

Dorchester Women's Club offered good works for a century

by Anthony Sammarco

The Dorchester Women's Club recently disbanded after a century of good works in Dorchester. Though few members supported the club in its final years, it once boasted 600 members, a magnificent clubhouse and one of the most active of the clubs in the State Federation of Women's Clubs.

Founded in 1892 by Clara May Ripley on Harvard Street in Dorchester, "three hundred eager women were conferring together, and perfecting an organization which should be broad, simple, and elastic." The club was admitted to the State Federation in 1893 and within five years they built their "Air Castle," a neo-Georgian clubhouse designed by local architect A. Warren Gould, who also happened to be the husband of member Susie Gould. The clubhouse was composed of Whiton Hall, named for President Ella Whiton, and Ripley Hall, named for founder Clara Ripley. The first meeting in the new clubhouse was in November, 1898 and each club member paid 69 cents for her chair.

Because the situation of women a century ago was marked by much greater inequality than today, the Dorchester Women's Club was much less involved in town affairs and far from financially self-sufficient. However, the club was composed of energetic, educated and concerned residents of Dorchester, using the seal of Dorchester and the motto signifying piety, learning and industry, the virtues of the Puritans who settled Dorchester in 1630.

The members of the club "maintained the custom first established, and presented annually sixteen programs, stimulating to the thought, the sympathies, or the artistic sense of the attending members, and catering at times to their palates as well, since even women grow wondrous open-hearted over their teacups." With lectures, art shows, musicals and evening dances, the Dorchester Women's Club became one of the most successful clubs of their kind in the Greater Boston area.

IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THIS CENTURY, the club also sponsored community development, social



Above: The Dorchester Club seal incorporates the town shield, a castle in memory of Dorchester in England, the date of town and club incorporation, and the motto "piety, learning and industry", all virtues revered by the early settlers. Left: Dorchester Women's Club

services and visits to hospitals. In 1913, musical instruments were donated to the Dorchester High School Regiment, with ten bugles and 14 snare drums emblazoned with the name and seal of the club. To further young adults, the Merritt Scholarship was established in 1915 for college-bound Dorchesterites and it is still awarded by the state federation. Throughout this century, though a social club in nature, the Dorchester Women's Club sponsored good will and service to the community. Hand knitted Afghans were donated to the Carney Hospital for children during the Holiday Season. With bazaars and open houses in the 1940-1960 period, the club maintained full membership, but as more women sought employment, membership began to dwindle after 1960. Many women were unable to give the time to an organization that met during the day, or to assist in the sundry duties of maintaining a large clubhouse where many wedding and shower receptions were held for five decades.

The last decade of the club's existence saw the membership drop to fewer than 30 members, most of whom

were either past presidents or long time members who loyally supported the club. The days of dances and musical afternoons had passed, as had the need for Whiton Hall, and it was sold to Doyle's Catering Company. A short return to the elegance of 1898 was witnessed when "Whiton Hall" opened for Sunday Brunch in the early 1980s. The remaining club members, who were heard to remark how good the clubhouse still looked, attended a reception for the 100th anniversary of the Dorchester Women's Club, but were unable to continue the club.

Today, we remember the Dorchester Women's Club as an important social institution in Dorchester with dance classes for children, a local history class for club members, wedding receptions and activity that made the clubhouse come to life.

Anthony Sammarco's award-winning history columns are a regular feature of Dorchester Community News.