

Daniel Webster's New England, Daniel Webster's Union

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:00

[Music fades in] "It's a story they tell in the border country, where Massachusetts joins Vermont and New Hampshire. Yes, Daniel Webster's dead—or, at least, they buried him. But every time there's a thunderstorm around Marshfield, they say you can hear his rolling voice in the hollows of the sky. And they say that if you go to his grave and speak loud and clear, 'Daniel Webster—Daniel Webster!' The ground will begin to shiver, and the trees begin to shake. And after a while you'll hear a deep voice saying, 'Neighbor, how stands the Union?' Then you better answer the Union stands as she stood, rock-bottomed and copper sheathed, one and indivisible, or he's liable to rear right out of the ground. At least, that's what I was told when I was a youngster." And that's how Stephen Vincent Benét starts the short story, The Devil and Daniel Webster.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:04

[Intro music begins] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Cassie Cloutier 01:13

This is Cassie Cloutier. And this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:20

Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve, and communicate the building blocks of history. Each episode examines an object, document, or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections. In this episode, we take a look at several artifacts that once belonged to 19th century New England statesman and political giant Daniel Webster. MHS Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian, Peter Drummey, will introduce us to Mr.

Webster and talk about his connections to the Historical Society. Curator of Art and Artifacts, Anne Bentley, will discuss some objects belonging to and portraits of Daniel Webster.

Cassie Cloutier 02:09

Graduate student Michael Larmann, who visited the MHS to research his dissertation this summer will talk about his project and try to explain why Webster is not better known today.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:33

Summer is a busy time at the Historical Society. Hundreds of researchers and visitors wander through our doors. On this particular day, Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian, Peter Drummey is taking graduate student Michael Larmann into the MHS stacks to show him several portraits of Daniel Webster, the subject of Larmann's dissertation.

Peter Drummey 02:55

This one....

Michael Larmann 02:56

Oh, he looks radically different here.

Peter Drummey 02:57

Yeah, this is the Chester Harding portrait.

Michael Larmann 02:57

That's from about 1830.

Peter Drummey 02:58

Okay, and this is understood to be a replica of a portrait that's at the Boston Athenaeum. And sometimes often, that doesn't mean that Chester Harding didn't do it. But if you had a favorite

portrait, the artists would make copies of them. So even as we're discussing this about the multiple copies, sometimes you have multiple copies by the same artist.

Michael Larmann 03:29

Yeah, it says this one is the study for the Athenaeum here.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:35

But who was Daniel Webster, the man immortalized in statues that dot the country, and whose name is forever attached to Stephen Vincent Benét's short story? Although well known in the 19th century, few people today can recall his contributions to American political life. We asked Peter and Michael to provide us with some background information. First, here's Peter Drummey.

Peter Drummey 04:05

Well, he holds important offices in Congress and as twice as Secretary of State and runs for the presidency as an unsuccessful candidate for president several times. But I think his chief importance is he lived at a time where oratory was extraordinarily important in a way that may be hard to understand now. I think it's hard to think of Webster without thinking of his role as a public speaker, and how much attention that drew to him and how, in some respects these public addresses influenced the country and drew the as a nationalist drew the country together.

Michael Larmann 04:50

So, Daniel Webster was born in 1782, in a little place called Salisbury, New Hampshire. So already we get to know a bit about the man because he was born very shortly before the end of the American Revolution. So, this is a man who didn't know much about colonial American life or life under British imperial rule. This is a man who grew up to inherit new world, a new world order a new political life, that was the American Republic and one that he shaped to make his own. He was born into a rather poor family of farmers, and he wasn't the strongest of sons in his family. So, due to his sickly character, yet his unusual intellect he did fairly well in school. And so, he began to pursue a profession in teaching and especially in law. So he went to Dartmouth College, and then

taking up a law profession, he moved to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, which was a major port city at the time. So, you had many Americans who were looking west in the expanding American empire trying to get territory, establish themselves as independent landowners. Yet, Webster decided to stay close to home on the east coast and pursue a life of politics and personal connections in New England, which served him quite well. I believe it was 1812 or 1813, he was first nominated to Congress as a in the House of Representatives for New Hampshire and then in the 1820s, he later became a congressman for Massachusetts, and then later became a Senator.

Peter Drummey 06:37

Describing Webster's career which spans from begins with the 19th century and essentially, he's centrally involved in all the issues of the day from there through his death in 1852. It's an extraordinary public career.

Michael Larmann 06:56

There are definitely a few landmark events which marks Daniel Webster's life. There are his speeches on the Pilgrims and his speeches, or eulogies on the lives of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, which was in the 1820s, which established him as a major orator and a voice at the time. So, this kind of raised him to a national level of prominence. Then there is his second reply to [Robert] Hayne during the Nullification Crisis, where he really became this man who is larger than life, where he professed the idea of the Constitution as the spinning document which triumphs over demands for like states' rights and nullification. Daniel Webster established himself over his time as a Senator and Congressman, as a nationalist in this time, when the early republic was still very much undetermined of what it meant. Was it a collection of states? Was it a nation unified under a constitution with national obligations? And even with his time as a lawyer, he was in some of the most important court cases of the early republic such as Gibbons v. Ogden, and Dartmouth College v. Woodward, when he established the idea of the contract clause of the Constitution and the federal government's right to regulate interstate commerce rather than states. I would say that Daniel Webster was this figure who inherited...who inherited this republic, and really shaped to make this federal constitutional system, one that very much influences the life we live with today.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 08:34

Anyone studying Daniel Webster will likely come across the term Union, again and again. By it, 19th century Americans meant the United States. But what did the term symbolize to Webster? We put that question to Michael.

Michael Larmann 08:52

Oh, that's a great question. What did the Union mean to Daniel Webster, but also what did the Union mean to anyone, during this time period? It's kind of like an aloof idea or concept of like, what is the Union? What is the balance of power? I mean, Daniel Webster clearly articulated his own philosophy in *Dartmouth v. Woodward*, or *Gibbons v. Ogden*, of the idea that the states have to submit to the power of the federal government and this he saw is necessary for holding together the rambunctiousness of the state governments trying to split off and do their own things. So certainly, to Webster, he saw a very fragile system, and the way to maintain it with the federal government and certain oversights. But also, I would say that Daniel Webster saw this and again, he inherited this life. So, it's not something that he so much made but he inherited and he tried to move forward with it. I think he saw the Union grew up in it and believed that it had to be preserved at truly any cost. I do think that Daniel Webster kind of saw the Union as this near state of perfection, or if not perfection, near perfection that had to be maintained. So, he wasn't so much as an innovator then as being like, 'Let's try these new crazy things.' But rather, he saw the Union as something that had to be preserved. And this obviously makes him butts heads with many reformers of the antebellum period, who wanted to either dismiss the Constitution or reform it to a radical extent. That's why many historians see Daniel Webster as this rather conservative politician. You know, while he was very innovative with his philosophy of the federal system, he saw it as something to be preserved, not so much radically changed. He started often at the beginning of the 19th century, as a Federalist. He was from a small New England town. He was very interested in law. He worked in commercial port cities. So, with this, especially around the time of 1812, he identified as a member of the Federalist Party, which was quickly losing ground and power to the Democratic-Republican Party, which was the party of Thomas Jefferson. So, he was certainly one

who valued commerce, connections with Great Britain, especially given the embargo act of 1806, 1807, I believe. He saw this as something harmful to the Union and the Republic. And then as time goes on, he kind of bounces around with politics for a while. Once the first party system kind of dissolves, then you have the rise of Andrew Jackson Jacksonian politics. And some historians believe that there was a possibility of a Webster-Jackson Alliance, which never truly solidified. But in the wake of that was the Whig Party, which Daniel Webster was a prominent member of, which formed in the 1830s, if I'm not mistaken. So, with this, Daniel Webster, was, was a proponent with Henry Clay, with the American systems, internal improvements, tariffs to protect certain industries, especially using the law to promote agricultural development improvements. So, in this sense, he's very innovative. He's using the law towards certain ends. Where he's seen as more conservative, I find this especially when you look at his approach towards the reform movements of the early 1800s, especially when you look at abolition and slavery, for example. So, on these fronts, the Whig Party as a whole, not all, but many are seen as conservatives, so the idea of like conservative or Cotton Whigs, who tolerate the institution of slavery, but are not proponents of it. So, Daniel Webster on many occasions, has spoken in his orations, calling the Atlantic slave trade, a form of theft, speaking out against the expansion of slavery into the western territories, yet again, this man who valued the unity of the Republic, said we must tolerate it for the time being. So, on that hand, again, when you look at the reform movements of the time, the idea of the Conservative Whig or the Cotton Whig, I feel like Daniel Webster kind of fit into that category.

Cassie Cloutier 13:35

So, can you share with us, what was Webster's relationship with the Massachusetts Historical Society?

Peter Drummey 13:41

Daniel Webster is elected to the Massachusetts Historical Society at a meeting that takes place in August of 1821. So, this is only a short time after he's given this famous historical address to do with the Pilgrim landing in Plymouth. But he's, I think, being recognized as a promising not by the standards of the Historical Society, probably thought of as still a young man, he's in his late 30s. But

nevertheless, the Massachusetts Historical Society, in the 1820s, still has people active in it officers who go back to the founding of the Historical Society in 1791. So, I think, especially due to his bicentennial address on the landing of the Pilgrims, is seen as this promising young speaker who is a man in his late 30s, but a person who is making these connections to the history of New England and his public life. So probably someone who's thought of as being interested in history at a time that essentially the Massachusetts Historical Society membership, which is very small, is made up of amateur historians, people who are enthusiastic about history, rather than professional historians or people out of academia.

Cassie Cloutier 15:14

And how does Webster interact with the Historical Society? Is he an active member?

Peter Drummey 15:21

Webster beginning his sort of second career in public life and national government in 1823, is largely absent over the 30 years that he's a member of the Historical Society that is absent from Boston, because of his service in Congress in both the House of Representatives, the Senate, and then as a cabinet officer. Some people have argued that there's little evidence that he ever attended a meeting of the Historical Society. But I'm not sure that that's necessarily reflects on his interest and engagement in the sense that I think there are a number of people who lived and worked here in Boston, who attended many meetings, and then a number of people who are certainly engaged in the work of the Historical Society, but not so much as attendees at meetings or speakers at meetings. But Webster, over the course of his career, would write letters of introduction for people to visit and make use of the MHS collections, and made donations to the Historical Society. These aren't necessarily described in detail, but I believe are gifts and kind of books and other documents, probably from his role in Congress. He acts when he's Secretary of State, to unsuccessfully tried to have returned to the Historical Society maps that the Society had loaned to the Department of State, when there was an attempt being made that Webster was active in to settle where the border between Maine and Canada was. So, these are not direct central as central engagement in the Historical Society. But as his national reputation grew larger, and as his role as a public speaker, he

spoke at the laying of the cornerstone of the Bunker Hill Monument in 1825, gave a very famous speech here in Boston, in 1826, commemorating the lives of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, at the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence on their deaths on the date of the 50th anniversary. So, he's speaking in public about national and historical themes, not for the Historical Society, but I think, very much appreciated for playing that public role as a member of the Historical Society, and probably over time, is probably the most well-known and famous member of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 18:15

Webster's fame may have helped him maintain his good standing at the MHS because, as it turns out, he was not exactly a model member.

Peter Drummey 18:26

Well, in microcosm, Webster's connection with the Massachusetts Historical Society reflects some of his complicated personal finances. In the 1840s, the bylaws of the Historical Society said that any member who had not paid their annual dues for three years would be discharged from their membership in the Massachusetts Historical Society. And in 1847, it turned out there were two members that found themselves in the circumstance. And one was I was about to say, of course, Daniel Webster, who had lots of bills, I think, had the reputation of not paying bills. Now, the dues at the Massachusetts Historical Society at that time, I believe, were \$3 a year, so we're not talking about a gigantic amount of money. But the officer of the Historical Society, probably the Treasurer responsible for collecting this was having no success in doing it and in the official records of the Historical Society, this is brought before the Historical Society's meeting in 1847. And then in 1848, there is a note that Webster has resolved this debt. I believe that one of the wonderful legends of the Historical Society is that the members, not having the nerve to throw their most eminent member perhaps over the side, simply paid this on their own. I like to think that's how the story is there's not really good concrete, there's no check in our records from Webster for \$9. But a \$9 would be much more than it would seem to us today. But still a relatively modest debt to I think he was simply busy in his public life. And this seemed like and not engaged in things necessarily here in

Boston and just ignored this. But it's not, I suspect, atypical for financial affairs of his life. They did, in fact, put out of their membership the other person who is in this circumstance, so they were serious about this, paying attention to their bylaws. But this is, in the case of Webster, this was resolved.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 20:54

Over the decades, items and objects that belonged to Webster have come into the MHS collections. We asked Curator of Art and Artifacts, Anne Bentley, to tell us about a few of these items.

Anne Bentley 21:08

So, the two things are a staff, a walking staff, which was given to Daniel Webster by Frederick Winston. And apparently, Frederick Winston was connected to Java in some in some manner because the cane the staff, it has a silver cap at the top that's engraved on the side DW from FW, Java 1844. Now, I am not sure what the wood is of this staff, but it's a curious thing. It's five and a half feet tall. And at the largest circumference there at the bottom, it's almost two and a half inches circumference. And it's in three sections about equidistant the same size piece, it starts off with a rather substantial base. And then that base transitions to a distinctly smaller circumference. And the top is slightly smaller circumference after that it's so it's not meant to be a sturdy walking stick that you lean on. But rather, I suppose a balance piece. We have a painting of Daniel Webster, full length by Joseph Alexander Ames and Webster's by the sea in his fields wearing his fisherman's costume, and he has in his left hand this walking stick.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 23:08

How do we know it's the same stick?

Anne Bentley 23:10

Because it is there's nothing else that he had was five, five and a half feet tall. And this is tall, it's there's a little bit of artistic license here the he's given. Ames has given the, the grip, the cap, the silver cap, a little bit of a bulbous look, but it's a silver cap on top of this tan stick. I'm not sure that

I have ever read a description of Daniel Webster that alludes to his height. I have read descriptions that allude to his barrel chest, which made it so much easier for him to project his voice as a famous orator.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 23:58

Anne also showed us Webster's wool hat and told us about its curious use by members of the Historical Society.

Anne Bentley 24:06

The hat is quite fragile. The wool is sturdy, but the other components are not as sturdy and as I say the leather the interior leather sweatband is disintegrating in the front. So, it is quite and it being wool it would be attractive to moths if we had any which knock-on wood, we do not. The hat the hat has a hat does have a funny story related to the MHS. This is a 1937 one we got them and that was in the age when the society was still very much a Brahmin club. The Boston Brahmins would meet here and they would enjoy their cigars with their Madeira after the whatever the meeting was and the talk at the meeting and then then their social hour would include the cigars and the Madeira. And when they were running low on Madeira funds, they would take Daniel Webster's hat and pass it around to be filled with bills for the Madeira fund to replenish their stock for the next meeting.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 24:06

That's probably not...

Anne Bentley 24:13

And that's not apocryphal. That actually is what they did.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 24:31

But that's probably not good practice.

Anne Bentley 24:40

Not good practice. No. Neither were cigars in the building. So, neither one of those practices take place now.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 25:36

What else do we have from him?

Anne Bentley 25:38

We have several pieces of jewelry with his hair in it. We have two really, really fine miniatures, one finished and one unfinished that are really, really gorgeous. We have a couple of [Chester] Harding paintings portraits up as a younger man, which are very, very handsome. We have prints, engravings up the wazoo. We have a pair of covered vegetable dishes, silver plate, that when he was in town, a grand banquet was issued in his honor and this this magnificent set of silverplate graced the table and he let it be known that he wouldn't mind getting it. So, so the owner actually packed it all up and gave it to him up where upon immediately put his crest on it. So that so that it would stay with him. And after her husband's death, Mrs. Fletcher Webster, I guess it's straightened circumstances a bit because she or somebody and somebody in the family used to give artifacts like this says as payment for legal work done or something like that, which is how we got them through the lawyer who received as his pay. So, there may be one or two other tchotchkes that I that I can't bring to mind right now. But yeah, he was a popular guy. And we, as I say, paintings, we have more of him than then even of [George] Washington. Some are some are pretty terrible paintings, but some are quite handsome.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:39

Given all the documents and items that the MHS has related to Webster, it is no wonder that scholars like Michael Larmann, visit us to learn more about the great order and political figure. We spoke with Michael near the end of his summer trip to the Historical Society.

Cassie Cloutier 27:56

Can you share with us what it was like viewing the objects that were owned by Webster?

Michael Larmann 28:02

Sure. It's very difficult to describe, but it's almost surreal seeing Daniel Webster's artifacts in person because as scholars, many of us have read Webster's speeches. We've seen his portraits and paintings. Sometimes we've gazed up upon his monuments, but to actually see his walking stick and his hat. It almost makes it more real in a very odd way, which is great for a historian. It reminds us that these people had tactile things, and they were real people. And we have this opportunity to really learn more about their lives. So the hat itself is also so intriguing because Webster, as we were talking about earlier, is an embodiment of New England where on one hand, he is this, like political powerhouse, with strong ties to Washington, other politicians of his time, the manufacturers and Boston Brahmins in Massachusetts, but at the same time, he lived in Marshfield and had this very rural and rustic persona of enjoying walking and having this farmland and going fishing. So, it's just fascinating how he kind of embodies at all.

Cassie Cloutier 29:22

Can you share with us some more about your research and what you found in the collection?

Michael Larmann 29:27

Over the course of the pandemic, I wrote a paper about a statue of Daniel Webster, which currently sits in front of the Massachusetts State House. You can actually still see it there today, although you can't approach it due to the gates. But this was a statue which was erected closely after Webster's death. He died in 1852. And a committee of some of Webster's strongest proponents and supporters came together to erect a memorial to prolong Webster's memory. So, the Webster Memorial Committee or Webster Statute Committee that names go interchangeably. Again, these were the Lawrence's, the Appleton's, the Curtis's, the Cushings's. This collection of cotton manufacturers, merchants, businessmen, lawyers, judges, kind of the political and economic power of Boston and Massachusetts, and rather that the conservative political character. So, these individuals came together, and they pulled the money to erect the statue. The first step, and I should mention, they hired Hiram Powers, who was a one of America's most famous sculptors who was

living in Florence. Italy wasn't yet a country yet, but he was living in Florence, Europe. And he created this statue at the behest of the committee, so that it could travel back to Boston. So, the first one sank while in transit in 1857, across the Atlantic. The second one, which is in front of the State House arrived and was erected in 1859, which was when the secession crisis was reaching its full fever pitch. So, coming back to what I've been looking at the Historical Society, the committee records are housed here at the Society, which I couldn't get my hands on over the course of the pandemic. So, I'm very fortunate to look at them now. And one thing I've come to realize is that the records are not the original copy. At the beginning, the secretary of the committee, I believe it was George Ticknor, he actually transcribed all of the records that he could find in 1863, put it in this book, and then submitted it to the Massachusetts Historical Society for preservation. So that's just another instance of people trying to build these permanent objects to preserve Webster's memory and legacy, but also their own work in doing so. That was one of the key objects I really wanted to look at and I've also been looking at the personal papers and correspondence of members of the committee seeing if I could find any mention of the statute committee, or their general impressions of Webster and his importance during this time period. Over the past two and a half weeks I've spent at the Massachusetts Historical Society, one thing that I've become more aware of which I find this fascinating is the idea of historical preservation, and the work of the historian. So certainly here, preserving Webster's artifacts, his hat, his staff, his smaller memorabilia. There is a mission at the Historical Society, to prolong Webster's life and his legacy so that future citizens, historians, and other members of the public may learn about him. So, one, I've also been thinking about, like how these objects have come to the Historical Society, but also my own role as a historian prolonging this mission, which is, how do we take Webster's legacy? How do we take these objects? And how do we take his correspondence and prolong it? So, in that way, I don't want to speak as if I'm on the grand mission. But I find that it's interesting that Historical Society in our work has a historian is to prolong Webster's life in a way. So, on one hand, he may have disappeared, his legacy may have continued, yet it's our job to prolong it as long as possible. So, I'm very excited to do that.

Cassie Cloutier 33:29

So, you touched on this a little bit in your introduction, but why should we know about Daniel Webster today?

Michael Larmann 33:37

So why should we know something about Daniel Webster? I do think, in today's political movements, or political moments, so to speak, there is kind of an effort to turn against those figures and historical actors who we believe may or may not have done enough or maybe too conservative, had close ties to slavery or compromise. So, Daniel Webster, who was an advocate for the Fugitive Slave Act as part of the Compromise of 1850, for example, many people look towards the later moments of his life and dismiss his legacy, and all the other things that he's done, whether that be in Congress, the court of law, or working with the executive branch. So, I do think it's interesting one, just take a look at these figures and just understand them within their own times of who were they and why did they matter? But also, it raises a much more fundamental question I find, which is, what is this person's legacy because Daniel Webster is a very problematic figure. As much as we've built him up about his importance within the early republic. There's also this matter of his opinions with compromise. So, this kind of links back to what we were talking about with the Nullification Crisis. In the 1850s, as we are on the verge of Civil War, Daniel Webster again, who believes that all parts that the Union must be preserved in all parts of the Union must submit to federal law believes that something such as the Fugitive Slave law, once encoded, must be enforced for the maintenance of the Union. So, what do we do with a historical figures such as this? You know, how do we think about political compromise or political conservatism, one in the past, but also as a part of democratic values within our very polarized politics today? I hope that over the course of my research with Daniel Webster, looking at a very fragmented Republic, and his solutions and his legacy and how people think about him, that I can gain greater insights into how we think about the functioning of American democracy, which I think can help me and others, given the world we live in today.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 35:59

[Outro music begins] The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. To view some of the items mentioned in today's episode and to learn more, please visit our website at www.masshist.org/podcast. We would like to thank Anne Bentley, the Curator of Art and Artifacts at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Peter Drummey, Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian and Michael Larmann, a PhD student at the University of Montana.

Cassie Cloutier 36:44

Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and by Podington Bear. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening.