

1814

The First Library in Bangor: Letter Written in 1814 Proves Existence of Earliest Known Library in Bangor

William D. Williamson

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Cover

Free
Wm. D. Williamson, P.M.
Bangor, Me

Rev^d Jed^h Morse, D.D.

Charleston, Mass.

Letter

Bangor May. 17. 1814

D^r Sir

Should I be charged with long neglect in answering your last I should plead guilty. My apology is that a number of individuals in this village have been forming themselves into a "Reading-Room" association, have already collected many rare books; a variety of political & historical & literary miscellany; and a great number of files of newspapers; and are expecting to be incorporated at the next session of the Gen. Court. Those books, which your kindly communication mentioned, will be wanted for this establishment. Tho I, as an individual, should be glad of an immediate perusal of them; yet we will not trouble you any farther than to call on you for them when we shall become organized, & be in funds to pay for them.

Any geographical information as to this section of the District, within my power to communicate, shall on your solicitation, be at your service. This much I can now state, that by an Act passed "Feb^v 28, 1814" Bangor[#] was made half shire with Castine in this

A large & commodious court-house is nearly finished here at Bangor.

county of Hancock & the towns & districts & plantations North of Buckston and Frankfort are constituted a District for the Registry of Deeds, -- the office to be kept at Bangor. -- No. 2. in 3d Range, Southerly of "Corinth" has lately been incorporated into a town by the name of "Levant".

The printed address communicated touching "the Reformation of morals" is truly a "word fitly spoken". Our Rev^d clergy certainly merit for their late & great exertions made to purify and correct public morals, the most cordial thanks of the moralist no less than the friend to Zion.

I am, D^r Sir, yours with much esteem.

Wm D. Williamson

N.B. I hope to see a new edition of your Gazeteer in print.

THE FIRST LIBRARY IN BANGOR

This letter, just obtained by the Bangor Public Library, was written in 1814 by William D. Williamson, then postmaster in Bangor, to Rev. Jedediah Morse, preacher, pamphleteer, and geographer, of Charleston, Massachusetts. It contains the earliest known reference to a library in Bangor. The library, when opened, was called the Bangor Athenaeum. It was one of six libraries operating in Bangor in various times between 1814 and 1883 which, in the end, all merged into the Bangor Public Library, founded in 1883. In 1814 Bangor was in the District of Maine, a part of the State of Massachusetts.

Recently Acquired Letter Proves Bangor Had Library Back In 1814

By JAMES A. BYRNES

The Bangor Public Library is two years older.

L. Felix Ranlett, the librarian, believed that the library was 139 years old. He knows better now. It is 141 years old.

POINT PROVEN

Though the years the histories have stated that in 1816 a library was established, known as the Bangor Athenaeum. Other libraries were formed during the years and at one time there were several. In 1883 the existing libraries became known as the Bangor Public Library. But through the years the Athenaeum was the granddaddy of them all.

Mr. Ranlett recently acquired the following letter, dated May 17, 1814, from William D. Williamson, Bangor postmaster, and addressed to the Reverend Jedediah Morse, D. D., Charlestown, Mass.:

TEXT OF LETTER

"Should I be charged with long neglect in answering your last I should plead guilty. My apology is that a number of individuals in this village have been forming themselves into a 'Reading-Room' association, have already collected many rare books; a variety of political and historical and literary miscellany; and a great number of files of newspapers; and are expecting to be incorporated at the next session of the General Court. Those books, which

your kindly communication mentioned, will be wanted for this establishment. Though I, as an individual, should be glad of an immediate perusal of them; yet we will not trouble you any farther than to call on you for them when we shall become organized, and be in funds to pay for them.

"Any geographical information as to this section of the District, within my power to communicate, shall on your solicitation, be at your service. This much I can now state, that by an Act passed February 28, 1814' Bangor was made half shire with Castine in this county of Hancock and the towns and districts and plantations North of Buckston and Frankfort are constituted a District for the Registry of Deeds,— the office to be kept at Bangor.— No. 2. in 3d Range, Southerly of 'Corinth' has lately been incorporated into a town by the name of 'Levant'.

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most cordial thanks of the moralist no less than the friend to Zion.

"N. B. I hope to see a new edition of your Gazeteer in print. "# A large and commodious court-house is nearly finished here at Bangor."

DEMOCRAT ELECTED

William D. Williamson, was the postmaster in Bangor from 1809 to 1821. In 1820 when Maine became a state, he was elected Senator from Penobscot and through a resignation was elected President of the Senate and acting Governor. And, hold your breath, he was a Democrat.

The Rev. Morse, to whom the letter is addressed, was Jedediah Morse and he was a minister at Charlestown, Mass., and quite a figure in his day. He is considered to be the father of American Geography having published a textbook on that subject in 1784 while he was a school teacher in New Haven. He continued throughout his life, and his sons after him, to publish geographies.

The footnote in Williamson's letter refers to Dr. Morse's "The American Universal Geography" published in two volumes in 1805. The Library has this set.

FIERY MINISTER

Dr. Morse was a fiery minister and an active one. He was also adventurous. When vaccination was first introduced and his community rebelled against it he and his family were the first to be inoculated.

Williamson probably met Dr. Morse while he was Senator to the General Court of Massachusetts in 1817-18-19, and that is presumably why the two men ex-

changed correspondence on the "Reading Room" Bangor's first library.

The letter which proves Bangor had a library in 1814 was acquired by Mr. Ranlett through noticing a note in a catalogue of historical documents sent by a dealer in Michigan.

The Bangor Public Library is considered to be one of the best in the United States for a city of this size and in fact is far better than many metropolitan libraries. It is heavily endowed for the purchasing of books but no money can be expended for building and room is badly needed for the storage of books.

UNIQUE HISTORY

The history of the Bangor Public Library is unique. It runs something like this, now:

1814 — "Reading Room."

1816 — The Bangor Athenaeum was founded and remained in operation until 1834 when it changed into the Bangor Social Library.

1828 — The Bangor Literary Club was formed but only lasted two years when it merged with the Athenaeum in 1830.

1828 — The Bangor Mechanic Association formed a Library. This association was part of a national movement and could be considered one of the first unions in the country. It was for mechanics, as the name indicates, and was formed for the benefit of the man who worked with his hands. Paul Revere, it is believed, was one of the early members and it was in part due to the discussions Paul and his fellow members held that the American Revolution was instigated. The site of these meetings was over a tavern near Dock

Square in Boston and the site is pointed out to the tourist to this day.

The library formed by this group existed until 1883 when it merged with others to become the Bangor Public Library. The Bangor Mechanic Association is still in existence today. It has 85 members and they meet once a year to elect four trustees to sit on the board of directors of the present Library.

1834 — The Bangor Social Library became the Bangor Mercantile Association — evidently the white collars wanted a library, too. At any rate, this group lasted until 1871 when it became the Bangor Library Association, and in 1874 it was merged with the Bangor Mechanic Association.

1883 — The Library as we know it today was established.

Bangor, May. 17. 1814.

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D. Williamson Esq

May 17. 1814

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Wm. Williamson Esq
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Rev. Jed^h Morse D.D.

Charleston. Mass.