

Dorchester Historical Society

Dorchester, Massachusetts

Dorchester Firsts

You may have seen the book *Boston Firsts* written by Lynda Morgenroth. She mentions a Boston first that occurred in Dorchester—the manufacture of chocolate by John Hannon in 1764.¹ As it turns out, this claim for first may not be true. The Brown family of Providence is reported to have manufactured chocolate as early as the 1750s.²

Dorchester should be acknowledged for other firsts of great importance, such as establishing a school with public money in 1639 and establishing the form of New England town government.

Town Government by Selectmen

On October 8, 1633, the Dorchester town meeting of its inhabitants produced what is probably the earliest “home rule” document in American institutional history.³ The entry in the records says that the inhabitants would select twelve men to act as a steering committee for the town. Dorchester claims the credit therefore of having been the first plantation to establish the New England town meeting by selectmen⁴ and prides itself as having established the system of local government by town meeting, which has so powerfully influenced the character of our people and the structure of our institutions.⁵

This act, which is printed here, acquires some importance from the fact of its precedence, and that the example was followed the next year by the other settlements, and led to the law of the General Court, passed in 1636, regulating town governments, which has continued in force to the present day.⁶

Imprimus It is ordered that for the general good and well ordering of the affayres of the Plantation there shall be every Mooneday ... a generall meeting of the inhabitants ... to settle (and sett downe) such orders as may tend to the generall good as aforesayd; ... It is also agreed

¹ Lynda Morgenroth. *Boston Firsts*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2006. p. 3. She calls the company that Hannon began and that the Baker family continued the “first, finest, most long lasting chocolate mill in America.” A statement in her preface is puzzling—The Firsts we chose had to be in an area that was part of Boston at the time of the event’s occurrence. Please note that Dorchester was a separate town, not part of Boston, until 1870.

² Charles Rappleye. *Sons of Providence*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007. p. 20, 28. Refers to chocolate manufacture in Rhode Island by the Brown family in the 1750s and early 1760s.

³ John Fairfield Sly. *Town Government in Massachusetts (1620-1930)*. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1967. p. 30-31.

⁴ George Emery Littlefield. *Early Schools and School-Books of New England*. New York: Russell & Russell, 1965. p. 62.

⁵ *Dorchester Old and New, 1630-1930*. Dorchester: Chapple Publishing Company for the Dorchester, Massachusetts, Tercentary Committee, 1930. p. 16.

⁶ *History of the Town of Dorchester, Massachusetts*. By a Committee of the Dorchester Antiquarian and Historical Society. Boston: Ebenezer Clapp, Jr., 1859. p. 32.

that there shall be twelve men selected out of the Company, that may or the greatest part of them, meete as aforesayd, to determine as aforesayd ..."⁷

Edward Everett said that Dorchester set the example in 1633 of that municipal organization which has prevailed throughout New England and has proved one of the chief sources of its progress."⁸

Prior to this time decisions were reached by the inhabitants of the town by consensus

First Church in Boston

The First Parish Church (Unitarian), Meeting-House Hill, Dorchester district, is the direct descendant of the religious society organized in Plymouth, England, March 20, 1630, the eve before the embarkation of the first settlers of Dorchester in the Mary and John. By virtue of this fact, Dorchester lays claim to having the oldest Church Society in the Boston.

It is not, however, the oldest in the Massachusetts Bay Colony-- The First Church in Salem is one of the oldest churches founded in North America. Its 377-year history began when thirty of the newly arrived Puritan settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony gathered together to form a church on August 6, 1629.

First School Supported by Public Funds

In May of 1639 the town appropriated public money for a school. This is believed to be the first use of funds from a public treasury for the establishment of a free school anywhere in the world.⁹ *"There shalbe a rent of 20 ls yeerely foreur imposed vpon Tomsons Iland to bee payd p euy p'son that hath p'rtie in the said Iland according to the p'portion that any such p'son shall fro tyme to time inioy and p'sesse there, and this towards the mayntenance of a schoole in Dorchestr ..."*¹⁰ The town voted to lay a tax (the rent is actually a tax) on the proprietors, and the money went into the public treasury and was used for the school.

Boston Latin claims to be the oldest school, but it was not supported by public money until a later date. Roxbury Latin has claimed to be the oldest continuously running school (Boston Latin has been said to have closed during the Revolution), but Roxbury was not supported by public money in the 1630s. Others may claim a first as well, but Dorchester was the first to use public money for the support of its school.

In 1644, the town established the positions of three Wardens or Overseers of the School who had full supervision of the school, including the responsibility to see that the school master fulfilled his duty, teaching from seven in the morning till five in the afternoon during the months of March to September and from eight in the morning till four in the afternoon from October through February. "Every second day in the week, he shall call his scholars together between 12 and one

⁷ *Fourth Report of the Record Commisioners of the City of Boston. 1880. Dorchester Town Records.* Second edition, 1883. Boston, 1883. p. 3. cited hereinafter as DTR.

⁸ Everett, Edward. *Dorchester in 1630, 1776, and 1855. An Oration Delivered on the Fourth of July, 1855.* Boston, 1855. p. 34.

⁹ DTR, 39; Orcutt, *Good Old Dorchester*, 289-290. Orcutt examines some of the claims by other towns for the first public school; George Emery Littlefield, *Early Schools and School-Books of New England* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), 64-70. Littlefield discusses the claims of Boston and Dorchester for the first school.

¹⁰ DTR, 39.

o'clock to examine them what they have learned on the Sabbath day preceding and take notice of any misdemeanor or disorder that any of his scholars have committed on the Sabbath ... due admonition and correction may be administered," and "every 6th day of the week at 2 o'clock, he shall catechize his scholars in the principles of Christian religion."¹¹

First Mill in Massachusetts Bay Colony

In 1634 Israel Stoughton opened a mill for grinding corn at Lower Mills, and the following year he erected a bridge across the Neponset River.¹² Stoughton's mill is mentioned both in the town records and in those of the Massachusetts Bay colony. Said to be the first grist mill in the country, it was installed to grind corn purchased from native Americans due to the shortages in the colony.

The Dorchester Town Records state: Nov. 3, 1633 "... it is generally agreed that Mr. Israel Stoughton shall build a water mill, if he see cause." Then, Jan. 6, 1633/4 "...it is ordered that Mr. Israell Stoughton shall have the privilage of a weare at Naponset adjoining to his mill ...", and Nov. 3, 1634 "... it also ordered that their shall be a sufficient cartway be made to the mill at Naponset ..."

From that point onward throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there were at least 6 mill sites developed on the Dorchester side of the Neponset River. These mills were made possible by the construction of a canal extending Mother Brook so that water from the Charles River could be diverted to East Brook and the Neponset River.¹³ At the opposite end of Dorchester the South Bay shopping center sits on land made from a real bay that was filled in over a period of years in the nineteenth century. In the early years of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Clap family erected a tidal mill on the bay approximately where the railroad trestle crosses Massachusetts Avenue. Clap's mill probably continued in operation into the nineteenth century.¹⁴ In 1645 Edward Breck was given land at Smelt Brook Creek "by the hands of most of the inhabitants of the town ... on the condition that he doth set a mill there." This tidal mill, which was located at Mill Street on Tenean Creek, approximately to the left of where the Armory on Victory Road is located today, continued in operation into the nineteenth century as well.¹⁵

First Tannery

"Dorchester was home to one of the early tanneries in the colony. John Glover, a very appropriate name for a light leather dresser, and a gentleman who was, according to some authorities, the first to set up tanning in the Massachusetts plantation, came to Dorchester in 1630." The Glover tanyards used to be located where Freeport Street crosses

¹¹ DTR, 54-57.

¹² DTR, 4, 5, 8.

¹³ Erastus Worthington. *Historical sketch of Mother Brook, Dedham, Mass. Compiled from Various Records and Papers, Showing the Diversion of a Portion of the Charles River into the Neponset River and the Manufactures on the Stream, from 1639 to 1900.* (Dedham, Mass.: Press of C.G. Wheeler, 1900?) Available on the internet. The man-made portion of Mother Brook is considered to be the first canal in America constructed by the English.

¹⁴ Ebenezer Clapp. *The Clapp Memorial: Record of the Clapp Family in America.* (Boston: David Clapp & Son, 1876).

¹⁵ DTR, Dec. 17, 1645.

Dorchester Avenue or approximately where the school buses for the City of Boston now park over night.¹⁶

¹⁶ “The First Tannery in New England.” by Wm F [or P] Bodwell in *Boston Sunday Herald*, May 26, 1901.