

**THE MEMORIAL BIOGRAPHIES OF  
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III; MEMOIR OF RUFUS CHOATE,  
PP. 383-436**

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## RUFUS CHOATE

IN March, 1633, John, son of Governor John Winthrop, with twelve men, began a plantation at Agawam, which in 1634 was incorporated as Ipswich by the General Court of Massachusetts. Its southern portion, long known as Chebacco, was created into a separate town in 1819, by the name of Essex. Ship-building was carried on upon the principal stream at least as early as 1668, and the "Chebacco boats" were long famous. Captain Barnstable of the *Ariel*, in Cooper's "Pilot," hailed from "old Chebacco."

John Choate, an immigrant from England, settled in Chebacco in 1645. His son Thomas settled on Hog Island, and, being the first resident there and a large farmer, was known as Governor Choate. A man of good sense and large influence, he represented Ipswich in the General Court in 1723-27, dying March 3, 1745. His son, Colonel John Choate, was born on Hog Island in 1697, and died in 1766. Seventeen years a member of the House of Representatives, and five of the Council, Justice of the Court of Sessions and Court of Common Pleas, and Judge of Probate, he was a leading citizen of the province. Elected Speaker in 1741, he was negatived by Governor Belcher. Francis, another son of Thomas Choate, was born on Hog Island in 1701, and died there October 15, 1777. He was prominent in church and town affairs. His second son, William, was the father of David Choate, born upon

Hog Island, November 29, 1757, who died March 26, 1808. He inherited the island farm which is still owned by his descendants, but in 1800 he removed to the main land. David Choate, the father of Rufus, was, at times, a school-teacher in Ipswich. He was highly esteemed for his social talents, good sense, and judgment. He is understood to have been a member of the State Convention called to consider the Federal Constitution, and to have advocated its adoption in a series of newspaper articles, sometimes ascribed to Chief-Justice Parsons. The statement shows, at any rate, the estimation in which his abilities were held. By his first wife David Choate had no children. October 11, 1791, he married Miriam, daughter of Captain Aaron Foster, who bore him two daughters and four sons, and who survived him more than forty years, dying in 1853, at the age of eighty-one. Their son David, born November 29, 1796, died December 16, 1872. He was long engaged in school-teaching, was an active town and church officer, a member of both branches of the legislature, and distinguished for the moral and intellectual traits characteristic of his family.

One of the daughters married Dr. Thomas Sewall, who, about 1808, succeeded another eminent physician, Dr. Reuben D. Muzzey, in practice at Essex. Dr. Sewall, some years after, removed to Washington, where he attained great distinction in his profession, his house becoming the home of his famous brother-in-law, the subject of this memoir, during his various residences in that city.

Fond tradition and affectionate eulogy preserve the memory of another son, Washington Choate, who, born January 17, 1803, died February 27, 1822, whilst a member of the Junior Class in Dartmouth College. His fair beauty, his sweet disposition, his extreme precocity and remarkable attainments were accompanied, we are told, by a sincere and fervent piety, which fitted him for the lofty service to which he had already determined to con-

secrete his life. He was undoubtedly a young man of rare promise, thought by many to be in no way inferior to his brother Rufus, — who was fondly attached to him, and refused to be comforted for his loss.

Rufus, the second son and fourth child of David and Miriam (Foster) Choate, was born upon the island "Tuesday, October 1, 1799, at 3 o'clock P. M." — according to the record made by his father in the Family Bible. Although the family removed to Essex village when Rufus was only six months old, the island farm continued to be cultivated by them, and frequent visits were made to it in a "dug-out." To his latest day Mr. Choate loved to repair there, and talk of his boyish work and sport upon that spot. Its scenery and associations became a distinct element in the formation of his character. His biographer wrote, in 1862 : —

An arm of the sea flows pleasantly about it, and a little creek runs up to within twenty rods of the old dwelling, which stands on the hillside, hardly changed from what it was sixty years since, — of two stories, heavy-timbered, low-roomed, with beams across the ceiling, bare and weather-beaten, but with a cheerful southerly outlook towards the marshes, the sea, and the far-off rocky shore of Cape Ann.

During the War of the Revolution a British frigate hovered off the shore, and sent boats into the near harbor of Annisquam. When they approached Hog Island, all the people fled to the main land, save the wife of William Choate, grandmother of Rufus, who refused to leave, and remained with two little children, fearless and unharmed. During the War of 1812, British men-of-war were more than once seen near the islands. The boy Rufus gazed with rapt eyes upon the Tenedos and the Shannon, "sitting like swans upon the water."

In August, 1813, he went to Salem, when the remains of the brave Captain Lawrence of the Chesapeake were reinterred. The last battle-cry of the hero, "Don't give up



the ship!" rang in his ears. The opening sentence of Judge Story's famous oration, "Welcome to their native shores be the remains of our departed heroes!" seemed to him the grandest eloquence. He delighted in accounts of naval battles; and, with his brother Washington and other boys, he fought them "o'er again." He was himself the captain, the admiral; and, above all things, he impressed upon his subordinates the duty of nailing the flag to the mast-head, never, never to be hauled down!

Indeed, the boyhood by the sea, the sight and sound of it in calm and storm, the fishing, the ship-building, the sea-stories and sea-fights, made an indelible impression upon this imaginative boy. His dream then was to be a sea-captain, — or better, himself a naval hero. And though the stronger passion for books, when it sprang up, dispelled that dream, yet to the last of earth he loved sailors and the sea. No man was more familiar with naval history, and the very manœuvres of the vessels in our various naval engagements. His most brilliant and beautiful lecture "The Romance of the Sea" — in which he had incorporated much that he had seen and thought of and about the ocean, and its wonders and its mysteries — was stolen or lost after its delivery in New York, and has never reappeared. Said Richard H. Dana, the author of "Two Years Before the Mast," in his remarks at the Boston Bar meeting, after Mr. Choate's death: "I take for the moment a simile from that element which he loved as much as I love it, though it rose against his life at last."

Although Rufus lost his father when he was only eight years old, his surroundings were pleasant and wholesome. His mother is described as "a quiet, sedate, but cheerful woman, dignified in manner, quick in perception, of strong sense and ready wit," whom her son was said to resemble "in many characteristics of mind and person." When she died, in 1853, he mourned her deeply, although she sank into a "timely grave." When in the Senate, in

1841, he wrote to his children: "Give best love to all at Essex. Go, especially, and give my love to grandmother, who was the best of mothers to your father, and help her all you can." To his son at Essex, about the same time, he wrote:—

There is a place or two, according to my recollections of your time of life, in the lane, where real, good, solid satisfaction, in the way of play, may be had. . . . One half-hour, tell grandmother, under those cherished buttonwoods, is worth a month under these insufferable fervors.

Many passages might be selected from the orations of Mr. Choate, descriptive of the scenery of Ipswich and its vicinity, with which his youth was familiar. Many spots were identified with his early readings. Forty years after, in riding from Ipswich to Essex, he pointed out a rocky dell, saying, "There is the descent to Avernus." The poetic feeling was already developing. In manhood he was wont to relate that more than once, after driving his father's cow to pasture and throwing away his switch, he returned to pick it up again and place it under the tree from which he had stripped it, saying to himself, "Perhaps there is, after all, some yearning of nature between them still."

For the lad was not exempt from the share of work which usually falls to the lot of New England farmer-boys. He was strong, active, and willing, and one stone-wall builder, at least, thought it a pity so good a worker should be sent to college. And to the master-workman the boy appreciatively said, "If ever I'm a lawyer, I'll plead all your cases for nothing." But, as we have seen, he loved play, at which he was eager and indefatigable.

The passion of his life, however, early disclosed itself in his absorbing devotion to reading. Before he was six years old he had devoured Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and could repeat it from memory. A little while before his death, he borrowed the old dog-eared copy, which

refreshed the memories of the child's absorption in the grand allegory. Before he was ten, he had "pretty nearly exhausted" the heavy histories of the village library — Rollin, Josephus, Plutarch, Hutchinson, &c. He read and re-read the Bible, and noted prophesies which foretold, he thought, Napoleon, then at the zenith of his power. He already sucked out the heart of books, as other boys fruit, and his wonderful power and tenacity of memory began already to be marked and commented upon. When in college, afterwards, he would read a chapter just before retiring, and on waking in the morning could repeat it correctly. He once recited in court a long passage from the Assembly's Catechism, saying, "May it please your Honor, my mother taught me this in my earliest childhood."

As an illustration of the vivid impression which the books read in youth make upon a plastic mind, it is worth recording that when, in the trial of Albert J. Tirrell for murder, Mr. Choate broached somnambulism as the theory of the defence, he read a striking passage — containing an incident of a sportsman, who, in his sleep, attempted to kill his comrade — "from a good old book, which used to lie on the shelves of our good old fathers and mothers, and which they were wont devoutly to read. This old book is Hervey's Meditations, and I have borrowed it from my mother to read on this occasion." Tirrell was a somnambulist, and the suggestion that he had killed Maria Bickford in his sleep is said to have been made to Mr. Choate by his friends. This defence was much ridiculed, and Choate was censured for adopting it, whilst the jury is said to have declared they acquitted Tirrell on entirely different grounds. But Mr. Choate, whose judgment in such matters was wellnigh infallible, defended Tirrell, in a subsequent trial for arson upon substantially the same facts, upon the same ground, and the jury again acquitted Tirrell. It is altogether probable