

LIFE IN THESE PLANTATIONS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

BY FLORENCE PARKER SIMISTER

THE FIRST census taken in Rhode Island in 1708 showed that there were 7,181 people living in this colony. Of these just over 1000 were freemen. The military force numbered 1362 and consisted of all the male population between the ages of 16 and 60. There was a constant drain on this body because the 18th century was a century of wars — from Queen Anne's War against France and Spain through King George's War, the French-Indian War, the Seven Years' War to the American Revolution. The establishing of quotas of men to wage these wars and the levying of taxes to finance them was a way of life in the colonies in the 1700s. If a male child marched off to battle at the age of 16 there was little chance for schooling and the saying was that "When one could read, write and do a sum in the rule of three, he was fit for business." There were dame schools, of course, where children learned reading and writing and some provision for educating children was made in 1716 in Newport and Providence (later in Portsmouth), but public school systems did not exist until the close of the century. Children, therefore, were not compelled to go to school. If they did not spend hours with primers, or were not "bound out" to learn a trade, then they performed various tasks around the house: helped with the churning, the cleaning, the cooking. When they played, the games were the same as children's games today: tag, blind man's buff, horseshoes, marbles, wrestling and racing. There were no children's clothes; boys and girls dressed exactly like their parents, the only difference being the size of the garments.

In the homes mostly pewter dishes were used. China was imported and used more widely toward the end of the century when ships were engaged in the China trade. There were some stoves for heat, but cooking was done in the oven of the fireplace and in the fireplace itself, in kettles and roasting-kitchens, on trivets and spits. Floors were sanded although there were more rugs than there had been in the 17th century. The interior walls of houses, whitewashed at first, became fancier in the 18th century and were sheathed with boards which had mouldings cut on the edges. A man of moderate wealth had a house with a huge kitchen and a bedroom downstairs and two small rooms upstairs under the eaves. There were also many large handsome mansions being built throughout the colonies. For lighting spermaceti candles, manufactured in Newport and Providence, replaced the resinous pine knots used in early days.

Gradually the industry of the colony increased. Ore-beds were discovered and these necessitated forges. In wooded areas charcoal kilns were built and wood was converted into that fuel. In Providence there were paper mills; this product was exceedingly scarce in America. Because this colony was a coastal one there was shipping and where there were ships there were shipyards and sail lofts and ropewalks. Saw mills, too, had to be built to convert trees into lumber for the ships and carpenters and blacksmiths were needed to build the ships and to make the fittings and the anchors. Shipbuilding went on everywhere in the colony from Cumberland to Narragansett. In the towns there were artisans: silversmiths, pewterers and potters. There were distilleries there, too, and sugar houses and fulling mills and mills for grinding corn and wheat.



"He that hath a trade hath an estate."

Poor Richard

In spite of the increase of industry this colony was still largely an agricultural and maritime one at the beginning of the century. The farms sometimes suffered because of the absence of the men of the family off fighting in the foreign wars and because the crude tools were hard for a woman to handle. Oxen were used for the farm work and horses for riding. In southern Rhode Island the Narragansett Pacer was bred and exported. He was "small, hardy and because of his side-winding gait, very comfortable." That section of the colony was where the great estates were located, with sometimes as many as 40 slaves working on them, owned by one family. There was much refinement there and the homesteads were extensive plantations. Much later one would be divided into ten large farms. The plantations were much like those in Virginia and the life was like that in the southern colonies. Stock was raised and bred there, wool and cheese were exported and the first woolen mills were established there.

In 1703 the Rhode Island-Connecticut boundary line was settled and it was then necessary to make representation accessible to the people in the outlying communities. As soon as a settlement was made at any distance from a town a petition was submitted for a new jurisdiction. When this was granted, each settlement held a town meeting and elected representatives to the Assembly. By 1729 Rhode Island had grown enough to be divided into three counties — Newport, Providence and King's. In 1746 the eastern boundary was adjusted and some territory there was returned to the colony. Where there was strictly a farm community it was greatly antagonistic to the merchants of the cities. This difference between farmers and merchants led to the paper-money troubles. The towns had specie brought back by the sea traders but the hard money either stayed in the towns or found its way back to the country of origin through trade. This left the farmer with nothing to use for repairs or improvements to his farm or for living expenses if his crop failed. Farmers, therefore, begged for issues of paper currency. Nine "banks" or emissions were voted by the paper-money party in 35 years. Finally an act of Parliament was passed in 1751 forbidding the emission of any more colonial paper money. One historian refers to this as Rhode Island's reckless mismanagement of her financial system.

There were really five capitals: Providence, Newport, Bristol, East Greenwich and Kingston and the General Assembly met in each in turn. Newport was without question the "metropolitan town of the colony" and in 1710 there were so many Sabbatarians in that town that two market days had to be designated to accommodate those who kept the Sabbath.

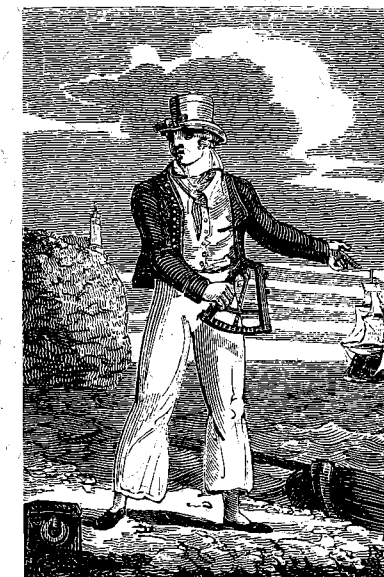
One of the most interesting events in this century was the wrecking of the Palatine ship from Holland bound for Pennsylvania. She went aground on the rocks off Block Island and although 17 persons were landed on the island only three survived. In a few days the ship floated off and disappeared. A year later a strange light was seen on the water near the north end of the island and was named by sailors the Palatine Light. It was considered supernatural and was connected in people's minds with the Dutch ship since grim stories were told by the survivors of the life aboard her on the voyage across the seas. This light appeared regularly for many years and the legend of it has been a subject for many poets and writers. Shortly after the appearance of the *Palatine*, pirates began harassing shipping along the Rhode Island coast. One vessel was captured and the pirates hanged at Newport.

As always, life was complicated by illness. In 1721 smallpox raged in the colony and a quarantine building was erected in Newport. Two years later the first almshouse was built there.

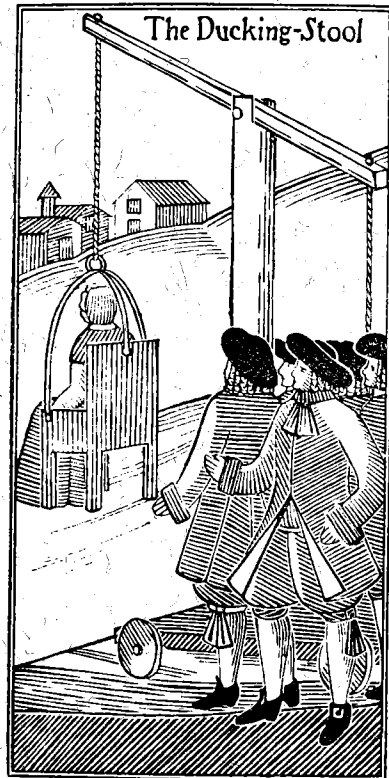
In 1726 Trinity Church was finished. Many years before, the Reverend James Honeyman was sent over from England by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts as a missionary to Rhode Island "in compliance with petitions from Newport, the eastern shores and Narragansett." In this same decade James Franklin, Benjamin's brother, set up a printing press in Newport and in 1732 began to print the first newspaper in the colony. At approximately the same time George Berkeley, Dean of Derry, came to Newport. Many literary men and artists came with him and their influence was widely felt. They are credited with



Corduroy roads made travel by wagon possible, but very uncomfortable.



A sailor's life was adventurous and profitable, even for young boys who preferred the sea to the farm.



giving an impetus to the creative arts in Rhode Island.

In Providence in these same years much attention was being given to bridges and when, a little later, lotteries were legalized a "scheme" was allowed for building Weybosset Bridge.

Everywhere in the colony wolves were so numerous that the bounty was raised to 30 shillings a head. There was also a bounty on foxes and rewards for the destruction of crows and blackbirds, gray squirrels, rats and wildcats.

The sale of bread was regulated by law. Every baker had a mark and was required to put it on his loaves and to make his loaves of a certain weight according to the price of wheat. If he failed to do this he forfeited his bread to the poor of the town.

That punishment was mild compared to some. There were pillories, whipping posts, ducking stools and cages. In Providence there was a bridewell, a small stone building for "the detention and punishment of the lowest order of petty criminals." These lawbreakers were apprehended by the Night Watch, a man who walked the streets calling out the hour of midnight and who carried a long pole with which he rapped on windows where a light shone warning the dweller to put out his candle. He was required to watch "until the ringing of the sunrise bell." That was the police protection of the day. As for fire protection, every householder was required to have a fire bucket for use in case of a fire in his own house or his neighbor's.

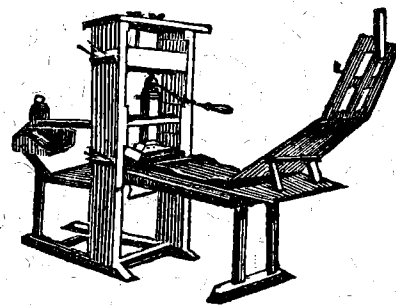
A great deal of confusion arose in the colony in 1752 when Parliament acted to change the calendar start of the year from March 25 to January 1. Up to this time some people had been using all of March as the first month of the new year although most of it belonged to the old year. Now it became the third month.

King George II died in 1761 and George III was proclaimed king. That year the first theatrical company to come to America arrived in Newport from Williamsburg. The director applied to the town for a license, the application was refused, then granted and a temporary theater like a tent was built for the performance. That was when the Great Storm hit Rhode Island. The spire of Trinity Church in Newport fell and the tent put up for a theater was blown down. In Providence and handbills were printed, advertising the performance, by a printing press recently established there. In addition to plays there were other entertainments from time to time — concerts, corn huskings, balls, horse-races and fairs. There were training days, too, when all the towns turned out to see the musters. People came from far and near to watch the men parade. Booths were set up around the training ground where one could buy a "supply of solid condiments and liquid stimulants. Here, too, throughout the day might be witnessed the jocund dance of the young of both sexes to the enlivening music of the violin and fife." These musters usually took place near inns or taverns which were the centers of the towns. The same places also served on occasion to house town councils or even the Assembly.

Halfway through the century the population of Rhode Island was over 32,000 persons, and the colony was in a flourishing condition. In 1764 Rhode Island College, now Brown University, was established at Warren. The Reverend James Manning came from New Jersey to lead a Baptist church in Warren and when the college was chartered he received his appointment as "President of the College, Professor of Languages and other Branches of Learning, with full power to Act immediately in these capacities at Warren or Elsewhere." For 6 years the college remained at Warren and then in 1770 removed to Providence. Its first commencement, however, was held at Warren in 1769.

Newport was at the height of its prosperity in the 1750s. More than 11,000 people lived there engaged in manufacturing rum, oil, hemp and candles. Two hundred of her vessels sailed out of the harbor for foreign ports and there was a regular line of London packets and 400 coasting craft for the domestic trade.

Roads, bridges and public buildings were being erected all over the colony and the highways were being improved. Each male inhabitant of the colony by law had to work on the roads four days annually.



Ben Franklin's printing press, now in the R. I. Historical Society.

The transit of Venus occurred in 1769 and there were enough men of wealth to secure the equipment for its observance. In Providence Joseph Brown procured the necessary instruments from London, a temporary observatory was set up and Governor Stephen Hopkins and Dr. Benjamin West assisted Mr. Brown. In Newport Abraham Redwood furnished the instruments and the observations were made by Dr. Ezra Stiles. The calculations made here compared favorably with those made by scientists all over the world.

Civilization was advancing. Fountain societies were being formed to convey water from a fountain to different parts of a town where the water might be brackish. Up to that time boys and girls, women and men walked to a town pump wearing a yoke from which hung two buckets. These were filled with water and carried home. A postal system was established in Rhode Island. Routes were laid out, offices designated, rates of postage fixed and post riders appointed. Benjamin Franklin was one of the two Postmasters General. For the first time, after 1753, mail was delivered within a reasonable time. The postrider brought newspapers, too, but not everyone bought these because the Town Crier read all the important proclamations on the street corners. Newspapers contained the same news with additional details the Crier didn't have.

In 1776 the last Colonial Assembly met in Providence. The road that led to the Revolution and the situation in the colony during that Revolution will be dealt with elsewhere, but life in these plantations during the years of the war was hard and unpleasant. British troops occupied some cities, destroyed others, pillaged still others. When the war was over Rhode Island's industry and her people were utterly prostrated.

In 1790 the state finally adopted the Federal Constitution including the Bill of Rights — the last state to do so. The population of Rhode Island was then 68,825. Providence was the busiest port in the state, "a place of more navigation than any of its size in the union." The city at the head of the bay had wrested the leadership from Newport which never regained its position. Both cities remained capitals of the new state until 1900 when Providence became the only capital of Rhode Island.

To sum up, we quote the reminiscences of Mr. Samuel Thurber of Providence. He was born about 1760 and was a well-known citizen of that town. "Manners and fashions were very plain," he said. "The dress in general was meant to be durable . . . Eminent men I can refer to whom they were, the world knows them, a Washington, a Franklin, a Lafayette together with all who composed our first Congress . . . The object and design of the great majority at that time was the same. They were ready and willing to make any and every sacrifice that should benefit the great whole . . . The fair, plain, honest man, although in moderate circumstances, was then the most eminent . . . Business and occupation was similar to what it now is, except machine manufacturing. Furniture in general was very plain, mahogany but little known. Almost every article of wood was straight without much paint or polish. But little crockery and that of a coarse kind. Pewter and wood were the principal table furniture. Two would be often eating out of the same dish . . . The rising generation will not have so good times as the latter. What wars and trouble we have had, have been but a trifle to what are to be."

Mr. Thurber's foresight was correct and his description of the men of his century was accurate: "The fair, plain honest man . . . was the most eminent." Every man in every small town contributed to the advance in culture and to the making of America. It was a stirring period and a fruitful one and life in these plantations in the 18th century was creative and meaningful.



"A fair, plain, honest man"