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"The Old Stone Bank"

HALEY & SYKES CO., PROVIDENCE

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JAMES S. SLATER

Presented by

"The Old Stone Bank"

Providence, R. I.

May 2, 1932



James S. Slater

ONLY a few years ago did Rhode Island awaken to an appreciation of the significance of the Fourth of May in American history. And, not so long ago, many would shamefacedly inquire why flags were displayed on that date; and when told that Rhode Island Independence Day was being celebrated, they might appear to understand, but few really did know what it was all about. It was not until 1884 that James S. Slater of Slatersville, Rhode Island, town clerk of Smithfield and an antiquarian of wide repute, hung the Stars and Stripes on his porch on the morning of May 4 and proclaimed to the world that the day was a holiday to him at least, that any attention was given to the occasion. Much patient delving into dust-laden records had convinced Mr. Slater that Rhode Island had been the first American Colony to renounce allegiance to the English crown, and bred in him a determination to rescue the observance from oblivion.

Neighbors were inclined to laugh at Mr. Slater, who went right on decorating his house with bunting once a year and spreading propaganda through the press and by word of mouth until 1909 when a special act was passed by the General Assembly giving State-wide recognition to the day. With the increase of interest in the observance came a deluge of criticisms from outsiders who claimed that the memorable

document was merely a technical thing at the most, reflecting the indignation of the Colony, but not committing Rhode Island irrevocably to the policy of open rebellion against the King. Others came forth with contentions that acts of renunciation had preceded the local action, but Mr. Slater's persistence, painstaking historical research and logical arguments gained many supporters here as time passed, and when official steps were finally taken, Mr. Slater was properly and appropriately named "The Father of Rhode Island Independence Day." He died in 1915.

Shortly before the Battle of Bunker Hill, the Rhode Island Army of Observation had marched to Boston and joined the American forces then encamped on Jamaica Plains. On June 12, 1775, the same day that General Gage proclaimed a state of martial war, Governor Cooke of Rhode Island, at the request of the General Assembly, issued a proclamation, "commanding every man in the Colony able to bear arms to equip himself with arms and ammunition, according to law." Committees were selected to take account of stock within the boundaries of the Colony; a general check-up of arms and ammunition supplies was made for the purposes of transmitting a detailed report to Congress; all supplies of saltpetre and brimstone were taken possession of and forwarded to the arsenals in New York; a lookout was established at South Kingstown overlooking the Bay to watch for the

approach of the enemy by water; minute men were enlisted and put under military discipline; the entrance to the harbor of Providence was fortified and the famous signal beacon was erected on Prospect Hill; more troops were ordered to join the growing army in Boston; Rhode Island prepared to be in the front lines of a fight to the finish.

By autumn of the same year Newport was having more than its share of troubles with the enemy. Captain Wallace with his fleet in and near Newport harbor continually harassed the population of the seaport town with his depredations. Commerce was upset, provisions were seized, destruction of the town was constantly threatened, many buildings were destroyed, and hundreds of the inhabitants had moved away. Wallace failed to carry out his threats to destroy Newport because he probably anticipated that the town would be of vast importance in the future when the stubborn revolutionists were finally subdued and peace and submission reigned again in these pleasant dominions of the King's Colonies. Wallace proved to be a poor prognosticator but an excellent judge of a good thing when he saw it. On October 7, the enemy fleet was withdrawn from Newport, after four additional ships of war had joined the terrifying array of fighting craft. Instead of departing to distant waters, Wallace moved his command to Bristol harbor where a demand was made of

the stalwart inhabitants of that patriotic community. The demand was promptly refused and Wallace answered with a heavy bombardment that sent many of the women and children scurrying back into the country. Immediately thereafter a general evacuation of Newport took place; sympathizers with the enemy, called Tories, assumed the government of the town, and the place was left to mercies of the British. Many of the Newporters hastily went to the northern end of the Island of Rhode Island, taking with them just a few personal belongings, and many families came as far north as Providence.

At the turn of the year the General Assembly of Rhode Island proceeded to take steps to defend Newport. From a strategic standpoint, that seaport town would have to be ridden of the enemy if the rest of the Colony were to be protected. A military force in the town and free entry into the waters of the Bay presented a serious menace not only to the safety of the Rhode Island Colony but also to the Continental Army then mobilizing under Washington in the vicinity of Boston. The local militia was increased in strength, fortifications were everywhere thrown up in anticipation of an expected attack. These home defense preparations combined with the steady drain upon resources in aiding the regular army soon found the Colony in an exhausted and discouraged condition. Appeals for assistance were made to Congress, to Gen-

eral Washington, and to others in authority. On January 21, Governor Cooke frantically called for help with these words, "I shall only add that unless the continent defends the colony, it must be abandoned." Of course, it was more essential to concentrate troops in the sections of the country where operations were already in progress, therefore Rhode Island went begging for reinforcements at the time, and had to be content with protection by home forces. In March, the Assembly passed an act for the purchase of "two thousand stand of good firearms, with bayonets, iron ramrods and cartouch boxes," for use among the militiamen, and another act was passed at the same time for "encouraging the fixing out, and authorizing armed vessels, to defend the seacoast of America, and for erecting a court to try and condemn all vessels that shall be found infesting the same."

Rhode Island was in the forefront of preparations for war, but the Colony's greatest distinction in the cause of liberty and justice came when a solemn and determined group met in the Old State House in Providence (still standing between Benefit and North Main Streets) and renounced, in certain and straightforward language, any and all allegiance to Great Britain. Rhode Island's Declaration of Independence was signed on May 4, 1776, after a formal statute had been drawn and approved with but six dissenting votes. Independence had been talked of in the Colonies for many months,

popular sentiment for it had been growing here, there and everywhere, but it remained for Rhode Island to be the first to act, the first to go on record with signatures affixed, despite the fact that this Colony was in immediate danger from an enemy near at hand.

By this legislative act it was voted to instruct the two Rhode Island Congressional delegates, Stephen Hopkins and William Ellery, to place the Colony on the side of independence. They were told, by virtue of the action taken, to take their stand along with the other Colonies, for a separation from Great Britain whenever Congress believed that the separation should be declared to the world. These instructions communicated by Governor Cooke left no doubt in anyone's mind as to the sentiment of those who represented the people in this Colony. They read thus: "You are authorized and empowered to consult and advise with the delegates of the said colonies, in Congress, upon the most proper measures for promoting and confirming the strictest union between the said United Colonies, for exerting their whole strength and force to annoy the common enemy, and to secure to the said colonies their rights and liberties, both civil and religious; whether by entering into treaties with any prince, state or potentate; or by such other prudent and effectual ways and means as shall be devised and agreed upon."

Another significant phase of the action

taken by the Assembly on that momentous day was the general elimination of all references to "His Royal Majesty" on court papers, documents and official orders. Everything heretofore issued in the name of the King was thereafter issued in the name of "The Governor and Company of the English Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations." Rhode Island still called herself a Colony, but she was then doing business in her own name. Some historians claimed that the word "independence" did not appear anywhere in the sentiments of the legislature, therefore it should not rightly be called in any sense a "Declaration of Independence." The word may not have been used but the intention was there. The action taken repealed an existing act entitled "An act, for the more effectually securing to his Majesty the allegiance of his subjects in this, his Colony and dominion of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations," and it also altered the forms of Commissions, of all writs, and processes in the Courts, and of the oaths prescribed by law. Nothing could have been more decisive, no procedure could have better demonstrated that this Colony, for one, had relinquished all ties with the mother country. George the Third, King of England, was severely taken to task in the body of the document, his power was to be opposed—Rhode Island was independent as long as independence could be maintained.

The royal coat-of-arms had always appeared on the title page of the *Providence Gazette*, but was never seen again after May 4, 1776. On the 14th day of the same month, General Nathanael Greene wrote in part as follows: "By a late act passed last session you have declared yourselves independent, 'tis nobly done. God prosper you and crown your endeavors with success." But, the apparent significance of all this was lost sight of during the greater part of the last century. James S. Slater, alone and unaided for many years, made it the goal of his life to uncover every high-light and side-light pertaining to the event that should be prominently included in every text-book on American history. Men of Mr. Slater's character signed the original document; Rhode Islanders like him fought for and won independence for this nation; and men with his patience, unswerving patriotism and dogged determination will be the ones who must preserve, cherish and defend the privileges of liberty and independence which were first demanded in writing here in this nation by the Colony of Rhode Island.

Additional Copies of this Booklet sent
upon request

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"THE OLD STONE BANK"
86 South Main Street
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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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