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Miscegenation and Acculturation in the Narragansett Country of Rhode Island, 1710-1790

by
Rhett S. Jones

The histories of most New England states view blacks as a strange, foreign people enslaved in southern states, whom New Englanders rescued first by forming colonization and abolitionist societies and later by fighting a Civil War to free them. The existence of a black population in New England as early as the seventeenth century has been pretty much ignored. Indeed Anderson and Marten, of the Parting Ways Museum of Afro-American Ethnohistory, touched off a furor with their discovery that Abraham Pearse, one of the early residents of Plymouth Colony, was black.¹

The long neglect of New England's black history has recently come to an end. Historical societies in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island have been formed to facilitate the study of black life in the colonial era as well as in later periods. A number of these organizations—notably the African Meeting House Museum, the Parting Ways Museum of Afro-American Ethnohistory, and the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society—have won national awards and acclaim. The scholarly literature now reflects this new interest in New England blacks. Carvalho's *Black Families in Hampden County, 1650-1855*, while not strictly speaking a history, provides much useful insight into black life.² Randolph Domonic presented a paper reflecting his work on the Abyssinian Church of Portland, Maine,³ and Randolph Stakeman has two articles forthcoming on black life in New England's largest state.⁴ Cottrol explores the history of blacks in Providence before the Civil War, while Horton examines Boston during the same period.⁵ Coughtry and Jones have each published articles on Rhode Island blacks.⁶ The present work is part of growing scholarly interest in New England's colonial black past.

Race, Economics, and Miscegenation

The Narragansett Country of southern Rhode Island, located along the western coast of Narragansett Bay and including such present day communities as South Kingston, North Kingston, Wickford,

Wakefield, Peacedale, Narragansett, and Charlestown, was a center of black life in eighteenth century New England. In 1755 one in every three residents of South Kingstown was a black slave, while in the same year there were 712 whites and 418 blacks in Charlestown. For much of the eighteenth century, half the slaves in the tiny colony lived in the Narragansett Country, with South Kingstown alone having about a fourth of all the slaves in Rhode Island.⁷ While the two Kingstowns were home to large numbers of slaves and a number of free blacks as well, Charlestown was home to more than 400 of Rhode Island's 1,100 slaves at mid-century.⁸ Slavery flourished in what is now called by Rhode Islanders South County for a number of reasons.

First, there was the climate itself. According to Miller, weather in the Narragansett Country was considered among the best in England's northern colonies because of the even distribution of rain through three of the seasons and because of light snowfall in the winter.⁹ The land itself is gently rolling and so well supplied with rocks as to make possible the building of innumerable stone walls. So numerous were these rocky walls that it was long argued by historians that Rhode Islanders were driven out of farming and to the sea by the inhospitable land. Bridenbaugh, however, found that the rich land and mild climate enabled the colonists to produce an agricultural surplus.¹⁰ The settlers turned to the sea not because they were failures as farmers, but rather because they were so successful that they needed an outlet for their produce. They marketed such goods as beans, hay, corn, fish, onions, and cider.¹¹ These products were shipped to colonies in British North America ranging from Connecticut to South Carolina and to the British West Indies as well. And despite various laws to the contrary, these and other goods were sent to Spanish, Dutch, and French colonies in the Caribbean. Rhode Island wood products such as boards, tar, timber, and fully-constructed barrels were also important items of trade.¹² Animals and animal products were also produced for export. Settlers in the Narragansett Country raised swine, sheep, and cattle and exported not only the live animals, but pork, mutton, beef, and lard.¹³ Rhode Island was also well-known for its dairy products, with its cheese considered a special delicacy. Virtually every planter had at least one cheese house on his estate.¹⁴ The South County residents also bred the famous Narragansett Pacer, a horse known throughout the New World for its easy gait which produced a smooth, comfortable ride. The Pacer was much in demand in the Caribbean and in North America, where good roads were rare and where an easy riding horse was highly appreciated.¹⁵ Finally, to go along with their good food, the settlers of the Narragansett Country also produced rum.¹⁶

But good weather alone was not sufficient to produce this bounty, nor to make the planters of

the Narragansett Country so wealthy they were often compared with their fellows in Virginia, Maryland, and South Carolina. Sound management and a spirit of entrepreneurship were also essential. The heart of the Narragansett Country, called by Rhode Islanders the Pettaquamscutt Purchase, was obtained from the Narragansett Indians in 1658 by five such entrepreneurs. These men, four of whom were from Aquidneck Island (composed of present day Newport, Middletown, and Portsmouth) and the fifth from Boston, were shrewd businessmen, alert to the possibilities offered by a largely unsettled wilderness. They purchased a tract about 12 miles square for 151 pounds and unspecified "other reasons." They soon admitted two other members to their partnership with equal shares, and, after carving out 7,000 acres each for themselves, the Pettaquamscutt Purchasers offered the remainder of the land for sale.¹⁷ Three hundred acres were set aside for the benefit of "orthodox" religion alone.¹⁸

The original purchasers sold off large tracts of land to Creole families such as their own, men who had either been born in the New World and understood its possibilities or had married into families who did. These families in turn became the founders of the plantation aristocracy that dominated South Country's economy for much of the eighteenth century. On May 26, 1663, the purchasers sold 1,000 acres to George Gardiner.¹⁹ And in 1700 Rowland Robinson, who eventually came to own more than 3,000 acres in the Narragansett Country, purchased land. Along with the Gardiners and the Robinsons, the Hazards were also counted among

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the more wealthy and influential families of South County.²⁰ Other prominent families were the Coles, the Babcocks, the Potters, the Carpenters, the Congdons, the Champlins, and the Stantons.²¹ Favored by the climate, secure in the belief they had nothing to fear from Amerindians, and in possession of considerable political influence, the planters prospered in the Narragansett Country. Many of the wealthier planters shipped goods directly from docks located on their own lands, either in one of the many little coves and inlets which dotted the western shore of the Bay, or along one of its many tributaries. The Hazards, for example, operated a shipyard on the west bank of the Pettaquamscutt River at the foot of Tower Hill.²² Most planters, large and small, shipped their products through Newport. This created a need for a ferry system between the Narragansett Country and what was then called Rhode Island (present day Aquidneck Island). John Gardiner, of the influential Gardiner family, petitioned the

authorities in 1748 to establish an additional ferry between Newport and South County because the existent ferries were "crowded with men, women, children, horses, hogs, sheep and cattle to the intolerable inconvenience, annoyance and delay of men and business."²³ In addition to their own produce, the Narragansett planters imported pork, grain, and wood products from other colonies, which they in turn sold outside Rhode Island.²⁴

But while climate and good management were necessary, labor was essential to the economic development of South County. The settlers of the Narragansett Country made use of labor from a variety of sources, but it was their slaves that made their society unique to New England. According to Woodward:

The proprietors of Narragansett estates had much in common with the planters of the Southern colonies. Their mode of life had no equal in other country districts of the North. Unlike other New England farmers, they comprised a landed aristocracy of superior intellectuals and social status that lived somewhat after the manner of English squires in spacious homes on a comfortably affluent level. Their estates were maintained with slave labor and they depended mainly on export trade for marketing their produce. For this similarity the Narragansett country has been called "a bit of Virginia set down in New England."²⁵

Like their counterparts in the South, this elite devoted little time to learning or to the arts, their greatest achievements coming in the law.²⁶ The Narragansett planters were also like Virginia and South Carolina squires in that their concern with the law was not a disinterested, abstract one, but rather arose from a pragmatic determination to bend it to their own needs. In this they were not unlike white men ruling over blacks in plantation societies elsewhere in the New World.²⁷

In sum, an excellent climate, good management, men who were knowledgeable of the area, and a disciplined labor force served to produce not only a flourishing economic order, but a slave-holding, family-conscious aristocracy that was unique to New England. The political influence possessed by the planters and the alliances they formed with those who shared their religious beliefs facilitated the development of the South County economy. As was true in other parts of the New World, slavery and the plantation system it made possible rose and fell together in the Narragansett Country. Slavery in South County ran its course in the eighteenth century. Jones writes:

South County planters in the first third of the century saw their wealth, influence, and prestige increase by leaps and bounds. . . . In the middle third of the century they were at the

apex of their influence. South County planters traded with a good part of the New World, exercised wide power to be reckoned with in New England, and were much respected by fellow Rhode Islanders. In the last third of the century their fortunes declined as the wars of the era proved as disruptive to their economy as to that of their fellow planters in the West Indies.²⁸

By the end of the Revolutionary War, the economic system that made possible the unique planter lifestyle lay in ruins.

It was against this backdrop that the three races met and mingled along the western shore of Narragansett Bay. Long before the end of the eighteenth century, miscegenation had become a problem for New England settlers, who, if they had no clear idea of the nature of Africans, had even less understanding of the nature of the growing number of mulattos. Unlike blacks, who might be of African, Caribbean, or American birth, mulattos were usually born in the New World and were, therefore, not only racially distinct from Africans and Europeans but culturally distinct as well. The New England colonies recognized them as a separate group. Massachusetts made the first distinction between blacks and mulattos in 1693, Connecticut did so in 1704, and Rhode Island and New Hampshire followed in 1714.²⁹ In addition to sexual relations between blacks and whites, Native Americans and blacks also came together and produced children. Greene believes the lowly status assigned both groups in white-dominated New England served to erase any distinction between them, and, as they were common victims of oppression, they naturally drew together.³⁰ In any event, along the eastern seaboard there was a mixing of Native Americans, whites, and blacks during the colonial era.³¹

Unlike the Spaniards and the Portuguese, the Englishmen who settled New England were not accustomed to race mixture and so had not developed the elaborate racial hierarchy that characterized much of the rest of the New World.³² Hence they were none too precise in the racial terminology they developed. While they freely borrowed the term "mulatto" from the Spaniards to refer to a person of mixed African and European ancestry, they used neither the Spanish term "mestizo" to refer to a person of mixed Native American and European ancestry, nor the term "zambo" to refer to a person of mixed Native American and African ancestry. In New England, and in some other British colonies along the Atlantic coast, the term "mestee" or "mustee" was sometimes applied to an individual whose ancestry was both Amerindian and black. The same term, however, was also sometimes applied to persons whom the Spaniards called "mestizos." The English never fully agreed on what to call persons of mixed Indian and European background. Race

mixture was common in all the New England colonies, but only Massachusetts ever legally prohibited it, passing a law in 1706 that made illegal not only marriage between blacks and whites, but sex relations between them as well.³³

Miscegenation was common in the Narragansett Country, scholars agreeing that the Narragansett Indians had considerable sexual contact with both whites and blacks.³⁴ The Indians were as unprepared for the cultural consequences of miscegenation as were blacks and whites, so that for a number of years it was not clear whether persons of mixed ancestry were members of the tribe. Woodward concludes that in the latter part of the eighteenth century "social lines between Indians and blacks became less distinct as inter-marriages multiplied."³⁵ And Boissevain claims that one of the consequences of the Narragansett's contact with both whites and blacks was that they lost their language by 1800.³⁶ The planter elite, having constructed a multi-racial labor force in the Narragansett Country, gradually became uneasy about both blacks and the Narragansett Indians. In 1726 a South Kingstown law forbade both racial groups to hold social gatherings and assemblages out of doors.³⁷

Regardless of the law, Native Americans and blacks continued to meet in both public places and in private. James and Simonds agree that the resultant population was one of ill-defined racial status, but these men and women found a niche for themselves in the workplace of the Narragansett Country.³⁸ Thomas Walmsely (the name is variously spelled in the eighteenth century records), described as a "a mustee or at least an octoroon," married an Indian woman and not only had a small holding of his own and a slave but did odd jobs for the planter aristocracy.³⁹ Despite his mixed heritage, Walmsely apparently felt no especial sympathy for blacks and was willing to track down and return a fugitive slave.⁴⁰ While some blacks and members of the Narragansett tribe intermarried and freely associated with one another, there was no emergent sense that Indians and blacks ought to band together against whites. The two associated with one another in the workplace and elsewhere but did not create an ideology that might have enabled them to present a unified front against their white oppressors. In this they were no different from blacks and Amerindians in other parts of the colonial Americas.⁴¹

The Reverend Joseph Fish, a standing order minister from Connecticut who travelled to the Narragansett Country to preach to the Indians in the 1760s and early 1770s, reflected in his diary on the confusion of these Amerindians as the result of miscegenation.⁴² Fish employed and worked with Joseph Deake to establish a school for the Narragansett. Deake, who was for a time schoolmaster, wrote Fish in December, 1765, to say there might be as many as 151 Indian children who were eligible for the

school. He continued, "Besides these there is a considerable Number of mixtures such as mulattos and mustees which the tribe Disowns."⁴³ Fish himself urged the Narragansett to make room for "Molattos" who lived with them and "to behave peaceably and friendly towards them, allowing their Children benefit of the School, if there was Room and the Master Leisure from tending Schollars of their own Tribe."⁴⁴ The Indians were divided over persons of mixed ancestry who were the children of the Narragansett and who lived with their parents and were loved by them yet were persons whom some tribal members sought to "disown." Fish noted that although he rode from Connecticut to teach the Indians, blacks, whites, and mixed bloods all attended his sermons.⁴⁵ Fish also candidly recorded observations of cross-racial sexual liaisons, such as the case of a "Molatto" named George, who in 1774 was living with an Indian woman who had at one time been married to the "king" of the Narragansett.⁴⁶

While the planters of South County passed a law aimed at preventing blacks and Indians from conducting public meetings, apparently a law was never passed prohibiting their living together or marrying one another, nor did they prohibit whites and blacks from doing so. The Charlestown Council Record Book duly recorded, for example, that Iahue, described as the son of "Negro Will" of Charlestown, and Phelby, "a malatto woman of Westerly," had been married on November 5, 1753. Thomas Walmsley, a "mustee," was married to Elizabeth, an Indian.⁴⁷

Despite the frequency with which red, white, and black intermarried or formed sexual liaisons with one another in the Narragansett Country, and despite their failure to agree upon a neatly ordered racial terminology, eighteenth century Rhode Islanders seem never to have become confused about the three original races. While there was much confusion about the intermediate peoples who were the result of miscegenation, residents of South County retained a clear sense of the racial identity and moral character of whites, Amerindians, and blacks.

Race, Work, and Acculturation

Miscegenation itself was common in the Narragansett Country because of the nature of the labor force. Although a Rhode Island law of 1652 prohibited both the enslavement of Indians and blacks, the rapid economic development of South County a half century later rendered the law a dead letter.⁴⁸ While the law was never formally repealed, subsequent laws concerning slavery, blacks, and the treatment of slaves made it clear it was no longer operative. Although slaves were the mainstay of the South County labor force, the planters supplemented them with Indians, mixed bloods, free blacks, and indentured servants.⁴⁹ The richer landowners also got

considerable work out of their tenants. The pragmatic entrepreneurs of the Narragansett Country took labor wherever they could find it, with the result that their work force was mixed, not only with regard to race but with regard to social status as well. There were also differences as to how long a person might work for a planter. Slaves worked, of course, for life, while indentured servants served a fixed number of years. Long-term informal employment was sometimes worked out between the planters and the Narragansett, mixed bloods, free blacks, and whites. Some persons simply worked for the day.

While other laborers were important in eighteenth century South County, slaves did the bulk of the work. According to Greene, blacks outnumbered white indentured servants by a ratio of eight to one.⁵⁰ Some of these slaves were house servants, but a close examination of the South County system reveals they were important in virtually every aspect of economic life.⁵¹ Many of the slaves worked on the sheep and

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dairy farms in the region.⁵² Slaves also bred horses, raised hogs and other live animals for sale, and helped to produce pork, butter, cheese, and wool. Slaves also worked as personal servants. Woodward found that in the wealthier families each family member had his own horse and usually an attendant to help him.⁵³ This slave would open gates and take charge of the horse when his owner wished to conduct business or enjoy a friendly visit.

Because the major trade of the Narragansett Country was conducted by means of the bay and the many streams that emptied into it, black men were often skilled boatmen. Slaves manned the ferries between South County and Newport, as well as the small boats that went up the rivers and streams to collect the products of smaller planters. Many of these same men were also engaged in coastal trade as far south as the Chesapeake where they used small ketches and sloops to go up the many shallow rivers and creeks of that area with Rhode Island goods.⁵⁴ Other black sailors, sometimes slaves but often free men, shipped out for distant ports in the West Indies. The sea had a powerful appeal for blacks in Rhode Island and in neighboring southeastern Massachusetts. Thanks to recent studies by Bolster and Wiggins, a clear understanding of the importance of seafaring in the lives of blacks in the early na-

tional period—particularly those who lived in coastal areas—is emerging.⁵⁵ There is reason to believe that these seagoing traditions rested on earlier choices made by black men in the eighteenth century. Greene concedes that seafaring occupations were attractive to many blacks, but claims that those who were free were reluctant to take long voyages to the South or to the Caribbean for fear they might be kidnapped and sold into slavery.⁵⁶ Granting this deterrent, many were willing to serve on the smaller vessels that did not sail too far.

[The] clear impression remains that Narragansett Country slaves were not specialists, but were expected to master the wide range of skills involved in mixed farming. Neither were they common laborers, since many worked as carpenters, butchers, iron smiths, rope makers, tailors, distillers, bakers and blacksmiths.⁵⁷

Slaves were trained in and were expected to perform all manner of tasks. This was as true for the women as it was for the men. Robert Hazard employed 24 female slaves in his dairy located in Boston Neck.⁵⁸ The female slaves on a working farm owned by the Reverend James MacSparran, an Angelic cleric who was shrewd enough to marry into the Gardiner family and who ministered in South County from 1733 to his death in 1751, worked at a wide variety of tasks. Not only did they perform such domestic chores as cooking, cleaning, serving meals, mending clothes, and working as personal servants to members of MacSparran's household, but

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they also engaged in such seasonal activities as drying, pickling, and otherwise preserving foods for winter use in an age before refrigeration.⁵⁹ And the good reverend did not hesitate to put his female workers into the fields at planting time and at harvest time if the need arose.⁶⁰

Because slaves, both men and women, were asked to work at a variety of tasks in South County, it is hardly surprising that whether African born, transported from the West Indies, or born in Rhode Island, they soon learned how the system worked. The Narragansett planters faced the same dilemma as slaveholders throughout the colonial Americas in that they needed to have their bondsmen sufficiently enculturated to be able to perform the work expected of them intelligently, but at the same time not so knowledgeable that they would become rivals to their white overlords. In general, the slaveowners' solution to this issue was to assign to slaves the production

end of business and to reserve to themselves its marketing and managerial end. For the most part, this worked well, particularly in the production of such plantation crops as tobacco, sugar, cotton, and coffee, where slaves could be isolated into gangs, sometimes controlled by black drivers who would see that the workers labored diligently at their assigned task. Sometimes even this system broke down; for example, the skilled slaves who were responsible for turning raw cane into sugar had to know something of the product they were expected to produce. Wherever slaves were required to make decisions, whether closely supervised by whites or not, slavemasters had to provide them with more information than they gave a common laborer. Or, put in a slightly different way, they permitted blacks to become more acculturated into the emergent Euro-American system.

Colonists in Belize (formerly termed British Honduras), for example, relied heavily on slaves to locate the hardwood that constituted the main export of the settlement, cut it, and oversee its transportation back to the coast.⁶¹ Under these circumstances, the settlers had no alternative but to share information with their slaves, even though they realized that with information, and success, would inevitably come political demands. There was no way to effectively eliminate the acculturation of blacks in the Americas; they saw mastery of information as the key first to escaping slavery and second to achieving success. The situation faced by the Narragansett planter was more difficult than that faced by planters in mono-crop, slave-based economies. Slaves in South County were involved in a variety of productive and other economic activities so that it was virtually impossible to keep them ignorant.

In Rhode Island the same owners who profited from slave labor and grew wealthy used their influence to see that laws were passed that barred slaves from entry into business. A 1750 South Kingstown law prohibited trading with a slave without permission of his master.⁶² The law was typical of those enacted in other parts of the New World. In New York, for example, no slave could engage in trade without permission of his owner.⁶³ And even before the Scono Rebellion led to a tightening up of South Carolina's slave codes, a 1686 regulation forbade trade with slaves without permission of their owners.⁶⁴ Such prohibitions were not limited to slaves in English possessions. The black slave code of 1724 forbade slaves in French colonies to sell produce or other items without permission from their masters. The same regulation also stipulated that any property accumulated by bondsmen should be turned over when discovered to their owners.⁶⁵ South Kingstown laws went further: slaves were not only forbidden to participate in trade but were forbidden to own animals. According to Greene, upon pain of 31 lashes, no slave was permitted to own a pig,

a cow, or stock of any kind.⁶⁶ The fear, of course, was that if slaves were allowed to own stock, they would pilfer that of their owners and claim it as their own. The law itself demonstrates that black people were becoming enculturated into the system and knowledgeable of the ways in which it could be manipulated to their advantage.

Free blacks, of course, were exempt from the restrictions placed on slaves. The system of mixed labor in the Narragansett Country, which forced the planters to work with a few indentured servants and slaves, supplemented by occasional free labor, sometimes gave free blacks an advantage. They were able to hire on when needed and, if they had small holdings of their own, keep a few chickens, raise vegetables and fruits, and survive. While money was as important in eighteenth century South County as in other parts of the New World, the County apparently ran on a quasi-barter basis. While the Reverend MacSparran paid his neighbor, Thomas Walmsley, for his labor, he supplemented the cash with other items; in October of 1751 he sent Walmsley two barrels of cider.⁶⁷ The planters also occasionally lent their slaves to one another, particularly when an urgent task needed completing. South County slaveholders lent one another oxen, boats, and farm equipment and therefore saw nothing unusual in loaning one another slaves. The barter system and the lending of slaves back and forth created opportunities for bondsmen and bondswomen who were willing to use their working visits to learn more about the system.

Proof of the fact that blacks grasped the workings of the economy can be found in the successes enjoyed by a few free blacks. Greene observes that black Rhode Islanders were handicapped by insufficient credit, lack of training, and lack of experience in their attempts to operate successful, independent, business ventures.⁶⁸ Despite these difficulties and the growing racial prejudice of the period, numerous black freedmen were sufficiently successful as ferry-men, caterers, seamen, small farmers, and independent merchants to leave behind modest estates. Weeden found that Jack Howard, who died in 1745, left behind 145 pounds, while John Reed, who passed away in 1754, left 100 pounds to his heirs.⁶⁹ At his death in 1757, the estate of Andrew Frank was valued at more than 229 pounds.⁷⁰ Emmanuel Bernoon, who had been freed by one of the Huguenot settlers of South County, a group which had been literally driven from the region by religious bigotry, left behind an estate inventoried at 539 pounds in 1769.⁷¹

Of course not all fared so well. In 1729 the Rhode Island Assembly, finding that "great charge, trouble, and inconveniences had risen from" manumissions, declared that no slavemaster might in the future free a slave without posting 100 pounds. These monies were to be used to repay the town in which

he resided in case the freedman should later depend on its charity for survival.

After Acculturation: Race, Religion, and Election Day

The nature of the labor force in South County, involving as it did free whites, indentured servants, Narragansett Indians, mixed bloods, and slaves (many of whom were themselves of mixed ancestry), resulted in a three-way acculturation process. Whites, Narragansett Indians (and other Native Americans who drifted into South County from neighboring areas), blacks, and mixed bloods learned from one another. Whites and blacks each learned from the Narragansett, who were generous in sharing their knowledge. Their generosity did not protect the Amerindians from being exploited by the settlers. Boissevain demonstrates that some Indians sold their land to the settlers because, lacking expertise in the English legal system, they became indebted to the colonists.⁷² They sold their land to get out of debt. Indians who had no land to sell or who were unwilling to part with their land indentured themselves to whites as a way of paying off their debts.⁷³ Once the colonists had mastered their environment, come to grips with its possibilities, and created a working economic order, they had no further use of Narragansett expertise. They needed the Indians only for labor. Having rapidly taken on much of the emergent Euro-American culture, the Indians found various economic riches for themselves. For example, they achieved a special reputation for the construction of stone walls and were often hired to build them.

While the acculturation process involved all three races and their children of mixed ancestry, it was in no sense an equal one. Just as Indian knowledge was no longer needed by the settlers after the initial years, neither was black expertise especially valued. In the Caribbean, scholars generally agree that colonists, albeit grudgingly, came to accept the idea that blacks knew more about survival techniques in a hot climate than did whites.⁷⁴ But South County planters were not so receptive to black ideas. Of course, as is the case with pragmatic managers, they sometimes accepted suggestions from their slaves, but these were utilized only to the extent they were compatible with the European value system.

[The "Afro-Yankees" were] so little challenged by the barriers of Jim Crow common in the Midwest and the South, so lacking in strong black institutions, and so bereft of political clout that they were counted out of the racial struggle.

While the three races influenced one another by virtue of their close contact and shared working conditions, Indians, mixed-bloods, and blacks each worked within the framework established by white folk. Mestees, "molattos," Indians, and blacks, for example, were drawn into Christianity. Unlike neighboring Connecticut and Massachusetts, Rhode Island had no established church that all residents of the colony were required by law to financially support. In South County Anglicans, Quakers, Baptists, and Congregationalists were all present, with the only divisions among the planter aristocracy coming along religious lines. In general, servants and slaves followed the religion of their masters, although this was not always the case. Some blacks (particularly those who were African born) and Indians clung to their traditional religions. But according to McLoughlin:

Insofar as the [Great] Awakening did have an impact, it was upon the poor, especially among black slaves and Indians. God's freely offered, miraculous grace gave them new hope. It also opened the doors of the white man's churches and spoke of Christian equality under God. Church records of the time (1740s) indicated greatly increased black and Indian membership after the Awakening, but as these new members were admitted, many pastors wrote the words black or Indian after their names, indicating that equality before God did not mean social equality.⁷⁵

The Narragansett, blacks, and mixed bloods were attracted to those varieties of Christianity that promised them fair treatment and spiritual equality. They were also attracted to those churches that emphasized the supernatural experience of becoming a Christian and de-emphasized formal learning. As a group, therefore, they tended to be attracted to "New Light" rather than "Old Light" churches. The Narragansett eventually formed their own separate church, one which they linked to other nearby Amerindian congregations such as those of the Mohegan, the Pequot, the western Niantic, and the Montauk.⁷⁶ All these tribes were converted at the time of the Great Awakening and established churches that laid more emphasis on other-world spiritual experience (itself a part of precontact Native American religion) than on learned study. For Native Americans, the Bible was not so much a book to be routinely drawn upon to illustrate theological arguments as it was a basis for visions and dialogue with supernatural figures, in the long-established Indian tradition.

In the early years of the nineteenth century, Rhode Island blacks also moved to establish separate black congregations, which were intended to embody their view of Christianity.⁷⁷ Greene, however, points out that despite the Great Awakening and vigorous

attempts to bring blacks into the Christian fold, by the time of the American Revolution the majority of the slaves "were still heathen."⁷⁸ Even though some blacks remained outside Christianity, they were obviously influenced by the dominant, racially based, Christian faith. This influence made itself felt despite the fact that blacks were segregated in the eighteenth century churches of South County. According to Woodward, when Anglican St. Paul's decided to construct a wide balcony to accommodate an ever growing congregation, a separate section was reserved for the parish's slaves.⁷⁹ Greene found that blacks not only were segregated in the Christian churches in life, but in death as well, a segregated portion of church cemeteries being set aside for them.⁸⁰

Just as the participation of blacks in the churches demonstrates the extent to which they had been enculturated into religion, so do the election day ceremonies demonstrate their mastery of the colonial Euro-American political process. On "Lection Day," the slaves elected their own officials. These men had little power, but the complex electioneering and the voting, held in Rhode Island annually on the third Saturday in June, illustrates the extent to which black Rhode Islanders understood the Anglo-American political process. The fact that the voting and accompanying festivities, including an all day picnic, games, drinking, a ball, and speeches, were supported by whites suggests that white Rhode Islanders regarded them as no threat to their own political hegemony.⁸¹

In sum, like the Narragansett Indians, the blacks of South County learned the ways of white folk. After the Revolution, with the Narragansett Country plantation system in ruin and slavery itself a doomed institution, black folk made their way from the Narragansett Country to Providence, Newport, and other areas in New England that were moving from an agricultural economy to a mercantile system and eventually to an industrial one. The descendants of South County blacks, knowledgeable of the way in which the white system worked, went on to establish independent black institutions such as the Free African Union Society, the African Benevolent Society, schools for black children, and independent black churches. Some of them participated in African colonization movements, others supported the spread of such Afro-American organizations as Prince Hall Free Masonry, and almost without exception black Rhode Islanders were strong supporters of abolition.

Conclusion

As was the case with most other blacks in New England, the Rhode Island people Cottrol has termed "Afro-Yankees"⁸² seemed for generations so completely integrated into Euro-America, so little challenged by the barriers of Jim Crow com-

mon in the Midwest and the South, so lacking in strong black institutions, and so bereft of political clout that they were counted out of the racial struggle. Yet when called upon, they were not found wanting. When, in 1968, the tiny handful of black undergraduates at Brown University walked out of the university demanding that Brown increase the numbers of black faculty and students on its campus and expand its curriculum to include the teaching of the black experience, they did not have to walk far. They found housing, food, and political support in the Congdon Street Baptist Church, established in the nineteenth century by black Rhode Islanders.

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