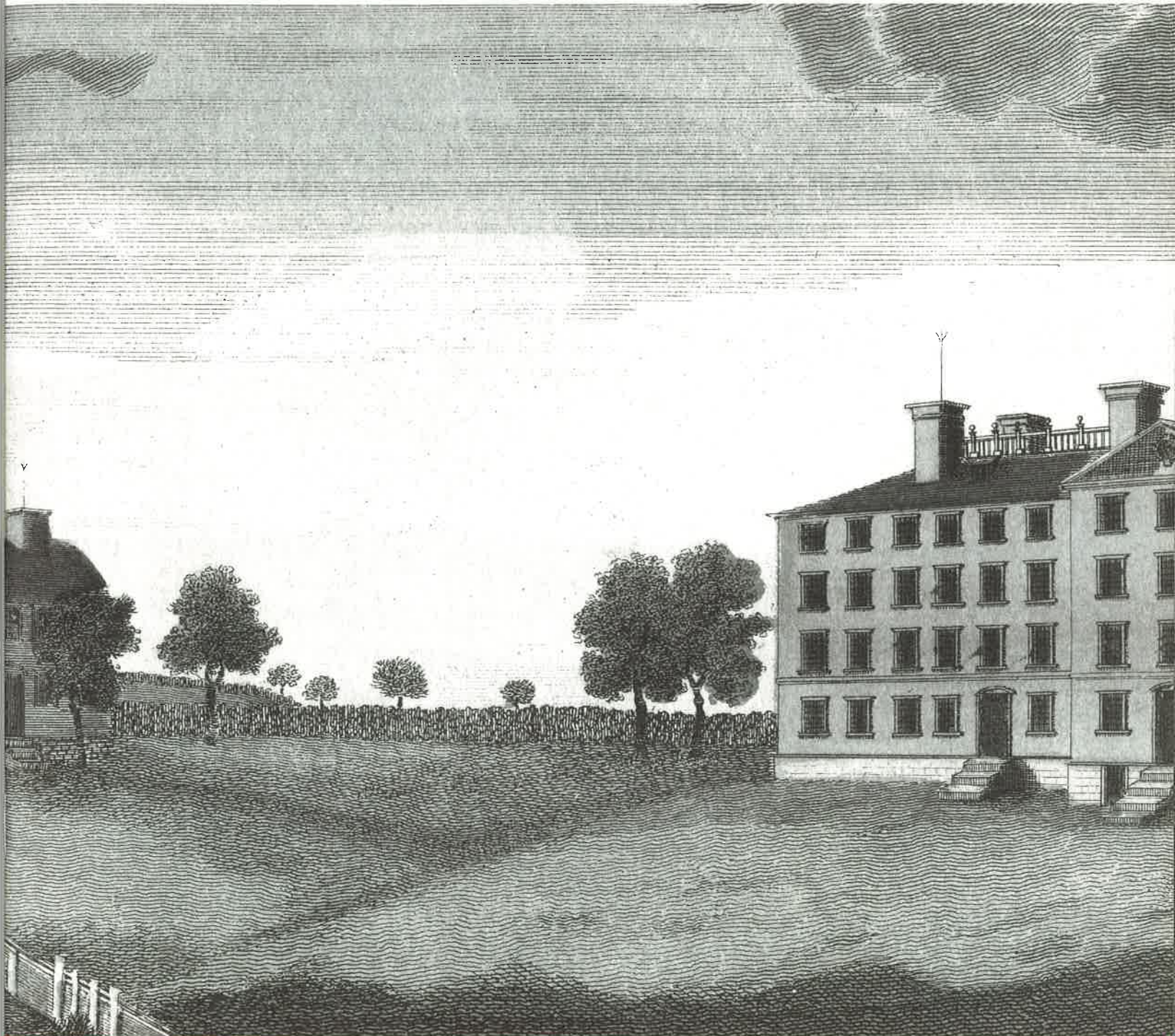




# Rhode Island History

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# Rhode Island History

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*A S.W. view of the COLLEGE in Providence, together with the PRESIDENT'S HOUSE & GARDENS.*

Figure 1.

As many as four black slaves were among the workers at the construction site of Brown University's University Hall. Engraving, ca. 1792; Brown University Library.

# Slave Labor at the College Edifice: Building Brown University's University Hall in 1770

One of the most enduring legends about colonial-era Providence is the story that University Hall at Brown University was built by slaves. As with most apocryphal tales, this one is never supported by specifics when it is recited: Who were these slaves? How many were there? What, exactly, did they do? Such details might allow the listener to judge the story's veracity. Yet, as with all good folk tales, the story contains some elements of truth. This article will examine the circumstances surrounding the construction of the "College Edifice" at Brown and, through reliable historical evidence, attempt to explain the part that slave labor played in the construction of this building.

In the winter of 1770 the governing corporation of the College of Rhode Island purchased an eight-acre pasture on a hill overlooking the town of Providence as a site for the school's first building, the large brick structure now known as Brown's University Hall, but which was then known throughout Rhode Island simply as the College Edifice. Construction records kept for the corporation reveal that the workforce that built the College Edifice was racially integrated, and that free people of color worked side by side on the job with enslaved Africans. Today, those who know Brown University (as the College of Rhode Island was renamed in 1803) might find the very notion that slave labor was ever used on the campus so foreign an idea as to be virtually unimaginable. In 1770, however, the use of slave labor on College Hill seems to have been so unremarkable that it passed

almost unrecorded.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the only evidence known today that enslaved Africans helped build the College Edifice must be inferred by reading between the lines of a ledger kept to record construction expenses for the building. Those few tacit references to wages paid on that job, however, give a glimpse into the ordinary workings of slave labor in Providence at the end of the colonial era.

In *Bodies Politic*, his authoritative study of race relations in the American North from 1730 to 1830, John Wood Sweet describes the multiracial world of late colonial Rhode Island, in which slave owners, slave traders, antislavery reformers, enslaved Africans, enslaved Indians, free people of color (both Native American and African), and indentured servants of African, Native American, and European ancestry constantly negotiated the practical realities of conducting their daily lives among one another.<sup>2</sup> The boundaries between these groups were always porous, such as when people of color earned or lost their freedom, or when slaves bore their white owners' children, or when the reformer and slave owner Moses Brown admonished his brothers to cease slave trading, or when Narragansett Indian women purchased African slaves to be their husbands and to father their children.<sup>3</sup> This welter of racial dynamics and contested power was intrinsic to the daily life of Providence when the college decided to build there in 1770. Thus the makeup of the African American, European American, and Native American workforce building the College Edifice reflected the complex society of that seaport town at the end of the colonial period.

ROBERT P. EMLÉN

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When it was founded in 1764, the College of Rhode Island was located in the parsonage of the Baptist church in Warren, Rhode Island, with the church's minister, James Manning, also the school's founding president. Within five years the college had outgrown its borrowed rooms and was looking for a permanent home. After a competition among the principal towns of the colony, in February 1770 the members of the college corporation resolved to locate the school in Providence and to construct a new building designed to serve every residential and academic function for the faculty and students (figure 1).<sup>4</sup> As soon as the ground thawed that March, work on the foundation for the College Edifice began. By the time spring arrived, College Hill was swarming with workmen—excavators, teamsters, stonemasons, timber framers, and joiners, as well as common laborers.

The college acted as what might today be called its own general contractor, negotiating with

project he relied on the practical skills of the treasurer of the college's governing corporation, Providence merchant John Brown. John and his three brothers were early proponents of settling the college in Providence, and they were some of its major benefactors. To manage construction expenses at the building, the new college could draw not only upon John Brown's considerable financial skill but also on the collective expertise of his family firm, Nicholas Brown & Company.

From January 1, 1770, to March 11, 1771, John Brown's clerks at the waterfront countinghouse of Nicholas Brown & Company recorded the expenses of materials acquisition and casual labor in a sixteen-page ledger.<sup>6</sup> John Brown did not produce the finished copy of the accounting ledger himself—extant examples of his correspondence show his own handwriting to be cramped, uneven, and difficult to decipher—but he had the firm's clerks transcribe entries for every sterling pound, shilling, and penny spent for materials and labor on the College Edifice. In the fine handwriting so essential to transacting business before the invention of mechanical typewriting, and in the irregular spelling so typical before the standardization of orthography, the countinghouse clerks at Nicholas Brown & Company recorded the minutiae of construction management in eighteenth-century Providence (figure 2). The ledger shows, for example, the value of bricks delivered to the wharf at the foot of College Street, the cost of a new shovel for digging the foundation trenches, the cost of a barrel of lime for making mortar, the value of a day's labor spent shoveling sand for the mortar (figure 3).

The level of detail in the ledger provides a wealth of information to the present-day reader, with laconic entries naming individual craftsmen and tradesmen and revealing what kinds of materials were used in the building and how much the college paid for them, down to the farthing, or quarter penny. Further, the ledger records that unskilled workmen like Patrick Dwier and Luke Thurston were paid three shillings a day for their labor (figure 4).

What sort of work were these laborers doing on the project? The actual construction

To paid Caleb Randall for parting boards	7/4	1.. 4.. 6 3/4
To what we paid Elisha & Nathaniel Burr towards their Acco for bricks and Water table Bill Tenches p <sup>d</sup> £ 51.. 9.. 2 3/4	335.. 9.. 3 3/4	

Figure 2. November 21, 1770, ledger entries in "The College to Nicholas Brown & Co, Dr."; Collection of the Brown University Archives. All reproductions of ledger entries are from this source.

craftsmen in a variety of trades—the masons who laid the bricks and stone, the roofers who attached the roof slates, the joiners who built the interior woodwork—to construct specific parts of the building on set terms for fixed prices.<sup>5</sup> The college also organized a workforce of unskilled

To paid Patrick Dwier for Days Shoveling Sand	3..	12.. 10
To paid Luke Thurston for Days Shoveling Sand	10	3.. 10

Figure 3. July 3, 1770, ledger entry.

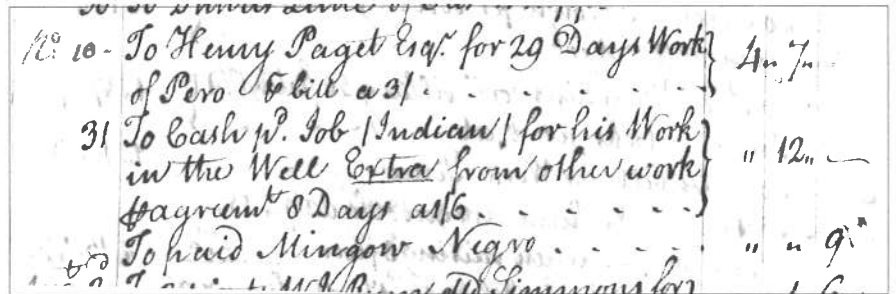
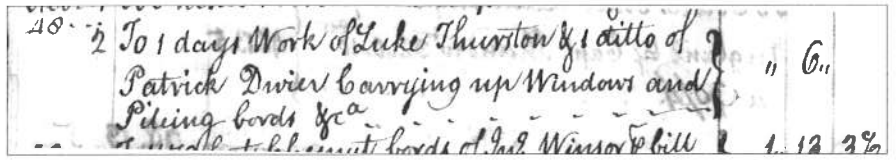
labor to assist with the innumerable small jobs not ordinarily covered by contracts with the skilled trades.

With just himself and one tutor the only employees of the college, President Manning was in no position to manage the construction of what would become the largest building in colonial Rhode Island. For this enormous

of the building was contracted to skilled crews of timber raisers, brick masons, roofing slaters, blacksmiths, and woodwork joiners.<sup>7</sup> But there were innumerable odd jobs that were crucial to the project, and these were handled by unskilled laborers. Though the nature of the work performed was not always specified in the ledger, such jobs as the digging of the well next to the building seem to have been assigned to the unskilled laborers.

Within individual ledger entries are indications that some of the laborers working on the job were persons of color. In listing the payments for the laborers' wages, in some cases John Brown designated the men by race (figure 5). Most people living in colonial Providence were of British descent, and government records of the period, such as censuses and probate documents, used racial descriptors to identify Native Americans and Africans, but not whites. The common assumption was that British or European ancestry was the natural order of things and need not be specified. Because the name of the laborer Patrick Dwier, for instance, is never accompanied by a racial descriptor in the ledger, it is safe to assume that he was not a person of color but rather (as the phonetic sounding of his name suggests) of Irish extraction.

Racial designations in the ledger are not always consistent, however. In the case of Mingo the well-digger, named several times in the ledger, the term "Negro" was used only once, on July 31, 1770: "paid to Mingow, Negro ..... £0/0/9." Perhaps different supervisors reported the payments for his wages, or perhaps he became a familiar presence on the job as time progressed and the construction supervisor no longer found it necessary to identify him in the accounting by race; thus the entries "July 16, 1770: cash paid Mingo for 1 days work in the well, which is over and above his common wages and agreement ..... £0/1/2 ½"; "February 15, 1771: paid Wm Mingo [a bonus] for extraordinary work in the well ..... £0/0/11." The ledger entries for wages William Mingo earned for himself by digging the well at the College Edifice suggest that he was a free man.

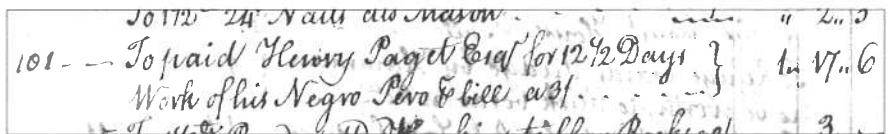


Slaves sometimes negotiated with their owners to split any wages they earned through outside work, but there is no suggestion of a master's agency in Mingo's accounts.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 4. (top)  
February 2, 1771, ledger entry.

Figure 5.  
July 31, 1770, ledger entries.

In stark contrast to the record of Mingo's payments is the record of payments made for the work of a man named Pero: "paid Henry Paget Esq. for 12 ½ days work of his Negro Pero & bill @ 3..... £1/17/6," reads a June 1, 1770, ledger entry (figure 6). The significance of this entry lies in the fact that while Pero did



the work, a man named Henry Paget received the fruits of his labor. Although there is no mention of the word "slave" anywhere in the accounts of payments for Pero's work, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Pero was Henry Paget's slave.

Figure 6.  
June 1, 1770, ledger entry.

Henry Paget, who styled himself "Esquire," was a Providence merchant who lived in a grand house on South Main Street on the present-day site of the Providence County Courthouse.<sup>9</sup> "Esquire" was an honorific rarely used in eighteenth-century Rhode Island; Paget may have adopted it as a vestige of some previous status among the British gentry.<sup>10</sup> When he died in January 1772, the inventory of his



Figure 7.  
Gravestone of Henry Paget, Esquire, 1772,  
St. John's Church, Providence. Photograph by  
the author.

taxable possessions recorded that at the time of his death he owned seven slaves, including "1 Negro Man named Pero .... £30/0/0."<sup>11</sup> That was an unusually large number of slaves for an urban dweller to own in Providence, and probably more than could be practically



Figure 8.  
Gravestone of Pero [Pagett], 1780, North  
Burial Ground, Providence. Photograph by  
the author.

employed under his roof. It is possible that Paget managed his slaves as a labor force and hired them out. Some sense of Paget's elevated

station in life and the importance with which he viewed himself can be seen in the inscription on his elegant gravestone in the burial ground of St. John's Church in Providence, in which "Esquire" prominently occupies the entire line following his name (figure 7).<sup>12</sup>

By comparison, the wording on the gravestone that Henry Paget's family erected for Pero eight years later, identifying him as "Pero An African Servant to the late Henry Pagett Esq.," reflects the family members' view of their slave as inferior and subservient to themselves (figure 8). To begin with, the name Pero signals that the man was a slave, a lesser member of the Paget household. Names given to African American slaves by their owners in Rhode Island were often meant to distinguish them from white Rhode Islanders. Classical names like Caesar or Jupiter or Scipio, nicknames like Mingo or Sambo, names derived from African words like Cudgo or Cuffee, or names of mock deference like Prince or Duchess were not used to name white Rhode Islanders; all such names were meant by whites to signify African ancestry. Furthermore, Pero, unlike Henry Paget, was not given the dignity of a last name on his gravestone but was identified only by his first name and, euphemistically, as Paget's "African Servant." A last name would have indicated an elevated status, and possibly legal standing as a free man. No such suggestion is apparent in the language Henry Paget's family had cut on Pero's stone.

The circumstances of the well-digger William Mingo seem to have been quite different from those of his fellow laborer Pero on the construction site of the College Edifice. Not only did Mingo have the use of his own money; he also had the use of his own name. By contrast, the ledger entries reveal that Pero had control over neither a last name nor the cash value of his labor; "July 30, 1770: to Henry Paget Esqr. For 29 Days Work of Pero & bill @ 3/: .... £4/7/0" reads a typical entry. This passing reference to the unpaid labor of a man with no last name is one of the few clues

that slave labor was employed in building the College Edifice. It suggests that while “Mingo, Negro,” was a free man of color, Pero, the “African Servant,” was enslaved at the time he was working at the College of Rhode Island.

Because the word “slave” was never used in the ledger of expenses for constructing the College Edifice, it cannot be known how many enslaved Africans worked on the building. But through certain identifying criteria—the presence of a racial descriptor, the absence of a last name, and the diversion of the college’s payment to a white owner—it is possible to deduce from the ledger the presence of as many as three other slaves in addition to Pero, sent by their owners to work at the College Edifice. On May 25, 1770, the ledger records an entry for payment for “½ days work of Earles Negro ..... £0/1/6”; on February 8, 1771, for “10 days work of Mary Young’s Negro Man at 3 shillings, to her account”; and on February 21, 1771, “To Martha Smiths bill for 8½ days work of Abraham ..... £1/5/6” (figures 9, 10, and 11). While no racial designation was used to identify Abraham, the diversion of his wages implies conscripted labor; without a pay packet and without a last name, he was either a child, an indentured servant, or, most likely, a slave. The status of “Earles Negro” likewise cannot be determined conclusively, as the ledger does not specify who received his wages. But the entries for Pero and for “Mary Young’s Negro Man” are less ambiguous; certainly these two, and possibly all four of these workmen on the College Edifice, were slaves.

The resources to pay for the construction of the College Edifice were donated by the citizens of Providence and its neighboring towns. These northern Rhode Islanders convinced the governing corporation of the college to settle the school at the head of Narragansett Bay, rather than in Newport, Warren, or East Greenwich, by pledging the most value to a subscription fund for building construction (figure 12).<sup>13</sup> The leading merchants and politicians of

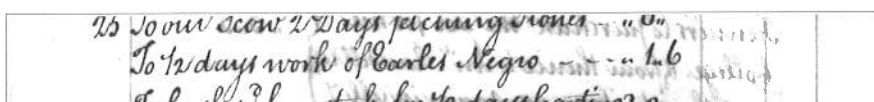


Figure 9.  
May 25, 1770, ledger entry.

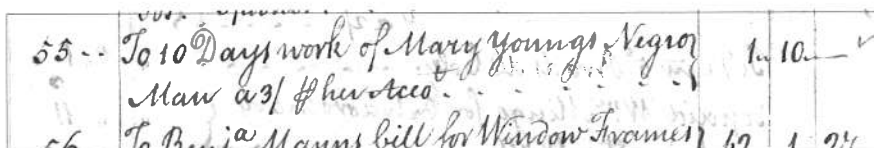


Figure 10.  
February 8, 1771, ledger entry.

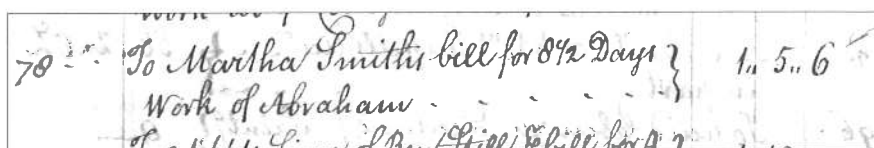


Figure 11.  
February 21, 1771, ledger entry.

Providence were assiduous in soliciting their neighbors on behalf of the college, enrolling 314 donors, whose pledges amounted to £3,630, in Providence alone.<sup>14</sup> In 1771 Providence contained an estimated 500 households, so it would seem that the college’s fund-raisers succeeded in soliciting pledges from over 60 percent of the heads of households in town. Including the outlying towns, the fund-raisers secured pledges of £4,559 from 520 different donors for the construction of the most celebrated building in the colony.

Pledges could be redeemed in British pounds sterling, Spanish dollars, or Rhode Island colonial paper money. But cash was scarce in 1770, and so, following the custom in local trade, pledges to the subscription fund for the College Edifice could be redeemed with the value of goods or services. In an announcement dated January 12, 1770, in the *Providence Gazette*, John Brown and Stephen Hopkins, the college’s chancellor, wrote that “we, in Behalf of the Committee for providing Materials and overseeing the Work, hereby give public Notice to all who are already Subscribers, and to those whose beneficent Minds may incline them to become such, to give us, as soon as they possibly can, (as the Season



**W**HEREAS the GOVERNOR and COMPANY of the ENGLISH Colony of RHODE-ISLAND, and PROVIDENCE Plantations, in NEW-ENGLAND, in AMERICA, by an Act passed at their Session in FEBRUARY, 1764, incorporated certain Persons, therein mentioned, into a Body Politic, and granted them full Power and ample Authority to found and endow a COLLEGE, or UNIVERSITY, in the said Colony: And whereas a sufficient Number of the Persons, so appointed, have qualified themselves agreeable to said Act, and are taking the most probable Measures for forming so useful and honourable an Institution, which will necessarily be attended with considerable Expences:—We therefore, the Subscribers, sensible that nothing hath a greater Tendency to adorn human Nature, and to promote the true Interest and Happiness of Mankind, than useful Literature, do, in Consideration thereof, each one for himself, promise and engage to give, and accordingly to pay, unto JON BENNET, Esq; Treasurer of the Corporation, or his Successor in said Office, or Order, the several Sums affixed to our Names respectively, to be applied for the aforesaid Purposes, in such Manner as the said Corporation shall think most conducive to answer the Ends of their Institution.

Part of the following Subscriptions, to the Amount of about Eight Hundred Pounds Lawful Money, is absolute, let the COLLEGE be built anywhere in the Colony; the remaining Sum is on Condition, that the COLLEGE EDIFICE be erected in the Town of Providence.

*Sum. 1769*

Stephen Hopkins	£ 36	15	0	Joseph Nash	5	8	0
Daniel Jenckes	300	0	0	David Harris	30	0	0
Joseph Hewes	100	0	0	John Field	6	9	0
Nicholas Brown	200	0	0	Isaac Field	3	0	0
Joseph Brown	200	0	0	Phineas Potter	2	10	0
John Jenckes	100	0	0	Benjamin Arnold	2	10	0
John Brown	200	0	0	William Latham	3	0	0
Nicholas Cooke	45	0	0	John Fenner	3	0	0
Moses Brown	160	0	0	William Brown	2	8	0
Joseph Russell	60	0	0	John Waterman (Providence)	6	0	0
Darius Sessions	30	0	0	William Morris	2	8	0
Amos Atwell	45	0	0	Jonathan Hammon	6	0	0
William Russell	20	0	0	Israel Wilkinfon	3	0	0
Hayward Smith	20	0	0	Nathan Waterman	2	0	0

Figure 12. List of subscribers to the College Edifice, 1769. RIHS Collection.

is far advanced) an Account of such Materials fit for the Building, as they would choose to furnish in Lieu of their Subscriptions" (figure 13).<sup>15</sup>

Evidence that materials were indeed pledged to the building fund in lieu of cash can be found in the lists of subscriptions solicited by the advocates for the college in Providence. For example, "Jona Arnold [pledge] to be paid in lime or yellow pine boards £ 3"; "Gideon Young two hogshead lime." As they scoured the colony for the resources to construct the College Edifice, the members of the fund-raising committee also recorded pledges for services in lieu of cash: "Zephaniah Andrews £10 to be paid in mason work"; "Asa Franklin £10 to be paid as Carpentry work"; "Sean [?] Currie £ 5 to be in glazing"; "Matthewson 25 dollars to be paid in house carpenters work"; "Daniel Tefft five dollars in Iron Work."<sup>16</sup>

Not surprisingly in a small town with such a high percentage of contributors to the building

fund, some of the subscribers to the campaign were also named as vendors in the ledger of expenses incurred in building the College Edifice. For instance, on November 21, 1770, college treasurer John Brown recorded an entry "To Hope Angell for carting load [of] boards .... £/0/0/9." It is unlikely that Hope Angell was paid in cash for driving the load of lumber up the hill herself; instead, the value of the cartage she supplied was probably credited to her pledge.

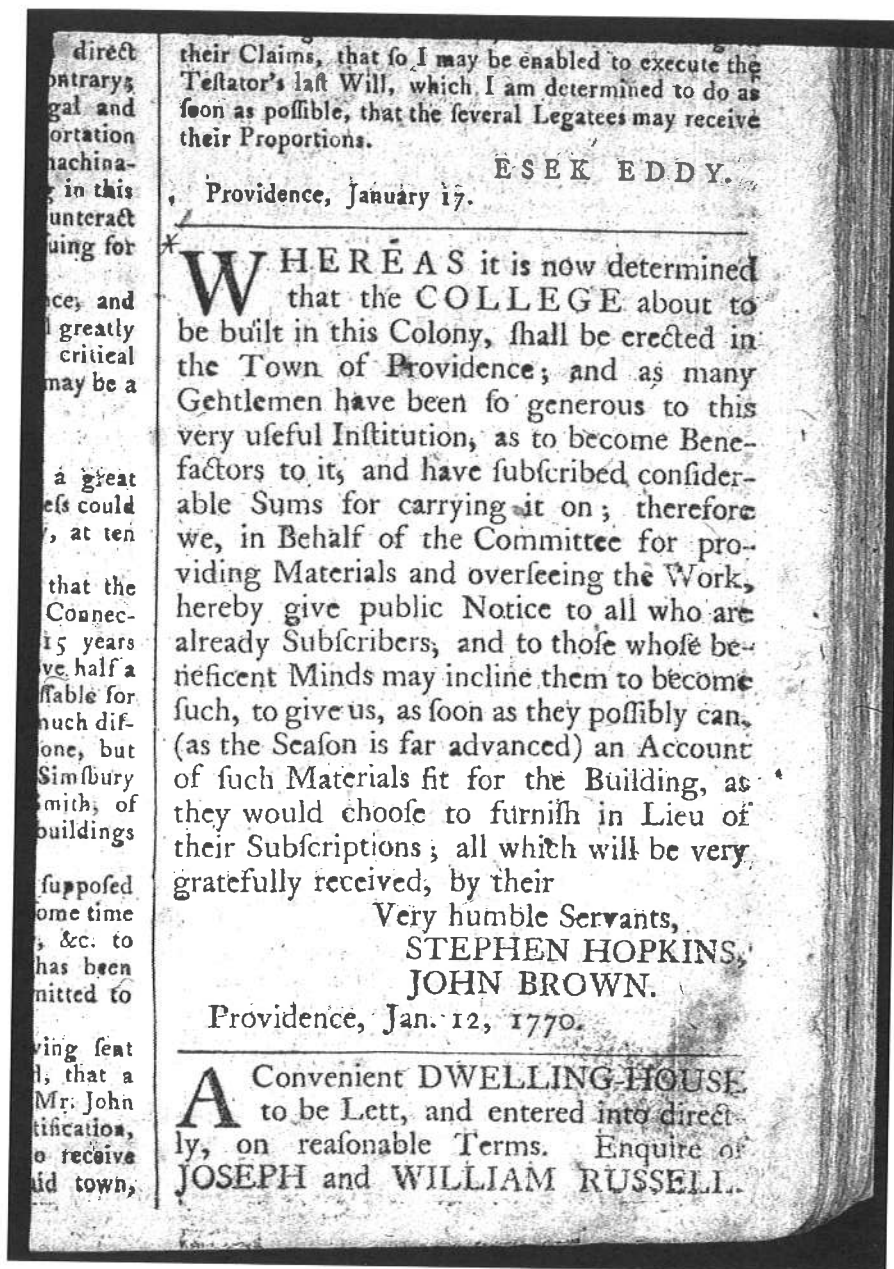
The coincidence of pledges to the building campaign and the ledger entries of credits for services supplied by contributors may explain in part how slave labor came to be employed at the College Edifice. For example, the February 8, 1771, ledger entry for "10 days work of Mary Young's Negro Man @ 3 shillings, to her account" can be seen in a new light when we learn that Mary Young pledged £6 to the building fund. By sending her "Negro Man" to labor at the construction site, she would have earned credit for 25 percent of her pledge. If William Earle was the man referred to in the May 25, 1770, ledger entry for "½ half days work of Earles Negro," the modest payment Earle received might have been credited against his pledge of £12.<sup>17</sup>

The crediting of contributions of daily labor towards pledges to the building campaign explains why the value of slave labor was recorded at the same rate as the value of freedmen's labor or white labor: no slave volunteered his own labor. A slave was assigned to the job by his owner, who would wish to be credited with the full value of a workingman's day labor. In an economy accustomed to bartering goods and services, it may not have made much difference to the college if it received the contributions in cash or in kind, but it might have made a big difference to large slave owners like Henry Paget, who may have hired out his slaves, or to building subscribers like Mary Young, who may have been strapped for cash while her husband, Archibald, was absent in London and his family's house on the Providence waterfront was being sold for back taxes.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps Mary Young was obliged to send her house slave up

to the college to work off the obligation of her pledge to the building campaign. John Brown was relentless about collecting on these pledges; in 1772, after Oliver Arnold died, the college sued his widow Elizabeth for fulfillment of her deceased husband's pledge.<sup>19</sup>

The image of enslaved men of color laboring alongside freed men of color and skilled white craftsmen suggests a complex social dynamic at work on College Hill in 1770. Working in close contact and dependent on each other's performance, the crew must have developed a familiarity that crossed racial boundaries and legal status. As the job progressed, hints of this familiarity can be read into the clerk's accounts, as in a July 4, 1770, ledger entry: "1 shod shovel delivered to Pero per Moses [?] Brown £0/3/0." Initially identified in the ledger as "Henry Paget's Negro," Pero soon came to be called by his own name. After a few weeks on the job his was a familiar face, and his race and status no longer required a distinction in the record. The scant references in John Brown's ledger of expenses give no sense that combining slave labor with free labor on the construction of the College Edifice was disruptive at the job. The college was acting in accordance with the law of the land, and according to local custom.<sup>20</sup> One can imagine the crew not just swinging their picks and shovels together in the well pit but also sitting together drinking the rum that Stephen Hopkins sent up to the job in appreciation for the backbreaking work being done (July 12, 1770, ledger entry: "½ gallon Rum £0/1/0. 1 quart W[est] I[ndian] ditto delivered to Pero 0/1/0").

The present-day reader might find it odd to imagine this eighteenth-century gang of enslaved and free men—black, white, and Native American—laboring together in concert, but in 1770 the dynamics of race and servitude in Providence were complicated and constantly shifting. John Wood Sweet notes that in contrast to "the illusion of slavery as . . . private, absolute, and permanent," the daily experience of slavery



was "public, negotiated, and fragile."<sup>21</sup> The quality of the well-diggers' work, the gratitude expressed to the workers by the members of the corporation, the responsibility entrusted to Pero to travel down to town and deliver supplies, including rum, to the work site—these were not predicated on some theoretical construct about the men's race or on their condition of freedom or servitude. The bonuses paid to the workers demonstrate that the men were judged individually by their performance on the job. Everyone concerned must have been aware that the difference between the enslaved Africans and

Figure 13. Announcement in the Providence Gazette, January 12, 1770.

Mingo, the free black man, was a consequence not of some inevitable natural law but of an accident of birth or some turn of fortune in each man's own history. Laboring shoulder to shoulder with the free men, the slaves likely saw no inherent deficiencies in themselves. As they engaged with the free men in the teamwork required to raise the building, the slaves might have sensed by example the possibilities for their own release from bondage.

By the close of the colonial period the institution of slavery in Rhode Island was faltering. Although Rhode Island's first antislavery law was not enacted until 1784, for some years there had been signs of a nascent awareness that human slavery was unjust, indefensible, and impractical. By mid century, slave owners had been increasingly hard-pressed to explain the convoluted logic underlying the institution. In the 1760s several Providence residents included clauses in their wills specifying that when they died their slaves were to be freed. In 1770 the Newport minister Samuel Hopkins preached a seminal sermon condemning slavery as immoral. Later in that same year the Reverend James Manning, a Baptist minister and president of the College of Rhode Island, freed his only slave. In 1773 the Rhode Island meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) resolved that, as a matter of conscience, its members should manumit their slaves. In 1778 the Rhode Island legislature passed an act offering freedom to any "able-bodied negro, mulatto, or Indian man-slave" who would enlist in the Continental army.<sup>22</sup> It would take decades of increasingly forceful legislation to abolish slave owning and slave trading in Rhode Island, but these were early manifestations of a growing awareness that slaves could be, and should be, freed for the good of all.

Although the social history revealed between the lines of John Brown's accounting may come as a revelation today, the ledger has been read and reread for 237 years. It was well known in the eighteenth century, when the governing corporation of the college scrutinized every expenditure that Nicholas Brown & Co. made for the construction of the College Edifice. In

the nineteenth century Reuben Guild, then the Brown University librarian, pointed out the payments for slave labor in his 1867 *History of Brown University*.<sup>23</sup> A hundred years later, in his definitive history of the construction of the College Edifice prepared for the 1963 designation of University Hall as a National Historic Landmark, John Carter Brown librarian emeritus Lawrence Wroth remarked on the use of enslaved labor on the building.<sup>24</sup> In 1998 the entire ledger was reproduced photographically, and enlarged copies of each page were exhibited on the walls of University Hall. In 2004, as part of an initiative mounted by the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, the entire document was reproduced digitally and placed on the website of the Brown University Library's Center for Digital Initiatives.<sup>25</sup>

Disquieting as those references to slavery may have been over the years, the ledger was never suppressed or expurgated. It was easy to overlook, however, as an amnesia about African slavery in New England settled so thoroughly over the land that the implication of these few tacit references—evidently the only documentation of a direct connection to slavery in the college's early history—failed to register with most of the ledger's latter-day readers. Only with the scholarly inquiry initiated with the formation of the Brown University Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice in 2003 were these few obscure references to slavery examined and explicated.

Finally, what happened to the slaves who worked on the College Edifice? Of those who can be identified as slaves, we know only Pero by name. Although no body of written evidence exists to document his life in Providence, some material evidence does survive him. Pero is memorialized by his gravestone in Providence's North Burial Ground, which reveals that he died in 1780 in his seventy-second year, eight years after the death of his owner, Henry Paget. The patronizing tone of the inscription carved on this stone, which emphasizes Pero's



Figure 14 (left)  
Gravestone of Genny Waterman, 1773,  
North Burial Ground, Providence.  
Photograph by the author.



Figure 15  
Gravestone of Sylvia Pagett, 1769, North  
Burial Ground, Providence. Photograph by  
the author.

subservience while it aggrandizes Henry Paget, suggests that it was the owner's family who commissioned Pero's marker, though very likely out of a sense of responsibility and longstanding affection for their slave.

The master-referential language inscribed on Pero's gravestone, however, is profoundly different from the wording on the 1773 gravestone of Pero's wife, Genny Waterman, and the 1769 gravestone of their daughter Sylvia (figures 14 and 15): "In Memory of Genny Waterman, Wife of Pero Paggett, Negros. She died Feb. the 9th [?], 1773 in the 49th [?] Year of her Age." "In Memory of Sylvia Daughter of Pero Pagett and Jane his Wife, dy'd May 15, 1769. Aged 13 years."

Here, on his own family's gravestones, Pero Pagett appropriated the use, and with it the dignity, of his owner's last name. No mention is made of Henry Paget, either by name or by reference to Pero's status as a servant. Indeed, the only references to relationships on these stones are to the marital relationship of Pero Pagett and his wife Genny, or Jane, and the relationship of their daughter. The couple may or may not have been married "in the white manner" under Rhode Island law. Slave owners were reluctant to permit their slaves to marry, as a slave's family concerns would almost certainly compete with the demands of his or her master.

As a result, many slaves engaged in stable but informal "Negro marriages" without the benefit of matrimony.<sup>26</sup> But whether or not Pero and Genny's marriage was sanctioned by the state, the use of the term "wife" on these stones suggests that Pero Pagett dictated the wording of the inscriptions. Apparently Pero and Genny were able to accumulate the funds to commission the family's first two gravestones on their own terms; but when Pero himself died, someone else chose very different language for his marker.

The Africans who labored at the College Edifice never made it into the history books. Save for Pero, we know nothing of them other than their jobs, the wages paid for their labor, and the names of their owners. But by stepping away from their work site to visit the North Burial Ground, we can get some sense of Pero's life beyond the reflected image of his owner. In addition to being a favored slave, Pero was a husband and father who outlived his wife and their daughter; and although he lived in bondage, he managed to memorialize his family on his own terms, with dignified, substantial gravestones. Viewing these gravestones as historical evidence of life in eighteenth-century Rhode Island helps illuminate our understanding of slave labor at the College Edifice.

*For more information and educational materials on this subject, go to [www.rihs.org](http://www.rihs.org).*

# Notes

1. John Brown was described laying the cornerstone with a crew of twenty in the *Providence Gazette* of May 30, 1770. For a description of the building under construction, see the *Providence Gazette*, Sept. 8, 1770.
2. John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).
3. *Ibid.*, 174.
4. Reuben A. Guild, *Early History of Brown University* (Providence, 1897), 139-40.
5. A detailed description of the construction of the College Edifice can be found in Lawrence C. Wroth, "The Construction of the College Edifice, 1770-1772," an unpublished manuscript in the Brown University Archives. See also Malcolm Freiberg, "Brown University's First 'College Edifice,'" *Old Time New England* 50 (April-June 1960): 85-93. For a price-fixing agreement, see *Providence Carpenters, Rules for House Carpenters Work in the Town of Providence* (Providence, 1796).
6. "The College to Nicholas Brown & Co., Dr.; 1770-1771," MS-1E-1, Miscellaneous Papers concerning Rhode Island College, 1763-1804, vol. 1:111, Brown University Archives. A facsimile of this document can be found at <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/repository/repoman.php?verb=render&id=1098447551250000>.
7. Wroth, "Construction of the College Edifice."
8. The surname "Mingo" is found under the heading "Blacks" in the 1774 Rhode Island census, but William Mingo is not listed there as a head of household.
9. Henry R. Chace, *Maps of Providence, R.I., 1650-1765-1770* (Providence, 1914), plate III.
10. In Gertrude Selwyn Kimball, *Providence in Colonial Times* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1912), 176, Henry Paget is described as "an Irishman and active member in King's Church."
11. "An Inventory of the Personal Estate of Henry Paget Esqr. . . . who departed this life the fifteenth day of January 1772," Will Book, 6:39-42, Providence City Archives.
12. The photograph of Henry Paget's gravestone in the Farber Gravestone Collection of the American Antiquarian Society incorrectly identifies its location as the North Burial Ground in Providence.
13. The funds pledged for building the college in Newport were actually greater than those pledged for building it in Providence, but the advocates for Providence carried the day by pointing out that the additional cost of transporting lumber to Newport from the forests of northern Rhode Island would render the Providence offer more valuable.
14. "A List of Subscriptions for the College Edifice," 1769-1772, Brown Family Papers, B 1196 F.8, John Carter Brown Library, Providence.

College debt brought forward £ 642. 7. 8 1/2

1770 SLAVE LABOR AT THE COLLEGE EDIFICE 45

Nov. 5	To paid Luke Agaw for 2 Days work w <sup>th</sup> } Lack on the Presidents Well w <sup>th</sup> } To 2 in 4 <sup>th</sup> Nails d <sup>d</sup> Smiths App <sup>ce</sup> . . . . . }	" 6 <sup>th</sup>
29 - 9	To Paid Maudous bill for 75 1/2 feet Timber } @ bill @ 3/4 <sup>th</sup> . . . . . }	12. 14. 8 <sup>th</sup>
10	To 1 in 6 <sup>th</sup> Nails d <sup>d</sup> Hamman's boy . . . . . }	" 4. 10
30 - 14	To Cash paid Robert Carver for Clabboards } and Shingles @ bill . . . . . }	64. 0. 5
17	To 2 in 6 <sup>th</sup> Nails d <sup>d</sup> Smiths App <sup>ce</sup> for } Presidents House . . . . . }	" 2. 5
20	To 1/2 in 6 <sup>th</sup> Nails d <sup>d</sup> Wheatons App <sup>ce</sup> . . . . . }	2. 5
	To 3 <sup>rd</sup> Black d <sup>d</sup> Sam <sup>l</sup> Spooner . . . . . }	" 2. 11
21	To 500 feet floor boards of Jos. Tenches @ bill } for Presidents House at Doll <sup>r</sup> per . . . . . }	1. 5. 1/2
	To Hope Angell for carting lead boards . . . . . }	9
	To 310 feet pine boards @ bill at 7/6 @ 1. 3. 2	
	To paid Caleb Randell for carting boards . . . . . }	1. 4. 6 3/4
31 - - -	To what we paid Elisha & Nathaniel } Murr towards their Acc <sup>o</sup> for bricks and } Water table @ bill, Tenches p <sup>d</sup> £ 54. 9. 2 3/4 . . . . . }	335. 9. 3 3/4
	To 1/2 in 8 <sup>th</sup> Nails d <sup>d</sup> Wheaton . . . . . }	" 3. 6
	To 1 whid Lime of Jon <sup>l</sup> Holden . . . . . }	" 15. -
	To 1 Small Stock Lock d <sup>d</sup> Smith . . . . . }	" 1. 7
Dec <sup>r</sup> . 4	To paid Adam for Digging a Trench . . . . . }	" 6. -
32 - 8	To 841 feet boards @ 10 dollars per m bought of } John Andrews of Newport @ bill p <sup>d</sup> in Cash }	2. 10. 5 1/2
33 - - -	To Moses Browns bill besides the Stones } charged before . . . . . }	24. 11. 9
13	To paid Moses Brown for his & Daniel } Larnards Team together 1 Day w <sup>th</sup> 6 Cattle }	" 12. -
	To 2 1/4 <sup>th</sup> 30 <sup>th</sup> Nails d <sup>d</sup> Andrew Cole . . . . . }	" 1. 12
15	To 1/2 in 20 <sup>th</sup> Nails 5/9. 1/2 in 10 <sup>th</sup> d <sup>d</sup> 4/ d <sup>d</sup> Comp <sup>ly</sup> } Wheaton . . . . . }	" 9. 9
	To 1/2 in 10 <sup>th</sup> Nails 4/ 2 <sup>nd</sup> 5 <sup>th</sup> Boards 1/2 in 5. 2	
	To 20 d <sup>d</sup> work of Wm. M <sup>o</sup> Kim / 2. 2	

- 15. The announcement ran in the *Providence Gazette* on several days, starting on Jan. 12, 1770.
- 16. "Subscriptions for the College Edifice."
- 17. *Ibid.*
- 18. See *Rhode Island History* 43 (May 1984): 47.
- 19. *Ibid.*
- 20. Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 100.
- 21. Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 99-100.
- 22. Lorenzo J. Greene, "Some Observations on the Black Regiment of Rhode Island in the American Revolution," *Journal of Negro History* 37 (April 1952): 142.
- 23. Reuben Aldrich Guild, *History of Brown University, with Illustrative Documents* (Providence, 1867), 236-37.
- 24. Wroth, "Construction of the College Edifice," 215.
- 25. See note 6.
- 26. Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 158.



Rear Adm. Stephen B. Luce. Painting  
by Frederic P. Vinton, 1900; Naval War  
College Museum Collection.

# Rear Admiral Stephen B. Luce, U.S.N., and the Coming of the Navy to Narragansett Bay

Most historians would agree that notable movements and events usually result from circumstances evolving and interacting over a substantial period of time. Yet the records of the past also contain many instances of changes brought about largely, if not entirely, by uniquely talented, single-minded, and charismatic individuals. To a notable extent, and considered in a regional context, the establishment of an official naval presence in Narragansett Bay in the second half of the nineteenth century—a presence that has continued now for well over a hundred years—was attributable to one such person. That person was Rear Adm. Stephen B. Luce (1827-1917), the U.S. Navy's acknowledged intellectual leader during his time and a man of extraordinary insight and commitment. Indeed, while Narragansett Bay's superiority to other East Coast sites as a base for naval operations was generally recognized from the very beginning of the nation, it is unlikely that a naval presence would have been established there had it not been for the strong advocacy and interventions of Admiral Luce.

*“The whole Bay is an excellent man-of-war harbor affording good anchorage, sheltered in every direction and capacious enough for the whole of His Majesty's Navy were it increased fourfold.”* It was in these glowing terms that George Melville, the newly appointed governor of the island of Grenada, described Narragansett Bay in a report to the British Admiralty in 1764. Great Britain was seriously contemplating the establishment of

a major fleet anchorage in the American colonies after the French and Indian War, and Melville had been instructed to conduct a survey of the bay en route to his new post in the West Indies. His report, prepared after three months in the region, stressed the uniqueness of the bay for naval purposes, describing it as “one of the best natural harbors the world affords.”<sup>1</sup>

Melville's assessment would be endorsed by others down through the years, including those well versed in naval and maritime affairs. During the Revolution the merits of the bay were readily apparent to all three belligerents—the British, the Americans, and the French—and at one time or another each took possession of it. The British occupied Newport, located at the entrance to the bay, for almost three years, beginning in December 1776; and when Sir Henry Clinton, the British commander in America, ordered its evacuation in October 1779, some of his peers became his harshest critics. The renowned admiral George Rodney, for example, characterized the move as “the most fatal measure that could possibly have been adopted. It gave up the best and noblest harbor in America, capable of containing the whole Navy of Britain, and where they could in all seasons lie in perfect security; and from whence squadrons, in forty-eight hours, could blockade the three capital cities of America; namely, Boston, New York and Philadelphia.”<sup>2</sup>

Clinton soon came to realize his error and even considered reoccupation, but by then five thousand French troops under General Jean Baptiste de Rochambeau, along with a strong naval squadron, were comfortably ensconced in

ANTHONY S. NICOLOSI

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the region, and any attempt to dislodge them would have been very costly, if not impossible. The French occupation would ultimately prove fatal to Britain's cause: Rochambeau opened communications with Admiral de Grasse, the commander of a large French fleet in the West Indies, and their combined naval force eventually gave George Washington the all-important command of the sea, which he had long desired, for the climatic battle of the war at Yorktown, Virginia.<sup>3</sup>

After the ratification of the Constitution and the formation of the federal government, the new Navy Department demonstrated a marked preference for Narragansett Bay, and specifically Newport, over other ports on the East Coast for its installations. Benjamin Stoddard, the first Secretary of the Navy, tried to persuade President John Adams to make the bay the home to one of the six Navy shipyards that the administration decided to establish in 1799. Calling Narragansett Bay the "Gibraltar of the East Coast," Stoddard bolstered his argument with a detailed assessment made by Joshua Humphreys, the renowned designer and builder of the Navy's Constitution-class frigates.<sup>4</sup>

Humphreys had conducted a survey of the bay on Stoddard's instructions, and among other laudatory remarks he made about the region, he reported that Newport was "by far the most suitable port for the establishment of dry docks and a great naval port for our Navy," and that "its eligibility, in preference to any other eastern port is universally acknowledged."<sup>5</sup> The report would be used again in 1802, this time by Robert Smith, Thomas Jefferson's Secretary of the Navy. Smith, a Marylander, was persuaded that Newport was clearly preferable to New York, Philadelphia, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire—the places designated by the Adams administration—as a site for a Navy shipyard, and he did not hesitate to say so.<sup>6</sup>

Yet nothing came of these efforts by America's first two Secretaries of the Navy, John Adams's administration had made its

decision for two New England sites, Boston and Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and it was not about to change that decision. The Anti-Federalist Jefferson, on the other hand, had little interest in a navy, and under the influence of his frugal Secretary of the Treasury, Albert Gallatin, he even considered doing away with all of the new navy yards.

A keen awareness of Narragansett Bay's attributes, especially in Navy circles, continued well into the nineteenth century, but it had little effect on those who actually determined where naval facilities were to be located. By the century's fourth decade the Navy, already encumbered by Jeffersonian suspicion and neglect, fell prey to the avarice and greed of the Jacksonian spoils system; in effect, the location of military installations became a kind of political football, with strategic military evaluations taking second place to political patronage. Decisions were made by Congress, with or without the collaboration of the civilian Secretaries of the Navy, and the lobbies with the most resources and the greatest ability to apply political pressure generally won the prizes.

The Navy's strong interest in locating in Rhode Island waters had earlier manifested itself in independent action. In 1817 a joint military commission voted in favor of an installation at Newport, and a few years later the Navy took official action, creating a naval station there. However, Congress was not about to abide an infringement of its prerogative, and by 1822 the station was abandoned.<sup>7</sup> Several other joint Army-Navy commissions and congressional investigating committees would review Narragansett Bay favorably during the antebellum years, but it would require a great deal more for action to be taken on their recommendations.<sup>8</sup>

Part of the problem for Newport and the lower bay, the most likely site for naval purposes, was that the town had no political clout. The Revolutionary War had devastated Newport, which had been one of the leading centers of commerce in the colonies, and it

had never recovered. Moreover, there was no one to effectively support its interests in the new national government; when Newport was bypassed as a location for a shipyard in 1799, for instance, the town responded with little more than a petition to the president—a feeble measure at best.<sup>9</sup> Political and economic dominance within the state had shifted twenty miles northward to Providence, which, in addition to its maritime commerce, was rapidly developing into a center of regional communications and manufacturing. If there was ever to be a naval facility in Narragansett Bay, it seemed likely that it would be located at or near Providence, if at all possible, and not in the lower bay.

Although the Rhode Island congressional delegation may in part have provided some motivation or support for the military commissions and congressional committee actions in the first half of the century, the major sustained efforts on behalf of Newport came from the Navy. But whatever the case, in the final analysis all efforts came to nothing, and the best that Newport could hope for occurred in 1829 when Congress decided that Boston to the north and Hampton Roads, Virginia, to the south would be the two major East Coast installations, with Narragansett Bay to be used only in times of emergency.<sup>10</sup> Beyond this, Newporters had to content themselves with a new coastal fortification on Brenton Point, at the entrance of the inner harbor. Construction on what would become Fort Adams began in 1824 and continued for nearly three decades.<sup>11</sup>

Eventually the interest of the Navy and other proponents of the Newport area as a site for a naval installation appears to have waned, and the issue might have been laid to rest were it not for the Civil War. With Annapolis, Maryland, the site of the Naval Academy, considered dangerously close to potential scenes of hostilities, in April 1861 the Navy Department authorized the school's move to a northern port. Newport was chosen, and the faculty, staff, and students arrived there in May 1861 for what was to be a short stay. They would remain in

Newport for the duration of the war and return to Annapolis in August 1865.<sup>12</sup>

Temporary though it was, this first sustained official naval presence in Newport was significant for having familiarized the Navy—particularly its officer corps—with the many attractive features of the region. One

*Lt. Comdr. Luce was the assistant commandant of midshipmen and head of the Department of Seamanship at the U.S. Naval Academy in Newport when this photograph was taken at the Atlantic House, the academy's principal administration building, about 1861. Naval War College Museum Collection.*



naval officer who was especially affected was Lt. Comdr. Stephen B. Luce, the academy's assistant commandant of midshipmen. Indeed, the period of the war marked the beginning of a love affair between Luce and Narragansett Bay, and he resolved, consciously or subconsciously, to do everything possible to create a permanent naval presence there. "In 1863 . . . Commodore Blake, then superintendent of the Naval Academy, . . . invited me to accompany him on a drive to look at a site on Coasters Harbor Island for a new building for the Naval Academy," Luce recalled in a speech before the Naval War College many years later. "As we stood on the highest point of the Island . . . and looked upon the broad expanse of the water of Narragansett Bay, the Commodore grew very eloquent upon the many advantages of the harbor and bay as a naval station, and the perfect adaptability of the site where we stood for a Naval Academy. The very favorable impression made upon me . . . at that time was never effaced."<sup>13</sup>

Luce had begun his naval career in 1841 as a fourteen-year-old midshipman aboard the USS *North Carolina*, commanded by the famed Matthew C. Perry of Newport.<sup>14</sup> By the advent of the Civil War, Luce had circumnavigated the globe twice and, through constant reading and self-education, had acquired a reputation as the most learned officer in the Navy. His particular interest was the education and training of both enlisted men and officers in order to make the Navy more truly professional. He embraced the concept of the Naval Academy, which had been formed in 1845, and in 1862 he published the school's first professional textbook, *Seamanship*, which went through eight editions, the last in 1898. In 1873 he would join with others interested in modernizing the service to form the United States Naval Institute, an association for the exchange of professional ideas outside the official context of the Navy, and he would publish the first article in the institute's *Proceedings*. A year later he would write the legislation for the establishment of state maritime schools; enacted

by Congress, it was based on the Land Grant Act of 1862 and provided for young men who desired careers in the maritime services. Luce would inaugurate the Naval Apprentice System in 1875, for training afloat for young boys who wished to be naval seamen, and he would play a crucial role in the establishment of the first shore-based recruit-training station in 1883 and the Naval War College, the first college of its kind in the world, in 1884.

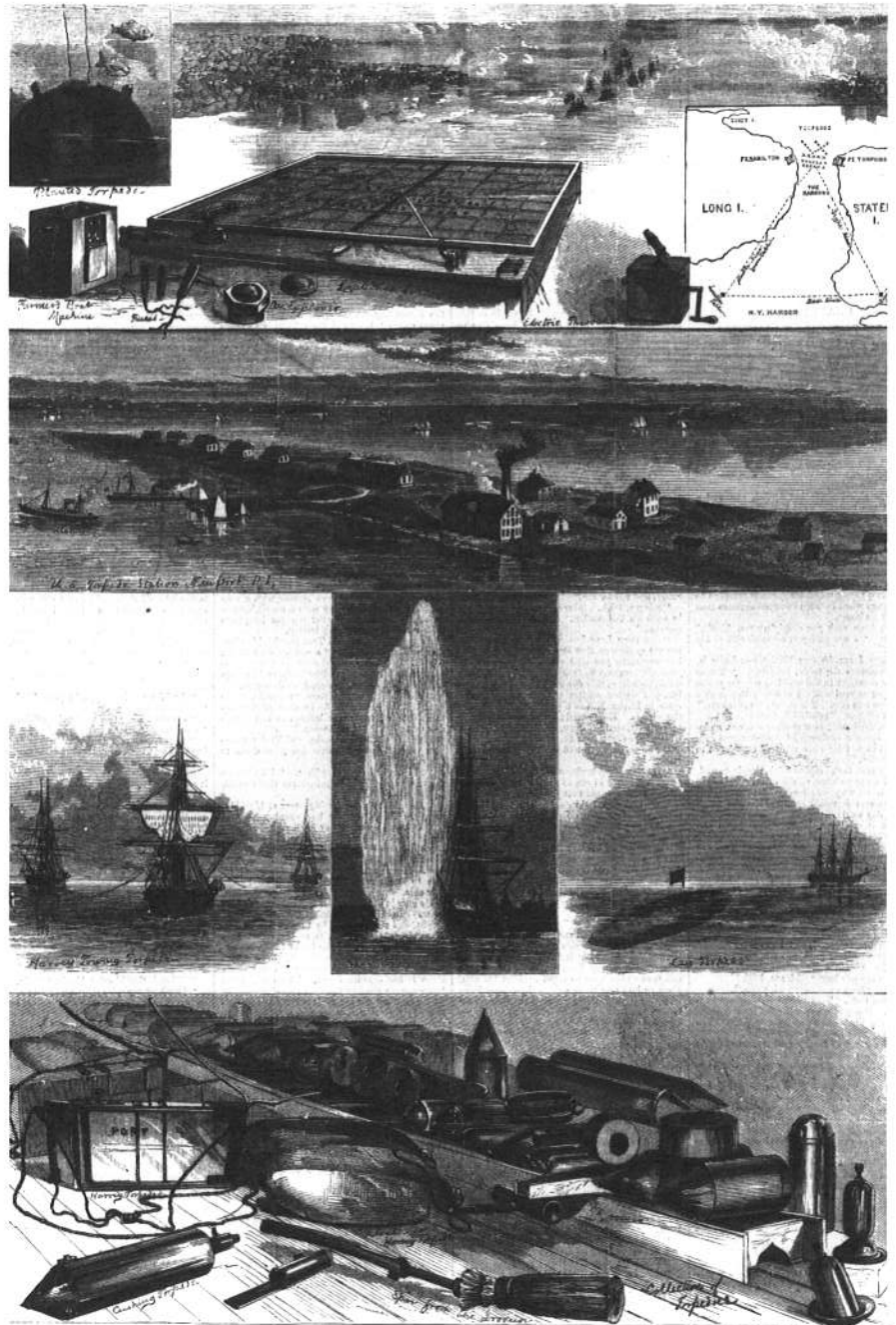
When Capt. George Blake, the superintendent of the Naval Academy during the Civil War, brought the academy to Newport and attempted to keep it there after the war, Luce was his strongest supporter.<sup>15</sup> There was, in fact, good reason to believe that the school would remain in Newport: it had been at Annapolis, Maryland, for only fifteen years and, what is more, without the blessing of Congress; Maryland was a border state with a large number of Confederate sympathizers; Congress was dominated by the northern states; Secretary of the Navy Gideon Wells was a New Englander; and Newporters voted overwhelmingly in a local referendum to give Coasters Harbor Island, the site of the city's poorhouse and farm, to the federal government without compensation if the school was located there. So sanguine were Newport's proponents that a prominent architect was engaged by Superintendent Blake to draw up plans for an academy building to be constructed on the island.<sup>16</sup>

But the best-laid plans sometimes go awry, and that is what happened with the attempt to keep the Naval Academy in Newport. In 1864 a strong Maryland lobby in Congress was somehow able to get legislation passed legitimizing Annapolis as the academy's home. When Luce, who had been detached from the school and was serving with the Atlantic blockade off the southern coast, learned of the movement in Congress, he responded quickly and forcefully. In a letter to Senator James W. Grimes, the chairman of the Senate Navy Committee, he observed that Annapolis was not a good place for the academy, and that the school "ought to be located at or near

one of our large naval stations but as that is not convenient just at present, let it be placed where a large Navy yard must sooner or later be built and that is in Narragansett Bay.”<sup>17</sup> To Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Vasa Fox, Luce wrote in the same vein: “So long as the Academy was at Annapolis it was naval only in name. It has only been since its location in a seaport [Newport], that it has begun to assume its true character, and it will be much further improved when the waters of Narragansett Bay become one of the great naval centers (which sooner or later it must become) supposing, of course, the Academy does not return to Annapolis, a consummation every friend to the Navy should struggle against.”<sup>18</sup> Years later, in a speech delivered to the students and staff of the Naval War College, Luce maintained that it was a political deal between Senator Reverdy Johnson of Maryland and Senator Grimes of Iowa that dashed Newport’s hopes and returned the Naval Academy to Annapolis.<sup>19</sup>

One positive effect of the whole affair on Luce was a lasting appreciation of the importance of politics and the need for naval officers to sharpen their political skills, despite the long and honored American tradition of the separation of the military from government decision making. Indeed, he never forgot the lesson of the failed academy project, and in later naval matters of particular import in which politics were involved, he prepared assiduously and performed astutely.

Four years after the Naval Academy’s departure from Newport, the Naval Torpedo Station, the Navy’s first permanent installation in Narragansett Bay, was established on Goat Island, in Newport’s inner harbor. The station was the brainchild of Civil War admiral David Dixon Porter, who had been greatly impressed by the primitive torpedoes used by both sides in the war and was persuaded of the weapon’s importance to naval warfare of the future.<sup>20</sup> However, there appears to be no satisfactory



THE TORPEDO SERVICE.—FROM SKETCHES BY THOS. R. DAVIS.—[SEE PAGE 102.]

explanation of why Porter selected Goat Island over several other equally attractive sites that were proposed for the station; the Navy Department regulation authorizing an experimental torpedo station did not mention Newport, and the man who was to become the installation’s first head, Comdr. E. O. Matthews, actually recommended Oyster Bay, on Long Island, for the site. But one possible reason for the admiral’s selection was the influence of the ubiquitous Stephen B. Luce.<sup>21</sup>

*Focusing on the Naval Torpedo Station on Goat Island, Newport, these drawings appeared in the February 5, 1876, issue of Harper’s Weekly.*

Porter and Luce had been close friends since the 1840s, when they had served together aboard ship. When Porter was appointed superintendent of the Naval Academy (then back in Annapolis) in 1866, he called upon Luce to be his commandant of midshipmen. It was during the three years that they served together there that Porter brought his plans for a torpedo station to maturity, and it is very likely that he received Luce's advice, solicited or otherwise, on the merits of Goat Island, one of the places that the academy had occupied during its stay in Newport.

No speculation is necessary, on the other hand, in determining Luce's role in the establishment of the Newport Naval Training Station, the first shore-based recruit-training facility in America, on Coasters Harbor Island in the early 1880s. Some time earlier, in 1875, Luce had founded the Naval Apprentice System for training young boys afloat, and he retained command of the program when it evolved into a shore-based operation in 1880.

Initially established by the Navy on a temporary basis, the station continued as such until 1883, when it was made permanent after the U.S. government accepted a gift of Coasters Harbor Island from Newport the previous year.<sup>22</sup>

The establishment of the recruit-training station at Newport was actually a feat of considerable proportions. New London, Connecticut, on the Thames River, was a strong contender to be selected for the site, and it lobbied hard and long in Congress. Since Rhode Island's congressional delegation was notoriously deficient in matters involving the Navy, the Nutmeg State's chances of success appeared to be very good. But Luce and his coterie of supporters in the service were not to be denied, at least not without a fight.

In the late 1870s, in league with principals in the Navy Department, some members of the Rhode Island delegation in Congress, and state and Newport political leaders, Luce set in motion a well-coordinated strategy aimed at neutralizing the Connecticut pressure in

*This photograph, taken about 1915, records a Sunday naval recruits formation and parade on the Newport Naval Training Station's Dewey Field. The large building (center background) is the Naval War College; to the left of it are battleships of the Atlantic Fleet at anchor in the bay. Naval War College Museum Collection.*

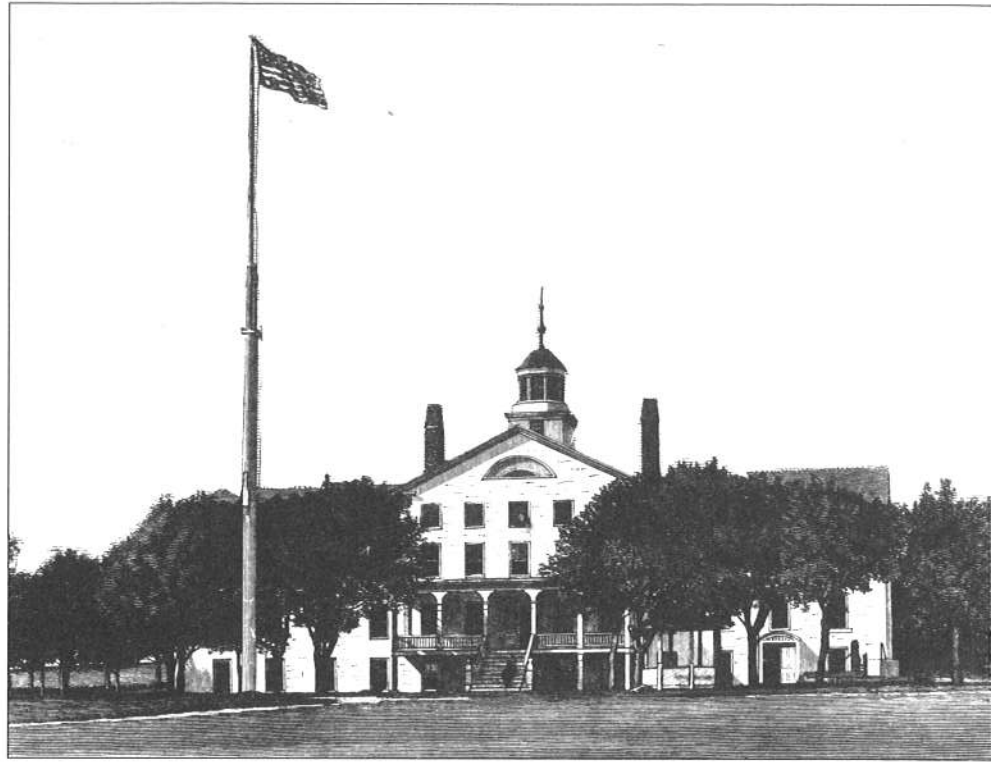


Washington. Extending over five years, the joint effort ended successfully on June 4, 1883, with Navy Department Regulation No. 33, which officially established the Naval Training Station on Coasters Harbor Island. Three of Luce's staunchest allies in the campaign were his old friend Admiral Porter, who was then the chief adviser to the Secretary of the Navy; former Rhode Island governor Charles C. Van Zandt, of Newport; and Rhode Island Congressman—and, after September 1881, Senator—Nelson Aldrich.<sup>23</sup>

The Aldrich connection was particularly important, for unlike Rhode Island's Senator Henry B. Anthony and Aldrich's senatorial predecessor Ambrose E. Burnside, the young, dynamic Aldrich was deeply committed to achieving a naval presence in the bay and welcomed an alliance with the equally resolute—albeit for different reasons—Stephen B. Luce: Aldrich saw the installation as benefiting the state's economy, while Luce focused on its military and naval value. The friendship that developed between these two men was a lasting one, and it would continue to benefit future efforts to expand the Navy's presence in the region.

Among other things, the success of the Newport project demonstrated to the Navy's officer corps that it was possible to engage, at least in a limited way, in the government decision-making process in order to accomplish important and desirable operations objectives, objectives based on strategic concerns rather than purely on patronage. Because of the sensitive nature of civilian-military relations, this had never been done in a concerted fashion. To have a fair chance of success, such engagement required an alliance with politicians involved in the world of patronage politics; yet it was now possible for the Navy to pursue objectives that would be in the best interests of the nation as a whole.

The successful establishment of the Naval Training Station on Coasters Harbor Island gave Luce the added confidence to undertake an even greater project in the Newport area:



the creation of a Naval War College. "My great hobby now . . . that the Training System is fairly established is to erect a 'War School' for officers—the prime object being to teach officers . . . the science of war," he confided in a letter to his son-in-law, Lieutenant Boutelle Noyes.<sup>24</sup> In this venture Luce would call once again upon his principal allies, Admiral Porter in the Navy Department and Senator Aldrich in Congress. Neither would disappoint him. The culmination of their joint efforts was Navy Department General Order 325 of October 6, 1884, creating the Naval War College in the former Newport poorhouse on Coasters Harbor Island. Luce became the first president of the college, which he would subsequently describe as "a place of original research on all questions relating to war and the statesmanship connected with war, or the prevention of war."<sup>25</sup>

Getting underway, however, was just half the battle, and the new and novel school faced a host of enemies, both in and outside the Navy. The college was opposed among older, traditional-minded members of the officer corps who felt that service before the mast was

*Constructed in 1820 for use as the Newport Asylum for the Poor, this building served as the Naval War College from 1884 to 1889. As Founders Hall, it now houses the Naval War College Museum. Photograph, 1884; Naval War College Museum Collection.*

a sufficient education for naval officers; those in charge of the Naval Training Station were not happy about sharing Coasters Harbor Island with the school; certain congressmen representing coastline states were opposed to another naval facility in Narragansett Bay, while others were concerned about the institution's expense to the government. In his battle to keep the fledgling institution alive during its formative years, Luce was aided by his fortunate association with the man he selected to teach naval tactics and history and to serve as his successor in the presidency, Alfred Thayer Mahan. It was Mahan's epochal book *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*, based on his lectures and first published in 1890, that established both his credentials as a historian and the reputation of the college as an institution of higher learning in the art and science of naval warfare. The book and subsequent writings by the widely acknowledged "Apostle of Sea Power" strongly influenced maritime nations the world over and have been credited with helping to shape the course of history in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>26</sup>

Luce continued in close association with the Naval War College after retiring to Newport in 1889, serving both as an adviser to its successive presidents, most of whom had served under his command as young officers, and as a college lecturer. But that was not all that he did, for when opportunities arose to expand the naval presence in the region even further, he responded in his skillful and politically astute fashion.

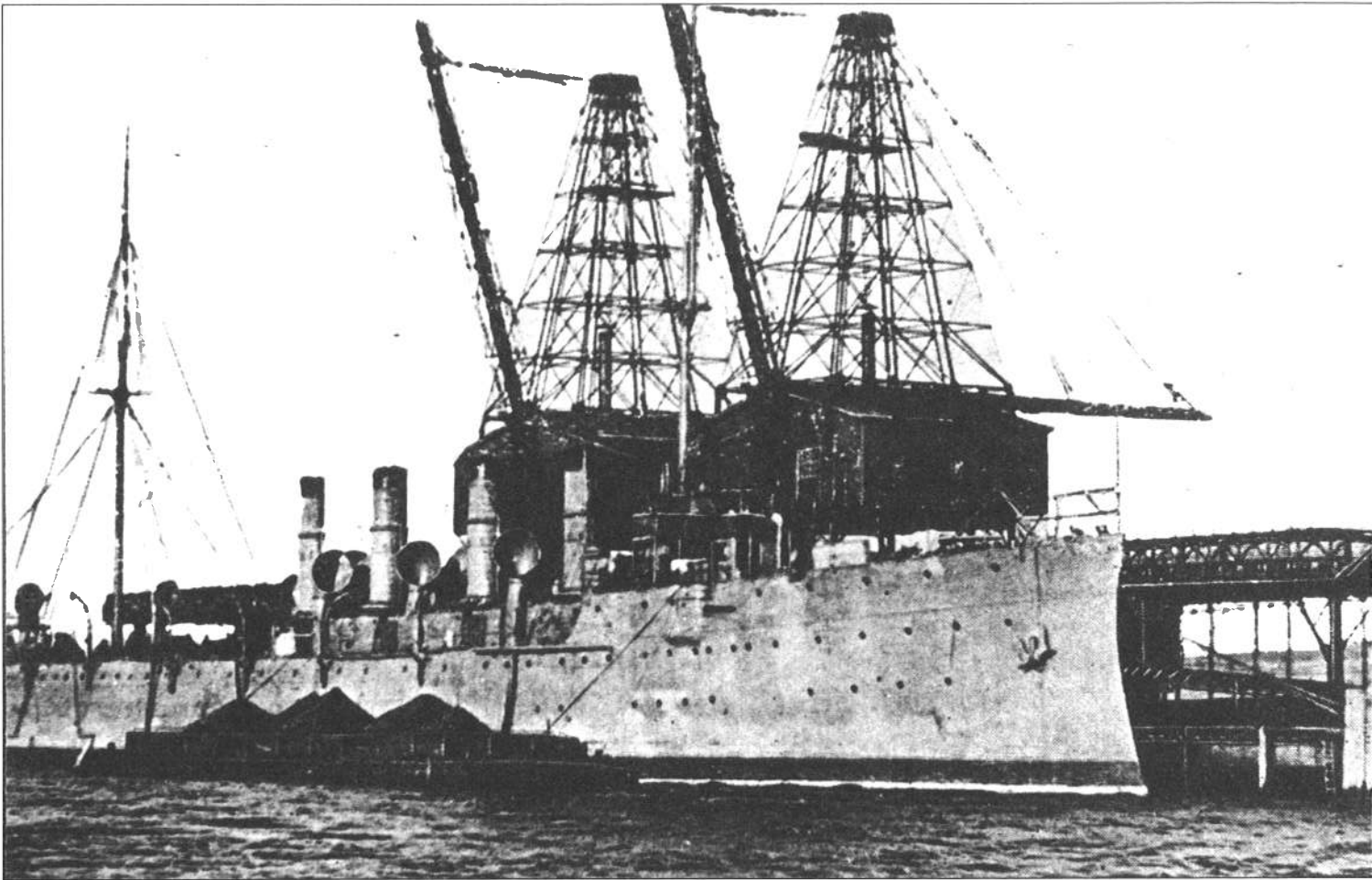
With the Navy beginning to build a modern battleship fleet in the 1890s, toward the end of the decade a War College committee headed by college president Capt. Henry C. Taylor was tasked by the Navy Department with locating a site for a coaling station to serve the new large warships. Taylor was one of Luce's closest friends, and he had been a prominent member of his coterie of "naval reformers" in

the campaign to establish the college.<sup>27</sup> It was no surprise, therefore, when the committee recommended Narragansett Bay, specifically the Melville area of Portsmouth on Aquidneck Island, for the new facility. The recommendation was approved in Washington, and the coaling station went into operation in 1900.

The Bradford Coaling Station made the North Atlantic Fleet (soon to become the Atlantic Fleet, consisting of dreadnaught-class battleships) a regular visitor to Narragansett Bay. By 1906, when the Great Naval Review of the Atlantic Fleet took place at Oyster Bay for President Theodore Roosevelt and the term "Great White Fleet" had come into vogue, Luce was actively campaigning to make Narragansett Bay the Navy's official fleet anchorage on the East Coast. In part, the campaign took the form of articles and letters in professional journals and newspapers, as well as correspondence with prominent individuals both in the service and in Congress. The message was simple and direct: Narragansett Bay was the ideal location for an East Coast naval base; old shipyard sites were cramped and congested with commercial traffic and had torturous approaches, while Narragansett Bay had numerous shoreline sites for naval facilities and an adequate supply of skilled labor and materials, and it was easily accessible to the open sea at all times of the year.<sup>28</sup>

The efforts on behalf of the bay had the desired effect, and the fleet continued in residence there for a good part of each year. It would do so until 1934, when it was decided, during the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt, that Norfolk, Virginia, would become the fleet's major East Coast anchorage.<sup>29</sup>

The legacy of Rear Adm. Stephen B. Luce to the City by the Sea and to Rhode Island was the addition of a distinct naval character to the community and the state. When he died in 1917, the activities that he had established and helped to establish were flourishing—a testimony to his clear vision of the future, his unerring judgment, and his astute interpersonal skills. Above all, Stephen Luce was the master



practitioner of those subjects that the professional naval officer studied at his beloved War College: tactics and strategy. A practicing Episcopalian, guided in his performance by the lofty principles of his faith, and ever conscious of the great privilege and responsibility that were conferred upon him from the wearing of the uniform, he was invariably the model of respectability, confidence, and leadership. As such, he commanded the respect of all with whom he came into contact, as well as the loyalty and obedience of his subordinates. Not least of all, Admiral Luce was a true patriot, one who dearly loved his country and the Navy; and in the best "can do" traditions of the service, he guided the Navy into a happy relationship with Narragansett Bay and with modernity.

*A U.S. Navy cruiser at the Bradford Coaling Station at Melville, Portsmouth, about 1914. Naval War College Museum Collection.*

*For more information and educational materials on this subject, go to [www.rihs.org](http://www.rihs.org).*

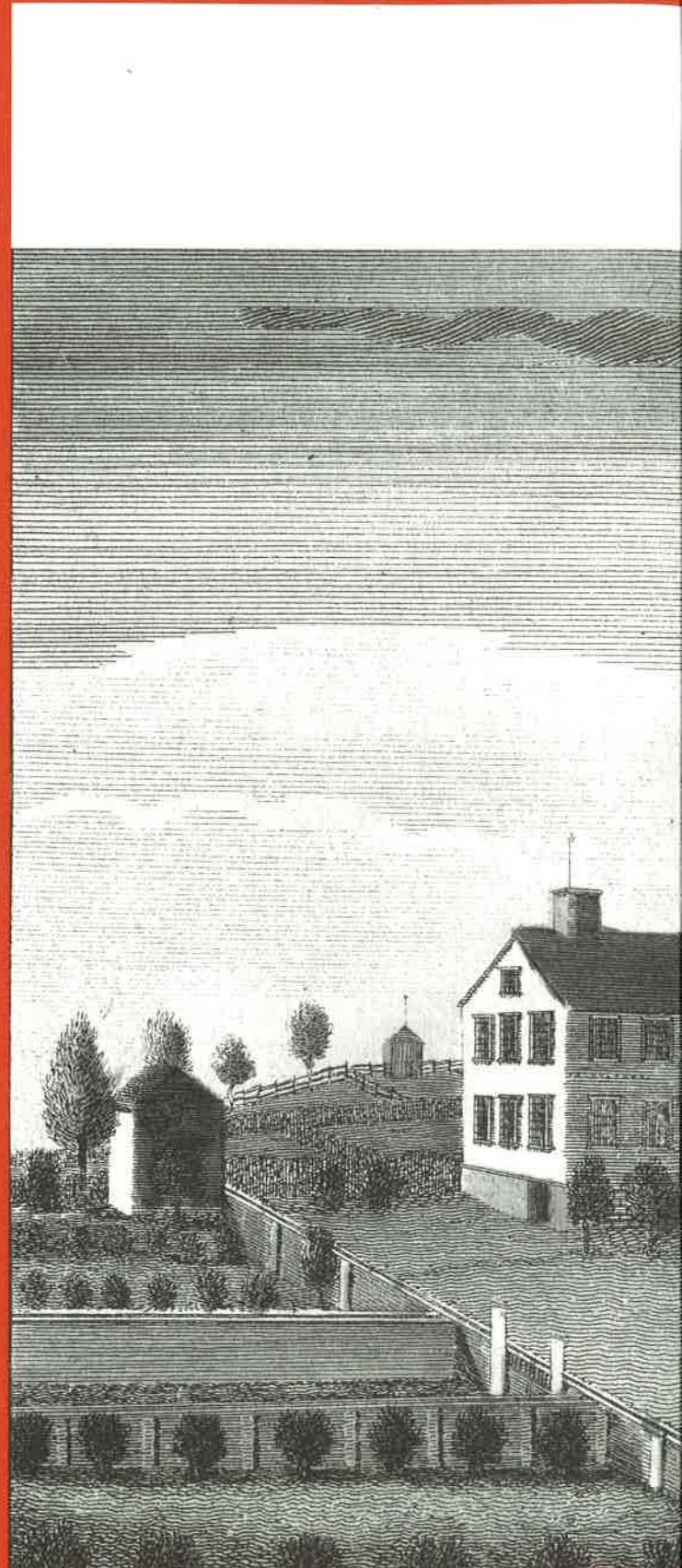


# Notes

1. Quoted in Maud Elliott, *This Was My Newport* (Cambridge, Mass: Mythology Co., 1944), 231-33. See also "A British Navy Yard Contemplated in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1764," *Rhode Island Historical Magazine* 6, no. 1 (1885): 42-47.
2. Quoted in Barbara W. Tuchman, *The First Salute* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 180-82.
3. Tuchman, *The First Salute*, 190, 223-24.
4. Benjamin Stoddard to John Adams, n.d., *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States . . . , Class 6, Naval Affairs*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C., 1834), 86-87.
5. Report, Joshua Humphreys to Benjamin Stoddard, n.d., *American State Papers*, 1:91.
6. Robert Smith to the Hon. Mr. Mitchell, House of Representatives, Jan. 20, 1802, *American State Papers*, 1: 84.
7. John Rodgers, Navy Commissioners' Office, to Smith Thompson, Secretary of the Navy, Jan. 20, 1821, *American State Papers*, 1:713, 715.
8. See, e.g., Mr. Storrs, Committee of Naval Affairs, to House of Representatives, Mar. 2, 1826, *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States . . . , Class 6, Naval Affairs*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C., 1860), 637.
9. George Champlin Mason, *Reminiscences of Newport* (Newport: Charles E. Hammett Jr., 1884), 138.
10. "Surveys for a Naval Depot in Narragansett Bay and Newport Harbor" [Joint Army-Navy Commission report], included with John H. Eaton to Andrew Stevenson, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Jan. 12, 1830, *American State Papers: Documents, Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States . . . , Class 6, Naval Affairs*, vol. 3 (Washington, D.C., 1860), 463-68.
11. A fortification of one kind or another existed on Brenton Point, the site of present-day Fort Adams, from the earliest colonial period. It is interesting to speculate whether the federal government approved the construction project to appease Newport and the state of Rhode Island for the government's not establishing a naval installation on the bay. For a concise history of the fort, see the pamphlet by Theodore Gatchel, *The Rock Which the Storm Will Beat: Fort Adams and the Defense of Narragansett Bay* (Newport: Fort Adams Trust, n.d.).
12. See Anthony S. Nicolosi, "The Naval Academy in Newport, 1861-1865," *Newport History: Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society*, vol. 66, pt. 4, no. 229 (1995): 151-85.
13. Stephen B. Luce, "A Talk on the History of the War College, August 20, 1906," Record Group 14, Faculty and Staff Presentations, 1892-1970, Archives, Naval War College, Newport.
14. For a concise but accurate treatment of Luce's early years and naval career, see John D. Hayes and John B. Hattendorf, *The Writings of Stephen B. Luce* (Newport: Naval War College Press, 1975), chap. 1.
15. George Blake was born and raised in Worcester, Massachusetts. As a young lieutenant in 1832, he served on a detail that surveyed Narragansett Bay to determine its suitability for naval purposes. Nicolosi, "Naval Academy in Newport," 152, 166.
16. *Ibid.*, 170.
17. Luce to James Grimes, Apr. 2, 1864, MS no. 2, United States Naval Academy Manuscript Collection, Annapolis, Md.
18. Luce to Gustavus V. Fox, Mar. 15, 1864, typescript copy in the John D. Hayes Research materials for *The Writings of Stephen B. Luce*, Naval Historical Collection, Naval War College.
19. Luce, "History of the War College."
20. John Merrill and Lionel D. Wyld, *Meeting the Submarine Challenge: A Short History of the Naval Underwater Systems Center* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1997), 134.
21. *General Orders and Circulars Issued by the Navy Department from 1863 to 1887* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1887), 84. In a letter of June 25, 1869, to Rear Adm. John A. Dahlgren, Matthews indicated that Oyster Bay, N.Y., was his first choice. See Martin E. Trench et al., comps., *The Naval Torpedo Station, Newport, Rhode Island, 1658 through 1951* (Newport: U. S. Underwater Ordnance Station, [1951]), 10.
22. For the history of the beginnings of the Newport Naval Training Station, see Anthony S. Nicolosi, "The Founding of the Newport Naval Training Station, 1878-1883: An Exercise in Naval Politics," *The American Neptune* 49, no. 4 (1989), 291-304.
23. *Ibid.*, 293, 297-98, 301-2.
24. Quoted in Albert Gleaves, *Life and Letters of Rear Admiral Stephen B. Luce, U.S. Navy* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1925), 163-64.
25. Hayes and Hattendorf, *Writings of Stephen B. Luce*, 39-40.
26. For Alfred Thayer Mahan's time at the Naval War College and the impact of his sea-power theories on the institution, see John B. Hattendorf, B. Mitchell Simpson III, and John R. Wadleigh, *Sailors and Scholars: The Centennial History of the U.S. Naval War College* (Newport: Naval War College Press, 1984), 11-37.
27. Nicolosi, "Naval Academy in Newport," 182. See also Hattendorf, Simpson, and Wadleigh, *Sailors and Scholars*, 38.
28. "Great Naval Depot," *Newport Mercury*, Nov. 3, 1906; "The Navy and Dock Yards," *Newport Mercury*, Nov. 10, 1906; "Narragansett Bay as a Naval Base," *Newport Daily News*, Oct. 31, 1906; "Dangerous Dry Docks," *Newport Daily News*, Nov. 2, 1906; "The Value of the Dry Dock," *Newport Mercury*, Nov. 23, 1907; "Up-to-Date Dock Yards," *Newport Daily News*, Nov. 19, 1906; Stephen B. Luce, "The Navy and Its Needs," *North American Review*, April 1911, 494-507. See also Hayes and Hattendorf, *Writings of Stephen B. Luce*, 226-28, 233.
29. Garrett D. Byrnes, "The Navy in Rhode Island: America Owes a Lot to Narragansett Bay," *Providence Sunday Journal*, July 1, 1973, *Rhode Islander* section.

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*The College Edifice, now Brown University's University Hall, is at the right in this detail from "A S.W. View of the College in Providence, together with the President's House & Gardens." Engraving, ca. 1792; Brown University Library.*