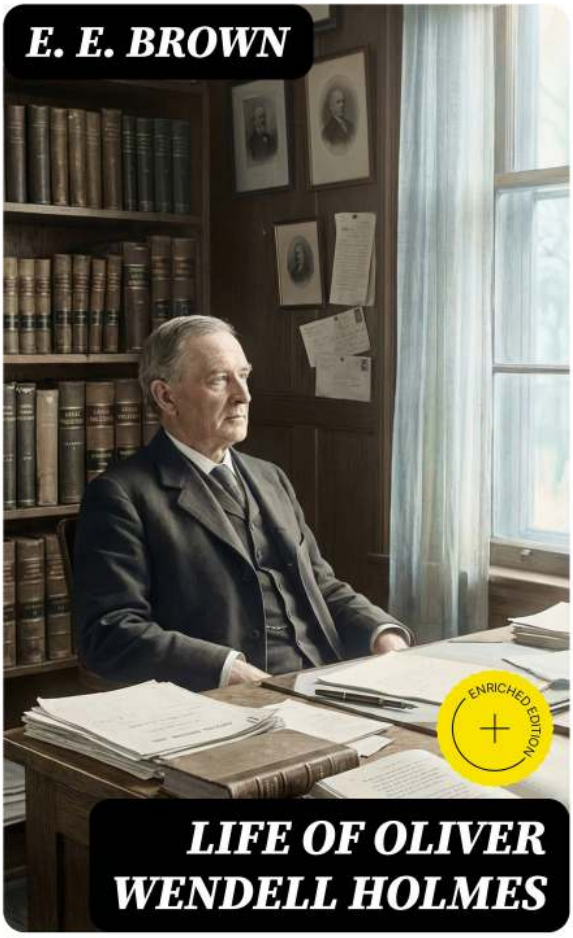
E. E. BROWN

ENRICHED EDITION

LIFE OF OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES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Life of Oliver Wendell Holmes

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Max Dillon

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Life of Oliver Wendell Holmes

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CHAPTER I.

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ANCESTRY.

IN a quaint old gambrel-roofed house[1] that once stood on Cambridge Common, Oliver Wendell Holmes—poet, professor, "beloved physician"—was born, on the twenty-ninth of August, 1809. His father, the Rev. Abiel Holmes, was the pastor of the "First Church" in Cambridge—

> That ancient church whose lofty tower,
> Beneath the loftier spire,
> Is shadowed when the sunset hour
> Clothes the tall shaft in fire.

Here, in Revolutionary times, General Washington frequently worshiped, and the old homestead itself was the headquarters of the American army during the siege of Boston.

"It was a great happiness," writes the *Poet at the Breakfast-Table*, "to have been born in an old house haunted by such recollections, with harmless ghosts walking its corridors, with fields of waving grass and trees and singing birds, and that vast territory of four or five acres around it, to give a child the sense that he was born to a noble principality....

"The gambrel-roofed house was not one of those old Tory, Episcopal church-goer's strongholds. One of its doors opens directly upon the Green, always called the Common; the

other faces the south, a few steps from it, over a paved foot-walk on the other side of which is the miniature front yard, bordered with lilacs and syringas.

"The honest mansion makes no pretensions. Accessible, companionable, holding its hand out to all—comfortable, respectable, and even in its way dignified, but not imposing; not a house for his Majesty's Counsellor, or the Right Reverend successor of Him who had not where to lay his head, for something like a hundred and fifty years it has stood in its lot, and seen the generations of men come and go like the leaves of the forest."

The house was not originally built for a parsonage. It was first the residence of a well-to-do tailor, who sold it to Jonathan Hastings, a prosperous farmer whom the college students used to call "Yankee Jont.," and whose son was the college steward in 1775. It was long known in Cambridge as the "Hastings House," but about the year 1792 it was sold to Eliphalet Pearson, the Hebrew Professor at Harvard, and in 1807 it passed into the hands of the Rev. Abiel Holmes.

For forty years the father of Oliver Wendell Holmes ministered to his Cambridge parish, revered and loved by all who knew him. He was a man of marked literary ability, as his *Annals of America* shows—"full of learning," as some one has said, "but never distressing others by showing how learned he was."

Said T.W. Higginson, at the Holmes Breakfast:

"I should like to speak of that most delightful of sunny old men, the father of Doctor Holmes, whom I knew and loved when I was a child. ... I was brought up in Cambridge, my father's house being next door to that of Doctor Holmes'

gambrel-roofed house, and the library I most enjoyed tumbling about in was the same in which his infant gambols had first disturbed the repose of the books. I shall always remember a certain winter evening, when we boys were playing before the fire, how the old man—gray, and gentle, and kindly as any old German professor, and never complaining of our loudest gambols—going to the frost-covered window, sketched with his pen-knife what seemed a cluster of brambles and a galaxy of glittering stars, and above that he wrote, *Per aspera ad astra*[2]: 'Through difficulties to the stars.' He explained to us what it meant, and I have never forgotten that quiet winter evening and the sweet talk of that old man."

The good pastor was a graduate of Yale College, and before coming to Cambridge had taught at his *Alma Mater*, and preached in Georgia. He was the son of Doctor David Holmes, a physician of Woodstock, Ct., who had served as captain in the French and Indian wars, and afterward as surgeon in the Revolutionary army. The grandfather of Doctor David Holmes was one of the original settlers of Woodstock.[1]

The genealogy of the Holmes family of Woodstock dates from Thomas Holmes, a lawyer of Gray's Inn, London. In 1686, John Holmes, one of his descendants, joined a colony from Roxbury, Mass., and settled in Woodstock, Conn. His son David married a certain "Bathsheba," who had a remarkable reputation as nurse and doctress.

In the great storm of 1717, when the settlers' houses were almost buried in the snow, it is said that she climbed out of an upper-story window and travelled on snow-shoes

through almost impassable drifts to Dudley, Mass., to visit a sick woman. The son of this noble Bathsheba was "Dr. David," the grandfather of Oliver Wendell Holmes.

In 1790, Abiel Holmes was married to the daughter of President Stiles of Yale, who died without children. His second wife, and the mother of Oliver Wendell Holmes, was a daughter of Hon. Oliver Wendell, an eminent lawyer. He was descended from various Wendells, Olivers, Quinceys, and Bradstreets—names that belonged to the best blue blood of New England—and his wife was Mary Jackson, a daughter of Dorothy Quincy, the "Dorothy Q." whom Doctor Holmes has immortalized in his poem. And just here, lest some of my readers may have forgotten some parts of this delicious bit of family portraiture, I am tempted to give the entire poem:

> Grandmother's mother, her age I guess,
> Thirteen summers or something less;
> Girlish bust, but womanly air,
> Smooth square forehead, with uprolled hair,
> Lips that lover has never kissed,
> Taper fingers and slender wrist,
> Hanging sleeves of stiff brocade—
> So they painted the little maid.
>
> On her hand a parrot green
> Sits unmoving and broods serene;
> Hold up the canvas full in view—
> Look, there's a rent the light shines through.
> Dark with a century's fringe of dust,
> That was a Redcoat's rapier thrust!

Such is the tale the lady old,
Dorothy's daughter's daughter told.

Who the painter was none may tell—
One whose best was not over well;
Hard and dry, it must be confessed,
Flat as a rose that has long been pressed;
Yet in her cheek the hues are bright,
Dainty colors of red and white;
And in her slender shape are seen
Hint and promise of stately mien.

Look not on her with eyes of scorn—
Dorothy Q. was a lady born!
Ay, since the galloping Normans came,
England's annals have known her name;
And still to the three-hilled rebel town
Dear is that ancient name's renown,
For many a civic wreath they won,
The youthful sire and the gray-haired son.

O damsel Dorothy! Dorothy Q.,
Strange is the gift that I owe to you;
Such a gift as never a king
Save to daughter or son might bring—
All my tenure of heart and hand,
All my title to house and land;
Mother and sister, and child and wife,
And joy and sorrow, and death and life.

What if a hundred years ago
Those close-shut lips had answered, no,

When forth the tremulous question came
That cost the maiden her Norman name;
And under the folds that look so still
The bodice swelled with the bosom's thrill
Should I be I, or would it be
One tenth another to nine tenths me?

Soft is the breath of a maiden's yes;
Not the light gossamer stirs with less;
But never a cable that holds so fast,
Through all the battles of wave and blast,
And never an echo of speech or song
That lives in the babbling air so long!
There were tones in the voice that whispered then
You may hear to-day in a hundred men.

O lady and lover, how faint and far
Your images hover, and here we are,
Solid and stirring in flesh and bone,
Edward's and Dorothy's—all their own—
A goodly record for time to show
Of a syllable spoken so long ago!
Shall I bless you, Dorothy, or forgive,
For the tender whisper that bade me live?

It shall be a blessing, my little maid,
I will heal the stab of the Redcoat's blade,
And freshen the gold of the tarnished frame,
And gild with a rhyme your household name,
So you shall smile on us, brave and bright,
As first you greeted the morning's light,

And live untroubled by woes and fears,
Through a second youth of a hundred years.

This Dorothy Quincy, it is interesting to note, was the aunt of a second Dorothy Quincy, who married Governor Hancock. The Wendells were of Dutch descent.

Evert Jansen Wendell, who came from East Friesland in 1645, was the original settler in Albany. From the church records, we find that he was the *Regerendo Dijaken* in 1656, and upon one of the windows of the old Dutch church in Albany, the arms of the Wendells—a ship riding at two anchors—were represented in stained glass. Very little is known of these early ancestors, but the name is still an influential one among the old Knickerbocker families.

Early in the eighteenth century, Abraham and Jacob Wendell left their Albany home and came to Boston. It is said that Jacob (the great-grandfather of Oliver Wendell Holmes) fell in love with his future wife, the daughter of Doctor James Oliver, when she was only nine years of age. Seeing her at play, he was so impressed by her beauty and grace that, like the Jacob of old, he willingly waited the flight of years. Twelve children blessed this happy union, and the youngest daughter married William Phillips, the first mayor of Boston, and the father of Wendell Phillips.

Fair cousin, Wendell P.,

says Doctor Holmes in his Phi Beta Kappa poem of 1881:

Our ancestors were dwellers beside the Zuyder Zee;
Both Grotius and Erasmus were countrymen of we,

> And Vondel was our namesake, though he spelt it with a v.

Jacob Wendell became, eventually, one of the richest merchants of Boston; was a member of the City Council and colonel of the Boston regiment. His son, Oliver (the grandfather of Doctor Holmes), was born in 1733, and after his graduation at Harvard, in 1753, he went into business with his father. He still continued his studies, however, and preferring a professional life to that of a business man, he afterwards graduated at the Law School, was admitted to the bar, and soon after appointed Judge of Probate for Suffolk County. In Drake's *Old Landmarks of Boston*, we find that Judge Wendell was a selectman during the siege of Boston, and was commissioned by General Washington to raise a company of men to watch the British after the evacuation, so that no spies might pass between the two armies.

The original Bradstreet was Simon, the old Charter Governor, who married Governor Dudley's daughter Anne. [2] This accomplished lady, the first New England poetess, and frequently called by her contemporaries "The Tenth Muse," was Doctor Holmes' grandmother's great-great-grandmother.[3]

With such an ancestry, Oliver Wendell Holmes surely fulfils all the conditions of "a man of family," and who will not readily agree with the *Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table*, when he writes as follows:

"I go for the man with the family portraits against the one with the twenty-five cent daguerreotype, unless I find out that the last is the better of the two. I go for the man that

inherits family traditions and the cumulative humanities of at least four or five generations. Above all things, as a child, he should have tumbled about in a library. All men are afraid of books that have not handled them from infancy**[1q]**."

CHAPTER II.

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BOYHOOD.

IN a curious little almanac for 1809 may still be seen against the date of August 29, the simple record, "Son b." Twice before had good Parson Holmes recorded in similar manner the births of his children, for Oliver Wendell, who bore his grandfather's name, was his third child; but this was the first time he could write "son."

A few years later another son came—the "brother John" whose wit and talents have gladdened so many hearts—and, last of all, another daughter came to brighten the family circle for a few brief years.

The little Oliver was a bright, sunny-tempered child, highly imaginative and extremely sensitive. Speaking of his childhood in after years, and of certain superstitious fancies that always clung to him, he says:

"I tell you it was not so pleasant for a little boy of impressible nature to go up to bed in an old gambrel-roofed house, with untenanted, locked upper chambers, and a most ghostly garret; ... There was a dark store-room, too, on looking through the keyhole of which I could dimly see a heap of chairs and tables and other four-footed things, which seemed to me to have rushed in there frightened, and in their fright to have huddled together and climbed up on each other's backs—as the people did in that awful crush where so many were killed at the execution of Holloway and Haggerty. Then the lady's portrait up-stairs with the sword-

thrusts through it—marks of the British officers' rapiers—and the tall mirror in which they used to look at their red coats—confound them for smashing its mate!—and the deep, cunningly-wrought arm-chair in which Lord Percy used to sit while his hair was dressing; he was a gentleman, and always had it covered with a large *peignoir* to save the silk covering my grandmother embroidered. Then the little room down-stairs from which went the orders to throw up a bank of earth on the hill yonder where you may now observe a granite obelisk, the study in my father's time, but in those days the council-chamber of armed men, sometimes filled with soldiers. Come with me, and I will show you the 'dents' left by the butts of their muskets all over the floor. With all these suggestive objects round me, aided by the wild stories those awful country boys that came to live in our service brought with them—of contracts written in blood and left out over night not to be found the next morning (removed by the Evil One who takes his nightly round among our dwellings, and filed away for future use), of dreams coming true, of death-signs, of apparitions, no wonder that my imagination got excited, and I was liable to superstitious fancies."

What some of these fancies were, he tells us elsewhere:

"I was afraid of ships**[2q]**. Why, I could never tell. The masts looked frightfully tall, but they were not so tall as the steeple of our old yellow meeting-house. At any rate, I used to hide my eyes from the sloops and schooners that were wont to lie at the end of the bridge, and I confess that traces of this undefined terror lasted very long. One other source of alarm had a still more fearful significance. There

was a great wooden hand, a glovemaker's sign, which used to swing and creak in the blast as it hung from a pillar before a certain shop a mile or two outside of the city. Oh, the dreadful hand! Always hanging there ready to catch up a little boy who would come home to supper no more, nor yet to bed, whose porringer would be laid away empty thenceforth, and his half-worn shoes wait until his small brother grew to fit them.

"As for all manner of superstitious observances, I used once to think I must have been peculiar in having such a list of them, but I now believe that half the children of the same age go through the same experiences. No Roman soothsayer ever had such a catalogue of omens as I found in the sibylline leaves of my childhood. That trick of throwing a stone at a tree and attaching some mighty issue to hitting or missing, which you will find mentioned in one or more biographies, I well remember. Stepping on or over certain particular things or spots—Doctor Johnson's special weakness—I got the habit of at a very early age.

"With these follies mingled sweet delusions which I loved so well I would not outgrow them, even when it required a voluntary effort to put a momentary trust in them. Here is one which I cannot help telling you.

"The firing of the great guns at the Navy Yard is easily heard at the place where I was born and lived. 'There is a ship of war come in,' they used to say, when they heard them. Of course I supposed that such vessels came in unexpectedly, after indefinite years of absence, suddenly as falling stones, and that the great guns roared in their astonishment and delight at the sight of the old war-ship

splitting the bay with her cut-water. Now, the sloop-of-war the *Wasp*[3], Captain Blakely, after gloriously capturing the *Reindeer* and the *Avon*, had disappeared from the face of the ocean, and was supposed to be lost. But there was no proof of it, and of course for a time, hopes were entertained that she might be heard from. Long after the last real chance had utterly vanished, I pleased myself with the fond illusion that somewhere on the waste of waters she was still floating, and there were *years* during which I never heard the sound of the great guns booming inland from the Navy Yard without saying to myself, 'the *Wasp* has come!' and almost thinking I could see her as she rolled in, crumpling the waters before her, weather-beaten, barnacled, with shattered spars and threadbare canvas, welcomed by the shouts and tears of thousands. This was one of those dreams that I mused and never told. Let me make a clean breast of it now, and say, that, so late as to have outgrown childhood, perhaps to have got far on towards manhood, when the roar of the cannon has struck suddenly on my ear, I have started with a thrill of vague expectation and tremulous delight, and the long unspoken words have articulated themselves in the mind's dumb whisper, *The Wasp has come!*

"Yes; children believe plenty of queer things. I suppose all of you have had the pocket-book fever when you were little? What do I mean? Why, ripping up old pocket-books in the firm belief that bank-bills to an immense amount were hidden in them. So, too, you must all remember some splendid unfulfilled promise of somebody or other, which fed you with hopes perhaps for years, and which left a blank in

your life which nothing has ever filled up. O.T. quitted our household carrying with him the passionate regrets of the more youthful members. He was an ingenious youngster; wrote wonderful copies, and carved the two initials given above with great skill on all available surfaces. I thought, by the way, they were all gone, but the other day, I found them on a certain door. How it surprised me to find them so near the ground! I had thought the boy of no trivial dimensions. Well, O.T., when he went, made a solemn promise to two of us. I was to have a ship, and the other a martin house (last syllable pronounced as in the word *tin*). Neither ever came; but oh! how many and many a time I have stolen to the corner—the cars pass close by it at this time—and looked up that long avenue, thinking that he must be coming now, almost sure as I turned to look northward that there he would be, trudging toward me, the ship in one hand and the mar*tin* house in the other!"

At an early age the merry, restless little fellow was sent to a neighboring school, kept by Ma'am Prentiss, a good, motherly old dame, who ruled her little flock, not with a scourge of birches, but with a long willow rod that reached quite across the schoolroom, "reminding,[4] rather than chastening." Among her pupils was Alfred Lee, afterwards the beloved Bishop of Delaware.

"It is by little things," says the Autocrat, "that we know ourselves; a soul would very probably mistake itself for another, when once disembodied, were it not for individual experiences which differ from those of others only in details seemingly trivial. All of us have been thirsty thousands of times, and felt with Pindar, that water was the best of

things. I alone, as I think, of all mankind, remember one particular pailful of water, flavored with the white-pine of which the pail was made, and the brown mug out of which one Edmund, a red-faced and curly-haired boy, was averred to have bitten a fragment in his haste to drink; it being then high summer, and little full-blooded boys feeling very warm and porous in the low studded schoolroom where Dame Prentiss, dead and gone, ruled over young children. Thirst belongs to humanity everywhere, in all ages, but that white-pine pail and that brown mug belong to me in particular."

The next school to which the Cambridge pastor sent his little son was kept by William Biglow, a man of considerable scholarship and much native wit. Five years were spent at a school in Cambridgeport, which was kept by several successive teachers, and it was here, as schoolmates, that Oliver Wendell Holmes first met Margaret Fuller and Richard Henry Dana.

"I was moderately studious," says Doctor Holmes, "and very fond of reading stories, which I sometimes did in school hours. I was fond also of whispering, and my desk bore sad witness to my passion for whittling. For these misdemeanors I sometimes had a visitation from the ferule, and once when a Gunter's scale was used for this purpose, it flew to pieces as it came down on my palm."[5]

It was about this time, doubtless, that the *Autocrat* learned that important fact about the "hat."

"I was once equipped," he says, "in a hat of Leghorn straw, having a brim of much wider dimensions than were usual at that time, and sent to school in that portion of my native town which lies nearest to the metropolis. On my way

I was met by a 'Port-Chuck,' as we used to call the young gentlemen of that locality, and the following dialogue ensued:

"*The Port-Chuck*: 'Hullo, you sir, joo know th' wus goin' to be a race to-morrah?'

"*Myself*: 'No. Who's goin' to run, 'n' wher' 's't goin' to be?'

"*The Port-Chuck*: 'Squire Mico 'n' Doctor Williams, round the brim o' your hat.'

"These two much-respected gentlemen being the oldest inhabitants at that time, and the alleged race-course being out of the question, the Port-Chuck also winking and thrusting his tongue into his cheek, I perceived that I had been trifled with, and the effect has been to make me sensitive and observant respecting this article ever since. The hat is the vulnerable point of the artificial integument."

CHAPTER III.

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EARLY RECOLLECTIONS.

OF the boyhood of Doctor Holmes we have many delightful glimpses.

"Like other boys in the country," he tells us, "I had my patch of ground to which in the springtime I intrusted the seeds furnished me with a confident trust in their resurrection and glorification in the better world of summer. But I soon found that my lines had fallen in a place where a vegetable growth had to run the gauntlet of as many foes and trials as a Christian pilgrim. Flowers would not blow; daffodils perished like criminals in their condemned caps, without their petals ever seeing daylight; roses were disfigured with monstrous protrusions through their very centres, something that looked like a second bud pushing through the middle of the corolla; lettuces and cabbages would not head; radishes knotted themselves until they looked like centenarians' fringes; and on every stem, on every leaf, and both sides of it, and at the root of everything that grew, was a professional specialist in the shape of grub, caterpillar, aphis, or other expert, whose business it was to devour that particular part, and help murder the whole attempt at vegetation.... Yet Nature is never wholly unkind. Economical as she was in my unparadised Eden, hard as it was to make some of my floral houris unveil, still the damask roses sweetened the June breezes, the bladed and plumed flower-de-luces unfolded their close-wrapped cones,

and larkspurs, and lupins, lady's delights—plebeian manifestations of the pansy—self-sowing marigolds, hollyhocks; the forest flowers of two seasons, and the perennial lilacs and syringas, all whispered to the winds blowing over them that some caressing presence was around me.

"Beyond the garden was the field, a vast domain of four acres or thereabouts by the measurement of after years, bordered to the north by a fathomless chasm—the ditch the base-ball players of the present era jump over; on the east by unexplored territory; on the south by a barren enclosure, where the red sorrel proclaimed liberty and equality under its *drapeau rouge*, and succeeded in establishing a vegetable commune where all were alike, poor, mean, sour, and uninteresting; and on the west by the Common, not then disgraced by jealous enclosures which make it look like a cattle-market.

"Beyond, as I looked round, were the colleges, the meeting-house, the little square market-house, long vanished, the burial ground where the dead presidents stretched their weary bones under epitaphs stretched out at as full length as their subjects; the pretty church where the gouty Tories used to kneel on their hassocks, the district schoolhouse, and hard by it Ma'am Hancock's cottage, never so called in those days, but rather 'ten-footer'; then houses scattered near and far, open spaces, the shadowy elms, round hilltops in the distance, and over all the great bowl of the sky. Mind you, this was the WORLD, as I first knew it; *terra veteribus cognita*, as Mr. Arrowsmith would have called it, if he had mapped the universe of my infancy."

"When I was of smallest dimensions," he says at another time, "and wont to ride impacted between the knees of fond parental pair, we would sometimes cross the bridge to the next village town and stop opposite a low, brown, gambrel-roofed cottage. Out of it would come one Sally, sister of its swarthy tenant, swarthy herself, shady-lipped, sad-voiced, and bending over her flower bed, would gather a 'posy,' as she called it, for the little boy. Sally lies in the churchyard, with a slab of blue slate at her head, lichen-crusted, and leaning a little within the last few years. Cottage, garden-bed, posies, grenadier-like rows of seeding-onions—stateliest of vegetables—all are gone, but the breath of a marigold brings them all back to me."

Of Cambridge at this time, James Russell Lowell, in his *Fireside Travels*, tells us: "It was still a country village with its own habits and traditions, not yet feeling too strongly the force of suburban gravitation. Approaching it from the west, by what was then called the New Road, you would pause on the brow of Symond's Hill to enjoy a view singularly soothing and placid. In front of you lay the town, tufted with elms, lindens, and horse-chestnuts, which had seen Massachusetts a colony, and were fortunately unable to emigrate with the Tories by whom, or by whose fathers they were planted. Over it rose the noisy belfry of the College, the square, brown tower of the Episcopal Church, and the slim yellow spire of the parish meeting-house. On your right the Charles slipped smoothly through green and purple salt meadows, darkened here and there with the blossoming black grass as with a stranded cloud-shadow. To your left upon the Old Road you saw some half-dozen dignified old

houses of the colonial time, all comfortably fronting southward.... We called it 'the Village' then, and it was essentially an English village—quiet, unspeculative, without enterprise, sufficing to itself, and only showing such differences from the original type as the public school and the system of town government might superinduce. A few houses, chiefly old, stood around the bare common, with ample elbow-room, and old women, capped and spectacled, still peered through the same windows from which they had watched Lord Percy's artillery rumble by to Lexington, or caught a glimpse of the handsome Virginia general who had come to wield our homespun Saxon chivalry. The hooks were to be seen from which had swung the hammocks of Burgoyne's captive red-coats. If memory does not deceive me, women still washed clothes in the town spring, clear as that of Bandusia. One coach sufficed for all the travel to the metropolis. Commencement had not ceased to be the great holiday of the Boston commonwealth, and a fitting one it was. The students (scholars they were called then) wore their sober uniform, not ostentatiously distinctive, or capable of rousing democratic envy; and the old lines of caste were blurred rather than rubbed out, as servitor was softened into beneficiary. Was it possible for us in those days to conceive of a greater potentate than the president of the University, in his square doctor's cap, that still filially recalled Oxford and Cambridge?"

The father of Oliver Wendell Holmes was a Calvanist, not indeed of the severest cast, but still strictly "orthodox" in all his religious views, and when Oliver, his elder son, was fifteen years of age, he sent him to the Phillips Academy in