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The Daughters of Liberty in Rhode Island

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THE DAUGHTERS OF LIBERTY IN RHODE ISLAND.

LIPPITT PRIZE ESSAY.

NELLIE ALBERTINE BRIGGS, 1901.

THE DAUGHTERS OF LIBERTY IN RHODE ISLAND.

Rhode Island had for its founder a man who stood for liberty in its highest sense; the liberty to worship God as the enlightened conscience should direct. Twenty years later, in 1658, we find that "the fundamental principles of the governments of Rhode Island and Massachusetts were brought into striking contrast by the arrival of the Quakers." While in Massachusetts they were persecuted and imprisoned, in Rhode Island they were allowed to worship according to their own convictions. But not only in matters of religion was this toleration shown. As early as 1652, a law was passed in Rhode Island that slaves should be free after ten year's service, and in 1784 it was enacted that all children born to the slaves, after the first of March, should be free. As Rhode Island enjoyed religious liberty, she was ready to take the next step with her sister colonies and make herself politically independent.

This spirit of freedom and independence could not stand the taxes England imposed; and when the stamp act was passed, in 1765, Rhode Island joined the other colonies in resisting. As a result, on the seventh day of October, 1765, the Colonial Congress met in New York, and after three weeks' discussion, declared, that as Englishmen, they could not be

taxed without their own consent, or deprived of the right of trial by jury. It was soon evident that the country would uphold them. "Associations were formed under the name of the Sons of Liberty." The women were as deeply stirred as the men by the "growing tyranny of the British government," and they were not slow in showing it. They wore only home-spun garments, gathered together for spinning, and signed papers that they would "drink no more of the taxed tea". At one of the meetings, composed of eighteen prominent young women of Providence, it was resolved that they should call themselves "Daughters of Liberty". This seems to be the origin of the order.

As regards the name, doubtless the "Sons" suggested the "Daughters". Both were working for the same end, though in a different way. Liberty and Independence! What cared they for trials and privations if they only gained these? A great sympathy existed between the Sons and Daughters and they used often to meet together to discuss the trials of the time. There is a very valuable relic of that period, a round mahogany table, at which Miss Betsy Ellery, a popular Newport young lady, and Daughter of Liberty, was wont to preside. Who shall say how much the good cause owed to her hospitality?

A society was formed in Newport at about the same time as the one in Providence. We have only an imperfect list of its members, but those mentioned are most interesting. First come the names of Polly and Elizabeth Lawton. They were the daughters of Robert Lawton, and it is said that they entertained the Daughters of Liberty at their first meeting. Robert Lawton was very wealthy and ranked high in the social life of Newport. His wife was "Massy Easton, a lineal descendant of Nicholas Easton, a Colonial governor of Rhode Island". The Lawton family were Quakers, and very loyal to the American cause. During the war, French officers were quartered in their house. Polly has always been famous as a Revolutionary belle, and her name will continue to be handed down as one of Rhode Island's patriotic women. Count Ségur once said of her: "So much beauty, so much simplicity, so much elegance, so much modesty, were perhaps never before combined in the same person. Her eyes seemed to reflect as a mirror the meekness and purity of her mind, and the goodness of her heart. She received us with an open ingenuousness which delighted me, and the use of the familiar word thou, which the rules of her sect prescribed, gave to our new acquaintance the appearance of an old friendship". In 1787 she married John Brighthurst, of Philadelphia. He was a prominent man,

and belonged to the society of Friends. Mrs. Bringham made many visits to the Presidential mansion, and lived a very brilliant, though short social life. She was but thirty-two years old, and had been married only six years when she died. Polly Lawton's sister, Elizabeth, was a fine-looking woman, of very graceful manners. She was much admired, but when she and her sister were together, Polly usually commanded the more attention.

Next on the list we find Margaret Champlin, a great belle and an active Daughter of Liberty, as were also her two sisters Mary and Elizabeth. It was at their father's house in Thames Street that the Daughters of Liberty held their second meeting. Margaret was beautiful as well as accomplished and popular, as was shown by the fact that General Washington chose her for his partner at a ball given by Mrs. Cowley, in Church Street. He requested her to choose the dance, and she selected, "A Successful Campaign". Some French officers present, were so delighted with her witty choice, that they acted as musicians and played for that dance with great spirit and energy. Miss Champlin married Dr. Benjamin Mason of Newport, and her eldest daughter became the wife of Commodore Perry, of the United States Navy.

Mr. Christopher Ellery, a most influential citizen

of Newport, was a widower and had but one daughter. "The Fair Betsy", as the French officers called her, presided over his entertainments. At a tea party, given in honor of General Washington, Miss Betsy had a severe cold, and the General expressed a wish for her speedy recovery. He said he would recommend a remedy if he thought she would take it. Her reply is very well known. She said without hesitation, "I am sure I would take any remedy that General Washington would propose." She kept her word and General Washington was informed that "onions boiled in molasses" had relieved her cold. Miss Ellery married Samuel Vernon, son of William Vernon, a popular Newport merchant. While the French were in Newport, a young French surgeon paid Miss Ellery considerable attention. After she was married in 1784, she received an envelope from him, containing two leaves, one withered and the other an evergreen.

Anne Vernon was thought to be an addition to any gathering. She continued to grace Newport society, and to be a helpful member of the Daughters of Liberty, after she became Mrs. Olyphant. Her husband, Dr. David Olyphant, was medical director in the armies of Gates and Greene.

The beautiful Miss Brinley and Martha Ellery, the grand-daughter of Abraham Redwood, were also Daughters of Liberty.

To this same organization belonged Polly Wanton, whose grandfathers were Governor Gideon Wanton and Governor Henry Bull. She was a great favorite in colonial society, as was also her cousin, Polly Bull; and many a discussion was held over the two, as to which was the more charming. Finally, an admirer of Polly Wanton's said, "Polly Bull is very handsome, but Polly Wanton is very charming and cunning". The word "cunning" was used in the sense of "being superior in intelligence." Polly Wanton became the wife of Colonel Daniel Lyman, and was, throughout her life, a loyal Daughter of Liberty.

Lucy Ellery, whose father, William Ellery, signed the Declaration of Independence, was another "Daughter". Mr. Channing said that her sound sense charmed him as much as her beauty attracted him.

It is thought that Elizabeth and Mary Anthony were daughters of Elisha Anthony, the Quaker, who, when General Prescott ordered him to remove his hat, replied that he bared his head to no one but his maker.

We can learn but very little of Patience and Sally Easton, beyond the fact that they belonged to the society.

Freelove Fenner must have been a member of the Providence organization. She was considered very beautiful, and was especially noticed by La Fayette, at a grand reception given in his honor, by Governor Fenner. The General paid her

marked attention throughout the evening, and at its close gave her a badge and asked her not to forget him while the colors remained bright. This, together with the Washington badge, and the famous Ellery table, help to make the past seem real, and are much treasured by their present owners.

There must have been many more women who were true Daughters of Liberty, though not enrolled with any formal organization. Among such should be mentioned Dorcas Matteson, Abigail Salisbury, Sarah Dyer, and Anna Aldrich, who had the true spirit, if not the name of the order. They worked in the fields, spun, wove, and knit innumerable pairs of stockings, and cared for the sick and wounded.

The organization of the Daughters of Liberty did not end with the struggle for Independence. There are many societies today, having for their motto, "Fidelity, Patriotism, and Integrity". One in Massachusetts, has a membership of about sixty, and works for the purpose of teaching American women the necessity of perpetuating American principles. Another of its aims is the furtherance of the public school system, as they have the same convictions as did the founders of our republic, that such schools are "a necessary safeguard of civil and religious liberty".

There are chapters in Connecticut, Maine, New Jersey, and New York; and we do not doubt that there are others of which we have not heard.

Let us hope that the men and women of America may never lose the spirit of independence and love of liberty which were so strongly manifested in the little colony of Rhode Island at the time of the Revolution.

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