

# History: Maria Cummins, 18th century Dorchester novelist

by Anthony Sammarco

The concept of social reform and responsibility was a great factor in the behavior of many nineteenth-century Dorchesterites, and no person was more aware of this than Miss Maria Cummins.

Maria Cummins was born in Salem, Massachusetts in 1827, to the Honorable David Cummins. She was educated at the exclusive Mrs. Sedgwick's School in Lenox, returning to her father's home in Dorchester after her "finishing". The Cummins' were a well-to-do family of education and wealth, who had moved to Dorchester's Meeting House Hill in the 1840s. The Cummins' purchased the Turks Head Tavern, on Bowdoin Street, an eighteenth-century tavern that had been converted to a dwelling of large proportions.

Once the Cummins' had settled, they began to attend the First Parish Church on Meeting House Hill, and Maria Cummins began to teach Sunday School at the church, where the first Sunday School class had been formed in 1822, one of the first Unitarian classes in the area. Under the direction of William Taylor Adams (Oliver Optic), Miss Cummins led a defined and religious life, devoting herself to her students. It was in 1850 that she undertook a novel to please her nieces, the daughters of her sister Helen, and Edmund Pitt Tileston.

Helen Cummins had married Edmund Pitt Tileston, a founder of the Tileston & Hollingsworth Paper Mill on the Neponset River. He was a founder in 1843, the year of his marriage, of the Dorchester Historical



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Society, and active in numerous charities. Their daughters, Florence, Grace, and Katherine Tileston, were doted upon by their aunt, and with the publication of her book *The Lamplighter*, were flattered by the attention. The book, a tribute and gift from their aunt, was to bring Miss Maria Cummins a great deal of attention. Published anonymously, it was to sell over 40,000 copies within a few weeks. The novel went through numerous editions, and was placed in many Unitarian Sunday School classes in Massachusetts.

In the period between 1850 and her death in 1866, Miss Cummins wrote *The Wide, Wide World*, *Folklore*, and *Haunted Hearts*. She also contributed numerous articles for the *Atlantic Monthly*. The books were all of a semi-religious type, and well-received by her readers. Of a deeply religious nature herself, Maria Cummins joined the First Parish Church in 1864, and was buried from the church on Meeting House Hill on October 1, 1866.

Her family home stood forlorn, and it was described in 1872, the year of its demolition:

"standing on the road, beside the estate, are four beautiful, gigantic poplar trees, which, like sentinals, guarding this somber place, seem alone of all to have defied the ravages of Time."

The house has been demolished, yet the writings of Maria Cummins live on. She is remembered as one of the "Women in Dorchester History."