

Biography of Tristram Dalton



Tristram Dalton (May 28, 1738 – May 30, 1817) was an American politician and merchant from Massachusetts. He served a single term as one of the first United States senators, from 1789 to 1791. He was for many years one of the leading citizens of Newburyport, Massachusetts and well-known nationally.

Portrait in the 1750's

Early life

Tristram Dalton was born in a part of Newbury, Massachusetts, that is now Newburyport, the only child of Michael and Mary (Little) Dalton.



He was educated at the Governor Dummer's school (Now the Governor's Academy) and went on to Harvard College graduating in 1755, in a class that also included John Adams. Afterwards, he studied law and was admitted to the bar, but did not practice, instead pursuing a career as a merchant. Dalton's father was a ship captain turned merchant, involved in trade with Europe and the West Indies, and was instrumental in securing the separation of Newburyport from Newbury. Tristram Dalton courted and married Ruth Hooper, the daughter of a wealthy Marblehead merchant, in 1761. Upon his father's death in 1770, Tristram inherited an estate on prestigious State Street right across from Nathaniel Tracy, considered at that time, one of the wealthiest men in all the 13 colonies. He also took control of his father's enterprises that soon made him Newburyport's wealthiest citizen.

Political career

Dalton was not significantly involved in politics until 1774, when the tensions of the American Revolution were rising. He was elected to the Newburyport board of selectmen in 1774, and the very important Committee of Safety for the Town securing the defense of the town during the war. Once the conflict broke out, he was an active proponent of independence. When Colonel Arnold brought a sizeable force of soldiers in September 1775, he, along with Nathaniel Tracy entertained Arnold and the officers and enthusiastically watched as the later ill-fated expedition boarded 11 ships bound for Penobscot River in Maine supplied by his neighbor free of charge, Nathaniel Tracy.

He was then elected to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress during the war, rubbing shoulders with Adams, Hancock, and other prominent Boston politicians.

His contributions included provisioning of ships from his merchant fleet to the Penobscot Expedition of 1780. He was also ordered to outfit two ships for Privateering which he promptly did.

Tristram was everywhere in politics.

And if that wasn't enough, he helped to frame the new constitution for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts!

His powerful connections made him many influential friends. Marquis de Lafayette visited him and George Washington partied in his home.

Consequently, James Monroe came here and when John Quincy Adams practiced here he visited the home.

In 1792, the house was sold to Moses Brown as Tristram and his wife moved to Boston as his increasing influential political career was found in Boston, New York and Philadelphia. (And eventually Washington, DC)

It was at this time that Dalton became a charter member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, founded in 1780.

Massachusetts became a free state in 1780. Many wealthy households with substantial estates maintained slaves in Massachusetts. These were household servants who were often treated as part of the family. (In 1804, Dalton buried his former slave, named Fortune, in the Old Hill Burying Grounds by the Bartlet Mall in Newburyport.) Congressional Records later under the U.S. Constitution have noted the peculiar situation that Dalton was one of only two members of Congress from non-slave Massachusetts who had ever owned slaves. Dalton served as a member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives from 1782 to 1785 and served as its speaker in 1784. He served as a Massachusetts state senator from 1786 to 1788.

Dalton was elected to the Continental Congress in 1783 and 1784 but did not attend. He was elected as a delegate to the state convention on the adoption of the United States Constitution, in which he vigorously advocated for its adoption. Previously, he had assisted in creating the World's first Constitution advising John Adams. In 1788 he was elected as one of the state's first United States Senators, along with Caleb Strong. Strong won the draw for the longer of the two terms, leaving Dalton with a short two-year term.

He was present in Newburyport in 1789 at his State Street estate when George Washington arrived to thank his fellow Federalists and to give thanks for the

contributions of the town. The reason the first President visited here were due to the Newburyport merchants who had bankrolled much of the Revolutionary War and continued their patriotic support by supplying the Merrimack, the first navy ship of the United States. They not only built it at their expense but gave it to the fledgling country freely. Tristram on his part lavishly entertained the now, President of the United States. Afterward, Tristram as senator served from March 4, 1789, to March 3, 1791. Ruth and Tristram grew fond of city life in New York City (then the seat of the federal government), and moved there, and then Philadelphia. In the 1791 election (US Senators were then chosen by vote of the state legislature), Dalton ran a distant fourth against George Cabot, the eventual victor, and others.

When the site of the nation's capital was selected, Dalton sold off most of his property in Massachusetts, and speculatively purchased land in Washington, D.C. Many of the family's personal items were lost when the ship carrying them to Washington floundered.

In 1801 he was appointed by President Thomas Jefferson as the last commissioner of the Federal City, which by then had been named Washington in the District of Columbia. He filled the seat vacated by William Cranch who was appointed to the bench in the new capitol and served for a little over a year until the Board of Commissioners of the Federal City was disbanded in 1802.

Dalton's investment was a failure, as Washington real estate did not appreciate, and he had invested through an unscrupulous agent, wiping out most of his fortune. The oncoming War of 1812 not only decimated his estate, there was a growing animosity toward Federalists making his political future forced into a harsh end.

In order to make ends meet, Dalton was given a patronage appointment by James Monroe as surveyor of the port of Boston, serving out of the Boston Customs House, serving from November 1814 until his death on May 30, 1817 at the age of 79.

He is interred in the churchyard of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Newburyport. He lies buried in the mausoleum he originally built for his mother Mary (Little) (1713-1791) in 1792. His wife died in 1826. Of their ten children, only three, all girls, survived adulthood.

Though largely unknown today, Senator Tristram and his patriotic efforts in the early years of the war, made him herald as one of the nation's great patriots who sacrificed much for the founding of the country. Because of that, Tristram Dalton is the namesake of Dalton, Massachusetts, Dalton, New Hampshire and yes, Dalton, Georgia.

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A portrait study by John Trumbull is owned by the Yale Art Gallery at Yale University.