

Menotomy Minutes

NEWSLETTER OF THE ARLINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

AUTUMN 2023



A Tribute to Bill Mahoney

By Richard A. Duffy

An organization is fortunate to have special members whose engagement can be termed “once in a generation.” When it comes to the Society’s collection of images, documents, and objects, the gifts of Bill Mahoney can be described—without hyperbole—as being at the level of “once in three generations.” The Society gratefully remembers Bill, who passed away at age 86 on May 11 in Champaign, Illinois, where he and his wife Carol

moved in 2014 to live close to their two daughters, Meredith and Megan.

Bill and Carol were both highly active members of the Society in nearly five decades living in Arlington. For many years, Bill was assistant treasurer, taking the Society’s membership from manual to computerized operation. Bill was forward-looking, yet his online alias was “Oldfife,” reflecting his love of

(Continued on page 4)



An advertising trade card distributed at the Pan American Exposition, held in Buffalo, N.Y., in 1901.

President's Corner

Happy Autumn!

My name is Robert Brazile, and since the May board elections I have taken on the role of President of the Society from George Parsons, who has led us with effectiveness, competence, and grace through the challenging times of the past three years. While my professional background was in software product development, I have a lifelong love of history (just one class shy of a second major in college) and both of my children teach history professionally. My history-related hobbies include hand-tool woodworking, in which I use



many antique tools, and historic process photography, including shooting gelatin dry plates – I make my own – and various traditional methods of photographic printing. I came to the Society through volunteering to work in the archives with our collection of glass plate negatives and one thing led to another until I found myself in this new role. As I write, we have just finished a fun series of summer Beer Garden events – despite more rainy Saturdays than we expected! – and are

looking forward to our interesting lecture series starting up for the fall. I hope to see you there. ♦

2023-2024 Election

OFFICERS

President – Robert Brazile
First Vice President – George Parsons
Vice President – Patsy Kraemer
Treasurer – Alan Jones
Clerk – Christine Cronin-Tocci

DIRECTORS

Paul Fennelly • William Lyons
Jonathan Nyberg • William Rapp
Elaine Ropi • Bob Tosi

TRUSTEES

Peter Howard • Joe Curro
Joseph Zona

NOMINATING COMMITTEE

Doris Birmingham • Angela Olszewski
Katharine Childs Jones



A 19th-century hand-pull mechanical doorbell once used in the Jason Russell House.

♦ 100 Years of Stewardship ♦

By Richard A. Duffy

On October 9, 1923, the Society's membership unanimously "Voted—That the Arlington Historical Society buy the Jason Russell House and that the directors be authorized to borrow as much as may be necessary, in addition to available funds of the Society, to pay for the same and for such repairs as may be absolutely necessary." This would be the most transformative moment in the Society's identity, history, and mission.

The Society had been a very active collecting and educational organization since inception in 1897, first holding its regular programs in the Misses Wellington's kindergarten building at 14 Maple St. (today a private residence), then at the Pleasant Street Congregational Church. Its growing collection of "relics" enjoyed a dedicated space at Robbins Library. But it lacked a permanent headquarters.

Over the summer of 1923 the board of directors had been carefully studying the "very generous offer" of owner James A. Bailey, Jr., to sell the house to the Society at a below-market price.

It is sometimes misunderstood that the Society saved the Jason Russell House from demolition, but it is profoundly unlikely that Bailey ever contemplated such a thing. He was a

major civic leader, among the earliest members of the Society, was directly descended from two heroes of the first day of the American Revolution, Captains Solomon Peirce and Benjamin Locke. Bailey's partial gift and a bank mortgage allowed the Society to conclude the purchase in December.

The notion that the Jason Russell House was at risk possibly emerged due to conflation with two other "eyewitness buildings" of April 19, 1775, the Solomon Bowman and Amos Whittemore houses. Both were razed in 1923 for construction of the Central Fire Station. Significant architectural elements were given by the Town of Arlington for restoration of the Jason Russell House, notably their small-pane window sashes.

The Arlington Advocate's reporting on the acquisition of the Jason Russell House stated that it had been moved and rotated to face Jason Street when the Teel family (Russell descendants) subdivided their land in 1884 for residential development. This doubtful account is surprising because in 1923 the opening of Jason Street was within the living memory of many readers. Most significantly, this information does not comport with photographs and maps from the 1870s that depict the placement and orientation of the Jason Russell House as it stands today.

To be continued.



This 1922 photograph of the Jason Russell House. Hemmed-in by other buildings and occupying just a 60 x 80-foot lot (4,800 square feet), it was only accessible from a narrow pathway. The house shows signs of disrepair, such as the exterior window shutters, and had been modernized with Victorian-era two-over-two large-pane windows.

history and music, especially playing the fife in Revolutionary-era costume as a member of the Menotomy Fife and Drum Corps.

Most of the space on the tribute pages—indeed in most of this issue—is occupied by donated items from Bill’s collection, because he would have wanted to place the focus on “the good’uns” rather than himself.

To give an example of this, in 2009 I worked on the traveling museum exhibit “Drawing Towards Home: Designs for Domestic Architecture from Historic New England.” The cover of the accompanying book was architect Edward Shaw’s front elevation of the William Wilkins Warren House built in 1840 at 128 Pleasant St. in Arlington. Bill owned the last known photograph of the house, showing its substantial alterations, before it was lost to fire in 1934. I asked if it could be used by Historic New England with credit to him. Bill declined. Not the use—the credit, insisting that the image be identified as from the Arlington Historical Society. When I saw it on display in 2010 at the National Building Museum in Washington, D.C., with “Arlington Historical Society” keeping company with names from world-renowned institutions, it felt just great.

Bill spent decades roaming book and paper shows, antique

stands, and other in-person events. He would be tickled to score rare items for cheap that had been passed over because they had been filed under Cambridge (owing to Arlington’s previous municipal name of West Cambridge). And just as Bill transitioned seamlessly to new technology in running membership, he rapidly mastered bidding on eBay, cooperating in a “fearsome foursome” with Jeanne Meister, Bob Fredieu, and myself so that the item be won by a member of the team. Bill was a skilled sniper, for sure—with human persistence, and no robotic tools.

Objects from Bill’s collection anchored part of the Society’s long-term centennial exhibit (1997-2007), “Centuries of Change.” Bill marveled at how exhibit designer Lisa Welter was able to create such a compelling display that included ice-cutting ploughs, saws, and tongs. Their artistic placement gave Bill satisfaction that what some might have viewed as “old things with rusty accents” could draw people into understanding a long-lost Arlington industry that held great fascination for him.

On a personal note, all three of my photographic history books of Arlington benefited greatly from open access to his images. I was honored to dedicate my 2006 book, *Then & Now: Arlington*, to Bill and acknowledge his wink-of-the-eye role as “the Patriarch.”



Bill would come into our small, top-floor office and off handedly throw a battered mailer onto the already overflowing table, containing his most recent historical photo find. We'd ooh and ahh over the discovery, but maybe it featured an unidentified building? Off he'd go to investigate, gimlet-eyed, armed with town histories and an uncanny ability to see both the present and the past all at once. He loved the pursuit! I miss seeing his finds, but I miss seeing him even more.

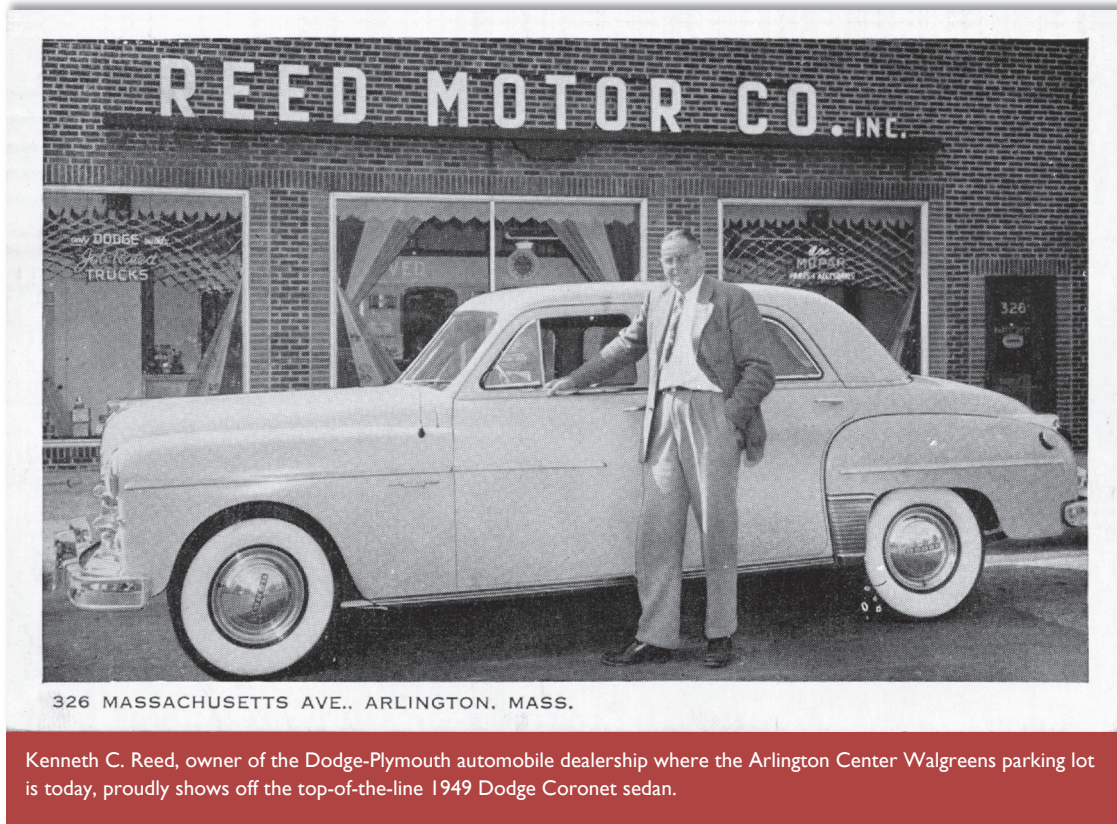
-- Doreen Stevens, retired museum director

Museum Director Doreen Stevens looks on as Bill Mahoney entertains a visiting class of third-graders, circa 2006.

After moving to Illinois, Bill remained steadfast in collecting “Arlingtoniana.” When he reached a critical mass of items, a box unexpectedly arrived at the Society, ensuring an exciting meeting of the Collection Committee.

Bill’s gifts are still being catalogued as they approach the 1,500 mark. They transcend centuries, beginning in 1774, with an “average year” of 1886. These include over 400 photographs,

nearly 100 objects (such as coins, medals, and bottles), over 100 books, reports, and magazines, and over 600 pieces of ephemera—advertisements, trade cards, programs, receipts, and letters. There’s even a small miner’s pick—the perfect symbol for what Bill has made available to help generations to come to dig deeper into Arlington’s past. ♦



Left: It is possible that the issuance of new uniforms for the Highland Hose Company of the Arlington Fire Department in 1874 was the occasion for this portrait to be taken.
 Right: Andrew J. Millican (1854-1930) stands in front of his modern moving van, circa 1925.

— Volunteers making the Society shine —

By Sara Lundberg

We want to publicly recognize the Society's volunteers for their dedication, careful thought, insights, and their time, a contribution that is always in short supply. Their flexibility in helping with tasks other than their ordinary volunteer areas, such as meeting the high-energy demands of the elementary-school student visits of our education program, is much appreciated. Some of the volunteer jobs that keep us going are those of our Board of Directors (see page 2), who lead our organization. The board meets once per month to discuss issues before the society, they develop our budget, strategize, plan events, raise funds. This year our board also participated in that very special activity of "beer garden hosts" – more often called "bathroom monitor." In this role they liaised with new people who got to experience our organization in a non-traditional way.

The Jason Russell House and the Museum are able to welcome visitors from May through October, thanks to our dedicated group of guides. They give up one or two weekends per month in the summer – not a small ask. The guides are trained, scheduled, and managed thanks to the guide committee: Elaine Ropi and Jean Yoder (co-chairs), and members June Baer, Siobhan Foley, Susan Lum, and Jim Vellenga.

Special thanks to the committee and to the 2023 guides: Doris Birmingham, Linda Cohn, Judy Conroy, Jonathan Cutter, David Emer, Melanie Evans, Ruth Faas, Katharine Childs Jones, Bill Levine, Jim Lindsay, Richard Martin, Jeff Maxtutis, Julie McDaniel, Terrie McFadden, John Morrison, Kenton Rhoades, Michael Ruderman, Joseph Snodgrass, Jen Thompson, Laura Wiener, and Andrea Winslow.

This past summer we were fortunate to have had two

college interns who brought fresh perspectives and valuable skills.

Julian Flesch came to us looking for something to do in the history field after graduating summa cum laude from Brandeis University, prior to starting his master's degree program at the University of Mississippi, with the goal of teaching. Julian's passion for the Civil War era was palpable, and he dove into the project of updating 632 records related to the Civil War, Civil War Veterans, and even some materials from the War of 1812 and the Mexican-American War.

Megan Horling, a sophomore at Wheaton College majoring in history with a minor in computer science, works as an archive assistant at Wheaton and also volunteers at the Belmont Historical Society. Megan is an Eagle Scout and Trustee Scholar for her school. Megan resolved many of our technical issues which had been piling up, helped to revise our manual for using our data-management program, and catalogued newly acquired collections.

We are fortunate that space does not allow us to recognize all of our 2023 volunteers in this issue, and we look forward to continuing to sing the praises of the others in the upcoming issue. ♦



Volunteer extraordinaire Chuck Kraemer designed and built this shed for outdoor equipment that previously had to be lugged up and down bulkhead stairs. Little could revelers in the beer garden this past summer know that on the other side of the Jason Russell House this creative and attractive endeavor was taking shape.



Upcoming Lecture

The 2023-2024 program season theme is "Collections: Objects We Collect and Conceptual Collections."

For information on other upcoming lectures, please visit the Society's website under the "Programs" tab.



**Tuesday, November 28
7:30 PM at Arlington Masonic
Temple, 19 Academy Street**

THE ART AND CRAFT OF QUILTING

Nancy Howard and Julie McDaniel

Quilters make quilts, build their own collections, contribute their handiwork to good causes, and preserve treasured quilts from earlier generations. Gain insights into designs and techniques through the ages.

Both Nancy Howard and Julie McDaniel are active in the Rising Star Quilters Guild and other quilting organizations. Nancy is a familiar face in Arlington from her many years as textile buyer at Fabric Corner. Julie is active in the Society in several volunteer roles, curating the 19th-century "Courthouse Steps" design quilt currently on display in the Smith Museum, a square of which is the illustration above.

Caring for Your Collections

Opening the 2023-2024 season for the Society on November 7, Museum Director Sara Lundberg's program "Caring for Your Collections" shared techniques that museum professionals use, and how to follow these practices at home.

It delivered a crash course in preventative conservation: what materials are safe to use, protecting collections from destructive threats, and—most importantly—what NOT to do. All manner of items were discussed: documents, photos, albums, clothing, and more.

Key learnings included:

- ◆ Never do anything irreversible to an object, which sometimes can mean performing a procedure or cleaning.
- ◆ Use appropriate archival materials—never use adhesives or tape, and don't fully enclose, encase, or laminate things.
- ◆ Acid free paper, tissue, or board is a best bet for storage or support, but you can also use some plastics or foam, if they are polypropylene or polyethylene.
- ◆ Handle objects as little as possible and with freshly washed hands to prevent the transfer of natural skin oils or moisturizers.
- ◆ Don't allow objects to be near food, which attracts pests. Trapping pests alerts you to a problem but does not solve it, due to the life cycle of most destructive insects which often are caught after laying their eggs
- ◆ Collecting can entail unknown hazards: be careful when handling fur, feathers, taxidermy, film, and some metals and rocks.
- ◆ Avoid extremes of heat and humidity in storage. The ideal temperature is 68 degrees, with relative humidity of 50%. Dampness can quickly lead to a range of issues, especially affecting the fragile emulsion layer of photographs, even under glass. ◆



Cabinet card photo from the collection of Bill Mahoney. This albumen print mounted on an embossed card poses a series of preservation challenges due to its composite nature.

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If you have an interest in becoming an Historical Society business partner, email ghparsons@msn.com.

Contact Us

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PLACE
STAMP
HERE

(William Mahoney collection.)
Commemorative photo pin.



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