

# Summer Reading for Rhode Island Researchers, Part Two

By Maureen A. Taylor

Just a few years ago, it seemed that publishers were ignoring Rhode Island. Now there are so many new books on the Ocean State that it takes two columns to cover what has been published since 1999. These volumes show efforts that took years of work to put into print. Two of these works were published posthumously, one took almost a decade to compile, another was self-published, and two titles are still forthcoming. Rhode Island researchers finally have lots of new material to consult, so pull up a chair and start reading. You will be surprised at what you can learn from this diverse group of titles.

*Lord, Please Don't Take Me in August: African Americans in Newport and Saratoga Springs, 1870-1930* (Blacks in the New World series) by Myra Beth Armstead (University of Illinois Press, 1999) \$16.95.

According to Myra Beth Armstead, an associate professor of history at Bard College in New York, “The African American people who lived in Newport and Saratoga Springs...were inhabitants of a relatively new type of urban place in the United States—the resort town.” These two places offered employment opportunities as well as a chance to socialize with the wealthy. Her book examines the development of these “resort towns” and how they supported their black populations by offering both seasonal employment and a chance to socialize with the wealthy. Armstead also points out the differences and similarities between the African American communities in each town.

*The Colonial Metamorphoses in Rhode Island: A Study of Institutions in Change* by Sydney V. James. Edited by Sheila L. Skemp and Bruce C. Daniels. (University Press of New England, 2000) \$35.00.

The name Sydney V. James should be recognized—and respected—by anyone studying the history or genealogy of early Rhode Island. As the author of *Colonial Rhode Island: A History* (New York, Scribner, 1975), James wrote an interesting and readable reinterpretation of the colonial period that is on my top ten list of books for Rhode Island.

*Colonial Metamorphoses* is one of two works by Sydney V. James published after his death in 1993, both edited by former students and outstanding scholars in their own right. The first book, edited by Dwight Bozeman, *John Clarke and His Legacies: Religion and Law in Colonial Rhode Island, 1638-1750* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999) explores John Clarke’s contribution to Rhode Island history through his founding of the First Baptist Church in Newport. It was Clarke that secured the royal charter that governed the colony and state until 1842. While early Rhode Island history focuses on the contributions of Roger Williams, this book suggests that Clarke was also instrumental in the formation of the colony.

In *Colonial Metamorphoses*, James meticulously details the establishment and development of colonial Rhode Island up to the Revolutionary era and explains how the institutions that affected individual lives—governments, churches, businesses, courts, and land companies—were organized and improved upon. Editors Sheila L. Skemp, a professor of history at University of Mississippi and Bruce C. Daniels, a professor of history at the University of Winnipeg express in their preface that “Rhode Island may be the most understudied of England’s mainland colonies. Its lack of clear form, its ironies and contradictions, its spotty and disorganized record keeping have discouraged even the most intrepid historian.” That may be true, but Sydney V. James was brave enough to tackle a difficult topic. Thanks to his efforts and those of his students, Rhode Island genealogists and historians now have a better understanding of the colony in its early years.

*Davisville, Rhode Island: A History of the Textile Mill Village of Davisville, North Kingstown, Rhode Island, Since the Arrival of Joshua Davis in 1694* by George R. Loxton (Gateway Press, 2001) \$32.00.

Order directly from the author, George R. Loxton, 7400 N. Range Line Road, Glendale, WI 53209.

Loxton, a native of North Kingstown, Rhode Island, where the village of Davisville is located, dedicated his work to his great-grandmother Mrs. Grace Wills because by sharing her “memories of nearly a century, she made history come alive.” Loxton provides the same benefit for readers of his history of Davisville from its Native American settlement through the twentieth century. The village, once part of Joshua Davis’s plot in East Greenwich, was at one time a

section of the Potowomut Purchase in present day Warwick. Davisville, established by Joshua Davis in 1694, later became an important textile center in the nineteenth century and a military installation (home of the “Seabees”) during World War II. Besides covering the details of daily life in the village, Loxton includes genealogical material on the Davis, Sweet, Reynolds, and Vaughn families. Photographs, maps, and drawings illustrate this fascinating story of one of Rhode Island’s smaller villages.

*Newportraits* by Eileen Warburton, introduction by Judith Sobel with annotations by Cora Lee Gibbs. (University Press of New England, 2000) \$50.00.

Newport families played an important role in the history of Rhode Island and the formation of the country. In 1992, the Newport Art Museum brought together the work of traveling painters, master artists of the Gilded Age, and twentieth-century figures to create a “family album” of Newport’s prominent men, women, and children in portraits. The result transcends a collection of portraits to become a study of Newport’s history for three centuries. Former Newport Art Museum curator Cora Lee Gibbs provides biographical material on each individual depicted in the color plates. This is a wonderful resource for anyone with Newport roots.

*North Burial Ground Providence, Rhode Island Old Section 1700-1848* by John E. Sterling (Rhode Island Genealogical Society, 2000) \$39.00.

Sterling, one of the founders of the [Rhode Island Cemetery Database](#) project spent years transcribing the headstones in the North Burial Ground in Providence. This book, published to coincide with the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the cemetery, creates a record of the burials in the oldest part of cemetery (1700-1848). By the time formal records started being kept in 1848, twenty-two acres of prior internments were unrecorded. The North Burial Ground now covers 110 acres. This volume updates and amends the 5,600 transcriptions done by Frank Williamson (1856-1879) that appear in Arnold’s *Vital Record of Rhode Island* and the 7,500 names recorded by F. T. Calef in 1923. In addition to double-checking and updating those two manuscripts, Sterling and his crew added over 20,000 names, bringing the total number of individuals listed in the North Burial Ground cemetery database to more than 35,000. This volume is vital to anyone with Rhode Island ancestry in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century. As the North Burial Ground was the central resting place for Providence residents regardless of their economic status, this book is a wonderful resource for anyone looking for a “missing connection.”

### **Forthcoming**

*Buildings of Rhode Island* by William H. Jordy (Oxford University Press, [spring 2003](#))

If Jordy’s new book resembles his last, *Buildings on Paper: Rhode Island Architectural Drawings 1825-1945* (Brown University, Rhode Island Historical Society, Rhode Island School of Design, 1981, jointly authored with Christopher P. Monkhouse), then it will be full of fascinating detail and great stories.

*The Devotion of These Women: Rhode Island in the Antislavery Network* by Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven (University of Massachusetts Press, fall 2002)

Van Broekhoven, executive director of the American Baptist Historical Society in Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, studies the role of women in the mid-nineteenth century abolitionist movement in Rhode Island. Amaraney Paine and other women of the Providence Anti-Slavery Society stepped forward to revive Rhode Island’s fading antislavery movement, and sustained it for many years. This unified effort helped provide the foundation for the Rhode Island State Antislavery Society.