

Menotomy Minutes

NEWSLETTER OF THE ARLINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SPRING 2023



The Portraiture of Ethan Allen Greenwood

by Sara Lundberg

Early 19th-century portraits are used by historians to investigate many aspects of life. They would be prominently displayed in formal areas of the home, such as the “best” room, which could have been a bedroom or parlor. The most common portraiture style was an individual person against a dark or neutral background. “Pendant pairs” were usually commissioned together and were meant to be displayed side-by-side. Most often they would portray the parents, but if the family was wealthy enough the children would have their own accompanying portraits. This was certainly the case with the

industrious brothers Amos and William Whittemore of early 19th-century Arlington, who had a full set of portraits painted by Ethan Allen Greenwood (1779-1856).

Typically, a portrait of one or both parents was done first to assess the quality of work, but that does not appear to be the case with Greenwood, who started with the teenage children of Amos first. Greenwood recorded the transaction in his 1813 diary: “Agreed with Mr. Whittemore of West Cambridge to paint 10 likenesses of his family for \$150.00. One daughter ill & couldn’t sit up in bed but ten minutes at a time, a difficult job.” The ill daughter was likely twenty-three-year-old

Clarissa, widowed after just four months of marriage, and who died two years later.

Greenwood completed multiple portraits with various branches of the Whittemore family—more than twenty when the project was completed. To give an idea of the speed of his production, the Whittemore family occupied most of his time for the month of March, portions of April, May, and the following January.

Greenwood, a relatively obscure yet fascinating figure of New England history, was born in 1779 in Hubbardston, Massachusetts. A Renaissance man and entrepreneur, he studied at Dartmouth College and West Point. In addition to his work as



Likely the home of Amos Whittemore Jr. and Rebecca Russell Whittemore, which stood at 421 Massachusetts Ave., demolished in 1924 to make way for the Central Fire Station. Many of the items shown are now in our collection.

(Continued on page 4)

President's Corner: An Honor and the Challenges

I have had the honor of serving as president of the Arlington Historical Society for the past three years. In this fast-changing world, few organizations have existed for 125 years, but that is exactly what our Society has done. We owe a great debt of gratitude to those who have gone before and the legacy upon which we have been able to build. In addition to the Jason Russell House, the Society is the custodian of a museum with over 18,000 items relating to Arlington's rich history. Often overlooked are our magnificent grounds that previously were three separate lots with structures on them until 1960, when they were razed to restore the view of the Jason Russell House and restore the open space where raged the famous battle of 1775. A ground-penetrating radar study in 2021 showed that the foundations for these houses remain just under the surface that now hosts the beer garden and many other functions. On any given day casual visitors will make use of the picnic tables for lunch or to just enjoy this green space. I am profoundly grateful to our predecessors' foresight and diligence in restoring this treasure for future generations.

The challenges of the past three years have been formidable. In addition to the ongoing issues of leading an organization that depends on the goodwill of our members and granting institutions, we had a pandemic that caused the Society to close its doors to the public in March 2020. Much to our relief and gratitude, support for the Society remained strong. This support allowed the Society to install a geothermal climate control system in the Jason Russell House and caretaker's cottage. The

ability to control temperature in this antique house will better preserve it for future generations and enhance the visitor and guide experience.

Our staff and volunteers also took the opportunity of the museum being closed during the pandemic to completely renovate that space. The old exhibit cases were removed and replaced with smaller, movable ones. Panels were installed over the cinder block walls to enable the wall space to be used for hanging items such as quilts and banners. A grant facilitated by our State Representatives Dave Rogers and Sean Garballey, and State Senator Cindy Friedman, enabled us to replace the carpeting and the lighting.

The renovated museum space was recently opened for a preview of the new exhibit entitled "A Few of Our Favorite Things". Board members, staff and other volunteers picked items from our collection for this exhibit. Many of these items had not previously been on public display. Tours of the Jason Russell House were also featured during this event. Our Tour Guide Co-chairs, Elaine Ropi and Jean Yoder, learned that many of the people on the tour had never visited the Jason Russell House. If anyone has out of town visitors coming to Arlington this summer, the Jason Russell House is a unique treasure to share with them.

Finally, I want to thank the staff, Board of Directors, Trustees and volunteers for all their support during my term as President. This job cannot be done alone.

- George H. Parsons

— JRH Openings —

As a supporter of the Arlington Historical Society, have you visited the Jason Russell House? Make 2023 the year you learn more about the site of some of the fiercest fighting on April 19, 1775. The walls of the house bear many bullet holes, evidence of the violent skirmish in which twelve colonials and two British soldiers were killed. The exhibit "Menotomy - Road to Revolution" features artifacts from April 19, 1775 and stories of how Menotomy citizens answered the alarm. Admission is free for members.

**Tour guide training will be held on
Saturday April 29th 10-4pm. If you would like to
volunteer as a tour guide, please email
contact@arlingtonhistorical.org or call 781-648-4300.**

The 2023 Jason Russell House tour season runs from June through October, Saturdays and Sundays, 1-4pm and by appointment.

❧ Save the Date ❧
Juneteenth Holiday
June 19, 2023

**Dedication of Monument
to Menotomy's Enslaved
and Free Persons of Color
Old Burying Ground**

**125th Anniversary
Gift of the Society
Invitation to Follow**

MUSEUM EXHIBIT OPENING



On Sunday, January 29, members and friends gathered to enjoy our newly installed exhibit, partially mounted in moveable cases to give the Smith Museum multi-purpose flexibility. Attendees also enjoyed a behind-the-scenes tour of our renovated



collection area. And, of course, there was cake to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the Society, a time to recognize our continuing vibrancy as an organization, and to celebrate new opportunities for us to share Arlington's past in the years to come.



The two teenage children of Amos Whittemore and Helen Weston Whittemore: Letitia (1799-1891) and Gershom (1796-1863).

an artist, he was a schoolteacher, a lawyer, and a museum director, who in 1818 founded “The New England Museum” on Boston’s Court Street. It displayed exhibitions of art, natural history, and “curiosities.” Greenwood consolidated the collection of many individuals and organizations into his curatorship and regularly held public events and concerts. When the museum closed in the 1830s, the collection was given to the individual who would later establish the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Greenwood returned to Hubbardston and became hotelier, builder, selectman, state representative, and state senator, living a long and interesting life until his death in 1856.

Amos Whittemore, a native of the Menotomy section of Cambridge, grew up in a large farming family in the east end of the precinct. He showed an early aptitude for all things mechanical and decided on a career as a gunsmith. Apprenticing in that field provided knowledge that was transferrable to his later pursuits. While being employed by a Boston manufacturer of hand cards used for the home processing of wool for spinning, Whittemore devised a way to mechanize one of the more time-consuming production steps that required hand-assembly of the bent wire tines. After securing a patent he established a company with his brothers

William and Samuel. This led to a remarkable period of prosperity for the area.

Portraiture Practice – the “Difficult Job”

Painted portraits were carefully constructed to create a specific public image—the clothing, accessories, backdrop chosen with care to add artistic flair, and to illustrate something about a person. Even against a neutral background, a sitter could signal status through clothing, jewelry, and hairstyle choices. The work of an itinerant painter was not necessarily a creative one, and many of Greenwood’s paintings are distinctive only for their homogeneity. The faces of the Whittemore family all look alike, perhaps due to family resemblance, but more likely due to the painter’s humble execution and smoothed brushstrokes. But tiny details in the lace and embroidered sheer muslin chemises of the ladies and accurate facial features set them apart from the more primitive portraits of other itinerant painters. Per his lists, Greenwood typically painted one, sometimes two per day. It is a myth that such painters used the slower season of winter to prepare canvases with shoulders and neck, ready for head to be added. Greenwood painted the Whittemore family as they sat and in the clothing they wore. It was more important that the patron appreciated the likeness

than the accuracy of the appearance. Greenwood used a physiognotrace instrument to improve his accuracy in his early years working on profiles; it helped to trace the silhouette of the sitter by projecting it onto paper. He may have used something similar, like a camera obscura, to aid him in capturing features and perspective.

Greenwood's list of patrons looks like a "who's who" of the prominent citizens of Boston and vicinity. As a result, his paintings are in nearby museum collections. He completed more than eight hundred likenesses in the twenty-four-year period he was working as a portrait painter. He worked as an itinerant painter in the early years, but eventually settled in Boston, opened a studio, and improved his craft based on the input of other working artists, including Edward Savage and Gilbert Stuart. He stopped painting altogether when demands as a museum director became more pressing and moved back to Hubbardston a few years after that.

The patron-listing shows the families of Amos Whittemore and his younger brother William interspersed on some of the days, which implies that the brothers purchased his services together. When Greenwood was finishing the extended Whittemore family commission more than a month later he wrote; "Began Miss W.'s likeness in such an attitude as she chose, next day having changed her mind in the course of the

night... wished her portrait to begin anew, in a different attitude & I accordingly began it on another canvas." Matching the date on Greenwood's list, the picky subject is likely Eliza Whittemore, daughter of William, who resided in the Whittemore-Robbins House.

While initially painted as a full suite, such individual sets of family paintings tended to be split up over time when willed to descendants. We have four paintings in our collection, all donated in 1959 by Marjorie Langdon Whittemore Allen. In addition to the two progenitors of the family, Amos and Helen Weston Whittemore, our collection includes two of their younger children, Gershom and Letitia. Greenwood's diary and other information about him are in the collections of the American Antiquarian Society, which lists the paintings in the order they were painted and on which date. The painting of William's wife, Rebecca Tufts Whittemore, is in the collection of Old Sturbridge Village. Images of Amos Whittemore Jr. and Rebecca Russell Whittemore, seen in an image of the couple's parlor on page one, are still in a descendant's collection.

These paintings also give us clues about intergenerational stylistic changes in costume and hairstyle. To learn more about the clothing featured in the paintings, and to find links to paintings in other collections, visit the Blog at arlingtonhistorical.org ♦



Helen Weston Whittemore, originally from Concord, (1763-1829) and Amos Whittemore (1759-1828).

— Pest Management in the Society's Collections —

By Melinda Howard

Pest control is an important part of museum work. In late January, I was working in our storage area when I saw something fluttering near our textile collection. After killing it, I saw that it was a webbing clothes moth, destructive and unwanted in a house, and even more so in a museum. Many of the textiles in our collection are made of wool or silk and are in delicate condition due to their age. In addition, most methods used to deal with pests in the house are liable to cause damage to items in a museum. However, most items can be safely frozen, so the Collection Committee agreed to purchase a freezer, since freezing will kill insects in all stages in life.

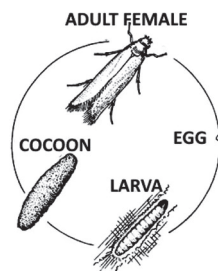
Even before the freezer arrived, some volunteers and I started working to minimize the damage. We lowered the heat, because while the life cycle of a clothes moth normally takes 4-6 months, with warm temperatures and high humidity the process can take as little as a month. Adult moths are only the most noticeable stage of the cycle, which goes moth – egg – larva – cocoon – moth. It is during their larva stage that moths eat, causing the damage to the textile. We also put down new traps to resume our integrated pest management (IPM), which had been paused during

our recent major renovation of the space. Bugs are virtually unavoidable, regardless of precautions taken, but we use traps to monitor what kind and how many pests there are and to help us to know whether we have a problem.

We started methodically checking the textiles for moths and vacuumed them to clean up any loose debris, placed them in tightly sealed plastic bags and into the freezer. One jacket and one rug were severely infested and we thought we had found “ground zero.” However, one day in early March I saw another moth flying and a few more in the traps. Focusing my efforts on searching the textiles, I found some more items with cocoons on them. Clothes moths like dark, hidden places, so textiles need to be checked extremely closely; one bodice had a moth hidden underneath decorative pleats on the sleeves.



Museum Assistant Melinda Howard meticulously vacuums-off moth frass and debris from an infested letter jacket recently discovered in the collection; it had been removed from freeze treatment two days prior.



Although the first batch of items has been removed from the freezer, we are far from done with exterminating the moths. There are more boxes left to be checked, and even then we will still need to recheck occasionally to make sure nothing was missed. However, we have made progress and the situation appears to be under the best control in our 125 years of collection management. ♦

CPA Project Underway

You might notice construction at the Jason Russell House. This is part of our current Community Preservation Act (CPA) project to address issues in our Preservation Plan. The front windows are being restored in stages, requiring removal to a specialist workshop. Moisture infiltration in the upper chamber has been addressed and rotted clapboards have been replaced. The façade will be repainted in the proper color when weather permits. The project also includes interior painting, electrical, masonry, and gutter work among other things. Our lawn is also being restored with aeration, topsoil, and re-seeding. This was necessary due to the digging for our geothermal wells and sewer line replacement last year.



Upcoming Lectures



Tuesday, April 25

7:30 p.m. at Arlington Masonic Temple

THE BATTLE OF MENOTOMY

A. Michael Ruderman

Battle Green was an accident. Concord Bridge, a skirmish. But in the most brutal and deadly warfare of the April 19, 1775, nearly 6,000 combatants fought hand to hand and house to house, the length and breadth of Menotomy. At the Foot of the Rocks, the British "regulars" encountered their worst nightmare: a nascent Continental Army.



Tuesday, May 24

7:30 p.m. at Arlington Town Hall

The Louise Ruma Ivers Memorial Lecture

Co-Sponsored by Arlington Human Rights Commission

DIMENSIONS OF ARLINGTON HISTORY VIEWED THROUGH THE LENS OF TODAY'S RACIAL RECKONING

Richard A. Duffy

This illustrated lecture presents nuanced context for the ways in which Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples have been portrayed in presenting the history of Arlington. Sharing both dispiriting stereotypes and the inspiring work of allies in the cause of racial justice, this lecture is but one step in our contemporary journey towards improving historical assessment of our community's evolution.

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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.

Menotomy Minutes is published with support from the James H. Winkler Fund.

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STAMP
HERE

Book of works by Arlington students in grades four through nine, based on 30 pieces of classical music they had studied.



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