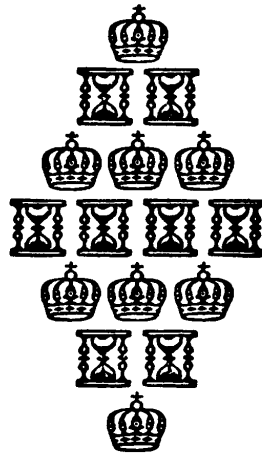


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Early Days
on
BOSTON COMMON

By
Mary Farwell Ayer

With many Illustrations after Old Prints



BOSTON
Privately Printed

1910



WHITE MASS MEETING ON BOSTON COMMON, SEPT. 19. 1844.
Return of the Procession.

Respectfully inscribed to CLAY CLUB BY 1, Boston.

IX

A HISTORY of the Common would be incomplete indeed without a few remarks relating to the old elm. The exact age of this tree was never ascertained,—though it was probably growing before the arrival of the earliest Puritans. The citizens took great pride in preserving this landmark, a witness to many scenes of interest in the early history of the town.¹ For many years there was visible a large hole in the side of the tree. A Boston citizen used to relate to Mayor Quincy the anecdote that as a boy attending Vinal's school, he frequently went into the "Tree's dark hole."² This cavity was later filled up. This old landmark was even thought a worthy theme for literature, and a special poem was addressed to the "Old Elm Tree in the Centre of Boston Common." The first of the fifteen verses reads as follows:

*"Gray twilight's mellow shades come down
In beauty round thee, aged tree;
A diadem of shadows brown
Rests on thy brow—how gloriously!"*³

Until the close of the eighteenth century it was customary for women living in the vicinity to wash their clothes beneath the limbs of the old elm. They would light a fire near the base of the tree in order to heat the water brought from the Frog Pond, and there do their week's washing.

Another tree of historic interest was the jingo, which grew for many years in the garden of Gardiner Greene on Pemberton Hill. After Mr. Greene's death the desire arose to remove it to the Common. The tree, which was forty feet high, with a circumference of four feet four inches, three and a half feet from the ground, was considered the largest ever transplanted in the vicinity. The jingo apparently thrived in its new environment, for its offshoot may still be seen.⁴

At this time the Common was still surrounded by an old

¹ *Columbian Centinel*, April 13, 1831. Regarding offshoots of the old elm, see article entitled *The Great Elm and its Scion in the New England Historical and Genealogical Register for April*, 1910.

² *Columbian Centinel*, April 13, 1831. ³ *Boston Monthly Magazine*, June, 1826, page 53.

⁴ *Niles Register*, May 23, 1835, page 203.

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wooden fence, which was in a dilapidated condition. One irate Bostonian wrote: "If any turnpike fence presented the disgraceful appearance that the Common fence does in Beacon and Park streets, the proprietors would be prosecuted for a breach of the laws."¹ We read of a runaway horse which started from the head of Walnut Street, "dashed down over the mall fence, breaking down a post and two lengths of rails, and finally a wheel of the cart coming in contact with a tree in the mall, the horse broke from the traces, the cart made a complete somerset, and the horse ran at full speed across the Common."² The citizens, feeling the disgrace of this existing condition of affairs, recommended that the city authorities substitute an iron fence. It was some time before anything further was done excepting to set out a few trees and lay out a mall from Charles to Tremont streets.

When the question of fencing in the Common finally came up for discussion, the common council at first suggested that two-thirds of the expense be paid by subscription among those owning estates in the vicinity.³ As the citizens objected to this method, the council agreed to add the necessary amount to the subscription.⁴ The fence, which was at once started, was completed in 1837 at a cost of about eighty-two thousand one hundred and nineteen dollars, of which sixteen thousand two hundred and ninety-two dollars had been raised by the inhabitants.

The suggestion was made at this time that the burial-ground in the Common be annexed to the public property, and that the bodies be removed to Mt. Auburn.⁵ It was also proposed, when improvements were made to the Frog Pond a few years later, that an iron fence be erected around the pond in order to keep "urchins and dogs at a respectable distance."⁶ The city council had already replaced the brick wall around the burial-ground by a neat iron fence, and had

¹ *Columbian Centinel*, Aug. 12, 1835. ² *Ibid.*, April 1, 1835. ³ *Ibid.*, Sept. 12, 1835.

⁴ \$67.50 was paid for plans, and the following year \$87.57 was paid for other plans.

⁵ *Columbian Centinel*, Aug. 5, 1836. ⁶ *Ibid.*, May 14, 1839.

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laid out a mall through the old cemetery. It refused therefore to comply with these requests.¹

At various times "Crescent Pond" and "Quincy Lake" had been names suggested for the sheet of water on the Common, but loyal Boston boys still adhered to the original name of Frog Pond. Here during the winter they skated, and here during the summer months they sailed their miniature vessels. Nathaniel Hawthorne declared that one of his principal amusements was to watch these young merchants consigning their imaginary wares to dangerous voyages across the pond.² Near by, beneath the shade of the trees, loungers were accustomed to gather in the cool part of the day and watch the children at play. Many of these onlookers were accustomed to enjoy a quiet smoke and were naturally much incensed at the passage of a law forbidding smoking on the streets or on the Common. One indignant citizen declared that although he thought a law forbidding smoking in the streets justifiable, it seemed wrong to collect fines from those smoking on the Common. "I am a moderate smoker, Messrs. Editors," he wrote, "and have heretofore, after the fatigues of the day, taken my cigar and enjoyed its flavor, sitting on the beautiful rising ground by the *great tree*, inhaling the western breezes, and am not satisfied with the idea of being restricted."³ The city authorities saw justice in this plea, and soon repealed the law in so far as it related to the Common.

The celebration of the Fourth of July was gradually assuming a different character. Formerly the colored people were only allowed the freedom of the Common on the day of "nigger 'lection." It was as much as their lives were worth to enter on artillery election day or on Independence Day.

¹ *Columbian Centinel*, June 24, 1835. *The buildings erected from time to time in the Common were gradually removed. The following article appeared in the Boston Daily Journal August 2, 1847: "The small buildings are marching off the Training-field, and the brick engine and school-house, so to speak, are preparing to follow. The school-house is to take a sort of right wheel, and back down in the lot lately purchased, fronting the Training-field on Common street. It is a huge undertaking to move so large a brick building, but we presume it can be done with perfect safety by the contractors."*

² Nathaniel Hawthorne's *American Note-Books*, June 1, 1842, page 280.

³ *Daily Centinel and Gazette*, July 27, 1836.

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A change occurred, however, in the feelings of the citizens, and July 4, 1836, "all distinctions were dispensed with, and all colors tolerated."¹ A new feature at this celebration was the presence of school-girls dressed in white, who carried moss baskets of different shapes, which were afterwards placed on sale.²

At the celebration in 1837 the national flag was for the first time raised on the flagstaff which had been erected near the great tree.

In November of this year, some Indians visited Boston, and performed a war-dance on the Common. One of their number, in the centre of the circle, beat a large drum, while the others jumped and danced, and in so doing they passed rapidly round the circle. Their faces were painted with various devices. In dancing round they uttered savage howls, and distorted their faces into hideous grimaces.³ The inhabitants took great interest in the doings of the Indians. It was but seldom that red men were seen in the East, and they therefore awakened great curiosity. So far as I know, this delegation was the last to make public appearance on the Common.

¹ *Daily Centinel and Gazette*, July 6, 1836.

² On one occasion \$1000 was realized from the sale of these baskets.

³ *Daily Centinel and Gazette*, Nov. 1, 1837.