

# Essays offer engaging look at R.I. and Civil War

## **"THE RHODE ISLAND HOME FRONT IN THE CIVIL WAR ERA,"**

edited by Frank J. Williams  
and Patrick T. Conley.  
Taos Press. 194 pages. \$14.95.

By **ERIK J. CHAPUT**  
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Frank J. Williams, retired chief justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court and one of the nation's top Lincoln scholars, and Patrick T. Conley, the dean of Rhode Island historians and the author of more than 25 books on the history of the Ocean State, have edited an informative and engaging volume on the Civil War home front that will be of interest to students and scholars alike.

The four original essays in the volume were originally presented at a conference organized by the Rhode Island Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration Commission. Mackubin Thomas Owens, retired professor of national security at the Naval War College in Newport, penned a concise introduction for the book. The four essays are heavily illustrated with rare images and items from private collections and the Providence City Archives.

Williams' lengthy contribution to the collection begins with an overview of Rhode Island's political culture at the dawn of the Civil War. In April 1860, 29-year-old Cranston industrialist William Sprague was elected governor on a fusion "conservative" ticket. The Republican Party's candidate for governor was Seth Padelford, a devout abolitionist, whose campaign song ended with the line, "Padelford for the Free." Sprague outpolled Padelford 12,278 votes to 10,740. As Williams notes, Sprague's "victory was celebrated as a rebuke to abolitionism." But that Southern joy was "short-lived" for there was an "unprecedented" response in the state to President Abraham Lincoln's call for troops. Indeed, Governor Sprague led the first contingent of Rhode Island troops to the defense of Washington in April 1861. Sprague's horse was shot out from under him at the First Battle of Bull Run.

Historian Maury Klein, emeritus professor of history at the University of Rhode Island and the author of the magisterial "The Life and Legend of Jay Gould," chronicles Rhode Island's unique contribution to the

"making of modern warfare." The Providence Tool Company, for example, produced more than 70,000 Springfield rifle muskets and more than 10,000 sabers for the Union war effort.

Conley's contribution to the volume is entitled "Politics, Prejudice, Patriotism, and Perseverance: Rhode Island's Catholic Irish Confront the Civil War." This is a topic Conley knows well. His 1977 classic, "Democracy in Decline," tracked the widespread nativist sentiment in the state from the late 18th century to the Dorr Rebellion. During the Civil War, according to Conley, the Adopted Citizens' Association, "worked strenuously to secure the same voting rights for naturalized citizens as those enjoyed by the native born."

The 3rd Regiment, Rhode Island Heavy Artillery, received the most Irish recruits during the war and was engaged in intense fighting around Charleston, S.C. Conley concludes his essay with a discussion of U.S. Sen. Henry Bowen Anthony's role in the adoption of the 15th Amendment. In the 1830s and '40s, Anthony served as editor and owner of the anti-Catholic Providence Journal.

The final essay in the volume comes from Prof. James Tackach and deals with Rhode Islanders' contributions to wartime literature, oratory, letters, diaries and poetry. Tackach teaches English at Roger Williams University and the author of a book on Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address. Julia Ward Howe, author of the poem "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," vacationed in Newport throughout her life. In 1867, Providence banker John Russell Bartlett, who served as secretary of state during the war, authored "Memoirs of Rhode Island Officers Who Were Engaged in the Service of Their Country During the Great Rebellion of the South." Bartlett's contributions to the study of Rhode Island history are epic. His 10-volume edition of the Colonial records is still widely used today.

Erik J. Chaput is the author of "The People's Martyr: Thomas Wilson Dorr and His 1842 Rhode Island Rebellion." He teaches at The Lawrenceville School in New Jersey and in the School of Continuing Education at Providence College.