

Providence Institution for Savings

Established 1819

A Mutual Savings Bank

where interest is allowed
from day of Deposit to
day of Withdrawal

MAIN OFFICE
86 South Main Street

OLNEYVILLE BRANCH
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"

F
79
Pg 71
#31

The Cove



Presented by

"The Old Stone Bank"

Providence, R. I.

February 13, 1933

The Cove

WHEN Roger Williams and his few first associates made their inspection of the land near the spot where they had decided to remain and establish a settlement, they were probably standing near the summit of what is now College Hill, probably not far from Prospect Street of the present. From this eminence they could look eastward towards the banks of the river which they had recently crossed in search of a suitable home, somewhere beyond the boundaries of the forbidden lands of Plymouth Colony. Although the wooded slopes between themselves and the Seekonk were easy and gradual they did not appear particularly productive, and so a more careful inspection was given to the more interesting valley that lay before them to the north and to the west. There they could see the headwaters of the Bay, with the east bank heavily wooded and with the west bank a deep marsh studded with tiny islands covered with coarse grass usually inundated with every Spring tide. Just beyond, to the north, the channel of these waters



widened into a cove with a broad gravelly beach on the east and north, and broad salt marshes on the west. From the north this cove was fed by two rivers, the Moshassuck and the Woonasquetucket.

Each of these two rivers had its own environment of marshes and woodland, and low sand hills, scantily covered with pines rose above the marshy sections; further away, rising higher and providing the horizon line, these pioneer prospectors could see a stretch of barren, rocky eminences. This area, rather than the Seekonk lands to their back, looked more attractive to Williams and the others who were thus encouraged to lay the foundations of a town—"without capital", as Dorr the historian said, "without aid—with little goodwill or assistance from England and with none whatever from their neighbors" of Massachusetts Bay, who had banished them.

What a transformation three centuries have brought about in this area! The Great Salt River, as they termed it, and the Cove, with the exception of a narrow, walled-in stream, have been transformed into a valuable, paved and built-up center of the second largest city in New England. The founders could have made a little Venice of

Providence and laid out the community with water highways where long, swan-like gondolas might have glided propelled by those solitary, picturesque figures precariously perched on what answers for the stern of a Venetian taxicab. But, they had little imagination of the romantic character, and they had less riches. However, they did build a highway along the east shore of Salt River, and, a few years after the date of the "initial deed" of the lands which Williams had secured from Canonicus and Miantonomi, and which he turned over to his associates, about two scores of houses were straggled along this road over Constitution Hill.

Later, when property values went up and more pasturage was required for a growing stock of farming animals, the settlers were desirous of fields more fertile than the barren hillsides which they said would "scarcely feed a goat". In 1654, they talked of building a bridge to connect the two shores. There was a fording place near what was once Steeple Street and is today the foot of Waterman Street, but crossing could only be made there at extremely low tides. A Mr. White of Warwick was consulted in regard to the construction of a span but when he learned that he would receive nothing more than

Proprietary lands in payment, his interest waned and he flatly declined to have anything to do with the project.

For two generations there was no trans-Cove communication except the ford. To the island of Weybosset which was near the present site of Market Square, and thence to the mainland, a ferry was maintained, but this was of no assistance in transporting cattle to the meadows across the Cove. In June 1662, it was recorded that the Town Meeting ordered "that a bridge be made over the Mooshaisic River". A committee was appointed to "get the timber for said bridge, and to frame it, and then give notice unto the surveyors, and warn the inhabitants together to mend the highways, and to rear the said bridge, and this bridge to be done before next hay time." It was to be thrown across a narrow part of the Moshassuck River, there being no one at the time who could put a safe bridge over a tidal river. All strangers who crossed the bridge had to pay toll. Roger Williams received from the townspeople only what they wished to contribute freely towards the upkeep of the structure, therefore, travelers from neighboring settlements were always required to pay toll to the head of the settlement. For twenty years after

the death of Williams this crude wooden bridge was the only one connecting the east and west shores. It was recorded in 1675 that there was "no bridge at Weybosset" although a second, larger one must have been built at that point soon after this date.

For years, the center of the Town was near Moshassuck Falls near which stood a community grist mill. This mill endured until the building of the Blackstone Canal during the first quarter of the last century. The mill building weathered many storms and freshets, even the one in 1784 that swept away one of the bridges and demolished most of the houses on the edge of the Cove.

Meanwhile, sloops and schooners were being constructed on the Cove and trade in Providence was being opened with England and the West Indies. International commerce felt the need of wharfage and warehouse lots, and presently, the east side of the river began, little by little, to encroach upon the river's bed; warehouses began to rise on the western side. Development and expansion was in a southerly and westerly direction, and, in 1716, the Cove was still deep enough for navigation. Clams and oysters were dug there in abundance, and that year it was ordered that "no seine could be drawn

in Providence above the Great Bridge". Shipping activities on the banks of the Cove continued until after the Revolution when a new generation controlled the government of the Town. After that, few vessels were launched in the Cove; the Town soon departed from this cradle of its early navigation. Behind the dwellings and warehouses of Cheapside there had been a row of wharves and docks extending into the waters of the Cove and these were regarded as undesirable although they remained there until the time when the Blackstone Canal was built, then all traces of the maritime east shore were obliterated. Trade, which seems to change headquarters with the coming and going of generations, soon settled itself around the Market House and the adjacent square and spread to the west up Westminster and Weybosset Streets.

Railroads must take the blame for the construction of the Cove. Aggression was first made by the building of the Providence and Worcester Railroad about the middle of the last century. Much controversy resulted when it was proposed that a part of the pleasant body of water would be used for transportation purposes. Some said that it would endanger the very existence of

the natural channel of the river between Fox Point and Weybosset Bridge. Others objected to such a grant on the grounds that it would destroy a site that should properly be a park dedicated to the memory of the first founders. These and other objections were overruled, and the General Assembly approved of the railway project. After the company had completed its construction work, the Cove, or Cove Lands, took on an appearance that remained until 1885. The basin was elliptical in shape and practically a mile in circuit. It was enclosed by a stone wall surmounted by an iron railing, and a small park, shaded by elm trees, encircled the wall.

All of the wastes of the Woonasquetucket found the basin a natural receptacle. In 1877, it was necessary to dredge and clean it out, and that undertaking cost the city nearly as much as it did to fill it in a few years later. Room for more tracks was needed in 1885; again there were those who remonstrated against any change in the much-loved Cove. But, railroad requirements prevailed. The waters were pushed back into a narrow runway by which the waters of the Woonasquetucket could flow into the Bay. That section of Providence where we

"THE OLD STONE BANK"

now see the Union Station, the lawns and approaches to the State Capital, the freight yards, buildings and streets lying between Market Square, Smith Hill and Sabin Street to the west, was once the muddy bed of a delightful stretch of water, the Cove that attracted those who first came to found a town in the name of religious liberty. If our forefathers did not conceive the creation of a little Venice they did make a little Rome out of a marsh, a lagoon, and seven surrounding hills.

Additional Copies of this Booklet sent upon request.

ADDRESS

"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"