

# The New Jersey Historical Society

by Hon. Charles W. Parker

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*Hon. Charles W. Parker*

Address given before the Trenton Historical Society  
on the 11th Anniversary of the Founding of that Society, March 20, 1930.

IT IS A very great pleasure to respond this evening to your kind invitation to address you and give some account of the New Jersey Historical Society. I am interested in that Society both directly and by inheritance. My father was one of its founders as a young man of 27, and my grandfather, James Parker, was a Vice-President, and was President at the time of his death. Trenton, I need not say, is not unfamiliar to me, and, as an officer of the State Society, I am glad to be here to congratulate the Trenton Society on this, its eleventh birthday, to rejoice in its strength and prosperity and to bid it Godspeed in the future. A local society which can start with a membership of sixty-six cannot very well avoid being a success, and a glance at the membership list would settle any doubt on that score. And so, Mr. President and members of the Trenton Historical Society, the New Jersey Society makes its bow to you on your anniversary and wishes you a life without end, and ever increasing success in your chosen work.

As we all know, the New Jersey Historical Society was, like your own, born in Trenton, and owed then and still owes much to Trenton and to Mercer county. The first meeting for organization was held on January 13, 1845, as a blizzard raged outside. Available sources do not disclose the names of those present, but ex-Governor Vroom was made Chairman and the Rev. Eli F. Cooley, Secretary. Both, if I mistake not, were then Trenton men. At the adjourned meeting on February 27, 1845, these Trentonians attended: George Clinton Bush, Rev. Eli F. Cooley, Henry W. Green, Thomas Gordon, Edward Harris, Samuel R. Hamilton and Charles L. Pearson, as well as Richard S. Field from Princeton. There were twelve others from different parts of the State. As time went on, among the Presidents were Richard S. Field, of Princeton, Henry W. Green, of Trenton, the Rev. Dr. Samuel M. Hamill, of Lawrenceville, and General William S. Stryker, of Trenton. Today Chancellor Walker is second Vice-President and, on the present list of members, we find the names of more than twenty-five from Trenton, and some twenty-three from Princeton, two from Lawrenceville, one from Hopewell and one from Hightstown. We should welcome a great many more.

At the beginning it was argued, and with force, that the home of this State Society should be at the State capital, and considerable debate and some parliamentary controversy followed on the subject, resulting, finally, in the choice of Newark, the counter proposition being that a Society of this kind would best serve the public if located in the principal city of the State and close to New York, with which our early history is so intimately connected. The argument is probably stronger today. When we look at other States, we find that there is nothing unusual in locating a State

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Historical Society in a city other than the capital. The New York Historical Society is in New York City; that of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; of Georgia in Savannah; of Delaware in Wilmington; of Louisiana in New Orleans; of Maine in Portland; of Maryland in Baltimore; of Missouri in St. Louis; of Rhode Island in Newport; of Nevada in Reno; of Oregon in Portland; of South Carolina in Charleston; of California in San Francisco; of Washington in Tacoma; of Arizona in Tucson. A number of States have none; a number of others maintain theirs with State funds. It is fair to say that the United States stands about 50-50 on the State capital idea.

I have dwelt somewhat on this matter by way of showing that there is nothing inherently artificial or unnatural about locating a State Historical Society at some place other than the seat of government, but that its objective is probably best attained by locating at a place where it can do the greatest good to the greatest number.

There is another consideration, which appears more vividly in retrospect than in forecast. A Society of this character, especially in its earlier development, is essentially a "one-man power." Its furtherance is a labor of love. There is no income, except from voluntary contributions, and no salaries are paid, except a pittance to an insufficient clerical force. To progress at all, such a Society must have as its *deus ex machina* some one of independent income, industrious habits and enthusiastic interest in its work, who can devote plenty of time to it. This puts out of the running the average business man, and there are few of the well-to-do non-business men who care enough about continuous hard work on a free job to take on the duties of Corresponding Secretary of an Historical Society. Such a man was found at the outset in William A. Whitehead (the father of the late Bishop Whitehead of Pittsburgh), who may well be called the founder of the Society; who was made Corresponding Secretary at its organization in 1845 and so remained until his death in 1884. It was under his supervision and a result of his labor, given without fee or reward for nearly forty years, that the principal volumes of "Collections" of the Society were compiled and published, the "New Jersey Archives" begun and continued, and the quarterly magazine of "Proceedings" conducted. The account of him by his successor, William Nelson, in the Semi-Centennial volume published in 1895, is correct and well worth reading, but too long to read here, though I may note that in the intervals of his routine work he wrote the first volume of the "Collections," entitled "East Jersey Under the Proprietors," published by the Society, and which has ever since been a landmark in the history of that period; compiled and edited the "Papers of Governor Lewis Morris," another publication of the Society; and that he dedicated to it the now rare and valuable book so commonly called "Whitehead's History of Perth Amboy." Many other contributions by him might be mentioned but time forbids. As he married my father's elder sister and they lived on the next block in Newark, I remember him well, and can confirm the excellent description of him by Mr. Nelson in his historical paper prepared for the Semi-Centennial in 1895.

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The earlier activities of the Society seem to have related mainly to the Colonial period; and this was wise, I think, because the shock and reaction of the American Revolution tended toward the subconscious mental position that everything really began with the Battle of Lexington, and that what happened before that was of no consequence. This, as we realize now, was a false and unfortunate point of view, but it was there. As in France, everyone became a "citizen," and a new calendar began with the year "one" (Roman notation by the way), the names and beginnings of the months were changed, and even religion was considered a back number, so in this country at the end of the Revolution the same complex obtained, though in a milder form. It showed itself rather forcibly in legal proceedings. As an illustration, even at the cost of digressing from the subject in hand, let me read this extract from a statute enacted in 1799:<sup>1</sup>

"IV. And be it enacted, That from and after the passing of this act, no statute or act of the parliament of England or of Great Britain shall have force or authority within this state, or be considered as a law thereof."

"V. And be it enacted, That no adjudication, decision or opinion, made, had or given, in any court of law or equity in Great Britain, or any cause therein depending, nor any printed or written report or statement thereof, nor any compilation, commentary, digest, lecture, treatise or other explanation, or exposition of the common law, made, had, given, written or composed, since the fourth day of July, in the year of our Lord, one thousand seven hundred and seventy-six, in Great Britain, shall be received or read in any court of law or equity in this state, as law, or evidence of the law, or elucidation or explanation thereof, any practice, opinion or sentiment of the said courts of justice, used, entertained, or expressed to the contrary notwithstanding."

An illustration of this tendency is the change of a great many place-names, although in fairness it should be said that the changes cannot always be ascribed to the Revolutionary spirit and in some cases are decidedly for the better; for example, in my part of the State Rahway is a better name than "Spanktown" (although the two places were not quite the same), and Bernardsville is better than "Vealtown;" but a good old name like Coffee House might well have remained.

This tendency to regard the Revolution as the beginning of things is reflected in Gordon's "History of New Jersey," published in 1838. Of its 332 pages, 135 relate to events prior to the Revolution, covering, let us say, a century; 13 pages to the period from 1783 to 1789, the adoption of the national Constitution; and, to the seven or eight years of the Revolution itself, 184 pages, or considerably over half the book.

So I revert to the proposition that the Historical Society did well to start with the Colonial period. Its first formal volume, "East Jersey under the Proprietors," has been mentioned. The second, "Life of Lord Stirling," by his grandson, William A. Duer, relates largely to the Colonial period, as Stirling was born in 1726 and served in

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<sup>1</sup> Paterson's Revision, p. 346, Act of June 13, 1799.

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the French and Indian Wars. The third, "Provincial Courts of New Jersey," by Judge Field, is a book of immense value to anyone interested in our legal history. The fourth, "Papers of Governor Lewis Morris," compiled and edited by Mr. Whitehead, covers the period from 1671 to 1746, the latter part of which was a succession of contests between Governors and Legislatures, interspersed by voyages to England and appeals to the Crown. I had to read a paper about Morris a short time ago and found he was a most interesting character, but that New Jersey acquired him as Governor too late in his life to get the benefit of his finer qualities, as he had lost all his teeth and naturally his digestion was impaired.

The fifth volume put out by the Society may properly be called monumental, although it is not appropriate for continuous reading. It is entitled, "An Analytical Index to the Colonial Documents of New Jersey in the State Paper Offices of England, compiled by Henry Stevens. Edited with Notes and References to Printed Works and Manuscripts in other Depositories, by William A. Whitehead." The story of this book appears in the Preface, and can be sketched here only in the barest outline, intensely interesting though it is to people like ourselves. Its beginnings antedate the New Jersey Historical Society itself, and may fairly be said to have somewhat to do with the origin of that Society, for in 1841, under the auspices of the State of New York, a Mr. Brodhead went to Europe to search out documents in the public offices and elsewhere, relating to the Colonial history of that State. Someone interested in the corresponding history of New Jersey, no doubt Mr. Whitehead, who was at least contemplating, if not already at work on, "East Jersey under the Proprietors," saw a wonderful opportunity to obtain matter relative to New Jersey and started a movement to secure a moderate appropriation from the Legislature; and here begins a tale which points one of the most important morals of these remarks. A resolution offered in the Assembly January 31, 1843, was referred to a special committee which incubated for a year, and on January 16, 1844, made a favorable report, about 3,000 words long, recommending an appropriation of \$1,000, which was rejected by the Assembly. In the following January, 1845, Governor Haines recommended favorable action by the new Legislature, but again that body refused to act. In the interim the Society had been organized as an unincorporated association, and at the session of 1846 took charge of the matter. A special committee again reported favorably, this time at a length of about 2,000 words, and again the resolution failed.

At this point the backers of the plan concluded that it would be better to cease their importunities to this group of unsympathetic and uninterested solons, and appointed a committee to raise the necessary funds independent of State aid, although, in 1849 and 1850, futile efforts to coax something out of the State treasury continued to be made. The Legislature took no interest, even to the extent of obtaining copies of its own ancient minutes from the other side, so the futile effort in that direction was abandoned, the promoters of the scheme themselves raised the needed funds, and Mr. Henry Stevens, an honorary member of the Society, then in London, was engaged to

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obtain the desired copies. He did his work promptly and well, and, in the language of the Preface, "The Committee ... had the pleasure on the 11th Sept., 1851, of exhibiting to the Society nine quarto cases covered with blue morocco, and having locks and keys, containing over 1,800 separate cards, each containing an abstract of some paper relating to New Jersey, beautifully engrossed, the cards being arranged chronologically, and each case having the first and last date lettered on the back, the whole forming a manuscript work of great value and unique appearance."

This collection was the occasion of Volume V of the "Collections," if not its backbone. The body of the volume, 469 pages, is a list in chronological order of historical documents running over 150 years, from 1649 to 1799, not only those in possession of the Society but those in private collections, in State archives, in other Historical Societies, and so on. The work is really monumental, and of inestimable value to the historian bent on original investigation. The Legislature relented to the extent of subscribing \$500 to the completed work, and there has also been a moderate appropriation from time to time to cover the expense, in whole or in part, of printing the various volumes of the "New Jersey Archives."

I must hasten on with a mere mention of the other volumes of the "Collections." Volume VI is a printed copy of the records of the Town of Newark, 1666 to 1833, published in 1864; Volume VII is the well-known work by Judge Elmer, called "Elmer's Reminiscences," published in 1872; Volume VIII is the Semi-Centennial history of the Society itself, published in 1895; Volume IX is a compilation of genealogical and biographical notes arranged alphabetically by family names collected from the "New Jersey Archives" by the late William Nelson, of Paterson, Corresponding Secretary, and Volume X is called "Index of New Jersey Loyalists," and was compiled by E. Alfred Jones, of Wales.

These are only a small part of the printed output of the Society. Most of you are familiar with the "New Jersey Archives," and the quarterly magazine called the "Proceedings." There are about 40 volumes of the "Archives" and about 48 volumes of the "Proceedings." Both contain a great variety of valuable material, as will appear by a glance at the back cover of any number of the "Proceedings" magazine. The fact that the Colonial period was particularly well covered at the outset does not argue at all that later history was neglected. The "Archives" come down into the Nineteenth century.

It was at the suggestion of the Society and through the influence of its members that the interesting "Minutes of the Council of Safety" were printed by authority of the Legislature. The newspaper files the Society possesses, though bulky, are almost priceless; they begin before the Revolution and come down to date. Here are a few noted casually by me the other day: Freeman's Journal, 1781 to 1785; Trenton Federalist, 1803 and later years; New Jersey Journal in the 18th and early 19th century; New Jersey Gazette in Revolutionary times.

The Society also welcomes contemporary documents, wisely recognizing that

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they are authority for histories of the future. In the department of Genealogy its library is well stocked, though lack of funds has forbidden extensive purchases of books bearing on this subject. But I hold in my hand a copy of the Genealogical Index, published in 1923, giving particulars of family names and of places and the material relating thereto. A Supplementary Index was put out in 1929. Both are in pamphlet form, and may be had for a trifle. On any day during business hours searchers will be found in the library working with the genealogical and other materials in our collection.

A Society of this character, to do its work properly and be most useful to the community, must have a suitable home and a suitable working force, and that means a reasonable income for maintenance and operation. Up to this time the New Jersey Historical Society has had none of these things in any such measure as it has deserved. Anyone familiar with the New York and Pennsylvania Societies, their fine buildings, ample force and general air of comfort, not to say opulence, and visiting the New Jersey Society for the first time, would be struck by the contrast. After two years of uncertainty about a place of domicile, we found one first in the Newark Library building on Market Street; then in the Court House; again in the Library Building, and in 1860 we moved to the third floor of the bank building on the corner of Broad and Bank Streets (present office of the Fidelity Union Trust Company), where we were still located in 1895 at the time of the Semi-Centennial. It was not until 1866 that a paid attendant was employed and then only for a small part of the time. There was little or no money for purchases, or binding, or cataloguing. Notwithstanding this, the quantity of books, documents, manuscripts and other things was constantly increasing, and by 1890 had filled the rented floor to overflowing.

Meanwhile two important things had happened. The Newark Library Association had moved from the Market Street building, which I surmise it sold for business uses greatly to its advantage, and had purchased a building in West Park Street which had been erected as a church and had later been turned into a theatre. That was the first thing. The second was that the Newark Library Association had outlived its usefulness, for in 1879 the Free Public Library Act had been passed, and in 1889 the new Free Public Library was opened with appropriate exercises. This effectually strangled the old library, which went out of business, its books, I believe, being taken over by the new Public Library. That was the opportunity for the Historical Society, which, in various ways, one of which was to trade a life membership for a share of Library stock, gradually acquired the great majority of that stock. A month or so ago it took over the last two shares and thereby became the beneficial owner of the West Park Street building, which it has been occupying for nearly 30 past years.

And now that building has become too small, and the collections are again overflowing. The clerical force, hard working and efficient, but numerically inadequate, has long been unable to make the catalogues keep pace with the accessions. I have tried in vain to secure a satisfactory representative list of the Society's treasures

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to read to you, but the employes and trustees and librarian literally do not know what is there. Of books there are some 40,000 volumes. As to the general character of the properties I cannot do better than quote the eloquent words of Mr. Nelson, commenting on the situation in 1895:

"The New Jersey Historical Society has been like the central sun in a planetary system. It has shed its refulgent rays into the obscurest corners of the history of our State. Moreover, it has exercised both a centripetal and a centrifugal force. It has drawn to itself a vast accumulation of priceless treasures of historical material, stored away in its Library, and printed in its various publications. It has attracted pilgrims from all parts of our State, from other States and even from foreign lands, in quest of light on abstruse points in history, genealogy, biography, bibliography. No history of the State can be written, nor the history of any county or town in our State, nor scarcely the account of any prominent man or of any striking event in New Jersey, without recourse to the rooms or to the printed works of this Society. It has exerted a centrifugal force, likewise. Many who have come to our rooms and have seen what has there been gathered together, and have observed the work that has been accomplished by this Society, have gone back to their homes inspired by a zeal to emulate this work, and have induced their neighbors to form local Historical Societies, which have done good service in their own towns or counties, and have been the means of saving from destruction many valuable manuscripts, books and relics, besides fostering the spirit of historical research among their members by that personal contact which is so important a factor in such a cause. ...

"Would you seek the monument of the evidence of work accomplished by the New Jersey Historical Society? Go to its rooms and look about you. Look upon the walls, lined from floor to ceiling with books - fifteen thousand [now 40,000] of them, besides thousands of pamphlets of greatest value. Examine the hundreds of volumes of newspaper files - those mines of knowledge of contemporary events. Go through the cases of manuscripts - the Papers of Ferdinand John Paris, written like copperplate, and giving the minutest information on public affairs relating to New Jersey a century before this Society had its beginning; the Papers of the Carterets, of John Fenwick, of Lewis Morris, of Robert Hunter Morris, of Jonathan Belcher, of Samuel Smith, of Robert Erskine, the Rutherford Manuscripts, the Whitehead Manuscripts, the Stirling Manuscripts, the original journals of the Convention which framed the first Constitution of New Jersey - one of the earliest written Constitutions ever formed; the original journals of the Provincial Congress in the troubled times of the Revolution; the scores of Orderly Books during the same period; the Diaries, Journals and Letters of the last century, with their precise details of life and living; the Papers and Drawings of Robert Fulton, the inventor of the first practical steamboat; the bundles of correspondence, with their revelations of the workings of the human heart a hundred years ago. Fail not to examine with care Canova's magnificent marble bust of the Princess Pauline, sister of Napoleon; the rare and beautiful portraits - Capt. James Lawrence, the Jersey hero who cried with his last breath, 'Don't give up the ship!'; Gilbert Stuart's portrait of Aaron Burr, which has as strange a history as its subject: the Rev. Dr. Edward Dorr Griffin; the Rev. Dr. Alexander Macwhorter, Newark's patriot preacher during the Revolution; Governor Daniel Haines; Col. Peter Schuyler; Senator Richard Stockton (the 'Duke'); the Rev. Dr. Nicholas Murray; William A. Whitehead; the Rev. Dr. Irenaeus Prime, and that exquisite portrait on ivory of Mrs.

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Francis Barber Ogden. In various cabinets the curious may find the naval uniform of Capt. James Lawrence, which he wore at the time of his death, and innumerable relics of bygone days."

But to handle this building and its collections the paid force for years consisted, and I think still consists, of an Assistant Librarian and an assistant to the Assistant, both women, and a janitor. The titular Librarian is not paid. Our valued Corresponding Secretary, a worthy successor to Mr. Whitehead and Mr. Nelson, likewise receives no compensation. An immense quantity of useful work is done as a labor of love by the "Woman's Branch," an auxiliary organization of women interested in the aims of the society, having a Board of Managers representing every county in the State, and which is earnest and efficient, as organizations of that kind naturally are. It is seldom that the visitor will fail to see one or more of these lady managers at work at something in the library, and the organization is constantly acquiring and presenting to the Society documents and other contributions of interest and importance. The Woman's Branch was organized in 1901, when the Society moved into its present building and has been in effectual operation for neary thirty years.

I had been a Trustee a very short time before it became evident that building and personnel were utterly inadequate and that the situation must be viewed in a large way, if the Society was to function as it should function. I do not claim the credit for getting the present movement under way, but did tell the other Trustees repeatedly that the Society needed and was entitled to a proper building, free of encumbrance, and a million dollars as an endowment fund to provide the income with which to pay its overhead and enable it to make wise purchases from time to time as favorable opportunities offer. That may have seemed a dream to them, but there are definite signs of its coming true, at least in large measure. For the march of trade is, on the one hand, driving us away from West Park Street as uninhabitable and dangerous for our purposes, and on the other has made our real estate holdings there so valuable that they should produce a net rent, sufficient with economy and judgment, to conduct elsewhere such a plant as we should and must have.

And so, after a good deal of investigation and consultation and deliberation, the Trustees decided on the purchase of a large lot of land on the former Belleville Avenue, now called Broadway, readily accessible by trolleys and buses, but out of the congested business district. Plans for a dignified and appropriate fireproof building were made and the work is to begin. A systematic campaign for the actual assumed cost of the land and buiding is in progress and two-thirds at least is definitely subscribed. The response has been most gratifying, and for the Society may I express its hearty thanks and deep appreciation of the substantial contribution from Trenton Society.

A few months, and we shall see a noble home for the New Jersey Historical Society; its treasures stored, arranged and adequately catalogued; the pride not only of its members but of every citizen of the State, and also with a suitable income to

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maintain and conduct it. To this storehouse of historical wealth, properly housed and operated, the Society welcomes the student and the investigator, the seeker after truth and even the mere sightseer. From it she extends the helping hand of sympathy and encouragement to all the local Societies of like character throughout the State, calling upon them to foster and preserve their local records and traditions, but reminding them at the same time that, precious as these may be, they are inseparably connected with, affected by, and affect in turn, the broader currents of State history in whose ebb and flow every citizen, from Cape May to Sussex, is vitally and permanently interested.

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