

Menotomy Minutes



NEWSLETTER OF THE ARLINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

AUTUMN 2020



Edith Stevens: A Pioneering Woman Cartoonist

By Robert S. Davison

Edith Stevens, a resident of Arlington for almost 50 years, used her witty observational skills, her love of fashion, and her drawing abilities to create a memorable comic strip that appeared for over three decades.

Stevens, often referred to as “the Kate Smith of the drawing board,” was part of an early wave of women cartoonists working at major daily newspapers in the United States. “Us Girls,” the single-panel cartoon created by Edith Stevens, reflected the fashion trends, foibles, and social manners of women in a humorous and accessible way. The strip debuted March 4, 1929 in the Boston Post, which for many years had a circulation of over one million copies, the largest of a daily paper in Boston. Her warmth, wit, and humor resonated, and “Us Girls” quickly built a multi-generational fan base, making her a household name in greater Boston.

Her keen eye for fashion helped drive the conversation about emerging styles and trends in her cartoons. Local retailers, such as Jordan Marsh, Gilchrist’s and Denby’s (an Upstate New York chain), included “Us Girls” in their window displays or advertising efforts, further reinforcing the fashion trends she featured.

Her cartoon about a woman’s snap-on skirt worn at outside events, such as a football game, which could then be removed to reveal a skirt underneath for a more formal event, created such a sensation that manufacturers rushed to supply Boston department stores with the fashion fad, coined the “Us Girls Skirt.”

After the Boston Post ceased publication in 1956, Stevens continued drawing “Us Girls” at the Boston Daily Globe, starting in 1957. Her July 15 debut in the paper was

(Continued on page 4)



Edith Stevens at her Boston Post drawing table. Circa 1930s

President's Corner

Dear Members,

My name is George Parsons and I was elected president of the Arlington Historical Society at the end of May. Assuming this position is simultaneously an honor and a challenge. It is an honor to be the leader of an organization that keeps and makes available the rich history of this place we call home. It is a challenge because I have no prior experience running an organization quite like the Arlington Historical Society. I am a semi-retired chemist with experience running organizations in the for-profit world.

In my familiar world of business, I managed groups of three to 85 scientists to build medical testing products for conditions such as pregnancy, heart attacks, or cancer. Everyone was paid to work a 40-hour week or longer; at the Society we have three paid staff members whose work weeks have been shortened due to budgetary constraints. Before the pandemic changed everyone's world, we also had an engaged group of volunteers delivering valuable services such as digitizing and cataloging items for our valuable collections, guiding tours, and cleaning the fragile objects and environment of the Jason Russell House. Now the Jason Russell House and the Smith Museum are strangely deserted. Our monthly board meetings are now on Zoom. As many of you have discovered for yourselves, such virtual meetings have advantages and drawbacks.

Nevertheless, the work of the Society is progressing. We have been hiring staff. Sara Lundberg, the Society's director, has curated a new exhibit on the events of April 19, 1775 in a totally refurbished Assembly Room. We are eager to show it to our members as soon as it is safe to do so. We are also embarking on the next round of Community Preservation Act grant work, with the goal of further improving the structural integrity of the Jason Russell House. Two previous CPA grants were instrumental in being awarded funds from the Massachusetts Historical Commission to supplement the CPA grants; they also helped us secure earmark grants from the Commonwealth to upgrade facilities at the Smith Museum. We are more active in pursuing a variety of grant opportunities than ever before.

Lexington and Concord got the Longfellow poem and the resultant fame, but Arlington (then Menotomy), was where the heaviest fighting took place on that fateful day in April 1775. We at the Arlington Historical Society are the current stewards of this historic legacy. Support for organizations like the Society usually comes in the form of time, talent, and treasure, about which I look forward to writing more in future issues.

Best wishes,
George

SIXTY YEARS AGO



Richard Cardinal Cushing, the archbishop of Boston, lays the cornerstone for the newly established Arlington Catholic High School of St. Agnes Parish, in 1960. Much of the school was built on the former site of the public Russell School, which closed in 1955. Two stories of the old elementary school building were renovated for inclusion in the building scheme. (Robbins Library)

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

In the Summer 2020 issue of Menotomy Minutes, I put out a call for contributions from Society members for this issue. We were rewarded by Rob Davison, sharing a previously untold story of a woman from Arlington's history that is both engaging to read and visually rich.

Speaking of women's history, in this presidential election season I would have liked to cover local angles of the centennial of ratification of the 19th amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which granted women the right to vote. The pandemic hinders research because microfilm of the Arlington Advocate cannot be accessed at libraries. A Tuesday, November 2, 1920 line in Nina Winn's diary simply noted "Women voting full ticket for first time"—but Winn herself did not cast a ballot.

While we must wait to describe events from the first year of universal suffrage at the town level, I would like to call attention to *Created Equal*, an exhibition at the Arlington Center for the Arts developed in partnership with the League of Women Voters of Arlington. The show runs at the ACA gallery through November 6. Visit acarts.org for more information. ❖

Pairing Past and Present

By Richard A. Duffy

This previously unknown image, recently donated to the Society by Charles Allen, is by prolific early-20th century Arlington photographer William J. O. Doane. It depicts the western corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Water Street and was taken in late autumn 1915, immediately prior to clearing the site for new construction.

The Federal-style house at left was built in 1804 for Ephraim Cutter, a mill owner. Note the separation of grade between Massachusetts Avenue and the sidewalk, which was so substantial that a safety rail was built, as well as a set of steps from the street leading towards the house. Unlike most of its contemporaries that met the wrecking ball, the Ephraim Cutter House was moved back and rotated to front on 4 Water St. For many years, it housed the editorial offices of the *Arlington Advocate*, under the ownership of C. Peter Jorgensen and his wife, Kathryn.

To the right of the house stood the former pharmacy of Omar W. Whittemore, which had been moved in 1896 from 635 Massachusetts Ave. to the corner of Water Street. In this view, the building has been vacated of its final tenants, Charlie Wong's Laundry (one of five "Chinese laundries" then operating in Arlington, from East Arlington to Arlington Heights), and the real estate and insurance office of James L. Mead. A sign on the side wall of the building advertises for prospective tenants to inquire of O.W. Whittemore "for stores to be erected on this corner."

The modern image shows an example of the many single-story retail blocks that came to characterize large stretches of Massachusetts Avenue in the early 20th century. James L. Mead returned to his former location when the new building was ready in 1916. On December 17, 1917, the Whittemore Block suffered a fire of unknown origin. Extensive damage in the basement affected all businesses; fortunately, there was adequate insurance to cover the losses.

Today the Whittemore Block, whose name is still centered on the front parapet, has a highly diverse mix of tenants: Camilla's bridal shop, Mamadou's Artisan Bakery, and (since the 1970s) Symmes Mini Mart—all types of businesses that Whittemore could easily recognize. The newcomer in 2020 is a franchised location of Code Ninjas, a computer-code learning center for children to build their own video games. Code Ninjas was founded in 2016, exactly 100 years after the Whittemore Block. ❖





Edith lived at 22 Churchill Ave. for almost 50 years. The house, which was built in 1925, is shown here in the 1930s.

Edith Stevens (Continued from page 1)

announced with a front page, above the masthead treatment, which spoke to the popularity of Stevens and “Us Girls.”

In addition to her cartoon work, Stevens explored a variety of other artistic pursuits. During the Great Depression, she designed and sewed her own hats and various textiles. In the 1940s and 50s, she was part of a collective of women who made enamelware and jewelry. Stevens studied with renowned Cape Ann artist Aldro T. Hibbard, who influenced her approach to landscape oil painting, a hobby she enjoyed throughout her life.

Stevens was born in Fitchburg, Mass. in 1899. She grew up in Boston at 31 Batavia St. (now called Symphony Road) and at 9 Albemarle St. Stevens moved to Arlington in 1930 and resided at 216 Broadway before moving to 22 Churchill Ave. in 1935, where she lived until her death in 1983 at age 83. Stevens was active in the community, where she lectured and exhibited her work at the Robbins Library and, for many years, served as a poll worker at town hall. After Stevens retired from drawing “Us Girls” in the 1960s, she worked at Touraine, the women’s clothing store in Arlington Center (occupying the commercial block where Mr. Sushi, Tryst, and Henry Bear’s Park are now located), where she oversaw the accessories counter.

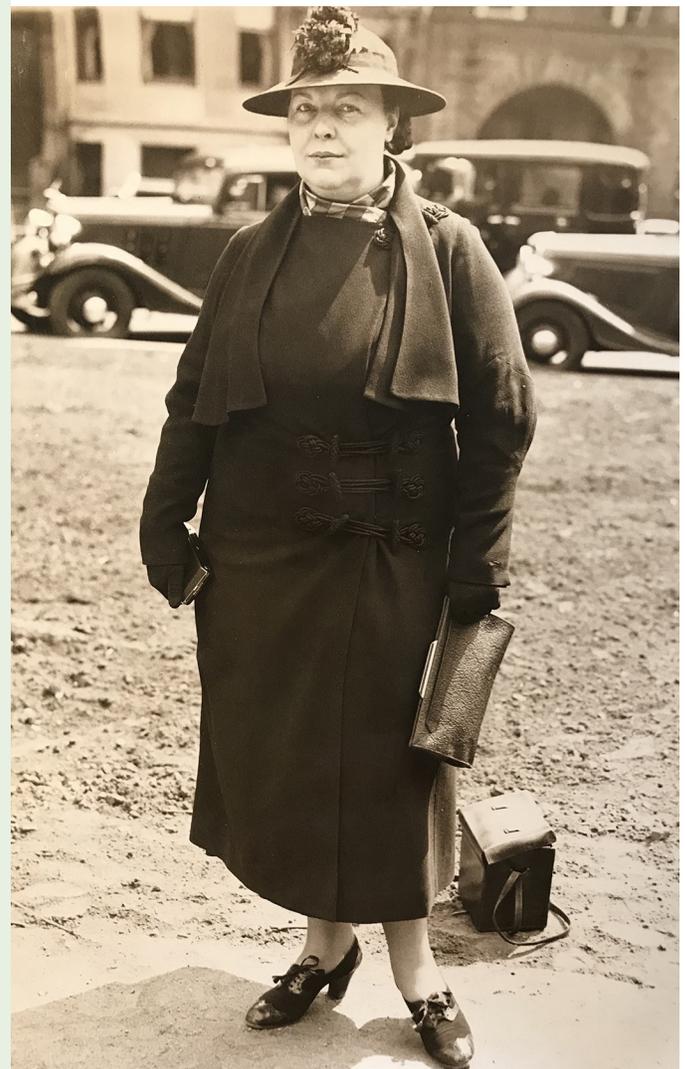
“Us Girls” appeared six days a week for over 30 years; Stevens had almost 10,000 cartoons published. She organized these clippings by year, which exist today as part of her extensive archives; a cross section of her prolific works can be viewed at www.edithstevens.com. These sketches serve as a time capsule of sorts, chronicling fashion and societal trends for over three decades of the twentieth century.

Edith Stevens’s story as a pioneering woman cartoonist in a male dominated profession marks another chapter celebrating the accomplishments of an Arlington resident that can inspire the next generation. ❖

Robert S. Davison, Stevens’s nephew, is a corporate creative director and design educator. His artistic abilities were cultivated by Stevens in his youth, which led to his career in the creative arts.



“Us Girls” billboard at Park Street Station in Boston, 1953.



Edith Stevens on Commonwealth Avenue in Boston. Note the camera in her hand. Circa 1935.

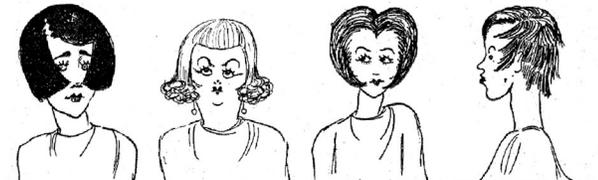
CUTS



HUCKLEBERRY FINN ACORN SNAIL WALRUS



PEKINGESE BLIMP CYCLONE GIZEH SPHINX



BLINDERS FAUNTLEROY VALENTINE PAGODA

EDITH STEVENS

October 8, 1929

A HUNDRED YEARS FROM NOW



BRONZING BEAUTY SHOP

EVENING GOWN OF GREEN BRONZED SKIN WITH GREEN FEATHERS - JUST THINK OF THE COLOR POSSIBILITIES - PEACOCK FEATHERS & BLUE-GREEN SKIN OR HAVE THE ARMS SPRAYED BLUE, LEGS GREEN & BACK BROWN BRONZE OR WHAT WILL YOU

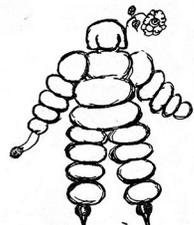
FOR SPORTSWEAR - NO JEWELS - DECALCOMANIAS PASTED ON & A LADY WILL ALWAYS WEAR HER GLOVES



A SIMPLE DINNER DRESS OF SUPPLE OIL CLOTH SO THAT SOUP COFFEE & GRAVY DRIBBLES CAN BE READILY ERASED



FOR WEAR & TEAR OF AEROPLANE TRIPS - KNITTED ALUMINUM - FUR LINED (SEE THE MITTENS?)



INFLATED RUBBER TRAVEL SUIT FOR CROWDED SUBWAYS

EDITH STEVENS

June 16, 1929

ISN'T IT SO?



ADMIRATION ATTENTION APPROVAL & APPLAUSE

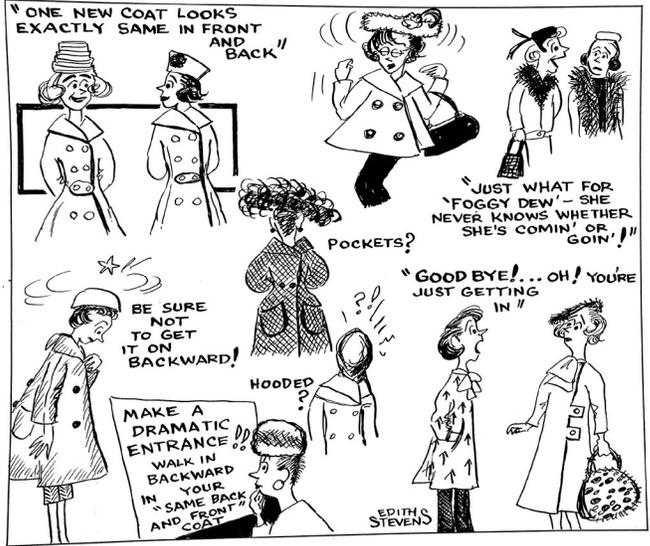


BUT WHEN THEY VOTE -

EDITH STEVENS

April 1929

US GIRLS



ONE NEW COAT LOOKS EXACTLY SAME IN FRONT AND BACK

JUST WHAT FOR 'FOGGY DEW' - SHE NEVER KNOWS WHETHER SHE'S COMIN' OR GOIN'!

GOOD BYE!... OH! YOU'RE JUST GETTING IN!

BE SURE NOT TO GET IT ON BACKWARD!

HOODED?

MAKE A DRAMATIC ENTRANCE! WALK IN BACKWARD IN YOUR "SAME FRONT AND BACK" COAT

EDITH STEVENS

October 1, 1956

The messages of these "Us Girls" cartoons are readily understood by modern readers. Others were very much "of the moment" in their themes.

EDITH STEVENS Creativity at Work



Oil painting by Edith Stevens. 1929



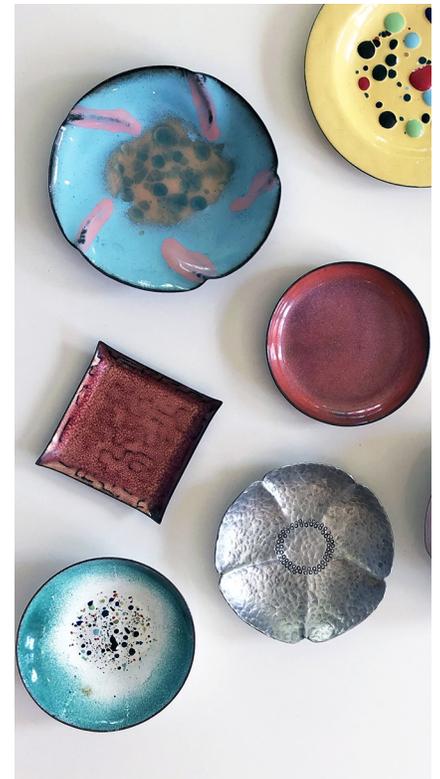
Millinery design by Edith Stevens.
Circa 1930s



Serving spoon by Edith Stevens.
Circa 1950s



Watercolor by Edith Stevens, 1917



Enamelware by Edith Stevens. Undated

A note from Sara Lundberg, Director of the Society

Well, it has been an interesting eight months, to say the least. What ordinarily would have been a busy tour guide and outreach season at the Jason Russell House (JRH) was eerily quiet. But much has been happening behind the scenes. There have been many conversations about whether the JRH could safely reopen. When we considered both the governor's guidelines for each phase, and the wellbeing of our volunteer guides, we concluded that re-opening is not yet feasible given our small spaces and need for volunteer-guided tours. Yet much work has been continuing during the pandemic. Our Community Preservation Act-funded project on the JRH has begun. We continue to care for and catalog our collection, much of which is available online through our website. Our increased posting on Facebook reaches thousands. We're also taking advantage of the newfound quiet to undertake exciting projects that might not have been possible otherwise. So my message for you today is: "stay tuned."

As readers of Menotomy Minutes are aware, last winter we were right in the thick of finalizing a new exhibition in the small area we call the "Assembly Room," which was set to open April 19, 2020. This is the area where the Society used to assemble to meet before the Smith Museum was built. When I began working here the plan was to mount some changing exhibitions in the space, and a sundry collection of old retail cases had been gathered for that purpose. Given the room's small size (315 square feet), unusual architectural features, and its location as a lead into the JRH, it didn't make sense to me to have exhibitions unrelated to the JRH. Changing exhibitions work better in the Smith Museum, which is more of an open and flexible "white box" gallery.

The Assembly Room exhibition, "Menotomy – Road to Revolution" was halted due to the pandemic. Its objective is to share the story of what happened here on April 19, 1775, to give more context to the JRH tour, and to eliminate confusion about what events happened where. We have discovered untold stories, complemented by unique and compelling objects from the collection that have not been on view in many decades, if ever. We're modifying interactive spaces where visitors could have touched and tried on materials, to create "no touch" interactivity. We'll soon share some of the exhibition in short video presentations, hearing from scholars who made the exhibition possible – our

"Consulting Scholar" Dr. Robert A. Gross and our own Dr. Doris Birmingham and Doreen Stevens.

Another project is in the Smith Museum. When the museum opened in 1981 it was primarily a lecture and programming space. It also was home to occasional thematic exhibitions, often based on lectures or new collection acquisitions. Since 1997 (the centennial of the Society) there have been two long-term exhibitions following installation of static display cases throughout the perimeter of the space by "The Story of Arlington" designer Lisa Welter, with the volunteer craftsmanship of her husband, Ron Welter. The "Family Ties" exhibition, under the leadership of former museum administrator Doreen Stevens, opened in 2007, the bicentennial year of Arlington as an independent town. To

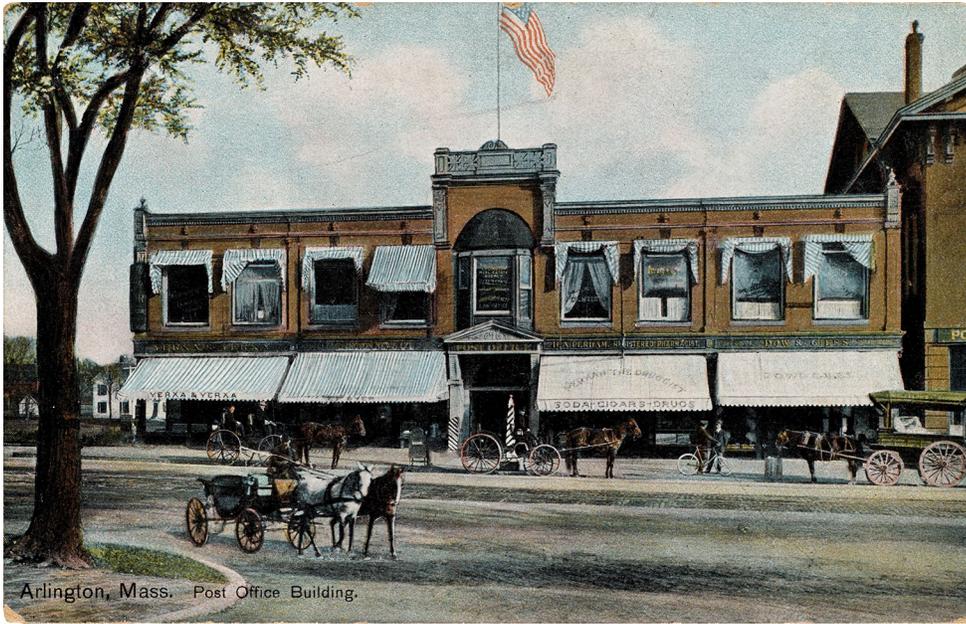
deliver fresh content, the Smith Museum will host changing exhibitions in a reimagined museum space. Thanks to Patsy Kraemer and her team who are leading the charge: Doris Birmingham, Robert Brazile, Elisabeth Carr-Jones, Alan Jones, Chuck Kraemer, and Kenton Rhoades.

I hope that you are as excited as I am about our potential opening of both new exhibition spaces next spring!

Finally, the Ballistics Study of the Jason Russell House mentioned in last winter's newsletter is also progressing while all else is shut down. A team of experts convened at the site in January to collect precise data using modern technology. This included

representatives from the National Park Service Regional Archaeology Program, militaria experts Joel Bohy and Christopher Fox, and Dr. Douglas D. Scott, one of the foremost battlefield archaeologists especially known for using the tools of forensics to aid in his research. The team examined every hole and strike (including the many new ones found by Bohy and Fox in the fall of 2019) and measured with calipers to determine caliber. They used metal detectors and a videoscope to investigate within the walls, swabbed to detect for lead residue, and they used ballistics rods and laser lights to determine the trajectory of each musket ball. In early May engineers from Feldman Surveyors visited to conduct a laser scan of the house. All this data is currently being studied and set to be presented as a paper at the Society for Historic Archaeology virtual conference in January 2021. For more information about this project, visit our blog <https://arlingtonhistorical.org/blog/> ❖

We discovered untold stories of April 19, 1775, complemented by compelling objects from the collection that have not been on view in many decades, if ever.



Arlington, Mass. Post Office Building.

From 1897 to 1916, the U.S. Post Office anchored the Sherburne Block, still standing (but much altered) at 635 -637 Massachusetts Ave. At the time of this circa 1908 postcard, mail was received and dispatched via the adjacent railroad depot five times daily, with reduced frequency Sundays. Trolley cars serviced three additional times, plus carried all "in-town" mail between Arlington's main office and the Arlington Heights postal station.

Contact Us

Office Hours:
Closed due to COVID-19

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

PLACE
STAMP
HERE

An assistant manager of Arlington
High School's football team, 1973.
(Robbins Library collection.)



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