

HISTORY

The heart of Dorchester

by Anthony Sammarco

Codman Square represents the geographical center of Dorchester, and the post office there is known as the Dorchester Centre branch. However, it was in 1848 that the square was renamed Codman Square in memory of Rev. John Codman, pastor of the Second Church. From 1765 to 1848, the square was known as Baker's Corners, after Dr. James Baker, who kept a general store at the corner of

Washington Street and Talbot Avenue, the present site of the Lithgow Building.

The photograph accompanying this article shows the eastern side of Washington Street about 1890. The street was laid out in 1654, and named the "Upper Road", leading from Roxbury to Braintree. After the Revolution, the street was renamed "Washington Street" in honor of President Washington upon his

election in 1789. The area was composed of large farms, with few houses until the Second Church was built in 1806 by Oliver Warren.

The population increase in Dorchester was dramatic; while there were 1,513 residents in 1776, by 1800 there were 2,347. The meetinghouse was located on Meeting House Hill, and it served the entire community until it was decided by a group of people from the southern side of Dorchester to depart the church, and establish their own church more convenient to their homes. The result was the New South Meeting House, or Second Church. It was built according to the designs

of Sir Christopher Wren, with a belfry housing a bell cast by the patriot Paul Revere. The design was in keeping with the architecture of most New England meetinghouses, and it commanded the corner of Washington and

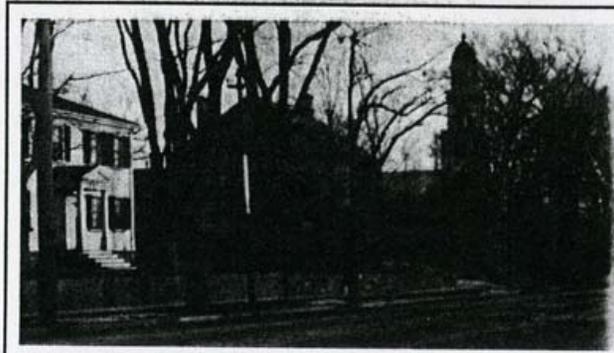
Centre Streets.

Second Church anchored the square

Prior to the erection of Second Church, the only streets in the square were Washington Street, Park, Centre, Norfolk, and Ashmont Streets. "Centre Street" was literally the center of the Great Lots, the agricultural areas of early Dorchester. Norfolk Street roughly followed the path of the Indians to the settlement at Dedham, and Park and Ashmont Streets ran from one end of town to the other. After the Second Church was established, the area began to attract more

residents, and the larger farms such as the Capen Farm and the Codman Estate were divided.

The Civil War was the pivotal point, for by the time of the Annexation of Dorchester to the City of Boston (January 4, 1870), the area was being rapidly developed into urban residential districts. New streets were cut through old estates and farms, and the land was prepared for housing. Elegant streets such as Melville Avenue, 1863, and Kenwood and Lyndhurst Streets (1894) were laid out. Moultrie Street was first known as Church Place



THE CODMAN SQUARE OF 1890: Looking southwest on Washington Street, a last-century photographer captures the Kendall House, the Mains House and the Second Church of Dorchester.



TODAY'S CODMAN SQUARE IS ANCHORED by the Lithgow building, now in its final stages of construction. At left is new housing; at right, rehabed retail space. Photos by Naomi Waters.

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upon its establishment in 1891, but renamed in 1901.

The development of the area was for upper-middle-class housing, much of which was designed by such well-known architects as

Arthur Vinal, John A. Fox, Edwin J. Lewis, Jr., and A. Warren Gould. The noted firm of Cabot and Chandler designed the villa of Elbridge Torrey at the 5 corner of Melville Avenue and Washington Street. In the accompanying photograph (from left to right) we see the Clap-Kendall house of 1796,

where the noted historian of the Second Church, Henry Clap Kendall, maintained the family house; the house of The Rev. James Meins, minister of the Second Church from 1848-1878, and the home of his family until the death of his last surviving child, Miss Miriam Meins, in 1937 when it

was demolished; and the 1806 Second Church of Dorchester. This photograph, from the collection of the Second Church, shows how very suburban the square was prior to this century, with the newly-laid tracks for the trolleys which impart the famous "Street-car suburb" aspect to the annexed

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towns of Boston.

Commercial development began later

In 1890, the famous Capen House still commanded the corner of Washington Street and Dunbar Avenue, since its erection in 1638 by Barnard Capen. The street would not see commercial development

until just before World War I, and many of the large houses remained until after the Great Depression.

The Codman Square shopping district, so distinct in my own memory, was one of the more fashionable areas with diverse and sundry dry good stores, hat shops, and the

ubiquitous "smoke shop" where my grandfather Mitchell purchased his cherry pipe tobacco. The square was a pleasant stroll with elm trees lining Washington Street, imparting a glimpse into what the developers foresaw for the area at the time of annexation.

Codman Square is

still attracting attention with the rehabilitation of the Lithgow Building and abutting residential development along Talbot Avenue. The securing of the former Dorchester High School, designed by Hartwell, Richardson, and Driver, as residences has ensured by building's survival, as has the re-use

of the 1904 Codman Square Library as the Codman Square Health Center. Always a vital and strategically-placed intersection, Codman Square's development has really only taken place within the last century.