

THE GAR IN VICTORIAN AMERICA

To fully understand the politics and dynamics of the Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) one must also understand the social, economic and political climate of the United States during the Re-Construction/Post Civil War Era. RI GAR Arnold Post No. 4 of Providence was formed during the most volatile part of this period. By 1876, the most influential Post of the RI GAR was Prescott Post No. 1, also of Providence. It, by far, had the most members, although it was losing ground to newer RI GAR Posts. Post No. 1 was the first RI GAR Post formed by RI Civil War Governor William Sprague in 1866. Post No. 1 was officially chartered by the National GAR in 1867 and its members were the primary organizers of the first ten RI GAR Posts that led to the chartering of the RI Department (or State) GAR. Post No. 1 boasted members such as Major General and RI Governor Ambrose E. Burnside (who also went on to become the first RI Dept. GAR Commander and the 3rd National GAR Commander-in-Chief as well as RI US Senator); former RI Governor and RI US Senator William Sprague; RI US Congressman Henry J. Spooner; RI US Senator Henry B. Anthony; the Post Civil War RI Republican Machine Party Political "Boss" and former Colonel of the 3rd RI Heavy Artillery Charles R. Brayton; former Lieut. Col. of the 2nd RI Volunteer Infantry Elisha Hunt Rhodes; RI State Attorney General and former Col. of the 2nd RI Volunteer Infantry Horatio Rogers (who went on to become the 2nd RI Dept. GAR Commander); and Dr. William F. Hutchinson, as well as many of the most prominent officers of all the RI units mustered to fight during the Civil War, most of who were also members of MOLLUS.

The general membership of the GAR were former Union Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers and Enlisted Men (of the Army, Navy, Marines, Medical and Revenue Cutter service). The enlisted men tended to elect the Veteran Officers they served under during the war to serve as officers of the GAR. Since for about the first 30 years of the RI GAR almost all the RI GAR Department Officers were also members of MOLLUS, the most influential men of the community actually controlled the GAR across the country. In most cases this trend tended to carry through during the 1870 to 1900 period of American History and the GAR. The GAR in Rhode Island overwhelmingly consisted of influential members of the Republican Political Party, of which former Colonel Charles R. Brayton, "Boss Brayton", emerged as being the most politically powerful figure in the Ocean State. Boss Brayton rigidly controlled almost all the political spectrums of Rhode Island on the Local, State and National levels. He was the only man in Rhode Island Colonial and/or State History to ever maintain a prominent office in the Rhode Island State House without ever holding an official RI Public office elected by the people of the State. Most who opposed Boss Brayton on just about anything, lived to regret it.

The source of Boss Brayton's power rested with two key Federally appointed positions that made him untouchable visa vie State and local politics. The two

important Federal Government appointments held by Brayton were that of Rhode Island State Postmaster and the State's Veterans Pension Director. For about 50 years Brayton skillfully used both to control the Rhode Island political agenda and State Officials from dog catcher to Governor, throughout the State. As Postmaster he used RI Mail Carriers to keep a constant line of communication with all RI Civil War Veterans at the State's expense, while knowing all Rhode Island Civil War Veterans were by far the largest voting constituency in the State. He also used his office as Pension Director to control how the Veterans voted in each election, making it obvious if they didn't vote his way, they might have problems receiving their pension benefits. Brayton's method was very effective, especially during the period of "Hard Times" in Rhode Island. As a former State or Department Commander of the RI GAR, Brayton also tried his best to exercise the same strong handed control within the RI GAR, but here he was not always as successful, which at times made the RI GAR quite volatile, especially between Brayton men and men apposed to his methods like Ambrose Burnside, Henry J. Spooner, Horatio Rogers, Elisha Hunt Rhodes and Dr. Hutchinson.

By the mid 1870s, during the Presidency of Ulysses S. Grant due to several scandals within the Grant Administration and a suffering American economy that had slipped into a severe depression, the Veterans were experiencing what they all called "Hard Times". RI GAR Department Commander of 1876, Charles H. Williams (former Post Commander of RI GAR Slocum Post No. 10) made specific reference to this in his end of the year Commander's Report at the Annual RI GAR Department Encampment (Annual Meeting-Convention). The RI GAR had actually experienced a down turn of its membership due to the poor State economy. The Veterans could not afford to pay their dues. Some RI GAR Posts were on the edge of closing and a few did close due to poor finances. A large number the membership in most RI GAR local Posts had dropped their membership saying they couldn't afford their dues, which at that time was generally about 50 cents, very expensive at the time. Plus, Boss Brayton was being tough with them as well, holding their pensions (\$25 to about \$40 per month) over their heads if they didn't vote in Rhode Island elections the way he wanted. The Veterans in greater numbers were turning to Elisha Hunt Rhodes for assistance. Rhodes was the State Tax Assessor. His position made him a powerful enemy of Boss Brayton, because Veterans Pensions were based on income and "property". The more valuable a Veteran's property, the less likely it was to receive an adequate pension. To get around Brayton and help Veterans, Rhodes got together with a local attorney and worked out a system for legally devaluing the taxable property and homes of the Veterans so they would qualify for their pensions, no matter what Brayton did and it worked, for a while.

Civil War Major General, RI Governor and RI US Senator Ambrose E. Burnside, also the third National Commander-in-Chief of the National GAR and former RI Department GAR Commander, encouraged Elisha Hunt Rhodes to continue to do all he could to help RI Veterans get through the "Hard Times". Rhodes did axactly what was expected however his actions directly threatened the political power of

Boss Brayton causing a nasty battle within the RI GAR, especially within Prescott Post No. 1, of which Braton, Rhodes and Burnside were members. Burnside admired the political courage and military service of Rhodes perhaps to a degree that he looked upon Rhodes as if he was a son that he and his wife Mary (Bishop) Burnside never had. The relationship between Burnside and Rhodes became similar to that of George Washington and Rhode Island's General Nathanael Greene during the Revolution. When Burnside finished his last term as National GAR Commander-in-Chief he supported Rhodes move up through the ranks of the National GAR to hold the positions of Jr. Vice and then Sr. Vice National GAR Commander-in-Chief, 1876-77. During this time in American History to become Commander-in-Chief of the National GAR along with being a member of MOLLUS (Union Civil War Officers) meant becoming almost as powerful as becoming the President of the United States.

Amidst the problems of the period, RI GAR Arnold Post No. 4 was approved by the R.I. Department GAR and was officially chartered by the National GAR on January 9, 1877. Twenty three (23) men (Honorably Discharged Union Civil War Veterans) served as Post Commander of Rhode Island Grand Army of the Republic (RI GAR) Arnold Post No. 4, from 1877 to 1930. Throughout the long and distinguished history of Arnold Post No. 4, Post members and officers faithfully held their meetings, twice a week on Monday (general membership) and Thursday nights (Post Officers). All members were fined 25 cents per meeting if they missed any meeting without a proper excuse. At each meeting a collection was taken from all members to donate what they could to the widows and/or orphans of the families of fallen R.I. Civil War Veterans in distress. At the end of each meeting the Post would vote on where the donation would go. In 1877 since the annual dues to belong to Post 4 was 50 cents and by 1933 their annual membership dues was \$2.25, all members made a strong commitment to the GAR.

Keep in mind the American dollar back then went much farther than it does today. Also, although income rates were less during this period, the standard family income in America has actually declined since 1913, because of the actual current inflated value of the dollar. Money actually went further back then.

All GAR Post 4 meetings were conducted in accordance to GAR and paramilitary protocol. Post 4 elected and appointed officers were expected to recite all meeting and ceremonial ritual from memory and never allowed to conduct their duties or standard GAR procedures for meetings and ceremonies by reading it from the GAR manual. GAR (and SUVCW) meeting rooms were arranged similar to Masonic tradition. About mid-way through each Post meeting the men would take a break and partake in a collation usually prepared by the WRC or the Daughters of the Union Veterans of the Civil War. During that time the veterans would smoke their cigars and reminisce about their experiences in the Civil War. The consumption of alcohol was forbidden at all Post 4 functions. Most Post 4 members were strict believers in the 19th Century "Temperance Movement" in America. Since

at times (in the early days of the GAR) meetings could become rather spirited and political, by 1890, Arnold Post No. 4 as well as most GAR Posts across the country required all members to check their personal weapons at the door.

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