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“The Old Stone Bank”

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The Curse
of Clawson

R. I. Hist. Soc.



Presented by

“The Old Stone Bank”

Providence, R. I.

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The Curse of Clawson

ROGER MOWRY was a "neat herd" in Salem, Massachusetts before he came to Providence some time prior to 1650. The duties of this curiously-named office placed him in charge of all of the town cattle. It was the custom of the times to drive the common herd into the fields during the day when the grass was suitable for fodder, and return them to town at sundown. The "neat herd" had one assistant, and the period of duty began in February and continued for about eight months. It is interesting to note that each townsman was required to have his cattle ready to be driven away with the common herd at a fixed time daily, and that those who were late in arriving at the appointed time and place were obliged to bring their own animals to the grazing lands. It is not known how long Roger Mowry was engaged in the "cowboy" profession at Salem before he followed Roger Williams to the place called Providence and there, in 1655, procured a license to "keep a house of entertainment". With this license, Mowry received official instructions to "sett out a convenient signe at ye most perspicuous place of ye



saide house thereby to give notice to strangers that it is a house of entertainment".

Roger Mowry's Tavern was an important institution in the Town. It stood on the north side of Abbott Street at No. 30, near the Old North Burying Ground, and originally consisted of one large "fire room", or living room, on the first floor, with an enormous stone fireplace that covered nearly the entire end of the building. A steep, narrow flight of steps, on the right of the fireplace, led to the sleeping loft above, and that upper apartment was probably warmed sufficiently by the natural rise of heat from below and by radiation from the hot stones of the upper part of the chimney extending through both floors. People of the early settlement assembled in Mowry's place to discuss the news and talk about the Indian situation, for that was long before the days of King Philip's War. Here the Town Council held its sessions and voted payment to the landlord for what he had provided in such words as these, "that ye Treasurer pay to Roger Moorie 1S.6d. out of the Treasurie for this days firing and house room." The word "firing" evidently meant "heating", likewise, the "fire-room" was that part of the dwelling

where the fireplace was located. Roger Williams held religious services for his flock in this public establishment, since there was no meeting house in the settlement for many years.

Evidently the place became a little too popular among a certain element in the early days for a decree was soon issued by the Assembly that "no house of entertainment shall suffer any person to tipple (drink) after 9 of the clock at night, except they give a satisfactory reason to the Constable or magistrate". The penalty for disobeying this decree was a fine of five shillings for the tavern-keeper, and two shillings and sixpence for the person who remained in his cups at the tavern after the expiration of the daily time limit. Naturally this tavern, the first in Providence, was connected with many interesting historical events, and several quaint stories of early life in this community centered about the place, but there is one story among those which have been passed down through the centuries that seems to be enjoyed by readers and writers, perhaps because of its gruesome implications.

Among the members of the household of Roger Williams was a young Dutch lad named John Clawson, a

homeless, wandering outcast that the kindly apostle of soul liberty had befriended and taken to his home where he served as a household servant. Later he grew to man's estate, acquired a tract of land upon which he erected a home; he learned the trade of carpentry, and soon became a successful craftsman in the settlement. One winter morning, in 1660, Clawson was found lying upon the snow in a dying condition. Nearby was a clump of barberry bushes, and the spot where he was found was not far from Mowry's tavern. Neighbors carried the dying man to the home of Roger Williams where he expired, surrounded by Mr. and Mrs. Williams, Elizabeth Herndon (Hernden or Hearndon) Mistress Throckmorton and several other friends and neighbors. The man had been dealt a vicious blow by some assailant, a blow, possibly from a broad-axe, that mutilated the victim's face and split the chin as though it had been struck by a cleaver. With great difficulty the man spoke just before he died, and it is said that he imprecated curses upon one of his fellow-townsmen, John Herndon by name, whom he accused of being responsible for the fiendish attack, and he expressed the strong hopes that all of Herndon's children and his

children's children would "be marked with split chins and haunted by barberry bushes."

Meanwhile, a search was instituted to locate the murderer, and, as it was the first crime of so serious a nature to be committed in the settlement, the greatest excitement prevailed throughout the Town. The story goes that the accused Herndon was leisurely walking along the road near the particular clump of barberry bushes involved in the crime shortly after Clawson was discovered and that he was pounced upon by Waumanitt, an Indian, and severely beaten. Tradition tells the story that Herndon had employed the Indian to commit the foul deed, but tradition holds no mention of the motive. Waumanitt was apprehended, taken to Roger Mowry's tavern where he was locked up and securely guarded. In the quiet and peaceful settlement of Providence no provisions had been made to jail a prisoner. Shackles and irons were not available, so the town blacksmith was requested to fashion a set, and his bill "for irons" was six shillings and three pence. For two days and a half a guard of nine men was maintained at the tavern to watch the prisoner; the pay for this service was three shillings each a night. Three

shillings were paid to Stephen Northup, the town crier, for warning the townspeople about the prisoner, and Roger Mowry put in a bill of four shillings for housing the Indian.

Then came the problem of holding the prisoner until the time of the trial. At town meeting it was quickly decided that Providence had no prison or place suitable for prisoners, so it was decided to send him to Newport. A boat was secured and one pint of liquor was provided for the young men who launched the craft; also, refreshments of the same order together with an ample store of powder and shot were supplied to Thomas Walling and Ed. Inman who were selected to transport Waumanitt to the town thirty miles away down the Bay. No account exists of the trip made by this trio, nor is there any record of what finally became of the suspected murderer. Clawson left some money and the Town had an empty treasury, therefore the dead man's property was taken over by the treasurer and turned into cash to pay the various expenses incident to the tragic affair. In addition to the items already mentioned, a funeral was provided in keeping with the murdered Dutchman's former position and estate in the settlement. For some reason or

other these funeral arrangements called for several pints of liquor, and a quantity of bread and cheese. Furthermore, a winding sheet was provided, and five shillings and six pence were expended for making the coffin and furnishing nails and "two Trap lines" with which to lower the body into the grave. Despite the curse placed upon the "House of Herndon" by the expiring Clawson, and notwithstanding the suspicion directed to John Herndon, the latter continued to reside in the settlement and lived to a ripe old age. Evidently the curse did have its effect, if tradition can be accepted as fact, for it was said that cleft or split chins disfigured the faces of all Herndons for several generations, and it is quite probable that men and women by that name did not linger long in the vicinity of barberry bushes, especially after dark.

The Mowry tavern that figured prominently in this account survived the disasters that befell neighboring structures during King Philip's War and remained standing until the year 1900. During the last century and before, it was known as the Abbott House, and this ancient building, which many can recall, was somewhat larger than the original tavern. Five years after the house disappeared, the great

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elm tree, said to have been one of the largest in the city, was cut down; thus passed on the sturdy guardian of a dwelling that played no small part in the early history of Providence. Mr. Albert E. Lownes, an enthusiastic antiquarian of this city, has recently constructed a full sized replica of Mr. Mowry's famous house of entertainment, and erected the building on his property in the vicinity of Worden's Pond, southwest of Wakefield. Perhaps Mr. Lownes will plant a clump of barberry bushes in the vicinity of the recreated hostelry and thereby provide a familiar trysting place for the ghosts of Waumanitt, John Herndon and the ill-fated Dutchman whose dying wish brought a strange curse upon the descendants of the one believed to have been the instigator of the first murder in Rhode Island.

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

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