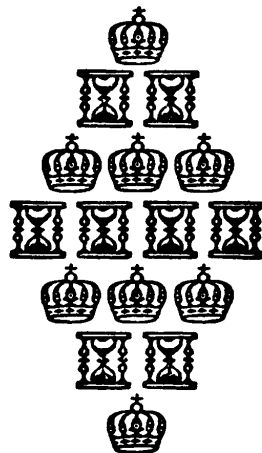


°
Early Days
on
BOSTON COMMON

By
Mary Farwell Ayer

With many Illustrations after Old Prints



BOSTON
Privately Printed

1910

VII

WASHINGTON'S successor, the former vice-president, John Adams, had long been noted for the important part he had played in the struggle for independence. Massachusetts naturally took great pride in the new president, and on his visit to Boston in August, 1799, tendered him an enthusiastic reception. Later the Bostonians celebrated his birthday by holding a review of troops, when the Independent Militia, the Chelsea Militia, and other companies were reviewed under arms on the Common. An interesting picture illustrating this event is still in existence.

Thanks to the interest taken by the town officials and public-spirited Bostonians, each year saw further improvements made in the "people's park." In order to prevent mutilation of trees and fences, the selectmen imposed fines. At one time an offender forfeited four dollars for removing turf, and five dollars for injuring trees. For years a part of the Common had been reserved for the town dump-heap. This was finally done away with; for the future no rubbish could be thrown there, with the exception of dirt collected from houses. Another law took away the right of pasturage,—a privilege which the townspeople had enjoyed ever since the earliest settlement of the peninsula.

A subscription taken up for opening a mall around the Common resulted in obtaining sufficient funds for the enterprise. In 1810 this mall was almost completed, although other gravelled paths started at the time were not finished until five years later. In 1812 the chairman of the board of selectmen and Mr. Oliver were empowered to raise the street next the ropewalk; in order to form a footwalk six feet wide; this was undertaken as a protection against high tides.¹

Executions on the Common were henceforth forbidden. For many years duelling had been prohibited. Other laws passed tended towards a more strict observance of the Sabbath. Those found skating on the pond on Sundays were taken be-

¹ *Selectmen's Minutes*, vol. 38, page 61.

Early Days on Boston Common

fore the magistrates, and some were prosecuted as a warning to others. Bathing on the Sabbath at the foot of the Common was also forbidden.¹

During the war of 1812 the selectmen allowed the newly formed New England Guards and the Sea Fencibles to erect a gun-house on the Common providing it be removed within ninety days after hostilities had ceased, free from expense to the town. This condition was not adhered to, for the gun-house was still standing three years after the treaty of peace had been signed.² In order to raise money for the defence of the town, a subscription was taken up in the different wards. At the close of the war, the amount left in the hands of the treasurer, together with five hundred dollars additional, was appropriated for improvements to the Common.³

In turning to a consideration of the so-called war of 1812, we find that although Congress had been able to avoid an open rupture in 1798, trouble between England, France and the United States still existed. The Berlin Decrees, Orders in Council, and the Embargo Act had all played their parts in stirring up trouble between the nations, and by 1810 war between England and the United States seemed imminent.

Although Congress favored it, decided opposition arose in the New England States, where some opponents referred to it scoffingly as "Mr. Madison's War." An article written at the time for a Boston paper stated: "We are about to go to war for an insult which half the country have not been able to find, and about which the other half are no two of them agreed among themselves!"⁴

Early in the spring of 1812 Congress began to make active preparations for war. According to an Act passed in April, ten thousand Massachusetts militia were to be drafted before June 1. On June 18 war was formally declared by the United States on Great Britain. The following week General Henry Dearborn requested the governor of Massachusetts to place

¹ *Selectmen's Minutes*, vol. 38, page 120.

² *Ibid.*, vol. 38, pages 244-7.

³ *Ibid.*, vol. 38, pages 177, 283.

⁴ *Attorney-General's Office, Boston: General Orders*, vol. 4, page 57.

Early Days on Boston Common

forty-one companies of the detached militia of the state at his disposal. Governor Strong paid no attention to this request for troops. Renewed demands on the part of General Dearborn proved equally unavailing. Possibly the lack of response was due partly to the fact that there was a scarcity of supplies on hand, for in October a return of ordnance and military stores belonging to Massachusetts showed that the state was almost destitute of muskets, powder, and cartridges of a proper size. Although there were many dismantled cannon in the laboratory, there were no planks or timber for the carriages.¹

Throughout the early summer, inroads were made by the British on Cape Cod. At one time a detachment of two hundred men, in six barges, was sent from the *Superb* and the *Nimrod*, which were lying off Buzzard's Bay, to destroy the shipping at Wareham. The loss caused was valued at twelve thousand dollars. Similar destruction occurred at Scituate and Orleans. Later the *Nimrod* and *La Hogue* were sent to blockade New Bedford.² The unprotected state of Maine and the fear of an attack from Nova Scotia at last impelled Governor Strong to take action, and in July he sent a detachment of the militia to ward off any descent upon Calais.

Major-General Henry Sewall was appointed commander of the Eastern Division, consisting of all detached militia in Maine. Three companies were at once ordered to Eastport to protect the coast.³ In order to render assistance to New York, a detachment of some three hundred soldiers from Fort Independence and Fort Warren was sent to Albany.⁴ May 21, 1813, a guard was furnished for the park of artillery on the Common "to parade at the Gun-House on the Common at seven o'clock on Saturday evening next, with their side arms and in their uniforms complete."⁵

¹ Attorney-General's Office, Boston: Letters, 1798-1812, no. 226.

² Rolls of Mass. Militia,

1812-14.

³ Attorney-General's Office, Boston: General Orders, vol. 4, no. 96.

⁴ *The Independent Chronicle*, Aug. 24, 1812. *Ibid.*, July 2, 1812. *Ibid.*, August 31, 1812. *The Salem Light Infantry under command of Captain King returned the visit paid by the Boston Light Infantry. They pitched their tents on the Common, and in the afternoon were reviewed by the governor on Fort Hill.*

⁵ Attorney-General's Office, Boston: General Orders, vol. 4, no. 126.

Early Days on Boston Common

Although the war party in Boston was at first in the minority, the townspeople watched the course of events with eager interest. After the victory of the *Constitution* over the *Guerrière*, Captain Hull paid Boston a visit, where a public entertainment was given in his honor in Faneuil Hall. The following April, when the *Constitution* was once more in port, the crew was invited by the managers of the theatre to an entertainment, at which Commodores Rodgers and Bainbridge and Captain Smith were also present.¹

In the spring of 1814 the news spread that the *Constitution* had been chased into Marblehead Harbor. Artillery was forthwith despatched to Marblehead. The New England Guards also set forth, but were recalled before advancing farther than Chelsea. On returning, they marched to the gun-house on the Common, where, on learning that the *Constitution* was safe, they were dismissed.² In May a public dinner was given in honor of Commodore Perry. The military escort, which had volunteered for this occasion, consisting of the Rangers, Winslow Blues, New England Guards, and Boston Light Infantry, were drawn up on the Common. Meanwhile the guests, who had assembled at the Senate Chamber, walked to the upper part of the Common in front of the State House. As they commenced the repast provided, a salute was fired by Captain Dyer's Artillery Company, from the lower part of the parade-ground.³ During the summer Eastport was obliged to surrender to a British fleet, under command of Sir Thomas Hardy. After forcing the inhabitants to take the oath of allegiance to the King, Hardy sailed along the coast.⁴

¹ *The Independent Chronicle*, September 7, 1812, and April 12, 1813.

² Plans for a procession of the Washington Benevolent Society, to be held on the 30th, appeared in the *Boston Gazette* for April 23, 1814. "The route of the Procession will be from the State-House to the Common, thence across the Common to Boylston-street . . . to the Meeting-House."

³ *The Boston Gazette*, May 12, 1814. June 15 the inhabitants held a religious festival to celebrate the delivery of Europe from military despotism. It was described as a melancholy occasion. "Ten thousand persons to assemble in the open Common, to look at 2600 lamps burning in the windows of the State-House, was a ludicrous display of festivity." The day was brought to a close by fireworks on the Common, also an illumination of the Hancock and Bowdoin houses. *The Independent Chronicle*, June 20, 1814.

⁴ *Rolls of Mass. Militia, 1812-14: Attorney-General's Office.*

Early Days on Boston Common

New England soon had further cause for apprehension on receiving news that Castine, Belfast and Bangor had fallen into the hands of the British. Active measures were at once put under way in Boston in order that the town might be prepared to ward off any sudden attack.

A new company of militia was formed, the Sea Fencibles, and attached to the first brigade. A detachment of artillery was stationed on the Common. Major Laommi Baldwin was ordered to draw up plans for a fort to be erected on Noddle's Island. Other fortifications were erected on William's Island and at South Boston. Vessels were also purchased, to be sunk in the harbor in case of necessity.

On September 6 Governor Strong requested that all state militia be ready to march at a moment's notice. Infantry, artillery and riflemen soon flocked to Boston in such numbers that by the middle of the month five thousand troops were stationed on the forts and batteries in and around the town.

The following letter, which was addressed to the adjutant-general, shows that doubtless many of these detachments of militia encamped on the Common, at least temporarily, until quarters could be assigned them. "I have marched with the Company of Lt. Infantry under my command and shall be in Boston on the Common this afternoon. I have thought proper to give you this notice as I was not ordered to report myself to any particular Superior officer."¹

At another time Captain Osgood, who was in charge of the militia stationed on the Common, applied for the following articles: "100 kettles, 200 pans, 100 pint pots, 32 axes, 32 spades, and for straw and wood according to law."²

In the meantime a British fleet under Hardy had already sailed by the Massachusetts shore. Admiral Cochrane's orders were to destroy the coast towns and to ravage the country. Hardy had therefore decided to begin his work of destruction by attacking Stonington, a seaport town of Connecticut; but the inhabitants showed such a warlike spirit that after

¹ *Rolls of Mass. Militia, 1812-14: Attorney-General's Office.*

² *Selectmen's Minutes, vol. 38, page 119.*



BOYS PLAYING BALL ON BOSTON COMMON

Early Days on Boston Common

a short bombardment, causing little damage, he withdrew.¹ With British vessels in such close proximity, the inhabitants of Boston continued to feel apprehensive, and took renewed precautions for the protection of the town. As the weeks passed, however, the expected attack did not take place, although as a further precaution the state militia was retained in the vicinity until the middle of November. Even as late as December the presence of a British vessel off Falmouth caused apprehension, but after firing a few harmless shots the *Nimrod* sailed away without inflicting further damage.

In February, 1815, the inhabitants received news of the victory at New Orleans. This event caused great rejoicing. Salutes were fired from the forts and by the artillery on the Common.² The 22d of February was appointed in Boston for celebrating the return of peace. At sunrise bells were rung and salutes fired, followed later by a procession passing through the town. The day was brought to a close by a brilliant illumination. Once more peace had been declared, and our last war with Great Britain had drawn to a close.

¹ B. Y. Lossing's *The Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812*.

² *Boston Gazette*, Feb. 23, 1815.