

Robert Ball Hughes: towering ability, lost opportunity

by Anthony Sammarco

Robert Ball Hughes was an eminent nineteenth-century sculptor who once lived on School Street, opposite Mother's Rest in Dorchester. Known for his skill as a sculptor, he was also remarkably adept at painting, wax portraiture and etching.

Hughes (1806-1868) was born in London, England and as a young child showed a marked aptitude in the modeling of figures from the family's supply of wax candles. His figures were thought to be so well formed that he was enrolled in the schools of the Royal Academy. He was later to enter the studio of Edward Hodges Baily, a noted sculptor in London, and to exhibit his works at the Royal Academy.

He married in London, and in 1829 set sail for New York with his wife, Georgianna Ball Hughes. Once in New York City, he opened his own studio and began to receive the attention of the city. His first major commission was a statue of the late governor, De Witt



Robert Ball Hughes
1806-1868



The Ball Hughes' family home on School Street in Dorchester.

Clinton. He later was given the commission to sculpt a statue of Alexander Hamilton for the Rotunda of the Merchants Exchange in New York. The statue, thought to be the first marble portrait sculpture in America, was destroyed by 1835 by fire, eight months after it was completed. His grief must have been great, and he removed to Philadelphia with his family.

In Philadelphia he competed for the commission of an equestrian statue of President George Washington. His model was thought to be the finest submitted for consideration, and it was said that "In Mr. Hughes' design we see everything to admire, and nothing to condemn." The model showed the President astride a noble horse, bowing with his hat to his assembled

constituents. The design was selected by the committee above all other entries; however, the failure of the Bank of the United States in 1841 ended the project and the commission.

Dejected, Ball Hughes left with his family for Boston, where he settled on Adams Street in Cedar Grove, opposite what is now the Cedar Grove Cemetery. Known as "Gin Plain" in the early nineteenth century, this area was a large flat plain that overlooked the Neponset River. The area was a favorite spot for walking, and the Ball Hugheses must have enjoyed the rural setting after such bad luck in New York and Philadelphia. Robert Ball Hughes continued his sculpting, producing busts of Washington Irving in 1836, Edward Livingston in 1838, and a large seated portrait of Nathaniel Bowditch, the noted navigator. This model was later to serve as the piece to be cast as the memorial at Mount Auburn Cemetery for Bowditch. His work continued to be sought, but his career, initially so successful, began slowly to dwindle.

The family moved about 1851 to School Street near Codman Square. The house was originally built by Captain Jeremiah Spaulding, a well known shipmaster in the East India trade. His wife and their daughters, Augusta and Georgianna, lived in simple comfort, while Ball Hughes began to teach art, lecture locally and to develop a new form of art, that of 'poker sketches', whereby a hot poker is drawn along a piece of wood to create a design by the singeing of the wood. These peculiar forms of art were so popular that he created a series including "The Trumpeter", "The Monk", "Falstaff Examining his Recruits", "Rembrandt", "Shakespeare", "Rubens" and "Don Quixote". These pieces, though not as time consuming as sculpting, continued to provide an income for the family.

Robert Ball Hughes was undoubtedly a fine artist, but a temperamental one. It is recorded that he displayed his talent better while 'under the influence.' His ability to create a likeness, be it in clay, marble or even a subject to be painted (he painted portraits to augment his income), made Ball Hughes an exceptional artist. His death, in 1868, left a void in the world of art. Through disappointments, destruction of his art, and his misfortune, he never attained the success or recognition that an artist of his ability should have had.

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The home of the Ball Hughes family, "Sunnyside", still stands on School Street, and was the home of his widow for many years. Their daughter, Georgianna, never married and inherited her father's artistic ability, continuing the artistic environment that her father created.

Robert Ball Hughes was buried in the newly laid out Cedar Grove Cemetery, a year after it was established. His grave overlooks the Neponset River and has a panoramic view from its knoll. His artistic genius, though never fully utilized, flourished in his Dorchester studio.

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