

The South End Historical Society Newsletter

Spring 2017



Jonas
Chickering,
Popular
Science
Monthly.
1890.

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*From a Modest Craft Operation
to a Major Industrial Enterprise:*

JONAS CHICKERING AND THE PIANO FACTORY

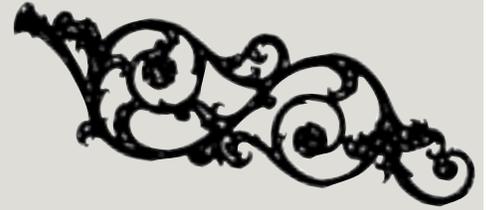
By Roberto Poli

At 29 Chester Square, now 568 Massachusetts Avenue, stood the residence of Elizabeth Sumner Harraden (1803-1879). Eliza, as she was called, purchased

In 1843, Jonas patented a one-piece cast-iron plate as a structural support for larger grand pianos, an innovation so influential that it was eventually adopted worldwide.

the bow-front brownstone at the south-east corner of the square in the mid-1860s and lived there with her daughter, Anna, and her son in law, John Henry Willcox. Willcox covered the position of organist and choir master at the nearby Church of the Immaculate Conception on Harrison Avenue, adjacent to the early settlements of Boston College.

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South End Historical Society

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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 seemingly endless winter, spring has finally arrived! I hope this newsletter finds you refreshed and ready to enjoy the warm weather that awaits us.

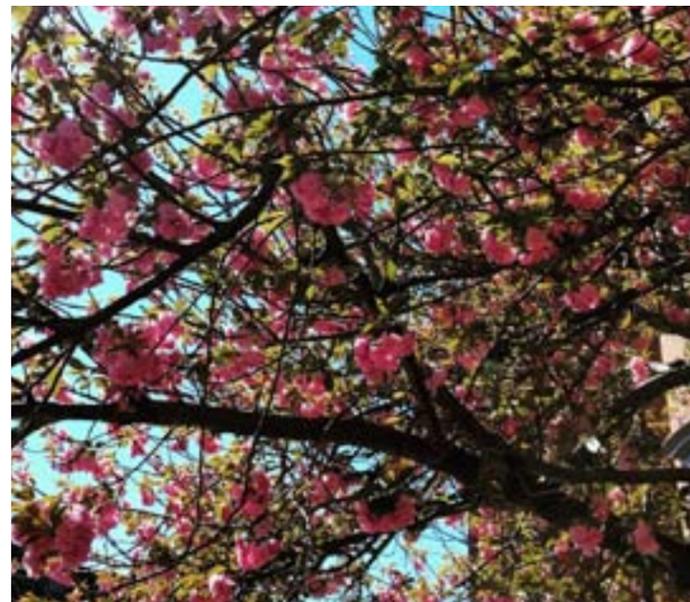
This newsletter brings you two interesting articles. Our feature article is about Jonas Chickering and the piano factory. Turning a modest craft operation into a major industrial enterprise, Chickering was one of the leading piano manufacturers in the United States. A devastating fire in 1852 demolished Chickering's original headquarters at 334 Washington Street. Shortly afterwards, Chickering purchased a vacant lot on Tremont Street, close to Chester Square. In the 1970s, the building was converted to artists' studios and residences.

The second article concerns our newest collection item! John Neale, SEHS Historian, has generously donated a portrait of John Davis Williams to the historical society. Williams was a wine and liquor merchant and lived on Washington Street in the South End in the early 19th century. He was one of the early purchasers of land on the Boston Neck when it was developed in the decades following the American Revolutionary War.

I am also pleased to announce that due to your generosity, our annual appeal continues to be a success. We hope you have had a chance to see the results of the complete restoration of the historic wooden oriel and significant improvements to the deteriorated cornice. With your support, we were able to undertake the most ambitious improvements yet to our historic headquarters, the Francis Dane House. This was a major step in restoring our historic home to its former glory, but there is still work to be done.

As we undertake a multi-year project to restore and preserve our headquarters, we hope to set an example for the standards of restoration that we feel should be maintained throughout the historic district. If you have not already, we hope that you will consider making a tax-deductible contribution to help us meet this goal.

Lauren Prescott
Executive Director



Flowers in bloom outside the South End Historical Society

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Immaculate Conception Church, 1911
(SEHS Collections)

Eliza was well known in the neighborhood, as she was the widow of Jonas Chickering, the founder of the Chickering Piano Manufacturing firm. Jonas was born in 1798 in the small village of Mason, New Hampshire. At the age of twenty he moved to Boston, where he worked for cabinet maker James Baker, after three years spent as an apprentice in the workshop of John Gould, near his birthplace in the town of New Ipswich. A year later he was working for John Osborn, who owned a small piano-making business.

In 1823, Jonas decided to form his own company, and established a close partnership with James Stewart, a Boston piano maker. That year, their first efforts produced fifteen pianos, the first one of which sold for \$275. That same year, in November, Jonas married Eliza at a private home in Dorchester. By 1827 Jonas was working independently, turning a modest craft operation into a major industrial enterprise. Chickering enjoyed great success thanks to his genius and audacity, addressing the building of pianos with utmost devotion, and displaying great interest in acoustical and technological improvements. His success grew on account of his humility

and camaraderie, and he showed loyalty and appreciation toward his employees, whom he treated with generous wages.

In 1843, Jonas patented a one-piece cast-iron plate as a structural support for larger grand pianos, an innovation so influential that it was eventually adopted worldwide. By the late 1840s, Chickering was one of the leading manufacturers in the United States, and his work was recognized at an international level when he was honored with a gold medal at the 1851 London World's Fair. Such was his impact in the world of piano making that in 1852, of the nine thousand pianos produced in the country, one thousand were made by the Chickering firm. By the mid-1850s, Chickering was manufacturing about 1,500 instruments per year, a production whose revenue amounted to \$200,000.

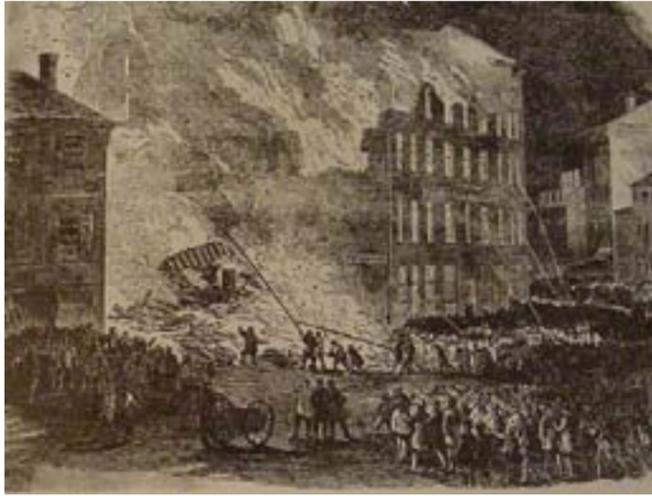
The company's headquarters was located at 334 Washington Street. It was a five-story building built in 1837, and hosted a large wareroom and a small performance hall. On the night of December 1, 1852,

On the night of December 1, 1852, the building burned to the ground in a terrible blaze. Much loss was experienced, including the tragic death of a watchman.

the building burned to the ground in a terrible blaze. Much loss was experienced, including the tragic death of a watchman. The damage was estimated at about \$250,000, half of which was uninsured. The Boston Atlas reported about the fire in a mournful tone:

It is not a mere Piano-Forte Factory which has been destroyed, but a familiar temple of music, to which not only our own worshippers have paid daily devotion, but into which the pilgrims from many a foreign land have come [...]. Mr. Chickering's loss is not to be measured by money. The patterns, the scales, and all the drawings, which have been the results of his long experience and close calculations, the work of many an evening hour of patient thought, have all been destroyed in a night. One instrument in particular will be a great loss. For a year past Mr. Chickering has been engaged in planning and constructing a new piano, which would possess many advantages over those now used in parlors. He had spent

weeks and weeks upon its preparation, and had got it so far completed that in a day or two it would have been ready for exhibition. This instrument, with all its patterns and scales, is destroyed with the rest.



Lithograph of the fire at the Chickering Factory on December 1, 1852
(Roberto Poli, private collection)

Jonas did not let the catastrophe impede his trade; plans were quickly made to use some land adjacent to the ruins. Eventually, a large vacant lot just half a block from Chester Square, on Tremont Street, was favored. With no time to waste, the construction of a new factory began in the early spring of 1853.



Bromley Map with Chester Square on the right and the Chickering Factory, outlined in grey, in the lower left. 1874
(SEHS Collections)

New energy was added to the business when in the early months of 1853, Jonas brought into the company his three sons Thomas, Frank and George, and renamed the company Chickering & Sons. The four of them set out with great excitement about the new facilities, when another low

blow hit the family: Jonas died of a stroke in December 1853, at the age of fifty-five, only several months away from the completion of the new factory. Some eight hundred people followed the funeral procession, and the ringing of church bells was ordered all around the city to honor its illustrious citizen.

The firm was now in the hands of Jonas's three sons. The most influential of them was perhaps Frank, who inherited his father's inventiveness and ambition. In 1867 he garnered the Imperial Cross of the Legion of Honor, presented to him by Napoleon III for his contributions to the arts – one of over two hundred awards he received while at the helm of the company. Frank moved to New York in the late 1850s to conduct the family business there, while George and Thomas remained in Boston.

The new monolithic factory, whose address was 791 Tremont Street was the second largest building in the United States at the time (the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. was the largest) and featured the latest technological advances, including steam-power engines. It was designed by architect Edward Payson. To our modern sensibilities, the intrusion of such a huge structure, with its ninety-foot-tall smoking chimney in the middle of a luxurious residential neighborhood, may look inappropriate. It does especially in the context of the bare landscape of the South End: indeed, the back of the building seems to be an unreasonable addition to a city's urban development.

Yet much of the land facing the back of the building had not been developed, or even filled and the openness of the landscape probably made the contrast starker than it had



Tremont Street, taken from the parlor window of 504 Massachusetts Avenue.
(SEHS Collections)

been anticipated. Still, much thought was given to the manner in which the façade would blend harmoniously into the architectural landscape of the square and its surroundings, and in the way the tall chimney in the back of the building would not be seen at street level, peeking above the rooftops of the square's five-story townhouses.



Chickering Piano Factory, 791 Tremont Street, ca. 1972 (SEHS Collections)

Named colloquially "The Piano Factory," in 1972 the building was converted to artists' studios, galleries, and residencies. Its history transcends piano making: during the Civil War, part of the building became the temporary home of the Spencer Repeating Rifle Company, which produced over eleven thousand of the rifles used on the battlefield.



A lithograph of the Chickering Piano Factory, 1856. *Boston Almanac*.

Today, no city planning would allow a factory to be introduced to the fabric of its urban development; and perhaps for that very reason, no factory would be built with such consideration for its architectural attractiveness. The imposing façade remains as a nostalgic figure, next to buildings that are more modern and a gas station. ☒



Pictures from SEHS Collection Available for Reproduction

Pictures from the South End Historical Society's collections are available for reproduction. Fees vary depending on the photograph and the intended use.

Most reproduction requests ask for images from our popular 1972 South End Streets Survey. The Streets Survey includes approximately 3,000 images taken by the Historical Society in 1972 documenting every extant South End building. These images were used in the Historical Society's application to place the South End on the National Register of Historic Places, which was successful. Image reproductions from the South End Streets Survey carry a fee of \$30 each for a 300 dpi digital copy.

If you are interested in reproducing a SEHS image for personal, commercial, or research purposes, please contact us at 617-536-4445 or admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org for more information about our image collection, fees, and policies.



Image from the 1972 South End Streets Survey





Portrait of John Davis Williams, ca. 1835-45
(SEHS Collections)

Portrait of John Davis Williams: SEHS's Newest Acquisition

By: Robert D. Mussey, Jr.

The South End Historical Society thanks our historian John Neale for his recent donation of a portrait (ca. 1835–45) of John Davis Williams.

John Davis Williams (1770-1848)

Williams was a prominent wine and liquor merchant living on Washington Street in Boston's South End. He was one of the early purchasers of land on the Boston Neck when it was first developed in the first two decades after the Revolution. His relative Jeremiah Williams conveyed the property to him, one of the original proprietors of "the 1400 foot lots" at the North end of Boston Neck. A rare early photograph of 1423 Washington Street, the main North-South artery descending Boston Neck at the intersection of Malden Street, depicts his large and impressive three-story Federal style house with cupola. This was near the southern limit of the "1400 foot lots." His main store, which he operated in partnership for many years with his brother Moses Williams, was directly opposite his house on Washington. His brother-in-law Daniel Weld's house was located next door. Williams was married to Weld's sister Hannah.¹

Williams's house was long a landmark in the area because it was always painted green. An 1855 history of the Boston Neck by "Gleaner," described Williams "whose well-known partiality for a particular color is still perpetuated

in his green house and green store." The author also noted that "Beyond these lots [to the South] on the city lands, there stood year after year, only the gallows – that landmark of civilization– the traveller's guidepost at the entrance of a great metropolis!" This was the spot for public executions for the meanest criminals. "Gleaner" was a pseudonym of Nathaniel Ingersoll Bowditch, an early insurance actuary, "property conveyancer" and dedicated researcher of deed histories of Boston

He was one of Boston's early true millionaires and in heady company with Boston's leading textile manufacturers, merchants and real estate developers.

properties.² His assembled research and hundreds of property histories and plot maps including that of Williams are at Massachusetts Historical Society.³

At the height of his commercial success in the 1840's, Williams was listed in one contemporary source as the seventh-highest taxpayer in Boston. He was one of Boston's early true millionaires and in heady company with Boston's leading textile manufacturers, merchants and real estate developers. His probate inventory detailed mostly commercial Boston real estate holdings worth \$920,654, and personal property valued at \$316,211.07,

including stocks, household furniture and receivable accounts. The enumeration of his entire estate extends to twenty-three pages.

His Washington Street "Mansion House" was valued at \$11,822. His brick store opposite his home on Washington Street, with two wooden stores and stables was appraised at \$28,000. Furniture listed in the front room (parlor) of the first floor included "2 Mahogany pier tables, marble slabs [\$] 50.00". One of these is now at the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, along with the original receipt to Davis from 1818 from Vose & Coates to Williams. The other table of the pair is in a private Massachusetts collection.



Portrait of Chester Harding, ca. 1860-65.
Photo courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LC-DIG-cwpbh-03466
(digital file from original neg.)

The painting is attributed to noted Boston artist Chester Harding. Williams' probate inventory also listed "4 Family Portraits by Harding" in the same first floor front room. One of these four is undoubtedly the present portrait of John Davis Williams. The subjects of the other three portraits are unidentified and their whereabouts unknown, but were possibly his wife Hannah (Weld),

his brothers Moses and Aaron Davis Williams, and/or perhaps two of his five children (David Weld, George Foster, Harriet Weld, John D. W., and Sarah Ann Williams).

Many of Harding's portraits employed the similar nondescript dark backgrounds. A portrait by Harding of Grace (Fletcher), Daniel Webster's first wife, now at Massachusetts Historical Society (copy at the Hood Museum, Dartmouth), she appears to be sitting in a virtually identical low-back upholstered chair with flat arms and flat upholstered arm pads.

The portrait will be part of an upcoming exhibit in 2018 at the Massachusetts Historical Society on the furniture of Isaac Vose. A leading furniture maker in Boston's early 19th century, Vose's home and shop were located at the corner of Washington and Dover (now East Berkeley) Streets. The exhibit will include a number of items once owned by John Davis Williams, including our portrait.

- ¹ For Williams' genealogy, see Louise Case and Eleanor H.D. Pearse, comp., *List of the Descendants of John Davis and Hannah Davis Williams*, copy at *New England Historic Genealogical Society; New England Historic Genealogical Register [NEHGR]*, vol. 106 (1952):142; and vol. 102 (1948): 232.
- ² Gleaner, (pseud., Nathaniel Ingersoll Bowditch), "Old Grants of Neck Lands," *Fifth Report of the Record Commissioners*, 1880 (Boston: Rockwell & Churchill, 1884), pp 41-43.
- ³ MHS: Bowditch Collection of Boston conveyances, Ms N-2044 Tall (11 cartons of records). ❧

Volunteer Opportunities

Want to be more involved with the SEHS?

We always need new volunteers! We have opportunities for volunteers in: the SEHS newsletter, House Tour (and other fundraisers), 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.

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