

Menotomy Minutes



NEWSLETTER OF THE ARLINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

AUTUMN 2017



★ 150 Years as Arlington ★

By Richard Duffy

On June 17, 1867 residents rejoiced at the town's re-naming as Arlington--opening a new chapter of its identity after 60 years as the independent town of West Cambridge.

The Society observed this milestone in Arlington history with a sesquicentennial open house, held at the Smith Museum 150 years ago to the day of the original celebration. During this "drop-in" event, guests enjoyed an array of savory and sweet refreshments, featuring a special cake bearing the image of Arlington's first town hall.

A fifteen-minute slide loop produced by Richard Duffy was continuously screened during the event, with words and images of Arlington in 1867, including many gems that had not been

previously published or exhibited. An encore presentation of "150 Years as Arlington" was a special feature of the September 22 "Evening in Arlington" wine reception, where many enjoyed it for the first time, and several people remarked that they enjoyed seeing it again even more!

June's tour guide coordinator, Susan Lum, did double-duty staffing extra volunteers to give free tours of the Jason Russell House, in addition to lending her considerable talents in arranging our floral decorations.

All agreed afterwards that the 150th anniversary of the naming of Arlington was the perfect opportunity for a bit of historical festivity. ❖



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Silvia Barrett of Arlington, a culinary student at Minuteman Regional Vocational and Technical High School, arranged the buffet and welcomed visitors.

President's Corner

What is a historical society?

A historical society such as ours is an odd beast. It is a hybrid of several different types of organization.

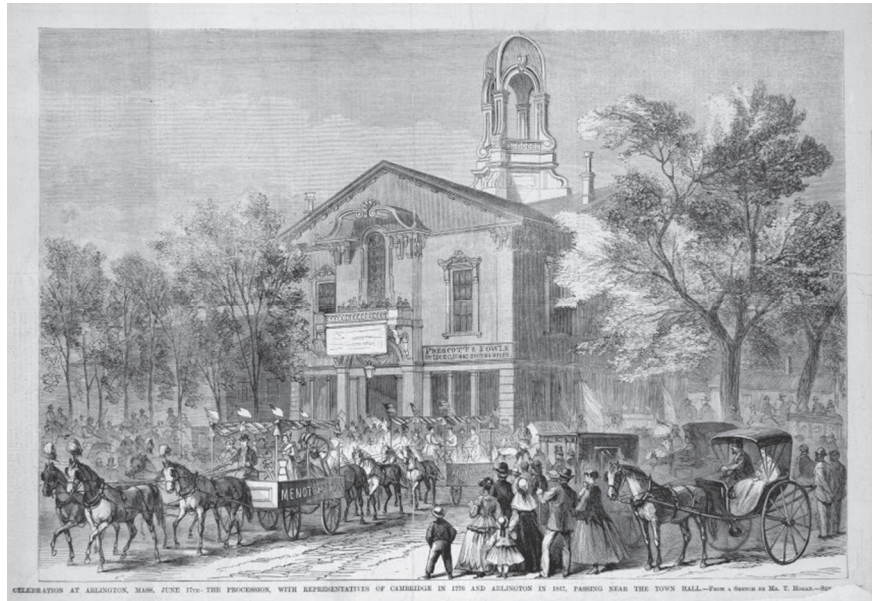
For one thing, we are a museum. We maintain and curate a collection of more than 15,000 objects related to the history of Arlington. We make those objects available to scholars and historians for study. We also display some of our collections for the general public in the Smith Museum and in the Assembly Room next to the Jason Russell House. We also maintain and preserve the Jason Russell House, which can be seen as the most important object in our collection.

We are also an educational institution. Besides our museum activities, we sponsor two lecture series: The evening public lecture series, and Winter Wednesdays in February. The goal of these lectures is to educate members of the public about interesting historical topics. Additionally, our Director Sara Lundberg provides internship opportunities for students studying for college degrees. Internships are an important part of these students' educations. In some sense, too, this newsletter is part of our educational mission – our historical articles are meant to educate and inform you, as well as entertain. For that reason I have insisted that we include at least one longer-form article in each newsletter. I hope you find them interesting!

We are also a club. As a club we offer the opportunity for like-minded people to get to know each other and work together on various projects. The coffee klatch after our meetings is one example of the Society functioning as a club. Many friendships have arisen from the community offered by our Society.

Most importantly, we are an organization of volunteers. Volunteerism is the thread which holds our hybrid organization together. Those who get the most out of their Society membership are those who become involved. We are always open to new volunteers working on new projects. If you are interested in increased involvement with the Society, please reach out to Sara or myself and we will be happy to find a project consistent with your interests.

Best regards,
Stuart Brorson



The patriotic decorating theme for the "150 Years as Arlington" event echoed that of the original 1867 celebration, which was chosen to take place and in keeping with the then-statewide Bunker Hill holiday.

Volunteer Spotlight – Doris Birmingham



Doris Birmingham (on right) leads a special tour with a visitor from South Africa. Doris serves on the Society Board of Directors and is the chair of the Tour Guide Committee. Her invaluable work keeps things running smoothly with our weekend volunteer tour guides, and she also steps in to guide tours frequently. Because of her educational background in American art and architecture, she is also called upon to help with our collection of furniture and decorative arts.

Memories of West Cambridge an excerpt

One of the important roles of our archive is the retention of documents that deal directly with the history of the Society. We house copies of our program presentations to this day, and a record of what were formerly called "Society Papers Read" goes back to the earliest Society meetings in the late 1890s. When a volunteer comes to me with a desire to work with collections, I try to find something that fits their interests and is as useful and meaningful for them as it is for us. Oakes Plimpton was one of those volunteers who appeared at my doorway relying heavily on a cane. He was recovering from West Nile Virus and looking for something to do. Knowing that he has been editor of a few local and oral history books, I set him to the task to digitize these varied documents.

It appears that our earliest member meetings were quite a bit longer than the 60 minutes currently allotted for presenters. One of the most loquacious speakers was our own Society founder, George Y. Wellington, who would drub on and on with his "Recollections" of a time or subject long forgotten. One Society Paper entitled "Remarks of George Y. Wellington, Esq. Before the Arlington Historical Society" in 1902 consists of 31 typewritten pages (imagine sitting through that meeting)! He also had a bit of trouble sticking to one subject, and sometimes said in three sentences what a modern writer could do in one. But his reminiscences are a charming look at days gone by, and his exactitude and attention to intricate detail of unique subjects are invaluable as a record now over 100 years after they were written.

Here we are presenting one example, ripe for the Halloween season, an excerpt from a paper entitled "Memories of West Cambridge" in which George Y. Wellington describes funerary customs in the early to mid-19th century. *(Intro by Sara Lundberg)*



I will now call your attention to the burying of the dead as it appeared to a small boy at that time, 1840. I have stated in its economy the Town had placed a school house and fire engine house on the burying ground (we had no cemeteries in those days) but there was one other building on this burying ground—that was the hearse house. It was built by the First Parish in 1806, and located about half way between the school and engine house. The Parish however sold this building with the hearse and other implements used in the burying of the dead to the town in 1830 for \$90; previous to this time and afterward the Sexton of the First Parish Church acted as undertaker in fact if not in name, for undertakers and funeral directors were unknown at this time.



George Y. Wellington, founder of the Arlington Historical Society, often entertained early Society members with reminiscences of his youth in West Cambridge in the 1820s and 30s.

Zephaniah Stetson was the Sexton of 1st Parish, a carpenter by trade, he was the Town Constable and full police force of the Town, and a terror, if not to evil doers, he was such to us small boys. He lived in the house that was formerly Gersham Swan chair shop and stood exactly where the Savings Bank building now stands, but there was no entrance from either Main or Pleasant Street. The front door opened into the side yard. On Pleasant Street about where Mrs. Holt's house now stands was his carpenter shop; at that time there were no coffin factories, and no burial caskets.

The coffins had to be made to order and right quick. As soon as a death occurred, Mr. Stetson was notified, and at once took the necessary measurements, and made the coffins in the old forms, broadest the shoulders tapering toward the head and feet; coffin was of Pine, and as there was

(Continued on page 5)

Town Day 2017

We were so pleased to offer a variety of activities for visitors on Town Day, September 16, 2017. Special thanks to the Menotomy Minutemen who offered musket firing, children's minutemen drills, corn husk dolls, cartridge rolling, and a musket ball casting demonstration. Thanks also to Nancy McCarthy who performed an interactive historic laundry presentation and to Meredith Affleck who painted a photo board for visitors to capture that special photograph. The Jason Russell House was open for free tours of the lower level, and 125 people took advantage of this offer. ❖



no time to paint it, Mr. Stetson stained his with Venetian red mixed with turpentine, and at all funerals in those days there was a strong turpentine order through the house. The hearse looked more like a modern rack wagon painted black; it had a frame floor, fence posts about 4 feet long on each side with slats up about 3 feet and no top; the coffin was secured in the body of the vehicle which rested on leather through braces (springs were not used then) the coffin covered with a fringed black velvet pall.

There was no seat for the driver, but the Sexton solemnly led the horse with the hearse the funeral procession, and the four bearers in the rear of the hearse arriving at the gate of the burying ground. The coffin was transferred to the beer, with the pall to cover the same, and the bearers bore it to the newly made grave then where the friends had gathered round. The bearers not only lowered the coffin into the grave, but their next duty was to fill the grave, piling the earth above it, and when their work was completed, and not till then, did the company depart. During this time the bell of the 1st Parish was tolling with a blow about once every half minute made by a son of old Stetson, who in the belfry with a rope around the tongue of the bell, tolled it. I know as a boy, it was a delight to me to be delegated by Joe to perform this task, which I did several times.

Perhaps a sketch of "Old Stetson" as he was known to us boys might be interesting, as at that time he was the whole of the police force in Arlington. He was not a native of this town. ... (The Sexton) I would judge was about 50 years old in 1830, tall about 6 ft 2 in, broad shoulders and a spare thin man with bushy gray hair, a square jaw, and a stern determined look out of his eyes so that we boys stood much in awe of him, with his shop and house, so near our school house—he seemed to be omnipresent to us, and I thought he was of the immortals selected for all time for the burying of the dead, and if he died I wondered who would bury him.

If we saw him hard at work early in the morning, we knew that a death had occurred, and he was making the coffin, and about noon as school was out the product of his labor would be in front of his shop for the purpose of drying. The fresh red stain he had placed upon it, and the color was rather gay for the solemn purpose for which it was used. It was a gruesome place for a School House, located on the burying ground with a hearse house next to it, and the Town Pound opposite.

Nor was this all—once School let out about 4 p.m., and if there was a funeral, it arrived here just about that time, so we children standing a little distance away, watched the burial ceremony. I early noticed that the head of the coffin was at the west end of the grave, and I was very curious to know why, and at last, just after a funeral was over I screwed my courage to ask Old Stetson the reason. "Boy" said he "have you not read your Bible and do you not know that it says in the last day, the day of judgement, that the Lord will appear in the East to judge the World, as the dead rise, to ride they should face the Master, which they could not do if their heads were to the East, for then in rising, their backs would be toward the Master which would not be respectful."



Old Burying Ground in Arlington Center.

This explained much to me, and I thought Old Stetson took a very practical view of the matter. It was old Stetson who notified all the Town and First Parish meetings, and besides that if he thought we boys were too noisy in our sports, he would put in an appearance and we would scatter. When we had wood burning stoves in the Church, he always replenished the wood during the singing of the hymn just before the sermon, and the noise he made always disturbed Samuel L. Cutter, the Chorister, for his boots squeaked and there was no carpet on any part of the church floors. Old Stetson performed his duties well, and at last resigned, and Mr. John B. Harrell was his successor, and he became an undertaker, until now; his grandson is both undertaker and funeral director; the old sextons have passed away, and janitors have taken their places.





2017 Wine Tasting

Written by George Parsons

In September, the Society held its second annual Wine Reception Benefit at the Smith Museum. Candles decorated the entranceway to welcome people from near and far, and bouquets of flowers provided lovely accents to the museum exhibits. There was a sampling of four delicious red and white wines from Spain, Sardinia and Italy. Menotomy Bar and Grill and members of the Society donated the appetizers.

The silent auction provided opportunities to bid on handmade items and art donated by Society members as well as gift certificates donated by local restaurants and shops. Thanks to Stu Galley, who was on hand to speak about his work transcribing Nina Winn's diaries of 100 years ago to the day. The event raised about \$2400 to support the Society's ongoing activities. Thanks to all who made this benefit possible with their labor and contributions. ❖



Upcoming Lectures

Our regular location for our Tuesday 7:30 p.m. programs will be the Masonic Temple, 19 Academy Street (disabled access is at rear).



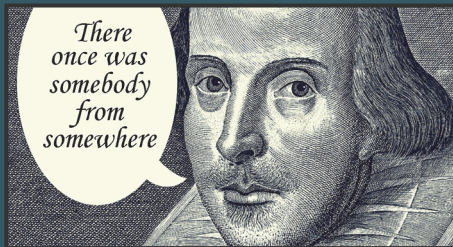
Tuesday, October 24

THE ART OF THE WOOD TURNER

(Program held at the Old Schwamb Mill)

David Graf

For over two decades, Graf has carried on the tradition of crafting the finest oval and circular frames which make the Old Schwamb Mill truly a living museum. Enjoy his presentation in the setting of one of America's most authentically preserved Victorian industrial interiors.



Tuesday, November 28

POETRY: THE SERIOUS AND THE NOT

Miriam Levine and Chuck Kraemer

Levine, Arlington's first poet laureate, reads from her work described as "Hills-Pond haunted, garden-centered, elegiac, people-centric, celebratory." Kraemer, Arlington's leading proponent of the lowly limerick, defends himself, and sketches the long history of AABBA.

Pleasant Street and its Trees in Poem *by Stuart Brorson*

Local author John T. Trowbridge is said to have been as popular and well-known as Mark Twain in the 19th century. Today he is largely forgotten. Nonetheless, the Society keeps a large collection of his works in our archives, and we sell a reprint of his book *The Tinkham Brothers' Tide-Mill* (edited and with commentary by Richard Duffy) on our book cart.

Besides his many prose works, he also published poems; one of them, *Pleasant Street*, is attention worthy because it describes Arlington's Pleasant Street at a time when it was a peaceful town road lined with graceful elm trees. The poem begins:

'T is Pleasant indeed,
As the letters read
On the guideboard at the crossing.
Over the street
The branches meet,
Gently swaying and tossing

Through its leafy crown
The sun strikes down
In wavering flakes and flashes,
As winding it goes
Betwixt tall rows
Of maples and elms and ashes.



The post card shown here depicts just how lovely and serene Pleasant Street was when it was nearly empty and lined with elm trees as described in the poem—and not jammed with irate automobile commuters as it is frequently today.

American Elm trees (*Ulmus americana*) were common on town streets all over the United States a century ago. As the postcard illustrates, their branches and canopy formed a cathedral-like ceiling over the road, offering shade and beauty to travelers. They were the most commonly planted tree in the US at that time and were nearly ubiquitous. Unfortunately, this tree monoculture made the species especially vulnerable to disease; starting in the 1950s, the trees succumbed to the Dutch Elm disease, and so today only a few isolated elms remain. Dutch Elm is a fungus which grows through the vascular system of the tree and prevents water movement to its leaves, causing the tree to wilt and die. Many readers of this newsletter probably recall an elm's long, sad demise in their own yards or streets. Today, arborists are working to hybridize the American Elm with other elm species to produce a tree offering the beauty and majesty of the American Elm, along with resistance to Dutch Elm disease. We hope to look forward to a day when Pleasant Street is again crowned by a leafy ceiling as beautiful as that in this postcard. ❖

About the Society



The Arlington Historical Society was established in 1897 as a collecting and educational organization. In 1923 it began operating the Jason Russell House, a major battle site of the first day of the American Revolution—April 19, 1775. Open weekends from April to October.

The Arlington Historical Society is dedicated to preserving the Jason Russell House and the Society's collections, and to discovering and sharing information about Arlington's history. The stories of individuals, families, and events associated with the town are interpreted in the Society's collections, programs, and Smith Museum exhibitions.

OFFICERS

- President – Stuart Brorson
- Vice President – Pamela Meister
- Vice President – Patsy Kraemer
- Treasurer – Alan Jones
- Assistant Treasurer – Angela Olszewski
- Clerk – Christine Bird

DIRECTORS

- Doris Birmingham • Linda Cohn
- Paul Fennelly • William Lyons
- Rosemarie Smurzynski

The Arlington Historical Society is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization. Contributions are deductible to the extent allowed by law.

Contact Us

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AHS Newsletter team: Sara Lundberg, Elisabeth Carr-Jones, Carolyn Parsons, Doris Birmingham and Stuart Brorson.

Submission Policy: The Arlington Historical Society welcomes submission of articles to Menotomy Minutes. The deadline for submissions is the end of the month prior to publication. We cannot guarantee when or if your article will be published, and all articles are edited for publication. If you wish to submit an article, we urge you to contact the Society offices to discuss your piece prior to submission.

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