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**"The Old Stone Bank"**

HALEY & SYKES CO., PROVIDENCE

**24**  
**Civil and Religious  
Liberty**

R. I. Hist. Soc.

Presented by

**"The Old Stone Bank"**

Providence, R. I.

March 28, 1932



## Civil and Religious Liberty

**T**HE very foundations of Rhode Island are embedded deeply and solidly in the bedrock of independence and liberalism. No other state can lay claim to any part of the early establishment of civil and religious liberty in America, although one of Rhode Island's esteemed Puritanical neighbors can reflect upon its own contribution which led to the early founding of the Colony where there were no restrictions regarding religious affiliations, and where men could, and can today, talk, act and think freely. Although this neighbor's contribution, the direct antithesis of personal freedom, shall always be recorded on the pages of history as a deplorable state of bitter persecution, it must be remembered that liberty is born amid oppression, that strife is the way to peace, and that injustice will invariably lead to revolution. First among those to escape the bitter persecution of the Massachusetts elders was the disillusioned Roger Williams, the nation's foremost champion of civil and religious liberty, who will always be hailed for his great share in the solid establishment of Rhode Island as an independent and liberal Colony.

But, there was another who left England for a country where one could be free to worship God according to what the Bible taught him, as God enabled him to understand it; another of those noble spirits who

esteemed liberty more than life, and, counting no sacrifice too great for the maintenance of principle, could not dwell in a land where the inalienable rights of humanity were not acknowledged or were mocked at. He was Samuel Gorton, the Colony's most ardent defender of the principles fearlessly promoted by his contemporary. Both Gorton and Williams, although of entirely different temperaments, were motivated by the same influences to leave England, to depart later from the Massachusetts Colony, and to fight for the noble experiment in Rhode Island. Samuel Gorton's political activities in the Colony furnish the most interesting chapters in his colorful, dynamic career but the account of his life up to the point when he made his hasty departure for Pocasset, now Portsmouth, contains material of unusual historical interest.

Samuel Gorton was born in the year 1592 in the town of Gorton, at that time adjoining but now included within the city limits of Manchester, England. Gorton's ancestors had lived in this community for many generations, and it is said that they were members of the gentry whose heraldic records were familiar to the antiquarian. Gorton spent his youth in the town of his own surname, and there he received his early education. As he approached his majority England was under the rule of King James who drew tighter and tighter the bonds uniting the church and state. The canons originating from the Convocation of

1606 admonished all to obey the law of the monarch alone, power was inherited through the divine right of kings, all liberal views were soundly denounced, and these canons were pressed upon a long-suffering nation through the artful co-operation of the clergy who zealously lent themselves to the support of the King's prerogative and to the shaping of everything to his views. Prominent lower schools and many of the higher universities were hotbeds of corruption and the educators were ever in the forefront of the opposition to those who retained liberal ideas and who refused to subject independence to arbitrary direction of their religious viewpoints. Gorton was of the many youthful English independents who were probably called "radicals" at the time, although he took full advantage of his opportunities to acquire an education and he became an accomplished scholar, more than ordinarily skilled in the languages and learned in English law. He assembled an excellent library and from the choice volumes which it contained he extended his knowledge of various subjects, particularly politics. Later events proved that he had a greater mastery of law and politics than the elders and magistrates of Massachusetts, and that he always understood his individual rights better than did those who sought to deprive him of his personal privileges.

It is evident that Samuel did not leave his home until he was about twenty-five



years old, and there is documentary evidence to prove that he later carried on a clothing business in London. His father had been a London merchant before him and a member of one of the merchant guilds. Samuel always appeared to be plentifully supplied with money, and it is quite possible that he inherited riches from his immediate family. There were great industrial and commercial opportunities for a young, enterprising business man in London at that time; England must have held many precious associations and attractions for him, in spite of his general disagreement with the ruling factions, but these conditions could not prevent him from having adventurous thoughts regarding the new land across the Atlantic. The decision was soon made, he made up his mind to join the little group of settlers on the rock-bound coast of New England where he hoped "to enjoy liberty of conscience in respect to faith toward God and for no other end."

The same year, 1636, when Roger Williams came to Rhode Island, Samuel Gorton landed in Boston with his family, including his wife, his eldest son, Samuel, and possibly one other child. Mrs. Gorton was a lady of refinement and education and her bringing up and former environment little prepared her for the experiences which she was destined to encounter in company with her pioneer husband. Her parents were also comfortably well off and later sent the daughter herds of choice breeds of

cattle which were raised on the Gorton's New England farm.

Gorton experienced the same disappointment as did Williams when he arrived in New England to seek liberty of worship and escape the persecutions of the English Government, for he found that here the new rulers had established over the youthful colony a church-affiliated government as austere and strict as the older one from which they had departed. Persons were not recognized as Massachusetts citizens unless they met every one of the many church qualifications required by the all powerful elders. Magistrates had the power to fine or imprison all persons who absented themselves from the services of the church, and no one was allowed the freedom of the commonwealth who had gathered in any other church meeting. The magistrates could also decide whether or not a person should inhabit the Colony, and these same officials exercised their powers to banish those whom they regarded as *persona non grata*.

In spite of the strict control of the Colony's spiritual and political activities much open dissension existed, and people indulged in warm controversies over the court actions which caused the banishment of popular men. There is no record to prove that Gorton took any active part in these controversies, but is quite likely that he was soon convinced that the liberties he sought were not here. He remained in Boston for a few weeks and then moved to Plymouth

where he found, as did Williams, a much more liberal government than that of Massachusetts. Plymouth, unlike the neighbor Colony, maintained its freeman's oath to the English ruler; the governor was chosen directly by the vote of the freemen, and the franchise rights of the early settlers were generally recognized.

But things changed in Plymouth. Shortly after Gorton's arrival there, an election was held resulting in the selection of Prence as Governor of the Colony. This individual personified extreme hostility to everything opposed to church, and demanded submission of everything to its direction. He ruled with an iron hand and naturally directed abuse upon those who maintained liberal views and who refused to support his autocratic and blindly narrow administration. Gorton, the liberal, was destined to cross swords with Prence, the conformist.

Previous to November, 1638, Gorton had retained the services of Ellen Aldridge, a servant of good reputation who had lately come from England to live with the family. It had been whispered about that Ellen had smiled in church on one or more occasions, and presently she was arrested, brought to trial and commanded to answer to this most serious charge. The poor woman was punished and threatened with deportation. Gorton said that the court proposed to banish her as a vagabond, and to escape the shame threatened to be put upon her she fled to the woods, where she remained for sev-

eral days, returning at night to his home for shelter. Gorton appeared at court in defense of the disgraced Ellen and showed that her offense was not recognized in English law. He in turn was charged with contempt of court for defending the woman and was instructed to answer for this contempt at the next session. He did defend himself for defending one of his household; he was fined for seditious conduct and given fourteen days to leave Plymouth.

There was no redress, and on December 4, 1638, Samuel Gorton departed from Plymouth, bade farewell to his wife, children and friends and plunged hopefully into the wilderness, almost paralleling the case of Roger Williams who had previously left home and family because of persecution. His leave-taking was in the extremity of a typical New England winter and occurred in the midst of the greatest tempest of wind and snow recorded of the times, at the very period when many of the Colonists perished from the cold. An old account describes the conditions when Samuel Gorton set out on his historic adventure, as follows: "When the snow was up to the knee and rivers to wade through up to the middle, and not so much as one Indian to be found in that extremity of weather to afford either fire or harbour, such as themselves had, being retired into swamps and thickets, where they were not to be found in any condition, we lay divers nights together and were constrained with the hazard of



our lives to betake ourselves to Narragansett Bay." He survived the hazardous journey, and before the expiration of the limit of his sentence he arrived, on December 18, in Pocasset, at the northern end of Aquidneck Island, now the Island of Rhode Island.

Gorton's arrival in Pocasset was at the time when Anne Hutchinson and William Coddington were embroiled in bitter controversy, the newcomer took sides against Coddington and aided the settlers in drawing up the necessary articles for local government. His departure from Pocasset, his later political activities in Providence, the purchase of the Warwick lands from Miantanomi, his arrest by soldiers from Massachusetts Colony, and his triumphant defense of the Rhode Island Charter offer unlimited subjects for the student of Colonial politics. Throughout his life Samuel Gorton remained a liberal and independent thinker and held many public offices; he, like Roger Williams, enjoyed a staunch friendship with the Indians; and, the greater the prominence given to the founder of civil and religious freedom in Rhode Island, the greater should be the acclaim for the outstanding defender of the same.

Additional Copies of this Booklet sent upon request

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"THE OLD STONE BANK"  
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Providence

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THE PROVIDENCE INSTITUTION FOR SAVINGS, familiarly known as "The Old Stone Bank," is in its own right a historic institution of Rhode Island. Founded in 1819 as one of the first mutual savings banks in the country, it has since contributed vitally to the development and life of this community.

Proud of its own historical significance, "The Old Stone Bank" has adopted this method of educational advertising to bring to light much that is of value and significance in the colorful annals of Rhode Island and national history.

The sketches and vignettes of old-time Rhode Island and Rhode Islanders that are broadcast weekly and then printed in this form are selected from local historical records which are full of the picturesque, romantic, and adventurous. In the hope that these glimpses into the lives, customs, and environment of our progenitors may be both revealing and inspirational to young and old, this booklet is presented with the compliments of

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