

Judge James Parmenter acc.933.15.39 1900

The Robbins family of Arlington is descended from Richard Robbins, who came from England in 1639 and settled in Charlestown. The first of the present family to settle in the 2nd Precinct of Cambridge, as Arlington was then called, was Nathan Robbins who came from Lexington about 1785. He married, soon after, Rebecca Prentice, who was descended from one of the original settlers of this town. Of the nine children born of this union, 6 sons and 3 daughters, descendents of only one are living today.

The business of Nathan Robbins was marketing in a small way and it was but natural that sons should follow the occupation of the father. The oldest son, also called Nathan, born in 1803, started to work when but fourteen years old, first as the employee of others and later on his own accounts. Then the extension of the old Faneuil Hall Market was opened in 1826 – he was the first to take stalls there and establish a business in poultry and game. His high reputation for honesty and sagacity brought him success. He knew and had the friendship of many of the most interesting men in the Boston of his day. He was averse to public life and held no office of importance beyond that of school committee in his town. Outside of his business his chief interest lay in the Faneuil Hall national bank of which he was president from its beginning in 1854 to the day of his death in 1888. He lived all his life in his native town, which he knew under its various names of the 2nd precinct of Cambridge, West Cambridge, and Arlington. He married in 1829 Eliza Eleanor Parker, a near relation of Theodore Parker and a granddaughter of Capt John Parker who led the Americans at the Battle of Lexington April 19, 1775.

Mr. Robbins had certain marked traits of character,, integrity and diligence being the most conspicuous. Men who dealt with him knew not only that he might always be found at his place of business but that his statements might be trusted. Throughout his life he clung to sound principles of business and refused to be drawn aside into any speculations however dazzling, choosing rather to rely for success upon the old fashioned virtues of prudence, economy and diligence. There is a fine portrait of him on the walls of his home now occupied by his granddaughter, Maria ? Robbins. This portrait was painted by Mr. Rousseau, the celebrated French artist and nothing could be more life-like than the pose and expression which bespeaks so much that was characteristic of the man.

Several men who achieved distinction in business owed much of their success to the sound training received under him. Conspicuous among them were his two brothers, Amos born in 1817 and Eli born in 1821. One was 14 and the other 18 years younger than himself. Beginning under his they were later sent to New York to open a business there where they founded the firm of A. & E. Robbins in the Fulton Market and which became and continued to be for years the largest receiver and shipper of poultry and game in the country. Amos and Eli Robbins were men of the same sterling character and integrity as their brother Nathan, and like him averse to public life yet fulfilling all the duties and responsibilities of private life with scrupulous care.

Eli Robbins married Maria G. Farmer of Arlington, by whom he had two sons who died early. Eli Robbins died in 1885 and in 1892 his widow gave to Arlington the present library building in his memory, she not surviving to see the building completed.

Amos Robbins married in 1838 Adelia Martling of Terrytown N.Y., and a granddaughter of Isaac Van Hart, one of the three captors of Major Andre. Of this union there were two sons and two daughters, none of whom are now living. The oldest of these children, Winfield Robbins, is the donor to Arlington of the new town hall. He was born in New York in 1841 and received an exceptional education, being sent abroad at an early age where he studied at the College de France and also at Heidelberg, Germany, where he received a degree. He was a man of unusual attainments and his intimate knowledge of French, German, Italian, and Spanish made him a citizen of the world, and enabled him to derive much from his extensive travels. His tastes were largely for the fine arts. Mrs. Eli Robbins entrusted the building of the Public Library which she erected in memory of her husband.

Winfield Robbins felt more than most that it was the duty of all to give of their means, whether large or small, for the good of the public. His travels had shown him the benefit of fine public buildings to a community, and knowing the needs of Arlington for a new town hall, he must have felt that here was an opportunity to benefit the public and at the same time to perpetuate the name of an honored father in the place in which he was born.

It is in the memory of Winfield Robbins that a little park is to be laid out between the new town hall and the Public Library and for which a fountain is designed with a figure of an Indian Hunter in bronze by Cyrus E. Dallin.

(The notice of Nathan Robbins has been taken largely from the History of Middlesex County edited by Hamilton Hurd – 1900)