

**The Duality of Freedom: The Colony of Rhode Island's Slave Trade  
Complex**

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

SHIELDS, THOMAS R. The Duality of Freedom: The Colony of Rhode Island's Slave Trade Complex

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In the eighteenth century British colonies there existed a duality of freedom, in which salutary neglect facilitated economic opportunism in the form of the slave trade. This paper examines how the colony of Rhode Island was a microcosm of this freedom duality in the merchant capitalist world. The colony became the epicenter of the slave trade in British North America, while also the home to a fervent abolition movement headed by the Quakers. This thesis contends that broad economic and individual freedoms in the colony created the environment where the slave trade prospered, the exact opposite of freedom.

After the introduction and literature review this thesis examines the Rhode Island political economy of the eighteenth century, focusing on the role of slavery, slave trading, and abolition movement. Chapter two utilizes primary sources such as historical records, letters, and laws to explain the development and economics behind the trade. Chapter three uses Quaker records and colonial history to show the development of the abolition movement and the impact of the revolution on the colony. Finally chapter four delves into the Brown family of Providence, showing how as a family they were a microcosm of the colony. Exemplifying both the slave trading side and the abolitionist side, the family was at the apex of Rhode Island's greatest moral crisis.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

### **The Slave Trade Society**

In mid of August of 1794, the wealthiest man in all of Rhode Island sat on trial in a Providence court house. John Brown was being tried for conspiring to send a slave trading ship to the coast of West Africa. He was the very first person tried under the new federal Slave Trade Act prohibiting the trade. As Brown was in his sixties, he faced a possibly life ending sentence in prison. This was a test of America's newfound commitment to ending the slave trade. The trial also risked the reputation of both the Brown family business empire and status of the national abolition movement. Even more, this was a family affair.<sup>1</sup>

In the midst of the trial, the Abolitionist Society of Rhode Island testified heavily against John Brown. They spent weeks testifying to Brown's involvement in the slave trade and his abundant wealth generated from its profits. However, no man had greater condemnation of John than his own brother Moses. Testifying publically, Moses denounced his own brother, calling his involvement in the trade reprehensible and unforgivable in the eyes of God.<sup>2</sup>

Just years earlier the two had been the greatest of friends, confidants, and business partners. Together they had built the greatest slave-trading dynasty in American history.<sup>3</sup> So what changed? What caused the rift in the family?

Better yet, how did Rhode Island get here? The answer lies with both freedom and opportunism. The colony, which had been founded on religious liberty by Roger Williams, was by the time of the Revolution, the slave trade capital of colonial America.

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<sup>1</sup> Rappleye, Charles. *Sons of providence the Brown brothers, the slave trade and the american revolution.*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

John Brown was, but one of a vastly wealthy merchant class that dominated the political economy of Rhode Island. This political economy was dictated by the slave trade.

In the colony of Rhode Island, the people took to slave trading, making the region the hub of Atlantic capitalism and slavery. In this thesis I aim to answer how Rhode Island's abundance of individual freedom led to an economy based on the enslavement of others. Salutary neglect, mercantile opportunism, and religious justification, among other factors, led to the development of this highly sophisticated slave trade society. Through the history all of this I will show how in Rhode Island, morals clashed with opportunism over the most evil trade in human history.

## **Literature Review**

There exists a rich historiography on the colony and later state of Rhode Island's economy in 18<sup>th</sup> century. There is especially a lot written on the slave trade in the state. There is much debate on Rhode Island's role within the broader context of the Atlantic Triangle Trade. Overall thought it is evident to scholars that the slave trade was a pivotal aspect of the colony's 18<sup>th</sup> century economy. Previous authors have written their own contributions to this realm of Rhode Island history. The following works have been critical in my research.

### **Origins of the Trade and its Dominance in Rhode Island**

The history of a colonial economy is one that progresses from complete reliance on the home country to becoming a vital part of the empire's economy. Scholar John J. McCusker contends that Rhode Island gained economic independence from Britain through its slave trade based economy. The colony not only became self sufficient, but incredibly wealthy compared to its New England neighbors. However, initially Rhode Island had to rely on Britain for imports for everything including food and raw materials. Eventually, the colony became highly self-sufficient producing almost all of its own goods. The main exception was sugar, in which by 1770 England still exported 1/3 of total sugar to the American colonies. British sugar manufacturers in the West Indies relied on American purchase of their sugar; the main purchasers were the rum distillers in Rhode Island and especially Newport.

McCusker reasons that Rhode Island's economic success within the British mercantile system was natural due to its geography. The state was unique in having a protected bay, perfect for shipping and mercantile activity. With a minor agricultural

based economy due to rocky shoreline, it was natural for Rhode Island's economy to gravitate towards means of trading. The colony's population was concentrated around the bay, so water was the easiest form of transportation. This facilitated Rhode Islanders to become some of the American colonies' best merchants and shippers. Atlantic commerce and especially the slave trade brought Rhode Island merchants, tradesmen and farmers together. The colony perfected a system of developing rum, cloth, barrels, and other goods that the merchants would ship abroad. Previous to this elaborate trade system, Rhode Island did not have a prominent economy and was even under threat of being annexed by a larger colony. This trading system and connection to the triangle trade made Rhode Island an integral aspect of the Atlantic World.

### **Rhode Island Rum Industry:**

In *The Colonial Molasses Trade*, author Gilman M. Ostrander argues that molasses production and trade was deeply important to Rhode Island because it was the only commodity produced in vast quantities that England did not manufacture. He claims that evidence of the industry's importance in New England is defiance to the Sugar Act. The previously passed Molasses Act, which taxed molasses colonists purchased for rum was universally disobeyed. However, the Sugar Act was actually enforced and most outrage against it came from New England because the area was deeply involved in the rum industry. Ostrander writes that rum production in Rhode Island had become so significant that it competed heavily with British rum production in the West Indies.

This work establishes the rum trade as a critical economic force for colonial America and especially New England. Ostrander writes that this market was significant in developing the New England economies. *The Colonial Molasses Trade* establishes the

prominence of New England and especially Rhode Island rum production to both the American colonies and triangular Atlantic economy.

In *Drinking History*, Andrew F. Smith also contends the importance of the Rhode Island rum industry and argues it was a medium of exchange in Africa and abroad. His main thesis of this is that rum was increasingly a valuable commodity in the 1700s. His work mainly is focused on rum's impact on the American Revolution and the New England colonists' zealous response to the passing of the Sugar Act. Before this though, Smith establishes the far reach of the rum industry in the colonies and abroad. He writes that the price of rum gradually increased throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century as production increased.

The Rhode Island connection to the triangle trade in general expanded throughout the century. The amount of slave ships making voyages accumulated in the later half of the century, the number of slaves taken increased, and the amount of rum brought to Africa increased. As demand soared, the number of distilleries in Rhode Island boomed. The increases in price of rum meant more slaves could be purchased and in turn more wealth returned to the colonies. Andrew Smith's contribution to this subject also lies in his theory on the end of the New England rum industry. He argues that the rum industry took a dip after the Revolutionary War, during which it took a downturn. This is because of the announced end of the American slave trade to be in 1808, which stimulated the slave trade market beforehand. The rum industry boomed in a last hurrah, before declining with the slave trade. Smith's second theory about the rum industry's decline is the beginning of the temperance movement, spearheaded by Dr. Benjamin Rush. Andrew



Smith overall outlines the how expensive and important a commodity rum was and then why it declined in the American/Atlantic economy.

J. Stanley Lemons of the Rhode Island Historical Society contends that molasses was the engine of Rhode Island's eighteenth-century commerce. He makes this claim based off of the extremely high numbers of rum distilleries in Newport and Providence. Additionally a lot of industry in the colony was indirectly related to the rum industry. Barrel making, ship building, and mercantile accounting all supported Rhode Island's rum exports. Rum was in fact Rhode Island's main export; its ingredients were cheaply imported from the West Indies either in the form of molasses or raw sugar cane. But the often-made assumption that this production was all for the slave trade is erroneous. In these rum distilleries of mostly Providence and Newport, production boomed throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Rhode Island's rum production was unmatched by any other colony even in New England. This is suggestive of rum's importance to the colony's export based economy.

Despite the rum business clear connection to the triangle slave trade, a significant amount of imported rum went elsewhere. Rhode Islanders sold significant supplies to North American buyers from Nova Scotia to Georgia.

By the mid 1700s Rhode Islanders were deeply involved in the West Indies plantation complex James A. Rawley contends that the colony's global trade depended on the success of their rum production. While the colony exported a variety of manufactured goods, rum was by far the most consequential. Rhode Island merchants supplied sugar plantations with slaves, livestock, dairy products, fish, candles, and of course rum. In return they received molasses/sugar cane, which they turned into rum. This system

worked well because the West Indies produced no amenities so they relied entirely on Rhode Island for their rum and all the American colonies for agriculture.

Rhode Island's domination of the rum industry propelled the colony forward from previously being a shadow of Boston. The demands of the West Indies for slaves and rum created a new capitalist merchant class in Rhode Island. In terms of North American slave importation, Rhode Island merchants controlled over 60% of it throughout the 1700s. Rhode Island traders would bring rum to Africa, sell it to warlords and in return get cheap slaves. These slaves would then be brought to Newport, Bristol, or Providence where Southern/West Indies plantation representatives would purchase them.

### **The Slave Trade's Importance in Rhode Island**

In *The Elusive Guineamen: Newport Slavers*, Sarah Deutsch contends that the role New England and Rhode Island has played in slavery has greatly been reduced and silenced. She claims that emphasis of involvement in slavery has been relegated to the Southern states/colonies with little attention to the North. She argues that the data is being misrepresented. In particular she analyzes a study from Phillip Curtin that states New England had a minor role in the overall global slave economy. However, Deutsch contends that is an unfair data sample because it is an unfair comparison. Brazil imported by far the most slaves from Africa, but this is not relevant to slave trade activity in New England. Instead her paper looks at not what percentage of total slave trade activity occurred in New England; it reviews the slave trade/triangle trade's impact on New England and Rhode Island in particular.

Deutsch does admit that most historians agree of Newport's centerpiece role in the slave trade. She reaffirms this, but makes the claim that slavery's significance to

Rhode Island and the developing of its economy has been largely unanswered in history. She criticizes other scholars of the colonial economy such as Herbert Klien, Richard Pares, and Gary Wilson for their vagueness in describing the activity of colonial New England merchants. It is clear that Newport and Rhode Island were enriched throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century from shipping and maritime trade. What is not as widely agreed upon and mentioned is that this trade was primarily in rum and slaves. Her contribution to this subject is that she argues of the rum industry's center importance in Rhode Island's economy. She primarily criticizes Richard Sheridan and John McCusker for stating the industry was not a main economic driver for the colony.

In *The Notorious Triangle*, Jay Coughtry argues that not only was Rhode Island a major player in the Atlantic slave trade, but the slave trade was central to the colony's economy during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In this way he differs from other scholars who contend slaves may been in New England, but the region was not important to the market. Coughtry places Rhode Island and even more specifically Newport front and center of the American slave trade. Coughtry agrees with Deutsch that there is a major knowledge gap in the quantitative and economic aspects of the triangle slave trade. Most works on the matter are unsurprisingly concerned with the humanitarian aspect of it.

Only in Rhode Island, out of all thirteen colonies, was a regular and continuous trade in African slaves pursued. Other state dabbled in the slave trade at varying times, but only in Rhode Island did the slave trade have long-term social and economic importance. The amount of Rhode Island slave voyages steadily increased throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century and overall the colony trafficked as many slaves as Holland. Rhode Island's most important niche in the global economy was rum though, which was present at every

slave trading facility especially in Africa. Coughtry's contribution is the clear statement that the knowledge gap of the Rhode Island slave trade must be filled. He also explains that while quantitative knowledge is often default to find from the time, there are sufficient evidence. He also states that historical logic explains why Rhode Island emerged as the hotspot for the American slave trade. In this way, his research is groundbreaking.

In his 2016 book, *Dark Work, the Business of Slavery in Rhode Island*, author Christy Clark-Pujara contends that the economic system of slavery developed Rhode Island. While most of colonial New England was in some way tied to the slave trade, in Rhode Island it was most important. The slave trade was the forefront of the Rhode Island economy and relied upon by all sectors of life. Clark-Pujara points out that by 1750 the colony had the highest percentage of slaves out of any colony at 10% of the total population. By contrast most other colonies such as Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania had about 2-3% of their populations as enslaved blacks. However, it must be taken into account that Rhode Island is also the smallest colony and had a smaller population.

Nevertheless, the pure concentration of slave trade activity in Rhode Island during the 18<sup>th</sup> century is staggering. This ties into the longstanding debate about Rhode Island slavery; Rhode Island is a small state and was dwarfed in slave trade involvement compared to the British or even Portuguese empires overall; however, a focused analysis on the colony reveals that the trade was pivotal to its development. Clark-Pujara contends that Rhode Island was not only dictated by the slave trade internally, but was also important to the broader trade. This is especially true when compared to any other

American colonies. Rhode Island was also the last state to pause the slave trade during the Revolutionary War and the first to return to it following peace in 1783.

An incredibly important facet of Rhode Island's slave trade involvement was the large-scale use of slaves. This is a measure of the colony's reliance on slavery, both in trading and in agriculture. Historian Ira Berlin has differentiated between a society with slaves and a slave society. Rhode Island in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was a slave economy perhaps, but not a slave society. This is exception for South County, where agricultural production was fueled by slave labor.

This fertile southern county along the coast produced mostly dairy products such as cheese and bred sheep, horses, and cattle. This was done through large-scale slave plantations with at times hundreds of slaves per site. Clark-Pujara connects this to the triangle trade, stating that the South County products were shipped to the West Indies. This is evidence that the Rhode Island was connected to the slave trade in more ways than just the rum industry. Overall the colony's economy relied greatly on the demands of the West Indies, but also clearly stocked the slave islands with necessary supplies. Clark-Pujara uses this South Country example as a way to show Rhode Island's greater importance to the Triangle Trade system.

The importance of the mercantile slave trade to the Rhode Island economy is indicative from the colony's reaction to the American Revenue Act of 1764. This act is otherwise known in the American Revolution as the Sugar Act. The Warwick Historical Society of Rhode Islands claims that the colony's opposition to the act was at least equally due to economics as it was patriotism. There seems to be a link between patriotism and economics here because Rhode Island wealth and self-pride depended on

mercantile trade. Almost all economic activity in the colony during the 18<sup>th</sup> century can in some way be linked to the slave trade. The Sugar Act greatly restricted trade with French ruled West Indie Islands. While Rhode had slave laws on the books since the early 1700s, they were willfully ignored because of the trade's economic importance.

Due to lack of fertile land and no staple commodity, Rhode Island relied on mercantile trade and exporting for economic prosperity. Rhode Island's main economic export was distilled rum in which the colony relied greatly on West Indie islands, both British and French, for its core ingredient of molasses. So with no other industries to fall back on, Rhode Island merchants, commoners, and legislators alike were greatly alarmed by the passing of the Sugar Act. Since the domestic production of rum and its exportation was inherently tied to the Triangle Slave Trade, this demonstrates the trade's importance to Rhode Island.

Economic survival of the colony was rooted in trade and explicitly West Indian slave trading. In addition to rum exporting, Rhode Island also exported cheese, candles, and other manufactured goods to the West Indies. These far away colonies relied heavily on each other and the Sugar Act noticeably disturbed their connection. This disturbance was enough for Rhode Islanders to outwardly protest the law. Rhode Island defiance eventually accumulated in the Gaspee Incident, in which locals in the Narragansett Bay sank a British Customs and Excise vessel.

Economic research by the Newport Historical Society indicates the slave trade was deeply engrained in Rhode Island society by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The trade affected all socioeconomic classes and regions of the colony, not just the coastal merchant class. As the slave trade was phased out, Rhode Islanders noticed a difference

in their society. They were affected not just economically, but culturally too, as the slave trade had become a staple of life.

The vast majority of Rhode Islanders were tradesmen, farmers, or laborers that did not own slaves. However their work and way of life depended on the greater slave system. Rhode Island also had the highest domestic slave population out of any Northern state. Needless to say, slavery was attached to Rhode Island society. Therefore prominent slave traders like John Brown and common Newport laborers were angry at its disintegration. This anger was not sustained for the reason that the Rhode Island economy transitioned from mercantilism to industrialization. Rhode Island's abolitionist movement only gained steam when those of wealth and power were willing to sacrifice for the cause. When the slave trade and its indirect affects on Rhode Island were no longer taken for granted, the system was overturned.

Rhode Island and especially Newport was known as the American slave trade capital by both reputation and politics. Colonial scholar James A. Rawley claims that the colony was internationally recognized as a slave-trading hub. The smallest of the North American colonies surprisingly had the greatest share of the Atlantic slave trade. The Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island became known as the hub of circular commerce. Slave and sugar ships poured into the bay constantly, stopping at Newport, Bristol, or Providence. Out of the bay came all the manufactured goods of the state. This included horses, provisions, rum, candles, and lumber from nearby colonies. Travelers often remarked that there was not a commodity in the American colonies that did not at some point pass through Rhode Island. The colony prospered greatly from the relatively unmonitored trade throughout most of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

As Rhode Island gained its reputation as a slave-trading hub, the market for both the trade and rum manufacturing was specialized in the region. Rum manufacturers in other colonies were out priced by Newport distilleries, which could immediately ship the product after production. The elimination of the middleman enabled Rhode Island to corner the rum and slave trade of North America.

Rawley also claims that Rhode Island's political system and federal representation reflects the slave trade's dominance in the state. In the years following the adoption of the Constitution both of Rhode Island's house representatives were prominent slave traders. This included Brown University benefactor John Brown. This indicates the voters' commitment to supporting the slave trade and the elites that lead the industry. Rhode Island also stood with Southern States in supporting the continuation of slavery and the international slave trade. In an 1800 vote on banning American involvement in the trade, Rhode Island was the only state North of the Mason Dixon line to unilaterally oppose the bill. Up until the final abolition of the slave trade in 1808, Rhode Island politicians defiantly defended the business. The views of the state's political leadership are indicative of what benefited the Rhode Island constituency. The state relied on both the direct and indirect benefits of the slave trade so its politicians advocated on its behalf.

### **The Slave Trade in a Quaker Society**

In *Slave Trading in a New World*, Leonardo Marques explains the strategies of American slave traders; he contends that they were the entrepreneurs of the time and developed in depth business strategies. He explores the in and outs of the business through analyzing several key players in the industry. One important historical case study he looks at regards the prominent Brown family. By the 1780s, Rhode Island had both the



highest Quaker population per capita in the country out of any state and the greatest involvement in the slave trade. This text explores how this dual-personality worked; by 1773 the Quaker Society of Rhode Island was officially advocating its members to remove themselves from the trade. This sparked serious debate among the leading slave traders in the state because of the prominence of the industry. For the Brown family this debate divided brothers as one was a major abolitionist and the other was one of Rhode Island's top slave traders. This work's contribution is that it explains the strategies of Rhode Island slave traders and then puts these business ventures into the context of the state's social climate.

In *The Elusive Guineamen: Newport Slavers*, Sarah Deutsch also alludes to the unusual hypocrisy of Quaker involvement in the slave trade. She explains that Quakers, known as friends, heavily populated the state. Included were of course the leading merchants and shippers of the Rhode Island. The Quaker tradition denounced extravagancy and slavery; in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century the church formally banned participation in it. Despite Quaker values, the most prominent merchants in Rhode Island during the early 18<sup>th</sup> century enthusiastically joined the slave trade. This speaks to what must have been viewed as too tempting of a business opportunity. It presented a powerful moral dilemma and situation in which Quaker businessmen abandoned their values for great wealth.

Besides the Quaker-slave trade dichotomy, Deutsch makes another potent claim. Through an analysis of the leading slave traders throughout the century, she realizes their diversity in terms of origins. She found that the wealthiest slave traders of Newport came from various means. While some came from old money Anglican families, many were

immigrants who gradually built their fortunes and reputations in the industry. The boom of the slave trading industry in Rhode Island seemed to create an entrepreneurial niche, in which skilled shippers could amass significant wealth. This disrupted the state's traditional social hierarchy and created a situation where immigrants rose in society on the backs of African misery.

In *The Entrepreneurial Spirit in Rhode Island History*, Peter J. Coleman dives into the history of entrepreneurship and the merchant industry of Rhode Island. He makes a unique claim about why Rhode Island became the hotbed and epicenter of mercantile activity and the global slave trade. Like Marques and Deutsche, Coleman speaks to the nature of how the most Quaker state (even more so than Pennsylvania) was also surprisingly the most involved in the slave trade. Other authors contend that pure greed overpowered morality for Rhode Island Quakers.

However, Coleman argues that liberalism, both social and economic, was engrained in the Rhode Island culture... and that this culture was more important in pushing Rhode Island merchants towards the slave trade than pure greed. To Coleman, this culture originated in the denial of Massachusetts Puritan values. He claims that Rhode Island was founded by those who sought greater freedom in all aspects of life as compared to the Massachusetts Puritans; these Rhode Islanders sought to live life in pursuit of wealth through shipping, not hard work for the purpose of pleasing God. Therefore, adherence to the slave trade was almost a natural extension of this cultural identity. The desire for a lifestyle of freedom and social mobility trumped retaining Christian morals.

Charles Rappleye explores the Quaker slave trade contradiction and opposition in his work *Sons of Providence*. The high profile Brown family is a fascinating case that illuminates the societal debates of Rhode Island at the time. This is the Brown family that was the benefactors of Brown University. Recent research has uncovered the slave trade's connection to the university colonial development. The brothers' story shows their connection to the university, the slave trade, and the Quaker Church while explaining the culture of the time.

John and Moses Brown were two of four brothers from the Providence banking, import/export and slave-trading family. John spent his life deeply involved in the family business of selling rum and slaves in the global triangle trade. The entire Brown family greatly prospered from this industry and became one of Rhode Island's wealthiest families because of it. However, John's brother Moses—following the American Revolution, during which all the Browns took up the cause of liberty—discovered Quakerism and abolitionism. He then vehemently opposed the business interests of his brother and the order of the Brown family.

In 1789, Moses organized an abolitionist group in Providence that was instrumental in achieving the federal Slave Trade Act of 1794. After years of abolitionist efforts this act prohibited ships from transporting slaves to any foreign country. John Brown believed staunchly in free trade and disregarded this new law which was ironically the first Rhode Islander tried under that legislation. Upon arrest, John Brown's slave ship named *Hope* was seized in one of the state's most critical legal battles. This family story reveals the tension on both sides; as the 18<sup>th</sup> century progressed both the colony's slave trade and

abolition movements accelerated. John Brown's arrest represents the collusion of the two forces.

Over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Rhode Island slave laws gradually became stricter. The ability to both own slaves and trade in slaves was incrementally reduced. Christy Clark-Pujara credits the progression of Rhode Island's slave laws to Quaker influence. In Rhode Island the Quaker population was significant and their influence was widespread from colony legislature to the mercantile elite. The Quakers were the very first religious group in the American colonies to publically and outspokenly denounce slavery. The group publically debated and called the institution into question across the colonies and especially in Rhode Island due to their prominence there. This had a profound influence on the colony and then state's slave laws.

## **Chapter Two: Southern Rhode Island & The Beginning of the Slave Trade**

### **The Origins of Mercantilism & Atlantic Capitalism**

The state of Rhode Island is known as a coastal region with its main industries being tourism and Atlantic commercialism. It is less known, but true that in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth century the colony was the slave-trading hub of America. The region developed and grew prosperous due to involvement in the trade and Rhode Island commercial connections with the West Indies. As the trade became more dominant in the colony, even the local government supported and defended it. In Narragansett, Rhode Island the commercialization materialized into large-scale slave plantations, similar in ways to those of the South. In Newport, the rum industry became king and the

town supplied the world with rum via trading it for West African slaves. Overall, Rhode Island became the prosperous, economically booming colony that it was through economic opportunism. Regardless of moral considerations, Rhode Islanders took every opportunity possible to profit from slavery, the slave trade, and their subsidiary industries.

Rhode Island's involvement in the slave trade began in the Southern region of the colony. Newport became the American hub of slave traders, sending out more slave ships to Africa than any other American city in the eighteenth century. As Newport became the capital of the American slave trade, a plantation based slave system emerged on the mainland of Southern Rhode Island in Narragansett County. Both Narragansett and Newport became vastly wealthy and developed between the times of the late seventeenth century up until the outbreak of the American Revolution. By the mid eighteenth century, Newport was the fifth largest city in colonial America. Mercantilism and international trade, mostly involving some aspect of the slave trade, dominated the city's economy. This is contradictory to the traditional understanding of which colonies were involved in slavery. So how did this region in Northern New England become a hub of the slave trade?

Newport seems to have been predisposed to mercantilism. It is a naturally protected island, located within the Narragansett Bay. It is also close to the mainland allowing for easy transportation even before there was a connecting bridge. Unlike its neighbors, Rhode Island lacked landmass so early settlers turned towards the seas. First came fishing and then inter-colonial trade.<sup>4</sup> The entire premise of Rhode Island is routed

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<sup>4</sup> Bicknell, Thomas, Williams. The History of the State of Rhode Island.

in its commercial trading. By trading with other colonies and then the West Indies, Rhode Island came into its own. Rhode Islanders were hardworking entrepreneurial merchants that established one of America's most important mercantile cities. However, they also willfully propped up and supported the most horrendous form of slavery in human history.

The Rhode Island slave trade relied on two pillars of shipping. The first was the essentials trade with the West Indies. Rhode Island sent food, manufactured goods, and luxury items to the West Indies in exchange for money. The second was the participation in the Atlantic Slave Trade. Rhode Islanders produced rum, which they traded for slaves in West Africa; they then transported the slaves to the West Indies where they were exchanged for money and molasses, which was reconverted into rum in Rhode Island.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Pro Slave Trade Government**

The formation of Southern Rhode Island due to these systems can be seen through actions taken by the colonial government. The Rhode Island General Assembly actively began to pass laws encouraging and supporting the trade. In 1708 the first tax upon slaves entering the colony of Rhode Island was enacted. The General Assembly voted to tax the owner three pounds for each slave imported. The sale of slaves was agreed upon to cost the buyer three pounds. This moderate tax expressed the early government's interest in the trade and served to bring revenue into the colony, not necessarily discourage the trade. That is a clear distinction from tariffs, later used by Great Britain, to prohibit trade.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Alderman, Clifford Lindsey. *Rum, slaves and molasses: the story of New England's triangular trade*.

<sup>6</sup> Act of the General Assembly, April 1708. Rhode Island Historical Society.

The slave trade was supported by not just the General Assembly, but also the governors of the colony. The same year, Governor Samuel Cranston wrote a letter to the British Board of Trade responding to economic inquiries. The board wanted an update on the status of the Rhode Island economy especially shipping. The board was also inquiring into the slave merchant trading of Rhode Islanders during the time.<sup>7</sup> By 1708 all British slave trading was monopolized by the African Company so the Board of Trade was investigating rogue traders.<sup>8</sup> In his response, Cranston denies any Rhode Islanders had taken part in slave trading outside of the crown's monopoly. In addition his letter gives a thorough description of Rhode Island's economic progress over the past thirty years. He writes that Newport in 1680 was a planting community focused on sustenance farming. There was no considerable shipping, port district, or customs duties.<sup>9</sup>

The Newport customs house was established in 1681 and rum distilleries appeared shortly after. It is during the 1680s and 1690s that the Newport distillers became greatly skillful at producing rum. Due to the industry's success, the General Assembly passed a duty of molasses in 1696.<sup>10</sup> Cranston describes Rhode Island as a rapidly developing commercial society with close ties to the West Indies. He elaborated on the vibrant commercial activity of Newport and the region's importance within the larger, Atlantic economy.<sup>11</sup> The colony's population by 1708 was 7181, of which 426 were black.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Governor Samuel Cranston to the Board of Trade, 1708.

<sup>8</sup> Bicknell, Thomas, Williams. *The History of the State of Rhode Island*.

<sup>9</sup> Governor Samuel Cranston to the Board of Trade, 1708.

<sup>10</sup> *History of the state of Rhode Island and the Providence Plantations*.

<sup>11</sup> Governor Samuel Cranston to the Board of Trade, 1708.

<sup>12</sup> *History of the state of Rhode Island and the Providence Plantations*.

Contextualization is important in understanding Governor Cranston's letter. His description of Rhode Island is not necessarily incorrect, but most likely biased. In the early eighteenth century, the British Parliament was considering dissolving the colony of Rhode Island and merging it with Massachusetts. Therefore Governor Cranston made sure to emphasize the importance of Rhode Island not just locally, but to the overall British economy. Additionally, it is noteworthy that when Governor Cranston refers to Rhode Island he is referencing Southern Rhode Island and specifically Newport. Of the 7181 people making up the colony, the large majority lived along the Southern Coast. Outside of Providence, the North was largely undeveloped.<sup>13</sup> The eighteenth century began with Newport as both the commercial and political capital of the region.

His letter and the acts passed by the General Assembly are also indicative of the opportunity realized by Rhode Islanders during this time period. As Cranston's letter insists, merchants in Newport quickly realized the profitability of rum distilling in the late seventeenth century. In the early eighteenth century, so many Rhode Islanders had joined the trade that the government began actively protecting it. That is an indication that the slave trade took off due to economic opportunism and the result was the development of Newport.

Thomas Richardson was a Newport slave trader who documented some of his travels in letters to his friends. Originally from Massachusetts, Richardson wrote that Newport is becoming a commercial trading hub. He says that any good can now be found among the markets and new buildings sprout up every year. He made connections with local rum distillers and exported their goods to the Southern colonies. Richardson

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.



encouraged his friends to come visit Newport, stating that he was making a handsome profit and there was ample opportunity in his trade. His depiction of the prosperous city and his successful business show the boom Newport was experiencing.<sup>14</sup>

In July 1715, the General Assembly voted to implement new regulation regarding the slave trade and the status of Newport.<sup>15</sup> The first part of the act describes Newport as a bustling city and the metropolitan center of the colony. The written act also reaffirms Newport's prevalence as a mercantile hub. Despite this, the town's infrastructure was lacking. The streets leading from the port to the city hall were narrow and crowded. They were also worn out from excess use.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, this first part enacted an infrastructure project to revitalize the developing city. This act reflected the Rhode Island government's reinvestment of slave trade profits back into the local economy. The amount of tax revenue earned from slave trading and the rum industry expanded each year. This therefore allowed for large-scale infrastructure projects to keep up with the growing population.<sup>17</sup>

The General Assembly explicitly noted that tax revenue from shipping, trafficking, and the rum industry, all tenants of the slave trade, would be used for infrastructure. Besides expanding and repaving the roads, the funds would be put toward erecting a, "substantial bridge over Potowomut River."<sup>18</sup> This money was also allocated to pay for engineers to plan and oversee the construction. This bridge was impactful to Newport in that it connected the island with the rest of the mainland colony. Now Newport was in an even better position to attract traders from neighboring Connecticut

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Richardson to Stephen Webb and Nicholas Coleman, 1714.

<sup>15</sup> Act of the General Assembly, July 15<sup>th</sup> 1715

<sup>16</sup> Jefferys, C. P. B., and C. P. B. Jefferys. *Newport: a concise history*

<sup>17</sup> Act of the General Assembly, July 15<sup>th</sup> 1715

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

and Massachusetts. This act is the first tangible evidence of the General Assembly literally building Newport with slave money.

The second part of the act dealt with the impacts of the slave trade more directly. It was an effort by the General Assembly to regulate, tax, and wrest control over the trade. It required all Rhode Island ships bound for the African coast to register with the government and pay a small fee. The act also raised the taxes on slaves imported into the colony.<sup>19</sup> The black population of Rhode Island had grown to be very large compared to other Northern colonies. It was mostly concentrated in Narragansett County where the plantations required constant slave importations.<sup>20</sup>

These regulations show a change in the General Assembly's attitude towards the slave trade. Just eight years earlier Governor Cranston had written that Rhode Islanders had no involvement in the slave trade. Now the Rhode Island government was outwardly acknowledging it and supporting it. What changed was the Royal African Company had lost its monopoly on the slave trade. Parliament had agreed to allow merchants of the British Empire to enter the trade.<sup>21</sup> The strategy was to allow more British merchants to enter the market and outcompete the highly successful French slave traders.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> McLoughlin, William G. *Rhode Island, a history*.

<sup>21</sup> Rawley, James A., and Stephen D. Berhendt. *The transatlantic slave trade: a history*.

## **The Narragansett Plantations**

As the Southern port town of Newport rapidly grew as a trading hub, the rest of Southern Rhode Island was developing as well. In Narragansett County a plantation society was created that mimicked both the aristocracies of England and the Deep South. Narragansett society was uniquely, “unlike that of the rest of New England.”<sup>22</sup>

These Narragansett plantations were located in the lands West of Newport along the Southern coast. The region surrounding the Narragansett bay had highly fertile land was occupied in the early seventeenth century following the displacement of the Narragansett Indian tribe. The emergence of large-scale plantations was likely only possible because of the tribe’s subsistence agriculture; the Narragansett had already cleared the land to grow corn and other crops. Throughout the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century the region served primarily as a ferry destination to Newport. Grazers also began to raise cattle and horses on the land.<sup>23</sup>

The first record of a home being constructed was Richard Smith’s estate in 1637. A veteran of King Phillip’s War in Massachusetts, Smith migrated to Rhode Island seeking open land. He built a trading house near the shoreline, which became a popular destination for travelers on their way to Newport. His son Richard Smith II expanded the structure and purchased numerous cattle and horses to graze on their land. The Smith family grew wealthy at this time and is considered the first Narragansett planter family.<sup>24</sup>

In 1657 several families purchased land near the Smith estate from the Narragansett Indians. These included around twelve buyers most notably William Brenton and Benedict Arnold. Both of these men became governors of Rhode Island.

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<sup>22</sup> Miller, William Davis. *The Narragansett Planters*

<sup>23</sup> Bartlett, John, Russell, ed. *Plantations in New England V. IV 1707-1740*.

<sup>24</sup> Miller, William Davis. *The Narragansett Planters*

This Benedict Arnold was the great-grandfather of the infamous Revolutionary War General. These twelve purchasers made the transaction together as a collective body known as the Atherton Company. All of the purchasers were of considerable wealth and were either Boston merchants or second sons of wealthy English families. Each of the twelve purchasers split up Narragansett County into equal plots with several villages throughout. Mostly importantly they erected the village of Tower Hill in the center of their plots, which became the first county seat of Narragansett. The region grew in population as sharecroppers were employed on the farms growing mostly corn and tending to livestock.<sup>25</sup>

Over the course of the late seventeenth century, not all of the original Atherton Company kept their land. Some sold it off in portions as the value increased and others went bankrupt. The wealthy Hazard family took advantage of one bankruptcy, purchasing some four hundred acres. In any case, by 1700 several powerful families controlled all of the fertile land and political power in Narragansett County. Unlike elsewhere in New England, the land distribution seemed more to parallel that of the Southern colonies. Outside of several trading villages in the region, every parcel of land was under control of a wealthy English family.<sup>26</sup>

The Narragansett planters established a unique economic system different from both Southern plantations and Northern farms. Despite being referred to as the Narragansett plantations, these plantations were primarily dairy farms. While they grew some substance crops such as corn and potatoes, the main use of the land was for raising

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

cattle and horses. The plantations became well known for thriving in the lucrative business of breeding horses, specifically a breed called the Narragansett pacer.<sup>27</sup>

As sugar and coffee production on the West Indies skyrocketed, so did the populations there. New plantations, roads, and towns meant a skyrocketing demand for fast transportation horses. The Narragansett planters utilized this niche and began exporting the durable, fast pacers in the mid seventeenth century. The importance of horse breeding was outlined by Governor Sanford in 1680 when he wrote, “the principle matters that are exported amongst us are horses and provisions.”<sup>28</sup> The second important economic beneficiary to Narragansett was the cultivation of dairy products. By 1730 each plantation had over one hundred cows. As they became extremely efficient at dairy production, Narragansett cheeses were exported throughout the colonies, but mainly to the West Indies. Overall the Narragansett plantations were greatly dependent on the West Indies plantation economies. Due to these islands specializing in the production of valuable commodities like sugar and coffee, they did not produce any self-sustaining food. Therefore they relied greatly on the American colonies to supply their produce; Narragansett became one of the main suppliers of cheese, in a market that greatly benefitted both places. The Narragansett plantations became immensely wealthy due to providing dairy and horses to the West Indies. However, their economic model is especially notable in that relied on slaves for labor.<sup>29</sup>

As Newport slave trading took off in the early eighteenth century, some slave traders began bringing African slaves back to Newport. These slaves were employed in

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<sup>27</sup> Bartlett, John, Russell, ed. *Plantations in New England V. IV 1707-1740*.

<sup>28</sup> Miller, William Davis. *The Narragansett Planters*

<sup>29</sup> Bartlett, John, Russell, ed. *Plantations in New England V. IV 1707-1740*.

mainly housekeeping and nursing. Newport never became a large-scale slave society, but moderate slave sales continued throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>30</sup> As demand for more horses and dairy increased in the West Indies, Narragansett plantation owners sought to make their business models more efficient and productive. So when slaves were made available in neighboring Newport, the owners jumped at the opportunity of cheaper labor. In essence, the dairy farms of Narragansett employed slaves simply because they were readily available and a cheaper option than hiring farmers. Indentured servants had worked the lands in the seventeenth century, but this form of labor had become obsolete. Throughout the colonies indentured servitude had virtually ended by the early eighteenth century. So for Narragansett planters, following their Newport neighbors in holding slaves seemed only natural.<sup>31</sup>

The Narragansett plantations are comparable to Southern plantations with the understanding that they were of a much smaller scale. While Southern plantations could be several hundred acres, most Narragansett farms were around one hundred acres. Many Southern plantations also used upwards of a hundred slaves, while the Narragansett average was around fifteen to twenty.<sup>32</sup> This often varied as the most prominent estates of the Stantons, Hazards, and Champlins each had over fifty slaves. Comparatively, this is clearly few compared to the amount of slaves in the Deep South. However, compared to the rest of New England these statistics are significant. By 1750 one third of Narragansett's population was enslaved blacks. The average slave percentage for other

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<sup>30</sup> Fitts. Robert K. *Inventing New England's Slave Paradise : Master/Slave Relations in Eighteenth Century Narragansett, Rhode Island*

<sup>31</sup> McLoughlin, William G. *Rhode Island, a history*.

<sup>32</sup> Fitts. Robert K. *Inventing New England's Slave Paradise : Master/Slave Relations in Eighteenth Century Narragansett, Rhode Island*

New England towns was at most five percent.<sup>33</sup> So even though these farms were much smaller than Southern plantations, they are proportionally comparable. It is also notable that Southern plantations and those of Narragansett had quite different labor requirements; dairy production requires far less labor than cotton.

Nevertheless, the Narragansett farms operated similarly to Southern plantations in terms of culture and ownership. Slaves often worked six days a week with a rest day on Sunday. They worked long hours doing everything from tending to cattle and horses to serving meals and taking care of children. Slaves were often not designated to certain positions and shared both domestic and field duties. All slaves were baptized in local churches and received communion. Scholars have contended that most Narragansett slaves were treated relatively well and even given their freedom later in life. While they most likely had higher quality lives than cotton or sugar producing slaves, they still worked tirelessly against their will. However, even the practice of freeing slaves later in life was financially motivated. Many Narragansett planters did not want to pay the living expenses for aging, unproductive slaves; therefore when they were no longer productive they would set them free. This often forced slaves to resort to begging and struggling to find a non-physically strenuous form of work.<sup>34</sup>

While these slaves worked on making fine cheeses and tending to prize Narragansett pacers, the plantation owners lived lives of leisure. The surplus wealth provided from exports allowed the Narragansett planters and their families to live lives modeled after the British gentry. The several plantation owning families such as the

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<sup>33</sup> Miller, William Davis. *The Narragansett Planters*

<sup>34</sup> Fitts, Robert K. *Inventing New England's Slave Paradise : Master/Slave Relations in Eighteenth Century Narragansett, Rhode Island*

Stantons, Hazards, Gardners, and Champlins had extensive ties with each other through intermarriage. They also had considerable influence in Rhode Island government.

Founding planters William Brenton and Benedict Arnold had both been governor and more planters followed in their path.<sup>35</sup> Planter families had no involvement at all in the managing of their exports so were free to get involved in university, politics, and travel. These elite families attended university at the most prestigious institutions in the world including Harvard and Oxford. They went to fox hunts, took long trips to Southern France and lived as English royalty would have. Most importantly to Rhode Island was their involvement in local politics. Throughout the eighteenth century their influence in the colonial government firmly protected their business interests. While Narragansett County certainly had well suited soil for grazing to do well, the prosperity of these plantations would not have been attained without slave labor.<sup>36</sup>

The existence of this planter class is rather remarkable in the context of American history. American history is traditionally understood with the pretext that there never existed royalty in this land. The history of colonization typically tells of how immigrants fled religious persecution or economic strife to found a more equal society. This history of the Narragansett plantations exemplifies a stark contradiction to America's understanding of colonial history. The plantations were not only an aristocratic like system, but one based on slavery in the far North. Controlling large swaths of land and wealth, these planter families were the aristocracy of Rhode Island. The Narragansett Plantations flourished throughout most of the eighteenth century and did not diminish

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<sup>35</sup> Miller, William Davis. *The Narragansett Planters*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*



until the outbreak of the American Revolution. (Bartlett, John, Russell, ed. Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence

The Narragansett plantations are indicative of the economic opportunism that dominated the growth of Rhode Island. Despite there being similar forms of slave-based plantation anywhere in the North, it was done in Narragansett simply for economic gain. These planters specialized in producing the highest quality products for the lowest labor costs possible. Their wealth, lifestyles, and business served no greater purpose for the community; they enriched themselves. Their business used slave labor to support slave labor in the West Indies. This morally bankrupt system was considered acceptable to the planter families because they had become part of the new wealthy class of the colonies. The lives of slaves enabled their opportunity for commercial success.

### **The Golden Age of Newport**

While Narragansett County developed due to dairy and horse exports, Newport was crafting the world's finest rum. Rum originated in the Caribbean as a result of the excess molasses of the West Indies sugar islands. It quickly became popular in the American colonies and the first rum distillery in Newport opened in the late seventeenth century. Newport rum production took off in the early eighteenth century so much so that by the 1770s there were twenty-two rum distilleries in Newport alone.<sup>37</sup> These distilleries fueled the local economy and bolstered supporting industries in the city such as barrel making, ship building, and iron casting. Additionally, thousands of locals were employed working in the ports, warehouses; the trade also employed numerous scribes and

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<sup>37</sup> Jefferys, C. P. B., and C. P. B. Jefferys. *Newport: a concise history*.

accountants to oversee business logistics. An expert typically managed the rum distilling, but African slaves were often employed in the low skill work required. By the mid eighteenth century, 20% of Newport's population was enslaved blacks, many of which were employed in rum distilling.<sup>38</sup>

Newport rum was extremely profitable as molasses collected from the West Indies was exchanged for slaves at a highly favorable rate. Several rum distillers in the city even conducted vertical integration. Abraham Redwood for example owned a major rum distillery, several slave ships, and had significant investment in Jamaican sugar plantations. This enabled his company and his colleagues to garner enormous profits.<sup>39</sup> Similar to Narragansett, the Newport rum industry was controlled by several key families who like Redwood, owned most of the means of production and distribution. In the city of Newport the industry seemed to benefit almost everyone, besides the enslaved. Founded on principles of religious liberty, Rhode Island was home to members of a variety of faiths. In more conservative places like Massachusetts, people of minority religions were barred or discouraged from taking part in prestigious industries. In Newport, however, the rum distilling and triangle trade employed Congregationalists, Anglicans, Jews, and Quakers alike. Profits from the trade even went into renovating America's first synagogue, Touro Synagogue.<sup>40</sup>

Newport rum was drunk and admired across the world. Even in Europe it was briefly used as a currency at its peak popularity. In Africa it became so wildly popular that the price soured during the mid eighteenth century and put French brandy out of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Dewan, Eve Harene. Newport Distilling Company, A Pirate's Legacy.

<sup>40</sup> Witney, Lynne. Urban Growth in Colonial Rhode Island: Newport and Providence in the Eighteenth Centuries.

business.<sup>41</sup> Slave ship captain John Cahoone Jr. wrote in 1736 that the shores of Africa were abundant in Rhode Island rum and that the locals were going mad over it. He bragged about outrageously favorable exchange he received in exchanging rum for slaves. His depiction of the slave trade illuminates the high value placed on rum and why so many Rhode Islanders citizens engaged in the trade.<sup>42</sup>

The liquor had seriously impacted the global Atlantic economy, but Newport exported far more than just rum. Traders exported essentials such as tools, paper, ink, and timber. However, the second most profitable export besides rum was spermaceti candles. Aaron Lopez, a Portuguese Jew fleeing persecution immigrated to Newport in 1752. He shortly began engaging in the slave trade with his family and made a substantial profit. He used this profit to found the United Spermaceti Candle Making Company. They used whale oil to produce some of the highest quality candles of the colonial era. The company was given a monopoly on spermaceti candles in 1761 and grew to become a major Newport industry, employing thousands.<sup>43</sup>

## **Rhode Island within the British Empire & the Atlantic World**

Rhode Island's eighteenth century mercantilism and involvement in the Triangle Trade did not come without serious hiccups. Enormous amounts of sugar were purchased by all of the American colonies, not just Rhode Island. A large portion of the sugar

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<sup>41</sup> Lipman, John F. History of American Rum.

<sup>42</sup> John Cahoone Jr. to Stephen Ayrault, 1736

<sup>43</sup> Spermaceti Candles and the Slave Trade. Newport.oncell.com

bought came from French sugar islands, which meant less profit for Great Britain. So in March 1733, British Parliament passed the Molasses Act, which severely taxed foreign sugar. This was meant not to gain revenue from foreign sugar, but to discourage its purchase altogether.<sup>44</sup>

While many Newport slave traders purchased molasses from British sugar islands, just as many purchased from French islands, mainly Saint Domingue. The passing of this act did not change their activity and the Newport traders began to engage in widespread smuggling. They ignored paying this new tax and continued seeking the cheapest available molasses. Even though the British government opposed this, local customs officials and Rhode Island militias did little to prevent it. The Governors and General Assembly willfully ignored the smuggling for the economic benefit of the colony. A major reason for this was the formidable influence and representation of slave traders in Rhode Island government.

The serious problem for the colony came the passing of the 1763 Sugar Act. Unlike the previous Molasses Act, this act was enforced by Parliament. For the entirety of Rhode Island's history, the colony had enjoyed essentially self-government without British overseeing. This was known as the period of benign neglect. This refers to the unwritten stance taken by Great Britain on the American colonies. Great Britain allowed the colonies autonomy in terms of self-government and laissez faire economics. In exchange the colonies provided raw materials to be manufactured in England. This system existed because Britain and other European powers were far more concerned with

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<sup>44</sup> Alderman, Clifford Lindsey. *Rum, slaves and molasses: the story of New England's triangular trade*.

the highly profitable sugar islands of the West Indies, than they were with vast North America.<sup>45</sup>

This all changed after the Sugar Act when British warships began monitoring smuggling in Narragansett Bay, which deeply frustrated colonists. Matters were made worse by the passing of several other acts, which Great Britain hoped would raise tax revenue on the mercantile colony. Colonial frustrations mounted and eventually culminated in what is known as the Gaspee Affair.

On June 9<sup>th</sup> 1772, a group of rebel colonists led by John Brown boarded a British customs schooner run aground at Gaspee Point in Warwick. They battled with the crew until they took control of the ship, then burned it in the bay.<sup>46</sup> This event is hailed as a heroic pushback on tyrannical British oppression; while this is part of the story it also says a lot about Rhode Island. It shows the utter dependency on unregulated trade Rhode Islanders had. They were used to shipping and slave trading without interference. This event proved the lengths Rhode Islanders were willing to go to protect the lucrative profits of their commerce, mainly the rum industry and slave trade. The colonists felt that the British were infringing on their essential freedoms. The irony is that they meant their freedom to enslave others.

Rhode Island grew up and developed as a product of the Atlantic World. With no triangle trade there is no Rhode Island. If the colony had remained a fishing settlement as it was in the mid seventeenth century, it likely would have been absorbed by Massachusetts. Rhode Island's participation in the slave trade guaranteed both its economic and political success. There is no doubt the colony benefitted enormously from

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Raven, Rory. *Burning the Gaspee: Revolution in Rhode Island*.

the Triangle Trade. Despite occupying the smallest landmass, Rhode Island became the primary exporter to the West Indies. Newport was literally paved and built with tax money collected from slave trading. Subsidiary industries boomed as did the population of the city due to slave trade related commerce. Rhode Island merchants, ship builders, rum distillers, and countless other professions thrived during the city's golden age. These people were hard-working entrepreneurs that built enormous wealth for themselves and their families. Despite this, they willingly participated in business that propped up the West Indies slave-based plantation complex; perhaps the most horrible institution in history.

Just like Newport, Narragansett County has slavery to thank for its substantial productivity and wealth. Fertile soil only helped the region so much; it was slave labor on the Narragansett plantations that made the planter families so vastly wealthy.

Ultimately, Southern Rhode Island emerged as a slave-trading hub because it could. Merchants seized upon the most profitable industry of the age because Rhode Island had no staple crop, abundance of minerals, or massive untapped forests. Rhode Island had the sea and utilized this resource to become the forefront of the American slave trade. Rhode Island became a society of opportunism. In Narragansett the planters seized on the opportunity to sell goods to the West Indies through the cheapest means possible, slave labor. In Newport rum was produced because it was the most profitable. Rhode Islanders did not care that its distribution involved the slave trading because its profits built the streets of Newport. Even the colony's government outwardly supported the trade. The history of the colony's development proves economic opportunity was a greater motivator than any social or political factor. Rhode Island was not dictated by a

political or religious mantra like some of its neighbors. Rhode Island developed solely around the concept of mercantile opportunity.

### **Chapter Three: Quakerism & Incremental Freedom**

#### **Roger Williams & The Progressive Making of Rhode Island**

The colony of Rhode Island was founded on the principle of religious toleration and freedom. These founding principles were established through the colony's founder, Roger Williams.<sup>47</sup> Its reputation attracted the Quakers, a progressive religious group that championed pacifism and abolition. Over the course of the eighteenth century the Quakers of Rhode Island campaigned against the power Rhode Island slave trade interests. They worked to influence the colonial government and pass laws against both the trade and ownership of slaves in Rhode Island. The presence of Quakers within the colony ultimately led to the downfall of slavery and the slave trade there.<sup>48</sup> Without decades of Quaker abolitionist campaign there likely would not have been the gradual breakdown of this economic system. In essence, without religious tolerance there would be no Quakers; without Quakers there would be no abolition movement. So even though

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<sup>47</sup> Barry, John M. *Roger Williams and the creation of the American soul: church, state, and the birth of liberty*.

<sup>48</sup> Rufus M. Jones MacMillan & Co. Ltd. *The Quakers in the American Colonies*.

Rhode Island became a slave-trading bastion, the colony's religious freedom facilitated a successful abolitionist movement.

Despite becoming a hub of colonial slave trading, Rhode Island's origins were progressive. The colony's founder Roger Williams, grew up highly educated attending Cambridge University in England. After graduating he served under a prominent English lord in the 1620s. This was during a time of intense religious persecution, so Williams being a Puritan, fled to Boston in 1631. A victim of religious intolerance he strongly opposed state sponsored religion. He believed the King of England's ties to the Church of England were unjust and sought to escape that in the New World. However, Williams arrived in the strictly Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony where opposing religious views were restricted. Even though he was a Puritan himself, Williams found himself in great opposition to local leadership. He was arrested by authorities and charged with heresy for publically denouncing state sponsored Puritanism.<sup>49</sup>

Facing trial for heresy and probable deportation back to England, Roger Williams fled South to Rhode Island in 1636. With sympathizers he established the town of Providence and the colony of Rhode Island.<sup>50</sup> The founding laws of the colony stated that a General Assembly would enforce laws based on civic matters only.<sup>51</sup> This was a deliberate exclusion of religion from the colonial government, representing an extremely radical move for the time. In 1638 more prominent religious dissenters including Anne Hutchinson fled the Massachusetts Bay Colony for Rhode Island and

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<sup>49</sup> Barry, John M. *Roger Williams and the creation of the American soul: church, state, and the birth of liberty.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> History of the state of Rhode Island and the Providence Plantations.



settled the town of Newport on Aquidneck Island. Together Providence and Newport aligned to officially found the colony, which was granted its royal charter in 1663.<sup>52</sup>

The establishment of Rhode Island as a place of religious tolerance attracted people of all different faiths. Dissidents like Roger Williams and his family flocked to the region. Unlike elsewhere in the colonies, Rhode Island welcome Baptists, Jews, and Quakers.<sup>53</sup> Pennsylvania was the only other colony in British America that welcome so much religious diversity at its founding. Rhode Island was unabashed about its religious tolerance stating in its royal charter, “No person within the said Colony, at any time hereafter, shall be any wise molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question, for any differences in opinion, in matters of religion, who does not actually disturb the peace of our said Colony.”<sup>54</sup>

The Religious Society of Friends was founded in 1647 in England by a group of Baptist dissenters. They became known as Quakers for shaking during their radical religious ceremonies. While the Baptists were persecuted, the Quakers were treated even worse in England. Facing threat of execution during a time of England’s civil instability, they fled to the New World. The group found appealing homes in both Pennsylvania and Rhode Island. The religious group played a major role in Rhode Island’s history, serving as spiritual, business, and political leaders of the community.<sup>55</sup>

A 1652 law evidences the radical and progressive nature of Rhode Island’s founding era. Over two hundred years before the federal government of the United States abolished slavery, the colony of Rhode Island passed a ban on slavery. On May 18<sup>th</sup>,

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Bicknell, Thomas, Williams. The History of the State of Rhode Island.

<sup>54</sup> Rhode Island and the Providence Plantations Royal Charter.

<sup>55</sup> Rufus M. Jones MacMillan & Co. Ltd. The Quakers in the American Colonies.

1652 the General Assembly passed an Act of Labor Statute that dictated slaves must be freed ten years after arrival in the colony. This ambitious law aimed to keep slavery out of Rhode Island as the penalty for keeping slaves beyond ten years was hefty.<sup>56</sup> The reasoning behind the enactment of this statute likely lies with the ideology of Roger Williams's and his followers. Williams experienced firsthand the brutality exercised in Massachusetts against local Indian tribes. Often prisoners of war from Indian skirmishes were forced into varying forms of slave labor or indentured servitude. Williams spoke out against this common practice, seeking fair treatment of local tribes such as the local Narragansett people.<sup>57</sup> By the mid seventeenth century the General Assembly would have also been aware of the abundance of African slavery in the Southern colonies as well as the West Indies.

Thus this act served as an expression of Rhode Island's values. The colony was founded on freedom that contradicted the comparably oppressive Massachusetts Bay Colony. Not only did it serve as an early melting pot of several different religious groups including Jews, but it legally opposed slavery. This was ground breaking for the time period and this era of Rhode Island's history has been looked upon with awe. The irony of course is that this progressive model did not last long in the colony.

Neither the General Assembly nor Roger Williams could have predicted the direction Rhode Island would take. By this time the colony was of meager importance to the region and played no significant role in the Atlantic world. Its residents by the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century sought only religious freedom, land, and a community of which to call their

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<sup>56</sup> Anti Slavery Statute of 1652.

<sup>57</sup> Barry, John M. *Roger Williams and the creation of the American soul: church, state, and the birth of liberty*.

own.<sup>58</sup> The Rhode Island General Assembly clearly saw no future in involvement in the slave trade or the slave plantations of the West Indies. Additionally the values of Rhode Island's founders were religious tolerance and equality.<sup>59</sup> Even though Quakers had not yet immigrated to the colony in large numbers, from its founding Rhode Island was certainly progressive. This is especially the case compared to strictly Puritan Massachusetts. Therefore this statute makes sense for the time period, but in hindsight is quite naïve. Evidently, the slave statute of 1652 was not followed and by the end of the century hundreds of slaves lived and labored in Rhode Island.

The law is especially notable because it was passed without a significant Quaker presence in Rhode Island. The Quakers would later be pivotal in undermining the colony's slave trade and advocating for its eventual emancipation. Similar to Pennsylvania at this time, Rhode Island was a culturally appealing place for the Quakers. In 1656 the General Court of Boston had passed an order legally persecuting and banning the religious group.<sup>60</sup> The order stated those who allowed Quakers entry to the jurisdiction of Boston would be fined one hundred pounds. Quakers that entered the city were to be immediately escorted out and those that returned after removal, "shall for the first offense have one ear cut off and upon return have the other ear cut off."<sup>61</sup> Therefore, it was no surprise that in the mid seventeenth century hundreds of Quakers fled to Rhode Island, as the region became known as a refuge.

Here, where they were freely tolerated, their principles spread to a large segment of the population. Between the years 1670-1695 Quakers were estimated to constitute

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<sup>58</sup> Bicknell, Thomas, Williams. The History of the State of Rhode Island.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Rufus M. Jones MacMillan & Co. Ltd. The Quakers in the American Colonies.

<sup>61</sup> 1656 General Court of Boston Order

half the voting population of Rhode Island.<sup>62</sup> Only land owning males were able to vote so this is also an indication of the Quaker's relative financial success even before the colony's shipping economy took off. Several of the Narragansett Plantation founders were Quaker as were early land owners of the town of Newport. Records indicate that the Rhode Island Society of Friends were first established in 1675 and that by this time there were meeting houses throughout the colony.<sup>63</sup>

The Quakers also controlled the politics of the colony. By 1673 the Governor of Rhode Island was a Quaker named Nicholas Easton. Additionally the Deputy Governor, their assistants, and almost half of the General Assembly was Quaker. Another Quaker was elected Governor in 1685 and Quakers continued to be active in colonial politics well into the eighteenth century.<sup>64</sup>

Throughout Rhode Island's colonial history the Quakers exhibited important influence on the government, economy, and social structure. As Rhode Island grew in population the amount of Quakers was diluted. Regardless they always exerted power over Rhode Island likely because of their prominence during the colony's formative period. By the end of the seventeenth century they were a critical part of transforming the Rhode Island economy from a subsidiary fishing area into a global trading hub.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Rufus M. Jones MacMillan & Co. Ltd. *The Quakers in the American Colonies*.

<sup>63</sup> Benedict Arnold and the Rhode Island Quakers, Ranters and Heretics

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

## Legalized Slavery

As the Rhode Island economy became increasingly entrenched in the Atlantic slave economy, so did its laws. The more involved the colony became in shipping and slave trading, the more those interests were represented in the colonial government. Even by the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the General Assembly was largely dictated and controlled by the Newport shipping moguls.<sup>66</sup> These interests worked to pass a series of laws regarding slavery that became the harshest in all of New England. In 1718 a law was enacted that banned slaves from entering the homes of free blacks. Both the slaves and free blacks were to be whipped if caught. After 1750, anyone caught helping in any way or selling to a slave that is not their own would be heavily fined.<sup>67</sup>

A 1714 law was especially strict and was perhaps a prerequisite for the Fugitive Slave Law of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The law specified that anyone who took a slave out of the colony without certified permission from their master would be greatly punished. They could face heavy fines or imprisonment. Due to a later law, the Rhode Island government also had the authority to search any ship suspected of harboring a runaway slave.<sup>68</sup>

Slaves were harshly punished for stealing as well. The same 1714 law specified that any slave caught stealing would immediately face fifteen lashes and potential banishment from the colony.<sup>69</sup> While banishment may have seemed appealing to many miserable slaves, it meant a much worse fate. Slaves found guilty of stealing or worse crimes were banished to the West Indies sugar islands where they would inevitably be worked to death. These plantations had a much worse quality of life than slavery in

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<sup>66</sup> CLARK-PUJARA, CHRISTY. *DARK WORK: the business of slavery in rhode island*.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Bartlett, John, Russell, ed. *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and the Providence Plantations in New England V. IV 1707-1740*.

<sup>69</sup> CLARK-PUJARA, CHRISTY. *DARK WORK: the business of slavery in rhode island*.

Rhode Island.<sup>70</sup> Regardless, the colony's strict slave laws kept the shipping interests satisfied and the slaves subjugated. This meant a particularly severe system prevented any slave uprisings. As the business of slave trading ramped up, the cruelty of the laws did as well.

These laws show that an entire apparatus existed around protecting the business of the slave trade and its subsidiary industries. Despite having far fewer slaves than the American South or the West Indies, Rhode Island's slave laws were comparable in their cruelty. This is especially the case as compared to the rest of New England. The laws prove the extreme measures the colony was willing to take to protect its commercial interests and ensure business ran smoothly. The colonial militia's prime duty was protecting the shipping industry of Newport and that meant the profits of traders.<sup>71</sup> The ability of the government to board and seize any ship suspected of harboring a runaway slave is clearly an enormous breach of freedom.

A major reason for the laws beyond protecting mercantilism was the ratio of black slaves to white citizen in Rhode Island. Colonies such as New York likely had more enslaved at its peak, but Rhode Island had more per capita.<sup>72</sup> Even with Newport becoming the colonies' fifth largest city, Rhode Island was still relatively small in terms of population. Therefore there was greater concern of slave rebellion, both on the Narragansett Plantations and on the slave ships coming in and out of Newport.

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<sup>70</sup> Rawley, James A., and Stephen D. Berhendt. *The transatlantic slave trade: a history*.

<sup>71</sup> CLARK-PUJARA, CHRISTY. *DARK WORK: the business of slavery in rhode island*.

<sup>72</sup> Clark-Pujara, Christy Mikel. *Slavery, Emancipation and Black freedom in Rhode Island, 1652-1842*.

## **The Progression of Quaker Belief**

The eventual downfall of Rhode Island slave trading occurred largely because of the actions of the Quakers during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. However, the religious group had expressed concerns about slavery since the late seventeenth century and spoken out across the colonies. In 1688 several prominent Quakers of Germantown, near Philadelphia, wrote a condemnation against slavery.<sup>73</sup> They proposed the moral questions of how a persecuted people from Britain turn around and enslave others in America? They asked what would Quakers do if the slaves revolted? Would they fight back and enslave them or honor their religion through pacifism. This well known petition set the debate that would haunt Quakerism and American society through the Revolutionary War. Although ignored in Rhode Island throughout the eighteenth century, these same arguments would be revisited at the end of the century.

Despite heavy Quaker involvement in the Rhode Island slave trade, the morality of the issue was questioned at an early stage. During a meeting of the Newport Society of Friends, members deliberated over the rise of Newport slave trading in recent history.<sup>74</sup> They pondered whether there were not better activities for the colony's sailors to take part in and whether they had turned their backs on God. It was ultimately decided that the church in Rhode Island would discourage its members from taking part in the industry. However it was not openly condemned and this time meeting reflects the uncertainty many Quakers had over the topic at the time. There seemed to be no clear consensus at least by the early 1720s over the morality of slavery in the Rhode Island Quaker Church.

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<sup>73</sup> The Role of Quakers in Abolition: Campaigning Against Slavery.

<sup>74</sup> Benedict Arnold and the Rhode Island Quakers, Ranters and Heretics.

More evidence of this disagreement was expressed in a 1722 meeting of the Newport Society of Friends. Prominent Quaker, Attorney General of the Colony, and Narragansett plantation owner Daniel Updike argued for the benefits of the trade.<sup>75</sup> He took the utilitarian argument, contending that the benefits far outweighed any moral costs for Rhode Islanders. He stated that the shipping had considerably stimulated the Newport economy. In particular he mentioned the construction of the bridge connecting the island of Newport to the mainland. His statements express the willingness to not only accept the morality of the slave trade, but expand the business.<sup>76</sup>

It is important to note that even though there was not agreement about abolition among Quakers, the fact that the discussion took place is important. In Rhode Island, Quakers and other religious groups were allowed the liberty to speak out and publically question societal norms such as slavery. The religious liberty of the colony enabled its abolition movement.

In 1727 the leadership of Quakers met in London and made the first official proclamation on slavery. At the convention of the London Yearly Meeting, it was concluded that owning slaves did not align with the values of the church. The leadership condemned the action stating, “it is the sense of this meeting that the importing of negroes from native country and relations by Friends is not a commendable nor allowed practice and is therefore censured by this meeting.”<sup>77</sup> This was the first clear expression of the Church that involvement in the slave trade or ownership of slaves was immoral.

This 1727 proclamation is fascinating in that it shows how for the rest of the eighteenth century Rhode Island Quakerism would be divided. The official stance of the

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<sup>75</sup> 1722 Newport Society of Friends meeting minutes.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> London Yearly Meeting 1717, Society of Friends



church stood with the Quakers of Pennsylvania in condemning slavery. The stance was hardline, without exception, and asserted that no good Quaker could support such an evil.

Despite this, Quakers continued fueling the Rhode Island slave trade at every level. They produced rum, built ships, and even captained slave ships. By the mid eighteenth century Quakers also made up around fifteen to twenty percent of Rhode Island's population.<sup>78</sup> Since so much of the economy was based around the trade, it would have statistically made little sense for Quakers to not be apart of it in some aspect. So what exists up until the Revolutionary War is this strange dichotomy: the church condemned slavery and the common Rhode Island Quakers ignored it and continue to work for the Newport shipping industry.

Rhode Island Quakers were not ignorant to the conclusions their church had made on slavery. They justified their actions by claiming involvement in the slave trade and being good Quakers were not mutually exclusive. They practiced their religion with their slaves, often bringing them to Friends Meetings and teaching them the tenants of Quakerism and Christianity. They believed treating the slaves respectfully was equal to protecting them and ultimately benefitted the slaves.<sup>79</sup> These justifications existed among Rhode Island Quakers through the late eighteenth century. However, by the 1770s most began to accept the far-reaching implications of the slave trade and the nefarious nature of the industry.

Evidence of this was seen through Quaker manumissions in the 1760s and 1770s. Quakers of the colony began to publically manumit (free) their slaves at meetings of the

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<sup>78</sup> Rufus M. Jones MacMillan & Co. Ltd. *The Quakers in the American Colonies*.

<sup>79</sup> Jennings, Judith. *The American Revolution and the Testimony of British Quakers Against the Slave Trade*.

Friends.<sup>80</sup> The intention of these demonstrations were to popularize the movement of abolition and encourage others to follow their actions. One of the most important Rhode Island manumissions occurred in 1769. Tom Hazard, a member of the prominent Narragansett Plantation family freed all of his slaves following the death of his father. He declared that he wished to erase the sins of his ancestors.<sup>81</sup> This movement remained mainly within the Quaker religion in Rhode Island did not cause any mass freeing of slaves throughout the colony. However, it was a sign that Quaker abolitionism had picked up steam. Luckily for the Quakers by the 1770s, they were not the only ones advocating for abolition of slavery and dis-involvement in the slave trade.

### **Rhode Island during the American Revolution**

The Rhode Island Quaker abolition movement coincided with pushback against the British Empire and rise of revolutionary rhetoric.<sup>82</sup> As exemplified through the burning of the Gaspee, a British Customs and Excise vessel, Rhode Islanders for the large part eagerly supportive of revolutionary fervor. Shipping and free trade with the West Indies were essential to the colony. The more the British restricted their trade and impounded Rhode Island ships, the more the colonists aligned with their rebellious Massachusetts neighbors. As the economic fate of the colony seemed to be increasingly threatened by British policing, the concepts of the Revolution were popularized in Rhode

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> *Rhode Island Quakers and the American Revolution: 1775-1790.*

Island. Enlightenment notions of equality, fraternity, and individual liberty were suddenly at the forefront of public life. Quakers successfully attached their abolitionist ideals to the now mainstream concepts of the Revolution.<sup>83</sup> The result was widening support for abolition outside of just their religion.

This manifested in the first gradual emancipation act in Rhode Island's history. In 1774 the General Assembly passed a law banning the importation of slaves into the colony.<sup>84</sup> This did not criminalize slavery existing within the state, but prohibited the bringing of new slaves into Rhode Island. Any slave that passed into the colony would immediately freed. This act is significant in that it was one of the first major abolition laws in all the colonies. Additionally it was passed before the outbreak of the American Revolution. The proponents of this law had argued that to be a revolutionary meant to support abolitionism. They contended that it was unjust to seek liberty from the British, while denying it from black slaves. This was a clear indication from the General Assembly that they sought to make sure no more slaves entered the colony. It was the first in a series of several acts of the next couple years that emancipated Rhode Island.

While the movement toward complete emancipation had begun through Quaker influence, the Revolution completed it. In essence, ideas pushed Rhode Island toward emancipation, but war and necessity finished it.

Tensions erupted between Rhode Island and Great Britain in the 1770s. Beyond the occurrence of the Gaspee Incident, protests against the British became common in Newport and Providence by 1773. Protests turned violent and in 1774 the General Assembly passed procurements to raise a colonial militia. The opposition to Great Britain

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> McLoughlin, William G. *Rhode Island, a history*.

was fervent in the colony; on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1776 Rhode Island became the first American colony to renounce its allegiance to King George III.<sup>85</sup> By that summer they had joined that the rest of the American colonies in the Revolution.

Following the fall of New York City in the fall of 1776, the British military turned their attention to Rhode Island. With all major population centers located along the coast, the colony was a vulnerable target for the British. In December of 1776 the British conquered Newport then Providence. They shortly after accepted the surrender of the colony.<sup>86</sup> The overwhelming British navy had been easily able to conquer Rhode Island due to its reliance on the ocean. Its advantage had become its downfall in wartime.

The British conquest of Newport decimated the city and its shipping industry. Before the British invasion, half the city's population had fled. During their three year occupation the British took control of homes and city buildings, depleted island resources, and destroyed structures for firewood. Overall the economy was devastated. All manufacturing and business activity came to a halt.<sup>87</sup> In 1774 Newport had twenty-two distilleries and nine spermaceti candle factories; in 1782 there were none.<sup>88</sup> As the city's infrastructure was ruined business did not return after the war. Newport experienced a severe recession, which lasted until it became a tourist destination in the mid eighteenth century. The British had occupied Newport during most of the war. The last few years of the war it was occupied by the French to keep the British out.

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<sup>85</sup> Raven, Rory. *Burning the Gaspee: Revolution in Rhode Island*.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> NEWELL, MARGARET ELLEN. "EMULATION OF EMPIRE." In *From Dependency to Independence: Economic Revolution in Colonial New England*

Ultimately, by the end of the war, the once primary port of shipping had become a minor harbor of the United States.<sup>89</sup>

The destruction of Newport was also a huge blow to slave trading in Rhode Island. During the occupation, the Narragansett plantations faltered, no slave ships made voyages, and the rum distilleries sat still. While the slave trading and its subsidiary industries stopped, abolitionism accelerated.

By 1778 the American Revolution was in full swing and the Continental Army sought munitions, aid, and soldiers from wherever possible. Despite initial orders in 1775 to deny blacks service, desperation called for more troops. In 1778 the Rhode Island General Assembly approved the recruitment of free blacks and slaves into its ranks.<sup>90</sup> In exchange for service Rhode Island slaves were granted freedom. This enticed hundreds to leave their masters for the Continental Army. During wartime tracking down runaway slaves was too difficult; after the war was over these former slaves were given certificates validating their service, which meant they were certainly not returning to slavery.<sup>91</sup>

This act was successful because it was a fulfilled promise to the slaves of Rhode Island, despite pushback from slaveholders. Slaves needed only to present themselves to Colonel Christopher Greene in Providence and they were guaranteed their freedom upon appropriate payment of the army to the slaveholder. This was a strong incentive for slaves to abandon their masters. Slaveholders of Newport and Narragansett sent a protest letter to the General Assembly claiming it was dangerous to arm slaves. They also tried

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<sup>89</sup> Bicknell, Thomas, Williams. *The History of the State of Rhode Island.*

<sup>90</sup> *Rhode Island in the American Revolution: An Exhibition from the Library and Museum Collections of The Society of the Cincinnati.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

convincing their own slaves not to list because they would be “used as manual laborers, put on the front lines, or sold to the West Indies.”<sup>92</sup>

The leaders of the American Revolution feared the involvement of slaves in the Continental Army. Like the shipping and plantation aristocrats of Rhode Island, they viewed the Revolution as a movement of attaining economic freedom by pushing back against unjust taxes. They envisioned a revolution for whites and worried about the implications of arming blacks and the message it would send to slave owning patriots such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Despite these concerns, thousands of slaves fought for the patriots, many from Rhode Island.<sup>93</sup>

While slaves were abandoning their masters in large swaths, emancipation was incrementally legalized in Rhode Island. The abolition movement in the colony had grown to include more than just Quakers and was bolstered by former slave owners who freed their slaves. This movement seized upon the perfect opportunity to influence the General Assembly during the war. They published pamphlets denouncing the horrors of slavery and distributed them throughout. They spoke out against not only slaveholding in Rhode Island, but the entire slave trading industry.<sup>94</sup> The movement asserted the West Indies slavery based plantation system was the greatest evil in human history. The abolitionist argument rested on two major pillars. The first, advocated by Quaker belief, was that supporting slavery or slave trading was unchristian and immoral. The second pillar was that it was against the values of the Revolution. The alignment of abolitionism with the revolution was successful in reducing Rhode Island slave holdings.

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<sup>92</sup> CLARK-PUJARA, CHRISTY. *DARK WORK: the business of slavery in rhode island*

<sup>93</sup> Rhode Island in the American Revolution: An Exhibition from the Library and Museum Collections of The Society of the Cincinnati.

<sup>94</sup> James, Sydney V. "The Impact of the American Revolution on Quakers' Ideas about Their Sect

The actions of abolitionists materialized into laws passed by the General Assembly. In 1779 Rhode Island slave traders lost the right to sell their slaves out of state.<sup>95</sup> This was a deliberate limit on what slaveholders could do with their slaves. It was a nod that the end of slavery was coming by making slaveholding increasingly difficult.

On September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1773, the Treaty of Paris ended the American Revolution, establishing the American colonies as a free entity. The end of the war did not slow Rhode Island abolition; in March, 1784 the General Assembly passed the Gradual Abolition of Slavery Act. This act guaranteed the freedom of any slave born in the state from that point on.<sup>96</sup> Even though it technically freed no one, it ended slavery in the long term. Additionally by the end of the war there were but a fraction of the slaves that had once been in Rhode Island due enlisting and abandoning masters. Finally gradual emancipation had been achieved.

### **Peace & the Promise of Freedom**

In 1787 a perhaps even more landmark law was passed, given the state's economic history before the war. The General Assembly officially banned Rhode Islanders from participating in the slave trade.<sup>97</sup> The condemnation of slavery had led to the condemnation of the slave trade itself. The slave trade had been interrupted during the war and this act intended to keep it shut down. This was the very first time the General Assembly had passed any law directly affecting the trade. Even though the state was still recovering from post war recession and Newport was in ruins, the slave trade was

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<sup>95</sup> Bicknell, Thomas, Williams. The History of the State of Rhode Island.

<sup>96</sup> Rhode Island in the American Revolution: An Exhibition from the Library and Museum Collections of The Society of the Cincinnati.

<sup>97</sup> Bicknell, Thomas, Williams. The History of the State of Rhode Island.

banned. The industry that had catapulted Rhode Island into being a major mercantile center had been officially banned. By this time the tide had turned. Legislators saw any involvement with slavery in opposition to the values of the new state. They wanted a future for Rhode Island and the country that did not rely on this nefarious trade.<sup>98</sup>

These laws did not free Rhode Island slaves and end the institution of the trade. They reinforced what became the norm during the revolution; black people in Rhode Island became patriots that won the colony and nation independence. Almost all became free during the war and these laws ensured it would stay that way. Rhode Island's independence from Britain meant the independence of its colored people. The true ideals of the American Revolution were realized.

Or were they? Despite the freedom of black slaves in the newly established state, many Rhode Islanders continued doing what they knew best. They continued sending out slave ships, but this time out of Providence. The destruction of Newport meant not that the Rhode Island economy had been destroyed; the mercantile activity in the state shifted from Southern Rhode Island, Newport and Narragansett, to Northern Rhode Island. Even after the 1789 ban slave traders made more money than ever illegally slave trading. The most prominent of these traders was the Brown family and especially John Brown, the benefactor of Brown University.

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<sup>98</sup> The Warwick, Rhode Island Digital History Project: *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*.



## Chapter Four: Broken Loyalty: The Clash of Ideologies

### **The Development of the Brown Dynasty**

The Brown family is most famously known as the benefactors of the Ivy League college Brown University. A Rhode Island dynasty, the Browns had been a prominent family in the colony since the mid seventeenth century. As the region grew and developed so did the family, amassing great power and wealth. As one of the main industries of Rhode Island became slave trading, the Browns participated in it heavily. The prominence of the family was built on slave trading as well as other related mercantile forms of business. They became involved in the Revolutionary war efforts and then also the abolition movement. By the end of the war, a rift emerged in the family. Brothers Moses and John Brown were on opposite sides of the spectrum in the abolition debate. John sought to continue the family tradition of slave trading, while Moses, an ardent Quaker, campaigned for abolition. The Brown brothers and the Rhode Island political economy at the micro level reveal a potent theme. Loyalties ran deep in Rhode Island. The Browns faced loyalty to family, business, country, religion, and friends; to Moses Brown, these loyalties were all tested.

Records of the Brown family begin with their colonial patriarch, Chaddus Brown. Chaddus was a devout Baptist who fled Buckingham, England in 1638 for the Massachusetts Bay Colony.<sup>99</sup> In Boston he faced further persecution for his religion so he migrated South to Providence shortly after arriving. Chaddus Brown was one of the main

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<sup>99</sup> The Brown Family. Brown University.

founders of the Rhode Island colony, signing the Providence Compact with eleven others, including Roger Williams. This compact established the General Assembly and laid out separation of church and state. He settled a large swath of land in Providence that his family would own for generations. The land eventually became the site of Brown University, of which is named for Chaddus Brown's family. A distinguished founder of Rhode Island, Brown was on a committee that oversaw affairs of the colony during Williams' absence. As an ardent Baptist he founded the Providence Baptist Church and served as its minister until his death. By the time of Chaddus Brown's death, the Brown family had been cemented into Rhode Island prominence.<sup>100</sup>

The story of the Brown family's immigration to Rhode Island mimics that of Roger Williams. Both Williams and Chaddus Brown fled England and then Boston to for a life in Providence. The two likely knew each other and were confidants given Brown's position in society and the small size of Providence. Along with several other families they helped found the small farming village of Providence and the colony of Rhode Island.<sup>101</sup> As the first minister of the Providence Baptist Church, Brown may have influenced Williams to become a Baptist. After migrating to Providence Williams relinquished his Puritan beliefs and became a practicing Baptist. The society the founders of Rhode Island built looked rather egalitarian, especially with the passing of the 1652 slave ban. This clearly did not last; slave trading and its subsidiary industries became dominant in the colony, while slave ownership also became quite common. In the slave trading business several family dynasties controlled the means of production, amassing great wealth from their businesses. While neither Roger Williams nor Chaddus Brown

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> History of the state of Rhode Island and the Providence Plantations.

lived to see Rhode Island in its mercantile golden age, Brown's descendants would rise to the forefront of it.<sup>102</sup>

The wealth and prestige of the Brown family continued into the eighteenth century. Chaddus had nine children all-together, five sons and four daughters. Most of his children had several of their own so by the mid eighteenth century the Browns were a well known and established family. Several Browns had served on the General Assembly, owned their own business especially rum distilleries, or both.<sup>103</sup> In the 1730s James Brown II was the owner of one of Rhode Island's largest rum distilleries. His factory produced copious amounts of rum, but never shipped it overseas. This changed in 1736 when Brown purchased a slaving ship *Mary* and launched the family's first slave trade. As the owner of the factory he had spent years managing the production of rum and was finally ready to personally deliver it to Africa. Accompanied by his brother Obadiah Brown, the *Mary* set sail for Africa in September 1636, reaching Africa by October, Jamaica by November, and back home to Rhode Island in December. The trip had been a major success; the Browns' first attempt at slave trading had yielded an enormous profit.<sup>104</sup>

### **Captains of the Family: Moses & John**

Three years later in 1639, James II died from complications of a weightlifting tournament leaving the care of his four sons Moses, John, Nicholas, and Joseph to Obadiah. With the death of his brother, Obadiah assumed control of the rum distilleries,

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<sup>102</sup> McLoughlin, William G. *Rhode Island, a history*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1986.

<sup>103</sup> Brown, Sylvia. *Grappling with legacy: Rhode Islands Brown family and the American philanthropic impulse*.

<sup>104</sup> Rappleye, Charles. *Sons of providence the Brown brothers, the slave trade and the american revolution*.

expanded production, and continued sending out slave trading trips. James' children grew up learning the in and outs of the family business. As they became older they learned how to conduct accounting work, survey the docks, and manage the distillery.<sup>105</sup> By the 1750s the boys had all come of age and together, "Obadiah and his nephews owned outright or jointly more than sixty vessels."<sup>106</sup> The four brothers each with their own personalities contributed differently to the business and family. Joseph and Nicholas were the more reserved of the four. Nicholas spent his career handling all of the elaborate family finances. As a mathematically minded man, he stuck to the numbers, not strategy. Joseph on the other hand, was, "indifferent to the affairs of the business."<sup>107</sup> He spent his life mostly occupied by the local Freemason chapter, presiding over meetings and debating philosophy.<sup>108</sup>

It was clear even by their early twenties that the future of the Brown family was going to be determined by Moses and John. Despite growing up running the family business together, they became sworn adversaries after the Revolutionary War. John's decision to continue slave trading destroyed their relationship, as Moses had become an outspoken abolitionist.<sup>109</sup> This feud later in life can perhaps be explained by their conflicting personalities. The two brothers were two years apart and spent most of their childhoods and careers together; they traveled on business to the West Indies together, their families vacationed together in Europe, and they were for most of their lives close friends and confidants. Despite this, they were quite different men. Even in his early years John was the charismatic one that loved entertainment, adventure, and socializing.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> The John Brown Papers.

Moses was humble, considerate, and considered more thoughtful of the two... “Where John was an egotist, Moses was painfully humble, where John sought conflict, Moses looked for conciliation.”<sup>110</sup> While the brothers’ personalities may not fully explain their decision-making, they make sense as to which one became the slave trader and which became the abolitionist.

In the 1760s Moses and John Brown emerged with two very distinct roles in the family business. Following the death of their uncle Obadiah Brown in 1762 the two brothers restructured the company to be called Brown Brothers and Company headed by Moses and John. The business expanded into shipbuilding and candle making, in which John was the primary selling agent. He traveled throughout the colonies and the West Indies promoting Brown and Co. while closing deals in all the great seaports of colonial America. He aggressively and insatiably worked to expand the company at any means possible. He illegally traded with the French sugar islands frequently and narrowly avoided arrest by British officials.<sup>111</sup>

Moses on the other hand handled the domestic affairs of Brown and Co., serving as a sort of lobbyist to the General Assembly. He oversaw the operations of both rum and candle manufacturing in both Providence and Newport, while also advocating for the company’s best lawful interest. His actions were especially needed after 1764 when Parliament passed the Sugar Act, heavily taxing colonial imports of molasses. The Molasses Act of 1733 had widely been ignored and unenforced throughout the colonies. Its lack of enforcement gave rise to the enormous profitability of rum distilling and slave trading by families such as the Browns. However, the large debt incurred from the Seven

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Brown University. Digital Archives.

Years War prompted Parliament to both tax the colonies and enforce the tax. This was deeply troubling for Moses Brown, the head of a business reliant on lenient enforcement and smuggling with French sugar islands.<sup>112</sup>

Luckily for Moses and Brown and Co. their influence was reached the highest echelons of Rhode Island colonial government. Moses and John's cousin Alisha Brown (a male) was the deputy governor of the colony. Records indicate that Moses met with Alisha and pushed him to advocate upon the merchants' interests to Governor Stephen Hopkins. A slave owner and investor in mercantile trade himself, Hopkins was sympathetic to the cause. Alisha Brown demonstrated the affect of the successful lobbying in a letter to Moses stating, "all the merchants or as many as sees fit in this town, should meet some afternoon in order to consult what method will be best to take when any of our vessels arrives which is liable to pay duties- so as we may stand by each other."<sup>113</sup> While there is no record of any meeting taking place, the correspondence between Moses and his cousin is indicative of the symbiotic relationship between business and politics in Rhode Island. For the Browns the line between their family, their business, and the government were blurred.

This is a specific example of the merchant class wielding excessive power to influence government. It was clear the colonial government served the shipping interests not the mother country. Salutary neglect had contributed to rise of this merchant aristocracy, in which the wills of families like the Browns carried significant weight. It is remarkable the lengths that Governor Hopkins worked with the merchant class to

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<sup>112</sup> Bicknell, Thomas, Williams. *The History of the State of Rhode Island*. New York: The American Historical Society, 1920.

<sup>113</sup> *The John Brown Papers*. Rhode Island Historical Society.

circumvent these new British enforcements. Governor Hopkins wrote a letter to Parliament protesting the enforcement of the law, while also stating he would strongly enforce it within Rhode Island. Meanwhile he deliberately allowed Moses Brown and other merchants to import molasses without paying duties and smuggle French molasses.<sup>114</sup> This instance is indicative of the interwoven nature of Rhode Island politics and business in which family and wealth mattered above all else.

This solution came back to the relationship between Moses and John Brown. Moses played the role of the shrewd negotiator crafting a way of operations despite the new Sugar Act; John on the other hand cared little what laws were passed by Parliament and continued his aggressive expansion of the business. In the years after the passing of the Sugar Act colonial resentment gradually built against the British especially among mercantile elites like the Browns. Moses and John certainly exhibited frustrations, but for somewhat different reasons. Moses sought to keep the business out of trouble and maintain profits, while John sought continued adventure without a curb on his lifestyle.<sup>115</sup>

### **Family Turmoil & Quaker Enlightenment**

In 1768 the first signs of strain in Moses and John's relationship emerged. This was the year the Brown brothers launched their largest slave expedition yet with the slaving ship the *Sally*. *Sally* was twice as large as any ship they had sent out before and could carry far more slaves and rum than usual; it was also much more expensive. The

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<sup>114</sup> Brown, Sylvia. *Grappling with legacy: Rhode Islands Brown family and the American philanthropic impulse*.

<sup>115</sup> Rappleye, Charles. *Sons of providence the Brown brothers, the slave trade and the american revolution*.

Brothers did not accompany the voyage per usual, but were highly optimistic about its journey and outcome. Early in the summer of 1768 it was reported that the Sally had sunk in a storm near Antigua. The entire crew and slave cargo were killed.<sup>116</sup> This was a shock to the family as the crew had been employed within their business for years. Beyond loss of life this was a major financial setback to the firm.

The worries continued for the Browns when in July of 1768 Moses Brown's second daughter died just two hours after being born. These calamities were especially hard on Moses, who thereafter experienced recurring bouts of depression. This same summer the business expanded rapidly into into several new industries including whaling and iron production. At a time when Moses was feeling increasingly overwhelmed with business and family, John incessantly pushed to expand the business into new ventures and continue slaving despite the failure of the *Sally*.<sup>117</sup>

Tensions between colonists and the British escalated into the Gaspee Affair in what became Rhode Island's most well known act of rebellion. The burning of the British customs ship was led by none other than John Brown. In the summer of 1772 under the command of Captain Dudingston the Gaspee was circling the Narragansett Bay impressing ships suspected of harboring undeclared molasses and rum. This sparked outrage from the merchant community. John Brown personally sponsored a complaint to Admiral Montigu, head of the royal fleet at Boston. Montigu ignored the complaint and the Gaspee continued going after ships. On June 8<sup>th</sup> the Gaspee followed a ship owned by Brown Brothers and Co. The ship's captain Benjamin Lindsey, knew the local waters

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<sup>116</sup> The Brown Family. Brown University.

<sup>117</sup> Rappleye, Charles. *Sons of providence the Brown brothers, the slave trade and the american revolution*.



much better and was able to outmaneuver the Gaspee. Eventually the two ships got close enough to shore near Narragansett and Captain Lindsey rammed the Gaspee aground. He immediately sent word for John Brown, one of the most outspoken critics of the Gaspee.<sup>118</sup>

John quickly assembled a local mob in Providence that overran the Gaspee and took control of the ship. They did not kill any of the crew, but burned the ship right there in the harbor. This immediately resulted in a hefty bounty out for the capture of John Brown. Thus the Browns were thrust into the American Revolution. Moses, the more cautious of the brothers had been reluctant to join the Revolutionary cause, but was seemingly forced to upon his brother's actions. John spent the next several months in hiding staying with friends and being protected by sympathetic locals.<sup>119</sup>

During his time of hiding, Moses and other prominent Rhode Islanders wrote pamphlets condemning the hunt of John and denouncing the aggression of the British navy. Moses negotiated with the General Assembly and ensured John would not be turned over to British naval authorities.<sup>120</sup> As was tradition, John acted on things; Moses thought and deliberated. In a way the two brothers mirrored the two kinds of American revolutionaries. They were similar to the rebellious Adams family of Massachusetts. Like Sam Adams, John Brown sought to act and fight the British through aggressive means. Like John Adams, Moses wanted to resolve matters through working the general assembly and cutting some sort of deal. The Brown brothers were a microcosm of both the philosophers and the rebels of the American Revolution.

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<sup>118</sup> Raven, Rory. *Burning the Gaspee: Revolution in Rhode Island*.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> The John Brown Papers.

Just a two months after the Gaspee Affair in the fall of 1772, Moses Brown's life was fundamentally changed. While walking through Newport one afternoon his wife Anna had a seizure and collapsed. She was bedridden and died within a few weeks. This was a transformative moment for Moses. Moses had become increasingly apprehensive about the business and unsure of himself. This moment brought him closer to God in a new way. He abandoned his family Baptist religion and became a strict Quaker.<sup>121</sup> This was a serious decision as his entire family and their ancestors were Baptist. Chaddus Brown had brought the religion to Rhode Island and established its first parish on the continent. For several weeks Moses became a hermit, locking himself in his home writing letters to his dead wife. According to Moses he experienced visions. The most important vision he recalled, "I saw my slaves with my spiritual eyes plainly as I see you now, and it was given to me as clearly to understand that the sacrifice that was called for of my hand was to give them their liberty."<sup>122</sup> Moses Brown of the slave trading dynasty that was the Brown family had become an abolitionist.<sup>123</sup>

In the following months Moses freed all of his slaves and completely cut ties with the family business. He stepped down as a head of Brown Brothers and Co. leaving the company to John. His brothers were taken back by his decision but not upset with him. Nicholas Brown stepped up engagement in the company and John moved into the managerial role Moses had occupied, despite being in hiding. Moses had freed his slaves at a time of major Quaker manumissions. Moses seemed to have built up guilt throughout the years of slave trading. Especially damaging to him was the destruction of the Sally

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<sup>121</sup> Browne, Katrina. The Warwick, Rhode Island Digital History Project: *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*.

<sup>122</sup> The John Brown Papers. Rhode Island Historical Society.

<sup>123</sup> The John Brown Papers. Rhode Island Historical Society.

because he had ripped slaves from their homes only to cause their deaths at sea. This guilt and the change of faith following Anna's death caused him to become an outspoken Quaker.<sup>124</sup>

In 1773, Moses's newfound religion led him to speak out against an old ally of the Browns, former governor Stephen Hopkins. The same man that had protected the Browns' shipping interests from British authorities was also a slave owning Quaker. In January 1773 the Providence Society of Friends called on Hopkins to free his slaves or he would be banned from the church. When Hopkins refused, Moses personally delivered his excommunication letter from the church. John had proven where his conscience was, but he had still not abandoned his family.<sup>125</sup>

Right before the outbreak of the Revolution in early 1775 John Brown was captured by British authorities and was awaiting trial in Boston. Luckily Moses knew the judge and was able to secure the freedom of John with the condition that both Brown brothers would lobby the Rhode Island General Assembly for peace with Britain. Despite both being sympathetic to the rebel cause and John an unapologetic patriot, they agreed. Both brothers reluctantly spoke before the General Assembly, but without impact. War had inevitably come to New England.<sup>126</sup>

During the Revolution Moses spent his time mostly in Philadelphia coordinating with other Quaker abolitionists about steps towards abolishing slavery in the colonies. His newfound religion seemed to give him a renewed outlook on life and he married in 1778 to a fellow Quaker. Personally Moses along with most Quakers were disgusted by the

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<sup>124</sup> Brown, Sylvia. *Grappling with legacy: Rhode Islands Brown family and the American philanthropic impulse*.

<sup>125</sup> Rappleye, Charles. *Sons of providence the Brown brothers, the slave trade and the american revolution*.

<sup>126</sup> Bicknell, Thomas, Williams. *The History of the State of Rhode Island*.

war and thought it horrifying for Englishmen to slaughter each other. As a pacifist he had religious opposition to the war and thus relegated himself to passing out pamphlets and spreading word of the abolitionist cause.<sup>127</sup>

On the contrary, his brother John wholeheartedly threw himself into the war effort. He fought in the defense of Newport and when the city fell he joined the small scale Continental Navy. He aided the French when they joined the war effort and were stationed in Rhode Island. His role was mostly as a naval advisor due to his extensive shipping experience throughout the colonies.<sup>128</sup>

After peace had been reached with Great Britain, the Brown Brothers and Co. had survived the war. During the Revolution its business had been paused, but most ships, and factories remained in good shape because they were located in Providence, not destroyed Newport. Moses' Rhode Island abolition during the war had also been somewhat paused; He had restricted his political efforts to the confines of the Quaker Church, working on building support not passing legislation. However, America was an independent nation now. Its destiny was up to its own people not a foreign king. Moses Brown wanted to ensure this new nation and especially his home was free of slavery. The end of the war meant both the abolitionists and the merchants would return to their full efforts. This led to an inevitable clash of ideas.<sup>129</sup>

In the fall of 1783 Moses led the Quakers of Rhode Island on a passionate campaign to pass abolition in the General Assembly. For months they staged protests and lobbied statesmen hoping to secure enough votes. By January 1784 a bill of abolition was

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<sup>127</sup> The Role of Quakers in Abolition: Campaigning Against Slavery.

<sup>128</sup> Rhode Island in the American Revolution: An Exhibition from the Library and Museum Collections of The Society of the Cincinnati.

<sup>129</sup> The John Brown Papers. Rhode Island Historical Society.

introduced to the assembly. Despite expressing no prior interest, John Brown, a recently elected representative of Providence, took to the floor as the head of the opposition. John argued fervently against the hereditary abolition of slavery in Rhode Island, citing economic loss and the breaking of slave owners' rights.<sup>130</sup>

John's sudden challenge to his brother's bill was likely the result of built up tension and sibling rivalry. There is no question that John was representing the commercial interests in Rhode Island by opposing a ban on hereditary slavery. He sought to return the region to its former economic glory before the war. However, he did not just vote against the bill, but spoke out ardently on the floor of the assembly. John and Moses had been partners and close friends for their entire lives, but had also always competed within the family business. John may have felt envious of his newly progressive Quaker brother and upset with him leaving the company. In any case this bill was shocking to Rhode Island. It tested the weakened power of the merchant class, while also bringing an aristocratic family's tension into the spotlight. This was a true contest for the future of Rhode Island in which each Moses stood for abolition and John stood for the merchant economy. Despite John Brown's opposition, hereditary abolition was passed through the General Assembly and the siblings lifelong friendship was torn.<sup>131</sup>

For Moses this was a bittersweet victory. He learned that his campaign against slavery and the slave trade was not an abstract philosophical concept. It was a campaign against his own brother, in which any victory would be painful. Moses next took his campaign back to Philadelphia where he lobbied with other Quakers for national abolition. Despite the tension John did not appear to dwell on the abolitionist victory of

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<sup>130</sup> McLoughlin, William G. *Rhode Island, a history*.

<sup>131</sup> Brown University. Digital Archives.

hereditary abolition. Instead he turned around and launched the Brown Brothers and Co.'s first slave trade since before the war. To Moses's dismay the company eagerly jumped back into the trade throughout the 1780s and 1790s. During this time the brothers spoke occasionally, but never at great lengths. Moses could not stop the company from going back to slave trading and John could not halt Moses's abolitionist fervor.<sup>132</sup> Although brothers they had taken very different paths and in doing so had altered the course of Rhode Island history.

### **The Complicated Legacy of the Browns**

In 1787 the Moses Brown led the effort to push the General Assembly to outlaw slave trading.<sup>133</sup> The resolution was passed through Moses' successful lobbying, signaling a major victory for his cause. It passed through the assembly without much contention. In one major swoop, Moses Brown had outlawed the industry that had made his family fortune. Perhaps Moses's entire battle against the slave trade dealt with his guilt in supporting the industry for so long.

It is unclear why John did not do more to oppose the bill. Even though he was no longer a representative on the General Assembly, he had considerable influence in politics. The reason might be that the family company had so many other avenues of income such as manufactured goods, whaling, and spermaceti candles. John likely figured the law would be meaningless and would go unenforced. Thereafter its passing his company blatantly ignored it and continued slave trading just as him and his brother

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<sup>132</sup> The John Brown Papers.

<sup>133</sup> Rappleye, Charles. *Sons of providence the Brown brothers, the slave trade and the american revolution.*

had ignored British laws years earlier. John may have also felt it not worth it to put up another fight with his brother.<sup>134</sup>

Despite their feuds, John and Moses found compromise in the years after the ban. John, Moses, and Nicholas together donated land that their ancestor Chaddus had founded for the formation of Rhode Island College. They also funded the new college, paying for and overseeing the construction of its first couple structures. This college would of course be renamed Brown University after its benefactors.<sup>135</sup> The brothers also established a preparatory boys school, which was later named the Moses Brown School. Additionally John Brown created the Bank of Providence, which became the first bank in all of Rhode Island. This successful venture lasted one hundred-sixty years until Bank of America absorbed it. These years are regarded as some of the best of the Brown family and the time in which they are remembered for their philanthropic endeavors.<sup>136</sup>

Although they worked together these years, the late a final conflict between the brothers arose in 1794. John had been right that he could use his influence to negate Rhode Island authorities even after the slave trade was banned. Brown Brothers and Co. slave traded throughout the 1790s without opposition from the law. John's years at the helm of the state's business and politics had paid off. However, this all changed when on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1794, Congress passed the Slave Trade Act. This act prohibited the trade in slaves with foreign nations; negating locals laws was one matter, but ignoring federal law was a different story.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> The Brown Family. Brown University.

<sup>136</sup> Rappleye, Charles. *Sons of providence the Brown brothers, the slave trade and the american revolution*.

<sup>137</sup> Coughtry, Jay. *The Notorious triangle: Rhode Island and the African slave trade, 1700-1807*.

In August of 1794 John Brown was arrested and became the first American to be prosecuted under the new law. The Abolitionist Society of Rhode Island, in which Moses was an officer of, provided all evidence to the federal judge. John had been conspiring to send his ship *Hope*, an ironic name for a slave ship, on a voyage. John pleaded with his brother for this society to relinquish the case and forfeit evidence but he refused. Ultimately after the 1798 trial, John lost the case and was forced to pay a small fine and surrender the *Hope*.<sup>138</sup> Financially, this was a small penalty to the massive fortune of John Brown and his company. Symbolically this was the final end of an era for the Brown family. After close to a century of involvement in the slave trade, it was finally over. Moses had scored one final victory over his brother. Despite finally getting caught by the law, John was not discouraged. In fact just months later John Brown ran for United States Congress and was elected in 1799. He served two terms as a Federalist and ally of John Adams. In 1803 John Brown died at the age of sixty-eight. His brother Moses became a major benefactor of Samuel Slater's mill in Pawtucket, considered the origin of the American industrial revolution. He lived until 1836 when he died at the old age of ninety-eight.<sup>139</sup>

Moses and John Brown are important because throughout their lives they represent Rhode Island in so many ways. Born into a merchant dynasty, the brothers grew up in the golden age of Rhode Island commercialism. They developed with the colony, growing wealthy and successful with it. Their divide during the Revolutionary era was symbolic of societal change within the colony. As the century progressed so did abolitionism. Moses fought for the future of the colony, while John fought for the wealth

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<sup>138</sup> CLARK-PUJARA, CHRISTY. *DARK WORK: the business of slavery in rhode island*.

<sup>139</sup> The John Brown Papers. Rhode Island Historical Society.



and prominence of his family. Moses represented the founding values of their ancestor Chaddus and Roger Williams. John represented Rhode Island at its height of a shipping hub full of life and activity. In this way there would be no Rhode Island without both types of people. In the end it seems both brothers got what they wanted as Rhode Island was made free and the Brown family named lived on.

## **Chapter Five: Conclusion**

### **The Making of Rhode Island & the Meaning of Freedom**

Every region, state, country, and civilization has its own self-made mythology. Just like Rome has its legend of Romulus and Remus, Rhode Island's state mythology is about Roger Williams. The collective history of Rhode Island focuses on the colony's founding, as a place of refuge for the downtrodden religious exiles from the Old World and the new. This is the understanding of what Rhode Island was previous to American Independence.

The history of Roger Williams and the founding of Rhode Island is not fabricated. However, the collective understanding of what made Rhode Island what it is today is missing a significant piece of history. There is no Rhode Island without slavery and the slave trade. From the late seventeenth century until the Revolutionary War the trade and its subsidiary industries dominated the colony's economy. However, to condemn this period of Rhode Island history and all Rhode Islanders would be mistake. Just as history is never black and white, neither are the morals history teaches us. Due to the trade the colony rose to prominence, its future was secured, its infrastructure built, and its most prominent institution of higher education was founded. It is impossible to untangle the connections between the success of Rhode Island in the colonial period and its residents' involvement in the international slave trade. Rhode Islanders should not forget this past, but understand it for what it really was and celebrate those who changed the system.

Rhode Island became the American slave-trading hub because of individual freedom and economic opportunism. The region was not an agricultural center. It was

never a land lush with abundant mines or forests. What Rhode Island had was a bay, an ocean, and the Atlantic economy at their disposal.

The early merchants of the colony were unrestricted in their activities; the Atlantic was theirs to explore and develop trade routes with. In this was there was always the desire for freedom in Rhode Island: freedom from the Puritans, freedom from inconvenient Christian morals, and freedom from British tariffs. For slaves that benefitted the Rhode Islanders, all their personal freedoms were robbed and they were condemned to menial existences. This duality of freedom was representative of the broader conflict within the new nation. Just as the divide was sharpened between slave traders and abolitionists in Rhode Island, the North and South were beginning a long contentious conflict over the issue of slavery. In Rhode Island the conflict played out in the most personal way possible between Moses and John Brown.

In terms of this entire era of Rhode Island history Moses Brown is the most fascinating and important character. Despite his family, his fortune, his reputation, and his life spent slave trading he defied the system in the place it was most popular. He campaigned arduously, eventually overthrowing the trade in Rhode Island, cementing a victory for the national abolitionist cause. Despite this and all of his conflict with his brother, he remained civil. He worked the system and solved the moral crisis of his generation through legal means. This was never personal against his brother or anyone, but a mission he felt morally obligated to commit to. Even in the most heated of the debates he wrote to his brother John, “though I do not see the Guinea trade with the same

eyes as you do, I respect you as a brother and a friend.”<sup>140</sup> The level of respect, despite differing opinions is inspiring. In order to change peoples’ opinions and right societal wrongs, there must be a sense of mutual understanding. Even though great injustices like the slave trade have been caused by laissez faire freedom, they can be overturned legally through public campaigns, resistance, and rejecting the status quo. There are dangers to freedom, but those dangers can overcome by utilizing the same individual freedoms of our society.

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<sup>140</sup> Brown, Sylvia. *Grappling with legacy: Rhode Islands Brown family and the American philanthropic impulse*.

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