

Dickens in Dorchester

Fields Corner street named after famous author



World famous author Charles Dickens (1812-1870) visited Dorchester in 1842 and would later have a street named after him in 1879, nine years after his death.

by Anthony Mitchell Sammarco

Dickens Street in Dorchester runs from Adams Street at Fields Corner to Clayton Street in Harrison Square (now referred to as Clam Point). Laid out by the City of Boston in 1879, the street was named to honor the great author and novelist Charles Dickens.

Charles John Huffam Dickens (1812-1870) was born in Landport, Portsmouth, England and was raised between London and Chatham, England. The Dickens family was not wealthy, and in a financial crisis in the mid 1820's, young Charles was sent to a shoe-blackening warehouse as a child laborer to assist the family in paying their debts. It is thought that this period of his life was to be the model for his book "David Copperfield."

After a short period of time at the warehouse, he was later sent to Wellington House Academy in London, from which he graduated in 1827. His first position was as a solicitor's clerk in London, and a year later as a reporter for the London-based "Morning Chronicle." It was during these years that his quick and astute mind was being finely honed to write short stories and later some of the best

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Nineteenth Century writings in Europe.

In 1836, Dickens married Miss Catherine Hogarth and they were to eventually be the parents of ten children. Early in his marriage, Dickens traveled to the United States, visiting Boston in 1842. The Dickenses were to stay at the Tremont House Hotel, built in 1829 at the corner of Tremont and Beacon Streets adjacent to the Granary Burying Ground. Designed by the noted architect Isaiah Rogers as a granite faced hotel, it boasted private rooms, luxury parlors, a dining room that served meals day and night and a massive ballroom — all the amenities that led to its being called America's first luxury hotel. During this sojourn in Boston, the Dickenses visited the noted artist Robert Ball Hughes at his home in Dorchester. Ball Hughes had been born in London but had come to the United States to further his career as a sculptor. His home and studio still stand at 10 School Street, near Mother's Rest, and the Dickenses must have enjoyed their week-long visit to Dorchester, as he referred to it in his writings.

Dickens' first novel was the "Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club," which was published in 1836. This was so popular that a group of young men who attended Dorchester High School were to form themselves into the Pickwick Club, which met annually for a gala dinner in Boston well into this century. The second novel Dickens wrote was "Oliver Twist" (1839) which was quickly followed by "Nicholas Nickleby." Though his writings were initially printed in England, there were numerous American editions that made him not only famous on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, but an immensely wealthy man.

The books that Charles Dickens wrote during the middle of his career include "A Christmas Carol" (1843), "The Chimes" (1844), "The Cricket on the Hearth" (1845), "The Battle of Life" (1846), and "The Hunted Man" (1848). These books, written in such rapid succession to one another, make an interesting outline to an author's career, but we must realize that this was but a prelude to his later writings.

Dickens also wrote "All The Year Round" (1859), "David Copperfield" (1850), "Bleak House" (1853), "Hard Times" (1854), "Little Dorrit" (1857), "A Tale of Two Cities" (1859), "Great Expectations" (1861), and "Our Mutual Friend" (1865). These books, all of which conjure up part of one's high school reading list, represents what our great grandparents so eagerly looked forward to. Dickens was an author of repute, one of great respect and actually one of the most eagerly awaited in the Nineteenth Century.

Though considered a writer, it is amazing to realize that Dickens was also sought after as a reader and public speaker, a well known and generous philanthropist, and as a director and actor in theatrical performances. Upon his death in 1870, his writings became his legacy. Today, we remember him through the name of a street that was laid out nine years after his death, but still conjures up the stories we have come to know and love.

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