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A Short Sketch of the Redwood Library of Newport Rhode Island

Redwood Library and Athenaeum

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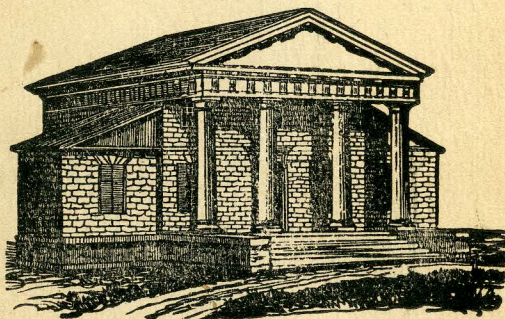
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THE
REDWOOD LIBRARY
AND
ATHENAEUM



NEWPORT, R. I.

A SHORT SKETCH

PRIVATELY PRINTED

1917

A Short Sketch
OF THE
Redwood Library

OF
NEWPORT
RHODE ISLAND



THE MERCURY PUBLISHING COMPANY

1917

HISTORY

The Redwood Library was incorporated in the year 1747. The Articles of Incorporation by the GOVERNOR AND COMPANY OF THE ENGLISH COLONY OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS declare "Whereas Abraham Redwood Esq. hath generously engaged to bestow five hundred pounds sterling, to be laid out in a collection of useful books, suitable for a public library proposed to be erected in Newport the said Governor and Company do give and grant that the said Abraham Redwood, James Honyman, and others be, and are hereby constituted, a body politic incorporate, by the name of the Company of the Redwood Library."

This generous act upon the part of Mr.

Redwood came as the result of conversations held at the meetings of an association "for promoting virtue and knowledge", formed in 1730 at the suggestion, it is believed, of Bishop Berkeley, and continuing to hold weekly meetings under the name of the Philosophical Society until its life was merged into that of the Redwood Library.

The members of this Philosophical Society included the leading men of the colony, governors, judges, men of political, social and professional importance. To their broad vision the need of a public library became apparent, and they set about the task of forming such an institution.

If the first gift of five hundred pounds by Mr. Redwood gave the impetus which started the Library, the second gift, by

Henry Collins, of land on which to erect the building, was no less important, and within one month of the receipt of the charter, the committee was appointed to collect funds for the building. The beautiful structure at the Bellevue Avenue end of the present series of buildings was the result.

In these days of light and frivolous reading, it is interesting to recall the seriousness with which the first governors of the Library entered upon the work, as evidenced by the books which were purchased with the five hundred pounds presented by Mr. Redwood. These contained over thirteen hundred volumes, of which about three hundred were theological, and the rest either historical, classical or scientific. One looks in vain through the list for anything in the nature of fiction.

Occasionally a book of fables is discovered, a few volumes of poems, and a number of dictionaries and books of reference.

What modern readers would have done with such a collection may be imagined from the statement that of the seventeen thousand volumes taken from the Library last year, over ten thousand were works of fiction. It is certain that the readers of those days were comparatively few, that life was serious and earnest, and that the Library met the want of the time.

It may be safely affirmed that from the very first this Library has exerted upon the people of Newport an influence toward better literature and higher thinking, for the figures of circulation of today show a more serious purpose in the readers of our books than can be found in most of the libraries throughout the country.

An important event in the history of the Library was the coming to Newport in 1755 of Ezra Stiles, drawn to accept the call to the Second Congregational Church, as he says, largely by "an agreeable town and the Redwood Library." Within a year of his settlement, he became the librarian, a position much of a sinecure, which he accepted in order that he might have always the key of the building, and be able to pass as many hours in the perusal of its books as he desired. Almost always, he informs us, was he entirely alone among its treasures.

His importance to the Library is proved by the fact that through his efforts many valuable books were obtained as gifts from Europe, as well as from this country, and he left it in a very flourishing condition and carefully arranged.

December 8, 1776, the British Army landed at Long Wharf, and took possession of the city. A large number, about three-quarters of its inhabitants, including Rev. Ezra Stiles, fled from the town. The British officers proceeded to make of the Redwood Library a club room, and were so reckless in their treatment of its contents that when, after an occupation of three years, they withdrew their forces from the city, there remained about one-half the number of books which the Library contained at their arrival.

Whether a later king of England was prompted to repair this injury done by his countrymen, or whether the promptings were simply those of a generous spirit, certain it is that King William, in 1835, made to the Library a generous donation of books, amounting to eighty-four volumes,

of which seventy-two are large folios. Not all the books being printed at the time of his death, the gift was completed by Queen Victoria.

After the Revolution till the beginning of the XIX century, as in the town itself; so in the Library, everything was in confusion, people were discouraged, and few efforts made at restoration.

At this time an interesting event in the history of the Library occurred, when on September 11, 1780, the General Assembly of the State came to Newport, after an absence of four years, and finding the State House much dilapidated, having been used as an hospital by the British, they convened in the Redwood Library building, which during that session became the capitol of the state.

The condition of the Library during

these sad years is well illustrated by the following advertisement which appeared in the Newport Herald on the 9th of September, 1790 :

“The key of the Library being missing, supposed to be lent by the former librarian, the person who has it in his possession is earnestly requested to deliver it to Mr. Stephen Ayrault, one of the directors.”

Another advertisement, printed in the Newport Mercury the 27th of September, 1801, is the first sign of an attempt to restore the Library to usefulness.

“The long neglect of this institution by the proprietors may possibly have furnished an excuse for neglecting to return the books, so that a large portion of them have in one way or another got upon the shelves of individuals in different quarters of the town.”

The spirit which prompted this advertisement in the paper also caused a new movement in the Library itself; affairs were re-organized, new members taken in, a catalogue of the books made, and gradually the interest in the institution became widespread.

From that time until the present, with varying degrees of energy, the directors have advanced the work of the Library. All the prominent residents of Newport, as well as members of the summer colony, have from time to time taken an interest in the prosperity of the institution, and it has gradually, though not steadily, increased, until today it occupies a prominent position among the proprietary libraries of the country.

THE BUILDINGS

Not the least interesting part of the Redwood Library is the history of its buildings.

The original portion, erected in 1750, included the much admired front room. This was designed by Peter Harrison, one of the few trained architects who came to the colonies in the XVIII century. The building is an imitation of a Roman temple of the Doric order, the pediment of the front supported by four columns of graceful form. The result is one of the finest examples in the country of the classical style of architecture. The details of the woodwork are exceedingly interesting, while at the rear of the room, as he erected it, was a window of three parts, gracefully arched, and enriched with columns of the

Roman Ionic character, which is now to be seen on the north end of the second building or reading room.

This first building for over a century served the purposes of the Library, but in 1858 it was found necessary to add to it that which is now used as the reading room. The architect of this addition was George Snell of Boston, who sought to carry out the idea suggested in the first building.

In 1875 the Library was further increased by the erection of the large addition now used for a delivery room, which was designed by Mr. George C. Mason of Newport.

All these buildings were erected by popular subscription.

In 1913, through a legacy of Mrs. Gardiner Blanchard Perry, the directors were

enabled to erect the fourth building, a fire-proof stackroom.

In each of these additions, an effort has been made to harmonize the architecture with the original building of Peter Harrison, but naturally none has equalled that in proportion and decoration.

THE NAME

Until the year 1833 the organization was known as "The Company of the Redwood Library," though the directors had not confined the work of the institution simply to that of a library. There had been gathered a considerable number of works of art, so that the materials for quite a respectable museum had accumulated, and in that year, at the meeting of the Company, it was unanimously voted "that the President and Directors be directed to make application in behalf of the Company to the General Assembly at the October session for an act authorizing a change in the corporate name of the institution." This change was at that time accordingly made, and ever since the association has been

known as "The Company of the Redwood Library and Athenæum."

This name implies the enlarged scope of the purposes of the institution, in accordance with which there has been continually increasing attention paid to the development of the artistic and historical features always appropriately associated with the Library. Those who visit its rooms today can not fail to appreciate the elevating and inspiring influence exerted by its remarkable collection of paintings and statuary.

Portraits by Stuart, Sully, Sir Thomas Lawrence, Charles B. King and others, representing almost all the notable men and women in Newport's history, as well as the leading figures in our national life, from Washington down; and many poets and writers. Visitors also are interested in the remarkable collection of marble statues of

Michel Angelo, Raphael, Demosthenes,
Socrates, Voltaire, Milton, and many
modern men of eminence.

PRESENT CONDITION AND PROSPECTS

The condition of the Library is in many ways most encouraging. There are at present over sixty-three thousand books upon the shelves, and a large number of pamphlets, maps, manuscripts and photographs. These are increasing rapidly, there being considerable funds for the purchase of books, which are being liberally and we believe wisely expended. And should we be so fortunate as to secure a considerable endowment to meet the running expenses, there is no reason why the future of this institution, growing rapidly as it is year by year, should not vastly exceed the past in the extent and the quality of the influence which it exerts upon

the community, permanent and transient. To this end the directors are desirous of exerting every effort, and trust that their ambition may be appreciated and aided by all the share holders.

FORMER PRESIDENTS
OF THE
REDWOOD LIBRARY AND ATHENÆUM

ABRAHAM REDWOOD	from 1747 to 1788
HENRY MARCHANT	“ 1791 “ 1797
WILLIAM VERNON	“ 1797 “ 1801
JOHN BOURS	“ 1801 “ 1809
JONATHAN EASTON	“ 1809 “ 1813
ROBERT STEVENS	“ 1813 “ 1830
DAVID KING	“ 1830 “ 1836
AUDLEY CLARKE	“ 1836 “ 1844
GEORGE G. KING	“ 1844 “ 1846
WILLIAM HUNTER	“ 1846 “ 1849
DAVID KING	“ 1849 “ 1859
GEORGE G. KING	“ 1859 “ 1870
WILLIAM COZZENS	“ 1870 “ 1872
HENRY LEDYARD	“ 1872 “ 1874
EDWARD KING	“ 1874 “ 1875
FRANCIS BRINLEY	“ 1875 “ 1882
JAMES E. MAURAN	“ 1882 “ 1883
HENRY E. TURNER	“ 1883 “ 1886
LEROY KING	“ 1886 “ 1895
HENRY G. MARQUAND	“ 1895 “ 1902
ARTHUR B. EMMONS	“ 1902 “ 1909
DANIEL B. FEARING	“ 1909 “ 1913
J. FRED PIERSON	“ 1913 “ 1916

PRESENT OFFICERS
OF THE INSTITUTION

President

RODERICK TERRY

Vice-President

J. FRED PIERSON

Directors

DARIUS BAKER

MRS. HAROLD BROWN

WILLIAM P. BUFFUM

FRENCH E. CHADWICK

DANIEL B. FEARING

MRS. CHARLES C. GARDNER

HENRY BARTON JACOBS

ARTHUR CURTISS JAMES

THOMAS P. PECKHAM

WILLIAM P. SHEFFIELD

WILLIAM S. SHERMAN

HORATIO R. STORER

ELIZABETH H. SWINBURNE

HAMILTON B. TOMPKINS

JAMES LAURENS VAN ALEN

JOSEPH H. WILLARD

Secretary

ALFRED G. LANGLEY

Treasurer

EDWARD A. SHERMAN

Librarian

GEORGE L. HINCKLEY

Assistants

ADA E. GOSLING

KATHERINE C. FRIEND

Cataloguer

SADIE ST. CLAIR