

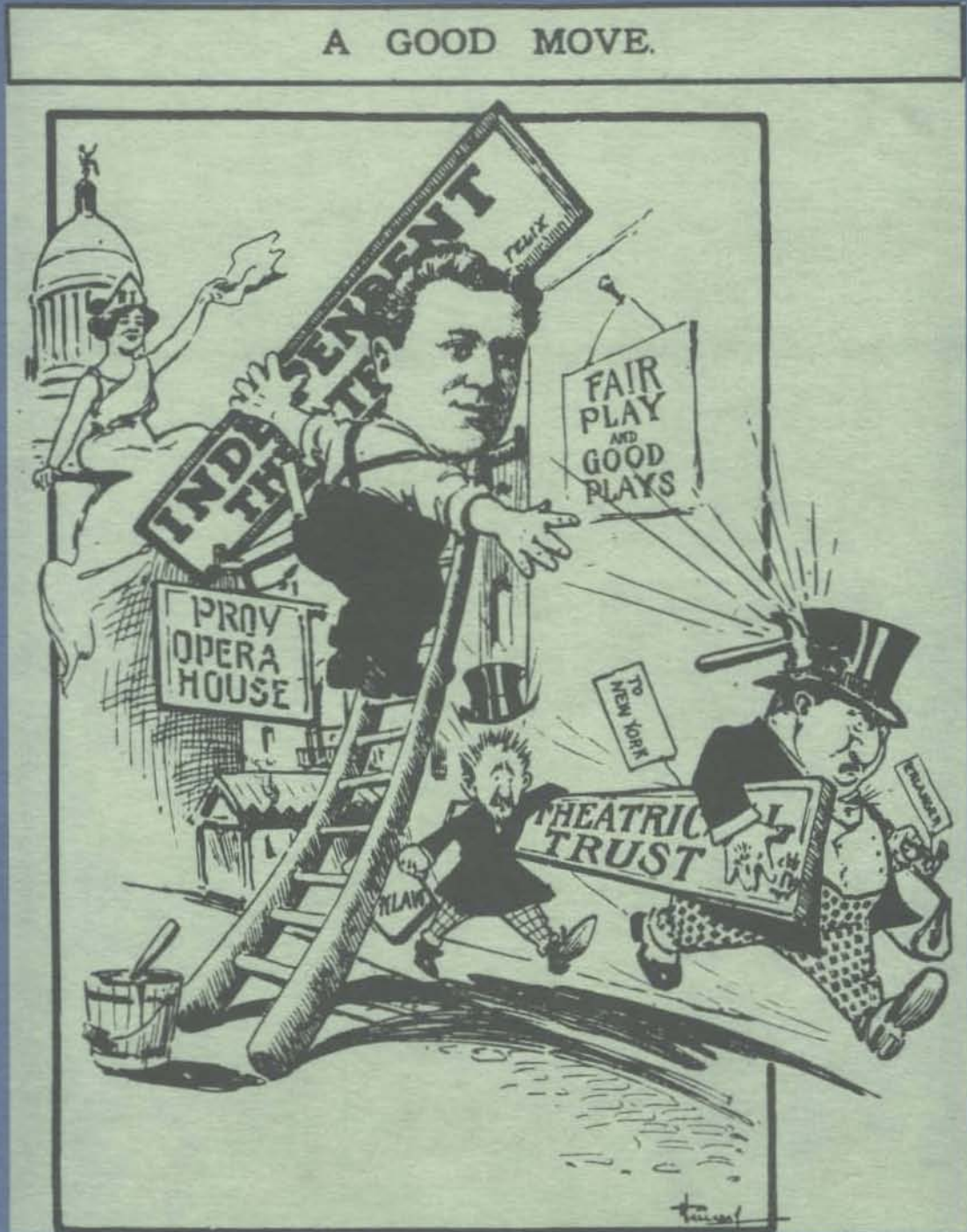


Rhode Island History

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A GOOD MOVE.





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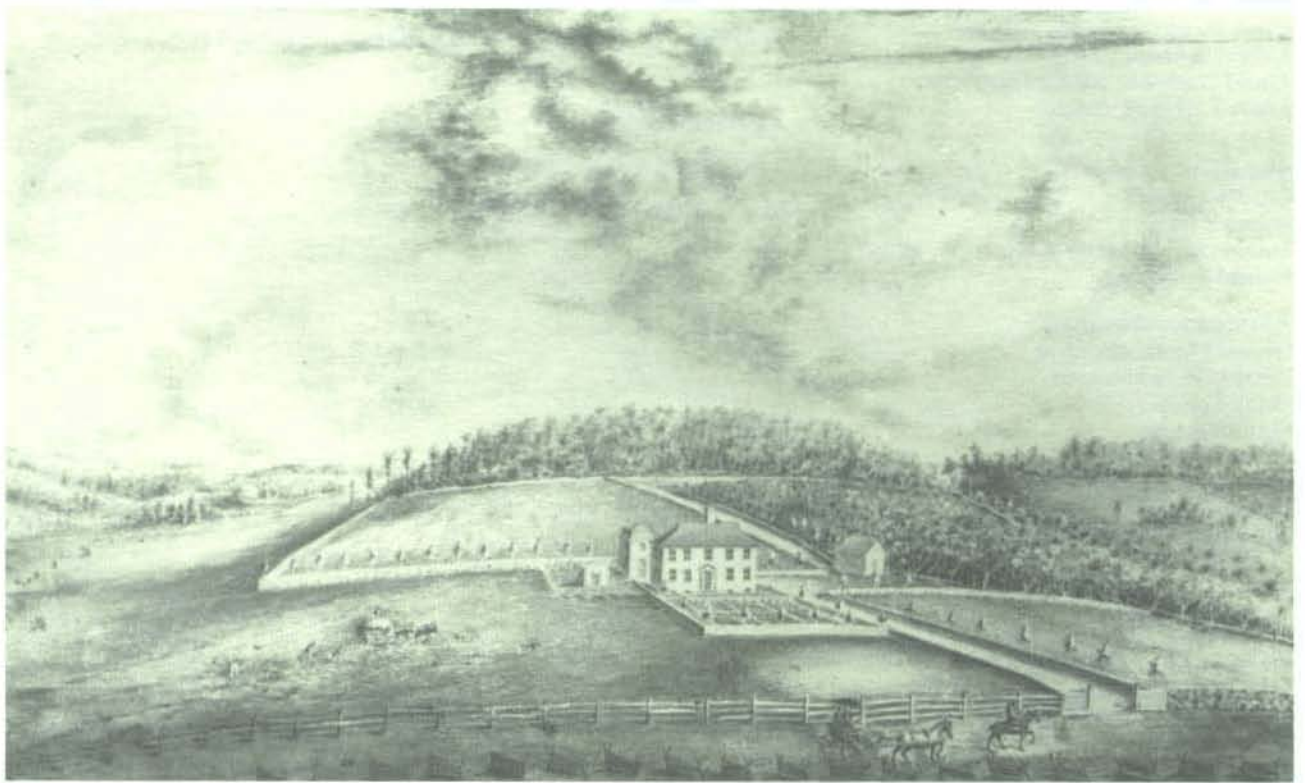
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"S.W. view of the seat of Henry Marchant in South Kingstown, R.I." circa 1785-1790. Anonymous. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 3019).

The South Kingstown Planters: Country Gentry in Colonial Rhode Island

Christian McBurney

In eighteenth-century southern Rhode Island a group of ambitious stock and dairy farmers attempted to create a landed, manorial gentry amid a rural New England dominated by villages, small farms, and few elites. Though their reign was short-lived, the Narragansett planters succeeded to a significant extent in developing a plantation-based economy. On a wider scale, they were New England counterparts to other colonials who intentionally created rural gentry communities. The most successful ones were located in the South where farmers grew tobacco, rice, and indigo for the market, but they were also to be found in New York's Hudson River valley where vast grain plantations prospered.¹ Wealth derived from commercial farming enabled the planters of the Narragansett Country and elsewhere to attain their highest aspiration: to imitate the lifestyle of the English country gentry, who enjoyed social prominence, political influence, and a life of leisure and privilege.

South Kingstown, which then included the town of Narragansett, was the heart of the Narragansett Country. Its planters were wealthier, more socially prominent, and more politically significant than their counterparts in the three other Narragansett Country towns: North Kingstown, Charlestown, and Exeter. Examination of surviving written and artifactual evidence left by the planters in the town of South Kingstown provides an in-depth portrait of the conditions leading to the rise of their plantation economy, the community's structure during its most successful era, and the factors that caused its decline on the eve of the American Revolution.

The Rise of the South Kingstown Planters, 1660–1730

Fortuitous circumstances in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries converged to permit the development of commercial farming and the formation of a planter class in South Kingstown by 1730. In short, rising demand from Newport merchants for livestock and produce to trade in foreign markets attracted ambitious stock and dairy farmers to the outlands of Rhode Island, including the Narragansett country.² Some enterprising farmers took advantage of a long-

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1. Richard Hoistadter, *America at 1750: A Social Portrait* (New York, 1971), 151–53.

2. See Carl Bridenbaugh, *Fat Mutton and Liberty of Conscience: Society in Rhode Island, 1636–1690* (Providence, 1974), 9–26, and Sydney V. James, *Colonial Rhode Island: A History* (New York, 1975), 77–82.

3. See Richard Pares, *Yankees and Creoles, The Trade Between North America and the West Indies Before the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), 2, and Bridenbaugh, *Fat Mutton*, 21.

4. Bridenbaugh, *Fat Mutton*, 12–13.

5. This summary of community settlement patterns is based on Howard S. Russell, *A Long Deep Furrow: Three Centuries of Farming in New England* (Hanover, N.H., 1976), 70–76, and Kenneth Lockridge, *A New England Town. The First One Hundred Years: Dedham, Massachusetts, 1636–1736* (New York, 1970), 3–22.

6. Bridenbaugh, *Fat Mutton*, Appendix 1.

running jurisdictional dispute between Rhode Island and Connecticut by purchasing large tracts of inexpensive Narragansett land and selling off parcels when land values began to climb once the disagreement was settled. This speculation gave these farmers the necessary capital to purchase more land, livestock, and slaves.

Newport merchants in the seventeenth century discovered eager markets in the West Indies and southern colonies for livestock and provisions. The raising of staple crops in these areas became so profitable that planters chose to import foodstuffs and farm animals rather than set aside enough land to raise food for their own population. The merchants needed a hinterland to provide these goods. Between 1640 and 1690, lands around Newport and Portsmouth were quickly developed, and ambitious farmers on Aquidneck Island began to look west across Narragansett Bay in search of more land to raise cattle, sheep, and horses.³

Land in southern Rhode Island, including Aquidneck Island and the Narragansett Country, was well suited for developing a commercial farm economy based on grazing. The fertile soil, high-quality grass, and open pastures made the area ideal for raising livestock.⁴ Southern Rhode Island benefited from a mild climate and shorter winters, unlike the rocky and less fertile coastal lands of Massachusetts and Connecticut.

The lack of a Puritan hierarchy also contributed to the development of a commercial farming economy in South Kingstown. Puritan leaders in Massachusetts and Connecticut inhibited the development of their farm economies by tightly controlling settlement and land distribution.⁵ The legislatures ensured a gradual and orderly settlement of towns. Settlers were given permission to form a new town only when a sufficient number applied, usually at least forty families. Local leaders allocated the land. Taking after well-known customs in England, they decided how much land a villager received, determined who was qualified to enter the town, and apportioned undivided land as needed. Thus a middling gentleman who had owned a farm in England received more land than a common laborer. Puritans adopted the village plan in settling their towns; houses and the church were clustered together while farms were located in the countryside. The purpose for this pattern of settlement went beyond the need for mutual protection against unfriendly Indians: Puritan clerics wanted to maintain an intimate connection with their congregants to ensure that they followed proper church teachings.

Initially, the four original towns of Rhode Island—Providence (1636), Portsmouth (1638), Newport (1639), and Warwick (1642)—followed the compact village plan. Portsmouth and Newport divided land among townsmen according to gradations of social status. A group of exiled Boston merchants received huge tracts, while most Aquidneck settlers were awarded relatively small land plots.⁶ But the attempt to impose a fixed social hierarchy and the compact village plan quickly broke down. Lacking a Puritan oligarchy and a strong legislature to control

land distribution, Rhode Island developed a free market economy. Middling Aquidneck Island farmers, dissatisfied with their original allotments, sought to meet market demands for livestock and provisions. Land lust broke out in the colony.⁷

In 1657–58, speculators from Portsmouth bought from the Narragansett Indians a twelve-square-mile tract in the heart of the Narragansett Country. The land from the Pettaquamscutt Purchase, as the deal came to be called, eventually was named Kingstown and included parts of the present towns of South Kingstown, North Kingstown, Narragansett, and Exeter. The purchasers assigned thousands of acres to each member and offered the remainder for sale.⁸

Widespread settlement of Kingstown, however, was inhibited by a serious competing land claim by the Atherton Syndicate, comprising influential Massachusetts speculators who used fraudulent means in 1659 and 1660 to obtain from the Narragansetts land that overlapped the Pettaquamscutt Purchase. A struggle over the competing claims immediately ensued. The Atherton Syndicate turned to Connecticut to validate its claim, and as a result that colony asserted jurisdiction over the Narragansett Country. Throughout the remainder of the seventeenth century, both colonies sent envoys to London to argue their cases before royal councils and hassled settlers supporting the opposing side.⁹

The presence of the powerful Narragansett Indians also discouraged settlement. That threat ended in 1676 when the Narragansetts were virtually wiped out in King Philip's War. Before the climactic battle in Kingstown, the Narragansetts drove the settlers back to Aquidneck Island and destroyed their farms, rending the town "a desolate wilderness againe . . . replenished with howling wolves and other wild creatures" until settlers returned to rebuild their farms.¹⁰

Although Connecticut officially did not concede jurisdiction over the Narragansett Country until 1726, the matter really was settled by 1700. Since the lobbying in London ended in stalemate, the dispute was decided by which colony could attract the most sympathetic settlers. Connecticut settlers were constrained by the need to form entire villages, and feared that their communities would become part of the heretic colony of Rhode Island. Although Rhode Island's Baptists and Quakers feared a Connecticut victory, ambitious Aquidneck Island individuals took their chances and moved to Kingstown. Analysis of the previous residences of twenty-three of the forty-eight men recorded as living in Kingstown in 1671 reveals that ten moved from Newport, seven from Portsmouth, two from Providence, and one from Warwick. Only the remaining three came from Massachusetts or Connecticut.¹¹ The free market economy in Rhode Island worked to the colony's favor.

The few settlers who did venture into the anarchy of seventeenth-century Kingstown were able to acquire large tracts of cheap land. A Portsmouth farmer in the 1670s could sell his small farm worth about 150 shillings per acre and use the money to buy hundreds of acres in Kingstown for about 2 shillings each. Robert Hazard probably did ex-

7. James, *Colonial Rhode Island*, 77–82.

8. William Davis Miller, "The Narragansett Planters," in *American Antiquarian Society, Proceedings* 43 (1933): 56.

9. James, *Colonial Rhode Island*, 67–68, 83–87, 104–9, 129–30.

10. John R. Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England*, 10 vols. (Providence, 1856–63), 3:59.

11. The list of male Kingstown residents appears in *ibid.*, 1:390–91. Previous residences were traced in John O. Austin, *Genealogical Dictionary of Rhode Island*, rev. ed. (Baltimore, 1969).

12. See *Rhode Island Land Evidences, 1648-1696* (Providence, 1921), 9, 12, 191, 230.

13. See "Letter from Samuel Sewall to Robert Hazard, 1687," Hazard Papers, XVII, RIHS, and *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729*, 2 vols. ed. M. Halsey Thomas (New York, 1973), 1:994, 1038.

14. *Rhode Island Land Evidences*, 95, 99, and George C. Davis, *The American Family of John Watson* (Kingston, R.I., 1983), 1.

15. *Recs. of R.I.*, 3:60, and "Taxes Under Governor Andros, #10," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 35 (1881): 124-27.

16. *Recs. of R.I.*, 4:59, and Elisha R. Potter, Jr., "Early History of Narragansett" in *RIHS Collections* 3 (1835): 114.

17. South Kingstown Land Evidences, South Kingstown Town Hall, 3A, 11, 18. South Kingstown's local records are located in its town hall unless otherwise specified.

18. See Austin, *Genealogical Dictionary*, 165, and South Kingstown Probate Records, 1:83, 86-87. Other planters who died during the early period also left substantial estates. James Wilson (d. 1705) left 200 sheep, 72 cattle, and 31 horses, and Jefferey Champlain (d. 1717) bequeathed 312 sheep, 124 cattle, and 34 horses. (See South Kingstown Probate Records, 1:23-24, 107.) Readers should note that probate records are not entirely accurate reflections of planters' property holdings during their lifetimes. Many gave away property before death. Moreover, only a few planters had inventories taken of their property.

19. South Kingstown Land Evidences, 3A:11, 18, 21, 25, 28, 31, 33, 37, 40, 44, 47, 49, 53, 56, 58, 60, 64, 269, 272; 3:16, 136, 155, 356, 357, 504, 542, 544, 545, 547, 586; 4:178, 538, 591, 662, 858.

actly that when he bought 500 acres in Kingstown in 1671 for £28.¹² Entrepreneurial men scrambled to earn money by any means so that they could raise cash to buy more land. Hazard worked as a surveyor for the Pettaquamscutt purchasers, and Nathaniel Niles served as a tenant farmer for a purchaser's heir.¹³ Fortunate farmers also acquired land through family ties to the original settlers. The Gardiners and Watsons, for example, received land from purchaser John Porter, a relation by marriage, who willed 2,550 acres in 1678.¹⁴

The early settlers sold parcels of their holdings to obtain desperately needed cash to develop their land into profitable farms. Land prices remained low, however, since the jurisdictional dispute discouraged widespread migration to Kingstown and left the town in disarray. By 1678 only 142 families had moved to Kingstown. A group of townsmen in 1679 sent a petition to the king urging that "he put an end to these differences about government thereof, which hath been so fatal to the prosperity of the place; animosities still arising in people's minds, as they stand affected to this or that government."¹⁵

When it became apparent by 1700 that Rhode Island would win the dispute, an environment favorable for land speculation arose. By 1708 Kingstown's population had increased dramatically to 1,200, making it the third most populous town in the colony, behind Newport and Providence. In 1723 Kingstown was divided into two towns, North Kingstown and South Kingstown. By 1730 South Kingstown had 1,523 inhabitants while 2,105 resided in North Kingstown.¹⁶ Population pressures increased the demand for more land and this meant rising land prices. Thomas Hazard, for example, purchased 900 acres for £700 in 1698 and in 1710 bought 300 acres for £500.¹⁷

Enterprising landholders used the extra money from land sales to buy more livestock and black slaves, an expanding source of labor for the planters. Rowland Robinson's investments followed this pattern. In 1709, he bought 3,000 acres of the "vacant lands," an area in Charlestown where Rhode Island wanted to promote the settlement of friendly families. Robinson made money from the tract by selling off parcels of 100 to 150 acres to settlers, and invested the money from land speculation in his farming operations. By the time of his death in 1716 he had sold 2,700 acres of vacant lands. He was perhaps Kingstown's greatest stockholder, owning at his death 666 sheep, 175 cattle, and 51 horses. Robinson willed to his only son, William, nine black slaves and 680 acres of land.¹⁸

The capital gained from land speculation and surplus stock and dairy farming enabled ambitious farmers to accumulate enough land to begin family dynasties, and pass their new wealth and social position to their sons. Thomas Hazard, one of four sons sired by early settler Robert Hazard, used the base of his inheritance to acquire immense amounts of land. He made his first purchase in 1698 when he bought 900 acres on Point Judith, which he rented as tenant farms. Between 1703 and 1738, Hazard bought another 2,731 acres of prime land in South Kingstown, and left his sons with ample estates.¹⁹ Commercial farming had

enabled about a dozen families to establish a planter class whose position would remain firm up to the American Revolution.

Commercial Farming and Elitism,

1730-1774

By 1730 South Kingstown estates included unusually large stockholdings and landholdings. The wealthiest planters owned thousands of acres, exceptional by New England standards. Thomas Hazard by 1738 and William Robinson by 1751 each had purchased about 3,600 acres of land.²⁰ William Gardiner willed 1,620 acres in 1732 and James Perry willed 1,440 acres in 1766.²¹ Planter landholdings usually consisted of several farms, each of which was large by Rhode Island standards. Consider the fifty-two farms ranging from 30 to 800 acres advertised for sale or lease from 1760 to 1766 in the *Newport Mercury* and *Providence Gazette*. Of the twelve of these farms that exceeded 250 acres, seven were located in South Kingstown, with acreages of 250, 265, 350, 400, 500, 550, and 800. The remaining five were dispersed in five different Rhode Island towns.

These farms were not only large, they were productive. Probate records indicate that the number of livestock owned by South Kingstown planters far exceeded those of Rhode Island farmers outside the Narragansett Country. Eleven wealthy planters who had been among the highest tenth of South Kingstown taxpayers and died between 1730 and 1760 left estates averaging 391 sheep, 93 cattle, and 18 horses. Individual planters exceeded these averages. For example, Jonathon Hazard in 1746 owned 676 sheep, William Robinson in 1751 owned 162 cattle, and Jeffrey Hazard in 1759 held 44 horses.²² The wealthiest farmers in Portsmouth, Middletown, and Jamestown in this period had inventories averaging about 140 sheep, 20 cattle, and 5 horses.²³

South Kingstown was probably the premier cheese-producing town in New England. Its "Rhode Island cheese" and other stock and dairy products were traded to Newport merchants who then shipped the foodstuffs to the West Indies and the southern colonies. An English observer describing Rhode Island's grazing economy in the 1750s wrote, "Their most considerable farms in the Narragansett country. Their highest dairy of one farm ordinarily milks about one hundred and ten cows . . . makes about thirteen thousand pounds of cheese, besides butter, and sells off considerable in calves and fatted bullocks." Another English traveler, Dr. Alexander Hamilton, met John Potter of South Kingstown, "a man of considerable fortune here," while journeying down the post road in 1744. Hamilton spoke of Potter's farm in impressive terms: "He has a large house close upon the road and is possessor of a very large farm where he milks daily 104 cows and had besides, a vast stock of ther cattle."²⁴

South Kingstown was also probably New England's most important horse-raising town. Its settlers raised both carting and riding horses for planters in the West Indies and the South. The small, hardy Narragansett Pacers were a favorite breed, admired for their speed and comfort.²⁵

20. *Ibid.*, 3:43; 4:25, 110, 248, 322, 331, 374, 425, 429, 510, 812; 5:47, 139, 206.

21. South Kingstown Probate Records, 2:222-23, 4:39-44.

22. See South Kingstown Tax Records, 1730, 1744, 1759, and South Kingstown Probate Records, 2:228; 3:75, 157; 4:58, 145, 167, 193, 237, 336-37, 360-63; 5:107-8.

23. Probate records for Portsmouth, Middletown, and Jamestown are available on microfilm at the Newport Historical Society. Northern Rhode Island farms probably produced even less of an agricultural surplus. Sixteen northern Rhode Island farms advertised for sale or lease between 1760 and 1766 in the *Newport Mercury* and *Providence Gazette* averaged 93 acres, while seven farms in Portsmouth, Middletown, and Jamestown averaged 196 acres.

24. See Russell, *A Long Deep Furrow*, 158-61; William Douglas, *A Summary . . . of the First Planting, Progressive Improvements and Present State of British Settlements in North America*, 2 vols. (London, 1754), 2:89; and Alexander Hamilton, *A Gentleman's Progress: The Itinerary of Dr. Alexander Hamilton, 1744* (Williamsburg, Va., 1948), 158-59.

25. Russell, *A Long Deep Furrow*, 161-63, and Bruce M. Bigelow, "The Commerce of Rhode Island With the West Indies Before the American Revolution," (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1930), pt. 1, ch. 3, page 7.

26. Lorenzo Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620–1776* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1966), chapter 3. Greene notes that with the colony's heavy demand for slaves in the Narragansett Country and the colony's heavy involvement in the slave trade, Rhode Island's black population in the eighteenth century ranged between 6 and 10 percent. For the censuses see [1730] Potter, "Early History of Narragansett," 114; [1748] Bartlett, ed., *Recs. of R.I.*, 5:270; and [1774] John R. Bartlett, comp., *Census of the Inhabitants of Rhode Island* (Providence, 1858), 84–92.

27. See South Kingstown Probate Records, 2:228–29; 4:57, 145, 173, 196–97, 306, 362; 5:107–8, 238, 337.

28. Elisha R. Potter, Jr., "Report Before the House of Representatives of the Rhode Island Legislature, January, 1840," reprinted in part in Wilkins Updike, *History of the Episcopal Church in Narragansett, Rhode Island*, 3 vols., 2d. ed. (Boston, 1907), 1:208.

29. Howard M. Chapin, *Rhode Island Privateers in King George's War, 1739–1748* (Providence, 1926), 161, 162, and Potter Papers, 1741–1770, file 1760, RIHS.

30. Updike, *Episcopal Church in Narragansett*, 3:11.

31. Other planters whose records have survived acted in such a capacity. See Potter Papers, 1771–1780, file 1772, RIHS (Nathaniel Gardiner and Rowland Robinson); Caroline Hazard, *College Tom*, (Boston, 1893), 63–69, 79–80 (Thomas Hazard); and Miller, "Narragansett Planters," 83 (Elisha Reynolds).

32. Edward M. Cook, Jr., *Fathers of the Towns: Leadership and Community Structure in Eighteenth Century New England* (Baltimore, 1976), 66–67.

As most New England farmers maintained relatively small farms and livestock herds, slavery never flourished. The South Kingstown planters, however, needed a large, cheap labor force to tend to their great herds and to cultivate their vast farms. Not surprisingly then, South Kingstown also became the most important slaveholding town in rural New England. Black slaves were easily available for purchase from nearby Newport merchants involved in the slave trade. While blacks numbered no more than 3 percent of the total population in eighteenth-century New England, in South Kingstown between 1730 and 1774 they constituted 16 to 25 percent of the town's population, as the slave population rose from only a few in the seventeenth century, to 85 in Kingstown in 1708, to 498 in South Kingstown alone by 1730.²⁶ Though they probably underestimate the actual numbers, probate and census records indicate that the average slaveholding for South Kingstown planters ranged from 5 to 20. When he died in 1751, William Robinson, the third wealthiest South Kingstown resident in 1744, left 19 black slaves, the highest number among the town's estate inventories.²⁷ In 1840 Elisha R. Potter, Jr. of South Kingstown, a respected historian who undoubtedly conversed with relatives of planters, reported to the General Assembly that planters on the average held from 5 to 40 slaves each.²⁸

South Kingstown planters typically supplemented their slave labor force with one or two Indian servants. Taken from the local Narragansett tribe, these Indians were probably hired to fill temporary work needs. An exception was the town's wealthiest man in 1774, Silas Niles, who, according to that year's census, hired 10 Indians in addition to owning 6 black slaves.

Commercial stock and dairy farming was so profitable that some South Kingstown planters became involved in mercantile activities. For example, Robert Hazard in 1744 invested in two privateers. In 1750 Hazard bought shares in seven trading voyages from Newport merchant Jonathon Nichols.²⁹ Additionally, Robert Hazard's grandson stated that the planter often loaded two ships a year with horses and provisions from his farm for shipment directly to the West Indies.³⁰ Hazard also probably acted as middleman, selling to Newport merchants farm products he had purchased from lesser farmers.³¹

The high level of commercial activity enabled South Kingstown to support an unusually large planter class. Tax records indicate that the highest tenth of South Kingstown taxpayers between 1730 and 1760 owned from 45 to 50 percent of the town's wealth, a concentration comparable only to New England's port cities. The highest tenth of taxpayers in rural Massachusetts and Connecticut towns during this period consistently owned around 25 percent of the wealth.³² South Kingstown's tax lists also demonstrate that wealth and family were important characteristics of the large planter class. The Hazard, Robinson, Gardiner, Potter, Niles, Watson, Brown, Perry, and Babcock families are found in the highest tenth of taxpayers from 1730 to 1774.

Wealth and family alone did not characterize the planter class. South

Kingstown elites consciously imitated the English country gentry in their religious, political, and social lives. Rich planters sought to affiliate themselves with churches of the elite class. Rural Rhode Island was dominated by Quakers and Baptists, but the austere and democratic nature of those churches did not appeal to every upwardly mobile planter. The Anglican and Congregational churches, previously confined to Newport's merchant elite, made impressive gains in the Narragansett Country.³³ The Anglican meeting house built in 1707 in South Kingstown swelled with new members after 1721 when the Reverend James MacSparran assumed leadership of the parish. MacSparran was both orthodox and elitist, attitudes that endeared him to his new parishioners seeking to flaunt their recently acquired social status. Referring to the Quakers, MacSparran wrote, "wherever Distinction of Persons is Decried, as among that People, Confusions will follow: For Levelism is inconsistent with Order, and a certain Inlet to Anarchy."³⁴ Of course many of the town's numerous birthright Quakers who could not accommodate their new wealth with the Society of Friends' restrictions did not convert. They either attended weekly worship while forgoing monthly and quarterly disciplinary meetings or ceased to associate with any church.³⁵

Wealth also brought political influence. Other than Newport and Providence, South Kingstown was the most important town politically in the colony. Planters George Hazard, William Robinson, and Robert Hazard served as deputy-governor. Nathaniel Niles and James Helme served many terms as chief justices of the Supreme Court. Planter families also dominated leadership positions at the county and town levels.³⁶

As much as religious affiliation or role in public life, the physical environment created by the planters testifies to their wealth and aspirations. Unlike the archetypal rural New England community, villages were unimportant to the Narragansett planters. Only Little Rest (now Kingstown) and Tower Hill came into existence, solely because they served at separate times as the seat for the county courthouse and jail.³⁷ Churches and graveyards were spread throughout the countryside.³⁸

The houses of planters reveal a high level of cultural standards for rural Rhode Island. The interior of the large Rowland Robinson House, remodeled in 1755 and still standing today, includes a pleasant spiral staircase and several fine built-in cupboards. Pictures show that John Potter's "Greate House," built near Matunuck in 1742, was decorated with elegant wood paneling.³⁹ Potter and other planters adopted the English custom of attaching high-sounding names to their commodious homes. Matthew Robinson called his house "Hopewell," which was described as built in 1750 "after the style of the English Lodge."⁴⁰ Although South Kingstown society was somewhat refined, planters really looked to Newport's cosmopolitan society for cultural leadership. The Newport merchants with whom planters traded were often richer and more sophisticated. For example, the interior architecture of the Rowland Robinson and John Potter houses reveal similarities to earlier Newport homes.⁴¹ Robinson and Potter apparently imitated patterns

33. Ezra Stiles, *Extracts From the Itineraries and Other Miscellanies*, ed. Franklin B. Dexter (New Haven, 9-11); Dr. Joseph Torrey's *Record Book of Marriages*, ed. William Davis Miller (Providence, 1925); "Narragansett Parish Register," in Updike *Episcopal Church in Narragansett*, 2:462-605.

34. James MacSparran, "America Dissected," reprinted in Updike *Episcopal Church in Narragansett*, 3:11.

35. Only a few dozen of the 77 Quakers listed by Ezra Stiles in 1760 attended monthly meetings. South Kingstown Monthly Meeting Records, I-II, RIHS; Stiles, *Extracts from the Itineraries*, 9-11.

36. Cook, *Fathers of the Towns*, 161-211; South Kingstown Town Council Records, 1-6; and Joseph J. Smith, comp., *Civil and Military List of Rhode Island, 1647-1800* (Providence, 1900).

37. Miller, "Narragansett Planters," 105.

38. Kenneth Roebuck, *Cemeteries in South Kingstown* (Kingston, R.I., 1979); George J. Harris, "A Visitation to the Cemeteries of Ancient Kingstown," (unpublished manuscript, RIHS, 1880).

39. For the Robinson and Potter houses see *Old Houses in the South County of Rhode Island* (Providence, 1932), 13-15, 42.

40. Quoted in Wilkins Updike, *Memoirs of the Rhode Island Bar* (Boston, 1842), 235.

41. Antoinette F. Downing, *Early Homes of Rhode Island* (Providence, 1937), 157, 187.

The gracefully turned spindles and carved drop ornaments of the staircase in the Rowland Robinson House in North Kingstown provide evidence of the wealth and aspirations of planters in the Narragansett Country. Taken from Old Houses of South County of Rhode Island (1932). Courtesy of NSCDA in Rhode Island.



42. See William Davis Miller, *Silversmiths of Little Rest* (Boston, 1928).

in Newport houses which had been constructed more than a decade earlier.

The decorative and fine arts left by the South Kingstown planters provide further evidence of the use and display of wealth. In the third quarter of the eighteenth century, South Kingstown remarkably supported four silversmiths, a number unmatched in rural New England, including Samuel Casey, among the finest at his trade in the colonies.⁴² Anglican planters also had their portraits painted by famous artists of the day. Sylvester Gardiner, son of William Gardiner, posed for John Singleton Copley. John Smibert painted Reverend MacSparran and his wife, the former Hannah Gardiner. Surviving murals from the John Potter and Rowland Robinson houses, though not painted by master artists, are revealing. The Potter mural, now hanging in the Newport Historical Society, shows John Potter's family enjoying tea on dishes of valuable porcelain and silver. Potter, a member of the Congregational church, wears a red coat with a ruffled shirt containing gold buttons.

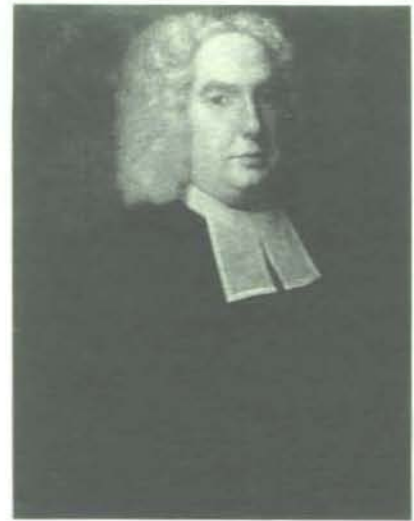
Three ladies are adorned in colorful dresses. The presence of a black slave adds to the atmosphere of wealth and status. The mural in the Robinson house shows the planter on horseback sacking a deer, a favorite sport of the English aristocracy at the time.⁴³

The image of South Kingstown planters as culturally refined, fun-loving socialites must be tempered somewhat. Some planters enjoyed their leisure time. Reverend MacSparran's diary shows that dinner parties and corn-huskings were social highlights. Nicholas Gardiner's wedding reception for his daughter was attended by a reported six hundred guests. Horse racing on Narragansett beach or on man-made circular tracks was a favorite pastime.⁴⁴ But religious convictions restricted the behavior of many. The town's Quaker planters especially avoided vanities, dancing, drinking, and other "frolicking." Jeffrey Watson's diary, for example, reveals his preference for evangelical sermons over wedding receptions. A friend of Dr. Alexander Hamilton, the English traveler then residing in Newport, found trouble with South Kingstown innkeeper Immanuel Case one Sunday. Hamilton wrote:

Case was mightily offended att Mr. Laughton for singing and whistling, telling him that he ought not to profane the Sabboth. Laughton swore that he forgot what day it was, but Case was still more offended at his swearing and left us in bad humour.⁴⁵

Moreover, relations between planters were not always harmonious. Fierce competition over possession of land and political offices sometimes divided the planter community. Jeffrey Watson in his diary mentions several disputes between local planters over land ownership, including one long and bitter struggle he had with his wealthy neighbor John Gardiner.⁴⁶ Watson's diary also includes references to the Ward-Hopkins controversy which rocked Rhode Island politics between 1757 and 1770.⁴⁷ South Kingstown was primarily Ward country, as planters, led by Watson and James Helme, joined with Newport merchants. But Hopkins had solid support in the town, led by the Hazards. Watson, Helme, and their allies gained town and county offices when the Ward faction won the annual election for governor, while the Hazards replaced them when Hopkins was elected.⁴⁸ In 1760 Watson described some typical electioneering for seats in the General Assembly. On 26 June he wrote, "I was at Little Rest where we met and set up William Potter and Hezekiah Babcock." On 26 August Watson wrote, "I was at Town Meeting. Potter and Babcock was chose Deputies by 30 majority after a great deal of fending and probing. Hard words and a Great Strife but ended well." Although political differences divided the planter community, South Kingstown's elite social structure was never threatened.

The presence of black slaves and Indian servants led to the creation of a very strict social order based on race, wealth, and family. Planters stood at the top of the social regime. For nonwhites, race determined the extent of their economic dependence on planters and of their legal rights. Black slaves, depending almost totally on planters for subsis-



The Reverend James MacSparran (1680?–1757) painted by John Smibert. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 5369).

43. Paintings of the planters appear in Updike, *Episcopal Church in Narragansett*.

44. See James MacSparran, *A Letter Book and Abstract of Out Services*, ed. Daniel Goodwin (Boston, 1899); Updike, *Episcopal Church in Narragansett*, 100; and Miller, "Narragansett Planters," 105.

45. See South Kingstown Monthly Meeting Records, 1–2, RIHS; Edward M. Cook, Jr., "Jeffrey Watson's Diary, 1740–1784: Family, Community, Religion and Politics in Colonial Rhode Island," *RIH* 43 (Aug. 1984): 79–116; and Hamilton, *A Gentleman's Progress*, 99.

46. Cook, "Jeffrey Watson's Diary," 82–83, 87–97.

47. For a discussion of the Ward-Hopkins controversy see David Lovejoy, *Rhode Island Politics and the American Revolution, 1760–1776* (Providence, 1969), and James, *Colonial Rhode Island*, 294–313.

48. Officers elected at the Colony level are listed in *Recs. of RI*; county officials are listed in Smith, *Civil and Military List of Rhode Island*; and town office holders appear in South Kingstown Council Records. In 1765 and 1766, when Ward was elected governor, he won solid majorities in South Kingstown. In 1763, when Hopkins won the governorship, South Kingstown voters supported Ward by a much narrower margin, 88 to 83. For vote totals see See Nicholas Brown Papers, John Carter Brown Library, Providence, RI.

When John Potter and his family sat for this portrait (artist unknown), they were careful to include many of the emblems of the planter class in the Narragansett Country: fine clothing, tea served on exquisite porcelain, and the presence of a black slave. Reprinted courtesy of the Newport Historical Society.



49. Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*, 129–39, and Edward Channing, “The Narragansett Planters: A Study in Causes,” in *Johns Hopkins Studies in Historical and Political Science* (Baltimore, 1886), 11–12.

50. MacSparran, *Letter Book*, 29, 52, and Thomas Hazard, *Recollections of Olden Times* (Newport, 1869), 126.

51. South Kingstown Probate Records, 2:228 (2 Indians), 3:75 (2 Indians); and South Kingstown Town Council Records, 2:17.

52. Mulattoes did have some legal rights. Newport officials in 1738 sent a note to the South Kingstown Town Council concerning John Cooper, “a mulatto man of prudence in the county of Newport,” who was the executor of the estate of servant Betty Heath, “a mulatto woman late of South Kingstown.” Heath’s master, John Lillibridge, prevented Cooper from obtaining Heath’s possessions. The town council requested Lillibridge to appear at the next meeting to explain his actions. South Kingstown Town Council Records, 1738, RIHS.

53. *Recs. of R.I.*, 6:257.

54. Thomas Hazard hired on a temporary basis several poor white men and women to perform both household and farm tasks. Hazard, *College Tom*, 308, 311.

tence and enjoying few legal rights, were at the bottom. South Kingstown supplemented Rhode Island’s slave code, described as the harshest in New England, with even harsher restrictions subjugating blacks.⁴⁹ As in other slave societies, terror was used to enforce the laws. Reverend MacSparran beat his male slave for breaking Rhode Island’s curfew law for nonwhites; he also beat his female slave for violating local law by receiving a gift from a male slave suitor without permission. A runaway slave who returned to his master reportedly was stripped of his clothes, tied to a stake in a swamp, and left to the mercy of mosquitoes.⁵⁰

Indians and mulattoes occupied a slightly higher position. By law Narragansett Indians could not be held in slavery, and many lived in their own households. The 1774 census, for example, revealed that 99 of the town’s 220 Indians lived in their own households. But some were so destitute that they hired themselves out as field laborers or as indentured servants for a term of years.⁵¹ Social custom apparently demanded that mulattoes be used as servants.⁵² The low level of miscegenation in South Kingstown indicates that social pressures were aimed at upholding the regime based on race. A state census in 1782 reveals that one mulatto for every eleven blacks lived in South Kingstown; towns where slavery was less important maintained mulatto-to-black ratios of one to five, one to three, and even one to one.⁵³

Poor landless whites also enjoyed some freedom, though their opportunities were limited by the influx of cheap black and Indian labor. These whites depended on planters for employment but usually received only seasonal work.⁵⁴ Only landholding whites had the right to vote. Small and middling white landholders in the voting class still often had to depend on planters to buy their surplus farm products and to supply them with goods.

This social system made South Kingstown resemble the colonial South more than the English countryside. Planters in Rhode Island and the southern colonies were similar in kind: they both resided on isolated estates, engaged in commercial farming, depended on black slaves, and dominated their communities socially and politically. Still, though South Kingstown’s gentry society was unique in colonial New

England, southern planters enjoyed more land, social prominence, and cultural refinement.⁵⁵

Decline of the Gentry, 1760–1784

By 1774, South Kingstown planters confronted economic and demographic problems faced by towns throughout New England and some additional problems caused by the town's economy. Increasing population, rising land prices, vulnerability of Newport merchants, overexportation of quality horses, movements to free black slaves, and the American Revolutionary War speeded the planters' downfall. At war's end South Kingstown was not much different from other rural New England towns.

By 1770 a finite supply of land and growing population combined to make New England an increasingly overcrowded society.⁵⁶ Family lands were divided again and again to accommodate the increasing number of young men in families. South Kingstown experienced these population pressures with other rural New England towns. Its white population had grown from 965 in 1730, to 1,405 in 1748, to 2,185 in 1774. As a preindustrial agricultural society, South Kingstown's planters required at least 250 to 1,000 acres to maintain their level of commercial farming. South Kingstown, too, was becoming overcrowded.

It became increasingly difficult to inherit or purchase land. Planters faced the prospect of not being able to pass on as much land to their sons as they themselves had owned. William Robinson in 1751 left a will dividing 1,385 acres between nine sons and grandsons. The eldest son, Rowland, received the most land, the homestead farm, but that amounted only to 300 acres.⁵⁷ This experience was repeated among the Hazard, Gardiner, and other planter families. At the same time, rising population forced land values higher throughout Rhode Island, making it difficult to purchase large estates to transfer the plantation system. Unlike Virginia planters along the James River, who purchased and developed huge tracts of land in the colony's vast interior, South Kingstown's farmers had no interior of which to take advantage.

The division of family estates meant smaller stockholdings and a reduction in agricultural surplus. Inventories of planters who paid the highest tenth of taxes show a dramatic decrease in livestock holdings by 1774. As mentioned previously, eleven wealthy planters who died between 1730 and 1760 owned on the average 391 sheep, 93 cattle, and 18 horses. The average holdings of four planters who died between 1762 and 1774 fell to 166 sheep, 54 cattle, and 4 horses.⁵⁸

Slavery also became less important. Fewer laborers were needed to work the smaller farms and livestock herds. Four inventories from 1743 to 1752 listing the highest number of slaves averaged thirteen; from 1762 to 1771 that figure declined to six.⁵⁹ In addition, South Kingstown Quakers led by Thomas Hazard, increasingly opposed slavery. Following the example of Friends in Philadelphia, they threatened in 1771 to expel members who kept slaves. In June 1773, South Kingstown Quakers appointed to "Visit Slave Keepers" proudly reported that "they don't

55. See Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1982) pt. 1.

56. See Bruce C. Daniels, *The Connecticut Town: Growth and Development, 1635–1790* (Middletown, Conn., 1979), ch. 2; Darrett Rutman, "People in Progress: The New Hampshire Towns of the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Urban History* 1 (1975): 268–92; and Kenneth Lockridge, "Land, Population, and the Evolution of New England Society, 1630–1790," in Stanley Katz ed., *Colonial America: Essays on Politics and Social Development* (Boston, 1971), 467–91.

57. South Kingstown Probate Records, 4: 328–31.

58. *Ibid.*, 5: 124, 213, 238–39, 365.

59. For the earlier figures see *Ibid.*, 4: 145, 196–97, 335; and 5: 108. For those between 1762 and 1771 see *Ibid.*, 5: 127, 214, 238, and 365. The 1774 census shows that the twenty wealthiest planters each owned from 7 to 13 black slaves.

60. South Kingstown Monthly Meeting Records, 1:243, 2:1.

61. *Newport Mercury*, 9 May 1763.

62. See the Aaron Lopez, Jonathan Easton, and John Freebody Ledgers at Newport Historical Society and the Benjamin Hazard Ledger at RIHS. Bigelow, *Commerce of Rhode Island*, pt. 1, ch. 7, 50.

63. Bigelow, *Commerce of R.I.*, 50.

64. Cook, "Jeffrey Watson's Diary," 109.

65. Samuel Greene Arnold, *History of the State of Rhode Island*, 2 vols. (London, 1878), 2:465.

find there is any held as Slaves by Friends," and six Quakers who were among the highest tenth of taxpayers in 1774 did not own any black slaves.⁶⁰

South Kingstown planters also were guilty of some poor farming practices, including overexporting their best breeding horses. Wealthy West Indian planters sent agents to Newport to buy all the best breeds in the Narragansett Country. An advertisement appearing in the *Newport Mercury* on 28 March 1763 decried that "the best Horses of this Colony have been set off . . . to the West Indies and elsewhere by which the Breed is much dwindled, to the great Detriment of both Merchant and Farmer." Shortly after that advertisement appeared, Newport merchants sponsored a race open only to horses meeting quality standards. Though a purse of one hundred dollars was offered, only three horses entered the race, won by Samuel Gardiner of South Kingstown.⁶¹

The planters also suffered because they depended on Newport merchants whose success was vulnerable to changing economic conditions. Surviving ledgers show South Kingstown planters sending great quantities of cheese, beef, hay, and livestock on the hoof to these merchants. In return the planters received imported luxuries from Europe such as linen, silks, chocolates, mirrors, and watches, in addition to necessities such as building materials and kitchen utensils. New England rum also was popular among the planters.⁶² Although Newport merchants prospered between 1763 and 1774, they lacked the larger hinterlands of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, and were susceptible to encroachment by the rising merchants in Providence and Bristol. Newport merchants were forced to rely on West Indian and other export trade at a time when production of food products by the Narragansett planters was on decline.

Disaster struck in 1775. A recession arrived in the foreign market trade, both in the West Indies and England. Business came to a standstill. Aaron Lopez, the leading Newport merchant, admitted that he had to strain his resources just to pay four hundred dollars for ship repairs.⁶³

The Revolutionary War hastened the downfall of both Newport commerce and the South Kingstown planters. While the war's effects on Newport are well known, its influence on the Narragansett economy are not. With the West Indies trade halted and Newport occupied by the British, South Kingstown planters lost their primary outlet for surplus farm goods. Furthermore, to replenish dwindling supplies, British troops invaded South Kingstown on several occasions in 1779, seizing sheep, cattle, cheese, and white and black laborers.⁶⁴ Additionally, the town bore a heavy burden in paying Rhode Island's war taxes. South Kingstown residents usually paid the third highest percentages of taxes in the colony, behind Newport and Providence. But the British and French occupations of Newport and the American army's stay in Providence drained those ports' resources. Thus in 1780 South Kingstown was assessed twice the tax paid by Newport residents and one-third more than Providence.⁶⁵ Finally, the decline of slavery in the Narragansett Country was hastened by legislative acts awarding freedom to any

slave who enlisted in Rhode Island's black regiment and the manumission in 1784 of all children born to slaves.⁶⁶

By war's end South Kingstown was no longer the gentry society of isolated estates and large farms. It was becoming more like other rural New England towns. Between 1774 and 1790 South Kingstown's population increased from 2,835 to 4,131. Most farmers created only a small agricultural surplus; four men who were among the highest tenth of taxpayers in 1774 left inventories between 1788 and 1796 averaging only 50 sheep, 43 cattle, and 4 horses.⁶⁷ Compact villages including Wakefield, Saunderstown, and Perryville were becoming important. Townspeople preferred to build their churches in villages rather than spread throughout the countryside. Significantly, by 1800 the Episcopal meeting house located between Little Rest and Tower Hill fell into such disrepair that it was moved to Wickford.⁶⁸ By the early nineteenth century the transformation of South Kingstown was so complete that the grandson of one prominent planter noted, "Few persons are now aware of the change that has taken place in the society here within the last fifty or sixty years."⁶⁹

66. *Recs. of R.I.*, 8:359-60, 10:7-8. An incomplete list of 73 slaves recruited in 1778 included 24 from South Kingstown. See "A List of Slaves Enlisted into the Continental Army," ed. James Arnold, in *The Narragansett Historical Register* (Hamilton, R.I., 1882-83), 313.

67. South Kingstown Probate Records, 6:206, 260, 284, 350-51.

68. Miller, "Narragansett Planters," 103, fn. 2.

69. Updike, *Episcopal Church in Narragansett*, 1:228.



Theatregoers crowded the Providence Opera House on 14 March 1931 for one last performance before it was razed. Courtesy of the Theatre Collection, Dept. of Theatre, Speech and Dance, Brown University.

The Shuberts and the Syndicate: The Independent Theatre Comes to Providence

Stephen B. Pollock and Don B. Wilmeth

"We are now independents: Independent to choose the attractions Providence will be sure to like. No more bad shows forced upon us. We guarantee a season of genuine enjoyment to the playgoers of our Home City."

—Colonel Felix R. Wendelschaefer¹

During the latter years of the nineteenth century small groups of American businessmen gained control of major industries by merging their organizations into trusts. A few men such as Morgan, Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Harriman made great fortunes. Rhode Island industry, and that of Providence in particular, likewise was dominated by a handful of men characterized by Erwin L. Levine as "the oligarchic commercial and manufacturing interests."² Although some of these businessmen belonged to the old landed aristocracy, others, such as Marsden J. Perry, were outsiders who moved into the state and began to gain political and economic power after the collapse of the business interests of William Sprague in 1873. By the early 1900s, power rested in the hands of men such as Perry, United States Senator Nelson W. Aldrich, Providence lawyer and state senator William G. Roelker, and the boss of Rhode Island's reigning Republican party, General Charles R. Brayton. During the early 1900s these men controlled the city government of Providence and the *Providence Journal*, which became essentially an organ for the Republican party. "Local bossism and corruption" became commonplace, fomenting bribery and dishonesty.³

The "show business" was not immune to these practices nor to the tendency for power to become concentrated in the hands of a few insiders. Nationally, six enterprising theatre businessmen formed an organization that became known as the Theatrical Syndicate. These individuals (producer Charles Frohman; booking agents Marc Klaw and Abraham Erlanger; Samuel F. Nirdlinger-Nixon and Fred Zimmerman, who controlled theatre leases in the mid-Atlantic; and Alfred Hayman, who leased most of the theatres in the West) pooled their considerable resources ostensibly to bring order to a chaotic situation in theatrical booking and the management of "the road." As a result the Theatrical

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1. "The Man on the Box" (Providence Opera House advertisement), *Providence Sunday Journal*, 9 Sept. 1906.

2. Erwin L. Levine, *Theodore Francis Green: The Rhode Island Years, 1906-1936* (Providence, 1963), 4. The first two chapters of this study explain in relatively simple terms the complexity of the political scene at the turn of the century in Rhode Island.

3. Levine, *Green: The Rhode Island Years*, 6.

4. Major sources on the Theatrical Syndicate include Alfred Bernheim, *The Business of the Theatre* (New York, 1932); Jack Poggi, *Theater in America: The Impact of Economic Forces, 1870-1967*; Monroe Lippman, "The Effect of the Theatrical Syndicate on Theatrical Art in America," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 26 (April 1940): 275-82; Milo L. Smith, "The Klaw-Erlanger Bogeyman Myth," *Players* 44 (Dec.-Jan. 1969): 70-75; and Steve Travis, "The Rise and Fall of the Theatrical Syndicate," *Educational Theatre Journal* 10 (March 1958): 35-40.

5. To date there have been three undocumented book-length histories of theatre in Providence. Charles Blake's *An Historical Account of Providence Stage* (Providence, 1868) was virtually reproduced and then updated by George O. Willard in *History of the Providence Stage, 1762-1891* (Providence, 1891). The most recent history, Roger Brett's *Temples of Illusion* (Providence, 1976), covers the period of the 1870s to 1950. In addition to these sources, especially the latter, we have depended heavily on the *Providence Journal*, Sept. 1902-Dec. 1906, and theatre programs from the Providence Opera House (1893-1906), Imperial Theatre (1902-5, Sept. 1906), Shubert Theatre (Jan.-June 1906), and Empire Theatre (1906-13). Also useful was Col. Felix R. Wendelschaefer's *The Story of the Opera House . . . As Told to Garrett D. Byrnes* (Providence, n.d.), originally published in the *Providence Journal-Bulletin* in Feb. and March 1931.

6. See Brett, *Temples of Illusion*, 117-46, for an account of the minor houses in Providence at this time.

7. The extensive and diverse theatrical structure of this period is explained in detail in Benjamin McArthur, *Actors and American Culture, 1880-1920* (Philadelphia, 1984). Also useful are Norman Hapgood, *The Stage in America, 1897-1900* (New York, 1901), and Alfred Harding, *The Revolt of the Actors* (New York, 1929).

Syndicate became the dominant force in the American theatre for almost twenty years and maintained a virtual monopoly from 1896 to 1916. By 1903 it governed most first-class theatrical production in America. To stay in business, theatre operators were required to deal exclusively with the Syndicate, paying it sizable fees and percentages of profit and accepting the attractions, routes, and show dates it specified. The Syndicate's position did not give way until 1910, influenced by such factors as the rise in power of the Shubert brothers, the introduction of the movies, the increasing popularity of spectator sports, the increased railroad rates after the turn of the century, and the advent of unionism.⁴

Providence theatres did not escape the Syndicate's grip. Just as the theatre business was not immune from the organizational and economic forces governing other industries, the Syndicate's domination did not escape the scrutiny of reformers. Its downfall in Rhode Island coincided with the emergence of the state's progressive movement in 1906. In fact, the rhetoric employed to publicize the arrival of independently produced shows might well have been used to extol the virtues of reform politicians seeking public office under the banner of Rhode Island's newly formed Lincoln party. Though the industry was entertainment rather than transportation or some other essential public service, the growth and decline of the Syndicate's control of first-class theatre in Providence serves as an instructive reminder of the methods used by businessmen to control an industry, and of the efforts by competitors to reintroduce competition to the marketplace.

The theatrical scene of Providence in the late 1890s initially was relatively modest.⁵ One major legitimate theatre, the Providence Opera House, and one principal vaudeville house, Keith's, provided most of the live, theatrical and variety entertainment in the city. Keith's, which originally had offered "legit" road productions, changed to a policy of full-time vaudeville in 1898, the same year its name changed officially from B. F. Keith's Opera House to B. F. Keith's New Theatre.⁶ These two theatres offered the best attractions in the finest facilities at the highest prices; they were the prestige houses of Providence.⁷



Line drawing of the Providence Opera House as it appeared in 1922. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 5645).

Prior to the opening of the Shubert Theatre, 7 January 1906, the notion of independence meant little to the theatregoing public in the home of the Independent Man. At a time when increased public attention to business practices and legal action to dismantle trusts was becoming common throughout the country, the Syndicate's position in Providence was comfortable. Although a progressive movement had emerged briefly in 1902-3, and the state badly needed reform, the Republican power base under Brayton stopped the progressives temporarily. In addition, the partnership of Klaw and Erlanger, the booking agents for New England and key members of the Theatrical Syndicate, had been spared the publicity of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act; under law, entertainment was not a necessary commodity, and therefore lay outside its jurisdiction. Basking in the shadows of an inert theatrical town, the Syndicate was guaranteed a steady income with little public outcry.

If secrecy was tantamount to security, however, the Shuberts' arrival immediately dissolved the Syndicate's clandestine role. Providence theatregoers, accustomed to supporting its only first-class theatre, the Providence Opera House, now had a choice. Favorite stars and competing shows, colored by an atmosphere of antitrust sentiment, became new divisive factors in a city which found itself unable to support two theatrical houses. The booking games played by the two combinations in New York were felt locally on a far more elementary level. Within seven months the situation was at an impasse. Colonel Felix Wendelschaefer, manager of the Providence Opera House, was the man caught in the middle.

Felix Wendelschaefer's affiliation with the Opera House, built in 1871 on Dorrance and Pine Streets (razed 1931), was long standing. He had been hired in 1891 as the theatre's orchestra conductor. Opera House Manager Robert Morrow had made a favorable reputation for the house and its successes had enabled him to earn numerous choice bookings each season. During his managerial term the Syndicate established its hold on the house, ending Morrow's duty as booking agent and transforming his managerial role to that of lessee. At the time of the Syndicate's incursion into the Opera House's affairs, Wendelschaefer was unaware of the situation that had evolved. While Klaw and Erlanger were known generally as *the* nationwide controlling booking combination, their policies of demanding percentages and strong-arming managers had slipped by unheralded. In June 1897, Wendelschaefer was educated in some of the Syndicate's unpublicized practices.

Desiring a hand in the running of the Opera House's season, Wendelschaefer approached Morrow concerning the purchase of a one-half interest in the theatre's management. Though he did not accept the offer, Morrow informed Wendelschaefer of some startling facts concerning the house's finances. Morrow, a salaried Opera House employee, held a lease for the building through June 1898. His weekly earnings were set at sixty dollars. Although they held no investment of any kind in the theatre, the firm of Klaw and Erlanger received one-third of the house's profits.

Felix R. Wendelschaefer, shortly after becoming the manager of the Providence Opera House. Courtesy of the Theatre Collection, Dept. of Theatre, Speech and Dance, Brown University.



Robert Morrow's death in February 1898 brought the opportunity that Wendelschaefer had awaited. With no managerial candidates interested in securing a long-term lease, he discussed the matter with Charles Fletcher, controlling stockholder in the Providence Opera House Association. They agreed to a new lease of five years, with an additional five-year option. To allow more time for renovations, Wendelschaefer purchased the last few weeks of Morrow's lease as well. These arrangements dealt only with the Opera House itself, however. Organized bookings with the Syndicate were quite another matter. Wendelschaefer's account of the negotiations clearly outlines the attitude of the "K and E" organization.

I went to New York to see Abe Erlanger, Mark [sic] Klaw and Al Hayman, who was the moneymen in the organization. Also associ-

ated with the K and E firm was Joe Brooks, the showman, and the firm of Rich and Harris, who were theatre owners and producers.

In contracting with Klaw and Erlanger to provide attractions at the Opera House, I was informed that thirty-three per cent of the net profits of the theatre would go to Klaw and Erlanger. This seemed an exorbitant profit for the booking syndicate which really had no investment in the theatre itself. I was inclined to disbelieve Abe Erlanger's statement that all of the theatres in the country were paying such heavy tribute.

Consequently, Mr. Erlanger sent over to his office and obtained a score or more of contracts. In all of them was a clause awarding Klaw Erlanger at least thirty-three per cent. Then, as an object lesson to the young manager, Mr. Erlanger called my attention to a Baltimore theatre manager who was paying fifty per cent of his net profits to the K. and E. treasury. The Baltimore showman had tried to rebel against the Klaw and Erlanger domination and book shows independently. As a result, his house was kept dark for many weeks, and when he finally agreed to book through Klaw and Erlanger, they exacted half his profits.

It was clear there was nothing else to do but sign with the booking syndicate if I wanted to keep the Opera House going. However, in consideration for the great expense of renovating the house, Klaw and Erlanger agreed to take only twenty-five per cent of the profits for the first season. After that, it went up to thirty-three percent.⁸

Too realistic to sacrifice business for principle, Wendelschaefer agreed to the terms offered by Klaw and Erlanger. As long as the new theatre manager had to sacrifice no more than his competition, which had yet to surface, the settlement was an agreeable one.

For Wendelschaefer's managing debut at the newly remodeled Opera House, the Syndicate presented the world premiere of a new version of *Jack and the Beanstalk*.⁹ This large musical extravaganza consisted of a jumble of fairy tales and the *Arabian Nights* entertainments. While the show was actually little more than a Syndicate landmark in popular "drama," Abe Erlanger ventured from New York to supervise the final rehearsals. Providence theatregoers responded enthusiastically on opening night; the Syndicate had won the city. Thus reestablished, the Syndicate again submerged from public view, reassuming its silent role as booking agent to the Providence Opera House.

The Opera House's position as the sole first-class theatre in Providence was altered in 1902, when Charles Allen, proprietor of Westminster Street's Star Theatre (a converted church that opened in 1899), undertook the construction of a new house. Although Allen was unable to finish the building, the firm of Edward D. Stair and John Havlin, who held a virtual monopoly on so-called "popular price" theatres throughout the United States between 1900 and 1911 (as opposed to the Syndicate's monopoly of "first-class" theatres), had made overtures toward Providence for a house of their own.¹⁰ Wendelschaefer realized

8. Wendelschaefer, *Story of the Opera House*, part xv.

9. Brett, *Temples of Illusion*, 121, says the interior was lightened with white paint and old single boxes were replaced with double tier boxes decorated with plastered scrollwork, as was the proscenium arch.

10. In addition to the Theatrical Syndicate and the Stair/Havlin monopoly, B. F. Keith and Edward Albee organized the United Booking Office in 1900, which monopolized all of vaudeville, and Samuel Scribner's Columbia Amusement Exchange virtually monopolized burlesque after 1905.

11. The major source on the Shuberts is Jerry Stagg, *A Half-Century of Show Business and the Fabulous Empire of the Brothers Shubert* (New York, 1968). Sam, the second brother who initially took the leadership, was killed in a train wreck in May 1905. Lee, the elder, assumed leadership; J. I., or Jake, the younger, contributed the least to the trio.

that competitors offering lower ticket prices could provide a serious threat to the Opera House's business. Once again, he negotiated with Klaw and Erlanger. Assured that they would supply this new theatre with popular priced shows, Wendelschaefer leased it from Foster for ten years. Abe Spitz and Max Nathanson, managers of the Empire Theatre (also built in 1899), completed the managing troika of the new Imperial Theatre, which opened on 22 August 1902 with the Four Cohans featured in *The Governor's Son*.

Despite an auspicious first season, the management found itself forced to keep the house dark on several playing nights. The Syndicate had erred in allowing another of its houses in Providence. While the public initially supported both houses, several factors dictated that this success would be short-lived. Local theatregoers had never been noted for their determined support for the performing arts. Middle- and working-class tastes did not favor the entertainments of the Opera House; they were aligned more closely with raucous comedy and vaudeville. Other houses in town, like Keith's, with its variety acts, held more popular appeal. Since the Syndicate's offerings were aimed at a particular audience, splitting the patronage could only hurt. Difficulties supplying the two theatres with worthwhile entertainment also created problems. Once the novelty of the new house had dissipated, the Syndicate found itself in an uncomfortable position. Klaw and Erlanger, unwilling to make any commitments as to the future of either house, lost control of the Imperial. After December 1904, Spitz and Nathanson left the management; Wendelschaefer remained for the conclusion of the season, at which point the stock company of William Courtleigh assumed control of the theatre. Once again, the Providence Opera House was the only first-class theatre in the city.

The Imperial, however, was to reappear as a first-class theatre after only one and one-half seasons as a stock establishment. Renamed the Shubert Theatre on 8 January 1906, and revived under the titular management and lesseeship of Messrs. Sam S. and Lee Shubert (although Wendelschaefer apparently had some say as well), it would exert a far more profound effect on the Syndicate's role in Providence.¹¹

Before they acquired the Imperial, the Shuberts' acquaintance with Providence had been minimal. One of their few sallies north to the Providence Opera House (if not the only visit; records are incomplete) was in April 1903. They presented their first New York hit, *A Chinese Honeymoon*, a piece of fluff capitalizing on the Oriental craze initiated by the New York producer/director David Belasco, one of the few successful Syndicate opponents with such vehicles as *Madame Butterfly* (1900) and *The Darling of the Gods* (1902). Plagiarizing the competition was quite profitable for the K. and E. Syndicate. The public was not overly discerning when each product was essentially the same. At the time, the Shubert brothers (Lee, Sam, and Jake) were in partnership with Sam Nixon and J. F. Zimmerman; Klaw and Erlanger controlled the booking only through the use of "influence." Such influence, in the guise of an ultimatum served by Erlanger to Nixon and Zimmerman,



Two of the Shubert brothers, Lee (left) and J. J. (right), as they appeared in the early 1920s. Courtesy of the Theatre Collection, Dept. of Theatre, Speech and Dance, Brown University.

brought an abrupt halt to the Shuberts' semi-alliance with the Syndicate. From that date in January 1904, the theatrical independents had won another ally. While the Shuberts were by no means the most faithful advocates of independence, they were to be the strongest.

At the turn of the century, local media coverage of theatrical affairs was sparse. *The Providence Journal* was no exception; its low-key coverage was limited essentially to daily advertising and the theatrical pages in the Sunday edition. Just as the Syndicate was able to escape public scrutiny, the independents found themselves in an identical situation. As such, the antitrust war between idealism and independence did not immediately accompany the Shuberts' arrival.

Historically, Providence theatregoers were interested only in the stars, not their agents. While Charles Frohman, the sole member of the Trust seriously interested in production and the art of the theatre, had presented a number of favorites such as Julia Marlowe, E. H. Sothorn, William Gillette, Maude Adams, and John Drew, many other popular

attractions shunned the Theatrical Trust. But in the minds of theatre-goers, independence was not an issue. They were far more concerned with who could present, for example, such a desired attraction as Minnie Maddern Fiske. Lee Shubert, as it turned out, could and did.

As figureheads in the fight for independence, Mrs. Fiske and her husband, Harrison Grey Fiske, editor of the anti-Syndicate trade paper *The Dramatic Mirror*, had excluded themselves from the Syndicate. With only one first-class house, Wendelschaefer's affiliation with Klaw and Erlanger eliminated any possibility of her performances in Providence. Mrs. Fiske's appearance in *Leah Kleshna* to inaugurate the Shubert as the initial independent first-class house in Providence transcended the usual opening. It became a matter of the audience's right to see any entertainment. The *Sunday Journal's* announcement of 7 January was typically subdued:

The Imperial Theatre becomes the Shubert Theatre, beginning tomorrow, and will hereafter offer the first-class attractions not in the Theatrical Trust. This means that Providence people now will be able to see a large number of prominent stars who have been excluded from this city by the trust, and the first will be Mrs. Fiske and the Manhattan Company.

The spring of 1906 was a remarkable season in Providence theatre history. Competition between the Shuberts and the Syndicate elevated local theatre to new heights. While the independents were hard-put to provide bookings for their new house, the quality of their attractions far outstripped the Syndicate's offerings at comparable prices. Charles Frohman and Klaw and Erlanger provided the Opera House with many standby favorites, but in comparison with the long roster of Providence debuts offered by the Shuberts, Wendelschaefer's house was no match. Among the most popular shows were Mrs. Fiske and Sarah Bernhardt, who appeared in late January and early February, and again on 11 June to close the season with a matinee of scenes. David Belasco was also introduced to Providence theatre-goers. Mrs. Leslie Carter, his current leading lady and an overnight sensation, was featured in *Zaza*, one of several productions that Belasco brought to the Shubert.

In the competition between the independents and the Syndicate, the Shuberts held a distinct advantage. By combining their house's independent stand with the current antitrust sentiment and presenting a season of first-class entertainment, they transferred the burden of competition to the Providence Opera House. Felix Wendelschaefer's patrons suffered directly, for many subscribed to the house and found themselves hindered from seeing the calibre of theatre that they desired. In the eyes of the Opera House subscriber, the Syndicate now affronted his freedom of choice. Theatre patrons were accustomed to attending one theatre; to change would be a matter of inconvenience, especially for most of the Brahmin class who had supported the Opera House from its inception. Indeed, the original stockholders in 1871 included such well-established citizens as William S. Slater, Christopher Lip-



Popular actress Sarah Bernhardt was among the performers who appeared at the rival Shubert Theatre in 1906. Courtesy of the Theatre Collection, Dept. of Theatre, Speech and Dance, Brown University.

pitt, John Carter Brown, Moses B. I. Goddard, and Henry Angell.¹² Consequently, the pressure was again transferred, this time to Wendelschaefer. There it rested, for past experience dictated that the Syndicate would show no interest in his plight. To Klaw and Erlanger, Providence was a secondary theatrical city, a "dramatic dog"; its needs were not fundamental in the determination of booking policies. Locally, the Syndicate's true colors began to show. In the public's estimation, Klaw and Erlanger's "laughing trust" of entertainment had become another case of rampant bossism.¹³

12. Willard, *History of the Providence Stage*, 197.

13. "The Ham Tree" (Opera House advertisement), *Providence Sunday Journal*, 6 May 1906.

14. For an excellent introduction to one phase of monopolism in Rhode Island and the battle over press control, see Robert E. Falb, Marsden J. Perry: "The Man Who Owned Rhode Island," (Honors thesis, Brown University, 1964).

15. "The Local Season," *Providence Sunday Journal*, 27 May 1906.

16. See "Opera House Open to All Attractions," *Providence Journal*, 28 July 1906.

And, not so incidentally, the local atmosphere had changed rather dramatically. Rhode Island's political situation had become almost unbearable. Earlier in 1906 the need for change had led to a revival of the state's progressive movement, ironically, just prior to the successful introduction of a Shubert theatre. In order to work toward the ousting of the old controlling factions, the Providence patricians—the Metcalfs, Sharpes, Goddards, and Greens—joined the middle-class reformers and established the short-lived Lincoln party (independent Republican), allying with the Democrats to lead a crusade against Perry, Aldrich, Brayton, Samuel Pomeroy Colt of the United States Rubber Company and a prominent Republican, and others. Although their efforts were not totally successful, the control of the *Journal* was regained in January seven months before the actual establishment of the Lincoln party.¹⁴ Within a month the attitude and opinion of the newspaper had changed, most notably in its support and puffery of reform measures of all kinds, including theatrical reform.

Current events, then, favored the Shuberts, and a sympathetic major newspaper never hurts a theatrical endeavor! A review of the theatrical season praised the new house's influence on the standard entertainment seen at both first-class houses and surmised that the upgrading of the Syndicate's offerings was due to the new competitive situation.¹⁵ But neither house, despite the higher artistic standard achieved, however, fared well economically. The dilemma hearkened back to the time when the Imperial was inaugurated. As before, Providence could not support two first-class houses.

This newspaper advertisement in the Providence Journal of 9 Sept. 1906 proclaimed the Providence Opera House's newly acquired status to Rhode Island theatregoers. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 5644).



At the close of the 1905-6 season, Wendelschaefer, who was painfully aware of the need to resolve the competitive situation, terminated his association with the Shubert. Although it was acknowledged that the Shuberts had the advantage of the Independent Theatrical Association and the public's distrust of the Syndicate, Wendelschaefer controlled the Providence Opera House. Its patrons formed the core of the city's first-class theatregoers. If he and the Shuberts continued along the present lines of action, Wendelschaefer would eventually lose the struggle. However, such action could entail more time than the Shuberts were willing to sacrifice.

On 27 July 1906, the same month the name Lincoln party was formally adopted and announced, Felix Wendelschaefer and the Shuberts reached an agreement that satisfied all parties concerned, save for the

Syndicate and Elwood Bostwick, the Shuberts' Providence manager (and previously Wendelschaefer's house manager). Declaring the Providence Opera House to be an independent house, the parties rid the city of the "yoke of the theatrical trust." Immediate statements by Lee Shubert and Colonel Wendelschaefer denied any reciprocal ties that might suggest remaining vestiges of the Syndicate.¹⁶ Hidden by the rhetoric of flowery editorials and flag-waving ads was the fact that the Shubert Amusement Company was in business at the Opera House for a profit; altruism was not in its character. While their demand of 5 percent of the gross receipts did not approach the 33 percent of the net profits exacted by Klaw and Erlanger, it did contradict their published independent, no-percentage policy. The Shuberts had been well educated by the Syndicate. Theatre business was best left unspoken to the public; the beneficial facade of the crusading independent won allies and sold tickets.

Massive support for the independents continued to snowball as anti-trust fervor was sustained by the upcoming elections. Considering their timing, Wendelschaefer and the Shuberts could not have acted more wisely. One week before the Opera House's opening of its 1906-7 independent season, public sentiment was aired at the Empire Theatre in a production entitled *The Power of Money, or In the Clutches of the Trusts*. A large advertisement encompassed by flags heralding the opening of the "new" house was placed in the *Sunday Journal* on 9 September. Colonel Wendelschaefer's "We are now independents" statement preceded the first independent feature to be presented, New York's "200 night success," *The Man on the Box*, starring Henry E. Dixey, an actor with almost forty-years' experience behind him.

Artistically, the season at the Providence Opera House could not approach the high-water mark reached by the Shuberts and the Syndicate during the preceding season. Financially, success was imminent. Wendelschaefer's self-induced competition had been leveled; the Shubert Theatre, devoid of major sponsorship, had relapsed into its former role as the Imperial. Burlesque, in the sense of comic parody, and stock shows characterized Bostwick's offerings. With the Syndicate unable to gain control over any theatres in the city, the Opera House enjoyed its singularity as a first-class house. Although Charles Frohman managed to obtain occasional bookings at the Empire throughout the following years, the Syndicate's luck would not allow further success in this city. A season at the Mayflower Theatre (previously the Imperial) was abortive, as were ensuing attempts at the Empire.¹⁷ Some ten years later, when a reconciliation was achieved between the Shuberts and Klaw and Erlanger, the Syndicate, a shadow of its earlier self, was able once again to book shows at the Opera House. However, this, as all Opera House booking, could be handled only through the Shubert offices.

Theatrical independence had come to Providence. The Syndicate was out, the Shuberts in. Having gained power through a campaign of good fortune and a sense of emerging antitrust sympathies, the Shuberts firmly rooted themselves in the local theatre power structure and

17. Syndicate attractions played at the Empire from Jan. 1911 through 1912-13 season, recalled as "the grand period of the Empire Theater" by Brett, *Temples of Illusion*, 145.

helped to establish Providence as a major tryout town, comparable to New Haven, Boston, and Philadelphia. They were to remain a part of local theatre history until vaudeville and the cinema usurped the remaining houses downtown. Although posing as the champions of liberty and freedom against tyranny and oppression, the Shuberts, having conquered the Syndicate, conducted their enterprises in essentially the same way and, in time, established a new theatrical monopoly.

RI Miscellany

The *Rose* Collection

Ruth Wallis Herndon

The recent discovery of a cache of eighteenth-century documents sandwiched between the pages of a soaking wet magazine stored in the basement of the state capitol promises to add new insight into Newport's precarious position on the eve of the Revolutionary War. Recognizing their potential value to scholars, Phyllis Silva, assistant in charge of the Rhode Island Archives, had the documents transcribed, and they now constitute the *Rose* Collection available at the State Archives.

The documents, dated between September 1775 and March 1776, proved to be a collection gathered by Captain James Wallace, commander of the *Rose*, a British warship that patrolled Narragansett Bay from November 1774 to March 1776. Much of the story of the *Rose's* patrol of Narragansett Bay has been known from Admiralty papers and reports in the *Newport Mercury*; but there have been shadowy patches that defied scrutiny. Of the *Rose* collection's sixty-two documents, forty-two appear to be completely new finds.

The *Rose* and several other smaller ships had been dispatched to Narragansett Bay as part of an effort by the British to control smuggling and provide a stern presence to assist the customs collectors. Many Rhode Islanders, dependent on unrestricted ocean commerce for their livelihood, found the enforcement of heretofore ignored customs laws and the imposition of new duties to be particularly irritating. In the summer of 1769, a mob of Newporters vandalized and scuttled the British revenue cutter *Liberty* in Newport Harbor in retaliation for the seizure of two vessels and the impressment of several sailors. And in June 1772, a group of outraged colonists burned another British revenue ship, the *Gaspee*.

To such an unwelcoming environment came the *Rose*. One of Wallace's orders was to obtain supplies for the British fleet at Boston as well as for the smaller contingent of ships under Wallace's command in Newport Harbor. "Obtaining supplies" ultimately came to mean extortion and outright stealing by the crew of the *Rose*; the Rhode Island State Archives holds numerous petitions from victimized colonists to the General Assembly requesting reimbursement.

The *Rose* collection gives evidence that the townspeople of Newport discovered in a particularly painful way what it meant to be the source of supply for an enemy fleet. Newport was in a very awkward position when the *Rose* began to make its demands for beef and pork, rum and

Ruth Wallis Herndon, a doctoral student at American University in Washington, D.C., served as transcriber of the *Rose* collection.

beer, medicine and fuel. The Rhode Island General Assembly had made it a treasonable offense for anyone to supply the British fleet. Newport was already under suspicion because the town had shown reluctance to support the nonimportation agreements that were designed to persuade the crown to repeal the irritating commercial restrictions and duties. Any support of Captain Wallace by the people of Newport was almost certain to be seen as further proof of the town's Tory sympathies. The *Rose* documents show that Newporters were well aware of their dubious reputation and were careful to explain their actions as a forced choice between two evils. Among the documents are memorials from the Town Council to Deputy Governor Nicholas Cooke, to the Rhode Island General Assembly, again to Governor Nicholas Cooke, and to the Continental Congress; each describes in mournful detail the "state of the town" and pleads for permission to supply the *Rose*.

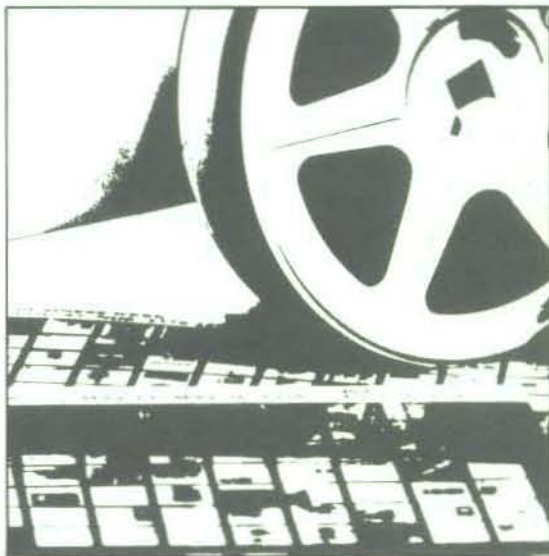
Obtaining such permission appears to have been a recurrent activity, since it was granted periodically by the General Assembly for a limited time. The Newport Town Council members were anxious to receive official endorsement for their negotiations with Captain Wallace and took pains to see that the record reflected their strict compliance with the resolutions of the General Assembly.

Nor were their problems any less painful as they looked out upon the British guns in their harbor. Captain Wallace did not possess an excess of patience with the colonists. Whenever supplies were slow in coming (while Newporters waited anxiously for the latest renewal of permission), Wallace sent arrogant missives to the town. In one particularly curt letter to the Town Council Wallace wrote: "Gentlemen[:] I shall be glad to know, whether you will come to any terms, whether we shall have any Supplies from You, or whether we must prosecute the War to the extent we do about the Rest of the Country." (Document 48, 19 January 1776). This was no idle threat from the commander of a crew responsible for the burning of Jamestown, the bombardment of Bristol, and many smaller-scale depredations along the coast of Narragansett Bay. Nor did the Newporters take it as such. The letters from the Town Council to Wallace are most abject in their eagerness to please. For example, the Town Council, anxious to disclaim any responsibility for Patriot vandalism of a Loyalist's estate, wrote to the *Rose's* commander that they disapproved of such conduct; on the contrary, "You may [Depend] upon our doing every thing in our Power to keep the [Truce] made with You in every Respect unviolated" (Document 29, 27 November 1775).

This truce, like permission to supply the *Rose*, was periodically renewable. Thus the people of the threatened town lived in constant uncertainty. Newport in the winter of 1775-76 was fighting for survival; its town council was attempting with epistolary diplomacy to pacify a well-armed British captain, a suspicious General Assembly, and a critical militia commander. It is the letters and other documents produced under these pressured circumstances that make up the *Rose* collection.

The *Rose* collection is housed at the Rhode Island State Archives, where it is available to researchers.

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