A UNIQUE RHODE ISLAND ENTITY: 
THE ELECTION PROX

By

BONNIE HAVHOLM

From time to time when such items are available, the Newport Historical Society purchases documents and imprints pertaining to Rhode Island history. Two of the newest acquisitions are a 1781 Election Prox and a 1787 Election Prox. The 1781 prox added to a 1782 Election Prox given to the Society in 1966 by Mr. and Mrs. Sydney L. Wright make a pair of the earliest 18th century proxes in the manuscript collection of eight.

"Prox" is a unique Rhode Island word. J. E. Alden in his book, Rhode Island Imprints 1727-1800, says in the introduction that after Rhode Island contributed "prox" to the English language, it soon merited inclusion in the Oxford English Dictionary.

In his History of the Town of Providence published in 1843, William Staples uses the word and defines it in context:

They appointed a General Assembly of the whole colony to be holden annually, "if wind and weather hinder not" ... at which the General Officers of the colony were to be chosen. ... it is probable that the greater part of the inhabitants of Providence, Portsmouth, Newport and Warwick attended . . . .

It was in truth a General Assembly of the people. Such of the colony as could not attend the General Assembly, had the right to send their votes for these officers, by some other persons; hence the origin of the terms prox and proxy votes, as applied to the present mode of voting for state officers in Rhode-Island.¹

An Election Prox is a printed list of those running for state office to be used as a voting ballot by those who could not attend the general meeting to cast a personal vote, but could send their marked ballot with one who was going to attend.

The Oxford English Dictionary, 1909, after showing the origin of the word as Rhode Island, gives, besides the above Staples reference, three other references where it is used:

PROX U. S. local (Rhode Island).
1698 Rhode Island Col. Rec. (1861) III. 333 Voted, That Capt'n Nathaniel Coddington, Capt'n Robert Carr, are appointed to open the prox votes on the day of Election.

118
1768 *Ibid.* VI 551 Upon this plan . . . only one prox will be printed.

1816 Pickering *Vocab U.* S. s.v. Proxies, The abbreviation Prox is also used in Rhode Island for the Ticket; that is, the List of Candidates at Elections.

The two consecutive Election Proxes in the Historical Society collection have a few of the same people running for office. Since they are only a year apart this is not unusual. William Greene and Jabez Bowen ran for Governor and Deputy Governor respectively on each prox. Five of the Assistants are the same on each prox, and Henry Ward ran for Secretary and Joseph Clarke for General Treasurer in both years. Daniel Mowry is the only one who ran both years as a Delegate to Congress.

There were evidently two election proxes printed for each election. All those people listed on the prox for 1781 won the election, but not all those listed on the 1782 prox were put into office. Jabez Bowen, running in 1782 for Deputy Governor, lost the election to William West, Esq. John Sayles, Esq. running as an Assistant, Henry Ward, Esq. running for Secretary, Joseph Clarke, Esq. running for General Treasurer, and Daniel Mowry, Esq. running as a Delegate to Congress are the four others listed on the 1782 prox who won. All others listed did not get into office in 1782.

In 1908, Sidney S. Rider in his fortnightly magazine, *Book Notes* published an article entitled, "The Origin, Meaning and Duration of Existence in Rhode Island of the Political Word Prox." The article lists the number of times and ways the word appeared in several dictionaries, and then concludes by saying: "The word prox has dropped out of existence. It has no longer either use or meaning in Rhode Island."2 This, of course, is not altogether true. It has use and meaning as a descriptive measure for the unique historical fact of the Election Prox as used in this state in the 18th and 19th centuries. Unusual particulars of Rhode Island history are important and interesting, and, prox as a unique Rhode Island word and its use as a political phenomenon that is singular to Rhode Island illustrate this.

---


His Excellency

William Greene, Esq; Governor.

The Honorable

Jabez Bowen, Esq; Dep. Governor.

1. John I. Clark, Esq; Assistant.
2. Thomas Wells, Esq; Assistant.
3. John Sayles, Esq; Assistant.
4. Jonathan Arnold, Esq; Assistant.
5. Richard Fry, Esq; Assistant.
6. John Northup, Esq; Assistant.
7. Enoch Haszard, Esq; Assistant.
8. Christopher Ellery, Esq; Assistant.
9. John Cooke, Esq; Assistant.
10. Daniel Owen, Esq; Assistant.

Henry Ward, Esq; Secretary.
William Channing, Esq; Atty. Gen.
Joseph Clarke, Esq; General-Treasurer.

Delegates in Congress.

Hon. William Ellery, Esq;
Hon. Ezekiel Cornell, Esq;
Hon. Daniel Mowry, Esq;
Hon. James M. Varnum, Esq;

[Printed by John Carter.]

Newport Historical Society Manuscript Collection

The 1781 Election Prox recently purchased by the Newport Historical Society.
Under such RULERS we hope for justice!

HIS EXCELLENCY
WILLIAM GREENE, Esquire,
GOVERNOR.

Hon. JABEZ BOWEN, Esq; Dep. Gov.
1. JOHN I. CLARK, Esq; Assistant.
2. GIDEON HOXSIE, Esq; Assistant.
3. AMOS ATWELL, Esq; Assistant.
4. JOHN SAYLES, Esq; Assistant.
5. Enoch Haszard, Esq; Assistant.
6. JOHN NORTHUP, Esq; Assistant.
7. RICHARD FRY, Esq; Assistant.
8. SAMUEL FREEBODY, Esq; Assistant.
9. METCALF BOWLER, Esq; Assistant.
10. NATHAN MILLER, Esq; Assistant.
HENRY WARD, Esq; Secretary.
BENJAMIN BOURNE, Esq; Ator. Gen.
JOSEPH CLARKE, Esq; Gen. Treasurer.

DELEGATES in CONGRESS.
1. Hon. JOHN BROWN, Esq;
2. Hon. DANIEL MOWRY, Esq;
3. Hon. JOHN MALBONE, Esq;
4. Hon. ADAM COMSTOCK, Esq;

Printed by BENNETT WAREING 1782

Newport Historical Society Manuscript Collection

The 1782 Election Prox given to the Newport Historical Society in 1966 by Mr. and Mrs. Sydney L. Wright.