

History: At Dorchester academy, proper young ladies learned needlework

by Anthony Sammarco

While Dorchester is credited with the first publicly supported school in America, the town has also had numerous private schools. One of these was Mrs. Saunders and Miss Beach's Academy on Meeting House Hill, Dorchester.

In 1804, Judith Saunders and Clementina Beach purchased from William and Frederick Pope a house and a quarter acre of land on "the corner of the road from Milton to Boston and the road to the seashore" or what is today the corner of Adams and East Streets. The house was built by lumber merchants and sold for \$4,500.00 to be used as a young ladies' boarding school.

Mrs. Saunders and Miss Beach had operated a young ladies' academy in Gloucester before they moved to Dorchester to be closer to Boston. In Dorchester, they offered "Reading, Writing, English Grammar, Arithmetic, Plain Sewing, Embroidery, Tambour, French Language, Painting, Geography, including the use of the Globes." The curriculum could also be expanded for a Dancing Master and Music Master and other necessary services deemed important by the academy. The academy, enlarged by a rear ell, was described as "very spacious, the accommodations excellent and the situation admirable and remarkably healthy." Set high on the road, it was just south of the First Parish Church, where a pew was reserved for ladies boarding there. The rear of the house overlooked the Town Landing, and Dorchester Bay beyond.

Mrs. Saunders and Miss Beach advertised their academy in the "Columbian Centennial," a leading newspaper, and enrolled upwards of thirty-six boarders and numerous day students. The academy was to attract students not just locally, but from as far as Mississippi, due to the high standards set by the two women.

Though the curriculum stressed a varied education, the embroideries executed at the academy by the students became legendary. Embroideries of classically inspired stories, of the Bible, or of mourning scenes to



NEEDLEWORK by Betsy Howe, a student at the Academy, 1803.

memorialize a deceased family member were of paramount importance. A young girl usually learned her alphabet by preparing a sampler that had all the letters from A to Z embroidered with numbers and occasionally a biblical quotation. At Mrs. Saunders and Miss Beach's Academy, the young ladies prepared intricate embroideries that were often framed in expensive gilt frames and presented to their families as both an example of their needlework skill and a cherished possession. These embroideries became of primary importance while other subjects sometimes were relegated to the background.

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MRS. SAUNDERS AND MISS BEACH'S ACADEMY, Meeting House Hill, Dorchester

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Also important were painting on velvet, known as theorem painting, hair work on ivory and drawing and sketching from nature. The artistic side of each of the young ladies was stressed, for if her family was in a position to educate her in a private academy, she would be required to sew, embroider, play the pianoforte and speak a bit of French.

The Academy was successful until Mrs. Saunders died in 1841. Miss Beach closed the academy and sold the property to the May family in 1846, moving to Hingham. The academy, which had instructed numerous Dorchester and Milton young ladies in deportment, education and embroidery, had lasted almost four decades. The house still stands, and though it is surrounded by residences and has itself become a residence, the Mrs. Saunders and Miss Beach's Academy is remembered through the numerous embroideries that survive as testimony to their skills as expert needlewomen and as educators of young ladies.

Anthony Sammarco is an award-winning historian and a volunteer history reporter for Dorchester Community News.