



Rhode Island History

Volume 45, Number 4

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Sarah E. Pope's sampler (see cover) is inscribed:

Duty Fear and Love we owe to God above

*Favour is deceitful and
Beauty is vain but a wo
man that feareth the
LORD shall be praised*

*Give her the fruit of
her hands and let her
own works praise her in
the Gate*

*Give first to GOD the flower
of thy Youth Take for thy
Guide the Holy word
of Truth Adorn thy soul with
Grace prize wisdom more
Than all the Pearls upon
the Indian shore*

*Labour for Peace chuse to con
tend with none Let reason
with sweet calmness keep
the Throng Treading fierce
wrath and lawlessness fall
down the Grace of
meekness is a womans
crown*



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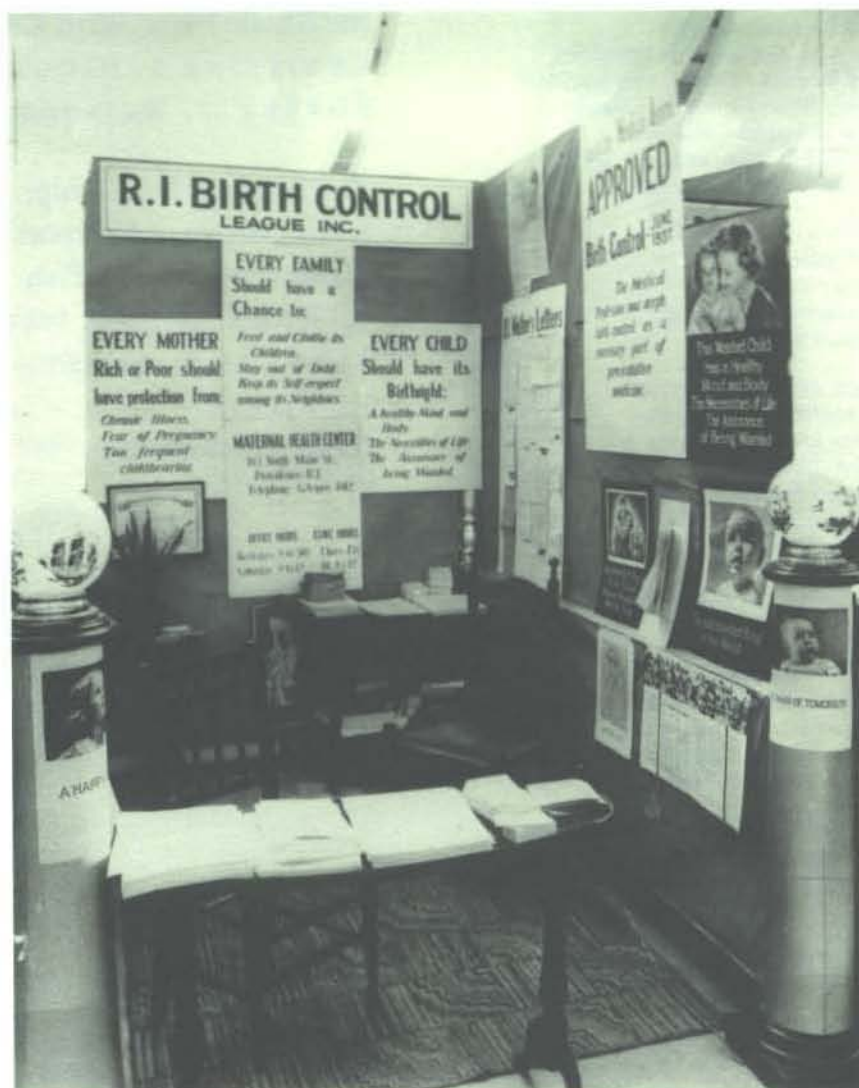
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Interior of the RIBCL's North Main Street clinic. Courtesy of Planned Parenthood of Rhode Island.



The Early Years of the Rhode Island Birth Control League

Christine E. Nicoll and Robert G. Weisbord

The often-told story of the birth control movement in America is one of the great legal wars between demons and heroes. Time and again, Margaret Sanger, the movement's founder, has been forced to do battle with the ghost of Anthony Comstock and the legacy he left in law. In 1873, Congress had passed a law that prohibited the mailing of "lewd and obscene" materials. Comstock, the law's sponsor, tacked on a last-minute rider which made the mailing of birth control information illegal, punishable by stiff jail terms. Comstock, secretary of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, was appointed special agent of the post office, and carried on a personal war against members of the medical profession who attempted to advise women on birth control. When Comstock suspected a physician of providing such advice, he often resorted to entrapment. A desperate letter from a woman seeking information would be sent to the doctor's office. If the doctor responded in writing with advice on birth control, Comstock would prosecute.¹

Thousands of pages are devoted to Sanger and what she termed "my right for birth control," and even those who have taken a jaundiced view of her contributions have dwelt heavily on her role in the movement. She becomes alternately martyr and devil within the heroic model, but the story ends happily with Comstock defeated and the national birth control movement triumphant.² New York, Massachusetts, and Connecticut are the battlegrounds—microcosms of a national movement. Most studies assume that the success of the entire movement depended on the outcome of battles Sanger and others waged within these "representative" states. The result has been a view of the national movement that focuses on the federal Comstock law, the states that legislated their own versions of that law, and the united and powerful Catholic opposition to legal change. Yet only twenty-four states had anything resembling Comstock laws and only a handful actually banned the dissemination of birth control information. Moreover, although the last of the Comstock laws were not overturned until the late 1960s, most were ineffective, as birth control advocates discovered as long ago as the early 1920s.³

When the courts ruled on these cases, they looked to the practices of states like Rhode Island.⁴ Unlike birth control opponents in the "representative" states, those in Rhode Island never had a Comstock-type law to support their position. Yet historians seeking to understand the dy-

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1. Madelaine Gray, *Margaret Sanger* (New York, 1979), 44.

2. In addition to Gray, several books on Margaret Sanger have appeared since the early 1960s. See Virginia Coigney, *Margaret Sanger: Rebel With a Cause* (Garden City, 1969); Emily T. Douglas, *Margaret Sanger* (New York, 1970); and Vivien Werner, *Margaret Sanger: Woman Rebel* (New York, 1970). In addition, David Kennedy's *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven, 1970) is by no means a study of the national movement, but it is one of the few to question the extent of Sanger's influence.

3. Sanger claimed that after 1925 the third stage of the movement had been reached in which they stopped agitating against laws and opened clinics and sought public support. Despite Comstock laws in several of these states, the clinics remained open. See Margaret Sanger, "Birth Control," *Social Work Year Book* (1929), reprinted in Robert Bremner, *Children and Youth in America, 1866-1932* (Cambridge, 1971), 11.

4. *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479 (1965).

namics of this social reform have overlooked these states in favor of those that possessed laws forbidding the dissemination of birth control information. Rhode Island's birth control movement is especially interesting because it succeeded against the wishes of the Catholic church in a state that was the home to a higher percentage of Catholics than any other in the nation. In 1931, the Rhode Island Birth Control League (RIBCL), formed to educate the public about contraception, opened and operated the first birth control clinic in New England. The public's response far exceeded the league's expectations; clinic hours had to be extended to accommodate the steady stream of patients. By 1937, the RIBCL also maintained clinics in Newport and the village of Shannock in Washington County. The story of the RIBCL's early years provides an important example of the movement's success in a state without a Comstock-type law on the books. It achieved this success with only minimal public controversy and without a charismatic leader like Margaret Sanger.

Birth control advocate Margaret Sanger leaving a New York City courtroom during her trial in 1916 following a raid on a Brooklyn, N.Y. clinic. Sanger was convicted and served a 30 day jail sentence. Photograph courtesy of the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.



Margaret Sanger was a visiting nurse in New York City in the early 1900s where she saw firsthand the results of widespread ignorance of birth control. The only sure method understood by the women whom Sanger treated was abortion at the hands of quacks. Sanger herself was the mother of three children, and, as her biographers point out, she had suffered in childbearing. Furthermore, as a singularly ambitious woman, Sanger felt constrained by and at times resented her own responsibilities as mother.⁵ As the wife of William Sanger, an anarchist and member of the Socialist party, she became active in radical causes; anarchist Emma Goldman and the notorious "Wobbly" Big Bill Haywood were among her friends. The influence of her new radical associates, and her own experiences as a nurse, led Sanger to develop her ideas about the rights of women and the need for readily available information on birth control. She first learned of Anthony Comstock and the law to which he lent his name in 1911, when she attempted to publish articles concerning venereal disease. The post office notified her that such articles were in violation of the law and would be suppressed.

The story of the early years of the birth control movement and of the American Birth Control League (ABCL), which Sanger founded in 1921, centers around the battles waged against Comstock's legislative legacy. Sanger's medical experience, combined with her knowledge of the uses of publicity (learned from her earlier radical association) assured her not only of center stage but also kept the issue of birth control before the public. Her greatest contribution to the movement lay in her ability to use the press to drive home the message that her prosecution under the Comstock laws was really the persecution of a helpless and high-minded woman. Many women flocked to the cause throughout the 1920s, and, with the ABCL assistance, they carried on similar battles against the federal and state laws.

Proponents of the Comstock law also understood the uses of publicity. They portrayed the birth control movement as a threat to marriage, family, and public morality. Despite Sanger's estrangement from her husband and his radical associates, her early causes and friends were offered as proof that the movement was subversive to the national interest. Her second marriage, to J. Noah Slee, a wealthy philanthropist, brought Sanger into a rich and respectable circle of people whom she cultivated for support. Undoubtedly, she converted many to the cause, but her association with the movement she helped to start was always a mixed blessing. Many physicians and members of the middle class, who might have agreed in principle with birth control advocates, were wary of running afoul of Comstock-type reformers and possibly even more wary of associating with "radicals." But the climate of opinion, public and medical, was changing.

In 1930, a federal court dealt the Comstock proponents a serious setback when it ruled that birth control information and devices could be sent through the mails for the "prevention of disease."⁶ Though the court's decision did not interfere with state anticontraceptive laws, it

5. Lawrence Lader and Milton Meltzer, *Margaret Sanger: Pioneer of Birth Control* (New York, 1969), 27-28, Gray, *Margaret Sanger*, 33-36.

6. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America*, 212.

7. *Ibid.*, 176–79.

8. See the RIBCL 1931 Scrapbook, Planned Parenthood of Rhode Island Archives, Providence, R.I.

did have serious implications. While leaving the anticontraceptive provisions of the federal law on the books, the court's decision nonetheless deprived many of those provisions of their teeth. As a result, dissemination of birth control information increased and many in the medical profession began to take an interest. Because of her earlier associations, Sanger had an unsavory reputation, which, David Kennedy claims, deterred doctors and other professionals from joining the ABCL.⁷ According to David Kennedy, the medical profession had an aversion to the "quackery" of birth control and increasingly tried to exert control over the dangerous devices on the market. Many doctors associated Sanger with quackery, and her removal from the ABCL in 1928 facilitated the participation of physicians in the movement. By 1931, the organization had expunged the radical taint associated with her name, and it actively sought the support of doctors.

While Sanger took her fight against Comstockery to Washington and in reality lost effective power over the movement, local groups were coming to see the irrelevance of legal controversies and quietly were opening clinics. By the end of the 1920s, no states had altered their laws. There were no attempts to alter the federal legislation, and throughout the 1930s such efforts failed. At the same time, the number of birth control clinics climbed steadily. In 1930, there were fifty-five clinics in twelve states; by 1931, the number had jumped to eighty-two in eighteen states. Thereafter, new clinics opened at a fast pace, despite the defeats of local and national birth control legislation and several years of impasse over state Comstock laws.

It was against this background that New England's first birth control clinic was established on Main Street in Providence in July of 1931. The RIBCL, comprising a group of prominent citizens, had been organized in May and subsequently was incorporated under the laws of the state. As set forth in its bylaws, the league's objectives were to educate the public about the medical, social, economic, eugenic, and ethical importance of birth control; to provide services for birth control prescriptions and treatment; and to cooperate with the ABCL. Contraceptive advice would be given only to married women who were referred by a hospital, private physician, recognized social agency, or another clinic.⁸ Whether the ABCL took the initiative in the formation of a local group or was contacted first by local supporters is unclear.

The RIBCL members, like those of similar leagues in other states, were overwhelmingly upper middle-class professionals. Doctors and academicians formed the backbone of the group, although businessmen and social service workers in Providence were well represented. Unlike their predecessors in the early years of birth control agitation, RIBCL members did not risk their reputations by joining the movement; they were not labeled radicals. Among the leaders of the RIBCL were several Protestant ministers and physicians. Six doctors ran the clinic with the aid of a social worker and a trained nurse. The "honorary committee of supporters," members of the league, included the

president, a dean, and several professors from Brown University, thirty-one doctors, the owner of the *Providence Journal*, a rabbi, and three Protestant ministers. The league also attracted businessmen who saw contraceptives as a way to control the supply of labor and keep down taxes and welfare costs during the Depression.⁹ If social position alone would have guaranteed success, the reforms sought by birth control advocates would have been accomplished by 1930.

Both the national birth control movement and its Rhode Island subsidiary were impelled by a curious combination of motives—mainly humanitarian, but sometimes elitist. Reproductive freedom (i.e. the right of a woman to have the number of children she wanted when and if she wanted them) was the principal goal of Sanger and her allies. For decades knowledge of efficient contraception was the monopoly of those who could afford private medical care. Poor people were not allowed to share the secret. It was against this gross inequity that Sanger, a proto-feminist, and many of her Rhode Island counterparts waged their crusade.

At the same time, eugenic, class, and nativist considerations undoubtedly informed the thinking of some birth control advocates in Providence and elsewhere. Birth rates among white Anglo-Saxon Protestants were lower than among the "hordes" of impoverished recent immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. If the fecund "unwashed" alien population embraced birth control, a multiplicity of problems that afflicted urban slums could be mitigated and the traditional character of America preserved. Birth control was part of the process of Americanization.¹⁰

For many years conservative Protestants had been in the forefront of opposition to birth control in the United States. Several Protestant denominations, along with the Catholic church and some Orthodox Jews, looked askance at contraception. By 1931, however, much of this sectarian hostility was in decline. A conference of the Methodist church, a special commission of the Presbyterian General Assembly, and the American Unitarian Association all sanctioned birth control, as did a Committee on Marriage and the Home of the Federal Council of Churches in Christ in America, which represented more than twenty million Protestants. The Central Conference of American Rabbis also endorsed birth control, but the movement's greatest international triumph came when the Bishops of the Church of England decided to support contraception.¹¹

By 1931, the most formidable foe of birth control internationally, nationally, and certainly within Rhode Island was the Roman Catholic church. Barely six months before the birth control clinic was founded in Providence, Pope Pius XI published the church's strongest denunciation of contraception since the sixteenth century, his encyclical on marriage, *Casti connubi*. Issued partly in response to the new liberalized statement on birth control made by the Anglican church, the papal document also was intended to "turn sheep from poisoned pastures,"

9. See, for example, *Providence Evening Bulletin*, 17 Oct. 1933. For a description of the typical ABCL member, see Kennedy, *Birth Control in America*, 200.

10. The Yankee elite's fears that they would be outbred by immigrants can be traced back to the pre-Civil War era. They were not easily dispelled. See Linda Gordon, *Woman's Body, Woman's Right: A Social History of Birth Control in America* (New York, 1977), 138, 277-78.

11. John T. Noonan, Jr., *Contraception* (New York, 1967), 486-87.

12. See *Seven Great Encyclicals* (Glen Rock, N.J., 1939), 54–56.

13. *Providence Journal*, 5 March 1932.

that is, to protect the Catholic faithful from the danger of depraved morality. Sexual intercourse was destined by nature primarily for the begetting of children, the pontiff argued. Those who deliberately frustrated that purpose sinned against nature. They committed a shameful and intrinsically vicious deed. The encyclical served as the basis of the diocesan response to the opening of the Providence clinic.¹²

When the RIBCL was formed in 1931, ABCL members held a conference in Providence which received wide coverage in the local press. The keynote speaker, Dr. C. C. Little, took the opportunity to discuss the Catholic church and birth control, arguing that the Pope's latest encyclical was so absurd as to be the catalyst that would draw American Catholics and Protestants together. Sexually isolated priests, he contended, were in no position to give counsel on such matters. His message was clear: Rhode Islanders had the choice of listening to misinformed priests or the "experts"—the doctors who formed the membership of the RIBCL.¹³

Bishop William Hickey.
1869–1933. RIHS Collection
(RHi X3 1704).



The Diocese of Providence was not cowed by social elites promoting what was, to the church, one of the greatest social evils.¹⁴ Bishop James Hickey, head of the diocese, understood the problems the church faced, and he did not mince words. Because of dissension within Protestant ranks, only the Catholic church could wage effective war against birth control.

Non-Catholic opposition to contraception merits respect and endorsement. But that it cannot, in the long run, prevail against the birth control prevention movement is a fact that no one appreciates more thoroughly than the advocates of contraception. Hence the inevitable attack upon the Catholic Church, one phase of which was witnessed in Providence this week.¹⁵

Bishop Hickey pointed out that the members of the ABCL were determined to use the church as a foil, as Margaret Sanger had done for years. He declared that the church was prepared to resist all "attacks upon Christian marriage to the limit of her power and influence."¹⁶ The question remains as to why, in a state in which the majority of citizens were Catholics and in which there had been a declaration of resistance by the church hierarchy, so little overt opposition was voiced when the birth control clinic opened.

Rhode Island had no anticontraceptive law. This fact may actually explain the clinic's success, but it by no means explains the lack of controversy or the reactions of the Catholic church and representatives of government. Moreover, the Providence diocese was directly responsible to the Archdiocese of Boston, which vigorously opposed birth control in Massachusetts. Similar resistance in Rhode Island would seem to have been inevitable. However, a wide range of forces precluded clear-cut battles between strong adversaries, such as those that took place in other states. In fact, each force acted to temper what was, potentially, a volatile situation.

Several months before the Providence clinic opened, the *Providence Visitor*—the diocesan newspaper—carried an article by the Reverend John Ryan, a liberal priest and a well-known radio personality. Referring to a court decision that favored birth control, Ryan wrote that "nothing encourages the practice of birth control and the spread of its propaganda so much as these legal decisions."¹⁷ In states like Massachusetts, which had both anticontraceptive laws and a high proportion of politically active Catholics, the church stubbornly opposed legal change. In the absence of such laws in Rhode Island, the church was in no position to test the legality of either birth control or clinics. An attempted lawsuit would have generated great publicity, and might very well have ended in a decision favorable to birth control advocates, bringing the force and sanction of law to the cause of the church's adversaries. Instead, the church sought to stress the immorality and the possible illegality of birth control, without resorting to risky litigation.

14. *Providence Visitor*, 10 Nov. 1933.

15. Editorial, *Providence Visitor*, 6 March 1931.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*, 30 Jan. 1931.

The *Providence Visitor* characterized the founding of the RIBCL as the beginning of a campaign against Christian marriage. Msgr. Peter E. Blessing told a Catholic audience that the movement would break down the Christian ideals of marriage and should therefore be called "birth prevention," not birth control. Still another Catholic spokesman described contraception as a greater menace to the family than that posed by the Depression. To explain why, given the church's strong negative reaction, there were no attempts at anticontraceptive legislation in Rhode Island, one must look to both the profound problems within the Catholic church and to the unusual political situation within the state.

By 1930, Italian immigrants formed the third largest ethnic group in Rhode Island. Since the first major influx of Italians into the state in the 1890s, the Irish-American Catholic hierarchy had found itself in a

Cartoon from the Providence Visitor, 17 Nov. 1933.



difficult position. The overwhelming majority of these immigrants, peasants from southern Italy, maintained a decidedly anticlerical outlook because the Italian church traditionally had sided with the landowners. These immigrants identified with their own folk religion rather than with the church. In their new country the hostility was mutual. The Irish-Americans were convinced that the Italians were pagans, and the hierarchy was not particularly sensitive to cultural differences. The Italian community did not look to the church as the center of social and spiritual guidance, and it resisted Catholic organization and hierarchical rule. They attacked and openly criticized Bishop Hickey during the 1920s and 1930s, and felt persecuted by his hierarchy. In more than one instance, they succeeded in ousting priests he had appointed. It was almost impossible for the church to ease ethnic tensions, for which it was in some measure responsible, or to retain the loyalties of Italian immigrants.¹⁸

French Canadians comprised Rhode Island's second largest ethnic group. During the 1920s, there had been a crisis in the Franco community, which feared that the Irish hierarchy was planning to Americanize them. A small group of French Canadians, calling themselves the Sentinelles, militantly fought all designs by the hierarchy to control the workings of the French community. The self-styled Sentinelles viewed this as part of a long-standing hierarchical policy "to eliminate all vestiges of 'national' parishes from American Catholicism."¹⁹ The majority of French Canadians chose to support the church despite their ethnic and cultural concerns, but during the 1930s the French community was torn and still suffered from bitterness and suspicion over the Sentinelle crisis.²⁰ Bishop Hickey delivered press releases and articles in French to their newspapers, but the hierarchy itself was still not free of its own prejudices. Adherence to cultural patterns by the French Canadians created problems similar to those posed by the Italians. They set themselves off; in fact, they virtually isolated themselves from the hierarchy.²¹

Although the Pope's encyclical on marriage and the family had made explicit the church's responsibilities concerning birth control, these fractures within the diocese made it difficult for the church to take effective action. While there is no reason to believe that many members of the Catholic ethnic minorities approved of or practiced birth control, the Italians and French were suspicious of hierarchical designs and would have nothing to do with church-led organizations. Through sermons and publications, the hierarchy attempted to prevent the acceptance of birth control among its own ranks. Beyond that, it could not present a united front against the clinic.

Rhode Island's peculiar political situation during the early 1930s also hampered the translation of Catholic opposition into political action. Despite the sizeable immigration of ethnic groups, Yankee hegemony had been assured because of Rhode Island's unusual laws and districting plans. Until 1935, the Democratic party had never been able to gain majorities in either the Senate or the House of Representatives, and be-

18. This account is based on Peter W. Bargaglio, "Italian Immigrants and the Catholic Church in Providence, 1890-1930," *RIH* 34 (May 1975): 47-57.

19. Richard S. Sorrell, "Sports and Franco-Americans in Woonsocket, 1870-1930," *RIH* 32 (Fall 1972): 122.

20. *Ibid.*, 122-23. It was certainly no accident that Rhode Island's leading Italian newspaper was named *La Sentinella*. It is quite possible that the French and Italian immigrants identified with each other more than the church establishment.

21. *Ibid.*, 124. According to Sorrell, Franco-American sports leagues were formed as a means of keeping the community's children from the company of Irish Catholics and Protestants.

22. Erwin L. Levine, *Theodore Francis Green: The Rhode Island Years, 1906-1936* (Providence, 1963), 110-11.

23. Leo E. Carroll, "Irish and Italians in Providence, Rhode Island, 1880-1960," *RIH* 28 (Summer 1969): 72-74.

24. Levine, *Green: The Rhode Island Years*, 112.

25. Matthew J. Smith, "The Real McCoy in the Bloodless Revolution of 1935," *RIH* 33 (Aug. 1975): 76.

26. Levine, *Green: The Rhode Island Years*, 76.

tween 1860 and 1930 it had been able to capture the governorship only twice. A state property qualification had successfully prevented large numbers of Catholic immigrants from voting in municipal elections until 1928. Although an amendment to the state constitution ended this property requirement, statewide gerrymandering effectively disenfranchised large blocs of potential Democratic voters, transforming potential Democratic strongholds into Republican districts.

Because of a unique districting plan, the Republican machine maintained a rotten-borough Senate through 1935. Although Providence had heavy Democratic representation in the House, the machine in 1930 was able to add several new seats for Providence Republicans, thereby dissipating the clout of the Democrats on the state and municipal levels.²² Providence voters continued to return large numbers of Democrats to the House, but their voice on state and local issues was diminished. Furthermore, 1930 marked the first year that the Irish were proportionately represented in the Providence City Council. Other ethnic groups continued to the underrepresented.²³

Only a concerted effort to register new voters and unite the Democratic party could possibly change the outcome of elections. Although Democrats under Theodore F. Green did launch a voter registration campaign, they, like the church, were badly splintered.²⁴ Four groups vied for control of the party, and only the two smallest had any sizeable number of immigrants. In Pawtucket, one group was led by Irish-Americans and included some Franco-Americans. In the Blackstone Valley, another group had a similar makeup, but was less united. Theodore F. Green and Joseph F. Gainer led one of the more powerful Yankee-based groups, while Peter G. Gerry led the other. Each group sought to gain at the expense of the others, precluding any unified strike against the Republican machine until the mid-1930s.²⁵

The Democratic party alone was in a position to create ethnic coalitions capable of mounting an attack on birth control, yet even its splinter groups composed of immigrants were controlled by Irish-Americans, which were, like the Catholic church, unable to retain Italian loyalties. In several districts throughout the 1930s, disaffected Italian voters swung elections for Republicans.²⁶

A massive political attack against birth control was inconceivable. The Democratic party itself was a Yankee stronghold throughout the 1930s, and it never made birth control an election issue. Catholic politicians showed no interest in the political potential of the issue. Had there been a united Democratic party with proportional Catholic representation, it is possible that opposition to birth control could have mobilized voters. Until 1935, continued Republican majorities within both houses prevented the possibility, however slim, of contraceptive legislation.

Sworn as it was to fight birth control to the "limit of her power and influence," the Diocese of Providence was forced into a policy of non-resistance which clearly reflected the minimal sway it held over its members and government. Any attempt to interfere with either the

RIBCL or its clinic would have resulted in free publicity for an organization the church viewed as a social evil. Not surprisingly, from 1931 to 1933, the *Visitor* published only a handful of articles about the RIBCL or its Providence clinic, focusing instead on selective coverage of the general birth control issue.²⁷ The opening of clinics around the country, increasing advocacy of contraceptives by the medical profession, and other movement successes went unnoticed. *Visitor* readers learned instead of the closing of clinics worldwide and legal battles lost by the movement, at a time when birth control advocates actually were winning more battles than they were losing.

Given the church's defensive position, its response was limited to keeping the general issue alive and making its stance clear to those who would listen. A few articles by William R. McGuirk, an attending surgeon at St. Joseph's Hospital and a member of its executive committee, contended that physical and mental ills were traceable to contraception. These represented the diocese's only response to the increasing number of Rhode Island doctors joining the RIBCL. In McGuirk's judgment, the intimate and public discussion of contraception was to be avoided, but since its advocates had seen fit to publicize it, he felt compelled to speak out. In those cases where childbearing was dangerous, he said, a physician should recommend self-control, but he had no right to give specific contraception advice.²⁸

The RIBCL also became a matter of concern to public officials in Providence. In August 1931, the city's Board of Aldermen approved a resolution condemning the operation of the clinic and urging Providence residents to boycott it. The resolution said that the birth control clinics might harm the health of the people of Providence. Alderman Antonio C. Ventrone, a Catholic doctor and the driving force in support of the resolution, told his colleagues: "If a physician were to attempt an abortion he would be found guilty of murder in the first degree. This is one step earlier. It is a business proposition from beginning to end." He went on to argue that all contraceptives were harmful to the patient and that the promotion of family planning was sacrilegious, a "hideous, shameful crime."²⁹ He wanted to see the clinic closed and its operators jailed.

Among the aldermen present at that meeting, eight favored prosecuting those who ran the clinic while three opposed. The resolution was reported in the public newspapers and the *Providence Visitor*, but generated no public response. At the next month's meeting, several East Side aldermen, absent previously, successfully managed to have the resolution tabled. Rush Sturges, alderman for the fashionable First Ward and representative of most RIBCL members, was quite blunt in his assessment. He pointed out that

no opportunity was afforded the distinguished citizens who have sponsored this movement of explaining the purpose and method of operation of said clinics . . . it seems to me that the members of this honorable body must have taken action without adequate

27. *Providence Visitor*, 6 March, 17 July 1931.

28. *Providence Visitor*, 10 Nov. (editorial), 17 Nov. 1933.

29. *Providence Journal*, 4 Sept. 1931.

30. Ibid.

31. Providence Board of Aldermen, Minutes, 3 Sept. 1931, Providence City Archives, Providence, R.I.

32. Ibid., 3 March 1932.

knowledge of the facts or of the people connected with the clinic under discussion . . . it is inconceivable that citizens of the experience and standing in the community who have sponsored this movement have done so without first being entirely clear of their lawful right to do so. As a matter of fact, they have been and are now being advised by a reputable firm of local counsel.³⁰

Several Providence newspapers provided front-page coverage for this meeting, but the *Visitor*, which had reported the decision to prosecute those involved in the clinic, ignored the action to table the resolution.

Headline from the Providence Visitor, 17 Nov. 1933.

EAST SIDE SOCIALITES PUSH BIRTH CONTROL PROPAGANDA IN R. I.

**97 Percent of Officers
Live in One Area,
Survey Shows**

**TWO CHANGES THIS
WEEK IN DIRECTORATE**

**Husbands of Most Identified
in Manufacturing
and Money Circles**

The attorney general's office had been contacted the previous week by City Solicitor John C. Mahoney. Attorney General Benjamin M. McLyman was unable to find any law that banned birth control or clinics, and he wanted no part of the controversy. He suggested that the state legislature was the place to challenge the clinic's legality.³¹ Not surprisingly, there was no move in this direction.

The resolution before the Board of Aldermen remained tabled and undiscussed until 1932, when it formally was dropped.³² In the absence of forceful and adverse medical or public opinion, the board did not challenge those persons of influence who supported the clinic, and no opposition groups attempted to make this an election issue.

Although the clinic's opening seemed to be legally, politically, and socially safe, RIBCL members were acutely aware of the Catholic church's continued opposition. In states like New York, force of law supported the church's position. But unlike Margaret Sanger's early battles, the RIBCL was not faced with the task of arousing public opinion against repressive laws. Furthermore, in the twenty years since the first clashes between Sanger and Comstock, public opinion across the nation had

shifted. The brutal effects of the Depression, most particularly on those burdened with too many children, increased public interest in and sympathy for birth control and family planning. While Sanger and her compatriots had challenged both the Comstock laws and the Catholic church in earlier fights, the RIBCL practiced nonaggression. This is not at all surprising. The clinic was opened primarily to treat poor women, and the RIBCL obviously wanted to appeal to Catholics. Rather than risking the controversy that undoubtedly would accompany public advertising, the RIBCL hoped to build a referral service from its own social and professional ranks.³³

The league rarely issued press releases, and when it did the announcements acknowledged neither the contentiousness surrounding the clinic nor the possible existence of opposition. The newspapers accepted and printed the information, but otherwise left the issue of birth control untouched. Generally, press releases announced the extension of clinic hours or the sizeable addition of new members. It then listed the names and academic credentials of the organization's patrons and honorary supporters.³⁴ The unspoken message was clear: this was a powerful and growing organization composed of Providence's most prominent citizens. Unlike the church, RIBCL presented a united front. The league never indulged in open attacks on the Catholic church, as had visiting members of the ABCL. With political and social power behind it, the RIBCL avoided entanglement in needless controversy.

Between 1931 and 1933, Providence newspapers reported no negative public response to the clinic. Certainly the involvement of Stephen O. Metcalf, president of the *Providence Journal*, as a leading RIBCL member, explains the willingness of the state's largest newspaper to publish the league's press releases. The *Journal* provided free space for press releases, but Metcalf did not make an issue of the clinic unnecessarily.³⁵ Similarly, the *Providence Evening Bulletin*, the *Journal*'s companion paper, consistently carried announcements concerning the RIBCL, but attempted no independent reportage. While the newspapers of the time cannot tell the whole story, the lack of a public response may be some indication of the extent to which the middle classes accepted the clinic. No written records or accounts have been discovered of the number of people, Catholic or otherwise, who boycotted and disapproved of the clinic and the RIBCL.

In 1933 the *Providence Visitor* confronted the RIBCL when the newspaper learned that certain social service agencies were referring clients to the clinic.³⁶ In the latter part of the year, the *Visitor* conducted a firsthand investigation into the workings of the Main Street clinic, sending an "experienced newspaperwoman, not a Catholic" to pose as a prospective client. The article painted a "sordid picture": contraceptive devices were displayed, demonstrated, and made available for purchase; a papier maché model provided a graphic demonstration; women were advised about family planning without their husbands'

33. *Providence Journal*, 7 July 1931.

34. For an excellent example of these announcements see *Providence Journal*, 7 July 1931. See also articles in the RIBCL 1931 Scrapbook, Planned Parenthood of Rhode Island Archives.

35. For a letter from a member of the *Journal* staff questioning the purpose of RIBCL press releases see David Patten to Mrs. George Jacobs, 1 Jan. 1935 in RIBCL Scrapbook, Planned Parenthood of Rhode Island Archives. Despite Patten's complaint that releases from the ABCL national headquarters were more propaganda than news, the *Journal* continued to print them.

36. David Kennedy intimates that during the 1930s the "national" church policy focused on blocking the incorporation of birth control services into public health programs. See his, *Birth Control in America*, 149-50.

37. *Providence Visitor*, 17 Nov. 1933.

38. *Ibid.*, 17 Nov. 1933, editorial.

39. *Ibid.*, 8 Dec. 1933.

40. As late as 1937 the student newspapers at Brown University and Providence College, a Dominican Institution, traded sharply worded articles on contraception. See the *Brown Daily Herald*, 26 Oct., 4 Nov. 1937, and *Providence College Owl*, 3 Nov. 1937.

knowledge or consent and asked personal questions about physical, moral, and domestic affairs. The investigator experienced "involuntary revulsion." Leaving the clinic, she noticed in the waiting room the same five or six women who had been there when she first arrived: "They still wore the frightened look. I opened the door of the clinic and stepped out and took a breath of clean, fresh air. I was glad it was over."³⁷

The *Visitor* also lashed out at social workers who assisted in spreading "life-suppression propaganda." It further alleged that all but 3 percent of the league's officers and directors lived on the fashionable East Side while RIBCL clients came from poorer neighborhoods, implying that the wealthier, Anglo-Saxon Protestants were victimizing the poorer, Catholic, immigrants. It was true, of course, that the majority of the clinic's clients were poor; middle-class women had the option of obtaining contraceptive information and devices from their own physicians. An editorial in the *Visitor* in November 1933 clarified the diocese's stance toward the clinic:

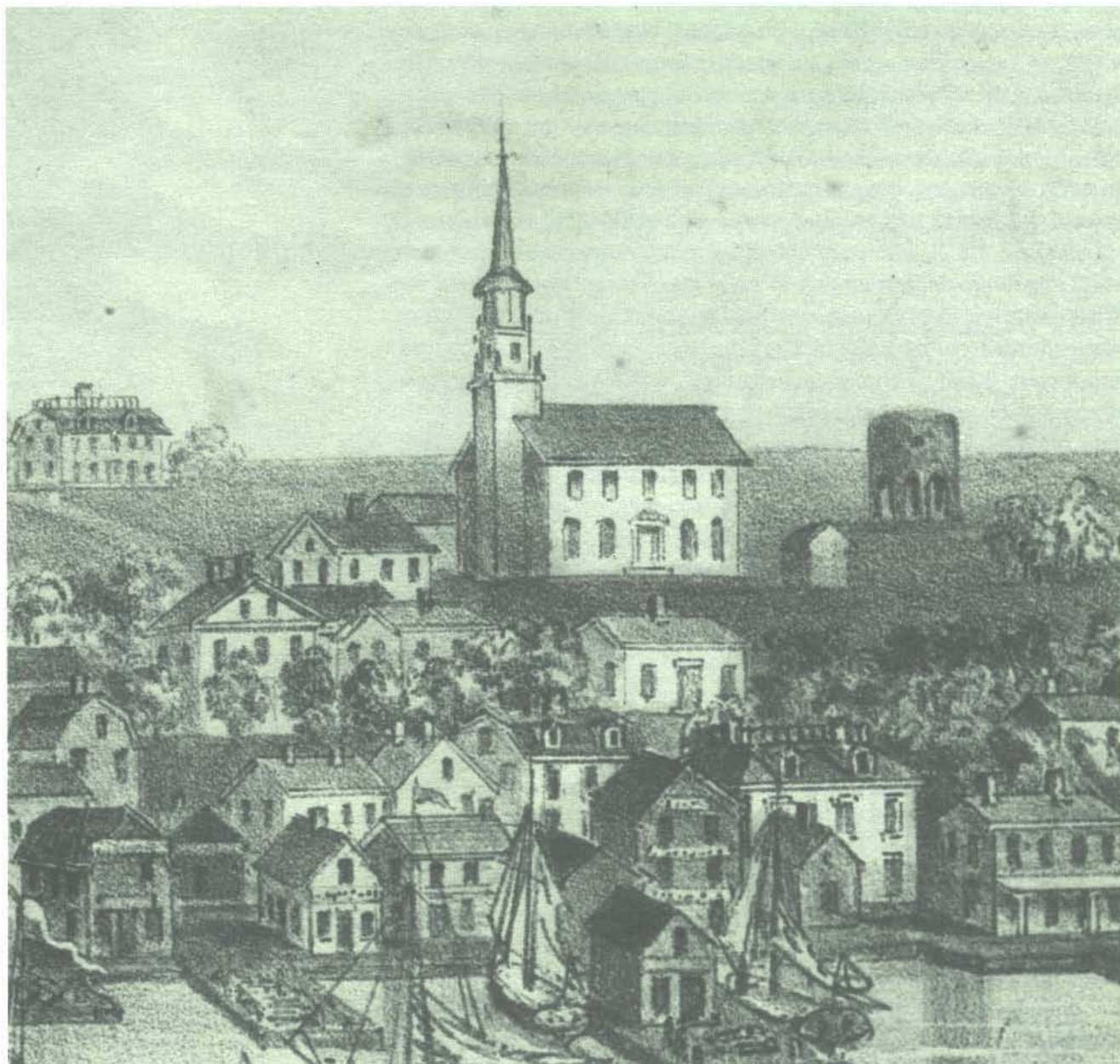
To remain silent in the face of this direct menace to morality might be construed by the promoters and the public at large as indifference, or even consent. That such indifference or consent has no place in the Catholic attitude toward public morality has been made clear beyond question by the Holy Father in his encyclical letter on marriage.³⁸

This wording is revealing. The church was no longer silent, but promised no public action. Moreover, the attacks on the clinic were printed only in the *Visitor*. The church acknowledged its duty to respond, but it could do little more.

Among Catholics, the *Visitor's* campaign to arouse the public met with considerable, if temporary, success. Those who opposed birth control demonstrated their zeal at a meeting held in December 1933 at Providence's Biltmore Hotel. Despite freezing weather, more than five hundred people attended the gathering, under the auspices of the Diocesan Council of Catholic Women. When Pope Pius XI's encyclical was read, they rose to their feet to show approval. In what the *Visitor* called "one of the most significant assemblies ever held in Rhode Island," the crowd reaffirmed its pledge to safeguard the morals of youth and to preserve the sanctity of the home.³⁹

Despite the large turnout, only the *Visitor* reported the meeting. The Yankee-dominated dailies apparently did not consider Catholic meetings, no matter what size or topic, to be of general interest. No political action was planned and none resulted. While calling for "aroused public opinion," the church remained powerless to translate its opposition into law. Despite a few plaintive articles in the *Visitor*, the clinic remained open. Birth control continued to be a matter of intense concern for Catholic Rhode Islanders, but the time for forceful opposition had passed. In fact, such an opportunity had never arisen.⁴⁰

The story of the RIBCL in Rhode Island offers an interesting example of the Catholic church's response to the birth control movement in one diocese. Perhaps because their interest has been motivated in large part by recent battles between advocates of legalized abortion and the Catholic church, historians have, unwittingly, failed to pay proper attention to the variety of actions and responses within the church and to its local, internal workings. It is also possible that recent analyses of the birth control movement have projected current controversies into the past, assuming that the forces of action must have been much stronger. Certainly the constant focus on Margaret Sanger, a volatile leader, has reinforced the view that birth control became available because of heroic leaders who were not afraid of confrontation and controversy. The introduction and acceptance of birth control in Rhode Island, however, presents a different story. The absence of law, factional splintering within the church and Democratic party, and the skill of nonheroic members of RIBCL who were unwilling to invite strife, served to neutralize political opposition and to assure success in Rhode Island for what was, even in 1931, a controversial reform. The Rhode Island story also illuminates the neglected middle passage of the birth control movement, in which clinics opened quietly and remained in operation decades prior to the judicial battle that finally provided the deathblow for Comstock laws. Until much more is known about birth control advocacy at the state level, generalizations about this movement may very well perpetuate distortions concerning modern reforms. Studies of other states without Comstock laws and containing only a small proportion of Catholics, for example, may reveal that often the battle for birth control was won without a war being fought.



*Detail from an 1864 lithograph
by J. P. Newell entitled "Newport
R.I. in 1730," showing the First
Church of Newport, of which
Sarah Osborn was a member.
RHi X3 (RHi X3 2287).*

The Bonds of Friendship: Sarah Osborn of Newport and the Reverend Joseph Fish of North Stonington, 1743–1779

Barbara E. Lacey

Women in eighteenth-century New England outnumbered men in church membership, and, to make their influence felt in the religious community, joined forces with chosen ministers. While this alliance has been described for the post-Revolutionary period, it had its origin in some localities at the time of the Great Awakening.¹ Women with a spiritual calling were largely unable to serve the church in the ministry, but their work as organizers and as writers came to be socially approved.² While church work soon was sanctioned by ministers as a proper part of women's sphere, it was a controversial issue early in the eighteenth century. Only ministers were accustomed to leading the congregation in hymns and prayers, and religious societies organized by women for these purposes broke new ground for female leadership. In Newport, for example, while women were "rather inconspicuous" in public life, they had "greater access than was common to spheres normally reserved to men," according to historian Sydney V. James. Although women had "no say in the Anglican or Congregationalist churches" of the city, according to James, they voted in the Baptist churches and had their own officers among the Quakers, giving them "a stronger voice in religious affairs than women had in most other places."³

Looking at correspondence and diaries for this period gives evidence indicating substantial influence on the part of women in religious affairs, including Congregationalism. Indeed by 1769, a society of women at the First Church of Newport was responsible for the call extended to the Reverend Samuel Hopkins, and for providing to him a "constant source of moral, intellectual, and even financial support" throughout his period of ministry.⁴ The roots of this alliance between women and ministers, and the process of changing gender roles, can be analyzed in some detail by examining the letters exchanged between Sarah Osborn, founder of the women's society in Newport, and her friend, the Reverend Joseph Fish, minister of the Congregational Church in North Stonington, Connecticut.⁵

Sarah Haggard, born in London in 1714, came to the colonies as a child. Her family lived in Boston and then moved to Newport, where Sarah resided for the rest of her life. Married at the age of eighteen to

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1. See Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York, 1977); Barbara Welter, "The Feminization of American Religion: 1800–1860," in Mary Hartman and Lois W. Banner, eds., *Clio's Consciousness Raised* (New York, 1974); and Richard D. Shiels, "The Feminization of American Congregationalism, 1730–1835," *American Quarterly* 33 (Spring 1981): 46–62.

2. Limits on the role of women in Congregationalism were a legacy of the Anne Hutchinson case, according to Mary Maples Dunn, "Saints and Sisters: Congregational and Quaker Women in the Early Colonial Period," *American Quarterly* 30 (Winter 1978): 582–601, and Lyle Kochler, "The Case of the American Jezebels: Anne Hutchinson and Female Agitation during the Years of Antinomian Turmoil, 1636–1640," *William and Mary Quarterly* 31 (Jan. 1974): 55–78.

3. Sydney V. James, *Colonial Rhode Island: A History* (New York, 1975), 248.

4. Joseph A. Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement: Calvinism, The Congregational Ministry, and Reform in New England Between the Great Awakenings* (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1981), 107–8.

5. The remains of their correspondence from 1743 to 1779 include about a dozen letters by Fish and over seventy by Osborn. Osborn's letters are in the Sarah Osborn Letters collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass. All quotations by permission of the American Antiquarian Society. Joseph Fish's letters, except where noted, are in the Silliman Family Papers, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn. All quotations are by permission of the Yale University Library.

6. Osborn's skill as a needlework instructor provided her with essential income: see Betty Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee: Needlework in the Education of Rhode Island Women, 1730-1830* (Providence, 1983), 46-48.

7. Samuel Hopkins, *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Sarah Osborn* (Worcester, Mass., 1799), 83.

Samuel Wheaton, she soon had a child, but was widowed in 1733 when her husband died at sea. She kept school to support herself and her infant. Eight years later, she married Henry Osborn, a widower with three sons. Although her husband had a business, he was in debt and their money was soon gone. Sarah Osborn resumed teaching school to support her family, and continued to do so for thirty years, until her eyesight and physical strength failed.⁶

SARAH OSBORN, Schoolmistress in Newport,
proposes to keep a
Boarding School.

ANY Person desirous of sending Children, may be accommodated, and have them instructed in Reading, Writing, Plain Work, Embroidering, Tent Stitch, Samplers, &c. on reasonable Terms.

Advertisement for Sarah Osborn's boarding school. From the Newport Mercury 19 Dec. 1758.

At the time of the Great Awakening, her home was a gathering place for neighbors to discuss and share their religious experiences. A group of women met weekly and chose Osborn as head of their society. The members conversed, collected money for the dissemination of the gospel, and regulated their organization by written rules. Although attendance waxed and waned over time, Sarah Osborn headed the society for fifty years.

During the 1760s, when the First Church in Newport was experiencing difficulties with its minister, a new wave of revivalism came to the city, and many turned to Sarah Osborn for advice. The women's society again flourished, and other religious societies that formed and met in her home included free blacks and slaves, young men and women, groups of children, and heads of households. Moreover, from 1770 until the British occupation of Newport, the church society held monthly meetings at her residence. Her biographer, Samuel Hopkins, notes, "Thus her house was indeed, and in an eminent sense, A House of prayer."⁷

One minister Sarah Osborn consulted about her religious activities was the Reverend Joseph Fish. Born in Duxbury, Massachusetts, and educated at Harvard, Fish was called to the church in North Stonington in 1732. His ministry included the period of the Great Awakening, and his congregation was greatly affected by the preaching of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and Gilbert Tennent. During the summer of 1741 alone, 104 individuals were added to his church. After the appearance in North Stonington of James Davenport, the powerful and wildly enthusiastic preacher, Fish had second thoughts about the revival, and made his views known in sermons and in print. As a result, a

number of members left his church, until his congregation dwindled to a third of its former size. While he received calls to serve other congregations in Newport, New London, and New Haven, Fish remained with his original parish until 1781, when he retired at the age of seventy-six.⁸

Joseph Fish and his wife were anxious to provide their only surviving children, Mary and Rebecca, with the best possible education. He taught them at home when they were young, but later sent them to Newport for instruction under Sarah Osborn.⁹ Fish and Osborn initially exchanged letters periodically concerning the progress of his daughters, but the correspondents grew closer and they exchanged letters on a variety of topics for over thirty years. Yet they never engaged in face-to-face interchange. Osborn was frequently invited to visit the Fish family in Stonington, but always found an excuse not to go. Fish came to Newport several times, but always was too occupied to visit Osborn. They seemed to prefer the formality of their letters, which began with the amenities and then engaged in topics of deep emotional and intellectual concern. Perhaps their frankness about these matters was possible only when they were safely separated by a distance of many miles.

One topic Sarah Osborn discussed with the Rev. Fish was her relationship with the ministers of various Newport churches. In the city were Baptists, Quakers, Congregationalists, and Episcopalians, as well as Jews and Moravians. Osborn was a member of the First Congregational Church, not the larger, wealthier, and less troubled Second Church, which was under the direction of the Reverend Ezra Stiles. Osborn's family had originally attended the Second Church, but she herself preferred the preaching of the Reverend Nathaniel Clap, and joined with the First Church in 1737 after the death of her husband. After Clap's death, William Vinal was installed as minister of the First Church in 1746, with an ordination sermon by Fish, but Vinal was dismissed after twenty years of service because of failing health, excessive drinking, and dwindling support among the membership. Osborn's female praying society, which was the core of the First Church at this time, actively backed the theologically conservative candidate Samuel Hopkins, and succeeded in bringing him to the First Church in 1770, despite the opposition of Stiles and the influential Second Church.¹⁰

Despite this evidence of politicking, most of the congregations in Newport were on good terms with one another, and ministers sometimes exchanged pulpits. Sarah Osborn heard a Baptist minister preach in her church on several occasions, and described him to Fish as an inspiring speaker. She was content, however, to remain a Congregationalist, and enjoyed her relationship with Vinal, telling Fish "I am happy in dear mr vinal far beyond what I ever expectd." However, Osborn also wrote, she preferred words of encouragement from Fish whenever possible, declaring to him: "I pationately Longd for a Letter or to see you but I beseech you dear Sir Let not my mentioning this prevent you from writing for time to come Since I can freely converse with my own min-

8. William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 9 vols. (1856; rep. New York, 1969), 1: 359-66.

9. Mary Fish, the eldest daughter, developed a deep affection for her teacher, and corresponded with Osborn throughout her life. For a study of Mary Fish based on family papers see Joy Day Buel and Richard Buel, Jr., *The Way of Duty: A Woman and Her Family in Revolutionary America* (New York, 1984).

10. This discussion of church history is drawn from Charles E. Hammett, Jr., "A Sketch of the History of the Congregational Churches of Newport, R.I., (type-written manuscript at Newport Historical Society, 1891).

11. Osborn to Fish, 4 Feb. 1747.

12. Osborn to Fish, 4 March 1750/51. Susa Anthony and Sarah Osborn may have been deferential in their initial approach to ministers, but both were part of the women's society that succeeded in bringing Samuel Hopkins to the First Church. Like Osborn, Anthony was the subject of a biography by Hopkins, *The Life and Character of Miss Susanna Anthony* (Worcester, Mass., 1796). In this work as in the Osborn memoirs, Hopkins quoted at considerable length from the women's diaries, letters, and verse to provide readers with "Christian models worthy of imitation."

13. Osborn to Fish, 29 May 1753.

14. Osborn to Fish, 10 Dec. 1755.

15. Osborn to Fish, 1 Nov. 1755.

ister."¹¹ Sarah Osborn enjoyed the society of several Newport ministers over her lifetime, but valued her relationship with Joseph Fish as a principal source of comfort and advice.

During the early stages of their correspondence, when Osborn was in her mid-thirties and married, she tried to define her relationship to Joseph Fish. She discussed it with her close friend Susa Anthony, and decided she had been too forward in her manner of address. "For really to me my Lines (now) appear Saucy, and imperious," she observed. She and Susa decided it was "a great privilage, that you indulge us with such freedom: . . . [Susa] wondred indeed that you should be so pleas'd with low poor servants."¹²

In an early letter, Osborn assumed the tone of an inferior addressing a superior: "bless the poor weak endeavors of a feeble worthless worm." She blushed "at the review of the freedoms I have us'd with one so much my superiour in all respects," and wondered "yt you could discern anything in my Poor writings worthy [of] your acceptance." She requested Fish to "pray for me dear Sir for I am a poor needy worm as ever askt a remembrance with you." Nevertheless, she aspired to reach a higher status. By seeking information and guidance from the minister, she expected her mind to be strengthened. She observed, "I cannot be willing always to remain a dwarf in religion truth."¹³ As the years passed, the tone of Osborn's letters grew stronger and more self-confident, and she came to correspond with Fish without self-disparagement.

Osborn wrote frequently and at length to Fish concerning her spiritual experiences. For example, one such experience occurred at the time of an earthquake, and she related the event to Fish with reverence: "At that Moment Never to be forgotten by me God by His Spirit gave me out of or in His word this cordial—the Mountains shall depart and the Hills be removed but my Kindness shall not depart from thee etc follow'd by this be not dismay'd I am thy God and again it is *I* be not afraid."¹⁴ Osborn expected Fish to read her accounts of spiritual experiences, dreams, and interpretations of Scripture, and to judge whether they came from God or were delusions. She also expected him to criticize attitudes expressed in her writing: "I entreat you dear Sir by all the bonds of friendship never to be afraid to reprove me, but Point out to me freely, my Errors and mistakes believe me tis impossible for you to endear your self more to me than in this way."¹⁵ While Osborn seems to have sought encouragement, as well as correction, from Fish, she increasingly turned to him simply as an audience, someone to whom she could direct her lengthy spiritual writings.

While Fish welcomed Osborn's letters, and repeatedly asked her to write, he was also a little humbled by his responsibility: "I find my self both refreshed & reprov'd by your letter.—Refreshed with those ardent pathetick breathings of your sympathizing soul after spiritual blessings. . . . I also find myself reprov'd, in that I fall awfully short of the character, frame and temper which your letter charitably [attributes to

me.]”¹⁶ Nevertheless, Fish encouraged Osborn in her expressions of faith. On one occasion, after having read “the narrative of Gods Dealings with you,” he observed, “It serves to Confirm Me in the Belief of the Riches of his Grace and the Way of Life spend in the Gospel . . . I read it over with close Attention & great Delight, not observing any thing in it that Needed Correction.”¹⁷ Like Osborn, Fish drew sustenance from their relationship, because he felt strengthened in his calling. Also, he probably enjoyed the attention given to him by Osborn, and generally approved of her spiritual accounts. On occasion he would not only be a sounding board for her creative ideas, but would seek her opinion on subjects of his own choosing.

Osborn continually turned to Fish for information related to the religious issues of the day. One subject she wanted to know about, after talking with Seventh Day Baptists, was their observance of the Sabbath on Saturday. She thought it her “duty in all respects to be full persuaded in my own mind, that I do practice agreeable to the divine will; and also to be able to render a version to those that ask [for my opinion].”¹⁸ Fish told Osborn that the Baptists had deviated from the true church by denying baptism to infants. Still, she continued to remain on friendly terms with them, telling Fish that “We Have sometimes been favr’d with mr Maxens assistance minister of the seventhday Baptist church a gracious good man who feeds us with wholesome food sincer Milk and Strong Meat too.”¹⁹

Mrs. Osborn and Rev. Fish were more in accord concerning Separates. These individuals operated under a “false spirit,” inspired by the devil, Fish believed, because they encouraged exhortation, zeal, and bodily expression. Osborn agreed with him concerning lay exhorting: “I cannot think that every real Christian is qualified, or has a right to preach ye Gospel.” And she agreed that the standing ministry had been “brought into such contempt” that a “Flood of error” would be the “fatal Consequence.” To help Fish in his effort to regain the allegiance of Separates, Osborn wrote a letter on his behalf to a Separate in Stonington. She praised Fish’s preaching, which was not a “Skin deep, Polite, Fashionable Preaching,” but rather a form of discourse which emphasized original sin, human depravity, and justification by faith alone.²⁰ Yet she did not agree totally with Fish, because she did not find the formation of “differing sentiments” to be a threat.

In an extensive commentary on Fish’s book, *The Church of Christ a firm and durable House*, Osborn made use of reason and logic to defend variations of religious views: (1) all rules and directions given by the Lord concerning his church are complete. (2) All men, even the wisest, are sinful and imperfect. (3) When men come to apply the rules of the church, they differ in their opinion as to forms and modes of service. They find it difficult to worship together, and hence there are various Christian denominations wherever the gospel comes. (4) Therefore there is no church which can claim to be perfect. (5) There is a need for mutual forbearance; everyone must think and judge for himself, and

16. Fish to Osborn, 20 Dec. 1743.

17. Fish to Osborn, 13 June 1751.

18. Osborn to Fish, 17 Sept. 1750.

19. Osborn to Fish, 19 Feb. 1760.

20. Osborn to Mrs. Oliver Prentice, 12 July 1755.

21. Osborn to Fish, n.d. [1763?]. The publication date of *The Church of Christ a firm and durable House* [New London, 1767], to which this letter clearly refers, indicates that the tentative 1763 date is incorrect.

22. James, *Colonial R.I.*, 163, 231.

23. For examples of these laws see Irving B. Richman, *Rhode Island: A Study in Separatism* (Boston, 1905), 125.

24. Fish to Osborn, 4 Sept. 1765, Sarah Osborn Letters collection. Two black servants, including one who learned the rudiments of reading and writing from Osborn, later received training at the College of New Jersey in order to serve as missionaries to Africa. For information about Bristol Yamma and John Quamine, see Hammett, "Congregational Churches of Newport, R.I.," 135, 208–16.

25. Osborn to Fish, 17 June 1766.

grant the same liberty to his neighbor.²¹ With this line of reasoning, Osborn indicated a tolerance for diverse views, in contrast to Rev. Fish who believed that the standing churches alone were the descendants of the original church. Osborn presented her opinions in a rational argument, and defended a position which was in opposition to that of an educated minister. Fish solicited her opinion, and was interested in her commentary, which no doubt helped her self-confidence to grow.

On 26 December 1760, Osborn informed Fish that a society of about twenty women was once again meeting weekly at her house, after a lapse of several years. She asked his blessing for this endeavor: "Pray sir pray for us yt gods glory may be Promoted by us and we may be strengthened in every duty and bond of Love to god and each other." The gathering of this group of women came to play an important part in Sarah Osborn's life. She enjoyed the warm companionship of like-minded women, she had the opportunity to describe her spiritual experiences to interested listeners, and she was regarded by all as the head of the group. Osborn was successful in this role, because she was careful not to arouse invidious comment from the watchful or jealous members of the community. She smoothed the way for discussion of any issue, seeking the full support of the group in its resolution.

Besides the women's group, another religious society, composed of blacks, began meeting at her house. Slaves formed a distinct element in Newport life; in 1708 and again in 1783, at least ten percent of Newport's population consisted of "black servants."²² Laws restricting the movement and free association of blacks were passed in an effort to keep peace and order in the town.²³ Blacks, who were given free time on Sunday, welcomed the opportunity to meet at Sarah Osborn's house for prayers; it was a chance to socialize as well as an occasion for spiritual renewal. Owners of slaves were glad to see them attend the religious meetings, which gathered them at a well-known location, and kept them out of trouble. Osborn sent to Rev. Fish an account of the religious experience narrated by one of the men, without altering the broken language. Fish responded favorably to the account, stating that the self-examination of unworthiness had the "Gospel Stamp," and led him to think the man's experiences were genuine.²⁴ Fish's interest in the case indicates his support of Osborn in her work with the society of blacks.

By 1766, the number and size of private societies meeting at the Osborns' house had increased; one or more met every evening of the week except Saturday. There was a society of young men; a society of Baptist brethren; the black society; groups of children; and a number of Baptist women "with whom we have a sweet harmony Having determined on both sides not to touch on points of controversy." Concerning their activities, she observed: "All this while there is Nothing More attempted then reading, singing, prayer perform'd by my Husband or any christian friend . . . and a plain familiour conversing about the things that belong to their everlasting peace."²⁵

Osborn applied her gifts as a leader to all these associations, but she apparently felt the need to defend her role in them. She wrote to Fish that she had wanted to tell him of these many kinds of meetings for a long time, but feared it would be "ostentatious," so she held back; now, however, she decided she did not want to rob God of his glory.

Rev. Fish had long approved of the society of women. He wrote in 1761: "I was much pleas'd & edify'd with your acct of the Female Religious Society; and am even transported with Gods Goodness to our De- arly Beloved Susa. . . . I saw nothing Savouring of Vain Ostentation in anything you Said of Her or the Society."²⁶

Concerning the growing society of blacks, "which above all the rest Has been exercising to my Mind," Osborn told Fish in 1767 that she had tried to "commit it into Superior Hands," but no one would help. Her pastor and the brethren of the church had not answered her request for assistance, and she had given up trying to find someone else. Osborn seems to have been conscious of the potentially revolutionary nature of the black society, and tried to defend her actions: "I only read to them talk to them and sing a Psalm or Hymn with them. . . . they call it school." She observed that "Ministers and Magistrates send their servants and approve."²⁷

As for the society of young men which met once a week in her home, she notes, "I have nothing to do with them."²⁸ Apparently her husband or a male friend led the prayers and hymns in this society, since a male leader would be appropriate for a male group, and Sarah Osborn had no desire to offend convention. She minimized the importance of the role she played in some of these groups, which was consistent with her modesty and sense of appropriate female behavior.

Besides defending the existence of the societies, Osborn felt impelled to explain her role in them. She wanted to answer Fish's question about whether she had the "strength, ability, and Time consistent with other Duties to fill a Larger Sphere." She observed, concerning strength, that she always felt "stronger when my companies break up then when they came in"; as to ability, she trusted in Christ's strength; and as to time, she was "called by the Providence of God as well as by His word to be a redeemer of time." She described her day of prayer and writing, meals and school, and observed, "I think my family does not suffer thro My Neglect tho doubtless if I Had a full purse and Nothing to do but Look after them some things Might be done with more exactness than now."²⁹ The meetings were "sweet refreshing evenings my resting reaping times and as God Has Gathered I dare not scatter in any wise."³⁰

Throughout her letters, Osborn grappled with defining her role as a leader of religious societies. When the women's group first formed and asked her to be its head, she was concerned with how it would appear to others. Fish's support helped her overcome her hesitation. "I was convinc'd of my folly in being too anxious about the opinion or Judgement or anger of others."³¹ When the religious groups grew in number and size under her tutelage, she defended herself from the accusation

26. Fish to Osborn, 13 Sept. 1761.

27. Fish to Osborn, 28 Feb. 1767.

28. Ibid.

29. Osborn to Fish, 7 March 1767.

30. Osborn to Fish, 28 Feb. 1767.

31. Osborn to Fish, 10 May 1761.

32. Osborn to Fish, 17 June 1766.

33. Ibid.

34. Osborn to Fish, 9 Aug. 1766.

35. Osborn to Fish, 2 July 1769.

36. Osborn to Fish, 28 Dec. 1779.

that she was setting herself up as "some great one." She asked herself, "Who am I and what am I indeed and why do any come Near me." She answered her own questions by observing, "I can resolve it no where but into adorable sovereignty th[at su]ch a weak ungrateful wretch should be alowd to sp[e]ak one word acceptable to any." She prayed for humility so as to "resolutely proceed to do what soever my hands find to do with all my Might within my *Proper Sphere*."³² Hoping to avoid being too conspicuous, yet benefiting from the attention and respect she received as a leader, Osborn resolved any internal conflict, and answered any objections, by observing that she simply was following the will of God in all she did.

Osborn had no desire to challenge overtly the traditional order of men's and women's roles: "I do solemnly declare I delight Ministers should stand in their Places and Private christians of both sexes in theirs in the beautiful order God has Plas'd them and abhor intrutions into Ministerial office." She asked Fish to tell her if he perceived that she had ventured "too far beyond my Line." But she devoutly believed that "God will Glorifie him Self and Make Every Path or duty strait and plain before my face."³³

Osborn did not wish to usurp the ministerial office. She feared she would "be charg'd as the ring Leader of rents or separations which from Her very Soul she abhors," and hoped to avoid the accusation by having regular ministers address her groups. But she was unable to get much help from the standing clergy. Many ministers seemed to have had second thoughts about helping Osborn. Perhaps they resented the spectacular success of her religious groups. She described losing sleep and health, and having fears concerning her mental stability, because of anxiety on this account.³⁴

Osborn gained confidence in her work, and in 1769 she could defend her activities to Fish as being part of her proper sphere. Her self-confidence had strengthened because no serious controversy or scandal had developed. "For more than sixteen years Has God preserved me from open scandalous sins etc. and now I can say thro grace tis More than twice sixteen years I Have Had experience of His power truth and faithfulness in preserving me."³⁵ As a woman and Christian, Osborn felt assured that she had not moved beyond her sphere.

In her last letter to Fish, written in 1779 during the siege of Newport, she indicated she was upheld by her faith during the ordeal. The city was occupied and threatened to be burned, but it was spared from destruction and her friends returned. And "now a new scene opens, for the first fortnight or three weeks upon the return of Christian friends to visit me my Elevation of spirits and alternate sinking . . . were almost to much for my feeble frame. . . . the great redeemer . . . will in his own time grant repentance and maintain His own Right In America."³⁶

In the course of a lifetime of experience and reflection, Sarah Osborn, with the approval of Joseph Fish, had expanded the role of a woman in a



"A Southwest view of Newport"
engraving by Samuel King, 1795.
RIHS Collection (RHi X3 213).

colonial community. Married, with pupils and boarders in her home, she found time to lead religious activities in private societies, and to cultivate close friendship with a minister. These activities became more common to women after industrialization, but it has been seen that, at least in the case of Sarah Osborn, women responded similarly in the period after the Great Awakening. It is also noteworthy that Osborn discussed, well before industrialization, the concept of her sphere. While she found no conflict between her religious activities and family responsibilities, it is apparent that women's work in the church, particularly if it involved the teaching of males, was a relatively radical idea that needed a defense. Osborn's ultimate argument, that she was following the path shown to her by God, seems to have been accepted by her spiritual advisor, Joseph Fish.

The Osborn-Fish relationship has been analyzed by Mary Beth Norton, who emphasizes the defensive attitude assumed by Osborn when writing to Fish about her societies. In her extended discussion of one Osborn letter, Norton argues that Fish "appears" to have criticized Osborn and advised her to discontinue her activities, in part because he seems to have thought they were "unfeminine."³⁷ However, if the Fish letters in the Silliman Collection at Yale are consulted, there is evidence that Fish supported Osborn in her chosen role, and looked to her for help concerning his own problems. In a second analysis of Osborn's letters, Norton states that while Osborn did not found a new sect like Jemima Wilkinson or Mother Ann Lee, she did blaze a trail for nineteenth-century American women to follow in working for female religious and charitable organizations. Osborn, in this view, pushed woman's role "to its outer limit," and was "as independent as circumstances will admit."³⁸

While Norton's second interpretation is basically sound, it can be argued further that Osborn was seeking not only independence and autonomy, she was looking for a position of authority and influence, yet one that would win social approval for her. Osborn was not a "traditional" woman, meek and submissive; she admitted she talked at

37. Mary Beth Norton, "'My Resting Reaping Times': Sarah Osborn's Defense of Her 'Unfeminine' Activities, 1767," *Signs* 2 (Winter 1976): 515-29.

38. Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston, 1980) 129-33.

39. Osborn to Fish, 2 Nov. 1761 and 25 March 1755.

40. Fish to Osborn, 13 Sept. 1761.

41. Osborn to Fish, 2 Nov. 1761; n.d.

42. Fish to Osborn, 30 June 1755.

43. Osborn to Fish 23 July 1762; Fish to Osborn, 16. Nov. 1767.

length, and had a temper, and her expressions of modesty may best be understood as offered for the sake of convention.³⁹ Essentially, Osborn wanted to enjoy a sense of power, although not unabashedly so, and she sought the approval of other authorities, namely ministers, in order to exercise her control. Fish gave her the endorsement she wanted when he wrote: "Never let a Friendly Caution agt [against] acting from a wrong Principle, prevent your trying to *do* what you know is right."⁴⁰

It is also important to realize that the nurturing relationship between Sarah Osborn and Joseph Fish was not one-sided. Fish wrote to Osborn about his problems, particularly with the Separates, and Osborn offered words of condolence: "You shall see the work of the Lord Prosper in your Hands yt you shall see good according to the days wherein you Have seen Evil." Furthermore, Fish sent Osborn a copy of his publication and asked her opinion of it, to which she responded at some length. Although disagreeing with him concerning different religious persuasions, she observed: "I Have fu[l]filld your requests in giving you freely my sentime[nts] on your book and do assure you the whole of it is to my satisfaction."⁴¹

Fish felt encouraged by Osborn's letters. He informed her that one of her letters "ministered delight & profit to me & mine." He planned to show it to some neighbors who had separated from his church, in an effort to convince them of their errors and secure their return. "Sure I am willing yt ye Honour of their Recovery should be ascribed to ye Hand of a Woman."⁴²

On an emotional level, the bonds of friendship between them were deeply satisfying. Osborn would speak of a relationship which would continue in heaven: "Oh May I be Prepar'd to Meet you and enjoy you in God where we shall Never Part again." On his side, Rev. Fish would describe their relationship as one which enabled him to do the work of God: "The only Favour I ask is an Intrest in your Addresses to ye throne of Grace, That I may be Sanctifyd for Gods Service, & obtain Mercy to be Faithfull unto Death."⁴³

A new relationship between ministers and women at the time of the Great Awakening is apparent in the correspondence of Sarah Osborn and Joseph Fish. In a community that had lost many members to the Separates, one minister turned to a woman for advice and consolation, and appreciated her active support on his behalf. In return, Sarah Osborn benefited from advice and encouragement of her spiritual accounts and her work with religious societies in her city. The Great Awakening may have created in some communities an early form of disestablishment, requiring the minister to seek friendship and voluntary support from members of the predominantly female congregation, and offering the woman an opportunity to develop religious associations and to achieve recognition without leaving her sphere. The woman's proper sphere itself, recorded in the Osborn-Fish correspondence, had been expanded as early as the mid-eighteenth century to include self-reliance in matters of theology, and active leadership in religious affairs. Sarah Osborn was able to find support among the clergy for activities that a century earlier had brought Anne Hutchinson condemnation and exile.

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