

George Peabody – Father of Modern Philanthropy

By Christine Comiskey



Ascending the steps of our town library, one can't help but notice the portrait of a distinguished looking gentleman at the top of the stairs. But do you know who he is? And what is he holding in his hand?

George Peabody has a classic rags-to-riches story. Born in South Danvers (later renamed Peabody in his honor) in 1795, he was the third of eight children born to Thomas and Judith (Dodge) Peabody. After only four years of schooling, he was apprenticed at age eleven to a grocer. In 1811, Thomas Peabody died and the family became impoverished. "I have never forgotten and never can forget the great privations of my early years," George once said.

While serving in the War of 1812, George met businessman Elisha Riggs, who, after the war, made George a partner in his wholesale dry-goods business in Washington D.C. The business flourished and young George was well on his way to becoming a very wealthy man. In 1835, while in London on business, George established the merchant bank of George Peabody and Company, dealing in securities in American enterprises. As his fortune grew, so did his reputation of honesty and integrity. George Peabody was a man of great generosity and through his many charitable contributions in the U.S. and London, where he later lived, he became known as the Father of Modern Philanthropy.

THE LOCAL CONNECTION

Georgetown had the good fortune of having a direct connection to George Peabody. His mother, Judith Dodge, was born here and his sister, Judith Peabody Russell Daniels lived here for many years. George was very generous in the support of his extended family and in 1836 purchased a parcel of land in the center of town for a home for his sister and brother-in-law. In 1845, he purchased a new pulpit and furniture for the First Congregational (Old South) Church, where his sister worshipped. When the heresy trial of Reverend Charles Beecher resulted in the withdrawal in 1864 of 83 church members, Judith was among those who left to form a new church in town. Upon hearing of the new congregation without a church building of their own, George offered to have a fine new church built in memory of their beloved mother.

At a ceremony in 1866 to lay the cornerstone of the church, Mr. Peabody addressed the crowd, stating that, since the church was for the "exclusive use of a particular society," he was also having built, at the back of the lot, a free library for the use of the entire town and that he had already ordered 2,400 volumes from London for the library.



The home of Judith Peabody Russell Daniels beside the Memorial Church

THE LAST OF THE LOCAL LEGACY

There is little left of Mr. Peabody's generous gifts to the town. When the Old South Church was torn down in 1875, the pulpit and furniture given by Mr. Peabody were sold. The Memorial Church burned down in 1920, although it had ceased being used as a church in 1908 when the congregation reunited with the First Congregational Church due to dwindling membership. The library, having been built too close to a wetland, suffered from moisture problems, damaging many of the books. A new library was opened on Lincoln Park in 1909 and the old library building was eventually torn down. The lot where the library and beautiful old stone church once stood is now the town parking lot. Judith Peabody Russell Daniels' house still stands.



Original Peabody Library and Memorial Church

Fortunately, the new library continues to carry his name and is known to this day as the Georgetown Peabody Library. A few of the original donated volumes are believed to remain in the Local History Room. The portrait that once adorned the wall of the old library hangs prominently at the top of the stairs in the new addition and was restored a few years ago. If you look closely, you will see an envelope in his hand, with the words, "To the Chairman of the Peabody Library, Georgetown Mass., George Peabody."



Interior of Memorial Church with tablets dedicated to Mrs. Peabody and Reverend Isaac Braman