

FIRST GIFT TO BROOKLINE

EDWARD DEVOTION'S BEQUEST FOR  
A SCHOOL NEAR THE CENTRE

The Changes That Befell the School Fund, and the Happy Fate of the Giver's Old Homestead, Recently Restored by the Edward Devotion House Association—Passages of Local History in Which Judge Sewall, Governor Dudley and Many Prominent Citizens of Later Times Have Played Important Parts—Opportunities Now Offered to the Public to Inspect the Ancient Dwelling

"The House is raw and unfinished," wrote Samuel Sewall to his friend Governor Joseph Dudley, under date of Jan. 3, 1702-3. "Are two good Lower Rooms, and one good Chamber. That towards Balfirstow's is but a sorry one; Only may see the Windmill go, in it. Barn and Outousins Ramshackled, Orchard, especially that part towards the River much decayed." It was in these unflattering terms that Judge Sewall pictured the Edward Devotion estate at Muddy River, now Brookline, which he had inspected with a view to buying a home for his son, who had married Governor Dudley's daughter. The property was not purchased. Young Sewall built at Brookline; but the Devotion house, with which, apparently, the judge would not have been content except he could have remodelled it, remained in the family, suffered few changes, and now, at the ripe age of 230 years, is recovering from these and being permanently established in the class of historic memorials.

Of Edward Devotion's ancestry there is no authentic record, but he probably came from one of "the rebel counties," Lincolnshire and Kent, with the apparent odds favoring the former. He joined the First Church of Boston in March, 1645, became a freeman in May of the same year, married soon after, and had his first child baptized by Rev. John Eliot in February, 1648. Ten other children were born to the Devotions, of whom the fourth, John, and the seventh, Edward, survive in the town records. The father was a "planter" and a frugal and acquisitive one. As early as 1650 he began to buy land, and when he died, some time after 1681, he owned more than a hundred acres, "on both sides of the road from Boston to Cambridge," which means the present Harvard street.

On this property, facing Harvard street, Devotion built in 1680—a two and a half story house, twenty-seven feet front and thirty-three feet deep with the ell, not to speak of the lean-tos and sheds that ran out at the rear. On the first floor were the hall, living-room, buttery, pantry and kitchen, this last a splendid room twenty-three feet long, with a fireplace seven feet wide and six feet high; on the second floor were three large chambers, and the half-story was, of course, an old-fashioned garret. Here Goodman Devotion's Rooseveltian family was brought up. Planning for other families of the name, perhaps, he seems to have made no provision for his daughters, though it should be noted that there are lacunæ in the genealogy and it is possible that none of the seven girls outlived their father. He left his dwelling and barns to his widow, her share including household belongings and livestock, and to his surviving sons, John and Edward, his lands, "equally interested, not to be aliened to others, but to fall to their successors."

Goodman Devotion was fully alive to his duties as citizen and performed them according to his lights. In 1651 he was one of the committee that "whipped the bounds," as the old custom phrase put it. In 1654 he was constable and overseer of fences. In 1661 and 1665 he perambulated the bounds again, in 1663, 1671 and 1676 he was constable once more, and in 1681 he was named tythingman. His sons, John Devotion and Edward, were equally active in town affairs, Edward, for instance, serving as constable, fence-viewer, tythingman, hog-herd or field-driver, and grand jurymen. And it deserves to be remembered that the younger Edward, like his father, hailed from "Muddy River in the County of Suffolke in New England," though in another place he described himself as "Edward Devotion of Brooklyn," when he incorporated this paragraph in his will:

"Item. in case my estate prove to be sufficient to pay my Just Debts, Funeral Charges and the aforementioned Legacies and there should be any overplus left them my will is and I hereby give the sd overplus to the town of Brookline towards Building or Maintaining a School as near the Centre of the said Town as shall be agreed upon by the Town. But if the said Town cannot agree upon a Place to set the said School upon then my will is that the said overplus be laid out in purchasing a Wood Lott for the use of the School and the ministry of said Town forever."

Touching that overplus, one notes two characteristic entries in the inventory rendered by Devotion's executors, his wife and son. Debts due to the estate are figured at £270, but there is also an entry, "Wavering debts, £7." And again it is recorded, "There is sundry Bonds due to said estate with interest as pr. acct. of Particulars on file 1735.6.6. Besides some desperate Bonds amounting to £53.7." Appearances at times have seemed to indicate that the town of Brookline got the desperate bonds and never collected principal or interest.

At the annual meeting of the Brookline Historical Society in 1908 Town Clerk Edward W. Baker read a comprehensive and interesting paper on the Devotion school fund—the first bequest for the public benefit which was ever received by the town. Brookline had voted as early as 1728, almost in the terms of Devotion's will, to have one school house as near the centre of the town as a site could be obtained. Land was bought and a building was authorized, but not erected. Two buildings, a north school and a south school, were voted instead; but that did not settle the question, and in 1742 a committee was appointed, "to find the most convenient spot to erect a schoolhouse for the benefit of the whole town." In 1745-6, when the provisions of Devotion's will became known, the selectmen took steps to protect the town's interest. The committee that acted in its behalf eventually turned over to trustees 308 Johannes, of full weight, equal to \$3696, "for ye use of a school in said town," and in 1762 a town meeting voted "that the Middle School House where it now Stands be the place to keep a School with the Interest of the Legacy left said town by Mr. Edward Devotion."

The Devotion fund disappeared as a separate trust in 1846. It had depreciated seriously because of a loan to the "State of Massachusetts Bay" in 1777, and the subsequent failure of paper money, and in 1779 the principal amounted to only about \$2280. In 1838 the school fund was increased by two instalments of the town's proportion of the surplus revenue of the United States, making a total of \$4501. But in 1843, when a part of the old town hall building, now Pierce Hall, was taken for a high school, and when this action, together with the burning of the engine house, precipitated the question of a new town borrowing, somebody conceived the idea of borrowing a part of the fund to help pay the bills, and, this being done, it became easy to lose sight of the terms of Devotion's bequest and use it all. In 1846 the town did borrow the fund, the trustees were discharged and the fund vanished. In 1884 the school committee sought to revive it in the interest of the high school enlargement, and succeeded in having \$5000 voted, thereupon naming the hall in the building, "Edward Devotion Hall," and placing within it a

memorial tablet. Not many years later, however, the old high school building was removed, and the idea of a memorial did not recur until in 1891, the necessity for school accommodations in the north part of the town becoming imperative, the town purchased the so-called Nahom Smith estate, a part of the Devotion homestead. In 1892, the present primary school building was erected, followed a few years later by the companion grammar school building, with the old house standing between the two. The school committee named the buildings the "Edward Devotion Schools," and then outlined a plan for a comprehensive and elaborate development of the area by a group of buildings which when completed will be a fitting memorial for any benefactor of the town's educational needs.

"The Devotion legacy was honestly and intelligently invested," added Mr. Baker, "and the income used for maintaining the schools as intended by the giver of the fund, from 1762 to 1837. It was not the fault of the trustees that the war which our country fought for its independence brought a depreciation in values, and reduced the income from investments. No one can blame them for loans to the State in the times of need and stress. There was no graft, and, as the committee of 1837 reported, there was 'ample sufficiency of the security.' It would seem, however, that when the town, in 1846, took the school funds to build the town hall it was false to the trust. To be sure, in 1883, the attempt was made to clear the record by calling the high school enlargement an investment of the Edward Devotion fund. But that improvement was imperative, and the money used was Devotion fund money only by the flimsiest of apologies, and even then the apology was soon lost sight of, and the memorial tablet disappeared from view.

"When the school committee named the Harvard street buildings the 'Edward Devotion Schools,' there was at last some fitting memorial to the name of that one of the twenty-eight signers of the Muddy River petition for independence who thought so much of the home of his parents, who felt so great an interest in the place of his own birth and residence for seventy-six years, that he bequeathed for the educational and religious welfare of the community a goodly share of his earthly possessions. Let us hope that never again will the town forget Edward Devotion and what he did for the town's benefit."

Mr. Baker is not the only citizen who holds that pious hope, which began to be realized when, in 1891, the Harvard street property was purchased. At that time the house was occupied, as it had been almost continuously since it was built, more than two centuries before, and it looked stanch and sound enough to last another 200 years. In 1900, however, when it became necessary to raise the grade of the lot, the house was shingled and made weathertight, and the lean-tos and sheds running out at the rear were removed. More recently the town appropriated \$1500 for a more thorough reconstruction, and in 1908 a group of representative citizens organized the Edward Devotion House Association, in charge of which society the structure was placed.

At present the association is officered as follows: Charles H. Stearns, president; Moses Williams, Hon. Joseph Walker and Charles F. Read, vice presidents; Edward W. Baker, treasurer; Miss Augusta T. Lamb, secretary; Mrs. Thomas B. Griggs, Mrs. George H. Francis, Miss Louise Howe, Mrs. J. C. Kittredge, Ernest Lyon and Walter H. Kilham, executive committee. For special purposes, such as the reconstruction just completed, the town of Brookline is represented by Selectmen Curtin and Building Commissioner Lyons, and in all respects the alliance between the town fathers and the public-spirited citizens who united to preserve the town's oldest building has been peculiarly intimate and friendly.

To Walter H. Kilham of Kilham & Hopkins, the member of the executive committee who planned and supervised the recent restorations, the old house and its friends owe a debt of gratitude. Mr. Kilham is authority on Colonial architecture and, making his a labor of love, lavished upon it treasures of conscientiousness whose results appear on every hand. One notices especially the paneling in the front rooms, an unusually fine example of the period; the black woodwork of the spacious kitchen, with its splendid fireplace; the antique hardware on the doors; the taste with which the collection of souvenirs is grouped and displayed; and the charming setting of the structure provided by an old-fashioned garden, gay with the plants and flowers beloved of the women of an earlier time.

To repeat, the Devotion house stands on Harvard street, between Babcock and Stedman streets, not far from Coolidge's Corner, and is conveniently reached by the Allston cars. On Wednesdays and Saturdays, between the hours of eleven and four, it is open at a nominal fee to visitors, and a custodian who knows its history and can speak intelligently of the collection of antiques is in attendance. One of the conditions attached to the assumption of oversight by the Edward Devotion House Association was that the building should be used as a historical museum, and it already holds a collection of which so competent an authority as Charles F. Read, secretary of the Bostonian Society—an officer of the Association—speaks with enthusiasm. Another purpose of the restored building is to serve as a place of meeting for patriotic and other societies. Already in such and other ways it plays a picturesque and important part in the life of the town.

The first name to be entered on the register of the Association was that of Miss Harriet N. Devotion of White Plains, N. Y., who made a substantial addition to the Association's fund and at the same time presented almost 100 books which had been the property of her ancestors. Space would fail to tell of many other benefactors, citizens of Brookline and others, who have added to the collection of antiques or helped to enlarge the roll of membership. Now that the "days of outdoors" approach, the efforts of these generous friends should be rewarded by appreciation taking the form of visitors to the old house, a structure well worth visiting and warranting the community's earnest good will.