

Moses Dresser Phillips

By Cindy Cooper

A dinner party proposal by Moses Dresser Phillips in May of 1857 started the ball rolling toward the establishment of "The Atlantic Monthly," a journal known for its literature, art, and politics. Prominent literary men attended the gathering, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, James Russell Lowell, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. His presentation speech included: "Mr. Cabot is much wiser than I am, Dr. Holmes can write funnier verses than I can, Mr. Motley can write history better than I, Mr. Emerson is a philosopher and I am not, Mr. Lowell knows more of the old poets than I, but none of you knows the American people as well as I do." The magazine's first issue was distributed by November 1857. Over the years it published such literary works as Mark Twain's "Old Times on the Mississippi" (in seven installments) and the memoir that inspired "The King and I."

Moses Dresser Phillips was born May 15, 1813 in Charlton, MA to Daniel Phillips (son of Israel Phillips and Huldah Towne) and Abigail Dresser (daughter of Asa Dresser and Abigail Wheelock). Siblings were Daniel, Jr., Abigail, and Austin. They were direct descendants of John Alden and Priscilla Mullins on their mother's side. MaryKate McMaster wrote "A Publisher's Hand" as a research project exploring the life of Mr. Phillips. She wrote that the Phillips children probably attended a local school, or possibly Dudley Academy. At age 19 Moses moved to Worcester and worked as a clerk in Clarendon Harris' bookstore, where he learned publishing and retail book sales (Harris' mentor had been Isaiah Thomas). "...family genealogy notes that Moses left because he was not 'of sufficiently robust constitution to endure the labors of the farm.'"

In 1837, Moses D. Phillips and Company was listed in Worcester as a publisher. During the second half of the 1830s, Mr. Phillips was also the librarian of the Worcester Lyceum. He was the Worcester agent for Brandreth's Vegetable Universal Pills, and Guy Fowland Phelps's Tomato Pills (used to "eradicate any harm done to the digestive system, lungs, and skin, by changes in diet and variations of temperature." (Massachusetts Spy Jan. 26, 1824)).

He married Charlotte Foxcroft on April 10, 1838. Their three children were Catherine, Sarah, and John. Moses was elected as an alderman in Worcester in 1852, but was not re-elected. In 1856 they moved to Brookline, MA.

The Oct. 1859 "Atlantic Monthly" carried the report of Moses Phillips death. The obituary included: "It indicates no ordinary force of character that a man, dying at the age of forty-six, should have worked himself, solely by his own talents and integrity, to the head of one of the largest publishing houses in the country." Such a man had his roots right here in Charlton.