

“The Usual Flaming Cross”:
Discourses of the Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island, 1905-1935

By

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Introduction

A modern student of Rhode Island history who happens to find herself reading the *Providence Journal* of March 2, 1924, might be quite surprised upon stumbling across a column on page 6 headlined “MAYOR OF NEWPORT MOVES AGAINST KU KLUX KLAN.”¹ Maybe she would not find it surprising that Rhode Islanders would stand in opposition to the Klan. Indeed, she might take for granted that a state as diverse and liberal as Rhode Island would oppose an order which represented the bigotry, intolerance, and xenophobia of white Protestants in the Jim Crow South. If she were to have any familiarity with the revived Klan of the 1920s, she might at least be aware that this particular incarnation of the “Invisible Empire” stretched its tendrils north of the Mason-Dixon Line. But she might assume that its growth was concentrated primarily in the overwhelmingly Protestant rural backwaters and small cities of the Midwest—the “Middletowns,” to use Robert and Helen Lynd’s terminology.² She would never assume that, in a state with as large a population of Catholics and immigrants as Rhode Island, an order that was known for being, among other things, virulently anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant, would be able to establish roots. She might be surprised, then, to find evidence of these roots in the *Journal*’s report, which stressed that the mayor’s action came in response to an “Alleged Klan Gathering... [on] Friday Night.”³

The Klan that our imagined reader stumbled upon was real, not imagined. According to the *Journal* article, Newport Mayor Mortimer A. Sullivan was taking decisive action against an immediate threat to the peace and safety of the Newport community. “Any attempt on the part of

¹ “Mayor of Newport Moves Against Ku Klux Klan,” *Providence Journal*, Mar. 2, 1924, p. 6. NewsBank.

² The Lynds’ groundbreaking 1929 study *Middletown*, which concentrates on the small city of Muncie, Indiana, deals extensively with the Klan, which was a major presence in the community during the period of their study.

³ “Mayor of Newport Moves Against Ku Klux Klan,” *Providence Journal*, Mar. 2, 1924, p. 6. NewsBank.

the organization known as the Ku Klux Klan to operate publicly or to hold any meeting in the city of Newport,” Sullivan had declared, “will not be tolerated,” for “the alleged aims and the alleged purposes of this un-American cabal find little, if any, sympathy in this community.”⁴ If this hypothetical student started flipping through the pages of previous issues of the *Providence Journal*, she would learn that, a few days earlier, a riot had nearly broken out in Newport’s central square when a gathering held by self-identified Klan organizers active in the area had been forcibly broken up by the Newport Post of the American Legion. Moreover, she would see that this incident was not unique—that there had been a Rhode Island Ku Klux Klan, and that it had been involved in the social, religious, and political life of the state.

Our hypothetical student might have been surprised to learn this, but an ordinary Rhode Islander of the period would not have been. She would have seen headlines like this appearing in the *Providence Journal* and every other local newspaper for months. If she were older, she might remember that, even in the post-Reconstruction North, the public was not sure whether the Klan was evil or dangerous. She might remember the waves of protests, petitions, lawsuits, and editorials that had surrounded attempts to show Thomas Dixon’s play *The Clansman*, and the film it inspired, *The Birth of a Nation*, from 1908 onward. But she would also remember that when these did get shown, attendance was enormous. She would remember the extensive debates among Rhode Islanders about the Klan, its purpose, its beliefs, its methods, in newspapers, churches, civic groups, politics, and dining rooms during the preceding years. And she might know of the Klan because she sympathized with its aims of preserving white supremacy, halting immigration, enforcing Prohibition, and promoting traditional Protestant morality—or even because she knew people who were members.

⁴ “Mayor of Newport Moves Against Ku Klux Klan,” *Providence Journal*, Mar. 2, 1924, p. 6. NewsBank.

Although it runs counter to many traditional narratives about both Rhode Island history and the Ku Klux Klan, the Klan was not a marginal factor in the lives of Rhode Islanders in the 1920s. Throughout the decade, the hooded order seemed to be everywhere in the state. The newspapers were full of stories of the Klan's activities, both nationally and locally. *The Birth of a Nation* had been regularly screened in Rhode Island movie theaters since its premiere in 1915, while literature about or featuring the Klan was flourishing across the nation.⁵ The hooded order was a frequent subject of debates, editorials, sermons, and speeches, both locally and nationally. And from 1924 onward, the Klan was very visibly present in Rhode Island. In communities across the state, pointed white hoods and burning crosses served as very visible signs of the Klan's presence. So did threats and acts of violence against marginalized groups. The Klan was regarded by Rhode Islanders as an exciting curiosity, a unique and mysterious presence to be read about and talked about all the time.

Yet even as Rhode Islanders regarded the Klan as an intriguing curiosity, they did not see it as an extremist group. In many ways, the Klan was seen as ordinary. In addition to its more shadowy activities, the order sponsored a wide variety of public lectures, picnics, dinner dances, charity drives, and even weddings across the state. These were frequently attended by members and nonmembers alike. Furthermore, members of the Klan were regular Rhode Islanders. Estimates of Klan membership in Rhode Island by contemporaries ranged as high as 37,000.⁶ This figure would represent more than 6% of the state's total population, recorded at 604,397 in

⁵ For more on the immense popularity of the Klan in both fiction and nonfiction literature during this period, see Felix Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), especially chapters 2, 4, and 5.

⁶ The estimate of 37,000 is mentioned in Norman W. Smith, "The Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island," *Rhode Island History* 37, no. 2 (May 1978): 43, https://www.rihs.org/history_journal/rhode-island-history-journal-vol-37-may-1978/.

the 1920 Census.⁷ Moreover, since only native-born white men were allowed to join the Klan, the percentage of those eligible for membership who joined would have been significantly higher; the 1920 Census recorded a native-born white male population of 205,967, meaning that, if the estimate of 37,000 is accurate, nearly 18% of eligible Rhode Islanders joined the Klan at some point.⁸ Even if the figure of 37,000 is taken to be an overestimate (as the scholar Norman Smith suggests), it is clear that a wide swath of native-born white Rhode Islanders joined the Klan; even a membership of half that would be significant. These individuals represented a wide cross-section of Rhode Island society. In studying the occupations of Washington County's Klansmen in 1927, Joseph Sullivan found that 26.8% worked in business or professional occupations, 44.4% worked in skilled occupations, and 28.8% worked in semi- or unskilled occupations.⁹ These were not marginal or backwards extremists. They were part of mainstream social and political life. Quite against the grain of what one might assume today, in the 1920s, being a Klansman was not at all mutually exclusive with being an ordinary Rhode Islander.

This is a fact emphatically demonstrated by the sheer scale of Klan gatherings in the state. Major public events like picnics and rallies regularly drew crowds in the thousands, many of whom were dues-paying Klansmen and many of whom were not. One all-day rally in Foster in June 1924 brought an estimated turnout of almost 10,000 people from all walks of life, many of whom had no formal association with the hooded order beyond an interest in its stated ideals.

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, "Population: Rhode Island: Composition and Characteristics of the Population," 1920 Census Bulletin, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 1920, 2
<https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1920/bulletins/demographics/population-ri-composition-and-characteristics.pdf>.

⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, "Population: Rhode Island: Composition and Characteristics of the Population," 1920 Census Bulletin, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 1920, 2
<https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1920/bulletins/demographics/population-ri-composition-and-characteristics.pdf>.

⁹ Joseph W. Sullivan, "Rhode Island's Invisible Empire," *Rhode Island History* 47, no. 2 (1989): 80,
https://www.rihs.org/history_journal/rhode-island-history-journal-vol-47-may-1989/.

Local Klan groups in communities like Coventry and Westerly were deeply integrated into the community, partnering with churches, organizing weddings and funerals, and raising money for charity. Many in these communities were not at all upset by the fact that their elected officials, their ministers, their grocers, or even their neighbors were Klansmen. In many communities, the Klan had become so ordinary by the end of 1924 that enormous public meetings were worthy of no more attention in the local newspaper than the sort of brief note that might be made of a comparable meeting of the Masons or Odd Fellows. The Klan was a part of the fabric of everyday life, both for Klansmen themselves and, in many cases, for the entire community around them.

The Klan's deep integration into the communities in which it took root is a defining characteristic of the 1920s Klan, not only in Rhode Island but also nationwide. The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s was not the Klan which had gained national notoriety during the Reconstruction period. This original iteration of the Klan, organized by former Confederate soldiers in the aftermath of the Civil War, had existed as a loosely organized network of masked terror cells dedicated to violently ending Reconstruction, forcing people of color out of public life, and restoring white supremacist rule in the South.¹⁰ For years, the order acted as an instrument of terror across the South, intimidating and killing people of color and anyone associated with the Reconstruction governments. Legislation passed by congressional Republicans in 1872 allowed for the order to be almost entirely suppressed within a decade of its founding.¹¹ Even after its suppression, however, the Klan remained an enduring symbol of the "Lost Cause" of the Confederacy for white Southerners. Works such as Thomas Dixon's *The*

¹⁰ David Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The First Century of the Ku Klux Klan, 1865-1965* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 9-10.

¹¹ Thomas Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American: The Rebirth and Decline of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee Publishing, 2011), 7.

Clansman and D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* glorified the hooded Klansman as the much-needed champion of law and order, white supremacy, and racial purity against the excesses of Reconstruction.

The second iteration of the Klan, which would rise to such significance in Rhode Island, had been founded on the night of Thanksgiving, 1915, on Stone Mountain, just outside of Atlanta, Georgia.¹² It was the brainchild of William J. Simmons, a physician, itinerant preacher, and serial joiner (he was reportedly a member of multiple churches and as many as fifteen fraternal orders). Simmons wished to create his own fraternal organization and, inspired by *Birth of a Nation* and his father's involvement with the original Klan, he chose to model his group on the Klan.¹³ Simmons' order languished initially. For the first few years, the new Klan had only a few thousand members in Georgia and Alabama, finding itself unable to make inroads even into other parts of the former Confederacy. This all changed in 1920, however, when Simmons hired professional marketing agents Edward Young Clarke and Elizabeth Tyler to promote his order.¹⁴ Tyler and Clarke transformed Simmons's order from a small southern organization into the nation's most significant standard bearer for "100% Americanism." Under their guidance, the new Invisible Empire maintained the racism of its predecessor while also decrying all sorts of "degenerative" forces which they claimed posed an existential threat to the American way of life, including Catholics, Jews, immigrants, bootleggers, sex workers, and jazz musicians in addition to people of color.¹⁵ The only way to defeat such a threat, according to the Klan, was to unite the

¹² Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 5.

¹³ Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017), 12; MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 5.

¹⁴ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 12.

¹⁵ Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 14.

nation's native-born Anglo-Saxon Protestants under the banner of white supremacy, ultra-nationalism, "old-time religion," and Victorian moral values.¹⁶

In many ways, Rhode Island in the early 20th century epitomized many of the "degenerative" social changes which the Klan feared. A booming manufacturing industry centered in Providence and the surrounding towns had brought many new immigrants to Rhode Island in the late 19th- and early 20th centuries. Between 1870 and 1910, as manufacturing employment grew by 245 percent, the state's population grew by 250 percent, a number largely attributable to massive numbers of immigrants.¹⁷ Immigration alone accounted for almost 75 percent of Providence's population growth between 1900 and 1910.¹⁸ Indeed, by 1910, nearly 70 percent of Rhode Island's population were either immigrants or the children of immigrants.¹⁹ Moreover, the vast majority of these immigrants were Catholics, largely from Ireland, French Canada, and Italy. In 1905, Rhode Island became the first state in the nation to be majority Catholic, marking a decisive demographic shift from the "old stock" Protestants who had long been the majority in the state.²⁰ Many of these immigrant communities were fiercely committed to preserving their cultural traditions in the face of a broad push towards assimilation. While some in the Providence diocese, especially Bishop William Hickey, believed strongly in assimilating their flock into an "American" Catholic Church, many immigrants fought to preserve their ethnic and linguistic heritage.²¹ Perhaps most notable was the large and militant French Canadian community in the mill town of Woonsocket, whose fight to preserve the

¹⁶ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 5-6.

¹⁷ Judith E. Smith, *Family Connections: A History of Italian and Jewish Immigrant Lives in Providence, Rhode Island, 1900-1940* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1985), 9.

¹⁸ Smith, *Family Connections*, 11.

¹⁹ Smith, *Family Connections*, 11.

²⁰ Evelyn Savidge Sterne, *Ballots and Bibles: Ethnic Politics and the Catholic Church in Providence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 3.

²¹ Sterne, *Ballots and Bibles*, 221.

independence of its parish, particularly with regard to the teaching of French in parish schools, brought them into conflict with the state government, the diocese, and, eventually, the Pope.²² In Rhode Island, many of the social and cultural shifts which the Klan had been warning against were already well underway by the time of the hooded order's ascendance.

Under Tyler and Clarke's strategy for "kluxing" (recruiting), traveling "kleagles" (organizers) proselytized for the Klan nationwide. Their efforts were especially focused on two areas believed to be rife with potential Klansmen: fraternal orders and Protestant churches. Grafted onto the organization's ideology were the trappings of a more traditional fraternal society; Simmons designed an entire lexicon and system of rituals, based on those of the original Klan and of the Masons, in order to attract members of other societies.²³ When hiring kleagles, Clarke favored members of other fraternal lodges, especially Masons, who he found to often look unfavorably on Catholics.²⁴ These organizers leveraged their fraternal memberships to recruit Masons, Odd Fellows, Elks, and Orangemen with great success.²⁵ Protestant churches, especially Baptists and Methodists, were also ripe for kluxing. Kleagles placed a particular emphasis on recruiting ministers, who were allowed to join without paying dues; by 1924, the organization boasted of 30,000 ministers within its ranks nationwide.²⁶ Under such schemes, the Klan grew rapidly, gaining footholds not only across the former Confederacy but among white Protestants in every corner of the country.

²² Sorrell, "The Sentinelle Affair (1924-1929) and Militant Survivance: The Franco American Experience in Woonsocket, Rhode Island," (PhD diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 1976), 3-4. Sorrell's dissertation provides a fascinating look into the story of Woonsocket's French Canadian community in the 1920s, which runs quite parallel to the events described in this thesis.

²³ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 6-7.

²⁴ Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 34.

²⁵ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 8.

²⁶ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 15; 8.

This rapid growth was augmented by the staggering media attention given to the Klan nationally. Felix Harcourt's recent study of the cultural politics of the Klan asserts that "what sold in the 1920s, more often than not, was the Ku Klux Klan," and indeed, whether they liked or hated it, Americans could not get enough of the hooded order.²⁷ A sensational 1921 exposé of the Klan by the *New York World* was syndicated in eighteen other major national newspapers and increased sales of the *World* by an estimated 100,000.²⁸ It prompted a highly publicized congressional investigation, during which Simmons eloquently defended his order before dramatically tumbling to the floor in a state of exhaustion.²⁹ The *World's* claim that its series had "given Kluxism a death blow" rang hollow in the storm of attention which followed.³⁰ Tyler reported that "the publicity given us [by the *World*] has caused thousands of inquiries from every section of the nation to flood our office," which required "three secretaries constantly employed answering these inquiries."³¹ Indeed, David Chalmers estimates that the *World's* series brought one million new members to the Klan.³² The *World's* series was far from the only moment in which the second Klan received enormous amounts of publicity. Throughout the 1920s, the hooded order was a common feature in not only newspapers but every element of American mass culture, from films and plays to novels and sports, with critics always appreciative of "a dash of Ku Klux Klan to give it spice."³³ As in the case of the *World's* series, such attention only served to benefit the Klan, bringing a whole host of new members to its doors.

²⁷ Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture*, 9.

²⁸ Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1986), 160-161; Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 38.

²⁹ Wade, *The Fiery Cross*, 164.

³⁰ Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture*, 3.

³¹ Wade, *The Fiery Cross*, 162.

³² Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 38.

³³ Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture*, 11.

The combination of the recruiting scheme and the vast media coverage paid off in dividends for the Klan. A lack of detailed nationwide membership records makes it rather difficult to tell exactly how many people were members of the Klan at one time or another, but estimates range from 2 million to as many as 5 million at the order's peak.³⁴ Although the order originated in the mythology of the Confederacy, many of the states with the largest Klan movements were in the North; the Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania Klans boasted of membership in the hundreds of thousands, while states like Oregon, Colorado, and Maine had surprisingly large Klans for their overall populations.³⁵ The Klan was able to expand so widely in part because of its veneer as a social fraternity, one in which people could find community and brotherhood. Klaverns gave money to charities and churches (often delivered by hooded emissaries), patronized local businesses, visited the sick, and attended to the funeral rights of fellow Klansmen and their families.³⁶ Local Klans called for improvements to public education, ran electoral campaigns on anti-establishment and anti-corruption platforms, and fought for enforcement of prohibition and vice laws.³⁷

Yet the Klan's community-building practices were rooted in an ideology of racism, nativism, anti-Catholicism, and anti-Semitism, intended to build a sense of community among white Protestants to the exclusion of all others. The Klan's strong support for public schools derived from the belief that public education was the "one unfailing defense against every kind of alienism in America" and a particularly necessary tool for combating the "alienistic" institution of Catholic parochial schools.³⁸ Klan documents condemned "trash immigration" and referred to

³⁴ Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, 26.

³⁵ Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, 26.

³⁶ Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, 23; 36.

³⁷ Leonard Moore, *Citizen Klansmen: The Ku Klux Klan in Indiana, 1921-1928* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 11.

³⁸ Hiram Evans, as quoted Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, 90.

Black men as “lust-crazed beasts in human form.”³⁹ William Simmons predicted a nation “blood-soaked by one of the most desperate of interracial wars” should it not heed the Klan’s message.⁴⁰ Such racialized violence was not confined to rhetoric, particularly in the Deep South. Nancy MacLean finds evidence of Klan leadership or involvement in the 1921 dynamitings of a Black church, several Black schools, and a Black lodge hall, as well as attacks on the homes of several Black families and multiple lynchings across Georgia. These incidents were part of a broader pattern of racialized terrorism enacted against people of color and white non-Protestants across the South and indeed the nation.⁴¹ As the Invisible Empire stretched across the nation, it combined community-building practices with violent rhetoric and action in order to work towards the construction of an American community of white Protestants.

While the Klan rose quickly to prominence in the first half of the 1920s, it soon stagnated. After reaching a peak membership in 1924, the hooded order began a significant decline. Massive national rallies in Washington D.C. in the summers of 1925 and 1926 could not conceal the flagging membership and growing internal divisions within both local organizations and the nationwide movement over the Invisible Empire’s fundamental goals and purpose.⁴² Klansmen elected to public office in 1922 and 1924 proved ineffective legislators, spurring further resentment among rank-and-file members already frustrated with the organization’s political ambitions.⁴³ A brief uptick in 1928 in opposition to the presidential campaign of the Catholic Al Smith could not slow the hemorrhage of members.⁴⁴ In 1936, the shattered Klan sold its Atlanta headquarters to the Catholic Church, which constructed the Cathedral of Christ the King upon the

³⁹ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 134.

⁴⁰ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 134.

⁴¹ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 149-155.

⁴² Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, 186.

⁴³ Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, 200-201.

⁴⁴ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, 178.

site. By 1944, federal tax obligations forced the formal dissolution of the order, which had been practically dead for over a decade.⁴⁵

Historians have struggled to determine what to make of a movement as complex and contradictory as the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s. The earliest attempts to reckon with the movement were made, not by historians, but by contemporary sociologists. 1924, the high point of the Invisible Empire's success, saw the publication of two major works—John Mecklin's *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind*, and Frank Tannenbaum's *Darker Phases of the South*—which set the tone for most scholarship on the Klan for the following five decades. For Mecklin and Tannebaum, the Klan was “essentially a village and small-town organization,” rooted in “that large, well-meaning but more or less ignorant and unthinking middle class” whose “cheap moral idealism” and “provincial fear of all things foreign” led to a violent backlash against the forces of urban modernity.⁴⁶ Indeed, Tannenbaum suggested quite bluntly that the Klan was a mere attempt to “reestablish the past by nullifying through terror the influences of the present,” a “proof of emotional infanthood.”⁴⁷

The view put forward by Mecklin and Tannebaum—of the Klan as being centered in a small town and rural lower-middle class lashing out violently against the foreign and different in a vain attempt to turn back the clock—went generally unchallenged among scholars of the Klan for several decades. While they generally used less condescending language, scholars such as Robert and Helen Lynd, Richard Hofstadter, John Higham, William Leuchtenberg, and John Hicks continued to follow many of the same assumptions. As economic growth and technological advancement shifted the center of American life from the small town into the city, the

⁴⁵ Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, 20.

⁴⁶ John Moffatt Mecklin, *The Ku Klux Klan: A Study of the American Mind* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924), 99; 103-104; 101.

⁴⁷ Frank Tannebaum, *Darker Phases of the South* (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1924), 27; 20-21.

old-fashioned Protestantism of small-town America was being challenged by an increasingly permissive urban environment in which new moral attitudes proliferated. As marginalized communities, especially communities of color and new immigrants, became increasingly visible in public life, especially in cities, the “old stock” Anglo-Saxons worried that their “way of life” was under threat and thus turned to reactionary movements like the Klan. In the view of these scholars, the rapid expansion of the 1920s Klan represented a futile, irrational attempt to conserve a dying social order against the force of modernity. These scholars took for granted the movement’s fundamentally violent character and assumed the average Klansman to be a backwards, lower-middle class hick plagued by paranoia and a “pitiful desire to keep the modern world at bay.”⁴⁸

By the mid-1960s, however, other scholars had begun to question the accuracy of this traditional understanding. Kenneth Jackson’s *The Ku Klux Klan in the City* undermined the long-running assumption that the Klan was a predominantly rural phenomenon. Jackson found that roughly half of Klansmen lived in metropolitan areas of more than 50,000 residents, suggesting that many were from “transitional” neighborhoods in which they would have regularly come into contact with new Black and immigrant communities.⁴⁹ Charles Alexander’s study of the Klan in Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas found that, rather than being a phenomenon purely of the lower-middle class, the Klan was “remarkably cross-sectional,” featuring individuals from all social classes.⁵⁰ Moreover, Alexander found that the primary targets of Klan violence in the Southwest were not racial or religious minorities but “moral

⁴⁸ Leonard J. Moore, “Historical Interpretations of the 1920s Klan: The Traditional View and the Populist Revision,” *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 2 (1990): 345. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh/24.2.341>.

⁴⁹ Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1967), 236; 244.

⁵⁰ Charles C. Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1965), 21.

deviants” such as bootleggers and adulterers; in Alexander’s view, “the ideology of the Klan... held a secondary appeal” to “a desire to protect and defend the native American’s own conception of what was right and wrong.”⁵¹

Jackson’s and Alexander’s works challenged traditional historiographies of the hooded order, and in doing so allowed for entirely new interpretations of the 1920s Klan. Influenced by the social history movement which had emerged in the 1970s, scholars such as Leonard Moore, Larry Gerlach, Shawn Lay, and Robert Goldberg focused their studies on small, local Klan groups in order to understand how these groups existed within their communities.⁵² In doing so, they found that the Klan groups they studied were not marginal but part of the mainstream of community life. While ethnic and religious violence were certainly part of the story of the Klan, nationally and locally, these scholars emphasized that in many localities, the Klan primarily focused its efforts on issues of civic importance, such as ousting corrupt political and economic elites, cleaning up vice, and improving public schools. Indeed, in his major study of the Indiana Klan, Leonard Moore went so far as to suggest that the hooded order was best understood “not as a nativist organization... but rather as a populist organization.”⁵³ For Moore, the Klan was “a kind of interest group for the average white Protestant who believed his values should be dominant in American society,” a movement “too much a part of America’s social mainstream to be dismissed as an extremist aberration.”⁵⁴

⁵¹ Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest*, 27.

⁵² See Leonard Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*; Larry R. Gerlach, *Blazing Crosses in Zion: The Ku Klux Klan in Utah* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1981); Shawn Lay, ed., *The Invisible Empire in the West: Toward a New Historical Appraisal of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992); and Robert Goldberg, *Hooded Empire: The Ku Klux Klan in Colorado* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1981).

⁵³ Moore, *Citizen Klansmen*, 11.

⁵⁴ Moore, “Historical Interpretations,” 353-354.

More recent scholarship has followed the shift towards more locally-focused studies of the Klan while also pushing back against the sidelining of ideologies of race, ethnicity, and religion which appears in the work of Moore and his contemporaries. Nancy MacLean's *Behind the Mask of Chivalry* argues that scholarship on the Klan must "move beyond such false polarities" between mainstream and extreme upon which most traditional interpretations of the Klan have been based.⁵⁵ She instead argues that the Klan displayed a sort of "reactionary populism," one which merged the anti-elite mobilization of populism with a commitment to the subordination of racial, ethnic, and religious minorities.⁵⁶ Thomas Pegram's *One Hundred Percent American* similarly argues that, while the Klan thought of itself as a civic organization, to reduce it to a mainstream interest group would be "to drain the contemporary controversy from the Invisible Empire" which led to its downfall.⁵⁷

Other recent studies have turned away from this more social historical work to instead explore the Klan's relationship to the popular culture of the 1920s. Felix Harcourt's recent book *Ku Klux Kulture* is perhaps the best example of this phenomenon, but Harcourt is only one of a number of scholars who have moved in this direction.⁵⁸ In recent years, scholars such as Nancy Bishop Dessommes and Tom Rice have written extensively on the Klan's relation to the burgeoning film industry.⁵⁹ Jonathan Zimmerman has written of the Klan's participation in the

⁵⁵ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, xiii.

⁵⁶ MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry*, xiii.

⁵⁷ Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*, xii.

⁵⁸ See Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture*. Harcourt's work has inspired many of the methodological decisions made in this thesis.

⁵⁹ See Nancy Bishop Dessommes, "Hollywood in Hoods: The Portrayal of the Ku Klux Klan in Popular Film," *Journal of Popular History* 32, no. 4 (1999): 13-22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1999.00013.x>; Tom Rice, *White Robes, Silver Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan* (Indiana University Press, 2015); Rice, "Protecting Protestantism: The Ku Klux Klan vs. the Motion Picture Industry," *Film History* 20, no. 3 (2008): 367-80, <https://doi.org/10.2979/fil.2008.20.3.367>; and Rice, "'The True Story of the Ku Klux Klan': Defining the Klan through Film," *Journal of American Studies* 42, no. 3 (2008): 471-88, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875808005537>.

“History Wars” of the 1920s.⁶⁰ Kelly J. Baker has written about the Klan’s presentation of Protestant religious beliefs.⁶¹ And Kathleen Blee has written extensively on the relationship that Protestant women had to the Klan movement.⁶²

In all this, there has been fairly little work done on the Klan in Rhode Island. The Rhode Island Klan is briefly touched upon in some older work on the hooded order, including David Chalmers’ *Hooded Americanism*, but it gets scant attention there.⁶³ There was no study focused solely on the Rhode Island Klan until Norman W. Smith’s 1978 article “The Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island.” Smith’s study focused largely on the broader narrative of the Rhode Island Klan. He assumed the movement’s rural center, although he did find violence to be relatively rare, and attributed the Klan’s growth largely to anti-Catholic beliefs among Rhode Island’s Protestant community.⁶⁴ While informative, Smith’s account was largely descriptive rather than interpretive; he was far more concerned with the “what” regarding the Rhode Island Klan than the “why.” Smith’s article was followed a few years later by Joseph Sullivan’s “Rhode Island’s Invisible Empire: A Demographic Glimpse into the Ku Klux Klan,” which used (incomplete) Klan membership lists to analyze the demographic and geographic makeup of the Rhode Island Klan. He found that the Rhode Island Klan, like other Klan movements, was remarkably interclass, and that, at least in Washington County (for which data is available), more populous towns were disproportionately represented compared to their more rural counterparts.⁶⁵ More recently, Mark

⁶⁰ See Johnathon Zimmerman, “‘Each “Race” Could Have Its Heroes Sung’: Ethnicity and the History Wars in the 1920s,” *The Journal of American History* 87, no. 1 (2000): 92-111, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2567917>.

⁶¹ See Kelly J. Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK’s Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

⁶² See Kathleen Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (University of California Press, 1991), and Blee, “Evidence, Empathy, and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan,” *The Journal of American History* 80, no. 2 (1994): 596-606, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2079873>.

⁶³ See Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 268-270.

⁶⁴ Smith, “The Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island,” 43-44.

⁶⁵ Sullivan, “Rhode Island’s Invisible Empire,” 82.

Paul Richard's study of the Klan in New England focuses two chapters on the Klan in Rhode Island. While informative, Richard's study is also lacking; in addition to major factual errors (including confusing Rhode Island with Long Island near the end of chapter 8), Richard's study is generally interested in drawing broad conclusions about the Klan in the New England states as a whole, perhaps to the detriment of the Rhode Island case in particular.⁶⁶ Given the relatively minimal scholarship, it seems worthwhile to give the Rhode Island Klan another look.

Throughout this long historiographical debate, there is a fundamental question over the basic terms on which the 1920s Klan should be conceptualized. Should it be understood primarily as a civic organization dedicated to community-building or a violent terrorist group motivated by ideologies of hate? Is it both? Neither? Answering these questions has only been made more challenging by the relative lack of internal Klan records which survive. Local klaverns kept their membership lists and meeting minutes secret to the best of their ability, and while some of these records have survived, their relative rarity has posed a significant challenge for historians attempting to construct an image of the Klan. As a result, scholars have primarily relied on the Klan as viewed by others, through newspapers, government reports, and similar documents. Scholars have relied on these sources primarily at face value, as accurate reports on events. They tend not to interrogate what exactly these types of sources were doing with regard to the Klan. For all the attention devoted to Klan groups themselves, there has been surprisingly little given to the ways that onlookers conceptualized and interpreted those groups in spheres of public discourse.

⁶⁶ Mark Paul Richard, *Not a Catholic Nation: The Ku Klux Klan Confronts New England in the 1920s* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015). On pages 145-146 of the book, Richard relates the story of Ernest S. Louis's abduction in the summer of 1924. None of the towns that his account mentions ("Freeport," "Hicksville") are in Rhode Island; all are in Long Island. All other sources which describe Louis's abduction confirm it as having taken place on Long Island, including "Abducted Druggist is Found in Hotel," *New York Times*, Aug. 28, 1924, p. 19, and "Arrest in Kidnapping of Druggist Ordered," *New York Evening Post*, Aug. 28, 1924, p. 3.

This thesis offers a new way of interpreting the 1920s Klan, one which places public discourse—what people were talking about, and the way they were talking about it—at the center of our understanding of the Klan movement. In this thesis, I examine the rise and fall of the Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island from 1905 to 1935, with a particular focus on the years 1924-1928, when the hooded order was most active in the state. I argue that, while the Klan was a fixture of Rhode Island's social and political life during this period, it was above all a fixture of public discourse. If there is one thing that Rhode Island's newspapers can tell us about the Ku Klux Klan during this period, it is that everyone wanted to talk about it. Politicians, pastors, fraternal lodges, even school groups all debated the Klan—whether it was patriotic or un-American, violent or peaceful, bigoted or moral, good or bad. But all agreed that it was a subject for debate, was something that was worthwhile and interesting to talk about. When the Klan was still something exotic and imagined as far away, its mystery captured the attentions of Rhode Island audiences, who sold out showings of *The Clansman* and *Birth of a Nation* and bought any newspaper which contained news of the hooded order's exploits in the South, in the Midwest, or in neighboring New England states. When it became more clear that the Klan was actively present in Rhode Island, local papers were full of sensationalized front-page stories about its activities, and readers hung on every word. And, eventually, Rhode Islanders began to talk of the Klan as an ordinary fixture of the community, worthy of little more note than the Masons or the American Legion. I argue that the ubiquity of such discourse throughout this period suggests that the Klan played a far larger role in Rhode Island public life than most scholars have been inclined to acknowledge.

Moreover, I argue that such public discourses not only reflected an existing reality, but actively participated in the creation of a perceived reality. The “meaning” of the Klan in Rhode

Island, what it signified to those who saw it, read about it, or interacted with it, was neither innate nor universal, but was instead the product of communal discourse, as reflected, structured, and constructed by popular culture and media. The presence of the Klan in the community meant very different things to different people, and these different meanings were articulated in different ways. The communal interpretation of the Klan, the way that it was to be interpreted by those around it, was thus a site of contestation, as many different viewpoints competed to “define” the Klan—as a patriotic fraternal organization or a terroristic society, as something which was fighting on behalf of the community or as something that was fighting to destroy it. In articulating their viewpoints, Rhode Islanders participated in the construction of a communal understanding of the Klan. To this end, I am somewhat less interested in the viewpoints of any one person or group on the Ku Klux Klan as I am in the broader social discourse to which those viewpoints contributed.

In my efforts to reconstruct this public discourse, I use a variety of sources, including personal diaries and correspondence, Klan propaganda and ephemera, and government documents. At the center of my analysis, however, are local newspapers from communities throughout the state, including from Providence, Westerly, Newport, Woonsocket, and Bristol. With certain exceptions, I do not generally try to identify whether certain newspapers are “pro-Klan” or “anti-Klan.” Nor am I particularly interested in the biographies of specific reporters or editors. Rather, I am interested in their writings as texts in and of themselves which convey meaning and participate in processes of social discourse irrespective of their creators. None of these publications use bylines; a contemporary reader would have engaged with each article as a text in itself rather than as a piece created by a specific individual. It is the goal of this thesis to figure out how these readers understood the Klan.

Throughout this thesis, I focus my attention primarily on Rhode Island, although I do occasionally refer to eastern Connecticut, especially New London County, which had close communal and cultural ties to communities in Washington County, Rhode Island. In centering Rhode Island in my study, I do not seek only to expand local historical knowledge. Rhode Island, like any geographic community, is both unique and representative: unique in the sense that the precise context of the Rhode Island case is distinct from anywhere else; and representative in that the historical forces which intersected to create that context were in effect, in one way or another, in communities across the country. Rhode Island was unique in being the most Catholic state in the nation at this time, but it was not unique in having received thousands of predominantly Catholic immigrants from southern and eastern Europe in the late 19th- and early 20th centuries. The Klan in Rhode Island was distinct from other state Klans, but it was still part of an enormous national movement, and the study of how it manifested in this (particularly Catholic) community may provide some insight into its broader history. And, although the particular dynamics of Rhode Island's public discourse about the Klan were certainly unique, the conclusions that this thesis draws about the ways that public discourse reflects, structures, and constructs social phenomena have implications far beyond Rhode Island.

Over the course of this thesis, I trace the Klan through Rhode Island's public discourse over the first three decades of the twentieth century. In the first chapter, I explore the ways that Rhode Islanders talked about the Klan before it had any significant presence in the state. I begin by considering Rhode Islanders' responses to representations of the hooded order in media, especially in Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel *The Clansman*, its eponymous stage adaptation, and its 1915 film adaptation, D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. I then turn to the ways Rhode Islanders reacted to news of the Klan's revival in the late 1910s and early 1920s. For those reactions, I rely

on newspaper coverage and on public debates over the essence and meaning of the Klan. I argue that, for years and even decades before there was any discernible Klan presence in Rhode Island, Rhode Islanders were fascinated by the Klan, as both an organization rooted in the past and as contemporary curiosity. In providing the hooded order a continued place in public discourse throughout that period, Rhode Islanders helped to create an environment fertile for the Klan to thrive.

In the second chapter, I turn to what happened when the Klan actually established an open presence in the state. Here, I analyze newspaper accounts of Klan activity in the first months of 1924. In particular, I focus on the *Providence News*, a significant daily paper which covered the Klan's activity extensively, with the stated goal of purging the order from the Rhode Island community. I argue that, in providing the hooded order with such constant and sensationalized coverage, the *News* and other local papers overinflated the Klan's significance, making it seem like a far more substantial institution than it may actually have been. Moreover, I argue that, through the muckraking style of journalism which the *News* embodied in its coverage of the Klan, the paper constructed the Klan as a sort of existential threat, one which only the *News*, rather than the authorities, could defeat. The effect of all this coverage was to construct a public discourse which treated the Klan as though it were far more significant than its reality suggested. This discourse ultimately served to make the Klan more significant in the state; the *News*'s attempts to destroy the Klan inadvertently fueled its growth.

In the third chapter, I explore the Klan as an institution within the Rhode Island community. I argue that the Klan's acceptance into the mainstream of Rhode Island society from the second half of 1924 onward was, in essence, a product of the way that people talked about the Klan. Newspapers across the political spectrum, in a seeming attempt at journalistic neutrality,

reported on the social activities of the Klan much as they would any other fraternal organization, in essence depicting the Klan as a fairly standard, if occasionally political, organization. This was a public image which local Klan groups were particularly interested in cultivating, as is made clear by their ties to various community mainstays, especially Protestant churches. This figuring of the Klan in public discourse as a standard fraternal order had real consequences, particularly in masking the hateful and violent words and actions of local Klan members and groups. Public discourse helped create the Klan as an ordinary part of the community, masking the violence in its rhetoric and, sometimes, in its actions.

In the epilogue, I briefly attend to the ways in which this figuring of the Klan as an ordinary fraternal organization ultimately contributed to the hooded order's downfall. As its mysteriousness and novelty dissipated, the Klan lost its sheen in the public eye. While a major scandal involving the Klan in 1928 briefly revived interest in the hooded order, its subsequent disappearance from public media like newspapers suggests that, by the end of the 1920s, the Klan was no longer relevant to Rhode Island public life because it was no longer an interesting subject in Rhode Island public discourse. I conclude by briefly considering the lasting consequences of the Klan's onetime powerful discursive presence in Rhode Island. That impact, significant in itself, also suggests meanings for the "second Klan" as a national phenomenon.

Chapter One

“Lofty Sentiments and Noble Ideals”: Perceptions of the Klan, 1905-1923

Around the time of Christmas, 1922, worshippers in many of Rhode Island's Protestant churches might have been surprised to hear their pastors briefly digress from their celebration of the birth of Christ to offer comments on an entirely different subject, albeit one on everybody's mind: the Ku Klux Klan. On December 23rd, Rev. A. J. Watson of St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Pawtucket gave a lengthy address on the hooded order to his parishioners. Watson accused the Klan of “inspir[ing] rancor of the worst sort,” perpetuating an “anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, anti-every color but white” feeling which went against both justice and true religion.⁶⁷ Moreover, Watson argued that the Klan was fundamentally anti-American because it promised to take the enforcement of laws and morals into its own hands. The Klan went against the basic ideals on which America was founded: “Does anyone seriously believe that the broad land ‘conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal,’ ought to be the private property of white Protestants only?”⁶⁸ All this led Watson to declare that “the Ku Klux Klan has no proper place in American life” and must be defeated, not only by the civil authorities but by the efforts of all the “institutions of religion in America.”⁶⁹

Parishioners who attended Christmas Eve services at the Church of the Mediator in Providence the following day heard a similar sermon. There, the Rev. Fred C. Leining criticized the hypocrisy of an order that warned Americans to “beware of the Catholics, beware of the negroes, beware of the Jews, beware of the foreign born” and yet who “dare not unmask their faces and work in the daylight.”⁷⁰ For Leining, this “racial pride... this silly waving of flags,” this

⁶⁷ “Pawtucket Rector Attacks Ku Klux,” *Providence Journal*, Dec. 24, 1922, p. 345. NewsBank.

⁶⁸ “Pawtucket Rector Attacks Ku Klux,” *Providence Journal*, Dec. 24, 1922, p. 345. NewsBank.

⁶⁹ “Pawtucket Rector Attacks Ku Klux,” *Providence Journal*, Dec. 24, 1922, p. 345. NewsBank.

⁷⁰ “Pastor Criticizes ‘K. K. K.,’” *Providence Journal*, Dec. 25, 1922, p. 2. NewsBank.

“babbling about ‘America first,’” threatened to undermine the fragile peace established at the end of World War I.⁷¹ Describing the Klan as “a plague of narrow sectarianism,” Leining asked, “how can we have peace with this bigotry running wild?”⁷² That preachers like Watson and Leining were willing to devote time during Christmas to criticizing the Klan reflected the prominence that the Klan had come to have in Rhode Island public discourse by the end of 1922.

But Protestant clergymen and Rhode Islanders generally were not sure what to make of the Klan. Not everyone was as concerned as Watson and Leining. Rev. Gilbert E. Edgett of the State Street Methodist Episcopal Church in Bristol asked his congregation, “Is the Ku Klux Klan a Menace to American Civilization?”⁷³ The answer, Edgett concluded, was no. While Edgett agreed with the Klan’s critics that “we have no room in this country for any secret society whose members are oath-bound to interfere with the liberties of American citizens,” he argued that the Klan did not fit this description.⁷⁴ Rather, he argued that the Klan’s principles “strike a high note of patriotism,” from which he concludes that “the Klan is a society of lofty sentiments and noble ideals.”⁷⁵ He found nothing “in the writings of its critics to convince me that it is as bad as represented.”⁷⁶ Indeed, Edgett declared, the Klan may “accomplish much good in focusing public attention upon certain groups who are bent upon breaking down respect for law, [and] making a farce of justice as administered by the constituted authorities.”⁷⁷ Edgett concluded by stating that “whatever the Klan may have done in the earlier years of its history,” he had seen “no convincing

⁷¹ “Pastor Criticizes ‘K. K. K.,’” *Providence Journal*, Dec. 25, 1922, p. 2. NewsBank.

⁷² “Pastor Criticizes ‘K. K. K.,’” *Providence Journal*, Dec. 25, 1922, p. 2. NewsBank.

⁷³ “Is the K.K.K. a Menace?” *Bristol Phoenix*, Feb. 13, 1923, p. 4. Rogers Free Library Archives.

⁷⁴ “Is the K.K.K. a Menace?” *Bristol Phoenix*, Feb. 13, 1923, p. 4. Rogers Free Library Archives.

⁷⁵ “Is the K.K.K. a Menace?” *Bristol Phoenix*, Feb. 13, 1923, p. 4. Rogers Free Library Archives.

⁷⁶ “Is the K.K.K. a Menace?” *Bristol Phoenix*, Feb. 13, 1923, p. 4. Rogers Free Library Archives.

⁷⁷ “Is the K.K.K. a Menace?” *Bristol Phoenix*, Feb. 13, 1923, p. 4. Rogers Free Library Archives.

evidence” that the hooded order was anything other than a patriotic fraternity which stood for “lofty sentiments and noble ideals.”⁷⁸

The debates among Protestant clergymen like Watson, Leining, and Edgett were only one part of a much broader conversation taking place in Rhode Island society during the early years of the 1920s. At this point in time, there was not yet any evidence of open Klan activity in the state. Yet, in spite of this, the Klan was a fixture of Rhode Island’s public discourse. It seemed as though everyone wanted to talk about the Klan. Not only Protestant clergymen but fraternal organizations, newspaper editors, politicians, and leaders of the state’s Black, Catholic, and Jewish communities all had opinions to express about the hooded order. They might have disagreed about what to make of it, but they all believed that it was a subject worth discussing. No one could be ignorant of the Klan; nor could one lack some sort of opinion on it. Media that represented the Klan, such as Thomas Dixon’s play *The Clansman* and D. W. Griffith’s film *Birth of a Nation*, received both intense protest and record-breaking attendance, but they certainly did not receive indifference. Even before they had to make value judgments, Rhode Islanders were fascinated by the image of the burning cross and the hooded night rider.

At the core of this fascination was an understanding of the Klan as something mysterious, unknown, thrilling, and foreign—a fascinating phenomenon from another place and time. Rhode Islanders were captivated by the dramatic spectacle of the Klan, as depicted on stage and screen and, later, as captured in public spectacles and the news. The Klan was understood as something fundamentally foreign to Rhode Island. It was a product of white Southern pride and nostalgia; Rhode Islanders were fascinated in part because it came from such a different place and political culture than their own. Yet even as they conceptualized it as foreign, Rhode Islanders

⁷⁸ “Is the K.K.K. a Menace?” *Bristol Phoenix*, Feb. 13, 1923, p. 4. Rogers Free Library Archives.

nevertheless regarded the hooded order as something worth knowing. Black Rhode Islanders and white racists in the state took opposite positions on whether *The Clansman* and *The Birth of a Nation* should be shown in the state, but both groups knew that these spectacles would generate intense interest.

Rhode Islanders struggled to determine how exactly to interpret the Klan. They disagreed over whether the hooded order was bigoted or patriotic, moral or unjust, in support of the law or against it, foreign or familiar. But they all agreed that it was worth talking about, and in talking about it, they participated in a communal project of meaning-making. In making this claim, I argue that the public discourses which emerged surrounding the Klan throughout this period were not only descriptive and reactive responses to a phenomenon that Rhode Islanders saw on the stage, the screen, and in the newspaper. Rather, I argue that these discourses were constructive. In conceptualizing the hooded order, Rhode Islanders generated and articulated their own interpretations of what the hooded order signified. In doing so, they participated in the creation of a communal understanding of the Ku Klux Klan. That understanding contained complexities and intense contradictions, much like the hooded order itself. Ultimately, the ubiquity of the Klan in public discourse helped lay the groundwork for the Klan to develop a real presence in the state. By the end of 1923, the Ku Klux Klan had been firmly established within Rhode Island's public imaginary; it was only natural that when the Klan arrived for real, it would find a fertile environment to grow.

The “8th Wonder of the World”: The Klan on Rhode Island Stages and Screens, 1905-1917

On September 2, 1909, the *Providence Journal* reported that the Empire Theatre, a popular performance hall in the city, had booked the original production of Thomas Dixon's

famous and controversial play, *The Clansman*, for the week of September 13th. After noting that the show was a dramatization of Dixon's "well-known book" of the same title, the paper emphasized that one "feature of the performance will be the appearance of the Ku Klux Klan Cavalry of night riders."⁷⁹ This advertisement's reference to the spectacle of the Klan night riders suggests that, long before the hooded order itself came to the state, Rhode Islanders were fascinated by the Klan. It was foreign and mysterious, a strange echo of the Reconstruction South. The *Journal* advertisement suggests that even the prospect of a glimpse of the Klan night riders could be enough to entice Rhode Islanders to the show. Yet even at this point, this notion of the Klan as mere spectacle was contested. Black Rhode Islanders and their allies challenged the vision of the Klan presented in the play as one which glorified racial hatred and violence. The discourse which occurred surrounding the Providence showing of *The Clansman* and later its film adaptation, D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*, suggests that even before the hooded order had been formally revived, the Klan was already a familiar presence in Rhode Island's public imaginary.

The Clansman, published by Thomas Dixon in 1905, first as a novel and then as a play, tells the story of two white families separated by the Civil War: the Northern family of Radical Republican Congressman Austin Stoneman (a thinly veiled caricature of abolitionist leader Thaddeus Stevens), and the Southern Cameron family. The two families were to be connected by the engagement of the eldest Cameron son, Ben, to Stoneman's daughter Elsie, but after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, Stoneman's intense thirst for revenge on the defeated South drives him to keep the young lovers apart. With the assistance and encouragement of the mixed-race Silas Lynch, Stoneman tyrannically forces a program of social and political equality on the South (actually, on one community in Alabama, but Dixon implied that the plan was

⁷⁹ "'The Clansman' at the Empire," *Providence Journal*, Sept. 2, 1909, p.14. NewsBank.

intended for the whole South). Social order breaks down as Lynch and his allies work to instill in the freedpeople notions of superiority to their former masters, and good white families like the Camerons find the law unwilling to protect them from their former property. In response, Ben helps to found the Ku Klux Klan to “redeem” the South through extralegal means. Lynch’s message of social equality leads to the rising specter of miscegenation, a threat exemplified both in Flora Cameron’s suicide to avoid being assaulted by a freedman, and in Lynch’s desire to marry Elsie Stoneman. Ben’s Klan steps in to restore order, murdering the man who made advances on Flora and rescuing Elsie from Lynch. By the end of the story, the nefarious Lynch is defeated, Stoneman has seen the error of social equality, and white Democrats have been restored to power through the efforts of armed Klansmen to terrify Black people into submission. The story ends with the marriage of Elsie and Ben, symbolically reuniting North and South under the banner of white male supremacy.⁸⁰

Dixon’s writing was part of a much broader effort during this period to rewrite the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction to be more favorable to the South and, by extension, to the Ku Klux Klan. Popular works like Dixon’s began to perpetuate a narrative of the “Lost Cause” of the Confederacy as a misguided but ultimately noble attempt to preserve regional independence. In this narrative, Reconstruction represented nothing short of Northern tyranny which had to be thrown off the South by force, through groups like the Ku Klux Klan. This narrative of Reconstruction found sympathy among historians of the Dunning School, which became the dominant historiographical view on Reconstruction in the early 20th century. Dunning School historiography framed “Radical” Reconstruction as a tyrannical and illegitimate regime opposed to the defeated (white) South. In this view, the Ku Klux Klan was not insurrectionary but rather patriotic, even chivalrous. While the hooded order’s methods may have been distasteful, the

⁸⁰ Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture*, 104.

Dunningites argued, its actions saved the South—and the nation—from the Radical Republicans and their allies, the newly-enfranchised Black voters who were not ready or able to wield political power. This romantic account of masked heroes saving their society from tyranny made for good entertainment, and writers like Dixon capitalized on it.

In the early 20th century, Americans across the country, including in Rhode Island, frequently encountered this romantic narrative of the Reconstruction-era Klan on the page and the stage—and, eventually, on the silver screen. Symbols which would become so central to the aesthetic of the revived Klan in the 1920s, such as the pointed white hood and the burning cross, already had become imprinted in Americans' minds in the century's first decade. Yet, also in this early period, communities of color, led especially by newly-formed social and political organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), challenged this narrative. Black Americans denounced both fictional representations of this mythology, like Dixon's novel, as well as historical versions, like those of the Dunning School. In Rhode Island and elsewhere, Black Americans challenged accounts of Reconstruction that erased the contribution of people of color while glorifying and encouraging acts of racial violence.

Rhode Islanders had encountered this narrative of the Klan years before the stage version of *The Clansman* came to Providence. When Dixon's novel was originally published in 1905, it received a fairly lengthy review in the February 22 issue of the *Providence Journal*. As a novel, reported the *Journal*, *The Clansman* was inferior. "There is little of the artist in Mr. Dixon," the review declared.⁸¹ It described the novel as "a melodrama" with language "appropriately tawdry."⁸² Yet the *Journal* approved of the novel's political message. Even as it mocked Dixon's writing, the review was sympathetic to his criticism of Thaddeus Stevens, as represented in the

⁸¹ "Books and Authors," *Providence Journal*, Feb. 10, 1905, p. 10. NewsBank.

⁸² "Books and Authors," *Providence Journal*, Feb. 10, 1905, p. 10. NewsBank.

character of Austin Stoneman.⁸³ Maybe history was on Dixon's side, the *Journal* suggested: "History is beginning to do justice to Andrew Johnson and to realize that his policy was wise and right and that a great national danger was averted when the effort to impeach him failed."⁸⁴ In siding with Johnson and those who acquitted him, the *Journal* was, like Dixon, siding against Thaddeus Stevens and Reconstruction. As early as 1905, then, at least some Rhode Islanders were prepared to take a positive view of stories that valorized the Ku Klux Klan.

The depth of white Rhode Islanders' approval of a positive version of the Klan became clear in the state's reaction to *The Clansman*'s stage adaptation. But the dramatization also produced controversy. Rhode Island was not unique in this regard. Highly publicized stagings of *The Clansman* provoked far more excitement, and drew far greater protest, than the novel had done. In cities across the nation, North as well as South, stagings of the play provoked civil disorder and racial violence against communities of color, leading many advocates of racial equality to call for the play's censorship or suppression. Indeed, years before controversy around the play occurred in Rhode Island, the *Journal* in October 1906 expressed its approval of the prohibition of the play in Philadelphia. The censorship was "justified by the disorders its production had already incited," the paper opined.⁸⁵ According to the *Journal*, "among the many places to discuss the race problem the stage is one of the worst... especially when the discussion is carried on in the violent fashion characteristic of the Rev. Thomas Dixon."⁸⁶ Even though the *Journal* had seemed to agree with the general thrust of Dixon's historical argument, it was critical of using that argument to justify present racial violence. In this way, the *Journal*'s reaction reflected the complexity of the cultural conception of the Ku Klux Klan put forward by Dixon.

⁸³ "Books and Authors," *Providence Journal*, Feb. 10, 1905, p. 10. NewsBank.

⁸⁴ "Books and Authors," *Providence Journal*, Feb. 10, 1905, p. 10. NewsBank.

⁸⁵ "The Suppression of 'The Clansman...'" *Providence Journal*, Feb. 25, 1906, p. 10. NewsBank.

⁸⁶ "The Suppression of 'The Clansman...'" *Providence Journal*, Feb. 25, 1906, p. 10. NewsBank.

Black Rhode Islanders were the sharpest critics of Dixon's story, especially when they heard that the play was to be staged in Providence. In the days after the Empire Theatre's announcement, Providence's Black community immediately began organizing to stop the play in advance of its scheduled opening on September 13, 1909. A petition featuring the signatures of over 200 Black Providence residents was presented to Mayor Henry Fletcher on September 3, declaring that the play would produce "that deadly evil known as 'race prejudice,' which we are glad to say does not now exist in our beloved States."⁸⁷ The language of the petition echoed a letter to the editor which had recently appeared in the *Providence Journal*, penned by Rev. S. W. Smith, pastor of the historically Black Congdon Street Baptist Church in Providence. Smith's letter denounced "that race-disturbing play" and stated "we know of no city in this country where the feeling is more congenial between the two races, and where less prejudice is shown than Providence."⁸⁸ In this letter, and the subsequent petition, Smith, an important leader in Providence's Black community, chose his words carefully so as to register his opposition to the play while not antagonizing his white audience. In framing Providence as a sort of racial utopia that could only be threatened by a hateful work like *The Clansman*, Smith and other Black leaders appealed to a cultural conception of racial harmony in which the iconography of the Klan had no place.

Upon receiving the Black residents' petition, Mayor Fletcher passed it on to the Board of Police Commissioners, who agreed to hold a hearing to determine whether or not to grant the play a license to be shown.⁸⁹ In the days leading up to the hearing, the interest that the controversy had raised was only further heightened when it was announced that the author

⁸⁷ "Protest Against 'Clansman,'" *Providence Journal*, Sept. 3, 1909, p. 11. NewsBank.

⁸⁸ Rev. S. W. Smith, letter to the editor, "The Clansman," *Providence Journal*, Aug. 8, 1909, p. 17. NewsBank.

⁸⁹ "Commissioner Will Give Hearing," *Providence Journal*, Sept. 4, 1909, p. 11. NewsBank.

Thomas Dixon himself would be in attendance at the hearing in order to defend the propriety of his play. Though from the South, Dixon was well-known especially among Brown University alumni in the city, including then-Brown President William H. P. Faunce, a longtime friend of the author who planned to host Dixon while he was in the city.⁹⁰

When the hearing began on Tuesday, September 7, it was attended by a delegation of local Black citizens led by Julis L. Mitchell, by Dixon and several others involved with the production, and by a number of other citizens “whose interest,” reported the *Journal*, “did not extend to putting their signatures to the petition.”⁹¹ After three hours of public comment and deliberation, the Board of Police Commissioners voted to grant the production a provisional license to go ahead with its first show the following Monday. The Commissioners would attend the performance to “see whether or not, as asserted, there was anything in it that would tend to excite race prejudice.”⁹²

The great controversy surrounding the staging of the play only served to bring it more attention. In its review of the opening performance, the *Journal* reported that the production “was witnessed by an audience that taxed the Empire Theatre last night to its extremity in accommodations.”⁹³ The amount of attention that the production and the protest against it had garnered in the preceding days was so great the *Journal* declared that there was no need to summarize the play’s plot, as the controversy had increased sales of the novel so much that only “a very small percentage of those who will attend the performances have not read the story.”⁹⁴ The *Journal*’s review of the play was surprisingly positive, especially considering the disdain it had shown for the novel. It had only warm words for the cast, and expressed particular

⁹⁰ “Playwright to Attend Hearing,” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 6, 1909, p. 2. NewsBank.

⁹¹ “‘The Clansman’ to be Given,” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 8, 1909, p. 14. NewsBank.

⁹² “‘The Clansman’ to be Given,” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 8, 1909, p. 14. NewsBank.

⁹³ “Empire Theatre,” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 14, 1909, p. 9. NewsBank.

⁹⁴ “Empire Theatre,” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 14, 1909, p. 9. NewsBank.

admiration for its ability to create tension through an intensity with “the power to twist the nerves of the spectator into a hard knot” which would make “even the most worn nature realize the possession of a nervous system.”⁹⁵ It is darkly ironic that the *Journal* so highly praised this intensity, attributing it to “the ever-present race problem” and “the deep growl of the mob,” while at the same time proclaiming that “there is nothing about ‘The Clansman’ which goes beyond the bounds permitted by the Board of Police Commissioners.”⁹⁶ At the end of the performance, the *Journal* reported, the Board allowed the play to continue to be staged as advertised.⁹⁷ Authorities made the decision with enthusiasm, it seemed; the large print advertisement that appeared in the paper the next day announced “POLICE BOARD ENDORSES THE CLANSMAN.”⁹⁸ Although the Black petitioners filed for an injunction against further performances, their plea was rejected in Superior Court, and the play ran for its full run with great popularity.⁹⁹

The immense excitement and controversy around *The Clansman* makes clear that, years before the hooded order came to the state itself, Rhode Islanders were nonetheless fascinated by it. One element of this fascination which comes through in the discourse surrounding the play is a general belief that the spectacle being depicted on stage was foreign to contemporary Rhode Island. This was certainly the impression given by the *Journal*’s review, which found that though “painted with the brush of the period just following the Civil War,” the play “bears woven into its background the ever-present race problem *of the South*.”¹⁰⁰ The *Journal* marked the “race problem” as peculiarly Southern, even as it also commented on the protest against the play made by Providence’s Black community. For Black Rhode Islanders, this “race problem” was certainly

⁹⁵ “Empire Theatre,” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 14, 1909, p. 9. NewsBank.

⁹⁶ “Empire Theatre,” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 14, 1909, p. 9. NewsBank.

⁹⁷ “Empire Theatre,” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 14, 1909, p. 9. NewsBank.

⁹⁸ Advertisement, “Police Board Endorses The Clansman,” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 14, 1909, p. 5. NewsBank.

⁹⁹ “Case Against ‘Clansman’ Fails,” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 17, 1909, p. 12. NewsBank.

¹⁰⁰ Italics added for emphasis. “Empire Theatre,” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 14, 1909, p. 9. NewsBank.

not confined to the South, for they worried that the play would incite outbursts of racial violence in Providence. But for the *Providence Journal*, and for the many white Rhode Islanders who saw the play, the spectacle and the drama of the Klan was enhanced by the fact that it was so foreign to the state.

Some white Rhode Islanders, however, found *The Clansman*'s depiction of the Ku Klux Klan to be extremely relevant even in the North. In a striking letter to the editor of the *Journal*, a young H. P. Lovecraft, who would later become one of Rhode Island's most famous authors, praised the Police Commission and the Court for permitting "the truth [to] be publicly shown and spoken"—the "truth" that "we must never, under any circumstances, at any time, or in any place, again allow the negro, with his dark ancestry of innumerable centuries of savagery, to become in any way a political power, or to hold any office whatsoever over persons of the superior Aryan race."¹⁰¹ To Lovecraft, "race prejudice" was the "essential instinct for the preservation of the purity and distinction of races."¹⁰² It was necessary so America would not "degenerate into a puny brood of mulattoes."¹⁰³ "To 'uplift' the blacks in masses to our level is impossible," Lovecraft declared, since "ethnology, even more than history, shows us that the African has still far to progress in the upward trend of natural evolution before he can call the Aryan 'brother.'"¹⁰⁴ Lovecraft offered particular praise for the Ku Klux Klan, "an organization of Honor, Chivalry, Humanity, Mercy and Patriotism, to protect the weak, innocent and oppressed" from the "hideous

¹⁰¹ H. P. Lovecraft, letter to the editor, "'The Clansman's' Other Side," *Providence Journal*, Sept. 26, 1909, p. 18. NewsBank.

¹⁰² H. P. Lovecraft, letter to the editor, "'The Clansman's' Other Side," *Providence Journal*, Sept. 26, 1909, p. 18. NewsBank.

¹⁰³ H. P. Lovecraft, letter to the editor, "'The Clansman's' Other Side," *Providence Journal*, Sept. 26, 1909, p. 18. NewsBank.

¹⁰⁴ H. P. Lovecraft, letter to the editor, "'The Clansman's' Other Side," *Providence Journal*, Sept. 26, 1909, p. 18. NewsBank.

and unspeakable terrors of the black peril.”¹⁰⁵ A white person who denounced the Klan was, to Lovecraft, “no very staunch friend of his race, nor of his country.”¹⁰⁶ For Lovecraft and others, the image of the Klan painted by *The Clansman* was positive and necessary. Rhode Islanders, in Lovecraft’s view, had much to learn from the production.

Yet even as Rhode Islanders like Lovecraft enthusiastically embraced *The Clansman*’s portrait of the hooded order, Black Rhode Islanders and their allies strongly contested this narrative and constructed their own image of the Klan. Even after their defeat in court, Providence’s Black leaders continued writing letters to the editor denouncing the play.¹⁰⁷ In a sermon at the Congdon Street Baptist Church, Rev. S. W. Smith described the production as a “nefarious drama” which “maligned, slandered and misrepresented” people of color.¹⁰⁸ In his address, he declared that “any effort on the part of anyone to discourage the blacks in their lofty undertaking to ameliorate their conditions should be bitterly condemned.”¹⁰⁹ A few days later, Rev. Smith presided at a mass meeting held at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, where he spoke alongside several other Black community leaders and former mayor P. J. McCarthy, criticizing the Police Commissioners for their decision and current Mayor Fletcher for his unwillingness to challenge it despite his belief that the play was “lacking in moral wholesomeness.”¹¹⁰

As it voted to denounce Providence’s city officials, the meeting expressed its gratitude to Mayor Patrick J. Boyle of Newport, Rhode Island’s second capital until only a few years earlier. In response to the protest of some of the leading Black citizens of the rich coastal city, Newport’s

¹⁰⁵ H. P. Lovecraft, letter to the editor, “‘The Clansman’s’ Other Side,” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 26, 1909, p. 18. NewsBank.

¹⁰⁶ H. P. Lovecraft, letter to the editor, “‘The Clansman’s’ Other Side,” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 26, 1909, p. 18. NewsBank.

¹⁰⁷ J. L. Witten, letter to the editor, “‘The Clansman,’” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 19, 1909, p. 18. NewsBank.

¹⁰⁸ “Condemns ‘The Clansman,’” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 20, 1909, p. 6. NewsBank.

¹⁰⁹ “Condemns ‘The Clansman,’” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 20, 1909, p. 6. NewsBank.

¹¹⁰ “City Officials Denounced,” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 21, 1909, p. 3. NewsBank.

Board of Aldermen had voted unanimously to deny a license for the play to be shown at the Newport Opera house. Even when petitioned by representatives of the production for the Aldermen to attend a performance before making a final decision, Newport's city officials stood firm.¹¹¹

The controversy reemerged on an entirely new scale with the release of D. W. Griffith's epic film adaptation of Dixon's novel, *The Birth of a Nation*, in 1915. It is difficult to overstate the impact of Griffith's film. A technical marvel which revolutionized early filmmaking, *Birth* was the longest and most expensive film to date, and audiences across the country flocked to see it; by one historian's estimate, over one hundred million people had seen the film by 1926.¹¹² This number included President Woodrow Wilson. The first movie ever to be shown in the White House, Wilson was reported to have commented afterwards, "it is like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true."¹¹³

Birth of a Nation, like the stage production of *The Clansman* before it, produced controversy wherever it was to be shown as local citizens, particularly those of color, protested against its glorification of white supremacist Klansmen willing to commit violence against Black Americans. Following intense controversy over early showings of the film in Boston and elsewhere, the Board of Police Commissioners in Providence initially declined to allow the film to be screened in the city after a protest was lodged by "a society of colored people in the city."¹¹⁴ The Board declared that it did "not intend to allow anything presented here that will tend to corrupt the morals of youth, that shows and exploits crime, or that affects race or creed."¹¹⁵ The *Providence Journal* seemed to approve of this decision, stating that although "considerable

¹¹¹ "Newport Bars 'The Clansman,'" *Providence Journal*, Sept. 17, 1909, p. 1. NewsBank.

¹¹² Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture*, 104.

¹¹³ Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 11.

¹¹⁴ "'Birth of a Nation' Not to be Shown in this City," *Providence Journal*, Apr. 28, 1915, p. 9. NewsBank.

¹¹⁵ "'Birth of a Nation' Not to be Shown in this City," *Providence Journal*, Apr. 28, 1915, p. 9. NewsBank.

disappointment was felt by many Providence movie fans” at the news of the ban, Providence was only one of many cities which had found that “it carries with it a great injustice to the colored race.”¹¹⁶

A few months later, however, the Board of Police Commissioners changed its mind and agreed to allow the film, with certain scenes cut, to be shown at the Providence Opera House.¹¹⁷ The immediate success of the film, it seems, had made it impossible for the Board to keep it from the public. Ads in the *Journal* in the days leading up to the film’s August 16th premiere in the city spoke of the film as the “8th WONDER OF THE WORLD,” the “Most Tremendous, Marvellous Dramatic Spectacle Man’s Brain Ever Conceived,” “THE GREAT AMERICAN PLAY AT LAST,” and “A DRAMATIC TRIUMPH, DWARFING ALL RECORDS.”¹¹⁸ One ad informed readers: “It Will be to Your Lifelong Regret if You Miss This.”¹¹⁹

The advertisements had their desired effect. Providence audiences flocked to see *Birth of a Nation*. In a rave review, the *Journal* declared that “the picture as a whole is tremendous, the story is gripping, the photography superb... the detail perfect and scenery splendid.”¹²⁰ This review accepted the critique of Reconstruction which was central to the film. The reviewer wrote that “as history the picture sets the North right concerning some phases of the activities in the South in carpet bagging days after the war,” and even admired “its controversial spirit’ as one of its “great outstanding features.”¹²¹

The *Journal*’s reviewer was not the only person to find the film to be outstanding. The Providence Opera House was filled to capacity for two showings a day for the entirety of the

¹¹⁶ “‘Misuse of History’ in Films,” *Providence Journal*, May 23, 1915, p. 41. NewsBank.

¹¹⁷ “Colored People Protest Photoplay,” *Providence Journal*, Aug. 11, 1915, p. 14. NewsBank.

¹¹⁸ Advertisement, “The Birth of a Nation,” *Providence Journal*, Aug. 15, 1915, p. 34. NewsBank.

¹¹⁹ Advertisement, “The Birth of a Nation,” *Providence Journal*, Aug. 15, 1915, p. 34. NewsBank.

¹²⁰ “Providence Opera House,” *Providence Journal*, Aug. 17, 1915, p. 13. NewsBank.

¹²¹ “Providence Opera House,” *Providence Journal*, Aug. 17, 1915, p. 13. NewsBank.

film's original three-week run. The theater ended up extending its run by two weeks, declaring that it wanted "to give the people of Providence an opportunity to see the very latest epoch-making production."¹²² The Opera House booked the film for a return engagement in May of the following year, and the Providence Hippodrome booked it for November.¹²³ A new theater that opened in Pawtucket in February of 1916 declared that *Birth of a Nation* would be the first film it would show.¹²⁴ This record-breaking success showed the popularity of the film, and revealed the extent of Rhode Islanders' readiness to imbibe tales of the Klan, including heroic ones.

The impact of *The Clansman* and *The Birth of a Nation* on the Rhode Island public imaginary is perhaps best exemplified by a curious anecdote which appeared in the *Journal* of November 1, 1915, a few months after *Birth's* original run in Providence. In a report on a youth Halloween party hosted the night before by the Young People's Society of the Hope Congregational Church in East Providence, the reporter mentioned that "Allen Usher, Harold Wood, and William Kirkpatrick in Ku Klux Klan costumes made a decided hit."¹²⁵ Almost certainly, the recent screenings of the film had inspired the costumes. While today such costumes would be recognized as hateful, and surely would have been seen as such by Black Rhode Islanders of the time, for the wearers they were primarily objects of spectacle. *Birth of a Nation* was the most widely seen film of its time, and it was wildly entertaining. The Klan scenes, with their depiction of mysterious masked night-riding vigilantes, were no small part of this. It is this conversion of the Klan from an actual hate group to a heroic spectacle that created the cultural milieu in which young men could deem it acceptable to dress up as Klansmen for their church

¹²² "Theatrical Note," *Providence Journal*, Aug. 20, 1915, p. 15. NewsBank.

¹²³ "The Birth of a Nation," *Providence Journal*, May 28, 1916, p. 41; "Providence Hippodrome," *Providence Journal*, Nov. 29, 1916, p. 10. NewsBank.

¹²⁴ "New Pawtucket Theatre," *Providence Journal*, Feb. 20, 1916, p. 41. NewsBank.

¹²⁵ "Halloween Party," *Providence Journal*, Nov. 1, 1915, p. 7. NewsBank.

Halloween party. In the wake of *The Clansman* and *Birth of a Nation*, the figure of the hooded Klansman had become a recognizable symbol in the Rhode Island public consciousness. And for many white Rhode Islanders, it was a symbol of value-free spectacle only, rather than a symbol of racial hatred and violence.

“Utterly Repugnant to American Institutions”: The Klan in the Rhode Island News

In November 1915, only two months after *The Birth of a Nation* had its first record-breaking engagement in Rhode Island, William Joseph Simmons founded the new, “second” national Ku Klux Klan. By the 1920s, Rhode Islanders were paying attention to the new organization. The November 14, 1920 edition of the *Journal* featured a haunting photograph of hundreds of Klansmen in white hoods and robes standing under the night sky on Stone Mountain, Georgia, the site where Simmons’s new Klan had been inaugurated. Beneath the image was the caption: “the Klan has been resurrected in nine southern States and its activities are the subject of much speculation.”¹²⁶ No further information was provided as to what those activities were, or even what they were speculated to be. The order’s newly defined and promulgated ideology, although essential to its “resurrection,” was not important, either to the *Journal* or, it seems, to its readers. The power of the image itself—the spectacle of the Klan, rather than its meaning—was the emphasis.

A similar focus on spectacle characterizes another article that appeared in the *Journal* a few weeks later, describing the silent parade of 200 masked Klansmen in Jacksonville, Florida. Although the article did mention Simmons’s announcement of the Klan’s desire to uphold white supremacy, this element of the story appears as an afterthought. The focus, again, was on image: the irresistible spectacle of hundreds of white hooded figures marching through town under the

¹²⁶ “A Midnight Session of the Ku Klux Klan,” *Providence Journal*, Nov. 14, 1920, p. 70. NewsBank.

light of a burning cross.¹²⁷ In each of these instances, the version of the Klan constructed by the *Journal* was aesthetic rather than ideological, a dramatic show rather than a vehicle for the violent reinforcement of white supremacy.

As the hooded order continued to spread across the nation, and as its actions became far more visible, press coverage of the Klan in Rhode Island began to shift from a focus on the organization's aesthetics to its actions. Yet even as the nature of coverage shifted in this way, the Rhode Island press was still primarily interested in the Klan as an object of fascination. It was exotic and mysterious, a fascinating phenomenon that happened elsewhere, and readers could not get enough of it. Flipping through the pages of the *Providence Journal* from the beginning of 1921 onward, it is remarkable how frequently stories about the Klan appear in the *Journal*, yet they appear almost exclusively as scenes from parts of the country far from Rhode Island. In 1921-1922, the *Journal* closely followed confrontations between the Klan, local communities, and law enforcement in Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, California, Kentucky, Kansas, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and elsewhere, sourced mostly from the Associated Press network. Stories about the national Klan organization, and especially federal probes into its endeavors, received particular emphasis, often appearing on the front page. When the U.S. House of Representatives conducted its investigation into the activities of the Invisible Empire in October of 1921—primarily in response to the *New York World's* widely-syndicated exposé series the month before—reports of the investigation's progress made the front page of the *Providence Journal* almost daily. Importantly, the Klan was fascinating to Rhode Islanders in part because it was a phenomenon that was always elsewhere; as Congress was preparing to begin its investigation,

¹²⁷ "Ku Klux Klan, White Clad, Silently Parades Streets of Jacksonville," *Providence Journal*, 12/23/1920, p. 5. NewsBank.

local Bureau of Investigation agents, Post Office inspectors, and the U.S. District Attorney for the state each confirmed that they had heard nothing of any Klan presence in Rhode Island.¹²⁸

Although the incidents upon which it was reporting were not local, the *Journal* did not fail to make its editorial stance on the Klan issue clear. In reporting on the efforts of state and local officials to curtail the growing influence of the hooded order in Kansas and Louisiana, the *Journal's* editors took a stance of unambiguous opposition to the Klan. On November 1, 1922, for example, they declared that Kansas Governor Henry Justin Allen's anti-Klan stance was "fundamentally sound" because the "country cannot afford to permit any irresponsible society to pass upon-questions of law and, disguised by sheets and masks, inflict penalties upon those who have incurred its displeasure."¹²⁹ The *Journal's* opposition was not solely on the basis of the Klan's methods, for it also attacked the order's ideology: "The Constitution of the United States provides for tolerance in religion and discriminates against no race of man... the procedure of the Klan is un-American."¹³⁰ In another editorial three weeks later, the *Journal* reaffirmed that "the character of the Ku Klux Klan is utterly repugnant to American institutions," and cautioned that while "we have heard comparatively little of the Ku Klux Klan in this part of the country," it would become a force in the region "if it is not properly and sharply repressed."¹³¹ For the *Journal*, the sensational attention given to the Klan by it and other papers was necessary to combat an organization that "works in the dark, literally as well as figuratively."¹³² Even as it argued that the Klan was harmful and un-American, the *Journal* participated in the construction of an image of the Klan which would be lurid and fascinating to readers.

¹²⁸ "Ku Klan Activities Here Not Under Investigation," *Providence Journal*, Sept. 23, 1921, p. 4. NewsBank.

¹²⁹ "Kansas and the Ku Klux Klan," *Providence Journal*, Nov. 1, 1922, p. 15. NewsBank.

¹³⁰ "Kansas and the Ku Klux Klan," *Providence Journal*, Nov. 1, 1922, p. 15. NewsBank.

¹³¹ "Louisiana's Appeal," *Providence Journal*, Nov. 24, 1922, p. 14. NewsBank.

¹³² "Louisiana's Appeal," *Providence Journal*, Nov. 24, 1922, p. 14. NewsBank.

The *Journal* was neither the only Rhode Island paper to report on the Klan nor the only one to opine about it. Throughout the early years of the 1920s, the *Westerly Sun* often published stories of the hooded order with editorial commentary. In one editorial entitled “DEATH BY LAUGHTER,” the *Sun* offered its own program for defeating the Klan: ridicule. In the view of the *Sun*, any organization, but particularly groups like the Knights of Columbus or the NAACP which were particularly loathed by the Klan, that treated the hooded order as though it were a serious threat would only end up assisting the Klan by creating the appearance of “a fight of equals against each other.”¹³³ Far from endorsing the *Journal*’s program of giving the Klan constant attention in order to expose it, the *Sun* expressed concern that such behavior would only result in making the Klan seem far more credible and legitimate than it really was. If, on the other hand, the Klan was ignored, “the American people will probably laugh the Klan to an early death,” since “no organization formed for deep, dark designs can stand ridicule.”¹³⁴ Yet even as the *Sun* ridiculed the Klan’s “Kleagles, Klexters, Kloran, Klaverns, Goblins, etc.,” it was not entirely dismissive of the hooded order’s ideology.¹³⁵ Though it denounced the order’s actions, the *Sun* acknowledged that “the Klan has many honest defenders, who maintain that it stands for American principles and the maintenance of law and order.”¹³⁶ Nonetheless, the *Sun*, like the *Journal*, declared that the Klan’s subversion of the constituted authorities was “plainly un-American whatever the motive may be.”¹³⁷ As the Klan became more and more of a significant national force, Rhode Islanders paid close attention to it through the coverage in papers like the *Journal* and the *Sun*. They did not agree on how exactly to interpret the hooded

¹³³ “Death by Laughter,” *Westerly Sun*, Oct. 3, 1921, p. 4. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

¹³⁴ “Death by Laughter,” *Westerly Sun*, Oct. 3, 1921, p. 4. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

¹³⁵ “Death by Laughter,” *Westerly Sun*, Oct. 3, 1921, p. 4. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

¹³⁶ “The Klan in Louisiana,” *Westerly Sun*, Nov. 27, 1922, p. 4. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

¹³⁷ “The Klan in Louisiana,” *Westerly Sun*, Nov. 27, 1922, p. 4. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

order. But they did agree that it was sensational and interesting, a spectacle worth paying attention to.

“A Society of Lofty Sentiments and Noble Ideals”: The Public Debates the Klan

Efforts in Rhode Island to make sense of the Klan also took place outside of the pages of newspapers. Across the state, civic organizations of various sorts were debating what to make of the order. This was particularly true in two centers of community social life during this period: churches and fraternal orders. These two sites were particularly relevant to the Klan, as they were sites for recruitment. Traveling Kleagles would often strive to make connections in Protestant churches. They would especially try to bring the ministers of Protestant churches (particularly Baptists and Methodists) into the hooded order, under the assumption that they would bring their flocks with them. Fraternal orders were also a significant part of the recruiting strategies of many Kleagles. Simmons himself was involved in many different fraternal societies, and he intentionally modeled the Klan’s rituals on those of older groups, particularly the Masons. Traveling Kleagles would often initially disclose their membership in other fraternal orders to build trust, eventually pitching the Klan as just another community organization. Considering how churches and fraternal societies in Rhode Island responded to the growing specter of the Klan thus provides insights into how the Klan—whether the actual Klan or its specter—was constructed in the Rhode Island public imaginary.

During the early 1920s, both the clergy and the lay faithful of Rhode Island frequently shared their thoughts on the hooded order in sermons and speeches. Some of those who were most willing to discuss the Klan were, of course, the order’s stated enemies, especially Catholics and Jews. Speaking in the largely immigrant community of Pawtucket, Catholic Bishop William

Hickey decried recent nativist attempts by Klansmen and their ilk to paint Catholics as not real Americans. He mentioned the Klan in particular as an organization which “we have no fear of” because “you are all American citizens”; indeed, he expressed his faith that “wherever the work of the Roman Catholic Church is understood she will not only be admired but loved for her accomplishments.”¹³⁸ Rhode Island’s small Jewish community also took an explicit stand against the Klan. In a gathering at the Providence-Biltmore Hotel, Rabbi Harry Levy cautioned his listeners of a rising wave of anti-Semitism of which the Ku Klux Klan, having “grown by leaps and bounds... and reached the North,” was a significant part.¹³⁹

The religious groups that were the specific targets of the Klan were not the only ones expressing their opinions on the hooded order’s rapid growth. As was discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Protestant clergymen fiercely debated what to make of the new Klan. While clergymen like the Rev. A. J. Watson of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church or the Rev. Fred C. Leining of the Church of the Mediator denounced the Klan as anti-American and anti-Christian, others, such as the Rev. Gilbert E. Edgett of State Street M. E. Church, offered far more sympathetic views of the organization. It is worth noting that different Protestant denominations had different feelings towards the Klan. Edgett preached at a Methodist church, a denomination the Klan considered particularly sympathetic. On the other hand, Watson and Leining’s churches were Episcopalian, a denomination that the Klan placed less emphasis on its recruiting. In general, the white Protestants the Klan targeted were divided over how to interpret the hooded order.

Fraternal orders, too, were divided about the Klan. Some societies in Rhode Island took a strong and immediate stance against the Invisible Empire. The state branch of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, for example, an Irish Catholic fraternal organization, declared in a September

¹³⁸ “Pawtucket Drops Spirit of Gayety to Give Thanks for Divine Guidance,” *Providence Journal*, Oct. 10, 1921, p. 1, 4. NewsBank.

¹³⁹ “Rabbi Urges Jews to Work Together,” *Providence Journal*, Oct. 17, 1922, p. 33. NewsBank.

1921 resolution that “the Ku Klux Klan represents a few mean and bigoted persons who are trying to stir up religious and racial hatred in this country.”¹⁴⁰ That the Hibernians stood opposed to the Klan is not surprising, given their close association with Rhode Island’s community of first- or second-generation Irish Catholic immigrants. More surprising was the opposition to the Klan in the sorts of benevolent and patriotic societies it was targeting for recruitment. In spite of William Simmons’s close association with Freemasonry, Rhode Island Masons followed the lead of many of their brothers across the Northeast in emphatically denouncing the Klan and all that it stood for, agreeing with the Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts that the Klan’s “avowed principles violate Masonic law at every point and it would be impossible for me to conceive of a Mason who could so far forget his Masonic teachings as to affiliate with an organization which advocates taking the law into its own hands.”¹⁴¹ Similar sentiments were expressed by the Providence Lodge of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, decrying the “dark cloud of religious and racial intolerance, the Ku Klux Klan, which threatens to destroy the religious and political liberty of our citizenship and strikes at the foundations of our government.”¹⁴² As Kleagles recruited heavily from fraternal societies like the Masons and the Elks elsewhere in the country, these societies stood staunchly against the hooded order in Rhode Island.

Although the state’s fraternal societies stood mostly against the Invisible Empire, veterans’ organizations—especially the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars—had far more complex relationships with the hooded order. It is not shocking that this might be the case; after all, patriotism was the defining feature of these organizations, and the Klan framed

¹⁴⁰ “Rhode Island Hibernians Denounce Ku Klux Klan,” *Providence Journal*, Sept. 29, 1921, p. 4. NewsBank.

¹⁴¹ “Un-Masonic as Well as Un-American,” *Newport Mercury and Weekly News*, June 24, 1922, p. 4. Newspapers.com.

¹⁴² “Elks Hold Annual Memorial Service,” *Providence Journal*, Dec. 4, 1922, p. 12. NewsBank.

itself as a strongly patriotic organization devoted to “100% Americanism.” Yet even veterans’ organizations were not sure what to make of the Klan at first, and they came to radically different conclusions about the hooded order. In early 1923, the Pawtucket and Cranston posts of the Veterans of Foreign Wars each denounced the Klan.¹⁴³ In Newport a year later, however, an officer of the local VFW post was implicated in attempts to found a Klavern in that city.¹⁴⁴ The officer in question was condemned by his post, but his involvement with the Klan suggests ambiguity as to how the VFW stood in relation to the hooded order.¹⁴⁵ The American Legion was also unsure of its position in relation to the Klan, and different posts expressed different views. In Coventry, later a hotbed of Klan activity, the local Legion post voted down a resolution to condemn the hooded order.¹⁴⁶ In Newport, on the other hand, Legionnaires nearly started a riot in order to break up a Klan meeting happening in the city.¹⁴⁷

Later, civic organizations like churches, fraternal orders, and veterans’ organizations would come to be actively involved in the story of the Rhode Island Klan, both with and against it. In the early 1920s, however, these groups were still trying to figure out where to stake their positions. What was clear, however, was that the Klan was not something that could be ignored. Everywhere where Rhode Islanders gathered—at the theater, the newsstand, church, or social halls—people seemed to be talking about the Ku Klux Klan. By 1923, the hooded order and its symbols—the pointed white hood and the burning cross—had been fixed in Rhode Island’s public imaginary. The Klan’s ubiquitous presence in public discourse would soon set the stage for rumors of an open invasion of the state by the Invisible Empire.

¹⁴³ “Pawtucket,” *Providence Journal*, Jan. 6, 1923, p. 8. NewsBank.

¹⁴⁴ “Watson Called to Explain Newport ‘Athletic Meeting,’” *Providence Journal*, Mar. 3, 1924, p. 5. NewsBank.

¹⁴⁵ “Newport Vets Vote to Expel Judge Advocate,” *Providence Journal*, Mar. 4, 1924, p. 4. NewsBank.

¹⁴⁶ “Coventry Legion upholds Ku Klux Klan,” *Providence Journal*, Mar. 5, 1924, p. 2. NewsBank.

¹⁴⁷ “Newport Aroused by ‘Klan’ Session,” *Providence Journal*, 3/1/1924, p. 1-2. NewsBank.

Chapter Two

“Exposure of the News”: The Klan and the Rhode Island Press, 1924

February 18, 1924. The state of Rhode Island was about to be invaded. According to the local papers, secret meetings and lectures had been held across the state with increasing frequency in recent weeks. Although no attendee had been willing to talk yet, the papers suspected that the gatherings were being held under the auspices of the Ku Klux Klan, which was trying to incorporate Rhode Island into its “Invisible Empire.” At least one journalist, John McKeown, thought that the story had merit. On the night of February 18, McKeown, who was also a state representative from West Warwick, had been dispatched by the *Providence News* to investigate a rumor that the Ku Klux Klan was holding secret meetings in Coventry. The humble Odd Fellows’ Hall, located in the small Coventry village of Anthony, did not look much like the headquarters of a dangerous, insurrectionary organization of hate. But McKeown knew that looks can be deceiving. He went to investigate.

Straining to see in the dim light, McKeown counted the automobiles parked in front of the hall. Nearly twenty-five. Too many. Trying to stay out of the glow from the hall, he crept forward with his notepad and started copying down as many license plate numbers as he could. All of a sudden, he heard a shout, and all the lights went dark. He had been spotted. Before he got a chance to flee the scene, McKeown found himself cornered by a group of men who came running out of the hall. When he saw the men approaching, he was surprised to find that they were some of Coventry’s most prominent figures, including several police constables, Chief of Police William B. Longridge, and Town Clerk Peter Beaton. Taking hold of McKeown and snatching the pad out of his hands, Chief Longridge told two of his attending constables to place the reporter under arrest until he could “find out what he was doing around here.” McKeown had the

same question for his captors, who dodged the question; Chief Longridge told the reporter that “It is none of your affairs,” while Constable James Albro told him “that’s for you to find out.” Longridge claimed that it was necessary to hold McKeown until his identity could be verified, but the reporter suspected that the police chief was really just buying time for his fellow Klansmen to escape out the back.

After a while, the chief tore the top few pages off McKeown’s notepad, shoved the now-blank notepad back into the newsman’s hands, and told him to go. When he was successfully away from the mysterious gathering, McKeown smiled and drew from his pocket a sheet of paper. Before Chief Longridge had confiscated the notepad, the reporter had ripped off the top sheet and stuffed it in his pocket. Looking at the list of license plate numbers, the reporter was already plotting his visit to the Rhode Island State Board of Public Roads to determine the owners of the cars. This would make one hell of a story.¹⁴⁸

The story that appeared in the *Providence News* the next day—“Coventry Added to Domain of the Invisible Empire of the K. K. K., Meeting Broken Up by Reporter”—was meant to be sensational, but readers would not have found it particularly unusual. In the early months of 1924, the growing strength of the Ku Klux Klan was a common topic in Rhode Island’s newspapers. Every day, readers could sit back and read lurid accounts of mysterious meetings, strange rituals, and violent confrontations. Reporters like John McKeown injected themselves into the stories as the daring investigators who were putting themselves in harm’s way to make the “Invisible Empire” invisible no longer. The *News* declared its intention to crush in its infancy an order which it found “as respectable as a plague-infested rat that has to be driven into a

¹⁴⁸ “Coventry Added to Domain of the Invisible Empire of the K.K.K. Meeting Broken Up by Reporter,” *Providence News*, Feb. 19, 1924, 1-2. Rhode Island Historical Society.

sewer.”¹⁴⁹ The paper was engaged in the most active form of muckraking: investigative intervention. The method was part of a larger trend by which the media in the state brought public attention to the Klan.

Yet the results of this trend on Rhode Islanders’ perceptions of the Klan were not wholly clear. Did these reports convince Rhode Islanders that the Klan was a large, sinister organization which possessed real power? Or did it merely make them think of the Klan as a strange but harmless curiosity? Did everyone who read these articles oppose the Klan’s principles? Or were there those Rhode Islanders who read of the Klan’s exploits with an open or even sympathetic mind? In any case, it is clear that by the spring of 1924, the Klan—something that had been on Rhode Islanders’ minds for years—had been brought to the forefront of their attention, so close they could touch it.

In his recent study of the Invisible Empire in 1920s popular culture, Felix Harcourt asserts that the Klan captured the imagination of Americans nationwide. Regardless of its numerical strength, Harcourt argues, the Klan possessed “broad cultural power.”¹⁵⁰ Across the country, exposés that claimed to reveal the truth of the Klan’s mysterious rituals and violent illegal activities were some of the best-selling stories of the 1920s.¹⁵¹ Whether they loved or loathed the Klan, Americans wanted to know everything they could about it. The Rhode Island public was no exception. Even before there was anything like an accurate assessment of the Klan’s presence in the state, the Invisible Empire was at the top of many Rhode Islanders’ minds. As we saw in the previous chapter, fraternal and patriotic orders debated the hooded order’s merits as pastors expressed their admiration of its dedication to “traditional Protestant morality.”

¹⁴⁹ “Rhode Island Ku Klux,” *Providence News*, Feb. 20, 1924. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁵⁰ Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture*, 6-7.

¹⁵¹ Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture*, 12.

Above all, the editors of the states' most prominent newspapers made their opinions known, frequently commenting on Klan activity in states near and far.

This fascination only grew when it became apparent to the residents of the Ocean State that there were actual Klansmen in their midst. It seemed as though everybody had something to say about the Klan. Statements and comments quickly emerged from many of the state's most prominent religious and fraternal organizations, as well as from many state and local politicians, almost uniformly denouncing the hooded order. Such statements accompanied the variety of reports, exposés, and editorials on the Klan which populated the pages of the many local newspapers. Yet, the efforts by the press to destroy the Klan may have had the opposite effect. As media coverage of the Klan increased, so too did its prevalence at the forefront of public discourse—and so did its membership and its prominence in Rhode Island's public life. The age-old adage that “any publicity is good publicity” seemed to be true for the Klan in Rhode Island. In framing the order as a significant threat which must be dealt with immediately, papers like the *News* helped to generate further public fascination with the hooded order. As more and more Rhode Islanders entered the public conversation about the Klan, a growing number became attracted to the organization, especially its ideology of “100% Americanism.” As the Rhode Island press sought to destroy the local Klan, then, they ultimately helped to create it.

“Successful Efforts”: Early Reports of Klan Activity

As the previous chapter discussed, in the first few years of the 1920s, Rhode Islanders were interested in the second Ku Klux Klan, but they thought of it mainly as an organization that existed somewhere else. When local political, civic, and religious leaders spoke about the Klan—often but not always denouncing it—they treated the actions of the Klan as foreign to the

state. Indeed, this foreignness was part of what gave it its appeal as an object of fascination. White Rhode Islanders could look upon the hooded order as something mysterious and exotic; even when they read scary stories of its activities, that fear was titillating rather than serious, because it was far off. Sergeant Joseph Armstrong of the Woonsocket police department seemed to represent the general view of the local community when he declared that “there is no fear from the Ku Klux Klan here so far.”¹⁵²

Yet even in those initial days, some had begun to consider the possibility that the Klan could eventually come to Rhode Island. As early as September 1921, rumors were circulating in the southern part of the state that the Klan was trying to find a foothold on Block Island, a small island located some thirteen miles off the coast. Although the island had a small year-round population—the 1920 census reported only 1,038 residents in the town of New Shoreham, coterminous with the island—the *Newport Mercury* reported that there were active recruitment efforts going on: “a number of the fishermen have been approached and it is understood that the local representative of the Klan... has succeeded in corraling a goodly number of ten dollar notes for the National Association.”¹⁵³ “Several midnight meetings of a mysterious nature” had occurred for which “the Chief suspects the Klan,” and the police had been ordered to “keep a watchful eye for any further activity on the part of the White Devils.”¹⁵⁴ About a year later, the *Mercury* reported another rumor that “a local organization to be known as the Klansmen is about to make its debut within the town of New Shoreham some time within the next few weeks.”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² “Police Disregard ‘Klan Scare’ Here,” *Providence Journal*, Jan. 18, 1923, p. 9. NewsBank.

¹⁵³ U.S. Census Bureau, “Population: Rhode Island: Number of Inhabitants, by Counties and Minor Civil Divisions,” 1920 Census Bulletin, U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC, 1920, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1920/bulletins/demographics/population-ri-number-of-inhabitants.pdf>. “Ku-Klux Klan on Block Island,” *Newport Mercury and Weekly News*, Sept. 24, 1921, p. 4. Newspapers.com.

¹⁵⁴ “Ku-Klux Klan on Block Island,” *Newport Mercury and Weekly News*, Sept. 24, 1921, p. 4. Newspapers.com.

¹⁵⁵ “To Organize Klansmen,” *Newport Mercury and Weekly News*, Aug. 26, 1922, p. 4. Newspapers.com.

The order was to be “a Secret Society” that would “assist the authorities in maintaining law and order,” although the paper was unsure whether “the Klansmen will eventually join forces with the National Ku Klux Klan.”¹⁵⁶ In spite of these rumors, no Klan organization seems to have materialized on Block Island. They do suggest, however, that, even as they conceptualized the Klan as something utterly foreign, Rhode Islanders also understood it as something which might be among them.

By the fall of 1923, public perception had begun to turn, as Rhode Islanders were forced to acknowledge the possibility that the Klan had arrived or would soon arrive in the state. On October 19th, the Democratic state central committee warned that the Klan was engaged in “successful efforts” to recruit Rhode Islanders to the hooded order, particularly in rural Washington County.¹⁵⁷ That the report took the form of a warning from Democrats might seem odd, in that the Democratic Party was the political organization which was traditionally allied with the hooded order. But the partnership between the Democrats and the Klan was primarily a southern phenomenon. In Rhode Island, as in many northeastern states, the Democratic Party’s primary constituents were urban immigrants, especially Irish Catholics, who, far from being fans of the Klan, were usually targets of its scorn. The *Providence News* served as the party’s mouthpiece in Rhode Island’s largest city. In emphasizing the second Klan’s recruitment efforts specifically in rural, Protestant, predominantly Republican Washington County, the *News* and Rhode Island Democrats sought to associate the order with the opposition Republican Party. This Democratic strategy of using anti-Klan rhetoric against their Republican opponents was part of local Democratic leaders’ efforts to break the Grand Old Party’s hold on state politics.

¹⁵⁶ “To Organize Klansmen,” *Newport Mercury and Weekly News*, Aug. 26, 1922, p. 4. Newspapers.com.

¹⁵⁷ Smith, “The Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island,” 36.

As 1923 drew to a close, Rhode Islanders began to discuss more visible signs of the presence of the hooded order in their midst. A November 25 editorial in the *Providence Journal* decried the “anonymous distribution of Klan literature in Rhode Island” which had apparently been occurring in recent days. The *Journal* took the occasion to state unambiguously its opposition to the hooded order, declaring that all true “hundred-per-cent Americans must set their faces resolutely against the craven practices, false logic and wicked prejudices of the uncourageous society that draws its sustenance from ignorance, illiberality and a fundamental disregard of the true doctrines of Americanism.”¹⁵⁸

A few weeks later, the issue of the distribution of Klan literature was raised again when Providence Mayor Joseph Gainer, a Democrat, drew the attention of school authorities to the circulation of supposed Klan propaganda in some city schools. The ensuing investigation revealed that a current events publication distributed to a number of classrooms had featured a report explaining the aims and objectives of the Klan. The Providence school district ceased distribution of the publication and cautioned teachers to guard against further dissemination of Klan propaganda materials in schools.¹⁵⁹ In its report on the controversy, the *Providence News* mentioned reports that Klan membership in the state had grown to 5,000, primarily concentrated in the Blackstone Valley, and that it aimed to make its influence felt in local politics.¹⁶⁰ Although the Klan had not yet publicly announced its existence in the state, by the end of 1923, Rhode Islanders had good reason to suspect that the hooded order was operating in their midst. In the coming months, their suspicions would be confirmed, as reports of Klan activity came to dominate local headlines.

¹⁵⁸ Smith, “The Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island,” 36.

¹⁵⁹ Smith, “The Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island,” 36.

¹⁶⁰ Smith, “The Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island,” 36.

“Openly Invaded”: The *Providence News* Confronts the Klan

1924 was a landmark year for the Ku Klux Klan, across the country. At the national level, the organization was ascendant; at an estimated four million members nationwide, it had become one of the largest secret societies in American history.¹⁶¹ Candidates with the tacit or explicit support of the Klan were elected to state and national office not only in the South but in Indiana, Colorado, Kentucky, Kansas, and elsewhere.¹⁶² With Klan support, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924, which dramatically limited immigration, particularly of the Southern and Eastern European Catholics and Jews whom the Klan disdained.¹⁶³ What had begun as a fringe sectional organization had become a national phenomenon. In Rhode Island, too, 1924 was the year of the Ku Klux Klan. Beginning the year as a small organization operating outside of the public eye, the Klan by the end of 1924 became a decided force. Its membership came to number in the thousands, a fact shown dramatically by the crowds that thronged to major rallies and events held throughout the state during the summer.

In early February of that year, the growing presence of the Ku Klux Klan in the state led to a resolution introduced in the state legislature by Senator John Greene of Newport that condemned the Klan and warned against the spread of its principles. The resolution was unanimously adopted by the state senate; a similar one already had passed the House of Representatives.¹⁶⁴

On February 13, only a few days after the General Assembly’s adoption of the anti-Klan resolutions, the front page of the *Providence News* was dominated by the headline “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in

¹⁶¹ Harcourt, *Ku Klux Culture*, 5.

¹⁶² Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 215

¹⁶³ Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 195.

¹⁶⁴ “Senate Passes Resolution Condemning Ku Klux Klan,” *Providence Journal*, Feb. 8, 1924, p. 2. NewsBank.

Attendance.”¹⁶⁵ “Rumors of the spread of the Klan to Rhode Island,” which had been “long current,” were at last confirmed.¹⁶⁶ The *News* put anti-Catholic bigotry at the center of Klan ideology. “From Pawtucket to Wakefield,” the paper declared, “the masked raiders of the night are holding secret meetings behind closed and bolted doors, preparing for an open assault on the free institutions of the State founded by Roger Williams as the center of freedom in thought and speech.”¹⁶⁷ As the result of a recruitment effort led by out-of-staters—the *News* claimed that Klansmen from New Jersey, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Maine were the ringleaders—Rhode Islanders were abandoning the principles of Roger Williams in exchange for the “un-American principles” of the Klan. In the *News*’s framing, the Klan was not confined to any one particular part of the state. “In Providence,” the paper reported, “at least a half dozen white-robed figures have been seen entering a manufacturing establishment near the water front late at night.”¹⁶⁸ “A street car operator” in the city was “guardedly soliciting membership in the Klan.”¹⁶⁹ Meanwhile, reports suggested that Klan lectures were being delivered weekly in communities across the state, from industrial Pawtucket in the north to Pawtuxet in the west to coastal Wakefield in the South.¹⁷⁰

The focus of the story was on one particular such gathering: a meeting of “150 or more members of the masked order” which had taken place in the Odd Fellows’ Hall on Broad Street

¹⁶⁵ “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 1. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁶⁶ “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 1. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁶⁷ “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 1. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁶⁸ “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 1. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁶⁹ “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 1. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁷⁰ “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 1. Rhode Island Historical Society.

in the village of Pawtuxet the previous night.¹⁷¹ Although a number of meetings had apparently been held at this hall in the preceding weeks, the *News* reported that “last night the persons attending the meeting were much more open about their presence.”¹⁷² Attendees were shut-mouthed about what had happened in the meeting—“all who were seen later refused to tell what went on,” reported the *News*—but they were brazen enough to be easily identified.¹⁷³ The *News* had no trouble recording and publishing the plate numbers and owners of all automobiles parked in the vicinity of the hall that evening.¹⁷⁴

The decision of the *News* to list the vehicles’ owners was indicative of what would become a broader trend in the early weeks of the Klan’s presence in Rhode Island. Local newspapers, the *News* foremost among them, placed themselves at the forefront of the battle against the Klan. In this article, the first major one providing details about a specific Klan meeting, the investigative work done by the *News* featured prominently. The *News* did mention that local police had been made aware of the gathering. Inspector James G. Miller visited the Odd Fellows Hall, the *News* reported, and questioned Charles J. Davis, the man who had booked the hall for the lecture.¹⁷⁵ Cranston Chief of Police James E. Cuff told the *News* that he intended to investigate the nature of the Pawtuxet gatherings and to take any action necessary “to drive any such organization as the Ku Klux out of the city.”¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 1. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁷² “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 2. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁷³ “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 2. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁷⁴ “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 1. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁷⁵ “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 2. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁷⁶ “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 2. Rhode Island Historical Society.

However, the *News* suggested that its reporters had done more than the police to inhibit the activity of the Klan. Whereas the Cranston Police merely interviewed one attendee of the gathering and expressed an intention of further investigating its nature, the *News* was actually engaged in a continuing investigation. Not only did the *News* publish the names of the owners of automobiles near the hall, but it also sent reporters to speak with each of those individuals to determine their whereabouts on the night in question. Although no one admitted to attending a meeting of the Klan, all refused to provide information about their whereabouts at the time. One interviewee admitted that his car had previously been borrowed by a relative of his wife who had used it to “attend Klan lectures.”¹⁷⁷ The *News* focused on Charles Davis, the man who had told the police that he had hired the hall. In extensive questioning at his home (the address of which the *News* printed), Davis refused to admit that the meeting was a Klan gathering and denied that he was a Klansman.¹⁷⁸ Further investigation by the *News*, however, turned up the fact that the previous year Davis had made several complaints about the parades of Italian Catholics in the Federal Hill neighborhood of Providence on the basis that they disturbed the services at the Protestant Church he attended.¹⁷⁹ In reporting this information, the *News* sought to prove its claim of Davis’s Klan affiliation by associating him with anti-Catholic bigotry.

This style of investigative journalism, in which the *News* framed itself as a crucial actor in the fight against the Klan in partnership with (or in the absence of) action by state and local authorities, would become a central part of the public narrative about the Klan in Rhode Island. Even the article’s framing of the Klan as an invading force which intended “an open assault on

¹⁷⁷ “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 2. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁷⁸ “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 2. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁷⁹ “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 2. Rhode Island Historical Society.

the free institutions of the State” necessarily framed the paper (one of the “free institutions”) as a force opposed to that invasion. One would be wrong to dismiss the *News*’s posturing as mere party politics. The *News* was a staunchly Democratic paper, to be sure, and often it sought to frame the Klan as an arm of the Republican Party in Rhode Island. For example, after referencing the General Assembly’s resolution condemning the Klan, the *News* noted that “the Democratic party, through its executive committee, has been on record for many months as opposed to its un-American principles,” while “the Republican party is not so on record and its executive committee thus far, although called upon repeatedly to do so, has failed to take action one way or another.”¹⁸⁰ But the partisan dimension to the *News*’s attacks was secondary. In later articles about the Klan, the *News* would emphasize more its role as the intrepid detective exposing evil, not merely a party sheet.

The day after the article on the meeting in Pawtuxet, the front page of the *News* was dominated by the headline “Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island, Frightened by Public Outburst, Hastily Again Takes to Cover.”¹⁸¹ The *News* took credit directly for this “Public Outburst.”¹⁸² The paper described a “scramble” among Klan members “to take cover. . . following the exposure of the Klan plot in the *Providence News*.”¹⁸³ However, the evidence that Rhode Island Klansmen were practicing absolute secrecy was actually fairly thin. The *News* based its claim on the fact that no one involved with the Pawtuxet meeting had affirmed an association with the Klan or been willing to discuss the meeting with the *News*. From this silence, the paper extrapolated that

¹⁸⁰ “Ku Klux Klan Invades Rhode Island Holding Meeting in Pawtuxet Hall With Many People in Attendance,” *Providence News*, Feb. 13, 1924, p. 2. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁸¹ “Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island, Frightened by Public Outburst, Hastily Again Takes to Cover,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924, p. 1. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁸² “Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island, Frightened by Public Outburst, Hastily Again Takes to Cover,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924, p. 1. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁸³ “Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island, Frightened by Public Outburst, Hastily Again Takes to Cover,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924, p. 1. Rhode Island Historical Society.

the attendees had “been warned not to talk to reporters and not to disclose any facts to strangers.”¹⁸⁴ For the *News*, this secrecy was proof of a nefarious plot, “the holding of secret meetings being an offense to a majority of the decent, law-abiding citizens of the State.”¹⁸⁵ Yet, there was in fact little real evidence of a conspiracy. *The News* could find no one willing to confirm *or deny* that they had been present in Pawtuxet or that the gathering had been a Klan meeting. From this absence of evidence, the *News* concluded that Rhode Island was under “invasion,” and only the brave work of the paper was saving the state.

The *News* had been successful at identifying specific people who had attended the meeting from the license plate numbers collected from vehicles parked near the Pawtuxet hall on the night of the meeting. Moreover, the *News* claimed that it had gone further, and had discovered the nest of the local Klan: the Broad Street car barn of the United Electric Railways Company (UERC), on the border between Providence and Cranston. According to “one employee of the company,” a number of UERC carmen at the Broad Street barn had been approached about joining the Klan: “A conservative estimate... would place the number of those [UERC employees] in the organization at 50,” many of whom would “openly boast of their affiliation with the hooded society.”¹⁸⁶ One UERC carman told the *News* reporter:

About six weeks ago a fellow employee, whose name he refused to give, casually mentioned that many of the men at the barn were members of the Klan. He then offered to get a card of admission to a ‘lecture’ to be held under Klan auspices in Pawtuxet. The prospect was cold toward the offer and no mention of Klanism has been made since that time to him.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ “Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island, Frightened by Public Outburst, Hastily Again Takes to Cover,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924, p. 1. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁸⁵ “Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island, Frightened by Public Outburst, Hastily Again Takes to Cover,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924, p. 1. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁸⁶ “Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island, Frightened by Public Outburst, Hastily Again Takes to Cover,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924, p. 2. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁸⁷ “Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island, Frightened by Public Outburst, Hastily Again Takes to Cover,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924, p. 2. Rhode Island Historical Society.

Another carman reported an incident at a local restaurant where the boasting of one Klan-affiliated carman to fellow workers who opposed the Klan resulted in physical violence.¹⁸⁸ Some claimed to have stumbled upon applications for Klan membership in the bathrooms of the Broad Street barn, while several UERC streetcar conductors asserted that they had found Klan literature placed conspicuously in their cars.¹⁸⁹ In the framing created by the *News*, the Broad Street car barn was at the heart of Klan organizing efforts in Rhode Island. Fifty workers at the site represented the largest single cluster of the 500 Klan members estimated by the *News* to exist in the Pawtuxet branch.

The *News*'s specificity in reporting certain elements of its investigation—particularly its lists of the owners of vehicles spotted at Klan meetings and its focus on the Broad Street barn of the UERC—makes its moments of vagueness all the more striking, and suggests that in some respects the *News* was turning mere hunches into frightening facts. The *News* made vague claims that local political, business, and religious leaders were providing support to the hooded order. In its February 14th report, the *News* declared that “the facts already uncovered by this newspaper show that employes of several big financial institutions and of several well-known business houses were actually at the meeting in Pawtuxet Tuesday night, that they are Klansmen and that they have taken part in the preliminary work of organization.”¹⁹⁰ But the “facts” the paper refers to had not been spelled out. The paper also reported with similar vagueness that “some business houses, operated for private gain, are discriminating against persons of certain religious faiths, requiring that the religion of an applicant for a position be given on the card which they must fill

¹⁸⁸ “Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island, Frightened by Public Outburst, Hastily Again Takes to Cover,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924, p. 2. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁸⁹ “Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island, Frightened by Public Outburst, Hastily Again Takes to Cover,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924, p. 2. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁹⁰ “Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island, Frightened by Public Outburst, Hastily Again Takes to Cover,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924, p. 1. Rhode Island Historical Society.

out before they are hired.”¹⁹¹ That the *News* was unwilling to name these particular businesses or their employees is striking, given the paper’s willingness to name the United Electric Railways Company and the attendees of the Pawtuxet meeting.

The *News* was using an old propaganda technique, insinuation, with the new power granted by a large readership which found the Klan particularly intriguing. In one short article entitled “THE KLAN BUSY,” the *News* gave shadowy descriptions of Klansmen. “One of its most important members,” the paper reported, was “tall, sinewy for his age, and with some local celebrity, . . . ageing into the nineties.”¹⁹² “On the surface he is a liberal and underneath he hates every Jew, all negroes and any nationality that seeks refuge in the communion of the Roman Catholic Church.”¹⁹³ One member, the *News* stated, was “a general advertiser of commodities in a special line,” while another was “a clergyman who has made many public addresses outside his church.”¹⁹⁴ Some were “politicians who mix with Christians of many faiths,” while still others were “educators in the sense that they are so designated where they are employed.”¹⁹⁵ The *News* claimed to have a list “of about 1700 Ku Klux members” in the state.¹⁹⁶ Yet it refused to print even part of this list, stating that “we hope that the spasm of intolerance will pass by without calling for methods of publicity that may injure innocent members of many households.”¹⁹⁷ This article offered a thinly-veiled threat to any who are involved with the Klan: the *News* had the power to destroy not only their personal reputations, but those of their friends and families as well. The *News* played up its own importance, emphasizing the power which it could wield over

¹⁹¹ “Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island, Frightened by Public Outburst, Hastily Again Takes to Cover,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924, p. 1. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁹² “The Klan Busy,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁹³ “The Klan Busy,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁹⁴ “The Klan Busy,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁹⁵ “The Klan Busy,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁹⁶ “The Klan Busy,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924. Rhode Island Historical Society.

¹⁹⁷ “The Klan Busy,” *Providence News*, Feb. 14, 1924. Rhode Island Historical Society.

the reputations of those even tangentially associated with Klansmen and also emphasizing the fact that it was choosing not to wield that power (yet). In this sense, the vagueness of the *News's* references to local Klan leaders served to position the paper as a powerful organ acting in the best interest of the community.

For all its confidence in its list, however, the *News* did not acknowledge another important reason why it might not openly accuse all those it suspects of being a Klansman: that it might be illegal. In May, former *Providence News* editor John A. Hennessy was sued for \$10,000 by Coventry attorney Wayne H. Whitman. In the February 26th edition of the *News*, the paper specifically named Whitman as an individual who it believed to be associated with the Ku Klux Klan branch active in that town. In the months which followed this accusation, Whitman claimed, he had suffered greatly in his reputation in the community; not only had he lost clients, but he had faced “pain, humiliation and ignominy.”¹⁹⁸ Although the paper faced the danger of lawsuits, it maintained its aggressive style of reporting. Almost always, the *News* itself was an important part of the story. Yet, in performing what it claimed was an act of public service by exposing the Klan (or at least suggesting that the paper *could* expose it), the paper actually gave the Klan publicity that organization actually wanted. In doing so, the paper may have contributed to the growth of the very body it claimed it was destroying.

The Rhode Island Klan at its Height

On June 21st, 1924, an estimated 8,000 individuals gathered at Foster Centre, an open space behind Foster Town Hall, for an all-day rally of the Ku Klux Klan. All through the morning and early afternoon, local constables directed the steady flow of traffic which entered the small

¹⁹⁸ Smith, “The Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island,” 37.

community from all across Rhode Island and New England.¹⁹⁹ Caravans from naval bases at Newport and New London, Connecticut further enlarged the massive crowd. Klan leaders from Rhode Island as well as Connecticut and Pennsylvania spoke before the assembled crowd, while members of the Klan's women's auxiliary gave lectures to the ladies of the crowd. Following the field day, in true New England fashion, a full clam dinner was served to all those in attendance. To close the day, several hundred candidates were initiated into the order beneath the light of a massive burning cross.²⁰⁰ A few days later, the small town of Exeter saw 100 residents of Washington County initiated into the hooded order beneath three burning crosses in front of a crowd of more than 1,000.²⁰¹ In spite of the best efforts of the *Providence News* to restrict its growth, the Ku Klux Klan was ascendent.

Explanations of the order's apparent significant growth during this period—and the failure of the investigative journalism of the *Providence News* to stop it—are varied. In the aftermath of the *New York World's* much-lauded exposé of the national Ku Klux Klan in 1921, the order saw enormous growth nationwide due to the sheer amount of publicity which the press coverage gave. A similar dynamic seems to have taken place in Rhode Island. For much of February and March 1924, the front page of the *Providence News* was dominated daily by articles about what was, in the grand scheme of the state, a relatively small organization. Readers who were not necessarily convinced of the Klan's evil would have found, in the assertions of the *News*, that the people who made up the mysterious society were not random raging bigots but their neighbors, friends, and family. The intensely partisan nature of the *News's* reporting—the

¹⁹⁹ Robert L. Smith, "In the 1920s, the Klan ruled the countryside," *Providence Journal*, April 26, 1999, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070930030745/http://www.projo.com/specials/century/month4/426nw1.htm>.

²⁰⁰ Smith, "The Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island," 38.

²⁰¹ "Exeter Saw Flaming Cross of the K.K.K.," *Westerly Sun*, June 25, 1924, p. 8. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

paper's staunch Democratic leanings and its repeated attempts to associate the Klan with the local Republican Party—may have made those who disagreed with the paper's politics more sympathetic to the organization which the paper so staunchly opposed. This is not to say that the *News* is entirely to blame for the Klan's rapid growth in Rhode Island during this period, and indeed its intense condemnation of the hooded order seems to reflect the views of many local Klan opponents. That said, it is clear that the *News* certainly gave the order very helpful publicity.

The *News*'s "exposure" of the Klan in fact served to dramatically heighten its importance in the public conversation. What had previously existed to Rhode Islanders only as an exotic, faraway phenomenon had suddenly been brought right up in front of them. A reader who had been captivated by the aesthetic spectacle of the Klan as they saw it on the stage and the screen and in their newspaper now had the opportunity to see the far grander spectacle of the thing itself. Curious Rhode Islanders no longer had to be satisfied with just a photograph of the white hood or the burning cross; now, they could attend a rally and see these things for themselves. As they did so, they could converse with the Klansmen, many of whom might have been their friends and neighbors. After the ceremony was over, they might have the opportunity to partake in a seafood dinner, or hear a lecture from a nationally-recognized Klan speaker. And at the end, they might choose to join the hooded order themselves. The final chapter of this thesis will explore how public discourse in Rhode Island came to treat the Klan as ordinary—and how this served to mask the violence at the heart of the Klan.

Chapter Three

“Masked Nuptials” and “Instructive Talks”: The Klan in the Community, 1924-1928

On Friday, September 11, 1925, a headline appearing on the second page of the *Providence Journal* announced a strange and rather novel event which had occurred a few days before: “KLAN HOLDS FIRST WEDDING IN R.I.” The preceding Wednesday, at Klan-owned Grant Field in Georgiaville, a small village in the town of Smithfield, Arthur Leroy Edson, the nephew of Mr. and Mrs. William O. Edson of North Scituate, had been joined in marriage to Miss Ruth Evelyn Arnold, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Arnold of Johnston. Preceded by flower girls carrying bouquets of calla lilies and dahlias, the bride and bridegroom walked down the aisle to Felix Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March,” played by a Providence band. As they did so, they were flanked by a double line of 150 robed Klansmen, who tossed flowers at the happy couple as they marched. When they reached the makeshift altar—decorated with an American flag and Bible and positioned beneath a glowing electric cross—the ceremony was performed by a clergyman in full Klan regalia. While the minister was confirmed to be a resident of Rhode Island, he refused to provide his name to the *Journal* because “public knowledge of his participation in the affair would prove detrimental to him.” Selections were read from *John* and *Ephesians* 5, and a song entitled “Love Me Truly” was performed by two robed women. Following the ceremony, the couple was showered with white roses, “making a veritable garden of the field.” A collection was taken up among the attendees—who numbered at least 2,000, according to the *Journal*—and the couple were given a gift of \$133.50 (approximately \$2,400 today). The event concluded with an “instructive talk” given by one Dr. Poacher, a national Klan speaker. As nearly 300 guests signed up as prospective Klan members at the end of the event, leaders of the Rhode Island Klan announced other upcoming social events being hosted at

Grant's Field, including a clambake, a lecture by another national Klan speaker, and a "naturalization" ceremony for the induction of new members.²⁰²

The *Journal's* brief account captures an event which is at once mundane and extraordinary. Part of what made the notion of a "Klan wedding" so strange is the fact that it was, in many ways, not that strange. The *Journal's* report emphasizes the most normal elements of the ceremony. That "flowers were thrown at the couple as they marched to Mendelssohn's 'Wedding March' played by a Providence band" is not unusual for a wedding ceremony; it is the juxtaposition of ordinary elements of a wedding with the strange rituals of the Klan that make this worthy of comment. Even the elements which make this an unusual wedding are framed, by the *Journal*, as relatively harmless. The fact of a "Klan wedding" is not a sinister development but a strange curiosity, worthy of comment because of the spectacle it created. The "white robes of the Klansmen and the regalia of the attendants" were described purely as spectacle, in their making the wedding "a colorful affair." Indeed, other than the preacher's comment that public knowledge of his identity would "prove detrimental to him," there is little suggestion in this article that the Klan signified anything more than spectacle.

Klan ideology was certainly not absent here: the flag and Bible at the altar, the white roses thrown at the couple, and especially the enormous glowing cross underneath which the ceremony took place were closely connected with Klan beliefs in white supremacy, conservative Protestant morality, and ultra-nationalism, whether those beliefs were stated during the ceremony or not. Indeed, the *Journal* report obfuscates what one might assume to have been the most explicit statement of Klan principles and ideology during the event; Dr. Poacher, who the *Journal* identifies as a nationally recognized Klan speaker, is only said to have given "an instructive talk," with no detail of its contents provided. The Klan wedding is reduced merely to a strange version

²⁰² "Klan Holds First Wedding in R.I.," *Providence Journal*, Sept. 11, 1925, p. 2.

of a mundane event. In this sense, an understanding of the Klan as fundamentally violent in its beliefs is obfuscated by the depiction of the Klan as mere spectacle.

The wedding of Arthur Leroy Edson and Ruth Evelyn Arnold was strange and striking, but it was not unique. This is true in a literal sense: although it was the first Klan wedding in Rhode Island, it was not the last. More significantly, the Grant's Field wedding was far from the only moment when Rhode Island Klansmen, under the auspices of the Klan, engaged socially with their local communities in ways that were, outside of their Klannishness, fairly conventional. In the mid-1920s, the Ku Klux Klan filled a role in Rhode Island social life that was surprisingly similar to the more mainstream civic and fraternal societies from whom William J. Simmons had drawn inspiration. Local Klan groups advertised their meetings in the paper, raised funds for charity, and hosted all manner of lectures, socials, field days, dances, dinners, potlucks, cookouts, parades, and even sporting events. When these events were reported on by the local press, they were described not as sinister or threatening. Eventually, as the novelty fell away, the Klan became merely a fact of the social life of some Rhode Island communities. In diaries and letters, Rhode Islanders discussed attending cross burnings and hooded parades in the same way as they discussed attending a movie. The Klan became, if not "ordinary" exactly, not unusual either.

Conspicuously absent in such accounts of the Klan's participation in the social life of the Rhode Island community are any discussions of white supremacist ideology or violence. Indeed, following the initial push against the Klan from papers like the *Providence News* (discussed in the previous chapter), the Rhode Island press seemed to have been remarkably uninterested in the local Klan as an ideological entity with its own social and political agenda. Accounts of such Klan events in Rhode Island papers tended to avoid reference to any specific ideological belief

which might have been expressed at an event, as evinced by the *Journal's* euphemistic claim that Dr. Poacher “gave an instructive talk.” This style of reporting on the Klan’s social events constructed the order as almost a non-ideological entity—and thus diminished its capacity for violence.

This chapter will argue that this construction of the Klan as a non-ideological organization in the public consciousness—through the conventional and recognizable ways that the order positioned itself socially and through the ways that such social events were reported—served ultimately to “whitewash” the image of the Klan in the mind of the Rhode Island public. Local Klan groups, led by the state organization, adopted the social trappings and rituals of other, more publicly accepted fraternal organizations. In doing so, they took on the appearance of less explicitly ideological organizations in order to position the Klan as an order primarily dedicated to the cultivation of social and communal relationships rather than the attainment of specific political aims. Of course, the sense of community the Klan sought to forge was rooted in the movement’s ideologies of hate, or at least exclusion, being a community that welcomed native-born white Protestant Americans and excluded all others. But, in the framing of the Klan, it was the creation of community that mattered rather than those who were excluded. Indeed, when speaking to reporters and other outsiders, many Klansmen emphasized that they were not “anti-” any other groups; rather, they were “pro-” a white Protestant communal identity. Through taking on the structure and appearance of a fraternal organization, the Rhode Island Klan positioned itself as a positive organization which sought to cultivate a white Protestant communal identity rather than a negative organization which sought to exclude those who were not white Protestants.

Local newspapers participated in the construction of this positive image of the Klan through their neutral manner of reporting on the hooded order, particularly in the years after 1924. As we saw in the previous chapters, many Rhode Island newspapers took a stated anti-Klan position in the period before the Klan had acquired a significant foothold in the state. Once the Klan had become an established presence in Rhode Island, however, many newspapers took a decidedly less antagonistic stance towards the order. The Klan continued to be reported on, but the tone was much more neutral. While spectacle had always been at the center of reporting on the Klan, it became the entirety of it. This shift allowed for the incongruities of the *Providence Journal* article about the Grant's Field wedding; the "weird ceremony" got several paragraphs of description, while the Klan leader's speech was flattened into an "instructive talk." As the Klan became a fact of Rhode Island life, newspapers like the *Journal* and the *Westerly Sun* diminished the importance of ideology to the Klan, focusing on its "weird ceremony" rather than its belief system.

One effect of this framing was to hide, and thus endorse, the violence at the root of the Klan. There were fewer acts of vigilante violence or terrorism attributed to the Rhode Island Klan than to Klan organizations elsewhere in the country during this period. Nevertheless, hatred towards people of color, Catholics, Jews, and immigrants was still formative to the Rhode Island Klan. Acts of violence against members of these groups were often assumed by Rhode Islanders to be the work of the Klan. Most notably among these acts were a series of suspicious fires at the Watchman Institute, a Black industrial school in the rural town of Scituate; they were widely rumored to have been set by the Klan, but the local police and press failed to investigate the matter. As the Klan became a normal and accepted part of daily Rhode Island life, which acted in the open and participated in the community, it thus began to be discursively constructed as a

non-ideological organization with the positive goal of cultivating a white Protestant community—ignoring the exclusion and violence upon which that communal identity was constructed.

The “Usual Flaming Cross”: The Community and the Klan

As the previous chapter explored, the early days of the Klan in Rhode Island were marked by strife. In no part of the state was the hooded order’s arrival accepted uncritically. The community backlash to the Klan was strongest in communities like Newport, where the combination of a swift and strong governmental response and the threat of violence from anti-Klan protestors essentially shut the order out of the city before it could even develop a foothold. Yet even in communities like Coventry, where the Klan found a more receptive audience, the order was controversial. While the Coventry post of the American Legion voted against a resolution condemning the Klan, it did so only by a very slim margin; after the first vote on the resolution resulted in a 19-19 tie, the pro-Klan side won by only two votes, 20-18.²⁰³ Even in a community where the Klan was strong, it remained deeply controversial. In those early days, its presence was still strongly contested.

By the end of 1924, however, the Klan had become, for many ordinary Rhode Islanders, just another social fraternity, a fact of life in the community. While papers like the *Providence News* sensationalized every “secret” Klan meeting they got word of in February and March, by the end of the year, newspapers and ordinary Rhode Islanders alike talked of public Klan meetings and displays as though they were commonplace (though certainly still dramatic). In a diary entry of Monday, May 26, 1924, Portsmouth resident Abigail Sherman followed descriptions of the day’s chores and weather with the unceremonious report that “Last night the

²⁰³ “Coventry Legion Upholds Ku Klux Klan,” *Providence Journal*, Mar. 5, 1924, p. 2. NewsBank.

‘Firey Cross’ was burned on the hill on the Coy land by the Klan. There [were] about 200 at the meeting.”²⁰⁴ A few months later, she mentioned offhand that she had attended a cross burning with her son Arthur (a local politician prominent in the Rhode Island Republican Party) while staying in Rutland, Massachusetts.²⁰⁵ For Sherman—a white, Protestant woman from an old family closely connected with the local Republican Party—Klan rallies and cross burnings had become commonplace. Compare, for example, the way she speaks of the Klan—a brief, matter-of-fact report at the end of an entry detailing a fairly ordinary day—with her account of another event that sparked stronger feelings; her entry of Friday, June 20, 1924, the day when a gas bomb was set off in the state Senate. Her diary that day begins, “The most dastardly and disgraceful thing that ever happened was enacted in the State House today.”²⁰⁶ Sherman was evidently far more outraged by this political chaos than she was the Klan’s presence. Indeed, she would later even attend a cross burning herself. For this particular Portsmouth resident, though the “Flaming Cross” of the Klan was unique enough to be worthy of comment, it was not something to be upset by; rather, it was a dramatic part of an ordinary day.

Abigail Sherman’s diary was not the only place where the Klan had come to be written of as a fairly ordinary phenomenon by mid-1924. Across the state, local newspapers had begun to write about the Klan in their communities as though it were not an intensely controversial order. Rather than the anti-Klan polemic which had previously characterized the *Providence News*, many papers began to depict the Klan as a fairly ordinary social fraternity—one with some strange and dramatic rituals, perhaps, but not worthy of special condemnation. The *Newport Mercury*’s report of the May 26th Klan meeting in Portsmouth was very similar in tone to Sherman’s diary entry describing the same gathering. In a small note in its Portsmouth column,

²⁰⁴ Abigail Sherman diaries, May 26, 1924. Private collection.

²⁰⁵ Abigail Sherman diaries, Sept. 19, 1924. Private collection.

²⁰⁶ Abigail Sherman diaries, June 20, 1924. Private collection.

the paper reported that “a Ku Klux Klan meeting was held on Monday evening in this town. A fiery cross was burned in a field in the vicinity of the Newport County Fair Grounds, which was observed by a number of persons. A large number of automobiles were parked in that vicinity, which would indicate that the Klan meeting was very well attended.”²⁰⁷ For the *Mercury*, the Klan meeting was worthy of news, but only as a local curiosity. If one were not familiar with what the Ku Klux Klan or the burning cross stood for, the *Mercury*’s article would shed no light. The event was only noteworthy in the way that a large public gathering of the Masons would have been noteworthy; as a community event of note, but not as one which carried any political or ideological significance. Later *Mercury* reports are even more indifferent in their treatment of the Klan. In August, the *Mercury* noted in its Portsmouth column that “2500 persons were present at the recent Klan Field Day which was held in this town.”²⁰⁸ Another note from the following year reported that “Members of the Ku Klux Klan held a parade and demonstration in Jamestown on Thursday evening.”²⁰⁹ There is no sense in these reports that the Klan was at all unusual or controversial; it appears to have been just another social organization holding parades, field days, and other public events (and fairly popular ones, if the report of 2,500 attendees was at all accurate). These reports give the impression that, by the second half of 1924, the Klan had become a fact of social life in Portsmouth and other Rhode Island communities.

Indeed, other Rhode Island newspapers were even more blasé about the presence of the Klan in their communities. While the *Westerly Sun*, the most prominent newspaper in the rural southwestern part of the state, regularly reported on Klan activity in Westerly and the

²⁰⁷ “A Ku Klux Klan Meeting...” *Newport Mercury and Weekly News*, May 31, 1924, p. 1. Newspapers.com.

²⁰⁸ “It is reported that 2500 persons were present...” *Newport Mercury and Weekly News*, Aug. 30, 1924, p. 1. Newspapers.com

²⁰⁹ “Members of the Ku Klux Klan...” *Newport Mercury and Weekly News*, Sept. 5, 1925, p. 1. Newspapers.com.

surrounding areas from June 1924 on, its articles generally treated Klan activities in the same way it might have reported on garden parties. The vast majority of references to the Klan that appeared in the *Sun* are small notes of recent gatherings, presented as a standard part of community social activity. The Peace Dale column of the *Sun* of October 28, 1924, which noted that “a meeting of the klan was held at the Rocky Brook school house grounds last Tuesday evening” in between comments on Miss Edith Jacques injuring her hand and a well-attended Republican rally at Miller’s opera house, was typical.²¹⁰ The *Sun*’s reporting not only neglected to make any reference to the Klan as an ideological entity; it did not acknowledge the presence of the Klan as unusual or worthy of special note. This lack of attention was not necessarily because of these gatherings being small or poorly attended. The Peace Dale column of November 14 noted that “about 2800 attended the Ku Klux Klan meeting on the Tower Hill road Sunday,” a statement which receives the same space as the paper’s note that “Mrs. Harry Turisa and family and Thomas Magnesa and family left for Hartford Wednesday.”²¹¹ That large Klan gatherings of this sort merited so little comment in Westerly’s largest newspaper suggests that, at least by the fall of 1924, the *Sun* did not consider them to be unusual enough to be worthy of special report. The paper’s brevity suggests that, in Westerly, the Klan was simply a part of Westerly life.

When the *Sun* did devote more than a sentence to a major Klan gathering, its focus was usually on the dramatic spectacle of the event. One report of a major rally in Westerly began: “Shooting skyrocketing penetrating a foggy atmosphere and three huge crosses ablaze in the night air were outward indications last evening of a large gathering of the Ku Klux Klan in a field off the Post road.”²¹² An important part of the spectacle, for the paper, was the sheer number of

²¹⁰ “Peace Dale,” *Westerly Sun*, Oct. 28, 1924, p. 9. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²¹¹ “Peace Dale,” *Westerly Sun*, Nov. 14, 1924, p. 11. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²¹² “Big Klan Meeting in Field Off Post Road,” *Westerly Sun*, July 13, 1924, p. 1. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

people in attendance: the article emphasizes the presence of “not less than 900 automobiles, largely from New London county and Rhode Island towns,” which carried “between 4,000 and 5,000 people, many of them women” and “400” of whom were “candidates ready to take the initiatory degree.”²¹³ Indeed, the popularity of such gatherings was a frequent focus of the *Sun*’s attention. Another *Sun* article about a Klan picnic in Mystic, just over the Connecticut border, emphasized that “New England was well represented, and thousands of automobiles made use of the huge parking space on the 10-acre lot” even as it described the even more dramatic spectacle of “a flying machine with a large burning cross attached to it... circling over the grounds.”²¹⁴ The paper’s claim that New England was “well represented” is striking. While most likely intended to indicate that people came from all over New England to attend the gathering (itself a fact worthy of note), the phrasing also carries the implication that the attendees represented a cross-section of ordinary members of the community.

Indeed, the *Sun*’s description of the picnic itself is extraordinary in its focus on the ordinary, picturesque nature of the event:

Thousands assembled Saturday at the Billings lot so-called north-east of Mystic where the Ku Klux Klan and their friends gathered to spend the whole day and evening until midnight, listening to eminent speakers from the large cities. The grounds were in readiness at 10 A.M., when the klansmen and women began to arrive. There they found the stars and stripes flying in the breeze and the most glorious weather prevailed. Clam chowder, hot dogs, and coffee, ice cream, candy and soda were sold. There was no disturbance.²¹⁵

The picture of this Klan picnic which the *Sun* presents is unambiguously positive in every respect. The event seems to have been well organized, based on the declaration that “the grounds were in readiness at 10 A.M., when the klansmen and women began to arrive.” Although the

²¹³ “Big Klan Meeting in Field Off Post Road,” *Westerly Sun*, July 13, 1924, p. 1. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²¹⁴ “Klan Picnic,” *Westerly Sun*, Sept. 28, 1924, p. 3. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²¹⁵ “Klan Picnic,” *Westerly Sun*, Sept. 28, 1924, p. 3. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

paper did not explicitly refer to children being present, the event described carried the impression of being a family affair, especially given the reference to “ice cream, candy, and soda” being sold alongside the “clam chowder, hot dogs, and coffee”; at the very least, the paper makes clear that the event was attended by both “klansmen and women.” That “the most glorious weather prevailed” reinforces the impression that this was an idyllic community gathering, an event which brought people together rather than creating divisions.

Moreover, as it painted the event as a beautiful day for the community to come together, the *Sun*’s description of the Mystic Klan picnic did not attempt to separate the event’s successes from the organization which organized it; on the contrary, the *Sun* offered a tacit organization of the Klan as a “popular” patriotic order, disguising the more controversial elements of the hooded order’s ideology. While the event in part served as a day of lectures by prominent national Klan speakers—who were apparently speaking to the crowd “the whole day and evening until midnight”—the *Sun* provided no indication of what they were saying. The paper merely referred to the event’s lecturers as “eminent speakers from the large cities,” a choice of words which carries the impression that the lecturers were of some national prominence and, perhaps, that the *Sun* found them to be worth listening to. Although the *Sun* referred to these “eminent” speakers, it notably did not name or quote any of them; there was no reference to any sort of ideological or political statements, nor even to the event’s particular purpose. Rather, the *Sun*’s framing seems to construct its own ideological significance for the event. The paper reported that “the band from West Mystic played popular and patriotic airs during the day and evening,” a statement that emphasized both the event’s patriotism and its roots in a community, from which it was able to draw a local band to play popular songs.²¹⁶ Even the imagery of the *Sun*’s description seems designed to center the picnic’s patriotism. Arriving Klansmen found “the stars and stripes flying

²¹⁶ “Klan Picnic,” *Westerly Sun*, Sept. 28, 1924, p. 3. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

in the breeze” as “the most glorious weather prevailed”; the day’s beauty, in the *Sun*’s framing, was intimately connected with the American flag. All this focus on the patriotism and picturesqueness of the Klan’s picnic has the effect of making the hooded order seem a totally ordinary and unobjectionable part of the community.

The reader whose only knowledge of the Klan came from this article would have no reason to stand in opposition to the Klan. Indeed, the Klan as depicted here seems like the ideal community group: patriotic, well-organized, popular. Of course, most of those who read this article would not be totally ignorant of the Klan’s controversies. The fact that the *Sun* felt the need to assert that “there was no disturbance” is confirmation that its editors were aware of this. However, even this assertion seems to be a defense of the Klan in and of itself. While one might assume that a Klan event of this scale would produce some sort of disturbance, either among the Klansmen themselves or between the Klan and other parts of the community, the *Sun* seemed to say, this gathering offered no reason to worry.

If the *Sun*’s reporting seems to have been particularly favorable towards the Klan, that is no accident. On the contrary, the paper seems to have been intimately connected with the hooded order. When former Westerly Klan leader O. M. Brees appeared before the Militia Committee of the Rhode Island House of Representatives in 1928 (see epilogue), he provided a lengthy list of current or former members of the Klan in Washington County. Among those he listed were Herbert Clark, a reporter for the *Westerly Sun*, and Louis Blackburn, the paper’s printer. While the membership lists provided by Brees should be taken with a grain of salt, the fact that he specifically named several people involved with the production of the *Westerly Sun* speaks volumes. If Clark and Blackburn were indeed involved with the Westerly Klan at one time or another, it would shed new light on the paper’s uncritical and even favorable treatment of the

hooded order. In that case, the work of normalizing the Klan as an ordinary part of the community would be not an unintended consequence but a desired result. While much of this chapter has been focused on the ways in which newspapers unintentionally served to normalize the presence of the Klan through their styles of reporting, the Westerly case should serve as a reminder that, in some cases, this normalization may have been the paper's explicit goal.

In spite of the relative neutrality with which many local papers reported on the Klan, it should not be assumed that the hooded order had become entirely uncontroversial or accepted. What is reported in local papers is, primarily, that which generates some sort of spectacle. The attitudes of ordinary citizens, private conversations over the dinner table or at the end of a Catholic Mass, may not have been captured in the historical record, but this does not mean that they did not happen. This is worth noting because, even as the hooded order did become a fixture in many parts of the state, it should not be assumed that every member of every community was comfortable with its presence. The moments in which challenges to the Klan's place in the community do appear in the historical record must not be merely viewed as isolated incidents, but as public manifestations of an opposition to the Klan which existed even when it was not as apparent. While such manifestations were never as dramatic as the anti-Klan riots which occurred in Massachusetts and elsewhere during this period, this is not reason to suspect a total lack of anti-Klan sentiment in Rhode Island.²¹⁷

Consider, for example, one of the stranger incidents involving the Rhode Island Klan. In July 1926, newspapers reported on a violent incident which had occurred early one morning at the Klan field in Georgiaville, where the Edson wedding had taken place. According to the account of the *Westerly Sun*, in an article entitled "Attempt Made to Rob Ku Klux Booth,"

²¹⁷ For information on anti-Klan organizing in Massachusetts, see Richard, *Not a Catholic Nation*, chapter 7.

following the conclusion of a Klan event for which he had been operating the refreshment booth, World War I veteran Walter Chappell had retired for the night. A few hours later, he was awoken by the sound of three persons approaching the booth; when he challenged them, “the reply he received was missiles, one of which hit him on his knee, wounded during the war.” Chappell proceeded to “open fire in the darkness of the early morning,” and he claimed that one of the men was hit and had to be carried away by his comrades. The following morning, no blood stains which would indicate a bullet wound were found in the field, although a pocket comb which had apparently been dropped in the “hasty retreat” was recovered.²¹⁸ The *Sun*’s account of this incident portrays it as a fairly typical account of an attempted crime, an event that does not carry any particular ideological significance. Indeed, it is likely this event *was* merely an attempted crime which was prevented by a well-armed Klansman who happened to be in the right place at the right time to stop it.²¹⁹ However, even if this incident was a conventional attempted robbery, the fact that the Klan was the target of the robbery is suggestive. That the Klan’s concessions booth would be deemed a worthy robbery target would certainly seem to suggest that the Klan’s events were well-patronized and produced enough money to be worth taking. However, the fact that the Klan was chosen as the target suggests that the community was not universally sympathetic to the hooded order. These individuals were willing to target it. Indeed, the Klan’s field was actively selected over other possible targets; while one cannot read too much into this, it is at least worth noting. While this may seem a fairly small incident, this attempted robbery serves as an important reminder that, for all the ways in which the media treated the Klan with

²¹⁸ “Attempt Made to Rob Ku Klux Booth,” *Westerly Sun*, July 19, 1926, p. 10. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²¹⁹ There are some inconsistencies and peculiarities in the account given by the *Sun* which are perhaps worth considering, especially the fact that Chappell was struck by an unspecified “missile” and responded with gunfire. I do not wish to dwell on these, however, because I am interested in the narrative presented by the *Sun* and what it signifies about the degree of acceptance the Klan enjoyed in the community.

indifference or sympathy, the communities in which it operated were not monoliths, and some in them were not accepting of the hooded order.

Charity and Churches: The Klan in the Community

While newspapers were participating in the normalization of the Klan through their reporting, local Klan groups also worked to construct an image of themselves as ordinary, even upstanding pillars of the community. One way this was accomplished was through charitable work. Scholars including Leonard Moore and Thomas Pegram have explored the ways in which local Klan groups across the country worked to improve their public image by contributing to charitable causes in their local communities, but studies of the Klan in Rhode Island have ignored this phenomenon.²²⁰

Local Klan groups appear to have regularly raised money for uncontroversial charitable causes in their communities, especially in areas like Westerly, where the Klan was strong. From 1924 until 1930, the Washington County Klan regularly appeared as a donor to local causes. In the weeks leading up to Christmas of 1930, the *Westerly Sun* listed the Klan among the dozens of organizations who donated to the Westerly People's Mission.²²¹ The *Sun* of November 27, 1925 mentioned the "Westerly and Pawcatuck women of the Ku Klux Klan" among the organizations who helped to distribute Thanksgiving dinners to 39 Westerly families.²²² When a Westerly family's home burned down in January 1925, the Westerly Klan donated \$21.25, making it one of

²²⁰ See Moore, *Citizen Klansman* and Pegram, *One Hundred Percent American*. Moore in particular uses the fact of extensive Klan charity work in Indiana to advance his argument that the Klan in Indiana was not a violent racist/nativist hate group but a popular social fraternity. In my opinion, however, Moore overstates his case; in focusing so overwhelmingly on the Klan's social work, he, like many of the newspapers I discuss in this chapter, neglects the violent core of Klan ideology and practice.

²²¹ "The Challenge Was Accepted," *Westerly Sun*, Dec. 24, 1930, p. 1-2. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²²² "Mission Sees that 39 Families Eat Well on Thanksgiving Day," *Westerly Sun*, Nov. 27, 1925, p. 1. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

the largest single donors to the family's relief fund. In the majority of these cases, the Klan was not focusing on a particular charitable cause but instead donated to a broader community effort. In contributing to the charitable work of groups like the People's Mission, the Klan could position itself as acting purely out of public interest, favoring no one cause over another.

While many of the Westerly Klan's charitable endeavors were coordinated with broader community fundraising drives, some were much more explicitly connected with the order's ideological goals. In one particularly striking instance, the *Sun* reported that the local Klan had paid off the entire outstanding mortgage of the Niantic Baptist Church at Bradford (a small village in Westerly), a sum of between \$1500 and \$1800. In the middle of the church's Christmas celebration, 18 Klansmen in full regalia, led by the Washington County Kleagle, marched into the church and presented it with sufficient funds to fully clear the mortgage. In celebration, the congregation and Klansmen joined in singing "Onward, Christian Soldiers." The *Sun*'s report concludes with the ominous note that four crosses had been burned in Westerly on the night of Christmas Eve, including one at Bradford.²²³ Notably, this is the only account of the Westerly Klan's charitable giving that makes note of the money's being presented by Klansmen in full regalia; it is also a dramatically larger sum than any other to which the order was reported as donating. Whereas previous instances of charitable work by the Westerly Klan had been fairly understated, the hooded order's gift to the Bradford church was intended to be a spectacle. The effect of this spectacle was to produce the impression that the Niantic Baptist Church was closely tied to the Klan. It certainly seems possible that the Klan's gift reflected ties; Klan organizers frequently sought to forge ties with local Protestant churches, and a donation large enough to pay off the church's mortgage certainly seems an effective way to do so. This event reflects the ways

²²³ "Bradford Church Mortgage Cleared," *Westerly Sun*, Dec. 27, 1925, p. 1. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

in which the Westerly Klan sought to further integrate itself into the local community by cultivating close relationships with Protestant churches.

Indeed, in the years that followed, the Niantic Baptist Church proved itself to be intimately connected with the Westerly Klan. In accounts of Bradford community life, the Baptist Church and the Klan were almost always mentioned in relation to each other. In its account of the church New Year's Eve celebrations, the *Westerly Sun* reported that the congregation followed up a delicious supper and pleasing musical performances with the "showing of local moving pictures," including "the Niantic Baptist Sunday School at dismissal from the church, also the parade of the Klan to the new Dinwoodie home on the Bradford-Ashaway Road, which the Klan helped largely to build and which takes the place of the Dinwoodie home destroyed by fire." After watching these pictures, the congregation "marched out upon the church grounds where a number of klansmen burned a fiery cross." The church's pastor, the Rev. O. M. Brees, offered a prayer, and the congregation celebrated the arrival of 1927 by singing "The Old Rugged Cross" beneath the burning cross.²²⁴ The clergyman Rev. Brees was particularly connected with the hooded order. In the House Militia Committee's hearings on the Klan in 1928, Brees was identified as having served as the secretary of the Klan for the whole of Washington County.²²⁵ While the Westerly Klan denied that the Niantic Baptist Church was a "Klan Church," per se, it did affirm that the church was an object of the hooded order's special interest.²²⁶ The Klan's close relationship with the Niantic Baptist Church, an otherwise fairly ordinary Protestant church, is

²²⁴ "At Baptist Church," *Westerly Sun*, Jan. 7, 1927, p. 9. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²²⁵ Brees played a significant role in the Militia Committee hearings. While he readily admitted that he had at one time been a leader of the local Klan, by the time of the hearings in March 1928, he was estranged from the hooded order. Based on the coverage of the *Westerly Sun*, Brees appears to have had a rather public falling-out with the Washington County Klan in late 1927, around which time he also resigned from his position as pastor at the Niantic Baptist Church. The cause of this conflict is not apparent.

²²⁶ "Klan Broke with Brees," *Westerly Sun*, Nov. 1, 1927, p. 1, 10. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

suggestive of the ways that local Klan groups integrated themselves into the religious life of the community. Through cultivating such ties, local Klan groups worked to integrate themselves as ordinary parts of the community, orders dedicated to the promotion of a patriotic Protestant community rather than hate.

“The Partial Fulfillment of Threats”: Ideology and Klan Violence

This chapter has explored the ways in which, during the mid-1920s, the Ku Klux Klan became a fixture in public life in many Rhode Island communities. In communities like Portsmouth and Westerly, massive public Klan meetings became fairly ordinary events, worthy of no more note than a workplace injury or a well-attended lecture; local Klan organizations worked to cultivate ties with their communities; local newspapers reported on the hooded order with indifference or even praise. Yet, even as the Klan became an ordinary part of the local community, this public face could not hide the more sinister elements which had made the Klan infamous. For all that Klan organizations and their supporters framed the Klan in positive terms, as a patriotic group which sought to generate a sense of white Protestant community rather than a group motivated by ideologies of racism, nativism, anti-Catholicism, and anti-Semitism, these ideologies were central to the Klan’s attraction and to its work. At moments, this dark side of the Klan, including acts of bigoted violence, came to the surface.

It is challenging to paint a full picture of the ideological beliefs, whether benign or sinister, of the average Rhode Island Klansman. Almost no internal documents or records kept by Rhode Island Klan organizations survive in the archive and, while the representations made by spokesmen in public are worth making note of, they were carefully curated to win public favor. Yet, enough documents do exist in the archive to offer clues as to how the Klan saw itself. A

belief system becomes visible, one at odds with the civic Klan of charity, picnics and weddings. It is a belief system based on violence against those deemed a threat to white, Protestant America.

The world in the eyes of the Rhode Island Klan was on the verge of apocalypse. In its communications, the state Klan spoke with urgency in its attempts to bring lapsed members back into the fold. One letter signed by the Grand Dragon of the Realm of Connecticut-Rhode Island appealed to the recipient as “one I could depend on to help the Imperial Wizard save our Country in this, our most perilous time since the Civil War.”²²⁷ Another declared that “the amalgamated enemies of America are making their final drive for supremacy in the coming election.”²²⁸ These communications were not subtle about who those enemies were. One document bluntly stated that “the Pope and his agents have been working to get control of this country,” lamenting “the propaganda that is going through pro-Papist papers all over the country” while asserting that only the Ku Klux Klan could stand against “the Roman Hierarchy.”²²⁹ Such explicitly anti-Catholic rhetoric stands in stark contrast to the public claims of local Klan leaders that the order was not “anti-anything.” Indeed, in the worldview propagated by the local Klan organization, the “Roman Hierarchy” represented an existential threat to white, Protestant America. In response to such a threat, anything might be justified. These communications refer to the conflict with Catholicism as a “war” which “We cannot LOSE.”²³⁰ One communication puts it more bluntly: “TRAITORS TO THE CAUSE OF A TRUE AMERICANISM AND A PURE PROTESTANTISM MUST BE

²²⁷ Letter from the Office of the Grand Dragon of the Realm of Connecticut-Rhode Island to Ernest M. Verry, Aug. 9, 1927. Ernest M. Verry papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, MSS 9001-V Box 2.

²²⁸ Letter from the Office of the Grand Dragon of the Realm of Connecticut-Rhode Island to Ernest M. Verry, undated. Ernest M. Verry papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, MSS 9001-V Box 2.

²²⁹ Letter from the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan to Ernest M. Verry, Ernest M. Verry papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, MSS 9001-V Box 2.

²³⁰ Letter from the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan to Ernest M. Verry, Ernest M. Verry papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, MSS 9001-V Box 2.

FERRETED OUT AND EXPOSED. RIDE FOR GOD AND COUNTRY!”²³¹ For all that the Rhode Island Klan sought to frame itself publicly as non-ideological, an ordinary part of the community, these communications offered the reality of a worldview in which the goal was to “SAVE A RACE AND PRESERVE A NATION!”²³²

The violence inherent to such ideologies was not confined to rhetoric. At multiple points during the period of the Klan’s heyday in Rhode Island, members of marginalized groups were the victims of acts of violence committed by Klan sympathizers. State or local Klan organizations never admitted responsibility in these cases, and indeed, it is impossible to say with certainty whether the perpetrators of these crimes were dues-paying Klansmen. However, in each case, the circumstances surrounding the instance of violence make clear that the perpetrators were, if not actual dues-paying members of the Klan themselves, at least sympathetic to the hooded order’s goals and ideals.

The first instance of violence associated with the Klan in Rhode Island occurred on May 22, 1924, when a devastating fire destroyed the entire three-story south wing of the Watchman’s Industrial Institute, a Black industrial school operating in the small rural community of North Scituate. No injuries were reported, but the fire was declared to have caused more than \$25,000 in damages (nearly \$500,000 today), an enormous financial burden for a small school which carried little insurance. Complete destruction was avoided only by several hours of fighting by volunteer fire companies from four nearby communities. Dr. William S. Holland, the school’s head, had no doubt that the fire had been set by persons in the predominantly white community hostile to a Black school in their midst. Holland declared: “This outrage is the partial fulfillment

²³¹ Letter from J. W. Perry, Grand Dragon of the Realm of Connecticut-Rhode Island, Ernest M. Verry papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, MSS 9001-V Box 2.

²³² Letter from the Office of the Grand Dragon of the Realm of Connecticut-Rhode Island to Ernest M. Verry, undated. Ernest M. Verry papers, Rhode Island Historical Society, MSS 9001-V Box 2.

of threats made to destroy our school by disgruntled persons in the neighborhood who have harassed us by trespassing on the grounds and by menacing us with violence if we did not grant them a right of way through our land.”²³³ To Holland, this attack was not unexpected, but the natural evolution of threats and vandalism the school had faced for several years: “They have torn down the gates we erected on our premises... One man, at least, among these persons, is known to us. He has openly threatened our boys. These people have been meddling with our property without cause. It is ours. We paid for it. This place hasn’t been in the beautiful condition in which we have kept it, for 35 years.”²³⁴ Holland informed the press that he had “reported to the Town Council the damage wrought by these marauders” and had “told that body that it would be held responsible if our school were not protected from these miscreants.”²³⁵

While Holland did not name specific individuals or groups in his statement, his insistence that the fire could not have been anything other than an arson attack by members of the Scituate community speaks volumes. He does not name the Klan specifically, but, given the hooded order’s well-reported activity in neighboring Foster and Smithfield, and given Scituate’s similar demographics to these predominantly white, Protestant towns, it seems very likely that any Scituate residents involved with the fire were at least sympathetic to the Klan, if not active members. Indeed, one local paper speculated that “the Ku Klux Klan organization, which is said to flourish in that community, may have taken this method of removing this Negro school from their midst and community.”²³⁶

²³³ “Destroyed School, May Have Been Set,” *Woonsocket Call and Evening Reporter*, May 23, 1924, p. 14, Woonsocket Public Library.

²³⁴ “Destroyed School, May Have Been Set,” *Woonsocket Call and Evening Reporter*, May 23, 1924, p. 14, Woonsocket Public Library.

²³⁵ “Destroyed School, May Have Been Set,” *Woonsocket Call and Evening Reporter*, May 23, 1924, p. 14, Woonsocket Public Library.

²³⁶ Smith “The Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island,” 37.

A few days after the fire, white residents of North Scituate flatly challenged Holland's declaration that the fire had been set, and that there had been threats made against the school or its students in the first place. A statement given by one Benjamin F. Boss (a figure of unclear relevance to the situation beyond his residence, being identified by the *Providence Journal* as only "a Scituate resident") pointedly dismissed Holland's concern that the fire had been the result of arson.²³⁷ Holland's comments that the school had been "harassed" and "menac[ed] with violence" were, according to Boss, "very interesting to the people of Scituate," who were "very sorry these charges were not more explicit."²³⁸ According to Boss, however, even if such threats were made, they had nothing to do with the fire; rather, "by voluntary information furnished us by several reliable persons who accidentally observed various things," Boss could say with absolute certainty that what "they knew to have actually happened" was that "boys of the school were in the cupola of the south wing 'smoking out bees'" and had accidentally set the building aflame.²³⁹ Boss did not identify the individuals who provided him this information. Nor did he acknowledge the fact that the school was in session at the time of the fire, with the 28 students who lived in the dormitory all being in class in the main building at the time.²⁴⁰ Boss's statement concluded with the further implication that Holland had lied about the threats received by the school: "If any person in this place has threatened to 'destroy their school if a right of way was

²³⁷ It is perhaps worth noting here that one Frank E. Boss of Hopkinton appeared on a list of members of the South County Klan given to the House Militia Committee in 1928, the only sort of membership list of any Rhode Island Klan group which appears in the archival records. It is impossible to determine from this whether Benjamin Boss might have been a member (Scituate, being located in Providence County, would have been associated with the Providence County Klan, the membership lists of which do not survive), but given the relative infrequency with which this last name appears, it is possible that there is some kind of family relationship here.

²³⁸ "Boys, 'Smoking Out' Bees, Set Fire to School, Claim," *Providence Journal*, May 28, 1924, p. 13. NewsBank.

²³⁹ "Boys, 'Smoking Out' Bees, Set Fire to School, Claim," *Providence Journal*, May 28, 1924, p. 13. NewsBank.

²⁴⁰ "Watchman School Damaged by Fire," *Providence Journal*, May 23, 1924, p. 1. NewsBank.

not granted through their land,' we would like to know who he is. If President Holland feels like pressing this matter further the case is open."²⁴¹

Whatever the role and possible Klan connections of Boss and others, their immediate reaction was unmistakable: to close ranks, providing a dubious alternative story and implying that Holland had lied about the threats that his school had received. Moreover, there seems to be no reason for the *Journal* to have punished this article other than to raise doubts about the possibility of the fire having been a racially-motivated attack. At the very least, it is clear that the relationship of Scituate's white community to the Watchman's Industrial Institute was reflective of Klan ideologies of the preservation of whites-only communities. It seems more than possible that, influenced by such ideologies, members of Scituate's community linked to the Klan may have sought to remove a small Black community in their midst through force.

A second violent attack, this time against a member of the state's Catholic community, occurred at the beginning of August. In Woonsocket, an industrial community with a large population of French Canadian Catholic immigrants, Lucien C. San Souci, reporter for the French language newspaper *La Tribune*, claimed to have been violently assaulted by hooded Klansmen while attempting to covertly observe a nighttime Klan meeting. While hiding in the grass near the meeting, which took place in northeastern Rhode Island near the Massachusetts border, San Souci had been discovered and grabbed by some of the Klansmen involved with the proceedings. The hooded figures then proceeded to take a heated iron and brand his forehead and left arm with the letter K.²⁴² San Souci's story was reported widely across Rhode Island and, indeed, the nation, having been picked up by the Associated Press.

²⁴¹ "Boys, 'Smoking Out' Bees, Set Fire to School, Claim," *Providence Journal*, May 28, 1924, p. 13. NewsBank.

²⁴² "Reporter Claims He was Burned by Klan," *Westerly Sun*, Aug. 5, 1924, p. 1. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

The leadership of the Rhode Island Klan vigorously protested against any attempts to hold it responsible for the attack. In a statement given the night after the attack, Morris S. Westervelt, king klan of the Providence County klan, claimed that San Souci could not have been observing a Klan meeting, since there had “been no meeting of the Ku Klux Klan in Woonsocket, Smithfield or in that section of Rhode Island yet” and that, furthermore, “there were no klansmen in the party which Mr. San Souci says attacked him,” because “robes and other regalia of the klansmen are in the custody of officials of the organization continually under lock and key,” only “taken out and worn at ceremonials.”²⁴³ Therefore, Westervelt claimed, “it was not the klan” that had attacked San Souci. Following Westervelt’s denial and in an absence of further evidence, most newspapers dropped the story fairly quickly. However, whether or not the men who attacked San Souci were dues-paying members of the Klan, it is striking that they chose to invoke the iconography of the Klan in their attack. Both the fire at the Watchman’s Institute and the attack on San Souci thus suggest that, even in cases where direct involvement of the Klan organization cannot be proven, Rhode Islanders understood that the potential for actual violence, if not actual violence, lurked within the Klan.

It is true that there were fewer instances of Klan-related violence in Rhode Island than there were in many other parts of the country during this period, including some other states in New England. For example, Rhode Island never witnessed the pitched battles between Klansmen and anti-Klan protestors which occurred in parts of Massachusetts.²⁴⁴ In spite of this, the claim of Norman Smith, one of the few scholars to write about the Rhode Island Klan, that Klan-related

²⁴³ “Declares San Souci’s Story of Burned K as False,” *Westerly Sun*, Aug. 6, 1924, p. 1. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁴⁴ In one instance, a crowd of 800 anti-Klan protestors reportedly threw stones and physically attacked Klansmen attending an initiation ceremony in Worcester. “800 Mob Klansmen at Worcester,” *Boston Globe*, Oct. 19, 1924, p. 11. Newspapers.com.

violence in Rhode Island was confined to “a few stones thrown and names exchanged between opposing factions” seems both to minimize the real violence that did occur and, to a certain extent, to miss the point. The Rhode Island Klan espoused the same ideology, with the same sort of rhetoric about the apocalyptic threat posed by people of color, Catholics, Jews, and immigrants, as its neighbors and states further away. Even if Klan ideology prompted fewer outbursts of physical violence in Rhode Island than elsewhere, it was still rhetorically violent in itself, and it may have prompted, directly or indirectly, actual violence. Moreover, the violence produced by Klan ideology was not in any way confined to physical violence. In 1920s Rhode Island, as across the nation, Klan members and sympathizers entered politics, with the expressed purpose of pushing for legislation which reflected Klan values, including prohibiting miscegenation and undermining Catholic schools.²⁴⁵ While not violence in a physical sense, such political activities were certainly a form of violence with the potential to negatively affect many lives. Ideology could produce all sorts of violence.

This violence was legitimized by many Rhode Islanders’ acceptance of the Klan as a fairly standard part of the community. This acceptance was the product of public discourse. Rhode Islanders spoke of the Klan as though it were ordinary, and in doing so made it ordinary. Newspapers were, of course, an essential part of the way that this discourse was constructed. The decisions made by papers like the *Providence Journal*, the *Newport Mercury*, or the *Westerly Sun* about what to include and what not to include in their reports on Klan activities surely helped to shape the public conversation around the Klan. But newspapers were not the only place where these conversations were occurring. The ease with which Abigail Sherman reported on local cross burnings in her diaries, even to the point of attending them with her son, suggests that Sherman and others like her spoke of the Klan as normal in their everyday lives. By doing so,

²⁴⁵ Smith, “The Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island,” 41.

they participated in the construction of a social reality in which the Klan *was* normal. What had once been mysterious and dramatic, a grand spectacle, was now no more interesting than any other everyday event. Ultimately, it was this—the transformation of the Klan into something mundane and uninteresting—which would be the hooded order’s downfall.

Epilogue

On March 17th, 1928, the state of Rhode Island was taken by surprise when Col. Harold A. Braman, commander of the First Light Infantry (FLI) Regiment of the Rhode Island state militia, relieved all members of the Regiment's Second Battalion from duty, forbade them from using the Regiment's quarters at the Cranston Street State Armory, and ordered them to surrender their arms. Braman's order, which purportedly "furnished a St. Patrick's Day sensation" in Providence and across the state, was given in response to four affidavits submitted by FLI members that alleged that all but one of the Battalion's companies were made up almost entirely of members of the Ku Klux Klan, that FLI recruits were required to join the Klan before enrolling in the Regiment, and that local Klan groups had promoted enrollment in the FLI.²⁴⁶ All the officers other than the secretary of the Roger Williams Klan, No. 16, were reported to be members, and one individual reported having been told by the Grand Titan of the Rhode Island-Connecticut Realm that the Klan's involvement with the FLI was part of a coordinated effort to take over militia groups in Connecticut as well as RI.²⁴⁷ Accusations were made that Adjutant General Arthur G. Cole had been made aware of Klan involvement with the FLI and had taken no steps to resolve the problem.²⁴⁸ After both Adjutant General Cole and Col. Braman announced intentions to conduct (separate) investigations of the Klan's influence, the Militia Committee of the Rhode Island House of Representatives chose to take over and conduct its own investigation into the Klan's involvement with the FLI.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁶ "Charges Made That Klan Would Control State Guard," *Westerly Sun*, Mar. 18, 1928, p. 1. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁴⁷ "Charges Made That Klan Would Control State Guard," *Westerly Sun*, Mar. 18, 1928, p. 2. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁴⁸ "Charges Cole Knew of Klan," *Westerly Sun*, Mar. 19, 1928, p. 1. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁴⁹ "House to Have Klan Hearing," *Westerly Sun*, Mar. 22, 1928, p. 1. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

The hearings, which were held between March 27th and April 15th of 1928, dominated headlines across Rhode Island for weeks. Reports on the proceedings made the front page of the *Westerly Sun* every day that the committee met, and many other major state newspapers followed just as closely. The proceedings were lurid and dramatic. Indeed, the *Sun* reported that “interest in the committee’s investigation... is attracting large crowds of men and women to the State House daily.”²⁵⁰ Current and former Klansmen appeared before the committee, under subpoena, and told spectacular tales of intrigue which went far beyond the FLI. Orton McGarrett testified that the hooded order had a “dark list” of community figures and others who supported the Klan but wished to keep their involvement secret.²⁵¹ The list included, according to other witnesses, numerous state and local legislators as well as the chiefs of police of three towns.²⁵² Austin C. Barney told the commission that John W. Perry, the Klan’s Grand Titan for Rhode Island and Connecticut, had told him that the Klan’s movement to capture the FLI was necessary to prepare for the war of religions which was sure to break out at any time.²⁵³ Grand Titan Perry himself testified for several days, during which he claimed to stand for a good, honest America of white native-born Protestants. His claim was undermined when members of the Militia Committee reported that, during a visit to his home city of New London, Connecticut, they found evidence that his parents were Portuguese immigrants who had been both practicing Catholics until the time of their deaths.²⁵⁴ Perry fled the state, and the Committee held him in contempt; he was later charged with perjury for making false statements under oath during his testimony.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁰ “No Assembly Friday; Klan Inquiry Tuesday,” *Westerly Sun*, Apr. 8, 1928, p. 5. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁵¹ “Old Klansmen Tell Tales,” *Westerly Sun*, Apr. 6, 1928, p. 1, 14. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁵² “Light Infantry Klan Members,” *Westerly Sun*, Apr. 6, 1928, p. 5. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁵³ “Bliss Takes Issue With Cole,” *Westerly Sun*, Mar. 28, 1928, p. 4. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁵⁴ “Perry Missing; Klan Hearing,” *Westerly Sun*, Apr. 11, 1928, p. 12. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁵⁵ “Perry Missing; Klan Hearing,” *Westerly Sun*, Apr. 11, 1928, p. 12. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park; “K. K. K. Leader is Indicted,” *Westerly Sun*, June 22, 1928, p. 1. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

Throughout the hearings, the politicians on the Militia Committee sparred both with the witnesses and with one another. In one tense exchange, Sergt. Clifford B. Hawes of the FLI was told to be prepared to be called to testify at any time, to which he responded that he was an automobile mechanic and asked for time to clean up before appearing before the Committee. When Representative J. Frank Sullivan asked Hawes, “to cover up the soiled spots why don’t you wear your white uniform?” Hawes responded, “Just a minute. I believe the Knights of Columbus wear black uniforms. I would like to state I have got some respect,” to which another member of the Committee reported that the Knights of Columbus “don’t wear any masks.”²⁵⁶ The sparring reached the point that the Militia Committee Chairman, Representative Herbert Bliss, stepped in to chastise his colleague for trying “to make a political game” of the hearings with the effect of it “developing fast into a comedy,” and telling Sullivan that “the members of this committee are not to bulldoze or misinterpret” the statements of the witnesses.²⁵⁷ In every way, the hearings made for exceptional spectacle. They were dramatic and intriguing, and it seems little wonder that, during the period in which they were taking place, they made the front page almost every day.

Based on all the media attention given to the Militia Committee’s hearings on the Klan, one might expect that the Klan, an organization which, as has been shown throughout this thesis, thrived on public attention and controversy, would have suddenly been thrust back into the limelight in Rhode Island. But that did not happen. As soon as the hearings were over, public attention to the Klan faded. Even in the midst of the scandal, the Klan simply was not that interesting to Rhode Islanders.

²⁵⁶ Transcript of Witness Testimony, Militia Committee of the Rhode Island House of Representatives. MSS 9001-K Box 3 Ku Klux Klan. Rhode Island Historical Society. 775-776.

²⁵⁷ Transcript of Witness Testimony, Militia Committee of the Rhode Island House of Representatives. MSS 9001-K Box 3 Ku Klux Klan. Rhode Island Historical Society. 776.

By the beginning of 1928, the Klan had become, in many communities, an accepted part of ordinary social life, just another (if slightly quirkier) patriotic fraternal order. It had built a brand on its mysterious and exciting nature, but then had become commonplace, losing its luster in the public eye. This is apparent in the way that the hooded order began to fall out of the main conversation of public discourse in the years after 1924: a search for the term “Klan” in the digitized archives of the *Providence Journal* or the *Westerly Sun* turns up noticeably fewer results in 1926 and 1927 than in 1924 and 1925.

The FLI story might have been exactly what the Klan needed to reassert its role in the public conversation. The infiltration of the FLI was the single largest event in which the Klan was openly implicated during the whole period of the hooded order’s existence in the state, and it is only natural to assume that these revelations would have returned the Klan to the forefront of public discourse in Rhode Island. The hearings had seen the dramatic exposure of many associated with the Klan, including social and political leaders from across the state, which could certainly attract attention. The hearings contained much talk about the ideals of white Protestant Americanism, and dire predictions of the imminent, existential threat to white Protestant Americanism posed by the Catholic Church. The hearings would, presumably, produce a statewide legal crackdown on the Klan, both in the attempt to excise the Klan presence from the FLI and in the prosecution of Perry for contempt and perjury. Klan leaders, including Perry, made fools of themselves in front of the committee, and the drama of their encounters with the committee certainly seemed likely to produce at least some form of public attention, even if just ridicule. But this was not how events played out.

In the months following the Militia Committee’s hearings, the Klan seemed to fall very nearly out of public discourse entirely. Following the Militia Committee’s investigation, various

reports were produced, both by the majority and minority parties of the committee and by the adjutant general, which sought to explain how the infiltration had happened and what could be done to prevent such a situation from happening again. Yet, in spite of the hearings' overwhelming focus on the Klan and the contradictions and follies of it and its leaders, the reports produced as a result of the investigation were not particularly interested in the Klan except insofar as it posed a threat to the FLI. While the majority report includes a condemnation of the Klan as a "baneful" influence "conducive to class feeling and bigotry," the members of which "were not representative of good citizenry of this state," the bulk of the report focused on the precise events that took place within the FLI during 1927 and 1928. It proposed legal reforms to prevent such influence of a militia group by any outside actors in the future.²⁵⁸ The investigation into John Perry's statements and previous history, which dominated several days of the hearings, went entirely unmentioned. The Klan was, of course, mentioned plenty throughout the report, but only as it related to the FLI and not necessarily in its own right. In a government body's report on the activities of the Klan, the creation of which had been highly publicized, the Klan itself seemed a rather minor presence.

Following the *Westerly Sun*'s account of the Committee's report on April 19th, the Klan did not appear again in a front-page headline until June, when the paper reported on John Perry's indictment and arrest.²⁵⁹ A speech given by national Klan leader Senator J. Thomas Heflin (of Alabama) at Klan-owned Grant's Field in Smithfield also made the front page a few weeks later.²⁶⁰ In the later summer and fall, however, despite occasional references to outings and field days held by Klan groups in Westerly and in neighboring Connecticut towns, these events were

²⁵⁸ "Klan Report Made Today," *Westerly Sun*, Apr. 19, 1928, p. 5. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁵⁹ "K. K. K. Leader is Indicted," *Westerly Sun*, June 22, 1928, p. 1; "Klan Head Under Bonds," *Westerly Sun*, June 24, 1928, p. 1. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁶⁰ "Sen. Heflin Heard in R.I.," *Westerly Sun*, July 2, 1928, p. 1. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

featured less frequently and less prominently than they had been previously. A few reports on Perry's trial in the winter made the front page—most notably the verdict, in which he was found not guilty—but otherwise the Klan went entirely unreported on.²⁶¹

In the years following, the Klan vanished from the public conversation of the *Westerly Sun*, a paper whose Klan sympathies were noted in chapter 3. Klan events and gatherings which would once have received lengthy, front-page coverage now received minor notes on the back pages, if they were mentioned at all. Moreover, it seems likely that what events were being held were not as well-attended as they once were. In the months following the Militia Committee's hearings, the Westerly Klan apparently faced such declines in regular attendance that it began to advertise its gatherings, both public events and ordinary business meetings, in the paper. Notes in the *Sun*'s "Sunbeams" section advertising the Thursday night meetings of Barbara Frietchie Klan, No. 3, appeared regularly from the summer of 1928 until the spring of 1930, when they too began to fade away.²⁶² Occasionally, larger advertisements were taken out for more public events, such as a public lecture at the Grange Fair Grounds in North Stonington on September 14, 1929.²⁶³ Prior to this point, the Westerly Klan had never felt a need to advertise itself in the newspaper. The Klan was losing its purchase on the public imagination. The *Sun* certainly seemed to think so, reprinting at one point an article from the *New Hampshire Labor Review* which declared that "the Ku Klux Klan is passing from the scene."²⁶⁴ In spite of an effort to revive interest by launching a crusade against Communism in 1932, it is clear that, by the mid-1930s, people no

²⁶¹ "Perry Found 'Not Guilty,'" *Westerly Sun*, Jan. 10, 1929, p. 1. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁶² Advertisement, "Barbara Frietchie Klan, No. 3..." *Westerly Sun*, May 8, 1930, p. 12. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁶³ Advertisement, "Ku Klux Klan Public Lecture," *Westerly Sun*, Sept. 13, 1929, p. 5. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁶⁴ "Passing of the Ku Klux Klan," *Westerly Sun*, June 3, 1928, p. 4. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

longer cared about the Klan.²⁶⁵ A brief report of John Perry's death in 1934 was relegated to page 8 of the *Sun*.²⁶⁶ The paper's last reference to a local Klan appeared in the "Real Estate Deals" section of the June 16, 1935 issue, in which it was matter-of-factly reported that Washington Kounty Klan, No. 120, had sold off its land in the town.²⁶⁷ Here, it seemed, was the undramatic end of the Klan in Rhode Island.

Scholars have given various different explanations for the decline of the Ku Klux Klan, at both national and local levels, in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Some have argued that the Klan declined nationally as a result of getting what it wanted. Following the passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 and the defeat of the Catholic Democrat Al Smith in the 1928 presidential election, these scholars argue, the Klan as a national organization had successfully accomplished many of its major political goals and no longer had any real reason to continue to exist. Others argue almost the opposite. In his study of the Klan in Indiana, Leonard Moore argues that the hooded order's decline was in many ways the product of its ineffectiveness as a political organization, pointing out that, although the Indiana Klan succeeded in electing many candidates to state and local office, there was little will to act on the Klan's agenda in the legislature. Moore also identifies bad publicity and public scandal as a factor which contributed to this decline; events such as Indiana Klan kingpin D. C. Stephenson's highly publicized murder trial significantly hurt the reputation of both the Indiana Klan and the national organization.

While there have been very few previous studies of the Rhode Island Klan, those which do exist largely follow these sorts of traditional explanations to account for its decline. Joseph Sullivan claims that "bad publicity, boredom, and ultimately the Depression contributed to the

²⁶⁵ "Ku Klux Klan Starts War on Communism," *Westerly Sun*, Oct. 3, 1932, p. 2. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁶⁶ "Former Klan Leader Dead," *Westerly Sun*, Feb. 14, 1934, p. 8. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

²⁶⁷ "Warranty deed..." *Westerly Sun*, June 16, 1935, p. 2. Westerly Library & Wilcox Park.

Klan's rapid decline," finding that "after a haphazard campaign on behalf of U.S. Senate candidate Peter Gerry in 1930, the Ku Klux Klan was no longer a feature in Rhode Island life."²⁶⁸ Norman Smith's account takes a more localistic stance, implying that Rhode Island represented uniquely infertile ground for the hooded order: "it may be that the Klan in Rhode Island amounted to nothing more than a momentary disturbance in her even-tenored way. With almost three centuries of experience as independent men, Rhode Islanders may have rebuffed the foreign in spirit rather than the foreign in body."²⁶⁹

It is probable that all of these factors contributed to the decline of the Klan in some way or another. What the Rhode Island case makes clear, however, is that one of the most important factors in this decline was cultural. The Klan had lost its luster as a subject of public discourse. Sullivan's identification of "boredom" as a crucial factor explaining the decline gestures towards this, although he does not follow this thread to its end point. The failure of the Militia Committee hearings to leave any sort of lasting consequences in Rhode Island's newspaper conversations, and the way that the klan did not go down in flames but instead slowly fizzled out, suggest that the hooded order's demise was not so much the product of bad publicity as it was of a lack of publicity, or more precisely, a lack of public interest which would generate demand for publicity.

By the time of the Militia Committee hearings, the public did not really care about the Klan anymore; its attention had shifted to other things. The Klan's normalization in public discourse described in chapter 3 thus seems to have been a double-edged sword. As was shown in chapters 1 and 2, the Klan thrived on publicity of any sort, good or bad. It did not matter how the Klan was being talked about so much as that it *was* being talked about. It was an unusual and exciting new presence in the community, one which Rhode Islanders wanted to read and have

²⁶⁸ Sullivan, "Rhode Island's Invisible Empire," 76.

²⁶⁹ Smith, "The Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island," 44.

conversations about. Its excitement drew, in large part, on its mystery and its novelty; people found it interesting because it was so strange, so different from the ordinary of the community. As public discourses of the Klan began to treat it as a more ordinary phenomenon—as a slightly quirky fraternal organization rather than a mysterious vigilante group—the strangeness and novelty of the Klan wore away. Because it had become ordinary, people no longer particularly cared to talk or read about it; it was no longer interesting, and thus no longer worth attention. With the Militia Committee hearings, the Klan briefly returned to the forefront of public discourse because the hearings themselves were interesting to the public as spectacle. However, a brief interest in the hearings themselves did not suddenly make the Klan interesting again. Indeed, in bringing so many current and former Klan members to the stand to spill the organization's secrets, the hearings took away any last vestiges of mystery which the Klan possessed. While they might have kept up with accounts of the investigation, Rhode Islanders, by the end of the hearings, no longer felt as though they needed to learn any more about the order. They had seen all they needed to see of the Ku Klux Klan, and this, more than any scandal or political failing, the hooded order could not survive.

The death of the Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island at the end of the 1920s is, of course, not the death of all the ideas for which the Klan stood. It was not the last time that some version of the Ku Klux Klan was active in the state; while at no point did any later Klan group in Rhode Island ever come close to the heights reached by the Klan of the 1920s, the distribution of literature for David Duke's iteration of the Klan in Providence and the prosecution of several Rhode Island Klansmen on federal firearm charges both made headlines in the early 1980s.²⁷⁰

²⁷⁰ See Richard, *Not a Catholic Nation*, chapter 11.

Beyond the publicized activities of groups calling themselves the “Knights of the Ku Klux Klan,” however, legacies of Klan belief and practice continue to haunt many elements of contemporary politics, both in Rhode Island and nationally. In many ways, we live in a world created—or, at the very least, heralded—by the Ku Klux Klan. Resurgent nativism and far-right nationalism have produced draconian immigration policies enforced at gunpoint by the forces of “law and order.” Civil rights legislation designed to protect the ability of marginalized communities to participate in democratic processes has been systematically dismantled. Hate speech and hate crimes have risen as both public and private institutions fail to take action against racial, religious, and ethnic bigotry. Politicians and commentators alike speak of preserving traditional, conservative American values in the face of new cultural changes. John Perry’s prediction of a religious war to preserve the government and the soul of the American nation seems to resonate quite strongly with the actions of a federal administration today that asks legislators to pass laws “for Jesus” and frames foreign conflicts in explicitly religious terms.²⁷¹ This is not to claim that the ideology of the modern American right-wing is the same as that of the Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s. Nor is this to accuse the wide swath of the American public who support immigration restrictions or religious values of being Klansmen. It is, however, to point out that many elements of modern political discourse resonate quite closely with the discourses of the 1920s Klan.

If this thesis has attempted to show anything, it is that discourses—what people are talking about, and how they are talking about it—matter enormously to the construction of social and political phenomena. The Ku Klux Klan of 1920s Rhode Island was in many ways a unique phenomenon grounded in a very specific time and place, but it was far from unique in terms of

²⁷¹ “Trump tells Republicans to pass voting law ‘for Jesus,’” *Reuters*, March 23, 2026, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-tells-republicans-pass-voting-law-for-jesus-2026-03-23/>; Alain Stephens, “Far-Right Religious Leaders Advising Trump See Iran as an End Times Holy War,” *The Intercept*, April 4, 2026, <https://theintercept.com/2026/04/04/paula-white-iran-war-christian-evangelicals/>.

the ways that people talked about it; sensationalized phenomena like the Klan had long dominated public conversations and have continued to do so since. The Klan gained and lost a place in Rhode Island public life from the way that it featured in popular discourses, the ways that newspapers reported on it and ordinary Rhode Islanders conceptualized it. When Rhode Islanders talked of the Klan as an exotic curiosity, something to be seen on stage or on screen rather than experienced firsthand, that was what it was. When the Klan was a novel, mysterious, exciting, and terrifying presence in the community, this was because it was talked about in newspapers and dinner conversations as being novel, mysterious, exciting, and terrifying. And in the years after 1924, the Klan became an ordinary, unexceptional part of the community because that was how people spoke of it. Each of these stages was, of course, influenced by broader contextual factors outside of public conceptions. However, the intervention of this thesis has been to assert that, in each of these cases, the social and political reality was undeniably shaped and constructed by the dynamics of public discourses. If we are to understand the rise and fall of the Ku Klux Klan in Rhode Island, we must thus pay close attention to public conceptions and discourses of the Klan; if we consider only the precise events which took place involving the Klan, we miss an enormous part of the story.

This thesis has aimed to shed light on what a consideration of such discourses can do for an understanding of a strange phenomenon like the Rhode Island Klan, but this sort of analysis is extremely relevant to historical work far removed from this particular subject. Discourses, both contemporary and present, shape our understanding of any historical event or period that we choose to study. Indeed, the study of history is itself a discourse, one which is continuously involved in both describing and constructing ideas of the past and what that past “means.” As historians, we would thus do well to pay close attention to such discourses: through the effect

they have on historical events and our understandings of them, and through the ways in which we engage with and participate in them. The narrative of the Rhode Island Klan should remind us that what people are talking about, and how they are talking about it, is often just as important to historical inquiry as the facts of historical events themselves.

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