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Rhode Island History

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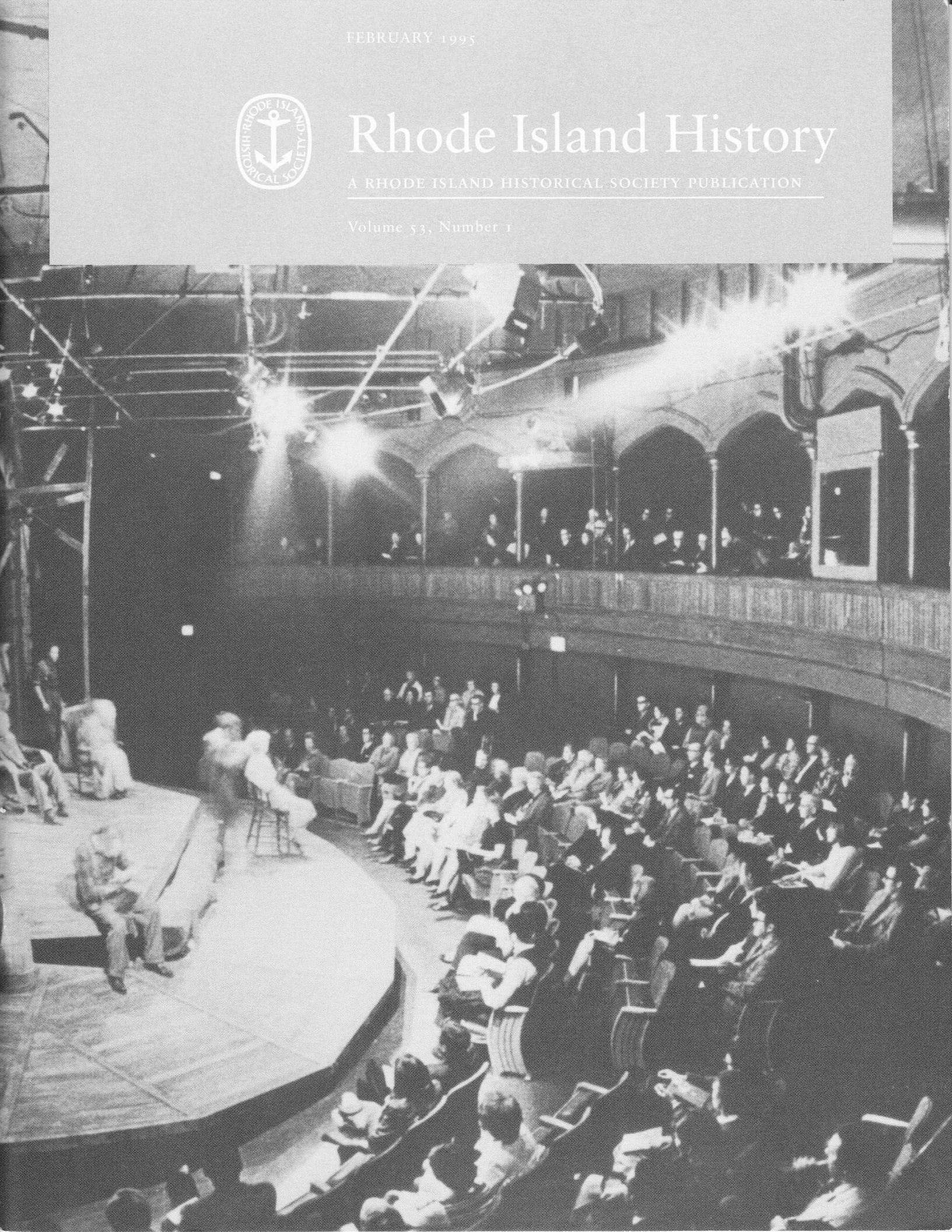

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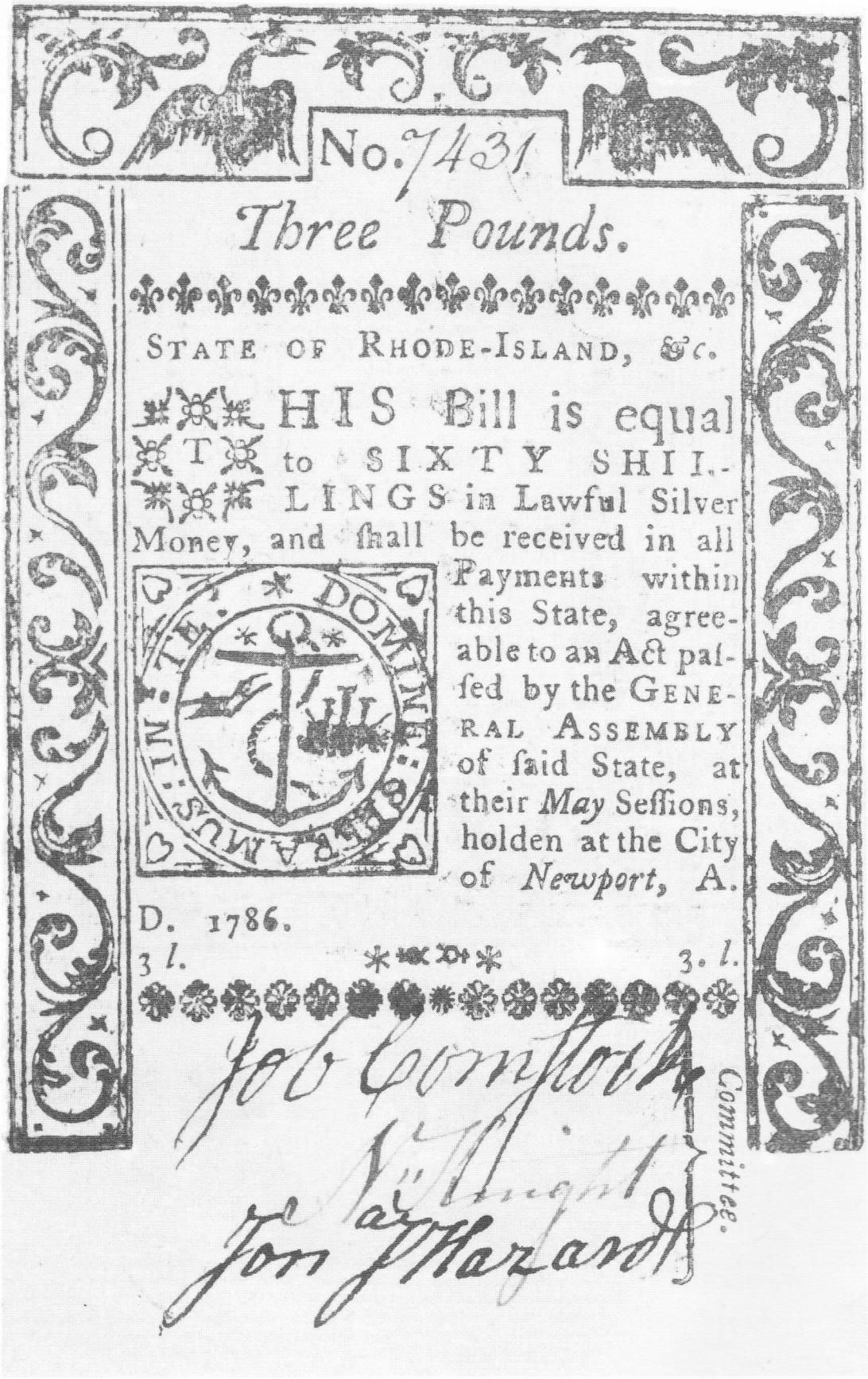

No. 7431
Three Pounds.
STATE OF RHODE-ISLAND, &c.
THIS Bill is equal to SIXTY SHILLINGS in Lawful Silver Money, and shall be received in all Payments within this State, agreeable to an Act passed by the GENERAL ASSEMBLY of said State, at their May Sessions, holden at the City of Newport, A. D. 1786.
3 l.
3. l.
Committee.

Landed versus Paper Property in Rhode Island, 1781-1790

THOMAS S. ALLEN

One of the few constants in the economic culture of the United States is the importance of private property in day-to-day financial transactions. The nature or character of economic exchange has varied considerably since the eighteenth century, but the form and function of these relationships have continued to be dictated by the underlying principle that the right to dispose of or manage property rests solely with its owner. Americans have reaffirmed their commitment to this all-important principle throughout their history. American governments are founded on the assumption that the right to the unfettered enjoyment of one's property must be held sacred, and this conviction continues to play a dynamic role in shaping our economic life.

At the same time, it is important to recognize the fact that private property, and our cultural commitment to its protection, has been the source of as much conflict as consensus. There has been a traditional tension in American society, for instance, between the right of individuals to buy and sell their property as they see fit and the greater good of the community. Each generation of Americans has faced this conflict in forms as diverse as the exercise of eminent domain by local governments and laws forbidding "engrossing."

In eighteenth-century Rhode Island, no issue produced more conflict than that of paper money. Yet, despite the attention given to this controversy by contemporaries and subsequent analysts, few scholars have commented on the critical role played by the principle of private property in the rhetoric on both sides of the debate. According to the traditional interpretation of the paper-money conflict, as it developed in Rhode Island and elsewhere, the struggle resulted from an attempt by improvident debtors to repudiate their obligations and to secure their gains by remaining beyond the control of the new central government.[1] While recent scholars have been more sympathetic to the situation and demands of eighteenth-century farmers, they have not so much challenged this thesis as they have championed the motives and cause of the land-bankers. Like their predecessors, the revisionists have seen the demand for paper money and the rejection of the new federal Constitution as primarily a revolt of traditional-minded farmers against the economic and political innovations of a party of avaricious merchants.[2]

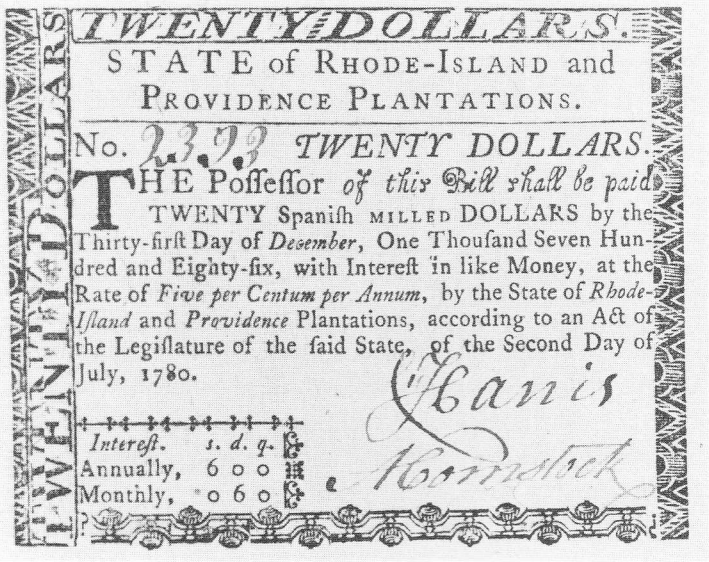
There is some validity to each of these positions. It is clear that there was a political revolution in Rhode Island in 1786, and that the "landed proprietors" dominated the legislature after that point and reversed most of the monetary and tax policies of their predecessors. It is also clear that this crisis in the state's economic and political affairs was the product of a clash between rural and predominantly urban interests. The conflict, however, was more than just a superficial struggle for political power between farmers and merchants over such matters as debt and political organization. In a very real sense, the paper-money debate demonstrated the primacy of private property in American culture.

Following the victory of the Country party in the spring 1786 elections, the General Assembly authorized the emission of £100,000 in paper money. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8151).

Thomas Allen is an independent scholar living in Foster.

The conflict between Rhode Island's propertied interests had its origins in the fiscal policies pursued by the state and Confederation governments during the Revolution. The Treaty of Paris of 1783 confirmed Rhode Island's political separation from Great Britain, but independence brought little relief from the economic strains of the war. The war effort had been financed largely by paper money and loans. Rhode Island's government, like those of its sister states and the Confederation, was deeply in debt, both to its own citizens and to persons beyond its borders. In addition to the heavy public debt, many among Rhode Island's commercial community still owed substantial prewar debts to British creditors, and in the months immediately following the war many more placed large orders with London merchant houses, glutting the local market with European goods and increasing their own debts. The wartime depredations of the British, together with bad harvests, made it difficult as well for the inhabitants of even the wealthiest agricultural towns to meet their personal and public obligations. The political resolution of the war did nothing to alleviate the farmers' plight, which promised to complicate any attempts on the part of the state government to settle its affairs.

By the close of the war, Rhode Island's public debt amounted to over £140,000. Only £691 of this sum was in paper money still outstanding; most of the balance, the vast bulk of the state's debt, was in public securities or notes that had been exchanged for Rhode Island and Continental bills of credit when these bills were retired after 1777. In February and March 1777 the General Assembly had ordered that the state and Continental bills of credit then in circulation be exchanged for treasurer's notes bearing 4 percent interest. By 1783 these notes, and the interest due on them, made up £47,366 of Rhode Island's debt. Bills emitted in 1780 were exchanged for treasurer's notes in 1782, this time bearing 6 percent interest. Approximately £36,874 in principal and £4,628 in interest on these notes was still outstanding when the state's liabilities were calculated.[3]


TWENTY DOLLARS.
STATE of RHODE-ISLAND and PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS.
No. 2,379 TWENTY DOLLARS.
THE Poſſeſſor of this Bill ſhall be paid TWENTY Spaniſh MILLED DOLLARS by the Thirty-firſt Day of *December*, One Thouſand Seven Hundred and Eighty-ſix, with Intereſt in like Money, at the Rate of *Five per Centum per Annum*, by the State of *Rhode-Iſland* and *Providence* Plantations, according to an Act of the Legiſlature of the ſaid State, of the Second Day of July, 1780.
Intereſt. s. d. q.
Annually, 6 0 0
Monthly, 0 6 0
TWENTY DOLLARS

Bills resembling Continental currency and guaranteed by the United States government were issued by the state in 1780. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8150).

Continental Loan Office certificates and the certificates that had been issued for interest on them made up another large proportion of Rhode Island's liabilities. Acting on the recommendation of Congress, Rhode Island had ordered in 1777 that Loan Office certificates be exchanged for the state bills of credit in circulation as a means of reducing both the currency supply and the state's debt to the Continental government. As the interest came due on these certificates, the state simply compounded and perpetuated the debt by paying the interest in new certificates, which were themselves payable in specie in a stipulated time.[4]

The paper debt of the state was further augmented by the specie loans procured after 1777. On several occasions after abandoning its paper-money policy, the state's government had been forced to resort to such loans to raise revenue and had instructed the general treasurer to borrow substantial sums of money for various purposes. Like the state securities, the notes exchanged for these loans carried interest until they were paid, and they were to be redeemed in specie.[5]

Finally, the state was responsible for substantial sums of money due on the notes and promises that had been exchanged for supplies, services, and the scrip used to pay the state's soldiers. The paper representing these debts quickly depreciated,

and much of it ended up in the hands of speculators who bought it for specie at considerable discounts from the original owners, the "widows," "orphans," and "poor soldiers" who would be the subject of so much solicitude in later years.[6]

By 1783 Rhode Island was faced with a staggering debt. Battered by the vicissitudes of war, and with its always limited resources strained to the breaking point, the state was ill-prepared to support such a burden. At the same time, largely at the instigation of the commercial and creditor interests, the General Assembly began to make increasingly heavy economic demands on an exhausted people. The state had assumed responsibility for the payment of Continental as well as state debts, and in order to meet its several obligations it was obliged to assess onerous specie taxes.

Between 1780, when the Assembly embarked on a hard-money policy, and 1786, when the landed interests, or "Country party," gained control of that body, Rhode Island's legislature levied nearly £2.5 million in taxes, at least £115,332 of which was payable in specie.[7] Since the bulk of the state and Continental debt was by this time in the hands of a few wealthy men, most of the population was in the unenviable position of playing the role of debtor to the public creditors, and paying substantial taxes to furnish wartime speculators with a handsome return on their investments.

Every poll twenty-one years or older was subject to the taxes, as was the property of every one of the state's citizens. Those whose wealth consisted largely or primarily of articles of "personal" estate, however, had a distinct advantage over those who calculated their worth in land, or "real" estate. Wealthy merchants and creditors who had much of their property in state or Continental securities could use those securities to pay taxes; but even those who were not affluent enough to own a substantial proportion of the debt could benefit because of the type of property that they owned. Personal estate was often easier to liquidate than real estate, and its loss, while inconvenient, was not likely to be as devastating to its owner as the loss of land was to the farmer.

Although many of Rhode Island's landed elite had considerable personal estates, this type of wealth was most concentrated in the seaport towns. When the state prepared a new tax estimate in 1780, the assessors appointed for each town recorded both the value of all the real estate and the total value of all the property in the town. The difference between these figures represented the amount of taxable property in personal estate. In its proportion of personal to total estate, the growing seaport of Providence led the state by a large margin; £145,000 of the estimated value of the town's property of £233,075 was listed as real estate, leaving some £88,075, or nearly 40 percent, as "personality." Even in Newport, devastated by its occupation by both the British and French armies, personal estate made up some 24 percent of the town's £110,473 property estimate.

In the agrarian towns the proportion of realty to the total of taxable estates was larger. In South Kingstown, the wealthiest of Rhode Island's towns according to the 1780 general estimate, £294,354, or 86 percent of a total estimated value of £341,872, was in the form of landed property. Real estate made up an even larger share of total value in the less affluent towns to the north. In Smithfield, Scituate, and Glocester, the proportion of real to total estate ranged between 89 and 91 percent.[8]

Despite their more limited supplies of specie or easily liquefiable property, the rural towns found themselves carrying the bulk of Rhode Island's economic

burden. Only one of the five top-rated towns in the 1780 estimate, Providence, was a seaport; all the rest were agrarian. That South Kingstown far outstripped second-ranked Providence in this estimate is hardly surprising, given the superior soil of South Kingstown's farms and the town's own proximity to the sea. On the other hand, the third-, fourth-, and fifth-ranked towns—Smithfield, Scituate, and Glocester—were situated in the rocky, comparatively unproductive uplands in the western part of the state; yet the estimated value of each of these towns, exceeding that of Newport, Bristol, or Warwick, was very little less than that of Providence.[9]

Moreover, while the taxes assessed on Providence were based on a greater total property estimate, the per capita tax burden was somewhat lighter there than in the less populous agrarian towns. Providence's population in 1782 was approximately 4,312, of whom 828 were ratable polls. As determined by the estimate of 1782, in which Providence again ranked second, the average value of the taxable property owned by each of these individuals was £262. Glocester, ranked fourth in this estimate, had about 567 ratable polls, each of whom paid taxes on an average of £278 of property. The freemen of tenth-ranked Scituate owned, on average, £48 more in taxable property than did their counterparts in Providence. In Smithfield, which ranked third in the general estimate, the average per capita value of ratable property was £468. The inhabitants of these country towns thus supported a greater per capita tax burden than did the people of the more populous town of Providence.[10]

As the burden of taxation increased after 1780, more specie was drained from the interior, making it increasingly difficult for the inhabitants of that area to meet both the state and Continental levies. Almost as soon as the first specie taxes became due, petitions for tax relief and complaints of unfair assessment began to flow into the General Assembly. The number and character of these during the following years suggest the increasing distress of Rhode Island's farmers.

The difficulty that Rhode Islanders had in paying their taxes is illustrated by the growing number of legal actions initiated against those responsible for collecting taxes and remitting them to the state treasurer. Tax collectors and treasurers were elected officials in eighteenth-century Rhode Island, but in order to assume their office, both were required to sign bonds guaranteeing the collection and proper remittance of the taxes assessed on their neighbors. Those who failed to carry out these duties were often sued by the state treasurer for the arrears in their accounts.

In July 1782, for example, when the town of Foster was apparently delinquent in paying its proportion of a state tax, its town meeting voted to "Hire" the money necessary to answer "an Execution for which the Town Treasurer [John Johnston] is now in Gaol." Later that year Benjamin Hoxey of Charlestown found himself in an even more precarious position than his Foster counterpart: although he was no longer the town's treasurer, having lost that office in the last spring elections, he was still responsible for a tax that was to have been assessed and collected during his term, and he was imprisoned when it was not remitted to the general treasurer. Hoxey petitioned the legislature for release from his confinement and more time to pay the tax.[11]

The situation of the rate collectors of towns whose taxes were in arrears was even less enviable than that of the treasurers. The first recourse of a town treasurer who, like Hoxey and Johnston, was imprisoned for his town's tax delinquency was to call a special court and initiate an action against the collector. The prop-

erty of tax collectors was always in danger of distraint for taxes that they were frequently unable to collect. Many collectors, unwilling to add to the distress of their neighbors "by Carrying the Law into Execution on their Estates," found themselves in very deep difficulty, and some actually lost their property.[12]

Rate collectors often met with considerable resistance in their efforts to discharge their duties. South Kingstown's collector reported to the Assembly in 1782 that he suspected that many of the persons who had pleaded distress when he had tried to collect taxes were simply indolent.[13] Other collectors were less fortunate still and met with armed resistance. In December 1782 Caleb Arnold of Glocester was "assaulted by a number of Persons who Rescued som Cattle and Sheep" distrained for unpaid taxes. The four perpetrators were soon arrested and brought before the justice court, but they were themselves "Rescued out of the Custody of the officers" by a mob made up of men from Glocester and from towns in neighboring Massachusetts. Eventually the various members of the mob were captured, tried, and convicted, but in the meantime the tax remained uncollected, and other events conspired to prevent Arnold from collecting much more of it for several months. His own illness immediately after the trial of the rioters, poor harvests, the requirements of his farm, and, finally, the near-fatal illness of his son allowed little time for tax collecting, and in the fall of 1783 Arnold was in danger of losing his own property at public vendue for the payment of the uncollected taxes.[14]

The Assembly granted Arnold's petition for more time to collect the tax, as it granted Hoxey's and the majority of others that it received between 1780 and 1786. During those years the legislature also made general allowances for the tardy payment of taxes, particularly in the years 1781, 1782, and 1784, when on several occasions it granted the various towns additional time to assess and collect taxes that were delinquent. In all of these cases, as in those of individual petitions, the treasurers of towns whose accounts with the state were in arrears were granted a specified time to remit the balance due, after which time they were to be remanded to prison.

Despite these allowances, the General Assembly showed little sympathy for the plight of the rural towns and little tendency to retreat from the policy of collecting specie taxes. As often as not, treasurers released from confinement were returned to prison when the next taxes came due and were not paid into the general treasury. As often as the Assembly granted further time to delinquent towns, it also ordered the state's treasurer to issue "warrants of distress" against town treasurers, and in 1781 it ordered a committee to draw up a bill for "compelling towns to pay taxes."[15]

The agrarian towns, of course, were not quiescent during this period. Their citizens clamored for tax abatements, and several towns either petitioned the Assembly for relief or instructed their deputies to seek some redress of town grievances. In January 1782, in a petition to the legislature requesting further time to collect a tax ordered the year before, the citizens of South Kingstown cited the scarcity of specie and the damage caused by the British as their reasons for not returning their proportion of the tax. The petitioners went on to say that despite their hardships and an unfair tax estimate, the town had paid its proportion of the state's taxes in a timely fashion until the last assessment.[16] The freemen of Scituate instructed their deputies to use their best efforts to promote legislation that would exempt the "poorer Inhabitants of the State" from paying any part of the $20 million loan requested by Congress and to "Draw a

petition . . . in Behalf of this Town praying the Gen.l Assembly not to Lay on taxes so fast and hard." The people of Foster waited only one month from the time of their town's incorporation to complain about their taxes and to request that their deputies obtain "some Relief in future Taxation." Cranston's residents also took that action the same year.[17]

Beginning as early as 1777, some of the more populous of the rural towns tried to attack the tax situation at its political root, that is, in the apportionment of deputies to the General Assembly. The state's four original towns—Providence, Portsmouth, Newport, and Warwick—were all granted more representatives in the legislature than the newer or incorporated towns, each of which were allowed two deputies, whatever the size of their population. On one extreme were the northwestern towns of Foster, Scituate, Glocester, Smithfield, and Cumberland, each with a larger population than that of Newport or Portsmouth but with fewer representatives in the Assembly. On the other extreme were towns like Jamestown, with a population of only 344, but with the same number of deputies as Scituate, a town of 1,763 inhabitants.[18]

Many among an emerging "Country" party saw the increasing specie taxes as the work of a dominant creditor interest and its clients, based in the port towns, determined to profit from the war at the expense of landholders.[19] Members of this developing landed faction were themselves determined to negate the political advantages of the public creditors. Early in the 1780s the yeoman of the agrarian towns began to instruct their deputies to move for a new constitution, or at least an act of the Assembly, that would provide for more equitable representation in the legislature and thereby give the rural towns considerably more legislative power than they then possessed.

Glocester was one of the most persistent advocates of legislative reapportionment, but the towns of Scituate and Cranston, among others, also either petitioned the Assembly for reapportionment or directed that their deputies use their influence in the legislature to achieve this end.[20] In 1781, after several attempts, Scituate effectively doubled its Assembly contingent when the town was divided in two and the western part incorporated as Foster. Soon after its incorporation Foster also instructed its deputies to work toward obtaining a more equitable legislative representation.[21]

The principal object of these political initiatives was relief not from the burden of personal debt but from the severity of the taxes levied after 1781. The state's farmers were in the uncomfortable position of owning substantial amounts of taxable property that could not be easily liquidated to pay taxes, and as a result many of these men faced the grim and very real prospect of losing their land, and their means of livelihood, just when political independence was realized. It is not surprising that the political reaction, when it finally came, was a violent one, or that it was narrowly directed at an economic interest perceived as profiting from the farmer's distress.

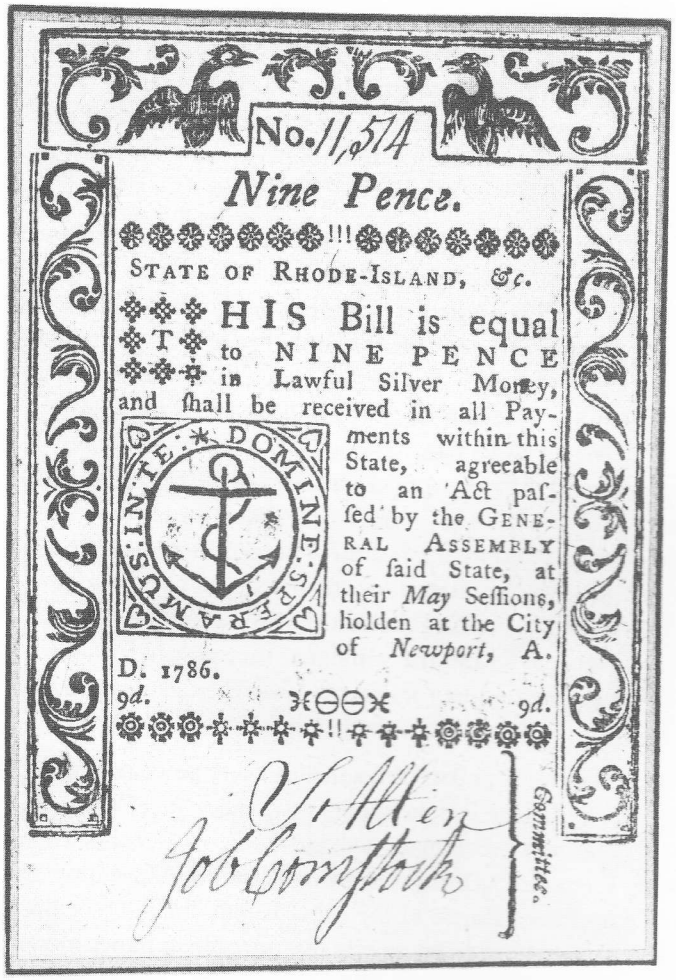
The struggle between the proponents and opponents of paper money in Rhode Island has often been characterized as one between debtors and creditors. While this characterization is true to a certain extent, it is more accurate to say that in the 1780s Rhode Island society was divided between those who measured their property in land and those whose wealth consisted, in large part, of

investments in goods or in the public debt. The nature of the conflict is complicated by the fact that neither the paper-money party nor the specie party represented a single economic interest or ideological position, but the central issue was always one of property. Despite the variety of reasons for opposing or supporting the 1786 land bank, and a welter of moral and rational arguments for and against the emission, it is clear that the protagonists in the conflict were as much bound to one another by their common conviction of the sanctity of private property as they were divided by their immediate interests.

The rising wave of "Country" indignation crested in 1786 and broke over Rhode Island in the spring elections of that year. The significance of the paper-money issue in this political revolution can be illustrated by actions of the General Assembly before and after the elections. In February a petition to establish a paper-money bank was soundly rejected by a margin of nearly two to one; four months later, when the so-called Country party—a coalition formed primarily among the state's "landed proprietors"—controlled a majority of seats in the Assembly, that body voted overwhelmingly in favor of an act emitting £100,000.[22]

This paper-money emission, Rhode Island's last, was a land bank, the first since 1751.[23] Like its predecessors, the act of May 1786 providing for the emission, distribution, and ultimate retirement of the new bills also stipulated that they could be borrowed only by those who owned real property worth twice the sum of the loan. The paper issued was to remain in circulation for fourteen years. During the first half of this period borrowers were to pay interest on the loan, at a rate of 4 percent, in seven equal installments. The principal was to be repaid, also in equal installments, during the seven remaining years.

Paper money issued in May 1786, like this nine-pence bill, began to depreciate in value almost immediately. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1056).



As in the past, a grand committee was named to supervise the distribution of the new bills. The money was to be apportioned among the several towns as the last tax was, and trustees were appointed in each town to disburse it and to receive the necessary mortgage bonds in exchange. To insure the currency of the paper money, the act of 1786 emitting it allowed for its use in payment of taxes (an allowance later extended to cover Continental taxes in arrears) and included measures designed to force its acceptance. In the event that a creditor refused to accept the paper money, the debtor could satisfy his obligation by depositing, or "lodging," it with a justice of the peace; the debt was then considered paid, and the debtor absolved of any further obligation in the matter. If the creditor did not collect the paper money so deposited, he forfeited the value of the debt.[24]

The paper money began to depreciate in value almost as soon as it was issued. The newly dominant landed interest blamed the public creditors and merchants for the depreciation and took steps to punish those men who, "from mistaken Principles . . . and from an Inclination to render invalid such Laws and Regulations of this Assembly as may not quadrate with their Interest, Judgement and Opinion of Things," helped to drive down the value of the new emission.

In June 1786 an act was passed providing for strict penalties to be meted out to those persons convicted of refusing to accept paper money, charging different prices for specie and paper remittance, or discouraging the circulation of the land bank money in any other way.[25]

The high-water mark of the conflict came late in 1786 when John Weeden, a Newport butcher, refused to accept the paper-money tender of John Trevitt and was prosecuted under the provisions of the act emitting the paper currency and its amendments. The *Trevitt* v. *Weeden* case eventually came before the Newport County Sessions of Rhode Island's Superior Court of Judicature. The justices found in Weeden's favor and in their decision declared provisions of the 1786 land-bank act unconstitutional. An incensed Assembly quickly ordered the offending justices to "give their immediate Attendance on this Assembly, to assign the Reasons and Grounds of the . . . Judgement." The justices appeared before the legislature during its second October session, and after a review of the transcripts of the trial that body grudgingly resolved that although "no satisfactory Reasons have been rendered by them for their Judgement," the justices were guilty of no crime in making such a decision and should be dismissed "from any further Attendance upon this Assembly on that Account."[26]

The decision by the legislature not to impose its will on the court suggests that a certain degree of moderation had begun to enter into the counsels of the Country faction. Other events of the fall and winter of 1786 confirm this impression. In the first October session of the year a draft of an act that was to "give Efficacy to the Paper Bills emitted by this State" was sent to the towns for approval, but it failed to win adequate support. The freemen of Cranston were apparently not alone in judging the proposed bill "unconstitutional & Impolitick."[27] By December 1786 the existing penal acts relating to the May emission had been repealed, and the most overt attacks on the interests of private creditors appeared to be over.

But while the Country party was retreating from a policy of forced compliance with the tender clause of the 1786 act, it had only just embarked on a program designed to liquidate the state's debt and relieve landholders from the burden of specie taxes. Beginning at the end of 1786 the Assembly began the systematic redemption (in paper money) and repudiation of the state's outstanding obligations. In December the Assembly resolved to "pay all Persons holding notes against the state . . . the One-Fourth Part of the nominal Sum of such notes" except those that had originated from the 4 percent notes of 1777. An amendment to that act, passed in the March 1787 session, provided for the payment of a quarter part of the principal and interest of the 4 percent notes within six weeks from the end of the session. To discourage the owners of the securities from hoarding them, the Assembly ordered that those who failed to bring the notes to the treasurer for payment within the stipulated time would forfeit to the state one-quarter of their notes' value (in practice, however, extensions were frequently granted to individuals throughout the balance of the decade).[28]

In October 1787 the second quarter part of the value of the 4 percent notes was ordered to be paid. The third and the last payments were made in 1788, although an act of the December session extended to 1 March 1789 the deadline for finally redeeming the notes.[29] During the same period the Assembly also provided for the retirement of the balance of the debt. To pay for the redemption of the securities, the Assembly ordered new taxes, payable in paper money. Between 1786 and 1790 approximately £120,000 in taxes were assessed on

An ACT to ſtimulate and give Efficacy to the Paper Bills, emitted by this State in May laſt.

WHEREAS a number of citizens of this State, who heretofore amaſſed great wealth by the depreciation of the ſecurities iſſued by this State, by reducing their value ſo as to purchaſe them for a mere triſle; and after ſecuring them in their own hands, had the addreſs to have them conſolidated at the value when iſſued by the Treaſurer, and being prompted by the ſame unjuſtifiable motives of lucre are endeavouring to reduce the value of the paper bills emitted by this State, in order to get them into poſſeſſion at a very depreciated ſtate, that they may compel the perſons who have mortgaged their lands for the ſaid bills to redeem them with gold or ſilver, or to ſurrender up their eſtates; and others from a ſpirit of oppoſition, and to weaken the reins of government, and to render abortive the good and ſalutary laws of this State, have, and do endeavour to depreciate and leſſen the value of the ſaid paper bills; and as the major part of the inhabitants of this State were reduced to great diſtreſs from the ſcarcity of a circulating medium, before the emitting the late bank of money, and will again ſoon be in ſuch diſtreſſing circumſtances, unleſs efficacy be given to the ſame; wherefore

Be it Enacted by the General Aſſembly and by the authority thereof it is hereby enacted, That each and every citizen within this State, and each and every perſon reſiding within this State, for the purpoſe of trade or commerce, owing temporary allegiance thereto, ſhall take and ſubſcribe the following oath or affirmation, viz.

"I, A. B. do ſolemnly ſwear (or affirm) that "I will uſe my endeavours that the paper bills "emitted by the authority of this State, agreeably "to an act of the General Aſſembly paſſed at their "ſeſſion holden in the city of Newport, in May "laſt, ſhall have a currency equal to gold or ſilver, according to the tenor of the ſaid bills; and "that I will not expoſe for ſale or vend within "this State any article or articles, goods, wares "or merchandize, but what I will take in pay for "the ſame the paper bills, emitted as aforeſaid, "at the ſame rate or price as I would in gold or "ſilver, ſo long as this act remains in force.—So "help me God—or this engagement I make and "give upon the peril of the penalty of perjury."

And which aforeſaid oath or affirmation ſhall be made and ſubſcribed by the declarant before either his Excellency the Governor, his Honor the Deputy-Governor, or either of the Aſſiſtants within this State, or before a Juſtice of the Superior Court of Judicature, Court of Aſſize, and General Goal-Delivery, or ſome one or other of the Juſtices of the Inferior Court of Common Pleas, or Juſtices of the Peace, within this State, who ſhall upon ſuch declarants taking and ſubſcribing the oath or affirmation, give unto ſuch perſon a certificate in the following words.

"Be it remembered, That A. B. of
"in the county of hath this day taken and
"ſubſcribed the oath or affirmation preſcribed by
"law for giving efficacy to the paper bills emit-
"ted by this State. Given under my hand at
" in the county aforeſaid, this day of
"anno domini, one thouſand ſeven hundred and
"eighty-ſix."

And be it further Enacted by the authority aforeſaid, That each and every officer of Juſtice adminiſtering the oath or affirmation aforeſaid, ſhall carefully keep and preſerve ſuch ſubſcribing teſtimony of the declarants making,—and ſhall alſo on the firſt day of January anno domini, one thouſand ſeven hundred and eighty-ſeven, make a return to the City or Town Clerks of each city and town, of the names of all perſons who ſhall ſubſcribe and take the aforeſaid engagements before them.

And be it further Enacted by the authority aforeſaid, That each and every perſon, who ſhall ſubſcribe and take the aforeſaid oath or engagement, and afterwards ſhall wilfully, wittingly and knowingly break the ſame, or be guilty of a breach thereof, and ſhall thereof be lawfully convicted before the Superior Court of Judicature, Court of Aſſize, and General Goal-Delivery within this State, he, ſhe or they, ſo offending, and being convicted as aforeſaid, ſhall ſuffer all the pains, penalties and forfeitures of perſons convicted of wilful and corrupt perjury.

And be it further Enacted by the authority aforeſaid, that each and every officer, civil and military, elected within this State, ſhall within twenty days after the riſing of this Aſſembly, take and ſubſcribe the aforeſaid oath or affirmation, or he ſhall be rendered incapable of acting and officiating in his ſaid office.

And be it further Enacted by the Authority aforeſaid, That each and every Repreſentative for any city or town within this State, ſhall previouſly to his taking his ſeat in the General Aſſembly, at their Seſſion to be holden on the laſt Monday in October inſt. take and ſubſcribe the aforeſaid oath or affirmation.

And be it further Enacted by the Authority aforeſaid, That each and every male inhabitant within this State, of twenty-one years of age and upwards, who ſhall refuſe or neglect to ſubſcribe and take the aforeſaid oath or engagement on or before the laſt day of December, anno domini one thouſand ſeven hundred and eighty-ſix, ſhall be and he is hereby declared incapable to be elected to any poſt of honor or profit within this State, or to exerciſe the functions of any civil or military office therein, after ſaid time, or of giving his vote or ſuffrage for electing any officer or repreſentative within this State. Provided always, and nevertheleſs, That this Act ſhall not extend to perſons who are abſent out of the State, or to infants under the age of twenty-one years, who may within forty days after their arrival within this State, or their attaining the age of twenty-one years, take and ſubſcribe the ſame, and thereby be entitled to all the privileges and immunities of citizens.

And be it further Enacted by the authority aforeſaid, That no perſon reſident within this State, ſhall be permitted, under any pretence whatever, to either enter or clear any veſſel or veſſels in either of the Intendant's Offices within the State, unleſs the perſon or perſons ſo preſenting to either enter or clear any veſſel or veſſels as aforeſaid, ſhall previous thereto take and ſubſcribe the aforeſaid oath or affirmation, and alſo produce certificates to the Intendant of Trade, that the owner or owners of ſaid veſſel or veſſels, have alſo taken and ſubſcribed the aforeſaid oath, or affirmation.

And be it further Enacted by the authority aforeſaid, That no practitioner of the law, within this State, ſhall be qualified or permitted to commence, proſecute, or defend any action, or ſuit at law, in any court of law within this State, unleſs he hath previous thereto taken or ſubſcribed the oath or affirmation as aforeſaid.

STATE OF RHODE-ISLAND, and PROVIDENCE-PLANTATIONS.

In GENERAL ASSEMBLY, *October Seſſion, A. D.* 1786.

IT is Voted and Reſolved, That the preceding draught of an act be copied by the Secretary, and a copy thereof be ſent by expreſs to each town and City Clerk in the State, within ten days after the riſing of this Aſſembly: That ſaid Town and City Clerks iſſue their warrants as ſoon as may be, to convene the ſeveral towns in legal town-meeting, in order that the ſenſe of the freemen of the ſeveral towns reſpecting ſaid Bill, by inſtructions, may be communicated through their repreſentatives to the General Aſſembly, at the next ſeſſion: And that the ſame be alſo publiſhed in all the newspapers in this State.

A TRUE COPY:

Witneſs, HENRY WARD, Sec'ry.

PROVIDENCE: PRINTED BY BENNETT WHEELER.

Faced with resistance to the paper money emitted in 1786, the General Assembly drafted the stringent act printed in this broadside and sent it to the towns for approval. The measure gained little support from the town meetings and was subsequently rejected by the Assembly. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8155).

Rhode Island's towns. Only a fraction of this revenue went to pay current expenses; most was used to pay off securities. In October 1788 the general tr surer was instructed to make the first quarter payment on the 6 percent note 1782. Perhaps in an attempt to speed the retirement of these notes, tax collect were instructed to receive them in payment of taxes.[30]

The Country majority in the legislature also tried to reduce the total value of the state's debt through depreciation. In March 1787 a committee appointed examine the state's debts recommended to the Assembly that those notes issu during the war be paid off at a depreciated rather than face value. In the case the 6 percent notes, the committee observed that "although they were not ma a Tender in Law, yet they were issued in the time of the late War, and were wh issued, as we apprehend, worth no more than the Paper-Money, which did de preciate, . . . and we are of the Opinion, that it is a hard Lot for the greater Pa of the Inhabitants to . . . be obliged to make good the Depreciation to others when the whole originated from one common Cause in which all were embroiled."[31]

As for the notes issued in February and March 1777, the committee felt that inasmuch as they were made "a Lawful Tender," they were of "no more Value than the same Amount of Continental Currency." The principal and interest o these notes had been consolidated, according to a scale of depreciation, back t the time when the last of them were issued, but the committee was of the opin ion that the reduction of their value "by the scale of Depreciation" should hav been calculated from "the Time the Continental Bills ceased to be a Currency" because the notes were originally issued by the state treasury "the same as Con tinental Bills" and circulated in the same manner. The committee therefore rec ommended that the 4 percent notes be redeemed at forty to one.[32] The deputies showed little hesitation in accepting the committee's report, and the members o the upper house concurred, with the proviso that a distinction be made betwee original and subsequent owners of the notes, the latter to be paid less than the former. The upper house further resolved that a committee be appointed to review each claim and to determine the value of each note presented for redemption, a measure that the deputies later approved.[33]

These actions by the Assembly—the payment of the state debt in paper money and the partial repudiation of that debt—reflect the determination of the domi nant landed interest to free the state from the toils of the war debt and to pro vide long-term security for the property of landowners. More than anything else, the agrarian partisans sought to relieve their constituents of a ruinous tax burden. In both language and intent, these measures also reveal the frank ani mosity of the landholders toward those whom they saw as profiting unfairly from speculation in Rhode Island's debt.

The policies of Rhode Island's government after May 1786 generated a fierce rhetorical battle between the public-creditor and landed interests. The debate over the justice and prudence of the 1786 emission began almost immediately and continued through much of the rest of the decade. The arguments offered by various essayists for and against the land bank and the government's subse quent policies tell us much about the bitter differences that separated Rhode Island's landed and public-creditor interests, but they also provide a wealth of information about shared attitudes toward property.

Most opponents of Rhode Island's fiscal policies after 1786 would have agreed that paper money, as such, had no intrinsic worth but, like a personal note, had value only as a representation of something "real"—that is, goods, specie, or services. States, like individuals, could do business on credit and could issue bills of credit, but their notes, like those of individuals, circulated only if those who received them in trade were confident that one day the paper might be exchanged for specie. To issue "fiat money," an unsecured paper medium, and force it on creditors was an act of fraud, and while it might benefit a few idle debtors, it would ultimately undermine the credit of the state.[34]

The primary objection of the private creditor and merchant was to the use of paper money in the settlement of past contracts and the payment of court judgments. In bombast typical of the attacks on paper money, "A Friend to good Government" condemned Rhode Island's monetary policy generally, and the tender act specifically, as a "poisonous Fountain" that would "deluge the State with an overflowing Flood of Vice," a reversal, in fact, of the government's proper role in safeguarding private property and ensuring public morality. A like mind, "Tom Thoughtful," described past contracts as "sacred things," beyond the authority of the legislature to change, and the tender law as the "Devil" because it deprived the creditor of the full value of his property.[35]

Addressing the readers of the *United States Chronicle,* "Plain Truth" went so far as to say that the chief purpose of the paper-money party was not to pay off the state's debt but rather to repudiate all debts simply by forcing depreciated paper money on the honest creditor. "Had our paper . . . by some supernatural influence passed equal to gold and silver, it would have been the most mortifying disappointment which the principal friends of it ever experienced." Had that unlikely event occurred, Plain Truth assured his audience, the paper-money faction would have responded by simply "emitting a succession of banks, till it [paper money] became as plenty as oak leaves, and equally as valuable, in the order that they might *afford* 'RELIEF TO THE DISTRESSED.'"[36]

Advocates of the paper-money emission were quick to answer these charges and to champion the cause of Rhode Island's landowners. Looking past the accompanying invective, we can see two primary arguments advanced in defense of the 1786 emission. The first of these involved the legitimacy of the claims against the state. Most apologists for the paper money believed that the taxes they had paid since 1780 had gone primarily to line the pockets of speculators who had obtained the state securities at depreciated prices.

"A Constant Reader" writing in the *United States Chronicle* in July 1786 undoubtedly spoke for many when he railed against the "men of property" who had sent Rhode Island men to war to defend that property and then "paid us with a piece of paper, telling us, we should soon receive our money." "For services done in their parlours," these "men of note and opulence" received money as quickly as the poor could pay it, then refused to honor the notes given to the soldiers, telling them that their "pieces of paper" were worth no more "than 2ss or 3s. in the pound." Once they had "extorted" all the securities from their proper owners at a fraction of their real value, the speculators then applied to "themselves (as being legislators)" for repayment of the debt, "under pretense that the poor soldier ought to have his interest payed [*sic*] annually, if not his principal discharged." Every tax that was granted for that purpose had gone to benefit speculators and defraud the honest soldier, argued Constant Reader.[37]

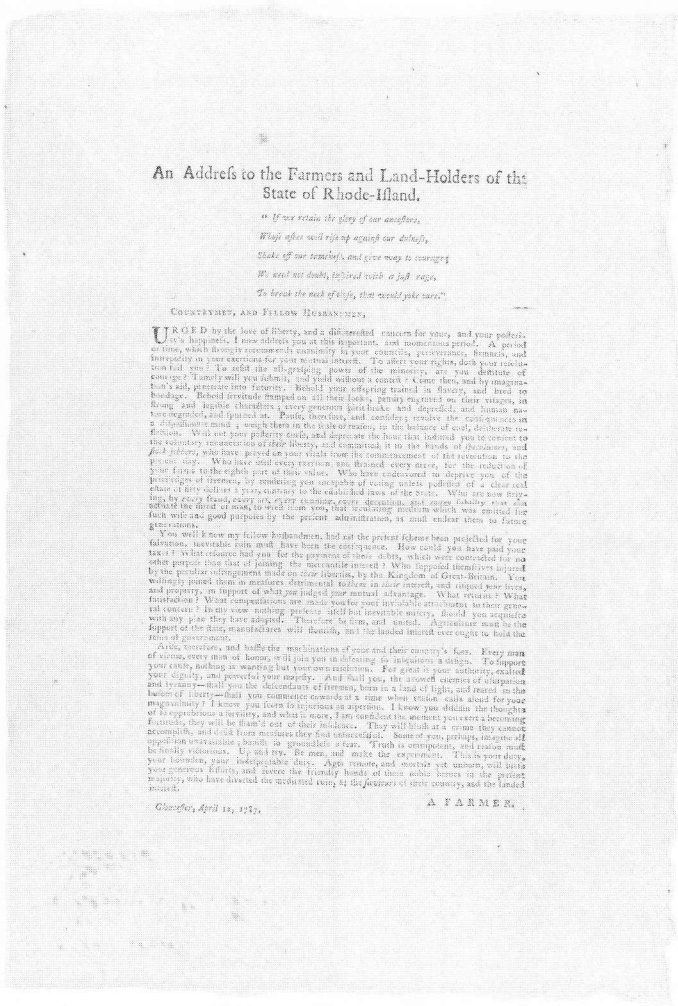
Another contributor to the *United States Chronicle,* "A. B.," agreeing with Constant Reader that most owners of the state's securities had come by ther either dishonestly or by mistake, recommended that only those who were th proper and honest recipients of the notes were entitled to full payment. Since new-emission bills were considered legal tender for all past debts, declared A there was no reason why the securities should not be paid off in this mediun

The second argument in favor of paper money was that its purpose was to p tect the property of the majority of the population. The owners of the public d had shown little compassion when they had enacted and assessed heavy taxe on their landed neighbors or when they caused the property of persons delinq in paying their taxes to be seized, the paper-money advocates charged. "The n ber of writs issued out within eighteen months past," maintained "Brutus" i August 1786, "was never known before by the oldest man in the State, in th same space of time." Estates were sold at a fraction of their real value to set small debts, and their owners were plunged into penury, said Brutus.[39]

Indeed, the reduction and engrossment of the property of Rhode Island's lan holders was thought by some to be a part of the purpose of the hard-money interest. In a letter to the *Newport Mercury,* "A Farmer" wrote that the *"sto jobbers"* had "used every exertion, and strained every nerve" to reduce Rho Island's farmers and deprive them of the "privileges of freemen." According its apologists, paper money was unpopular among creditors because it offere the landholder the means to "pay his tax with the work of his oxen" rather than forcing him to sell his estate to satisfy his obligations. It was the Count party's avowed purpose to "protect the Citizens in their personal Liberty, an their Property" and to "prevent the Ruin of one Part of the community for t undue Emolument of the other." Privilege, the advantage that one propertied interest had had over another, was the target of the campaign begun in 1786 the Country party claimed.[40]

One could argue, in fact, that privilege was the real point of contention for b the public-creditor and landed factions after 1780. When the former interest in power, its members had been vigorous in their efforts to secure the value of public debt, regardless of the distress caused to landholders. Once the landed interest gained control of the legislature, it in turn did everything necessary to tect the property of its constituents, even if it meant repudiating the state's de The right to hold and dispose of one's property as one chose, while a frequer theme in Rhode Island's political dialogue, was treated as a given, an unques tioned principle. Certainly those who shared their views with the public betw 1786 and 1789 appear to have agreed that property rights were sacred. Each was at great pains to show that the opposition, be it public creditor or landhol was hard at work undermining the foundation of free society.

The clear victors in the political contest in Rhode Island during the 1780s w the landholders. The majority of the state's freemen remained unconvinced b the arguments of the public creditors and continued the Country party in po through the rest of the century, largely because of the success of the govern- ment's fiscal policies. At no time since the war were farmers so secure in thei property. After 1786 the number of actions for debt declined precipitously, probably because few creditors wished to be granted a court settlement that



An Addreſs to the Farmers and Land-Holders of the State of Rhode-Iſland.

" If we retain the glory of our anceſtors,
Whoſe aſhes will riſe up againſt our delinquſh,
Shake off our tenderneſs, and give way to courage;
We need not doubt, inſpired with a juſt rage,
To break the neck of thoſe, that would yoke ours."

COUNTRYMEN, AND FELLOW HUSBANDMEN,

URGED by the love of liberty, and a diſintereſted concern for yours, and your poſterity's happineſs, I now addreſs you at this important, and momentous period. A period of time, which ſtrongly recommends unanimity in your councils, perſeverance, firmneſs, and ſtrenuouſly to exert your exertions for your mutual intereſt. To affert your rights, doth your reſolution fail you? To reſiſt the all-grafping power of the minority, are you deſtitute of courage? Tamely will you ſubmit, and yield without a conteſt? Come then, and by imagination's aid, penetrate into futurity. Behold your offspring trained in ſlavery, and bred to bondage. Behold ſervitude ſtamped on all their looks, penury regiſtred on their visages, and ſtrong and legible characters, every generous ſpirit broke and depreſſed, and human nature degraded, and ſpurned at. Paſte, therefore, and conſider; revolve the conſequences in a diſpaſſionate mind; weigh them in the ſcale of reaſon, in the balance of calm diſintereſted reflection. Will not your poſterity curſe, and deprecate the hour that induced you to conſent to the voluntary tranſmiſſion of their liberty, and committed it to the hands of *ſpeculators*, and *ſtock jobbers*, who have preyed on your vitals from the commencement of the revolution to the preſent day. Who have ſtrid every nerve, you ſtrained every ſtrave, for the reduction of your ſtores to the eighth part of their value. Who have endeavored to deprive you of the privileges of freemen, by rendering you incapable of voting unleſs poſſeſſed of a clear real eſtate of fifty dollars a year, contrary to the eſtabliſhed laws of the ſtate. Who are now ſtriving, by every fraud, every art, every ſtratagem, every deception, and every falſehood that can actuate the mind of man, to wreſt from you, that ſecuring medium which was emitted for ſuch wiſe and good purpoſes by the preſent adminiſtration, as muſt endear them to future generations.

You well know my fellow huſbandmen, had not the preſent ſcheme been purſued for your ſalvation, inevitable ruin muſt have been the conſequence. How could you have paid your taxes? What reſource had you for the payment of thoſe debts, which were contracted for no other purpoſe than that of joining the mercantile intereſt? Who ſuppoſed themſelves injured by the peculiar infringement made on *their* liberties, by the Kingdom of Great-Britain. You voluntarily purſed them in meaſures detrimental indeed to *their* intereſt, and ſtripped your lives, and property, in ſupport of what you judged *your* mutual advantage. What returns? What ſatisfaction? What compenſations are made you for your invaluable attachment to their general concern? In my view nothing preſents itſelf but inevitable miſery, ſhould you acquieſce with any plan they have adopted. Therefore be firm, and united. Agriculture muſt be the ſupport of the ſtate, manufactures will flouriſh, and the landed intereſt ever ought to hold the reins of government.

Ariſe, therefore, and baffle the machinations of your and their country's foes. Every man of virtue, every man of honor, will join you in defeating ſo iniquitous a deſign. To ſupport your cauſe, nothing is wanting but your own reſolution. For great is your authority, exalted your dignity, and powerful your majeſty. And ſhall you, the avowed enemies of uſurpation and tyranny—ſhall you the deſcendants of freemen, born in a land of light, and reared in the boſom of liberty—ſhall you commence cowards at a time when union calls aloud for your magnanimity? I know you learn to injuriouſe an aperſion. I know you diſdain the thoughts of ſo opprobrious a reviviry, and what is more, I am confident the moment you exert a becoming fortitude, they will be ſham'd out of their inſolence. They will bluſh at a crime they cannot accompliſh, and drink from meaſures they find unſucceſsful. Some of you, perhaps, imagine all oppoſition unavailable; bandy to groundleſs a fear. Truth is omnipotent, and reaſon muſt be boldly victorious. Up and try. Be men, and make the experiments. This is your duty, your bounden, your indiſpenſable duty. Ages remote, and poſterity yet unborn, will bleſs your generous efforts, and revere the friendly hands of their noble heroes in the preſent tragedy, who have diverted the unfortuned ruin, of the farmers of this country, and the landed intereſt.

Glocester, April 12, 1787. A FARMER.

Supporting the Country party and its paper-money program, this 1787 broadside contended that "speculators" and "stock jobbers" were threatening to reduce the state's farmers to destitution and the farmers' descendants to outright slavery. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8156).

would simply be paid in paper. Creditors who might ordinarily have tried to recover money owed to them in the courts delayed these actions, giving their debtors time to make other arrangements to pay them.[41]

Protected by an Assembly friendly to their interest, landholders were relieved from the even more pressing burden of taxes. Between 1780 and 1786 a steady stream of petitions from farmers, town treasurers, and tax collectors spoke of the difficulty of the times and the impossibility of paying further taxes. By 1788, only two years after the paper was emitted and made a tender, "A Real Farmer" could report that the condition of farmers in Rhode Island had never been better. Taxes were light compared to those that had been levied only a few years earlier, and the money that was collected from them went direcly to payment of the state debt, "the greatest Part of which is already sunk, and this year will complete that."[42]

It actually took until March of the following year to retire Rhode Island's debt. When that was done, the landed interest, having accomplished its primary purpose, began to dismantle its paper-money policy. The tender act was suspended in the September 1789 session of the Assembly, and during the following session that act and the lodging act were repealed. As the paper-money controversy ended, a new political crisis—this one over Rhode Island's refusal to ratify the Constitution—became acute, and the state's essayists shifted their attention to that issue.

Despite the often vitriolic exchanges between the landbankers and their opponents, each side in the paper-money debate shared a common ground. Both were agreed in the conviction that one of the principal roles of a republican government was to protect the property of its people. Those on each side of the debate would have agreed with "A Friend to Justice" in maintaining that when "we are deprived of the common, natural and obvious right of the disposal of property, our boasted liberty is at an end, and we are but one remove from the most abject slavery [by] which a people were ever oppressed."[43]

While it is unlikely that many in the hard-money party or in the landed interest had designs on the property of their neighbors, it is clear that each regarded the other as an enemy to the rights of property holders. It is equally clear that the advocates of both paper and hard money saw themselves as the champions of private property. Other issues rose to the surface during the course of the debate—majority versus minority rule, the need to preserve public credit, the question of merit in reimbursing public creditors—but essayists consistently returned to a common theme. A sacred right, one that the Revolution had been fought to defend, was again under attack, and honest men had once more to rally to its defense.

The political conflict of the 1780s, then, was based not on a difference in political ideology, or even on one of economic condition, but rather on a tension between two different propertied interests. The break with Britain had precipi-

tated economic interests arising from a new sort of property, the public deb thus dividing Rhode Island society between those who bore the burden of p ing the state's debt and those who reaped the rewards of investing in public securities. The state's novel experience of dealing with its own fiscal proble without outside aid or interference, proved to be cathartic. For the first tim Rhode Islanders were forced by circumstances to confront the fact that they could share common political convictions and yet remain divided by irrecon able economic differences.

Although the situation was complicated by the fact that many of the public debtors were also private debtors, and by the growing divergence between t commercial interests of the merchants and those of the farmers, the critical i was always the public debt and taxation. The conflict that surrounded Rhod Island's 1786 land bank was a struggle for power between two propertied in ests. The poor and indigent had little or no stake in the 1786 emission, a fac that was apparent to at least one contemporary, who warned his less affluen readers not to be swayed by the protestations of either party.[44]

Ultimately the debate over Rhode Island's monetary policy tells us more abo the ties that bound Rhode Island society together than about the political dif ences that divided it for the space of a decade. The Revolution had helped to create a conflict among men of property over the spoils of victory, but rather than challenging eighteenth-century ideas about the sanctity of property, the struggle actually served to reinforce them, and to demonstrate the strength a ubiquity of those notions among the people of the state.

Notes

1. See, for instance, Samuel Greene Arnold, *History of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1860), vol. 2, and Frank Greene Bates, *Rhode Island and the Formation of the Union* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1898), 119-48.

2. David P. Szatmary, *Shays' Rebellion: The Making of an Agrarian Insurrection* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), includes one of the more recent instances of this interpretation; see also Christopher Clark, *The Roots of Rural Capitalism: Western Massachusetts, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990). The best and most balanced account of Rhode Island's last paper-money emission is in Irwin Polishook, *Rhode Island and the Union, 1774-1795* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 103-62; but even Polishook does not sufficiently emphasize the critical connection between the state debt and Rhode Island's paper-money emission of 1786, and he neglects the central role of property rights in the political debates of the 1780s.

3. Records of the Rhode Island General Assembly, 9:566 (February session, 1777), 12:26 (October session, 1782), Rhode Island State Archives, Providence; Arnold, *History of Rhode Island* 2:486.

4. Records of the General Assembly, 12:544, 553 (December session, 1783), 12:575-76 (February session, 1784.

5. Ibid., 500-502 (October session, 1783.

6. Ibid.

7. These figures were calculated from evidence in the Records of the General Assembly, vols. 11-12.

8. Ibid. 11:295 (November session, 1780).

9. Ibid.

10. See ibid. 12:118-19 (January session, 1782) for the general estimate figures and Jay Mack Holbrook, *Rhode Island 1782 Census* (Oxford, Mass.: Holbrook Research Institute, 1979), ix, for population figures.

11. Foster Town Meeting Records, 11 July 1782, Foster town clerk's office; Petitions to the General Assembly, 20:81 (October 1783), Rhode Island State Archives, Providence.

12. Petitions to the General Assembly, 19:61 (August 1782); Foster Town Meeting Records, 15 Feb. 1783.

13. Petitions to the General Assembly, 19:61 (August 1782).

14. Ibid. 20:81 (October 1783).

15. Records of the General Assembly, 11:352 (January session, 1781). See also Ibid. 11:167 (January session, 1780), 11:498-99 (May session, 1781), 11:522 (May session, 1781), and 12:37 (October session, 1781) for instructions to the general treasurer concerning legal action against the treasurers of delinquent towns.

16. Petitions to the General Assembly, 19:1 (January 1782).

17. Scituate Town Meeting Records, 21 Aug. 1780, Scituate town clerk's office; Foster Town Meeting Records, 7 Dec. 1781; Cranston Town Meeting Records, 10 Mar. 1781, Cranston city clerk's office.

18. Arnold, *History of Rhode Island* 2:400, 454; Holbrook, *Rhode Island 1782 Census*, ix.

19. See, e.g., "Paul," *Newport Mercury*, 23 Apr. 1787.

20. Glocester Town Meeting Records, 5 Dec. 1778, Glocester town clerk's office; Scituate Town Meeting Records, 6 Feb. 1786, 28 Apr. 1787; Cranston Town Meeting Records, 10 Apr. 1787.

21. Records of the General Assembly, 11:620, 624, 627 (August session, 1781); Scituate Town Meeting Records, 1 Oct. 1781; Foster Town Meeting Records, 17 June 1786.

22. Records of the General Assembly, 13:262-66 (May session, 1786); Arnold, *History of Rhode Island* 2:517, 519. See also Cranston Town Meeting Records, 18 Feb. 1786, for that town's instructions to its deputies to support a paper-money emission.

23. For a description of earlier emissions, see John MacInnes, "Rhode Island Bills of Public Credit, 1710-1755" (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1952).

24. Records of the General Assembly, 13:262-66 (May session, 1786).

25. Ibid., 270 (June session, 1786), 296-99 (August session, 1786).

26. Ibid., 303-4 (October session, 1786), 315 (October session [second], 1786.

27. Cranston Town Meeting Records, 23 Oct. 1786.

28. Records of the General Assembly, 13:344 (December session, 1786), 359 (March session, 1787).

29. Ibid., 429 (October session, 1787), 451 (February session, 1788), 549 (October session, 1788), 569 (December session, 1788).

30. Ibid., 546 (October session, 1788).

31. Ibid., 359-62 (March session, 1787).

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.

34. See, e.g., "Common Sense," *United States Chronicle*, 18 May 1786.

35. *United States Chronicle*, 8 June 1786, 28 Sept. 1786.

36. Ibid., 27 Feb. 1787.

37. Ibid., 27 July 1786.

38. Ibid., 10 Aug. 1786.

39. Ibid., 17 Aug. 1786.

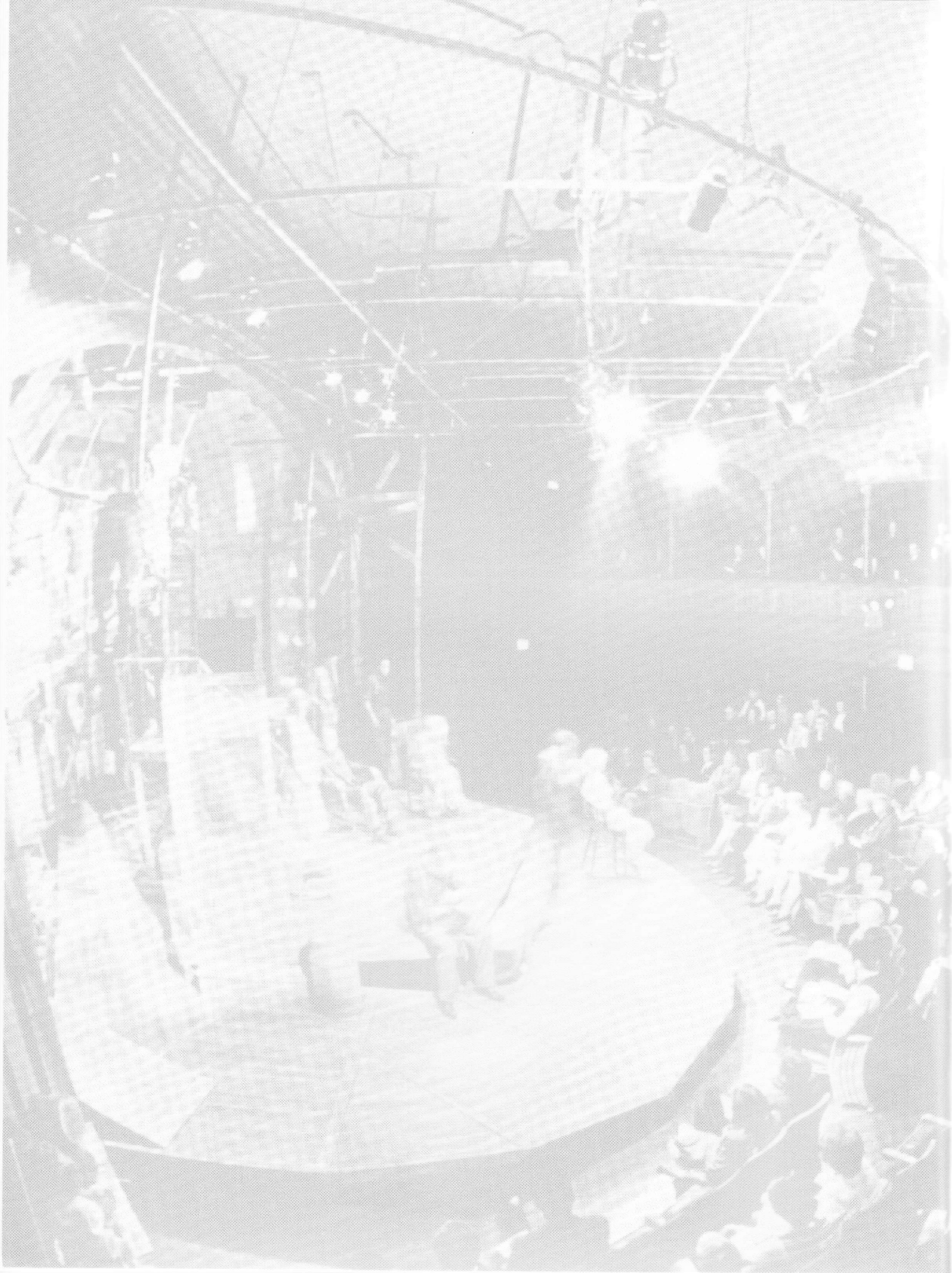
40. "An Address to the Farmers and Landholders of the State of Rhode Island," *Newport Mercury*, 23 Apr. 1787; "Paul," ibid., 23 Apr. 1787; "A Friend to the Laborious Poor," ibid., 16 Apr. 1787; Records of the General Assembly, 13:675-83 (October session, 1789).

41. Brown and Benson to Champion and Dickason, 7 May 1790, Champion and Dickason Correspondence, vol. 2, Brown Papers, John Carter Brown Library, Brown University.

42. *United States Chronicle*, 28 Aug. 1788.

43. Ibid., 10 Aug. 1786.

44. Ibid., 24 Aug. 1786.



Trinity Rep: Creating a Professional Theater in Providence

MILTON STANZLER

It did not happen because a leader or an artistic director or a team of director-managers sought out Providence or the state of Rhode Island. It did not happen because some Providence theater professionals needed to establish an outlet for their theatrical inclinations, though some of the early participants may well have had that in mind. It did not happen because the community's "establishment" determined that a theater might be a way to enhance the community's image and way of life.

It happened, rather, because in 1962 and 1963 some residents of the area felt the need to see professional performances of new drama, as well as the classics, without having to take weekly or monthly or annual trips to Boston or New York. Compared to distances that theatergoers had to travel in certain other parts of the country, such trips were perhaps not very long, but they often seemed far too long nonetheless, particularly for those who had young families or busy social and professional schedules.

A few years after the end of World War II, theater lovers could travel to Boston along Route 1 or, later, over the newly completed Route 95—a substantial excursion either way—to attend ten to twelve plays a year presented by the Theatre Guild as a subscription series. Most of these were performances of Broadway-bound shows, including *Camelot, Destry Rides Again, Jamaica, The Sound of Music, Flower Drum Song,* and a host of other musicals. Occasionally there was a Shakespeare production, such as *Much Ado about Nothing* with Katharine Hepburn, or a touring company's post-Broadway production of a play like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or *West Side Story*. Not bad entertainment, to be sure, but when it was coupled with the parking and traffic problems of downtown Boston and the tedious late-night drive home, perhaps during heavy snow or rain, some of the enjoyment quickly evaporated.

Reading *New York Times* and *New Yorker* reviews of plays by Brecht, Albee, Ionesco, and Beckett, most being performed off-Broadway, further reminded theatergoers of the drawbacks of living in this area. By the time one could arrange an excursion to New York to attend one of these plays, its performances might be sold out or its run ended. Opportunities for seeing productions of classic drama were not much better. Theater enthusiasts here—like those anywhere outside New York, for that matter—knew that they might sometimes get the chance to see a touring Shakespeare play (generally in a mediocre production), but they would not be likely to see professional productions of Chekhov, Moliere, Gorky, or Ibsen presented locally.

Faced with these unhappy circumstances, some people began wondering whether there might be a way to remedy the situation.

A 1964 performance by the Repertory Theater in the Square. Courtesy of the Trinity Repertory Company.

Milton Stanzler, presently a semiretired attorney, was the coordinating chairman and the chairman of the board of trustees of the Trinity Repertory Company during its first six years. He remained a member of the board of trustees for the next six years, until 1976.

If memory serves correctly, it was sometime around 1957 or 1958 that the late Bradford Swan, for many years a most admirable movie, drama, and art critic, mused in the *Providence Sunday Journal* on the possibility of the city's having a professional theater of its own. Swan seemed interested in challenging the community—or someone—to seriously consider that possibility, although he was not unduly optimistic about it; Providence's spotty past history of support for theater, even good touring theater, seemed to him to bode badly for the success of such a venture. It was, in fact, at about that time that the city was abandoned by theatrical producers as a good town for tryouts between Boston and Broadway. Yet Swan's article planted a seed, and over time it would begin to flower.

About the spring of 1962, after having been involved in a few annual shows (mostly musicals) produced and directed by Norman Tilles and Robert Kaplan at the Jewish Community Center in Providence, this writer proposed the creation of a professional theater, to be headed by a professional director, to Tilles, Kaplan, and Barbara Orson. Tilles had recently returned to Providence from Boston to work in the floor-covering business, an occupation that did not seem to consume enough of his energy. He was devoted to theater, particularly in a production capacity. Kaplan had returned to Providence some years earlier after a stint in New York as a choral director of *High Button Shoes;* an excellent musician and pianist, he had directed the music and choruses of numerous community productions of Broadway musicals. Barbara Orson, an Actor's Equity member who had long been active in theater and operetta in New York, had recently moved to Rhode Island with her pediatrician husband, Dr. Jay Orson, and their small family. She had distinguished herself in a production of *Come Blow Your Horn* by the venerable amateur theater group at Providence's Barker Playhouse, as well as in shows (particularly *Two for the Seesaw*) at Gordon and Betsy Argo's summer theater at the city's old Johnson's Hummocks restaurant.

Thus it was that during the spring and fall of 1962 Bob Kaplan and his wife Susan, Barbara Orson and (when he was available) her husband Jay, Norman and Flo Tilles, and this writer and his former wife Phyllis frequently gathered around the coffee table at the Stanzler home to consider the establishment of a professional theater in Providence. A number of questions were discussed: What did we want in a theater? Were these needs being met by the many local theater groups around the state, particularly those at the Barker Playhouse and the colleges and universities? Who would our audience be? Were they out there in sufficient numbers? Who would operate the theater? Would it be a profit-making or nonprofit venture? Could we agree on what kind of plays to produce? Would we aim at professional or semiprofessional standards? Could the local theatergoing population support a continuous season of productions for twenty-six to thirty-six weeks a year? Where would the actors and technicians come from? Where and how could funds be raised to start and support the kind of theater we were envisioning?

Surprisingly, we found that we all had substantially the same thing in mind. We wanted to create a theater that would present not only the classics but new plays as well, particularly those by dramatists whose works were being produced off-Broadway—Albee, Beckett, Pinter, Kopit, and some of England's angry young playwrights. Offering such a variety of plays would be one major way in which our theater would be distinguished from other groups around the state. Equally important was our decision that the plays would be produced on a professional level with professional leadership. How this could best be done remained to be determined.

With this in mind, others were now invited to join the group's discussions. The new participants included Roz Goldberg, who had been active in theater in New York before moving to Providence with her husband Lawrence, a local businessman and lawyer; Betsy Argo, who had operated the summer theater at Johnson's Hummocks as well as one in Orleans, Massachusetts; and James O. Barnhill, who was then the director of the Brown University theater department. Barnhill and Argo had some sound advice to offer: start with a professional director and the many good amateur and semiprofessional actors living in and around Providence, and if the necessary funds could be raised and the audiences responded in sufficient numbers, build to an all-professional company. It was also decided in these discussions that the theater would be a nonprofit enterprise, one that could call on the community for financial support.

There were, of course, serious concerns. Was there a sufficient audience out there for the kind of plays and theater we wanted to present? Would the community be interested in financially supporting what—in the light of the failure of other professional theaters in Providence in the past—could only be an uncertain proposition? We did have some reason for optimism here. Tentatively it was agreed that the area's growing college population might help to provide the kind of audience we wanted, and that the community's increasing support for the Rhode Island Philharmonic might indicate that it would support a professional theater as well.

There was also some precedent that we could look to. In the fall of 1962 and the early spring of 1963, at the Trinity Union Methodist Church on Broad Street in Providence, assistant minister Richard Waters was directing and producing a series of church-related plays. Some of these were attended by Jay and Barbara Orson. One of the plays, an original by Waters, had been attracting capacity audiences (about a hundred a performance) to the church's little theater. Having seen the play, the Orsons reported that the set was good and the acting passable, and that Waters, who had been a professional theater person in his earlier years, was far more than passable in his writing, performing, and directing. Some of us were persuaded by the Orsons to attend the play, and we were indeed quite impressed. Presented on weekends, Waters's play had a capacity run of fourteen or fifteen weeks, and its audience was clearly not confined to the members of the church.

We now put together a list of about 150 people who we thought might be interested in our projected theater. In the spring of 1963 we held a cocktail party at the Stanzler home to explain our ideas. Although financial commitments were not yet solicited, it was generally felt that we would be able to count on a good deal of support when the time came to get our project under way.

Encouraged, we decided to move on to the next—and decisive—steps: finding a theater and a director. In our ensuing search for a theater, we must have inspected at least fifty locations, including the Roger Williams Park Casino, the Johnson's Hummocks restaurant (which was then struggling to remain open), the Biltmore Hotel, and various buildings and garages on North Main Street, South Main Street, and Fountain Street. All of these proved to be either too small, too large, or too expensive to rent or renovate.

Finally, as a result of our chance meeting with James Brasch, then an assistant professor of English at the University of Rhode Island and the dean of the university's summer school, we began considering a possible liaison with URI. Brasch introduced us to Arthur Custer, who was then the assistant dean of

URI's School of Fine Arts. Custer and Brasch believed that a professional theater company in Providence would be an important cultural resource for the community, the state, and the university, and that URI should play a part in supporting it. In the summer of 1963 they suggested that we inspect a small hall at the university's extension school in Providence—the old location of the Henry Barnard School, which had recently moved out. We were rather excited by what we found there, for on the building's first floor was an amphitheater-like auditorium, ideal for a thrust stage, with seating for about two hundred people, and there was ample parking available at the site. It seemed to be what we were looking for.

At about the same time, during discussions of who might be available to serve as our director, Betsy Argo suggested a man with whom she had worked in New York City several years earlier—a man named Adrian Hall. Betsy contacted him in Arizona (locating him through his old friend Howard London, who would later become a member of the company), and Hall indicated his interest in the position. After seeing his curriculum vitae and some of his reviews, including a *New Yorker* review of his production of the musical *Riverwind,* we invited Hall to Providence.

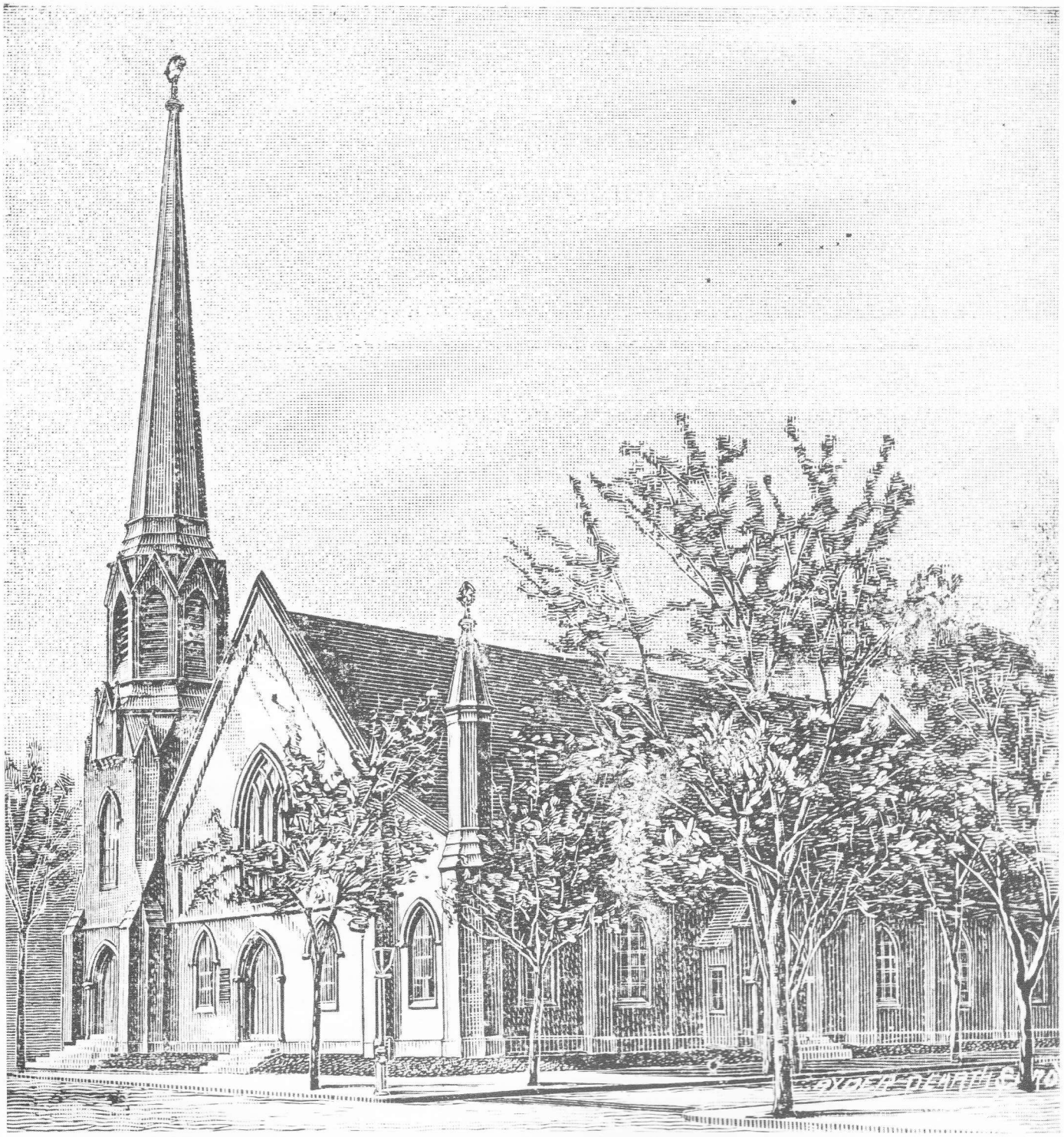
A young Adrian Hall was recruited to serve as the new theater company's artistic director. Courtesy of the Trinity Repertory Company.

He came in the late summer of 1963, having just finished directing a play at the Hampshire Playhouse at Hampton Beach, New Hampshire. He was greeted by Brasch, Custer, Tilles, and me, and after an initial conference we took him to the site of the extension school. Adrian agreed that the auditorium was an excellent space for a theater and remarked that he would love to have it in New York, but he recognized its potential in Providence as well. He was also receptive to the ideas we had for our theater company. Yes, he said, he would consider working here and helping to establish a permanent company, provided it would ultimately be an Equity company and provided that he could also accept directing commitments elsewhere. His charm and dynamism won us all over, and we were quite impressed with him. With our promise that we would keep in touch and that we would soon be contacting him for further discussions, Adrian departed for New York.

Shortly thereafter we began negotiating for the use of the auditorium at the old Barnard School, which was the only site we were then considering. Alas, that site soon became unavailable. Despite the efforts of Brasch and Custer, and their enthusiastic recommendations to URI's president Dr. Francis Horn (who also showed some enthusiasm for the plan), the two men could not overcome the objections of the extension school's administrators, who insisted that their school needed the exclusive use of the space.

After more than a year of talk, we were almost back at square one. We had, however, met the director we wanted—indeed, all of us agreed that there would be no point in considering other candidates—and we advised him of what had happened at the extension school. Then, discouraging as that episode was, we agreed to continue our search for a site.

On 29 September 1963 the story of our plans and problems became public in a *Providence Sunday Journal* column by Ted Holmberg, the *Journal*'s theater and cinema editor. Providence and the state of Rhode Island, said Holmberg, "came within a whisker recently of having a repertory theater with a professional artistic director"; the major obstacle "at the moment is the lack of a proper place in which plays could be presented." For a time the release of the story did



Trinity Union Methodist Church, Providence. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6835).

not seem particularly desirable to us, since it dealt only in possibilities, but the publicity in fact brought the answer to our problem of finding a site. The Reverend Ronald Stahl, the minister of the Trinity Union Methodist Church, contacted me and asked if our group would be interested in seeing his church's meeting hall—the hall where the Reverend Richard Waters had staged his exciting work the year before. Waters had moved to another church outside Rhode Island, and there were no plans for presenting other plays in that space. Tilles,

Barbara Orson, and I met with Stahl and took a good look at the hall. It wasn't perfect, but we thought that with some imagination, hard work, and money, we could turn it into a theater we could use. We later came back with Brasch and Custer (we all still believed in the importance of a relationship with the university), and they were most enthusiastic. Thus, and finally, our major problem—location—seemed to be solved.

About eighteen months had passed since our first discussions. Before commitments were made, our group reassembled to review and reaffirm our objectives. We discovered that we all still wanted the same things: to establish a theater that would present both the classics and the best of contemporary drama (and not, as we always put it, *Mary, Mary* or *Kiss and Tell*); to start with a professional director, who at first would use the many talented people available locally; and, if the audiences and the broader community proved supportive, to become a professional theater company, some of whose full-time personnel would be employed for a substantial number of weeks per year on an annual contract basis and take up residence here.

Having reassured ourselves that we still had the same objectives, on 19 March 1963 we created a nonprofit corporation called The Foundation for Repertory Theater of Rhode Island. The incorporators were Professor James O. Barnhill, Betsy Argo, Barbara Orson, Lawrence Y. Goldberg, Norman Tilles, and Robert Kaplan. The ambitious aims of the foundation were expressed in the corporate papers: "Said corporation is constituted for the purpose of establishing programs, productions, and appreciation of the art of the theater by regularly presenting dramatic productions, lectures, and programs of high quality and professional standards."

In early October 1963 tentative arrangements were made with Ronald Stahl and John O'Connor, the chairman of the board of trustees of the Trinity Square church, to begin using the church's auditorium in February 1964. With that accomplished, we again contacted Adrian Hall, and during the Columbus Day weekend Adrian and I met in a coffee shop across the street from New York's Museum of Natural History. Adrian's ideas were still the same as ours, and his enthusiasm was as great as ever. Nonetheless he was very careful not to commit himself beyond a short season during the late winter and early spring of 1964. He wanted to test the waters: to measure the audience responses, to see if we could work together, to see if there would be the energy, commitment, and resourcefulness necessary for creating a permanent professional theater. He also insisted that he should be free to take other directing assignments, in New York or elsewhere, if he remained with us beyond the spring of 1964. This condition posed no problem, since any such assignment would only enhance his prestige in Providence.

The results of the meeting were reported to the rest of our group. While none of us except Betsy Argo had seen Adrian's work, his contagious enthusiasm for our project, together with the review of his production of *Riverwind* in the *New Yorker,* were more than sufficient to persuade us to engage him as our director for the exploratory season. We were sure that the local actors who would be participating that first short season would respond to his enthusiasm as we had.

By this time we had discussed our plans with a number of other people, including Eric Godfrey, an enthusiastic businessman, and Ed Gnys, Jr., and John Mut-

ter, two local attorneys who were very active in local community theater groups. We had also enlisted the aid of Bruce Ruttenberg, another local attorney, who helped organize the foundation and draft its first set of bylaws. Sometime in November or December 1963 we invited a number of actors, actresses, and technical people whom we knew to be active in local theater groups to hear about our plans, and we asked them to participate in the forthcoming season. Excited by the prospect of a permanent professional theater and, particularly, by the engagement of a full-time professional director, these people were more than enthusiastic. Having thus assured ourselves of the availability of performers, we now set about enlisting well-known and respected members of the community to serve on our first board of trustees.

On 2 January 1964, on behalf of the new Foundation for Repertory Theater, we sent a letter of agreement to Adrian Hall setting out the terms of our understanding at that time. This letter provided, in part, that the foundation would "operate the tentatively named Trinity Square Playhouse," and it asked him to confirm the understanding that "he agreed to assume the position of artistic director or managing director for the period commencing on or about February 18, 1964 . . . until the completion of the spring season so-called, which will terminate in June, 1964." Adrian's responsibilities were defined to "include the direction of three plays and the participation in the development of the foundation and its resources, which may include but not be limited to such functions as speaking before interested groups and organizations in the community, and such other tasks as may be necessary for the development of a professional repertory theater." The foundation would pay him the sum of two hundred dollars a week for his services during this first season. Terms for the 1964-1965 season would be discussed at a later date, and if these were agreed upon, he would continue as artistic director for that season as well. Adrian was asked to return a signed copy of the letter if it confirmed his understanding of our agreement.

In anticipation of the return of the signed letter, and because we wanted to move things along as quickly as possible, we notified Custer and Brasch on 8 January 1964 that Adrian had been engaged, and we suggested—despite difficulties the two administrators were having in trying to work out some arrangement with the university's theater department—that a meeting be arranged with him to dicuss what URI's involvement would be during the coming summer and the following seasons. We also sent letters to the local talent we had spoken to, advising them of our engagement of Hall, outlining his background, and inviting them to attend a meeting on 19 January 1964 at the newly named Trinity Square Playhouse. In preparation for our first play, which we planned to open in March 1964, we asked them to fill out forms providing us with information about their interests and experiences.

At this point a serious problem arose: our announcement of Hall's engagement turned out to be premature. On 15 January 1964 Adrian wrote from Milwaukee with some unexpected news: he had received a grant from the Ford Foundation "to investigate for 60 days the theater situation in Hawaii"; he was to leave on 1 February and would not return until the latter part of March. There was no way out, he said, for there were four other people involved, and the grant, applied for a year earlier, was contingent on his participation ("Who the hell dreamed it would happen now," he wrote). "Milton, if you want to drop me from the plans of your theater I will most certainly understand," said Adrian. "If you feel that you can wait, I could definitely get to Providence the first of April and we would

extend into June or we could just do 2 shows. If the Ford Foundation is pleased with the work in Hawaii, it could possibly be very good for us in Providence. However, Milton, you must have no questions about getting someone else if you feel that you should. Please contact me as quickly as you can, as I'd like to get things settled, before I leave Milwaukee."

Adrian's letter precipitated the company's first major crisis. On the very day we received the letter, 20 January, we also received the final draft of the lease agreement with the Trinity Church. Although we had used the facility the previous day for our meeting with local actors and technicians—a well-attended meeting of some twenty-five or thirty people, all of whom were quite enthusiastic about our plans—the full formal use of the space was to commence on 1 February 1964. Thus we now had a theater and would soon have to pay rent for it, but we had no director, at least for part of our planned season. There were some quick decisions to be made.

Adrian had been our choice from the beginning, but before definitely committing ourselves to him we had discussed a few other interested candidates who had somehow heard of our plans and contacted us. Until now none of us but Betsy Argo, Tilles, Brasch, Custer, Phyllis Stanzler, and I had met Adrian. Should we seek out a director to start the season and have Adrian come later, as he had offered to do? Should we drop him from our plans? If we did drop Adrian, should we begin searching for someone who would be available both for the full first season and for future seasons as well?

After several hours of heated discussion, the group that would later become the company's first executive committee (Robert and Susan Kaplan, Barbara Orson, Norman Tilles, Larry and Roz Goldberg, and I) decided (1) to try to find another director to start the season, (2) to have Adrian come in April for two plays, and (3) to make inquiries for other full-time directors who might be more fully available in the future. There was little doubt within the group that we wanted Adrian, even if it was for only part of the season. We had just recently begun learning something about the regional repertory theater movement, and one of the things we had learned was that he had significant stature within that movement. Currently he was directing a production for the Milwaukee Repertory Company; he also had an assignment in Phoenix, which he would have to give up in order to go to Hawaii. The grant from the Ford Foundation was of no small moment either. But although we wanted Adrian to direct for us, we did have qualms about his availability. It was possible that he might come to feel that Hawaii offered greater possibilities than Providence for the establishment of a new regional theater; perhaps he might be influenced by a sense of obligation to those participating in the Hawaii study with him. In deciding to ask him to direct two plays that first season, we were hoping that he would ultimately choose Providence rather than Hawaii.

Adrian was understanding and agreeable when we called him in Milwaukee to inform him of our decision. Changing the starting date of his engagement to 5 April, he returned the signed letter of agreement, with a few other minor amendments (which we immediately accepted), on 20 January. (This would be the only written agreement ever executed by Adrian prior to 1976, when this writer's tenure on the foundation's board of trustees ended.) In an accompanying letter Adrian remarked that he did not think our idea of having a guest director for the season's first two shows "is too good," but he recognized that we had already committed ourselves. "Now the thing to do is take every pre-

caution in the world that nothing slow down or impede the progress of this initial enthusiasm," he said. He then suggested a number of plays we might do, and he asked that we supply him with information about some of our actors as well as a list of plays that had been presented in Providence through such organizations as the Broadway Theater League.

Meanwhile, since we were determined to begin our season in late February or March, Tilles and I were hurriedly dispatched to New York to interview a few potential directors for our first plays. One of these directors was Ira Zuckerman. On 24 January we sent Zuckerman a proposed letter of agreement stipulating that he would begin working in Providence on 3 February 1964, that he would direct two plays, that he would be employed for two months, and that he would be paid five hundred dollars a month. Zuckerman accepted the terms and quickly returned the signed agreement. Shortly after his arrival in Providence on or about 2 February, he tentatively settled on either Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* or Lillian Hellman's *Toys in the Attic* as his first play, and an opening date of 14 March was decided upon.

On 2 February the *Providence Sunday Journal* carried a column by Ted Holmberg announcing that "Rhode Island will have its second repertory theater when the Trinity Square Playhouse opens its doors in early March." The reference to our playhouse as the state's "second repertory theater" alluded to a recent development in West Warwick: a group had taken over a movie theater there, renamed it The Playhouse, and already presented a play or two. We were a bit dismayed to be called the second repertory theater, for we believed that our objectives and those of the West Warwick group were not at all comparable. Noting the differences between our theater and The Playhouse, Holmberg himself observed that he "[didn't] see any real conflict between the two," nor did we. (If there had been any conflict, it would have been short-lived, for The Playhouse did not survive beyond that spring.) Holmberg's column briefly reviewed the history of our efforts over the past two years or more and listed some of our supporters, particularly a number who had joined our board of trustees, including Senator Claiborne Pell, Joseph Dougherty, Joseph S. Sinclair, Michael A. Gammino, Jr., Lawrence Spitz, Francis Horn, William H. Edwards, and Judges Joseph R. Weisberger and William M. Mackenzie.

During this time we continued trying to maintain and strengthen our connection with the University of Rhode Island. Brasch and Francis Horn agreed to serve on our board of trustees, and Brasch proposed consideration of the "possibilities of Mr. Hall being involved with [URI's] theater workshop next summer" if it did not conflict with any of the foundation's programs. But politics within the school's theater department made the establishment of such a relationship impossible. After Holmberg's article appeared, department chairman Robert Will wrote to us expressing his regrets that the university had not been able to provide a home for our theater at the old Henry Barnard School and assuring us of his department's wish to cooperate with us in any way within its power. Although we appreciated receiving this letter, we learned from other sources that the theater department would probably want to oversee Adrian's efforts, an arrangement we could not accept. Thus there seemed to be no immediate possibility of a working relationship with URI.

With the Holmberg article announcing our opening in March, our real work was at hand. We had a space for a theater, commitments from a director and many fine actors and actresses, and numerous offers of voluntary help from enthusiastic members of the community. What we did not immediately have was money, the funds we would need for the director's salary and the work we had begun doing to turn the Trinity Square hall into a real theater. For a time there was some uncertainty about where this money would come from. Eventually it was supplied by two sources: a $3,000 start-up loan arranged through Michael A. Gammino, Jr., then the president of the Columbus National Bank, and a solicitation campaign, headed by Lesta Bardach, that raised $3,140 from "angels" and "supporting angels" with events held at the church after our first two performances.

The work on the theater was supervised by Lester Millman, our volunteer architectural consultant, and Arthur Torg, our volunteer technical director. In addition to a general cleanup, there was painting and repair to be done. On weekends before the opening, dozens of people—including entire families and the children of cast members and organizers—pitched in to paint, repair, and restore the hall. Platforms had to be built to support rising tiers of seats, and the seats themselves (donated by Harold Stanzler and his sister, Mollie Richter Fisch, from their Star Theater in Pascoag) had to be installed. Lights for the stage were needed, and these were fashioned by Art Torg from so many coffee cans that he suggested the theater be named Maxwell House. (The homemade lights and wiring survived the first electrical inspections, but by the time we were rehearsing our third play the inspector was preparing to shut the theater down. At this point we managed to persuade a theater-loving electrician to do an emergency rewiring job, perhaps with the promise of a small part in the forthcoming production.)

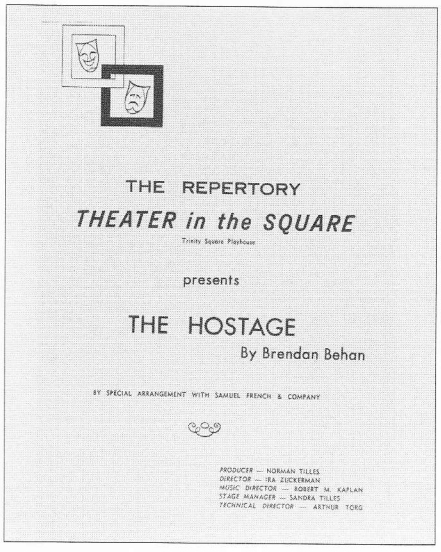
It was during the early stages of this work on the theater, at the beginning of February, that Ira Zuckerman arrived to begin his stint as our director. After finally deciding on Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* as his first play, he held a few days of auditions, cast the roles, and began rehearsals. The opening was scheduled for 14 March.

Meanwhile, another significant event also occurred during that first week of February: *Time* magazine published an in-depth story on the regional repertory theater movement then developing throughout the country. This article was a real eye-opener for us. Except for a *New York Times* article the previous month on Milwaukee's Fred Miller Theater (where Adrian was then directing), and some national publicity about the opening of the Tyrone Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, many of us were unaware of the extent of that movement. As the *Time* article made clear, however, success was not guaranteed: some regional theaters had in fact failed. At that point there were probably about six or seven regional theaters in operation. As a result of the *Time* article we became even more determined that our venture would succeed, and that Providence would be counted as part of the national movement. Appeals to local pride quickly became an important element in our fund-raising. "Repertory theater is sweeping the country," read the first paragraph of one of our solicitation letters. "Rhode Island fortunately and rightly has now been caught up in this movment."

Although we had confidence in Ira Zuckerman, we did not see him as our permanent artistic director, and we were fervently hoping that Adrian would not

succumb to the allure of Hawaii and decide to remain there. Our concern was somewhat allayed in late February when we received a card from him requesting that he be kept abreast of developments in Providence. His participation was of great importance to us, for we had come to see him as an integral part of what we were planning—"the presentation of important new, contemporary and classical drama on a continuous basis by professionally competent people who utilize the highest of professional standards," as the foundation's corporate charter put it, a formulation that we reprinted in our first brochure and in the program for our first production.

The Hostage opened, as scheduled, on 14 March 1964. The two opening nights filled the theater. After each performance a buffet supper party was held in the church's social hall, attended by the cast, members of the production crew, "angels," "supporting angels," and most (if not all) of the trustees. The reviews proved to be fair to excellent, and the play went on to become a modest success at the box office. We were all quite exhilarated; after the many setbacks and uncertainties we had experienced, we felt that we were on our way at last.


THE REPERTORY

THEATER in the SQUARE

Trinity Square Playhouse

presents

THE HOSTAGE

By Brendan Behan

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT WITH SAMUEL FRENCH & COMPANY

PRODUCER — NORMAN TILLES
DIRECTOR — IRA ZUCKERMAN
MUSIC DIRECTOR — ROBERT M. KAPLAN
STAGE MANAGER — SANDRA TILLES
TECHNICAL DIRECTOR — ARTHUR TORO

The cover of the program for the company's initial offering, Brendan Behan's The Hostage. *Courtesy of the Trinity Repertory Company.*

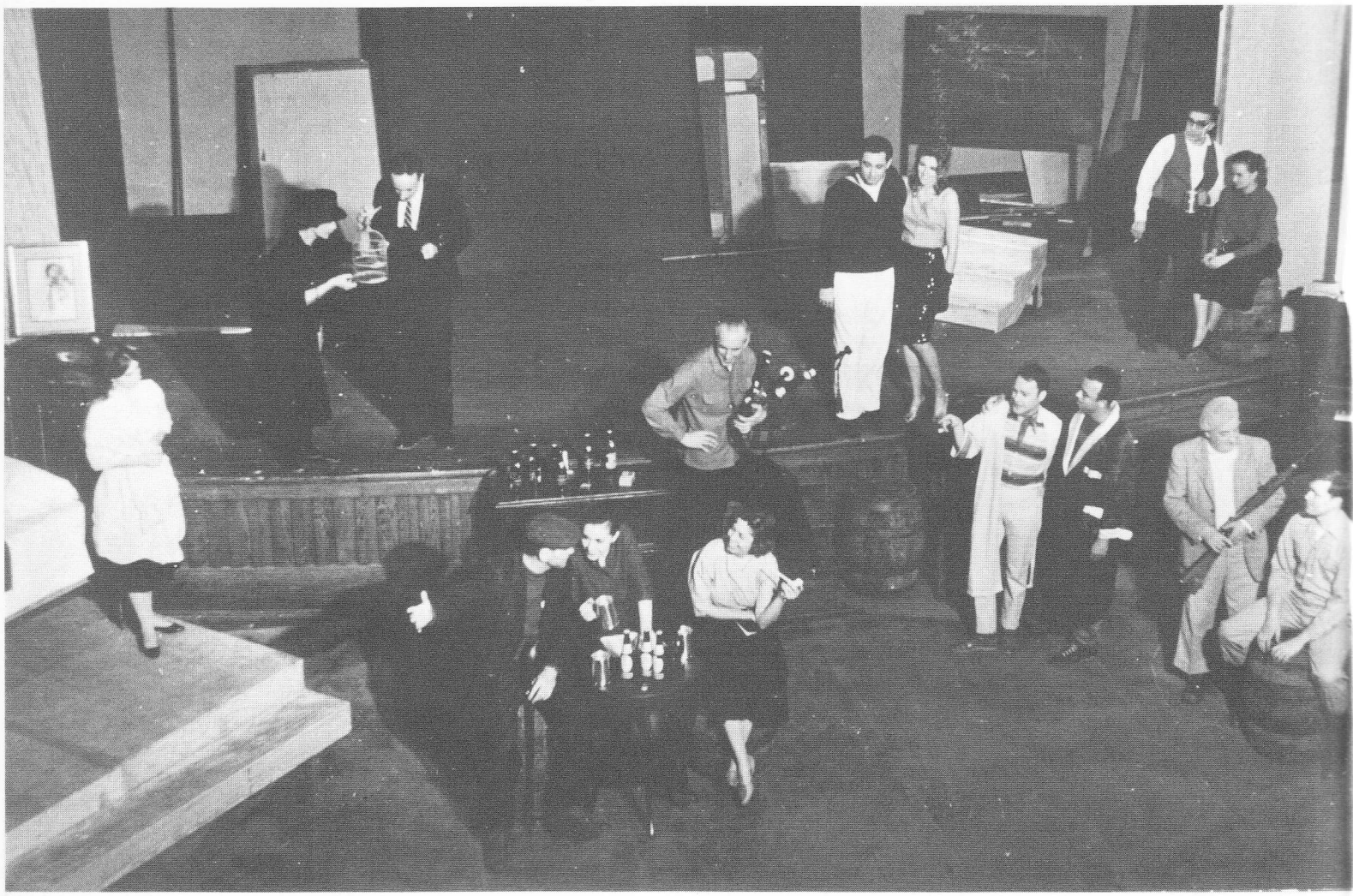
But we were soon in for a rather severe letdown. The second play directed by Zuckerman, Federico Garcia Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba,* opened on 10 April, and it was neither a critical nor a box-office success. The critical failure was disappointing enough, but the box-office failure seemed to threaten our entire undertaking, for although our expenditures were modest—the actors all worked for expenses only—we were heavily dependent on box-office receipts for our survival. It was also about this time that city building and electrical inspectors were demanding that corrective work be done on the theater, work that would put an additional strain on our finances.

As promised, Adrian Hall arrived in Providence early in April, shortly before the opening of the Lorca play. He immediately set to work selecting the plays for the balance of the season, meeting actors, casting the plays, and generally infusing the confidence and enthusiasm that became so sorely needed after the failure of *The House of Bernarda Alba.* For his first play he chose Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending,* which would open in May. This would be followed by two one-act plays by Edward Albee, *The Death of Bessie Smith* and *The American Dream,* early in June.

These productions proved to be hugely successful, both with critics and at the box office. Typical of the reviews of *Orpheus Descending* was Ted Holmberg's in the *Providence Journal* of 8 May:

> The Repertory Theater in the Square [a name we were then using] came of age last night.
>
> Which is to say that in the third production of its short life, it has something of which it can be very proud indeed.
>
> For in the presentation of Tennessee Williams' "Orpheus Descending" there are moments of great beauty and of that peculiar magic when belief is suspended and the theater suddenly assumes a life of its own. . . .
>
> For this and much else the credit must go to director Adrian Hall. . . .
>
> Deserving as much attention as Hall is Barbara Orson, a magnificent earth mother in the Williams tradition, rich of spirit and powerful of blood.

Holmberg was similarly laudatory in his 6 June *Journal* review of the two one-act plays:

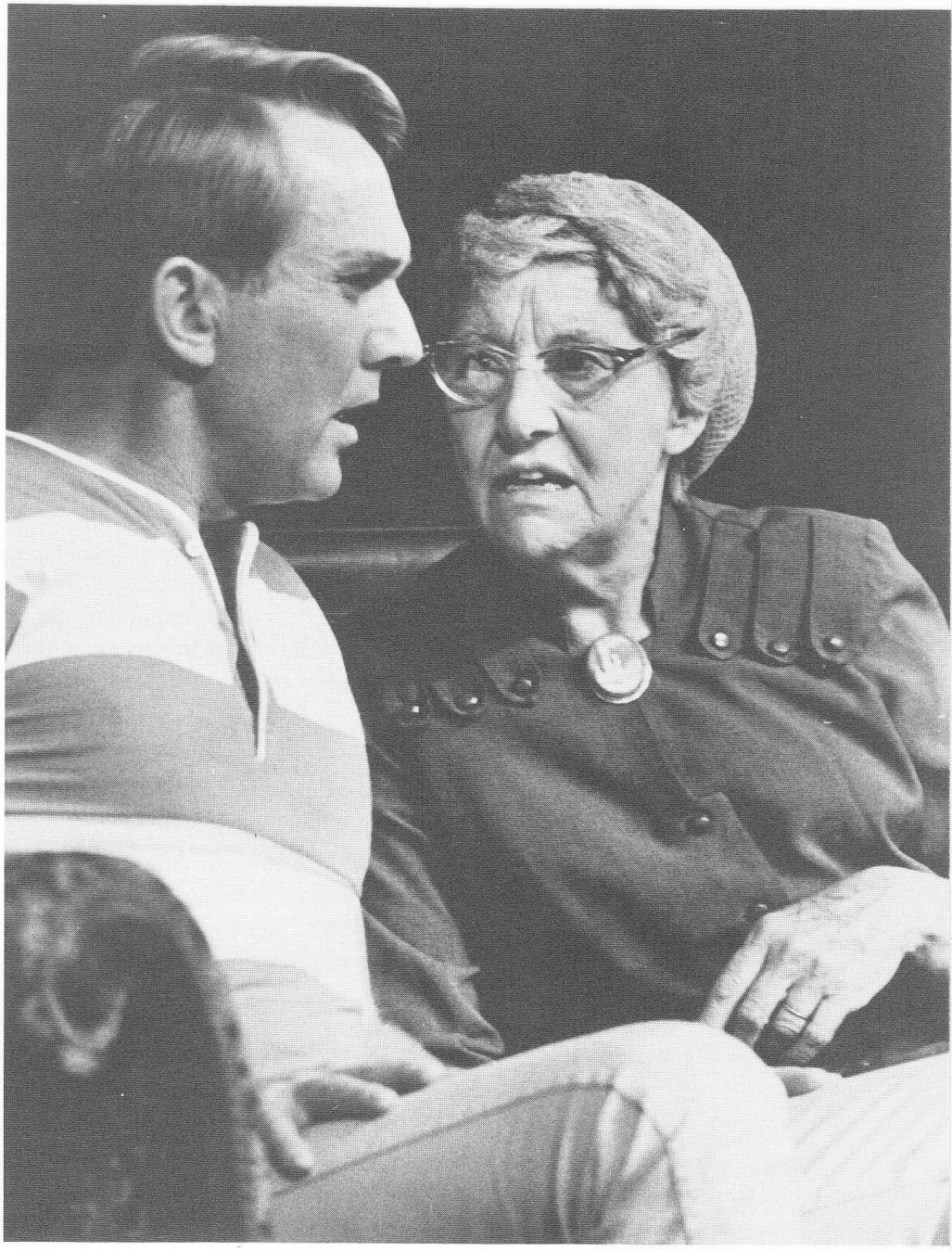


Appearing in The Hostage were (clockwise from lower left) Marcia Savella, Marjorie Merdinyan, Robert B. Hargreaves, Allen Thorton, Anthony Mancini, Sunny B. Warner, Bob Kaplan, Sheila Whitcomb, Bond Perry, Victor L. Allen, Edward Smith, Jr., Michael Surgento, Margaret Wilbur, Barbara Orson, and Walter Covell. Courtesy of the Trinity Repertory Company.

> If the opening play ("The Death of Bessie Smith") is a first-class effort, "The American Dream" is something this community can be extremely proud of indeed. It compares most favorably with a good deal of the Off-Broadway theater I have seen and is infinitely superior in most ways to many of the plays which have passed through Boston this year on the way to New York. . . . .
>
> As for Adrian Hall's direction, he once again demonstrates, as he did with "Orpheus Descending," his acute awareness of a playwright's intentions and his ability to bring those intentions to life.

Attendance at the Albee plays proved, particularly to Adrian, that there was a potential audience out there, that local people would pay to see plays of significance professionally produced and directed. Our box-office receipts totaled $6,674.30 for the first three plays and $3,848.56 for the Albee plays alone. These grosses may seem remarkably low, but it must be remembered that the top ticket price was $2.75, there were only about 180 seats in the theater, and there were only three performances a week (at that time we were all convinced that Rhode Island audiences would venture outside their homes only on weekends).

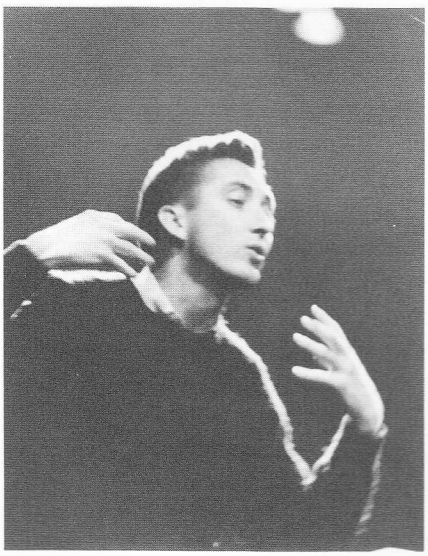
Notwithstanding the artistic and financial success of the Hall-directed plays that short spring season, we were not certain that Adrian would return for the fol-



Richard Kneeland and Edith Thomas, in Albee's The American Dream, *1964. Courtesy of the Trinity Repertory Company.*

Roz Goldberg, in Edward Albee's The Death of Bessie Smith, *1964. Courtesy of the Trinity Repertory Company.*

An integral part of the new company's planning, Adrian Hall arrived in Providence to assume his duties as artistic director in April 1964. Courtesy of the Trinity Repertory Company.



lowing season, planned to begin in September. Through private discussions we learned of his concerns: he wanted to be sure that at some point we were going to become a fully professional theater, one that would operate not just with volunteers but with a full-time paid staff; he wanted to be assured that ultimately we would have a professional acting company able to devote full time to rehearsal and a full schedule of performances, at least eight a week. Also, since he felt that he could not possibly be responsible for all the administrative details of the operation, he insisted that we engage a managing director for the following season. This was, in fact, something we had always intended to do.

There was no doubt that Adrian wanted to continue with us if he could be assured that his few conditions would be met. Becoming a fully professional theater would have to remain a goal for the future (we would have our first

Equity actors in the fall), but we were prepared to take action now to give him the administrative help he wanted. Just before a scheduled meeting of the board of trustees in July, he recommended that we hire Donald Schoenbaum for the position of managing director. Although funds were scarce, the board readily agreed to accept the recommendation if it assured that Adrian would return in the fall. Our commitment to employing a managing director would be largely fulfilled during the following years, though not without a constant struggle for supporting funds.

Adrian was sent another letter of agreement for his services for the 1964-65 season. This proposed agreement was very similar to the one he had signed and returned in January, and we expected him to sign and return this one as well. This was never done, nor, so far as I know, did he ever sign another written agreement with the company. To him, signing such an agreement would have meant that he was an employee of the foundation, subject to satisfying the whims of its board of trustees, whereas he considered himself an independent artist. In view of his feelings in the matter, we did not insist upon a signed agreement; rather, we accepted his word that he would return, just as he accepted our word about the length of his engagement and the salary he would be paid (eight hundred dollars a month). The arrangement was cemented toward the end of July by the execution of a written contract with Donald Schoenbaum to serve as our managing director.

This was a nerve-wracking period, for essentially the decision to engage two full-time people was made on sheer nerve and the faith that in some way the necessary financial support would materialize. The decision was made easier by board members like Larry Spitz, area director of the United Steelworkers of America, who took the position that under no circumstances should we risk losing Adrian Hall. Somehow the funds would be raised, Spitz insisted; and, as it turned out, he was right.

The engagement of Hall and Schoenbaum prompted the foundation's board of trustees to create an executive committee, a move that also formalized the committees that had functioned during the past spring. The executive committee consisted of a coordinating chairman; the chairmen and cochairmen of the production, finance, publicity and promotion, subscription, and house management committees; and five members at large, to be selected by the coordinating chairman. This structure was designed to give Adrian and Don as much help as possible, since we had no funds to engage any other paid staff in the coming season. Without the assistance of volunteers, there would have been no season at all.

Although an organization's board of trustees is usually responsible for raising funds for operations and capital improvements, our board was not quite ready to commit itself to doing that, probably because of a general belief that large sums could not be raised in difficult times (the current business climate did not seem strong). The need for a professional repertory theater in Providence had not yet been established. We did have a grant of $2,500 from the Rhode Island Foundation, and we had received other contributions totaling about $3,700, but these funds were hardly sufficient to meet our capital-improvement needs, which would cost from $6,000 to $10,000. We needed additional money. This ultimately came from loans, from a subscription campaign conducted by Hall, Schoenbaum, and the executive committee, from the subscriptions sold by our many volunteers, and from the sale of tickets at the box office.

During that second season our operating expenses included the salaries of Hall, Schoenbaum, and our first professional actors: Richard Kneeland, William

Cain, J. Frank Lucas, and Barbara Orson. All the other actors that season were volunteers. With our attendance and box-office receipts again exceeding expectations, a financial report showed that from 1 August to 11 December 1964 our income from subscriptions and box-office ticket sales exceeded our operating expenses by about $100. However, by 28 May 1965—the end of the season—we had an operating loss of close to $14,000. That loss may seem modest, especially compared to those we would incur later on, but it should be remembered that at that time our entire operation was conducted on a relatively modest scale; for instance, our subscription and box-office income for the season was only a little over $40,000, and we received only about $6,000 in contributions.

The season of 1964-65—our first full season—proved beyond question that Adrian Hall was a talent to be nurtured and supported. His work generated a rare excitement: who could forget his production of Pinter's *The Caretaker* or his staged reading of Shaw's *Don Juan in Hell* (to name just two of that season's outstanding presentations)? Artistically the season was all we had hoped for, and it was clear that the state was beginning to notice that something important was happening.

But our success did not come without serious problems. The chairmen of the various committees (many of whom were among the company's organizers) were given substantial power by the committee structure the organizers had designed, and they felt that they should in fact participate in all of the company's decision making—including, to some extent, the selection of plays. As a consequence, conflicts arose both with Adrian and with Don Schoenbaum, but particularly with the latter. Sometime around the spring of 1965, when the trustees were to consider the renewal of his contract, Don asked Adrian to support him in his demand for a contract of two years rather than one for the following season only. This support was not forthcoming; and knowing that he was unlikely to get the contract he wanted, Don resigned before the end of the second season. Over the next ten years his short stay would prove to have set a pattern for our managing directors, none of whom would remain with the company for longer than two years.

In the late spring of 1965 the foundation's bylaws were changed to dilute the authority of all the committees except the executive committee and to strengthen the hand of the artistic director and his staff. These changes resulted in the replacement of many committee members, including some on the executive committee and some who had been among the company's founders. Although this seemed unfortunate, it was recognized that we could not grow and become a truly professional group if volunteer committees were to supervise a professional staff. It is unlikely that Adrian would have remained unless these changes were made. He was clearly not disposed to seek approval of his play selection or any of his artistic decisions; although none of his decisions was ever overruled, he did not like having to respond to questions about them. The changes in the bylaws and in the membership of the committees were satisfactory to Adrian and induced him to continue with the company. One problem, however, was left unresolved: he still had to account to the board of trustees. This obligation would cause many disagreements and crises down through the years.

In another significant event that spring, Jim Brasch approached Adrian and this writer (then serving as the executive committee's and trustees' coordinating

chairman) about doing a summer season on the campus in Kingston. This was an opportunity to implement our long-held belief in the importance of a relationship with the university, as well as to keep Adrian and his actors employed (there were three Equity actors—Kneeland, Cain, and Orson—with the company at the conclusion of the regular season). By the end of March we had reached an agreement with URI to begin a summer season there on 30 June.

After Don Schoenbaum's resignation two young people were engaged, with Adrian's approval, to serve as managing director and business manager. These were David Frank and Douglas Buck. By the end of June they and Adrian had prepared a budget for the fiscal year 1 June 1965-30 May 1966, covering the summer season at URI and the regular season that would follow. As revised in August, this budget projected an income of $104,400 and expenses of $127,556, with a deficit of $23,156. By 1 July we had taken in $23,800 in paid subscriptions for the 1965-66 season. During that season we would have six full-time

J. Frank Lucas and Richard Kneeland were among the company's first professional actors. Here they perform in the 1965 production of Harold Pinter's The Caretaker. *Courtesy of the Trinity Repertory Company.*

Barbara Orson, seen here in George Bernard Shaw's Don Juan in Hell *in 1965, was one of the company's organizers. During the 1964-65 season she also became one of Trinity's first four professional actors. Courtesy of the Trinity Repertory Company.*

paid actors and a full-time paid office and box-office staff, a far cry from the spring of 1964, when everything but the directing was done by volunteers.

It was during the summer season at URI that Katherine Helmond, Marguerite Lenert, and Robert Van Hooten came to the company, joining Richard Kneeland, William Cain, and Barbara Orson and thereby doubling the number of our Equity actors. Later that summer Ed Hall joined the company when he and Katherine Helmond were cast for a memorable production of Leroi Jones's *Dutchman*. Since there was an ongoing censorship issue on the campus that summer, Adrian was somewhat apprehensive that the play's provocative material and production might bring about a raid by the police, but fortunately this did not happen. This production of *Dutchman* was so well received that it was recreated, with the same cast, during the 1966-67 season, when it again enjoyed great success.

In regard to the deficit projected for 1965-66, the August 1965 budget included an interesting note: "A government sponsored program of providing performances of classic plays from Trinity Square Playhouse's repertory could provide additional income without incurring large expenditures. These performances would be for high school students in the Providence area." This proposal in fact anticipated what was to happen two years later when the company initiated its government-sponsored Project Discovery program, an undertaking that propelled us to our goal of becoming a fully professional company and raised our budget over the $1,000,000 mark. In more modest form the Project Discovery program continues to this day, as does the Trinity Repertory Company itself, which now operates with a budget in the range of $3,000,000 to $4,000,000 a year.

Adrian Hall speaks to students as part of Trinity's Project Discovery program, circa 1972. Courtesy of the Trinity Repertory Company.

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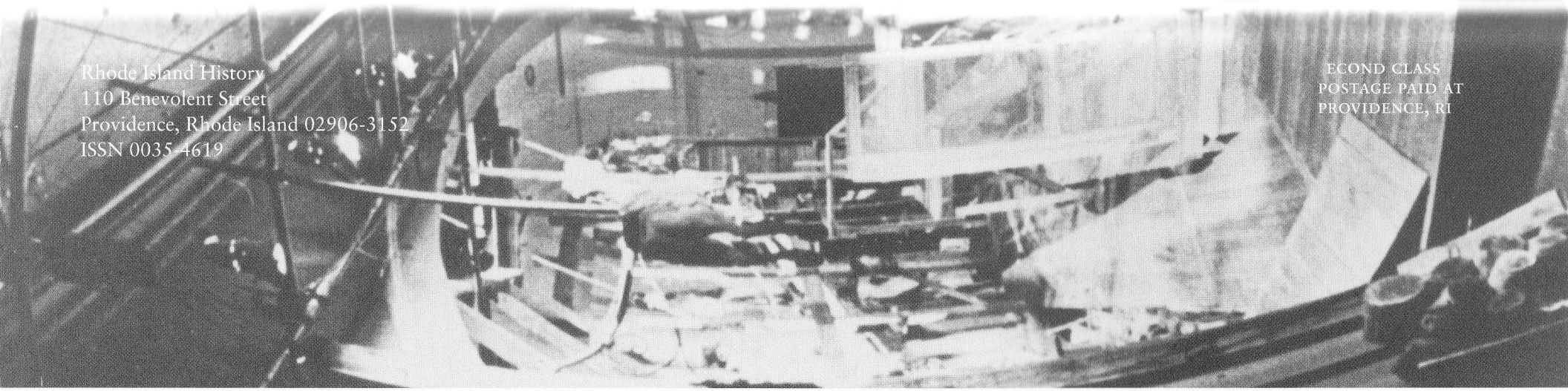

Cover

A 1964 performance by the Repertory Theater in the Square, presented at the Trinity Union Methodist Church in Providence. Courtesy of the Trinity Repertory Company.