

**RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY: SKETCH OF ITS  
HISTORY, WITH LIST OF PAPERS  
READ AT ITS STATED MEETINGS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649282258

Rhode Island Historical Society: Sketch of Its History, with List of Papers Read at Its Stated Meetings by Various

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Cover @ 2017

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**VARIOUS**

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RHODE ISLAND HISTORICAL SOCIETY.

SKETCH OF ITS HISTORY

WITH

LIST OF PAPERS READ AT ITS STATED MEETINGS.



PROVIDENCE:

PRINTED FOR THE SOCIETY BY SNOW & FARNHAM.

1890.

# HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE SOCIETY,

WITH A

Chronological List of Lectures and Papers,

READ AT STATED MEETINGS FROM 1835 TO 1889, INCLUSIVE.

(PREPARED BY THE SECRETARY.)

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THE origin of the Rhode Island Historical Society, the circumstances which led to its formation, and the aims of its founders, all well understood forty or fifty years ago, were thrown into comparative obscurity by the pressing events of our Civil War. To bring these matters again to view, and thus promote a better understanding of the success of the Society, and also of the duties devolving on its members and citizens of the State, is the object of this paper.

The Society owes its origin to a spirit of inquiry and research manifested long before steps were taken for its formation. The need of such an institution was felt and the way was prepared for it by men who early entered the historic field and labored without the advantages of associate action.

The founders of the State and the men of their day were followed in due time by men who appreciated their work and strove to perpetuate their memory by making a record of what they did. Of the latter class, were notably the Rev. John Callender, Governor Stephen Hopkins, Friend Moses Brown, Senator Theodore Foster and their compeers.

They led the way to a connected and truthful history of the State, and their services are appreciated by their successors in this line of labor.

The Society's records and public journals show that there was, in 1822, a newly-awakened interest in historical pursuits, and that there was then earnest inquiry after authentic documents belonging to various periods of these Plantations. A Revolutionary soldier, who became the second president of this Society, is reported to have spoken as follows :

"From the settlement of the Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, more than a hundred and eighty years ago, valuable historic material has been wasting away year by year without any concerted effort being put forth to save it and use it in the interest of veritable history."

It was stated that through ignorance or other causes some valuable historical records had been converted into pulp for paper, some had been used for kindling fires, and some had been accidentally burned; and the hope was expressed that the Society might prevent similar losses in time to come, and secure for historical purposes the valuable family, town and State records then in existence.\*

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\*It is a matter of regret that the hope thus expressed has not been realized. Many losses have occurred since that time. Some valuable documents have been destroyed because they were kept in unsafe places; some because their historic value was not understood by those who owned them or had them in charge, and some for other reasons that need not be stated. It is proved that stores, shops, dwelling-houses, and even some buildings called town-houses or town halls, are not fire-proof. The following losses, of which the secretary of this Society has authentic information, are a few of the many that have occurred:

The town records of North Kingstown were injured and narrowly escaped complete destruction from an accidental fire, December 16, 1870. The numerous manuscripts of United States Senator Elisha Mathewson, including autograph letters of Thomas Jefferson and other historic men who lived in the latter part of the last century and in the early part of this,—these, with Mr. Mathewson's library and portraits of himself and wife (partially promised for the archives of this Society) were all destroyed February 6, 1870, together with the house in which they were kept in the town of Scituate. The many exceedingly valuable records of the proprietors of the Providence Plantations, kept in a wooden chest in a paper and twine warehouse, were all reduced to ashes in the Aldrich House fire that occurred February 15, 1888. A large collection of manuscripts left by the late Deputy Governor and Chief Justice Daniel Owen, who presided over the convention that adopted the National Constitution in 1790, were kept in Judge

After deliberation, a meeting was called and held at No. 3, South Main Street, Providence, on the 19th of April, 1822, the time being noted as the anniversary of the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord. Jeremiah Lippitt was elected chairman and William R. Staples secretary of that meeting, and measures were then and there adopted for the formation of this Society and for its incorporation by the General Assembly. On the 29th of the following June a meeting of the incorporators\* of the Society was held at the old Manufacturers' Hotel (kept then by John Wilde, at No. 65 North Main street, opposite the First Baptist Church). The charter introduced into the General Assem-

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Owen's family mansion in Gloucester till about a third of a century ago, when one of his grandsons submitted them to the flames, assigning as a reason for this act that they never had been wanted and probably never would be. Another considerable collection of manuscripts, left by Col. John Singer Dexter, a distinguished officer of the Continental army,—manuscripts, some of which were personal sketches, entitled "Memoranda Concerning the Society of the Cincinnati," of which Colonel Dexter was successively treasurer, secretary, vice-president and president,—were burned by a descendant of Colonel Dexter to get them out of the way. Still another lot of manuscript, left by Captain Daniel Singer Dexter, who, on account of his remarkable skill as a penman served as clerk or secretary for many organizations during and subsequent to the Revolution, were burned a quarter of a century ago by a descendant of his to get possession of a trunk in which they were kept.

But though fire has made sad havoc of historical documents, paper-makers are of late reputed to be more efficient agents of mischief. During the War of the Rebellion the registers of the public schools of Providence, some of them dating back to 1850 and containing records that would have promptly settled more than one legal controversy, were all delivered over to the paper-makers, and thus used up. Among the tons of materials annually sent off from dwelling-houses to pass through junk shops on their way to paper mills, are usually some books, pamphlets or manuscripts which, if saved, would greatly enrich the library of this Society: and to this end an appeal is here made to the public, in the hope of having valuable material rescued from destruction and the interests of history thereby promoted.

Bearing in mind the principle that historical records should not only be preserved, but be put in such order that they can be readily consulted, we give, in illustration of this principle, the following extract from a letter lately written by a gentleman who is deeply interested in this his ancestral State: "The people of Rhode Island should not only guard against the destruction of their early town records, but should have such classified and indexed copies of them made as will render their lessons available to all who wish to be instructed thereby."

\* The following are the names of the twelve incorporators: Jeremiah Lippitt, William Applin, Charles Norris Tebbitts, Walter R. Danforth, William R. Staples, Richard W. Greene, John Brown Francis, William G. Goddard, Charles F. Tillinghast, Richard J. Arnold, Charles Jackson, William E. Richmond.



bly at its May session and passed in June was received and adopted, and measures were taken to secure a constitution embodying suitable by-laws and rules of action. It was voted at this meeting that the annual election of officers should take place on the anniversary of the granting of the charter of 1663, viz., July 19, corresponding to July 8, old style. Accordingly, on that historic day, in the hotel before named, the first annual officers were elected, the venerable Moses Brown serving as chairman and William R. Staples as secretary, and for twenty-six years the anniversaries of the charter of 1663 and of the establishment of this Society were observed together. The names of the distinguished members enrolled and officers elected from that time down to January, 1888, may be found in the "Proceedings of the Society, 1887-88."

Thus organized, the Society promptly issued a circular, informing the people of the State of the objects it had in view, and inviting them to co-operate in collecting and turning to account such manuscripts, printed works and other material as might serve to illustrate State, family and local history. One of the earliest responses to this appeal was an autobiographical sketch from Col. Christopher Lippitt, of Revolutionary memory, and this was followed by contributions from Moses Brown, Theodore Foster, Henry Bull, John Brown Francis, William Giles Goddard, William Aplin, Zachariah Allen, and other like-minded citizens, who, with their successors down to the present time, merit the honor of having their gifts kept in a safe, commodious and attractive building.

The records show that the Society was early nursed and encouraged by the State, receiving from it \$500 when that sum was more to it than \$5,000 would be to-day. From 1822 to 1834 the Society was the guest of the State, holding its meetings, with the manifest approbation, if not by invitation, of the General Assembly in the Senate chamber, and keeping its collections on one side of that room in cases

furnished gratuitously by the Providence Library Company. In the course of twelve years the Society outgrew its quarters in the Senate chamber, and was cramped for the lack of room for its collections. When this fact became known to Messrs. Brown & Ives they offered the free use of what is termed in the records "a spacious room (their present counting room) in their brick block on South Main street." The Society gratefully accepted the offer. At the end of two years Mr. Cyrus Butler expressed his appreciation of the Society as a conservator of the material interests of the community, and offered it still ampler accommodation in the upper story of the Arcade, which offer it gratefully accepted, and held its meetings and kept its collections in room 53 of that building for the next eight years, when it removed (in 1844) to its present Cabinet; and now, after having occupied this building forty-five years, it finds itself more cramped for room than ever before. With its renewed life and the general interest awakened in historical pursuits, it now painfully realizes its need of means to carry forward the work for which it was organized. In Newport the Society was for a long time generously cared for by the Redwood Library Company.

During the first twenty-seven years of its existence the business of the Society was mainly transacted through the agency of a board of trustees and of its committees. Its early records contain long and elaborate reports and letters, furnishing ample evidence of interest and diligence in collecting material for local history and in preparing for the publication of the first volumes of its "Collections"; but they fail to show that any lectures or papers (other than reports or letters) were given or read before the Society during a period of thirteen years. The first record on this subject was to the effect that the Hon. William Hunter, of Newport, would address the Society at the State House on the 30th of October, 1828, and a subsequent record shows that on Mr. Hunter's failing to appear at the appointed

time, the members consoled themselves therefor by a festive and social entertainment. In 1834 an earnest but unsuccessful effort was made to have lectures that would awaken interest in the objects of the Society and enrich its treasury.

In 1835-36, however, twelve lectures were given in Franklin Hall, the efficient President of the Society, John Howland, presiding on each occasion and reading the first paper. Many of the tickets to these lectures are still preserved, having upon them the printed name of T. H. Webb, secretary, and the clear autograph of T. W. Dorr, treasurer.

In the winter of 1836-37, a second course of lectures, ten in number, was given, President Howland reading the first paper, and introducing the lecturers at the subsequent meetings.

In December, 1837, through the influence of the Society, but without its agency, the Rev. C. W. Upham, then pastor of the church in Salem, from which Roger Williams was driven into exile, gave in Franklin Hall a course of three lectures, entitled "The Life, Adventures and Character of Roger Williams."

Attention is here called to the appended chronological list of lectures and papers read before the Society from 1835 to 1889, inclusive. In making up the first part of this list it has been found necessary to have recourse to the newspapers of the day, and it is not improbable that, owing to omissions in the early records, some papers are omitted that belong on the list.

Long as the list is, it would be much longer but for the adoption of a rule excluding letters, reports, the annual addresses of the presidents of the Society, and many other papers which constitute an important part of the history of the institution. Thus, though the Canonicus Memorial in the North Burial Ground was erected and dedicated under the auspices of the Society on the 21st of Septem-