

# Providence Newspapers and the Racist Riots of 1824 and 1831

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Between the American Revolution and the Dorr Rebellion of 1842, Providence, Rhode Island was the scene of two major riots. In the Hardscrabble riot of 1824, and again at Olney's Lane and Snow Town in 1831, white rioters tore down several houses in black settlements. A handful of the Hardscrabble rioters were prosecuted, and either were acquitted or got off lightly. Leading citizens congratulated them openly. Similar riots in 1831, however, ended with the militia killing four whites. Afterwards, nearly all written opinion approved of suppressing the rioters to maintain order, and Providence voters swiftly approved a charter for a city government with strong police powers.

This article tells the story of the riots. It tries to convey a little of what Providence, its newspapers, its newspapermen, and its ruling class as a whole were like. It also looks at the way Americans learned to use the language of community and democracy in such a way as to justify using government to control, supervise and disenfranchise people of other classes and races.

Of all the records which remain for posterity, newspapers were among the most public, representative means by which the community expressed itself. With a few entertaining exceptions, Providence's newspapers took pains to put their opinions in terms which would echo the perceived sentiments of the "respectable" townspeople. In editorials they jockeyed to define the terms of debate, and to proclaim a reasonable prevailing consensus on every issue.

Ordinarily, in a town of Providence's size, spreading local news among the citizenry was not an important function of newspapers. They mostly provided advertisements, mercantile information, and news from other towns and other continents, and served as an occasional forum for opinion or literary musings. They also provided condensed, factual local news for papers in other towns to reprint. However, when faced with controversial and confusing local events (especially the 1831 riots), newspapers sought to provide readers with a definitive account.

Then as now, journalists sometimes indicated their opinions through the language of

their factual reporting. They authoritatively provided loaded words with which to discuss events. It is also useful to examine which issues and facts they ignored.

Providence in the 1820s was a fast-growing port town, drawing on its hinterland's farms and manufactures to overshadow Newport, once Rhode Island's metropolis. Providence had about 11,750 people in 1820, possibly 15,000 in 1825, and nearly 17,000 in 1830. Of these about 1,000 were freemen who met the property qualification to vote in Town Meetings. This article is principally about what these people read and wrote about their black neighbors, white rioters, and themselves.

This group of about a thousand households was not strictly an economic class. On the basis of long residence, personal identification with the town and state, property, education, or reputation, its members ascribed to each other a natural right to manage the town's affairs. Though intimate, it was not a closed society. It welcomed self-made merchants, professionals, craftsmen, shopkeepers and journalists, and even immigrants from distant states who had developed a stake in the community.

At the nether end of Providence's social spectrum were about a thousand blacks, rising from 980 in 1820 to between 1200 and 1400 in 1830 (estimates differ). Many families had lived in Providence for generations, while others were recent arrivals from South County. A bare majority lived with employers. The rest were scattered, but were drawn to neighborhoods at the north end of town, where land and rent were cheap. A proud few owned their homes.

All but four blacks were free. Their occupations were menial, often servile. Most were female, and were often domestic servants or laundresses. A few men were barbers or pursued other trades, but most were confined to cooking, cleaning, carrying things, or caring for animals. Many had no steady employment at all, but took what work they could get each day. But a good number were sailors, often on "coasters" with small crews that were often in port.

Some blacks gained a bit of independence, stature, and profit by renting a room and operating a low-budget bakery, tavern or dance-hall for a transient, racially and sexually mixed clientele. As the Rhode Island American and Gazette complained, a black with very little capital could hire one room for a week for \$1. 50, and with enough money left over to buy fish and rum could provide a stately pleasure dome for weary sailors. These establishments were common in the Northeast's greater ports, and often earned the name of "bawdyhouses" because of the business which was transacted, though not consummated, on their premises. Bawdy-house riots, in which the clientele of a bar or brothel gathered a crowd and knocked the house down to protest some offense, had been a tradition in other ports on both sides of the

Atlantic throughout the previous century.

Two days before the "Hardscrabble" riots, the Providence Beacon editorialized on "Our Black Population." The Beacon, published almost single-handedly by William Spear, was described simply as "a fearless paper" by one of the rioters' lawyers, Chief Justice William Staples, in his *Annals of Providence*. It advocated universal suffrage and vowed to unmask "vice, immorality and hypocrisy" indiscriminately. Spear was sickly, prickly, righteously wrathful, and chronically short of funds. Attorney General Duttee Pearce called him "a person of evil, wicked, and malicious mind and disposition." He was the object of libel suits, as well as more direct threats, from members of some of the town's most prominent families. He believed that "the law of libel [is] a libel on law." He called Brown University students "nauseating," "miserable," and "infinitely below mediocrity." Spear often printed anonymous poems and sketches, which were thought to be thinly-veiled accusations of prominent townspeople. He professed to have no knowledge of the authors or their subjects.

Spear lamented that blacks were "naturally vicious and wicked," "profligate" and "worthless." He elaborated that groups of blacks had taken to forcing whites off the sidewalks, and the previous weekend they had defeated a white crowd for possession of the Smith Street bridge, since nature had given them disproportionate "physical strength." A stone had wounded "a respectable lady" on the breast. Spear warned that Providence after dark was now "absolutely dangerous for females."

In contrast, the contemporary black autobiographer William Brown later recalled only that gangs of whites consistently forced blacks off the sidewalk, and that blacks in general felt constrained to act timidly. If we believe Spear at all, however, it would seem that each race had a few defiant champions, equally determined to defend their own notions of etiquette.

Spear's Beacon went on to explain that since Providence was so tolerant of blacks, transients had begun to feel too much at home there. While their "extermination" was not yet necessary, he pleaded, some authority should "rid the town of its superabundant share" of them. Spear appealed to New England's traditional view of the poor: that each town was responsible for those born, or previously prosperous, within its borders. Providence felt burdened with more than its share.

Two days later, on the evening of October 18, 1824, a white mob marched north to Hardscrabble and destroyed eleven houses. Most were speakeasies, but all accounts agree that a few were the homes of "respectable" black craftsmen and their families. By some accounts, including the Beacon's, the mob comprised 400 to 500 rioters and up to 1,000 spectators, but others estimated only 50 or 60 rioters and 100 onlookers.

The next Beacon published a short account of the violence, followed by a romantic lamentation for the poor, innocent, hard-working black victims, after which Spear chastised their impudence, "idleness and vice" and proposed draconian controls on them. This article, entitled "RIOT AND REBELLION," announced that Providence, known "for the purity of its morals and its domestic felicity and repose," had been "disharmonized" by the indiscriminate "atrocities" of an "abandoned and profligate mob."

Hardscrabble, wrote Spear, was a "hamlet" of "smiling aspect" where blacks had moved "to avoid all intercourse" with "hostile" whites. When attacked, the "unoffending and unsuspecting inhabitants" "were engaged in convivial sports and rural games." Their "innocent festivity" may have involved rum, for he reported that some provident housekeepers had enough of it on hand to buy off the mob and preserve their houses. In the mob's wake Spear found devoted mothers, an "honest sailor" and "an aged son of Africa," mourning "with downcast countenance" their "humble cottages," the fruits of "honest toil," and gasping, "'Hope forsaken!'"

It is hard to tell with a loose cannon like Spear: the silliness about "convivial sports and rural games" is in jest, but it seems as much a parody of a style of writing as of the blacks themselves. The part about blacks' moving to Hardscrabble "to avoid all intercourse with hostile whites" can hardly have been meant as sarcasm, and the relative positions of pitying and fearful references to blacks seem to indicate sincere, if frenzied and confused, sentiments.

Spear predicted that blacks would seek vengeance. He protested that they were innocent as lambs, except that they were a bit "impudent, and often offer insults to whites." He said blacks "cannot bear the luxuries of freedom," and were temperamentally incompatible with whites. Therefore "let their liberties be abridged." He proposed putting "every Negro under the immediate control of the Orphan's Court," and apprenticing them all to "respectable Mechanics." Some would be "susceptible of improvement," and for others "it would be the means of driving them from our region." This "benevolence" would benefit both whites and blacks, while the only alternative was a cycle of riot culminating in a "war of extermination."

The next week, Spear's sympathies were more firmly with the "injured" blacks. He pointed out that many were the children of "noble" Revolutionary veterans, but were now "miserable wretches," though not nearly so miserable as in Haiti - which set him off luridly sketching the horrors of slavery there over most of the page. He then graphically described the results of the Haitians' "just fury," hinting that the same could happen in the United States.

The Beacon received several letters about the riot, but declared their language too unseemly for print. In fact, they were "committed to the flames a few moments after they were perused." When one writer threatened to boycott the paper if his letters were not printed, Spear replied on the front page, "Shocking! Alarming! O La! Cease to rant silly, idle little boy."

Other newspapers were too preoccupied with the presidential elections and the recent visits of Lafayette, a dwarf and a mummy to give much attention to the riot. The Jeffersonian Providence Patriot, the proto-Whig Manufacturer's and Farmer's Journal and the old Federalist Providence Gazette were consumed with a newspaper war among themselves, but the riot provided them no ammunition for further disagreement. The Patriot ran a half-inch notice of the "affray," and after a few days reprinted the Gazette's editorial obliquely deploring "the increase of our colored population." It noted that the Town Council had ordered a census of blacks for the purpose of expelling the "idle, dissolute" ones. After reviling the capacities of the race, it allowed that most long-settled blacks were "sober, industrious and respectable citizens."

Ten rioters were prosecuted for several serious offenses. Their defense, led by the prominent Joseph Tillinghast, argued that they had improved "the morals of the community" by removing a "pig-stye" of lewdness, disorder, drunkenness and unseemly dancing. Nearly all were acquitted, and the only convictions were on lesser charges.

Between 1824 and 1831 community leaders felt a progressive loss of influence over the lower classes. The black and white populations grew, and a majority of blacks lived outside of white households. Many were moving to Olney's Lane (now Olney Street) and to Snow Town, in a hollow up against Smith Hill, southwest of Hardscrabble. Laboring whites patronized the blacks' dance-halls and taverns, but certain blacks evinced a proprietary interest in their neighborhood that could appear threatening. Interracial scuffles were not uncommon.

Gentlemen periodically called for efficient, full-time law enforcement and supervision of the unemployed. An asylum was established and sheltered an assortment of indigents, physical and mental invalids of three races. In 1830 a majority of voters approved a charter for a city government, but the legislature rejected it since less than 60 percent had voted for it. Efforts to broaden suffrage, successful elsewhere, also failed in those years.

One expression of genteel concern was the formation of a Society for the

Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants in the winter of 1830-31. One hundred men of the town's most eminent families joined in its first year. It was intended to be an employment agency, to certify and reward good servants. Under its auspices ladies were supposed to train prospective servants in housekeeping and more abstract virtues, but the officers reported some difficulty interesting "the ladies" in this work. One of their foremost concerns was that black servants were decreasingly bound to yearly contracts, but increasingly contracted odd jobs by the day, and lived on their own. They aimed to reverse this trend. They counted five hundred who had yearly contracts, out of a black population of 1200. (This, incidentally, demonstrated that their concern was with black people, though they never said so explicitly.)

In the intervening years Providence's newspapers merged, expanded, and developed specialized editions. All generally had small advertisements on the outside (first and fourth) pages, and literary musings, international news, and presidential politics on the second. Local and national news spilled from the second onto the third page, where shipping news and advertisements resumed.

The Rhode Island American absorbed the old Gazette, the Daily Advertiser, and the Microcosm, and published the same news and commentary under variously combined titles for different markets. Anti-Masonic activist Benjamin F. Hallett was the editor. Originally from Cape Cod, he had come to Providence as a Brown University student, and stayed. He was thought pedantic, awkward, and a bit of a self-promoting humbug, but tolerably amusing. (The Journal called him "slimy.") He promoted Henry Clay and his "American System" of industrialization and development. During the riots of 1831 Hallett was in Baltimore sending home lengthy manifestoes from the Anti-Masonic convention, so local events were handled by an unnamed "friend."

The Providence Patriot and Columbia Phenix was the only paper to survive unchanged from 1824 to 1831. Editor Josiah Jones had founded it when very young to defend President Jefferson and his party from the Federalist Gazette, and was still as Democratic as ever. His assistant, William Simons, was a Bostonian educated in the newspaper business. He had worked for papers in Boston and Newport, but had decided to let his fortunes rise with those of Providence.

There were many excellent reasons for the Beacon to meet its demise late in 1826. I could not tell exactly what became of Spear or his paper. None of its rivals commented on the Beacon's passing, and Spear was not listed in the next city directory. The hole the Beacon left was more than filled by the Literary Subaltern. This weekly was independent, neither Masonic nor anti-Masonic, but partial to Henry Clay. It was irrepressibly irreverent, but upheld serious principles. Its jovial, self-

conscious editor, Sylvester Southworth, had been trained as a blacksmith in Dighton, but described himself thereafter as "ten years a rover," affecting a Byronic image. He had come to roost in Providence, taking to family life with the zeal of a recent convert. His columns were deluged with literary contributions from ladies whom he, at least, described as young.

Southworth claimed to speak for "middling republicans," the "grocer and workingman," against the inbred local "Bourbons" who dominated the Town Council. He satirized creaky, outmoded, authoritarian old Puritans who anathematized ladies' gaiters and square-toes shoes, and he confronted more serious issues in the same spirit. He appealed for a broader suffrage, and assailed the new Dexter Asylum as a degrading "Alms house" where "honest but unfortunate worth, disease and crime" were jumbled "like a heap of lumber." This "coldblooded policy" allowed the town fathers to eliminate all outdoor poor relief.

The Manufacturer's and Farmer's Journal became part of the Providence Daily Journal family of papers, along with the Country Journal and Independent Inquirer. Published at varying intervals for various regions and occupational groups, they had the same editorial content and were edited by Thomas Rivers, a popular lawyer. Rivers, about 35, was a South Carolina native who had come north to attend Brown University, and never left. The Journal's motto was "Encourage National Industry," and it praised John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay unceasingly.

September of 1831 seemed a perilous time to faithful readers of the Providence Journal. South America was in tragicomic chaos, Turkey was torn by civil war, China was plagued with piracy and rebellion, and the King of Belgium-on whom "civilization in Europe hinges"-had disappeared during a Dutch invasion. America itself was plagued by "cholera morbus," rabies, and the presidency of Andrew Jackson, a despotic, dueling, drooling, drunken demagogue. The Journal posed as a lonesome voice of cool-headed moderation, rallying respectable, reasonable men amid an epoch of mindless revolution.

On Wednesday, September 21, 1831, the Journal reprinted reports of a massive slave revolt in North Carolina. It appeared that the slaves had taken over Wilmington and burned it down, and a white army was gathering at Raleigh. At the very end of the column, the editor opined that the reports were probably exaggerated, perhaps wholly false.

That evening riots began in Olney's Lane. White sailors who had some dispute with blacks who lived there gathered a crowd which headed up the lane to confront them. As the Journal would later put it, "stones were thrown." A black man stepped out of a

house with a gun and warned them away, then shot and killed a sailor. The crowd retreated to the foot of the hill, except for five sailors. Someone shot and wounded three of them, and the mob again advanced and began systematically knocking down houses. They destroyed two that night, and damaged several others.

The next day's Journal ran a very small item at the end of the news columns, reporting a fatal "affray." Amidst the confusion of a "large mob," the "particulars" of this "melancholy termination" could not be ascertained.

The Journal's major news of the day was the "Insurrection in North Carolina". Again, no particulars could be ascertained, but it was "pretty certain" that a slave insurrection was going on. There was no confirmation of the burning of Wilmington, but it was estimated that conspirators had slain half the town. Bands of slaves were reportedly sweeping across two counties, burning and killing. The Journal reprinted a letter praising citizens who took "vigorous measures" against "offenders." The letter concluded, "I foresee that this land must become a field of blood."

I am not aware of sufficient evidence to suggest a cause and effect relationship between the Southern revolts and the Providence riots. Having found no published comments originating in Providence, I can only speculate on the revolts' effects. On the other hand, were I certain that they had no influence on the riots, I would not have describe them here at such length. I think that such rumors were a significant contribution to the general climate of democratic revolt and lawlessness to which substantial, respectable New Englanders were so sensitive throughout Jackson's presidency. Further, it is likely that unsettling news from the South and from other continents convinced community leaders to be increasingly vigilant and show a firm hand, so as to forestall greater bloodshed in the future.

Any link between the news from the South and the rioters themselves is probably quite vague. Their timing was dictated by the killing on Olney Street, not by outside considerations. The rioters' methods did not correspond in any way with the reported slave atrocities, but simply imitated the 1824 riot on a grander scale. Nonetheless, news of the Southern revolts must have pervaded the town, in print and by word of mouth, and added to the sense of excitement.

The American gave a fuller account of the local "RIOT AND MURDER," blaming the sailors for starting it. But it placed ultimate blame on "the owners of these sinks of iniquity, [who rent] them to these wretches" on cheap, flexible terms. While it said the constables were doing a good job of quelling "the riots which frequently happen in this vicinity," the American demanded a program "to stop them altogether."



That day the American published a letter, apparently from one of the rioters, saying that the "Negroes armed themselves and fired upon four sailors," and that the crowd had destroyed only the houses of the "foul-blooded" murderers. However, as the neighborhood was "worse than the celebrated Five Points District in New York, our populace are determined to level" the remaining houses.

This was the only published communication from the rioters, and so may not represent the full range of their concerns. For what it is worth, though, it must be acknowledged that the writer did not base his argument on race, and was careful to relate each punishment inflicted by the rioters to a specific offense. He specified that only those who actually shot the sailors were held accountable for that crime. (If other rioters were equally particular about not punishing blacks for the crimes of their friends and neighbors, then they could hardly have considered punishing them for slave rebellions at the other end of the country.)

The anonymous writer's main argument, justifying the other demolitions, was the one that was so successful in 1824: that the neighborhood was an evil influence that could be remedied only by urban renewal on a scale not attempted since King Philip's War.

That evening, the 22nd, a mob of 700 or 800 dismantled six more houses in Olney's Lane. The sheriff, constables and Town Council watched uneasily for a few hours, now and then ordering the rioters to desist. Late at night Governor James Fenner called out a militia company, of whom 25 arrived. Pausing only to free rioters whom the authorities arrested, the mob finished off Olney's Lane and proceeded to Snow Town, near what is now the University of Rhode Island's Providence campus (as best I can tell). After leveling two houses there, they retired around 4 a. m. The militia succeeded in jailing seven rioters.

The next day's Journal ran a two-inch article on "RIOT" at the end of the news columns, noting that a mob of hundreds had "defeated civil and military authority." An article headed "NEGRO CONSPIRACY" revealed that there was "no overt rebellion" in North Carolina, but that most of the slaves in two counties had been plotting one. In other news, South America was "rent with broils and deluged with blood." A reprint from New Haven reported that the blacks there had "imbibed the notion that they were oppressed," notwithstanding many benevolent efforts to educate them. As in Providence, they had an inordinate concern with "dignity," and were demanding an "equal standing in society." Specifically, they had bought land and founded a black college. A city meeting there resolved unanimously that such a college would support abolition, so that to tolerate it was to violate other states' rights. Furthermore, it would ruin Yale and the city's other schools. The citizens vowed to resist it "by every lawful means."

The same day's Literary Subaltern showed more concern with the situation in North Carolina. It revealed that "infatuated" Negroes had left a trail of "bloody and horrible" vengeance across North Carolina and Virginia, slaughtering women, burning infants and leaving them for "the vulture and the hyena." This "massacre," second only to the "atrocities of St. Domingo," was intentionally incited by "seditious" and demonic abolitionists, including David Walker and William Lloyd Garrison.

We "detest" slavery, Southworth added. But it was a "Gordian Knot" which must be undone with glacial slowness, by means as yet unknown. Any sudden actions would unleash the blacks' thirst for vengeance. Southworth kept returning to that note, concluding that the "ghosts" of Wilmington's mothers and infants "cry for revenge."

Southworth also devoted more thought to the recent scenes of "RIOT AND REBELLION" in Providence. While faintly advising otherwise, he predicted "ten thousand fold retribution" against the black "fiends" of Olney's Lane who had "wantonly murdered" a temperate, continent sailor. The crowd was composed of "good men" who were "justly indignant" at the murder, and who turned their indignation to constructive ends. Thanks to them, "an indignant public has been awakened" to the crimes of the landlords who countenanced the infamous "bloody brothels" of Olney's Lane. Southworth admitted that he had collected few facts, but promised to provide them next week.

That day, Friday the 23rd, the jailed rioters were released. However, some of the mob were determined to storm the jail and rescue them nonetheless. 130 militiamen from six companies were on hand. With some difficulty, town officials finally convinced the mob's belligerent spokesmen that the jail was empty, and everyone dispersed for the day.

The next day's American was pleased to note that "precautions" against new riots had "proved effectual." It enjoined "every orderly citizen" to "lend his influence" to prevent further disorder. It reprinted a lurid account of "THE BURNING OF WILMINGTON," -- "without attaching the least credit to it."

The Journal of the 24th published a short, factual account of the riots at the head of the news column. Though the fallen houses all sheltered "the same class of people," it warned that "every substantial citizen" would quash any "attack on person or property." It admonished the curious to stay in their homes so as not to impede the authorities. Citizens had a "duty" not to watch riots, and would be "in the way of being arrested" if they attended. It also reprinted an uncompromising defense of the

New Haven Negro college.

The Providence Patriot and Columbia Phenix published a relatively calm account of the "RIOT," beginning with the "murder" attributed to "some Negro inhabitant." It simply revealed that "a riot took place," in the impersonal, passive and intransitive style which was then fashionable. It ominously concluded, "Fears are entertained that this will end in something more serious than it begun."

It did. Saturday night nearly a thousand white rioters and an equal number of spectators marched across the Smith Street bridge and over Smith Hill to finish off Snow Town. As the militia of 130, including some cavalry and artillery, countermarched from the bridge to the hill and back, the crowd encompassed them, swallowed them up, and all but disintegrated their ranks. At one point a man grabbed a militiaman's gun and they both tumbled off a 20-foot bank, where they continued to struggle. Several militiamen and dozens of rioters scrambled down to aid them, and the militia barely fought their way out. The rioters threw every stone they could find, and wounded some militiamen.

The sheriff read the riot act, which authorized him to start shooting those who heard it and did not disperse. As before, the crowd responded with various insults, including "Fire and be damned." Firing into the air only attracted greater abuse. Half the crowd began destroying a house, and the rest tormented the militia as they tried to form a line from the bridge up the hill. When the militia pleaded that they were about to disintegrate, the governor, sheriff and officers announced that they would fire if the mob would not disperse. Greeted only with defiance, Governor Fenner ordered the militia to fire. They fired one volley, killing four young white men: a sailor, a bookbinder, a paper-hanger and an apprentice. At once the crowd grew silent and dispersed.

There were no Sunday newspapers, but a special Town Meeting that day attracted 3000 people (most of whom had no right to vote in it). Monday's papers devoted much more space to the riots than before. The American emphasized the overriding issue of respect for the law and constitutional authority. Everyone's "interests and property" were "sacred," even those of "suspicious reputation." The bottom line was that every citizen's duty was to enforce "the Majesty of the Law," which had given Providence the sublime "public tranquillity" for which it usually was renowned.

The Journal boundlessly expanded this concept of the law. On that principle it condemned both the rioters and their victims, and heaped praise on the militia. While giving a factual account, it put everything in abstract terms of lawfulness and lawlessness (rather the same way in which it defined its opposition to Jackson and his

party).

The Journal recounted how and why the riots began, emphasizing the agency of unnamed mob "leaders." As the Journal saw it, when the mob's noise reached the discerning ears of "respectable citizens," it led them to reflect on "the consequences of living in a land in which lawless riots continue unchecked." Sensing their duty, they "assembled" as a militia, "standing forth openly to defend the laws of the land." Their civic responsibility "devolved upon [the] supreme executive officer," who discharged it prudently.

The Journal stressed formal details, which indeed appear to have been crucial. The officials and militiamen fired with great reluctance, only when the crowd seemed ready to disarm them (thereby arming itself). The rioters were repeatedly warned, though they apparently did not believe the warnings.

They had even made a formal challenge, shouting, "Fire if you dare!" The Journal took grim satisfaction in having "taught a rebellious portion of our community that they owed an allegiance to the laws."

The Journal printed some of the most edifying remarks from the Town Meeting. A judge had declared the Riot Act "a wholesome law" protecting sacred rights of "property." He said the mob had "no excuse," because "they were amenable to the laws" for "redress." They should have looked to the law to punish the murderer and to suppress houses "of ill fame." John Whipple told the meeting that the mob must have been "stimulated" by gentlemen "who dared not bear the disgrace of acting openly."

In reply to such insinuations, Thomas Sekell and Ezekiel Burr placed brief notices in the Journal denying rumors that they had secretly armed the mob. Burr owned one of the houses the mob destroyed, and there is no record of rioters being armed with anything ordinarily used as a weapon. This raises questions about why anyone made such unlikely charges, and why Burr, especially, took them so seriously.

By the 27th the Journal's attention was waning. It published a tiny, platitudinous editorial on the riots, and went on to denounce the "bluster" of Hallett's "anti-masonic Sanhedrin" at Baltimore and the "DISGRACEFUL CONDUCT OF THE BELGIANS." In the conflict between the Netherlands and Belgium, on which "civilization in Europe hinges," fifty Belgians and no Dutchmen had perished.

That day Newport's Democratic Rhode Island Republican praised Governor Fenner's decision to fire on the mob, noting that it differed with him only on mere politics. It

explained that liberty, law and authority were "intimately blended," as inseparable as the Trinity. It published extracts from Rhode Island's superannuated charter, which authorized the governor "to kill, slay and destroy, by all fitting ways," any who "enterprize the destruction, invasion, detriment or annoyance" of Rhode Islanders.

The American's story on "Another Riot" was either a bit schizophrenic or extraordinarily subtle. It lamented that "this neat and beautiful village has become one mass of ruin," and its "virtuous and orderly citizens deprived of their dwelling." Then, referring to Olney's Lane as "celebrated" (meaning infamous), it swung into a denunciation of the black race. Providence's blacks had recently been "unusually bold" and "repeatedly defied civil authority." It returned to the theme of ultimately blaming landlords who "countenance their dissolute habits" by renting single rooms weekly. It urged owners to "consult the morals and peace of the community" when making economic decisions. It saw no rightful way to punish the landlords, but neither did it consider the issue of compensating the owners of houses destroyed in the riots.

The Anti-Masonic American also entertained the conspiratorial theories which had been elaborated in the Town Meeting and elsewhere. It alluded to "accomplished" ringleaders, presumably veteran leaders of previous mobs, and "prominent" rioters whom it was unnecessary to name.

On the 28th, the Democratic Patriot sadly approved of the militia's action. They "have slain their best lover for the good of Rome," it sighed. However, it was thankful for the destruction of Olney's Lane, which was an "annoyance" to "the most respectable part" of its immediate neighbors. Like other commentators, the Patriot was usually careful to distinguish these respectable blacks from the operators and patrons of the saloons.

When the weekly Subaltern appeared again, Southworth sheepishly admitted that he had been in Boston Saturday night, and missed the fireworks. He graciously referred his readers to the other papers. He simply appealed for "all good men to unite to restore public tranquility," and proceeded to other matters. He had been thoroughly scooped.

On the 29th, most papers printed the report of an investigating committee of notables appointed at Sunday's Town meeting. The Journal gushed,

"In this community, there is no doubt one expression is heard throughout--decided approbation"

for the committee, the militia, and all responsible public officials.

The committee's report brought many facts together coherently, but cautioned that it had only heard the sailors' side, and not the blacks'. This was nearly the only printed acknowledgment that the rioters and the blacks had sides of the story that were worth hearing. It described the riots' setting as a Babylon of "indiscriminate mixtures of whites" and "idle blacks of the lowest stamp," whose "midnight revels" and "bloody affrays" disturbed the sleep of the "respectable" every night. The blacks, however, were victims of their environment, steeped in "bad habits" through "a want of education and example." The "moral guilt" of their tolerant landlords was far worse.

In such circumstances, the committee granted, the approval of nearly 1,000 "satisfied and passive spectators" was understandable. Nonetheless, it bemoaned the vocal "approbation" of certain "respectable" onlookers. The report conveyed an impression of the sheer pressure of the enormous crowd, which had physically forced the militia to the point of disintegration. If the militia had broken ranks, it argued, the mob could easily have overpowered individuals, taken their guns, and killed people. So "they were obliged to fire." The committee did not question the imperative of calling out the militia to uphold the law and protect the blacks' property and lives.

The report, without comment, included a list of the owners of destroyed houses, and of the dead and wounded. One landlord who lost a house was William Staples, one of the lawyers for the 1824 rioters, and later Rhode Island's Chief Justice. Nicholas Brown owned another of the houses. The houses' residents were not listed, for the committee did not think that "any houses occupied by respectable persons have been injured."

The committee concluded with an indictment of "the defects of our police." If not a "City Government," Providence needed a single, accountable, full-time "executive magistrate" who could drop in on "suspicious" houses unexpectedly, "visit" each neighborhood each day and become acquainted with everyone who belonged in town, and everyone who did not. He would know everybody's business, and be the eyes of the Town Council. This was an attempt to re-create the small traditional community in which everyone knew everyone else.

As intended, the report rekindled the debate over a city charter. The Journal attempted to set the tone of debate, saying the "recent melancholy occurrences" would never have happened in a real city. It cited no evidence, but declared that among "the supporters of the law, there is but one opinion." The American concurred, "it is the general opinion" that a charter "is necessary."

A letter to the American from a former charter opponent admitted that the town was powerless to protect "comfort, order and security." "We want a head man. I hope some of our principal and substantial citizens will make a move."

This was exactly what some principal and substantial citizens were waiting to hear. A series of Town Meetings quickly prepared and approved a city charter, with councilmen elected by ward and a mayor who could jail anyone for 24 hours, search houses and dissolve riots. At the beginning of the process, the Journal boasted that "the greatest unanimity prevailed."

Opposition soon arose, however. A letter to the American blamed the charter-fever on the recent excitements, caused by "a negro mob, composed of the scums of other towns." The writer supported the committee's proposal for a powerful "high constable." Though the problem of law enforcement had outgrown the old system, he noted that other concerns of government had not, and the Town Council seldom had anything to do at their meetings.

Sylvester Southworth jumped back into the fray on the 14th. He predicted a "prodigious" scramble for "ostentatious and expensive" offices, so that "we shall smell amazingly like a city." He reported a theater riot in New York, which was not prevented by that city's charter. A charter could not "work wonders," though people seemed to think it would "remoddlle the whole town, and give each man a new coat and trousers." Encountering little success, he waxed extreme, declaring that the charter gave the mayor more "despotic and dangerous powers" than Napoleon ever had.

Southworth began to speak for the rioters' interests, at least as he saw them. He called the committee's report "a good move" which pretended to explain "how scientifically six of our townsmen were killed in the public street, without the shadow of law." Bitterly, he noted how "with the utmost feeling" the Town Meeting pronounced its condolences to the widows and orphans of "the massacred citizens."

A letter to the Journal warged that Rhode Islanders were "not yet so profligate that they should be bound hand and foot to preserve order." A city form of government was a "useless machine foreign to our habits," and the aldermen would surely perpetuate themselves "like bank directors." Notice the derogatory use of the word "machine," and Southworth's similar use above of the word "scientifically."

The Journal acknowledged its surprise that there were genuinely "sensible men" opposing the charter. It responded with several new arguments. For one thing, the mayor would have no new powers, but would merely combine those of constables,

sheriffs, and justices of the peace. In a homogeneous "community like ours there is no danger of an abuse" of power. Furthermore, the town was becoming newly heterogeneous. The Journal dubbed Providence "the grand thoroughfare between two large cities," which gathers "the scum and froth of their population." A "necessarily heterogeneous" city needed more "vigor" in its government.

A city government, the Journal claimed, would quickly save the town money by expelling idlers who "do not belong to us," or making them work in a workhouse. The local "superabundant population" were non-producers. They "live on the town" through "charity" or "pilfering," which were both equally evil from an economic point of view, equally burdensome to "the industrious part of the community." "It would be economy" to build a workhouse where they would be "compelled to labor for their own support."

A large majority of voters, and the legislature, soon approved the charter. The sad end of the riots had triggered the change. When Mayor Samuel Brigham took office the next year, he declared that the new city was simply "too heterogeneous" for its old form of government.

Modern accounts of the riots are usually set in the context of rediscovering the history of Providence's black community. This context sees the blacks exclusively as victims of white violence, which they were, and focuses on the losses of the presumably non-violent "respectable" blacks who left most written records. Contemporary journalists, however, were prone to notice more "impudent" blacks. The relatively casual newspaper accounts from the 1820s up through the first two days of the 1831 riots embody a view of group violence as a continuing give-and-take between various groupings of the laboring classes. It had gone on for centuries, especially in cities, and indeed bore some resemblance to more recent events, whether mundane or newsworthy.

If there is anything to be said in defense of the rioters, it is that they did not completely take the law into their own hands. They made no attempt on the lives of those who shot the sailors, and in fact said little about bringing them to justice, but seemed exclusively interested in tearing down houses.

Violence was seen as increasing as Providence grew and more lower-class whites and blacks lived outside of their employers' households. The dominant community's perception of the violence, as expressed in newspapers, seems to have been changing more radically than the violence itself.

The reasons for this change were various. Journalists and other community leaders



had specific, concrete urban blights in mind. Writers referred to drunken, violent and disorderly scenes that they had personally witnessed. They wanted specific people run out of town, even if they no longer knew them personally.

The element of impersonality was slowly growing in Providence. Especially as the town became a major port, people no longer knew everyone else. Newspapers hardly ever provided the names of the lower-class whites and blacks who intruded into their columns, unless they wound up in court. However, members of the enfranchised "respectable" community still recognized one another individually, as did members of more obscure communities.

Ideas of what constituted a serious problem were changing. Authorities hesitantly decided to call out the militia to stop house-wreckers in 1831, though such rioters had been acquitted and congratulated in 1824. Outdoor relief, provided to poor householders with few strings attached, was replaced with an asylum. Finally, a growing majority of voters decided to give up their traditional form of government for one that would efficiently expel the idle and disorderly and prevent riots.

Newspapermen also used urban problems as vehicles for the ideas that were foremost in their minds. William Spear, thinking in terms of traditional New England practices, advocated placing all blacks, of all ages, in apprenticeships. Apprenticeship was not dead yet, but there was more than a touch of nostalgia in his system. Sylvester Southworth, likewise, called for a return to outdoor relief, which had been thought satisfactory in his childhood. Most others saw the problem of the poor as how to expel people more energetically, and keep them out, in the New England municipal tradition.

Newer concerns were equally prominent, though. Papers opposed to Jackson, especially the Journal, harped on an absolute veneration for the law which recalled the fealty of a medieval knight to his liege. Anti-Masons envisioned rich and powerful men who secretly raised mobs to serve the hidden designs of secret societies. Jackson was portrayed as a Masonic demagogue who disregarded the law when it did not suit him. A very few, like Southworth, championed the figure of the honest white workingman, energetically defending his home from abolitionists and other murderers. Each of these treatments of the riots dealt with symbols, ideologies, and classes, but not with individuals.

Nearly everyone insisted on upholding the law, but nobody spoke of defending the blacks - except when they quoted the black man who killed the sailor as shouting, "Is this the way the blacks are to live, to be obliged to defend themselves from stones?" Only once was there any mention of what the rest of the blacks did during the riots

(those who could not appease the mob with rum escaped with their valuables and some furniture). Though defending the general rights of property, none spoke of compensating specific property-owners, even though the Town Council took care to pay the doctor who had treated the wounded. There was no discussion of individual rioters or militiamen, except for the dead and wounded.

The committee's vindication of the authorities' actions was thorough, factual, and dispassionate, but entirely focused on the authorities themselves and their perceptions. None explored the implications of the fact that the rioters, from past experience, had learned not to take the authorities' warnings seriously. Constables and militiamen seem to have pleaded sincerely and earnestly with the mob, but their final warning did not mean the same thing to the rioters as it did to the committee. It was the authorities who changed the rules, albeit for the better. The precedent of Hardscrabble was on the side of the rioters.

Most journalists, as well as the committee, distanced themselves from the controversy between the blacks and the rioters, so that they could consistently, convincingly condemn both equally. They saw the 1824 Hardscrabble riot and other brawls as the messy, inconsequential affairs of a lower class. Once the riots of 1831 drew their undivided attention, they identified with the supremacy of the law over all parties.

However, this distant cool-headedness was fragile when confronted with emotional concerns. One of these, apparently, was the status of black people.

The journalists' opinions of black people were especially complex. Many followed Spear's tortuous path from empathy to pity to contempt to fear. It was respectable to see blacks as intrinsically amusing and grotesque, but it was considered more virtuous to discern that some blacks were "susceptible of improvement." Blacks affected writers emotionally, so that some were wholly carried away and said things they did not mean. Writers saw them sometimes as saints, sometimes as clowns, and sometimes as dark, savage, bloody avengers.

Dealing with the riots, most journalists transcended their partisan divisions with a common perspective on class and order. They shared the Journal's notions of unanimity among all respectable men, which drove most Democrats and poorer or sinful people out of the picture, even when they were a majority. Many unacceptable opinions and associations of otherwise respectable men were explained as corruption: the demagoguery of leading Democrats, the inhumanity of some slaveowners, and the scheming of Masons put them all beyond the pale. Within Providence, journalists and community leaders increasingly ignored the opinions of the rioting classes, and

looked only to other reasonable men for ideas on how to run the city.

Providence's voters realized that their world was increasingly heterogeneous, and chose to govern it through a homogeneous political community in which consensus and republican virtue were still possible. They were able to maintain the continuity of this sense of community while modernizing the agencies by which it governed the growing city. This led them to more impersonal, universal conceptions of the workings of government.

There is much still to be found out about the 1831 riots. Available accounts say little about the thoughts, or even the identities, of the rioters or their victims. Other, less public, records might tell more about the rioters' motivations. It would be helpful to know who the militiamen involved were, or at least whether they represented any particular social class, and what their relationships with the rioters were. Someone might want to inquire whether the members of the official committee which investigated the riots were the same people who were involved in the riots in any way, and whether there was any basis for the vague charges of conspiracy which circulated at the time. Certainly some important decisions were made without receiving scrutiny in the press. Also, several important trends operated, unfortunately for historians, in communities that were ordinarily were beneath the press's concern.

To examine newspaper accounts, then, is only to examine the surface of events. But in this country many important things go on at surface level. In newspapers, which were then more abundant in the United States than anywhere else in the world, the public found not only the news, but also the meaning, of events in which they were not directly involved. Especially in literate, contentious Providence, newspapers were an arena where actions were justified or condemned, and the public's ideals, standards, symbols, hopes and fears were invoked.

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## FOOTNOTES

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4 Coughtry, p. 40-41; William J. Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*. Freeport, N. Y. : Books for Libraries Press, 1971, p. 97.

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9 Brown, p. 88.

10 "Our Black Population," *The Beacon*, October 16, 1824, p. 1.

11 Coughtry, p. 60; *Beacon*, Oct. 23, 1824, p. 1; Howard Chudacoff and Theodore Hirt, "Social Turmoil and Governmental Reform in Providence, 1820-1832," *Rhode Island History* 31:1 (Winter 1972) p. 22.

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13 *ibid.*

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15 *Beacon*, October 30, 1824, p. 1.

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21 *First Annual Report, 1832*, Providence Society for the Encouragement of Faithful Domestic Servants. Providence:1832. pp. 12, 13, 6.

22 *The Rhode Island American and Gazette, the Daily Advertiser and American, and the Microcosm and Weekly American*, which are all hereafter referred to as the *American*.

23 This and the following descriptions of newspapers are drawn from Staples's *Annals*, pp. 545-559, and Southworth's "Literary Biographies," in the *Literary Subaltern*, January 6, 1829, p. 1. Also *Manufacturer's and Farmer's Journal*, November 13, 1826, p. 2.

24 *ibid.*

25 *ibid.*

26 *ibid.*

27 *ibid.*

28 *Providence Journal*, Sept. 21, 1831, p. 2.

29 *Providence Journal*, Sept. 29, 1831. p. 2.

30 *Providence Journal*, Sept. 22, 1831, p. 2. 31 *ibid.*

32 *American*, Sept. 22, 1831.

33 *ibid.* The letter was addressed to "The Gazette." The *American*, having absorbed the *Gazette* in 1825, entitled one of its editions *The Rhode-Island American and Providence Gazette*.

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