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**“No Baker’s dozen was her taste”: Rhode Island, Ratification, and Rhetoric in American
Constitutional History**

Countless historians have worked tirelessly to produce monographs, articles, documentary collections, and databases detailing the history of the United States Constitution. From discussions about the origins which necessitated the creation of a new, national government, to the Convention itself, and the document’s impact after ratification, scholars have endeavored to tell the story of how the United States truly came to be following the American Revolution—and rightfully so. The period of American Constitutional history is arguably one of the most consistently relevant to the modern age. Whether it is debated every four years during presidential elections, in each case reaching the Supreme Court, or even in school classrooms, the Constitution is undeniably present in the daily life of the American people. Discussions about the Founding Fathers, the ‘original intent’ of the Constitution, and the lasting significance of the document now over two centuries old still exist today. Understanding the historical background of the Constitution, then, becomes essential for reaching a better understanding about what the document means for America today.

While a detailed historiographical analysis of every source discussing American Constitutional history would take a lifetime, if not longer, there are certain trends that can be

identified by a select few sources. The spectrum of historical interpretation of the constitution is diverse. Many histories, such as Carol Berkin's 2002 book, *A Brilliant Solution: Inventing the American Constitution*, have glorified the creation of the Constitution, discussing the "gathering of demigods" who drafted the document and the subsequent "battle for ratification" that would surely save a nation in danger of collapse. Some historians have framed their analyses of Constitutional history in economic terms. In 1913, Charles Beard argued in *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* that the Framers convened in Philadelphia to protect their personal economic standing, while Woody Holton's more recent *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution* hinges upon state legislatures and their failed tax relief measures as the major impetuses for an elitist, reactionary movement that resulted in the creation of the Constitution. Still other prolific historians like Pauline Maier have attempted to approach Constitutional history on a state-by-state basis. Maier's 2010 book, *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788* discusses several of the state ratifying conventions that took place once the Constitutional Convention released the document for approval by "We the People" in each of the states. Maier credits the Wisconsin Historical Society's massive editorial project, *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, a multi-volume compilation of significant documents relating to each of the states, as a hugely influential for her research. Maier's impressive 485-paged tome, however, largely focuses on Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Virginia, and New York—only four of the original thirteen states involved in the Constitutional process.

With all of these differing interpretations of the Constitutional period, a breadth of important information exists. Within this diverse collection, however, exists a common trend. The majority of these books either briefly describe Rhode Island's participation in the dramatic

unfolding of the Constitutional history, or they ignore it completely. Most students of this time period are aware that Rhode Island did not send any delegates to the Constitutional Convention. While this fact often makes its way into the history books, noted historians rarely ever expand upon it, instead opting to gloss over the fact and move on to seemingly more relevant factors contributing to Constitutional development, or even engage in the popular “Rouge’s Island” narrative, which characterizes the state in its historic tradition of dissent. That many during the colonial, Revolutionary, and Constitutional eras harbored these same attitudes marks the true irony of this historiography.

As with every trend, however, there are always exceptions. Historian Patrick Conley marks one of these exceptions. Beginning with his 1970 dissertation, Conley has written extensively on Rhode Island and its place in Constitutional history, discussing both Federalists and Anti-Federalists. In *The Constitution and the States: The Role of the Original Thirteen in the Framing and Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, his short chapter on Rhode Island provides a much needed discussion of the state’s unique position in the larger narrative of American Constitutional history. Conley’s contributions, as well as Irwin Polishook’s seminal *Rhode Island and the Union* and the recent *Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution* are important resources that have greatly contributed to the historical understanding of Rhode Island’s place in Constitutional history.

Given Rhode Island’s refusal to send delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1787, it is important to analyze the reasons behind this decision. What made Rhode Island the only state to abstain, even as the twelve other states began to realize the necessity for convening? Tracing Rhode Island’s history back to its colonial beginnings can help clarify some of these motivations. From its beginning, Rhode Island’s unique status afforded its residents the

opportunity to develop equally unique attitudes about the nature of government. These ideologies made Rhode Island particularly susceptible to criticism. This criticism—often framed in political, moral, and intellectual terms—existed since the colony’s establishment. Over time it hardened Rhode Island’s dissident determination and resulted in the state’s refusal to send delegates in 1787 and repeated rejection of the Constitution, a political move seen as the ultimate affront by outside commentators.

Roger Williams founded Rhode Island as a haven for colonists persecuted for their religious beliefs. From the start, orthodox Massachusetts Puritans labeled the colony a “moral sewer” while Rhode Island defended its newly acquired territory from “land-grabbing and resentful neighbors.”¹ Immediately faced with criticism and outside threats, Rhode Island’s isolationist, inward-looking identity had been established. This focus gave rise to the dominating ideology that persisted in Rhode Island through the Constitutional Convention over 100 years later. “Throughout the colonial and Revolutionary eras, individualism, self-reliance, democratic localism, and resistance to external control were characteristic Rhode Island traits.”² These traits, developed over more than a century’s time, had important foundations in Rhode Island’s royal charter issued by King Charles II in 1663. Unusual in its terms, the charter allowed Rhode Island the “greatest degree of local self-government of any British colony.”³

The Rhode Island General Assembly’s extensive legislative power marked one of the most significant stipulations of the charter. Under its terms, the General Assembly could make or

¹ Patrick Conley, “First in War, Last in Peace: Rhode Island and the Constitution, 1786-1790,” in *The Constitution and the States: The Role of the Original Thirteen in the Framing and Adoption of the Federal Constitution*, ed. Patrick T. Conley and John P. Kaminski, (Madison: Madison House Publishers, 1988): 269.

² Patrick Conley, “Rhode Island: Our Microparadise from the Founding to the Millennium,” in *Rhode Island in Rhetoric and Reflection: Public Addresses and Essays*, (Providence: Rhode Island Publications Society, 2002): 4.

³ *Ibid.*

repeal any law so long as it did not conflict with any English laws. It could grant pardons, regulate elections, and determine the status of freemen in the colony. Additionally, “the absence of a provision for appeal to the King in Council in private causes,” afforded the colony even greater governmental autonomy. Rhode Island had “full liberty in religious concerns” under the charter and, perhaps most significantly, asserted that the colony’s inhabitants would “have and enjoy all liberties and immunities of free and natural subjects...as if they...were born within the realm of England.”⁴ This stipulation became immensely important for Rhode Island on the eve of the Revolution. Citing fellow historian George Bancroft’s statement that ““no where in the world were life, liberty and property safer than in Rhode Island,””⁵ Conley concludes that the supremacy of General Assembly was the most significant feature of Rhode Island’s colonial government.⁶

Despite this great power, however, the colony was not immune to criticism. During a 1699 imperial reorganization of the colonies, Richard Coote—governor of New York, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire—evaluated Rhode Island’s legislature and issued “a scathing summary” based on what he discovered. “‘The people,’ he said, ‘had a disdain for learning and were ‘shamefully ignorant.’” Having insulted the intellectual capacity of Rhode Islanders, Coote further concluded that certain “deviations from the directives of the charter” supported his assertion that “‘his Majesty is neither honored nor served by that government, as at present managed.’”⁷ Outside critique of Rhode Island would employ strikingly similar language

⁴ Patrick Conley, “Rhode Island Constitutional Development, 1636-1841: Prologue to the Dorr Rebellion,” (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 1970): 16-17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷ “Report of the Earl of Bellomont, on the Irregularities of Rhode Island,” *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, III, (November 27, 1699), 385-400 quoted in Conley, “Rhode Island Constitutional Development,” 20.

in 1787, when William Short wrote to Thomas Jefferson in Paris saying, “Rhode Island seems at present under an administration that does it no honor.”⁸ An even harsher criticism described the state as being “govern’d by Miscreants void of even the external apperances of Honour or Justice.”⁹ While the terms of the state’s dishonor had changed from the king to the Federal cause, the sentiment was the same; the General Assembly’s power, which Rhode Islanders had grown accustomed to, was in desperate need of reform. For Rhode Island Anti-Federalists the safety and supremacy of the General Assembly, enjoyed since 1663, would come under attack with the arrival of the Federal Constitution.

In addition to legislative supremacy, the 1663 charter set the stage for tremendous freemanship in Rhode Island. A suffrage statute in 1665 allowed a person to become a freeman “either by direct application to the Assembly or through being proposed by the chief officer of the town in which he lived.” Typically, most Rhode Islanders secured dual freemanship by acquiring a “competent estate” and then being admitted by fellow townsmen of landed status.¹⁰ In 1723 the Assembly passed a statute that established the first land requirement for freemen at the value of £100. By 1729, the value increased to £200 and later to £400 by 1746. By 1760, however, the value dropped substantially to £40—approximately \$134 based on Conley’s 1970 currency rate conversions.¹¹ These requirements meant that between 1723 and the start of the Revolutionary War, approximately 75 percent of Rhode Island’s white adult male population

⁸ William Short, “From William Short, Paris May 29. 1787,” *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 1 January to 6 August 1787*, Vol. 11 Ed. Julian P. Boyd, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955): 381.

⁹ Francis Hopkinson, “From Francis Hopkinson, Philada. July 8th 1787,” *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 1 January to 6 August 1787*, Vol. 11 Ed. Julian P. Boyd, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955): 561.

¹⁰ Conley, “Rhode Island Constitutional Development,” 35-36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

could vote.¹² For conservative critics of Rhode Island government, the colony was “dangerously democratic.” Chief Justice Daniel Horsmanden of New York “disdainfully described Rhode Island as a ‘downright democracy’ whose governmental officials were ‘entirely controlled by the populace,’ and the conservative Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson lamented to George III that Rhode Island was ‘the nearest to a democracy of any of your colonies.’”¹³ These critiques, offered prior to the American Revolution, would again resurface when it came time for the Constitutional Convention.

The tremendous degree of male suffrage in the colony clearly rendered Rhode Island extremely democratic. The ratio of population to the number of deputies in the General Assembly further highlighted the heightened democracy in the colony. In 1782, Rhode Island had a population of 52,347 people. Seventy deputies represented this population in the General Assembly. Based on these figures, then, there was one deputy for approximately every 748 people.¹⁴ By 1790, there were 72 seats in the General Assembly, with one for every 983 people.¹⁵ These proportions indicate that Assembly deputies would be fairly responsive to their constituencies in Rhode Island. “The structure of politics in Rhode Island was thus uniquely susceptible to popular control,” which became a major concern for the Federalist Framers.¹⁶ On September 17, 1787, the last day of the Constitutional Convention, the Framers decided that the minimum population of each congressional district would be 30,000, a figure reduced from James Madison’s initial suggestion of 40,000. These “immense new congressional

¹² *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 40-41.

¹⁴ “The Rhode Island Census of 1782,” Theodore Foster Papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, Vol. XIV; *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island*, IX, 520 quoted in Conley, “Rhode Island Constitutional Development,” 48.

¹⁵ Conley, “Rhode Island Constitutional Development,” 126.

¹⁶ Irwin Polishook, *Rhode Island and the Union*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969): 37.

constituencies,” Woody Holton argues, “were expected to make the federal government much less responsive to the public will than any of the states.”¹⁷ The exponential increase of people per representative is clear. A centralized federal government would curb the pronounced democracy in Rhode Island—a goal Federalists were all too ready to achieve.

Wary of the powerful Rhode Island General Assembly and the ‘dangerous democracy’ it facilitated, the Framers raised additional concerns over Rhode Island’s paper money supporters who they saw as a threat to national unity and the success of the Constitution.¹⁸ In 1781, the Congress governing under the Articles of Confederation proposed an impost in which the states would give the federal government the power to impose a 5 percent tax on foreign imports and all naval prizes and prize goods. The impost would have an indefinite term, “expiring only when the entire debt had been paid off.”¹⁹ Under the Articles of Confederation, which Rhode Island was the first state to ratify in 1778, the Congress had no taxation power.²⁰ Thus, the Impost of 1781 was not merely an economic recovery plan but also an amendment to the Articles of Confederation—an amendment which required ratification by all member states.²¹ “The Impost was an integral part of the nationalist movement. It proposed to strengthen a weak central government and thereby set a crucial precedent for changing a constitution not yet in force.”²² While the impost had economic implications that threatened the profits of Rhode Island’s merchant class, David Howell, an opponent of the Impost, voiced his dissent in ideological terms, equating the Impost amendment to the oppressive British taxation that the colonies had

¹⁷ Woody Holton, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007): 205.

¹⁸ For a more in depth discussion of paper money and its affect on the Constitutional Convention’s proceedings, see Woody Holton’s *Unruly Americans*.

¹⁹ Polishook, 58.

²⁰ Conley, “Rhode Island Constitutional Development,” 58.

²¹ Polishook, 58.

²² Polishook, 59-60.

resisted during the American Revolution.²³ For Howell and other Rhode Island dissidents, “the Articles of Confederation were explicit and established,” so any supporters of “undefined, implied powers,” and thus a stronger, more centralized government, “were a danger to the United States.”²⁴ On November 1, 1782, nearly two years after Congress proposed the Impost, the Rhode Island General Assembly rejected it, striking a blow to the nationalist effort to amend the Articles and consolidate power.²⁵ Yet another instance of dissent and a reaffirmation of commitment to states’ rights and local democracy, Rhode Island’s rejection of the 1781 Impost further calcified the attitudes of Federalist critics.

The 1786 General Assembly elections ushered in a new wave of Rhode Island legislators who espoused a paper money platform. The victory of Rhode Island’s Country Party “transformed the legislature from a merchant-dominated body to one in which the interests of the farmer took precedence.”²⁶ Faced with massive public debt following the Revolution, Rhode Islanders experienced heavy taxation that was insufficient in paying off their debts. In an effort to avoid further taxation or a complete repudiation of the debt, Rhode Island began to issue paper money, a tactic the General Assembly had employed several times before.²⁷ In 1786, the Country Party issued £100,000, or \$333,000, of paper money to alleviate the heavy tax burden. When the following year’s call to amend the Articles of Confederation occurred, which eventually resulted in the creation of an entirely new Constitution, “the Country Party was firmly entrenched.”²⁸ The paper money issue came under direct attack at the Convention. The new Constitution, which Rhode Island Anti-Federalists vehemently opposed, prohibited the states from rescuing debtors

²³ *Ibid.*, 70.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁶ Conley, “First in War, Last in Peace,” 272.

²⁷ Polishook, 109.

²⁸ Conley, “First in War, Last in Peace,” 272.

and issuing paper money in Article I, Section 10.²⁹ Then, “when the ratification process began, Rhode Island was too deeply enmeshed in the paper-money program to back out.”³⁰ Thus the Convention’s strike against the use of paper money proved to be an important motivation for Rhode Island’s refusal to attend the Convention and later hesitance to ratify.

As the paper money controversy and the Constitutional Convention occurred contemporaneously, the Federalist battle against paper money raged outside of Independence Hall as well. From harsh private correspondence among leaders to public vilification in the newspapers, paper money supporters, particularly in Rhode Island, became the subject of much derision after the 1786 issuance. In assessing the state of America in 1786, James Madison wrote to his brother, Ambrose, highlighting the several problems facing the young nation: “No money comes into the public treasury, trade is on a wretched footing, and the States are running mad after paper money, which among other evils disables them from all contributions of specie for paying the public debts, particularly the foreign one.” Madison goes on to mention Rhode Island as one of the key problem states driven ‘mad’ by the ‘evil’ of paper money.³¹ After Rhode Island officially refused to send delegates to the Constitution, Madison expressed the depth of his frustration: “Nothing can exceed the wickedness and folly which continue to reign there. All sense of Character as well as of Right is obliterated. Paper money is still their idol.” In this expression of exasperation, Madison manages to question Rhode Island’s intellect, character, and morality with only a brief statement. Madison was not the only one to speak about paper money in these terms. The *Massachusetts Gazette* criticized states that were, “deeply infected with the

²⁹ Holton, *Unruly Americans*, 184.

³⁰ Conley, “First in War, Last in Peace,” 280.

³¹ James Madison, “To Ambrose Madison, New York Aug. 7th 1786,” *The Papers of James Madison, 9 April 1786-24 May 1787*, Vol. 9 Ed. Robert A. Rutland, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975): 89.

paper influenza...this virulent plague with all its concomitant evils,” foretelling fatal “devastation” should the usage of paper money continue.³² Rhode Island’s paper money dependence thus not only represented the height of poor economic policy, but also a veritable moral illness.

In February 1787, shortly after the paper money issuance, the Rhode Island General Assembly failed to vote on the resolution to hold the Philadelphia Convention and later refused to send delegates when the Framers convened later that year, making it the only state to do so.³³ As if Rhode Island’s paper emission was not offensive enough to the Federalist mindset, the General Assembly’s refusal to send delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 represented the peak of Rhode Island’s dissidence in one last attempt to maintain the individualism, self-reliance, democratic localism, and resistance to external control that had marked the state’s history since its colonial beginnings. For Federalist leaders looking to undermine these characteristics, Rhode Island’s intransigent refusal to attend the Constitutional Convention marked yet another occasion for ridicule. It should come as no surprise, then, that Federalists reacted to this refusal with contempt. “By some late acts of Rhode Island it appears that the current of Madness in that State has not yet compleated [*sic*] its course. The Assembly have decided by a Majority of upwards of twenty, not to send Deputies to the Convention,” wrote

³² “Newport, (Rhode-Island) May 31,” *Massachusetts Gazette* Volume VI, Issue 336 (June 5, 1787): Page 3, http://0-infoweb.newsbank.com.helin.uri.edu/iw-search/we/HistArchive/?p_product=EANX&p_theme=ahnp&p_nbid=G58X61IUMTM4NjA3MzAzNy41ODczNDg6MToxMzoxMzEuMTI4LjcwLjIz&p_action=doc&s_lastnonissuequeryname=2&d_viewref=search&p_queryname=2&p_docnum=1&p_docref=v2:1080E81BCACD03C0@EANX-108557010C039790@2373904-10855701642AC230@2-108557022C017CD8@Newport%2C%20%28Rhode-Island%29%20May%2031

³³ Conley, “First in War, Last in Peace,” 273.

Edward Carrington to Virginia Convention delegate Edmund Randolph.³⁴ A few weeks later, Carrington continued to express his dissatisfaction, writing, “Rhode Island is at all points so anti-federal, and contemptible, that her neglecting the invitation, will probably occasion no demur whatever in the proceedings.”³⁵ Angered by Rhode Island’s absence yet still confident in the Convention’s potential, Carrington essentially casts Rhode Island aside, implying that her delegates were not necessary to begin with. Issuing his most virulent statement to Thomas Jefferson, Carrington once again framed his criticism in moral and political terms: “All the States have elected representatives except Rhode Island, whose apostasy from every moral, as well as political, obligation has placed her perfectly without the views of her confederates.”³⁶ Faced with Rhode Island’s most seemingly backward opposition to date, Carrington again attempts to dismiss the Rhode Island issue entirely. James Madison agreed, simply stating: “Their company will not add much to our pleasure or to the progress of business.”³⁷ Scorned by Rhode Island’s ultimate display of intransigence, some Federalists began to ignore Rhode Island and continued on with their creation of a new federal government.

On September 28, 1787, the Convention sent copies of the proposed Constitution to the states.³⁸ On the same day, Henry Channing accurately predicted that the “truly wretched people” of Rhode Island would reject the Constitution.³⁹ James Madison voiced his agreement in

³⁴ Edward Carrington, “Virginia Delegates to Edmund Randolph, New York April 2d. 1787,” *The Papers of James Madison, 9 April 1786-24 May 1787*, 9:362-363.

³⁵ Edward Carrington, “From Edward Carrington, New York April 24. 1787,” *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 1 January to 6 August 1787*, 11:311.

³⁶ Edward Carrington, “From Edward Carrington, New York June 9. 1787,” *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 1 January to 6 August 1787*, 11:407.

³⁷ James Madison, “To James Monroe Philada. June 10. 1787,” *The Papers of James Madison, 9 April 1786-24 May 1787*, 10:43.

³⁸ Wisconsin Historical Society, *comp.*, “General Ratification Chronology, 1786-1791,” *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution (DHRC)*, (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society: 2011) Vol. XXIV, 1:xxi.

October, saying that while the “general impression seems to be favorable,” Rhode Island, “whose folly and fraud have not yet finished their career,” would be difficult to persuade.⁴⁰ The Framers themselves were not the only ones aware of the difficult road to ratification. Several newspapers covered Rhode Island’s continued resistance. Vicious rhetoric pervaded the federally inclined papers, whether they re-printed letters from other states or produced their own biting remarks. In many cases, writers juxtaposed the honor and virtue that Federalists exhibited with the corruption and vice existing in Rhode Island. One letter made the bold statement that in Rhode Island, “a viler and more abandoned sett [*sic*] of beings never disgraced any Legislative, Judicial or Executive Authorities since the Fall of Adam,” while “every *conscientious* and *honest* man in our devoted republic is employed in contemplating with admiration, and devoutly wishing for the *speedy* adoption of the NEW CONSTITUTION.”⁴¹ A similar letter opposed the “*virtuous* freemen of the state,” with the “*minority of Rhode-Island*,”⁴² while yet another decried “the little nest of villains,” who threatened the nation’s restoration “to a state of happiness and splendour.”⁴³ One encouraged Rhode Islanders to “abandon the obscure cavern of *ignorance*,” for the “delightful atmosphere, the *knowledge of our country’s good*.”⁴⁴ Many other contemporary articles like these consistently illustrated Rhode Island’s evildoers against the backdrop of the virtuous and moral rest of the nation that existed beyond the state’s borders.

³⁹ Henry Channing, “Henry Channing to David Daggett Lyme, Conn., 28 September 1787 (excerpt),” *DHRC*, Vol. XXIV, 1: 28.

⁴⁰ James Madison, “To William Short New York Oct. 24 1787,” *James Madison Papers*, 10:221.

⁴¹ “Extract of a letter from Rhode-Island, dated the 7th instant,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 21 November 1787, *DHRC*, Vol. XXIV, 1:59.

⁴² Newport Herald, 20 March 1788, “Extract of a letter from a gentleman in a neighboring State, dated March 7, 1788,” *DHRC*, Vol. XXIV, 1:119.

⁴³ “Massachusetts Centinel, 26 April 1788,” *DHRC*, Vol. XXIV, 1:257.

⁴⁴ “Newport Herald, 29 May 1788,” *DHRC*, Vol. XXIV, 1:267.

Amidst this barrage of criticism, the Rhode Island General Assembly issued an official reply to the President, the Senate, and the House of Representatives that explained the motivation for their resistance:

The People of this State from its first Settlement have been accustomed and strongly attached to a democratical Form of Government:—They have viewed in the new Constitution an Approach, tho' perhaps but small, towards that Form of Government from which we have lately dissolved our Connection, at so much Hazard and Expence of Life and Treasure....We are sensible of the Extremes to which democratical Government is sometimes liable—something of which we have lately experienced, but we esteem them temporary and partial Evils, compared with the Loss of Liberty and the Rights of a free People.⁴⁵

Harkening back to the ideology on which Rhode Island had always relied, the Assembly related the new Constitution to the British assault on rights that had precipitated the American Revolution. Reaffirming its dedication to democracy, yet cognizant of its potential dangers, the Assembly declares that the people of Rhode Island would prefer these minor 'evils' to the minimization of democratic principles that the new Constitution would bring. Steadfast in upholding the tradition of dissent in favor of maintaining democracy, individualism, and resistance to outside threats, the Assembly responded to the critics by defending its position and declaring the sensibility of continued resistance. But the justification did not matter. Rhode Island remained at a loss and the democratic government that had been appreciated since "first Settlement" would be restrained by the now inevitable federal government and the continued harassment from its most prominent leaders.

Two months prior to Rhode Island's official ratification of the Constitution—a move of uncharacteristic conformity—John Adams wrote a fury-filled letter to Henry Marchant, a Rhode

⁴⁵ "Rhode Island General Assembly to the President, the Senate, and the House of Representatives, 19 September 1789," *DHRC*, Vol. XXV, 2:605.

Island General Assembly member largely responsible for steering the state towards ratification in May 1790.⁴⁶ Adams's letter reads, in part:

“Your Champions are all but poor puppets danced on the wires of certain hot spirits in other states whose ambition is greater than their talents or virtues, and whose vanity is greater still. Nothing in all this surprises me so much as the blockheadly ignorance and stupidity of your common people which suffers them to be made the dupes of artists so unskillful. This fact among many others serves to show that in proportion as you approach in a Constitution of government to a complete democracy by the same degrees your people must become Savages. The vulgar envy and malignity will not be content with plundering the helpless and Defenceless, but they will not bear the least superiority in knowledge nor in virtue. They will never be content till all are equally fools knaves and brutes. Equality! Perfect Equality!”⁴⁷

Adams employs all the usual criticisms, and even adds a few of his own quite colorful descriptions. Calling into question the virtue and intelligence of Rhode Island Anti-Federalists, Adams characterizes them as uncivilized, crippled by the government of “complete democracy” that renders them incapable of supporting or even understanding the necessity of the Constitution. With bitter sarcasm he mocks the level of equality in Rhode Island, reducing it to a right reserved for only the most sordid individuals. As more and more time passed after the Constitutional Convention and as Rhode Island continually refused to capitulate to the calls for ratification, the tension grew and often resulted in great vitriol. Whether in newspapers presented to the public or in private letters exchanged between people, Rhode Island consistently remained an easy target for harsh criticism before, during, and after the Constitutional Convention.

⁴⁶ “Henry Marchant.” *Dictionary of American Biography*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), *Biography in Context*, Web. (accessed 7 Dec. 2013): http://0-ic.galegroup.com/helin.uri.edu/ic/bic1/ReferenceDetailsPage/ReferenceDetailsWindow?failOverType=&query=&prodId=BIC1&windowstate=normal&contentModules=&mode=view&displayGroupName=Reference&limiter=&currPage=&disableHighlighting=false&displayGroups=&sortBy=&search_within_results=&p=BIC1&action=e&catId=&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALE%7CBT2310008358&source=Bookmark&u=providence_main&jsid=e3bdc075a6c299189de148f700ffdb8e

⁴⁷ “John Adams to Henry Marchant New York, 20 March 1790,” *DHRC*, Vol. XXVI, 3:792.

Even after Rhode Island conceded to ratifying the Constitution on May 29, 1790, it was still not immune to criticism.⁴⁸ Four months before Rhode Island's official ratification, critics at the *Pennsylvania Federal Gazette* still maintained the same characterizations of the state despite the fact that it had finally expressed a willingness to ratify. "Every friend to union and good government will rejoice to hear, that this deluded people have become sensible of their errors; and that paper money and tender laws will be banished from this their last hold."⁴⁹ Perpetuating the 'good' versus 'evil' characterization and making a final remark about the ever-threatening presence of paper money, critics continued their now familiar rhetoric even after Rhode Island had changed its apparently evil ways. On June 12, 1790, the *New York Daily Advertiser* issued a particularly scathing poem called "Rhode-Island Conversion," a title with clear moral connotations. With ratification, Rhode Island Anti-Federalists had officially been delivered from their heathenism yet the incessant smear campaign continued. Rhode Island, "like a coy unwilling maid,/Was long averse to joining hands/A queen amidst the wat'ry waste,/No Baker's dozen was her taste." The poem continued, issuing one final taunt: "Your little paws were never made/To box with twelve such hags as *we*." Relishing in the absolute victory, Federalists rejoiced after finally having converted Rhode Island to the national cause. They had forced the state to see the error in her ways and could now "*moor her safe in freedom's port*."⁵⁰

Precisely what this *freedom* meant—to different people, different states, and different leaders—represented a hallmark question that the Constitutional Convention ultimately sought to answer. The Convention was essentially a debate about the nature of this *freedom*, who could exercise it, and who could not. Differing conceptions of what freedom actually entailed divided

⁴⁸ "General Ratification Chronology, 1786-1791," *DHRC*, Vol. XXIV, 1:xxiii.

⁴⁹ "Philadelphia Federal Gazette, 1 February 1790," *DHRC*, Vol. XXVI, 3:716.

⁵⁰ "New York Daily Advertiser, 12 June 1790, *Rhode-Island Conversion*," *DHRC*, Vol. XXVI, 3:1048.

the Federalist and Anti-Federalist camps. While Anti-Federalists made significant gains in achieving their vision of freedom with the eventual adoption of the Bill of Rights, history often remembers the Federalists as the new nation's first winners in the fight for freedom. This brand of freedom, housed in a now stronger, more centralized federal government, came at the expense of other freedoms. Anti-Federalist ideals, especially in Rhode Island, were initially either berated or ignored. The state's commitment to local democracy, observance of states' rights, individualism, and resistance to external control began in 1663 and persisted until 1790, reacting to the constant criticism it faced from external critics who questioned Rhode Island's political policies, intelligence, and overall moral character. In this time period, Rhode Island established itself as a state separate from the rest, relentless in espousing its own conception of freedom. For many Federalists, however, Rhode Island remained the same "moral sewer" full of "shamefully ignorant" people that it had been since the beginning. The only difference, according to these critics, was the ways in which Rhode Islanders demonstrated their moral depravity, intellectual ineptitude, and political backwardness. In 1790, however, the Federalists had finally won the battle against Rhode Island. While the state remains a member of these United States today, it also continues to maintain its culture of individualism and eccentricity—reminders of the rich history, certainly not lacking in drama, that contributed to the overall history of this nation.