

Rhode Island and the Union: 1774 – 1795
Irwin H. Polishook

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Irwin Polishook's *Rhode Island and the Union: 1774 – 1795* examines the economic and political factors that led Rhode Island to join the Union in 1790. Polishook's study focuses on the decisions made by Rhode Island's General Assembly during the Constitutional era and how federal and local needs guided the State's decision making processes. While federal issues were catalysts for debate, Polishook shows Rhode Island's decisions "were rendered out of local experience" (ix). With a focus on town politics, Polishook is able to trace the evolution of a two party system, which later aligns with the national Federalist and Anti-Federalist factions. While Polishook argues, "the most significant conclusion drawn from Rhode Island story was the evidence it offered in favor of a new Constitution," he also captures detailed agendas of the Anti-Federalist party.

Rhode Island's colonial history explains its isolationist and democratic tendencies. "The Rhode Island colony operated under a royal charter that granted almost complete authority to the American settlers" (7). The American colonies suffered from an unfavorable balance of trade with Great Britain that resulted in gold and silver leaving the colonies faster than it could be replaced. The specie deficit left the colonies without a medium of exchange. When economic repression threatened Rhode Island, it exercised its unique freedoms by printing paper money to avoid catastrophe. The State benefited from printing paper currency because the influx of new currency spurred trade during recessions and gave Rhode Island a monopoly over colonial paper-money. "The Rhode Island experience with paper money was thus a special source of strength for the colony, even while these emissions might on occasion prove objectionable in the New England region" (8). To protect this unique freedom, Rhode Island turned increasingly

isolationist. They “fear[ed] any outside influences. . . and defend[ed] their local practices to ensure isolationism from Great Britain and the other colonies” (8). Local interests prevailed over regional interests, which led Rhode Island to become the “most despised and fiercely autonomous of the colonial outposts of Great Britain” (241).

The onset of the Revolutionary War challenged Rhode Island’s isolationism by requiring colonial interdependence and cooperation,. Polishook demonstrates how a referendum secured Rhode Island’s resolution to join the colonies in their mutual defense. He describes Rhode Island’s constitutional system as “democratic localism” (27) “uniquely susceptible to popular control” (37). “All state-wide officers were chosen each year in an annual poll of the freemen, who cast their ballots at town meetings . . .members of the lower house were elected twice a year . . . the frequency of these elections, particularly of the lower house, ensured that candidates would be responsive to popular demands” (28). Rhode Island sympathized with Boston after the passage of the Coercive Acts and feared similar Acts may curtail Rhode Island’s freedoms. Town meetings were called throughout the State to deal with the impending war. As freemen discussed and debated the costs and benefits of a colonial alliance, “enemy warships dominated Narragansett Bay and . . . Newport harbor, endangering the seacoast communities” (9). Towns cast their votes and unanimously voted to support Articles of Confederation, satisfied with the guarantees for State sovereignty. Under direct threat, local politicians unified at the State level and temporarily suspended isolationism.

Polishook shows how Rhode Island’s isolationist tendencies re-emerge as Anti-Federalist arguments in the 1780s. “Two developments brought the problem of the national government to a crisis between 1780 and 1783. One was the military campaign

at Yorktown; the other was the impending collapse of American finance” (54). The need to support the army at Yorktown and an extensive federal debt left the American government in crisis. Without assurances that Congress could pay its current debts, further loans were thought impossible to secure. The solution was the Impost of 1781, an amendment to the Articles of Confederation that “would have given the federal government limited taxing power, a steady and growing revenue, and limited control over commerce through its administration of the tariff system” (59). “Town meetings convened in all parts of [Rhode Island] to consider the Impost amendment. The freemen gathered to discuss the issue throughout 1782, and their deliberations were decidedly in opposition to giving more power to the Continental Congress” (79). Rhode Island’s freemen feared “further steps toward a strengthened federal government were not in their interest or in that of the state as a whole” (242).

Rhode Island’s General Assembly delayed voting on the Impost and sent David Howell to represent Rhode Island at the Philadelphia meeting of the United States Congress. Howell was called before Congress to defend Rhode Island’s delay of the Impost ratification. Howell defended Rhode Island’s position stating revenues from duties on international trade should be given to the state since Rhode Island suffered greatly during the war and needed the money for its own reconstruction. He explained how tariffs would “unnecessarily burden commerce, raise the price of foreign goods, and, by increasing the demand for domestic substitutes, raise the cost of American produce” (82). Additionally, should the market not be able to withstand higher prices, the burden of the tariffs would fall unfairly on the importers and “Rhode Island bought more foreign products than its sister states and would inevitably pay a disproportionate share of the

nation's taxes" (82). Howell's two final arguments said that the Impost was an infringement on State sovereignty, because it would allow "foreign ministers" into the state, and the Impost was unnecessary because western lands could be sold off for profit. Howell's testimony on behalf of Rhode Island illustrates the local arguments Anti-Federalists used to rebuke the Federalist movement. In 1782 the Rhode Island towns collectively voted down the Impost and without the State's ratification, the amendment failed.

Political unity disintegrated as sectional factions debated how to resolve the debt threatening to bankrupt the State. Rhode Island amassed great debts financing the war, which were compounded by the need for capital to rebuild port cities. Repayment of these debts was unevenly distributed throughout the State. The agricultural mainland paid the largest proportion of the debt and demanded redistribution of the financial burden evenly throughout the State. Farmers also blamed the shortage of hard money on the merchants and the called for the "emission of paper money" (112). Merchants tried to oppose the new paper emissions by refusing to accept it as legitimate currency. The country party, the majority in the General Assembly, passed laws penalizing creditors who refused to accept the paper bills (128). The "paper-money emission [debate] dominated [Rhode Island's] press and political councils throughout 1785 and early 1786" and town meetings became "the real fulcrum of political power in the state of Rhode Island" (119). The "enactment of the paper-money system and penal laws designed to force the circulation of the new currency" added "political divisions . . . to the economic and financial controversies" (131).

The Rhode Island party lines quickly aligned with national factions as the State was asked to ratify a new Constitution and merchants realized the futility of their situation. Merchants were in the minority both in town debates and in Rhode Island's General Assembly. Suffering from the paper money system, "the merchants – disregarding their states' rights position of 1781 to 1784 – were now fully persuaded of the useful part which a powerful central government might play in controlling the excesses of the state legislatures" (242) Merchants used the press to further their cause. They shared details of Rhode Island's paper-money issues nationwide and reported "threats [of embargo and dismemberment] by the United States government," as well as "the danger of secession by the largest towns" (242). The merchants fiercely supported the Federalist cause and warned Rhode Island would not be permitted to survive as an independent country should they fail to join the United States of America. Polishook's Federalist sympathies emerge at this point in his argument. He asserts "The Federal Convention and the Constitution of 1787 were godsend to the minority in Rhode Island" because the proposed federal Constitution would change the paper-money policies to favor the merchant party (171). Polishook also shows how a strong national government was necessary "to control the excesses of the members of the Union by transferring sovereignty from the states to the nation" (171).

Polishook's study of Rhode Island downplays the importance of Rhode Island's voice in the Anti-Federalist debate. Rhode Island joined the United States in May, 1790, but "only after the country party had paid off the state debt" (242). "Even then most Rhode Islanders were still suspicious that the ratification of the Constitution was a mistake" (242). Polishook's argument that "individuals chose party alignments based on

personal interests” lends itself to a more specific, localized view of Anti-Federalism (241). Most American history textbooks neglect the Anti-Federalist arguments in favor of more detailed biographies of the Founding Fathers. A close contextual reading of Polishook’s description of David Howell’s testimony on the Impost Amendment of 1781 will help students comprehend the personal choices freemen were faced with during the Constitutional Era. Howell defends his State’s delay of the ratification of the Impost by articulating Rhode Island’s isolationist fears, monetary issues, and belief in State sovereignty. The reading of Howell’s testimony, combined with selected Federalist and Anti-Federalist readings, will help students evaluate and closely interpret the local consequences of the national Federalist and Anti-Federalist debate.

Bibliography

Polishook, Irwin H.. *Rhode Island and the Union: 1774 – 1795*. Evanston: Northeastern University Press, 1969.

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