
THE OLD MARKET HOUSE

LIKE the old Arcade which stands as a monument to the business life of old-time Providence, the old Market House at the foot of College Hill, though threatened on various occasions with destruction, has remained for nearly a hundred and fifty years to strengthen its increasing importance as a local landmark. About both of these antiquities is a good deal of that intangible romance which time alone, if nothing else, brings. And as the Arcade becomes more and more prominent in sharp contrast with the new Providence which grows toweringly about it on all sides, so the Market House attains a new significance as the city builds, and re-arranges, and expands all about it.

Back in the 1770's it looked out upon a community that was industrious and thriving. Providence was at that time growing in direct relationship with its sea trade, and ships sent out to all ports of the world by enterprising Providence merchants were constantly returning with full cargoes to make a bustle of unloading at the many wharves. Those were the years of the stage-coaches, of the infancy of Brown University (then the College of the English Colony of Rhode Island and the Providence Plantations), of dirt streets, of many busy little shops. Those were the times of home-trading, times when the farmers from the outlying countryside used to drive into the city with their wagon loads of produce and hawk their wares about the streets in search of buyers, following no set routes but driving haphazardly wherever the whims of business might lead.

Back in 1758, David Bucklin voiced the need of a common place for the buying and selling of wares and produce in his petition to the General Assembly for permission to have a Market House built for his own use on town property. He had chosen as a site, land at the east end of the old Weybosset Bridge, but was unable to buy the land outright. The matter started a great deal of public discussion, resulting in his being given permission to build a market house at his own expense. However, the unfortunate applicant, who could not purchase the site, had even less money to build a market house. And there the matter ended for almost fifteen years.

It came up again in a letter addressed to the *Providence Gazette* and printed in 1768. But again the citizens of the town, though active enough in other respects, were sluggish in sensing the need for a Market House. Several more years passed with nothing done, but in 1771 plans were started. That year a petition was drawn up and presented to the General Assembly by the townspeople as a whole, asking for the immediate establishment of a Market House for the common good. But the town, like David Bucklin, had no money for such an enterprise, and the only recourse was to a lottery.

Lotteries had played a large part in the development of early Rhode Island Institutions, being then totally free from the stigma which hangs over them now. The First Baptist Church, Brown University, and many other public buildings were financed in part, if not in whole, by this method. And it seems very odd and rather amusing that, in a time when theatres were prohibited, such a

practice should have been not only condoned but enthusiastically supported. Tickets for the Market House lottery had a large sale, and the actual scheme of the lottery was as follows: "Granted by the Honourable General Assembly of the Colony of Rhode Island, to raise Four Thousand Five Hundred Dollars, for building a Market-House in the Town of Providence. This lottery will be divided into five classes, each class to consist of 2,000 tickets.

"The managers appointed are Moses Brown, James Lovett, and David Harris of Providence and Elisha Mowry Jun., of Smithfield, who have given bond for the faithful performance of their trust."

A lot of controversy arose over the choosing of a site for this community building, but the original site selected by David Bucklin so many years before was finally taken. However, this site was then covered with water and had to be filled in before building could commence. John Brown took a contract to do this preliminary work. Final plans were completed by Joseph Brown and Stephen Hopkins and the building begun in May, 1773.

Lumber came from mills at Johnston and Cumberland and bricks from Rehoboth by way of the river. And on Saturday, June 12th, the *Providence Gazette* echoed the enthusiasm of the people in the notice: "Tuesday last the first stone of the Market House was laid by Nicholas Brown, Esq." The famous Brown brothers, as you probably have noticed, were again as prominent in this public undertaking as in many others.

The start had been made but the building progressed slowly. Yet, upon the completion of the first story in 1774, a great celebration took place, and the rejoicing of the workmen and people was aided by their tremendous consumption of potent New England rum. Whether it was actually their pride in the new Market House or simply a desire for another convivial gathering (enhanced by rum) that brought them together again within a month, nevertheless they re-assembled to acclaim the addition of a second story. This jovial old custom, which was always carried out (though to a lesser extent) in the raising of any large building, principally "barn raisings," unhappily passed away many years ago.

Once finished, the Market House sprang into life. Silas Downer, who had made the noted Liberty Tree address, was made the clerk of the Market and had offices on the second floor. The lower floor was given over to trading and was open with the stalls in the places of the full length windows, which were substituted later. The stalls were built in 1776 and auctioned to the highest bidders in the following year.

But there were other matters of far more importance to detract from the importance of the new Market House. The war years were beginning and all Providence was astir. Private business was submerged in the patriotism which demanded the undivided attention of all to matters of state. Throughout these years the Market House, along with other public institutions, was used when necessary to aid the war needs of the colonists. In Brown University the French allies under Rochambeau housed many of their sick, while the Market House was appropriated by the War Council as a storage place for grain. Later, the French not only stored their personal baggage in the Market House but occupied it over night as a quarters. When they departed from the city, they left a guard over the munitions and provisions stored there.

With the ending of the war, the Market House regained its normal activity. It served in its original capacity, and also became more and more of a civic center in other ways. The town clerk had his office on the second floor, and, for a long while, it was suggested that the lower floor be remodelled and used as a town hall. Meanwhile the Masonic Fraternity within the city had been growing steadily, meeting like many an infant organization wherever it could, in taverns, private homes, and the like. But, in 1797, the St. John Chapter added a third story to the Market House and used it for Fraternal rooms. Where the clock is now, was a tablet with the Masonic emblems. And in the Market House, on August 23, 1802, Thomas Smith Webb organized Saint John's Encampment Number One, Knights Templars, the oldest Templar organization in the country. Until 1853, the building served as a meeting place for members of this fraternity, and many a conven-

tion was held within its walls, but, in that year, the growing organization was obliged to move to more commodious quarters.

For a while the Providence Fire Department housed an engine on the first floor of the Market House. And so time passed on, bringing changes on every hand. The Great Gale of 1815 whirled its waters about the old building and drove ships up against it. Fires swept the city, and drastic changes came in the transition from commerce to manufacturing. But still the Market House maintained its importance. Its second floor was continually used by the town for public offices, where the Town Council met, and finally the building became the City Hall in 1865, serving in this capacity until the

present City Hall was erected in 1878. The last transfer of occupancy brought the building into the hands of the Board of Trade, in 1880, an organization which has since become the Chamber of Commerce, and which has continued to occupy the building to the present time.

Not without some protests has the building survived in all its historic glory. In 1898 and again in 1906 movements were started to abolish the building in order to widen the square. However, in both instances there were those to whom we may be thankful who would not stand to have traditions so lightly swept aside, and through their championship the time-scarred structure has remained for us to cherish.
