

THE EPHEMERA JOURNAL

VOLUME 26, NUMBER 3

MAY 2024

In the Absence of: Bringing Forgotten People to Life Through the Providence Writs and Warrants Collection

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I am deeply interested in the lives of people who don't have their names displayed on any historic house: transients, vagrants, runaways, apprentices, landladies, spinsters, sailors, sex workers, and others who rarely appear in the history books. They can be difficult to research, but I have found that the Writs and Warrants collection in the Providence, Rhode Island City Archives is one pathway into these often-overlooked lives.

The entire Writs and Warrants collection was found in the early 2000s stashed in burlap sacks in the dank basement of Providence City Hall, with most of the official writ or warrant documents folded around a receipt detailing the transaction that had led to a Justice Court action. Many are attached with a delicate metal pin. Not every writ has a receipt, but most include at least some kind of detail about the parties involved in the dispute, such as their gender, race, and job or social position. [Figure 1]

These records, spread over a dozen or so boxes, contain a huge number of receipts that document, in ways both explicit and vague, the details of everyday life in and around Providence from the 1790s through the 1850s. Scrawled in ink on paper ranging from torn scraps to pages from ledger books, these receipts were not originally created for any official record, but were the artifacts of day-to-day commercial interactions between people. Some were made by business owners such as shopkeepers and providers of professional services. Others reflect direct person-to-person transactions, such as rent paid at a casually run rooming house or loans made between neighbors or co-workers. With no credit cards and limited access to cash, customers would purchase what they needed with the intent to pay up at an agreed-upon time, often the end of the month. Evidence of these transactions entered the archival record only if a debtor did not pay a bill, and the

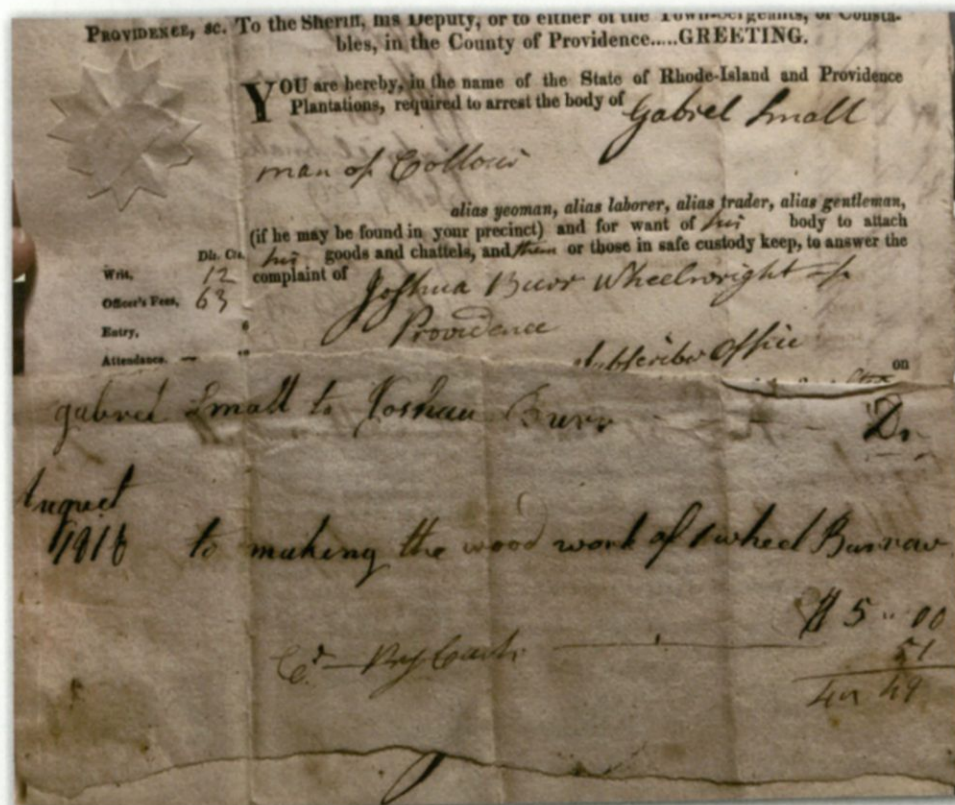


Figure 1. Warrant to arrest Gabriel Small, a man of color, for not paying Joshua Burr, a wheelwright of Providence, \$5 for "making the wood work of 1 wheel barrow" in August 1816. The attached receipt shows that 51 cents was paid in cash, leaving \$4.49 to be collected.

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Figure 2. From the author's exhibition display: items mentioned in writs, including a pearl ring, lottery tickets, a pencil, twine, and a "box of junk" arranged on fabric printed with scans of a writ demanding that Lucy Crawford pay Elisabeth Hammond \$10.50 for seven weeks' work from December 1826 to February 1827.

creditor tried to collect the debt in court. Sometimes the debtor died, or went to sea, took ill, or got too drunk; sometimes the money just wasn't there.

This collection is a rare window into the material culture of Providence's lower-income residents. It captures some aspect of the lives of people who may have no other record in any other archives, anywhere. A survey of these records helps to identify broad trends, such as what categories of debts people faced

and the big picture of costs and wages. It may not come as a surprise that food, rent, and health care were major categories, and that lower-income people sometimes had to fight to get their wages. But we can also learn very specific details such as the popularity of gingerbread, the staggering amount of rum sold, or the conflicts that arose when someone broke a neighbor's wooden well bucket. And we can observe the buying and selling of an impressive range of

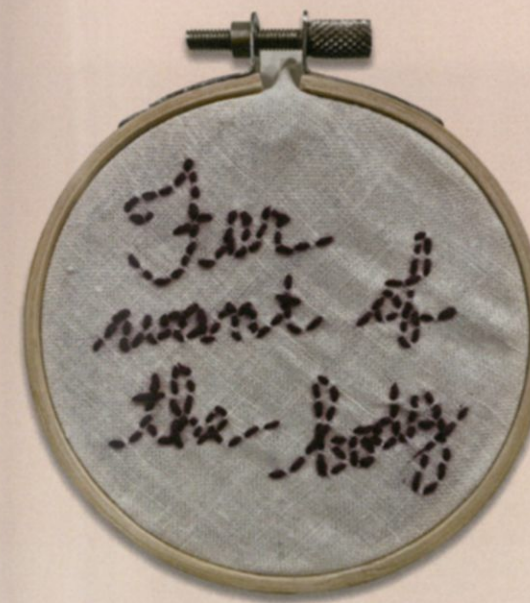


Figure 3. The title of the display, For Want of the Body, is taken from the phrase sheriffs used before they seized the absent debtor's possessions. It is embroidered to symbolize the labor of women.



Figure 4. Clothing items made for the project, set in a laundry display which references the many women who took in laundry to pay the bills.

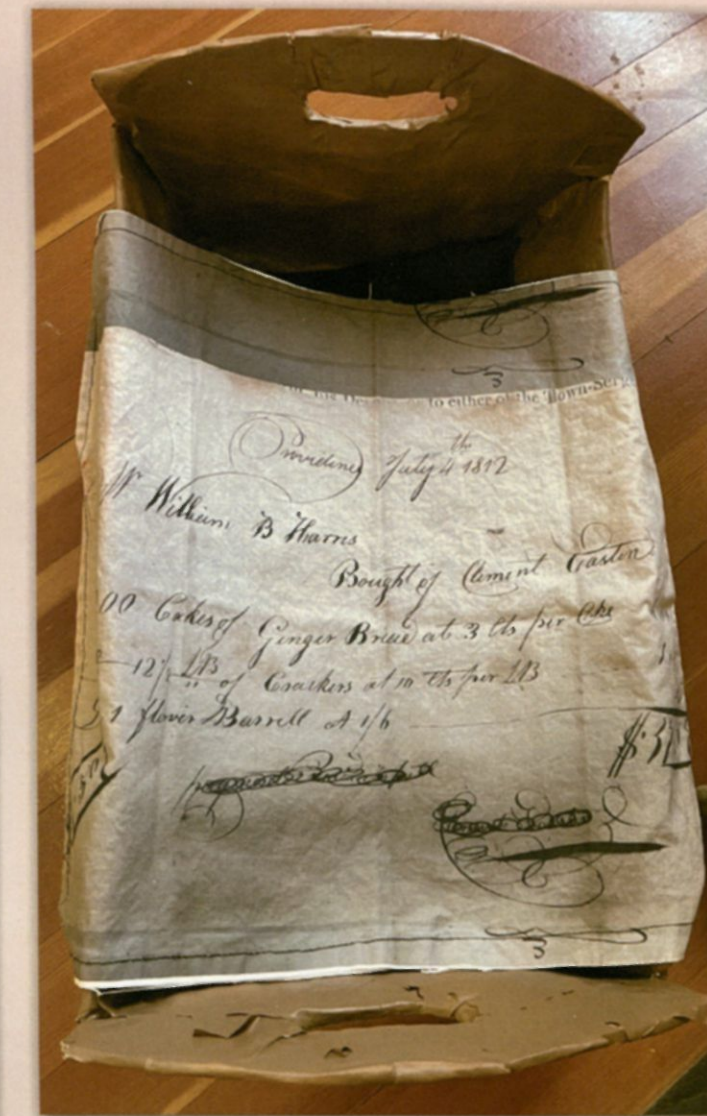


Figure 5. A papier maché cradle, covered with a blanket on which writs are printed (in 1813 William B. Harris did not pay Clement Easton for 10 cakes of gingerbread as well as crackers and a flour barrel). The object symbolizes the cultural implications of being born into debt.

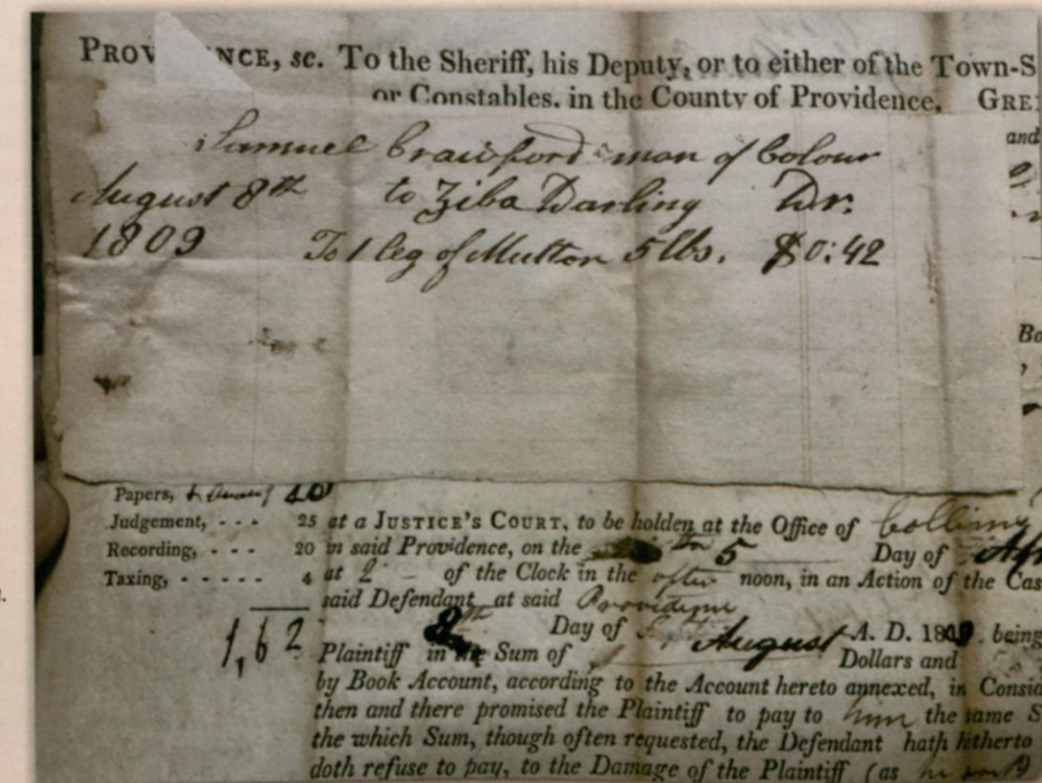


Figure 6. An 1809 writ to arrest Samuel Crawford, a man of color, for not paying Zika Darling 42 cents for a five pound leg of mutton. The writs contain much information about the diet of the underclass of Providence.



Figure 7 (above). A display representing a typical meal for laborers in the early 1800s: the fish are wood, the bread is crocheted wool and the butter is felt.

Figure 8. (right) Oysters were a popular commodity in the early 19th century - affordable and easy to collect. These were purchased from a theatrical supply store, and the lemons are made of clay.

Figure 9. (below) Food and other domestic items that appeared in the writs, clockwise from top left: soap, butter, parsnips, a gouda cheese, peas, cone sugar, fish, a pie.



fabrics and articles of clothing, from suspenders to bombazet, wool yarn to black velvet.

While these transactions provide a snapshot of daily life, it is just that: a snapshot. As with all records, much is left out. And working with this huge collection—receipts often written hastily in early nineteenth century cursive, using highly irregular spelling, on paper often damaged over time—is a challenge. But it is a treasure trove of information that historians can use in several ways, from extracting data to telling micro-histories and tracking relationships within communities.

My exhibition project, *In the Absence Of*, was intended to bring the records to life through craft. Those of us who descend from and relate to laborers, immigrants, or



Figure 10. Part of the gallery space exhibiting the project — the table set with items mentioned in the writs that were either sourced or crafted.

people of color often don't see our cultural artifacts in historic houses or history museums. By using the Writs and Warrants to inspire an immersive space, I transformed these ephemeral documents into tangible materials. You can see that items mentioned in the writs, such as oysters, butter, stockings and a pencil have been re-created or assembled into an imagined home. The writs themselves are reproduced on paper and textiles to communicate how the debtor is surrounded by their debt, it is always in the background [Figure 2].

This is by no means the end of my work with this collection that still lives at Providence City Hall, and I intend to continue building out the dataset, to make it available to other researchers and to continue spending time with the documents. I have found a lot of joy and purpose in working with these papers. The materiality of the collection tells a story before we even get into the content. The research felt very immersive, and I would leave each session with my imagination sparked,

eager to learn more. This feeling is what I hoped to capture with the project; a sense of relationship with the past which can come through the everyday details.

Traci Picard is a researcher, writer, editor, plant nerd and public historian from Providence, RI. This article reflects some of her work towards a Masters in Public Humanities at Brown University. She presented on the subject at *Ephemera* 43 in March 2023. Traci proclaims she loves cities, art, educational equity, micro-history, urban nature, archives, systems thinking, and asking questions—ideally in collaboration with others. She values brevity, enthusiasm, persistence, and care.

