

*The Early Records of the Town of Providence*, Vols. I-IV, printed under authority of the City Council of Providence by HORATIO ROGERS, GEORGE MOULTON CARPENTER and EDWARD FIELD. Providence, 1892-93.

The printing in an accurate and scholarly fashion of the records of so important a town as Providence is an event of sufficient prominence to call for a special mention. Of all the New England States, Massachusetts has been the only one to pay any attention to her local records, and this is the first instance outside of that State where a systematic attempt has been made to perpetuate in print this valuable material. This is the more unfortunate in that in consequence of this lack of material the study of New England town life has been confined largely to the evidence which these printed Massachusetts records have furnished. Theories of municipal origin and development have been based on this foundation alone, and have been for this reason incomplete and unsatisfactory. The records of the New Haven and Connecticut towns still remain in manuscript and are unavailable except to the local student and the antiquarian.

Now, however, Rhode Island has given to the public the most important of her local material, the first, second and third books of the town of Providence, in four admirably printed volumes, on heavy paper and in serviceable binding. To the City Council of Providence, who authorized the publishing of the volumes, and to the Record Commissioners, to whose charge the work was entrusted, every praise is due for their public spirit, zeal and efficient management. The thoroughness of the work of the commissioners can best be appreciated from the following statement:

"The following method has been pursued in making this copy: In the first place, a careful copy of the original was made under the careful direction of the commissioners. They then personally compared this copy, letter by letter, with the original, and, at the same time, with the transcript of 1800, for the double purpose of assisting in the interpretation of doubtful words and also of supplying letters or words, which are wanting or illegible in the original. The copy thus produced being sent to the printer, the commissioners have personally read all the proofs, comparing every letter therein with the original and also with the copy previously prepared by them, and, in every case, receiving and reading revises, until a proof sheet was received in which such vigilance as they were able to exercise could detect no error."

In the subject-matter thus carefully printed, the student intimate with other town records will notice many familiar topics, furnishing admirable comparative material, and at the same time some less

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familiar, indicating the peculiar circumstances of the settlement of Providence and the different character of her people. Land-regulation is everywhere prominent: its division, distribution, extension, alienation and exchange. These volumes are full of this agrarian activity, as are all other volumes of New England town records, and yet with the single exception of Eggleston's monograph scarcely any scientific investigation of the land system has been made. It is certainly just as much a subject for scholarly examination as are the political conditions, the town meetings and the like.

Providence shows a custom, rare in the Colonies, of a constant interchange of land. Land in the plain was exchanged on equal terms with land at the upper end of the valley. A share of meadow was exchanged for two ponds and a parcel of hill-land. Two shares of meadow were exchanged for ten acres of upland. Sometimes two persons exchanged land with each other. This at first was done without charge at the request of the landowner under the supervision of the town, but later a payment was made called "change money." Such a system must have greatly complicated the land records, for it would seem as if the greater portion of the inhabitants exercised this privilege of exchange. The records offer excellent opportunities also for the study of the "purchase right," the powers and qualifications of proprietors, the practice of commoning and its limitations, the election of officers, the contents of wills, the forms of manumissions, deeds, conveyances, the value of fees, rents, etc. An occasional record of published banns may be noticed, and a more frequent record of civil marriage. Even after the union (1647) Providence occasionally called her "orders" "laws," and we get important glimpses of her relation to the central government in the careful watch which she kept upon expenditures. (Cf. iii, pp. 164-165, 240.) Providence started, as did Guilford, Milford, Southampton and Branford, as an independent self-centred community, a town-state.

It is a wish, though without promise of fulfillment, that other Rhode Island and Connecticut towns would follow the example which Providence has set. We can hardly expect small country towns to appropriate one thousand dollars, or even a part of this sum, for such a purpose, but large cities, such as Hartford and New Haven, can well afford to do it, and it is a disgrace to them that they do not. Braintree, Dorchester, Salem, Groton, Boston and now Providence have set them an example which they would do well to follow.

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