



Brookline Historical Society

Incorporated April 29, 1901

FALL MEETING: "The Material and Mental World of the 18th Century Professional (the Rev. Ebenezer Devotion)." Speaker: David Jaffee

Sunday, Oct. 25, 3 p.m. in Pierce Hall of First Parish Church, 382 Walnut St.

Members and guests invited. Refreshments. For transportation, call 566-5747.

President's report

As your new president, this is my first report to the membership. Earlier this year, I received the honor of being selected to serve the Society. I wish to thank my predecessor, Miriam Sargon, for her many years of service and dedication. I hope that I will be able to carry on in her footsteps.

As a relative newcomer to the Society, I will be relying on the more "seasoned" members for advice and counsel. If you have an idea for a meeting topic or other suggestion of interest, please do not hesitate to call me at 277-1492 (an appropriate telephone number for this year, don't you think?).

One of the most serious issues facing the Society at this time is the timely maintenance and repair of our major possessions and historic properties curated by the Society. We need to insure that both the Town and the Society know what needs to be repaired and that the lines of communication between both groups remain open. At the last Board of Trustees meeting, I proposed that we establish a Capital Needs Subcommittee. The Board adopted my suggestion and the following members have been appointed: Vice-President Linda Dean, Chris Idzik, Ray Moreno, and myself as chairman. The subcommittee has been charged with: 1. conducting an audit of all property owned and/or overseen by the Society; 2. preparing a list of priorities for repairs; 3. investigating alternative funding for repairs including, but not limited to, grants, private groups and fundraising.

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-- Chris Crowley

Curator's report

This summer the Society received a grant to serve as a pilot in the Scholar-in-Residence Program, a project of the Bay State Historical League funded by the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities. Professor David Jaffee, of the City College of New York Department of History, our scholar-in-residence, worked to continue the preliminary research undertaken last year for the Lyman Allyn Museum exhibit on the Devotion Family. He will share his findings with us on Oct. 25.

Special thanks to Debra Abraham, who assisted Dr. Jaffee with his research in the Brookline Public Library. The library's books include many that formed the background of the Winthrop Chandler portrait of Rev. Devotion, seen by many of us on our trip to New London last year.

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very different message was being sent to the Jewish community by some of its leadership: that it was done with Dorchester-Roxbury.

I believe that those who looked to the suburbs as the future home of the Jewish community reflected conventional wisdom of ethnic succession, whereby first the Yankees move on, perhaps the Italians and Irish move in, then they move on and perhaps the Jews move in. Last in succession are the blacks. This attitude was adhered to almost religiously: neighborhood change was a natural force.

However, I would contend that the earlier decisions to move older institutions out to Brookline and Newton very seriously undermined the Jewish community in Boston, and sent signals later to those in charge of urban renewal and to B-BURG (Boston Banks Urban Renewal Group) that the Jewish community was weak, without leaders, and that it would take very little to move them.

Temple Mishkan Tefila is a third institution that you can look at in the same way. Founded in the 1890's, it moved to its beautifully crafted Roxbury site on Seaver Street in 1925. By 1953, two years after Hebrew College made its move, the well-to-do board members and officers of the synagogue decided that a swath of newly developed MDC land in Chestnut Hill was the place to be. In their public relations pitch to make the move attractive, they talked about the natural beauty, the trees and flowing water -- as if to say the new temple would be closer to God's work. Keep in mind, the Roxbury synagogue sat right across from Franklin Park, the crown jewel in the emerald necklace designed by our greatest landscape architect, Frederic Law Olmsted.

The story is both sad and rife with hypocrisy. The same individuals who made these decisions had embraced the great civil rights struggle of the black community, advancing the movement in the pages of the New York Times and other great media of the day. At the same time, their actions were undermining the

lower and middle class communities, both Jewish and black. In 1965, the racial imbalance law, which required integration of schools, essentially exempted Brookline, Newton, Wellesley, Framingham -- everyone other than Boston, Springfield and Cambridge, by making 50-percent minority the cutoff point defining "racially imbalanced." Only Boston, Springfield and Cambridge had such schools. Yet the strongest support for the law came from leaders such as (Father) Robert Drinan, Beryl Cohen, Elliot Richardson. They and the wealthy, Jewish, essentially liberal establishment were giving lip service to the great debates of the day but had a blind spot when it came to their own local communities.

It was a class issue. Much of Dorchester-Roxbury Jewry did not come this way. Brookline has been lucky to absorb these institutions because richer members of the community came here. But the poorer members went to the north and elsewhere. They pined for their old neighborhood. Today they think of the Jewish leadership as hypocrites. Some have fallen victim to racism and have confused the elusive forces that undermined them with the general black community. People are bitter. Anger tends to replace rationality.

Everything about the story betrays class bias. That brings me to B-BURG, the Boston Banks Urban Renewal Group. Shortly after Martin Luther King was assassinated in April of 1968, there was a profound feeling on the part of Mayor Kevin White and his urban renewal director, Hale Champion, that the black community was on the verge of an uprising, and that it would be the financial district, not Roxbury, that would burn. They were also well aware that Boston's black leaders had done a tremendous job of damage control -- the damage and injury from rioting was nothing like that in Watts and New York City and elsewhere.

B-BURG represented, in part, the good intention of providing home ownership options for the black community -- that made sense: give them a stake in their

own community. But in a callous, lethal action, the city fathers and the major savings and thrift institutions put together a 30 million dollar mortgage package and, essentially, drew a line around the remaining Jewish neighborhoods in Dorchester and Mattapan. The message was: loans would be available for housing, but not in Newton or Brookline -- rather, in this section of North Dorchester and Mattapan that was still largely Jewish.

There, people had been living in their homes for 30 years. Their mortgages were paid off. There was no more money for the banks to make. The trick was to get people out. What was later described as the worst block-busting in the history of our country by a Senate subcommittee took place during 1968-69 in Dorchester and Mattapan. I cite "Confessions of a Blockbuster," which describes how four or five guys would sit in an office and make up the most outlandish, racist stories they could think of to drive Jews out of their homes. There was lots of money to be made by corrupt FHA inspectors who would scare Jews out of their homes, buy them up for very low prices, then turn around and do an inspection and sell a basic home in need of work to an incoming black homebuyer with a federally-insured mortgage for double or even sometimes triple the purchase price. The black and Jewish communities now saw each other as racists and criminals when it was banks, insurance companies and corrupt realtors that were taking advantage of both.

America has two great strains -- the urge to establish equality for all, and the impulse to form communities -- to protect property, advance schools, even to join a historical society. The tendency of these two strains to come into conflict with one another can be transcended if we don't give power over to corrupt individuals. Dorchester and Roxbury paid the price for that mistake.

A response: the Black presence in Boston

By Rep. Byron Rushing

(From a talk given to the Brookline Historical Society, March 1, 1992)

Although my district (South End and Lower Roxbury) is not the geography central to Larry Harmon's presentation, I came here with two other qualifications: as president of the Museum of Afro-American History, and as someone who was active in the civil rights movement in Boston. At that time, in the 1960's I lived in Roxbury, but I have to say that for key years I was not in the city because this was the height of the Vietnam War and my draft board finally caught up with me. I was a conscientious objector. In 1967, right after the riots of the summer, I had to go out and do alternative service as a hospital orderly in Rochester. Still, I know just about everybody who figures prominently in the book, "Death of an American Jewish Community."

Two pieces of Afro-American history are important to an understanding of the response of the black leadership during the B-BURG era.

The first has to do with the 20th Century. For most of the modern era, the black community in Boston was relatively small. The large influx of African-Americans from the South to the North arrived late in Boston. Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, Harlem saw the large influx at the beginning of the 20th Century. There was nothing comparable in Boston, and the reason was economic.

Black people left the South as economic and political refugees. There was an on-going buildup of political oppression, but black people were also drawn to the North for jobs. That meant cities where the economy was growing at a rate that would allow black people to have jobs without threatening white people, and

that was not true of Boston. Boston was an economic backwater. There are people in this room who can remember when the first skyscraper taller than the Customs House Tower was built. The Boston skyline is a post-World War II skyline. This was a dreary place for working people before the war.

Statistics tell the story. In 1900, 11,000 black people. In 1940, 23,000. That wouldn't fill up one representative district today. In 1940, you have to understand, there were more Jews living in Boston than black people. And the population of Boston was increasing -- the black population stayed at 2-3 percent.

After World War II, the MIT whiz-kids came back, set up Lincoln Labs and dozens of little companies along the road that would become famous as Route 128. Everything changed. There was a jobs boom and suddenly it was not so threatening to have black people be cab drivers and bus drivers. The influx began -- in 1950, 40,000 black people, a 69 percent increase in the decade. In 1960, 63,000 black people, a 57 percent increase. In 1970, 104,000 black people, a 65 percent increase. Those 104,000 represented 16 percent of the population of Boston, because during this same period another migration is taking place -- white people leaving. The high point of Boston population was 1950, when 800,000 people were counted. By 1960 it was 697,000. The flight had nothing to do with black people moving in. Whites were fleeing to this ideal of being able to have your heart attack while mowing your lawn -- the suburban dream.

This had consequences for black people. Their numbers were growing while the rest of the city was shrinking, yet those who looked beyond the established black neighborhoods to rent and to buy encountered severe racial segregation. Black leaders began to focus on the question of housing availability. One idea was that the community could be housed within existing bounds if the housing itself were improved through rehabilitation, and blight replaced with new housing. The same Snowdens who organized

Freedom House invited urban renewal to Roxbury. Unfortunately, the net result of urban renewal efforts was not an increase in the number of housing units. Some actually argue it caused a decrease. That led, in 1967, to a concern among young black leadership that older leaders had not been forceful enough -- they were acting as they did when black people were 3 percent of the population, but now they were 10-15 percent of the population. And the same young leaders were influenced by the national civil rights movement.

That sets the stage for the 1967 riots. Now, Larry, you've got to stop calling them the welfare riots. The welfare mothers did not riot in Grove Hall on June 3rd in 1967. The police rioted. Even the most conservative black newspaper, Mel Miller's "Bay State Banner," ran headlines that described a police riot. That added to the impression that white Boston did not see development of the black community as a priority.

The power structures in the city -- the bankers and the new political class led by Kevin White -- saw the future in terms of making downtown Boston a financial center of this country. That's where they wanted money invested.

I believe that the white power structure honestly feared there was going to be a racial confrontation in this country. If they looked at other cities they certainly got that impression. And they wanted to assure investors that Boston was peaceful.

Now, I'm going to stop there and jump backwards to tell the story from another point of view.

From black peoples' point of view, the 20th century in Boston has been a time of major transition, not stability. But we have had times of stability in this city. And it's important to understand that black people have been in Boston almost as long as the English. The first black people were brought here by the Puritans eight years after they had settled Boston. After the Revolution, black



Incoming and outgoing BHS presidents Christopher Crowley and Miriam Sargon greet speaker Larry Harmon.-



Rep. Bryon Rushing takes questions from Brookline Historical Society members.-

people in Massachusetts were all free -- the only state of the original states where that was true. The community was small and saw itself as special. They made an intentional decision to settle on the north slope of what we now call Beacon Hill. They set up schools, organized churches, and engaged in political activity that transcended their own community. They were involved in the Abolitionist Movement and that, too, served to knit together the community.

For a hundred years this tiny community, 2 percent of the population of Boston, lived on the north slope of Beacon Hill -- a record of stability not matched since. Why did they leave Beacon Hill? They left because there was a major influx in the 1880s of immigrants from southern Europe and from Eastern Europe. And as those immigrants came to Boston, real estate developers realized that they could make a profit by housing them. And they looked at the north slope of Beacon Hill over to the flat part of what we used to call the West End and they saw small wood and brick houses. They bought them up and tore them down and built what, in New York, would be called cold water flats for the immigrants.

The black people had to decide whether to stay or move, and they chose to relocate to the South End and lower Roxbury. They could have moved back, but the people with the most money wanted to leave. And, of course, they had control of the major institutions. So the first to

leave were the churches. The African Meeting House, which was then called St. Paul's Baptist Church, bought a church on Camden Street right on the border of the South End and lower Roxbury. They moved there and changed their name to Peoples's Baptist Church. Others followed -- the last to leave was not until the 1930's. If the institutions had stayed, maybe black people would have gone back to Beacon Hill. But that didn't happen.

I tell that story because there are lots of reasons why neighborhoods change. Now let me say this about Larry Harmon's book. The argument carried out in the book is an important argument -- important inside the Jewish community. There is another book to be written. It's the hardest story to tell because it's the one by the people who never tell, whose smoking guns are so hard to find. That is the history of the Yankees. Because, you see this could have happened without black people, just like it could have happened without Jews. When you put the Jewish story and the black story together in one book and talk about the leadership and who did what to whom, it really is an internal squabble. It's a mistake for Jews at any time to start arguing and saying how black people did this to them, because they know it's not true. They didn't have to sell. So it wasn't that. It was some other things going on -- something that has to be named and addressed in the community in power.

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up your copy at the Devotion House
by calling the curator at 566-5747.

Also of interest to Society members are
two new books published by the Chestnut
Hill Association:

"Chestnut Hill memories," by Anne Moore.
The development of Chestnut Hill from a
farming community to a suburb is traced
with particular emphasis on the Golden
Years of 1870-1900.

"Gardens of Chestnut Hill," by Judith
Leet. Six of the grandest gardens are
described, interwoven with history.

Both are available for \$20 from the As-
sociation (PO Box 173, Chestnut Hill
02167). Please call 734-9355 for further
information.

--Steve Jerome



Children from Mrs. Yee's class at De-
votion School visited Devotion House
last spring.