

19th century "country doctors in Dorchester" treated small town population

by Anthony Mitchell Sammarco

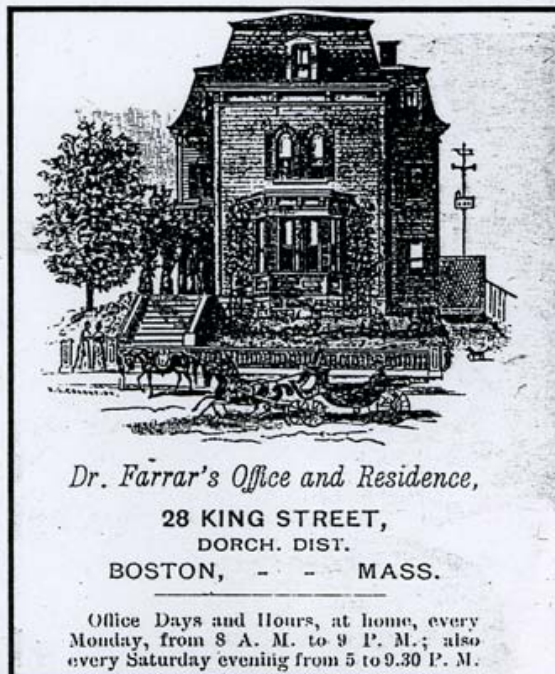
Dorchester has not only numerous doctors, but the Carney Hospital and many health centers to provide medical attention to residents. However, at the beginning of the 19th century, there were but three doctors to serve Dorchester.

Doctors Eleaser Clapp, Thomas Danforth and Robert Thaxter had all been graduated from Harvard College, after which they studied medicine before practicing in Dorchester. The two former had great potential, but each committed suicide in 1817, leaving only Dr. Thaxter "who enjoyed a large medical and surgical practice" in Dorchester. By the time of his death in 1852 from a fever, he was able to count four other doctors in town.

Dr. Benjamin Cushing, for whom Cushing Ave. is named, was a leading physician in Dorchester, serving as consultant to numerous hospitals. With Dr. Gardner, who lived on Pleasant St., they were to be joined by Drs. William Cranch Bond Fifield and Erasmus D. Miller, who carried on medical services for a town with fewer than 8,000 residents by the time Dorchester was annexed to Boston in 1870.

Dr. Fifield opened his office in his home on Ashland St. and had a wide practice after his return from studying medicine in Germany. Dr. Miller's office was on Washington St., near School St., where he concentrated on the disease of consumption. Their continued efforts on behalf of their fellow townspeople continued until their deaths, but as Dorchester's population swelled to huge numbers and former farms and estates were subdivided for continued residential development, the need for additional doctors arose.

ONE OF THE NEW DOCTORS TO SETTLE IN Dorchester was Dr. Farrar of Hartford, Connecticut. Moving to 28 King St., a large Italianate house with a slate mansard roof set back from the street with trees, vines and grass lawns, he commenced practice not as a general practitioner but as a specialist in "ruptures", or what we now refer to as hernias. So well known was Dr. Farrar in the treatment of hernias that he designed and had produced a special truss for patients that alleviated pain. His medical service was "highly endorsed" by former patients and "For Full information send 10 cents for a sealed book (in plain envelope) on Rupture, Hydrocele, Varicocele." His patients



An advertisement for Dr. Farrar's medical practice on King Street.

were not just local residents, but many who travelled far and wide to his Dorchester office.

An 1890 brochure Dr. Farrar stated that "the Ashmont and Milton Electric Cars leave the corner of Franklin and Washington Sts. for King St. every half hour. The Steam Cars from the Old Colony Depot, Boston, come out to our Shawmut Station every half hour and return as often." Having chosen Dorchester as both his home and medical office, Dr. Farrar's practice benefited from both the streetcars along Dorchester Ave. and the trains of the Old Colony Railroad, the Red Line of a century ago.

Dr. Farrar's "Radical Cure for Rupture...Without Pain or Inconvenience" would ensure his reputation as a successful doctor, and also as a man who participated in Dorchester's economic growth.

Anthony Mitchell Sammarco's award-winning history columns are a regular feature of Dorchester Community News.