

Highlights in Portsmouth, RI, History, 1638—2013

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The Portsmouth Compact

Unlike the settlement of Plymouth Colony with its several constituencies, Massachusetts Bay Colony was colonized and governed by a fairly homogeneous population of Puritans. Nonetheless conflicts of opinion did occur and the dissidents might be banished for heresy or might voluntarily withdraw to form new communities. Such were the twenty-three men with their families who signed in Boston the Portsmouth Compact, which declared their intent to organize a settlement of Christian worshippers with a secular government.

The 7th Day of the First Month, 1638

We whose names are underwritten do hereby solemnly in the presence of Jehovah incorporate ourselves into a Bodie Politick and as He shall help, will submit our persons, lives and estates unto our Lord Jesus Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and all those perfect and most absolute laws of His given us in His Holy Word of Truth, to be guided and judged thereby.

Signed by: William Coddington; John Clarke; William Hutchinson, Jr.; John Coggeshall; William Aspinwall; Samuel Wilbore; John Porter; John Sanford; Edward Hutchinson, Jr., Esq.; Thomas Savage; William Dyre; William Freeborne; Phillip Shearman; John Walker; Richard Carder; William Baulston; Edward Hutchinson, Sr.; Henry Bull--X his mark; Randall Holden; Thomas Clarke; John Johnson; William Hall; and John Brightman

Signers of the Portsmouth Compact were literate and several were well-educated. William Coddington was a wealthy man and both he and Dr. John Clarke were influential in Boston affairs. They were among those who joined in discussions with Anne Hutchinson, a highly educated woman and skilled midwife, daughter of an English clergyman who had been jailed for non-conformity. She brought down the wrath of ministers in Boston by interpreting their sermons. Her work created confusion and dissension among congregants and fomented controversy among Boston religious leaders. Eventually Hutchinson was judged a heretic and banished from the Colony. Her husband William signed the Portsmouth Compact and the family became members of the new colony.

The little band conferred with Roger Williams, also banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony, who had settled Providence in 1636. Acting as intermediary Williams negotiated with the Narragansett sachems Canonicus and Miantonomi and arranged the sale of Aquidneck Island to William Coddington and Dr. John Clarke for the price of “forty fathoms of white beads, ten coats and twenty hoes.”

Settlement

The newcomers settled in the northernmost part of Aquidneck Island, near Town Pond, located today along Boyd’s Lane, in the area known to the native people as “Pocasset.” The location was situated near a brook, which provided potable water, near Town Pond, which allowed access to Narragansett Bay, and near a sheltered cove, which opened onto the Sakonnet River. They named the settlement “Portsmouth.” At the 300th Anniversary of the town in 1938, a plaque honoring the signers of the Portsmouth Compact was placed on a puddingstone rock at Founder’s Brook across from Town Pond. More recently Anne Hutchinson and her protégé Mary Dyer were memorialized in the same location. After

the death of her husband in 1642, Anne Hutchinson and some of her family moved to New York, where they were killed in an Indian uprising the next year.

The first recorded town meeting convened on May 13, 1638. At this and subsequent meetings, citizens elected officers, established military training days, fixed tax rates and addressed the myriad problems and regulations required for the orderly growth and maintenance of their town. Transcriptions of town meeting minutes from 1638 to 1697 are collected in a single volume, *The Early Records of the Town of Portsmouth*, available in the Ocean State Library system. Reading through these records gives one insight into 17th Century colonial life.

Farming was the main occupation of the colonists. Soils proved excellent for grasses, which assured good grazing for cattle, horses, sheep and pigs. Several small islands, Hog Island, for one, provided pasture for free-roaming livestock, especially pigs, with minimum care from herders. Settlers arranged with the Wampanoag sachem Massasoit for rights to the grass in what is now Tiverton and ferried livestock to and fro across the Sakonnet River. The inhabitants cleared land, constructed dwellings, dug wells, and established orchards. The little colony seemed to thrive and quickly grew as other families joined.

Even with freedom of conscience, however, some residents became restive and at odds with the dominant thinking. In April of 1639 thirty-one men—some original settlers along with newcomers—drafted a new Compact of Loyalty. Unlike the original Portsmouth Compact, these men proclaimed themselves “legal subjects of His Majesty King Charles...and bind ourselves...unto his laws according to matters of justice.” Signers included: Will[ia]m Coddington, Samuel Gorton, Samuel Hutchinson, John Wickes, Richarde Maggson, Thomas Spiser, William Aspinwall, Will[ia]m Haule, John Roome, John Sloffe, Thomas Beddar, Erasmus Bullocke, Sampson Shotten, Ralph Earle, Robert Potter, Nathanyell Potter, Wm Heauens, George Cleare, George Lawton, Anthony Paine, Jobe Haukins, Richard Awards, John More, Nicholas Brown, William Richardson, John Trippe, Thomas Layton, Robert Stainton, John Briggs, James Davice and Henry Bull. (*Early Records* 1-2) At

this time Coddington, Clarke and others trekked to the southern end of the island and established Newport. The fine harbor, combined with the wealth and influence of Coddington and Clarke, led this colony to attract merchants and traders and shipping and it prospered. Dr. Clarke founded a Baptist church, which is still active.

The next year—1640—the two settlements at opposite ends of Rhode Island established an island government with William Coddington serving as governor and William Brenton as deputy governor, William Dyer as secretary and Henry Bull as sergeant. Still later, in 1663, John Clark obtained a new charter for the colony from King Charles II to conduct “a lively experiment.” This charter guided Rhode Island until a state constitution was adopted in 1843. (Bayles 40)

Revolution and the Battle Of Rhode Island

Following several decades of benign neglect England began to bear down on its American colonies by enforcing laws for trade and conduct on the high seas by levying new taxes and by impressing American seaman. Actions and reactions intensified until 1774 when the British blockaded Narragansett Bay. Then in December 1776 the British fleet filled Newport harbor. Some residents fled to the mainland, taking domestic herds and flocks and other valuables with them. The families who remained suffered greatly under the occupation. An estimated 6000 British soldiers and their much-feared Hessian mercenaries were deployed across the island and quartered in private homes, appropriating food, crops, animals and firewood. At a later time, during a retreat, these forces laid waste to Portsmouth lands, burning structures, filling wells, cutting any remaining trees and shrubs to the very ground, leaving the land stripped and barren. Ferry service was halted and the inhabitants’ personal liberties curtailed, although spies and deserters surreptitiously slipped back and forth. The oppressors fortified strategic high points on the island while their ships patrolled the waters of the Bay.

One of the bright spots for Aquidneck Islanders during the ensuing years was the audacious capture of British General Richard Prescott by American Colonel William Barton and forty volunteers on July 9, 1777. Under

cover of darkness the party arrived undetected at the Overing Farm, now Prescott Farm, on West Main Road and spirited Prescott across the Bay. Prescott was eventually repatriated in a prisoner exchange, returning to Aquidneck Island to fight another day.

Meanwhile the victory of the Americans over the English at Saratoga gave the French confidence to support the Colonies against their common enemy. General Washington and the Comte d'Estaing hatched a plan to force the British out of Newport and d'Estaing stationed the French fleet in position just south of the entrance to Narragansett Bay. At the same time the Marquis de Lafayette marched Continental troops to Rhode Island to join forces with General John Sullivan and the local militia in preparation for a major offensive. At this point, August 9, plans went awry.

Gen. Sullivan, finding the British decamped from Butts Hill Fort and the northern outposts in Portsmouth, moved his forces to the island to man the deserted fortifications. The French fleet, meanwhile, battled a reinforcing British naval force at sea, while American and British troops lobbed shots at each other for several days near Green End in what is now Middletown. Nature intervened with a ferocious storm, battering the French ships and drenching the Americans. The French sailed to Boston for repairs, leaving the Americans without naval support. Sullivan strategically retreated north to Butts Hill.

The Battle of Rhode Island opened on the hot, humid morning of August 29, 1778, when a British company marching north on East Main Road met with a devastating surprise attack by a squad of Continental soldiers. As the day wore on the British force of about 6000, including the fearsome Hessians, lined up across Portsmouth from Quaker Hill west across Turkey Hill to Almy's Hill. In the Bay to the west British ships began to shell 5000 American troops entrenched to the north. Three times that day the British charged the American lines in fierce and bloody fighting. Here it was that the First Rhode Island Regiment with its complement of over one hundred black soldiers earned its famous reputation as they valiantly repulsed the enemy in fierce hand-to-hand combat. It is said that the slaughter during this engagement caused a little stream to run red, giving it the name Bloody Run Brook. A fine

memorial to the Black Regiment and the Battle of Rhode Island stands in this area today.

At the end of the day little ground had been gained by either side. After burying their dead the fatigued British troops retreated to prepare for another day, while in the darkness, Sullivan in a brilliant withdrawal ferried his troops across the Sakonnet River to the mainland.

Patrick T. Conley, Rhode Island Historian Laureate, summarizes the ending of the battle this way in his treatise "The Battle of Rhode Island, August 29, 1778: A Victory for the Patriots": "The British and Germans simply butted their heads against a wall so stout that retreat was their only sane and tactical alternative." (21)

The British finally departed from Aquidneck Island in October 1779, thus ending the occupation. It took years for the citizens to recover from the devastation of their lands and properties and even longer for compensation from the new Congress for losses due to the war.

The Civil War Years

Although far from Civil War battlefields, Portsmouth was home to a bustling army hospital from 1862-1865 where hundreds of sick and wounded Union--and Confederate--soldiers were housed and treated. Lovell General Hospital took possession of the Portsmouth Grove resort on the western shore of town, which once attracted thousands of day-trippers. The injured soldiers arrived by steamboat and were housed in barracks. The Quartermaster Corps at this time was so overwhelmed with demands that outposts such as Lovell Hospital beseeched local residents for donations--straw to make mattresses, clothing, food, bandages. Citizens also organized fund-raisers, entertainments, classes and worship services for the men.

Following major battles ships would arrive with 300, 500, 700, or more, badly wounded soldiers. Smallpox and measles epidemics broke out. Coal, oil and firewood were always in short supply and patients suffered in winter cold and winds. It seemed that never was there enough food. Some patients died and their bodies were shipped home by train, while other families came to claim their loved ones. Still others were buried in the

cemetery on the hospital grounds. Despite hardships, by the end of the war the hospital had “treated 10,593 patients, with a mortality figure of 308...a low death rate of 3 percent when the national average was 8 percent.”(Grzyb 138)

The federal government had leased the Portsmouth Grove property from Edmund Cole and had no plans to continue the hospital at the termination of the war. Everything was sold or auctioned off, including the buildings and supplies on hand. Bodies in the cemetery were disinterred and re-buried at Cypress Hills National Cemetery in Brooklyn, NY. Almost all traces of the physical plant were obliterated. Today boat-building companies, marine businesses and the large Melville Boat Basin marina occupy the site.

Julia Ward Howe

Dr. and Mrs. Samuel Gridley Howe were Boston residents who spent summers at their Oak Glen Farm property on Union St. Mrs. Howe, better known to us by her full name-- Julia Ward Howe-- was active in both communities. She entertained intellectuals in her home and organized discussions and literary events. As a Unitarian preacher she often spoke at the Christian Union Church, now home to the Portsmouth Historical Society, which maintains an exhibit dedicated to her. Both Dr. and Mrs. Howe were ardent Abolitionists and Julia also worked tirelessly for women’s right to vote. A remarkable woman, she is probably best known as the author of the poem, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” which was published in *The Atlantic* in 1862. The words were put to the old tune of “John Brown’s Body” and the song soon became a favorite with the troops. Julia Ward Howe died in Portsmouth October 17, 1910 at the age of 91.

The Gilded Age

During the last four decades of the 1800’s, the United States economy boomed with new ideas and inventions, cross-fertilization of ideas at national exhibitions and easier and faster transportation and communication. Clever men made money. A few amassed fortunes and established handsome summer estates in Newport. Estates required huge staffs of maids, gardeners, housekeepers, coachmen and a full array of people to run them. Guests frequented

the estates and parties and fancy-dress balls were popular. All these people had to be fed and Portsmouth farmers were often the source of foodstuffs that graced the tables of the rich and famous. Eventually wealthy estate owners began to buy up small farms in Portsmouth, consolidating them into larger farms, which were self-sufficient and also required an army of workers to maintain them. These gentlemen’s farms became home to prize-winning cattle and horses and other domesticated animals. Landowners participated in town social affairs, organizing agricultural fairs, holding picnics for townspeople on their estates and donating money to worthy causes, such as the Portsmouth Free Public Library. Polo was a popular activity and made a comeback in the 1980’s; international polo games attract a loyal following today.

As time went on vast estates became increasingly expensive to maintain and, as the original generation grew older and passed on, their descendants preferred other pastimes and other places to live and work. The large farms were sold to developers for new housing, although a few buildings were utilized for other purposes. The J. C. Taylor mansion at Glen Farm, for instance, first became a Catholic school and convent and then, when purchased by the town, has become a popular venue for weddings and special events. The barns at Glen Farm still house horses and hold equine activities. In the 1980’s residents of Portsmouth voted to purchase Glen Farm property when it went on the market. The former farmland now provides recreational opportunities for townspeople with playing fields, polo grounds, and walking trails and preserves open space and a superb vista across the Sakonnet River.

Conclusion

Today, in the early 21st Century, the town is fully modernized, yet retains its small-town feel. Some old traditions have been discarded. For instance the Town Meeting, based on direct democracy, has been replaced by a professional administrator directed by elected town council members. Ask any one of them and he will tell you, “Oh, yes, indeed, I hear directly from my constituents!” Many residents commute to jobs off-island or out of town. Yet, the old

occupations of fishing, farming and boat-building continue, often in different ways.

A few small commercial fishing boats ply the waters of Narragansett Bay and the Sakonnet River, and small boats of quahoggers daily dot the surrounding waters. Aquaculture is a growing business, especially for oysters. Today's boat-builders, rather than constructing ferries and work boats, cater to the needs of international yachtsmen and pleasure boaters. Farming continues in many guises: pick-your-own fruit and flower operations; nursery stock; potatoes and other vegetables; Community Supported Agriculture schemes (CSA's); fleeces

from sheep, as well as llamas and alpacas. Pleasure horses are raised here. One dairy farm remains in business and goat herds also produce milk and cheese. Fields which ten years ago flourished with potatoes and corn are now hayfields and pasture for grass-fed beef or covered with grapevines for the commercial production of wine. Home-based enterprises thrive.

The motto on Portsmouth's 375th anniversary design clearly states the residents' outlook toward their hometown: Proud Heritage—Bright Future.

The author has resided in Portsmouth since 1981. She currently serves as Recording Secretary for the Portsmouth Historical Society. This article originally appeared in the March edition of the RI Genealogical Society newsletter.

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