

HISTORY

"As here my Mortal relicks lie, May heaven receive my soul"

by Anthony Sammarco

The Old North Burying Ground in Upham's Corner is the oldest burial place in Dorchester, predating the South Cemetery on Dorchester Avenue by almost two centuries. Since 1634 when it was laid out by a vote of the Selectmen of Dorchester it has been the resting place of many important residents, but no one was more readily identifiable with the Old North in the nineteenth century than "Uncle" Daniel Davenport.

Daniel Davenport (1773-1860) was the son of Isaac and Mary Davenport of Dorchester. He was married by The Rev. Thaddeus Mason Harris of the Dorchester Church (there was only one meetinghouse in Dorchester before 1806 and it was on Meeting House Hill) to Miss Sally Spur in 1796. They built a house in "Cracker Hollow", the area off Geneva Avenue near Bowdoin Street, and so named for the fact that crackers were baked in the vicinity.

As a young man, Davenport succeeded Thomas Clap as sexton of the Meetinghouse and also as the town gravedigger in 1799. Clap had served the town from 1760 to 1797 as sexton and gravedigger and had buried 1,080 of his fellow townsmen at Cemetery Corners, as Upham's Corner was known in the eighteenth century. However, Daniel Davenport, a father of numerous children and uncle of even more nephews and nieces, was beloved by many people and had not only served as grave digger, but as sexton at the Meetinghouse where he performed many services, among them filling the footwarmers with hot coals on Sunday mornings to comfort those attending the long services in the unheated meetinghouse.

Davenport's interest in the Old North Burying Ground is evident in the publication of "The Sexton's Monitor, and Dorchester Cemetery Memorial", which was printed in 1826. Not only did he list interesting inscriptions on many of the tombstones at Old North, but he included an important record of the Ministers, Ruling Elders and Deacons of Dorchester and a Table of Annual Deaths from the Seventeenth Century to 1825. Though it might not have been as important when it was first published, this information is vastly important in the research of Dorchester's history today.



"Uncle" Daniel Davenport, 1773-1860

Davenport must have realized that he was preserving some of Dorchester's history, for in his memorial he said, "When I read the several dates on the tombs, of some that died as yesterday, and some centuries ago, I consider that great day, when we shall all of us be contemporaries, and make our appearance together."

In 1833, after thirty-four years as the town grave digger, he must have felt his mortality and he asked The Rev. Thaddeus Mason Harris to compose his tombstone epitaph, which he did:

This grave was dug and finished in the year 1833 by himself when he had been Sexton 27 years and attended 1135 funerals. As Sexton with spade I learned to delve beneath the sod. Where body to the Earth returns but Spirit to its God, years twenty seven this toil I bore. And midst deaths of it was spared. Seven hundred graves and thirty I dug then mine prepared. And when at last I too must die. Some else the bed I must tole

As here my Mortal relicks lie.

May heaven receive my soul.

His tombstone, a large slate stone, was carved and erected but the grave remained empty until 1860, when "Uncle" Daniel Davenport died at the age of 87. His retirement, which had occurred in 1852, was a smooth transition for the town, as the new sexton and grave digger was his son William Davenport.

The Old North Burying Ground, which remained relatively neglected for two centuries, became a virtual garden in the mid-nineteenth century, when Samuel Downer, an horticulturist and town resident, began to embellish the grounds with trees and flowering shrubs. The aspect of embellishing the Old North was an important one and as the "resting place of our forefathers" became, and still remains, a place of reverent reflection of the town, its history and of "Uncle" Daniel Davenport. He said that "when I look upon the tombs of the great, every motion of envy dies within me" and that "when I meet with the grief of parents on a tombstone, my heart melts with compassion."

Daniel Davenport provided a necessary service to the Town of Dorchester for many years, and he provided this service with respect and compassion. Let us recognize his contributions as important ones in Dorchester's "Garden of the Dead."

Come with me to the garden,
That sacred spot of earth,
Where ne'er is heard the airy song,
Nor the wanton sound of mirth.
-- Davenport

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