



“The Tide Taken at the Flood”



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

By Caleb Troy Horton

I think that our labors 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 those labors 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 color. Such a constitution was finally adopted.¹

In his autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, he wrote a powerful reflection. He underscored the pivotal role of the Rhode Island African American community and abolitionist allies in securing a monumental victory for Black civil rights in 1842. This win was achieved through a state constitution that granted African American males the right to vote. Douglass’s reference to William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (act 4, scene 3, lines 218–224) when Brutus says to Cassius, “There is a tide in the affairs of men. Which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune,” further emphasizes that this enfranchisement was a triumph born from political adversity, shaped by the “labors” of Black and white supporters during the Dorr Rebellion—Rhode Island’s chartist revolution from 1841 to 1842.

New England is celebrated for its progressive and democratic ethos. Enlightened transcendentalists, romanticists, and abolitionists thrived in this charming and egalitarian region. However, the independent spirit of the devout pilgrims and gentleman farmers who dominated the late seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries eventually gave way to an industrial age defined by capital, profit, and labor-intensive production. Ironically, Rhode Island, home to Roger Williams—an advocate for religious tolerance and freedom—would become a cradle of inequality, slavery, and anti-democratic principles.²

The era of significant transformation began in 1793 when Samuel Slater introduced the factory system by establishing Slater’s [Textile] Mill in Pawtucket.³ Over time, profit began to overshadow idealism. Factory owners and landholders took measures to reinforce and sustain the stark divide between themselves and their workers. Those in the lowest tiers of society—

laborers, immigrants, and especially racial minorities—keenly felt this inequality, a reality that became increasingly pronounced by 1840.⁴

Since Rhode Island experienced a consistent rise in industrial power in 1793, a dominant class of property owners maintained a political monopoly over the state. Following Rhode Island's admission to the Union in 1790, some opposed adopting a new democratic constitution that aligned with the principles of the United States. Instead, they clung to the remnants of the Royal Charter of 1663. By 1840, it was clear that this charter, once suitable for the colonial era, needed revision. The “rotten borough” representation, known to the disenfranchised as the Rhode Island landholder system, gave the agricultural towns the most political power and representation in the Rhode Island State General Assembly. Such representation needed to be more equitable, since urban areas, such as Providence, had the state's largest populations. Also, under the charter, no white adult male who did not own \$134 in land could vote, meaning that in 1840, more than 60 percent of this demographic was disenfranchised. It was a serious divide for a state that was swiftly becoming the Union's largest per-capita industrial economy.⁵

Laborers and artisans were dissatisfied, and in 1840, they formed the Rhode Island Suffrage Association, including its political apparatus, the Rhode Island Suffrage/People's Party. Thomas Dorr, former Rhode Island State Representative (1834–1837), joined them in 1841 and later led their movement. On May 5, 1841, the Suffrage Association held a mass rally in Newport, and on July 5, leaders of the movement held a procession and convention in Providence to formally organize a “People's Convention,” to be held in the city, and begin drafting a new constitution on October 4 through late autumn, which sought to create a progressive, more democratic, and representative doctrine, known as the “People's Constitution.” Notwithstanding the Suffrage Association's decree in favor of universal male suffrage, the

convention excluded men of color from participating, and they were denied access after numerous attempts at arbitration. Eligible and non-eligible white men voted for the People's Constitution in a referendum on December 27–29, and reassembled on January 12, 1842, to tabulate the official results, which favored the new constitution.⁶

The Rhode Island General Assembly attempted to draft a new constitution to take up suffrage reform on their terms with their “Freemen’s Constitution” and convene a convention in February 1842 and a referendum the following month. Some in the legislature realized that their charter was archaic and, fearing the popularity of the People’s Constitution, sought to produce a democratic framework of their own. On March 21–23, 1842, eligible voters in Rhode Island did not approve the Freemen’s Constitution in a plebiscite. Instead, despite concerns regarding the legitimacy of its ratification, the People’s Constitution secured a majority approval, along with Thomas Dorr, to be elected governor on April 18, 1842, and sworn in on May 3.⁷

Sitting Rhode Island Governor Samuel Ward 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 of Whigs and conservative Democrats—began arrests on May 4, 1842. “Act in Relation to Offenses against the Sovereign Power of the State,” enacted the month prior on April 2, branded the People’s Constitution and the Rhode Island Suffrage Party as traitors to the State. The “Dorrites”—supporters of the Rhode Island Suffrage Association and Party—referred to this edict as the “Algerine Law,” an allusion to tyrannical rulers called Deys in Algiers, Africa, and to the oppressive laws they enacted upon their people.⁸

No longer able to seize power peacefully, Dorr and his followers turned to force. Starting an insurrection, the Dorrites made two unsuccessful attempts to take over the state government—one on May 17–18, 1842, at the State Arsenal on Cranston Street, Providence, and another on

June 28, 1842, in Chepachet, at the Battle of Acote's Hill. By the summer of 1842, a state militia of both white and Black men had gathered under the Law and Order banner to smash the Dorrite insurgency. Dorr and his supporters were defeated, broken, and arrested in the aftermath of the fray.⁹

In the rebellion's aftermath, the legal government of Rhode Island realized it needed to compromise to end hostilities. In September 1842, the Law and Order Party and its supporters met and drafted the Law and Order Constitution—which extended universal suffrage to all native adult males—to replace the charter (collecting where they had left off previously in March 1842 with their failed Freeman's Constitution). Most eligible voters in a referendum in November favored enfranchisement of Black males, primarily because African Americans had supported the party during the rebellion. Thus, Black male suffrage became a reality in Rhode Island.¹⁰

This early victory in African American civil rights was hardly the mark of white charity to oppressed people. Despite Black male enfranchisement in the aftermath of a riotous rebellion, could it be that Black and white relations in the state were improving? Perhaps, but more evidently, it was the wit, guile, and cunning of the Rhode Island African American community during the Ocean State's civil war.

Not that 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 aiding this civil rights victory. Perhaps a more brazen 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—with its agency in Providence—during this period of study, compared to the overwhelmingly large influx of Irish

immigrants, whites with nativist dispositions no longer perceived African Americans as a threat that they once were to them.¹²

These are mere subsidiaries of a broader theme. The Black community's voice and struggle for citizenship secured enfranchisement. This essay presents the narrative of the Rhode Island African American community and its faculty in Providence during the 1840s, exemplifying the community's struggle as a micro-historical contribution to the historiography of Black agency in the antebellum United States.

Robert J. Cottrol, in his monograph *The Afro-Yankees: Providence's Black Community in the Antebellum Era*, claims that the pre-American Civil War Black community in Providence was a local study of a bigger pattern, writing,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 have 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

Despite their humble beginnings, the events in Rhode Island from 1841 to 1842 and the Black populace's participation in a chartist rebellion in the antebellum United States transformed this group into an anomaly. During this period, the Providence Black community stood out for its distinctiveness. The Dorr Rebellion and its impact on the city's African Americans were extraordinary. Their participation in the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, their petition and boycott against the Suffrage Association, and their volunteering in local firefighting companies and militia regiments during the conflict were perhaps as revolutionary as the Dorrites' plight for universal white male suffrage.

Erik J. Chaput and Russell J. DeSimone, in “Strange Bedfellows: The Politics of Race in Antebellum Rhode Island,” detail the unique political alignment that granted Black men the right to vote during the Dorr Rebellion:

This legal triumph, 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

In his monograph, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, historian David Roediger argues that the African American community was viewed as an enemy rather than as members of a social compact.¹⁶ The Dorrites viewed them as a handicap to their cause for suffrage; hence, they rejected them from the People’s Convention, and ultimately barred them from the People’s Constitution by inserting a white-only clause.

Because of this repudiation, the community secured suffrage under the legal constitution (Law and Order Constitution) by aligning with the Law and Order Party. Thus, Black suffrage resulted from the benevolence of white authorities during the drafting of the Law and Order-backed constitution in September, and its approval by plebiscite in November 1842. While this may be partly true, the literature offers little consideration of whether the Black community attained suffrage under its own authority. The vast volume of African American history typically echoes the rhetoric of oppressed and burdened people liberated by historical events or by benevolent white benefactors.

The question of the Black man’s place within the context of the Great Experiment is a vehement inquiry. In New England, African American men sought to be respected as legal citizens of their communities and the state.¹⁷ Prior to the Dorr Rebellion, Rhode Island African American males were locked in a perpetual state of social inferiority—a *samsara* of Jim Crow. Despite a growing middle class, the African American population was denied in all modes of

civic involvement among whites. Black men still bore the humiliating status of a “boy,” which many of their southern brethren endured in the slave South. The community would not tolerate this social injustice.

The Foundation of a Community in Providence

In 1784, all enslaved people in Rhode Island were poised for gradual emancipation.¹⁸ By the turn of the century, most African Americans continued the occupations they once held when they were slaves (domestic servants, farmers, and laborers) and continued to depend on the white populace.¹⁹ Since their manumission, the Black populace took nearly forty years to develop significantly in the city.

By 1819, the formation of a community came to fruition during the construction of the African Union Meeting House on Providence’s East Side on Meeting Street. Moses Brown, a devout abolitionist and Quaker, bought the land and donated a small sum to construct the meeting house.²⁰ The Black community raised \$800 out of the total \$2,200 needed for the congregation.²¹ By 1821, the building was completed and served as both a school for young African American children and a place of worship for the community. Reverend Jacob Perry, a Black man, served as both a teacher and a preacher.²²

Despite the construction of the meeting house, the populace remained dispersed across the city, settling in areas that offered employment and affordable housing. Some settled on Meeting and nearby Spring Street. Others settled in the neighborhood surrounding Olney’s Lane (vicinity of modern-day University Heights) and west of that in the Addison Hollow neighborhood.²³ Despite the steady proliferation of the community, where 60.7 percent of African Americans became heads of households by 1820,²⁴ racial bigotry ensued, causing tension.

On October 18, 1824, Providence’s first major riot occurred at Addison Hollow, or, as city

residents called it, the “Hardscrabble.” The Hardscrabble (modern-day College Hill) was an impoverished neighborhood, and the impetus for the riot occurred the prior evening, when a Black man refused to step off the sidewalk for a white man. According to William J. Brown, an African American shoemaker and lifelong resident of Providence during the mid-nineteenth century,²⁵ “A great many colored people purchased land there, because it was some distance from 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 ignited the riot, noting that:

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

The neighborhood “drew a class of bad men and women,” explained Brown. Tensions between resentful poor whites and disenfranchised Blacks spurred the violence.

On September 21–24, 1831, a second riot occurred on Olney’s Lane in Providence’s “Snowtown” neighborhood (believed to have stood at the base of Smith Hill, where the state capitol and the Providence train station are located today) and had almost the same catalyst as the Hardscrabble Riot. The Olney’s Lane, or Snowtown, Riot began after a confrontation at Richard Johnson’s food stand in the basement of the Red House, a brothel on Olney’s Lane known for interracial clientele and frequent violence. As Johnson—a Black man—and a coworker were packing up due to the stand’s recent closure, five white sailors began aggressively harassing him. Following a brawl with the Black food-stand operator, the group of white sailors marched up Olney’s Lane and cornered a nearby Black-owned home, defying warnings to leave with the shout, “fire and be damned!” This confrontation resulted in a fatal

shootout that triggered a massive, days-long riot.²⁸ It was a rabble between angry lower-class whites and African Americans who had little choice but to live and work in Hardscrabble and Snowtown, and they were undoubtedly caught in the crosshairs.²⁹

Despite these setbacks, the community prospered well in the years that followed. In 1828, William J. Brown and his friends, Samuel Brown and Charles Cozzen, formed the Young Men's Union Fund Society. The society raised money to cover expenses and participate in funeral processions for African American families. The community also had its own militia, the African Greys.³⁰ Brown recalls their ostentatious uniforms, as "their commander, was dressed to represent an African chief, having on a red pointed cap, and carried an elephant's tusk in his hand" and "the other officers [carried] emblems, decked with lemons and oranges, representing the fruits of Africa".³¹ Also, in 1832, Reverend John Lewis, a Black minister, formed the Providence Temperance Society,³² and many of its members would join the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society in 1836.³³

The Black population had grown significantly. According to a census aggregate recorded for 1840, Rhode Island's "free colored" populace numbered 3,243.³⁴ In 1790, only 475 African Americans lived in Providence. By 1840, 1,302 Black people were living in the city.³⁵ Their numbers grew substantially, and by the decade of the 1830s, housing for Black residents in Providence became an issue within the community, and they began to buy property. In 1838, African Americans in Providence owned \$29,000 in real estate and \$1,200 in personal property. By 1840, African Americans owned \$34,200 worth of real estate and \$1,600 in personal property.³⁶ Elleanor Eldridge (born in Warwick, Rhode Island, in March 1784 and died circa 1845) was an African and Native American laundress, nurse, and entrepreneur who started a soap business in her twenties; she accumulated \$4,800 of real estate during her lifetime and rented to

Black tenants.³⁷ If a Black woman could acquire such assets despite the considerable adversities of the time, it stands to reason that the community would have the capacity to thrive alongside the white populace, particularly within the city.

As the community grew, bureaucrats noticed an increase in property ownership, with roughly half of Providence's Black populace owning homes. Never was it considered taxing the African American populace because, despite owning property, they did not have the right to vote under the standing charter, nor did anyone in authority believe that people of color could own as much property as they did. The state legislature concluded that its property should be taxed. On January 6, 1831, the community called for a gathering at the African Union Meeting House to draft a petition; among those who attended were prominent Providence Black leaders: Chairman George Waterman, Secretary James E. Ellis, George C. Willis, George McCarty,³⁸ and Alfred Niger³⁹ as committee members. Their concern was twofold: a per annum tax assessed without the right to representation, and the City of Providence's refusal to build a public school for children of color, as only taxes were paid for white children's public education. The Rhode Island General Assembly debated the petition and memorial, but it yielded no results. In January 1841, Alfred Niger and George McCarty submitted a similar petition to the Assembly on behalf of fifteen other local African American leaders, but it also proved futile, according to William J. Brown:

[The committee] believed taxation and representation went together; and they were unwilling to be taxed and not allowed to be represented. Some of the members of the house said it was perfectly right; 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 legislature's decision defeated the community's cause for citizenship. Even with their growing prosperity, ultimately, racial bigotry ruled the day and tore any hope of enfranchisement

by respectable means asunder. Brown recalled the lack of respect and representation his fellow African Americans received before the Dorr Rebellion, for “at that time the 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. The community’s “no taxation without representation” stance served as the battle cry that secured suffrage for Black men in subsequent events.

Suffrage Denied

According to the Rhode Island charter enacted in 1663, voting rights were restricted so that no white adult male without landholdings valued at least \$134 within the state was permitted to vote, thereby excluding over 60 percent of this demographic. In the spring of 1840, working and middle-class white men formed the Rhode Island Suffrage Association to address this inequity. Their preamble demanded that lawmakers cease treating landholding as a qualification for voting and that they institute universal suffrage for all adult white males living in the state. In November of that year, the Association began publishing a weekly newspaper, the *New Age and Constitutional Advocate*, to mobilize its supporters.⁴²

On May 5, 1841, the Suffrage Association held a mass rally in Newport, and on July 5, the leaders of the movement held a procession and convention in Providence to formally organize a People’s Convention, to draft a new constitution beginning on October 4 (the first Monday of the month) in the city. Conventioners sought to replace the old charter and had invited only white men to the convention. However, there was a loophole in their convocation, as Article VI of the organization’s preamble stated, “Any American citizen, living in Rhode Island, of the age of twenty-one years, may become a member of this Association,”⁴³ which does not, as it is written, appear to exclude on the basis of race or color of skin. On August 28, 1841, when election time

came to cast ballots for delegates for the People’s Convention to be held in October, members were flabbergasted when African Americans began participating and revoked their voting privileges. An incident occurred when a poll station warden, despite his ambivalence about allowing light-skinned people of color to vote, denied Alfred Niger—one of the community leaders who petitioned the Rhode Island General Assembly in January—and subsequently any other Black man the right to cast a ballot at a polling station in Providence’s Sixth Ward. The incident sparked a firestorm.

Political commentator Samuel Ames, brother-in-law and vehement opponent of Thomas Dorr, who went by the pen name “Town Born,” tarnished the Suffrage Association’s reputation in the *Providence Daily Journal*:

Much fault has been found with the Association by some cavillers, because upon their own principles they do not seem 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

Ames continued his commentary on the manner in which Niger and African Americans were turned away from the ballot box:

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

Town Born’s harangue concluded, addressing the “abolition gentlemen” involved:

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 hence the axiom, “that there must be exceptions to general truths” and that these, so far from invalidating, rather prove the general rule? Will they 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 deeply rooted 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 it is absolutely necessary should be respected and yielded to, at least for the time?—And will they not, 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 ameliorated 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 Ames was quick to attack the convention's unwillingness to allow African Americans to participate, even he was reluctant to allow Black men the right to citizenship. He favored a "gradual" inclusion of African Americans in a future amendment, given a time when they would have "evolved" enough intellectually to participate in local politics. Ames was mistaken. The African American populace refused to wait any longer. They demanded their enfranchisement.

The community fired back. They submitted a rebuttal under the pseudonym "A Friend to Equal Rights":

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 Ames's slight against the abolitionists, calling for them to promote the gradual inclusion of African Americans into political life, the article deconstructs Ames'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 accommodation to 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, consent to no compromise.—The suffrage movement cannot go back!⁴⁸

After the rebuttal, the response argues the indignation 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 prejudice bestowed on them was repugnant to the cause of the Suffrage Association.

On September 24, 1841, Alfred Niger stirred controversy once again after being rejected for the position of treasurer at an organizational session of the People's Convention's executive committee, bringing matters to a head. Although Niger was supported by a majority report, a minority report favored a white man, Thomas Greene. The delegate who put Niger on the ballot, whether or not known to Niger, was an anti-Black inclusionist named Mr. Field, who was attempting to root out abolitionist sympathizers.⁵⁰ Meeting minutes printed in the *Providence Daily Journal* revealed another anti-Black delegate named Mr. Russell, supporting Field's ploy, as "he 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 The affair served as a ruse to expose and subdue those who supported Black enfranchisement in the convention. Those in favor of nominating Niger were either ignored or backed down. The subject ended, and Mr. Greene became treasurer.⁵² The Black community ran out of patience.

On October 8, 1841, Alexander Crummell (appendix, fig. 1), an African American Episcopal priest, approached Thomas Dorr—a former representative in the Rhode Island General Assembly (1834–1837) who joined the Suffrage Association and later led their movement—with a petition he drafted on behalf of the grievances of the Black community. During the convention, Dorr presented the petition at the Masonic Hall in Providence (on the third story of the Market House, Market Square), where many participants believed it was an abolitionist ruse. Dorr assured the

conventioners that it was “written by Alexander Cromwell [sic], a respectable colored man of this city, of some education, signed by himself and five others, relating to their exclusion from the rights of suffrage, which they feared would be voted by this convention.”⁵³ Dorr then began reading the petition, addressing it “To the Free Suffrage Convention”:

GENTLEMEN: The remonstrance of the undersigned colored citizens of Rhode Island respectfully represents: 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

It was clear to the convention members that the community wanted representation. The following few paragraphs in the petition take it a step further. The community justifies their cause for inclusion in the People’s Constitution by citing 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

Arguing for citizenship, they debated that they were as nativist and Yankee-born, if not more, than a majority of the people attending the convention. The African American community was not alien to New England culture. Northern free Blacks assimilated themselves into Rhode Island culture much as the oldest of the Anglo-Saxon “Swamp Yankees.”⁵⁶ They had been cultivating in the state for nearly 200 years; their forefathers fought for independence during the American Revolution; they had no relation to African Americans from the South, and they came from a few homogenous families.⁵⁷ In their eyes, they deserved the same voting privileges as white native Rhode Islanders. They believed 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 Black community's strength served as a weapon against all dissenting voices. How could one argue against their ability to vote with such potent symbols of citizenship—amidst the odds of racial discrimination, no less? The African American populace embodied the true spirit of New England—progress:

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, do we regard this measure; and do therefore remonstrate against it.⁵⁹

The document, titled “Committee in Behalf of the People of Color,” was signed by the following Black leaders: Ichabod Northrup, a laborer living on Cushing Street; Samuel Rodman, a laborer living on Union Street; James Hazard, a clothes dealer at 49 South Main and 148 North Main Street; George J. Smith, a coachman residing on Power Street; and Ransom Parker living on Congdon Street—all addresses belonging to Providence.⁶⁰ Convention members then voted on whether to keep or remove the white-only clause from the People's Constitution.⁶¹ As the petition argues, the clause remained as a voter qualification in the constitution, for “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 at which he offers to vote, shall be an elector of all officers, who are elected, or may hereafter be made eligible by the People.”⁶²

Division arose over whether to remove the word *white* on Tuesday evening, October 5, a few days before the African American community presented their petition. The debate over

extending male suffrage culminated at a caucus meeting. According to a copy of the meeting minutes published in the *Providence Daily Journal*, “Dr. J[ohn] A. Brown introduced a resolution declaring that the right of Suffrage ought to be extended to colored people.”⁶³ “Major N[athaniel] Mowry” dismissed the resolution, “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 resolution was not rejected, but placed aside, with no votes taken upon it. On Thursday evening, October 7, it came to light once more. Mr. Atwell opposed discussing the topic, for “he hoped the Convention would not be made an arena for abolition discussion.”⁶⁵ Again, as the *Daily Journal* reports, “nothing was decided upon.”⁶⁶

On the following day, the subject could no longer be ignored when Thomas Dorr read the petition to the convention, and the delegates had to decide. Some wished to see the word *white* “stricken out” of the constitution; others wanted the word to stay. One delegate opposed reading the petition until the “report on that subject be taken up,” delaying the discussion further, but a motion to read the petition was approved by thirty-one to twenty-three.⁶⁷ Mr. B[enjamin] Arnold approved striking out the word *white* as a voting qualification in the constitution. He claimed that the Suffrage Association’s original preamble 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. Arnold was “interrupted by a gentleman from Smithfield,” who alluded that the petitioners were abolitionists who spoke for a “different body” and “not to be bound by their nets.” The chair concluded he was “out of order” and allowed Arnold to continue speaking. He defended himself: “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

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

Col. [Samuel H.] Wales presented a new question in the Black Man'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 Dorr 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

Welcome B. Sayles suggested that "it was endangering the whole project to strike out this word [*white*], 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 thunderous applause. A vote was then called to keep or remove the white-only clause from the constitution: eighteen were for removing it, and forty-six were for keeping it.⁷³

Dorr, genuinely sympathetic to the community's struggles, failed to persuade the convention to remove the white-only clause. He sought to appease the African American and abolitionist community by introducing Article 1, Section 14, into the People's Constitution, guaranteeing fair trials for fugitive slaves. This clause stated, "Any person in this State who may be claimed to be held to labor or service under the laws of any other State, territory, or District shall be entitled to a jury trial to ascertain the validity of such a claim." Additionally, Dorr sought to encourage patience within the Black community by including a provision

stipulating that the white-only clause would be revisited. Specifically, it mandated that in the first election following the establishment of the “People’s Government,” the issue would be presented to voters as a referendum, allowing them to decide its fate. Unfortunately for Dorr, these efforts proved fruitless: they neither won the Black populace’s favor nor that of abolitionist allies, and ultimately alienated federal government support for the Suffrage Association’s cause (appendix, fig. 3).

Meanwhile, in February 1842, the state legislature’s convention drafted its Freeman’s Constitution (a.k.a. Landholders’ Constitution) in East Greenwich. They attempted to revise the old charter by reducing the rotten borough representation and property-owning qualification for native-born white men. Between March 21–23, 1842, the Freeman’s Constitution was rejected by voters by a narrow margin of votes. Secretary of State Henry Bowen wrote, “By a small majority (676) the Constitution has been rejected. We have no doubt many voted against it because of their attachment to the freehold qualification. Some voted against it because colored people were not placed on the same platform with white men.”⁷⁴

At the time, the African American populace had no political representation. “Town Born” (Samuel Ames) responded to the Black exclusion, among other criticisms, in an address to the People’s Convention on October 4 and published on October 11 in the *Providence Daily Journal*, “you may ride along in the same tram of revolution with us if you please, but alas! It *must be* in the James Crow car!!!”⁷⁵ The Suffrage Association had not realized what they had done. They made an enemy out of the Black community, and they would thwart their rebellion in the events to follow.

The Community Fights Back

Alexander Crummell and the five petitioners were not alone: they had a formidable ally in the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society. In mid-November 1841, the Society agreed to petition for Black suffrage at the People's Convention.⁷⁶ On November 11–13, 1841, during its sixth annual meeting at Franklin Hall (located inside the Market House building in Market Square, South Main Street, Providence), participants agreed to petition against the white-only clause. An excerpt printed in the *Suffrage Examiner*—the Society's newspaper, specifically established to attack the Suffrage Association—reported:

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

Alfred Niger participated, along with abolitionists across the Northeast and members of the American Anti-Slavery Society, including William Lloyd Garrison, the female abolitionist Abby Kelley,⁷⁸ Charles Lenox Remond, and Frederick Douglass, among others. The local cause of enfranchising Black men united them all. Attendees at the meeting, many of them African Americans, raised over \$1,000 in donations to fund a statewide speaking tour to encourage Rhode Island voters to protest the white-only clause in the People's Constitution and reject it.⁷⁹

On the twelfth, the Black suffrage question came to a head when John Brown, president of the Suffrage Association, who had advocated Black enfranchisement at the People's Convention, confronted the abolitionists during their discussions. Brown tried to defend the white-only clause by advocating for the gradual inclusion of African Americans in a future amendment. William Lloyd Garrison and Douglass, among others, denounced Brown's claims, and the Rhode Island

Anti-Slavery Society officially declared that they would no longer support the Suffrage Association.⁸⁰ The *New Age and Constitutional Advocate*, the Suffrage Association's newspaper, slammed the abolitionists for failing to support the People's Constitution. The *Suffrage Examiner* disavowed the Association and published counter-editorials. In a letter submitted to the *Providence Daily Journal*, George Clarke, Secretary of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, responded to the Association's newspaper:

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 the 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

Whenever the Society held a meeting, incensed 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" at the Town House in Providence—a meeting house once located at present-day 250 Benefit Street, site of the Providence County Courthouse—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[d]."⁸² The disturbance most likely came from anti-Black inclusive Suffrage Association supporters, who sent their kids to disturb the meeting's delegations. The response to the editor further documented the harassment of the meetings in the city and throughout northern Rhode Island:

What kind of men were those of whom Abby Kell[e]y 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 newspaper continued, and 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

The debate lapsed when the Suffrage Party held its referendum and approved the People’s Constitution on December 29, 1841. In the Spring of 1842, suffragists across the state elected Thomas Dorr as governor on April 18, and he was sworn in on May 3. Sitting Governor Samuel Ward King refused to recognize it, arguing that the election was illegal.⁸⁵ On May 4, 1842, Governor King began a series of sweeping arrests, invoking the “Act in Relation to Offenses against the Sovereign Power of the State,” passed a month prior on April 2, in anticipation of Dorr’s election, declaring 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 power but the existing government—colloquially referred to as “Algerine Law” by the Dorrites.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 African American community would not support the insurrection. After enduring numerous injustices, they fought alongside Governor King and his Law and Order Party. On the night of May 17–18, 1842, Dorr and his followers attempted to seize the State Arsenal in Providence, on Cranston Street. The attack initially failed when the Dorrites’ old Revolutionary War-era cannon misfired, prompting them to retreat. After the attack on the arsenal, Governor

King called for more volunteers to defeat the insurgency. The *Providence Daily Journal* described that “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 built their renown by joining the militia, policing the city, and manning the fire companies during the onset of the rebellion.

Nearly 200 Black men attempted to form two militia companies. They then tried to elect their officers. The first nominee was Thomas Howland; the second was James Hazard, considered the wealthiest African American in Providence; and the last was a man whom William J. Brown endearingly refers to as Peterson the Barber. Brown does not elaborate on the details of his background other than “he could not boast of money or influence, but had a good education, and thought that he should have the place on that account” to be elected an officer.⁸⁸ When he addressed them, Peterson had a peculiar effect on the company:

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 promise he made to manumit his segregated Black soldiers who fought under him at the Battle of New Orleans (January 8, 1815). On this note, they agreed that integrating themselves into white regiments would better serve their interests. That way, they could demonstrate their capacity to fulfill their civic duty, as well as that of their white colleagues, and prove that they could work harmoniously with whites. Their plan

succeeded. The *Emancipator and Free American*, an abolitionist newspaper, reported the affair:

[Black men 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 interest of the great cause of regulated civil liberty which they were now called to defend.⁹⁰

As Governor King gathered his forces, Dorr and his “People’s Army” prepared to defend themselves against their Law and Order foes. On June 28, 1842, the Dorrites fortified themselves on Acote’s Hill in Chepachet, Rhode Island. Three thousand five hundred men, including 200 Black volunteers, marched on to attack the Dorrites. Some African Americans volunteered to operate the Providence fire companies while the men were on campaign, reported the *Providence Daily Journal*:

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 Harriet Whipple Green McDougall, in her tract detailing the conflict, *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

At the Battle of Acote’s Hill, Governor King’s forces defeated and routed the Dorrites. Law and Order seized the day. The Black community’s contribution was not overlooked: their participation impacted all who thwarted Dorr’s rebellion. The *New York Courier and Enquirer* praised their actions:

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 the service which did more soldierly duty, or showed itself more devotedly patriotic.⁹³

On July 6, 1842, a Black marching band played in a victory parade on Smith’s Hill in Providence. The Law and Order soldiers provided them with captured instruments from Acote’s Hill.⁹⁴ With the rebellion thwarted, the Law and Order Party duly noted the community’s service. The Dorrites were not pleased. Following the conflict, a loyal Dorr soldier approached William J. Brown and told him that African Americans had made them lose the war. Brown asked him why they had retreated from the battle at Acote’s Hill. He retorted, somewhat hyperbolically, “Who do you suppose was going to stay there when the Algerines [a.k.a. Law and Order forces] were coming up with four hundred bull niggers?”⁹⁵

Black Male Suffrage Achieved

By September 1842, Governor King and the Law and Order Party had begun drafting a new state constitution in the Old Colony House in Newport, and had resumed work where they had left off six months earlier, when they attempted the Freemen’s Constitution. This time, they could not bar Black participation or ignore the issue of African American suffrage.

“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 of them live; but it is to their credit, that here, where they are most numerous, the feeling towards them is most liberal,”⁹⁶ reported the *Providence Daily Journal*. Public opinion now commended Black men for their service and efforts to maintain “Law and Order,” emphasizing their willingness to serve a government that had neglected them for decades.⁹⁷

The convention’s meeting minutes report a similar sentiment. On September 15, 1842,

delegates debated extending suffrage to Black men on the same terms as eligible white males.⁹⁸ On September 21, the convention received three petitions, signed by 183 people from Providence, opposing a white male-only qualification in the constitution.⁹⁹ On September 29, delegates resolved to exclude the word *white* as a voting qualification from the constitution and put the vote to the people on whether it should be inserted, which passed in a vote of forty-five to fifteen.¹⁰⁰

The Law and Order Convention ended on November 4, 1842, and it was now up to the citizens to extend suffrage to Black men. On November 7, 1842, a draft of the constitution was published that left a blank where the word *white* would typically appear as a voting qualification:¹⁰¹

[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 men could vote on it also, as “all 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 on the question of the insertion of the word *white* in said section” of the constitution.¹⁰³

Black voter turnout would help swing the amendment in their favor.¹⁰⁴

On November 14, 1842, the *Providence Daily Journal* printed the qualifications for would-be eligible voters:

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 would grant universal suffrage to all “native-born” (excluding Narragansett Indians) and free adult men who could pay a one-dollar poll tax. This tax was better than the \$134 property qualification and more progressive than the old property restriction charter. The *Providence Daily Journal* published a comparative article on other state constitutions to demonstrate the liberality of the new state constitution. Whether this was a publicity stunt to ease angry Dorrites is open to interpretation. Regardless, African Americans in New York could not vote unless they held a \$250 freehold and had resided in the state for three years. In New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and the Southern states, Black men could not vote, and these states had a freehold or tax qualification.¹⁰⁶

On November 21–23, 1842, Rhode Islanders voted in the referendum for the constitution and an amendment to extend suffrage to Black men. On November 22, the first votes were reported in. The First counted were Providence’s ballots. The First Ward voted seventy-nine for the admission of Blacks and three against; the Second Ward voted 194 for and nine against; the Third Ward voted 123 for and twenty-two against; the Fourth Ward voted 185 for and two against; the Fifth Ward voted 138 for and eight against; and the Sixth Ward voted ninety-six for and seven against, equating in the city 815 for and fifty-one against the admission of Blacks. The city and town votes went as follows: North Providence’s votes did not come in; Johnston voted fifty-two for and three against reported; Foster voted thirty-six for and seventy-three against; Scituate voted thirty for and eighty against; Bristol voted 107 for and thirty-four against; Warren voted twenty-eight for and sixty-two against; Barrington voted eleven for and six against; in Newport, Middletown, and Portsmouth it is reported that “nearly all [were] for admitting the blacks”—an aggregate [also reported the next day] to change for Aquidneck Island by the end of

reporting. Tiverton voted seventy for and thirteen against; Little Compton voted twenty-three for and two against. In total, 1,072 were in favor of the admission of Blacks, and 324 were opposed.¹⁰⁷ The community's polls were holding steady. An anonymous letter printed in the *Providence Daily Journal* kept up enthusiasm:¹⁰⁸

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 November 23, the reporting gained momentum. Providence's First Ward voted 108 for and four against; the Second Ward voted 237 for and thirteen against; the Third Ward voted 168 for and twenty-four against; the Fourth Ward voted 231 for and three against; the Fifth Ward voted 194 for and eleven against; and the Sixth Ward voted 143 for and ten against—a total in Providence of 1,081 for and sixty-five against extending suffrage to Black males. The city and town ballots went as follows: North Providence cast ninety-seven votes in favor and three against; Cumberland did not record any votes; Smithfield cast 116 votes in favor and thirty against; Johnston's aggregate did not change; Cranston cast twenty-six votes in favor and eight against; Foster cast thirty-six votes in favor and seventy-three against; Scituate cast thirty votes in favor and eighty against; Bristol cast 107 votes in favor and thirty-four against; Warren cast twenty-eight for and sixty-two against; Barrington cast sixteen votes in favor and eleven against; and Coventry did not report any votes. West Greenwich voted two for and five against; Warwick voted seventy-two for and seventy-seven against; East Greenwich's votes were not recorded; Exeter did not report any votes for the admission of Black men but recorded forty-three votes against it; North Kingstown recorded forty votes in favor and thirty-three against; South Kingstown did not report any votes; Charlestown cast one vote in favor and twenty-three against; Westerly did not report any votes; Tiverton's aggregate did not change; Little Compton's

aggregate also did not change. The total number of votes (since November 23) tallied to 1,797 for and 565 against.¹¹⁰

On November 26, the *Providence Daily Journal* published another nearly complete list of votes by cities and towns, except for a few rural towns that reported later. Providence's total vote was 1,384 for and 109 against; North Providence voted 163 for and eight against; Cumberland voted 199 for and seven against; Smithfield voted 302 for and fifty-four against; Johnston voted 131 for and thirteen against; Cranston voted sixty for and fourteen against; Scituate voted fifty-two for and ninety-eight against; Newport voted 365 for and 235 against; Middletown voted thirty-four for and thirteen against; Portsmouth voted seventy for and twelve against; Tiverton voted one-hundred for and twenty-one against; Little Compton's aggregate did not change; Bristol's votes are illegible; Warren voted forty-nine for and 119 against; Barrington voted twenty for and seventeen against; Coventry voted 206 for and twenty-one against; West Greenwich's aggregate did not change; Warwick voted 111 for and 113 against; East Greenwich voted eighty-eight for and twenty-seven against; North Kingstown voted fifty-three for and seventy-two against; South Kingstown voted fifty-five for and 167 against; Charlestown voted two for and fifty-six against; Westerly voted thirty-two for and sixty-seven against; Exeter voted 126 for and two against.¹¹¹ Richmond's votes were recorded later, with four for and sixty-five against; Hopkinton's were recorded later, with thirty-six for and twenty-seven against. The total number of reported votes for the admission of eligible Black males in the constitution was 3,845, and the total number against was 1,412.¹¹² In a separate vote, the constitution was ratified 7,024 to fifty-one.

Rhode Island African American men were now enfranchised. "The vote of the colored people was unanimous for a new constitution," William J. Brown recalled.¹¹³ Not all were happy

with their political ascension. When William J. Brown went to cast his vote, he was approached by a Dorrite who exclaimed, “Algerines have got the niggers to help them out, and I will not stand it. I think it 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 Black community could enjoy the fruits of its labor on May 2, 1843, when the General Assembly enacted the Law and Order Constitution. At last, they achieved political agency.

The Aftermath

Black and supportive white men’s ballots helped turn the vote for the amendment in their favor to remove the word *white* as a clause for enfranchisement. The African American community had come a long way since its humble beginnings at the turn of the nineteenth century, especially in Providence. The question begs an answer: how did the community exercise its agency to advance its suffrage cause, particularly in light of the factors that contributed to its extension?

The Irish were a catalyst for the fruition of Black male suffrage. A large number of the Suffrage Association’s followers were immigrants.¹¹⁵ They were the single most significant threat to political power in New England beginning in the mid-1840s. During this period, the nativist movement gained momentum and peaked by the 1850s. Their platform was anti-immigration and anti-Catholic, and many members of the Whig Party were sympathetic and later joined the movement when the American Party was established in 1854. The last thing they desired was universal suffrage for immigrants. The Dorr Rebellion fueled nativist hatred toward the twenty-three million immigrants, primarily Irish, who would arrive in the United States between 1845 and 1855.¹¹⁶ In Rhode Island, the Law and Order Party was affiliated with the

broader national Whig Party,¹¹⁷ whose platform was strong centralization, internal improvements, and tariffs on imports to promote domestic growth and the sale of U.S.-manufactured goods, and although not officially, anti-immigration. Voters, albeit legal ones, in Rhode Island, the most industrialized state in the Union,¹¹⁸ predominantly favored Whig candidates. Extending political power to the Irish and their Suffrage Association affiliates would have dismantled the state's hegemony.

African Americans 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”—warned of the dangers of Catholicism and Irish immigration. Ironically, the article appears alongside one promoting the liberality of the new Law and Order Party Constitution in November 1842 and its respect for the rights of “colored people.”¹¹⁹ U.S. Congressman Elisha Potter wrote in a private letter to Former Rhode Island Governor and U.S. Senator John Brown Francis that Law and Order delegates “would rather have the negroes vote than the damned Irish” (both men were elected to their seats by the Law and Order Party).¹²⁰

This argument is still insufficient to stand on its own as the sole catalyst for Black male suffrage in Rhode Island. Bigoted whites would have never compromised by letting Blacks vote, so the Irish could not. As previously observed in this essay, old prejudices died hard, as they did in January 1831 and 1841, when the state legislature denied enfranchisement to the Black populace, even as it ordered them to pay taxes. State lawmakers preferred to remove African Americans' taxes rather than allow them to vote. The Law and Order Convention delegates could have voted down an amendment extending Black male suffrage, as they would have when they unilaterally imposed a natural-born voting qualification in the Law and Order Constitution. They did not, which raises the question: why the change of heart?

The abolitionists played a significant role in achieving Black male suffrage. While most abolitionists historically voted Whig, the party itself was deeply divided between two main ideological factions: the “Cotton” Whigs and the “Conscience” Whigs. The Cotton Whigs were a conservative branch composed of Southern slaveholders and Northern businessmen. The Northern faction relied heavily on slave-picked cotton for their textile manufacturing and business ventures; consequently, they cared little for abolition and felt threatened by the anti-slavery movement. Conversely, the Conscience Whigs were abolitionists and intellectuals who actively fought for the eradication of slavery and the political advancement of people of color.¹²¹ The Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, comprising whites and Blacks, collaborated towards the same “Conscience” platform. The *Suffrage Examiner* reported the sentiment during the Society’s sixth convention: “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” were united under the cause of Black liberation.¹²² The Anti-Slavery Society did indeed align with the Law and Order Party, and most regarded themselves as party members of that statewide moderate Whig establishment.

Despite the Dorrites’ bitter claims, the African American community was not used as a political instrument for the Law and Order Party. Frances Harriet Whipple Green McDougall (a Dorrite), in her tract *Might and Right*, complained that “they took advantage of the situation of the colored population” and were “without one particle of friendliness towards the colored race.” Asserting, “they made colored men voters, not because it was *their right*, but because *they needed their help*.”¹²³ Given the publication date of the tract in 1844, a few years after the Dorr uprising, this interpretation of the treatment of Blacks by the Law and Order party is untrue. Frances was a Suffrage Association supporter. After the rebellion, she fled to Connecticut with her husband in exile; therefore, her supposition regarding the conflict is biased. There is no

convincing evidence that the Law and Order Party ever needed the Black community on their side. As the documentation shows throughout this essay, the Dorrites essentially gave the Black populace to them. Frances mentions little of the Suffrage Association's immense prejudice towards the community: from the initial rejection of Black participation at the People's Convention to the dismissal of Alfred Niger as treasurer, the denial of their petition, the discriminatory meeting minutes printed in the *Providence Daily Journal*, and last but not least, the many occasions when the Dorrites crashed the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society's meetings. Hypocritically, the Suffrage Association was "without one particle of friendliness towards the colored race" (appendix, fig. 2.1, 2.2, & 2.3). Despite Thomas Dorr's attempt to include measures to amend the white-only clause in a future referendum and to extend fair trials to run-away slaves, one man's actions could no longer stall and appease the community (appendix, fig. 3).¹²⁴ Ultimately, it was the Rhode Island Suffrage Association who were the ones to alienate the community and its abolitionist allies, not the Law and Order Party.

Subtracting Irish discrimination, white abolitionist benevolence, and purported Law and Order Party manipulation, allowing Black men to vote did not threaten the hegemony of Rhode Island's established government: the population was too small. The statistical data on the Black population in Providence showed a decline in growth from 1.7 percent per year to 0.25 percent per year between 1850 and 1860. In 1845, Black males accounted for 41.4 percent of the African American population in Providence. Compared to the 1840 aggregate of 1,302 Black people living in the city,¹²⁵ and the total African American state population of 3,243 people in 1840—a 2.98 percent proportion of the total state population—it was too insubstantial for the legislature to consider denying enfranchisement to Black men in fear of creating a new oppositional voting bloc. In total, despite growing property ownership, the Black population in Rhode Island shrank

by nearly a percentage point between 1830 and 1840, even as the state's total population grew.¹²⁶ Nevertheless, it was never solely about numbers. The Law and Order Party was genuinely sympathetic to the community's grievances. The press and party members frequently commended the community for its assistance during the rebellion, as noted throughout this essay. As a result of the deal, the Law and Order Party and their Whig affiliates acquired a new political ally.¹²⁷ An editorial in the *Providence Daily Journal* surmised the situation, "Besides, they [African Americans] are not numerous, and, judging from past 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 the *white* [Irish] 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

Among all these circumstances, none is as striking as the assertiveness of the African American community, which demanded that their voices be heard and made enfranchisement a reality. A few years before the rebellion, African Americans displayed their agency by insisting on "no taxation without representation" and petitioning the Rhode Island General Assembly to expand suffrage. In response to their exclusion from the People's Convention, they and abolitionist allies published their grievances in the *Providence Daily Journal*, cited their nativity, citizenship, strong community ties, and dedication to republican values in a petition addressed to the convention, and engaged the public to oppose the white-only clause in the People's Constitution through the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society. Men of color answered Governor King's call to arms by mustering their able-bodied to march shoulder to shoulder with fellow white male citizens and to operate the firefighting companies while the militia was on campaign. Ultimately, it was the African American populace who organized and sent eligible Black men to the polls.

As Frederick Douglass wrote, “It was the ‘tide,’ ‘taken at the flood,’ ” evocative of a scene in William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*. In a moment of *carpe diem*, the Rhode Island African American community had restored Black manhood and dignity through the attainment of citizenship—the right to vote; they had seized their day:

There is a tide in the affairs of men.
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

Julius Caesar, act 4, scene 3, lines 218–224

Appendix

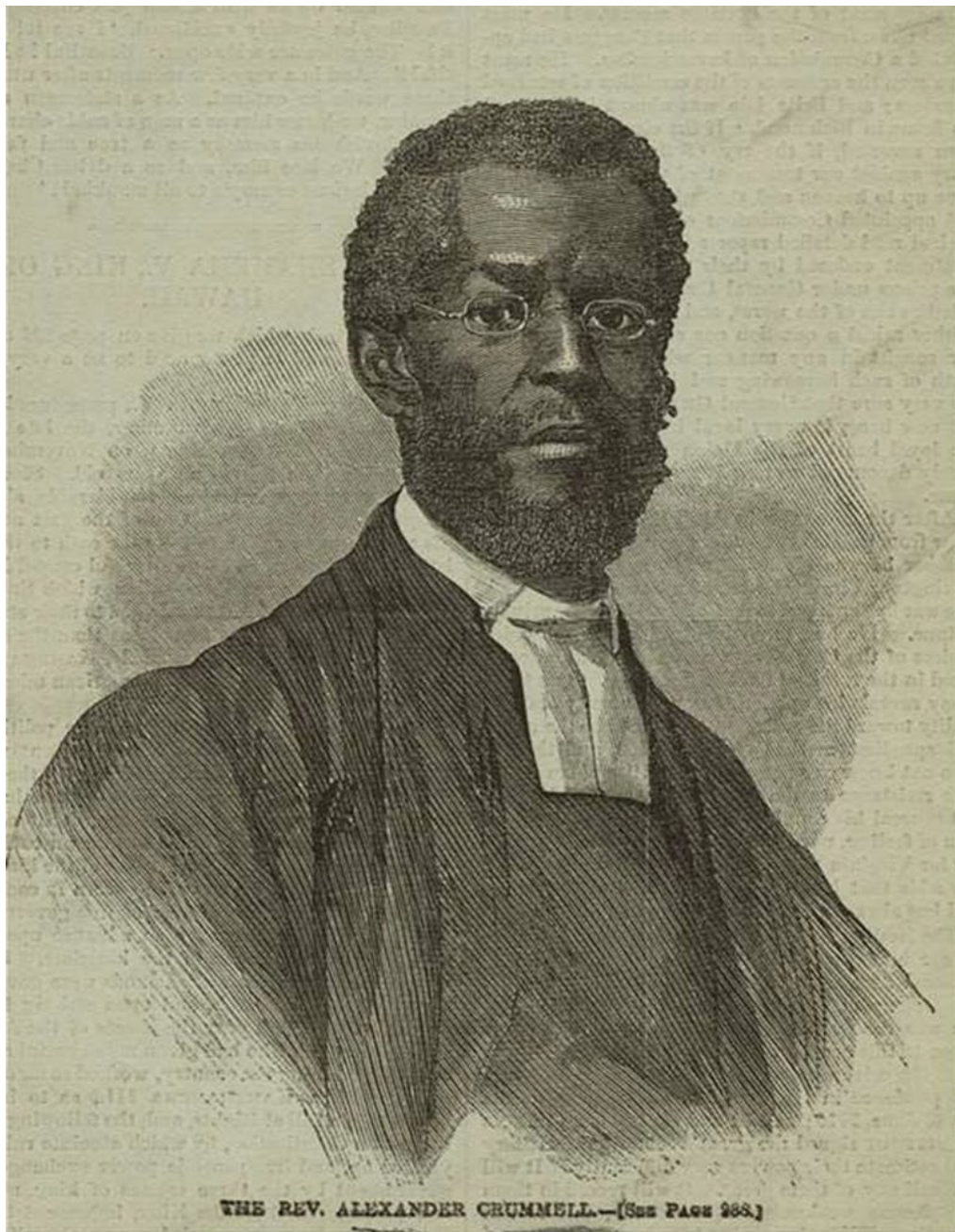


Fig. 1. Alexander Crummell (March 3, 1819–September 10, 1898), an avid abolitionist and proponent of Black nationalism who served the African American populace in Providence. He was an Episcopal minister at Christ Church and a professor of theology. Crummell helped draft the petition for the “colored community” to the People’s Convention in October 1842. He claimed he secured the community’s “political rights in Rhode Island”: “the 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.”¹²⁹Alexander Crummell, in *Harper’s Weekly*, April 4, 1866. Image courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence, RI.

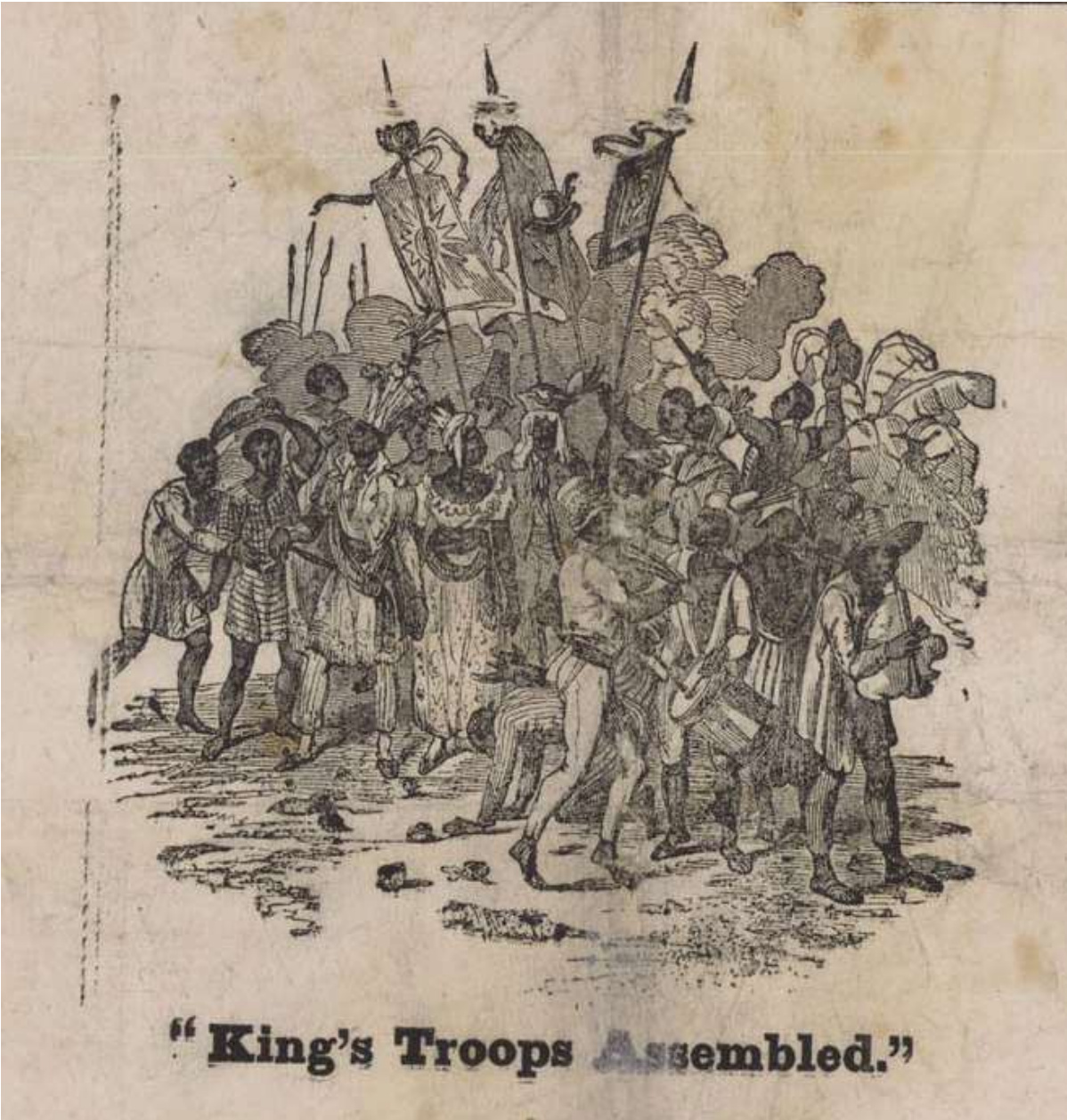
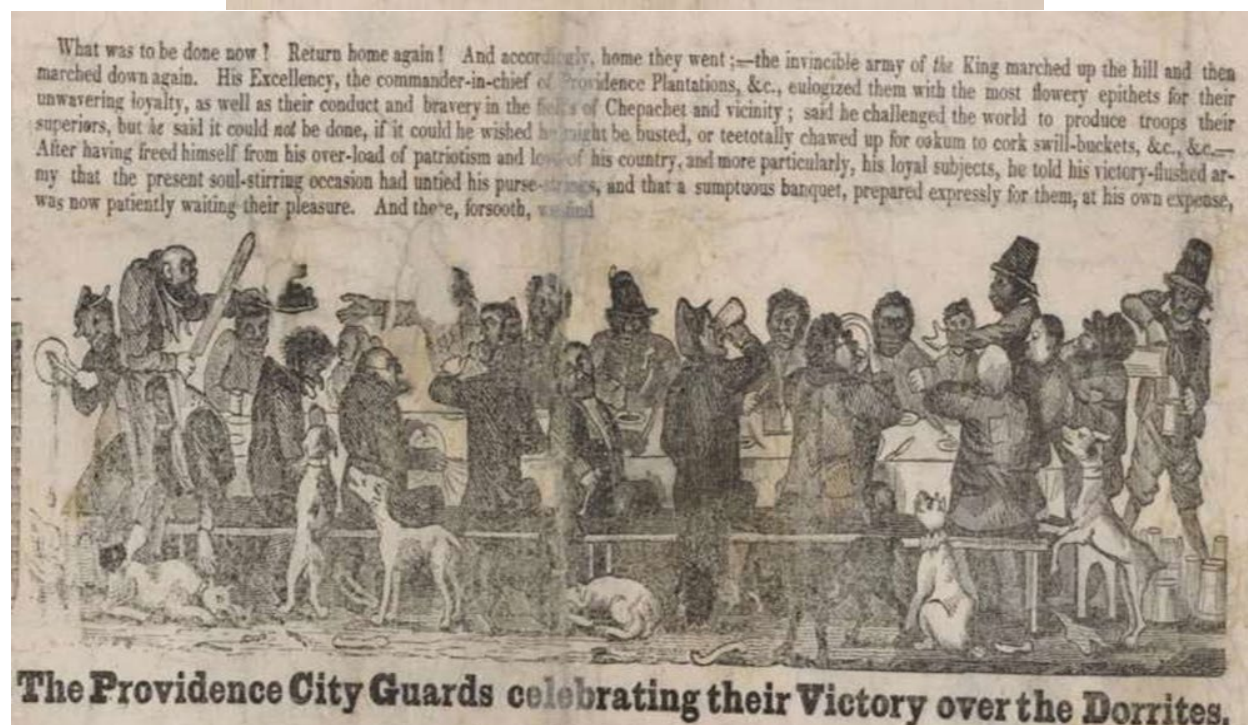
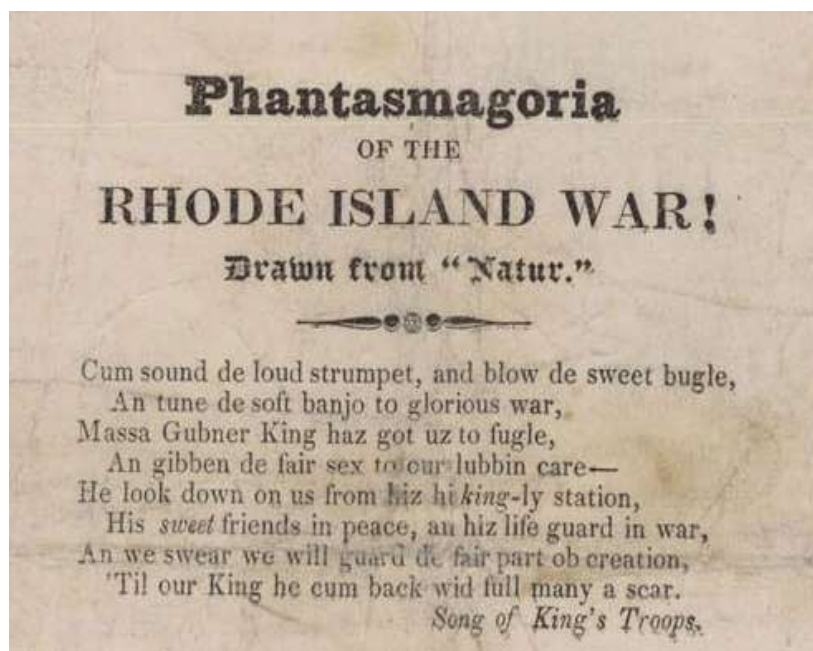


Fig. 2.1. This broadside depicts the mustering of Black soldiers who fought on the side of Governor King and the Law and Order Party. A Dorrite propaganda piece, the cartoon resembles a motley group of Southern enslaved individuals, akin to a classic Sambo stereotype. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence, RI.



Figs 2.2 and 2.3. The "Song of the King's Troops" is another mockery of the African American militiamen who fought against the Suffrage Association during the rebellion. The song's style is a demeaning minstrel show tune. The image "The Providence City Guards Celebrating their Victory over the Dorrites" depicts Black militiamen, firemen, and city watchmen feasting savagely. Courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence, RI.



Fig. 3. "Trouble in the Spartan Ranks" is a political cartoon printed shortly after the rebellion's conclusion. The scene depicting Thomas Dorr (top right) features the so-called cloven foot of abolitionism, which many in both the North and the South believed was a ruinous group that sought to divide the nation. The caption above Dorr refers to jury trials for fugitive slaves stated in Article 1, Section 14, of the People's Constitution: "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." Ironically, the insertion of this article into the People's Constitution did not garner support from the African American and abolitionist communities and simultaneously alienated Dorr from federal support. White Southerners were gripped by an intense fear that Dorr would spread his doctrine of the right of the people to alter or abolish their form of government across the country. They believed that Dorr's actions would incite slave revolts. This apprehension was so intense that it even alienated any support Dorr could have gained from President John Tyler during the rebellion. Tyler, convinced by Southern legislators like John C. Calhoun and William Preston, saw Dorr as a radical abolitionist whose actions would set a dangerous precedent for all state constitutions and upend the fugitive slave laws of the United States. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

Endnotes

¹ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass. Written by Himself. His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time* (Hartford: Park Publishing Co., 1882), 274–75.

² For more information on New England’s transformation into an industrial and capitalist society, see Paul Rivard, *A New Order of Things: How the Textile Industry Transformed New England* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2002). Rivard’s monograph is an excellent study of the development of an economically privileged society in New England during the Industrial Revolution. His emphasis on the social inequities between laborers and factory owners in the mid-nineteenth century is also relevant to the Dorr Rebellion and to the laboring class’s struggle for equality.

³ William G. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1986), 117–22.

⁴ *Providence Directory, 1841* (Providence: H.H. Brown, 1841), 181–187, Providence City Archives, Providence, RI; The city directory contains a section titled, “Colored People.” This section lists a residence, sometimes the place of business, and the occupation. None of the listings, however, includes Black factory laborers. As elaborated in Rivard’s monograph, employers preferred to hire non-landholding whites and immigrant workers, and these workers refused to work alongside Black laborers, which left little opportunity for African Americans to pursue careers in the textile industry during the early to mid-nineteenth century. It is also possible that there were some Black factory workers, but they were misclassified as laborers in the directory. The following number of occupations are listed:

- Baker: 1
- Barbers: 14
- Business owners: 9
- Carpenter: 1
- Clergy: 2
- Coachman: 1
- Cooks: 3
- Draymen: 20
- Engineer: 1
- Gardeners: 2
- Laborers: 85
- Livery: 1
- Livery stable: 1
- Mariners: 27
- Shoemakers: 3
- Teacher: 1
- Waiters: 8

⁵ Arthur M. Mowry, “Chapter VI: The Charter Criticized,” *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,” 107–18.

⁷ Mowry, “Chapter X: The Freeman’s Constitution,” 119–26.

⁸ Mowry, “Chapter XI: The Elections,” 128–38; “Chapter XIII: Rival Governments,” 162.

⁹ McLoughlin, *Rhode Island*, 134–35.

¹⁰ For a more thorough synopsis of 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 Rhode Island abolitionism, please refer to Deborah B. Van Broekhoven, *The Devotion of These Women: Rhode Island in the Antislavery Network* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

¹² Charles Hoffmann and Tess Hoffmann, *Brotherly Love: Murder and the Politics of Prejudice in Nineteenth-Century Rhode Island* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 22. From 1840 through 1854, Providence's Irish population increased exponentially: Irish immigrants made up twenty percent of Providence's population by 1854.

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

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁵ Erik J. Chaput and Russell J. DeSimone, "Strange Bedfellows: The Politics of Race in Antebellum Rhode Island," *Common-Place* 10 (2009): 3, <https://commonplace.online/article/strange-bedfellows/>

¹⁶ See David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of American Working Class* [Revised Edition] (New York: Verso, 1999), 58.

¹⁷ For more information on theses of conceptualizations of Black manhood in the nineteenth 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* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Rhode Island implemented a phased approach to emancipation. Any child born after March 1, 1784, was not allowed to be held in slavery. However, there was uncertainty about the status of children born to mothers who were still enslaved. Under the law, masters were obligated to provide for these children until they reached the ages of twenty-one for males and eighteen for females.

¹⁹ This statistic comes from a graph cited in Cottrol, *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* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2006), 26. William J. Brown refers to Moses Brown's contribution to the construction of the African Union Meeting House: "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 [yourself] a lot, suitable for your purpose, and I will pay for it."

²¹ Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 58.

²² Brown, *Life of William J. Brown*, 27.

²³ Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 52–53.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁵ William J. Brown was a shoe cobbler and a lifelong resident of Providence. Born in 1814, he wrote an autobiography in Providence and published it in 1883. His memoir is an invaluable source on the daily lives of the Providence Black community in antebellum Rhode Island, and is especially relevant as an eyewitness account of the Dorr Rebellion (1841–1842). See Brown, *Life of William J. Brown*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 50. The original location of Hardscrabble is believed to have developed north around Olney Street (formerly Olney's Lane) and North Main Street, rising up what was called Camp Hill or Constitution Hill. However, the exact site of Snowtown remains unclear due to historical ambiguities and a lack of detailed maps. It is generally thought that Snowtown was located west of Hardscrabble, west of the Moshassuck River, and encompassed Smith Hill. Encompassing where the Rhode Island State House sits today, stretching down south to the edge of the old

Great Salt Cove (now Waterplace Park and the Providence Place Mall).

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): 52–53.

²⁹ Ibid., 57–58. Sullivan argues that interpreting the Olney’s Lane Riot solely as a racial conflict oversimplifies the historical reality. Although racism was present in Jacksonian Rhode Island, the initial clash grew out of the rough, often-violent culture of sailors rather than a targeted racial attack, especially since some white sailors helped defend the brothel. The concentration of people of color in impoverished areas—caused by economic marginalization—meant they were more likely to live near places of vice, but the rioters attacked only known brothels, not Black residences generally. After the riot, authorities treated the Black community relatively fairly, prosecuting only one man for a lesser charge and applying no new discriminatory laws. The text concludes that while people of color were inevitably involved due to their presence in the district, race was incidental rather than fundamental to the riot’s causes.

³⁰ Brown, *Life of William J. Brown*, 46–47.

³¹ Ibid., 47.

³² Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 62.

³³ See *Proceedings of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Convention, Held in Providence, on the 2d, 3d, and 4th of February, 1836* (Providence: H. H. Brown, 1836).

³⁴ Edwin M. Snow, *Report Upon the Census of Rhode Island, 1865; with the Statistics of the Population, Agriculture, Fisheries, and Manufactures of the States* (Providence: Providence Press Company, State Printers, 1867), xlv.

³⁵ Ibid., xlv–xlvi.

³⁶ Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 126.

³⁷ Elleanor Eldridge was a free Black woman. She sued to reclaim a house on Spring Street in Providence that was seized from her on account of a \$240 defaulted loan she could not pay due to an illness she contracted, resulting in her temporary inability to work. In 1838, she co-wrote *the biography Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* with novelist Frances Harriet Whipple Green McDougall to raise funds for her court battle to recover her property. She eventually had to buy her property back at a heavily inflated price of \$2,700. See Elleanor Eldridge, *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge* (Providence: B.T. Albro, 1838).

³⁸ George Waterman joined the Freewill Baptist Church in 1840, located on Pond Street, Providence, and was an officer of the church. Eventually, he became a deacon. See Robert J. Cottrol, ed., *From African to Yankee: Narratives of Slavery and Freedom in Antebellum New England* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1999), 157; When Moses Brown sold the land for the African Union Meeting House, George McCarty served on the initial organizational committee. See Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 58; George C. Willis was a member of the African Union Meeting House and a proponent of temperance. Ibid., 58, 69; Willis lived at 43 Benevolent Street. See *Providence Directory, 1841*, 187.

³⁹ Alfred Niger was born in 1797 in the Old Saybrook area of Connecticut. He moved to Providence and worked as a barber at 87 High, Spring Street—once within the boundaries of Fricker, Westminster, Cahir, and Broad Street, at the site of Central and Classical High School—from 1824 to his death in 1862. Niger began his career in

Black civil rights in the 1830s. He represented Providence at the 1830 National Colored Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison hired Niger as an agent for the newspaper *The Liberator* in Rhode Island. In Providence, Niger also served as an agent for *Freedom's Journal*, the first African American-owned newspaper in the United States. Niger joined the New England Anti-Slavery Society and served as a delegate from Providence, and in 1836, he became a founding member of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society. Niger became involved in the Black suffrage cause beginning January 6, 1831, with Providence African American community leaders George Waterman, James E. Ellis, George C. Willis, and George McCarty. Their concern was twofold: a fee per annum charged in taxes to African American property owners without the right to representation, and the refusal of the City of Providence to build a public school for children of color, as taxes only paid for white children's public education. They drafted a petition, submitted it to the Rhode Island General Assembly, and debated on the floor, but no legislation was passed. In January 1841, Alfred Niger and George McCarty submitted a similar petition on behalf of fifteen other Black leaders regarding taxation, which met the same fate as in 1831, with assembly members rejecting it.

In 1846, Niger served as a delegate from Providence to the American Anti-Slavery Society. One of Niger's sons, Alexander Petion Niger, worked in printing and became the first Black member of a typographical union in Providence, joining as a founding member in 1857. Alfred Niger died on August 25, 1862, in Providence, Rhode Island. He is buried in the Locust Grove Cemetery in Elmwood, Providence.

For more biographical information and Niger's involvement in the Rhode Island Black community and the Dorr Rebellion, see CJ Martin, "The 'Mustard Seed': Providence's Alfred Niger, Antebellum Black Voting Rights Activist," Small State, Big History, <https://smallstatebighistory.com/the-mustard-seed-providences-alfred-niger-antebellum-black-voting-rights-activist/>

⁴⁰ Brown, *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), 34–37.

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

⁴⁴ Erik J. Chaput, *The People's Martyr: Thomas Wilson Dorr and His 1842 Rhode Island Rebellion* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013), 57; "Extension of Suffrage No.V: To the People of Providence," *Providence Daily Journal*, September 15, 1841.

⁴⁵ "Extension of Suffrage No.V."

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ "People of Color.—Their Right to Vote," *Providence Daily Journal*, September 17, 1841.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ J. Stanley Lemons and Michael McKenna, "Re-enfranchisement of Rhode Island Negroes." *Rhode Island History* 30 (Winter, 1971): 8.

⁵¹ "Meeting of the Suffrage Association," *Providence Daily Journal*, September 27, 1841.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ “Suffrage Convention, Friday Evening,” *Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841.

⁵⁴ “To the Free Suffrage Convention,” excerpted in Edmund Burke, *Rhode Island—Interference of the Executive in the Affairs of June 7, 1844: Burke’s Report* (Washington: Blair & Rives, printers, 1844), 111.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁵⁶ “Swamp Yankee” is a slang term applied to southern New England white Anglo-Saxons, or “native” southern New Englanders, who have lived in the region since the seventeenth century. For more information, please see Alan Rosenberg, “Is Swamp Yankee an Insult or a Badge of Honor?,” *Providence Journal*, February 29, 2008.

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

⁵⁸ “To the Free Suffrage Convention,” excerpted in *Burke’s Report*, 111.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 113; *Providence Directory, 1841*, 184–186. The following men were all Black activists who continued to fight for civil rights: Ichabod Northrup argued for school integration in 1859 before the Providence City Council and School Committee; Samuel Rodman owned \$400 worth of property by 1860 and became a doctor in the community; James Hazard, described as the “richest colored man in the city” joined the ranks of the state militia to thwart the Dorr Rebellion; George J. Smith was a founding member of the African Union Meeting House, the first school, church, and organizational center of the Providence Black community in 1821; and Ransom Parker, who by 1859, owned \$1800 worth of real estate and fought for the desegregation of schools in 1859 by signing the petition “To the Friends of Equal Rights in Rhode Island” presented to the Rhode Island General Assembly. See Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 100, 128–29, 76, 58, 99.

⁶¹ “Suffrage Convention, Friday Evening,” *Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841; *New Age and Constitutional Advocate*, October 22, 1841; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, October 21, 1841.

⁶² *Constitution of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, as Finally Adopted by the Convention of the People Assembled at Providence, on the 18th day of November, 1841* (Providence: Printed at the New Age Office, 1842), 6.

⁶³ “Suffrage Convention Caucus,” *Providence Daily Journal*, October 9, 1841.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ “Suffrage Convention: Friday Evening,” *Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.; *New Age and Constitutional Advocate*, October 22, 1841; *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, October 21, 1841.

⁷⁴ Richard Kidder Randolph, *Report of the Committee on the Action of the General Assembly, on the Subject of the Constitution*, 11, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, <https://www.loc.gov/item/10017224/>

⁷⁵ “To the People of Providence. Address of the Free Suffrage Convention. Extension of Suffrage. No.XVI. An Address: To the People of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, by the Free Suffrage Convention, held at Providence on the 4th day of October A.D. 1841,” *Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841.

⁷⁶ *Burke’s Report*, 113–14.

⁷⁷ Quoted from the *Suffrage Examiner* and excerpted in *Burke’s Report*, 114; “Annual Meeting,” *Suffrage Examiner*, December 1841, Brown University, Sidney S. Rider Collection on Rhode Island History, John Hay Library, Providence, RI.

⁷⁸ 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.” See Douglass, *Life and Times*, 274.

⁷⁹ Martin, “The ‘Mustard Seed.’ ”

⁸⁰ *Burke’s Report*, 115.

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

⁸² “Anti Slavery Meeting,” *Providence Daily Journal*, December 13, 1841.

⁸³ “Be Not Alarmed,” *Providence Daily Journal*, December 29, 1841.

⁸⁴ “Questions to be answered,” *Providence Daily Journal*, December 30, 1841.

⁸⁵ Gettleman, *Dorr Rebellion*, 101–6.

⁸⁶ Mowry, *Dorr War*, 162.

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

⁸⁸ Brown, *Life of William J. Brown*, 102.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 102–3.

⁹⁰ *Emancipator and Free American*, June 5, 1842.

⁹¹ *Providence Daily Journal*, June 28, 1842. One hundred African Americans enrolled in Hydraulion No. 1. The company was situated near the old railroad depot, by the cove-basin, in an area often described as Exchange Street (a.k.a. Exchange Place). The Hydraulion was a hand-pump fire hose engine that required its tank to be refilled with water from the cove.

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

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

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

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

⁹⁶ “Providence Journal. Tuesday Morning, Sept. 20, 1842. The Convention.—,” *Providence Daily Journal*, September 20, 1842.

⁹⁷ Martin, “The ‘Mustard Seed.’ ”

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), 35–36.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 47–48.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 67–68.

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

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

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ An increase of 200 votes in Providence in the November 1842 referendum compared to the balloting numbers in the failed March 1842 referendum for the Freeman’s Constitution, backed by the Law and Order Party to replace the old charter, appeared to be caused by the bloc vote of the city’s adult Black male populace. This aggregate helped tip the balance in favor of Black male enfranchisement by voting “no” against a white-only clause in the Law and Order Constitution. See Gettleman, *Dorr Rebellion*, 145, 148.

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

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

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

¹⁰⁸ “For the Journal,” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 22, 1842.

¹⁰⁹ Pen names were often used in articles published in the *Providence Daily Journal*. A stylistic choice in nineteenth-century editorial writing, the titles “A Friend of Equal Rights,” “A Citizen,” and “Equality” reflect the author’s allegiance to African American male suffrage and equality. The pen name “No: No: No!,” for obvious reasons, urged voters to circle “no” on their ballots for an amendment to the Law and Order Constitution that included the word *white* in its voting clause.

¹¹⁰ “Vote on the Constitution,” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 23, 1842.

¹¹¹ “Vote on the Constitution,” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 26, 1842.

¹¹² *Providence Daily Journal*, November 29, 1842; votes from Hopkinton (36 for & 27 against) and Richmond (16 for & 65 against) added to the original aggregate of 3,793 for and 1,320 against the admission of Blacks as cited in “Vote on the Constitution,” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 26, 1842. The towns of Burrville, Foster, Glocester, Jamestown, and New Shoreham are left unreported and never appear again after November 29 in the *Providence Daily Journal*.

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

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹¹⁵ McLoughlin, *Rhode Island*, 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*, 124.

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

¹²⁰ Elisha R. Potter, to John Brown Francis, July 22, 1842, MSS 426, Francis Family Papers Collection, Rhode Island Historical Society Library (RIHSL), Providence, RI.

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

¹²² Quoted from the *Suffrage Examiner* and excerpted in *Burke’s Report*, 114.

¹²³ McDougall, *Might and Right*, 291.

¹²⁴ “Fugitive Slaves,” *Providence Daily Journal*, March 9, 1842.

¹²⁵ Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 114–15; *Report Upon the Census of Rhode Island, 1865*, xlv.

¹²⁶ “Population of the United States,” *Providence Daily Journal*, July 1, 1841; *Report Upon the Census of Rhode Island, 1865*, xlv–xlvi.

¹²⁷ Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 77–79.

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

¹²⁹ Quoted in Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 35.

Bibliography

Archival Sources :

- Burke, Edmund. *Rhode Island—Interference of the Executive in the Affairs of June 7, 1844: Burke's Report*. Washington: Blair & Rives, printers, 1844. Special Collections & Archives, Robert L. Carothers Library and Learning Commons, University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI.
- Constitution of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, as Finally Adopted by the Convention of the People Assembled at Providence, on the 18th day of November, 1841*. Providence: Printed at the New Age Office, 1842. Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence, RI.
- Eldridge, Elleanor. *Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge*. Providence: B.T. Albro, 1838. Stages of Freedom Museum and Archive, Providence, RI.
- Francis Family Papers Collection. Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence, RI.
- 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. Providence Public Library, Special Collections, Providence, RI.
- McDougall, Francis Harriet Whipple Green. *Might and Right; by a Rhode Islander*. Providence: A.H. Stillwell, 1844. Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence, RI.
- Preamble and Constitution of the Rhode Island Suffrage Association: Adopted Friday Evening, March 27, 1840*. Providence: B.T. Albro, 1840. Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence, RI.
- Proceedings of the Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Convention, Held in Providence, on the 2d, 3d, and 4th of February, 1836*. Providence: H. H. Brown, 1836. Rhode Island Historical Society Library, Providence, RI.
- Providence City Directory, 1841*. Providence: H.H. Brown, 1841. Providence City Archives, Providence, RI.
- Randolph, Richard Kidder. *Report of the Committee on the Action of the General Assembly, on the Subject of the Constitution*. Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
<https://www.loc.gov/item/10017224/>
- Snow, Edwin M. *Report Upon the Census of Rhode Island, 1865; with the Statistics of the Population, Agriculture, Fisheries, and Manufactures of the State*. Providence Press Company, State Printers, 1867. Providence City Archives, Providence, RI.

Articles:

- Chaput, Erik J., and Russell J. DeSimone. "Strange Bedfellows: The Politics of Race in Antebellum Rhode Island." *Common-Place* 10, no. 2 (January 2009): 1–14.
<https://commonplace.online/article/strange-bedfellows/>
- Lemons, J. Stanley, and Michael McKenna. "Re-enfranchisement of Rhode Island Negroes." *Rhode Island History* 30 (Winter, 1971): 3–13.
- Martin, CJ. "The 'Mustard Seed': Providence's Alfred Niger, Antebellum Black Voting Rights Activist." *Small State, Big History*. <https://smallstatebighistory.com/the-mustard-seed-providences-alfred-niger-antebellum-black-voting-rights-activist/>
- Rosenberg, Alan. "Is Swamp Yankee an Insult or a Badge of Honor?" *Providence Journal*, February 29, 2008.
- Sullivan, Joseph W. "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.

Monographs:

- Bracey, John H. *Free Blacks in America, 1800–1860*. Belmont: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1971.
- Brown, William J. *The Life of William J. Brown of Providence, R.I.: With Personal Recollections of Incidents in Rhode Island*. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2006.
- Chaput, Erik J. *The People's Martyr: Thomas Wilson Dorr and His 1842 Rhode Island Rebellion*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013.
- Conley, Patrick T. *The Dorr Rebellion: Rhode Island's Crisis in Constitutional Government*. Providence: Rhode Island Bicentennial Foundation, 1973.
- Cottrol, Robert J. *The Afro-Yankees: Providence's Black Community in the Antebellum Era*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982.
- . *From African to Yankee: Narratives of Slavery and Freedom in Antebellum New England*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1999.
- Douglass, Frederick. *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass. Written by Himself. His Early Life as a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time*. Hartford: Park Publishing Co., 1882.
- Gettleman, Marvin E. *The Dorr Rebellion: A Study in American Radicalism: 1833–1849*. New York: Random House, 1973.

Hine, Darlene C., 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*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Hoffmann, Charles, and Tess Hoffmann. *Brotherly Love: Murder and the Politics of Prejudice in Nineteenth-Century Rhode Island*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993.

McLoughlin, William G. *Rhode Island: A History*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1986.

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

Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Mowry, Arthur M. *The Dorr War: The Constitutional Struggle in Rhode Island*. Providence: E.L. Freeman and Sons Press, 1901.

Rivard, Paul. *A New Order of Things: How the Textile Industry Transformed New England*. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2002.

Roediger, David. *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* [Revised Edition]. New York: Verso, 1999.

Van Broekhoven, Deborah B. *The Devotion of These Women: Rhode Island in the Antislavery Network*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002.

Newspaper Articles

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

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

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

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

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

Emancipator and Free American, June 5, 1842.

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

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

“Fugitive Slaves.” *Providence Daily Journal*, March 9, 1842.

“Increase of Catholicism in the United States.” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 18, 1842.

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

“Meeting of the Suffrage Association.” *Providence Daily Journal*, September 27, 1841.

National Anti-Slavery Standard, October 21, 1841.

New Age and Constitutional Advocate, October 22, 1841.

“People of Color—their right to vote.” *Providence Daily Journal*, September 17, 1841.

“To the People of Providence. Address of the Free Suffrage Convention. Extension of Suffrage. No.XVI. An Address: To the People of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, by the Free Suffrage Convention, held at Providence on the 4th day of October *A.D. 1841.*”
Providence Daily Journal, October 11, 1841.

“Population of the United States.” *Providence Daily Journal*, July 1, 1841.

“Proposed Constitution of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.”
Providence Daily Journal, November 7, 1842.

“The Proposed Constitution: Compared with the Constitutions of other States.” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 18, 1842.

“Providence Journal. Tuesday Morning, Sept. 20, 1842. The Convention.—,” *Providence Daily Journal*, September 20, 1842.

Providence Daily Journal, December 29, 1841.

Providence Daily Journal, June 26, 1842.

Providence Daily Journal, June 28, 1842.

Providence Daily Journal, July 12, 1842.

Providence Daily Journal, November 29, 1842.

“Questions to be Answered.” *Providence Daily Journal*, December 30, 1841.

“Suffrage Convention Caucus.” *Providence Daily Journal*, October 9, 1841.

“Suffrage Convention, Friday Evening.” *Providence Daily Journal*, October 11, 1841.

“The Vote on the Constitution.” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 22, 1842.

“Vote on the Constitution.” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 23, 1842.

“Vote on the Constitution.” *Providence Daily Journal*, November 26, 1842.

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

Index

- Acote's Hill, Chepachet, 5, 25–26
 Addison Hollow, 8
 African Greys, 10
 African Union Meeting House, 8n20, n38, n60, 11
 Algerine Law, 4, 23
 American Anti-Slavery Society, 21n39
 Ames, Samuel, 13, 20
 Arsenal, Cranston Street, 4, 23
- Blacks, Admission of, 28–30n112
 Black population, 5, 10, 34–35
 Bowen, Henry, 20
 Brown, John, 21
 Brown, Moses, 8n20
 Brown, Samuel, 10
 Brown, William, J., 9n25–12, 24, 26, 30–31
- Charter, Rhode Island, 1663 Royal, 3–5, 11, 12, 20, 28
 Clarke, George, 22
 Committee in Behalf of the People of Color, 17n60
 Cozzen, Charles, 10
 Crummell, Alexander, 15, 21, 37
- Dorr, Thomas, 3–5, 7, 13, 15–16, 18–20, 23, 25, 34, 40
 Douglass, Frederick, 2, 21, 36
- Eldridge, Elleanor, 10n37
 Ellis, James E., 11n39
 Emancipation, 8n18
- Fire[fighting] companies, 6, 24–25, 35
 Francis, John Brown, 32
 Freemen's Constitution, 4–5, 20, 26
- Garrison, William Lloyd, 21n39
- Hardscrabble, 9–10n26 & n29
 Hazard, James, 17n60, 24
 House: Town House, 22–23
 Howland, Thomas, 24
- Irish, 5n12, 31–32, 34–35
- Johnson, Richard, 9
- Kelley, Abby, 21n78–22
 King, Governor Samuel Ward, 4, 23–25, 26, 35, 38
- Landholders' Constitution. *See* Freemen's Constitution, 20
 Law and Order Party, 5, 7, 23, 26, 31–35
- Law and Order Constitution, 5, 7, 31, 32
 Law and Order Convention, 27, 32
 Lewis, Reverend John, 10
- McCarty, George, 11n38 & n39
 McDougall, Frances Harriet Whipple Green, 25, 33
 Militia, 5, 6, 10, 24, 35, 39
- Newspapers: *Emancipator and Free American*, 25;
New Age and Constitutional Advocate, 12, 22;
New York Courier and Enquirer, 25;
Providence Daily Journal, 13–15, 18, 20, 22–25, 26–30, 32, 34–35;
Suffrage Examiner, 21–22, 33
- Niger, Alfred, 11n39, 13, 15, 21, 34
 Northrup, Ichabod, 17n60
- Olney's Lane, 8–9
- Parker, Ransom, 17n60
 People's Army, 25
 People's Constitution, 3–4, 7, 16–17, 19, 21–23, 35, 40
 People's Convention, 3, 7, 12–13, 15, 20, 21, 34–35, 37
 People's Government, 20
 People's Party. *See* Rhode Island Suffrage Party
 Perry, Reverend Jacob, 8
 Peterson the Barber, 24
 Potter, Elisha, 32
- Remond, Charles Lenox, 21
 Rhode Island Anti-Slavery Society, 6, 10, 21–23, 33–35
 Rhode Island General Assembly, 3–4, 11n39, 13, 15, 27, 31, 35
 Rhode Island Suffrage Association, 3–4, 6, 12–15, 18, 20, 21–23, 31–34, 39
 Rhode Island Suffrage Party, 4, 22–23
 Riot. *See* Hardscrabble; Snowtown
 Rodman, Samuel, 17n60
- Sayles, Welcome B., 19
 Smith, George J., 17n60
 Snowtown, 9–10n26 & n29
- Town Born. *See* Ames, Samuel
- Waterman, George, 11n38 & n39
 Willis, George C., 11n38 & n39
- Young Men's Union Fund Society, 10