# THE JOHN CARTER BROWN LIBRARY: A HISTORY

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Trieste

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## A HISTORY

BY

GEORGE PARKER WINSHIP


PROVIDENCE
1914

## THE FAMILY

THE John Carter Brown Library has a history that goes back as far as that of the University to which it now belongs and to which it has been linked for a hundred and fifty years by the family that gave its name to both. Starting as a family library, it has grown into an institution for historical research, widely known among scholars as an unequalled collection of Americana. The handful of pamphlets taken home from the country store passed from mother to son and grandson. They grew in number with the widening interests of two prosperous merchants and public-spirited men of affairs. The next generation bought rare books. John Carter Brown, turning his hobby toward the subjects that he most enjoyed reading about, became a collector of old books on America. His library came to be famous for its treasures and for the generosity with which he allowed scholars to use it. After his son's death, it passed in 1904 into the keeping of Brown University. There it is a lasting memorial to the collector and a permanent endowment for American scholarship.

The copy of "The Secretary's Guide, or, Young Mans Companion," printed by William Bradford

at New York in 1728, in which Nicholas Brown, aged eleven years, wrote his name in 1740, is the earliest of the family possessions now in the collection. The accumulation of a library cannot fairly be dated from this, however, nor from the tract on "The Importance of the British Plantations in America," in which his signature was written in 1749.

It was in July, 1769, when the contest over the location of Rhode Island College was at its height, that Nicholas Brown "bot at Dotr. Gibbs Vendue" at Newport an author's presentation copy of Judge Samuel Sewall's "Phænomena quædam Apocalyptica Ad Aspectum Novi Orbis configurata," which was printed at Boston in 1727. At this auction sale he also secured "A brief Account of the Revenues, Pomp, and State of the Bishops, and other Clergy in the Church of England," printed at the same place two years earlier. As Nicholas Brown owned two copies of the Book of Common Prayer, it is probable that a keen but tolerant interest in matters of religious concern, rather than any feeling inspired by controversial dogmatism, led him to buy these books. They are now treasured by the Library because they belong within its especial field of collecting as well as for their sentimental value. Since 1769 there have been

few years during which purchases were not made at book-auctions for the Brown family library, and scarcely one in which the Library records do not show that some addition was made to the collection.

One of Nicholas Brown's earliest possessions was a copy of "The English Pilot. The Fourth Book. Describing The West-India Navigation, from Hudson's-Bay to the River Amazones," which was printed at London in 1745. This useful volume had belonged to his seafaring brother, who carried it with him on his last voyage. On the final fly leaf is found the record: "York in Virginy, Febery 15$^{ye}$ 1750–1, Capt. James Brown Died half a Oure Past 6½ at Nite." Captain James was the oldest son of James Brown of Providence, who had likewise followed the sea in his younger days. The elder Captain James Brown sailed on one of the little vessels with which a flourishing trade to the southward was managed by Nicholas Power, whose daughter Hope he married in 1722. Shortly thereafter he left the sea to enter the business of keeping a general store. Four of the sons of James and Hope Brown grew up to become the famous "Four Brothers" of eighteenth-century Providence.

As "Nicholas Brown and Company" the four brothers carried on the family business after 1762. They had diverse interests, however, and the sen-

ior soon came to be the only active partner. Of the others, Joseph devoted himself to scientific pursuits, studying architecture and astronomy. The present Transit Street marks the location of the telescope, imported for the occasion, with which he made observations of Venus in 1769. At the time of his death in December, 1785, he occupied the chair of Natural Philosophy in Rhode Island College. John and Moses devoted themselves to their independent business affairs, and to politics. Moses Brown was a keen judge of men and a shrewd investor. The establishment of the first cotton mill in Rhode Island was due to his confidence and capital. He endowed the Friends' School which now perpetuates his name, and the gift of his life-long accumulation of papers relating to the history of the state made him the most important contributor to the foundation of the Rhode Island Historical Society.

Nicholas Brown and his brother John, in more or less friendly rivalry, came to be the leading merchants of Providence. One or the other served on most of the important committees appointed by the Town Meeting to pave the streets, build bridges, and raise money for a Market House. When the recently organized Rhode Island College was seeking a home, Nicholas and John Brown

secured the subscriptions, while their brother Moses attended to the legislative negotiations which brought this institution of learning to Providence. Nicholas Brown paid the bills and collected the funds for building the original edifice, University Hall, on the hill overlooking his home on the Main Street. Five years later, in 1774, when the Boston Port Bill threatened the mechanics of the neighbouring city with starvation, Nicholas Brown sent word that they could find work in Providence. He organized a lottery, signing the tickets with his own hand and taking up the unsold chances, to raise the money with which to pay the Boston craftsmen for the work of erecting the First Baptist Meeting House, still standing "for the public worship of Almighty God and to hold Commencement in."

The four brothers, with their friend Stephen Hopkins, were leaders in the group which induced the first Providence printer and newspaper editor, William Goddard, to establish himself in their town. Goddard's son became the Professor of Belles-Lettres in the local university, and married Nicholas Brown's granddaughter. Through her the management of the family affairs descended to the members of the present firm of Goddard Brothers. William Goddard's business was acquired by a