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Introduction to the Dorrite Women Letter Collection

When the Rhode Island Charter government succeeded in routing Thomas Dorr's ragtag group of followers at the village of Chepachet in late June 1842, many Dorrites, including their erstwhile leader, fled the state for fear of arrest and imprisonment.¹ By July, there were over 40 Dorrites in jails, or what Catharine Williams called, the "Black Holes of Calcutta" in Bristol, Newport and Providence. Male Dorrites, who were fortunate enough to escape capture, went into hiding, while it was the Dorrite women who kept the reform cause alive, often traveling to New Hampshire to visit the exiled governor to keep him up abreast of their efforts.² With the opportunity for change was still within reach, or so they fervently believed, female Dorrites took action to keep suffrage reform in the spotlight. John Harris of Providence, an associate of Thomas Dorr — who was still hailed as the People's Governor by his close followers — informed him that "nothing has given more life and animation to the cause of suffrage since the Chepachet affair, than the unceasing effort of the Ladies."³

Dorrite women were fully aware, as the leading lady of reform Ann Parlin put it in a speech to a large crowd in New York City, that they "might be accused of departing from the social forms and usages, which, from the earliest times, have restricted the action of the sex to which [they] belonged within the narrow circle of domestic occupations." Parlin and her doctor husband Louis had moved to Rhode Island in 1841, the same year the suffrage reform cause

¹ See Erik J. Chaput, *The People's Martyr: Thomas Wilson Dorr and His 1842 Rhode Island Rebellion* (Lawrence KA: University Press of Kansas, 2013), 141-181.

² See, for example, Catharine Williams to Thomas Wilson Dorr, November 2, 1842. Rider Collection, Dorr Correspondence, John Hay Library, Brown University. Williams and other female Dorrites also helped to facilitate a correspondence between Dorr and his beloved mother Lydia.

³ John Harris to Thomas W. Dorr, September 12, 1842. Rider Collection, Dorr Correspondence.

caught fire. Louis Parlin was elected a justice of the peace under the People's Constitution in April 1842; he was later arrested.⁴ It "was from women" that young men, continued Ann in her speech at the famed Shakespeare Hotel, "received the precepts which their tender minds, then more easily impressed, imbibed as principles, opinions and rules of action never after to be effaced. So far it might truly be asserted that the fortune of a nation was always prepared and molded by women."⁵ Though he did not know her well, Dorr referred to Parlin as a "clever politician."⁶

An examination of the correspondence of women connected to Thomas Dorr's attempt at constitutional reform in Rhode Island provides a unique insight for students and teachers into antebellum America. Much has been written about middle to upper-class women who took part in reform efforts, most notably temperance and abolitionism, in the decades before the Civil War.⁷ These women, along with their husbands and children, were often connected to the Whig Party. However, Dorrite women mainly hailed from the lower ranks of society, were often unmarried, sometimes divorced, and were most notably devout supporters of the Democracy, the name used at the time in reference to the party of Andrew Jackson.⁸ Although there was not an

⁴ For details of Louis Parlin's arrest see his account in the October 4, 1842 issue of the *Providence Express*. For more on Dorrite prisoners see Dorrite Frances Harriet Whipple Green McDougal's *Might and Right* (Providence, 1844), 280-284 and Russell J. DeSimone, *Rhode Island's Rebellion, series 3* (Middletown, RI: Bartlett Press, 2009), 5-40.

⁵ *Daily Plebian*, November 5, 1842. See also the discussion of the Parlins in Anthony Comegna's doctoral dissertation, "'The Dupes of Hope Forever:' The Loco-Foco or Equal Rights Movement, 1820s-1870s," (University of Pittsburg, 2016), 106-207.

⁶ Thomas W. Dorr to William Simmons, September 26, 1842. Rider Collection, Dorr Correspondence.

⁷ See, for example, Jean Fagan Yellin and John C. Van Horne, eds, *The Abolitionist Sisterhood: Women's Political Culture in Antebellum America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994) and Deborah Bingham Von Broekhoven, *The Devotion of These Women: Rhode Island in the Antislavery Network* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002).

⁸ For informative discussions of Rhode Island suffrage women see Ronald P. Formisano, "The Role of Women in the Dorr Rebellion," *Rhode Island History* (August 1993), 89-103, Susan Graham, "Call Me a Female Politician, I Glory in the Name!" Women Dorrites and Rhode Island's 1842 Suffrage Crisis," doctoral dissertation, University of Minnesota, 2006, and Ronald and Mary Zboray, *Voices Without Votes: Women and Politics in Antebellum New England* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2010), 112-130.

overt call for suffrage to be extended to females in 1841-43, Dorrite women still demonstrated a remarkable capacity for political agitation on behalf of disenfranchised males, often drawing directly from the ideology of the American Revolution. Their activism predates the historic gathering of women in Seneca Falls, New York, by six years and is without question a subject worth studying.

Using labels such as Ladies' Free Suffrage Association and the Young Women's Free Suffrage Association, females raised money to help "those individuals and families who have been sufferers in the cause of Free Suffrage, or the People's Rights."⁹ The associations were formed in mill villages and towns, including Providence, Pawtucket and Woonsocket. In a remarkable letter to Dorr dated September 4, 1842, Ann Parlin referred to herself as the "presidentess" of a Ladies Benevolent Association. The Charter government authorities concluded that "we are rather treasonable characters; we intend to remain so, we bear our suffrage badges at all times in open daylight, we are doing all that women can do," declared Parlin.¹⁰ The editor of the *Providence Express* compared the Dorrite women to the "daughters of the Revolution" as they took on crucial work to continue the reform effort just as women had done during the American Revolution.¹¹

Thomas Wilson Dorr's correspondence files reveal that he kept up an active dialogue with women who were devoted to the suffrage cause. Let "us behold in anticipation our most willful & crooked little State regenerated, and claiming boldly the return of the Governor of the People's choice," maintained Dorr's close friend and confidant Catharine Williams, an

⁹ *Providence Express*, October 8, 1842.

¹⁰ Ann Parlin to Thomas W. Dorr, September 4, 1842. Rider Collection, Dorr Correspondence.

¹¹ *Providence Express*, October 10, 1842.

accomplished writer and poet living in Providence.¹² For the fiery Ann Parlin, her soul was “wrapped in” the “glorious cause, & come life or death” she was willing to soldier “on.”¹³ Parlin often expressed her anger to Dorr about the timidity of male Dorrites and her desire to take matters into her own hands. In “case that we are not heard in Congress this next session, there will be a movement on the part of the women — which will necessarily move the men to action, for the present state of affairs cannot much longer be tolerated and if I remain in RI I may yet have the honor or disgrace of striking the first blow.”¹⁴ For her part, Williams maintained that the Dorrite women “kept up the courage of the [Suffrage] Party,” and if the men, despite their “pride,” could “have stooped to being advised by” the Suffrage ladies, “the cause of Free Suffrage would eventually have triumphed.”¹⁵ Dorr did not disagree with Williams. In a November 1844 letter to his mother Lydia, written from the state prison in Providence, he remarked that had the Suffrage ladies “taken up the cudgels in 1842, and kept the men at home to do the chores, affairs might have ended differently.”¹⁶

The main instrument of political agitation for female Dorrites was an old Native American custom — the Rhode Island clambake. As the *Bay State Democrat* noted,

This peculiar Rhode Island festival has of late attracted much of public attention, from the fact that the suffrage party in that state have adopted it as an appropriate occasion for the meeting together and interchange of sentiments and views of the friends of the suffrage cause.¹⁷

¹² Catharine Williams to Thomas W. Dorr, September 6, 1842. Rider Collection, Dorr Correspondence. For more on Williams see Susan Graham, “A Warm Politition and Devotedly Attached to the Democratic Party”: Catharine Read Williams, Politics, and Literature in Antebellum America,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 30 (Summer 2010), 253-278.

¹³ Ann Parlin to Thomas W. Dorr, September 4, 1842. Rider Collection, Dorr Correspondence.

¹⁴ Ann Parlin to Thomas W. Dorr, November 6, 1842. Rider Collection, Dorr Correspondence.

¹⁵ Catharine R. Williams, *Recollections of the Life of and Conversations of Thomas Wilson Dorr* (Providence, 1854), 11. Thomas Wilson Dorr Papers, John Hay Library, Brown University. This handwritten manuscript was given to Walter Burges shortly after it was composed in the late 1850s. Burges gave it to Sidney Rider in July 1881.

¹⁶ Thomas W. Dorr to Lydia Dorr, November 12, 1844. Thomas Wilson Dorr Papers, John Hay Library.

¹⁷ *Bay State Democrat*, August 29, 1842.

At an August clambake newspaper editor Lewis Josselyn proclaimed at the close of an address to a crowd of over 5,000 that the suffrage cause was in good hands because of the activism of Rhode Island women. The “ladies were now in the field,” said Josselyn. They constituted an “effective force in the consummation of” the work that Dorr had begun. “They have held up the hands of those who have been struggling for liberty by their active assistance and warm sympathy — have visited those in prison and supplied the necessities of life.”¹⁸ From August to late November, suffrage women organized numerous clambakes on the Rhode Island-Massachusetts line in the towns of Seekonk (August 4, August 30), Somerset (August 17), Dartmouth (September 22), Millville (September 13), and Southbridge (October 5).¹⁹ Out-of-state clambakes were necessary in order to ensure the safety of prominent Dorrites who were on the Charter government’s most-wanted list.

The Boston *Atlas*, a conservative Whig paper sympathetic to the Charter government in Rhode Island, derided these affairs as gatherings of “spunky women.” According to the *Atlas*, the clambakes were “little petticoat Revolution, truly – and, if they had been nobody to contend with but those same fathers, husbands and brothers of theirs, we have little doubt that they would come off conquerors.” The article went on to deride female Dorrites as “Rhode Island Amazons,” “Immoral Ladies of the Clambake,” “Witches of the Enchanted Grove of Medbury,” and “Fairies of the Free Suffrage Grotto.”²⁰ In addition to the fund-raising efforts at clambakes, numerous female reformers took on political roles traditionally reserved for men with the goal of checking “tyranny in its course.”²¹ Catharine Williams journeyed to Washington, D.C., to meet

¹⁸ *Bay State Democrat*, August 6, 1842.

¹⁹ See Erik J. Chaput, “Rhode Island’s Dorr Rebellion and Bay State Politics, 1842-1843,” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* (Summer 2011), 108-143.

²⁰ Quoted in the *Pawtucket Gazette and Chronicle*, September 2, 1842.

²¹ *Providence Express*, October 20, 1842.

with President John Tyler in an attempt to gain federal recognition of the People's Government.²² Writing under the pseudonym, "A True Dorrite," Ann Parlin proclaimed that any woman "who thinks she has no right to speak against a government; or that a man who says she has no right," was a "fool." At one point Parlin, according to historians Ronald and Mary Zboray, offered to lead an "army" to release Dorrite prisoners.²³ Parlin later refused to "apologize for having acted a manly part during" the "civil discord" in Rhode Island. She informed Dorr that her "whole soul" was wrapped in the "glorious cause," and "come life or death," she was "willing" to see the issue through to the end.²⁴

Abby Lord, a carriage painter's wife, along with Williams, took it upon themselves to march right up to the executive mansion in Providence to demand Governor James Fenner return Dorr's personal papers.²⁵ No male Dorrite made such a bold attempt. Lord was actually arrested for her steadfast support of Dorr. As historian Russell J. DeSimone has rightly argued, instead of "demurring to her male contemporaries and shunning public involvement, she was emboldened by the actions of the suffrage party and willingly served in its cause, assuming a leadership role and defiantly confronting the representatives of the Law and Order government when they came to her door."²⁶

In order to raise funds to pay for Dorr's legal counsel after he returned from exile in New Hampshire and stand trial for treason, Abby and her husband Henry formed the Dorr Liberation Society. Interested citizens could purchase certificates at a number of locations throughout Providence, including the modest home of the Lords. At the time of Dorr's treason trial in

²² See Catharine Williams to Thomas W. Dorr, September 6, 1842. Rider Collection, Dorr Correspondence. Williams wrote about Tyler with a great deal more sympathy than the vast majority of Dorrites.

²³ Zboray, *Voices Without Votes*, 124.

²⁴ Ann Parlin to Thomas W. Dorr, September 4, 1842. Rider Collection, Dorr Correspondence.

²⁵ See Abby Lord to Thomas W. Dorr, November 25, 1842. Rider Collection, Dorr Correspondence.

²⁶ DeSimone, *Rhode Island's Rebellion* - series 7 (Middletown, RI: Bartlett Press, 2009), 6-7

Newport, newspaper editor Frances Whipple Green published a valuable history of the suffrage cause entitled *Might and Right*. The following year, Dorrite women played a crucial role in Dorr's release from the state prison in Providence.²⁷ For the remainder of his life, Dorr kept up a correspondence female supporters, most notably with Catharine Williams. Just a few years before he died, Dorr thanked Almira Howard for her "valuable services to the democratic cause in 1842 when men were deterred by fear and expediency from openly contending for the principles which they had professed."²⁸

²⁷ See Chaput, *The People's Martyr*, 182-203 and Chaput, The "Rhode Island Question" on Trial: The 1844 Treason Trial of Thomas Wilson Dorr's," *American Nineteenth Century History* (Summer 2010), 205-232.

²⁸ Thomas W. Dorr to Almira Howard, May 2, 1853. Rider Collection, Dorr Correspondence.