

**Providence Institution
for Savings**

Established 1819

A Mutual Savings Bank

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1917-21 Westminster Street
Olneyville Square

EMPIRE-ABORN BRANCH
Between Westminster and Washington Sts.

Open all business days and Tuesday evenings
5 to 8:30. Olneyville Branch open
Saturday evenings also.

"The Old Stone Bank"

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

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**Post Roads and
the Mails**



Presented by

"The Old Stone Bank"
Providence, R. I.

March 6, 1933

Post Roads and the Mails

IT has long been observed that the winding, twisting streets of Boston are the built-up cart paths of that historic community. Likewise in Rhode Island, the first travelled ways, several of them still followed today, were the well-worn Indian trails once traversed on foot and on horseback. Of course, the first highways were laid out by individuals and by the towns that sprang up here and there, and these thoroughfares were later connected for the convenience of the owners of the estates and the inhabitants of the towns. Many of these land owners fenced in their estates, thereby blocking the highways with gates and bars that remained for many years as obstructions to rapid travel. On many private roads, away from the beaten track in Rhode Island, such obstructions may be found today, but many of the ingenious devices similar to those provided for the traveler in this generation to swing the gates without alighting from horse or auto, were probably in use back in the days when the horse was the only means of long-distance transportation.



The probate records of the Town of Providence in 1700 show that horse-carts and wheel vehicles were then owned by the wealthy inhabitants; they also owned saddles with pillions, but these were of little service for journeys of any distance over the bridle-paths or bridle-ways of that period. Furthermore, an official report dispatched to the English government at some time during the closing years of the seventeenth century disclosed the fact that there were but few horses in the Colony. In 1713, "it was ordered that the Great Highway between Pawtucket and Pawcatuck should be repaired and a new one opened from Providence to Plainfield, Connecticut, through Warwick and West Greenwich". A very popular Indian trail led from Providence to Pawtucket and thence on to Boston, while the other important trail, known as the "Pequot Trail", led to the southwest "through East Greenwich, Wickford, over Tower Hill and through Westerly into Connecticut". These trails and their continuations became, as the Colony developed, the highway between Boston and New York, through Providence, New London and other English settlements, and this road through the low lands not a great distance from the

seacoast continued for a long period to be the main artery of land travel in these parts. At the towns or settlements along the highway, inns and taverns for the entertainment and accommodation of travelers were established, and these stopping places became important centers of social growth, for, in such public establishments, people could gather and exchange news and catch glimpses of the outside world. Besides, social life centered within the walls of these hospitable taverns and there the gossip of the neighborhood could freely circulate.

Indian trails, like early railroads, followed the lines of least resistance. Instead of crossing a swamp or bridging a river, they went around the one and forded the other. Since they followed the easiest course they were generally high and dry, but modern road construction can generally overcome any of the ancient natural obstacles, therefore many of the early trails that later became heavily travelled highways are rapidly moving away from the circuitous routes that were laid out in a particular course because of necessity. However, Rhode Island is naming many of its new main arteries and connecting highways after the earlier, completely obliterated roads that took the

travel-weary Colonist from place to place when the crossing of Rhode Island was a day's journey, at least.

In 1667, it was ordered in Town meeting "that Mr. Roger Williams shall receive toll of all strangers which shall hereafter pass over the bridge at Wapwaysett, also that of all the inhabitants of the Town he shall receive what each person is willing to contribute towards the support of the aforesaid bridge". The bridge at Weybosset was built by a later generation and this bridge with those over the Pawtucket and the Pawtuxet were kept in safe condition by the Colonies of Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut, as they were parts of the New England post route to New York. The first legalized lottery in Rhode Island was organized for the purpose of raising fifteen thousand pounds for the building, or rather, rebuilding of the Weybosset bridges in Providence. Samuel Chace, the first Providence postmaster, was appointed clerk to draw the lottery in 1744. The second lottery was granted a few years later for paving the streets of Newport, and, at the same session a new ferry was established between South Kingstown and Jamestown to replace the one first established in 1707. Previous to this,

and here is a fact worthy of note, streets had been built and rivers bridged from the proceeds received from duties on imported slaves.

In June, 1775, post routes and riders and post offices were established by the General Assembly in Newport, Providence, Bristol, Warren, Tower Hill, South Kingstown and Westerly and postmasters were appointed. A committee was appointed to agree with postmasters and post-riders as to their services and pay and all of the accounting of the postmasters was to be made to this committee. All letters sent to or coming from Boston were to be post-paid and submitted by the post-rider to the examination of the Commander-in-chief of the American forces at Cambridge or to a committee chosen by the Provincial Congress of the Massachusetts Bay. In August of that year, John Lasell as post-rider, carried mail from Providence to New London, leaving the Rhode Island city every Tuesday afternoon and returning as soon as possible. His pay was \$85.00 a year. Succeeding Mr. Chace, the first Providence postmaster, William Goddard served in that capacity until the year 1769. It was this William Goddard who came from New London to Providence and established and edited the Provi-

dence Gazette and Country Journal in 1762, the first newspaper in the Town.

When the Federal Constitution was adopted in 1789, Congress took exclusive control of postal matters for all States, established general rates of postage and passed laws regulating the post office department of the government. In 1800, the postal rates at all Rhode Island offices were for single letters, a single sheet of paper, not over 40 miles, eight cents; not over 90 miles, ten cents; not over 150 miles, twelve and one-half cents; not over 300 miles, seventeen cents; not over 500 miles, twenty cents; over 500 miles, twenty-five cents. Since the familiar letter envelope which we use today was then not conceived, two, three and four sheets of paper in a letter were charged at double, triple and quadruple rates.

Many vivid word-pictures of those glamorous days of post-riding have been painted by writers who have successfully visualized the familiar scenes that attended the arrival of the lumbering stage coach or the panting steed bearing the dust-covered rider, charged with the responsibility of delivering Uncle Sam's mail-bags. Those days are gone—the clouds of dust, the roar and rattle of wheels, the hoarse shouts of the drivers and cheery greetings of the

patient passengers, the excitement at the tavern, the concern for the weary horses, those picturesque days of Colonial romance and quaintness have passed into oblivion, for the stage-coach and the post-rider disappeared from the highways with the arrival of the railroads. We of the present can appreciate the rapidity of these changes. A comparatively few years ago a local writer reflected upon these same fascinating days of rough travel over winding roads, when it was a heavy responsibility for a coach driver or a horseman to deliver a handful of briefly-penned, folded and sealed sheets. He wondered if the day would ever come when airplanes would carry passengers, mails and all forms of express from city to city and from nation to nation "as swiftly and as safely as the flight of the swiftest birds". Today the journey from Providence to Boston requires about one hour by auto, just a few minutes by air, but in pre-Revolutionary days this same journey required three days to go and return.