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UNEASY COEXISTENCE: RELIGIOUS TENSIONS IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NEWPORT

by

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Of all the colonies in America, Rhode Island has the reputation of being the most tolerant. While religious diversity did guard against overt persecution (particularly in a heterogeneous city such as Newport), there were, in fact, underlying prejudices which surfaced in times of crisis and caused grave divisions in the community. This article attempts to describe the religious atmosphere of eighteenth century Newport and to suggest what caused these deep seated biases to erupt during one such crisis — the revolutionary era.

Rhode Island's religious activities were of great concern to its neighbors as the tiny colony was founded by dissenters who argued that toleration served their interests better than persecution. Despite urging from Massachusetts, Roger Williams' spiritual descendants refused to eject anyone from the colony for non-conformity, and by the eighteenth century, Quakers were rubbing elbows with Jews, Huguenots, Anglicans, Catholics, Moravians, Congregationalists, and Baptists. There was neither time nor motivation for overt religious harassment in Rhode Island, and "notwithstanding so many differences," there were "fewer quarrels about religion than elsewhere, the people living peaceably with their neighbors of whatever profession. They all agree in one point, that the Church of England is second best." George Berkeley, the English philosopher who took up residence in Newport in the late 1720s, was fascinated by the "subdivision of sects," the "four sorts of Anabaptists," as well as the "independents" and those "of no profession at all."¹

Religion was not likely to be a disruptive force in mid-eighteenth century Newport. Indeed, each minister evidenced an interest and an open mind about other persuasions, rather than the suspicion that seemed to pervade the other New England communities. On one occasion this spirit of brotherhood led to an excess of spirits which was reported in a delightful but apocryphal story concerning the event, which supposedly took place around 1730:

It was about this time that Nathanael Greene, father of the Revolutionary general, caused considerable gossip. While passing an evening at the home of one of the Wantons, many visitors

dropped in, including every clergyman in town. A punch was prepared, and the unity of spirit which ensued was surprising. The Reverend Honeymen thought there was not half as much virtue in a surplice as he had always believed, and Parson Clapp concluded there was less error in the established church than he had supposed. The Jewish Rabbi agreed that if the Messiah had not already come, the sound of His chariot wheels was in the air, and the Baptist brethren cheerfully admitted that *to* or *into* the water was very much the same thing. When the party sallied into the street, 'the Hebrew and the Episcopalian locked arms, and abandoned themselves to a contemplation of the heavenly bodies,' and the others 'betook themselves to making Virginia fences with one side of the street to the other.' Nathanael Greene had been 'seized with some mild affection of the knees, which made the assistance of a negro in going up-stairs quite convenient.' Next morning the ministers omitted their usual services in order to attend the Friends meeting at which Greene was to speak. The meeting-house was filled to capacity. At length, Nathanael Greene arose, and in a tremulous voice, counseled all his hearers to be temperate, especially in the use of strong drink.²

If these observations give an impressionistic view of Newport in the eighteenth century, the copious notes made by the Reverend Ezra Stiles in his diaries and itineraries confirm a good part of the story. (See table 1). A bewildering variety of denominations existed in Newport, and more than half the population was affiliated with one of these churches. According to Stiles, this number rose from 51% in 1760 to almost 58% in 1770.³ Like Berkeley, Stiles indicated that "in Newport there are many of no religion," and if pressed for a more precise figure he would have admitted to "two or three hundred Families not connected with any denomination," or "nothingarians" as he facetiously labeled them.⁴

Despite suggestions that relations were harmonious among the various groups, Stiles also hinted that an ongoing rivalry existed among ministers for converts. He noted with something less than his customary humility that in the Rev. Mr. Hopkins' congregation, baptisms did not rise "above one third," while "two thirds" of his own flock were baptized. Stiles, however, was not completely satisfied with his count and blamed "Baptist and Quaker influence" for what he considered fewer professors than he deserved. Indeed, he was not even content with "seven hundred Souls" under his "pastoral care"; he would have preferred to have been able to account for more than 77 communicants in his congregation.⁵

According to his own words, Stiles welcomed blacks; he recorded 70 in his congregation, six of whom were in full communion. The other churches in Newport were equally receptive to blacks, and the blacks divided their numbers equally among the churches. Six or seven black communicants attended each of the

Baptist and First Congregational churches, and perhaps four or five in the Anglican church.⁶

TABLE 1
Religious Denominations, by Number of Families
1760 and 1770

<i>Denomination</i>	<i>Year Founded</i>	<i>Number of Families 1760</i>	<i>Number of Families 1770</i>
Congregationalists	1st — 1695 2nd — 1728	Both meetings 228; (41 widows — in 2nd, 40 bachelors)	1st Cong.: 135 2nd Cong.: 130
Episcopalians	1698	169 — 18 widows and 31 bachelors	200
Friends	1656	105	150
1st Baptist	1648	25	40
Sabb. Baptists	1671	15	40
2nd Baptist	1656	150	200
Jews	17—	15	30
Moravians or United Brethren	1758	15	35
Baptists	1770		20
		722	980 families

Source: Adapted from the figures of Ezra Stiles in the SECOND CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH RECORDS 1728, Binder No. 838 B, p. 122, Vault A, NHS; Stiles, ITINERARIES, 13.

As elsewhere in the colonies, women were more avid churchgoers in Newport than men. Stiles' writing suggests that the institution encouraged the dependency of women upon men. Although the Baptist churches allowed "the Sisters to equal votes in the Chh meetings," Ezra Stiles observed that only

the Aged Sisters Lift up Hands with the Brethren . . . The younger sisters keep their places and say nothing . . . probably their Voting is growing into Disuetude — so that the usage may be intirely dropt in another generation in these old as well as in the New Churches.

Probing further, Stiles noted that "as to the Congregational Chhs I never knew or read of the Sisters voting: they often stay with the Brethren and see and hear what is transacted, but dont even speak in the Church."⁷ Since women voiced no complaint at their inability to vote in elections outside the church, one suspects they raised little fuss at lacking this privilege in the church itself.

Quaker women had a little more power within the Church than women of other denominations. This is not to say that they were completely independent, but rather that they had their own meetings and made their voices heard through minor policy decisions. Important decisions were referred to the men's meeting, but the minutes of the women's monthly meeting indicate they were not shy about making their wishes known.⁸

Newport had no religious ghettos in the eighteenth century. People of every denomination could be found everywhere, but certain neighborhoods seemed to attract particular groups in greater proportion than others. For instance, the Quaker proprietors who originally owned all the land in the Point section and sold land subject to a quit rent, found members of their own persuasion eager to take advantage of one or more lots. The area was laid out in a gridiron pattern about 1725 and was a striking contrast to other parts of Newport which followed no pattern at all. Merchants who happened to be Anglicans or Episcopalians had a slight tendency to settle in the neighborhood of Trinity Church; not surprising, since it was a region of lovely homes reflecting the affluence of their owners. The Jewish members of the community were scattered around town despite a reference to "Jew Street" on 1712 and 1777 maps. The street was probably so named because the Jewish Cemetery was located there.

For the most part, Newport tolerated religious diversity with equanimity. Indeed, there were times when it was used to advantage throughout Rhode Island. For example, the governor and assembly of the colony were elected by the people, and political candidates were quick to secure the backing of specific groups during a heated campaign. In the midst of the Ward-Hopkins controversy which spanned the generation preceding the Revolution, Governor Ward knew he could count on most of the Baptists, some Quakers, a few Episcopalians and the majority of the Presbyterians.⁹ Hopkins relied on most of the Quaker and Anglican ballots, and a few Baptist votes.

Beneath the surface underlying tensions threatened to disturb the religious calm from time to time. The townspeople may have thought of Newport as a haven where "*every religious Sect [could] enjoy the glorious Liberty of publickly worshipping God according to their consciences,*" but this was not strictly accurate.¹⁰ For instance, in 1773 when the Reverend John Murray, a visiting

Universalist, denied the doctrine of eternal punishment, Newport's ministers unanimously excoriated him. And as openminded as they were, it was stretching the bounds of tolerance too far to allow Murray to administer the Lord's Supper to some mellow party goers as they enjoyed after dinner cordials. He was tried as a "false apostle" by the Reverend Bisset and found guilty as charged.¹¹

More importantly, Catholics and Jews were not as welcome as Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers, or even Anglicans, although in the interests of harmony and good business, they were allowed to live and worship unmolested within the community. There was no Catholic Church in Newport, and when Francis Vandale "from Old France" opened a language school in town in 1774, he felt compelled to announce that he expected good patronage because he was Protestant rather than Catholic.¹²

The welcome extended to Sephardic Jews in the seventeenth century was also less than warm. The General Assembly told them they "could expect as good protection here as any stranger, being not of our nation, residing amongst us in His Majesty's colony ought to have, being obedient to His Majesty's laws."¹³ The wording of this resolution clearly implied that although the Jewish population could worship as they pleased, they were, in fact, long term guests of the community — rather than citizens. This conclusion is reinforced by a 1663 Rhode Island statute limiting the ranks of freeman to "all men professing Christianity (Roman Catholics only excepted) . . ."¹⁴ Since only freemen could vote, this provision effectively disenfranchised Jews and Catholics, and prevented them from holding office. Furthermore, this may have been one of the few laws which Newporters scrupulously obeyed, since there were no Jewish town officials or even voters in the years for which records survive.

It is tempting to speculate on the reaction of one of Newport's most eminent residents to this deprivation of civil rights. Aaron Lopez fled the Portuguese inquisition against the Jews in the early 1750s and eventually made his way to Newport. Within a short time he had established himself as a respected merchant and by the early 1770s, paid Newport's highest taxes. Did he resent not being allowed to vote or participate as a town official? Or were he and other Jews so grateful for being allowed to worship freely that they were content to let well enough alone? As Lopez has left behind no comment on this touchy subject, we are permitted to do

no more than speculate, but there is somewhat more evidence about another incident involving the Jewish community.

In 1761 Lopez and another co-religionist, Isaac Elizer, applied to the Superior Court and the General Assembly for naturalization — a prerequisite to trading rights within the British empire. Nothing should have prevented this routine grant of citizenship since both men met the requirements of the 1740 Naturalization Act. Both had lived in the colony the required seven years, and Moses Lopez, a relative of Aaron's, had been naturalized in 1753. Despite this precedent, both the legislature and the superior court refused to grant citizenship to Lopez and Elizer on the grounds that

. . . as the said Aaron Lopez hath declared himself to be by religion a Jew, this Assembly doth not admit him nor any other of that religion to the full freedom of this colony, so that the said Aaron Lopez nor any other of said religion is liable to be chosen into any office in this colony nor allowed to give a vote as a freeman in choosing others.¹⁵

The Superior Court denied the petition on much the same grounds. Certainly Lopez and Elizer were chagrined at the verdict, the more so because it completely skirted the issue. They had not petitioned to become freemen — they had asked to be naturalized — a different matter altogether. Commenting on the court's verdict, Ezra Stiles gave one of his own: "Providence seems to make everything work for the mortification of the Jews" — and one cannot be sure to which Providence he referred.¹⁶ Ironically, Lopez was forced to go to orthodox Massachusetts for naturalization, which was swiftly and uneventfully granted. Historians have been quick to argue that politics affected Rhode Island's decision not to grant Lopez and Elizer citizenship, but there is no evidence to support this.¹⁷ It does not make political sense to deny naturalization to those people who would be unfranchised in any case. Although history does not record it, it is likely that this incident strained the relations between Jews and other members of the town. It is probably not coincidental that the Jewish merchants and shopkeepers chose this same year — 1761 — to form their own social club. They were excluded from the prestigious Artillery Company and perhaps the Lopez incident encouraged them to withdraw still further from the larger community. Moreover, a fear that the welcome mat might be pulled from under their feet entirely may have prompted the congregation to ask Peter Harrison to add an escape tunnel to the original plans of Touro Synagogue.

While in prosperous times anti-semitic incidents might be suppressed for the sake of good business, in times of economic stress it was more difficult to deny that these tensions existed. For example, there is evidence that the Jewish people in Newport were considered less trustworthy patriots in the revolutionary era than were other members of the community. Early in 1774 John Collins, a successful merchant in the town, expressed fear that "the jews at Newport" would not boycott dutied tea — a suspicion that Collins himself later admitted was unjustified.¹⁸ Nevertheless, accusations flew back and forth. Thomas Vernon complained to a friend that "for the trifle of goods we have Imported here chiefly by the Jews this Spring and Summer, has caus'd the resentment of the colonies . . ."¹⁹ If there was any truth to the charges, it was only because *many* of the merchants chose to ignore the non-importation agreements. The violations were hardly limited to Jewish merchants, although they were blamed for them.

In 1773 the *Newport Mercury* noted with satisfaction that "Mr. Aaron Lopez, owner of the Ship Jacob . . . has assured us, in Riting, that said ship has no India Tea on board and that he thinks himself happy in giving such assurance."²⁰ Meanwhile, scarcely a month later, a captain and part time merchant, Peleg Clarke, made elaborate plans to conceal his trade in this commodity: "I have sold 20 lbs of it [tea] . . . provided it will suit, so I must beg you will send a small mustard bottle full by Post . . . please let it be wraped in paper and not let him know what it is . . ."²¹ Undoubtedly Lopez was not "happy" to be singled out for such "assurances" while others continued to carry on an illicit trade without censure.

The revolutionary era brought other religious divisions to the surface in Newport as the movement gained in momentum and partially buried fears overcame common sense. The overwhelming majority of Anglicans (members of Trinity Church) remained loyal to the crown, while the Congregationalists were equally ardent whigs. In fact, Stiles' Second Congregational Church has often been called "The Church of the Patriots" since it spawned so many rebels.

It was no secret that the Congregationalists feared that the British would send bishops to oversee the Anglican churches in America. This was a particularly frightening thought to the anti-episcopalians in Newport who had maintained an uneasy but long-

standing truce with members of the Church of England. To Ezra Stiles, at least, bishops would upset the delicate balance of religious and civil power in Newport. He agreed with most Congregational ministers that bishops were politicians who held court, demanded taxes, and encroached on the rights of dissenters. Stiles feared that if the Anglican church became powerful enough in America, it could persuade parliament to pass laws denying civil or military power to dissenters. In a small community where few things escaped a watchful eye, Stiles could not have helped but notice that a number of Quakers and Baptists were enhancing their prestige and status by converting to Anglicanism. He periodically counted the number of families belonging to each of those denominations, and must have become increasingly uneasy to find that the Congregational churches were not growing as rapidly as the others in the pre-revolutionary era. (See table 1). Stiles saw how easily the British could divide and conquer by wooing the Quakers and Baptists away from their neutral stand toward Congregationalists.

It was the Quakers, however, who found themselves in the most difficult position in the pre-revolutionary era. They were bound by their beliefs to support legitimate authority. At the same time, astute Quaker merchants realized that the British restrictions hampered their trade. There seemed to be no way to reconcile Britain's right to regulate commerce with their own need for a steady supply of molasses. Indeed, the whole question of political legitimacy was becoming tangled in the sticky stuff. Officially the Quakers took neither side, but in reality, they were divided as the rest of the community. To their everlasting credit they tried to remain as neutral as their philosophy dictated, but it was a losing battle, and all they seemed to gain was the enmity of their non-Quaker associates.

One of two people Stiles credited with being a five-star tory, Thomas Robinson, was also a leading Quaker merchant.²² Other Quakers received fewer stars, but were, nevertheless, far from neutral. Early in 1777, seventy-six Newport Quakers declared "their allegiance to the King," in an address to General Clinton, and reminded him that they had disowned "such as have appeared openly in taking up Arms."²³ The fact that the Quakers were forced to expel members for supporting the rebel cause was evidence of their internal division. For the most part it was the younger Quakers who became too restless to remain neutral. It was probably with great reluctance that the Quaker ministers re-

ported that since William Bennet (son of Jonathan) "hath enlisted as a soldier and gone into the army . . . we do therefore disown him . . ." ²⁴ A short time later, "John Coggeshall (son of Elisha Coggeshall) . . . entered on board a vessel of war and gone out on a Cruise . . ." ²⁵ Job Townsend, Gideon Shearman, and Seth Thomas were among those Quakers whose own principles forced them to deviate from the principles of their society.

For some, the neutral stance of the Society of Friends provided an excuse for not taking sides, and as war became inevitable there were a rash of conversions and requests to be taken under the protection of the Society. Quaker parents who had put off requesting admission for their children suddenly brought them in front of the appropriate committee. ²⁶

As the conflict escalated, long time friends and business correspondents went separate ways, each convinced of the rightness of his course. Everyone in Newport probably wanted the same thing — a peaceful environment in which to live, carry on trade, and pursue profit. The townspeople differed over means, not ends, because no one really knew which side would serve them best. And in their frustration, they turned on one another, no longer able to suppress once hidden prejudices.

In July 1776, when the Rhode Island General Assembly prohibited prayer in support of the King of Great Britain, Trinity Church closed its doors in protest. Unfortunately, this left the loyalists without a forum altogether. After haughtily refusing to join either the Presbyterians or Baptists at their so-called "Raccoon Boxes" (i.e. meeting houses), the Trinity congregation attempted to reopen their own church, but ran into some difficulty and much "Reproach." Once the British occupied Newport in December 1776, Trinity Church and its members were spared further distress. No further harm came to Touro Synagogue either, perhaps because its congregation was considered "foreign," or more likely, because some of its members supported the British cause. Neither the Friends nor their meeting house was abused since they did not take up the whig cause, and, indeed, declared their continued allegiance to the crown.

The other churches in Newport were not as fortunate. During the war Newport's population declined to half its pre-war number, and various congregations were scattered in different directions. Stiles referred to his "dear exiled Flock," and although he argued

that his congregation would be “regathered with Honor and Triumph,” he must have feared, as did William Ellery, that “many of them [would] never again return to Newport.”²⁷

Stiles’ Second Congregational Church was used as a hospital during the war, as were the meeting houses of the Reverend Samuel Hopkins and the Reverend Gardiner Thurston. Hopkins refused to be silenced, however, and cornered the pulpit of the Sabbatarian Baptist Church for his use during the war.²⁸ Dr. Stiles left Newport at the beginning of the conflict, and it was not until 1785 that President Stiles of Yale University preached to his former congregation again in their newly refurbished meeting house.²⁹

Most of Newport’s inhabitants who survived the calamities of the revolutionary era tried to make their way home, and eventually the churches were filled once again. Not so for the Jewish community whose small numbers in the post-war era prevented communal worship at the synagogue. The General Assembly met there after the war since the Colony House was damaged, but no religious services were held for nearly forty years and only sporadically during the following decades.³⁰

The immediate post war era saw few other significant religious changes. Jews were permitted to vote after 1777, but in view of their small numbers, the extended suffrage affected few people. When Rhode Island finally invited the United States to join its company in 1790, Newporters turned their full attention to commerce once again — pausing only, one hopes, to reflect on the words of their distinguished visitor, George Washington, that the happiest societies gave “bigotry no sanction,” and “persecution no assistance.”³⁰

FOOTNOTES

1. George Berkeley to Sir John Percival, March 28, 1729, Redwood Library, Newport, Rhode Island.
2. *Rhode Island: A Guide to the Smallest State*, WPA Project (New York, 1937), 204-205.
3. Second Congregational Church Records, 1728, Binder 838B p. 122, Vault A, Newport Historical Society (NHS).
4. Franklin B. Dexter, ed., *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles* (New York, 1901), 1:230; Franklin B. Dexter, ed., *Extracts From the Itineraries and Other Miscellanies of Ezra Stiles, D.D., LL.D. 1755-1794* (New Haven, 1916), 105; Second Cong. Ch. Records, p. 122.
5. Second Congregational Church Records, 122-123. Samuel Hopkins was a pastor of the First Congregational Church.
6. Stiles, *Diary*, 1:214.
7. Stiles, *Diary*, 1:146-147.

8. Women's Monthly Meeting of the Society of Friends 1759-1784, binder 814, NHS.
9. Stiles, *Itineraries*, 103.
10. *Newport Mercury*, May 25, 1767.
11. George Bisset, *The Trial of the False Apostle* (Newport, 1773); Stiles, *Diary*, 1:421.
12. *Newport Mercury*, Oct. 3, 1774.
13. General Assembly Opinion, 1684. Thomas Durfee, "Gleanings from the Judicial History of Rhode Island," *Rhode Island Historical Tracts* (Providence, 1883), no. 18, 135. Also cited in Stanley Chyett, *Lopez of Newport* (Detroit, 1970), 35-36.
14. *Acts and Laws of His Majesty's Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in America* (Newport, 1730), 4.
15. Chyett, *Lopez*, 36.
16. Chyett, *Lopez*, 37; Stiles, *Itineraries*, 53.
17. Morris A. Gutstein, *The Story of the Jews of Newport* (New York, 1936), 162; Samuel Arnold, *History of Rhode Island* (New York, 1859), 2:495; Chyett, *Lopez*, 38-39.
18. Bernard Knollenberg, ed., *Correspondence of Governor Samuel Ward, May 1775 - March 1776* (Providence, 1952), 24.
19. Thomas Vernon to I. R., Esq., Newport, June 27, 1770, Vault A, Box 79, folder 3, NHS.
20. *Newport Mercury*, December 27, 1773.
21. Peleg Clarke to Herman Brimmer (in Boston), Newport, Jan. 22, 1774, Peleg Clarke letter book, NHS.
22. Stiles ranked Tories according to the number of stars he assigned them. *Diary*, 2:131-134.
23. The Address of the people called Quakers on Rhode Island in Monthly Meeting Assembled the 2nd day of the [1st] mo. 1777. Friends Records, NHS.
24. Friends Record Monthly Meeting, 1773-1790, volume 810, p. 77, Vault A, NHS.
25. *Ibid.*, 93.
26. Friends Records, Testimonies 1718-1827, Book 821, pp. 96, 98, 99, Vault A, NHS.
27. Stiles, *Diary*, 2:28-29, 36, 216, 250.
28. Stiles, *Diary*, 2:473.
29. Stiles, *Diary*, 3:162-163.
30. George C. Mason, *Reminiscences of Newport* (Newport, 1884), 57.