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“The Tide Taken at the Flood”



*The Black Suffrage Movement during the
Dorr Rebellion in the State of Rhode Island
(1841-1842)*

By Caleb T. Horton

I think that our labours in Rhode Island during this Dorr excitement did more to abolitionise the state than any previous, or subsequent work. It was the “tide taken at the flood.” One effect of these labours was to induce the old “Law and Order” Party, when it set about making its new constitution, to avoid the narrow folly of the Dorrites, and make a constitution which should not abridge any man’s rights on account of race or colour. Such a new constitution was finally adopted.¹

The renowned Frederick Douglass wrote this reflection in his autobiography *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*. His message was explicit – the Rhode Island black community, as well as the abolitionist community, won a tremendous victory for black civil rights in the year of 1842, through a state constitution that gave African American males the right to vote. However, Douglass concludes that it was an achievement conceived amid political calamity, and solely obtained because of one reason -- the Dorr Rebellion -- Rhode Island’s very own chartist revolution from 1841 to 1842.

New England is known for its progressive and democratic spirit. Enlightened Revolutionaries, Transcendentalists, Romanticists, and Abolitionists, flourished in the quaint egalitarian region. Contrarily, the autonomous spirit, which was once so apprised by pious pilgrims and gentlemen farmers in the late 17th and 18th centuries, would succumb to an Industrial era, one marked by capital, profit, and laborious production.² Rhode Island, the home of Roger Williams, a humanist zealot who preached religious tolerance and human suffrage, would ironically become the birthplace of inequality, slavery, and anti-democratic principles.

The epoch of this tumultuous transformation came about when Samuel Slater introduced the factory system in 1793 when he established Slater’s Textile in Pawtucket, Rhode

Island.³ Profit slowly replaced idealism. Factory owners and landholders would do all they could to establish and maintain the great divide between owner and laborer. The worst effects of this inequality were usually felt by those citizens who belonged to the lowest tiers of society. That, in 1840s Rhode Island, comprised laborers, immigrants, and most notably, racial minorities.⁴

Since Rhode Island enjoyed a steady rise in industrial power since 1793, an oligarchy of wealthy property owners had enjoyed a political monopoly over the state. Naturally, after Rhode Island had joined the Union in 1790, these oligarchs in state government refused to adopt a new democratic constitution and continued to clutch onto the vestiges of the King's Charter of 1663. The charter, progressive for its time, was woefully outdated by 1841. It was plagued with "rotten borough" representation that gave the most political power and representation to the agricultural towns in the Rhode Island State House of Representatives and Senate. Such representation was inequitable since the urban areas, such as the City of Providence, had the largest populations in the state. Also, under the charter, no white adult male was allowed to vote who did not own \$134 worth of land, which meant, in 1840, that 60 percent of the state's white adult male population could not vote. For a state that had the largest industrial economy per capita in the entire Union, it was a serious problem.⁵

Laboring males were dissatisfied, and in 1840 they created the Rhode Island Suffrage Party. Thomas Dorr, a representative in the Rhode Island General Assembly, joined them in 1841 and led their movement. In October 1841 they held a "People's Convention" which sought to create a new, more democratic, and representative state constitution which they called the "People's Constitution." African Americans were excluded from participating in the convention,

and despite many attempts for arbitration, they were bitterly denied access. Nonetheless, in April 1841, eligible and non-eligible voters alike in town gatherings throughout the state participated in drafting the new constitution.⁶

The Rhode Island General Assembly attempted to draft a new constitution called the "Freemen's Constitution" in February 1842. Even the chartists realized that their Landholder's Constitution (1663 King's Charter) was archaic, and fearing the popularity of the People's Constitution; they tried desperately to produce a democratic constitution of their own. In March 1842, the Freemen's Constitution was defeated in the legislature, and the People's Constitution, despite the questionable legality of its ratification, won a majority vote for ratification including replacing Samuel King with Thomas Dorr as governor.⁷

Governor King would have none of it, and feeling that their political power was now in jeopardy, King and his party of "Law and Order"-- a coalition comprised of Whigs and conservative Democrats -- declared martial law on May 4, 1842. An act was passed ("Act in Relation to Offenses against the Sovereign Power of the State") that branded the People's Constitution and the Rhode Island Suffrage Party as traitors to the state. The "Dorrites" (supporters of the Rhode Island Suffrage Party) referred to this edict as the "Algerine Law."⁸

No longer able to take power by peaceful means, Thomas Dorr and his followers turned to force. Creating an insurrection, the Dorrites made two unsuccessful attempts to take over the state government -- one on May 19, 1842, at the Cranston Street Arsenal in Providence, Rhode Island, and another on June 27, 1842, in Chepachet, Rhode Island. By the end of the summer of 1842, state militia of both white and black men gathered under the banner of Law and Order to

smash the Dorrite insurgency. Thomas Dorr and his supporters were defeated, broken, and arrested.⁹

In the aftermath of the rebellion, the legal government of Rhode Island realized that they needed to compromise to end hostilities. In November 1842, the Law and Order Party drafted a Law & Order Constitution -- which extended universal suffrage to all native adult males -- to replace the old King's Charter (picking up where they had left off previously in March 1842 with the Freeman's Constitution). The question of black male suffrage was considered, especially since African Americans supported the Law and Order Party during the outbreak of the rebellion, and was voted on by qualified voters across the state, supporting black male voting privileges. Thus, black male suffrage a reality in the state of Rhode Island.¹⁰

This early victory in African American civil rights was hardly the mark of white charity to downtrodden people. Despite their suffrage being conceived in the aftermath of a riotous rebellion, could it be that black and white relations in the state were improving? Perhaps, but more than likely it was the wit, guile, and cunning of the African American community in Providence, Rhode Island, during the midst of the Ocean State's civil war.

That is not to say other elements did not contribute to this suffrage victory. Rhode Island always had a great affinity for abolitionism.¹¹ The state's Quaker and moralist Whig sentiment cannot be ignored as a factor in aiding this civil rights victory. Perhaps an even more pressing factor was the increasing abhorrence towards Irish immigration in the early 1840s, which had de-stigmatized African Americans as an object of ridicule in the Northeastern urban centers of the United States. Given the small population of the black community in Rhode

Island during this period of study, compared to the overwhelmingly large influx of Irish immigrants, whites with nativist dispositions no longer perceived blacks as a threat that they once were to them.¹²

Nonetheless, these are mere subsidiaries of a larger theme. It was the voice of the Providence black community and their plight for citizenship that won them suffrage, and it is through this thesis that their narrative shall be interpreted, by exemplifying the Providence black community's struggle as a microhistorical addition to the historiography of African American agency during the antebellum era in the United States.

Historiography

Robert J. Cottrol, in his monograph *The Afro-Yankees: Providence's Black Community in the Antebellum Era*, claims that the antebellum black community in Providence, Rhode Island, was a "local study of a bigger pattern."¹³

Providence did not produce a black newspaper or house a major black essayist. Instead the story of Providence's black community is told by the ordinary men who spent their lives struggling to carve out a place for themselves in American society. In many ways the history of free Negroes in Providence is better memorialized by the writings of the ordinary residents with their parochial concerns than it might had Providence been the home of some of the more illustrious black persons of the antebellum era. The day-to-day concerns, the desire to celebrate relatively minor triumphs, the quest for recognition, led to a home-grown literature that provides an invaluable foundation for those studying everyday black life in antebellum Providence.¹⁴

Cottrol is correct in his assumption; the black community in Providence, Rhode Island, was less illustrious compared to the grand scheme of antebellum African American history. Thus, it is a pristine piece of social history that can be applied to larger themes in black American history. However, the events that ensued in Rhode Island during the years 1841 through 1842 were far

from ordinary. A mini chartist rebellion in 1840s United States is nothing short of an anomaly. It is this very reason why, circa 1841, the Providence black community stood above the rest concerning uniqueness. The Dorr Rebellion and the circumstances it placed on the community made them quite extraordinary. Their organization in the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, their petition and boycott against the Suffrage Association Party, and their volunteering in the local fire departments and militia regiments during the rebellion were perhaps just as revolutionary as the Dorrites' plight for white male suffrage. Hence, Cottrol's supposition is almost correct except for the years 1841 through 1842.

Erik J. Chaput and Russell J. DeSimone, in "Strange Bedfellows: The Politics of Race in Antebellum Rhode Island," agree over the extraordinary circumstances of black suffrage during the Dorr Rebellion:

[It is] the only instance in antebellum history where blacks regained the franchise after having it revoked, was rooted both in the particular political and economic situations of Providence's black community and in the Revolutionary rhetoric that was part and parcel of Dorr's attempt at extralegal reform.¹⁵

Historian David Roediger, in his monograph *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, claims that the black community in Providence was viewed as "enemies rather than members of a social compact."¹⁶ The Dorrites viewed them as a handicap to their cause for suffrage; hence, they rejected the black community from the People's Convention. It was because of this rejection that the community achieved suffrage in the legal constitution (Freemen's Constitution) of 1842 when they joined the side of the Law and Order Party in Rhode Island. Thus, the achievement of black suffrage came about from the

benevolence of whites who were in charge during the drafting of the Law & Order Constitution in November 1842.

While all this may be true, there is little consideration in the literature of whether or not Providence's black community attained suffrage under its autonomous power. The usual rhetoric of an oppressed and burdened people liberated by circumstantial historical events or by kind white benevolence is a typical theme found in the vast volume of African American history. It is not until recently that modern historians have considered black agency a theme in the antebellum period. The most particular theme relevant to the Providence black community's struggle in the Dorr Rebellion is that of "black manhood." The question of the black man's place within the context of the Great Experiment is a vehement inquiry. Manhood conveyed different meanings to different people in the 19th century. However, for African American males it was an obsession to become model citizens, such as providers, laborers, and most of all voting and respectable legal citizens of both their community and their country.¹⁷ In the context of 1841 Rhode Island, African American males were locked in a perpetual state of social inferiority -- a *samsara* of "Jim Crow." In 1840s Providence, despite a growing middle class African American population, black males still could not participate in local, state, and national government. Black males still bared the humiliating status of a "boy," which many of their Southern brethren endured in the antebellum slave South. However, as we find out in this article, they would not let this social injustice stand.

The Foundation of a Community

In 1784, all slaves in the state of Rhode Island were poised to become emancipated gradually.¹⁸ By the turn of the century, most blacks continued the occupations they once held when they were slaves (domestic servants, farmers, and laborers) and continued to be dependent on the white populace. Such occupations and status remained true in Providence, and in 1800 only 38 percent of the black population was head of household.¹⁹ Since their emancipation in 1784, it would take nearly forty years before the African American community to develop substantially in the city.

By 1820, the formation of a community came into fruition at last when the African Union Meeting House Church was constructed on Providence's East Side on Meeting Street. Moses Brown, a devout abolitionist, and Quaker bought the land and donated a small sum for the meeting house's construction.²⁰ The black community raised a total of \$800 out of the total cost of \$2,200 needed for the congregation.²¹ By 1821, the meeting house was finished, and it functioned as both a school for young black children and a place of worship for the community. Reverend Jacob Perry, a black man, took on the roles of teacher and preacher.²²

Even with the construction of the new church, the community was still spread about the city, for they settled in areas where they could find work and inexpensive property. Naturally, some settled in Providence's East Side where the meeting house was located on Meeting Street and nearby Spring Street. Others settled in the Olney Street-Gaspee Street district and in the northwest part of the city called Addison Hollow.²³ Despite the steady proliferation of the community, where 60 percent of African Americans became heads of households by 1820,²⁴ racial bigotry ensued, causing tension and riots.

On October 18, 1824, Providence's first race riot occurred at Addison Hollow, or as city residents called it, the "Hardscrabble." The Hardscrabble area was similar to that of modern-day project housing. According to William J. Brown, an African American shoemaker and lifelong resident of Providence during the mid 19th century:²⁵ "A great many colored people purchased land there, because it was some distance from the town, and hence quite cheap. They put up small houses for themselves and earned their living in various ways."²⁶ Brown also remarks on the poor seedy conditions of the impoverished neighborhood, which was more than likely the source of the riot:

A man named Addison built houses, and rented to anyone who would give him his price. As he rented cheap, people of bad character hired of him, and these drew a class of bad men and women, so that the good were continually being molested, having no protection. At last disturbances became so common that they raised a mob, and drove many from their houses, then tore them down, took their furniture – what little they had – carried it to Pawtucket, and sold it at auction.²⁷

As Brown explains, the neighborhood "drew a class of bad men and women." Thus, the riot was mostly spurred on by class tensions between resentful poor whites and disenfranchised blacks.

On September 21, 1831, a riot broke out on Olney Street bearing almost the same catalyst as the Hardscrabble riot. The riot started when drunken sailors visited a "cooky stand" owned by a black man by the name of Richard Johnston. The stand served as a pub and brothel in Providence's red-light district called "Snowtown" off of the wharf section of Olney Street. The area attracted many laborers, both black and white, who thrived off of selling commodities to the "needs" of sailors who came into the Port of Providence. The sailors, in their drunken stupor, forced Johnson to defend himself. Johnson shot and killed a sailor during the altercation

which caused an angry mob of workers who vandalized black homes and businesses in the district. The riot was thwarted on the 23rd, two days later, when the local militia suppressed the mob.²⁸ Like the Hardscrabble riot, the Snowtown riot lacked any deliberate reason behind it. It was a rabble between angry lower class whites and blacks. As one historian put it, “its catalyst lay in class tensions.”²⁹

Nevertheless, despite these setbacks, the community prospered quite well in the years following. In 1828, William J. Brown, and his friends Samuel Brown and Charles Cozzen, formed the Young Men’s Union Funds Society. The society raised money for funeral expenses and to participate in funeral processions for black families. Another society established in 1826 called the Mutual Relief Society took care of the sick and elderly in the community. The community also had its own militia company called the African Grays.³⁰ William J. Brown recalls their ostentatious uniforms: “[T]heir commander, was dressed to represent an African chief, having on a red pointed cap, and carried an elephant’s tusk in hand.” Brown also remarks: “The other officers carry emblems, decked with lemons and oranges, representing the fruits of Africa.”³¹ Also in 1836, Reverend John Lewis, a black minister, formed the Providence Temperance Society.³² In 1838, this society would galvanize into the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society and held its first organizational anti-slavery convention.³³

By the 1830s, the community had grown significantly. According to a census recorded in the year 1840, Rhode Island’s “free colored” populace numbered around 3,238 people.³⁴ In 1790, only 475 blacks lived in Providence. By 1865, there were a total of 1,711 blacks living in the city.³⁵ Their numbers grew substantially, and by the late 1830s, housing for black residents in Providence became an issue within the community, and they made a concerted effort to buy

new property. By 1838, African Americans in Providence owned \$29,000 in real estate and \$1,200 in personal property. By 1840, blacks owned \$34,000 worth of real estate and \$1,600 in personal property.³⁶ Elleanor Eldridge, a laundress, and nurse, in 1838 owned two houses, which she rented to black tenants.³⁷ If a black woman could attain such property in 1830s Providence, Rhode Island, there is little doubt of the community's ability to prosper with the rest of the white population within the city.

Just as the community was blossoming, town officials began to take notice of their growing property ownership. Never before had it been considered to tax the African American populace because, despite owning property, they did not have the right to vote under the current 1663 King's Charter, nor did anyone believe that the community could own as much property as they did by the late 1830s. Regardless, town officials concluded that their property should be taxed.

The community called a meeting at the old Union Meeting House Church; among those who attended was Geo. C Willis as chairman³⁸ and Alfred Niger³⁹ as secretary. Their concern lay in the 40 dollars per annum charged in taxes. They agreed to put a committee together to petition the Rhode Island General Assembly, which William J. Brown narrates in his biography:

[T]hey [the committee] believed in taxation and representation went together; they were unwilling to be taxed and not allowed to be represented. Some of the members of the house said it was perfectly alright; if the colored people were to be taxed they should be represented. But the members of the house from Newport were bitterly opposed to colored people being represented, saying: "Shall a Nigger be allowed to go to the polls and tie my vote? NO, Mr. Speaker, it can't be. The taxes don't amount to more than forty or fifty dollars; let them be taken off." So the taxes were taken off.⁴⁰

The Assembly's decision was a blow to the community's cause for citizenship. Despite their growing prosperities, ultimately, racial bigotry ruled the day and torn any hope of attaining citizenship by respectable means asunder.

The community's frustration came to a head. William J. Brown iterates the lack of respect and representation his fellow African Americans received before the Dorr Rebellion: "At that time colored people had little or no protection. It was thought a disgrace to plead a colored man's cause, or aid in getting his rights as a citizen, or to teach their children in schools."⁴¹

Not all was lost, however, Brown's and the community's plight for "no taxation without representation" was just the kind of organized agency that would win the black male population suffrage in the events to follow.

Suffrage Denied

In the spring of 1840, working-class white men formed a suffrage organization called the Rhode Island Suffrage Association. Their preamble demanded a lift on the \$134 landholding voter qualification and universal suffrage for all adult white males residing in the state. In December the association began printing a weekly newspaper, called *The New Age and Constitutional Advocate*, and began rallying supporters across the state.⁴²

On August 28, 1841, the suffrage association held its "People's Convention" in Providence. Convention members sought to draft a new state constitution to replace the old Landholder's Charter. All adult men were invited to the convention. However, there was a catch. Although Article VI of the association's preamble stated that "[a]ny American citizen, residing in Rhode Island, of the age of twenty-one years, may become a member of this

Association [Rhode Island Suffrage Association],”⁴³ convention members were flabbergasted when African Americans began showing up to the convention. They immediately began denying them access to the committee proceedings.

On September 15, 1841, political commentator William Goddard, who went by the pen name “Town Born,” wrote the following passage in *The Providence Daily Journal*:

Much fault has been found with the Association by some cavilers, because upon their own principles they do not [feel] inclined to admit our colored brethren to an equal participation in suffrage. It is said, if “all men are born free and equal,” if “the right to vote be a natural and inalienable right,” if the principles of the revolution and of democratic liberty apply in favor of American citizens generally upon this subject, why does the mere accident of color make a difference?⁴⁴

Goddard continues his article by describing the manner blacks were turned away from the convention:

A scene occurred on Christian Hill, in the city growing out of the exclusion of a respectable colored man from voting at the election of delegates to the People’s Convention, which gave much cause for regret to some of the friends of free suffrage, and which it seemed to us, might easily have been avoided by a little more caution in the wording of the call on the part of the Association. The call certainly, included our colored friends, and in some wards of the city a few of the lighter colored were allowed, there being no objection, to vote.⁴⁵

Goddard continues his rant by addressing the “abolition gentlemen” of the state:

But have the abolition gentlemen duly reflected upon all the difficulties of the position in which the Association was placed in this respect? Have they recollected, in their anger, the well known truth, that it is possible to push general principles too far in practice, and when the axiom “that there must be exceptions to general truths” and that these, so far from invalidating, rather

prove the general rule? Will allow no policy to this body in its course, but insist upon its riding their hobby so hard as to ride down on it, the primary object that gave the Association birth. Do they not know that there are long established and deep prejudices, even in this city, and especially in the country portion of this state, on the part of many against colored men and against their admission to the rights of citizenship, which is absolutely necessary should be respected and fielded to, at least for the time?—And will they meet, as friends of the great cause, give way until some future and better day, when the colored man by education and improvement, may have so [sic] his intellectual and moral condition as to exhibit so plainly the injustice done to him, that no good man can refuse to redress it? Rome was not built in a day, my friends, Wait – wait patiently upon *Providence*, and your time will come.⁴⁶

Although Goddard was quick to attack the convention’s unwillingness to allow blacks to participate, even he was reluctant to allowing blacks the rights to citizenship. It is clear that he favored a “gradual” inclusion of African Americans, given a time in which they will have “evolved” enough intellectually, to participate in local politics. However, Goddard was mistaken. The African American populace in Providence refused to wait any longer. They demanded their citizenship.

The community fired back. Two days after Goddard’s article was published in *The Providence Daily Journal*, they submitted a rebuttal:

Admiring, as I do, the generous enthusiasm of “Town Born” in behalf of the largest liberty, and his patriotic desire to secure for his native city that political ascendancy to which, by her population, wealth, and intelligence, she is fairly entitled. I have observed, with surprise and regret, the efforts which have been made to traduce his motives, and to impair public confidence in his conclusions. The business of those who assail him should not be with his motives, but with his argument.⁴⁷

Skeptical of Goddard's slam against the abolitionists, calling for them to promote "gradual" inclusion of blacks into political life, the article deconstructs Goddard's motives and the appeals of the community:

From some of the views expressed by "Town Born," in his last number, I am compelled to dissent. If I do not misunderstand him, he is disposed, in the accommodation of the unreasonable prejudices of the country, to exclude, even under the new dispensation, the approach of which he hails with so much delight, our *colored* fellow-citizens from the right to vote and to be elected to office. To be sure, he encourages them with the prospect of redress, at a distant day, when the full blessings of universal suffrage shall come to be felt through-out our borders. In this matter, however, I would submit to no delay, sent to no compromise. The suffrage movement cannot go back!⁴⁸

After the article's assault on "Town Born," it then argues of the People's Convention's grave injustice upon black civil liberties by claiming that "the new constitution should make our colored fellow-citizens the subject of a most offensive and unjust discrimination."⁴⁹ The community wanted justice, and the discrimination bestowed on them was repugnant to the cause of the Suffrage Association.

Matters came to a head on September 24, 1841, when Alfred Niger, a representative of the black community during the taxation crisis a few years earlier, was rejected as treasurer from the convention. Despite winning the majority nomination from convention's executive committee, a minority report nominated and favored a white man by the name of Thomas Greene for treasurer.

The conflicting nominations caused a firestorm. The committee proceeded to take a vote on allowing Niger to keep his office.⁵⁰ Meeting minutes printed in *The Providence Daily Journal* reveal that a chairman by the name of Mr. Russell exclaimed: "[H]e hoped all would

vote in this ballot and vote their sentiments, in order that all might know how many ‘wolves in sheep’s clothing’ [abolitionists] were among them.”⁵¹ Those in favor of electing Nizer were either ignored or backed down as no record of a vote was kept. The subject came to a close, and Mr. Greene won a majority ballot proceeding as treasurer.⁵² The community ran out of patience.

On a Friday morning, October 8, 1841, Alexander Crummel (See fig. 1), an African American Episcopalian priest, approached Thomas Dorr with a petition he drafted on behalf of the grievances of the black community. Dorr presented the petition to the convention, and many believed it to be a ruse constructed by abolitionists. Dorr assured the convention members that it was “written by Alexander Cromwell [Crummel], a respectable colored man of this city, of some education, signed by him and five others, relating to their exclusion of the rights of suffrage and the white-only clause in the People’s Constitution.”⁵³ Dorr then began reading the petition to the convention and its committee members, addressing it, “To the Free Suffrage Convention:”

GENTLEMEN: The remonstrance of the undersigned colored citizens of Rhode Island, respectfully represent, that, in the constitution that is proposed to be sent forth by your respected body for adoption, there is one measure inserted, upon which we as an interested party, beg leave, with deference, to make known our views, and give an expression of our sentiments. We have reference to that proposed article which, in inserting the word “white,” denies all persons of color the use and exercise of the elective Franchise.⁵⁴

The community wanted representation, and the convention members knew it. However, the next few paragraphs in the petition take it a step further; the community justifies their cause for inclusion in the new People’s Constitution by arguing their nativity to the state:

We protest against it as *unwarrantable*. We affirm that there is nought in the character or condition of the colored people of this State, as a class, which can justify this procedure. We are mostly native born citizens. We have lent our best strength in the cultivation of the soil, have aided in the development of its resources, and have contributed our part to its wealth and importance.⁵⁵

The community argued for citizenship. They were as nativist and Yankee born, if not more so, than a majority of the people attending the convention. The black community was not alien to New England culture. They were just as assimilated into Rhode Island culture as the oldest of “Swamp Yankees” were.⁵⁶ They resided in the state for nearly 200 years; they had no relation to blacks from the South; they all came from a few homogenous Rhode Island families.⁵⁷ In their eyes, they deserved the same voting privileges as whites. They were citizens:

Is a justification of our disfranchisement sought in our want of Christian character? We point to our churches as our reputation. In our want of intelligence? We refer not merely to the schools supported by the State, for our advantage; but to the private schools, well filled and sustained, and taught by competent teachers of our own people. Is our industry questioned? This day, were there no complexional hindrance, we could present a more than proportionate number of our people, who might immediately, according to the freeholders’ qualification, become voters.⁵⁸

The strength of their community was their weapon against all dissenting voices. How could one argue against their ability to vote with such powerful symbols of citizenship: stable housing, churches, businesses, and schools, amidst the odds of racial discrimination no less. The community embodied the true spirit of New England – progress. The petition concludes:

We claim, then, that to deprive the colored people of this State of the immunities of citizenship, on account of the color of the skin, (a matter over which they have no control,) is anti-republican; and against such a procedure we enter our solemn protest. As a harm

and injury, as destructive in tendency, we regard this measure: and do therefore remonstrate against it.⁵⁹

The document, under the title “Committee in behalf of the people of color,” was signed by the following black men:⁶⁰ Thomas Howland, a grocer on 125 South Water Street; Ichabod Northrup, a laborer on Cushing Street; James Hazzard, a clothes dealer on 49 South Main and 148 North Main Street; Charles G. Brown, a confectioner located at the rear of 94 Benefit Street; and James Gumes, a laborer residing on the Pawtucket East Turnpike.⁶¹

As the petition argues, the white-only clause remained as a voter qualification in the newly drafted People’s Constitution, which stated: “Every white male citizen of the United States, of the age of twenty-one years, who has resided in the state for one year, and in any, town, city, or district of the same for six months next preceding the election” shall be able to vote.⁶²

The committee was divided over whether or not they should remove the word “white” from the constitution. On October 4, 1841, a few days before the community presented their petition, the debate over the extension of black male suffrage came into fruition at a caucus meeting. According to a copy of the meeting minutes published in *The Providence Daily Journal*, Chairman “Dr J. A. BROWN introduced a resolution declaring that the right of suffrage out to be extended to colored people.”⁶³ Chairman “Major N. Mowry was opposed to the resolution.” Saying, “If we let niggers vote they will be elected to office; and a nigger might occupy the chair where your honor sits, a pretty look that would be.”⁶⁴ The proponents of African American exclusion refused to discuss it any further and placed the debate aside. On October 7, 1841, it came to attention once again. A Mr. Atwell was

opposed to discussing the topic, for “[h]e hoped the Convention would not be made an arena for abolition discussion.”⁶⁵ Again, as the *Journal* reports, “nothing was decided upon.”⁶⁶

By Friday the 8th, October 1841, the subject could no longer be ignored. Thomas Dorr read the petition to the convention, and the committee members had to make a decision. Some members wished to see the word “white” “stricken out” of the constitution; some members wanted the word to stay. Most members were opposed to even discussing the matter; however, it was voted that the debate continue by 31 to 23.⁶⁷ Chairman Mr. B. Arnold approved of striking out the word “white” as a voting qualification in the constitution. He claimed that the original preamble of the Suffrage Association included all adult male citizens in its cause for universal suffrage; therefore, allowing the white-only clause to stand would be abhorrent to the cause of their movement. The Committee concluded that he was “out of order.” He defended himself by stating: “He did not appear here as an Abolitionist, but as an advocate of human rights. He was for rights and justice and freedom, and he joined the suffrage cause because he thought these were the great causes of that movement.”⁶⁸ The secretary further reported:

He [Arnold] was glad to find the colored people had taken the matter into their own hands, and bring the matter before the convention. This was the first intimation he had of their doing so, and they came here just as the report was to be acted upon, just as they were disenfranchised and would have no hope.⁶⁹

Chairman Col. Wales presented a new question in the community’s defense: “Did they choose their complexion when they came into the world? They were brought into existence arbitrarily, and ought not to be classed among criminals and malefactors as unworthy the right of suffrage. It

was enough for him that they were men, and American citizens.”⁷⁰ Even Thomas Dorr, the president of the committee, agreed to have the clause removed:

The Convention would be inconsistent with their former declarations, with their bill of rights just adopted, and would diverge from the great principles acted out by Roger Williams. He [Dorr] alluded to the colored soldiers of the revolution, their bravery and patriotism. He instanced slave States which had admitted all free men to the right of voting. Mr. Dorr concluded by some eloquent remarks upon the great principles involved in this question.⁷¹

However, committee member Mr. Sayles suggested that “it was endangering the whole project to strike out this word, and might prevent the adoption of a republican constitution in this state. It was endangering the rights of 15000 white men.”⁷² His comment brought great applause by members of the convention. A vote was then called on members of the convention to keep or remove the word “white” from the People’s Constitution; 18 were for it, and 46 were against it.⁷³

Meanwhile, in November 1841, the legal government’s convention was trying to draft their Freeman’s Constitution. They attempted to revise the state charter by removing the rotten borough representation and lifting the \$134 property owning qualification for native-born white men. However, in March 1841 the Freeman’s Constitution was rejected by a narrow margin of votes by voters. Secretary Henry Bowen wrote: “By a small majority (676) the Constitution has been rejected. We have no doubt many voted against it from their attachment to the freehold qualification. Some voted against it because colored people were not placed on the same platform with white men.”⁷⁴

For the time being, the community was without political representation. “Town Born” (William Goddard) responded to the black exclusion by publishing in *The*

Providence Daily Journal: “You may ride along in the same train of revolution with us if you please, but alas! It *must be* in the James Crow car!!!”⁷⁵ Ironically, the Suffrage Association had little realized what they had done. They made an enemy out of the black community, and the community would thwart their “revolution” in the events to follow.

The Community Fights Back

The community was not alone in the fight for suffrage, for they had a formidable ally in the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society. In mid-November 1841, the society agreed that they too would petition for black suffrage at the People’s Convention.⁷⁶ On the 11th, 12th, and 13th, the Society held its sixth annual meeting at Franklin Hall in Providence. According to an excerpt printed in *The Suffrage Examiner*, a reporter described the meeting in a grandiose manner:

Never before did this State witness such a gathering of free, independent, and self sacrificing spirits. The farmer and the mechanic, the merchant and the broker, the manufacturer and the operative, the clerk and the teacher, the lawyer and the printer, the priest and the politician, the old and the young, the rich and the poor, male and female, white and colored, bond and freed, of all sects and all parties: all these came up from the extreme parts of the State, and co-operated ‘*in glorious unity*’ for the advancement of our noble enterprise.⁷⁷

Abolitionists from across the Northeast were present, including William Lloyd Garrison, female abolitionist Abby Kelly,⁷⁸ and the famous Frederick Douglass. They were all united under a single cause: the cause for black male suffrage and the restoration of black manhood.⁷⁹ On the 11th, the question of suffrage came to a head when Dr. Joseph Brown, a Dorrite who had advocated black suffrage at the People’s Convention, confronted the abolitionists during their meetings. Dr. Brown tried to defend the white-only clause in the constitution by advocating that African Americans would be included in the People’s Constitution gradually over time.

William Lloyd Garrison and others denounced Dr. Brown's claims, and the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society officially declared that they would no longer support the Suffrage Association.⁸⁰

The Suffrage Association's newspaper *The New Age Advocate* slammed the abolitionists for their failure to support the People's Constitution. From here on, the abolitionist's newspaper, *The Suffrage Examiner*, disavowed the Suffrage Association by attacking them with political broadsides. In a letter submitted in *The Providence Daily Journal*, George I. Clarke, Secretary of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, responded to *The New Age Advocate's* claims:

The suffrage party, by the insertion of the word "*white*" in their Constitution, do in effect declare that the colored man is not a citizen – is not entitled to the rights which other men possess, and in fact, re-enacts and approves the proscription and injustice which has so long been meted out to him. Therefore, they oppose it, and it is well known to the leading men in the Suffrage Party, that this is the ground of our opposition. Quite different reasons lead "others" to oppose the "People's Constitution," and the only object which the "New Age" can hope to gain by making this unfounded assertion, is to prejudice the minds of its readers against Abolitionists. I will add, that this matter would not have been alluded to thus publicly, but for the *specific manner* in which the assertion was made by the organ of the Suffrage party.⁸¹

The Dorrites took this as a grave insult and made an enemy of the abolitionists. Whenever the society held a meeting, the Dorrites would crash it. On December 13, 1841, *The Providence Daily Journal* reported that an Anti-Slavery meeting was disrupted by a "number of rowdy boys," in which "Abby [Kelley] was full of spunk and did not care a fig for the noise, but told them to make as much disturbance as they please."⁸² The disturbance most likely came from young Dorrite men, or Dorrite supporters, who sent their kids to disturb the meeting's

delegations. A response in *The Providence Daily Journal* further explained the harassment of the Anti-Slavery meetings:

What kind of men were those of whom Abbey Kelly complained, in Woonsocket, Smithfield and Scituate, who became a riotous mob, so as to deprive the Anti-Slavery Society of freedom of speech, when discussing one of the articles of the Suffrage Constitution? And what kind of scenes have our Town House witnessed in relation to those who took the liberty to think differently from a majority of their party on this question? "If these things be done in the green tree, what will be done in the dry!"⁸³

The Providence Daily Journal reported another crashed meeting. This time, the writer demanded justice for the Dorrites' crime of thwarting free speech:

Have not the Anti-Slavery meetings, held in Scituate, Woonsocket, and even in the city of Providence, been "molested," merely because some of the speakers had the temerity to treat profanely that sacred instrument, *the Free Suffrage Constitution*?

Was there not something approaching to a *Theatrical row*, at the Town House, on *Sunday* evening!—caused by the Free Suffrage men, restraining and molesting an Anti-Slavery meeting? Was not the High Sheriff in attendance upon that occasion, for the purpose of protecting the laws from violation?⁸⁴

Nevertheless, the debate came to a lull when the Suffrage Association began campaigning for the ratification of the People's Constitution and electing Thomas Dorr for governor. On April 18, 1842, the Suffragists held an election. Governor King refused to recognize it. The legal government argued that the election was not valid since it included votes from non-eligible voters (immigrants and other non-landholding whites). Dorr reassured them that legal voters took the vast majority of votes.⁸⁵ Governor King would have none of it; on May 4, 1842, King signed into power an "Act in Relation to Offenses against the Sovereign Power of the State," which declared that it was an act of treason against the State of Rhode

Island for anyone to accept the nomination for office or serve in office under any government but the existing government. The Dorrites referred to this edict as the “Algerine Law.”⁸⁶ The Suffrage Association’s cause came to a crossroads; if the Suffrage Party could not take power legally, they would take it by force.

The black community would not support the insurrection. After all the injustices the community had endured with thus far, they decided to fight on the side of Governor King and his Whig and conservative Democrat-affiliated party of “Law and Order.” On May 19, 1841, Dorr and his followers attempted to take the Cranston Street Arsenal in Providence. The attack initially failed when the Dorrites’ old Revolutionary War era cannon misfired, and they retreated from the battle. After the attack on the arsenal, Governor King called for more volunteers to defeat the Dorrite insurgency. *The Providence Daily Journal* described the scene: “The meetings to form these companies were fully attended by both young and old—men of all professions and pursuits came cheerfully forward and entered their names. We entreat all those who wish to live in *peace and security* to ‘go do likewise,’ Signed, ‘Law and Order.’”⁸⁷ This provided an opportunity for Providence’s black men to prove their citizenship, and they proved their worth by joining the militia, policing the city, and manning the fire departments during the onset of the rebellion.

Nearly 200 black men attempted to form two militia companies. They then made a concerted effort to elect their officers. The first nominee was Thomas Howland; the second was James Hazzard who was considered the richest African American in Providence; and finally, a man William J. Brown endearingly refers to as Peterson the Barber. Brown does not elaborate on the details of his background, other than “he is a poor man with good education.”⁸⁸

Nevertheless, Peterson had a peculiar effect on the company when he addressed them.

According to Brown, this is what he said:

He [Peterson] said to the assembly, they had better understand what they were about to do, and not be too fast, for colored people had often been deceived. When they were needed, great promises would be made, and when they were through with them, they would be forgotten. He referred to the speech of General Jackson on the banks of Mobile to his colored soldiers. This created such a sensation that they closed without proceeding any farther, and the company broke up, saying they would not organize a separate company, but would offer themselves to the different companies, which they did and were received.⁸⁹

Peterson was referring to Andrew Jackson's failure to fulfill the promises he made to the free black soldiers that fought with him at the Battle of New Orleans (January 8, 1815). On this note, they mutually agreed that their interests would be better served by integrating themselves into white regiments. That way, they could prove themselves just as capable of fulfilling their civic duty as the whites they served with, and it also proved that they could work harmoniously with whites; their plan worked. *The Emancipator and Free American*, an abolitionist newspaper, reported:

Blacks in Rhode Island were placed in the ranks according to their height, and I saw no manifestation of disrespect toward either one of them, by any member of the company, but on the contrary, all praised and honored them for their noble devotion to the interests of the great cause of regulated civil liberty which they were now called to defend.⁹⁰

As Governor King gathered his forces, Thomas Dorr and his Suffrage men prepared to defend themselves against the forces of the Law and Order Party. On June 22, 1842, the Dorrites entrenched themselves on "Acote's Hill" in Chepachet, Rhode Island. Three thousand, five hundred men including 200 black volunteers marched on to attack the Dorrites entrenched

there. Some African Americans volunteered to operate the Providence fire departments while the men were on campaign:

THE COLORED POPULATION of our city, have come forward in the most honorable manner, and taken upon themselves the charge of the fire engines. They have pledged themselves to assist in the protection of property from fire and plunder, while the other inhabitants are engaged in the defense of the state.⁹¹

Frances Greene, in her tract *Might and Right*, recalled:

It should not be forgotten, that when the fire engines were left almost without a man to direct them, THE COLORED MEN came forward, and volunteered to take charge of them; and this act, the condition and treatment of the men being considered, was one of the noblest that were developed during the whole controversy.⁹²

Shortly after the Battle of Acote's Hill, the Dorrites were defeated and broken. The men of Law and Order seized the day. The black community's contribution did not go unnoticed; their participation had a substantial effect on all those who supported the Law and Order Party.

The *New York Courier and Enquirer* reported:

The colored people of Rhode Island deserve the good opinion and kind feelings of every citizen of the State, for their conduct during the recent troublous times in Providence. They promptly volunteered their services for any duty in which they might be useful in maintaining law and order. Upwards of a hundred of them organized themselves for the purpose of acting as a city guard for the protection of the city and to extinguish fires in case of their occurrence while the citizens were absent on military duty. The fathers of these people were distinguished for their patriotism and bravery in the war of the Revolution, and the Rhode Island colored regiment fought on one occasion until half their numbers were slain. – There was not a regiment in their service which did more soldierly duty, or showed itself more devotedly patriotic.⁹³

On July 6, 1842, an African American marching band played in a victory parade on “Smith’s Hill” in Providence. Their instruments were captured from the Dorrites at the battle of Acote’s Hill.⁹⁴ With the rebellion thwarted, the community’s service was duly noted; however, the Dorrites were not impressed. An anonymous Dorrite approached William J. Brown after the conflict. He told him that African Americans were responsible for making them lose the war. Brown asked him why they retreated from the battle at Acote’s Hill, and he responded: “Who do you suppose was going to stay there when the Algerines [Law and Order forces] were coming up with four hundred bull niggers?”⁹⁵ Brown’s confrontation is but one example of the angst the black community faced in the events to follow.

Black Male Suffrage Achieved

By September 1842, Governor King and the Law and Order Party began drafting a new state constitution and picked up where they had left off six months earlier when they attempted to draft the Freeman’s Constitution. This time, black participation could not be barred, nor could the subject of African American suffrage be ignored.

The Providence Daily Journal reported: “Public sentiment in this city, is decidedly in favor of admitting colored people to the right of suffrage. We are aware that a prejudice against them exists in some of the country towns, where but few live; but to their credit, that here, where they are most numerous, the feeling towards them is most liberal.”⁹⁶ Another article published in *The Providence Daily Journal* argued that since blacks were allowed to participate and vote for delegates in the current convention, they should be given the right of suffrage in the constitution.⁹⁷

The convention's meeting minutes report a similar sentiment. On September 12, 1842, committee members debated whether they should consider extending suffrage to black males who met the same qualifications as eligible whites.⁹⁸ On September 21st the committee received three petitions signed by 183 people from Providence against a white male only qualification in the new constitution.⁹⁹ On September 23rd, Chairman Charles Jackson of Providence proposed two resolutions: one, that land-owning African American males be enfranchised in the new constitution, given that they pay the same taxes as the white males do, and the second proposal would be to put the vote to the people on whether black males should be allowed suffrage. On September 29th the committee resolved to put the vote to the people by a vote of 45 to 15.¹⁰⁰

The Convention ended on November 4, 1842, and it was now up to the people to extend suffrage to black men. On November 7, 1842, *The Providence Daily Journal* printed a preliminary constitution which included a blank space where the word "white" would normally appear as a voting qualification.¹⁰¹ The *Journal* put the vote to the people:

[A] majority of votes in favor of filling said blank with said word *white*, the General Assembly shall cause the blank to be so filled, and the same shall be a part of said constitution in the same manner as if originally inserted therein by this convention. But if there be a majority of votes against filling said blank as aforesaid, the constitution shall be printed without said blank.¹⁰²

Whites were not the only ones to be allowed to vote on this question, for adult black males were allowed to vote on it as well: "[A]ll colored persons under the second section of the article on the qualifications of electors, who may vote on the question of the adoption of the constitution, and also the question of the insertion of the word *white* in said section."¹⁰³

However, black voters had their ballots kept separate from white voters; nevertheless, black voter turnout would swing the amendment in their favor.¹⁰⁴

On November 14, 1842, the General Assembly printed qualifications for eligible voters for the adoption of the new constitution. Those who were qualified, including African Americans, had to meet the following qualifications:

All native male citizens 21 years and upwards, black or white, *resident* and *registered* as above, and who shall, before or at the time of registry, pay to the clerk or treasurer of the town, the sum of one dollar, or such sum as, together with their taxes, paid shall make one dollar, which sum, *so paid*, shall be appropriated to the support of public schools in the town; proof of such payment to be made by certificate of the clerk or treasurer of the town.¹⁰⁵

The new constitution had granted universal suffrage to all native free adult men who could pay a \$1 poll tax. This tax was far better than the \$134 property qualification, and vastly more liberal than the old freeholder's constitution. *The Providence Daily Journal* printed a compare and contrast article with other state constitutions to prove the liberality of the new state constitution. Whether this was a publicity stunt to ease angry Dorrites or not is open to interpretation. Regardless, African Americans in the state of New York could not vote unless they held a freehold of \$250; in New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia African Americans could not vote; and all of these states had a freehold or tax qualification.¹⁰⁶

On November 21, 22, and 23, 1842, the time had come for the people of Rhode Island to vote on the new constitution and the amendment to extend black male suffrage. On the 22nd the first votes came in. First, Providence's ballots came in. The first ward voted 70 for the admittance of blacks and three against; the second ward voted 194 for and 0 against; the third ward

voted 123 for and 22 against; the fourth ward voted 185 for and 2 against, the sixth ward voted 96 for and 7 against, which totals 815 for and 51 against the admittance of blacks. The county and city votes went as follows: In Providence 815 voted for and 51 against; North Providence's votes did not come in; Johnston voted 52 for and 3 against; Foster voted 36 for and 73 against; Scituate voted 30 for and 80 against; Bristol voted 107 for and 34 against; Warren voted 28 for and 62 against; Barrington voted 11 for and 6 against; in Newport, Middletown, and Portsmouth it is reported that "nearly all [were] for admitting the blacks;" Tiverton voted 70 for and 13 against; Little Compton voted 23 for and 2 against. In total, 1,072 were for the admittance of blacks, and 324 were against it.¹⁰⁷ The polls were holding steady for the community. An anonymous letter printed in the *Providence Daily Journal* kept the momentum going:

Shall the word "white" be inserted in the constitution, for the purpose of excluding men of color from the suffrage—yes or no? The freemen of Providence will, I trust, say NO. . . . Let us refuse to say "yes." Let us all say NO, and thus restore . . . worthy colored men their rights under the old Federal sway.¹⁰⁸ [Signed] No: No: No!¹⁰⁹

On the 23rd the voting gained momentum. Providence's first ward voted 108 for and 4 against; the second ward voted 237 for and 13 against; the third ward voted 168 for and 24 against; the fourth ward voted 231 for and 3 against; the fifth ward voted 194 for and 11 against; and the sixth ward voted 143 for and 10 against. A total of 1,081 for and 65 against extending suffrage rights to black males. The county ballots went as follows: Providence voted 1081 for and 65 against, North Providence voted 97 for and three against; Cumberland's votes were not recorded; Smithfield voted 116 for and 30 against; Johnston voted 52 for and three against;

Cranston voted 26 for and 8 against; Foster voted 36 for and 73 against; Scituate voted 30 for and 80 against; Bristol voted 107 for and 35 against; Warren voted 28 for and 62 against; Barrington voted 16 for and 11 against; Coventry's votes were not reported; West Greenwich voted 2 for and 5 against; Warwick voted 72 for and 77 against; East Greenwich's votes were not recorded; Exeter has no votes reported for the admittance of blacks but has 43 against reported; North Kingstown voted 40 for and 33 against; South Kingstown's votes were not reported; Charlestown voted 1 for and 23 against; Westerly's votes were not reported; Newport, Middletown, and Portsmouth were again reported as all being in favor of admitting blacks; Tiverton voted 70 for and 13 against; and finally Little Compton voted 23 for and 2 against. The total number of votes (since the 23rd) tallied to 1,797 for and 565 against.¹¹⁰

On November 26, *The Providence Daily Journal* published a complete total list of votes by counties, except for a few rural towns whose votes came in later. Providence's total vote was 1,384 for and 109 against; North Providence voted 163 for and 8 against; Cumberland voted 199 for and 7 against; Smithfield voted 302 for and 54 against; Johnston voted 132 for and 13 against; Cranston voted 60 for and 14 against; Scituate voted 52 for and 98 against; Newport voted 365 for and 235 against; Middletown voted 24 for and 13 against; Portsmouth voted 70 for and 12 against; Tiverton voted 100 for and 21 against; Bristol voted 49 for and 119 against; Warren voted 20 for and 17 against; Coventry voted 206 for and 21 against; West Greenwich voted 2 for and 5 against; Warwick voted 111 for and 113 against; East Greenwich voted 88 for and 37 against, North Kingstown voted 53 for and 72 against; South Kingstown voted 55 for and 167 against; Charlestown voted 2 for and 56 against; Westerly voted 24 for and 67 against; and Exeter voted 2 for and 126 against.¹¹¹ Richmond's

votes came in later which numbered 4 for and 65 against; Hopkinton's votes also came in later numbering 36 for and 27 against.¹¹² Thus, the total number of votes for the admittance of eligible black males in the constitution numbered 3,833 votes, and the total number against the admittance of eligible black males in the constitution numbered 1,412 votes. Rhode Island African Americans now had political faculty; they were now enfranchised. William J. Brown recalled that the "vote of the colored people was unanimous for a new constitution,"¹¹³ and a new constitution did they receive!

However, not all were happy with their political ascension. When William J. Brown went to cast his vote, he was approached by a Suffrage Association supporter who exclaimed: "The Algerines have got the niggers to help them out, and I will not stand it. I think it is the duty of every man to come up and help, when niggers are allowed to vote against us." The angry Dorrite continued his lament by telling Brown that his "wool will grow closer to [his] skull than it does now before [he can] vote again." Brown ignored him and went about his civic duty.¹¹⁴

The community could finally enjoy the fruits of its labor. They answered their civic duties above and beyond the call of duty—finally, they became real citizens.

The Aftermath

Eligible African American ballots had turned the vote for the amendment in the black's favor. The community had come a long way since its humble beginnings during the turn of the 19th century. Nevertheless, the question begs answering: How did the community use agency to achieve their plight for the extension of suffrage? -- especially when several other contributing factors added to this extension.

The Irish were a catalyst in the fruition of black male suffrage. A large majority of the Suffrage Association's followers were Irish immigrants.¹¹⁵ They, especially during the 1840s, were the single largest threat to political power in New England. The Nativist movement was at its epoch during this period. In 1843 the American Party (the "Know Nothing's") were established in New York; their platform was anti-immigration and anti-catholic. The last thing they wished for was universal suffrage for immigrants, and the Dorr Rebellion fueled the fires of Nativist hatred for the 23 million immigrants, mostly Irish, that would arrive in the United States through the years of 1845 and 1855.¹¹⁶ As for the political power in Rhode Island, the Law and Order Party were politically affiliated with the Whig Party. Many conservative Whigs were either sympathetic or affiliated with the American Party.¹¹⁷ Also, factory owners and entrepreneurs generally voted Whig, as their platform promoted strong centralization, internal improvements, and trade tariffs on imports to promote the internal growth and sale of U.S. manufactured goods. Rhode Island, the most industrialized state in the Union per capita, predominately voted Whig.¹¹⁸ Extending political power to the Irish and their Suffrage Association affiliates would have dismantled their hegemony over the state.

So how does this affect the black community? They no longer became the primary focus of discrimination; the Irish were a new threat. In *The Providence Daily Journal*, a headline titled "Increase of Catholicism in the United States," warns of the dangers of Catholicism and Irish immigration. Ironically, the article appears alongside an article promoting the liberal policies of the new state constitution of 1842 and its respects to the rights of "colored people."¹¹⁹ Also, one Law and Order Party member wrote in a private letter that he would rather have "the negroes vote than the damned Irish."¹²⁰ Nevertheless, this thesis is still not

strong enough to stand on its own as a sole reason for black male suffrage in the State of Rhode Island; there are too many factors. Bigoted whites would have never compromised by letting blacks vote so the Irish could not. Old Prejudices die hard, as observed earlier in this essay, and the community was denied suffrage in the 1820s when they were ordered to pay taxes. The legal government could have just as easily voted down an amendment for extending black male suffrage as they just had easily promoted an amendment for a natural born voting qualification in the Freeman's Constitution of 1842. Nonetheless, they did not, which begs the question, why the change of heart?

The abolitionists played a major role in achieving black male suffrage. Historically, the Whig Party divided between "Cotton" (notably those who dealt in textiles produced from slave-picked cotton) and "Moralist" Whigs. The Cotton Whigs were usually made up of factory and business owners who cared little for African American equality and more for free labor and profit; the Moralists Whigs were abolitionists and intellectuals who believed in universal suffrage and the abolition of African American slaves.¹²¹ The community was largely helped by them. However, the benevolence of guilty whites did not aid the community. It is quite the contrary. The Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society was a confederation of whites and blacks all working towards the same goal. *The Suffrage Examiner* reported this sentiment during the 6th annual Anti-Slavery Convention: "[T]he old and the young, the rich and the poor, male and female, white and colored, bond and freed, of all sects and all parties" were united under the cause of black liberation.¹²²

It is true that the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society aligned with the Law and Order Party and most saw themselves compatible with that Whig establishment; however, despite

the bitter claims the Dorrites made, the black community was not used as a political instrument for the Law and Order Party. Frances Greene (a Dorrite), in her tract *Might and Right*, complained that "they took advantage of the colored population. Without one particle of friendliness towards the colored race," and that "[t]hey made colored men voters, not because it was *their right*, but because *they needed their help*."¹²³ Given the context of when this tract was written, a few years after the Dorr Rebellion in 1844, this interpretation of black treatment by the Law and Order party is not true. Greene was a Suffrage Association supporter, and as such, her supposition of the conflict is biased. There is no conclusive evidence that the Law and Order Party ever needed the black community on their side, as the evidence shows throughout this article, the Dorrites essentially gave the black community to the Law and Order Party. Greene mentions very little of the immense prejudice the Suffrage Association had towards the community. From the initial rejection of black participation at the People's Convention, from the firing of Alfred Niger as treasurer, the rejection of their petition, the discriminatory meeting minutes printed in *The Providence Daily Journal*, and last but not least, the numerous occasions when the Dorrites crashed the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Association meetings. It was the Suffrage Association who was "without one particle of friendliness towards the colored race" (see fig. 2, 2.2, and 2.3). Also, the community and the abolitionists questioned the Suffrage Association's stance on a larger national question, slavery. An article printed in *The Providence Daily Journal* questioned whether the Dorrites supported the fugitive slave laws by claiming that Article 1 Section 14 stated: "Any person in this State, who may be claimed, to be held to labor or service, under laws of any other State, territory, or District, *shall be entitled* to a

jury trial to ascertain the validity of such claim.”¹²⁴ (See fig. 3) The Dorrites were the ones to alienate the community and its abolitionist allies, not the Law and Order Party.

If the black suffrage did not come about solely because of Irish discrimination, white benevolence, or Law and Order Party manipulation, then it must have come into fruition through the community itself. Several factors helped the community achieve this feat.

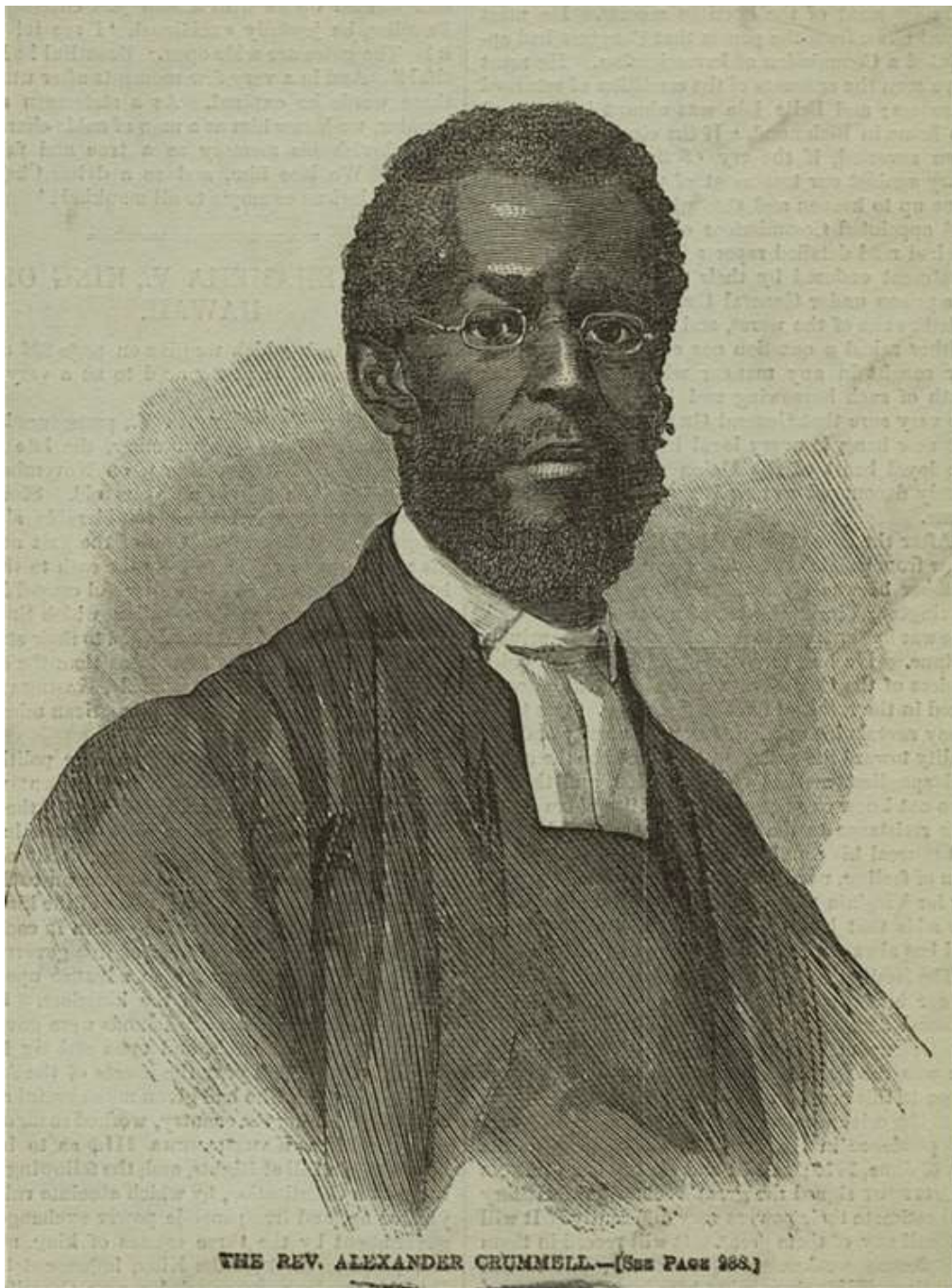
The first and foremost factor was the community’s demographics. Allowing black males to vote did not pose a threat to the established state government; the population was too small. The statistical data shows that the population shrank to a growth rate of 0.25 percent per year between 1850 through 1860. In 1845 males made up 41.3 percent of the total black population¹²⁵, and out of a total African American population of about 3,238 people,¹²⁶ it was quite insubstantial, concerning political opposition, to extend suffrage to black males.

Regardless of this fact, it was not all about numbers. The Law and Order Party were genuinely sympathetic to the community’s grievances. On numerous occasions, as observed throughout this essay, the press and members of the Law and Order Party commended the community for their help during the rebellion. Also, the Law and Order Party and their Whig affiliates gained a new political ally out of the deal.¹²⁷ An article printed in *The Providence Daily Journal* surmised the situation best: “Besides, they [blacks] are not numerous, and, judging from experience, they will always be friendly to what is termed conservative men and measures. The people in the country have vastly more to fear from white ruffians of Woonsocket and other villages of a similar stamp than from any number of black voters that may ever come to exist in Rhode Island.”¹²⁸

Out of all these reasons, none stands more apparent than the community's assertiveness. It was they who demanded their voices be heard, and it was they who made black male suffrage a reality. The community showed their agency just a few years before the rebellion when they demanded "no taxation without representation" and petitioned the Rhode Island General Assembly to extend suffrage to them. The community published complaints in *The Providence Daily Journal* demanding their inclusion in the People's Convention. The community submitted a petition delivered to the Dorrites at the People's Convention, which argued their nativity and citizenship, their strong community, and their dedication to republican values. The community worked with their abolitionist allies for their demands of justice. The community answered Governor King's call to arms by marching shoulder to shoulder with their fellow white citizens and operating the fire departments in the protection of their city when the men went off on campaign. Finally, the community showed its strength at the polls; their votes had tipped the ballot in their favor.

It was the "tide taken at the flood." The Providence black community had restored black manhood and dignity through the attainment of true citizenship—the right to vote; they had seized their opportunity for suffrage and reaped the rewards of true citizenship in 1840s antebellum Rhode Island.

Appendix



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Fig. 1. Alexander Crummell, an avid abolitionist, and proponent for Black Nationalism served the public as an Episcopal pastor and professor of theology. Crummell helped draft the petition on behalf of the “colored community” in Providence to the People’s Convention in October 1842. He claimed that he secured the community’s “political rights in Rhode Island,” stating: “[T]he leading colored men communicated their interests to my hand and judgment; and laid upon me the burden of drafting the documents and addresses and of taking the steps which secured in the end their political rights.”¹²⁸ Alexander Crummell, in *Harper’s Weekly*, April 4, 1866. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence, Rhode Island.

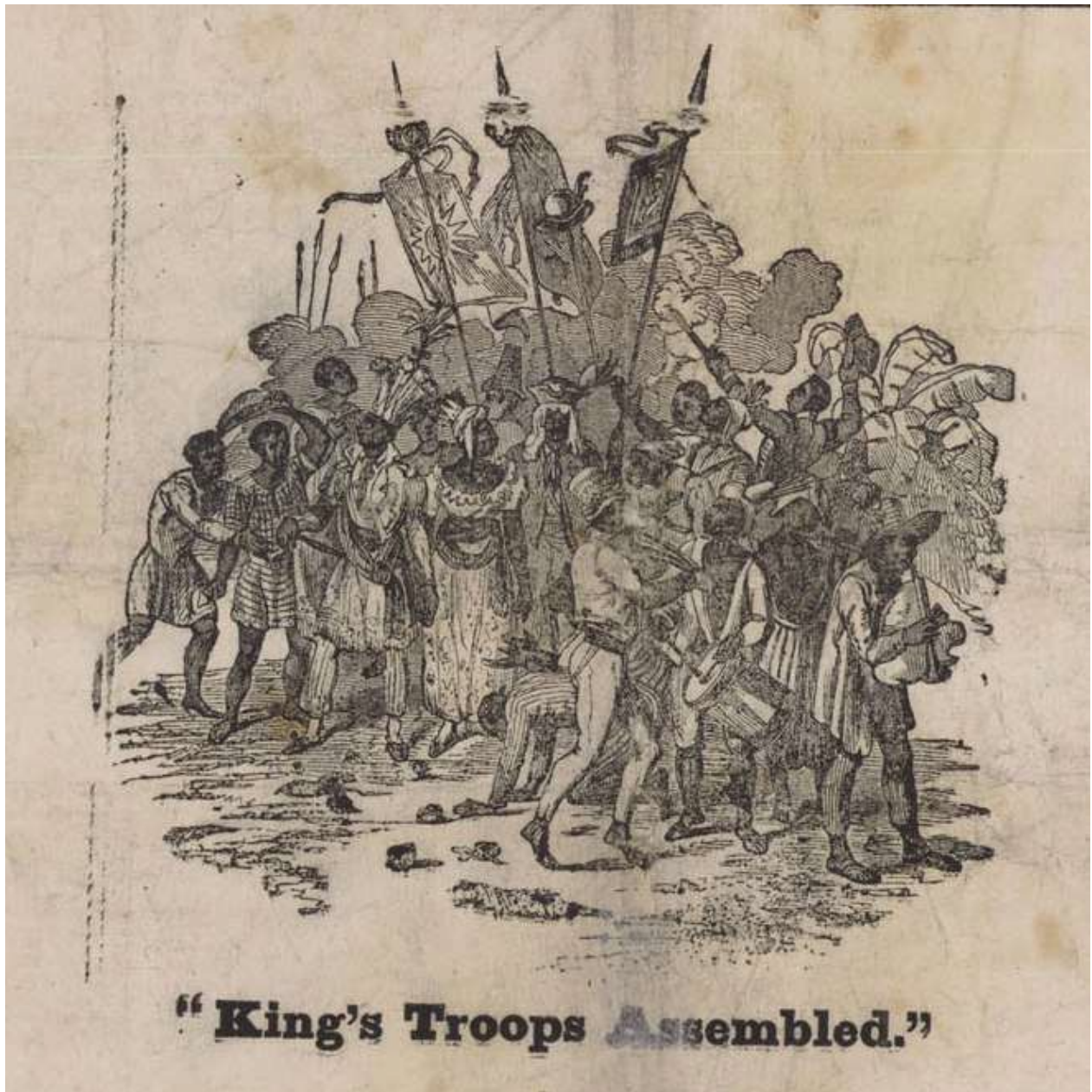


Fig. 2.1. This image is from a Dorrite broadside published by an unknown author or date (presumably 1842). This broadside depicts the African American populace of Providence in a discriminatory manner. The image above is a depiction of a mustering of black soldiers who fought on the side of Governor King and the Law and Order Party. The image is likened to that of a rabble of Southern slaves in the typical *Sambo* stereotype fashion. "Governor King's Extra." Courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence, Rhode Island.

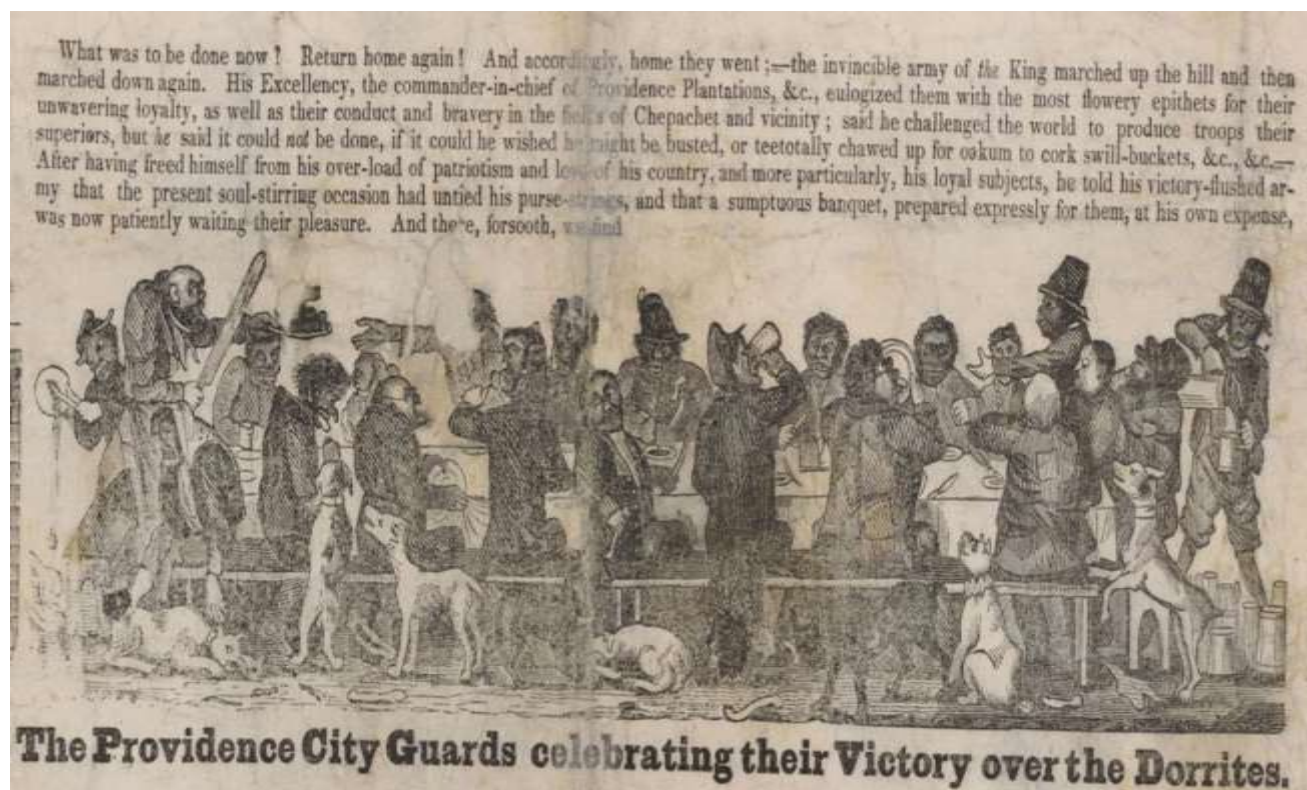
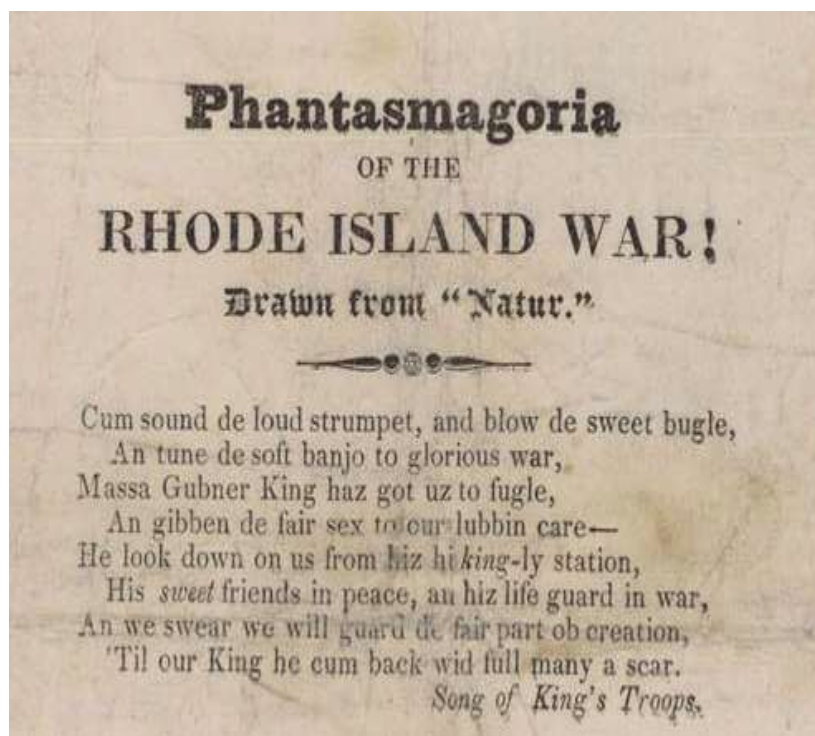


Fig 2.2, and 2.3. These images were also printed in the broadside cited above. The "Song of the King's Troops" is yet another mockery of the black militiamen who fought against the Suffrage Associates during the rebellion. The song is written in a demeaning minstrel style. The image "The Providence City Guards Celebrating their Victory over the Dorrites" depicts black militiamen, firemen, and police deputies, in a savage like manner.



Fig. 3. A political cartoon titled "Trouble in the Spartan Ranks," displays an image of Thomas Dorr with a cloven foot. The hoof symbolizes the hypocrisy of Thomas Dorr and his Suffrage Associates for supposedly supporting the fugitive slave laws of the United States. C. Maolsehber del., Thayer & Col, lith., (Boston, 1843). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

Endnotes

¹ Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, From 1817 to 1882* (London: Christian Age Office, St. Bride Street, Ludgate Circus, E.C., 1882), 190.

² For more information on New England's transformation into an industrial and capitalist society: Paul Rivard, *A New Order of Things: How the Textile Industry Transformed New England* (New Hampshire: UPNE, 2002). Rivard's monograph is an excellent study of the development of an economically classed society in New England during the Industrial Revolution. His emphasis on the social inequities between laborers and factory owners during the mid 19th century is also contextually relevant to the Dorr Rebellion and the laboring class's struggle for equality.

³ William G. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1986), 117-122.

⁴ *The Providence Directory, 1841* (Providence, 1841), 181-187. The African Americans recorded in the city directory consists of 172 "employed Negroes:" 85 are listed as laborers, 27 as Pilot-mariners, 14 barbers, 20 as draymen, 9 small business owners, 8 waiters, 3 Clergy, 3 cooks, 3 shoemakers, 2 painters, 2 gardeners, 1 engineer, liveryman, 1 carpenter, 1 teacher, 2 bakers, and 1 coachman. This directory is not accurate in comparison with the total black population of the city. However, it does provide enough evidence to surmise that most black males worked as laborers. It comes as no surprise that most blacks in 1841 Rhode Island, even residing in an industrial center such as Providence, were at the lowest tier of the social economic ladder. Also, the reader may take note, that none of the occupancies listed include black factory workers. This may be because, as cited in Rivard's monograph, employers preferred to hire non-landholding whites and immigrant workers, and these workers refused to work alongside black workers, which left little opportunity for African Americans to pursue careers in the textile industry during the mid 19th century. It is also possible that there were some black factory workers, but they were miscellaneously filed under the title of "laborer" in the *Directory*.

⁵ Arthur M. Mowry, "Chapter VI: The Charter Criticized," in *The Dorr War: The Constitutional Struggle in Rhode Island* (Providence: E.L Freeman and Sons Press, 1901), 74-83.

⁶ Mowry, "Chapter VI: The Conventions," 95-106; "Chapter IX: The People's Constitution," 107-118.

⁷ Mowry, "Chapter X: The Freeman's Constitution," 119-126.

⁸ Mowry, "Chapter XI: The Elections," 128-138.

⁹ McLoughlin, *Rhode Island*, 134-135.

¹⁰ For a more thorough synopsis on the Dorr Rebellion, please refer to: Patrick T. Conley, *The Dorr Rebellion: Rhode Island's Crisis in Constitutional Government* (Providence: Rhode Island Bicentennial Foundation, 1973).

¹¹ For an authoritative narrative of the Rhode Island Abolitionism, please refer to: Deborah B. Van Broekhoven, *The Devotion of These Women: Rhode Island in the Antislavery Network* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

¹² Charles Hoffmann and Tess Hoffmann, *Brotherly Love: Murder and the Politics of Prejudice in Nineteenth-Century Rhode Island* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 22. From 1840 through 1854, Providence's Irish population increased exponentially. By 1854, twenty percent of Providence's plantation consisted of Irish immigrants. The Hoffmanns go into lengthy detail concerning the racial hatred of Nativists against the Irish in 1840s Rhode Island. For those who are interested in learning more about this racial bigotry, please refer to page 22 of the Hoffmann's monograph.

¹³ Robert J. Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees: Providence's Black Community in the Antebellum Era* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), forward.

¹⁴ Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 172.

¹⁵ Erik J. Chaput and Russell J. DeSimone, "Strange Bedfellows: The Politics of Race in Antebellum Rhode Island," *Common-Place* 10 (2009): 3, accessed November 28, 2010, URL: <http://www.common-place.org/vol-10/no-02/chaput-desimone/>

¹⁶ David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991).

¹⁷ For more information on these of conceptualizations of "black manhood" in the 19th century, please refer to: Darlene C. Hine and Earnestine Jenkin, *A Question of Manhood: A Reader in U.S. Black Men's History and Masculinity, Vol. 1: "Manhood Rights:" the Construction of Black Male History and Manhood, 1750-1879* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Joseph P. Parker, *Slavery in Rhode Island*, thesis (University of Rhode Island, 1962), 67.

¹⁹ This statistic comes from a graph cited in: Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 48.

²⁰ William J Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown of Providence, R.I.: With Personal Recollections of Incidents in Rhode Island* (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2006), 26. William J Brown refers to Moses Brown's contribution to the construction of a church: "I [Moses Brown] always had it in my heart to help the colored people, whenever I saw they were ready to receive. Now go and select you out a lot, suitable for your purpose, and I will pay for it."

²¹ Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 58.

²² Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 26-27.

²³ Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 52.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁵ William J. Brown was a shoe cobbler and lifelong resident of Providence. Brown was born in 1814 and wrote an autobiography of his life in Providence and published it in 1883. His memoir is an invaluable source of information into the daily life of the Providence black community in Antebellum Rhode Island. His memoir is especially relevant as an eyewitness account of the events that ensued during the Dorr Rebellion (1841-1842). For more information see: William J Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown of Providence, R.I.: With Personal Recollections of Incidents in Rhode Island* (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2006).

²⁶ Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 50.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁸ Joseph W. Sullivan, "Reconstructing the Olney's Lane Riot: Another Look at Race and Class in Jacksonian Rhode Island," *Rhode Island History Journal* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 49-60.

²⁹ Historian Joseph W. Sullivan theorizes that the riot was a result of class tensions between unskilled laborers and artisans, not necessarily a race riot. Sullivan's initial thesis surmises that the Providence black community was

treated well, and that the riot had more to do with conflicting class interest than race. For more information, please refer to the citation above.

³⁰ Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 46-47.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

³² Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 61.

³³ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

³⁷ Elleanor Eldridge, *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* (Providence: B.T. Albro, 1843), 68-69.

³⁸ George C. Willis was a laborer according to the 1860 U.S. Census cited in: Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 69.

³⁹ Alfred Niger was a barber according to the 1860 U.S. Census cited in: Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 124.

⁴⁰ Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 48-49.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴² Marvin E. Gettleman, *The Dorr Rebellion: A Study in American Radicalism: 1833-1849* (New York: Random House, 1973), 34-36.

⁴³ *Preamble and Constitution of the Rhode Island Suffrage Association: Adopted Friday Evening, March 27, 1840* (Providence: B.T. Albro, 1840), 11.

⁴⁴ "Extension of Suffrage No.V: To the People of Providence," *The Providence Journal*, September 15, 1841.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ "People of Color – their right to vote," *The Providence Daily Journal*, September 17, 1841.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ The author highly suspects that Alfred Niger could have been of mixed heritage and/or had a light complexion. It is doubtful that he would have otherwise made it as far as he did in the People's Convention. Nevertheless, this is mere speculation, and there is not enough sufficient documentation to prove such a supposition at this time.

⁵¹ "Meeting of the Suffrage Association," *The Providence Daily Journal*, September 24, 1841.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ "Suffrage Convention: Friday Evening," *The Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841.

⁵⁴ "To the Free Suffrage Convention" (A petition by the Providence black community presented to the People's Convention) excerpted in: Burke, Edmund. *Rhode Island--Interference of the Executive in the Affairs of June 7, 1844: Burke's Report* (Washington: Blair & Rives, print., 1844), 112-113.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ "Swamp Yankee" is a slang term applied to southern New England white Anglo Saxons or "native" Southern New Englanders who have resided in the region since the 17th century. The term is mostly applied to Rhode Islanders and people from southeastern Connecticut. For more information, please see: Alan Rosenberg, "Is Swamp Yankee an Insult or a Badge of Honor," *The Providence Journal*, February 29, 2008.

⁵⁷ John H. Bracey, *Free Blacks in America, 1800-1860* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1971), 86-87.

⁵⁸ "To the Free Suffrage Convention," excerpted in: Burke, *Burke's Report*, 114-116.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ *The Providence Directory, 1844*, 194-199.

⁶² *Proposed Constitution of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations as finally adopted by the People's Convention Assembled at Providence on the 18th Day of November, 1841* (Providence: Office of the New Age, 1841), 6.

⁶³ "Suffrage Convention Caucus," *The Providence Daily Journal*, October 9, 1841.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ "Suffrage Convention: Friday Evening," *The Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Henry Bowen, *Report of the Committee: On the Action of the General Assembly, on the Subject of the Constitution,* "State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in General Assembly, March Session, 1842, 11.

⁷⁵ *The Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841.

⁷⁶ Burke, *Burke's Report*, 113.

⁷⁷ Quoted from *The Suffrage Examiner* and excerpted in: Burke, *Burke's Report*, 114.

⁷⁸ Abby Kelly was a prominent female abolitionist and a leader of the Rhode Island Anti Slavery Society. Frederick Douglass remarked in his memoir: "Her [Abby] youth and simple Quaker beauty, combined with her wonderful earnestness, her large knowledge and great logical power, bore down all opposition in the end." Frederick Douglass, *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, 190.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸¹ *The Providence Daily Journal*, December 29, 1841.

⁸² "Anti Slavery Meeting," *The Providence Daily Journal*, December 13, 1841.

⁸³ "Be Not Alarmed," *The Providence Daily Journal*, December 29, 1841.

⁸⁴ "Questions to be answered," *The Providence Daily Journal*, December 30, 1841.

⁸⁵ Mowry, *The Dorr War*, 136-138.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 136-138.

⁸⁷ "The Duty of All Citizens," *The Providence Daily Journal*, June 1, 1842.

⁸⁸ Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 102-103.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 102-103.

⁹⁰ *The Emancipator and Free American*, June 1842.

⁹¹ *The Providence Daily Journal*, June 26, 1842.

⁹² Frances H. Greene, *Might and Right; By a Rhode Islander*, (Providence: A.H. Stillwell, 1844), 294.

⁹³ Excerpted in: *The Providence Daily Journal*, July 12, 1842.

⁹⁴ "The Celebration," *The Providence Daily Journal*, July 6, 1842.

⁹⁵ Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 96.

⁹⁶ "The Conventions," *The Providence Daily Journal*, September 20, 1842.

⁹⁷ "The Suffrage Qualifications," *The Providence Daily Journal*, September 21, 1842.

⁹⁸ *Journal of the Convention Assembled to Frame a Constitution for the State of Rhode Island, at Newport, September 12, 1842: Printed by order of the House of Representatives, at its January Session, 1859* (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., State Printers, 1859), 36.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 51-68.

¹⁰¹ "Proposed Constitution of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations," *The Providence Daily Journal*, November 7, 1842.

¹⁰² Thomas A. Jenckes, "State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations: In Convention, Nov. 5th, A.D. 1842," *The Providence Daily Journal*, November 7, 1842.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ There were at least 700 eligible black men who could vote in the state alone. This helped tip the amendment to extend black male suffrage in their favor. Also, many eligible voting Dorrites refused to participate in the elections, which also helped significantly. For more information, see: Gettleman, *Dorr Rebellion*, 147-148.

¹⁰⁵ "Who Have the Right to Vote on: The Adoption of the Constitution," *The Providence Daily Journal*, November 14, 1842.

¹⁰⁶ "The Proposed Constitution: Compared with the Constitution of other States," *The Providence Daily Journal*, November 18, 1842.

¹⁰⁷ "The Vote on the Constitution," *The Providence Daily Journal*, November 22, 1842.

¹⁰⁸ "For the Journal," *The Providence Daily Journal*, November 22, 1842.

¹⁰⁹ Pen names were used in the majority of newspaper articles that were published in *The Providence Daily Journal*. A stylistic choice of editorial writing during the 19th century, names such as "A friend of Equal Rights," "A Citizen," "Equality," reflect the author's allegiance to African American male suffrage and equality. The pen name "No: No: No!," for obvious reasons, called for voters to write "no" in their voting ballots for an amendment which included the word "white" as a voting clause in the Freeman's Constitution.

¹¹⁰ "Vote on the Constitution," *The Providence Daily Journal*, November 23, 1842.

¹¹¹ "Vote on the Constitution," *The Providence Daily Journal*, November 26, 1842.

¹¹² *The Providence Daily Journal*, November 29, 1842.

¹¹³ Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, 102.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹¹⁵ McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History*, 133.

¹¹⁶ James M. McPherson and James K. Hogue, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 90-92.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 93-94.

¹¹⁸ McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History*, 124.

¹¹⁹ "Increase of Catholicism in the United States," *The Providence Daily Journal*, November 18, 1842.

¹²⁰ Elisha R. Potter, to John Brown Francis, July 22, 1842, Francis Collection, RIHSL.

¹²¹ McPherson and Hogue, *Ordeal by Fire*, 135.

¹²² Quoted from *The Suffrage Examiner* and excerpted in: Burke, *Burke's Report*, 114.

¹²³ Greene, *Might and Right*, 291.

¹²⁴ "Fugitive Slaves," *The Providence Daily Journal*, March 2, 1842.

¹²⁵ Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 114-115.

¹²⁶ "Population of the United States," *The Providence Daily Journal*, July 1, 1841.

¹²⁷ Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees*, 77-79.

¹²⁸ "The Doings of the Convention," *The Providence Daily Journal*, September 20, 1842.

¹²⁸ Quoted in: Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 35.

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