

## The Jefferson Debating Society Bicentennial Collection, 1823 - 1829

<b>Repository:</b>	Hingham Public Library
<b>Manuscript Number:</b>	MSC #3
<b>Creator(s):</b>	Jefferson Debating Society and John P. Richardson
<b>Quantity:</b>	½ document box
<b>Processed By:</b>	Robert Malme and Jennifer Williams. Finding aid completed in November of 2013.
<b>Access:</b>	Open for research. Some materials have been placed in protective enclosures and should not be removed from them.
<b>Related Materials:</b>	The Hingham Public Library also has material regarding the Jefferson Debating Society in its subject files. There are also collections of personal and family papers related to many of the members.

### Provenance

The materials in this collection were created by members of the Jefferson Debating Society in Hingham, Mass. between 1823 and 1829. This is an artificial collection, having been collected and assembled by John Richardson in the mid-twentieth century. Part of it was donated in 1974 and the remainder in 1981 as part of the Bicentennial Collection.

### Historical Note

The Jefferson Debating Society was formally established in March 1824, although it appears to have held meetings in 1823, by “the Republican young men of Hingham, who adhere to the political principles of that venerated statesman and patriot, Thomas Jefferson.” These principles included: that the will of the people, expressed through elections, provided the most appropriate guidance for directing the republic's course; that the central government should be "rigorously frugal and simple;" and that one of government's most important roles is the protection of civil liberties and minority rights. The purpose of the Society, as stated in its Constitution, was to impart these political beliefs among its members and the general public. Membership in the Society was limited to men age 21 to 35. Once members came to the age of 40 they transitioned to honorary members who attended meetings but could no longer take part in any debate. Society officers, referred to as The Government, were chosen by secret ballot every year. The Government was made up of a President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Secretary, and a representative from each ward of the town. Government members chose the debate topics to be discussed at each meeting. The President moderated each debate (or Vice-President in his absence).

The Society's regular meetings were held on the first Wednesday of each month, and focused on the political, social, and religious topics of the day. The president appointed a committee of Society members to research a topic and advocate for their collective opinion at the next meeting. The subjects discussed included the following questions: Is the establishment of military academies and standing armies in time of peace consistent with the principles of Christian religion? Is it expedient to have a Congressional caucus for the purpose of nominating a candidate for the presidency? Is a man bound to vote for a candidate that is nominated by his own political party? Should there be financial qualifications for candidates that run for office? Is the love of money attended with beneficial effects on society? After the debate, the chairman of the debating committee wrote and signed a report summarizing the position they had taken. At a subsequent meeting the other members of the Society

discussed the issue and voted on whether they supported or rejected this position.

The Society also held an anniversary celebration on March 4<sup>th</sup>, the date on which Thomas Jefferson gave his inaugural speech in 1801. The main purpose of this meeting was to elect new Government officers, but it also included other more celebratory activities. A hall was rented for the occasion and a speaker from outside the Society was invited to make an address. The president-elect of the Society read the preamble to the U.S. Constitution while another member read Jefferson's Inaugural Address. Other members were invited to compose hymns for the occasion, and the meeting was concluded by a community supper. The Society was disbanded sometime in the early 1830's for unknown reasons.

## **Scope and Content Note**

The bulk of this collection is composed of reports summarizing the positions taken by debating committees during meetings held between 1823 and 1828, with notes on whether or not those positions were accepted by the Society. These hand-written reports contain discussions on the most important civic, political and religious topics of the day, both locally and nationally. The collection also contains the following: both a hand-written and printed Society Constitution, the latter dating to 1828; the only known remaining membership certificate, which belonged to John Leavitt, Jr., dated March 4, 1824; a collection of Massachusetts legislative reports, acts, and petitions used during debates held in 1827; and programs/reports put together for the annual anniversary celebrations in 1828 and 1829.

## **Arrangement**

This collection is organized into the following series:

- Series I. Society Constitution, 1824? - 1828
- Series II. Reports on Issues Considered, 1823 - 1828
- Series III. Debate Materials, 1827
- Series IV. Membership Certificate, 1824
- Series V. Anniversary Celebration Materials, 1828- 1829

### **Series I. Society Constitution, 1824? -1828**

#### **Box 1, Folder 1**

This series consists of two documents, the first being a handwritten copy of the Society's Constitution. Modeled on the United States Constitution, this document has a Preamble as well as sixteen bylaws. These bylaws discuss such topics as the Society's governance structure, membership dues and requirements, and meeting times. The last page contains the signatures of the founding members, including Charles Lane, Elijah Lincoln, Albert Fearing, Alfred C. Hersey, and Solomon Lincoln, Jr. The document is five pages long and is undated. It is possible that this is the original constitution. The second document is a 24-page, printed version of the Society's Constitution that was published in 1828 by Farmer and Brown. It includes the inaugural address of Thomas Jefferson given on March 4, 1801, the preamble and sixteen bylaws of the Society's Constitution, the names of all the members who signed the original Constitution, three amendments dating between 1824 and 1826, and rules and orders regarding the duties of the president.

## **Series II. Reports on Issues Considered, 1823-1828**

### **Box 1, Folders 2-3**

This series contains over forty handwritten reports on questions debated during the Society's meetings. The reports are written and signed by the chairman of the committee assigned to each specific question, and include the question itself as well as the opinion of the committee. Most reports are no longer than one page in length. Handwritten on the back of most reports is the debate topic, whether the Society agreed with the committee's conclusion (listed as either accepted or rejected), and the meeting date. The majority of the materials date between 1823 and 1827.

## **Series III. Debate Materials, 1827**

### **Box 1, Folder 4**

This series consists of seven printed documents used during Society meeting debates. They include Massachusetts Senate proposed acts, petitions, and reports regarding various issues under consideration. The materials include: an act concerning the property of insolvent debtors, dated January 11, 1827; an act to form a committee to study election reform, dated January 6, 1827; an act regulating elections and the qualification of voters, undated; a petition and act to license the sale of lottery tickets, dated January of 1827; and an act related to prosecutions for libel and to pleadings in actions for libel and slander from 1827.

## **Series IV. Membership Certificate, 1824**

### **Box 1 Folder 5**

This series consists of a single Jefferson Debating Society membership certificate dated March 4, 1824. The certificate was given to John Leavitt, Jr. and was signed by both the president and secretary, David Harding and Jacob H. Loud, respectively. According to the notes of John Richardson, this is the only certificate known to have survived.

## **Series V. Anniversary Celebration Materials, 1828-1829**

### **Box 1, Folder 6**

This series consists of three documents: a program for the 1828 anniversary celebration; a committee report regarding the same celebration; and a program for the 1929 anniversary celebration. The printed program for 1828 indicates that a poem was composed and read by Solomon Lincoln, an ode was composed by Winslow Turner, and the address was delivered by James S. Lewis. The program for the 1829 celebration indicates that there was a reading of Thomas Jefferson's first inaugural address by Solomon Lincoln and an address made by Caleb Gill, Jr. On both pamphlets, the words for the odes and hymns are printed in their entirety. The committee report written by Charles Lane documents the preparations made for the 1828 meeting, including the accepted invitation to the main address speaker, the arrangement of payment for the hall rental, the order of the meeting, the distribution of tickets to members, and the location of the celebration supper.