

HISTORY: Dorchester generosity provided elder care in south

by Anthony Sammarco

In the decades just prior to the Civil War, Dorchester saw a surge in anti-slavery feeling and witnessed the founding in 1835 of the Dorchester Anti Slavery Association. The association, which derided the institution of slavery in the South and the inhuman treatment of slaves, was founded by literate and compassionate citizens who were "never to countenance the oppressed in vindicating their rights by resorting to physical force."

The anti-slavery movement, which emanated primarily from the First Parish Church on Meeting House Hill, was supported by the minister, The Rev. Nathaniel Hall, whose sermons on slavery caused great comment. It was said that "no other pulpit in America was more earnestly or more powerfully outspoken on behalf of human freedom in the most critical day of the anti-slavery struggle." The advent of the Civil War, and the enlistment of many recruits from Dorchester, led to the support by church groups, women's associations and general relief societies to provide support and necessary supplies for both Union troops and the freed slaves after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.

After the war, many residents of Dorchester joined in the newly founded Associated Charities of Boston. This group endeavored "to provide that the case of every applicant for relief shall be thoroughly investigated [and] to place the results of such investigation at the disposal of the Overseers of the Poor, of charitable societies and agencies, and of private persons of benevolence." Public charity had a long history in Boston, and extended beyond the city limits.

In the South after the Civil War, there was a period of great depression and reconstruction that affected every part of society. The former slaves were in a precarious position, as they had, in most instances, only one marketable skill. One person who realized how serious the plight of the poor in the South was Amelia Pride, an African American who had been graduated from Hampton University in 1876 and was a dedicated teacher in the schools of Lynchburg, Virginia.

Amelia Perry Pride (1858-1932) was the daughter of William and Ellen George Perry and was raised in Lynchburg, Virginia. Following her graduation from Hampton University, a remarkable achievement in 1876 for not just a woman but an African American woman, she began her career as a teacher in Lynchburg, and later



FIRST PARISH CHURCH on Meeting House Hill in Dorchester sits in the center of the hill in this 1885 photo. To the left is the Mather Schoolhouse; to the right, Lyceum Hall. In the foreground is the Soldiers and Sailors Monument erected in 1867 by the Pickwick Club of Dorchester in memory of the men who fell during the Civil War (1861-1865). Many from the congregation of the First Parish Church responded to the fund-raising appeal of Amelia Perry Pride, who built the Dorchester House home for the elderly in Lynchburg, Virginia.

organized a night school for both adults and children, as many blacks who wished to be educated were unable to attend school at any other time but at night. Realizing that her own education was an important factor in her chosen career, she "firmly believed that education was the salvation of her race" and that education included more than the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Amelia Pride was a tireless worker for the education of African Americans, and as an additional interest she began to concern herself, and her community, in the welfare of elderly African Americans. Through determined fund raising efforts, she solicited the financial assistance of the people of Dorchester, Massachusetts for the establishment of a home for the elderly in Lynchburg, Virginia. Dorchester had become the home, in 1869, of Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell, two supporters of both the women's rights movement and the anti-slavery movement. So it is not a surprise that residents of Dorchester would contribute the necessary funds for food, fuel, clothing and other necessary supplies in addition to the funds required to purchase a building where the elderly, most of whom were former slaves, could live comfortably for the remainder of their lives. So grateful for the financial assistance from our town was Mrs. Pride that she named the new home for

the elderly the Dorchester Home.

Mrs. Pride's life was one of dedication to education and to the less fortunate of her community. Her marriage to Claiborne Pride in 1881 was a supportive one, and together they raised three sons. The challenging aspects of her life, combined with her obvious concern for her fellow citizens of Lynchburg, Virginia, make us well aware of her achievements in education and elder-care, but the courage and determination to raise the necessary funds and to instill a sense of industriousness in her students was to render her an exemplary role model. She is quoted as saying, "In my work among the destitute I have been forced time and again to ask myself the question: Am I really helping?" Well, we in present-day Dorchester, Massachusetts can say, yes, she did, and still does help, for the Dorchester Home in her hometown of Lynchburg, Virginia is a concrete example of her help and her concern.

Anthony Sammarco is a volunteer history reporter for Dorchester Community News. See a profile of Anthony and his many contributions to local historical education in the City Living section of The Boston Globe, Sunday, February 14.