

A New Role for an Old Building

THE OLD BRICK SCHOOLHOUSE at 24 Meeting Street, acquired last fall as the new headquarters of the Preservation Society, is uniquely suited by history and tradition for its new role. Its story is the story of Providence since late colonial times, and the span of its history encompasses that of most of the historic structures which the Society now is so interested in seeing preserved.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the history of the building is the very fact that it was built in the first place, or that, having been built, it has endured through nearly two centuries until 1960. Most historians give the impression that Rhode Island's early residents were downright niggardly when it came to supporting a public school system, or building a schoolhouse.

Apart from the little commonwealth's long and admirable tradition of separation of church and state — which consequently reduced the influence of academic-minded churchmen in public affairs — it is plain that the pressure of immediate events conspired to put school-building well down the list of public priority. A look at the problems of the 1760's seems to confirm this view, and, at the same time, to enhance our respect for the sturdy little schoolhouse on what was then Gaol Lane.

Fortune was laying a heavy hand on the residents of Providence in the early 1760's, both in the form of natural calamity as well as in the form of man-made, bureaucratic encumbrances. By 1765, the manipulators of power and policy in London had imposed the Sugar Act and the Stamp Act and other equally onerous schemes designed to extract wealth from their colonial subjects. If rumbles of rebellion were not already in the air in Providence, the residents at least must have felt an oppressive pinch when proposals were advanced to collect more taxes.

And pinched they were. In 1758, the County House had burned down, and in 1760 work began, financed partly by public funds, on a new government building to be called the Colony House. (Enlarged in 1851 and 1880, and now known as the Old

State House, the building stands today at the rear of the Brick Schoolhouse.) There were other burdens on the public treasury, too. A new and larger "water engine" was purchased from London in 1760 to prevent further disasters like the County House fire. The highway system of the town was a virtual mess, and in October 1761, Weybosset Bridge was carried away on a high tide, an event which seems to have recurred with discouraging regularity in those days.

We can read with sympathy and understanding — if not with complete approval — then, that the good citizens of Providence rose up with vigor to vote down a rather bold proposal for a new system of free schools in 1767. But almost as an act of contrition, the same town meeting resolved to construct a two-story, brick schoolhouse, 30 by 40 feet, to be financed by public subscription (rather than by a tax levy). Two centuries later, the Providence Preservation Society can be grateful for the town's wise decision to invest in bricks for the construction of the building — indeed, it was the first time they had indulged so lavishly in brick construction for a schoolhouse. Had they specified wood, the building might not have withstood the rigors of nineteen decades of Providence school children.

The site chosen for the new schoolhouse was in the heart of the civic center of 18th century Providence — a fact which makes the structure all the more appropriate to the Preservation Society's use today. Immediately to the north stood the new Colony House, the center of civil government. Across the street, in the Shakespeare's Head which still stands, were located the Post Office, a bookshop and a print shop from which issued the community's first newspaper, the *Providence Gazette and Country Journal*. Completing the group of structures were the Quaker Meeting House and a number of shops and taverns.

Even the public subscriptions which the town meeting had authorized for the construction of the schoolhouse were slow to materialize, but in July 1768, after two failures at raising the quota, sufficient funds

were pledged to start construction. By 1770, the building was in full use. The upper floor, controlled by the subscribers, was occupied by Rhode Island College, the ancestor of Brown University, which had been moved from Warren and was awaiting the completion of permanent quarters. The lower floor, controlled by the town, was occupied by the University Grammar School.

Thus, after a grudging beginning, the Brick Schoolhouse was launched on its long and distinguished career of service to Rhode Island education. The only major interruption seems to have occurred during the Revolutionary War, when the schoolhouse served as a chemical laboratory for the manufacture of explosives for the Continental army. With the restoration of peace, the building resumed its intended role, serving successively as a free school maintained by the town, as a segregated school for colored children, as the Boys' Latin School of Providence and as the city's first fresh air school for delicate children.

Since World War II, the old building has seen what in many ways seems to be its greatest era of public service as the training center of the Rhode Island Society for Crippled Children. In its first decade, the school treated and trained some 800 handicapped children who in an earlier age might have been condemned to lives of hopeless neglect. Last summer, the school, still keeping the name Meeting Street School, moved to more spacious quarters at the Butler Health Center, and in October, the Providence City Property Committee turned the venerable schoolhouse over to the Preservation Society under a \$1-a-year lease.

If the halls of the Brick Schoolhouse no longer echo the voices of school children, they nonetheless shelter a venture highly appropriate to the historic purpose of the building. For the real purpose of an organization like the Providence Preservation Society is nothing less than education in the true sense of the word: education of the public in the unique worth of the city's physical heritage, and education, too, in the most practicable means of preserving that heritage.