

Portrait of a Loyalist: Research findings for the Nichols-Overing House
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Introduction

The farm lying partly in Middletown and partly in Portsmouth has been historically significant not only locally but also nationally since prior to the revolutionary war. Research has been able to trace the land to the second quarter of the 18th century when it seems it was owned by the lieutenant governor of the Colony of Rhode Island, Jonathan Nichols. Through several generations, the property's owners have manifested "slices of life" on Aquidneck Island. However, the house is most known for the capture of the British General Prescott by Captain Barton in 1777. This event is so well known throughout Aquidneck Island that the farm has been called Prescott Farm for at least the 20th century, and known as Prescott Farm reaching back into the 19th century. As important as this event was to not only Rhode Island but also to all 13 colonies, the property and its owners are just as important in the broad overarching themes that makes colonial Newport different from the other major port cities such as Boston and Charleston, South Carolina. The third owner of the house, Henry John Overing, is a fine example of Newport in the mid-18th century.

About 15 years after the death of Jonathan Nichols, the Lieutenant Governor of Rhode Island, the house came to be owned by a merchant and distiller by the name of Henry John Overing. Overing, a Loyalist, was a wealthy slave owner, distiller, and sugar baker. Overing, like many wealthy merchants, in Newport relied highly on the Atlantic trade. Newport was irrefutably tied to the trade the Atlantic Ocean offered the island; more specifically the many of the merchants of Newport were part of the "triangle trade" between Africa, the West Indies, and Newport. While it is unknown to what extent Overing was involved in the trade, as a sugar baker and distiller, Overing would need large quantities of sugar and molasses. Molasses and rum were the underlying currency of the "triangle trade" and the driving force behind the importation of slaves from Africa to both the West Indies and to the colonies. Therefore, the conclusion can be drawn that he was involved in some respect in the "triangle trade" that supported a majority of the wealthy merchants in Newport.

The story of the Overing family goes hand-in-hand with the story of Prescott's capture. In order to understand the importance of this particular chapter in the history of the house, a complete history of the property must be given. Without a complete history of the property, the house becomes stuck in one period. It is necessary to show the evolution of the house as a living history because it is still being used as such and will continue to offer us glimpses into the past. The history of the house did not begin or end with the capture of General Prescott and neither will this paper.

The history of the house begins with the original land grants in the town of Portsmouth and continues today with the Newport Restoration Foundation. The goal of this research project is to give a complete history of the house, while focusing in on the period between 1770 and 1800.

History of Prescott Farm

The farm now known as “Prescott Farm” was possibly built by Jonathan Nichols, Jr., the first known owner of the property lying partly in Middletown and partly in Portsmouth. The land may have been part of the original grants of the town of Portsmouth given to Thomas Nichols after 1638.¹ The Nichols family owned several of the plots surrounding this specific parcel of land. The property stayed within the Nichols family until 1765 when Anne Nichols, widow of Jonathan Nichols, Jr., sold it to Peleg Thurston.²

Jonathan Nichols, Jr., and his father, Jonathan Nichols, were both prominent members of the Colony of Rhode Island. Jonathan Nichols, the elder, was born circa 1681.³ He was Deputy Governor of the Colony of Rhode Island between May and August 1727.⁴ He died in August 1727 at the age of 46 years. His son, Jonathan Nichols was born circa 1712, and was also the Deputy Governor of the Colony of Rhode Island from November 1753 to May 1754 and again from May 1755 to September 1756.⁵ He died in 1756 at the age of 44 years.⁶ It appears that both Jonathan Nichols died while holding the lieutenant governor position. The house appears to have been held by John Nichols, Jr.’s wife for several years after his death, until 1765 when she released her power of thirds to Peleg Thurston.⁷ When a husband died intestate, a widow was typically given a third of the property with the remaining property divided between the surviving children. It appears that through widow’s thirds, Anne Nichols, received the Nichols Farm in Portsmouth. She deeded her rights to Thurston for £2000 of “Rhode Island Colony, old tenor.”⁸

While the Nichols owned the property, it appears that they parceled off a piece of their property for a burial ground. Located adjacent to West Main Road, the cemetery is now known as Rhode Island Historic Cemetery 22. The graveyard made deed research relatively easy because it was always in the land descriptions. When the Nichols sold the property to Peleg Thurston, they excluded the burial ground in the sale.⁹ Therefore, the burial ground does not include burial plots of any owners of the farm other than Jonathan Nichols, Jr. It also has the remains of his father, Jonathan Nichols. The burial ground continued to be used through the end of the 19th century.¹⁰ It contains the remains of members of the Hassard and Sheffield family.¹¹ Time constraints prevented determining the connection, if any, of these families to the Nichols family.

¹ Original Land Grant Map of the Town of Portsmouth

² For a complete history of the deed transactions regarding Prescott Farm, please see attached Appendix I.

³ Kohl, “Cemetery Twenty-Two”

⁴ Office of the Secretary of State. <http://www.sec.state.ri.us/library/riinfo/lrgovernors>

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Kohl, “Cemetery Twenty-Two”

⁷ Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Record 6:409

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Kohl, “Cemetery Twenty-Two”

¹¹ Ibid

Although it cannot be proven conclusively, it is presumed that the Nichols built the structure based on structural evidence. The house has the architectural styling of a house built during the second quarter of the 18th century. The deed evidence supports the claim because when the property was deeded to Peleg Thurston, the land description includes evidence of a house or “messenger.”¹² He bought the house for £16,383, 15 shillings, old tenor from the deceased Jonathan Nichols, with an additional £2,000.00 pounds, old tenor going to Anne Nichols for her rights of widow’s thirds.¹³

Research thus far has yielded some information about Peleg Thurston. He evidently owned a shop in Newport.¹⁴ The store sold American goods as well as English imports. According to a *Newport Mercury* advertisement, his shop sold such items as beaver coats, cloth, rum, and molasses.¹⁵ His shop sold a diverse group of products. This apparently was common to colonial Newport. Many merchants diversified their market in order to spread the economic risk.¹⁶ If people did not want to buy rum or molasses, they could buy clothing or coats. There is also evidence that Peleg Thurston may have been involved in privateering. This may have been a reason he offered a variety of goods at his store. If the latest shipping endeavor proved to be unsuccessful, at least his store may have offered a little financial security.

Thurston owned the farm on the Middletown / Portsmouth line for a period of five years before he passed away in 1770. Peleg Thurston died without leaving a will in 1770.¹⁷ He had several outstanding debts adding up to over £6643.¹⁸ In order to repay his debts, some of his real estate had to be disposed of after his death. The men in charge of his estate, Charles Wickham, Francis Brinley and Samuel Fowler sold the property to Henry John Overing.¹⁹ At the time of purchase Henry John Overing was listed as residing in Newport.²⁰

Henry Jonathan Overing was born circa 1731 in Boston, Massachusetts, to John Overing and Henrietta Auchmuty Overing.²¹ Jonathan Overing was the Attorney General for the Colony of Massachusetts during the years 1722 – 1733 and again from 1739 – 1748.²² His mother came from an affluent family in the Roxbury area of Boston.²³ Some time during the year 1755 Henry Jonathan Overing married Mary Whitehorne, daughter of Jonathan G. Whitehorne, a prominent Newport merchant and distiller.²⁴

¹² Ibid

¹³ Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Records 6:409 and 6:214

¹⁴ In the 18th Century, Shops sold retail items, and stores sold wholesale items.

¹⁵ *Newport Mercury*, February 21, 1763

¹⁶ Crane 12

¹⁷ Original Document at Newport Historical Society

¹⁸ Newport City Hall, Probate Records, 2:103

¹⁹ Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Records, 6:425

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ancestry.com. For an Overing Family tree, please see attached Appendix II.

²² New England Historic Genealogical Society (N.E.H.G.S.) pg. 16

²³ Ibid

²⁴ N.E.H.G.S. 11. This appears to be the same John G. Whitehorne, distiller, who owned a house on 428 Thames Street, currently owned by Newport Restoration. Mary Overing may be the aunt of the Newport

It is unclear as to when Henry John Overing moved to Newport, but it is certain that he was here by the year 1758. Overing was admitted as a freeman to the town of Newport at the May 1758 meeting of the General Assembly held in Newport.²⁵ A freeman had the right to vote including the right to choose officers both local and general. The Colony of Rhode Island had very restrictive voting regulations. During the 18th century only men over the age of 21 had the right to vote. These men also had to be worth over £40 or have a rental that rented for over 40 shillings per annum. The right to vote was passed on only to the eldest son of the family. Marriage did not constitute a way to become a voting member of society. If a man married into a prominent Rhode Island family, the right to vote was not immediately granted to him.²⁶ This means that Henry John Overing on his own status was granted the right to vote and become a full citizen of Newport.

Also in 1758, Henry John Overing purchased property in Newport.²⁷ Unfortunately many of the pre-1779 town records were ruined during the British occupation. When the British left the Island, they also took the town records. The boat that contained the records sank, and the records stayed submerged in the salt water for several hours before they were retrieved. Although these records are in poor condition, some are legible. There is a recorded deed between Francis Skinner and Henry John Overing. All that can be gathered from this deed is that Henry John Overing bought the property for £302 and it was eighty feet square.²⁸ Overing also bought a property from Beriah Goddard pre-1779 for the amount of \$700.00, old tenor. The property was bordered in some direction by Thames Street, Northerly by a street leading from somewhere to the “harbour or salt water,” and Southerly on land late of Handley Chipman, and in another direction by property of Simeon Price.²⁹

Like his father-in-law, Overing became a member of the Church of England and Trinity Church. Overing was a member and active member of Trinity Church as early as 1758. All of his children were baptized at Trinity, and some members of his family are buried there. In 1762, Overing was among several members that paid for an expansion of the church.³⁰ Also in 1762 a diagram naming the owners of the box pews was created. Henry John Overing and family occupied a pew in the front of the church on the outside of the inner-right row.³¹ In the hierarchy of church seating, this was a prominent position. As a side note, a tax roll of the town of Newport was taken in 1772, twenty-seven of the highest tax payers were members of Trinity Church.³² Several of the members were also Loyalists.

distiller Samuel Whitehorne, whose house at 416 Thames Street is also owned by NRF, and Jonathan Whitehorne.

²⁵ Bartlett, Volume VI, 140

²⁶ Crane 61

²⁷ For deed history of Overing transactions, please see Appendix V.

²⁸ Original Record at Newport Historical Society, Price may actually be Pease. It is hard to tell due to the condition of the records.

²⁹ Newport City Hall, Probate Record 12:405

³⁰ Mason 134

³¹ Ibid. Please see Appendix III for the chart.

³² Crane 24

Due to the condition of the records, it has been virtually impossible to peg a specific location to the Overing family in Newport, however, with evidence given through later deeds of his son, Henry Overing, and through newspaper advertisements, it can be concluded that Overing's property was on the lower end of Thames Street.

As early as 1759 Henry John Overing, a sugar baker, began placing advertisements for his sugar-wares in the year-old Rhode Island newspaper, the *Newport Mercury*.³³ The *Mercury* was the first continually published newspaper in the Colony of Rhode Island. In an advertisement dated April 24, 1759, Henry John Overing had a sugar house at the lower end of Thames Street. As described by the newspaper, he sold

Choice double and single refin'd loaf sugar, by wholesale. Country Gentlemen may be supply'd by letter, the same as if present. N.B. Loaf Sugar, either by wholesale or retail, will be likewise dispos'd of by Peter Mumford, at his Shope between Cowley and the Ferry Wharf.³⁴

According to the Oxford English Dictionary a sugar baker is another name for a sugar refiner. In 1794, there were only 17 sugar bakers in the United States.³⁵ Sugar refining was a labor intensive industry. Sugar was imported from places such as the West Indies into Newport and other colonies, probably in the form of raw sugar. Once the sugar was in Newport, it was cured and the remaining molasses was drained from the granulated sugar in conical containers. The sugar was now in the form of loaves and these loaves would be sold once they were completely dried.³⁶

As a businessman in Newport, Overing involved himself in the political atmosphere. In 1761 he and several other men including John and Evan Malbone, Silas Cooke, and Samuel Bours, petitioned to the General Assembly for the right to collect the sum of £6,000 by lottery in order to complete the pavement of the lower end of Thames Street. This £6,000 was to be added to an additional £6,000 that had already been collected to pave Thames Street. The project had been halted, and the town needed to raise the money in order to alleviate the inconvenience of driving on an unpaved street. Their petition was granted at the September 1761 meeting of the General Assembly.³⁷

Since his sugar house was located at the lower end of Thames Street, the pavement project would have been very important to Overing. The lower end of Thames Street is also known as the southern end. This end of Thames Street was where many prominent members of Newport society located their businesses and houses and was known as the "court end of town."³⁸ John Whitehorne, Overing's father-in-law, located his house at this end of Thames Street (428 Thames Street). Whitehorne also had his distillery

³³ Newport Mercury, April 24, 1759. A sugar baker is synonymous with sugar refiner.

³⁴ Newport Mercury, April 24, 1759

³⁵ O.E.D. Compact Edition 116

³⁶ Diderot Plate 41, Sugar V

³⁷ Bartlett Vol VI, 286-287

³⁸ Crane 50

located at this end of town, most likely located very close to his residence.³⁹ During the 1700s, it was very common for the wealthy Newport merchants to locate their house near their business.

As a member of the more affluent tier of society, Henry John Overing subscribed to the *Boston Chronicle* during the year 1767. He was among several noted members of Newport to subscribe to the newspaper. Among the subscribers were Dr. Wm. Hunter, Augustus Johnston (the stamp master), Mr. Charles Handy, John Nicoll, Esq., John Bannister, Jacob Rivera, Archimedes George, Isaac Touro, and Abram Redwood.⁴⁰ All of these men were relatively loyal to the British Crown. The *Boston Chronicle* was published under the guidance of the English. It was a loyalist newspaper with sentiments that did not support the colonists.⁴¹

As many wealthy merchants in Newport appeared to have done, Henry John Overing purchased a summer farm. In 1771, Henry John Overing purchased the property now known as “Prescott Farm” from the estate of Peleg Thurston for \$1,460 Spanish Milled Dollars. The deeded property was described and bounded as follows:

“a certain messuage or dwelling house and tract or parcel of land situate lying and being partly in Middletown and partly in Portsmouth in the county aforesaid (Newport) containing 55 acres and half an acre and 18 rods and is bounded Westerly on the road leading to Bristol Ferry, Northerly and Easterly on land of John Jepson and Southerly on land of Joseph Church which above mentioned and described tract or parcel of land to exclusive use of the burial ground together also with all and singular the house...”⁴²

Henry John and Mary Overing had several children. According to the census of 1774 the Newport household of Henry John Overing contained the following members:⁴³

Males above 16	2
Males under 16	1
Females above 16	2
Females under 16	1
Slaves	8
Household Total	14

The 1774 Census also listed Henry John Overing as being the head of a property in Middletown. The household at Middletown listed members as follows;⁴⁴

³⁹ Kingston Town Records 5:527-529

⁴⁰ Newport Historical Magazine, Vol 1, 1880 – 1881, 231

⁴¹ Newport Historical Magazine, Vol 1, 1880 -1881, 230

⁴² Original document located at the Newport Historical Society

⁴³ 1774 Census of the Colony of Rhode Island. The censuses of 1774 and 1782 are attached as Appendix IV.

⁴⁴ Ibid

Males above 16	1
Blacks	3
Household Total	4

All the Overing children were baptized at Trinity Church in Newport.⁴⁵ They had three sons: John, baptized in 1755, Henry, baptized in 1758, and Robert, baptized in 1778 (born in April 1778).⁴⁶ The only son to live past his mid-twenties was Henry who lived until the age of 78.⁴⁷ Henry married Charlotte Debrousses and moved to New York City by the year 1804.⁴⁸ John died in Newport in 1782, and Robert died in 1800 at Tobago in the West Indies. He had just been honorably discharged from the 16th Infantry in the Army eighteen months prior to his death.⁴⁹

The Overings also had two daughters: Henrietta, baptized in 1760 and Mary who was baptized in 1775.⁵⁰ Henrietta married her second cousin, Robert Nichols Auchmuty after the passing of his first wife.⁵¹ Robert Auchmuty was from a prominent Boston family. Henrietta had her portrait painted by Gilbert Stuart. The painting is now owned by the Brooklyn Art Museum.⁵² Mary wed Thomas Handy and eventually was given the Nichols-Overing farm.⁵³

The 1774 census also points out the number of slaves the Overing family owned. The family owned at least eight and as many as eleven. According to Dr. Crane, author of *A Dependent People*, Newport had 460, out of 1590, families that owned slaves. The majority of slave owners (222) owned only one slave. On the census, eight slaves were specifically listed as owned by Overing in Newport. Of the 460 slave owning families, only 10 families owned eight or more, three of these families owned eight slaves.⁵⁴ This is evidence of the wealth of the Overing family. In other words, less than 0.6% of the entire population of Newport owned more than 8 slaves, and of the slave owning families, only 2% owned more than eight slaves. Put into context, this alone can verify that John Overing was a fairly wealthy man. If the slaves at his farm were not included as part of the number of slaves owned in Newport and indeed were owned by him, then Overing would have owned eleven slaves, which would have given him one of the largest counts of slaves in Newport.⁵⁵

⁴⁵ Arnold, 120 - 127

⁴⁶ It is unclear as to when the oldest sons were born. They were, however both baptized in 1758.

⁴⁷ N.E.H.G.S. 17

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Arnold 120-127

⁵¹ Mason 177

⁵² Ibid

⁵³ Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Record 9:140

⁵⁴ Crane 58

⁵⁵ Crane's chart has been attached as Appendix VI.

Although Henry John Overing owned several slaves, there is evidence that he also held indentured servants. In 1766, Henry John Overing and his brother-in-law, Samuel Whitehorne, placed an advertisement in the *New-York Mercury* about two runaway servants. Their names were John Fox and Darby Harrington, and there were both from Ireland.⁵⁶ It is unknown whether these servants were indentured to Overing or Whitehorne, but since both men placed the advertisement, it seems apparent that Overing had some stake in their safe return.

It appears that Henry John Overing did not use the farm on the Middletown / Portsmouth line as his permanent residence in 1774. However, as the 1770s progressed, Henry John Overing, a Loyalist, may have frequented the farm more often. The British began to occupy the island during 1776. Overing's farm was eventually made the headquarters of General Prescott.

On January 27, 1777, Henry John Overing took an oath to the British crown, and in October of that year he was made a lieutenant of the Royal (Loyal) Newport Association.⁵⁷ The Royal Newport Association was partial to the British and this may have been a reason that Overing's farm was indeed occupied by the British; however, there is no concrete reason why Prescott chose to live so far from Newport, but it is known that he was advised not to live at the farm because there could not be sufficient security there.⁵⁸ As a result of his choice to stay in the countryside, he had less protection, and on the night of July 9th - 10th, 1777, General Prescott was captured by Captain William Barton. The event was recorded contemporarily by Lieutenant Frederick Mackenzie, a Welsh Officer, stationed near the Overing Farm. Mackenzie described the event as follows:⁵⁹

a party of Rebels landed behind Gen^l Smith's late quarters at Redwood's, about 5 miles N. of Newport, from whence they advanced very silently to General Prescott's quarters at M^r Overing's on the W. road. They surrounded the house about 10 minutes before 12, seized the Sentry, who had challenged twice, but who, not being loaded, could give no further alarm, and immediately forced open all the doors, they then went directly into the Chambers, where they laid hold of Gen^l Prescott, and Lieu^t Barrington, his aide-de-Camp, and in about 7 minutes quitted the house, taking the General, Lieu^t Barrington, and the Sentry with them, returned to their boats by the way the came and immediately went off. Some of the party broke open M^r Overing's Chamber door, as also that of his son, and

⁵⁶ N.E.H.G.S. 22. The article mentions a John Overing and a Samuel Whitehorne. It is most likely Henry John Overing. Samuel Whitehorne was the brother of Overing's wife, Mary Whitehorne Overing. In all my research of the subject I have seen no mention of a John Overing anywhere in the vicinity of Newport. It appears as though Henry John Overing was known, or at least transcribed to be Henry Overing or John Overing. Henry John Overing did have a son named John Overing, but in 1766, John Overing would have been roughly 10 years old.

⁵⁷ N.E.H.G.S. 16

⁵⁸ Mackenzie 150

⁵⁹ For Mackenzie's complete diary entry on the capture of Prescott, please see Appendix VII.

endeavored to take them also, but after some struggling and being in hast, they let them go.”⁶⁰

Mackenzie placed Henry John Overing at his farm at the time when General Prescott was captured. The account also placed a son at the farm during the capture of Prescott. Since Lieutenant Mackenzie recorded the event from the perspective of a British officer, it offers an interesting perspective when compared to the letters of George Washington.

George Washington’s revolutionary correspondence has been catalogued by the University of Virginia.⁶¹ In a letter dated July 16, 1777, a letter written by George Washington mentioned the capture of Major General Richard Prescott. In this letter, Washington made reference to a possible exchange of officers between the British and the Patriots. The trade would give the Colonial forces Major General Lee and return Major General Prescott to the British forces.⁶² Eventually this trade did happen, but unfortunately, the trade was not that beneficial to the Colonial forces. Major General Lee eventually was noted as a trader to the forces and released from his position in the army.⁶³

The records of the capture that were written contemporaneous to the event do not make any mention of Mrs. Overing even being on the property. According to later accounts a story has been mentioned of an affair between the General and Mrs. Overing. As late as 1981, there have been references to this story. However, it is important to take into account the earlier accounts and how they made no mention of the affair. In fact Mackenzie did not even make mention of any other member of the Overing family at the farm other than Mr. Overing and one of his sons.

After the capture of Prescott at the Nichols-Overing farm not much is known about the activities there. After the British occupation of Aquidneck Island ended in 1779, the French occupied the town of Newport.⁶⁴ At a meeting of the General Assembly in October 1779, the Assembly recognized that the enemy (the British) had left the island. They repealed the laws that the British had made, and once again allowed the citizens of Aquidneck Island to trade and correspond with residents of other towns in Rhode Island.

Like other families on both sides of the conflict, the Overing's were involved in a variety of property claims and legal issues as a consequence of the war and their post-war status. For example, the sheriff of Providence repossessed a piece of property in Gloucester that had belonged to Robert Auchmuty, Peter Luce, Estes Hatch, and Henry Overing because they were “represented as enemies to this and the United States.”⁶⁵ A reason the sheriff had taken possession of the land was that he believed enemies to the United States should

⁶⁰ Mackenzie 148

⁶¹ Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources: Volume 8. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu>

⁶² Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources: Volume 8. <http://etext.lib.virginia.edu>

⁶³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Revolutionary_War

⁶⁴ Newport Historical Society. <http://www.newporthistorical.org/history.htm>

⁶⁵ Bartlett Vol VIII 601

not be profiting from land located on soil of the United States.⁶⁶ The Henry Overing mentioned may be his son Henry Overing, but it is more probable that this is Henry John Overing. Henry John Overing was an established member of the community and had land holdings on the mainland of Rhode Island. His son, Henry Overing, would have been around the age of 21 and relatively young to be a land owner.

Shortly after the British left, the French fleets arrived on Aquidneck Island in July of 1780 and stayed for the next 18 months.⁶⁷ During the French Occupation, the General Assembly of the state of Rhode Island authorized a committee to assess the damages to residences in towns that had sustained a heavy amount of destruction caused by the British Forces. During the year 1781 an assessor made his way to Middletown where several residents made claims against the British crown. Although Henry John Overing was a Loyalist, he still made a claim for £787.16.⁶⁸ His neighbors, John Jepson and Joseph Church, did not make any claims in Middletown. The claims made by the residents of Middletown totaled £137,777 ^{1/6}.⁶⁹

In 1782, a census was taken, and there was no listing for Overing in Newport. He was solely listed as a resident of Middletown. His household consisted of the following members:⁷⁰

Males under 16	1
Males between 16 and 22	0
Males between 22 and 50	1
Males upwards of 50	1
Females under 16	1
Females between 16 and 22	0
Females between 22 and 50	3
Females upwards of 50	0
Household Total	7

This census did not tabulate the number of blacks for anyone, so therefore it is unknown the number of blacks he had on the premise with him during this period.

If Henry John Overing is in fact the male above the age of 50 at his farm in 1782, he left shortly after the census was taken for Bermuda. He died in Bermuda in March 1783, only a few months before the official end of the Revolutionary War.⁷¹

In 1783 Overing's son, Henry sailed for England in order to make claims against the British for wrongfully seizing one of his father's ships. However, Henry's ship had to make an emergency stop in Ireland in order to fix a leak that had sprung on the voyage.

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Newport Historical Society. <http://www.newporthistorical.org/history.htm>

⁶⁸ Historical Magazine, Vol I, 1880-1881, 242

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ 1782 Census

⁷¹ United Empire Loyalists, Parts I-II

Because of this delay, Henry Overing was unable to make claims in his deceased father's name by the deadline.⁷²

Henry Overing claimed that his father never subjected himself to the American States, and nor did he ever help the Rebels.⁷³ He offered proof of his loyalty in the form of certificates from Brigadier General F. Smith, who stated that H.J. Overing had indeed taken an oath of Loyalty to the British, and from General Pigot who had made Henry John Overing a lieutenant of the Royal (Loyal) Newport Association. Henry Overing also noted that he was a member of the 54th Regiment. It is unclear what the 54th regiment was, but there was a line infantry called the 54th Regiment of foot that was made of colonists that sided with the British Army.⁷⁴

Henry Overing claimed that his father's ship, the brig *Mary*, had been made a prize of war illegally under the Prohibitory Act.⁷⁵ The *brig Mary* had left Newport for Quebec in September 1775; however, it is not clear when the ship was captured. It may have been captured in April 1776. The ship was captured in the waters surrounding the Island of Dominica.

The Prohibitory Act of 1775 was passed in December 1775. It was aimed to damage the budding economy of the colonies. Parliament outlawed all trade with the colonies, and stated that American ships were now to be treated as if owned by an enemy to Great Britain. A seized ship's cargo could be sold and any profit made was to be split between the captain and crew of the capturing ship.⁷⁶

Allegedly, the British Capt. Graves commandeered the brig *Mary* somewhere in the waters outside of the Island of Dominica. The captain and crew then sold the cargo for profit. Henry Overing produced a letter from an Elliston Piratt, of Dominica, stating that the brig *Mary* had a cargo worth approximately "682 Dom. Cury."⁷⁷ He also produced a letter dated December 10, 1778, stating that the ship had been worth about £100 sterling, and that when the ship set sail, she was worth £500 sterling. The cargo was to be bought by Thomas Stacey. Stacey claimed with a receipt that \$2,000.00 was the purchase price of the cargo.⁷⁸

Claims were also given under oath in regards to this case in Quebec. Felix Otter D., Collector of Gaspe, stated that the brig *Mary* and Captain Stacey had been cleared by himself from the Port of Gaspe, in Quebec, loaded with a cargo of cod fish and headed

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Ibid

⁷⁴ List of British Forces in the American Revolutionary War.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_British_Forces_in_the_American_Revolutionary_War

⁷⁵ United Empire Loyalist, Parts I-II

⁷⁶ War for Independence, American Prohibitory Act, December 22, 1775. <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1272.html>

⁷⁷ United Empire Loyalists, Parts I-II

⁷⁸ Ibid

toward Dominica as its destination.⁷⁹ It is unknown whether Henry Overing received any of the money he thought due to his family.

Because Henry John Overing died intestate, there is no written record of what happened to his properties. However, since there was no will at the time of his death, a complete inventory was taken of all of his belongings.⁸⁰ The inventory includes a section under the heading “at the farm.” Inventory found on the farm includes:⁸¹

At the Farm	£	S	D
2 Oxen	9	-	-
2 Cows	5	10	-
2 Yearling Heifers	3	2	6
1 Calf	-	6	-
1 Horse	3	2	6
One Ox Cart and One Horse D.	?	?	?
One Large Harron and 1 Small ditto	-	14	-
2 Chairs 15/ 4 Pitch Forks, 5 Rakes 5/	1	-	-
1 large Brass Kettle and 1 Small D	1	5	-
1 Small Looking Glass	-	3	-
2 Small Maple Tables	-	4	-
1 Easy Chair	-	12	-
6 Pewter Plates, 2 Platter, 1 Bason	-	4	-
1 Milk Pail, 2 Keelers, 1 Cheese Tub	-	2	-
1 Pot, 1 Disk Kettle, 2 Bake Pans, 1 Skillet	1	-	-
1 Copper Tea Kettle Small	-	5	-
2 Trammels, pr Iron Dogs + Tongs	-	5	-
1 Ax and Hatchett	-	2	-
Cheese Press, hatchet, and Flax Break	-	10	-
3 Empty Hogsheads, 1 Grind Stone, 1 Scythe	-	5	-

It is interesting to note that there is not a lot of mention of furniture located at the farm. The inventory does include a complete inventory of a house that contained several rooms with a lot of impressive furniture, it is presumed that this house was in Newport. Along with the farm, the Overings had stakes in several properties located on the lower end of Thames Street.

The probate inventory gives a very detailed picture of the Overing household located in Newport. The house contained several mahogany pieces, including chairs, tables, and beds. They had several dozen china dishes, pewter dishes, and tea cups. They also have

⁷⁹ Ibid

⁸⁰ Newport City Hall Probate Record 3:122. The Inventory has been included in its entirety as an appendix located at the end of this paper.

⁸¹ Ibid. The 1783 Inventory of Henry John Overing’s property has been attached as Appendix VIII. Also included in this appendix, is the 1927 inventory of Annie C. Branston. Through research, it appears this inventory was taken of Prescott Farm at the time of her death.

a few carpets, bread baskets, and tea chests.⁸² The inventory also listed the Overing slaves by name. They were Cato, Toney, Robin, and Pomp.⁸³ Cato died in 1821 at the age of 100.⁸⁴ He was free by the time he died, and is listed as being interred at the Common Burial Ground.⁸⁵ Robin died in October 1803 and was buried in the common burial ground.⁸⁶

The inventory also lists the amount of money owed to Overing at the time of his death. This totals an amount over £2000.00.⁸⁷ In 1777, Henry John Overing agreed to loan £432 to Archimedes George and William Barnett, both of Newport. The indenture stated that George and Barnett needed to pay the total of £216 by December 30, 1789 and the debt would be forgiven.⁸⁸ In 1792, the debt apparently had not yet been paid. Mary Overing, the widow of Henry John Overing appointed Richard Brisett of Jamaica her lawful attorney at law.⁸⁹ She hired him to help settle overdue debts to her family, including specifically Archimedes George and William Barnett. The record was witnessed by John G. Whitehorne and M. Julia Overing, possibly Henry John Overing's sister.⁹⁰ Henry Overing and his sister Henrietta Overing Auchmuty also hired Brisett to represent their interests in debts due.⁹¹

As previously mentioned, Overing owned a distillery and a sugar house on the port, possibly on a wharf located off or near Pope Street. On the 1777 Blaskowitz map, the last wharf is named as Overing's wharf. The street the wharf was located off is unclear, but it was south of Young Street.⁹² Henry Overing, Henry John's son, ran the distilleries for several years until 1796.⁹³

In 1791, Rhode Island realized that they could obtain a large amount of income by taxing the large number of distilleries located in the state, so the state instituted an excise distillery tax to be collected weekly.⁹⁴ The records are quite interesting because the accounts were checked weekly. Therefore, for a period of six years, there are records of how much rum the Overing distillery produced, the quantity that was removed from site for both domestic and foreign locales, the amount of stock on hand, the amount of duties paid, and the amount of tax reduction due to prompt payment. These records are priceless because it is not only a thorough picture of the distillery accounts of Henry

⁸² Newport City Hall, Probate Record 3:122

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Rhode Island Republican, October 17, 1821

⁸⁵ Newport City Hall, Probate Record 3:122

⁸⁶ Rhode Island Historic Cemetery Database.

<http://www.rootsweb.com/~rigenweb/cemetery/cemetery270.html>

⁸⁷ Distillery Excise Tax Records 1791 – 96, Henry Overing.

⁸⁸ Newport City Hall, Probate Inventory 3-321

⁸⁹ Newport City Hall, Probate Record 5-140

⁹⁰ Ibid

⁹¹ Newport City Hall, Probate Record 5-141

⁹² 1777 Blaskowitz Map of Newport. This map and other maps pertaining to Prescott Farm and / or the Overing family are included in Appendix IX.

⁹³ Distillery Excise Tax Records 1791 – 96, Henry Overing. A sample page of the distillery excise tax records has been included as Appendix X.

⁹⁴ Ibid

Overing, but it also allows for comparison of other Newport Distilleries, such as the Whitehorne distillery.

There is no deed evidence of the Overing distillery, but there are records of the Overing sugar house in town. The sugar house was sold by Henry Overing to a man by the name of Thomas Voax in 1804.⁹⁵ Voax was a resident of Newport and a sugar baker. The sugar house was described as follows:⁹⁶

A certain estate on a lot of land situate in Newport aforesaid being about fifty feet square and bounded Northerly on a street, Easterly on land late of John Whitehorse, deceased; Southerly on land, late of Edward Lillibridge, deceased; and Westerly on land heretofore of the said John Whitehorne. Together with the sugar house, thereon standing and all the coppers, moulds, drips, utensils, implements, and appurtenances belonging to the said sugar house.

The aforementioned probate inventory of the property of Henry John Overing offers another invaluable glimpse into the past. The inventory listed items that Overing had stored in his sugarhouse at the time of his death in 1783. The inventory showed these items as being at the sugarhouse at the time the inventory was taken:

In the Sugar House	£	S	D
A Quantity of Sugar Pots, Molds + Drips	9	-	-
1 Copper Cooler	1	10	-
2 Ditto Basons	-	12	-
1 Large Scale Beam + 24 Weights	1	5	-
1 Small D. with small D.	-	9	-
7 Empty Hogsheads	-	3	-
1 Cow, 1 Horse, Shaise and Whiskey	9	6	-
7 Empty Butts	4	10	-

Some of the same type of items were listed in the deed of sale to Thomas Voax in 1804, twenty-one years after the inventory had been taken.⁹⁷ The year 1804 appeared to be a turning point for Henry Overing in Newport. He appears to have sold all his shares in property there, and was now recognized as a resident of the Bronx.⁹⁸

Mary Overing, Henry John's widow, may have stayed in Newport. She died there in 1816. She was buried at Trinity Church. Unfortunately, it has been impossible to find where she was living in Newport up until the time of her death. At about the age 27,

⁹⁵ Newport City Hall 9:267

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ Newport City Hall, Probate Records 9-267

⁹⁸ Ancestry.com Search: Henry Overing

Henry Overing's brother, Jonathan, died in Newport.⁹⁹ Mary's other son, Robert, died in 1800 in the West Indies. He was about 22 years old.¹⁰⁰

After the war, the house in Portsmouth/Middletown stayed with Mary Overing until 1796 when she sold it to Thomas Handy, the husband of her daughter Mary Handy, for £18.00.¹⁰¹ The Handy family kept the farm until 1797 when they sold it to Nathaniel Briggs for \$3009.00.¹⁰² It appears as though the Handys continued to live on the property as tenants well into the 19th century, as late as 1804.¹⁰³ Thomas and Mary Handy are also buried at Trinity Church in Newport.¹⁰⁴

When the Handys sold the property to the Briggs, the farm went from roughly 55 acres to roughly 71 acres.¹⁰⁵ The Briggs owned the property until 1802. By 1802, Nathaniel Briggs had passed away leaving the farm to be sold by his wife, Mary, and her children Nathaniel Briggs (and his wife Patience) along with Hannah Briggs, who was listed as a spinster.¹⁰⁶ They sold the house to Asher Robbins for the consideration of \$5,000.00.¹⁰⁷ It was under the Robbins, that Thomas Handy was listed as the occupant of the house.

Asher Robbins, and his wife Mary, sold the property a year later, in 1803, to Sarah Reed Page, the wife of Benjamin Page.¹⁰⁸ It appears as though Benjamin Page mortgaged the house for \$1,000.00 to Benjamin Hoppin in 1804, and repaid the loan by 1805.¹⁰⁹ The Pages owned the property for several years. In 1830 they sold the property to Ambrose S. Page for \$6,000.00.¹¹⁰ Under the ownership of Ambrose S. Page, there seems to be a challenge to some of the land included in the 70-acre farm. In 1838, Ambrose S. Page paid John Nelson Coffin \$5.00 for what was probably the same land he had bought from the Pages in 1830.¹¹¹

Ambrose Page, and his wife Frances Eliza, keep the property until 1840 when they sell it to Benjamin Page of Ohio for \$5,000.00.¹¹² Benjamin Page died sometime between 1840-41, and as a result, in 1841 the house was sold by William H. Douglass, the sheriff, to John T. Tilley, a ropemaker, for the sum of \$1.00.¹¹³ He was the highest bidder for the property at the public auction. John T. Tilley sold the house to Sarah Dennis in 1851.¹¹⁴

⁹⁹ N.E.H.G.S. 17

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

¹⁰¹ Portsmouth Town Hall 9:140

¹⁰² Portsmouth Town Hall 8:18

¹⁰³ Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Record 9:30

¹⁰⁴ N.E.H.G.S. 17. Mary Handy died in 1830, and her husband, Thomas, died in 1834. For a family tree explaining the Overing relations please see the attached appendix.

¹⁰⁵ Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Record 9:140 and 8:18

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Record 9:30

¹⁰⁹ Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Record 9:60 and 9:149

¹¹⁰ Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Record 11:240

¹¹¹ Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Record 12:140

¹¹² Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Record 12:225

¹¹³ Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Record 12-335 and Newport City Hall, Probate Record 8-196

¹¹⁴ Ibid

At the time of purchase, Sarah Dennis was the widower of Isaac A. Dennis. She purchased the house for \$7,000.00 and then mortgaged it back to John T. Tilley for \$4,000.00.¹¹⁵ Over roughly the next year she made scheduled payments to John Tilley as noted below:¹¹⁶

January 31, 1852	1,000.00
June 14, 1852	1,400.00
September 16, 1852	600.00
October 25, 1852	800.00
February 10, 1853	200.00
Total	\$4,000.00

Her son Joseph C. Dennis came into the property with his sister Ruth Ann C. Chase in 1859.¹¹⁷ There is no record of a will for Sarah Dennis. It looks as if the property was divided between her son Joseph C. Dennis and her daughter Ruth Ann C. (Dennis) Chase. It appears that Joseph C. Dennis sold his part of the property to Joseph W. Chase, the soon-to-be husband of Ruth Ann Dennis.¹¹⁸ Ruth Ann Chase married Joseph Chase, and they lived on the property for several years.

Ruth Ann Dennis died on January 15, 1889 without a will. She was survived by her husband. The property was eventually given to their daughter, Annie C. Branston.¹¹⁹ Branston lived at the house until 1927 when she deeded it to Bradford Norman.¹²⁰ She willed it to him for the sum of \$10.00. This deed recorded the farm as known as “Prescott Place.”¹²¹ Branston passed away two months after deeding the property to Bradford Norman. It appears as though she lived in the property until her death. An inventory was taken. She had a few mahogany pieces and several stuffed chairs in the household. Her total property was worth \$26,658.09.¹²²

Bradford Norman was a wealthy resident of Newport and owned several acres across West Main Road, including Redwood Farm. He owned the property until his death in April 1950.¹²³ He willed his property on the east side of West Main Road to his daughter, Barbara Norman Cook, aka “Kitty Mouse Cook.”¹²⁴ In his will, he referred to this property as “Prescott Place.” By the time that Barbara Norman Cook came into the property, the farm included roughly 33 acres. Bradford Norman’s property on the other side of the road went to his son, Bradford Norman, Jr.

¹¹⁵ Newport Historical Society, original document pertaining to Prescott Farm

¹¹⁶ Ibid

¹¹⁷ Portsmouth Town hall, Probate Record 14:220 and 14:242

¹¹⁸ Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Record 14:242

¹¹⁹ Portsmouth Town hall, Probate Record 33A:219

¹²⁰ Ibid

¹²¹ Ibid

¹²² Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Record 13:201

¹²³ Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Record 17:56A

¹²⁴ Ibid

Barbara Norman Cook lived in the house until 1969, when she sold it to Doris Duke for the sum of \$475,000.00.¹²⁵ Doris Duke then deeded the property to Newport Restoration Foundation in 1970.¹²⁶

Conclusion

Prescott Farm offers an invaluable look into the history of not only Newport, but also the Colony and State of Rhode Island. While I focused most of my research efforts on the Overing family, there have been several families that have lived here that deserve just as much attention. The Dennis family owned the house for over 70 years, and it was originally bought by a woman and passed down to the women of the family. Bradford Norman, one of the last owners of the house, was apparently a fairly wealthy and affluent resident of the town of Portsmouth. It is important to remember that the history of Prescott Farm did not begin nor end with the Overing / Prescott chapter of its existence.

While researching the families that owned the farm, it became apparent that the Overing family offered a valuable account of not only the farm, but also of Aquidneck Island during the mid-18th century. Since the goal of this project was to offer a more complete picture of the farm, the research on the Overing family has not been exhaustive. Unfortunately, time constraints have kept certain topics regarding the Overing family from being thoroughly researched such as the importance slavery played in the distilling and sugar business that Overing was involved in at Newport.

My research hopefully will lay grounds on which further research can spring. Overing seems to offer an insight into colonial Newport that is invaluable. Overing moved to Newport during the heyday of the pre-war economic vitality of the city. He appears to have profited in some ways by the success of his business ventures. Overing was not only involved in the triangle trade, but he was also fairly involved in the everyday happenings of Newport. Hopefully with further research a more thorough picture can be drawn of not only the Overing family, but also Newport.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Record 67:289

¹²⁶ Portsmouth Town Hall, Probate Record 68:334

¹²⁷ For further ideas for research opportunities regarding the Overing family, Appendix XI.