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 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.

*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.*

*(continued on page 3)*
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 cornice 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 meet this goal.

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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.

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 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.

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 spring of 1853.

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 months of 1853.

The imposing façade remains as a nostalgic figure, next 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.

Today, no city planning would allow a factory to be introduced to the fabric of its urban development; and pictures for 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@southernhistoricalsociety.org for more information about our image collection, fees, and policies.
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 Williams’s house was long a landmark in the area because it was always painted green. An 1855 history of the Boston

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 $[5] 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.

The lead portrait here is one of the two life-size portraits by Chester Harding (ca. 1860-65). The portrait was painted for Daniel Webster’s first wife, Sarah Foster, and shows her seated in her famous oriel window. Another portrait of Sarah Foster by Harding was painted in 1860 and is currently in a private collection in the United Kingdom. The present portrait is attributed to Harding on the basis of the use of the similar low-back upholstered chair with flat arms and flat upholstered arm pads present in both portraits. A third portrait by Harding, “Old Grants of Neck Lands,” Fifth Report of the Record Commissioners, 1880 (Boston: Rockwell & Churchill, 1884), pp 41-43.

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 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.


3 MHS: Bowditch Collection of Boston conveyances, Ms N-2044 Tall (11 cartons of records).