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## Contents

- The Broken Bond: Divorce in Providence County,  
1749–1809 67  
SHELDON S. COHEN
- Building the Democratic Party: Black Voting  
in Providence in the 1930s 81  
NORMA LASALLE DAoust
- Book Reviews 89

**W**HEREAS SYLVIA, the Wife of  
me the Subscriber, hath left my  
Bed and Board, and endeavoured to sell  
all my Furniture and wearing Apparel:  
This is to forbid all Persons harbouring or  
trusting her on my Account, as I will  
not pay any Debts of her contracting from  
this Date.                      EZEKIEL BALLOU.

*Providence, August 29, 1795.*

*A frustrated husband turns to  
the Providence Gazette to warn  
those who would support his  
newly liberated wife. RIHS  
Collection (RHi x3 5140).*

# The Broken Bond: Divorce in Providence County, 1749–1809

Sheldon S. Cohen

The high incidence of divorce in American society has recently been the focus of much attention. Contemporary media coverage of the various aspects of this subject has indeed been substantial and widespread. And despite a decline in the nationwide divorce rate from 5.4 per 1,000 population in 1980 to 5.2 in 1982, there remains concern that in future years such high percentages could completely alter the family structure.

The principal focus of this study, however, is not on the ramifications of contemporary or future divorce trends, nor even on the origins of a social institution that reaches back to the ancient Sumerians. Rather, it concentrates on the historical implications of 293 divorce petitions that were submitted to the Superior Court of Providence County between 1749 and 1809. These manuscript records are the only ones of Rhode Island's five county superior courts for this period that are legible and are already catalogued. However, since Providence was Rhode Island's largest county in size and population and also contained its greatest economic diversity, the manuscript records for this locale alone merit examination and analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Providence County experienced significant changes during these sixty years. At the time of the superior court's first session in 1749, the county included approximately 11,600 inhabitants, most of whom were engaged in agricultural pursuits. Its largest settlement, Providence, with about 3,500 residents, had some commercial and other small enterprises, yet in such economic endeavors it still lagged behind the larger, more cosmopolitan, overbearing, and prosperous community of Newport.<sup>2</sup> Yet subsequent decades produced new developments that altered the county's quiescent colonial environment.

By 1809, as Thomas Jefferson prepared to relinquish his executive office and the nation was poised to experience profound changes in its economic and social order, Providence County contained almost thirty thousand residents. Providence town comprised a third of this number. Providence County's population was double that of Newport County, and the town of Newport, with only seven thousand inhabitants, had clearly been eclipsed as the foremost urban community in Rhode Island by its rival at the other end of Narragansett Bay.<sup>3</sup>

Sheldon S. Cohen is a professor in the Department of History at Loyola University, Chicago. He wishes to express his sincere thanks to the following individuals for their assistance in the research for this article: Mr. Joseph Urban, Assistant Archivist, Providence College, Ms. Phyllis Silva, Director of Archives, Rhode Island State Library; Ms. Elaine Kessler and Mr. Mitchell Kessler, Cranston, Rhode Island; Mr. Wilfred Gerstenblatt and Ms. Roberta Gerstenblatt (1936–1981), Providence, Rhode Island. Professor Cohen would also like to express his appreciation to Loyola University of Chicago for a research grant in 1982 and their help in providing typing for this completed work.

1. Peter J. Coleman, *The Transformation of Rhode Island, 1790–1860* (Providence, 1963), 9–16; Sidney V. James, *Colonial Rhode Island: A History* (New York, 1975), 184–85, 232, 364–65; Richard M. Bayles, ed., *History of Providence County, Rhode Island*, 2 vols. (New York, 1891), I, chaps. 1, 2, 11; J. M. Holbrook, ed., *Rhode Island 1782 Census* (Oxford, Mass., 1979), v. The superior court records for Kent, Washington, and Bristol Counties were too badly damaged for study. The superior court records for Newport County had not yet been organized at the time of my research in August 1982.

2. Henry E. Tiepkke, *Census of Rhode Island, 1895* (Providence, 1898), 3; John R. Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England*, 7 vols. (Providence, 1856–62), V, 270; James, *Colonial Rhode Island*, 156–85; Coleman, *Transformation of Rhode Island*, 8–9; Bayles, *History of Providence County*, I, chap. 5.

3. Coleman, *Transformation of Rhode Island*, 16–21, 71–73; Tiepkke, *Census of Rhode Island*, 2.

4. Lucian L. Knight, *Georgia's Landmarks, Memorials, and Legends* (Atlanta, 1913-14), I, 390-91, II, 314-15; Mary Bowen, Divorce Petition, Providence, March 1773; Pink Arnold, Divorce Petition, Providence, 1793. All Providence County divorce petitions, depositions, and responses are from Providence County Superior Court Records, Providence College Library. Subsequent citations will include name, category, date, and location.

5. Sheldon S. Cohen, "To Parts of the World Unknown: The Circumstances of Divorce in Connecticut, 1750-1797," *The Canadian Review of American Studies*, XI (1980), 275-93; Nancy F. Cott, "Divorce and the Changing Status of Women in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., XXXIII (1976), 586-614; Nancy F. Cott, "Eighteenth-Century Family and Social Life as Revealed in Massachusetts Divorce Records," *Journal of Social History*, X (1976), 20-43.

6. Howard M. Chapin, ed., *Documentary History of Rhode Island*, 2 vols. (Providence, 1916-19), II, 152; Lyle Koehler, *A Search for Power: The Weaker Sex in Seventeenth-Century England* (Urbana, IL, 1980), 320-23, 459; Nelson R. Blake, *The Road to Reno: A History of Divorce in the United States* (New York, 1962), 39-40; Bartlett, *Recs. of R.I.* I, 231, 312, II, 188-89, 479.

7. *The Public Laws of the State of Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations as Revised by a Committee and Finally Enacted by the Honorable General Assembly* (Providence, 1798), 479; George E. Howard, *A History of Matrimonial Institutions Chiefly in England and the United States*, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1904), II, 365, III, 14; Samuel G. Arnold, *History of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*, 2 vols. (New York, 1874), II, 156-58, 175. For a statement concerning Rhode Island's grounds for divorce in the late colonial period see, Governor Thomas Hutchinson to Earl of Dartmouth, March 13, 1774, in K. G. Davies, ed., *Documents of the American Revolution, 1770-1783*, 21 vols. (Dublin, Ireland, 1974), VII, 62-63.

This general framework of social, economic, and political change provides the background for consideration of the almost three hundred divorce petitions submitted to Providence County's superior court. The petitioners represented exceptions to traditional New England marital ideals of provident and faithful husbands bound to loyal, caring, obedient wives. In another respect, they also represented quite varied social levels within the county. Thus the petitioners included Mary Cooke Bowen, who sought a divorce for desertion from Oliver Bowen, a successful Providence merchant, as well as Pink Arnold, a destitute black mother who obtained a legal separation from her husband, Prime, as a result of his alleged cruelty, adultery, and desertion.<sup>4</sup>

These Providence County divorce records offer valuable insights into prevailing social mores in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century New England. By analyzing their records, we can relate the various circumstances of marital disruption to existing social customs and family life. And the legal proceedings themselves also serve as indicators of attitudinal changes toward marriage and marital responsibilities in pre- and post-Revolutionary America.<sup>5</sup> The substantial increase of Providence County divorce petitions filed by wives in the years after the War for Independence supports the growing body of evidence regarding the influences of Revolutionary ideology on American women.

Marital separation occurred in Rhode Island almost from its beginnings. Indeed, in 1644 John Hicks requested Newport officials to grant him a separation from his wife, Horrod (Hardwood) on the grounds of adultery. Six years later the colony's General Assembly enacted legislation rejecting divorce requests "for any other case but that of Adulterie," reserving to itself jurisdiction in all such cases. However, in 1655 the legislature permitted "a general or town magistrate to grant a bill of divorce" in case of adultery, and by implication allowed the General Court to consider other grounds. A half-dozen divorce actions had been initiated in the colony before Providence County experienced its first case in 1667.<sup>6</sup> About this same time, jurisdiction over divorce shifted to the Court of Trials, composed of the governor and his council, which maintained this authority until 1747 when supervision was delegated to each county's superior court. Afterward the General Assembly might still receive such petitions, but was involved only in exceptional cases. Desertion had already been added to adultery as an official ground for marital dissolution. The colony and county courts continued to grant divorces for other grounds prior to 1798 when a revised law code specifically added "impotency, extreme cruelty," and "gross misbehavior and wickedness in either of the parties, repugnant to and in violation of the marriage covenant."<sup>7</sup>

These Rhode Island legal practices were more liberal than those of England and the southern colonies, which permitted only separation from bed and board, denying complete divorce from legally constituted marriages. Rhode Island's practices were also somewhat more liberal than those procedures in neighboring Massachusetts where, until 1786, the grounds for divorce were not codified and the governor and his

council still made final decisions. Connecticut, which had codified its causes for divorce in 1667 and by the early eighteenth century allowed its superior courts to grant divorce, most closely approximated Rhode Island's legal convention.<sup>8</sup>

But what of the almost three hundred men and women from Providence County who, between 1749 and 1809, felt sufficiently wronged to seek divorce and endure the social stigma that accompanied permanent dissolution of one's marital bonds? Their petitions to the superior court followed a generally similar pattern. The claimant normally began with a statement listing the date of the marriage, citing a specific grievance or grievances against the mate (often including, in the case of female petitioners, personal distress), and concluding with a plea that he or she be granted a divorce based on the alleged violations of the marriage contract. The court had the right to summon an accused spouse, though often, as in the case of desertion, no such attempt was made. However, when the respondent was notified of the action and appeared in court, a hearing usually took place in which both parties could present their arguments. And, similar to existing practices in Connecticut, cases could be referred to the General Assembly.<sup>9</sup>

Petitioners to Providence County's superior court most often cited desertion as the primary cause of their actions. This reason appeared as the fundamental complaint in thirty-nine percent (114) of the 293 cases examined. Several of these actions also alluded to physical or mental maltreatment, but these were incidental addenda to the overriding claims of wanton abandonment.<sup>10</sup> A majority of desertion-related divorce suits noted that the absent spouse had departed after several years of marriage and the birth of several children. Thus, in 1794, Deborah Baker of Glocester declared that her husband, Stephen, had deserted her after twenty-one years of marriage and five children, while that same year Thomas Eddy of Johnston noted that his wife, Ann, had left him and their children after twenty-three years of marriage. Conversely, a significant minority of such petitioners claimed that their spouses had fled within a short time after their nuptials. Lydia Sylvester of Scituate declared that her husband, Amos, deserted "immediately" after their wedding ceremony, while Samuel Johnson asserted that his wife, Nancy, had fled to unknown locales only one day after exchanging wedding vows.<sup>11</sup>

A significant number of these petitions cited the absent respondent's whereabouts, most reported places within other American colonies or states, principally in neighboring New England. Thus James Prince of North Providence asserted that his wife, Eunice, had deserted to Plymouth, Massachusetts, while Lillis Inman of Smithfield declared that her laborer husband, Joseph, had departed to Maine.<sup>12</sup> Errant spouses allegedly had fled to the Middle Atlantic and southern states and the Northwest Territories as well. And a few petitioners (all female) listed places outside America where their absent husbands reportedly resided. Hence Dinah Row of Cranston stated that her husband, John, had gone to France after leaving her; Freelove Tweedy reported that her

8. Henry S. Cohn, "Connecticut's Divorce Mechanism: 1636-1969," *American Journal of Legal History*, XIV (1970), 39-40; Blake, *Road to Reno*, 36-39; Cohen, "Divorce in Connecticut," 276-77; Cott, "Divorce and the Changing Status of Women," 587-92.

9. Cohn, "Connecticut's Divorce Mechanism," 39-43. A check of existent divorce petitions to the Rhode Island General Assembly revealed only six covering the period 1734-55. Rhode Island State Archivist Phyllis Silva to Sheldon S. Cohen, Sept. 24, 1982.

10. Koehler, *Search for Power*, 321, 459.

11. Deborah Baker, Pet., Glocester, March 1794; Thomas Eddy, Pet., Johnston, March 1794; Lydia Sylvester, Pet., Scituate, March 1771; Samuel Johnson, Pet., Providence, March 1797.

12. James Prince, Pet., North Providence, Feb. 15, 1799; Lillis Inman, Pet., Smithfield, August 17, 1802.

13. Dinah Row, Pet., Cranston, Sept. 1772; Freelove Tweedy, Pet., Providence, March 1774; Jane Todd, Pet., Providence, August 13, 1807.

14. Sidney H. Ditzion, *Marriage, Morals, and Sex in America: A History of Ideas* (New York, 1975), 15-35, 49-52; Arthur W. Calhoun, *A Social History of the American Family, From Colonial Times to the Present*, III vols. (Cleveland, 1918), II, 82-84, 94-95.

15. Daniel Barnes, Pet., Gloucester, March 1769; Stephen Page, Pet., Johnston, March 1808; David Darling, Pet., Gloucester, March 1790; Robert Potter, Pet., Scituate, March 1795; David Bowen, Pet., Gloucester, March 1788; Caleb Edely, Pet., Providence, March 1802.

16. Sarah Wood, Pet., Cumberland, March 1786; Zephaniah Wood Response, August 15, 1785; Jeremiah Williams, Pet., Scituate, March 1788; Christopher Potter, Pet., Smithfield, March 1794; Obadiah Seaver, Dep., March 7, 1794.

17. Marcy Olney, Pet., Providence, March 1749; William Backus, Dep., Jan. 5, 1749.

husband, an apothecary, was refusing to return from St. Croix in the Danish West Indies; and the greatest distance-setter, Jane Todd, proclaimed that her mate, Joseph, a former Providence bookseller, had declined to return from Buenos Aires.<sup>13</sup>

Men were cited more often as the offending party in these abandonment cases. Indeed, male deserters accounted for 78 of the 114 or almost seventy percent of the abandonment cases.<sup>14</sup> Of course, several Providence County wives deserted their husbands, too, and the memorials revealed their whereabouts more frequently than those concerning absent males. Many of the departed wives sought shelter among family or other supportive groups. For example, Daniel Barnes, a Gloucester yeoman, claimed that his wife, Hope, had behaved in an "incorrigible and undutiful manner" after their marriage the previous year. Daniel added that two months prior to his petition, Hope had left in the company of her father and brothers, who had also helped themselves to furniture and other goods. Stephen Page, Paul Smith, David Darling, and Robert Potter all protested that their wives had left them for the sanctuary of their parents' homes. Marcy Brown of Gloucester and Chloe Edely of Providence found other refuges; their husbands claimed that these women had deserted them after lengthy marriages and raising children in order to join the Shaker religious sect.<sup>15</sup>

Petitioners who knew the whereabouts of absent spouses ordinarily sought their return. Such endeavors came in the form of letters or personal appeals by the claimant or supplications of friends, relatives, clergymen, and, in a few instances, local magistrates. However, these attempts were fruitless. Sarah Wood, for example, declared in 1786 that her absent husband, Zephaniah, had written her from Massachusetts: "I intend to travel for the future. Get married as quick as you please." Two years later, Jeremiah Williams of Scituate declared that his wife Suze had left him for her parents' home and, despite his pleas for reconciliation, declared that "she wished him to get clear of her." And Mary Potter of Smithfield was even more defiant; she allegedly told her husband, Christopher, that "she did not love him, and she would rather cut her throat than return again."<sup>16</sup>

The second most frequently cited cause for divorce combined adultery and desertion. There were ninety-one such actions in this category, approximately thirty-one percent of the total petitions. And like the classification for desertion alone, males formed the majority (sixty-six percent) of the respondents for these offenses. Irrespective of the offending party's gender, these adultery-desertion cases obviously manifested drastic breaches of conjugal harmony. Indeed, the first divorce petition presented to the Providence Superior Court fell within this classification. In 1749 Marcy Olney of Providence declared to the justices that her husband, Nedabiah: "Several years past left her and a large family of Children in poor Circumstances, and he has since married another woman in the Province of Pennsylvania."<sup>17</sup>

Subsequent actions within this group reveal similar particulars of abandonment and betrayal. Thus, Mary Manchester of Scituate re-

ceived a divorce in 1758 after claiming that her husband Bage, who had deserted her sixteen years before, had committed adultery with Mehitable Eddy and now planned to marry her. Ephriam Baker, also of Scituate, stated in his petition that his wife Hannah had "behaved herself most inconsistent with the Marriage Contract by leaving him the previous November and committing adultery with one Edward Clifford, "a transient man." Phebe Peck of Cumberland declared in her successful action that her husband, Steven, had left her and their seven children, and had committed adultery with Phebe Ballou. He went to Maine, where he subsequently married Miss Ballou.<sup>18</sup> Not surprisingly, the offenders within this category included several of the county's mariners. Sarah Jones, wife of Providence sailor George Jones, declared to the justices that he had left on a voyage shortly after their marriage and now lived with another woman in Norfolk, Virginia.<sup>19</sup>

Many of the adultery-desertion proceedings included allegations of ignominious indignities endured by the petitioners, especially the wives. Rebecca Thayer, for example, received a divorce from her absent and unfaithful husband, David, after declaring that she had borne his cruel treatment and his blatant infidelities—even those with the housemaids. One deponent testified that David had boasted to him that "he would not hier [*sic*] no maid except they would have do with him." Patience Dolbe of Scituate sought a divorce from her husband, John, not only for his desertion and illicit affairs, but because he had once attempted to rape her mother. In 1800 Mary Smith alleged that she "had to get wood in the snow and take care of cattle wast John [her husband] was sporting" with Vine Herendeen of Smithfield.<sup>20</sup> Some petitioners also added accusations of drunkenness and cruelty to their principal charges of desertion and adultery. But the single additional charge most often entered by the woman petitioner was that the unfaithful spouse had left her destitute. Many of these women received succor from family or friends, but some, like Phebe Lawrance and her two children, had to be supported by Providence's Overseers of the Poor.<sup>21</sup>

Destitution was not cited by the husbands who submitted petitions involving desertion and adultery or simply adultery. A few male petitioners within these groups added general charges of wifely neglect or contentiousness, and in one instance farmer Joseph Burlingame asserted that his wife, Sarah, had even stolen his horse and saddle when she eloped with her younger paramour. Perhaps Timothy Vicent presented the most ignominious allegation. He claimed that his wife, Harriet, had "often for long periods of time been [an] inmate of brothels and houses of ill fame."<sup>22</sup>

The third most prevalent class of divorce memorials cited only adultery as the fundamental complaint. Fifty-one such petitions, or seventeen percent of the total, were submitted to the superior court during this period and the majority (twenty-seven) were filed by men. The preponderance of these accusations did not mean that men were more faithful, but rather suggests their greater ability to hide indiscretions.

18. Mary Manchester, Pet., Scituate, Sept. 1758; Ephriam Baker, Pet., Scituate, March 1768; Phebe Peck, Pet., Cumberland, Sept. 1785. (One of Mary Manchester's supporting depositions was signed by eleven townsmen.)

19. Sarah Jones, Pet., Providence, March 1802.

20. Rebecca Thayer, Pet., Gloucester, March 1766; Ephriam Pearce, Dep., May 2, 1766; Patience Dolbe, Pet., Scituate, Sept. 1774; Mary Smith, Pet., Gloucester, August 26, 1800.

21. Phebe Lawrance, Pet., Providence, March 1788.

22. Joseph Burlingame, Pet., Johnston, Feb. 25, 1808; Nabby Batchelor, Dep., March 18, 1808; Daniel Silver, Dep., March 28, 1808; Timothy Vicent, Pet., Providence, Sept. 3, 1808.



23. John Clemence, Pet., Providence, Sept. 1758; Noah Smith, Pet., Smithfield, March 1758; Amasa Killiam, Pet., Providence, Sept. 1759; William Peters, Pet., Gloucester, March 1766; Stephen Hill, Dep., May 27, 1758.

24. Benjamin Dexter, Pet., Foster, March 1796; Mary Hopkins, Dep., March 10, 1796; William Bowen, Pet., Cumberland, March 1786; James Briggs, Pet., Scituate, March 1784.

25. Noah Smith, Pet., Smithfield, March 1758; William Young, Pet., Providence, Sept. 19, 1789; Benjamin Coleman, Pet., Providence, March 1795; Samuel Morgan, Pet., Providence, March 11, 1803; Robert Norris, Pet., Providence, March 1797.

26. Sylvia Whipple, Pet., Smithfield, March 1753; Hannah Staples, Dep., March 20, 1753.

It was also indicative of the fact that prior to the American Revolution, wives were less inclined to sue on the basis of adultery alone. Actually, a woman filed only one of nine such suits prior to 1776. Providence County males, however, were not so reluctant to overlook their wives' adultery, and they generally instituted divorce proceedings more quickly once they discovered evidence of their spouses' infidelity.

These male petitioners and their supporting depositions depict a variety of circumstances surrounding the adultery. Thus in 1758 John Clemence of Providence and Noah Smith of Smithfield obtained divorces after claiming that their wives had conceived illegitimate offspring following their infidelities. Providence's Amasa Killiam lacked such damning evidence; his petition included only unspecified charges that his wife, Hannah, had committed adultery "over diverse years." Gloucester's William Peters alleged that his wife, Sarah, had committed her indiscretions in her own home.<sup>23</sup> Foster's Benjamin Dexter divorced his wife, Sarah, in 1796 after citing her liaisons with fellow townsman Joseph Hopkins. Benjamin supported his petition with six depositions including one from Joseph's wife, Mary. While most of these particular male-instituted proceedings occurred after relatively short marital spans, some were submitted long after marriage. For example, William Bowen and James Briggs, both of whom had spouses significantly named Free love, were among several males whose marriages of over fifteen years dissolved on charges of adultery.<sup>24</sup>

Many Providence County males learned that *their* absences had not made their spouses' hearts grow fonder. Merchant Noah Smith's memorial, for instance, revealed that a month before he returned from a seventeen-month business venture in the Middle Colonies, "his said wife [Anne] was delivered of a child in said Smithfield." Mariners, who often left the region for quite lengthy periods, offered similar testimony. Providence County sailors including William Young, Benjamin Coleman, Samuel Morgan, and Robert Norris all declared their shock and dismay on returning home from long sea voyages to discover their wives with newborn infants.<sup>25</sup>

Petitions and substantiating depositions filed by wives primarily alleging adultery reveal widely varying circumstances. In September 1753, Sylvia Whipple of Smithfield received a divorce from her husband, Ephraim, based upon his adulterous conduct with Sarah Staples of nearby Cumberland. Although Ephraim denied any misconduct before the justices, accounts by four sworn witnesses to his infidelity, including Sarah Staples's mother, evidently swayed them.<sup>26</sup> Elizabeth Maloney also provided testimonies of informants when she received a divorce from her husband, a Providence barber, for his assignations with "a certain Negro or Mulatto girl." Prudence Austin had nine children during her thirty-four year marriage, but these marital bonds were severed in 1787 after she charged her husband, Gideon, with adultery over a twenty-year span. It was Providence's Nancy Smith, though, who seemed the most humiliated when she successfully argued to the county justices in 1808 that her husband, John, had repeatedly flaunted



Eighteenth-century Boston engraver Nathanael Hurd offered this humorous rhyme and illustration to warn of the perils of marriage. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

his infidelities as well as his drunkenness before her and their eight children.<sup>27</sup>

One of the most revealing and recurrent aspects contained within the depositions accompanying these adultery-related actions was the manner in which the alleged indiscretions occurred. Though New Englanders of the late eighteenth century may have sought privacy, in fact a considerable lack of such privacy existed in daily life. Many of the deponents in divorce actions testified to overhearing the respondents mentioning their infidelities, but many others actually witnessed acts of adultery. Ruth Bartlett of Cumberland, for example, declared that during a winter evening in 1752–53 she was in bed with Sarah Staples when Ephraim Whipple “climbed into the other side” and “had Carnel Knowledge of the body of ye said Sarah.” Ruth’s fourteen-year-old brother, John, swore that he had once seen Ephraim and Sarah “both in motion on the ground.” In September 1773 Stephen Herendeen of Douglas, Massachusetts, declared that he had lodged in the same room the previous year with his fellow townsman David Brown, and also Hannah Ross, a married Gloucester woman. He added that “I used to see them strip and go to bed together, and I think other ways behave them-

27. Elizabeth Maloney, Pet., Providence, March 1781; Prudence Austin, Pet., Scituate, March 1787; Nancy Smith, Pet., Providence, March 15, 1808.

28. Ruth Bartlett, Dep., Cumberland, May 8, 1753; John Bartlett, Dep., Cumberland, May 8, 1753; Stephen Herendeen, Dep., Douglas, Mass., Sept. 4, 1773; Elliot Marshall, Dep., Providence, March 29, 1800; Cott, "Eighteenth-Century Family and Social Life," 21-26, 38.

29. Hannah Blanchard, Pet., Smithfield, Feb. 11, 1802; Mary Brown, Pet., North Providence, Sept. 1784.

30. Mary Sprague, Dep., Gloucester, Feb. 27, 1808; Stephen Steere, Dep., Gloucester, July 27, 1808; Mary Miller, Pet., Providence, Feb. 19, 1806; Anna Nichols, Pet., Providence, March 1799.

selves like Man & Wife—" And in 1800 Elliot Marshall swore that he and Elizabeth Olney, married to Stephen Olney of Providence, were among six men and women in Olney's home who had "all slept promiscuously in the same bed together at which time the said Stephen was absent." Elliot also noted that Stephen's brother Peter participated in this frolic.<sup>28</sup>

The least frequent of the categories for which these divorce actions were instigated involved cruelty, gross misbehavior, wickedness, fraudulent contract (i.e., impotency, bigamy), and lengthy absence at sea. Only thirty-seven such cases, less than thirteen percent of the total, fell within this grouping. Over half of these cases occurred in the decade after 1798 when the revised law code, as previously noted, recognized officially the above-mentioned causes as grounds for marital dissolution. Furthermore, only two memorials during the entire period cited lengthy absences as the cause for their action. No doubt this low figure stemmed from the fact that wives of missing sailors could obtain divorces on the grounds of desertion, or if their absent husbands were declared legally dead, they were not obliged to sue for divorce in order to remarry.

Thirty petitions citing cruelty or gross misbehavior comprised the majority written in this last category and, as might be expected, wives initiated three-quarters, or twenty-three, of the complaints. Some of these women reported the maltreatment that their husbands inflicted upon them in general terms or merely focused on verbal abuse. More often, these women spoke of physical as well as emotional ill-treatment. Hannah Blanchard of Smithfield claimed that her husband, Joseph, had refused to allow a physician to attend her during an illness and later forcibly turned her out of their home. Mary Brown of North Providence augmented her petition with a deposition from Ezra Hubbard alleging that her husband, Jeremiah, had "bit part of her finger off," and also swore that "he would split her damn brains with an axe."<sup>29</sup> Mary Miller asserted that her sailor husband, Ebenezer, while beating her "with many stripes," had "threatened to take her life and has frequently armed himself and laid wait for that purpose." And in 1799, Anna Nichols of Providence described quite graphically how she endured her husband, Fortune's, beatings with "whips, fists, a shovel, and Tongs."<sup>30</sup>

Few of these memorials portrayed the contemporary, albeit little publicized, phenomenon of "battered" husbands. Though infrequent, such complaints did occur. For example, in 1795 farmer Andrew Stone of Cranston sought a divorce from his wife, Mary, for gross misbehavior and cruelty. According to some of Andrew's six deponents, his spouse of fourteen years had thrown objects at him and beat him with a broom and birch rod. Later, in 1804, Peter Brown, a Providence laborer, declared that during his twenty-year marriage to his wife, Phebe, she "hath many times driven him from his house with force & violence, shamefully beating & bruizing him in a cruel manner & threatening his life." Peter, however, submitted no depositions to substantiate these and other claims of gross misbehavior. And in February 1807 Nathan

Walker, a Scituate gentleman, declared that his wife, Mary, had wasted his property and threatened violence against him and their children.<sup>31</sup> While there may have been other physically abused husbands, such charges, if accurate, were still exceptions in this male-dominated society. Most men who did cite cruelty in their petitions used complaints similar to those of female plaintiffs. However, terms such as "neglectful of wifely duties" and failure to prepare necessary food indicate a specific gender connotation.

A few cases within this last classification fell within the category of fraudulent contract or deceitful conduct involving one of the marital partners. Stephen Day of Smithfield, Benjamin Spooner of Providence, and Weaver Hopkins of Scituate all claimed that they had been tricked into marrying their wives after false accusations that they were the fathers of expected offspring. Day and Spooner submitted depositions in their successful actions alleging the actual fathers; Hopkins, who claimed that he had been forced to marry his wife, Urania, or go to jail, submitted depositions, including one from a physician, to prove that he had been working in upstate New York when Urania had become pregnant. Women, too, had their own versions of fraudulent contract. Mary Blackman and Martha Bishop, both widows, asserted that their new husbands deliberately tried to cheat them out of their estates. Martha alleged that her merchant husband, John, took all of her personal estate "except for one bed and a few other trifling articles."<sup>32</sup> Yet, regardless of gender, the plaintiffs in fraudulent contract cases appeared most obliged to submit depositions that supported their contentions.

The Superior Court of Providence County granted seventy-one percent of the initial divorce petitions submitted during this time. As might be expected, the petitioners showing desertion or adultery-desertion over a considerable duration had the easiest time obtaining approval of their cases. Reasons cited by those who failed to receive approval for their initial petitions were that court citations were being issued; the case was being filed or continued; the case was withdrawn, dismissed, or referred to another court; or, lastly, that the case was being contested.

Contested divorce actions included varying details and results. Sarah Lyndsay of Providence challenged her husband, Thomas, when he sought a divorce from her alleging periodic desertion and adultery with Thomas Taylor on Hope Island. A divorce was granted by mutual agreement, but only after Sarah denied his charges as "malicious, false willed, and groundless" and accused her husband of constantly displaying a "morose Temper & Bitterness of Heart towards her." Later, in 1787, Esther Brown of Cumberland, married for thirty-one years, contested a petition from her husband, Christopher, in which he alleged desertion and adultery. The court sought citations after Esther submitted a deposition signed by twelve individuals declaring Christopher's accusations groundless, and she eloquently offered to defend her innocence in a "faire tryall."<sup>33</sup> And during the September 1807 session, the court dismissed farmer Stephen Sheldon's memorial seeking divorce from his

31. Barbara Mahany, "Battered Men: A Secret Fraternity Suffers in Silence," *Chicago Tribune*, Sept. 26, 1982, Sec. 3, 13; Andrew Stone, Pet., Cranston, March 1795; Lydia Collins, Dep., Cranston, April 20, 1795; John Stone, Dep., April 27, 1795; Peter Brown, Pet., Providence, Feb. 18, 1804; Nathan Walker, Pet., Scituate, Feb. 19, 1807.

32. Stephen Day, Pet., Smithfield, March 1778; Phebe Day, Dep., Smithfield, Dec. 28, 1777; Benjamin Spooner, Pet., Providence, Sept. 1786; Weaver Hopkins, Pet., Scituate, Sept. 20, 1804; William Olney, Rosanna Seamans, Deps., Scituate, Sept. 20, 1804; Dorastus Hatch, Dep., Richfield, N.Y., Sept. 4, 1804; Mary Blackman, Pet., Johnston, Sept. 1795; Martha Bishop, Pet., Providence, Feb. 11, 1802.

33. Thomas Lyndsay, Pet., Providence, Sept. 1759; Sarah Field Lyndsay, Response, Providence, Sept. 1759; Divorce Agreement, Thomas and Sarah Lyndsay, Providence, Sept. 28, 1759; Christopher Brown, Pet., Cumberland, March 28, 1787; Esther Brown, Response, Cumberland, Sept. 1787.

Another scene from "Heroic Women of the Revolution." Reprinted in Ruth Warren, *A Pictorial History of Women in America* (1975). Courtesy of the Picture Collection, The Branch Libraries, The New York Public Library.



34. Stephen Sheldon, Pet., Providence, Sept. 1807; Lydia Sheldon, Response, Providence, Sept. 1807.

35. Elizabeth Sanford, Pet., Providence, March 1783; Daniel Woodward, Dep., Norton, Mass., Feb. 28, 1783; Elizabeth Smith, Pet., Providence, March 1784; Israel Bryon, Pet., Smithfield, March 1778; Susannah Olney, Charity Hawkins, Deps., Smithfield, May 20, 1777; Edward Vose, Pet., Providence, April 1781; Peleg Barker, Jr., Dep., Newport, April 10, 1781.

wife Lydia for assertedly threatening him, refusing to carry out her marriage vows, and reneging on a substantial cash agreement for a separation. Lydia's countercharges accused Stephen of insanity and also of forcing her to sign under duress the separation agreement.<sup>34</sup>

The Revolution, which bisects these first six decades of Providence court records, caused significant social changes within the United States. War-related petitions deserve perhaps the most immediate notice. Although Newport County suffered more severe wartime dislocations, including lengthy British occupation, and perhaps had more marital problems, Providence County families were not unaffected by the conflict. Thus Elizabeth Sanford of Providence received a divorce from her husband, Robert, after alleging that he had deserted her in 1775 to join the service of King George and had later committed bigamy in Great Britain. Elizabeth Smith's wartime marriage ended after assertions that her spouse, John, had failed to support her or their child during his Continental Army service, and that he was also guilty of adultery. Among the male plaintiffs, Israel Bryon claimed that his wife, Robe, had sexual relations with both a patriot volunteer and a British deserter from Newport. Providence laborer Edward Vose obtained a separation from his wife, Dorothy, after being cuckolded by a Hessian officer.<sup>35</sup>

Yet the Revolution had less direct though far more significant effects on marital patterns. Linda Kerber and Mary Beth Norton's studies of the

status of women during the colonial and post-Revolutionary eras suggest that the latter decades transformed the standing of American women. Both of their studies demonstrate that colonial wives in fact did not experience a "golden age" of respect, freedom, and domestic equality, but rather an age of debasement and inferiority in relationship to their male counterparts. The struggle for independence, however, altered this situation as women enjoyed new feelings of individualism, self-confidence, and self-assertion. Marital patterns reveal allegedly some of the effects of these emergent sentiments: women resist male monopolization in family matters, reject their husbands' denigration of their characters, and declare themselves openly in the event of abuse or dissatisfaction in marriage. The increasing prevalence of post-war divorce petitions and their wordings can thus be seen as indicators of such social changes.<sup>36</sup>

Statistics from these Rhode Island litigations offer part of the evidence of transformation. A computation of divorce petitions during each of the six decades after 1749 shows that, as in Connecticut and Massachusetts, the frequency of such litigations was extremely small prior to the American Revolution (see appendix 1). For the decades 1749–58 and 1759–68, the figures averaged .066 and .053 per 1000 population, and .097 per 1000 population for the pre-Revolutionary period from 1749 through 1774. Such inconsiderable numbers compared to those of Connecticut for these same periods. During the Revolution (April 1775–September 1783) there were only fifteen divorce memorials presented to Providence Superior Court, a frequency rate of about .095 per 1000 population—slightly higher than that for Connecticut. After the Revolution, the average frequency rate for Providence County climbed dramatically, reaching .310 for the decade 1789–98, .485 for the decade 1799–1808, and an overall average frequency of .380 during the quarter-century after September 1783. Such numbers are considerably higher than Connecticut's growth of .170 for the postwar years 1786 through 1797. Connecticut as a whole, however, was more isolated than Providence County, and its continued Congregational Church establishment probably hindered a comparative upsurge in divorce actions.<sup>37</sup>

The wording of female divorce petitions after 1783 offers a barometer of shifting circumstances. Their phraseology clearly displays a greater emphasis on wifely expectations of obtaining future lives of happiness and peace on a more equal or cooperative basis with their husbands.<sup>38</sup> Less prevalent are complacent declarations such as that of Sarah Lyndsay, who in 1769 replied to her husband's accusation of adultery that "she hath managed her Domestic affairs with Industry & frugality & in all things acted as a prudent, obedient & good wife ought to do toward her Husband." Wives also became less reticent about seeking legal separation on the grounds of cruelty and nonsupport. Providence's Mary Smith exemplified this new spirit. She declared to the justices in March 1805 that despite her own destitution and need to support six

36. See Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980); Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750–1800* (Boston, 1980); Cohen, "Divorce in Connecticut"; and Cott, "Divorce and Changing Status." [For one recent scholarly contention that the American Revolution did not have a positive effect on women's status in the United States see, Joan Hoff Wilson, "The Illusion of Change: Women and the American Revolution," in Alfred E. Young, ed., *The American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism* (DeKalb, Ill., 1976), 383–445.]

37. Cohen, "Divorce in Connecticut," 287–90. [Statistical figures for Providence County, 1749–1809, are based upon the manuscript divorce petitions and interpolations of population figures in Bartlett, *Records of Rhode Island, Holbrook, 1782 Census*, Tjepke, *Census of Rhode Island*, and Robert V. Wells, *The Population of the British Colonies in America Before 1776: A Survey of Census Data* (Princeton, 1975), 96–109.]

38. Prudence Austin, Pet., Scituate, March 1787.

39. Mary Smith, Pet., Providence, Feb. 7, 1805; Sarah Field Lyndsay, Response, Providence, Sept. 1759.

40. Benjamin Peck, Pet., North Providence, March 1796; Stephen Mathewson, Pet., Scituate, March 1795; Christopher Potter, Pet., Smithfield, March 1794.

41. George Dunkin, Pet., Providence, Sept. 1794; Robert Brettun, Pet., Providence, March 1799.

42. Joseph E. Cannon, Lera L. O'Hara, Roberta A. Chevoya, eds., *State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Department of Health, Vital Statistics—1980* (Providence, 1981), 26–30, 134. [According to this *Vital Statistics* survey the divorce rate in the state for 1980 was 3.8 per 1000 population and an interpolation of county population and divorce figures shows a slightly lower rate of 3.66 for Providence County in 1980.]

43. Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 7–12, chaps. 2–9, Norton, *Liberty's Daughters*, chaps. 4–9, 295–99.

children, "she did not find it her duty to struggle any longer with her afflictions," and had therefore left her drunken and abusive husband.<sup>39</sup>

Other statements or actions by wives in post-Revolutionary Providence County were equally explicit. Smithfield's Mary Potter swore to her husband, Christopher, that "she would rather cut her throat" than reconcile with him. Elizabeth Peck of North Providence deserted her husband, Benjamin, shortly after their marriage in November 1791 and afterwards bluntly advised him, "if he wished for a wife to seek for and obtain another." Stephen Mathewson's petition and supporting depositions declared that not only had his wife, Sarah, deserted him and gone back to her mother, but she was obstinately refusing him any visits to their children.<sup>40</sup> And Providence ropemaker George Dunkin asserted that his wife, Patience, had not only left him, taking their furniture, but had subsequently answered his entreaties to return only with threats and curses. Robert Brettun's divorce petition of 1799 offers another representative example of this emergent female individualism. Brettun claimed that his wife, Sarah, whose parents had induced her to marry him, had left him the previous year and "openly declared she will never cohabit with him."<sup>41</sup>

The precipitous increase in divorce litigations after 1783 did not signal the destruction of family life in Providence County. Despite the fact that the frequency of postwar divorce cases was considerably higher than that of Connecticut, marital separation remained infrequent and socially unacceptable in the region. Furthermore, even the .485 frequency rate per 1000 for the period 1799–1808 was almost eight times lower than all divorces granted in the county during 1980.<sup>42</sup>

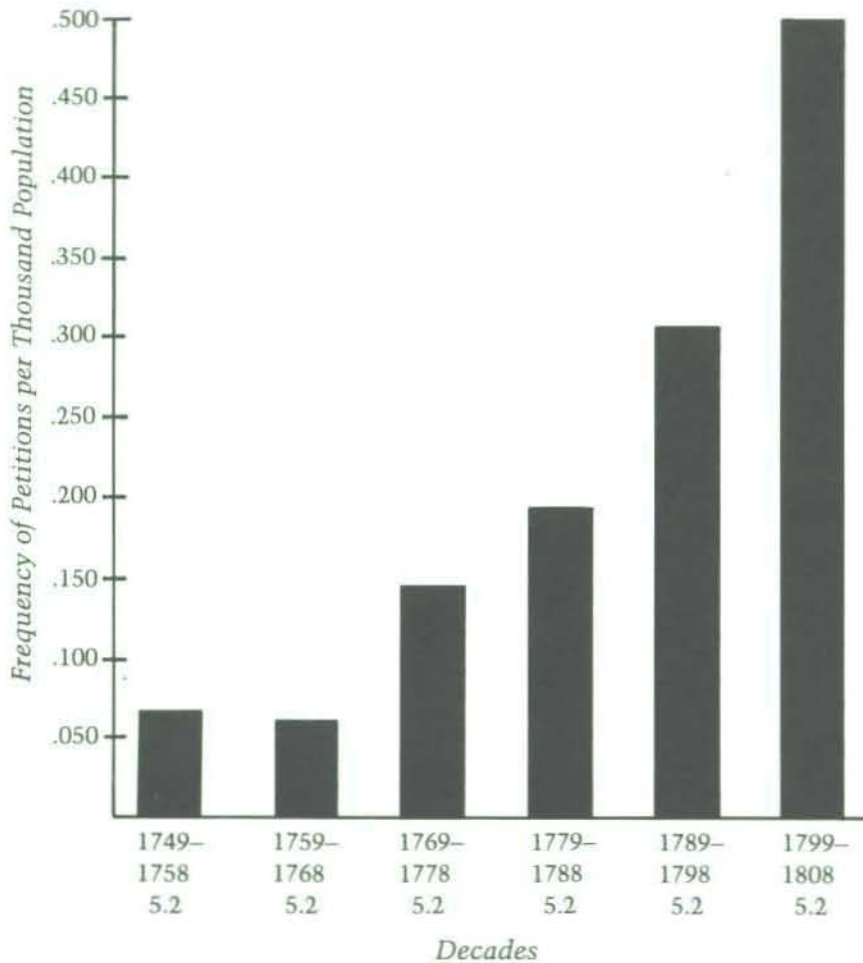
Nevertheless, examination and analysis of these 293 cases does offer further significant substantiation for Kerber and Norton's portrayal of post-Revolutionary feminine awareness. For it is apparent in the memorials after 1783 that many Providence County women had come to regard their marital bonds in a new perspective. While their suits still acknowledged the need to carry out the sacred precepts of the marriage contract, these women were reexamining and demanding more from marital bonds. In growing numbers after the War of Independence, wives, and also husbands, repudiated earlier tenets that they should endure the afflictions of unhappy wedlock, and they sought instead marital relationships based upon more modern concepts of romantic affection and mutual respect. Indications of such changing feelings can be observed in this county's sharp postwar increase in the number of litigations involving desertion, adultery, or cruelty; the growing expectation of mutual cooperation in marriage; and the tendency of wives to institute divorce proceedings as soon as possible after their spouse's alleged indiscretions. And finally, most of the new feminist sensitivity can be traced to the Revolution itself. I believe that the unprecedented wartime involvement and responsibilities of Providence County women, and their varying contacts with liberative Revolutionary ideology, gave many of them their own particular framework of independence.<sup>43</sup>

Certainly many aspects of the subject and implications of divorce in early America remain to be explored. Classification of the Newport County Superior Court records should offer a valuable comparison to the broken marital bonds of Providence County. Moreover, such matters as child custody practices, alimony and property settlements, and the average marital spans of divorce petitioners remain open for research and exposition. Naturally, no accurate gauge can measure the acrimony, stress, and heartache involved in failed marriages of the eighteenth century. But these weathered Providence County divorce petitions offer opportunities for new insights into the social history and family relationships of early America.<sup>44</sup>

44. The Providence County Superior Court did award varying, though usually small, amounts of alimony to certain women during this period of study. As in many contemporary divorce cases, however, it often proved difficult for these women to collect their allowances. Thus, Abial Fairfield of Burrellville complained to the justices in March 1807 that even though she had been granted alimony as part of her divorce the previous year from her husband, Abraham, she had been unable to collect anything. The reason for this, she declared, was that, "the said Abraham having conveyed & secreted all his personal estate & omitted to put the deed on record, thereby rendered it impossible to your Petitioner to prove that he was possessed of any property at all whereof alimony might be paid." Petition of Abial Fairfield, Burrellville, March 1807. See also *Pub. Laws of R.I.* 1798, 480.

## Appendix 1

Average Frequency of Divorce Petitions,  
in Providence County, 1749–1809





*Flyer announcing a campaign rally to lure Providence's black voters to the Democratic party. Bertha Higgins Collection, Rhode Island Black Heritage Society. Reprinted by permission.*

# MONSTER Mass Meeting !

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## Monday, Nov. 5th, 1934

at 8 P.M.

sponsored by

*Providence Colored  
Democratic Club ::*

**EAGLES AUDITORIUM**

830 WESTMINSTER STREET, PROVIDENCE, R. I.

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### SPEAKERS:

GOV. THEODORE FRANCES GREEN

Former SENATOR PETER G. GERRY

MAYOR JAMES E. DUNN

CHARLES E. McELROY

CYRIL F. BUTLER, JOHN F. LOPEZ

MRS. BERTHA G. HIGGINS

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MUSIC

REFRESHMENTS

# Building The Democratic Party: Black Voting in Providence in the 1930s

Norma LaSalle Daoust

The decade of the 1930s was a turning point for both Providence's Democratic party and the city's black community. The Democrats learned to expand their appeal to include non-Irish voters, and blacks responded by switching their allegiance from the Republicans to the opposition. In addition, the black community emerged from impotence to activism. Numbering 5,500 in 1930, black citizens represented only 2.2 percent of the Providence populace. While their numbers did not grow significantly, the black community effectively used the ballot box to demand services and patronage that had been denied them. Recent conversations with Providence blacks who had witnessed or participated in these events, combined with more traditional sources, provide a portrait of the process by which this new era of racial awareness led blacks into the Democratic party.

Segregation remained the norm in Rhode Island's capital in the 1930s. Two neighborhoods held the bulk of the black populace, the lower East Side or Camp Street area, where blacks coexisted with Jewish peddlers and shopkeepers, and the West End, a few blocks of crowded, dilapidated housing south and west of downtown.<sup>1</sup> Although the Rhode Island General Assembly enacted a public accommodations law in 1885, it was not enforced. Theatre owners would sell black patrons balcony tickets only. Hotels and most downtown restaurants refused to accommodate nonwhites. One black resident, for example, recalled that "in the Senate Cafe on Weybosset Street they would break the glass after serving you."<sup>2</sup> Black students attended predominantly white high schools, but this was due mainly to demographics; blacks constituted no more than fifteen percent of any one census tract even as late as 1940. Black youths played on school athletic teams but were not welcome at social functions. The social world of both young and adult blacks was built around churches and fraternal organizations such as the Odd Fellows on Cranston Street or the Masonic Lodge on Camp Street.

The NAACP established a branch in Providence before World War I and initially it was fairly active. During the summer of 1917 the Providence branch staged the first protest parade held by the organization in New England. More than twelve hundred marchers from Rhode Island and Massachusetts demonstrated their concern over race riots in Waco, Memphis, and East St. Louis.<sup>4</sup> However, when its president, Dr. Julius

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1. Ernest T. Attwell, "A Study of Recreational Opportunities for Negroes in Providence, Rhode Island," (Report commissioned by the Providence Council of Social Agencies, Mimeographed, June 1941), 4.
2. William Wiley, interview by Norma LaSalle Daoust, Feb. 3, 1981. Benjamin Branner, interview by James Clarke, May 2, 1978 (tape at the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, Providence, R.I.).
3. Joseph LeCount, interview by Norma LaSalle Daoust, Feb. 1, 1979.
4. Irving H. Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen: The Story of the Negro in Rhode Island* (Providence, 1954), 65.

5. Wiley interview.

6. William Howard "Dixie" Mathews, interview by James Clarke, May 7, 1978 (tape at the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, Providence, R.I.).

7. LeCount interview.

8. Olive Wiley, interview by Norma LaSalle Daoust, Feb. 3, 1981.

9. *Boston Chronicle*, Jan. 28, 1933, 2.

Robinson, died in 1924, the organization all but fell apart and did not revive until the next decade; the middle-class leadership and membership was unable to attract and hold the support of lower-class blacks.

Before the depression decade, the black vote in Providence, as in most other cities, was predominantly Republican. Working through black fraternal organizations and churches, the party reminded black residents of their debt to nineteenth-century Republican abolitionists. William Wiley, a local black leader who authored the Providence column in the *Boston Chronicle*, and, later, edited the *Providence Chronicle*, observed that blacks were "trained to look to the Republicans as God" and if they attempted to support Democrats, "their neighbors viewed them as traitors."<sup>5</sup> William "Dixie" Mathews, a popular sports figure, became disillusioned with the party of Lincoln and by the 1930s was one of the city's first black Democratic politicians. He recalled that although the Republicans courted their votes in the 1920s, rewards were few:

The Republican party had one scene—we helped free you people through Abraham Lincoln. . . . The Republican party limited the blacks to a category of street sweepers or a water wagon.<sup>6</sup>

Even Attorney Joseph LeCount, one of the city's most prominent black Republicans, admitted that his party dispensed very little patronage in return for the votes of the black community, and "the only time we heard from the Republican party was at election time."<sup>7</sup> Black ministers received money to preach sermons urging their congregations to vote Republican, and it was not rare for the party to pay as much as two dollars for a vote. Olive Wiley commented recently that "blacks figured that no matter which way the election went, it wasn't going to affect them, so why not take the two dollars."<sup>8</sup> Without the cash there was little incentive for blacks to vote, and in most elections the turnout in black neighborhoods was quite low throughout the 1920s. In-migration of blacks to the capital city was small, and the size of the black community limited its political clout. William Wiley observed that in 1933 the black population of Providence was demoralized, impotent, and "in none of this community is there any appreciable racial consciousness."<sup>9</sup> The depression years would change that.

After the 1928 election, elimination of the property qualification for voting in council elections spurred voter registration. This factor, coupled with the economic problems caused by the depression, increased voter registration significantly and intensified the Democratic party's popularity in Providence. Providence's 1930 voter registration had increased by forty percent since 1926. Less than thirty percent of West End voters owned sufficient property, and registration increased seventy-five percent in that neighborhood after the removal of the property restriction. The increase can be traced to both the fact that potential voters were more likely to register if they could cast ballots for all candidates and to the intensive registration drive launched by the Democrats.

Both parties in 1930 made overtures to black voters. Democrats reminded blacks that Republican Senator Jesse Metcalf had disregarded a telegram from the Providence NAACP and supported the nomination of conservative Judge Parker to the Supreme Court. For their part, Republicans continued to characterize the opposition as "the party of slavery, segregation, proscription, discrimination, and oppression of the Negro."<sup>10</sup>

The city's two black neighborhoods demonstrated differing patterns in this election. Democrats received a smaller portion of the vote in the Camp Street area in 1930 than in 1928. But this was a community in which the Republican party was particularly active in vote buying.<sup>11</sup> A good number of Camp Street blacks worked as domestics and gardeners for wealthy East Side Republicans, and this may have influenced their party loyalty.<sup>12</sup> The West End, however, increased its Democratic vote slightly. Because the black West End was only one voting district in the ward, it was unable to swing Ward Eight away from the Republicans. For the first time, though, Democrats witnessed the potential of the black vote.

By 1932 black leaders finally realized that the Republicans had failed to keep promises made to their community. A group of blacks met in January 1932 at Democratic headquarters and organized the Providence Young Men's Colored Democratic Unit. Bertha Higgins, wife of one of the city's black physicians and head of the Julia Ward Howe Republican Association, announced that in the election of 1932 she would support the Democratic slate.<sup>13</sup>

The depression particularly affected blacks, and certain Democrats capitalized on this fact. Fearing foreclosure on his property because almost two-thirds of his congregation were out of work, the pastor of the Bethel A.M.E. church wrote to presidential candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt. In response to this plea, former Democratic Senator Peter Gerry made a donation to help this, the oldest black church in Providence, keep afloat.<sup>14</sup>

Admitting that the Democratic party was an unknown quantity making its first real bid for black support, Wiley ventured that "if the party in Providence is of the same calibre as the party in Newport," where Democrats secured for a few blacks jobs as policemen and teachers, "Negroes can at least expect a break." He urged blacks to register because "there was never a more important election to Negroes since Lincoln was elected President."<sup>15</sup>

In response, Republicans emphasized national instead of local issues important to blacks, and one black Republican admitted that "they have done so little for us here in Rhode Island, that there is not much that can be truthfully said."<sup>16</sup> At a rally at Eagles Hall, the lone black member of the Republican National Committee, Perry Howard, cracked a "few funny stories, mainly of the 'darkey' variety" and the state's Republican attorney general contended that blacks could go into all public accommodations on an equal basis with whites. Wiley observed that "the attorney general displayed an ignorance of local conditions."<sup>17</sup>



*Joseph LeCount (1888–1981). Though a onetime prominent Republican, LeCount, like many black leaders, deserted the party of Lincoln in favor of the party of Roosevelt. Photograph courtesy of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society.*

10. *News Tribune*, Sept. 16, 1930, 14; Oct. 31, 1930, 1. *Providence Journal*, Nov. 1, 1930, 6.

11. LeCount interview.

12. Wiley interview.

13. *Boston Chronicle*, Jan. 23, 1932, 2; Feb. 13, 1932, 2; Nov. 5, 1932, 2.

14. J. R. Campbell, Pastor of Bethel A.M.E. Church, to Franklin Roosevelt, Nov. 3, 1932, Democratic National Committee Correspondence, Folder C. Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y.

15. *Boston Chronicle*, Oct. 22, 1932, 2; April 23, 1932, 2; Nov. 5, 1932, 2; June 25, 1932, 2.

16. *Ibid.*, Oct. 29, 1932, 2.

17. *Ibid.*, Nov. 5, 1932, 2. *Providence Journal*, Oct. 29, 1932, 2.



As a columnist for the *Boston Chronicle* and, later, as editor of the *Providence Chronicle*, William Wiley (1897– ) encouraged black voters to use the ballot box to demand their share of patronage and city services. Photograph courtesy of the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society.

The Democratic party had a good friend in William Wiley, who, through his columns in the *Boston Chronicle*, urged Providence blacks to resist the temptations of the Republicans. He was particularly upset with Republican vote buying, as evidenced in his editorial "Men, be Men." He wrote:

For years Negro men have sold their votes on election day for a few paltry dollars, ranging anywhere from 1 to 5 . . . and nobody gets anything *after* the election because everyone has been paid before. . . . It is said that a colored leader in the Hoyle Square section has already been given election day money for the "boys." Another "leader" in the North End, [Camp Street neighborhood] a henchman of a Jewish druggist, is expected to pass out the green as usual. . . . This sort of thing is a disgrace.<sup>18</sup>

One black resident recalled that the proprietor of a North Main Street drugstore dispensed two dollars to each voter who pledged to support the Republican party's slate. "He was the power within the community and he had contacts with the police to help people."<sup>18</sup>

In the West End, black voters rewarded the Democrats' efforts, and for the first time the neighborhood gave a majority to Democratic candidates at all levels. Roosevelt polled 9.2 percent more votes in the West End than had Smith in 1928. Black Democratic leader John Lopez documented the shift of the black vote: "Here in Rhode Island, the state of ultra conservatism, the Negro in a very large measure has had a part in the great victory of the Democratic party. The Negro has seen the 'star' and has followed it."<sup>19</sup>

In the Camp Street area, however, due to factionalism and continued Republican vote buying, many blacks split their ballots. Black attorney James Stockett, Jr., a Republican appointee to the State Returning Board, attributed his party's success in Wards Two and Three (the lower East Side or Camp Street neighborhood) to the loyalty of black voters.<sup>20</sup> Democratic leaders realized that more work would have to be done, especially in this neighborhood, and two weeks after the election they announced a series of meetings to organize permanently black Democratic leaders.

Soon after the election of 1932 black Democrats threatened to defect from the ranks unless more of their people were given city jobs. Maybe, William Wiley suggested, blacks should follow the example of Italian voters and place group above party "by making certain demands and then supporting the party that meets them."<sup>21</sup> Democrats, in response, gave the first new city job to a black, who was assigned to Roger Williams Park. The appointee was described as "an ardent Democratic worker in the last election."<sup>22</sup> Throughout 1933, however, black Democrats continued to complain that they had not received their share of city patronage, but they praised Democratic Governor Theodore Francis Green's unsuccessful attempt to appoint Lopez to a one-thousand-dollar-a-year position on the State Harbor Commission. Although every Democratic senator voted for Lopez, the Republican majority—

18. *Boston Chronicle*, Nov. 5, 1932, 2. Branner interview.

19. *Boston Chronicle*, Nov. 12, 1932, 2.

20. *Ibid.*, Nov. 19, 1932, 2.

21. *Ibid.*, Jan. 14, 1933, 2.

22. *Ibid.*, May 13, 1933, 2.

as expected—defeated his appointment. Governor Green knew this would happen, but Wiley noted that “at least he made the gesture which was more than we ever got from the Republicans.”<sup>23</sup>

In fact, the governor, rather than the mayor, more often won the praise of local black leaders. When, in the summer of 1934, Narragansett Race Track officials set up separate entrances to its restaurant for blacks and whites, the governor, at the urging of the Providence NAACP, ordered the State Racing Commission to have the signs removed. Wiley noted, “Green is to be congratulated for the fearless, decisive manner in which he handled the whole case.”<sup>24</sup>

Before the next election Democrats launched an all-out campaign to increase their share of the black vote. Party organizers approached young black leaders, such as William “Dixie” Mathews, Ed Mathews, and Bill Scott, to lure them away from the Republicans. One black resident of the Camp Street neighborhood recalled that Providence Democrats told them that “we’ll make it worth your while.”<sup>25</sup> “Dixie” Mathews noted that Democratic City Chairman Charles McElroy promised them a share of the city’s better jobs if they could persuade their neighbors to switch their support. Mathews recalled his own defection from the Republicans:

We told them [Republicans] that leopards never change their spots and you’re just like a leopard and we’re going elsewhere. So we left them in the early ‘thirties.<sup>26</sup>

The depression was a major factor in this conversion. Republican Joseph LeCount admitted that his party took the black vote for granted, while Democrats gave them something for their stomachs, and Mathews emphasized that “we got in there at the right time because it was around the depression.”<sup>27</sup> Blacks and “other colored races” constituted only 2.6 percent of the city’s population, but in 1934 they made up 7 percent of the households on relief. Democrats constantly took credit for the relief programs, and Wiley reminded his readers that “the Democratic administration has made an earnest effort to see that unemployment relief was extended to all, and the Negro has benefitted from these efforts.”<sup>28</sup>

The Democratic overtures to black voters proved successful, and Providence’s two black neighborhoods gave larger percentages to Democratic Mayor James Dunne in 1934 than they had in 1932. The *Boston Chronicle* reported that Providence blacks supported Democrats, although not by very large margins as continued Republican vote buying in the Camp Street neighborhood limited this new majority. But those who deserted “did so because of the lack of interest in the Negro by the Republican party after years of faithfulness.”<sup>29</sup> A black resident recalled that after 1934 “the Democrats made good on their votes” and “Dixie” Mathews admitted that “I wouldn’t say they gave them outstanding jobs, but what they gave them . . . helped to keep their families together.” Mathews, himself, received a clerical job in the city sewer department. When, early in 1935, Democratic City Chairman Charles

23. *Ibid.*, Sept. 9, 1933, 2; Feb. 10, 1934, 2.

24. *Ibid.*, May 18, 1933, 2.

25. Branner interview.

26. Mathews interview.

27. LeCount and Mathews interviews.

28. Katherine D. Wood, *Urban Workers on Relief*, Part 2, WPA Division of Social Research, Research Monograph IV (Washington, 1936), 72. *Boston Chronicle*, Oct. 27, 1934, 2.

29. *Boston Chronicle*, Nov. 17, 1934, 2; Nov. 10, 1934, 2.

# DEEDS NOT PROMISES

Why the Negro People  
Will Vote For  
**ROOSEVELT**  
and  
**TRUMAN**

DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE

By 1944, Democratic party appeals for black votes, such as this campaign brochure, could cite the party's record of New Deal programs as actions that supported campaign rhetoric. Bertha Higgins Collection, Rhode Island Black Heritage Society. Reprinted by permission.

30. Branner and Mathews interviews. *Boston Chronicle*, March 9, 1935, 2.

31. *Ibid.*, March 7, 1936, 2.

32. *Ibid.*, Oct. 30, 1936, 2.

33. *Ibid.*, Oct. 24, 1936, 2.

34. *Providence Journal*, Nov. 4, 1936, 1.

35. The Union party received 8.4 percent of the presidential votes cast in the West End, and these might have gone to Roosevelt if Lemke had not been on the ballot. The increase in Roosevelt's vote in the Camp Street area can also be attributed to the Jewish vote swinging firmly Democratic. J. Howard McGrath to James A. Farley, Oct. 28, 1936, Democratic National Committee Correspondence, 1936 Election Forecasts, Group 27, Box 12, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y.

36. *Providence Journal*, Nov. 3, 1938, 9; *Boston Chronicle*, August 13, 1938, 2.

McElroy was appointed to head the State Department of Public Works, Wiley described him as a "staunch and constant friend of the Negro" and predicted that blacks "should come in for numerous positions in the new order of things."<sup>30</sup>

During the 1936 campaign John F. Lopez, chairman of the Negro State Committee, reminded blacks of the patronage given to them by the Democrats.

For the first time in the history of the city, Negroes are holding competent positions in the highway, sewer, public buildings, water, park, and city health departments, while in the state departments the Democratic party has been directly responsible for employment in the Public Works, Health, Supreme and Superior courts and the State House Building. During the past four years lucrative posts have been given to Negroes in Newport, South County, East Providence and Providence.<sup>31</sup>

The Republican National Committee sent Jesse Owens to address a rally at Elks Auditorium, but his appeals were in vain. Democratic leaders such as Lopez and Mathews, aided by Wiley through his column in the *Boston Chronicle*, were more successful in attracting their black neighbors to the Democratic camp. Support for Roosevelt, asserted Wiley, could be demonstrated by "sending to Washington men who would be behind him in carrying out his recovery and security programs and by continuing administrations in the city and state which will give the fullest measure of cooperation."<sup>32</sup> Referring to Senator Metcalf, whose family owned textile mills, the *Chronicle* contended that certain candidates, mainly in the Republican ranks, were industrialists and employers "who studiously refrain from hiring Negroes."<sup>33</sup> Wiley could see no benefits that a Republican administration would bring to black voters.

The record number of Providence voters who went to the polls in 1936 gave the Democrats a clean sweep. "The New Deal steamroller rolled on," reported the *Providence Journal*, and "in the end it rolled over the whole Republican state ticket."<sup>34</sup> Roosevelt increased his percentage in the Camp Street neighborhood by 14.7 percent, and although his increase was minimal in the West End, both neighborhoods were now decidedly within the Democratic fold.<sup>35</sup>

Two years later party leaders again attempted to weld the black vote to the Democrats. "Dixie" Mathews, nominated for Fourth District representative, reminded his neighbors that "hundreds of our men are employed at the present time on construction projects on city, state, or federal projects," and he urged them to recall the "indignities which blacks suffered under a Republican administration who simply purchased their votes and forgot about them until the next election." Even the president of the Providence NAACP, Joseph LeCount, a Republican, admitted that blacks had made great strides in city employment under Democratic administrations.<sup>36</sup> William Wiley estimated that the city's weekly payroll in Ward Three (Camp Street area) totaled at least

twelve hundred dollars, and most of the jobs had been obtained through Mathews's efforts and the friendship of white Democratic leaders. He wrote:

In dispensing patronage jobs, colored people have fared well under the Democratic administration in Providence. . . . The "New Deal" for colored workers began when Charles F. McElroy was secretary to the Providence Commissioner of Public Works and also city chairman. It has continued under Edward Flanagan who now has the two positions formerly held by Mr. McElroy.<sup>37</sup>

In one of the most turbulent elections in Rhode Island history, the Republicans swept the state and its capital city in 1938. Although he was defeated, "Dixie" Mathews won more votes in his home district of Camp Street than did Democratic gubernatorial candidate Robert Quinn and the rest of the state ticket; clearly blacks were now willing to split their ballots. The same situation prevailed in the West End, where black voters were credited with helping to defeat the Republican candidate for alderman, Bernard Fay, a theatre owner accused of selling only balcony seat tickets to blacks. But the vote against Fay was a protest, and blacks in this neighborhood supported the rest of the Republican ticket.

Black voting patterns in 1938 followed the rest of the city and did not necessarily mean that they had deserted the party of Roosevelt. Local issues including patronage and payroll scandals on the city level, lavish spending by the Republicans, the presence of a third party on the state ticket, the recession of 1938, and confusion resulting from the use of voting machines for the first time were all cited as reasons for the Democratic defeat.<sup>38</sup>

By 1940 black leaders were attacking Republican Governor William Vanderbilt and Republican Mayor John Collins for their indifference. John Lopez, head of the Providence NAACP, revealed data showing that the Democrats in ten years had given blacks more patronage than had the Republicans in over fifty years. There were still no blacks in the police department or teaching in Providence schools, and Wiley in the *Providence Chronicle* accused the mayor of having forgotten black voters.

Prior to this election the now-mayor John F. Collins appeared before Negro audiences seeking their votes. Since the election Mayor Collins has made friendly gestures to colored citizens, but nothing very tangible in the way of patronage has been done for this group in the city of Providence.<sup>39</sup>

In the election of 1940 Providence's black leaders, for the most part, supported the Democratic ticket, emphasizing how the New Deal had helped their people. In 1938 William Wiley had founded the *Providence Chronicle* for the capital city's black community. Through this paper Wiley praised Democratic gubernatorial candidate J. Howard McGrath, who as chairman of the Democratic State Committee had or-

37. *Ibid.*, Oct. 29, 1938, 2.

38. P. H. Quinn to James A. Farley, Sept. 10, 1936, Official File—Democratic National Committee, Box 90; James E. Dunne to James A. Farley, Dec. 19, 1938, Official File—Box 300; Democratic National Committee, "Election Forecasts and Analysis of Election Results: Rhode Island," Thomas McCoy to James A. Farley, Dec. 16, 1938; J. J. Cunningham to James A. Farley, Dec. 22, 1938; all in the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N.Y. *Rhode Island Labor News*, Nov. 28, 1938, 2.

39. *Providence Chronicle*, Jan. 6, 1940, 6. Editor William Wiley pointed out that Collins appointed himself to the Board of Police and Fire and thus was in a position to do something for blacks but had failed to do so. See *Providence Chronicle* Sept. 30, 1939, 1.



40. *Ibid.*, August 10, 1940, 6; Jan. 11, 1941, 6.

41. John M. Allswang, "The Chicago Negro Vote and the Democratic Consensus: A Case Study, 1918-36," in *The Negro in Depression and War*, ed. Bernard Sternsher (Chicago, 1969), 234-57.

42. Ernest M. Collins, "Cincinnati Negroes and Presidential Politics," in *The Negro in Depression and War*, ed. Bernard Sternsher (Chicago, 1969), 263.

ganized black Democrats and was always "fair and straightforward in his dealings with them." Wiley also predicted that Providence blacks would fare better under the Democratic candidate for mayor, Dennis J. Roberts, than they had under Republican Mayor John Collins.<sup>40</sup>

The 1940 election demonstrated that the Democrats had reached a new height of power in both the city and state governments and that black voters contributed to that victory. Providence's two main black neighborhoods were now firmly within the Democratic fold. McGrath polled larger percentages in both neighborhoods than the 1936 Democratic candidate, Quinn, and the conversion of blacks to the Democratic ranks filtered down to the remainder of the ticket. The defection of black voters from the GOP that had commenced in 1930 was now complete.

The Democratic city government brought to power by the depression finally united and consolidated its control in 1940. The party, which in 1928 had been so dominated by the Irish, learned that it had to share power with other groups. Not only did Providence Democrats court the votes of white ethnics, but the party made a concerted effort to lure blacks from the Republicans. As in Chicago, Providence's black voters lagged behind other ethnic groups in the swing to the Roosevelt coalition, but viewing the period from 1924 to 1940 as a whole, the increase in Democratic black votes—from thirty to sixty percent—was dramatic.<sup>41</sup>

The New Deal, no doubt, was a major factor in the party's success. Ernest M. Collins, in his analysis of Cincinnati's black vote, found that "economic aspects of the New Deal programs were the primary factor responsible for Negro voters deserting the Republican party."<sup>42</sup> The Providence case reinforces this point. Throughout the 1930s party leaders reminded blacks that the Republican policies had led the nation into the depression and that the Democratic policies had brought much-needed help.

Finally, during this decade Providence's black leaders demonstrated a new level of power. No longer content to follow blindly the promises of politicians, they demanded jobs and other forms of aid in return for their political support. With the revival of the NAACP and founding of the Providence Urban League, by the end of the decade a new era of racial political awareness had emerged.

## Book Reviews

*To Starve the Army at Pleasure: Continental Army Administration and American Political Culture, 1775-1783.* By E. WAYNE CARP. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1984. xiii + 306 pp. \$29.00.)

In 1981 Erna Risch published *Supplying Washington's Army*, a study of the organizational structure that provided logistical support for the Continental Army. In painstaking detail Risch described the development of each army department and examined its operations. In the process she explained a good deal about the difficulties involved in obtaining adequate supplies. E. Wayne Carp's *To Starve the Army at Pleasure* has a different purpose, which is to explain the relationship between logistical problems and political culture. Simply put, Carp's theme is that Americans of the Revolutionary generation perceived public service "through the eyes of republican morality," which had its origins in seventeenth-century Whig ideology. For the Whigs the ideal polity was the republic, modeled on those of classical antiquity. Drawing on examples from the past, the Whigs contended that the most serious danger to a republic's stability was the unbridled power of its rulers, who, history revealed, used every means possible, including the standing army, to destroy their subjects' freedom. Only a virtuous, public-spirited citizenry, ever alert to the dangers of vice and corruption, could preserve the republic and the liberty it was established to protect. Americans inherited both the fear of power and the anti-standing army tradition and tried to wage war accordingly. The intense localism and fear and suspicion of staff officers it engendered, almost cost them the Revolution.

During the first two years of the war, the inherited fear of power and the antimilitary tradition, combined with congressional inexperience, made it difficult for the Continental Congress to administer the war. The lack of a centrally controlled supply system forced Congress to resort during crises to the creation of temporary committees for specific supply tasks—as the need arose, for example, to purchase medicines or shoes, and to rely upon the states as agents of supply. Tasks normally carried out in European armies by staff departments, such as the Quartermaster, Commissary, or Hospital departments, were routinely delegated to state authorities, including the governor, the legislature, or the state committee of safety.

As a result of the military defeat on Long Island in 1776, Congress made an effort to reform or reorganize war administration beginning in 1777. In place of ad hoc committees, it formed several standing ones,

including the Board of War. It created new staff departments, including a superintendent of bakers and a commissary of hides to alleviate the chronic complaints about shortages of bread and shoes, and a commissary general of musters and inspector general to improve discipline in the army. In order to produce specialization of functions and public accountability, it reorganized the major staff departments: the Hospital Department was divided into four geographic areas, headed by Director General William Shippen; and a commissary of forage and a wagonmaster general were appointed to relieve some of the burdens on the new quartermaster general, Thomas Mifflin. The fear of concentrating power in a single individual persisted, however, and is reflected in the decision to divide the office of commissary general into a commissary general of purchases and the commissary general of issues. This allowed each official to "check" the other. Congress retained its power to appoint, for example, assistants to the commissary or subordinate medical officers outside the Director General's district and to issue detailed procedures for recordkeeping so as to make staff officers more accountable for public funds.

The efforts of Congress to rationalize the supply system failed, however, due ostensibly to the disastrous winter at Valley Forge. In fact, the deplorable condition of the army at Valley Forge was due to a combination of factors, not the least important of which was the host of resignations at all levels in the staff departments due to disgruntlement over congressional reforms. The departure of Thomas Mifflin left the Quartermaster department badly disorganized and unable to collect and transport food, tents, entrenching tools, and other supplies needed urgently by the suffering troops. The problems of supply were further exacerbated by adverse weather conditions, shortages of transport and labor, difficulties in procuring food, negligence and fraud of contractors and suppliers, competition from state authorities over staff personnel and supplies, and the growing problem of inflation and a depreciating currency, which resulted in the financial crisis of 1779.

Critical shortages of supplies ultimately forced the army to resort to ad hoc solutions, such as civilian volunteer efforts to make clothing and footwear, to use captured equipment and finally to impress civilian property, first by impressment statutes passed by state assemblies and, beginning in 1780, by direct military impressment. Despite efforts to assert the authority of civil government over the military, impressment proved both politically unpopular and inefficient as local magistrates consistently frustrated the efforts of staff officers by refusing to issue impress warrants, requiring the army to comply with the letter of impressment statutes as to fair price, and using legal sanctions, such as fines or suits for trespass, against staff officers. After 1779 ideological fears of the military and loss of property led civilians to begin refusing to cooperate with the military by withholding supplies, breaking contracts, requiring cash for deliveries, and suing supply agents and staff officers for the payment of public debts. Beginning in 1780 growing reliance on impressment met violent resistance, which Carp maintains

suggests the erosion of citizen respect for authority, growing out of the inability of local leaders to protect property.

Charges of corruption among staff officers further eroded American respect for constituted authority. Because of their adherence to republican ideology, most citizens, including congressmen, blamed staff officers for the problems that began accumulating after 1780. Most critics attributed the country's financial woes to the practice of paying staff officers on a commission, which allegedly encouraged them to raise prices in order to reap higher profits. In fact, Carp argues that staff officers tried unsuccessfully to keep down prices in the face of inflationary pressures caused by international economic conditions, profiteering, and competition between state and national purchasers of supplies. Inspired by the belief that a republic founded on the virtue of its people should not tolerate profit-making during war, Congress, in February 1780, turned over to the states responsibility for supplying the army. They were called upon to carry out investigations of graft and corruption among staff officers and to develop strict auditing policies making department heads responsible for their subordinates' deficits. As a result many staff officers found themselves owing money to the government. Although some officers resigned, most stayed on, a few for economic reasons, most because of patriotism or esprit de corps, and above all, because of a sense of honor that was peculiar to the eighteenth century.

Repeated frustrations and the near failure of the war effort gave rise to an influential body of opinion which questioned the value of localism and of the militia system as an instrument of national defense. The ideological conflicts over military policy that ensued occupied American politics for the next twenty years, and is the subject of Richard Kohn's *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783-1802*. Carp's *To Starve the Army at Pleasure* should be read in conjunction with Kohn's work and with James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender's *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789*. Together they present a highly useful study of the relationship between revolutionary ideals and military practice.

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*Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee: Needlework in the Education of Rhode Island Women, 1730-1830*. By BETTY RING. (Providence: the Rhode Island Historical Society, 1983. 276 pp. Biblio. and index, \$20.00.)

Seldom nowadays is a book produced that one can recommend so unreservedly as Betty Ring's *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee: Needlework in the Education of Rhode Island Women, 1730-1830*. Eminently scholarly yet thoroughly readable and profusely illustrated, it sets a shining

example that is rarely equalled in American fine and decorative arts studies.

True, there are aspects of the creation of Rhode Island needlework that one wishes Ring would explore in greater depth, for instance, comparing the work of Rhode Island women with that of women in other areas of the country. Such wishes should be construed as a tribute to the author's grasp of the subject, for they reflect not deficiencies but simply the stimulating effect of the present volume. Like all well-written research, Ring's work establishes a frame of reference that answers many worthy and valid questions but simultaneously challenges one to pursue deeper or tangential queries that are beyond its stated scope. Clearly such is the case here. The goal of the catalogue and the exhibition it accompanies is concisely stated in the first two sentences of the introduction: "to establish the recognition of Rhode Island schoolgirl needlework as an important regional form of naive American art within the field of American decorative arts" and "to demonstrate how a group of embroideries, once identified, may be used as a resource in tracing the history of female education in early America." One wishes that every author were so straightforward! Although simply stated, Ring's goal is ambitious. To her distinct credit, it is also fulfilled.

Chapter One provides the historical background of English heritage that so firmly linked female needlework with school instruction in early America. It provides an essential foundation for the layman's understanding of what follows, but it also delves into questions about the origins of sampler making that have long perplexed scholars in the field. Speculation would be tempting, since time has erased many valuable clues. However, Ring forbears. Instead, she creates a framework of reliable references and presents the unresolved forthrightly. From the fact that Jane Bostocke's 1598 sampler was discovered as late as 1960, one derives hope that still more concrete evidence remains to be unearthed. (Hers is the only signed and dated Tudor example known.)

The succeeding three chapters form the bulk of the catalogue. Ring assesses Newport, Providence, and—finally—Bristol, Warren, and Warwick embroideries, detailing regional proclivities, stylizations, and techniques, and focusing on the critical role of schools, specifically the teachers, in introducing and dispersing these styles. Using Rhode Island as an example, Ring establishes a vital link between education and embroidery, leading one to wonder why this fundamental aspect of needlework study has been so superficially treated heretofore. Discussions of distinct socioeconomic factors among the stated locales provide a context for the works and a rationale for regional variations within the relative consistency of Rhode Island needlework as a whole. In-depth genealogical and related biographical data reveal much about the particular girls and their instructors. Extensive quotations from period documents flesh out statistical facts and make both students and teachers into lively individuals full of human hopes, longings, and

fears. Throughout, Ring assiduously and fully footnotes her sources of information and assistance; happily for the reader, these credits appear on the same pages as the text to which they refer. An abundance of primary sources, many of them little known, attest to Ring's concern for accuracy and thoughtful scholarship, as does her careful phraseology in text, footnotes, catalogue entries, and captions.

The volume is beautifully designed and its format well considered and readily comprehensible. Each of the three regional chapters is initiated by a double-page illustration followed by a section of text. Illustrations for the latter include period advertisements, bills, letters, maps, city views, images of particular buildings, and the like, all of which aid enormously in constructing a mental picture of the area, schools, and individuals discussed. They also renew one's appreciation of Ring's adherence to period documentation. A page from Sarah Osborn's diary, for instance, reminds one of the difficulties of deciphering eighteenth-century script and spelling and of compensating for the ravages of time.

Following each text section within the regional chapter divisions are the catalogue entries for the respective areas ("bullets" helpfully indicate embroideries included in the exhibition). Each entry is illustrated and juxtaposed with basic data, including transcriptions of inscriptions, and specific commentary. Gratifyingly, embroideries are shown in original frames and behind original painted glass, where possible, and nearly half of the 122 catalogue entries are illustrated in color. Most entries are allocated an entire page, but when two appear on a page, information pertinent to each is carefully segregated to avoid confusion. Page numbers are easy to find and appear on every page. Catalogue entry numbers run consecutively throughout the book in a manner conducive to easy reference. Within regional chapters, catalogue entries run chronologically from earliest to latest, making stylistic developments within an area readily discernible. Within the catalogue sections, illustrations of such documents as print sources, framers' labels, portraits of the artists, itemized bills, and a rare example of an embroidery still attached to its working frame all augment the text and expand our understanding of how the pieces were fabricated.

The brevity of Ring's concluding chapter is misleading, for it presents fascinating food for thought. The author documents the young nation's evolving controversy over what rightly constituted a woman's education, and she also postulates a rationale for the gradual decline in emphasis on "accomplishments," such as fine embroidery. In a creative manner, Ring then dovetails this demise with the birth of historical and antiquarian interest in the embroideries, and gives an accounting of scholarly consideration of the subject up to the present. The list is discouragingly sparse.

Finally, mention should be made of three appendices that are valuable studies in and of themselves. One discusses the materials used to create the embroideries and the patterns and verses appearing on them. A second, long overdue in needlework studies, describes methods of

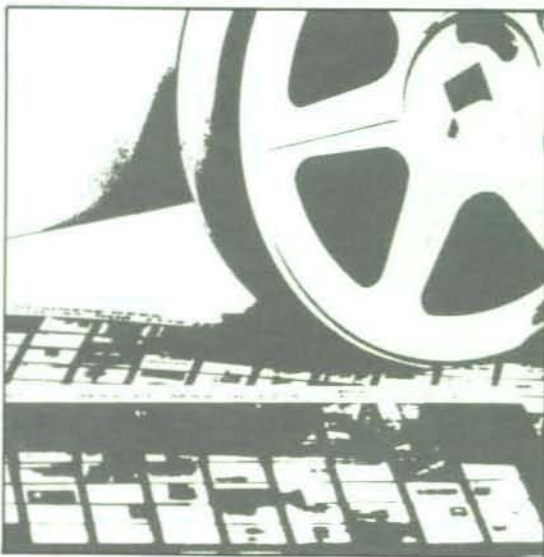
framing the pieces and the craftsmen and firms responsible for fashioning these important finishing touches. The third supplements genealogical and biographical information provided in the catalogue's main text. More concisely, it summarizes statistical data in text and chart form, sometimes exploding preconceived notions of the circumstances under which the embroideries were executed; for instance, the assumption that the needleworkers were from wealthy families. (Some were, but many were the offspring of simple craftsmen and farmers.) Here one also discovers with surprise that of the two hundred women studied, more than a quarter never married. (A reason is suggested; read the book to discover it!)

Ring's scholarly evaluation of Rhode Island embroideries will be welcomed and consulted by an audience far wider than students of American needlework. Educators and historians of all kinds, whether professional or self-appointed, will find her work an invaluable reference and an admirable revelation of the past.

*Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center  
Williamsburg, Virginia*

BARBARA LUCK

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