

The South End Historical Society Newsletter

Summer 2016



Doe Sprogis was actively involved in the South End community for over 50 years. This 2012 photo is featured on the Sprogis and Neale Real Estate website.

Remembering Doe Sprogis

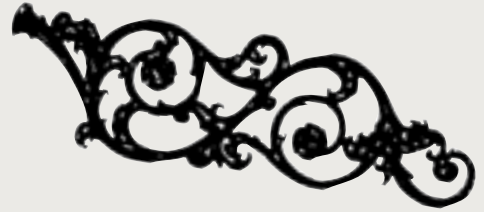
By John Neale

The South End lost one of its best known residents, and the South End Historical Society lost one of its original founders when Doe Sprogis passed away peacefully, surrounded by her family, on June 15th last year at the age of 83. Starting in 1966, Doe organized the Society's first four South End house

Doe and David Sprogis... were among the first of a wave of young buyers looking to move to the South End for its convenience, affordability, beauty and sense of community.

tours and she continued to be a driving force behind every one of them right up until 2014, when she and her husband David opened their own house once more for what turned out to be her last tour.

Doe and David Sprogis bought their home at 184 West Brookline Street in February 1962. They were among the first of a wave of young buyers looking
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Vol. 44, No. 1

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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

Summer has finally returned to the South End! After an unusually cold spring, it's a relief to be outside enjoying the weather again. I hope this newsletter finds you refreshed and ready to enjoy the summer.

For those of you who don't know me, my name is Lauren Prescott and I am the new Executive Director at the South End Historical Society. I have been with SEHS since October 2015, when I came on board as an administrator. I have recently graduated with a Master's degree in Public History from UMass Boston and have previously worked with the Arlington Historical Society and Boston City Archives. I am excited to continue working here at the historical society under this new position and hope to see many of you at our future programs and events!

This newsletter, like our last is dedicated to the memory of one of our most dedicated members, Doe Sprogis. Last summer we were sad to lose both Doe, the originator of our South End House Tour, and Dick Card, the SEHS's founding president. Doe and Dick were the signers on our original articles of incorporation, and they both left an indelible mark on our organization. We are profoundly sad over their loss and hope that you will join us in celebrating their lives.

We also have a feature from SEHS member Paul Wright, who took inspiration from an old family tradition to learn more about a unique sculpture on Columbus Avenue, and the story behind one of the neighborhood's most distinctive houses.

Finally, we'd like to draw your attention to the Boston Redevelopment Authority Urban Renewal Plan extension. Over the last 8 months, the SEHS took a strong stance against the extension of the BRA's authority in the South End and encouraged all of our members to get involved with the process as it went through Boston City Council. The matter has now gone to a vote, with City Council approving a 6-year extension of these powers in all the BRA's proposed urban renewal zones, including the South End. This matter is far from resolved, and the SEHS intends to stay involved with the process as these powers come up for extension in 2021.

Lauren Prescott
Executive Director

(continued from page 1)

to move to the South End for its convenience, affordability, beauty and sense of community. Their friend Royal Cloyd had moved from Beacon Hill to Union Park in 1959 and encouraged them to move to the neighborhood as well. He found their new house for them. "When we looked at



*Doe and David
on Charpentier
Boulevard in
Willimansett, MA,
June 5, 1965.*

it," David recounted, "we walked up and down the street and found people so friendly we made an immediate decision." They paid only \$7,000 for their elegant bow front townhouse, "a song" as Doe told a Boston Globe reporter the next year.

Their new house was a South End time capsule filled with original detail. Besides the plaster crown moldings and walnut woodwork, the house retained its original wool wall-to-wall carpeting on the parlor level. The rear parlor, originally the music room, had musical instruments painted on the ceiling in the bay window. Even the original Victorian square grand piano still occupied the arched niche on the side of the room where it remains to this day. Upstairs, the bedrooms also contained original pieces of furniture. It proved to be a wonderful home for them for more than 50 years, a place where they regularly entertained friends and neighbors and raised their two sons David and Bradford.

Doe was born Doris Aubuchon on September 14, 1931 in the village of Willimansett, Massachusetts, part of the City of Chicopee, located along the banks of the Connecticut River just north of Springfield. She graduated

from Chicopee High School and attended Springfield College. Doe developed a great interest in the advertising business, a field that was more open to women than many were at the time. Pursuing her career meant a move to Boston where she landed a job at Chirurg & Cairns Inc., a prominent advertising and public relations firm at the time with offices in New York City, Hartford and Boston.

While working at Chirurg & Cairns, Doe attended a party on Beacon Hill where she met her future husband David, a native of Cambridge and a civil engineer. They married in 1961, and in 1963, a year after moving to the South End, Doe gave birth to her first son, David. She left her advertising job to devote more time to parenting, but Doe soon enrolled David and herself in a real estate institute course as new homeowners to learn more about the process.

Doe soon found that helping friends find new homes in the South End was becoming a real business for her, and she began working from her kitchen in 1964. She later opened an office on Tremont Street for Sprogis Real Estate, where its successor, Sprogis & Neale Real Estate is still located today.

Doe's flair for advertising served her well when she decided to start selling houses (there were no condominiums at the time). A very stylish woman, always dressed to the nines, Doe's great interest in color and graphic design were just part of her overall interest in the arts. Her



*Founded by Doe Sprogis
over 50 years ago, Sprogis
and Neale Real Estate is
located on Tremont St.
in Boston's South End.*

advertising and graphics were bold and contemporary at a time in the real estate business when most offices were barely aware of the importance of such matters. The brilliant yellow she selected as her principal signage color popped when used against the ubiquitous red brick of the South End's row houses.

Doe found herself selling real estate in the South End at a time when urban renewal projects were changing the

face of the neighborhood as well as the greater city. The early demolition of the South End's New York Streets Neighborhood in the mid-1950s, the demolition of the West End in the late 1950s the demolition of Scollay Square in the early 1960s, and finally the ongoing demolitions of historic buildings in the South End created an atmosphere of urgency among new residents of the neighborhood who had come to value its Victorian heritage.

Led by founder Richard "Dick" Card (Doe had sold him his townhouse in 1964), a group of concerned residents that included Doe and David helped form the South End Historical Society in 1966. It would take many years for them to realize their dream of making the neighborhood a state-recognized landmark district (officially created in 1983). Ultimately about 25% of the neighborhood's original fabric would be lost to demolitions, but through its efforts, the Society succeeded in preserving the largest concentration of Victorian row houses remaining in the United States.

Doe loved her real estate work, but the arts were always near and dear to her heart. She and David were once again in on the ground floor when they and a group of neighbors founded the Boston Center for the Arts (BCA).



Doe and David at a party circa 1974.

Doe and David's friend Royal Cloyd eventually became the first President of the BCA when it was officially established in 1970 and David served on the board of directors. Doe contributed to its early success by helping to bring the New England Art Show to the BCA's centerpiece, the Cyclorama building. To this day, the Cyclorama is still the home of its successor, the Boston International Fine Art Show, as well as many other exhibitions and shows.

Doe also devoted her time and support to the Children's Art Centre and its parent organization United South End Settlements (USES), as well as the Community Music Center of Boston at the BCA. Doe regularly took watercolor classes at the Harriet Tubman House, home of USES, and was particularly proud to have some of her works displayed there during exhibits.

To quote SEHS board member Frances Blair's father Rusty Aertsen: "Doe was exceptional, truly one of a kind. She sold an entire generation of South Enders their houses and in so doing, she and her family became their lifelong friends. She was the grandest of ladies and a shining star to everyone lucky enough to know her."

When Doe wasn't selling real estate or working on neighborhood events she most enjoyed spending time with her family. Her sons David and Bradford had started families of their own and Doe took to being a grandmother with great relish. Summers at their second home by Horseneck Beach in Westport, Massachusetts was her favorite way to spend time with them, walking along the sand and collecting stones and shells to take home and paint. When her son Brad started to look for a summer home of his own he ran a few Cape Cod possibilities past her and she would invariably discourage him because of cost. When Brad eventually found a home just doors away from their own house in Westport, Doe didn't even bother to ask the price and said, "Oh, you can afford that!" Needless to say, the sale went through.

Doe and David loved travel, and they saw a great deal of the world over the past five decades. They regularly spent a month in Provincetown in the summers or a month in Key West during the winters. More distant trips included many river cruises throughout Europe, a visit to Latvia to seek out the Sprogis family roots, and very memorably, a trip to Buenos Aires with friends that allowed Doe to make use of what she had learned in her recent tango lessons.



Doe and David in front of 184 West Brookline Street, circa 2008.

When all the travel was finished, Doe came back to her favorite home, the South End. It had changed her life just as she helped to change so many lives in the neighborhood. She leaves behind a remarkable record of public-spirited service to her community and a long list of loyal friends who will always miss her. To quote SEHS

When all the travel was finished, Doe came back to her favorite home, the South End.

board member Frances Blair's father Rusty Aertsen: "Doe was exceptional, truly one of a kind. She sold an entire generation of South Enders their houses and in so doing, she and her family became their lifelong friends. She was the grandest of ladies and a shining star to everyone lucky enough to know her."

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.



In addition to her husband, David, Doe leaves her two sons, David and his wife Cindy of Watertown, Bradford and his wife Louise of Needham, and four grandchildren, Max of Watertown and Madison, Bradford and Lilly of Needham, and a brother, Howard Aubuchon of Pennsylvania. ❀



Doe and David and our former Executive Director Hope Shannon on the left at SEHS's 2013 Soiree.



MEMBERSHIP REMINDER

Our membership year runs from January 1 to December 31. If you have not yet renewed for 2016, please do so soon. Individual memberships are \$25 and family/dual memberships are \$40. Additional opportunities to support the Society include the supporting membership at \$100 (\$60 tax-deductible), the patron membership at \$150 (\$110 tax-deductible), and the benefactor membership at \$250 (\$210 tax-deductible). Checks for membership payments can be made out to South End Historical Society and sent to the same at 532 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, MA 02118. Or you may visit our website at southendhistoricalsociety.org/membership and renew online with a credit card.

All memberships that aren't renewed by May 1st are considered lapsed and membership benefits will cease.





South End Lion



by Paul M. Wright

My wife Judi and I moved from Amherst to Boston's South End in 1972 with two preschool-age boys, Paul-David and Joshua. The big city was exciting, unknown territory for us after living in semirural western Massachusetts, and the boys and I would often go out on exploring expeditions. One of our walks took us outbound on Columbus Avenue where we discovered a massive stone lion at sidewalk level outside number 511.

Being a goofy dad I stuck my finger in the lion's mouth and pretended it bit me, much to the boys' consternation and subsequent amusement. As the years went by and grandchildren came along visiting the lion and feigning a bite would become something of a family ritual—first Paul's children, Taylor (now 18), then Caroline (15), then Paul Michael, II (13), followed by Josh's, Aviva (11), Isaac (8), and this past Thanksgiving with Maya (3).



Maya Wright, Thanksgiving Day, 2015
(Photograph by Paul M. Wright)

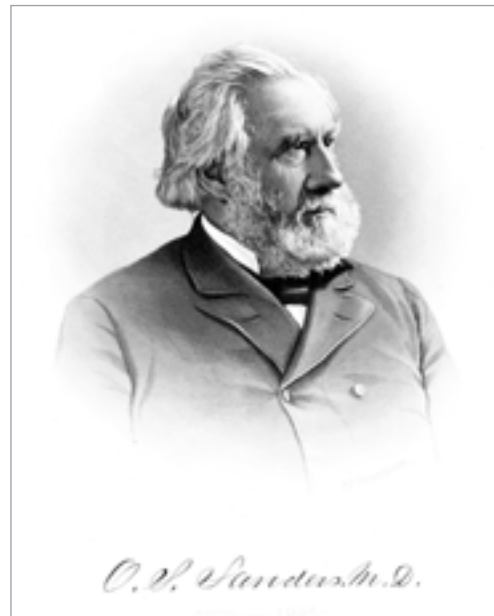
At first unasked and for a long time unanswered was how and why such a lion—an uncommon sight I suppose on a residential street of any city—came to our neighborhood. Despite our affection for him he responded only with stony silence.

It turns out that lion, sculpted out of a granite monolith from New Hampshire by one Giovanni Bettelini,¹ was installed by Dr. Orren Strong Sanders, a proud native son of the Granite State and a prominent homeopathic physician, when he had built in 1872 the house, now much altered, at the corner of Columbus and Greenwich Park. The house, designed by the well-known architect Thomas W. Silloway,² in a highly wrought Gothic style was untypical of South End rowhouses. Apparently, Dr. Sanders with his nonconforming house and exceptional

lion wanted to make a statement. The arrival of the lion himself was announced in the *Boston Daily Globe*:

Columbus Avenue is to have a new ornament in the form of a lion, carved from marble [*sic*]. It is to be placed at the corner Greenwich Park, in front of the residence of Dr. Orren S. Sanders.³

The good doctor served on the Boston School Committee, helped found the New England Home for Little Wanderers, and received an honorary degree from Dartmouth College. He lived in the house and kept a consulting room there until he died full of honors in 1898.⁴



"O. S. Sanders, M.D."
(Engraving from *History of Merrimack and Belknap Counties, New Hampshire, 1885*)

"Residence of O. S. Sanders" [511 Columbus Avenue]
(Engraving from *History of Merrimack and Belknap Counties, New Hampshire, 1885*)



Detail of Stone Lion, 1885

The fate of the house in the two decades after Dr. Sanders's death needs further research. In any event, by 1931 it had become an African American funeral home run by James B. Wright (no relation to the present writer), then was vacant for a year. Beginning in 1934 the first of a series of presumably interlinked African American churches occupied the building, starting with the First Church of the Messiah, which interestingly had a female pastor, Mary J. Moore, from 1937 to 1940. It then housed Moore's Tabernacle, presumably named after Mary J., from 1941 to 1949 and eventually was the location from 1950 to at least 1981 to what became known as the Zion Fire Baptized Holiness Church, overseen for many years by Pastor Ora J. Davidson.⁵ Throughout all these years the lion remained in place, a silent witness to many social and cultural changes.



"African-American Boy with Stow[n]e Lion, South End, 511 Columbus Ave." Ca. 1934 - 1956
(Photograph by Leslie Jones, Courtesy of the Boston Public Library, Leslie Jones Collection)

An interesting, revelatory, but inaccurate description of the house and its residents appears in the diary entry for February 27, 1938, of Arthur Inman, an eccentric and overtly racist resident of the Garrison Hall Apartments in the nearby St. Botolph Street neighborhood

Columbus Avenue. Houses that once were fine look more squalid with neglect than houses which never were fine. Negroes living in the houses that once were fine, sauntering the streets with the air of being in their own African village, idling before poolrooms and drugstores. The mansion with the carved lion recumbent before it is now a colored undertaking establishment. Before that it was a religious meeting place. Before that it was empty. The building still beautiful, though soiled. A nurse in black, a child with golden curls, a man wearing a top hat, a woman in silks should be coming down those red sandstone stairs which turn so gracefully, and an equipage with jingling harness should be waiting at the curb. But that is fancy. Down the steps comes a small black negro with oiled hair.⁶

Giving the lie to the racist notions of Inman is the life and career of Reverend Davidson's son Lowell Davidson (1941-1990) who grew up in the house, went to Boston Latin School (class of 1959)—one of the few black students in the school—where he was a record-setting



"Lowell Skinner Davidson"
(Senior class photograph from *Liber Actorum, 1959*, Courtesy of the Boston Latin School Archives)

track star, went on to Harvard University, and became a well-known jazz musician. We can imagine that as he went down the graceful stairs on his way to Latin School his hand gave the nose of the recumbent lion a friendly pat.⁷

Sometime in the early 1970s the building's original Nova Scotia sandstone façade on Columbus Avenue, which had eroded over the years, was covered with light brick sheathing totally out of character with the red-brick and brown sandstone surroundings.⁸ In the mid-1980s the house came into the hands of a developer, who rehabbed it

as the Bailey Mansion Condominium Trust. This name derived from some bit of mistaken urban folklore that assigned residence in the house to one of the partners in the Barnum & Bailey Circus—one assumes because of the grand lion sitting out front.⁹ With the oversight and



511 Columbus Avenue, ca. 1964
(Photograph by James Kermegis for the Boston Redevelopment Authority, Courtesy of the Boston Landmarks Commission)

assistance of the Landmarks Commission the developer's architect removed the light brick and came up with the fanciful red-brick façade we see today that tries to pay homage to the original design expressed on the Greenwich Park side.¹⁰



511 Columbus Avenue, ca. 1972
(Photograph Courtesy of the South End Historical Society)



511 Columbus Avenue, ca. 1972
(Photograph Courtesy of the South End Historical Society)



511 Columbus Avenue, Summer 2010
(Photograph by Paul M. Wright)

During the rehab there was discussion of putting a protective cage or fence around the lion, but the Landmarks Commission objected, and the lion remains

free to this day for little kids and doting grandfathers to stick their fingers in his mouth.

[Much more is to be learned about this material, and I would welcome input on this article. Information about Rev. Ora Davidson and his son Lowell would be useful, as well as any information about the building's residents and uses before it was converted to condominiums. I can be reached c/o the South End Historical Society, 532 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, MA 02118, admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org. I am grateful to Alison Barnett, Jean Gibran, Kate Kruckemeyer, Ken Kruckemeyer, John Neale, Hope Shannon, Judy Watkins, and Judi Wright for reviewing a draft of this article.]



South End Lion, December 2015, aetat. 142
(Photograph by Paul M. Wright)

Notes

- 1 Keith N. Morgan, ed., *Buildings of Massachusetts: Metropolitan Boston* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2009), entry “SE31 Dr. O. S. Sanders House,” p. 144. The material of the sculpture is almost certainly incorrectly identified as “sandstone,” but it should be noted that the material needs further research. One source cited below (Hurd, *History*) states that it is “carved from a block of granite selected by the doctor himself,” while another (*Globe*, 1873) states that it is marble. See also Penny Cherubino, “Attention to Detail,” *The Boston Sun*, Feb. 25, 2016, p. 10. My thanks to Ms. Cherubino for directing me to the Morgan book.
- 2 Morgan, *Buildings of Massachusetts: Metropolitan Boston*, p. 144; and Cherubino, “Attention to Detail,” p. 10. Silloway (1828-1910) was a prolific architect of churches. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Silloway, accessed Feb. 26, 2016. Thanks to architectural historians Keith Morgan and Roger Reed for information on this building and to Reed in particular for directing me to his primary source for the entry in Morgan’s book: “Architecture in the City,” *Boston Daily Evening Transcript*, November 1, 1872. The *Transcript* article is very valuable for the information it contains on the materials and specific designers, contractors, and artisans who worked on the house.
- 3 “Local News,” *Boston Daily Globe*, Nov. 1, 1873, p.8.
- 4 Information on Orren Strong Sanders can be found in D. Hamilton Hurd, ed., *History of Merrimack and Belknap Counties, New Hampshire* (Philadelphia: J. W. Lewis & Co., 1885), pp. 471-73. Also useful was Richard Herndon, comp. and Edwin M. Bacon, ed., *Boston of To-Day: A Glance at Its History and Characteristics* (Boston: Boston Post Publishing Company, 1892), p. 381. Sanders’s obituary, “Old Boston Physician,” was in the *Boston Daily Globe*, Nov. 21, 1898, p. 10. See also S. A. Sylvester, M.D., et al, “Necrological Report, Dr. Orren S. Sanders,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Homœopathic Medical Society*, vol. XIII (1899), pp. 39-40.
- 5 Information on the occupants of the house is derived from successive annual issues of the street directories of the City of Boston (various publishers and imprints) consulted in the Boston Athenaeum.
- 6 Arthur C. Inman, *The Inman Diary: A Public and Private Confession*. 2 vols., edited by Daniel Aaron (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), vol. 2, pp. 828-29. See also, Shaun O’Connell, ed., *Boston: Voices and Visions* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), p. 284.
- 7 See *Daily Boston Globe*, “Latin’s Davidson Cracks Own ‘C’ 800-Yard Mark,” Mar. 3, 1957; and “Latin Star Breaks Reggie ‘B’ 440 Mark,” Feb. 27, 1958. See also *Liber Actorum 1959*, published by the seniors of the Boston Latin School (Boston, 1959), “Lowell Skinner Davidson,” p. 30; and the “Lowell Davidson” entry in Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lowell_Davidson, accessed 12/01/2015. In Adelaide M. Cromwell, *Developing a Black Meritocracy: A History of Black Graduates of Boston Latin School* (Boston: Boston University, 1985) Davidson is listed as one of four black 1959 graduates, p. 45. Thanks to the indefatigable South End historian Alison Barnet for information about Lowell Davidson’s career as a musician, and to Boston Latin School Archivist Valerie Uber for a copy of Davidson’s yearbook photograph.
- 8 Urban planner Ken Kruckemeyer suggests that this may have been a result of the Boston Redevelopment Authority’s urban-renewal driven “façade restoration” program.
- 9 This mistaken notion is thoroughly debunked in James R. Holland, *Boston’s Notable Addresses: Historic Homes and the Residents That Made Them So* (Boston: Bit of Boston Press, 2011), pp.16-17. Holland’s informant was John Neale, Historian for the South End Historical Society. Thanks again to Alison Barnet for this reference.
- 10 Information on the rehab processes can be found in the Landmarks Commission file on 511 Columbus Avenue. These files are currently in the process of digitization and difficult to access. Thanks to Rosanne Foley, executive director, and Meghan Hanrahan Richard, South End preservation planner, of the Boston Landmarks Commission for help with this. ✎

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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Doe Sprogis

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