

Passing of the Post Cane

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Butch Crosbie, the president of the Hamilton Historical Society, never seems to tire of the story of the Boston Post Cane.

Begun as a promotional stunt in 1909 by the Boston Post publisher Edwin Grozier as a way to drum up publicity for the newspaper, the practice of awarding the cane to the oldest citizen in town was so well received, the PR aspect of it fell away and people embraced the idea of honoring the elderly to whom it is traditionally given.

There are few in Hamilton-Wenham who do not know the story of the cane, and even fewer who do not know some of its mystery, said Crosbie, from his Hamilton Historical Society offices in the basement of Town Hall.

As is often the case in such matters, the rumors abound. A random *Chronicle* poll of local residents brought up much intrigue. Many stories involve theft, the reasons many. There was a housebreak, some say. Or the cane was taken because of its materials (the original canes were African ebony, their tips of 14 carat gold). There were the canes with which someone absconded as part of a family dispute, and there were those that broke in half. More than one person claims, with all certainty, that the cane has been tucked, 'twixt body and silk, in the casket of the (presumably) last recipient whose last known address was the Hamilton Cemetery, Bay Road, Hamilton, MA, 01982.

Are the rumors true? Crosbie was asked. He shrugged. Can't verify all that, he says. However, he can tell you that, more than once, the cane has been refused.

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Refused? Why?

"They call it 'The Death Cane.' People have said that once you get it, you die."

Hale and hearty

Those in the Two Towns should take comfort in the fact that not all regard the cane as an omen. Anything but. Because rumor also holds that more than one recipient has lived a long(er) and happ(ier) life after having received the cane. Many in town honor it as the symbol of wisdom and longevity it traditionally symbolized.

Take this year's honorees. Albert. D. Coonrod, born on July 27, 1916, recently celebrated his 95th birthday, and Helen M. Goggin, born on July 24, 1912, her 99th. Anyone who attended each of the ceremonies recently can attest that each party is hale and hearty. This would describe the first recipient of the cane, according to Barbara Staples in her book, "Boston Post Canes," the first recipient of the Hamilton cane.

Nirum Neal was quite the athlete, according to Staples, a Lynn historian.

"A great pedestrian, Mr. Neal was known to walk from North Berwick, Maine, to Hamilton," about a 50-something trek. Mr. Neal could cradle more rye than any man in town, and when he wasn't hauling or dragging something he was laying tracks for the Eastern railroad.

A tradition dies out

Hamilton was not the only town to receive a cane. More than 430 were given to towns and cities in Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Rhode Island. The cane read, "Presented by the Boston Post to the oldest citizen of the town. To be transmitted." Initially, only men received them. (Many have surmised that because the term "citizen" referred to a voter, it was given only to men because they had the vote. Women were not allowed to carry the cane until 1930, 10 years after they got the vote.)

Due attention was given the matter in the Boston Post, which ceased publication in 1957. Soon after, the cane tradition died, and Hamilton was no exception.

However, that was not the end of the story. In 2002, in part inspired by a manufacturer who wished to resume manufacture of the cane, the tradition was revived. Crosby welcomed it, and arranged for each recipient to receive a contract and a certificate along with the cane.

A mace

Much can be said about the cane and its history, but perhaps its legacy can be best felt if one holds the cane in one's hands. The cane balances very well, and it's tempting to twirl it, as one would a baton, or hold it aloft or in one's arms, as a mace. These days the tip is made of brass and the shaft is mahogany, but one may as well be holding an elegant ebony-and-gold cane.

At that point, the history of the cane as a publicity stunt falls away, and one is left with the original desire to honor the ceremony attending its gift; for the gift, it is clear, is not from the town of Hamilton to the oldest citizen, but from the oldest citizen to the town of Hamilton.

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