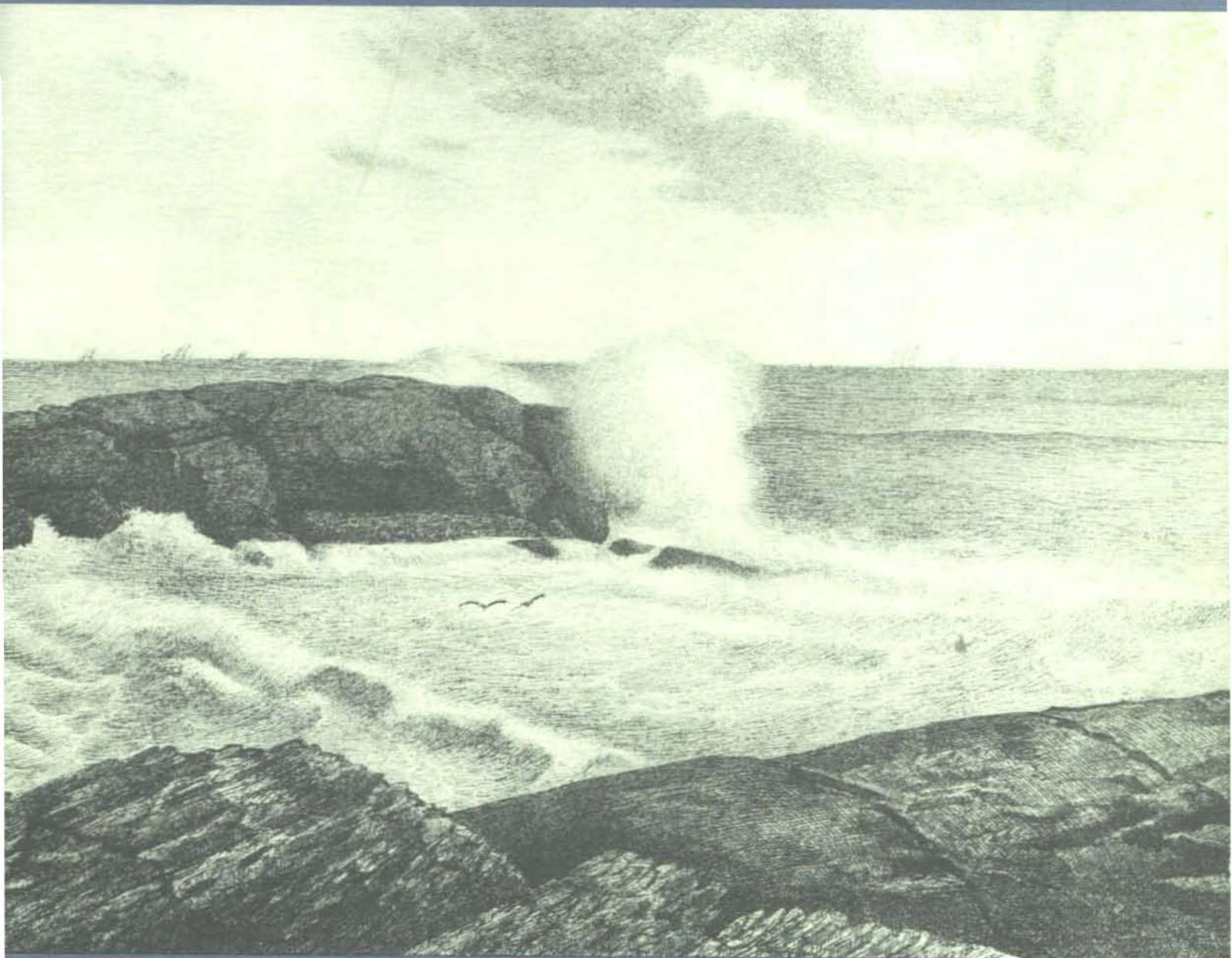




# Rhode Island History

Volume 48, Number 2

May 1990



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*A rare glimpse of Providence's early trading activity appears on this Rhode Island banknote, issued by the Traders Bank about 1800. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 4047).*

# Prosperity at the Wharves: Providence Shipping, 1780–1850

Paul G. Bourcier

Between 1780 and 1815 there was no mistaking the fact that Providence was a major seaport. The landscape abounded with activities and structures that rested squarely on a maritime foundation. The 1798 tax list for Providence is replete with features related to shipping or trade: these included fifty-eight wharves, one bank, four ropewalks, seven distill houses, one shipyard, fifteen cooper's shops, and four blockmakers. Merchant John Brown alone owned three wharves, one toll bridge, three shops, one spermaceti candle works, one distillery, and one iron furnace.<sup>1</sup> In pursuing his varied mercantile activities, Brown was carrying on a family tradition in Providence shipping that had begun in the 1730s.

The Browns, like many colonial Yankees, had become traders because New England produced few items that they could exchange for much-needed European goods. To acquire wares that would find a favorable market in Europe, they found it necessary to trade with other colonies. As a result, a series of so-called "triangle trades" developed, in which merchants sought supplies and satisfied demands on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. The most famous (or infamous) triangle trade involved the trafficking of slaves. Providence merchants imported molasses from the West Indies, converted it to rum in Providence distilleries, and shipped the rum to Africa in exchange for slaves, who were then carried across the ocean to the West Indies for more molasses. Another important triangle trade involved the shipping of New England provisions to the West Indies in exchange for Caribbean products (mainly sugar and molasses), which were then shipped to Europe and

traded for manufactured products for local consumption.

Although extremely simplified, these two examples of colonial shipping patterns point to the fact that Providence became an international entrepôt whose livelihood depended not only on its own production and consumption but also on intricate commercial relationships around the globe.<sup>2</sup> This was true for the eighteenth century and would hold true for Providence into the nineteenth century as the town became Rhode Island's premier port.

In the colonial period, Newport overshadowed Providence in trade. In fact, Newport had enjoyed status as one of the five biggest ports in the thirteen colonies. By mid-century, however, Providence merchants were on the ascendancy, able to tap into a larger hinterland than Newport could. The Revolutionary War proved to be the last blow for Newport's maritime commercial economy. The British occupation of Newport from 1776 to 1779 effectively shattered that town's trade, but Providence was able to continue its commerce either by running British blockades or by outfitting its ships elsewhere (as the Browns did at Nantucket). Providence merchants were able to find profit in selling cannon, weapons, ships, naval stores, and provisions to French and American forces. In addition, private ships were authorized to capture and sell enemy cargo vessels and their contents of sugar, rum, cotton, whalebone, and oil. This privateering activity proved very lucrative for Providence merchants. At the conclusion of the war in 1783, Providence's waterfront and fleet were intact and its merchants were in a position to

Paul Bourcier, formerly chief curator of museums at the Rhode Island Historical Society, is now curator of interpretation at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

1. Cited in William B. Weeden, *Early Commercial Providence*

(Worcester, Mass.: Davis Press, 1909).

2. Michael Holleran, "History of the Providence Waterfront," unpublished appendix to William D. Warner, *The Providence Waterfront, 1636-2000* (Providence: Providence Foundation, 1985), 6.

assume Newport's predominant place in trade.

Providence's commercial supremacy soon was reflected in its population and registered tonnage statistics. In 1774 Providence's population was 4,321, less than half the population of Newport. By 1800 Providence's population was larger than that of Newport.<sup>3</sup> Enough shipping activity was occurring in Providence to warrant its separation from Newport as an independent customs district in 1790. By 1802 Providence's fleet of 120 vessels surpassed Newport's fleet in tonnage for the first time.<sup>4</sup>

International politics continued to play a substantial role in Providence's shipping in the years after the American

Revolution. The commerce of the town's merchants depended not only on supply and demand but also on trade regulations designed to promote various national interests.<sup>5</sup>

American independence had its benefits and disadvantages in regard to trade. American ships no longer had the protection of the British fleet, and Americans were excluded from British colonial markets in which the mother country wished to maintain a trade monopoly, markets that included the sugar-producing colonies of the British West Indies. In reaction, Providence merchants shifted their trade to the French, Dutch, and Danish colonies in the Caribbean.<sup>6</sup> American shippers also were denied the preferential treatment they had known in dealing

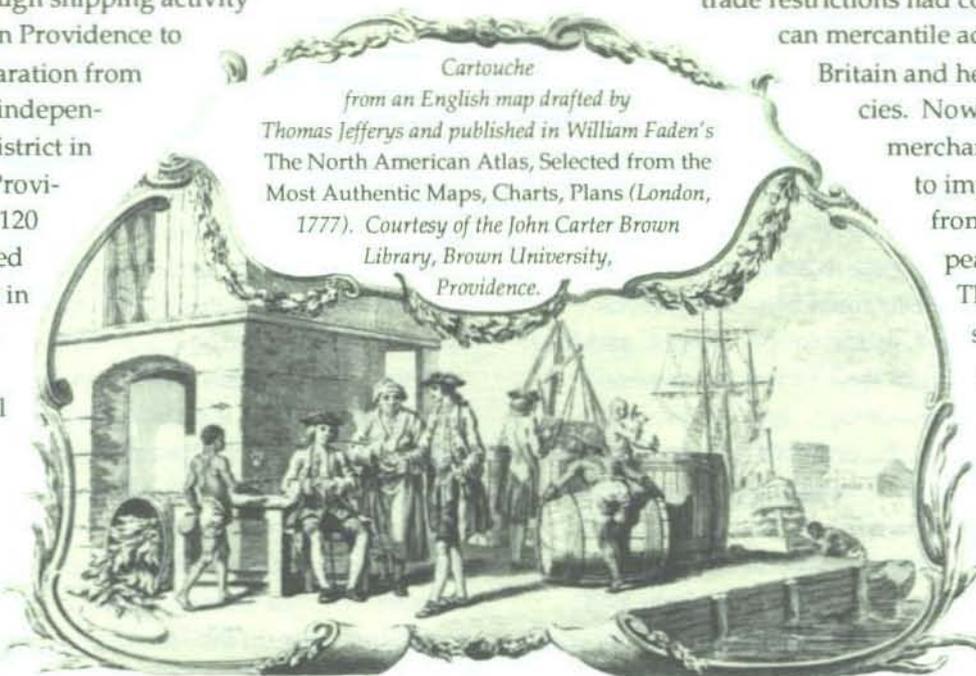
with the British Empire, and Providence's trade in iron goods, rum, and spermaceti candles suffered as a result.<sup>7</sup>

On the positive side, Americans gained the freedom to trade anywhere in the world that American merchants could gain admission. In colonial days, trade restrictions had confined American mercantile activity to

Britain and her dependencies. Now Providence merchants were able to import directly from other European countries. They also could send their ships east of the Cape of Good Hope to the rich, productive shores of the Indian Ocean and the China Seas to compete

with the British East India Company.<sup>8</sup>

European politics were to prove a boon to Providence shipping in 1793. That year the outbreak of war between France and Britain forced both nations to resign much of the trade between their colonies and Europe to neutral parties. Since the war prevented Britain from carrying on normal trade with her colonies in the Caribbean, neutral American ships were allowed to trade once again with the British West Indies.<sup>9</sup> In addition, with France and continental Europe blockaded and thus unable to import goods from their overseas colonies, neutral American ships were able to bring West Indian produce to Europe, provided they could overcome the Rule of 1756. This rule stated that trade closed to other countries in



3. Statistics cited in Earl C. Tanner, "Trade between the Port of Providence and Latin America, 1800-1830" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1951), 4.

4. Robert G. Albion, William A. Baker, and Benjamin W. Larabee, *New England and the Sea* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1972), 49.

5. Tanner, "Trade," 95.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Wm McKenzie Woodward and Edward F. Sanderson, *Providence: A Citywide Survey of Historic Resources* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, 1986), 45.

8. William B. Weedon, *Oriental Commerce in Providence* (Cambridge, Mass.: John Wilson and Son, 1908), 3.

9. Tanner, "Trade," 8.

peacetime could not be opened to them in wartime. To dodge this mandate, Providence merchants began to conduct "broken voyages," in which West Indian cargoes were first brought to Providence, where they were unloaded and the duties on them paid; then the goods were loaded onto another ship and reexported as American goods.<sup>10</sup> Customs officials did nothing to close this loophole, and Providence merchants, as neutral traders in a global market, experienced a zenith of foreign trade for the next fifteen years.

Providence's foreign trade during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was remarkable for its breadth, its variety, and its intricacy. Such trade was extremely important for local merchants, who, like all New England traders, sought to overcome the perennial problem of finding goods that European markets valued. An idea of the importance of foreign trade at this time may be gleaned from the fact that in 1789 there were 101 Providence vessels amounting to nearly ten thousand tons, more than three-quarters of which were employed in foreign trade.<sup>11</sup> During the period from the American Revolution to the War of 1812, Providence was in direct commercial contact with every quarter of the globe, including every major European port from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, the Guinea coast of Africa, India, Batavia (Java), the Philippine Islands, China, Latin America, and the Atlantic seaboard from Canada to the Caribbean.

Of all this commerce, the China trade has received the most attention through the years, perhaps because of its exotic nature and the fact that many of this trade's artifacts still survive and are treasured by antiques enthusiasts. Yet, although several prominent Providence merchants were able to amass a fortune through trade with the Orient, and their wealth played an important role in the growth and development of Providence, the fact remains that the relative volume of this trade paled in comparison with that of commerce with Latin America and Europe.

The American China trade began with the voyage of the ship *Empress of China* from New York in 1784. Three years later John Brown sent his ship *General Washington* to the Orient, the first Providence vessel to make the voyage. The *General Washington* left Providence in December 1787 with a cargo of anchors, cordage, sailcloth, cannon, gun carriages, shot, bar iron, sheet copper, steel, spruce spars, rum, brandy, Teneriffe wines, claret, porter, cordials, cider, hams, chocolate, spermaceti candles, and Narragansett cheese. The total valuation of the cargo was \$26,348. The return cargo from the Orient was valued at \$99,848 and included 240,000 pounds of tea, as well as silks, cotton goods, porcelain, lacquered ware, cloves, and flannels.<sup>12</sup> John Brown and his partners made a 30 percent profit from their \$57,000 investment.<sup>13</sup> This return encouraged other Providence merchants to enter the trade, optimistic that the enormous profits to be had more than offset the heavy cost of doing business in China.<sup>14</sup>

Great risks and uncertainties were involved in the long-distance voyages to the Orient. Enormous initial investments were needed; the cost of sending a ship to China could amount to more than \$100,000, while the cost of fitting out a ship to Europe ranged from \$10,000 to \$20,000.<sup>15</sup> At Canton each ship was charged the same high import duty, regardless of the size of the vessel, and so it was more profitable to invest in larger ships for the oriental trade. In addition, the time investment for a voyage to the Far East — the *General Washington* took eighteen months — made an unprofitable voyage even worse than an unprofitable voyage to Latin America or Europe. ❖

Between 1787 and 1828 Providence averaged only three voyages to China annually, while thirty ships a year sailed to Europe and fifty a year to Latin America.<sup>16</sup> The trade duties collected each year from the China trade, however, equaled those from the European trade. In 1806 seven ships from Providence sailed for the East Indies, the largest number in any one year.<sup>17</sup>

10. Albion, Baker, and Larabee, *New England and the Sea*, 61.

11. Edward Field, ed., *State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations at the End of the Century: A History*, 3 vols. (Boston: Mason Publishing Co., 1902), 2:456-57.

12. Gertrude Selwyn Kimball, *The East-India Trade of Providence from 1787 to 1807* (Providence: Preston and Rounds, 1896), 10.

13. Woodward and Sanderson, *Providence*, 46.

14. Margaret C. S. Christman, *Adventurous Pursuits: Americans*

*and the China Trade* (Washington, D.C.: National Portrait Gallery / Smithsonian Institution Press, 1984), 24.

15. *Ibid.*, 44.

16. Edward Sanderson, "Rhode Island Merchants in the China Trade," in Linda Lotridge Levin, ed., *Federal Rhode Island: The Age of the China Trade, 1790-1820* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1978), 51-52; Tanner, "Trade," 147.

17. Kimball, *East-India Trade*, 33.

While Rhode Islanders developed a hearty appetite for imported oriental goods, Providence merchants found it difficult to find local products desired by this foreign market. Ginseng, it was discovered, was virtually the only American product marketable in China. As a result, merchants found it necessary to develop subordinate and auxiliary patterns of commerce to furnish goods for the Oriental trade.<sup>18</sup> Often the first stop on a voyage to the Far East was in a European port such as London, Amsterdam, Madeira, Saint Petersburg, Lisbon, or Hamburg, where wines, liquors, fabrics, specie, and glass products were picked up for delivery to the Orient. Then the voyage would continue on around the Cape of Good Hope to the Indian ports of Pondicherry, Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras. In India the ship could take on printed calicoes and chintzes, muslins and muslin handkerchiefs, long cloths and other cotton cloths, Persians, taffetas, ginghams, and doreas.<sup>19</sup> From there the voyage would continue either through the Indonesian Islands (for Java coffee) or around Australia (for bullion or British notes) to Whampoa Reach, just outside of Canton, the only area in China in which foreign trade was allowed by the Chinese imperials.<sup>20</sup>

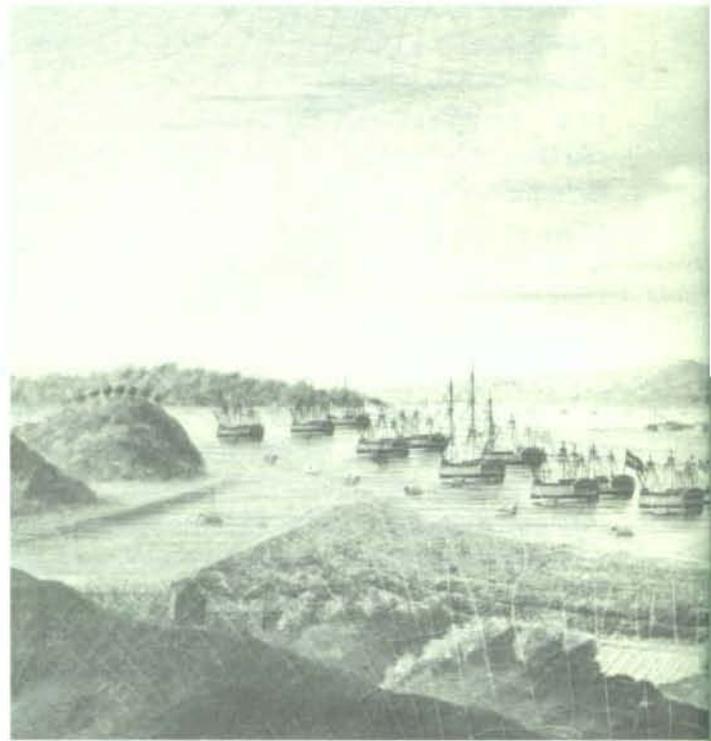
A review of the voyage of the Brown, Benson, and Ives ship *John Jay* in 1794 summarizes the nature of the oriental trade at this time. The ship departed for Bombay and Canton with a cargo of pig iron, bar iron, cordage, rum, Holland gin, beef, pork, white pine boards, anchors and anchor stocks, candles, geneva, London porter, tobacco, masts, spars, Russia duck, and Ravenna duck. The return cargo consisted largely of tea, the major import from China, which came in three major varieties: Bohea, Hyson, and Souchong. Also included in the return cargo were silks, lutestrings (a type of silk), umbrellas, nankeens (yellow or buff cotton cloths), lacquered ware, ostrich feathers, silk handkerchiefs, opium, quicksilver, cassia, gauze, lambskin, rattans and canes, sugar candy, preserved fruits, sweetmeats, fans, window

screens, mats, tea trays, rhubarb, a backgammon board, and china, packed as ballast.<sup>21</sup>

Bric-a-brac with oriental motifs and portraits painted by Chinese artists were popular imports among the merchant class. Oriental goods also proved to be valuable reexports to Europe and Latin America. One voyage of the *Ann & Hope* in 1816 brought a shipment of Chinese tea and other goods costing \$207,000 to Amsterdam, where it sold for \$430,000.<sup>22</sup>

Before long, merchants discovered an alternate route to the Orient that also offered valuable commodities for the Chinese market along the way. By going west around Cape Horn, ships were able to trade for precious metals (specie) in western South America or for furs and skins in the American Northwest before venturing across the Pacific.

Major Providence China trade merchants at this time included Nicholas Brown, John Brown, Nicholas



Most likely brought back to Rhode Island by a Providence China the deepwater anchorage at Whampoa. Under the Chinese system Whampoa and engage a Chinese pilot to ferry the captain and the (RHi X3 3033).

18. Weeden, *Oriental Commerce in Providence*, 41.

19. Kimball, *East-India Trade*, 31.

20. Albion, Baker, and Larabee, *New England and the Sea*, 58.

21. This summary is from Kimball, *East-India Trade*, 14-17.

22. Albion, Baker, and Larabee, *New England and the Sea*, 107.

Brown, Jr., Thomas Poynton Ives, George Benson, Welcome Arnold, John Innes Clark, Colonel Joseph Nightingale, Joseph Russell, William Russell, Thomas Lloyd Halsey, Samuel Snow, Sullivan Dorr, and Edward Carrington. The last three of these merchants actually spent time in China.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the profits that these men found in the China trade, more than half the total foreign tonnage that arrived at Providence between 1800 and 1830 came from Latin America. During these thirty years 1,432 vessels from Latin America docked in Providence, compared to 459 vessels from Europe, the second largest foreign market. The duties paid on Latin American goods were exceeded only by the duties on oriental cargoes. Unlike other ports, Providence had little trade with Mexico or the Spanish Main; but otherwise Providence merchants traded widely in Latin America. This Latin American trade was significant not only in volume but in its impact on

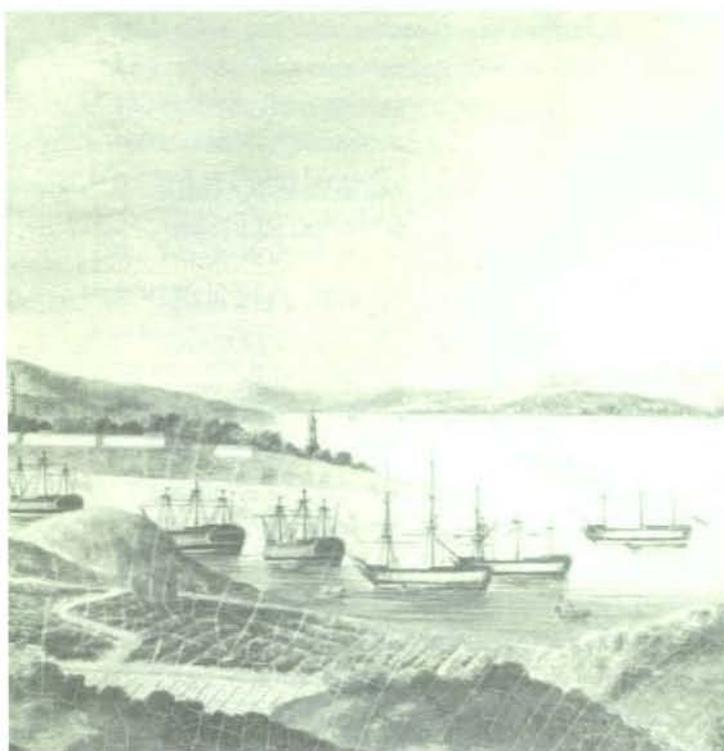
the global trade patterns of Providence's fleet. The town's merchants relied on Latin American goods for trading with every other world market, foreign and domestic.<sup>24</sup>

Providence merchants usually shipped well-assorted cargoes of fifteen to twenty types of articles to Latin America in return for cargoes consisting of two or three staples and a small quantity of sundries. Latin America's exports to Providence were typical of its exports to America in general, but Providence's exports to Latin America were not typical of American exports: while ports in Maine and outside New England were able to ship lumber, flour, rice, and other staples to Latin America, Providence did not have such marketable goods, and thus its merchants had to assemble mixed cargoes from Europe and other American ports.<sup>25</sup>

Most Providence vessels trading with the Caribbean between 1800 and 1830 carried cargoes composed exclusively of American agricultural, animal, marine, and forest products (see table 1). Local manufactures appeared on ships bound for the Caribbean with greater frequency after 1820. These manufactures included Cumberland-made small boats, hats, furniture, crockery, hardware, scythes, saddlery, jewelry, bricks, nails, flatirons, lampblack, and snuff.<sup>26</sup>

The most typical vessels involved in the Caribbean trade were brigs and brigantines. The former had two square-rigged masts; the latter had one square-rigged mast and one mast rigged fore and aft. One-masted sloops were sometimes used as well in the West Indies trade.<sup>27</sup> These vessels returned to Providence with large quantities of sugar products—brown sugar, white sugar, molasses, rum—and coffee, as well as a variety of minor products.

Regular trade with Brazil began in 1811 with the ship *Ann & Hope*. To obtain Brazilian coffee and hides, Providence merchants sent out cargoes of mixed domestic goods, as they did to the West Indies, but to Brazil-bound cargoes they added more of such



trader, this 1805 painting by an anonymous Chinese artist depicts of foreign trade, Western traders were required to anchor at buying agent upriver to the hong at Canton. RIHS Collection

23. Sanderson, "Rhode Island Merchants," 40-41, 49.

24. Tanner, "Trade," 7-8.

25. *Ibid.*, 50, 217-18.

26. *Ibid.*, 29-35, 40.

27. *Ibid.*, 35.

Table 1

## American Products Carried by Providence Ships to the Caribbean, 1800-1830

3,000-9,000 barrels a year of wheat flour from New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Richmond	Mules and oxen
1,000-3,000 barrels a year of hard bread from New England	Several thousand pounds each of lard, butter, cheese, soap, and tallow candles a year
Rye, oats, and Indian meal from southern New England and the mid-Atlantic states	1,500-2,000 quintals a year of dried fish (especially cod) from Cape Cod, Block Island, Wickford, Greenwich, and Pawcatuck (the Providence fishing fleet produced little for export)
4,000-20,000 bushels a year of potatoes from Rhode Island	Alewives, shad, bass, hake, oysters, and Nantucket whale oil from Massachusetts and Rhode Island
Onions from Bristol and Warren	1,500-2,000 quintals a year of pickled fish (including herring, menhaden, and mackerel) from Massachusetts
Beans, peas, beets, turnips, carrots, and walnuts	270,000-440,000 feet a year of boards (especially pine) from North Carolina and Maine
Apples, cider, and vinegar	Staves, headings, and boxes of white or red oak from Rhode Island and nearby states
Tobacco from the southern states	Shingles from North Carolina and Maine
Rice from Georgia and South Carolina	
2,000-3,000 barrels a year of beef from New York and southern New England	
1,000-2,000 barrels a year of pork from New York and southern New England	
Ham, bacon, chops, and sausages from New York and southern New England	

SOURCE: Earl C. Tanner, "Trade between the Port of Providence and Latin America, 1800-1830" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1951), 29-35.

European reexports as spirits, cotton goods, and fancy goods. Ships and brigs were the vessels most often used for trade with Brazil.<sup>28</sup>

The Rio de la Plata (Uruguay/Argentina), even more than Brazil, was a market for European and oriental reexports rather than North American goods. Direct commerce with this region began in 1800, when the ship *Palmyra* completed a trading voyage to Buenos Aires. Providence merchants were soon reexporting Catalonia wine, Holland gin, Barcelona brandy, and Spanish olive oil to satisfy the region's demands. In return, large ships and brigs came to Providence with cargoes of animal products—primarily hides and skins of horses, oxen, sheep, seal, and a variety of other creatures, many of them exotic—as well as wool, feathers, horsehair, horns, dried beef, tallow, candles, and tongues.<sup>29</sup>

Reexported goods from Providence also found their way around Cape Horn to Chile, Peru, and Ecuador, where a trade soon developed for precious

metals, including silver, and Spanish dollars, which proved valuable in exchange for oriental and European goods.<sup>30</sup>

Many minor imports from Latin America made the trade a varied and exotic one between 1800 and 1830. Among these imports were Latin American woods, including Honduran mahogany (used to make furniture, much of which was exported back to Latin America), logwood and fustic (which were reexported or converted to red and yellow dyes for the growing local textile industry), cedar, lignum vitae, and brasileto. Latin American indigo plants and cochineal insects were imported to make dyes. From Honduras came sarsaparilla, coconuts, copper, and grass hats; from Cayenne, peppers and cocoa; from the West Indies, turtles and oranges; from Cuba, cigars, honey, pineapples, and tamarinds; from Brazil, tapioca and drugs such as ipecacuanha and balsam of capaiva.<sup>31</sup>

Each year during the early nineteenth century

28. *Ibid.*, 41-49.

29. *Ibid.*, 70, 71-73.

30. *Ibid.*, 74-79.

31. *Ibid.*, 60-69.

there were about thirty Providence merchant houses engaged directly in the Latin American trade. Most of these firms were involved exclusively in trade with the Caribbean or with the Caribbean and Europe. They included Carpenter and Hodges, Humphrey and Everett, William Richmond II, William Church, John I. Clarke, John Corlis, and Brown and Ives. Only the largest of these companies had the resources to engage in regular trade with continental South America, Africa, and the Orient.<sup>32</sup>

Edward Carrington and Company, founded in 1815, was the first and foremost among Providence firms engaging in the Latin American trade. The voyages of two of Carrington's ships in 1822 illustrate the complexity of trade patterns at that time and demonstrate how the trade with Latin America was crucial to the commercial relationships of Providence merchants with other world markets.

In 1822 the ship *Nancy* sailed to Baltimore to take on a cargo of flour. This flour was shipped to Brazil and sold in return for beef. The Brazilian beef was then taken to Cuba, where it was exchanged for sugar and coffee. The sugar and coffee were shipped to Providence, then reexported to Gibraltar, where they were sold for Spanish dollars. The specie was returned to Providence.<sup>33</sup>

That same year the ship *William Baker* was sent to the Rio de la Plata for hides. The cost of hides there proved to be too high, but the cost of beef and tallow was low, so the supercargo purchased the beef and tallow and headed back to Providence. Providence, however, was not a profitable market at that time for beef and tallow, so the ship was sent to Cuba, a better market. In exchange, the ship took on a cargo of white sugar, brown sugar, molasses, and cigars and returned to Providence. The molasses and cigars sold profitably in Providence, but the sugar had to be shipped to Europe, where there was a better market for it.<sup>34</sup>

These examples show that patterns of trade were not rigid, but rather were subject to the vagaries of commerce, which depended on the latest news about

prices, markets, rates of exchange, and political incidents. Rather than committing their vessels to one preconceived plan for a trading voyage, international merchants usually outlined a number of contingencies, relying on the judgment of their ship captains and supercargoes: the captains handled the navigation and managed the crew, while the supercargoes, the business agents who traveled with the ships, directed the voyage and everything pertaining to the cargo. Merchants also depended on the advice of their agents and commission houses in ports throughout the world. These resident representatives monitored the activities of other merchants and kept abreast of prices, gluts, demand, and quality of goods.<sup>35</sup>

As shown in some of the trade patterns outlined above, Europe figured prominently in Providence shipping, both as a market and as a supplier of merchandise. To Europe, Providence brigs delivered Latin American reexports (rum, coffee, and tobacco were most popular), oriental reexports, and such domestic products as beef, pork, fish, onions, potatoes, lumber products, and a few manufactured items.<sup>36</sup> In return, Providence merchants received a variety of goods, which were consumed locally or reexported to Latin America and the Orient (see table 2).<sup>37</sup>

A smaller commerce existed between Providence and the Guinea coast of Africa. Most typically, Providence sent to Africa cargoes of rum, tobacco, beef, pork, ham, rice, corn, muskets, and notions, and vessels returned laden with gold dust, ivory, palm oil, camwood, and peanuts. Providence vessels also transported slaves from Africa to the West Indies and (until the United States Congress prohibited the importation of slaves to America in 1808) to the American South, but the volume of this trade, although not known, never amounted to a substantial percentage of the town's commerce; Newport and Bristol merchants (the latter led by James DeWolf) far outstripped Providence merchants in this trade.<sup>38</sup>

Although much of the business of Providence merchants consisted of trading valuable goods

32. *ibid.*, 146-48.

33. *Ibid.*, 152-56.

34. *Ibid.*, 156-59.

35. Weeden, *Oriental Commerce in Providence*, 8; Christman, *Adventurous Pursuits*, 108.

36. Tanner, "Trade," 10.

37. *Ibid.*, 9; Kimball, *East-India Trade*, 11-12; Sanderson, "Rhode Island Merchants," 41.

38. Field, *State of Rhode Island*, 2:403-4.

Table 2

## Providence's Imports from Europe, 1800-1830

Place of Origin	Goods
England	Textiles, crockery, glassware, coal, salt, books, stationery, hardware, sewing materials, and other manufactured goods
France	Wines, brandy, almonds, cambric, silks, paper hangings, and books
Holland	Gin, cheese, looking glasses, watch crystals, and oriental goods from Amsterdam
Spain	Figs, raisins, salt, sherry, Catalonia wine, almonds, brandy, merino sheep, and specie
Portugal	Corks, baskets, raisins, currants, figs, lemons, salt, port wine, olive oil, and specie
Baltic ports	Glass, iron, steel, hemp, cordage, canvas, duck, down beds, and tallow
Cape Verde Islands	Wine and salt

SOURCES: Tanner, "Trade," 9; Gertrude Selwyn Kimball, *The East-India Trade of Providence from 1787 to 1807* (Providence, 1896), 11-12; Edward Sanderson, "Rhode Island Merchants in the China Trade," in Linda Lotridge Levin, ed., *Federal Rhode Island* (Providence, 1978), 41.

between Latin America, Europe, and the Orient, a considerable amount of shipping activity actually centered on the coastwise trade with other American ports. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the coastal trade was closely integrated with foreign commerce. American ports provided local merchants with a market for foreign goods and with a source of American products that Providence's own hinterland did not produce. England was a good market for tobacco, Spain for lumber, and Brazil for

flour; but Rhode Island possessed none of these commodities for export. Providence's domestic trade during the first decade of the nineteenth century demonstrates this dependence on foreign shipping patterns (see table 3).<sup>39</sup>

Providence traded not only with distant American ports but with local ports as well. Bristol provided onions and other vegetables; Wickford and East Greenwich supplied wood, eggs, and farm produce; and Fall River exported nails and cotton waste. In return, Providence shipped out general merchandise and supplies.<sup>40</sup>

The vessels that conducted the coastal trade in the early nineteenth century ranged from small packets (sloops and schooners of fifty to one hundred tons burden) to broad, flat-bottomed, square-rigged tramps. The former carried passengers and a variety of cargoes between close ports, while the latter carried bulk cargoes great distances along the coast.<sup>41</sup> The smaller packets were built for speed and usually operated in conjunction with stage lines for passenger travel.<sup>42</sup> The fastest way to travel along the coast, packet lines served as the spine of communications, carrying mail and news, linking foreign trade to domestic markets, and distributing Rhode Island's early manufacturing output.<sup>43</sup> By the 1820s more reliable steam-driven "night boats" assumed much of the coastal packets' business in passenger travel and in the shipping of certain valuable types of cargo for which speed was more important than cost. By that time the coastal trade had been stimulated by the United States government. According to the Act concerning the Navigation of the United States of 1 March 1817, foreign flags were forever barred from participating in the United States coastal trade; and without competition from other nations, American coastal shipping flourished.<sup>44</sup>

Meanwhile, an opposite trend had developed in Providence's foreign commerce. While the war between France and Britain (1793-1815) gave American merchants large profits in neutral shipping, there were drawbacks. American vessels were subject to

39. Tanner, "Trade," 10-12; Field, *State of Rhode Island*, 2:507-8.

40. Field, *State of Rhode Island*, 2:507-8.

41. Albion, Baker, and Larabee, *New England and the Sea*, 127.

42. Field, *State of Rhode Island*, 2:505-6.

43. Holleran, "History of the Providence Waterfront," 11.

44. Albion, Baker, and Larabee, *New England and the Sea*, 124-25, 128.

Table 3

## Providence's Coastal Shipping, 1800-1810

	<u>Providence Exports</u>	<u>Providence Imports</u>
Canada	West Indian sugar, molasses, and rum; flour, corn, and tobacco from Connecticut and mid-Atlantic states; Rhode Island lime and manufactured goods	Grindstones, plaster of paris, and herring
Maine	West Indian sugar, molasses, and rum; flour, corn, and tobacco from Connecticut and mid-Atlantic states; Rhode Island lime and manufactured goods	Shingles, lathes, joists, and boards
Nantucket	West Indian goods and Rhode Island lime	Whale oil
Cape Cod and New Bedford	West Indian goods, Rhode Island lime, and flour	Fish and cordwood
Connecticut	Rhode Island lime and manufactured goods	Rye, flax, pork, hay, and paving stone
Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia	West Indian goods, fish, lime, potatoes, onions, butter, cheese, and manufactured goods	Flour, corn, tobacco, coal, iron, starch, and general merchandise
North Carolina	West Indian goods, fish, lime, potatoes, onions, butter, cheese, and manufactured goods	Lumber, rosin, pitch, varnish, and tobacco
Georgia and South Carolina	Hay, onions, butter, cheese, manufactured goods, and Rhode Island lime	Rice, cotton, and hides
New York and Boston	Cotton goods; Rhode Island lime; oriental tea, silk, and china	Flour, cotton, iron, madder, chemicals, supplies for cotton mills, grain, vegetables, and fruit

SOURCES: Tanner, "Trade," 10-12; Edward Field, ed., *State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations at the End of the Century* (Boston, 1902), 2:507-8.

costly British inspections of cargoes. At times American vessels were seized and their crews forced into the service of the belligerents. In response to these violations of America's rights as a neutral nation at sea, Thomas Jefferson imposed an embargo against France and Britain in 1807. This embargo halted all legitimate commerce with foreign nations by forbidding American ships to leave for foreign ports and by

requiring coastal ships to post bond to ensure that their cargoes would travel only to American ports. The embargo not only limited American shipping to fisheries and the coastal trade but also discouraged (but did not prohibit) imports by making sure that foreign vessels bringing cargoes to the United States left American ports with empty holds.<sup>45</sup>

The Embargo Act became effective in Providence

45. *Ibid.*, 74-75, 78-79.

on 29 December 1807 and brought an end to a period of booming commercial prosperity. Shortly afterward William Jones, speaking for Providence at the Rhode Island General Assembly, stated:

Our commerce, the main spring of New England's existence, is destroyed. Our merchants' prosperity is rotting at the wharves and its owners becoming bankrupt. Our tradesmen are obliged to turn speculators. Our honest artisans, mechanics and laborers can find no employment, and misery and starvation are the consequences.<sup>46</sup>

Jones may have had a penchant for the melodramatic, but statistics do show that Providence's foreign commerce waned in the years following the embargo. In 1806, 1807, and 1808 the number of vessels arriving from the Caribbean dropped from 56 to 53 to 34 and arrivals from Europe dropped from 30 to 20 to 5. Providence merchants, however, did find loopholes in the Embargo Act and its enforcement by indirectly trading with Canada by way of Maine.<sup>47</sup>

The 1807 embargo was a failure. It earned no recognition of neutral American rights from either France or Britain.<sup>48</sup> It handed British shippers a near monopoly of the world's trade. It hurt commerce and domestic agriculture, although it did stimulate American manufactures by denying Americans foreign-made finished products.

Eventually the embargo was repealed. The Nonintercourse Act of March 1809 allowed Americans to trade with any port in the world except those under French or British control. The following year the Macon Act lifted nonintercourse with both belligerents but reserved the option to reinstate it against one nation if the other agreed to repeal its restrictions against neutral trade. Napoleon agreed to do so, and nonintercourse with Britain was resumed in May 1811.<sup>49</sup>

The War of 1812 provided another stimulus for domestic manufactures by interrupting American trade with foreign ports. Providence's wharves, however, were by no means stripped of activity at this

time. The coastal trade continued, and privateering (although minor in comparison to that of Bristol) brought in seven or eight prizes, including a rich cargo of hides from Buenos Aires and 9,000 gallons of rum from Saint Thomas. Moreover, the belligerence of the British navy during the war caused neutral nations to find it more profitable to carry goods to American ports, despite the duties charged there. In 1814 sixteen foreign vessels arrived in Providence, fourteen of them from Latin America. However, because of an American embargo on all shipping, followed by a British blockade, that year was one of the most disastrous in the history of Providence commerce.<sup>50</sup>

The end of the war in 1815 found Providence ready to rebuild its foreign trade. On 25 February of that year the Providence Gazette announced:

The noise of the axe and the hammer begins to be heard in our work shops and on our wharves, and the busy note of preparation presages the return of those halcyon days from which we have been too long and unnecessarily estranged. Already a number of our best ships are fitting up with every possible sign of dispatch, confidently expecting that no intervening cloud will obscure the bright prospect of free and uninterrupted commerce throughout the globe.<sup>51</sup>

Unfortunately, an "intervening cloud" did appear. The destruction caused by the Great Gale of 23 September 1815 retarded the recovery of the Providence merchant marine, but not for long. Commerce increased rapidly afterward—so much so that in 1819 Rhode Island's direct foreign trade reached its zenith.<sup>52</sup> Providence seamen were again spanning the globe, although not in the same trade patterns they had known before the Embargo of 1807. Trade with Europe gravitated toward England and Sweden, with whom the United States signed postwar commercial treaties. Reexports decreased, since the coming of peace allowed Europe to trade directly with Latin America. Direct trade with Latin America maintained its normal preeminence in Providence's shipping, but

46. Quoted in Tanner, "Trade," 12.

47. *Ibid.*, 13-15.

48. Albion, Baker, and Larabee, *New England and the Sea*, 80.

49. *Ibid.*, 80-81.

50. Tanner, "Trade," 16-18.

51. *Providence Gazette*, 25 Feb. 1815, as quoted in Tanner, "Trade," 19.

52. Field, *State of Rhode Island*, 2:469-71.



Many marine-related businesses sprang up along the Providence waterfront. William Hamlin, a noted Providence engraver and nautical-instrument maker, used the harbor scene as the backdrop for his business card. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6137).

traffic began to center more on British Honduras, Cuba, and Brazil than on the West Indian islands. Trade with the Orient revived, with ships preferring the route around South America to the one around Africa.<sup>53</sup>

The port of Providence was now a beehive of activity. Longshoremen loaded and unloaded a vast variety of goods, packed in hogsheads, puncheons, casks, barrels, bags, and boxes. Shipbuilding continued to flourish (although not to the degree it had in the days prior to the 1807 embargo). Specialized craftsmen worked in the shipyards of the Providence River and Fox and India points, constructing vessels on slips or ways close to the water's edge. Sailmakers seamed together linen or hemp canvas with strong twine and beeswax, working in sail lofts whose size was determined by the size of the biggest mainsail they were likely to have to spread out on the floor. Blacksmiths pounded out the axles, chains, anchors,

and other iron fittings used on vessels. Ropers made ships' rigging in their long, narrow ropewalks, built to accommodate the enormous lengths of the cordage (a ropewalk owned by Joseph Brown and Nicholas Power measured twelve feet wide and seven hundred feet long).<sup>54</sup>

The customs house provided a busy scene as well. This is where vessels were registered, enrolled, and licensed. Registration was required for vessels involved in foreign trade. Vessels engaged in the coastal trade or in fishing were enrolled for indefinite periods of time. One-year licenses were issued to coastal or fishing boats under twenty tons net burden.<sup>55</sup> Providence's first customs house was built near Crawford Street in 1790; in 1818 this was replaced by a new brick customs house constructed by the federal government.

Along the dockside, multistoried buildings provided artisans and shopkeepers with places to live and work. Booksellers offered nautical charts; instrument makers fashioned compasses, quadrants, and sextants; tailors made garments for mariners and ship captains; coopers constructed casks and barrels; and merchants sold the myriad of goods that arrived daily from beyond the horizon.

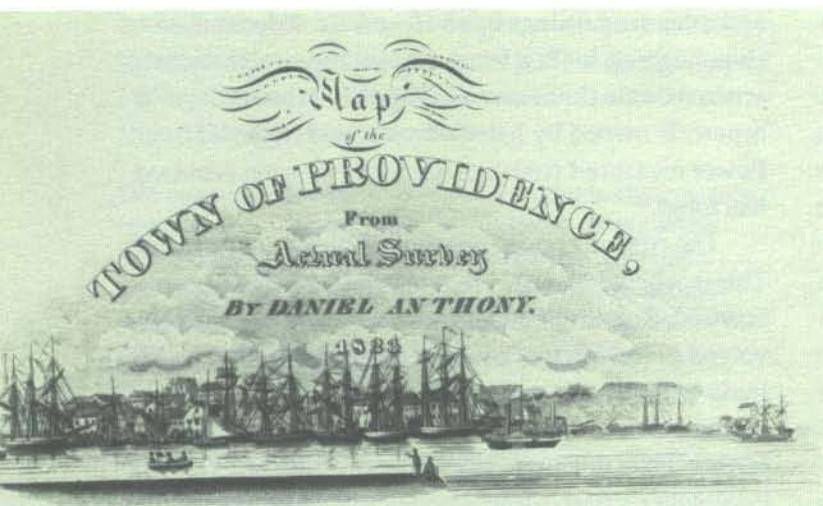
Providence's maritime landscape—with its stores, shipyards, chandleries, sail lofts, ropewalks, and customs houses—underwent drastic change to accommodate the expansion of trade in the years prior to the 1807 embargo and in the period following the War of 1812. In the late eighteenth century the east side of the Providence River along South Main Street became the district of the merchant countinghouses, the offices at which maritime firms carried on their operations, including accounting and correspondence. A line of warehouses (sometimes called "stores") lined this part of the waterfront as it had in previous years. Small public alleys, called gangways, ran between the offices and storage buildings between South Main Street and the riverbank, providing the citizenry with ready access to the shoreline to launch small boats or to draw water to fight fires. These

53. Tanner, "Trade," 20-21.

54. The description in this paragraph is based on Ruth Macaulay, "The Written and the Unwritten Word: A Study of the Documentary and Material Culture Sources for the Maritime

Industries of Providence and Warren, Rhode Island, from Their Beginnings to 1860" (unpublished manuscript, 1983), 5-8.

55. *Ships' Registers and Enrollments of Providence, Rhode Island, 1773-1939* (Providence: National Archives Project, 1941), 1-iii.



The Providence waterfront in 1823. Cartouche from Daniel Anthony's "Map of the Town of Providence," 1823. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 986).

gangways had names such as Bullion Street, Gold Street, Silver Street, Coin Street, Dubloon Street, Sovereign Street, Cent Street, Dime Street, and Dollar Street.

The east side of the Providence River soon became overcrowded with wharves booming with sloops, schooners, and brigantines, vessels primarily engaged in coastal and West Indian trade. The expansion of foreign trade to the Orient and other distant shores necessitated the use of larger ships, but the crowded east bank of the river proved incapable of receiving these bigger vessels.<sup>56</sup> For this reason John Brown launched the first large-scale development of the southern shoreline of Providence's "Neck," at the confluence of the Providence and Seekonk rivers, about 1790. It was here that he headquartered his East India trading business, and for this reason the area became known as India Point. Soon the natural shoreline gave way to wharves and quays for docking vessels, and the waterfront became dotted with ropewalks, ship chandleries, distilleries, warehouses, shipyards, and shops. Brown also built a bridge (called India Bridge) across the Seekonk River so that overland connections could be made between his

wharves and communities on the east side of the bay. One historian has noted that India Point was the most flourishing section of Providence at this time.<sup>57</sup> When waterfront uses eventually became differentiated, the wharves closest to Market Square were devoted to short-distance packet lines while the wharves between Fox Point and India Point served long-distance traffic.<sup>58</sup>

Providence merchants also looked to the marshy west bank of the Providence River to satisfy the demands of a shipping trade that had increased in both the number and size of the vessels used. The first step was the construction of Long Wharf (present-day Custom House Street) in 1792, with shops, warehouses, distilleries, and shipyards located nearby. It was not until after the War of 1812, however, when Providence's foreign shipping resumed and reached an apex, that the west shore witnessed its most dramatic transformation; and with the Great Gale of 1815 eliminating many of the features of the old waterfront landscape, and with Providence struggling to keep pace with its maritime success, a new order was imposed on the port.

The entire eastern shoreline of the river, from the Great Salt Cove to India Point, was rebuilt with frontage streets that ran parallel and adjacent to the water, forming a continuous quay. These streets provided more efficiency in loading and unloading goods than the line of small, jutting wharves that preceded them. Conforming to newly established harbor lines, the frontage streets kept the river channel free of congested wharves.<sup>59</sup>

The marshy west side of the river experienced the first large-scale cutting-and-filling project in 1817. The easternmost portion of Foxes Hill was cut to provide landfill for the marsh. The object of this project was to build the waterfront out to the deep, navigable portion of the river, thereby creating more practical docking and storage space. The long finger piers that merchants erected on this landfill during the next decade allowed large vessels to unload directly to land. These piers—Anthony's Wharf, Butler's

56. Woodward and Sanderson, *Providence*, 46-47.

57. Field, *State of Rhode Island*, 2:445.

58. Holleran, "History of the Providence Waterfront," 9.

59. *Ibid.*, 8.

Wharf, Lippitt's Wharf, and Central Wharf—created a distinctly new profile for the waterfront between Long Wharf and Dorrance Street.<sup>60</sup>

By the time this "wharfing out" process was completed, Providence's golden age of foreign shipping had begun a gradual shift in emphasis. The most significant change in Providence's postwar trade was a sharp increase in the export of domestic manufactured goods. Although detested by merchants, the Embargo of 1807 and the War of 1812 stimulated the development of Providence's manufacturing sector. Cloth, jewelry, and other finished products soon took their place on the ships' manifests alongside pork, flour, onions, potatoes, and barrel staves. Providence's overall commerce did not languish, as did that of some other smaller ports, since manufactured goods were able to replace the reexports that European nations had reclaimed.<sup>61</sup>

The introduction of power looms in 1817 stimulated the rapid expansion of the production of cheap cotton textiles. Now large quantities of sheetings, shirtings, stripes, checks, and plaids made their way from Providence to the Caribbean. During the 1820s much of the oriental and European reexports taken to Brazil were replaced by domestic manufactures.<sup>62</sup> In the "new" China trade that emerged, cotton cloth became the major export to the Orient, replacing goods that Providence merchants had to look to foreign countries to find. Furthermore, with the productivity of domestic industries, the local demand for Chinese silk and porcelain decreased, and tea came to make up more than 80 percent of American imports from the Far East.<sup>63</sup> The tables had turned: instead of having to search out things to export to China, merchants now had difficulty finding Chinese imports in demand in America.



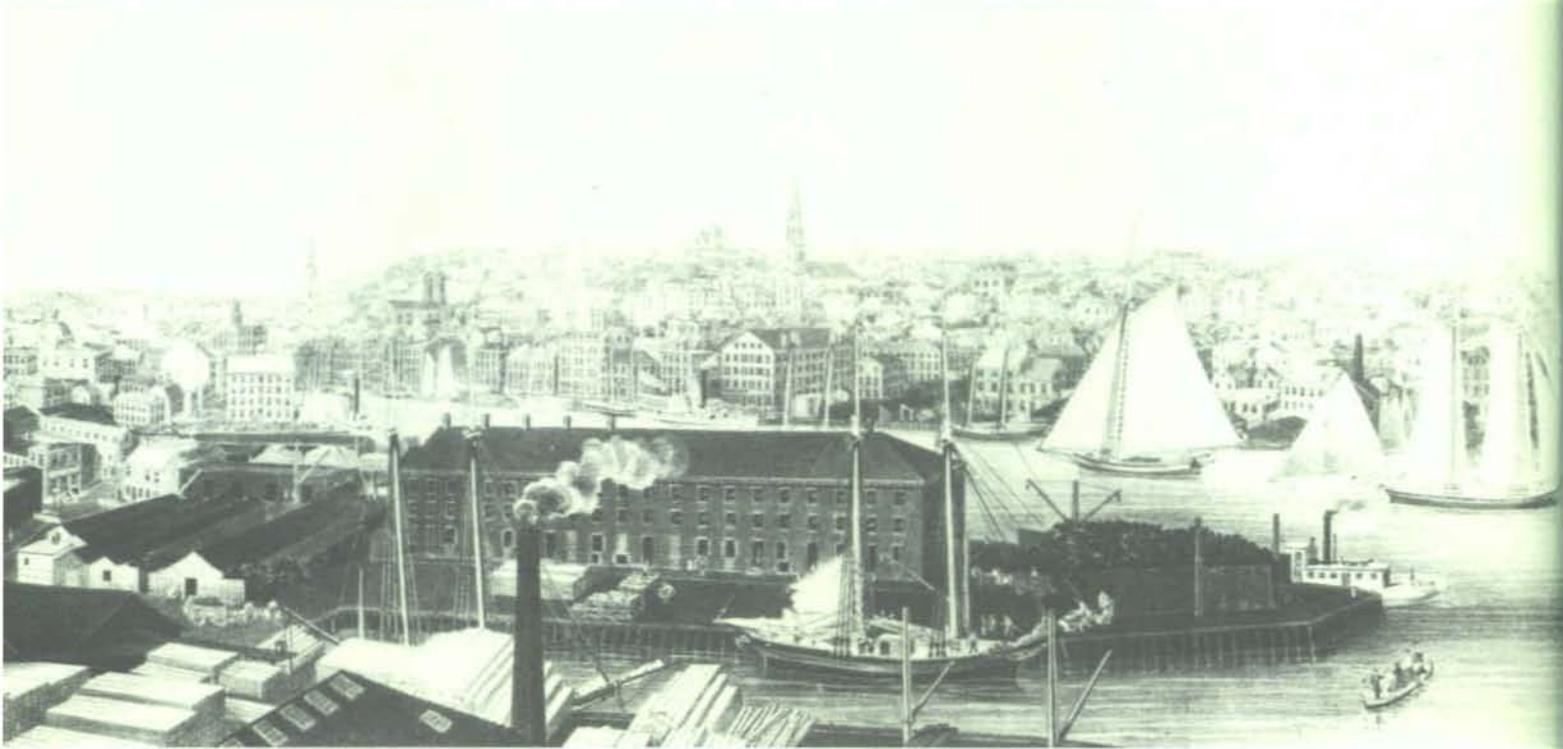
E. L. Peckham's pen-and-ink drawing of the Providence waterfront, sketched in 1840, captures the "wharfing out" of the west side of the river and the long linear dock along the river's east side. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 4472).

60. *Ibid.*, 4, 51-52.

61. Tanner, "Trade," 21.

62. *Ibid.*, 39-40, 49.

63. Christman, *Adventurous Pursuits*, 29.



By 1858, when J. P. Newell engraved his "View from the West Bank of the River," a shift from global trading to domestic trade had occurred. This detail from the engraving highlights the lumber and coal businesses that would dominate waterfront activity for the next thirty years. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6376).

The rise of manufacturing and the growth of Providence as an industrial city also had a major impact on the community's imports. The city had a particular need for coal, which was used to fuel the steam engines in factories, to power the steam locomotives making inroads in the seaport after 1835, and to feed the rising number of coal stoves in area homes. Providence's main source of coal from the 1830s to the Civil War was Canada, and bituminous coal from the Maritime Provinces replaced the old Canada trade based on grindstones, plaster, and herring. Coal became Providence's largest import; the second largest was lumber, much of which was provided by Canada as well. After 1841, in fact, the only large-scale foreign trade that remained in Providence was in these commodities—articles of great bulk, low value, and large local consumption—coming from Canada.<sup>64</sup>

The glory days of Providence's worldwide shipping had passed. It was a demise that had been a generation in the making.

The economic panic of 1828 forced Providence merchants to reduce the scale of their operations. When investments became profitable again two or three years later, the Providence merchant marine confined itself mostly to those areas of the world with which it had had trade relations in colonial days—Europe, the Caribbean, Africa, the American coast, and Canada. The *Panther*, the last ship from Buenos Aires, had discharged its cargo in 1825. In 1831 the *Antelope* became the last ship to arrive from Brazil. Ten years later the Providence china trade came to an end with the voyage of the ship *Lion*.<sup>65</sup>

Many merchants were investing money in manu-

64. Tanner, "Trade," 7, 222.

65. *Ibid.*, 221.

facturing that might otherwise have gone into a revival and expansion of maritime commerce. The Brown family had already done so, and its maritime affairs entered a gradual decline after 1821. Having shifted its energies to the manufacture of cotton, Brown and Ives sold its last ship in 1838.<sup>66</sup>

Reasons for the decline of Providence's foreign commerce are several. The city's growing industrial economy demanded new imports and provided new exports. No longer did the people of Providence have to rely on shipping goods from one nation to another to earn a living. Providence was no longer an international entrepôt; it was an industrial producer and consumer.

Another major factor in the demise of the era of direct foreign trade was the development of New England's inland transportation system. The Boston and Providence Railroad was completed in 1835, assuring an efficient transportation link with the major port of Massachusetts. Beginning in the 1820s, steamboats (and, later, rail connections such as the Providence and Stonington Railroad, completed in 1837) offered improved transportation between Providence and New York. For three decades before the Civil War, port cities vied with one another to be the major termini for these railroad and steamboat

routes. Ultimately New York won out because of its superior harbor, its great financial resources, and its large hinterland tapped by the Hudson River, Erie Canal, and New York Railroad.<sup>67</sup> To a lesser degree Boston emerged as a major port as well, to the detriment of Providence and other smaller cities. Providence merchants now found it more efficient to bring goods to New York or Boston and then send them on to Providence by steamer or train.<sup>68</sup> The only exceptions to this rule were low value, bulk-cargo imports like Canadian coal and lumber, for which it was not worth paying the extra expenses of transshipment from New York or Boston.

For these reasons direct trade with Europe and the Caribbean eventually declined after 1830. As foreign shipping waned, coastal shipping boomed and ceased to be closely integrated with foreign commerce.<sup>69</sup> More traffic passed through the Providence harbor than ever before, but with larger amounts of less glamorous cargoes such as coal, lumber, and southern cotton for the textile mills.<sup>70</sup>

A new chapter had begun. Providence's economy and the Providence waterfront had entered a new era, leaving behind the days of a small maritime community with a global reach.

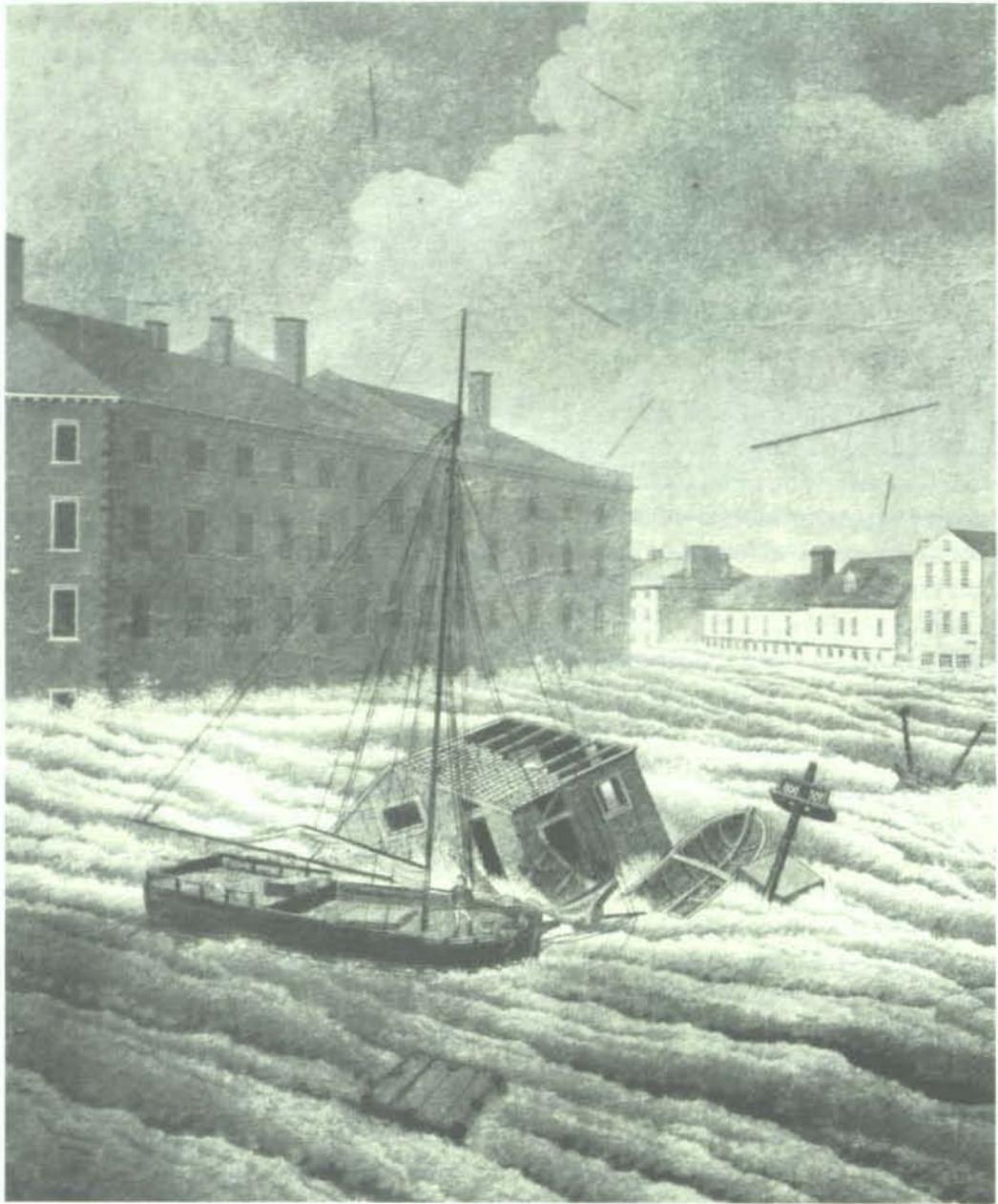
66. Albion, Baker, and Larabee, *New England and the Sea*, 107.

67. Tanner, "Trade," 5.

68. Holleran, "History of the Providence Waterfront," 11.

69. Tanner, "Trade," 227.

70. Holleran, "History of the Providence Waterfront," 10.



# The Great Gale of 1815: Artifactual Evidence of Rhode Island's First Hurricane

Robert P. Emlen

On the morning of 23 September 1815, a storm of unprecedented proportions hit southern New England, devastating the coastline from New Bedford to New Haven. At sea, ships were lost with all hands. Ashore, entire families drowned in the unexpected flooding. Inland, sea spray was found on windows in Worcester and wind damage was reported as far away as New Hampshire.

Life in Rhode Island was different after the storm. Property damage was widespread and severe—Moses Brown estimated at the time that one-quarter of Providence's taxable value was destroyed<sup>1</sup>—but the wreckage on the waterfront was only the visible manifestation of the storm's effects. Rhode Islanders now realized that they were vulnerable to forces of nature in ways they had not previously imagined. Long after the waterfront was cleared of wreckage, the effects of the storm were reflected in the ways Rhode Islanders responded to it. Consciously and unconsciously, in obvious and subtle ways, the Great Gale of 1815 had changed their lives. Its effect could be found in their vocabularies, in their lore, in their economic enterprise, and in the ways they rebuilt their towns.

In the early nineteenth century the word *hurricane* was not commonly used in Rhode Island. It is not that Rhode Islanders were unaware of hurricanes; they had experienced these autumnal storms in the Caribbean, just as they had seen typhoons in the South Pacific or monsoons in South Asia. But their remarkable tales from foreign lands had little to do with New England. In their experience hurricanes were connected to a specific place, and in two centu-

ries of recorded history nothing like that had ever been known in Rhode Island. There was simply no reason and no occasion to use the Spanish term for a Caribbean storm to describe a gale in Narragansett Bay.

Certainly the seacoast had seen great storms throughout the years. On 15 August 1635, for instance, a day of lashing winds and rain produced record high tides in the Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth Bay colonies. Indian narratives of that storm report that in the Narragansett Country the water rose so high that the natives were forced to climb into the trees to save their lives.<sup>2</sup> But nothing in the experience of any New Englanders prepared them for the suddenness and intensity of the storm that fell upon Rhode Island that muggy September morning in 1815. Though contemporary accounts describe what we define today as a hurricane, it was known at the time simply as "the great storm," "the great gale," or "the memorable gale," a singular and epochal event which needed no further explanation (see figure 1).



Figure 1. The gravestone of Allin Viall (1757-1815) in Barrington refers to "the memorable gale" in which Viall was drowned. Photo by Robert P. Emlen.

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1. Moses Brown, "An Official Record of the Great Gale of 1815," *Publications of the Rhode Island Historical Society* 2 (1894): 232-35.

2. Nathaniel Morton, *New Englands Memorials* (Cambridge, Mass., 1699), 111-12.

Figure 2. "A Representation of the Great Storm at Providence, Sept. 23rd 1815," by James Kidder (1776-1852), Boston, 1816. Aquatint, 29 cm x 51.2 cm. From the collection of the John Nicholas Brown Center. Photo by John Miller Documents.



*A Representation of the* **GREAT STORM**

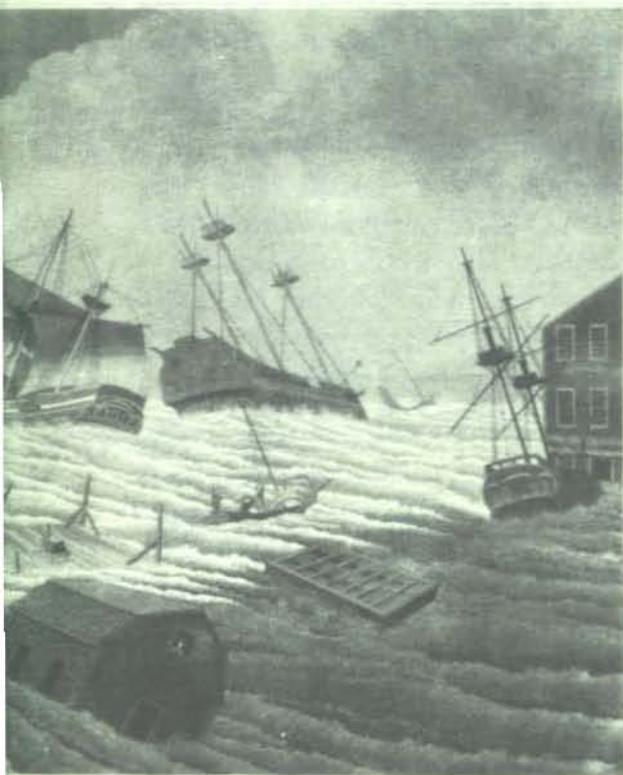
Entered according to Act of Congress, 1817, by James Kidder, and Published by J. B. Allen, Boston.

No town was harder hit than Providence. Three days after the storm had passed, newspaper editor William Goddard reported the damage in the *Rhode-Island American*.<sup>3</sup> After a night of heavy rain the storm quickened in the morning and blew first from the southeast, then the southwest. Winds whipped a record high tide up Narragansett Bay and into the harbor, reducing wharves and buildings to flotsam and carrying it upriver to the Cove or into the streets of the town. Men were drowned trying to protect their property. Virtually every ship in the harbor was cast loose and driven aground. Weybosset Bridge was carried away. By noon, when the wind died, the waterfront was in ruins.

Attempting to make sense of what he had experienced, Goddard grasped for language to fully communicate his overwhelming sensation:

Whether we consider the violence of the late storm, or the desolation which ensued, we do not incur the hazard of contradiction in pronouncing it the most sublime and tremendous elemental strife that has been witnessed for centuries by the inhabitants of this town. It seemed as if He, who "rides the whirlwind and directs the storm" had permitted sea and air to combine their strength and terror to give us an impressive assurance of His power, to humble our pride and to discipline our affections. "The angry spirit of the waters" rose in might and majesty, and the productions of nature and the fabricks of art were victims of his fury. Had there lived a being whose bosom was tenanted by misanthropick feelings, he could have ascended some lofty hill and apostrophized with the exultation of a demon the sublime desolation which surrounded him—but he who inherits the sensibilities or weaknesses of our nature, must have viewed with revolting feelings "the wild and the wasteful scene."

3. "Awful Storm!" *Rhode-Island American*, 26 Sept. 1815.



RM at Providence, Sept. 23, 1815

Goddard concluded his florid observations with the assurance that a comprehensive account of the storm would be forthcoming. However, his report and subsequent dispatches were the only substantial account to be published in Providence for the next forty-eight years. At the time, Moses Brown was charged at a town meeting with drawing up "an Historical and topographical account of the Great Storm in this Town, September 23rd A.D. 1815, in order that there may remain a Record in the Town descriptive of an Event so important in its Annals," but his manuscript of the "Official Record of the Great Gale of 1815" was not published until 1894. A com-

prehensive account of the storm, prepared by Olney Winsor in the autumn of 1815 from Providence newspaper accounts, was not published until 1966.<sup>4</sup> Today the printed record is augmented by several personal reminiscences, published posthumously as historical curiosities many years after the fact.<sup>5</sup> But it was not until 1863 that the stories of surviving witnesses were first gathered and printed in a retrospective article in the *Providence Daily Journal* by Sidney S. Rider, the librarian of the Rhode Island Historical Society.<sup>6</sup>

It would be a mistake, however, to judge the effects of the storm in the minds of Rhode Islanders by the absence of contemporary discussion in the local press. The effects might rather be judged by evaluating the artifactual evidence—the physical evidence not just of what Rhode Islanders said about the storm but of what they actually did in reaction. One small but telling example, for instance, was the opportunistic response of a Providence druggist named Henry Condy, who hoped to profit from the health scare caused by contaminated drinking water. "The Late Storm has spread contagion more or less wherever it prevailed," he announced in an advertisement, but if Dr. Relfe's Asthmatick Pills were "applied without delay, the whole of the inflammatory symptoms will be subdued in a few hours."<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to this small example of individual enterprise is the widespread popular reception for commemorative pictures of the event. Boston artist James Kidder, also remembered for his engraving of Hope College at Brown University, apparently found himself in Providence when the storm hit. From a vantage point on the east side of the river he sketched his impressions of the scene, which he subsequently developed into an oil painting (location now unknown). The next year he reproduced that scene as a print, which he called "A Representation of the Great Storm at Providence, Sept. 23rd 1815" (see figure 2). In the legend Kidder described his work as an engraving, though it is now properly classified as an aquatint, a forerunner of the lithograph, whose shaded

4. William G. McLaughlin, "Olney Winsor's 'Memorandum' of the Great Hurricane of September 23, 1815," *Rhode Island History* 25 (1966): 85.

5. See, for instance, Esther Hoppin E. Lardner, "The Great Gale of Sept. 23, 1815," *Publications of the Rhode Island Historical Society* 2

(1894): 202-5.

6. "The Great Storm: Detailed Account of the Memorable Great Gale that Prevailed in Providence, September 23rd 1815," *Providence Daily Journal*, 23 Sept. 1863.

7. Advertisement in the *Rhode-Island American*, 10 Oct. 1815.

tones can reproduce the atmospheric quality of a landscape painting.<sup>8</sup>

None of the buildings represented in Kidder's print are standing today. They were well known at the time, however, and the scene was immediately recognizable to the contemporary public. At the left of the print are commercial buildings on what is now the corner of Dyer and Westminster streets. At the center, across Westminster Street, is the Washington Insurance Company, on the current site of the Hospital Trust Building. At the far right is the Exchange Coffee House, now the site of the auditorium of the Rhode Island School of Design.<sup>9</sup> Kidder's view must therefore have been made from the eastern end of the Weybosset Bridge, likely from an upper floor of the Brick Market House (see figure 3).

As a composition Kidder's print lacks cohesion, illustrating a series of unconnected vignettes amidst the storm. But when the print is viewed in conjunction with the eyewitness accounts of the event, these vignettes appear to illustrate the same kinds of incidents described in period accounts. Indeed, the print's discrete parts function as a visual narrative of

the gale. By approaching the work as another kind of eyewitness account, we can reconstruct a scene which was once obvious to everyone who had lived through the storm or who had heard and repeated its stories.

The Exchange Coffee House, at the extreme right of the print, was sited at the foot of Weybosset Bridge, a key location in the center of town that made it a gathering place for Providence's literati. By 1815 its original function as a coffee house had been overtaken entirely by the offices of the newspapermen and publishers who gathered there.<sup>10</sup> Kidder's illustration of the building being battered by the runaway brig *Hunter* (see figure 4) parallels eyewitness accounts gathered by Sidney Rider forty-eight years after the fact:

Mr. B. Cranston was engaged at the time of the gale in the office of the *Rhode Island American* in the third story of the old coffee house, on the corner of Market Square and North Water Street, now called Canal Street. At ten o'clock the hurricane drove in two or three of the windows, and the printers accepted that demonstration as a notice to quit. The waves were rolling very high. The oystermen whose benches line the eastern shore had been obliged to leave for

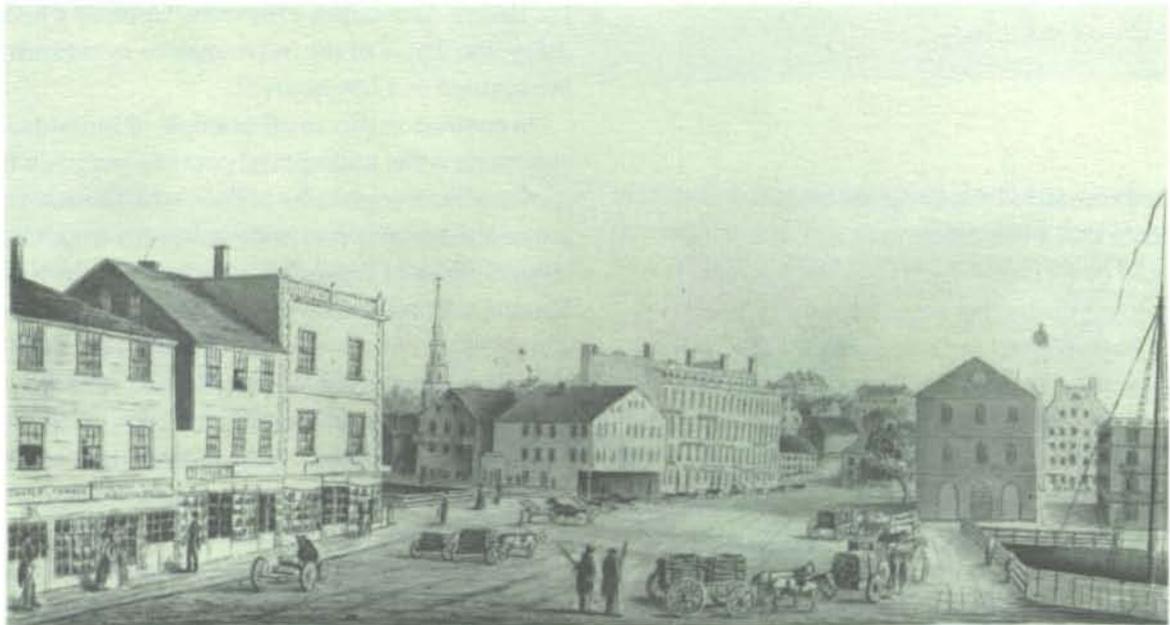


Figure 3. "Market Square," by Edward Lewis Peckham (1812-1889), January 1835. Pen and ink with wash, 24 cm x 37.8 cm. The Brick Market House is the third building from the right. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 955).

8. So identified on January 31, 1990, by Lora Urbanelli, assistant curator of prints at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.

9. John Hutchins Cady, *The Civic and Architectural Development of*

*Providence* (Providence, 1957), 58.

10. W. R. Danforth, "Pictures of Providence in the Past," *Rhode Island History* 10 (1951): 93-95.

higher ground. A large sloop made fast to a tree tore it up with apparent ease and dashed against the bridge with frightful force. As he passed from the office towards North Main Street the railing on top of the Market House blew off, and a piece flying across the street struck the late James Amesbury on the head, rendering him insensible.

On the ground floor of the coffee house, Kidder carefully picked out a shop sign reading "Wm. Wilkinson Book-Store." Though he included signs on other buildings, he made no attempt at lettering them, leaving one to suppose that the artist had arranged with Wilkinson to sell his print.

By the summer of 1815 the great drawbridge of 1792—the sixth one to span the Providence River at that location—had outlived its usefulness. In July the town council had voted to replace it.<sup>11</sup> The storm spared the town the trouble of tearing it down. According to Rider's article,

Capt. Josiah Jones had an office on the corner of Market Square and North Main Street. From this point he witnessed the carrying away of the bridge; the first vessel that dashed against it was brought up, but the second one made a clean sweep through and the bridge was gone.

In Kidder's print the river is surging up into the Cove at the right. The old Weybosset Bridge has vanished without a trace.

One of the most conspicuous buildings on the Weybosset side of the river was the three-story brick headquarters of the Washington Insurance Company, across the bridge from the Exchange Coffee House. Its prominent place on the riverfront put it squarely in the path of the storm and the vessels it drove upriver. It appears at the center of Kidder's print, being rammed by storm-tossed ships (see figure 5). William Goddard described the scene:

Every vessel in port, with two exceptions, were driven from their moorings. Thirty-five sail, including 4 ships (one of them over 500 tons), 9 brigs, 7 schooners, and 15 sloops, now form a melancholy dismantled line at the head of the Cove. . . . The third story of the Washington Insurance Office, occupied by the Mount-Vernon Lodge, was much injured, being perforated by the bowsprit of the ship Ganges when she rushed with impetuosity up the river. This handsome building was otherwise, but not materially, injured.



Figure 4. Detail from the Kidder print showing the brig Hunter slamming into the Exchange Coffee House. Photo by John Miller Documents.

Passing to the right of Washington Row in the print are two more ships, part of the fleet that remained high and dry in the Cove until the next flood tide, when ten of the smaller vessels were floated again and towed back downriver to the harbor. The temporary bridge to the Weybosset side had to be dismantled to let them out.<sup>12</sup>

11. Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 83.

12. *Providence Patriot and Phoenix*, 21 Oct. 1815.



Figure 6. Detail from the Kidder print showing a man aboard a storm-driven sloop. Photo by John Miller Documents.

In the foreground of the scene a man is riding out the storm aboard his sloop (see figure 6). With his sails down he has very little control as he weaves his way through a river awash with building wreckage. Also amidst the flotsam, in this copy of the print, are two people swept up in the peril of the storm, one in the water holding fast to a floating object (see figure 7) and the other in the window of a gambrel-roofed building. Rider gives us this account:

The late Judge William Aplin escaped almost by a miracle. In the early part of the forenoon, he went on board a vessel in which he was interested, then lying at a wharf in the southerly part of the town, to render her situation more secure by getting out additional fasts to the wharf. In this he succeeded so well that in a short time the vessel raised the wharf, which was wood, and started off with it up the

river for the cove. Mr. Aplin was not aware of any danger until the vessel was in the middle of the stream. The wind carried her over to the west side of the river against a schooner, and thence toward a pile of bricks on a wharf, upon which he attempted to jump. A sudden movement of the vessel prevented his reaching the bricks, and he fell short of the wharf and into the stream. Though a very athletic man and an expert swimmer, in vain were his attempts to stem the current. He yielded to necessity, and amidst the ruins of buildings and wharfs, contents of stores and lumber yards, he pursued his course upstream, sometimes astride of a stick of timber, and at other times diving beneath the floating mass to avoid danger. In his course, with unexampled presence of mind, he took off his hat, coat, vest, and boots. He commenced to take off his pantaloons, but modestly replaced them. He finally landed near where the state prison is now located, so chilled and bruised as to be unable to move for some time. The lady who afterward became his wife, but did not know him at this time, then resided on Hydraulion (now Exchange) Street, and was looking out the window when her future husband came drifting by on a log or something of that sort. The judge always congratulated himself that he kept his pantaloons on.

Although both characters in the narrative appear in this example of the print, only the swimmer was originally part of the scene as Kidder depicted it. Comparison of the print illustrated here with a copy in the collection of the John Hay Library of Brown University reveals that in this instance the distressed figure in the garret was added after the fact, scratched into the window on the finished aquatint.

James Kidder's print captured one of the great natural events in the history of Rhode Island, and it provided a point of common interest for everyone who had lived through that event. Although the historical implications of the storm may not have been obvious at the time, its impact on the popular imagination is suggested by the popularity of the print; not only did Rhode Islanders purchase and display it, but they were inspired to make copies of it as well.

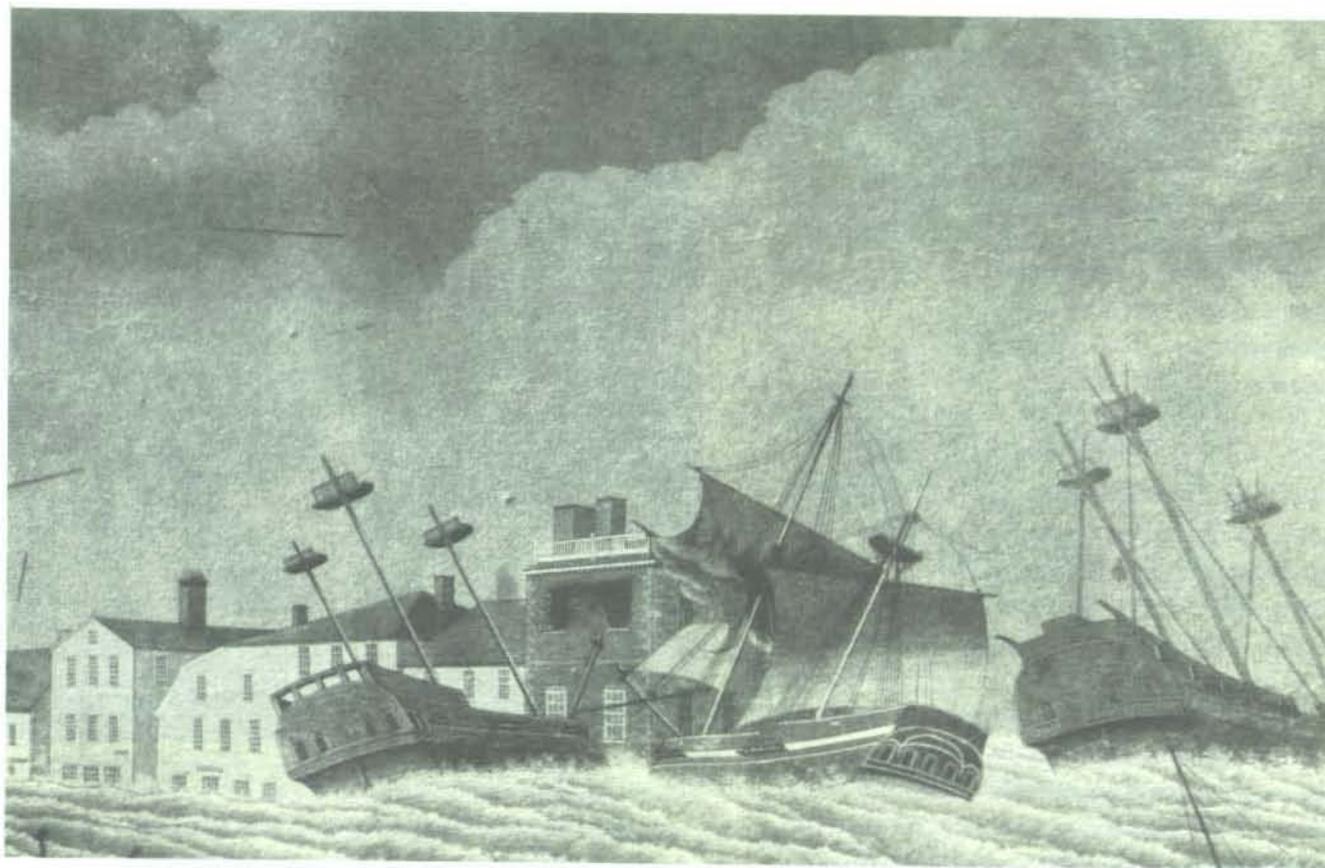
Using the print as a model, John Russell Bartlett painted an enlarged version of the scene in the 1830s.<sup>13</sup> Bequeathed to the Rhode Island Historical Society in 1886, Bartlett's canvas was a familiar sight in the Society's Cabinet Building, where it can be seen prominently displayed in early photographs of the

13. Illustrated in Frank H. Goodyear, Jr., *American Paintings in*

*the Rhode Island Historical Society* (Providence, 1974), 60.



*Figure 7. Detail from the Kidder print showing a man struggling in the water. Photo by John Miller Documents.*



*Figure 5. Detail from the Kidder print showing the Washington Insurance Building on Weybosset Neck. Photo by John Miller Documents.*

galleries. Another oil painting that reproduces Kidder's print of the great storm is in the collection of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.<sup>14</sup> Possibly this is the same one being promoted by Henry Cheever Pratt in an 1835 broadside, in which he announced a public viewing of his painting of the Great Gale for an admission charge of twenty-five cents.<sup>15</sup>

Not all copies were reproduced as paintings. Throughout the nineteenth century the scene was engraved anew as woodcuts and electrotypes, making its reproduction possible in the popular press. (An almost unrecognizable version illustrates Sidney Rider's 1863 article in the *Providence Daily Journal*.)

The memory of the event survived in others ways as well. A tall case clock with works by Providence clockmaker Caleb Wheaton survived the flood in the dining room of the Washington Hotel on Weybosset Street, ticking away until the rising water dragged its pendulum to a stop.<sup>16</sup> That incident, and the tide line left by the flood waters on the clock's mahogany case, became part of the lore of the storm in the family of Esek Aldrich, the proprietor of the hotel. Later generations of the Aldrich family preserved the story for posterity by pasting a written account of the event inside the door of the case, along with a woodcut reproduced from Bartlett's painting in the Historical Society (see figure 8).

Until 1808 Nicholas Brown and his brother-in-law and business partner Thomas Poynton Ives had had their offices in the Providence Bank, a building constructed by Joseph Brown in 1774 with an entrance a story above the street. When the bank was renovated in 1801, its doorway was lowered to street level for

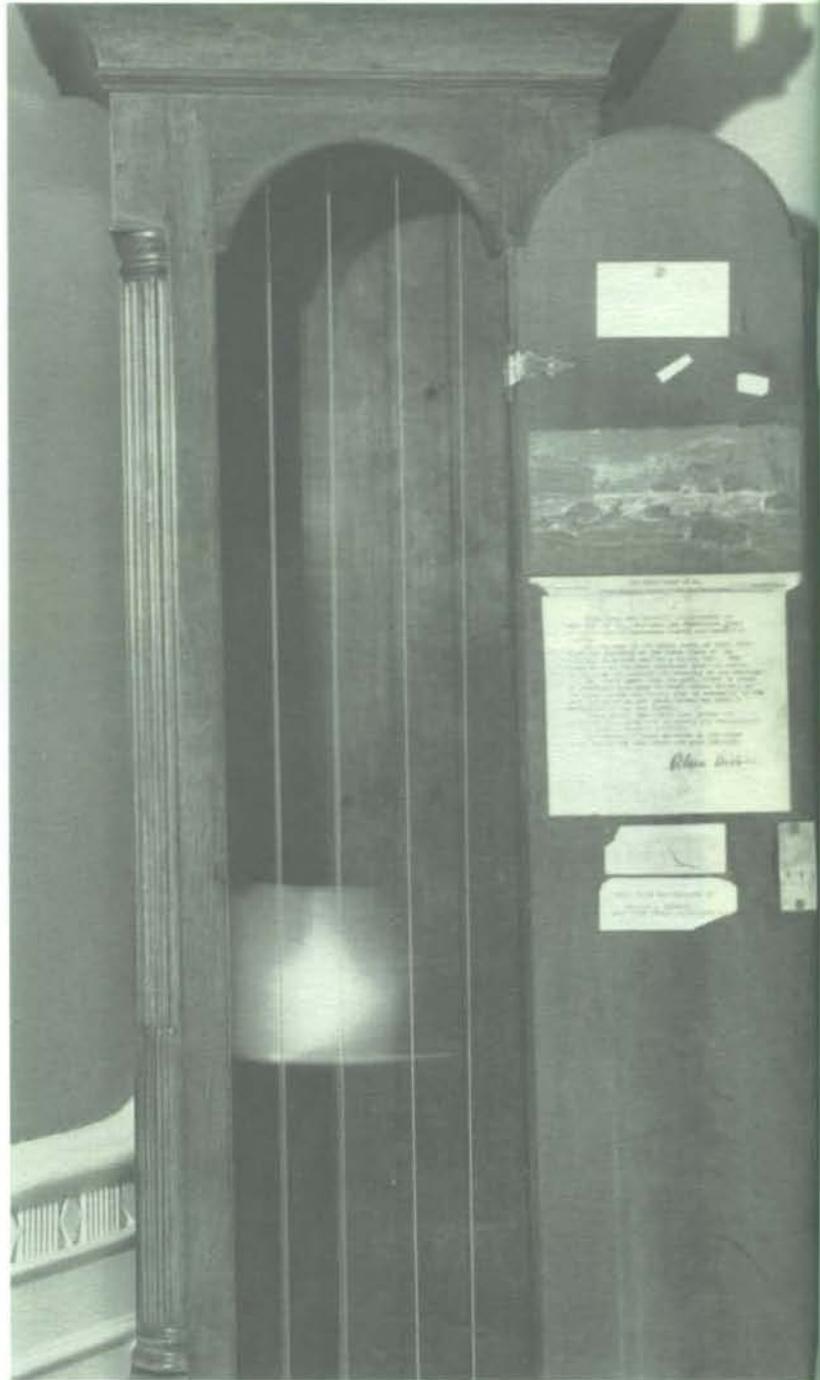


Figure 8. Long-case clock, with works by Caleb Wheaton, Providence, last quarter of the eighteenth century. Mahogany, 8 feet 3 inches high. Bequest of Mrs. Allen Aldrich in memory of Allen Aldrich. Photo by Robert P. Emlen, courtesy of the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.

14. Illustrated in *The Magazine Antiques* 48 (1945): 132.

15. This broadside is in the graphics collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

16. The clock is illustrated in Christopher P. Monkhouse and Thomas S. Michie, *American Furniture in Pendleton House* (Providence, 1986), 89.

greater public access (see figure 9), an arrangement repeated by Brown & Ives in the design of its new countinghouse on the corner of Bank Lane and South Main Street. It was from the wharf in front of this countinghouse that the partners set off down the bay on Friday evening, 22 September 1815, with plans to spend the weekend fishing with some friends. After finding refuge and riding out the gale in the harbor at Stonington, Connecticut, the would-be fishermen made their way back to Providence the following Tuesday.<sup>17</sup> When they stepped ashore there to greet their frantic families, they found that the flood waters had risen seven and a half feet above the highest spring tide on record, just eighteen inches below the thresholds of the countinghouse and the Providence Bank.<sup>18</sup> Thirteen years later, when the architect John Holden Greene designed matching houses for Benoni Cooke and Rufus Green just south of the Providence Bank on South Main Street, he located their principal entrances on the second floor (see figure 10).

When journalists reflected on the devastation the Great Gale had wreaked on their town, they spoke about the sublime and awful power of nature. But when the townspeople acted to repair the damage and prevent its reoccurrence, they changed the face of their waterfront. The way the harbor was transformed was perhaps the most obvious response to the storm. Weybosset Bridge was rebuilt as a fixed span, its sixty-five pilings driven permanently into the riverbed.<sup>19</sup> That established the head of navigation at the bridge and closed the Cove to shipping. New harbor lines were laid out; the riverbanks were raised and filled, accelerating development of the Weybosset side; South Water Street was laid out on the new embankment; and, not least of all, the construction and placement of new buildings was reconsidered.<sup>20</sup>

After the storm William Goddard had lamented:

Our wharves, on which were stored the riches of every clime, exhibit the most sad and repulsive aspect. Scarcely a vestige remains of the stores (many of them very spacious) which crowded the wharves bordering Weybosset Street.

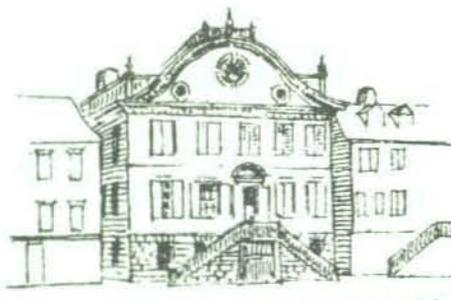


Figure 9. These sketches by E. Eldon Deane show the Providence Bank Building, 50 South Main Street, with its original facade (top) and with the front entrance lowered to street level (bottom). From *American Architect and Building News*, 3 September 1887.



Figure 10. Located just south of the Providence Bank, these two residences, built in 1828 for Rufus Green and Benoni Cooke, were designed with their main entrances above street grade. Sketch by E. Eldon Deane for *American Architect and Building News*, 9 July 1887.

17. Eliza Hoppin Richmond Waller, *More Recollections of the Hoppin Family* (Providence, 1934), 14.

18. This elevation was determined in a survey by Colgate Searle

in February 1990.

19. *Providence Gazette*, 27 July 1816.

20. Cady, *Civic and Architectural Development*, 83.

Most of those south of the Market House south to India Point shared a similar fate.

Within a few years, however, an unknown landscape artist painted a colorful scene of the waterfront at what is now the Crawford Street Bridge.<sup>21</sup> In his picture there is no evidence that the harbor had suffered so greatly. In fact, a new brick warehouse and store, secured behind cast-iron window shutters and standing above a newly reinforced riverfront embankment, suggests that the port of Providence had quickly regained its economic health and felt prepared for the next gale.

As the trauma of the storm receded, Rhode Islanders came to view it as an important historical event worth remembering. In 1894 a visitor to the Rhode Island Historical Society wrote:

While recently examining your interesting and instructive collection of portraits and pictures, my attention was attracted to the representation of the great gale of 1815, when vessels were driven up Westminster street and the

tide rose to a great height on Market square. It seemed to me, as I gazed at this picture, that tablets erected at various points, showing the height to which the water rose on that occasion, and the places where vessels were carried and left on dry land, would prove interesting and instructive to young people, and indeed to one generation after another that will pass through this section of the city. . . . It seems fitting that one of the most remarkable events that ever occurred in Providence should be suitably commemorated.<sup>22</sup>

In 1917 a bronze plaque was mounted on the old Market House with a line showing the record high tide of that unique event. It was still a record; in over a century nothing remotely like it had occurred, and another twenty-one years would pass before such a storm struck again. If, in that time, Rhode Islanders had become overconfident, their understanding of the Great Gale was not entirely lost. In 1938, when a September storm again devastated New England and brought a new record tide to Narragansett Bay, the people of Providence recognized that storm as a hurricane (see figure 11).

21. This picture is illustrated and discussed in Robert P. Emlen, "A View of Providence: The Explication of a Landscape Painting," *Rhode Island History* 43 (1984): 39-49.

22. Elisha Jencks to the Gentlemen of the Rhode Island Historical Society, 5 Nov. 1894, *Publications of the Rhode Island Historical Society* 2 (1894): 236.

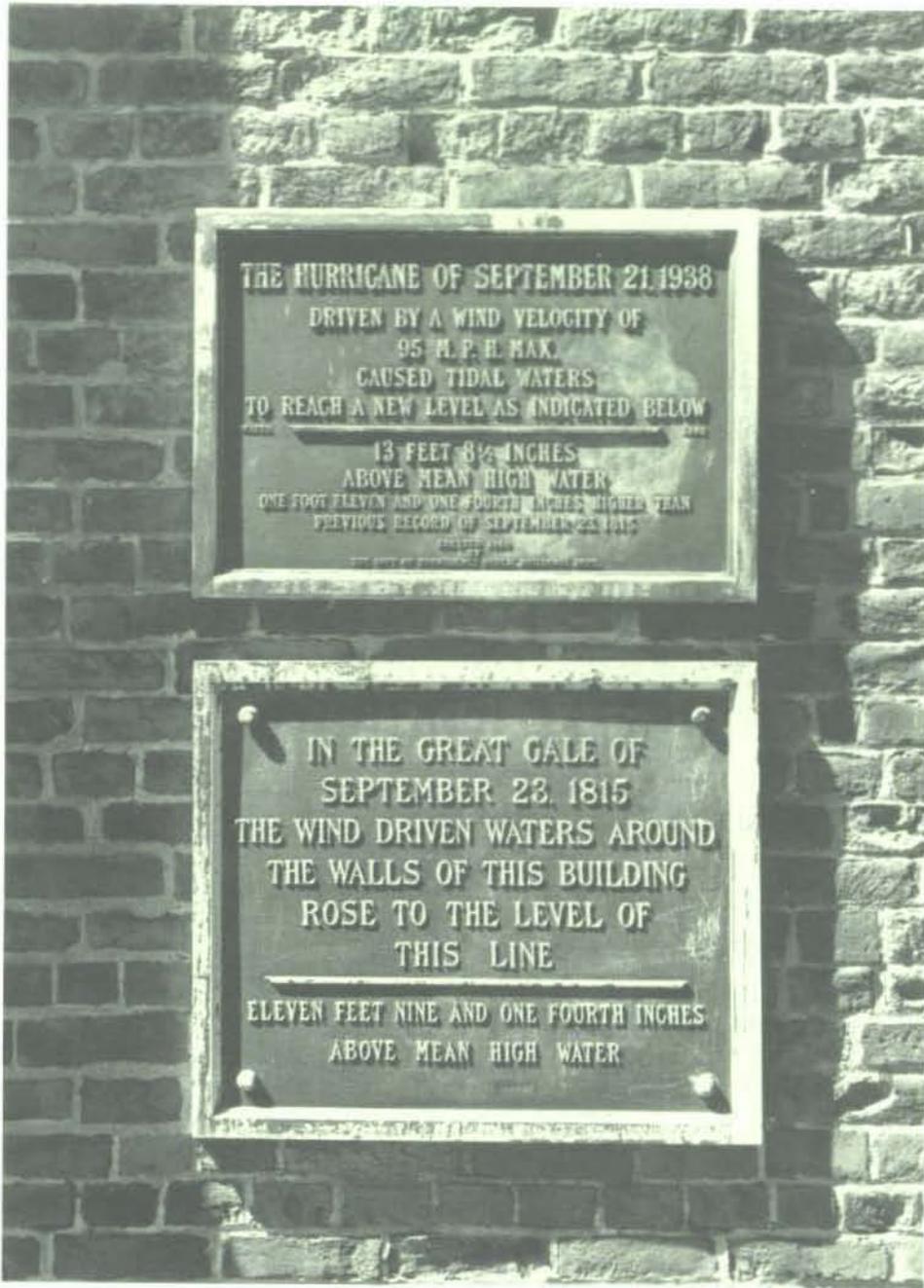


Figure 11. Bronze plaques on the Market House in Providence show the high-water levels of the two most famous storms in Rhode Island history. Photo by Robert P. Emlen.