



Dorchester High School was officially organized in 1852 and located at what is now the corner of Gibson and Dorchester Avenue.

## Dorchester home to country's first public school

by Anthony Sammarco

**T**hough Dorchester can claim, with justifiable pride, that the first school in America supported by taxation was founded here in 1639, it was not until 1852 that a high school was established for secondary education.

In the early nineteenth century six schoolhouses were scattered over Dorchester, serving a population of fewer than 3,000 residents. Though these "dame schools" were to serve as an important factor in education, by 1827 it became evident that town residents wanted a high school. In a report published that year, according to *Good Old Dorchester*, it was "expedient to establish a high school; otherwise the town exposes itself to heavy penalties."

Though Dorchester was close to Boston, it remained a separate town until 1870 and was required by state law to educate the youth of the town. Though a committee thought it important in 1827 to found a high school, it was not until 1850 that one again saw the subject raised again. Town Meeting members and the Dorchester School Committee were petitioned by 183 taxpayers of Dorchester "to recommend to the town the immediate establishment of a high school." This important petition was debated at town meetings and was to languish until 1852 when it became a reality.

IN 1852 DORCHESTER HIGH SCHOOL was officially organized and located in as centrally convenient a place as possible. The school was to be built on the

"westerly side of South Boston and Dorchester turnpike, a little north of Centre Street" or what is now the corner of Dorchester Avenue and Gibson Street. For many years, this land had remained open and undeveloped. With a fund of \$6,000 the school house was built as a two story, wood framed building. Most probably designed by Luther Briggs, Jr., a local architect from Port Norfolk, the high school was to be headed by William J. Rolfe, a noted Shakespeare expert who was later to publish the definitive work on the great writer's works.

With 59 pupils, Dorchester High School opened its doors to students from the "Everett, Mather, Adams, Gibson, Winthrop, Norfolk and private schools" as a co-educational school. For four years, Master Rolfe headed the school, followed by Jonathan Kimball and Elbridge Smith both of whom served a total of thirty three years after Rolfe.

Today, Dorchester High School's population is many times the original number, in a far larger and better equipped school on Dumber Avenue, but 143 years later, it is still known by its colors "The Red and Black" and the hope that all who pass through it will make their hometown proud.

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