

A Town Known for Many Firsts Preserves History for Future Generations

The Portsmouth Historical Society is a Treasure Trove of Local Stories and Artifacts

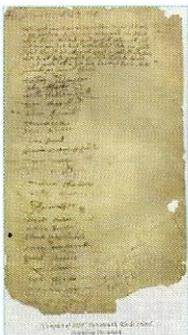
BY MICHELE GALLAGHER PHOTOS PROVIDED BY THE PORTSMOUTH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newport, at the southern tip of Aquidneck Island, is celebrated for its colonial past, Revolutionary War history, world-class sailing, and the grandeur of its Gilded Age "summer cottages." By contrast, Portsmouth, on the island's northern end, has long been defined by rolling farmland sloping toward the Sakonnet River, expansive gentlemen's farms once favored by wealthy horse breeders, and its place in history as the site of the inconclusive Battle of Rhode Island in 1778.

Less widely known is Portsmouth's foundational role in early American democracy. The town traces its origins to the Compact of 1638, a document referenced on local welcome signs but often overlooked in meaning. Drafted by religious dissenters seeking freedom from the authority of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Compact established a community that was Christian in character yet non-sectarian in governance. Signed on March 7, 1638, by 23 of Rhode Island's founders before departing Boston at Roger Williams' urging, the document is widely regarded as the first true instrument of democratic self-government in the Americas.

A plaque commemorating the Compact is mounted on a puddingstone in Founders' Brook Park near the site of the original settlement, established by dissenters that included Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer. Although women were not permitted to sign the document, their influence on the colony was significant. The original Compact is preserved in a climate-controlled vault at the State Archives in Providence, while replicas are available for purchase at the Portsmouth

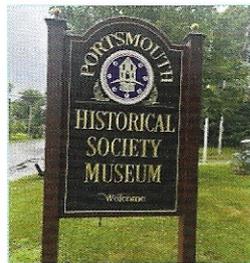
Historical Society Museum. Upcoming viewing: The original document, along with the Southwick copy of the Declaration of Independence, will be on display at Portsmouth Town Hall to commemorate Founder's Day, March 6, 2026 from 11am - 1pm.



The Society's Museum and Grounds

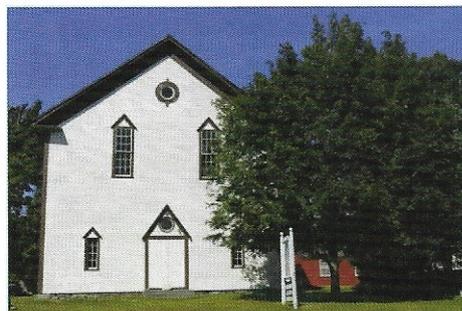
The Portsmouth Historical Society was founded in 1938, coinciding with the 300th anniversary of the Compact's signing and the devastation of the Great New England Hurricane. Together, these events sparked renewed interest in preserving the town's history for future generations.

The Society's museum occupies the former Christian Union Church, a meetinghouse originally built in 1824 at the opposite corner of Union Street and East Main Road. It was relocated to its current location and enlarged in 1865. In 1940, the remaining congregants donated the building to the newly established Society. Over time, the museum grounds' buildings expanded to include the oldest known surviving one-room schoolhouse in New England, dating to 1725. Known as the Southernmost School, it contains original desks and teaching artifacts that offer a glimpse into early education on Aquidneck Island.



Another significant structure is the Old Town Hall, built in 1846 and relocated to the Society's grounds in 1970. Over the years, it served various civic purposes,

including as the first home of the Portsmouth Volunteer Fire Department. Today, it houses large agricultural



equipment and horse-drawn vehicles that reflect the town's rural heritage.

Since its founding, the Society has assembled an extensive collection of family papers, photographs, municipal records, maps, furniture, textiles, artwork, books, and genealogical materials. Its library includes both reference and rare book collections featuring 19th-century children's textbooks, Quaker religious works, and early American histories. These resources are frequently used by members researching family connections and historic properties.

Gearing Up for Rhode Island's 250th

Celebration As Portsmouth approaches its 388th anniversary this March, it is also preparing to play an important role in Rhode Island's Semiquincentennial celebrations. A full schedule of educational and commemorative programs has been planned in collaboration with statewide partners, historians and educators. Event details are available at portsmouthhistorical.org/events.

Play Your Part in Preserving Portsmouth

History To support this work, the all-volunteer Board of Directors has launched a new membership drive to broaden community engagement and advance its mission. Individuals, families, businesses, students, and retirees are all encouraged to participate. More information is available at portsmouthhistorical.org/membership. The museum is open for private tours by appointment during the off-season and offers regularly scheduled hours on summer weekends.

