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Rhode Island Lotteries – Three Centuries of History

by

Russell J. DeSimone

In April 2003 the University Library of the University of Rhode Island presented an exhibition entitled *Rhode Island Lotteries – Three Centuries of History*. The exhibition was a comprehensive look at the role of lotteries in Rhode Island as well as a study of the evolution of the role of lotteries over a period spanning three hundred years. In addition to the exhibition, the University Library published a booklet *History of Lotteries and The Lottery System in Rhode Island* by John Russell Bartlett - originally published in a series of newspaper articles in the *Manufacturers and Farmers Journal* in 1855; issued a series of three posters depicting the role of lotteries in each of the three centuries and hosted a panel discussion titled “Lotteries: A Public Good or Social Scourge”. The panelist included Rhode Island Lottery Executive Director Gerald Aubin; GTECH Vice President for Public Affairs Robert Vincent; URI Professors Timothy Hennessey and Galen Johnson as well as Russell DeSimone of the library staff and the exhibition’s curator. The panel was moderated by Professor Scott Molloy.

The Eighteenth Century

During the 18th century Rhode Island issued more lotteries than any other state. Lotteries played a significant role in providing the revenue for public works such as the building and maintenance of roads, bridges and wharves. They were also used by towns as well as civic and religious societies to build schools and meeting houses, churches, Masonic halls and armories. Lotteries were an important part of daily life.

Lotteries Outlawed

The Rhode Island General Assembly, at its January 1732 session passed a law to prohibit the practice of lotteries. Just 12 years latter, the General Assembly reversed itself and authorized a lottery for the construction of Weybosett Bridge in Providence.

Lotteries and the Public Good

1760 – The public granary and market house of Newport, today’s Brick Market, received a grant of £24,000 for its construction.

1769 – Trinity Church, Newport received a lottery grant of \$2,500 for a new steeple. Another grant of \$1,500 for repairs was awarded in 1791.

1774 – The First Baptist Church of Providence received a lottery grant of \$2,000 for its construction.

1796 – A lottery grant of \$2,300 for improvements was awarded to the Beneficent Congregational Society of Providence.

1790 - By 1790 the Weybosett Bridge, first built with the aid of funds from a 1744 lottery was beyond repair. A new bridge was constructed with the proceeds of another lottery granted by the General Assembly in 1790. Depicted here are a lottery ticket and Providence newspaper announcement from the November 10, 1791 issue of *The United States Chronicle*.

1796 – Rhode Island College, now Brown University received a lottery grant of \$25,000 for its general use.

The Nineteenth Century

During the 19th century lotteries continued to raise funds for public and private projects. Often lotteries from this century were managed by national lottery management companies with ticket offices and agents throughout the state. The major beneficiaries of lotteries during the 1830s and 1840s were the public schools. In 1842 lotteries were finally prohibited by the state’s newly written constitution.

Lotteries and the Civic Good

In 1806 the Redwood Library of Newport received a grant of \$3,000 for the repair of its building and for the acquisition of books. The Rhode Island Historical Society received a grant of \$5,000 in 1830 “to aid them in the objects for which they were incorporated.”

Public Education

With only one exception, all lottery grants made by the General Assembly from May, 1831 until their prohibition in 1842, were for the support of public education. Shown here are an 1831 lottery announcement broadside for the encouragement of public schools and an 1839 lottery ticket for the school fund.

Anti-Lottery Literature

Beginning in the mid 1820's and gaining momentum throughout the 1830's, a campaign developed to outlaw lotteries and expose irregularities by some lottery managers. Thomas Doyle, future mayor of Providence and former lottery agent, wrote this expose of the inner workings of a 19th century lottery office.

Forlorn Hope

An interesting depiction of Forlorn Hope and a grieving Adventurer – the unsuccessful ticket holder – taken from Thomas Man's 1833 essay *Remarks on Lotteries*, an early anti lottery treatise.

Lotteries Outlawed

Following the turmoil of Dorr's Rebellion, a new constitution was framed in 1842 to replace the original Royal Charter. Under Section 12 of this constitution all future lotteries were prohibited.

The Twentieth Century

In 1973, following the trend of other states, Rhode Island's constitution was amended to legalize lotteries. In May 1974 the first drawing of "The Lot" was held on the lawn of the State House. Throughout the remainder of the 20th century the state's lottery adapted to the changing times by participating in the national game of PowerBall, establishing "Keno" and starting Video Lottery Terminals at Lincoln Park and Newport Jai-Alai. Proceeds from these games were transferred to the state's general fund, making lotteries the state's third largest revenue source; trailing only income and sales taxes.

1974 – The Lot, Rhode Island's first 20th century lottery

1975 – The Grand Lot began with the drawings being televised

1975 – Lotto, The first televised lottery drawing.

1975 – Play Ball – The Rhode Island Lottery
Commission's first instant ticket game.

During the 1980s many games were designed around sporting themes.

1984 - The Rhode Island Lottery Commission
celebrated its 10th anniversary

1986 - Rhode Island celebrated its 350th
anniversary.

1998 – The Blizzard of '78 was commemorated.

1998 - Rhode Island Scenes, a multi vignette
game.

1999 – The Rhode Island Lottery Commission
celebrated its 25th anniversary.

Note: All images and lottery ephemera are from the collection of Russell J. DeSimone.