

HISTORY: The great loss of Great Neck

by Anthony Sammarco

Dorchester was chosen by the early settlers on account of the abundant pasturage Great Neck [South Boston] afforded their cattle," says William Dana Orcutt, in *Good Old Dorchester* (1908). The Puritans, who settled Dorchester in 1630, settled at what we know as Edward Everett Square, or Five Corners as they called it. Dorchester for the first two centuries after the settlement was comprised of farms and elegant country seats, with a productive mill complex along the Neponset River at the Lower Mills.

Dorchester Street, leading to Broadway, represents the original cow path to the pasturelands, a wood gate having been extended across the path at the present junction of Dorchester Avenue and Dorchester Street to contain the pasturing cows. For the first decade after the settlement (1630-1680), the Great Neck was used for pasture, with relatively few inhabitants on the peninsula. By the time of the Revolution, the Great Neck was inhabited by less than twelve families, a growth almost triple that of the previous century's population. The Neck was the scene of tremendous revolutionary activity, with Dorchester Heights being fortified by the American troops as a stronghold commanding Boston Harbor.

Led by General Washington, the fortifications were built by an estimated three thousand men in such a manner as to dispel General Howe and his officers, the British troops and Loyalists in Boston summarily setting sail for Halifax, Nova Scotia on March 17, 1776. Following this feverish excitement in fortifying the Heights, the Neck again resumed its placid existence as a farming and pastureland until the last decade of the eighteenth century.

Inhabitants of the Great Neck attended the Meeting House in Dorchester, their children attending the school located on the northwest slope of Meeting House Hill. However, due to flooding conditions on the Causeway at Washington Village (now Andrew Square) during the year, the inhabitants could not attend either church or school at various times. To allow for the education of their children, the inhabitants of Great Neck supported a school which was subsidized in part by a contribution from the Dorchester Selectmen. These unsatisfactory conditions, unresolved by the town, led to discontent and eventual action by the town.

In 1803, a number of the Mount Vernon Proprietors,

who had laid out and developed Beacon Hill, purchased large tracts of land on the Neck for speculative purposes. Bostonians including William Tudor, Gardiner, Greene, Jonathan Mason and Harrison Gray Otis presented a petition to Boston in 1804 to annex the Neck. "It was thought that Boston could not accommodate many more inhabitants, and that Dorchester Neck was the most accessible to it, and could easily be united by a bridge."¹ The Town of Boston immediately formed a committee, which reported on January 17, 1804 that "the Town will consent that the lands on Dorchester Neck, agreeably to the Petition of the Owners, shall be annexed to and incorporated with the Town of Boston, provided it can be done on such conditions as the Town shall hereafter agree to."²

Subsequently, additional meetings were held, but the fervor and excitement concerning annexation was so great that little business was transacted. The petitioners' positions were clearly evident, for "in the mean time the petitioners were making the most strenuous efforts to effect the passage of the bill. They had bought a large number of acres at Mattapanock (Dorchester Neck) at a very cheap rate, and they were convinced that if the bill should pass, the property would immediately rise in value. It was also considered highly important to the Town of Boston that the Neck should be annexed, as it was then supposed the peninsula (Boston) itself could not contain many more inhabitants."³

The Town of Dorchester vehemently opposed annexation of the Great Neck to Boston, another area that the town felt would further decrease the land area, and further reduce the tax base.⁴ An Anti-Annexation Committee was formed on January 23, 1804, Moses Everett being chosen as moderator.⁵ The committee consisted of nine persons: Ebenezer Wales, Stephen Badlam, John Howe, Samuel Withington, Major James Robinson with Ebenezer Tolman, Lemuel Crane, Thomas Moseley, Edward Baxter, representing the selectmen of Dorchester.⁶ This committee was formulated to ensure Dorchester's rights in the annexation procedures, a remonstrance being presented to the General Court of Massachusetts in 1804.

The culmination was on March 6, 1804, when the annexation of Dorchester Neck was voted to join Boston, without compensation to Dorchester for the land. Land speculators realized tremendous profits, with the twelve families who inhabited Great Neck attaining great wealth through the rise in land values. "Thus, when the bill passed... those who had held out not only

had to give up the land, but also lost the money which they might have received."⁷

Boston immediately constructed a bridge connecting South Boston, as the Neck was renamed after the annexation, to Boston proper. This bridge was built from South Street in Boston to the Neck at South Boston, with an annual assessment to the petitioners of the annexation. "In spite of this, it was completed (in 1805) at an expense of \$56,000.00. It was afterwards known as the South Bridge."

Changes were rampant on the Neck, as William Tudor built a row of houses along Broadway at A Street, known as the Brinley Block. His profit through land speculation led to further development of the former pastureland as an urban settlement. One Mr. Murphy constructed the South Boston Hotel, known by the large golden ball outside his public house. The changes were swift, and tremendous urban growth occurred in South Boston after 1804, when the street-grid plan by Stephen Badlam and Mather Withington, two well-known land surveyors, was laid out. With streets being listed from "A" at Broadway Station, it rose in letters to "P" Street at City Point; cross streets, which ran from east to west, were named "First Street" on up. The minor streets were named after some of the land speculators, so Tudor, and other streets, were laid out by name rather than by letter or number.

However, the growth realized within the first decades after the annexation was low in comparison to the building boom South Boston was to experience from the Civil War to World War I.

Footnotes:

1. *History of Dorchester*, Ebenezer Clapp, Jr., Editor, Boston, MA 1859, page 372.
2. *History of South Boston*, Thomas C. Simonds, David Clapp printer, Boston, MA 1857, page 73;
3. *Ibid*, page 74;
4. Dorchester once included the towns of: South Boston, Milton, part of Quincy, part of Dedham, Hyde Park, Stoughton, Foxboro, Wrentham, Raynham and Rehoboth. It went within sixteen rods of the Rhode Island border in the seventeenth century;
5. Moses Everett was the minister to the Dorchester Church at Meeting House Hill from 1774-1793;
6. *History of South Boston*, pp. 74-75;
7. *Good Old Dorchester*, page 149.

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