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Guide to the

Society of Tammany, or Columbian Order records

1791-1898, 1916

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Compiled by Susan P. Waide, 2016

Summary

Creator: Tammany Society, or Columbian Order (New York, N.Y.)

Title: Society of Tammany, or Columbian Order records

Date: 1791-1898, 1916

Size: .92 linear feet (7 volumes)

Source: Purchased from The Walpole Galleries, 1927, with additional gifts, 1899-1970

Abstract: The Society of Tammany, or Columbian Order, was a fraternal, patriotic and benevolent society founded in New York City in 1786. It was officially organized under a constitution in 1789. The Society played an instrumental role in the development of the Democratic Party in New York during the 19th century, and the name of its meeting place, Tammany Hall, became synonymous with Democratic machine politics in the City. The Society's members influenced local, state and national Party politics into the mid-20th century. The Society of Tammany, or Columbian Order records, dated 1791-1898 and 1916, chiefly document the Society's administration, patriotic fellowship activities, and benevolent work in New York City during the Early National period. The collection consists of the Society's minute books, 1791-1844 (5 volumes); a slipcase of miscellaneous correspondence and documents concerning Society and Democratic Party matters, 1810-1898; and a bound photostat copy, made in 1916, of the Society's constitution and membership roll for the period 1789 to 1916.

Access: Advance notice required.

Preferred citation: Society of Tammany, or Columbian Order records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library

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Creator History

The Society of Tammany, or Columbian Order, was a fraternal, patriotic and benevolent society founded in New York City in 1786. It was officially organized under a constitution in 1789. From its inception the Society associated itself with democratic principles and the republican form of government established by the American Revolution. The Society played an instrumental role in the development of the

Democratic Party in New York during the 19th century, and the name of its meeting place, Tammany Hall, became synonymous with Democratic machine politics in the City. The Society's members influenced local, state and national Party politics into the mid-20th century.

Saint Tammany societies began their existence in the 18th century as social clubs in the American colonies, notably in Pennsylvania, and flourished during the Revolutionary era in association with the American cause. Tammany, or Tamanend, was a Delaware Indian chief and contemporary of William Penn, who later acquired the role of patron saint of America in popular culture.

In its 1789 constitution the Saint Tammany society in New York City identified itself as "Saint Tammany's Society, or Columbian Order," thus acknowledging two patrons: Tammany and Christopher Columbus. The name was changed shortly thereafter to "Tammany Society, or Columbian Order." The Society was incorporated in New York State in 1805 as a charitable organization under the name "The Society of Tammany, or Columbian Order, in the City of New York," the form used in later constitutions. The names "Tammany Society, or the Columbian Order" and the "Society of Tammany, or Columbian Order" were both in common use. The Society established itself as the head of a national order, issuing "dispensations" for the creation of other societies of the same name within New York State and for the main society in other states, including Pennsylvania. These in turn were empowered to establish societies within their own states.

The choice of patrons emphasized the American identity of the Society, which initially required native birth for its officers in contrast to fraternal societies associated with European heritage, such as Saint Andrew's Society, St. George's Society, and the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick. Like other Tammany societies, it modeled its organizational structure and culture on an amalgam of Native American and national traditions. Its meeting place was the Wigwam, and its membership was divided into thirteen tribes representing the original thirteen states, led by Sachems. The Grand Sachem was elected annually as its head. William Mooney, its first Grand Sachem, and John Pintard, a wealthy merchant and its first Sagamore, or master of ceremonies, figured prominently in the Society's foundational years.

Early meetings were held in rented spaces at local taverns until the Society acquired property and built Tammany Hall, at the corner of Nassau and Frankfort Streets. Commemorative anniversaries, celebrated with great fanfare, included Washington's birthday (February 22), Tammany's feast day and the Society's founding (May 12), American Independence (July 4), Columbus's birthday (October 12), and the British evacuation of New York in 1783 (November 25), later joined by the Battle of New Orleans (January 8). In 1790, due to the influence of John Pintard, the Society established a museum with a library and American artifacts; its holdings were eventually dispersed. Early charitable work focused on making donations to the widows and children of deceased members.

In addition to the patriotic fellowship of its meetings and celebrations, the Society made great efforts to inter and honor the remains of the Revolutionary prisoners who died on board the Jersey and other British prison ships at Wallabout Bay in Brooklyn. During the War of 1812 members volunteered to strengthen the fortifications at Brooklyn Heights.

The Society played an instrumental role in the development of the Democratic Party during the 19th century. The Society's anti-Federalist alignment was fully established by the U.S. presidential election of 1800, although it was officially a non-partisan organization. Membership in the years represented in these records included men from all walks of life who espoused republican principles, such as laborers, artisans, attorneys, doctors, merchants, prominent politicians, and members of old New York families.

Although the Society and the Party organization in New York County were distinct entities, they were connected by powerful political and social fellowship. Tammany Hall was used by both the Society and

Democratic political organizations and their memberships were highly integrated. Tammany's influence grew as it assisted the City's many immigrants with jobs, housing and citizenship, gaining their voting loyalty in the process. The name Tammany Hall, or simply Tammany, became synonymous with Democratic machine politics in New York, exemplified by the corrupt practices of William M. "Boss" Tweed. In spite of reform efforts, Tammany dominated City affairs by its hold on political patronage and the vote, and it was a powerful force in local, state and national Democratic politics into the mid-20th century.

The decline of Tammany's power has been attributed to several factors, including the election of mayoral candidates backed by reform movements, notably Fiorello La Guardia in 1934; changes in the City's demographics and social welfare policies; regulation of elections and political parties; and the growth of community-based Democratic Party organizations in the City. During its brief renaissance under the leadership of local politician and Grand Sachem Carmine de Sapio in the 1950s, Tammany again fell into disrepute, leading to the apparent demise of the Society in the early 1960s.

Custodial History

Materials acquired at The Walpole Galleries sale of August 18, 1927 were originally collected by Douglas Taylor, a member of the Society.

Scope and Content Note

The Society of Tammany, or Columbian Order records, dated 1791-1898 and 1916, chiefly document the Society's administration, patriotic fellowship activities, and benevolent work in New York City during the Early National period. The collection consists of the Society's minute books for Committee of Amusement proceedings, 1791-1795 (1 volume), Grand Council meetings, 1802-1844 (2 volumes), and general membership meetings, 1799-1808 and 1814-1817 (2 volumes); a slipcase of miscellaneous correspondence and documents concerning Society and Democratic Party matters, 1810-1898; and a bound photostat copy, made in 1916, of the Society's constitution and membership roll for the period 1789 to 1916.

Committee of Amusement minutes, 1791 October 24-1795 February 23 (1 volume), record the activities of that portion of general meetings when the Society resolved itself into a Committee of Amusement, listing topics debated, toasts given at commemorative meetings, patriotic anecdotes delivered, and songs sung.

Grand Council minutes comprise two volumes recording meetings of the Judiciary Council or Grand Council of Sachems, 1802 May 24 to 1819 May 24, and 1819 May 24-1844 January 19. These document the administrative management of the Society, particularly its growing financial and real estate responsibilities. Minutes concern the election of officers and Society appointments, membership and impeachments, collection of dues, rules of order for meetings, revision of the constitution and by-laws, the issuing of dispensations to create Society branches in other locations, and arrangements for commemorations. Also mentioned are the distribution of charity funds, the Society's museum of American artifacts, and efforts to preserve the remains of those who died on British prison ships at Wallabout Bay. The minutes also mark the movement of its meeting place, the Wigwam, from rented space to Tammany Hall, and the separation of accounts for Society activities and Tammany Hall real estate matters. Approval for the political use of Tammany Hall is also considered. Reports from the Treasurer and other officers or committees, and listings of Tammany Hall stockholders, are included. The minutes for 1819 May 24 are identical in both volumes.

Minutes of the Society's general membership meetings, incorporating Committee of Amusement proceedings, comprise two volumes dating 1799 Mar 4 to 1808 February 1, and 1814 August 15 to 1817 August 25. The second volume begins with minutes for 1815 May 1 to 1817 August 25; the minutes for 1814 August 15 to 1815 April 10 begin from the reverse end. With the exception of some financial matters, they cover many of the topics addressed in the General Council minutes, while providing further insight into the Society's activities as a patriotic social club. Items of interest include the visit of Osage Indians (1804 August 10), and observance of the deaths of George Washington (1799 December 23-1800 January 6), Alexander Hamilton (1804 July 13), and American sailor John Pierce, killed by a shot from a British frigate off Sandy Hook (1806 April 28). Listed commemorative toasts reflect current events and the political stance of its members, especially their anti-British sentiments in the years leading to the War of 1812. Questions for debate on social, political and economic topics are usually listed with the names of those speaking for each side; however, a summary of the debate on the need for a national bank is recorded in detail (1816 January 16). Lists of candidates proposed for membership sometimes include their occupation or citizenship status, and circumstances leading to the impeachment of member John Low (1804 November 19) are detailed in full. Later minutes also reflect the Society's temporary divestment of Native American nomenclature for its organizational structure, and document its concern with financial stability, reinvigoration of the Society, and the revision of its constitution and by-laws in 1816-1817.

The collection also contains a bound photostat copy of a volume containing the Society's constitutions of 1813, 1817 and 1789. Signatures inscribed at the end of the Constitution of 1789 continue as a list of members to April 3, 1916. Notations as to later amendments were noted on the original documents. The copy was made in 1916 from the original held by the Society, present location unknown.

Correspondence, 1838-1866, 1891-1898, consists chiefly of letters written or signed by prominent persons responding to invitations to attend Society events, especially the annual ball celebrating Andrew Jackson's victory at the Battle of New Orleans.

Miscellaneous documents, 1810-1871, consist of real estate documents pertaining to property for Tammany Hall, 1810; a statement of Society election results, 1834; a request for the Society's approval for political use of the Hall, 1845; a petition by Society members concerning Democratic Party primary elections and the leasing of Tammany Hall, 1857; and subscription lists for donations to defray Democratic Party expenses, 1857, and Society expenses, 1859; as well as Society loan share certificates, and printed invitations to Society events.

Key Terms

Subjects

Fraternal organizations -- New York (State) -- New York
Patriotic societies -- New York (State) -- New York

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Minutes (administrative records)
Property records

Geographic Names

New York (N.Y.) -- History -- 1775-1865
New York (N.Y.) -- Societies and clubs

United States -- History -- 1783-1865

Names

Democratic Party (N.Y.)

Container List

- v. 1 Committee of Amusement minutes 1791 October 24-1795 February 25
Grand Council minutes
- v. 2 1802 May 24-1819 May 24
- v. 3 1819 May 24-1844 January 19
Minutes
- v. 4 1799 March 4-1808 February 1
- v. 5 1814 August 15-1817 August 25
- v. 6 f. 1 Correspondence 1838-1866, 1891-1898
- v. 6 f. 2 Miscellaneous documents 1810-1871
- v. 7 Constitution and roll of members 1916 (Bound photostat copy of the original volume)