

1964

## From Federalist to Whig: The Political Career of Tristram Burges

Thomas John Sullivan  
*University of Rhode Island*

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FROM FEDERALIST TO WHIG:  
THE POLITICAL CAREER OF TRISTAM BURGESS

BY

THOMAS JOHN SULLIVAN

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

UNIVERSITY OF RHODE ISLAND  
1964

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author wishes to express his gratitude to Dr. William Dewitt Metz of the University of Rhode Island History Department for his guidance in the preparation of this thesis. His wide knowledge of Rhode Island history and bibliographical aids proved an invaluable asset.

Appreciation is also extended to Mr. Clarkson Collins, III and his staff at the Rhode Island Historical Society for their help in locating needed manuscript materials.

Lastly, the author wishes to express his gratitude to his wife, Marguerite C. Sullivan. Her patience and inspiration made the writing of this thesis a much lighter task than it otherwise would have been.

## ABSTRACT

Tristram Burges was born in Rochester, Massachusetts, on February 26, 1770. After beginning his educational career rather late in life, he entered Brown University as a sophomore in 1793. A fine student, he was chosen to deliver the class valedictory address in 1796. Burges then settled down to practice law in his adopted state.

Through his law practice Burges became well known in Providence and interested in local politics. He took the Federalist Party stand in opposition to Jefferson's economic policies before the War of 1812. In 1811 he was elected to the State House of Representatives. He served one term and resigned in 1812 after being reelected. In May, 1817 he was chosen by the State Grand Committee as Chief Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court. After a year of service he was replaced by the Republicans when his party fell out of power.

In 1825 Burges was nominated to run for Congress by the Federalist element in the Republican Party. This nomination was made possible when Job Durfee, an incumbent Congressman who failed renomination, bolted the party and ran as an Independent. In the ensuing election Burges polled the highest number of votes and was elected. This began a career in Congress that was to span a ten year period, for he was

consistently reelected until 1835.

In Congress Burges ardently defended Rhode Island from the attacks of the South. His most vehement clashes came with Congressman George MacDuffie of South Carolina over the tariff. Burges, influenced by family connections in the Rhode Island woolen industry as well as by the needs of the state, fought for a high protective tariff. He supported the Tariff of Abominations in 1828 and the bill of 1830. Over the compromise lowering of the tariff in 1833, however, he denounced Henry Clay and voted against the measure. His later years in Congress might be termed the anti-Jackson years. With the exception of the nullification controversy, Burges was in constant opposition to the President. This is especially true in the controversy over the Bank of the United States and the French spoliation claims. The bank controversy also caused Burges to break with his fellow Rhode Island Congressman, Dutee J. Pearce. This had political repercussions at home.

As a member of the anti-Jackson forces, it was easy for Burges to follow the general shift into the Whig Party. In 1835 he ran as a Whig for his sixth term in Congress but was beaten by a narrow margin. Along with his break with Pearce, this defeat may be attributed to a general decline of Whig popularity at that time. In 1836 Burges ran as a

Whig for the governorship, and was again defeated. After this defeat Burges' only political activity occurred in 1839 when he lost in a race for the governorship. Burges had not wanted to run in this election, but was put forth against his will by Whigs who were dissatisfied with the existing administration.

After this final defeat in 1839, Burges retired to his family farm in Seekonk, Massachusetts, where he lived in partial seclusion. Tristram Burges died at his home on October 13, 1853, in his eighty-third year. He was buried in Providence--the town he had represented for many years.

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## I

### A CAREER BEGINS: THE EMERGENCE OF A FEDERALIST

A common feeling among many leading Americans of the early 1790's was the hope that political parties would not develop. Although men like Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison felt that political parties stood mainly for self-satisfaction and personal maneuver, the impulse toward political organization was inexorable. Indeed, the man who perhaps unwittingly began political parties was Washington's Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton. Through his organization of congressional support for such measures as a national bank and the assumption of state debts, the Secretary not only was able to gain the adoption of his program, but he also brought about the organization of an opposition--which in time came to be known as the Republicans.

Gradually during the 1790's these Republicans built their strength in the states and districts, and actively campaigned on party tickets in 1796. By the end of Washington's second term the United States had its first national party in the Republicans. The Federalists, original supporters of Hamilton, had an identity and a following also, but were less inclined to hustle at the polls. It was not until after the Federalist loss to Jefferson in 1800 that Hamilton proposed the party organize local clubs, debate issues, and



set up real party machinery.<sup>1</sup> By the time of the presidential election of 1804, the Federalist party had become quite forlorn in its hope of stemming the Jeffersonian tide. It did in fact receive only fourteen electoral votes in that contest. The extent of Federalist pessimism was expressed by the melancholy Fisher Ames of Massachusetts when he wrote, "I fear Federalism will not only die, but all remembrance of it will be lost."<sup>2</sup> However, the resumption of hostilities between England and France with the resultant seizure of neutral vessels and impressment of American seamen, leading to the subsequent policies of economic coercion of the Jefferson Administration, revived the hope of the despairing Federalists throughout the nation. Indeed, whereas by 1807 the Republicans had invaded the Federalist stronghold of New England and captured the governorship in every state except Connecticut, by the end of 1808 they had lost every one of them.<sup>3</sup>

One of the outstanding features of New England's history during the war that followed was the great opposition and obstruction posed by the powerful Federalist majority

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<sup>1</sup>James MacGregor Burns, The Deadlock of Democracy: Four Party Politics in America (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1963), pp. 27-31.

<sup>2</sup>Wilfred E. Binkley, American Political Parties, Their Natural History (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1958), p. 89.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 88-91.

to the national prosecution of the struggle.<sup>4</sup> By the time of the war the Federalist Party in New England had completely changed from the principles of Washington and Hamilton, becoming practically anti-federalist to the point of discussing secession. Instead of following Washington's principle of avoiding foreign alliances, these Federalists openly supported the British cause, and in turn Great Britain showed its good will by opening its blockade of the east coast south to New London.<sup>5</sup> Throughout 1814 the Federalist newspapers in New England became more and more outspoken on the subject of dissolution of the Union, and on December 15 a Federalist convention met in Hartford to assert New England's place in the Union and to propose amendments limiting the federal governments' power to declare war.<sup>6</sup> Although the majority of Federalists in the north-east and Middle-Atlantic States believed that the Hartford Convention's proposals were sound, and that the delegates had a perfectly good right to meet and petition their federal government,<sup>7</sup> the political effects

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<sup>4</sup>James Truslow Adams, New England in the Republic, 1776-1850 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1927), p. 80.

<sup>5</sup>Edward Channing, A History of the United States (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), IV, 226.

<sup>6</sup>Adams, New England in the Republic, pp. 285-99

<sup>7</sup>Shaw Livermore, The Twilight of Federalism; the Disintegration of the Federalist Party, 1815-1830 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), pp. 11-12; See also Theodore Dwight, History of the Hartford Convention: With a Review of the Policy of the United States Government, Which led to the War of 1812 (New York: N. & J. White, 1833).

were shortly to prove crushing.

When the news of Jackson's victory at New Orleans and of the Peace of Ghent reached Washington in January and February of 1815, the commissioners from the Hartford Convention, who had come to present their convention's resolutions, were forced to flee from the capital city as quickly as possible. With them they carried the ruin of the Federalist Party. The party was just strong enough to carry Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Delaware against Monroe in 1816--but that was the end.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, "The Federalist Party, which in twenty years had run the gamut from rabid nationalism to New England sectionalism, accepted the defeat of Rufus King in 1816 as its death knell and quietly folded up as a national organization."<sup>9</sup>

Although it may be generally accepted that the Federalist Party passed out of existence as a national organization soon after the Hartford Convention, that does not explain what happened to both the party and its members on the state and local levels. In describing the political conditions that existed in the state of Rhode Island from 1817, the beginning of the Era of Good Feelings, to 1829, the period might be conveniently divided into three segments: the years from 1817 to 1820, when there was a close balance between the Federalist and Republican Parties and when they continued political warfare;

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<sup>8</sup>George Dangerfield, Era of Good Feelings (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1952), p. 98.

<sup>9</sup>Leland D. Baldwin, The Stream of American History (New York: American Book Company, 1952), I, 429.

from 1820 to 1824 when the state's climate was more congenial to the dying Federalist Party than that in other states and where in 1822 the legislature was evenly divided but the Federalists were unable to elect their men to state-wide offices; and from 1825 to 1829 when a limited suffrage and an interest in manufacturing led to a successful amalgamation of many Federalists into the Adams Republican Party and the anti-Jackson ranks, while still another hard core of Federalists were drawn into the pro-Jackson party.<sup>10</sup>

It was New England's fear of and opposition to the War of 1812 that was instrumental in the growth of Federalist strength in Rhode Island prior to the war. In 1811 the Federalist candidate for governor, William Jones, was elected to office over James Fenner. In that year the Federalists also secured control of the previously Republican dominated General Assembly. Although the Federalist Jones was defeated for the governorship by Nehemiah R. Knight in 1817 by sixty-eight votes, it became even more apparent from the gubernatorial election returns of 1818 that the Federalists had lost the support in the state which they had gained during

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<sup>10</sup> Livermore, The Twilight of Federalism, pp. 82, 120, 131.

the war. In that year Elisha R. Potter, a man long associated with the Federalist Party on both the state and national levels, and the rest of the Federalist Prox, the list of nominees for state offices supported by that party, were defeated by Governor Knight and the Republicans--Knight receiving a majority of 616 votes over his opponent. Indeed, "as is true of most organizations, the Federalists, when they lost a cause to fight for, also lost the ability to win elections."<sup>11</sup> Although intense campaigning was carried on by both sides, there was such a low regard for the once proud Federalist Party that its members even avoided using the term "Federalist" when speaking of themselves.<sup>12</sup>

It was the rise to power of the Rhode Island Federalist Party in 1811 that brought Tristram Burges into prominence. Born in Rochester, Massachusetts, on February 26, 1770 to John and Abigail Burges, he was the youngest of their three sons and one of eight children. In his early years, Tristram Burges received a spotty education in schools near his home until he entered the Academy of a Doctor Williams, at Wrentham, Massachusetts in 1791 to study medicine when just over

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<sup>11</sup>Kenneth Thomas Langer, "Elisha Reynolds Potter, Sr., Politician . . ." (unpublished Master's Thesis, The University of Rhode Island, Kingston, 1957), pp. 56-57; Charles P. Bennett, Manual with Rules and Orders for the use of the General Assembly of the State of Rhode Island, 1909 (Providence: E. L. Freeman Company, 1909), p. 102.

<sup>12</sup>Langer, "Elisha R. Potter," pp. 56-57.

twenty-one years of age. Two years later, after leaving school in Massachusetts and a short stint at teaching in his home town, he entered Rhode Island College (later Brown University) as a sophomore. After overcoming his financial difficulties with a timely win on a lottery ticket, Burges turned to the study of public speaking and oratory under Dr. Jonathan Maxcy, then President of the college. In belles-lettres he developed into a fine scholar, and at an early period became distinguished through his oratorical ability. Indeed, at the choice of his classmates he stayed to deliver the class valedictory address in 1796. After a short period as a school master in Providence, Burges began reading law with Judge Barnes and was admitted to the Rhode Island Bar in 1799. He then settled down to practice law in his adopted state.<sup>13</sup>

With his acceptance into the state bar Burges began an extensive and successful legal career. In October of 1799 he, along with Jeremiah Brown Howell, another prominent attorney, petitioned the General Assembly on behalf of two branches of the state militia. Because of declining membership the Governor's Independent Company of Volunteers and the Governor's Independent Company of Light Infantry asked their agents, Burges and Howell, to petition so that

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<sup>13</sup> Henry L. Bowen, Memoir of Tristram Burges; with Selections from His Speeches and Occasional Writings (Providence: Marshall, Brown & Co., 1835), pp. 13-36.

they might merge and have their names change to the United Independent Volunteers. While meeting in South Kingstown during the same month, the State House of Representatives approved the petition. That Burges had more than just a passing interest in the state militia and was becoming active in Providence society was demonstrated in 1805 by his elevation to the post of Commander in the same unit he had petitioned for six years earlier.<sup>14</sup>

The star of the young lawyer was indeed rising rapidly in his new home. On May 22, 1801, he married Mary Arnold, the daughter of Welcome Arnold--a prominent merchant of Providence.<sup>15</sup> Having developed both family and economic ties to the upper-class merchants and manufacturers of Providence, it is not surprising that Burges also began to adopt their legal outlook and political viewpoint. In 1805 he signed a petition along with Samuel Arnold, Patience Arnold, and Joseph Martin (Burges signed as Martin's attorney as well as on his own behalf) to gain a nullification of an adverse judgment given by the Supreme Court when it met in East Greenwich in that year. Burges, moreover, defended the ship-owner and mercantile interests of Providence against the charges of seaman Whipple

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<sup>14</sup>Petitions to the Rhode Island General Assembly (State Archives: State House, Providence, Rhode Island), V. 32, p. 57; V. 36, p. 89.

<sup>15</sup>James N. Arnold, Vital Records of Rhode Island (Providence: Narragansett Publishing Company, 1892), II, 31.

Andrew's widow that her husband had been unjustly demoted from the rank of first-mate while on a voyage from Providence around Cape Horn to the South and Western United States. She contended that the owners had broken a contract and demanded restitution. Speaking for himself and his client, Burges charged that Whipple was relieved of his duties by the ship's captain for neglect and breaches of duty in violation of the interests of the owners. Upon presenting the deposition of a fellow crewman who supported the captain and the owners, the House of Representatives on October 31, 1806, upset the old decision and ordered a new trial be held.<sup>16</sup> It is evident, therefore, that within six years after passing his bar exams Burges had become a successful defender of the vested interest group in his adopted city. This successful defense was to stand him in good stead with these groups in the future.

As his law practice continued to grow to the point where there were "few important cases . . . in which he was not engaged," Tristram Burges also became interested in politics. This was about the time of Jefferson's Embargo, and Burges took the stand of the Rhode Island Federalist party during the excitement which followed. At public meetings held in Providence he was usually present, and at several of

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<sup>16</sup>Petitions to the Rhode Island General Assembly, V.  
37, pp. 18, 21.



them he made enthusiastic and successful addresses to fellow Federalists.<sup>17</sup> As the threat of war grew and it became popular in the state to oppose the policies of the Republican government in Washington, Tristram Burges grew politically. In the general statewide elections of 1811, when the Providence Gazette appealed to the people to back the Federalist William Jones and turn out the incumbent "Fennerian Dynasty,"<sup>18</sup> the electorate responded with a sweeping Federalist triumph. Among those elected was Tristram Burges, who took his seat as a State Representative from Providence at the May, 1811, session of the General Assembly held in Newport.<sup>19</sup>

While Burges was serving his term in the state General Assembly there were two major actions in which he took part, one involving the establishment of a new courthouse in Bristol and the other a proposed revision of the general election laws of the state. During the June session of 1811, House speaker William Hunter and Representatives Burges and Levi Totten were appointed a committee to take into consideration the expediency of erecting a courthouse in Bristol, to set up a plan, estimate the expenses, and determine if the State owned any land on which the structure could be built.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Bowen, Memoir of Tristram Burges, pp. 38, 49.

<sup>18</sup>The Providence Gazette and Country Journal, April 6, 1811.

<sup>19</sup>Engrossed Records of the State of Rhode Island (State Archives: State House, Providence, Rhode Island), V. 18, p. 104.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 210.

The committee convened in Bristol in September of the same year and determined that the existing courthouse was in such a state of repair that its future use was impracticable. It further decided that the old house should be sold by the State and a new building be erected. Upon investigating, the committee decided the best location was in the commons of the town, on the same site occupied by the Bristol Academy; and after lengthy negotiations with the town it was agreed that Bristol would pay to move the academy and that the state would then construct the courthouse. This report, however, did not draw up any cost estimates or plans, and the successful completion of the plan was somewhat delayed because both Burges and Hunter failed to return to the House after the next elections.<sup>21</sup> Indeed it was not until 1816 that the matter was finally settled and construction begun.<sup>22</sup>

The act involving change in the state election laws was much less "cut-and-dried" than the courthouse actinn, and shows much more clearly the conservative outlook that Burges held at that time. During the early summer of 1811 an act for regulating the manner of electing the freemen of the State and the method of electing general state officers, which in essence was designed to expand the state-wide suffrage, was

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<sup>21</sup> Reports to the General Assembly, State of Rhode Island, 1810-1817 (State Archives: State House, Providence, Rhode Island), No. 88.

<sup>22</sup> Engrossed Records of Rhode Island, V. 19, pp. 423-25.

passed in the State Senate. After a long and heated debate in the House, Tristram Burges was among the thirty-eight who voted against the measure, compared with twenty-eight in favor. It is not known exactly who spoke either for or against the bill, but Burges' oratorical ability and his objections to a piece of legislation already accepted by the Senate leads to speculation that he was one of the Representatives involved. Burges, moreover, was instrumental in having the suffrage bill defeated. At the same time, however, he voted in favor of exempting the established voters of the state from payment of a poll tax. Thus while Burges would lessen the restrictions on those who held the franchise and would support his own vested interests, he was unwilling to extend the same benefits to others.<sup>23</sup> Because of his actions upholding the conservative Federalist ideals of government and his still growing anti-war spirit, Burges received a letter of commendation from the Federalist Governor Jones shortly before the state elections of 1812. Jones believed that Burges was working for the public good and his actions placed him on higher ground in the opinion of the Governor.<sup>24</sup>

In the elections of 1812, the established electorate of Providence gave the Federalist Party a unanimous 541 to 0

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<sup>23</sup>The Providence Gazette and Country Journal, June 22, 1812.

<sup>24</sup>Governor William Jones to Tristram Burges, Providence, March 24, 1812., Misc. Mss., Box J, Jo. 728, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, R. I..

sweep of the city; but Peter Grinnell replaced Burges, who although reelected, resigned his seat in the General Assembly.<sup>25</sup> The reason why Burges, riding the crest of a unanimous victory, should resign his seat is not known. His one biographer ascribed his actions to the pressures of his law practice and the "peculiar state of parties at that time," but he does not explain what this "peculiar state" was.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps a closer examination of Providence society and politics in 1812 will give a better explanation. During this period there were four hundred mechanics residing in Providence who were freemen of the town. They owned about half of the property in Providence but were unrepresented in the legislature. On the other hand, for the twenty-five lawyers of the city there were two representatives--one being Tristram Burges. The property of these twenty-five lawyers, moreover, was worth about \$150,000 compared to \$2,000,000 for the property of the mechanics.<sup>27</sup> It would be an understatement to say that there was considerable unrest among this group of unrepresented freemen. Indeed, Burges might have resigned not only because of the pressures of his law practice, but also to

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<sup>25</sup>The Providence Gazette and Country Journal, April 18, 1812.

<sup>26</sup>Bowen, Memoir of Tristram Burges, p. 51.

<sup>27</sup>Marx Libero Renzulli, "The Extent of Rhode Island's Participation in the War of 1812" (unpublished Master's Thesis, The University of Rhode Island, Kingston, 1958), p. 42.

preserve much of this practice and to hope for the support of this mechanic class in the future.

Although not in office but active in his law practice and civic affairs, the ex-legislator remained prominent in the Federalist Party and continued to be a leader in Providence society in the years that followed. Both Burges and his wife, Mary, were among the first pew-holders in the new First Congregational Society Church when it was established in October, 1816.<sup>28</sup> Continuing as a leader, the lawyer was also selected by the town of Providence to serve on a committee with Moses Brown, Samuel Eddy, George Jackson, and John Howland--all equally prominent citizens--to draw up an historical and topographical description of the Great Storm of September 22 and 23, 1815. This was one of the most destructive storms that Providence had known up to that time, and the town wished to preserve a record of its happenings. When the report was finally completed, however, it bore mainly the signature of Mr. Brown.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>"First Congregational Society Pew Holders," Rhode Island History, II (April, 1952), 47.

<sup>29</sup>Moses Brown, "Official Record of the Great Gale of 1815," Publications of the Rhode Island Historical Society, New Series (Providence: The Standard Printing Company, 1894), II, 232-35; William R. Staples, Annals of the Town of Providence from its First Settlement, to the Organization of the City Government, in June, 1832 (Providence: Knowles and Vose, 1843), p. 379.

Burges became a leading Federalist lawyer and leader of Providence society. It is not surprising therefore that the Federalist dominated Grand Committee (the State Senate and House together) elevated Burges to the position of Chief Justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court in May, 1817.<sup>30</sup> Writing some time after Burges' tenure on the bench, one member of the bar left the following impression of the Rhode Island courts:

Little of interest can be found in print in regard to the character of the courts during the Revolution and for fifty years afterwards. The judges continued to be annually elected and were mostly unlearned in the law. Courts so consisted were faulty of course; but they seem nevertheless to have administered justice with fair success. It is true that the tradition of the bar does not flatter them; but tradition paints with a free brush and delights in fantastic effects. The fact that such able lawyers as William Ellery and David Howell were willing to serve in the higher court as associate justices, and that James Burrill and Tristram Burges, at the zenith of their professional renown, each filled the office of chief justice

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<sup>30</sup>Gordon F. Harrison, Lineal and Collateral Ancestors of Senator Theodore Francis Green Who Served in the American Congress (Washington: n. p., 1955), p. 53; Bowen, Memoir of Tristram Burges, p. 52; and Bennett, Rhode Island Manual, pp. 240-41. Although Bowen and Harrison date Burges' term as Chief Justice from May, 1815, to May, 1816, the Manual dates it from May, 1817, to May, 1818. In 1816 the Federalist Governor Jones was reelected by a 332 vote majority and the Federalist strength in the House was still double their opponents. It was not until Mr. Knight defeated Jones in 1818 by 616 votes and the Republicans gained control of both Houses that they would be in a position to replace Burges as Chief Justice. Bowen also states that Mr. Burges was elected Chief Justice upon the election of Chief Justice James Burrill, Jr. to the Federal Senate in 1815. According to the Manual (p. 240) Daniel Lyman was Chief Justice from May, 1812 to May, 1816, and Burrill from May, 1816 to May, 1817. The Manual also places the election of Burrill to the Senate in 1817 (pp. 144-145), and not in 1815 as Bowen contends. It would seem, then, that Burges was Chief Justice from May, 1817 to May, 1818.

for a year is pretty good proof that the court was held in high honor, for certainly it could not have tempted them by its emoluments.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed the monetary rewards were not the main attraction to the office, for in 1789 the pay of the State Chief Justice was fixed at \$500 and that of the associate justices at \$350 per year. These rates prevailed until 1822, when they were lowered to \$250 and \$200 respectively.<sup>32</sup> Burges' tenure as chief justice proved quite short, however, for he remained in office only until the following May. When the Federalist Party fell out of power in both houses of the legislature in 1818, the Republican opposition promptly replaced the Federalist chief justice with one of their own, and ex-governor James Fenner succeeded Tristram Burges on the bench.<sup>33</sup>

Upon his removal as chief justice, Burges again returned to his law practice and a professorship of Oratory and Belles Lettres at Brown University.<sup>34</sup> While engaged in these two pursuits, he also had time to seek support in establishing a boarding school for girls in Providence. He described Miss Burroughs and Miss Calder, the teachers, as highly accomplished and in every way qualified to run such a school, for they would teach English, reading, grammar,

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<sup>31</sup>Thomas Durfee, Gleanings from the Judicial History of Rhode Island (Providence: Sidney S. Rider, 1883), p. 81.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 29.

<sup>33</sup>Bennett, Rhode Island Manual, pp. 240-41.

<sup>34</sup>Bowen, Memoir of Tristram Burges, pp. 51-52.

mathematics, accounting, chronology and history, geography with the use of globes, belles lettres lessons and composition, ornamental needle work, religion and morals, music and dancing, and drawing and painting in oil, water colors, and crayons. All this for \$2.50 a week for board and \$8.00 per quarter for tuition.<sup>35</sup>

As a lawyer Burges served the merchant and manufacturing elements of Providence society. In June, 1821, he petitioned the State General Assembly to set aside a judgment against his client, Providence manufacturer Thomas Sprague, because of damages allegedly caused by his mill-dam to property owned by one Caleb Williams of Cranston. Burges contended that the damages could not actually be attributed to Sprague and that the first trial had been a miscarriage of justice because his client had not been given an opportunity to prepare an adequate defense. He also argued that the last decision was unjust because the jurors were townsmen of Cranston, friends of Williams and undoubtedly partial towards him. After considering the matter until January, 1823, the General Assembly finally accepted the arguments and ordered that a new trial be held.<sup>36</sup> The arguments presented by Burges in this plea indeed pointed out the swing of many Federalists in New

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<sup>35</sup>Tristram Burges to James DeWolfe, Providence, April 3, 1820, Shepley Papers, V. 16, No. 163, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence, R. I..

<sup>36</sup>Petitions to the Rhode Island General Assembly, V. 50, p. 87.



England from an interest in shipping to manufacturing. In 1805 Burges had defended the commercial interests of Providence. Sixteen years later he was doing the same for the manufacturing element.

Although the Republican Party had gained the upper hand in the state with Nehemiah Knight's election as governor in 1817 and 1818, and retained it under Governors Gibbs and Fenner during the 1820's,<sup>37</sup> Tristram Burges was loath to give up the Federalist principles he had acquired. As late as 1824 his Federalist sympathies were still quite prominent. The visit of the Revolutionary War hero, Marquis de Lafayette, to Providence in August of that year was culminated by a banquet at which Burges proposed a toast to the distinguished guest. After a day that was filled with a gala celebration, a parade through the streets of the city, and the official greeting at the State House by the Governor, Burges expressed the feelings of gratitude of Rhode Island for the general's visit and of the nation for his great help in the Revolution. He ended his speech by saying:

. . . our eyes and hearts are turned to the same illustrious individual while we say

All hail to  
The companion of Washington;  
The fellow soldier of Greene and Hamilton;  
The friend of Freedom;  
The Citizen of Europe;  
The guest of the United States;  
GENERAL LAFAYETTE.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Bennett, Rhode Island Manual, pp. 102-03.

<sup>38</sup>The Providence Gazette, August 25, 1824.

Indeed, Burges' linking the name of Hamilton with those of Washington and Greene as a military hero without opposition or criticism showed the strong Federalist sentiment of both Burges and Providence in general, "a sentiment that still lived, although no man then, when the memory of the Hartford Convention was fresh in the minds of the people, had the moral courage to declare himself a Federalist."<sup>39</sup>

Thus it may be observed that almost ten years after his party had collapsed on the national level and been driven out of power on the state level, Tristram Burges continued to espouse the Federalist outlook and ideals. But if Tristram Burges could not call himself a Federalist, what then? In order to continue his career in politics he would have to do something about the stigma attached to the name "Federalist." The Congressional elections of 1825 in Rhode Island presented him with just such an opportunity.

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<sup>39</sup>Edward Field, ed., State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations at the End of the Century: A History (Boston: The Mason Publishing Company, 1902), I, 311-12.

## II

### A NATIONAL REPUBLICAN TO CONGRESS

In 1824 a general swing of Federalists into both the Adams and the Jacksonian presidential camps made it impossible for Burges to remain true to his affiliation. Necessity, therefore, rather than any great change in his personal or political ideology caused Burges to gravitate towards the Republicans and to accept the 1825 congressional nomination of a convention of the old Federalist element in the Rhode Island Republican Party. This pro-Federalist convention was the result of a split in the Republican Party. At its nominating convention that year the incumbent Congressmen, Samuel Eddy and Job Durfee, were the leading contenders. Eddy was renominated unanimously, but Durfee was much less fortunate, being beaten by Dutee J. Pearce of Newport. The defeated Durfee then claimed that the convention did not truly represent the freemen of the state and announced himself as an independent candidate for re-election. The old Federal element, who had never been cordial in supporting the candidates chosen by the Republicans, seized the opportunity presented by Durfee's bolt from the party and nominated Tristram Burges of Providence and William Hunter of Newport.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Field, State of Rhode Island, p. 313.

Indeed, by the sixth of August the list of candidates for the Nineteenth Congress included Samuel Eddy, Dutee J. Pearce, Tristram Burges, William Hunter, and Job Durfee--all alleging to be Republicans.<sup>2</sup>

To compound the mix-up in party affiliation, The Providence Patriot announced its support of Dutee J. Pearce and William Hunter, one a Republican nominee, the other a Federalist, and neither an incumbent, as the only true Republicans and labeled Burges as the Federalist candidate. To prove their point, the Patriot's editors went back to Jefferson's election in 1800 and noted how only 56 Republicans had been courageous enough to vote the Republican ticket in Providence. Moreover, they accused Burges of having commented on this fact by saying, "then there are fifty-six r---s in Providence." They went even further to charge that if Burges' supporters could find any deviation from his ultra-Federalist position in the last twenty-five years, then there would be at least one bright spot on his "political disk."<sup>3</sup>

Not content with just denouncing him as a Federalist, the Patriot continued to hammer away at the Providence lawyer. They demanded to know with what right he hoped to claim the support of the party with which he formerly acted when it was a known fact that he had not been set up by the entire organization but by only a few who were unsatisfied with the

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<sup>2</sup>The Providence Gazette, July 6- August 6, 1825.

<sup>3</sup>The Providence Patriot, August 17, 1825.

other candidates. The assertion that Tristram Burges was still a Federalist at heart was constantly reiterated and he was declared to be the "federal" candidate,<sup>4</sup>

Despite the allegations of the opposition press about his political beliefs, the largest and most highly attended meeting of Republicans ever known in Providence, held at the Manufacturers' Hotel on Monday evening, August 15, adopted resolutions supporting Burges in preference to the incumbent, Samuel Eddy. The Providence Republicans, moreover, said that Eddy had done nothing for Rhode Island during his six years in Congress; they opposed his vote in favor of the Missouri Compromise; and they accused him of having been a Crawford supporter until the last minute. Burges, on the other hand, was termed a "warm and able advocate of John Q. Adams."<sup>5</sup>

The men behind these statements said they were forced to make them because the supporters of Eddy had led the people of the city to believe that Burges had been nominated exclusively by the Federalist Party and would be supported only by its members. Indeed, the Republicans went on to stress that Burges should not be regarded as a Federalist Party candidate at all.

Mr. Burges is not the candidate of any party--he stands

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., August 17, 1825.

<sup>5</sup>The Providence Gazette, August 20, 1825.

before the people on his own merits, as a generous and open competitor for one of the most responsible and dignified posts in their government. He has formed no secret coalitions--he is propped by no Minority Caucus--he relies on no political party.<sup>6</sup>

Sensing that there was a strong popular support for the ex-Chief Justice among many freemen of the state, the editors of the anti-Burges Providence Patriot circulated a handbill "To the Farmers of Rhode Island" on the eve of the election. Directed to the agricultural element of the state, the handbill denounced Burges as being a manufacturer, a friend to manufacturers, and controlled by the manufacturing interests of Providence. The sad effects his election would have on the farming interests in the state were enumerated, and his opponent, Samuel Eddy, was declared to be the true friend of the farmers.<sup>7</sup>

This last ditch effort to stop the Providence attorney and swing the election to the incumbent proved to be a failure. On election day, August 30, 5,556 votes were cast. A majority was needed for election. Tristram Burges, receiving 2,932, nearly 300 more than his nearest rival, was the only candidate elected. A run-off election was held the following November to determine who would accompany him to Washington in December, and Dutee J. Pearce was chosen as the state's second representative.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>The Rhode Island American, August 19, 1825.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., August 30, 1825.

<sup>8</sup>Bennett, Rhode Island Manual, p. 166.

In the Nineteenth Congress, which convened in December of that year, were a number of notable figures with whom the newly elected representative from Rhode Island would be associating. Massachusetts boasted of having both the oratorical ability of Daniel Webster and the learned and professorial talents of Edward Everett; Louisiana claimed the learned jurist Edward Livingston, who had done so much to draft a penal code and a code of prison discipline in that state; and from Pennsylvania there was John Sergeant, one of the most learned and accomplished constitutional lawyers of his day.<sup>9</sup>

Hardly had Burges situated himself in the nation's capital when he began receiving mail from his constituents. One Republican reminded him that the welfare of the country would be best promoted if he supported the measures of the administration, worked for equitable treatment of the Indians, and acted according to his own principles on any question regarding slavery--remembering of course the sentiments of his friends in Rhode Island.<sup>10</sup>

A few weeks after Congress assembled, a bill to enlarge the Supreme Court was introduced into the House of Representatives. The main feature of this administration measure

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<sup>9</sup>Bowen, Memoir of Tristram Burges, p. 53.

<sup>10</sup>William Almy to Tristram Burges, Cranston, December 28, 1825. Misc. Mss., Box A, al 68, Rhode Island Historical Society.

was the creation in the new states of the Mississippi Valley of four new judicial circuits designed to raise the total number of circuits in the nation to ten. District judges would then maintain jurisdiction in all of these areas except western New York, western Pennsylvania, and western Virginia-- where the district judges of the ten areas were to perform lesser circuit court duties on a rotating basis. These ten new circuit areas were then to be combined into an enlarged national Supreme Court of ten justices. As soon as the bill was introduced onto the House floor, Representative Charles F. Mercer of Virginia offered a counter resolution to recommit the entire subject to the Judiciary Committee for further study.<sup>11</sup> It was in support of Mercer's resolution and in opposition to the bill itself that Burges chose to deliver his first address as a Federal Representative. Speaking against the measure on January 23, 1826, he listed the evils that many felt the new bill would remedy. After noting that it would equalize judicial administration, judicial representation, and knowledge of state laws, he then proceeded to speak in favor of the motion to recommit and to debunk the arguments of the bill's proponents.

Burges argued that the bill, because of its exclusion of over one million people in western Pennsylvania, Virginia, and New York, did not even make an attempt to equalize judicial

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<sup>11</sup>Gales and Seaton, Register of Debates in Congress, 19th Cong., 1st Sess., II, 1082.



administration. Instead of giving equal judicial representation, he stressed that the new bill would make the court an agent of sectional and partisan politics. Such a measure, Burges felt, would bring the "great doctrine of electioneering" to the court and allow it to work either for or against particular candidates. On this point Burges disagreed with his northern neighbor, Daniel Webster of Massachusetts, calling his idea of limiting the number of Supreme Court Justices by practical convenience a political heterodoxy. The Rhode Islander argued also that the new bill could not bring a greater equalization of judicial knowledge than already existed. The only way a judge could learn the laws was through reading and study--and no law could guarantee this.<sup>12</sup>

Burges, moreover, saw a great danger embodied in the proposed legislation. He feared that the idea of having ten Supreme Court judges for ten circuits would lead to demands for a new judge with each new circuit. Although the advocates of the measure said there should be no concern on this matter for another twenty to fifty years, the Rhode Islander saw at least ten more new states being admitted to the Union within twenty years.<sup>13</sup>

On January 24, the day after Burges' speech, the resolution was voted upon and defeated without further debate.

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<sup>12</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 19th Cong., 1st Sess., II, 1086-095.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

Not content to let the freshman Representative's speech lie in defeat, however, the Chairman of the Judiciary Committee attacked Burges and denounced him as a supporter of the old midnight judiciary established to bolster a dying administration of an earlier period,<sup>14</sup> thus raising the spectre of Federalism that had followed Burges from Rhode Island and from which he was struggling desperately to disassociate himself. The defeat of Mercer's resolution in January proved to be only a temporary setback, however. When the entire judiciary bill came up for its final vote in May, Burges again expressed his disapproval. This time among the majority (99 to 89), he voted against the expansion of the Supreme Court and helped cause its defeat.<sup>15</sup>

Despite his opposition to an administration measure supported by Webster and designed to give the President a chance to appoint at least two new justices,<sup>16</sup> Burges could not bring himself to say anything against the Adams administration or John Quincy Adams personally. He said, moreover, that if the President continued throughout his first term as the same profound scholar, enlightened statesman, ardent patriot, and exemplary Christian, there would be no doubt

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., pp. 1086-2000.

<sup>15</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 19th Cong., 1st Sess., II, 2647-648.

<sup>16</sup>Samuel Flagg Bemis, John Quincy Adams and the Union (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), p. 75.

of his re-election in 1828.<sup>17</sup> Burges was playing politics. Elected to Congress as a National Republican and a supporter of Adams, he found himself unable to support the expansion of the conservative Federalist dominated Supreme Court; but neither could he allow himself to be called an opponent of the administration. Using the kindest words possible, the Rhode Islander made a valiant effort to both oppose and support Adams at the same time.

In his first speech Burges also showed his feeling toward the doctrine of territorial expansion and the belief that the American people had a pre-emptive right to the North American Continent.

Will not new States arise? Already, sir, you have three new territories. Florida is spreading her population down to the very margin of her waters, and enriching her cultivation from 'the cane-bearing isles of the West.' Arkansaw [sic] is looking up the channel of her long rivers, towards the Mountains of Mexico, and will soon become rich, populous, and highly cultivated. The tide of migration is setting up the grand canal towards Michigan; and that Peninsula will, in a short period, be located and peopled from Lake to Lake. These three, sir, in less than five years with due courtesy and fair cause for admission, will knock at your door, and propose to sit down in the family circle of political Union. This is not all, sir. Population is travelling up the latitude across your northern territory, towards the great Caspian of our continent; and when they shall have heard of your ships on the waters of the Oregon, and of your colonies along the rich valleys of that river . . . these people will, sir, with the rapidity of a deep sea-lead thrown from the chains of a seventy-four, plunge down the longitude to meet and mingle with their

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<sup>17</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 19th Cong., 1st Sess., II, 1083.

countrymen on the waters of the Pacific.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed in an expansionist mood, Burges ended his speech with the American Eagle winnowing the breezes of the Atlantic with one wing and hovering over the Pacific with the other, "until the colossal power of the Republic, standing on the lofty mountains of this continent, shall, with one hand, extend the olive branch to the peaceful nations of the earth, and with the other wave the sword of justice over the satisfied and tranquil citizens of these widely extended regions."<sup>19</sup> Thus far had he moved from the parochial feelings he had voiced just before the War of 1812!

The first real conflict to develop between the parties emerging under the Adams administration was over the degree to which the country would participate in the Panama Congress. From the beginning Henry Clay was the champion in the Senate of the new Latin American Republics, and he desired to see the United States lead in a movement for cooperation among the countries of the New World. The President was also interested, but for other reasons. Adams feared the designs of George Canning, the British foreign minister, and of General Simon Bolivar, the promoter of the all-American Congress. By his own hand Adams made possible the strife that

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 1092-093.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 1095.

resulted in both houses. He would not act until the Senate confirmed his two appointees and the House voted the necessary funds. This was an action contrary to President's belief that foreign policy was an activity on which the executive alone should decide.<sup>20</sup>

In the House the majority of the debate centered around the resolution of Congressman McLane of Delaware. On April 4, 1826, in an attempt to tie up the Foreign Relations Committee's resolution that the House appropriate the necessary money as quickly as possible, and to discredit the administration forces, McLane resolved that the delegates being sent to Panama go in a diplomatic character only and be forbidden to make any treaties or to "discuss, consider, consult, upon any proposition or alliance, offensive or defensive, between this country and any of the South American Governments."<sup>21</sup> Immediately the friends of the President, led by Webster and with Burges in full support, argued that such an amendment had no grounds under the Constitution and might indeed be construed as direct instruction from the House to the ministers selected for the mission. Backing down a little, the opposition forces, now led by James Buchanan of Pennsylvania, the next day offered an amendment to McLane's amendment that the House

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<sup>20</sup>William O. Lynch, Fifty Years of Party Warfare, 1789-1837 (Indianapolis, Indiana: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1931), pp. 334-35.

<sup>21</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 19th Con., 1st Sess., II, 2009.

would only "deem it inexpedient" for the ministers to enter into any alliances.<sup>22</sup> This took much of the element of force and unconstitutionality out, and the two amendments were ordered to be printed.

Although Burges delivered no formal address on the Panama mission, his disgust at the delaying tactics of the opposition and his own opposition to McLane's ideas were made evident in a letter to his son:

The eternal Panama Mission is still corroding away the precious [sic] moments of our remaining time. The question seems not now so much whether we shall make the appropriation as whether we shall annex it to McLane's condition. Disgraceful as it would be to the House I fear this resolution in some shape or other will pass.

Burges felt that if the resolution must pass, it should be separated from the appropriations bill. As he saw it, the great object involved was for the United States to gain as many commercial treaties with South America as possible.<sup>23</sup>

What Burges hoped would happen regarding the amendment eventually took place. Although the House initially voted 99 to 95 to accept the resolution, with Burges in the negative, it turned around and on April 21 decidedly defeated the original resolution of the Foreign Relations Committee as amended by McLane. The vote was 54 yeas to 143 nays, with Burges and his colleague voting for the defeat. It must be

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 2029.

<sup>23</sup>Tristram Burges to his son, Washington, April 9, 1826. Peck Mss., Box XII, No. 58, Rhode Island Historical Society.

pointed out, however, that these motions were kept separate from the appropriations bill, which was approved the next afternoon 143 to 60, with Burges in the majority.<sup>24</sup>

The major portion of Burges' time for the remainder of the Nineteenth Congress, with time out for a battle with chronic asthma and family bereavement by the death of a daughter, was spent in fighting to obtain passage of a relief bill for surviving officers of the Revolution, and a bill to raise the minimum duty on wools and woolen goods imported into the country. As the bill for Revolutionary officers was originally reported out of committee, the provisions for amounts of money were left blank--to be filled in at the discretion of Congress.<sup>25</sup> It was then that a three-ring circus began. On April 26, 1826 on the motion of the Pensions Committee Chairman, Joseph Hemphill of Pennsylvania, the House provided the surviving officers with \$1,000,000. The House then voted \$1,200,000 for the enlisted soldiers and cut the length of service necessary for qualification from nine months to three. As a member of the committee, Burges got into the act May 1. Sensing possible political advantages at home he upped the ante for surviving officers from \$1,000,000 to

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<sup>24</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 19th Cong., 1st Sess., II, 2456-457, 2490, 2514. It should be noted that of the two delegates selected to go, John C. Anderson of Kentucky died enroute and John Sargent of Pennsylvania arrived too late. Little of value was accomplished at the Congress.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 2520.

\$1,200,000 (passed 70 to 47).<sup>26</sup>

The opposition was not lax in establishing a roadblock, however. As soon as Burges' amendment had been approved Congressman Benjamin Estill of Virginia was on his feet denouncing the bill for its haphazard construction and lack of documentation. In a surprise act he moved that the bill be recommitted, and despite the urgings of Burges and his fellow Rhode Islander, Dutee J. Pearce, the Estill forces carried the day. By the slim vote of 90 to 85 the House voted on May 2 for a recommitment--thus killing the bill for the remainder of the session.<sup>27</sup>

When the Nineteenth Congress reconvened for its second session in December, Burges again took up the fight for a pension bill. Now serving as Pensions Committee Chairman, the Rhode Islander reported the bill out of committee for the second time on January 4, 1827 and had it placed before the Committee of the Whole House for consideration. He then suggested two separate bills, one for officers and one for all enlisted men, excluding the state militias. He moved that everything after the enacting clause of the old bill be struck out and the two new bills be inserted. Largely because of objections to the split nature of the bills and the exclusion

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 2532, 2558, 2573, 2589.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 2592-593.



of the militia, however, Burges' motion was defeated, 95 to 53.<sup>28</sup> Burges then moved to insert an amendment combining his two bills into a single form including both officers and enlisted men--but still excluding the militia. In defense of his position he argued that the House had no constitutional right to include the militia and that if anything were granted to them it would have to go through the state governments. Although the Committee of the Whole accepted the bill as amended and reported it to the floor for debate,<sup>29</sup> the stand taken by Burges is strongly reminiscent of his advocacy of state control of the militia during the War of 1812 and of his service as an officer in the Rhode Island organization.

Once again the opposition pounced on the bill and it became bogged down in partisan politics and parliamentary maneuvers. Finally, on January 16, it was sent back to the Committee of the Whole by the narrow margin of four votes, 97 to 93. It was considered briefly on January 22, but before any votes were taken the committee rose and formed itself into the House of Representatives,<sup>30</sup> leaving the pensions bill of the Nineteenth Congress dead. The bill continued to be

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<sup>28</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 19th Cong., 2nd Sess., III, 602-34.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 631-34.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., pp. 732, 777-78.

a political football for another year, however, and was finally passed on May 13, 1828 with little opposition.<sup>31</sup>

While the debate over the pensions bill was raging, another measure that was to prove far more important to both the Rhode Island Congressman and his constituents was brought forward. Because the tariff of 1824 had not given the American woolen manufacturers the protection they expected and since English goods under-sold American goods in the domestic market, the depressed manufacturers sought relief from Congress. One such depressed entrepreneur was Zachariah Allen, a Providence manufacturer whose woolen broadcloth mill in North Providence was capitalized at \$94,000 --one of the largest in the state.<sup>32</sup> Tristram Burges and Zachariah Allen had both married daughters of Welcome Arnold.

As soon as Congress reassembled in December, 1826, Burges wrote to his brother-in-law asking for data, statements, and calculations that could be used in establishing a higher tariff on imported woolens. He also requested copies of memorials written by Providence manufacturers to hand out to the members of Congress whom he felt could make good use of them. Although he foresaw a fight between Providence

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<sup>31</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 20th Cong., 1st Sess., IV, 2596-662.

<sup>32</sup>Peter J. Coleman, The Transformation of Rhode Island, 1780-1860 (Providence: Brown University Press, 1963), p. 98.

manufacturers and New York merchants, he was sure Providence could bring more pressure to bear on Washington than could New York. The Congressman also informed his relative that "You may be assured of my best services in favour [sic] of the Memorials [asking for higher duties] both on acct. of my friends who are interested in its success & because I am persuaded that the interests of the country requires it."<sup>33</sup>

Burges was in on the political maneuverings behind the woolens bill from the very start. After conferring with Congressman Rollin C. Mallery of Vermont, the bill's sponsor, it was decided that the measure would have the best chance of passage if it came up under the mask of a bill to prevent frauds on the revenue. It was also his idea that the woolen manufacturers have an agent in Washington to protect their interests. Since he was convinced that no man in the country knew as much on the subject of woolen duties as his brother-in-law, Burges was quick to suggest that Zachariah come south.<sup>34</sup> Business pressures, however, were to prevent this from developing.

On January 17, 1827, the House took up Mallery's bill

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<sup>33</sup> Tristram Burges to Zachariah Allen, Washington, December 5, 1826. Peck Mss., Box XII, No. 61, Rhode Island Historical Society.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., December 11, 1826. No. 62.

"for the alteration of acts imposing duties on imports."

In the bill, the ad valorem rates on woolens were not touched, but four minimums were to be established. All woolens whose actual value at the place of importation was 40 cents or less per square yard were to be valued at 40 cents; between 40 cents and \$2.50 at \$2.50; and between \$2.50 and \$4.00 at \$4.00. The duty on raw wool was to be advanced to 35 per cent after June 1, 1828, and to 40 per cent a year later. As a final provision, the duty on raw wool costing between ten and 40 cents per pound was to be set at the higher figure.<sup>35</sup>

The day after the bill came up, Buchanan of Pennsylvania tried unsuccessfully to kill the measure by having it discharged from the Committee of the Whole, where it was being considered, with the avowed intention of laying it on the table. Burges was quick to rise in opposition. To table the measure, he argued, would be to kill it for the rest of the session while the woolen manufacturers needed relief as soon as possible. It would be, he claimed, unjust for Congress to delay six months waiting for information that could be obtained in a few weeks. Largely because of these arguments the bill was not removed from committee as Buchanan had

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<sup>35</sup> Register of Debates in Congress, 19th Cong., 2nd Sess., III, 740-46; Orrin Leslie Elliott, The Tariff Controversy in the United States, 1789-1833, With A Summary of the Period Before the Adoption of the Constitution (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press, 1892), pp. 238-39.

hoped.<sup>36</sup>

After the Committee of the Whole had considered the bill and itself discharged it onto the House floor for debate, Burges remained in the thick of battle. On January 22 he again pleaded that the bill not be delayed to see if other sectors of the economy, especially the New York merchants, were in the same depressed conditions or would be if the bill passed. If they were he reasoned, they would have petitioned for relief or in opposition to the bill as was the normal procedure. It was also emphasized that the main object of the bill was to give the manufacturers of woolen goods the same protection they should have received under the tariff of 1824, but hadn't.<sup>37</sup>

Tensions ran high in the House on February 7 when it refused by three votes (104 to 101) to allow the opposition to recommit the bill and kill it by delay. On the same day Burges again successfully defended New England woolen manufacturers against more attacks by Buchanan, who still opposed the measure as designed to aid New England at the expense of his own state. Three days later the opposition again went down to defeat when their movement to table the bill indefinitely failed, 84 to 109, with Burges and his colleague in the

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<sup>36</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 19th Cong., 2nd Sess., III, 747-49.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 782.

majority, Sensing a preponderance in voting strength, the advocates of protection then moved to consider the bill itself, and it passed by 106 to 95 with the triumphant Burges voting in favor. All these successes proved to be in vain, however. Eighteen days later the Senate voted by a one vote margin, 21 to 20--the deciding vote cast by Vice-President John C. Calhoun, to table the woolens bill and thus effectively killed it.<sup>38</sup>

The defeat of the Woolens Bill of 1826 and 1827 was not the end of the struggle to establish a more protective tariff, however. Indeed, in many respects it was only the beginning. Events that were to take place over the summer of 1827 and before the convening of the Twentieth Congress gave the controversy a new intensity and a new meaning-- a meaning that Congress, once assembled, could act upon.

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., pp. 995-1099 House, 496 Senate.

### III

#### LATER ADAMS YEARS: THE TARIFF OF 1828

During the summer of 1827 there were two distinct events that prepared Rhode Island for the stormy session of Congress that was to follow. The first centered around the election of state representatives to the Twentieth Congress and the other around the demands made by a convention at Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, regarding the tariff.

The political atmosphere in the Union's smallest state was noticeably calm during the summer of 1827. Indeed, toward the end of June one major newspaper stated that while a few people in the state desired some sort of political change, there was, "happily," no agitation by either the pro- or anti-Adams factions.<sup>1</sup> It was not until nearly the end of the same month that any candidates were nominated. On Tuesday, June 26, a meeting of "people friendly to the administration" was held at the State House in Newport, and Tristram Burges and Dutee J. Pearce were easily renominated.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that no party name was mentioned--the candidates were simply described as being in

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<sup>1</sup>The Rhode Island American and Providence Gazette,  
June 26, 1827.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., June 29, 1827.

sympathy with Adams.

At a convention of "regular" Republicans, held in the same place the following evening, there was representation from only thirteen of the state's thirty-one towns--and even less excitement over the nomination of candidates. In the course of the discussion over the possibility of endorsing the nomination of Burges and Pearce, Nathan B. Sprague of Smithfield objected, saying it would be far better for the true Republican Convention to dissolve without making any nominations. It was his contention, moreover, that while Pearce was generally acceptable to all Republicans in the state, his running-mate was not. Sprague brought up the old issue that Burges had long been associated with the Federalist Party and that "there would be some objections in the minds of old Republicans to nominate that Gentleman in a Republican convention." After a few short speeches on the subject, the convention finally resolved that because Burges and Pearce had done their job well enough it would be inexpedient to oppose them, but neither did it officially support them.<sup>3</sup> Thus while Burges was no longer opposed by many of the state's Republicans, to a significant minority he was still associated with the Federalist Party and would be openly opposed.

Once the nominations were over, however, the campaigning settled down and was exceptionally quiet. The two incumbents

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.



were elected without opposition.<sup>4</sup> So lop-sided was the balloting in August, that of the 263 votes cast in Providence Pearce had all except three and Burges all but four.<sup>5</sup>

The protective system was also an area of prime concern during the summer of 1827. After the defeat of the Woolens Bill in 1827 many Rhode Islanders still had high hopes of raising the tariff walls as soon as possible. The state sent four delegates to the Harrisburg Convention for the Encouragement and Support of Domestic Industry. The convention, attended by almost all of the Northeastern and Central states (including Kentucky, Ohio, and Virginia) resolved that while it would advocate the raising of protective barriers on all the industries represented, the interests of the wool growers and manufacturers, due to their badly depressed conditions, would be the main concern.<sup>6</sup>

Although the supporters of Andrew Jackson alleged that the convention was little more than a demonstration by the administration forces to use the protective movement for political ends,<sup>7</sup> it may be seen that it was not really a

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<sup>4</sup>Charles Carroll, Rhode Island, Three Centuries of Democracy (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, Inc., 1932), p. 568.

<sup>5</sup>The Rhode Island American and Providence Gazette, August 31, 1827.

<sup>6</sup>Proceedings of the General Convention of Agriculturists, and Manufacturers, and Others Friendly to the Encouragement and Support of the Domestic Industry of the United States (no place: no pub., 1827), pp. 1-3, 10; Tariff Pamphlets, I, University of Rhode Island.

<sup>7</sup>F. W. Taussig, The Tariff History of the United States (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), p. 84.

gathering of either Adams or Jackson men--but of men from both sides who were ardently committed to a higher tariff.<sup>8</sup> A higher tariff was what the delegates at Harrisburg sought. The proposition regarding wool and woolens, so important to Rhode Island, asked for many features strikingly like the bill defeated in Congress only a few months earlier. A duty of 20 cents a pound on all wool costing 8 cents a pound was asked for--to be increased by 2 1/2 cents annually until 50 cents was reached. On most imported woolen goods a 40 percent duty was asked, to be increased to 45 percent after the first year and to 50 percent after the second. Four minimum duties were also suggested: goods valued at less than 50 cents per square yard were to be taken at 50 cents, then \$2.50, the third at \$4.00, and the fourth at \$6.00. These clauses were frankly intended to place the duty on wool at a prohibitive rate, and it was openly avowed that the minimum duty idea was designed to produce an open market in certain types of goods for the American manufacturers.<sup>9</sup>

When the Twentieth Congress convened in December, 1827, Tristram Burges was present but did not take an active part in the debates for over a month. In September his youngest daughter, age 14, had died; and the following month his eldest

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<sup>8</sup>Lynch, Fifty Years of Party Warfare, p. 340.

<sup>9</sup>Edward Stanwood, American Tariff Controversies in the Nineteenth Century (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1903), I, 266.

daughter, age 23, followed her younger sister. Bowed down with family grief and confined to his lodgings with recurrent asthma, there was little he could do in the first weeks of the session.<sup>10</sup>

Despite his inability to take part in the early actions of Congress, the Rhode Islander continued to inform himself on the feelings and desires of his constituents. Late in December he received memorials from the Providence manufacturers to distribute concerning the tariff. He was also reminded to call the attention of the members of the House to the desires of the Harrisburg Convention. His brother-in-law informed him of a feeling of disillusionment that had set in among many people of New England because President Adams had failed to mention either the American system or internal improvements in his message in Congress. New England had expected zealous support of a higher tariff from the administration, but as it was, they feared Adams had jeopardized his popularity by not mentioning a subject that had become disagreeable to certain elements in the South.<sup>11</sup>

The ideas on the tariff drawn up by the Harrisburg Convention were not destined to appear before Congress, however.

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<sup>10</sup>Bowen, Memoir of Tristram Burges, pp. 57-58; The New York Daily Times, October 15, 1853.

<sup>11</sup>Zachariah Allen to Tristram Burges, Providence, December, 22, 1827. Peck Mss., Box XII, No. 67. Rhode Island Historical Society.

The partisan feelings that had developed between the Adams and Jackson men since the election of 1824 prevented it. Through a combination of the pro-Jackson Southerners and Pennsylvania Democrats, the anti-tariff forces were able to place one of their own men, Andrew Stevenson, in the Speaker's chair. Stevenson then proceeded to stack the Committee on Manufactures, which would consider any tariff bill, with a decidedly anti-protectionist majority while leaving Mallary of Vermont on as Chairman. The first indication of the opposition's plan came on the last day of 1827 when the committee, over Chairman Mallary's protest, voted to send for persons and papers to examine the need for a change in tariff legislation. Although protectionists were startled and united against what they interpreted as a delaying action, it was sustained by the Southern coalition 102 to 88.<sup>12</sup> The second move of the anti-tariff group was even bolder. The new bill was prepared which, while it seriously modified the woolens schedule, contained other clauses and rates designed to make it obnoxious to most protectionists.

The new bill would raise the duty on hemp from \$35 to \$45 per ton, on molasses from 5 to 7 1/2 cents a gallon with no drawbacks for rum manufacturers, on pig-iron from 56 to 62 1/2 cents per hundredweight, on hammered bar-iron

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<sup>12</sup>Elliott, The Tariff Controversy, pp. 241-42.

from \$30 to \$37 per ton.<sup>13</sup> The most controversial feature of the new bill was the proposed alteration of the wool and woolen duties. Under the tariff of 1824 the duty had been fixed at 30 percent. This was now to be changed to a mixed specific and ad valorem duty. Wool, moreover, was to pay seven cents a pound duty plus 40 percent in 1828, 45 percent in 1829, and 50 percent thereafter.<sup>14</sup> The South hoped to make this bill so unacceptable to the Adams protectionists of the Northeast that they would be forced to defeat it; while the Jackson men of the North, knowing the measure would be defeated, could support it and term themselves as the advocates of sound protectionism.

In preparation for the heated debate that he knew would come and in which he earnestly desired to take part, Burges began to fortify himself with information from his manufacturing connection in Providence. On January 23, Zachariah Allen sent estimates of both the fixed and circulating capital in his woolen business, and described how this capital was constantly fluctuating because of the seasons and sales. Burges was informed, moreover, that during the last half of 1827 his brother-in-law had been forced to hold this stock rather than sell it at prices

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<sup>13</sup>Percey Ashley, Modern Tariff History (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1911), pp. 193-94.

<sup>14</sup>Taussig, The Tariff History, pp. 89-91.

greatly depressed by English competition.<sup>15</sup> In another appeal to his congressman-relative, Allen told how he had lost over \$20,000 since starting his business in 1822 and how he feared being forced to abandon his effort unless some relief was soon in coming.<sup>16</sup>

Burges was also informed that the new tariff had excited a great deal of interest in his home state. Indeed, there was a feeling among many in Providence who had originally supported the Harrisburg resolutions that the reported Congressional plan of duties on hemp, molasses, and woolens should be opposed. It was felt that the new duty on wools and woolens would utterly destroy the state's manufacturers of coarse woolens and be of little benefit to the makers of finer grade products because the increase in duty on imported raw wool came far too soon and would not allow the time needed for the domestic flocks of sheep to increase to the point where they could supply domestic consumption. Some consideration, it was asserted, should be provided for in the meantime.<sup>17</sup>

It was not just the wools and woolens provisions that were of major concern to Rhode Island and her representatives. Reflecting the new desire to establish ties between New England and the West, a feeling existed that if the duty on molasses was opposed by the East it would have a detrimental

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<sup>15</sup>Zachariah Allen to Tristram Burges, Providence, January 23, 1828. Peck Mss., Box XIII, No. 1.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., No. 2. January 24, 1828.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., No. 3. February 11, 1828.

effect on the minds of the agriculturalists in the Middle and Western states.<sup>18</sup> The men who believed this, moreover, represented a growing number of Northeastern manufacturers who saw the benefits that could be derived from economic and political links with the West. Allen informed Burges that if his colleague, Dutee J. Pearce, were so blind as to vote against the new duties on molasses merely to please a few distillers and importers in his home town of Newport, it would surely bring about his political death.<sup>19</sup>

As Zachariah Allen's letters to his brother-in-law would indicate, there was a great deal of disagreement in various sections of the state on the merits of the proposed legislation. In the cities of Warren and Bristol many people saw the proposed increase of duty on molasses and the abolition of any cutback for rum distillers as a deliberate plot to bring the total destruction of the distilling industry on New England. It was generally felt that the proposed piece of legislation would return the towns to sad days of the Embargo and Non-Intercourse. The distillers argued that it was up to the government to extend the same protection to the makers of rum as to any other industry, even if it meant a downward tariff revision. They appealed to their representatives to act

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid...

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., February 13, 1828. No. 4.

accordingly, in the "true principles of a judicious tariff."<sup>20</sup>

The shipping interests of Providence were also hotly opposed to any upward revision of the tariff. Decriing the fact that their commerce had fallen from 15,490 tons in 1821 to only 13,126 in 1828, the merchants argued that one segment of the economy should not be protected at the expense of another. It was their belief, moreover, that if the domestic manufacturers followed more rigid economies and paid closer attention to improvements, they would not need to apply to Congress for more protection at every session.<sup>21</sup>

Aligned with the state's woolen manufacturers, and in direct opposition to the distillers and shippers, were the makers of cotton goods--especially the finer grade products. Arguing for a high tariff on imported fine cotton goods, this group feared that many among its numbers would either be forced to revert to making poorer quality goods or go out of business entirely if they were not granted an increased degree of protection.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Memorial of the Citizens of the Town of Warren, In the State of Rhode Island, Against an Increase of Duty on Molasses Imported, February 25, 1828 (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1828) pp. 3-4; Memorial of the Citizens of Bristol, In the State of Rhode Island, Against an Increase on Certain Imported Manufactures, March 3, 1828 (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1828), pp. 3-4.

<sup>21</sup>Representation of Sundry Citizens of Providence, In the State of Rhode Island, Upon the Subject of an Increased Duty On Certain Imports, March 3, 1828 (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1828), pp. 3-5.

<sup>22</sup>Memorial of a Committee in Behalf of Cotton Manufacturers of Providence, In the State of Rhode Island, February 1, 1828 (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1828), pp. 3-4.



Armed with both letters and memorials expressing the sentiments of his constituents, Burges was well prepared when he delivered his first major address on the subject. Speaking before the Committee of the Whole House, where the bill resided after being released from the anti-protectionist Committee on Manufactures, on March 29, Burges raised the voice of Rhode Island in harmony with that of the Harrisburg Convention. Using copious facts and comparative figures, largely supplied by his brother-in-law, the Congressman argued that the British were the ones responsible for driving down the price of domestic wools and woolens. He asserted that almost all of the import trade since the war had fallen back into the hands of the English, who were crowding vast quantities of woolen goods onto the American market--but not with the hopes of making a profit for themselves. The British, he believed, were working with the sole purpose of driving the American manufacturers and growers out of business because of their inability to compete at lower prices. Burges, moreover, stated that only pure protection could remedy the financial losses sustained by the woolen industry, and such protection must be against excessive foreign competition as well as importation.<sup>23</sup>

Soon after the bill was reported to the House by the

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<sup>23</sup>Tristram Burges, Speech of Mr. Burges, of Rhode Island, in Committee of the Whole on the State of the Union, March 29, 1828, on Mr. Mallary's Motion to Amend the Bill on Wool and Woolens (no place: no pub., 1828), pp. 3, 11-16. Tariff Pamphlets, II, University of Rhode Island.

Committee of the Whole on April 3,<sup>24</sup> Burges again expressed his opinions. Although he believed that the entire bill was a delusion of the hopes of both the farmers and manufacturers, he stressed that he was personally obligated to vote for it as nothing better could be obtained. Four days later, after advocating a tariff high enough to protect the domestic production of indigo, he reiterated his belief that the bill, taken as a whole, would probably be more injurious than beneficial to the Eastern manufacturers.<sup>25</sup>

His major effort on behalf of the tariff of 1828 came on April 21, two days before the final House vote on the measure. In a speech that the New York Daily Times later estimated to have taken nearly six hours to deliver,<sup>26</sup> the Congressman answered all those who felt that the protective or American System would work to the detriment of any section or state. Conjuring up the sharpest Anglo-phobian ideas he could, Burges argued for perfect protection of the domestic market for wools and woolens under the American System. English competitors should be driven out of the country because they were trying not only to undersell American goods, but to destroy the entire American industry. He counseled his colleagues not to listen to compromisers who would

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<sup>24</sup>Stanwood, American Tariff Controversies, I, 281.

<sup>25</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 20th Cong., 1st Sess., IV, 2255, 2323-324.

<sup>26</sup>The New York Daily Times, October 15, 1853.

oppose the American System by asking for "modified protection" designed to give a "judicious tariff," because to do so would be to play into the hands of the British lion.<sup>27</sup>

As his speech progressed in length and grew in intensity Burges turned from dealing exclusively with the English threat to his personal antagonist, Congressman George McDuffie of South Carolina. During the process of the debate on the tariff, the Southerner in an earlier speech had bitterly assailed Burges, pouring forth a torrent of invective and calling upon the reporters to present his words to the country. Burges replied in the same style and with perhaps even greater acrimony. He accused McDuffie of having plagiarized some of his statements on the finances of the country and criticized his opponent for not having adopted the style of speaking common to scholars and gentlemen. When he intimated that anyone who had heaped abuse on a fellow congressman in a manner like McDuffie's had placed himself beneath the reach of rebuke, Burges drew a sharp rap from the Speaker's gavel and was told to temper his remarks.<sup>28</sup>

Turning from a personal rebuke of McDuffie, Burges then

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<sup>27</sup>Tristram Burges, Speech of Mr. Burges, of Rhode Island, In the House of Representatives of the United States, April 21st, A. D. 1828, on the Tariff (Washington: Way and Gideon, 1828), pp. 20-21. The brevity with which the Register of Debates (20th Cong., 1st Sess., IV, 2452-453) treats this speech in many instances does the speaker an injustice by deleting arguments and factual material.

<sup>28</sup>The New York Daily Times, October 15, 1853.

considered the Southerner's argument as to whether American or English manufacturers could supply the domestic wool and woollen markets at the lowest cost to the consumer. With elaborate comparative figures of English and American families engaged in labor, the New Englander arrived at the conclusion that while duties for protection were not a tax on the consumption of domestic goods they were on the consumption of foreign manufactures. He explained this by saying that the elements of cost in American products were capital, labor, and raw material; while the British had to pay for all of these plus the cost of importation. The conclusion was then drawn that American goods would be cheaper in their own market by as much as sixteen percent, and could compete successfully in any market where they were admitted on equal terms. Indeed, he added, Americans could and must sell domestic woolens in their own market at a cost lower than the British--and to facilitate this the expansion of the sheep industry into the mountain valleys of the upper South was urged as an accompaniment to the higher tariff.<sup>29</sup>

Unable to confine himself to economic matters any longer, Burges returned to his attack on the South in general and George McDuffie in particular. Calling the arguments

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<sup>29</sup> Burges, Speech in the House, April 21, pp. 25-38.

used by the anti-tariff men and the new Southern sectionalists the foundations of "maddening delusions," the Northerner turned his full attention to the South when he warned that with its new arguments,

The South have but two courses before them. The first, is to join the north and perfectly protect the cotton trade, and secure the most extended domestic market. The second is, to become immediately colonies to Great Britain, which I know they will never; and sell their independence to secure the sale of their cotton wool.<sup>30</sup>

Showing a national interest and a belief that the good of the nation would foster the good of New England, a concept many New Englanders had accepted since the early 1820's, Burges expressed a candid personal opinion on the new tariff. Although not fully certain of its benefits and well aware of its harmful effects upon his home state, he said he expected to support it because it had the appearance of doing good in some areas of the North, West, and South; and because there was nothing better at the time.<sup>31</sup>

And support the tariff measure he did. When the final House vote was counted Tristram Burges cast his lot for protection and was among the 105 to 94 majority. It is interesting to note, however, that his fellow Rhode Islander, Dutee J. Pearce, remained closely connected with his Newport interests and voted against the bill because of the clause

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

pertaining to the molasses duties.<sup>32</sup> After the bill had been sent to the Senate for concurrence (where it later passed), Burges stated again his political and economic reasons for supporting the measure.

If they [the House amendments to the tariff bill] do not prevail it will be because the Jackson senators vote them down. Our object is to get a good bill now & if not now to leave the business in the best condition to be amended. This is the object of all friends of the true American system. It is important too that New England should not defeat this Bill which promises so much to the middle and western states. It will be instantly said by the opposition that Mr. Adams & all his N. England friends are Anti-Tariff. This argument will be calculated [circulated] from any [every] meridian from Maine to Missouri. It is the settle purpose of all the southern Jackson party first to overthrow this administration & then to remove every law of protection so far as they can and retain revenue enough to go on with the government. All true friends of the great American policy must unite if they intend to save the manufacturers of the country.<sup>33</sup>

He then informed the freemen of his home city that he was sorry if any of his friends disagreed with his vote, but personal feelings prevented him from voting otherwise.<sup>34</sup>

It was not over the tariff alone that Burges managed to raise the ire of many Southern congressmen. Late in January, 1828, the representatives from Louisiana laid before the House the claims of one of its citizens, Marginy D'Auterive, for injury done to one of his slaves and the subsequent medical

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<sup>32</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 20th Cong., 1st. Sess., IV, 2731-742.

<sup>33</sup>Tristram Burges to Zachariah Allen, Washington, April 26, 1828. Peck Mss., Box XIII, No. 6.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid..

expenses incurred while building barricades prior to the battle of New Orleans.<sup>35</sup> Because of the nature of the claim it quickly became a sounding board for the anti-slavery arguments that were gradually developing in the North, especially among those who sought the abolition of slavery. During the debate Burges took a stand on the issue. What he said was not acceptable to large segments of New England's population. Speaking in reference to those who favored quick emancipation, Burges counseled:

They have indeed zeal--unbounded zeal--but they are entirely without that knowledge and wisdom indispensable to the accomplishment of any great enterprise. Slavery they regard as an evil and Freedom as a good--indeed, as all wise, good, and prudent men in the country regard them. Immediate and universal emancipation is their only remedy for every care and condition of slavery. They say nothing, and think nothing, of the legal rights of the masters thus at once extinguished; nor ask what condition of servitude could equal the wretchedness of a million and a half of slaves at once thrown out of the employment and the support, the protection and control of their masters.<sup>36</sup>

He claimed that the South had nothing to fear in regard to the status of slavery, and pledged that he personally would never work to overthrow the rights of any slaveholders in the states where slavery was an established institution. It was here, along with the aggravations over the tariff, that his break with the South came. The Rhode Islander argued,

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<sup>35</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 20th Cong., 1st Sess., IV, pp. 1093-098; Bowen, Memoir of Tristram Burges, p. 69. According to the date in the Register Bowen is one year off by dating the D'Auterive claim in January, 1829.

<sup>36</sup>Bowen, Memoir of Tristram Burges, pp. 74-75.

moreover, that the Federal Congress had no right to legislate on slavery in the existing states, as that was a state matter. But not so in the territories, for "except concerning the exclusive jurisdiction of ceded territory, the legislative powers of Congress seem confined to raising revenues for common defense, and general welfare; together with legislation incidental and auxiliary to those great objects."<sup>37</sup> It was this exception regarding the right of Congress to legislate over any matter in the territories that brought a storm of Southern protest down on both Rhode Island and her representative.

Despite his unpopularity in the South and the fact that some elements in Rhode Island had urged a vote against the tariff, Burges continued to maintain close accord with the state's manufacturing element. A dinner was given in his honor on June 12, 1828 in Pawtucket, as a compliment for his distinguished services in defense of the New England outlook and policies; and among the guests was Samuel Slater, the father of Rhode Island's industry. After a toast to President Adams, drunk standing with three cheers, the assemblage toasted the guest of honor "as the fearless advocate for the interests of New England" and hailed him

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<sup>37</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 20th Cong., 1st Sess., IV, 1093-098, 1094. Underlining done by author, not in original.



as the champion of the great national policy and the friend of the Revolutionary soldier.<sup>38</sup> The Congressman, after the meal was concluded, delivered a very short address. He reminded his listeners, after complimenting Senator Nehemiah R. Knight for supporting the tariff bill, that while some in the state disagreed with the new bill the vote of Rhode Island in Congress should be applauded rather than censured. For Henry Clay, the prime advocate of the American System and the man to whom Burges was increasingly giving his political support, he concluded "words cannot honor him; we extend to him the homage of our grateful hearts."<sup>39</sup>

As events of the next few years were to prove, however, words such as these would become harder and harder to say. Once again over the tariff they would be entirely forgotten and replaced with new ones. New words that would have an entirely different meaning.

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<sup>38</sup>Hezekiah Niles, ed., Niles' Weekly Register, Containing Political, Historical, Geographical, Scientific, Economical and Biographical Documents, Essays and Facts, together with Notices of the Arts and Manufactures, and a record of the Events of the Times, XXXIV, (June 28, 1828), pp. 283-84.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

#### IV

#### THE JACKSON YEARS

Caught up with recurrent illness and still grieving over family losses, Tristram Burges was not very active during the short second session of the Twentieth Congress. He did hope, moreover, that Adams would be re-elected in 1828 and was pleased when the President carried Rhode Island by a substantial majority.<sup>1</sup> When the final votes were in, however, it was seen that Andrew Jackson would be the next President.

In the congressional elections that followed in 1829, Burges and Pearce were again re-nominated by the National Republicans. The Jackson forces, calling themselves "General Republicans," put forth ex-Republican Congressmen Samuel Eddy and Job Durfee, with the old Federalist representative, Elisha R. Potter, and John DeWolfe, Jr. having some support. DeWolfe, a member of a well known merchant family of Bristol, had previously served two terms in the State House of Representatives. During the course of the campaign numerous charges and counter-charges were leveled. Judge Eddy and Job Durfee accused the incumbents of misusing

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<sup>1</sup>The Rhode Island American and Providence Gazette, November 21, 1828. The vote: 2,180 for Adams; 479 for Jackson.

public property while in Washington and asserted that Pearce and Burges were nominated to oppose the Jackson Administration in all its measures--whether they were right or wrong. It was also pointed out that Congressman Burges had been often sick and missed a good deal of time while Congress had been in session. In answer to these charges the National Republicans ran primarily on the basis of their past records. Burges' opponent, Samuel Eddy, was charged with being a three sided politician: originally supporting Crawford at his nominating convention; switching to Adams when Crawford was seen a loser; and finally deserting Adams for Jackson to receive the Jackson Party nomination for Congress.<sup>2</sup>

It was during this campaign that Burges wrote to Nathan M. Wheaton, a Wickford Republican and candidate for Lieutenant Governor in 1830, informing him of a "fishing party" to be held at Howland's Ferry, in Portsmouth near Newport. Wheaton was urged to have his county represented.<sup>3</sup> In an address given at the "fishing party" Burges let his anti-Jackson feelings shine through. He described the Jackson party as the one which "the fence men leaped down

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<sup>2</sup>Tristram Burges, Address. Slanders Refuted, Being a Reply to the Foul and Abusive Attacks Made on Dutee J. Pearce and Tristram Burges (no place, no date), pp. 5-II.

<sup>3</sup>Tristram Burges to Nathan M. Wheaton, Providence, August 6, 1829. Rhode Island Historical Society Mes., XVII, No. 50.

[into] and joined with those who had sincerely been of that party; and all together, they started for every office in the gift of the President."<sup>4</sup> Another electioneering pamphlet announced the party's complete support of Burges and attempted to dispell any rumors that the National Republicans were not united behind him. It labored at length to disassociate Burges from any attachment to the Federalist element that might linger in people's minds.

Mr. Burges was first elected to congress by a majority over Mr. Eddy in 1825. The Republican party had, at that time, the controlling power of our elections. The four counties of Newport, Providence, Kent, and Bristol, all counties which had Republican majorities, gave majorities to Mr. Burges. Washington, the only county with a Federal majority, gave a majority against him, and the greatest adverse majority was in the most decided Federal town of South Kingstown. These are matters of fact about which there can be no dispute. They are recorded in the list of votes, in 'figures that cannot lie.' Mr. Burges then owed his election to the Republican Party. In 1827 he appeared again before the same party. He spread before them a map of his political life for the last two years, and they again supported him. Another term of two years has now elapsed, and if he is not a Republican candidate now, pray who has changed? Mr. Burges or the Republican Party? Neither Mr. Burges or the Republican Party has changed, but certain men for certain purposes, have taken upon them to apply that much abused title, to a thing too odious to pass without disguise.

As the campaign drew to an explosive close the Jackson forces brought forth further charges. Since Burges had been

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<sup>4</sup>Tristram Burges, An Address to the Landholders and Farmers of Newport County to the Friends of Messrs. Pearce and Burges, Holden at Howlands Ferry Bridge, August 7, 1829, 3rd. ed. (Providence: Daily Advertiser, 1829), pp. 11-12.

<sup>5</sup>An Address to the Freeman of Rhode Island by a Republican Farmer (Providence: 1829), pp. 11-12.

born in Massachusetts and owned land in Seekonk it was felt that he could not represent his adopted state as well as Eddy-- a native son.<sup>6</sup> On the day before the election his opponent issued a highly partisan handbill explaining and praising his own stand on many important topics. Eddy boasted of his courage and challenged Burges to gratify his curiosity on the subject "as soon as he pleases." Picked up quickly by the Rhode Island American and labeled as a challenge to a duel, Eddy was denounced as unfit for office and undeserving of any votes.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of the effect this final attack had on the outcome, it was obvious that the National Republicans were behind their candidates. Burges and Pearce far out-distanced their Democratic rivals.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time Burges also worked to better the relationship between his home section and the South. Opposed to their stand on the tariff of 1828, he hoped to establish commercial ties between the Southern growers and Northern producers--and earnestly hoped that Rhode Island and South Carolina could become closer friends both economically and

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<sup>6</sup>The Providence Patriot, August 22, 1829.

<sup>7</sup>The Rhode Island American, Statesman, and Providence Gazette, August 25, 1829.

<sup>8</sup>Bennett, Rhode Island Manual, p. 166. The vote was as follows: Burges, 4,108; Pearce, 4,328; Eddy, 1,251; Durfee, 1, 126; Potter, 581; DeWolfe, 203; Scat'., 33.

politically.<sup>9</sup> This appeal, however, fell on deaf ears.<sup>10</sup>

One of the earliest factors to emerge from the House when it assembled in December, 1829, was that sectional topics were rife, sectional jealousies high, and partisan warfare unrelenting. Because of his National Republican election and outlook, Burges was more often than not found in opposition to the Jackson Administration.

Taking a relatively inactive role in the early political movements of the House, the Rhode Islander gathered information and support for the attack on the high tariff he knew would come. Early in February, 1830, a constituent from Providence expressed surprise that the Southern planters wanted to lower the existing tariff and had not grasped the idea that the true policy, even for the South, was sound protection. He appealed for Burges to seek a common ground where New England as the producer and the South as the consumer could come together for mutual benefits.<sup>11</sup> This was an approach the Congressman had tried before, and it had failed.

Burges' major action during this first session of the

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<sup>9</sup>Tristram Burges to William Drayton, Providence, June 25, 1829. In Niles' Register, September 5, 1829, XXXVII, 24.

<sup>10</sup>William Drayton to Tristram Burges, Charlestown, South Carolina, August 1, 1829. In Niles' Register, September 5, 1829, XXVII, 24.

<sup>11</sup>Lemuel H. Arnold to Tristram Burges, Providence, February 5, 1830. Misc. Mss., Box A, Ar 64. Rhode Island Historical Society.

Twenty-First Congress came as a leader in the fight to beat down the amendments to the tariff of 1828 put forth by his arch-foe, George McDuffie of South Carolina. On April 26 the Southerner moved that all increases on the duty on manufactured or raw wool be reduced to the point where they were before 1828, and all increases on the manufactures of cotton or of goods in which cotton was a major component also be reduced to the same point.<sup>12</sup>

Trading argument for argument and parliamentary move for parliamentary move, the two sides faced each other squarely in a renewed tariff debate. The argument of the opposition forces reached its crescendo the day before the final vote on McDuffie's amendments. Burges, speaking for the advocates of protection, delivered in searing invective an attack against both the Southern Congressman and his home state. Speaking on May 10 in support of a bill for a more effective collection of revenue, Burges reaffirmed his support of the tariff bill of 1828. He was quick, however, to reject McDuffie's idea that the only way to end transgressions against the law would be to abolish the law so there could be no violations possible. Burges again saw Great Britain as the instigator and the South as the agent in an attempt to destroy the American protective system. He continued to

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<sup>12</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 21st Cong., 1st Sess., VI, 819-20.

hammer away at McDuffie's amendments as designed to abolish the American System, a system supposedly detrimental to a minority in the South and whose end would alleviate Southern grievances against the North. South Carolina, it appeared, would only be satisfied when the entire American System was dead and the United States had reverted to the position of economic colonies of England. Burges' anti-South Carolina invective reached its climax in the following attack:

South Carolina, of all these States once most devoted to this Union, go if thou, if thou wilt, Leave this Brotherhood of republics, this home of equality in the new world, for alienage in the old, and secondary rights and honors with European royalty. Provide thyself with other relations; alliance with England . . . Alliance with England! No matter by what name this connexion [sic] is known to politicians in South Carolina, it will be deemed by all free men in other lands, [as] the lion and the lion's provider.<sup>13</sup>

With the Rhode Islander a leader among the opposition, a separate vote was forced on McDuffie's amendments the day after Burges' speech. The result was a resounding success for the protectionists. The woolen amendment was defeated by 120 nays to 68 yeas and the cotton clause by a voice vote.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as the final tariff bill of 1830 arrived, it was essentially the same as the 1828 law--but designed for stricter

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<sup>13</sup>Tristan Burges, Speech of Tristan Burges, In the House of Representatives of the United States, When in Committee of the Whole, May 10, 1830, On the Bill for the More Effectual Collection of the Duties on Imports, Mr. McDuffie's Amendment to Repeal the Tariff, Being Under Consideration. (Providence: Marshall and Hammond, 1830), pp. 3-5, 22, 25.

<sup>14</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 21st Cong., 1st Sess., IV, 984-85.



enforcement and more efficient collections of duties. It passed the House on May 13 by an overwhelming 127 to 40 majority. Fifteen days later, however, the protectionists relented by reducing the duty on imported molasses and restoring the drawback to rum distillers removed earlier<sup>15</sup>—much to the pleasure of many in Rhode Island.

Burges did not center all of his political attention on just the tariff measure. At a highly partisan dinner attended by over 300 persons in New York on March 30, 1831, he presented a general view of the leading measures and doings of the Jackson Administration especially reprobating Martin Van Buren for his management of foreign affairs. Burges scorned the United States' foreign policy as poorly conducted and playing into the hands of other nations. He decried Jackson's use of the spoils system; condemned the administration's attitude on the Bank of the United States; and denounced the President's treatment of the Cherokee Indians as holding the country up in judgment before the eyes of mankind. Turning from issues to personalities, Van Buren was attacked as a "wily genius," a man of "crooked counsels," and prone to "Machiavellian principles." Jackson was denounced as the destroyer of the Constitution and the advocate of state's rights. Aligning himself with the founder of the American System, Burges praised Henry Clay as the "bright sun of the West" who had come to save the

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 986-87; 1139.

country, and received a toast to Clay's health with three, six, and nine cheers.<sup>16</sup>

In the summer of 1831 Burges and his colleague, Dutee J. Pearce, were renominated on June 22 by a state convention of National Republicans for a fourth two-year term.<sup>17</sup> Although they tried to stir up interest in the state by using the need for a high tariff as an issue,<sup>18</sup> it became obvious as the summer wore on that the Democrats were going to put up little or no opposition. Indeed, in the August elections the National Republicans were easily victorious. This one-sided result was due largely to the overwhelming victory of the National Republican gubernatorial candidate, Lemuel Arnold, and the rest of his prox in the state elections earlier that spring.<sup>19</sup>

The argument for keeping the tariff walls as high as possible was again brought to the fore a few weeks before the Twenty-Second Congress convened in December, 1831. Late in October delegates friendly to a high tariff met in New York City to counter the demands of the South that the protective system be abolished. The convention, moreover, rose to support a high tariff and defended protection as being in the

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<sup>16</sup>Niles' Weekly Register, March 30, 1831, XL, 89.

<sup>17</sup>Providence Daily Journal, July 1, 1831.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., August 2, August 9, 1831.

<sup>19</sup>Field, State of Rhode Island, p. 319.

national interest. To Burges this meeting was especially significant, for among Rhode Island's delegates were his political friends Nathan M. Wheaton of Wickford and Nathaniel Ruggles of Newport, and his brother-in-law, Zachariah Allen, the Providence woolen manufacturer.<sup>20</sup>

In Washington the tariff discussion began almost as soon as Congress met. Three bills were brought forth in the House. The anti-Jackson Southern forces rallied around a bill proposed by McDuffie of South Carolina that would reduce the tariff by degrees to a general 12 1/2 percent level. The Administration bill, sponsored by Congressman McLane of Delaware, was designed to reduce the average rates from 44 percent to 27 percent, repeal the tariff of 1828, reduce the duty on raw wool to 5 percent and on finished woolens to 20 percent, and abolish the "minimum categories" on all but the lowest quality of woolen products.<sup>21</sup> Neither side appeared satisfied. Members of both groups appealed to ex-President Adams, now a representative from Massachusetts and chairman of the Committee on Manufactures, to work out a compromise solution. On May 23 Adams introduced a modification of the McLane bill, which while based on the administration measure, changed some of the details. With this compromise plan before

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<sup>20</sup>Address of the Friends of Domestic Industry, Assembled in Convention, at New York, October 26, 1831, to the People of the United States (Baltimore: 1831), pp. 1, 35, 40-41.

<sup>21</sup>Elliott, The Tariff Controversy, pp. 258-59.

the House, McDuffie's original bill calling for drastic reductions was quickly done away with, but the protectionists still despaired for the high tariff.<sup>22</sup>

While the parliamentary battle was raging over the type of plan that should be used to cut the tariffs, Burges was representative of the despair that the protectionist element felt. Late in February, soon after McDuffie's proposal was first made, Burges expressed fears for the tariff and of making any concessions to the South. He let it be known that he himself would be unable to accept any compromise that would abandon the system of encouragement.

The South will again play, or attempt to play the Missouri game with us. They will threaten to dissolve the Union, if we do not yield. Some men are alarmed; more may be; but you may be assured that R. Island will not flinch. When it comes to the worst we have other sops to throw the . . . South, without giving him the bones of the American System to gnaw.<sup>23</sup>

During the course of the debate, Burges kept well informed of the feelings in his home state. In a letter from his brother-in-law he learned that the State General Assembly had unanimously concurred in a protest against the proposed tariff alterations. Indeed, Burges was told that the old Federalist turned Democrat, Elisha R. Potter, was on the verge

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<sup>22</sup>Elliott, The Tariff Controversy, p. 259; Claude G. Bowers, The Party Battles of the Jackson Period (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1922), pp. 193-95.

<sup>23</sup>Triestam Burges to Zachariah Allen, Washington, February 26, 1832. Peck Mss., Box XIII, No. 23.

of abandoning the Jackson administration over its tariff policies.<sup>24</sup>

Voicing the desires of the October convention in New York and of his friends in Rhode Island, Burges delivered a major address on June 16, 1832 against the proposed compromise bill of Adams. The Congressman pleaded with the members not to overlook the woollen industry and trade in their desire to protect others and once again brought up the spectre of American industry being deliberately destroyed by England. Calling the proposed bill a "consuming sword, whetted for slaughter" he reminded his colleagues of the terrible results it would have, and made a last plea for perfect protection as the necessary preserver of domestic industries.<sup>25</sup> Despite his efforts to forestall a final vote and his speech appealing for rejection of the proposal, the tide for tariff reduction was too great. On June 28, 1832 the bill passed the House by 162 to 65,<sup>26</sup> then went quickly through the Senate to be signed by Jackson on July 14.<sup>27</sup>

It was not just the tariff battle that concerned Burges however. Both he and Pearce combined forces in April to press

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<sup>24</sup>Zachariah Allen to Tristram Burges, Providence, May 7, 1832. Peck Mss., Box XIII, No. 24.

<sup>25</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 22nd Cong., 1st Sess., VIII, 3845-646.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., pp. 3830-331.

<sup>27</sup>Stanwood, American Tariff Controversies, pp. 381-83.

for a federal survey of Narragansett Bay with a view to finding the best location for a naval base. Although they argued that such a measure was of national concern, they were opposed. Many in the House did not want naval appropriations attached to bills for civil expenditures as its proponents advocated. Upon the favorable recommendation of the Committee of the Whole it was defeated 80 nays to 60 yeas--with Burges and Pearce in the minority.<sup>28</sup>

In the waning days of the first session of the Twenty-Second Congress Tristram Burges found himself turning politically towards the ranks of the anti-Jackson forces. This became evident on July 2, 1832 when Burges was among the House majority that voted to recharter the Bank of United States in the hope of using it to defeat Jackson in the forthcoming presidential election.<sup>29</sup>

The summer between the first and second session of the Twenty-Second Congress was filled largely with tending to neglected business transactions in Providence and in campaigning for the defeat of President Jackson in the fall. Opposed to Jackson because of his attitude toward the bank, the refusal to support internal improvements, and his lowering

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<sup>28</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 22nd Cong. 1st Sess., VIII, 2649-650.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 3851-852.

of the tariff,<sup>30</sup> Burges also denounced the spoils system as being feudalistic. He urged the National Republicans, Masons, and Anti-Masons to "form a ring around the Constitution" and "move onward to the redemption of our common country" by voting the President out of office.<sup>31</sup> Although Henry Clay, the National Republican candidate, carried Rhode Island by a 684 vote majority,<sup>32</sup> it was Jackson's ultimate victory in the entire election and the events of a nullification convention meeting in South Carolina that set the stage for the stormy second session of the Twenty-Second Congress.<sup>33</sup>

When Congress met for its second session in December, Clay had been defeated, but there was hope that between the Northern support of protection and the general horror of nullification the tariff would come through unharmed. The winter that followed was one of excitement. Jackson met the developing Southern crisis with a mixture of firmness and concession, and issued a proclamation denouncing nullification

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<sup>30</sup> Tristram Burges, A Statement of Some Leading Principles adopted by General Jackson, and the Effects of these Principles and Measures on the Union, Prosperity and Constitution of the American People. An Address to the Citizens of Rhode Island, In Answer to Their Call on the Delegation of this State in Congress. (Providence: William Marshall & Co., 1832), pp. 3-5.

<sup>31</sup> Tristram Burges, A Brief Sketch of the Remarks Delivered at East Greenwich at a Convention of National Republicans on the 23rd of August, 1832. (Providence: William Marshall & Co., 1832), pp. 6, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Bennett, Rhode Island Manual, p. 188. The vote was: Clay, 2,810; Jackson, 2,126.

<sup>33</sup> A good summary of the events and ideas leading up to the Nullification Convention is presented in Frederic Bancroft's Calhoun and the South Carolina Nullification Movement (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1928).

and warning South Carolina that the federal laws would be enforced. While the North rang with applause for the President, South Carolina answered in a spirit of defiance.

Meanwhile, in his annual message to Congress, Jackson discussed the tariff problem at length and argued for a reduction in all but the most essential items.<sup>34</sup> On December 27, 1832, the ardent free trader George C. Verplanck of New York, chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means, brought forth a bill which was understood to have the President's approval.<sup>35</sup> In Verplanck's bill wool and woolens, as usual, were hardest hit. The duty on wool costing more than eight cents a pound was to be reduced to 35 percent with no specific duty. In March, 1834 it would be lowered to 25 percent and a year later to 20 percent. Woolen manufactures were hit equally hard. Goods charged with 50 percent in 1832 were reduced to 40 percent for the first year, 30 percent for the second, and thereafter to 20 percent. Discussion of the bill began on January 5, 1833. It continued almost daily until February 12, when a new series of propositions arrived from the Senate.<sup>36</sup>

Most of the protectionists in the House, while they

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<sup>34</sup>Elliott, The Tariff Controversy, pp. 263-64.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 264; Stanwood, American Tariff Controversies, pp. 390-91.

<sup>36</sup>Stanwood, American Tariff Controversies, pp. 390-99.



would cordially support the President's desire for a Force bill directed at South Carolina, would resolutely resist any changes in the tariff. Standing as firmly as possible, they regarded the Verplanck bill as a death blow to the American System.<sup>37</sup> During the period this bill was under consideration, Tristram Burges delivered a major speech against it. Speaking all day Saturday, January 26, and concluding on Monday, he vigorously defended the interests of New England. With lavish use of facts and figures he attempted to show that any tariff cut would do more harm than good to the nation. Expressing a fear that many in the Northeast felt, Burges viewed reduction of the tariff not as a necessity, but as a weapon in the war being fought by Southern slave owners against the free whites of the North in an attempt to destroy their higher wage scale. His greatest objection to the bill, however, he stated bluntly and openly:

This bill calls for concession, nay, for submission to South Carolina; to admit, adopt, and incorporate her ordinance and her law into our system of legislation. Will this preserve or destroy your constitution [sic], cement or dissolve our Union? Sir, mingle nullification with the pure principles of your enactments, and, were your constitution [sic] strong and impenetrable as iron or [as] adamant, this vile alchemy will dissolve into impalpable gas every link in the chain of your Union.<sup>38</sup>

Burges continued to oppose any tariff reduction even

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<sup>37</sup>Niles' Weekly Register, January 5, 1833, XLIII, 297.

<sup>38</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 22nd Cong., 2nd Sess., IX, 1385-1413.

when a compromise bill proposed by his political ally, Henry Clay, was substituted for Verplanck's bill on February 12. Although Clay's bill differed from Verplanck's bill only in postponing the day when the lowest rates would reach 20 percent,<sup>39</sup> Burges could not accept it. On February 26 he spoke out against this compromise lowering of the tariff. He reminded the House of its unanimous acceptance of a resolution from the Rhode Island General Assembly earlier in January condemning any tariff cuts. He repeatedly counseled the West not to be duped by the South, and reminded them of their bonds with the North. As for the South itself, Burges again called forth the vision of free white working men in the North laboring for a wage as low or lower than the poorest Southern slaves--a situation he felt was bound to result if the bill passed.

It was for the proponent of the compromise plan that Burges saved his greatest abuse. Although he had praised Henry Clay on numerous previous occasions, he could now do little else but denounce him. He referred to Clay as:

. . . our star in the west [sic], our sun in the storm, our bow of promise in the tempest of our times. He has been the hero of our tales; his deeds the argument of our discourses; his glory the song of our festivals. Whose name was ever so frequent in our flowing cups! Who,

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<sup>39</sup>Elliott, The Tariff Controversy, p. 265; Lynch, Fifty Years of Party Warfare, p. 434.

like him, ever sat with us at the great political table! We have together taken salt from the same stand, bread from the same basket; he has, with us, dipped the political sop in the same dish; and now he has lifted up his heels against us, and we are delivered into the hands of our adversaries.<sup>40</sup>

An observer of the speech, Elisha Reynolds Potter, Jr., was much more succinct in conveying Burges' meaning to Rhode Island. Indeed, he wrote his father that "Mr. Burges cut Mr. Clay very hard, called him a Judas. . . ."<sup>41</sup> On the day the speech was given, the House took its final vote on Clay's bill. Burges, defending his state's interests, opposing any concession to South Carolina, angered at Clay, and toeing the protectionist line, could not compromise. He voted against the bill. His vote was to no avail, however, as the measure passed 119 to 85.<sup>42</sup>

Although Burges was in the party of opposition to Jackson, he supported the President's stand against South Carolina's nullification. He argued against any postponement of the Effective Revenue Collection (Force) Bill, but made it clear he was working for the good of the country and not to aid the administration. After attempts to postpone it failed, Burges and Pearce both voted for it when it passed.

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<sup>40</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 22nd Con., 2nd Sess., IX, 1781-791. Quote, pp. 1789-91.

<sup>41</sup>Elisha R. Potter, Jr. to Elisha R. Potter, Sr., Washington, February 26, 1833. Potter Mss., University of Rhode Island.

<sup>42</sup>Register of Debates in Congress, 22nd Cong., 2nd Sess., IX, 1810-1811.

the House on March 1<sup>43</sup>--perhaps as a way of getting back at the South for forcing a tariff reduction.

Burges, however, could not support Jackson on most of the issues he personally deemed injurious to the country--such as the war on the bank. When the House, March 3, 1833, passed a resolution "that Government deposits in the opinion of the House may be safely continued in the Bank of the United States," Burges supported the measure.<sup>44</sup> Placing himself in opposition to the President, he assumed a position from which he was not often to retreat during the remainder of his congressional career.

To Tristram Burges, 1833 was also an election year, and this meant getting re-elected during the summer recess. The National Republican Convention, held early in June, unanimously nominated him for a fifth term but withdrew its support from Dutee J. Pearce. In Pearce's place they put up Nathaniel S. Ruggles of Newport, Burges' political ally who attended the New York tariff conference in 1831.<sup>45</sup> On the last day of June the Democrats met and appointed a select committee of five to nominate candidates at a later date. By August 7 the

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid., pp. 1821-1903.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., pp. 1922-936. The vote was 109 to 46.

<sup>45</sup>The Providence Journal, July 1 and August 10, 1833.

pro-Jackson Republican Herald announced its support of Wilkins Updike of South Kingstown and Nathan B. Sprague of Smithfield.<sup>46</sup> More was yet to come. By mid-August Burges's name appeared alone on the Republican prox after Ruggles had decided not to run. As it was then less than two weeks from the election, the party chose to leave the post vacant.<sup>47</sup> To this list of candidates Dutee J. Pearce added his name as the "People's Candidate" and Albert C. Greene, Henry Y. Cranston, and Nathan F. Dixon entered as un-nominated National Republicans.<sup>48</sup>

As the campaign itself entered its final weeks, the hottest battle was waged between Sprague and Burges. While Burges ran primarily on the basis of his record, his opponent did just the opposite. Speaking for Sprague and the Jackson Party, the Republican Herald charged that for Rhode Island to gain a share in the benefits of federal legislation "she must muzzle the lips of professor Burges, and keep him as silent as the marble pillars that beautify the Legislative Halls."<sup>49</sup> The Democrats, moreover, compiled a list of reasons why Burges should be defeated: he had grown "purse-proud"

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<sup>46</sup>The Republican Herald, August 3-7, 1833.

<sup>47</sup>The Providence Journal, August 15-17, 1833.

<sup>48</sup>Carroll, Rhode Island, Three Centuries of Democracy, I, 568.

<sup>49</sup>The Providence Journal, August 8, 1833; The Republican Herald, August 10-17, 1833.

and aristocratical; he regarded his fellow citizens with respect only at election time; he advocated a course favorable only to the state's manufacturers; he was not a friend of the farmers; he was not really a Republican; he committed the political sin of working to elect anti-Jackson candidates in Massachusetts; he had spurned Henry Clay; and he persisted in the outmoded beliefs that had brought him to power despite changes during his years in Congress.<sup>50</sup>

The Jackson men hoped that by courting the support of the state's Anti-Masonic faction they could defeat Burges. As early as October, 1831 the Democrats had gained Anti-Masonic support when they dominated a State committee that investigated Masonic activity and recommended that all Masonic institutions be discontinued.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, five days before the election the Democrats still felt that the Anti-Masons would go against Burges. As his opponent wrote: ". . . there is fair prospect of the Anti-masonry going in great nubur [sic] for me & as far as I know they will go against Burges. I think under these circumstances my chances to defeat him are very good."<sup>52</sup> Despite these attempts to oust him the incumbent

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<sup>50</sup>The Republican Herald, August 17, 1833.

<sup>51</sup>Report of the Committee Appointed by the General Assembly of Rhode Island to Investigate the Charges Against Freemasonry & Masons in Said State: Together with all the Official Documents and Testimony Relating to the Subject. (Providence: William Marshall, 1832), pp. 3, 121-24.

<sup>52</sup>Nathan B. Sprague to Elisha R. Potter, Smithfield, August 22, 1833. Potter Mss., University of Rhode Island.

was able to ride his record to victory and was elected on the first trial. Since no other candidate received a majority in the August election, a by-election was held in November, and Dutee J. Pearce emerged the victor--but this time as a member of the Jackson Party.<sup>53</sup>

No sooner had the Twenty-Third Congress convened than Burges took a decidedly anti-administration stand. In the first session the fight was mainly over Jackson's bank policy, and it led to a serious rupture between Burges and his long time colleague, Dutee J. Pearce.

The split between Burges and Pearce began in mid-February, 1834. On the seventeenth Burges presented a memorial from 1,065 voters in Providence favoring the reestablishment of the bank. Pearce, now with the administration, attacked Burges, denying that 1,065 voters could represent the true feelings of a city of 19,000; and saying that many of the signatures seemed to be in the same handwriting. While Burges expressed regret that his colleague had to sever their ties of friendship, he continued to support his memorial. Pearce insisted that in the past three years the majority of people in Rhode Island had grown opposed to the bank and he no longer felt that cordial relations between him and Burges

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<sup>53</sup>Field, History of Rhode Island, p. 324. The August results were Burges, 3,162; Pearce, 2,078; Updike, 1,904; Sprague, 1,499; Greene, 557; Cranston, 325; Dixon, 167; Scat'., 227. The November results were Pearce, 2,152; Dixon, 1,705; Scat'., 25. (Manual, p. 167.)

were possible.<sup>54</sup>

Late in March four resolutions concerning the federal deposits were presented in the House: 1) that the Bank of the United States should not be rechartered; 2) public deposits should not be restored to the bank; 3) state banks should be continued as places of deposit for public funds; and 4) a select committee be appointed to investigate the functions of the bank and report to Congress when it had completed its study.<sup>55</sup> The debates around these motions led to further alienation between the two Rhode Islanders and drove Burges further into the anti-Jackson ranks.

On March 31 Burges presented two more memorials, one from Patterson, New Jersey, and the other from Smithfield and Cumberland, Rhode Island, asking for the recharter of the bank and restoration of deposits. Pearce countered with a letter from his home state saying the Rhode Island memorial had not been signed exclusively by people of the towns mentioned, but by outsiders for political purposes. Burges flatly charged that Pearce's letter was a forgery, and a debate of "a very lengthend and recriminatory nature arose between the two honorable members from Rhode Island." The dispute was temporarily ended by George Evans of Maine when he

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<sup>54</sup>The Congressional Globe: Containing Sketches of the Debates and Proceedings of the Twenty Third Congress (Washington: Office of the Globe, 1835), 23rd Cong. 1st Sess. 1, 181-82.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 250.



moved that Burges' memorials be printed and laid on the table. A third memorial from Newport was then presented with no objection from Pearce.<sup>56</sup>

Burges' anti-Jackson stand continued during the vote on the four bank resolutions in early August. On the proposal that the bank should not be rechartered he voted no and lost 132 to 83--with Pearce opposing him. The resolution not to restore deposits was also carried 118 to 103 with Pearce on the Jackson side. Burges remained silent. On maintaining deposits in state banks Burges again voted against Jackson and was defeated 117 to 105--with Pearce again in the majority. The resolution for an investigation, however, found the two Rhode Islanders among the preponderant 171 to 43 majority,<sup>57</sup> but for different reasons. While Pearce felt the investigation would expose the evils of the bank, Burges was sure it would be vindicated.

Even after the vote on the four resolutions had been taken in Jackson's favor, the split between Burges and Pearce continued. When on April 14 Burges presented a memorial from Providence protesting the removal of bank deposits, Pearce countered with memorials from Providence and Bristol favoring the Jackson program.<sup>58</sup> In mid-June the Democratic House also killed two Senate resolutions disapproving the withdrawal of

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., p. 292.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., pp. 308-09.

public deposits from the bank and directing that such deposits be restored. Both times Burges and Pearce voted in opposite directions, the Republican in favor of the Senate resolutions and the Democrat opposed.<sup>59</sup>

The only show of unity between the two antagonists from Rhode Island did not come until four days from the end of the session, and was necessary to prevent possible political repercussions at home. Both men supported an appropriation amendment allowing pay to Rhode Island's Elisha R. Potter, Sr., for each day of attendance in the Senate preceding his removal after a contested election.<sup>60</sup> Burges' support was given despite the fact that he had earnestly worked for Potter's defeat before the election was held.<sup>61</sup>

The most important battle in the short second session from 1834 to 1835 arose over Jackson's attempt to compel the French government to observe her obligations under the Treaty of July, 1831. According to the stipulations, in compensation for damages to the United States during the Napoleonic period, France was to pay five million dollars in six annual installments in return for a reduction of the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 445. For Burges' position in the bank controversy see also Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., The Age of Jackson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1946), p. 108.

<sup>60</sup> The Congressional Globe, 23rd Cong., 1st Sess., I, p. 474.

<sup>61</sup> Tristram Burges, Reasons Why the Hon. Elisha R. Potter Should not be a Senator in the Congress. By One of the People (Providence: 1834).

duty on French wines. It was the President's contention that he had lived up to his half of the bargain but France had not. Under such ominous conditions, and with the majority of the representatives favoring continued negotiations only with concurrent military preparations, the House became engaged in heated debates reflecting the excitement of the times.<sup>62</sup>

When on February 28, 1835, Representative Cambreling, a New York Democrat, resolved "that in the opinion of this House the treaty of the 4th of July, 1831, should be maintained and its execution insisted upon at all hazards," Tristram Burges rose in opposition. Burges counseled the House against a war with France over the collection of the claims. Although he felt that every individual in the land should insist upon having the treaty carried out, he thought the House should be extremely cautious in any actions that might lead to hostilities with France. After observing that there were slim grounds on which to call for military actions, he noted that once the United States had been willing to pass over the insults of France for a monetary settlement it would be an inglorious disgrace to go to war. He would, however, not object to any resolutions on the subject that did not involve the use of force. Burges feared that any ultimatum to the French of pay-or-fight would put France into a position where "she would be cowardly indeed if she should pay the

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<sup>62</sup> Bowers, Party Battles of the Jackson Period, pp. 386-96.

money under such circumstances."<sup>63</sup>

The outcome of the fight was the adoption on March 2 of a resolution that insisted on the maintenance of the treaty and in favor of military preparations. Adopted that evening the House resolved that "the treaty of the 4th of July, 1831, should be maintained and its execution insisted upon." The vote was an unanimous 212 to nothing, but the name of Tristram Burges was not among those recorded.<sup>64</sup>

At three A. M. on Tuesday morning, March 3, 1835, Speaker John Bell of Tennessee adjourned the second session of the Twenty-Third Congress. With this action the career of Tristram Burges as a member of the House of Representatives was ended.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup>The Congressional Globe, 23rd Cong., 2nd Sess., II, 313.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., p. 323.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., pp. 328-33.

## A WHIG IS DEFEATED, THE ELECTIONS OF 1835 and 1836

Politically 1835 began on an inauspicious note for Tristram Burges. Late in 1834 it had been rumored around Washington that he would seek election to the Senate from Rhode Island as an anti-Jackson candidate. Burges hoped to replace Senator Nehemiah R. Knight, whose term would expire March 3, 1835, and who had announced he would not seek re-election.<sup>1</sup> Late in January the Grand Committee of Rhode Island, the House and Senate acting together, failed after twenty ballots to elect a senator, and postponed further action until May. By that time, however, Senator Knight was anxious to get back into the race. As the nominee of the anti-Jackson forces he defeated Elisha R. Potter, 41 votes to 38. Burges, receiving only one vote, was disappointed at being set aside by his party for Knight and at not being elevated to the national upper house.<sup>2</sup>

Since he was vigorously opposed to "King Andrew I," it was not at all difficult for the Federalist-turned-National Republican Tristram Burges to follow the general shift into

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<sup>1</sup>Niles' Weekly Register, XLVI, 396.

<sup>2</sup>Field, State of Rhode Island, I, 327-28.

the newly created Whig Party that had been developing since the early 1830's. Indeed, contemporaries recorded that the Whig Party was made up of National Republicans, Anti-Masons, pro-bank Jackson men, Webster Federalists, and a large states' rights element who felt the federal government had no right to coerce a sovereign state and were violently opposed to Jackson.<sup>3</sup>

That Burges had joined the Whig ranks became evident during the gubernatorial and senatorial elections then going on. On March 3, 1835 he told a well attended gathering in Providence that if the Whigs triumphed in the spring they would also win in August. This would, he asserted, insure the defeat of Jackson because the Whigs would control Congress and be in a position to elect a new President when the issue, according to Whig strategy, was thrown to the House.<sup>4</sup>

At the State Whig Convention on June 24, 1835 Tristram Burges and Henry Y. Cranston of Newport were unanimously chosen as candidates for the Twenty-Fourth Congress.<sup>5</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup>Lynch, Fifty Years of Party Warfare, p. 467.

<sup>4</sup>Niles' Weekly Register, XLVII, May 2, 1837, p. 147; Tristram Burges, Speech of Mr. Burges, Delivered at a Meeting of his fellow citizens, in the Town House in Providence, on Friday evening, March 3, 1835 (Providence: n. p., 1835).

<sup>5</sup>The Providence Journal, July 2, 1835.

next day Jackson forces, now called Democrats, put forth the ex-Republican Dutee J. Pearce and William Sprague, Jr. of Warwick.<sup>6</sup> The campaign that followed has been called one of the bitterest in the history of Rhode Island politics.<sup>7</sup>

Although the Whig dominated City Council of Providence resolved that they had complete confidence in Burges and approved of his and Cranston's nomination,<sup>8</sup> such actions were not to be the major features of the campaign. With the Providence Journal vigorously supporting the Whigs and the Republican Herald standing for the Democrats, the battle became a personality contest with neither side sticking strictly to the issues.

Taking the initiative, the Journal reminded the Whigs that unless they were active and sure to vote on election day Pearce and Sprague, with "a retinue of servile demagogues and independents," would be elected. If the state was to keep its influence in Congress, the Whigs argued, it would come only through representation by a man of power, intellectual force, and moral wisdom. Using the argument that Rhode Island must replace what it lacked in population with personal force,

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<sup>6</sup>The Republican Herald, July 11, 1835.

<sup>7</sup>Carroll, Rhode Island, Three Centuries of Democracy, I, 568.

<sup>8</sup>"Proceedings of the Providence City Council, July 6, 1835," in The Providence Journal, July 11, 1835.

they strongly favored the election of Tristram Burges.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the election of Burges and Cranston was a necessity to assure the selection of a man like Massachusetts' Daniel Webster when the presidential election was thrown into the House of Representatives as the Whigs planned. This, the Journal felt, was far better than the election of Jackson's hand picked successor, Martin Van Buren--"a man without elevation of mind or dignity of character--a political Grimalkin, constantly purring over petty intrigues, and who spends time in devising schemes for his own advancement."<sup>10</sup>

As the campaign progressed the greatest clashes came between Burges and Sprague and Burges and Pearce. The Democrats, moreover, were trying desperately to unseat the five term incumbent. Continuing the attack, the Journal repeatedly asked if Sprague was qualified to replace Burges and then answered its own question with a resounding "no."

The friends of Wm. Sprague, Jr., pretend that they have some hope of electing him to Congress over Tristram Burges. Readers do not laugh. Hold in, if you can, your risible propensities.--Wm. Sprague, Jr. in preference to Tristram Burges!!!--the idea is too ridiculous to be entertained for a moment. It is a libel upon the good sense of our freemen--it is a slander most foul against our state.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., July 27, 30, 1835.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., August 6, 1835. Quote from the Journal, July 30, 1835.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., August 6, 7, 1835.



It was felt, moreover, that both Sprague and Pearce belonged to the class of politicians who advocated anarchy and confusion rather than law and order.<sup>12</sup>

The Democratic press did not sit idly by during the Whig attacks. Besides comparing Burges to his rival, William Sprague, and finding the incumbent lacking in the qualities Sprague possessed, the Republican Herald began to drive home a new issue. It was well known, they contended, that Burges consented to run for reelection only when his party refused to elevate him to the Senate. The conclusion was drawn for the voters that Burges now regarded the House of Representatives as a secondary position and was insulting the people by running for it.<sup>13</sup>

Burges was also condemned for his anti-Jackson stand. The Herald noted how the Whigs were scheming to have the presidential election thrown into the House to insure Van Buren's defeat. In doing so, it was argued, Burges was attempting to subvert the will of the people through an undemocratic action. For his work in trying to uphold the Bank of the United States, he was deemed more a member of a "Federal Bank Party" than a Whig.<sup>14</sup> The Herald reiterated, moreover, that Burges' role in his own party had

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., August 10, 1835.

<sup>13</sup>The Republican Herald, August 12, 1835.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., August 13, 1835.

degenerated since his failure to capture a Senate seat to the point where he had become the "pack-horse" of his party's desires. Because of advancing age it was felt that he had become little more than the "pliant tool" and "plaything" of the party leaders.<sup>15</sup>

Particularly bitter against Sprague because he represented a new element in politics after becoming wealthy in industrial ventures,<sup>16</sup> the Whigs continued their attack. When the Republican Herald, ridiculing his role in Congress, said of Burges:

Tristram is a real thund'rer,  
 Trumpet tounge'd, a magnus homo,  
 And one must be a stultus blund'rer,  
 Not to feel his oratoro.  
 Did he not once floor MacDuffie  
 As flat as e'er Mac did a Cufee?

And did he not lay on MacDuff  
 Till Mac cried 'hold' and said 'enough'!  
 Oh! once he took to battle Dutee  
 About memorials and the Bank,  
 But Dutee trounced him as did he Duffie,  
 And down his seat the hero sank;<sup>17</sup>

the Journal lost no time in replying. Noting that Burges had been on the Rhode Island scene for many years and knew the conditions in farming and manufacturing, the Whig paper countered:

Some say, that Tristram Burges  
 Don't know a thing or two;  
 But I say he forgot  
 More than Sprague ever knew.

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., August 18, 1835.

<sup>16</sup>Carroll, Rhode Island, Three Centuries of Democracy, I, 569; Coleman, The Transformation of Rhode Island, pp. 84, 131.

<sup>17</sup>The Providence Journal, August 12, 1835.

He knows more about farming  
 Than Sprague and Dutee both;  
 Talk with him and you will see  
 That what I say is truth.

. . . . .  
 He knows to, by experience, well  
 As any in Pawtucket;  
 Dutee himself, don't doubt his skill,  
 To mend a leaky bucket.<sup>18</sup>

The poems and good words in favor of the incumbent were of little avail. Burges, after serving ten years in Congress, was beaten by 148 votes.<sup>19</sup> Although some have said his election was lost because of his break with Clay,<sup>20</sup> and the Journal was later to call it a fraud,<sup>21</sup> a number of other reasons were given for the defeat. Gloating in their victory over Burges and Cranston, the Herald gave one reason, although highly partisan, of why Burges lost.

Even Tristram Burges, the idol and oracle of the federal party, has condescended to become a eulogist--to stand in public and sound h-s [sic] own praises--to boast of his own acts, and with the most consummate egotism, excusable only as the folly of an old man in his dotage, to compare himself with other men, and strike the balance in his favor.<sup>22</sup>

The conduct of his opponents must also be noted. Besides

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid, August 13, 1835.

<sup>19</sup>Field, State of Rhode Island, I, 328.

<sup>20</sup>Gordon F. Harrison, Lineal and Collateral Ancestors of Theodore Francis Green who Served in the American Congress (Washington, 1955), p. 53.

<sup>21</sup>The Providence Journal, March 30, 1836.

<sup>22</sup>The Republican Herald, August 29, 1835.

being among the wealthiest industrialists in the state, the Sprague family were also resourceful election manipulators. Through the supervision of their employees' ballots (there being no secret voting as yet) they were able to secure the election of their own candidates or members of the family itself.<sup>23</sup> The defeated candidate himself added a major reason. Four days after the election he wrote:

Already the [anti-slavery] question has been mingled [sic] with politicks [sic]; & I doubt not that some men have voted against me on the 25th inst. because I was against the abolitionists. Wm. Sprague, Jr. My opponent, is a Van Burin [sic] man & it is understood that he will vote for the abolition of slavery in the D. of Columbia. I have no doubt, that Van Buren is secretly formenting this excitement in New England that he may profit by our divisions. Come what will, I have set my face against whatever may peril the constitution, the union or the peace or prosperity of our country. It seems almost certain, that Sprague and D. J. Pearce are elected the representatives of R. Island in the next Congress & whatever Van Burin [sic] directs, they will willingly endeavor to do.<sup>24</sup>

Despite his defeat in 1835, Burges was still among the most prominent Whigs in the state. Indeed, he commanded enough loyalty to be placed at the head of his party's prox in the gubernatorial elections in the spring of 1836. Running with John H. Cross of Westerly, he opposed the incumbent Governor John Brown Francis of Warwick and Jeffrey Hunter of Exeter. Burges' opponents, moreover, ran on both the Republican,

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<sup>23</sup> Coleman, The Transformation of Rhode Island, pp. 622, 688.

<sup>24</sup> Tristram Burges to H. L. Pinckney, Providence, August 29, 1835. Peck Mss., Box XIII, No. 35.

Administration, and Farmers' Prox as well as the Antimasonic Republican Prox.<sup>25</sup> Using alleged frauds in the election of 1835 as their major issue, the Whigs again tried to run Burges on the basis of his record. His exertions in favor of the agricultural, manufacturing, and commercial interests of the state were emphasized and his unswerving opposition to the "corruption" and "patronage" of Jackson were pointed out. Burges was again made out to be the friend of the Revolutionary War veterans, and his defense of the old soldiers on the floor of Congress was lauded.<sup>26</sup>

Regardless of boasts by Burges' supporters that he could not be beaten, the Democrats felt that his political magnetism had passed its zenith with his defeat in 1835. They didn't expect him to draw nearly as many votes in the forthcoming contest as he had a year earlier. As issues, the Democrats reminded the voters of Burges' statements made in 1835 regarding slavery and the anti-slavery movements in the District of Columbia. He was declared to be unfriendly to the abolitionist cause.<sup>27</sup>

The Democrats continued to hammer away at Burges' desire to run on his record. It was insisted that Burges was not really a defender of the war veterans at all because he

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<sup>25</sup>The Providence Journal, March 7, 1836; The Republican Herald, March 12, 1836.

<sup>26</sup>The Providence Journal, March 7, 30, 1836.

<sup>27</sup>The Republican Herald, April 2, 1836.

had opposed a pension for the state militias and worked mainly for the benefit of the officers. The opposition felt he should not be elected because he was an avowed anti-Jackson man and would oppose the President just as he had opposed Madison during the War of 1812. To elect Burges, moreover, would be to defeat the national policies of the administration and allow the banks and manufacturers to control the state.<sup>28</sup>

Late in April the Democrats found an issue that was particularly damaging to Burges' political image. They accused him of working to establish a Narragansett Bay maritime station for Massachusetts on his property in Seekonk--an act virtually treasonable for a Rhode Islander. It was alleged that Burges had argued that the boundary of Massachusetts extended out into the channel of the Providence River and not only to the high water mark on the Massachusetts side as Rhode Island insisted. After drawing bleak pictures of a Narragansett Bay clogged with Massachusetts shipping, the Democrats effectively scoffed at Burges' denial of the charges.<sup>29</sup>

Continuing the attack, one Democratic paper pulled out all the stops in journalistic sensationalism to defeat Burges. Taken out of context, in dark print on the front

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., April 9, 1836.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., April 20, 1836.

page, and with absolutely no references, the statements, "I thank God that I was never a democrat!!!" and "I trust in God that I shall never see another President elected by the people!!!" were attributed to Burges. He was publicly ridiculed in verse and again chastized as unworthy of election.<sup>30</sup>

After an ineffective Whig campaign with much of the old Burges fire and oratory missing, the Providence Journal reminded its readers "TO THE POLLS, TO THE POLLS, EVERY WHIG FREEMAN, and there deposit your vote for Tristram Burges."<sup>31</sup> Such a reminder was far from sufficient to save the election. Outmaneuvered and outfought in the campaign, the tide was with the Democrats. The Whigs managed to gather only 2,984 of 7,151 votes cast, and Governor Francis was easily reelected.<sup>32</sup>

Although defeated twice in two years, Tristram Burges was still regarded by the Democrats as the most popular and the most powerful Whig in the state.<sup>33</sup> He was, however, attached to a cause that had fallen out of favor for the time being. In less than three years he would again fill a brief but significant role in the Rhode Island gubernatorial elections. After that, however, his political career would be over.

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<sup>30</sup>The [Newport] Rhode Island Republican, April 13, 1846.

<sup>31</sup>The Providence Journal, April 16, 1836.

<sup>32</sup>Bennett, Rhode Island Manual, p. 105.

<sup>33</sup>The Republican Herald, April 23, 1836.

## VI

### THE BALD EAGLE PASSES

Although politically inactive for a short period after his defeat in 1836, Tristram Burges played a significant role in the state gubernatorial elections of 1839. At their nominating convention of that year the Whigs pledged support to the incumbent Governor William Sprague, Jr. and Lieutenant Governor Joseph Childs of Portsmouth.<sup>1</sup> Sprague, who had defeated Burges for Congress as a Democrat in 1835, had seen that the Democratic stand on tariff reduction was harmful to his textile interests. He renounced his party, became a Whig, and was elected Governor over the incumbent John Brown Francis in 1838.<sup>2</sup> Two other parties were opposed to Sprague's desires for reelection. The Democrat, Republican, and Farmers' Prox was led by Nathaniel Bullock of Bristol for Governor and Benjamin B. Thurston of Hopkinton for Lieutenant Governor. Besides the two major parties a splinter group also presented itself. Operating under the name of the Liberal Party, a group of Whigs unhappy with

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<sup>1</sup>The Providence Journal, April 1, 1839.

<sup>2</sup>Carroll, Rhode Island-Three Centuries of Democracy, I, 570-71.



Sprague put forth Tristram Burges for Governor and Charles Collins of Middletown for Lieutenant Governor.<sup>3</sup>

The Providence Journal, remaining loyal to the Whig Party, supported the nomination of the ex-Democrat Sprague and the rest of his prox. While they roundly denounced the Democrats in their usual fashion and singled Bullock out as having been "an old Hartford Convention blue light Federalist" who actively opposed the War of 1812,<sup>4</sup> they carefully refrained from giving similar treatment to the Liberals and said nothing against their candidates personally. They claimed, moreover, that while Burges could not be elected, it was possible he could keep the two major candidates from gaining the necessary majority of votes needed for election. If this happened the Liberals would hold the balance of power and could dictate the terms of compromise to either the Democrats or the Whigs. The Whigs, fearing such a move would play into the hands of the Democrats and spell the ruin of their own party in the state, appealed for Burges to consider his old Whig beliefs and principles before making any further moves.<sup>5</sup>

The Liberal support of Burges for Governor was

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<sup>3</sup>Early Prox Collection, State Archives, State House, Providence, Rhode Island; Field, State of Rhode Island, I, 330.

<sup>4</sup>The Providence Journal, April 1, 1839.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., April 8, 1839.

apparently unsolicited, however, and its recipient uninformed. Burges had been out of Providence since the first of March, and did not learn of his nomination until the sixth, when he returned to the city. After studying the situation he quickly disavowed any desire on his part to participate in the election.

On my return to this city, on Saturday evening, having been absent from it since Monday preceding, I found in your daily paper a Prox of General State Officers with my name as one of them. It will be, I fear, in any event impossible for me to accept, or even undertake to discharge the duties of that office. I would state the reasons at large to you and the public which have induced me to write to you, but my health is an all sufficient reason, and which is so reduced by fatigue and exhausting labor, endured for a number of weeks past, that I cannot hold the pen to go into any details; and can only request that you publish this letter, that the gentlemen who have honored me with this nomination may be fully informed upon the subject.<sup>6</sup>

Although the Journal carried Burges' letter on the tenth of April and reprinted it in bold type on the fifteenth, the same paper continued to run the advertisement for the Liberal Prox with Burges as the gubernatorial candidate.<sup>7</sup> While he did no campaigning and showed no desire to be elected, the Whigs feared that this continued support would split the electorate and defeat their bid to retain

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<sup>6</sup>Tristram Burges to the Editors of the Currier, Providence, April 10, 1839, in The Providence Journal, April 12, 1839.

<sup>7</sup>The Providence Journal, April 15-17, 1839.

control of the Governor's office.<sup>8</sup> This is essentially what happened. Of the 6,173 votes cast in the election Burges received only 457--enough to prevent either Sprague or Bullock from gaining the necessary majority. Since the laws of the state did not provide for a new election in such circumstance, Samuel Ward King, the first elected Senator, became the acting Governor under the provisions of the old Charter.<sup>9</sup>

After this brief and unwilling excursion into the gubernatorial race in 1839 Burges withdrew from active politics. Receiving two votes as an un-nominated candidate for the Federal Senate by the Rhode Island Grand Committee on October 24, 1840,<sup>10</sup> was the final act of his political career. His remaining years were spent in retirement at the family farm, Watchemoket, in Seekonk, Massachusetts.

During his years in retirement, Burges was drawn towards religious study and reflection, perhaps intensified by the death of all but one of his children. He developed the habit of reading from the New Testament for at least half

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., April 15, 1839.

<sup>9</sup>Bennett, Rhode Island Manual, p. 105. The vote was Sprague, 2,908; Bullock, 2,771; Burges, 457; Scat<sup>r</sup>., 37. Carroll, Rhode Island-Three Centuries of Democracy, I, 570-71. At this time Rhode Island was still governed under the stipulations of the old colonial Charter granted in 1663.

<sup>10</sup>Records of the House of Representatives of the State of Rhode Island Commencing October Session, 1839, and October Session, 1840. State Archives, State House, Providence, Rhode Island; Bennett, Rhode Island Manual, p. 147.

an hour before going to bed at night and spent much time meditating on the life of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Indeed, Burges expressed the hope of writing a biography of Christ in either dialogue form or as a series of letters in which Christ's life, mingled with accounts of His contemporaries and neighbors, would be portrayed. Confiding only in his wife and Reverend Thomas Williams of East Greenwich, Burges asked that no one else be informed of his desires. He also told of feeling guilty for not having gone into the ministry as he had planned much earlier in life.<sup>11</sup>

As he increased in age, Burges' appearances in Rhode Island were confined mainly to social events. A fellow participant described the aging ex-legislator at one meeting:

I remember the bent figure of an old man dressed in a plain gray business suit, his eyes undimmed and his mental vigor unabated [sic]. His manner was calm, and gave no hint of the terrible force which had given him his ascendancy in the courts of Rhode Island and in the halls of Congress; but there was a rare felicity in the construction of his sentences, and his elocution was perfect. I had heard nothing like it before, nor have I heard anything to compare with it since, except when listening to Rufus Choate or Wendell Phillips.<sup>12</sup>

Whenever possible Burges attended the alumni meetings of Brown University. At one of these meetings he was called on to speak and was toasted as "The Bald Eagle of Rhode Island:

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<sup>11</sup>Tristram Burges to Reverend Thomas Williams, Watchemoket Farm, Seekonk, Mass., August 13, 1843. Peck Mss., Box XIII, No. 49.

<sup>12</sup>Abraham Payne, Reminiscences of the Rhode Island Bar (Providence: Tibbitts and Preston, 1885), pp. 68-9.

may his old age be as tranquil as his manhood has been glorious." To this remark, however, Burges replied, "I do not claim to be an eagle of any kind, much less a bald eagle."<sup>13</sup> But the term "Bald Eagle" was one that had been applied to Burges early in his Congressional career when he was violently defending the interests of his state from the attacks of the South. During his second term in Congress, 1827 to 1829, a contemporary on the Washington scene described him:

Tristram Burgess [sic], of Rhode Island, who had a snowy head and a Roman nose, was called 'the bald eagle of the House.' . . . A man of iron heart, he was ever anxious to meet his antagonists, haughty in his rude self-confidence, and exhaustive in the use of every expletive permitted by parliamentary usage. In debate he resembled one of the old soldiers who fought on foot and on horseback, with heavy or light arms, a battle-axe or a spear. The champion of the North he divided the South and thrashed and slashed as did old Horatius, when with his good sword he stood upon the bridge and with his single arm defended Rome.<sup>14</sup>

As the years of retirement passed, advancing age and a lingering illness began to take their toll. The public appearances grew more and more infrequent. Tristram Burges died at his home in Seekonk at half past ten on the morning of Tuesday, October 13, 1853.<sup>15</sup> He was eighty-three years

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>14</sup>Ben. Perley Poore, Perley's Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis (Philadelphia: Hubbard Brothers, Publishers, 1886), pp. 81-2.

<sup>15</sup>The New York Daily Times, October 15, 1853; The Providence Journal, October 14, 1853.

old. A few days later he was laid to rest in his adopted city of Providence.

One pleasant afternoon in October a long procession moved through the city [of Providence] to the North Burying Ground to pay the last tribute of respect to Mr. Burges. We talked on the way of the stormy career and its tranquil close. It was near the hour of sunset when the door of the tomb was closed, and to apply the words of Theodore Parker, speaking of the death of Dr. Channing, to the great Rhode Island orator: 'He and the sun went away together.'<sup>16</sup>

With the passing of Tristram Burges and other similar men of his generation a political tradition was also passing away. This was the tradition established by members of the old Federalist Party who were forced to realign themselves politically when their original party had been discredited and collapsed. Burges, like many of his well educated and professionally successful contemporaries, tended to gravitate into the ranks of the more conservative National Republican-Whig Parties. From the time he accepted the National Republican nomination for Congress and was elected in 1825, to the last days of his political career, Burges remained closely attached to the beliefs and ideals espoused by his new party.

This is not to say, however, that he never swerved from the established line of the party. As his congressional career proves, Burges worked for what he considered to be in the best interests of his home state--regardless of what the majority of his party or the majority of the House members

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<sup>16</sup>Payne, Reminiscences, p. 72.

thought. As indicated in his letters to his brother-in-law, he regarded the fight to preserve the protective tariff and to establish the American System as in the vital interest of his country. To this end he devoted most of his energy while in Congress. The fact that he was unwilling to accept Henry Clay's compromise measures of 1833 and denounced the Kentucky Senator as a traitor to the cause indicated the degree to which he advocated protectionism. Although this may be partly explained by his desire to aid his brother-in-law's woolen business, Burges' uncompromising stand on the tariff bill showed that by the mid-1830's he was advocating a political doctrine that had lost much of its former meaning and intensity.

That Burges often put principle and personal feelings ahead of political issues is also seen in his views on slavery and the slavery controversy. Burges served in the House from 1825 to 1835, during which time the anti-slavery movement gradually began to transform itself. With the movement of William Lloyd Garrison to the North, the establishment of the Liberator and the collapse of the gradualist emancipation societies in the border states, the North began a gradual swing towards a demand for immediate abolition. Despite the changes taking place around him, Burges himself refused to become an abolitionist. Regarding slavery from a legal standpoint, he felt no emancipation should come without some form

of compensation to the slave-owners. Not a "dupe" of the South, however, he inflamed Southern tempers when he advocated that the federal government had the right to act upon the legality of slavery in the territories and could prohibit it if necessary. This was a stand very similar to that taken by the Republican Party twenty years later. Burges' personal feelings on slavery, however, were no longer shared by a majority of his constituents in Rhode Island. As he saw it, the difference between his position and that of his constituents was one of the major reasons for his defeat in 1835.

During his ten years in office, however, it must be conceded that Tristram Burges served his state very well. The fact that he could be elected for five successive terms, while never completely being able to rid himself of his old Federalist background, attest to his popularity and widespread appeal. Although never able to be elected governor of his state after retiring from Congress, despite two all-out tries, there can be little doubt that Tristram Burges had earned a high place in the history of both his nation and state. Indeed, as one writer later phrased it:

A few years since, I listened to some old men who were gathered from different parts of the country, and resting themselves on benches by the Profile Lake, in New Hampshire [Near Franconia Notch]. They were telling each other stories about Tristram Burges, recounting the many brilliant things he had said. Some of these anecdotes were genuine, and some of them have been floating around the world since the time when the Athenians were running about their city hearing and telling



of some new thing. There could be no better proof of the unique fame of Mr. Burges. There is no surer evidence to a man's pre-eminence in any walk of life than that all the good things said or done in his line are attributed to him.<sup>17</sup>

Tristram Burges has rightly not been accorded the recognition given men like Webster, Calhoun, Jackson, Clay, or Van Buren, for he did not dominate the national scene as did these men. To those who knew him, however, Tristram Burges was most certainly a leading member of the lesser team nationally, and truly a leader in his own state.

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 69-70.

APPENDIX A  
ELECTION RESULTS BY TOWNS FOR THE  
CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS OF 1825

Town	Burges	Durfee	Eddy	Pearce	Hunter	Scat'.
Providence	580	331	135	138	42	14
N. Providence	91	18	35	39	1	
Smithfield	141	173	102	70	6	
Cumberland	124	125	96	93	5	
Glocester	102	58	94	151		5
Burrillville	101		61		1	3
Foster	112	183	106	38		1
Scituate	112	183	92	13		36
Johnston	43	148	48	3		57
Cranston	59	105	71	33	7	6
Warwick	163	145	58	78	11	2
E. Greenwich	65	38	31	62	6	
W. Greenwich	94	100	40	38		
Coventry	131	26	115	227	6	
Newport	99	63	132	239	161	
Portsmouth	79	81	75	83	12	
Middletown	17	43	57	33	8	
Tiverton	85	123	71	101	6	
Little Compton	93	60	38	66	5	

## APPENDIX A (continued)

Town	Burges	Durfee	Eddy	Pearce	Hunter	Scat'.
Jamestown	17	10	9	9	20	
New Shoreham	80	0	0	109	0	
N. Kingstown	67	55	127	107	32	20
S. Kingstown	80	45	134	153	17	
Exeter	68	73	96	93	1	1
Richmond	8 maj.					
Charlestown	5 maj.					
Westerly						
Hopkinton	10 maj.					
Bristol	61	44	43	76	3	
Warren	37	5	52	84	6	
Barrington	29	5	16	29	0	1
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>2731</b>	<b>2260</b>	<b>1943</b>	<b>2171</b>	<b>363</b>	<b>146</b>

The Providence Gazette, September 3, 1825.

## APPENDIX B

ELECTION RESULTS BY TOWNS FOR THE  
CONGRESSIONAL ELECTIONS OF 1835

Town	Burges	Cranston	Pearce	Sprague	Scat'.
Providence	970	973	271	268	7
N. Providence	121	117	88	86	
Smithfield	197	196	176	176	
Cumberland	152	145	110	1x6	
Johnston	143	142	9x	91	
Cranston	75	74	122	124	1
Burrillville	85	85	139	139	
Glocester	81	78	228	228	2
Scituate	79	69	232	231	
Foster	84	83	228	227	
Newport	342	348	187	173	
Portsmouth	131	1x0	9x	89	
Middletown	69	64	25	22	
Little Compton	93	85	53	48	
Tiverton	40	35	176	175	
Jamestown	22	20	29	30	
New Shoreham	34	32	112	110	
Bristol	144	140	100	101	
Warren	92	68	36	17	
Barrington	47	47	24	24	

## APPENDIX B (continued)

Town	Burges	Cranston	Pearce	Sprague	Scat'.
E. Greenwich	82	81	81	82	
W. Greenwich	58	39	116	130	
Warwick	155	126	195	228	1
Coventry	152	150	178	173	
N. Kingstown	43	37	195	194	
S. Kingstown	127	112	158	149	
Exeter	30	19	162	173	
Richmond	37	35	63	65	
Hopkinton	78	72	89	87	
Westerly	72	69	79	72	
Charlestown	47	47	66	66	
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>3882</b>	<b>3675</b>	<b>3903</b>	<b>3914</b>	<b>11</b>

The Providence Journal, August 31, 1835

"x" indicates numbers not legible.

## APPENDIX C

ELECTION RESULTS BY TOWNS FOR THE  
GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS OF 1836

Town	Burges	Francis	Collins
Providence	655	321	51
Cranston	57	113	
Bristol	74	113	4
Warren	17	60	45
Johnston	105	94	3
Warwick	93	232	
Barrington	38	31	5
N. Providence	86	80	6
Smithfield	171	235	5
Scituate	70	251	1
Burrillville	65	126	
Cumberland	124	142	2
Foster	60	212	
E. Greenwich	34	123	
Exeter	21	149	
N. Kingstown	33	203	
Coventry	128	190	
Newport	282	178	4
S. Kingstown	183	168	
	2295	3021	126
		599 maj.	

## APPENDIX C (continued)

Town	Burges	Francis	Collins
Glocester		128	
W. Greenwich		128	
Richmond		2	
Jamestown		45	
Westerly	15	2	
Middletown	24		
Portsmouth	43		
Little Compton	19		
Tiverton		111	
Hopkinton		22	
Charlestown		13	
TOTALS	101	922	
		Total majority	
		821	

APPENDIX D  
ELECTION RESULTS BY TOWNS FOR THE  
GUBERNATORIAL ELECTIONS OF 1839

Town	Sprague	Burgess	Bullock
Providence	605	243	232
N. Providence	49	33	32
Cumberland	70	57	78
Johnston	96	11	54
Cranston	76	8	82
Scituate	56	2	123
Smithfield	91	51	121
Burrillville	49	4	98
Glocester	59	17	124
Foster	30	5	161
Warwick	212	10	110
E. Greenwich	84	3	59
W. Greenwich	42		52
Coventry	143		131
N. Kingstown	54	5	130
S. Kingstown	169		174
Hopkinton			54 maj.
Charlestown	32		62
Exeter	24		82



## APPENDIX D (continued)

Town	Sprague	Burges	Bullock
Richmond	32		66
Westerly	77		75
Barrington	31	8	24
Warren	102	1	22
Bristol	69	2	148
Newport	329	5	143
Middletown	48 maj.		
Portsmouth	41 maj.		
Little Compton	54		22
Tiverton	59		131
Jamestown			4 maj.
New Shoreham			21 maj.
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>2772</b>	<b>463</b>	<b>2615</b>

The Providence Journal, April 20, 1899.

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