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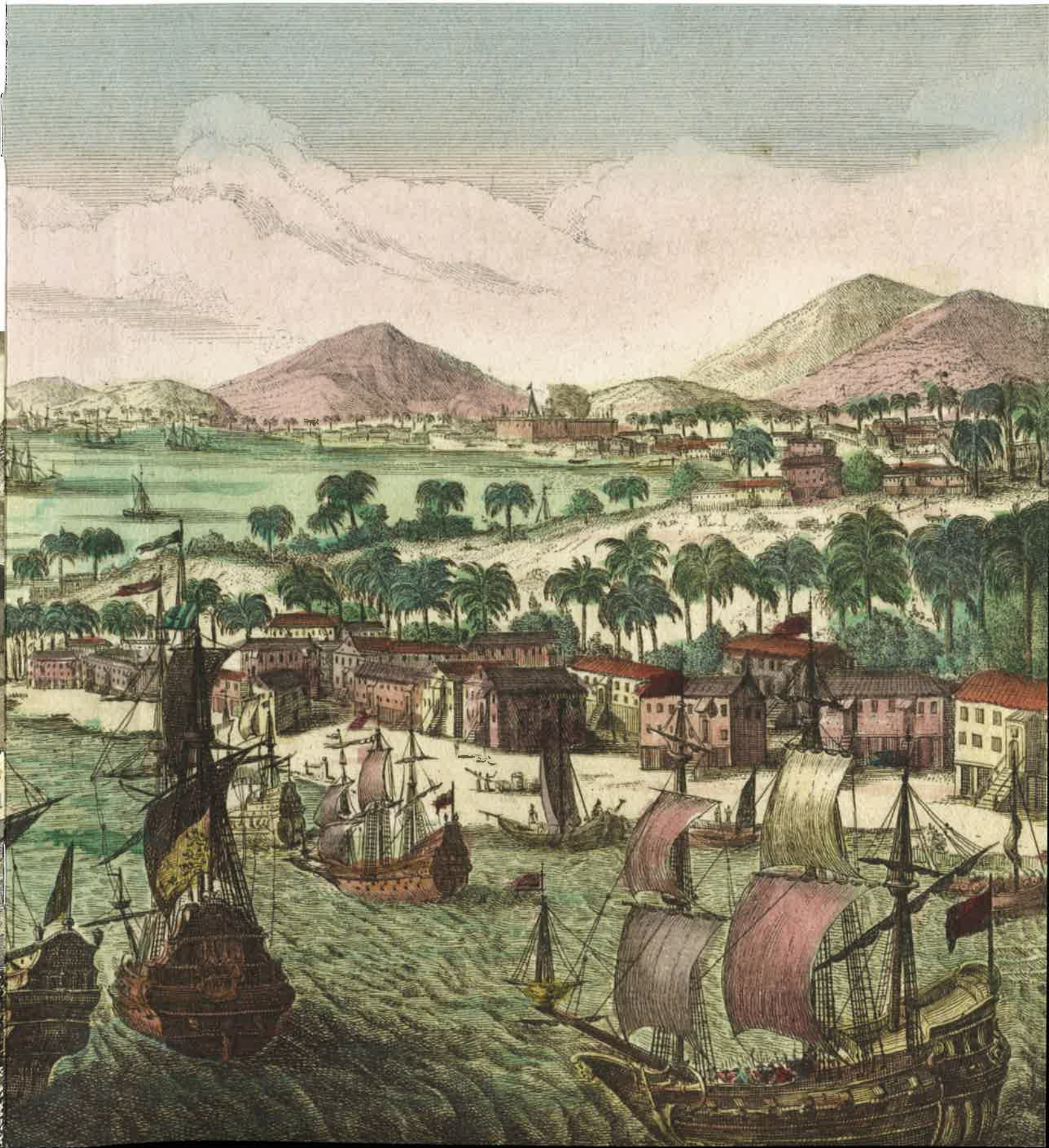
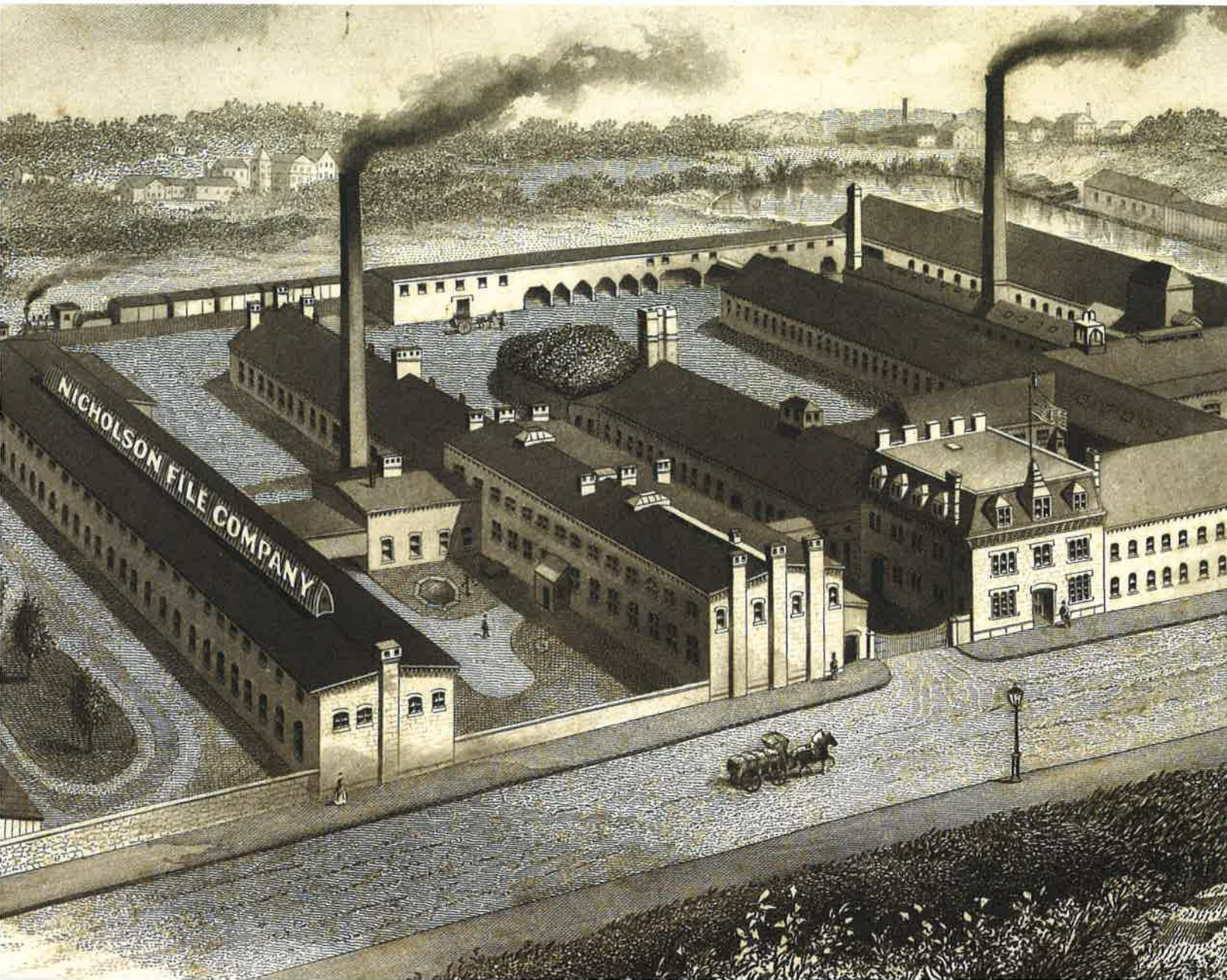
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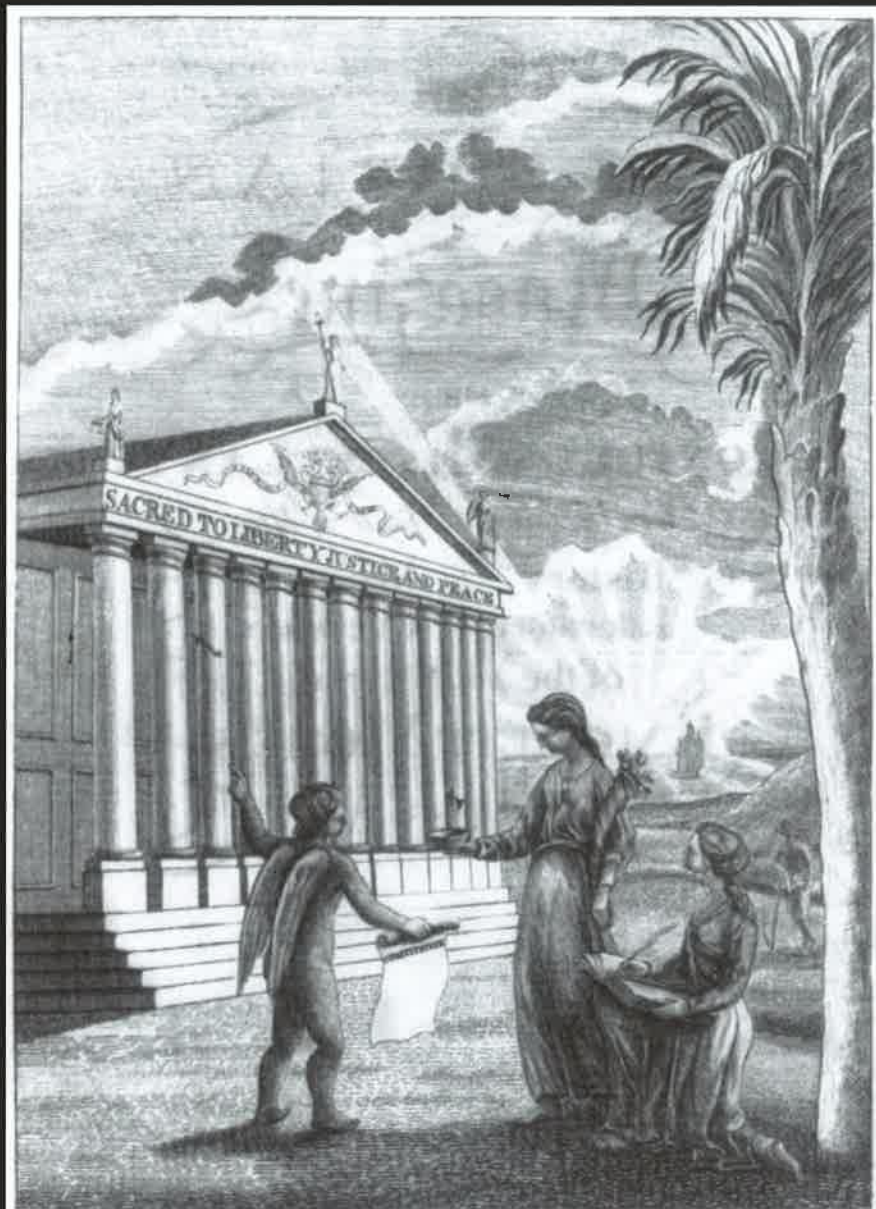
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On the cover:

This c. 1780 Bergmüller engraving depicts a British naval assault on the island of Saint Eustatius.
["St. Eustache une des Isles d'Antilles dans l'Amerique du Nord," Courtesy of the Library of Congress. c. 1780]



Behold the Fabric new to Freedom rear'd,
Approved by Friends, and won by Foes rear'd,
Where Justice, too, and Peace, by us ador'd,
Shall heal each Wrong, and keep on sheath'd the sword
Approach then, Concord fair, Columbia's Son,
And, faithful O'er, write that 'WE ARE ONE.'

Algiers or St. Eustatius: Foreign Affairs and the Ratification of the Constitution in Rhode Island

ROBERT W. SMITH

TWO PATHS SEEMED TO LIE BEFORE RHODE ISLAND IF IT DID NOT ratify the Constitution of the United States. A Federalist writer in the *Newport Herald* claimed that “the paper money leaders flatter themselves that their unfederal conduct in not sending Delegates to Convention and not permitting the people to meet to consider the new Constitution, may cause them to be thrown out of the Union, and then they will become the Algiers of America.” The Federalists made the idea of independent Rhode Island as a pirate’s den a recurring theme in their literature. The writer went on to claim that, if necessary, Rhode Island’s leaders would seek British protection against the United States. Rhode Island’s fate would be sealed, as the United States would not permit that outcome. “Sooner than such an event should take place, we should see our country wasted with destruction, our fields drenched with blood, and our little territory parceled out among the adjacent states.”¹⁴

¹⁴Published in 1788, this print from an engraving by Philadelphia artist James Trenchard promotes a reverence for the newly ratified constitution. [Courtesy of the Library of Congress. James Trenchard. *The Columbian magazine, or, Monthly miscellany*. Philadelphia: Printed for Seddon, Spotswood, Cist, and Trenchard, 1788, frontispiece]

In the limited amount of Anti-federalist literature, Rhode Island independence was more of an opportunity than a danger. An Anti-federalist under the name "Charlestoniensis," who may have been Jonathan J. Hazard of the Country Party, responded to Federalist criticism: "I will observe that, in that case [that Rhode Island does not ratify], this state will not become an Algiers, as some malevolent scribblers in Massachusetts have impudently asserted, but a St. Eustatius." St. Eustatius was a Dutch-owned island in the Caribbean that functioned as a free port. "Charlestoniensis" clearly saw an independent Rhode Island as an entrepôt for the trade between Europe and the United States. The idea was not as outlandish as it seemed. By the 1760s Newport was the entrepôt for southern Rhode Island, southern Massachusetts, and parts of eastern Connecticut, and Hazard envisioned a return to that role.²

Foreign policy is generally acknowledged as one of the main reasons for drafting the Constitution and a key element in the ratification debate. Foreign affairs are generally seen as a better issue for the Federalists than the Anti-federalists.³ Studies of the debate in Rhode Island tend to focus on Rhode Island's historical peculiarities and its paper money system as the main elements of its politics. In the first scholarly study of Rhode Island in the 1780s, Frank Greene Bates argued that Rhode Island opposed the Constitution to preserve its paper money system, but also out of "the undying love of the people for democracy and liberty, and the jealousy of all authority outside their own boundaries."⁴ Hillman Metcalf Bishop argued that paper money and fear of federal taxation were the economic reasons for Rhode Island's Anti-federalism. Politically, Rhode Islanders considered a balanced government at odds with their notions of democracy.⁵ Irwin H. Polishook attributed Rhode Island's

Foreign policy is generally acknowledged as one of the main reasons for drafting the Constitution and a key element in the ratification debate.

politics to a "tradition of isolation and distrust," pushed along by border disputes and paper money.⁶ Patrick T. Conley, the most thorough student of Rhode Island in the 1780s, saw a close correlation between paper money and Anti-federalism, and argued that Rhode Island's tradition of individualism and separatism was the key to understanding its behavior.⁷ Jackson Turner Main departed somewhat from the consensus. He agreed that paper money was the main issue, but saw it as an example of the struggle between localists and cosmopolitans that could be seen in every other state, rather than an example of Rhode Island exceptionalism.⁸

Foreign policy is the key to both sides of the debate in Rhode Island. Both the Anti-federalists and Federalists saw foreign policy as an issue that worked in their favor. For the Anti-federalists, it was the answer to the question of how Rhode Island would preserve its economic and political

system, even its very existence, should it reject the Constitution. As a free port and a sovereign entity, Rhode Island would enjoy the theoretical protection of the law of nations, and the practical protection of diplomatic and economic interest. Other nations would use Rhode Island as an entrepôt and preserve it against the United States. In short, Anti-federalists believed foreign policy was the method through which Rhode Island would get everything it wanted even if it were not part of the union. In this instance, holding out the possibility of successfully remaining independent, the debate in Rhode Island most resembled Virginia, the state Rhode Island least resembled. For the Federalists, foreign policy was the best answer to why Rhode Island should ratify the Constitution. Rhode Island's crops were worth little, and most of its profits came from the reexport of other goods. The Anti-federalist vision of an independent Rhode Island, Federalists warned, was a dangerous fantasy. The

only way Rhode Island could protect its foreign policy interests was to ratify the Constitution and remain a member of the union.

Rhode Island depended on shipping for its livelihood and had little to export on its own. It was the hardest hit by the disruption of pre-Revolutionary War trade networks. The war and British occupation nearly destroyed Newport, which lost about half its population. Much of Newport's wealth and prestige passed to Providence, which was undamaged by the war.⁹ The merchants of both cities hoped to resume prewar trade patterns, which centered on the West Indies and Great Britain. West Indian trade provided hard money or bills of exchange used for the purchase of British goods. This source was eliminated by the British Order in Council of July 2, 1783, which excluded American shipping from the British West Indies. French trade could not replace British trade. John and Moses Brown, Providence's leading merchants, concluded that France was a poor market for New England products based on their wartime experience. France also barred American ships from its colonial trade.¹⁰

Rhode Islanders rejected a national solution to their commercial problems, and agreed that their resources should be applied for their own benefit. The state, led by its merchants, opposed the impost of 1781 on the philosophical grounds of free trade and commitment to local authority, as well as on the practical grounds that Rhode Island would give up its chief source of revenue. Furthermore, the impost did not provide for a drawback, or a refund of the duty if the goods imported were reexported soon after the duty was paid. As Rhode Island's economy depended on a reexport trade, Rhode Island would be particularly disadvantaged.¹¹

The merchants and their political allies soon came to regret their opposition to the impost. They had anticipated the continuance of free trade among the states. Instead, states passed their own imposts, which had the same effect of putting Rhode Island's trade at the mercy of outsiders. By 1785 and 1786, Rhode Island's merchants favored a national trade regulation to replace a patchwork of state laws.¹² The merchants' stand cost them politically. The Country Party, led by Jonathan J. Hazard of Charlestown, proposed an emission of paper money as a means of economic relief. The General Assembly rejected it in March 1786. Soon after, the Country Party swept to victory at the polls. The new legislature issued £100,000 in paper money backed by land. The measure exacerbated Rhode Island's already poor reputation within the union, not least because the state's merchants launched a propaganda campaign denouncing the paper money supporters as cheats. At minimum, the merchants considered paper money bad for business.¹³ A London agent for the Champlin family of Newport complained that paper money made Newport a poor site as a depot for imported goods, but added that Newport might be more attractive if Rhode Island declared it a free port.¹⁴

The Country Party remained in power for the next four years, winning by increasingly larger margins. They continued to set a course independent of the union. When Congress asked the states to repeal laws in conflict with the Treaty of Paris in 1786, Rhode Island replied that it had no such laws, even though the requirement that all debtors accept Rhode Island paper as payment fell into that category. Rhode Island relented in the fall of 1787 and exempted British debts from its paper money law. This was politically expedient for the Country Party, and the burden fell most heavily on their mercantile opponents.

In the context of this divergence over what was best for Rhode Island, the state received and grudgingly considered the Constitution.

Rhode Island refused to send delegates to the Constitutional Convention, explaining in September 1787 that the state assembly could not change the fundamental laws of the state, and thus had no power to send representatives to a convention that would do just that.¹⁵

Both the Country Party and the merchants acted chiefly for Rhode Island's interests. By 1787, the Country Party placed Rhode Island's interests in contrast to the whole union, whereas the merchants believed Rhode Island's interests could not be secured without a stronger union. In the context of this divergence over what was best for Rhode Island, the state received and grudgingly considered the Constitution. That same divergence defined the conflict between the Anti-federalists and Federalists.

The first phase of the ratification struggle in Rhode Island ran from the arrival of the Consti-

tution until August 1788, while the fate of the Constitution was in doubt nationwide. The literature of this period is almost entirely Federalist, which is not surprising given that the three main newspapers, the *Newport Herald*, the *Providence Gazette*, and the *United States Chronicle*, were all Federalist.¹⁶ The protection of trade made up the bulk of the Federalist case on foreign policy. National issues appeared infrequently in Rhode Island. National honor, a staple of the Federalist case elsewhere, appeared in one of the earliest pieces in Rhode Island. "The inefficacy of our present government is fully proved by the encroachments of our commerce, the decline of national honour, and the confusion pervading every State," wrote an essayist in the *Newport Herald*.¹⁷ Yet national honor made only a sporadic appearance in the debates. In January 1790 "Philanthropos" argued that the Constitution "promises to the United States a high degree of respectability among the nations of the earth—

extension of commerce—increase of agriculture and manufactures—peace, order, justice and liberty.”¹⁸ A month later another writer warned that Rhode Island would “blush that she procrastinated to so late a period, the adoption of a Constitution which will encourage and promote every useful art, afford her peace at home, and render her respectable abroad.”¹⁹

The issue of British retention of western forts made a brief appearance in Rhode Island newspapers. “A Rhode-Island Man” argued that the Constitution would allow British creditors to recover prewar debts, and the British would then withdraw from western forts.²⁰ “A Freeman” elaborated on how the West was a Rhode Island interest. British evacuation would allow the sale of western land, which would reduce the national debt.²¹ “A Newport Man,” an Anti-federalist writing in response to “A Rhode-Island Man,” believed that British actions in the West had nothing to do with the American form of government. The British held the forts merely because they could get away with it and would be driven out only by force.²²

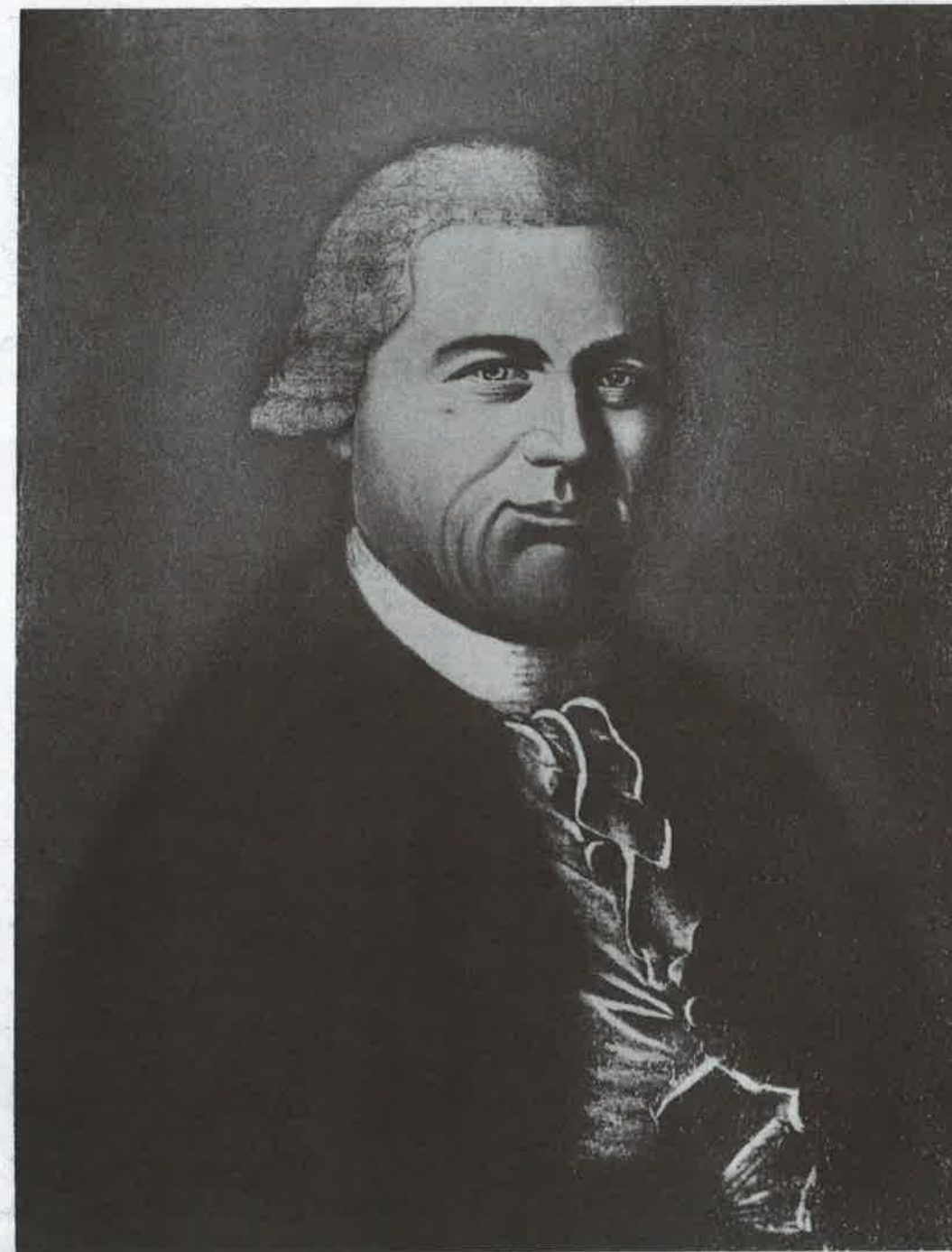
Commerce was also a national concern for some Federalists. “A Correspondent informs us that we are in a falling state,” wrote an essayist in the *Newport Herald*. “That our credit is falling—our commerce is falling, and that both of them have about fallen through.”²³ A few months later another Federalist blamed the nation’s troubles on “the want of power in our federal head to regulate the finances of the continent,” which the Constitution would provide.²⁴ “Commerce and agriculture will flourish on a more solid foundation—Our harbors will be clothed with ships.”²⁵

A writer in the *Newport Herald* portrayed trade as both a national and a local concern. He observed

that the United States is “destined by nature to be the carriers of her own produce, yet tamely suffers this valuable branch of trade to be monopolized by foreigners.” The vast majority of ships in New York and Charleston were British. Without a new government, “the Northern States will soon be depopulated and dwindle into poverty, while the Southern ones will become silk worms to toil and labour for Europe.” The writer argued that the Constitution would restore the United States to its own carrying trade, and Rhode Island must ratify to claim its share. “This is the seed time of the union—the State that should be now unfederal will plunge herself into merited disgrace, if not annihilation.”²⁶

The discussion of trade reveals how closely the debate was tied to Rhode Island’s interests. More purely national issues failed to gain traction, but trade was easily made a local concern. Here the Federalists could meet the Anti-federalists on their own ground. One Federalist wrote that “no State in the Union hath such interested motives for adopting the NEW CONSTITUTION as this State.” Rhode Island’s economy depended on the carrying trade and free trade with the other states. Without a new government, Rhode Island’s trade would be hampered by the imposts of the other states.²⁷

Using the pseudonym “Phocion,” Theodore Foster, a Federalist and longtime town clerk of Providence, wrote a lengthy essay on the possibilities for Rhode Island trade, but only if Rhode Island ratified the Constitution. Otherwise, Rhode Island “shall then be left in a contending world, to shift for ourselves, surrounded by great, powerful and confederated neighbours.”²⁸ His enthusiasm often outran his literary skill. He described Rhode Island as “emboweled by a great and excellent bay of water, leading a great distance toward the heart of the country, and furnishing



HON. THEODORE FOSTER.

April 29, 1752—January 13, 1828.

United States Senator for Rhode Island, 1790-1808.

Theodore Foster (1752-1828), United States Senator from Rhode Island. Rhode Island Historical Society Collections, RHIX173668.

Rhode Islanders resumed the slave trade after the [Revolutionary War] as the only way to pay off debts to British merchants.

at Newport one of the finest harbours for shipping on the Atlantic ocean." Eighteen of Rhode Island's thirty towns sat on Narragansett Bay.²⁹ Under the Articles of Confederation, Rhode Island lost its trade with the interior to Connecticut, and Connecticut taxed Rhode Island commerce. The Constitution would sweep away state duties and restore Rhode Island's trade.³⁰ Providence would be the central depot for goods headed from Boston to New York, as the overland route to Providence was safer than sailing around Cape Cod. Newport would likely be the seat of the navy, and the port that housed the navy would likely have an extensive trade as well.³¹ In closing, Foster noted that all of the small states had voted to ratify by large majorities, and Rhode Island should not further delay.³²

One aspect of Rhode Island's commerce threatened to turn Federalists into Anti-federalists. Rhode Island was at the center of the Atlantic slave trade prior to the American Revolution.

Rhode Islanders resumed the slave trade after the war as the only way to pay off debts to British merchants. It was also home to one of the largest efforts to abolish that trade in the 1780s. Moses Brown, a former slave trader who renounced the traffic after converting to Quakerism, led the movement. The effort culminated in a law banning the slave trade in October 1787. Article I, Section 9, of the Constitution forbade Congress from abolishing the Atlantic slave trade before 1808. Samuel Hopkins, a Congregationalist minister in Newport, captured this dilemma in a letter to Moses Brown. The clause permitting the slave trade was an enemy admitted into the camp, he wrote. However, the alternative to the Constitution was anarchy. Brown believed that if the slave trade were cut, slavery itself would die. By January 1790 Brown publicly supported ratification.³³

By the summer of 1788 the nature of the debate in Rhode Island shifted and the question of

what Rhode Island would do outside the union dominated Federalist thought.³⁴ "Solon, junior," possibly David Howell, a Providence lawyer and former member of Congress, noted on August 2 that New York was about to ratify, and believed (mistakenly) that North Carolina would soon follow. Rhode Island was left with two choices: "either to adopt, in gross, a Constitution we had no hand in forming, and which is perhaps in several respects exceptionable—or to be left out of the American Confederacy." Rhode Island's interests dictated the former.³⁵ Independence would require foreign alliances, which were not likely to happen. France and the Netherlands "have too much interest in this country to countenance this little State in setting up its will against the whole Confederacy." Rhode Island might seek out Austria or Prussia, but without the likelihood of success. Any forces sent from those countries would be paid in paper money that was worthless outside of Rhode Island. If Rhode Island were to remain independent, it would have to turn to Great Britain. "To Britain, then—to haughty Britain, we must bend the knee—and ask the protection of that power which we once conquered—and, in this case, against our brethren too—the men that nobly fought by our side."³⁶

Through the ratification process, the Federalists hammered on the idea that Rhode Island could not secure its foreign policy interests outside of the union. On October 18, 1788, "A Friend to the Union" argued that Rhode Island would need alliances, but Rhode Island had nothing to offer in return for foreign protection. "The idea of forming foreign alliances is so chimerical, that I presume no man can seriously contemplate it."³⁷ Rhode Island's position would naturally get worse once the new government went into operation. "A Friend to the State" observed that Rhode Island's commercial interests depended

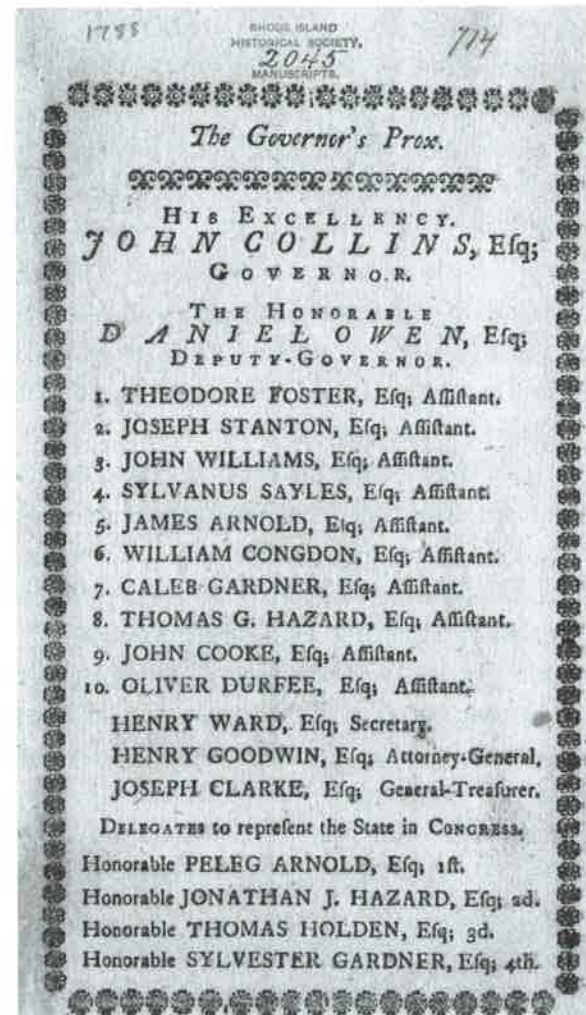
on free trade with the other states. "Many of the articles of which our cargoes for foreign markets have been composed, have been collected from the other States." Rhode Island had little of its own to export, and as an independent state "we shall become the hiss, and the scorn of the whole commercial world."³⁸

As the new government formed, the ports of Providence and Newport sought to avoid the consequences of Rhode Island's Anti-federalism. A town meeting in Providence instructing the town's delegates to the General Assembly bemoaned the fact that Rhode Island's commerce lay outside the protection of the union, and was not included under the treaties the United States had with European nations. "All trade with the new confederated States will probably soon be interdicted to the citizens of this State, except on the footing of foreigners, and of course on the payment of exorbitant duties."³⁹ The Federalists of Newport made a similar argument and contended for the unity of all economic interests. "This state cannot exist without Commerce, Agriculture, and Manufactures, these are naturally connected and must rise and fall together, however the Bad Policy of some Men have endeavoured to disunite them."⁴⁰

While the mercantile towns pled for relief, the Rhode Island legislature prepared for life as an independent state. In May 1789 the Rhode Island legislature, controlled by the Country Party, passed a tonnage bill that mirrored the bill in Congress.⁴¹ Federalist observers considered the duty either a disaster for the local economy or a ruse. A writer in the *Providence Gazette* warned that if the state impost went into effect, "the Ruin of our Commerce and Navigation must be the Result." Most of Rhode Island's trade came from the reexport of imported goods to other states, and that trade would be cut off if Rhode Island

remained outside the union.⁴² James Manning, the president of the College of Rhode Island, was in New York and dined with various members of Congress, and they seemed to believe that Rhode Island's impost was a signal that Rhode Island would ratify the Constitution. The president himself shared that sentiment.⁴³ Providence politician Jabez Bowen warned Vice President John Adams not to be fooled by the act. He wrote that "mankind would suppose by this that Rd. Island was preparing to come into the Union, but there was no such Idea at Bottom," and that the act was intended to prevent Congress from taking any action against Rhode Island. Bowen believed that if Rhode Island did not ratify, Providence, Newport, and the other seaport towns would appeal to Congress for protection.⁴⁴ "Detector," writing in the *Newport Herald*, agreed that the act contradicted the Anti-federalist argument that Rhode Island would be a free port outside of the union. "Instead of encouraging an intercourse with the United States, a duty, by this act, is to be collected on foreign articles, which may be imported from them into this State; although they should have previously paid a duty in those States."⁴⁵

"Z," writing in the *Newport Mercury*, pointed to the wealth that Rhode Island would sacrifice if it did not ratify. The southern states seldom carried their own products. Their exports required 250,000 tons of shipping. "Were we connected with the Union, 30,000 tons of shipping for the carrying trade might easily be furnished by this State."⁴⁶ A few weeks before the Rhode Island ratifying convention, "A Freeholder" pointed to the connection between the commercial and landed interests, which he charged that the Anti-federalists missed. The new government would be funded by import duties, which would be borne by the merchants rather than by the farmers. "The prosperity of this State is much



The Governor's Proxy from 1788 shows that year's ballot, which includes Theodore Foster and Thomas G. Hazard. Rhode Island Historical Society Collections, RHIX173664.

dependent on commerce; it is the medium for disposing of the produce of our country, besides enabling us to build ships and be the carriers for others."⁴⁷

Rhode Island was a frustration to its defenders in Congress. Royal Flint, a New York merchant and land speculator, warned Rhode Island governor John Collins that Rhode Island stood to benefit most from the new government and was the least able of all the states to defend its

independence.⁴⁸ "Congress has at present a disposition to treat with your State, with the tenderness of an old friend, and with the respect due a Sovereign power," Flint wrote. But Rhode Island could not stand in the way of the common good. "The principle of self preservation will make it requisite for the general Government to prevent your counteracting any of their views or Systems."⁴⁹ New Englanders in the government differed on what to do about their neighbor. Congressman Fisher Ames of Massachusetts proposed to treat Rhode Island produce as foreign as of December 1, 1789, by which time North Carolina should ratify, and Rhode Island would be convinced to do likewise.⁵⁰ By May 1789 Vice President Adams was already losing patience with Rhode Island. "I shall continue to be as friendly as possible to Rhode Island but it is too small a part of America to dictate to the rest."⁵¹ New Englanders in Congress agreed on Rhode Island's conduct. "They are betraying the Rights and Interests of New England every day," Adams wrote to Massachusetts politician James Sullivan.⁵² Jabez Bowen argued to Adams that Rhode Island should not be treated as foreign under the new tonnage duty.⁵³ Adams would not hear it. "But if unhappily Rhode Island should not call a convention; or calling one not adopt the Constitution, Something much more serious than has ever yet been done or talked of will most probably be undertaken," Adams warned. "There can be no medium: Enemies they must be or fellow citizens, and that in a very short time."⁵⁴

The alternative to ratification was independence. Virginia was the only other state where independence was an option, promoted by Patrick Henry. Even there, it was used primarily as a threat in order to reverse the trend toward ratification.⁵⁵ As Rhode Island remained outside the new government for more than a year, independence was more real there. Rhode Island's

version of Patrick Henry, at least in Federalist rhetoric, was Jonathan J. Hazard. Hazard was a leader of the Country Party, which had a majority in the Rhode Island Assembly.⁵⁶ In August 1788 William Ellery, a Newport Federalist and former member of Congress, wrote a friend in Connecticut about Rhode Island's politics. Ellery claimed that Hazard believed ratification would destroy Rhode Island's commerce and that the New England states had been duped by the southern states. "That this State by standing out may derive great benefits in point of trade.—that he can procure as many British bottoms as the merchants may want,—that our ports may be free;—that this State has been imposed upon,—that we have been called upon for a fiftieth part of the expense of the war, when in fact we ought not pay more than two hundredths part;—&c. &c. &c." Ellery also passed along the rumor that Hazard, while a member of Congress, met with Sir John Temple, the British consul.⁵⁷ Ellery elaborated on Rhode Island politics to his friend six days later: the Country Party was convinced that the other New England states would make no move against Rhode Island, as they expected Rhode Island to eventually ratify, and Rhode Island was needed to counteract the influence of the southern states. "While they think thus, and amuse themselves, and the country people of free ports, trade with protection from G. Britain, etc., it cannot be expected that they will adopt the new government, and when their minds will be open to conviction I am sure no man can tell."⁵⁸ A Federalist writing as "Rhodiensis" delivered a public attack on Hazard and the idea of a free port on October 23, 1788. He denounced Hazard as the "Machiavel of Charleston," who had deluded Rhode Island into thinking it would have a free trade with the protection of Great Britain.⁵⁹ "Rhodiensis" considered the idea ridiculous in all particulars. "What nation, think ye, would recognize such a petty Sovereignty as this

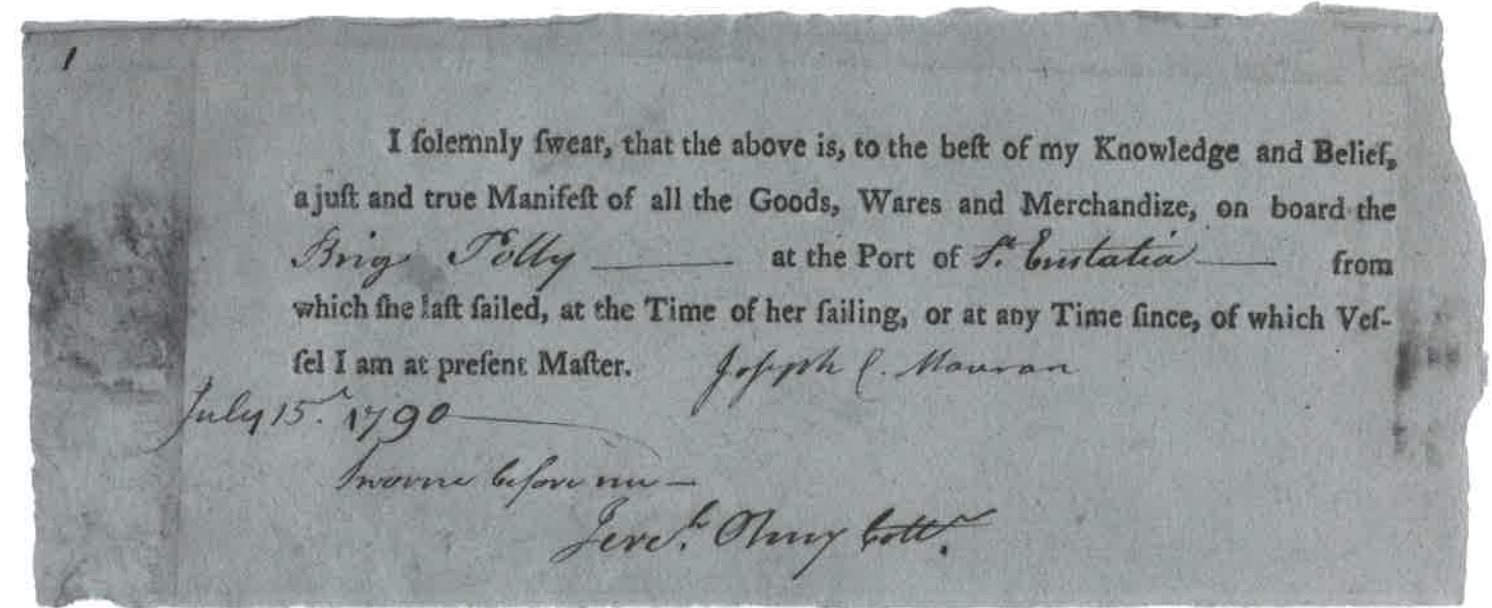
and enter into commercial treaties with us?"⁶⁰ Rhode Island had no staple crops, and was chiefly the reexporter of imported goods, which made it unsuitable as a free port. Besides, the writer pointed out, even if Rhode Island intended to be a free port, the United States would not permit it. An independent Rhode Island would interfere with American trade regulations. "Sooner than suffer their commercial ordinances to be defeated in the manner mentioned,—sooner than suffer so fine an harbour to become a nest for smugglers, or a receptacle for the ships of an enemy, from which the United States and its commerce might easily be annoyed, they would strip this State of its Sovereignty and partition it between the two neighboring States."⁶¹ Great Britain would not ally with Rhode Island because Rhode Island had nothing to offer. "We have only some cheese, barley, cyder, potatoes, &c. to give, and they are articles of a trifling value—articles of which our surplusage is small, and with which she abounds."⁶² Rhode Island was thus a poor candidate as a free port, and the Anti-federalists were foolish if they thought otherwise. "Is it possible that the Antifederalists can entertain themselves with the delusive hopes of forging a trade with foreign powers against the system and will of the United States, and with powers too who would probably disdain to treat with so small a State as this?"⁶³ Rhode Island's stubbornness in refusing to ratify the Constitution could end only in its destruction.⁶⁴

In July 1789 Congress considered a bill that would treat North Carolina and Rhode Island shipping as foreign for the purpose of revenue collection. The bill passed in September, but its implementation was delayed until January 15, 1790, in order to allow time for the two remaining states to ratify.⁶⁵ Rhode Island Federalists were divided on such a measure. William Ellery favored harsh action as the only way to defeat

Anti-federalism. "If we are treated as foreigners, with regard to the Impost it will, I am confident, operate beneficially on the opposition," he wrote.⁶⁶ By December Ellery was convinced that the policy of giving Rhode Island time had not worked. "I am of the same opinion now, which I have often expressed to you, that if Congress had subjected those articles [of Rhode Island trade] to the foreign duty this state would have joined the Union," he wrote to Benjamin Huntington. "But Congress chose to subdue our Antifeds by lenient measures.—to draw them by the cords of love."⁶⁷

Other Federalists hoped to put off the day of reckoning. Jabez Bowen wrote to Vice President Adams in December 1789, asking for an extension. "I hope and Intreat that Congress will not think of Restricting our Trade, as that will but distress the Federal Towns and will be pleasing to our Antes."⁶⁸ Adams was often the intermediary between Rhode Island Federalists and the federal government. Henry Marchant, a Newport lawyer and leading Federalist, wrote the vice president on January 18, 1790, after the Rhode Island Assembly called for a ratifying convention. Marchant asked for a delay in the revenue act, as he expected Rhode Island to ratify.⁶⁹ Adams tended to agree with William Ellery that Congress needed to take a firmer stand toward Rhode Island. In September 1789 he informed merchant John Brown that Rhode Island would be punished if it did not ratify.⁷⁰ In March 1790 Adams warned Henry Marchant that Rhode Island must ratify or be treated as foreign: "To be trifled with again would be too much."⁷¹

By early 1790 Adams, whom Rhode Island Federalists considered their inside contact in the government, had run out of what little patience he had with Rhode Island. As much as Adams sympathized with Rhode Island's Federalists, he



A manifest signature of the Rhode Island ship *Polly*, returning from St. Eustatius. Rhode Island Historical Society Collections, RHIX173669.

knew his southern neighbor too well to expect a change in conduct. "He must be less than a thinking being who can be at a loss to foresee [sic] what congress will ultimately do with Rhode Island, if she obstinately refuses to come in," Adams warned Jabez Bowen. Rhode Island should expect no concessions from Congress, or for Congress to wait for Rhode Island to act. "They will leave them at perfect liberty—and whenever they take any steps it will not be till injuries shall be multiplied and their just resentment approved by all the world."⁷² Adams wrote to the firm of Brown & Francis to inform them that Rhode Island would be treated as a foreign country if it did not ratify.⁷³ William Ellery argued that Rhode Island would not act without external pressure. The hard line Adams warned of was what Ellery wanted. "Unless something is done by Congress which will make the Antis feel they will in my opinion adjourn again and again."⁷⁴

Given the paucity of Anti-federalist literature, much of what is known or suspected of Anti-federalist motives comes from Federalist sources. There is one extended debate, between the Anti-federalist "Greenwichensis" and the Federalist "Agricola," which ran from February to April 1790. The first "Greenwichensis" essay appeared on February 25, 1790, and the author sketched out the Anti-federalist view of Rhode Island as a free port. "Let the Constitution be immediately rejected, we have dallied with it too long for our interest," he wrote. Rhode Island should also repeal its impost, which would attract both European and American ships. Rhode Island would exchange for European goods. "Greenwichensis" believed Rhode Island would become a more prosperous version of the Dutch island of St. Eustatius.⁷⁵ The United States had no right to act against Rhode Island. If it did, "would not foreign powers, who will find their account in a commercial intercourse with us, combine to

the center of the United States and that by means of free commerce it will be able to become for them what the Island of Eustache is for the West Indies.”⁸⁸

On January 17, 1790, the Rhode Island Assembly passed an act calling for a convention to consider the Constitution.⁸⁹ The first session met at South Kingstown from March 1 to March 6. Trade was one of the main topics. On March 3 William Bradford, a former governor and delegate from Bristol, argued that the Constitution was necessary for Rhode Island’s trade. “No plan so well fixed as this for Commerce—He [Bradford] has objections to the Constitution—But it [is] best for us to adopt it.”⁹⁰ On March 6 the Federalists cited the danger to Rhode Island’s trade if the convention adjourned without ratifying the Constitution. Shearjashub Bourne of Bristol argued that Rhode Island’s commerce was endangered. Fishing and the coastal trade would be destroyed if Rhode Island remained out of the union through spring.⁹¹ William Bradford noted that Rhode Island’s trade would be stopped and “our State Disgraced” by adjournment.⁹² Nevertheless, the convention voted 36–32 to adjourn on March 6.⁹³ Between sessions Congress tried to push Rhode Island toward ratification. The Senate passed a bill on May 18 that would cut off trade with Rhode Island as of July 1, 1790, and demanded payment of \$25,000 for Rhode Island’s share of the national debt.⁹⁴ The convention resumed at Newport on May 24 and voted 34–32 in favor of the Constitution on May 29.⁹⁵ As was common, the Rhode Island convention offered a series of proposed amendments. Of the twenty-one approved, four touched on foreign policy. The seventh recommended an end to the slave trade as soon as possible. The twelfth denounced standing armies. The fourteenth called for a two-thirds vote in Congress for a declaration of war. The twentieth for-

bid Congress from creating any commercial monopolies.⁹⁶

It is generally acknowledged that merchants and commercial towns were more likely to be Federalist. Rhode Island bears this out. “The Towns of Newport Providence Bristol &c. with the whole Mercantile interest in the other towns in the State are Federal,” Jabez Bowen informed George Washington.⁹⁷ In May 1790 the *Gazette of the United States* cited a letter from a Rhode Islander indicating “large majorities” for the Federalists in Providence, Newport, Bristol, and Warren. Furthermore, those towns might seek the protection of the federal government if Rhode Island did not ratify.⁹⁸ After ratification, John Brown told John Adams that had Rhode Islanders known their true interest, Rhode Island would have been the first to ratify rather than the last.⁹⁹ The roll call shows the divide between the commercial and agricultural towns. Newport and Providence constituted the backbone of Rhode Island Federalism. Of the thirty-four votes in favor of the Constitution, twenty-two came from the commercial towns on the east side of Narragansett Bay. Of the remaining twelve, four came from Providence and two from Warwick, on the west side of the bay. Two each came from Cumberland, a shipbuilding town on the Blackstone River bordering Massachusetts, and Hopkinton and Westerly, in the southwest on the border with Connecticut. The interior towns were overwhelmingly Anti-federal.¹⁰⁰

Contemporaries pointed to trade as the issue that shifted Rhode Island from solidly Anti-federal to narrowly Federal. Certainly, the extensive rhetoric suggests that both sides saw trade as a main issue. Henry Marchant believed seating the second session of the Rhode Island convention at Newport reduced the influence of the Anti-federalists. He also pointed to the threat

18. That any person religiously scrupulous of bearing arms ought to be exempted, upon payment of an equivalent to employ another to bear arms in his stead.

UNDER these impressions, and declaring that the rights aforesaid cannot be abridged or violated, and that the explanations aforesaid are consistent with the said Constitution, and in confidence that the amendments hereafter mentioned will receive an early and mature consideration, and conformably to the fifth article of the said Constitution speedily become a part thereof: WE, the said Delegates, in the name and in the behalf of the People of the State of Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations, DO, by these presents, ASSENT TO and RATIFY the said Constitution. In full confidence, nevertheless, that until the amendments hereafter proposed shall be agreed to and ratified, pursuant to the aforesaid fifth article, the militia of this State will not be continued in service out of this State for a longer term than six weeks, without the consent of the Legislature thereof; that the Congress will not make or alter any regulations in this State, respecting the times, places and manner, of holding elections for Senators or Representatives, unless the Legislature of this State shall neglect or refuse to make laws or regulations for the purpose, or from any circumstance be incapable of making the same; and that in those cases such power will only be exercised until the Legislature of this State shall make provision in the premises; that the Congress will not lay direct taxes within this State, but when the monies arising from the impost, tonnage and excise, shall be insufficient for the public exigences, nor until the Congress shall have first made a requisition upon this State to assess, levy and pay, the amount of such requisition, made agreeably to the census fixed in the said Constitution, in such way and manner as the Legislature of this State shall judge best; and that the Congress will not lay or make any capitation or poll-tax.

D O N E in Convention, at Newport, in the State of Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations, the twenty-ninth day of May, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and ninety, and the fourteenth year of the Independence of the United States of America.

By Order,
DANIEL OWEN, *President.*
Attest. DANIEL UPDIKE, *Secretary.*

This excerpt from the *Providence Gazette* on June 5, 1790, reports the delegates’ announcement at the May 29 convention in Newport that the “People of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations ASSENT to and RATIFY the . . . Constitution.” Rhode Island Historical Society Collections, RHIX173666.

P R O V I D E N C E, June 5.

Saturday Night last, at Eleven o'Clock, an Express arrived in Town from Newport, with the important Intelligence, that the CONVENTION OF THIS STATE had ratified the CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES.

The Question, "Shall the Constitution be adopted, or not?" was taken on Saturday, about Five o'Clock, P. M.—when the Affirmative was carried by a Majority of Two, Thirty-four Members voting for, and Thirty-two against it. The Yeas and Nays were as follow :

YEAS.—*Newport.* George Hazard, Henry Marchant, George Champlin, Peleg Clarke, William Tripp, George Sears.—*Providence.* Jabez Bowen, Benjamin Bourn, William Barton, John I. Clark.—*Portsmouth.* Burrington Anthony, Peter Barker.—*Warwick.* Benjamin Arnold, jun. Christopher Greens.—*Westerly.* Walter White, George Stillman.—*Jamestown.* Benjamin Remington, Nicholas Carr.—*Middletown.* Joshua Barker, Elitha Barker.—*Bristol.* William Bradford, Shearjashub Bourn.—*Tiverton.* Isaac Manchester, Abraham Barker.—*Little-Compton.* John Davis, William Ladd.—*Warren.* Benjamin Bolworth, Samuel Pearce.—*Cumberland.* John S. Dexter, Levi Ballou.—*Hopkinton.* John Brown, Jesse Maxson.—*Barrington.* Thomas Allen, Samuel Allen. 34.

NAYS.—*Portsmouth.* Giles Slocum.—*Warwick.* Thomas Rice, Gideon Arnold.—*North-Kingstown.* William Congdon, Bowen Card.—*South-Kingstown.* Jonathan J. Hazard, Samuel J. Potter.—*East-Greenwich.* Job Comstock, Pardon Mawney.—*Smithfield.* Andrew Waterman, John Sayles.—*Scituate.* James Aldrich, Nathan Bates.—*Gloucester.* Stephen Steer.—*Charlestown.* Joseph Stanton, Thomas Hoxsie.—*West-Greenwich.* William Nichols, William Mathewson.—*Coventry.* Benjamin Arnold, Job Greene.—*Exeter.* Joseph Reynolds, Job Wilcox.—*Richmond.* James Sheldon, Thomas James.—*Cranston.* Peter Stone, Jonathan Sprague.—*Johnston.* Noah Mathewson, William B. King.—*North-Providence.* Elisha Brown, Ezek Esten.—*Foster.* William Hayward, John Williams. 32.

This pleasing and most interesting Event was immediately announced here by the Ringing of Bells, and firing Salutes from the Artillery on Federal Hill, and the Ship Warren, Capt. Sheldon, lately arrived from India.

The next Day the Delegates for this Town returned from Newport, and on their landing were saluted by a Discharge of Thirteen Cannon.

to cut Rhode Island off from American trade. "The late Act passed by the Senate of Congress was an instrument which we wielded with much Success and Execution:—Nothing could be more timely," he wrote to John Adams.¹⁰¹ The final vote also reveals who each side saw as their target audience. The Anti-federalist idea of a free port was not aimed at the merchants or port cities. Newport was nearly destroyed in one bid for independence, and was unlikely to be up for a second. For the Federalists, a free port would not solve the problem of American duties on Rhode Island's exports. At the same time, Federalists had no chance at converting interior Rhode Island with visions of expanded trade. Daniel P. Jones has argued that trade in northwestern Rhode Island remained local.¹⁰² The target audience on both sides is revealed by the progression of towns switching to Federalism. Patrick T. Conley lists Newport, Providence, Little Compton, and Bristol as the original Federalist towns. Through 1789 and 1790 they were joined by Portsmouth, Middletown, Tiverton, Jamestown, Warren, and Barrington. At the convention, Westerly, Hopkinton, and Cumberland switched sides. Most of those were small ports on Narragansett Bay. Westerly was a minor shipbuilding port on Long Island Sound, and Hopkinton its neighbor. Cumberland was a shipbuilding town on the Black-

stone River. Both sides considered the matter already decided in the large ports and the interior. The smaller ports and towns with industries related to trade, such as shipbuilding, were in play.¹⁰³ The movement of those towns toward Federalism suggests that the Federalist campaign, focused on Rhode Island's diplomatic interests, secured the east side of the bay and converted enough of the west side to ratify the Constitution.

The debate also shows that the conflict in Rhode Island was not national versus local interest, but competing versions of local interest. John P. Kaminski has written that Rhode Island "held to the principle that its own interests came first."¹⁰⁴ While Kaminski referred to Rhode Island's Country Party leadership, the observation applies equally to Rhode Island's Federalists. Western forts and the broad idea of national honor made brief appearances in the debate. Rhode Island's Federalists made their case, and narrowly won, on the belief that the Constitution best secured Rhode Island's foreign policy interests. Rhode Island could not survive as an Algiers or a St. Eustatius, but only as an American state.¹⁰⁴

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OPPOSITE: This excerpt from the *Providence Gazette* on June 5, 1790, describes the pomp and circumstance that followed the announcement in Providence of the ratification: "This pleasing and most interesting Event was immediately announced here by the Ringing of Bells, and firing Salutes from the Artillery on Federal Hill and the Ship Warren, Capt. Sheldon, lately arrived from India." Rhode Island Historical Society Collections, RHIX173667.

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2. “Charlestoniensis,” *Newport Herald*, November 20, 1788, *DHRC:RI*, 2:434. On Newport, see George Joseph Lough Jr., “The Champlins of Newport: Commercial History” (PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 1977), 13–14.
3. See, for example, Frederick W. Marks III, “Foreign Affairs; A Winning Issue in the Campaign for the Ratification of the Constitution,” *Political Science Quarterly*, LXXXVI, no. 3 (September 1971): 445–46, 465–66; Norman A. Graebner, “Isolationism and Antifederalism: The Ratification Debate,” *Diplomatic History*, 11, no. 4 (Fall 1987): 337–40.
4. Frank Greene Bates, *Rhode Island and the Formation of the Union* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1899), 211–12.
5. Hillman Metcalf Bishop, *Why Rhode Island Opposed the Federal Constitution* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1950), 35–36, 41, 45.
6. Irwin H. Polishook, *Rhode Island and the Union, 1774–1795* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 5.
7. Patrick T. Conley, *Democracy in Decline: Rhode Island’s Constitutional Development, 1776–1841* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1977), 118–19, 121. See also Patrick T. Conley, “First in War, Last in Peace: Rhode Island and the Constitution, 1786–1790,” in *The Constitution and the States: The Role of the Original Thirteen States in the Framing and Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, ed. Patrick T. Conley and John P. Kaminski (Madison, WI: Madison House, 1988), 280–82, 285–86.
8. Jackson Turner Main, *Political Parties before the Constitution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 303–4.
9. Polishook, *Rhode Island and the Union*, 46–47; Conley, *Democracy in Decline*, 72; Elaine Forman Crane, *A Dependent People: Newport, Rhode Island in the Revolutionary Era* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1985), 164–65; Franklin Stuart Coyle, “Welcome Arnold (1745–1798), Providence Merchant: The Founding of an Enterprise” (PhD diss., Brown University, 1972), 144.
10. Coyle, “Welcome Arnold,” 128–30, 148; Lough, “Champlins of Newport,” 160–61, 172–75; James B. Hedges, *The Browns of Providence Plantations: Colonial Years* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), 259, 306; Frederick W. Marks III, *Independence on Trial: Foreign Affairs and the Making of the Constitution* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 65, 110; Charles R. Ritcheson, *Aftermath of Revolution: British Policy Toward the United States, 1783–1795* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1969), 6; Curtis P. Nettels, *The Emergence of a National Economy, 1775–1815* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), 55.
11. Forrest McDonald, *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 325; Polishook, *Rhode Island and the Union*, 69; Conley, *Democracy in Decline*, 76–78; Bates, *Rhode Island and the Formation of the Union*, 78–79.
12. John P. Kaminski, “Rhode Island: Protecting State Interests,” in *Ratifying the Constitution*, ed. Michael Allen Gillespie and Michael Lienesch (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 368–69; Conley, *Democracy in Decline*, 78–79.
13. Conley, *Democracy in Decline*, 82–84, 86–87, 126.

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15. Polishook, *Rhode Island and the Union*, 183–84, 188. For acceptance of the Treaty of Paris as binding, see John Russell Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England* (New York: AMS Press, 1968), 10:257 (hereafter cited as *RCRI*). For the reasons Rhode Island refused to attend the Constitutional Convention, see *RCRI*, 10:258–59.
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18. “Philanthropos,” *Newport Herald*, January 9, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:660.
19. *Newport Herald*, February 18, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:730–31.
20. “A Rhode-Island Man,” *Newport Mercury*, February 25, 1788, in *DHRC:RI*, 1:102.
21. “A Freeman,” *Newport Herald*, April 3, 1788, in *DHRC:RI*, 1:222.
22. “A Newport Man,” *Newport Mercury*, March 17, 1788, in *DHRC:RI*, 1:114.
23. *Newport Herald*, October 4, 1787, in *DHRC:RI*, 1:30.
24. *Newport Herald*, February 28, 1788, in *DHRC:RI*, 1:108.
25. *Newport Herald*, February 28, 1788, in *DHRC:RI*, 1:109.
26. *Newport Herald*, October 25, 1787, in *DHRC:RI*, 1:39.
27. *Newport Herald*, February 7, 1788, in *DHRC:RI*, 1:93.
28. “Phocion,” *Providence United States Chronicle*, July 17, 1788, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:354.
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30. “Phocion,” *Providence United States Chronicle*, July 17, 1788, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:356.
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36. “Solon, junior,” *Providence Gazette*, August 2, 1788, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:377–78.
37. “A Friend to the Union,” *Providence Gazette*, October 18, 1788, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:416; Polishook, *Rhode Island and the Union*, 194–96.
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40. Newport Town Meeting, April 15, 1789, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:482.
41. *DHRC:RI*, 2:502.
42. *Providence Gazette*, May 16, 1789, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:507.
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44. Jabez Bowen to John Adams, May 19, 1789, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:508–9.
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46. “Z,” *Newport Mercury*, December 30, 1789, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:654–55.
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51. John Adams to Jabez Bowen, May 18, 1789, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:508.
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54. John Adams to Jabez Bowen, September 15, 1789, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:598–99.
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67. William Ellery to Benjamin Huntington, December 12, 1789 in *DHRC:RI*, 2:641.
68. Jabez Bowen to John Adams, December 28, 1789, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:652.
69. Henry Marchant to John Adams, January 18, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:680.
70. John Adams to John Brown, September 18, 1789, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:598.
71. John Adams to Henry Marchant, March 20, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:792.
72. John Adams to Jabez Bowen, February 27, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:743.
73. John Adams to Brown & Francis, February 28, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:747.
74. William Ellery to John Adams, post March 6, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:751.
75. “Greenwichiensis,” *Newport Herald*, February 25, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:734.
76. “Greenwichiensis,” *Newport Herald*, February 25, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:735.
77. “Agricola,” *Newport Herald*, March 11, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:758.
78. “Agricola,” *Newport Herald*, March 11, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:759.
79. “Agricola,” *Newport Herald*, March 11, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:760.
80. “Greenwichiensis,” *Newport Herald*, March 18, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:765–66.
81. “Greenwichiensis,” *Newport Herald*, March 18, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:766.
82. “Agricola,” *Newport Herald*, April 1, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:804.
83. “Agricola,” *Newport Herald*, April 1, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:804–5.
84. “Agricola,” *Newport Herald*, April 1, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:806.
85. “Agricola,” *Newport Herald*, April 1, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:807.
86. “Solon, Jr.,” *Providence Gazette*, February 27, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:745.
87. Louis Guillaume Otto to Comte de Montmorin, December 5, 1789, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:640.
88. Louis Guillaume Otto to Comte de Montmorin, March 13, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:762–63.
89. Rhode Island Act, January 17, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:675.
90. William Bradford, March 3, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:920.
91. Shearjashub Bourne, March 6, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:959–60.
92. William Bradford, March 6, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:967.
93. *DHRC:RI*, 3:968.
94. Conley, *Democracy in Decline*, 136–37; Bates, *Rhode Island and the Formation of the Union*, 192–96.
95. May 29, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:989.
96. May 29, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:1001–2.
97. Jabez Bowen to George Washington, December 15, 1789, in *DHRC:RI*, 2:648; Marks, *Independence on Trial*, 191–92, 201.
98. *Gazette of the United States*, May 12, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:866.
99. John Brown to John Adams, June 11, 1790, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:1043.
100. Roll call, in *DHRC:RI*, 3:904–5; Conley, *Democracy in Decline*, 129–30; Polishook, *Rhode Island and the Union*, 195.
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102. Daniel P. Jones, *The Economic & Social Transformation of Rhode Island, 1780–1850* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 7.
103. Conley, *Democracy in Decline*, 130.
104. Kaminski, “Rhode Island: Protecting State Interests,” 387.



A Postscript to “Jews, Freemasons, and Religious Accommodation: Rhode Island’s Redwood Lodge and the Congregation of the Sons of Israel and David”

SHAI AFSAI

IN 1877, THE FORMERLY ORTHODOX CONGREGATION OF THE Sons of Israel and David (better known today as Providence’s Temple Beth-El) became Rhode Island’s first Reform Jewish congregation. That year, ten of its members also resolved to form a new Masonic lodge in Rhode Island, Redwood Lodge No. 35. Their endeavor was consistent with nineteenth-century Reform Jews’ preoccupation with integrating into the Christian social fabric of Europe and the United States. Redwood Lodge’s formation served both to bring together Rhode Island’s Jewish Freemasons and to link the state’s new Reform congregation with an established, respected, and mostly Protestant fraternity.¶

In September 1889, a Masonic procession set out from Freemasons’ Hall on Dorrance Street and made its way to the land recently purchased by the Sons of Israel and David. Redwood Lodge’s members escorted the Grand Lodge officers, and Redwood’s by-laws were among the Masonic documents placed beneath the synagogue’s cornerstone. Freemasons’ Hall was destroyed by fire in 1896. “Masonic Temple,” VMO13_wco240, Rhode Island Photograph Collection, Providence Public Library, Providence, R.I.

This endeavor also entailed several peculiar and enduring accommodations on the part of Rhode Island's Jewish Freemasons. As discussed in my 2013 *Rhode Island History* article on religious accommodation in Rhode Island Freemasonry,¹ Masonic rituals, lectures, and orations in Rhode Island have historically had, and continue to have, much overtly Christian content. Redwood Lodge has a phrase about Jesus for its motto, is dedicated to two Christian saints, and adheres to a Masonic ritual emphasizing the need for faith in Jesus and asserting Judaism's inferiority to Christianity.

The extent to which Redwood Lodge's Jewish founders succeeded in integrating the Providence Reform congregation, to which the vast majority of them belonged, into the Christian social fabric of Rhode Island, and in gaining the recognition and respect of their neighbors, was fully apparent when the congregation purchased land and moved forward with plans to construct

the city's first synagogue building. Equally apparent is the extent to which Rhode Island Freemasonry played a part in that successful integration. As reported in the *Providence Journal*, on September 23, 1889, "with the substantial co-operation of friends of other [that is, Christian] religious denominations," an elaborate Masonic cornerstone ceremony was conducted for the congregation by the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island. A procession set out from Freemasons' Hall, the Grand Lodge building then located on Dorrance Street, and made its way to the Sons of Israel and David's recently purchased land at the corner of Friendship and Foster Streets. Members of Redwood Lodge acted as an escort to the Grand Lodge, and Redwood Lodge's by-laws were among the Masonic documents placed in a box beneath the synagogue's cornerstone.²

The *Providence Journal* described this Masonic cornerstone ceremony as having overtly Chris-



The interior of the chapel at Freemasons' Hall in Providence. "Freemasons' Hall - Chapel," VM013_WCO271, Rhode Island Photograph Collection, Providence Public Library, Providence, R.I.

The cornerstone ceremony and the polemics surrounding it exhibit the tension between Judaism and American Freemasonry in the nineteenth century, a tension that necessitated compromise and concession that was seldom made explicit in Rhode Island.

76 tian content, raising the question of whether or not the Grand Lodge was as open with Christian Masonic displays at a Jewish event as it was in its internally used Masonic ritual, as well as the question of whether or not Providence's early Reform Jews were as indifferent to Christian Masonic rituals being carried out in connection with their synagogue as they were in connection with Redwood Lodge. I left those questions unaddressed in my previous *RIH* article, stating: "Whether or not the Grand Lodge slightly modified its 1889 cornerstone ceremony in consideration of the members of the Sons of Israel and David, it made no similar modifications for internally used Masonic ritual."³ Since 2013, I have had the opportunity to engage with additional documents relating to the cornerstone ceremony. Material printed in Masonic periodicals during 1890 allows for a settling of the question raised by the *Providence Journal's* account and for an enhanced understanding of this cultural

moment. The cornerstone ceremony and the polemics surrounding it exhibit the tension between Judaism and American Freemasonry in the nineteenth century, a tension that necessitated compromise and concession but that was seldom made explicit in Rhode Island. Within Rhode Island Masonic lodges it was Jewish applicants and members who often compromised and conceded in order to belong to the fraternity. The cornerstone ceremony affords an illustration of the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island modifying its public ritual in order to satisfy members of the Sons of Israel and David. The Grand Lodge was as desirous of laying the cornerstone for Providence's first synagogue building as the synagogue's members were eager to have Masonic involvement in their new venture. For a time, during 1889 and 1890, various interested parties in and out of Rhode Island were unclear as to what exactly had transpired at the cornerstone ceremony for the Sons of Israel and

David. According to the *Providence Journal*, the September 1889 Masonic cornerstone ceremony that the Grand Lodge conducted for the Sons of Israel and David included Christian prayer (the Lord's Prayer) and invoked the patronage of Christian saints. The newspaper described how, after a brief address about the congregation's history, its president, Alexander Strauss, requested that Grand Master George H. Kenyon lay the cornerstone: "Most Worshipful Grand Master of Masons of the State of Rhode Island: The Congregation Sons of Israel are about to have this structure erected for the purpose of worshipping God the Almighty, and perpetuating our faith, and in their behalf I most respectfully request you to lay the cornerstone, according to the ancient rites and usages of Free Masons." Grand Chaplain Alfred Manchester "began the office," commencing a call and response of Biblical verses. He then said, "Let us pray," after which "the Grand Chaplain and the people united in

the Lord's prayer." The Grand Chaplain's Christian prayer was followed by an oration by Rabbi Morris Sessler and by other exercises. Prior to consecrating the cornerstone, "[t]he Grand Master approached the stone, and, striking it three times with his gavel, said: 'To the glory of God, under the patronage of the Holy Saints John the Baptist and the Evangelist, I declare this stone to be well formed, true and trusty, and laid by us in ample form.'" The cornerstone exercises "were concluded with the benediction by the Rabbi, with response by the choir."⁴

Word of the Jewish congregation having had a Christian Masonic cornerstone ceremony soon circulated beyond Providence, eliciting widespread opprobrium. Some of the commentary in Masonic publications touched on the pronounced difference between English and American lodges when it came to accommodating Jewish Freemasons. In February 1890,

REDWOOD LODGE, No. 35, PROVIDENCE.



Following is the blazon of this shield:
Arms of the Grand Lodge of Rhode Island impaling per fess,

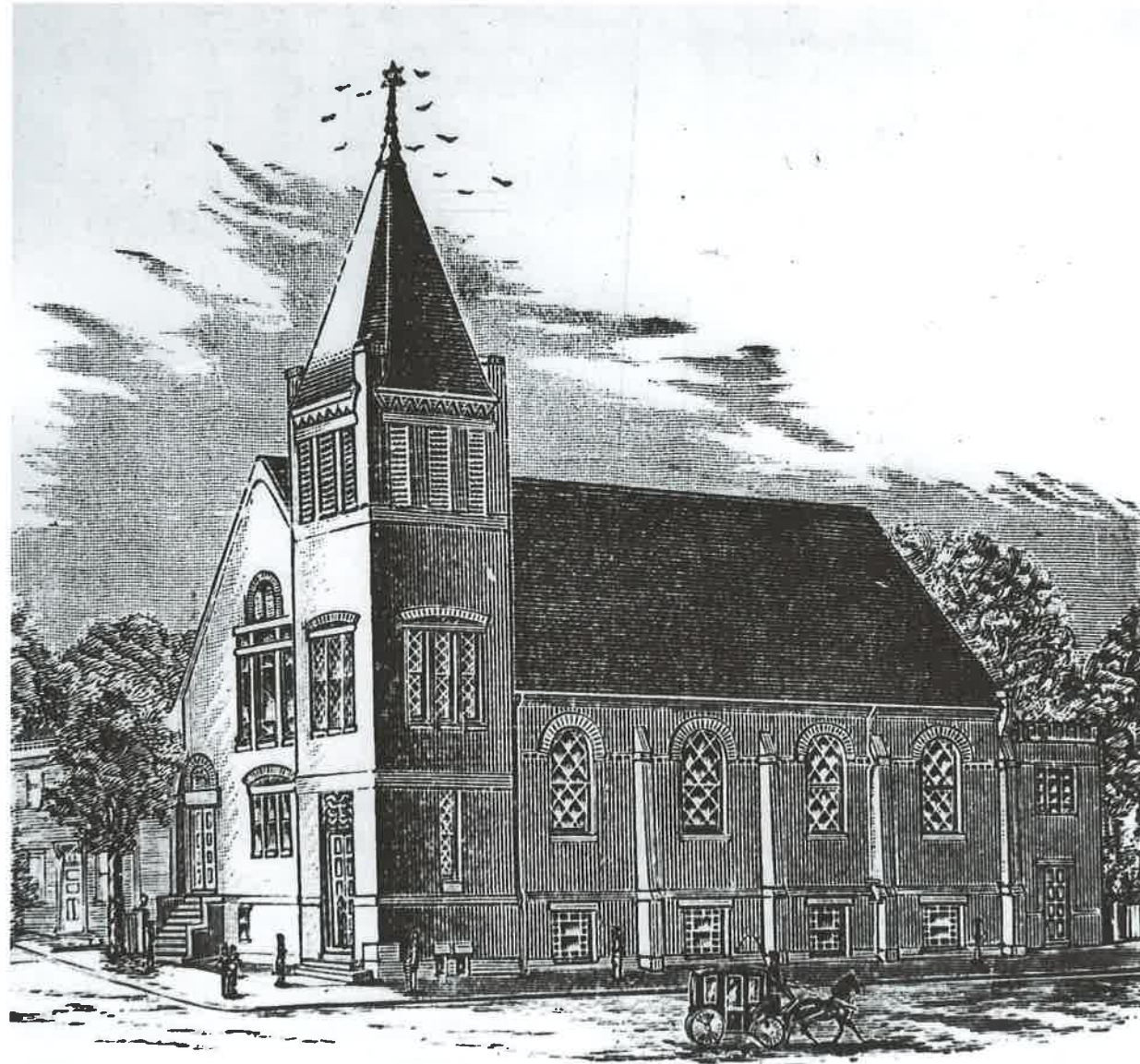
First, gules; a shield per bend or and argent, bearing two eagles displayed counterchanged for Redwood; second, azure; the seal of King Solomon or and argent enclosing the tetragrammaton sable.

Crest: A demi-lion.

Motto: Leo de Judah est Robur Nostrum; (The Lion of Judah is our

strength.)

Redwood Lodge's Coat of Arms. From Henry W. Rugg, *History of Freemasonry in Rhode Island* (Providence: E.L. Freeman and Son, 1895), 743.



Dedicated in 1890, the Sons of Israel and David's synagogue building at the corner of Friendship and Foster Streets was the first constructed in Providence. It was used by the congregation until 1911. Sketch, "Friendship Street Synagogue," Courtesy of the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association.

the editor of the *Freemason's Chronicle*, a weekly published in London, declared in a front-page article entitled "Judaism and Freemasonry" that American Freemasons would do well to emulate their English brethren and de-Christianize American Freemasonry:

An instance has recently occurred . . . proving that it is absolutely necessary to sometimes adopt our ritual to circumstances, rather than to maintain a rigid observance of the actual letter of our ceremonies. It appears the cornerstone of a new Synagogue was to be laid at an American town, and the Masonic Order was honoured in being asked to perform the ceremony with Masonic rites, the Grand Master of the District himself undertaking to conduct the work. All went well, observes one of the Jewish journals, "until the presiding official came out with the following declaration:—'To the glory of God, and under the patronage of the holy saints—Saints John the Baptist and the Evangelist—I declare the stone to be well formed, &c.'" . . . Freemasonry is essentially free to all classes and conditions of men, and in admitting all sorts it is distinctly understood that in its ceremonies there is nothing which in any way interferes with the peculiar religious views of the members. All that is required is a belief in a Supreme Being, and . . . on this basis then it must be wrong to associate in our ceremonies the name of any saint, or anything that cannot be acceptable to all classes alike. Of course it will never be possible to wholly disassociate the names of the two Saints John from Freemasonry, but it is possible to reduce reference to them to a minimum—almost to a vanishing point—such as is the system adopted in England, a system that might well be followed in some parts of America and other quarters of the globe.⁵



Lyman Klapp

Grand Master Lyman Klapp (G.M. 1883–1886) laid the cornerstone of Providence's Freemasons' Hall in 1884 and dedicated its Masonic rooms in 1886. From Henry W. Rugg, *History of Freemasonry in Rhode Island* (Providence: E.L. Freeman and Son, 1895), 164a.

Another criticism of the cornerstone ceremony, entitled "Contemptuous treatment of Jews by American Masons," was published in the *Freemason's Chronicle* in mid-March 1890. In this letter to the editor, the Jewish Bostonian Jacob Norton, who had formerly lived in London and been made a Freemason there, contrasted what he considered to be the gentlemanly conduct toward Jews in English lodges with the insulting conditions he found in American ones:

Outside of a Masonic gathering the American Jew, when associating with any kind of decently behaving Christian society [in America], is treated as gentlemanly as the Jew is treated in similar good society in England. But in a Masonic Lodge the Jew receives a very different kind of treatment in America to what he receives in an English Lodge. In my younger days I imagined that a Masonic Grand Lodge was a focus of wisdom and justice. I have, however, long since found out my mistake. I am now a firm believer that in America at least a Grand Lodge is a compound of credulity and Jesuitism. Hence, under the pretence of "ancient landmarks," they assume a right to insult a Jew in a Masonic Lodge, which they would not dare to do when not decorated with a Masonic apron, Square, Compasses, &c. Here [that is, the cornerstone ceremony for the new synagogue in Providence] is an instance or case in point.⁶

Norton, who wished to know what Providence's Jews thought and had to say of the cornerstone ceremony, promised to look into the matter and update the *Freemason's Chronicle* on his findings. In the meantime, Henry W. Rugg, editor of *The Freemasons' Repository*, a Masonic monthly published in Providence, responded to the February *Freemason's Chronicle* editorial with his own "Judaism and Freemasonry." Though identically

titled, Rugg's editorial was palpably different in tone and approach from what had been published in England about the cornerstone ceremony. Rugg, employing the editorial *we*, avowed that Christian language had indeed been used in the cornerstone ceremony, but that this was of no consequence, as the proper response for Jews was not to be insulted by such tactlessness:

Our Jewish Brethren, belonging to a people ever faithful to the religion of their ancestors, must not be quick to take offence where none is intended. They must expect, as we know some of the most intelligent of the Hebrew Masons do expect, that in a Fraternity where the Christian element constitutes so considerable a majority there will be some expressions occasionally in form, ritual, prayers, or special services, to which under other circumstances they would take objection. For their own peace of mind they will do well not to be over sensitive or over critical regarding allusions to the distinctive Christian features supposed by some to attach to Freemasonry...we allude to this matter to make the statement that the Jewish Brethren gathered at that cornerstone laying were not greatly troubled at the form of words used in the ritual, and the special allusion to the Saints. As one prominent Jew remarked in our hearing: "We knew that no offence was intended, and therefore did not feel insulted, scarcely annoyed, by the form used in placing the foundation stone of our new Synagogue."

George H. Kenyon, Rhode Island's Grand Master in 1889-1891, laid the 1889 cornerstone of the Sons of Israel and David's synagogue. He insisted that the Masonic cornerstone ceremony had indeed been slightly modified in order to "make it conform to the Jewish faith." From Henry W. Rugg, *History of Freemasonry in Rhode Island* (Providence: E.L. Freeman and Son, 1895), frontispiece.



Engraved by John Sartain, Phila.

Geo. H. Kenyon



Henry W. Rugg's contributions to Rhode Island Freemasonry included serving as Grand Chaplain, editor of *The Freemasons' Repository*, and Grand Lodge Historian. From Henry W. Rugg, *History of Freemasonry in Rhode Island* (Providence: E.L. Freeman and Son, 1895), vii.

This, we think, is the proper view to be taken by members of the Hebrew faith in all cases where Masonic teaching and services may not quite harmonize with their own ideas.⁷

About a month after he had first stated his intention to update the *Freemason's Chronicle* on the cornerstone ceremony, Norton shared his findings in the article "Not so bad as at first supposed." Basing himself in part on information provided by a Jewish non-Mason who had been present at the cornerstone ceremony, Norton concluded that Christian terminology had not actually been used:

A ritual, printed in Rhode Island in 1886, for laying a cornerstone has in it, "under the patronage of the holy Saints John," &c. And the same ritual was reprinted to be used at the laying of a cornerstone of a synagogue on the 23rd of September 1889. The said ritual

was printed in the local papers; the Jewish papers in New York naturally found fault, so did the editor of the *FREEMASON'S CHRONICLE*, and so did I. Upon further inquiry I was informed... that the printing of the ritual, without expunging the objectionable allusions to the Saints John, was a blunder of the building Committee... and the Grand Master had the good sense to act accordingly, and after the error appeared in the Jewish press the Rabbi of the Providence, R.I., congregation informed the Jewish editors in New York and Cincinnati that the Grand Master of Rhode Island did not use the objectionable part of the ritual.

Norton went on to discuss Rugg's peculiar defense of an affront that had not in fact been committed on that particular occasion, but which otherwise took place regularly within Rhode Island lodges:

Rev. Bro. Rugg, editor of *The Masonic Repository*, in Providence, Rhode Island, in the last issue of his publication, makes no denial whatever about the Grand Master having uttered the very words of the printed ritual when laying the cornerstone of the Synagogue... He reminds them [that is, Jews] that since the Masonic revival [of 1717] at least, the Christian element has predominated in Masonic Lodges, and as it is of no use to reason with pious Christians about the case in point, then, for the sake of peace, harmony, and brotherly love, the Jew should not be too sensitive to the insults he receives in Masonic Lodges; the Jew should be broad-minded; and, in short, he should grin and bear with equanimity the treatment he receives from brother Masons... Bro. Rugg's testimony certainly confirms the report that was circulated in the Jewish papers, that the cornerstone was laid in accordance with the printed ritual. But, on the other hand, my informant assured me that Bro. Rugg was not present at the laying of the said cornerstone... until otherwise proved, I shall indulge in the hope that good manners are not altogether extinct, even in the very pious Masonic Grand Lodge of Rhode Island.⁸

Norton's indulgence proved wise. In March 1890, Rugg, again employing the editorial *we*, informed readers of *The Freemasons' Repository* that Christian language had not been used as part of the cornerstone ceremony:

We supposed the allegation in regard to a reference to the Saints John in a Masonic ritual used at the laying of the cornerstone of a Jewish synagogue, to be in accordance with the facts in the case. We are assured on the best authority that no such reference was made in the ceremony—that the words alleged to

have been uttered were not spoken by the presiding officer or anyone else taking part in the services of that occasion.⁹




It should not, however, be supposed that the controversy surrounding the cornerstone ceremony resulted in any realization among Rhode Island Freemasons that something fundamental might be amiss in their sectarian rituals. There was no deliberation about what similar modifications might be called for in their internal rituals in light of the fact that public ceremonies required modification before being suitable for a Jewish audience. Instead, Rugg, unaware of his ironic complacency, editorialized:

In giving this desired correction [that is that Christian language had not been used], we would express our satisfaction that something of benefit has been the outcome of the article entitled "Judaism and Freemasonry," for it has called attention to what is the large and liberal conception of Freemasonry, and thus helped to make evident what should be the broad and tolerant forms of its expression.¹⁰

Grand Master Kenyon also felt it necessary to correct the widespread misapprehension about aspects of the cornerstone ceremony over which he had presided. At the one hundredth annual communication of the Grand Lodge, in May 1890, Kenyon acknowledged the potential tension between Rhode Island Masonic ritual and Jewish beliefs:

[O]n the 23d of September [1889] Grand Lodge was convened in Special Communication to lay the cornerstone of the new Jewish Synagogue on Friendship street. Having received from the Committee of the Congregation of the Sons of Israel an invitation to perform that service the same was accepted,

ONE
Hundredth
ANNIVERSARY
of **Workshop**
of **GRAND LODGE**
of
RHODE ISLAND
A.F. & A.M.

PROVIDENCE, R. I.
WEDNESDAY, JUNE 24th 1891.

and on the day mentioned the cornerstone was laid in ample form according to the ritual adopted by Grand Lodge, with only such slight modification as would make it conform to the Jewish faith... I wish here to correct an impression which has been circulated extensively, and commented upon not only in the Masonic journals of our country but abroad, wherein we were represented as performing this ceremony in terms inconsistent with the religious faith of our Jewish brethren. Such was not the case, and all who were present and gave attention to the services can well remember the omission of the words which were said to have been used, and to have been distasteful to the people for whom we were laying the cornerstone.¹¹

The story of Redwood Lodge's founding and development raises questions about the ways American Jewish Freemasons have negotiated membership in the sometimes avowedly Christian Masonic fraternity and the reasons they

chose to do so. Likewise, the story of Redwood Lodge's founding and development raises questions about how American Christian Freemasons have negotiated the presence of Jewish members in the fraternity and the reasons they decided to do so. The Reform Jewish founders and early members of Redwood Lodge accepted Masonic Christian content, including within their own lodge. Nevertheless when asked to do so, the Grand Lodge willingly modified its public ceremony for laying a cornerstone in consideration of the members of the Sons of Israel and David. The aspirations of Redwood Lodge's Jewish founders to integrate into Rhode Island's Christian society and to affiliate their congregation with the state's established, respected, and mostly Protestant Masonic fraternity were visibly fulfilled that day in September 1889 without an embarrassing compromise of Jewish faith.

Shai Afsai is an independent scholar.

OPPOSITE: At the one hundredth annual communication of the Grand Lodge in May 1890, Grand Master George H. Kenyon felt it necessary to correct what he perceived to be a widespread misapprehension about aspects of the Masonic cornerstone ceremony conducted for the Sons of Israel and David. From Henry W. Rugg, *History of Freemasonry in Rhode Island* (Providence: E.L. Freeman and Son, 1895), 620a.

1. Shai Afsai, "Jews, Freemasons, and Religious Accommodation: Rhode Island's Redwood Lodge and the Congregation of the Sons of Israel and David," *Rhode Island History*, 71:1 (Winter/Spring 2013): 2–19.
2. "Jewish Synagogue. Laying of the Corner Stone with Masonic Ceremony," *Providence Journal*, 24 September 24, 1889, 6.
3. Afsai, "Jews, Freemasons, and Religious Accommodation," 15.
4. "Jewish Synagogue," 6.
5. "Judaism and Freemasonry," *Freemason's Chronicle*, 1 February 1, 1890, 1.
6. Jacob Norton, "Contemptuous treatment of Jews by American Masons," *Freemason's Chronicle*, 15 March 15, 1890 (written 28 February 28, 1890), 11.
7. "Judaism and Freemasonry," *Freemasons' Repository*, 29, 5 (February 1890): 40–41.
8. Norton, "Not so bad as at first supposed," *Freemason's Chronicle*, 12 April 12, 1890 (written 28 March 28, 1890), 4.
9. "Judaism and Freemasonry," *Freemasons' Repository*, 29, 6 (March 1890): 45.
10. "Judaism and Freemasonry," *Freemasons' Repository*, 29, 6 (March 1890): 45–46.
11. Proceedings of the M. W. Grand Lodge, of Ancient, Free and Accepted Masons, of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, for the Year Ending May 19, A. L. 5890, A. D. 1890 (Providence: E. L. Freeman, 1890), 26–27.

A Note on New Acquisitions

RICHARD J. RING

The many and varied items that the RIHS has acquired in the past year (mostly by gift) include portraits, posters, diaries, deeds, ledgers, letters, photos, furniture, silver, scrapbooks, billheads, busts, magazines, miniatures, and archives (personal and professional). Some of these items were placed on exhibit in the Aldrich House at our 197th Annual Meeting on November 14, 2018, and will remain on display until the end of January. Each of these items and collections hold their own fascination, but one gift in particular is so significant that it demands mention in these pages.

The Nicholson family gave several portraits, artifacts, and over a dozen boxes of documents related to the history of the Nicholson File Company—a manufacturing firm founded in 1864 by William Thomas Nicholson (1834–1893) and continued by his son Samuel M. Nicholson (1861–1939), his grandson Paul C. Nicholson, Sr. (1888–1956), and his great-grandson, the late Paul C. Nicholson, Jr. (1918–2018). This gift more than triples our existing holdings on what was at one point (according to the *Providence Journal*) "the world's largest manufacturer of files and rasps." Included in the collection are scrapbooks, photos, advertisements, patents, correspondence, company public and internal documents, news-



Lithograph of William T. Nicholson. Rhode Island Historical Society Collections, RHix173684.

paper clippings, land records, reports, speeches, financial records, legal records, brochures, catalogs, manuals, and records related to its merger with Cooper Industries in 1972.

One of the typescript speeches included in the collection is a narrative history of the first 40 years of the company, and is dated April 11, 1951. The author was likely an officer of the company, although it is unsigned. A few excerpts from the speech are included here to give our readers a sense of this company's place in Rhode Island's history.

The earliest known file company in Rhode Island was a little hand-cutting shop in Providence started in 1845 by James Wolstenholme & Sons, and it was possible on a casual visit there that our founder may have first become aware of the savings in time and expense to be made with machine-cutting methods, an observation that would have been apparent to any young machinist watching a hand-cutter at work. Centuries earlier, Leonardo da Vinci, the great Italian scientist, had devised the first known file cutting machine. A man named Duverger is said to have built one in 1699 and a Frenchman, Raoul, invented a machine for cutting watchmaker's files, but through prejudices of one sort or another few others cared to follow their examples until the first cutting machines were built in America in 1853 for the American File Works at Ramapo, New York. In a few years that project failed completely, and there was no new attempt made until the Whipple File Company was organized at Ballardville, Massachusetts, near Worcester in 1858. A large plant was built and production begun of a tool which was reportedly most inferior in quality. In 1863 a second enterprise, the American File Company in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, started similar operations on a small scale. This was the situation and challenge which fascinated the 30-year-old William T. Nicholson.

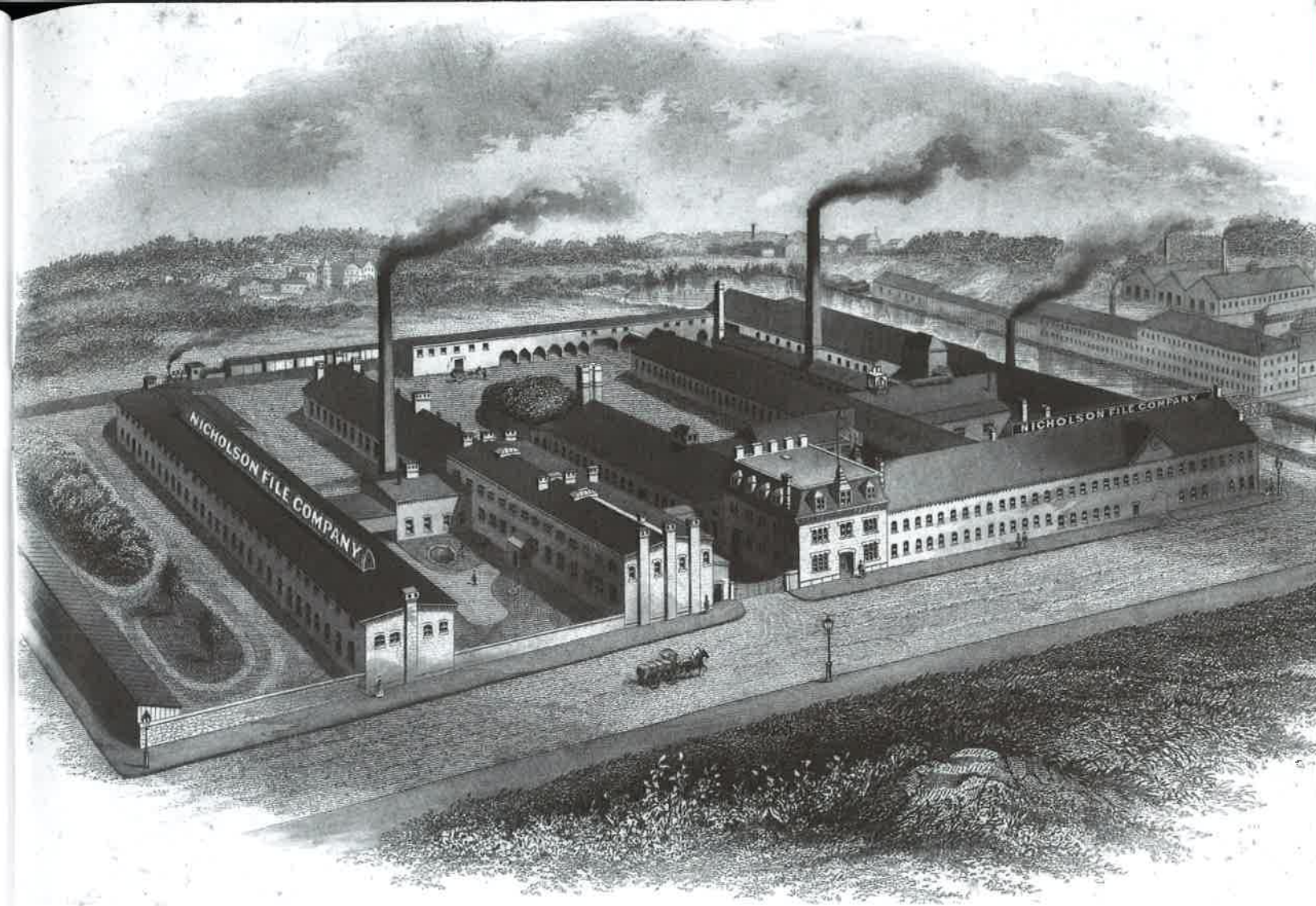
Born in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, in 1834, William T. Nicholson passed his boyhood and early school days at Whitinsville, Massachusetts, and attended nearby Uxbridge Academy for a short

time. The great era of mechanization was under way in America, following in the wake of the so-called Industrial Revolution. Like many boys of the period who lived in growing mill towns, young William decided at an early age to learn a trade, so at 14 entered the machine shop of Paul Whitin and Sons where he served for three years. In 1851 he moved to Providence to work for Halsey Hadley in the construction of screw machinery for the Eagle Screw Company and then for the firm of Arnold & Barber on steam and gas piping.

The broad practical experience of these varied pursuits was to stand him in good stead in later days and was further enhanced when the next year he entered the employ of Joseph R. Brown* at his small machine shop on South Main Street. Here he gradually acquired a proficiency at mechanical drawing during his six years of service, and despite his youth was later promoted to Mechanical Manager of their works with thirty men under his supervision. By the spring of 1858 he felt competent to strike out on his own, so we find him forming a partnership with Isaac Brownell, under the name of Nicholson & Brownell, at 85 Eddy Street... the partnership soon dissolved, but continuing on alone as sole proprietor, the now confident man of 26 moved to larger quarters at 110 Dorrance Street, doubled the size of his plant by purchasing the assets of Foster, Luther & Company, and expanded his production to include such varied items as rifling machines, six spindle drills, milling machines, lock plate edging machines, and revolving head lathes.

The speech goes on to detail how Nicholson & Co., employing over 60 people, began producing 10,000 rear gun sights per month in 1860 for Springfield rifles to be used by the Union army. The final excerpt of this 30-page history which is here reprinted deals with the company's first directors:

*The founder of Brown & Sharpe, a manufacturer of precision measuring devices, machine tools and machinery for over 150 years.



|| Rhode Island Historical Society Collections, Nicholson File Company Records (MSS 587), n.d.

If you had been present at the organization meeting on that wintry day in early 1865, you would have been instantly impressed with the dignified and handsome young man who called the group to order. Byron Sprague, the only son of former governor William Sprague of Rhode Island, at 41 was already one of the industrial leaders of his period. He had been connected with the powerful firm of A. & W. Sprague which controlled the Natick and Balthick Mills and many other properties, but at the early age of 38 he had retired from his family business with an ample fortune and had become the head of a number of smaller manufacturing enterprises. Here indeed was an experienced, energetic, and able leader for any embryo company. His daughter, Annie, was a few years hence to marry Arthur H. Watson, a Vice President and

Director of the Nicholson File Company a generation later, and the father of the late Byron Sprague Watson who was known to a great many of you.

Probably the next individual to attract your attention in the first annual meeting would have been the tall figure and the stern angular countenance of William G. R. Mowry, lumber merchant from Lime Rock, Rhode Island, prominent Democrat, advocate of free trade, and a staunch friend of the temperance cause which he aided for several years as Chairman of the State Prohibition Committee. He was destined to serve the Nicholson File Company as a Director for 27 years until his death in 1892 at the age of 82.

A few of the other prominent persons in the original group was E. F. Waters of Boston, head of the *Boston Daily Advertiser*, and President of Insulated Lines Telegraph Co.; Charles W. Pierce of Boston, Treasurer of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad; Alexander Farnum, a retired businessman about whom we shall hear more later; and Benjamin F. Thurston, who proved invaluable as an expert on patent matters and served as the Company's attorney until his death in 1890. These were the type of men who placed their faith and their funds at the disposal of William T. Nicholson and directed him to build a factory for the manufacture of files with all haste. A site was selected on the "Harris Lot" at the corner of Kinsley Avenue and Acorn Street and 160,000 square feet of land purchased for \$20,000 or 12½¢ per square foot. William G. R. Mowry agreed to supervise the construction of the brick buildings, while William T. Nicholson devoted his efforts to the providing and installing of machinery.

These brief but tantalizing glimpses into the early years of the Nicholson File Company convey a small part of a significant archive that will appeal both to amateur and professional historians of Rhode Island. We plan to make it available for research as soon as possible.

Richard J. Ring is Deputy Executive Director for Collections and Interpretation at the Rhode Island Historical Society.

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