, and the greatest difficulties were outside of Providence in the Blackstone Valley and in Bristol County, which had unemployment rates over 50 percent in 1932.¹⁸ Statistics from all sectors of Providence's economy show the Depression's impact, but relative to other major cities the decline was more manageable. The state and the city had some bright spots. No local government in Rhode Island, for instance, went into default. Bank failure is a standard yardstick for measuring one aspect of the Depression's impact, but Rhode Island's banks generally weathered the storm. The state began and finished the decade of the thirties with sixty-eight institutions. By the beginning of 1931, Rhode Island banks had the largest cash reserves since 1918.¹⁹ The mood in Rhode Island seemed to be concerned with retrenchment, not panic. Substantial property wealth, especially in Providence, helped cushion the shocks for institutions, although individual and family hardship were real and pervasive.

Nevertheless, prior to Christmas 1931, businessmen sponsored Providence Day discounts to attract shoppers, and all sales volume records were "smashed."²⁰ The somewhat desperate enthusiasm of 1931 receded, however, as the Depression got worse. Unemployment climbed from about 7 percent in 1929 to around 32 percent in 1932 (or about 35,000 workers).²¹ By 1933, net retail sales in Providence were half those of 1929, and 800 fewer stores existed (out of 4,036 in 1929).²² Textile profits in some products recovered early. In 1934, Martha Gellhorn,

16. *Ibid.*, Mar. 5, '932.

17. Brown University Bureau of Business Research, *Employment and Unemployment in Rhode Island*, Report No. 1 (May 31, 1932), 26.

18. *Ibid.*

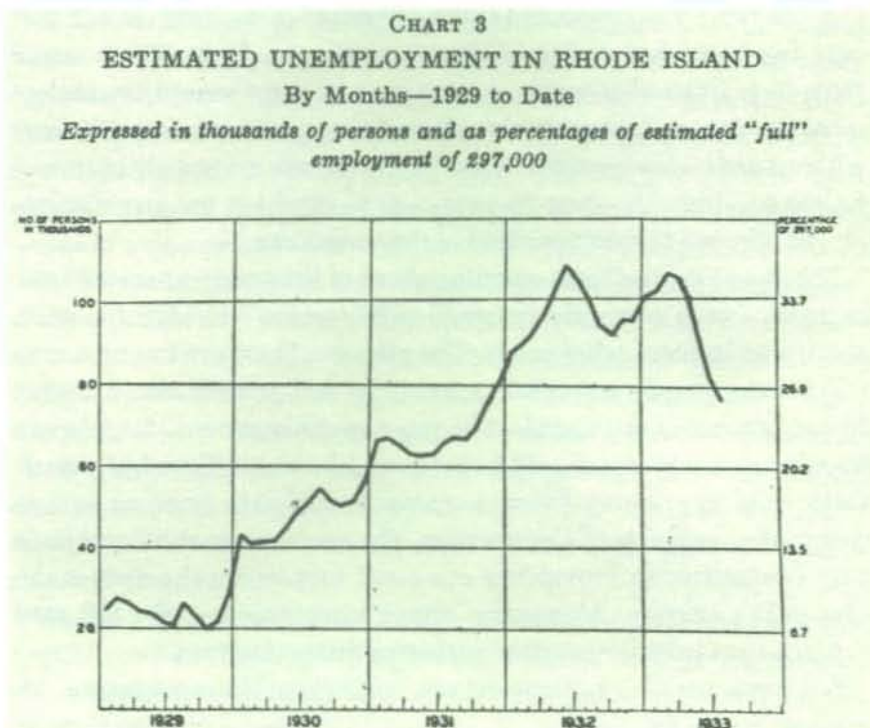
19. *Providence Magazine*, Jan. 1931, 5.

20. *Ibid.*, Dec. 1931, 385.

21. Brown University Bureau of Business Research, *Employment and Unemployment*, Report No. 1, 26.

22. *Providence Journal Almanac*, 1937, 73.

From Brown Business Service, X
(Oct. 27, 1933), Report 2.



23. Martha Gellhorn to Harry L. Hopkins, Dec. 19, 1934, FERA-WPA Narrative Field Reports, Harry Hopkins MSS, Box 66, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y. See also James T. Patterson, ed., "Life on Relief in Rhode Island, 1934: A Contemporary View from the Field," *Rhode Island History*, XXXIX (1980), 79-91.

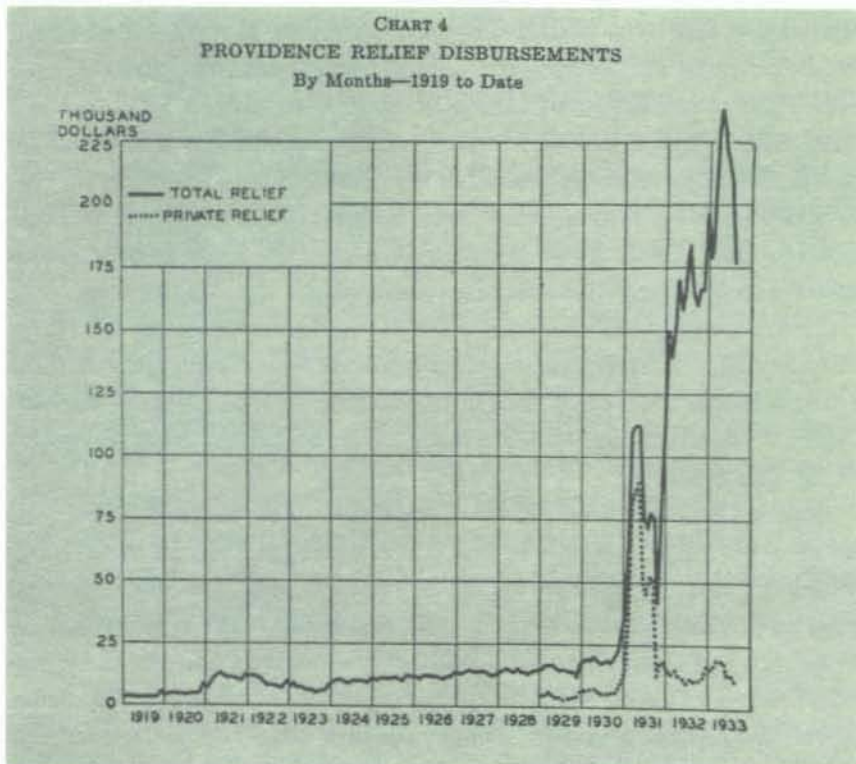
24. *Providence Journal*, Oct. 1, 1933.

25. PGRB, *Newsletter*, Oct. 1937, No. 32.

a roaming federal investigator, reported to Harry Hopkins: "The mill owners I saw didn't seem as cheerless as their Massachusetts colleagues though it has now become a ritual for mill owners to weep about their impossible lives and how no man can make a decent living any more. One of them, however, in a burst of candor, admitted that the whole group had cleaned up in 1933 in a way which resembled war profiteering and that any textile manufacturer who hadn't was such a mutt that he deserved bankruptcy."²³

The city government adjusted to the Depression; it did not confront a real fiscal crisis at any specific time. Real property values supported city tax revenues, and valuation losses were far less in Providence than in most other cities. A *Providence Journal* editorial in October 1933 reported a 4.1 percent decline in real estate valuations in the city since the 1931 peak, and concluded that "the showing is an excellent one after four years of economic disturbance."²⁴ Between 1932 and 1937, assessed valuations fell 14.9 percent nationwide, 15.8 percent in nearby Massachusetts, and as much as 34.7 percent in Ohio. Rhode Island valuations decreased only 6.2 percent in the same period.²⁵

Despite this firm foundation for meeting relief costs out of current tax revenues, Providence avoided the immediate tax hikes and voter unrest that accompany pay-as-you-go policies. Unlike many cities, Providence could get credit. When Mayor Dunne called for tax-anticipation notes in November 1931 to raise \$300,000 for relief, he established Providence's long-range financing program. Between 1932 and 1938, Providence borrowed some \$9,000,000 for relief. Other cities



From Brown Business Service, X
(Oct. 27, 1933), Report 2.

in the region financed relief out of current revenues. So while Providence paid \$2.14 per capita from current revenues in 1934, Boston paid \$18.25, Worcester \$10.54, and Hartford \$12.03.²⁶ In many states, strictly enforced debt limits and overspending in prosperous years forced cities to rely on current revenues. Borrowing relief funds, on the other hand, delayed political accountability for higher tax bills for a few years. Without the pain of immediate higher taxes, poor relief did not require difficult choices and political controversy.

Local relief costs did not figure prominently in the review of city finances prepared in 1936 by the Providence Governmental Research Bureau (the predecessor of the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council): "Providence seems to have weathered the usual difficulties occasioned by the depression in a manner much more satisfactory than have most other cities. Municipal services have been rendered without appreciable curtailment; interest and principal payments on the public debt have been maintained; all essential relief has been provided; and municipal revenues have been sustained so that no very serious problems have been created by tax delinquency or accumulated deficits."²⁷

The City Council enthusiastically accepted federal relief money, even when the federal contribution was only one-third of total costs under Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and Public Works Administration (PWA) programs. The first inflow of federal dollars under the New Deal was through FERA, channeled through the State Unemployment Relief Program.

The state relief program was part of the administrative apparatus set

26. International City Management Association (ICMA), *Municipal Yearbook*, 1937, 329.

27. PGRB, *A Financial Review of the City of Providence*, Sept. 1936, summary.

28. Robert T. Lansdale to Aubrey Williams (Memorandum on Rhode Island), June 27, 1934, Hopkins MSS, Box 59, Rhode Island Field Reports, Roosevelt Library.

29. Gellhorn to Hopkins, Dec. 19, 1934, Hopkins MSS, Box 66, Roosevelt Library. See also Patterson, ed., "Life on Relief," *R.I. History*, XXXIX (1980), 86-91.

30. ICMA, *Municipal Yearbook*, 1937, 413.

31. PGRB, *A Comparison of Public Relief Expenditures*, Oct. 1935, 25.

32. ICMA, *Municipal Yearbook*, 1937, 413.

33. Henry W. Mann, *Manufacturing in Rhode Island*, Rhode Island State Planning Board, Special Report No. XIII (Dec. 30, 1937), 63.

34. *Providence Journal*, Mar. 3, 1936.

up to supervise local welfare and relief programs. It conditioned Providence officials, and welfare directors in other towns, to centralize control. Federal staffer Robert Lansdale reported to Aubrey Williams in a field report: "All investigation for need is controlled by a State social work investigation force headed in the State office in Providence. This is the tightest arrangement I have discovered. It of course permits no argument. The State determines the budgetary needs and the towns must accept them [likewise all expenditures by localities are controlled in advance]." ²⁸ While Martha Gellhorn reported to Harry Hopkins that in Massachusetts "administrative incompetence had become a menace" to poor relief, the situation in Rhode Island was different: "The unemployed themselves are getting pretty good service, as these things go." ²⁹

State relief aid was not absolutely crucial to Providence's ability to finance job programs, but it was more generous than in most other states. Of the \$13,000,000 expended in Providence for relief between July 1933 and December 1935, only \$5,000,000 was contributed by FERA (38.6 percent). The state program provided \$3,200,000 (24.8 percent), leaving Providence with the balance of \$4,800,000 (36.6 percent). (Contribution averages for the entire country were 71.8 percent federal, 10.1 percent state, and 18.1 percent local.) ³⁰ Rhode Island contributed a greater percentage of state and local funds than any other state. It is important to note that despite Providence's diminished responsibility for program content and administration, the local contribution in tax-supported dollars matched the federal effort and exceeded the state's generosity.

This state and local self-reliance did not result in lower benefits for the poor: in 1935, Rhode Island ranked eighth among all states in monthly relief benefits per family. Providence in 1934-1935 provided average relief benefits per family of \$35.94 per month. ³¹ (The average for eighty-nine cities over 100,000 population was \$30.60. Boston led all with \$50.93.) ³² By way of comparison, the average monthly wage for manufacturing workers in Providence was \$75.58 in 1935. ³³

Conditioned to state supervision, Providence officials worked relatively smoothly with WPA administrators, most of whom were former state bureaucrats. When problems arose, inefficiency or red tape was generally at issue, as in the wholesale transfer of workers to WPA projects. Democratic party leaders censured WPA administrator J. Burleigh Cheney for "lack of cooperation." Cheney replied, "You can't play politics with empty stomachs. There are no politics in WPA and there won't be any." ³⁴

"Politics" in fact permeated upper echelons of state and federal programs. City officials seeking to use federal programs for political advantage had to skirt statewide supervisors well-schooled in political expediency. The first state administrator, George S. Cody, was forced out by FERA-WPA field representative R. C. Branion, with Harry Hopkins's approval, because of alleged payroll and expense account abuses. Cody

had a protector in Governor Green, however, who resisted firing Cody for fear that recently ousted budget director and political foe Thomas McCoy would use the information in his public campaign against the governor. Cody quietly resigned to become a state parole officer. Roosevelt Democrats quickly tagged his successor, J. Burleigh Cheney, as politically dangerous. As Hopkins counseled Branion over the telephone: "This thing in Rhode Island is getting very hot. Here this guy Gerry [Senator Peter Gerry] walked out on us and on the President. This fellow Cheney is Gerry's henchman, and every other Democrat is raising hell because we keep a man who is tied up with Gerry."³⁵ They resolved to force Cheney's resignation, which occurred months later. (Gerry was an incorrigible maverick Democrat.) Cheney's successor was Farrell D. Coyle, who apparently had his political loyalties in order. On relief issues, virtually all political maneuvering was at the state and federal levels. Evidence is lacking that politics guided actual distribution of dollars and jobs. Unpredictable and complex rivalries within both parties created a kind of political stalemate that allowed state and federal social workers to maintain professional standards.

A precarious political balance at the city level owed much to Democratic infighting and ethnic rivalries. Republicans remained competitive because of the dissension in Democratic ranks and the similarity of party platforms on socio-economic issues. In 1936, Colonel

35. Branion and Hopkins, Aug. 25, 1936, Transcripts of Telephone Conversations with State Relief Directors and Other Officials, Hopkins MSS, Box 66, Roosevelt Library.



Some key state leaders during the early New Deal: John W. Haley, Frederick S. Peck, Norman S. Case, and Frank E. Ballou. The photograph was taken in the State House in 1932. Courtesy of Rhode Island Historical Society (RHi x3 4791).

36. P. H. Quinn to James Farley, Sept. 10, 1936, President's Official File 300, Box 90, Roosevelt Library.

Patrick H. Quinn, former state Democratic chairman, warned James Farley, a presidential aide, of upcoming Democratic setbacks in Providence municipal elections: "We are hoping that there may be such a change in the personnell of nominations for city offices in Providence that our municipal ticket will look like a 'new deal' and attract back the support of the (in my opinion) thousands of loyal Democrats who certainly will not support the present municipal officers and who might remain away from the polls altogether." Quinn held that Mayor Dunne was a "fine fellow" but had been tarred not only by political sins of the past ten years "but with those of some of the most asinine members of the Common Council who ever acted in public."³⁶ He concluded that Dunne would not be renominated. Dunne led the Democratic ticket, but was returned to office by a mere 791 votes. In 1932 Dunne had prevailed by 23,762 votes, in 1934 by 14,285. (The president's aides were not ordinarily interested in local elections, but Rhode Island attracted their attention after a Republican, Charles Risk, was elected to Congress in a 1935 special election, an election with implications for the New Deal's continuing appeal.) As the New Deal progressed, the Providence Republican party and independent movements grew in strength.

Ethnic rivalries also prevented formation of a unified Democratic machine that could tilt relief favors to loyalists. The anomalies of Providence ethnic politics stood out in Ward 13, the Federal Hill section of the city. Predominantly Italian and containing more relief cases than any other ward in Providence, Ward 13 displayed an independent Democracy and its own brand of competitive Republicanism. The red flag for both movements was the symbol of "Tammany Hall," opposition to which drove Italian Democrats into alliances with Republicans and created Italian Republicans. Relief was only one of many issues. Ward politicians gave it only passing notice in their election campaigns. Ethnic pride was a far greater concern.

By the 1930s the Italians of Providence had secured a durable political base in city and state politics. (The Italians of Boston had much more difficulty gaining political influence proportionate to their numbers.) Italo-Americans took over ward committees of both parties in wards 4 and 13 in Providence, beginning in the 1920s and consolidating in the 1930s. General political disunity provided opportunities to expand Italo-American power. The factions and close votes in the City Council gave elected Italo-Americans much more influence than they might have held in a government dominated by a powerful mayor or a cohesive party.

Italian Democrats controlled wards 4 and 13, but were not subservient to Irish Democratic leaders. Democratic aldermen Ventrone, Parente, and Luongo often voted with Republicans against "Tammany." Alderman Parente and Councilman D'Agnew eventually broke with the party to build independent factions. In the election of 1934, the first since the New Deal programs had begun, former Representative

Torelli, a Democrat, urged Federal Hill voters to break the back of Tammany and vote straight Republican.³⁷ An independent stance was also important for Italian Republicans. The best showing of Republicans on the "Hill" occurred after party insurgents took nominations away from regulars.³⁸

Providence's Italian newspaper, *The Italian Echo*, strikingly reveals the complexity of political attitudes within the Italo-American community. Ethnicity, unemployment, and the New Deal did not necessarily add up to Democratic votes. Although the *Echo* honored Al Smith, it waged vitriolic warfare against Tammany, Roosevelt, and Italian Democrats ("pagnottisti" or hirelings). Prior to the New Deal it warned: "Both nationally and locally the Democratic party is controlled by elements hostile to the immigrant groups. . . . No amount of distortion and hokum can obscure the fact that only at the hands of a Republican Administration can the so-called foreign groups receive fair-play and an equal opportunity."³⁹ The *Echo* was not unconscious of the suffering within the community, but its suggested remedies stressed action of a European variety: "An Emergency Dictatorship that could interpret relief in terms of the country as a whole, with the dispassionate outlook of a general in war, should be established. Somebody with the forcefulness of—the comparison seems inevitable—Mussolini. . . . America may yet find that it needs a bit of fascist tonic to revive her sleepy and loose liberalism."⁴⁰ After the New Deal had established a track record, a new editor was no kinder to Roosevelt:

The purpose of the New Deal, both national and local, is to keep the masses down, to keep them under control. The device has been effective as we see hundreds of citizens of Italian birth or extraction actually *terror-stricken* because of the threat held over them by the New Deal feudal lords who administer relief. . . . Roosevelt himself represents a group that is congenitally opposed to everything Italian. He cooperated with the League of Nations against Italy and today he clandestinely cooperates with the Spanish Soviet against the German and Italian fascists. Why! BECAUSE AMONG HIS ADVISORS ARE REDS WHO WANT TO SEE FASCISM DESTROYED.⁴¹

But, as the *Echo* observed a week later, citizens of Italian extraction in fact voted for Roosevelt in large numbers, and voters in wards 4 and 13 consistently returned Democratic candidates. Yet the strident positions of the *Echo* suggest attitudes and beliefs within the Italian community that vote totals do not explain. Many Italians consistently supported Republicans and independents, and many ethnic voters had ambivalent opinions about Roosevelt.

Italo-American Republicans like Benjamin Cianciarulo, deputy speaker of the House, rose to prominence in the state Republican party, but Cianciarulo must have found that his heritage was a liability in scaling the Yankee-dominated party hierarchy. Yet the Republican party

37. *Providence Journal*, Nov. 2, 1934.

38. *Ibid.*, Oct. 1, 1938.

39. *The Italian Echo*, Aug. 26, 1932.

40. *Ibid.*, Nov. 13, 1931.

41. *Ibid.*, Oct. 30, 1936.



Rush Sturges, in a photograph from a 1934 broadside issued during his campaign for reelection as a city alderman in Providence. Sturges died in 1967. Courtesy of Rhode Island Historical Society (RHi x3 4792).

42. *Providence Journal*, Nov. 26, 1935.

43. *Ibid.*, Feb. 9, 1939.

actively sought Italian votes, and in close city and state elections a Democratic majority in Italian wards might not be as important as the size of that majority in determining the outcome in an election. In the 1934 mayoral race, Democrat Dunne beat Republican Collins in Ward 13 with 74 percent of the vote, and in Ward 4 with 66 percent. In 1938, the same two candidates competed for Italian votes, but Dunne came away with only 58 percent in Ward 13 and 51 percent in Ward 4. Republican Collins, however, was the election winner with a plurality of 4,951. In the two Italian wards, 7,471 voters supported the Republican, more than enough to put him over the top.

Despite the independence of Italian politicians, many did not seek to change the system that allowed machine control of party caucuses. Rather, they sought to take over the existing system. "Good government" reforms were suspect. In November 1935, Providence played host to the National Municipal League, which held its forty-first annual conference at the Biltmore Hotel. In the heady company of Judge Samuel Seabury ("the scourge of Tammany") and municipal expert Dr. Thomas Reed, Democratic Councilman Peter Reilly called the Providence form of government out-of-date: "Providence city government is cumbersome, antiquated, wasteful, and . . . there is no central responsibility anywhere. . . . Patronage is rife; there is practically no control over expenditures; deficits are created without anyone knowing about it and no one is responsible. And in the background is a caucus set-up perfectly adapted to perpetuating machine control."⁴² The conference concluded that Providence needed a city manager and proportional representation, and over the next few years, the *Providence Journal*, the League of Women Voters, Republican Mayor John F. Collins and others pushed for an appropriate charter change. The city manager was seen as a nonpolitical, strong executive, and proportional representation promised an end to machine control of caucuses. But other voices encouraged Italian Democrats to see the proposed charter as a means to exclude "racial groups" from representation. In February 1939, John O. Pastore called the charter "a sugar-coated pill," forced on the people of the city by "the swanky East Side crowd."⁴³ Italo-Americans were sufficiently represented within the existing system to tolerate if not assist in its perpetuation. The bipartisan Italian campaign against "Tammany" did not result in a unified Italian effort to break the machine's control of nominations.

Although incumbent politicians could avoid changes in the political system, they could no longer avoid the repercussions of those years of easy borrowing at the beginning of the Depression. The long-deferred tax hikes came back to haunt officials in the late 1930s. As taxes inevitably increased, patronage and corruption became major political issues, not so much because of glaring abuses but because debt-service costs made the usual waste more visible. Occasional stories appeared in the press that encouraged citizens to question whether city officials were profiting from relief appropriations. Commissioner of Public

Works Charles A. Maguire's attempt to retain his post while undertaking lucrative PWA consultancies was one example. A former Democratic alderman from Ward 4, Angelo Parente, urged voters at a Republican rally to "turn out the crooked politicians" by voting a straight ticket. "Mr. Maguire has been a decided asset to the Dunne-Ganier machine," he added.⁴⁴

Republicans and independents prevailed in key 1938 state and city contests, and voters rejected a proposed \$27,000,000 state bond issue to finance PWA projects. John F. Collins, in the Republican, Independent Citizens, and Good Government column, defeated Dunne. The Democrats lost a citywide office for the first time since the suffrage was extended to non-propertied citizens in 1928. Fusion candidates for the City Council in the low-income wards 11 and 12 defeated Democrats, including Raymond Shawcross, president of the aldermen. Democratic incumbents were not benefiting from all those years of dispensing relief.⁴⁵

In contrast, Pawtucket voters reelected Democratic Mayor Thomas McCoy with a 69 percent plurality. A closer look at McCoy's administration might reveal how a strong city boss could make relief and patronage work to his advantage despite state and national trends to the contrary. Perhaps the ethnic differences between Providence and Pawtucket provide an answer. Yet in large heterogeneous cities like Pittsburgh, local Democrats effectively used relief dollars to expand the influence of their political organizations. Providence Democrats missed this opportunity.

Forces from without and within directed or acquiesced in the impoverishment of Providence politics. Relief administration played a central role. The federal government extended the carrot, and the state applied the stick. The easy-going anarchy of Providence political life ensured that no local official could amass power by finding loopholes in job programs. Millions of dollars spent on jobs and public works projects provided risks and opportunities. Providence took and got neither.

Providence had not been found wanting in its initial response to the economic calamity of the century. City officials generally said and did the right things, while the responsibility was theirs alone. Had the New Deal been delayed two or three years, Providence might have displayed vision and capacities far beyond expectations. This experience might have provided a base on which to develop local approaches to the welfare and revitalization problems of later decades. Mistakes would have occurred, but they would have been local mistakes, largely funded with local dollars. As it happened and has continued to happen, local government kept the onus of a disproportionate share of the cost while higher levels of government set the priorities and took the credit, either for program results or for the grudging enlightenment of local officials. It is only fair to add that if the jobless of Providence had had a choice, they would have been loath to gamble on local competence and professionalism. Under state-federal direction, the poor of Rhode Island re-

44. *Ibid.*, Oct. 11, 1938.

45. Three letters to James Farley in President's Official File 300, Box 98, Roosevelt Library, mention the 1938 setbacks for the Democratic party. Thomas P. McCoy found the Democratic collapse in Providence astounding. See McCoy to Farley, Dec. 16, 1938, *ibid.* J. J. Cunningham cited the fraudulent actions of caucus officials and injudicious distribution of patronage as reasons why many Democrats deserted the party. Cunningham to Farley, Dec. 22, 1938, *ibid.* James H. Kiernan explained the losses as due to a number of factors: waning appeal of the New Deal, relief recipients were voting Republican, people were fearful of taxes and opposed to expensive public works bond issues, and some other reasons. Kiernan to Farley, Nov. 30, 1938, *ibid.* Dunne claimed that the amount of money spent by the Republicans in the past eighteen months was unprecedented and that the new voting machines were to blame for his own defeat. Dunne to Farley, Dec. 19, 1938, President's Official File 300, Box 90, Roosevelt Library.

ceived relatively fair and uniform assistance. But Providence government, denied issues of substance, focused instead on the insubstantial—personal and ethnic rivalries.

The conventional view of the Great Depression has fiscal necessity forcing the federal government and the nation's cities into a new partnership. Certainly many cities across the country had neither the means nor the will to provide for the Depression's victims. For these cities the New Deal was a godsend. In the specific case of Providence, however, the New Deal was less of a partnership and more of a buy-out, less a rescue from calamity and more a restructuring of federalism on terms favorable to and dictated by federal and state agencies.

Book Review

The Providence Journal: 150 Years. By GARRETT D. BYRNES and CHARLES H. SPILMAN. (Providence: Providence Journal Company, 1980. 465 pp. Illustrations, appendices, bibliography, and index. \$34.50.)

The *Providence Journal* first appeared as a daily newspaper on July 21, 1829, and since that date, it has seen the coming and going of more than one hundred other Providence papers, over forty of which were daily publications. It has survived near-bankruptcy, fire, hurricanes, partisan politics, and cut-throat competition to become the dominant newspaper in Rhode Island and, according to *Time* magazine, "the Conscience of New England." Here is an institution that deserves a substantial history, but this 150th anniversary book by Garrett Byrnes and Charles Spilman fails to meet that need. While this may be a coffee-table book, it is not one to place on the shelf beside the likes of Meyer Berger's and Harrison Salisbury's books on the *New York Times*, Chalmers Roberts's work on the *Washington Post*, or Louis Lyons's history of the *Boston Globe*.

The *Providence Journal* grew from the older, semi-weekly *Manufacturers' & Farmers' Journal* when one of its competitors became a daily publication. In its early years the *Journal* promoted business and industry in the city and sought to advance Henry Clay's "American System." This devotion to Whig party principles led to the newspaper's evolving into a Republican party organ under the leadership of Henry Bowen Anthony. From the beginning, however, the *Journal* was "a faithful Reporter of the PASSING NEWS," and the practice of separating news from partisan opinion attracted readers over the years and was a factor in its success.

Probably more important in those vital, early years were the acumen and political connections of Henry B. Anthony, who became editor in 1838 and then principal owner until his death in 1884. Byrnes and Spilman do not make this point: but had the politically ambitious Anthony been editor of a competing Republican paper, that paper might have been the survivor, not the *Journal*. Anthony became a power in the growing Republican party of the 1850s and was sent to the United States Senate by the General Assembly in 1858 and served until 1884. By then the *Journal* was large and secure enough to fly without Republican sup-

port; and under the editorship of Alfred M. Williams it adopted an independent line, while generally endorsing Republican candidates. This independence led the Rhode Island Republican party at its 1888 convention formally to excommunicate the newspaper, and never again has the *Journal* been so close to any party. In 1906 the great chieftains of the Republican party, Senator Nelson W. Aldrich, would-be senator Samuel P. Colt, Marsden J. Perry, and former *Journal* editor Richard S. Howland, attempted to capture the newspaper to advance their political interests; but they were defeated by *Journal* stockholders and directors Stephen O. Metcalf, Henry D. Sharpe, and William A. Hoppin.

The *Providence Journal* gained national prominence under the editorship of John R. Rathom during World War I. Daring and flamboyant, Rathom brought national attention to the *Journal* with his sensational reports of German spying, espionage, and sabotage. The finest section of the present book deals with the enigmatic, but colorful Rathom. Byrnes and Spilman seek to uncover the mystery of Rathom's origins, marriages (he probably was never married to his Providence wife), and counter-espionage activities (some were fabricated). They confess that the truth may never be known; but during the war years, all over America important newspapers reprinted stories that began, "The Providence Journal will say this morning. . . ."

Anyone coming after Rathom would appear grey by comparison; but the integrity and perspective of the *Journal* were restored by Sevellon Brown, who became managing editor in 1923. Brown led the newspaper for the next three decades. He, David Patten, and James B. Stickley made the *Providence Journal* a statewide newspaper by establishing news bureaus throughout Rhode Island and nearby Massachusetts. Brown insisted that these offices be no more than twenty minutes from any news event.

Over the decades the Providence Journal Company grew with the city and state. It adopted all the various services and features that characterized city newspapers; and it branched into radio, gravure printing, and conventional and cable television. While it is difficult to judge whether the *Journal's* political endorsements count for much at the polls, its investigative reporting frequently has visible impact. As the state's major newspaper, when the *Journal* speaks, people listen.

Even if the *Providence Journal* were not the principal newspaper in Rhode Island, its age would demand a good history. But this book fails. Apparently written in haste and rushed into print to meet the 150th anniversary deadline, what this book needed was a good editor. This is surprising since the *Journal* prides itself on good editing and the authors were themselves former editors.

The authors diligently compiled their notes and used every one of them. Nothing seems to have been discarded, even if it meant concocting an odds-and-ends chapter to accommodate unused items. Many chapters are scissors-and-paste work, composed of as much as 40 percent quotations, endless quotations. Later chapters about newspaper

columns, comics, art and authors degenerate into little more than lists and disjointed comments. No effort was made to blend the work of the two authors, with the result that the book abounds with redundancies. The same stories and even the same quotations are repeated in different chapters. One reads the story of the newspaper's founding several times, the story of the Dorr War twice, the deaths of George W. Danielson and Henry Anthony three times, the improving of the Mergenthaler linotype machine twice, that Mary Banim's diary for 1888 was studded with references to cheques from the *Providence Journal* twice, and on and on. The Great Gale of 1815 is pictured twice because it is discussed in two places. The same picture of the silver tray given to Henry Anthony by Providence citizens appears twice. They even print a picture allegedly showing Abraham Lincoln at Hanover Junction, Pennsylvania, enroute to deliver his Gettysburg Address. The fact that it is not a picture of Lincoln has been known since 1952. Another picture caption reduces Thomas Doyle's terms as Mayor of Providence from nineteen to three. It appears that the writers could not decide what sort of approach to take, so they treat some things chronologically, others topically, and many things repeatedly.

The book lacks an interpretative theme except to assert that the newspaper succeeded because of its high principles and outstanding owners, editors, and staff. A critical reader recognizes that such a view is essentially ancestor worship. This is a history of a successful enterprise, so the authors' eyes are on that success. What is missing is most of the history of Providence and Rhode Island. You will not learn much, if anything, about urban growth, industrialization, immigration, state politics, the labor movement, or workers. One does not learn much about the state or city in which the newspaper grew or lives, nor even, oddly, what the *Journal* thought about that state, city, or its people. That would take a whole different book.

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