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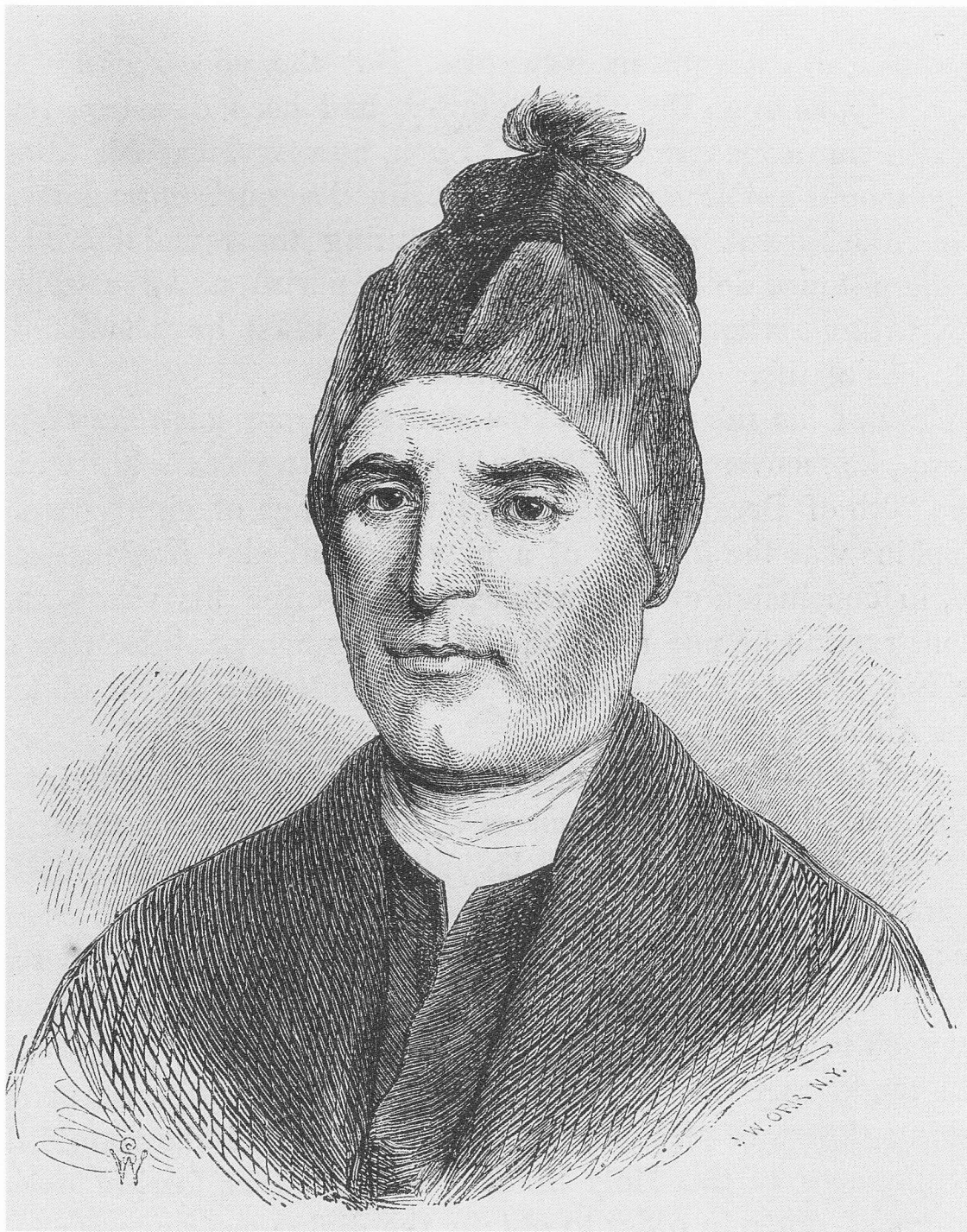
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“The Path of Duty Plain”: Samuel Hopkins, Sarah Osborn, and Revolutionary Newport

SHERYL A. KUJAWA

In 1769 Newport's First Congregational Church found itself in need of a pastor. Its previous pastor, William Vinal, had been forced to resign his pulpit amid charges of drunkenness, and for two years the struggling congregation had been served by a rotation of temporary preachers.¹ In these circumstances the church called the Reverend Samuel Hopkins to be its minister. It was a decision that testified to the influence of one of the congregation's most prominent woman members, Sarah Osborn (in whose home some of the meetings were then being held),² and the female society she had founded in 1741. Although women were not accorded equal privileges with men in the church,³ Osborn and the female society played a significant role in church affairs, and it was they who paved the way for the church's call to Hopkins.

Sarah Haggar Wheaten Osborn, revival leader and educator, was born in London on 22 February 1714, the daughter of Benjamin Haggar, a brazier, and Susanna Guyse Haggar.⁴ She came to New England in 1722, and by 1729 she was settled in Newport, where she would live for the rest of her life. After years of soul-searching, she joined the First Congregational Church in 1737. Her life was permanently changed in 1740 and 1741 when she participated in revivals and heard the preaching of George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent. “A number of young women, who were Awakened to a concern for their souls, came to me, and desired my advice and assistance, and proposed to join a society, provided I would take care of them,” she later wrote.⁵ Along with her close friend Susanna Anthony, Osborn provided the leadership for this female society as it continued to meet at least once a week throughout her lifetime. One of the few female prayer societies to survive the period of the Awakening, the group would continue into the nineteenth century as the Osborn Society.

Samuel Hopkins, the first child of Timothy and Mary Judd Hopkins, was born on Sunday, 17 September 1721, in Waterbury, Connecticut.⁶ The Hopkinses, devoutly religious, were among the most respected families of the town: Timothy was a justice of the peace and a member of the town council, and Mary was the daughter of a deacon. When informed he had a son, Timothy Hopkins was reported to have said, “If the child should live, we would give him a public education, that he might be a minister or a Sabbath-day man.”⁷

Samuel was initially more attracted to farming than to the ministry. He dreaded leaving his family to attend college, but during time spent reading the Bible he came to feel a strong inclination toward serious study. At the age of fourteen he was sent to John Graham, a minister in Waterbury, for college preparation, and he was admitted to Yale before his sixteenth birthday.⁸

At that time freshmen at Yale College spent four days a week on Latin, Greek, and Hebrew; second-year students focused on logic, third-year students on physic (natural science), and fourth-year students on mathematics and metaphysics. All classes devoted Fridays to the study of ethics, rhetoric, and theology. Both undergraduates and graduate students were required to commit sermons to memory and deliver them publicly in the college hall. During his college years Hopkins developed an appreciation for the abstract

Samuel Hopkins. Engraving by J. W. Orr, n.d. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 4240).

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sciences and a reasoned approach to his work that tended to encourage scrupulousness rather than intellectual creativity. Sober and shy in his youth, by his own admission he spent little time socializing with other students, preferring instead to devote his time to his studies. "I was constant in reading the Bible, and in attending on public and secret religion," he wrote in his autobiography. "And sometimes at night, in my retirement and devotion, . . . I could not recollect that I had committed one sin that day. This ignorant was I of my own heart, and of the spirituality, strictness, and extent of the divine law!"

In October 1740, during his last year at Yale, Hopkins heard George Whitefield preach in New Haven. Hopkins's experience of the first revivals of the Great Awakening and of Whitefield was not unlike Sarah Osborn's. Hopkins was impressed by the large numbers of people who flocked to hear Whitefield and by the growing attention to religious matters sweeping New England. The following spring Hopkins also heard Gilbert Tennent preach, and he wrote of the many conversions that took place. "Thousands, I believe, were awakened; and many called out with distress and horror of mind, . . . and under this conviction the members of college appear to be universally awakened."¹⁰

Hopkins was sympathetic toward the Awakening, but he was at first unable to find his own conviction. Conscious of a lack of religious experience, shy and insecure, he avoided his professors and fellow students. Then, during his private devotions one day, he experienced a new sense of the "being and presence of God" while reading Watts's version of Psalm 51. "I dwelt upon it with pleasure and wept much," he wrote. "And when I had laid the book aside, my mind continued fixed on the subject, and in the exercise of devotion, confession, adoration, petition, &c., in which I seemed to pour out my heart to God with great freedom."¹¹

Greatly affected, yet still uncertain about his own conversion, Hopkins decided that after he had completed college he would study with Gilbert Tennent. Like Osborn, Hopkins was moved even more by Tennent's preaching than by Whitefield's. "I thought [Tennent] was the greatest and best man, and the best preacher, that I had ever seen or heard," wrote the young Hopkins. "His words to me were like apples of gold in pictures of silver." But when Hopkins heard Jonathan Edwards preach his sermon on "The Trial of the Spirits," his plans changed: he was so impressed with Edwards that he resolved to study with him before they had even met.¹²

Hopkins arrived on Edwards's doorstep in December 1741, only to discover that the famous preacher was away on tour. The young man was nonetheless welcomed into the Edwards home by Sarah Edwards, Jonathan's wife. Hopkins was instantly attracted to Sarah, whom he found to be exceedingly pious, "more than ordinarily beautiful," and so admirable in character that she would not engage in petty gossip. She was, by all accounts, not only an elegant woman but an unquestionably brilliant one.¹³

While Hopkins benefited greatly from the time he spent with Jonathan Edwards and the other students in the household, in some ways he was influenced even more by Sarah Edwards. One Hopkins memoirist suggests that the theological discourse between Sarah Edwards and "the solemn youth who sat at her table" provided the basis for Hopkins's mature religious thought. An emphasis on the heart of God, the language of resignation, the horror generated by the thought of dishonesty with God, the relation of all activities to the divine scheme of Providence—all these were characteristic of Sarah Edwards's theology, and all are found in Hopkins's mature theology as well.¹⁴

In June 1743 Hopkins accepted a call to Great Barrington (then called Housatonic) in western Massachusetts. His first impressions of his new pastorate appalled him. "Took

a walk to-day in the woods, and I returned, went into the tavern. Found a number of men there, who I believe had better been somewhere else. Some were disguised by drink. . . . The circumstances of this place appear more and more dreadful to me. There seems no religion here."¹⁵

While he was pastor at Great Barrington, the female society of the Old South Church in Boston asked Hopkins to be its chaplain. This contact may have eventually led to his call to Newport, since the women of the Boston society also knew Sarah Osborn.¹⁶ Hopkins's reputation as chaplain to another female religious society in New England would surely have made him an appealing candidate to Osborn and the other members of the Newport society for the vacant pulpit of the First Congregational Church.

Personal tragedy brought Hopkins much pain soon after his arrival at Great Barrington. Within a year of his installation he lost his mother, one of his brothers, and his sister-in-law, all within a few days of each other. His mother's death was a particular blow, for he considered her "in many respects nearer and dearer" to him than any other relative.¹⁷

After two failed engagements, in January 1748 Hopkins married Joanna Ingersol. Though pious and intelligent, Joanna had a "consumptive" constitution, and during the last twenty years of their marriage, prior to her death in 1793, she would suffer from recurring bouts of insanity. Less than a year after his marriage, Hopkins became the guardian of his two younger brothers when their father died from measles. Joanna and Samuel Hopkins themselves had three daughters and five sons while in Great Barrington, and though some of the children inherited their mother's frail health, all were well educated, particularly the eldest daughter, Elizabeth, who was sent to school in Boston. A dutiful and diligent parent, Hopkins insisted on the importance of a sound religious education for all his children, emphasized the importance of the Sabbath, and regularly led the family prayers.¹⁸

Although Hopkins built a congregation of 116 members at Great Barrington—no small accomplishment in a town known for gross immorality—his ministry there had run its course by the 1760s. A large proportion of the congregation refused to contribute toward his maintenance, and Hopkins was often hard-pressed to support his family. Congregation members grew to take offense at his unabashed Calvinism and stringent criteria for Communion, so much so that they brought in an Episcopal clergyman to baptize the children of unconverted parents. Moreover, Hopkins's Whig politics did not sit well in a town controlled by Tories. In 1767 the congregation agreed to raise his salary, but no additional funds were forthcoming. The pastoral relationship between Hopkins and the congregation was formally dissolved in January 1769, and he decided to go back into farming. While he wanted to continue his studies, until he received the call from Newport he believed he would preach only on occasion by special invitation.¹⁹

Samuel Hopkins arrived in Newport during the summer of 1769, and pending a formal call from the First Congregational Church, he set about his duties as the church's pastor with zeal.²⁰ With women accounting for a sizable majority of the congregations's full members,²¹ Hopkins began meeting with the female society immediately upon his arrival in Newport.²² He also organized meetings for young women and young men in his home, and he catechized over a hundred children weekly.²³

The Newport community held many attractions for Hopkins. He enjoyed its tradition of religious liberty, and he valued access to the extensive book collections available at the Redwood Library and in the personal library of Ezra Stiles. But most of all he was impressed by the character of his church's congregation; quite in contrast to Great

Barrington, in Newport he found "a number who appeared to be excellent Christians and the best regulated church he had seen."²⁴

After preaching for five consecutive Sabbaths in Newport, in the fall of 1769 Hopkins received a call to settle there, though it was not unanimous: of the congregation's voting members (all male; only men were entitled to vote), seven favored his candidacy, three opposed it, and two abstained from voting. Hopkins took the call into consideration and a few weeks later informed the congregation that he would accept it. But after a sarcastic pamphlet was circulated against him in March 1770, ridiculing his preaching as dull, a few of the church's voting members rescinded their original approval, and another vote indicated that a majority did not want him for their pastor. Feeling that the matter was settled, and fully expecting to return to a life of farming, Hopkins preached a farewell sermon on 18 March 1770, declining the original call.²⁵

Voting members of the First Congregational Church were not the only ones unhappy about the prospect of having Hopkins as the church's pastor. Ezra Stiles, the pastor of the

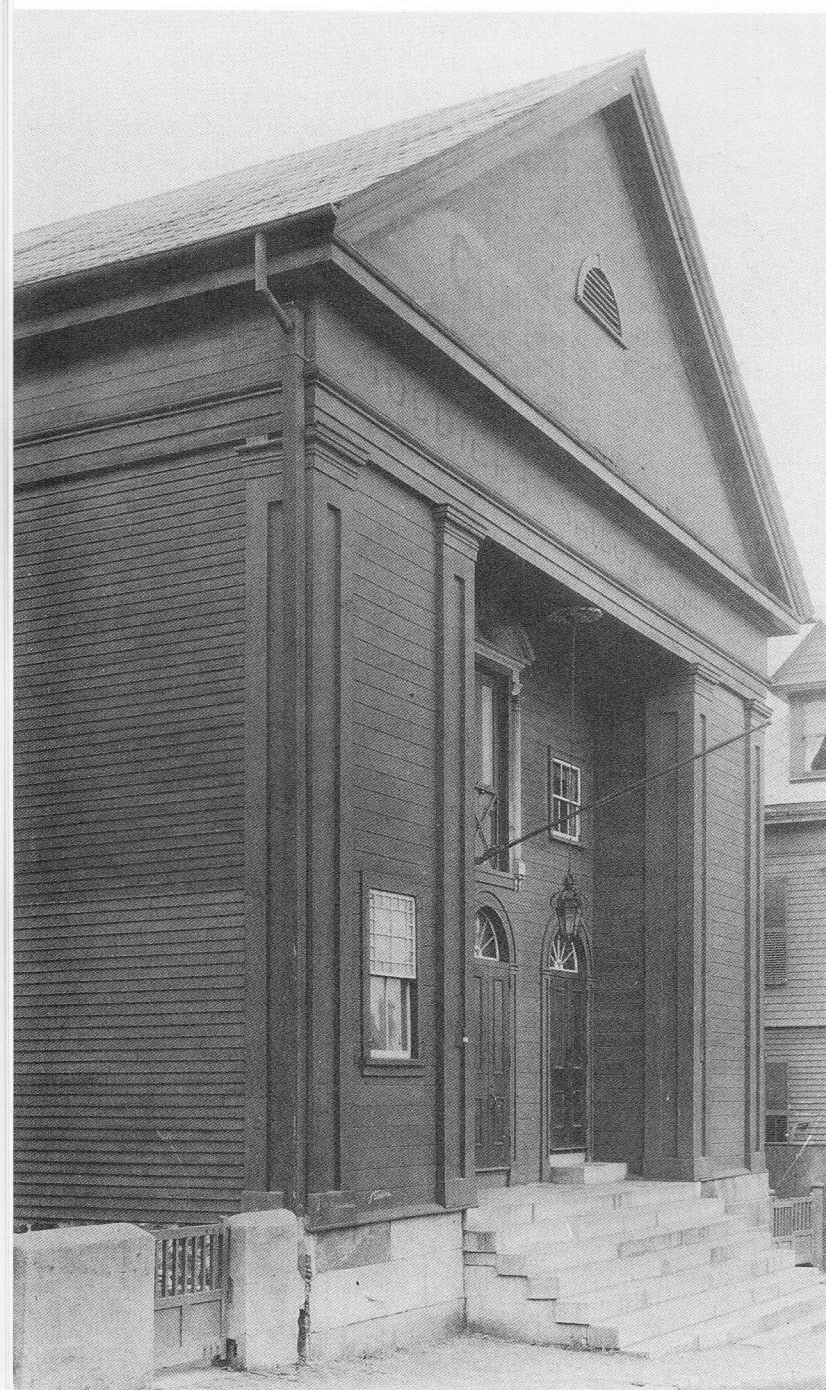
town's Second Congregational Church for over fifteen years before Hopkins arrived in Newport, did not look forward to having him as a colleague. For the most part, the Second Congregational Church was more aristocratic and liberal than the poorer and puritan First Congregational Church. An adherent of a strict form of congregational polity, Stiles was specifically disenchanted with Hopkins for baptizing and administering the Lord's Supper before he was formally installed as minister to the congregation.²⁶

Hopkins's farewell sermon caused a strong reaction among those who heard it. Some wept openly during the sermon; others begged for Hopkins's forgiveness.²⁷ The sermon also motivated Sarah Osborn, Susanna Anthony, and other members of the female society who were in favor of Hopkins to exert their influence on the congregation's voting members to secure his tenure in Newport.

Osborn had been trying to persuade Hopkins to remain in Newport from the first, while he was still battling his own insecurities about the quality of his preaching and his lack of a clear mandate from the congregation, and she continued to encourage him during the crisis. In August 1769 she had apologized to him for harsh treatment he had received from congregation members, telling him that "It was a matter of grief that many . . . who I thot would indeed be kind and friendly to a minister if only a candid prudent conversation was shown" had not in fact been so.²⁸ Hopkins had evidently made friends in the female society very soon after his arrival in Newport (if, indeed, he had not known some of the women earlier), and they in turn were delighted to have the support of a minister. "I rendered your thanks to the dear society at your request but since we owe a thousand times more under obligation to you the Lord in His infinite grace reward you," wrote Osborn to Hopkins early in 1770.²⁹

Ever a practical woman, Sarah Osborn had enlisted Hopkins's assistance with the female society and the school for blacks

When theological conflict led to the formation of Newport's Second Congregational Church in 1728, Providence builder Cotton Palmer was commissioned to create a new meetinghouse for the First Congregational Church. The Mill Street building is shown in this undated photograph. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 9466).



she conducted in her home soon after they met. She lost no time in asking for his help in her work with blacks: "God has . . . providentially gathered a Number of black people servants and free that have usually attended in reading and catechizing at Sabbath evenings at our House," she told him, "who will also be glad of your instructions sir if you incline to visit them on Sunday evening next."³⁰

During this time Osborn was consistently urging Hopkins to make a commitment to the First Congregational Church. "Has your gracious faithful God made the path of duty plain? . . . I must be tenderly concerned or amazingly stupid in this important affair," she wrote to him in October 1769.³¹ Having found a minister whom she not only personally liked, but who would also assist her in her work, Osborn was understandably unwilling to let him go without a fight. Yet Hopkins himself continued to vacillate on the question of whether he wanted to remain in Newport: "But as to staying at N.P. or going away, I have yet no light," he told Osborn a few days later.³²

Uncertain of his future and apprehensive that he might lead the church to ruin as its pastor, Hopkins turned for advice to those he trusted most, and whose intimate knowl-

edge of the congregation's politics he knew he could rely on—the members of the female society. "At present I see no other way but to advise with you, Miss Anthony, &c.," he wrote to Osborn, "and do as you shall think best relying on your judgement and faithfulness and courage in my own mind."³³ "I want to have you tell me what you think of the state of the congregation, and tell me what you think ought to be done," he wrote to Susanna Anthony in March 1769, before he came to Newport. "Something, it seems, must be done soon, but I am afraid to take a wrong step, wither [sic] I turn to the right or to the left. I should be glad of an opportunity to converse with you freely on the subject."³⁴

Hopkins was always honest with Osborn and Anthony, whom he considered his closest allies in Newport, and he discussed his problems with them more freely than with others in the community. He was plagued with indecision not only about staying in Newport; he was also uncertain whether he would ever take on another pastorate. "I came to Newport," he wrote to Anthony in September 1769, "at first without the least doubt of being the way of my duty. . . . But since I have come this last time things have looked very dark to me in respect to my fixing here, and I have been much dejected and sunk in my own mind. I have, the most of the time, not had the courage enough to think of settling anywhere in the work of the ministry, without sensible and great reluctance of mind, especially here."³⁵

Anthony assured Hopkins of the support and prayers of the female society, to the extent that it was willing to make his call to Newport a priority. "Perhaps we have not prayed enough yet, for so great a mercy, as the re-establishment of the gospel among us," she told Hopkins. "Wait, dear sir, awhile longer. And God helping us, we will pray more frequently, more earnestly. . . . By divine assistance, we will make this a principle [sic] subject of our addresses, and the throne of grace, this afternoon."³⁶

Familiar Letters Written by Mrs. Sarah Osborn and Miss Susanna Anthony, Late of Newport, Rhode Island was published in 1807. RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 9467).

FAMILIAR LETTERS.

LETTER I.

From Mrs. O. to Miss S. A.

My very dear and lovely friend,

AS I cannot pay you a personal visit, I must beg your acceptance of a short one from my pen, just to tell you, my heart is with you, and also to call upon you, to praise God, with, and for me. God hath graciously appeared for me this day, in his house, and at his table; notwithstanding all my unbelieving fears! Oh, my friend, trust, love, and live upon, this good, and faithful God; and pray for me, that I may constantly do so too. I long to know how you do, in this trying time. I hope your precious soul, is swallowed up in the God of ordinances; while, for wise and holy ends, you are at present detained from God's house! The Lord preserve you from any murmurings, and enable you patiently to submit to his blessed will, at all times. If you are able, let me hear from you, by a line or two, which will be very grateful to,

Your sincere friend,
S. OSBORN.

As a result of the lobbying efforts of the female society, the congregation took another vote on 26 March 1770, and this time the call to Hopkins was reissued. Except for two or three abstentions from the more marginal voting members of the congregation, the vote in favor of Hopkins was unanimous.³⁷ Members who had previously voted against Hopkins had now either changed their minds about him or else did not wish to interfere with the plans of Sarah Osborn and her female society. Ezra Stiles, who preached at Hopkins's installation, felt Osborn's influence strongly enough to note it in his diary: "Mrs. Osborn & the Sorority of her Meeting are violently engaged and had great Influence. They & the 2 Deacons & Two Thirds of Chh. were warmly engaged for Mr. Hopkins."³⁸ Despite his earlier opposition to Hopkins, Stiles himself would find that he and Hopkins shared a common political perspective and similar philanthropic concerns.

Newly installed as minister, Hopkins expressed his appreciation for those "Christian friends, of whom there were a considerable number," who worked to support him: "Their pious affection, gratitude, and joy were greatly heightened, by the dark and trying scene which preceded, in my being apparently rejected by the congregation, . . . And the remarkable manner in which a revolution took place in favour of my staying, in which the hand of God was so conspicuous."³⁹

The female society of the First Congregational Church continued to provide spiritual, psychological, and financial support to Hopkins during his long pastorate in Newport. So close was the friendship between Hopkins and the unmarried Susanna Anthony that some outside their circle began to question its propriety.⁴⁰ But though Hopkins's tone in his letters to her bordered on the effusive, the two were apparently soul mates, sharing a similar temperament, with no romantic attachment to each other. Hopkins openly envied Anthony's ability to "withdraw from society," while he was obliged to "lead in public worship, and engage in the most solemn & awful business of speaking in God's name."⁴¹ Anthony was flattered by the value Hopkins placed on their friendship, but her letters to him were always spiritual in nature. She tested her theological views on him, asking him for clarifications and comments,⁴² while he, in turn, sought her opinion on his sermons before he preached them in public. "I thank you Sir, for your sermons on Baptism," she wrote in one letter to him. "I could not but ardently wish, they might be made public."⁴³

Hopkins was always most comfortable confiding in women, and he and Sarah Osborn developed a working partnership during his years in Newport. The two had tea together every Saturday, meeting after both had prepared for the Sabbath with fasting and prayer. When Osborn's health began to fail in the later years of her life and she could no longer attend public worship, Hopkins held services in her home.⁴⁴ There is little evidence in regard to their conversations, but Hopkins credited Osborn for her helpful input into his Sunday sermons. It is also likely that Osborn (who was more of an activist than Anthony) spent part of her time with Hopkins discussing other aspects of congregational affairs besides the next morning's sermon. Although Hopkins had the ordained role, Osborn knew the members of the congregation intimately and was in a position to give him a great deal of advice concerning the church's affairs. Hopkins's dedication to his Saturday appointments with Osborn was evidence of his high regard for her.

One of the areas where Osborn most obviously had an impact on Hopkins's ministry was his work with Newport's blacks. Although Hopkins had owned and sold a slave shortly before arriving in Newport in 1769, within the year he asserted from the pulpit his support of Whig and antislavery positions. While both he and Osborn lived with

slaves in their households, both came to see slavery as morally wrong. Living among people who considered slavery an essential fact of life, Osborn lost friends because of her work with blacks, but she never lost her overall credibility in the community.⁴⁵

Hopkins and Ezra Stiles have both been recognized for their work with blacks in Newport, but it is important to note also that Osborn had worked with the town's blacks years before either minister became involved, and that it was she who recruited Hopkins and Stiles by contacting them to assist her with the revival meetings in her home. Osborn was particularly influential with Hopkins, not only affecting his attitudes toward blacks but eventually involving him in her work to the extent that he could continue it in a more public fashion when her health gradually deteriorated.⁴⁶

On the other hand, Hopkins must be credited with the tremendous zeal with which he supported the antislavery cause from the early 1770s until his death in 1803.⁴⁷ His transformation from theologian to antislavery activist occurred during the relatively short period between 1770 and 1773, at the same time that he was developing his doctrine of

disinterested benevolence.⁴⁸ Hopkins did not speak against slavery before 1771; indeed, both he and his former mentor Jonathan Edwards were slaveholders.⁴⁹ But Hopkins was completely unprepared for the evils of the slave trade that he witnessed when he moved to Newport. Although the total number of ships involved in the trade will never be known, it is estimated that over thirty voyages a year left Newport by 1760, and that this number increased over the rest of the century. By the 1770s, 70 percent of the ships bound for Africa left from Newport, which by that time had earned a reputation as the great slave market of New England.⁵⁰

The risk in taking a stand against slavery in eighteenth-century Newport may have been less for Hopkins than it would have been for ministers of other congregations. The members of the First Congregational Church were, on the whole, relatively

poor, and although more persons of lower income owned slaves in Newport than elsewhere, there were, overall, few slave owners in Hopkins's congregation, for wealthy merchants and other aristocrats tended to belong to other Newport congregations. While Hopkins risked creating ill will with his antislavery stand, he was thus never seriously in danger of losing his position.⁵¹

Hopkins preached against slavery from 1771 until the British occupation of Newport in 1776. Each of his sermons was most likely discussed with Sarah Osborn the day before it was delivered from the pulpit. Although a few members of his congregation were offended, as might be expected, only one family actually left the church; according to a memoir of Hopkins, "The majority of his hearers were astounded that they, of themselves, had not long before seen and felt the truths which he disclosed to them."⁵²

In 1776 Hopkins published his most noteworthy antislavery statement, a pamphlet entitled *A Dialogue concerning the Slavery of Africans*. Dedicated to the members of the Continental Congress, to whom he had it sent, the pamphlet presented and refuted the possible justifications for slavery, and in a wide-ranging way decried "the shocking, the intolerable inconsistency" of those who were willing to wage war for principles of freedom while enslaving others for profit, a subjection far more monstrous than that of British rule.⁵³

Hopkins's views on slavery were rooted in his religious experience of the Great Awakening, and he combined his own belief in the nature of human sinfulness with Revolutionary rhetoric concerning the nature of human equality. To Hopkins, British

Newport, July 6, 1764.
Just imported in the Sloop *Elizabeth*,
from *Africa*, and to be sold, by
John Miller,
At his House, or Store ;
A Number of healthy
Negro Boys and Girls.
Likewise to be sold,—*Tillock's* and *Kip-*
pen's Snuff, by the Cask or Dozen.

Advertisement in the Providence Gazette and
Country Journal, 28 July 1764. RIHS Collection
(RH1 X3 5421).

oppression in America was divine punishment for American sins, one of the most serious of which was the institution of slavery.⁵⁴ "And I take leave here to observe," he wrote in his *Dialogue*, "that if the slavery in which we hold the blacks is wrong, it is a very great and public sin; and therefor a sin in which God is now testifying against the slavery imposed in the calamities he had brought against us."⁵⁵

Hopkins further argued that if the patriot cause was to fight against the slavery imposed by the king, then it was likewise the job of Congress to fight against the slavery imposed on African Americans: the liberty demanded by the colonists had to be available to all. Thus, as one scholar has noted, Hopkins "combined and supplemented conclusions drawn from the Revival and its theology to form an egalitarian philosophy based upon the true Christian's duty to love God and his fellowmen and to devote his life to their welfare. His mind was made up before the Revolution began and before the ideas of liberty and natural right were relied upon to justify independence and domestic reform."⁵⁶

Besides preaching and writing against slavery, Hopkins visited wealthy slaveholders in the hope of convincing them to free their slaves. In addition, he urged other ministers to join him in denouncing the evils of slavery. In one notable success, in 1772 he persuaded Ezra Stiles to work with him on a plan to train black ministers to be sent to Africa as evangelists. Stiles was an obvious choice for the project, having previously worked with Sarah Osborn in her meetings for blacks. By 1772 Stiles was holding his own meetings for over eighty blacks in his home.⁵⁷

The first two men selected for the new venture in theological education were Bristol Yamma and John Quamine, former slaves who had secured their freedom after purchasing a winning lottery ticket. Both men had been converted through Osborn's teaching (Quamine had been baptized and admitted to membership in the First Congregational Church in 1765), and both were participating in the revivals that Osborn had been holding at her home since 1769.⁵⁸

Although Stiles was not fond of Hopkins's "high Calvinism," he nevertheless entered into what he called a "cordial union" with him "in promoting the spiritual good of Africa."⁵⁹ Stiles also agreed to examine Quamine's skills in an effort to determine his fitness for missionary service. Quamine told Stiles that he had not learned to write until 1772, and that he had only Sundays to practice reading.⁶⁰ Given the day of the week, it is likely that Quamine's education began at the Sunday meetings at Osborn's home, which he continued attending into the 1770s. Evidence suggests that Osborn played an important role in promoting basic literacy among the black population of Newport.⁶¹

While Stiles was not impressed with the scholarly attainments of either of the two black candidates for ministry, he was even less pleased that the two men may have been influenced by Hopkins's theology. Yet, after interviewing them, Stiles found that he admired their integrity, and he decided to pursue the missionary-training project more fully. "We have done [blacks] such injury & injustice, we taught them so much Iniquity & such dishonorable Ideas of the *Christian Morals* that I have not a heart to oppose the least attempt to carry the gospel among them or to discourage even persons of small ability yet of Sobriety & Virtue who shall offer themselves in so Discouraging an enterprise," Stiles wrote.⁶²

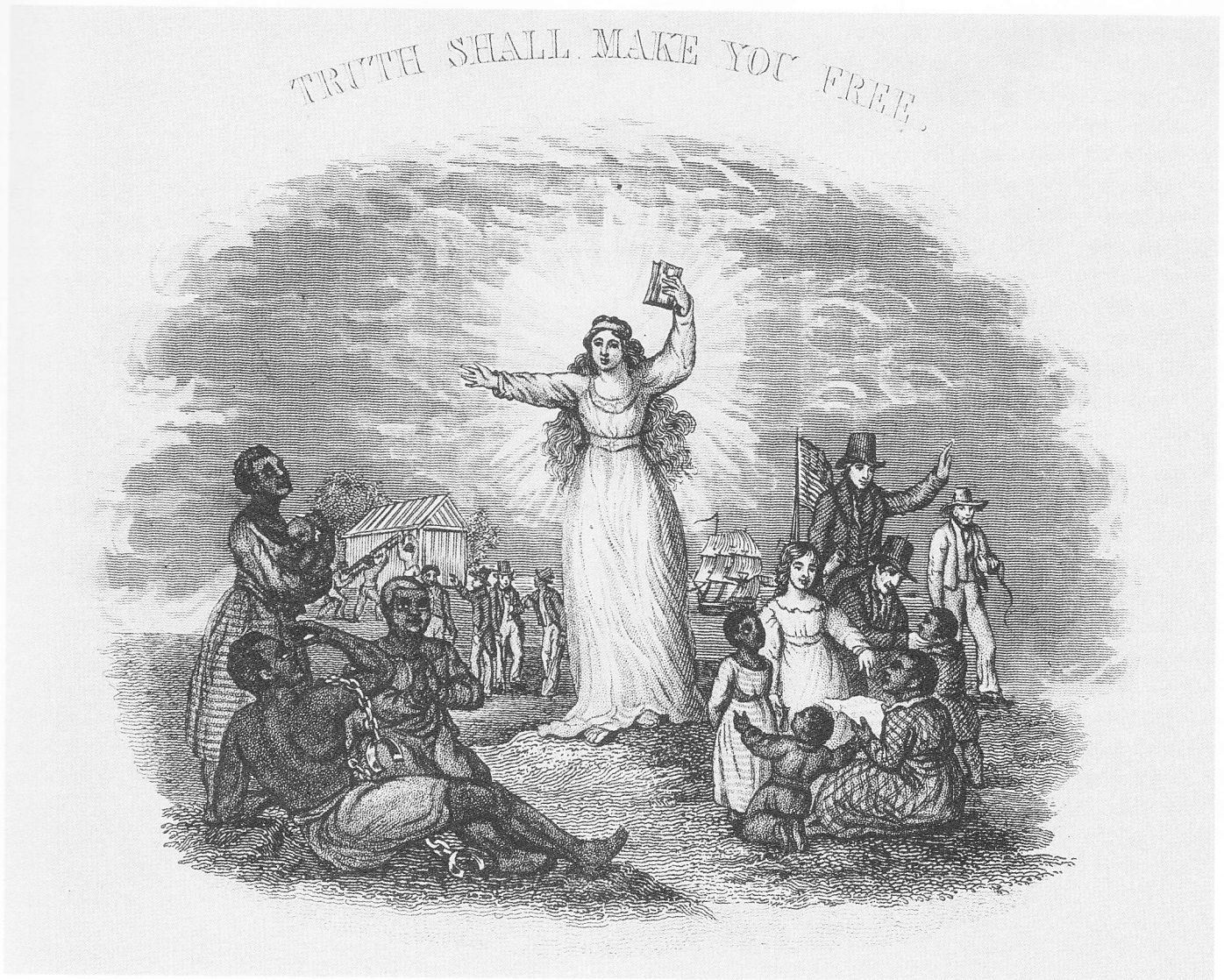
Hopkins was also involved in the antislavery cause through his supportive association with the poet Phillis Wheatley (1753?-1784).⁶³ Wheatley had been about seven years old when she was taken from Senegal Gambia in West Africa and sold to John and Susanna

Wheatley of Boston. A precocious child, she was educated by the Wheatleys in the Bible, English literature, history, astronomy, and geography. Proficient in Greek and Latin, she read Virgil, Ovid, Terence, and Homer.⁶⁴ She was baptized at Boston's Old South Church, whose evangelical women were well acquainted with Hopkins; Susanna Wheatley was a member there, and probably a member of the church's female society as well.⁶⁵

Phillis Wheatley's talent was known in Newport as early as 1767, when the *Newport Mercury* printed a poem of hers entitled "On Messrs. Hussey and Coffin," a recounting of a miraculous deliverance from the sea. The poem appeared when the revival that Sarah Osborn led was at its peak, and it is likely that it was Osborn who forwarded the poem to the *Mercury*.⁶⁶ A eulogy by Wheatley, "On the Death of the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield—1770," was published as a broadside in Newport, as well as in Boston and Philadelphia, as early as 1771.⁶⁷

Wheatley's first book, a collection of twenty-eight poems, appeared in 1773 (the year the poet obtained her freedom). The Wheatleys had attempted to publish it in Boston, but finding little support for the project, they turned to London, where they enlisted the support of wealthy evangelical and antislavery proponent Selina Hastings, the countess of Huntingdon, to whom George Whitefield himself had been chaplain. The resulting book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was the first volume of poetry to be published by an African American.⁶⁸

Truth Shall Make You Free. Engraving from The
Envoy of Free Hearts to the Free (Pawtucket:
Juvenile Eman Society, 1840). RIHS Collection (RHi
X3 6716).



Wheatley was involved by Hopkins in his preparation of Bristol Yamma and John Quamine for their missionary work. Eventually she found herself facing a Newport merchant's suggestion that she accompany the two men when they journeyed to Africa. She declined the proposal, declaring that the "undertaking appears to [sic] hazardous," and that she would be distressed at leaving her "British & American Friends." "I am . . . acquainted with those missionaries in person," she wrote to the merchant, John Thornton. "The reverend gentleman who undertakes their education has repeatedly inform'd me by Letters of their progress in Learning."⁶⁹

Wheatley regarded Hopkins as an important pastor,⁷⁰ and she corresponded with him regarding religious matters. Hopkins apparently informed her of the difficulties that Philip Quaque, a black Anglican priest, was having in his mission on the Gold Coast (Ghana). "Let us not be discouraged," she replied, "but still hope, that God will bring about his great work, thro' [sic] Philip may *not* be the instrument in the Divine Hand to perform this work of wonder, turning the African 'from darkness to light.'"⁷¹

Wheatley also notified Hopkins in that May 1774 letter that three hundred copies of her book would be arriving by ship from England. Hopkins did his share in distributing Wheatley's work. On one occasion Wheatley sent seventeen copies of the book to Hopkins, two copies to her friend Obour Tanner, and one copy to Mrs. Mason, the woman who took care of Sarah Osborn in her later years. Inasmuch as Hopkins privately said that he loathed poetry, his support of Wheatley's work seems to reflect the depth of his concern for the antislavery cause. Newport's black community was apparently well aware of that concern, and Tanner and sixteen other Newport blacks in turn subscribed to Hopkins's volume on theology.⁷²

Obour Tanner was Wheatley's closest friend.⁷³ They may have met sometime between 1771 and 1773,⁷⁴ though it has also been suggested that they arrived from Africa on the same ship.⁷⁵ Sharing Wheatley's lively intellect and active piety, Tanner was well respected in Newport, where she acted as Wheatley's book agent and was associated with Hopkins and Osborn in their work. Tanner would certainly have known of the gatherings in Osborn's home. Indeed, it is quite possible that she participated in the meetings for black women that Osborn held during the 1760s—the only such opportunity available in Newport at the time for black women to study and discuss religion.⁷⁶

Through introductions by Osborn, Hopkins developed a number of close relationships within the black community. Besides his associations with Wheatley, Tanner, Yamma, and Quamine, he was involved (along with Osborn, through the meetings at her home) in the career of Newport Gardner, an accomplished poet known for his intellect, piety, and musical ability.⁷⁷ Gardner was devoted to Hopkins during his pastorate; eventually he helped the aged Hopkins ascend the stairs to the pulpit.⁷⁸ After gaining his freedom, Gardner became a deacon of the First Congregational Church, and in 1808 he founded a school for Newport's black children. In 1826 he fulfilled his long-cherished dream of returning to Africa as a missionary.⁷⁹

Sarah Osborn and her household remained in Newport during the British occupation. It is not known why she chose to stay in such a precarious environment, but since she was a poor woman, supporting herself, her disabled husband, and perhaps several blacks in her household as well, it is distinctly possible that she had nowhere else to go. The Osborn household—one of the largest in the town, and among those with the most black occupants⁸⁰—was the primary link between the people who remained in Newport during the British occupation and the Congregational Church. From 1770 until the

British took possession of Newport in 1776, religious meetings for both men and women had been held at Osborn's home, and weekly meetings continued there for the duration of the war. The female society remained active throughout this time. Osborn lived the remainder of her life in Newport, where she died, in her eighty-third year, on 2 August 1796. At her funeral Hopkins preached a sermon from the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians 4:1ff: "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you, that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called."⁸¹

Because of their sympathies with the patriot cause, when the war broke out both Hopkins and Ezra Stiles were advised to leave town. Hopkins remained in Newport until British troops arrived in December 1776. After supplying pulpits in various towns for the next four years, he returned to Newport in 1780, following the British evacuation, to find that his house had been demolished and much of the town had been devastated. The First Congregational Church had been used as a barracks and hospital: all its windows were destroyed, as were its pulpit and pews, and the church bell had been removed and

carried off to England (it would not be replaced until 1806). Many of the church's members had permanently moved elsewhere, leaving only the most impoverished to carry on. The church would never recover from what it suffered during the British occupation.⁸²

But those who remained had not lost their spirit. Under Hopkins's leadership, and undoubtedly with Osborn's support, in 1784 the congregation voted to condemn slavery and the slave trade. Its resolution—believed to have been the first such action on the part of an American congregation, except for the Quakers⁸³—declared "That the slave trade and the slavery of Africans, as it has taken place among us, is a gross violation of the righteousness and benevolence, which are so inculcated in the Gospel; and therefore, we will not tolerate it in this church."⁸⁴

Hopkins labored on for the next two decades, but without the benefit of a regular income. Times were so bad financially that even the female society could not raise enough money to cover his meager salary. Although he received a call from a congregation that could afford to pay him, he chose to remain at the First Congregational Church, supplementing what salary he did receive with funds sent by Christians in other areas in support of Newport missionaries. He died on 20 December 1803 at the age of eighty-two.⁸⁵

French troops under Comte de Rochambeau landed in Newport in July 1780, nine months after the British evacuated the town. Engraving, 1784. RIHS Collection (RHi X3) 1057).



The partnership of Samuel Hopkins and Sarah Osborn during the 1770s renewed and transformed their work. The installation of Hopkins as the minister of the First Congregational Church, which came about through the influence of Osborn and her female society, brought Osborn a valuable colleague. The alliance of the two in the anti-slavery cause—an alliance rooted in their common heritage in the Great Awakening—allowed Osborn to work with blacks in a more public way than she had in the 1750s and 1760s, and it gave Hopkins a public platform for his controversial beliefs. Just as their evangelical faith moved them in the direction of social reform, their religious perspective influenced them in their sense of revolutionary politics and patriotic ideals. While essentially sympathetic to the patriot cause, neither viewed the war in military terms, nor did they espouse a republican ideology. Instead, both fasted and prayed for the repentance and conversion of the new nation.

The experiences of Hopkins and Osborn reflected a major crisis in religion that occurred before the Revolutionary War.⁸⁶ Between the Great Awakening of the 1740s and the Second Great Awakening of the 1790s and early 1800s, American religion, like American politics and domestic life, underwent fundamental changes, changes evidencing a crisis in authority that extended across all areas of human endeavor.⁸⁷ The church remained an active participant in the larger social currents of the time, and through the medium of the pulpit it would continue to be a primary influence on the transformation of American culture until well into the nineteenth century.⁸⁸

TRUTH SHALL MAKE YOU FREE

Notes

1. Texts and preachers for that period are listed in an anonymous journal, 10 Aug. 1768-12 Aug. 1770, in Records of the First Congregational Church, Newport, Rhode Island, 1754-1830, Rhode Island Historical Society.
2. See, e.g., the entries of 4 Dec. 1768 and 14 June 1769 in the above-cited journal. The entry for the latter meeting reads, "June 14 By Mr. Austin in the evening at Mrs. Osborn's, Isaiah 40:31. . ."
3. For instance, women attended the church's business meetings, but they did not customarily speak or vote at them. See *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1901), 3:116, 163, 234, 306. See also Mary Sumner Benson, *Women in Eighteenth Century America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935), 262.
4. For Sarah Osborn's life and work, see *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Sarah Osborn, Who Died at Newport, Rhode Island, on the Second Day of August, 1796, in the Eighty Third Year of Her Age*, comp. Samuel Hopkins (Worcester, Mass.: Leonard Worcester, 1799), 49. See also Sheryl A. Kujawa, "Religion, Education, and Gender in Eighteenth-Century Rhode Island: Sarah Hagar Wheaton Osborn, 1714-1796," *Rhode Island History* 52 (1994): 35-47.
5. *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Sarah Osborn*, 49.
6. The life of Samuel Hopkins has been the focus of several nineteenth-century memoirs. Hopkins's autobiography was printed as *Sketches of the Life of Samuel Hopkins: The Late Samuel Hopkins, D.D., Pastor of the Congregational Church in Newport*, ed. Stephen West (Hartford: Hudson & Godwin, 1805). Other nineteenth-century memoirs include John Ferguson, *Memoir of the Life and Character of . . . Samuel Hopkins . . . Formerly Pastor of the First Congregational Church in Newport, Rhode Island* (Boston: Leonard W. Kimball, 1830); William Patten, *Reminiscences of the Late Samuel Hopkins, D.D., of Newport, Rhode Island, Illustrative of His Character and Doctrines with Incidental Subjects* (Providence: Isaac Cady, 1843); and Edwards Amasa Park, *Memoir of the Life and Character of Samuel Hopkins*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Doctrinal and Tract Society, 1843). Brief biographical sketches of Hopkins appear in Frederick Lewis Weis, *The Colonial Clergy and the Churches of New England* (Lancaster, Mass.: Society of the Descendants of Colonial Clergy, 1620-1776, 1936), 110; Franklin Bowditch Dexter, ed., *Biographical Sketches of the Graduates of Yale College with the Annals of the College History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1885-1912), 1:670-75; William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit, or Commemorative Notices of Distinguished American Clergymen of Various Denominations* (New York: Robert Carter, 1858), 1: 428-35.
7. Park, *Memoir*, 11.
8. *Ibid.*, 12-13.
9. *Ibid.*, 13-14; Hopkins, *Sketches*, 27.
10. Hopkins, *Sketches*, 27-43; Park, *Memoir*, 15-16.
11. Hopkins, *Sketches*, 27-43; Park, *Memoir*, 17.
12. Hopkins, *Sketches*, 27-43; Park, *Memoir*, 18.
13. Amanda Porterfield, *Feminine Spirituality in America: From Sarah Edwards to Martha Graham* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980), 39-41; Sereno Edwards Dwight, "Life of President Edwards," in *The Works of President Edwards* (New York: S. Converse, 1830), 1:171-86.
14. Park, *Memoir*, 22; Dwight, "Life of President Edwards," 182-83;
15. Park, *Memoir*, 33-34.
16. *Ibid.*, 67; Patten, *Reminiscences*, 56-57. Hopkins probably maintained communication with the female society in Boston even after he moved to Newport.
17. Park, *Memoir*, 54-55.
18. *Ibid.*, 55, 57-58.
19. *Ibid.*, 67-71.
20. Hopkins was the church's only preacher from the time of his arrival in Newport until George Whitefield visited the town from 4 to 8 August 1770, apparently hosted by Hopkins and Ezra Stiles. Journal, Records of the First Congregational Church.
21. In May 1770 the First Congregational Church consisted of 135 families, with approximately 70 full members, of whom 50 were women. See Treasurer's Accounts, Records of the First Congregational Church. See also Stiles, *Literary Diary*, 1:44-45.
22. Osborn to Joseph Fish, September 1770, Sarah (Mrs. Henry) Osborn Letters, folder 8, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass. Ferguson, *Memoir*, 94, mistakenly credits Hopkins with founding the First Congregational Church's female society. The society was actually in existence for nearly thirty years before Hopkins's arrival.
23. Park, *Memoir*, 84-85. During Hopkins's first years in Newport the congregation would draw up new rules of ecclesiastical order, formulate a new creed, improve the music at worship services, and devise new means to care for the poor. *Ibid.*, 85.
24. *Ibid.*, 84.

Notes continued

25. Park, *Memoir*, 85; Joseph A. Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins and the New Divinity Movement* (Grand Rapids: Christian University Press, 1981), 100-108.
26. Stiles, *Literary Diary*, 1:37-38; Park, *Memoir*, 79-83. For Stiles's life and background, see Edmund S. Morgan, *The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962); Weis, *Colonial Clergy*, 263; and Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 470-79.
27. Park, *Memoir*, 78.
28. Osborn to Hopkins, 26 Aug. 1769, Notable American Women Collection, case 7, box 20, Simon Gratz Manuscript Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
29. Osborn to Hopkins, 4 Jan. 1770, Autograph Collection, Simon Gratz Manuscript Collection.
30. Ibid.
31. Osborn to Hopkins, 25 Oct. 1769, Autograph Collection.
32. Hopkins to Osborn, 4 Nov. 1769, Samuel Hopkins Papers, Franklin Trask Library, Andover Newton Theological School.
33. Ibid.
34. Hopkins to Anthony, 11 Mar. 1769, American Colonial Clergy Collection, case 8 box 23, Simon Gratz Manuscript Collection.
35. Hopkins to Anthony, 9 Sept. 1769, American Colonial Clergy Collection, case 8, box 23.
36. Anthony to Hopkins, n.d., *Familiar Letters Written by Mrs. Sarah Osborn and Miss Susanna Anthony, Late of Newport, Rhode Island*, [comp. Elizabeth West Hopkins] (Newport: printed at the *Newport Mercury*, 1807), 94-95.
37. Park, *Memoir*, 78.
38. Stiles, *Literary Diary*, 1:44. See also Park, *Memoir*, 99; Benson, *Women in Eighteenth Century America*, 262; and David Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism and Phillis Wheatley's 'Sable Veil,' 'Length'ned Chain,' and 'Knitted Heart,'" in *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989), 378.
39. Park, *Memoir*, 70.
40. Hopkins to Anthony, 7 July 1770, American Colonial Clergy Collection, case 8, box 23.
41. Hopkins to Anthony, 7 Nov. 1771, Samuel Hopkins Papers.
42. See, for example, *Familiar Letters*, 148-53.
43. Anthony to Hopkins, n.d., *ibid.*, 146.
44. Park, *Memoir*, 99; Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism," 378.
45. Osborn to Joseph Fish, 9 Aug. 1766, Sarah Osborn Letters, folder 6; Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism," 381.
46. Park, *Memoir*, 114; Ernest L. Wismer, "Congregational Church in Newport," *Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society*, no. 101 (January 1940): 40; Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism," 339, 378-78, 381. For Stiles's work with blacks, see his *Literary Diary*, 1:10, 33, 116, 248, 363-66, 462.
47. For Hopkins's work in the antislavery cause, see Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins*, 125-41; Joseph A. Conforti, "Samuel Hopkins and the Revolutionary Antislavery Movement," *Rhode Island History* 30 (1979): 39-49; David Lovejoy, "Samuel Hopkins: Religion, Slavery, and the Revolution," *New England Quarterly* 40 (1967): 227-43; and Park, *Memoir*, 115-29.
48. Conforti, *Samuel Hopkins*, 126, and "Samuel Hopkins," 39-40. Hopkins expounded his doctrine of disinterested benevolence in his 1773 *Nature of True Holiness*. His basic argument was that Christians should so love humankind and be so "disinterested" in their own concerns that they would be willing to die for the good of others.
49. Park, *Memoir*, 114.
50. Elaine Forman Crane, *A Dependent People: Newport, Rhode Island, in the Revolution* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1985), 17-18, 20; Park, *Memoir*, 115.
51. Conforti, "Samuel Hopkins," 40; Park, *Memoir*, 116. 52. Park, *Memoir*, 116.
52. Park, *Memoir*, 116.
53. Samuel Hopkins, *A Dialogue concerning the Slavery of Africans* (Norwich, Conn., 1776; reprint, New York: New York Manumission Society, 1785); Lovejoy, "Samuel Hopkins," 227-43; Conforti, "Samuel Hopkins," 41; Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism," 402, 439, 442.
54. Lovejoy, "Samuel Hopkins," 234-37; Conforti, "Samuel Hopkins," 41.
55. Hopkins, *Dialogue*, 34.
56. Lovejoy, "Samuel Hopkins," 243.
57. David Swift, "Samuel Hopkins: Calvinist Social Concern in Eighteenth Century New England," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 47 (March 1969): 43-45; Stiles, *Literary Diary*, 1:363-66, 248.
58. *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Sarah Osborn*, 78-79; Park, *Memoir*, 130-31; Stiles, *Literary Diary*, 1:366. In 1764 Osborn had been the first person to read the conversion account that Quamine had had a black woman, probably also a participant in the revival meetings, write down for him. Quamine later gave a similar conversion account to a deacon whom Osborn had recruited to work with black men and boys. Park, *Memoir*, 130; Stiles, *Literary Diary*, 1:366; Osborn to Joseph Fish, 15 Sept. 1766, Sarah Osborn Letters, folder 6; Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism," 357.
59. Stiles, *Literary Diary*, 1:363-66.
60. Ibid., 1:364-65; William D. Pierson, "Afro-American Culture in Eighteenth-Century New England: A Comparative Examination" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1975), 137.
61. See Kujawa, "Religion, Education, and Gender," 40-41.
62. Stiles, *Literary Diary*, 1:364-65.
63. Park, *Memoir*, 137-38; Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism," 379.
64. Sondra O'Neale, "Phillis Wheatley," in *American Colonial Writers, 1735-1781*, ed. Emory Elliott (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1984), 260-61.
65. Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism," 379.
66. *Newport Mercury*, 21 Dec. 1767; Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism," 379. Osborn may also have been instrumental in the April 1767 publication of the *Mercury's* first antislavery article, a powerful condemnation of slavery by the bishop of Gloucester. The letter to the printer introducing the article appears to be written in Osborn's style. Expressing outrage that blacks were not receiving the Christian message while living under the "Yoke of Bondage" (a phrase that Osborn had used in her diary a month earlier in regard to the repeal of the Stamp Act), the letter also expressed the hope that the iniquitous slave trade would someday be ended, and "that posterity may see that there are some in these days who publicly declared their abhorrence of so flagitious a commerce." *Newport Mercury*, 20 Apr. 1767; Sarah Osborn, *Diary*, no. 44, 18 Mar. 1767, Newport Historical Society; Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism," 379-80. For background on the *Mercury*, see Alvah H. Sanborn, "The *Newport Mercury*," *Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society*, no. 65 (April 1928): 1-11.
67. O'Neale, "Phillis Wheatley," 261.
68. Ibid. Whitefield's views on antislavery have been debated by scholars. For a perspective suggesting that Whitefield continued to believe in the theological defense of slavery, see Stephen J. Stein, "George Whitefield on Slavery: Some New Evidence," *Church History* 42 (June 1973): 243-56.
69. Wheatley to Thornton, 30 Oct. 1774, in William Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley and Her Writings* (New York: Garland Press, 1984), 340-41. The idea of Wheatley's returning to

- Africa as a Christian missionary was actually first raised by the Mohegan minister Samson Occum. "Pray Madam what harm would it be to send Phillis to her Native Country as a Female Preacher to her Kindred," he wrote to Susanna Wheatley in March 1771. "You know Quaker women are allow'd [*sic*] to preach, and why not others in an extraordinary case." Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley*, 340.
70. See Wheatley to Obour Tanner, 21 Mar. 1774, "Letters of Phillis Wheatley," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 1st ser., 7 (1863-64): 277.
71. Wheatley to Hopkins, 6 May 1774, Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley*, 337.
72. Robinson, *Phillis Wheatley*, 43-44; Park, *Memoir*, 137, 166; Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism," 380-81.
73. Tanner's name has been spelled Obour, Arbour, and Abour, though Obour is the most frequent spelling. Six letters from Wheatley to Tanner have been located; see "Letters of Phillis Wheatley," 167-78.
74. *Ibid.*
75. Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism," 372.
76. *Ibid.*
77. *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Sarah Osborn*, 76-83, 334; Osborn to Joseph Fish, 4 Sept. 1765, 7 Mar. 1767, Sarah Osborn Letters, folders 6 and 7; Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism," 374-75, 378; Park, *Memoir*, 154; George C. Mason, *Reminiscences of Newport* (Newport: Charles C. Hammett, 1884), 159.
78. Grimsted, "Anglo-American Racism," 381.
79. *Ibid.*, 378; Irving Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen: the Story of the Negro in Rhode Island* (Providence: Urban League, 1964), 50-51; Susanna Anthony, *Diary* (1772-73), 20 Oct. 1773, Newport Historical Society (cataloged as Osborn's, but written by Anthony).
80. In 1774 the household consisted of Sarah, her husband Henry, a white adult female (probably Susanna Anthony), and six blacks. *Census of the Inhabitants of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation, Taken by Order of the General Assembly, in the Year 1774*. . . . (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., 1858), 24. By 1778 the household had seventeen occupants. "The Occupants of the Houses in Newport, Rhode Island, during the Revolution," *Newport Historical Magazine* 2 (1881-82): 44.
81. Charles Edwin Silcox, "Rev. Dr. Samuel Hopkins," in *Early Religious Leaders of Newport: Eight Addresses Delivered before the Newport Historical Society, 1917* (Newport: Newport Historical Society, 1918), 122; *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs. Sarah Osborn*, 83, 363; Park, *Memoir*, 99.
82. Park, *Memoir*, 90; Silcox, "Rev. Dr. Samuel Hopkins," 67; R. W. Wallace, *Sermons on Congregationalism in Newport* (Newport: Daily News Job Print, 1896), 57. The church eventually closed.
83. Swift, "Samuel Hopkins," 43.
84. Park, *Memoir*, 157-58. See also Charles E. Hammett, Jr., "A Sketch of the History of the Congregational Church of Newport, Rhode Island" (manuscript, Newport Historical Society, 1831), 183-84, and Swift, "Samuel Hopkins," 43.
85. Park, *Memoir*, 91-93.
86. See William G. McLoughlin, "The Role of Religion in the Revolution: Liberty of Conscience and Cultural Cohesion in the New Nation," in *Essays on the American Revolution*, ed. Stephen G. Kurtz and James Hutson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973, 197-255).
87. There are a number of studies of the role of religion during this period. Among the most recent are Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against Patriarchal Authority, 1750-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Melvin Yazawa, *From Colonies to Commonwealth: Familial Ideology and the Beginnings of the American Republic* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985); David Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).
88. See Patricia Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), and Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

WHEREAS Waite, the Wife of
me the Subscriber, on the 24th
Instant, left my Bed and Board;
all Persons are cautioned against trusting
her on my Account, as I will not pay
any Debts of her contracting after the Date
hereof.
DANIEL WILBUR,
jun.
Smithfield, Aug. 27, 1790.

WHEREAS Waite, the Wife of
me the Subscriber, on the 24th
Instant, left my Bed and Board; all Per-
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Smithfield, Aug. 27, 1790.

*Advertisement in the Providence Gazette and
Country Journal, 28 August 1790. RIHS Collection
(RH1 X3 9495).*

"She Hath Left My Bed and Board": Runaway Wives in Rhode Island, 1790-1810

SARAH LEAVITT

Waite Wilbur left her house in Smithfield, Rhode Island, on 24 August 1790. This was not a simple outing, a friendly call on a neighbor, or a trip to the market. Three days later she still had not returned. She may have planned this escape, or perhaps it was a spontaneous reaction to a specific egregious act by her husband. Daniel Wilbur, Jr., might have been physically or mentally abusing her; she may have decided to elope with another man; perhaps she concluded that she could live more comfortably with her father's family. Whatever her reasoning, Waite's action did not go unnoticed. On the morning of Saturday, 28 August, all of Providence County could read about her departure in their weekly newspaper. Alongside notices of runaway slaves, servants, cows, pigs, and horses, eighteenth-century newspapers routinely printed advertisements for wives who had left home.¹ "WHEREAS WAITE, the Wife of me the Subscriber, on the 24th Instant, left my Bed and Board; all Persons are cautioned against trusting her on my Account, as I will not pay any Debts of her contracting after the Date hereof," wrote Daniel Wilbur, Jr., for the entire community to read.² Whether or not the Wilburs resolved their differences—and it is possible that they did, since they did not get divorced in Providence County—their entrance into the public record stands as testimony both to their marital unhappiness and to Waite's agency in deciding to leave.

Historians will never be able to know the full extent to which husbands and wives fought their way through the past. The study of marital unhappiness and distress, however, can be an important way to enhance our understanding of the early years of the Republic. Newspaper advertisements involving runaway wives give us a way to explore the growing initiative of women in that period. All of these advertisements involved women who decided to leave their husbands, but in only a few cases did the marriages of these women end in divorce. Divorce was uncommon in New England at that time.³ If marital happiness could be gauged solely by divorce records, historians would have to conclude that lives were simpler, people more content, and marriages rarely other than peaceful during those years. But divorce was not the only outlet for dissatisfied partners to vent their anger, frustration, and alienation. Instances of separation and abandonment, as recorded in the runaway wife advertisements, may perhaps be more useful for measuring the prevalence of marital stress. An examination of these advertisements can tell us a great deal about marriage, and the lives of women, in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Rhode Island.⁴

The *Providence Gazette*, one of the state's primary newspapers in this period, recorded close to one hundred instances of women who left their husbands in Providence County or Kent County between 1790 and 1810. Other newspapers of the time, such as the *Providence Phenix* and the *Providence Journal and Country Advertiser*, also included advertisements for those counties. Only thirteen couples with advertisements in the newspaper ultimately were divorced during this twenty-year period.⁵ These numbers suggest that separation was indeed far more common than divorce in Rhode Island. Whether those couples who did not divorce reunited or stayed separate for life is diffi-

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cult to determine,⁶ but the more important point here is that they did separate at least temporarily, and at the wife's initiative. The difficulty that women had in supporting themselves on their own, and the difficulty that they might have had in retaining custody of their children, are important aspects of this story and are also worth exploring. However, the original motive is perhaps more important here than the actual outcome. These women had at least the idea, if not always the reality, of an independent life. Although each acted individually, summoning her own personal strength to meet her own personal dilemma, their collective force teaches us an important lesson in the history of women's lives. An analysis of the separations evidenced by these advertisements illuminates a legacy of defiance in the face of powerful cultural restrictions.



Each newspaper advertisement placed by a husband whose wife had left him began with an introductory phrase similar to Daniel Wilbur, Jr.'s: "WHEREAS WAITE, the Wife of me the Subscriber." The wording here is significant, since it immediately established that the advertisement was a communication from the husband and not the wife. Indeed, most of the advertisements in the *Providence Gazette* and other newspapers featured men as the "subscriber." With many articles focusing on gendered subjects such as politics, these newspapers clearly aimed at a masculine audience; columns on fashion, domestic advice, and other feminized topics would not appear in Providence newspapers until later in the nineteenth century. By asserting in the first part of the text that "me the subscriber" was a man, husbands established the context of their public disclosure in the masculine print culture. In an examination of any conflict, it is important to identify the arena "in which [to use Jane Collier's insightful phrase] people negotiate the consequences of actions and events."⁷ In this case, such negotiation was conducted in newspapers read by literate male citizens of the Providence area.⁸

The customary capitalization of the first two words of the advertisements, which may have been used to alert potential readers to advertisements on otherwise undifferentiated pages of type, were most likely a matter of editorial design rather than the choice of the abandoned husbands.⁹ Yet the capitalization is worth recognizing, if only to note the normalization of this kind of advertisement. Runaway wife advertisements followed a pattern that was no doubt familiar to any newspaper reader in the eighteenth century. As a study of the rest of the wording of the advertisements will show, these notices had their own format and their own rules. The advertisements had become so common over the course of the eighteenth century that by 1790 the phrasing was almost routine.

After identifying the wife, the abandoned husband proceeded to an explanation of what she had done. Stating that she had left his bed and board was fundamental, since the use of the pronoun "my" identified one of the primary conflicts in American family law at the time. This involved coverture, which is usually explained as the legal right of a husband to all property, movable or otherwise, which his wife brought into their marriage. Although Suzanne Leacock has argued that women did, in fact, have some leeway in terms of property rights in the early-nineteenth-century South,¹⁰ historians concur that coverture was overarching and difficult, at best, to overcome.¹¹ Linda Kerber finds that coverture remained dominant in the northern states well into the nineteenth century; "not until the 1850s could married women's property legislation be called a trend."¹² Thus the phrase "my bed and board" takes on a specific resonance for runaway wives, for they had left not only their husbands but also, in the eyes of the law, their homes, their children, and all of their property. Under coverture, husbands automatically retained custody of children and all land and property brought into the marriage by either spouse.

Faced with the reality of coverture, women had difficult decisions to make about how and where they would live after they had left their husbands. For many, that probably delayed the time when they felt ready to take that drastic step. The advertisements themselves do not reveal where the women had gone, but divorce records from the period indicate that many moved back to their childhood homes, left the state with their parents, or found other men to support them. Polly Waterman, who filed for divorce from her husband, Olney, in 1801, complained to the Providence County court that she was forced to rely on "the charity of her father," a humiliating proposition for a grown woman with several small children.¹³ Despite the limited resources and opportunities for working women, however, many must have been able to support themselves through outside labor. Penelope Keene, divorcing her husband in 1800, declared to the court that during her marriage "she was constantly in a destitute situation" but had managed "by her own industry to support . . . herself and four children."¹⁴ A significant proportion of runaway wives must have at least anticipated some sort of opportunity for wage earning outside their marriage, or they probably would have remained with their husbands, however painful that might have been. Some women may have left the state to search for work in larger cities, but judging from the evidence of divorce petitions, most were forced to rely on local family and friends.

"My bed and board" is perhaps the key phrase in the advertisements. Embedded in these words is the very essence of marital existence for women in the late eighteenth century: in the eyes of the law, married women did not live in their own homes. When they left their houses and their married lives behind, even only temporarily, it was their husbands' property that they left. That both husband and wife realized this is evident in the advertisements. Not only did the husband routinely indicate that his wife had left "my" bed and board, and not "our" bed and board; when wives replied to these advertisements—as they sometimes did—they often pointed out the inequality of ownership. "That I have left *his* 'Bed and Board' and [thereby] retired from my *own* I shall not deny," wrote Rosanna Kilton indignantly in response to her husband's advertisement.¹⁵ Roxanna Fuller, in a full-blown tirade against the public insult to her character by her husband, Noah, insisted that whatever the law might say, the bed and board she had left did not rightfully belong to her husband at all. "It is true that I have left his House," she wrote, "but I deny that I have left *his* Bed and Board; the Bed I left was my own, and never to my knowledge has *he* owned a bed since our Intermarriage, other than those I carried with me."¹⁶ Though coverture was the legal doctrine in force, there were significant distinctions to be made about ownership.



When composing their advertisements, abandoned husbands did not often reveal specific details of their marital difficulties. Some were silent on this point, but those who did allude to such difficulties usually did so in vague terms (e.g., "behaved in an indecent manner"), and unsurprisingly, all placed total responsibility for the separation on their wives. These advertisements had a twofold aim: their main purpose was to repudiate debts, but they also served to preempt potential community speculation about the separation. By publicly declaring that it was his wife who was at fault, and that it was her own folly or her own mistakes that had caused the conflict, a husband could hope to escape any ill will that he might otherwise suffer when the community realized that his wife was no longer living at home.

With husbands absolving themselves of all blame, an uncritical reader of these advertisements might assume that the wives were, in fact, always at fault. However, the responses of wives to some of these notices challenge that assumption. When Seth Clark

announced in the *Providence Gazette* that his wife, Sylvia, "refuses to live with me, and has otherwise conducted herself in an unbecoming manner," Sylvia Clark revealed a starkly different situation in her answer: "His being almost constantly in a state of intoxication, and often threatening my life, are the causes of our misunderstanding."¹⁷ To Samuel Kilton's statement that his wife had "without any cause eloped," Rosanna Kilton countered by insisting that her departure "was entirely owing to his Brutality."¹⁸ Although much remains unrevealed in such exchanges, they do underscore the fact that the advertisements of abandoned and aggrieved husbands present only one side of the story.

The formulaic wording and dispassionate style of many of these advertisements obscure what must have been severely delineated battle lines in homes and families beset by violence, stress, and despair. While most of the men's advertisements include only terse references to the "unbecoming," "indecent," or "improper" behavior of the wives, the occasional women's replies, usually less formulaic, often suggest something of the emotional tenor of the relationship. Responding to William Gillcust's assertion that she had "behaved in so disorderly a manner that I shall not live with her any longer," Catharine Gillcust penned a bitter, sarcastic reply that suggested some of the anger and frustration that must have accompanied many of these breakups: "I am unconscious of having con-

ducted myself in a 'disorderly Manner,'" she insisted, "unless refusing to live with him, till he will provide for his Wife and Children with *his Earnings*, instead of squandering them by Intemperance, and associating with lewd Women, can be deemed disorderly Conduct in me."¹⁹ Similarly, Abigail Bradlee rejected her husband's description of her behavior as "unbecoming" by declaring that she had "never behaved in an unbecoming Manner in any thing, except in keeping with that most worthless of Men."²⁰

In their study of sexuality in early America, John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman note that since "a woman had few means by which she could support herself outside of marriage . . . she had reason to remain in her husband's favor."²¹ While this was surely true, the newspaper advertisements of both husbands and wives show that many women no longer had the desire, the patience, or the willpower to pursue their husbands' "favor," and that

they did not consider domestic violence to be either normal or acceptable. Many of these women probably left their husbands specifically because of physical and mental abuse. Since the notices from women so often mention brutality and violence, extrapolation of their number suggests that a sizable proportion of the marital separations were traceable to that cause. The women who published their own advertisements in the newspapers no doubt represented an especially strong and capable group of people—the least afraid of public recrimination for their audacity, and the most indignant about the wrongs done to them by their husbands. Surely there were other women, similarly mistreated, who left their husbands but could not muster the power or money to reply

WHEREAS William Gillcust has forbid any Person trusting me on his Account: I think it my Duty to declare, that I should not expect to obtain any Credit on his Account, were I inclined to make the Attempt, till he has paid the Debts of his own contracting; and that I am unconscious of having conducted myself in a "disorderly Manner," unless refusing to live with him, till he will provide for his Wife and Children with *his Earnings*, instead of squandering them by Intemperance, and associating with lewd Women, can be deemed disorderly Conduct in me.

CATHARINE GILLCUST.

Providence, October 8, 1803.

Some wives composed bitter retorts to their husbands' public accusations. Catharine Gillcust announced her side of the story in the Providence Gazette of 8 October 1803. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 9496).

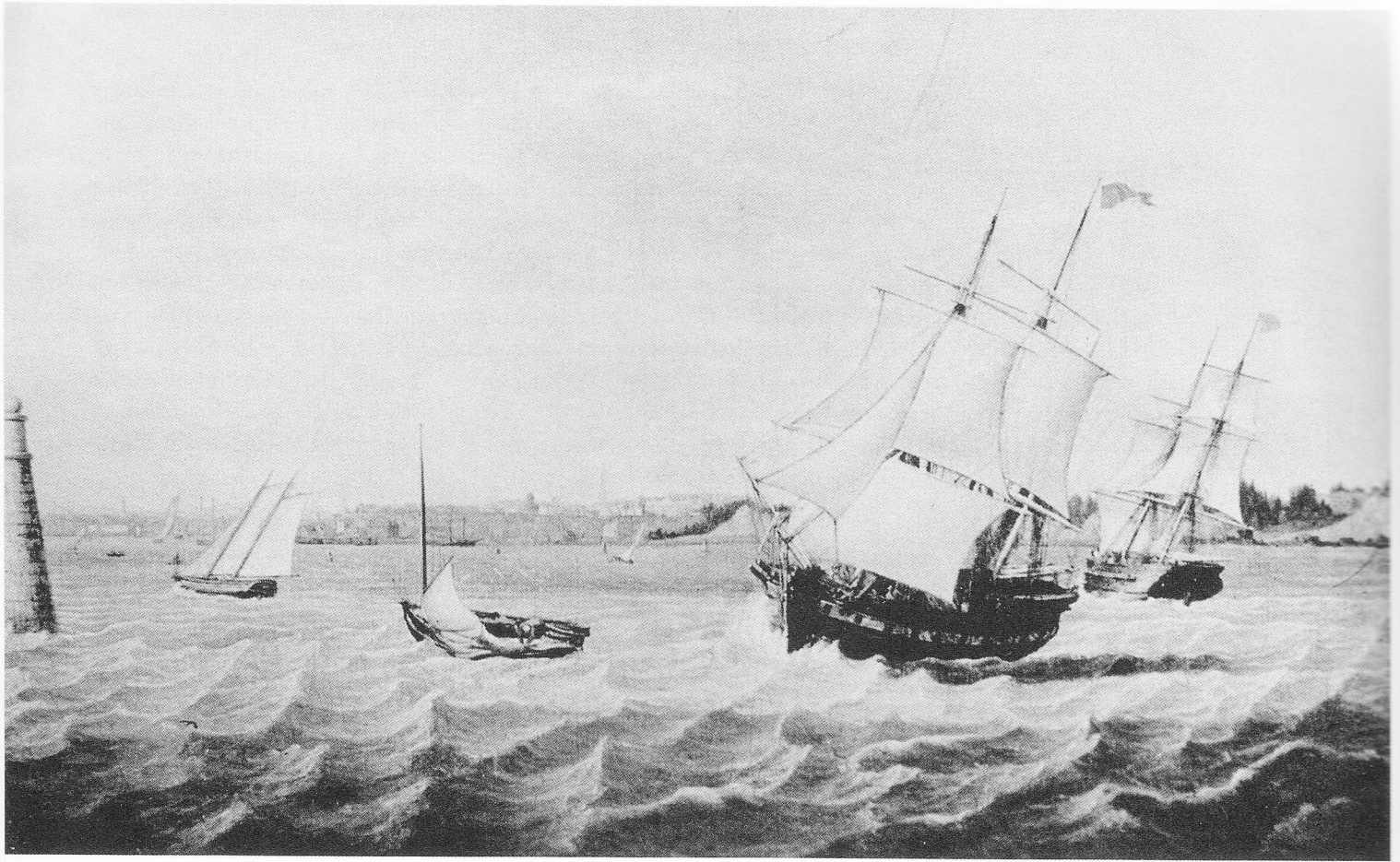
in a public newspaper, as well as still others who could not gather the strength necessary to leave their abusive situations.

When Noah Fuller, Jr., published an advertisement in the *Providence Gazette* declaring that his wife had "conducted herself in an unbecoming manner," he did not specifically deny any responsibility for her departure, but neither did he acknowledge any role in precipitating that act. In reply, in the fullest and most eloquent diatribe among the *Gazette's* notices in the post-Revolutionary period, Roxanna Fuller presented her own truth for everyone to read. "During the whole Time since our Intermarriage," she stated, "I have been subjected to a servile Fear, treated as a slave, and in the most brutal and degrading Manner. . . . One continual scene of unexampled Cruelty, tending to destroy my Health and Life, has marked his whole conduct. . . . and of late he has added Insult to Abuse, Barbarity to Cruelty, and Violence to Outrage."²² As an answer to Noah's unprovocative original notice, this outpouring of emotion almost seems overblown to the other extreme, but it does show how women of the time might be subjected to cruelty without any obvious recourse.

Although Roxanna Fuller made her case with more detail, she was hardly the only woman to mention abuse as a reason for her departure. When Nathan Aldrich indicated only that his wife "hath separated herself" from his house, Marcy Aldrich decided to set the record straight in regard to her "unworthy husband." Since he had "thought proper to stigmatize my character in a public paper," she said, a reply was necessary: "I was reduced to the hard necessity of making my Escape from the most brutal Treatment; he had threatened my life, and actually kicked me, and bruised me with his fists."²³ Dorothy Fisher responded to her husband's notice in the *Providence Phenix* by declaring that she had left his home "owing entirely to his brutality: I could not stay any longer with a person who threatens my life."²⁴ Having cited the "repeated insults" and "the seeking of Instruments of Destruction" by her husband, Betty Fuller of Rehoboth concluded her notice with a confident statement of her motivation: "believing in Self-Preservation," she wrote, "I bade him adieu."²⁵

Infidelity was undoubtedly a major cause of desertion among Providence families, but it is never explicitly revealed in the newspaper advertisements. Although adultery was one of the main causes of divorce in the written records, it is harder to identify as a cause of separation. It can reasonably be assumed, however, that many of the wives who left their husbands did so because of infidelity—their husbands' and/or their own. The wording of some advertisements by husbands suggests adultery without being specific, using phrases such as "otherwise misbehaved herself"²⁶ or "behaved amiss,"²⁷ or the more cryptic "indecent," "unbecoming," or "improper." These expressions could encompass a wide range of behavior, but given the prevalence of adultery in the divorce records, it is likely that many do indicate unfaithfulness on the part of at least one spouse. During the eighteenth century, men filed for divorce most often because of adultery, while women filed most often because of desertion.²⁸ This does not, of course, indicate any empirical differentiation between the sexual habits of men and women; rather it reflects the legislative rules in regard to divorce. Only in the last quarter of the eighteenth century was divorce made more accessible to women. By the post-Revolutionary period it was at least possible for Rhode Island women to win a divorce on the grounds that their husbands had committed adultery.

Husbands often cited their absence at sea as a reason why they were not responsible for their wives' improper conduct. Since Providence was a busy port town during this time, with ships arriving and departing daily, it is hardly surprising that mariners figured often in the stories of dysfunctional local families. Similarly, in an era of westward



View from Fort Hill, Providence, showing Fox Point and the west side of Providence harbor. Lithograph, circa 1840, from a painting by T. Thompson. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 9497).

migration, several men referred to their recent travels to distant territories. The phrases "during my absence" or "in my late absence at sea" enabled a husband to explain away his ostensible responsibility to control or prevent his wife's unbecoming or indecent behavior. Yet it is hard to imagine that a husband's absence from home was no more than incidental to the subsequent departure of his wife in these cases. For families dependent on a single income, such absence could cause great hardship, with wives subjected not only to loneliness and overwork but to impoverishment as well. Joanna Phillips replied to her husband's notice by insisting that he had not sufficiently provided for her welfare while he was at sea: "I have never received but a small portion of his wages, on any Voyage he has been on since our Union," she claimed.²⁹ Women left to support a family alone could face a difficult and frustrating task.



One of the main grievances expressed by husbands of runaway wives was that their spouses had not departed empty-handed. According to Reuben Bates, his wife, Leuthana, had "carried off a considerable Part of my Property and refuses to live with me."³⁰ Sylvia Ballou, evidently particularly bitter about her marriage, went even further; she "endeavored to sell all my furniture and Wearing Apparel," wrote Ezekiel Ballou in the *Gazette*.³¹ These women seem to have been either oblivious of the law regarding property or else defiant of a legal system that they understood to be unfair; by taking household goods, they were in effect declaring that they felt themselves entitled to that property. Property battles were also evident in divorce cases, where many husbands echoed Andrew Stone's despair at being "plundered by his said wife of his property," or

William Irons's fury when his wife "carried away a large part of his household furniture and refuses to Return to live with him or to restore his furniture."³² Married women may have been legally defined as "femes covert," but many seem to have dissented from the doctrine of coverture.

Coverture did not encompass only household goods; women could also be penalized for attempting to keep their children after leaving home. "My wife Elizabeth has eloped from my bed and board," announced John West of Scituate; moreover, she "carried off two children without my consent."³³ Similarly, Thomas Waterman claimed that his wife, Amey, "carried away my children, which I was and am yet willing to support."³⁴ Elizabeth and Amey evidently felt that they were entitled and able to care for their children, a sentiment with which women of that time have not always been credited. Because of property laws of primogeniture, under which first-born sons could stand to inherit more than their mothers, historians have often argued that children were considered as economic entities rather than as objects of love. For example, Jan Kurth suggests that "given the economic and productive organization of the family that persisted into the nineteenth century, it is not surprising that some mothers could not sustain a sentimentally solicitous attitude toward their children."³⁵ This may have been true of some mothers, but evidence from the women's advertisements shows that it was certainly not true of all.

Whether taken or left behind, children created an angry conflict in many separations and divorces. Gendered definitions of fatherhood and motherhood meant that each parent had different responsibilities in the care of children, and this is evident in the runaway advertisements. As primary providers for the family welfare, fathers were accountable for their children's financial support. In an attempt to ensure that her husband would be held responsible for supporting her children, Rhoda Nelson inserted an advertisement in the *Gazette* calling the public's attention to his delinquent behavior and demanding appropriate action: "The said Nelson hath left Nine Children in a suffering condition," she charged; "I therefore forbid all masters of vessels and others harbouring or carrying him off."³⁶

Mothers, on the other hand, were criticized not for failing to provide but for failing to nurture. If deserting a husband was unbecoming, deserting children was abhorrent. Aholiab Branch showed only contempt for his wife, who, he said, "cruelly deserted my infant children," an accusation clearly rooted in the divergent domestic roles of men and women.³⁷ Thus women were in a unique bind: if they left without their children, they could be condemned for their unnatural behavior; if they took their children with them, they were guilty of an illegal act. Some women apparently defied the law, while others left their children at home either by choice or by necessity. Many children were given over to friends, relatives, or apprenticeships for unofficial guardianship.³⁸



The most important reason for an abandoned husband to place a notice in the newspaper was to warn all local businesses, tavern and inn keepers, and other persons that he would no longer pay the debts incurred by his wife. This disclaimer of financial responsibility could have the most serious consequences for a runaway wife. The testimony of many impoverished women who sued for alimony shows that poverty was a common accompaniment to martial separation.³⁹ Providence County divorce records reveal that many women who had left their husbands were forced to return home to their fathers or to seek assistance from friends. Since most runaway wives were not subsequently divorced, however, it is hard to be certain of the fate of all of them. Perhaps some were compelled to return to their husbands for financial reasons, others resolved their disputes

and returned willingly, and still others struck out on their own and made their own way. By refusing to pay the debts of their wives, abandoned husbands very likely helped to create a population of unsupported women who, through necessity, learned to support themselves.

As divorce records and the newspaper advertisements of runaway wives show, many wives had already been living in poverty within their marriages, with husbands unable or unwilling to adequately support their families with their own income. Faced with this situation, some of these women had provided or supplemented their families' income by working for wages themselves. "From the time we were married, until his advertising me," wrote Joanna Phillips, "I have maintained myself, and also him, when he was at home, which he cannot deny. . . . The Trouble he has taken is entirely unnecessary, as he could not obtain credit on his own account, were he to make the experiment."⁴⁰ With work experience of their own, women like Joanna Phillips could face the prospect of marital separation with a good degree of confidence.

In many cases an abandoned husband tried to ensure his wife's return not only by disclaiming responsibility for her debts but also by forbidding the entire community to associate with her. While most such notices were limited to prohibiting others from "harboring," "trading with," or "associating with" the errant wife, occasionally an especially bitter husband would add more demands to the list. "Whereas Betsy, the wife of me the subscriber, has eloped from me, and behaved in a very indecent manner," Nathan Inman began relatively innocuously, "I therefore forbid all persons concealing, harbouring, entertaining, employing, or detaining the said Betsy, or trusting her."⁴¹ If Nathan's intent was to win back the love of his wife, he failed miserably, since Betsey (Betsy) subsequently sued him for divorce. He also failed if he was trying to ruin her chances of finding refuge with friends or gaining support by other means, since she testified in court that she had indeed "been obliged [and therefore able] to fly to her friends for protection."⁴² This case proved to be a complicated conglomeration of depositions and testimony from twenty-six witnesses, indicating that Betsey's friends had not deserted her even after Nathan had explicitly ordered them to. Besides being an example of a drawn-out and painful divorce, the Inmans' story shows that forbidding others to associate with a runaway wife did not necessarily translate into obedience on the part of the community at large.

Runaway wives who published their own newspaper notices shared a common aim: like Roxanna Fuller, who asserted the importance of "justice to my own character," and Joanna Phillips, who declared "it my duty to exculpate myself in the public opinion," they were publicly asserting their self-worth.⁴³ Some women went even further, insisting—contrary to the prevailing view of the post-Revolutionary wife as a dependent creature—on their strength and their ability to control their own lives. Revealing to the public that she had been beaten and otherwise maltreated by her husband, Rosanna Kilton announced her refusal to submit to further humiliation at his hands. Whether or not she had the means to support herself she did not mention, but she assured the community that she had no need of a man who did not respect her. "As to running him in Debt," she concluded, "he may rest perfectly at Ease on that score; I certainly never shall be so weak as to make the attempt."⁴⁴



The economic and educational status of the runaway wives and their husbands varied considerably. The abandoned husbands included laborers, mariners, yeomen, and merchants;⁴⁵ if the wives' replies are to be believed, they included the unemployed and destitute

as well. Many wives claimed that the repudiation of their debts by their husbands had little meaning, while others no doubt depended on their husbands' income. Despite the advertisements' appearance in the newspaper, a product and evidence of a literate society, many of the advertisers were in fact illiterate. Notices ending with such subscriptions as "Pleasant hisXmark Hitch" suggest that while literacy may have been growing among the population, it was far from universal.⁴⁶

The racial makeup of the people who placed the advertisements is hard to ascertain from the notices themselves, although a small number of men and women do identify their spouses as people of color and thereby indicate their own likely racial identity as well. For example, Dorcas Sampson responded to her husband's notice by indignantly insisting that he, not she, was the deserting party: "Whereas my Husband James Sampson (a black man) has posted me: instead of my absenting his bed and board, he has absented from my bed (not having any of his own)."⁴⁷ Thomas Jones advertised in Providence in regard to "Betsy, my wife (a woman of colour) [who] has behaved herself in an unbecoming manner."⁴⁸ Black people did not always identify themselves as such in their advertisements, but through a check of census and cemetery records, a few more notices can be attributed to that population.⁴⁹

The runaway wives named in the advertisements came from towns throughout Providence County: Providence, Glocester, Smithfield, Scituate, Cumberland, Johnston, Cranston, and North Providence were all represented in the advertisements. It is hard to estimate the effect that the advertisements had within a community, but it is certainly possible that runaway wives from the same town may have known one another, or at least known of one another. The four Scituate women who left their husbands between 1794 and 1798 may seem like a very small number, but in a town of some 2,300 people they may well have drawn strength from one another. In Cumberland, an even smaller town, Sylvia Clark, Betsey Inman, and Marcy Aldrich all left their husbands within a three-month period early in 1802; Sylvia and Marcy subsequently responded to their husbands' newspaper advertisements, and Betsey and Marcy sued for divorce the next year.⁵⁰ Whether or not the three women were in fact friends, it is hard to imagine that they were not at least familiar with one another's stories. "While the act of running away might be seen as a so-called 'private' rebellion," argues Jan Kurth, "it is also clear that each of these 'private' rebellions was setting off ripples through the community and the public forums of the newspapers."⁵¹ Women could receive emotional and social encouragement from women they had perhaps never met, and that encouragement could prove even more important than the monetary subsistence they received from their husbands.



Although exact numbers are difficult to determine, it seems clear that only a relatively small percentage of those who placed advertisements in local Providence newspapers between 1790 and 1810 were later divorced.⁵² The distinction between divorce and separation may have been insignificant for many couples, since they were living apart in either case, and instances of separation probably went well beyond those recorded in the newspaper advertisements. Divorce proceedings were expensive and time-consuming, and therefore, to many, an impossible luxury. Historian Hendrik Hartog has pointed out that separation was "a condition that described the marital situation of an extraordinarily large number of Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some few Americans obtained divorces in eighteenth-century America. A far larger number would live lives separated from their spouses."⁵³ Since divorce is easier to find in the historical record than separation, historians have placed an emphasis on quantifying rates of divorce as signifiers of social and familial discord. Divorce does not tell the whole



Detail from a marriage certificate, 1862. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 9498).

story of domestic strife during this time, but the availability of records from divorce cases does make them a useful supplement to the newspaper advertisements.

In March 1805 Jonathan Merithew advertised in the *Providence Phenix* that his wife, Nancy, "hath eloped from my bed and board, and otherwise behaved herself in an unbecoming manner."⁵⁴ Since Nancy did not reply to this advertisement with her own side of the story, the record of their marital troubles would end there if it were not for Jonathan's divorce petition filed with the Providence County court in September of that same year. Jonathan filed for divorce because he felt that his wife had not lived according to his ideals: "She was disrespectful of all domestick duties of a faithful & prudent wife," he declared. "She willfully & repeatedly refused & neglected to cook the necessary meals of provision for your Petitioner & his family & has frequently in the abusive language of a termigant [*sic*] when your Petitioner has returned from the labores [*sic*] of the field, fatigued & exhausted, told him to get his victuals himself or go to bed with out."⁵⁵ Such disregard for her husband's needs was perhaps an act of cultural resistance by Nancy; perhaps, rebelling against the accepted rules of marriage, she speaks through her husband's sharp words. Whatever the other circumstances in this case, Jonathan's complaint indicates that his wife was not afraid to act counter to social regulation, even if the consequence was divorce.

Adultery can be discerned more easily in the court documents than in the newspaper notices. Several of the advertised wives who subsequently filed for divorce had endured an unfaithful mate or had been unfaithful themselves. As much of the testimony in adultery cases shows, privacy was virtually nonexistent in many families at the time. Questioning witnesses, Betsey Inman's lawyer did not simply ask whether a witness had known Nathan Inman to have committed an adulterous act; instead, the lawyer's most frequent inquiry was "Did you ever see Nathan Inman in Bed with Any other woman (or more than one) than his wife since March, under clothes or partly undressed?" Since both Betsey and Nathan filed for divorce simultaneously, the Inman trial was a complicated affair of accusations and counteraccusations. Nancy Lapham testified that she "saw Betsey Inman on the bed with Oliver Bartlet . . . on the cloathes in each others armes [*sic*]." Chloe Bradford was asked, "did any person or persons offer you a fee of 3 dollars if you would swear that you had seen Betsey I. in bed with Any other person since March except s[ai]d Nathan." Chloe's testimony has not survived. The Inmans brought forward over twenty witnesses to testify that they had seen one or the other in bed with someone else.⁵⁶

When John Matthewson accused his wife, Lois, of adultery, he had several witnesses ready to back up his claim. His sister Sarah testified that Lois "was gone from the house [with her lover] some considerable length of time and I understood they went a dandalioning [*sic*] together." Neighbors Mary and Sarah Phillips corroborated that story. Lois allegedly asked the "young man . . . to go out in to the field and help her pick some greens and they went off hand in hand and was gone for the space of one hour." Looking for intent, John's lawyer asked Mary Phillips if Lois "had anything to pick greens in that



gave you reason to believe that she was really going to pick greens." "No," said Mary, "she had nothing." The lawyer pursued the point: "From the manner in which she addresst this young man did you Really suppose that she was going to pick greens or did you suppose that she was agoing to Commit some unlawful act?" "I supposed that she had some other object in view besides picking greens," said Mary. Sarah Phillips later testified that she "saw Lois Matthewson wife of John Matthewson in bed with another man and her husband was not their [*sic*]." ⁵⁷ The case is not particularly unusual in the close knowledge that John's friends and family seem to have had of his wife's sexual encounters. Divorce records from the time present an image of a society in which illicit liaisons must have been difficult to conceal. ⁵⁸

For women who decided to relinquish the monetary support of their husbands, family loyalty was particularly important. Several of the advertised women whose cases later appeared before the Providence County court indicated that their parents had, in fact, been very helpful to them when such help was needed. In 1794 Sarah Potter "gave out among her neighbors that her Husband was an object of aversion to her and that it was her determination to cohabit no longer with him." Rather than being financially forced to remain in this distasteful situation, Sarah was able to rely on her parents for assistance, and in the early part of 1795 she departed for "the new countries with her father's family, leaving her husband and her child behind." ⁵⁹ Similarly, Esther Greene "removed with her father's family to the Mohawk River" only four years after her marriage. Marcy Daly, a family friend, testified in that case that Esther "told me several times that she had finally done with [her husband] and was determined never to live with him again." "I had rather live with dad & mom," Marcy quoted Esther as saying; "they say I may live with them and I had rather live with them than with him." ⁶⁰ Many women probably did not have such a choice and were thus forced to remain in oppressive marriages.

Just as in the newspaper advertisements, divorce records often highlight the different viewpoints of husbands and wives as to the reasons for the breakup of their marriage. For Betsey and Nathan Inman, who battled over adultery, the reason was relatively straightforward, but for other couples the problems could be more complex. Christopher Williams declared in the *Gazette* only that his wife, Phebe, "has eloped from my Bed and Board, and otherwise conducted [herself] in a disorderly and unbecoming Manner." ⁶¹ Suing for divorce several months later, he expanded on his grievance: "she has totally disregarded that economy by which alone industry can secure the means of a comfortable living & instead of being the faithful steward of his household she has wasted his little substance." He further insisted that he had, "to the utmost of his power, [been] attentive kind & affectionate to her," while she had returned the favor by stripping "his house of every article of furniture." ⁶² To Christopher, the marriage had been an economic relationship in which his wife had violated the laws of property ownership.

Phebe, however, saw the situation differently. Testifying on her own behalf, she stated that "the said Christopher has repeatedly most shamefully beat, bruised, scratched and lacerated [her] body . . . and has often even during the very cold & severe winter past, neglected to provide any wood or provisions for the support of [her] and [their] child." Christopher was apparently unable to muster any support from his own family in the case. His sister-in-law Lydia Williams testified that "Phebe Williams has come to our house for some thing to subsist on in his absence, and my husband has cut wood for her and lent it to her." Phebe's decision to leave her husband's house may seem more desperate than revolutionary, but in taking the furniture with her she perhaps revealed a glimpse of a tough and audacious spirit. Added to her awareness of her own self-worth, Christopher's conduct both obliged and enabled her (as she told the court) to "flee from his rage and violence."

Despair is overwhelmingly prevalent in the divorce records. Philena Thornton, married for only two years, felt "destitute of all the necessities of life"; Nancy Burrough was "abandoned to want and distress"; Polly Shearman was "rendered completely miserable." Seeking divorce on the grounds of "extreme cruelty," Anna Nichols testified that her husband "had by his insults abuse and Outrages compelled the petitioner to leave that house which ought to have afforded her protection against all abuse."⁶³ But for all its connotations of liberation and hope for the future, divorce is fundamentally a profoundly unsettling event; and despite the marked increase of divorce petitions filed in Providence County during this time,⁶⁴ the ideology of marriage remained strong. Surely most of the women who left their husbands, permanently or temporarily, would rather have been able to stay. Even for women suffering from the most severe abuse and despondency, the decision to leave could not have been easy.



In his study of divorce records of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Sheldon Cohen has found that in the years after the American Revolution "Providence County women had come to regard their marital bonds in a new perspective. . . . these women were reexamining and demanding more from marital bonds."⁶⁵ Like those who divorced, the women whose names appeared in the newspaper advertisements were in fact engaged in the beginnings of a major social change. Because of their status as second-class citizens, women of the time could be subject to a cruel dilemma: a choice between fidelity to their socially ordained marital obligations and their own material and/or psychological survival. Faced with this choice, those who decided to exercise their rights as

free individuals—the runaway wives—helped to create a legacy of tenacity and courage for later generations. Because their numbers were small, and their high rates of mobility make them difficult to locate in such traditional sources as censuses and cemetery records, the newspaper advertisements in which they are named are of particular importance. As victims of pain, frustration, and distress, and as foremothers of change, control, and empowerment, these runaway wives enlarge our understanding of the history of women's struggles for individual and social equality.

Scene from Heroic Women of the Revolution, an engraving in Godey's Lady's Book, September 1859. Picture Collection, The Branch Libraries, The New York Public Library.



Notes

1. In a quantitative study of runaway wife advertisements in the newspapers of sixteen states, Herman Lantz recorded 3,348 advertisements between 1700 and 1800. "The projected number, had we been able to examine all of the newspapers [in those states], is estimated to be 7,504." Herman R. Lantz, *Marital Incompatibility and Social Change in Early America*, Studies of Marriage and the Family Series (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1976), 17.
2. Daniel Wilbur, Jr., *Providence Gazette*, 28 Aug. 1790.
3. Although uncommon, divorce was possible. All the English colonies in America had been subject to British law, which allowed divorce under certain strict criteria. New England early established marriage as a civil contract and codified rules for dissolving marriages in civil court, but strong social biases favored preserving even the most troubled marriages. When the new states began easing restrictions on divorce after the Revolution, New England took the lead, and though its divorce rates remained extremely low, they far exceeded those in the middle and southern states. According to Herman Lantz, divorce laws in Rhode Island were among the least restrictive in the early republic. Lantz, *Marital Incompatibility*, 5-48. See also the analysis of divorce in Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), and Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1980).
4. Runaway wife advertisements have been largely unexplored in studies of women and divorce. In one article that focuses specifically on these advertisements, Jan Kurth likens runaway wives to runaway slave women, with the act of running away interpreted as a form of resistance to an entrenched male power structure. "Wayward Wenches and Wives: Runaway Women in the Hudson Valley, N.Y., 1785-1830," *National Women's Studies Association Journal* 1 (Winter 1988-89): 199-220. Lantz, Sheldon Cohen (see note 28), and Glenda Riley (see note 9), among others, do mention the advertisements, but none of these historians have looked into their significance in any depth.
5. These were James and Dinah Devol, 1792; Robert and Sarah Potter, 1795; Ezekiel and Silvia Ballou, 1797; Benjamin and Esther Greene, 1797; Reuben and Sarah Aldrich, 1802; Lemuel and Lucina Hall, 1802; Nathan and Betsey Inman, 1803; Nathan and Marcy Aldrich, 1803; Joel and Hannah Comstock, 1805; John and Lois Matthewson, 1805; Jonathan and Nancy Merithew, 1805; Christopher and Phebe Williams, 1805; and Stephen and Philena Thornton, 1807.
6. Cemetery records might reveal whether or not a couple stayed together by whether or not they were buried near each other. However, a search of the records for Coventry, Cumberland, East Greenwich, Glocester, the North Burial Ground in Providence, Rehoboth, Scituate, and Warwick showed that very few people named in the advertisements died in the towns in which they resided when the advertisements appeared. This search was confined to matching the town named in each advertisement to the cemetery records of that town; it is possible that a more comprehensive search, checking all the names against the records of all the towns, might have been more productive.
7. Jane Collier, *Marriage and Inequality in Classless Societies* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1988), 231-32.
8. Advertisements in the *Providence Gazette* indicate that the newspaper was circulated in Providence County (i.e., Cranston, Cumberland, Foster, Glocester, Johnston, North Providence, Providence, Scituate, and Smithfield) and nearby Kent County (Coventry, East Greenwich, Warwick, and West Greenwich).
9. From a cursory analysis of runaway wife advertisements in the *Boston Evening Post* for the mid to late 1700s, Glenda Riley surmises that such capitalization was the choice of the husbands. "The abandoned husband of one Boston woman was so chagrined by her departure," she comments, "that he put her name, Lydia, in capital letters in his notice, probably to attract the attention of her relatives and friends." Glenda Riley, *Divorce: An American Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 33. But whatever the practice in the Boston newspapers, in the Providence papers almost every notice, of every kind, capitalized the first two words. (Advertisements for runaway slaves often included a stylized silhouette of a person on the run; otherwise they differed little in appearance from advertisements for runaway wives.)
10. See Suzanne Lebsock, *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860* (New York: W. W. Norton Co., 1984).
11. "That marriage in the late eighteenth century was, legally speaking, described by coverture is . . . neither controversial nor [as a matter for scholarly debate] interesting." Hendrik Hartog, "Abigail Bailey's Coverture: Law in a Married Woman's Consciousness," unpublished manuscript, 1990, 13.
12. Kerber, *Women of the Republic*, 154.
13. Polly Waterman, petitioner, September 1801. Providence County divorce records are now at the Rhode Island Supreme Court Record Center in Pawtucket.

Notes continued

14. Penelope Keene, petitioner, March 1800.
15. Rosanna Kilton, *Providence Gazette*, 27 June 1801.
16. Roxanna Fuller, *Providence Gazette*, 22 Sept. 1804.
17. Seth Clark, *Providence Gazette*, 20 Feb. 1802; Sylvia Clark, *Providence Gazette*, 6 Mar. 1802.
18. Samuel Kilton, *Providence Gazette*, 20 June 1801; Rosanna Kilton, *Providence Gazette*, 27 June 1801.
19. William Gillcrist, *Providence Gazette*, 1 Oct. 1803; Catharine Gillcrist, *Providence Gazette*, 8 Oct. 1803.
20. William Bradlee, *Providence Gazette*, 30 Jan. 1796; Abigail Bradlee, *Providence Gazette*, 13 Feb. 1796.
21. John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 79.
22. Noah Fuller, Jr., *Providence Gazette*, 15 Sept. 1804; Roxanna Fuller, *Providence Gazette*, 22 Sept. 1804.
23. Nathan Aldrich, *Providence Gazette*, 8 May 1802; Marcy Aldrich, *Providence Gazette*, 15 May 1802.
24. Dorothy Fisher, *Providence Phenix*, 14 April 1804.
25. Betty Fuller, *Providence Gazette*, 18 Aug. 1810.
26. Caleb Matthews, *Providence Gazette*, 21 Jan. 1797.
27. Pleasant Hitch, *Providence Gazette*, 5 Nov. 1803.
28. In a study of the 293 petitions for divorce filed in Providence County between 1749 and 1809, Sheldon Cohen finds that over 70 percent of the abandonment cases were initiated by women. Sheldon Cohen, "The Broken Bond: Divorce in Providence County, 1749-1809," *Rhode Island History* 44 (1985): 70. Glenda Riley notes that in eighteenth-century Massachusetts, "men most frequently employed the complaint of adultery against their wives" in seeking a divorce. Riley, *Divorce*, 21.
29. Joanna Phillips, *Providence Gazette*, 11 Aug. 1804.
30. Reuben Bates, *Providence Gazette*, 13 Aug. 1791.
31. Ezekiel Ballou, *Providence Gazette*, 29 Aug. 1795.
32. Andrew Stone, petitioner, March 1795; William Irons, petitioner, March 1794.
33. John West, *Providence Gazette*, 10 Mar. 1798.
34. Thomas Waterman, *Providence Gazette*, 18 Aug. 1810.
35. Kurth, "Wayward Wenches and Wives," 219. Kurth uses this argument, which she derives in part from Nancy Cott, to explain why slave women usually ran away with their children while nonslave runaway wives did not. But this reasoning—which is common in studies comparing the life experiences of white women to those of slave women—seems to overlook the vast difference between leaving children with a slave master and leaving them with an estranged husband. In any case, Kurth's argument does not seem to apply to Rhode Island, for while none of the runaway wife advertisements that she examined (all from New York's Hudson Valley) mentioned missing children, children are mentioned in several of the Rhode Island advertisements.
36. Rhoda Nelson, *Providence Gazette*, 15 Jan. 1802.
37. Aholiab Branch, *Providence Gazette*, 21 Jan. 1801.
38. For example, when Marcy Aldrich divorced her husband, she told her friends that her one regret was that "she was very loth to part with her child." Rather than keeping the child himself, however, Nathan Aldrich "said he would provide a place for the child[;] he said he would put it to James Chevers house to live." Marcy Aldrich, petitioner, September 1803.
39. In her discussion of the urban poor in the early national period, Christine Stansell emphasizes the hardships that many women endured when male support was no longer available. While some women were born poor, she points out, for others "poverty ensued from a sudden loss of male support. . . . As much as they could, [financially dependent] women tried to hold together disintegrating family economies." Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 12.
40. Joanna Phillips, *Providence Gazette*, 11 Aug. 1804.
41. Nathan Inman, *Providence Gazette*, 24 Apr. 1802.
42. Betsey and Nathan Inman, petitioners, March 1803.
43. Roxanna Fuller, *Providence Gazette*, 22 Sept. 1804; Joanna Phillips, *Providence Gazette*, 11 Aug. 1804.
44. Rosanna Kilton, *Providence Gazette*, 27 June 1801.
45. This information is drawn from those who both advertised and divorced (occupations are stated in the divorce records), but it most likely applies as well to those who only advertised.
46. Pleasant Hitch, *Providence Gazette*, 5 Nov. 1803.
47. Dorcas Sampson, *Providence Phenix*, 20 Oct. 1805.
48. Thomas Jones, *Providence Gazette*, 27 Feb. 1808.
49. For example, Charles Haskill, who advertised in 1794, was buried next to his second wife, Lucy, and identified as "a man of color / Soldier of the Revolution." Cemetery records of North Burial Ground, Providence, Rhode Island Historical Society. It is interesting to note that advertisements placed by people of color often appeared on the same page as notices seeking the return of runaway slaves. As Jan Kurth observes, "the efforts of runaway wives might well be placed in a long tradition of women, both slave and free, who dared to struggle against the particular forces that constrained their lives." Kurth, "Wayward Wenches and Wives," 220.
50. For Clark, see note 17; for Inman, notes 41 and 42; for Aldrich, notes 23 and 38.
51. Kurth, "Wayward Wenches and Wives," 220.
52. The *Gazette* had 90 advertisements during this time; the *Phenix* had 20 between 1802 and 1805. Of the couples named in these advertisements, 13 were involved in divorce proceedings in the Providence County court between 1790 and 1810, during which time the court received approximately 165 petitions for divorce. Some of the advertising couples might have divorced at a later time and/or in a different place.
53. Hartog, "Abigail Bailey's Coverture," 32.
54. Jonathan Merithew, *Providence Phenix*, 2 Mar. 1805.
55. Jonathan Merithew, petitioner, September 1805.
56. Betsey and Nathan Inman, petitioners, March 1803.
57. John Matthewson, petitioner, March 1805.
58. "Though New Englanders of the late eighteenth century may have sought privacy, in fact a considerable lack of such privacy existed in daily life." Sheldon Cohen, "The Broken Bond," 73.
59. Robert Potter, petitioner, March 1795.
60. Benjamin D. Greene, petitioner, March, 1797.
61. Christopher Williams, *Providence Gazette*, 4 May 1805.
62. Christopher Williams, petitioner, September 1805.
63. Philena Thornton, petitioner, September 1807; Nancy Burrough, petitioner, September 1794; Polly Shearman, petitioner, March 1795; Anna Nichols, petitioner, March 1799.
64. See Appendix 1, "Average Frequency of Divorce Petitions in Providence County, 1749-1809," in Cohen, "The Broken Bond," 79.
65. Cohen, "The Broken Bond," 78.

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*Detail from Newport, R.I., in 1730.
Engraving by J. P. Newell, 1864. RHIS
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