

# Benjamin Dearborn

## Teacher, Inventor, Philanthropist

By EMMA FORBES WAITE

IT is my desire that my Real Estate may eventually be converted into a Charitable Fund for alleviating the miseries of enfeebled and disconsolate sufferers . . . the residue of my personal estate consists principally of my Literary and Mechanical Studies. Of the former, so many copies are now on hand of my Columbian Grammar, Perpetual Diary, and Lenient System, that I will not enumerate them, but refer to one only. . . . This favorite invention is my Model of a Relief Factory, which if erected in magnitude would provide for destitute children, the effective means of earning their subsistence by their own useful amusement."

Benjamin Dearborn, Junior, was sixth in descent from Godfrey, one of a Massachusetts Company which emigrated into the New Hampshire Province, 1639, a signer of their Compact, the "Exeter Combination," and a "man of high standing and importance among his fellows." His later years were spent in the Hampton area where his descendants for three generations maintained his reputation for probity and public service. A great grandson, Dr. Benjamin Dearborn, Harvard, 1746, married into a Portsmouth family of his own profession, and settled in the Province capital. His death at thirty left his widow with the one son, Benjamin, of whose formative years little beyond his baptism in 1754 is on record. Later accomplishments and connections suggest the best local education available, presumably at Major Hale's Latin Grammar School, a Province institution of long and distinguished standing.

At the outbreak of the Revolution, he was associated with Daniel Fowle, owner and publisher of the first Province newspaper, the *New Hampshire Gazette*, 1756. Early in 1776, Mr. Fowle clashed with the authorities over the publication of an article highly critical of the Colonies' struggle, and was "ordered to appear before this House, and give an account of the author of such Piece, and further, to answer for the printing of such Piece." This savored too much, perhaps of a similar experience in Boston which had cost him a jail sentence and loss of prestige as printer and bookseller. With his printing-press, he now removed to Exeter, temporary capital, leaving his youthful apprentice in charge of a new paper, with the more timely title of *Freeman's Journal*. Dearborn, "fully convinced of the justice of the common cause" carried on until the end of that year when he "resigned said paper into the hands of Daniel Fowle, Esq. original owner of the *New Hampshire Gazette*." With the eventual return of its first title and numbering, plus Fowle's immediate engagement as state printer, the Exeter episode reads more like a sop to public opinion than an extended rebuke.

In his last issue of the *Journal*, Dearborn informs the public that he has removed to the "house opposite Major Hale's where may be had variety of English, West India and other goods." Scattered advertisements reveal him in the same general business until 1780 when his stock had dwindled to a "small assortment of Hardware, such as Hand and Pannel Saws, Box-Irons, &c." and his

new project, a "writing School for Misses" is on the way. As elsewhere, public interest in the education of girls was practically nil. Several local schools for boys offered instruction at different hours, and a solitary dame school for girls set the standard at "working samplers, pictures, and coats of arms, plain work, and reading." Dearborn's idea being to establish equality, he engaged to teach spelling and grammar, as well as the three R's. "Mr. Dearborn wanted to get up a class in grammar, but could only prevail upon six scholars to join. . . . Grammars were obtained in Boston," Meantime, for reading, the "scholars brought the Spectator and Guardian, and such books as they had."

In common with other contemporary educators, Dearborn realized the handicap of imported textbooks, and took an early hand at remedying it. His school was hardly a year old when he published (1782), his *Pupils' Guide being a Collection of the most Useful Rules in Arithmetic*. . . . In a slim volume of sixteen pages, he provided each pupil "with every example he works at school being penn'd in a book, with a rule for each." It had been tested first in manuscript, and was reprinted in Boston the following year. His *Columbian Grammar* (1795), part of a general educational scheme belongs to the later Boston period, though its approach also through manuscript may well have dated back to the New Hampshire days.

The Portsmouth school in his house "on the Paved street, opposite the Printing-Office," continued to prosper. At times, he takes boys, admits young children for reading and spelling, introduces geography and the use of the globes. When the Province adopted the Federal Constitution, a feature of the local celebration was the "Terrestrial Globe, recited for New Hampshire, and decorated

by a company of Young Ladies who were studying geography." Announcement of a Singing-School (1785), is repeated two years later; scholars already attending the Writing School will be admitted "Gratis." His interim experience in teaching music had evidently been illuminating, for "Mr. Dearborn has now in the Press 'Rules for Teaching Music entirely by Letters!'"

In January, 1791, he is advertising the opening of Portsmouth Academy, with boarding school attached, on the rear of his home lot, adding a "master for the French Language, and a mistress for Needle-Work." When it was completed, "Dr. Haven delivered an elegant address, in honor of the occasion, in the North Church, and Mr. Sewell wrote an Ode. The Scholars were all present." By September, he is selling his household goods, and explaining "that on account of support being withdrawn from some of the branches of Portsmouth Academy, and given to rival institutions, he is obliged to discontinue said Academy." Nothing daunted, he has taken a "commodious house in Boston . . . for instituting an Academy where Young Ladies will be boarded."

Spanning the ten years of the Portsmouth school, Dearborn maintained a house shop where books and stationery augmented a choice assortment of fancy goods and ladies' accessories. Dictionaries and Bibles, Belles Lettres and Psalters suggest comprehensive importations, secured through Boston. The later period saw an emphasis on domestic manufactures and imprints; hanging papers, dress goods, textbooks and juveniles. His house "on the Paved street" could hardly have been more strategically situated. In the "compact part" of the town, it ran straight from the Parade to Spring Hill Market, thence to the ferries, fisheries and shipyards on Langdon's (Badger's) Island. That same year, 1761, a "chaise"

stage, with three seats, and drawn by two horses began a weekly run to Boston.

At the "commodious house" (Mason's Hall at the Green Dragon Tavern, now owned by the Grand Order of Masons), the Boston Academy opened auspiciously with "departments for the French Language, Dancing, and Musick as soon as

have topped other pursuits, and the state of New Hampshire had already granted him a patent for a waterwheel and scales, but had rejected his "patent balance." It was to be several years after he had settled in Boston that he secured a Massachusetts right to this, his most famous invention. As a "vibrating steel-

## THURSDAY the 1<sup>st</sup> of March

**A** SCHOOL will be open'd for MISSES,  
By BENJAMIN DEARBORN,  
at his House in pav'd Street,—where Reading, Spelling, Writing, and Arithmetic, will be taught from 9 to 12 o'clock A. M. and from 2 to 5 P. M.  
Portsmouth 1780.

---

FIRST ANNOUNCEMENT OF DEARBORN'S SCHOOL, IN THE "NEW HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE," FEBRUARY 26, 1781

a competent number of Pupils apply." At "Terms Two Dollars per Month, every Scholar will be provided with a Separate Desk, Books for Writing, for Reading, and Study, Pens, Ink, Slates, &c . . . without further expense except for Fire-Money." By 1796, the Academy was in "Mr. Dearborn's new building, at the south entrance of the narrow lane from the Theatre to Milk Street" (Theatre Alley). Flanked by Franklin Place, where the lane emerged on the south, it was directly behind the new Theatre, which faced Federal Street, and opposite Tontine Crescent (annuity residence), both planned by Charles Bulfinch, as part of a community project. Three stories high, and built mostly from salvaged timber, it was to prove doubly strategic as Dearborn advanced from schoolmaster to manufacturer. Inventions seem always to

yard" or "just balance," it was modestly advertised (1799) from Taunton, where the first factory was located; more grandiloquently, after he had let out its manufacture, and turned over the Academy to a new master, in an apparent attempt to reconcile conflicting demands. Final triumph for the balance came in 1801, when "it will be manufactured and vended by the subscriber at his factory near the western end of the Theatre."

His inventive talents had secured him a life membership in the Academy of Arts and Sciences (1793), which later included in its *Memoirs* his "Remarks on the Common Scale-Beam, with a Description of the New Standard Gold Balance, invented by the Author." Construction ranged from the delicate gold balance for banks, to the "Platform Balance," for heavy merchandise, "with weights cal-

culated for the entire commercial world." For twenty-two years, he worked at his balance factory, perfecting a variety of inventions, and keeping busy a staff of model-making mechanics. His "Machine for Drawing in Perspective," his "Perpetual Diary" and his "Table for Computing Interest" all fall within the crowded years of his early Boston life. In a note to Isaiah Thomas, Worcester publisher and printer, "having completed an additional apparatus for my printing-press, I address to you the above specimen," a ship's clearance paper, from a wood-block, printed in colors. Two other like experiments, "View of Niagara Falls" and "Plan of Boston" were also, as he notes, "the earliest examples of typographical colouring in this country."

In 1819 he journeyed to Washington to lay before the Congress his proposal for running steamcars on rails. Though his proposal came to nothing, he felt that he had "planted a good seed," and lived to see the dream become a reality.

In newspaper articles and pamphlets, he demonstrated a lifelong concern for a more equitable social and economic status. Such revolutionary ideas as the employment of prisoners for mutual benefit, in "Friend to Industry" (1785), or the payment of debts without imprisonment, in "Lenient System" (1827), have become the commonplaces of today. His "Model of a Relief Factory," as he describes it, envisaged a guaranteed security in return for manual skills.

For the best part of his active life, he taught and wrought in Theatre Alley. Possibly to ease the business strain, he moved his residence around the corner to Federal Street about 1820, and took on a clerk who became the owner of the factory, and one of his executors. The last years, until his death in 1838, were spent

on Avon Place, a residential blind alley, in the heart of today's business district.

His will, published as a pamphlet at his request, after careful consideration for his heirs during their lives provides that all his real estate holdings (about \$90,000) "shall be at the disposal of the officers of the Boston Dispensary, to be by them appropriated to the charitable purpose expressed in the first passage. . . ." In 1797, a sign painting of the Good Samaritan, formally adopted as a symbol had been hung over the Dispensary's Apothecary Shop, in nearby Cornhill. "It would not require a great flight of imagination to suppose some connection between the adoption of this favorite symbol of Benjamin Dearborn and the munificent bequest which connects his name insolubly with our Institution."

His sons may have inherited artistic leanings, but little of the parental genius. In the further distribution of his property, Nathaniel, "wood engraver" received only his share of the real estate; to the more congenial John, "machine factor," he bequeathes his mathematical instruments and mechanic's tools as well as a right in the dwelling house, along with his second wife and her two daughters. A third son, Samuel H., died before his father, but "to my grandson, Samuel Dearborn, my watch, with its gold diary key, as a small testimonial of the high estimation in which I hold his exemplary conduct during the period of my supporting him at New Ipswich" (a co-education school after his own heart). Furni-

As a final gesture, he reiterated his philosophy by reprinting and distributing a poem of his youth:

Thus would I use the reason given;  
And thus enjoy that gift from Heaven;  
Aiming to keep from folly free,  
By wisdom's singularity.