

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
p971
#80

A Merchant of Providence

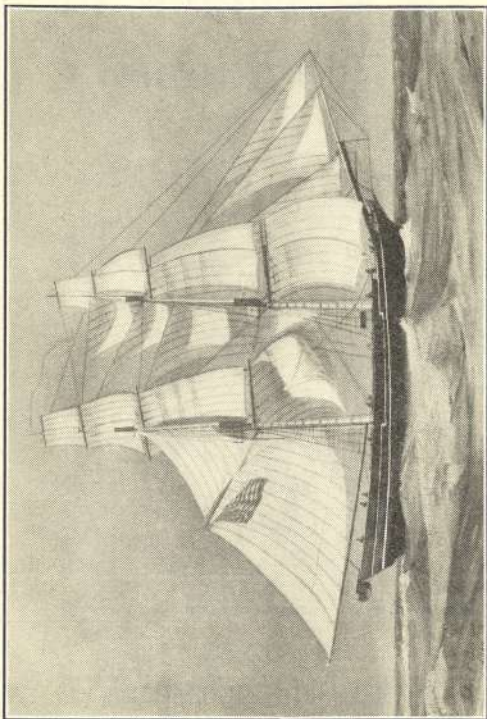


Presented by

“The Old Stone Bank”

Providence, R. I.

December 7, 1931



A Merchant of Providence

THE name Brown has been as indigenous to Providence as the Baptist Church, and for as long. We find it bound up in all the activities of the Providence Plantations, public and private, and, moreover, in almost every instance it is a leading name. This is wholly fitting from any historical standpoint, for it was to this colony that Chad Brown came in 1638, bringing the name from England and becoming the founder of the family in this country. But it is not this man, but, rather, his great-grandson in whom we shall be interested at this moment, James Brown, Jr., the father of the famous four "Brown brothers" and the enterprising merchant, ship owner, and trader, who, with his brother Obadiah, laid the foundations for the great shipping firm of Brown & Ives. We shall be interested in this man for various reasons, partly for the satisfaction we may derive in drawing some estimate of his character and personality and partly for the reason that we may look into his activities as a merchant as into a mirror, gaining thereby a very true reflection of the quaint methods by which Providence merchants conducted their business two centuries ago. In drawing the word-portrait of James Brown, Jr., as an individual, we shall be indebted to the biographical sketch composed by his great-

great-great-grandson, John Carter Brown Woods, as a preface to an edition of his letter book, while in picturing him as a typical merchant of his day (although undoubtedly more shrewd and capable than a host of his contemporaries) we can do no better than to draw upon his letter, or account, book itself.

He was born in Providence in 1698, his father being an associate pastor of the Baptist Church, as Chad Brown had been two generations before. It was a good time for a boy to be born. Providence had finished with Indian Wars, had rebuilt itself after its burning by King Philip's warriors, and was just entering upon the century that was to find it great as a shipping port. The early days of dependence upon farming and land-trading were past. The generation of James Brown, Jr., was to turn its eyes away from Rhode Island, to build ships, and to trade with many far ports of the world. It was a generation that felt the heave of a sea-rolled deck beneath its feet, that fought water and wind to get goods to sell or trade, and that then came back to open shops and sell over the counter the foreign luxuries its enterprise had won.

As a boy he probably went to sea a while, as most Rhode Island boys did in those days, for when he was but twenty-three he was one of five partners employing a certain John Barnes to construct a sloop. Two years later, after his marriage to Hope Power, he sailed away from Providence in command

of the "Four Bachelors," setting a course for the West Indies, there to begin his own trading career. It was a successful trip and by the next fall he had opened a shop of his own on Towne Street, close by Market Square and near his own home, where he could dispose of his goods. He dealt in everything imaginable, that is everything that we find being wanted and bought by the townsmen of that day. Mr. Woods calls his shop "the first department store in Providence" and, in variety of goods, it deserved its name. Not all of the transactions took place within the store, nor were many of the goods he mentions in his account book on his shelves or in his storerooms, for he dealt in horses and cattle, lumber, and sometimes negro slaves, as well as such common articles as salt, corn, cotton, rum, beef, pork, or cheese.

Although he had established this store, he had too much energy to stay in port and tend it all the time and made occasional voyages between Providence and the West Indies. One instance is in the year 1727, when he sailed the Sloop, "Truth and Delight," out of Narragansett Bay, bound southward "with a cargo of horses, Indian corn, tobacco, cheese, tar, boards, and shingles" to exchange for a cargo of rum and molasses. As his business grew, he took his younger brother, Obadiah, as a partner in his manifold enterprises and frequently sent him off as captain of one of his own ships engaged in the West India trade. After

sending out the "Mary," the first slave ship to sail from Providence to the Guinea Coast, James retired from active life as a sailing master and gave his full attention to the great shipping trade he was building up. His vessels were bringing in quite as rich cargoes as he could dispose of and he even had ships among the whaling fleet that harbored at Nantucket.

On shore, his activities were extremely varied. He did not confine his attention to mere buying and selling, but set himself up as a money lender, a distiller, a renter of transportation in the form of horses or scows, or of varied necessities such as blocks and falls, and, finally, as a philanthropist, keenly interested in the welfare of his own community. It was at his own expense that the first Meeting House in Providence, occupied by the Baptists, was erected.

And now let us take odd items from his letter book to learn something of the business character of this man and of the methods of business in his day. Despite phonetic spellings and quaint manners of speech we shall be able to understand his jottings. In many instances he followed a common custom of the time of using rum in the place of money. Thus he writes to a customer to whom he owes an account.

"I am Sorry you would not take that hhd. of Rhum, there is no such thing as money to be had here abouts as I Understand, if you have any Opportunity to Sell it, pray take it"

As a bit of insight into the shrewdness as a merchant which increased his resources, we find him dealing sharply with those who have sent him poor goods. In one case he writes:

"Sr. I am sorry you took so much pain to send me Stuff that is good for nothing, but the fire, Sr. if you cold send me Stuff that is good I would give a good price but as for this I had rather have money then the Stuff at any price, because it troubles me to see so much labour Spent in Vain"

At another time he says:

"Sr. I Should not have Charged you so deer for the hogsheads, but your Carters went and took two of my best hhd. & knoc't the heads of them out, before I saw them, Whereas I could lett them have two hhd. that would have Answeared your end as well for Six Shillings apiece."

Obviously he was endowed with plenty of the blunt frankness and honesty that make a good business man. He frequently trusts others to transact business for him, settling accounts when he sees them. Much of his trading was done wholly outside of Rhode Island and by his agents or friends, so that only the profits of the transactions reached his hands. Although in a few cases where money was short he tried to settle his

own obligations in rum or other goods, he was generally scrupulous in settling his accounts speedily and in full. On the other side, that of asking for money due him he was not in the least bashful. He might write a curt note saying:

"I want my money verry much."

Or indulge in a bit of sarcasm in the case of an old offender, writing:

" . . . for a debt that is so long due, possibly you may think I have forgott it, or otherwise that you have your selfe, but it seems to me that an Article of Eleven pounds Eighteen Shillings & Eight pence is not so soon forgott."

At times he seems a little cold-blooded, although we do not know the full circumstances of various cases. However, he writes to a recent widow:

"I am Sorry to here of your Trouble, which you mett with in looseing your husband, but however, so Shure as we came into the World we must go out.—he had of me one hundred bushells of Salt which he was to pay me last fall Twenty three pounds fifteen Shillings for."

Madm. these may informe you that I will take any of your Moveables at what it were Apprised at, if money be Scarse with you, provided you will Send it Soon . . ."

In one reply to a sailmaker asking for quick payment, he comments amusingly:

"Sr. I recd. your Account wherein you say Speedy payment will Suit you best. Sr. that is what Suits every one but there is but few that (have) the luck to gett it . . ."

As evidence of the custom of the day in not always settling accounts directly, but by proxy, we later find him writing to a friend about the account of this same sailmaker and saying:

"Take this Whalebone and Carry it to Boston and Sell it if you can readily and deliver the money to Mr. Bullfinch the Sailmaker, and if you cannot readily Sell it deliver it with this letter to him . . ."

Thus the items read on for numerous pages, James Brown, Jr., merchant and trader being more fully revealed all the while. One minute he is asking for more horses, the next reprimanding his brother for cutting wood out of his woodlot without his permission, telling a cloth dealer that his price is too high, writing to one of his ship captains and giving him light gossip of the town and the love of his wife along with instructions of how to sell his cargo, writing to the parents of a boy whom he is about to employ as an apprentice, offering his services in myriad ways, living a busy life in a busy community. We could

THE OLD STONE BANK

go on, but we must leave him here, the first of the line of great shipping merchants in Providence by the name of Brown, the sire of the four "Brown brothers," and the real founder of the noted shipping firm of Brown & Ives. He died in 1739.

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