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Massachusetts Legislature.

THE COMMITTEE ON FEDERAL RELATIONS.

SPEECH OF PRESIDENT ELIOT

FOR AID IN THE PRESERVATION OF THE

OLD SOUTH MEETING-HOUSE.

BOSTON:
ALFRED MUDGE & SON, PRINTERS,
34 SCHOOL STREET.
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IN EXCHANGE
JAN 5 - 1915

ADDRESS OF PRESIDENT ELIOT, OF HARVARD
COLLEGE.

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen, — Since I last came here in this cause, a year ago, great progress has been made in the enterprise. Some obstacles have been removed by time and events. Before seeking, as they now do, the help of the State, the men and women for whom I have the honor to speak have at least shown their faith by their works. They have given to the enterprise much more in proportion to their means than they ask the State to give.

It seems so inevitable that every son and daughter of Massachusetts, who has read its history, should long to have this building preserved, that one cannot but feel astonished at the presentation of objections to its preservation. Yet, during the past year and a half, I have had occasion to hear many objections; and as I think some of them may be encountered in the Legislature, when discussion arises upon a grant of money for the preservation of this building, I should like to rehearse some of them, if the committee have no objection, and to indicate the manner in which I have endeavored to meet them.

Events have met some of them. I remember, for instance, an eager objection which was made to this undertaking in its inception. It was that the city of Boston could not spare from its valuation the mercantile buildings that might stand upon the site of the old meeting-house; that no such piece of ground in the heart of the city could properly be spared

from trade and industry. But now the many vacant shops and stores within a stone's throw of the Old South effectually answer that objection. We have learned that Boston has more mercantile buildings than are needed, and that it is not the reservation of ground for churches, schools, and parks which checks the industry and trade of the city.

I have often met persons who said, "The price is very excessive. It is an outrage that four hundred thousand dollars should be paid for that building." Disinterested persons, competent to value the site, expressed the opinion that the price was not an unreasonable one at the time it was agreed upon. But suppose that the price agreed upon at a moment of pressure was eight or ten per cent higher than would now be offered, — the money is all applied to a good use; the four hundred thousand dollars go to carry on a valuable religious trust, an ancient trust in this commonwealth, in whose continuance and prosperity we ought all to rejoice. There may be gentlemen who say, "I am not a Calvinist, or a Congregationalist; I am a Roman Catholic, or I am a Baptist, a Methodist, a Churchman: what interest have I in the preservation of the Old South trust?" I think such objectors could learn a lesson from that Massachusetts hero of the Revolution, Samuel Adams, with whose labors and achievements the Old South is indissolubly connected. At the second day's session of the First Continental Congress, a question arose as to choice of a chaplain; Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists found themselves face to face, and the question was evidently embarrassing. But Samuel Adams, the Calvinist and Puritan of the true Old South type, arose and said, "I am no bigot; I can hear a prayer from a man of piety and virtue, who is at the same time a friend to his country." And he moved that an Episcopal clergyman be appointed chaplain; which was thereupon done. The proportions of sects have changed a good deal in

Massachusetts during the last hundred years, and there are, doubtless, many Episcopalians in the present Legislature. We ask them to remember these words of Samuel Adams, when they come to vote upon the question of paying something to preserve the building in which he taught the people of Boston to know their rights and to maintain them.

I have heard persons say, "We cannot care much for this building; for the original pews are not there,—the inside is all altered. If it were only the old building unchanged,—if we could really sit in the seats where our fathers sat, we should have a different feeling about it." But why are the original pews, pulpit, and platform not there? It is because they were taken out by the troops of King George,—by troops who came to subdue and punish Boston and Massachusetts. Those pews gave place to the earthen ring of a riding-school. Now, Mr. Chairman, is not this reminiscence worth more than the old pews to any American who has a pride in remembering why the King's troops were sent hither, how they fared here, and how they departed hence? I hope there are some members of the Legislature of Irish birth who will bear in mind that English soldiers stripped that building, and will wish on that account to aid in preserving it.

I have heard the objection that the meeting-house was an old and ugly thing which could not last long; that it would be a great deal better if nothing but the spire were kept, or if a single stone—some monument—were erected upon the vacant lot. Well, gentlemen, we must have the lot before we can put upon it the spire or any monument; and the price of \$400,000 is the price of the lot, and not of the building. For the meeting-house itself only \$3,500 were paid. That was the whole value of the Old South considered as second-hand building materials.

But there has been a deeper objection urged in my presence, by persons whom I had previously supposed to have some acquaintance with the history of their country. They have said, "Well, after all, what was ever done in the Old South? Was much done there? Is there really good reason for venerating it? What are the associations with the Old South which are so precious?" Now, that is a fundamental question. I should have to read you the history of the Revolution to give an effective answer to such a doubt. Time will not permit me to do more than barely mention five public meetings held in that building, which ought to make it sacred to this people so long as its bricks can be made to hold together.

I mention, first, the meeting of the 14th of June, 1768, when the ship-of-war "Romney," sent hither to enforce the orders of the Commissioners of Customs, lay in the harbor, and excited the indignation of the town by the insolence of its officers in impressing sailors, and supporting and harboring the commissioners. There had been a commotion in the town, with some actual violence, on the 10th, and all but one of the commissioners had taken refuge on the "Romney," when the people of Boston came together in the Old South Church, — Faneuil Hall being too small for them, — and were there addressed by James Otis. The objects of the meeting were to prevent impressments, and to cause, if possible, the removal of the King's ship from the harbor. Then and there James Otis uttered these words, after expressing the hope that, in time, the grievances of the people might be removed: "If not, and we are called on to defend our liberties and privileges, I hope and believe we shall, one and all, resist even unto blood." What was the town, gentlemen, in which these bold words were uttered, in the presence of the forces of the King? It was what we should call a village. Its entire population numbered not

more than sixteen thousand people, while for political purposes its population did not exceed thirty-five hundred men. Yet Otis there spoke of resisting unto blood the power of Great Britain; and by mere moral force that meeting accomplished one of its objects. It put a stop to impressments.

Let me next bring to your minds the meeting after the Boston massacre. On the 5th of March, 1770, citizens had been shot down in our streets by the troops of the King. On the 6th a crowded meeting was held in the Old South Meeting-house; and there Samuel Adams filled his fellow-townsmen with his own dauntless spirit, and wrought their indignation to the pitch of self-possessed and irresistible resolve. Commissioned by that meeting, Samuel Adams went into the presence of the governor and the commander of the royal troops, and demanded the total and immediate removal of all the troops from the town. Incomprehensible as it seems to us at this distant time, when we consider the relative forces of the two parties to the contest, with no other power than that of clear determination, Samuel Adams and that unanimous meeting in the Old South succeeded, and the two offending regiments were withdrawn from the outraged town.

I come next to the tea meeting, or meetings, of Nov. 29th and 30th, 1773, when five thousand men of Boston and the neighborhood thronged the meeting-house, and resolved that no duty should be paid upon the tea, and that it should be sent back whence it came. On the 30th, you remember, a proclamation by the governor was sent to the meeting, commanding them "forthwith to disperse and to surcease all further illegal proceedings, at their utmost peril." An ample force was at his disposal for the execution of this order; but the meeting unanimously resolved that they would not disperse, and that they would execute their resolutions at the risk of their property and their lives. A fortnight later, on the de-

cisive day of Dec. 16th, 1773, seven thousand men waited in the Old South from morning till night, to see if the tea-ships were to be cleared from the port. After nightfall they learned that the governor refused to give a pass for the ships; when Samuel Adams, the moderator, arose and said, "This meeting can do nothing more to save the country"; and at that word the tea-party started from the porch of the building — the same building which we can look upon to-day, and which we want to have our children's children see — and went down to Griffin's wharf, and threw the tea into the sea. That act made Boston the first object of the King's wrath, and Massachusetts the first field of the war of the Revolution.

The fourth meeting in the Old South, to which I ask your attention, is to my mind the most affecting, magnanimous and momentous popular meeting ever held in New England. It was the meeting of June 27th and 28th, 1774, when the Boston Port Bill had been four weeks in force. I have heard it said, as an objection to this effort to preserve the building in which that meeting was held, that these are hard times, that everybody is poor, that the State must be frugal. I agree, gentlemen, that the times are hard; I admit that this generation has never known such hard times. But let us compare them, for an instant, in our thought, with the times of June, 1774.

The port had been closed. No vessels but those of the King of Great Britain — the armed vessels of his Majesty, which weighed heavily upon the desolate harbor — could either enter or go out. Boston was a little town of not more than thirty-five hundred effective men, almost all of whom were traders, mechanics, and sailors. Shipping and commerce being the principal interests of the inhabitants, their whole livelihood was threatened. Ruin stared the people in the face. Their communications with England, the West Indies,

Africa, and all the ports with which they had been accustomed to trade, were completely cut off. Moreover, there were two regiments of King's troops encamped upon the Common, — a thing unprecedented and illegal. In the preceding April, Lord North had introduced into Parliament, where it had been triumphantly carried without delay, "An Act to better regulate the Province of Massachusetts Bay"; and that act provided, among other things, that the council, which had heretofore been elected, should be appointed by the Crown or the governor; that judges and sheriffs should be appointed by the Crown; that juries should be named by the sheriffs; that officers and soldiers of the King charged with offences against the people should not be tried here, but be removed for trial to some other colony or to Great Britain. Adams, Hancock, Warren, and all the other popular leaders were in instant danger of arrest and punishment. The whole town knew these things. They had no government, and no organization of any sort except a committee of correspondence; and they were not sure even of the sympathy and support of their sister colonies.

Under these dreadful circumstances the people assembled in our Old South Meeting-house. They, gentlemen, were poor indeed, and in great tribulation. And what did they do? The meeting was invaded by the Tories, in the hope of procuring some concessions from the forlorn townsmen, — in the hope that a submission might be extorted from this suffering people; and Samuel Adams was obliged to leave the chair, and contend in debate with the party proposing submission. They were not content with one day's debate; they had a second. Every blandishment was used by the supporters of the government; every motive for concession was set before the meeting; fear, selfish interest, and the lingering sentiment of loyalty prompted them to submission; nothing but commercial and industrial ruin was before them if they per-

sisted in rebellion; and yet, by an immense majority, they refused to censure their committee of correspondence, and encouraged them "to continue steadfast in the way of well-doing."

I hope, gentlemen, that it will not be alleged that the Massachusetts of to-day is too poor to honor those men, by keeping as their best monument the building which witnessed their self-sacrificing constancy. They acted for posterity, — for us. Let us preserve the scene of their trial and of their triumph. Let us remember, too, what Samuel Adams said so truly of himself: "For my part, I have been wont to converse with poverty; and however disagreeable a companion she may be thought to be by the affluent and luxurious who never were acquainted with her, I can live happily with her the remainder of my days, if I can thereby contribute to the redemption of my country." [Applause.] Verily, gentlemen, no times are so fit as hard times in which to commemorate Samuel Adams. Will not the people count it a privilege to make some real sacrifices in his honor?

There was a fifth great meeting in the Old South. It was in 1775, on the fifth of March, the anniversary of the Boston massacre, and Joseph Warren was the orator, and Samuel Adams the moderator. Forty or fifty officers of the British army and navy were conspicuously seated on the platform and the pulpit stairs, and the meeting-house was thronged with people. Warren was to speak of the killing and wounding by the King's troops of a few citizens of Boston on the night of the 5th of March, 1770. Although Lexington was still six weeks distant, Boston was already occupied, like an enemy's town, by the army of the King, and the harbor was in possession of vessels of war; yet Warren took for his subject the evil of standing armies in a time of peace; and he spoke heroically and convincingly, — so heroically, so movingly, that not even that band of

English officers, whose feelings against the rebellious populace were exasperated to the highest pitch, ventured to interrupt him. They all listened in silence until the close, though his words were as bold and free as if he himself, the moderator, and all the principal men there present, were not in immediate danger of arrest and transportation to England,—as if the little province could be expected to cope with the most formidable power of the world,—as if he knew how his own name was to ring along the centuries. “Our country is in danger,” he said; “our enemies are numerous and powerful. You are to decide the important question on which rests the happiness and liberty of millions yet unborn. Act worthy of yourselves. . . . My fellow-citizens, I know you want not zeal or fortitude. You will maintain your rights, or perish in the generous struggle.”

But, perhaps, the sceptical thought occurs to some of you, —after all, were these Old South meetings events of real importance; they make brave pictures in the imagination, but had they at the time any grave significance? Let Lord George Germaine and the English ministry answer that doubt. In March, 1774, Germaine said in Parliament, “Put an end to their town meetings,” and the ministry of Lord North brought in and carried in due course the Act, already referred to, “for the better regulating the province of the Massachusetts Bay,” one provision of which forbade free town meetings, except two a year for the choice of officers and representatives, and for no other business. No other assembling of a town was permitted under this act except by written leave of the governor. Such was the contemporaneous English estimate of the significance of Massachusetts town meetings. Yet Parliament were far from comprehending what those meetings proved. They proved nothing less than that the people of the province were fit to be free; they

demonstrated that the mass of the people were clear-headed, self-possessed, resolute, and martial, and that their leaders were incorruptible, inflexible, and zealous for liberty. Moreover, they consolidated opinion, won sympathy, fed enthusiasm, and developed political sense. Now the Old South meetings, which I have mentioned, were the most memorable meetings of the Revolutionary period.

Finally, gentlemen, let me meet an objection which may be plausibly expressed somewhat in this wise: "Shall fifty thousand hard-earned dollars be wrung from an over-burdened people for a mere piece of sentiment?" The foundations of society are sentiments. The ultimate causes of industrial and commercial prosperity are the sentiments of courage, honor, and good faith. Are not current events teaching us how completely all profitable industry and commerce depend upon the moral qualities of men and communities? The cause of the existing national distress is not physical, but moral. Our ports are open, our highways broad and free; the products of our fields and mines abound; no rumors of wars have terror for us. The cause of our distress in the midst of material abundance is what the Old South called sinfulness, — the lack of the mere sentiments of fortitude, faith, and duty. What this country needs is a new flood of righteous sentiments carried into action. There is no more effective public method of fostering for the benefit of the present and the future the virtues which uphold the state than by honorably commemorating conspicuous exhibitions of these virtues in the past. As we would have men hereafter ready to die in defence of our country's flag, we gather reverently the flags around which men have in our day died, and preserve them with costly care. As all states experience crises in which they rely for preservation upon that splendid spirit of military honor and devotion which has been of infinite service to civilization, the state

rightly marks memorable battle fields, and builds monuments to its soldiers and sailors. So if Massachusetts desires to find in later generations the civil courage which resists oppression and wrong at the risk of life, liberty, and fortune, let her hold in honorable remembrance the men who, at her very birth, conspicuously illustrated this virtue, and let her contribute to preserve the venerable building which witnessed their struggles and their victories. And as she is grateful for pious founders, as she hopes that righteous and faithful men may not cease, let Massachusetts help to save from destruction a famous shrine of that sturdy religious faith to which she unquestionably owes her own existence, and which has done more for civil liberty than any other religious opinion which the world has known.

The Old South is emphatically a local monument. It reminds us that in the glorious conflict for national independence, Boston was the first object of Great Britain's wrath, and Massachusetts fields the first to be stained with blood. Sure am I that the sentiment of local pride is a strong support to any people, to keep them in the way of virtue; and that monuments to the great words and deeds of ancestors foster that wholesome pride. Are we not glad that Boston and Massachusetts paid the interest on their debts in gold all through the civil war? In that strait, local pride helped us greatly to do our duty. Do we not wish that all the States, and the United States, were as proud as Massachusetts? [Applause.]

It seems to me that Massachusetts should take part in this grateful work for her own credit and honor, — that she may pay a fitting tribute to the virtues and achievements of generations to which she owes her being. No one can be more opposed than I am, as a general rule, to subsidies paid from the public treasury to private corporations, whether indus-

trial, commercial, or educational; but a contribution to keep this venerable building as a public monument cannot be likened to these objectionable subsidies. The Old South commemorates the birth of the State; it prolongs the memory of the men who founded this precious institution which we call "Massachusetts"; it is a unique memorial of heroic times.

The plain duty of our generation is to save that building, that it may stand before posterity as long as its stout old walls will endure. It cannot last forever; and what will remain when, centuries hence, it crumbles to decay? The hallowed ground will remain, and then another generation will gladly take up the work we now begin. They shall clear the ground, and set up a stone on a little green in the heart of a then ancient city, and on it write names as well known to them as to us, — the heroic names of Otis, Warren, and Adams! [Applause.]



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