

Menotomy Minutes



NEWSLETTER OF THE ARLINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

WINTER 2023



Sharing Arlington history for 125 years

by *Richard A. Duffy*

On November 19, 1897, an organizational meeting to discuss creating a historical society was hosted by lifelong resident and local businessman George Yates Wellington. The twenty-five residents attending were so enthusiastic that a formal organization was established by December 7, and incorporation was complete by April 6, 1898.

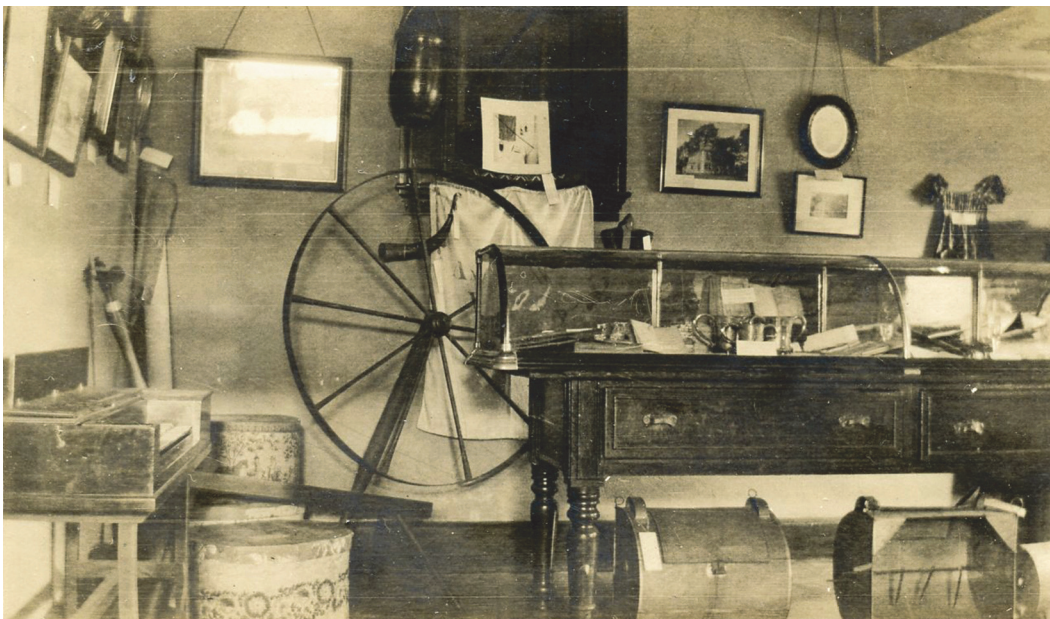
The original mission of the Society (which has been much expanded since) endures: “the gathering and recording of knowledge of the history of Arlington, and of individuals and families connected with the town, and the collecting and preserving of printed and manuscript matter, and other articles of historical and antiquarian interest.”

The Arlington Historical Society was founded during an era of unprecedented change. In the previous quarter-century Arlington’s identity as a “country town” gave way to its ultimate destiny as a residential suburb—more than doubling in population. Most of the recent residents were immigrants or first-generation Americans. It has sometimes been mooted that the emergence of local historical societies in eastern Massachusetts reflected nativist sentiments of old-guard Yankees who were dismayed by such societal changes.

But in fact, the founders of the Arlington Historical Society had been strong backers of economic progress, especially in expanding public utilities and transportation, which naturally drew a more diverse population to the town. On January 7,

1898, the *Arlington Advocate* reported: “new comers to Arlington will be as cordially welcomed [by the Society] as those representing families whose history ante-dates the incorporation of the town.”

To be sure, the programming of the early decades of the Society, like that of its peers in neighboring communities, focused on (and sometimes romanticized) the colonial era, the American Revolution, and the early nationhood of the United States. As a matter of context, the



The collection and display room for the Society was at Robbins Library from 1898 to 1924.

(Continued on page 4)

President's Corner

Dear Members,

If you have been by the Jason Russell House recently, you may have noticed that our once beautiful lawn now looks like a plowed field. Town Day came with a flood of visitors who wanted to use the bathrooms. At the end of that day, sewage was bubbling out of a manhole in the lawn.

A company that specializes in sewer pipes put cameras down the manhole to see what the problem was. They were able to get the camera about ten feet down the sewer line that had either collapsed or was totally blocked by tree roots. When a permit was pulled to replace the sewer line, we learned that it had been in place since at least 1896, making it among the earliest installations since Arlington joined the Metropolitan Sewerage System in 1895! The Jason Russell House was then a private dwelling owned by James A. Bailey, Jr., who as state senator had a strong influence on water and sewer matters, becoming chairman of the Metropolitan Sewerage Commission by 1900.

The old sewer line predated the formation of the Arlington Historical Society by a year. In 2022 we observed the 125th Anniversary of the founding of the Society in 1897. Both the Society and the old sewer line have shown remarkable longevity. In the end we had to replace 150 feet of clay sewer pipe from the manhole to Jason Street with modern PVC piping. That necessitated digging a 9-foot-deep trench which is why the lawn was disrupted.

While the trench was filled back in, the digging uncovered many stones that were less than ideal for growing new grass. A team of volunteers, including Chuck and Patsy Kraemer, Alan and Elisabeth Carr-Jones, Julie McDaniel, Kathy Kiefer, Kenton Rhoades, and Robert Brazile spent several days with a motorized lawn aerator which pokes half inch holes in the ground to a depth of 2-3 inches and kicked up a lot more stones which were then raked up and stacked for disposal in the spring. We will oversee the lawn as soon as the weather permits.

New back doors have also been installed at the rear of the Museum. The new doors block harmful UV light from damaging the exhibits in the museum and the increased width allows the Society to bring in traveling exhibits that were previously not possible. We look forward to welcoming you on Sunday, January 29 to view the Society's first in-house exhibit in the recently reimagined museum gallery space of the Smith Building.

George Parsons



Beaded change purse, c. 1890. Gift of Caira and Ida Robbins, 1931.

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 Pewtersmith 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 4).

SUNSET ROCK

By Howard Winkler

Years ago, Don Mattheisen gave a very interesting talk before the Arlington Historical Society about Menotomy Rocks Park. It was based on his historical study of the park, and is available at the Robbins Library, REF 974.44 MAT.

A feature shown on the map in the study, labeled Sunset Rock, caught my attention. A couple of years ago, I wondered if it still existed or if it was destroyed by a house builder. I drew lines on Don's map from street intersections to Sunset Rock. Transferring these lines to an assessor's map, it looked like Sunset Rock was to be found at 8 Valley Way. I went to that address. When the lady of the house answered, I told her what I was looking for, and learned that the rock was not on her property, but at 89 Churchill Avenue whose back yard abutted hers. There I found it! It was



round, looked to be granite, and about 20 feet across. It may well be an erratic that was deposited when the glacier retreated 20,000 years ago.

Before the colonists arrived and cut the coniferous forest to create farms and pasture land this natural object could only be seen if you got close to it.

After the forest was cut, and before the advance of suburbia, Sunset Rock was exposed.

The sun set over the rock twice a year on about February 18 (5:20) and again on October 22 (4:50). It could easily be seen in colonial times from Cooper's Tavern at the intersection of Mass Avenue and Medford Street, about 1,100 yards away. Maybe some of the townspeople would go to this watering hole around the time of sunset and see the sun disappear. Of course, Sunset Rock could be seen at any time of day back then. ♦

Above: Sunset Rock from Google Earth, Below: Sunset Rock up close.



changing character of the town's population was not yet history, but rather a "current event." In time, studying this diversity would highlight essential threads in the fabric of Arlington history.

A Society activity in early years was the regular practice of members preparing and reading "papers" before the Society. This resulted in the preservation of invaluable eyewitness accounts and family traditions of nineteenth-century Arlington that predate the appearance of the Advocate as the town's newspaper of record.

While some historical societies have experienced highs and lows—the highs often stimulated by wider events such as the Massachusetts Tercentenary in 1930, or the Bicentennial years of 1975 and 1976, the Arlington Historical Society has had a constant presence, moving from strength to strength. Undergirding this success has been its annual season of live programs, interrupted since 1898 only by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 1923, the Society's acquisition of the Jason Russell House—site of the deadliest battle of April 19, 1775—raised

the organization's profile and widened its mission enormously. The Jason Russell House is mentioned only briefly in this article, because next year the Society will celebrate the centennial of its stewardship. Menotomy Minutes will cover this compelling history in detail.

The Jason Russell House opened in 1924 as both a house museum and a permanent headquarters for the Society, but the growth in collections—referred to in the early decades as "relics"—presented problems of safe storage and suitable display. The Assembly Room was pressed into service to lovingly, if perhaps disjointedly, function as its only museum-exhibit space. Most frequently, items for the Society's collection were simply presented as topics of program meetings.

In 1944 an important chapter in the life of the Society began when George and Irene Capes were hired as caretakers, residing in the Jason Russell House "cottage," where they reared their son, Nelson. The widely beloved Mrs. Capes proudly served the Society for 60 years until her retirement. When she grew elderly, many young schoolchildren she welcomed assumed that she must be none other than Mrs.

1897



Pleasant Hall at 14 Maple St., where the Society was organized and held its program meetings.

1923



The Jason Russell House, was purchased for \$3,500 and was heavily mortgaged to enable its restoration.

1960



Elizabeth Abbot Smith with her father, George Smith. The Smiths' benefaction allowed the purchase and removal of three buildings, to restore the Jason Russell House battlefield.

Jason Russell, a “mistaken identity” that always brought her the kindest chuckle.

In May 1974, heroic rescue by volunteers prevented the loss of irreplaceable Society items following a three-alarm blaze at the Arlington Storage Warehouse on Mill Street. Brigham’s ice cream plant offered freezers to arrest water damage to historic documents, which then were systematically dried, spread in single layers with constant ventilation, at the Old Schwamb Mill. This near-tragedy galvanized the Society’s plans to expand its premises, to include meeting, exhibit, and collection-storage space, culminating in construction of the Smith Museum building.

The following years of the 1980s under historian David Baldwin, as the museum’s first executive director (he later served as Society president), were pivotal to bringing the collection of the Society up to professional museum-cataloguing standards and laid the foundation for the Society to share the history of Arlington more broadly.

In 1996 the Society had big plans for its centennial, lifting it to higher visibility. The museum’s first permanent exhibit, “Centuries of Change,” opened in 1997, followed by “Family

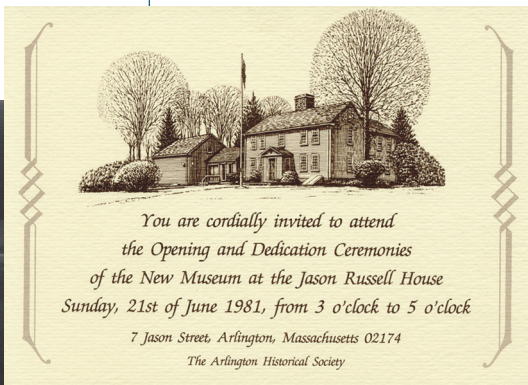
Ties: 200 Years of Arlington Life,” to honor the bicentennial of Arlington as an independent town in 2007. Public-facing projects such as books, hundreds of newspaper articles, and especially a resurgence of high-quality, Arlington-focused programming presented by Society members drew expanding audiences to the organization. New themes from Arlington’s past and present are regularly explored, keeping the Society relevant in modern times. This success led the Society by 2004 to outgrow the Smith Museum as its regular lecture-series venue.

At the heart of the Society for the past 125 years have been generations of dedicated volunteers. The officers, directors, and trustees have provided creative, hands-on leadership. The professional staff have not only advanced the mission of the Society through their expertise; they also provide a rewarding environment for the many volunteers whose contributions in front of and behind the scenes cannot be overstated. In 1897 success was the product of teamwork and passion—and in that regard, nothing really has changed today. ♦

1981

1987

2021



The Smith Museum, sensitively designed to harmonize with the Jason Russell House, dramatically enhanced the Society’s ability to broaden and deepen its mission.



The Society spearheads the effort to restore the long-neglected Prince Hall Mystic Cemetery on Gardner Street.



Tubes to carry liquid to geothermally heat and cool the Jason Russell House add an almost-futuristic dimension to the 1745 dwelling.

Albert
Purchase and
on Russell

IMLS Project Update

Our Institute of Museum and Library Services grant to address a critical need for expanded space and thorough inventory in our storage area is ending. This highly competitive grant of \$39,306 funded a project to move all objects from one of our storage rooms (Room 2) in the Smith Building, installation of high capacity rolling shelves, and the inventorying, photographing, rehousing, and recording accurate location data for all objects. As of this writing 1,345 items have been cataloged and rehoused. Many of these items have been included on our online catalog, which currently contains 7,404 selected records.

More important than the numbers is the quality of the outcome. We have a completely reorganized, well-stored, and well-documented segment of our collection. The storage system was designed based on thorough analysis of the items in need of care. Large paintings on canvas are hung on wire mesh panels around the perimeter of the room, framed works on paper are housed in appropriately sized bins, objects on shelves are either stored in proper containers or on uncrowded and accessible shelves. Most of this work was done by a dedicated group of volunteers, with oversight by staff.

This project targeted a smaller portion of our collection space that needed most help, but also served as a roadmap for how the same work can be carried out in the larger storage area, Room 1. We are currently designing a fundraising plan for a similar project in this more complicated space which houses all of our archival storage, photographs, and textiles. Members are invited to come view our storage areas—both the yet-to-be improved and the improved—as part of our “Favorite Things” reception on January 29.

Sara Lundberg



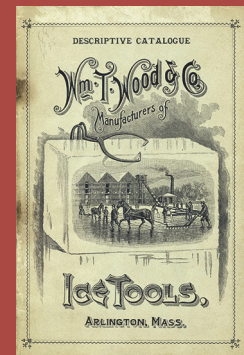
Museum Assistant Melinda Howard moving the high-capacity rolling shelves in Storage Room 2.

Collections of Note

In addition to our programs, the Arlington Historical Society is also a collecting institution. We house a significant collection of objects and archives, caring for over 18,000 items. We continue to catalog and digitize our collections and records so that they may be of use to scholars, researchers, and the public. If you would like to know more about our collections, visit our website at arlingtonhistorical.org.

William Mahoney Collection

Bill Mahoney remains very active in discovering and acquiring historical images and ephemera on-line, since his retirement to Champaign, Illinois. After he has reached a "critical mass" of items, the Society receives a box filled with his donated new treasures. These are currently being catalogued, but below is a preview of 19th-century color lithographs from the W.W. Rawson seed catalogue, from the era when "Arlington-Tested Seeds" were a hallmark of quality for market gardeners, and a scene depicting W.T. Wood's famous tools harvesting from Spy Pond's "frozen field."



MUSEUM EXHIBIT OPENING

Sunday, January 29, 2023 at 2PM

Please join us for a "Sneak Peek" reception for our new exhibition at the Arlington Historical Society Museum.

"A Few of Our Favorite Things" asked volunteers, board members, and friends to serve as co-curators. Each participant chose an item from our collection of over 18,000 items and wrote a short caption describing the history of the item and their reason for choosing it. It offers new and unexpected perspectives on our collection from a cross-section of people who are involved in the Society in many ways. It mines from our diverse collection that began immediately after our founding. This special project is both



in celebration of our 125 years as a collecting organization and also the successful conclusion of our Institute of Museum and Library Services grant (see page 6) to move and rehouse a portion of our collection into modernized compact storage system.

This members-only reception will include a look at the new exhibition (which won't open to the general public until spring), "Member Highlight" tours of the Jason Russell House, and a look at the newly renovated collection storage area. And of course, there will be a 125th-anniversary cake!

We hope you can join us for this special birthday party on January 29 at

2:00 p.m. at the Arlington Historical Society, 7 Jason Street. ♦

Upcoming Lecture



Tuesday, March 28 at 7:30 p.m.

Arlington Masonic Temple, 19 Academy Street

OUR WASTEFUL SOCIETY: DID WE DO BETTER "IN THE OLD DAYS"?

Charlotte Milan

Town of Arlington Recycling Coordinator

Why do we have so much stuff? And what are we supposed to do about it when we're done with it? We'll look at waste from historical and sociological perspectives. How did our predecessors manage trash? When did recycling become a thing? If there's something we can re-learn from the past about reducing waste, let's learn it now and fast!

Winter Wednesdays — February 2023

Wednesdays at 1pm at the Smith Museum of the Arlington Historical Society*

Welcome to our tenth year of Arlington Historical Society members gathering to hear interesting talks and enjoy refreshments on mid-winter Wednesdays!

* Note: Please check our website the morning of the scheduled talk for postponements or cancellations in event of inclement weather. www.arlingtonhistorical.org

February 8th

Rosemarie Smurzynski – PRINCE HALL: MAN & LEGACY

Among Prince Hall's accomplishments: he lobbied to be a Mason; he founded Black Masonry; he petitioned the Massachusetts Great and General Court for black rights, including equal education. Each Memorial Day we celebrate the man and his legacy in the East Arlington cemetery named for him.

February 15th

The Singing Grandpops – A VALENTINE SPECIAL

In a lighthearted get-together, the "infamous" Singing Grandpops will serenade us with love songs and goofy antics that are sure to entertain and warm this February afternoon.

February 22nd

Howard B. Winkler, former Society president

– THE STATUE OF LIBERTY

Learn about her origin, her features, her construction, her finances, and her pedestal—many interesting details about why she is still standing.

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Our business partners have been very helpful in preserving the Jason Russell House. Please thank them with your patronage.



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Contact Us

Office Hours:
Tuesday-Thursday, 10AM-4PM

7 Jason Street
Arlington, MA 02476-6410

(781) 648-4300
contact@arlingtonhistorical.org

Visit us on the web at
www.arlingtonhistorical.org



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Editor: Richard A. Duffy

Layout: Elisabeth Carr-Jones

Contributors: Richard A. Duffy,
Sara Lundberg, Howard Winkler,
George Parsons, Carolyn Parsons

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1880s die-cut Valentine
"Gracie from Grandma N."
(Grace Noble Knight Estate)



Arlington Historical Society
7 Jason Street
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