

Arthur Fenner Shaped State Organization Out of Fragments

By J. Earl Clauson

Rhode Island began its career as the thirteenth State with a well-defined tradition of political-mindedness which it never has forgotten. It had been trained in the Hopkins-Ward school and accustomed to argument about public affairs by the fight over paper money which lasted for three-quarters of a century.

And for its first Governor after it had decided on allegiance to the Federal Constitution it chose a man from whom politics as practiced in his day, held no secrets.

Arthur Fenner sprang from a distinguished family. His ancestor Arthur had been captain of the home guard when the Indians burned Providence and active in many kinds of public service. His mother was an Olney.

He himself had been in public life almost ever since gaining his majority. Born in 1745, he was already sufficiently proved to be named one of the committee of inspection when war loomed in 1774. For many years he held the job of clerk of the Court of Common Pleas, which kept him in touch with the minds which shaped public affairs.

By 1790, British shackles thrown off and colonial restrictions—not that Rhode Island ever minded them very much—removed, he was ready for the governorship. Two parties were shaping, that which soon came to be known as the Republicans and the so-called anti-Federalists. Fenner aligned himself with the former.

Boss of His Party

Political manoeuvring was neither less active nor less cunning in his day than now. Fenner knew how to make himself undisputed boss of his party, as well as how to keep that party in line and build it up. He won an easy victory. From that time until his death in office in 1805 he was never headed.

The property qualification for voting obtained. Not all of the returns of those far-off election days are available, but in 1801 the figures still preserved show Arthur Fenner 3756, with no record of any cast for an opponent; for 1802, Fenner, 3802; William Greene, 1934. In the missing years it is fair to presume the opposing vote was so small as not to be worth recording.

He is said to have been the tallest Governor Rhode Island ever had; one reporter has set him down as six feet eight, although that sounds like almost too much Governor. His administration of 15 years was notable chiefly for his own complete bossism and for the part he took in shaping a State



... HE WAS RHODE ISLAND'S TALLEST GOVERNOR

organization out of the fragments carried over from colony days.

A Fenner dynasty seemed in prospect when in the next election but one following Arthur Fenner's death his son James was elected to the governorship. The Governor had brought up James in the political path which perhaps he wanted him to follow. Graduated from Brown in 1789, James was associated with his father in the latter's activities and proved himself an apt pupil of political affairs.

U. S. Senator at 34

He aligned himself with the Jeffersonian school of thought. Several times elected to the General Assembly, he was only 34 when he was chosen United States Senator.

There is little doubt that he himself had a finger in his recall to become Governor. At any rate he resigned his Senate seat, was elected in 1807, and proved the people's choice no less than 13 times.

His terms, however, were not consecutive. From 1811 to 1824 and from 1831 to 1843 he surrendered the gubernatorial seat to others. Altogether the Fenners, father and son, occupied the executive chair 28 years. James was president of the constitutional convention at East Greenwich in 1842 and first Governor under the adopted constitution.

His obituarist describes him as a man of iron will, inflexible resolution, vigorous intellect and unconquerable energy. Allowing the customary ten per cent discount for an obituarist, it is reasonable to believe that he was a man of exceptional parts and a skilled political manipulator. He was 74 when in 1845 he declared himself tired of serving the State and withdrew to his place called "Whatcheer," where he died the following April.

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