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# Rhode Island History



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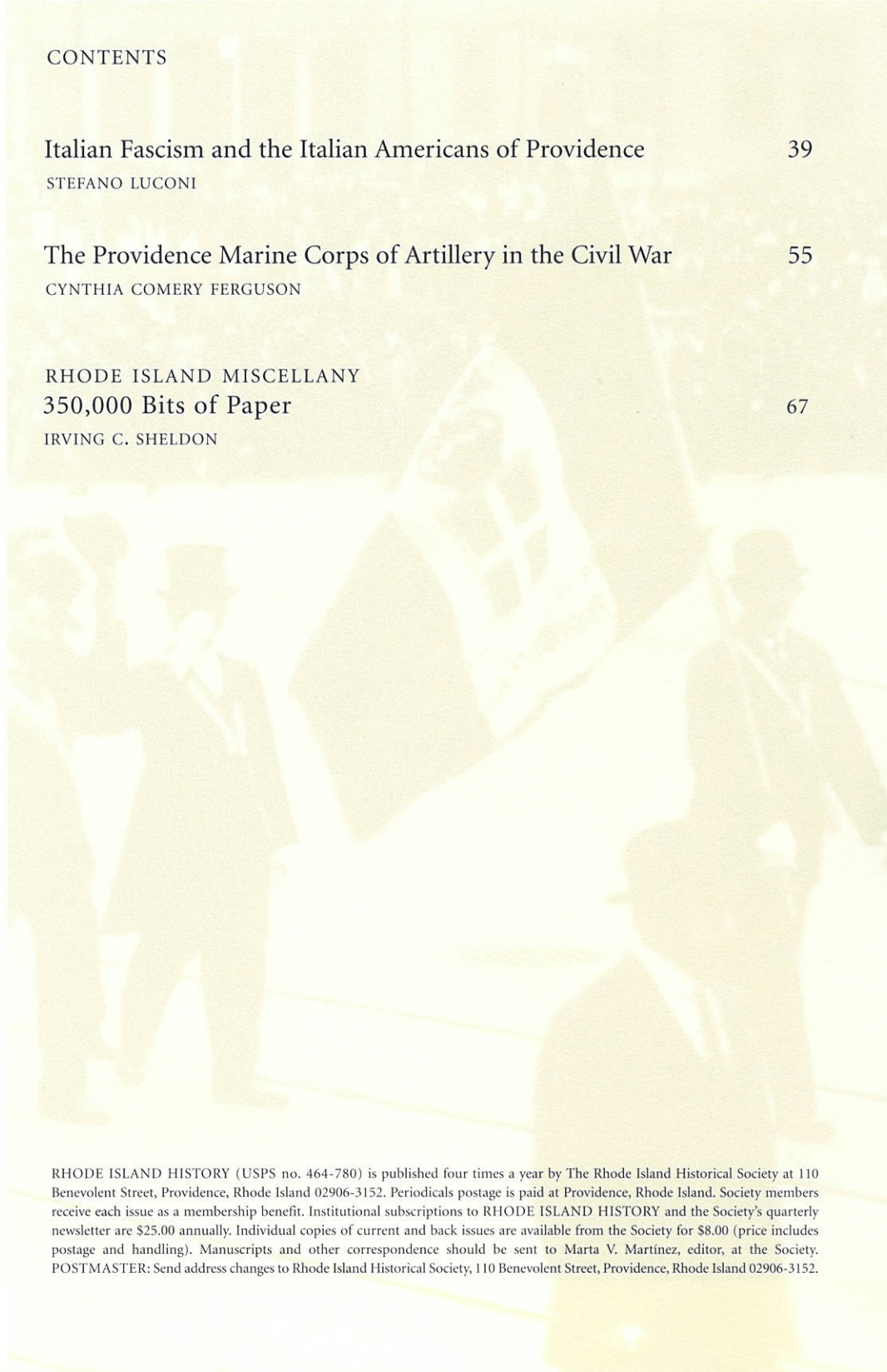
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## Italian Fascism and the Italian Americans of Providence

STEFANO LUCONI

On 30 April 1929 Providence's Italian American community gave a bon voyage banquet in honor of Benjamin Cianciarulo, a local Republican politician who was about to leave for Italy. The gathering suddenly acquired political implications when former Democratic state chairman Luigi De Pasquale disrupted the casual and festive atmosphere with an unexpected reprimand of Fascism in his toast to Cianciarulo: "If you meet Mussolini, tell him we don't need any money here for Italian propaganda, especially in Rhode Island. We want Italian children to learn Italian but don't want any money shipped here. Fascism is no good here."<sup>1</sup>

De Pasquale's criticism referred to a controversial strategy of Mussolini's regime to win the allegiance of Italian Americans through the use of Italian-language courses—subsidized by Italian consulates—to spread Fascist propaganda and ideology in the nation's "little Italys." As a memorandum of the U.S. Department of State pointed out, "In the Italian parochial schools where the children are compelled to take their daily lessons in Italian from an instructor fresh from the Italy of today and aided by a text book where everything Italian is lauded and the virtues of Mussolini and the Fascist state are extolled, there is doubtless created in the minds of the children a feeling of distinct friendliness to Italy. This feeling when given expression in the home may indirectly sway the sympathies of the parents in the same direction."<sup>2</sup>

Two of these parochial schools, the St. Ann School and the Holy Ghost School, operated in Providence in the 1920s. *L'Eco del Rhode Island*, a local Italian-language weekly, argued that they helped Italian American children develop ties to their ancestral country. However, such links were not only cultural but political as well, since the pastors of both St. Ann's Church and the Holy Ghost Church, Fathers Carlo Sasso and Flaminio Parenti, were outspoken admirers of Mussolini and rarely missed an opportunity to extol his regime.<sup>3</sup>

Secular Italian-language evening schools also became tools of Il Duce's propaganda. Two representatives of Providence's Fascist club had sat on the board of the Dante Alighieri School since 1926. When the other members of the board tried to limit the growing influence of their Fascist colleagues, the city's Fascist leaders planned to create another Italian-language evening school. This school was never opened, however, since the lavish subsidies of the Italian government enabled Il Duce's supporters to gain control of the Dante Alighieri School by the fall of 1929. As a result, the school's students—who numbered an average of three hundred to five hundred per year in the mid-1930s—gave their teachers the Fascist salute and were taught the songs of Mussolini's Blackshirts. In addition, the best pupils were sent to Italy at the expense of the Italian government in the summer of every year to visit their ancestral country and receive full-immersion Fascist indoctrination.<sup>4</sup>

In late 1929 muckraking journalist Marcus Duffield denounced the Dante Alighieri School for teaching students "Fascism along with their A-B-C's." Indeed, the textbooks used for the Italian-language classes included volumes such as *L'Italia nel passato e nel*

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Luigi De Pasquale, circa 1935. RIHS Collection (RHI X3 7468).

*presente* (Italy past and present), which quoted passages from Mussolini's writings suggesting that "the state was in disintegration" under Italy's pre-Fascist liberal democracy, that Fascism "strangled the last effort of antinational subversive activity," and that Il Duce governed the country "in the spirit of the Constitution." Another book, *Nel paese del sole* (In the land of sunshine) called Mussolini's rise to power a "bloodless revolution."<sup>5</sup>

Although De Pasquale sided with Mussolini's opponents in the controversy over the Italian-language schools in 1929, he backed the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and welcomed the subsequent annexation of that country to Italy. In late November 1935 he attended a rally by Italian Americans in support of Mussolini's colonial venture. When anti-Fascist dissenters tried to disrupt the rally with shouts of "America first," reported the *Italian Echo*, De Pasquale "made a point of publicly expressing his sincere admiration for Italy." He also volunteered to serve on a committee that channeled Italian Americans' dollars into Mussolini's war chest under the cover of humanitarian contributions to the Italian Red Cross. Undaunted by criticism that his participation in this scheme did not become his role as a public official, De Pasquale—then an associate justice of Rhode Island's Sixth Judicial District Court—declared that he would rather give up his political career than betray his sentiments for Italy. In early January 1936 he even endorsed a resolution against a prospective embargo on U.S. oil exports to Italy that Representative Orazio Petrarca had introduced in the state's General Assembly. Later De Pasquale attended a ball that celebrated Italy's conquest of Ethiopia and the proclamation of a Fascist empire in eastern Africa.<sup>6</sup>

But De Pasquale's alignment with Mussolini did not long survive the outbreak of World War II. As soon as Italy declared war on France in June 1940, De Pasquale disavowed Fascism, and he reiterated his rejection of Il Duce's regime immediately after Italy's declaration of war against the United States on 11 December 1941.<sup>7</sup>

One of the most prominent Italian American leaders in Providence in the years between the two world wars, De Pasquale was elected to Rhode Island's General Assembly in 1914, was named as a delegate to the national conventions of the Democratic party in 1920, 1924, and 1928, was selected as an assistant attorney general of Rhode Island in 1923, served as chairman of the Democratic State Committee from 1924 to 1928, was elected to the Rhode Island Senate in 1934, and was appointed to a judgeship of the state's Judicial District Court in 1935. The political journey of this important figure—a journey from an anti-Fascist stand in 1929, to support for Mussolini's expansionism in Ethiopia in the mid-1930s, to the rebuke of Il Duce's entry into World War II in 1940—well epitomized the shifts of allegiance and changing attitude toward Fascism of most Italian Americans in Providence.<sup>8</sup>



Located primarily on Federal Hill, the Italian American community of Providence took shape only at the beginning of the twentieth century. As few as 1,519 Italians lived in the city in 1890, but their number increased in the following decades as newcomers from southern Italy joined and outnumbered the early settlers from the northern areas around Genoa and Lucca. Providence was home to 6,256 Italians in 1900, 17,305 in 1910, and 19,239 in 1920. Ten years later a total of 53,635 Italian immigrants and their children resided in the city and accounted for more than 20 percent of its population.<sup>9</sup>

Several Italian Americans gained professional status as lawyers or physicians; others made a living by providing services for their fellow ethnics as shopkeepers, bakers, or hotel or restaurant owners; still others worked in municipal or state patronage jobs, usually lower-level, secured through political connections; a few became entrepreneurs.



At the corner of Spruce and Lily Streets, Federal Hill, Providence, circa 1940. Photo by John Hutchins Cady. RIHS Collection (RHi C120 399).

But most in the community found employment in the metal, textile, or jewelry industries or in the building trades. According to 1925 statistics, 51.6 percent worked as unskilled or semiskilled laborers, 20.4 percent were employed in skilled jobs, 12.5 percent were in low-level white-collar occupations, and only 6.2 percent enjoyed high-level white-collar positions. Italian Americans were still disproportionately concentrated among the city's unskilled workers and underrepresented in clerical, professional, and managerial occupations as late as 1930.<sup>10</sup>

Since most of the immigrants and their offspring belonged to the working class, Providence's Italian Americans were responsive to the campaigns of the labor movement. Socialism and anarchism also made inroads into Federal Hill. The reaction to the establishment of the Fascist dictatorship in Italy, as well as to the controversial trial, conviction, and execution of fellow-ethnic anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti—who were arrested on charges of murder in 1920 and electrocuted seven years later—helped revitalize the Left in Providence's "little Italy" in the mid-1920s after a decline of radicalism in the wake of the Red Scare of the early postwar years.<sup>11</sup>

Yet Fascism enjoyed a large following among Italian Americans in Providence before World War II. The anniversaries of both the founding of the Italian Fascist Party and Il Duce's rise to power soon became major celebrations in the city's little Italy. A local *fascio* (Fascist club) called Vittorio Veneto was established on 25 November 1923, roughly one year after Mussolini became prime minister, and a *fascio femminile* (Fascist women's auxiliaries club), Vittoria Colonna, was organized in 1926. Remarkably, as late as June 1929, six months before the Department of State had the Italian govern-

ment dissolve the Fascist League of North America and the *fasci* network that this organization controlled in the United States, there were only four *fasci femminili* in the country, for Fascism's disregard for women—whose roles were generally confined to those of housewives and mothers, both in Italy and in the United States—was notori-

ous. That one of these *fasci femminili* was in Providence shows how widespread pro-Fascist feelings were among the city's Italian Americans.<sup>12</sup>

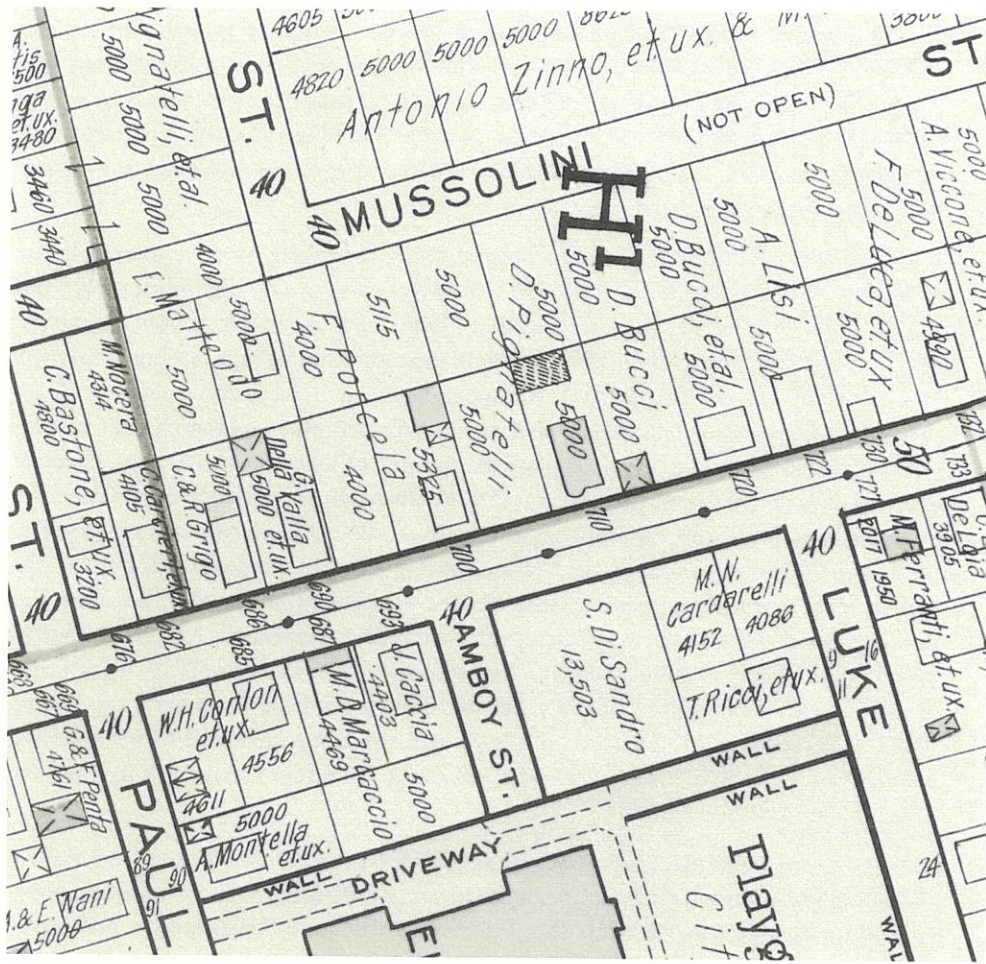
The leaders of both the men's and the women's Fascist organizations in Providence belonged to various social classes. The founding fathers of the *fascio* Vittorio Veneto included an engineer, Luigi Viccarone; a journalist, Vincenzo De Orchis; a teacher, Domenico Lombardi; a grocer, Francesco Salzillo; and three laborers, Nicola Marinelli, Giuseppe Di Iorio, and Emilio Mattia. Likewise, working-class women such as Ilaria Martella Buonanno, Amelia Marchetti, and Ida Scotti sat on the executive committee of the *fascio femminile* along with Sofia Vervena and Teresa Castallo, whose husbands were, respectively, the president of the Columbus Exchange Bank and a prominent physician.<sup>13</sup>

In 1926 the city's Italian Americans took part in a nationwide campaign that required immigrants to each donate one dollar to their mother country. This donation was to help Mussolini's government pay the debt that Italy had incurred for United States financing of its military machinery during World War I. The Italian ambassador in Washington received \$1,215 from Providence. Little as it was as a contribution toward what Italy needed, the sum was evidence of the Italian Americans' attachment to their native land. The community provided much greater financial support for the Fascist regime a year later, when during the first three months of 1927 it purchased Italian bonds for more than two million lire (\$105,263) to strengthen Il Duce's regime by stabilizing the lira's exchange rate.<sup>14</sup>

Italian Americans in Providence also celebrated Mussolini's 1929 covenant with the Catholic Church. After the 1929 demise of the Fascist League of North America, which marked the disbandment of Providence's local *fasci* as well, they even tried to reestablish that organization under a new name. Moreover, in 1933 Italian Americans successfully pressured Providence's Board of Aldermen into changing the name of Hassan Street to Mussolini Street and that of Arthur Avenue to Balbo Avenue, the latter to honor Italo Balbo, Il Duce's minister of aviation, who had just led a 24-airplane transatlantic flight from Italy to Chicago in a propaganda stunt that aimed to show off Italy's technological achievements under Mussolini.<sup>15</sup>

Even traditional Italian American festivities were imbued with Fascist references. Columbus Day, for instance, became an opportunity to celebrate the alleged achievements of Il Duce's government. As late as October 1939, a month after the outbreak of World War II, Mussolini's supporters staged a protest against the Providence City Council's decision to forbid participants in the Columbus Day parade to give the Fascist salute.<sup>16</sup>

The climax of pro-Fascist support in Providence came with the Ethiopian War. Roughly eighty local Italian American associations came out in defense of Italy's supposed rights to a colonial empire even before Mussolini launched his attack on the African country. The Providence community also collected \$37,132.04 for the Italian Red Cross; cutting across class lines, the lists of contributors published in the *Italian Echo* included jewelry manufacturers such as Vincent Sorrentino and Salvatore Chiappinelli, professionals like pharmacist Raffaele De Angelis, and common laborers who could afford to donate no more than a dollar. In addition, Italian Americans sent their wedding rings, other gold objects, and postcards made of copper to the Italian government to support the Fascist regime's war effort and defy the economic sanctions that the League of Nations had imposed on Italy for its invasion of Ethiopia. Total donations from Providence amounted to more than a hundred pounds of gold, a remarkable outpouring in Depression times for a community with numerous destitute workers. The city's Italian Americans also participated in a successful nationwide letter-writing campaign to lobby Congress against restricting the exports of U.S. oil, trucks, and scrap iron to Italy.<sup>17</sup>



Detail of plate 26 in Plat Book of Providence  
(Philadelphia: G. M. Hopkins Company, 1937).  
RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7476).

A parade with black-shirted Fascists, uniformed veterans of World War I, and ladies in Red Cross uniforms hailed the fall of Addis Ababa in May 1936. But the pro-Fascist activities of Italian Americans in Providence did not end with Italy's conquest of Ethiopia. In May 1937 more than two thousand people crowded the Uptown Theatre to celebrate the first anniversary of the proclamation of the Italian Empire. The day became a major festivity for the community and was still observed in 1940, on the eve of the entrance of the Fascist regime into World War II.<sup>18</sup>



Both before and after the outbreak of hostilities in Europe in September 1939, Italian Americans mobilized in a fruitless attempt to prevent Congress from amending the U.S. neutrality laws and introducing a "cash and carry" clause that would lift the existing ban on arms sales to belligerent countries and let France and Great Britain purchase military equipment on the U.S. market. As Senator Theodore Francis Green's correspondence reveals, most of the letters sent to congressmen were carbon copies with different signatures at the bottom, demonstrating that a hidden hand had planned the lobbying campaign. The puppeteer of this effort was in fact Ugo Veniero d'Annunzio, the coordinator of Mussolini's propaganda machinery in the United States.<sup>19</sup>

Undaunted by Italy's entry into the conflict in June 1940, some members of the Providence community even intensified their support for their ancestral country. Contributions for the Italian Red Cross were once again collected on Federal Hill. The local chapter of the Federation of the Italian World War Veterans also raised funds to be



sent to Rome, contending that such donations would benefit the widows and orphans of Italian soldiers. In a short time, however, the secretary of state ordered that the Italian World War Veterans end their solicitation, since the organization was closely identified with the Fascist government. In response to the obvious fear that Washington would take the field against Italy, another letter-writing campaign was launched to urge that the United States maintain its neutrality.<sup>20</sup>

Louis J. Cella, a former alderman of Federal Hill's Thirteenth Ward, exhorted Italian Americans to protest the tendency of the U.S. government to side with France and Great Britain in the war. Yet despite his claim that "99 per cent [of Italian Americans] venerate[d]" Mussolini, few members of the Providence community were willing to follow Il Duce after the Fascist declaration of war against France. Indeed, unlike what had happened four years earlier, in 1940 Italian Americans contributed no more than a few hundred dollars to the Italian Red Cross, and the number of letters sent to Senator Green in support of American neutrality significantly declined. In the wake of Italy's attack on France, a remarkable development occurred: other Italian American leaders followed in De Pasquale's footsteps and disavowed their mid-1930s pro-Fascist stand, a stand that had, in turn, replaced an initial hostility toward the policies of Mussolini's regime. For instance, Rhode Island Supreme Court justice Antonio A. Capotosto, who had criticized Rome's sponsorship of the Italian-language schools in Providence in 1929 as an "extra-territorial and indefensible" practice but had then joined De Pasquale in endorsing Italy's annexation of Ethiopia in 1936, now rejected any attachment to his ancestral country, declaring that "a true American, whatever his descent may be, will stand for America and America only."<sup>21</sup>

But it was only Italy's declaration of war against the United States that put a definitive end to the Providence Italian American community's solidarity with the Fascist regime. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Federal Bureau of Investigation designated 2,147 Rhode Island residents of Italian descent as "potential and active hostile individuals," and it conducted raids on Federal Hill to arrest a few suspects and to seize the shortwave radios of Italian citizens. Against this backdrop, not only did Italian Americans rush to purchase U.S. defense bonds, but a crowd of more than three thousand unnaturalized Italian immigrants stormed the headquarters of the State Defense Council in hope of being allowed to apply for American citizenship.<sup>22</sup>

In order to demonstrate the unqualified patriotism of Italian Americans toward the United States, Providence's sole Italian-language newspaper—the former *Rhode Island Echo*, now renamed *L'Eco d'America*—volunteered to cease publication. Significantly, both the *Rhode Island Echo* and *L'Eco d'America* had rejoiced in Italy's initial military victories in World War II and had echoed Fascist war propaganda.<sup>23</sup>

Commenting in 1942 on the rising Italian American demand for defense bonds, Renzo Sereno, an American intelligence official of Italian ancestry, maintained that former Fascist sympathizers were "led to believe that if they buy bonds they also purchase personal security through an operation which, in their minds, smacks of bribery." This observation almost certainly applied to some bond buyers, although it can hardly be assumed that the rejection of Fascism on the part of most of Providence's Italian Americans who had supported Mussolini was necessarily a matter of mere expediency.<sup>24</sup>



Prominent anti-Fascist exiles such as Don Luigi Sturzo, Massimo Salvadori, and Gaetano Salvemini have contended that ethnic pride and compensation for the discrimination suffered in the United States transformed most Italian Americans into

Fascist sympathizers. According to this view, nationalistic feelings were the backbone of Italian Americans' allegiance to Mussolini. In particular, Italy's aggressive foreign policy under the Fascist regime met their demands for the recognition of their ancestral country as a great power, which in turn uplifted the image of their ethnic minority in the United States.<sup>25</sup>

Nationalist World War I veterans such as Captain Angelo Martella played a prominent role in the birth of the Fascist movement in Providence. Martella was one of the founders of the city's Fascist club and became its assistant secretary. Another of the founders of the *fascio*, Vincenzo De Orchis, had been a volunteer in the Italian army during the war. The club itself was named Vittorio Veneto after the place that witnessed the victory of Italian troops against the Austrian army in World War I.<sup>26</sup>

Among the self-assigned goals of the city's *fascio* was the protection of Italian Americans (as the *Italian Review* put it) "from secret organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, which are spreading prejudice against them." Indeed, in the 1920s Italian Americans perceived Rhode Island's Klan as a menace, since that nativist organization targeted Catholics both through physical violence and through attempts at curtailing the autonomy of their parochial schools.<sup>27</sup>

Nationalism and anti-Italian prejudice intertwined in De Pasquale's experience as well. On the one hand, as a delegate to the 1920 National Democratic Convention, he introduced a resolution in favor of Italy's annexation of the port of Fiume in western Croatia. He therefore challenged the stand of Democratic president Woodrow Wilson, who opposed this solution to the diplomatic controversy between Yugoslavia and Italy that had exploded at the peace conference following the end of World War I. De Pasquale was also a member of the committee that welcomed General Armando Diaz to Providence when the victorious commander in chief of the Italian army in World War I visited the city in December 1921, rousing the enthusiasm of the Italian American community. On the other hand, De Pasquale's political career was hindered by anti-Italian discrimination. In January 1929 Democratic officials in Providence decided to nominate Ellis Yatman, rather than De Pasquale, to the Municipal Court, despite the fact that De Pasquale, a lawyer (as was Yatman), was also the sitting chairman of the party's state committee. A year later, after De Pasquale had been forced out of the state chairmanship, the local Democratic establishment refused to support him for a seat on the Probate Court. The Italian-language press, both in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, charged that such decisions reflected a deep-seated prejudice against Italian Americans in the Democratic party.<sup>28</sup>

The charge was not an exaggeration. Commenting on De Pasquale's political marginalization, Patrick Henry Quinn—Rhode Island's representative in the Democratic National Committee—warned in 1930 that his party could no longer thrust aside politicians of foreign ancestry, since "the so-called Yankee Democrats are not sufficient in number to turn this State one way or the other." Along with Thomas P. McCoy, Quinn led a faction of the state Democratic organization that sympathized with the Italian Americans' claims for political recognition in an effort to gain that community's support. Quinn's strategy was opposed, however, by another faction of Rhode Island Democrats, headed by Theodore Francis Green and Senator Peter G. Gerry. As a result, both parties continued to limit their recognition of Italian Americans. For example, although residents of Italian birth or parentage made up more than 20 percent of Providence's population in 1930, individuals of Italian ancestry accounted for only 17 percent of the members of the city's Republican ward committees and 12 percent of the Democratic ward committees in 1933.<sup>29</sup>

Until 1928 Rhode Islanders were prohibited from voting in city council elections unless they owned \$134 worth of property, a device by which the Yankee establishment avoided sharing power with immigrant groups, at least on the local level. Since most of the predominantly working-class residents of Providence's little Italy could not meet the property qualification, this restriction contributed to keeping Italian Americans (as it kept those of other nationality groups as well) outside the political process, and to nourishing their awareness of being discriminated against. A majority of Italian Americans could vote in mayoral elections, but the real political power in the state's cities lay not with mayors but with city councils. Before 1928 about 60 percent of those eligible to vote for mayor in Providence were excluded from voting for candidates to the city council. In 1926, for instance, only 39.5 percent of the voters who participated in the mayoral election in the city's Ninth Ward—81.2 percent of whose foreign-born population was of Italian origin in 1925—were also entitled to cast their ballots in the city council election.<sup>30</sup>

In addition, the Irish long controlled the lower ranks of the Democratic party, and except for a few token appointments and candidacies, they kept Italian Americans at the margins of the political establishment at least until the so-called Bloodless Revolution of 1935, when the Democrats gained full control of the state administration for the first time since the turn of the century. But even after this coup, De Pasquale and other Federal Hill Democratic leaders failed—to the great disappointment of their fellow ethnics—to persuade Democratic governor Theodore Francis Green to appoint Ernest Santangini, an engineer of Italian ancestry, to the position of state commissioner of public works.<sup>31</sup>

Discrimination characterized the religious experience of Italian Americans as well. The early establishment of Catholic national parishes with Italian priests—the first, Holy Ghost Parish, formed in 1889, was followed by three additional Italian parishes by 1920—prevented the Irish clergy from antagonizing and alienating parishioners of Italian descent in Providence. Matthew Harkins, bishop of Providence from 1887 until 1921, was a great supporter of national parishes to accommodate Italian immigrants. Yet he, too, shared the notorious anti-Italian prejudice of the Irish clergy; for instance, providing an example of what historian Peter D'Agostino has called “the segregation of Italian clergy in the Church in America,” he opposed the appointment of Father Antonio Bove, the pastor of St. Ann's, to the position of “domestic prelate” on the grounds that the Italian priest was a “stranger.”<sup>32</sup>

Ethnic intolerance was widespread in the everyday lives of Italian Americans. *L'Eco del Rhode Island* contended that some contracts for the sale of real estate included clauses that prevented the owners from renting out their properties to blacks and Italians. Many complained that local newspapers were promoting anti-Italian sentiments by the emphasis they placed on the involvement of gangsters of Italian ancestry in organized crime, and by their tendency to associate people of Italian descent with illegal activities. Italian Americans deeply resented the prevalent American view, expressed in the restrictive legislation on immigration in the 1920s, that they were an inferior and undesirable nationality group, unassimilable into American society.<sup>33</sup>

Prejudice especially affected Italian Americans in the workplace. Frank Sgambato recalled that “There was an opening for a hand-twister's job in the Esmond Mill. . . . The boss in the finishing room wouldn't transfer me to the weaving room. . . . I knew it was a skilled craft; the job was more or less noted to be an English job, they had very few mixed nationalities, and an Italo-American going into a twisting job was a little hard to accept.” Fellow ethnic Luigi Nardella similarly remembered that “Italians . . . were in the majority in the mills. [But] they suffered discrimination. People said ‘Dago, you might



*Holy Ghost Church, Providence. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7471).*

as well say 'Nigger.' When Italians first moved to Atwells Avenue they couldn't walk the streets. They'd get pelted with everything, eggs, tomatoes. They had to organize to defend themselves."<sup>34</sup>

Working-class Italian Americans were not the only ones to suffer discrimination; those in the community's upper social strata encountered it as well. The discriminatory exclusions that the latter often faced in their business and social lives was among the reasons that led to the establishment of the Aurora Club, a civic association for Providence professionals of Italian ancestry, in 1931.<sup>35</sup>

Discrimination on ethnic grounds made Italian Americans aware of their common national origin, and identification with their ancestral country fostered those national-

istic sentiments that Fascism subsequently used to gain a large following on Federal Hill. The Providence community celebrated Italy's annexation of Libya in 1912 as a success that partly wiped out the ignominy of the 1896 defeat of the Italian army at the hands of Ethiopian emperor Menelik II at Adowa. Along with De Pasquale, Italian Americans rallied almost unanimously to support Italy's claims on Fiume. Members of the community petitioned their congressmen in this effort and raised more than two thousand dollars to finance flamboyant Italian poet Gabriele d'Annunzio's military expedition that briefly occupied the Yugoslavian port between 1919 and 1920. Moreover, in the 1920 presidential election the Democratic party lost 15 percentage points from their 1916 showing in the heavily Italian Fourteenth Representative District after *L'Eco del Rhode Island* urged Italian American voters to vote for the Republican candidate in retaliation for the Wilson administration's policy on the issue of Fiume.<sup>36</sup>

Nationalism caused De Pasquale to depart from his initial anti-Fascist stand as early as 1926. At the end of the previous year, U.S. secretary of the treasury Andrew W. Mellon and Italian minister of finance Count Giuseppe Volpi di Misurata had signed an agreement for settling Italy's war debt, an agreement that resulted in the cancellation of nearly four-fifths of the sum Mussolini's government owed the United States. The leniency of the Mellon-Volpi Pact stirred up the opposition of several Democratic congressmen, who denounced Washington's appeasement of the Fascist dictatorship. To gain congressional confirmation of the pact, pro-Fascist Italian American organizations launched a nationwide campaign that played on nationalistic feelings in urging members to plead with their senators and representatives for ratification. In Rhode Island, the state's Grand Lodge of the Order Sons of Italy in America spearheaded these lobbying efforts, which eventually contributed to congressional approval of the war-debt settlement. The most prominent lobbyist was De Pasquale, who resorted to all his influence as chairman of the state's Democratic Committee to gain Senator Peter Gerry's support for the pact.<sup>37</sup>



It was against this backdrop of widespread nationalistic sentiment that Italian Americans embraced Fascism, especially at the time of the Ethiopian War, for by apparently turning their native land into a mighty country that commanded respect in the United States, Mussolini was seen as enhancing America's respect for Italian Americans as well. Indeed, in supporting Italy's annexation of Ethiopia, Judge Antonio Capotosto rhetorically asked whether his ethnic minority was "still to be considered as a primitive and transitory element in the life of this country"; after the successful outcome of the Ethiopian War, he said, at least "we take pride in our ancestry." Likewise, in an article about the Italian Americans' outburst of enthusiasm for Italy's victory against Ethiopia, the *Italian Echo* argued that "our people have never been more pleased with being Italian than they are today."<sup>38</sup>

Considerations of this sort were not confined to the ethnic press and such *prominenti* as Capotosto. Albert Peter Russo, in his historical autobiography, recalled Providence's Italian American community in the mid-1930s: "In Italy, Benito Mussolini strutted about basking in the glory of conquests over hapless North African Nations. Strains of the song, '*Facciata [sic] Nera*,' bolstered the country's ego, spreading overseas. Thousands of transplanted Italians rejoiced over the lyrics. Vestiges of pride in the land of their birth lingered with them." Another Italian American, Mary Merolla Hansen, had similar recollections: "The Italian communities in Rhode Island admired Mussolini of Italy during the 1930s. Local Italian-American citizens viewed him as a man who would save Italy from poverty and depression. . . . News of what was happening in Italy reached Knightsville, giving the Italian community a sense of pride and happiness that things

were going well back home. When Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, Mussolini was considered a hero. . . . Old timers could be heard saying ‘Let’s pay back the Ethiopians for what they did to us,’ referring to the atrocities done to the Italian soldiers by the Ethiopians during the Italian-Ethiopian War of 1896.”<sup>39</sup>

University of Trieste professor Pierpaolo Luzzato Fegiz, who was sent to the United States on a lecture tour by Il Duce’s Ministry of Popular Culture in 1938, made observations not unlike those of Mary Merolla Hansen in his description of how Providence’s Italian Americans responded to Fascist propaganda. Fegiz found that references to the successful Ethiopian War struck a sensitive chord in the community. He also reported that Italian American moviegoers enthusiastically hailed a film on the reclamation of the Pontine Marshes. Members of the community were greatly disappointed, however, with paintings that depicted reclaimers as barefoot and untidy, for such images of poverty did not appeal to Italian American ethnic pride.<sup>40</sup>

An editorial about Italo Balbo’s transatlantic flight in the *Italian Echo* reveals how the alleged attainments of the Fascist regime enhanced the self-esteem of Italian Americans. That flight, said the *Echo*, “is the answer to the claim that Latins are romantically given to garish display and extravagant sentiment. When those airplanes came winging over Lake Michigan it proved once again that the Latin, at least the Italian offshoot, is capable of persistency, concentration and stolidness when the occasion requires it. If those soldiers of Italy, grimly charging up the stony flanks of the Alps in the teeth of machine gun fire and the blast of Austrian siege guns, didn’t prove this, and if proof is still needed, Fascist Italy is supplying it in abundance.”<sup>41</sup>

Admiring recognition of the transatlantic flight was not limited to the Italian American community. Preceding the *Echo*’s editorial was a salute to “Italy’s epic air armada” and Balbo’s “triumphal journey” by the *Providence Journal*. Rhode Island’s acting governor Robert Quinn not only congratulated the Fascist flyer but even tried to persuade him to stop in Providence with his squadron on his way back to Italy. With the American establishment showing admiration of this sort for Balbo, Italian Americans no longer seemed an inferior immigrant group, a marginalized minority in their adoptive land.<sup>42</sup>

Not even the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia marred the image of a new and powerful Italy that contributed to improving the status of Italian Americans in the interwar years. After the Italian army occupied Addis Ababa, the *Providence Journal* contrasted the “demonstrated ineffectiveness” of the League of Nations, whose sanctions had failed to prevent Italy’s victory, with “Mussolini’s seven-month campaign of steady progress and yesterday’s spectacular triumph,” which was achieved “despite the much-heralded unfriendliness of the African climate in the rainy season, despite the absence of modern highways . . . , despite the threat of League of Nations reprisals.” The *Journal* further flattered the Italian government by adding that “the timely entrance of the Italian troops . . . was marked by Roman precision and efficiency.” Although “Addis Ababa has been in the past a squalid town,” the paper declared that “under Italian control its material improvement is assured,” since Italy was “a Power abundantly trained to the carrying through of great civic enterprises.” An editorial in the *Providence Evening Bulletin* similarly acknowledged that “in seven months, the Italians have accomplished what military experts thought at the outset to be impossible—victory over one of the world’s harshest territories.”<sup>43</sup>



But the ethnic empowerment of Italian Americans through Fascism could be effective only as long as Mussolini remained popular in the United States as a whole, as he was in the 1920s and 1930s, when he was highly regarded as a Bolshevik-buster and a mod-

ernizer. With the Italian intervention in World War II, Mussolini's honeymoon with the U.S. government and American public opinion came to an end.<sup>44</sup>

By that time the identification of Italian Americans with the alleged accomplishments of Fascism had evolved from an asset into a liability. In denouncing Italy's 1940 entry into World War II as "a direct menace to the most vital interests of America," the *Providence Journal* warned the Italian American community that "There can be no compromise. No Italian national interest or aspiration can be pleaded by anyone in this country when the issue is so vital to America as this brutal threat of Nazi force. The issue is America, the American way of life, the moral and political order of Christianity and democracy. On this we must unite. Who does not is a traitor to the nation."<sup>45</sup>

Because of their national ancestry and their previously blatant pro-Fascist sympathies, Italian Americans were now regarded as possible fifth columnists at Mussolini's beck and call. The 1940 Smith Act, which prescribed the registration and fingerprinting of foreigners who lived in the United States, seemed to be the starting point of a witch hunt targeting unnaturalized Italian immigrants and, potentially, U.S. citizens of Italian extraction as well. As rumors circulated that workers of Italian descent were being dismissed from their jobs or turned down for new openings on the grounds of their alleged loyalty to a foreign and hostile government, the members of Providence's community hurried to distance themselves from Il Duce. The Dante Alighieri School was disbanded because of its ties to Mussolini's regime, and even the 1940 Columbus Day celebration was canceled "because of the complications of the foreign situation."<sup>46</sup>

Author Ubaldo U. M. Pesaturo provided a case in point of the Italian Americans' shift of allegiance. The 1936 edition of his anecdotal history of Italian Americans in Rhode Island, published in the wake of Italy's annexation of Ethiopia, was dedicated "To Benito Mussolini . . . Creator of the Modern Roman Empire." Conversely, the dedication of the second edition, which came out in 1940, after Italy had entered World War II, read "To my fellow citizens of the Great American Republic whose cooperation and good opinion I cherish." Moreover, the latter volume omitted the references to Italian Americans' overt pro-Fascist activities, which had bulked large in the previous edition. Remarkably, the book's biography of Vincenzo De Orchis was deleted, and the reader wishing to find information about the cofounder of the now disbanded *fascio* Vittorio Veneto was advised to refer to the 1936 edition.<sup>47</sup>

The lot of the Fascist toponyms on Federal Hill after the attack on Pearl Harbor further demonstrates that Fascism operated primarily as an ideology of ethnic compensation among Italian Americans. On 17 January 1942 the name of Mussolini Street was changed to Russo Street in honor of Albert Russo, a Rhode Islander who was serving in the U.S. Navy when he became the first Italian American from the state to die in World War II. The new name was proposed by Frank Prete, the alderman who had sponsored the earlier name change when Hassan Street became Mussolini Street in 1933. On the other hand, Balbo Avenue kept its name until 1958, when it became De Pasquale Avenue. The Italian Americans' identification with Il Duce had clearly become a mark of shame by early 1942, but this was not the case with Balbo. The Providence community did not refrain from mourning when Balbo died at the beginning of Italy's participation in World War II, as the *Rhode Island Echo* recalled once again how his "legendary" 1933 transatlantic flight had marked "one of the most beautiful pages in the history of modern-times aviation." The supposedly heroic aviator remained a source of great pride, a public figure who could uplift the ethnic ego of Italian Americans through the war and into the postwar years.<sup>48</sup>



For all the community's repudiation of its earlier allegiances, admiration for Mussolini and Fascist Italy remained strong for many Italian Americans. As late as August 1942, when Italy and the United States were at war with each other, a few, such as shoeshiner Federico Dellegatta, were not afraid to let other Americans know that they were proud to be Italian because "Italy was winning the war." Even when celebrating Mussolini's fall in a palace coup on 25 July 1943, many Italian Americans revealed that they still held Il Duce in high regard. "Though Mussolini's resignation was a sign for general rejoicing," the *Providence Journal* reported, "it too was tinged with a measure of sadness by those who recalled his early ascension to power and the measures he invoked to bring modern civilization to Italy." As one Italian American put it, "Mussolini had done much for Italy" because he had "raised her to a world power"; his only mistake was "his attempt to win by the sword what he felt rightfully belonged to Italy."<sup>49</sup>

When the news of Italy's surrender to the United States reached Federal Hill on 8 September 1943, a resident, Maria Russo, told the *Providence Journal* that "it would have been better if Italy had never gone to war." One might easily suggest that it would have been better not only for the Italian people but for Italian Americans as well. Haunted by suspicions about their potential disloyalty toward the United States, the residents of Providence's little Italy were at risk of losing almost overnight that rise in their social standing to which both Italy's supposed achievements under Mussolini and their own identification with Il Duce had contributed.<sup>50</sup>

In 1926 the Italian ambassador in Washington reported to Mussolini that the ethnic pride of Italian Americans throughout the United States was growing as a result of Fascist accomplishments. In this view, as historian R. J. B. Bosworth has put it, "with the spirit of Mussolini to sustain them, emigrants could walk tall as never before." Another scholar, John P. Diggins, has remarked that Italian Americans were "ripe for fascism" because of their "inferiority complex" and "nostalgic nationalism." Indeed, the timing and causes of the Providence Italian Americans' flirtation with Mussolini were not different from those of their fellow ethnics across the country. After suffering from anti-Italian bigotry for decades, the nation's Italian Americans embraced Fascism as an ideology of ethnic compensation that empowered them, but they turned away from Mussolini as soon as their identification with his regime revived the discrimination they had struggled so long to escape.<sup>51</sup>



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## The Providence Marine Corps of Artillery in the Civil War

CYNTHIA COMERY FERGUSON

Much of the South cheered when William Sprague, a Democrat, was elected governor of Rhode Island in early 1860. Southerners pointed to the Democratic victory in a northern Republican state as further evidence that the North was divided on the issue of secession. They were wrong.

Although the abolition movement was indeed weak in Rhode Island and Sprague's win was due in large part to his conservative views on the issue, the former commander of the Providence Marine Corps of Artillery was firmly committed to maintaining the integrity of the Union.<sup>1</sup> Rhode Islanders shared this commitment and later that year voted overwhelmingly for the Republican presidential candidate, Abraham Lincoln. They then watched in horror as one state after another seceded, and as nearly half of the United States Army—including dozens of high-ranking officers—pledged loyalty to the South.

Lincoln believed that until his inauguration on 4 March—four months after his election—he could do or say little to stem the secession movement. In the meantime, incumbent president James Buchanan insisted that he lacked the legal authority to coerce the seceding states into remaining within the Union. “A feeling of alarm that well-nigh grew into terror was developed throughout the North among the loyal citizens, and was fully experienced in Providence,” wrote Welcome Arnold Greene in his 1886 history of the city.<sup>2</sup>

In December and again in January, Governor Sprague offered Buchanan the services of his state militia, but the president flatly rejected both offers. “It was a time that tried men's souls,” Greene noted. “We of the North were lying supinely on our backs, held by reverence to the forms of the law, while the executive, whose duty it was to enforce the laws and protect the country, was allowing the vulture of secession . . . to tear out its vitals.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite the rejected offers of help, Sprague ordered sixty-four new overcoats for the PMCA and urged his former battery to intensify training for what he feared lay ahead. Like others, the governor remained convinced that a military conflict was inevitable. “The thunder of your guns breaks upon the stillness of the air like a voice of superhuman warning,” the Right Reverend Bishop Thomas M. Clark told the more than one hundred PMCA officers and men who participated in a parade and ceremony marking Washington's Birthday on 22 February 1861. “Days of terrible contests and nights of weary watching may await you. The turf may be your dying bed and the drum your requiem. . . . The two great virtues of a soldier are courage and obedience. I do not believe that you will be wanting in either.”<sup>4</sup>



*The Benefit Street arsenal, headquarters of the Providence Marine Corps of Artillery. 1886 photo. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7475).*

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In fact, it was almost with relief that the PMCA and other Rhode Islanders learned of the 12 April attack on Fort Sumter, a federal outpost in the Charleston, South Carolina, harbor. Even before Lincoln issued a call to arms three days later, Sprague offered the services of an artillery battery from the PMCA and a regiment of 1,000 volunteer foot



William Sprague. Ambrotype portrait, circa 1860.  
RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 4255).

soldiers, under the command of Ambrose E. Burnside, to defend the capital. Sprague himself would accompany the Rhode Island regiment as Burnside's volunteer aide.

In his 15 April proclamation Lincoln called for 75,000 men for a period of ninety days. The maximum term of service a militia could be sent outside its own state. Just hours later, at an emergency meeting held that night at the Benefit Street arsenal, 75 PMCA members eagerly signed a pledge to serve, while hundreds of jubilant city residents milled about outside. "The greatest excitement was manifested, not only inside but outside," noted the PMCA clerk in his report. "People crowded in and around in every direction as far as they could hear or see, manifesting great intent in the proceeding, occasionally cheering for the country, the flag and the battery. Never was there so much confusion in and about the arsenal as there was during the whole time until the [battery] left for the seat of war."<sup>5</sup>

Within days many more would sign the pledge, far more than the 145 needed for the battery of light artillery that would depart on 18 April under the command of Captain Charles H. Tompkins, the PMCA's colonel.<sup>6</sup> In full dress, Tompkins's battery filed through the massive doors of the armory and, with hundreds of cheering spectators in tow, marched down Benefit Street to Fox Point. There the men boarded the *Empire State*, the steamer that would take them—along with their hundred horses and smoothbore cannon—to Jersey City, the first stop on their journey to the nation's capital. They were the first troops of any state to leave for the war.<sup>7</sup>

As their boat pulled out of the harbor and headed down Narragansett Bay, the men heard a parting cannon salute fired off Fields Point by their friends in the PMCA. "Almost every vessel in the vicinity was covered with spectators and every available standing place had its occupant," reported the *Providence Journal* the following day. "It presented a spectacle such as has not been witnessed in the lifetime of a majority of those who beheld it."<sup>8</sup>

From Jersey City the battery marched to Easton, Pennsylvania, where it exchanged its smoothbore guns for James rifled cannon, the first ever used by American artillery men. "They fire with great exactness," a private noted in a letter to the PMCA. "They were made for Alabama but were never delivered because the state seceded."<sup>9</sup>

The men remained in Easton for a week of drilling—impressing regular army officers with their skill and dexterity—and then moved on to Washington. Marching gallantly down Pennsylvania Avenue on 2 May, the battery halted in front of the White House to receive high praise from Lincoln, who privately

expressed great relief at seeing the uniformed men within the city. The PMCA was the first volunteer artillery battery to reach the nation's capital.<sup>11</sup>




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*Fearful of a strong centralized government and a powerful standing army, the Founding Fathers saw the citizen-soldier and local militia organizations as the greatest deterrent to tyrannical rule. This belief was so widely held by most Americans of the time that protection of the militia system was guaranteed in the Second Amendment to the Constitution.*

*The American militia system was initially a form of military training, with all men of a certain age required to serve in units operated by the states or locales within them. As the compulsory system waned in the late eighteenth century, independent volunteer groups grew in both number and military value.*

*In 1801 the governor of Rhode Island granted the Providence Marine Corps of Artillery its independent charter. As in most volunteer organizations, its members were prominent residents of the community. They elected their own officers and provided their own, often gaudy uniforms. Parades and banquets filled many hours, but the elite volunteer militia also produced the state's finest troops and military officers.*

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*A second detachment of the First Rhode Island Regiment departs from Exchange Place, Providence, en route to Washington, 24 April 1861. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1692).*

With a regular army of fewer than 17,000 men, most of them stationed on the western frontier, Lincoln soon saw the need for additional volunteers. In his second call on 3 May, the president asked for a pledge of three years or the duration of the war, whichever was shortest.<sup>12</sup> The three-month militia terms of the past would hardly provide the experienced soldiers required in what many now feared was to be a lengthy conflict.

Anticipating the need for more men, Rhode Island began recruiting immediately after the departure of the First Regiment and First Battery in April. Four days after Lincoln's second call, Sprague authorized a second artillery battery—Battery A, under the command of Capt. William H. Reynolds<sup>13</sup>—and the Second Regiment of Rhode Island Volunteers (infantry), commanded by Col. John S. Slocum.

On 22 June, after several weeks of training at Providence's Dexter Training Ground, Battery A and the Second Regiment joined their fellow Rhode Islanders at Camp Sprague, a mile north of Washington. After a brief ceremony there, "the lines were soon dismissed and there was great intermingling, hunting up old acquaintances, shaking hands and getting news from home," reported a private in the First Battery.<sup>14</sup> The men of the First Battery were particularly delighted to see Captain Reynolds, a much-loved and admired officer who had left their unit a month earlier to command Battery A.

## ARTILLERY AND BATTERIES IN THE CIVIL WAR

As in all wars, the mission of the artillery in the Civil War was to let other arms of the service do their jobs by lending massive fire support. A battery of artillery—usually about 100 to 150 men—could produce as much firepower as a regiment of infantry, and it could deliver it at much longer range.

Rifled cannons were just being introduced at the start of the Civil War. The spiral grooves inside a rifle's barrel put a spin on an elongated projectile, making the gun far more accurate than a smoothbore when shooting long distances.

"Most Civil War artillery had a practical range of about a mile," notes Civil War historian Paul Chiles. "At a mile a smoothbore could be aimed to hit a barn; a properly handled rifle could be aimed to hit the barn door." Smoothbores, however, had the advantage of being able to shoot almost any kind of projectile, including rocks when ammunition was depleted.

Artillery batteries in the Civil War operated one or more of the following guns:

**Three-inch ordnance gun:** The lightest and strongest rifled gun, the 3-inch ordnance fired ten-pound projectiles with a range of about a mile. It weighed 1,726 pounds.

**1857 Napoleon:** A smoothbore named after Napoleon III, this gun fired twelve-pound projectiles with a range of about 1,680 yards. It weighed 2,355 pounds. For short ranges in rough country, the Napoleon was preferred to the rifle because it was better at delivering canister—a tin can filled with 27 iron balls tightly packed in sawdust.

**Six-pound smoothbore:** This was the workhorse of the Mexican War, but it was considered obsolete by the time of the Civil War. Its range was 1,523 yards, its total weight 1,784 pounds.

**Ten-pound and twenty-pound Parrott guns:** These rifles were named after their inventor, Robert Parker Parrott. The ten-pound Parrott weighed 890 pounds and was first manufactured in 1860. The twenty-pound Parrott weighed 1,750 pounds and was developed the following year.

A typical Civil War battery had six cannon, each manned by a team of eight. The gunner, who stood directly behind his cannon and in front of his limber box, had overall supervision of the piece, selecting the ammunition and adjusting the aim. The gunner was usually a corporal and typically carried a sidearm. The remaining seven men surrounding the cannon and limber box each performed a specific role, such as cleaning the barrel, firing the gun, or preparing the ammunition. Because of the danger of exploding gunpowder, men serving directly on a piece generally did not carry firearms, but they were usually issued sabers. When in battle position, the six cannon would be lined up in a row eighty-two yards wide, with the captain of the battery in the middle. Behind him was the bugler, who would signal the captain's commands on his horn. Three lieutenants were each assigned a section, or pair of guns, and a fourth lieutenant, positioned in the rear, was responsible for the six caissons (each gun had its own caisson). Eighty to one hundred horses pulled the cannons, caissons, and limber boxes and carried the officers.

Information on Civil War artillery is drawn from Paul Chiles's "The Guns of Antietam" and "Guide to Civil War Field Artillery," both in *Blue and Gray*, holiday issue, 1998. Chiles is an artillery specialist and ranger-historian at Antietam National Battlefield Park.

\* Chiles, "The Guns of Antietam," 22.

On 9 July, during a routine drill, a tragic accident occurred that shook Reynolds to the core. Ammunition in the limber box of one of the cannons exploded, killing two men—Pvt. William E. Bourn and Cpl. Nathan T. Morse—and injuring three others. "For the first time since leaving Providence I was not present at the drill," wrote Reynolds to the PMCA commander, Benjamin F. Remington. "You may have some conception of my feelings as I rode forward to the hospital and there found the mangled bodies of my dead and dying men who had but an hour before left the quarters in good health and spirits. . . . Col. Burnside, Gov. Sprague and Co. Slocum told me that there was no blame or fault with me or my officers, but I feel heart sick. . . . I should not feel as badly as twenty men had been killed in battle and do about this."<sup>15</sup>

Reynolds and his men would see many battles over the next three years, but the First Battery, enlisted for just three months, saw none.<sup>16</sup> It did, however, go to Harpers Ferry with the First Rhode Island Regiment to help Maj. Gen. Robert Patterson dislodge the Confederates under Gen. Joseph E. Johnston. When Johnston's evacuation of Harpers Ferry made further advances pointless, Patterson sent the First Regiment back to Camp Sprague but kept the artillery with him. Patterson and his troops marched easily about in the area of Charleston. Johnston slipped away to report to Gen. Pierre G. T. Beauregard at Manassas. Patterson's inability to detain Johnston would have serious consequences.



The mood at the Union camp on 20 July 1861, the eve of the First Battle of Manassas (or First Bull Run, as it is remembered in the South), was almost jubilation.

The recruits would finally meet their enemy and, they thought, quickly crush it. "Soon had fires burning and coffee cooking in our cups," wrote Pvt. Elisha Rhodes of the Second Rhode Island Regiment, which would be supported the following day by the First Rhode Island. "I enjoyed the evening by the fire and speculating on what might happen on the morrow."<sup>17</sup> Others, however, were more apprehensive, including Rhodes's commanding



*Elisha Hunt Rhodes, who enlisted in the Second Regiment of Rhode Island Volunteers (infantry) as a private, rose to the rank of colonel by the end of the war. Albumen print, circa 1864. Gift of Robert Hunt Rhodes. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7472).*

cer, Colonel Slocum, who reportedly told Colonel Burnside that he fully expected to die in the conflict.

Burnside's brigade—which included Battery A, the two Rhode Island regiments,<sup>18</sup> and two regiments from New Hampshire and New York—was attached to Gen. David Hunter's column. The Second Rhode Island Regiment, followed closely by Battery A, led the advance, and they were the first two units to engage in battle. Among the earliest of the day's casualties was Colonel Slocum, who would die a few days later from wounds he received while leading his troops onto the field.

The battle raged for most of the morning, but by early afternoon there was a lull. Union soldiers smelled victory; civilians, many of them with picnic lunches, cheered them on. But as the battle resumed, and fresh Confederate troops—some of them Johnston's men—arrived, the tide began to turn. Strong Union artillery held the Rebels back for a while, but it was decimated when the Thirty-third Virginia, dressed in blue uniforms and mistaken for battery support, was allowed to come within seventy yards of the Union guns.<sup>19</sup>

The fatal mistake occurred just as Battery A had positioned its guns between two other batteries. "We withdrew with a loss in material of only a caisson, the pole of which was broken in the endeavor to turn to the side hill," wrote Lt. John Albert Monroe. Monroe described the scene of the ensuing Union retreat as "one of indescribable confusion, although there appeared to be no fright or terror in the minds of the men leaving the field. Officers seemed to have lost all identity with their commands; subalterns and even colonels moved along in the scattered crowd as if their work was over and they were wearily seeking the repose of their domiciles."<sup>20</sup>

Battery A was given quarters that night in a privately owned house in nearby Centreville. Exhausted from the day's grueling battle, the men fell quickly to sleep—most of them on floors, porches, and stoops—but were awakened by the late-night return of Pvt. Charles V. Scott, who in the confusion of the retreat had lost contact with his company. To the delight of the battery, Scott had not only survived the battle but had retrieved a precious souvenir. Hitched to the horse he was riding was one of the battery's cannons, a smoothbore that had been sent off the field for lack of ammunition.

While walking through the woods, Scott explained, he had stumbled across the cannon, still hitched to its horses. With the help of some infantrymen who were also astray, the determined Scott brought the piece back to camp. The sight of their lost gun greatly restored the spirits of the disheartened men, and the private was greeted with hearty cheers. The cannon, forever afterward known as the Bull Run Gun, now graces the lawn of the Squantum Club in East Providence.<sup>21</sup>

Although the first major engagement of the Civil War shook the confidence of the North, most historians agree that the battle highlighted what would become a Federal hallmark—good artillery. In the next four years the artillery would emerge as the most efficient part of the Union armies, and the many batteries sent from the arsenal on Benefit Street were among the finest.



Following the departure of Battery A in June 1861, seven additional batteries—Batteries B through H—would leave the arsenal at intervals of less than a month and complete the First Regiment of Rhode Island Light Artillery. In May 1862 the PMCA responded to a plea from President Lincoln by organizing its Tenth Battery, recruited for a three-month term to defend the nation's capital. The First and Tenth Batteries were manned



exclusively by members of the PMCA; Batteries A through H were not, but members of the PMCA were well represented in—and usually commanded—those batteries. Regardless of their affiliation with the PMCA, nearly all of the artillerymen in all ten of the batteries enlisted at the organization’s arsenal. Ledgers with the signatures and occupations of these recruits, many of them still teenagers and some unable to write their own names, remain in the arsenal’s archives.

“By 1863 there had been enlisted for the Light Artillery Regiment, principally at the armory, 1,552 men who left the city under the command of 36 officers,” noted the PMCA clerk. “Four hundred and thirty-five men commanded by 15 officers went forth from our armory to fill the 3rd Regiment R.I. Heavy Artillery. Moreover, twice did the Marine Artillery take the field in defense of the government, with 11 officers and 275 men. . . . Surely our organization may justly lay claim to the title ‘Mother of Rhode Island Batteries.’”<sup>22</sup>

Surely it may, for the arsenal housed not only the recruiting activities but also the drilling and training of these illustrious batteries. A January 1862 entry in the PMCA’s records, detailing the training of one of the batteries, illustrates the arsenal’s busy and productive life throughout the early years of the war:

The 155 men quarter at the Marine Artillery Armory, drilling, eating and sleeping there. Everything is kept in perfect order and the strictest discipline prevails. The kitchen is in the basement and the men pass down there to receive their rations, eating them in the hall above. Meat is served out three times a day and coffee in the morning and tea at night. In the forenoon, squads drill with the pieces, and in the afternoon, the entire corps drills together in marching.<sup>23</sup>

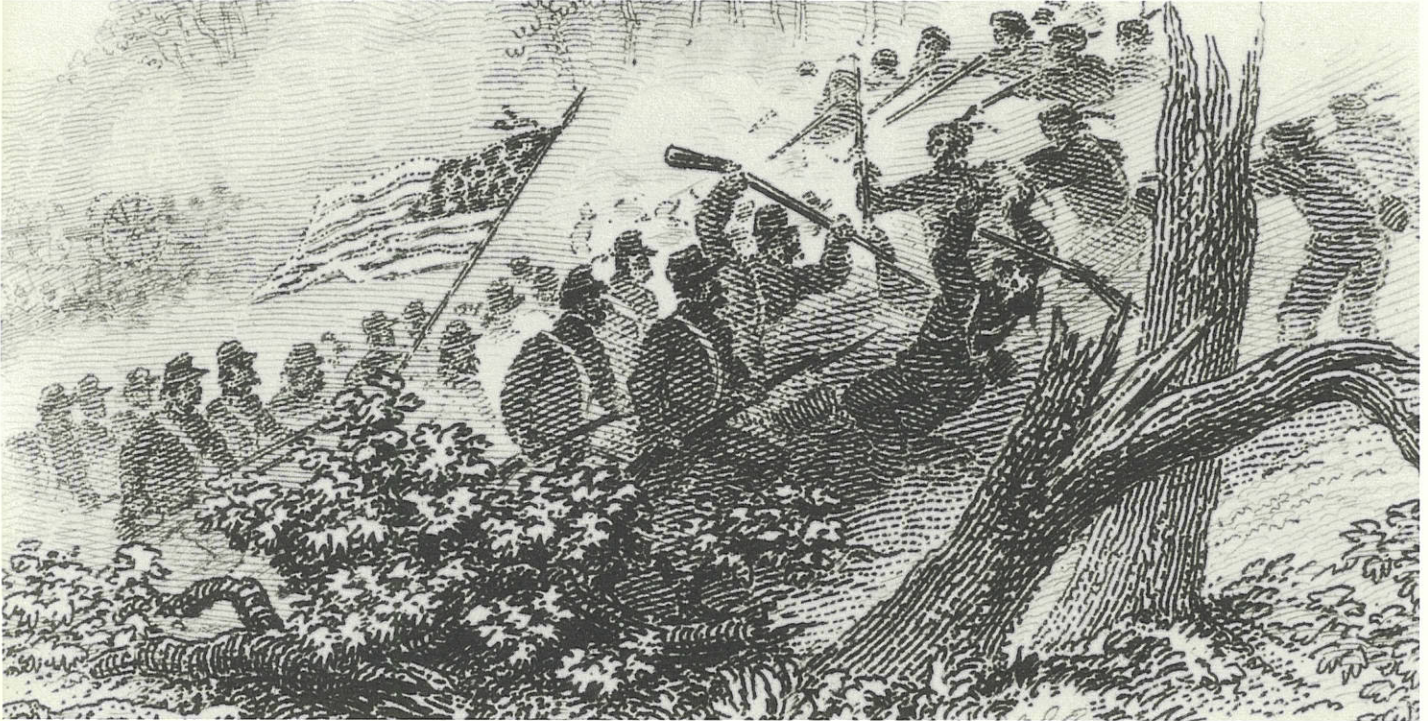
The recruits came from all walks of life, and while most were in their twenties, some were in their forties and others were just out of school. The first batteries drew primarily from Providence and nearby cities, but recruitment later expanded into the state’s more rural areas. Young boys hailing from towns like Foster and Exeter, many having never traveled more than twenty miles from their family farms, eagerly signed on for a journey that would shape their lives. “[They] are tough and muscular, most excellent material to make a serviceable and efficient corps,” noted the PMCA clerk in his records.<sup>24</sup>



At every major battle throughout the war—from the First Bull Run to Appomattox—the Rhode Island batteries would win the respect of all who fought beside them. Emblazoned on their ragged guidons were the names of battlefields, towns, and rivers that bore witness to some of the most horrific engagements in the nation’s history. Among the fiercest was Antietam, a battle remembered as “artillery hell” by Col. Stephen D. Lee, who commanded some of the Rebel guns. In a single day Union casualties were more than double those that would be sustained by American forces at Normandy Beach on D-day eighty-two years later. Batteries A, B, C, D, and G were all there, representing five of the fifty-seven Union batteries engaged in the campaign.

“I have never in my soldier’s life seen such a sight,” wrote infantryman Elisha Rhodes in his description of the battlefield once the fighting had stopped. “The dead and wounded covered the ground. In one spot a rebel officer and 20 men lay near a wreck of a battery. It is said Battery A, 1st Rhode Island Artillery, did this work.”<sup>25</sup> In recognition of Battery A’s bravery and skill at Antietam’s “Bloody Lane,” the uniform of its commanding officer, Capt. John A. Tompkins, is now prominently displayed in the visitors’ center there.<sup>26</sup>

Just three months later, Batteries A, B, C, D, E. and G met at Fredericksburg, Virginia, with Battery B playing a conspicuous role in the ensuing battle. Burnside, who succeeded Gen. George McClellan as commander of the Army of the Potomac, ordered the capture



Engraving illustrating the battle at Gettysburg.  
Published by Virtue, Yonston & Company, circa  
1870. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7473).

of Marye's Heights, despite warnings from Union generals that to attempt this would be "murder, not warfare." "There goes Battery B to hell," yelled men from Battery A as they watched their fellow Rhode Islanders advance, under murderous fire, to within two hundred yards of the famous Sunken Road.<sup>27</sup>

"The battery's position . . . was a perfect hornets' nest," wrote Capt. John G. Hazard. "Minie balls were flying about with a zip and w-w-w, or a thud as they struck; though they flew thick and fast, the men were too busy to dodge. . . . It was remarkable, considering the close action with the enemy, that none of the battery men was killed." "Men never fought more gallantly," wrote D. N. Couch, the major general commanding.<sup>28</sup>

At Gettysburg, the bloodiest battle of the war, batteries A, B, C, E, and G once again brought honor to their small state—and another relic. On 3 July 1863, in fighting described as the "most terrible ever witnessed on this continent," a Rebel shell struck Battery B's fourth gun, killing the two privates who were in the process of loading it. When the damaged cannon was reloaded, the cannonball became lodged in its dented muzzle and, as the piece cooled off, became permanently fixed there. Deemed unserviceable, the cannon—later known as the Gettysburg Gun—was taken off the field. It was displayed in Washington until 1874, when Rhode Island asked that it be returned to Providence. There it was first placed outside the Old State House on North Main Street, then moved in 1904 to the north portico of the new State House on Smith Street.<sup>29</sup>



Back at home the PMCA followed the campaigns and achievements of the Rhode Island batteries and regiments with enormous pride. News of a victory or the return of soldiers always triggered an enthusiastic salute. On very special occasions the Bull Run Gun was fired.

In the spring of 1863 the Tenth Battery reorganized—again commanded by Lt. Col. Edwin C. Gallup, as it was when it was sent to defend Washington in May 1862—for the protection of Narragansett Bay's West Passage against "rebel pirates." The unit was stationed at "the Bonnet," about two miles below Narragansett Village, where the men mounted

two 32-pound siege guns directed at passing ships. “[They] blazed away blank cartridges at vessels which did not show a flag or whistle a salute to the battery flag on the bluff,” noted the *Providence Journal* in a short history of the PMCA.

A solid shot was fired at a suspicious looking craft which did not show any bunting on one occasion. It turned out to be a revenue cutter and the battery got a return fire of a cannon ball that went whizzing over their heads.

Another vessel, a freight steamer, had a copperhead captain who did not feel disposed to show all the courtesies of war in his daily trips up and down the bay. The battery got exasperated with him . . . and fired a 32-pound shot across his bow. The copperhead saluted at once and never failed to do so afterwards; but the sequel came in a reprimand from Gov. Smith, [who noted] that the battery had not been placed in position to fire at peaceable merchantmen.<sup>30</sup>

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#### DISTINGUISHED SERVICE

*Members of the PMCA distinguished themselves throughout the Civil War, many rising to positions of great responsibility within the military and in the political arena.*

*Joseph P. Balch, former commander of the PMCA, distinguished himself as a major in Burnside’s brigade at the First Battle of Bull Run.*

*Ambrose E. Burnside, who at one point commanded the Army of the Potomac, became an honorary member of the PMCA in 1864. Although his reputation as a military officer was tarnished during the war, he returned to Rhode Island a local hero. After the war he served as the state’s governor and then as a U.S. senator. Burnside was famous for his strange whiskers, from which the term “sideburns” was coined.*

*Thomas A. Doyle, a former member of the PMCA, was elected to his first term as mayor of Providence in 1864.*

*John G. Hazard, a former quartermaster of the corps, left for the war as a first lieutenant in Battery A and was later promoted to captain of Battery B. He was brevetted brigadier general in the volunteer service and was appointed chief of artillery in the Second Army Corps.*

*Edward C. Mauran, a former quartermaster of the PMCA, served as the state’s adjutant general for two decades, including the years of the Civil War.*

*John A. Monroe, who joined the PMCA in 1861, entered the Civil War as a lieutenant in Battery A and was later put in command of Battery D. At different times during the war he served as chief of artillery of the Second and Ninth Army Corps, and for more than a year he was the commanding officer of the Artillery Camp of Instruction at Camp Barry in Washington. With more than one hundred batteries at the school at any given time, Camp Barry was the largest artillery school the country had yet organized.*

*George E. Randolph served as captain of Battery E and later as chief of artillery of the Third Army Corps.*

*Henry T. Sisson, a former captain and major in the PMCA, became colonel of the Fourth Rhode Island Volunteers. After the war he served as the state’s lieutenant governor.*

*William Sprague was the commander of the PMCA from 1856 until 1859, the year before he was elected governor of Rhode Island. He volunteered as Burnside’s aide at the First Battle of Bull Run.*

*Charles H. Tompkins, commander of the PMCA in 1860, headed the First Battery. He was later appointed chief of artillery of the Sixth Army Corps.*

In his reports from the Bonnet, Gallup discussed a less serious problem: “All water used by the camp was brought from Providence in whisky barrels, giving the water such a flavor as to provoke both temperance and anti-temperance men. There was too much of the stuff for one class—not enough for the other.”<sup>31</sup>



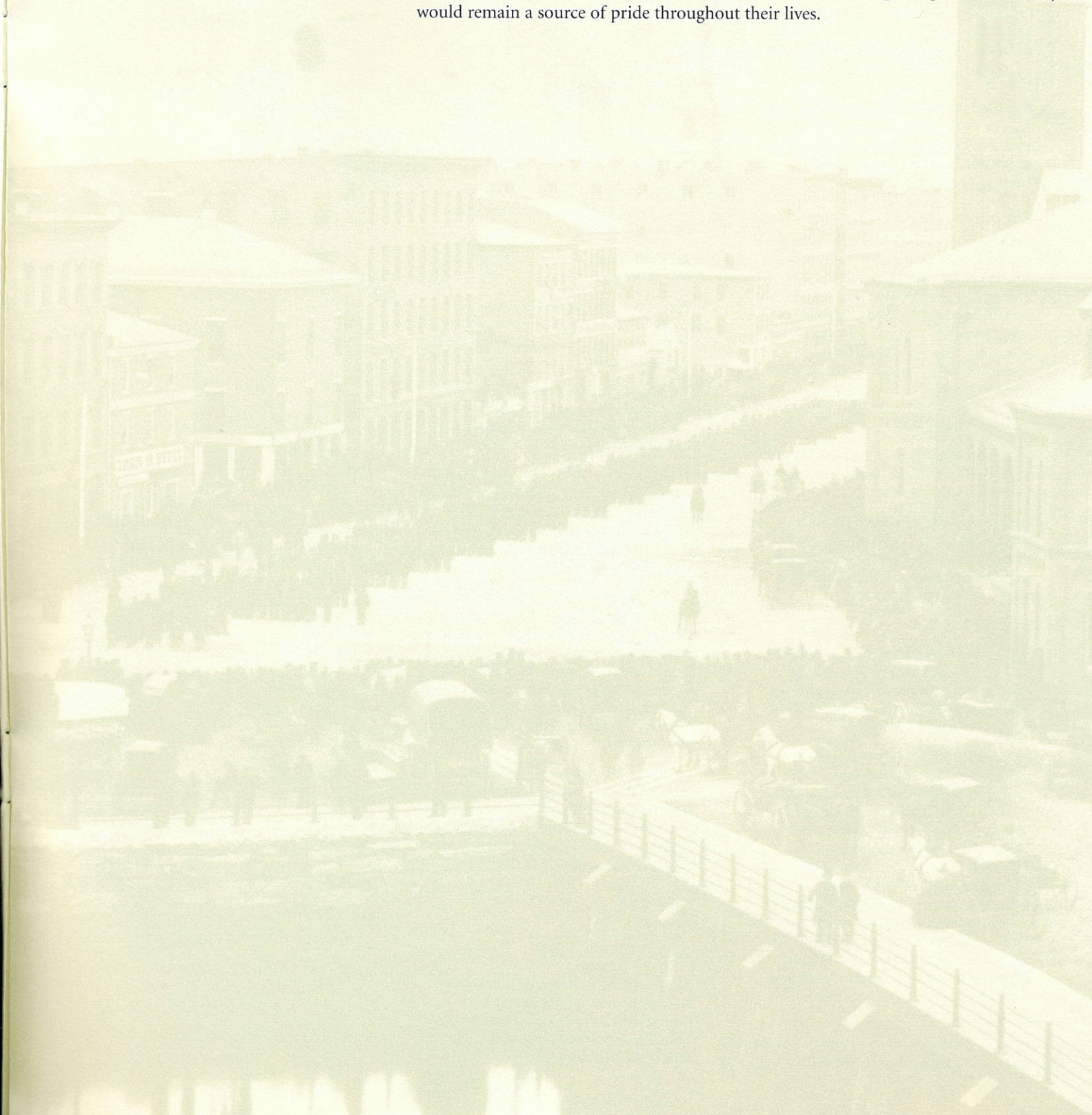
Isolated celebrations took place in Providence in 1864 as soldiers who had completed their three years of service began returning home. But it was not until April 1865, nearly four years after this sad chapter in the nation’s history began, that the city truly rejoiced.

“The glorious news of the surrender of General Robert E. Lee and his army to General U. S. Grant was received this evening about 10 o’clock,” noted the PMCA clerk in an entry dated 9 April. “Major Smith, being in the [Providence] Journal office when the news came, immediately sent to his Honor [Mayor] Thomas A. Doyle . . . a suggestion to have the bells rung, which was promptly heeded. [Smith] then proceeded to the residence of Gov. James Y. Smith, who ordered a salute of two hundred guns at 12 p.m. (midnight). The Marines were rallied and reported [to Smith’s Hill] with their usual promptness.”<sup>32</sup>

Sadly, the city’s celebrations were only just beginning when, on 15 April, the PMCA was called upon once again to fire its cannons, this time with none of the joy that had accompanied the previous

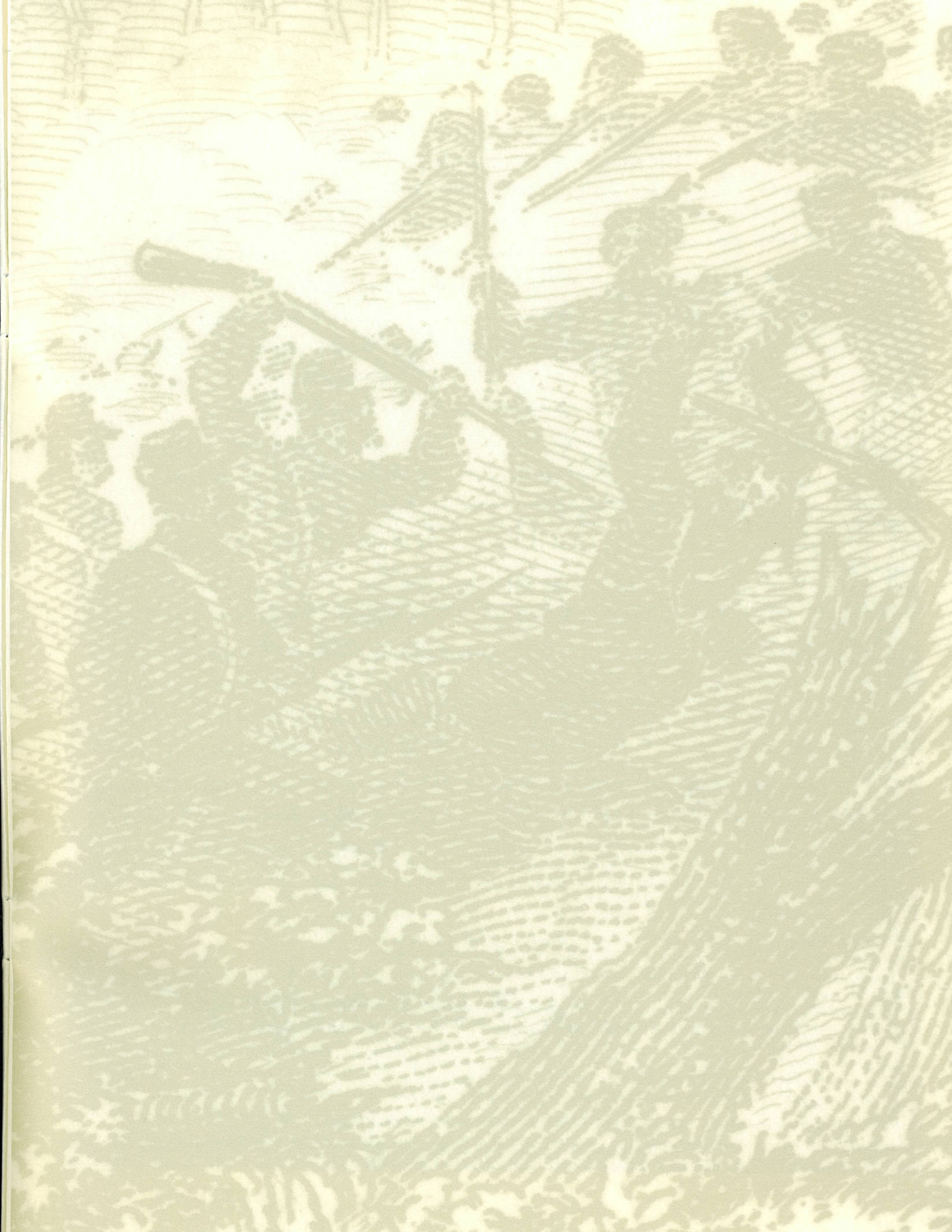
week's salute. For the twenty-four hours following the announcement of Lincoln's death, the PMCA fired a gun every half hour. On 19 April, the official day of mourning in the city, it was with the Bull Run Gun that the organization honored its slain chief.

Soldiers still in the field returned home in the months that followed, many of them stopping in the nation's capital to march in the grand review. Soon most of them would slip quietly back into civilian life. The horrors they had witnessed, the cold and hunger they had endured, would fade in memory, but their membership in a particular battery would remain a source of pride throughout their lives.



## Notes

1. Sprague served as the PMCA's commander from 1856 to 1859.
2. Welcome Arnold Greene, *The Providence Plantations for Two Hundred and Fifty Years* (Providence: J. A. & R. A. Reid, 1886), 91. Among the contributing writers of this massive history was Dr. George Peck, who joined the PMCA in 1863 while still a student at Brown University. He later became the historian for the PMCA and its Veteran Association.
3. *Ibid.*, 92.
4. Records of the PMCA, 1861-1868, book 3, box 1, pp. 3-4, Rhode Island Historical Society library. Bishop Clark accompanied the First Rhode Island Regiment when it left for Washington in April.
5. *Ibid.*, 7.
6. Raising and equipping the First Regiment and First Battery required money that needed to be authorized by the legislature, which could not be called into special session in time to send the troops off by 18 April. To prevent any delay, Governor Sprague and his family business, A & W Sprague, offered a guaranty that all accounts would be paid. Greene, *Providence Plantations*, 92. Lt. Gov.-elect Samuel G. Arnold accompanied Tompkins's First Battery when it left Providence.
7. The Sixth Massachusetts Volunteers (infantry) left later that day, but not as fully equipped for combat as the First Battery.
8. Just two days after the departure of the artillery battery, the First Regiment, Rhode Island Volunteers (infantry), under the command of Col. Ambrose E. Burnside, left the city in two detachments.
9. Records, 17.
10. Both the First Battery and the First Regiment were temporarily quartered at the Patent Office in Washington until Camp Sprague, a mile north of the capital, was opened to the Rhode Islanders on 18 May.
11. Although the First Battery was the first artillery battery in Washington, it was not the first state militia to arrive there. Who left first and who arrived in the nation's capital first was long a matter of dispute between the PMCA and the Sixth Massachusetts Volunteers (infantry). Most historians of the two organizations eventually agreed on the following account: The Sixth Massachusetts Volunteers left their state late in the day on 18 April, several hours after Rhode Island's First Battery. The battery's stay in Pennsylvania, however, allowed the Massachusetts infantry to march into Washington first. *Providence Journal*, 15 Dec. 1889.
12. By the fourth year of the war, when manpower was low and enthusiasm waning, Lincoln and his generals would regret that the enlisted term had not read "whichever is longest."
13. Battery A was the first of eight batteries that together formed the Rhode Island Regiment of Light Artillery. Reynolds, who held the rank of lieutenant colonel within the PMCA, was second in command to Charles Tompkins, the PMCA's colonel. Tompkins and Reynolds were reelected to their positions by the PMCA later that year, but because both were serving on the front, Governor Sprague appointed Benjamin F. Remington the PMCA's colonel and Henry B. Barstow its lieutenant colonel.
14. Records, 24.
15. *Ibid.*, 55.
16. Many of the men in the First Battery reenlisted upon their discharge and saw action with other batteries.
17. Geoffrey C. Ward, *The Civil War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 64.
18. Although its three-month obligation had expired, the First Regiment volunteered to remain in service to participate in the engagement at Bull Run.
19. One of the difficulties at Bull Run was that many of the volunteer militia still wore their own, often elaborate uniforms, making it difficult to distinguish friend from foe.
20. Harold R. Barker, *History of the Rhode Island Combat Units in the Civil War* (n.p., 1964), 15, 19. By the end of the day Battery A had to abandon five of its cannons. Two men from the battery, neither a member of the PMCA, were killed in the battle.
21. With permission from the PMCA, Burnside loaned the gun to the Squantum Club, of which he was a member, after the war. A second gun, a rifle housed at the Rhode Island State House, is also called the Bull Run Gun, but records suggest that the smoothbore at Squantum is the gun retrieved by Scott. Burnside became an honorary member of the PMCA in 1864.
22. Records, 158. The personnel figures for the "Marine Artillery" were for the First and Tenth Batteries, the latter of which was organized twice—first in 1862 for the defense of Washington, and then again in 1863 for the defense of Narragansett Bay's West Passage.
23. *Ibid.*, 111-12.
24. *Ibid.*, 94.
25. Ward, *The Civil War*, 154.
26. John Tompkins succeeded William Reynolds as the commander of Battery A when Reynolds was promoted to lieutenant colonel of the Rhode Island Regiment of Light Artillery in September 1861.
27. Ward, *The Civil War*, 170; Barker, *Rhode Island Combat Units*, 129.
28. Barker, *Rhode Island Combat Units*, 130, 131.
29. In 1988 the reactivated Battery B, with the help of the R.I. National Guard, brought the gun to the spot where it had been silenced 125 years earlier. The gun was returned to the State House in November of that year and remains there today.
30. *Providence Journal*, 15 Dec. 1889. A "copperhead" was a Northerner who supported the South during the Civil War.
31. Records, 170.
32. *Ibid.*, 271.



Line Wednesday Evening at 9 o'clock 1767

Gent. I am now 80 miles from Hoome, the Horses will not eat & I am  
I fear full weather he will endure the Journey & expect to reach New haven  
~~at the best~~ tomorrow Night were I shall endeavor to hire  
one and leave him if I then think he wont hold out, I see the  
Contraler <sup>Doct. P. Moffatt</sup> at New London who told me was going to the Assembly  
next week in Newport we had Sam Saulth about his affair

I told him that <sup>was to be determined</sup> I would order the Town of Newport to make good  
the Damages & Impower them to prosecute offenders, he Replyed  
that Mr. Wood could soon find them if he pleased, I wrote you  
afew Lines from East Greenwich of M. a Lopez's buying a Large  
Quantity of Goods in Boston, & that I spoke to Nathl. Green I am about  
buying part of the Burnan & to build part of the Forge, he after words  
told as I mounted asked the price it had bin sold for which I told him  
& also the Circumstances of Carnd's part & that we wanted a  
good man who was able & acquainted in the Iron Branch) to take that  
part & believe it might be made up of 8. he is to advise with  
his Father on the Subject, I think it would be worthwhile to  
advertise nearly the time we begin to blow & that any kind of  
~~Castings~~ <sup>Castings</sup> may be had & in particular mention Iron  
Keels for Boats & that Experiment has bin made & answers the Intent  
Exceeding well, I only mention'd <sup>Com?</sup> over the Ferry in New London and  
it was immediately observed to be a fine Invention and  
Doubted not but would become very Common, I believe they  
may be cast at 35 Dolls. <sup>per Ton</sup>

By next post I shall put my letter in  
the Newport Bag, or you'll be Hursto Newice of  
Seabrook Ferry Thursday morning at 8 o'clock

the horse doth prilly well yet, Eat  
Corn very hearty at 9 o'clock have this moment had the make offend  
of a letter from Welch with his son & Martin, also one from Jones  
Silghman in behalf of Mr. Francis, but being his writing I think he doth  
not understand the Report as we did by Mr. Francis Letter, but that the  
policy for Mr. Briggstons was given <sup>and determined</sup> against us in more case as well as  
pervious, but I think he must be mistaken post wait?

I am Willm. Brown

## RHODE ISLAND MISCELLANY

# 350,000 Bits of Paper

IRVING C. SHELDON

In 1935, in his eighty-eighth year, Rhode Island yacht designer Nathanael Greene Herreshoff included in a letter to William Picard Stephens, dean of yachting journalists, his recollections of what he had long before heard of naval architecture in the lore of his distinguished boatbuilding family. “Referring to outside ballast,” he wrote, “my great uncle James Brown of Providence, and son of John Brown, merchant . . . was very fond of sailing. He had a boat that I think was two-masted and he fitted her with a heavy iron keel to take place of the usual inside ballast. This was at about close of eighteenth century.”

Annotating the correspondence between Herreshoff and Stephens about fifty years later (*Their Last Letters, 1930-1938* [Bristol, R.I.: Herreshoff Marine Museum, 2001]), John W. Streeter noted that “an opportunity is here presented to declare N. G. Herreshoff’s great uncle, James Brown (1761-1834), the inventor of the sailing yacht with outside ballast thus elevating him considerably in the ranks of yacht designers and the modeler/builders who followed them. It would be better if corroboration could be found before the fact is put in the record books.”

Scholarship had actually begun its work well before “Captain Nat” Herreshoff passed on his recollection, from his distant childhood, of what he had heard about James Brown and his boat. It was scholarship that had much material to work with, for the enterprises of the Brown family had taken care to preserve their records since 1723—an amazing total of some 350,000 separate items. “Decade by decade through the nineteenth century,” wrote Brown University professor James B. Hedges in the preface to the first volume of his *Browns of Providence Plantations*,

these records accumulated in the counting house of Brown & Ives at 50 South Main Street in Providence. Near the turn of the century George Parker Winship, first librarian of the John Carter Brown Library, moved some of the papers for the earlier period to the Library, with a view to the preparation of a volume dealing with activities of the Brown family. Unfortunately, the pressure of other duties prevented the consummation of this plan. In 1923 the remainder—and by far the greater portion—of the collection was deposited in the John Carter Brown Library.

In the 1930s I spent considerable time over a period of two or three years in an examination of these manuscripts. Carefully folded and tied neatly in small bundles according to subject matter, they had remained undisturbed in their boxes for decades. On a spike file were documents apparently untouched since 1771. This investigation revealed not only the richness of the collection but also the magnitude of the task of making it available to the student of history. In 1941 the timely interposition of [Rhode Island Historical Society librarian] William G. Roelker and others enlisted the interest of Arthur H. Cole, Chairman of the Committee on Research in Economic History. As a result, that committee, with the cooperation of Brown University, the Rhode Island Historical Society, and John Nicholas Brown, provided the funds necessary for calendaring and indexing the Papers, and making them readily accessible to the investigator.

When Professor Hedges set about writing his history of the Brown family, which he planned to publish in three volumes, he had an enormous amount of detail to collate and put into readable form. He was reputed to have an extraordinary ability to handle

*Letter from John Brown to Nicholas Brown & Company, June 1767. Brown Papers, P H6, vol. 2, John Carter Brown Library, Brown University.*

*Irving Sheldon is a retired manufacturer who lives in Saunterstown.*



this sort of work. Time and again he would recall an item that would fit into his story and know precisely where to find it in the masses of papers he was using.

Volume I, *The Browns of Providence Plantations: The Colonial Years*, was published by the Harvard University Press in 1952. Hedges was hard at work on the second volume when he died in 1965. With gifted associates completing some unfinished work, Volume 2, *The Browns of Providence Plantations: The Nineteenth Century*, was published by the Brown University Press in 1968, along with a reprint of the preceding volume.

For those researching the provenance of outside ballast, however, the true story of the Brown family's connection with that invention remained unknown. In recommending corroboration of James Brown as the inventor, John Streeter had suggested looking into the Brown family archives. During the late 1990s one researcher was encouraged by a gracious lady of the family and put in touch with the director of Brown University's John Nicholas Brown Center, and this contact led, in turn, to the manuscripts collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society; but these leads turned into blind alleys. By November 1999 he had lost hope of ever ascertaining the invention's origin.

But the following month there occurred a fortunate turn of events. Puzzled by an item referring to Stephen Hopkins—signer of the Declaration of Independence and several times governor of the colony of Rhode Island—the researcher remembered that Hopkins had been an associate of Providence's famous Brown brothers. Pulling out the first volume of *The Browns of Providence Plantations*, he began leafing through the chapter on the making of pig iron at the Browns' Hope Furnace, an enterprise in which Hopkins had an interest. Sixteen pages into the chapter the researcher's eye fell on a quotation from a letter by John Brown in which Brown referred to "Iron Keels for Boats." It was surprising how long it took, even then, for the long-frustrated researcher to realize that he had at last found what he had spent years looking for.

The letter, from Lime [*sic*], Connecticut, was written as John Brown was journeying towards Pennsylvania in search of a new ironmaster. In the letter Brown urged his brothers to advertise that their Hope Furnace was producing "Iron Keels for Boats & that experiment has bin made & answers the Intent exceding well." When he had mentioned the innovation to others, he said, "it was Immediately observed to be a Fine Invention and Doubted not but would become Very Common." The date of the letter was June 1767, a generation earlier than the story Captain Nat had recalled.

An endnote in *The Browns of Providence Plantations* directed the researcher, armed with the proper reference for the item in the immense Brown Papers collection, to the John Carter Brown Library, and there a copy of the 233-year-old letter was put in his hand. Resolving a long-standing uncertainty, Professor Hedges's remarkable work had yielded yet another benefit.

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Cover

*Italian Americans participate in a parade in  
Exchange Place, Providence, circa 1915. Photo  
by Frank W. Marshall. RIHS Collection (RHI X3  
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