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"The Old Stone Bank"

THE J. C. HALL CO., PROV., R. I.

The First Rhode Island Elections



Presented by

"The Old Stone Bank"

Providence, R. I.

November 7, 1932

The First Rhode Island Elections

THROUGHOUT the Colonial period of American history, beginning at the earliest times and continuing down until after the Revolution when the "royal authority" was repudiated, some system of popular elections existed among the several Colonies. Deprived as the Colonists were of a voice in the deliberations of the English government, the people of every province, whether royal, proprietary or chartered, exercised a partial check on the arbitrary rule of the governor and his council, by means of a legislative assembly whose members were chosen on the basis of a limited popular suffrage. In several of the more northern Colonies in America the people possessed the power of electing their governor and other general officers, while, in nearly all sections, the local town officials held their positions by virtue of popular suffrage. This early system of election by the people was not entirely confined to the English Colonies for it had already obtained a partial foothold in the Dutch province of New Netherland.



In Massachusetts the election of a governor, deputy-governor and eighteen assistants was authorized by the Charter of 1628, under which the Colony was founded. In 1647 an order declared that a treasurer, major-general, admiral-at-sea, commissioners for the United Colonies, secretary of the General Court and "such others as are, or hereafter may be, of like nature" should be chosen annually "by the freemen of this jurisdiction." The voting took place in May, at a "court of election" held annually, and freemen could vote at first only in person, but eventually by proxy also, if they desired to do so. The last election of Massachusetts general officers under the Charter of 1628 was held in 1686, and soon after that the government passed into the hands of a president and council appointed by the English crown. In Plymouth, general officers were elected every year by the freemen of the Colony, although existing records do not contain mention of an election before 1632.

In the detached settlements which sprang up in the southern portion of what is now New Hampshire, all officers were originally elected. Thus in Dover, a governor was chosen annually after 1633, while Exeter and Hamp-

ton had a similar custom. Before 1640, a governor and two assistants appear to have been elected in Portsmouth, and the following year these towns were taken into the Colony of Massachusetts, and as such sent deputies to the general court at Boston. In the Hartford Colony, which was Connecticut proper, the earliest mention of elections is found in the Fundamental Orders of 1638, which have become famous as the first written constitution framed on the American continent. There and then it was enacted that a governor and six magistrates should be chosen annually by the freemen of the jurisdiction, and when the charter of Charles II placed the New Haven and the Hartford colonies under one government, provision was made for the election of the same general officers, together with twelve assistants.

The several towns that finally formed the Colony of Rhode Island were at first independent of each other, and they elected their own local officers. Although early records are incomplete we find that, in 1638, Portsmouth established a government "according to the Word of God" and that Providence took similar action two years before that. The earliest evidence on the subject of elections in the

Newport records speaks of the presence of the judge and elders from Portsmouth. A joint government was later set up for these three towns and it was determined to have the judge, elders and all other officers of the "Bodie Incorporate" annually chosen at a general court or assembly "by the greater body of the freemen present." At the first election which took place in March, 1639, the chief magistrate was given the title of governor, and the next that of deputy-governor, the remainder being assistants. Two of the assistants and either the governor or the deputy-governor were to be chosen from each of the towns. Two treasurers and a constable for Newport, as well as one for Portsmouth and a "sarjeant" were also chosen. At the election the following year the government was declared a democracy and the power of the freemen to make laws and appoint officers to execute them was established.

The charter of Providence Plantations granted not by the Crown but, on account of the civil war which was then raging in England, by Commissioners under authority of Parliament, allowed the inhabitants of the Colony the power to rule themselves. In addition to the three towns already men-

tioned, Warwick was also taken into the Colony. Warwick had established no government of its own because it considered that authority from England was necessary before that could be done. The officers of the enlarged Colony, chosen at the first election in 1647 were a President, four assistants (one from each town), a recorder, a treasurer and a "general sargant" who seems to have been more or less of a high sheriff. This organization of governmental authority continued until a break occurred between the member towns in the Colony. Portsmouth and Newport, both situated on the Island of Rhode Island, separated themselves from Providence and Warwick. Each half of the confederacy had a separate legislative assembly and elected its own governor and two assistants. After a long period of negotiations between the opposing factions, the breach was closed in the summer of 1654 and the old form of government was resumed. About this time an "attorney" and a solicitor were elected annually.

After the accession of Charles II to the throne of England, a second charter was obtained in order to avoid any question as to the validity of the first one obtained. In the new document

under date of 1663, the officers of the Colony were named, and it was provided that a governor, a deputy-governor, and ten assistants were to be elected annually by those who qualified as freemen. A plurality of votes was declared sufficient to elect, but in case the person chosen refused to serve—and this happened quite frequently—the general assembly was empowered to fill vacancies. Except for a brief period, elections were held annually thereafter until the time of the Revolution, following which Rhode Island became a free and independent state.

Most of the states adopted new forms of government at that time, but Rhode Island continued under the Colonial charter. No question or objection was then raised, within or without the State, to Rhode Island's form of government, and she became a member of the Federal Union. The charter government does not appear to have been objected to strongly until the year 1814 when a bill was introduced in the state Senate for an extension of suffrage. This bill was defeated by a change in administration before being acted upon. In the year 1824 the General Assembly directed a convention to be called when a written constitution was submitted to the people,

but they rejected it by a majority of 1538 votes. After that, many attempts were made to alter the constitutional government of Rhode Island by the presentation of petitions and motions in the General Assembly. The most objectionable features in the old charter were considered to be the inequality of representation, but more particularly the fact that every voter must possess \$134 of real estate, and that the eldest son was admitted to the privilege of the father. Popular sentiment did bring about a change in local government, but the first direct movement in that direction did not come until early in 1841 when a Suffrage Convention was held in Providence, an important and respectable gathering, both as to size and character. A second convention was held at Newport shortly afterwards, at which a State Convention was appointed, who issued an address and called a convention to form a constitution.

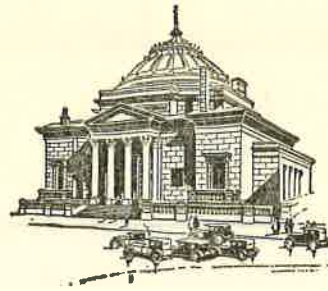
The events that followed are included within the pages of one of the most significant chapters in Rhode Island history, a chapter that historians should regard as a high point in local political annals. The great movement now referred to as the Dorr Rebellion most certainly aroused the minds of

the people upon the subject of common rights, it awakened the citizens to a new sense of duty, and it undoubtedly hastened the framing and subsequent adoption of the present form of government. The new, liberal Rhode Island constitution went into effect on the first Tuesday in May, 1843, and the old Colonial charter passed as a relic into the archives of the State.

Additional Copies of this Booklet sent
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"THE OLD STONE BANK"
86 South Main Street
Providence



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

"THE OLD STONE BANK"