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An Economic Interpretation of Rhode Island's 1788 Referendum on the Constitution

Ruth Wallis Herndon and John E. Murray

On 24 March 1788, the voters of Tiverton, Rhode Island, met at Mr. Nathaniel Briggs' dwelling house to decide whether or not to support ratification of the proposed Federal Constitution. Town clerk Walter Cook recorded in meticulous handwriting the names and votes of all freemen present: twenty-three yeas and ninety-two nays.¹ (Briggs abstained from voting; Cook voted no.) On the same date, a similar meeting took place in Portsmouth, Rhode Island, the western terminus of the ferries that linked the two towns across the Sakonnet River.² Portsmouth town clerk Abraham Anthony, Jr., used his very best handwriting as he wrote out a list of the votes to forward to the secretary of the Rhode Island General Assembly: twelve yeas and sixty nays.³ (Anthony abstained from voting.)

One month earlier, Rhode Island's General Assembly had ordered a popular referendum on adoption of the Constitution, declaring that a state ratifying convention was insufficient; Rhode Island's voters should decide a constitutional matter. On 24 March 1788, every town convened a meeting, and every town clerk wrote down the names and votes of the freemen who participated. State-wide, 238 freemen voted for ratification; 2,714 freemen voted against it – that is, 8 percent for and 92 against adopting the new Constitution.⁴ (See Table 1.)

¹ "Papers Relating to the Adoption of the Constitution of the United States," manuscript file, Rhode Island State Archives, 25.

² *A Patchwork History of Tiverton, Rhode Island*, 1976 Bicentennial Edition (Tiverton: privately printed, n.d.), 36.

³ "Papers Relating to the Adoption," 17. Anthony's handwriting in the other meeting minutes of this time is not nearly so precise and elegant as on the voting list that he sent to the General Assembly.

⁴ The official state record shows the total vote (inaccurately) as 237 yeas and 2,708 nays (John Russell Bartlett, ed., *Records of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England* [Providence: The Providence Press Company, 1865], 10:275). John P. Kaminski et al

Alone among the thirteen states, Rhode Island held a popular referendum on ratification of the Constitution. In the two years following the referendum, a majority in the state legislature defeated eleven attempts to call a ratifying convention, claiming that the will of the people had been declared on 24 March 1788.⁵ Only after Rhode Island had stood by itself outside the Union for several months did anti-Constitution sentiment waver. The General Assembly finally called a ratifying convention in the spring of 1790 and Rhode Island voted to enter the Union on 29 May 1790, adopting the Constitution by a narrow margin.

By strongly rejecting ratification in 1788, Rhode Island's freemen revealed the extent of popular resistance to the Constitution. The farmers, artisans, craftsmen, and small merchants of Rhode Island's towns left few details of their lives beyond such formal documents as vital records, wills, tax lists, and estate inventories. Their votes in this referendum provide valuable evidence of the opinions of the many who never attended a ratifying convention. Received by the secretary of Rhode Island's state legislature 230 years ago, the voter lists are unique, just as the Rhode Island referendum was unique. The lists are the only systematic record of the opinions of ordinary people concerning the Federal Constitution. Elites wrote letters to each other and to the newspapers, airing their opinions in documents available to later generations. Ordinary freemen may have held their beliefs with equal passion, but their voice votes are the only documents they left on the issue.

scrutinized the individual town records of the votes and report 238 yeas and 2,714 nays in *Ratification of the Constitution by the States: Rhode Island*, volume 25 of *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2012), 421.

⁵ While some historians have argued that the General Assembly rejected calls for a ratifying convention on seven occasions, Patrick T. Conley argues convincingly for eleven such attempts in *Democracy in Decline: Rhode Island's Constitutional Development, 1776-1841* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1977), 109-110 and note.

That issue was an explosive one. Few state legislatures welcomed the Federal Constitution and rushed to ratify it by unanimous decision. Most state assemblies divided into “friends” and “enemies” of the Constitution. Ratification became a highly charged political issue for the new nation. Historians have zealously investigated the divisions between the pro-Constitution Federalists and anti-Constitution Antifederalists. Why did the Federalists believe that the best solution for the nation’s ills was a radical restructuring of the federal government? Why did the Antifederalists believe that the best solution was a more restrained patching of the obvious flaws in the Articles of Confederation? Historians have based their arguments largely on the writings of elites. Do their findings apply to ordinary people?

Rhode Island’s referendum voting lists give us an excellent opportunity to test an economic interpretation of opinions about the Constitution. In this essay, we concentrate on seven Rhode Island towns for which we have both voter lists and good tax and estate records: Exeter, Hopkinton, Jamestown, Little Compton, Middletown, Portsmouth, and Tiverton (see Appendix 1 for the voter data). The names on these voter lists have been cross-matched with tax and estate values and the data has been submitted to various statistical tests (see Appendix 2). Of the seven towns studied, five show a statistically significant difference between the average wealth of the “yea” voters and the average wealth of the “nay” voters. (See Table 2.) In Exeter, Hopkinton, Little Compton, Portsmouth, and Tiverton, those who favored ratification were clearly wealthier than those who opposed it – sometimes more than twice as wealthy. In Jamestown and Middletown, the sample size is too small to respond to statistical tests. The Tiverton data (see Table 3) specifically pinpoint personal estate wealth as the major division between pro-ratification and anti-ratification groups. Alone among the usable tax records, the Tiverton tax books divide the taxes into subcategories of personal estate (livestock, farm and

household goods, shop inventories, slaves, securities, hard money) and real estate (land and houses). The results of separate analyses on these two subcategories show that the average “yea” voter possessed five times as much personal estate as the average “nay” voter and more than twice as much personal estate as the average taxpayer. Similarly, the “yea” voters paid significantly more real estate tax than the “nay” voters did. The Tiverton data indicate that those who rejected ratification were, on the whole, middling landholders who had little else beside that land. In contrast, those who favored ratification were, on the whole, large landholders who also possessed significant personal estates as well.

The simple means for all seven towns in every tax or estate valuation show that “yea” voters were wealthier than “nay” voters. Although the statistical significance of the differences in wealth holds for only five of the seven towns, the data leave the consistent and overwhelming impression that pro-ratification freemen were far wealthier than anti-ratification freemen. And while the Rhode Island voter data does not necessarily apply to other states, the data supports a theory already advanced and buttressed by other, wider evidence: Charles Beard’s argument that those who favored the Constitution were wealthier, particularly in personal (non-real) estate, than those opposed to the Constitution.

I. Origins of This Essay

This essay is the product of a long discussion between a social historian (Ruth Herndon) working in a history department and an economic historian (John Murray) working in an economics department. John died in the spring of 2018, bringing our collaboration to a close, and I (Ruth Herndon) have written the final version of this essay after his death, using notes that

John left (often in emails) indicating his vision for the project. That vision rested on the interplay of history and economics, languages that John spoke and wrote with ease.

John Murray and I met when we were both at the University of Toledo (1996-2007). From our earliest conversations, John made it clear that he considered himself an historian as well as an economist, and he held himself to the scholarly standards of both disciplines. He interpreted economic data and put it to work in the service of history. He read history and put it to work in the service of economics. He understood these different audiences and shaped our collaborative projects to appeal to both historians and economists.

Over the years we worked together on numerous projects, most of them focusing on poor people and children in early America. We had our niches of specialization: John studied South Carolina; I studied New England. We gave papers together on the same conference panels, applied jointly for external grants, co-authored book chapters and a journal article, and co-edited an anthology of essays, *Children Bound to Labor: The Pauper Apprentice System in Early America*. When the book was published with Cornell University Press, John had a copy of the cover framed for me; it still holds pride of place on my office wall at Bowling Green State University.

Early in our scholarly friendship, while wearing his historian hat, John read my dissertation on Rhode Island towns in the Revolutionary Era.⁶ When he came to the chapter on Rhode Island's referendum on the Constitution, he put on his economist hat and considered the data's potential in a new light. We each had other projects in hand, but we agreed to finish the Referendum project as soon as we could clear our schedules. Clearing our schedules proved an

⁶ Ruth Wallis Herndon, "Governing the Affairs of the Town: Continuity and Change in Rhode Island, 1750-1800" (Ph.D. dissertation, American University, 1992); see chapter 5 (104-131).

impossible dream, especially after John moved to Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, in 2011. We continued to discuss the Rhode Island referendum via email and we talked about it face-to-face whenever our paths crossed. In this essay, I have brought together my original work and twenty years of relevant conversation with John; in so doing, I hope to create a posthumous gift from him to his scholarly disciplines.

II. Charles Beard and the Scholarly Debate

At the turn of the twentieth century, a group of historians challenged the prevailing nationalist interpretation of the Constitution, which held that the Founding Fathers were great patriots motivated by high moral principles and humanitarian concerns. The challengers, Progressive historians, argued instead that economic and class self-interest lay behind the Founding Fathers' desire to craft a stronger central government.⁷ The most influential of the Progressives was Charles Beard, author of *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution*. Beard examined the economic backgrounds and holdings of the framers and advocates of the Constitution and concluded that “the movement for the Constitution of the United States was originated and carried through principally by four groups of personalty interests which had been adversely affected under the Articles of Confederation: money, public securities, manufactures, and trade and shipping.”⁸ Beard further argued that ratification magnified this interest by showing a “line of cleavage . . . between substantial personalty interests on the one hand and the small farming and debtor interests on the other.”⁹ Personalty, as Beard indicates, referred to

⁷ Gerald N. Grob and George Athan Billias, eds., *Interpretations of American History: Patterns and Perspectives*, 4th ed., vol. 1, *To 1877* (New York: The Free Press, 1982), 150-54.

⁸ Charles Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935), 324.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 325.

movable forms of property, including slaves, money lent at interest, commercial stock, and especially (in Beard's argument) securities issued by the states and Congress in lieu of specie to those who had rendered war-time service or lent money to the Revolutionary government.¹⁰

Realty, on the other hand, referred to land.

Beard's work became a foil for many later historians. Some historians criticized Beard's data base and his use of it. In *Charles Beard and the Constitution*, Robert Brown combed through Beard's evidence and concluded that Beard had used "questionable figures in a manner open to criticism."¹¹ Brown argued that realty was a more significant motivating factor than personalty and that land ownership and the franchise were more widespread than Beard suggested. Brown concluded that the United States was a highly democratic country in the late eighteenth century, quite unlike the arena of class conflict that Beard had identified.¹²

Other historians criticized Beard's focus on economic motivation as too narrow. Forrest McDonald accepted Beard's challenge to historians to do the hard work of "filling in the details" of the economic interpretation.¹³ McDonald deliberately adopted Beard's assumptions and methods, collected data, and set out to see if the economic interpretation explained the massive amounts of economic data McDonald had organized concerning delegates to the Constitutional Convention and subsequent state ratifying conventions. McDonald reported that the economic interpretation did not work: "Beard's thesis—that the line of cleavage as regards the Constitution was between substantial personalty interests on the one hand and small farming and debtor

¹⁰ Ibid., 16-17.

¹¹ Robert E. Brown, *Charles Beard and the Constitution: A Critical Analysis of "An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 49.

¹² Ibid., 54.

¹³ Forrest McDonald, *We the People: The Economic Origins of the Constitution* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 16.

interests on the other—is entirely incompatible with the facts.”¹⁴ Beard had asked “invalid questions” and ignored the complex “interplay of conditioning or determining factors.”¹⁵

Beard had his defenders. Some historians supported the core of Beard’s interpretation by insisting that economic factors (and also social factors) are crucial in shaping history. In various ways, this refined and substantiated the original Progressive interpretation, attributing socio-economic motives to the Founding Fathers. Merrill Jensen depicted American society as “split into polarized groups through the [Federation] period.” The writing of the Constitution amounted to a “conservative counterrevolution” on the part of Federalists determined “to protect their political and commercial interests.”¹⁶

Other scholars favored a more complex intermingling of social, economic, and political factors. Jackson Turner Main, for example, argued that “there did exist an antagonism between small and large property holders” which resulted in “a division along lines of class.”¹⁷ But Main was careful to point out that politics contributed to the split between Federalist and Antifederalist. While Main acknowledged a critical division between merchant and farmer and between creditor and debtor, he also emphasizes the pressure of local geographical, military, and political concerns in shaping opinion on the Constitution within each state.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid., 355.

¹⁵ Ibid., 400-401.

¹⁶ Grob and Billias, 162.

¹⁷ Jackson Turner Main, *The Antifederalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781-1788* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1974; originally published by University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 261-62, 266.

¹⁸ Ibid., 274-81. See also Robert A. Rutland, *The Ordeal of the Constitution: The Antifederalists and the Ratification Struggle of 1787-1788* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966). Rutland picked up strands from both McDonald and Main. Even though the Federalist-Antifederalist split was not the focus of his book, Rutland nevertheless identified a distinction between the two groups: unlike the Federalists, the Antifederalists were associated with local government and the concerns of the people.

These were the main outlines of the scholarly discussion before John Murray read my dissertation chapter and turned my attention to the work of economic historians, familiar work in his discipline. In 1984, Robert McGuire and Robert Ohsfeldt published the first essay in what they called a “quantitative rehabilitation” of Beard’s interpretation, statistically analyzing the relationship between the voting behavior of delegates and “their economic and personal characteristics.”¹⁹ McGuire and Ohsfeldt considered both the delegates to the Philadelphia Convention and the delegates to the state ratifying conventions. They concluded that “the division of interests at the ratifying conventions generally was consistent with Beard’s view.”²⁰ In following essays, McGuire and Ohsfeldt expanded their database and their methodology, but maintained their argument that delegates’ economic interest influenced their vote on the Constitution.²¹ In their 1989 essay, they carefully pointed to specific kinds of economic holdings as key to favoring the Constitution: “delegates with merchant interests or delegates who owned western lands, large amounts of public securities, slaves, or who represented inland counties.”²² In their 2007 article, Jac Heckelman and Keith Dougherty neatly summarized McGuire’s and Ohsfeldt’s signal contribution: “they did not claim, as Beard had, that owning real estate or securities fully explained voting patterns. Rather, they showed that personal ideology, constituent ideology, and constituent economic interests were also important.”²³

¹⁹ Robert A. McGuire and Robert L. Ohsfeldt, “Economic Interests and the American Constitution: A Quantitative Rehabilitation of Charles A. Beard,” *The Journal of Economic History* 44:2 (1984): 509-19; quotations from p. 509.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 517.

²¹ Robert A. McGuire and Robert L. Ohsfeldt, “An Economic Model of Voting Behavior over Specific Issues at the Constitutional Convention of 1787,” *The Journal of Economic History* 46:1 (1986): 79-111.

²² Robert A. McGuire and Robert L. Ohsfeldt, “Self-Interest, Agency Theory, and Political Voting Behavior: The Ratification of the United States Constitution,” *The American Economic Review* 79:1 (1989): 219-34; quotation from p. 232.

²³ Jac C. Heckelman and Keith L. Dougherty, “An Economic Interpretation of the Constitutional

Heckelman and Dougherty themselves followed Beard's trail. They re-examined the data and subjected it to a statistical analysis that considered the Philadelphia Convention delegate votes in a "pooled cross-section." They concluded that "proxies for personal economic interests and personal ideology" were better predictors of voting behavior than "proxies for constituent economic interests and constituent ideology". In sum, they found that Beard's economic interpretation of delegates' voting behavior was more important than many have credited: it was more personally driven than constituent driven.²⁴ In a subsequent essay, Heckelman and Dougherty tried to infer delegate votes "on all substantive motions" during the Constitutional Convention.²⁵ This time, they gave limited support to Beard's economic interpretation. Beard, they pointed out, "claimed that delegates who owned personalty controlled the Convention and inserted clauses into the Constitution that favored their interests, often against the interests of those who owned land." Heckelman's and Dougherty's analysis, in contrast, "suggests that plantation owners were much more in control of the Convention than their landholding status might suggest." Delegates who "owned large plantations and represented constituents with interests in agriculture should have been considerably more influential than Beards thesis suggests."²⁶

Economic historians, then, had carried forward a lively discussion of Beard's economic interpretation while other historian-scholars debated a political interpretation that dominated in

Convention of 1787 Revisited," *The Journal of Economic History* 67:4 (2007): 829-48, quotation from p. 830. See also Jac C. Heckelman and Keith L. Dougherty, "A Spatial Analysis of Delegate Voting at the Constitutional Convention," *The Journal of Economic History* 73:2 (2013): 407-444.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 831, 846-47.

²⁵ Jac C. Heckelman and Keith L. Dougherty, "A Spatial Analysis of Delegate Voting at the Constitutional Convention," *The Journal of Economic History* 73:2 (2013): 407-444; quotation from p 438.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 437-38.

the traditional historical journals.²⁷ In a special 1987 Forum on the Constitution in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, Jackson Turner Main observed that economic analyses of Constitutional formation had been eclipsed by political explanations. “This may change,” he wrote in his first footnote, citing McGuire’s and Ohsfeldt’s 1984 essay.²⁸ Had he lived to see it, Main would have been gratified by Robert McGuire’s 2003 book, *To Form a More Perfect Union*, which offered historians of all stripes a thorough discussion of an economic analysis of the Constitution.²⁹ This book particularly impressed John Murray as a work of *history*. McGuire examined primary documents, analyzed and interpreted them, and told a story that explained what he found. He dedicated a 15-page appendix to a description of his sources. McGuire built a clear road from the sources to the statistical analysis and then to the written interpretation. His book was not economics with old data, and not a pre-determined exercise in ideological reassurance, but history as it should be done, carefully and in a scholarly fashion. McGuire’s work demonstrated powerfully that the scholarly conversation on Charles Beard had not stopped with Forrest McDonald’s books.

This ongoing conversation on Beard could profit from the Rhode Island town voter data, which gives scholars information beyond the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia and beyond the state ratifying conventions. The Philadelphia material has been well worked, and the state convention data has been the subject of valuable studies. Van Beck Hall, for example, examined the votes cast by town representatives at the Massachusetts ratifying convention; he

²⁷ This paragraph is based on John Murray’s comments on *To Form A More Perfect Union* by Robert A. McGuire, delivered at the Social Science History Association Conference in Chicago in November 2004.

²⁸ Jackson Turner Main, “An Agenda for Research on the Origins and Nature of the Constitution of 1787-1788,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 44:3 (1987): 591-96; quotation from p. 593.

²⁹ Robert A. McGuire, *To Form a More Perfect Union: A New Economic Interpretation of the United States Constitution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

divided the towns into three categories, roughly equal in population.³⁰ Hall discovered that the most commercial-cosmopolitan towns, which ran Massachusetts' commercial life, elected representatives who strongly favored the Constitution (82 percent of these towns voted for ratification). The least commercial-cosmopolitan towns elected representatives who strongly opposed the Constitution (29 percent of these towns voted for ratification). The middling towns split on the issue (51 percent voted for ratification).³¹ This correlation between commercial wealth and Federalist support is, in broad strokes, compatible with Beard's interpretation. But while Hall's method accounts for the majority decisions within each town, it does not take into consideration possible strong minorities within the towns. Heated debate over ratification might well have split communities, leaving only a small margin of victory for the majority. The ordinary voter who did not attend a ratifying convention remains out of sight.

Rhode Island's unique voter lists enable us to go directly to the town meetings and focus on individual town voters. Correlating these voting lists with individual economic data allows a closer examination of economic motivation behind the Federalist-Antifederalist split in Rhode Island. In Exeter, Hopkinton, Jamestown, Little Compton, Middletown, Portsmouth, and Tiverton, we can see the greater wealth held by pro-ratification voters. The Tiverton data in particular shows a polarization between large and small holders of personal estates, bolstering Beard's economic interpretation of the Constitution.

III. Political and Economic Context of the Rhode Island Referendum

³⁰ Van Beck Hall, *Politics Without Parties: Massachusetts, 1780-1791* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972).

³¹ *Ibid.*, 286-92.

The call for a popular referendum on the Constitution was logical and unsurprising in Rhode Island. A highly charged political atmosphere permeated the state in the late 1770s and 1780s. Local issues of tax collection and paper money emissions dominated elections when the new Constitution arrived for inspection. Rhode Island was long accustomed to considerable political freedom and self-government under a generous colonial charter. Freemen often participated in political disputes that resulted in a rapid turnover among elected officials and earned the state a reputation for factionalism well before the Revolution.³² This state of politics evidenced itself in independent, non-conformist behavior during the Confederation Period.

The town meeting formed a key element of Rhode Island's political structure. Although the General Assembly provided the arena for thrashing out differences between communities within the state, the towns ultimately provided both the cause and the resolution of conflicts within the legislature. Town meetings regularly gave detailed and confining instructions to their elected deputies to the General Assembly; in turn, the General Assembly frequently required the towns to validate the Assembly's actions by referendum.³³

In this way, the town meeting gave substantial authority to the individual voter who chose to interest himself in politics. Further, Rhode Island had minimal property requirements for the franchise. Property ownership was widespread, and historians estimate that 75 percent of Rhode Island's adult males were eligible to vote in mid-eighteenth century.³⁴ This figure probably increased in the Confederation period, when emissions of paper money made property

³² David S. Lovejoy, *Rhode Island Politics and the American Revolution, 1760-1776* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1958), 29-30 and passim.

³³ Irving Polishook, *Rhode Island and the Union, 1774-1795* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), 32-35.

³⁴ Lovejoy, 16; Joel Cohen, "Rhode Island and the American Revolution" (Ph.D. diss., University of Connecticut, 1968), 5.

requirements even easier to meet.³⁵ The combination of a wide franchise and strong town authority in state-wide matters made Rhode Island “uniquely susceptible to popular control.”³⁶ The history of Rhode Island during the Confederation Period, therefore, is one of strong factionalism over state and national matters, divisions that were thrashed out in town meetings as well as in the state legislature.

More than most states, Rhode Island had suffered economically and socially from the upheavals of the Revolutionary War. British occupation severely damaged Newport and sent it into a commercial decline from which it never fully recovered. British soldiers burned and pillaged many of the exposed towns along Narragansett Bay. British soldiers, French soldiers, and the American militia each in turn occupied portions of Aquidneck Island, site of Newport, Middletown, and Portsmouth. Even those citizens who lived in inland towns and farms suffered economic distress during the war. Threatened by British troops and suffering from internal upheavals, the state legislature unanimously ratified the Articles of Confederation in 1778, eager to be connected to the other states in time of trouble.³⁷

Without the pressing exigencies of the war, however, Rhode Island’s passion for connection soon passed. The state’s internal economic and political needs drew it increasingly away from national concerns. The General Assembly unanimously vetoed the proposed Impost of 1781, designed to strengthen the fiscal power of Congress by giving it an independent income through a tax on imported goods. The Impost of 1783 received the same treatment. Having

³⁵ Polishook, *Union*, 29-30.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁷ This and the following paragraphs in this section are drawn largely from Herndon, “Governing the Affairs of the Town,” 104-31.

recently shaken off British customs laws, Rhode Islanders rejected any similar attempts by the Confederation to restrict their vital commercial interests.

Not only individual citizens had suffered financially as a result of the war; Rhode Island itself was heavily in debt. From 1784 to 1786, post-war economic depression plagued the state, evidenced primarily by the disappearance of hard money to out-of-state and European creditors. Financially distressed Rhode Islanders tended to blame merchants for the hard times, creating a gap of resentment. Indebted farmers called out for issuance of paper money, which would enable the state government to make loans to individuals who needed a way to pay their creditors. Merchants and creditors strongly resisted the printing of new money as inflationary and an attack on the value of their rightful property. The two largest commercial centers in the state, Newport and Providence, became strongholds of opposition to the proposed paper money issue. But these two towns were in the distinct minority, an indication of the widespread distress in Rhode Island.³⁸

The struggles between debtor and creditor interests rapidly assumed political forms. Paper money advocates swept the annual election of 1786; freemen, eager for economic relief, voted out the mercantile coalition that had controlled the state legislature in the preceding years. The new legislators, forming a Country party, had pledged to support paper money, and they were as good as their word. In 1786, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed paper money

³⁸ On Rhode Island's paper money crisis, see Polishook, *Union*; John Paul Kaminski, "Paper Politics: The Northern State Loan-Offices During the Confederation, 1783-1790" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 1972); Roger H. Brown, *Redeeming the Republic: Federalists, Taxation, and the Origins of the Constitution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 83-96; Jackson Turner Main, *The Antifederalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781-1788* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961); and Patrick T. Conley, *Democracy in Decline: Rhode Island's Constitutional Development, 1776-1841* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1977).

legislation designed to reduce personal debt and remove the state debt by the end of 1789. The laws had teeth: they included heavy penalties for any creditors who refused to accept the paper money as legal tender.

Despite the legal strictures, many merchants refused to accept paper money, regarding it as unfair, a cheater's way of settling debts. When faced with legal action, some merchants refused to open their stores and sent their goods to warehouses and safe places far away from angry customers. Farmers retaliated by withholding their produce from market centers. Meanwhile, the General Assembly continued to enact legislation based on paper money. The result was a virtual polarization in the populace: the largest merchants drew into one camp; the majority of the farmers into the other. This was the hostile political environment entered by the new Constitution.

Before the Constitutional Convention of 1787, some political observers had viewed Rhode Island's factionalism as proof of the need for a strong federal government to check the excessive democracy of the states. The dispute over paper money strengthened this opinion. Angry merchant creditors did nothing to disabuse outsiders of the distorted notion that Rhode Island was on the brink of chaos and anarchy, while the interests of the minority (that is, the merchants) went unheeded. The state legislature made matters worse by trying to use its suspect paper money to meet Rhode Island's share of Congressional requisitions and to pay debts to out-of-state creditors. Rhode Island served as the perfect foil for Federalists looking for tangible proof of the need for an energetic central government to curb the factionalism of wayward states.³⁹

³⁹ Polishook, *Union*, 165-78.

Suggestions for strengthening the federal government fell on deaf ears in the Rhode Island state house. The General Assembly, jealous of its ability to control its own destiny and elected because of its support of paper money emission, feared that the federal government would interfere with the state's efforts to settle its internal debt by issuing paper money. The alienated merchants, however, gladly received the proposed Constitution. They saw the proposed Federal Constitution as a godsend, believing it would put a halt to the paper money policy of the Country party.⁴⁰ In this way, the issues of creation and ratification of the Constitution matched the political divisions already present in Rhode Island.

The General Assembly had refused to send delegates to the Constitutional Convention in May of 1787, protesting that any constitutional changes should be made in accordance with the Articles of Confederation, which did not authorize a separate convention. The state legislature further declared that it could not appoint delegates for a convention which was "for the express purpose of altering a Constitution, which the people at large are only capable of appointing the Members."⁴¹ A few other reluctant states sent their delegates with strict instructions only to revise the Articles of Confederation; but Rhode Island alone was unrepresented at the Constitutional Convention.

When the proposed Constitution arrived in Providence in October 1787, it was received without enthusiasm. As part of their proceedings on the last Monday in October, the General Assembly voted that copies of the proposed Constitution be printed and distributed to the towns in order that "the freemen may have an opportunity of forming their sentiments of the proposed

⁴⁰ Ibid, 171.

⁴¹ Merrill Jensen, ed., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, vol. 1, *Constitutional Documents and Records, 1776-1787* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1976), 226.

constitution.”⁴² The official record shows no mention of a ratifying convention, which Congress had specified when it sent the Constitution on to the states.

Arriving in the midst of the paper-money controversy, the Federal Constitution immediately provided a new focus for old antagonisms. The debate over ratification was heated and vituperative. Some who wanted the Constitution questioned the moral character of those who did not; and some who rejected the Constitution attacked the motives of their opponents. Some merchants thought that debtors rejected a stronger federal government because it would prevent them from solving their financial problems through paper money. Some struggling farmers feared that new Constitution would establish “iron government,” ignoring their local concerns and destroying liberty.⁴³

Between these two extremes stood Rhode Islanders who were neither totally enamored of nor totally hostile to the Constitution. One such person was Ezra Stiles, pastor of the Second Congregational Church in Newport. On 24 December 1787, Stiles noted in his diary:

I have formed this as my Opinion. 1. That it is not the most pfect Constitution yet 2. That it is a very good one, & that it is advisable to adopt it. However 3. That tho’ much of it will be pmanent & lasting, yet much of it will be hereafter altered by future Revisions. And 4. That the best one remains yet to be investigated.⁴⁴

Those who felt strongly that the Constitution was necessary, the Federalists, were concentrated in Newport and Providence, where they used the press as a means of conveying their enthusiasm for ratification and their sarcasm against those who resisted. They also had a

⁴² Bartlett, ed., *Rhode Island Records*, 10:265.

⁴³ Polishook, *Union*, 192; Brown, *Redeeming the Republic*, 204-05.

⁴⁴ *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, ed. Franklin B. Dexter (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1901), 3:296.

persistent, if minority, voice in the state legislature, where they repeatedly called for a ratifying convention.

In the February 1788 session, the General Assembly ignored Federalists demands for a ratifying convention and instead voted to call a popular referendum to decide the issue. The Federalists were outraged, claiming that the towns were controlled by “town bosses.”⁴⁵ The Antifederalist majority in the Assembly was unmoved, perhaps sensitive to the charges of bullying and manipulation in the Pennsylvania ratifying convention that had appeared on the front pages of Rhode Island newspapers.⁴⁶ The General Assembly issued an order for the referendum; and on 24 March 1788, every town in Rhode Island held a town meeting for the express purpose of hearing the voice of the freemen on the issue of ratification. The results of these votes (Table 1) were submitted to the general assembly at their session on the last Monday in March 1788.

Federalists boycotted the balloting, a measure that was particularly effective in Newport and Providence (see Table 1). John Kaminski has argued that the boycott was meant to conceal the Federalists’ weakness and has asserted that even if all the Federalists in Providence and Newport had voted, they still would have received “fewer than half the total votes of the Antifederalists.”⁴⁷ Kaminski has suggested that the Antifederalists also stayed away from the referendum in Newport and Providence, fearing social and economic repercussions.⁴⁸

Twenty-eight towns showed an Antifederalist majority, with seven towns achieving unanimous rejection of ratification. The overall strength of Antifederalist sentiment elsewhere

⁴⁵ Kaminski, “Paper Politics,” 226-27.

⁴⁶ *United States Chronicle* (Providence), 25 October 1787 and 1 November 1787.

⁴⁷ Kaminski, “Paper Politics,” 227.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 228.

highlights the Federalist victories in Little Compton and Bristol. Whatever boycott the Federalists organized did not appear to affect these two towns. Little Compton displayed Federalist sentiment even before the referendum was called. On 1 January 1788 the town's freemen instructed their deputies to try to persuade the General Assembly to call a ratifying convention as soon as possible. The majority of the townspeople considered the new Constitution "a Plan of Government Well Adapted to the Present Critical Situation of our National Affairs" and they believed it would meet "the Extreme Need We Stand in of a Well Organized Energetic National Government."⁴⁹ Despite overwhelming anti-ratification opinion in most of the state, then, there were pockets of Federalist sympathy outside the expected strongholds of Newport and Providence.

After the stunning Federalist defeat in the referendum, the state legislature accordingly vetoed the proposed Constitution. Federalists considered the referendum a fraudulent measure, since the Constitution itself stipulated ratification by a convention, and they continued to agitate for such a gathering. But an Antifederalist majority in the General Assembly blocked every attempt by Federalists to call a ratifying convention until 1790, after the state had paid off its debt, thus illustrating the tight link between the paper money issue and the Constitution. On 25 June 1788, Rev. Ezra Stiles recorded in his diary the news that New Hampshire had ratified the Constitution (the ninth state to do so) and speculated about the coming decisions of New York, Virginia, and North Carolina. He remained pessimistic about his own state, however, when he added: "Rh. Isld will come to her Senses again after recover^s from the Frenzy of Paper Money."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Town Meeting, 1 January 1788, *Little Compton Town Meeting Records 2: 1759-1865* (Little Compton Town Clerk's Office), 67.

⁵⁰ Stiles, 3:320.

Rhode Island did “come to her Senses” in 1790. In January of that year, the General Assembly finally capitulated and called for a ratifying convention to meet on 1 March. The March meeting was adjourned until 24 May without bringing the issue to a vote, however. And by May, the town of Providence had seceded from the state and refused to rejoin it unless the Constitution was ratified. This threat weakened Antifederalist sentiment enough to allow ratification to proceed. On 29 May 1790, Rhode Island adopted the Constitution in the closest vote of the thirteen states: 34 to 32.⁵¹

The Federalists did not have a clear victory. In his study of the distribution of the vote on ratification, Charles W. Roll, Jr., reports that the delegates voting for the Constitution represented only 44.1 percent of the population, whereas the delegates voting against represented 51.4 percent.⁵² Further, the ratification of the Constitution may have hinged on one man: delegate William Peckham, Jr., of Middletown. Peckham, who voted against ratification in the town referendum (Appendix 1, p. 25, case 39), resigned as convention delegate and was replaced by Mr. Elisha Barker, who had voted for ratification in the referendum (Appendix 1, p. 23, case 1). This substitution of delegates was the last official act in the convention before the official vote was taken. Barker, voting for the Constitution, enabled the question to pass by a margin of two votes; had Peckham been present and continued to resist ratification, the vote would have been a tie.⁵³

⁵¹ William R. Staples, *Rhode Island in the Continental Congress with the Journal of the Convention that Adopted the Constitution*, ed. by Reuben Aldridge Guild (Providence: Providence Press Company, 1870), 681.

⁵² Charles W. Roll, Jr., “We, Some of the People: Apportionment in the Thirteen State Conventions Ratifying the Constitution,” *Journal of American History* 56:1 (1969): 21-40; see especially p. 26.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 33, n. 22; Staples, 672-73.

IV. Economic Analysis of the Rhode Island Referendum

Rhode Island's Antifederalists were largely pro-paper-money people; and pro-paper-money people were generally rural farmers. Thus we should be able to make a tidy chart with rural farmers on one side and coastal merchants on the other. But the referendum vote was far more ambiguous than such a chart would indicate.

Jackson Turner Main explains the two Federalist victories in Little Compton and Bristol as a function of the strong mercantile interests in those two coastal towns. He also suggests that the unanimous Antifederalist victories in the inland towns reflect an absence of mercantile interests in those areas. “The significant difference in Rhode Island was that of the coast versus the interior.”⁵⁴ This assertion leaves important questions unanswered. Why did Portsmouth have more Antifederalists than Bristol? Both are port towns on Narragansett Bay. Why did Hopkinton, a rural farm community, show a stronger Federalist interest than South Kingston, another land-locked area to the east? Strongholds of coastal merchant interest produced Antifederalists. Strongholds of rural farm interest produced Federalists. The “town” variable may have masked another, more important variable that determined how a man voted.

To probe more deeply at the connection between town wealth and pro-ratification sentiment, I ranked the towns (except Newport and Providence) according to strength of pro-ratification sentiment in their total vote; I also ranked the towns according to mean household wealth in land and houses. A rank-order test performed on this data resulted in an r_s of .019, clearly indicating that there was no relationship between wealth of the town and pro-ratification voting strength. (See Appendix 2, pp. 72-74.)⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Main, *Antifederalists*, 213.

⁵⁵ For a full discussion of the multiple regression analysis performed on the town-level data, see Herndon, “Governing the Affairs of the Town,” Appendix G, pp. 415-19.

Another town-based approach was to look at the town leaders in relation to the town voters. Did the town fathers show the same opinion about ratification as the ordinary freemen? Or did the position of authority separate the leaders from others? Using those town officers holding what Edward M. Cook calls “major offices” (clerk, councilman, sergeant, and treasurer),⁵⁶ I compiled statistics for each town and measured the strength of pro-ratification vote by the town leaders against the pro-ratification vote by all voters. Town leaders, it appears, were significantly more pro-ratification than other voters (Table 4). I also tested for a significant difference of wealth between town leaders and other voters, looking for a connection between greater wealth among town leaders and greater pro-ratification sentiment. In line with Edward Cook’s assertion that wealth was not the primary qualification for town leaders in eighteenth-century New England,⁵⁷ the computations show that there was a significant difference of wealth between town leaders and voters in only three of the six towns: Exeter, Middletown, and Tiverton (Table 4).

This greater wealth did not neatly correlate to vote on ratification, however. Exeter’s town leaders, significantly wealthier than the voters, showed no pro-ratification strength at all: they registered a unanimous rejection of the Constitution (Table 4). Similarly, Tiverton’s town leaders, significantly wealthier than the voters, showed less pro-ratification strength than the voters (Table 4). Middletown is the only town which shows a positive correlation between both greater wealth and stronger pro-ratification vote. But Middletown’s statistics are themselves suspect: half the town leaders did not vote, and the resulting computations are based on a small sample size of five (Table 4, Note 1).

⁵⁶ Edward M. Cook, Jr., *The Fathers of the Towns: Leadership and Community Structure in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 1-2.

⁵⁷ Cook, *Fathers of the Towns*, 80-85.

The statistics on town leaders indicate that the freemen did not always second the opinions of their elected officials. This is particularly evident in Little Compton, where the town leaders showed remarkable solidarity of pro-ratification sentiment not reflected in the other voters. If Little Compton is representative, then the voters were motivated by something stronger than respect for and deference to the opinions of their leaders. If Charles Beard and Jackson Turner Main are right, the motivation was in their pocketbooks.

V. Further Opportunities for Analysis of the Referendum

How might this Rhode Island data contribute further to the conversation about Beard's economic interpretation of the Constitution? How might it initiate and foster scholarly dialogue between economists and historians about the validity of Beard's theory? Such conversations would be in keeping with John Murray's vision of interdisciplinary collaboration.

The Federalist boycott in Newport and Providence presents important lines of further research. Did this boycott suppress voter turnout elsewhere? If the missing votes from these two towns are accounted for, the voter turnout for the referendum, 27.4 percent (see Table 1), is similar to the turnout for state elections held in the same time period.⁵⁸ Still, voters might have been more inclined to turn out for a constitutional matter. Just as critical is the question of who was willing to vote in the face of the Federalist boycott. Perhaps only those Federalists who felt very secure in their community standing dared to vote, while poorer Federalists feared social or economic penalties. If so, then the pro-ratification vote is biased towards the wealthier voters. The correlation between wealth and "yea" vote holds even in Little Compton, where Federalists

⁵⁸ Herndon, "Governing the Affairs of the Town," 440-41.

won a narrow victory; but the wealth gap is the narrowest there, thus supporting a hypothesis that only the wealthy were likely to voice their opposition.

Family or clan voting would provide another fruitful avenue of research. The voter lists show clusters of people who shared the same last name and the vital records indicate how marriage linked families that bore different surnames. How were the Rhode Island voters connected to each other by kinship ties? Does the correlation between wealth and vote hold when extended into family groupings?

John Murray had identified slave ownership in particular as an important trail to follow. Charles Beard had posited that Southern slaveholders constituted a particular interest group that might have opposed the Constitution, fearing that a union would impose “commercial regulations devised immediately in behalf of northern interests.” However, Beard argued, these Southern slaveholders owned personal estate other than slaves, and these other economic interests “cut through state boundaries.”⁵⁹ It would be useful, then, to discover the relationship between slave ownership and opinion on the Constitution in Rhode Island, a state with “the largest concentration of blacks in New England.”⁶⁰ In 1750, enslaved people made up 10 percent of the Rhode Island’s total population, a figure which dropped to 6 percent in 1770, as the “white population doubled, primarily as a result of immigration.”⁶¹ In 1783, 21 percent of Rhode Island’s “Mulattoes” and “Blacks” lived in one seaport – Newport – and almost 17 percent of the population of agrarian (quasi-plantation) South Kingstown were either “Mulattoes” or “Blacks”;

⁵⁹ Beard, 29-30.

⁶⁰ Christy Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 25.

⁶¹ Clark-Pujara, 24-25; see also John J. McCusker, “Population of Rhode Island,” in *Historical Statistics of the United States: Earliest Times to the Present*, eds. Susan B. Carter et al (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Table Eg 132-140.

one scholar has argued that Narragansett Country (South Kingstown and its bordering townships) was a “slave society within a society with slaves.”⁶² Anti-slavery (predominantly Quaker) and slaveholder interests waged a protracted battle in the Rhode Island legislature from 1775 onward until they finally compromised on gradual abolition legislation in 1784.⁶³ Under this statute, children born of slave mothers after March 1, 1784, would be free on their eighteenth (girls) or twenty-first (boys) birthdays; meanwhile, they were raised as servants to their mothers’ masters. The social, economic, and political interests of Rhode Island slaveholders would likely surface in their debates over the Constitution in 1787-90.

In their 1984 study, McGuire and Ohsfeldt looked specifically at slaveholding as a factor and discovered that “delegates with a large share of their assets in the form of slaves were significantly less likely to vote for the Constitution than were those with no slaves.”⁶⁴ In fact, slaveholders were the one possible exception to their general conclusion that Beard was right about the “division of interests” at the ratifying conventions, since slaveowners generally opposed the Constitution.⁶⁵ In contrast, Heckelman and Dougherty, in their 2013 study, found that “owning slaves tends to move a delegate in a pro-national direction (i.e., to the right).”⁶⁶ Given this diversity of conclusions, it would be highly useful to include the Rhode Island referendum voters in any consideration of the correlation between slaveownership and sentiment towards the Constitution.

⁶² Population figures extrapolated from Evarts B. Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, *American Population before the Federal Census of 1790* (Gloucester, Mass: Peter Smith, 1966), 69; “slave society” quotation from Clark-Pujara, 25.

⁶³ Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 107, 120-22.

⁶⁴ McGuire and Ohsfeldt, 516.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 517.

⁶⁶ Heckelman and Dougherty, “Spatial Analysis of Delegate Voting,” 426.

John Murray had begun identifying slaveholders among Rhode Islanders who voted on the 1788 referendum. Likely sources of information were the first federal census of 1790 and local data in the form of probate records, since estate inventories usually listed slaves. Very likely, Murray would have worked economic history magic with existing and new-found data, subjected it to more sophisticated statistical analysis, and rendered it highly significant for the ongoing discussion of an economic interpretation of the Constitution. My hope now is that enterprising historian-scholars who love both data and the archives will carry on the story of Rhode Island's referendum, listening for the questions that ordinary voters were asking about the form of government proposed in the Constitution, and analyzing their votes on ratification with sensitivity to context. What was town clerk Walter Cook telling us about his community when he voted against ratification in Tiverton in 1788? What was town clerk Abraham Anthony telling us about his community when he abstained from the voting in Portsmouth on the same day? How did they interpret the new Constitution?

Table 1. 1788 Ratification Referendum Vote and Voter Turnout in Rhode Island, by Towns⁶⁷

Town	Yea Votes	Nay Votes	Total Votes	Percent of Eligible Voters ⁶⁸
Barrington	9	34	43	34.1
Bristol	26	23	49	20.0
Charlestown	6	51	57	21.5
Coventry	0	180	180	37.1
Cranston	0	101	101	28.9
Cumberland	10	113	123	32.8
East Greenwich	2	91	93	27.9
Exeter	6	136 (142)	142 (148)	31.8
Foster	0	177	177	45.0
Glocester	9 (10)	228 (227)	237	32.1
Hopkinton	33	95	128	32.3
Jamestown	5	11	16	21.1
Johnston	1	79	80	32.4
Little Compton	63	57	120	42.4
Middletown	6	40	46	27.5
Newport	1	10	11	1.0
New Shoreham	0	32	32	26.0
North Kingstown	2	160	162	35.0
North Providence	0	48	48	24.4
Portsmouth	12	60	72	23.3
Providence	0	1	1	0.1
Richmond	1	68	69	25.4
Scituate	0	156	156	36.6
Smithfield	2	158	160	26.7
South Kingstown	1	125	126	21.0
Tiverton	23	92	115	26.6
Warren	2	41	43	20.0
Warwick	3	140	143	32.6
Westerly	12	56	68	19.1
West Greenwich	2	145	147	37.1
TOTALS	237 (238)	2708 (2713)	2945 (2951)	27.4

⁶⁷ Yea and Nay votes and totals were extrapolated from the manuscript voting lists in “Papers Relating to the Adoption of the Constitution of the United States,” Rhode Island State Archives, and from original manuscripts in the various town clerks’ offices. Vote totals are from Bartlett in *Rhode Island Records*, 10:275, amended in parentheses. The results for Exeter and Glocester were apparently miscopied into the official record. These totals differ slightly from Kaminski et al, *Ratification of the Constitution: Rhode Island*, 25:421 (238 for and 2714 against).

⁶⁸ Figures for eligible voters from Robert J. Dinkin, *Voting in Revolutionary America: A Study of Elections in the Original Thirteen States, 1776-1789* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982), 113.

Table 2. Means of Voters' Tax and Estate Values, by Town

Town	Valuation	Mean of Yea Voters	Mean of Nay Voters	Statistically Significant?
Exeter	1787 Tax	84.00s	54.29s	YES
Hopkinton	1787 Tax	£2.89	£1.27	YES
Hopkinton	1788 Tax	£5.90	£2.84	YES
Jamestown	1787 Estate	£624.80	£370.45	NO
Jamestown	1788 Tax #3	146.60s	74.73s	NO
Little Compton	1798 Tax	\$2.44	\$1.88	YES
Middletown	1783 Tax	69.00s	40.64s	NO
Middletown	1783 Estate	£1977.00	£801.63	NO
Portsmouth	1783 Estate	£1405.33	£406.87	YES
Portsmouth	1798 Tax	\$3.51	\$1.87	YES
Tiverton	1784 Tax	79.19s	41.68s	YES
Tiverton	1788 Tax	129.13s	48.95s	YES

Sources of Data: Hopkinton and Jamestown tax and estate valuation records are at the respective town clerks' offices; Little Compton, Middletown, and Portsmouth tax and estate valuation records are at the Rhode Island State Archives; Exeter and Tiverton tax records are at the Rhode Island Historical Society Library. _____

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Table 3. Personal and Real Estate Means, Tiverton

Statistic	"Yea" Voters	"Nay" Voters	All Taxpayers
1788 Personal Estate Tax Mean	9.61s	1.62s	4.13s
1788 Real Estate Tax Mean	113.96s	41.72s	39.11s

Table 4. Pro-Ratification Vote and Wealth, Voters and Town Leaders

Town	Town Voters: Pro-Ratification on Vote	Town Leaders: Pro-Ratification Vote	Town Voters: Mean Wealth	Town Leaders who Voted: Mean Wealth	Means Test T-score	Statistically Significant?
Exeter	4.05%	0.00%	55.54s	69.13s	-3.8698	YES
Jamestown	31.25%	33.33%	97.19s	72.00s	.9827	NO
Little Compton	52.50%	85.71%	\$2.20	\$2.25	-.2380	NO
Middletown	13.04%	60.00%	44.10s	61.40s	-1.7191	YES
Portsmouth	16.67%	20.00%	£573.28	£611.75	-.4163	NO
Tiverton	20.00%	16.67%	65.72s	85.00s	-2.0895	YES

Note 1: The number of town leaders who voted varied from town to town:

- 8 out of 9 voted in Exeter; 0 voted to ratify
- 3 out of 7 voted in Jamestown; 1 voted to ratify
- 7 out of 9 voted in Little Compton; 6 voted to ratify
- 5 out of 9 voted in Middletown; 3 voted to ratify
- 5 out of 9 voted in Portsmouth; 1 voted to ratify
- 6 out of 9 voted in Tiverton; 1 voted to ratify

Note 2: The sources of wealth data are as follows: Exeter 1787 tax; Jamestown 1788 tax; Little Compton 1798 tax; Middletown 1783 tax; Portsmouth 1783 estate valuation; Tiverton 1788 tax.