

# Historic Dorr Rebellion

by Edna Kent, Gloucester Historian

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Significant history impacting our Nation's history finds many traces and stories along our country roads and villages. Not only was the scene of the final act of the Dorr Rebellion in the charming village of Chepachet, Rhode Island, but it changed American history as a first step to equal voting rights!

The 1842 Dorr Rebellion was all about suffrage - who had the right to vote, especially as

more farmers left the countryside and joined new immigrants in the mills. This growing majority of citizens was not allowed to vote - solely because they were not landowners. Before the dramatic episode was over, U.S. President Tyler, his Cabinet, Congress and the United States Supreme Court had all become involved.

It is very fitting that the Dorr Rebellion's final conflict occurred under the shadow of the unassuming Pettingell-Mason House near Chepachet's scenic

Acotes Hill as it will eventually become the Dorr Rebellion Museum.

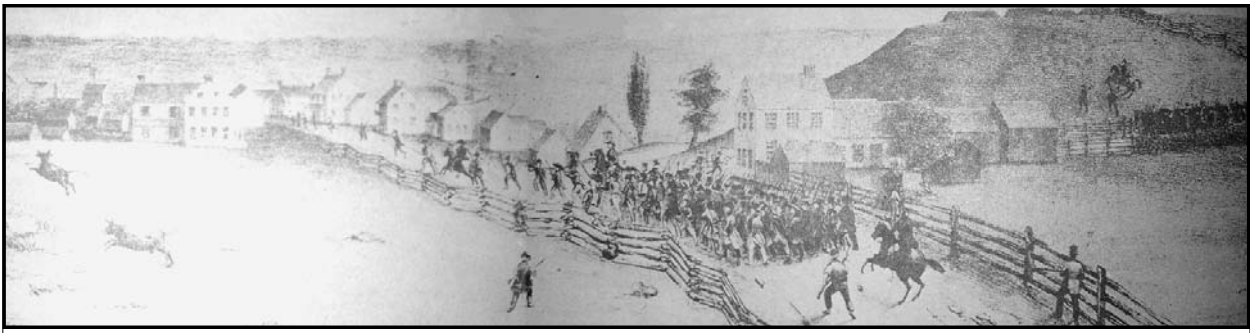
Also, four of the key participants lived in Chepachet, which was a strong center of Dorrite sentiment.

Several attempts in the early 1800s had failed to extend voting rights to non-landowners, but in 1841, the Rhode Island Suffrage Association, led by lawyer Samuel Atwell, held a meeting in Newport

which passed a resolution that Rhode Islanders had the right to draw up their own constitution, thus prompting the General Assembly to call a convention on the issue of suffrage.

Ultimately, conventions were held by two separate legislatures roughly at the same time. In early 1842, they invited votes on the constitution;





Drawn by Henry Lord, who was taken captive near Acotes Hill in Chepachet, marked with other prisoners, with arms pinioned, and there confined in the State Prison with 13 others in a cell 7' x 10' in which they were kept 21 days. (Burkes Report 80)

a large majority of fourteen thousand voted for the Peoples Constitution, including about five thousand owning land! Under the Peoples' Constitution, Thomas W. Dorr, a well-off landowner, was elected Governor, Amasa Eddy Jr. as Lt Governor along with the election of all other governing officials. Now Rhode Island had two Constitutions, two Governors, two Legislatures, and two of all statewide officials.

By May, the Peoples' Constitution officers had met with serious resistance from incumbent state officials. The Charter legislature met May 4, 1842 at Newport and declared a state of insurrection and requested federal aid. President Tyler perceived the problem to be a state matter and urged a compromise.

In an attempt to take over the military, Dorr's supporters launched an attack on the Cranston Street Armory. It failed; many were arrested and a warrant was issued for Dorr, who by that time, had fled the state.

While Dorr was seeking Federal aid and other out-of-state help, violence broke out in Pawtucket and Dorr supporters began to withdraw. Governor King ordered state troops to Providence.

Loyal Dorr supporters assembled in Chepachet under General Jedediah Sprague and Acote's Hill was fortified with cannon and protective trenches. Upon Dorr's return to Rhode Island, he established his headquarters at Sprague's Tavern (*now operating as the Tavern on Main*) and issued a proclamation to the General Assembly at Chepachet on July 4, 1842.

#### The Encounter

The narrow, rutted roads into the village of Chepachet were jammed with hundreds of carriages coming and going. Dorr supporters brought all manner of weaponry into the village. Some villagers were so alarmed that they headed to Connecticut or hid in haymows or ponds. Martial law was declared and large detachments were moving to Chepachet by several different routes. The Charter government's military forces greatly outnumbered the Dorrites.

Since bloodshed was not Dorr's intent, he sent a letter by horseback rider to Providence for all of his constituents to remain at home peacefully. He also ordered his followers to disband and go home. Dorr then left the state.

Village boys took advantage of the abandoned fortifications early the next morning and began firing nails out of the cannons causing much concern to advancing state troops. Warned away by Boston merchant Henry Lord, the boys scampered for home.

One hundred thirty prisoners were taken that day, including Henry Lord. Firearms were confiscated throughout town and then prisoners were marched by force 16 miles to the Providence jail. One prisoner's description... "threatened and pricked by the bayonet if we lagged from

fatigue, the rope severely chafing our arms; the skin off mine... no water till we reached Greenville... no food until the next day... and, after being exhibited, were put into the State prison."

An encounter which resulted in injury was at Sprague's Tavern where those inside barred the door. Soldier John Pitman fired through the keyhole to break the lock and hit Dorrite Horace Bardeen in the thigh.

To save his business from further assault, Sprague allowed the state troops to lodge there. Much to his dismay, however, the tariff came too high! According to Sprague's deposition to the state "...consumed by the troops during the occupation were: thirty seven gallons of brandy, twenty nine

gallons of West India rum, thirty four flasks of liquor, thirty four bottles of champagne, two dozen bottles of cider, nine hundred forty glasses drunk at the bar and one hundred dollars worth delivered by Mr. Sprague's brother". There were, in addition, "eight hundred twenty bushels of oats, seventeen tons of hay, fifty bushels of corn, sixteen bushels of meal and a quarter ton of straw." Consumed also were "two thousand four hundred dinners and eleven thousand, five hundred cigars." All were charged, not to mention the utter chaos caused by their drunken reveling, and never paid.



During the occupation, troops were billeted in all the large buildings in Chepachet and some evidence of their presence remains today.

Warrants were issued for Dorr's arrest for treason against the state of Rhode Island and he voluntarily returned to face trial in October 1843 at Newport. Dorr was found guilty and was sentenced to life imprisonment. Pardoned in June 1845 after one year in jail, his full civil rights were restored by the General Assembly in 1851. In 1854, the judgement of the Supreme Court was annulled. Health failing, Thomas Wilson Dorr was at last, exonerated, but just ten months later, he died at the age of forty-nine.

In 1912, a monument was erected at Acotes Hill to the memory and honor of Thomas Wilson Dorr, 1805-1854. It reads:

*Of Distinguished Lineage  
Brilliant Talents  
Eminent in Scholarship  
A Public Spirit Citizen  
Lawyer, Educator, Statesman  
Advocate of Popular Sovereignty  
Framer of the Peoples Constitution of  
1842  
Elected Governor Under It  
Adjudged Revolutionary 1842  
Principles Acknowledge Right 1912*

*"I stand before you, with the greatest confidence in the final verdict of my country"  
"The right of suffrage is the guardian of our liberties"*