

History: Dorchester's "Four Corners"

by Anthony Sammarco

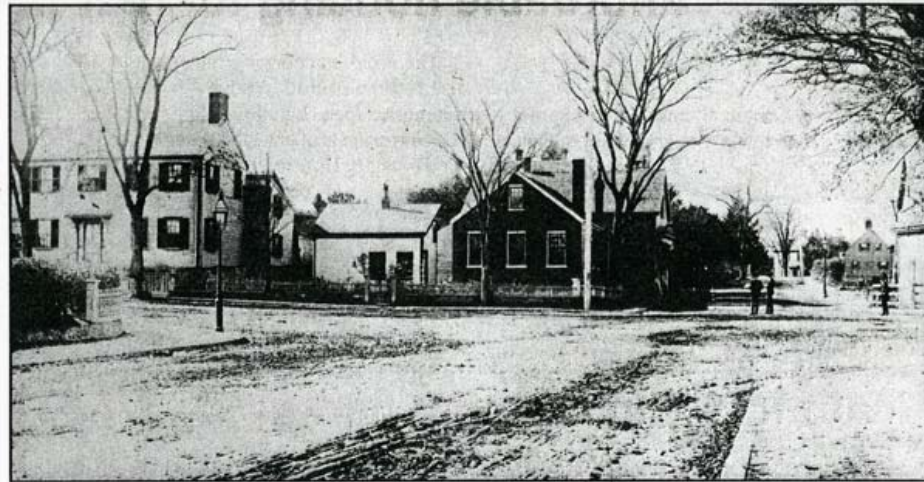
Four Corners is the junction of Washington Street, Harvard Street and Bowdoin Street, Dorchester. Simply named, it is the intersection of four corners, yet the history behind the area is fascinating.

Washington Street was originally known as the "Upper Road", being laid out in 1654. Most of what was surrounding land in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was farmland, and largely undeveloped until after the Civil War. Four Corners was a crossroads, with Harvard Street leading to the Brush Hill Turnpike (Blue Hill Avenue), which was laid out as a toll road in 1805 connecting Roxbury to Milton. Washington Street, named after President Washington, was laid out to connect Roxbury at Grove Hall to the Lower Mills, and Bowdoin Street connected Four Corners to Kane Square just below Meeting House Hill. The area remained somewhat rural until just after the Revolution.

Supurb view

However, after the Revolution, the area about Four Corners was a prime location, as the view from the Upper Road towards the harbor was unparalleled. The panoramic view from Boston to Squantum was a reason to build houses along the road, and one of the first owners was Edmund Pitt Tileston, a partner in the firm of Tileston & Hollingsworth, a papermill on the Neponset River. He bought a large federal mansion at the corner of Washington and Dakota Streets, which had a splendid view. The grounds, laid out as a small estate, included a gold fish pond on the present site of Claybourne Street.

Adjacent to his estate was a small cottage that was



This was Four Corners in 1885, looking from Bowdoin Street across Washington Street and down Harvard Street. Photo courtesy of Dorchester Historical Society.

the home of Edwin and Mary Devine Booth. He was the noted Shakespearean actor and brother of the notorious John Wilkes Booth, assassin of President Abraham Lincoln. The Booths moved to Dorchester from Boston for the "healthy air" as Mrs. Booth was consumptive. In Booth's biography, it is said that Mrs. Booth moved to Dorchester to be near Dr. Erastus Miller, a noted consumptive doctor who lived at the corner of Washington and School Streets in Four Corners. The cottage was visited sporadically by Booth when in Boston, and he later died there.

Commercial development

The commercial development of Four Corners was slow, with Schmeyl, a noted tinsmith, having his shop and home at the western corner of Harvard and Washington Streets. It was he who apprenticed a boy from Vermont named Roswell Gleason in this trade.

Gleason eventually purchased his former master's shop from the widow and started his own business in 1819. He later established a britannia factory at Four Corners, the present site of Mother's Rest. Gleason Britannia Works employed upwards of fifty men and is reputed to be the first company to silverplate metal in America. Britannia is a pewter alloy, and could be fashioned into teapots, cruets and serving pieces, and if plated with silver, it mimicked expensive silver services at a fraction of the cost.

Roswell Gleason was probably Dorchester's first millionaire, and he lived in great style in "Lilacs", his mansion at the corner of Washington and Park Streets. Continuing until a disastrous fire in 1872, Gleason Britannia Works was a local landmark.

With the residential development of the former Tuck-

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er Estate, Gaylord, Algonquin and Bradley Streets were cut through and were made available for building lots. The houses along these streets, all built between 1870 and 1930, were substantial examples of Victorian architecture.

The annexation of 1870 allowed new residents of Dorchester to live in a suburban atmosphere, known as "streetcar suburbs", and the area around Four Corners attracted a diverse population. To serve the needs of this growing community, the Chittenden Brothers opened an apothecary shop at Four Corners, and Engine 18 built a new firehouse near Washington Street on Bowdoin. The demolition of earlier houses made way for the building of commercial streetscapes, which were quickly let to merchants, tailors and small shops.

Remembering something special

Four Corners was a crossroads that was sandwiched between Codman Square, a noted shopping district, and

Grove Hall, where one could obtain other conveniences.

The name "Four Corners" seems to echo a past that seems simplistic in regards to four corners at an intersection, but I well remember walking to Four Corners for medicine, the Chinese laundry with thick steam rising from the backroom, to visit cousins on Algonquin Street or to borrow books at the Mount Bowdoin branch of the Boston Public Library just north of the corners.

The name should be remembered not simply as a given name, but as a place where each one of us can remember something special.