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## CONTENTS

- Encouraging Faithful Domestic Servants:  
Race, Deviance, and Social Control in Providence 71

JANE LANCASTER

- The Role of Women in the Dorr Rebellion 89

RONALD P. FORMISANO



DEXTER ASYLUM IN 1856

*Dexter Asylum, Providence's poorhouse.  
RIHS Collection (RHi X3 5196).*

# Encouraging Faithful Domestic Servants: Race, Deviance, and Social Control in Providence, 1820-1850

JANE LANCASTER



Jacksonian America is said to have “discovered the asylum” as a way to control vice, deviancy, and dependence. As David Rothman has shown, the nation, faced with new urban conditions and rapid social change, came to see the poor and the deviant as products of a faulty environment, and it grew to believe that reform or improvement was possible only if such people were removed from the harmful influences of their society. Consequently, asylums—prisons, almshouses, and orphanages—were built to replace such “barbaric” colonial punishments as the stocks and such inadequate charitable measures as boarding orphans with relatives.<sup>1</sup>

The discovery of the asylum was reflected in Providence in the 1830s and 1840s when wealthy and influential citizens attempted to solve two pressing problems simultaneously: the problem of limiting the growing independence of the black community—an independence that they interpreted as deviance—and the problem of satisfying an increasing demand for faithful, deferential, and well-trained domestic servants. With the Providence Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants, a group of citizens (almost exclusively male) sought to achieve these ends through financial incentives. This effort proved ineffective and was short-lived. A few years later another group (almost exclusively female) took a different, more radical approach: their Providence Shelter for Colored Orphans “rescued” children from their unhealthy environment and trained them to be domestic servants. In many ways a typical asylum of the period, this institution gained a certain measure of success, as evidenced by its continued existence (although in a very different form) more than 150 years after its founding.



Servants have been in short supply in America from the seventeenth century onward.<sup>2</sup> Despite nostalgia in certain quarters for the days when servants “knew their place,” evidence from letters, diaries, and statute books suggests that there never was such a time. In a letter dated 10 July 1639, John Winter of Richmond Island, Maine, complained that his indentured servant Priscilla “is so fatt and soggy she Cann hardly do any worke. Our men do not desire to haue her boyle the kittle for them she is so sluttish.”<sup>3</sup> In addition, he criticized her for staying out late, not getting up in the mornings, running away, and being unable to milk a cow or a goat. Punitive laws for controlling servants were enacted in all the colonies; under a 1728 Rhode Island law, for instance, a servant guilty of disobedience or disorder could be punished by up to ten stripes for each offense.

The “servant problem” looms large in the literature of the nineteenth century. This problem affected the servers and the served in different ways, but because of differences in rates of literacy, it was mainly (but not exclusively) described by the employers.<sup>4</sup> From their viewpoint there were two elements involved: first, obtaining domestic servants who were both skillful and obliging; second,

Jane Lancaster teaches at the Lincoln School in Providence. She wishes to dedicate this article to the memory of Professor Bill McLoughlin, for whose class it was written.

keeping good servants as long as possible. The problem became acute in New England in the 1820s and 1830s, for textile mills were then competing for young [white] female labor. "Perhaps the difficulties of modern housekeepers did begin with the Lowell factories," wrote Lucy Larcom, a poet who had worked in the mills of Lowell as a child. "Country girls were naturally independent, and the feeling that at this new work the few hours they had of every-day leisure was a satisfaction to them. They preferred it to going out as 'hired help.' It was like a young man's pleasure in entering into business for himself."<sup>5</sup> Significantly, blacks were not employed in the mills, so their range of employment options was more limited, a circumstance that increased their proportion among potential servants.<sup>6</sup>

Along with the reduced supply of young white women willing to go into service, there came an increased demand for servants. Standards of housekeeping and a desire for leisure were rising among middle-class white women, and most middle-class families kept at least one servant. Among elite groups servants became either a form of conspicuous consumption or, if women were to pursue charitable and benevolent activities, a necessity. With white, native-born servants in short supply in Providence, employers increasingly recruited from among the free black population. This made the servant problem very complex, since it now involved social control and racial issues: the upper and middle classes were seeking reliable servants from a racial group that was increasingly seen as deviant. This "deviance" took a number of forms, including the desire of many free blacks to live in their own homes, an arrangement that limited the hours they were on call to their employers and made it difficult for employers to supervise their servants' leisure time.

The demand for domestic servants was spurred by a growing prosperity that permitted the establishment of "separate spheres" for men and women. According to this ideology, the home was to be a calm, well-regulated haven, wherein women—who had hitherto engaged chiefly in household production [of cheese, cloth, etc.], perhaps with help from a hired girl—were to be involved with the consumption of goods manufactured elsewhere, and with the management of domestic servants. Standards of housekeeping rose dramatically, inspired and accompanied by a flood of advice manuals explaining how to do everything from caring for the sick to training servants to clean the parlor. Catharine Beecher's influential *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, first published in 1841, gives a detailed explanation of what weekly cleaning required. This task included covering all furniture with dustcloths and using "a duster of old silk, and a dust-brush" on all the books, and "a painter's brush, never used except for this purpose, [to] brush off the dust from all narrow cracks and small recesses in the furniture or mouldings." "It is necessary to . . . superintend [most domestics] till they form a habit of doing this work regularly, thoroughly, and carefully," the author cautions.<sup>7</sup>

Besides implementing such rigorous standards of cleanliness, a servant was expected to emulate the kind of wifely behavior that William A. Alcott advocated in *The Young Wife*:

Above all, does [a wife] perform her angelic task by the reception she gives [her husband] at evening. When he comes home, as often happens, after dark, he finds not only the lighted window and the blazing hearth, but the still more cheering light of his wife's countenance, to welcome him.

He can scarcely feel a want of food, drink or repose, which is not fully anticipated, and for which provision is not made in the most happy manner.<sup>8</sup>

## RULES AND REGULATIONS

OF THE

## PROVIDENCE SOCIETY

FOR THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF FAITHFUL DOMESTIC SERVANTS.

1. This Society shall be styled "The Providence Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants."

2. The officers of the Society shall consist of a President, a Vice President, and eight Managers, being subscribers, who shall be chosen by ballot (unless this mode is dispensed with by a vote of the Society) from among the subscribers, at a general meeting to be annually held after the first election, but should anything prevent the annual meeting from being held, on any succeeding day within ten days afterwards, and all officers shall hold their offices until others are elected by the Society. It shall be the duty of the President, or in his absence, of the Vice President, to preside at the meetings of the Society.

The Managers (a majority of whom shall be sufficient for the transaction of business) shall have power to supply vacancies in their own body, till the next general meeting after such vacancy has occurred—they shall have charge of the concerns of the Society, shall appoint from their number the Secretary and Treasurer, and shall lay before the Society, at each annual meeting, a report of their proceedings.

3. The Managers shall appoint an agent to keep, in a central part of the town, the Register Office of the Society, and shall, from time to time, give him such directions as they may deem necessary—they are empowered to regulate his salary and hours of attendance, or to remove him for misconduct, and appoint a successor.

4. Any servant who prefers to the Register a satisfactory recommendation as to character, and a description of the service he or she wishes to engage in, shall be entitled, without any charge or expense, to have his or her name registered as an applicant for employment. In case the Register has any doubt respecting the recommendation, he shall refer, if a male, to either of the Managers, and if a female, to either of the Committee of Ladies.

5. If any servant shall present a forged recommendation, or a recommendation that has been granted to another servant, the Managers are empowered to expose the fraud in any manner they may think proper.

6. The Managers shall appoint a Committee of sixteen ladies, being subscribers, who shall be requested to visit by turns the office of the Society, at least once in each week, during the hours of business, and to communicate, by report, their suggestions to the board of Managers.

7. The annual subscription for membership shall be three dollars; one half to be paid on subscribing, and the other half within six months from that time; and all subscribers are entitled to apply for servants as often as they may have occasion, with the additional privilege of nominating one servant who shall be entitled to the gratuity hereafter mentioned. But the name of such servant must be recorded at the office one year before any premium can be given. A certificate of this record is requisite, and will be furnished by the agent. Every additional servant so nominated, must be paid for at the same rate.

8. The current year shall commence on the day of the election of officers, and all subsequent subscriptions on the quarter day preceding the day of subscription.

9. No person giving notices shall have access to the Register, or be furnished with a servant from the office. And no subscriber shall be permitted to apply for a servant for another person, who is not a member.

10. Any person who may give a false or grossly defective statement of the character of a servant, or who may be guilty of

withholding or averting away a servant from any other person, whether a member of the Society or not, or who shall be convicted of treating servants harshly, or unjustly, or wantonly withholding a certificate, shall be excluded from the Society by the Managers.

11. Every servant over fifteen years of age having been nominated on the Society's books one year, and having so long lived with the same subscriber, if he or she personally attend the next quarterly, or sales subscription quarterly distribution of the gratuity, bringing the certificate of nomination and a letter of recommendation from the subscribers, certifying his or her good conduct and continuance in the same service, shall receive a handsome octavo Bible, or in lieu thereof

At the end of 2 years	\$2.00
" " 3 "	2.50
" " 4 "	3.00
" " 5 "	3.50

And on the completion of every year thereafter, 10.00

12. Any servant who shall have received after this time a five years certificate from the Society and shall at any future period of his service be incorporated for service or indigent, may be annually assisted by the managers, if a male servant, or if a female on the recommendation of the Committee of Ladies, with a gratuity not exceeding ten dollars.

13. If any female servant, who has obtained a five years certificate, should marry and leave the same service, she shall be entitled on her marriage to receive a gratuity from the Managers, not exceeding twenty dollars.

14. The Managers, in addition to the regular premiums they award, shall pay, from any unappropriated funds of the Society, to each person who shall receive a five years certificate, a premium of one per centum on all balances of money then at their credit in the Savings Bank, the Bank books to be exhibited to the Managers.

15. If any subscription is not received and paid within three months after the expiration of the list, such default shall be considered as an intention to discontinue the subscription, and the servant or servants of such subscriber, although nominated, shall not have a claim to any gratuity from this Society.

16. The Managers shall hold meetings quarterly, for the transaction of business of the society, and on any other day they may deem necessary; and shall have power to call general meetings of the Society, when it shall appear proper so to do.

17. The names of all faithful servants who receive rewards, shall be inserted in the next succeeding report and printed; and as long as their names are found in the register, as faithful servants, they shall always be considered as under the protection of the Society, and shall have a preference given them when in want of a place of employment; and when sick and destitute shall, if females, upon the recommendation of the Committee of Ladies, and, if males, upon the recommendation of the Managers, have medical advice and assistance furnished them gratuitously.

18. The Board of Managers and the Committee of Ladies, may each, respectively, make such further regulations for the government of their respective Boards, as they may deem expedient, not being inconsistent with the general regulations of this Society.

19. Any person who shall pay into the treasury not less than three dollars per year, shall be considered an honorary member, entitled to all the privileges, and subject to the regulations of the Society, without becoming a subscriber.

At a meeting of the subscribers to the Providence Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants, January 1st, 1831, the following resolution was passed, and ordered to be printed with the Rules and Regulations of the Society:

"Whereas, it being a generally admitted fact, that for many of the comforts of housekeeping we are indebted to the faithfulness, sobriety and capability of our domestic servants; and whereas it is believed great improvement can be effected among them by rewarding faithfulness and sobriety, by making distinctions between the virtuous and vicious, and by adopting rules as to the mode of their employment, and that such a course would eventually result in the mutual benefit to both masters and servants; and whereas such measures can be better adopted and carried into effect by mutual concert and co-operation among housekeepers than by individual effort—

Therefore Resolved,—That it be recommended to the Housekeepers of Providence, and its vicinity, generally, to co-operate in this philanthropic undertaking, by impressing their servants with just views of the objects of this Society, and by encouraging and inviting them to become partakers of its bounty and care."

HUTCHINS A. WEDDEN, PRINTERS, No. 3, MARKET-SQUARE.

Rules and regulations of the Faithful Servants' Society, Broadside, 1831. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7011).

Thus the demands of a servant's job were too exacting for women to willingly enter long-term service if they had any reasonable alternatives. Wages were low [although when combined with board and lodging, they were comparable to a mill operative's pay]. Mary Troop Dorr Ames, a Providence woman who kept records of her servants from 1842 to 1860, paid \$1.50 per week to her housemaids throughout the 1840s, though she did raise her cook's pay from \$1.75 to \$2.00 in 1843, "on condition of her taking charge of the lower part of

the house, attending to the furnace, setting tables and doing any other work I might require of her cheerfully." (That last word suggests a wealth of implications about mistress-servant relations.) Living conditions for servants varied. One of Catharine Beecher's recommendations, that each servant should have her own bed, suggests that this was not always the case. Compared with many other occupations, domestic service could be very lonely. Mrs. Ames sometimes commented disapprovingly on those of her servants she considered oversociable; e.g., Mary Burns was a "good washer and ironer, tolerable cook, pleasant temper, careless—everything out of place, always a throng of company about her," while Alice Benisher, a chambermaid, "liked to be out a great deal [and was] not very tidy."<sup>9</sup>

In addition to its long hours, variable conditions, low wages, and onerous duties, domestic service was a low-status occupation. In 1837 an English gentlewoman in reduced circumstances, Georgiana Kirby, arrived in the United States in need of work. With the help of references from a previous employer testifying that she was "a young lady of refinement, ability and character," she was engaged to take charge of an infant by the Reverend E. S. G. of Boston at "one dollar a week until my fitness for the undertaking was proved, when another quarter would be added." Although Kirby was far from a typical servant—she eventually left her job in Boston to live at Brook Farm, became a noted abolitionist, and traveled to California during the Gold Rush—she needed to earn money, and she stayed with the family for three years. During that time she read theology in her employer's library until "at last my mind was at rest on the subject of religion. I did not see that any one person knew any more about it than anyone else. It was all surmise."<sup>10</sup>

Her employer's wife, "the cold, unsmiling Mrs G.," was extremely status-conscious, and having a well-educated servant must have been a great trial to her. "I had far more quiet self-esteem than the lady members of the family, who seemed constantly on the alert lest I should be moved to cross the line of demarkation," Kirby remarks. She makes a very telling observation about her name:

When . . . Mrs G. demanded my given name, I was afraid it would make appearances worse to say "Georgiana." That would sound ridiculously fine for the station; so, to save myself, while blushing at the untruth, I replied:

"Ann."

I found out later that "domestics" were not limited as to names in the United States, but might be Anastasias or Corinnas, if it pleased them. There was no class of American servants, as only a very few temporarily accepted service. The majority were either Irish or German.<sup>11</sup>



Providence was growing rapidly in 1830. During the preceding decade the population had increased by 43 percent, much of this growth the result of natural increase or rural-to-urban migration. Of the town's 1830 population total of 16,784, only 257, or 1.5 percent, were described as aliens.<sup>12</sup>

Among Providence's residents was a free black population of 1,213, of whom two-thirds lived in the Olney's Lane area of the East Side. This group was not growing at the same pace as the population as a whole, its numbers having increased by only 12 percent in the 1820s; but important changes had occurred in the black community's patterns of employment and residence. At the beginning of the decade almost all employed blacks worked as domestic servants, living in the homes of their white employers, since there were

few other occupations open to them. In the years following, however, blacks started to work as draymen, grocers, bakers, and confectioners, trades that enabled them to live independently. By 1830 half the black population lived in their own homes. This group included numbers of servants, for many of those who were in domestic service were now "living out" or were casual workers contracting on a daily basis.<sup>13</sup>

These years also saw the growth of community consciousness and community organizing among Providence's black population. This development was spurred by a group of white philanthropists, including Moses Brown, who had encouraged black leaders to set up the all-denominational African Union Meeting and the Meeting Street School for Negro Children in 1819. There were, in addition, two black Masonic lodges in Providence, one founded in 1799 and the other in 1826. In 1832 blacks took a classic step toward respectability by organizing the Providence Temperance Society. The forty charter members took a pledge to renounce liquor, except for medicinal purposes, and they agreed that if they broke this pledge, "they shall be conversed with and shewn the error of their ways; if they did not reform . . . they shall be expelled from this society."<sup>14</sup>

The movement by blacks toward bourgeois respectability, accompanied by a relatively low birthrate and little inward migration (Providence was not a destination favored by fugitive slaves), boded ill for those whites who wanted faithful and deferential black servants. The demand was there, but the supply was problematic. The career of Elleanor Eldridge illustrates the unwillingness of blacks to enter permanent domestic service if they had any reasonable alternative. Part Narragansett Indian and part black, Elleanor started work at ten years of age as a domestic servant. She became a skilled weaver and a dairywoman, but she preferred to run her own business as a whitewasher and paperhanger. She also invested in property, and by 1840 she owned real estate valued at four thousand dollars.<sup>15</sup> When she did work as a domestic servant, she did so on her own terms. According to an account of her life written in 1838, she

worked [at her own business] for nine or ten months in the year, but commonly, during the most severe cold of winter, she engaged herself for high wages, in some private family, hotel or boarding house. Two of these winters she worked at Mr. Jackson's; and the two following at Governor Taft's; and it is worthy of remark, and alike creditable to herself and her employers, that ELLEANOR HAS ALWAYS LIVED WITH GOOD PEOPLE.<sup>16</sup>

Tensions between the black and white communities of Providence had long simmered, but they were exacerbated by the town's growth, the emergence of a property-owning black artisan class, and the concentration of unskilled blacks in or adjacent to areas that also catered to sailors and "lewd women." The association of blacks with deviant or vicious behavior is most clearly seen at this point, although it became clear during the hearings on the 1831 Olney's Lane riot that most of the slum landlords (including Nicholas Brown, one of the richest men in Providence) were white.<sup>17</sup> In the Hard Scrabble riot of 1824 and the more serious Olney's Lane riot seven years later, the town's interracial tensions came to a head.

Hard Scrabble was the name given to the area at present-day Moshassuck Square, a neighborhood that was home to many of Providence's black residents. According to William Brown, a black shoemaker who later wrote his memoirs, blacks were subjected to petty harassment on the town's streets;



for instance, local whites would amuse themselves by "knocking off men's hats and pulling off ladies' shawls and often following them as they passed to and from church."<sup>18</sup> Another favorite pastime was ordering black couples off the sidewalk into the street. The Hard Scrabble riot of October 1824 seems to have come about when a series of such incidents led to a fight between whites and blacks "in consequence of an attempt of the former to maintain the inside walk in their peregrinations through the town." The following night a white mob assembled, made its way to Hard Scrabble, "and in the short space of four or five hours, levelled it with the ground."<sup>19</sup> Four white men were tried and two were found guilty, but the verdict was quashed on a technicality and all were freed.

Far more serious was the disturbance that occurred in Snow Town, a black neighborhood near where the Providence-Worcester Canal met Olney's Lane. This area contained bars and brothels catering to sailors. In 1826 it was described as a place where "the scum of the town and the out-scourings of creation, nightly assemble to riot and debauch, and in the midst of their bacchanalian revels the whole neighborhood is kept in a constant state of inquietude and alarm."<sup>20</sup> This alarm was justified in September 1831, when four days of rioting took place there. Most accounts of the Olney's Lane riot agree that it had begun with a confrontation in Snow Town between a party of white sailors and a group of blacks; that the sailors returned with about a hundred supporters; that a black householder told them to stay away from his property, and when they refused, he shot one of the sailors dead. The fight escalated, with the authorities powerless to stop it until the fourth day, when a magistrate read the riot act and authorized the militia to shoot. Four members of a white mob were killed and fourteen others were injured before the rioting finally ended. Eighteen houses in Snow Town had been destroyed. Following the disorder the rioters enjoyed considerable sympathy among local whites. "The mob made but little noise and were expeditious and scientific in the performance of their arduous duties," a newspaper editorial sarcastically claimed. "Not one reputable building was attacked."<sup>21</sup>

The Olney's Lane riot was instrumental in forcing community leaders to face and deal with the problems of lawlessness and control inherent in explosive urban growth. If Providence was to be governed more efficiently, it seemed necessary to replace the town-meeting system with a city form of government. The movement to create a city charter advanced apace, and a new charter was approved by the General Assembly and ratified by the voters of Providence by November 1831. This document (which took effect in June 1832) gave the mayor extensive powers to curb vice and disorder: he could impose a twenty-four hour jail sentence on "any dissolute person" who was "fighting, or being otherwise disorderly," and he could search any building reasonably suspected to be inhabited by "persons of ill fame, or to which persons of dissolute, idle, or disorderly behavior are suspected to resort."<sup>22</sup>



The city charter was proposed, debated, and instituted by a group of men almost identical to the group that composed the Providence Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants. This organization was apparently patterned after one in London. Dr. William Kitchener's *The Cook's Oracle and Housekeeper's Manual*, "Adapted to the American Public by a Medical Gentleman" and published in 1829, describes this British group as "a most laudable SOCIETY for the ENCOURAGEMENT of FEMALE SERVANTS, by a

gratuitous registry, and by rewards, . . . instituted in 1813; plans of which may be had gratis at the Society's House, No. 10, Hatton Gardens."<sup>23</sup> The first such society in North America had been set up in New York in 1825, and other groups followed in Philadelphia, Boston, and Albany within the next decade. Prospectuses of the various American societies contain similar language and describe similar aims and rewards, probably reflecting the influence of the original organization in London. Registries, or servant labor exchanges, and financial rewards to workers for continuous service were the main features of these societies.

Apparently speaking for the organizers of the proposed society in Providence, a anonymous writer in the *Providence Advertiser* of 27 October 1830 suggested that both servants and employers would benefit from the new organization. The article explained how the servants would be financially rewarded for faithful service ("they will have annual rewards held out to them increasing every year in proportion to the length of continuances of services in any one family"), how their welfare would be provided for ("when sick and destitute [they] are to have medical advice and assistance furnished to them gratuitously"), and how they would be encouraged to be frugal (they "are to have a premium of one per cent on all balances of money to their credit in the Savings Bank"). In return for these benefits and kindnesses, the employers would expect from their servants "faithfulness, attention, obedience, activity and sobriety in the performance of duties and a general attendance to the rules and regulations of the family in which they reside." According to the article, the benefits to both sides would minimize the effects of class differences, for it would become an honor to be a servant under such conditions. The article cited the impact of the society in New York, where such an arrangement, "instead of making the necessary distinction between master and servant burdensome, has often softened its character so much as to make it rather a



"The Birth-day Dinner." Steel engraving by Illman Brothers from a painting by Wieschebrink, *Peterson's Magazine* 57 (January-June 1870). RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 7012).

privilege than otherwise; while at the same time a most respectful manner is preserved."<sup>24</sup>

A series of organizational meetings were held in Providence in the fall of 1830, and by 30 December there were enough subscribers to meet for the election of officers. Detailed rules and regulations were approved, including provisions for employing an agent to keep a registry office "in a central part of town," appointing a committee of sixteen women to take turns in checking references and visiting the office, and implementing a scale of rewards that the society would pay to servants whose employers had nominated them for good conduct and continued service:

After one year, a handsome octavo Bible, or in lieu thereof	\$2,00
At the end of 2 years	3,00
" " " " 3 "	4,00
" " " " 4 "	5,00
" " " " 5 " (and a certificate of their good service for that period)	10,00
And on the completion of every year thereafter	10,00 <sup>25</sup>

Ten dollars was equivalent to a month's wages for a cook, or six weeks for a housemaid, so these were not inconsiderable bonuses.

Ninety-eight of Providence's leading citizens joined the society, all presumably paying their three-dollar annual subscriptions. Their publicly stated reasons for

"Market Square." Drawing by Edward Lewis Peckham, pen and ink with wash on paper, January 1835. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 955).



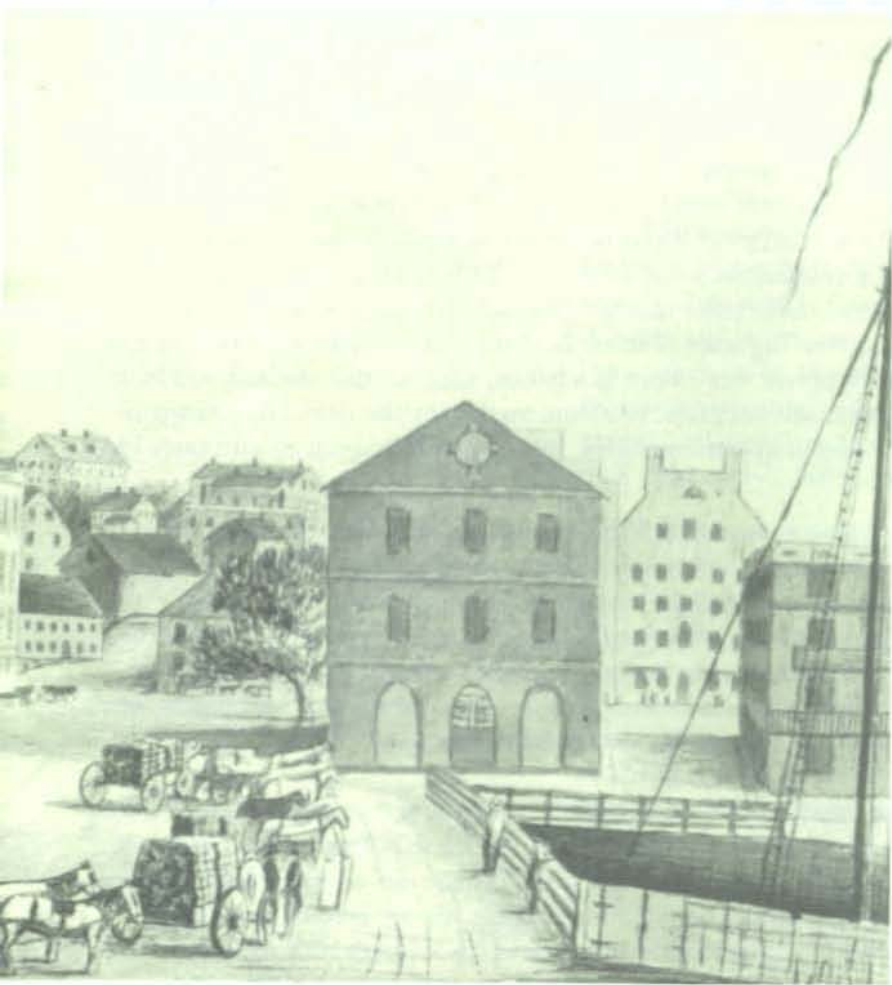
forming such an organization are set out in a report that was read at the first (and last) annual meeting, held on 2 January 1832. Regretting that the complexities of modern life made servants indispensable, the report declares that the character of household servants "is generally conceded to be bad." A number of reasons for this unfortunate situation are cited. There is, first, a difficulty in checking references, so that a kind of Gresham's law prevails, bad character driving out good. Second, employers submit to "gross misbehavior in their servants, rather than have them leave their employ." Third, servants are not properly educated in skills "qualifying them for the stations to which in all probability they will be called." Fourth, servants (as well as employers) are "fickle," and continuity of service is rare. Finally, the growing practice of hiring servants by the day leads them to "habits of idleness and dissipation" during the days when they are not employed, or during the hours when they are not in their employer's house.<sup>26</sup> The report offers an interesting explanation of this last evil, and one that suggests how the Olney's Lane riot realized the worst fears of the society's founders:

It is supposed that there are servants enough in this town, to do the work of twice its population, and yet it is well known that good servants were never more wanted. This supposition is founded in part on the late census. As for instance, it appears that of the colored population, there is rising of twelve hundred in this town alone, yet only five hundred are returned as being at service. The seven hundred, except children, if they are at work at all, are doing "day's work." It requires but little calculation to shew what this labor amounts to.<sup>27</sup>

Studies of similar societies in New York and Philadelphia reveal close similarities in aims, membership, and methods,<sup>28</sup> but the specific concern with colored servants seems to be unique to Providence.



What were the members of the Faithful Servants' Society like?<sup>29</sup> On the whole, they were conservative, antiabolitionist, meliorist rather than reformist, wealthy, and Whig. A decade later many of them would become leaders of the Law and Order party during the Dorr Rebellion. They were, of course, from the servant-employing classes, people who needed servants for their domestic comfort. There were fifteen lawyers, fifteen merchants, nine shopkeepers, five physicians or dentists, five clergymen (three Congregationalists, one Baptist, and one Episcopalian), four manufacturers, four bank cashiers or accountants, and two professors. The nineteen members for whom there is no occupation listed in the 1832 *Providence Directory* may have been either independently



wealthy or retired. The society's membership included the aged Quaker philanthropist Moses Brown and two women, Mrs. Frances Arnold and Mrs. H. S. Newcomb. Both female members were widows, the latter of a U.S. Navy captain who had fought in the War of 1812.

The president of the society, and apparently its driving force, was Samuel Bridgham, a lawyer who would soon be inaugurated as the first mayor of Providence. Among the society's eight managers were Benjamin Cowell, a federal law officer; Charles F. Tillinghast, an attorney and relative of the lawyer who defended the whites arrested during the Hard Scrabble disturbances in 1824; and Lemuel H. Arnold, the governor of Rhode Island at the time of the Olney's Lane riot. William S. Patten, the justice of the peace who read the riot act during that disorder, was also a society member, as were United States marshal Burrington Anthony; Justice of the Peace William Aplin; Henry Bowen, Rhode Island's secretary of state from 1819 to 1849; Congressman Tristram Burges, formerly chief justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court; and former governor James Fenner, who had been chief justice of the state Supreme Court as well. Seventeen members of the society served at one time or another in the General Assembly.

Brown University was well represented among the society's membership. Founding members included Francis Wayland, Brown's president; Nathan Crocker, vice president of the society, rector of St. John's Episcopal Church, and secretary of the Brown University corporation; doctor and manufacturer Samuel Tobey, a Brown trustee; and Brown professor William Goddard. Bridgham himself was the university's chancellor. Tristram Burges had been a professor of oratory and belles lettres at Brown, and most of the other members of the society had been educated there.

But despite the eminence of its members, the society was not a success. The first (and only) annual report hints at some of the reasons for the organization's demise. "The Managers have to regret a want of co-operation among the housekeepers [employers] generally," said the report. Further, "At first, the Society met with great opposition from servants themselves. It was industriously circulated among them that the Society was gotten up with a view to oppress and degrade them."<sup>30</sup> The servants may not have been wrong in this perception: the scale of rewards, rising significantly after five years to the equivalent of five week's pay as a bonus, suggests that the aim was to create a permanent servant class. In a time marked by the rise of the common man and a belief in upward mobility, this cannot have been an attractive idea to servants.

In addition, there was another, more immediate, problem: the agent that the Faithful Servants' Society appointed "proved to be unfaithful." This—together with the fact that the women's committee was never formed, because many of those approached declined to serve—greatly hampered the society's operations. During the first year the names of fifty-five servants were on the agent's books, and ten servants were nominated for rewards; but during the second year the society ceased to function.



Throughout this period there were also a number of commercial "intelligence offices," or labor exchanges, in operation. In the 1824 *Providence Directory*, for example, William Mumford, a justice of the peace, advertised the addition of an intelligence office to his debt-collecting, money-lending, and legal-document-writing agency. Mumford offered his services both to servants and

Caption title of "History of the Providence Riots, from Sept. 21 to Sept. 24, 1831." Broadside, 1831. RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 4457).

to employers, his office on Broad Street being a place "where masters or mistresses of families, and others, wanting men or maid servants, tailoresses, seamstresses, house-keepers or nurses: or any of the above described persons wanting places . . . may be accommodated, and have all their wants supplied."<sup>31</sup> Most such agencies were short-lived, for they were widely distrusted and suspected of many abuses. Because they charged a fee for each servant supplied, it was not in their interests to check references carefully. Reflecting the public distrust of these agencies, in the 1840s Samuel Wheeler advertised his business, also on Broad Street, as a "Temperance Grocery and Intelligence Office" "where the business is conducted in such a manner, as to insure the confidence of the public".<sup>32</sup>

Another method of obtaining servants, also fraught with difficulty, was through advertising in a local newspaper. Since it was a tedious task for would-be employers to reply to servants advertising for work, such situation-wanted advertisements are rare; there was, for instance, only one such advertisement in the *Providence Journal* during all of 1833, compared to twenty-three advertisements by employers in search of servants. Two of the employers' advertisements that year specified race: one sought a young or middle-aged white woman to care for three children, the other "a black woman to do the work in a kitchen." Two people needed wet nurses, one to live in the country, the other either to "take a child home and nurse it, or to live in the advertiser's family." Perhaps suggesting the difficulty of finding respectable servants, seven advertisers said they had small families, and one promised that the work would be light.

Ten years later Providence's economy was in recession, and very few domestic servants' jobs were advertised. Of the eight advertisements that appeared in the *Providence Journal* in 1843, three were for wet nurses; one of these stipulated that the applicant should be "of good moral character," two required almost apologetically that the servant be prepared to go into the country for a few weeks, and one stated that "an American or English woman would be preferred." A preference for Americans was not confined to wet nurses; an advertisement placed by a soap and candle manufacturer sought "a steady young man (an American) with a horse and wagon, to collect ashes in this city and the vicinity." Such nativism had increased dramatically by 1853, when seven of eighteen advertisements sought American, English, or Protestant servants, and six of the eleven people seeking domestic work described themselves in those terms. No advertiser stated explicitly that "no Irish need apply," but the message was certainly implied.

The binding out of pauper children as indentured servants offered another possible source of domestic help. The indentures of Lorra Bennett in 1839—requiring that her master, Henry Mathewson, "cause her to be instructed in the necessary callings of sewing, knitting and doing housework . . . and also . . . to read and write"—were typical.<sup>33</sup> But the practice of indenturing children had largely fallen into disuse, and few were apprenticed for domestic service. Intelligence offices, newspaper advertisements, and indenture arrangements all seemed inadequate as measures for ensuring a steady supply of good and faithful servants for those who needed them. Could some better method be found?



It remained for the characteristic Jacksonian response to problems of social control to be applied to the twofold problem of servant supply and perceived



"Cottage Life." Steel engraving by William Owen in *Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine* 19 (1841), RIHS Collection (RHi X3.7013).

vice and deviance among the black population. This response came with the creation of the Providence Shelter for Colored Orphans. A combination asylum and benevolent society, the shelter was founded in March 1838 by a group of women of various religious denominations meeting at the home of Mrs. Anna Jenkins, a Quaker and the only granddaughter of Moses Brown. Many of these women were socially prominent, but only one was married to a member of the group that had founded the Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants: Mary Flagg, the wife of surgeon-dentist J. F. Flagg. The medical officer of the new organization was Dr. Samuel Tobey, a Quaker who had belonged to the Faithful Servants' Society and who would later be active in the establishment of Rhode Island Hospital.

The shelter began operating in April 1840, when Anna Jenkins lent them, rent-free, a house she owned on North Main Street. Financial support came from the organization's membership and from a number of interested groups. One of these groups was the Infant School Society, which had disbanded in January 1839; "desiring their funds still to be appropriated to indigent chil-

dren," said a shelter report, "[the society's members] presented to us the liberal donation of \$420."<sup>44</sup> Other donors included the Ladies' Anti-Slavery Society, the Juvenile Anti-Slavery Society, the Ladies' Humane Society of the Universalist Church, and the Fourth Baptist Church.

The Providence Shelter for Colored Orphans set out its aims in its constitution and its annual reports. A preamble to the first annual report declared that many among the city's black population "are destitute of every physical comfort, and among this class are to be found the most ignorant and degraded." The shelter's members were particularly concerned about the children who were "subjected to the blighting influence of evil example, surrounded by the effects of intemperance and vice, taught and encouraged in the practice of wickedness by those whose duty it is to train them to habits of useful industry." This description echoes the kind of remarks that were made after the Hard Scrabble and Olney's Lane riots, as well as the paragraph in the Faithful Servants' Society report describing the idleness and dissipation of black servants when they were away from their work. But whereas the

practical men of the Faithful Servants' Society had relied on financial inducements to counteract these conditions (even the one-year bonus of "a handsome octavo Bible" could be replaced by money), the benevolent ladies of the Colored Orphan's Shelter took a more radical approach: they attempted to reform black children by removing them from an unwholesome environment to one more conducive to virtue and to socially acceptable habits and aspirations. According to the shelter's organizers,

It was our desire to provide a suitable home where the children might be placed and taught habits of industry, improved in their morals, and instructed in such branches of knowledge as would enable them to procure respectable maintenance, as domestics in families, or to acquire trades adapted to their capacities or inclination.<sup>35</sup>

The founders soon realized that it was not only orphans who required attention; there were also children who needed to be separated from their "vicious" parents, and there were children who had to be cared for because their otherwise responsible parents were in domestic service and could not provide such care themselves. The shelter received the latter children as boarders for fifty cents a week, about a third of a female servant's wages.



*"The Cottage Fire-sides." Steel engraving by W. Drummond in Graham's Lady's and Gentleman's Magazine 19 (1841). RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 7010).*



Although the first design of this Association was to benefit orphans, yet finding a much larger class in the community inhaling an atmosphere rife with impurity and vice whose parents exerted only an evil influence upon their children, it was thought that the object in view could not be fully accomplished but by rescuing those little immortals from the scenes of iniquity, and placing them within the salutary influence of virtue and religion. . . . There are still a number in our midst who have families, and whose circumstances oblige them to be at domestic service, [who] must necessarily place their children under the care of others. The difficulty which this class encounter in procuring homes for their little ones, where they will be uncontaminated, has induced us to receive such children as boarders.<sup>36</sup>

Article 7 of the shelter's original constitution, in the manuscript collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society,<sup>37</sup> insisted that "no relative shall interfere in the management of children in the Shelter, nor visit them, except in the presence of the Instructress, nor at any time when such visits are disapproved

by the Board." By the time the constitution was printed in the shelter's second annual report, however, it had been made clear that this restriction applied particularly to those parents "yielding to the destructive effects of intemperance and immoral conduct."<sup>38</sup>

Notwithstanding the occupational training provided by the shelter, of the sixty-four children it received during its first four years of operation, only eight had been sent out to work by the end of that time, all as domestics. Of the others, twenty-six were still at the shelter (which took children as young as three years of age and kept boys until they were ten, girls until they were twelve); twenty-one had been returned to their parents; and nine had died.<sup>39</sup> According to the reports, all but one of the latter were already ill when they came to the shelter. Several of the reports contain long and sentimental accounts of the death of a child. The first to die was a young boy who had entered the shelter just six weeks earlier. His death was followed by that of his sister, aged seven:

Through a protracted illness . . . scarcely an expression of impatience escaped her lips. Once, after her attentive physician had visited her, she said "I wish the doctor could make me well." Her kind teacher told her that she feared the doctor did not know of anything that could do that—she looked at her a few moments in silence, and then bursting into tears said—"Will you pray for me?"<sup>40</sup>

Shortly before her death the girl gave all her playthings to her teacher and asked her to keep them, "thus evincing to the utmost of her power, her affection and gratitude and evidently bidding farewell to the things of this earth." The report adds that this child and her brother were taken from "the most abject poverty and wickedness, their parents being slaves of intemperance and vice."

The records of the Shelter for Colored Children (the name was officially changed in 1847) show a continuing effort to "rescue" children from environments perceived as unhealthy. The matron's admission book contains accounts of what would now be called dysfunctional families, in

*Poem published in the annual report of the Providence Shelter for Colored Children, 1850. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7014).*

## THE CHILDREN'S SONG,

WRITTEN FOR THE

## TWELFTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE SHELTER.

GUARDIANS and friends, this day,  
With grateful hearts we come,  
Our debt of thanks to pay,  
For this our peaceful Home.

To breathe our fervent prayer,  
That God will ever bless  
Ye, whose protecting care,  
Sheltered the shelterless.

Amid life's deserts wild,  
Once we were left to roam ;  
But ye upon us smiled,  
And found for us a Home.

And as ye sheltered us  
With kind parental care,  
May God, our Father, thus,  
A home for you prepare.

That when earth's scenes are past,  
And life to death is giv'n,  
We all may meet at last,  
At Home, with Him in heav'n.

which children were not receiving the kind of care normally expected from parents. In one such case a Mr. Sampson brought his three children to the shelter's board in 1839. Their mother was in prison, and the children were "in a most miserable condition." After "giving some encouragement" about paying their board, the father disappeared, probably on "a vessel to New York." Faced with few alternatives, the board "consented to [the children's] remaining for the present."<sup>41</sup>

The shelter continued to house needy black children until 1952. Since then it has operated as a grant-giving agency to help African-American children through such institutions as the Urban League, the Mount Hope Day Care Center, and the John Hope Settlement House.<sup>42</sup>



David Rothman's description of the Jacksonian response to crime, deviancy, and dependency seems clearly applicable to events in Providence. From the 1820s to the 1840s, members of the city's elite came to believe that these conditions prevailed among the black population because of faulty environmental factors, particularly the lack of proper discipline in black families. Whereas the founders of the Providence Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants were meliorist and conservative in emphasizing law and order and economic incentives, the organizers of the Providence Shelter for Colored Orphans were millennial, emphasizing the possibility of character reform through firm but gentle discipline, administered in a wholesome environment removed from the evils of society. The Faithful Servants' Society may be seen as backward-looking—an attempt by an old elite to stem what appeared to be an alarming tide of lawlessness—or as very modern, in that it eschewed moral suasion in favor of economic incentives. The Colored Orphans group, on the other hand, was exactly in step with the benevolent spirit of the 1830s and 1840s; it had indeed "discovered the asylum" in its search for order and comfort in Jacksonian Providence.

## Notes

- David Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971), 57-59, 76-78, 155-79.
- Modern scholarship on domestic service started with Lucy Maynard Salmon's *Domestic Service* (1897; 2nd ed., New York: Macmillan, 1901). Salmon, a Vassar professor and Progressive, was anxious to document abuses in order to effect reform. Her book has three useful chapters on the history of domestic service in America, but apart from footnotes on Negro servants in the South, she has little to say on the topic of black servants. Daniel Sutherland provides useful information on servant reform movements in the antebellum period in *Americans and Their Servants: Domestic Service in the United States from 1800 to 1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), esp. chap. 8, but the Providence experience does not support some of his conclusions. Faye Dudden's *Serving Women: Household Service in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1983) is useful on intelligence offices (servant labor exchanges) and on contemporary responses to the "servant problem." An economic analysis of domestic service is provided by George J. Stigler, *Domestic Service in the United States, 1900-1940* (Cambridge, Mass.: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1946). Stigler also includes a most unscholarly dig at Beatrice Webb, who claimed that the domestic servant had all the advantages in bargaining because the mistress's "own ease of body and mind is at the mercy of the servant's hundred and one ways of making herself disagreeable." According to Stigler, Webb made it clear that she wrote with an authority that "the untutored male cannot challenge" (p. 13).
- Quoted from Trelawny Papers, 3:166-68, Maine Historical Society, in Salmon, *Domestic Service*, 33, 45.
- Employers' records consulted include those of Mary Troop Dorr Ames (Thomas Wilson Dorr's sister) in "Household Servant Records, 1842-1860," MS codex 6751, John Hay Library; of the Beecher family in Jeanne Boydston, Mary Kelley, and Anne Margolis, *The Limits of Sisterhood: The Beecher Sisters on Women's Rights and Woman's Sphere* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); and of a non-elite woman in Claudia L. Bushman's "A Good Poor Man's Wife": *Being a Chronicle of Harriet Hanson Robinson and Her Family in Nineteenth-Century New England* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1981). Servants' memoirs include Georgiana Bruce Kirby's *Years of Experience: An Autobiographical Narrative* (1887; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1971) and William Brown's *Life of William J. Brown of Providence, Rhode Island, with Personal Recollections of Incidents in Rhode Island* (Providence, 1883), a valuable source about black servants in Providence, as is Frances McDougall's biography of a black entrepreneur, *Memoirs of Eleanor Eldridge* (Providence, 1838).
- Lucy Larcom, *A New England Girlhood* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1889), 199.
- The exclusion of blacks from manufacturing occupations, even as laborers, is documented in Robert James Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees: Providence's Black Community in the Ante-Bellum Era* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982).
- Catharine Beecher, *Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* (Boston: 1841), 345-46. The "separate spheres" literature is large. Useful works in relation to domesticity and domestic service include Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), chap. 2; Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); and Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York: Norton, 1976). Glenna Matthews describes many of the advice manuals in *Just a Housewife: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 35-65. Catharine Beecher was one of the best-known writers of such manuals; her *Treatise on Domestic Economy* was reprinted nearly every year between 1841 and 1856 and was reissued as *The American Woman's Home* in 1869.
- William A. Alcott, *The Young Wife, or Duties of Woman in the Marriage Relation* (1837; 9th ed., Boston: 1844), 47. Alcott was unique among domestic-advice writers of the time in that he proposed solving the servant problem with a return to republican simplicity that would do without servants altogether. He was also an advocate of raw food.
- The servant account book kept by Mrs. Ames also records why servants left (or were dismissed). Though most of her servants had Irish names and are thus outside the scope of this discussion, some of her exasperated comments are worth noting; e.g., "May 15th 1851. Came Ann Daily. Six foot high, knew nothing, staid four days, went away at half an hour's notice to be married. Glad I am to be rid of her."
- Kirby, *Years of Experience*, 77, 83.
- Ibid.*, 78-79.
- These population figures were taken from the 1830 *Providence Directory*. Edwin M. Snow, *Census of the City of Providence Taken in 1855* (Providence, 1856), is also useful, since it gives historical population data as well as tabulating the servant population by ward and employer's family size. This type of statistical analysis was a mid-nineteenth-century development that had not been attempted for earlier population counts.
- Julian Rammelkamp, "The Providence Negro Community, 1820-42," *Rhode Island History* 7 (1948): 22-23. Rammelkamp's article is the first scholarly treatment of this topic and the first to use William Brown's memoirs as a source.
- Liberator*, 13 Oct 1832.
- Her real estate holdings are listed in the Providence tax books.
- McDougall, *Memoirs*, 64-65. Frances McDougall wrote two short books about Eldridge in order to arouse sympathy and financial support for her after she was swindled out of some of her property. Eldridge succeeded in recovering the property by taking her case to court.
- History of the Providence Riots from September 21 to September 24, 1831* (Providence 1831), 18. This report names eleven property owners whose buildings were destroyed or badly damaged; of these, only one, Rosanna Jones, appears in the 1831 Providence tax list as a "Person of Color."
- Quoted from Brown, *Life*, in Irving H. Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen* (Providence, 1954), 27.

19. Quoted from *Hard-Scrabble Calendar* (Providence, 1824) in Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen*, 27.
20. Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen*, 30-31.
21. *Ibid.*, 33.
22. See Howard P. Chudacoff and Theodore C. Hirt, "Social Turmoil and Governmental Reform in Providence, 1820-1832," *Rhode Island History* 31 (1972): 21, 29-30. See also John Shanklin Gilkeson, Jr., "A City of Joiners: Voluntary Associations and the Formation of the Middle Class in Providence, 1830-1860" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brown University, 1981).
23. William Kitchener, *The Cook's Oracle and Housekeeper's Manual* (1829, 2nd ed., New York, 1831), 25.
24. *Providence Advertiser*, 27 Oct. 1831.
25. *Providence Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants, First Annual Report* (Providence, 1832), 15.
26. *Ibid.*, 3-6.
27. *Ibid.*, 6.
28. See M. J. Heale, "From City Fathers to Social Critics: Humanitarianism and Government in New York, 1790-1860," *Journal of American History* 63 (June 1976): 26-27.
29. Much of the following information was obtained from *The Biographical Cyclopaedia of Representative Men of Rhode Island* (Providence, 1881). Thirty of the founders were sufficiently prominent to be included. Other sources were the 1830 and 1832 *Providence Directory* and William Staples's *Annals of the Town of Providence* (Providence, 1843), 403-91.
30. *Faithful Domestic Servants*, 8.
31. *Providence Directory*, 1824, p. 9.
32. *Providence Directory*, 1847, n.p.
33. Indentures of Lorra Bennett, Peck Collection, 14:98-99, RIHS.
34. *Second Annual Report of the Providence Association for the Benefit of Colored Orphans* (Providence, 1841), 6.
35. *First Annual Report of the Providence Association for the Benefit of Colored Orphans* (Providence, 1840), 2.
36. *Second Annual Report*, 6.
37. Colored Orphans' Shelter Record Book, March 1838-April 1844, n.p., RIHS.
38. *Second Annual Report*, 3.
39. *Fifth Annual Report of the Providence Association for the Benefit of Colored Children* (Providence, 1844), iii.
40. *Second Annual Report*, 8-9.
41. Colored Orphans' Shelter Admissions Book, 14 Sept 1839, RIHS.
42. See Pamela K. Dahlberg et al., *A Short History of the Providence Shelter for Colored Children, 1839-1989* (n.p.: North Star Express, 1990), written for the organization's 150th anniversary.



HARRISON  
AND  
REFORM

DAILY JOURNAL

# The Role of Women in the Dorr Rebellion

RONALD P. FORMISANO

Until recently women's history in the United States had been understood principally through the concept of "separate spheres." Women's place was in the home, not in public, even when women participated in reform movements, as they did throughout most of the nineteenth century before getting the vote, their social concerns were expressed in terms relating to the family, morality, and private life. While the notion of separate spheres as an ideal or ideology still dominates scholarly treatments of nineteenth-century gender relations, historians have come to recognize that women's social action did not always conform to the neat divisions of public and private that gender ideology prescribed. Recent scholarship has shown that while gender imposed many restrictions on women's freedom of action, women frequently crossed the lines dividing the public and private spheres.

Yet historians still see women as largely peripheral to the main show. Over three decades ago a "new political history," armed with computers and informed by a desire to analyze the social fabric of communities more intensively than ever before, launched detailed studies of voting, participation, and power in localities across mid-nineteenth-century America. But in following the "law of available data"—only men could vote—the new political history (perhaps now better labeled the "middle-aged political history") began by largely ignoring women, and only recently has it begun to make amends. Yet in their consideration of women in public before the Civil War, both political and women's historians (occasionally the same persons) have relegated them to the sidelines, or, at best, to a role as auxiliaries: as banner makers, picnic fixers and attenders, trinket producers and consumers, and monitors—from a safe distance—of public morality.

Historians have noticed that women became particularly visible in the presidential election of 1840. The Whigs' exuberant Log Cabin and Hard Cider campaign of that year utilized innovative techniques of mass mobilization and drew families and communities into political activities in extraordinary fashion. In her 1990 general history of mid-nineteenth-century women in public, Mary P. Ryan notes the striking presence of women in the Whig campaign but finds that they functioned symbolically "as emblems of femininity": "The Whigs introduced women into politics as passive and respectable representatives of femininity. . . . [The Whigs] dwelt upon sexual difference, not commonality."<sup>1</sup>

Although Ryan is undoubtedly correct about the Whig party leaders' symbolic and representational uses of women, she (and Ryan is hardly alone in this) may be overlooking the full scope of women's activities in 1840 and after.<sup>2</sup> In the aftermath of Rhode Island's Dorr Rebellion, as we shall see, women crossed lines of gender differentiation, and in politics they did almost everything except vote.

Ronald Formisano is a professor of history at the University of Florida. He would like to thank Cindy Bendroth, Patrick T. Conley, Deborah VanBroekhoven, and Elizabeth Varon for their help with this essay, which was presented as a lecture at the Rhode Island Historical Society on 27 May 1993.



**LOG CABIN LYRICS.—No. 3.**

Composed for the celebration of American Independence, by the Providence Tippecanoe Club, at the Buttonwoods, Warwick, July 4, 1840.

BY A MEMBER.  
Air—"Yankee Doodle."

All Hail! our Independence day,  
Success to those who gained it  
A Nation's vow went up to heaven,  
And nobly she maintain'd it.

CHORUS.  
God bless the honor'd veterans,  
Who fought to win our freedom;  
Hurrah! Hurrah! for HARRISON,  
Who gallantly did lead them

We celebrate the glorious day,  
But not with wasting powder,  
We feast on Clams, and Bread and Cheese,  
Hard Cider, and Fish Chowder

CHORUS.  
God bless the honor'd veterans,  
Our rustic meal would shock the nerves,  
Of those who spoil are grabbing;  
But he would join with right good will,  
Who lives in a "Log Cabin."

CHORUS.  
God bless the honor'd veterans,  
To him our gratitude is due,  
Despite each lying tory,  
Who to exult the pamper'd few;  
Would rob him of his glory.

CHORUS.  
God bless the honor'd veterans,  
Let Keadall print his filthy sheet  
And eke out his finances,  
Our "Hero" far above his reach  
Tow'rd the "White House" advances.

CHORUS.  
God bless the honor'd veterans,  
Let lying Felix still leech forth,  
His locofoco speeches,  
His poisonous shaft fails of its mark,  
Himself, it only reaches.

CHORUS.  
God bless the honor'd veterans,  
Let the whole party growl, and snarl,  
Bloodhounds and all, if needed,  
They cannot harm our Candidate,  
"He never was defeated."

CHORUS.  
God bless the honor'd veterans,  
We're CLAY, and WEBSTER, DAVIS, WISE,  
TOM CRAWFORD, RIVES, and PARSON;  
Each one, far better than the best,  
The locofoco rest on.

CHORUS.  
God bless the honor'd veterans,  
Above the best, above them all,  
As him we can unite on;  
We're HARRISON, the bravest man,  
That ever led a fight on.

CHORUS.  
God bless the honor'd veterans,  
We'll shout his praise, and spread his fame,  
Yet wider and still wider,  
Our emblems shall be household words  
"Log Cabins," and "Hard Cider."

CHORUS.  
God bless the honor'd veterans,  
Let every Whig with loud acclaim,  
Denounce each loco spoiler,  
And make the "Buttonwoods" resound,  
For HARRISON and TYLER.

CHORUS.  
God bless the honor'd veterans,  
Who fought to win our freedom,  
Now, three times three, for HARRISON,  
Who gallantly did lead them.

CRANSTONIER'S



Log Cabin and Hard Cider campaign  
broadside, 1840. R.H.S. Collection (RH-X3  
7009).



It was no coincidence that radical women had breached walls of gender confinement during the tumultuous years of the 1830s, immediately before the apparent debut of women in politics in the hoopla of 1840. The "notorious" Fanny Wright had shocked respectable New Yorkers with her free-thinking public speeches as early as 1829; and after Wright was silenced by conservative reaction in the mid-1830s, the challenge to the taboo against public speaking by women to "promiscuous audiences" of women and men was carried on by abolitionist women in New England, most notably the Grimke sisters. The issue of women's rights flared up among the country's minority of abolitionists in 1837 and 1838, contributing to factional divisions in the anti-slavery movement. Angelina and Sarah Grimke carried the public activity of abolitionist women into new territory, and in 1838 Angelina even testified before a committee of the Massachusetts legislature. Replying to an invitation to speak to a Providence women's group that same year, Sarah declared that she and her sister would come only if it was a public meeting open to

men and women.<sup>4</sup> Women's rights quickly receded as an issue, however, and remained dormant until revived by radical feminists in the late 1840s. Yet perhaps because of too narrow a focus on abolitionists, historians have missed the subsequent entrance of women, most of them not particularly radical, into the political mainstream during and after the 1840 campaign.

Electioneering in 1840 did not attain the heights of enthusiasm and mass frenzy in Rhode Island that it reached elsewhere. With voting limited to freeholders (and their eldest sons) with \$134 worth of real property, and continued resistance by the state's elite to constitutional reform, campaign display and fervor were naturally reduced. Disfranchisement was greatest in the most populous northern towns, where there were many adult white males who owned no real property but who nonetheless could have voted if they lived in other states. Yet the 1840 Whig campaign sparked unusual partisan excitement even in Rhode Island, and it drew women into the campaign's vortex. In Providence, Whig organizers of speeches and debates reserved the front rows of seats at Tippecanoe Club meetings for ladies; the presence of the fairer sex was considered "a guarantee of order and decorum," and it may also have stimulated greater attendance of young male Whigs.<sup>5</sup>

The 1840 campaign played an important part in bringing on the Dorr Rebellion. Efforts to reform the suffrage, to redress legislative malapportionment, and to correct a variety of unrepresentative features of Rhode Island's unamendable seventeenth-century royal charter had occurred sporadically during the early nineteenth century. In the 1830s constitutional change had been called for first by mechanics, artisans, and small businessmen and then by young lawyers and dissident gentry, including Thomas Wilson Dorr of Providence. The movement had faded by 1840, but then a bumbling General Assembly needlessly antagonized nonfreeholders and revived the agitation, and the political revivalism of "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" added fuel to the fire. According to one observer, the "hundreds and even thousands" of men and women who "swelled the meetings and participated in the excitement" of the 1840 election included many who were denied the vote. "People who could not vote," recalled a journalist, "more than ever envied those who could."<sup>6</sup> It was under these circumstances that the Rhode Island Suffrage Association came into being, and sentiment for constitutional reform became more widespread and respectable than ever before, especially in the populous industrial towns in the northern part of the state.

Although female voting was not an overt issue, women were enlisted on both sides of the conflict as it intensified in 1841 and early 1842, for there were few Rhode Islanders who could remain neutral in what was surely the state's most compelling public episode since the American Revolution. Towns, churches, neighborhoods, and families were arrayed on one side as charterite supporters of law and order or on the other as Dorrite suffragists. Some families, churches, and towns were in fact torn apart by the rebellion.<sup>6</sup>

After Dorr's abortive attack on the state arsenal in May 1842, one charterite woman of Providence, Anna Francis Herreshoff, wrote to her relatives in the strongly anti-Dorr town of Bristol that the "electrifying" news of the incident brought "even ladies . . . out in the streets." She reflected the views of charterite households in believing that "the lower classes are not looking for suffrage alone" and that Dorr and his followers were threatening a major social upheaval. On that same occasion a young charterite man in Westerly



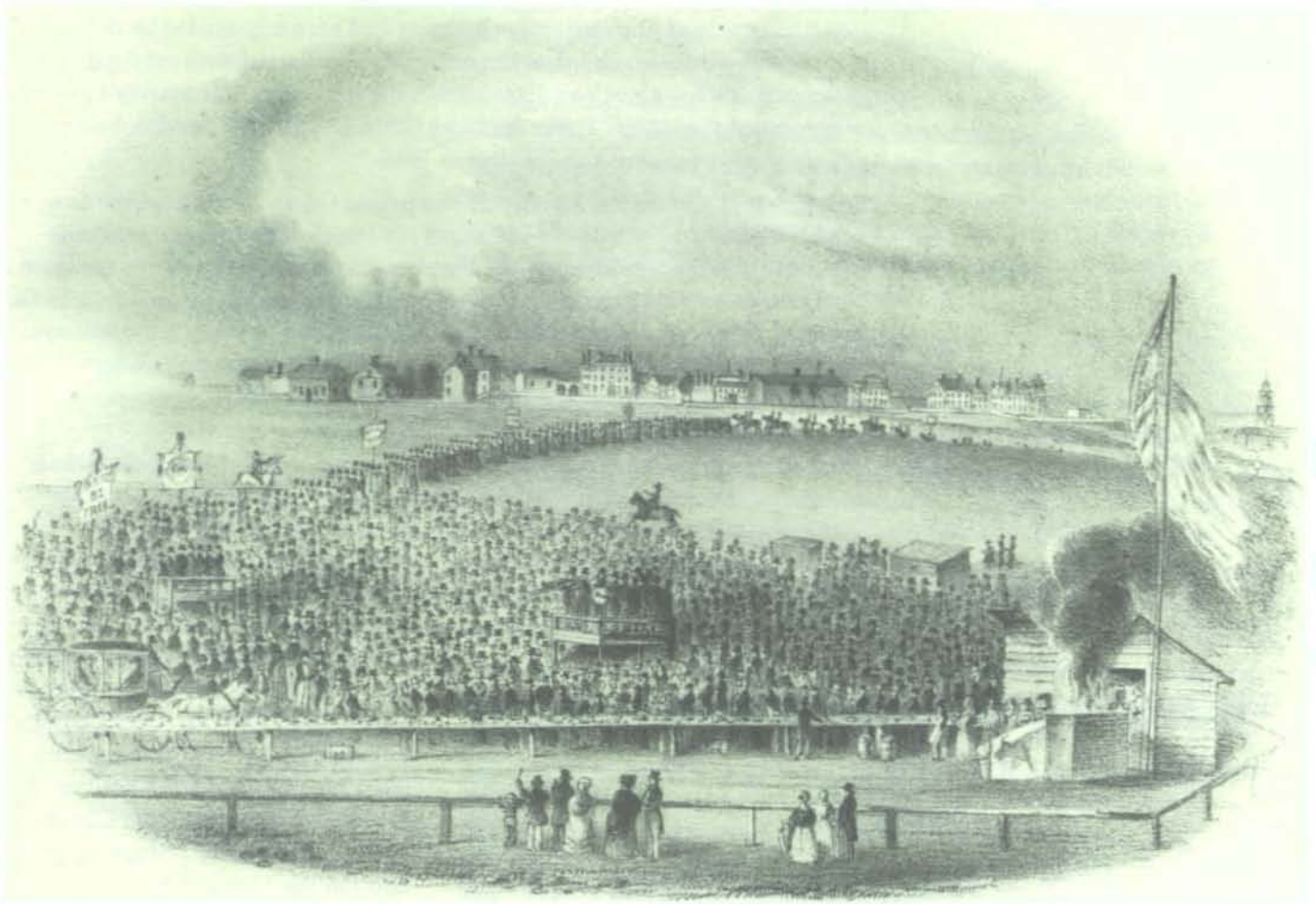
boasted that he and his comrades were ready to fight, regretted that his Providence brethren had not shot forty or fifty of Dorr's men, and reported that "even the Ladies scold because Dorr was suffered to escape."<sup>7</sup>

The tension in one household was revealed by a Providence suffrage leader who was imprisoned briefly after the arsenal fiasco and then returned home to find his son and a friend firing guns about his house to celebrate the charterites' success, "deporting themselves toward me as insolently as bandits, while the female part of my family treated me as an aider and abetter in a war which would probably be the death of my son. Even our coloured girl Kate was taught to speak disrespectfully of suffrage folks and to talk saucy to me. The only friendly face in the house was that of an Irish girl, a sincere friend of liberty."<sup>8</sup>

During the tense days after the assault on the arsenal, rumors flew about the state regarding Dorr's intentions. The chief rumor, encouraged by charterite authorities, was that Dorr intended to sack Providence and put it to the torch. Conservatives also charged that Dorr planned an "agrarian despotism" and a confiscation of property, which would be redistributed among the poor. Making light of the latter rumor, some Providence wits walked around the city pointing to fine dwellings and remarking that if Dorr triumphed, "I guess I will have that house." A woman correspondent of the exiled Dorr sought to cheer him up later on with a story about a washerwoman and her employer. "One [charterite] woman, who was in her kitchen, washing day, began to dilate upon the subject [of Dorrism], abusing the poor, and classing them 'scurrilous washer-women,' until the [washer]woman, thoroughly provoked, turns round and says, 'Well do you know I expect to have your house, and as it won't be long—I will even leave off washing and be ready,' so saying she quitted the house." The husband of the lady of the house later cajoled the washerwoman into returning, but "The Lady . . . still persists, that 'if Mr. Dorr had taken the city, her washerwoman was to have had that house."<sup>9</sup>

Less amusing were the real fears of armed conflict, fears that remained strong during May and June 1842. Although in reality there was little or no chance of serious military conflict, appearances certainly encouraged alarm. Law and Order militia patrolled the streets of Providence every night, and new militia companies were continually forming.<sup>10</sup> A loyalist wife expressed extreme bitterness toward the People's governor: "that door (Dorr) to misery has shut out from us our dear husbands and fathers and brothers and compelled them to spend their evenings in laborious military exercises . . . while we poor helpless women are penned up at home deprived of their society and in constant fear lest the knowledge they are acquiring may be called into exercise and they be lost to us forever."<sup>11</sup>

On 25 June 1842 Dorr returned to Rhode Island, hoping to rally the People's legislature and a large force of defenders at rural Chepachet in Gloucester. Two days later, with an army of three thousand charterite militiamen on its way, and with only a few score supporters of his own at Chepachet, Dorr ordered his followers to break camp, and he himself fled the state once again. The charterite army nonetheless "stormed" the Dorrites' vacated camp on Acote's Hill, an incident well known in Rhode Island history. Less well known, however, was the state government's dispatch of militia to many of the northern mill villages where citizens—men and women—favorable to Dorr were becoming unruly. In some rural villages all the men had gone into



"Sufrage Meeting on Jefferson Plain,"  
17 April 1841. Engraving by Thayer and  
Company, Boston. RIHS Collection  
(RH1 X3 2173).

hiding for fear of retribution, and travelers and charterite patrols encountered only women peering at them from behind curtains and locked doors.<sup>13</sup>

The fears of these villagers were well justified. After finding that Dorr's group at Chepachet had disbanded and that no military resistance would be forthcoming, charterite militiamen scoured the countryside for Dorrite sympathizers, breaking into houses and taverns, rounding up prisoners, brutally mistreating many, and marching more than a hundred tightly bound captives back to Providence. As the charterite procession marched into the city with its prisoners, loyalist crowds cheered and women waved handkerchiefs from windows and greeted the returning militiamen with "a shower of flowers."<sup>13</sup>

Word spread quickly through neighborhoods of Dorrites that charterite "press gangs" were on a rampage, and consequently many women were left behind to deal with the often malicious and vengeful patrols as best they could. One such woman was Warren resident Rachel Luther. On 29 June a party of charterite militiamen burst into her home, looking for her son, shoemaker Martin Luther, who had served as a local official under the People's government. Martin had fled to nearby Massachusetts, but the militia party harassed and threatened the aged Rachel and her hired man. Later in 1842 both Martin and Rachel Luther filed suits in federal court, charging that the charterites had committed an illegal trespass; by virtue of the overwhelming

approval gained by the People's Constitution in the referendum of December 1841, they argued, the charter government had been superseded by the People's government, and thus the militiamen had acted without legal authority. Rachel's suit was dismissed at the state level, but Martin's eventually reached the United States Supreme Court as *Luther v. Borden*, being finally resolved against the Dorrists in 1849.<sup>14</sup>

In April 1842 the charter legislature had passed the so-called Algerine Law, which leveled stiff penalties—including life imprisonment—against those who would seek to implement the People's Constitution. With this measure in effect, some forty Dorrists remained in various state jails after 4 July 1842. It was at this point, during a period of repression known among the suffrage party as the Algerine Reign of Terror, that suffrage women really began to play a major role in the political turmoil of the state.



With many of the most ardent reformers and Dorr's most loyal male friends in exile, in prison, or intimidated by the victorious and repressive charter government, Dorrite women—some of whose spouses or kin had been detained or harassed—stepped forward to carry on the fight. In early August 1842 Dorr was informed by a group of his associates that the Democratic newspaper would show him that he had "many friends among the ladies of

R.I." The activity of suffrage women was such that by September a Providence friend told the exiled People's governor that "nothing has given more life and animation [to] the cause of suffrage since the Chepachet affair, than the unceasing effort of the Ladies friendly to the cause." On the other hand, "on the Algerine side some *worthy Lady Macbeths* whose souls long for the blood of their neighbors, [are] urging their husbands, brothers and friends to such damnable acts of cruel despotism as would make an eastern despot blush to read of."<sup>15</sup> Clearly many middle- and upper-class Rhode Island women were becoming engaged to an extraordinary degree in this critical public affair.

During the summer women formed suffrage associations in Providence, Pawtucket, Woonsocket, and other mill villages and towns. These organizations called themselves by such names as Ladies' Free Suffrage Association, Benevolent Association of Suffrage Ladies, Young Ladies' Suffrage Association, or, simply, Suffrage Ladies. The members began by raising money for the legal fees of

"Rhode Island Algerines Appeal to John Davis." *Broadside*, 1842. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6689).

## Rhode-Island Algerines' APPEAL TO JOHN DAVIS, Governor of Massachusetts.

Prepare your forces, honest John—  
Each man his sabre draw,  
For oh! we fear a third attack  
Of Thomas W. Dorr.  
Oh dear! that dreadful Dorr!  
The traitor, Thomas Dorr—  
We fear he'll take Rhode Island yet,  
In spite of "Martial Law."

Another thing we greatly fear,  
From what we've heard and saw—  
That certain States would lend their aid  
To help T. W. Dorr.

John Tyler, too, once promised troops  
To help us through the war;  
But now we fear, if called upon,  
He'd prove a friend to Dorr.

Should Congress strictly scan our claims,  
We fear they'd find a flaw  
That would displace our government,  
And yield the reins to Dorr.

We'll own to you deeds have been done,  
Licensed by "Martial Law,"  
That would have hung the followers  
Of Thomas W. Dorr.

We've tried by art and stratagem  
To rule with "order and law,"  
Yet there are those who boldly talk  
About their Gov. Dorr.

The ladies, too, have swelled his ranks,  
And threaten swords to draw;  
Such zeal was ne'er before displayed  
As they express for Dorr.

Go where you will, you're sure to meet  
Their everlasting jaw;  
They'll curse the Charterists to the face  
For what they've done to Dorr.

Clam-bakes and meetings they appoint,  
Regardless of the law,  
And resolutions boldly pass,  
To favor Thomas Dorr.

Though Algerines have threatened them  
Indictions of the law,  
They do not fear the cannon's mouth  
When advocating Dorr.

Read o'er our troubles, honest John,  
And some conclusion draw;  
Pray tell us what we have to fear  
From women, claims, and Dorr.

suffragists and for the relief of those in prison. Then they visited the prisoners. A suffragist woman reported to Dorr that on a 3 September visit to six prisoners in the Bristol jail, "we carried all that the chaise would hold," including food, tobacco, and "daily papers and all others for a week past [about 100 . . . from various places]." Seth Luther, the radical democrat and workingmen's advocate jailed in Newport for standing by Dorr at the arsenal and Chepachet, received flannel socks, tobacco, and small sums of money. Providence women sent the exiled Dorr a hundred dollars for his needs, but Dorr graciously returned the money and asked them to use it for "our brethren, who are confined in prison."<sup>16</sup>

Suffrage women also played an important role by joining men as couriers to transmit letters between Rhode Island and the New Hampshire exile whom they regarded as their rightful governor. Dorr's closest associates in Rhode Island and in hiding in other states sent letters to him in this fashion. Women themselves also wrote to Dorr, including some who had never met him. One of these was Mary Jane Campbell of Providence, who, hearing that Dorr was suffering from rheumatism, sent him an ointment along with the assurance that "I have not ben [*sic*] a silent or uninterested observer" in the fight for the people's liberties against Algerine tyranny.<sup>17</sup>

Most conspicuously, suffrage women took the lead in arranging a series of clambakes throughout the summer and fall. These festive social affairs drew from several hundred to several thousand attendees and served a number of political functions. One of the first clambakes was held in late August to coincide with the election of delegates to the charterite constitutional convention scheduled for that fall, an election that the suffragists had decided to boycott. The clambakes also raised money for "needy Suffrage families," for the prisoners, for suffrage newspapers and printing, and for legal costs. They also "wondrously" lifted the spirits of the suffrage community at a time when reformers did not see much to cheer about. On 28 September an estimated five to eight thousand Dorrites from Rhode Island and Massachusetts assembled for a bake at Acote's Hill in Chepachet—a spot symbolizing suffragist failure to the Algerines, but hallowed ground to the Dorrites. Although some exiled Dorrites attended, Dorr himself did not, and so the organizers sent him "a box . . . containing one prime codfish weighing 15 lbs., 2 mackerell [*sic*], 1 peck of clams, and a few fine oysters."<sup>18</sup>

Women not only organized the clambakes but sometimes spoke at them as well, although extant descriptions suggest that these speeches were not planned. Ann Parlin, an ardent suffragist and the wife of a Providence doctor who had been briefly imprisoned in June as a Dorrite, told Dorr that "on impulse" she "gave a brief speech at the mass clambake" in August.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Catherine R. Williams was pressed into speaking at a Millville clambake of some fifteen hundred persons in late October. An accomplished writer, Williams had published poetry, stories, a novel, and a history of a sensational murder and trial; now in her early fifties, she was a confidante of Dorr.

Some one mentioned there was a Lady present who had lately seen Gov. Dorr [she wrote] and to my confusion she was called for by so many voices at once, she was obliged to show herself. Literally forced to the stump. Thank heaven, women never are at a loss for words, and finding herself thus compelled, the Lady in question, threw off her cloak and stepped forward to the front of the Stand and gave a brief and I trust intelligible history of her visit to our exiled Governor; you might have heard a leaf move in the forest, so profound was the attention given.<sup>20</sup>

It is difficult to know whether women spoke frequently at Dorrite meetings, but in Pawtucket in March 1843 it did seem routine for the Friends of Free Suffrage to call a meeting for "both male and female" suffragists.<sup>21</sup>

The political activity of suffrage women seems to have reached its height during the period of "Algerine persecutions," when the Dorrites and Democrats boycotted both the August 1842 election of delegates to the constitutional convention and the November ratification vote on the proposed constitution. The latter boycott was so effective that the constitution was approved by a vote of 7,054 to 51, whereas the previous spring the suffragists had managed to defeat the Landholders' Constitution by a vote of 8,689 to 8,013. After the ratification boycott, however, the suffragists changed their tactics and joined with the Democratic party to contest the spring 1843 state election, the first held under the new constitution.

With the return to more traditional political channels, women's activity receded, but it did not end. The new constitution angered reformers with several of its provisions, including its retention of the real estate qualification for naturalized citizens. It also required natives without property to pay a one-dollar poll tax, thus creating a class of "registry voters" susceptible to the pressure of men of wealth and influence who would pay the tax for them. In the fiercely fought election of 1843, with both sides working to get out the vote, suffrage women helped raise and distribute money to pay the poll taxes of poor voters who could be counted upon to cast their ballots for the Democratic-Equal Rights party.<sup>22</sup> Suffrage women also participated in the "liberation" campaign of 1845, raising funds and agitating for Dorr's freedom, and thus they helped win Dorr's release from prison that year.



In 1842 abolitionist William Goodell published *The Rights and Wrongs of Rhode Island*, the first of the two major contemporary accounts of the constitutional controversy from the suffragist point of view. Two years later appeared the other such work, *Might and Right*, by Frances Harriet Whipple. In her late thirties at the time of the Dorr Rebellion, Whipple was descended from an old Rhode Island family. Since 1830 she had been publishing poems in newspapers and advocating various causes, including temperance, abolition, and labor. Her novel *The Mechanic* appeared in 1841, and during 1842-43 she was editing and publishing the Fall River *Wampanoag and Operatives Journal* in the interest of improving the lives of factory workers, especially females.<sup>23</sup> In *Might and Right* Whipple contemptuously dismissed the Law and Order elite as a false aristocracy, parvenus risen from the dregs, who swaggered and talked about "the 'lower orders,' and 'the rabble,' and [their] 'operatives.'" Whipple condemned the concentration of political power in the hands of a few, and the social condition, "restrictive and Aristocratical," that had grown out of that concentration.<sup>24</sup>

Whatever their ancestries, most of Rhode Island's commercial and landed elite seemed to favor the Law and Order party, while suffrage reform attracted many artisans, factory workers, farmers, and small shopkeepers, as well as a few maverick members of the elite like Whipple and Dorr. The leading suffrage women came mostly from the same ranks of middle-class respectability, or would-be respectability, from which abolitionist women came, and men and women active in the abolitionist cause tended to support the cause of suffrage. Some of these, like Whipple, were also advocates of better conditions for factory workers and mechanics.

Like abolitionist women, suffrage women (and girls) sold handicrafts and other items at fund-raising fairs in halls rented for the day.<sup>25</sup> But the similarity between abolitionist and suffrage women was more than a matter of similar activities or social background; there were also strong resemblances in mentality. Both groups shared a similar language of benevolence and social commitment. Typical sentiments were expressed in a letter to Dorr by Almira Howard of Pawtucket, a woman writer who sent anonymous pro-Dorr letters to newspapers in Boston and New York: although "it was not my fortune to be nursed in the lap of wealth or pampered with the luxuries of a rich man's table," she wrote, "I have heart to sympathize with the sons and daughters of affliction."<sup>26</sup>

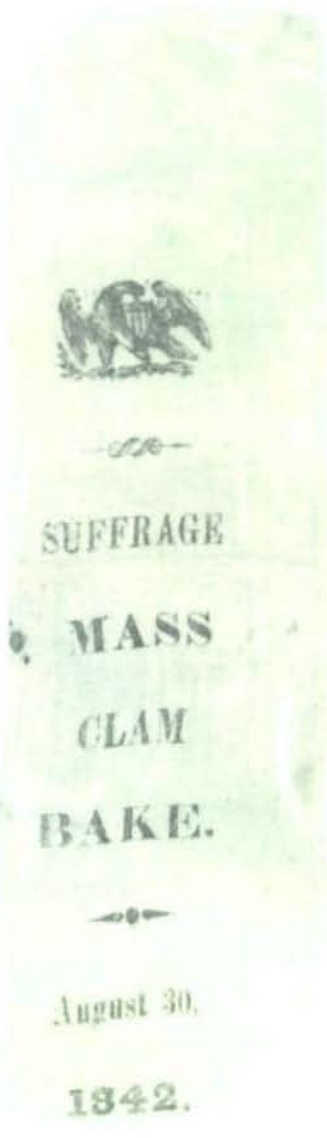
Dorrite women (and men) exhibited a passion for their cause much like that of the abolitionists. "You will please to excuse my warmth," wrote Ann Parlin (later active in the abolitionist cause) to Dorr, "for my whole soul is wrapt in this glorious cause, and come life or death I am willing and I will go on, until I am victorious." Acutely conscious of "Algerine persecution," Parlin assured Dorr that she and her associates "bear our suffrage badges at all times in open daylight, we are doing all that women can do, we meet every Monday night and pass resolutions to keep it [the suffrage issue] before the men of our unfortunate state."<sup>27</sup> E. Taylor of Providence, who signed herself "A firm and true Suffrage woman," told Dorr that he

cannot fail to have impressed in the breast of weak woman as I am the highest feelings of gratitude and admiration. Although I have not the pleasure of knowing, or even beholding you, yet let me tell you through this struggle, you have had a place, day by day, in my thoughts and feelings; feelings that any daughter of America would not blush to own; feelings that my mother felt, and have been handed down to us [from] the noble Washington and others who struggled for liberty.<sup>28</sup>

A letter from Dorr in reply to a suffrage woman in Providence occasioned "more than a dozen meetings of ladies . . . for the purpose of hearing it read."<sup>29</sup>

In an influential essay, Thomas L. Haskell ascribed a "humanitarian sensibility" to the abolitionists. That Dorr was regarded as a martyr by many suffrage men and women suggests that a similar sensibility might be ascribed to the Dorrites as well. Dorr himself bore much resemblance to Haskell's "'man of principle,' the moral paragon of a promise-keeping, market-centered form of life," whose defining characteristic is "his willingness to act on principle no matter how inconvenient it might be."<sup>30</sup> Dorr acted that way throughout the rebellion, and he continued to act that way in returning to Rhode Island to stand trial before his enemies and to accept the consequences of that trial. His admirers, men and women, especially appreciated his dedication and courage. So too did some of his enemies: former Democratic governor James Fenner, a charterite stalwart who headed the Law and Order ticket and was reelected governor in 1843, reportedly said that "whatever Mr. Dorr does, he does from principle."<sup>31</sup>

Although men could be effusive in their attachment to Dorr—a male friend exhorted him to take comfort in knowing that "He who was the personification of all moral truth and light was [also] unsuccessful in teaching . . . and the 'Rulers' caused him to be murdered"<sup>32</sup>—suffrage women may have identified with him even more because of the costs they risked paying for their public political action. Ann Parlin provides a case in point here. A suffrage man in Providence wrote confidentially to Dorr of the delicate matter of Mrs. Parlin:



Silk satin badge for a suffrage clambake, 30 August 1842. RIHS Collection.



*Portrait of Catherine Williams. Oil on canvas by Susanna Paine. RIHS Collection (RH: X3 4475).*

When the waters are agitated, somethings not the most valuable we know will rise to the top first and swim best. . . . Mrs. Parlin has been very active and done much good. She is a woman of first rate abilities. I would do her nor any of her associates, any wrong, nor give them one painful emotion, but duty I consider imperious. I know I may count on your sympathy and silence. I feel that you ought to know something of the standing of this woman. Suffer me to say, by urgent request of Col. Simons [who had publicly objected to women marching in a men's procession] they are much doubted amongst suffrage folks, even. It is painful for me to say this, but without this knowledge, you, in some communication, might be placed in an unpleasant situation. The suffrage women generally have been withdrawing from the society of which they claim to be leaders. It is quite perplexing to all. *The fact is they are accused by the Algerines and we cannot vindicate them. What shall we do!* [Emphasis added]<sup>11</sup>

What Mrs. Parlin or her associates were accused of is not clear, but the writer added almost as an afterthought that a forthcoming young women's fair "seems to excite much interest, and were it not for the trouble hinted at above, would be a splendid affair. Mrs. P. is determined to do the controlling part or destroy all. She takes up collections and says its no body's business how much or what she does with them."

This letter was written on 12 October 1842. Shortly before, in a 26 September letter to Col. William Simons himself, Dorr had referred to "my good friend Mrs. Parlin"; but the attacks on Parlin took effect. Dorr, who saved his correspondence and later went back to it and made notations, sometime afterward noted on the draft of his letter to Simons that the woman became "notorious" at New York and elsewhere, and that "she had the reputation of talent and spirit. I will add that I knew her mostly by repute as an active *politician*, and never saw her but once—viz, when she called . . . with her husband, Dr. Parlin, and with another lady." Clearly there are innuendoes of sexual impropriety lurking here, despite the gentlemanly reserve with which the matter was discussed.

Other evidence, however, calls into question the attacks on Parlin and raises the possibility that the reformers were unduly influenced by the assumptions of patriarchy and the ideology of separate spheres, which allowed no role for women in public life. Parlin's real sins may have been her public speaking and her decision making independent of male leaders. This possibility is certainly suggested in one of Catherine Williams's letters to Dorr, in which Williams described her unscheduled clambake speech and then went on to refer to Algerine descriptions of suffrage women as Dorr's "masculine followers." "The Algerines have torn Mrs. Parlin's character in fragments," she continued, "and several others so they boast, & I expect every moment they will take hold of mine, as yet they have only reported I 'am subject to fits of insanity' (considerate creatures) & 'that as to talents, I never wrote one of my books in my life,'" her work allegedly having been written by a man who had helped proofread her first book for the printer. Williams further told Dorr of state and city authorities punishing her for her suffrage views by levying additional taxes on her house and on a thousand dollars in bank shares that she did not even own.<sup>34</sup>

Williams also explained that the Parlins intended to move from Providence to Boston or New York because

his business is utterly down, as the Algerines were his principal customers. The Suffrage being generally a hard working set are seldom on the Doctor's hands so poor man he has nothing to do. He is a man of real science and a fine mind . . . modest and retiring. . . . Mrs. P. is in New York, she cares not for their censure feeling her motives pure, but her sensitive husband, though he despises the source from whence it comes, feels it too deeply. She is too careless.

Williams promised that she would advise Parlin as a friend "to overlook the freedom of speech, in consideration of the motives."

Parlin herself wrote to Dorr shortly afterward from New York, telling him that the people there were still interested in Rhode Island affairs and that "it has stimulated them considerably by seeing a female take so much interest in state affairs as I have, and a meeting was called on Friday evening for me to address."<sup>35</sup> Parlin's public speaking and hobnobbing with male politicians may have been the extent of the grounds for her reputation as "notorious,"



## THE LAST CONSTITUTION.

Come, listen now, you Suffrage men,  
And hear what I shall say  
About those savage Algerines  
That gained the victory.  
Oh dear! you Algerines;  
You now must soon give o'er;  
Although you captured Acot's hill,  
You lost T. W. Dorr.

And next they chose their delegates  
To frame a Constitution;  
But there were two that did it all—  
The meanest of creation.  
Oh dear! do heed him, Jim;  
For that will never do  
For a democratic Suffrage man  
To take the lead from you.

So when our worthy Newport man  
A liberal move did make,  
"Do heed him, Jim," says Uncle Sam,  
"He'll ruin our estate."  
Oh dear! do heed him, Jim, &c.

When walking Newport streets, one night,  
Declaring his intentions—  
That he and Jim would never make  
A liberal Constitution.  
Oh dear, &c.

They say they never will invent  
A liberal Constitution,  
To let the people have the power:  
They fear our resolutions.  
Oh dear, &c.

Aristocrats! we have one now;  
We ne'er will ask for more,  
The lawful Governor we have chose;  
He is T. W. Dorr.  
Oh dear, &c.

Who gave these men the power to act  
At Newport, in Convention?  
Assembled there—for what? to make  
A Mongrel Constitution.  
Oh dear, &c.

The people! No, I'm sure they've not;  
They need no Constitution  
From two such men as Jim and Sam,  
Who met in that Convention.  
Oh dear, &c.

This Mongrel Constitution gives  
The Assembly power to act,  
And make such laws as they see fit:  
Believe me—'t is a fact.  
Oh dear, &c.

To pass such laws as they think best  
To adopt this Constitution;  
They're none so good to fine you high,  
Or put you in State prison.  
Oh dear, &c.

But I do say: "Keep from the polls,  
And let them pass their law;  
Stay then at home; devote your time  
To Thos. Wilson Dorr.  
Oh dear, &c.

The nation now is wide awake;  
Fear not, my boys, their law,  
For you shall soon your Governor see;  
'T is Thomas Wilson Dorr.  
Oh dear, &c.

Oh yes! 't is Thomas Wilson Dorr  
The people will maintain;  
As long as life with them exists,  
He'll always be the same.  
Oh dear! that Thomas Dorr!  
Rhode Island's brightest star!  
We'll give you now three lusty cheers,  
Hurrah! hurrah! hurrah!

A DORRITE LADY.

"The Last Constitution," by A Dorrite Lady. Broadside, 1843. RIHS Collection (RHI X3 6684.

though she may also have provoked suffrage men with her ardent temper. She alone among Dorr's correspondents wished

our people would commence another action, and fight it out, if they would—or if they do, I will pledge myself to lead the army to death or victory. . . . There will be a movement on the part of the women, which will necessarily move the men to action, for the present state of affairs cannot much longer be tolerated, and if I remain in R.I. I may yet have the honour or disgrace of striking the first blow. I shall not be a silent spectator, one half of our valiant men, in peace are cowards in war, and they often tell me, that I judge them too hard, but I am sure, had they shown as much courage last spring and summer as they did at the roasting of the ox [at a suffrage rally in 1841], they would not have been imprisoned.<sup>116</sup>

Although Dorr himself had been disappointed with the timidity of both the People's legislature and the hundreds of potential People's militiamen who did *not* rally to Chepachet, he never put it quite so bluntly.



It appears that suffrage women played a far greater role in the Dorr Rebellion than the historical construct of separate spheres would lead one to expect. Why did this happen? What was the historical significance of this participation? Definitive conclusions would be unwarranted here, for this aspect of the rebellion needs to be explored much more fully; but some speculation might be in order.

Is it possible that for suffragist women there were issues involved beyond the overt issues of the conflict? Might the beleaguered suffrage movement have offered these women the opportunity to challenge their male-dominated society, at least indirectly? There is reason for believing that this was the case, for their criticism of the Law and Order elite suggests a rejection of the Algerines as a false patriarchy, an unjustified claimant to the authority that, along with church and God, stood behind the authority of the family and the community. For more ardent spirits such as Ann Parlin, this sociopolitical patriarchy may even have served as a surrogate target for the actual patriarchy. Moreover, and even more obviously, the efforts of these Dorrite women might well be seen as part of a struggle that culminated with the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, for it is hard to see how the Dorr Rebellion could not have provoked women in Rhode Island and elsewhere to think about acquiring the vote for themselves.



Caricature of a Dorrite lady. Detail from  
"Trouble in the Spartan Ranks. Old  
Durham in the Field," a Law and Order  
broadside. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6742).

## Notes

1. Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880* (Baltimore, 1990), 135-36. See also Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *American Historical Review* 89 (1984): 620-47.
2. A dissertation on pre-Civil War Virginia, for example, indicates that Whig women in 1840 did virtually everything that men did except vote. That such activity should be found in a southern slave state, where gender restrictions are thought to have been stricter than in the North, is significant. Elizabeth R. Varon, "Counted in the Muster Roll of Men: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1993).
3. Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York, 1984), 176-83; Larry Ceplair, ed., *The Public Years of Sarah and Angelina Grimke: Selected Writings, 1835-1839* (New York, 1989), 135-41, 300-303, 324-25. In Massachusetts women shoebinders protested low wages with meetings and letters to newspapers in the 1830s. Mary H. Blewett, *We Will Rise in Our Might: Workingwomen's Voices from Nineteenth-Century New England* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), 36-39, 45-46.
4. *Providence Journal*, September and October 1840.
5. Thomas A. Jenckes, "Record of the Proceedings of the Governor and Council under the Resolutions of the Assembly referring to them sundry petitions of persons indicted and imprisoned for offences against the state, 1843," Thomas Wilson Dorr Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society (RIHS); Charles T. Congdon, *Reminiscences of a Journalist* (Boston, 1880), 106. For a recent brief treatment of the Dorr Rebellion, see Patrick T. Conley, "No Tempest in a Teapot: The Dorr Rebellion in National Perspective," *Rhode Island History* 50 (1992): 66-100. See also Peter J. Coleman, *The Transformation of Rhode Island, 1790-1860* (Providence, 1963); Marvin E. Gettleman, *The Dorr Rebellion: A Study in American Radicalism* (New York, 1973); and George M. Dennison, *The Dorr War: Republicanism on Trial, 1831-1861* (Lexington, Ky., 1976).
6. Regarding community and family divisions in Rhode Island, see my unpublished paper "Suffrage-as-Deprivation for the Working-Class: Rhode Island's Dorr War." Although the People's Constitution, approved in an extraconstitutional referendum in December 1841, enjoyed the almost unanimous support of nonfreeholders, and substantial backing among freeholders as well, Dorr's actions in May and June 1842 further divided Rhode Islanders. When Dorr launched his unsuccessful attack on the Providence arsenal on 17 May, he lost the support of many constitutional reformers who did not want to resort to force and bloodshed.
7. Anna Francis Herreshoff to Charles F. Herreshoff, 20 May 1842, Herreshoff Family Papers, RIHS; J. Willard Burke to J. Williams, 20 May 1842, Williams Papers, RIHS.
8. William H. Smith to Thomas W. Dorr (TWD), 3 Sept. 1842, Dorr Papers, John Hay Library, Brown University. All cited letters to and from Dorr are in this collection.
9. Catherine R. Williams to TWD, 3 Sept. 1842.
10. The Dorrites were also organizing new militia companies in Providence, but secretly. When Dorr encamped at Chepachet, however, the Providence men—except for about a dozen—stayed home. Dorrite rallies and militia organizing were open and enthusiastic in the northern industrial towns, but although these towns sent more men to Chepachet than Providence did, they too failed to provide Dorr with significant support there.
11. Harriet Bailey to Jane Keely, 14 June 1842, William M. Bailey Papers, RIHS. See also Mary Nightingale to Albert C. Greene, 30 May 1842, Greene Papers, RIHS.
12. S. C. Newman, "A Journal, containing a short account of a traveler from Warwick to Thompson during the Rhode Island War," S. C. Newman Papers, RIHS. Regarding disorderly mobs in Pawtucket, see *History of the Kentish Guards* [n.p., n.d.], 14, 16; S. A. Crane, *Proceedings of the Citizens of East Greenwich and Vicinity on the Return of the Kentish Guards and Volunteers, Friday, July 1, 1842* (Providence, 1842), 10; and John J. Richards, "History of the Collapse of Compulsory Militia Service in Rhode Island, 1836-1842" [manuscript, RIHS, ca. 1930], 66, 79-84.
13. Elisha Dyer, "Reminiscences of Rhode Island in 1842 as Connected with the Dorr Rebellion," *Narragansett Historical Register* 6 (1888), 185.
14. Accounts of Rachel Luther's experience, and those of Mehitable Howard of Cumberland and Ann Maria Buffinton of Providence, can be found in U.S. Congress, House, *Interference of the Executive in the Affairs of Rhode Island*. Report No. 546, 28th Cong., 1st sess., 1844, 317-20, 322-24; this publication is known as *Burke's Report* after Edmund Burke, a Democratic congressman from New Hampshire and a supporter of Dorr. Regarding this period, see Arthur May Mowry, *The Dorr War: The Constitutional Struggle in Rhode Island* (1901; reprint, New York, 1970), 223-37; Dennison, *Dorr War*, 97-98, 148, 150-54; and *Burke's Report*, 472, 767-68, 771-816.
15. Walter R. Danforth et al. to TWD, 11 Aug. 1842; John S. Harris to TWD, 12 Sept. 1842. See also Nicholas Brown to TWD, 12 June 1842, and Lewis Jossely to TWD, 8 Sept. 1842. Even in Enfield, Connecticut, "females [were] . . . unanimously suffrage to a man." Calvin Whitney to TWD, 7 Sept. 1842.
16. Letters relating to helping prisoners include Ann Parlin to TWD, 4 Sept. 1842 (quoted); TWD to Suffrage Ladies of Providence, 24 Aug. 1842 (quoted); Seth Luther to TWD, 2 Nov. 1842; Mary A. Anthony and Sarah G. Anthony to TWD, 21 Aug. 1842; and Catherine R. Williams to TWD, 28 Dec. 1842. Some of these letters contain names of or references to the associations, as do Caroline Ashley to TWD, 5 Sept. 1842; Samuel Whipple to TWD, 6 Sept. 1842; and Suffrage Ladies of Providence to TWD, 20 Aug. 1842 [which contained the hundred dollars]. Ashley and Whipple were both abolitionists. In Newport, a strongly charterite town, two longtime members of the Second Baptist Church were excommunicated because of their suffrage views. After being reinstated, the two men resigned from the church, alleging that the only definite charge made against them had come from the keeper of the Newport jail, who had complained "that Deacon Bell had sent basketful after basketful of the best provision the market affords to . . . prisoners in jail on a charge of

- Treason against this State; and Shaw had aided in the collection of Five Dollars by subscription, and sent the same, to said prisoners for their relief and comfort." Sanford Bell and George C. Shaw to the Second Baptist Church in Newport, R.I., 29 Sept. 1842, Papers of the Second Baptist Church in Newport, RIHS.
17. Mary Jane Campbell to TWD, 8 Oct. 1842. Among other such letters are Mary W. Midden to TWD, 7 Sept. 1842, and several letters cited in notes above.
  18. "The women took the lead in the matter of clam bakes," wrote Samuel Ashley to Dorr on 12 Oct. 1842; Mary A. Anthony and Sarah G. Anthony to TWD, 21 Aug. 1842, also describes a clambake. The needy families are mentioned in Catherine R. Williams to TWD, 2 Nov. 1842, which also refers to clambakes in Nashua, Medbury, Millville, and other places. The suffragists went to Acote's Hill despite charterite threats to send the militia to prevent their clambake there; John S. Harris to TWD, 29 Sept. 1842. The description of the box sent to Dorr is from J. Holbrook to TWD, 23 Sept. 1842. On 5 Oct. 1842 Dorr was sent an invitation (signed by Ariel Ballou, a man) reading, in part, "The Ladies of Woonsocket, friendly to the Cause of Equal Rights, propose to have a Mass Clam Bake and Pic Nic, at a Grove near this Village, the 13th."
  19. Ann Parlin to TWD, 4 Sept. 1842.
  20. Catherine R. Williams to TWD, 2 Nov. 1842. Regarding Williams, see Sidney S. Rider, *Bibliographical Memoirs of Three Rhode Island Authors*, Rhode Island Historical Tracts No. 11 (Providence, 1880), 51-61.
  21. The newspaper notice for a 29 Mar. 1843 meeting in Pawtucket is in an undated and unlabeled clipping in the Dorr Papers at the John Hay Library.
  22. Dorrite efforts with poor voters are described in Catherine R. Williams to TWD, 28 Dec. 1842.
  23. Allen Johnson and Duane Malone, eds., *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1931), 7:542; Rider, *Bibliographical Memoirs*, 30, 33, 34.0
  24. A Rhode Islander [Frances Harriet Whipple], *Might and Right* (Providence, 1844), 22, 34-35. Whipple maintained that contrary to the common impression, "the families of the first settlers [from which she sprang] . . . are, for the most part . . . with a few disgraceful exceptions . . . uniformly favorable to the freedom of the Elective Franchise. They are Democrats of the Old School." P. 16.
  25. Mary Anthony to TWD, 31 Oct. 1842, describes a fair held in Providence on 18 Oct., at which fifty young ladies occupied Washington Hall from ten o'clock in the morning, with their wares displayed on long tables. "The hall was trimmed with flowers and sprigs of pine tree," Anthony wrote, and "there was 4 banners hung around also pictures of our Govener with wreaths of flowers around them." Music was provided throughout the day for the hordes of people who attended. Another fair would be held in November at Pawtucket, Anthony told Dorr.
  26. Almira Howard to TWD, 16 Aug. 1842. Howard had written to President Tyler and was planning to convene a committee of suffrage women, then one of suffrage men, to see Tyler and "importune him, till our arguments prevail." In Providence, according to John S. Gilkeson, Jr., abolitionists sprang from "the stable, industrious, sober middle classes of society." *Middle-Class Providence, 1820-1940* (Princeton, N.J., 1986), 12. This was certainly true of abolition leaders; rank-and-file abolitionists also included many artisans and laborers.
  27. Ann Parlin to TWD, 4 Sept. 1842.
  28. A firm and true Suffrage woman [E. Taylor] to TWD, 5 Sept. 1842.
  29. William Simons to TWD, 4 Sept. 1842.
  30. Thomas L. Haskell, "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility," part 2, *American Historical Review* 90 (1985): 560.
  31. Woonsocket suffrage leader Ariel Ballou acknowledged to Dorr "the extreme suffering that you have so disinterestedly subjected yourself to." Ballou to TWD, 2 Nov. 1842. Fenner is quoted in Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage: From Property to Democracy, 1760-1860* (Princeton, N.J., 1960), 247. Other critics saw Dorr's behavior rather in terms of "unconquerable obstinacy" [Jacob Frieze, *Concise History of the Efforts to Obtain an Extension of Suffrage in Rhode Island from the Year 1811 to 1842* (Providence, 1842), 69] or "boundless obstinacy" (Congdon, *Reminiscences*, 109).
  32. B. T. Albro to TWD, 18 Sept. 1842.
  33. Samuel Ashley to TWD, 12 Oct. 1842.
  34. Catherine R. Williams to TWD, 2 Nov. 1842. This letter also mentions the uproar over the procession.
  35. Ann Parlin to TWD, 6 Nov. 1842.
  36. *Ibid.*