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Disorderly House Keepers: Poor Women in Providence, Rhode Island, 1781-1832

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DISORDERLY HOUSE KEEPERS: POOR WOMEN IN PROVIDENCE, RHODE
ISLAND, 1781-1832

BY
ANDREW T. POLTA

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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MASTER OF ARTS THESIS

OF

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2018

ABSTRACT

This study examines the lives of poor women in Providence, Rhode Island between the end of the American Revolution in 1781 and the formation of Providence's municipal government in 1832. In this same Early Republic period, many historians have described a crackdown by local authorities in cities throughout the northern United States on perceived threats to social order and stability, in stark contrast to the Enlightenment-inspired rhetoric of egalitarianism that marked the Revolution and its immediate aftermath. This crackdown was the result of long-term and interlocking economic, social, and political changes, and frequently took the form of the arrest and removal from town of women—both white and African American—associated with so-called disorderly houses. 'Disorderly house' was a blanket term used by local authorities to encompass a wide variety of illicit or suspect establishments like racially integrated boarding houses, brothels, unlicensed liquor stands, dance halls, or family homes that entertained company too late at night.

Providence records, such as town council meeting minutes, county court records, deeds, and town directories, reveal that trends similar to those in major cities like Philadelphia, New York, and Boston were present in a mid-sized regional town. They also demonstrate the importance of disorderly houses, both as a focus for town authorities' efforts to prevent disorder by removing women through existing poor laws and in women's resistance to removal. In Providence's expanding maritime economy, disorderly houses provided income for women who were often left to fend for themselves as the result of a mariner husband's absence at sea, an absence that was often permanent. At the same time, such houses also connected poor women with

benefactors from the ranks of Providence's elite, many of whom rented properties in the town's disreputable neighborhoods, like Olney's Lane and Hardscrabble, and sometimes turned a blind eye to disorder or intervened with the authorities to protect reliable tenants. Local evidence also demonstrates that Providence disorderly houses served as community institutions, providing women with cheap lodging, rudimentary social services, and a network in which to hide from town authorities.

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For this finished product, I owe many debts of gratitude, starting with the members of my committee. Dr. Rod Mather, my major professor and head of committee, shepherded this thesis through the University of Rhode Island's graduate program and steered me toward a program of study that laid the groundwork for this project. Dr. Catherine DeCesare provided invaluable advice on conducting research in Rhode Island and answered many detailed questions as I interpreted court and city records. Dr. Jessica Frazier's feedback on my proposal and early outlines was key to giving this thesis a clear structure and focus from the beginning, thus saving me many future headaches.

I must also give a special thanks to Dr. Miriam Reumann, whose class on the history of sexuality in the United States was the seed from which this thesis grew, and who generously gave her feedback as the project progressed. Dr. Joanne Melish was similarly generous in providing her transcriptions of many late eighteenth century Providence records, in addition to asking several pointed questions early on that led me to rethink the time period I should cover. Toby Ayers, the current owner of one of the Burr family homes, answered my questions about Ezekiel Burr and provided me with scans of several maps that helped me visualize Olney's Lane and its residents.

Finally I must thank the archivists and other staff at the Rhode Island Historical Society, the Providence City Archives, the University of Rhode Island Library, and the Rhode Island Supreme Court Judicial Records Center for their help and infinite patience as I took my first steps in archival research.

DEDICATION

For Tinsley, Penny, and Hawthorne, who all helped in their own ways.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There's definitely a mutual covering of asses going on in the lower classes...I've even tracked down babysitters for employees who'd lost their child care and couldn't afford to lose their shift as well. Instead of letting an employee call off work and winding up shorthanded to boot, I called around until I found a cashier who was more than happy to babysit for a few hours for some extra cash. I loaned the cook the money to pay the cashier, and everyone got something they needed. We do shit like that a lot.

We'd never survive otherwise.¹

Linda Tirado wrote this description of working-class life in her 2014 memoir of her experiences on the economic margins of twenty-first century “Bootstrap America.” In addition to how she made ends meet working several minimum-wage service jobs, she also describes humiliations large and small at the hands of capricious authorities and convoluted, understaffed social service bureaucracies that harmed more than helped. In one chapter, she dwells on the feeling that modern poverty has been criminalized, explaining the danger of being cited for minor offenses like public intoxication while drinking in her own front yard and the need to avoid police when she could not afford the fifty-dollar registration fee—equivalent to a day's wages—for her car.²

Tirado likens these experiences to Dickensian England, but had she wanted to, she could have looked much closer to home for comparisons. Though she writes about Ohio and Utah in the early 2000s, many of Tirado's experiences might have

¹ Linda Tirado, *Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2014), 24-25.

² *Ibid.*, 150-152.

sounded familiar to Betsey Taylor, a woman of color living in early nineteenth century Rhode Island. Taylor, a daughter of slaves, moved to Providence a little before 1800, where she made at least part of her living catering to sailors' need for a good time ashore. Maritime commerce drove Providence's post-Revolutionary War economy, and the town soon sprouted dance halls, brothels, sailor boarding houses, and unlicensed shops for liquor and food.³ Such activity was partially why the town council expelled Taylor in 1809, noting that she entertained "noisy company at unseasonable hours."⁴ Returning to Providence in 1822, Taylor and her daughter Eliza set up shop in Olney's Lane, a neighborhood on the north edge of town with a reputation for drunkenness, prostitution, and sailors' riots.⁵ It also had cheap housing, and thus attracted much of the town's marginalized and impoverished African American population. Again Taylor's activities caught the attention of the town authorities, who ordered her to leave on seven separate occasions between 1822 and 1830. When she either returned to town or refused to leave in the first place, the council threatened her landlords with hefty fines if they did not evict her.

It is easy to see Betsey Taylor and those like her in Olney's Lane and other Providence black neighborhoods like Hardscrabble and Snowtown as disorderly troublemakers, feeding off an underworld of sex, liquor, and carousing Jack Tars. Certainly many of her respectable neighbors thought that way about her, as shown by their numerous petitions to the town council complaining of women, both white and

³ While Tirado herself was never involved in the illicit economy of crime or prostitution in the same way Taylor was, she acknowledges an informal system of "sex as currency," where the prospect of moving in with a friend to save on rent or utility bills came with the implication of entering a sexual relationship. She also notes that "pushing dime bags is enough to pay a bill or two, keep your phone or gas on, and keep your car moving;" *ibid.*, 98-99, 164.

⁴ Providence Town Council Minute Book, Providence City Archives (hereafter PTC), 9A:182-183.

⁵ Olney's Lane, renamed Olney Street, still exists in Providence today, just off North Main Street near a commercial strip mall with a Whole Foods and a Starbucks.

black, whose “disorderly houses” and “houses of ill fame” disturbed the public peace and corrupted the local youth.⁶ However, when put into the wider context of social and economic changes sweeping Providence, the state of Rhode Island, and the entire United States of America, the actions of women like Betsey Taylor and her fellows—disorderly women like Eliza Granger, Rosanna Jones, Sally Andrews, Mahala Greene, and Susan Parr Gardner, whose names appear repeatedly in the Providence records—look less like criminality and more like the kinds of hustles necessary to survive in a society that offered few other choices.

Historians have looked at the Early Republican period of the United States from multiple angles, and it has become clear that these women were caught in a vortex of interconnected social, political, economic, and cultural changes. In a summation of recent work in American social history, Christopher Clark has argued that the first half-century of the country’s history, especially in New England, saw the breakdown of a colonial-era society in which the family, including slaves, servants, and apprentices, was the basic economic and social unit. The nineteenth century saw these integrated family economies break down into a pool of independent wage laborers, no longer tied to the land or a particular town and able to migrate in search of

⁶ Rhode Island at this time did have a significant Native American population, but the vast majority lived in the southern part of the state. I have chosen to restrict my analysis primarily because of difficulty in accurately identifying Native Americans in nineteenth-century Providence sources. While eighteenth century records differentiate between “blacks,” “mulattoes,” “mustees,” and “Indians,” by the nineteenth century, the council more often used the blanket designation “of color;” cf. John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic: Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 9; in this study, because the categories used by the council are such a muddle, I am using the terms ‘black,’ ‘African American,’ and ‘people of color’ interchangeably, with the understanding that the first two categories contain many people who are bi- or multiracial; for a full discussion of the implications of these various terms in the context of Rhode Island history, see Christy Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2016), 160-161 n8.

steady work.⁷ While the rise of manufacturing was one major driver of this process, port towns like Providence and Newport, with their large populations of wage-earning sailors, had helped catalyze the transition in the late eighteenth century.⁸ However, while these wage laborers' newfound mobility mitigated locally or seasonally intermittent labor demands, it also cut them off from social support systems rooted in their families.⁹ Young unmarried women often started new families after they left home, but in a port town like Providence, a husband who went to sea might not return for any number of reasons, thereby leaving a wife destitute. Officially, her only recourse then was to town poor relief, which was issued based on legal residency, which in turn was based on land ownership. Rather than spend money on perceived strangers and outsiders, town authorities usually resorted to removal of non-residents, with fines or public floggings to enforce it.¹⁰ In fast-growing Providence, then, a growing number of landless migrant women faced poverty not just as material scarcity, but also as a threat of being torn from a community in which they had spent years, for some nearly their entire lives.

This new economic precariousness was entwined, especially for poor women, with new social and cultural vulnerabilities. Historians of gender in America have

⁷ Christopher Clark, *Social Change in America from the Revolution Through the Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 21-27, 138-140.

⁸ Clark, *Social Change*, 97-100; with regard to the growth of female wage labor in eighteenth-century towns and cities, see Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 41-43; cf. Elaine Forman Crane, *Ebb Tide in New England: Women, Seaports, and Social Change, 1630-1800* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 102-104.

⁹ See Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 6-7: she argues that, broadly speaking, the hierarchical structure of marriage and the family "organized the division of labor and power" and was "the main source of social security, medical care, and unemployment insurance."

¹⁰ In town council records, terms such as "vagrant" or "transient" simply meant a person who was not legally settled in that town. The most common procedure was to remove transients to their last place of legal settlement. For rural migrants in the nineteenth century, this often meant where a parent or grandparent had last owned property; see Chapter 2.

long rooted a major shift in early nineteenth century New Englanders' perceptions of gender roles within marriage and the family in the rise of wage labor. The new family ideal was ostensibly more egalitarian than the rigid patriarchal hierarchy of the eighteenth century, as it emphasized spousal romance and a domestic role for wives that complemented their husbands' public one. However, this new ideal was the product of the middle classes, and poor women who failed to live up to it because they had to work outside the home and support their families were suspect. Outside the new bounds of respectability, they were dangers to public order and thus fit for harassment and removal by town authorities.¹¹

Racism also affected poor women, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly. The Revolution unleashed ideals of liberty and equality with disruptive effects across the new nation. In the North, many enslaved African Americans had used the Revolution to seize their chance at freedom, and in its aftermath, the northern states legally emancipated their remaining slaves. Though free, black men and women continued to struggle against racial discrimination that determined what jobs they could work, where they could live, and how quickly their neighbors complained about them to a town constable. At the same time, historians have noted calls for universal white manhood suffrage and the removal of property requirements for voting.¹² One of the side effects of this discussion was to exclude non-white males from the public

¹¹ For extreme examples from New York, such as the opprobrium reserved for female boarding house keepers and the violence directed at prostitutes, see Wendy Gamber, "Tarnished Labor: The Home, The Market, and The Boardinghouse in Antebellum America," *Journal of the Early Republic* 22 (Summer 2002): 177-204 and Timothy Gilfoyle, "Strumpets and Misogynists: Brothel 'Riots' and the Transformation of Prostitution in Antebellum New York City," *New York History* 68, no. 1 (1987): 45-65.

¹² Clark, *Social Change*, 113-114; Rhode Island famously lagged behind the rest of the country in this respect, with expansion of suffrage only taking place in Dorr War of 1841-1842; see Patrick T. Conley, *Democracy in Decline: Rhode Island's Constitutional Development, 1776-1841* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1977), 290-371.

political sphere. Many states, including Rhode Island, disenfranchised recently freed black men. At the same time, white laborers and artisans, frustrated by the slowness with which wealthy property owners relinquished their hold on government, sparked a wave of riots in cities across the North, including Providence, from the 1820s through the 1840s with the aim of asserting their claims to political power and physically driving African Americans and women from public spaces.¹³

These national trends have been closely studied in the North's major urban areas, and while New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore all had higher populations and more varied and dynamic economies, they provide relevant models for trends seen in a regionally important town like Providence. For example, in addition to its similarities with Gilfoyle's study of New York, the crackdown on so-called disorderly or bawdy houses that swept Providence in the 1810s and 1820s is mirrored in Claire Lyons's study of the sexual culture of Philadelphia and Barbara Meil Hobson's of prostitution in Boston.¹⁴ In their examinations of women's economic activities, Seth Rockman and Christine Stansell also provide useful models for how perceptions of female dependence and the middle-class cult of domesticity hampered lower-class women's efforts to earn a living in antebellum Baltimore and New York, respectively.¹⁵

¹³ See Gilfoyle, "Brothel Riots." Another historian's examination of the 1831 Olney's Lane Riot in Providence acknowledges some superficial similarities with the New York brothel riots, but ultimately roots the Providence riot in class and racial conflicts; see Joseph Sullivan, "Reconstructing the Olney's Lane Riot: Another Look at Race and Class in Jacksonian Rhode Island," *Rhode Island History* 65, no. 7 (2007): 49-60.

¹⁴ Clare A. Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble: An Intimate History of Gender and Power in the Age of Revolution, Philadelphia, 1730-1830* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Barbara Meil Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue: The Politics of Prostitution and the American Reform Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹⁵ Seth Rockman, "Women's Labor, Gender Ideology, and Working-Class Households in Early Republic Baltimore," *Pennsylvania History* 66, Explorations in Early American Culture (1999): 174-

While a thorough study of tensions between poor and middle class women or prostitution and urban sexual culture does not exist for Providence, the city's black population has received dedicated scholarly attention. Much of the early work focused on the formation of black middle class institutions, as it drew on the memoirs of prominent black citizens and institutional histories to show how the development of black schools, churches, and fraternal organizations produced independent leaders and served as a bulwark against white prejudice.¹⁶ In addition to an analysis of institutional formation, Robert Cottrol adds quantitative analysis of census records to describe occupations, family structure, and the extent of property ownership in the Providence black community at mid-century. Despite some caveats, his findings can likely be projected back into the 1830s or 1820s.¹⁷ While placed in the broad context of the Atlantic world, Jeffrey Bolster's work on black sailors, especially their economic advantages, also sheds light on a significant part of Providence's black community. Bolster, like Cottrol, focuses on black sailors' roles as "pillar[s] of free black society," but he also describes how black sailors became associated with disorder in the brothels, dance halls, and boarding houses in ports up and down the Atlantic coast.¹⁸ More recently, Christy Clark-Pujara has gone over similar territory in her examination of how the legacies of enslavement and Rhode Island's continued

200; while Baltimore is as much Southern as Northern, Rockman's intersectional examination of poor women's survival strategies in a city with a significant black population provides a useful comparison for Providence's black community; Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York 1789-1860* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

¹⁶ See, for example, Julian Rammelkamp, "The Providence Negro Community, 1820-1848," *Rhode Island History* 7, no. 1 (1948): 20-33 and Robert J. Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees: Providence's Black Community in the Antebellum Era* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982).

¹⁷ Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 115-116; much of his work also focuses on the growing antagonism between working class African Americans and Irish immigrants, but that development falls outside the scope of this study.

¹⁸ W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 160-161, quote from p.189.

involvement in the business of slavery—i.e., the links between the state’s textile mills and the cotton-producing South—affected free blacks after emancipation.¹⁹

While the above studies mainly concern male institutions and experiences, there are others that take a closer look at the women of Rhode Island’s black community. In contrast to Cottrol’s focus on black middle class men, Joanne Melish factors in the many transient and transplant women missed by the official censuses.²⁰ For example, she addresses their confrontations with town councils that accused them of ‘disorderly conduct’ or ‘disturbing the peace.’²¹ However, her descriptions of lower-class black women are set within the context of a much larger argument about how whites’ association of African Americans with public disorder contributed to the hardening of racial categories in New England after gradual emancipation.²²

If we want to look specifically at the experiences of lower-class African Americans in Providence, the best places to look are studies of the nineteenth century riots. John Wood Sweet provides a good discussion of how the 1824 Hardscrabble Riot fit into the process of black exclusion from citizenship and respectability in the new American Republic.²³ Two other works deal specifically with the Olney’s Lane Riot, the first by Howard Chudacoff and Theodore Hirt, who show how the riot was the final straw in a disorderly decade and led to Providence chartering a city government with increased police powers.²⁴ The other, by Joseph Sullivan, does the most to highlight that, despite its reputation as a black neighborhood, Olney’s Lane

¹⁹ Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*.

²⁰ Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 76n, 122-130.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

²² See Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*, esp. 98-101.

²³ Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 353-397.

²⁴ Howard P. Chudacoff and Theodore C. Hirt, “Social Turmoil and Governmental Reform in Providence, 1820-1832,” *Rhode Island History* 31, no. 1 (1971), 20-33.

remained racially mixed, and crackdowns on disorder affected black and white residents.²⁵

Given the attacks against them on multiple fronts, it is a wonder that women like Betsey Taylor hung on in Providence so long. In her case, she even returned to face down the council again after being successfully removed in 1809. Many other Providence women shared her persistence, from Sally Andrews, a white woman from Coventry who tried multiple times to set up a boarding house in the 1820s, to Phebe Potter, who defied nearly a dozen attempts remove her between 1807 and 1823, and Rosanna Jones, a single woman of color who both ran a successful boarding house in Olney's Lane and avoided the council's ire.

How these women survived in the face of poverty, accusations of disorderly conduct, riots, and the constant threat of removal is key to understanding urban life in Early Republic Providence. Of course, these women were not completely isolated in their struggles against the town council. While transient women had no access to a social safety net, not even the bare-bones aid administered by the town's Overseer of the Poor, they could draw help from those around them.

One of the easiest ways to look at these networks of support is to examine urban boarding houses. 'Boarding house' is a nebulous term, covering everything from a rented-out spare room to a multi-family tenement. Taking in boarders was a common survival strategy for single women.²⁶ In studies of New England women, and especially in Lisa Norling's and Elaine Crane's studies of maritime communities,

²⁵ See Sullivan, "Olney's Lane."

²⁶ In this study, "single" refers to women living without access to a male partner's wages, thus encompassing those who have never been married, who have been widowed, divorced or abandoned, women between relationships, or married women whose husbands are absent for some reason, such as being away at sea.

boarding is often discussed as one of many ways in which wives contributed to a family income.²⁷ Excellent work has also been done on the economic role of boarding houses in facilitating urban industrialization in America and how their negative reputations helped cement middle class ideals of domestic femininity and the home.²⁸ Betsey Taylor—like many other women in Providence—seems to have relied on income from taking in boarders, especially when her husbands were absent at sea.

However, most of these previous studies look at boarding houses from the perspective of the middle class, both as proprietors and tenants. Most of the women in Cott's studies are middle or lower-middle class, while Lisa Norling primarily looks at the wives of captains and officers in the New England whaling industry. Wendy Gamber's study of mid-nineteenth-century New York boarding houses primarily relies on diaries and prescriptive literature griping about bad housekeepers and shady fellow boarders. Of course, a focus on materials produced by and for the middle class makes perfect sense, as these were the people with the education and free time to produce the vast majority of written records about boarding and boarding houses.

To understand the experience of boarders and boarding houses further down the social ladder, it is necessary to look at different sources. To gain access to the experience of people who were mostly illiterate and rarely left accounts of themselves, it is necessary to follow Gilfoyle's recommendations for researching historically marginalized groups like prostitutes in New York. Gilfoyle urges historians to look for evidence where marginalized peoples' lives came in contact with government

²⁷ See Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*; Crane, *Ebb Tide*; and Lisa Norling, *Captain Ahab had a Wife: New England Women and the Whaling Industry, 1720-1870* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

²⁸ See Gamber, "Tarnished Labor."

record keeping.²⁹ In Early Republic Providence, that means turning to the records of the town council, whose meeting minutes record biographical details for hundreds of transients examined to determine their eligibility for poor relief, and who also received dozens of petitions, letters of complaint, and town watch reports that further illuminate life in neighborhoods like Olney's Lane and Hardscrabble.

Ruth Wallis Herndon has already demonstrated the possibilities for constructing biographies of transient paupers with her work on eighteenth century Rhode Island. In *Unwelcome Americans*, she constructs detailed individual lives, based on the relatively abundant information in examinations and associated documents like petitions to town and state authorities, warrants, and treasurers' accounts.³⁰ However, in the nineteenth century, examinations got shorter while becoming more numerous, as if the council were rushing through them. The result is that, while it is hard to develop individual portraits, it is possible to look for connections and networks between people based on scattered references to occupations, family connections, and where people were living in town. When combined with information gleaned from town directories, court records, and deeds, a picture arises in Early Republic Providence of a mixed-race poor community in which connections between and within so-called disorderly houses played a key role in shielding women from the council's increasingly harsh attempts to marginalize and remove them.

²⁹ See Timothy Gilfoyle, "Prostitutes in the Archives: Problems and Possibilities in Documenting the History of Sexuality," *American Archivist* 57 (Summer 1994): 518-521.

³⁰ See Ruth Wallis Herndon, *Unwanted Americans: Living on the Margins in Early New England* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001).

To discern this role, it is necessary to read past the sources' use of terms like "disorderly persons" and "disorderly houses." Based on clues in the records and analogies from contemporary cities, these vague terms could apply to anything from brothels to unlicensed liquor shops, noisy families, or boarding houses with racially mixed tenants. When they do apply to illicit activities, like brothels or selling liquor without a license, it is also necessary to strip away the implications of moral depravity. For poor single women with few options, Providence's high population of sailors in search of entertainment supported an illicit economy in which they could sell liquor or food or sex, often for more money than they could hope for in domestic service or by taking in washing. Each of these business ventures relied on the same pool of customers, so these women also relied on each other to keep business brisk. African American women faced additional hardship, as the council's refusal to issue them licenses made their businesses disorderly by definition. What the council saw as disorder was in fact poor women working together to keep their heads above water and avoid abject poverty for themselves and their families.

In addition to an income, disorderly houses provided some rudimentary services to people who never expected aid from the town, charities, or mutual aid societies, and had no political institutions to advocate on their behalf. Some disorderly house keepers were successful enough to become property owners and were thus shielded from the council's main weapon against disorder—removal. Those keepers who paid rent also had success cultivating the protection of the wealthy men of Providence, many of whom owned buildings in Snowtown or Olney's Lane and looked the other way as long as payment came in regularly. This protection also

possibly allowed some keepers to avoid the attentions of the council if a tenant or customer did not appear for a summons or was absent when the town sergeant turned up to carry out a removal. There may have also been an informal network of boarding houses through which people passed to elude officers sent after them and to keep ahead of the council. Finally, evidence exists as well of boarding house keepers providing childcare for single women, negotiating rent, and extending credit to tenants in particularly hard times.

Researching how poor women in Providence survived in the Early Republican period has the potential to illuminate lives and experiences that have so far not received enough attention from historians. While good studies touching on poverty and race have been done at the state level in Rhode Island, many aspects of Providence's history have yet to receive close attention. Historians studying other cities have done a much better job of looking at the poor as a class, while still remaining sensitive to the ways in which race and gender cross-cut social divisions. Examining the lengths these women went to support themselves and their families in the face of harsh social and economic pressures is also an opportunity to think about our own society, as described by women like Linda Tirado. We can note how the lives of the poor and marginalized have improved in many ways since Betsey Taylor's time, and yet how many parallels between her life and Tirado's remain. In turn, we can think about what a just society looks like, and what kinds of institutions or cultural attitudes will lead to a nation where marginalized women do not have to "hustle" to secure the bare minimum for themselves and their families.

CHAPTER 2

POVERTY AND ENTRY INTO THE WAGE LABOR MARKET

Providence after the Revolution presented opportunities and dangers for people in search of a better life. With the rejuvenation of the town's maritime commerce in the 1790s, both white and recently freed African American families came in search of jobs aboard ship and along the docks. The swelling population created further opportunities to provide lodging, food, entertainment, and domestic services. Paradoxically, however, life for many urban residents was increasingly precarious as the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth. The shift from rural farming to urban wage labor meant that many new residents in Providence failed to meet the property requirements of legal settlement that allowed access to what little poor relief or social services the town offered. Instead, local governments ejected them from town to spare local taxpayers the expense of supporting them. For women, the catastrophic consequences of a husband or father lost at sea or absent on a long voyage left them particularly vulnerable. Those women who sought work had to accept low-paying, often sporadic employment, which often failed in the end to keep them out of poverty. Still, a precarious existence in Providence was evidently preferable to life in the outlying countryside, as shown in the town council's evident frustration with women who returned repeatedly after their removal. The cumulative effects of these pressures on urban poor can be seen in a rapid rise in the numbers removed by the council. Such numbers were the result of the lure of Providence's postwar economy,

which created both the possibility of prosperity, as well as many of the conditions for a swift fall into poverty and ejection from the urban community.

The rise in Providence's economic fortunes were a consequence of the War of Independence, since for much of Rhode Island's early history, Providence had lagged behind Newport in that respect. From its founding in 1636 until the end of King Phillip's War in 1676, Providence had a reputation as a small, fractious religious commune in the middle of Narragansett country, not a driver of the colonial economy.³¹ Though the number of ships carrying goods from Providence to the British West Indies increased around 1690, by that point Newport had an almost fifty-year head start. Newporters had built ships suitable for the coastal trade as early as the 1640s, and on the eve of the Revolution, it was one of the five largest seaports in the British North American colonies, along with Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston, South Carolina.³² The war was not kind to Newport, however. The British occupied the town from December 1776 to October 1779, during which time trade ground to a halt and half the population fled. Providence's sheltered position at the head of the Narragansett Bay spared it from the tender mercies of the British, and after the war it took over the primary economic and governmental mantle previously held by Newport.³³

As a result of this stroke of wartime luck, Providence grew steadily. While the town boasted a population of only 4,321 in 1774, that had risen to 7,614 by 1800, and

³¹ William G. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1978), 9-13, 43-44.

³² *Ibid.*, 25.

³³ *Ibid.*, 92-98; for a more detailed study of these cities, see Carl Bridenbaugh, *Cities in the Wilderness: the First Century of Urban Life in America, 1625-1742*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1971).

between 1820 and 1830 it spiked rapidly from 11,767 to 16,836.³⁴ By contrast, Newport's population in 1830 was half that of Providence, a ratio that had been reversed back in 1774.³⁵ Much of this rise in Providence's population was the result of Rhode Islanders moving in from declining port towns like Newport and Bristol or impoverished farms in Washington County.³⁶ Others came from eastern Connecticut towns like Plainfield or Killingly, or towns in southern Massachusetts like Attleboro and Rehoboth. Very few were foreign immigrants: while Providence town records note plenty of foreign-born sailors in port, mass immigration into Rhode Island only began in the mid-to-late 1830s, when the potato famine drove waves of Irish refugees across the Atlantic to find work in the state's then-expanding textile industry.³⁷

Another source of population increase was the migration of freed African American families from outlying rural counties into Providence searching for work after the end of slavery. Colonial Rhode Island had invested heavily in slavery, both as a significant element in Newport's maritime economy and as a labor force on the livestock-raising plantations in Washington County, on the southwest side of

³⁴ John Russell Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantation, in New England*, vol. 7, 1770-1776 (Providence: A. C. Greene and Brothers, 1862), 299; US Department of State, *Return of the Whole Number of Persons Within the Several Districts of the United States* (Washington, DC, 1800); US Census Bureau, *Population Schedules of the Fourth Census of the United States, Rhode Island*, vol. 3, *Providence Co.* (Washington, DC, 1956), Rhode Island Historical Society (hereafter RIHS) microfilm collection; US Census Bureau, *Fifth Census of the United States, 1830: Population Schedules, Rhode Island* vol. 2, *Providence and Washington Counties* (Washington DC, 1949), RIHS microfilm collection.

³⁵ Newport's population in 1830 was 8,010; see US Census Bureau, *Fifth Census*, vol. 1: *Bristol, Kent, and Newport Counties*; contrast Bartlett, *Records*, 299.

³⁶ Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 358.

³⁷ See, for example, examinations of James Boston, brought from Africa as an infant with his parents, PTC 11:387; or John Hill, also born in Africa, PTC 9B:170; or Offer Lane, born in China, who married Abby Updike, a local woman of color, and signed his residency examination in Chinese characters, PTC 11:387; for men, often sailors, and women from England and Ireland, see examinations of Josiah Freeman and John Williams, PTC, 10:344 and 9B:39 respectively; see also the examination of Jane Holmes, an Irish woman married to a Norwegian sailor; PTC 9A:332; on mass immigration from Ireland starting after 1830, see Peter J. Coleman, *The Transformation of Rhode Island, 1790-1860* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1963), 229-230.

Narragansett Bay. Of all the northern colonies, Rhode Island had the highest ratio of slaves to white residents on the eve of revolution.³⁸ However, the disruptions brought on by that crisis and the subsequent war gave many black slaves opportunities for freedom. Many simply ran away amid the chaos; Christy Clark-Pujara notes that runaway slave notices in Rhode Island newspapers spiked during the war and estimates that at least a fifth of all slaves in British North America had escaped by the end.³⁹ Northern states also allowed black slaves to enlist in the Continental Army in exchange for their freedom, especially after the heavy losses from death and desertion during winter at Valley Forge in 1778. Rhode Island fielded an entire battalion of around 250 African Americans that year, and many more probably served in other units as soldiers, musicians and laborers.⁴⁰ Masters who tried to prevent their slaves from enlisting often found their commitment to the Patriot cause questioned by unsympathetic local officials and recruiting officers desperate for men. After the war, with so many slaves either escaped or gone into the army, many Northern state courts and legislatures saw the writing on the wall and emancipated the remainder. The Rhode Island General Assembly passed the Manumission Act in 1784, which freed all children born of slaves after March 1 of that year. However, the Assembly ensured emancipation incurred as little public expense as possible, providing no material

³⁸ McLoughlin, *Rhode Island*, 64-65; see also Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*, 24-29, 42-43, where she describes in detail the involvement of black slaves in the Newport's slave trade, from building the ships to supplying the crews; for nuanced looks at the relative importance of the Newport slave trade, see Virginia Bever Platt, "'And Don't Forget the Guinea Voyage' The Slave Trade of Aaron Lopez of Newport," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1975): 601-618 and James A. Rawley and Stephen D. Behrendt, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 355-383.

³⁹ Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*, 76.

⁴⁰ Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 206-209; cf. Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*, 70-72 and Lorenzo Greene, "Observations on the Black Regiment of Rhode Island in the American Revolution," *Journal of Negro History* 37, no. 2 (1952): 142-172.

assistance to freed slaves and compensating slave-owners by making freeborn children indentured servants to their parents' masters until age twenty-one for boys and eighteen for girls.⁴¹

As freed slaves and poor whites moved into the port of Providence and put their hopes in the postwar boom, the nature of maritime labor made whatever prosperity they found there fragile. With the British West Indies closed to American shipping following independence and Newport falling behind, Providence flourished as local merchants pursued trade with the Baltic Sea and the East Indies, thus ensuring plenty of work for sailors and for laborers on the docks and in the shipyards.⁴² The town was especially attractive to freedmen since one of the few places skilled black men could earn equal pay for equal work with white men, and where they could expect promotion based on merit, was aboard a ship.⁴³ However, families did not always share in Providence's maritime prosperity, and many a wife, daughter, or sister found herself tossed onto the labor market by the death, abandonment, unemployment, or absence at sea of a male relative. Sudden poverty was a special concern for those relying on mariners' wages, which came as a lump sum at the end of a voyage, not at regular intervals. Thus, while their menfolk were at sea or unemployed at home between voyages, many women had to fend for themselves.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 71-73.

⁴² McLoughlin, *Rhode Island*, 110-111.

⁴³ Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 158-189; cf. Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*, 95; a significant number of black Rhode Islanders had worked aboard ship while enslaved, and after emancipation turned those skills into wages for themselves and their families; see Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 27, 154-160.

⁴⁴ Lisa Norling describes the precariousness of sailors' finances in the colonial New England whaling industry, in which merchants sometimes gave wives advances on her husband's wages. However, such advances could put a family in debt if the sailor's share of the voyage's profits proved too small. The Providence town council records have no indication whether sailors' wives received support from their husbands' employers or not, and Norling notes that these advances were usually reserved for officers' and mates' wives, especially in the nineteenth century; see Lisa Norling, "Contrary

Luckily, enterprising or desperate women found plenty of opportunities in the increase of Providence's maritime traffic.⁴⁵ Olney's Lane, in the north section of town, was a common haunt for men off the ships where women like Susan Parr Gardner of Newport and Betsey Taylor, who married several sailors, rented rooms and catered to the demand for food, liquor, and sex.⁴⁶ Further down the economic ladder, women made money working in the houses run by people like Taylor and Gardner, selling sex to sailors or other travelers.⁴⁷ William Brown, a prominent member of Providence's black community, recalled growing up next to a boarding house where sailors stayed "long enough to be stripped of nearly all their money by [the proprietor] and his wife, and the females which hung around there."⁴⁸ Other women made money by selling cakes, like Mary Caesar, a woman of color from Smithfield, or liquor, as Eliza Granger did after the death of her husband.⁴⁹ Many others earned wages through

Dependencies: Whaling Agents and Whalemens' Families, 1830-1870," *Log of Mystic Seaport* 42 (1990): 3-12 and Norling, *Captain Ahab*, 28-34.

⁴⁵ While Rhode Island textile mills were on the rise after 1790 and employed a little over 9,000 people by 1832, only 360 of them worked in Providence factories. Rhode Island mill owners also preferred to employ whole families, and relied especially on child laborers, who made up a third of Rhode Island's industrial workforce by the 1830s. Furthermore, early industrialists like Samuel Slater only mechanized one or two of the steps of cloth manufacture, such as spinning thread or carding, with the rest left to domestic labor on rural farms through the putting-out system. The complete mechanization and consolidation of textile manufacture under one roof and the employment of a large workforce of single women was mainly practiced in Massachusetts, most famously in Lowell, where factories were established in the 1820s. Thus, industrial work was not a significant source of income for the vast majority of lower-class women in Providence in this period. See Coleman, *Transformation*, 93 (Table 7), 98 (Table 8), 234; Thomas Dublin, *Women at Work: The Transformation of Work and Community in Lowell, Massachusetts, 1826-1860*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 3, 14-22; Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*, 94.

⁴⁶ On Taylor and Gardner, see below.

⁴⁷ For a somewhat speculative introduction to the intersection of prostitution and maritime history, see Linda M. Maloney, "Doxies at Dockside: Prostitution and American Maritime Society, 1800-1900," in *Ships, Seafaring and Society: Essays in Maritime History*, ed. Timothy J. Runyan (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 217-225; Maloney speculates that many prostitutes in port towns entered the trade following death or abandonment by a sailor husband or father.

⁴⁸ William J. Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown of Providence, R. I. with Personal Recollections of Incidents in Rhode Island* (1883), in *From African to Yankee: Narratives of Slavery and Freedom in Antebellum New England*, ed. Robert J. Cottrol (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), 125.

⁴⁹ For Mary Caesar, see PTC 8:71; for Eliza Granger, see below.

domestic labor, either in the homes of the middle class—the primary beneficiaries of Providence’s new-found prosperity—or by taking in washing or sewing clothes.

Providence’s growth in the years following the Revolution also ensured that peripheral businesses—shipbuilding, blacksmithing, tavern-keeping, marine insurance, banking, teamsters, retail—also flourished and produced a prosperous white middle class. With the growth of an urban middle class, women in the families of prosperous merchants or middling clerks found their lives to be very different than those of their mothers and grandmothers on rural farms. Farm wives provided many of their families’ necessities through their own labor, from spinning yarn and weaving cloth to baking bread and churning butter, along with caring for children and the sick, cooking, cleaning, and making soap or candles. As more women moved to cities and towns as early as the late eighteenth century, especially to thriving commercial ports like Providence, they found many products that had previously been produced domestically—mainly textiles and basic foods—could now be purchased for cash.⁵⁰

Urban middle class women also found a large pool of domestic help in the growing population of the urban poor. While rural wives might have employed a neighbor’s daughter or indentured servant—or owned a slave or two in Rhode Island—to help around the house, a dense urban population provided many potential domestic assistants.⁵¹ Sometimes, urban middle class women hired another woman as a live-in servant as their mothers had done, though tenures were shorter. Eliza Gardner, a twenty-five-year-old woman of color, told the Providence town council in 1826 she had been “out to service at a number of families,” while Maria Mooseek, a

⁵⁰ Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 41-43.

⁵¹ Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 29-30, Joanne Melish offers the comparison between the domestic labor of white women and slaves in Rhode Island, see Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 17-20.

migrant from South Carolina, lived in the wealthy Bowen family for two years, then with several others, and was about to take a position in yet another local family when the council ordered her to leave town in 1820.⁵² The kinds of labor these women were expected to do can be seen in Moses Staunton's complaint that his black housekeeper, Mary Long, "neglect[ed] the care of my children – often leaving them for days to suffer and neglect[ed] cooking victuals and mending cloaths."⁵³

However, many other women, especially free women of color, boarded out and went to work in middle class homes during the day. While these women experienced greater freedom from their employers' oversight, they also had to pay for room and board, stretching thin their meager wages. Women with these jobs, such as Rachel Watson, a young mother of color who had lost her father at sea, or Hope Slocum, a poor white woman from Rehoboth, described their employment as "going out to days labor."⁵⁴ While it is possible this vague phrase refers to daily work in a factory, the scarcity of such labor for women in Providence makes domestic service much more likely. Indeed, one historian of the early textile industry notes that despite the boom of the nineteenth century, domestic labor remained the most common occupation for women until well after 1900.⁵⁵ Likewise, Clark-Pujara points out that many freedwomen found employment doing the same kinds of domestic work they had performed as slaves: cleaning, washing, weaving, sewing, child care, and making

⁵² PTC 10:279-281; quote from *ibid.*, 11:480-481.

⁵³ Providence Town Papers, MSS 214 sg 1, RIHS (hereafter PTP), 88 doc. #0024971; see also PTC 11:197-198.

⁵⁴ PTC 9A:303, 10:429-430, 11:398. The town council usually indicated the race of an examinant only if he or she was non-white. Thus, unless they referred to a person's past enslavement, I have assumed that those with no racial descriptor in their examinations were white.

⁵⁵ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 16.

paper or soap.⁵⁶ The primacy of domestic wage labor for women working in Early Republic Providence mirrors Seth Rockman’s examination of black and white working class households in contemporary Baltimore and Christine Stansell’s description of domestic service in New York before the influx of Irish immigrants in the late 1830s and 1840s.⁵⁷

Those in the middle class who could not afford a full-time servant still contracted with other women who specialized in specific domestic tasks like washing clothes.⁵⁸ Thus, Betsey Sheffield, a woman of color from Newport, “at service at Susan Parr [Gardner’s boarding house in Olney’s Lane] and some other places” also took in washing.⁵⁹ So did Mary Long, Moses Staunton’s servant, who also did her own housekeeping and took in washing on the side. She likely needed the extra money since her husband Richard was away at sea.⁶⁰

Despite these available jobs, many women—single, widowed, abandoned or with a husband at sea, white or of color—still teetered on the edge of poverty due to a combination of gendered and racial assumptions that depressed their wages and restricted their job prospects. Women’s low wages in the urban market economy were a holdover of wives’ and daughters’ places within the interdependent labor arrangement of the family farm.⁶¹ In rural colonial New England, the family was a largely self-contained economic unit, in which a husband was the authority figure with all other members—children, servants, apprentices, wife—dependent on him for their

⁵⁶ Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*, 95.

⁵⁷ Seth Rockman, “Women’s Labor,” 175-178; Stansell, *City of Women*, 12-13, 155-158.

⁵⁸ Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 51.

⁵⁹ PTC 10:494.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 9A:363.

⁶¹ Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 22; cf. Stansell, *City of Women*, 106; when describing the sources of sex segregation and poor wages for female industrial laborers, she attributes them to “the incorporation of patterns of female subordination within the family into those of capitalist exploitation.”

financial and physical well-being.⁶² In cities, families were no longer self-sufficient, and rather than producing goods, members earned wages with which to purchase them. This economic shift led to a concurrent one in gender ideals, to that of the so-called separate spheres, in which a wife maintained the home, or domestic sphere, while a husband went out into the public sphere to work and provide for his family. This new gender system did much to change women's roles and responsibilities within the home, but left their assumed dependence on their husbands and fathers intact.⁶³ While the rich and some middle-class women could afford to maintain the female domestic ideal and remain at home while their husbands worked, in many poor families, one person's wages were not enough to live on, and thus women—in addition to domestic labor and childcare in their own homes—had to work as well.⁶⁴ However, women earned much less than men because, according to Cott, “wage rates reflected the expectation that they would rely on men as providers.”⁶⁵ Such expectations made life difficult for poor families, since women and children necessarily provided only meager supplements to men's wages. In cases where

⁶² See Laurel Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1980), 35-50 for an elaboration of female roles within the household economy of colonial New England farm communities.

⁶³ The classic works on the middle class ideals of separate, gendered spheres and cult of female domesticity are Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood* and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America,” *Signs* 1 (Autumn 1975): 1-29; however, for an important critique and assessment of historians' use of this ideology as an analytical lens, see Linda Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds: Woman's Place in the Rhetoric of Women's History,” *The Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 9-39; for a demonstration of how these ideals affected women's self-perceptions and daily lives in a maritime context, see Lisa Norling, “How Frought With Sorrow and Heartpangs?: Mariners' Wives and the Ideology of Domesticity in New England, 1790-1880,” *New England Quarterly* 65 (September 1992): 422-446.

⁶⁴ Children often worked as well, or were bound out as indentured servants if their families could not afford them; see Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans*, 7, and Coleman, *Transformation*, 233 on the prominence of child labor in Rhode Island.

⁶⁵ Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 21.

women lost a male income, these depressed wages were a recipe for disaster.⁶⁶

Providence's records contain many residency examinations similar to that of Deborah Cady, widow of David Cady "lately deceased." Suddenly bereft of a male breadwinner, Cady still had to care for nine children, the youngest aged ten months. The council ruled that she and her children were not residents of Providence or Rhode Island, and left her with the choice of struggling on in Providence without any town assistance or somehow conveying her family to her legal residence in Connecticut.⁶⁷

The effects of this gendered wage discrimination is readily apparent in studies of the Early Republic in the North. Thomas Dublin, in his study of the Lowell Mills, describes different pay scales for female and male workers, with women's daily wages roughly 50-60% that of men's. In addition to the assumption of female dependence, these lower wages were the result of women performing unskilled or semi-skilled labor, while jobs requiring specialized skills were reserved for men, who had access to the necessary education or apprenticeships.⁶⁸ In Rhode Island mills, the idea of single female wage earners was so foreign that one historian presents wages in terms of a family unit: in 1820, an average family—a husband, wife, and four children—working in a mill earned eight dollars per week.⁶⁹ Rockman and Stansell, in their studies of Baltimore and New York, also find that female domestic laborers were near the bottom of the wage scale available to men, though they made better money than

⁶⁶ Cf. Stanstell, *City of Women*, 45.

⁶⁷ PTC 9B:521; Cady had ten children, but the eldest was married and presumably not dependent on her.

⁶⁸ Dublin, *Women at Work*, 65-66.

⁶⁹ Coleman, *Transformation*, 233; Coleman notes these wages were livable, but left little disposable income.

women in the factories.⁷⁰ Rockman finds further evidence of disproportionate female poverty, with half of female-headed households too poor to owe taxes in 1818, as opposed to a third of male-headed households.⁷¹ He attributes female poverty to women's "assumed dependence within a male household" and social conventions of female domesticity and childcare that prevented them from moving to seek better wages.

For women of color, racial discrimination added to the disadvantages they faced because of their gender. Joanne Melish paints a dire picture for African Americans emerging from slavery into an economy with a growing land scarcity and a pre-industrial workforce with little ability to absorb newly free black laborers. This post-war economy was already difficult for poor rural white families, few of whom wanted to make room for their black neighbors.⁷² Poverty followed rural black migrants into the cities, where they carved out livelihoods for themselves while "flagrantly disregard[ing]" the property requirements for legal residency, though it left them permanently vulnerable to expulsion by the town council.⁷³ Even as late as 1860, Cottrol finds that 88% of black households in Providence owned negligible amounts of property.⁷⁴ He also notes the Providence black community had a higher proportion of women, nearly 60% in 1825, as opposed to a nearly even split among white men and women in Providence at the same time. While this imbalance may have been the result of men leaving Providence to find work, it may also reflect a

⁷⁰ Rockman, "Women's Labor," 190; Stansell, *City of Women*, 155; they note that wage rates were not necessarily much higher for domestic laborers than industrial laborers, but that domestic work was steadier.

⁷¹ Rockman, "Women's Labor," 180.

⁷² Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 134; in addition, Melish notes that few of their former masters were willing or able to pay freed blacks wages.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁷⁴ Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 121.

significant proportion of women at least temporarily left to fend for themselves.⁷⁵ For work, most Providence black residents were casual laborers, domestic servants, and sailors, much like their enslaved parents and grandparents. Coming out of slavery, African Americans had few opportunities to acquire land for farming, to accumulate capital for a business, or to gain the education that led to skilled labor or professions such as doctors, lawyers, or professors.⁷⁶ In acknowledging the hard work of Providence's early free black community, Melish notes that, despite some acquisition of property and the formation of a fledgling middle class, "the rewards of such industry for the majority were low pay, uncertainty and irregularity of employment, and relegation to housing of poor quality."⁷⁷

All these men and women crowding into Providence exposed cracks in age-old systems for dealing with poverty, thus producing a reaction from town authorities that put the stability of many poor families at risk. Rhode Island towns had long dispensed, via the local Overseers of the Poor, some local tax revenue to provide basic relief for resident paupers, with the town council deciding who merited relief. If an Overseer of the Poor determined someone was "likely to become chargeable to the town," the council had to first assess if the person was a legal resident eligible for assistance.⁷⁸ According to Rhode Island law, a person gained legal residence by

⁷⁵ Ibid., 115-116.

⁷⁶ Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 119-121; Cottrol bases his portrait of the Providence black community on data from the 1840s through the 1860s, so property ownership was probably higher than earlier in the nineteenth century, while mariners probably played a less important economic role; see Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 225-232 on the decline of black maritime participation in the 1830s and 1840s.

⁷⁷ Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 241-242.

⁷⁸ *The Public Laws of the State of Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations* (Providence: Carter and Wilkinson, 1798), 348-351, quote from p. 351; with a few small changes, the process for warning out remained mostly the same for the period under study, cf. *The Public Laws of the State of Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations* (Providence: Miller and Hutchins, 1822), 271-272 and *Public Laws of the State of Rhode-Island and Providence Plantations* (Providence: Knowles and Vose, 1844), 340-341.

owning and paying taxes on a certain amount of land or serving an apprenticeship in a town. Women gained residency through marriage, and children followed the residency of their parents. Simply being born in a town did not confer legal residency if the parents were legally settled elsewhere.⁷⁹ Rhode Island had inherited this system from England, where a series of laws developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, like the Settlement Law of 1662, had allowed towns to distinguish who fell under their jurisdiction and obligations to provide relief, and who did not, thus preventing the resources of any one community from being overstretched. If the Providence town council determined a pauper was a legal resident, its first step was to require any family members living in town and able to provide support to take her in. If that option was unavailable, the council authorized the Overseer of the Poor to provide money for necessities like food, firewood, or lodging; the council could also bind out paupers or their children as indentured servants to avoid expense. If a pauper was not settled in town, because she had moved to find work or follow a husband, the council ascertained her last legal place of settlement. Once that was determined, the town sergeant or constable conveyed her to that town, and she became another Overseer of the Poor's problem. According to Herndon, town poor relief was a "severe charity," and in the years leading up to the Revolution, many transients preferred to leave town and try their luck elsewhere rather than submit to the Overseer of the Poor.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ *Public Laws* [1798], 346-347; there was a distinction, however, between children born within marriage, who followed the father's residency and those born outside of marriage, who followed their mother, see *ibid.*, 346.

⁸⁰ Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans*, 6; though Herndon covers roughly the last half of the eighteenth century, the system she describes remained largely unchanged well in the nineteenth century.

This system of poor relief presupposed a settled agrarian society where individuals spent most of their lives rooted to a family farm, but in the economic transformation following the Revolution, the system started to break down.⁸¹ A growing population of mobile wage laborers with increasingly tenuous ties to the land made legal residencies difficult to determine. For example, in 1821, when the Providence town council examined sixteen-year-old Louisa Stoddard, they had to go back to her grandfather, who had owned land in Middleton, near Newport, to determine her legal settlement.⁸² In other cases, the existing rules led to determinations that were simply absurd, as when the council decided in July 1825 that Eliza Singleton, Betsey Taylor's daughter, had no legal residency in Rhode Island and had to leave Providence in three days. Eliza had been born in Providence, her mother was living in town, and she had other relatives either in Providence or other towns in the state. However, she had married John Williams, a sailor from Baltimore, and so her marriage negated any previous legal residency in Rhode Island. Thus, Eliza and her six-year-old son were kicked out of town to seek aid in Baltimore. It is unlikely she had ever been to Baltimore or had any means of getting there, and her husband could not help because he was away at sea when she was examined.⁸³

⁸¹ Another reason for the paucity of poor relief was that the funding came from taxes voted by a town meeting composed of a given town's male legal residents. Naturally, these men did not want to raise taxes on themselves and exerted pressure on the council, who controlled both the treasury and the distribution of poor relief, to be frugal. This aversion to increasing the pool of money available to local paupers intensified after independence with the imposition of new state and national taxes, and the need of those governments to fund debts incurred from fighting the Revolutionary War and the economic troubles wrought by Jefferson's embargo of 1807, the War of 1812, and the Panic of 1819; see Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans*, 1-2; McLoughlin, *Rhode Island*, 112-113; Coleman, *Transformation*, 104, 249-251.

⁸² PTC 10:481-482.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 11:347-348.

Examinations like Eliza Singleton's were out of the ordinary not only because of their results, but also because of their frequency. For most of Rhode Island's history, up until about the end of the War of 1812, removals were relatively rare occurrences, with no more than five occurring in any given council meeting for most years, and with many gaps between such days.⁸⁴ Large spikes in the number of examinations per day were rare and usually the result of the council consolidating a month's or a year's worth of examinations into single meeting. Two of the major spikes in examinations before 1800, in 1785 and 1795, occurred in December, as if the council were trying to get through a lot of business before the New Year.⁸⁵ Similarly, in 1789 the council called on Providence residents in early October to "Give Information to...this Council of all [transient paupers] as shall come to their knowledge, that they may be forthwith Removed" because "the Winter Season is now Approaching wherein such persons may & are likely to become chargeable."⁸⁶ In that year, as in most years before 1800, the council ended up removing only one or two people on any given day, if any, at a time of year when the council often went a month between meetings.⁸⁷

Starting around 1815, however, the number of examinations and removals rose rapidly and remained high until Providence established a city government in 1832. In contrast to the low rates of examination and removal in the previous three decades,

⁸⁴ see *ibid.*, vols. 5-9B; between 1784 and 1815, there were only nine years in which the council removed more than five people in one day.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 5:350-355, 7:66-71; on the former occasion, ten people were removed, and fourteen on the latter. A third major spike in examinations, to 18 in 1797, took place in October, in a year when funds for poor relief were probably tight from caring for residents with smallpox. In the end, few of those examined were actually removed; see *ibid.*, 7:195-120.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 6:97.

⁸⁷ The highest number of people removed in a single day in 1789 was five people removed on September 14, nearly a month before the council started trying to clear people out before winter; see *ibid.*, 93-94.

this stretch of seventeen years contains twelve in which the council removed more than five people on a single day.⁸⁸ Examinations and removals become much more frequent occurrences in the records as well. Instead of condensing a year or month's examinations into a single day, the council undertook large batches of them, sometimes stretched across multiple weekly meetings or requiring extra sessions to get through everyone. For instance, between March 8 and 15 in 1824, twenty-one examinations occurred, along with another batch of nineteen in the second half of July and another seventeen in November.⁸⁹ In other years, such examination marathons took place on a single day, like the twelve on March 12, 1820 or the sixteen on June 19, 1828.⁹⁰ Thus, as Providence grew rapidly in the nineteenth century, the council had to cope with increasing numbers of transients.⁹¹

The town council's power over poor transients had increased since the Revolution. Through a town meeting as early as 1796, the council gained the power to hold out-of-state transients in the workhouse when it was "utterly impossible" to convey them to their proper homes or a they were source of "great trouble and expence."⁹² The workhouse also presented further options if the volume of in-state transients made removal or binding out too difficult. Later, in 1828, care for many of the aged, insane, and poor was taken over by the Dexter Asylum. The state law code

⁸⁸ See *ibid.*, 9A-12.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 11:178-188, 230-241, 285-294; cf. 1818, when twenty examinations took place between September 11 and 28, 1823, when fifteen took place between November 10 and 23, and 1825, where there were nineteen between September 14 and 26; see *ibid.*, 10:77-79, 11:152-164, 387-397.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10:274-278, 12:176-180.

⁹¹ While it is not entirely clear if removals rose in proportion with Providence's population, certainly the large influx of wage laborers meant that much more of the population lived under the threat of removal, whether the council targeted them or not. Whatever the reality was, the council certainly perceived a drastic rise in the number of people they had to remove, and when it decided to crack down on public disorder in the 1820s, the large numbers of people they could clear out from tenements in Olney's Lane and Hardscrabble gives a good idea of just how many transients they could target if they wanted; see Chapter 3.

⁹² *Public Laws* [1798], 362.

of 1822 shows further expansion of the town council's powers over transients. It could expand the search for places to bind out the children of local paupers to Connecticut and Massachusetts.⁹³ Rhode Island lawmakers also added a section to the poor laws that allowed local councils to order out-of-state paupers—or people they thought might become paupers—to simply leave rather than going through the time-consuming and expensive process of conducting them to the Overseer of the Poor in their hometown.⁹⁴ Thus, for a significant number of transients, rather than taking the steps to see they got proper care, the council now just kicked them out and washed their hands of the problem.

This treatment of out-of-state transients is evident in the council records. For paupers who claimed residence in a Rhode Island town, the full removal procedure was generally followed. In the aftermath of the 1831 Olney's Lane Riot, for example, during a concerted effort to clear out-of-state paupers from that neighborhood, the council removed a man of color named John Gardiner to North Kingstown, while Pompey Gardner and his wife Abigail were given six days until they were to be removed to Newport.⁹⁵ At the same time, however, Fanny Dunliva, Rachel Sands, and Matilda Nova, after cursory examinations, were simply ordered to leave town within the week.⁹⁶ The treatment of the latter three was by then standard. Before 1800, constables had commonly conducted paupers to nearby towns like Attleboro, across the border in Massachusetts, as they did for Zelph Carpenter in 1784 and Luthania

⁹³ *Public Laws* [1822], 274.

⁹⁴ *Public Laws* [1822], 280; cf. *Public Laws* [1798], 348-358; section thirteen of the 1798 law only allowed the council to order non-citizens of the United States to depart, but all others had to go through the removal process.

⁹⁵ PTC 12:435-436.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 431-432; a significant factor in these removals was the women's purported bad fame; a further exploration of this topic will be the subject of Chapter 3.

Lealand in 1792.⁹⁷ Likewise, in 1786, constables removed Abigail Foster to Newent, between Norwich and Plainfield, in eastern Connecticut.⁹⁸ As time went on, however, and the number of paupers grew, the council and the constables no longer had the time for such journeys. By 1808, Lavinia Dashpee, a woman born in Rehoboth, Massachusetts but legally settled in Attleboro, was given a week to leave Providence, where she had lived for nearly twenty years.⁹⁹ In December 1814, Abiel Brown, also settled in Attleboro, was ordered to leave as well, and the next month, when the council discovered he was still residing in town, they only ordered the constable escort him as far as the Providence town line.¹⁰⁰

While simply ejecting paupers from town saved constables time, the lack of supervision also sometimes backfired, leading to the further problem of transients ignoring orders to leave or quickly returning to town after ostensibly complying. One particularly troublesome case was that of a single white woman named Betsy Azuba Herendeen, who was twenty years old when the council first examined her in July 1826. She had been in Providence about three months and was boarding somewhere in town; the council determined she was “likely to become chargeable” to the town and was an “unsuitable person,” to become an inhabitant, a hint the council had objections to her besides poverty. Since her father owned property in Douglas, Massachusetts, she was ordered to leave in two days.¹⁰¹ However, Betsy soon returned and—despite five separate attempts to remove or punish her in 1827 and

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 5:258, 6:233; these removals across state lines did have limits. Paupers from New Jersey or South Carolina, to which an escort was obviously impractical, had long been instructed to just leave.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8:390-391.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8:2-3, 9A:203.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 9B:102, 105.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 11:499; in her next examination, the council explicitly said she is “of bad fame;” see *ibid.*, 12:65.

another four in 1828—kept returning until the council, in apparent exasperation, bound her out to Gideon Palmer for a year in August 1829.¹⁰² The council had few tools to deter persistent women like Betsy who returned without permission after their removal. According to state law, the council could issue a fine of seven dollars and then, if a person failed to pay, administer up to twenty-nine lashes.¹⁰³ In Betsy's case, the council only ever threatened her with ten lashes and soon switched to sentencing her to stints of up to a month in the workhouse.¹⁰⁴

As a summation of how the combination of the rise of wage labor, assumed female dependence on male earning, the increasing power of town councils made life precarious for poor women in the early nineteenth century, the case of Phebe Potter is even more evocative than Betsy Herendeen's. Phebe Potter was the daughter of a freedwoman, Lucy Potter, who had taken the last name of her former master, Caleb Potter of Cranston. After attaining her freedom at eighteen, Lucy lived as a transient, moving first from Cranston to East Greenwich, where she married a sailor named David Spencer. When he went to sea, she moved to Warwick, probably in search of work for herself to last the length of his voyage. Evidently, Lucy struggled to find work, or at least work that paid enough to support her and her two children. To make matters worse, Spencer never returned: perhaps he died at sea or moved on to a different relationship. Either way, by the time the Providence town council examined her, Lucy subsisted by picking oakum and receiving poor relief from the town of Cranston. She and her daughter Phebe boarded with a Mrs. Pullenburgh, while her

¹⁰² For 1827, see *ibid.*, 12:65, 68-69, 75, 97-98, 112-114; for 1828, see *ibid.*, 161, 170, 183, 193; for binding out, see *ibid.*, 273.

¹⁰³ *Public Laws* [1798], 356; this law remained unchanged through the 1830s.

¹⁰⁴ The council ordered Betsy to spend two weeks to a month in the Work House; see PTC 12:75, 114, 161, 183.

son Charles was bound out to a Colonel John S. Dexter. Despite Lucy's efforts to support her family on her own, the town council removed her and Phebe twice, to Cranston in 1807, and to East Greenwich in 1809. Thus, by the time Phebe went by herself to confront the council in 1813 at age nineteen, she had already endured a childhood and adolescence of grinding poverty. She had received no formal education, and could expect little or no support from her family.¹⁰⁵

Despite her poverty and vulnerability before the council's power, Phebe Potter attempted to make a life for herself in Providence. Phebe had likely spent much of her life in Providence, and she clearly intended to stay there, despite the council's increasingly harsh attempts to keep her out of the town she had decided to call home. Between 1813 and 1823, Phebe Potter went before the council over a dozen times. Resolutely single and with two children of her own, Lucinda and Almira, and relying on the wages and job prospects available to a single women of color, Phebe Potter was in constant danger of becoming chargeable to the town.¹⁰⁶ Certainly, acquiring property and gaining legal residency was out of her reach. At first, removal was easy for her to deal with: between 1813 and 1818, the most she could expect for returning without the permission of the council was a night or two in the Bridewell and re-removal to East Greenwich.¹⁰⁷ Sometimes, the constables left her at the town line,

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 9A:147, 225; Phebe and Lucy Potter, like most of those examined by the town council, were illiterate, and signed their examinations with a mark, not their names.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 9A:458; the fate of Phebe's children is unclear. Almira is mentioned only in 1813, so she may have died or been bound out. Lucinda, then aged seven, was removed with her mother in 1818, but at the time had been living apart from her mother, another sign that Phebe was having trouble supporting them both; see *ibid.*, 10:70-71.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 9A:458 9B:71, 430, 520-521 10:70-1; the Providence council referred to the same institution as both the Bridewell and the workhouse. The former term was usually in reference to its use as a short-term holding place for minor offenders, sometimes including transients, while the latter was in its capacity as housing for paupers.

making her return to Providence easier.¹⁰⁸ Beginning in September 1818, however, the council began meting out harsher punishments, when they confined her to the Bridewell for two weeks. The next time she was caught, in September 1819, the council read her the legal penalties for returning without permission and threatened her with a hefty seven-dollar fine, to be paid the following day by noon, or seven lashes.¹⁰⁹ Over the next few years, the council tried to deter Phebe from returning with the threat of increasing corporal punishment, sometimes to ten lashes, other times to twelve or fifteen. They also kept moving up the deadline for the payment of her fine from noon the next day, to eleven, then ten, then noon the same day, perhaps implying that she somehow managed to scrounge up the money and frustrate their desire make a public example of her.¹¹⁰ When she finally refused to pay the fine, “pleading inability” in 1822, it may have been because the council demanded it immediately.¹¹¹ The last time she appears in the records is in September 1823, when the council members threw up their hands and instead of trying to whip her, just sentenced her to two weeks in the Work House.¹¹² Perhaps that worked in the end, and Phebe finally moved on from Providence, or perhaps once she was released, she found a male partner or job that meant she was no longer in danger of becoming chargeable to the town. The record does not say.

The lives of Lucy and Phebe Potter illustrate many of the trends that made Providence both a beacon of opportunity and a harsh place to live for poor women in the Early Republic. Both women were part of a large influx of newly freed slaves and

¹⁰⁸ See *ibid.*, 9B:121, 557.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 10:223-224.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 223-224, 238, 454, 584, 593.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11:2.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 129.

their descendants that flooded, along with their poor white neighbors, into Providence from Rhode Island's declining hinterlands. Both women's dogged efforts to stay in town despite the council's efforts to eject them speak to the hopes of many that the expanding opportunities for urban wage labor were the surest way to prosperity. However, this wage economy also proved Lucy and Phebe's downfall, since their move to Providence, where they owned no property, meant they were in constant danger of being removed from their community of choice and sent back to the small country towns they wanted to get away from. Of course, in an ideal world, Lucy and Phebe would have earned the money to buy property to achieve a settlement in their adopted home, but several factors conspired against them. The first was the predominance of a maritime economy and labor system in Rhode Island that cost Lucy Potter her husband. Deprived of a male income, gendered assumptions of female dependency handicapped both Lucy and her unmarried daughter's attempts to earn wages and support themselves and their children. Combined with their lack of legal settlement, both women's poverty meant they were in constant danger of being arbitrarily torn from a community in which they had put down roots and lived in for years. In one major way, however, Lucy and Phebe were atypical: by the 1820s, public disorder, and especially so-called women of bad fame, were much more of a concern for the town council than women who, like Lucy and Phebe, were simply poor. It was this concern over disorder that was at the root of the council's major crackdown on poor women.

CHAPTER 3

THE RISING PERCEPTION OF PUBLIC DISORDER

Starting in the War of 1812 and then with increasing intensity in the 1820s, leading citizens of Providence began to express their concerns to the town council about a breakdown of public order in their town. In the decade leading up to the establishment of a city government, Providence saw an increased awareness of disorderly houses and their denizens in neighborhoods like Snowtown and Hardscrabble, an awareness dramatically brought home by the two riots in 1824 and 1831. In many ways, this increased concern over disorder was a reflection of local conditions, from the disruption of Providence's economy by President Thomas Jefferson's trade embargo to the growth of local institutions' ability to deal with other problems like disease. However, it also had parallels in major urban areas up and down America's Atlantic coast, and was a symptom of deep social changes occurring in new American Republic, from shifting views of race and gender that rendered working women suspect to growing calls for universal suffrage for all—and only—white men. In response to calls from respectable citizens to do something about neighborhoods like Snowtown, the authorities cracked down hard by increasing removals, increasing the powers they could use against disorderly elements, and ultimately forming a more centralized city government with more robust police powers. However, while the respectable citizens of Providence bemoaned the condition of their town, the real blow fell on the poor women living in these neighborhoods and trying to make a living as best they could: sometimes illicitly,

sometimes not, sometimes somewhere in between. However, such nuances were lost on the council, and by painting whole neighborhoods and groups as disorderly, they increased the suffering of the poor women of Providence.

In the 1780s and 1790s, the council's tried and tested tool against immorality and disorder was removal of the offenders from town. Under the same act that allowed them to warn out poor transients, Rhode Island law empowered the council to remove those considered of bad fame, even if they had "not become" or would not "then be likely to become," chargeable to the town. The designation of "bad fame" was sufficient.¹¹³ By 1822, the council could also fine or flog people of bad fame who refused to leave, in addition to those who returned voluntarily after their removal.¹¹⁴

Since "bad fame" is such a vague term, a look at other legal tools available to the council will reveal some of the specific behaviors that concerned its members. They were clearly worried about drunkenness, and thus tried to control all "taverns, ale-houses, victualling-houses, cook-shops, oyster-shops, [and], oyster-cellars" by issuing yearly licenses. The keepers of these establishments were strictly enjoined to keep good order by not selling liquor on credit or employing African Americans. It followed, of course, that black residents were prohibited from gaining a license, thus making any such business they started automatically illegal.¹¹⁵ Black proprietors were also under the threat of the "Act for breaking up disorderly Houses kept by free Negroes and Mulattoes, and for putting out such Negroes and Mulattoes to Service." Passed by the General Assembly nearly thirty years before gradual emancipation, this statute enumerated the many perceived threats posed by black-owned establishments:

¹¹³ *Public Laws* [1798], 356.

¹¹⁴ *Public Laws* [1822], 280.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 295-296.

they were “disorderly houses, [which] entice[d] servants and others to spend their time and money in gaming, drinking, and other vicious practices.”¹¹⁶ The law allowed the council to bind out for a period of up to two years any African American who kept a disorderly house or entertained customers “at unseasonable hours, or in an extravagant manner.”¹¹⁷

A curious omission in the Rhode Island legal code of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is any specific reference to prostitution or disorderly women. For adultery, there was a fine of two hundred dollars or half a year in prison, but for single women, the closest prohibition against prostitution was a five-dollar fine or five-day jail sentence for fornication.¹¹⁸ The Rhode Island legal code did not mention prostitution until after the incorporation of Providence as a city in 1832. The 1844 code prohibited keeping a “house of ill fame, resorted to for the purpose of prostitution or lewdness,” and enticing “virtuous” women to such houses.¹¹⁹

Providence was not alone in lacking explicit legal penalties for prostitution at this time. In post-Revolutionary New York and Boston, city officials used vagrancy laws similar to Rhode Island’s to deal with sexually transgressive or disorderly women. Boston had a colonial-era statute against “nightwalking,” but that term was as vague as “bad fame” and included everything from prostitution to peddling and playing the fiddle too loudly. By all accounts, prostitution was a minor concern in most cities, and Hobson argues that in traditionally Puritan Boston, social and religious custom paired with close family supervision had long been sufficient to

¹¹⁶ *Public Laws* [1798], 612-613.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *Public Laws* [1798], 594; by the 1840s the fine had climbed to ten dollars, see *Public Laws* [1844], 393.

¹¹⁹ *Public Laws* [1844], 392-393; quote from p. 392.

police female sexuality.¹²⁰ Moreover, as urban populations along the eastern seaboard grew, theft, assault, and riots were the main worries of thinly stretched local governments. So as long as prostitution remained out of sight or confined to poor neighborhoods, respectable citizens were mostly content to ignore it.¹²¹ Even in Philadelphia, the fledgling American Republic's largest and most cosmopolitan city, which did have statutes against prostitution, enforcement was so lax that prostitutes "flooded" the streets and vagrancy arrests far exceeded those for prostitution.¹²²

In practice, a 'disorderly house'—like 'bad fame'—covered a broad set of establishments and represented a perennial problem in a port town where lots of sailors spent their wages and let off steam between voyages. Many complaints came into the Providence town council from neighbors kept up at night by the racket. For example, tavern keeper Andrew Parker sold "Liquor, late at night, to persons of bad fame," while Asa Whiting kept his unlicensed victualing house "open late at night and thereby disturb[ed] the peace of the Inhabitants" of the town.¹²³ In some cases, the complaint had nothing to do with a business, as in the case of James Lee, a man of color whose family, aside from "entertaining persons of very bad habits," the council noted were "very quarrelsome among themselves as well as with others—and that their children are very mischievous and seem to be under no kind of government."¹²⁴

There were also a small number of disorderly houses whose sins went beyond simply disturbing the neighbors' rest by exposing the youth of Providence to

¹²⁰ While colonial Rhode Island was more fractious in terms of religious doctrine and authority than Massachusetts, one historian notes that "virtually every one of the New England colonists was a puritan—with a little *p* that is;" see Carl Bridenbaugh, *Fat Mutton and Liberty of Conscience: Society in Rhode Island, 1636-1690* (Providence: Brown University, 1974), 7.

¹²¹ Stansell, *City of Women*, 173; Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 32.

¹²² Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 6-7, 193 n15, 333-334.

¹²³ PTC 7:435, 12:332-333.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 9B:501.

prostitution and excessive drunkenness. When a group of townspeople petitioned the council in May 1800 to remove a Widow Violet, they implied that because her house, where she kept “women of abandoned character,” was in a “very conspicuous part of the Main Street” it was especially detrimental “to the morals of our Youth, and to the utter subversion of all good order & decency.”¹²⁵ Nearly three decades later, a petition against James Collins, who ran a popular shop on North Main Street that sold liquor, complained that “children are induced there to hear the profane and obscene language; and to see the indecent behavior of the intoxicated and jovial customers.”¹²⁶

As in other northern cities, it is clear that until the War of 1812, social disorder played a relatively minor role in the Providence town council’s enforcement of the poor laws. Occasionally, seemingly out of frustration at the number of transient poor who were in town, the council ordered the relevant statutes to be posted throughout town and published in the local newspapers. They often attributed the crackdown to the “considerable Expense” the town incurred from “persons not Inhabitants coming into [Providence] to dwell” or, as previously noted, the approach of winter.¹²⁷ In all these instances, town finance, not a concern with public order, was the council’s main motivation.

Houses of ill fame and disorder also remained low on the Providence town council’s list of concerns. There were two major spikes in disorderly house complaints between the end of the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812, but

¹²⁵ PTP 40 doc. #0023.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 132 doc. #0051657; the petition also contains the more common complaint that, “in the summer heat, the neighbors must keep their windows open and have suffered from the noise.”

¹²⁷ From a meeting on July 26, 1784, see PTC 5:279-280; cf. similar statements in the summer of both 1798 and 1805, see *ibid.*, 7:273, 8:489; From a meeting in early October, 1789, see *ibid.*, 6:97; cf. similar statement in September 1792, *ibid.*, 6:288.

otherwise, these were years of relative calm.¹²⁸ The timing and the nature of the complaints in these instances suggest broader changes occurring in the northern United States and the racial anxieties behind some concerns over public disorder. The first incident occurred in July 1782, when a mob “pulled down” the brothel run by a woman of color named Margaret Fairchild. Following this spate of violence, the council took the opportunity to crack down on disorder in general by summoning and removing as many disorderly house keepers as possible. Like the mob, the council apparently objected to the “drinking, tippling, Whoreing, and Misbehaving” that took place at Fairchild’s house. The racial integration there—residents included several white women, including Phebe Bowen and her daughter Betsey, “a Negro Woman called Black Bets... and a Molatto Girl about Eighteen or Nineteen Years”—also suggests the association of women of color, sexual deviancy, and race mixing had been established well before emancipation in 1784.¹²⁹

The second flare-up lasted from 1800 to 1804, and involved several prominent female housekeepers: Marget Holden, Luthania Lealand, and Freelove Ballou. The town constables accused the latter two in 1803 of keeping “disorderly and bawdy houses... wherein riotous, tumultuous and lewd conduct [was] continually practiced” and recommended their arrest.¹³⁰ Three years previously, Lealand had also been accused of “entice[ing] away the female help of many of the good Citizens of this Town.”¹³¹ As for Holden, the town watch accused her of “incouraging and upholding

¹²⁸ See *ibid.*, 6:150, 7:427-440, 8:1-350; years with many disorderly house complaints usually coincide with increased residency examination numbers as well, though the reverse is not always true.

¹²⁹ Quotes from PTP 6 doc. #2746; for the residency examination of Margaret Fairchild, who also went by the name Bowler, see PTC 5:215.

¹³⁰ PTC 8:258.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 28; Luthania Lealand also appears under the name Luthania Bates. See also the examinations of several young women who were probably sneaking out to her house at night, *ibid.*, 28-29. The

all manner of Inequity,” probably by running a dance hall supplied with unlicensed liquor, in a report from January 1802.¹³² In addition to these individuals, the watch took note of general disorder in Providence’s black community, as in their 1803 report that “almost every Night one or Two frolicks or Dances is held in Some part of the Town which do not Break up till a very late Hour of the Night thereby filling our streets with Black people at all Hours of the Night.”¹³³ A possible explanation for this sudden preoccupation with disorderly free blacks and servants may be that the period from 1800-1804 roughly coincided with the end of indentured servitude for the first children born after the passage of Rhode Island’s Manumission Act. Girls born in 1784 turned eighteen in 1802, while boys turned twenty-one in 1804.¹³⁴

The War of 1812 and its aftermath marked the end of this period of relative tranquility in Providence. Between 1814 and 1818, the council received fifteen disorderly house complaints. Among the offenders were several people of color whose houses remained thorns in the council’s collective side well into the 1820s, including Thankful Sharpe and her partner Peter Brown, and the duo of John L. Jones and Amos Hopkins.¹³⁵ However, white landlords, such as a Miss Packard and Doctor Thomas C. Greene, both of whom owned tenements off North Main Street, also had neighbors who complained they were “continually disturbed by...riots and quarrels,

council reiterated the same accusation against Lealand of luring away female apprentices in 1801, see *ibid.*, 85; they also tried to remove many of her tenants in 1805; see *ibid.* 454-463.

¹³² PTP 47 doc. #003265.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 52 doc. #005553.

¹³⁴ In addition to the complaint against Luthania Lealand, the watch complained in 1803 that Samuel Spywood entertained “Servants and other Black People to the Great detriment of their masters & employers,” while at Henry Taber’s so-called dancing school, “Servants [were] encouraged to Carry Stolen Goods;” see *ibid.*, doc. #005539.

¹³⁵ PTC 9B:228, 232, 259, 261 10:112; Thankful Sharpe’s first examination is under the name Thankful Reeves.

night and day.”¹³⁶ A noticeable concern for collective disorder, not just individuals or houses, also began as early as 1814, when James Burr complained to the council “respecting certain Blacks.”¹³⁷ In June 1817, public anxiety reached a peak when the council received a petition with around sixty signatories, including such leading citizens as Moses and Obadiah Brown, Thomas Ives, and the Reverend Stephen Gano. It warned of “divers Houses of Bad fame not only among the Coloured People but Even among the Whites who come here from Neighbouring States.”¹³⁸ Such houses were a danger to the town because they brought in various unsavory types for the:

Infamous and Degrading purpose of Seducing our Youth and Others to the Ruining of their Morrals and debacing their manners to their...parents Grief, and the Grief of all Good Citizens, and [especially] the Professors of all Denominations of Christians, and if continued unrestrained to the Ruin of the Morral Character of Our Town & State, and highly Injurious to their Civil & Religious Interests and the best feelings of our fellow Citizens who regard the Virtue of the Ripening youth as well as the Morrals of those in Riper years.¹³⁹

The following month, a similar warning of general disorder in town told of “sundry houses” that were “appropriated to the purpose of harbouring and maintaining numbers of lewd Women.”¹⁴⁰

These complaints set off a flurry of activity from the council. Tenement owners Greene and Packard were ordered to “clear their tenants of the black people who at present occupy them” and to not rent to disorderly—read black—people in the future.¹⁴¹ The council also removed many of the African American tenants on its own initiative, and conducted thirteen examinations in the days after they received the

¹³⁶ Ibid., 9B:290-291.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 9A:40.

¹³⁸ PTP 93, doc. #0027950.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ PTC 9B:462-463.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 290-291.

complaint, including eight on July 24 alone.¹⁴² As for John L. Jones and Thankful Sharpe, the former was warned out—unsuccessfully—in 1816, while the latter had four of her female tenants removed in late April of the same year.¹⁴³ While the council noted she kept a disorderly house, they postponed consideration of her case for some unknown reason and did not take it back up until 1818.¹⁴⁴ The council also took steps to curb disorder in general by passing, for example, ordinances forbidding the sale of “liquor, beer, oysters, cakes, [and] fruit” on Weybosset Bridge and on the streets around the town theater on performance nights in 1815.¹⁴⁵ The following year, the constables were ordered to “Note all assemblages of Boys and other Persons who may be gambling and disturbing the Peace in the Streets,” and the watch had to make sure all “oyster or eating cellars” were shut by ten o’clock at night.¹⁴⁶

Such efforts were clearly not enough. While both disorderly house complaints and removals fell briefly between 1819 and 1822, the 1820s was the most turbulent decade in Providence since the Revolution. As previously noted, removals by the council reached all-time highs in this period. In December 1823, presumably in response to the increased scrutiny of the previous years, the Providence County Court of General Sessions of the Peace put seven people on trial for keeping disorderly houses, an unprecedented number.¹⁴⁷ Finally, two riots occurred in the predominantly

¹⁴² Ibid., 292-299.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 232; for Sharpe’s tenants, see examinations of Maria Johnson, Mary Austin, Abby Hubbard, and Mary Gammet. The latter three were ordered to be kept in the cage at the workhouse, indicating the council probably thought they were guilty of egregious behavior, probably prostitution, see *ibid.*, 257-259.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 10:112.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 9B:168.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 262, 422.

¹⁴⁷ See Ledger of Case Summaries for Providence County Courts (hereafter, PCCs), Rhode Island Supreme Court Judicial Records Center (hereafter RIJRC) 25:253-255, *State of Rhode Island v. Mary Johnson*, *State of Rhode Island v. Emeline Bliss*, *State of Rhode Island v. Rosannah Jones*, *State of*

black neighborhoods of Hardscrabble, Olney's Lane, and Snowtown, which already had reputations as red light districts and the sites of drunken brawls.¹⁴⁸ The destruction visited on the residents of these districts by the rioters was seen in some quarters as at least a fitting punishment for their sins, and at best a public service on the part of the rioters.¹⁴⁹

The Hardscrabble Riot occurred on October 17, 1824, the result of an altercation between a group of black men and white men over who should yield the sidewalk.¹⁵⁰ Stung by the challenge to white supremacy, a mob several dozen strong pulled down seven houses and damaged several others in the neighborhood. At trial, in which none of the rioters faced harsh, if any, punishment, it was revealed that one of the main targets of the riot had been a dance hall run by an African American, Henry Wheeler. The Olney's Lane Riot of September 19 to 22, 1831 began as a brawl between two groups of sailors, fairly common there, but turned deadly when a black sailor, William Jordan, produced a pistol or shotgun and killed George Erickson, just off a ship from Gothenburg, Sweden. According to some accounts, the shots were fired in retaliation for Erickson and his companions throwing rocks at the building—a brothel owned by Ezekiel Burr—where Jordan was staying while in port. Enraged by

Rhode Island v. Susan Parr, *State of Rhode Island v. Christopher Hall*, *State of Rhode Island v. Sarah B. Andrews*, *State of Rhode Island v. Andrew Horton*, December 1823; by comparison, the only similar cases that occurred were one in 1822 and one in 1828; see *ibid.*, 24:378, *State of Rhode Island v. John L. Jones*, May 1822; 29:242, *State of Rhode Island v. Amos Lincoln*, November 1828; I have relied on the case summaries in these ledgers when trial documents are missing; Rhode Island's county courts were divided into the Court of General Sessions of the Peace, which tried criminal cases, and the Court of Common Pleas, which tried civil cases. These courts met during the same two sessions each year, and the name was often combined. To avoid confusion, I shall use the name of each court separately.

¹⁴⁸ Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 360-361; Sullivan, "Olney's Lane Riot, 50.

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, "Riot," *Providence Daily Journal*, September 26, 1831, and the report commissioned by the Town Meeting, "Committee's Report," *Rhode Island American and Gazette*, September 30, 1831.

¹⁵⁰ A good summary of these events is in Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 353-356; whichever party left the sidewalk had to walk in the mud and other refuse that collected in the middle of the road. Customarily, the relatively clean area close to the buildings was reserved for whites.

the killing, over the next three nights, a large mob of local artisans attacked homes and businesses in the north part of town, both in Olney's Lane and Snowtown. In the end, Rhode Island Governor Lemuel Arnold called out the state militia, which fired into the mob, killing four.¹⁵¹ The riot destroyed ten buildings and left another eight or nine considerably damaged.¹⁵²

As a result of this chaos, the Providence town council received many complaints from local residents pleading or demanding that more be done. A good example is the irritated letters of a local blacksmith named Moses Haskell, who wrote the council several times in the early 1820s, in what was a relatively calm period.¹⁵³ His first two letters, written in December 1821, informed the council that four houses of ill fame were operating near Olney's Lane and that several licensed tavern owners were illicitly selling liquor on Sundays.¹⁵⁴ The next year he wrote again, this time in a testier mood, and complained that "Houses of Ill fame *which your Honors have been*

¹⁵¹ There are numerous conflicting accounts of the Olney's Lane Riot. William J. Brown recounts a version he claims one of the participants in the original brawl told him, and there is also the version drawn up by a commission of the Town Meeting and published less than two weeks after the riot. I have mainly drawn on Sullivan's version, which uses the pre-trial testimonies of several sailors involved in the initial brawl. These testimonies have their own flaws, mainly that each deponent claims they were trying to get away from Olney's Lane and heard or observed someone else fire the shot that killed Erickson; see Brown, *Life of Brown*, 125-126; "Committee's Report," *Rhode Island American and Gazette*, September 30, 1831; Sullivan, "Olney's Lane Riot," 52-54.

¹⁵² Numbers from "Committee's Report," *Rhode Island American and Gazette*, September 30, 1831; Sullivan places Hardscrabble between modern day Chalkstone Avenue and Orms Street on the west side of the Moshassuck River. In the 1820s, this neighborhood was on the banks of the Cove, part of the Providence harbor, which was later filled in and is now the site of the Rhode Island State House. Olney's Lane exists today as Olney Street, and Snowtown was between North Main Street and Steven's Bridge, around where Hewes Street is today; Sullivan, "Olney's Lane," 50.

¹⁵³ By 1824, Haskell was living and working on the west side of the Moshassuck River. While he may have moved in the years between writing the council and the compilation of Providence's first directory, the tone and Biblical references in his letters suggest he was writing out of genuine moral outrage rather than out of annoyance at noisy neighbors; see *The Providence Directory, Containing the Names of the Inhabitants, Their Occupations, Places of Business and Dwelling-Houses, with Lists of the Streets, Lanes, Wharves, &c.* (Providence: Brown and Danforth, 1824), 36. For my research, I have used the editions of *Providence Directory* held in the RIHS collection.

¹⁵⁴ Haskell's first letters were written on December 3 and 10, 1821; see PTP 111 docs. #0038544 and #0038546.

informed of do Continue their entertainment of Both sexes of bad Company.”¹⁵⁵

Haskell then exhorted the council to use their “Power to employ any or all of the Constables for commanding peace and good order,” and reminded them that “the perpetual existence of vice” was no more valid an excuse for inaction than “the same certainty with respect to disease is a reason against exercising the art of medicine.”¹⁵⁶

In the aftermath of the 1831 riot, the town newspapers further amplified complaints of the council’s inability to deal with disorder. One paper, while it admitted “The Town Council use every exertion...to quell the riots,” still wished for “some plan...to stop them altogether!”¹⁵⁷ Another paper, while calling for order, issued a subtle rebuke by noting, “the removing of improper inhabitants belonged to the Town Council and not the mob” and that some rioters had come from Newport, New Bedford, and Warren “to protect the town from houses of ill fame”—implying that the council had failed to do so.¹⁵⁸

These complaints had not fallen on entirely deaf ears, and town authorities spent much of the 1820s trying to increase their ability to enforce the law. While at this time the only law enforcement consisted of an all-volunteer town watch, an act of arson on the property of Henry Williams on Westminster Street in March 1823 led the council to add members to the nightly patrol and empower them to arrest any

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 112 doc. #0039147; emphasis added.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid; Haskell also insinuated that the council and the town watch not only tolerated but were complicit in the continued existence of the houses of ill fame; for similar sentiments, see Chapter 4.

¹⁵⁷ “Riot and Murder,” *The Rhode Island American and Gazette*, September 23, 1831.

¹⁵⁸ “Riot,” *The Providence Daily Journal*, September 26, 1831; this subtle and not-so-subtle blaming of the council for not doing enough about the disorder in Olney’s Lane may have also partially been a manifestation of Jacksonian-era class resentment of the mostly middle and lower class rioters against the wealthy and upper-middle class members of the council; see Toby Ditz, “Shipwrecked; or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representations of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia,” *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 1 (1994): 51-80 for the perception of the wealthy as effeminate and weak; cf. Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 356-367 on the Hardscrabble Riot in the context of lower-class white Rhode Islanders’ frustrations over lack of political power; for a national overview of social trends at this time, see Clark, *Social Change*, 79-121, 139-168.

“disorderly or suspicious Person” on the streets at night.¹⁵⁹ Around the same time, the council also set aside money to establish streetlights to help the night watch on their rounds.¹⁶⁰ In a bid for more tools of enforcement, the council also supported an 1825 petition to the Rhode Island General Assembly to raise the fines against tavern or boarding house keepers who failed to report potentially chargeable or disorderly transients to the council.¹⁶¹ The fine had previously been seven dollars, but in September the following year, the council threatened Samuel Staples, Jr., a Providence house carpenter who rented out the buildings he owned in Olney’s Lane, with a fine of fifty dollars if he did not evict Sally Andrews and the five women living with her, possibly in an informal brothel.¹⁶² A month later, the council used the same threat to get Staples to evict Betsey Taylor.¹⁶³ The council also enforced laws previously on the books more rigorously, as we have already seen in the cases of Betsy Herendeen and Phebe Potter, who faced an early version of the crackdown in the 1810s.¹⁶⁴ They also brushed off the laws against “Disorderly Houses run by Free Negroes and Mulattoes.” There were almost no examples in the previous decades of this law being

¹⁵⁹ PTC 11:79-84; the fire also occasioned another of the council’s periodic requests that Providence residents “make the strictest enquiries into the character of the persons in their employ, and Strangers who may appear to be in town without any known employment,” probably in search of a culprit for the fire; quote from *ibid.*, 79; see Chudacoff and Hirt, “Social Turmoil,” 22-23 on the relative ineffectiveness of the town watch.

¹⁶⁰ Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 371.

¹⁶¹ PTC 11:415.

¹⁶² PTC 12:5; Andrews had been part of the group accused of running disorderly houses in 1823, while the council had already labeled two of the women living with her, Rebecca Rockwell and Maria Innman, “of bad fame.” Innman, who was white, had allegedly “exhibit[ed] herself in one of the disorderly houses run by Peter Brown and Thankful Sharpe; see PCCs 25:253 *State v. Andrews*; PTC 11:404-405, 12:5, 26 41-42; for more on Samuel Staples, Jr., see Chapter 4.

¹⁶³ PTC 12:26; she was going by the name Betsey Singleton at the time.

¹⁶⁴ See Chapter 2.

used, but in the 1820s, three men of color were bound out for keeping disorderly houses in Providence.¹⁶⁵

As we have seen, none of these new enforcement efforts were satisfactory. After the riot in 1831, concern for public disorder led to a major turning point in Providence's history. An article in the *Rhode Island American and Gazette* decried not only the late riot, but the "shouts and noise of rioters [i.e., brawling sailors]" that frequently came out of Olney's Lane.¹⁶⁶ A few days later, a letter in the same paper argued that instituting a city government—as opposed to the old town structure—would have prevented the riot, not by suppressing the mob, but because the disorderly houses in Olney's Lane "would be under better regulation, and we should have less number of vagrants, and dissolute, idle people."¹⁶⁷ The turmoil of the 1820s had led Providence to toy with the idea of instituting a city government two years before the Olney's Lane Riot, but the measure had failed to pass the necessary margin of votes in the Town Meeting. However, as Chudacoff and Hirt argue, the Olney's Lane Riot proved the final straw, and the Town Meeting in November 1823, a month after the riot, approved a city charter.¹⁶⁸ In comparison to the old town council—despite its earlier attempts at reform—the new city government, headed by the mayor, could crack down on disorder much harder and much more decisively. The mayor assumed many of the sheriff's riot-control and police powers, including the ability to jail disorderly persons for up to twenty-four hours and enter buildings with potentially

¹⁶⁵ The three men were Thomas Brown, bound out in 1825, Amos Hopkins, 1826, and Reuben Allen Brown, 1828. The latter two had been the subject of numerous complaints before the council took this final action; see PTC 11:479, 12:182 420-421.

¹⁶⁶ "Riot and Murder," *Rhode Island American and Gazette*, September 23, 1831.

¹⁶⁷ "Letter from 'A Citizen'," *The Rhode Island American and Gazette*, October 4, 1831; for a similar conclusion about the need for a city government, see the "Committee's Report," *Rhode Island American and Gazette*, September 30, 1831.

¹⁶⁸ Chudacoff and Hirt, "Social Turmoil," 24.

disorderly inhabitants. Furthermore, rather than volunteer constables and night watchmen, Providence's streets were now patrolled by a professional police force.¹⁶⁹ This formation of Providence's city government marked the culmination of a long effort to enforce public order that, while it became an acute crisis in the 1820s, had roots stretching much further back.

Some of these roots were in local events and a climate of anxiety over disruptions to Providence's economic stability. President Thomas Jefferson's 1807 embargo of trans-Atlantic trade brought Providence's maritime economy to an abrupt halt, throwing many in the port out of work and costing their employers a fortune. The War of 1812 and concurrent threats of invasion and blockade did further damage, from which Providence's maritime trade never fully recovered.¹⁷⁰ At the same time, the fledgling industrial economy was also harmed by the resumption of trade with Britain after the War of 1812, and manufacturing did not replace maritime commerce as Providence's main economic activity until well after 1830.¹⁷¹ Following on these anxious times, when the economic future of Providence was still uncertain, the city also saw one of the sharpest rises in population, from 11,767 in 1820 to 16,836, in 1830, with most of the net rise likely concentrated in the first half of the decade.¹⁷²

The war itself had also been a source of disruption, and the council had tried to exert control in that crisis as well. In June 1814, the year the Royal Navy's blockade against New England began to be felt, the council passed measures aimed at thwarting

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 22, 28, 31.

¹⁷⁰ McLoughlin, *Rhode Island*, 112.

¹⁷¹ Coleman, *Transformation*, 84-95.

¹⁷² See US Census Bureau, *Fourth Census*, vol. 3, *Providence Co*; US Census Bureau, *Fifth Census*, vol. 2, *Washington and Providence Counties*. A census conducted by the town in 1825 already showed a population of 15,941, but there may have been differences in methodology between the town and federal census that led to higher counts in the former; see Noah Smith Jr., *Providence Town Census, 1825*, Providence Census Collection (microfilm), MSS 214, subgroup G., v. 2, RIHS.

a possible British invasion force.¹⁷³ They ordered ship keepers to extinguish all lights at night and established a regular patrol along the wharves to ensure compliance.¹⁷⁴ In a move to deter fire spreading throughout the town—from an attack or possibly sabotage—they also ordered all vessels to anchor out in the harbor, away from Providence’s bridges and homes, while they were not in use.¹⁷⁵ At the same time, in addition to the increased removals already mentioned above, they cautioned innkeepers “and others intertaining Strangers in their houses” to report all such people to the council.¹⁷⁶ These measures may have reflected a desire to clear out unnecessary distractions in the face of invasion, though given the anxieties over fire they may also indicate paranoia about spies or saboteurs.

In addition to acute anxieties over war and the economy, long-term trends played a role in shifting the council’s focus toward combating social disorder, such as the growth by 1820 of local institutions for containing disease.¹⁷⁷ Since well before the Revolution, most summers saw the council commission a health officer to report on the compliance of ships entering the harbor with quarantine regulations.¹⁷⁸ Likewise, the council frequently discussed smallpox or yellow fever outbreaks: the

¹⁷³ A decent overview of the events of the War of 1812 is contained in Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 659-700, esp., 688-689 on the British blockade of the Atlantic seaboard.

¹⁷⁴ PTC 9B:48.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁷⁷ Smallpox and yellow fever are frequently referred to as disorders in town council records; see for example, the meeting on June 17, 1795 when they note that a woman named Annie Bullock has come down with smallpox; PTC 7:33. On the trend of ‘medicalizing’ communities in the early nineteenth century, see Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 370; scholars have traced the use of a healthy body as a metaphor for the ideal community as far back as town aldermen in medieval cities who were themselves drawing on Classical traditions; see, for example, Carole Rawcliffe, *Urban Bodies: Communal Health in Late Medieval English Towns and Cities* (Woodbridge, UK: The Boydell Press, 2013), esp. 78-115.

¹⁷⁸ See PTC 9B:272-274 for a typical example of the council’s summer quarantine regulations, passed on June 5, 1816.

health officer's reports on new cases, what citizens were in the hospital, and the enforcement of measures to prevent the spread of the diseases.¹⁷⁹

In response to these constant concerns, the council gradually built up institutions and practices to more effectively mitigate disease. The first major milestone was a reaction to the arrival of yellow fever in the summer and autumn of 1797, when the council instituted regular committees to inspect the town for nuisances—piles of garbage, fetid standing water, or overflowing vaults of privies, for example.¹⁸⁰ In the last two decades of the eighteenth century, they also regularized regulations for quarantining and cleaning ships with sick crews or passengers, as well as the policies governing the town hospital.¹⁸¹ As the port grew in the early nineteenth century, so did the risk of disease, and in 1816, the General Assembly allowed Providence to establish its own board of health to replace the old state-appointed health officers.¹⁸² By the early 1820s, the board operated more or less independently, keeping its own records and merely notifying the council when they promulgated quarantine regulations.¹⁸³ At the same time, worries over smallpox abated somewhat, as the council authorized local doctors to vaccinate residents at public expense.¹⁸⁴

¹⁷⁹ See *ibid.*, 482-533, for example, when from August to October, 1817, the council was enforcing both quarantine regulations in the harbor and dealing with a smallpox outbreak in town.

¹⁸⁰ Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans*, 123; see also PTC 7.

¹⁸¹ On quarantines, see, for example, PTC 5:405-413; on the hospital, see the regulations enacted by the council in autumn 1792, *ibid.*, 6:216-219.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 9B:272-274; the council had struggled with the sluggishness of the old system since at least the summer of 1806, when they took matters into their own hands, naming their own officer after repeatedly receiving no reply to their entreaties to Rhode Island's Lieutenant Governor to appoint a health officer; see *ibid.*, 9A:29.

¹⁸³ See *ibid.*, 11:45-47, 104.

¹⁸⁴ The town council twice passed resolutions for a "general vaccination with the Kine Pock [cowpox]" first in 1818, then 1822; see PTC 10:15-16, 594; the council had considered smallpox inoculation as well as far back as 1792, see PTC 6:216-219; for the distinction between inoculation and vaccination, see Elizabeth A. Fenn, *Pox Americana: the Great Smallpox Epidemic of 1775-82* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 31-43.

While these local events—threats of invasion, economic depression, and epidemics—were likely fuel for anxieties about public order, even more important were far-reaching cultural changes in the meanings of gender and race at the regional and national level. As we have seen, the rise of wage labor after the Revolution generated new gender ideals, which had major impacts on women’s economic lives by depressing wages and restricting available jobs. The new ideology of separate, gendered spheres, coupled with the rising cult of female domesticity, also affected what was considered proper and moral behavior for women in what became known as the Victorian era.¹⁸⁵ Confined to the home, women were supposed to cultivate a peaceful, moral refuge in which to bring up moral children and to which husbands could retreat after a rough-and-tumble day of work or politics in the public sphere.¹⁸⁶ At around this same time, Cott has argued, an idea of female “passionlessness” also arose, resulting in part from late eighteenth century evangelical sermons that urged women to serve as moral guides for men and touted chastity as one of their greatest virtues.¹⁸⁷ Thus, in a part of the country with strong religious traditions of sexual self-denial and self-control, the assumption arose that women naturally had a lower sex-drive than men.

These twin assumptions—of female passionlessness and the cult of domesticity—and the whole ideology of separate spheres were, of course, ideals and

¹⁸⁵ While the Victorian era, if it can be said to coincide with the eponymous queen’s name, did not begin until the late 1830s, in American this system of separate, gendered spheres was fully in place by 1830 and had taken shape starting around the end of the Revolution; see, for example, Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 4.

¹⁸⁶ For a thorough explanation of the ‘cult of domesticity’ and ‘cult of true womanhood,’ see Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, and Smith-Rosenberg, “Female World.”

¹⁸⁷ Nancy F. Cott, “Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Sexual Ideology,” *Signs* 4, no. 2 (1978): 221-225; Cott also argues passionlessness was attractive to some Victorian women as a way of exerting control over sexual relationships with their husbands and limiting family size.

metaphors.¹⁸⁸ The ideal of the single-income family with a husband at work and a wife at home was attainable only by the middle and upper classes, and poor women who worked outside the home to support their families frequently faced opprobrium because of their failure to live up to the domestic ideal.¹⁸⁹ While women had fulfilled the role of ‘deputy husband’ in colonial times—doing everything from running a store to conducting legal business—in the years after the Revolution women’s wage labor was increasingly frowned upon.¹⁹⁰

The effects of this friction between ideal and reality are amply demonstrated in several studies of urban women in the early nineteenth century. Wendy Gamber has explored how popular portrayals of boarding houses and their female keepers “denigrated women’s participation in the market, even under the auspices of what was indisputably women’s work” in antebellum Boston and New York.¹⁹¹ Middle-class moralists also policed the cultural boundary between true homes, where wives performed domestic labor out of love and devotion for their families, and boarding

¹⁸⁸ As such, their use by incautious historians threatens to “impose a static model on dynamic relationships;” see Kerber, “Separate Spheres,” 38; furthermore, it is important to make the distinction between the historic ideal and historic reality of how these ideals played out in peoples’ actual lives; see, for example Carl N. Degler, “What Ought To Be and What Was: Women’s Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century,” *The American Historical Review* 79, no. 5 (1974): 1467-1490.

¹⁸⁹ One historian argues that it has only been economically possible for a majority of Americans to enact this ideal since the 1950s; see Coontz, *Marriage*, 8-9.

¹⁹⁰ See Ulrich, *Good Wives*, 36-50; cf. Norling, “Sorrow and Heartpangs,” 425-429; for colonial women’s participation in legal actions, see Sara T. Damiano, “Agents at Home: Wives, Lawyers, and Financial Competence in Eighteenth-Century New England Port Cities,” *Early American Studies* 4 (Fall 2015): 808-835.

¹⁹¹ Gamber, “Tarnished Labor,” 202. Gamber’s focus is primarily on middle class boarding houses as opposed to the tenements occupied by the lower classes. The latter were the primary target of the Providence town council in the 1810s and 1820s and were viewed as even more depraved and disorderly. If Providence’s tenements were anything like those described by Stansell in New York, they preserved little of the middle class divide between public and private life, as their living quarters were too small. Instead, the working poor conducted much of their domestic life in public spaces, such as hallways and streets. Thus, those living in the tenements could not enact the middle class conception of the home as “an incubator of morals and family affections;” see Stansell, *City of Women*, 41.

houses, where the same domestic labor was done for paying strangers.¹⁹² The negative view of paying for “women’s work” also helps explain the common contemporary conflation of boarding houses and brothels and women in public with public women.¹⁹³ Another study similarly notes that female industrial laborers in early nineteenth century New York were sometimes assumed to be prostitutes merely because they were out in public at night.¹⁹⁴

A perusal of the *Providence Directory* reveals that the men who governed the town during the period of acute concern over public disorder were firmly entrenched in the middle and upper classes and thus fully invested in these new ideals of female domesticity. Of the three long-serving council presidents in the late 1810s and 1820s, William Richmond was likely a wealthy, retired gentleman with no occupation or business listed other than his role on the council; Richmond Bullock was a merchant with offices near the waterfront; and Charles Holden was a mariner, probably a captain or ship owner given that he lived on well-to-do Benefit Street.¹⁹⁵ The group who removed so many people in the aftermath of the 1831 Olney’s Lane Riot serves to illustrate the makeup of the rest of the council. In addition to Holden, who was president at the time, they were John H. Ormsbee, agent for the Aetna Insurance Company, merchant William Sheldon, and a grocer named Henry P. Franklin.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² Gamber, “Tarnished Labor,” 180.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 194-196.

¹⁹⁴ Stansell, *City of Women*, 97.

¹⁹⁵ *Providence Directory* [1824], 18, 56; *The Providence Directory, Containing the Names of the Inhabitants, Their Occupations, Places of Business and Dwelling-Houses, with Lists of the Streets, Lanes, Wharves, &c.* (Providence: Carlile and Brown, 1826), 44.

¹⁹⁶ *The Providence Directory, Containing the Names of the Inhabitants, Their Occupations, Places of Business and Dwelling-Houses, with Lists of the Streets, Lanes, Wharves, &c.* (Providence: H. H. Brown, 1832), 62, 94, 108; a few skilled artisans also made it onto the council, like cabinetmaker John Carlile, as did early industrialists like Zachariah Allen, listed as a wool manufacturer; see *Providence Directory* [1824], 9, 19.

Finally, most immediately relevant to the lives of Snowtown and Hardscrabble residents, Walter R. Danforth served as an attorney when he was not submitting complaints to the council as Overseer of the Poor.¹⁹⁷ Thus, these prosperous, respectable businessmen saw the ideal model of womanhood in their and their peers' wives and sisters, who could likely afford to spend the bulk of their time managing a large home or taking care of children. Poor women who deviated from this ideal by earning wages through domestic labor, running a boarding house, or keeping a food stand must have been automatically suspect in their eyes. Add the frequent lack of distinction in this period between brothels and boardinghouses, and it is no wonder the council branded so many female boardinghouse keepers and their tenants "of bad fame."

In addition to changing views of a woman's proper place, emancipation in 1784 forced a shift in how the white population viewed the growing number of free African Americans living in their communities. During the colonial period, New England whites had viewed most African Americans as servile and dependent, but only as a natural result of their enslavement. After the Revolution, with egalitarian ideals sweeping the country and their slaves now mostly emancipated, New England whites were suddenly faced with the unexpected question of whether free African Americans qualified as citizens in the new republic. In the opinion of Joanne Pope Melish, by 1820 the answer was a "resounding 'No!'"¹⁹⁸ She argues this answer resulted from new constructions of race that saw African Americans as inherently inferior to whites and thus unfit to ever become citizens. At the same time, the

¹⁹⁷ *Providence Directory* [1826], 30.

¹⁹⁸ Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 2.

Revolution's promise of a republic free of slaves and slavery had been recast as a republic free of black people.¹⁹⁹

In Providence, this change in racial categories and the subsequent attempt to exclude free blacks from post-Revolutionary society manifested itself in several ways. As early as the 1790s, Providence officials had associated African Americans with disorder caused by disease, singling them out for removal during the yellow fever epidemics of 1797 and 1800 because they “lived in areas where officials suspected that fever was breeding or spreading.”²⁰⁰ Whites' concerns also reflected a real increase in instances of freed slaves publicly and privately gathering to drink, dance, and enjoy themselves without fear of a master's disapproval or punishment.²⁰¹ As discussed above, many of the town council's early nineteenth-century crackdowns on disorder can be read as expressions of white anxiety over black freedom and as efforts to re-impose white control over former slaves who were perceived as “unmanaged [and] incapable of self-management.”²⁰²

Efforts to re-impose control were enacted at multiple levels of Rhode Island's government. The state's General Assembly forbade interracial marriage in 1789, and disenfranchised all black men in 1822. Until that year, Rhode Island had based (male) suffrage solely on property ownership, but Clark-Pujara speculates that, as members of

¹⁹⁹ See Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 2-3, 148; several other scholars have also noticed the hardening of racial categories following the end of slavery; for further description of growing divide between increasingly homogenized racial types following the Revolution, see Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 9-11; Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 147-151; historians covering Rhode Island are careful to limit their conclusions about the chronological process of racial category formation. This process, while in Rhode Island associated with the elimination of slavery, took a very different course at different times in other parts of the country; see, for example, one historian's description of the growth of racial categories in the wake of Bacon's Rebellion in colonial Virginia: Edmund Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975), 316-337.

²⁰⁰ Herndon, *Unwelcome Americans*, 123.

²⁰¹ Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 126-127.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 132.

the first freeborn generation of black Rhode Islanders began to amass enough property to vote, state authorities decided to head off a potential threat to white civic control by adding a racial restriction.²⁰³ At the town level, Providence enacted various regulations, including a curfew the applied only to African Americans in 1808.²⁰⁴ The year after the state revoked black suffrage, the council increased its powers of surveillance and ordered constable Henry Alexander to conduct a census of Providence's black households. By noting their addresses and places of legal settlement, this census allowed the council to issue removal orders more quickly in the future.²⁰⁵ Furthermore, the census takers were instructed to inform—or threaten—the heads of household that “if they receive into their Houses or possessions any transient white persons or coloured people to reside not having a Settlement in this place, without giving notice thereof to the Council, that they will be prosecuted thereof without delay.”²⁰⁶

The intersection of racial anxieties with rising ideals of female domesticity and passionlessness made black women especial targets for the authorities' crusade against disorder. White concern over black female sexuality had its had roots in the colonial period, when sex and childbearing were some of the few aspects of an enslaved woman's life at least partially outside her master's control. Likewise, black women's bodies were potential sites of racial “amalgamation,” a subject of increasing concern as the distinction between white, ideal republican citizens and unfit, servile African

²⁰³ Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*, 94; cf. Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 42; Cottrol surmises that Northern states were correcting the unwitting mistake of leaving ‘white’ out of their voter qualifications. At the time the state constitutions were written, most African Americans were either still enslaved or too poor to own enough property to meet the qualifications for voting.

²⁰⁴ Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 371.

²⁰⁵ For the census document itself, see PTP 112 doc. #0039155; note that part of the document has gone missing.

²⁰⁶ PTC 10:601.

American non-citizens rose in importance after the Revolution.²⁰⁷ As a result, in early nineteenth-century cases of white men raping black women, Sweet roots the tendency of white judicial officials to blame and punish the victims—rather than the perpetrators—in the growing cultural association between black women and sexual depravity.²⁰⁸ Likewise, in the attacks on Providence black neighborhoods in 1824 and 1831, he sees rioters justifying their actions through the association of those neighborhoods with prostitution and of black women with sexual deviance.²⁰⁹ The actions of the council in the first weeks after the Olney’s Lane Riot suggest a similar association, since one of their first reactions was to remove fifteen people of “bad fame,” who had probably just lost their homes, including nine women of color.²¹⁰

Particularly in the riots of 1824 and 1831, we can see political and social forces that were trying to exclude women and people of color from civic life throughout the new republic. In New York, between 1825 and 1857, Gilfoyle has identified a rash of so-called “brothel riots” that represented a “new misogynist attitude toward prostitutes and women in public life.”²¹¹ This attitude combined the new ideal of female domesticity with the rising tide of white male egalitarianism. Commonly associated with populist figures like Andrew Jackson, proponents of the latter ideology—usually urban laborers and small scale artisans—pushed to remove barriers to white male

²⁰⁷ Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 122-123; on the sexuality of female slaves, see the discussion of slave-owner James MacSparren’s diary, in which he vents his frustration over the unwanted offspring of his slave Maroca, conceived with the slave of one of his neighbors, *ibid.*, 30-31.

²⁰⁸ Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 294.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 374-376.

²¹⁰ PTC 12:425-432.

²¹¹ Gilfoyle, “Brothel Riots,” 65; efforts to stamp out prostitution in Boston under mayor Josiah Quincy commenced in 1823, and included a rash of “bawdyhouse” riots in 1825; see Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 11-27; In Philadelphia, Lyons notes that punitive new laws against prostitution dated from the 1810s and 1820s, and while enforcement was often lax, the laws established a clear divide, based on sexual propriety, between lower class women, often of color, and the more respectable classes; see Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*,” 333-353.

voting, like property qualifications, while sending a clear message that women were to “get off the streets, stay in the home.”²¹² Sullivan notes the similarity of the working class and artisan participants and the instigating incident of the Olney’s Lane Riot to these “brothel” riots, while Clark-Pujara argues the riots also demonstrated “white resentment at black freedom” and belief that “black emancipation had demoted all whites, especially those whites who had never owned slaves. Their whiteness, in and of itself, was no longer a clear marker of freedom if black people were also free.”²¹³

An unintended consequence of the focus on disorder in Providence’s black community was that, since they were a minority, many white residents who lived in the same neighborhoods were caught up as well. For example, the 1808 curfew against African Americans was eventually expanded to include “any disorderly or suspicious Person,” thus including the white population as well.²¹⁴ The same phenomenon occurred in the wake of the multiple complaints about black-run disorderly houses in the latter part of the 1810s and the conviction of John L. Jones for keeping a disorderly house—probably a dance hall or brothel—in 1822.²¹⁵ When seven indictments for running disorderly houses were subsequently handed down the following year, the defendants were predominantly white, with only one black woman included. Finally, the riots, while they targeted sections of town predominantly

²¹² Gilfoyle, “Brothel Riots” 58; On nationwide trends associated with Jackson and the Democratic party, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 489-491; Rhode Island lagged behind many other states in removing property qualifications for voting, and did not widen the franchise until the events of the Dorr Rebellion in the 1840s. At the same time, unlike most others, the state also re-instated voting rights for African Americans; see Conley, *Democracy in Decline*, 290-371; Sweet notes that in the months leading up to the Hardscrabble Riot of 1824, a convention had altered Rhode Island’s state constitution to make state legislatures more representative of demographic realities, but had failed to radically expand the franchise; see Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 356-365.

²¹³ Sullivan, “Olney’s Lane Riot,” 51, 53; Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*, 109.

²¹⁴ PTC 11:83-84.

²¹⁵ PCCs 24:378, *State v. Jones*.

inhabited by African Americans, did plenty of damage to white interests. The town meeting's report on the Olney's Lane Riot, for example, listed the destruction of property that, while rented to African Americans, was owned by prominent white residents like Nicholas Brown, Ezekiel Burr, William R. Staples, and Thomas Sessions. A white businesswoman, Eliza Granger, also had her windows "considerably broken."²¹⁶

The effects of broadening definitions of disorder can also be seen in the change over time of how the council determined an examinant was "of bad fame and reputation and an unsuitable person to become an inhabitant to the town."²¹⁷ In early examinations, like that of Deborah Barney in 1801, this phrase appeared at the end of the proceedings as a justification for her removal "as soon as may be."²¹⁸ There is also enough information in Barney's examination to hint at why the council thought she was "of bad fame:" she was an unmarried woman of color with a young son and had lived for a time with a tavern-keeper, Silas Pike, and later with Sarah Gibbs. Gibbs, another woman of color and a sailor's wife, took in boarders and had a bad reputation in the council's eyes as well.²¹⁹ Thus, it is reasonable to guess the council suspected Barney of drunkenness and possibly sexual impropriety, especially if they assumed that Gibbs's boarding house doubled as a brothel.²²⁰ Over time, however, the council applied this phrase, "of bad fame," with a much broader brush and to larger groups of people. A typical instance was the council's examination of eleven people—a man

²¹⁶ "Committee's Report," *Rhode Island American and Gazette*, September 30, 1831.

²¹⁷ The phrase had long been in use and was lifted from the relevant legal statute; cf. *Public Laws* [1798], 356.

²¹⁸ PTC 8:116.

²¹⁹ On Sarah Gibbs, see *ibid.*, 7:453, 8:120.

²²⁰ It is equally possible that the council's suspicions had no basis in fact, but they are at least understandable.

and ten women—on July 12, 1824. In this case, the initial summons contained the accusation that all were “of bad fame and reputation.”²²¹ At the same time, the examinations were too short to ascertain why exactly these people were “unsuitable” to remain in town. The combination of perfunctory examinations with blanket accusations of “bad fame” was also in evidence in the examinations, as previously described, that took place after the 1831 riot.²²² It appears, then, that over time the council associated disorder less with individual actions and more with membership in a group: a race, a social class, a gender, or residence in a particular neighborhood. Such broad assumptions were plausibly the result of the council’s attempt to cope with rising numbers of examinations by falling back on their middle class assumptions about African Americans and white women who failed to conform to contemporary ideals of domesticity, rather than examining each case individually.

However, the women who actually inhabited the neighborhoods where the council and the rest of Providence’s respectable citizens saw so much disorder did not always live up to their assumptions. While the poor neighborhoods of northern Providence were, without a doubt, sites of prostitution, drunkenness, and crime, middle-class perceptions of black inferiority and female domesticity—or lack thereof—sometimes led respectable white residents astray when identifying specific culprits. Given the one-sided nature of the evidence in the town records, we can never be sure how often council members or disgruntled neighbors inflated or misapplied an

²²¹ PTC 11:229; the eleven people were divided into four separate complaints—each prefaced by the accusation of bad fame—from the Overseer of the Poor. Two were for a single person: the one man, Thomas Sensiblee, and Eliza Granger, who was accused of running a disorderly house. The other two complaints are divided based on whether the women had illegally returned to Providence or were facing their first examination; cf. similar mass complaints against those of “bad fame;” *ibid.*, 10:540, 11:181.

²²² See especially the examinations of Fanny Dunliva, Rachel Sands, Joanna Greene, Charlotte Sampson, Matilda Nova, and James A. Johnson; *ibid.*, 12:431-432.

accusation of “bad fame.” However, some of the complexities on the ground can be seen in the contrasting profiles of two prominent female boarding house keepers who operated in Snowtown in the 1820s, Susan Parr Gardner and Rosanna Jones.

Susan Parr Gardner was a white woman who owned a large parcel of land around modern day Hewes Street, as well as several lots on Olney’s Lane.²²³ Of all the disorderly house keepers in Providence, she is the one for whom there is the clearest evidence that the boarding house she ran was a brothel, a conclusion that mostly derives from how her neighbors perceived her. In 1821, nineteen people signed a petition claiming that she ran a house of ill fame, “which has the immediate effect of corrupting the morals of the youth of the Town as well as children in the neighborhood,” and they exhorted the council to put a stop to such a “monstrous evil.”²²⁴ Evidently any effort to do so failed, since several months later Moses Haskell included a house of ill fame “ocupyed By Sucky Par” in his complaint to the council about Olney’s Lane.²²⁵ Two years after that, Gardner pleaded guilty to a charge of keeping a “common ill-governed & disorderly house” where people engaged in “drinking, tippling, whoreing and misbehaving themselves.”²²⁶

The other strand of evidence for the nature of Gardner’s house is the examinations of her tenants. Most of the evidence we have comes from the council’s one attempt to clear out her house following the complaint in 1821. The council eventually examined four white women—Louisa Stoddard, Emeline Bliss, Betsey Lee,

²²³ For Gardner’s Hewes Street property, see Record of Deeds, Providence City Archives, (hereafter Deeds), 41:38, 44:212, and 49:1; for her acquisition of property along Olney’s Lane, see *ibid.*, 41:302, 63:116, 65:84; in 1825, she was also sold a house and piece of land on Benefit Street, but it appears the owner was mortgaging the property to her; see *ibid.*, 59:74.

²²⁴ PTP 109 doc. #0038069.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 111 doc. #0038544; Sucky, or Sookie, is a diminutive form of Susan; Gardner also sometimes went by her parents’ name, Parr.

²²⁶ PCCs 25:254 *State v. Parr*.

and Phebe Davis—who explicitly stated they lived with Gardner.²²⁷ While it is not conclusive proof, these women, aged between sixteen and twenty-three, could conceivably be interpreted as prostitutes. Not only were they young and living on their own, but the council also regarded Bliss, Lee, and Davis as women “of bad fame.” In the case of Bliss, we can further back up the council’s suspicions because she was one of the disorderly house keepers charged in 1823 along with Gardner, a charge to which she pleaded guilty.²²⁸

On the other hand, some of the evidence does not quite fit the identification of Susan Gardner’s house as a brothel. It is odd, for example, that Phebe Davis and Betsey Lee were Gardner’s sisters, and Davis had recently married a sailor named Griffin Davis, who had immediately gone to sea about a week before her examination.²²⁹ While some sailors’ wives did resort to prostitution while their husbands were at sea out of economic necessity, it is unlikely Davis was that desperate, especially since her husband had just recently left.²³⁰ Susan Gardner was also perfectly capable of taking care of her sisters if they fell on hard times, since she successfully petitioned the council to forgo removing Betsey, who was “sick and need[ed] Nursing” in September 1821.²³¹ However, there is evidence that Gardner and her sisters were frequent denizens of Olney’s Lane, where they regularly consorted with male partners.²³² Thus, Davis may have engaged in prostitution before her marriage. A further complication is the examination of James Scott a few days

²²⁷ PTC 10:481-500; a fifth woman, Alice Thayer, was examined with Louisa Stoddard, and may have lived with Gardner as well, but does not say so for sure. Thayer was also later judged to have a bad reputation when the council removed her and another large group of young women; see *ibid.*, 11:184.

²²⁸ PCCs 25:253, *State v. Bliss*.

²²⁹ PTC 10:485-486.

²³⁰ See Maloney, “Doxies at Dockside.”

²³¹ PTC 10:505.

²³² See PTP 103 doc. #0033879 and Chapter 5.

before the women in Gardner's house. Scott was probably a sailor and also claimed to live with Gardner. Like most of the women, the council considered him of "bad character" and a "quarrelsome" disturber of the peace, but the question remains of what he was doing in Gardner's house.²³³ Possibly, he was a client living with one of the women. Sailors in Providence were known to live in brothels while ashore. For example, a black sailor, William Jordan, was residing with a woman named Mahala Greene in an Olney's Lane brothel on the eve of the 1831 riot.²³⁴ On the other hand, Scott could simply have been boarding at the house on his own, with the women being either fellow boarders or prostitutes who lived among more respectable tenants.

However, the most convincing evidence that Susan Gardner was a brothel keeper is the story of Henritt Washburn, an eighteen-year-old white woman examined by the town council in July 1830.²³⁵ She had come to Boston the previous year, having been "enticed...by the master of a Vessel," to leave her parents' home in North Carolina. Sometime later, abandoned, "poor and destitute," she somehow encountered Gardner in Boston. She convinced Washburn to come to Providence and live with her, and provided money for her travel by stagecoach. Once in Providence, Washburn lived with Gardner and paid her eight dollars a week for board, an amount that seems

²³³ PTC 10:478-479.

²³⁴ Jordan was deposed as a witness in the trial for the murder of George Erickson; see deposition of William Jordan, *State of Rhode Island v. Richard Johnson and Augustus Williams*, Albert C. Greene Papers, RIHS; another deponent identified the house Jordan and Greene lived in as the home of "black and white prostitutes;" see deposition of Richard Johnson, *State v. Johnson and Williams*, Greene Papers; for similar arrangements in British naval ports later in the nineteenth century, see Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 29.

²³⁵ This story reads like Victorian cautionary tales of innocent young women seduced and then abandoned to a life of prostitution; cf. Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 101-114, 312-317 for a discussion of the popular literature of seduction in contemporary Philadelphia, and Stansell, *City of Women*, 27 for observations on the similarities between the eighteenth century novels of Samuel Richardson and a seduction case tried in the New York courts.

too high for a young single woman to afford.²³⁶ Reading between the lines, it is possible Washburn had to pay her high rent through prostitution, and Gardner may have used the debt to hold her at the house. Whatever their arrangement, after about seven weeks, Washburn fled, leaving everything behind including her clothes, which Gardner kept as collateral for unpaid board. After she had lived two weeks “with no particular abode” and in poor health, the council sent Washburn to recover in the Dexter Asylum pending her removal. This is the clearest example from any of the Providence records of a woman who was procured and went to live in a boarding house as a prostitute.²³⁷

For much of her time in Providence, Susan Gardner’s neighbor on Hewes Street was a single woman of color named Rosanna Jones. Both women owned property on Olney’s Lane, and like Gardner, Jones faced accusations of running a disorderly house.²³⁸ The location of Jones’ properties, in Snowtown and on Olney’s Lane, is strong circumstantial evidence that they were scenes of public disorder. Certainly other historians have thought so, and Sullivan refers to the building on Hewes Street as a brothel.²³⁹ That rioters targeted and destroyed her house on Olney’s Lane in 1831 further suggests it had a widely known reputation as a house of ill fame

²³⁶ PTC 12:324.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 324-325; the implication may have been that Washburn was pregnant.

²³⁸ For Jones’s property, see Deeds 40:78, 43:169, 44:296, 47:144. Her land was on the “West Side of the Street leading from Steven’s Bridge to Jabez Whipple’s” house. Since Whipple’s house was on North Main Street (see below), this street roughly corresponds to modern Hewes Street, though historically there were several small streets between Stevens Bridge and North Main Street.

²³⁹ Sullivan, “Olney’s Lane Riot,” 54; I have been unable to check the sources the author uses to make this claim. The author cites both an article in the *Providence Daily Journal* and the trial of Richard Johnson and Augustus Williams. However, I was unable to re-locate those trial documents in the Rhode Island Supreme Court Judicial Records Center, and the date for the article corresponds to a Sunday, a day on which the paper was not published at the time. No other contemporary newspaper articles referred to Jones by name, except the committee’s report.

or site of social disorder.²⁴⁰ Likewise, in 1823, the year she bought that house, she was part of the large group of women accused of keeping disorderly houses in the fall session of the Court of General Sessions of the Peace.²⁴¹

Yet when we look more closely, there is actually little clear evidence that Jones was running a brothel. For example, unlike anyone else accused of running a disorderly house in 1823, her case never went to trial. In the ledger for that term, next to *State of Rhode Island v. Rosannah Jones*, there is only the short note, “Not Pros[ecuted].”²⁴² Furthermore, unlike many other boarding houses, including Susan Gardner’s, the council never tried to clear out multiple tenants at a time from Jones’s house, nor did other Providence residents complain about her. The only negative mention of Jones in the council records is a complaint from 1827 about a wall she built that “encroached on a public highway” on her Hewes Street property.²⁴³

The few of Jones’s tenants that we do know about also suggest the differences between Jones’s and Gardner’s boarding houses.²⁴⁴ In all, only three people associated with Jones were examined. The first, in June 1823, was Sally Taylor, the only one of Jones’ tenants similar to the women from Gardner’s house. She was a

²⁴⁰ “Committee’s Report,” *Rhode Island American*, September 30, 1831, lists her house in Olney’s Lane as destroyed. Sullivan may have meant this property when he describes Jones’s house as a brothel. He says the rioters attacked her brothel in Hewes Street, but she is not mentioned in the description of property damage in Snowtown.

²⁴¹ PCCs 25:253, *State v. Jones*.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ PTC 12:113; Moses Haskell, in his complaints to the council refers to a house run by somebody named Jones, but, though the writing is blurred, it looks more like “Mr. Jones,” i.e., John L. Jones. Haskell also refers to a house “the next house but one [after Susan Parr Gardner’s] below on the same side of the street.” This could not refer to Jones’s house on Hewes Street, as she was directly next to Gardner, and Jones did not yet own property on Olney’s Lane when Haskell wrote his letter; see PTP 111 doc. #0038544; for more on John L. Jones, see Chapter 5.

²⁴⁴ There are also two people who claim to live with a “Widow Jones,” but this does not appear to be Rosanna Jones. While some documents do describe Jones as a widow, the couple also say they live west of the river, where there are no records of Rosanna Jones owning property; another transient refers to a “Mrs. Jones,” which could be Rosanna Jones, but it is not clear; see examinations of Isaac F. Hollis and Lucy Healy, and Sophia White, PTC 11:339-340, 12:166.

twenty-two-year-old white widow from New Bedford. The council considered Taylor to be of “bad fame,” probably because she was boarding at the time with Mary Johnson who, unlike Jones, pleaded guilty to running a disorderly house a few months later.²⁴⁵ However, Taylor told the council she had not lived with Jones since first arriving in Providence several years previously, so her bad reputation may have had no connection to Jones. The second of Jones’s tenants was John Lewis, a black sailor originally from Jamaica, whom the council accused in 1826 of running a shop that stayed open too late and sold beer on Sundays. It looks like he rented space in one of Jones’s properties for his shop, which, while a connection with disorder and drunkenness, is not clear evidence of a brothel.²⁴⁶ The final example of those who stayed with Jones was another family of color, that of William Greene. The council likely removed him because he was destitute, having lost “what little he had of furniture and other articles” in the Hardscrabble Riot a few days before his examination. Thus, Jones appears to have rented to a variety of people, from young single women like Sally Taylor to family groups like the Greenes and the Lewises. Unless she ran a mixed boarding house with some rooms given over to individual prostitutes and others to families, it is hard to see Jones as a brothel keeper.²⁴⁷

In addition to the shaky evidence for Jones as a brothel keeper, the records also reveal a woman who was deeply embedded in the commercial and, to an extent, civil fabric of Providence, in a way that Susan Gardner was not. For example, Gardner only appears in the court records once, in 1823. Jones, on the other hand, was

²⁴⁵ PTC 11:110; see PCCs 25:254 *State v. Johnson*.

²⁴⁶ PTC 11:515-516, 525, 528.

²⁴⁷ It is also possible Sally Taylor was still married when she lived with Jones, and the death of her husband was the impetus to move to Mary Johnson’s. Taylor does not specify where or when her husband died.

involved in nine different civil cases between 1824 and 1834. While the cases demonstrate that she was probably not popular with her creditors, the mere fact that business owners, many of whom probably knew Jones personally or lived near her, still agreed to lend her money implies a degree of trust.²⁴⁸ Some of her debts may also reveal an attempt at respectability and a sort of civic-mindedness, since she was a frequent buyer of lottery tickets. Aside from a desire to win big, participating in lotteries was a way to be seen contributing money toward public schools or infrastructure projects.²⁴⁹ Thus, rather than engendering complaints from her neighbors like Susan Gardner, Jones made an effort to cultivate business relationships with hers and to be—or at least act the part of—an upright citizen.

Despite the evidence pointing to Susan Gardner as a greater source of disorder than Rosanna Jones, the reaction of respectable white Providence residents to the two women was the diametric opposite of what might be expected. Gardner faced almost no pushback from town authorities for operating a brothel under their noses: her sisters eventually avoided removal despite the 1821 complaint, and while the council questioned her about Henritt Washburn in 1830, she apparently suffered no consequences for procuring and exploiting a young woman.²⁵⁰ The council also did nothing when she continued her activities after pleading guilty to the charge of

²⁴⁸ For a fuller discussion of Jones's civil cases, see Chapter 4; it is possible that Gardner, whose property was valued higher than Jones's, was wealthier, and thus did not need to buy on credit. However, given that Jones was still buying up property in 1829—she paid \$100 for a newly platted parcel just off the turnpike going north to Pawtucket—she was certainly not poor; see Deeds, 56:259.

²⁴⁹ In May 1833, William Dinneford sued Jones on behalf of Enoch and Joseph Clark. In 1831, the *Providence Daily Journal* advertised a lottery run by their company, E. W. Clark & Bro., to support the “Rhode Island Literature Lottery,” held “for the encouragement of Public Schools.” Another company, Paine, Burgess, & Co., who sued Jones in 1830, ran a lottery the following year to raise money to build a bridge in Connecticut; see Providence County Court of Common Pleas, RIJCR (hereafter PC CCP), *William Dinneford v. Rosanna Jones*, May 1833; PCCs 30:536, *John Paine, Daniel Burgess, and Philip Case. v. Rosannah Jones*, November 1830; “Lottery Advertisements,” *Providence Daily Journal*, September 20, 1831.

²⁵⁰ PTC 12:325.

running a disorderly house and somehow paying a steep fifty-dollar fine in 1823.²⁵¹ Despite complaints from some of Providence's respectable citizens, Gardner was also not targeted by the mob in 1831, despite owning a house in Olney's Lane directly adjacent the epicenter of the riot at Ezekiel Burr's.²⁵² This omission could have been the result of the randomness of mob violence, and Gilfoyle points out that many brothel riots were "arbitrary, unplanned, and unstructured," the result of bands of increasingly drunk and belligerent young men.²⁵³ However, given the long duration of the Olney's Lane Riot and its roots in the reaction to a specific incident, it seems more likely that its targets were the result of deliberate planning.²⁵⁴ So how did Susan Gardner get away with it? Perhaps the council and the rest of Providence saw in her only a successful white property owner and businesswoman. Perhaps her wealth allowed members of the council to tell themselves the evidence against her was inconclusive and to overlook her and her tenants' failures to live up to their ideals of female domesticity.²⁵⁵

On the other hand, the mob of 1831 did target and destroy Jones's property in Olney's Lane, and shortly thereafter she appears to have left town.²⁵⁶ What explains the animosity towards Jones, given that she was in many ways a model citizen? It is first important to note that the local authorities, like the council and the local courts, largely left her alone. Except for John Lewis, the council never directly associated

²⁵¹ PCCs 25:254, *State v. Parr*.

²⁵² Deeds 44:77.

²⁵³ Gilfoyle, "Brothel Riots, 53.

²⁵⁴ Cf. the deliberate actions and organization of the mob during the Hardscrabble Riot, which took place a day after the inciting incident and was advertised with handbills beforehand; see Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 353-354.

²⁵⁵ She also cultivated connections with members of Providence's middle class; see Chapter 4.

²⁵⁶ On Gardner's life in Providence after 1830, see Chapter 6; a case from 1833 shows Jones settled in Cranston; see PC CCP, *Dinneford v. Jones*.

Jones with disorder, and in that case there is no evidence they held her responsible for her tenant's behavior. Since she seems to have been on good terms with most of her neighbors, the council received no complaints about her, and thus probably did not spend much of their limited time thinking about her. That leaves the mob of artisans and working class laborers who rioted in Olney's Lane. Few of them probably knew her as well as her immediate neighbors or the men she did business with, and so they viewed her through the lenses of racial and gendered prejudice and the stereotypical associations of Olney's Lane: as a symbol of black sexual deviance and the fallen womanhood of a brothel. For those that did know more about her, it is also possible she was targeted as a successful black business owner and property holder. Like those free blacks who amassed property and prompted Rhode Island to bar them from voting, like the black sailors who defended themselves in Olney's Lane and fired on a white man, Jones had disrupted the social order in which blacks were assumed to be naturally inferior and servile to whites.

In the early decades of the republic, questions had arisen about the implications of its egalitarian ideology, particularly for blacks and women, and led to such policies as gradual emancipation in northern states like Rhode Island. However, spurred on by local economic instability, riots, and a surge in population, the Providence authorities acted in the 1820s to re-impose order and stability on what they saw as an increasingly disorderly town. They were not alone in these efforts, as local governments and populist mobs all along America's Atlantic coast imposed a major realignment of racial and gender ideals that sought to relegate women to the home and African Americans to the margins of civic life. In Providence, with the establishment of a

strong city government in 1832, hierarchy and stability had been at least symbolically restored.²⁵⁷ However, in their rush to eliminate disorder in their town, the council damaged the lives of many women trying to eke out a living and stay out of their way. The efforts to restore public order were also sometimes blinded by the rigid racial and gendered categories they sought to impose, and thus a single black woman who tried to blend into her community lost her livelihood, while a white brothel owner next door was untouched. However, such women were not entirely powerless against the forces arrayed against them.

²⁵⁷ The characterization of Post-Revolutionary American as an Enlightenment-inspired, egalitarian society that gradually transitioned toward a re-imposition of hierarchies and stability is common in studies of the Early Republic; on intertwined gender and class hierarchies, see, for example, Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 1-4; for a description of changes in maritime labor in the 1830s as a move toward “Jim Crow at Sea,” see Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 215-232.

CHAPTER 4

CONVERGING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN RICH AND POOR

As we have seen, complaints from respectable citizens helped spur the Providence town council to crack down hard on public disorder, and specifically on disorderly houses, in the 1820s.²⁵⁸ The removal of those considered “of bad fame” and the prosecutions of disorderly house keepers compounded these women’s already acute economic difficulties. Many in the boarding houses faced the unenviable choice of accepting near-poverty or entering the illicit economy of neighborhoods like Olney’s Lane. Increasingly, either path could land them with a removal warrant from the council. Thus, women had to develop strategies to avoid such an outcome. They sometimes found unlikely allies among their erstwhile accusers. Though upright men like George A. Olney, Isaac Angell, Nicholas Brown, and Ezekiel Burr complained to the council about disorder, they also rented out property and conducted business in Snowtown and Olney’s Lane, and sometimes their disorderly tenants and business partners found ways to leverage the relationship for their own benefit.

It is no surprise, of course, that people of different classes and races came into contact with each other in a small and bustling port city like Providence. While black and poorer white residents had started to concentrate in defined neighborhoods on the north edge of town by the 1820s, Providence was still transitioning from a vertical to horizontal arrangement of different racial and social groups. Many lower-class

²⁵⁸ Olney, Angell and Burr signed several complaints about Thankful Sharpe’s and her son James’s houses, and Olney put his name to a complaint that James Collins sold liquor to disorderly persons; see PTP 132 doc. #0051647; 127 doc. #0048354; PTC 11:404-405; Nicholas Brown’s signature appears on the 1817 complaint of general disorder in Providence; see PTP 93 doc. #0027950.

domestic workers still lived with the families they served, and wealthy merchants, who needed access to docks, still lived down the street from sailor boarding houses, grog shops, and tenements.²⁵⁹ The complaints of property owners like Olney, Angell, and Burr also show that even by 1830, plenty of middle and upper class white families still lived near Olney's Lane.²⁶⁰

Just because they complained, however, does not mean that they were above conducting business with or making money from their neighbors. George Olney and his business partner, Caleb Mosher, Jr., extended credit to Rosanna Jones a few years after she was accused of running a disorderly house.²⁶¹ Ezekiel Burr owned the house that was the initial target of the Olney's Lane Riot, where one witness claimed "black and white prostitutes" lived.²⁶² Finally, an 1822 complaint alleged that two women, Rachel Smith and Judah Maxwell, kept a disorderly house in one of Isaac Angell's tenements.²⁶³ Of course, business transactions or rental agreements between disorderly women and merchants and property owners do not always imply a social connection, let alone moral approval. Just because the tenants in these men's houses were disorderly or engaged in prostitution does not necessarily mean that they condoned it or that they were fully aware of its occurrence.

A good illustration of the possibility of such ignorance is the case of Esek Tillinghast, who rented a house on Hope Street to James S. Gardner, a teamster, and

²⁵⁹ Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 359.

²⁶⁰ Cf. Sullivan, "Olney's Lane Riot," 50-51.

²⁶¹ PC CCP, *George R. A. Olney and Caleb Mosher, Jr. v. Rosannah Jones*, November 1827; this case may have been over a food bill. Olney is listed as a grocer, with his business on North Main Street, see *The Providence Directory, Containing the Names of the Inhabitants, Their Occupations, Places of Business and Dwelling-Houses, with Lists of the Streets, Lanes, Wharves, &c.* (Providence: H. H. Brown, 1828), 74.

²⁶² Deposition of Richard Johnson, *State v. Johnson and Williams*, Greene Papers.

²⁶³ PTC 10:564-565.

his family. In March 1829, the council ordered Gardner and his family to leave town after a complaint from the Overseer of the Poor. The initial complaint did not mention disorderly conduct, but the council decided to hear evidence from Lydia Eastforth, perhaps one of Gardner's neighbors. Gardner also appears to have persuaded some of his other neighbors and acquaintances to give the council "their opinions as respects [his] Character." The new evidence must have made a good impression, because the Council suspended their initial removal order in early April.²⁶⁴

However, on New Year's Day 1830, an anonymous "Friend of Morality" sent the council a letter claiming that Gardner actually kept "bad women [in the house], and [had] been doing so for a long time." The letter also said that when the landlord, Esek Tillinghast, dropped by, "the girls [had] been secreted," and that none of the neighbors dared report to the council because Gardner threatened to "burn their buildings if he can find out any one's saying anything about it."²⁶⁵ Within days, the council issued a new order for removal, this time based on the complaint of keeping a disorderly house and harboring "women of bad fame."²⁶⁶ Thus, it certainly seems possible for a landlord to have no idea that a tenant was running a brothel out of his property. If we really think about the episode, however, it raises many questions about the interactions between disorderly house keepers and the respectable citizens of Providence. Was it really possible to conceal prostitution or disorder from a landlord or the neighbors, especially if it was such an open secret? Was Gardner unusually canny in his concealment, or was a combination of willful ignorance or tacit approval a more

²⁶⁴ Ibid, 12:241-248.

²⁶⁵ PTP 146 doc. #0060381.

²⁶⁶ PTC 12:293; quote from PTP 146 doc. #0060242.

normal attitude of a landlord toward disorderly tenants? Furthermore, to what extent did neighbors play a role—willingly or not—in concealing or condoning disorder?

The career of property owner Ezekiel Burr demonstrates that Esek Tillinghast—if his ignorance was genuine—had to have been exceptionally naïve or gullible. While it is certainly possible that Burr would have been shocked to find that prostitution was going on in the house he owned in Olney’s Lane, his relationship with one tenant, an African American woman named Mahala Greene, suggests otherwise. Greene first came to the council’s attention in 1824, when they removed her to Cranston. She had a daughter, Mary Ann, and she told the Council she and her husband Stephen, who also lived in town, were no longer living together.²⁶⁷ Four years later, she was running an unlicensed “victualling house” out of the cellar of one of Burr’s properties, and on the night of the Olney’s Lane Riot, she was living with mariner William Jordan in what witnesses described as a brothel in the upper floors of Burr’s house.²⁶⁸ Since Jordan claimed he and Greene had lived together for five years, Greene was probably also renting from Burr when the Providence Sheriff cited her for keeping a disorderly house in 1829 and 1830.²⁶⁹ Given the frequency of Mahala Greene’s infractions and the proximity of his own house to the rental property on Olney’s Lane, it is difficult to imagine Ezekiel Burr plausibly claiming the kind of

²⁶⁷ PTC 11:192.

²⁶⁸ PTC 12:29; depositions of Richard Johnson and William Jordan, *State v. Williams and Johnson*, Greene Papers; “Committee’s Report,” *Rhode Island American and Gazette*, September 30, 1831. Interestingly, another participant in the riot referred to William Jordan’s “wife” probably in reference to Greene, who appears never to have divorced her first husband; see deposition of John Gardner, *State v. Williams and Johnson*, Greene Papers.

²⁶⁹ Sheriff’s Record Book, Feb. 2, 1829, and Aug. 16, 1830, RIHS, cited in Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 285 n76. The first citation in February 1829 was likely the cause of the town council’s order that Greene break up housekeeping to avoid another complaint from the Overseer of the Poor. It appears Greene ignored the order, with no evident consequences; see PTC 12:238.

ignorance of her behavior as Esek Tillinghast could for James Gardner.²⁷⁰ Yet at no time did he evict her or report her to the council after repeated threats of removal.²⁷¹

However, Burr did not just tolerate his disorderly tenant, he helped Greene when she was in trouble. In May 1829, mere months after the Providence Sheriff and the town council ordered her to “break up housekeeping,” Greene appeared before a Justices Court in Providence.²⁷² Accused of assaulting Charles Caesar, she was initially found guilty and given a ten-day jail sentence. However, she appealed her case to the next Court of General Sessions of the Peace, and while we do not know the final outcome, Burr was one of the two men acting as surety for her appearance in court.²⁷³ Since he almost undoubtedly knew what Greene was up to in his rental property, why would he facilitate her case like this? Given the increasing anxiety in Providence over urban disorder and prostitution, and Greene’s alleged role as antagonist in the assault, it was unlikely that Burr helped her out of any feeling of charity. Rather, it was likely a reciprocal act based on mutual interest. Burr was helping a long-term tenant whose money he took even though he probably knew it came from illicit activity, and Greene got her landlord to sponsor a defense that could keep her out of jail.

²⁷⁰ After the riot, William Jordan claimed when the crowd started throwing stones at the building where he was staying, he “went out the back way and went to Mr. Burr’s to see whether he could get his things in there,” implying that his landlord’s house was nearby; see deposition of William Jordan, *State v. Williams and Johnson*, Greene Papers. Today, just south of the west end of Olney Street, there is still a small cul-de-sac called Burrs Lane.

²⁷¹ In January 1826, the council threatened Burr with legal penalties if he did not evict Prudence Hunter, another tenant of “bad fame” whom the council had previously removed, but this never occurred with Greene; see PTC 11:443.

²⁷² Quote from *ibid.*, 12:238.

²⁷³ Providence County Court of General Sessions of the Peace (hereafter PC CGS), *Recognizance of Mahala Greene &c. on Appeal*, May 1829, RIJRC.

Liquor vendor Eliza Granger also leveraged her relationships with the upper class to fight downward social mobility and urban poverty in the wake of her husband's death. There are several clues that Granger started life reasonably well off, such as her literacy and evident education.²⁷⁴ She was also white, and at some point married Bildad Granger, a landowner and legal resident of North Providence. The family sold the property around 1812 and Bildad may have used the proceeds to move to Providence and go into business with Joshua Leavett, probably in a tavern or some other establishment that required a liquor license.²⁷⁵ However, by the time the Providence town council examined him in March 1822, the family had fallen on hard times, the business either having failed or been sold off. The council also decided that Bildad Granger was an "unsuitable person to become an inhabitant" hinting perhaps at a quarrelsome nature or a lack of public order at his business. He and his wife were ordered to leave town by the first of May.²⁷⁶ Whether they did or not is unclear, but two years later, Bildad Granger was dead and Eliza, his widow, was on her own. It is possible her adult son gave her some support, though since he was often away at sea, she had to go into business herself. Despite having no legal settlement in Providence, Eliza Granger supported herself well enough that she avoided becoming chargeable to the town for the rest of the decade.

To maintain her living, Granger clashed regularly with Providence authorities. She made most of her money selling liquor, though by 1830 she was supplementing

²⁷⁴ See the letter she wrote and signed to the town council, PTP 131 doc. #0050466; most people examined for residency were illiterate and left their mark, rather than signed their name, to endorse their testimony.

²⁷⁵ Bildad Granger received his liquor license in October 1821, see PTC 10:512.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 11:77-78.

her income by taking in boarders.²⁷⁷ She received a liquor license in 1824, but perhaps because she violated its terms by remaining open on Sundays, it was not renewed in subsequent years. To refute just such a charge, and perhaps hoping to be approved for another license, Granger wrote a letter to the council in June 1826 to prove that she kept a well-ordered house. To back up up claim, she suggested that one of the town constables, Edward Harwood, could bear witness that “no just cause of complaint can exist against me for entertaining or encouraging any riotous or disorderly company on the Sabbath day.”²⁷⁸ She could have been suggesting that Harwood passed her shop on his rounds, but perhaps he was an occasional customer as well.²⁷⁹ If the latter is true, it was a further example of a woman utilizing her relationship with a powerful man in Providence as a shield from the council. The letter and Harwood’s testimony may have worked. There is no evidence the council took any further action to shut down Granger’s establishment, and she must have continued to run a successful business, since in December 1826, she bought a house for one thousand dollars on the south side of Smith Street, in Snowtown on the west side of the Moshassuck River.²⁸⁰

In 1831 Eliza Granger again tried to use her contacts with Providence’s upper crust gain a favorable outcome from the council. The town had sued her for selling liquor without a license in 1830, and she was forced to pay the fifty-dollar fine plus

²⁷⁷ In that year, the town council ordered her to evict a vagrant named Prentice Sackey and his family; see *ibid.*, 12:358.

²⁷⁸ PTP 131 doc. #0050466.

²⁷⁹ If Harwood drank in Granger’s shop, it would not have been unprecedented: as far back as January 1800, the council had to remind members of the watch to “abstain from going into any of the Houses... for the purpose of getting spirituous Liquors;” see PTC 7:427.

²⁸⁰ Deeds 50:431-432.

court costs.²⁸¹ Despite this legal and financial setback, she tried again to obtain a license, and in February 1831 the council took up “the Subject of granting a license to Mrs. Granger to sell Spiritous Liquors at her place of business.” Arguing on her behalf were “Mr. Rivers” and “Mr. Brown,” i.e., Nicholas Brown, an owner of the firm Brown and Ives, and one of the wealthiest men in Rhode Island. Brown’s was a powerful voice for Granger to have on her side, especially given her past record.²⁸² It is possible that Granger’s “place of business” was one of the buildings he owned and rented out in Snowtown, and thus it was in both their interests that she maintained her store, legally if possible.²⁸³ Unfortunately for Granger, there were six other men at the meeting arguing against granting her a license, and the council denied her request.²⁸⁴

It did not matter much. Eliza Granger continued living in Snowtown, but the end of 1831 was not kind to her. Three buildings owned by Brown were damaged during the riot in late September, with either the windows smashed or the whole house “upset and much injured.” The investigating committee’s damage report also included “one dwelling house, owned by Mrs. Granger, windows considerably broken.”²⁸⁵ In the aftermath of the destruction of her house and likely her business, the second trial for selling liquor without a license ended in another fine of fifty dollars plus another

²⁸¹ PCCs 31:175, *John Howland v. Eliza Granger*, May 1830.

²⁸² She was charged for selling liquor on December 6, 1830, but the case went to trial the following year, in the May session of the Court of Common Pleas, so a recognizance, warrant and other court processes may have already been in motion when the town council took up issuing Granger the license. She contested the charges in the May session, and the case was continued to the November session; see PCCs 32:153, *John Howland v. Eliza Granger*, November 1831.

²⁸³ Granger had bought another lot on Smith Street in 1829 adjacent to one owned by Brown; see Deeds 56:224.

²⁸⁴ PTC 12:374; the six men were “Mr. Burt, Mr. Metcalf, Mr. Holden, Mr. Fletcher, Mr. Josling & Mr. Hayford.” Mr. Holden might have been Charles Holden, who later became president of the council.

²⁸⁵ “Committee’s Report,” *Rhode Island American and Gazette*, September 30, 1831.

eleven in court costs.²⁸⁶ While she had made every use of her relationships with Brown and with constable Harwood, in the end, luck and the council were against Eliza Granger.

While Granger tried to use her relationships with Nicholas Brown and Edward Harwood to keep on the good side of the council, Rosanna Jones cultivated her white neighbors for financial and commercial benefits. As mentioned in the last chapter, Jones appears frequently, more than any other disorderly house keeper, in the court records. Between 1824 and 1837, creditors sued her nine times to recover various loans.²⁸⁷ While she usually defaulted, and thus lost from \$23.35 to \$124.33 at a time, it does not look like she was ever in financial trouble, since the records indicate the debts were always paid off eventually.²⁸⁸ Around the same time, Jones was also buying up hundreds of dollars worth of property, so she definitely had plenty of disposable income.²⁸⁹ What is striking, given her record, is that neighbors continued to extend credit to her.

It does not look like Rosanna Jones had to use subterfuge or the anonymity of a growing city to obscure her record and take advantage of unwary businessmen. Many of the people suing her probably knew her personally, like Philip Martin, who

²⁸⁶ PCCs 32:153, *Howland v. Granger*.

²⁸⁷ Of these nine cases, files exist for five of them: PC CCP *Philip W. Martin v. Rosannah Jones*, May 1824; *Charles Hadwin v. Rosanna Jones*, May 1827; *George R. A. Olney and Caleb Mosher, Jr. v. Rosannah Jones*, Nov. 1827; *Moses Baker v. Rosanna Jones*, May 1831; *William Dinneford v. Rosanna Jones*, May 1833. The rest exist as summaries in the ledgers: PCCs 31:318, *John Pellion & John B. Dexter v. Rosanna Jones*, May 1830; 31:536, *John Paine, Daniel Burgess, and Philip Case v. Rosannah Jones*, November 1830; 31:565 *Asa Pierce and Walter Paine, Jr. v. Rosanna Jones*, November 1830; 35:285, *Parks & Lippitt v. Rosanna Jones*, December 1837.

²⁸⁸ As a point of comparison, a family of six earned eight dollars a week working in a textile mill in the 1820s. These wages were livable, but left little disposable income; see Coleman, *Transformation*, 233.

²⁸⁹ See Deeds 40:78, 43:169, 44:29, 47:144; in the third transaction, from 1821, Jones paid \$850 for a lot in Snowtown.

may have once been her landlord and to whom she owed \$37.37 in 1824.²⁹⁰ Several others owned businesses in the north part of Providence, thus making it likely they extended credit to Jones because she was a known customer.²⁹¹ For example, George R. A. Olney and Caleb Mosher, Jr., who sued her in 1827, kept a grocery on Canal Street, probably near Snowtown.²⁹² Furthermore, they probably did business with her knowing that she was at least indirectly associated with the disturbances in Olney's Lane, since George Olney signed several petitions demanding the council suppress vice and disorder there.²⁹³ Given their proximity, therefore, these men likely knew that Jones made her living in Snowtown and Olney's Lane, and that she had been accused of running a disorderly house in 1823. Thus, though the court process was probably arduous, the business and credit relationships between Rosanna Jones and her neighbors were not only financially useful to her, but may have also secured her neighbors' tacit acceptance. None of them ever complained about her to the town council, thereby allowing Jones to live mostly unmolested.²⁹⁴

²⁹⁰ PC CCP, *Martin v. Jones*; Martin and Rosanna Jones may have had a past connection if she is the same person as the wife, also named Rosanna, of James Jones, a sailor who was living at Martin's house when the council examined him in 1805. Martin's house, near Stevens Bridge, was also in the same part of town where Rosanna Jones eventually owned property; see PTC 8:457.

²⁹¹ Charles Hadwin sued her in 1827, when he was probably running a shoe store at 16 North Main Street; see *The Providence Directory, Containing the Names of the Inhabitants, Their Occupations, Places of Business and Dwelling-Houses, with Lists of the Streets, Lanes, Wharves, &c.* (Providence: H. H. Brown, 1830), 76. Of the members of John Pellion and Company, who sued Jones in 1830, one, jeweler John B. Dexter, lived at 314 North Main Street. The other, grocer John Pellion, while not listed in 1830, had previously lived at 113 North Main Street; see *Providence Directory* [1826], 31; *Providence Directory* [1828], 77.

²⁹² *Providence Directory* [1826], 59; *Providence Directory* [1828], 74; While the address for Olney's place of business changes from North Water Street to Canal Street, this switch reflects the renaming of the street sometime between 1827 and 1828.

²⁹³ See PTP 132 doc. #0051647; 127 doc. #0048354.

²⁹⁴ There is also the—admittedly conspiratorial—possibility that some of the men were her customers, and the multiple lines of credit from their businesses were to prevent exposure or blackmail. However, there is no supporting evidence for that scenario in any of the complaints about Providence brothels. Most referred only to resident African Americans or people from out of town as sources of disorder, not white citizens of Providence. Most of the contemporary descriptions imply that sailors and other lower-

An analysis of a second group of Rosanna Jones's creditors reinforces the impression that she was well connected in Providence. As previously discussed, she liked to buy lottery tickets, often on credit, and sometimes purchased well over one hundred dollars worth. Based on the *Providence Directory*, three of the lottery companies that sued her in the 1820s and 1830s maintained offices near each other on the Market Square during that time.²⁹⁵ One of them, Paine, Burgess, and Company also shared an address with a fourth plaintiff, Asa Pierce and Company. There also may have been a family connection between John Paine, of the former company, and Walter Paine, Jr. of the latter.²⁹⁶ Thus, despite the likelihood of information passing between them and the knowledge that Jones had failed to repay their peers on time, each of these brokers still extended her credit. These brokers, like the shopkeepers along North Main Street, must therefore have trusted Jones to some extent, despite her associations with disorder and tardiness in paying back her debts. Thus, her bid for civic respectability through participating in lotteries also demonstrates the advantages of her ties with Providence's business community.²⁹⁷

class men were the primary customers in Snowtown and Olney's Lane; see Brown, *Life of Brown*, 91-93, 124-126; PTC 11:79; PTP 93, doc. #0027950.

²⁹⁵ When Paine, Burgess, and Co. sued Jones in 1830, one partner, Philip Case, was an accountant working at 12 Market Square. Another, John Paine, was an accountant at 27 Market Square, but the year previously had been a lottery and exchange broker at 12 Market Square; see *Providence Directory* [1828], 31; *Providence Directory* [1830], 103. Moses Baker, who sued in 1831, was also a lottery and exchange broker, working at 17 Market Square; see *Providence Directory* [1830], 39. William Dinneford, who sued in 1833, was a lottery and exchange broker working on Canal Street in 1832, and two years earlier he was at 16 Market Square. He was suing on behalf of E. W. Clark and Brother, which consisted of Enoch and Joseph Clark. Enoch was the proprietor of the company and a lottery and exchange broker working at 17 Market Square, the same address as Moses Baker, in 1830; see *Providence Directory* [1830], 57, 62; *Providence Directory* [1832], 47; PC CCP, *Dinneford v. Jones*.

²⁹⁶ PCCs *Pierce and Paine v. Jones*; Walter Paine, Jr. and John Paine shared the same business address, 27 Market Square, in 1830; see *Providence Directory* [1830], 103.

²⁹⁷ Jones also got legal help in 1833 from Samuel Staples, Jr., another member of Providence's respectable class who owned property in Olney's Lane. Staples was close with Jones's neighbor Susan Parr Gardner, and had also run a lottery, so it is reasonable to think he knew her and her accusers fairly well. However, his relationship with Jones was probably more than casual, since by 1833 she was

Rosanna Jones was not exactly unique in this respect, as shown by the many connections between Providence disorderly house keepers, including Jones, and local businessman George W. Bowen. Bowen lived for much of the 1820s on North Main Street, near Snowtown, and probably worked there part of the time as a grocer.²⁹⁸ By 1830, he also ran a lottery and exchange office, so perhaps he knew Jones from selling her lottery tickets that she actually paid for on time.²⁹⁹ Whatever the reason, he and Jones were close enough that he stood surety for her after her 1823 arrest, thus helping her as Ezekiel Burr had Mahala Greene. He did the same for another of the accused women, Mary Johnson.³⁰⁰ Bowen continued to help Johnson after she pleaded guilty, served her prison sentence, and sold off the house she had kept.³⁰¹ When the council finally removed her in 1830, they found Bowen had taken her in, and she had to be evicted from his house.³⁰²

While it is unclear what benefit Bowen received from his relationships with Rosanna Jones and Mary Johnson, it is clear why he maintained relations with other house keepers in Snowtown and Olney's Lane. For instance, he accepted hundreds of dollars in mortgages from notorious disorderly house keepers like John L. Jones and Susan Parr Gardner.³⁰³ He further benefited from his relationship with Gardner when

living in Cranston; see *Providence Directory* [1830], 122; PC CCP *Dinneford v. Jones*, see especially reverse side of arrest warrant; on Gardner and Staples, see below.

²⁹⁸ See *Providence Directory* [1824], 15; *Providence Directory* [1828], 24; by 1829 he also owned a lot in Snowtown, next to Eliza Granger's house on Smith Street; see Deeds 56:224.

²⁹⁹ *Providence Directory* [1830], 44.

³⁰⁰ PC CGS, Recognizances, *State of Rhode Island v. Rosanna Jones* and *State of Rhode Island v. Mary Johnson*, December 1823.

³⁰¹ Since Johnson had no legal settlement in Providence by 1830, she had probably sold the properties she had bought in 1815 and 1819; see Deeds, 38:146; 43:191; for her sentence, see PCCs 25:254, *State v. Johnson*.

³⁰² PTC 12:258.

³⁰³ Deeds 46:226, 44:77.

she sold him her Hewes Street property in 1832.³⁰⁴ By 1836, possibly aided by earlier investments with disorderly house keepers in Olney's Lane and Snowtown, Bowen was the proprietor of a new rubber factory on South Main Street.³⁰⁵ However, while he clearly benefited from his relationships with Gardner and Jones, his financial and help in turn allowed them to keep their establishments open and maintain legal residency. Unfortunately, it is not immediately clear what he—or the council and his neighbors—thought about his support for disorderly house keepers.

To better understand the nature of the relationships between Olney's Lane and the respectable families of Providence, we must look to the Staples family. During the 1820s, carpenter Samuel Staples, Jr. lived on Benefit Street, along with many others of the Providence elite.³⁰⁶ Included in their number was his relative, William R. Staples, who later became a Rhode Island Supreme Court Judge and wrote a history of Providence.³⁰⁷ However, then as now, Benefit Street nearly ran into Olney's Lane at its northern end, and the Staples family was heavily invested in property there. The 1822 census of black households recorded three houses belonging to the Staples family, and the report on the Olney's Lane Riot noted the destruction of five of their properties.³⁰⁸

The Staples houses contributed their fair share to the disorder that plagued the Olney's Lane neighborhood in the early nineteenth century. Between 1821 and 1824,

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 62:71.

³⁰⁵ *The Providence Directory, Containing the Names of the Inhabitants, Their Occupations, Places of Business and Dwelling-Houses, with Lists of the Streets, Lanes, Wharves, &c.* (Providence: H. H. Brown, 1836), 20.

³⁰⁶ *Providence Directory* [1824], 38.

³⁰⁷ *Providence Directory* [1828], 91; William R. Staples, *Annals of the Town of Providence from its First Settlement to the Organization of the City Government* (Providence: Knowles and Vose, 1843).

³⁰⁸ PTP 112 doc. #0039155; Committee's Report, *Rhode Island American and Gazette*, September 30, 1831.

the council tried four times to remove Peter Reynolds, a son of freed slaves who lived in a house owned by William Staples. The most likely reason for the council's efforts was that Reynolds was using the Staples property as a dance hall, a type of establishment long associated with illicit sex in Providence and other cities in the nineteenth century United States.³⁰⁹ Even after the council issued its removal order, Reynolds remained a cause of trouble, and at one point, he claimed his name was Peter Rose and that the removal issued for Peter Reynolds did not apply to him.³¹⁰ William R. Staples never refused to rent to Reynolds nor did he help the council evict him, and there is no evidence the council ever blamed him for his inaction.

The same cannot be said for William Staples's relative, Samuel Staples, Jr. He owned at least four houses in Olney's Lane that were the subject of numerous complaints, and the council repeatedly asked him to clear them of disorderly tenants. In Moses Haskell's December 1821 complaint to the council about houses of ill fame, he included "one in Owlney's Laying [Olney's Lane]...a red Haus on the Wright hand side of the Street...owned By Samuel Staples."³¹¹ Staples also frequently rented to people long considered disorderly by the council, like Betsey Taylor, whom he was ordered to evict in October 1826, and a succession of black sailors, like John Johnson, Henry Gray, and John Williams. The latter two were married to Betsey Taylor and her daughter Eliza, respectively.³¹²

³⁰⁹ PTC 10:428; for the prominence of dance halls along the Bowery in early nineteenth century New York, see Stansell, *City of Women*, 92, 99; for the association of brothels with dance halls in early Boston, see Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 13-14. In Providence, the Hardscrabble Riot targeted a dance hall run by Henry T. Wheeler, while John L. Jones, a musician, was probably convicted in 1822 of running one where "whoredom and fornication" also occurred; on Wheeler, see Sweet, *Bodies Politic* 354; on Jones, see PCCs 24:378 *State v. Jones*; John L. Jones papers, MSS 9001-J Box 3, RIHS.

³¹⁰ PTC 11:113.

³¹¹ PTP 111 docs. #0038544.

³¹² PTC 11:347-348, 387; 12:26, 179.

Around the same time the council ordered him to evict Betsey Taylor and her family, they also threatened Staples with a fifty-dollar fine if he did not evict six women from his “House or possessions,” probably on suspicion of running an informal brothel.³¹³ The council’s fears may have been well founded, since Sally B. Andrews, a white woman from Coventry who had pleaded guilty to running a disorderly house in 1823, appeared to be in charge. The other women included Maria Innman, who was in her early twenties and had “exhibit[ed]” herself in Thankful Sharpe’s brothel or dance hall the previous year, and Rebecca Rockwell, a sixteen-year-old who had first been examined at twelve or thirteen and had already spent time in the Bridewell for disobeying a removal order.³¹⁴ The other member of the group for whom we have information was Sarah Wanton, a woman of color in her thirties with three children born out of wedlock—a clear source of the council’s disapproval.³¹⁵ In addition to their individual bad reputations, these women living together represented the specter of race mixing, a particular cause of anxiety at the time, as we have seen.

Samuel Staples, Jr. also went well beyond tolerating disorder in his rental properties, and, like Ezekiel Burr and George W. Bowen, actively aided disorderly women, especially Susan Parr Gardner. As early 1820, he helped her purchase property, as when he witnessed a sale from Gardner to Sally Andrews—who, as we

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 12:5; on Sally Andrews, see below.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11:159, 284-285, 404-405; Rebecca sometimes went by the last name Corp, her mother’s maiden name.

³¹⁵ The other two were Mary D. Mason and a person named Hawkins, for whom there is little or no information in the records. Instead of Sarah Wanton, the record actually says “Sarah Watson,” but this may be a clerk’s misprint, since Sarah Wanton had previously lived in one of Staples’s house on Olney’s Lane; see *ibid.*, 398, 504.

have seen, later became one of Staples's tenants as well.³¹⁶ The next year, when the council suspended action against Gardner's sister Phebe Davis—despite having branded her “of bad fame” and twice trying to remove her—it was because she showed that her husband had earlier purchased property from Staples.³¹⁷ It is very likely Gardner had set up the sale between him and her future brother-in-law. While in most cases Staples helped Gardner, sometimes the tables were reversed, as when he mortgaged a house on Benefit Street to her in 1825.³¹⁸

There is also evidence they jointly managed some properties, a collaboration that sets their relationship apart from the more skewed power dynamics between Mary Johnson and George W. Bowen or Mahala Greene and Ezekiel Burr. In 1824, a woman named Elizabeth Hines told the council that she hired her house from Staples and rented her furniture from Gardner.³¹⁹ Interestingly, the council did not label Hines “of bad fame,” a possible indication that Gardner pursued multiple business interests, some licit, others illicit. At the same time, perhaps collaboration with a respectable artisan and property owner like Staples imparted an air of legitimacy to some of her other pursuits.

All the previous examples indicate a business collaboration that, while it suggests Staples's indirect support for Gardner's illicit activities, left his hands clean of any direct involvement. However, the testimony of Henritt Washburn, the most

³¹⁶ Deeds, 44:77; cf. *ibid.*, 41:302, when Gardner first bought property in Providence. While the immediate seller was Timothy Bardine, he had originally bought it from Staples. This is the earliest evidence of any connection between Gardner and Staples.

³¹⁷ It is not clear why exactly this transaction caused the council to drop the case: to gain residency, one had to own property and pay taxes on it for several years. Likewise, Phebe had not gained residency by her marriage, since her husband was “an Englishman.” Perhaps Staples, or Gardner herself, had some direct influence on the council; see PTC 10:485, 500.

³¹⁸ Deeds 59:74.

³¹⁹ PTC 11:185-186.

likely example of a prostitute employed by Gardner, belies that impression. Washburn described Staples playing a seemingly active role in convincing her to go live with Gardner, telling the council, “Samuel Staples, Jr., and Susan Parr [Gardner] were in Boston and agreed with her to come to Providence.”³²⁰ His participation in the negotiations with Washburn and his accompaniment of Gardner to Boston indicate their relationship was more than a simple business partnership.

Assuming Staples understood the implications of his advice to Washburn, why would he go so far as to entice her into a brothel? Was he more deeply involved in helping Gardner run her disorderly house than most records seem to imply? On the other hand, perhaps Washburn was, in a way, strictly a business proposition. Since both Gardner and Staples kept houses in Olney’s Lane, good business for her was good business for him. Most of the disorderly houses both competed with and relied on each other for customers, and William Brown notes that Olney’s Lane “had a correspondence with all the sailor boarding houses in town, and was sustained by their patronage.”³²¹ Staples, along with men like Bowen and Burr, may also have been willing to ignore the strictures of middle-class respectability if it got in the way of financial success. According to one scholar, many early American businessmen tied their sense of manhood to their work, and felt a reversal or failure—and the subsequent dependence on creditors or other financial help—as “a ‘stain’ on manhood.”³²² While the full implications of Staples’ trip to Boston with Gardner

³²⁰ Ibid., 12:324-325.

³²¹ Brown, *Life of Brown*, 123.

³²² See Ditz, “Masculinity Imperiled,” quote from p. 71; this disregard from respectability may also track with supposedly immoral character of business transactions in the public sphere; see Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 69-70. The question of whether wealthy artisans like Staples or Burr also felt gendered class resentment against merchants, such as Nicholas Brown or some members of the council, who were

cannot fully be known, it dramatically shows how deeply enmeshed the upper class of Providence could become in the illicit world of Olney's Lane, and how such connections could benefit them.

Of course, such accusations against the good name and reputation of respectable citizens of Providence stem not just from the cynicism of a modern perspective, but were also widespread among contemporaries. In the aftermath of the Olney's Lane Riot in particular, the local papers cast dark hints about the complicity of white landlords in the violence. In the midst of the riot, the *Rhode Island American and Gazette* vaguely noted that renting cheap rooms in "sinks of iniquity" to the "wretches" of the neighborhood was "a profitable, but not very honorable mode of investing surplus funds."³²³ A few days later, though acknowledging "the blacks of this town have been unusually bold for the last few weeks," the paper expanded on the share of blame greedy landlords bore for the general disorder in Olney's Lane:

If these huts and brothels which have caused the town so much expense and trouble, were not let out in the manner they are, the number of disorderly blacks would be reduced and their characters generally improved...A man, to be sure, has a right to invest his money as he chooses, but it is well for him occasionally to consult the morals and peace of the community of which he is a member.³²⁴

The paper never named names, but enough people were aware of Ezekiel Burr's connection to the site of the riot's beginning that rumors spread alleging he had provided his tenants with the guns that killed George Erickson. Obviously fearing a backlash, he had a notice published claiming "there is not one word of truth in those

slightly above them on the social ladder, and thus tried to achieve success via business practices that flouted the policies of the council, may be worth further research.

³²³ "Riot and Murder," *Rhode Island American and Gazette*, September 23, 1831.

³²⁴ "Another Riot," *Rhode Island American and Gazette*, September 27, 1831.

reports, for there is no person who laments more than I do the melancholy occurrence of that evening.”³²⁵

In the 1820s, the council also realized they needed to lean on landlords if they wanted to successfully remove large groups from disorderly and poor boarding houses. They likely understood that landlords were reluctant to evict their sources of income, even if such a selfish view abetted disturbers of the public peace. As early as the summer of 1805, the council publicly displayed the sections of the poor laws prohibiting tavern keepers from harboring transients or knowingly bringing paupers into town in an effort to prevent the “great damage and expense in consequence of frequent violations” of the law.³²⁶ By 1825, the council knew they needed stronger law enforcement tools, so they endorsed a petition sent by George Olney and others to the General Assembly lamenting “the inadequacy of the existing laws for preserving the public peace and securing individual rights.”³²⁷ In the end, the new law reflected the council’s frustrations with landlords by increasing fines from seven to fifty dollars on those “receiving or continuing any persons in their families or tenements, who shall have been ordered to depart from [Providence],” rather than targeting disorderly persons directly.³²⁸

This new law resulted in the council’s demands that Samuel Staples, Jr. evict Betsey Taylor and Sally Andrews with her five companions in 1826, a year after it went into effect, and others faced increased scrutiny as well. Benjamin Addison,

³²⁵ “To the Public,” *Rhode Island American and Gazette*, September 27, 1831.

³²⁶ PTC 8:489; cf. *Public Laws* [1798], 357-358; cf. PTC 10:69-70 11:78 for similar proclamations in 1818 and 1823.

³²⁷ PTC 11:415; see also “An Act in Addition to an Act Entitled ‘An Act Providing for the Relief, Support, and Employment, and Removal of the Poor,’” in *Schedules of the Rhode Island General Assembly*, October Session, 1825, p.72, Rhode Island State Archives.

³²⁸ PTC 11:415.

another of Betsey Taylor's landlords, received the same threat as Staples in 1825, and even Ezekiel Burr was ordered to evict a woman named Prudence Hunter or be "liable to the penalty" of the new law.³²⁹ In 1827, when the council removed members of Rebecca Corp's family, they also had to gently inform the widow of Rufus Bartow that "Notice is given...that she may take such steps...as to avoid the penalty of the Law"³³⁰

While landlords certainly felt the heavy hand of the council more than they had been used to after 1825, they still did not suffer as much as their tenants, even taking into account the destruction of the riots. Men like Ezekiel Burr, Samuel Staples, Jr., and Nicholas Brown never faced prosecution and removal. However, though these men faced almost no consequences and probably outwardly disapproved of the disorderly houses in Olney's Lane and Snowtown, many of them were complicit in their operation and success. They had no qualms about dealing with those the council considered disorderly or immoral if it was to their financial advantage. If they had to lend a hand legally or financially to keep a reliable tenant or, most egregiously, help entice a young woman into a brothel to support a business partner, so be it. Of course, women like Rosanna Jones, Mahala Greene, Susan Gardner, and Elizabeth Grainger clearly benefited from the relationship as well when these respectable and wealthy men ignored removal orders against them, covered for them in court, helped them acquire property, and advocated for them in front of the town council. Thus, paradoxically, in their struggle to avoid removal, disorderly women in nineteenth-

³²⁹ Ibid., 428, 443.

³³⁰ Ibid., 12:132.

century Providence found one of the most useful weapons to be relationships with the very elite men who were trying to remove them.

CHAPTER 5

DISORDERLY HOUSES AS REFUGES

While aid from the upper ranks of Providence helped some disorderly women acquire property or run businesses, the majority could not rely on such benefactors. Luckily, even without the help of the wealthy, women in disorderly houses could rely on each other for protection from poverty and removal. If women lacked access to male wages because of death, abandonment, or long sea voyages, the most important thing a disorderly house could do was provide an income. Some houses were so successful that a female house keeper could in turn offer economic support in cases where a husband was unemployed or suffered from illness or injury. Boarding house keepers could pass on their success by finding work—licit or not—for other women, arranging for delayed payment of rent, or helping with childcare. Others clearly felt it worthwhile to pass on the skills needed for running a disorderly house to other members of their family. Those skills were based in an understanding of the close-knit networks within the poor neighborhoods of northern Providence. To remain lucrative, dance halls relied on unlicensed food and drink stands to provide refreshments and all relied on the brothels and boarding houses to provide customers. When complaints arose about disorder in a particular house, there were apparently arrangements that allowed residents to lay low and avoid the constables when they came to deliver a summons or removal order. The networks between women in disorderly houses were an essential institution for preventing poverty and avoiding the attention of the authorities.

One of the most common ways for women to make money in the Colonial and Early Republican periods was taking boarders into their homes. In her overview of the nineteenth century cult of domesticity, Cott lists keeping boarders as a respectable option for married women who needed to contribute to their family's income, along with teaching school or taking in piecework from textile manufacturers.³³¹ Boarding was especially attractive to sailors' wives, and Norling notes when whalemens were on years-long voyages, "taking in boarders may have tied or surpassed sewing in [their wives'] income-producing possibilities."³³² However, as multiple studies have shown, there was no clear line between boarding houses and more illicit establishments like brothels, either in contemporary commentators' minds or in reality.³³³ For example, in antebellum New York, Gilfoyle finds that agents of otherwise respectable absentee landlords commonly rented rooms to individual prostitutes who then lived alongside the other tenants.³³⁴

This wide range from licit to illicit held true for other female-run establishments as well. In stores selling liquor, for example, Stansell finds a continuum from stands selling "cheap liquor to patrons of the 'lowest' sort: free blacks, journeymen, apprentices, sailors and women on the loose," to shops and taverns whose widowed proprietors were respectable and prosperous enough to merit inclusion in the city directories.³³⁵ In Baltimore, Rockman describes similar female-run businesses, ranging from widowed tavern or innkeepers to unlicensed

³³¹ Cott, *Bonds of Womanhood*, 45; cf. Crane, *Ebb Tide*, 17, specifically on colonial-period Boston and Newport, Rhode Island.

³³² Norling, *Captain Ahab*, 158-159.

³³³ See, for example, Gamber, "Tarnished Labor," 179, Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 281; Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 38-39.

³³⁴ Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton and Company, 1992), 156.

³³⁵ Stansell, *City of Women*, 14.

pawnbrokers, hucksters, and grocers operating on the margins of the city's economy.³³⁶

If the female proprietors of disorderly houses found it somewhat easier to keep poverty at bay, so too could their female tenants or employees. In an era when the industrial or domestic work available to women offered long hours for little money, and when a husband's absence spelled economic ruin, the pull of the illicit economy was strong. In her groundbreaking work on the Progressive Era, Ruth Rosen calculates that in an evening of prostitution, a woman could earn the equivalent of a week's work in a factory or domestic service. The dangers of sex work—abuse, venereal disease, pregnancy—were present in the form of demands for sexual favors from male employers in respectable jobs too, but without the added financial benefit.³³⁷ Further work has shown that prostitutes in the early nineteenth century made similar calculations to those in the early twentieth century.³³⁸ Rockman calls prostitution a “dangerous but lucrative” option for poor women in Early Republic Baltimore, and Lyons asserts that at roughly the same time in Philadelphia, some viewed it positively as “a symbol of independent womanhood.”³³⁹

Prostitution was so lucrative that in some cases it allowed women to rapidly climb the social ladder. The most outstanding nineteenth century example of this trajectory was Eliza Bowen Jumel, whom Gilfoyle calls “the leading prostitute in post-

³³⁶ Rockman, “Women's Labor,” 185-187.

³³⁷ Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 147-149.

³³⁸ See Stansell, *City of Women*, 175-179; Stansell bases her assertions of women's economic preference for prostitution on William Sanger's work interviewing New York prostitutes in the 1850s, but she also cites comparable examples from the 1820s.

³³⁹ Rockman, “Women's Labor,” 191; Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 320.

Revolutionary America.”³⁴⁰ Born in Providence in 1775 to a prostitute named Phebe Bowen, Eliza—or Betsey as she was called—lived with her mother in Margaret Fairchild’s brothel as a child, and was there when the mob pulled down Fairchild’s house in 1782.³⁴¹ By the time she moved to New York City at age nineteen, Betsey had entered her mother’s profession, and after spending some time in a theater troupe she caught the eye of Stephen Jumel, a French-born wine merchant who married her and put her up in a Harlem mansion to make her acceptable to New York society. Gilfoyle claims that Jumel was the wealthiest woman in America for several decades, and in the forty years she lived after her first husband’s death, she retained her position of wealth and respectability. In 1833, she became the wife of former Vice President Aaron Burr, a marriage that lasted the final three years of his life.³⁴²

While Betsey Bowen was an outstanding example, historians have found plenty of her contemporaries who also achieved financial stability and social advancement by similar methods. Gilfoyle also describes how brothel owner Maria Williamson purchased her house and other property worth \$3,500 in 1819, while Adeline Miller leased several brothels and acquired \$500 in personal property by 1820. Especially after that year, and well into the 1840s and 1850s, the number of wealthy brothel-owners in New York grew rapidly.³⁴³ While she does not give specific estimates of their wealth, Lyons also provides a list of Philadelphia women

³⁴⁰ Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 70; I would like to thank Dr. Joanne Melish for pointing out the connection between Betsey Bowen from Margaret Fairchild’s brothel in Providence and Eliza Bowen Jumel of New York.

³⁴¹ PTC 5:215; see *ibid.*, 409 for a later examination of Phebe Bowen, in which Betsey was said to be bound out to Samuel Allen.

³⁴² Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 70; cf. the marriage, in 1809, of a descendent of William Penn, the respected founder of Pennsylvania to a woman reputed to be a prostitute from Philadelphia; see Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 284.

³⁴³ Gilfoyle, *City of Eros*, 70-71.

who ran successful brothels in the first decades of the nineteenth century.³⁴⁴ In contemporary Boston, Hobson argues that the potential profits from bawdy houses and surrounding food and liquor shops played a major role in the failure of Mayor Josiah Quincy's efforts to curtail prostitution around 1820.³⁴⁵

As in cities up and down the eastern seaboard, the records show that in Providence, a disorderly house was a common venture for women hoping to earn a lot of money. The rise of Susan Parr Gardner from a childhood in poverty to wealthy Providence boardinghouse keeper is an excellent example. Susan was born in the 1790s in the declining agricultural region of Washington County.³⁴⁶ At some point, her father, Thomas Parr, moved the family across the Narragansett Bay to Newport, where it seems he then abandoned them. The loss of his income may explain why Susan's mother died a pauper under the care of Newport's Overseer of the Poor.³⁴⁷

Given her background, Susan's rise out of poverty was remarkable. As early as 1817, she purchased a lot of land in Snowtown for two hundred dollars from Martin Stoddard.³⁴⁸ Over the years she expanded this property and when she sold it to George W. Bowen in July 1832, it was worth \$3,000, comparable to the wealth amassed by contemporary brothel owners in New York.³⁴⁹ At the same time, she also invested in Olney's Lane by purchasing a house on the south side of the street next to Ezekiel Burr's building for five hundred dollars in 1818.³⁵⁰ Gardner's property also

³⁴⁴ Lyons, *Sex Among the Rabble*, 344-345.

³⁴⁵ Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 19-20.

³⁴⁶ McLoughlin, *Rhode Island*, 121-122, Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*, 28; the outline of Susan's childhood comes from the council's examinations of her sisters, Phebe and Betsey, in 1821. They make no mention of their father other than his name; see PTC 10:486.

³⁴⁷ PTC 10:486.

³⁴⁸ Deeds 41:38.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 62:76.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 41:302.

made her a legal resident of Providence, and so when the council received complaints about her, as they did in 1821, she was neither summoned nor examined.³⁵¹ On the other hand, the council did try to remove her two sisters, Betsey and Phebe, until they showed evidence that Gardner and Staples had helped them acquire property as well.³⁵²

As previous chapters have already outlined, there is strong evidence that all this wealth came from running a brothel, in part with the help of her sometime partner, Samuel Staples, Jr. There is also evidence that she may have started out working in a brothel or disorderly house herself, together with her sisters. In December 1819, a woman wrote anonymously to the town council, warning them that she and her six children would need poor relief unless “Sucky Parr [and her] two sisters [were] removed from town.”³⁵³ Evidently, the writer’s husband was spending most of his time—and more importantly his wages—at the home of a Mr. Tripp in Olney’s Lane in the company of the Parrs. While it is unclear what exactly was happening at Mr. Tripp’s, the implication of sexual impropriety, not to mention excessive drinking, is unmistakable given the reputation of Olney’s Lane. The letter writer further complained that Tripp told her “he will keep them [i.e., her husband’s wages] & defies the Counsile to hinder it.”³⁵⁴ Perhaps the Parrs were also getting a cut, and this is how Susan originally financed some of her early property purchases.

Susan Gardner was not the only woman in Providence who prospered from running a disorderly house. A single white woman named Sally Andrews briefly

³⁵¹ See PTP 109 doc. #0038069, cf. PTC 10:47.

³⁵² PTC 10:486, 500; see also Deeds, 44:251; Susan Gardner sold Betsey Lee part of the Hewes Street property and then had Betsey mortgage it back to her.

³⁵³ PTP 103, doc. #0033879.

³⁵⁴ Ibid.

flourished in the 1820s while running several of them. The council removed her from a boarding house where she lived with Mary Johnson back to her home in Coventry in 1819, but within a year she had returned and purchased Susan Gardner's house in Olney's Lane, thus putting her on the path to legal residency.³⁵⁵ Evidently this is where she was living in 1823, when she was charged with keeping a "common ill-governed and disorderly house."³⁵⁶ Despite pleading guilty, selling the house, and another removal to Coventry in 1824, Andrews remained undaunted.³⁵⁷ In 1826, as we have seen, she was living with several other women in a house of Samuel Staples, Jr., operating what the council probably suspected was another brothel.³⁵⁸ Two years later, the council received yet another complaint that residents of a tenement she was living in disturbed the neighbors "by their noise and riotous conduct, by day and by night, alarming [them] in their beds by their cries of murder and fire."³⁵⁹ They blamed Andrews for some reason, since they summoned her to name the culprits, but she evidently refused and the constables then removed her again when they cleared out the house.³⁶⁰ Thus, lacking any male support, with little evidence of other job prospects, and in the teeth of the council's disapproval, Sally Andrews persisted in keeping houses in Olney's Lane and Snowtown. Given the odds against her, she must have believed it was a viable living, and one worth pursuing despite the obstacles.

³⁵⁵ PTC 10:192; Deeds 44:92.

³⁵⁶ The case describes her as a "trader," probably an indication that she sold liquor, and the examinations of several women from June earlier that year show she also took in boarder; see PCCs 25:253-254, *State v. Andrews*; PTC 11:109-110, examinations of Ann Johnson, Sally Votey, and Eliza Potts, June 25, 1823; while these women were currently living in the house of Mary Johnson, they all told the council they had previously lived with Andrews.

³⁵⁷ PTC 11:232.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 12:5; see also Chapter 4.

³⁵⁹ PTP 140 doc. #0056029.

³⁶⁰ See PTP 136, doc. #0054114; PTC 12:216.

While she did face significant setbacks, Sally Andrews was successful enough that she went from boarding with Mary Johnson to owning her own house, a transition that further illustrates the potential benefits of the illicit economy. Another of Johnson's tenants, Eliza Potts, followed the same trajectory. She was examined in June 1823, before Johnson, along with Andrews, went to trial.³⁶¹ A year later Potts was taking in her own boarders: Sally Taylor, who had lived with her at Johnson's house, and Catherine Sawyer, a recent arrival from Boston.³⁶² Even Johnson herself rose from tenant to house keeper: she was probably one of the female apprentices who frequented or worked in Luthania Lealand's disorderly house in the winter of 1800.³⁶³ Fifteen years later, she bought a house of her own from Lealand for \$150, probably the one where Andrews and Potts stayed later.³⁶⁴

Susan Gardner herself may have also made this transition when she first arrived in Providence. While she owned property by the time the council received the complaint regarding her and Mr. Tripp, Gardner and her sisters may have boarded together when they first arrived in Providence, just as they lived together at Gardner's property on Hewes Street.³⁶⁵ One of Gardner's own tenants, Emeline Bliss, appears to have acquired her own house as well, at which she was accused of permitting

³⁶¹ Potts also said she had recently lived with Sally Andrews, PTC 11:101; PCCs 25:254, *State v. Johnson*.

³⁶² PTC 11:230-231.

³⁶³ See *ibid.*, 8:28-29; around the same time that Lealand was accused of "entici[ing] away" female servants from their masters, a young woman named Polly Johnson told the council she could "give no proper account why she should work to [?] such places of disorder and confusion;" cf. *ibid.*, 9A:223, where Mary Johnson also goes by Polly in an examination from 1809.

³⁶⁴ Deeds 38:146.

³⁶⁵ Certainly Betsey Lee stayed with Gardner while she was sick; see PTC 11:505.

“drinking, tippling, [and] whoreing,” during the rash of accusations against disorderly house keepers in 1823.³⁶⁶

Another indication of the potential profits of Providence disorderly houses was the ability of so many single house keepers to support themselves. For Sally Andrews and Eliza Potts, there is no evidence they ever married.³⁶⁷ Neither is there mention of where Susan Parr picked up the name Gardner, which is as likely to be the name of a family in which she served out her indentures as that of a former husband. Mary Johnson briefly lived with a man named Abiel Smith—though he was already married—but court documents in 1823 refer to her as a “single woman.”³⁶⁸

For many of these single women, the potential independence to be had from running or working in a disorderly house must have also been a major draw. Some of the exuberance and fun of Christine Stansell’s depiction of nineteenth century youth culture in New York City’s Bowery neighborhood must have also been found in Providence at this time.³⁶⁹ Of course, Olney’s Lane and Snowtown were not the Bowery, but like the Bowery boys and their gals, young wage workers in Providence probably felt the thrill of financial independence and freedom from familial supervision. For others, the chance to escape the necessity of marriage or an unwanted spouse may have also been a factor. Naomi Weatherhead, who was examined in 1822, had been married three times and left her third husband because he “had so many failings she could not live with him.” Perhaps the boarding house she

³⁶⁶ PCCs 25:253, *State v. Bliss*.

³⁶⁷ Both Sally and Eliza used their parents’ names in all of their examinations, and neither ever mentioned a husband or other man living with them. In Sally Andrews’ first examination, she went by Sally Anderson, but that was likely a clerk’s mistake; see PTC 10:192; cf. *ibid.*, 11:232.

³⁶⁸ PCCs 25:254, *State v. Johnson*; PTC 9B:102.

³⁶⁹ Stansell, *City of Women*, 90-92.

kept had allowed her and her three children the freedom to keep living in Providence for the five years her husband had been gone in Pawtucket.³⁷⁰ The same year, the council also accused Rachel Smith and Juda Maxwell of running a disorderly house. The two women, at least one of whom was recently divorced, appear to have been friends pooling their resources to maintain a household and raise their children independent of male wages.³⁷¹ Of course, such independence and flouting of middle-class norms of marriage and domesticity came with the danger of attracting the disapproval of neighbors and the council. However, though such behavior was risky, at least these women had the mutual support of those they lived with.

Many other women had independence thrust upon them and turned to running a disorderly house after the loss of a husband. The best example is Eliza Granger, who turned to selling liquor after the death of her husband Bildad. Rosanna Jones may have also been married at one point to a man named James Jones, but he either died or they separated.³⁷² Court documents refer to her variously as a “single woman,” “spinster,” or a “widow.”³⁷³

Finally, as might be expected given the long absences and dangers of life aboard ship, many disorderly house keepers were the wives of sailors. Emeline Bliss, though she was single when she lived with Susan Gardner, eventually married a sailor named William “Billings” Burch. That she and not he was charged with running a

³⁷⁰ PTC 11:11-12.

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 10:564-565; of course, there is also the possibility that Maxwell and Smith were in a romantic or sexual relationship. There is no evidence they were running a disorderly establishment, so the nature of their relationship or simply the unorthodox composition of their household may have been the sole reason for the complaint.

³⁷² See PTC 8:457 for the examination of James Jones, Rosanna’s possible husband. If it is the same person, he was still alive, but living separately from Rosanna Jones in a “House of Philip Martin” in 1822; see PTP 112 doc. #0039155.

³⁷³ See, for example, PC CCP, *Dinneford v. Jones* and *Martin v. Jones*.

disorderly house in 1823 suggests that she was the main proprietor, possibly because he was away so often.³⁷⁴ An earlier example was Lucy Fry, the subject of a complaint of “Noise at all times of Knight Fid[d]ling Singing Dancing, [and] fighting” in 1800.³⁷⁵ She was a freed slave, aged around forty, and kept a dance hall or other gathering place for fellow African Americans while her husband, William Fry, worked on the packet to New York.³⁷⁶

One of the best illustrations of the connections between sailors’ wives and disorderly houses is the life of Betsey Taylor and her daughter Eliza. Betsey first married a black sailor named Daniel Watson while she was still living in Washington County.³⁷⁷ After she moved to Providence in the late 1790s, she lived with a black man named John Blanchard, who may have been a sailor, based on the amount of traveling he had done.³⁷⁸ Later, after her first removal from Providence in 1809, she married an Englishman, Joseph Singleton, in East Greenwich—given his foreign birth and residence in a small port town, he may have been a sailor as well. When Singleton died, Betsey moved back to Providence, where she married a fourth time to sailor Henry Gray.³⁷⁹ Furthermore, around the same time, Betsey’s then-grown daughter Eliza also married a black sailor named John Williams.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁴ PCCs 25:253, *State v. Bliss*; Billings Burch is identified as a mariner in a trial for theft in 1821; see PC CGS, *State of Rhode Island v. Billings Burch*, December 1821.

³⁷⁵ PTP 40, doc. #0024; cf. PTC 8:554, 9A:129 for similar complaints that she ran a disorderly house.

³⁷⁶ PTC 8:203.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 8:218-219, 405; Daniel Watson later remarried and moved to Providence as well, see *ibid.*, 9B:311.

³⁷⁸ See *ibid.*, 8:405; John Blanchard had been a slave in the western part of New Jersey, and after he was freed, he made his way to New Haven, Connecticut and then Rehobeth, Massachusetts before ending up in Providence. While Betsey Taylor claimed they were married, the council examined them separately, indicating they considered them two separate households.

³⁷⁹ PTC 11:64; for Gray’s examination, see *ibid.*, 387.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 347-348.

Betsey and Eliza's choice of husbands may partially explain why they were so often in trouble with the council. The two must have been on their own much of the time, for though examinations exist for Henry Gray, John Blanchard, and John Williams, Betsey and her daughter were more often examined on their own, indicating the council was treating them as heads of household.³⁸¹ Normally, a husband or father filled that role, so the examinations likely occurred while the men were at sea or otherwise absent. Possibly due to such absences, Betsey Taylor kept a house during her first sojourn in Providence that ran into trouble with the council because its "noisy company" kept "unseasonable hours."³⁸² When she returned for the second time around 1820, she rented space in Olney's Lane where she took in boarders, one of whom was likely her future son-in-law.³⁸³ However, the council did not approve of this new boarding house, and by 1825, they had again declared Taylor and her daughter women of "bad fame."³⁸⁴

While it is clear that female proprietors personally benefited from keeping disorderly houses, it also allowed them to help others. For sailors, the profits from a wife's disorderly house could support them between voyages, or if injury, illness, or misfortune ended their careers. For example, in 1821, Emeline Bliss was probably the only support her husband, Billings Burch, had after he pleaded guilty to theft and spent part of the following winter in jail unable to work.³⁸⁵ Likewise, in the early 1800s, Marget Holden "hired" the house where her daughter Katy and her partner

³⁸¹ For these examinations, see *ibid.*, 8:405, 11:347-348, 387.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 9A:182-183; it is notable that she was accused of keeping the disorderly house, not John Blanchard.

³⁸³ In the 1822 census of Providence's black households, John Williams was living with an unnamed wife in the same house as Betsey, but Eliza was living on her own somewhere else; see PTP 112 doc. #0039155.

³⁸⁴ PTC 11:347-348, quote from p. 384.

³⁸⁵ PC CGS *State v. Burch*.

Jacob Hull lived, probably because she kept a house—likely a dance hall—where a “Disorderly and Riotous Company” was supplied with unlicensed liquor.³⁸⁶ In addition to lodging, Marget’s house may have also provided Jacob, a sailor who also played the fiddle, an opportunity for work between voyages.³⁸⁷

Even women whose husbands were not sailors could benefit from running a disorderly house, since accidents and misfortune did not just happen at sea. For example, in the 1790s, Reuben Ballou, a white man from Cumberland, worked for a while as a butcher, and may have also tried to run a tavern or other liquor shop.³⁸⁸ However, he eventually sold off his slaughterhouse, and may have been sick or infirm in some way.³⁸⁹ When the council tried to remove Reuben and his wife Freelove in 1794, the order was suspended because Ballou was “indisposed and an unsuitable Subject for removal, at present.”³⁹⁰ Meanwhile, Freelove Ballou ran a boarding house starting as early as 1798.³⁹¹ She likely became the family’s main source of income because although she and her husband were both branded “persons of bad fame” who ran a “disorderly and bawdy” house in 1803, all their tenants, as late as 1821, told the council they lived at “Freelove Ballou’s house” or “with Mrs. Ballou.”³⁹²

In addition to their husbands, female disorderly housekeepers could also support the next generation, and not just financially, as the case of Thankful Sharpe

³⁸⁶ PTP 47 doc. #003265; the watch called the proprietor “Margate,” but this is likely the Marget Holden identified in Jacob Hull and Katy Holden’s examinations; see PTC 7:431-432; Hull’s claim that he lived in a house “hired by Marget” is also from this examination.

³⁸⁷ PTC 8:358.

³⁸⁸ For Reuben Ballou’s liquor license, see PTC 6:233; he was described as butcher when he first bought the slaughterhouse in 1795, see Deeds 24:119.

³⁸⁹ He sold the slaughterhouse to George Ballou, possibly a relative, and his wife in 1798; they sell it Freelove Ballou at a reduced price in 1800, another possible indication that she was taking over the running of the family from her husband; see Deeds 26:481, 28:120.

³⁹⁰ PTC 6:346.

³⁹¹ See examination of James Apply in July 1799; he had stayed with Ballou the previous year as well; PTC 7:361.

³⁹² PTC 10:481.

and her son James shows. In May 1826, the council summoned two men of color, Amos Hopkins and James Sharpe, before the council “to answer the charge that they keep disorderly houses.”³⁹³ While Hopkins duly appeared and was punished with six months of indentured servitude, Sharpe declined to and avoided punishment.³⁹⁴ James’ savvy decision was likely a result of a long apprenticeship served at his mother’s side. His mother and her partner, Peter Brown, had run two notorious dance houses or brothels, which had been the subject of complaints since 1816.³⁹⁵ Twice, in that year and in 1818, the council accused her a running a disorderly house, but then either postponed consideration of her case or simply did nothing.³⁹⁶ However, in 1825 another complaint, which called Brown and Sharpe “old offenders,” alleged that their houses “admit[ted] white females of low character in the night who [were] visited by sailors and probably other disorderly persons.”³⁹⁷ Also included was the first mention of Thankful’s son James Sharpe, who was involved with the house. Yet again, though, Sharpe and Brown somehow dodged punishment, despite the council’s threat to bind them out as indentured servants if they did not leave town in two weeks.³⁹⁸ To keep her house open for at least a decade, in the teeth of multiple complaints to council and riots like the one in Hardscrabble was no mean feat.³⁹⁹ However she did it, James appears to have absorbed a great deal of his mother’s knowledge, probably by helping her and Peter before striking out on his own. By the time he faced the

³⁹³ PTC 11:477.

³⁹⁴ PTC 11:479; cf. Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 393, where James Sharpe’s wisdom to not obey the summons is also noted.

³⁹⁵ See PTC 9B:258-259 for the examinations of several of her female boarders in that year.

³⁹⁶ PTC 9B:261, 10:112.

³⁹⁷ PTC 11:404-405.

³⁹⁸ PTC 11:406; a year later, a woman named Jane Gardner was still hiring a house from Sharpe, see PTC 12:19-20.

³⁹⁹ No doubt it helped that Sharpe owned property and was a legal resident of the town, having bought her house from Peter Brown in 1806, see Deeds 31:218.

council on his own in 1826, he appears to have learned many of his mother's lessons, and while he may not have made much money, at least he avoided indentured servitude.

One of the skills Thankful Sharpe might have passed on to her son was her knowledge of the complex, interdependent ecosystem of Olney's Lane's illicit economy. Recalling his childhood along the Providence docks in the 1820s and 1830s, William Brown described the many establishments in Olney's Lane that catered to sailors off the ships and their dependence on each other:

Some of these places had bar-rooms, where liquors were dealt out, and places where they sold cakes, pies, doughnuts, &c. These they called cooky stands. In some houses dancing and fiddling was the order of the day... This street had a correspondence with all the sailor boarding houses in town, and was sustained by their patronage.⁴⁰⁰

More specifically, Brown describes how sending someone to "take a pitcher and go after liquor" at "every half hour" sustained "drinking and dancing" at all hours in the sailor boarding house next to his childhood home.⁴⁰¹ A similar arrangement was probably implied in the report that Marget Holden and Putman Williams' disorderly houses obtained their liquor from John Clark, who supplied it "with out licence."⁴⁰² Proprietors of smaller scale ventures, like stands selling cakes, oysters, or spirits, also knew to take advantage of local congregations or events, likely prompting the council to ban such food stands on Weybosset Bridge and near the theater on performance nights in 1815.⁴⁰³ Keepers of disorderly houses also increased their business by bringing in novel entertainers or shows to drive attendance, as John Andrews did over

⁴⁰⁰ Brown, *Life of Brown*, 123.

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴⁰² PTP 47 doc. #003265; cf. the letter of Moses Haskell to the council in 1822, describing similar arrangements between brothels and liquor stands; *ibid.*, 112, doc. #0039147.

⁴⁰³ PTC 9B:168, 175.

the course of three nights in June 1830. The council complained that as a result of the show, “there was great disorder in the Bar room Kept by said Andrews & while a mob was assembled about his house he was dealing out Spiritous Liquors to persons mingling and mixing with the Mob.”⁴⁰⁴

There is also evidence that the disorderly elements of Providence knew to collaborate with each other, both within the same house and between houses. Some were likely set up as joint ventures, like the one managed by Lucy Fry, Fanny Thomas, and two other women in 1807.⁴⁰⁵ Likewise, Peter Brown and Thankful Sharpe ran their houses in tandem for almost a decade. Women with established houses also lent some aid, like helping acquiring property, to those just starting, as Susan Parr Gardner did for Sally Andrews and Luthania Lealand for Mary Johnson.⁴⁰⁶ Not only did Johnson and Gardner gain a place to start their businesses, they also got on track for legal settlement.⁴⁰⁷

Further collaborations are revealed in the papers surrounding an 1822 Justices Court case concerning the debt owed to John L. Jones by a tenant, Thomas Vorris.⁴⁰⁸ Vorris, a musician, had stayed with Jones that May. Since the documents describe Jones as a musician too, it is possible his house served as a dance hall, and perhaps Vorris had helped provide entertainment for Jones’s customers. Since Jones himself

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 12:313-315, quote from p. 315.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 9A:129; surely the mixed-race nature of the house—Thomas was white and Fry was black—was also a cause for the council’s concern.

⁴⁰⁶ See Deeds, 44:92, 38:146.

⁴⁰⁷ In 1816, Sharpe told the council she had purchased her house from Brown. While it appears they operated separate houses, in 1825, Brown told the council he lived with Sharpe, possibly indicating a more integrated operation; see PTC 9B:261, 11:407.

⁴⁰⁸ The first complaint against John L. Jones for keeping a disorderly house came in 1815. In the same year as his Justices Court case, Moses Haskell called his dwelling a “house of ill fame” in a letter to the council. That December, Jones was indicted before the Court of General Sessions of the Peace on a charge of keeping a house of ill fame where “whoredom & fornication” took place, as well as other “lewd & filthy offenses.” He was convicted, and sentenced to pay a \$100 fine plus court costs, and was imprisoned for six months; see PTC 9B:228; PTP 111 doc. #0038544; PCCs 24:378, *State v. Jones*.

probably filled this role normally, Vorriss may have added novelty or an extra attraction to draw in more people. However, it appears that Vorriss worked for other residents of Olney's Lane besides Jones, since Sally Andrews was one of the two people standing bail for him.⁴⁰⁹ If she was willing to cover Vorriss's legal costs, they may have had some prior relationship, perhaps because he had played at her house too. Thus, it looks like musicians circulated through the disorderly houses of the Olney's Lane, with the proprietors of those houses providing lodging. However, some ambiguity remains regarding these arrangements. Were the house keepers willing to share the additional profit a musician could bring in with neighboring establishments? Sally Andrews's intervention—though indirect—on the opposite side of a case from Jones may indicate that Vorriss was a subject of contention between them, and that competition was as much a part the Olney's Lane networks as cooperation.

The nature of Sally Andrews's relationship with Mary Johnson is similarly ambiguous. The two women first became acquainted sometime around 1819, when Andrews boarded with Johnson.⁴¹⁰ By 1821, Andrews had a place of her own, and both she and Johnson were among the disorderly house keepers indicted in 1823. It appears they kept up with each other, since three of the four women removed from Johnson's house on June 25, 1823—Sally Votey, Ann Johnson, and Eliza Potts—had previously lived with or had some contact with Andrews.⁴¹¹ Perhaps Andrews knew

⁴⁰⁹ John L. Jones Papers.

⁴¹⁰ PTC 10:192.

⁴¹¹ Only Potts and Johnson specifically name both Andrews and Johnson. Votey said she had lived with Andrews, but not where she was living at the time of the examination. A fourth woman, Emmeline Ormsbee, mentions neither Andrews nor Johnson. However, given that the four young women were examined on the same day, that the council found several of them to be of bad fame, and the proximity of the examinations to Mary Johnson's June 9 recognizance for her case in December, the council was most likely trying to clear out what they perceive to be a brothel; see PTC 11:108-110; PC CGS Recognizance, *State v. Johnson*.

the authorities were going to shut her down and advised her tenants to seek lodging elsewhere, or perhaps the women decided to decamp to Johnson's house on their own.⁴¹² If the former, did Andrews decide to look out for an old friend by sending some business her way, or did Johnson take advantage of a competitor's legal troubles by luring away her tenants? As one historian of the networks among poor women reminds us, we must be cautious about imposing "facile notions of 'sisterhood'" on the poor women of Providence.⁴¹³

While relations between disorderly housekeepers like Sally Andrews and Mary Johnson were complicated, networks also formed between tenants that helped secure future livelihoods and stave off removal. The career of Eliza Potts, who boarded with both Andrews and Johnson, demonstrates how tenants helped each other. Perhaps she, like many others, made enough money working in Andrews's or Johnson's houses to set up housekeeping on her own.⁴¹⁴ That she achieved independence despite her eviction from Johnson's house and subsequent removal to her home in North Providence in 1823 is especially impressive. However she managed it, a year later Potts was living back in Providence with two boarders of her own, Sally Taylor and Catherine Sawyer.⁴¹⁵ Taylor had been removed from Mary Johnson's at the same time as Potts, so it is plausible that she owed her new lodging to a bond that had formed

⁴¹² See PC CGS Recognizance, *State of Rhode Island v. Sally Andrews*, July 26, 1823.

⁴¹³ See Margaret Hunt, "Women and the Fiscal-Imperial State in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries" in *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire 1660-1840*, ed. Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 43; though the women in her study are capable of collective action, Hunt also finds evidence of "women defrauding or exploiting each other, denouncing friends and even relatives...and pursuing their own or their immediate family's interests at everyone else's expense."

⁴¹⁴ See PTC 11:110 for Eliza Potts's first residency examination.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 230-232.

when they were first living together. In addition, Potts also likely preferred to board someone she already knew to be reliable.⁴¹⁶

Connections like that between Eliza Potts and Sally Taylor made disorderly houses informal institutions that potentially offered aid to men and women as they navigated a harsh urban environment. Maritime historians have long known that boarding houses and brothels offered fringe benefits to sailors in port.⁴¹⁷ As early as the seventeenth century, one historian has found the English Royal Navy relied on female boarding house keepers “to provide medical care for...sick and injured [sailors].”⁴¹⁸ Victorian sailors returning to the British ports of Southampton and Plymouth also stayed repeatedly with the same women who, in addition to sex, provided services such as “housing them, holding their money, and protecting them from being skinned by unscrupulous lodging-house keepers and thief-prostitutes.”⁴¹⁹ In Providence, William Jordan, who had been living on and off with Mahala Greene for five years, trusted her to store some of his property—a set of pistols—in her room at Ezekiel Burr’s brothel.⁴²⁰

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., 110, 230; Taylor’s two examinations differ in some surprising respects, but the repeated name and the plausible change in age, plus the association with Potts suggest it was the same person, who may have been lying to the town council for unknown reasons.

⁴¹⁷ Boarding house keepers who doubled as sailor employment agents—also known as crimps—were most predominant after 1830. For discussions of this often exploitative practice in late nineteenth century Canada and in the United States in the 1840s and 1850s, see, respectively, Judith Fingard, *Jack in Port: Sailortowns in Eastern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 194-241 and Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 226-229; for an undated anecdote of the practice in Providence, see Brown, *Life of Brown*, 93-95.

⁴¹⁸ Hunt, “Women and the Fiscal-Imperial State,” 35.

⁴¹⁹ Walkowitz, *Victorian Society*, 29; for similar practices among nineteenth century British and American whalers, who sometimes ‘married’ local women or prostitutes when they landed on Pacific islands, see Margaret S. Creighton, *Rites and Passages: The Experience of American Whaling, 1830-1870* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 183-184. Creighton speculates that desire for such relationships “may have been heightened by sailors’ desire for wifely services such as laundry, sewing, or cooking,” along with feelings of rootlessness and lack of control over their lives.

⁴²⁰ Depositions of Richard Johnson and William Jordan, *State v. Johnson and Williams*, Greene Papers; Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 187 notes that sailors were not allowed to keep guns aboard ship.

The Providence records reveal that sailors were not the only recipients of the aid boarding houses offered. Many women—some of them sailors’ wives—also used them to keep from falling into poverty and to avoid unwanted attention from the authorities. In several cases, boarding house keepers simply hid tenants who might draw the ire of the council, like whoever “secreted” the “bad women” living with James Gardner whenever his landlord, Esek Tillinghast visited.⁴²¹ Luthania Lealand provided a similar cover for Patty Greene, a seventeen-year-old who had eloped from Norwich, Connecticut and lived in Providence for about a year under an assumed name “to prevent being detected.”⁴²² When a tenant did run afoul of the authorities, some proprietors simply ignored their orders, as in the case of a woman known as French Mary. Though the council declared one of her tenants, an African American widow named Sally Veney, to be “of bad fame” and ordered her to leave the state in 1816, Mary allowed her to stay.⁴²³ The council re-examined Veney in 1818 and 1819, and each time found her still living with Mary.⁴²⁴ It was just this kind of response—or lack thereof—that drove the council to seek steeper fines against landlords in the 1820s.

Once that crackdown happened, many women tried to keep ahead of the town watch and the constables by moving rapidly between different boarding houses to avoid detection. In 1821, the town council added the cryptic request for a constable to “go to the house of Freelove Balloue and request of her the articles of Clothing belonging to Louisa Stoddard now there” to the examination of a woman living with

⁴²¹ PTP 140 doc. #0060381.

⁴²² PTC 7:387-388.

⁴²³ Ibid., 9B:290-291.

⁴²⁴ In the later examinations, Sally Veney was variously referred to as Sally Binney and, after her marriage to a sailor named George White, Sally White; see *ibid.*, 10:8, 216-217, 254-255, 328-329, 508.

Susan Gardener.⁴²⁵ Had Stoddard heard about her impending summons and removal and tried to escape to another boarding house? She would not have been the only one, since Gardner's two sisters and Emeline Bliss hid from the constable for several days before finally being caught.⁴²⁶

Sympathetic boarding house keepers probably also helped disorderly women in the aftermath of the Hardscrabble Riot. Between December 1825 and October 1826, Betsey Taylor stayed in three different houses—in one case for only four months—as the council tried to find and remove her.⁴²⁷ Despite the council's threats of increased fines and legal retribution, she still found houses willing to take her in, a further indication of how resilient the support networks were among the marginalized folk of Providence. Around the same time as Taylor's odyssey, a constable arrested a white woman named Maria Innman, who had been ordered to return home to Smithfield after she "exhibit[ed] herself" at Thankful and James Sharpe's brothel.⁴²⁸ However, the complaint had occurred well over a month before the constable apprehended her, suggesting that she may have utilized the same networks as Taylor to hide in town.⁴²⁹ Furthermore, when constable Edward Harwood tried to fine Innman after she still refused to leave town, he had to inform the council that she had eluded him again.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁵ Ibid., 481-482.

⁴²⁶ On August 8, the council noted, "Emeline Bliss, Patty Parker [probably a misprint for Phebe Parr], and Betsey Lee are secreting themselves for eluding the Officer and to avoid an Examination." The three were examined together on August 9, see *ibid.*, 484-486.

⁴²⁷ Benjamin Addison, Jacob Perry, and Samuel Staples, Jr., were all informed that Betsey, who had previously been removed, was residing in their properties; at some point, she had moved to Addison's from Dr. Thomas Greene's tenement, where she was living in 1822; see PTC 11:428, 463; 12:26; PTP 112 doc. #0039155.

⁴²⁸ PTC 11:404-405, 421.

⁴²⁹ The complaint occurred on October 14, 1825, and the removal was issued on November 25; it seems unlikely she returned to Smithfield to hide, since, while that was her legal settlement she had told the council earlier that her family had moved to Dudley in southern Massachusetts; see PTC *ibid.*, 187-189, 405-406, 421.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 421-423.

Wherever Innman had hidden, she eventually scraped together the seven dollars she needed for the fine—possibly from performances similar to the one she gave at the Sharpes’ house.⁴³¹ In April, the council tried to remove her yet again, but in September she was found still living in town with Sally Andrews.⁴³² Perhaps she had been hiding with Andrews all along, or maybe, like Taylor, she had kept changing her residence to elude Harwood. Though she was ultimately caught, Innman had evaded permanent removal for almost a year using the network of boarding houses as a refuge.

While Maria Innman, like a significant proportion of women in disorderly houses, was likely procuring her income by prostitution or other illicit behavior, boarding houses were also sources of more respectable employment. Susan Gardener employed Betsey Sheffield, a thirty-year-old woman of color who, in addition to taking in washing, told the council she had “been at service” at Gardner’s house in August 1821.⁴³³ In addition to direct employment, the records also indicate that boarding house keepers helped transient women find work elsewhere in Providence. In 1802, a young white woman named Polly Weeden told the council that Margaret Simons, the black woman with whom she had been living for the past week, had “found no Business for her.” In response, the council issued Weeden a removal order since she was “of bad fame” and sent Simons to the Bridewell for running a disorderly house. However, it is likely that the council’s main concern was over a black and a white woman living together. Rather than employing her as a prostitute, Simons may have been trying to find Weeden, who had lived with several families in East

⁴³¹ Harwood noted to the council that Innman paid the fine in February 1826; see *ibid.*, 456-457, 469.

⁴³² *Ibid.*, 11:469, 12:5.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, 10:494.

Greenwich and Providence over the years, domestic work.⁴³⁴ There are also indications that boarding house keepers could draw on networks beyond Providence to connect women with jobs, as shown by Ann Johnson's claim that she had first come to Providence from New York "by the request of Sally Andrews."⁴³⁵

If boarding house keepers did not find them work, some tenants may have at least gotten a roof over their head in exchange for providing needed services. Pusha Jenckes, a young woman from North Providence, told the council in 1804 that she took in washing and lived with an elderly freedwoman named Phillis Page.⁴³⁶ Page was ill and the council record implies that Jenckes lived at Page's house because she was caring for Page on top of her other work. An exchange of similar services may have been the root cause of John L. Jones's previously discussed legal dispute with Thomas Vorriss. While Jones had charged Vorriss three dollars per week in rent, Vorriss had only paid one dollar per week with the rest on credit, and Jones was suing to recover the remainder of three weeks' rent. Perhaps Jones had originally given Vorriss such favorable terms in exchange for playing music in the evening for customers. Either way, this case shows that tenants could, if needed, negotiate with their landlords if funds were tight.⁴³⁷

In some cases, however, the lower ranks of Providence took it upon themselves to help those who were near rock bottom and could not immediately repay their benefactors. A good example is the case of Caesar Lockwood and his wife Mary, an

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 8:138-139; while there is no more record of Polly Weeden in Providence, Margaret Simons appears in the records as late as 1804, though all her subsequent boarders are black women; see *ibid.*, 8:154-155, 350, 355.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 11:109; at the time she was examined, Ann Johnson had moved to live with Mary Johnson.

⁴³⁶ See *ibid.*, 8:356 for Pusha Jenckes's examination; *ibid.*, 363 for examination of Phillis Page alias Sarle.

⁴³⁷ John L. Jones Papers.

African American couple who took a Native American woman named Sarah Hill into their home in 1803. Hill had been living with an African American man named Joseph Bailey in Warwick when the town removed her to Providence because she had served an apprenticeship there in her youth. However, Hill was in her fifties and her two grown sons were both at sea and could not help her when she was warned out. It seemed like Hill had nowhere to turn, but at this point Caesar Lockwood sent his wife to lead Hill, who was also blind, to Providence and provided a place for her in his home. There is no indication that the town councils of either Warwick or Providence were involved in the transfer. A later examination placed Lockwood in Warwick, so perhaps he had a previous connection with Hill or Bailey, and was simply helping a friend or acquaintance in need.⁴³⁸

Other women received help from boarding house keepers with childcare or in cases of illness. In 1810, Rebekah Jones, a woman of color from Maryland, had been “sick about a fortnight of an inflammation of her Eyes” and was staying with another woman of color, Mary Edwards. Since she was about to become chargeable to the town, Jones was probably not working, and Edwards may have been giving her room and board for free or on credit, if not also providing some medical care.⁴³⁹ Polly Booth also received help from wives in the community during and after a pregnancy. Booth was likely a domestic servant working and living with a Dr. Mason, whose house she “quitted” in mid-February 1803. She had likely been fired when her employer discovered she was pregnant, and found refuge in the house of a Mrs. La

⁴³⁸ PTC 8:224; the association of the Lockwoods with Warwick and their identity as people of color comes from later examinations of their daughter and son-in-law; see *ibid.*, 9A:457; 11:324-325.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9A:338; while Jones was not legally settled in Providence, the council did not order her removal, possibly indicating the believed she would soon recover and find work. If so, she may have arranged to pay her landlady back once she recovered.

Roche, where she spent a week; again it is unclear how she paid her landlord given her condition and lack of employment.⁴⁴⁰ The council removed Booth to her home in East Greenwich, but by late spring or early summer she had apparently given birth and returned to Providence. Perhaps trying to find another job, she left her child in the care of another local woman, Mrs. Fenner. Unfortunately, by June Booth had died—it is unclear how—and the town council had to arrange with Mrs. Fenner to return the child to East Greenwich. Though her story ended tragically, Polly Booth had received plenty of help from local women, none of whom appear to have been family or had any other connection with her.⁴⁴¹ Mrs. La Roche may have simply been a boarding house keeper helping a desperate young woman. Similarly, a woman named Lydia Hazard left her young daughter with Lucy Fry while Hazard served a year in jail.⁴⁴²

These networks between disorderly houses helped many women stave off the worst when crushing poverty and the town council threatened to disrupt their lives. By providing rudimentary services like temporary childcare or a little credit towards rent, many boarding house keepers kept their tenants from hitting rock bottom. Most tenants, however, wanted to improve their lives, and saw in disorderly houses a good chance to make money more quickly than in the other jobs available to women in the early nineteenth century. As Susan Gardner and Rosanna Jones demonstrate, the potential profits in catering to sailors and other travelers in search of a night on the town were large. So is the amount of evidence that disorderly house keepers

⁴⁴⁰ It seems unlikely that Booth willingly quit her job in the middle of winter. Given that she had had her child by June, she was probably trying to conceal the pregnancy and was fired when Dr. Mason finally noticed.

⁴⁴¹ PTC 8:264.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 9B:301; it is possible the child was acting as a servant of some sort to pay her way, though since she was four, she may not have been that much help.

supported their families and passed on enough wealth for some of their tenants to strike out on their own. Of course, the profits of disorderly houses came with the added danger of the scrutiny of a town council increasingly bent on eliminating disorder from Providence. However, the interconnected networks that supported the illicit establishments in neighborhoods like Olney's Lane could also be used for protection. Thus, the council sometimes had difficulties removing troublesome residents, as some boarding houses were always willing to take in disorderly residents or transients and conveniently forget to inform the council while the neighbors looked the other way. While the council only saw disorder and poverty in Olney's Lane and Hardscrabble, many residents saw opportunity and a refuge.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

As we have seen, poor women in early nineteenth century Providence often relied on informal networks with their neighbors, both respectable and disorderly, to combat the increasing pressures exerted by economic forces and the town council's concurrent efforts to stamp out disorder. Clearly, for some women, reliance on these networks eventually paid off. Susan Gardner avoided the destruction of her property in the Olney's Lane Riot and continued to live and prosper in Providence for years. The last entry on her in Providence's record of deeds comes from 1844, when she purchased, for \$2,050, three lots of land at the corner of Olney's Lane and North Main Street from her long-time partner Samuel Staples, Jr.⁴⁴³ Likewise, Eliza Granger, despite damage from the riots and the council's refusal to grant her a liquor license, expanded her property holdings along Smith Street in 1833.⁴⁴⁴ Even Rosanna Jones—despite losses so bad she seems to have quit Providence altogether after the riot—made a new life for herself a few miles down the road in Cranston. In 1833 and 1837, she was still settling debts as high as one hundred dollars, indications that she was carrying on much the same in Cranston as she had in Providence.⁴⁴⁵

However, these women were exceptional. As property owners, they never faced the same threats of removal as did many of their tenants, who were without legal residency in Providence. Likewise, through their connections with respectable white men such as George Bowen, Nicholas Brown, or Samuel Staples, Jr., they gained an

⁴⁴³ Deeds 92:38.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 63:212.

⁴⁴⁵ PC CCP, *Dinneford v. Jones*; PCCs 35:285, *Parks & Lippitt v. Jones*.

air of respectability, allies who might intercede on their behalf with the council, or legal aid. With the exception of Jones, they were also white, and thus, while they did not conform exactly to the new ideal of female domesticity that coalesced in the early nineteenth century, they did not carry the added stigma of black women and their associations with sexual disorder. Most women were not fortunate enough to have all these benefits, and by their nature, the town council records highlight the failure of many women to avoid removal.

Included with those removed were women who relied heavily on informal networks to shield them from the council. The last mention of Sally Andrews, after her numerous attempts to set up a brothel or boarding house of her own, is a notation from May 30, 1829 that, having again defied the council and returned to Providence, she was to be whipped ten stripes if she did not leave by eight o'clock on the morning of June 1.⁴⁴⁶ Her onetime landlady and possible competitor, Mary Johnson, received her final order to leave Providence and return to Newport on December 4, 1830. She had been reduced from a boarding house keeper to a boarder, and the council notified George W. Bowen of her removal, to make sure he evicted her.⁴⁴⁷ Nothing is known about Mahala Greene after the Olney's Lane Riot.⁴⁴⁸ She must have been left homeless after the destruction of Ezekiel Burr's house, but it is impossible to say whether she left Providence or found somewhere else to live in town quickly enough to avoid the rash of removals that came in the days following the chaos. Finally, there is Betsey Taylor. The last entry in the decades-long struggle between her and the

⁴⁴⁶ PTC 12:258.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 358.

⁴⁴⁸ The last mentions of her are in the depositions of Richard Johnson and William Jordan, *State v. Johnson and Williams*, Greene Papers.

council is a notation from June 1830 that she and another woman were in “contempt of [an] order” to leave Providence, and, since they were “poor destitute Idle Vagrants,” and could not pay the fine imposed on them, they were instead to be removed after a week spent in the new Dexter Asylum.⁴⁴⁹ These, of course, are but a handful of the many poor women removed or thrown in the workhouse in Providence in the American Republic’s first half century.

Yet there is evidence that the networks that grew up in these poor neighborhoods persisted despite many individuals’ misfortunes of riot and removal. We know of some disorderly house keepers who never faced legal consequences for their activities. James Axum and his wife Hannah, who ran the sailor boarding house next to William Brown’s childhood home, were never disciplined for the disorder and drunkenness described in Brown’s memoir.⁴⁵⁰ Even houses that were shut down did not always stay that way. Brown wrote that after 1831 “Olney street had fallen to rise no more as a place of resort for rum shops, sailors and lewd women,” but Susan Gardner’s continued presence there certainly suggests that disorderly houses were not entirely eradicated.⁴⁵¹ Brown himself later undercut his statement by an offhand reference to some Methodists’ deliberations over whether to build a church on Gaspee Street, “where many poor people lived and some of bad reputation.”⁴⁵² Gaspee Street was just off Smith Street, probably not far from Snowtown and Eliza Granger’s house.

⁴⁴⁹ PTC 12:319; the Dexter Asylum for the poor and insane was founded in 1828 to supplement the workhouse or Bridewell.

⁴⁵⁰ A single notation in 1817 demands that Axum come to the next council meeting to answer a complaint from the captain of the town watch, but he either never showed up or answered the complaint in some other way, because there was no follow-up; see PTC 9B:526.

⁴⁵¹ Brown, *Life of Brown*, 126.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, 157; Brown may have been partially correct, however, as the decline of maritime commerce in Providence coupled with the rise of manufacturing and Irish immigration in subsequent decades must have significantly altered the character of Providence’s poor neighborhoods.

Furthermore, the section reserved for black residents in the 1836 *Providence Directory* shows many people still clustered in Olney's Lane, in Hardscrabble, and on Hewes and Stampers Streets in Snowtown. Among them was Augustus Williams, one of the black sailors tried in the wake of the riot, and Brown's source for his version of the event.⁴⁵³

Though it persisted, for many women, the network of boarding houses and other disorderly establishments served only to delay the inevitable. True, the nature of the council records means we know the most about those who were eventually caught and removed. However, in the early nineteenth century, a growing number of landless migrants settled in Providence where, unlike Axum, Susan Gardner, or Rosanna Jones, the threat of removal was ever present. For many female transients, the question of whether they stayed in or left Providence depended on the chance that the council did not have the time or resources to get around to examining them and kicking them out. The best they could hope for was to barely eke out an existence for years and lay low hoping the watch, their neighbors, or the council did not take too much notice.

Many who wanted to get out of poverty had to choose the lesser of two evils. One of the quickest possible routes to earning enough money to avoid becoming chargeable to the town led into the neighborhoods frequented by sailors and others rowdies in search of drink and other diversions. However, while illicit trade or prostitution could—possibly—alleviate the danger of removal as a poor transient, it also invited the attention of the council for disorderly behavior. By the late 1820s, even living in Olney's Lane or Hardscrabble for the cheap rent or rudimentary social services could brand a woman as disorderly. This choice between being kicked out for

⁴⁵³ *Providence Directory* [1836], 130-133; see Brown, *Life of Brown*, 125.

disorder or for poverty was especially fraught for women of color, because they not only were stuck with the racist stigma of sexual deviancy, but also any victualing or liquor establishment they ran was automatically disorderly, even if they did not stay open too late or sell liquor on Sundays.

Unfortunately for women in Providence, the informal networks of the town's poor neighborhoods were all they had to rely on until the twentieth century, and with few exceptions the best those networks could do was keep a woman's head above water and prevent the worst from happening. While the 1820s and 1830s saw scattered efforts to organize female textile workers, including a modestly successful strike at one of Samuel Slater's mills in Pawtucket in 1824, the early labor movement had largely collapsed in the United States by the early 1840s.⁴⁵⁴ Some improvements in social welfare did occur in the nineteenth and early twentieth century through partnerships between female reformers and local governments. However, these often produced mixed results or unintended consequences, a major example being the Progressive-era effort to eliminate prostitution that drove many desperate women into the arms of violent criminal organizations for protection from the police.⁴⁵⁵ In Providence's black community, while a flurry of institution-building started as early as 1820 and the nineteenth century saw successful organization to desegregate

⁴⁵⁴ On the mixed success of early female labor organization in Massachusetts's Lowell mills during the 1830s and its subsequent collapse as poor Irish immigrants replaced the daughters of native Yankee farmers, see Dublin, *Women at Work*, 86-107, 198-207; Christine Stansell attributes the failure of similar efforts to organize skilled female workers in New York in the 1820s and 1830s to the acceptance by working class men of middle-class ideals of domesticity, and their consequent efforts to exclude women and children from the workplace, see Stansell, *City of Women*, 130-133; for the Rhode Island's early labor movement, which collapsed after the Panic of 1837, see Coleman, *Transformation*, 245-237 and Gary Kulik, "Pawtucket Village and the Strike of 1824: The Origins of Class Conflict in Rhode Island," *Radical History Review* 17, no. 1 (1978): 5-37.

⁴⁵⁵ Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood*, 169-70, cf. Hobson, *Uneasy Virtue*, 163-164; Stansell also examines the mixed record of middle class reformers in the nineteenth century. For example, see her discussion of the Children's Aid Society, which broke up working class families and shipped the children to farms in the country ostensibly to develop a proper work ethic, see Stansell, *City of Women*, 209-214.

Providence's schools and re-enfranchise black men, material assistance to poorer members of the community was not always possible. Furthermore, many middle-class African American institutions tried to distance themselves from racist stereotypes of disorder by maintaining rigid moral standards that precluded any kind of disorderly behavior.⁴⁵⁶ For example, the correspondence of Providence's earliest black mutual aid society, the Free African Union Society, was suffused with a message of Christian uplift, and members were urged to refrain from drinking, to legalize their marriages, and to avoid extravagant expense or idleness.⁴⁵⁷

The twentieth century has seen more improvement. In place of parsimonious town poor relief, the United States since the Great Depression has implemented an expansive federal welfare program. The social movements of the latter half of the century, from the Civil Rights movement to the feminism of the 1970s, have brought sweeping changes as well, not least in implementing laws that try to close racial and gendered wage gaps. This combination of factors has enabled unprecedented numbers of women to live and work independently of marriage and a male breadwinner. However, even these advances have left significant economic, racial, and gender inequalities, and in early twenty-first century America, as Linda Tirado points out, poor women are still struggling. In a time when the power of unions is fast declining, when deindustrialization has hollowed out many American towns, and when the social safety net is under attack, it is worth contemplating the lives of women who lived without the benefit of these institutions. As the lives of Linda Tirado and Betsey

⁴⁵⁶ Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 160.

⁴⁵⁷ Cottrol, *Afro-Yankees*, 45-47; the society started out in the late 1780s as an advocate of Afro-American re-colonization of Africa, but later shifted toward providing mutual aid for members; see also Brown, *Life of Brown*, 92 for a description of Thomas Reed, a middle-class man of color who maintained a good reputation for his boarding house by refusing to rent to sailors.

Taylor demonstrate, these women can and will hustle to survive. But perhaps they should not have to.

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