

Menotomy Minutes



NEWSLETTER OF THE ARLINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

WINTER 2021



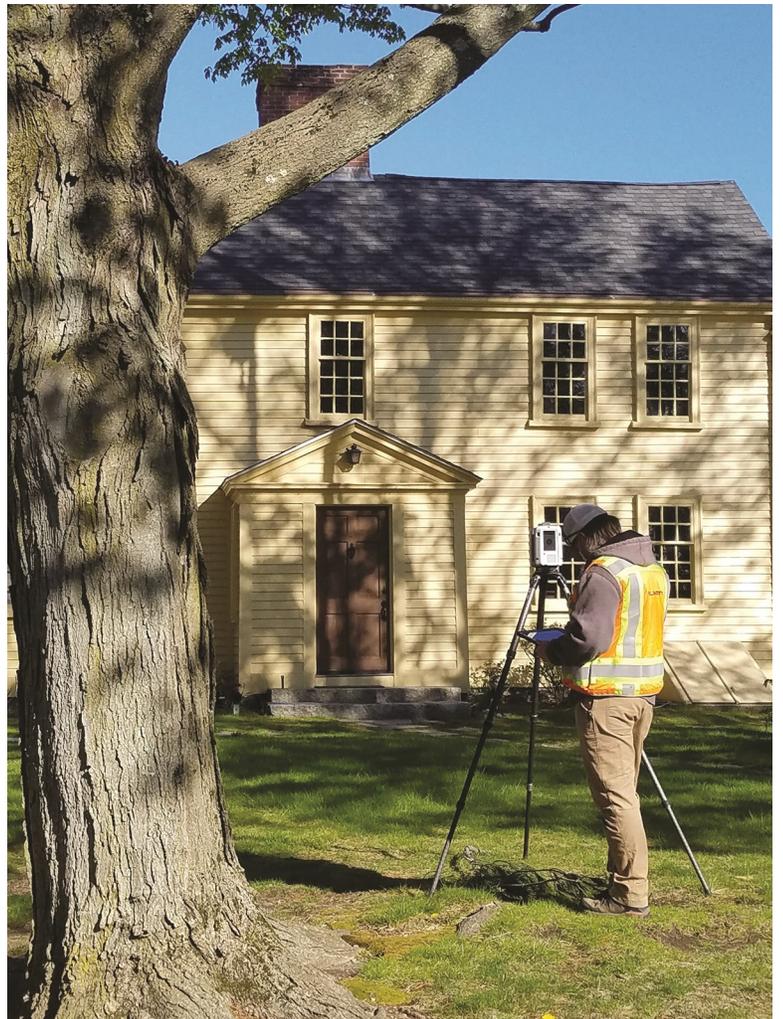
Light and sound deepen knowledge of Jason Russell House

by Joel Bohy

As a kid who was infatuated with April 19, 1775, I frequently visited the Jason Russell House and remember those visits well. Going through the rooms and looking at bullet holes through the stair risers and wall paneling always sent shivers up my spine. Reading about an event is one thing, but those visits to see the house and battle damage painted a mental picture of the ferocity and brutality that reading alone cannot. Do not get me wrong, the reading is essential, but the combination of the history and the artifacts gets the story across in a much better way. In my mind the house was an artifact and a big piece of material culture with an interesting and fascinating story to tell.

Fast forward 40 or so years. I was still studying April 19th material culture and documentation and working on numerous conflict archaeology projects, one of them being the “Parker’s Revenge” project at Minute Man National Historical Park on the Lincoln/Lexington line. During that three-year study I worked with Dr. Douglas D. Scott, a well-known forensic archaeologist who pioneered new archaeological techniques at the Little Big Horn battlefield in the 1980s. I had read Doug’s work and saw him on television; it truly was a pleasure to learn from him in person and in the field. In 2015 Doug and I, with a group of conflict archaeologists, put together live-fire ballistics studies of the muskets, carbines, and fowling pieces used at the start of the American Revolution. During these studies we fired at cloth, ballistics gelatin, and wood. We collected muzzle velocity data to better

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Technicians from Feldman Surveyors conducted a laser scan of the Jason Russell House and grounds May 14 and 15, 2020. A limited crew size enabled working within physical distancing guidelines. The data revealed will provide incredibly technical documentation of the current conditions of the house.

President's Corner

Dear Members,

The Arlington Historical Society is primarily a volunteer organization. We have just two part time employees, plus a caretaker who lives in the “cottage” section of the Jason Russell House (JRH). While the efforts of these people are vital to our smooth operations, we could not manage without our cadre of volunteers. Our board of directors are all volunteers and serve with no pay as do the officers of the Society.

All volunteers contribute to the Society in one or more of three principal ways: time, talent, and treasure. They collectively donate thousands of hours annually. They are tour guides at the Jason Russell House. Our colonial herb and flower gardens are carefully tended by the Arlington Garden Club. Currently, a group of volunteers is hard at work during the quiet time imposed by the pandemic, to develop a new exhibit space in the Smith Museum expected to open this summer.

To highlight one example of the donation of talent to the Society, I recognize our longtime treasurer, Alan Jones. Alan expertly manages our budget and works closely with the Society's Trustees—volunteers who oversee the Society's endowment. The Society is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt non-profit organization, and Alan assures full compliance with the Society's filings to maintain this status.

The Society gets no operating funds from any governmental agency. We have benefited enormously from Community Preservation Act (CPA) grants and Massachusetts Preservation Project Fund (MPPF) grants for the preservation of the JRH. These grants specifically forbid the use of these funds for routine maintenance or operating expenses such as staff salaries, utilities, or insurance. We have also been the recipients of two preservation earmark grants from the state thanks to the efforts of our state representatives, Dave Rogers and Sean Garballey, and our State Senator Cindy Friedman. These have been used to upgrade the facilities in the Smith Museum.

For operating needs, we rely instead on the generosity of our members and some non-members for donations to fund our work. Our Annual Appeal is a core effort, augmented by targeted fund raising by Museum Director Sara Lundberg. Membership dues are intentionally kept low to allow participation by many, but dues represent a tiny piece of the budget. We typically draw upon endowment earnings for less than one-third of our operating budget. My personal thanks to the donors to the Annual Appeal; we hope that others will consider making a gift as the campaign continues.

So, why do so many people contribute their time, talent and treasure to the Arlington Historical Society? The reasons are as varied as our members. Here's why I support the Society: history has always fascinated me, and Arlington has a rich history that did not just begin or end on April 19, 1775. The Society's mission is specifically to preserve and share the history

of Arlington, and I thoroughly enjoy helping to make that mission statement a reality. From the mastodon tusk in the entry way of the Smith Museum to Richard Duffy's daily look at life in Nina Winn's 1923 diary, to our active presence on Facebook, to our engaging newsletter, the Society's contributions are on display for all to see and enjoy. For me, one of the challenges of retirement (even semi-retirement) is staying relevant. That means continuing to make a difference in the world. Being an active member of the Society enables me and many others to do just that. In non-pandemic times we get to enjoy the company of others who share interests. For those of you who would like to become more active in the Society, please let me know and you'll certainly find a good match for what sparks your enthusiasm.

With best wishes for 2021,
George Parsons



Donate to the Annual Fund

Our Annual Appeal is underway. With your help, we are able to continue our mission to educate the public about the history of Arlington. If you like and appreciate the work we do, please consider making a tax-deductible donation to the Society today. Donors will be recognized in the next issue of “Menotomy Minutes.”

- Jason Russell Circle (\$1,000+)
- Goldsmiths (\$500-\$999)
- Silversmiths (\$200-\$499)
- Pewtersmiths (\$100-\$199)
- Friends (\$50-\$99)
- Other (any amount accepted)

Gifts at the Friend level or higher will be listed by category in our publications, and in the lobby of the museum. You can donate by mail, securely online at arlingtonhistorical.org/contribute/ or by phone at 781-648-4300 (please call Tuesday through Friday 10 to 6).

understand the weaponry. We also had a film crew with high-speed cameras to record every shot, with teams using metal detectors to recover each musket ball we had fired and recording the data.

During a visit to the Jason Russell House in November 2019 with Christopher Fox to look at some of the artifacts and bullet strikes, we had an eye-opening experience. The live-fire study had taught us to look at bullet strikes in a different way. We looked at each ball entry and exit to see where the ball went after its first strike. Soon we were finding more holes and damage from where balls reached their terminal velocity. It was a truly enlightening event. Chris and I left that day with an idea: we needed to use current archaeological methodology and tools to do a thorough investigation of the house. We did not know at the time how we would do it, but with amazing and talented friends anything is possible.

As Doug would be attending the Society for Historical Archaeology conference in Boston in January 2020, I told him of our plans, and he was extremely interested. I also met with friends from the National Park Service Northeast Archeology Regional Program who were equally excited. On January 13, our group converged on Museum Director Sara Lundberg and the house with equipment, ballistics rods, and lead-testing material. We were able to record all the data we needed but new ideas sprouted from this visit. Could we get three-dimensional scanning done? What about ground-penetrating radar? Luckily, some of the folks who came that day were just as enthusiastic as we were and reached out to their friends. Soon we had Feldman Surveyors, who decided to do the scan pro bono, as well as GSSI, Inc., a firm of experts in ground penetrating radar. We were doing this as volunteers, and we were delighted that they also felt that this was worthy of their time and effort. Their donation of these valuable professional services is deeply appreciated.

Once we completed our research on the house, we realized we needed to expand the study to all known bullet strikes from April 19. This included other objects in the Arlington Historical Society collection, as well as at Lexington Historical society, Acton Memorial Library, Christ Church in Cambridge, Minuteman National Historical Park, a private home in Lexington, and a tavern sign at the Medford Historical Society.

The information from those artifacts will also be part of our work, as they are the last objects to help tell the history of what happened to men and structures along the historic road of the British retreat from Concord.

When COVID-19 hit in March, it delayed some of the work until the team from Feldman Surveyors came in May and spent a couple of days scanning the interior and exterior of the house. The results of 3-D scanning were amazing. The use of this modern technology will allow for some great educational tools to be put into use, when we are able to add-in all the strikes to show where they came from and where they went. In the autumn of 2020 the team from GSSI, Inc., came out to do the ground-penetrating radar field work. They scanned the

property on both the Massachusetts Avenue side as well as Jason Street. The scan was completed in one day. We look forward to seeing the results after they review and organize the data and share the results.

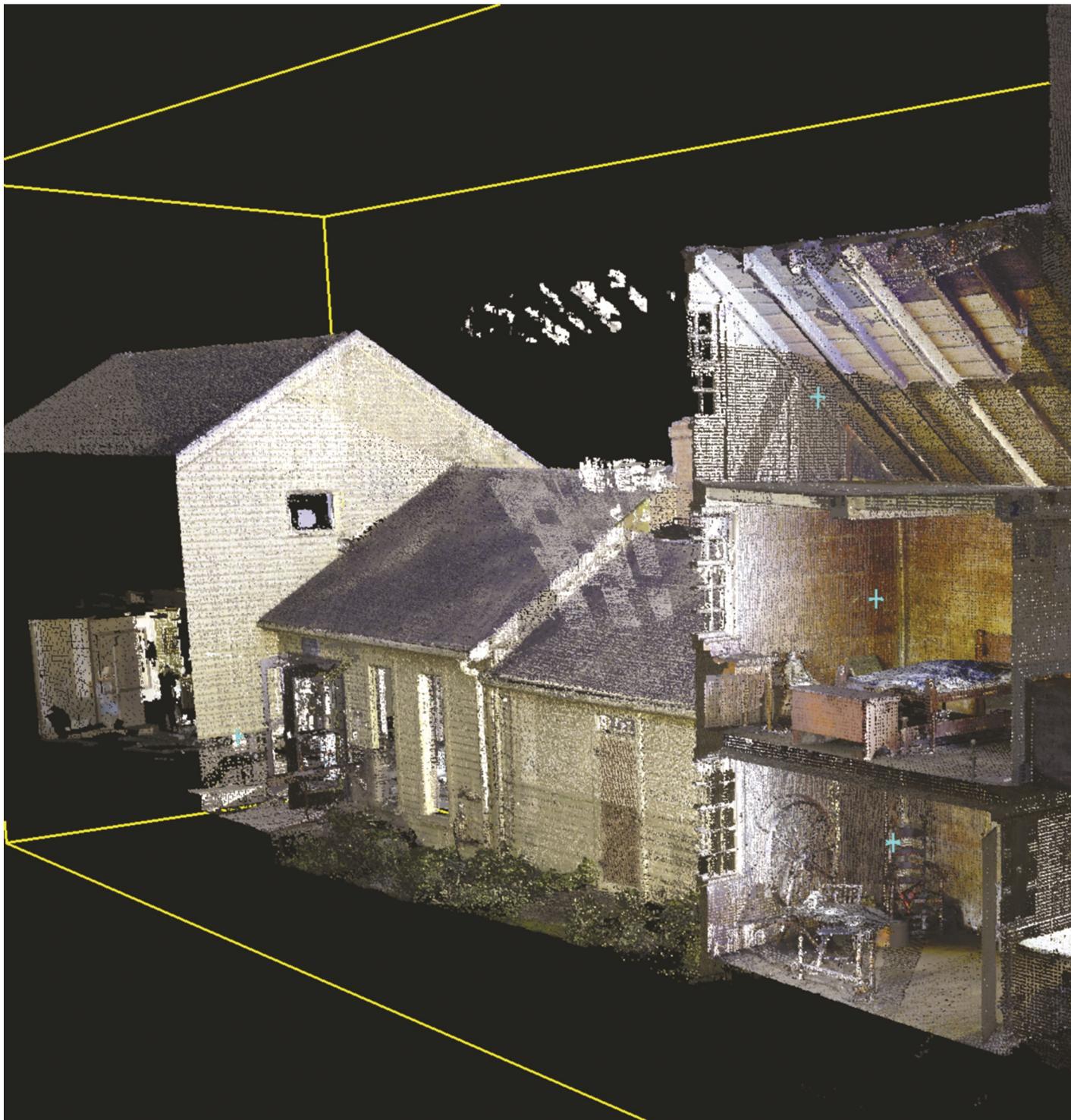
Some of the COVID-19 delays allowed us additional time to review more primary accounts from both sides of the afternoon of April 19th, and to transcribe them, including a letter in a private collection from a British officer with his eyewitness account of the inside of the Jason Russell House. We have transcribed all the original documents at the Massachusetts Archives relating to Provincial losses during the retreat from Lexington. While this has expanded the project quite a bit, we felt that this research as a chapter or appendix will deepen understanding of the heavy fighting in this area.

Our next and last exercise will be live-fire study at an outdoor shooting range in western Massachusetts to see if we can replicate the data we see in the house. Another generous volunteer donated period house material and had house sections built for us to shoot. The wood we used was dated around the same time that the Jason Russell House was built and would have about the same density as it had in 1775. We also have interior paneling and other objects that we will shoot. The hope is that we can do this at a clean range and recover some of the fired ball as well to record the damage. Once we are done, the panels will go to the Arlington Historical Society to be used for educational programs.

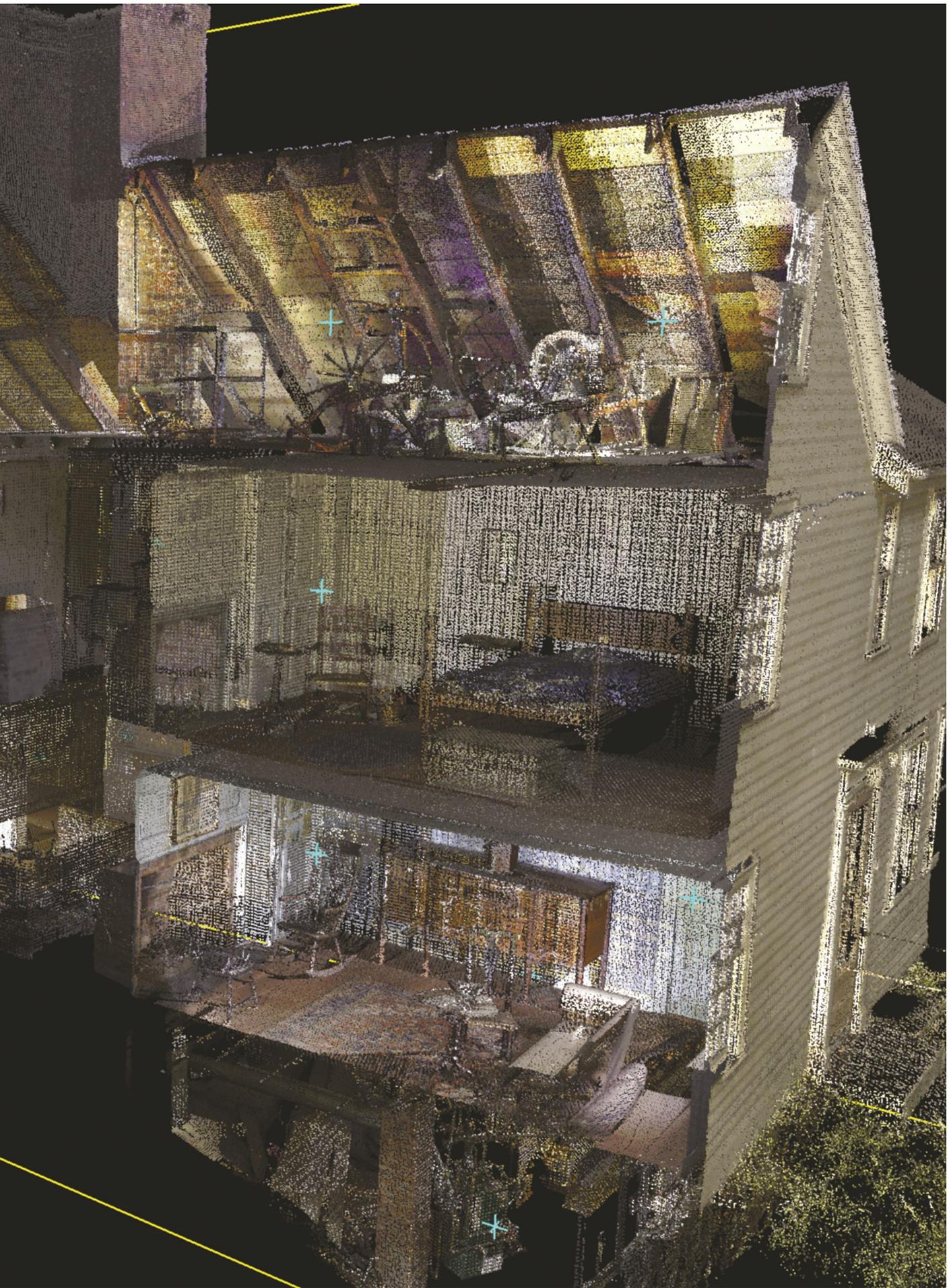
Several weeks ago, I met with a publisher and received some great news: he is interested in publishing the entire study

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The live-fire study had taught us to look at bullet strikes in a different way. We looked at each ball entry and exit to see where the ball went after its first strike.
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The Society has owned the Jason Russell House for almost 98 years, but this amazing visual three-dimensional laser scan cutaway view by Feldman Surveyors straddles the boundary between the familiar and the hard-to-believe. The 3D technique vividly illustrates the technology that is deepening our understanding of the Jason Russell House. Feldman's pro bono work is a tremendous gift to the Society. The image will be helpful for both overall historic preservation documentation and as a tool for further interpreting the musket ball strike data collected by a team led by Joel Bohy. The early phase of the study was featured in the Winter 2020 issue of Menotomy Minutes and is available on-line on the Society's website, via the "Learn" dropdown tab, then clicking the "Newsletters" hyperlink.



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as a book. This will enable everyone to see this project as a whole and learn from it. Nothing quite like this has ever been done before and most people I have talked to are fascinated by it.

As we recover from the pandemic, I hope that our study might help draw visitors to the site. The educational potential of this study will be beneficial to the society. It is important as a community that we recognize the important events of April 19, 1775, the men and woman who participated and went on to live full lives, as well as those who died in and around the Jason Russell House. For some of us these people have not been forgotten; the time has come to share more of their stories. ❖

Joel Bohy, of Concord, is director of historic arms & militaria for Bruneau & Co Auctioneers and an appraiser on the PBS television program Antiques Roadshow.



Geophysical Survey Systems, Inc., conducted ground-penetrating radar investigation of the Jason Russell House grounds on November 10, 2020. The remarkable technology will help to understand what is below the ground without disturbing it. GSSI also did this work pro bono as their way to give back to the community. It sounds as if they found a few interesting things, but we will have to wait for their report to find out.

Remembering Sally Rogers

Sally Rogers passed away peacefully on November 30, 2020 at age 97. Her obituary captures a remarkable life of varied and impactful community service and I encourage you to enjoy it on the Blog page of the Society's website. At the Society, Sally was active as a board member, tour guide, centennial celebration chair, and most recently, the founding coordinator of the Winter Wednesdays daytime lecture series.

I was fortunate to have worked often with Sally during my decades at the Society. Indeed, it was Sally who, as chair of the Nominating Committee, recruited me in 1996 to join the Society's board of directors. In the many years to follow, I would say, "don't forget: I am all your fault." Sally introduced me to the life of Metropolitan Opera contralto Louise Homer, the wife of composer Sidney Homer, who was the first owner of Sally and George Rogers's home at 47 Bartlett Ave. She inspired my producing a 1999 program on the Homers, and its expanded encore in 2016.

When the Society outgrew the Smith Museum for our programs, Sally arranged for our return to the Pleasant Street Congregational Church for several years starting in 2004. Already in her eighties, she was running circles around those of us setting up and breaking down the auditorium. One night as she was locking up, I asked how it happened that the multi-racial nursery school she had co-founded as Creative Playmates in 1970 came to be called the Rogers-Pierce Children's Center. She replied, "Because Creative Playmates turned out to belong to another school," adding with a twinkle in her eye, "and by then, all the other good names were already taken." — Richard A. Duffy



The Joy of Coasting

by Richard A. Duffy

This view featuring four boys coasting down Wollaston Avenue was made c.1908 by professional photographer William J. O. Doane, a resident of Arlington Heights who published it as a postcard. It was printed in Germany, as were most chromolithograph postcards prior to World War I. In addition to coloring the image, it was enhanced by painting-out most of the wires between the telephone poles, adding an idealized blue sky with cumulus clouds, and impossibly suggesting sunrise or sunset with the peachy glow at the top of the hill; the strong shadow cast by the coasters indicates that the sun was high in winter's southeastern sky.

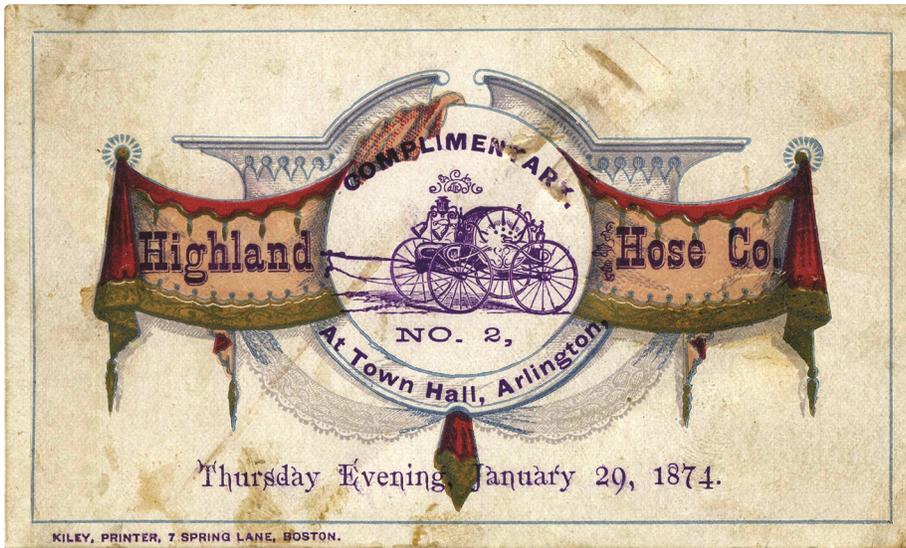
Coasting—a term broadly replaced by sledding later in the 20th century—was a common sight on the hilly streets of Arlington. The automotive age was in its infancy in 1908, and those who owned motor vehicles rarely operated them in winter. All the town's public ways were not even routinely plowed until 1922. For generations, coasters ruled the road—or so they acted. Coasting collisions were frequent news items in the *Arlington Advocate*.

When the automobile had all but replaced horse-drawn vehicles year-round, the town officially designated and sign-posted streets just for coasters, to allow the recreation but contain it to diminish the risk of accidents. Snow plowing down to bare pavement was still unusual on side streets, so surface conditions were ideal for coasters, who flocked to them with joy. ❖



In Memoriam: John Sweeney

Word has reached us that John Sweeney died in Middletown, N.Y., on December 17, 2020 at age 88. A retired captain in the U.S. Navy who specialized in naval architecture and marine engineering, John brought his considerable skills to bear for nearly a decade leading the Society's Buildings and Grounds Committee, staying on in that capacity after concluding his service on the Board of Directors. Both he and his wife, Nancy, who died in 2013, were involved as volunteers at the Society. They are remembered with much appreciation. ❖



This is the ticket to the first “fireman’s ball” held by the twelve-man Highland Hose Co. It was one of Arlington’s two hose companies, which along with the hook and ladder company, was one of three units of the fire department. The members served on an on-call basis, under the overall direction of a chief engineer and two assistant engineers. The Highland Hose Company’s annual ball, which attracted 200 couples and several prominent guests from Arlington and beyond, was a tradition for many years.

Contact Us

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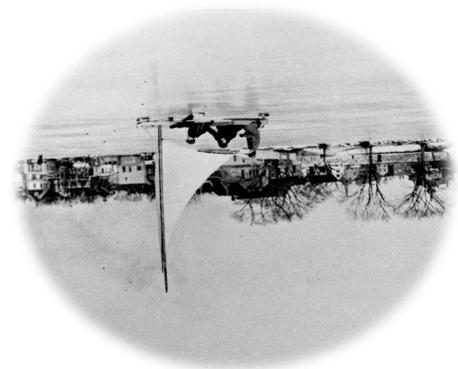


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The Arlington Historical Society is a 501(c) 3 non-profit organization. Contributions are deductible to the extent allowed by law.

An ice boat on Spy Pond, circa 1910.



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