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Opinion/Chaput: RI women's long role in the suffrage fight

Erik J. Chaput Guest columnist

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Erik J. Chaput, Ph.D., teaches American history at the Lawrenceville School. He is the author of "The People's Martyr: Thomas Wilson Dorr and His 1842 Rhode Island Rebellion" (2013) and is a historian on the Dorr Rebellion Project Website:

<http://library.providence.edu/dorr>. The website contains digitized material for students, including a new section on Dorrite women.

Dating back to Ronald Reagan's second term in office, American presidents have issued annual proclamations declaring the month of March "Women's History Month." Last year the PBS documentary "The Vote" helped to make the story of the battle over women's suffrage come alive as the nation entered into a celebration of the 100th anniversary of the right to vote for women. Rhode Islanders Alva Vanderbilt Belmont and Sara Algeo played critical roles in the suffrage battles that culminated in the 19th Amendment. However, Rhode Island women had been active in suffrage reform for nearly 80 years. The long history of female political activism in Rhode Island really begins with the 1842 Dorr Rebellion.

A profound political crisis gripped the state in the decades before the Civil War. The problem stemmed from the continued reliance on the 1663 colonial charter as Rhode Island's governing document. The Charter restricted suffrage to only those men possessing real estate (a figure set at \$134 in 1798) thereby disfranchising most of the population from the commercial and manufacturing districts.

As historian Patrick T. Conley has argued, Rhode Island was a "democracy in decline." Tensions rose in the early 1840s with the creation of the Rhode Island Suffrage Association and the emergence of Providence attorney Thomas Wilson Dorr as the de facto leader.

In late June 1842, Dorr's attempt at extralegal constitutional change was put down by state authorities, but female suffrage advocates kept the reform cause alive. For female Dorrites, the cause of suffrage reform resembled a religious crusade, even though only men stood to benefit

initially. Female Dorrites, many of whom were outspoken in their affinity for the Jacksonian Democrats, challenged the prevailing view of the proper role of women in American society and pushed the boundaries of citizenship.

By the summer of 1842, Dorr was safely living in exile in New Hampshire. Dorr's male followers were either in jail, exiled or silenced for fear of reprisal. It therefore fell to women to take up the suffrage cause. Looking back on the situation during his time in the state prison in Providence a few years later, Dorr told his mother Lydia that he owed "much gratitude to the goodwill of the suffrage ladies." Had "they taken up the cudgels in 1842, and kept the men at home to do the chores, affairs might have ended differently."

Dorrites Catherine Williams, Frances Whipple Green, Ann Parlin, and Abby Lord were some of the first women in American history to advocate for suffrage reform. The prominent Providence author Catharine Williams maintained that if the "pride" of the men could "have stooped to be advised by" women, "the cause of Free Suffrage would eventually have triumphed."

Ann Parlin, much like Dorr, was willing to become a martyr for the suffrage cause. She told a crowd gathered at a clambake over the state line in Somerset, Massachusetts, that she was willing "to be the first to be shot down." I "shall be happy in having fallen a martyr in the cause of human rights," proclaimed the fiery Parlin. She informed Dorr in September 1842 that women "bear" their "suffrage badges at all times in open daylight." Dorr in turn referred to Parlin as a "clever politician."

The Dorr Rebellion provided a platform for women to be involved in public political discourse, heralding the beginning of the women's suffrage and equal rights movement. Just a few years before he died, Dorr praised a female ally, thanking her 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." The torch carried by female Dorrites was passed on to abolitionists Paulina Wright Davis, an organizer of the first National Woman's Rights Convention in Worcester in 1850, along with Central Falls native Elizabeth Buffum Chace, in the Civil War era.

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