



THE SEHS NEWSLETTER

532 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02118-1402

Vol. 21, No. 1

Sprucing Up 532 Massachusetts Avenue

by Stephen Greene

As varied and interesting as the history of the Francis Dane house is, I can assure you that the repair and maintenance are equally interesting. The challenge for us is to catch up on the maintenance that has been deferred for many years. We are making progress, as you will see from what we have done in the past two years.

First, you need your proverbial committee. We formed, had our meetings, set out an agenda of work to be done, and promptly had a hundred times more work than money. Alex Adkins used his architectural talents to draw floor plans, plans were discussed for improving the meeting facilities so that we might lease out the function space. Meeting code and access requirements were so costly that these ideas were quickly dismissed.

Then reality set in: the roof leaked. Repairs were made, only to have other leaks appear. The roof had been a high priority item on the list of work that needed to be done, but to do the whole job in 1989 was projected to cost around \$25,000. This included three separate roof areas, and the mansard, which now has asphalt shingles. When we had to repair the top floor ceiling, just to have additional water damage after a rainstorm, it was time to make some compromises. Though the decline of the local real estate hurt many investors, it did

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Sidewalks in the South End

Dear Members:

from Arthur F. Howe

In 1806, the trustees of the lands on the Neck sold a parcel of land on the corner of Washington and Springfield Streets to William Porter. One of the trustees who signed the deed was Charles Bulfinch. A provision in the deed said that William Porter should build "a dwelling house or store not less than three stories in height and shall lay and maintain a foot walk of brick, ten feet wide and secured by hammered stone, the whole extent of the front on Washington Street." As the South End was developed through the nineteenth century, photographs show that all sidewalks were paved with brick.

The next period of major development in the South End came in the late



1960s and '70s under the Federal Urban Renewal Plan. The City's contribution to this plan was the upgrading of the infrastructure including water and sewer lines and street and sidewalk reconstruction. Contracts for these improvements were all under the supervision of the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA). Nearly three quarters of the South End streets were rebuilt and in all cases brick sidewalks were installed. Two major streets, Columbus Avenue and Tremont

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Sidewalk in the South End

A New Historical Description of the Allen House Freestone Palace at the South End

by Stephen Jerome

"The large stone dwelling house at the corner of Worcester Square and Washington Street, on the ground formerly owned by Mrs. Fitz Henry Homer, is in process of construction. The exterior is nearly completed and is very elaborate: the materials used for the same is of Connecticut stone; the windows have ornamental pediment caps, supported by leaf trusses, and stone balconies to each. The porch is supported by two columns, composed of four rounds, making the same cluster columns; the rounds run down and come out in the form of a lion's paw, clasping the caps to pedestals. The caps to the columns correspond with the trusses to windows. The sides fronting on the square and Washington street each have bay windows of stone with French gables, and in each gable the proprietor has had cut in bold relief his coat of arms.

Extending round the building is a carved belt in imitation of a chain. The second story windows are similar to the windows below. The cornice is heavy, overhanging like the Egyptian; a profusion of carving ornaments the soffit, with leaf trusses at the angles, in pairs; each side has a gable carved running up level with the top of the roof, of stone, with a cornice as above described; each gable has a peculiar shaped window in the form of a heart reversed. The roof is of the French style, with dormer windows to correspond. The flat part of the roof is surrounded with an ornamental sawed trellis. Surmounting the whole is the cupola, new and original in style, with French gables on the front sides, and finished with finial on top. The exterior of this house has more carved work on it than any other house twice its size in the city, and when finished, it will be quite an architectural curiosity; the proprietor, A.H. Allen, Esquire., has spared no expense in carrying out his new and peculiar design. Mr. McNutt, of the firm of Curtis and McNutt, is the designer and builder. Joseph Coburn is the mason. We understand the inside will be furnished to correspond with the exterior."



This description, quoted in its entirety from the September 24, 1859 issue of the *Boston Saturday Evening Gazette*, is the richest and most detailed contemporary account of the Allen House yet to surface; it follows a brief notice in the August 27th issue of the same newspaper:

"The most ornate freestone house in this city is now being erected by A. H. Allen, Esquire. It attracts great attention and promises to be, when completed, a great addition to our specimens of architecture."

The long article brings to light the long obscured names of both the builder, who is credited with the design, and the mason. Both McNutt and Coburn were well known members of the building trade in mid-nineteenth century Boston, as indicated by their long and active involvement with the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics Association. In 1860, Hiram Curtis and John J. McNutt are listed in the Boston Directory with a Sawing Mill and Box Manufactory at 458 Harrison Avenue with offices at 23 State.

The firm of Curtis and McNutt is credited with the carpentry work for the Boston Journal Building, built

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the season following the construction of the Allen House, on Washington Street in downtown Boston in the "Egyptian and Roman styles" from plans by John Roulstone Hall for publisher Charles O. Rogers of Chester Square.* In an earlier partnership with Joseph F. Paul, McNutt added to and remodeled an existing building at 43 Congress Street for tailor and restaurateur Joseph Stark from plans by John R. Hall.

A dozen years previous to the construction of the Allen House, Joseph Coburn was one of the builders of the old Fitchburg Railroad Station, the granite Gothic structure with, as Walter H. Kilham described in *Boston After Bulfinch*, "massive battlemented towers (that) dominated Causeway Street with an air of imperishable permanence" but which, unlike the Allen House, no longer remains.

By 1859, brownstone, or freestone, was the preferred building material in the fashionable circles of Boston, as seen in the Arlington Street Church (1859-61, Arthur Gilman, architect) and its neighboring mansions along Arlington Street in the Back Bay. As the account of the Allen House implies, the choice of freestone was a deliberate and conscious decision to make a grand statement in the South End. It served as an advertisement for the broad range of abilities of its builders as well as the extraordinary taste of its owner.

In many respects, the Allen House represents a highwater mark in the early history of the South End. As John Neale and others have noted, the Allen House mirrors the history of the neighborhood, for Aaron Allen, like the fictional figures Silas Lapham and the father of George Apley, left the South End for the Back Bay, in this case after a residency of less than a dozen years in the "Freestone Palace." After Allen's departure, its use as a club, union and school for many years until its abandonment in 1961 assured its survival; its future, though now perilous, is worthy of further adaptive reuse.

*NOTE: See "A Splendid Block of Houses: John R. Hall, Charles O. Rogers, Calvin Swallow and the Development of Chester Square and West Chester Park," *The SEHS Newsletter* (Spring, 1991. Volume 20.)

Sidewalks in the South End

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Street, were later done under a special Federal Program and for the first time the unhappy compromise of concrete sidewalks with a brick strip on the curb side was introduced. The folly of concrete sidewalks can clearly be seen on parts of Tremont Street where the stark white concrete is beginning to look like "a dalmatian" with all the black spots caused by chewing gum.

By statute, the South End Landmark Commission has jurisdiction over public areas in the South End. In the *Landmark Guidelines*, approved by the whole community at a public hearing in 1983, Section III, Public Areas, states, "The intent is to retain and improve those aspects of the public area which contribute to and enhance the character of the South End," and under Sidewalks and Curbs, "Public sidewalks should be designed and constructed to reinforce the character of the district." In 1971, the South End was

placed on the National Register of Historic Places. Probably nothing enhances the historic character of the South End more than the brick bow front row houses and the brick sidewalks.

There is now a controversy in the South End as to whether new sidewalks should be brick or concrete or a corruption of both with concrete and a brick strip along the curb. The arguments being put forth for concrete by various proponents are that concrete is safer for the elderly and the handicapped, is easier to shovel in winter, and is less expensive. All of these are spurious arguments. If the safety issue were true, the city would be inundated with law suits since many parts of the City have long had brick sidewalks. Beacon Hill, City Hall Plaza, Back Bay and much of the South End are examples. Landlords in these same areas have been able to remove snow in the winter without undue hardship. The matter of expense has been created by the Department of Public Works. Their specifications for brick sidewalks call for building two sidewalks, a four inch concrete slab and then a brick veneer on top. The preferred sidewalk in the South End has been brick laid on sand or stone dust so that water can percolate through and provide better aeration and water for the street trees. Ann Johnson, landscape architect for the BRA, has said that the South End trees are the healthiest in the city, probably because they do get moisture and are not subject to the constant glare from concrete sidewalks. According to the head of the Bricklayers Union, the cost of brick on stone dust is at most 20% more than plain concrete, not 100%, as stated by the DPW.

The Department of Public Works is drafting a master plan for sidewalk replacement in the South End, as a result of a request by the South End Landmarks District Commission to avoid constantly having a review each time a street comes up for replacement. Preliminary information is that the master plan shows that the sidewalks along the main "traffic arteries" will be replaced with concrete, while the "residential" side streets that already have brick will be replaced in brick. Side streets that currently do not have brick will be replaced according to the wishes of the residents on a block-by-block basis.

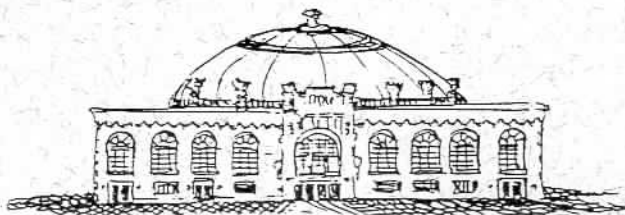
This concept for the master plan is entirely unacceptable under the guidelines for the Landmark District, which are extremely clear. Concrete is not appropriate for the Landmark District under any circumstances, detracting from the South End's historic character. Although the city may like to think of Tremont Street, Columbus Avenue and Washington Street as "traffic arteries," these remain residential streets that are also the South End's most highly visible byways. They do not deserve second class treatment and are critical to the Landmark District's historic character.

The South End Historical Society will be doing everything possible to ensure that the city lives up to its obligations to the Landmark District and the quality of life in the South End. Brick sidewalks are as critical to the South End as they are to Beacon Hill, helping to define our neighborhood as one of the most unique historic districts in America.

Starched white antique linens wrapped in pink ribbons....

Antique Dealers Flock to Spring Cyclorama

by Elizabeth Sippel



The Cyclorama Flea Market of Antiques and Collectibles is back and celebrating its 21st year on March 28 and 29 at the Gettysburg Cyclorama building, the Boston Center for the Arts, 539 Tremont Street. This bi-annual event benefits both The South End Historical Society and the Boston Center for the Arts. A large number of diverse dealers will be present.

Andrew Anderson will once again be participating. This will be his third time at the Cyclorama. This collector and dealer started selling for the first time at the Cyclorama in March of 1991. His main interests include antiquities and 20th century collectibles.

Andrew is an artist himself, a graduate of the Museum School at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. He works at Neil Beckerman Antiques in Brookline Village and learned about collecting primarily through reading and on-the-job training. He attributes a great deal of his knowledge to the owner of the shop. In addition to selling at shows, he also sells through Neil Beckerman. Andrew and his wife Ellen, who is also an artist, started collecting 8 years ago. Former residents of the South End, they reside in Jamaica Plain. Eventually, they would like to open their own shop.

Eleanor Strong and a group from the **United South End Settlements** (part of the Harriet Tubman Program and located at the Rutland School in the South End) will also be participating. The proceeds help support activities of the after-school program of the United South End Settlements. Ninety-five percent of the crafts that are sold are made from recyclable materials, many of which are donated. The items consist primarily of Christmas ornaments and folk crafts, such as doll house furniture.

Known as the World Fellowship Workshop, the group was until five years ago associated with the YWCA. Originally, the funds made by the crafts supported international YWCA programs. The World Fellowship Workshop has been part of the Cyclorama since the early 1970s.

Marsha Manchester is a dealer in antique linens. Her interest in linens developed about 20 years ago when she and her husband first opened their antique store and explored estate sales for furniture; there was very often a box of heirloom linens, and Marsha always found it a

pleasurable challenge to clean the linen.

In 1984 Marsha's husband went into business with a partner, and she began selling linen at shows in order to support her gardening hobby. She discovered how much people love starched white linens wrapped in pink ribbons, and it has now become her primary interest. All the linens she sells are antique. Marsha completely restores the linen herself, from the cleaning process (she uses an antique wringer) to the ironing, which she claims is the "bottom line."

This is just a tiny sampling of the more than 100 dealers that will be present at the Cyclorama. Please come and support The SEHS and the Boston Center for the Arts! Admission is \$4, or \$3 with enclosed coupon.



Photo courtesy of Richard O. Card.

Betty Gibson Remembered for Her Style and Achievements

by Robert A. Bennett

When thinking of Betty Gibson, the first word that comes to mind is *style*...in her clothes, certainly her hats, the way she would slide in and out of her Mercedes roadster, her manner, and, of course, in her houses. Born Bertha Catherine Gibson in West Roxbury, she spent most of her life in the Boston area. She served in the U.S. Navy during World War II and retired from the Reserves in the late 1960s as, she was convinced, the Navy's oldest lieutenant.

Following the War, she worked in retailing for a few years before getting started in real estate in the '50s with the Codman office on Beacon Hill. Her first house was a small one, one of two pairs still standing in Warrenton Street near the Charles Street Playhouse. When she moved in, John Codman was prompted to say, "You must be very socially secure." What an understatement about someone who led the pack.

Later, she marketed apartments and town houses in the first section of Charles River Park. About this same time she "traded up" to a house on Melrose Street. She soon set her sights on those terrific houses on Chester Square and lived briefly on East Concord Street while starting work on her Massachusetts Avenue house, where she lived in comfort and splendor on only one floor until shortly before

Originally the home of a realistic panorama of the Battle of Gettysburg — today the Cyclorama is part of the Boston Center for the Arts and houses the twice-annual Flea Market of Antiques and Collectibles, which will be held Saturday and Sunday, March 28 and 29.

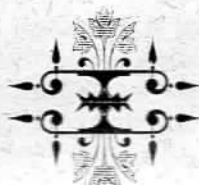


photo: Ron Chapman

Betty Gibson, July 4, 1976, on Boston Harbor Cruise sponsored by The South End Historical Society.

her death. Her quarters were spacious enough that she was able to keep the rest of the house as a well-maintained rooming house. Betty shared her gracious home with many people through house tours and in the constant entertaining she did in her promotion of the South End.

During all of her real estate career she was very active in the Greater Boston Real Estate Board, serving on a number of committees. This, of course, gave her an additional forum for selling the South End. She was always a "visible" person and never shy in her compulsive, full-time preoccupation of convincing people that the South End was a fascinating, viable neighborhood and community. She accomplished her self-assigned role well. There is no doubt that the South End as it stands bears the Betty Gibson imprint.

Bob Bennett worked with Betty Gibson for several years when he first started in real estate in the mid-1960s. Now retired, he spends a portion of the year in Mexico City but still returns to the South End to keep abreast of development.



A Glimpse of the Victorian Aesthetic

By Elizabeth Sippel

— Eclecticism characterizes the Victorian style that was so popular when the South End was created. During 60 years of history (roughly, the 1840s through the 1890s), style after style emerged at an alarming rate: from Neo-Gothicism in the 1830s and '40s, to Egyptian, Rococo and



Opulent Victorian style in a drawing room on Union Park.

Renaissance revivals in the '50s, '60s and '70s, to Louis XVI revival in the '60s and '70s, to the exoticism of the Orient and the Near East in the 1870s and '80s, and finally to the Colonial revival of the late '70s through the turn of the century.

Despite the lack of a seemingly uniform and consistent style in the nineteenth century decorative arts, it is not difficult to recognize a piece of furniture created during the Victorian years. All are marked by a dark, heavy opulence, and arranged with a certain cluttered informality.

The Victorian aesthetic is the result of numerous factors: the series of revivals developed partly from a new interest in history that came about during the Greek and Roman excavations that occurred in Europe in the early part of the century. The changing styles were facilitated by the new age of industry which allowed furniture to be made by machine rather than by highly skilled, and paid, artisans. And the Romantic Movement, calling for expression and emotion, led to the emphasis on the act of lounging that was required by several new styles of furniture (such as the chaise-longue), and the curvaceous and flowery motif of forms inspired by nature.

But the most important continuous thread that joins the

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Calendar

First Tuesday of every month:

South End Landmark Commission
Room 801, Boston City Hall
4 PM
For more information call 635-3850

Second Thursday of every month:

The South End Historical Society Board Meeting
The Francis Dane House
532 Massachusetts Avenue
7:45 PM

CYCLORAMA FLEA MARKET OF ANTIQUES AND COLLECTIBLES

Saturday, March 28, 11 AM - 6 PM
Sunday, March 29, noon - 6 PM
Cyclorama, Boston Center for the Arts
539 Tremont Street, Boston
Admission \$4; \$3 with coupon

SOUTH END HISTORICAL SOCIETY 26TH ANNUAL BALL

Saturday, April 25.
8 PM - midnight
The Abbott Lawrence House,
5 Commonwealth Avenue

ANNUAL MEETING

Election of Board of Directors
Program: William Clendaniel, President of Mt. Auburn Cemetery will give a slide talk on the cemetery. Time and location to be announced

EARLY EVENING WALK THROUGH MT. AUBURN CEMETERY, CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

Thursday, June 4
Time to be announced
Mr. Clendaniel will lead us on a walk through this historic and beautifully landscaped cemetery.
Mount Auburn Cemetery

Library Notes:

Books in The SEHS library are now included in a computer file, listed by title, author and subject category. Any donated books should be given to Dick Card or Fran Duffly to be entered in the file. Books and photographs in the library are for use at the Society office, not to be removed. In rare cases (such as publication) where brief removal is necessary, Dick Card or Fran Duffly may grant permission.

We are looking for two books: *The Book of Boston, Fifty Years' Recollections of the New England Metropolis*, by Edwin Monroe Bacon, 1911, and *Lost Boston*, by Jane Holtz Kay, 1980.

Notecards for Every Season

The South End Historical Society is selling handsome notecards, appropriate for all occasions. They are \$1 each, and are available individually or in packs of ten. The cards depict an illustration from

Gleason's Pictorial of 1853, entitled "Sleigh Racing at the Neck." In the background of the scene of the popular Victorian winter pastime is the 1848 Edward Preble Deacon House, mid-century Boston's grandest house. The cards are blank on the inside. All proceeds benefit The South End Historical Society. They will be available at the Cyclorama Flea Market on March 28 and 29, 539 Tremont Street (see Calendar of Events). They are also available at the SEHS office. For more information, call 536-4445.



GLEIGH RACING ON THE NECK, DORSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Sprucing Up 532 Massachusetts Avenue

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help us when we decided to split the work up into affordable projects. We were able to get a quality job done on the top level of the roof at a cost that we were able to pay out of pocket. Leaking roofs don't wait for the mortgage applications to be processed.

Yes, I did say mortgage. We had applied for a mortgage, but the economy, which helped us get better prices for the roof, had hurt the banks. The mortgage went nowhere and the maintenance and repairs still had to be done. We resolved ourselves to operate out of pocket for those items that were of the highest priority.

Painting the trim and installing Nixolite were the next order of business. Pigeons had taken up residence on our elaborate lintels, badly soiling the front of the building. Nixolite, a strip of pins to keep pigeons from lighting, was installed when the painting was done. The installation was so successful that most people asked us why the Nixolite had *not* been installed. Again, we were fortunate to have had the job well done. Another area of the roof became a priority because of the leaks. It was repaired. We have been fortunate that the work we have done in stages has not caused any damage to previously done work. This had been a concern while we were doing initial planning of larger projects, such as the whole roof. We still have not done the mansard.

Our biggest challenge is to get enough money to carry on the additional projects. The interior stairwell is due for painting; carpet runners should be installed. Wallpapering and some repairs to plaster also need to be done. We are looking forward to installing the cast iron railing in front of the house. This will protect the wonderful garden that one of our neighbors has planted for us. If any members have some creative ideas in helping us reach our financial goals, your thoughts and ideas would be greatly appreciated. Maybe someone will donate a winning lottery ticket!

NEW MEMBERS:

Susanne K. Albert and Sam D. Albert	Sheila Grove
Sixto A. Alonso	Andrew Hering
Therese and Kevin Beauvais	R. A. Horne
Kristen and Robert Beazley	David Kantrowitz
Emily Belliveau	Edward S. Lewis
Deborah Benson and David D. Killam	Laurel S. Luby and Thomas C. Beland
Elizabeth S. Boveroux	John L. McDonough
Nancy Carleton	Michael K. McLean
Nancy and Allen Clapp	Bradford J. Minnick
Bess and Arthur Collias	Rudy L. Mitchell
Community Music Ctr. of Boston, Inc.	Elden Saathoff
Thomas J. Donnelly	Elizabeth Sippel and Kathleen Peets
Patti Ferris and Mike Melikian	Sanford A. Smith IV and James C. Devereaux
John Golden	Marcia and Barry Soloff
	Paul Stuart Spyрка
	April and Stephen Tang
	David Stuart Tobin
	Haven Tyler
	Silke and David Wallace

A Glimpse of Victoriana

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diverse elements of the nineteenth century together is the ascendancy of the middle class. Ambitious and imitative, they re-interpreted old-established forms, borrowing motifs and styles rather than creating original ones.

The re-interpretations of previous styles are, in addition to the new interest in history, an attack of the rising middle class on the static formality of the old, declining aristocracy. The Victorian style reveals a decided softening of lines and a new informality. Even the arrangement of the furniture is far less rigid and orderly. And comfort is now, for virtually the first time in history, an important factor; hence the overstuffed chairs, the tête-à-tête sofas, and the low chairs without arms to accommodate the large bustles of women's dresses that were now the fashion.

Yet, in spite of the movement against the old aristocratic styles, there is also a desire to imitate the higher classes. Furniture was made to look costly and showy. It is often considered over done. The strong colors, native softwoods, either marbled or made to look like exotic hardwoods, and silverplated brass all reflect the middle class perception of



Health-conscious Victorians brought the outside in, using forms inspired by nature.

wealth. In an age of industrial transformation, mass-produced, inexpensive furniture was for the first time accessible to the middle class, and the development of the steam engine and the new transcontinental railroad made furniture in the latest style available to those living in the most remote areas of the country.



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