

Arizona Territory's Earliest Historical Societies

By Al Bates

Contrary to popular belief, the *Arizona Historical Society* as incorporated by the first territorial legislature did exist, although briefly.¹ It was organized in Prescott and officers were elected in November 1864. Its existence ended two years later when it merged with a rival organization which itself had but a brief life.

The legislature selected 15 men to be charter members of the historical society: Richard C. McCormick, W. Claude Jones, Allen L. Anderson, Gilbert W. Hopkins, King S. Woolsey, Henry Bigelow, Ammi White, Charles A. Curtis, James S. Giles, James Garvin, Richard Gird, T. J. Bidwell, Edward D. Tuttle, William Walter, and Samuel Todd.²

The Arizona Historical Society's "birth notice" most certainly was announced in the territory's official (and only) newspaper, the *Arizona Miner*, early in 1865, but no copies of the paper for that year are known. However, the *Miner* had several items about the organization in the following year.

The original *Historical Society* officers included Richard McCormick, president, and W. Claude Jones, corresponding secretary. County vice-presidents were Gilbert Hopkins, Pima; Thomas J. Bidwell, Yuma; William Walter, Mojave; and A. L. Anderson, Yavapai.³ A year later (late 1865) Henry A. Bigelow replaced the departed Jones, and Coles Bashford replaced the recently deceased Hopkins. County vice-president for newly-created Pah-Ute was Octavius D. Gass. (Besides Gass, the *Miner* mentions another addition to the original 15 named in the act of incorporation, Herman Ehrenberg.)

Little is known of the activities of the original Historical Society except that: "Its seal is a representation of Casas Grandes on the Gila, the best preserved ruin in Arizona, with the sun rising, and the motto, *Only a Shadow Remains*."⁴ Only one *Historical Society* document, a December 1864 letter signed by Richard McCormick, the society president, is known.⁵

Little is known of the original Arizona Historical Society except that it had a seal with a representation of Casas Grandes, the best preserved native American ruin in Arizona, and used the motto, *Only a Shadow Remains*.

Converse W. C. Rowell, a political ally of Richard McCormick from Mojave County, is credited for organizing the *Pioneer Society* immediately following the second territorial legislature in late 1865.

Why he set up a competing society is unknown. (However, one must wonder about the role played by Mr. McCormick who was a charter member of the new group while leading the original organization as president.) The new society's existence is mentioned in the *Miner* on January 10, 1866, followed two weeks later when the group's constitution and bylaws were published.⁶

There were 63 charter members, thus honoring the year that Arizona became a separate territory and echoing the California Pioneer Society's 48 charter members honoring that state's emergence. Three categories of membership were established for the *Pioneer Society*; active, honorary and corresponding, with new members added by member vote. Active members were limited

to those in residence prior to January 1, 1864. Honorary members were “persons of distinction” and those resident prior to January 1, 1860. Corresponding members could be voted in at any regular meeting.

Like the *Historical Society*, the *Pioneer Society* had territory-wide ambitions, and in their constitution specified there would be a resident vice-president plus a corresponding secretary in each county. The earliest *Pioneer Society* officers included: James Grant, president; F. G. Christie, secretary and two County vice-presidents, W. J. Berry, Yavapai; and Wm. H. Hardy, Mohave County (no record was found for Pima, Yuma or Pah-Ute county vice presidents).⁷

The *Pioneer Society*'s goals and structure were so similar to that of the *Historical Society* that the older group began considering a merger at their January 5, 1866, meeting, appointing James Giles, Henry Bigelow and T. J. Bidwell as a committee “to consider the propriety” of a union of the two societies.⁸ Another factor favoring a merger was that five of the most prominent members of the *Historical Society* (including its president, Acting Governor McCormick) were among the *Pioneer Society*'s charter members.⁹

The 63 charter members of the *Pioneer Society* included 11 of the 18 men who were active in the 1865 territorial legislature. (Only one Pima County legislator had participated.)¹⁰ The roster also included nine members of the famed Walker Party and two from the Peeples expedition and at least two who arrived with the Governor's Party.

Merger of the two societies was announced at the *Pioneer Society* annual meeting in November 1866 when the *Historical Society* dissolved and agreed to turn over their “books, charts, maps and other effects” to the younger organization, now renamed the *Arizona Pioneer and Historical Society*.¹¹

Librarian G. W. Barnard set up a library and meeting room in 1866 which was supplied with: “home and foreign newspapers, journals, periodicals and [illegible word] standard works.” The shelves also contained mineral specimens from the territory and “curious relics of the past.” In August 1867, Librarian Barnard issued the following plea: “Persons allowed the privilege of reading the papers and magazines of the Arizona Pioneer and Historical Society, are requested not to tear strips from the margin of the papers, or in any manner mutilate them. The man that ‘borrowed’ Nix Nax has set a very bad example. Harper's Magazine for July 1866, has very mysteriously disappeared. Don't destroy it, but please return it.”¹²

The constitution and by-laws of the new organization were amended May 6, 1867, formally recording the name change. Most of what else was changed had to do with record keeping and finances. First came the addition of a Board of Auditors and then came rules for tracking dues payments including rules for expulsion and restoration of membership of those in arrears.¹³

An indication that the society was in trouble came in an unsigned item in the Arizona Weekly Miner at the end of 1874: “We are in hope that ‘The Arizona Pioneer and Historical Society’ will soon be reorganized, and that every important town in the Territory will keep a branch of the same running, continuously, not that we wish to use the society as a means to political or other nefarious ends, as did some of its first members and promoter, but because we wish to see old timers *enthuse* [sic] each other and unitedly [sic] assist in keeping bright the pages of our history.”¹⁴

And then, no more. But what became of their records and artifacts? I'm still looking.



ENDNOTES

¹ Today's Arizona Historical Society was founded in Tucson in 1884 (at the instigation of Charles D. Poston and Sam Hughes) as the Society of Arizona Pioneers. Poston dropped out in a huff over member qualifications after the second meeting, but they later designated him as an honorary member which he accepted. (He later tried to start a rival organization he called the Pioneer Historical Society of Arizona.) In 1897 the Society of Arizona Pioneer's name was changed to the Arizona Pioneers Historical Society, and in 1971 it became known as the Arizona Historical Society.

² A noteworthy omission from the original society was Charles D. Poston whose presence in Arizona dated back to the 1850s and who had recently been elected as the territory's first congressional delegate.

³ *Arizona Miner*, 1/24/1866, headline ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, p 2, col. 2

⁴ *Arizona Miner*, 1/24/1866, headline ARIZONA PIONEER SOCIETY, p 2, cols. 5 & 6.

⁵ *Journal of Arizona History*, Vol. 6, pp 90-91. (The letter exists in the files of the Long Island Historical Society.)

⁶ Rowell was a noteworthy early pioneer. A former US Army Captain who was court-martialed for "mutinous conduct" in California, he arrived in Mojave County in 1863 to begin mining ventures. He was a member of the second Territorial legislature for Mojave County in 1865. Later, he was the US Marshal for Arizona at the time of the Camp Grant Massacre, and was hung in effigy by the citizens of Tucson for his efforts to convict the perpetrators.

⁷ *Arizona Miner*, 1/24/1866, headline ARIZONA PIONEER SOCIETY, p 2, cols 5 & 6.

⁸ *Arizona Miner*, 1/24/1866, headline ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, p 2, col. 2.

⁹ The five were: McCormick, Jones, Woolsey, Bigelow, and Giles.

¹⁰ Both societies were exclusively male although there were well-qualified women available. Mrs. Mary Catherine Leib Brooks who arrived with the Fort Whipple founding party in 1863, and Mrs. Sara E. Robinson Boggs who came to Southern Arizona in the 1850s, are noteworthy examples.

¹¹ *Arizona Miner*, 11/30/1866, headline, ARIZONA PIONEER [sic] SOCIETY, p 2, cols. 5 & 6.

¹² *Arizona Miner*, 08/24/1867, adv. headline, PIONEER NOTICE, p 3, col. 3.

¹³ *Arizona Miner*, 06/29/1867, p 1, cols. 4-6.

¹⁴ *Arizona Weekly Miner*, 12/24/1874, p 1, col 5. (The reference to ". . . use the society as a means to political or other nefarious ends . . ." appears to be one of John Marion's many barbs aimed at Richard McCormick.)

1865 ARIZONA PIONEER SOCIETY CHARTER MEMBERS

John Allen, John T. Alsap, Coles Bashford, Hezekiah Brooks, Emmet A. Bently, William J. Berry, Thomas J. Bidwell, Henry A. Bigelow, Herbert Bowers, Augustus Brichta, George Brooks, John J. Campbell, Follett G. Christie, Henry Clifton, George Coulter*, John H. Dickson*, Dobbins, Marcus D., Peter Doll, Amasa G. Dunn, Richard E. Elliott, Daniel Ellis (Conner)*, James H. Ferry, William T. Flower, William France, Adnah French*, James S. Giles, James Grant, William H. Hardy, Joseph P. Hargrave, Calvin Jackson, Henry Jenkins, Nathan E. Lewis, George Lount*, James E. McCaffry, Richard McCormick, Alexander McKey, Rodney McKinnon*, Jacob L. Miller*, Samuel C. Miller*, William R. Murray, Albert O. Noyes, Edward G. Peck, Abraham H. Peeples**, William G. Poindexter, William Pointer, Manuel Ravena, James O. Robertson, Robert A. Rose, Converse W. C. Rowell, James G. Sheldon, James B. Slack, Van Ness C. Smith, Augustus Spear, Louis B. St. James, Charles Taylor, Edward G. Taylor, Nelson VanTassell, G. H. Vickroy, Joseph R. Walker, Jr.*, Aaron Wertimer, Henry Wickenburg**, King S. Woolsey.

*Walker Party member (9)

**Peeples/Weaver Party member (2)