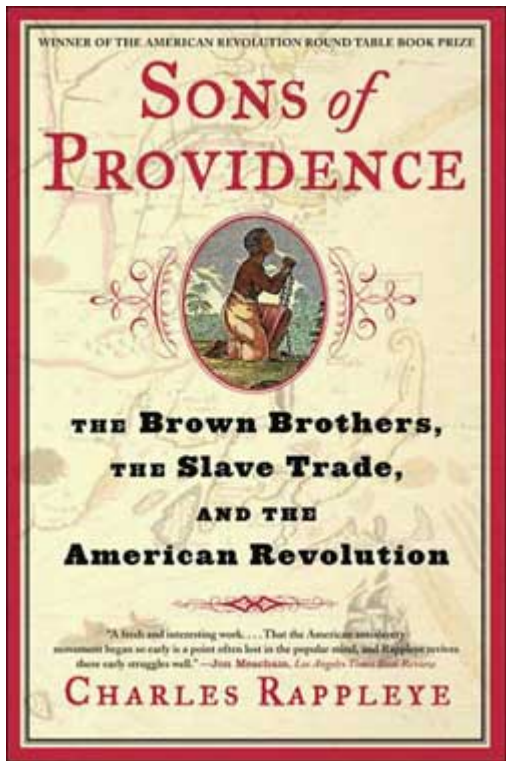


Sibling Rivalry in Early America



✘ Charles Rappleye, *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, The Slave Trade, and The American Revolution*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006. 416 pp., hardcover, \$27.00.

On September 6, 1836, Moses Brown, the famed Quaker convert, devout abolitionist, civic reformer, and member of one of Rhode Island's leading families, died at his estate on the east side of Providence at the age of ninety-seven. Son of merchant James Brown, Moses, along with his brothers Nicholas, Joseph, and John, was a fifth-generation Rhode Islander. Indeed, the history of the Brown family is inherently connected to the history of the city of Providence and, concomitantly, to the story of Rhode Island's participation in the international slave trade. It was this latter portion of the Brown family legacy that haunted Moses and fundamentally altered his political, social, and religious outlook.

James Brown's sloop *Mary*, which set sail for Africa in 1736, made the first slave voyage from Providence. Between 1725 and 1807, Rhode Island slave merchants accounted for nearly 60 percent of all slave-trading voyages to Africa. While the Brown family's participation in the notorious trade was relatively minor in comparison with other families in the North, it nevertheless created a profound legacy, which journalist Charles Rappleye grapples with in his new book *Sons of Providence*.

The disastrous 1764-1765 voyage of the *Sally* started Moses Brown on a decade-

long spiritual and moral transformation (74). Captain Esek Hopkins's log reports 109 of the 196 slaves purchased in Africa died from sickness or suicide or were shot during an onboard rebellion. Shortly after the death of his beloved wife Anna in 1773, Moses manumitted his slaves and joined the Society of Friends. Rappleye's aim is simple: to tell the story of how two prominent Americans, Moses and John Brown, reconciled the persistence of American slavery with the ideals sanctioned by the Revolution.

Rappleye's work is an engaging narrative that places two prominent and influential Rhode Islanders in the broader context of early American history. Across sixteen tightly written chapters, we follow, among other things, the rise of Providence as a major mercantile port, the role of Moses and John in the Revolution, the critical decade of the 1780s and the politics of the early republic. Rappleye is the first writer to fully detail the life of John Brown. "John's story," as Rappleye notes in the introduction, "has never been told—in part, perhaps, because so much of it," such as his war profiteering and his fervent defense of slavery, which rivaled any late antebellum Southern apologist, "smacked of the unsavory" (3).

Rappleye's mining of the Moses Brown papers at the Rhode Island Historical Society and the vast Brown Family Collection at the John Carter Brown Library is impressive. But with the good sense and keen judgment that he is well known for in journalistic circles, Rappleye moves beyond a mere chronicling of major events in the lives of his subjects to a penetrating exploration of the Brown brothers' vituperative debate over the nature of American slavery.

By focusing on this debate, Rappleye succeeds in making the story of Moses and John Brown more intelligible in human terms than it has often appeared in other scholarly discussions. As historian John Wood Sweet notes in his insightful book, *Bodies Politic*, the rivalry was a microcosm of the moral and political battle over slavery that was raging in Rhode Island and most of the North after the Revolution. Rappleye argues that no "other abolitionist had to face the reality of the slave trade so close to the center of his identity; no other slave trader had to fend off so persistent and so intimate a challenge to his prerogative" (345).

The contradiction between what Moses eventually saw as the moral clarity of the case against slavery and slavery's relentless persistence was clear evidence that the revolutionary rhetoric employed against Great Britain now needed to be directed against the peculiar institution. In 1784 Moses and the Providence Abolition Society secured passage of a manumission statute. This was a significant achievement because the economies of Newport and Washington counties depended heavily on slave labor—more heavily than even parts of Maryland and Virginia. In 1787 Moses achieved an "unmitigated triumph," according to Rappleye, when Rhode Island became the first state to prohibit residents from participating in the slave trade (248). While other states had banned slave imports, Rhode Island went a significant step further by restricting the activity of citizens who sought to profit from the trafficking

of human cargo beyond the state's borders.

Despite its many strengths, I found *Sons of Providence* unsatisfying in certain areas. Rappleye's use of the sibling rivalry narrative framework limits his ability to cover the larger context of the Brown brothers' differences. For example, what was the meaning of the Revolution for African Americans and whites in Rhode Island in terms of their understanding of race and citizenship? How fully do the Brown brothers' differences reflect the broader tensions over slavery and revolutionary principles?

Historian Woody Holton presents a much more sophisticated argument than Rappleye in regards to the nature of Rhode Island politics in the 1780s and the heated debate over paper money. In his new book, *Unruly Americans and the Origins of the Constitution*, Holton recognizes that John and Nicholas Brown stood to make "enormous profit" from Congress's 1785 requisition (80). Holton points out that "hardly anyone," including Rappleye, "remembered that the currency emission" issued by the Rhode Island legislature in May 1786 "had primarily been not a life-line thrown to debtors but a direct response to the congressional requisition of September 1785" (81).

Finally, it is clear that Moses understood the conflict between slavery and the capitalist world view, as did other Quakers such as John Woolman, but Moses, as Rappleye notes, never addressed the use of Southern cotton in his factories (290). In the pages of the *Providence Gazette and Country Journal* from February 1789, John fully recognized his brother's contradictory stance. John told Moses that as a "receiver" of the benefits of slavery, he was "as bad as the thief, and the receiver" was, in John's mind, no different from the "kidnapper" (266). Rappleye might have cast his net wider here, noting how Moses's position squared with that of his Quaker brethren or with that of supporters of the "free produce" movement. Perhaps his antislavery posture was not quite so representative. Furthermore, while Rappleye does provide some evidence for his claim that Moses "saw blacks not just as pitiable objects for philanthropy but as equal to whites in every human capacity," I wanted to see more than just two pages in support of this notion (340-41). As historian William M. Wiecek has noted, abolitionists Lewis Tappan and William Lloyd Garrison both understood equality in terms of "equal opportunity for blacks." But neither abandoned their belief in the idea of racial categories. Was Moses really so different?

Further Reading:

The writing and researching of *Sons of Providence* coincided with work of Brown University's Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice. The final hundred-plus-page report, "[Slavery and Justice](#)," which was chaired by Brown University historian James Campbell, can be accessed online. The most detailed account of Rhode Island antislavery is Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven's *The Devotion of These Women: Rhode Island in the Antislavery Network* (Boston, 2002). See also James B. Hedges's two seminal works on the Brown family, *The Browns of*

Providence Plantations: Colonial Years (Cambridge, Mass., 1952) and *The Browns of Providence Plantations: The Nineteenth Century* (Providence, 1968). Patrick T. Conley's *Democracy in Decline: Rhode Island Constitutional Development, 1776-1841* (Providence, R.I., 1977) remains the authoritative political and constitutional history of Rhode Island for the period covered. Rappleye deserves considerable credit for moving past Mack Thompson's description of Moses as a "reluctant reformer." Rappleye argues that Moses's Quaker faith was instrumental in all of his social and political endeavors. See Mack Thompson's *Moses Brown: Reluctant Reformer* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1962). *Traces of the Trade*, a new documentary by a descendant of Rhode Island's D'Wolf family—the largest slave-trading family in U.S. history with eighty-eight trips to the African coast—is an official 2008 competition selection at the Sundance Film Festival.

This article originally appeared in issue 8.3 (April, 2008).

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