

# Menotomy Minutes



NEWSLETTER OF THE ARLINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SUMMER 2018



## The Jason Russell House: a Treasury of Early American Furniture

By Doris Birmingham

Visitors to the Jason Russell House are rightly intrigued by the house's role on day one of the American Revolution when the bloody battle that took place in and around it resulted in the death of Jason Russell and eleven other patriots. The musket ball holes throughout the house are reminders of the violence of that day, and they can understandably distract from the many pieces of furniture that give the house a feeling of "home." The obvious exceptions might be the three surviving Deacon Joseph Adams heirlooms, all of which amplify the story of April 19: an ancient blanket chest, from which the Redcoats grabbed the parish church's communion silver; a Japanned tall clock which they gutted for its valuable metal; and the cradle of the newborn Anne Adams, who along with her mother and brothers escaped the fire set by the British as they fled the scene.

Other objects in the house have less dramatic stories to tell, but they help visitors to imagine the domestic environment of the Russells and their neighbors from the time of the Revolution and through the late 19th century. Based on Jason's probate inventory it is evident that his house was comfortably furnished. Among other things, he owned four bedsteads, a chest of drawers, two tables, a desk, a clock, and no fewer than fifteen chairs. Sadly, none of Jason's or his descendants' furniture has survived, but much of what is now in the house



1. Painted Washstand, c. 1840. Gift of Mrs. Nellie Russell

gives an idea of the sort of pieces they and families of their social class would have owned. Made by country craftsmen with a view toward function more than fashion or aesthetics, they speak to us about the life of Jason, his descendants and their neighbors in old Menotomy, later known as West Cambridge and finally Arlington.

Today, however, the house also is the setting for a number of objects whose provenance can be traced to the town's most affluent families and that easily could have graced the most elegant parlors, whether in Arlington or in Boston. These were the works of skilled urban craftsmen, nearly equal to their London contemporaries in their ability to produce pieces that might be characterized as "high style." The cohabitation in almost every room of these masterpieces with a variety of vernacular examples results in an eclectic assemblage that will pique the interest of any lover of early American furniture.

The vernacular furniture ranges from simple painted board chests that are little more than wooden boxes, to drop-leaf tables, cradles, and hand-decorated washstands (fig. 1). And like Jason himself, the Society possesses a prodigious number of chairs: slat-backs with turned members; many others that quote from William and Mary, Queen Anne and Chippendale; and several 19th century Windsors. This stylistic nomenclature, by the way, was not

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# President's Corner

Every summer I like to take stock of the past year's achievements at the Historical Society. We saw much important activity, particularly restoration work on the Jason Russell House. The work was funded by major grants obtained through the efforts of our members George Parsons and Paul Fennelly. Other big things happened too. For example, our director Sara Lundberg won a grant to start work on creating a permanent exhibit in our Assembly Room devoted to the Battle of Menotomy. We also added two new part-time employees: Meredith Affleck, working Tuesdays as our administrative assistant; and John Flood, managing buildings and grounds.

Following are figures that partly measure the success of our organization.

- Memberships: 257 (last year: 234)
- Membership income for FY2017-2018: \$12,605 (FY2017: \$10,295)
- Annual appeal donations for FY 2017-2018: \$31,122.50 (FY2017: \$20,070)
- Collections volunteers working at the Society during the week: 13
- School program: Number of third-graders visiting us: 309
- Jason Russell House tour guide program:
  - Number of tour guides: 33 (last year: 30)
  - Number of tours given on the weekend (including Town Day, Patriots Day, and special events): 148 (last year: 153)
  - Number of weekend visitors (including children and free admission): 544 (last year: 617)
- Collections: Number of items cataloged in our database: 16,151 (last year: 15,285)

The numbers show that we continue to thrive and grow as an organization. I am particularly pleased at the large increase in donations. A very generous \$5,000 came from an anonymous family foundation to provide much of this increase, but many other people stepped-up their support too. Through such giving we remain an active and vital organization.

Perhaps you will host guests from out of town this summer? Why not show off Arlington's historical importance by bringing them for a tour of the Jason Russell House? Maintaining the house and showing it to visitors is one of the main reasons we exist as an organization. Also, your visitors will do us a service by keeping our tour guides busy!

My best regards,  
Stuart Brorson, President

## - In Remembrance -

At our Annual Meeting on May 29, we paused to honor the memories of three Society members who passed during the past year: Life Member George Rogers, whose wife Sally has been one of our most active members for decades; Rosalie Gardner, who was a delightful presence on our Hospitality Committee; and Geraldine "Gerry" Kaye, who served for six years as the Society's assistant treasurer and did much to advance our knowledge of Russell-family genealogy. Former President Howard Winkler has written a remembrance of Gerry; please be sure to visit the blog page of the Society's website to read it. ❖

Save the Date

## Fall Fundraiser Cocktail Party

Friday, September 21, 2018

5:30—8:30

### Volunteer Spotlight



**Susan Lum** is a volunteer who observes opportunities and decisively acts upon them. She has been a guide at the Jason Russell House for about seven years and served on the Tour Guide Committee for six of those. When Susan noticed accumulated dust and debris in the house, she took it upon herself to undertake regular cleaning. She performed research to ensure that all cleaning was within museum standards, even visiting other sites and making calls to discover what vacuum cleaners other historic houses use. Her meticulous nature and good taste have been in abundant display in the decorations and floral arrangements she has created for various events, especially those that beautifully transform the Smith Museum inside and out for our evening autumn fundraising socials.

*The Jason Russell House... Furniture*  
(Continued from page 1)

used in the Russells' time, but it is useful today as a means of pointing out the distinguishing characteristics of any given item.

Country furniture makers used available materials and allowed themselves a free hand with style. They worked in local woods such as oak, hickory, ash or soft maple and painted the finished pieces black or brown to simulate more expensive walnut or mahogany. Seats are made of rush or woven reed. Current fashion and stylistic consistency were probably of little interest. Thus a country chair that is William and Mary in its details might date from around 1800 even though that style was already unfashionable by 1720. The Society's collection in fact suggests a persistent fondness for William and Mary, which makers blithely married to the more 'modern' Queen Anne (1720-55) or even the elegant Chippendale (1755-1800), a style that spread through the Colonies through the publications of English cabinetmaker Thomas Chippendale. His chairs often featured difficult to execute cabriole legs, but he also introduced the Marlborough leg, a straight, sometimes fluted, leg easily produced by the country craftsman. The Society possesses a number of these chairs, including an interesting example with Marlborough legs and an ambitious knotted ribbon design pierced into its back splat (fig.2).

Scattered throughout the house are a number of Windsor chairs, the most interesting of which may be two armchairs and a child's chair all stamped under their seats "N. Cutter," designating either their maker or owner (fig.3). A similar Windsor armchair appears in an interior photograph of the no longer extant Elijah Cutter house. N. Cutter may be Nehemiah Cutter (1753-1828), Elijah's father, whose trade is listed in Benjamin Cutter's History of Arlington as copper nail maker. But like many men of his time Nehemiah may have engaged in a second trade; certainly, as a member of the Cutter milling family he may have had unique access to the tools and raw materials



2. Vernacular Chippendale Side Chair, c. 1790. Louis P. Metcalf Estate



3. Windsor Arm Chair, stamped "N. Cutter," c. 1800. Gift of Emma Locke Sprague



4. Chippendale Chest of Drawers, c. 1780. Gift of Mrs. Marjorie Whittemore Allen



5. Federal Period Card Table, c. 1805. Gift of Marjorie Whittemore Allen



6. Federal Period Sideboard, 1813, made by Abel Whitney. Gift of Christopher Brown

needed for chair making.

Sharing the space with the vernacular in the Russell house are some striking pieces of high style furniture. Four are in the parlor: an elegant mahogany Chippendale chest of drawers with a serpentine front (fig.4), a cherry wood Chippendale desk with drawers and a slant front; a beautifully inlaid Federal period card table (fig.5), possibly produced by the Boston father and son team, John and Thomas Seymour; and, the most recent acquisition, a large Federal period sideboard (fig.6). A fifth noteworthy piece is the Federal bow-front chest of drawers now in the parlor chamber, once owned by the Locke family.

As a new acquisition, the sideboard demands special attention. Commissioned by Amos Whittemore and finished in 1813, it was made by Abel Whitney (1781-1853), a cabinet-maker whose shop was near the present day Porter Square in Cambridge. The sideboard is a gift of Christopher Brown, a Whittemore descendant. Whitney's authorship and the date of completion are established by his signature on the preserved sales receipt. Although Whitney was prominent in Cambridge as a selectman and a deacon of the Universalist Church, almost nothing is known about his professional career.

Made of solid mahogany and mahogany veneers, the piece is a good example of the Sheraton style, popular in the Federal period (1790-1815). It is massive, composed in three shaped sections separated by slender fluted columns topped with foliate capitals. A variety of storage areas would have offered the Whittemores' servants many conveniences. These include three broad drawers along the top and three sets of cupboards below, the central set being flanked by smaller drawers for wine storage and other purposes. The round wooden drawer pulls are modern replacements for what were almost certainly round brass pulls. This unique treasure is well worth professional conservation and further research in light of the fact that it once belonged to one of Arlington's most famous residents and is possibly one of the few Abel Whitney pieces still in existence. ❖

# 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 – Rosemarie Smurzynski
- Vice President – Patsy Kraemer
- Treasurer – Alan Jones
- Membership Manager – Angela Olszewski
- Clerk – Christine Bird

## DIRECTORS

- Doris Birmingham • Linda Cohn
- Paul Fennelly • William Lyons
- Pamela Meister • Angela Olszewski

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