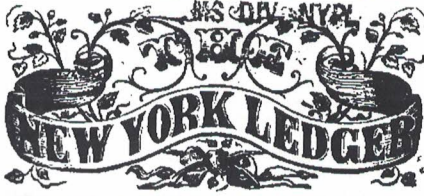


ANTHONY GOLL



ROBERT BONNER, EDITOR AND PROPRIETOR.

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TWELVE ARTICLES

By Twelve Distinguished Senators of the United States.

No. I.

THE DORR WAR IN RHODE ISLAND.

BY HON. HENRY B. ANTHONY, UNITED STATES SENATOR FROM THAT STATE.

From the time of the Revolution to the breaking out of the great Rebellion, the United States had enjoyed unusual freedom from internal commotion. The violence of popular feeling had found sufficient expression in political contests, which, although waged with great fierceness, were yet carried on within the law, and without attempt to overthrow them or to change them, except in the mode prescribed by the fundamental compact. Shay's Rebellion and the Whisky Insurrection were the most noteworthy exceptions; and these were little more than local tumults, occasioned by impatience of taxation, led by ignorant men, and involving no great principles. These risings sprung from no definite plan of operations, and looked to no well-considered modes of redress for the grievances that were alleged. If they differed from ordinary riots on an extensive scale, the difference was rather in the untested power of the Government than in the strength of the insurrection.

The outbreak against the Government of Rhode Island, in 1842, was of a different character. It was a long-meditated, well-considered and well-organized movement. It embraced men of personal and political consequence—men of dignified antecedents and of future prospects, which they expected to advance by this movement. They announced in the beginning principles which they defended, by speech and by pen, before they attempted to maintain them by arms. They denied that they were insurgents, resisting the power of a legal government, and claimed that they were acting under rightful authority, and only against a usurping government that was legally defunct. They held that the people, acting in their primary capacity, and without consulting the existing authority or regarding the existing law, might alter their constitution of government at will, and that the actual government, being duly notified of such a desire on the part of the popular majority, was bound to acquiesce in it, and to retire before the new order of things. How subversive of all stable or authentic government such a rule would be, I do not propose to argue. They held an election with such forms as were practicable, in the absence of legal authorization; and claiming that a majority of the people had voted in favor of a new constitution, and had elected a Governor and general officers under it, they communicated the result to the General Assembly, and in the name of the people demanded possession of the government. The demand had been anticipated by a law imposing severe penalties upon any persons who should assume, without legal authority, to exercise any of the legislative, executive or judicial power of the State. This enactment was called by the insurrectionary party the "Algerines."

cal, and it brought into the public service the best class of men. Mr. Bancroft says:

"The annals of Rhode Island, if written in the spirit of philosophy, would exhibit the forms of society under a peculiar aspect. Had the territory of the State corresponded to the importance and singularity of the principles of its early existence, the world would have been filled with wonder at the phenomena of its history."

And again, speaking of the Charter—I quote from the first edition—he says:

"This charter of government, constituting, as it then seemed, a pure democracy, and establishing a political system which few besides the Rhode Islanders themselves believed to be practicable, is still in existence, and is the oldest constitutional charter, new valid, in the world. It has outlived the principles of Clarendon and the policy of Charles II. The probable population of Rhode Island at the time of its reception may have been two thousand five hundred. In one hundred and seventy years that number has increased forty-fold; and the government, which was hardly thought to contain checks enough on the power of the people to endure even among shepherds and farmers, protects a dense population, and the accumulations of a widely extended commerce. No where in the world have life, liberty and property been safer than in Rhode Island."

One of the early colonial documents says: "We have long drank of the cup of as great liberties as any people that we can hear of under the whole heaven." In November, 1663, "George Baxter, the most faithful and happy bringer of the Charter," arrived in Newport. The document "was taken forth from the precious box that held it, and was read by Baxter in the audience and view of all the people; and the letters, with His Majesty's royal stamp, and the broad seal, with much seeming gravity, were held up on high, and presented to the perfect view of the people;" and the thanks of the colony were voted to His Majesty "for the high, the inestimable, yes, incomparable grace and favor."

I have narrated this to show how unfounded was the allegation that the Charter was "imposed upon the people by a dissolute monarch." It was the grant of their earnest petition, the fruition of their steady and persistent efforts. It conferred a degree of freedom that the English subjects of Charles had never enjoyed, and that was unknown in any other country. And the hereditary attachment with which the people clung to it, for nearly two centuries, proves what good reason the colonists had for welcoming its arrival, and how well it fulfilled the purposes for which it was intended.

The insurrection against the government of Rhode Island culminated on the 18th of May, 1842. Dorr had organized his government; his General Assembly had elected various executive officers; but his adherents lacked his bold and resolute spirit. They evidently feared the legal consequences of assuming to act under their commissions. No vigorous effort was made to enforce the authority which they claimed, and not a foot of the territory of the State acknowledged it. His own plan was to proceed to the State House immediately after his inauguration, and to take forcible possession of the public archives: This was the next logical consequence of the steps which he had already taken. But he could not bring his men to that point. There was a slender but determined guard in the State House. His military force did not exceed three hundred men, without drill or discipline, and who had come with no expectation of using the arms which probably half of them knew not how to load.

From this unsatisfactory state of things at home, Dorr turned to Washington, whence he had received encouragement from high quarters, and assurances of assistance. But his mission was not successful, and he retraced his steps. In Philadelphia and New York his spirits were revived by public meetings, at which questions of constitutional law were discussed by statesmen fresh from the "Pewter Mug," and military aid and money were promised by the heroes and the capitalists of the Five Points. At New York, when he embarked for Providence, he was escorted to the wharf by as rough a procession as probably the vast population of New York, as it then was, had ever turned out. He was welcomed at Providence by a great concourse of his adherents, who, to do them justice, seemed always willing to do anything for him but to fight for him. It is but fair to add that many of them, while sincerely entertaining the

Government. A mock-heroic poem, entitled "The Dorrard," thus described the gathering:

Already, in the torches' glare,
Their bayonets gleam in Market Square;
Weybosset trembles 'neath their tread;
Through Westminster their ranks are spread;
And all South Main and Benefit
With spears and flashing swords are lit.
From Pappoose Squaw, the platoon pour,
From Nooseneck Hill, from Sanket shore,
From Monthaup's grassy side;
And if we linger here till light,
From Alim Pond to Kingston Height,
Will pour one living tide.
Down Louisiquiet's stony steeps,
Where dark Moshassuck slowly creeps,
The note of warning peals
From swift Pawtuxet's farthest floods,
And next we'll know all Hillburn woods
Will be upon our heels.

In nobler verse, in a lyric worthy of the theme, the late Bishop Burgess celebrated this great event in the history of Rhode Island, this worthy event in the history of constitutional freedom.

High hung the rusting scythe a while,
And ceased the spindles' roar,
The boat rocked idly by the isle,
And on the ocean shore;
The helmed burgler paced his street;
The seaman wheeled his gun;
Steel gleamed along the ruler's seat,
And sturdy's task was done!
Old Narragansett rang with arms,
And rang the silver bay,
And that sweet shore, whose girdled charms
Were Philip's ancient sway;
And our own island's halcyon scene
The black artillery sent;
And answered from the home of Greene,
The men of dauntless Kent!

"These stanzas," says Mr. Goddard, in a note to his admirable address on the occasion of the change in the civil government of Rhode Island, "are exactly descriptive of the state of things in Rhode Island during the last week in June, 1842. All the common occupations of life were suspended; and troops, composed of infantry and artillery, promptly ordered to Providence, from the county of Washington (old Narragansett,) and from the counties of Newport, Bristol and Kent. Sentinels were stationed in the most frequented streets of Providence; and an efficient company of seamen, the 'Sea Fencibles,' was organized. The Legislature adjourned, for the purpose of allowing the members to proceed to the scene of conflict; and such confusion reigned in the city, that the studies in the University were suspended till Commencement."

The following was the leading article in the Providence Journal, the organ of the "Law and Order" party:

"TO ARMS!

"The time has come when the people of Rhode Island are called upon to defend their institutions by their own right arms. A military usurper, surrounded with cannon, and boasting his strength in foreign bayonets, has assumed the supreme authority, and has announced his design to subvert the liberties of the State. Men of Rhode Island! by your love of liberty, by your ancient fame, by the ancestral blood that flows in your veins, you are called upon now to prove your lineage. The citizen of Rhode Island who refuses to respond to her call, is a recreant and a traitor; the drop of blood that will not flow like water in her defence is false and bastard."

After the signal gun had been fired, Dorr marched in person upon the arsenal. He had two pieces of artillery, and between three and four hundred men. He sent out a part of them to intercept a reinforcement that was on the way from the Light Infantry Armory, but the two detachments did not meet. The night was foggy, and till the moon rose it was so dark that scouts penetrated the insurgent lines, and, mingling with the undisciplined mass, returned with pretty accurate information. Dorr sent a flag of truce to the arsenal, and demanded a surrender. Receiving a contemptuous answer, he ordered the guns to be fired. The order was obeyed, but no report followed. Seizing the match with his own hand, he applied it to the priming—those were not the days of percussion caps—but the powder only flashed in his face. It was never perfectly explained, but it is believed that some of his own men had plugged the guns, although the "Algerines" uncharitably declared that his cannoniers, in their ignorance of gunnery, had loaded them shot first. His men began to leave him as daylight reddened the skies. The cause was lost, and they did not wish to expose their identity with it. One of his officers plainly told him that when he accepted the honorable place of a part of his military escort, he had no intention of making a military corps of himself for anybody.

Disheartened by this failure, disappointed by the firmness of the Government and the adherence of the people, chagrined by the desertion of his own men, the baffled chief retired, but thirty men remaining to escort him back to the quarters which a few hours before, he had left with such confident expectations. Even his fierce and sturdy temper yielded; and although, in the following month, he made another demonstration, which called out a stronger and more general manifestation of the public sentiment and of the power of the government, he never again saw himself at the head of so many followers as welcomed

