

The South End Historical Society Newsletter

Fall 2016



Construction of MBTA Orange Line cover, 1984.
Richard O. Card Collection, South End Historical Society.

People before Highways: The Southwest Expressway

By Lauren Prescott

Upon leaving Mass Ave station on the Orange Line, one notices the expansive park across the road. With a stunning view of the Boston skyline, the park extends from the South End and Back Bay to Forest Hills in Jamaica Plain, covering almost 5 miles. First opened for use in 1987, the Southwest Corridor Park has been part of the city for almost three decades. But why does the park closely follow the route of the MBTA Orange Line and Commuter Rail? Those

Completed in 1958, Route 128 drained Boston of people and jobs thanks to high-tech industries in the suburbs. The city needed a way to bring people back to Boston and the highway projects were an enticing option.

new to the city may not remember the history surrounding the park. To answer this question, we must go back to 1948.

William F. Callahan, commissioner of the Massachusetts Department of Public Works, released the Master Highway Plan for the Boston Metropolitan Area in 1948.

The proposed plan involved the construction of new highways in the city over the next twenty-five years. The purpose of the project was to solve the traffic
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for upcoming programs, events,
and walking tours

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South End House Tour
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The SEHS newsletter is a benefit of membership in the Society; a nonprofit organization dedicated to recognizing, preserving and recording the historical buildings, monuments, parks and artifacts of Boston's South End and through advocacy, documentation and education to preserve them for future generations.

Individual membership is \$25 per year, Family/Dual memberships are \$40, and opportunities to support the Society at the Supporting (\$100), Patron (\$150) and Benefactor (\$250) levels are also available.

The opinions expressed by the contributors to the newsletter are not necessarily those of the SEHS. Ideas for stories and manuscripts are welcome. Unsolicited manuscripts submitted for possible publication and not used will be returned if they are accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Those interested in reprinting articles must obtain written permission from the editor.

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From the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

After a long, sweltering summer we are finally in my favorite season – autumn! The air is crisp and peak fall foliage is just around the corner. The Southwest Corridor Park is a great starting point for leaf viewing in the South End. Walk along the park, enjoying the changing trees and colorful gardens. Then make your way through the neighborhood's intimate streets and enjoy a hot drink at any of the South End's cafes and restaurants. This fall is also the season of our major fundraiser. The 48th Annual South End House Tour is coming up in a few weeks. This is my first House Tour and I'm excited to share all of our hard work with you!

Our feature article is about the Southwest Expressway. In the 1960s there were plans to build two highways. The first was the Inner Belt and the second was the Southwest Expressway. Countless residents in Boston opposed the project, including many in the South End. When Gov. Frank Sargent canceled the project in 1972, the cleared area was turned into the Southwest Corridor Park. Almost five miles long, the urban park connects the neighborhoods of Boston. Today, residents can enjoy basketball and tennis courts, as well as paths for biking, jogging and walking.

Our second article is about a building close to SEHS, located at 558 Mass Ave. The building is owned by the League of Women for Community Service and both the organization and building have a fascinating history. Over the years the building has fallen into disrepair, yet the history surrounding this building cannot be forgotten. Historic preservation is essential to safeguarding the historic elements of neighborhoods. These buildings can tell powerful stories of our communities and residents. Preserving these stories is vital, yet many organizations don't have the power to save these buildings on their own.

Founded in 1966, the South End Historical Society has served the neighborhood for 50 years! In honor of those founding members, we have included our first newsletter, written in September 1966.

I hope you enjoy this newsletter and the beautiful New England weather!

Lauren A. Prescott

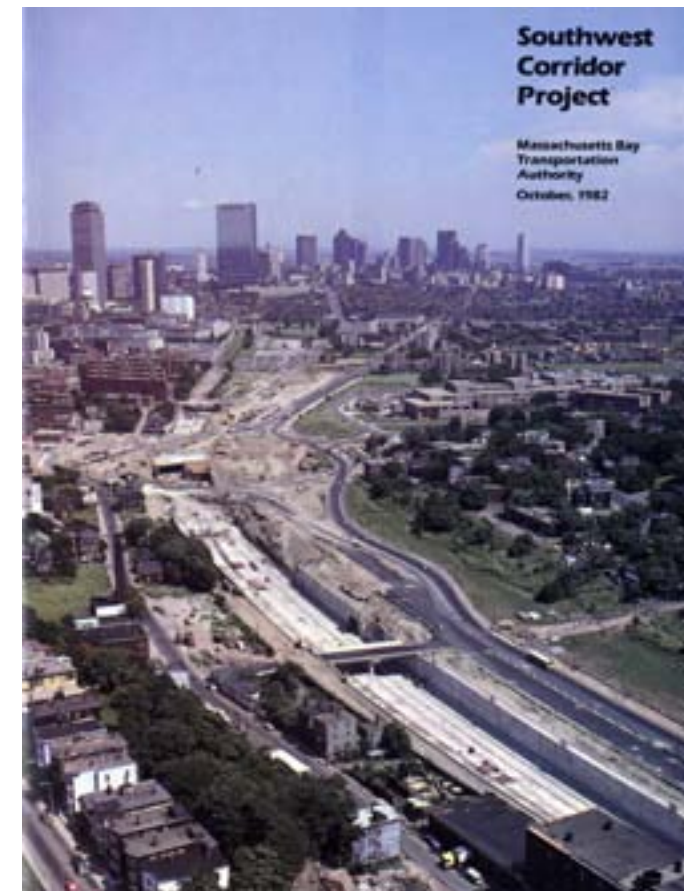
Lauren Prescott
Executive Director



Photo courtesy of Brian Dupont. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/>

(continued from page 1)

problem in the city. "The traffic congestion problems of the Boston Metropolitan Area have been the subject of studies for a number of years [...] we recommend the adoption of a modern high-speed expressway system as

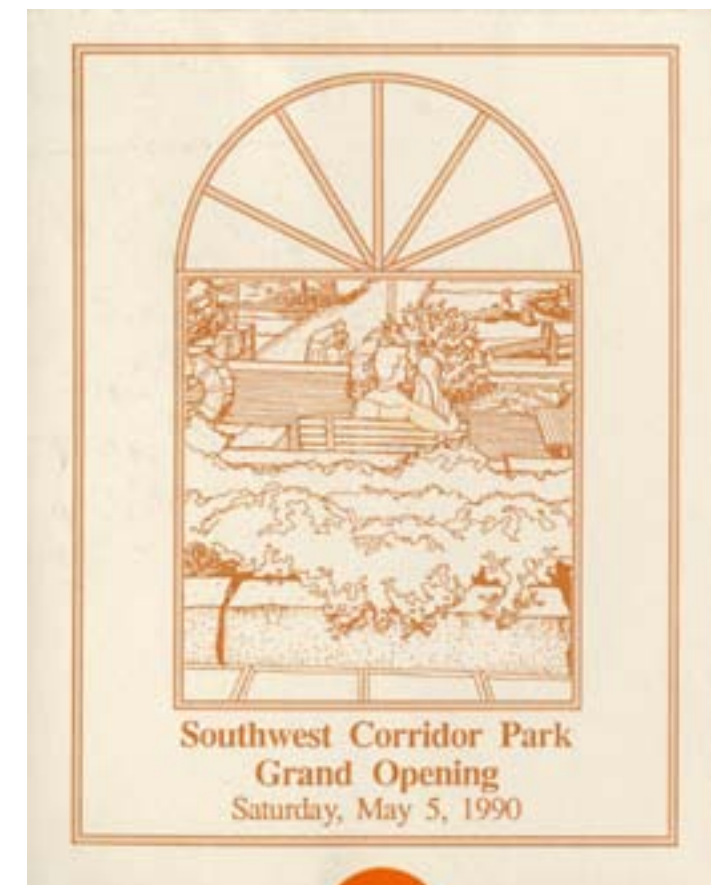


Southwest Corridor Project, 1982.

Courtesy of the University Archives and Special Collections Department, Joseph P. Healey Library, University of Massachusetts Boston: Ann Hershfang papers, 1937-2003, bulk 1970-2003.

the foundation on which highway construction should be programmed for the ultimate solution of the problem."¹ The plan was also meant to encourage economic growth by allowing people easier access into Boston, essentially encouraging more traffic. Completed in 1958, Route 128 drained Boston of people and jobs thanks to high-tech industries in the suburbs. The city needed a way to bring people back to Boston and the highway projects were an enticing option. A bigger incentive was the 1956 National Interstate and Defense Highways Act, which promised to pay for 90% of highway construction costs.

In the 1960s, there were plans to build two highways. The first was the Inner Belt. It was a 10-mile, eight-lane, mostly elevated highway that was to run from Charlestown "through the neighboring municipalities of Somerville, Cambridge, Brookline, then back into Boston through the Fenway, Roxbury, and the South End."² The second was the Southwest Expressway (now known as the Southwest Corridor), a proposed eight-mile, eight-lane highway that was to run from Canton to the South End, connecting to the proposed South End By-Pass. The By-Pass was to be an off-ramp for the Southwest Expressway and Inner Belt, clogging the neighborhood with traffic as cars connected to the Southeast Expressway. The proposed projects would affect thousands of families and hundreds of businesses, who would have to move to make way for the highways. Those that were lucky enough to escape demolition would still have a highway bisecting their neighborhood.



Southwest Corridor Park Grand Opening.

Courtesy of the University Archives and Special Collections Department, Joseph P. Healey Library, University of Massachusetts Boston: Ann Hershfang papers, 1937-2003, bulk 1970-2003.

Timeline:

- 1948:** A Regional plan is proposed which envisions an expressway along the Southwest Corridor, as part of the Interstate network of highways
- 1963:** A plan is developed by the state to build I-95 as a 12-lane elevated expressway through Jamaica Plain and Roxbury, as well as an Inner Belt through Lower Roxbury and Fenway into Cambridge.
- 1966:** The anti-highway movement begins in Cambridge and the demolition begins in Boston. By the end of 1973, more than 500 buildings are demolished.
- 1969:** A demonstration at the State House brings together highway opponents from various Boston neighborhoods as well as environmental groups
- 1970:** Governor Francis Sargent, in response to neighborhood and environmental opposition, stops the highway project to begin the Boston Transportation Planning Review restudy.
- 1971:** The South End convinces Mayor Kevin White to halt plans for the South End By-Pass
- 1972:** Neighborhood plans for redevelopment of cleared land is vital in convincing Governor Sargent to cancel plans for highway in Southwest Corridor
- 1975:** Massachusetts becomes the first state to cash in highway funds for mass transit under new federal funding act, which provided Urban Mass Transit Administration (UMTA) funding for Southwest Corridor
- 1980:** Construction of the new Southwest Corridor project begins, and neighborhoods plan details of park and redevelopment of cleared land
- 1987:** Opening of the new Orange Line
- 1989:** Dedication of Southwest Corridor Park

South End in 1966. Ann and her husband Herb began renovating their home that they bought at auction only to discover the By-Pass project in 1968. They had no idea that the city proposed a four-lane highway half a block from their home. One particularly important detail of the proposed highway project was that it was to go through poorer sections of the neighborhood. In the South End, the By-Pass was to be built along the railroad corridor between Columbus Avenue and Saint Botolph Street, a predominantly black neighborhood.

Ann first heard of it from Urban Planning Aid at a meeting at the Harriet Tubman House on Holyoke Street. She and other South End residents formed the Tubman Area Planning Council. Neighborhoods came together to oppose the highway projects and captured the attention of government officials.

Mayor Kevin White was in favor of the highway project because many of his voters were union workers and they supported a project that promised jobs. Yet South End residents were able to convince Mayor White to halt plans for the South End By-Pass in 1971. “Mayor White wanted to run for Governor and needed votes from our delegates at the Democratic National Convention,” Ann explained. South End residents offered Mayor White the votes he needed if he



Southwest Corridor Park, May 2016.
Photo by Lauren Prescott

helped halt the By-Pass project. Kevin White met their demands and came out against the South End By-Pass.

Governor Frank Sargent also received increasing pressure to stop all the highway projects. It began on January 25, 1969, when a “People Before Highways” rally in the Common brought together 2,000 people. “The crowd was described as including city councilors, uniformed police and firemen, working-class whites and blacks, mothers with kids, church parishioners, and students.”³ Several months later Governor Sargent organized a task force to review the highway plans. Despite the creation of the task force, the city continued to clear land for the proposed highways.

In 1970, Governor Sargent’s task force released a report stating that the highway projects were pushed “not because they are the best public investment ... [but] because they involved ten cent dollars from the state standpoint.”⁴ A month later, Sargent halted work on highway construction and canceled plans for the Southwest Expressway on November 30, 1972.

Despite the cancelation of the Southwest Expressway, the project cleared hundreds of acres and razed countless homes, mostly in Roxbury but also in Jamaica Plain and the South End. Today, part of the proposed highway is now the Southwest Corridor Park (SWCP). It is an urban park that extends almost five miles from the South End and Back Bay to Forest Hills in Jamaica Plain. First opened for use in 1987, a ribbon-cutting ceremony took place for the completed park on May 5, 1990. “Approximately a quarter of the parkland is decked over the railroad tracks, providing more space for grass and plantings, and such recreational facilities.”⁵ Visitors to the park can also enjoy its basketball and tennis courts, paths for biking, jogging and walking. Between the Mass Ave and Back Bay stations, look for the rose and butterfly gardens. If you are near Stony Brook station, visit the Festival Garden which provides free vegetable samples! The Festival Garden is the first public vegetable garden established on Boston city property.

Today, the Parkland Management Advisory Committee (PMAC) and the Southwest Corridor Park Conservancy (SWCPC) maintain the park. Both organizations are



Southwest Corridor Park, 2012.
Photo by SEHS

closely connected. Established when the park opened, PMAC is an advisory committee and has provided a forum for the community regarding the park. The conservancy (SWCPC) formed a little over a decade ago in 2004, and raises money to maintain the park in partnership with the state Department of Conservation and Recreation. The park is also maintained thanks to its many volunteers. In 2015, community volunteers provided over 1,500 hours in landscaping and gardening in the park.

The two organizations are hoping to build community awareness and interest in the park by encouraging neighborhood organizations to organize educational, recreational, arts and/or environmental projects for youth and families. By garnering interest in the park, these organizations are able to invest in a new generation of park users. For more information on the Southwest Corridor Park, the organizations that maintain it and information on volunteering, please visit <http://www.swcpc.org/>.

- 1 Charles A. McGuire and Associates. The Master Highway Plan for the Boston Metropolitan Area. Boston, MA, 1948, 7.
- 2 Jim Vrabel. A People's History of the New Boston. Amherst and Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014, 140.
- 3 Ibid., 146.
- 4 Ibid., 149.
- 5 “Southwest Corridor Park Conservancy.” About SWCPC. Accessed August 11, 2016. <http://swcpc.org/about.asp>. ❖

The History and Mystery of 558

by Daniel Morast

What's happening here? On the southeast edge of Chester Square, amidst the Victorian row houses that architecturally define Boston's South End, a mystery engulfs 558 Massachusetts Avenue. The structure is boarded; the home's ironworks are rusting and its façade is crumbling. This alarming observation belies a truly unique history, and it's one that we must work to preserve.

John Farwell, a wealthy (white) sea captain, shipping merchant and avowed abolitionist first owned the once-stately mansion which was built in 1857. It's been said that through his efforts, the residence was a station on the Underground Railroad prior to the Civil War, protecting Blacks escaping Southern slavery and Bostonian bounty hunters.

In 1920 the League of Women for Community Service, a civic organization created by prominent women of color,



558 Massachusetts Avenue, 1972.
From the SEHS collections.

purchased (and still owns) Farwell Mansion. Founded in 1918, the League (proclaimed by a commemoration plaque affixed to the brownstone structure) “has been dedicated to the cultural and educational advancement

It's been said that...the residence was a station on the underground-railroad protecting Blacks escaping Southern slavery and Bostonian bounty hunters.

of Negro women.”¹ Because of its importance to Black history, the Department of Interior and National Park Service declared the Farwell House and League of Women Headquarters a National Historic Site in 1974.

A brief review of the League of Women and the organization's historic civic activities at 558 Massachusetts Avenue reveals a remarkable legacy wherein the League touched the lives of so many African American women and men in Boston. Originally a social network gathering informally in the first decade of the twentieth century, group members responded to a civil cause that perhaps only they could truly appreciate. The women formed the Soldier's Comfort Unit to assist the needs of Black soldiers and sailors of World War I stationed near or residing in Boston. At the time, 558 was noted to have “marble fireplaces, French gold leaf chandeliers, a ballroom and library, fine iron work around the windows, massive mahogany staircases and doors, Corinthian columns, elaborate plaster work, huge Venetian mirrors on the walls, silver doorknobs and beautiful Victorian furniture.”² The women active in the Comfort Unit held “receptions for black soldiers returning home to Boston and regular visits to soldiers at Fort Devens with knitted sweaters, candy, and cigarettes.”³ With war's end, the dedication and service to Boston's Black community grew; the Comfort Unit became the League of Women for Community Service (LWCS).

In 1932 the mothers and wives involved in the League established a Junior Comfort Unit, “to draw the attention of the younger people to the need of work ... for soldiers and to cooperate in the patriotic service we are trying to render the race.”⁴ During WWII, the League and their Junior Comfort Unit held dances and produced entertainment programs for service men in collaboration with the U.S.O. and the Soldiers and Sailors Committee of Boston.⁵



558 Massachusetts Avenue, August 2016.
Photo by Lauren Prescott

The League's directors, working from their home and headquarters at 558 Massachusetts Avenue provided housing and employment assistance to young black women in a significantly racially-divided Boston. The League's mansion at 558 hosted meetings, lectures, Black cultural productions of music and drama, public art exhibits, and literary study groups at a time when Bostonian Blacks had little access to the arts, education, music or inspirational mentorship. Working in collaboration with the local community, 558 also opened its doors for meetings of the South End Historical Society and the Chester Square Neighborhood Association.

The LWCS website, now off line, eloquently highlighted the organization's past activities. Prominently noted was a reference to the League's first president, Maria L. Baldwin, “One of the most distinguished African-American educators of the late 19th & early 20th century.”⁶ She taught at the Agassiz School in Cambridge where educational officials ultimately named her headmaster, making Baldwin, “the first African-American person appointed to this position in the Commonwealth.”⁷ In 2002 the elementary school was aptly renamed after Maria L. Baldwin, who led the school for thirty-three years.

During the 1940s and 1950s, when young female students of color were not welcome in Boston's segregated college dormitories, the League housed, “dozens of African-American women at its headquarters at 558 Massachusetts Avenue.”⁸ One of the noted student residents was Coretta Scott, who resided at 558 during her courtship with the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

The League's website detailed more recent activities and accomplishments. The organization had annually awarded

One of the noted student residents was Coretta Scott, who resided at 558 during her courtship with the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

the Maria Baldwin Scholarship, “to a deserving female high school senior of African American descent slated to graduate each year.”⁵ The League also administered the Virginia Glennon Housing Program, providing, “housing to three individuals who are actively pursuing graduate education in Boston with subsidized rent at a property in the South End.”⁹ The most recent LWCS activity promoted on the League's website was a March 17, 2012 presentation and ceremony at Simmons College celebrating “Black Women in the Media.” But all activity ended there; the charity had not updated their website for four years.



The League of Women for Community Service Plaque.

Photo by Lauren Prescott

As noted above, the Department of Interior formally recognized 558 Mass Ave. as a National Historic Site in 1974. In the decades since, the League has held numerous

fundraising events specifically aimed at acquiring funds to maintain and restore the infrastructure and exterior of 558.¹⁰

During the filming of the 1984 Hollywood feature, “The Bostonians” (starring Vanessa Redgrave, Christopher Reeve, Jessica Tandy and Linda Hunt), a production company rented the home at 558 for its Victorian decor. Jackie Arrington, LWCS President at the time noted, “We’re most pleased that the hallway walls were sanded and repainted, and that the rental fee they paid us will go toward more renovation, insurance fees of the League, and community service.”¹¹ The Hollywood effort wasn’t the first the League undertook to help the aging structure.

In 1994 the National Trust for Historic Preservation awarded a reportedly modest grant to the League of Women specifically for restoration work at their headquarters building on Massachusetts Avenue. Though a gallant effort, the photograph of 558 today clearly, and most unfortunately, shows that the cumulative assaults of rain, wind, snow and gravity over the past twenty-two years have taken a noticeable toll on the noble, but aging structure.¹²

All of the above adds to the mystery at 558 and alarmingly raises the question: what can we do? Recently, residents of Chester Square reached out to State Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz regarding the building. The Senator, in turn, contacted the South End Historical Society for background information. The Chester Square Area Neighborhood Association has also recently adopted a measure to reach out to elected officials and civic groups to come to the aid of the LWCS headquarters at 558 Massachusetts Avenue.¹³

If you have any insights or would like to save this historic building and help preserve the legacy of the League of Women for Community Service, please send a statement of concern and request for assistance to:

Senator Sonia Chang-Diaz
Massachusetts State House
Room 111
Boston, MA 02133
Email: Sonia.Chang-Diaz@masenate.gov

- 1 “The League of Women for Community Service,” plaque.
- 2 Roses, Lorraine. “A Tale of Two Womens’ Organizations.” Boston Black History. February 22, 2006. Accessed July 11, 2016. <http://academics.wellesley.edu/AmerStudies/BostonBlackHistory/history/tale.html>.
- 3 “History,” League of Women for Community Service. Accessed July/August, 2016. <http://www.leagueofwomen.org/history>.
- 4 “A Tale of Two Womens’ Organizations”
- 5 “South End Junior Group to Work All Summer.” *The Boston Sunday Globe (Boston)*, June 7, 1942.
- 6 “History,” League of Women for Community Service
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Cullen, Kevin. “City Scenes.” *Boston Globe*, April 17, 1992, Metro Region sec.
- 11 Hartfield, Julie. “Hello Hollywood; Filmmakers Give Boston Homes New Wardrobes and Starring Roles.” *Boston Globe*, June 27, 1984, Homes and Gardens sec.
- 12 Andrew, James. “Minority Groups Climb Aboard the US Preservation Movement.” *The Christian Science Monitor (Boston)*, November 9, 1994.
- 13 “CSANA June Meeting Minutes.” Chester Square Area Neighborhood Association. July 7, 2016. Accessed August 8, 2016. <https://csana.wordpress.com/2016/07/07/csana-june-meeting-minutes/>. 

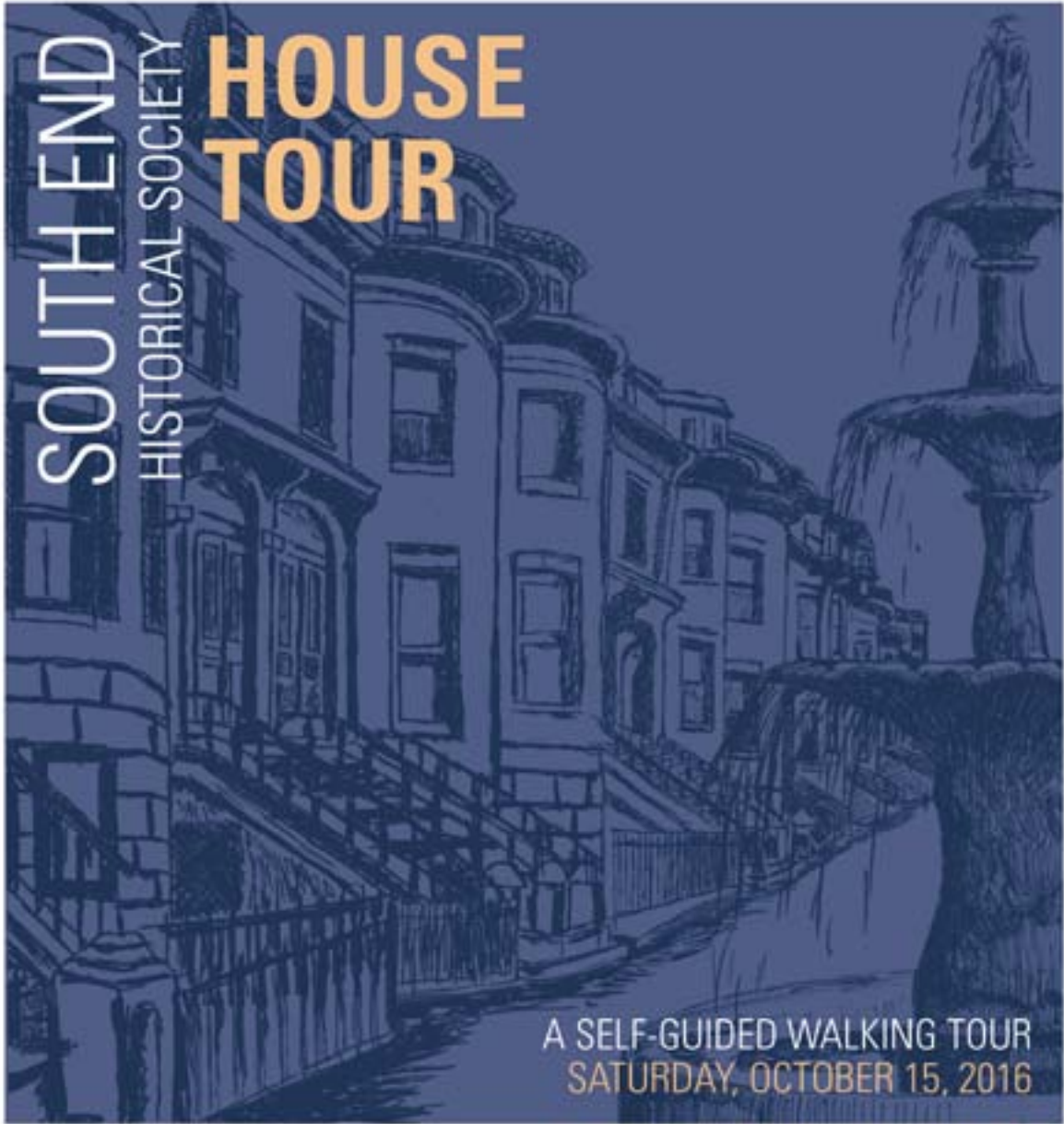
Volunteer Opportunities

Want to be more involved with the SEHS?

We always need new volunteers! We have opportunities for volunteers in: the SEHS newsletter, fundraisers (Spring Ball and/or House Tour), collections, office tasks, preservation, history related projects, programs and events

Interested or have questions?

Call Lauren Prescott at 617-536-4445 or email her at admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org.



The South End House Tour is a self-guided walking tour of private homes and public spaces in Boston’s historic South End. Tour goers are given a ticket that gains them admission to the homes and a guidebook with descriptions of the homes and a map of the tour route so they can take the tour at their own pace.

Saturday, October 15th
10 a.m. – 5 p.m.

General admission for the Tour is \$30 if you purchase your tickets in advance (by credit card, cash, or check), or \$35 on the day of the Tour (by cash or check only). All General Admission Tickets purchased in advance will be available for pick up the day of the Tour at the Boston Center for the Arts Plaza Theater, 539 Tremont Street. There is no need to bring a receipt, your name will be on the will-call list. Contact us at admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org or call 617-536-4445 www.southendhistoricalsociety.org/housetour/

September 1, 1966

A Newsletter of the South End Historical Society:

Greetings, fellow historians. With the impending Labor Day weekend, we know that summer is all but over, and that the maple trees soon will strive once again to match the red bricks of our houses. It seems a good time to pass on to you a few notes on activities concerning our South End Historical Society since the last general meeting.

During the hot days of July, your president showed, I am afraid, all the ambition of a turtle on a sun baked stone. Plans for an outing didn't materialize, because we couldn't get our first two choices of site, and because all prospective entertainers seemed to be vacationing. August has been a bit more productive.

At the August meeting of the Directors, we decided to invite as our speaker, for a general meeting in September, Walter Muir Whitehill, Curator of the Athenaeum and author of Boston -- A Topographical History and Boston in the Age of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. He has accepted our invitation, and will speak at our meeting to be held at 558 Massachusetts Avenue at 8:30 P.M., on Thursday, September 29th. I need not tell you that this is a meeting none of us will want to miss. (Mr. Whitehill and Miss Susan Parsons, incidentally, spent the past Tuesday evening walking around the South End with me, observing some of the restoration and preservation work being done, as well as some of the less gratifying sights.)

At the August Directors' meeting, two new committees were set up. One, under the chairmanship of Doe Sprogis, is working on a house tour to be held in the spring. The second, chaired by Mel Linton, is laying out a pamphlet which is aimed at the education of the public as to the do's and don'ts of house renovations, with especial emphasis on preserving architectural details. We hope to get the co-operation of one of the local banks in the publication of this public service pamphlet.

Meanwhile, Joan Fitzgerald and her guidebook and walking-tour-map committee have been gathering information for these planned publications. Dave Myers has assembled the photo survey project team, and he and Jim Fitzgerald have already printed the first of their street-by-street photographs of houses as they exist in 1966.

I have not as yet heard from any other committees. Our Curator, David Lewis, has, however, received a gift to the Society of a number of photographs from Robert Severy. One hopes that you will be on the lookout for any old South End photographs, documents, books, or artifacts, for we hope to build up a worthwhile collection of South End (and other Boston) historical information.

If you are interested in participating in any of our committee activities, give me a call at 266-1949, or contact the committee chairman. There's certainly enough going on for there to be something for everyone. I am also sure that Betty Gibson, our Society's hospitality chairman, will be glad to have your help with refreshments at any of our coming meetings. And, if you have constructive ideas, speak up. This is your Society, your South End, and your heritage to preserve and to savor.

I'll see you on the 29th, amid the Victorian splendor which the League of Women for Community Service has so generously made available to us.

Dick Card

President
The South End Historical Society

Now on Sale!

The South End in the MFA Gallery Guide and SEHS Tote Bags are now on sale! Make an appointment to pick one up in our offices, or contact us at admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org to have them shipped to you!



Gallery Guide: \$5

Tote Bags: \$15

All orders to be shipped include an additional \$5 fee for shipping costs.



Cast Iron Questions?

Need help restoring, repairing, or replacing your cast iron fence? The South End Historical Society can help! Call or email us at 617-536-4445 or admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org for more information.



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Don't Miss the 48th Annual
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