

The Freedom Seeker

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Summer 2007

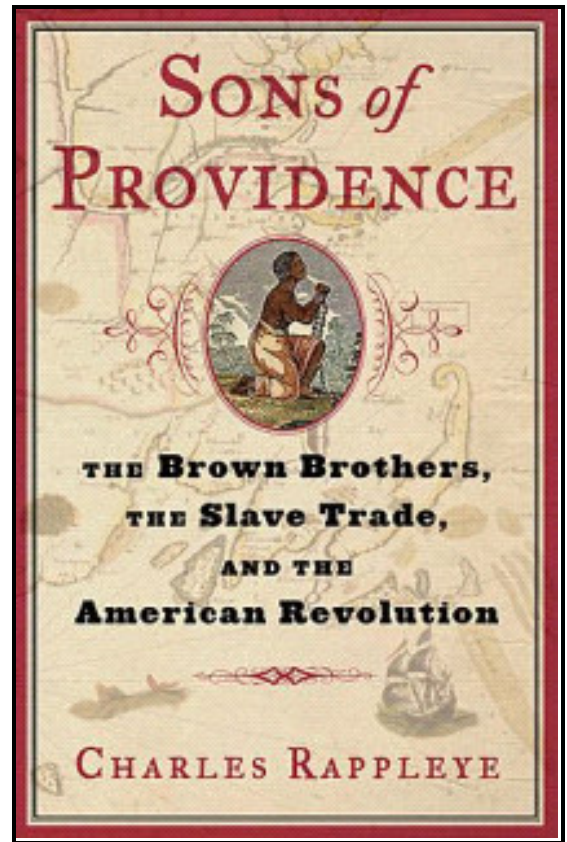
Special Issue: Summer Reading

Book Reviewed: Charles Rappleye, *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade and the American Revolution*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006, 400 pages, \$27.00 hardcover

Reviewed by Delores M. Walters, Ph.D.

Charles Rappleye's *Sons of Providence* tells the story of John Brown, 1736-1803, and Moses Brown, 1738-1836, two brothers whose personal and political legacies unfolded after the Revolution amidst a rivalry over slavery that marked deepening dissension in the emerging republic. On the basis of an extensive review of archival documents, Rappleye, an investigative journalist, details the lives of the Brown brothers as they led Providence to become Rhode Island's commercial center, and shows the extent to which slavery was a pivotal question for New England patriots.

Among the northern colonies in eighteenth-century America, Rhode Island was second only to New York in the size of its enslaved population. No longer is it such a startling revelation that slavery and the slave trade were vital to establishing northern as well as southern



Coming Events

Walking tours: August —
October see p. 3

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social economies, or that two-thirds of the first eighteen presidents in the early republic were slaveholders. It is remarkable, however, that Rappleye depicts slavery as so deeply divisive and controversial during the quest for independence.

Imbued with an entrepreneurial spirit and educated in the culture of commerce, both formally and through family-business ap-

prenticeships, the two brothers first ventured into the slave trade in 1764 when they outfitted the *Sally* as a slave ship and retained a friend as captain. Engaged in the notorious triangle trade whereby Africans were exchanged for rum, the round-trip voyage between Newport, Rhode Island, West Africa, and the Caribbean was a disaster. Such entries as "1 garle slave dyed," listed as No. 21 in the ship's logs stunned my students who viewed these

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Next Year's Conference

Well ahead of the yearly schedule, the URHPCR's conference committee has announced next year's event: "How It Worked: Two Centuries of Resistance, Escape, and the Underground Railroad in New York and Across the Continent." The conference will take place the weekend of February 22, 23 and 24. Dr. Spencer Crew, director of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, will join us as the Friday evening guest speaker. Kim and Reggie Harris and Nzinga's Daughters will perform Saturday evening. More details to come at www.ugrworkshop.org.

The Freedom Seeker is a publication of the Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc., a non-profit corporation dedicated to promoting and encouraging knowledge and understanding of the 19th-century Underground Railroad Movement in the Capital Region, in New York State, and in the United States. This newsletter is published three times a year. Editorial inquiries can be sent to URHPCR, P.O. Box 10851, Albany NY 12201. Email at info@ugrworkshop.com

Book Review

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documents at Brown University's John Carter Brown Library in Providence where they were recently displayed. During the dismal journey, 109 enslaved people, more than half of the total who had been purchased on the Gambia shore, succumbed to disease, malnutrition, shock, despair, suicide and a shipboard insurrection.

Rappleye explores the essential characteristics and contradictions inherent in the lifelong rivalry between the two brothers for whom the dreary outcome of the *Sally* was a turning point in their outlooks on slavery and the trafficking of human beings. John, relentless in his pursuit of profit continued in the slave trade. Even the revolution was a business proposition, though John also led the rebellious band of Rhode Islanders who in 1772 protested the interception of

colonial ships smuggling illegal or untaxed merchandise by burning the *Gaspee*, a British ship.

Moses, equally relentless in pursuing a vision of a new America, recognized as equals even those who were brought involuntarily and freed all of the people he had enslaved. He became a Quaker and abolitionist. His staunchest opponent in the ensuing battles over slavery was his own brother, John. Both brothers, in seeming contradiction to the notion of social responsibility, initiated fundraising for what became Brown University even as their slave trading venture with the *Sally* proved disastrous in both human and financial terms.

This is a fascinating story; however, because of the complex integration of materials and analysis it is not always an easy read. Yet, as I sat reading the book on the site near Providence where the wounded captain of the *Gaspee* was brought ashore after his ship was destroyed (an event that

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News and Notes

Walking Tour Dates for Summer and Fall:

Tours of underground railroad sites in downtown Albany begin at the Albany Heritage Area Visitors Center at Quackenbush Square (Clinton and Broadway). There is a modest charge (\$7 in cash or check) for taking the tour. Call 518 432-4432 to register. Tours last from 1pm to 3 pm.

Dates through the fall: August 19, September 16, October 14

Group tours for 10 to 20 participants are possible by special arrangement. Sixty-minute presentations to groups also are available (for \$75). Call 518 432-4432 for both.



There will be an International Underground Railroad Conference, Sept. 28-30, in Roches-

ter, New York, for more information go to : www.workforcediversitynetwork.com



URHPCR board meetings are now monthly (the second Thursday). Remaining meetings for this year will be August 9, September 13, October 11, November 8, December 13.



Volunteers are needed for database entry and revisions. We have a ton of mailing list tasks that need to be kept up with. If you're interested, please contact Paul or Mary Liz at



We need used inkjet and bubble-jet printer cartridges which the project can redeem for cash. Email or call (518-432-4432) for details or send them to: URHPCR, Box 10851, Albany, NY 12201

BECOME A MEMBER

The Underground Railroad History Project of the Capital Region, Inc. (URHPCR) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting and encouraging knowledge and understanding of the 19th-century Underground Railroad Movement in the Capital Region, in New York State, and in the United States. Among other goals, URHPCR promotes and encourages historical research and education on the Underground Railroad Movement and seeks to mark places of historic interest relating to the Underground Railroad Movement in the Capital Region.

Benefits of Membership:

- ◆ Invitation to the annual Albany Conference in February 2007.
- ◆ Subscription to *The Freedom Seeker* (published three times a year).
- ◆ Invitations to URHPCR special events
- ◆ Walking tour of Downtown Albany Underground Railroad Sites for a nominal charge.
- ◆ Calendar of local, state, and national events on the Underground Railroad Movement

A limited number of subsidized individual memberships is available. Please call 518.432.4432 for more information.

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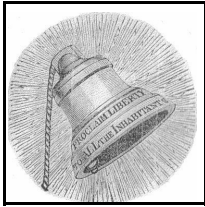
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ON THE WEB AT
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Book Review: Sons of Providence

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is still celebrated in Rhode Island, though mainly by Whites), I wondered if the still unrecognized voices of women and Blacks could be better integrated into the story. Would the accounts of the *Sally's* enslaved passengers remain as "cold," i.e., "Their suffering is tallied but not described, their agonies presumed but not the subject of contemplation"-- a reference to the letters exchanged between the brothers and the captain (p. 75)? Would Moses' contradictory role in funding the textile mill that spurred industrialization, but depended on cotton produced by enslaved labor in the South, be better understood? Would the American dream still largely omit those of African descent if American history texts were more inclusive?

Rhode Islanders think of their state as embracing religious freedom much as New Yorkers consider their state as a destination for those seeking freedom from slavery. Yet, like other northerners, they tend to disavow the state's partici-

pation in slavery despite its official title, "State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations."

But the historical record reveals a different story. We know that slavery was central to the entire colonial economy and society, north and south. Still, our knowledge is incomplete: essential contributions, especially of African Americans, remain inadequately integrated into the history of the United States, even in this award-winning book.

Delores Walters, a native New Yorker and cultural anthropologist, who formerly was an educator at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center and Northern Kentucky University, is teaching part-time in a college and workplace training program called Year Up in Providence, Rhode Island.