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Erik J. Chaput
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Introduction

That the Roger Williams state, the pioneer of religious freedom, should still be governed by the Charter of King Charles II instead of a popular constitution . . . is certainly among the very singular anomalies of this boasted nineteenth century, in which we preach so much republicanism, and practice little of it.

*Friend of Man, January 11, 1842*

As dusk turned to dark on May 17, 1842, the residents of Providence, Rhode Island, were returning to their homes. But few were preparing for a restful night’s sleep. Citizens were on edge, expecting the sound of cannon fire at any moment. Schools, shops, banks, and Brown University on College Hill had been closed all day. The sheriff had closed the court house weeks before. The cobblestone streets were filled with men in uniform, from young recruits engaged in their first military drills to more senior militiamen who might have performed a similar duty a decade earlier when the city was beset by a deadly, multiday riot in an area of rundown dwellings along the Moshassuck River. There was a great commotion in Market Square over rumors that the city might be set aflame.

At first it was mere speculation, but as the night wore on, credible witnesses reported that the People’s Governor, Thomas Wilson Dorr, a short, portly man with thick, jet-black hair and piercing, hazel eyes, was planning an assault on the state arsenal on the west side of the city. The other man with a claim to the governorship, Samuel Ward King, had feared this for more than a month. The fifty-six-year-old King, a medical doctor by training, was in his fourth term as governor. Rumors circulated that if he captured the arsenal, Dorr intended to march east across the city to Brown University in order to use the dormitories as barracks for his troops. From there he
would order his men to seize public and private property and redistribute it among the poor masses, establishing an “agrarian despotism.”

Dorr and his men needed either to acquire the supply of armaments inside the arsenal, or, at the very least, to neutralize the government’s control of such a large stockpile of firepower. With only thirty men on hand to defend the state’s weapons, the arsenal building was extremely vulnerable. Those Providence residents with a knowledge of history probably made the connection to Daniel Shays’s attempt to capture the federal arsenal in Springfield, Massachusetts, on January 25, 1787. Four men died in that attempt. Indeed, the prominent New York Whig editor Thurlow Weed would use the headline “Second Shays’s Rebellion” when describing events in Rhode Island.

Born into wealth and privilege, Thomas Dorr was certainly no Daniel Shays. As a young man, Dorr seemed destined to take his place among Rhode Island’s upper echelon, using his degree from Harvard and considerable legal training to live a life of leisure and civic pursuits. He was often described by his followers as a gentleman of “amiable temper and strict purity [of] character.” Dorr would certainly earn his place in the history books though it was not quite in the way his father, Sullivan, and his mother, Lydia, had hoped. Sullivan and Lydia likely dreamed that their oldest son would become governor one day, but they surely did not imagine he would bypass the sitting government of Rhode Island in order to get there.

In the eyes of the wealthy class of people with whom Sullivan and Lydia associated, their thirty-six-year-old son was a sanctimonious, deluded demagogue bent on destruction. A deacon at the prominent First Baptist Church on North Main Street in Providence expressed a “desire” to see their son’s head carried “through the streets on a pole.” Another deacon at the same church wished to see the “blood” of Dorr’s followers flowing in the “gutters.” James McKenzie, pastor of Roger Williams Baptist Church in Providence and Dorr supporter, correctly noted that turmoil among Providence’s faithful in the spring of 1842 led to “divisions and enmities in families, neighborhoods, and [churches]—presenting such spectacles of Christian armed against Christian.”

In the spring of 1842, in the nation’s smallest state, there were two governments—one claiming legitimacy under a 1663 Charter that prescribed no mode for amendment, the other claiming legitimacy from a constitution adopted by the majority of citizens in a plebiscite in December 1841. When eleven of the colonies adopted new constitutions during the Revolution,
General Assembly of Rhode Island simply crossed out the name of King Charles II and pushed forward. Despite repeated attempts, the state had never adopted a formal written constitution. The Charter afforded those with landed property a monopoly on political power. The changing nature of work and immigration in the early nineteenth century meant that the ownership of property and real estate became an unattainable goal for most workers. The growing laboring class who did not own $134 worth of landed property (figure set in 1798) were unable to participate in government. To make matters worse from the reformers’ point of view, mill owners frequently made “voters for a day” by temporarily conveying tracts of land to employees. Since there was no secret ballot, employees were forced to vote the ticket their employer desired. In the spring of 1842, many mill owners scared workers away from supporting Thomas Dorr and his People’s Constitution, a liberal document that fully incorporated laborers into the body politic. The always colorful New York labor leader Mike Walsh labeled Rhode Island landholders “a craven, avaricious, and unfeeling gang of sneaking, hypocritical thieves and tyrants.”

Drawing inspiration from the democratic religious revivals of the 1820s and 1830s, the disenfranchised plebian reformers hoped to improve their chances of not only finding the Lord, but also finding justice on earth. In the early 1840s, almost 60 percent of all adult white males in Rhode Island were excluded from the ballot. Dorr told Amos Kendall, the intellectual fire-power of Andrew Jackson’s administration, that in the city of Providence there were only 1,300 voters in a white male population over the age of 21, of about 4,500. The state’s political institutions, in Dorr’s analysis, were “totally inconsistent with a just regard to natural rights,” to the “doctrine of popular sovereignty,” to the “Declaration of American Independence,” and to the “spirit of the Constitution of the United States.” The situation in Rhode Island, as historian Patrick T. Conley has noted, was a “democracy in decline.”

After the legislature repeatedly blocked attempts to reform the state’s archaic system, Dorr and his followers decided to take matters into their own hands. They took the basic principles of popular sovereignty that emerged during the American Revolution as their North Star. Elisha R. Potter, Jr., a lawyer and conservative Democrat from South Kingstown, succinctly summarized the 1841–1842 constitutional crisis in a letter to his brother. “One of the constitutions commonly called the People’s was made in this way: a number of the friends of free suffrage on their own authority
called a convention to make a constitution . . . the convention met and made a constitution extending suffrage to all on a residence of one year.” A vote was then taken in late December 1841 and the “People’s Party now says their constitution has been adopted and that they shall support it by all necessary means.” In April 1842, Dorr was elected the “People’s Governor.”

By May, the months-long war of words was now reaching a critical state, a potentially deadly battle over the meaning of American constitutionalism. Both sides fundamentally disagreed over how the sovereign could express its will. Each side claimed that it enjoyed the support of the relevant popular majority required to govern and, therefore, refused to yield. In late 1841, commentators frequently referred to the state of “civil commotion.” Now the “commotion” looked like all-out war as Dorr and his band of devoted followers threatened “violence and conflagration.”

The “smallest state of the Union” was now the only one that could “boast of two governors” recorded New Yorker Philip Hone in his diary on April 21, three days after Dorr’s election as the People’s Governor. Hone, a former mayor of New York City, noted that Dorr and his followers were of the belief “that the State belongs to them, and that they will govern it; whilst the other party swears that it does not . . . and so they are preparing to go to blows about the matter.” Providence militiaman William Bailey was convinced that Thomas Dorr was motivated only by “malice and revenge.” Dorr’s goal, according to Bailey, was to “destroy lives and property.” Not taking any chances, Bailey hired a carriage to take his wife and young son out of the city. The elites living in the elegant homes on the east side of Providence, including John Whipple, the state’s leading attorney and Dorr’s former mentor, had already sent their loved ones to Worcester and Boston.

Many of the nation’s newspapers promulgated the rumor that radical Democrats in New York City had been stoking the flames of rebellion by encouraging Dorr’s forces to rape and plunder. In mid-May, Dorr spent a number of days in the metropolis gathering support for his cause. He was serenaded by Walsh’s Spartan Band, an emblem not just of physical strength, but also of the North’s workingmen’s movement. The radical editor Levi Slamm used his newspaper, the Democratic Republican New Era, to call for weapons to be shipped to Rhode Island. The New Era had been attacking Rhode Island’s “unjust, unnatural, and disgraceful” political structure for several years, chastising the state’s leaders for making property the sole determinate of political rights. A September 1839 memorial in Slamm’s paper
invoked the language of the guarantee of republican government clause in Article IV, section 4 of the Constitution and urged Congress to interfere in Rhode Island in order to remove the “corporate charter.” Dorr was an ardent believer in the paper’s radical agenda.

On May 16, upon his return to Rhode Island via the Stonington railroad line, Dorr rode triumphantly into downtown Providence in an open-air coach. There “was quite an escort prepared to receive him [by] those who are in favor of insurrection and sedition,” wrote Aurilla Moffitt, the wife of a Providence militiaman. Like Napoleon’s return from Elba, Dorr, who slightly resembled the French emperor in height and build and greatly admired his military exploits, intended to take up the reins as the governor of Rhode Island. Dorr, who often walked with the aid of a cane, discovered an element of bravado that he never knew he possessed and gave a fiery address to a throng of supporters and onlookers. For the occasion, Dorr replaced his cane with a sword that had been given to him by a group of radical New York City Democrats.

In most circumstances, Thomas Dorr, referred to as “Wilson” by his family and friends, was not an intimidating man. He was a respectable, well-educated, religious, urbane gentleman with an impeccable pedigree. He was more comfortable with a history or law book than a sword or pistol. Careful observers of Rhode Island’s political culture in the 1830s knew that Dorr was a rising star, a firebrand politico of the first order. However, no one could have predicted he would be leading a military brigade in the spring of 1842. Dorr’s lifelong effort to improve himself and the world around him led directly to his becoming one of the state’s leading reformers. In December 1833, he jotted down a series of notes on what he wanted to accomplish in his lifetime: reforms in the banking, education, and prison system, along with the establishment of an independent judiciary, suffrage extension, and most prominently, constitutional reform. A few years later, the destruction of slavery and political rights for free black Americans were added to the list. Dorr devoted all of his considerable intellectual energy and ambition to public service. Captivated by the revolutions that tore across Europe in the early 1830s, especially the July Revolution in France and the English Reform Movement of 1831–1832, Dorr believed that he could lead Rhode Island into the modern era.

Just as Americans both before and after the Revolution attempted to regulate and exert popular control over unjust and unresponsive government, Dorr attempted to restore the political and economic system in Rhode
Island to its proper order. In Dorr’s analysis, the American Revolution “scattered to the winds” assumptions of “monarchical divinity and infallibility” and enshrined the belief that “all just governments rest upon the substance of natural and inalienable rights and that under God the sovereigns of the People are the People themselves.” A recently discovered letter from a group of Rhode Island women loyal to Dorr succinctly illustrates this Revolutionary-era connection. Eliza Shaw, Sarah Davis, Mary Stiness, Ann Buffington, and Maria Gardiner believed that Dorr endeavored “to establish a constitution . . . based upon the principles for which our Fathers bled and died in 1776.” Shaw, Davis, Stiness, and Buffington believed that “a longer continuance under, and servile submission to a Government deriving its power from a Royal Charter granted by that reckless and prolific wretch, Charles the 2nd more than 200 year ago” stamped Rhode Island citizens “with the indelible term of slaves.” Lower-to-middle-class women loyal to Dorr were political activists, driven by a deep-seated belief in the power of the people and, most importantly, an unwavering faith in the Democratic Party. In contrast, bourgeois women identified with the Whig Party and took a strong and, indeed, vocal stance against Thomas Dorr.

Adherents to a broad definition of popular sovereignty, the Dorrites claimed that their actions were within the bounds of American constitutionalism. They insisted that the rights of the people did not end with voting and petition but “included the right of the people to pass judgment on or to ‘regulate’ their alleged rulers.” As historian Christian G. Fritz has rightly noted, Dorr’s “expansive view of popular sovereignty,” which included the belief that the people had a right to both ordain and abolish a form of government, constituted a constitutional “middle ground” between state-sponsored revision and the “ultimate right of revolution based on sheer force.” Since he viewed his actions as within the bounds of American constitutionalism, Dorr never used the word “rebellion” when describing any of his actions. His opponents, of course, found it to be an accurate description.

Dorr’s understanding of the people as sovereign demonstrates the continued salience of the Revolutionary-era ideology in the antebellum era. During the debate over Michigan’s admission to the Union in 1837, Pennsylvania Senator James Buchanan foreshadowed the constitutional crisis in Rhode Island in a speech on the floor of the U.S. Senate. “But suppose the case of a State, whose constitution, originally good, had, from the lapse of time and from changes in the population of different portions of its territory become unequal and unjust,” said Buchanan. If repeated calls for constitu-
tional reform fell on “deaf ears,” then the people could “invoke” their “sovereign capacity, to remedy” the defects in their form of government. “They are not forever to be shackled” by their representatives. The people “are the source of all power; they are the rightful authors of all constitutions,” concluded the future president. Thomas Dorr wholeheartedly agreed.34

However, the people also had an electoral role to play, and Dorr’s opponents chided him for failing to understand this. They were responsible for electing representatives to work for their interests; otherwise, every issue would force a fundamental debate about the basic workings of government. As a correspondent of New York Governor William Henry Seward noted, “It is a dangerous thing to force the people to resort to first principles, when any real or imaginary evil besets them.”35 According to U.S. Senator James F. Simmons, it was an “unheard of doctrine that the people have a right to change their government whenever they please.”36

As the night of May 17 deepened and Providence began to resemble a city besieged, a deep sense of fear and trepidation gripped the minds of many of the men who gathered inside the arsenal awaiting orders from Quartermaster General Samuel Ames, who married Dorr’s younger sister, Mary Throop, in 1839. Dorr’s other sisters, Candace and Ann, had married into the Carrington and Ives families, themselves pillars of the Rhode Island aristocracy. Moses Brown Ives called for “firm, decided action” to stop the suffrage movement’s “designing leaders,” in particular Thomas Wilson Dorr.37 Candace’s father-in-law, Edward Carrington, Sr., sat on Governor King’s executive council. Carrington, once one of the richest men in the state, had suffered huge financial losses as a result of the Panic of 1837 and was likely fearful that Dorr’s reform effort would hurt his pocketbook even further.

Dorr’s three younger brothers, Henry, Allen, and Sullivan, Jr.—whom he so deeply loved and helped to raise—did not come to his aid the night of May 17. The outspoken Henry Dorr saw his older brother’s course of action as one that would incite violence and social disorder—staples of the French Revolution after 1791. Paranoid Rhode Island conservatives feared that Dorr would follow Robespierre’s fall from grace and institute a Reign of Terror in the name of defending the people’s rights. William Bailey informed his mother that he had been reading Adolphe Thiers’s History of the French Revolution and had reached the conclusion that there “were many elements” of the French Revolution alive in Rhode Island. Dorr was “Marat, Robespierre, and Danton” rolled into one.38 When Robespierre was “contending for the same doctrines as advocated by Dorr he drenched France in
blood,” declared Indiana Whig Caleb Blood Smith on the floor of the U.S. Congress.  

Despite desperate pleas from Lydia’s prominent brothers, Crawford, Philip, and Zachariah Allen, Jr., Dorr refused to negotiate with representatives from the General Assembly. There was no need. Dorr believed he had the upper hand. Seventy of Dorr’s men had successfully stolen two six-pounder cannons in broad daylight from the United Train of Artillery in Providence. He now intended to make use of them. If Dorr’s men had dragged the cannons directly to the arsenal, they probably could have taken it without firing a shot. The arsenal, a 50-by-60-foot structure with chip stone walls, was constructed to withstand shot and shell, but its thatch roof could easily be blown off, or worse, ignited, burning those inside. King called for additional reinforcements from the conservative coastal enclaves of Warren, Bristol, and Newport, former centers of the lucrative slave trade. King went to the arsenal to encourage his men to stand their ground. Shortly after two o’clock in the morning, Dorr’s men set up an encampment within “musket shot” of the northeast wall of the building. At least five cannons were pointed out windows right back at his position.  

Rabble-rousing newspaper editors, poor laborers, and assorted urban rowdies might have clamored for a chance to shed blood, or even to take a few potshots at the arsenal, but the more worldly men of good sense still believed that diplomacy would settle the issue. They quickly discovered, however, that Dorr was not interested in compromise. The People’s Governor tended to see challenges to his perception of right and wrong as the product of nefarious conspiracies against the common good of the citizenry. “It can’t be possible that your brother intends to fire on this building when he knows that you, his father and his uncles are all in it,” remarked a Providence militiaman to Sullivan, Jr., who was looking out a window of the arsenal at his older brother in the darkness. “I guess you are not acquainted with the breed,” young Sullivan was said to have replied. If this were to be his final battle, Dorr intended to go out like a cannonade. He would willingly become a “martyr to the cause of Democracy.”  

From a distance, southern slaveholders followed events in Rhode Island with a close eye. Dorr’s past membership in the American Anti-Slavery Society (1837–1839) led to frequent charges that he was a diehard abolitionist. Slaveholders worried that Dorr’s intention was to spread his “revo-
olutionary spirit south.” Southerners looked with trepidation on anyone who adopted a literal interpretation of the alter or abolish provision in Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence. The extensive coverage devoted to the rebellion in southern newspapers, such as the Charleston Courier and the Southern Patriot, shows that proceedings in Rhode Island were watched closely. Dorr’s attempt at extralegal reform was enjoined with the increasingly heated national debate over slavery. Proslavery southern Whigs and Democrats believed that Dorr’s ideology threatened to “convert the numberless blacks of the South into voters, who could vote down the Southern state governments at their pleasure.” As the abolitionist David Lee Child noted in the National Anti-Slavery Standard, the reform effort in Rhode Island was “precisely” a “movement that Southern statesmen” had “warned” of “as being analogous to slave insurrection in the South.” If it was “decided” that the “disfranchised majority” in Rhode Island could “recover” their lost rights, it would be of “great interest” to the “disfranchised majority in South Carolina” declared the Emancipator and Free American, a Boston abolitionist newspaper.

In addition to his reliance on Jefferson’s Declaration, Dorr often turned to the guarantee of republican government clause in Article IV of the Constitution. Dorr believed that Charter government was simply not republican and therefore needed to be replaced. During this period, abolitionists, most notably William Goodell, began to use the clause to serve antislavery ends. Southern states with their enslaved populations were deemed unrepublican. Providence Congressional minister Mark Tucker, no fan of Thomas Dorr, explicitly linked the political reform movement in Rhode Island with Goodell’s antislavery efforts.

Dorr’s early political career was in line with what historian Jonathan Earle has labeled “Jacksonian antislavery.” Dorr’s relationship with prominent antislavery advocates in the 1830s—such as James Birney, Wendell Phillips, Lewis Tappan, Arnold Buffum, and John Greenleaf Whittier—along with his attendance at numerous meetings of the American Anti-Slavery Society in New York City led to frequent charges a decade later that he intended to spread his doctrine of the people’s sovereignty to the American South. During the People’s Convention in the fall of 1841, Dorr fought valiantly for the rights of black Rhode Islanders—a fight that represented the culmination of the Revolution’s values of liberty and equality. However, the majority of the delegates believed a white-only clause was necessary to ensure success at the polls. After learning of the clause, Pawtucket aboli-
tionist Susan Sisson declared that only the abolitionists were the “true champions of freedom” in Rhode Island. Neither “the old charter nor the free suffrage parties have any claim to the sympathies of abolitionists, inasmuch as both are radically wrong . . . the former making property and the latter color the basis of suffrage,” proclaimed the *Emancipator and Free American*.

In an intense campaign against the People’s Constitution, the ex-slave Frederick Douglass and Abby Kelley, the high priestess of New England abolitionism, descended on Rhode Island to display their polemical brilliance and their ferocious critical bite. It was a revolutionary, chaotic situation in Rhode Island in late 1841. Dorr worked hard to achieve a color-blind democracy in the midst of a deep and abiding division over race, but in the end his fellow delegates opted to define citizenship as the exclusive province of whites. This “glaring inconsistency” could not have “escaped the cognizance of even the most prejudiced minds,” wrote a correspondent of the Cincinnati *Philanthropist*, a prominent abolitionist tract founded by the two-time Liberty Party presidential candidate James Birney in 1836.

Dorr’s life and the rebellion he led in the spring of 1842 are significant in their own right, but they also provide a window into the turbulent and shifting world of antebellum politics. The intense national interest in Rhode Island created an unparalleled written record, which highlights the partisan debate between Jacksonian views of popular sovereignty and the Whig commitment to the rule of law. As historian Sean Wilentz has argued, Dorr’s reform efforts constituted “a striking [and] exceptional case in the history of American democratization before the Civil War.” Democrats, according to the party’s semi-official organ the *Democratic Review*, gleefully “strove to associate their Whig opponents with the suppression of republican institutions and the repudiation of democratic principles.” Dorr argued that the Whigs should “surrender” their “title” which was “stolen in grand larceny from the democrats of ’76. Let Whigs call themselves Federalists, Tories, nationalists, native, raccoon republicans anything but Whigs, the glorious title of the men who established our liberty.”

The broad-based and far-reaching discussions of the people’s sovereignty in Rhode Island also reveals the contention between proslavery and antislavery politics in antebellum America. While northern Democrats nearly universally hailed Dorr’s conception of the people as sovereign, Democrats south of the Mason Dixon line were apprehensive. Southern Democrats’ disdain for the people’s sovereignty in 1842–1844 foreshadows their
lukewarm support for Lewis Cass’s and Stephen A. Douglas’s attempts to use the ideology to settle the dispute over the status of slavery in the western territories. John Calhoun and other southern Democrats could not endorse a theory that on the surface seemed to allow antislavery settlers in the Mexican Cession the right to pass laws prohibiting slavery. Southern Democrats argued that settlers could determine the status of slavery only when they drafted a constitution and sought admission to the Union. This would give southern settlers enough time to move west. As one of Dorr’s correspondents correctly noted, although the “sovereignty of the people” was in the “hearts of the great democratic mass” in the North, the idea had met with “limited reception” in the South, especially with the “disciples” of Calhoun.60

Finally, this book details the ways in which a strong antislavery politician like Dorr eventually turned away from his principles in the 1850s. A complex man, Dorr’s later years were marred by a lack of consistency. In the 1850s, Dorr became increasingly resentful of holier-than-thou abolitionists, who, he believed, threatened the strength of the Democratic Party and, by extension, the Union itself. It was, in some ways, an ironic twist of fate for a man whose ideology had threatened to do the same a decade before.