

Quincy History



Quincy, Massachusetts

Quincy Historical Society

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A Capsule History of Quincy

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Many college students come to our library with assignments to write papers on some aspect of Quincy's History. For them, reading a short paper on the City's history generally has helped them in selecting a specific subject from Quincy's rich and diverse history.

It is hoped that this brief but more comprehensive paper may give many a better understanding of Quincy's history generally, and enable them to find some area of our heritage that is of particular interest to them, one that they may pursue for their enjoyment and enrichment.

Few places can compare with Quincy for the richness and diversity of its historical heritage. That is why this unusual heritage is too often taken for granted. If just one of our historic sites were located in another town, it would probably be the historical focal point of that town. By good fortune, Quincy is blessed with many diverse historical features within its boundaries, features with appeal to many different interests.

The sites on the Quincy Historic Trail, sites that are visited by thousands of tourists every year, show this diversity. We have: Moswetuset Hummock, an unchanged Indian site, the seat of the Massachusetts Indians from whom the name of the Commonwealth was derived; the John Winthrop, Jr. Iron Furnace where the first commercial iron in this country was produced, and from which skilled ironworkers went to found ironworks at Saugus, Taunton and other places; the Granite

Railway, this country's first commercial railway; the birthplaces of two presidents of the United States and also the later home and other legacies of the Adams family; the Quincy family and their two beautiful homes to be seen here; the United First Parish Church where two Presidents and their wives are buried, and which is a landmark for its architecture- as are also the nearby City Hall and the Thomas Crane Public Library; Constitution Common commemorates the drafting by John Adams in his law office here of the Constitution of Massachusetts, a milestone in the history of democratic government; few burial places anywhere are more important historically than the Hancock Cemetery, and in Mount Wollaston and St. Mary's Cemeteries are examples of the later stonecutters' art second to none anywhere. Also here we had Germantown, the first planned indus-

trial development in this country, and the granite and shipbuilding industries. Aviation history was made at Squantum. There are communities with very distinctive histories. We have churches and other institutions with histories of significance; and maybe most important, people of various nationalities and cultures who have given us the heritage that we enjoy today.

Our History

Our story starts with the Native Americans who lived here for thousands of years until virtually wiped out by the plague of about 1616. In the fall of 1625, Capt. Richard Wollaston left a small group of indentured workmen in charge of his lieutenant to spend the winter here. Although he immediately left for England, the area that is today Quincy except for North Quincy, Braintree, Randolph and Holbrook was

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Our History One Hundred Years

Quincy Historical Society was incorporated on November 16, 1893 with Charles Francis Adams 2nd as President, Samuel A. Bates Vice President, and representatives of the four towns that constituted Old Braintree as incorporators. We are therefore entering our one hundredth anniversary year.

The history of our society is the record of a Quincy institution that has served and been part of its community and area these many years. All members, past and present, have been part of this history, a history in which all members can take pride.

Our anniversary year is the occasion to take special note of our past, and to better understand the trust that is now in our hands. It is our obligation and privilege to preserve what has come to us from the past, use it beneficially, and pass it on enriched by what we have contributed to it.

We 1993 members of the Quincy Historical Society are especially fortunate to be the ones to celebrate this important anniversary. It also falls to us to serve our society with special effort this anniversary year to assure that a finer and stronger institution will enter its second century. By this extra effort we will be making Quincy history.

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named for him- Mount Wollaston. The next spring, an adventurer by the name of Thomas Morton came in, took over the small group of men and established a trading post that is famous today for his colorful escapades here. The colonies from Plymouth to Salem tolerated Mr. Morton until they discovered that he had traded to the Indians, along with firewater, more firearms than they possessed collectively. He was then sent back to England and his trading post ended and the men dispersed.

Mount Wollaston was an uninhabited area when it was annexed by the town of Boston in 1634. Although only four years old, Boston was already running out of land on the Shawmut Peninsula. It was a time when everyone had to have at least a subsistence farm. To encourage people to come out here, the Town of Boston offered land grants, the opportunity to acquire land at favorable terms. A few large grants were given to Coddington, Quincy and others, but it was mainly to individuals on the basis of four acres per head in the household. This is very significant since the settlers came out as individual families from various parts of England, not as a group with a common background. None came from Braintree, England.

Through Mount Wollaston ran the old Boston and Plymouth Highway, today Adams Street, Hancock Street, School Street and Franklin Street in Quincy, and Commercial Street in present Braintree. Where this road came close to tidewater and a town landing, became the center of a new settlement. This was present Quincy Center. The first meeting house and school were located at about present Cliveden Street, the burying place is now the Hancock Cemetery, the training field was where the church now stands, and the town grist mill at present Fort Square.

In the day when church and state were one, there had to be a parish before there could be a town. The early settlers were members of the church in Boston with a chapel here in 1637. In 1639 a parish was gathered, and in

1640 the area was incorporated as the Town of Braintree, named for Braintree, County Essex, England. As more settlers came and new generations looked for more land, settlement moved south in the large town. Eventually the walk to church became rather long; so in 1707 a Second Parish was gathered in what is now Braintree, and in 1731 a Third Parish in what is present Randolph. The areas served by the parishes became precincts within the town- North, Middle and South. Eventually, like all the large early towns except Weymouth, Old Braintree was divided along precinct lines. In 1792, the North Precinct together with the part of Dorchester south of the Neponset River (present North Quincy) became the Town of Quincy, named in honor of Col. John Quincy. The residents of Quincy Neck has been part of the original petition but withdrew. In 1854 they again petitioned and became part of Quincy. The boundaries have since remained essentially unchanged. In 1888, the former town was incorporated as the City of Quincy.

The residents here in colonial times had both a farm and a trade. Most farms were little more than subsistence operations with little production for market. Farms were mostly dairy and orchard. Firewood for Boston and salt hay were the principal exports. Business was largely on a barter basis with the residents exchanging goods and services. Rather than pay the store in cash, a man would offer to do plowing or cut wood for the storekeeper. Some paid their taxes by working on the roads. Farms were seldom a single tract of land. The wood lot, the saltmarsh and even some pastures were located at a distance from the homestead. People who had money to invest had basically two choices- in a ship and the enterprise in which it was engaged, maybe in a local fishing boat; or in land. The Adams and most other local families went in for land. They would buy pieces of land when common land was divided or parcels in other tracts became available. Towns around here were not agricultural but they were land dependent; the North Precinct

less than most because of its long shoreline, granite, and other activities; factors that were important in the history of Quincy that followed. Proximity to Boston was also an important factor in determining Quincy's distinctive history.

During the years that present Quincy was the North Precinct of Old Braintree, some important history was made here. In 1704 Christ Church was established here. Now the oldest Episcopal parish in Massachusetts, it is the oldest religious institution in the state that was not an established town church- truly a monument to religious freedom. Industrially, geography was an important factor. Whereas the Middle Precinct, now Braintree, has the Monaquot River that powered mills from the earliest times, the North Precinct had but two small streams. Therefore the industries here were generally those that did not require much power; they resorted to tide and wind mills when power was required. Again in contrast, the long shoreline here fostered maritime activities with shipbuilding, fishing and trading being significant throughout the period. In 1789 the ship MASSACHUSETTS was built in Germantown, the largest vessel built in this country up to that time. Germantown had been established in 1750, the first planned industrial development in this country. Of five products manufactured here, glass was the most important. From the earliest times much use was made of the granite that was plentiful in the town in the form of boulders and ledges. When in 1754, granite from the common lands was used to build Kings Chapel in Boston, the town placed restrictions on stone for other than local uses. The granite industry nevertheless continued.

In the Revolution, the North Precinct's military role was minor. Like neighboring towns, the local militia saw limited service and not many residents joined the Continental Army. Here was located Old Braintree's Liberty Tree at the Sons of Liberty headquarters. A few Tories departed. However, in providing leaders of the Patriot

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cause few places can match the North Precinct - John Adams, John Hancock, Josiah Quincy and Joseph Palmer. In 1779, a most important historical event took place here. In his law office in his home, John Adams drafted the Constitution of Massachusetts which became the pattern for our Federal Constitution and other democratic constitutions. It has been called the most important result of the American Revolution. This milestone in the history of democratic government is commemorated by Constitution Common next to City Hall.

In its first thirty years, there were no radical changes in the new town of Quincy. Granite activity increased with some significant buildings being built of the stone. Shipbuilding increased as builders from the North River and other places to the south moved here primarily because of the good deep water. As in all towns in our area, shoemaking developed from a home-shop activity to an important industry.

The big change came in 1826 after Solomon Willard chose West Quincy granite for the Bunker Hill Monument. Here he developed the stone working techniques that made Quincy granite a practical building stone and earned Mr. Willard the title of "Father of the Granite Industry". True quarrying started at

this time and Quincy granite became famous. Custom houses and other important buildings up and down the coast as far as the Gulf of Mexico were built of Quincy granite. Quincy also became a center of stone cutting using stone from many sources. The national headquarters of the Granite Cutters Union was in Quincy from the early 1900s until just a few years ago. Quincy had fifty-four true quarries. At one time thirty-six were in operation. The quarries were mostly in West Quincy and in the North Common area around Quarry Street. The quarry industry here declined as the demand for Quincy granite diminished. The last quarry, Swingle's, ceased operation in 1963. There was no better building stone than Quincy granite, but for monument work its use was limited by its coarse grain and the expense of working. There is still significant stone cutting activity here.

Quincy granite was always expensive to work. It was able to compete with other sources because of cheap saltwater transportation on sloops and schooners. The granite sloop was developed and built here, the only type vessel indigenous to Quincy. As railroads and highways to inland sources improved, Quincy lost its economic advantage. To get the West Quincy stone to tidewater at the Neponset

River, the Granite Railway was constructed in 1826. It was the first commercial railway in this country, that is, the first railway incorporated and operated as a transportation business. As the pioneer common carrier, it required flexibility that earlier single-purpose railways did not. Here Gridley Bryant invented practices that are still railroad standards today; most notably the two-truck, eight-wheel car. For stone from the North Common area, the Quincy Canal was built in 1826 and extended from Town River Bay up to near Washington Street.

Highly important historically is the fact that most of the quarrymen and quarry operators, and the stone cutters, came as skilled men from outside Quincy. The earliest were from northern Europe - Irish, Scottish, Swedish, German, and a little later the Finnish. The Italians were mostly artists and came later when the cutting was mainly monument work. Important too were the granite blacksmiths who made and serviced the tools. Standardization of granite-working tools started here. The contribution of these national groups to life in Quincy cannot be overestimated. St. Mary's Church, the first Roman Catholic parish on the entire South Shore was founded in 1845 to serve the new granite community.

The granite industries changed Quincy from a rural town to a prosperous town and then to a prosperous city.

Shipbuilding increased in importance through the 19th century with George Thomas' yard at Quincy Point of particular significance. The shipbuilding capability of the area culminated in the Fore River Shipyard that brought world fame to Quincy and was the South Shore's largest industry for many years. In the 1830s there was a migration of fishermen from outer Cape Cod to Germantown where a thriving industry developed. In the 1840s there were some whaling voyages from Germantown, the only ones from the Port of Boston at that period of time.

The coming of the railroad in 1845 had a great impact on Quincy's history. New industries, mostly in the metal

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Hough's Neck Lightship

Labelled "the smallest lightship in the world" and probably the shortest lived was the tiny 19-foot dory anchored in five feet of water at Hough's Neck near Quincy, Massachusetts. The vessel was never recognized by the United States government by was the brainstorm of Captain Joseph C. Riley, the jovial commander of the Hough's neck steamer. Lying in the steamer's path was a shallow sand bar which could have grounded the craft.

Captain Riley, reputed to be the "most capable steamboat man of the coast", secured a small dory that had washed ashore and fixed it up to look

like a lightship. The dory was painted red with a white band amidships and towed to her station. Two large gasoline cans donned the two masts and two red lanterns were suspended front he stays. The words Hough's Neck Lightship were written on the white background with the number 15 painted below them. She remained in the channel during the summer of 1909. When asked why the number 15 was painted on the little dory, Captain Riley replied that since the steamer's fare was 15 cents, no other number seemed appropriate.

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trades, located along the railroad. Some of these continued in operation until recent times. The railroad also served commuters and brought workers to the granite cutting shops in South Quincy and to the shoe factories. The street railways were also a factor. Most important, however, were the residential communities that developed around the railroad stations.

The northern part of the town was lightly populated. Here was still farmland and other undeveloped tracts. In

this area the railroad had four stations - Atlantic, Norfolk Downs, Wollaston and Montclair. Around these stations communities developed that took their names from the stations. All the developments were primarily for Boston commuters and were started after the Civil War. On Wollaston Heights the railroad offered one year's free commutation to the purchaser of a lot there. The result was that prosperous Boston businessmen bought lots and erected handsome homes. Before long these people were seeking services that the

town of Quincy was not providing - paved streets for example. This started the movement that resulted in Quincy becoming city in 1888.

The making of history in Quincy did not stop at the turn of the century; but the pattern had been set for a city of very distant residential communities, a city of many national cultures, a city with important industries and businesses but with many residents commuting elsewhere to work, a city with a rich and diverse heritage that few places can match.

Facts and Not Facts

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Historical presentations should be based on facts and interpretation. Errors of fact are out of place. Quincy history seems to have more than its share of errors; and once an error is in print it seems to be repeated indefinitely. The comments below relate to a few of the more persistent.

1. Quincy was named in honor of Col. John Quincy. It was not named for the family or any other member of the family.
2. Squantum was not named for Squanto, the Pilgrim Indian guide.
3. There is often confusion between the Town of Braintree incorporated in 1640 and comprising generally what is now Quincy, the original center, Braintree, Randolph and Holbrook, and which was divided along precinct lines in 1792 and 1793, and the present Town of Braintree. It has proved convenient to the present town as "Braintree" and the 1640-1792 town as "Old Braintree".
4. Moswetuset Hummock was the seat of the Massachusetts Indians from whom the name of the Commonwealth was derived. The Indians did not take their name from Moswetuset which meant "Place of the big house" or "Place of the great chief", not "Hill shaped like an arrowhead".

5. Capt. Wollaston did not establish a trading post here. He left a small group of men to winter here and never returned. The next spring Thomas Morton moved in and established the trading post of fame and ill-repute.
6. The John Winthrop, Jr. Iron Furnace in West Quincy was the first productive iron furnace in this country. Here was produced the first commercial iron in this country and from here iron workers went to found iron works at Saugus and elsewhere. It was not the first iron furnace in the country, and it never developed into an iron works because of insufficient water power in Furnace Brook.
7. The Granite Railway was not built to carry stone for Bunker Hill Monument or any other single purpose. It was the first railway in this country incorporated and operated as a common carrier, the reason that many commercial railway practices were pioneered here. The first freight contract was with the Bunker Hill Monument Association but was cancelled after one year. The Granite Railway operated for forty-four years.
8. Josiah Quincy was not Abigail Adams' uncle; he was her first cousin twice removed. From his home in Wollaston, he watched Gen. Gage depart from Boston, but that was not the Evacuation of Boston.
9. Interesting legends have developed

- around the Quincy Homestead such as a secret tunnel and secret hiding places. No tunnel has ever been found. The void spaces resulted from the incorporation of the 1685 house into the mansion of 1706. The romance of Dorothy Quincy and John Hancock there is highly unlikely since the Quincys lost the property to creditors in 1763, twelve years before their marriage.
10. The Presidents and their wives are not buried under the portico of the United First Parish Church. They lie within the church walls under the vestibule.
11. Adams Academy was not established under John Adams' will. John Adams established the Adams temple and School Fund and wrote the specifications for his school in deeds of 1822.

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