Port Norfolk, Dorchester:

Noted historian returns to illuminate "The Port"

by Anthony M. Sammarco

One of the interesting things about being the Dorchester Town Historian is the fact that people from all parts of the United States who read my books Dorchester and Dorchester Volume II share information on Dorchester and often send me photographs, stereoviews and prints that augment what I already know about the history and development of the town.

HISTORY

One such example is a descendant of Thomas French Temple, the last town clerk and treasurer of the Town of Dorchester from 1864 to 1869, president of the Dorchester Mutual Fire Insurance Company and Register of deeds, Suffolk County. Temple lived at Port Norfolk, in a house still standing at the corner of Walnut and Woodworth Streets. The Temple Family, originally from Canton, moved to Dorchester in the late 1840's during the momentous years of tremendous development that included the Old Colony Railroad and new streets that were being laid out by Luther Briggs, Jr., a resident of Port Norfolk, on the former Pine Neck, later to be renamed Port Norfolk in honor of the fact that Dorchester was part of Norfolk County until 1870 when it was annexed to the city of Boston and became part of Suffolk County.

Luther Briggs, Jr. (1822-1905) was a noted architect and surveyor, and was nephew of the famous Boston architect Alexander Parris who designed Quincy Market, St. Paul’s Church (now Cathedral) on Tremont Street and numerous other buildings in Quincy granite. Briggs was to lay out street grid plans for two new neighborhoods in Dorchester, among them Harrison Square (now known as Clam Point) and Port Norfolk, both of which were conveniently situated on the Old Colony Railroad which was laid through Dorchester by Nathan Carruth (1808-1881) and opened on November 10, 1845.

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The new neighborhood was originally called the “Village of Port Norfolk” and has streets such as Lawley, Port Norfolk, Walnut, Erickson, Water, Franklin, Redfield, Woodworth, Berry, Lorenzo, Rice, Oakman and Taylor Streets and Walnut Court being laid out for residential development. The proximity of the new neighborhood to the waterfront was an attraction, but even by the late nineteenth century its waterfront was lined with commercial concerns such as the S.S. Putnam Nail Works, the George Lawley & Son Shipbuilding Company and both the A.T. Stearns Lumber Company and the Laban Pratt Lumber Company.

One building, in particular, survives today as an example of how grand Port Norfolk was envisioned -- the Dorchester Mutual Fire Insurance Company headquarters (now City Lights Electrical Company) which was designed by local architect Charles Austin Wood (1818-1898) as a commercial block with Italianate brownstone (now stucco) rowhouses on Woodworth Street abutting it. Wood, who lived on Woodworth Street in Port Norfolk, was to create a distinctly urban feeling with this complex, with its decorative lintels, slate mansard roof and cast iron stair rails, which was distinctly more impressive with its brownstone facade and steps than the wood framed houses in the neighborhood. An impressive Second French Empire design with corner quoins, bracketed cornice and triple arched windows and doors, its site was an appropriate location for the insurance company that had been founded in 1855; it also served as the local post office and an apothecary shop. Many of the houses on the side streets were built between the mid nineteenth century and World War I. Both Albert T. Stearns (1821-1906) and Laban Pratt (1829-1923) lived in the neighborhood and also had lumber yards on Port Norfolk, and with surplus lumber they built speculative houses on Water and Taylor Streets and Walnut Court according to the 1869 Taxable Valuation of Dorchester. One house stood out from the rest and it still stands at the corner of Walnut and Wood Streets. Built circa 1855, it was modernized about 1870 by the noted Boston architect William Gibbons Preston (1842-1910) who had built the Hotel Vendome and the Rogers Building of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston’s Back Bay. With an impressive domed mansard roof, arched dormer windows and iron cresting along the roof, the Temple Family lived in dignified splendor.

Seen in the accompanying photograph, taken circa 1875, the Temple House is an impressive late Greek Revival house (circa 1845) with decorative details, corner pilasters and the pedimented dormers of the original roof, which are capped by the new mansard roof by Preston. An impressive wood balustrade fence outlines the property and the carriage house can be seen on the right. On the left is the predecessor to the Community Church of Neponset on Walnut Street.

Today, Port Norfolk is a compact neighborhood, separated from the rest of Dorchester by a wide swath of the Southeast Expressway and Morrissey Boulevard. The streets, dating from the mid nineteenth century, are lined with wood framed houses in a panoply of architectural styles ranging from the Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, French Second Empire and the Italianate, all within walking distance of Dorchester's Tenean Beach and panoramic views of Boston Harbor from The Estuary.

[Editors Note: Anthony M. Sannmarco will lead a walking tour of Port Norfolk on Sunday, October 1, 2000 for the Victorian Society. Participants should meet at the corner of Morrissey Boulevard and Walnut Street (the site of the Texaco Gas Station opposite Neponset Circle) at 1:00 PM; admission to the walk is $10.00 per person. For further information on the Victorian Society, please call (617) 267-6338.]

Anthony Mitchell Sannmarco’s award-winning columns are a continuing feature of the Dorchester Community News.