



The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife
Annual Proceedings 2000

New England Celebrates: Spectacle, Commemoration, and Festivity

The Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife is a continuing series of conferences, exhibitions, and publications whose purpose is to explore everyday life, work, and culture in New England's past. Founded on the premise that traditional lore and material folk culture are rapidly disappearing in New England, the series focuses attention on emerging areas of folk studies, regional and local history, cultural geography, historical archaeology, and vernacular and antiquarian studies. The Dublin Seminar is designed to serve as a meeting place and archival program for scholars, students, and committed amateurs who share an interest in a specific folklife area and who can pool their knowledge, offer exhibits, and exchange ideas and methods. Conferences are held in June, July, or August of each year with concurrent tours and exhibitions at participating museums and art galleries. Papers presented at each conference are published as the *Annual Proceedings of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife*. Dublin Seminar activities and publications are offered in conjunction with the Program in American and New England Studies, Boston University. These activities are supported through registrations, sales of educational materials, grants from federal and state agencies, and private donations.

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Title-page illustration: Detail, sign for the Clap tavern in Northhampton, Massachusetts (now Easthampton, Massachusetts). Courtesy of Historic Deerfield.



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John Pierce's Pitch Pipe: Music and Myth-Construction in Early National Celebrations

Richard J. Bell

It was the grand opening and trial of the first organ that drew the Reverend John Pierce to the First Congregational Church in Brookline on Saturday, 18 August 1849.¹ At the age of seventy-six, the venerable senior pastor, too feeble to walk or ride, was borne to his church in a chair by several of his friends. Now in the advanced stages of stomach cancer, he had come to listen to the music of which he was so passionately fond. The assembled congregation took his rare public appearance as an opportunity for a timely celebration of Pierce himself. Although technically retired, and practically succeeded by his good friend, the Reverend Frederic Knapp, Pierce himself read passages from the Scriptures. At his special request, a hymn, beginning "From all that dwell below," was sung to the tune of *Old Hundred*, well known as Pierce's favorite — "the best that ever was or ever would be."² When the assembly stood to sing, accompanied for the first time by the swell of the organ, Pierce joined in as heartily as he could from his chair, jesting that he no longer belonged to the "rising generation."³

Pierce died a week later; his funeral was attended by three Harvard presidents and countless other dignitaries from his beloved alma mater, many of whom had paid him regular visits during his final months.⁴ Their attendance was fitting testimony to a man who had given his life to Harvard (*Figure 1*). Although a dedicated and dearly loved pastor in Brookline, it was in the Yard that Pierce had felt most at home. During his more than half a century of service to the college, Pierce served as tutor and overseer, choirmaster and precentor. It was in this last role that he appeared to take the most pride, as it required him, among other duties, to lead the singing of the Seventy-eighth

1. The author is grateful to Darcy Kuronen of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, for providing some invaluable references and for allowing use of an unpublished paper he wrote; the author also wishes to thank Monica C. Lewis for her criticism of the various drafts of this paper.

2. Frederic N. Knapp, *A Discourse Delivered at the Funeral of Rev. John Pierce, DD, Senior Pastor of the First Congregational Church, Brookline, Mass, 27 August 1849* (Boston, Mass.: W. Crosby and H. P. Nichols, 1849), p. 31.

3. *Ibid.*

4. "The Father of Brookline" — *John Pierce (1797–1849)* (n.p., n.d.), p. 5.

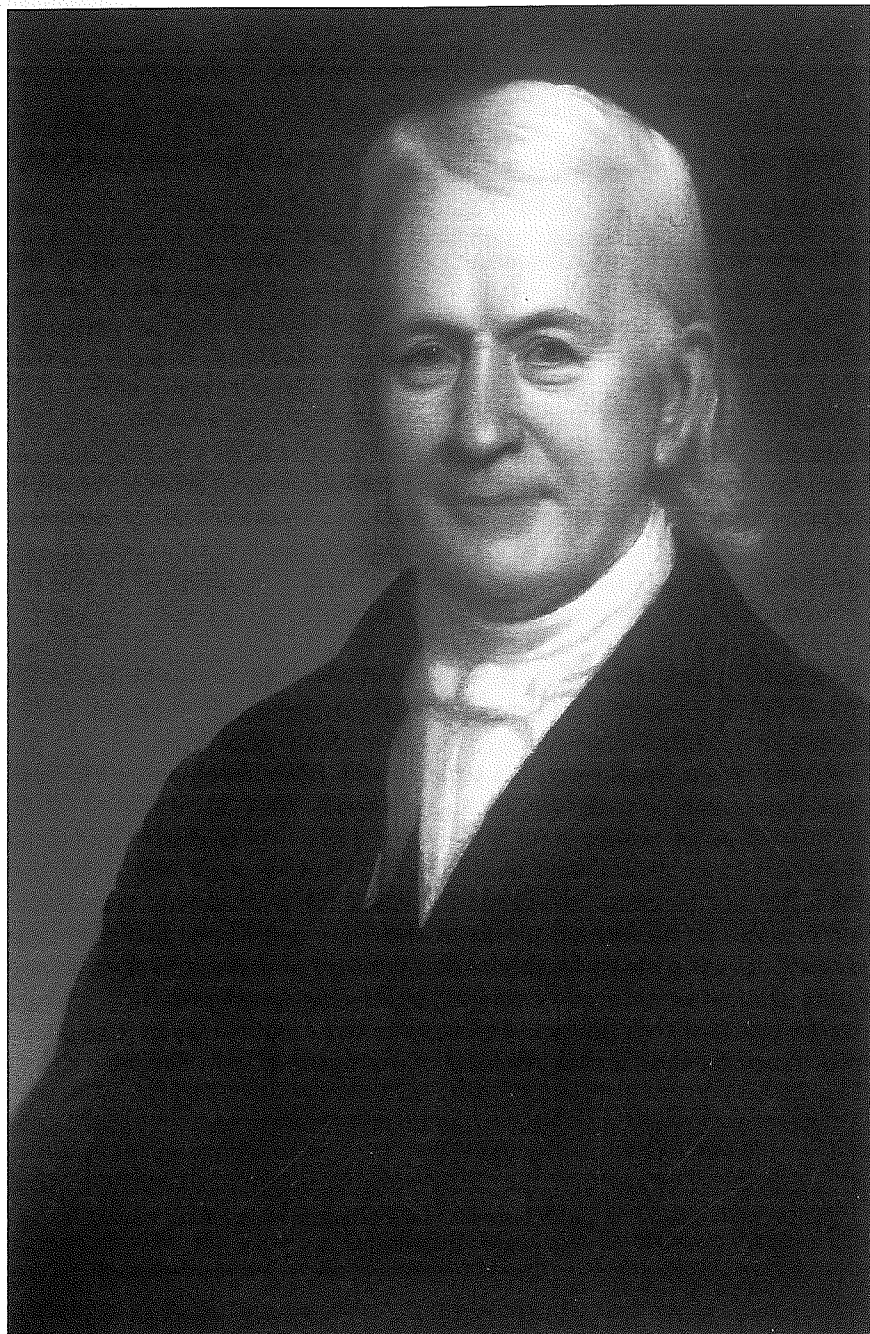


Figure 1. JOHN PIERCE (1773–1849). Edward Mooney (1813–1887). Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1846. Oil on canvas, $29\frac{3}{16}$ in. x $25\frac{1}{8}$ in. Harvard University Portrait Collection. Given by Frederick T. Gray to Harvard College in 1848.

Psalm at the annual commencement dinner. Evidencing a lifelong concern for musical harmony, Pierce carried a small brass pitch pipe for the last twenty years of his life, an instrument most likely purchased from a Boston music dealer in the 1820s. With this tiny instrument, less than two inches in length, he would pitch the first note of these annual exercises. As he recounts in his voluminous memoirs, the standard of singing and the respect accorded these ceremonies by students improved dramatically over the course of his years as precentor. Harvard commencements have not always been the orderly, reverent celebrations of excellence that we know today. Beginning around 1829, Harvard president Josiah Quincy and other figures in the administration initiated a program to bring the annual descent into debauchery under some semblance of control. This paper will examine the nature and causes of these changes to discover how men like Pierce regulated musical and social performance and in so doing created a myth of the Puritan past. Why did pitch become an issue of such contention in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? What was the state of musical performance at Harvard in this period? And third, how and why were changes in the quality of musical performance engineered at Harvard commencements?

I

Pitch is the particular quality of a sound that fixes its position in the musical scale. Before the late-nineteenth-century development of industrial technology, pitch levels in western music varied chaotically. Indeed, the concept of a precise and universal relation between notation and pitch was alien to most western musicians, and there was no specific term for pitch itself before the eighteenth century.⁵ However, in the course of that century as a growing population and increasing mobility created the need for visible status differentiations between emerging social strata, musical performance became an arena in which class distinctions became visible and things like pitch began to matter.⁶ Thus recitations became formalized, musicians professionalized, and audiences developed more particular tastes. Music makers consequently turned to various devices to regulate their performance pitch.⁷ Like most other pitch regulators, the monochord, a simple contrivance consisting of a single string stretched and subdivided into elementary mathematical ratios by means of a movable bridge,

5. See Stanley Sadie, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 20 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1981); Percy Alfred Scholes, *The Oxford Companion to Music, Self-indexed and with a Pronouncing Glossary and over 1,100 Portraits and Pictures*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955).

6. For an analysis of the general character of this growing trend toward refinement, see Richard M. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

originated in Europe. Particularly popular in Germany during this same period was the pitch horn, a metal horn cast to produce a single pitch—a wind equivalent of the tuning fork.⁸ The tuning fork itself was invented in 1711 by John Shore, sergeant trumpeter to the English court and lutenist to the Chapel Royal; though he used it to train his lute, the tuning fork was more widely employed in the pitching of organs. In America, however, due largely to the slower appearance of organs, particularly in Congregational churches, tuning forks were far from widespread. The invention that secured the widest market was the pitch pipe or reed pipe which featured an adjustable pitch.⁹ But like the tuning-fork, pitch pipes suffered from poor sound projection.

Pitch pipes found a ready market in the growing number of singing schools of North America, the first of which had been founded in Boston in 1722. Singing masters used them to set the tunes of their vocal exercises to the proper height so that the notes of the melody always fell within the compass of the different voices, and it was for this same purpose that pitch pipes eventually became popular in many churches during the revolutionary and early national periods. Their adoption by this larger church market was a much slower process than their popularization in secular schools, as Calvinist belief and Puritan tradition prohibited instrumentation of any kind to accompany sung psalmody. Since the early eighteenth century, however, Calvinist ministers had been lamenting the perceived decline in the vocal abilities of their congregants. One of the most vociferous critiques came from the Reverend Thomas Symmes of Bradford, Massachusetts, who complained in 1721 that "the tunes are now miserably tortured, and twisted, and quavered . . . into an horrid Medley of confused and disorderly Noises."¹⁰ By the mid-eighteenth century, then, certain churches were adopting new measures such as the replacement of lining-out, line-by-line repetition, with singing from printed words and music. Yet complaints continued, and by the late eighteenth century many congregations were still hopeful of finding further ways to improve pitch and harmony in their weekly worship. Thus, while strict Congregationalists refused to admit any instrument of a complexity or eloquence sufficient to distract its player or audience from the proper

7. An excellent examination of the role of musical performance in this process is Michael Broyles's *"Music of the Highest Class": Elitism and Populism in Antebellum Boston* (New Haven: Yale, 1992), chaps. 1–4.

8. See Rosamond E. M. Harding, *Origins of Musical Time and Expression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938).

9. Scholes, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, p. 816.

10. Thomas Symmes, *The reasonableness of regular singing, or, singing by note; in an essay, to revive the true and ancient mode of singing psalm-tunes, according to the pattern in our New-England psalm-books; the knowledge and practice of which is greatly decay'd in most congregations* (Boston: B. Green, 1720), p. 8.

worship of God, among even the most orthodox communities the pitch pipe proved to be a common, if ill favored, exception to the instrument ban. Unlike the recorder or organ, the pitch pipe required no skill to use and could hardly play an effective tune.¹¹

Thus, wooden whistle-type pitch pipes were locally constructed in large numbers during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to serve both church choirs and singing schools.¹² The typical design was a wooden pipe with a variable and graduated plunger, which when blown gave any desired note of the musical scale as marked on the stopper. They were often constructed from mahogany, and most extant early British and French examples are between fifteen and eighteen inches in length with a depth of about one and a half inches and a scale from \hat{c} to \hat{c}' or from \acute{e} to \acute{e}' .¹³ Following the introduction of the pitch pipe into America, several ministers asserted their benefit. For the Boston preacher Zabdiel Adams, writing in 1771, the use of the pitch pipe to set the tune was akin to the precentor's use of his hand to maintain the tempo. Adams believed that both these employments were "circumstances necessary to the decent and regular performance of vocal musick."¹⁴ In addition, in his sermon entitled "The Nature, Pleasure and Advantages of Church-Musick," Adams remarked that the introduction of the pitch pipe represented a significant advance. "For want of some such expedients . . . how often have we known the most melodious compositions spoiled in the performance, and converted into harsh and grating dissonance?"¹⁵

To placate conservatives within the church, to whom even the sight of a pitch pipe was abhorrent, these essential tools were disguised as

11. See Laurence Libin, *American Musical Instruments in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), p. 67.

12. James Bazin notes that he received a broken pitch pipe for repair from a "Singing Master from Boston." G. W. Chase, "History of Reed Instruments in the United States," *Musical World and New York Times*, 9 April 1853, p. 227.

13. The Metropolitan Museum of Art holds a pitch pipe (#1189), 16 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches in length. It is a four-sided tube of stained wood with a graduated wooden rod sliding within it, giving a scale of chromatic notes, from A to A'. It is eighteenth-century English (Metropolitan Museum of Art, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2nd Edition, Hand-book No. 13: Catalogue of the Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments of All Nations*, vol. 1 [New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1904], p. 126). The Victoria and Albert Museum in London owns a mahogany pitch pipe (#83) with a rectangular section and graduated stopper made of boxwood which dates from the eighteenth century and measures sixteen inches; the museum also owns a French model (#84) produced in 1772 by no less eminent a maker than Delusse. This boxwood example has a graduated mathematically divided stopper and may be the earliest example of a signed pipe. (Jean Jenkins et al., *Eighteenth-Century Musical Instruments: France and Britain* [London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1973], p. 130).

14. Zabdiel Adams, *The nature, pleasure and advantages of church-musick*. A sermon preached at a lecture in the First Parish of Lancaster, on Thursday April 4th. 1771 (Boston: Richard Draper, 1771), p. 36.

15. Adams, *The nature, pleasure and advantages of church-musick*, p. 36.

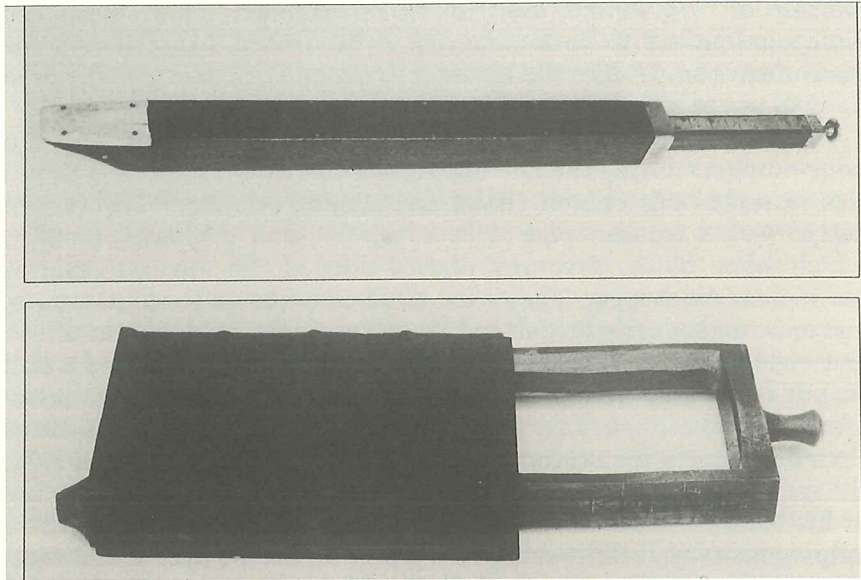


Figure 2. Organ Pipe: Pitch pipe with metal and bone fittings, plunger inscribed with date 1816. New York State? Length (closed) $12\frac{5}{8}$ in. Book Pipe: Pitch pipe in form of a small book, with cutout plunger. Early nineteenth century. Length (closed) $6\frac{25}{32}$ in. Laurence Libin, *American Musical Instruments in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1985), f.p. 67.

small books, as suggested by the innocuous appearance of pipes such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art's flat, rectangular cherry pipe (Figure 2).¹⁶ Though the *Scots Magazine* of 1755 ridicules "[t]hose who are offended at this" instrument, countering that such persons "might as well be offended at a parson's hemming to clear his throat before he begins,"¹⁷ some ministers, nevertheless, maintained their concern regarding the ostentatiousness of these large, unwieldy musical aids. Thus, disguising them as books was one means of subduing their visual intrusion into divine worship. Attempts to reduce the size of pitch pipes answered this need while at the same time catering to the requirements of increasingly mobile singing masters and musicians. However, the size of wooden pipes was determined by their need for a plunger and fipple; to condense these workings was near-impossible. Even the smallest wooden models exceeded eight inches in length.¹⁸ The only way to reduce the size of the pitch pipe was to overhaul its

16. This example is from the early nineteenth century. It is of the fipple type and is composed of a plunger in a rectangular book-like body. It is almost seven inches in length. See Metropolitan Museum of Art, *A Checklist of Musical Instruments* (New York: Department of Musical Instruments, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989), p. 30; Libin, *American Musical Instruments in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, p. 66.

17. *The Scots Magazine* (1755).

design; most early experiments in this direction turned to brass as the new base material.

Of the few inventors, craftsmen, and machinists who experimented with brass pitch-pipe manufacture in the early national period, James Amireaux Bazin was not only the most prolific but the only identifiable producer of metal pitch pipes before 1875.¹⁹ The son of a Huguenot watchmaker who had emigrated from France in 1788, James, born in Boston in March 1798, moved with his family to Canton, Massachusetts, about eighteen miles south of Boston, in 1812.

From his adolescence, James was dubbed an "ingenious lad," with a taste for mathematics and a flare for the mechanical arts, making estimates and constructing spring-wound models to trace the movements of the celestial bodies.²⁰ He began his association with brass instruments in the closing months of 1821 when a Boston singing master brought a small brass pipe, most likely French in origin, to him to be repaired. He described the pipe in a brief article written in 1880.

[It had] the letter A marked on it, and a piece of thin brass screwed on one side, which had the appearance of having been made to vibrate through an opening about half the length of the pipe, but had been broken off near the screw. Having ascertained how the sound was produced, I made several of the same kind, and soon afterwards made an improvement in the pipe by making it so as to vary the length of the vibrating part of the tongue or reed. This was effected in various ways, one of which is the well-known brass-sliding pitch-pipe with which I supplied the dealers in Boston for many years.²¹

Bazin's modified design, despite the introduction of the sliding tongue, was the smallest yet produced and proved "capable of being carried in the vest pocket."²² He apparently sold hundreds of these "well-known" pipes through a network of dealers, including one to the Reverend John Pierce that survives today as one of only three musical instruments held in the Harvard Archives.²³ Another Bazin

18. The smallest wooden example seen by the author is held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (#1158). It consists of a square tube, with sliding block, and is eight inches in length. It is English and dates from the early nineteenth century. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Crosby Brown Collection* [1904], p. 125).

19. The first pitch pipe from another identifiable maker was produced sometime after 1876 in New York by the firm of Cook and Read. It is composed of a free reed in a cylindrical plated brass tube with a sliding shaft, stamped with notes from F to F' (Metropolitan Museum of Art, *A Checklist of Musical Instruments*, p. 30).

20. Howard Alan Jewell, "James Amireaux Bazin," *RosBulletin: Quarterly of the Reed Organ Society* 8 (1989): 3-8, 4-5; Darcy Kuronen, "James Bazin and the Development of Free Reed Instruments in America" (paper presented at the twenty-fifth annual meeting of the American Musical Instrument Society, 18 May 1996, Vermillion, S.D.), p. 1.

21. James A. Bazin, "First Reed Organs in America," *Musical and Sewing Machine Gazette* (14 February 1880): 23.

22. Jewell, "James Amireaux Bazin," pp. 4-5.

23. Harvard University Archives: Pitch pipe (HUO 57793.1.vt).

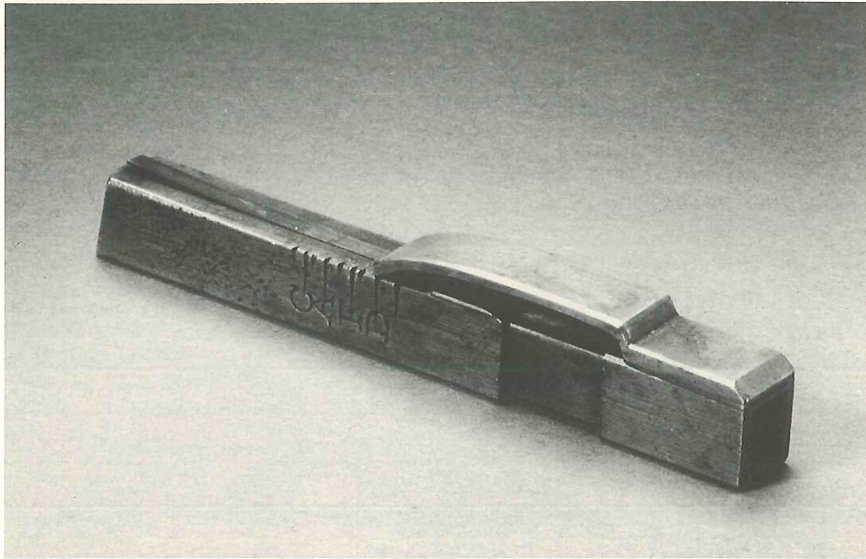


Figure 3. Pitch pipe used by John Pierce. HUU 57793.1.vt, Harvard University Archives, Pusey Library, Harvard University.

pipe of precisely the same specifications is now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, stamped with Bazin's eponymous mark and manufactured circa 1825.²⁴ Pierce's pitch pipe measures almost two inches when unextended and, echoing Bazin's description of its dysfunctional inspiration, is composed of two pieces of brass molded so that one fits snugly inside the other. The reed in Pierce's pipe was fixed to the outer piece in the same manner, while the protruding end of the inner pipe has molded to it a brass tongue that protrudes down half the length of the outer pipe and serves to restrict the vibration of the otherwise free reed. The magnitude of this restriction can be modified by pulling the inner and the outer pieces in opposite directions, thereby lessening the restrictions on the reed and changing the pitch of the note sounded when the hollow pipe is blown. On one side of the outer pipe, the letters *C*, *A*, *F*, and *D* are carved; and it appears that Pierce or possibly Bazin also etched in five other markings denoting intermediate pitches (Figure 3).

Pierce's purchase evidenced not only his concern for harmony but also his lifelong delight in musical performance and participation. The

24. The museum describes its pitch pipe (#2650) as a "small rectangular cylinder fitted with a free reed. The pitch of the note is altered by a sliding bar which lengthens or shortens the vibrating position of the reed. A graduated plate shows the position of the bar for each note of the chromatic scale within the octave f-f'." (Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Crosby Brown Collection*, p. 163). It measures two inches in length and half an inch in diameter. The collection of Alan G. Bates of Hockessin, Del., also contains an identical, yet unstamped, pitch pipe.

very organ whose inauguration he had left his sick bed to attend had been his dream for many months previous. As one valediction recounted, he had "begged and pleaded and gathered money" for its purchase and installation.²⁵ At Pierce's funeral, his eulogist and successor, Frederic Knapp, recalled some other memories from Pierce's long life. Born in Dorchester in 1773, the son of a shoemaker, Pierce had graduated from Harvard at age twenty and immediately taken the ministry, assuming in 1797 the office of minister of the First Parish, Brookline, a post he held until his technical retirement in 1847.²⁶ After collecting his master's degree in July 1796, Pierce served as a tutor at the college for a year, and although he was not to hold another formal office in the university until 1816, he was rarely to be found far from either his church or the college yard.²⁷ For the majority of his long adult life, Pierce had led his Brookline church in its weekly hymn singing and had annually led the singing at the Harvard commencement dinner. As Pierce's son later recounted, however, John Pierce's baritone singing voice was "more remarkable for strength and accuracy than sweetness of tone."²⁸

II

At Harvard, John Pierce found a thriving college music scene. There were musical organizations in several of the New England towns from which students came to Harvard, notably Salem, Stoughton, Dorchester, and Taunton; and many students arrived at the college with some previous musical training and perhaps even their own instruments. A 1771 issue of the *Boston Gazette* contains a notice of a reception for Governor Hutchinson at Harvard, reporting that after the general exercises "there followed an anthem composed, set to music and performed by the young gentlemen of the College."²⁹ Fifteen years later John Quincy Adams, a Harvard undergraduate a few years in advance

25. "The Father of Brookline," p. 5. If it was of the same quality and size as those Pierce recorded in his memoirs in the few years previous to his death, then the organ may have cost around \$4,000 (John Pierce, *Memoirs*, 1803-1849, 18 vols., 4 [13 March 1834] Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass.).

26. "The Father of Brookline," p. 3.

27. In the course of a distinguished career, Pierce established what was to become the Harvard Divinity School and presided over the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge and the Massachusetts Bible and Peace Societies. He was also a member of the following: American Statistical Society, American Antiquarian Society, Massachusetts Historical Society (to which he left his memoirs), New-York Historical Society, Rhode Island Historical Society, Massachusetts State Board of Education, National Institute of Phi Beta Kappa. He was a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and Chaplain of the Massachusetts Militia.

28. Rev. Thomas P. Fox, "Memoir of John Pierce, D.D., Communicated by Charles Lowell, D.D.," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 1 (n.p., n.d.).

29. *Boston Gazette*, 8 April 1771; Walter Raymond Spalding, *Music at Harvard: A Historical Review of Men and Events* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1935), p. 35.

of Pierce, recorded the existence of a "Musical Club," often known as the "Handel Sodality." According to Adams, the Sodality gave regular, somewhat impromptu concerts: on one occasion they went serenading young ladies until the early hours; on another evening they "took it into their heads to Serenade the Tutors."³⁰ They practiced regularly in preparation for the occasional exhibitions at which they were sometimes asked to perform.³¹ Despite their obvious enthusiasm, however, their standard, when compared to Boston professionals, was variously described as poor. Adams wrote in his *Diary* for 28 March 1787.

We had a meeting of the musical society this evening at Foster's chamber. It was after eight before we could make the instruments accord; and at nine we were obliged to break up; this indeed is most frequently the case. It would not be easy to collect a set of worse instruments than we have, among eight or ten violins and as many flutes there are not more than two or three that will accord together, without scraping or blowing an hour or more, so that we can seldom play more than three or four tunes at a meeting.³²

As John Quincy Adams implies, bringing instruments into accord, achieving harmony, was a pressing concern among musicians in this period. Musical performance, both collegiate and civic, came to be increasingly scrutinized by an audience keen to demonstrate their advancing notions of refinement through an appreciation of good music. Performers, whether vocal or instrumental, had to pay continual attention to matters of pitch in order to measure up. Although the many musical groups that were entertaining discerning Bostonians by the late eighteenth century had probably acquired some device to regulate their pitch, Adams's comments regarding the musical ability of his peers suggest the absence of any such device among Harvard student groups. Nevertheless, the Handel Sodality struggled on as best it could:

August 11 1807: Met agreeably to adjournment in the Chapel—played, or rather murdered a few tunes, a natural consequence of a want of harmony amongst the members! each one appearing more zealous to gratify his own private inclination than to promote the general order and interest of the Society.³³

Short of instruments, music books, and time, the society remained clearly sensitive to the subject of harmony. Yet through the course of Pierce's undergraduate and subsequent pastoral career at the college,

30. John Quincy Adams, *Diary*, 2 vols., ed. David Grayson Allen (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981), 11 June 1787; 12 May 1786.

31. *Ibid.*, 18 September 1786.

32. *Ibid.*, 28 March 1787.

33. John Fullerton Evans, *The Early History of the Pierian Sodality, 1808–1908* (n.p.: n.p., 1908), 11 August 1807.

the scope and formalization of Harvard's musical life grew, despite their discord. By 1808 the Musical Club had evolved into the Pierian Sodality under the mandate of fostering much needed "improvement in instrumental music."³⁴ More regular practice certainly improved their standard from Adams's days, and by the early nineteenth century the group was increasingly performing at university events such as the publicly held convocations that took place twice a year for the giving out of scholarships. Nevertheless, it was not until 1833 that the secretary first gleefully recorded that the Sodality had "the use of a metronome this evening which is likely to do us much good in keeping time."³⁵

III

One of the many events at which early student musical clubs such as the Pierian Sodality performed was the annual commencement exercises. The first commencement was held in September 1642 and the university had staged a similar event every year since, allowing for a brief hiatus in 1764 due to smallpox and a more prolonged respite from 1775 to 1783 as a consequence of the Revolutionary War. Early Harvard commencements were not so decorous as Victorian authorities maintained. Seventeenth-century commencements were loud, drunken, public affairs, most likely a consequence of being one of the few public holidays in the Puritan commonwealth. A fair was held on the common in front of the college, attracting local people from every walk. As a contemporary "satirical" poem about Harvard commencement recorded, "All sizes, and each sex, the ways do throng, / Both black and white ride jig-by-jole along."³⁶ Despite the best efforts of the college authorities, before long the festivities of the day were seized as an opportunity for license.

The graduands held feasts in their rooms, serving "distilled liquours."³⁷ "Plumb-cake"—a euphemistic reference to a dessert heavily laced with rum—was consumed to the degree that in 1693 Harvard's ruling body, the corporation, passed a vote to "put an end to that custom, and do thereby order that no commencer, or other scholar, shall have any such cakes in their studies or chambers."³⁸ Clearly this ordinance was anything but successful because by 1722, the corporation

34. Evans, *The Early History of the Pierian Sodality*, 6 March 1808.

35. Spalding, *Music at Harvard*, p. 54.

36. "A Satirical description of Commencement. Calculated to the Meridian of Cambridge, N[ew] E[ngland]," first printed in 1718, quoted in its entirety in Pierce, *Memoirs* 2 (September 1813).

37. George Birkbeck Norman Hill, *Harvard college: by an Oxonian* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1894), p. 84.

38. *Ibid.*

was forced not only to restate its decree but also add "mix'd drink made with distill'd Sp[iri]ts" and "roasted, boyled, baked meats and pyes" to the prohibitions.³⁹ No matter how stringently enforced such rulings were, however, they were never sufficient to prevent these generations of Harvard's students from quenching their thirst in the town's taverns with the locals or from sampling any of the other traditional commencement-day activities. Our satirist further reported:

Some spend the time at pins (that toilsome play)
Others at cards (more silent) passes the day.
In rings some wrestle, till they're mad out-right,
And then with their antagonists they fight;
. . . While some intoxicated are with wine,
Others (as brutish) propagate their kind;
Where amorous lads to shady groves resort,
And under Venus with their misses sport.⁴⁰

The disorders both inside and outside the college on commencement day grew to such a head that in 1727 the corporation attempted to remove the public element by not publishing the day on which commencement was to be held. In addition, the corporation made the decision to move to a much smaller venue, the First Congregational Church, in the hope that reduced space might reduce attendance. This policy backfired dramatically. The *Weekly Rehearsal* of 1735 described a commencement during this period: "Tis said the Meeting House was [now] so prodigiously crowded, that the galleries were in danger of falling; and several Persons were so apprehensive of their Danger, that they jumped out at the Windows, and others with great Difficult got out thro' the Doors."⁴¹ The local outcry against the ruling was too strong for the corporation to resist and public announcements were soon resumed.⁴² The reinstatement of public attendance in the 1740s actually served to reduce reports of riotous disorder because the announcement coincided with the adoption of a larger venue, thus eliminating the congestion that had been a cause of much of the disorder during the years of reduced publicity.

Even the core commencement ceremony, the series of orated theses, was subject to frequent subversion.⁴³ The governor's presence at these

39. Ibid.

40. "A Satirical description of Commencement," in Pierce, *Memoirs* 2 (September 1813).

41. *Weekly Rehearsal*, 1735; Albert Matthews, "Harvard Commencement Days, 1642-1916," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Transactions, 1915-1916* (Cambridge: J. Wilson and Son, 1916), pp. 309-84.

42. One member of the Lowell family suggested that even the pulpits joined the clamor to restore public participation, as "the one great holiday of the clergy of Massachusetts was the Commencement, which they punctually attended." Hill, *Harvard college: by an Oxonian*, p. 84.

occasions always helped maintain a greater sense of purpose than at other festivities, yet students still tested the limits of acceptability. In 1763 the overseers were forced to take action over a report submitted to them that highlighted "a practice which has obtained [popularity] within these few years of addressing the female sex in the orations on Commencement day." The board of overseers considered this license to be "exceptionable & improp[er]" and thus ruled that all future orations to be delivered on commencement days were to be submitted to the president for inspection before their delivery to "prevent such like addresses or any other indecencies or improprieties for the future."⁴⁴

When commencements resumed in the 1780s following the Revolutionary War, they proved more popular than ever, drawing large crowds from Cambridge and Boston as well as alumni from all along the seaboard. If anything, the occasion had grown more rambunctious. Despite the prohibitions of the corporation, students continued to subvert the central ceremonies for their own enjoyment. At one of the exhibitions in 1803, John Pierce recorded that clapping was prevented "by ordering the students to sit, and by threatening them, after repeated murmurs, with closing the Exhibition, if any more disturbance was heard."⁴⁵ The lack of discipline on commencement day among students and observers became so acute that in 1805 the corporation felt it necessary "to engage the assistance of the Sheriff of the County of Middlesex & two justices of the peace with a guard of 18 men Officers . . . to attend for the preservation of order at the next Commencement season."⁴⁶ Describing the college as it was when he attended his first commencement as an undergraduate in 1814, Professor Andrew Peabody remarked:

The entire Common, then an unenclosed dust-plain, was completely covered on Commencement Day, and the night preceding it and following it, with drinking-stands, dancing-booths, mountebank shows, and gambling tables; and I have never heard such a horrid din, tumult, and jargon of oaths, shout, scream, fiddle, quarreling, and drunkenness as on those two nights.⁴⁷

It was not until the presidency of Josiah Quincy (1829-1845) that Harvard found the means to sweep the common clear. Peabody com-

43. Cotton Mather explained that it "has been the Annual Custom for the bachelors to publish a Sheet of Theses pro virili Defendendae, upon all or most of the Liberal Arts." Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* . . . 7 pts. in 1 vol. (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1702), 4:131.

44. Harvard College, *Overseers' Records*, 2:65; Matthews, "Harvard Commencement Days," p. 349.

45. Pierce, *Memoirs* 1 (18 October 1803).

46. Harvard College, *College Book*, 9:43; Matthews, "Harvard Commencement days," p. 367.

47. Andrew P. Peabody, *Harvard Reminiscences* (Boston: Ticknor, 1888), p. 59.

ments that Quincy's efforts were so substantial that "during his entire administration the public days of the College were kept free from rowdyism."⁴⁸ The imposition of such decorum extended beyond the fun-fair's displacement. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the concerted efforts of Josiah Quincy succeeded in banishing all suspicion of mayhem from the morning exercises, replacing it with decorum and etiquette. By excluding disruptive elements, Quincy hoped to create a ceremony deemed grand enough to befit the nation's oldest and most prestigious college (*Figure 4*).

Even before accepting the Harvard presidency in 1829, Josiah Quincy, himself a Harvard graduate, was perhaps the most well-known person in Boston. Having served in the United States House of Representatives for most of his public life, he had been elected mayor of the city of Boston in 1823, a position he held for two terms before coming to Cambridge. He was first elected on a wave of popular enthusiasm, but his autocratic actions as mayor turned many of his most ardent supporters against him. Manipulating his popular support into a mandate for dictatorship, he ran the city with with "a zeal predicated upon his own conception of what was good for the city and its people."⁴⁹ Despite being eventually dismissed from the position of mayor for his excesses, Quincy adopted this same style at Harvard. Just as Bostonians had been witness to Mayor Quincy's belligerent attitude toward vice and crime—he could often be seen riding around the city late at night apprehending, arresting, and delivering criminals to the city jails—Harvard students began to feel the college administration tightening its grip on student discipline.⁵⁰ To improve perceivedly lax student morals and behavior, President Quincy introduced the practice of appealing to the laws of the lands in extreme cases of student misdemeanor. Not only did this make students subject to stricter penalties but it also meant that the university could compel testimony under oath from its students in such cases.⁵¹ Similarly, in driving the fair from Cambridge common and reducing the instances of public intoxication and licentiousness at commencement, President Quincy repeated in microcosm what he had achieved as mayor with the almshouses, street fairs, and brothels in nearby Boston (*Figure 5*).⁵²

Attempting to solemnize the commencement ceremony itself, Quincy's program consisted largely of increasing the orations both in length and in number in an attempt to dissuade the "rabble" from

48. *Ibid.*

49. Matthew H. Crocker, *The Magic of the Many: Josiah Quincy and the Rise of Mass Politics in Boston* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), p. 132.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 143.

51. James Walker, *Memoir of Josiah Quincy* (Cambridge: John Wilson, 1867), pp. 47–48.

52. *Ibid.*, pp. 36–39.

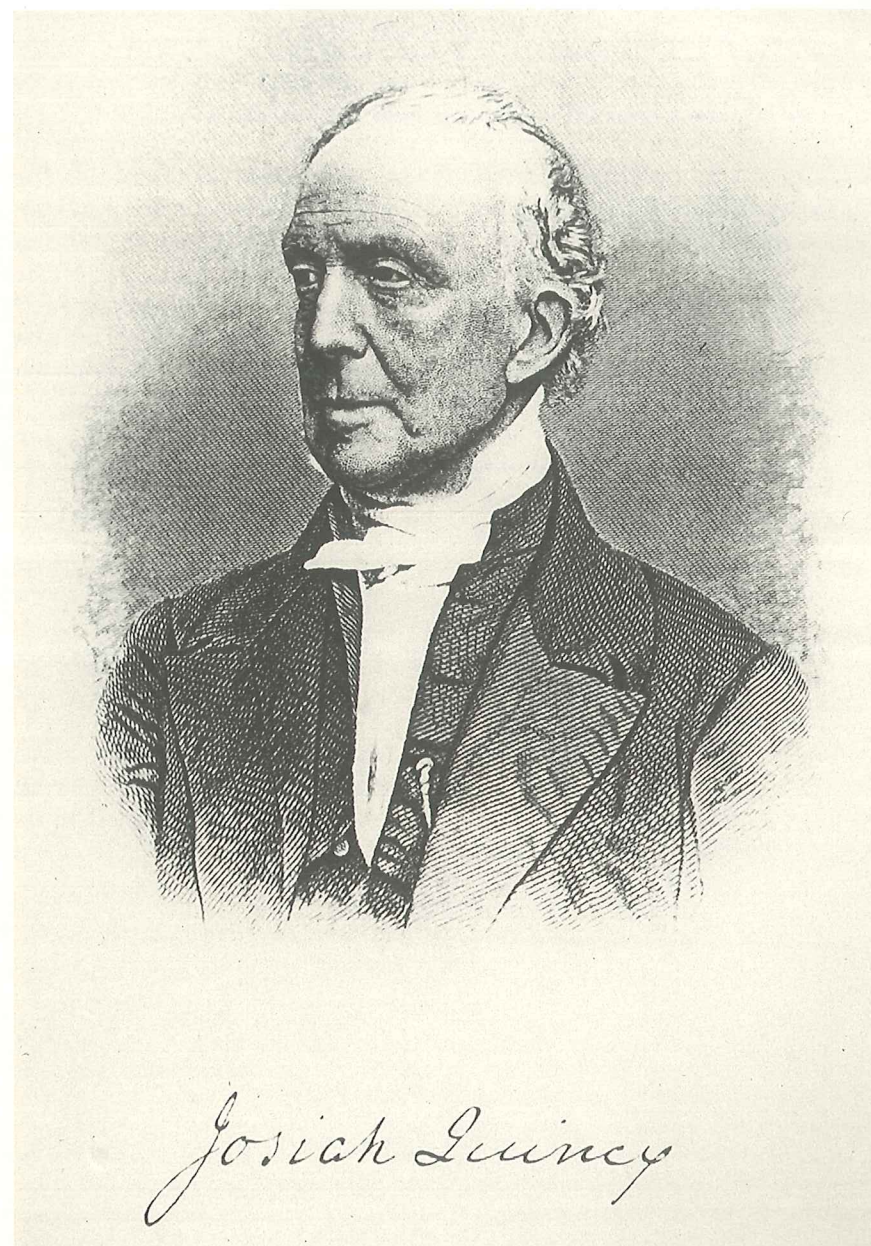


Figure 4. JOSIAH QUINCY (1772–1864). From: James Walker, *Memoir of Josiah Quincy* (Cambridge: John Wilson, 1867), p. iii.

attending; during the height of Quincy's presidency the morning ceremonies exceeded five hours in length.⁵³ Samuel Eliot Morison writes of this period of Harvard commencement history: "[n]ever before or since have Harvard Commencements been . . . such prolonged feats of endurance for all."⁵⁴ In contrast to the eight or ten orations of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Harvard, under President Quincy the number rose to twenty-three, peaking at twenty-six under his successor, President Everett.⁵⁵ Morison asserts that this test of stamina proved too much for many ladies who "grow faint and have to be fanned, 'supported' or even carried out" of the stifling meetinghouse.⁵⁶ While the exercises continued to fill their chosen venue, the crowds jostling for places outside the windows and at the back of the church showed a marked dissipation in the Quincy years.⁵⁷ Alumni interest remained substantial. However, within three years of assuming the presidency, Quincy found that his reforms had served to reduce dramatically local interest in the proceedings. In 1832 the *Boston Transcript* reports that "there has been none of the morning stir and bustle, and the mid-day stillness which formerly prevailed in the city on this occasion, and one would hardly recollect that it was 'Commencement Day,' unless reminded of the circumstance by something more positive than mere observation."⁵⁸ By 1849 another account lamented that "Commencement day used to be a 'great time', but somehow or other it has become of late years much diminished in importance as a popular festival . . . Few people nowadays come a hundred miles to stare their eye out on Cambridge Common, where there is no more shaking of 'props', [and] sucking of egnog."⁵⁹ Also integral to this transformation of the commencement-day exercises was the introduction of a

53. Calculated from details to be found throughout Pierce, *Memoirs*, vols. 1–8.

54. Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard, 1636–1936* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 246.

55. Calculated from details to be found in Pierce, *Memoirs* 3, new series (27 August 1845); 4, new series (26 August 1846); 5 new series (25 August 1847); 6 new series (23 August 1848); Harvard University, *Order of the exercises of Commencement* (Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts: various printers, 1791–1813).

56. Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard*, p. 247.

57. After 1833, commencement occupied the First Unitarian Church, which had split from the First Congregational Church in 1833 and erected its own meetinghouse.

58. *Boston Transcript*, 29 August 1832, p. 2. Matthews, "Harvard Commencement Days," p. 367. Of course the reduction in local interest also had much to do with the establishment of other regional colleges and the consequent competition for commencement audience. As John Pierce himself records in his Brookline Jubilee address, "[t]he first class in Williams College was graduated, but the year before my ordination [1797]; in Schenectady, New York, the very year; in Middlebury, Vermont in 1802; in Burlington, Vermont, in 1804; in Bowdoin College, Maine in 1806; in Amherst, in this State in 1822; and, the same year, in Waterville, Maine." (Pierce, *Memoirs* 5, new series, p. 33.)

59. *Boston Courier*, 19 July 1849, p. 2. Matthews, "Harvard Commencement Days," p. 367.

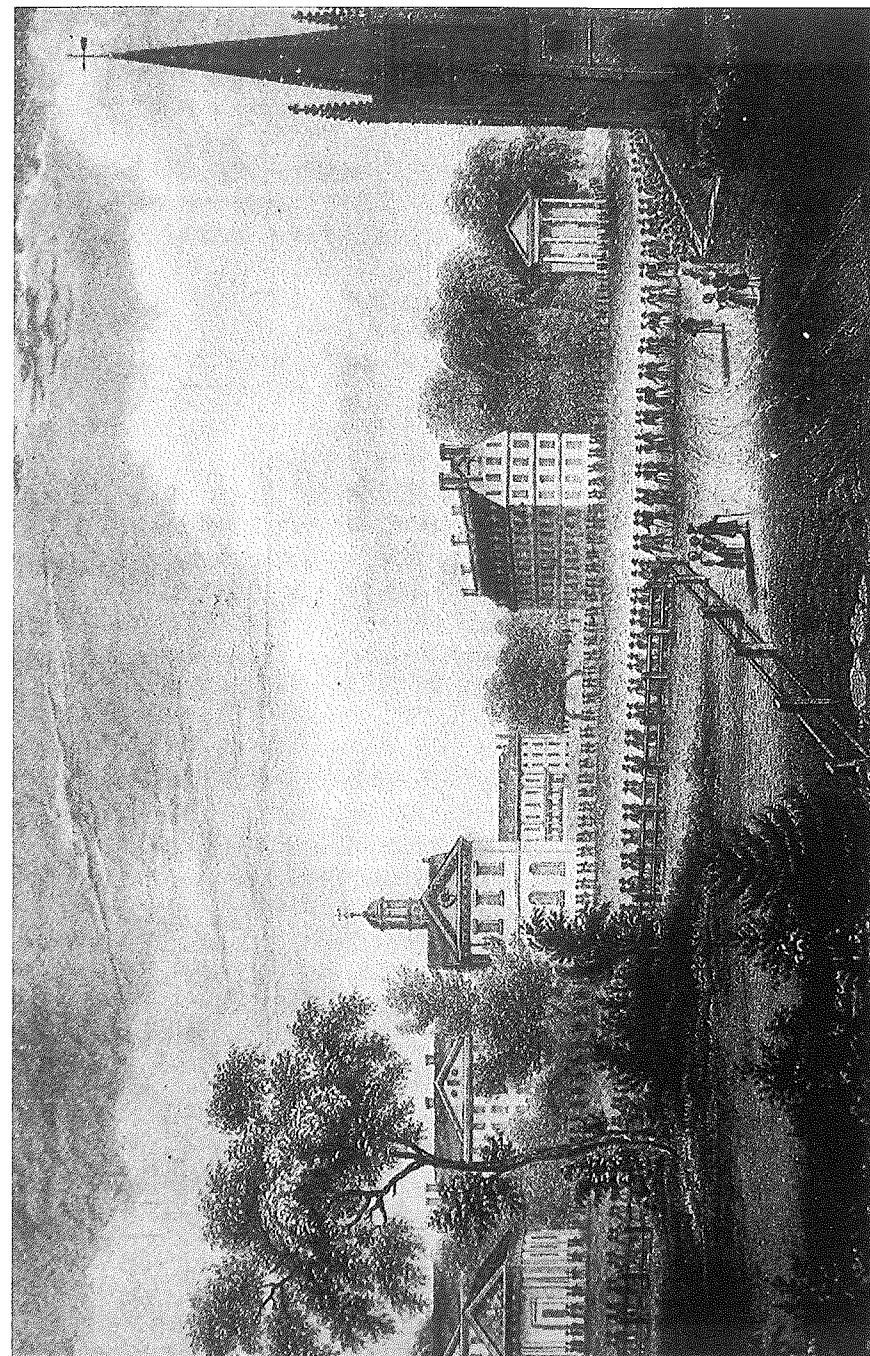


Figure 5. Harvard College in 1836: The Second Centennial Celebration. From Hill, *Harvard college: by an Oxonian*, f.p. 26.

musical band in the college yard so that in the afternoon and evening, the senior class might discharge their energies in a less subversive manner. Quincy also encouraged the attendance of female friends at these festivities, thus serving to improve the manners of his graduate revelers.⁶⁰

Under Quincy's presidency, the commencement dinner also underwent changes aimed at a rechanneling of the students' disruptive merry-making. Since 1701 Harvard commencement dinners had traditionally followed the afternoon exercises and until the mid-1830s were known for the opportunities they afforded for drunken revelry. John Pierce, a life-long pro-temperance activist, remarked in 1835 that in previous years the "hilarity" of the assembled diners was so great by the time for speeches that it was "difficult to restore order" sufficiently to conduct the singing of the psalm.⁶¹ However, by the late 1830s, Pierce's references to rowdiness at these dinners change subtly. While graduates continued to drink their fill of the cider and wine provided, increasingly "[t]here was pretty good order til the President and suite had retired."⁶² The domineering presence of the fiercely pro-temperance Harvard president, Josiah Quincy, served to defer the real festivities until after the formal proceedings of the dinner were concluded. It was only after his exit that, in Pierce's account, "certain lewd fellows of the baser sort congregated in the North hall, and . . . continued for a long time to exhaust the remaining bottles which had not been emptied by the regular company."⁶³ No doubt the presence of such disapproving abstemious as Pierce and Quincy sped the postponement of such excesses and thus helped to install the greater sense of venerable occasion that was evident by the close of the 1840s. Greater changes were afoot, however, and Pierce himself, who, beginning in 1784, attended over sixty commencements, remarked that the 1836 ceremonies marked "the first Commencement I ever attended in Cambridge in which I saw not a single person drunk in the Hall or out of it."⁶⁴ He noted in the same entry, and perhaps in consequence of the stricter tone of that year's proceedings, that "[t]here were the fewest present I ever remember." While wine reappeared for several years subse-

60. F. O. Vaille and H. A. Clark, *The Harvard book: a series of historical, biographical, and descriptive sketches* (Cambridge, Mass.: Welch, Bigelow, and Company, 1875), p. 156.

61. Pierce, *Memoirs* 6 (26 August 1835).

62. Pierce, *Memoirs* 7 (30 August 1837).

63. Pierce, *Memoirs* 7 (30 August 1837); see also Pierce, *Memoirs* 8 (28 August 1839); 9 (23 August 1843).

64. Samuel Sewall's diary is the first to mention the dinner that followed on Monday, 30 June 1701 (Samuel Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674-1729*, 2 vols., ed. M. Halsey Thomas [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973], 30 June 1701).

quently, its resurrection was relatively short lived and from the 1840s no drink stronger than coffee was provided.⁶⁵

However, the efforts to instill dutiful observance of ritual and create a sense of occasion during commencement dinners were nowhere more evident than in the singing of the Seventy-eighth Psalm. Its five stanzas began, "Give ear, my children, to my law" and then proceeded to instruct the next generation to "not be like their ancestors, a stubborn and rebellious generation."⁶⁶ John Pierce states in his memoirs that he first led the singing of Psalm 78 at his own graduation in 1793, and he maintained this practice on all but a few occasions until his death in 1849. In 1806 he first records that the tune employed was *St. Martin's*, and it is likely that the tune had been customary since the late eighteenth century.⁶⁷ For many years Pierce's contribution was to line-out, or deacon, the tune since no printed versions were available for the occasion. It was not until the commencement dinner of 1803 that the university first printed the psalm and placed bills under each diner's plate.⁶⁸ As in the local congregations, this development served to introduce continuity among the gathered singers.

The achievement of choral unison proved to be another matter of concern for Pierce. Traditionally, commencement dinners had been held in the single dining hall in Harvard Hall; however, in 1814 University Hall opened and commencement dinner was transferred to the new purpose-built commons. It had four dining rooms on the main floor, one for each class, which, Harvard historian Mason Hammond has suggested, were so divided to prevent the classes from fighting.⁶⁹ These new premises thus presented Pierce with the problem of maintaining unison and tempo between the four rooms. From 1829 Pierce adopted the scheme of stationing a chorister at the head table in each hall to "receive and communicate the time, so that we may all sing together, or keep time."⁷⁰ Pierce excitedly reported that this plan was

65. George Park Fisher, *Life of Benjamin Silliman, M.D., LL.D., late professor of chemistry, mineralogy, and geology in Yale college. Chiefly from his manuscript reminiscences, diaries, and correspondence*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner and Company, 1866), 2:32; *Boston Advertiser*, 27 August 1846, p. 2.

66. Pierce records that the first three stanzas were taken from N. Tate and N. Brady, *A New Version of the Psalms of David* (London: M. Clark, 1696) and the rest from I. Watts, *Psalms of David, Imitated in the Language of the New Testament* (London: J. Clark, 1719). Pierce began using Belknap's version around 1830 (Jeremy Belknap, *Sacred Poetry, Consisting of Psalms and Hymns adapted to Public Worship* [Boston: J. Belknap, 1795]; Pierce, *Memoirs* 10 (23 August 1843). See also Mason Hammond, *Notes on the Words and Music Used in Harvard's Commencement Ceremonies* (n.p.: n.p., 1978), p. 273.

67. *St. Martin's* was composed by William Tans'ur and first published in London in 1755 (Tans'ur [1755]). See also Hammond, *Notes on the Words and Music*, p. 273.

68. Pierce, *Memoirs* 4 (26 August 1846).

69. Hammond, *Notes on the Words and Music*, p. 284. The serving hatches for food brought from the basement may still be seen in the two cross halls.

resoundingly successful, allowing participants to sing "more in unison than has been common."⁷¹

Tempo and congruence were not Pierce's only musical concerns. Following the distribution of the printed psalm, his duties as precentor became more keenly focused on matters of pitch. Even for Pierce, who led congregations in their singing every Sunday of his adult life, striking the right note in a roomful of noisy and sometimes inebriated diners was a considerable feat. In 1831 he records that he pitched the tune "a little too high,"⁷² a complaint to the same effect reached his ears in 1833.⁷³ In 1834 he for the first time had the aid of a "band of instrumental music," a unique addition to the proceedings which no doubt improved his pitching. In subsequent years, he searched for other means to set the pitch on his own. Certainly before 1829 he had not had recourse to any sort of pitch regulator; and it is not until 1843 that he explicitly records his use of a pitch pipe at the commencement dinner. Even then, however, "in my confusion it [the tune] was one or two notes too high. This made it more difficult to sing."⁷⁴ An undated account from President Quincy's term of office reports that, in addition to his use of the pitch pipe, it was also common for Pierce to set *St. Martin's* "on the old tuning fork."⁷⁵ A pair of tuning forks were lodged in the Harvard Archives in 1916 by Henry Spalding, the retiring precentor.⁷⁶ In a letter to the archivist, he records that these tuning forks, the only other musical instruments besides Pierce's pitch pipe to be found in the university's extensive object collection, had originally belonged to Pierce. Spalding himself used the forks to set *St. Martin's* at commencement until the introduction of the orchestra.⁷⁷

Although the evidence, even from Pierce's eighteen-volume memoirs, is sparse, it does suggest that Pierce acquired his pair of tuning forks some years after his purchase of the pitch pipe. Amid the "great hilarity" of the commencement dinners of the 1820s and 1830s, even his pitch pipe would have proved scarcely loud enough for Pierce to hear. It was not until these dinners had become substantially more subdued that the much quieter pitch of a tuning fork could have been detected. As such, his use of a pitch pipe in this period alludes to the

70. Pierce, *Memoirs* 5 (28 August 1829).

71. Pierce, *Memoirs* 5 (29 August 1832). See also Pierce, *Memoirs* 6 (28 August 1833 and 26 August 1835); 7 (30 August 1837 and 29 August 1838); 8 (28 August 1839).

72. Pierce, *Memoirs* 5 (31 August 1831).

73. Pierce, *Memoirs* 6 (28 August 1833).

74. Pierce, *Memoirs* 5 (26 August 1829); 10 (23 August 1843).

75. Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard*, p. 247.

76. Harvard University Archives: Tuning Forks (HUO 57916.1).

77. H. G. Spalding to W. C. Lane, 18 April 1916, Harvard University Archives. The commencement dinner was served for the last time in 1904.

original boisterousness and high spirits of commencement dinners, the likely possibility of using tuning forks thus marking a microcosmic reflection of changes evident throughout the commencement rituals.

The use of the most basic musical accompaniment at ceremonies such as the Harvard commencement dinners was manifest of the peculiar ways in which early-nineteenth-century New Englanders remembered their Puritan forebears. Despite the essentially secular purpose of rituals such as commencement, those in charge of such occasions came increasingly to model their ceremonies on Puritan religious worship rather than on secular styles of music and celebration from the early New England past. In this regard, pitch pipes came to serve a central yet anachronistic purpose in such quasi-religious services since they came to symbolize the purity of old-style Congregational worship. Thus when John Pierce arrived at the First Church, Boston, in 1833 for the two hundredth anniversary of the Thursday lecture—a series of talks he had attended since his youth—the participants naturally turned to Pierce to set the tune on his brass pipe. As he noted in his memoirs, "We might have had the organ played; but it was thought more proper to dispense with it, as it was [an] instrument not used by our Puritan fathers."⁷⁸ Their logic was justified in the sense that their Puritan fathers had not used organs. Not introduced to North America until the early eighteenth century, the first organ made its appearance in Boston's Anglican King's Chapel in 1713. Among Congregationalists they had been resisted for most of the eighteenth century; and John Pierce's Brookline church, unveiling its first organ in 1849, was hardly the last to embrace musical modernity. Ironically, however, those who gathered in First Church in 1833 to commemorate their Puritan past chose an instrument to set their tunes that would have engendered outright condemnation from their forefathers. Its revolutionary brass design and its sleek, compact manufacture make it seem, even today, very stylish and almost futuristic.

Artifacts like John Pierce's pitch pipe grant us peculiar insight into cultural corners of the early national period that otherwise remain in the shadows. In this case, attention to a small brass instrument lying in the Harvard Archives allows us to examine social changes in the world of music and celebration that are hard to discern with sole recourse to the printed, official record. As Pierce's pitch pipe in concert with his substantial memoirs reveal, there were important changes in Boston's religious and musical life in this period. The advances of secular music technology first into the singing schools and then into churches and quasi-religious rituals like Harvard commencement dinners betokened a growing concern for regulation. The introduction of longer orations, the presence of security, and dry dinners were also evidence

78. Pierce, *Memoirs* 5 (17 August 1833).

of the growing desire of Harvard presidents and administration to achieve harmony. Seeking to instill order and respect among a newly liberated post-revolution society recently infused with a reduced regard for tradition, these officials expected that every loyal citizen, regardless of affiliation, sing—literally and metaphorically—in one perfect voice. Pierce's pitch pipe and the hundreds like it formed one crucial link in this attempt. At Harvard, its use at commencement dinners to set the tune of a traditional psalm was indicative of an associated campaign for veneration and regulation. Pierce and his pitch pipe formed part of a concerted crusade to invent and impose a well-ordered and reverent semblance on the vital central components of the end-of-year observances.

The morning of John Pierce's last commencement was so cool that thick clothing was comfortable. Within a few minutes of ten o'clock, the governor, in procession with the faculty, students, and graduands of the college, arrived at the door of the First Unitarian Church. The record twenty-six performances were, unlike so many that had gone before, delivered clearly and unhesitantly and without recourse to notes. The assembly then retired to the newly restored Harvard Hall for a revelry-free commencement dinner, and following the repast the seventy-five year-old Pierce eased out of his chair to address the hushed meeting: "[A]s time has not yet beaten me, I should beat time once more, as this practice enables a large company the better to keep time." His remarks concluded, Pierce took his small brass pitch pipe from his vest pocket put it to his lips, and with a single breath pitched the first note of a tune he had heard since adolescence. The diners, now risen to their feet, sang the Seventy-eighth Psalm in a respectful manner, in good time and in good tune. As he recorded in his memoirs soon afterwards, "it was remarked by some good judges that St. Martin's never went better."⁷⁹

79. Pierce, *Memoirs* 6, new series (23 August 1848).