

Rhode Island, Hoping to Shed Unsavory Past, Weighs Shorter Name

By **ABBY GOODNOUGH**

It does not appear on the state flag or license plate. You won't see it on road maps or welcome signs. But Rhode Island has a lightning rod of a formal name — Rhode Island and Providence Plantations — that harks back to its prominent role in the slave trade and makes some of its residents cringe.

Defenders of the name say that the word "plantation" did not have a negative connotation when Rhode Island was founded in 1636, and that it referred to the state's farming settlements. But the state's early economy did thrive on the slave trade, with Rhode Islanders distilling rum from molasses, trading it in Africa for slaves and then trading the slaves in the West Indies for more molasses.

"We have more and more people in the state saying, 'Look, change the name,'" said Joseph S. Almeida, a Democratic state representative from Providence. "We don't want to change history. We want to add to it."

After years of defending the state's name, the State Senate and House of Representatives

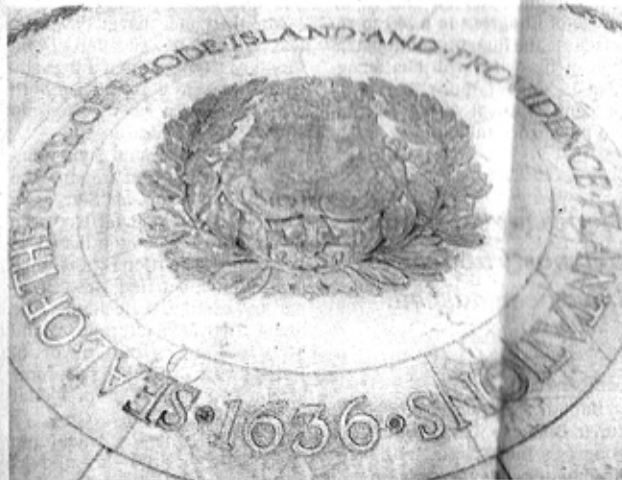
voted overwhelmingly last week to allow a referendum asking voters whether to shorten it by seven syllables, to Rhode Island. On Tuesday the Senate could adopt the House's bill, paving the way for the referendum.

Mr. Almeida, who is black, sponsored the measure in the House. He pushed for the referendum for a decade, he said, and succeeded after recruiting citizens to help persuade his fellow lawmakers.

"Instead of working inside the House," Mr. Almeida said, "I started working out on the street with community organizers who had the connections to put the pressure on."

Those organizers are forming a new group to campaign for the name change, Mr. Almeida said, adding that the referendum would probably appear on the ballot in November 2010.

Gov. Donald L. Carcieri, a Republican, opposes the change, said his spokeswoman, Amy Kempe. But the governor will not try to stop it, Ms. Kempe said in an e-mail message, because he lacks the authority to veto resolutions for constitutional amendments.



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The rotunda of the Statehouse in Providence, R.I., is one of the few public places to display the state's complete name.

"The historical definition of the word 'plantation' is 'settlement or colony,'" Ms. Kempe wrote, "and is no way in reference to the most modern definition associated with slavery."

Representative Alfred A. Gemma, a Democrat from Warwick

who was one of three House members who opposed the measure, said that striking "and Providence Plantations" from the state's name would be "like tearing down our history."

"They're trying to be revisionist, and revisionism doesn't

work," Mr. Gemma said. "All this is going to do is divide people, not bring them together."

The change would be largely symbolic, since the state's formal name is so rarely used. It appears on some state stationery and on many documents, like elevator inspection certificates and marriage licenses. The official name also appears on the state seal, which is imprinted on the floor of the Statehouse Rotunda and elsewhere around the building.

Mr. Almeida said that the full name would not be removed from state buildings if the referendum was approved, but that state letterheads and documents would be replaced when current supplies ran out.

He referred to recent resolutions by the United States Senate and House of Representatives apologizing for slavery as evidence that the name change was past due.

"If Congress is apologizing and there's a change in the national attitude about slavery, not doing anything here would be foolish," Mr. Almeida said. "Rhode Island needs to recognize its past."