



Rhode Island History

Volume 44, Number 4 November 1985





Published by The Rhode Island Historical Society, 110 Benevolent Street, Providence, Rhode Island, 02906, and printed by a grant from the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Edward D. DiPrete, Governor; Susan L. Farmer, Secretary of State.

Issued Quarterly at Providence, Rhode Island, February, May, August, and November. Second class postage paid at Providence, Rhode Island.

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Licht campaigning among textile workers in Warwick during the 1968 campaign. Providence Journal Bulletin Photo.

Ethnicity and Politics in Rhode Island: The Career of Frank Licht

Walter H. Conser, Jr.

Though its role has not always been the same nor its prominence so distinct, ethnicity has always played a part in the American political experience. In a study of American politics written in 1951, Samuel Lubell discussed, for example, the rise and consolidation of Italo-American electoral strength in Rhode Island and the limited but significant implications of this ethnic cohesion. Twenty years later, in 1971, Michael Novak surveyed the contemporary American political scene and found ample evidence that this ethnic consciousness among the nation's voters was asserting itself more forcefully. In *The Rise of Unmeltable Ethnics* Novak studies the descendants of southern and eastern European immigrants and their role in the development of a politics of cultural pluralism based on kinship, neighborhoods, and personal familiarity.¹

Novak argued that America's newly established ethnic constituencies shared a common frustration with the cultural power of the ruling Yankee Protestant elite. Repeatedly underscoring the political dimension of this ethnic phenomenon, he saw the invocation of such cultural symbols as heritage, location, and aspiration overcoming differences of national background, class, and experience to unite these disparate groups. Such appeals need not be explicit as ethnic voters understood even veiled allusions regarding ethnicity as directed against their opponents' preeminent position.

Rhode Island politics in the twentieth century includes many examples of the dynamics and significance of ethnicity in the electoral process. Novak's central argument about the persistence of ethnic cohesion among the children of immigrants can be seen in the achievements of Frank Licht, a leader whose political career was shaped by his experiences in South Providence's Jewish community and forwarded by the Democratic party's desire to represent Rhode Island's diverse ethnic constituencies. Licht's public service culminated in his election in 1968 and 1970 to two terms as governor. As Rhode Island's first Jewish governor, and one of only a handful throughout America, Licht's career—especially the 1968 gubernatorial election—illustrates a particular Rhode Island mix of politics and ethnicity.

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1. Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics*, 2nd revised edition, (New York, 1961) 73–79; Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* (New York, 1971), 9.

A ship carrying immigrants to America (circa 1925) arrives at State Pier number one, Allen avenue and Bay street. RIHS Collection (RHi L866 922).



2. This biographical material is drawn from the transcript of an oral interview of Frank Licht by Rita Michaelson, August 24, 1976, and September 15, 1976 (hereafter Michaelson interview), and an oral interview of Frank Licht by the author May 29, 1982 (hereafter Conser interview). The interview by Rita Michaelson is in the possession of the William E. Weiner Oral History Library of the American Jewish Committee, New York, N.Y., whose director the author wishes to thank for permission to use this material.

Born in 1916, Frank Licht grew up in the Elmwood section of Providence. Later in his life he singled out a "feeling of belonging" as the most characteristic aspect of his youth. While the familiarity and cohesiveness of the South Providence neighborhood contributed to this sense of affinity, his involvement with organized religion probably helped more than any other influence to form his identity as a young man.²

When Licht's parents arrived in Providence after emigrating from eastern Europe, they discovered a Jewish community in transition. Like other Jewish settlements in America, the Providence community was undergoing dramatic demographic changes and experiencing concomitant social tensions. In 1870, for example, the Providence city directory included only eighteen Jewish names; by 1900 that number had grown to 1,607, an increase reflecting several important changes. While Ashkenazic Jews—those mainly of central and eastern European origin—had been emigrating to the United States in larger numbers than Sephardic Jews—those of southern European or Mediterranean origin—since the second quarter of the nineteenth century, from about 1875 through 1914 the composition of these Ashkenazic immigrants had changed from predominantly German to largely eastern European. Characteristically, these immigrants spoke Yiddish rather than English

or German and were Orthodox rather than Reform as the older community had tended to be.³

In addition to these regional differences, changes in the occupational profile of the Jewish community emerged. The new eastern European immigrants became tailors, shoemakers, peddlers, and grocers, occupations requiring little capital but also further distinguishing these newcomers from their more affluent German predecessors, many of whom were involved in commerce. The immigrants felt settled and accepted in society and perceived their newly achieved respectability to be threatened by the appearances, customs, and indigence of these fresh immigrants. For their own part, the eastern Europeans resented the disapproving condescension of the bourgeois Germans. These differences born of national background, language, and experience, however, never became so acute as to rupture the Jewish community's unity in Providence. Here, a common faith, pressure from the outside society, and a shared desire to succeed in their new homeland bound the community together.⁴

Because Orthodox Judaism focused its major attention and rituals only on adult members, the Licht family became involved in the conservative movement in Providence. Frank Licht participated in synagogue youth activities and served as president of the local Masada chapter and, later, as national vice president of this group. As much as any other aspect of his religious upbringing, however, Licht's growing interest and involvement in Zionism affected his understanding of Judaism. He was a member of the Young Judea movement as well as president of the Providence Zionist District and Rhode Island Zionist Region.⁵

The Zionist movement in America contained several factions, each with a particular emphasis and orientation to central questions of policy. At one end of the spectrum the Mizrahi Organization favored, on the basis of religious orthodoxy and tradition, the development of Jewish life in Palestine. In contrast to the Mizrahi, the Union of *Poale Zion*, or the "Workers of Zion," sought a synthesis of Zionism with socialism. Somewhere between these two groups the General Zionists, as their name suggests, aimed for a broad, nonexclusionary basis for Zionism. They advocated a spirit for General Zionism akin to Chaim Weizmann's notion of "organic Zionism," with its concern to build up the social, cultural, and economic foundations of Jewish settlement in Palestine rather than to press for the immediate implementation of a particular set of proposals concerning the area's political sovereignty. In this context, then, both General Zionists and Weizmann further emphasized the development of youth organizations, education programs, and support networks for prospective or actual Jewish settlers in Palestine.⁶

Licht was well acquainted with the disputes between these various Zionist parties, and attended many of the national conventions where he heard Stephen Wise, Louis Lipsky, and others. Licht recognized Chaim Weizmann as the world leader of the Zionist movement and al-

3. See Marvin Pitterman, "Some Casual Observations," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Society Notes*, III (November 1958), 44-54; Sidney Goldstein, "The Providence Jewish Community After 125 Years of Development," *RIH*, XXI (April 1966), 51-58.

4. See the discussion by David C. Adelman, "The Providence Jewish Communities Unite," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Society Notes*, III (December 1960), 188-91.

5. Conser interview; Michaelson interview.

6. For a discussion of Zionism, its background, and history, see Ben Halpern, *The Idea of the Jewish State* (Cambridge, 1961); Samuel Halperin, *The Political World of American Zionism* (Detroit, 1961); Joseph Blau, *Judaism in America* (Chicago, 1976); David Vital, *The Origins of Zionism* (Oxford, 1975), and *Zionism: The Formative Years* (Oxford, 1982).

7. See the discussion in Adelman, "The Providence Jewish Communities," 160-91, and Beryl Segal, "The General Jewish Committee—the first quarter century, 1945-1970," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Society Notes*, VI (November 1971, 5-24).

8. Conser interview.

ways worked closest with the General Zionist organization through its youth affiliate, Young Judea. Here then in the resources of Judaism the young Licht found the self-identity that first joined his religious interests, scholarly talents, organizational energies, and political concerns.

Licht's increasingly prominent role in charitable service activities further indicated his roots in the Jewish community. Until the third quarter of the nineteenth century, Jewish charity efforts in Providence had been individualistic in nature. In the late 1870s, however, Rabbi Jacob Voorsanger of the Congregation of the Sons of Israel and David founded the Montefiore Lodge, Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Association. The leaders and membership of this group reflected Providence's older and more established German Jewish population. By the 1890s with the growing influx of eastern European Jews into Providence, another organization, the United Hebrew Charities, under the leadership of Rabbi David Blaustein, sought to centralize the distribution of charity and meet the needs of all the factions within the city's growing Jewish community. The United Hebrew Charities, however, soon gave way to the Associated Hebrew Charities of Providence, which in turn was the distant forerunner of the General Jewish Committee of Providence, formed in 1945. Drawing on the efforts of individuals such as Rabbi Blaustein and Harry Cutler (who had been especially active in overseas relief work), the General Jewish Committee provided a single framework for united philanthropy and became a focus for leadership in the Jewish community as a whole. Frank Licht was elected secretary of the General Jewish Committee at its founding and in 1967 became its president. Under his direction the committee undertook successful statewide fund-raising campaigns, and a regional network formed which later became the foundation for further statewide organizational efforts.⁷

Alongside these accomplishments in Jewish community affairs, Licht developed a successful career first in law and then in state politics. He had graduated from Brown University in 1939 and received his law degree from Harvard University in 1941, after which he joined the law firm of Ira Letts and Andrew Quinn. Licht's first bid for public office came when he ran for the state senate in 1948. In this race, he secured the blessing of Providence Mayor Dennis J. Roberts, one of the major power brokers in the state Democratic organization and a man whose support was absolutely necessary if Licht was to break into the party's higher echelons. This endorsement paid off not only when Licht won the state senate race, but also when Roberts continued his own political career as governor. As mayor of Providence Roberts had established himself as a progressive-minded politician and an efficient administrator, and these traits continued during his years as governor. As a state senator, Licht worked closely with Roberts behind the scenes to caucus support and to help draft several pieces of social legislation, with workmen's compensation and home rule heading the agenda.⁸

Licht's budding political career halted abruptly in 1956 when Roberts appointed him to the Rhode Island Superior Court. In exchanging the feverish give-and-take of Smith Hill for a calmer atmosphere of the judicial chambers, Licht recognized that he was undertaking new duties and would be facing new challenges. For the judiciary, in Licht's opinion, was above all a nonpolitical arena, and thus he felt it essential to refrain from any public comment on political issues. As Licht would later remark, whenever he gave a speech during his tenure as judge, "I never said anything more controversial than speaking for brotherhood, motherhood, and against disease." Yet if the judiciary precluded political comment, Licht still considered it as a vehicle for change within society. As a law student Licht had always admired jurors such as Louis Brandeis, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Benjamin Cardozo. He believed that it was entirely appropriate (as in the reapportionment case of *Baker v. Carr* in 1962) for the judiciary to take action that the legislature was afraid or unable to enact. "The law," Licht once declared, "can be stable without being immutable," and in this concept of governmental activism there is a thematic link between Licht's years of service in the legislative, judicial, and executive branches of government.⁹

9. *Ibid.*

In 1968 Frank Licht's career in public life took another turn when he resigned his position on the bench to seek election as governor. His decision to step down from the court was a difficult one, and the race he entered promised to be an uphill battle, especially in light of the popularity of the incumbent Republican governor, John H. Chafee. Yet Licht's political liberalism and ethnic background enabled Democrats to cast the contest within an older political perspective so prominent in Rhode Island's electoral contests of the twentieth century. Voters would be asked to choose between progressive, socially minded, and ethnically diverse Democrats, on the one hand, and Republican candidates alleged to be the conservative wardens of the rural Yankee social elite, on the other.

A view of Charles street around 1900 includes signs for Jewish-owned businesses. RIHS Collection (RHi x3 4006).



10. Elmer E. Cornwell, Jr., "Party Absorption of Ethnic Groups: The Case of Providence, Rhode Island," *Social Forces*, XXXVIII (March 1960), 205-8.

11. William G. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island, A History* (New York, 1978), 156-57.

12. See the recent discussion in *Ibid.*, 200-8.

The Rhode Island Democratic party had indeed been the first to develop an ethnic constituency in the state. Reform movements during the Progressive Era, especially those concerned with electoral reform, had not achieved the success in Rhode Island that they had experienced in other parts of the nation. Instead, an older pattern persisted, one in which the Republican party, controlled and largely populated by native-born, rural, and old-time Yankees, dominated a Democratic party which was slowly becoming more ethnically heterogeneous and urban. Until, approximately, the Civil War, both parties had tended to be native born and Yankee, and in 1917 the Republicans were still 90 percent Yankee and overwhelmingly rural. Until 1888, limitations on the franchise further strengthened Rhode Island Republicans. Before that year naturalized males could vote only if they were substantial property holders, while native-born males suffered under no such restrictions. By this time, however, the Democrats had begun incorporating the urban Irish immigrants into their party structure. With the reduction of the property requirements, ethnic (largely Irish) affiliation with the Democratic party continued to such an extent that by 1900 Irish politicians controlled three-quarters of the ward committee positions in the city of Providence. In this way, the Democrats broadened their political base by integrating the growing and newly enfranchised Irish vote into their party organization.¹⁰

Other ethnic groups besides the Irish, however, were moving into Rhode Island. In 1910, the year with the highest percentage of foreign born population in Rhode Island, 30 percent of the population claimed Yankee heritage, 33 percent had been born abroad, and 36 percent cited at least one parent born outside the United States. A breakdown of this non-Yankee population in 1910 shows 35,000 French-Canadians, 30,000 Irish, 38,000 English (including Welsh and Scots), 27,000 Italians, and 6,000 Portuguese.¹¹ The Jewish population in Rhode Island was much smaller than most other ethnic groups, with 1,607 families in 1900 and a total of 1,193 Jewish immigrants entering Rhode Island between 1885 and 1900.

The implications of these political and demographic developments became clear in 1935 with the famous "bloodless revolution" engineered by Governor Theodore Francis Green. Under Green's leadership the Democrats gained control of the legislature and judiciary, thus consolidating their power in all three branches of government. Beyond the shift from Republican to Democratic predominance in the state, two other significant developments resulted from Green's actions. First, the ranks of Democratic party leadership and patronage positions were opened to ethnic groups besides the Irish. Additionally, under Green's direction the governor assumed greater authority and clearer responsibility in the state's governmental structure.¹²

Perhaps ironically the door to wider ethnic participation in the Democratic party would be opened first by Green, a wealthy Yankee. In any case, by 1950 the results of his actions were clear; the ethnic heritage

of Democratic legislators broke down in the following percentages: Irish, 33.8; French-Canadian, 22.1; Yankee, 20; Italian, 13.2; Jewish, 4.4; and Portuguese, 4.4. Beyond that, in the two decades following Green's revolution, the Democratic party in Rhode Island worked in harmony with the activist New Deal/Fair Deal philosophies of the national administrations. Led by bright, ambitious, and ethnically diverse party leaders, Rhode Island Democrats constructed an urban and ethnic power base, a coalition accurately mirroring the changing composition of Rhode Island's population.¹³

By 1968, however, the Democratic party organization in Rhode Island had lost some of its clout, its power sapped by a decade of intraparty frustration and contention. Divisive primary battles for governor and United States senator had weakened the party's earlier unity and diverted its organizational efforts. Party endorsement, in short, no longer carried the same expectations and assurances. The clearest gauge of Democratic reversals came in 1962 when John Chafee captured the governor's office. Six years later, Licht's prior legislative and judicial experience as well as his distance from recent party squabbles made him an appealing Democratic challenger for the difficult upcoming gubernatorial contest with Chafee. Beyond that, Licht's voting record, electoral style, and political concerns harkened back to the earlier Democratic heyday. In early June, Licht's name was touted in the public press as the likely Democratic candidate, and on July 5, 1968, he resigned from the superior court in order to seek that office.¹⁴

Nineteen sixty-eight was a volatile election year in America, one in which electoral contests served as plebiscites on scores of local issues and national policies. Licht stated that he left the court because he felt that he had something to offer which the constraints of the judiciary prevented him from doing and that, further, he would be able to have a more direct and positive influence on the lives of Rhode Islanders as governor than as a judge. Licht's running mates against the Chafee slate were J. Joseph Garrahy and Anthony Brosco in a ticket constructed to appeal to a wide range of ethnic voters. As they had been doing since the 1930s, Democratic party leaders again resorted to the familiar techniques of ethnically balancing their ticket in the hopes of offering voters a clear choice to the Yankee Republican governor.¹⁵

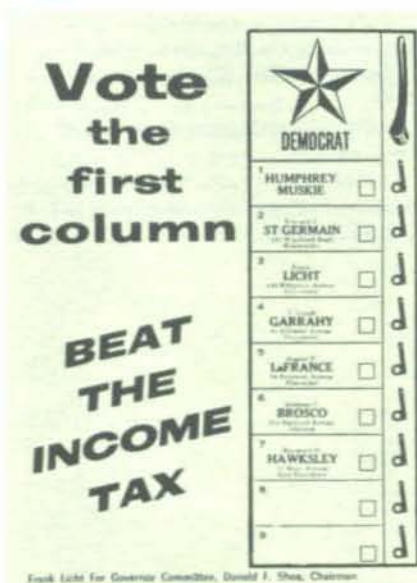
Considered by most observers to be the underdog, Licht waged a vigorous campaign focusing on social issues and attacking Chafee on his plan for a personal income tax. By October, Licht felt that his voter recognition problem had been overcome, and he was gearing up for the last weeks of campaigning when Chafee's daughter died tragically. All electioneering stopped until just prior to election day when both sides briefly resumed the campaign. Despite predictions of sympathy votes, religious bigotry, and loss of momentum, Licht won the election, and became the first Jew in Rhode Island history to be elected governor and one of only a handful to be so elected in modern American political history.¹⁶

13. *Ibid.*, 208-9, and Matthew J. Smith, "Rhode Island Politics, 1956-1964: Party Realignment," *RIH*, XXXV (May 1976), 48-61.

14. *Providence Journal*, June 11 and July 4, 1968.

15. *Ibid.*, June 30 and Nov. 8, 1968; Conser and Michaelson interviews.

16. Michaelson interview.



Campaign literature from the 1968 election reveals the mix of ethnic backgrounds of the Democratic candidates and illustrates a prominent campaign theme that would later return to haunt Frank Licht's second term as governor. RIHS Collection (RHi x35198).

17. *Providence Journal*, Nov. 6, 1968.

18. *Ibid.*, March 9 and 21, 1969; Michaelson interview.

19. *Ibid.*, Nov. 17, 1969, May 18, 1970.

The margin of victory over Chafee was close, with Licht capturing 52 percent of the statewide vote. Political commentators observed that Licht did very well in Providence and the major cities and that this edge counteracted his deficits in the state's rural areas. This pattern represented a resumption of older voting trends in which Providence voters led the way to electoral victory rather than being outnumbered by the rural and suburban areas of the state. Beyond that, Licht had capitalized on Chafee's sponsorship of a state personal income tax and had used this issue primarily to defeat him.¹⁷ Here again the Democrats depicted the Republicans, with the Yankee John Chafee as their leader, as defenders of the interests of the state's social and financial elite, and represented their own plan as a fairer and more balanced approach. The Democratic proposal called for an investment tax instead of Chafee's personal income tax. The investment tax in effect was a dividend interest tax focused on stocks, savings deposits, and capital gains. And after Licht's election this plan eventually passed the Democratic legislature, as most legislators seemed to prefer it to the more politically volatile personal income tax proposal.¹⁸

During his first term, Licht continued the centralization of power and programmatic initiative in the governor's office that was a legacy of Green's revolution in the 1930s. Under his direction the state established a municipal police training academy, created a Board of Regents with jurisdiction over all public education, appointed a commission overseeing public utilities, legislated improvements in the state consumers council and workmen's compensation, and authorized a presidential primary. Beyond that, Licht's investment tax plan was well received, although many in the financial community worried that the relatively small amounts of revenues that it and additional levies brought into the government's coffers would not solve the state's fiscal problems. Still, the latitude for programmatic initiative given to the governor's office, in conjunction with the legislature's support, enabled Licht to plan, promote, and carry out his programs. Successful leadership is often a blend of administrative vision and understanding what is achievable politically, and in Frank Licht's first term these two ingredients had complemented each other nicely. When he decided to seek reelection in 1970, Licht could point to a record full of accomplishments highlighted by his efforts to reorganize and streamline state government while not raising personal taxes.¹⁹

Although as governor Licht had spoken out on national issues such as the Vietnam War, the 1970 race focused on questions closer to Rhode Island. Republican challenger Herbert DeSimone, a former attorney general, combined an image of vigorous public experience, an ample war chest, and a non-Yankee heritage to broaden his party's appeal. Indeed, within the Republican party, challenges to its traditional Yankee bias had become evident. Christopher Del Sesto had run as the Repub-

lican candidate for governor twice, narrowly losing a contested election to Dennis Roberts in 1956 and winning in 1958. In 1963 Joseph O'Donnell and Louis Jackvony had opposed Chafee in the Republican gubernatorial primary. In 1970 the Republicans again sought a non-Yankee candidate to beat the Democrats at their own game. Led by DeSimone, they criticized Licht for an alleged financial crisis confronting the state, and they suggested that the incumbent faced a credibility problem with the voters. They again raised the issue of taxes and the adequacy of Licht's investment tax plan. Despite these criticisms, Licht continued to advocate his plan, and as late as September, in a debate with DeSimone, he vowed not to impose a personal income tax. Beyond that, the Republicans, capitalizing on DeSimone's successful prosecution record as attorney general, called for a renewed attack on crime.²⁰

As late as six weeks before the election, the race between Licht and DeSimone appeared quite close. Overall, polls showed DeSimone leading Licht by 40 to 32 percent with 28 percent undecided. Broken down by ethnic groups, the figures revealed that DeSimone led among Italo-Americans (39 to 25 percent with 36 percent undecided), Yankees (35 to 23 percent with 42 percent undecided), and French-Canadians (40 to 35 percent with 25 percent undecided), while Licht led among Irish voters (48 to 33 percent with 19 percent undecided). In that same poll, Protestants strongly favored DeSimone (58 to 22 percent with 20 percent undecided), while Catholics gave Licht a slim majority (37 to 35 percent with 28 percent undecided). The consistent number of undecided voters ultimately proved to be the most significant factor in the election. In November, when the results were tallied, Frank Licht had once again come from behind to capture the office of governor.²¹

The jubilation of reelection for Licht and his staff was short-lived, for state and national economic indicators continued to point downward. Licht's second inaugural address, in January 1971, admitted the severity of the economic problems facing the state and predicted that his second term would concentrate on "coping with the paradoxical dilemma of unchecked inflation and rising unemployment."²² What Licht did not admit was that beneath this dilemma lurked the even more perplexing issue of tax reform.

Licht's investment tax had received mixed reviews during his first term. While politicians applauded Licht's commitment to the investment tax, others in the state's financial community continued to point out that the tax simply had not raised enough money to meet the needs of the state budget.²³ Provisions in the state constitution stipulating that the state budget must be balanced at the end of the fiscal year and prohibiting the government from borrowing money to accomplish this purpose further exacerbated the problem. At the beginning of Licht's second term, the anticipated state budget deficit was twenty-five million dollars. Licht saw only a limited number of options available to



Licht explains his fiscal proposals at a conference to discuss the 1970 state budget. Providence Journal Bulletin Photo.

20. *Ibid.*, April 27, Sept. 17 and 20, 1970.

21. *Ibid.*, Sept. 24, 1970.

22. *Providence Evening Bulletin*, Jan. 5, 1971.

23. *Ibid.*, Sept. 24, 1970.

24. *Providence Journal*, Dec. 12, 1972; Conser interview.

25. *Providence Evening Bulletin*, Jan. 6, 1971, Dec. 14, 1972; Conser interview.

26. *Providence Journal*, March 25, 1972; *Providence Evening Bulletin*, June 21, 1972.

meet this economic crisis. He could work to raise the sales tax, but it was doubtful that this device would bring in sufficient funds. He could institute a payroll tax, but he believed that solution would further compound the problems of employers, who already faced a depressed economy. He could cut social services as a means of reducing expenditures, but Licht was personally and philosophically opposed to this approach to balancing the budget. Finally, he could institute a graduated personal income tax, and in what he called his "most painful public decision," he chose this path.²⁴

Licht assumed full responsibility for the tax proposal, and upon its subsequent enactment by the legislature he hailed it as one of the greatest achievements of his administration. Yet, coming on the heels of his campaign pledge not to impose this very tax, many criticized Licht for the expediency of his decision and the seeming duplicity of his campaign promises. In response, Licht maintained at the time and has reiterated subsequently that he was forced to deal with an economic challenge of major proportions, and this solution gave the state financial solvency and a firm economic footing for the future.²⁵

Controversy over the tax measure swirled around Licht throughout his second term and was revived in March 1972 when he announced that he would not run for a third term. Licht cited his desire to return to private life and nonpublic responsibilities, and Democratic leaders were just as happy to avoid a bitter primary race and continued discussion of the tax issue. Subsequently, the French-Canadian mayor of Warwick, Philip W. Noel, headed the Democratic ticket and won the race for governor in 1972.²⁶

In 1970, Licht again faced a formidable Republican opponent, Herbert DiSimone. Here the two candidates conduct a television debate on Oct. 26, shortly before the election. Television newsman Dick Wood moderates. Providence Journal Bulletin Photo.



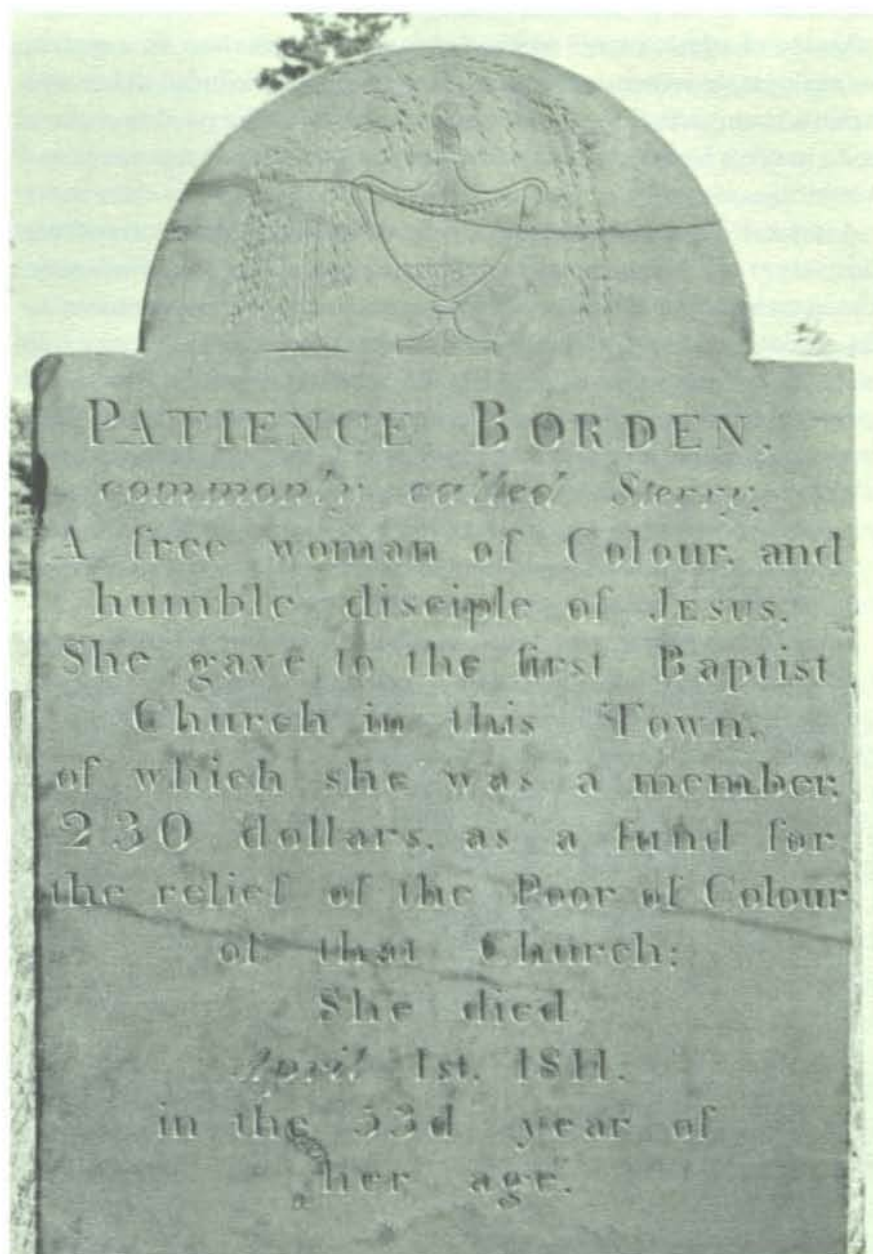
In reviewing his two terms in office, Licht expressed satisfaction with what he had accomplished, though he recognized that his reversal on the tax issue angered many. Beneath such personal appraisals, Licht's tenure as governor displayed two stylistic features quite consistent with Novak's analysis of ethnicity. First, there was Licht's respect for and acknowledgment of the diverse ethnic heritage of the state's population. Participating in various ethnic and national holidays, attending the variety of social and political club meetings, or speaking to their anniversary celebrations symbolized his ceremonial role as governor and allowed him to recognize his ethnic constituencies. Beyond that, Licht explicitly expressed his own personal identification with the rich contribution of ethnic groups to Rhode Island and the nation. In a speech, for example, to a Portuguese American group, Licht alluded to his own father's immigration to America and underscored the need to express pride in one's heritage and to preserve ethnic culture within the larger American society.²⁷

A second dimension of Licht's gubernatorial career concerned his cultivation of a Rhode Island brand of the politics of public familiarity. The state's comparatively small size promoted public accessibility to the governor and with all points within a quarter hour's helicopter ride from Providence, Licht could make full use of his political and civic appearances to remain visible to all groups and informed about their concerns. Beyond such traditional political practices, Licht could also take advantage of the increasingly available opportunities of television to communicate with the electorate on a regular basis. Technological innovation and political style complemented one another in Licht's mixture of ethnic identity and political practice.

Frank Licht's public career both represented a particular ethnic group's heritage and aspirations and signaled the successful translation of these specific aspirations into broader, more publicly accessible terms. Licht's immersion in Zionism during his youth and his subsequent involvement in Jewish community affairs as an adult marked out the contours and the continuity of his identity as a Jew in modern America. Likewise, in the political realm Licht's own style of governmental activism and early alliance with Dennis Roberts displayed his consonance with a tradition of Democratic politicians stretching back to the New Deal years. Beyond that, Licht's electoral career suggested that if ethnicity had played a role in his success, it was not simply a function of the 3 percent of the Rhode Island electorate that was Jewish. Rather, his skillful administration of particular issues, the symbolic identification by an ethnically diverse electorate with a candidate whose experiences were similar to their own, and the Democratic party's role as a vehicle for multicultural aspirations helps to explain Licht's achievements. Frank Licht's public career, culminating in his election as governor, provides a vivid example of the persistence of ethnic identity in Rhode Island and America.

27. *Providence Journal*, Sept. 29, 1969.

A rare memorial to a member of Providence's black community in the early nineteenth century, Patience Borden's gravestone contains a wealth of information. It reads "Patience Borden / commonly called Sterry / A free woman of Colour, and humble / disciple of Jesus, She gave to the first Baptist / Church in this Town, of which she was a member, / 230 dollars as a fund for / the relief of the Poor of Colour / of that Church; / she died / April 1st, 1811 / in the 53d year of / her age." Photograph by Robert P. Emlen.



Black Pauper Burial Records: Providence, Rhode Island, 1777–1831

Jamie Coughtry and Jay Coughtry

The inestimable value of vital records (births, deaths, and marriages) has long been recognized by genealogists and historians alike. What frustrates researchers of both stripes is simply the paucity, incompleteness and/or imprecision of such data. As both groups know only too well, the availability of vital records generally decreases as one moves backward in time, down the social pyramid, and across racial lines from white to black. Given these formidable barriers, it is not hard to appreciate the task of locating such information for the black laboring poor in early America. The skimpy and tentative findings to date by both amateurs and professionals in the field, especially those focusing on the North, are ample and ongoing testimony to the dearth of basic resources available to those engaged in the related pursuits of Afro-American history, demography, and genealogy before the Civil War.


A source famine of this magnitude requires researchers seeking new evidence to extend their normal range and explore uncharted documentary territory. Discovery of the subjoined black pauper data resulted from such a search and illustrates the potential dividends available from manuscript holdings in local archives. Publishing these records ultimately serves two functions: they add to the small number of vital records relating to the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century black community in Providence and suggest a category of archival material that should assist those in search of the laboring poor (black and white) in Providence and other American communities as well.

The burial records appended below derive from a single source, the Providence Town Papers, a mammoth manuscript collection comprising nearly ninety thousand items assembled by a city records commission during the 1890s. Briefly described by Bradford Swan in these pages in July 1952, the Town Papers have yet to receive their due from the historical community. They have been ignored at considerable loss, especially to social historians, for although the bulk of material relates to the workings of the town council, the principal governing body in Providence's preincorporation period (1636–1832), the highly detailed and personal nature of that institution's proceedings renders them a remarkable repository of information about town life generally and the laboring classes specifically. In short, black burial records are but a single nugget in this vast and largely untapped mother lode: there is

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Few blacks received the extensive eulogy bestowed on the talented Caesar Pratt in the Providence Gazette, May 19, 1804. RIHS Collection (RHi x3 5197).

At Salem, "Cæsar Pratt, a black man, aged 65—remarkable for his instinctive facility in numbers, by which he was able to make, in an instant, calculations which would require in common persons the aid of many figures; his memory was also the register of every person's age of which he had ever been informed, and which he was sure to remind them of as the anniversary of their birth came round; and in other respects he was a convenient chronologist."



virtually no topic treated in social history—"old" or "new"—that cannot profitably be pursued in the Providence Town Papers.

Despite local resolutions as early as 1655 requiring residents to report all births, marriages, and deaths to the town clerk, the systematic recording of vital records in Providence dates only from 1840. Consequently, when City Registrar Edwin M. Snow indexed all available municipal records from Providence's founding to 1850, totals for the three categories numbered a mere 28,993. The latter year marked the town's 214th anniversary, at which time the population stood at 41,513. (See Edwin M. Snow, comp. *Alphabetical Index of the Births, Marriages, and Deaths, Recorded in Providence From 1636 to 1850 inclusive* [Providence, 1879].) As Snow's *Index* reveals, the collection of mortality figures had been especially lax. Prior to 1840, when undertakers began to file monthly reports with the city clerk, "there were really no records of deaths in the town and city of Providence" (p. vii). Snow found only 400 deaths noted for the entire period, which, when supplemented with church listings and the abundant figures for the post-1840 period, brought the number of deaths recorded for the entire time span to only 10,003.

Not surprisingly, the collection of black mortality figures suffered disproportionately before record keeping was systematized in 1840. Snow recorded only 14 deaths of Providence blacks between 1636 and 1839, 13 for the 1766–1801 period and one in 1833. In sum, there are virtually no public records on black mortality for the entire 196-year history of the Town of Providence nor during the first eight years of the city's incorporated history.

Alternate sources are few and do little to alleviate the dearth of black mortality records. The occasional abstracts of annual mortality figures appearing in the local press during the early nineteenth century do not

include racial categories. Gravestones, too, are of limited value. Few blacks could afford even a modest marker, and, with the exception of "servants" (really, slaves) and free blacks with conspicuous African names, race is infrequently noted on grave markers. A final alternative, newspaper obituaries that list the decedent's race, are too few to serve as an adequate substitute for public records. The Providence press, which dates from 1762, failed to eulogize a local free black until 1804 (having noted the passing of a slave or two previously), and by 1832 had listed the deaths of less than 100 free blacks, invariably described as "respectable" men and women "of color." That figure, incidentally, includes not only obituaries proper but also news items noting the deaths of local black residents.



Another memorial reads "In Memory of / three respectable Black / Persons, Phillis, Rose, & / Fanny Chace / who served Faithfully / in the family of / Samuel Chace Esqr." Photograph by Robert P. Emlen.

Although Thomas Graham had been a prominent member of Providence's black community and received a death notice in the Providence Gazette of May 18, 1820, the Providence Town Papers reveal that he, too, received a pauper burial. RIHS Collection (RHi x3 52 84).

DIED,

In this town, on Sunday last, Mr. THOMAS GRAHAM, a respectable man of color, aged 38.

Black mortality records, then, remain woefully incomplete even when combined with additional sources. Therefore, the burial records included in the Town Papers contain the single largest source for those seeking the missing third vital statistic. In most cases, the information pertaining to black pauper burials is drawn from bills submitted to the Town of Providence by individuals—town officials as well as private citizens—who assisted in the process of interring the town poor. Normally, expenses included the cost of a coffin (traditionally pine), grave clothes (usually a "winding sheet and shirt"), and grave digging and burial (occasionally performed by a black gravedigger). Less frequently, itemized statements record rental fees for a "horse and hearse" and such incidentals as candles for the mourning family.

In a few cases the information is extracted from bills received by the Overseer of the Poor from citizens who supplied the deceased with some form of aid during his or her "last sickness." Rarely do any of the documents contain a cause of death, although in a few instances other items in the Town Papers provide it. Occasionally, additional information is noted on the account. Common examples include residency at the time of death, especially if the decedent was a boarder, and for identification purposes, the name or names of kin, friends, or landlord.

It is important to note that for the most part the dates provided refer to burial not death. Variance between the two averages two or three days, although in a few cases the discrepancy may run as high as a week to ten days.

Finally, it should be emphasized that while all persons on the list, by definition, received a pauper's burial (i.e. interment at public expense), all were not necessarily paupers at the time of their decease. In fact, persons who had been subsisting solely on public assistance, and therefore qualified as paupers, collectively constitute a small minority of the overall listing. For the majority, death occasioned their sole appearance on the poor rolls. They were, for the most part, drawn from the ranks of the black laboring poor, a class whose subsistence level of day-to-day living could not readily absorb the cost of burial—minimally six dollars, a week's wages for a laborer during the period.

Sprinkled among the poor wage earners and their children, the widows and widowers, and the minority of genuine paupers who make up the bulk of the list are a number of men and women who, either at the time of their demise or earlier, belonged to the bedrock of Providence's



The gravestone of another Providence black reads "Here lies/ The body of YARROW/ an African who after/ a life of quiet Integrity/ He resigned his Soul to God/ April 7, 1786 aged/ Aged about 60 years/ Mat. 25. 23d Well done good and/ Faithful Servant Enter into the/ joy of the Lord/ An honest Man's the Noblest work of God."

Photograph by Robert P. Emlen.

black community. A few had fallen far down the economic ladder. Thomas Read, for example, had been a prosperous barber with a large, white clientele until a succession of family illnesses bankrupted him in 1822 and eventually forced him into the Dexter Asylum. Thomas Graham, while lacking Read's wealth, was serving on the committee of the African Union Meeting House at the time of his death. In addition to such men of mark, those familiar with Providence's black community in this period will recognize the names of former property owners, church and organization members, Revolutionary War veterans, and ex-slaves of prominent white families. It is by no means, then, merely a catalogue of the marginal members of the black community. If it necessarily excludes those at the apex of black society, "genteel people of color," the pauper burial records comprise more of a cross section of black Providence than their title might initially suggest.

Public records often serve to illuminate private lives. Systematic study of the Providence Town Papers certainly reinforces that lesson

and reminds us that the manuscript public records of many other towns undoubtedly contain similar unexplored resources. These black burial records are but a single, albeit archetypal, example of public manuscripts that can serve the needs of the entire historical community.

BLACK PAUPER BURIALS: PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, 1777-1831

<i>Name</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Providence Town Papers No.</i>
Black child	7/5/1784	2861
Black child	7/5/1784	2861
Child of Black woman	3/6/1790	5575
Black woman	2/9/1793	7781
Negro boy	4/1795	9758
Negro child	4/11/1795	9689
Negro child	4/7/1796	10746
Negro man	10/14/1796	11268
Black man	4/10/1801	002285
Black child	5/12/1803	005154
Black man	12/22/1803	0105406
Black person	6/4/1804	0106458
Negro child	12/21/1804	007522
Black woman	1/9/1809	0013779
Black woman	6/13/1809	0013548
Black man	2/5/1810	0014661
Black man	10/10/1811	0017468
Black woman	10/11/1811	0017468
Black woman	4/6/1812	0018899
Black child	6/20/1812	0020504
Black child	8/28/1812	0020504
Negro man	8/29/1812	0018701
Black woman	3/30/1813	0020667
Black woman	4/13/1813	0021075
Black woman	6/4/1813	0021168
Black woman	6/21/1813	0021168
Black woman	11/8/1814	0024402
Black woman	12/6/1814	0024402
Man of color	10/6/1815	0024690
Woman of color	2/13/1816	0025565
Woman of color	5/12/1816	0025684
Woman of color	5/18/1816	0025684
Black man	6/27/1816	0025747
Black child	3/17/1817	0028712
Black woman	4/3/1817	0028712
Black woman	10/8/1817	0029099
Black woman	6/27/1818	0030939
Black child	6/29/1818	0031772
Man of color	2/1/1819	0031716
Black man	2/2/1819	0031772
Colored child	11/7/1820	0036455
Black boy	7/20/1822	0040193
Black man	8/7/1822	0040274
Black	12/9/1822	0042514
Black woman	5/15/1824	0044431
Black man	8/1/1824	0044612
Colored man	9/2/1829	0058515
Adams, Hannah	7/10/1828	0055597
Adams, Polly	12/19/1787	4575
Angell, James	10/8/1823	0042881
Angell, John	2/2/1829	0058412
Anthony, Michael	5/25/1815	0024537

BLACK PAUPER BURIALS: PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, 1777-1831

<i>Name</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Providence Town Papers No.</i>
Antone, Lucy	10/24/1824	0044798
Antono	3/8/1819	0031790
Babcock, Martha	2/25/1831	0062491
Bailey, Violet	2/6/1812	0018432
Barney, Fillis	3/28/1831	0062514
Barrett, Richard	1/17/1826	0049270
Bates, Betsey	9/12/1827	0053455
Blacke, Diley (child of)	6/14/1814	0022033
Bloomdol, Jacob	12/13/1806	009830
Blympton, Daniel (child of)	5/11/1829	0058463
Blympton, John (child of)	3/25/1829	0058384
Boston, William	12/12/1831	0062693
Bowers, Rosanna	9/17/1818	0030939
Bradford (male)	9/28/1823	0042852
Briggs, Mary	1/17/1826	0049311
Briggs, Taney	12/18/1819	0035152
Brown, Free love	1/29/1828	0055130
Brown, George (wife of)	9/13/1816	0025926
Brown, Henry	3/4/1825	0047325
Brown, John	5/12/1799	16587
Brown, John	2/18/1807	0010494
Brown, Joseph	4/21/1826	0049630
Brown, Jude	12/30/1829	005622
Brown, London	2/20/1795	9467
Brown, Mary	9/15/1815	0024690
Brown, Newport	1/27/1806	009171
Brown, Nicholas	7/29/1820	0035825
Brown, Pero	1/23/1780	1880
Brown, Provy (wife of)	9/19/1800	13914
Brown, Rhoda	11/5/1819	0032987
Brown, Stephen	7/9/1828	0055597
Burdon, Hetty	5/16/1830	0060054
Burk, William	4/3/1823	0042381
Burrill, Prime	9/12/1800	13914
Bush (male)	6/2/1816	0025684
Carlow, Edward	3/15/1826	0049495
Case, Thomas (wife of)	1/17/1826	0049310
Casey, Mary	11/13/1825	0047979
Cato	12/20/1794	9067
Church, Deborah	10/13/1808	0012147
Church, Hannah (child of)	8/10/1804	007519
Church, Jeremiah	3/11/1829	0058370
Clifford, Rhoba	4/19/1827	0053052
Congdon, Roba	11/29/1808	009397
Cooke, Violet	9/28/1800	13914
Cooper, Isaac	5/6/1808	0012265
Corey, S. (female)	2/27/1822	0042398
Corles, John	8/18/1827	0053391
Corlis, Bristol	2/14/1815	0024402
Covil, John (child of)	2/22/1798	12792
Craft, Samuel D.	1/16/1807	0010495
Crawford, Hannah	4/16/1812	0018447
Curtis (female)	3/27/1824	0044322
Davis, John	9/11/1821	0039717
Douglas, Nero	10/14/1796	11268
Dozier, Peter (child of)	1/3/1825	0047278
Durfey, Rhoda	1/28/1826	0049472
Earl, Peter	8/23/1777	1188
Finch, Prudy	3/20/1826	0049570
Fortune, Peggy (child of)	12/4/1828	0055843

BLACK PAUPER BURIALS: PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, 1777-1831

Name	Date	Providence
		Town Papers No.
Frances, John	7/15/1820	0035825
Francis, Esther	2/10/1824	0044127
Francis, Hannah	5/8/1828	0055443
Francis, Henry (daughter of)	1/10/1826	0049311
Francis, Thomas (child of)	10/24/1826	0040193
Francis, Thomas	2/2/1830	0059959
Franklin, James	1/3/1829	0058278
Freeman, Brister	3/9/1832	0063251
Freeman, Joseph	1/9/1823	0042100
"French John"	5/9/1822	0040599
Gardner, Content	11/27/1829	0058597
Gardner, Margaret	1/8/1799	16217
Gardner, Nancy	8/26/1803	005249
George	7/8/1810	0015038
George, Melody	8/21/1817	0027838
Goree (male)	4/22/1823	0042567
Gorham, Prince (daughter of)	2/14/1809	0015218
Gorham, Prince	8/1/1810	0015218
Govmar, Jack	4/4/1806	009306
Graham, Mrs. Thomas (son of)	8/5/1820	0035825
Grant, Josiah (child of)	5/23/1827	0053144
Grant, Polly	3/26/1827	0052945
Gray, Levina	4/7/1817	0028710
Green, Jane	5/12/1825	0047539
Green, William (daughter of)	12/8/1812	0020504
Greene, Ann	6/26/1828	0055561
Greene, Countice	6/11/1825	0047602
Greene, Hariot	5/26/1823	0042567
Greene, Mrs. William	5/28/1812	0018522
Hacker, Andrew	1778	1585
Hannibal (male)	7/15/1826	0049886
Harcklis (female)	4/8/1787	4266
Haskell (child of)	10/17/1826	0050177
Haskell, Mary	5/22/1830	0060060
Hatch, James	10/14/1819	0032888
Havens (female)	9/30/1797	12231
Hazard, Lydia	2/18/1822	0039560
Hazard, Mary	7/6/1828	0055584
Hazard, Ruth	4/24/1815	0024537
Hazzard, Adah	10/16/1808	0012146
Hercules	3/16/1787	4295
Hill, Mary	2/24/1813	0020667
Hix, John (child of)	6/26/1799	16384
Hix, John (wife of)	6/26/1795	10840
Holden, Mercy (child of)	11/27/1824	0044936
Holden, Sarah	10/5/1830	0060156
Hopkins, Ebo	8/5/1806	009512
Hopkins, Pomp	12/19/1820	0036455
Humphrey, Joseph	6/12/1806	009350
Hussey, Joseph	4/19/1824	0044360
Ide, Fillis	10/3/1811	0017468
Ingerson, Stephen	6/2/1821	0037086
Jackson (male)	1/16/1819	0031716
Jackson, Eunice	3/29/1824	0044294
Jackson, Thomas	3/15/1826	0049495
Jeffers, Sally	4/1/1825	0047415
Jenckes, Betsey	3/12/1828	0055289
Jenckes, Thankful	10/9/1824	0044778
Jenkins, Congo	2/3/1809	0013629
Jenkins, Peggy	12/10/1827	0051202
Johnson, Adeline	10/29/1829	0058570

BLACK PAUPER BURIALS: PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, 1777-1831

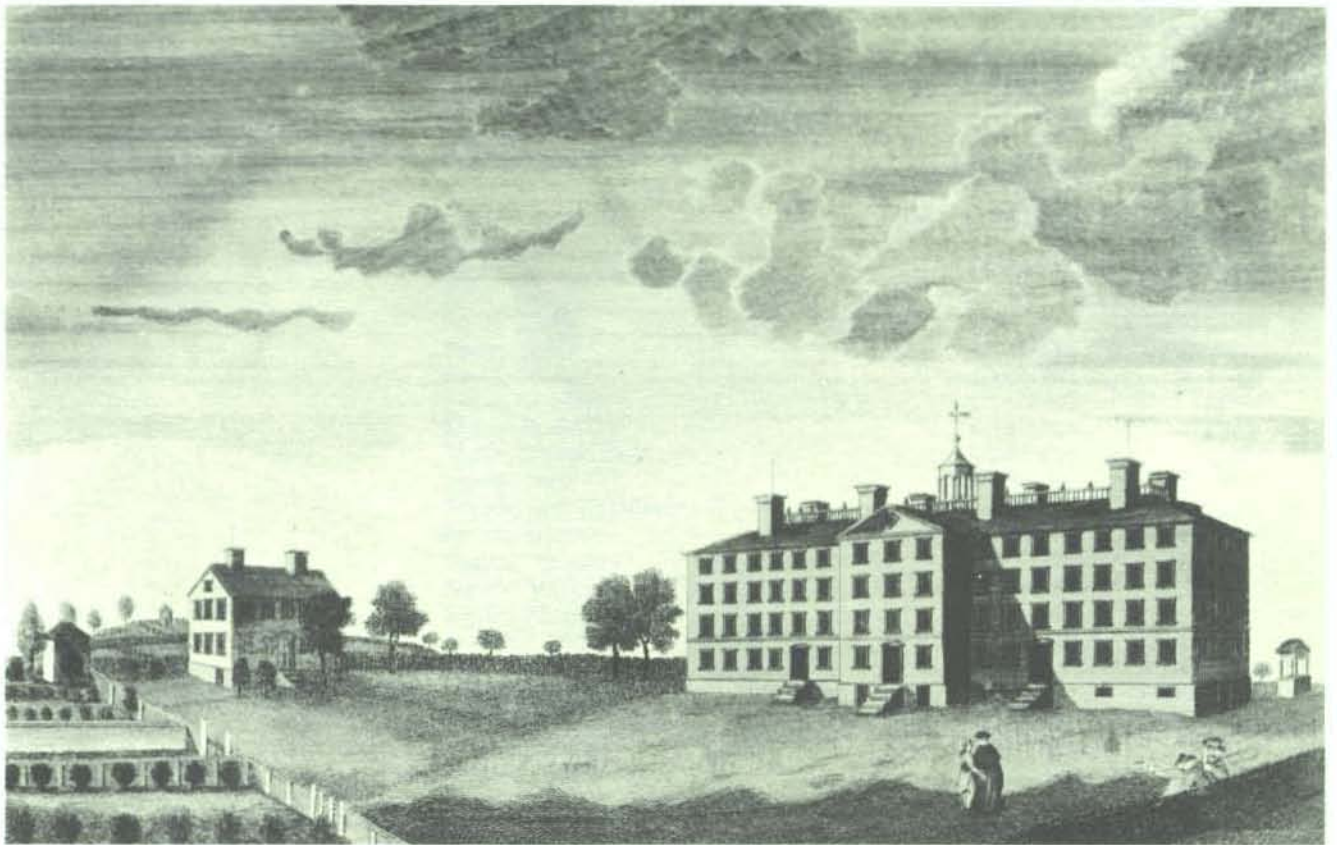
<i>Name</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Providence Town Papers No.</i>
Johnson, James	8/4/1811	0017468
Johnson, James	8/5/1819	0032401
Johnson, Peggy	4/14/1804	006369
Johnson, Sylvia	9/28/1822	0040465
Johnson, William	1829	0056943
Johnston, James	7/10/1813	0021257
Joles, Lucy	10/24/1819	0032925
Jones, Paul	12/7/1795	10126
Kelley, John Weaver	3/15/1809	0013629
Kinnikut, Patience	9/18/1814	0022043
Landemon, Betsey (child of)	4/8/1825	0047632
Lasimo, Nasis	11/6/1808	0012147
Lawrence, Henry	7/16/1828	0055610
Leachmore (male)	1/24/1798	12619
Lewis, William	1/17/1824	0044031
Lippitt, Fanny (child of)	9/25/1828	0055775
Lippitt, James	5/26/1810	0014865
Littlefield, Zilpha	4/3/1817	0028712
Low, Lucretia	11/25/1824	0044928
Luckey, Nancy	12/23/1823	0040986
Lyndon, Robert (child of)	7/11/1822	0040121
Manchester, Constant	4/24/1815	0024470
Manning, Lewis	4/1794	8683
Marsh, Mrs.	7/4/1830	0060075
Mathewson, Sarah	1/20/1811	0016939
Maulbone, Newport	2/3/1810	0015218
McKenzie, Sally A.	11/20/1826	0050271
Miller, Peggy	9/23/1826	0050087
Mingo, Dinah	12/8/1822	0042398
Mingo, Jenny	9/27/1804	006681
Moore, Rache (child of)	12/13/1808	0013242
Morris, Harry	6/7/1786	5686
Mott, Thomas	1/7/1827	0052571
Mumford (male)	8/4/1809	0013628
Mumford, Pomp	5/24/1809	0013629
Munday, Bettey	6/22/1813	0021075
Navy, Darkes	1/12/1780	1877
Newfield, Nancy	9/27/1800	13914
Nickerson, Dolly	1/20/1831	0062378
Nightingale, Bristol	2/2/1811	0017054
Nightingale, Nimble	4/4/1826	0049563
Nightingale, Nimble (wife of)	7/31/1824	0047227
Niles, Mary	9/20/1814	0022043
Noel, John	3/14/1820	0036865
Northrop, Cato	5/20/1822	0039921
Norton, Ginny	1/22/1810	0014661
Nott, Betsey	3/18/1827	0052935
Novy, George	12/3/1808	0012271
Old York	3/30/1791	6258
Olney, Hannah	1/23/1793	15121
Orchard, Sarah	1/5/1811	0016939
Packerd, Veary	8/12/1806	0010675
Paine, Mr.	11/26/1825	0048069
Parker, Andrew	3/22/1829	0058380
Patience	Fall/1797	12273
Pearson, James	11/20/1824	0044909
Peres (male)	8/25/1793	15176
Pettis, Sarah	6/15/1805	007787
Philips, Philo	3/18/1826	0049718
Phillips, George	3/29/1823	0043472
Phillips, Kiah	11/20/1830	0060198

BLACK PAUPER BURIALS: PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, 1777-1831

<i>Name</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Providence Town Papers No.</i>
Pleasant (male)	4/5/1804	006401
Potter, Boston	7/7/1801	002432
Potter, Paul	9/9/1826	0050060
Purchase, Diana	9/24/1821	0037546
Randolph, Mary	12/8/1814	0022146
Read, Deborah (child of)	2/13/1813	0020591
Read, Thomas	10/30/1831	0062648
Rhodes, Edward B.	10/2/1826	0050970
Rhodes, Prime	1/27/1794	15292
Richardson (male)	8/11/1807	0012173
Richmon, Sigbee	10/24/1787	4451
Roberts, Cuff	3/13/1820	0034503
Robinson, Chloe (child of)	1/4/1830	0059925
Roby (son of)	11/9/1799	16587
Rodman, Isaac	3/16/1808	0012239
Sal (female)	8/17/1814	0022043
Salsbury, James	12/14/1831	0062693
Saltonstall, Dudley	11/27/1826	0050317
Samuel	9/1/1817	0028962
Sands, Betey	3/30/1824	0044457
Sanns, Betsey (child of)	8/3/1824	0044628
Shearman, Peter	10/21/1820	0036865
Shoemaker, Phebe	9/25/1799	16587
Shoomake, Elizabeth	5/12/1814	0022043
Sisco, Betty	8/11/1809	0013860
Sisco, Eben	2/25/1813	0020667
Sisco, Frank	9/13/1826	0050068
Sisco, Mode	4/10/1801	002285
Sisco, Patience	1/15/1798	12560
Sisco, Phebe	6/28/1808	0011912
Slade, Maria (child of)	1/26/1791	6133
Smith, Jack	1/9/1822	0039504
Smith, Jack (daughter of)	8/23/1809	0013779
Smith, Jesse	11/4/1826	0050317
Smith, Thomas	9/7/1828	0055759
Smith, William	11/10/1816	0025926
Squib, Marcy	4/1795	9758
Stanton, Moses	11/29/1828	0055831
Steward, Lucinda	3/2/1826	0049428
Stewart, Peggy	6/30/1827	0053264
Stewart, Polly Ann	7/5/1827	0053422
Stokes, Betsey	9/11/1800	13914
Stokes, John	9/21/1800	13914
Swan, Thomas (wife of)	1/18/1826	0049248
Tanner, Hammon	1/16/1802	003658
Tew, Newport	1/24/1810	0014650
Tew, Rosanna	11/9/1826	0049548
Tew, Rose	11/8/1825	0047979
Thomas, George	12/16/1824	0045001
Thomas, John	11/18/1815	0025565
Thompson, William Thomas	10/14/1819	0032888
Thomson, John	11/12/1825	0047979
Tillinghast (female)	2/21/1803	004764
Updike, Lilly	6/27/1824	0044540
Updike, Lucy	7/8/1803	005088
Veane, Sal	7/20/1922	0040193
Wait, Fortune	4/28/1823	0040848
Wallace, Jack	5/23/1810	0015062
Wallace, Lemon (sister of)	11/13/1815	0024795
Wallis, Caty	3/15/1826	0049495
Wanting, Sally (child of)	4/4/1824	0044360

BLACK PAUPER BURIALS: PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND, 1777-1831

<i>Name</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Providence Town Papers No.</i>
Warner, William	12/15/1830	0060217
Warren, Samuel	6/25/1825	0047632
Warren, Thomas	5/20/1824	0044443
Waterman, Phillis (child)	10/5/1786	4107
Waterman, Phillis	4/17/1827	0053033
Waters, Mrs. Vilet	4/29/1924	0044380
Watson, William	5/26/1814	0022026
Wells, Margaret	1/22/1827	0052629
Whipple, Elizabeth	12/9/1826	0050369
Whipple, Jenny	9/22/1808	0012239
Whitman, Dianna	3/4/1825	0047327
Whitman, Prince	4/22/1814	0022043
Whitman, Prince (widow's child)	2/21/1821	0036691
Wilcox, Augustus	11/26/1828	0055837
Wilson, John	4/29/1824	0045317
Wood, Sally	3/28/1824	0044457
Zilph (female)	11/1/1807	0011558



The earliest view of University Hall captured the new college as it appeared circa 1795. Courtesy of Brown University Archives.

Nicholas Brown to Isaac Backus: On Bringing Rhode Island College to Providence

Richard Luftglass

Eighteenth-century religious sects established numerous colleges in the American colonies to educate young men for their ministries. In the 1760s, Baptists sought to establish a college which would provide education free of sectarian religious tests, unlike those of some other denominations, thus opening its doors to members of all religious societies. As a Baptist stronghold and a colony without a college of any sort, Rhode Island seemed to be the optimal location for such an institution. Encouraged by such respected Baptist leaders as Morgan Edwards, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Philadelphia, and the Welsh immigrant James Manning, the colony's general assembly granted a charter in 1764 to establish Rhode Island College.¹

The college's incorporators selected Warren as the institution's temporary location, but by decade's end they were seeking a permanent site where it could flourish. In addition to Warren, East Greenwich, Newport, and Providence soon entered the competition to become the site of the new college, but the amount of capital needed to persuade the incorporators that a locality could support construction of the college's new quarters soon narrowed the contest to the colony's two largest towns, Newport and Providence.

A previously unpublished letter between two of the college's incorporators, Providence merchant Nicholas Brown (1729–1791) and Reverend Isaac Backus (1724–1806), a Baptist minister then residing at Marlborough, Massachusetts, offers more than an interesting communication from the eldest of the prominent Brown brothers to a clergyman who would later become one of the most forceful Baptist spokesmen in America.² The letter explains very precisely the position of the corporation's Providence members and offers a clear and concise account of the events that would lead to the college's placement in that town.

Dated January 27, 1770, the correspondence was written shortly before a meeting of the corporation called to reconsider its decision to relocate the college to Providence. Earlier, the incorporators had taken a tentative step toward selecting a site by the following action:

Resolved—That the place for erecting the College Edifice be now fixed—But that nevertheless the Committee who shall be ap-

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1. Information on the early years of Rhode Island College, later Brown University, is taken from Walter C. Bronson, *The History of Brown University, 1764–1914* (Boston, 1914); Reuben A. Guild, *History of Brown University* (Providence, 1867); *Historical Catalog of Brown University* (Providence, 1905); William W. Keen, *The Early Years: Brown University, 1764–1770* (N.p., n.d.); William V. Kellen, *The Sesquicentennial of Brown University, 1764–1914* (Providence, 1914); and B. Sears, ed., *Celebration of the One-Hundredth Anniversary of the Founding of Brown University* (Providence, 1865).

2. Nicholas Brown to Rev. Isaac Backus, Jan. 27, 1770, Haverford College Library, Haverford, Pennsylvania. Reprinted by permission.

3. Bronson, *History*, 45, 46.

pointed to carry on the Building do not proceed to procure any other Materials for the same, excepting such as may be easily transported to any other place, should another hereafter be thought better, untill further Orders from this Corporation; if such Orders be given before the first day of January next—And that in case of Subscription be raised in the County of Newport, or any other county, equal or superior to any now offered; or that shall then be offered, and the Corporation be called in consequence thereof, that then the Vote for fixing the Edifice shall not be esteemed binding; but so that the Corporation may fix the Edifice in another place in case they shall think proper.—Voted—That the College-Edifice be at Providence.³

The letter recounts these deliberations, as Brown attempts to persuade his fellow corporator of the devious strategies and questionable motives of Newport's supporters. Due in large part to the participation of the Brown family, Providence's advocates had raised nearly £2700 pounds in subscriptions to support the college. Brown advanced the idea that other religious societies were conspiring to defeat the college entirely. The Baptists of the corporation feared that the Baptist dominated character of the college would be threatened if it were placed in Newport, the home of a large number of Congregationalists (including Ezra Stiles and Samuel Hopkins), and Episcopalians. Providence, on the other hand, had a far stronger Baptist population. The college's "Open Enemies" or "New Friends," Brown feared, were attempting to acquire the rights to build the college but would subsequently abandon the project, leaving the Baptists with no school at all. He insisted to Backus that Newport's boosters, claiming to have raised funds equal to Providence's bid, had used questionable means to call a meeting of the corporation to reconsider placement of the college. Nonetheless, the meeting was set to occur on February 7, 1770, and it was certain to precipitate a fierce struggle between supporters of the competing towns.

Nicholas Brown wrote to Backus to encourage his attendance and, he hoped, to persuade him to support Providence as the site of Rhode Island College. The letter's tone provides some insight into the author's intent and the relationship between sender and recipient. Though informal in part and friendly throughout, Brown's demeanor can best be described as one of respect to his reader; expressing any sentiment but humility might prove risky, and consequently his words seems carefully chosen to avoid offending Backus in any way. Stating his views as facts but never assuming Backus's sympathy, Brown seeks to influence his reader without seeming self-righteous or overbearing. Toward the letter's conclusion, for example, Brown, after describing the controversy in such a way as to rouse Backus's spirit in favor of Providence, stops short of asking for the Reverend's vote, requesting only that he attend the meeting to "hear on both sides and be able to judge accordingly."

The letter leaves unstated another important reason why Nicholas Brown and the supporters he represented desired to have the college located in their town. At this time Providence remained smaller, poorer, and less prominent than Newport. As the site of the colony's only college, Providence stood to gain in population, wealth, and importance, which in turn would expand business opportunities and benefit those who owned extensive land holdings in the town, including the Brown family. As a man of business, Brown recognized that Providence would gain as the seat of Rhode Island College, and lose if it were built elsewhere. It is important to keep in mind that in addition to encouraging the liberal arts and advancing the Baptist denomination, economic considerations played a role in Brown's support for locating the college at Providence.

As it turned out, Providence won the battle, receiving twenty-one of the incorporators' thirty-five votes. As predicted, the issue was vigorously debated: Backus wrote in his diary, "Both sides shewed such indecent heats and hard reflections as I never saw before among men of so much sense as they, and hope I never shall again."⁴ The Brown family continued to provide substantial financial support to the growing institution, which was renamed Brown University in honor of another family benefactor, Nicholas Brown, Jr., the son of this letter's writer.

Providence January 27th. 1770

Sir

This Sarves to acquaint you that a Meeting of the Corporation of the College in this Colony is called, to be at Warren on Wednesday the 7th of February next at 10 OClock in order to Determine finally the place of Erecting said College Edifice. As it would be too tedious for you at this time to read from me the particular History of all the Transactions relative to plaicing said College from the first untill this Time, [I] Shall only give you a Short Sketch of the Facts as possable. Mr. Camble,⁵ If you remember at Commencement,⁶ Seemed Uneasy that the College was fixed at Warren without given them a hearing from Greenwich, the petition from the Corporation to the General Assembly failing, as it was warmly Opposed by the Members from Newport and Kent Counties and but one member out of four belonging to the County of Bristol attended on this Interesting Matter.

We can Justly Say its principal Support was from this Town who where [were] all Zealous Infav of the Petition. Some of the principal pretents for Opposing it was because it was fixed in Warren, at one Edge of the Government [colony], and Mr. Camble failing in his Subscription for Building it at Warren was Induced to open a Conditional Subscription with Incouragement of geting Such a Sum as would be Equal to all the Advantages which Warren had. About this time it was that the Revd. H. Smith passed through this Town with Presedant Manning⁷ in his way Southward, who advised while here to Incorage the People of Greenwich and proposed that if they got the Sum of £1000 £m. Subscribed by Such person as would actually pay that, they ought to have a hearing even if it posponed the Building for one year.

4. Isaac Backus, *Diary of Isaac Backus*, ed. William McLoughlin (Providence, 1979), 753.

5. Archibald Campbell of East Greenwich served as a corporator in 1769 and died shortly thereafter.

6. The college's first commencement, Sept. 7, 1769.

7. Rev. Hezekiah Smith, a fellow of the corporation, traveled to the South during 1769 and 1770 to solicit donations for the college. James Manning (1738–1791) served as the college's first president.



Reverend Isaac Backus
(1724–1806). From his *History of New England*, published in 1839.

8. The college's charter required that in order to call a formal meeting of the corporation, a petition was to be approved by the president and two of the twelve fellows or by three fellows.

9. No enclosure was discovered with the letter. The resolve, however, seems to have been the one reprinted earlier in this article.

10. Samuel Ward, Sr. (1725–1776) was a successful Newport merchant who served as governor of Rhode Island and a corporator of the college. Henry Ward (1732–1797), brother of Samuel Ward, Sr., was also involved in Rhode Island politics.

This seemed the General Sentiments of the Corporation as the Presedant found before he Called a Meeting.⁸ But Mr. Camble, the only member in that part of the Government, Dying suddenly Struck a Damp upon there proceeding. Notwithstanding, the meeting was Called afterward, and the people in this Town having already Signed about £800 £m., a Sum about Double to all that had been Subscribed in the whole Government, besides unconditional, and the people hear [here] of all Denominations Showing much more Zeal for the Good of the Institution than any where also espically Newport, who after so Unexpected an agreeable Commencement to us, Seemed by many there rather Rediculed it than give it due applause. We just a Week before the Meeting Oppend our Conditional Subscrip which when lay'd before the Corporation including the unconditional amounted to about £2700 £m. After hearing the Debate, fully about 2 to 1 Acted for repealing the Old Vote for placeing the Edefice at Warren. Then a New Vote called between this town [Providence], Greenwich & Warren and we got more than both of them. But Previous to this last Vote the Enclosed Resolve⁹ was agreed to and Enter'd, By which Vote you'l observe the people in Newport had a right by Raising Subscription as high as Ours was at the time of making application to the Presedant and Two Fellows to have a Meeting Called if done according to Charter, which must be 20 Days Notice. But no body expected to hear any thing more about it as the Messrs. Wards¹⁰ had tryd for about three weeks every measure in their Power to raise a Spirit in the people to Subscribe but had given out and Govr. Ward gone home.

But some time after, Some people Joined, who have been Open Enemies to the Institution and by Perswading the people that if they Obtained to get a Meeting Called the Charter Shud be alterd and every Society put upon equal footing. And by engaging the Trades Men & Sca. who wou'd be Interested in it, they set to Subscribing and about a Week before the 1st of January they Sent Express to the Presedant, but there Sum not being equal to ours and the Time Elapsed the Presedant did not see Cause to call a Meeting. And not long after, they sent another Express pretending there Subscription was as high as Ours, Demanded a Meeting but they not mentioning the Sum and the time being pass't they was Refused. Mr. Upham also all along refused. They at last by application to Doctr. Babcock to Join Messrs. Ward & Eyres¹¹ and by using under means, as the Doctr. had not ben acquainted with the True Reasons why the others of the Fellowship had Refused, he Signed the Advertisement and the meeting is Called as aforesaid.

Upon the Information wch. Mr [Rev. Morgan] Edwards had heard of the Pretents of Some other Denominations to get the Charter alterd among other things about the College, Writes to me Thus,

I hope no Babtist talks of having the Charter alterd. Had no other society been Concerned in it but the Baptist, we Should have more money from home and I have reason to beleive more from other Denominations and perhaps more Schollars. These may seem paradoxes, but to me they are Certaintys,—I beseech you to listen with Caution to all the Advantages which other Societies propose lest you fall into a snare—They will Cause delays and Suspence, and inactivity—and those are but Steps to render the whole abortive. Let the Friends of the Institution go on, and if they are but few they will prevail. I am Glad that the College is to be at Providence, be-

cause I have Confidence in you and others in Town That you will let nothing hinder you.

Mr. Manning has Acted very Stedy and firm in this whole matter but has been very ungenerously Treated by the New Friends to the College, as they are Called) and, as he had the Advice of a Great Majority of the Members of the Corporation both here and at Newport before he refused to Call a Meeting the last Time, is Desirous of an Opportunity of Vindicating himself before as full a Meeting of the Corporation as possibly Can be got together. Beside the Crittical Necessity of every Member abroad Should be present is evedently his Opinion as appears from the following Paragraff from his Letter to me of the 20th Inst.

It is of the utmost importance that all the well wishers of our College Should attend the meeting in February now advertized; for I think this is the Critical Juncture that will Determine whither the Baptist Society Shall ever have a College or not. The latent Enemies of this Institution, have got an Advantage against us in divid-ing the minds of the Corporation about the place of it, and if our friends from abroad do not Come in to our assistance, (I tremble to pronounce it) I fear that the unhappy faction which has long Sub-sisted in this Colony, to its great detrement, will utterly Subvert the College. You will not fail therefore to use your utmost endeavours to engage all the members abroad that you can advertize, to give there attendance.¹²

You see the Sence Mr. Manning has of the real Danger the Institution is in, But he would not be willing it shoud be know publickly as from him who is Desireous to Cultivate Harmony amongst all. Its the General Opinion of all the Members that if they at Newport Carry the Vote for removeing the College from here that it will Certainly Come to Nothing as they will give themselves no further—Further Trouble or Concern about it, and the Damages that must arise on account of the Committees Contracting for most of the materials and workmen Ingaged &ca. will be very Considerable.

As I have already been much Longer than I designed, [I] must Conclude by Intreating you Sir by all means to be at Said meeting when you will hear on both Sides and be able to Judge accordingly. As the Season is Difficult would advise you to Set off[f] on Monday morning Early and Come to my House where I shall be glad to wait on you while hear, and to Set off[f] from hence with the members belonging hear from Warren, which is but 8 or 9 miles on Tuesday afternoon or Early Wednesday morning, as the Weather may prove, most agreeable.¹³ With great Truth and Regard

your Most
Esteemd Humble Servant
Nich Brown

P.S. I recd. two Vols. or [of] yr. works.¹⁴ Some time ago, wch will pay yu. for when I see you here or at the meet. Mr. Leach¹⁵ will hand you one of Mr. Edws. sermons.¹⁶ The above Sctratch'd as Co'd rong by the Boy¹⁷ & time would not admit of drawing it over again wth. much yr. Care will Excuse Pray give me yr. answer whither you Shall Come by Mr. Leach.

11. Rev. Edward Upham, Dr. Thomas Eyres, and Dr. Joshua Babcock served as fellows of the corporation.

12. Manning's pleas seemed to have encouraged Brown (along with his brother Moses, John, and Joseph, who also strongly supported placement of the college at Providence) on Feb. 5 to print and distribute a handbill throughout Providence calling for a general meeting of the town's inhabitants that afternoon in order to consolidate their efforts and rally support. The tactic proved effective, as Providence boosters attended the Feb. 7 meeting in full force.

13. For Backus's actual itinerary see his *Diary*, 752–53. It records that he left Marlborough on Feb. 2, visiting Boston before arriving at Rehoboth, Mass. on the 5th. The next day, Backus passed through Providence, where he visited several friends and apparently spent the night at the home of Samuel M. Mason, before traveling to Warren on the day of the meeting.

14. Backus had published ten small volumes prior to this time.

15. Most likely Stephen Leach (1730–1807), a resident of Scituate whom Backus visited frequently.

16. The letters here seem to read "Edws.," probably referring to Rev. Morgan Edwards.

17. Only the postscript was written in Brown's hand. A scribe had written the text.

Book Review

Congress at Princeton: Being the Letters of Charles Thomson to Hannah Thomson, June–October 1783. Edited by EUGENE R. SHERIDAN and JOHN M. MURRIN. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Library, 1985. xlv + 100 pp. Illustrations and index. \$15.00.)

During the American Revolutionary War, communication between the Continental Congress and the army, between the army and the states, and between different military commands was slow, haphazard, and risky. Letters were lost or intercepted; congressional resolves went unpublished for lack of money to pay the printer; rumors, half-truths, and fabrications often passed for fact. Indeed, by the sixth year of the conflict, many war-weary Americans had become increasingly skeptical of the news they heard. It is within this context that one may understand why the quartermaster general of New York, Hugh Hughes, wrote one of his assistants that "A Report prevails that Arnold is Captured, but it wants Charles Thomson." In other words, without the signature of the secretary of the Continental Congress, the information was not to be trusted.

Today Charles Thomson is remembered chiefly by historians. As Hughes's statement illustrates, however, Thomson's name was universally recognized and had become virtually synonymous with reliability and truth during the Revolutionary War. But Thomson's renown could never have been predicted from his humble origins. As editors Eugene R. Sheridan and John M. Murrin note in their superb introduction to *Congress at Princeton: Being the Letters of Charles Thomson to Hannah Thomson, June–October 1783*, Thomson's life reads like a Horatio Alger novel. Born in Derry County, Ulster, in 1729, the eleven-year-old Thomson arrived in Newcastle, Delaware, a penniless orphan. After receiving a classical education through the generosity of a mysterious benefactress, Thomson moved to Philadelphia, where he was befriended by Benjamin Franklin. By 1763, with Franklin's invaluable help, Thomson had made a name for himself in the Quaker City first as a tutor of Greek and Latin at the Academy of Philadelphia and later as a staunch defender of Indian rights and a successful merchant. With the onset of the imperial crisis, Thomson became one of the most radical opponents of British colonial policy, earning the sobriquet "the Sam Adams of Philadelphia." When Thomson's conservative opponents prevented him from being elected to the First Continental Congress, the fledgling national legislature outflanked them by offering him the posi-

tion of secretary of Congress. Thomson accepted and served for the entire fifteen-year life of the Continental Congress, in the process becoming "the most indispensable civil servant of all" (xviii). Thomson not only kept a record of Congress's proceedings but also oversaw the publication of the journals of Congress (when money could be found to pay the printer), acted as a liaison between Congress and its executive departments, and kept an eye on state compliance with congressional resolves. In addition, he issued letters of marque and passports, attested military commissions, and, as Sheridan and Murrin observe, "submitted reports to Congress, advised the members thereof on matters of public policy, corresponded with American diplomats overseas, translated foreign dispatches, and presided over Congress during the interval between the retirement of one president and the election of another" (xix). The fifty thousand surviving papers of the Continental Congress in the National Archives are a monument to Thomson's devotion to public service.

Despite his service to the country, Thomson was treated shabbily in the immediate post-Constitutional period. A victim of political factionalism and of the nation's need to disassociate itself from the most prominent living symbol of the moribund Continental Congress, he was denied public office in the new federal government. Thomson spent the next thirty-five years with his wife and political confidant, Hannah Harrison Thomson, in retirement working on two projects. The first, a political history of the American Revolution comprising more than one thousand folio pages of everything he left out of the *Journals*, Thomson destroyed in the 1790s so as not to undermine the nascent mythology surrounding the Founding Fathers and the creation of the republic. "I could not tell the truth without giving great offense," he confided to Pennsylvania's Benjamin Rush. "Let the world admire our patriots and heroes. Their supposed talents and virtues (where they were so) by commanding imitation will serve the cause of patriotism and our country" (xxii). The second project of Thomson's retirement years was an English translation of the Bible, a task he undertook in order to refute Deistic criticism of sacred scripture. The initial fruit of his labors was a four-volume work entitled *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Covenant, Commonly Called the Old and New Testament* (1808), which included the first translation of the Septuagint, the pre-Christian Greek rendition of the Hebrew Old Testament. Modern authorities still praise Thomson's translation for its lucidity. Thomson's last work, a single volume entitled *A Synopsis of the Four Evangelists* (1815), attempted to refute charges that the Evangelists were inconsistent in relating the events of Jesus's life. Thomson fell seriously ill shortly after publication of *Synopsis*, lapsed into senility, and died in 1824 at the age of ninety-five. The nation mourned the death of one of the great men of the Revolutionary generation.

Before he died, Thomson destroyed most of his private papers. The publication by the Princeton University Library of these lively and in-

formative letters, which recount Congress's stay at Princeton from June to October 1783, only serve to remind us of the magnitude of our loss. Thomson had a sharp eye, a caustic wit, and a nationalist vision of America, all of which are well represented in this volume. Princetonians will be charmed by Thomson's description of the "genteel homes" that made up the sleepy little village and his admission that he did "not know a more agreeable spot in America" (p. 57). They will be less than pleased, however, with Thomson's rapid disillusionment with Princeton's housing, entertainment, and cuisine. As he noted on July 3, 1783, three days after he arrived, "I have the honor of breakfasting at my lodging, of eating stinking fish & heavy baked bread & drinking if I please abominable wine at a dirty tavern" (p. 14). Ocean State residents will find much of interest in this volume, too, especially Thomson's repeated unflattering remarks about Rhode Island's zealous defender of state sovereignty in Congress, David Howell. Thomson viewed Howell's intransigent localism as a major stumbling block to national unity and was of the opinion that if the British had wanted to plant an agent provocateur in the nation's councils they could not have chosen a better person.

And all readers, historians included, will profit greatly from reliving through Thomson's critical eyes the birth pangs of the new nation. Scholars today tend to downplay the problems of the Confederation period and underestimate the centrifugal forces set loose by national independence. While this volume will probably not change their minds, it should give them pause. Thomson provides a vivid portrait of Congress's inability to conduct business, decide on its next location, command respect, or even gather a quorum. His fear of "internal convulsions" and national disintegration underlay his shrill denunciation of Congress's weakness. If something was not done to control the particularistic nature of the states and strengthen Congress's powers, Thomson predicted, the United States would break into four warring confederacies—New England, the Middle States, Virginia, and the rest of the South. Thomson's pessimistic vision was not unique; many Americans had similar fears. Its originality lay in his forecast that if ever royal government were reestablished in North America, it would occur first in Virginia.

This volume is a model of historical editing: deeply researched, fully annotated, and handsomely produced and illustrated. We are indebted to the Princeton University Library and the editors for shedding new light on this now forgotten patriot and providing a fascinating glimpse of the nation's origins.

The Nathanael Greene Papers

E. WAYNE CARP

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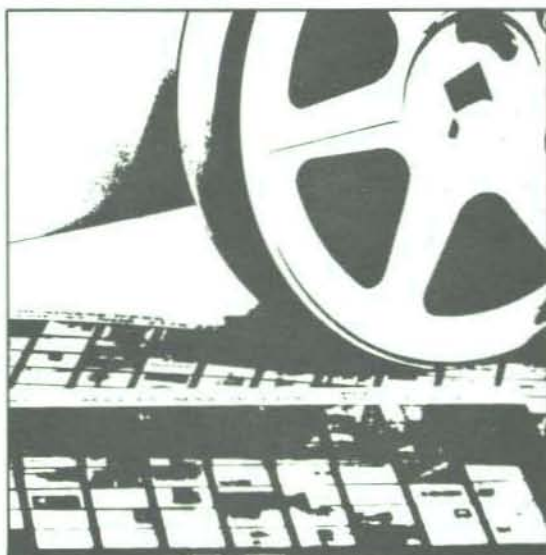
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