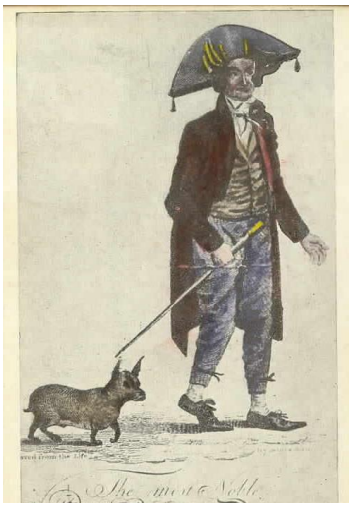
The Biography of Lord Timothy Dexter



Timothy Dexter was born on Jan. 22, 1747, and moved to Newburyport as a young man. In 1791, Dexter purchased the Tracy Mansion on State Street for $8,400, which equates to roughly $220,000 in 2018. In 1798, he purchased a grand Federal mansion at 202 High St., now known as the Dexter House, for $6,360, or approximately $125,000 in 2018. He called himself ”Lord Timothy Dexter” in a new nation that eschewed royalty. He was notorious for his extravagancies and foolish exhibitions, but also his amazing ability to amass a fortune through unusual means.

He was the son of Nathan and Esther (Brintnall) Dexter, and was born in Malden, Mass., Jan. 22, 1746-7. He wrote, "I was born when great powers ruled, on Jan. 22, 1747. On this day, in the morning, a great snow storm; the signs in the seventh house; whilst Mars came forward Jupiter stood by to hold the candle. I was to be one great man."

He had limited advantages in the way of schooling, and at the age of eight years, May 9, 1755, his father put him with a farmer in Malden, with whom he remained six years and six months. He then went to Charlestown, the then principal center of the skin or leather dressing business of New England, and learned the trade of a leather dresser, dressing skins for leather breeches and gloves. He stayed there eleven months and then went to Boston, where he remained until he was of age. In 1769, fourteen days later, he says, "I went to Newbury Port with A bondel in my hand to A plase all noue to me."

He engaged in the business of a leather dresser in Newburyport; and in May, 1770, he married a widow who was nine years his senior. This was Elizabeth, daughter of John Lord of Exeter, N. H., and widow of Benjamin Frothingham of Newburyport, a glazier. The widow was industrious and frugal and possessed a house and lot on the southern corner of Merrimack and Green streets. With her, Timothy Dexter, then twenty-three years old, took up his residence. In the basement of the house Mrs. Dexter conducted a shop for the sale of provisions, vegetables and small fruits; and in the garden Mr. Dexter dug vats, and continued at his trade. He became a respectable part of the business community.

He prospered in business; and entered into speculation in various ways. At about the same time, he was advised, as a joke, it is said, to buy a large quantity of public securities “Continental Dollars” when they were selling at about thirteen per cent of their face value. He followed the advice, and after the adoption of the new constitution, followed by the Hamilton funding system, caused the securities to advance in value to nearly par. It is supposed that he profited to the extent of ten thousand dollars by the rise of the market.

He began to indulge in ventures that seemed at the time utterly foolish, but which resulted in great profit to Mr. Dexter. He bought a large quantity of warming pans, and shipped them to the West Indies

at the instance of some merchant clerks, as a part of an assorted cargo. The Yankee ingenuity of the young commander of the craft that carried them to the sunny South was aroused, and he took off the covers and had handles attached to them. The covers were readily sold as skimmers, and the pans as ladles, to the various sugar making establishments at a good profit.

Before the days of Wall street, Dexter practiced its methods, buying articles when beginning to be scarce and cornering the market. As an illustration of this, the whalebone story is told. Some one told him that the whales were all dying off, and he bought at once all that could be found in the market, and disposed of it at a large profit ending up selling them as a support material for corsets. He kept his eyes open for chances of this sort, and at one time made a good thing out of a similar speculation in opium. After a while shrewd merchants were slow in selling their stock in trade to him, being apprehensive from his mere desire to purchase that the goods were about to rise in value, though they could see no reason for such a conclusion. His next venture was selling coal to Newcastle, which should have been a sure failure. His ships happened to arrive in the time of a coalminer's strike and potential customers were desperate. A shipment of red woolen night caps to the coast of Guinea, suggested as a joke, turned out greatly to his benefit. Asian traders there snatched them up and sold them in Siberia. The same is said of sending Bibles to the West Indies. He instructed the captain to inform the islanders that if they did not buy the Bibles, they would all go to hell. He sent cats to the Caribbean and they were bought up to control the rat population.

He was sharp at a bargain but met all his engagements promptly and squarely. He had two ships built in Newburyport established an export business and actively sent them to trade in the West Indies and in Europe.

A Thirst for Fame & Notoriety

Having secured what was estimated in his time and place an independent fortune, Mr. Dexter turned his attention from money making to money spending, and an endeavor to achieve notoriety.

With the acquirement of wealth and desire for notoriety and probably popularity, he changed his abode. April 8, 1791, he purchased, for fourteen hundred pounds, the stately Tracy house, now [and still, ed.] the public library. Here he lived for five years, and April 9, 1796, conveyed the estate to John Greenleaf.

Something Snapped

He removed to Chester, N. H., where he purchased an extensive country seat. In that new section of the country, he first gave rein to his desire for notoriety. He styled himself "King of Chester," and undertook to exercise kingly prerogatives over his neighbors. He made an ostentatious display of his wealth in an absurd ornamentation of his house, in erecting magnificent stables and enormous pigeon houses; being now wealthy, Dexter assumed the title of "Lord", taking his wife's maiden name as a title but failed to obtain social recognition. but, as he became quarrelsome, the neighbors frequently repaid his impudence with a public horsewhipping and shaming.

A Rapid Increase in Notoriety

The punishment clearly did not diminish his ego. In 1798, Mr. Dexter returned to Newburyport, and August 15th of the same summer he bought the large house on High street that had been erected by Jonathan Jackson in 1771. Its situation is high, and commands an extensive view of the coast and the Isles of Shoals. The grounds were laid out by intelligent landscape gardeners. Everything about the house was in excellent order; but not to his wish. He raised minarets on the roof, and surmounted them with gilt balls. He caused it to assume a gaudiness and cheapness that was most undesirable to a person of taste.

Directly before the front door of the house, on a Roman arch, he erected a figure of Washington in his military garb, and on his left, a figure of Jefferson, and on his right one of Adams, the latter being hatless. On columns erected in the garden were figures of Indian chiefs, generals, philosophers, politicians, statesmen, and goddesses of Fame and Liberty. He changed the name of the statues by the aid of the painter's brush as he pleased. General Morgan was thus transformed into Bonaparte, and to the latter Dexter always touched his, hat. There were more than forty of these figures, including four lions, two couchant, and two passant. These images were of wood, life size, and fairly well carved. The lions were open-mouthed and looked fierce. The figures were made by a young ship carver who had just come to Newburyport, named Joseph Wilson, and were gaudily painted. The images were all in good condition when Dexter died, and the first to fall was an Indian. The remainder stood until the great September gale of 1815, when all but the presidents were cast prostrate upon the earth. The images were sold at auction, the specimen that brought the most money, five dollars, was the goddess of Fame. William Pitt was sold for a dollar, and the "Travelling Preacher," fifty cents. It is said that the arch and figures of the three presidents, all the presidents there had been in Dexter's day, cost at least two thousand dollars, the lions two hundred dollars apiece, and the other images a similar amount.

In the group of presidents, Jefferson held in his hand a scroll partly unrolled, which represented the Declaration of Independence. The painter was an artist named Babson, and when he painted the inscription for Jefferson he proceeded to write upon the scroll the words "The Declaration of Independence," but when the second word was begun, Dexter ordered him to write "Constitution." To this the artist objected, but a random shot from a pistol brought the painter to terms, and the scroll

ever afterwards read, "The Constitution." The three presidents occupied their positions upon the arch until about 1850.

He had a stable well filled with good horses, and frequently procured new animals, having owned a number of spans. He rode in a gaudily painted coach, which had a Dexter coat of arms emblazoned upon it, with the baronial supporters. He also had a footman. Pictures were also suspended upon the walls of the house in profusion, gaudy daubs being most numerous. Having heard that the nobles in England had a great passion for paintings, he employed a young gentleman of taste to purchase pictures for him in Europe, but, on his return, Dexter selected all the daubs and declined to take the others. He had a coat of arms painted on his coach, with baronial supporters, and was never happier than when the boys ran after his coach and cream-colored horses, crying " Huzza for Dexter's horses!" But when their admiring cries no longer followed high, his love for cream-colored horses died away. When the news of the death of Louis XVI. reached Boston, Dexter was there, and at once hastened to Newburyport and bribed the sextons to ring the passing bell before he circulated the tidings of the monarch's death.

Having completed his new house and provided it with appurtenances suitable to a grandee of his stamp, he announced himself, this former dresser of skins, as "Lord Dexter, the first in the east, the first in the west, and the greatest philosopher in the western world." One thing he lacked, however: he must have some one to sing his praises, a poet laureate. Over in Newbury he found the man he wanted. This was Jonathan Plummer, who was fourteen years younger than himself. The man was suitable for the position, the choice was indeed a wise one. For the sake of the notoriety he would gain and the good material things of life given him he was entirely willing to be Dexter's fool. His employment consisted in writing rhymes to the glory of "his lord's " power, wisdom and wealth, and as long as Dexter lived all went well with him. William Barley, a strong man, six feet, seven inches in height, called "Dwarf Billy," was in Dexter's employ as the protector of his orchard at one time.

There was no dullness about "Lord" Dexter. He could not be still, and having little to occupy his mind he fluttered from folly to folly. Liquor was indulged in too freely. He said of himself that he could no more be still than a devil's needle. He had an idea that he would like to be buried, when he died, in his garden. He built a tomb, not a lightless vault, but a basement story, so to speak, of a pleasant summer house. He then had his coffin prepared. He searched for, and found here and there, mahogany boards full of knots, gnarls, and richly colored veins. The coffin was beautifully made lined and pillowed. Massive silver handles were employed. He was delighted with it, and tried it. He then placed it on exhibition in one of his rooms. Now he had his coffin and tomb, he turned his attention to his funeral.

But the only thing he could do about that was to hold a rehearsal. Cards were sent to certain persons inviting them to his funeral; and his wife and children were dressed in mourning. Some wag read the burial service and pronounced a eulogy. The procession moved to the tomb, the coffin was deposited therein and the door locked. The mourners returned to the house, and filled up on the choicest wines. Soon, cries were heard in the kitchen; Dexter was caning his wife, because she had shed no tears.

"Lord" Dexter wrote a pamphlet entitled "A Pickle for the Knowing Ones." It is a unique production and in his best style. It principally concerns himself and begins as follows:

> "Ime the first Lord in the younited States of A mercary Now of Newburyport it is the voise of the peopel and I cant Help it and so Let it goue Now as I must be Lord there will foller many more Lords pretty Soune for it Dont hurt A Cat Nor the mouse Nor the son Nor the water Nor the Eare then goue on all is Easey Now bons broaken all is will all in Love Now I be gin to Lay the corner ston and the kee ston with grat Remembrence of my father Jorge Washington the grate herow 17 sentreys past."

The author wisely provided for the punctuation of the book by the reader by placing a sufficient quantity of periods, commas, semi-colons, and other points at the end of the book with instructions to pepper and salt it to suit their tastes. It was printed at the office of the Salem Register, and a large edition was issued. He sent them as presents to "the knowing ones" and others. The book had a frontispiece that was engraved by James Atkins of Newburyport. The peculiar dog is said to be a good likeness of the canine companion of his "titled" master. The portrait of "Lord " Dexter was engraved originally by Doyle from a wax figure of Dexter in the Columbian museum, in or before 1810.

> "Lord" Dexter wrote many occasional pieces, and the following is, given as a good specimen of his style. This was an advertisement printed and circulated upon the robbery of his peach orchard. "Whereas I, Lord Timothy Dexter, having been truly informed that several audacious, atrocious, nefarious, intrepid, night walking, garden violating, immature, peach stealing rascals, all the spawns of the devil, and cubs of Satan, do frequently, villainously, and burglariously assemble themselves together in my garden, therein piping, fighting, swearing, roguing, duck egg hunting, with many other shameful and illicit acts which the modesty of my pen cannot express. This is to give you all notice Delicarians, Capinicarians, Talarminarians, base born scoundrels, and old rascals, of whatever nation you may be, return ye my fruit and property, or, by the Gods, the Heathen Gods, I swear, I will send my son Sam to Babylon, for bloodhounds fiercer than tigers, and fleeter than the winds; and mounted on my noted horse Lily, with my cutting sabre in my hand, I will hunt you through Europe, Asia, Africa, and America, until I can enter you in a cavern under a great tree in Newfoundland, where Beelzebub himself can never find you.
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> "Hear! ye tatterdernallions, thieves, vagabonds, lank jawed, herring gutted, and tun-bellied plebeians, that if ye, or any of ye, dare set your feet in my house or garden, I will deliver you to Charon, who will ferry you across the River Styx, and deliver you to the Royal Arch Devil Lucifer, at the place of his infernal cauldron, there to be dredged with the sulphur of Caucassus, and roasted forever before the burning crater of AEtna.
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> LORD TIMOTHY DEXTER."

An Arthor

At the age of 50 he decided to write a book about himself - A Pickle for the Knowing Ones or Plain Truth in a Homespun Dress. He wrote about himself and complained about politicians, clergy and his wife. The book contained 8,847 words and 33,864 letters, but absolutely no punctuation, and capital letters were sprinkled about at random. At first he handed his book out for free, but it rapidly became popular and ran into eight editions in total. When people complained that it was hard to read, for the second edition he added an extra page - 13 lines of punctuation marks - asking readers to "peper and solt it as they plese".

Dexter the Christian

Dexter for most of his life had no definite ideas of religion. He sometimes apparently held a peculiar philosophy, similar to transmigration, and again expressed sentiments closely allied to Deism. He regularly consulted fortune tellers, mystics, and sorcerers. In all his speculations, he is said to have had conferences first with Madam Hooper of Newburyport, and after her decease with Moll Pitcher of Lynn before he engaged in them. Such a man as he would naturally be superstitious. He had books on dreams and fortune telling books of his own. Both of the above-named sorceresses were shrewd, and their advice, aside from any occult ability they may have possessed, was valuable. Later in his life, as he saw his death approaching, he wisely became a reformed Calvinist and joined the Old South Presbyterian Church purchasing the most prominent pew to purchase for his family. His renewed concern for the Gospel compelled him to donate great sums at his death for its advancement.

His amazing trading abilities were extended to his talent to see future profits via investments. Among the first was his purchase of land at the Penobscot, and as a proprietor in the Ohio company's purchase, being associated in the latter with Dr. Manasseh Cuttler and other prominent men. He prospered in these land ventures. He financed the building of the first suspension bridge across the Merrimack and profited from the tolls it generated. He also invested in the first major toll road that would extend from Newburyport to Boston that would later become part of the nation’s Route 1. It failed to make a profit because it bypassed major towns, and long before the invention of dynamite, the road went up and down steep hills making it slow and difficult on oxen driven carts. He was decades ahead of Mark Twain and believed in the concept of tourism. The garish nature of his mansion on High Street was for the specific purpose of attracting travelers, who he reasoned, would stay in the city and partake of the taverns and spend money in town. Instead, the staid citizens of Newburyport grew embarrassed at his lunacy completely misunderstanding his intent.

One thing could not escape him. His horrific lack of education dogged him throughout his entire life. Members of the New England high society could hardly contain their dislike for this ignorant but newly rich upstart and refused to socialize with him. Dexter decided to buy a huge house in Newburyport (now the public library building) from Nathaniel Tracy, a local socialite, and tried to emulate them, but did not attract any sympathy. His relationships with his "nagging" wife, daughter, and son were not

particularly good, either. This became evident when he started telling visitors that his wife had died (even though she was still very much alive) and that the "drunken nagging woman" who frequented the building was simply her ghost.

In an insane desire to be “accepted” by the leaders of Newburyport’s society, he would try in vain to imitate their ‘wealth’ only to make it a public mockery to polite society. He had seen, at the houses of Hancock and Russell, cases of well-bound books. He then desired to have a library of books that would indicate a literary taste; and he procured the best bound volumes he could find, having little regard for their contents. He could barely read them. The leaves in many of them were turned down at attractive places, and numerous cuts were taken from the volumes by his curious visitors. He gave liberally to the poor and religious societies. In June, 1800, he presented to St. Paul's and the Old South Presbyterian church in Newburyport one hundred pounds each for the purchase of a bell for each of their houses of worship (The former purchased from Paul Revere, what would be known as the tenth oldest bell made by the bell maker, and is still rung at every service)(The latter purchased a smaller bell from Paul Revere’s sons that was forged in Canton, MA, unfortunately, it developed a crack and is on display in the foyer of St. Paul’s today); and in October, 1800, he gave an elegant standard to the artillery company of Newburyport. He offered to build a market house and to pave certain parts of the town.

This lack of acceptance finally did him in as the pain of rejections caused him to be intoxicated for a large portion of the time during his later years. He was considered a lackwit by his social contemporaries, and they gave him bad business advice to discredit him and make him lose his fortune, only to be amazed at his ‘good luck’. Toward the close of his life he appears to have regretted his follies. His remarks at times showed great acuteness, as on one occasion, when the papers were teeming with Lord Thurlow's famous remark, " When I forget my king, may my God forget me," he travestied it to "When I forget myself, may God forget me." Were this all there were to relate of Lord Timothy Dexter's achievements, he might be regarded with a contempt that still left room for pity; but his bacchanalian orgies and licentious escapades preclude almost every feeling but that of disgust.

His final days

Regardless, his bitterness at not being accepted did not extend beyond his passing. His will was surprisingly generous and wise to his heirs and to the community. In his will he gave to his native town three hundred dollars for a bell for the meeting house, and two thousand dollars for the support of the gospel there, and two thousand dollars to Newburyport for the benefit of the poor outside of the alms house. He also established a trust fund for the advancement of the Gospel to be managed by the Town of Newburyport.

Reason left him two days before his death, which occurred peacefully in his house Oct. 23, 1806, at the age of fifty-nine. His remains were not allowed to repose in his tomb by order of the Town, and they still lie where they were placed in the Old Hill burying ground by the side of Bartlett Mall. A

GRAVESTONES IN MEMORY OF TIMOTHY DEXTER AND HIS WIFE.

simple marble slab marks his resting place. Near the top is the picture of an urn, the initials, "T. D." being engraved upon it. The inscription reads as follows:

In memory of
Mr TIMOTHY DEXTER,
who died October 23"
A. D. 1806.
AEtatis 60
He gave liberal Donations,
For the support of the Gospel:
For the benefit of the Poor,
And for other benevolent purposes.

His wife survived him until July 3, 1809 and lies buried at his side. Her plain marble gravestone is inscribed as follows:

In Memory of
Elizabeth Dexter
who died July 3, 1809
AEt. 72

The Dexter house still stands, and is a stately mansion, with extensive and beautiful grounds. Mr. and Mrs. Dexter had two children, a son and daughter. The son was Samuel Lord Dexter, and he was baptized Oct. ,6, 1772. He lived at home and died July 20, 1807, without issue. The daughter was named Nancy. She was born Aug. 16, 1776; and married Abraham Bishop of New Haven, Conn. It proved to be an unhappy marriage; and they separated. She became a drunkard and finally an imbecile, and died in Newburyport Sept 30, 1851, leaving a daughter.

"Lord" Timothy Dexter House, Newburyport, Massachusetts

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Samuel L. Knapp, "The Life of Lord Timothy Dexter, with Sketches of the Eccentric Characters that Composed his Associates," 1858

The Official Virtual Seat on the "Noue Systom of Knollege & Lite" Assigned the Notable and Most Noble Lord Timothy Dexter

Complete transcription of "A Pickle for The Knowing Ones; or Plain Truths in a Homespun Dress" ~ with translation and annotations