



President's Overview Meet Medford's Stunt Driver

by John Anderson

The focus of this issue is "volunteerism". In this issue, you will also find a "Brief History of MHSM" to provide a sense of the evolution of the Society over the past 100 years.



For me one of my greatest volunteering pleasures is coming across interesting Medford citizens and the unusual things they have accomplished. Richie Travers is just such a person and I have enjoyed meeting and interviewing him.

Richie graduated from Medford High School in 1959 along with two other well-known Medfordites....Paul Donato, former Mayor and State Rep for years, and Paul Theroux, celebrated author. The Travers family lived on Cross Street until their home was taken for the construction of Interstate 93. The family moved to West Medford. Who knew that the building of I-93 would mean more than a house move for Richie and his friends?

My first connection with Richie was when his donation of items to the Society was approved by our Collection Committee volunteers. In 2017 he donated 2 truck models, some photos and other materials related to his drag racing career in the 60's and 70's. These

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MHSM Officers

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A Brief History of the Medford Historical Society & Museum

by John Anderson

Located at the corner of Ashland and Salem Streets, the Lydia Maria House served as the first home of the Medford Historical Society from 1896 to 1916.



This issue of the Newsletter focuses on what MHSM is actually doing on a day to day basis. For context, I'd like to provide a bit of information on how we got here.

The Medford Historical Society & Museum (MHSM) was founded in 1896. Our original mission was "To collect, preserve, and disseminate the local and general history of Medford and the genealogy of Medford families; to make antiquarian collections; to collect books,... prepare ... papers and records" MHSM was founded as Medford was rapidly transitioning. In 1892, the town reorganized to become a city. At the same time, open space was giving way to industrial, commercial and residential uses. MHSM's founding was in part a reaction to the rapid change.

In 1916, the Society constructed a building on Governors Avenue near the center of town, and it remains our headquarters today. It soon filled with donations of historical documents and artifacts. The Civil War continued to loom

large in people's minds for decades and is reflected in our collections. When Medford's Grand Army of the Republic (GAR) Hall closed in 1931, the Society accepted a large quantity of Civil War memorabilia. In 1948, the Lawrence Light Guard donated its collection of Civil War and other military items to the Society as well.

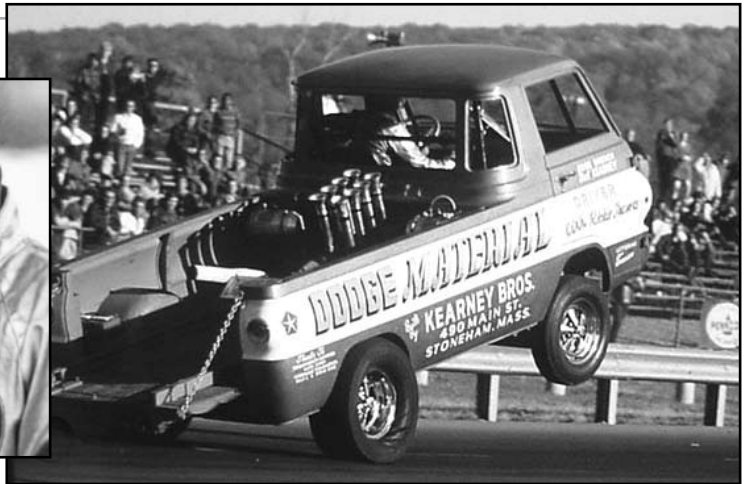
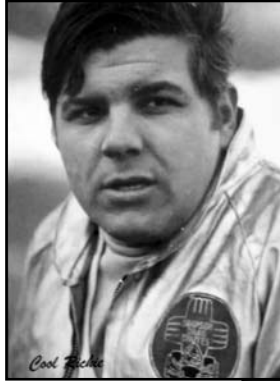
First Rise & Decline

In the early decades, the Society met monthly except during the summer since so many people "summered" elsewhere. Starting in 1898, and continuing for nearly 50 years, the Society published an illustrated quarterly journal, *The Register*. Each issue contained the best papers researched and written by members and previously read at the monthly meetings. *The Register* ceased publication in 1943 and did not resume after the war. All the issues are available at the Museum as well as online.

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President's Overview *continued*

Richie Travers was the master of the "wheelies", the skill of driving a vehicle with so much power that the torque in the rear wheels tips the whole vehicle backwards and the front wheels lift completely off the road.



items were used by Allison Andrews to create a 20th century exhibit for the Society.

Richie has an interesting story to tell. This is more than just his story as it harkens back to an era when cars played a much more prominent role in American society. After WWII car ownership took off. Every family wanted a car, and many found the need for two cars. Annual sales climbed from about 5 million/year in 1951 to nearly 12 million in 1971. This ushered in a new era of suburban living, shopping malls, and the paving of America with parking lots and multi-lane highways. Cars became a sign, especially for men, of who you were – your status and your character. A Ford Thunderbird, a Buick station wagon, and a Cadillac Eldorado sent different messages. Unlike today, each manufacturer had a distinctive, easily recognizable, often glitzy style which they updated every year. Cars were the cellphones of their day – you wanted the latest. Cars were technically much less complicated and with \$20 worth of tools and some advice from a friend anybody could learn to do most of their own maintenance and repair. More adventurous car buffs, like Richie could build hot rods. Drag racing, either on the track or the street was a new pastime for some as was just “tooling around town” to impress the girls. Hollywood portrayed these new pursuits darkly in “Rebel Without a Cause” (1955) or, more nostalgically, in “American Graffiti” (1973).

After High School, Richie bought a 1960 Ford Sunliner, a big V-8 convertible with bench seats for 6. I-93 had recently opened. As hard as it is to believe today, at night there was almost no traffic. Richie and his friends laid down marks for a quarter mile course north of Roosevelt Circle. They took bets and raced until “the cops got wind of it and chased us away.” Unfortunately, in 1966 Medford experienced its own version of James Dean’s 1955 death. Paul Grasso, recent high school graduate and a popular guy around town, lost control of his Ford hotrod on the southbound side of the overpass approaching City Hall. There was no wall there as there is now. He flew off the overpass and slammed into a house across the street, killing him instantly. Several months later he posthumously became a father.

Fortunately, Richie moved on to drag ways and became a MOPAR guy. (That means Chrysler Corporation products for the uninitiated!) Chrysler Corporation, although much smaller, was more innovative than Ford or GM. Dodge was the sporty marque in the Chrysler lineup. It featured the famous “hemi-head” which meant more power. Richie had a day job managing a grocery store but still participated in

racing though prize money was very meager considering the abuse the cars had to take.

Then Richie saw a new opportunity - wheelies! To me, “wheelies” meant teenagers laying rubber in empty parking lots. No, it meant driving a vehicle with so much power that the torque in the rear wheels tips the whole vehicle backwards and the front wheels lift completely off the road. It’s dare-devil drama and looks a bit like a dachshund running fast on its hind legs. When properly adapted, the vehicle can go for hundreds of yards tilted up at about 30 or 40 degrees at over 100mph. With so much power, the first challenge is not flipping over, and the second challenge is to see where you are going! Remember you are now pointed up and looking at the sky. Richie and his Dodge A-100 pickup (see illustration) solved this problem with its unusual “cab over” design and no front hood blocking your view. How do you steer without front wheels on the ground? Richie had a separate brake on each of the rear wheels so he could brake on either side to keep the truck going in a straight line.

Crowds at drag ways loved wheelies. The management paid Richie as much as \$750 for putting on a show. That was a princely sum in the late 60s when you could buy a new Chevy for less than \$3000. He did very well with his first A-100 Dodge pickup truck. Unfortunately, he was ill one day and his buddy ran the stunt and flipped the truck. His buddy was OK, but the truck was totaled. They soon built another and performed for a number of years. Now his drag way earnings rose to as much as \$50,000, a good year’s pay. For \$50,000 you could buy a nice house plus a new car or two for the garage.

Richie eventually retired from the car show business but continued to follow the racing scene. He made video recordings of events and the people involved. He started a video transfer business to save the collections of people who had slides, VHS tapes, and other obsolete formats. As a result, we are fortunate to have some of his recordings available on our website as well as a 45-minute interview I conducted with the man himself earlier this year. You can also find his videos on YouTube. **On the [medfordhistorical.org](http://www.medfordhistorical.org) home page, scroll down to “Richie Travers”!**

Even though racing is now big business and national teams dominate the scene, Richie assures me that most tracks still have events for local car enthusiasts with small budgets. As Bill Golden, a fellow wheelie driver, says in one of Richie’s interview tapes, “Only 24 hours a day is all it takes, and you can be a racer just like that.”

Brief History *continued*

During its first 50 years, the Society was very active and participated in many community events. Membership was as high as 250. This is remarkable considering the population of Medford was around 18,000 as compared to 62,000 today. The old high of 250 was not equaled until 2006. After World War II, the Society was not able to keep pace with the changes occurring in Medford and society at large. With increased car ownership, better roads and new entertainment options such as television, citizens found new ways to socialize and spend leisure time. MHSM remained open, but essentially frozen in time.

The Second Rise & Decline

In 1975, the Society was re-energized when Dr. Joseph Valeriani became President. He was the head of the Social Studies Department at Medford High School and was popular and influential throughout the city. Early in his tenure, the mission of the Society was expanded to "... correct the myths that had grown up over the years...."

During this time, MHSM financed a number of privately published books, including *Medford on the Mystic* and *The Incredible Ditch*. *The Incredible Ditch* is a history of the Middlesex Canal, a part of Medford history largely forgotten after railroads made canals obsolete. These books are still available from the Society.

In 1991, something surprising happened. While rummaging around in the disorganized collection, an officer of the Society and his sons discovered a horde of over 3,000 Civil War photographs that had come to the Society in 1948 and then were forgotten. Due to poor storage, many of the photographs had curled up to the point where they resembled cigarettes! The photos were originally collected by General Samuel Lawrence, Civil War veteran, wealthy businessman, and first Mayor of the City of Medford. After the photos were professionally restored, the collection was recognized as one of the top three Civil War collections in the United States. Selections from the collection were published in a book, *Landscapes of the Civil War* and have been displayed in a number of exhibitions. Now, years later, they have been digitized and are available online at Digital Commonwealth.

In 1991, MHSM President Dr. Valeriani announced his intention to step down. In 1994, Mr. Jay Griffin, a protégé of Dr. Valeriani, became President of the Society. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the Society engaged in a number of worthwhile projects and partnerships but faltered in the core mission to "protect and preserve" historic records. We did not have the resources to keep up with modern standards for archiving and preserving historical artifacts. The condition of the building and collection storage caused our insurance company to cancel the fire insurance. The fact that the poorly preserved Civil War photo collection had to be "discovered" in the building illustrates the state of the collection and absence of effective collection management.

The Third Rise

In 2005, a large number of new members were encouraged to join MHSM. In 2006, the membership elected a new board. Fresh volunteers brought a semblance of order to the building and collection while presenting many new and very popular public programs. These included lectures about the Civil War (including the surprising combat activities of women in the conflict), the role of working animals prior to trucks and cars, the infamous (but unintentional) role of Medford in the introduction of gypsy moths in America, and a series of lectures on Amelia Earhart. To expand program participation and interest, the Society sponsored a hike along the Middlesex Canal, bicycle tours to historic sites in Medford, and a series on "greening" older homes while maintaining their historic character. In a nod to the old *Register*, MHSM began publishing a newsletter with articles of historic interest and announcements of upcoming public programs.

In 2018, we were determined to address our collection management issues. We started with a modest grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. We used the money to fund a formal collection assessment by the Northeast Document Conservation Center. Since then, using their analysis and recommendations, volunteers have spent thousands of hours inventorying our collection and providing improved storage and access. This work has corrected the incomplete, inconsistent, and obsolete paper records and haphazard storage of the past.

Beginning in 2019, we used private donations and substantial Community Preservation Act grants to fund a major building upgrade. This included exterior repairs, insulation, replacement of interior walls, upgraded electrical work and a new HVAC system.

Our Current Challenge

MHSM is a busy, multifaceted, healthy organization. But we recognize the need to evolve and adapt alongside our rapidly growing and changing community. We have new immigrant neighbors and are among the fastest growing cities of our size in the nation. Our collection focuses on the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries. Our volunteer corps and board are aging. We recognize the need to increase demographic diversity within our membership, programming, and collections to reflect the changing reality of our community and society at large. The goals of the last 10 years have essentially been met. We have stabilized the finances, improved the condition of the building, inventoried and protected the collection, increased programming options and membership. To carry out our newly revised mission statement, we are looking for people to help us visualize and move MHSM to the next level:

To collect, preserve, and promote an inclusive understanding of Medford's history, offering educational lectures and programs to the general public. Join us in building a shared sense of Medford's history and rich diversity.

Sunday Afternoons: People are Curious

by Sunday Volunteer Staff



Now that MHSM is open every Sunday from 1:00 PM to 4:00 PM and has new exhibits, we are delighted to see visitors stopping in.

Some explain that they have lived in Medford a long time, or even all their life, but this is the first time they have come in to see what we are all about. They are impressed by how good the space looks and how interesting the exhibits are. Also, they are often eager to share their memories of the city, fondly recalling how they roller-skated at the rink on Mystic Avenue, went to the movie theater in Medford Square, shopped at the A&P market on Salem Street, or attended an elementary school that no longer exists.

Other visitors have a specific goal. A young woman from Mexico said she was taking a walk and wanted to see what is inside the Spanish-looking building that reminded her of where she grew up. Two women in town from Memphis for a conference were eager to compare New England history with what they had grown up knowing in Tennessee, where they had learned about slavery in the South but not about its presence in the North. A father and his teenaged daughter came in to tell us they had been walking in circles trying to find the marker commemorating Sarah Bradlee Fulton for a Medford High School assignment. They wanted to know if we could help them, which we did. We pointed them to the marker on Main Street near the new police station and had a lively conversation about the value and drawbacks of oral history, which is the basis for most of what we know about Fulton. A scholar who researches food justice in the 21st century wanted to learn about Civil War soldiers' rations.

Most visitors, though, stop in with no goal in mind. They see the new sign we put out at the corner of High Street and Governors Avenue, each Sunday at 1:00pm, announcing that we are open and free. So they drop in. From mid-August through the spring, there has been a steady stream of visitors.

Almost everyone gravitates to the diorama showing the center of Medford in 1855. People like to figure out what has stayed the same and what has changed, such as the drawbridge over the river where the Craddock Bridge is now, the old library that is the site of the new one today, or the Osgood House that has a new paint job. Many visitors spend time studying the new exhibits, which touch on various topics, from early entrepreneurs to notable Medford women to Civil War artifacts to Medford's rum industry.

The diversity of the exhibits reflects some of the diversity of Medford, past and present, which people appreciate. A woman with her two teenaged sons thanked the museum for including information about the connection between the production of Medford rum and the system of slavery. Another person especially appreciated the inclusion of Indigenous information and Black history, saying it meant a lot to him as an African American resident of Medford. A Medford homeowner originally from China was interested in all the exhibits but said the information about Herbert Kelley, an immigrant from Nova Scotia, and Pasquale Volpe who came from Italy, particularly resonated with him. An older couple visiting from Europe reflected on the Civil War exhibit and had a long conversation with the MHSM volunteer about the disturbing rise of fascism today.

On a different note, a nine-year-old who came with his mother admired the model ship on display. He explained how the boat he made at school when

they studied Medford shipping sank. "But," he allowed, "it was fun anyway."

Along with our mission of sharing information with the public, visitors share information with us, which is always welcome. A longtime supporter of MHSM described an old Medford brick she found in her basement and asked if we would like to have it. When she brought it in, we could see an explanatory note attached to the brick that revealed it was auctioned off to raise money to support Civil War recruiting in Medford, and it is now part of our collection.

Visitors browse the gift shop and often go upstairs where we house our reference books, subject vertical files, and photo collection. Volunteers assist visitors and researchers with reference questions about house histories, genealogies, Medford history, and more. We also have old photos of Medford and maps to peruse. As many of the materials are

rare, we ask visitors not to bring food up when they come. When people come back downstairs, many comment on what they have learned. A family who recently moved from Somerville to a condo in an 1890s house near Medford Square were delighted to be able to look for old pictures of their house. A young couple new to Medford from Brooklyn, New York, were excited to learn about their new hometown, which they explained feels practically pastoral after living in NYC.

All of which is to say, it is great to have MHSM open again every Sunday afternoon. One visitor, as he got on his bike to continue his Sunday afternoon ride in the autumn, said in parting: "This place is wonderful!"

So do come by to see the new exhibits or do some research. Chat with the volunteers. And if you are interested, get involved as a volunteer yourself. We are happy to welcome new volunteers!

Tidbit from the Medford Municipal Records Collection

by Will Tenney

The Medford Annual Reports, now online on the MHSM website, can offer some humorous insights into the workings of our town.

The following is from the Annual Report of the Park Commissioners in 1919:

The bathing on the shore of the Mystic River at Foster's Court has increased greatly since the building of the Bath Houses by the Commission by order of the Board of Aldermen in 1913. The bathing along the river banks during the warmer months of the year has been the assumed right of the people of Medford and their visitors from outside for many years. This right is still as rigorously proclaimed as in the past, in spite of the many restricting laws that have been enacted, regardless of the fact that in lapse of time the territory has become settled and so thickly populated as to make indiscriminate bathing a nuisance and when indulged in without proper clothing, a menace to the City's morals.

The land on which the bath houses were constructed is under the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth represented by its Metropolitan Park Commission, from whom your Commission, upon request, received permission to allow bathing at Foster's Court and the maintaining of bath houses to accommodate the bathing public.

This privilege was granted with the understanding that the State assume no responsibility in the matter.

The presumption was that in view of the present conditions the Commonwealth does not consider the water sufficiently free from pollution to permit of general bathing.

The houses of corrugated iron of cheap construction have so deteriorated that while the women's and girls' bath house may still be used for a time, the men and boys' bath house has become so thoroughly dilapidated as to be of little use.



The damage to the men's and boys' bath house was so great, principally from innumerable bullet holes, that the repairing, which would require several new corrugated iron plates and a new lock, was indefinitely postponed. To reduce further damage a floor should be laid in the men's and boys' bath house.

The women's and girls' bath house was repaired and closed September 2, 1919; but the men's and boys' bath house was so badly damaged, being without a floor, that there were not sufficient funds in the Bath House Appropriation to make the needed repairs and properly fasten the building for the winter.

The expense this year for each bather was less than one cent; a larger bath house appropriation to improve the bathing facilities would seem reasonable and wise. Proper decency requires that the men's and boys' bath house should be fit to use, and not oblige them to undress outside as is now the case.

Note: Foster Court or Foster's Court, named after the shipyard, hasn't moved, but the Mystic River has been re-channeled and filled. The McGlynn School now stands where people once swam in the river.

MHSM Events Calendar

Notice of Annual Meeting

The MHSM Annual Meeting will take place on May 23, 2024 at 6:30 PM in the Bonsignore Hall at the Medford Public Library. The meeting will be followed by Justice Curran's Lecture on the murder trial of Sacco and Vanzetti.

The agenda will include a report on our activities during 2023-2024, an overview of plans for 2024-2025, and election of the board and officers for the coming year.

All are welcome at the meeting, only MHSM members may vote.

The following people have been nominated and are supported by the Board.

BALLOT FOR 2024-2025

Name	Office
John Anderson	President and Treasurer
Jay Stott	Vice-President
William Miller	Assistant Treasurer
Meg Bowen	Recording Secretary
Ann Marie Gallagher	Corresponding Secretary
Heather Champigny	Director of Collections
Susan Gerould	Director at Large #1
Martha Reagan	Director at Large #2
Will Tenney	Director at Large #3
Sandy Lawrence	Director at Large #4

Members in good standing may run for any of these positions. If you would like to stand for election, please get in touch with us by emailing mhsm.officemanager@gmail.com or leave a message at 781-391-1630. Please let us know by end of day, May 18, 2024 so we can prepare ballots. Otherwise, we will assume that the membership supports the slate and we will call for approval by acclamation at the annual meeting.

MAY

The Murder Trial of Sacco and Vanzetti: Inciting Passions a Century Later
Speaker: Hon. Dennis J. Curran, Justice, Massachusetts Superior Court (Ret.)

Thursday, May 23, 2024, at 7:00 PM, Charlotte and William Bloomberg Medford Public Library

Co-Sponsored by Friends of the Library



On April 15, 1920, a robbery and double murder in South Braintree, Massachusetts, led to the arrest of two Italian anarchists, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. They were tried and convicted at Dedham Superior Court in 1921. No one could have foreseen that this local criminal case would become an international affair.

Arguably the most famous trial in the 20th century, this

murder trial propelled two Italian immigrant anarchists into the international media spotlight.

It divided a nation in the 1920s, and has continued to arouse deep emotions, giving rise to enormous literature.

REGISTER NOW!
SPACE IS LIMITED

Registration for these events is free at
www.medfordhistorical.org/events

Freedom Denied/Freedom Insisted Upon: Selected Documents & Life Stories from the Struggles for Racial and Gender Equality in Medford

Sunday, May 19 & 26, 1:00-4:00 PM, MHSM, 10 Governors Avenue

On display will be material related to the Atlantic slave trade, Abolition, Women's Suffrage, Civil Rights, and equality for Native American people and immigrants.

The exhibit is part of the regional Freedoms Way month-long program at participating museums called Hidden Treasures and will include an interactive hand-out about items on display titled: "Can You Find ...?"

JUNE

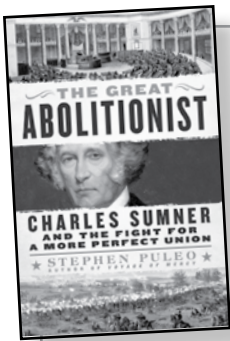
The Great Abolitionist: Charles Sumner and the Fight for a More Perfect Union
Speaker: Stephen Puleo, Author and Historian

Thursday, June 6, 2024, at 7:00 PM, Charlotte and William Bloomberg Medford Public Library

Co-Sponsored by Friends of the Library

During his presentation, The Great Abolitionist, historian Stephen Puleo will relate the story of one of the most influential non-presidents in American history, transporting attendees back to an era when our leaders exhibited true courage and authenticity in the face of unprecedented challenges.

In the tempestuous mid-19th century, as slavery consumed Congressional debate and America careened toward civil war and split apart—when the very future of the nation hung in the balance—Charles Sumner's voice rang strongest, bravest, and most unwavering. Where others preached compromise and moderation, he denounced slavery's evils to all who would listen and demanded that



it be wiped out of existence. More than any other person of his era, he blazed the trail on the country's long, uneven, and ongoing journey toward realizing its full promise to become a more perfect union.

Before and during the Civil War, at great personal sacrifice, Sumner was the conscience of the North and the most influential politician fighting for abolition.

Throughout Reconstruction, no one championed the rights of emancipated people more than he did. Through the force of his words and his will, he moved America toward the twin goals of abolitionism and equal rights, which he fought for literally until the day he died. He laid the cornerstone arguments that civil rights advocates would build upon over the next century as the country strove to achieve equality among the races.

Watch for our Fall Programs

September: African American, Native American, and Afro-Native Histories of Medford

A Conversation with the Initiative on Slavery, Colonialism, and their Legacies at Tufts

October: The Salem Witchcraft Trials: What Really Happened

Speaker: Hon. Dennis J. Curran, Justice, Massachusetts Superior Court (ret.)

November: What's Faith Got to do With It? "Let go of your story . . . Connect to God's Glory!"

A Look at Some of the Remarkable History of Shiloh Baptist Church of West Medford

Speaker: Pastor Gerald E. Bell, Shiloh Baptist Church

December: Deep Time: The Early Archaeology of Medford and Greater Boston

Speaker: Suanna Selby Crowley, PhD, RPA, Archaeologist

An Invitation to learn more about MHSM's work to preserve and promote Medford's history:

Visit 10 Governors Avenue on Sundays between 1-4 PM, see our exhibits, and talk to a docent.

Attend our regular meeting at 10 Governors Avenue on the third Monday of every month at 7PM. Meetings review ongoing projects and events and plan future activities. Members can also learn about volunteer opportunities. All members are welcome to attend Board meetings unless an executive session is called.

A Case Study from the Collection Committee

by Heather C. Anderson, MHSM Director of Collections



The Collection Committee includes John Anderson, Martha Reagan, Sue Gerould, Beth Hayes, Anne Marie Gallagher and me. One of our favorite responsibilities is to review and approve items offered for donation by determining their relevance. As our space is limited, this is often a difficult decision, as there are so many interesting items. How to decide? We take into consideration the following: conditions; how the item relates to Medford; how it might expand an area of our collection; and the story behind the object.

Recently, we were offered two Class of 1937 MHS 50th Reunion glasses by Marcia Coolidge Butman. Marcia has been a generous donor over the years and has offered us many items related to the Dame and Coolidge families. Do you remember the Dame School and that Mayor Coolidge served from 1923 to 1926?

The Process:

- 1. Condition:** Excellent
- 2. Connection to Medford:** Obvious!
- 3. Relation to Existing Collection:** We already have the 1937 Annual School Committee Report, a 1937 MHS Yearbook with photos and many signatures, 50th Reunion Program, 1937 Class Trip photo, and photos and material from the 20th and 25th reunions. WE ARE LOOKING FOR a 1937 Program of Graduation! Please let us know if you have one.
- 4. The Story (always the best part):** Olive Dame Coolidge and Robert Butman both attended MHS, graduating in 1937. Olive and Robert were friends in High School but did not date. Olive lived at 9 Hastings Lane and Bob at 14 Newton Road. They started dating in college - Olive went to Wellesley and Bob to MIT. They were married in 1942 at Olive's family home and settled nearby in Concord where they raised three children, including Marcia. They attended the 50th MHS reunion in 1987. These glasses were in their Concord home after they died, and their daughter Marcia Butman offered them to us.

We were happy to accept them on 11/30/2023.



Join us on May 23rd to hear speaker, the Hon. Dennis J. Curran, Justice, Massachusetts Superior Court (Ret.) speak on The Murder Trial of Sacco and Vanzetti: Inciting Passions a Century Later at the Bloomberg Medford Public Library.

Your Medford Historical Society Newsletter

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

MEDFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM
 10 Governors Avenue
 Medford, MA 02155

