



The Old Brick School House (1769)



Robert A. Kesack, *intern*
The Providence Preservation Society
19 March 2013

Completed in 1769, The Old Brick School House, a small but dignified building, built by John Smith, with carpentry work finished by Jonathan Hammon¹, embodies a special kind of significance in the history of Providence. It is a direct, simple two-story timber-framed brick building in the Georgian style.² The house is rectangular in form and the fabric of its foundation is comprised entirely of rough stone. The entrance to the School House faces south onto Meeting Street, formerly named Gaol Lane.³ The history of the School House and its very existence today is a representation of the struggles fought and faced by many courageous colonial citizens to create a new public school structure within a delicately new and increasingly independent society.

Originally, the School House was born out of a growing awareness, shared by these noble inhabitants, of the then small town of Providence, for the necessity to establish a fixed and permanent location for public education. Prior to the completion of the School House, it was common for many of the town's children to receive their education either by means of home schooling, private institutions, or through apprenticeships and other such field work⁴. There were perhaps but a few other known school houses in the town before the construction of the building at 24 Meeting Street, all of which were private and likely built of wood.⁵

During the 1760s, an attempt was made to establish a proper school system in Providence. This effort appeared doomed until 1765 when a committee of men, was authorized, on behalf of the town, to acquire land reserved specifically for the construction of a new school house. Ultimately, in February of that same year, after some difficulties⁶, the land chosen by the committee to erect this new school house was the site of the former Colony House, which had been tragically destroyed by a fire⁷, on Christmas Eve, some eight years earlier⁸. Prior to the Colony House, ownership of the lot can be traced back to Captain William Page⁹, whose parents were both descendant of Mayflower Pilgrims.¹⁰



Rev. James Manning.

The Brick School House is a direct product of an earlier proposal, first advocated on December 2, 1767¹¹, supported by Rev. James Manning (President of Rhode Island College, since renamed Brown University) and his contemporaries, to build four separate school structures throughout the ever growing town. The proposal suggested the construction of three one-story buildings reserved for children and a fourth explicitly reserved for youth. According to Moses Brown, that original plan was rejected by “the POORER sort of the people” largely due to the burden of proposed taxes which would have been necessary to support such a scheme. Approval was eventually granted, in February of the following year, to build one structure as opposed to four (the structure which now resides on Meeting Street).¹²

It was also resolved at this February meeting, in accordance with a projected period of completion and available funds¹³, that the School House be made of brick and should be “thirty feet by forty, and two stories high”¹⁴. Concurrently, it was voted by the committee that proceeds stemmed from a

1. Thomas B. Stockwell, *A History of Public Education in Rhode Island from 1636 to 1876* (Providence: Providence Press Company, 1876), 139.

2. Well-known tradesmen of the time, Smith and Hammon have left their architectural imprint on many of the City's colonial-era structures. Hammon is best known for his work on the 1792 rebuild of the Weybosset Bridge and an earlier draught rendered for the construction of the First Baptist Church.³

3. John Hutchins Cady, *The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence* (Providence; Akerman Standard Press, 1957), 43.

4. Osmund R. Overby, “Brick School House, 24 Meeting Street, Providence, RI,” Historic American Buildings Survey Report [HABS No. RI-191] (Washington, DC: US Department of the Interior, National Park Service, February 1962).

5. William Read Staples, *Annals of the Town of Providence, From its First Settlement, to the Organization of the City Government, in June 1832* (Providence: Knowles and Vose, 1843), 503.

6. *Ibid*, 501-502.

7. Overby, “Brick School House, 24 Meeting Street, Providence, RI,”.

8. Staples, *Annals of the Town of Providence*, 192.

9. *Ibid*, 191.

10. John E. Soule, Milton E. Terry, *George Soule of the Mayflower and His Descendants for Four Generations* (Plymouth: General Society of Mayflower Descendants, 1992).

11. Staples, *Annals of the Town of Providence*, 501.

12. Staples, *Annals of the Town of Providence*, 500-501.

13. *Providence Town Papers* MSS:214, SG:1, s1, v. 7, 404, Jan. 1768.

14. Barnard, *Report and Documents Relating to the Public Schools of Rhode Island for 1848* (General Assembly of the City of Providence, 1848), 36.

previous sale of town land were to be applied to the project “so far as they would go”¹⁵ if, in addition, individual subscribers, collectively referenced as the Proprietors in the Town School House (*see Appendix A for a complete list of Proprietors*) would contribute what remained to ensure the school’s completion, resulting in what became the joint ownership of the School House.¹⁶

Initially, a free school was maintained by the town on the first floor while a private school was managed by the Proprietors on the second floor. Masters were regularly appointed by the town to keep school in their portion of the house while, on the upper story, the Proprietors held a school of their own. The town’s masters developed and enforced rules and regulations which served to benefit both schools¹⁷.

Stephen Hopkins, Jabez Brown, and Moses Brown were members of the earliest committee responsible for the crafting of the school’s first regulations. Under these new regulations, a teacher’s discipline was to be “strict, though not passionate” and students were to be taught to read “twice in the forenoon and twice in the afternoon.” It was also expected that pupils be educated “in accenting, pronouncing and proper understanding of the English tongue.” Additionally, teachers were obligated “to devote a suitable portion of laudable emulation to excel in the respective branches of learning” and “range the scholars in proper classes according to their several attainments, weekly, monthly or quarterly.” The use of scripture was quite prominent and heavily relied upon to perfect “moral training” of their subjects.¹⁸



Stephen Hopkins



Moses Brown



College Edifice

From the dawn of its completion, the School House sat vacant, for many months, before a Latin School was installed at the site and operated, until 1771, in conjunction with Rhode Island College, after its move from Warren, RI. It is understood that the students would conduct their recitations and prayers¹⁹ on the second floor. The students of the Latin School moved to their new location, the so-called College Edifice (later named University Hall), upon its completion in November 1771.²⁰ Several years after, in 1785, the town realized the disadvantages of joint ownership in the Brick School House and eventually purchased the building outright, in 1800, when plans for a free school system had been ratified by the Rhode Island Senate.²¹

During the Revolution, The School House was temporarily occupied by the Providence committee in charge of the Patriotic Movement²² and was converted into an arsenal for the storage of munitions²³ and as a laboratory where cartridges were manufactured.²⁴ The School House functioned this way for several years, from December 1776 through August of 1784.²⁵

Even in the face the building’s wartime functions, it is commonly believed that it may still have operated as a school. As several sources do so cite, students and faculty of Rhode Island College were physically displaced when college exercises were suspended in 1776, after the landing of the British in Newport, until approximately

15. *Ibid*, 36.

16. Barnard, *Report and Documents Relating to the Public Schools of Rhode Island for 1848*, 36.

17. *Ibid*, 37.

18. Stockwell, *A History of Public Education in Rhode Island from 1636 to 1876*, 139.

19. Reuben A. Guild, LL.D., “Brown University.” *The New England Magazine and Bay State Monthly* (January 1886): 8.

20. Gertrude Selwyn Kimball, *Providence in Colonial Times* (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912), 351.

21. Barnard, *Report and Documents Relating to the Public Schools of Rhode Island for 1848*, 39-40.

22. Michael Vincent O’Shea, *The Nation’s Schools*, vol. 9 (1928).

23. Workers of the Federal Writer’s Project of the Works Progress Administration, *Rhode Island: A Guide to the Smallest State* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1937), 266.

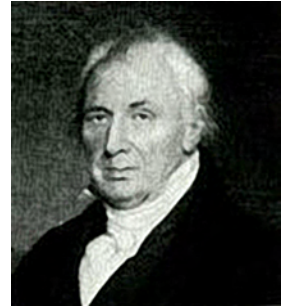
24. Overby, “Brick School House, 24 Meeting Street, Providence, RI,”.

25. Samuel Greene Arnold, *History of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations 1701-1790*, vol. II (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1874), 364.

1782, while their own University Hall was inhabited by troops for use as a barracks and hospital.²⁶ For this reason, it has often been speculated that university students may have retained a minor presence in the School House during that time, although it seems highly unlikely as there is no known documentation to support this theory.

After the Revolution, in 1786, the college's University Grammar School was documented as having been moved, in its entirety, to the Brick School House.²⁷ In February of the same year, it was recommended to and subsequently approved by Edward Chinn Esq., the person appointed to settle the accounts between the United States and Rhode Island, that funds be granted and allocated towards the repair of damages done to The Brick School House during the Revolution.²⁸ Then, from 1787 through 1788, more repair work and improvements followed on the building's second-story, including the whitewashing of several interior walls²⁹ and repairs of the damage done to the west chamber resultant from its prior conversion as a munitions laboratory.^{30 31 32 33}

Despite the fact that Providence and Rhode Island, as a whole, proudly boasted the presence of the college (renamed Brown University in 1796), there still lacked, at that time, any respectable or comprehensive system for educating the community's youth. It was only through some highly persuasive articles and several petitions to the General Assembly of Rhode Island, that a respected man named John Howland was able to spearhead a new venture to finally establish a legitimate and free public school system. The Brick School House at 24 Meeting Street was one of the first such free institutions opened to the public. The pursuit of establishing a system to support free education for Rhode Islanders was quite progressive for the time. Because of this, many consider Mr. Howland as having been the "father of public school in America."³⁴



John Howland

Finally in 1800, the establishing of a more complete and functional public school system had commenced. As formerly desired, either written or discussed as part of a number of previous proposals, each iteration of which imagined more thorough and different, a four-school, four-district plan was enacted. The City of Providence, in order to save on expenses, decided to acquire two already existing school houses and would then erect two more. The Brick School House was among the two houses purchased by the City for this purpose and represented the Second School District. In total, \$892.50 was paid to the Proprietors collectively.³⁵

From that point on, The Brick School House served various educational functions. For a good part of the early half of the 19th century, the building was purposed as a school for black children. In fact, in 1828, "the first separate school for pupils of color was established in the 'Old Brick School House'." Some eight years later, attendance at what was then known as the Meeting Street Grammar School had rapidly declined. A committee was formed and charged with the duty of investigating the cause of this waning trend in attendance. In their report, the committee noted that at the start of the colored grammar school, roughly one-hundred pupils were enrolled and that number had significantly decreased to merely twenty-five in 1836. The cause, it was believed, had to do with "an unhappy prejudice" against the instructor.³⁶

The building was enlarged in 1850. After 1865, it housed a cooking school and in 1908 the upper floor was converted into a fresh air school for tubercular children, the first such school in America. This is when

26. Ibid, 364.

27. Reuben Aldridge Guild, "Chapter II. 1764-1769" in *Life, Times, and Correspondence of James Manning, and the Early History of Brown University*. Reuben Aldridge Guild (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1864), 63-87.

28. John Russell Bartlett, *Index to the Printed Acts and Resolves of, and the Petitions and reports to the General Assembly of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations from the Year 1758 to 1850* (Providence: Knowles, Anthony, & Co., 1856), 267.

29. *Providence Town Papers* MSS:214, SG:1, s1, v. 13, 5409, Nov. 23, 1787.

30. *Providence Town Papers* MSS:214, SG:1, s1, v. 13, 5411, Nov. 1787.

31. *Providence Town Papers* MSS:214, SG:1, s1, v. 13, 5403, Dec. 28, 1787.

32. *Providence Town Papers* MSS:214, SG:1, s1, v. 11, 4765, Mar. 24, 1788.

33. *Providence Town Papers* MSS:214, SG:1, s1, v. 13, 5404, Apr. 5, 1788.

34. Florence P. Simister. "The Old Brick School House," *The Providence Preservation Society Newsletter*, vol. 4, iss. 2 (February 1965): 1.

35. Stockwell, *A History of Public Education in Rhode Island from 1636 to 1876*, 200.

36. School Committee of the City of Providence, *Report of the School Committee for the Year 1899-1900* (Providence: Snow & Farnum, 1901), 131.

one of the more significant changes to the façade of the school was made - the replacement of large windows where more traditional ones had previously existed.³⁷ To accommodate the installation of this new “wall of windows”, bricks from the south wall had to be removed. The windows were elaborate in both their construction and operation. They were “hinged at the top and capable of being raised against the ceiling by means of cords and pulleys”. The windows were always left open, except during the poorest of weather such as heavy snow and rain.³⁸



Hinged Windows



Tubercular Students

The curriculum taught at the fresh-air school mirrored that which was taught to all other city students. Albeit, the program was a much lighter one, as far as workload, and students were given individual instruction. Students at the school were graded not only academically but physically as well. They were examined and weighed once a week by a physician and nurse, the idea being to monitor the students' for glandular swelling and chest expansion, as well as to test the hemoglobin counts in their blood.³⁹

During the days when the fresh air school was in session upstairs, an eye and ear clinic was open on the lower level. Nearly half a decade later, the house became the home of the School for Crippled Children and Adults of Rhode Island.⁴⁰ From 1946 to 1957, the building functioned as the home of The Meeting Street School, an institution for the care and education of children of all aptitudes, with a particular focus on those with developmental disabilities. Increasing demand made it necessary for the school to relocate to a larger facility.⁴¹ Then, in October of 1960, the Providence City Property Committee turned over the building to The Providence Preservation Society, who leased the space for decades, at a rate of one dollar per year⁴², until its recent acquisition funded by a substantial grant, in the amount of \$341,500, awarded by The Champlin Foundations in December of 2012⁴³. In 1972, the School House was officially added to The National Register of Historic Places⁴⁴.

When the building was first occupied by the Providence Preservation Society, it underwent several restorative changes. A fireplace at the west end of the second floor was reopened and the large windows installed during the era of the school for tubercular children were replaced with windows that more accurately reflected the original 18th century appearance. Among some of the other more notable corrections and changes made to the building were the fitting of all windows with 12 over 12 sash and paneled shutters.⁴⁵



*Exterior School House
(Post Restoration)*

Further work done on the interior included restoration of the finish to the wooden beams and trim which upon assessment were discovered to have been

37. Overby, “Brick School House, 24 Meeting Street, Providence, RI.”

38. Richard A. Meckel, “Combating Tuberculosis in Schoolchildren: Providence’s Open-Air Schools,” *Rhode Island History: A Rhode Island Historical Society Publication*, vol.53, no. 3 (Providence: RIHS, 1995), 91-92.

39. Meckel, “Combating Tuberculosis in Schoolchildren: Providence’s Open-Air Schools,” *Rhode Island History: A Rhode Island Historical Society Publication* 92-93.

40. Overby, “Brick School House, 24 Meeting Street, Providence, RI.”

41. Meeting Street, “Our History,” <http://www.meetingstreet.org/AboutMeetingStreet/OurHistory/tabid/152/Default.aspx> (accessed March 19, 2013).

42. Orlando B. Potter, “A New Role for an Old Building,” *The Providence Preservation Society Newsletter*, vol.I, no. 1 (February 1960): 5-7.

43. Paul Wacrow, “Grant From the Champlin Foundations Secures the Future of Historic 1769 Brick School House,” *Welcome to the Providence Preservation Society* (March 18, 2013). www.ppsri.org.

44. National Park Service, *National Register of Historic Places, 1966 to 1994: Cumulative List Through January 1, 1994* (Washington D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1994), 725.

45. “Restoration at 24 Meeting Street,” *The Providence Preservation Society Newsletter*, vol. VI, no. 1 (February 1967): 3.

originally coated with a varnish glaze of a dark brown tint. The finish was painstakingly reproduced and carefully reapplied to the woodwork, although it has since been painted over. Modernization in the way of updated electrical work and the installation of baseboard heating upstairs also took place⁴⁶.



*Interior School House
(Post Restoration)*



Restored Fireplace, first floor.

Then in the summer of 1971, a new type of shop run by PPS was opened in the School House. It was the brain-child of Mrs. John Gwynn, chairman of the Society's Consultant Bureau. It was not a typical gift shop.⁴⁷ Merchandise offered at the shop included an "unusual assortment of reproduction Providenciana objects." Local artisans were encouraged to provide unique items which reflected and honored the city.⁴⁸ For some time, the shop even offered reproduction period-sensitive furniture.⁴⁹ The shop was short-lived, however, as the return on sales were not as high as initially anticipated. The project was transformed into a seasonal offering only, until that venture also was deemed unsustainable sometime in 1976.⁵⁰ The Preservation Society chose to relocate to the John Carter House (known as "Shakespeare's Head") in 1986⁵¹. The Providence Revolving Fund remained in the Brick School House until 2008. Since PPS moved their headquarters to Shakespeare's Head, the second floor of the School House has functioned as the organization's meeting space and lecture hall, after renovations in the 1990s made that possible.⁵²

For more than two centuries, The Old Brick School House has housed various institutions, all of which were committed to promoting educational values within a free society. Through the efforts of The Providence Preservation Society, the School House has been carefully restored and retains the same sense of simple, open space which originally characterized the learning environment in the 18th and 19th centuries. Although it stands somewhat crowded by current neighbors, the Old Brick School House still makes a significant statement about the democratic and civic ideals of 18th Century Providence. While the building very closely resembles its original appearance, restoration work is currently being planned to bring the structure even closer to its original glory and accommodate adaptations to be made for its continued future use as a meeting and educational site for The Providence Preservation Society; upon completion of all construction, the building will once again function as the organization's headquarters.

46. "Restoration at 24 Meeting Street," *The Providence Preservation Society Newsletter*, 3.

47. "PPS Shop," *The Providence Preservation Society Newsletter*, vol. X, no. 1 (April 1971): 4.

48. "Shop Opens Doors," *The Providence Preservation Society Newsletter*, vol. X, no. 2 (June 1971): 4.

49. "PPS Shop," *The Providence Preservation Society Newsletter*, 4.

50. Frank Mauran III, "President's Report," *The Providence Preservation Society Newsletter*, vol. XVI, (May 1976): 5.

51. "Shakespeare's Head," *PPS News*, vol. XXIV, no. 2 (March-April 1986): 8.

52. "PPS Buildings Get Facelifts," *PPS News*, vol. XXXII, no. 4 (June 1995): 7.

Works Cited

- Providence Town Papers MSS:214, SG:1, s1, v. 7, 404.* Providence, January 1768.
- Providence Town Papers MSS:214, SG:1, s1, v. 13, 5409.* Providence, November 23, 1787.
- Providence Town Papers MSS:214, SG:1, s1, v. 13, 5411.* Providence, November 1787.
- Providence Town Papers MSS:214, SG:1, s1, v. 13, 5403.* Providence, December 28, 1787.
- Providence Town Papers MSS:214, SG:1, s1, v. 11, 4765.* Providence, March 24, 1788.
- Providence Town Papers MSS:214, SG:1, s1, v. 13, 5404.* Providence, April 5, 1788.
- Arnold, Samuel Greene. *History of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*. Vol. II. 2 vols. New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1874.
- Barnard, Henry. *Report and Documents Relating to the Public Schools of Rhode Island for 1848*. Providence: Published by order of the General Assembly, 1849.
- Bartlett, John Russell. *Index to the printed Acts and Resolves of, and the Petitions and Reports to the General Assembly of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*. Providence: Kownles, Anthony, & Co., 1856.
- Cady, John Hutchins. *The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence*. Providence, Rhode Island: Akerman Standard Press, 1957.
- Guild, LL.D., Reuben A. "Brown University." *The New England Magazine and Bay State Monthly*, January 1886: 8.
- Guild, Reuben Aldridge. *Life, times, and correspondence of James Manning, and the early history of Brown University*. Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1864.
- Isham, Norman M. *The Meeting House of the First Baptist Church in Providence: A History of Fabric*. Providence: The Akerman-Standard Company, 1925.
- Kimball, Gertrude Selwyn. *Providence in colonial times*. Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1912.
- Mauran III, Frank. "President's Report." *The Providence Preservation Society Newsletter*, May 1976: 5.
- Meckel, Richard A. "Combating Tuberculosis in Schoolchildren: Providence's Open-Air Schools." *Rhode Island History: A Rhode Island Historical Society publication*, August 1995.
- National Park Service. *National Register of Historic Places, 1966 to 1994: Cumulative List Through January 1, 1994*. Washington D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1994.
- O'Shea, Michael Vincent. *The Nation's Schools*. Vol. 9. McGraw Hill, 1932.
- Our History*. n.d. <http://www.meetingstreet.org/AboutMeetingStreet/OurHistory/tabid/152/Default.aspx> (accessed March 19, 2013).
- Overby, Osmund R. "Brick School House, 24 Meeting Street, Providence, RI,". Historic American Buildings Survey Report, (HABS No. RI-191). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, 1962.
- Potter, Orlando B. "A New Role for an Old Building." *The Providence Preservation Society Newsletter*, February 1960: 5-7.
- PPS News*. "PPS Buildings Get Facelifts." June 1995: 7.
- PPS News*. "Shakespeare's Head." March-April 1986: 8.

- School Committee of the City of Providence. *Report of the School Committee for the Year 1899-1900*. Providence: Snow & Farnham, 1901.
- Simister, Florence P. "The Old Brick School House." *The Providence Preservation Society Newsletter*, February 1965: 4.
- Soule, John E. *George Soule of the Mayflower and His Descendants for Four Generations*. Plymouth: General Society of Mayflower Descendants, 1992.
- Staples, William Read. *Annals of the Town of Providence, From Its First Settlement, to the Organization of the City Government, in June, 1832*. Providence, Rhode Island: Knowles and Vose, 1843.
- Stockwell, Thomas B. *A History of Public Education in Rhode Island from 1636 to 1876*. Providence: Providence Press Company, 1876.
- The Providence Preservation Society Newsletter*. "PPS Shop." April 1971: 4.
- The Providence Preservation Society Newsletter*. "Restoration at 24 Meeting Street." February 1967: 4.
- The Providence Preservation Society Newsletter*. "Shop Opens Doors." June 1971: 4.
- Wackrow, Paul. *Welcome to the Providence Preservation Society*. Highchair Dedsignhaus. 2013. www.ppsri.org (accessed March 19, 2013).
- Worker's of the Federal Writer's Project of the Works Progress Administration. *Rhode Island: A Guide to the Smallest State*. Cambridge: The Riverside Press, n.d.

Appendix A.
Proprietors in the Town School House

John Updike,
Thomas Greene,
Nichola Brown,
Ambrose Page,
Joseph Russell,
James Sabin,
Solomon Drowne,
William Smith,
Richard Olney,
Caleb Greene,
Noah Mason,
Hayward Smith,
James Lovett,
Joseph Carver,
Daniel Jackson,
Caleb Harris,
Nicholas Cooke,
Nathaniel Wheaton,
Henry Sterling,
George Hopkins,
Moses Brown,
Joseph Brown,
Jabez Brown,

Nathan Angell,
John Jenckes,
Benjamin Cushing,
John Brown,
George Corlis,
Nathan Jacobs,
John Smith,
Knight Dexter,
Charles Keen,
John Waterman,
John Peck,
Zephaniah Andrews,
Jonathan Hammon,
Elijah Bacon,
Benjamin Bowen,
Joseph Tillinghast,
Samuel Nightingale, Jr.,
Bernard Eddy,
Joseph Whipple,
Gideon Crawford,
Abraham Whipple,
Jonathan Ellis,
Elihu Robinson.