

Quincy History



Quincy Historical Society, Quincy, Massachusetts

Number 389

Spring, 1999

Benjamin Tompson, 1642-1714

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In Quincy, or more correctly in old Braintree, Dr. Benjamin Tompson was known as physician, schoolmaster, and town clerk. The epitaph on his tombstone in Roxbury indicates his wider reputation, "The Renowned Poet of New England." As early as 1676, his *New England's Crisis* was published in Boston and his *New England's Tears for her Present Miseries* was published in London. In 1924, H.J. Hall collected and published a volume: *Benjamin Tompson, His Poems*. Again, in 1980, Peter White produced a critical edition of Tompson's poetry, *Benjamin Tompson, Colonial Bard*, published by Pennsylvania State University Press. It is the subject matter—Indian wars, Puritan divines, colonial fashions, attitudes, and standards—rather than their style that make Tompson's verse a minor landmark in American literary history.

Benjamin Tompson was born on July 14, 1642 in Braintree to the Reverend William and Abigail Tompson. His mother died soon after his birth and Benjamin was reared in the home of Thomas Blanchard. When the Blanchards moved to Charlestown they took Benjamin with them. Contrary to the account of Daniel Munro Wilson, Benjamin was prepared for Harvard College by John Morley rather than by Henry Flynt. Tompson was graduated from Harvard in 1662 and returned to Braintree to live with his

father until the latter's death in 1666.

The following year Benjamin married Susanne Kirtland, who bore him nine children. To support his wife, Benjamin accepted the position of Master of Boston Latin School, where he presided until January 1670/71. At this time he exchanged positions with Ezekiel Cheever in Charlestown, where he taught until November 7, 1674. For the next five years he supported his family solely by means of his profession as a physician, before being hired by the Town of Braintree on March 3, 1679 to teach school.

Benjamin Tompson was not the first teacher in Braintree, but was the first to be hired by the town. The first entry in the first volume of the Braintree Town Records is entitled "The Schoole Land." William Coddington had been granted land in Braintree in 1636 when the area was still part of Boston. Two years later he fled to Rhode Island during the Antinomian controversy to avoid persecution by the General Court. In 1640 Braintree purchased Coddington's land, 175 acres, for 98 Pounds. The income from this land was the primary source of school funds during the seventeenth century.

Henry Flynt was the first teacher of whom we have any record in Braintree. His name appears on the Braintree church covenant of September 16, 1639 as a teacher, though he was not formally ordained until

March 17, 1640. The position of teacher in the early New England churches was essentially that of associate pastor. That a small and poor community, such as Braintree then was, needed two pastors seems to indicate one of two things, or perhaps both. The pastor, William Tompson, Benjamin's father, was unable to perform all of his duties, or there was a demand for an active educational program in the town. Henry Flynt kept school for eight years in Braintree. While he was instructing boys in Latin, his wife, Margery, was conducting a dame school at the parsonage for "instructing young Gentlewomen." In 1648 Flynt sold the schoolhouse to Dr. John Morley.

The citizens of Braintree placed a great value on education, but this was not free education. In 1668 the town voted to augment the revenues received as rent from the school lands to the total of twenty pounds "besides what every child must give" for a salary for a schoolmaster. The earliest schoolhouse must have been in use by about 1645. The Braintree records for March 11, 1735 refer to the town having kept a "Free Latin-School for about ninety years." We have noted the sale of the school house in 1648 to Dr. Morley by Reverend Flynt. It seems logical to conjecture that Henry Flynt had purchased the property in question for the purpose of establishing a school for boys while his wife was conducting a school for girls in the parsonage.

By the time that Dr. Benjamin Tompson was engaged by the town to teach school (March 3, 1679), the school house was regarded as a landmark, located "on what is now Hancock Street, near Canal Street, and almost opposite the old stone meetinghouse." Tompson was offered a piece of land to build a house on and promised a salary of thirty pounds per year. The rent of the town land was estimated at fifteen pounds a year and the remainder was to be raised by a town rate. The town agreed that "every child should carry into the schoolmaster half a cord of

wood beside the quarter money every year." Tompson apparently decided that he could do a better job of renting the school lands than the selectmen had been doing, for on March 10, 1682 he signed an agreement with the selectmen to be responsible for the letting of the school lands. If he could get more value from the lands than the selectmen, either through rental or personal use, this was apparently his privilege, provided he obeyed the town ordinances designed to maintain the value of the land.

It is interesting to note that the town agreed to pay the schoolmaster the equivalent of thirty pounds a year while the pastor received ninety pounds for the year. It was usual for the town minister to receive a salary at least double that of the schoolmaster throughout New England. In this case, however, the town physician was trying to supplement his income through teaching school. This may have been an advantage for the doctor, but the students' education may have suffered when the teacher missed school while treating the sick.

In 1691 the schoolmaster was to receive fifteen pounds "by a rate in country pay." In 1697 the schoolmaster was granted permission to cut and export ten cord of wood from the school land. In reading the town records, one begins to wonder what the school could possibly have done with all of the wood brought to the school by the students. Samuel Maverick suggests an answer by his statement that "during the early colonial period, Braintree subsisted 'by raising provisions, and furnishing Boston with wood,'" or as the records read "countrey pay at countrey prise."

Democracy was a great instrument of Yankee thrift. The town voted in 1695 that the schoolmaster, Benjamin Tompson, should have ten pounds besides the school rents for the following year provided the schoolmaster "acquit and fully discharge the town from all former debts and arrears." Tompson voted in the negative. Apparently this was a

convenient and efficient way for the town to acquit itself of the back salary which it owed to the schoolmaster. Dr. Tompson registered strong dissatisfaction with the efficiency of the New England town meeting by refusing to teach in 1699, and apparently he threatened to sue the town for his back salary, for the town appointed a committee to reply to the expected law suit. The committee was also empowered to offer Tompson five pounds money. Tompson won a moral victory when the town acknowledged its debt and offered at least token payment. Having made his point, Tompson accepted the five pounds and gave the town a receipt acknowledging the payment as being in full. Between 1699 and 1704 Tompson taught in the Roxbury Latin School. After trying three new schoolmasters in five years, the town rehired Tompson in 1704 and he taught for six more years, retiring at the age of 68.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Braintree and Roxbury had such excellent schools that they were attracting

scholars from other towns. In September, 1701, the Town of Braintree voted to charge five shillings a year to any local scholar attending the school, but the rate should be twenty shillings a year for any person living out of town. At the same time provision was made for poor families of the town who could not afford to send their children to school to apply to the selectmen to rebate a part or the whole of the required fee. From this beginning the rising cost of schooling was eventually raised by a town rate equally proportioned among the inhabitants.

Tompson's fine penmanship can be found in the Braintree Town Records which he wrote while serving as town clerk. After retiring as schoolmaster in 1710, Dr. Tompson moved to Roxbury where he died on April 13, 1714, leaving eight children and twenty-eight grandchildren.

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Tompson's Poetic Renown

Edward Fitzgerald

Although Benjamin Tompson's tombstone describes him as "the Renowned Poet of New England," that renown has been far from consistent in the nearly three centuries since the poet's death. The most famous 17th-century New England poets were Anne Bradstreet, who was a generation older than Tompson, and Michael Wigglesworth, who was roughly his contemporary. Modern critics add Edward Taylor, who was slightly younger and whose poems, during his own lifetime, were private compositions.

Tompson does hold claim to an important "first". He is the first poet in

English actually born in America. And according to Peter White, Tompson is among the earliest American poets to have work published in London. Tompson's New England contemporaries were certainly aware of his work. White points out that among Tompson's students at Boston Latin school was Cotton Mather. As an adult Mather both praised Tompson and included two poems by Tompson in his *Magnalia Christi Americana*. White also notes that Tompson was evidently chosen by the colony to write welcoming verse for the newly arrived Governor in 1699.

No one in Puritan Massachusetts,

including Mrs. Bradstreet, thought of himself or herself as a full-time poet. And Tompson's poetical output is not large. Tompson's work is "occasional"—work composed for a specific occasion or in response to a specific event. His two best-known works-- *New England's Crisis* and *New England's Tears*, a revised version with some additional poems on intervening events-- are collections of poems about King Philip's War, written in the midst of events. Both were published in both Boston and London. Tompson's poems catalogue the sufferings of the colonists at the hands of the Native Americans while at the same time raising the possibility that the Indian Wars are God's judgment on a moral and religious decline among the New England Puritans.

Most of Tompson's other poems are elegies prompted by the death of individuals, often leading citizens of the Commonwealth. Of these, best known is "The Grammarian's Funeral," on the occasion of the death of Ezekiel Cheever—who (see above article) had succeeded Tompson at Boston Latin School and had gone on to a long and legendary career. Also of particular interest for us is Tompson's poem memorializing his father, "Remarks on the Bright and Dark Side of that American Pillar, Mr. William Tompson."

According to White, Tompson—while he passed into obscurity-- was never completely forgotten in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. By the late 19th century, there was new interest in rediscovering the colonial past—literary and otherwise. Moses Coit Tyler in his groundbreaking *History of American Literature, 1607-1785*, published in 1888, describes Tompson's talent as essentially satirical and compares him in intent, if not achievement, to his great English contemporary, John Dryden. At the same time, Tyler's tone is dismissive. Nor does Tompson rate a mention in 1917's *Cambridge History of American Literature*.

In 1924 H.J. Hall published his edition

of Tompson's poems. Still, even as a reappraisal of the Puritans gained strength in the 1920s and '30s, Tompson's reputation seemed to lag behind. Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson in their influential anthology, *The Puritans*, include sections of *New England's Crisis*, but do not consider Tompson a good poet. Gradually, Johnson's reputation began to rise. Peter White points to Harold Janowitz' 1943 *First Century of American Verse* and Edwin Fussell's 1953 article, "Benjamin Tompson, Public Poet," as particularly influential in recognizing the merits of Tompson's work. Two standard reference works from the 1950s, Robert Spiller's *History of American Literature* and James Hart's *Oxford Companion to American Literature*, treat Tompson respectfully. White's own 1980 book presents the most sustained case for Tompson's importance.

At least part of the reevaluation of Tompson comes from an increased appreciation for his satiric, almost vitriolic, nature. White is one of several critics to note that Tompson's elegy of Cheever seems to mock even as it praises the man who, after all, took Tompson's job at Boston Latin. In his King Philip's War poems, Tompson is scathing in his portraits of Native Americans and of those colonists he sees as straying from piety. How these poems also set a pattern for our way of looking at subsequent Indian Wars has begun to be addressed by the recent and highly praised study of King Philip's War, *The Name of War*, by Jill Lepore.

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QUINCY HISTORY is published by
Quincy Historical Society
8 Adams Street
Quincy, MA 02169