



# MEDFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

FALL, 2013

## Presidents' Overview



I hope everyone had a great summer! Although I haven't been in school for decades, somehow September always seems like a time for both new beginnings and renewal of existing efforts.

### Membership

If you haven't renewed your membership already, please use the enclosed form to do so now. The recent changes at the Peter Tufts House temporarily take away a revenue source for the Society, so membership revenue is now more important than ever.

### Peter Tufts House

Beth Hayes, long-time Medford resident and Society member, has agreed to chair a committee charged with preservation and maintenance of this historic property. Their first order of business is to consider the best use of the building, consistent with its character. The house has been used as a single family home for decades, with occasional tours during the summer. Beth and the committee will be considering a number of options. The Society's funds are limited, so grants will be essential. Even if the building continues as a single family home, considerable updating is needed of non-historic areas such as the bathroom, kitchen, and heating system.

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### Society Officers

President **John Anderson**

Vice President **Kyna Hamill**

Treasurer **Ruth Roper**

Assistant Treasurer **Mike Oliver**

Recording Secretary **Jay Hurd**

Corresponding Secretary **Susan Fedo**

Director of Collections **Barbara Kerr**

### Directors at Large

**Stanley Eckstein**

**Luke Pomorski**

**David Fedo**

**Joan Quigley**



*(left) A closeup of the poorly restored portrait of Lydia Maria Child by Francis Alexander, (right) An engraving from the painting before it was ruined.*

## A Portrait of Lydia Maria Child, 1826

*by Kyna Hamill*

Despite the best intentions of volunteers with a love of art, restorations without any training can be detrimental. A case in point is the *ecce homo* fresco in Madrid, which last summer fell victim to the good intentions of Cecilia Giménez. She was unhappy with how the paint was flaking off due to moisture. In her attempt to restore the image, she destroyed the original and rendered the new version unrecognizable.<sup>1</sup> Alas, at the Medford Historical Society, we must have had our own well-intentioned "Cecilia" back in the 1950s, in light of a recent discovery of a painting of Lydia Maria Child from 1826 that is so badly "restored" it is almost grotesque.

A few events brought us to the discovery of the painting, donated in 1898, that enlightened our knowledge of it. In June, we invited an art conservation specialist to survey our collection of artwork and give us an estimate of what

needed cleaning or restoring. We pulled all the paintings we could find from our collection to display in the main hall for the conservator. When we saw the painting of Lydia, we were astonished to see her face. Parts of the painting seemed to be literally scraped off and repainted with caked on layers of badly smeared paint. The tag on the painting said "Lydia Marie Child Portrait by Francis Alexander c. 1826, Face and upper parts of body 'restored' in 1950's, rather poorly. For a photo of pre-restoration, see *MHS-Register* Vol 2, No. 4, Oct. 1899 opp. p. 137." While many of our paintings are in excellent condition and some only need cleaning, the conservator told us that he could not restore this painting. We do not know who tried to "repair" the painting, but it is definitely not the Lydia Maria Child we recognize anymore.

Serendipitously, a few months later, we had a reference question

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## President's Overview *continued*

This will be an exciting year since the committee has agreed to have the building back up and running by September, 2014.

### Garden Club Initiative

The Medford Garden Club has graciously offered to provide design, labor, and financial help to redo our long overgrown front yard at 10 Governors Avenue. The Society will pay for some professional help to clear out stumps and overgrown plantings which are choking the existing garden. We would welcome contributions to help pay for this work as well as a few volunteers to maintain the area next year when the plantings are complete.

### New Board Members

In the sidebar below, our three new board members will introduce themselves. Susan Fedo is the new Corresponding Secretary, and David Fedo and Joan Quigley are new Directors at Large.

—John Anderson

### Susan and David Fedo

We are both natives of Duluth, Minnesota, but have happily lived in our house in West Medford since 1981.

Both of us ended up in New England after attending graduate school at Boston University and working mostly in administrative and faculty roles at various area colleges and universities in the intervening years. In 2007, we moved to Singapore where David directed a baccalaureate program in Early Childhood Education for Boston's Wheelock College, and in which Susan taught courses to our Singaporean students. We remained in Singapore for five years, traveling widely throughout Southeast Asia, and returning home to Medford in 2012.



### Joan Quigley

I grew up and went to school in Medford and have always been interested in the history of the city. I love to read about the Colonial era in and around Boston, especially through diaries and letters from that time. I worked, along with others, on the large Civil War photo collection. We looked at, measured, and described each of the almost 4,000 photos. It was an amazing experience. I am currently working on the Lydia Maria Child scrapbook which is filled with so many items relating to her: from poems, to paintings to her personal feelings. I am so thankful to the Medford Historical Society for being such a welcoming group.



## MHS Programs and Events Fall 2013

**Saturday, September 21 | 9:45 AM - 12:30 PM**

***The 5th Annual Medford Historic Bike Tour: Brooks Family Heritage Tour***

This family-friendly bike tour will visit sites of the Brooks Family of Medford and describe their impact on the city during 300 years of history. The ride begins at 9:45 a.m. at Whole Foods in Medford and will conclude with lunch at the Brooks Estate manor. Participation in the ride is free to MHS and M-BELT members and \$5 for non-members. Riders are invited to stay for a guided tour of the Brooks Estate afterward.

**Monday, October 28, 7:00 - 9:00 PM**

***Poetry's Haunted Past***

Edgar Allen Poe's eerie opening lines to his poem *The Raven* "Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary..." will set the tone for this fun, but bone-chilling evening that will explore the uncanny and strange in poetry. Invited speakers will do their best to unearth "the souls of some old poets" as Baudelaire once said. Come if you dare. Medford Historical Society, 10 Governors Ave. (Free)

**Sunday, November 17, 2:00 - 4:00 PM**

***A History of Grace Episcopal Church***

In our continuing series of programs which highlight the religious institutions of Medford, we will visit Grace Episcopal Church built in 1868 and designed by noted American architect Henry Hobson Richardson. Located at 160 High Street, reception to follow. (Free)

**Saturday, December 6, 4:00 PM &**

**Sunday, December 7, 12:00 PM**

***Jingle Bell Festival House Tour***

The Medford Historical Society is excited to be a site on this year's Jingle Bell House Tour. Come by to see holiday decorations and artifacts from the time the original song "Jingle Bells" was composed. For more information visit [www.jinglebellfestival.org](http://www.jinglebellfestival.org), or call 781-475-2162.

**Saturday, December 13, 2:00 - 4:00 PM**

***"Do Come in for a Cup of Tea":***

***An Emily Post Fundraiser for MHS***

Enjoy tea and cakes and an etiquette lesson from the pages of Emily Post. As she wrote in her chapter on *Teas and Other Afternoon Parties*, "a 'tea', even though it be formal, is nevertheless friendly and inviting." We will enjoy cakes, tea and conversation and learn about Emily's informative and sometimes hilarious ways of social etiquette. Special guest in attendance. Medford Historical Society, 10 Governors Ave. Tickets are \$15. Seating is limited. Reserve tickets at [kynahamill@yahoo.com](mailto:kynahamill@yahoo.com).

come in asking for the rights to reprint the portrait of LMC that was “believed to be hanging at the Medford Historical Society.” I had to let the patron know that the painting was in no condition to be reproduced. The good news is that the requestor led me to an engraving, now at the Library of Congress, of the painting before it was ruined. We also looked up the photo reproduction of the painting from the *Medford Historical Register* mentioned on the tag. Although the photo is not of great quality, between the engraving and the image in the *Register*, we have some idea of what the original painting looked like.

To add to the ill-fated news of the state of the painting, we now understand that the painting may have been of value and has an interesting history of its own. The date of the painting, 1826, places Lydia at age 24, long before photography. We are all familiar with photographs of the elderly Lydia in her cap reading a book from 1870. But this painting represented her at a youthful age, when she was still Lydia Maria Francis entertaining many suitors. In fact, the painter, Francis Alexander, may have been one of those suitors who bid for her affections along with David Lee Child whom she eventually married. In her book, *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child*, Carolyn L. Karcher writes: “A more serious contender for Child’s heart was the painter Francis Alexander who she described to her younger sister as ‘young, unmarried, - and my *especial* friend’ (‘Do not smile!’ She exhorted Mary).”<sup>2</sup>

Francis Alexander (1800-81) was born in Killingly, Connecticut. In this rural town, he grew up on a farm with greater ambitions than his family. He rarely contributed to his father’s farm and instead was said to “hang around the house and paint.”<sup>3</sup> In 1820, he saved up his money to go twice to New York City in order to study painting with Alexander Robinson, probably at the Columbian Academy of Painting. Though he had little schooling, he improved quickly and was able to ask higher prices for his work upon his return. One of his greatest champions was Miss Maria Francis who reveals her admiration for him as an artist in a letter: “You have genius – why do you care whether Mr. — or Miss — - acknowledge it or not? Above all why do you care that another is more appreciated, while you are undervalued?...Do you know why I write to you in this style? It is because your greatest fault is to be too easily discouraged.”<sup>4</sup>

Over the next few years he became a leading New England portrait painter of the early nineteenth century. He was noted especially for his female portraits, some of which are now at the Museum of Fine Arts. One of the highlights of his career was in 1842 when Charles Dickens consented to sit for him in Boston, a portrait which the MFA also holds. In *Charles Dickens in America*, we know that the artist’s rooms were at “No.

41 Tremont Row, not far from the Tremont House” and Dickens’ arrival at the studio caused quite a fanfare.<sup>5</sup>

It was in the spring of 1826 that Lydia sat for Francis Alexander in his studio in Boston. Karcher describes the painting as “a three-quarter view of a lively young woman whose fashionably dressed black hair and demure semidécolleté gown with puffed, lace-edged sleeves belie the trace of defiance in her expression, it hangs today in the Medford Historical Society.”<sup>6</sup> Though Karcher was wrong about the state of the painting, she offers us an interesting description of Child as a fashionable woman. Still other more contemporary observations of the painting can be found in a letter by Mary T. Peabody.<sup>7</sup> Mary wrote to her friend Miss Rawlins Pickman: “I saw...at Alexander’s room a portrait of Miss Francis—I can compare the expression on her face to nothing but a tiger— (you perceive the effects of bad example) I think she must have ‘called up a look’ that minute, for I never heard that she looked fierce.”<sup>8</sup>

In *Lydia Maria Child: The Quest for Racial Justice*, Lori Kenshaft gives a much different description of Child: “Maria was short, with dark hair and dark eyes, and her features were not considered beautiful by the standards of her time. She was also intelligent and witty, enthusiastic and self-educated, and passionate in her convictions. Young ladies were supposed to be gentle and submissive, and many people felt that Maria was too inclined to speak her mind.”<sup>9</sup>

Whatever features Francis Alexander saw in Lydia to illustrate in the painting, Lydia thought that it was overly flattering. Karcher notes a letter that Lydia wrote to her sister Mary regarding the painting: “If it has any fault, it is because the artist has *too much* genius – He wanted to make a Sappho of me, and to pour over my very ugly face the full tide of inspiration.”<sup>10</sup>

Her phrase: “very ugly face” tugs at the heart when we view her portrait now. Though we cannot conjecture what exactly went on between them, a certain kind of intimacy between this artist and his subject is obvious through their letters. Their secret is now lost in the painting itself!

If you would like to contribute to the restoration of the MHS paintings that can be preserved please contact [kynahamill@yahoo.com](mailto:kynahamill@yahoo.com).

<sup>1</sup> See Raphael Minder, “Despite Good Intentions, a Fresco in Spain Is Ruined”. *NY Times*, 23 August, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Karcher, 50. Francis Alexander was two years older than LMC, David Lee Child was eight years older.

<sup>3</sup> See Catherine W. Pierce “Francis Alexander”. *Old Time New England*. (44:2) 1953, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Pierce, 33.

<sup>5</sup> *Charles Dickens in America*, edited by William Glyde Wilkins. London: Chapman and Hall, Ltd., 1911, p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Karcher, 51.

<sup>7</sup> Mary T. Peabody married Horace Mann in 1843. Mary’s sister, Sophia Peabody Hawthorne, married Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1842.

<sup>8</sup> Op cit. Karcher, 629.

<sup>9</sup> Kenshaft, 26

<sup>10</sup> Karcher, 51.



(left) Archiving volunteers Cambia Davis, Kaleigh Smith and Peter Escott prepare to remove Civil War artifacts from the cases where they have been stored since the early 1900s. (right) These artifacts include a carved pipe depicting General Robert E. Lee, a wooden relic from Hancock House and a Confederate buckle.



## The Civil War Panels

by Devon Armstrong

In 1948, seven cases of Civil War artifacts were donated to the Medford Historical Society from the Grand Army of the Republic, or GAR, a Civil War veterans' organization which had already dwindled down to two living members. The cases, divided into thirteen 'panels,' were hung on the wall of the alcove and never inventoried. Sixty-five years later, they have been finally opened.

As a summer intern at the Medford Historical Society, I have had the opportunity to work closely with Kyna Hamill and Allison Andrews on various projects. While I spent the majority of the first few weeks doing cataloguing on PastPerfect and inventorying collections, it was this project that has taken the majority of my time. Fittingly, beginning in mid-July with "Panel #1", a team of volunteers – including Peter Escott, Jay Stott, and Sue Gerould – and I managed to empty every case in short order. Peter and Jay's expert knowledge was particularly invaluable during this phase.

Along the way, we made some interesting discoveries. For example, "Panel #7" is notable for several reasons, not the least of which being the addition of northern bullets arranged to read "U.S." However, one of the most curious pieces from this panel is not the arrangement of bullets, but rather a curious spoon with the word "RICHMOND" written on the handle. Looking through the glass, it appears to be made of rusted metal, which one would expect from a Civil War-era eating implement. However, upon closer inspection, and with a little help from the disintegrating label, we learned that the spoon was actually wooden, carved by a prisoner in Libby prison. In another case, we discovered a tooth – a canine attributed to a Confederate soldier whose body, as the label states, was over 7 feet long! One final artifact of note is a small six-shot revolver handgun. Found at the site of Gettysburg, Peter and Jay were dubious as to whether

it was used during the battle. A little research uncovered the truth: the revolver was a model developed too late for the battle and was probably dropped sometime after the war. Eventually, it was found and collected as a 'relic' of the battle.

As the handgun demonstrates, the objects in the cases were not necessarily collected during or immediately after their attributed battles. Some objects were, of course, but many were found after the war by visiting collectors, who scoured the battlefields looking for treasures. We can be fairly certain of this, as some labels provide dates from when they were collected; 1886 standing out as one of the latest dates given. Interestingly, my own research narrows down the time frame for when these cases were developed. From my visit to the Grand Army of the Republic Museum in the Frankford area of Philadelphia, PA, I learned that the construction of the cases was not isolated in Massachusetts, but that they were also fashioned in Philadelphia. The Philadelphia cases, similarly constructed as the Medford ones, were put into their final form somewhere just prior to 1900, as a lithograph exists at the current GAR Museum with the cases prominently visible at that time. Assuming a similar timeline in Medford, that places the construction of these cases between 1886 and 1900, a scant fourteen years.

*This artifact, cut from a cracker box was carved in to a wooden spoon by a Union prisoner at Libby Prison.*



## Civil War Panels *continued*

Considering their construction, the cases were clearly a labor of love. It took up to six people, working on average two to three days a week, to empty each case. This involved cutting copper wires, which held most every object in place. Things that were not held by the wires were either sewn into the backing, as in the case of a few buttons, or else screwed in, such as with the 12-lb. shot balls. Bullets and pieces of wood were, more often than not, nailed into the back of the case, sometimes bending the nail to ensure that it remained in place. The backing itself was filthy and ratty, and easily highlighted the rust particles falling from the various metal pieces.

Naturally, the objects were not separated by material, but rather confined together in a closed space. This allowed for all sorts of chemical reactions to occur, which account for the disintegrating labels and high levels of oxidation. To combat all of this, the objects have now been removed from each panel and stored in temporary boxes. Allison has begun categorizing materials based on PastPerfect search terms, into which each object will be sorted. At that time, they will be placed in specially-purchased archival blue boxes with modular designs, to accommodate the

smaller pieces. Meanwhile, Jay and Peter are systematically going through items that have already been entered into the system and filling in the information with their own knowledge and research. This will make the collection more useful and more approachable for the future. At this time, I am completing the preparatory steps for creating an exhibit on the Battle of Gettysburg, commemorating its 150th anniversary. The display, which is set to be unveiled in mid-to-late-September, will be accompanied by updated Civil War displays on the life of the soldier, state of the Union and Confederacy, and most importantly Medford's role throughout the war.

My time at the Medford Historical Society as an intern is drawing to a close, but I wish to continue working with the wonderful individuals I have had the pleasure of working with this summer. There is so much I want to do, and so much that needs to be done, but only so much time to devote. I wish everyone luck with their various projects! I especially want to thank Kyna Hamill and Allison Andrews for agreeing to take me on as an extra responsibility, Peter and Jay for their wonderful knowledge and insight to the collection, and everyone else for being so helpful and excited for the project as I have been this summer. I wish you all well!

## A Note About Medford's Post Offices

by John Anderson



*The central Post Office on Forrest Street circa 1930s*

The April, 1913 *Register* contains a biography of all of Medford's Postmasters, with much too much detail for this article, but also the history of postal service in Medford.

The first post office was established in 1797 at City Hall, located at the present site of RE/MAX Andrew Realty and Carroll's Restaurant. It moved from time to time to various retail stores around the square and in 1849 to the Boston and Maine Medford Square railroad station.

Our two remaining branch post offices are also the oldest.

The post office in West Medford opened in 1852 at the railroad station. It alternated between various buildings, including the Mystic Seminary, before find-

ing a more permanent home in the Usher Building (Bistro 5) which was favored because it was brick and therefore fire resistant!

College Hill Post Office was established in 1863 and was also in a railroad station. It moved several times and was eventually renamed Tufts College.

As Medford grew in the late 19th century, Glenwood (East Medford) opened in 1872 in a grocery store, and a post office opened in Wellington in 1883.

All of these post offices were independent with their own postmasters until a consolidation in the 1890s and 1900s. The *Register* article refers to the fact that "free delivery" was also established during this time, implying that prior to that time you had to pick up your mail at the post office or pay extra! This is not really explained in the 1913 article, since everyone would have been aware of the old ways, just as today everyone remembers VHS tapes and rotary phones.

Wellington and Glenwood closed soon after the consolidation and establishment of free delivery service. Tufts and West Medford continued operating as branch offices, but without their own postmasters.

From time to time, patrons of West Medford's PO see notices of potential closure. The process of consolidation is continuing nationwide. Interestingly, many rural post offices are being consolidated with small retail stores, returning to the model that was commonplace in the 18th and 19th centuries.

5th Annual Medford Historical Society Bike Tour

# Brooks Family Heritage Trail

**Saturday, Sept. 21**  
**9:45 am - 12:30 pm**  
This family-friendly bike tour will visit sites of the Brooks Family of Medford and span over 300 years of history.



[www.medfordhistorical.org](http://www.medfordhistorical.org)

**Helmets required,**  
7-8 miles covered.

**Start: 9:45 a.m. - Whole Foods, 2151 Mystic Valley Pkwy, parking available.**

**End: 12:30 p.m.**  
Brooks Estate Manor.  
*Representatives of M-BELT will be at the Manor and will offer tours until 3 p.m.*

**Cost:** Bike Tour free to MHS & M-BELT members, \$5 for non-members. *(includes lunch),*

**Email:**  
[kynahamill@yahoo.com](mailto:kynahamill@yahoo.com)  
for more information.



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