

# A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE SCOTS' CHARITABLE SOCIETY

“May this Society Subsist so Long as Charity Shall be a Virtue”

On January 6, 1657 twenty-eight “Scottish men” signed the “Laws Rules and Order of the Poor Boxes Society” in Boston, New England and formed the Scots’ Charitable Society. The founder stated that “...our benevolence is for the releefe of our selves being Scottishmen or for any of the Scottish nation whome we may see cause to help...”<sup>[1]</sup> Almost 350 years later this dedication to benevolent acts continues to guide the work of the Scots’ Charitable Society.

In 1841, when the members of the Society marched in the Boston funeral procession in honor of President Harrison, the Society was recognized as the oldest charitable society in the United States. Among the Boston organizations that marched only the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company, founded in 1638, was older. The next oldest Boston society was the Irish Charitable Society which was founded in 1737. <sup>[2]</sup>

***Today the Society remains the oldest charitable organization in the United States.***



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100 Washington Street, Boston.

1. DR. A. D. SINCLAIR, President.
2. ALEXANDER McDONALD, Vice President.
3. JOHN SUTHERLAND, Treasurer.
4. ROLAND McLEAS, Secretary.
5. ALEXANDER T. LAUGHTON, Rec. Secretary.
6. JAMES M. SMITH.
7. DAVID M. BALFOUR, Auditors.

## Scots Charitable Society.

INSTITUTED 1657

GOVERNMENT OF 1875.

8. DANIEL GUNN, Chairman.
9. JAMES RUSSELL.
10. HUGH KILPATRICK.
11. WILLIAM WALKER.
12. WILLIAM HEWITT.
13. JAMES PATERSON.
14. WILLIAM WATSON.
15. WILLIAM DOWNSIE.

Trustees.

## Founding

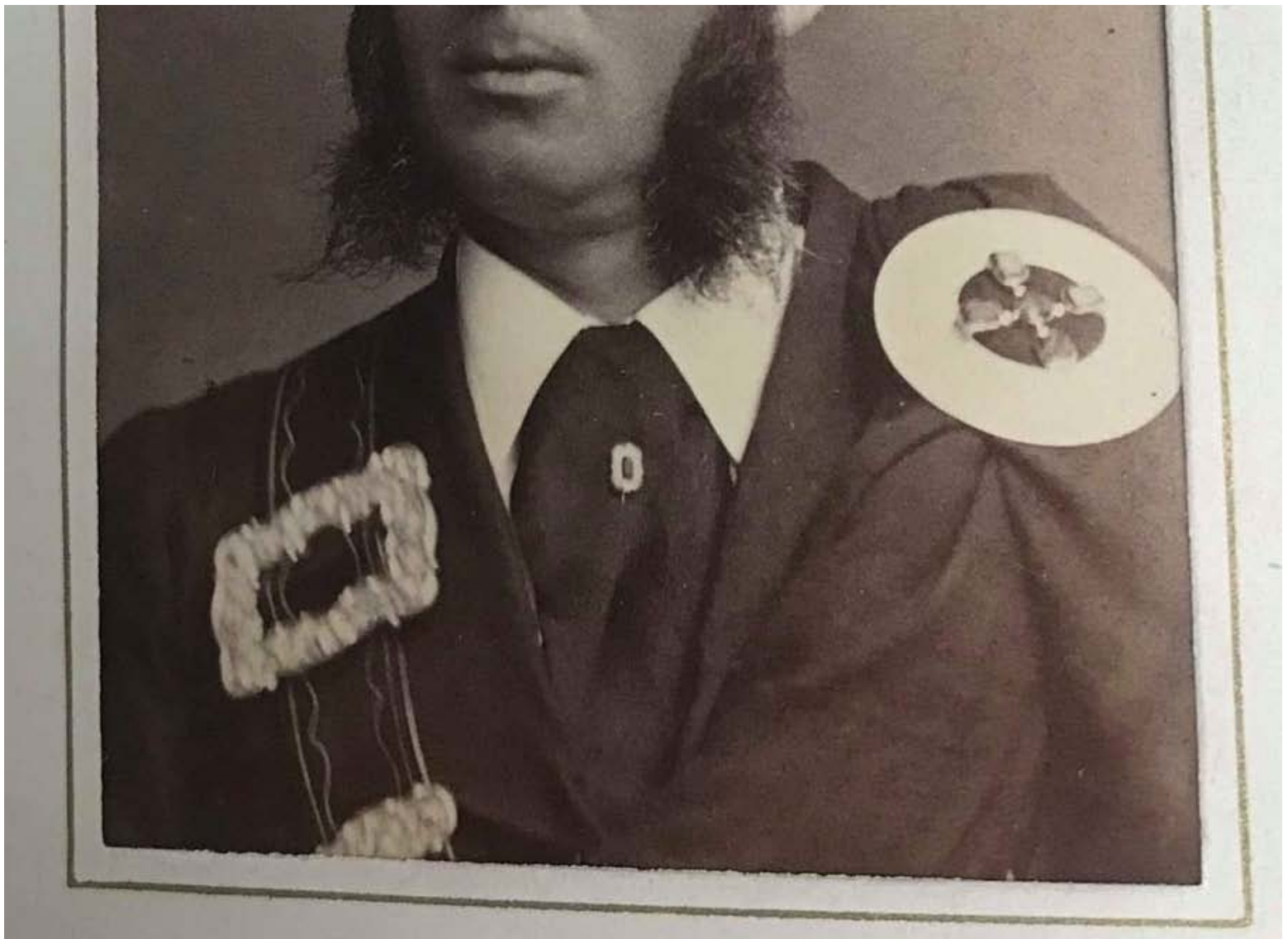
It is likely that the Society was founded in part to assist a specific group of destitute Scots – those captured by Oliver Cromwell at the Battle of Dunbar in 1650 and those captured exactly one year later at the Battle of Worcester. Prisoners from both battles were sold as indentured servants to the London Company of Undertakers, a venture capital group in London investing in the first successful iron works in the American colonies. Bound to the Iron Works at Lynn, now Saugus, in Massachusetts, most of the indentured Scots were required to complete seven years of labor for the company. It seems the indentures began to expire between 1655 and 1657 when the Scots' Charitable Society was formed.<sup>[3]</sup>

While the need of the indentured Scots may have been a factor in the founding of the New England Society, it was modeled on a similar organization in London, England. This earlier

organization was the Scottish Hospital of the Foundation of King Charles II, also known as the Royal Scottish Corporation. Like the New England society, the London society was founded to aid Scottish men and women who found themselves in need while away from their native home. [4] The New England society recognized this historic tie in several ways, including references found in revisions of their Rules and Orders. Both Society's used what was referred to as the "Scots Box" to hold the monies they collected. The Royal Scottish Corporation box has been dated to 1611 while the Boston box is first referenced in 1657. The first reference to the London Society appears in the 1684 Rules and Orders where it alludes to the earlier charitable societies: "good workes of this kind... in their severall societies, and also of our Countriemen at home & abroad in many parts of the world..."[5]

The 1770 revision of the Rules and Orders is more specific in recognition of their relationship to the Royal Scottish Corporation. They stated that they were "particularly encouraged by the success of a Scot's Society in London of the same nature, established by Charter of King Charles 2nd" recognizing they followed the "laudable Example of the London Society." They also stated that contributions from natives of any nation were welcome, "noting that some persons of other Nations having generously contributed to the Scot's charity in London." [6]





## Early Crises

The Scots' Charitable Society faced two serious threats during its history. The earliest challenge nearly ended the young Society. Founded in 1657 the Society seems to have run short of members and money by 1665. This was confirmed and detailed in the revised Rules and Orders of 1770. These specifically state that the Society floundered due to "the Smallness of their Number, Lowness of the Stock, & Mismanagement of some Private trustees."[\[7\]](#)

Because of the "Smallness of their Number" the Society seems to have been dormant from 1665 until 1684 when new Rules and Orders were written. Only four of the original 27 founders returned with the re-organization in 1684 – Alexander Simsom, James Webster, William Gibson and James Ingles.[\[8\]](#) The membership crisis is seen in the clearest light when the list of new members from 1657 to 1665 is compared with new members from 1684 to 1693. In the first eight years only 34 new members were admitted, while 154 new members were admitted in the eight years between 1684 and 1692. This was roughly 4 ½ times the



number seen in the eight years after the Society was founded.

Accounting and management practices were also addressed in the re-organization of 1684. The treasurer was obligated to invest the excess monies in the locked box in order to earn interest income. [9] Later the treasurer was required to be bonded “with sufficient Sureties in double Value of the Stock.”[10]

A second serious challenge occurred during the Revolutionary War. After surviving the first crisis, which could be described as an organizational crisis, the Society faced a serious political crisis. Membership was deeply divided over the American Revolution. Following the Boston Tea Party of December 16, 1773, minutes for a meeting held on May 10, 1774 indicate that members were aware of the uncertain future in Boston. At this meeting the membership voted to call in the outstanding bonds issued by the Society. [11] Ten months later the Society entrusted all of the “Books, Bonds, Obligations, & Notes” and cash on hand to Andrew Cunningham, one of the joint treasurers.[12]

When the British evacuated Boston following the American siege in March 1776, the Loyalist members of the Society took the books, bonds and records with them. This started a struggle for the assets that was not resolved until 1803 when the Society passed a resolution thanking “the Secretary for procuring the Books and Papers of the Society.”[13]

It appears that the delay in resolving the return of the books was due to the unresolved problem about distribution of the Society’s assets. The Loyalist treasurer, Mr. Cunningham, proposed the dissolution of the Scot’s Charitable Society. In a letter dated 1783 he insisted on an equal distribution of the assets to all members.[14] Mr. Cunningham also pointed out in a letter dated 1784 that the majority of members left Boston when the British evacuated the city. He goes on to state “Therefore give me leave to inform you, that at the Evacuation of Boston by the British Troops, The Scotch Society’s Books & Securities (but not cash) were legally in my hand, as an officer, & almost the whole of the members then quitted the Town ordered me to take them...”[15] At that point (1782) there may have been as few as twelve members of the Society left in Boston.[16]

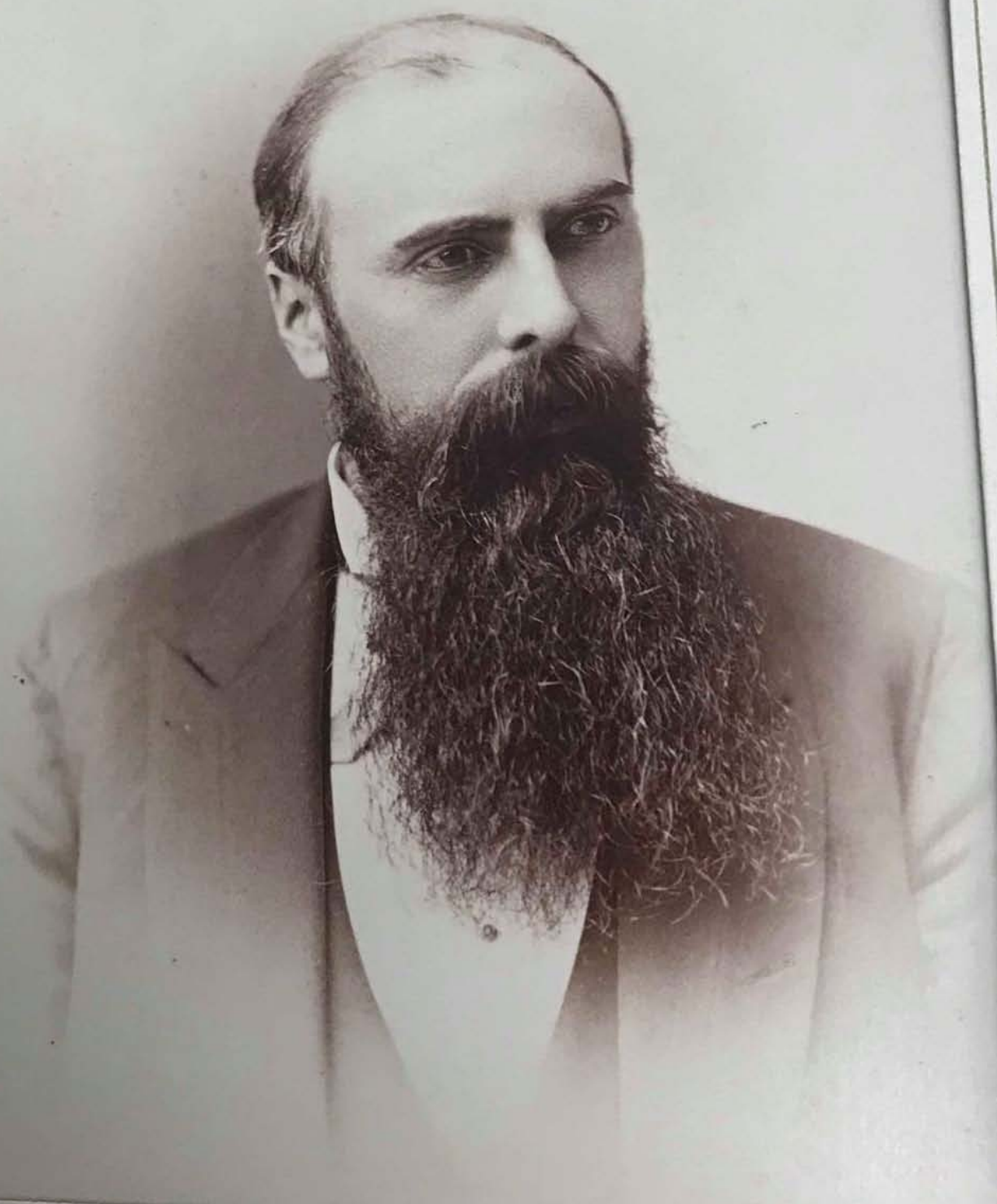
The return of the records and bonds was not resolved until the intervention of a personal friend of Mr. Cunningham’s, Dr. Danforth. By the time the material finally returned to Boston in 1803, the Society’s records had traveled 1,500 miles over 27 years.

Correspondence between Mr. Cunningham and members of the Society remaining in Boston seems to be incomplete. However, one of the remaining letters offers an interesting insight into the attitudes held toward the Scots in Boston, or at least in Mr. Cunningham’s perception of the attitudes. In a letter to John Scollay dated August 14, 1786 Mr. Cunningham comments on the

application for incorporation filed with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. He notes the historical mistrust towards the Scots and states that this is the reason for the limits in funds and membership imposed by the Commonwealth.[\[17\]](#)

“... The authority that has given you Powers, are fearful of your acquiring too large a Fund, as they have confind the Society to the Annuall income of Two hundred pounds.~but what appears more stricking to me their having a jealous eye, over you, is in restricting the number of members to one hundred, This is a convincing proof of[–]ir fears of the Scotch nation, and allows me to say, that [–] very reason that the Scotch Charitable Society could never obtain an act to Incorporate them before.”

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## Rules and Orders

The early Scots' Charitable Society was governed by various revisions of Rules and Orders, the equivalent of what are now called the [constitution](#) and by-laws. The first Rules and Orders were short compared to the subsequent revisions. The 1657 rules totaled 523 words compared to approximately 1,200 words contained in the 1648 revision.[\[18\]](#)

When the Society was re-organized in 1684 the Rules and Orders were specifically revised to address the earlier mismanagement.

Two locks, requiring two keys to unlock it, now protected the box holding the society's assets. Each key in turn was held by a separate member of the Society.

Monies for charitable purposes could only be disbursed with the consent of five members and an entry recording the transaction in the ledger.

Entries had to include the name of the borrower, the amount and the date.

Any loan over ten shillings required a bond to ensure repayment.

Only the truly needy were to receive the aid of the Society.

Society funds were to be invested with interest. This interest was to be used to support their charitable works.

Members of the Society were not to benefit from the aid unless they had contributed, the exception being "strangers of our nation that is cast in by a shipwreck or otherways."

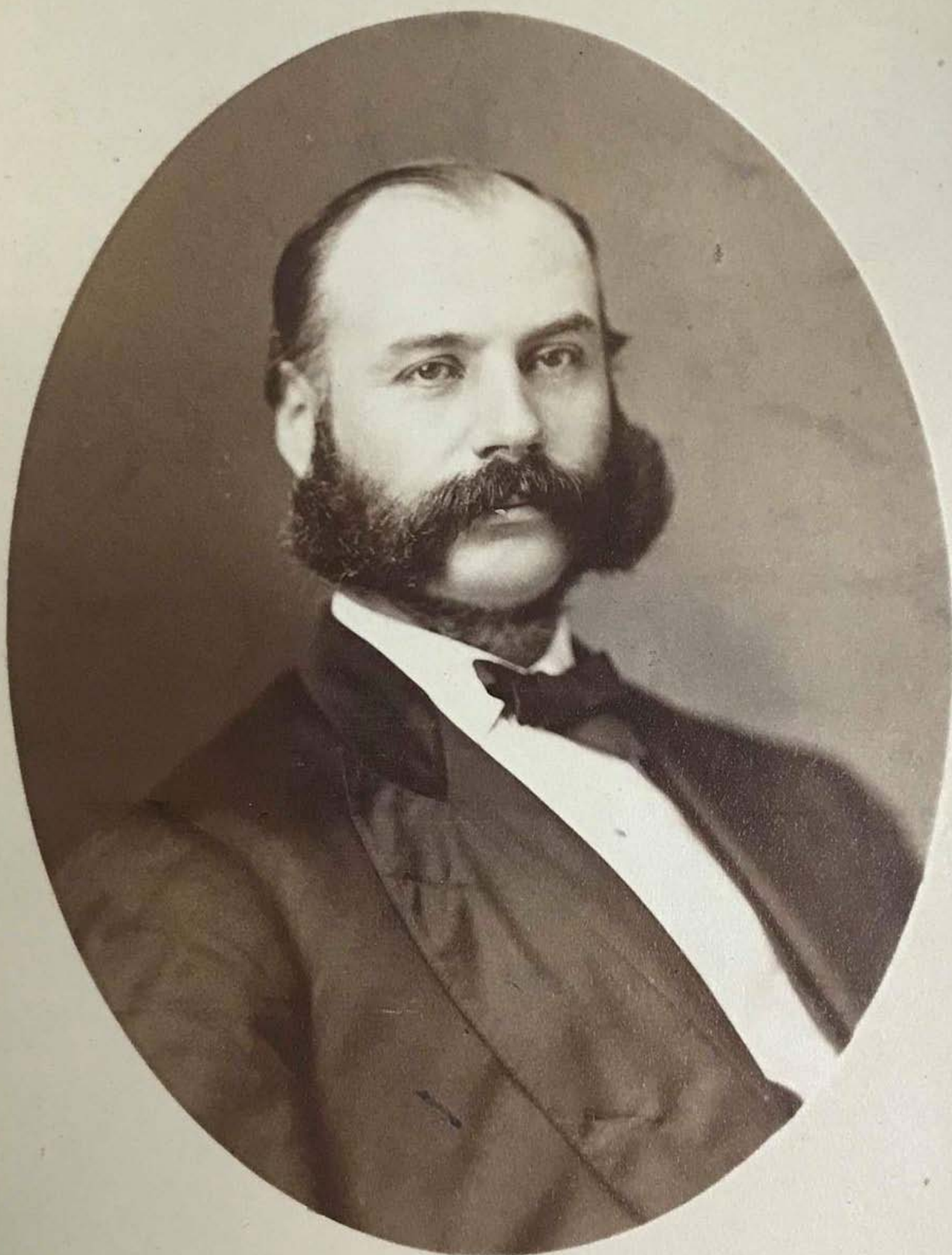
Only reputable persons were to be made members, no "prophane or dissolut person, or openly scandalous....."

All changes in the rules and laws of the Society were to be recorded in the "book."

These primary points were to be carried forward in future revisions to the Rules and Orders. In most cases any changes seemed to serve as a means to clarify these points. For example, the treasurer was later required to be bonded for twice the value of the funds he supervised. In 1770 the purpose of the Society was clearly identified as "the Relief of the poor aged or infirm, helpless widows and orphans, indigent, Sick, the distress'd shipwreck'd, & to pay the



charges of those who are desirous but not able to Transport themselves to their native Country.” The Rules and Orders, now referred to as the Constitution and By-laws, were last revised in 1992.[\[19\]](#)



*President 1871 - 1872*

## Membership and Early Meeting Places

Membership in the Society, which stands at 158 in December 2002, has always been open to Scots or those descending from a Scottish ancestor. Other than Scottish Heritage there were few requirements except one: "... no profane or dissleut person, or openly scandalous shall have any part or portione herein, or be a member of a Society."[\[20\]](#) This rule, in various forms, has continued to guide the membership process since 1684. There seems to be two reasons for including this specific statement in the Rules and Orders. First was the early experience with mismanagement of the Poor Box funds. The second reason seems to be the English, and later Scottish, practice of using forced indentures or banishment of the colonies as an alternative punishment for convicted criminals. New England was spared the worst excess of this practice for a number of reasons, but the southern plantations complained bitterly about the practice of sending felons across the ocean. For example, in 1670 Virginia made it clear that they did not want any more prisoners, especially dangerous felons: They forbade "any person trading hither to bring in and land any goal birds or others who, for notorious offenses, have deserved to dye in England."[\[21\]](#)

Admission to the Society was, and still is, by invitation. The general procedure, established by 1684, requires potential members to be invited to learn of the "designe of our charity." If the Society felt the individual was qualified to become a member he was invited to join by the presentation of one of the "keyes... that theirby he may be encouraged to concur with you in this charitable work." The procedure was refined by 1770 when the Rules and Orders stipulated that potential members were to apply to managers at their meeting. The managers would then present a recommendation to the general membership at the next quarterly meeting of the full membership.

By 1770 the role of the Key Keepers was specifically defined in the Rules and Orders. Key keepers were four members responsible for inviting potential contrivutors to support the Society. This was done by presenting one of four silver keys to the recruit.[\[22\]](#)

Early meeting places included some of the most notable taverns and coffee houses of Old Boston – The Green Dragon, the Exchange Coffee House, the Bakers' Arms. The Bakers' Arms Tavern, located on Union Street as early as 1665, was one of the first homes to the Scots' Charitable Society. The Society meet there frequently enough to have one of the meeting rooms named after them: the Cross Keys. This seems to be a reference to the officers that held the keys to the early locked money box.

The Green Dragon Tavern became the new meeting place for the Society about 1690. This tavern, also located on Union Street in Boston, was "probably the counterpart of the Green Dragon in Bishopgate Street, London."

It appears that several Society members were active innkeepers in early Boston. These include William Browne of the Castle Tavern about 1674, William Douglass and his sister, Catherine Kerr (whose husband John was a Society member) of the Green Dragon about 1771, John Borland of the Star Tavern at the corner of Hanover and Union Streets and possibly Duncan McFarland of the Cromwell's Head Tavern on School Street in 1692.

The Green Dragon undoubtedly played a significant role in the history of the Scots' Society. It was John Kerr's widow that sold the tavern to the St. Andrew's Lodge of Free Masons in 1771. Members of the lodge were active participants in the Boston Tea Party protest against the Stamp Act.<sup>[23]</sup> Given the strong loyalist feelings of many Scots' Charitable Society members and the strong independence feelings of the St. Andrews' Lodge membership, both meeting at the Green Dragon, the atmosphere was undoubtedly tense at times.



Officers of the Scots' Charitable Society, 1844-5.

W. H. Woodbury, Boston and Philadelphia, 171 Franklin St., Boston.

## Nature of the Charitable Acts

Since the founding of the Society in 1657 the types of charitable acts have changed little. Aid to the sick and indigent, assistance with transportation home, burial and housing have been the cornerstone of the charity. The newest aid has been the granting of scholarships for undergraduate college education. However, not all aid was available from the beginning.

From the very first meeting aid to the poor was the stated goal of the Society. This was clarified in 1684 when it was agreed that monies collected for the box and the aid of the poor were not to be spent for any other purpose than to increase the charity of the Society. The were “to spend nothing out of the sd box lest it be reputed sacrilege.”<sup>[24]</sup> The only monies to be used for charitable purposes were limited to the interest earned on the Society’s investments.<sup>[25]</sup> Monies for the fund were collected through quarterly membership dues and donations solicited from residents and travelers.

The early assistance focused on monetary support. As time passed and experience grew the Society began to expand the type of assistance they supported. One of the first recorded statements of this expansion reported the inclusion of sickness and burial assistance in 1685. Three years later the membership approved the purchase of a “morcloath” for the good of the company. Use of the mort cloth for funerals was to be free for those in need.<sup>[26]</sup> Undoubtedly burial and mort cloth benefits were necessitated by the epidemics that ebbed and flowed through the early colony. Boston was spared the outbreak of bubonic plague that struck London in 1665, but measles and smallpox were two recurrent epidemics in Boston (measles in 1657 and 1687 and smallpox in 1648 – 49 and 1677 – 78).<sup>[27]</sup> Royal Scottish Corporation Records report the London Society gave aid to victims of the devastating bubonic plague of 1665 in the form of nursing, burial and maintenance care.<sup>[28]</sup>

It appears that the early Scots’ Society assisted with burials of Scottish descendants at various cemeteries in the Boston area. Some time between 1831 and 1847 the Society purchased a burial plot in Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The cemetery opened in 1831 as the first garden cemetery in America.<sup>[29]</sup> The Scots’ Charitable Society lot consists of 1,819 square feet surrounded by a cast iron fence, erected in 1847, with a statue of St. Andrew. In 1890 the Mt. Auburn lot was filled with a total of 216 internments. The society then purchased a new lot in Mt. Hope Cemetery which was dedicated on May 30, 1890.

In 1872 the Scots’ Charitable Society purchased what was known as the Scots’ Temporary Home at 77 Camden Street, Boston. This building apparently replaced an earlier one located at 73 Concord Street. The home was discontinued in 1892 for several reasons. According to the Society the reasons included a lack of need and changes in the United States immigration laws.<sup>[30]</sup>



They also strive to promote Scottish and Celtic heritage through education and participation in highland games festivals parades and other cultural events throughout the Greater Boston area including a tartan bowl in celebration of tartan day held every April and opened to the public.

This was prepared for the benefit of potential members by William Budde,  
MS, FSA Scot

[1] "Laws Rules and Orders of the Poor Boxes Society (1657)," The Constitution and By-Laws of the Scots' Charitable Society of Boston, (Instituted 1657) with a list of members and officers, and many interesting extracts from the original records of the society. Cambridge, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1878, p.25. Hereafter Laws Rules and Orders (1657).

[2] Marshal's Notice: Funeral Ceremonies in Honor of President Harrison. Daily Evening Transcript. Boston, MA: Dutton & Wentworth, printers. April 19, 1841, vol. XII, no. 3292.

[3] Harley, E. N. Ironworks on the Saugus, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957.

[4] The Royal Scottish Corporation – A Helping Hand for Scot's in London. Electronic website found at [www.royalscottishcorporation.org.uk/](http://www.royalscottishcorporation.org.uk/), December 2002

[5] "At Boston in New England This twenty fifth day of October sixteen hundred and eighty four years: The Constitution and By-Laws of the Scots' Charitable Society of Boston, (Instituted 1657) with a list of members and officers, and many interesting extracts from the original records of the society. Cambridge, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1878, p.28. Hereafter Laws Rules and Orders (1684).

[6] "Rules and Orders Agreed Upon by the Scots' Society in Boston, New England, for the Management of their Charity (1770)." The Constitution and By-Laws of the Scots' Charitable Society of Boston,(Instituted 1657) with a list of members and officers, and many interesting extracts from the original records of the society. Cambridge, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1878, p.47. Hereafter Laws Rules and Orders (1770).

[7] Ibid

[8] Scots' Charitable Society, Microfilm Roll No. 79-1, reel I, vol. 1: Minutes, rules, receipts, quarterly payments of the Society, 1657-1739. Name index. On deposit at the New England Historic Genealogical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

[9] Laws Rules and Orders (1684), p.29

[10] Laws Rules and Orders (1770), p.50

[11] “Minutes of the Scot’s Charitable Society, 10th May 1774.” The Constitution and By-Laws of the Scot’s Charitable Society of Boston, (Instituted 1657) with a list of members and officers, and many interesting extracts from the original records of the society. Cambridge, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1878, p.47. Hereafter May 10, 1774 Minutes.

[12] “Minutes of the Scot’s Charitable Society, March 29th, 1775.” The Constitution and By-Laws of the Scot’s Charitable Society of Boston, (Instituted 1657) with a list of members and officers, and many interesting extracts from the original records of the society. Cambridge, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1878, p. 47. Hereafter March 29, 1775 Minutes.

[13] “Meeting of 2nd August 1803.” The Constitution and By-Laws of the Scots’ Charitable Society of Boston, (Instituted 1657) with a list of members and officers, and many interesting extracts from the original records of the society. Cambridge, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1878, p.47 Hereafter August 2, 1803 Meeting.

[14] Archibald Cunningham Letter dated New York, 16 July 1783. Robert May Collection, 1771-1929. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society Manuscript Collection.

[15] Archibald Cunningham Letter dated Shelburne [Nova Scotia] July 23, 1784. Robert May Collection, 1771-1929. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society Manuscript Collection.

[16] “Authorization to Collect Bonds, Mortgages, etc., December 27, 1782.” The Constitution and By-Laws of the Scot’s Charitable Society of Boston, (Instituted 1657) with a list of members and officers, and many interesting extracts from the original records of the society. Cambridge, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1878, p. 47. Hereafter Authorization to Collect Bonds, Mortgages, etc.

[17] “Letter from Archibald Cunningham to John Scollay dated Shelburne [Nova Scotia] August 14, 1786. Robert May Collection, 1771-1929. Boston, MA: Massachusetts Historical Society Manuscript Collection.

[18] Laws Rules and Orders (1657), p25; Laws Rules and Orders (1684), 28.

[19] Constitution and By-Laws of the Scots’ Charitable Society of Boston as of October 23, 1992. n.p., n.d.

[20] Laws Rules and Orders, (1684), p. 30.

[21] Coldham, Peter Wilson. *Bonder Passengers to America, Volume I: History of Transportation 1615-1775, A Study from Original and Hitherto Unused Sources of Some Human and Some Inhuman Aspects of Transportation and Sale of English Convicts.* Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Company, Inc., 1983, 1221-22.

[22] Laws Rules and Orders, (1684), p. 30; Laws Rules and Orders, (1770), p. 48.

[23] The night of the Tea Party the scheduled St. Andrew's Lodge meeting was "adjourned for lack of attendance, 'public matters being of greater importance.'" See Drake, Samuel Adams. *Old Boston Taverns and Tavern Clubs.* Boston, MA: W. A. Butterfield, 1917, p. 90.

[24] Laws Rules and Orders, (1684), p. 30.

[25] Laws Rules and Orders, (1770), p. 49.

[26] "Minutes of the Scots' Charitable Society, June 9, 1685" and "minutes of the Scots' Charitable Society, Nov 12, 1688." *The Constitution and By-Laws of the Scots' Charitable Society of Boston, (Instituted 1657) with a list of members and officers, and many interesting extracts from the original records of the society.* Cambridge, MA: John Wilson and Son, 1878, p. 47.

[27] Found in the Sept-Oct, 1997, Newsletter – Genealogical Society of Santa Cruz County" the original sources and listed as: *Ancestors West, SSBCGS, Vol 20, No 1, Fall 1993, South Bend (IN) Area Genealogical Society*; and Duffy, John. *Epidemics in Colonial America*, Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1953. From the first 4 chapters. Posted electronically at <http://www.geocities.com/heartland/Acres/7241/>, 1997. See also *Encyclopedia of Plague and Pestilence*, George C. Kohn, editor. Published by Facts On File, Inc., 1995 and the FamilyEducation Network. Posted electronically at <http://www.rootsweb.com/~wijuneau/Epidemics.htm>.

[28] See the Royal Scottish Corporation history on their website at [www.royalscottishcorporation.org.uk/history.htm](http://www.royalscottishcorporation.org.uk/history.htm), December 2002.

[29] Mt. Auburn Cemetery, found December 20, 2002 on the Let's Go Boston web site at [www.letsgo.com/BOS/04-sights-678](http://www.letsgo.com/BOS/04-sights-678).

[30] The Constitution and By-laws of the Scots' Charitable Society of Boston, (Instituted 1657) with a list of members and officers, and many interesting extracts form the original records of the society. Boston, MA: Farrington Printing Co., 1896, p. 156-59.

This content was created specifically for the use of the Scots' Charitable Society, with contributions from the following individuals:

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- Samuel Stocker, age 14, a fiddle student taught by Marielle Webster at [Scottish Arts](#).
- Claire MacPherson, President of [Scottish Arts](#), who provided the voice audio.

All credit and thanks go to these talented individuals and Scottish Arts for their dedication and artistry.