

**AN HISTORICAL SKETCH OF
THE REDWOOD LIBRARY
AND ATHENAEUM, IN
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649199495

An historical sketch of the Redwood library and athenaeum, in Newport, Rhode Island by
David King

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Cover @ 2017

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BY DAVID KING, M.D.



BOSTON:

PRINTED BY JOHN WILSON AND SON,

22, SCHOOL STREET.

1860.

HISTORICAL SKETCH.

THE REDWOOD LIBRARY AND ATHENÆUM owes its origin to a literary and philosophical Society, which was established in Newport in the year 1730. This Society* was composed of some of the most respectable men of the town of Newport; at that period, one of the most remarkable in the American Colonies, for its wealth, learning, and public spirit. Its origin is connected with a splendid name in literature and philosophy.† The celebrated Bishop Berkeley, who resided at this time on Rhode Island, encouraged the formation of this Institution, and participated in its discussions. He was the intimate friend of some of its members, and the charm of his conversation undoubtedly gave a delightful interest to its meetings. Berkeley resided on Rhode Island from January, 1729, to September, 1731; and, from frequent intercourse with these vigorous-minded men, derived that knowledge of American character, which prompted his Muse to utter the prophetic declaration, —

“ Westward the star of empire takes its way.”

At that period, the advantages of the Association depended on a system of weekly debates and conversations upon questions of utility or interest. The formation of a library was subsequently considered by them as one of the most powerful means of accomplishing their

* The following gentlemen were members of this Society: Daniel Updike, Peter Bours, James Searing, Edward Scott, Henry Collins, Nathan Townsend, jun., James Honyman, jun., Jeremy Condy, Samuel Wickham, Thomas Ward, Josias Lyndon, John Callender, jun., Sueton Grant, John Brett, Charles Bardin, Rezekiah Carpenter, Joseph Jacob, Joseph Sylvester, John Cheekley, jun., William Ellery, John Adams, Daniel Hubbard, John Wallace, Stephen Hopkins, and Samuel Johnson.

† See the very interesting Biographical Sketches of the Rhode-Island Bar, by Wilkins Updike, Esq.

original purpose, — “the promotion of knowledge and virtue.” The system of debates was gradually laid aside, and the energies of the Society were solely directed to the collection of valuable books. Had the establishment of a Library constituted, originally, an object of the Society, the valuable books given by Bishop Berkeley to Yale College and Harvard University, on his departure from Newport in 1731, would undoubtedly have been presented by him to this Institution, to individual members of which he was strongly attached.

In the accomplishment of this new object, a great impulse was given by ABRAHAM REDWOOD, Esq.; who, in 1747, placed at the disposal of the Society five hundred pounds sterling, for the purchase of standard books in London. To give permanence and usefulness to his donation, Mr. Redwood enjoined on the Society the duty of erecting an edifice, as a depository for such books as might be purchased. In pursuance of their object, a charter of incorporation was obtained in 1747; and the Society, in honor of their most liberal benefactor, assumed the name of the REDWOOD-LIBRARY COMPANY. For the erection of a library building, five thousand pounds were almost immediately subscribed by different citizens of the town. HENRY COLLINS, Esq.,* proved a noble co-adjutor of Mr. Redwood; and presented in June, 1748, to the Company, the lot of land then called Bowling Green, on which the present Library edifice now stands.

The Library Building, which is a beautiful specimen of the Doric order, was commenced in 1748, and completed in 1750. The plan was furnished by Peter Harrison, Esq., assistant architect of Blenheim House, England. He also superintended the erection of the edifice, with the Committee of the Company, consisting of Samuel Wickham, Henry Collins, and John Tillinghast. The master-builders were Wing Spooner, Samuel Green, Thomas Melvil, and Israel Chapman. The principal front is ornamented with a portico of four Doric columns, seventeen feet in height, and projecting nine feet from the walls of the building. The edifice consists of a main building, and two small wings on each side, ranging in a line parallel with the west end

* Henry Collins was a merchant of Newport, distinguished for his wealth, liberality, and taste. He employed Smitbert, who came out with Dean Berkeley, to take the portraits of Callender, Clap, Hitchcock, and Berksley. Smitbert was an excellent artist, and had been previously patronized, while at Florence, by the Grand Duke of Tuscany. The portrait of Henry Collins taken by Smitbert is supposed to be in the possession of some branch of the Flagg Family; but the proprietors of the Library have not, as yet, been enabled to obtain it.

of the building. The wings furnish two rooms, of about twelve feet square. The principal Library room, occupying the whole of the main building, is thirty-seven feet long, twenty-six feet broad, and nineteen feet in height. The edifice is lighted by seven whole windows, and three attic windows in the east and west ends. The three whole windows in the east end are beautifully enriched with tasteful architectural ornament. As a matter of local interest, it may be mentioned, that, in their first plan, the proprietors contracted for three attic windows on the north, west, and south sides; making, in all, twelve whole windows and nine attic windows. The east end was to contain only one large Venetian window. The Library Building, on the outside, is worked in imitation of rustic, and is adorned by the ornaments appropriate to the Doric order. The whole building is supported by a substantial foundation, raised several feet from the ground.

The first meeting of the Redwood-Library Company, after their incorporation, was held in the Council Chamber, in Newport, on the last Wednesday of September, 1747. The following gentlemen were chosen officers of the Institution: Abraham Redwood, Rev. James Honyman, Rev. John Callender, Henry Collins, Edward Scott, Samuel Wickham, John Tillinghast, and Peter Bours, *Directors*; Joseph Jacob, *Treasurer*; Edward Scott, *Librarian*; and Thomas Ward, *Secretary*.

At a meeting of the company in the Council Chamber, on the 4th of July, 1748, the Directors presented a catalogue of the books which they proposed to purchase in London. The liberal share given in this catalogue to the ancient classics evinced a disposition to provide for the scholar the objects of his favorite study. In these times of customary appeal to direct utility, we fear a less liberal expenditure would be allowed for the gratification of classical taste. This catalogue, with Mr. Redwood's bills of exchange, was sent immediately to Mr. John Thomlinson, Esq., of London, who appears to have satisfactorily executed the commission of the Society. He was elected an Honorary Member in 1749.

A system of laws for the regulation of the Company, drawn up by Daniel Updike, James Honyman, jun., Thomas Ward, and Matthew Robinson, Esqs.,* was adopted at a meeting in March, 1750. In 1750,

* For the high character of these men, see Updike's Sketches of the Rhode-Island Bar.

a tax of twelve hundred pounds was assessed on the members of the Company, to defray the expense of completing the building.

In 1755, the Rev. Ezra Stiles was admitted an Honorary Member of the Society. His distinction as a scholar and theologian, connected with his exertions in behalf of the Library, justifies some allusion to his character in an historical sketch of the Institution. The Redwood Library, at the time of his settlement in Newport, contained about one thousand five hundred volumes of standard books. The classical and theological departments were the most valuable, and constituted the principal attraction which determined Dr. Stiles to fix his residence in Newport. He remained in Newport twenty years; and, during the greater portion of the time, officiated as Librarian of the Company. Having constant access to this valuable collection of books, he drew from it, by assiduous study, his great and various learning. He held an extensive correspondence with European scholars; and the principal object of that correspondence was to illustrate and perfect those researches and investigations in philosophy, history, antiquities, and physical science, to which his mind had been prompted by the perusal of books which he found on our shelves. His zeal for the diffusion of knowledge led him to solicit for the Library valuable works from European authors. Many of these works, obtained through his instrumentality, are still preserved in the Library. The copy of Montanus's "Hebrew Bible and Dictionary" now belonging to the Library enabled him to perfect his knowledge of the Hebrew language; and a folio copy of "Homer" still bears the marks of his profound study, in the form of Greek annotations, in his own handwriting. He was one of the most eloquent advocates of liberty in the Colonies, before the Revolution. The late Dr. Channing says of him, "To the influence of this distinguished man, in the circle in which I was brought up, I may owe, in part, the indignation which I feel toward every invasion of human rights. In my earliest years, I regarded no human being with equal reverence." His rare learning, eloquence, and goodness, uniformly supported by tradition, have received, of late, the attestation of great names. The eloquent eulogy pronounced upon this gifted and extraordinary man by Chancellor Kent will preserve for many generations the memory of his attainments, genius, and virtue.

In 1770, the proprietors, to evince their grateful sense of Mr. Redwood's exertions for the advancement of the Institution, requested him to sit for his picture; the expense of which was to be defrayed from the Company's treasury. After repeated solicitations, Mr. Redwood,

in 1778, gave his consent, agreeably to the wishes of the Company. David Cheeseborough, Thomas Vernon, and John Bours, Esqs., were appointed a Committee to carry the vote of the Society into execution. This painting was probably executed; but it is doubtful whether it was ever placed in the Library. The beautiful portrait which, at the present time, adorns the walls of the Library room, was copied by Charles B. King, Esq., from an original portrait of Mr. Redwood; and was generously presented by him to the Society in 1817.

No meetings of the Library Company were held from 1778 to 1785. During the Revolution, the town of Newport was occupied by various armies. The disastrous state of the town compelled many of the best citizens* to leave their homes, and to seek shelter for themselves and families in the more secure retreats of the country. The tumults of war and revolution interrupted the peaceful pursuits of literature, and exerted a chilling influence on the growth of knowledge, and the prosperity of institutions like that which forms the subject of our sketch. During the war, the Library Building is said to have been defaced, and many of the books carried off. To the honor of Gen. Prescott, it is said, that, on being informed of the exposed state of the Library, he stationed a military guard to protect it from further injury and depredation.

At a meeting of the Company, held at Mr. Townsend's Hotel on the 14th of October, 1785, — it being the first meeting after the conclusion of the war of the Revolution, — the following gentlemen were chosen officers of the Institution: Hon. Abraham Redwood, Stephen Ayrault, William Vernon, John Malbone, Jonathan Easton, Nicholas P. Tillinghast, Jacob Richardson, and Robert Stevens, *Directors*; William Channing, *Secretary*; Christopher Ellery, *Librarian*; Stephen Ayrault, *Treasurer*. Several important objects engaged the attention of the Society: the principal were the remission of the annual tax from 1778 to 1785, the repair of the Library edifice, the recovery of missing books, and the formation of a catalogue of the Library. William Vernon, Henry Marchant, and William Channing, Esqs., were appointed to apply to the Honorable General Assembly, at their next session, for a renewal of the charter of the Company, with alterations and amendments.

The Society experienced a great misfortune in the death of Mr.

* Mr. Redwood resided, during the Revolutionary War, on his farm in Mendon, Mass.