

# The Library



*“I hold it a distinguished privilege to be designated to lay the cornerstone of this noble building. May it serve, long and well, the uses of this ancient Society; promoting mutual respect and sympathy among its Fellows; keeping alive the faithful, honored and distinguished dead of many generations; aiding the diligent and intelligent search after true knowledge of all that makes for the good of mankind.”*

So spoke Frank L. Day, MD, in the late afternoon of Thursday, June 1, 1912, standing at the corner of Hayes and Francis Streets, across from Rhode Island’s magnificent new McKim, Mead & White State House. The throng he addressed included Governor Pothier; Mayor Clay; representatives of Brown University, Harvard University and Rhode Island Hospital; and many of the Rhode Island Medical

Society’s 387 members. The occasion was the laying of the cornerstone for the Medical Society’s library building.

## RIMS’ EDUCATIONAL MISSION

From the day of its founding 99 years earlier, the Rhode Island Medical Society had always been devoted to continuing medical education. The very first slate of officers, elected on April 22, 1812, included a librarian and cabinet keeper. In the 19th century and into the 20th, the Society collected books, subscribed to journals, sponsored and published clinical lectures, held annual prize essay competitions, and archived anatomical specimens.

By 1825, the Society had two librarians and cabinet keepers and was maintaining two library collections, one in Providence to serve the Society’s Northern District and one in Newport for the Southern District.

Books and journal subscriptions were acquired in duplicate, so as to keep both libraries up to date.

After the Civil War, the Society’s collections were consolidated and given to Rhode Island Hospital, which the Medical Society had founded in 1863 and which opened its doors to accept its first patients in 1868.

## A PERIPATETIC COLLECTION

Civil War-era plans for a museum of comparative anatomy were never realized, but the Society quickly rebuilt its own library collection after the gift to the hospital. For many years the books were housed in the rooms of the Providence Franklin Society at 54 North Main Street, where the Medical Society also held many meetings. As the collection grew, the need to find a permanent home for it became more pressing. Toward that end, a building fund was inaugurated in 1882.

By 1900, the collection had grown to 12,000 volumes but still had no home of its own. In that year the collection moved from the Franklin Society to the third floor of the newly opened Providence Public Library on Washington Street.

By 1909, as the collection approached 30,000 volumes, the Providence Public Library served notice that the Society would have to find another place for its books. Planning and fundraising began in earnest. The Medical Society acquired an 8,000 square-foot building site at the corner of Hayes and Francis Streets and engaged the Providence architectural firm Clarke, Howe and Homer.

## A HOME, AT LAST

And so it happened that the Rhode Island Medical Society celebrated its centennial in grand style with the festive opening of its newly completed library building on Wednesday evening, June 12, 1912. The following day, the Society conducted its 101st Annual Meeting in the new second-floor auditorium and then welcomed the general public to tour the building.

The library served as the Medical Society’s headquarters for 90 years, from 1912 to 2002. For most of the 20th century, it was the premier center for continuing medical education in the state of Rhode Island. Full-time, professional librarians were

on hand five days a week to serve the membership and the public. The 250-seat auditorium was packed on a weekly basis for clinical lectures.

At the height of its service to the community in the 1960s, the library subscribed to some 400 medical journals. More than 300 of these were published in the United States. Another 94 journals came from 24 different foreign countries, including 28 from Japan, 13 from Italy, 13 from England, 6 from Poland, 4 from the Philippines, 3 each from Switzerland and Cuba, 2 each from Australia, Brazil, Canada, Finland, Romania, Turkey and Yugoslavia, and 1 each from Argentina, Belgium, Denmark, Egypt, El Salvador, India, Peru, Senegal, Spain and the Soviet Union.

No other state medical society in America has devoted as great a proportion of its resources to building and maintaining libraries for the edification of its members and the public, with the possible exception of the Medical and Chirurgical Faculty of Maryland.

Inevitably, with the specialization of medicine, advances in technology and the growth of hospital-based information services, the maintenance of a library was no longer central to the mission of a modern state medical society. The Society gave its 50,000-volume collection to Brown University in 1987. Today the oldest and most



valuable volumes, including many from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, reside together in the Lownes Room of Brown’s John Hay Library.

The graceful, colonial-revival building at 106 Francis Street continues in the service of human health and welfare today. It is the headquarters of the Moran Shipping Agencies, Inc., a 75 year-old family-owned Rhode Island enterprise that cares for ships’ crews in more than a hundred ports in North America and around the world. Now geothermally heated and cooled, it is one of the most environmentally advanced buildings in Rhode Island.

