

## Lyceum Hall hosted lectures, dances, school classes, masses

by Anthony Sammarco

**L**yceum Hall, since torn down, used to stand across from the First Parish Church on Meetinghouse Hill. The puddingstone ledge there provided a firm foundation for a hall that aimed to carry on the traditions of the philosopher Aristotle.

Of course, the first lyceum, a public lecture hall, was in ancient Greece. But the ideals of democracy, which first took root in that country, had a vast impact on many aspects of early nineteenth-century Boston culture.

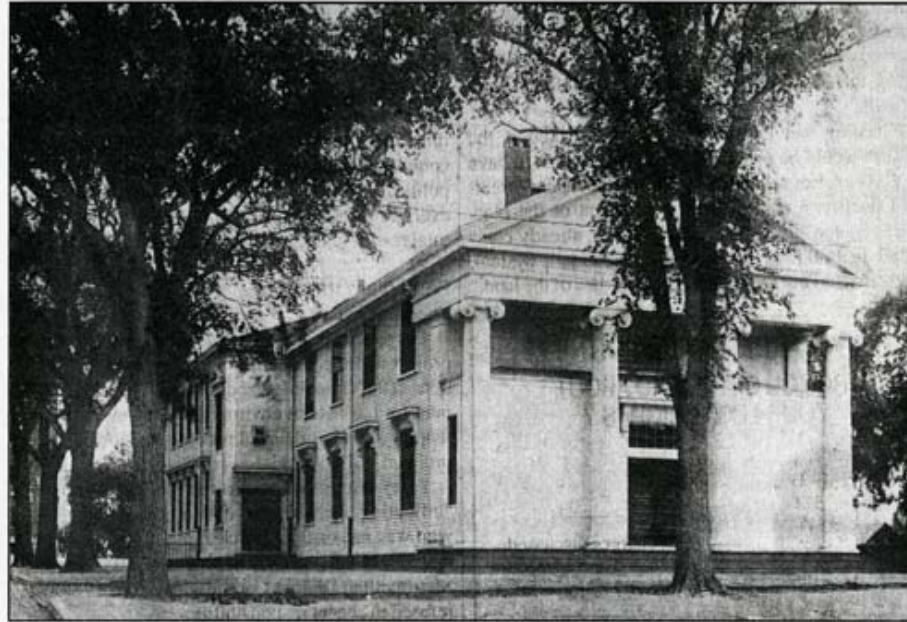
In 1839, Dorchester residents voted to erect a lecture hall on town land located on Meetinghouse Hill. The town selectmen then appointed a building committee, which was chaired by Colonel Walter Baker, the wealthy owner of the Baker Chocolate Co. The committee also included Samuel Loud, John Robinson, Thomas Tremlett, William Draper Swan, Moses Draper, and Oliver Hall.

The committee's job was to raise the necessary funds to build a hall, and they appealed to their townsmen with a pamphlet entitled "Address to our Fellow Citizens," which argued that the hall would be a benefit to the town. It would, they said, provide a place for public discussion and debate on subjects of common interest.

The Lyceum Hall would also provide another public space that could be used for a multitude of purposes. The Town Hall, located at Baker's Corners (Codman Square) and in use from 1816, was a good walk from Meetinghouse Hill. A new lyceum would be convenient for residents in the northern part of town.

### Lyceum served various needs

On February 27, 1840, the Lyceum Hall was officially dedicated. The famous educator Horace Mann spoke, while Baker presided. With great ceremony, the Lyceum Hall was accepted by the selectmen of Dorchester from the building committee, and a hymn com-



**HISTORIC LYCEUM HALL**, which once stood across from the First Parish Church on Meetinghouse Hill, was dedicated in 1840.

posed by Rev. John Pierpont for the occasion was sung. In all, the dedication was one of the finest seen in Dorchester, and attracted attention far and wide.

Lyceum Hall was built in the then-fashionable Greek Revival style, with a stately portico with four Doric columns gracing the front. The hall, a large gallery, and two anterooms came to serve the diverse needs of a growing population. Baker had made extremely generous donations to the building fund, and the committee had wished to dedicate the hall to him. He declined the honor, and the name "Lyceum Hall" be-

came official.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the hall was the site of educational lectures, demonstrations, dances, and military drills. Work tables were set up for women who cut cloth bandages for the army during the Civil War. Also, the first Roman Catholic masses on Meetinghouse Hill (1872) and the first Episcopalian mass in Dorchester (1847) were celebrated there. The hall showed no bias, and served as a steady and prominent building

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## HISTORY

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### ***Dorchester's Lyceum Hall hosted lectures, dances, school classes, masses***

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on the hill. In the 1860s, the First Parish Church began using the hall for choir rehearsals and for their Sunday School.

#### **Hall becomes 'schoolhouse'**

However, after the annexation of Dorchester to the city of Boston in 1870, the use of Lyceum Hall began to change. It was still used for dances, socials, and concerts, but during the day it was used by local schools for mechanical arts, woodworking, and sundry purposes that served the growing population.

By the Great Depression, the First Parish Church was one of the few community groups still using the stately hall. The school department used the space for mentally-handicapped students, in addition to the shop classes

still being conducted there. But no longer was the lecture by a visiting Harvard professor or a dance with the Germania Band a drawing card to the Lyceum Hall, as movie houses along with the Strand Theatre and attractions in Boston drew residents away.

After an unsuccessful attempt by local residents to save the building, primarily led by the First Parish Church, Lyceum Hall was demolished in 1955.

The relatively-new Sturbridge Village had declined to take Lyceum Hall, saying it was not a "significant" building. No further use for it could be found by the city, after the school department stopped holding classes there.

Where Lyceum Hall once opened its doors is evident in the ledge of puddingstone across Parish Street from the Georgian-Revival First Parish Church. The pillars, four tall columns that graced the building for over a

century, were salvaged and stored by the church.

Today, we look back at a time when the Lyceum Hall provided not only an educational service, but a meeting place for our ancestors.

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