Louisa May Alcott in the South End

By Rebecca Carpenter & Lauren Prescott

Louisa May Alcott was a novelist and poet best known for *Little Women* and its sequels. Raised by her transcendentalist parents Bronson and Abigail Alcott, Louisa grew up in Concord, Massachusetts. Towards the end of her life, Louisa lived on Beacon Hill, but many are unaware that Louisa also lived in the South End.

Louisa was born in 1832 on November 29th in Germantown, Pennsylvania. She moved with her family to Massachusetts in 1834. The family, though poor, had famous literary friends that Louisa spent time with and learned from, famous men and women the likes of Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Margaret Fuller. Louisa was so well educated that she, along with her mother and sisters, taught reading and writing to others.

(continued on page 3)
To celebrate the 150th anniversary of *Little Women*, our feature article is about Louisa May Alcott and her time spent in the South End. Alcott was a novelist and poet best known for *Little Women* and its sequels. Raised by her transcendentalist parents, she also grew up among many well-known intellectuals of the time, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Many know of her family home in Concord, Massachusetts and the connections she had to Beacon Hill, but Louisa and the Alcotts also lived in Boston’s South End.

Our second article, by Alison Barnet, talks about Chicos’ Variety, which was located at the corner of Washington and East Springfield Streets (where Mike’s City Diner is today). Alison recounts her memories of Chicos’ and the Albanian family who ran the variety store between 1953 and 2002.

Finally, I am excited to announce that the South End Historical Society has been awarded a Research Inventory grant by Mass Humanities this year, to process the Chester Square Area Neighborhood Association (CSANA) records. We are extremely gratified to receive Mass Humanities’ support, especially since Mass Humanities grant proposals are subjected to a rigorous review process.
Between 1835 and 1837, the family frequently moved, having lived on Somerset Court, Front Street, Cottage Place and Beach Street. According to the Orchard House Museum in Concord, the family moved twenty-two times in nearly three decades. In 1840, the family moved to a home in Concord and remained for eight years, before moving in November 1848 to a small house on Dedham Street in the South End.

**Due to the family’s financial hardships, Louisa often worked, even at a young age, to support the family as a teacher, seamstress, and servant.**

The Alcott family struggled financially, and Louisa found herself in a “small house in the South End with not a tree in sight, only a back yard to play in, and no money to buy any splendors...” Louisa was sixteen at the time of this move and she found she hated living there. “I was left to keep house, feeling like a caged seagull as I washed dishes and cooked in the basement kitchen, where my prospect was limited to a procession of muddy boots.” However, due to a cholera outbreak in the crowded neighborhood, the family left the following summer.

Due to the family’s financial hardships, Louisa often worked, even at a young age, to support the family as a teacher, seamstress, and servant. Her goal was to pull her family from poverty and provide for them, which she eventually did. She began writing often as an outlet from her daily life and her first published work, *Flower Fables*, was published in 1854. The book was a compilation of stories first written for Ralph Waldo Emerson’s daughter, Ellen Emerson. Although the book sold well, Louisa received a mere $35 from the publisher. She also wrote several novels and stories under the *nom de plume* A.M. Barnard.

In the fall of 1849, the Friendly Society of the South Congregational Church named Louisa an official missionary for a six-month trial period. The Unitarian church was then on the corner of Washington and the present Herald...
on abolition, education, and other major issues of the time. It boasted of writers like Emerson, Longfellow, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. A few years later the Civil War broke out and Louisa left to serve as a nurse. Alcott scholar Harriet Reisen, author of *Louisa May Alcott: The Woman Behind ‘Little Women’*, said that Louisa’s “father quipped that he was ‘sending his only son to war.’”³ Reisen notes that at this time, Louisa was the family’s breadwinner. While serving as a nurse she contracted typhoid and almost died, but later recovered and published works about her time serving as a nurse, which earned her some limited acclaim.

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the lives of the four March sisters—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy—detailing their passage from childhood to adulthood and is loosely based on Louisa and her sisters. Alcott styled Josephine “Jo” March on herself. The novel proved to be her most successful.

By the fall of 1868, Louisa felt that she needed a more stimulating atmosphere than the family home in Concord. In October, she rented a quiet room on East Brookline Street (probably 26 East Brookline Street) in the South End to work on her second volume of Little Women. She hoped to finish the entire book there. Louisa believed that she could “do a chapter a day, and in a month, I mean to be done.”4 She began writing on November 1st, but had not finished when she traveled to Concord for Christmas. She did not return to her room on East Brookline Street, but rather stayed in Concord. The second volume of Little Women was published shortly after in April 1869. With the novels, Louisa’s fame was assured. She continued writing about the March family with two more novels: Little Men in 1871 and Jo’s Boys in 1886.

Another interesting connection that Louisa has to the South End is through the Everett family. The Everetts were a middle-class family that lived in the South End in the mid-to late-19th century. Otis and Elizabeth Everett lived in the neighborhood on Blake’s Court (near today’s Cathedral of the Holy Cross) and on Shawmut Avenue and had four children: Otis Blake, Thomas, Percival and Louisa.

The South End Historical Society holds a collection of letters written by the Everetts, dating between 1851-59. These letters contain correspondence between Otis and Elizabeth in Boston and their son Otis Blake Everett.

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4. The original text contains a typographical error, with the numbers 14 and 464 being printed as “4”.”
who was working as a merchant in Calcutta, India. In a letter to Otis Blake from February 20, 1859, Elizabeth writes to her son:

_We have been quite gay lately with parties, theatres, fairs, concerts, &c. We went to see some very fine private theatricals at Mrs. Sargent’s (our Mamataug fellow boarder). She inquired particularly for you. The principal party were sustained by your old acquaintance, Louisa Alcott. She is said to be the most accomplished actress in private life in the neighborhood._

Just three years her senior, Otis probably had gotten to know Louisa in the late 1840s when the Alcotts were living on Dedham Street and later on Groton Street in the South End. Even before she was a literary success, Louisa was well-known in the neighborhood.

After the publication of _Little Women_, Louisa spent time traveling through Europe, writing, and caring for her ailing mother. In November 1873, Louisa returned to the South End and rented rooms at 26 East Brookline Street with her mother Abigail “Marmee” Alcott, her sister Anna “Nan” Pratt, and Anna’s two sons, Frederick and John. In her journal, Louisa writes:

_Took sunny rooms at the South End, near the Park, so the lads could play out and Marmee walk. She enjoyed the change, and sat at her window watching people, horse-cars, and sparrows with great interest. Old friends came to see her, and she was happy. Found a nice school for the boys; and Nan enjoyed her quiet days._

The boardinghouse at 26 Brookline Street where Louisa rented rooms no longer exists, but was located where Cathedral Housing is today, opposite Franklin Square. Louisa’s mother grew ill during this trip to Boston, and it would be her last. Marmee died just a few years later in 1877.

Louisa May Alcott never married, but she did raise her niece Lulu after her sister May died in 1879. Louisa suffered from chronic health problems as she aged, which some attribute to mercury poisoning from medicine she received while fighting typhoid during the Civil War. Louisa died on March 6, 1888 at the age of fifty-five, just two days after her father’s death. She is buried at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord, on a hillside known as “author’s ridge” alongside Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau.

2. Ibid.
6. Louisa May Alcott: _Her Life, Letters, and Journals_
Hot Coffee, Good Conversation

By Alison Barnet

There was a point in the 1980s when South End “variety” stores became “convenience” stores. It didn’t amount to much of a difference, but doesn’t variety sound more interesting? Take Chicos’ Variety at the corner of Washington and East Springfield Streets, where Mike’s City Diner is today. Far from the only colorful South End business back in the day, it’s surely worth a story.

My neighbor, Mrs. Thomas, always cautioned me not to drink the coffee at Chicos’ because “bad people” hung out there, but as I wrote in my journal:

I freely admit I’ve often been a loiterer at Chicos’—inside and out. I enjoy the camaraderie of the regulars there—the sense of neighborhood, the intelligence, the humor. I’m glad that people who once lived here come back for a cup of coffee and conversation because I enjoy their company.

The men who gathered on the sidewalk outside Chicos’ debated the heavy issues of the day while keenly aware of everything and everyone around them.

The Chicos family was Albanian, although they didn’t advertise it, probably because there were so few Albanians in Boston in 1953 when Ochi J. Chicos opened a station-ary and news store on Washington Street in what’s now called Minot Hall. I loved to go in and read the tabloid headlines: “Leading French novelist admits: I LIVE IN SIN...TO GET MATERIAL FOR MY BOOKS.”

In 1975, Chicos moved the store across the street to 1714 Washington Street, once a White Tower. He died three years later, but he had three sons: Charlie, Jimmy, George, and a daughter Joanne to continue on and run

CHICOS VARIETY & NEWS COMPANY

We are open 24 hours every day for your convenience, featuring groceries, tobacco, slush, hot dogs, and weekly specials.

Chicos’ Variety, from the Washington Elevated train, 1987. (Photo courtesy of Alison Barnet)
the store. Charlie, who bore a resemblance to actor Nicholas Cage, was a key figure, and it was to talk with Charlie that we often frequented Chicos’, even in the middle of the night.

Charlie had a dry sense of humor and gave customers, who enjoyed every minute of it, a hard time. A man with only $3 once wanted to know how much a package of Pampers cost. When Charlie told him $5.29, the man was outraged. “Well, I’m not going to sell them for $3!” said Charlie; “I’ve got a tradition to live up to.” In the end, of course, he accepted the $3. When Natasha, a homeless woman who stayed at Rosie’s Place, had her picture in the Globe, she went to Chicos’ to see it. She was on her way out, paper tucked under her arm, when Charlie yelled, “Hey! You owe me for the paper!” Natasha knew he was kidding and stood in the doorway grinning.

When little Jesse, whose mother was a hooker down on Marginal Road, came in before school with a note that said, “Charlie, please make Jesse a cup of tea with lots of milk, warm enough for him to drink it but not so hot he can’t hold it. Thanks, Maria.” Charlie asked, “Is that your breakfast, Jesse? Have a doughnut on me.”

The blacker the humor the more I liked it, running home to make entries in my journal:

*Man behind the counter is wearing a bandage around his finger and wrist. Customer asks, “What happened?” He says, “Oh, I got in a fight in here with a girl and she hit me with a sledge hammer.”*

When a rack of green three-piece suits went on sale on a rack behind the counter, I was tempted to say, “Oh hi, I’ll have a small coffee, a pack of Marlboros, and a three-piece suit.”

Charlie was a big supporter of local literacy efforts and always a generous advertiser. His
ads in the *East Springfield Gazette* were classics:

**Hot Coffee — Donuts**

**Sandwiches — Good Conversation**

When the South End News began in 1980, those in the know went to Chicos’ to pick up the paper. Chicos’ was our home away from home and always got a great big stack.

Interaction with Charlie’s siblings could be a little difficult; they were nothing like Charlie. And then there were the girlfriends. Once after middle brother Jimmy came to my house to help organize a block party, Melinda became jealous. She tried to run me over in her car when I was crossing Washington Street one day. “Stay away from my Jimmy!” she yelled to onlookers’ amazement. Later, Jimmy and Melinda had their hands full with a little restaurant named Jamel’s (guess how they got that name) next door to Chicos’. Jamel’s signature sandwich was a pork chop, bone and all, between two slices of bread.

Mornings began when Josephine, a West Springfield Street neighbor, came in to pour the coffee, a volunteer job. We stood next to the counter where the coffee machine shared space with hot dog and popcorn machines and open boxes of doughnuts under loose sheets of wax paper, holding our cups and socializing. This was way before Flour and sidewalk cafés.

Among Chicos’ employees was the ever pleasant Leon, always dressed in black, and Tex, a rough, unshaven sort with a filthy t-shirt and a big belly. We all knew he kept a pistol under the counter; he’d show it to us sometimes. Once, an East Springfield Street neighbor tried to buy a pack of cigarettes with a $20 bill, and Tex told her: “I had to shoot somebody just last night for less than that.” In those days, not many people brandished twenties. Sonny, a sallow-faced man, regaled customers with gory tales at great length. He had been knocked unconscious with a baseball bat back in the Sixties and wasn’t supposed to live, a fact he regularly impressed on us. More recently, he was stabbed in the chest trying to save two women from a knife-wielding handbag snatcher at Northampton Station and was on the danger list at City Hospital for two days.

“I couldn’t believe what I was reading,” a Chicos relative wrote to me after seeing this story. “My dad never spoke about this.” What did he mean? It turns out that Chicos’ founder was also known as Sonny, something I wasn’t aware of.

In *Tally’s Corner*, a classic Sixties sociology, Elliot Liebow describes a Washington D.C. takeout place that could easily have been Chicos’ even though Chicos’ wasn’t a takeout. “Inner-city carry-out shops serve many
functions other than selling prepared food,” he wrote. “Among other things they may serve as informal communication centers, forums, places to display and assess talents, and staging areas for a wide range of activities, legal, illegal, and extralegal.”

Not only did I recognize Chicos’ in Liebow’s New Deal Carry-out shop, I recognized myself in Liebow, who obviously enjoyed the store and became personally involved. He even placed a bet with New Deal’s “numbers man.” I had only the most limited exchange with Chicos’ bookie, an innocuous older man who stood inside the store most of the day, made friendly visits around the neighborhood, and at the end of the day got on the #1 bus and went home.

Don’t think I’m overlooking the “illegal and extralegal” activities: yes, a lot went on at Chicos’. One of the tamer events was in 1982 when Charlie bribed Tommy Casserly, a junkyard owner running for State Rep, in an attempt to get a video game license at Chicos’ and, when the license was denied, Charlie asked for his $1,000 back. Mike Barnicle wrote a column on it in the Globe: “Charley [sic] felt he was a victim of consumer fraud and became upset.”

In 1987, Chicos’ was temporarily closed by Inspectional Services after new neighbors complained about the station wagon out back in which employee Sonny and his mother were living with a large dog and a number of cats and kittens, some allegedly dead. (Once, when I had jury duty, Sonny gave me a ride to the courthouse, cats climbing all over me.) Newcomers also objected to the seven-foot high pile of trash. For Charlie, the store closing was only “the latest incident” in a campaign of harassment. When one of the new neighbors said, “I spent $100,000 on my condo and you keep a dirty sidewalk,” Charlie countered, “I’m going to stay here until I die and have my kids run it to aggravate the people who buy the $100,000 condos.” In a South End News article entitled “Heap of Trouble,” Charlie was described as a “flamboyant character” using “many words that the South End News cannot print.”

He put a sign on the door:

*We would like to thank all our customers and friends for bearing with us during our problems with the different state and city inspectional services. With the help and financial support of all our friends we hope to be open 24 hours daily for the next 35 years.*
Another sign went up:

*Reports of my demise are greatly exaggerated [sic]*

I missed the store after it closed in 2002, and when sometime later I met Ernie on a bus, I was glad to hear that Charlie was doing well. Ernie was a gentle soul who did menial jobs at Chicos’ and slept in the back of the store. I’d see him out in my alley, the pockets of his gray overcoat bulging with cat food tins and a can opener, alley cats running to meet him. “Charlie’s giving out free coffee at Dunkin’ Donuts at Back Bay Station, stealing ‘em blind,” Ernie told me and so, even though I had no other business at Back Bay Station, I started dropping by Dunkin’ Donuts for conversation with Charlie.

This story and more can be found in *South End Character*. Alison’s other books are *Extravaganza King* and *Sitting Ducks*. All are for sale at the South End Historical Society.

**Volunteer Opportunities**

Want to become more involved with the South End Historical Society? We always need new volunteers! We have opportunities for volunteers in the SEHS newsletter, the House Tour, collections, preservation, history related projects, programs and events.

Interested or have questions? E-mail Lauren Prescott at admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org

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Pictures from SEHS Collections 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 over 3,000 images taken by the South End 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 300dpi digital copy.

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

The Everett Family Web Exhibit

Corinne Bermon has created a web exhibit for the South End Historical Society, titled The Everett Family: Middle Class Life in Boston’s South End, 1851-1859. This digital exhibit follows the Everett family’s experience living in the South End, a unique Boston neighborhood, during the 1850s. Please visit theeverettfamilyletters.com to learn more.

Self-Guided Audio Walking Tour

Now when you visit the South End, you can learn more about its history with an audio tour created by the South End Historical Society and UniGuide. Starting at SEHS in Chester Square, the walking tour takes you through 12 points of interest in this historic neighborhood (such as the Porter House, Blackstone & Franklin Square, and Union Park). UniGuide is a free smartphone app that provides you with hundreds of audio tours across the United States. Access all tours in a single app, stream them or download ahead of time to save data.

Get the app for your phone and listen to a wonderfully curated tour of the South End. Visit http://uniguide.me/ to download the app.
Grant Awarded by Mass Humanities

We are excited to announce that the South End Historical Society has been awarded a Research Inventory grant by Mass Humanities this year, to process the Chester Square Area Neighborhood Association (CSANA) records.

Founded in the 1980s, CSANA aims to promote neighborly interactions and programs for sharing information and discussing common problems. The organization donated its records to the South End Historical Society in 2016 and it contains administrative records, correspondence, photographs, project records, and architectural plans related to the renovation of the park. The final product will be an organized collection for researchers and a searchable finding aid on the South End Historical Society’s website.

Boston created Chester Square in 1850 as a grand boulevard and residential square for the South End’s upper middle-class residents. It was the widest and grandest of the neighborhood’s garden squares, with several walking paths and a three-tiered cast iron fountain situated in the center of the park. In 1894, all the unique Chester addresses were lost and renamed as Massachusetts Avenue, which still circled the park. By 2009, the parks were underutilized and run down. The Chester Square Area Neighborhood Association (CSANA) spearheaded the petition to the Parks Department for change, and plans for renovations began. The records donated by CSANA for preservation and future use relate to its efforts to renovate the parks.

We are extremely gratified to receive Mass Humanities’ support, especially since Mass Humanities grant proposals are subjected to a rigorous review process. Mass Humanities was established in 1974 as the state-based
affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The organization conducts and supports programs that use history, literature, philosophy, and the other humanities disciplines to enhance and improve civic life in Massachusetts.

With no federal funding, the South End Historical Society has a small operational budget and limited funds towards preserving its collections. Founded in 1966, SEHS was a volunteer run organization until the mid-2000s. Since then, the South End Historical Society has had a staff of one to fulfill all aspects of running a non-profit organization. Since 2016, Executive Director Lauren Prescott has worked with interns to begin the long-term goal of processing and properly inventorying collections, and making them accessible to the public. With the support of Mass Humanities, SEHS is able to preserve its collections for future generations.
Please join us in celebrating the **50th anniversary** of the South End House Tour on **Saturday, October 20th**. This event is our single fundraiser for the year, and the revenue it generates is essential to the Society’s continued operations and mission to preserve and protect the South End’s history and architectural heritage for current and future generations.

For more information and to purchase tickets, please visit our website: [www.southendhistoricalsociety.org/housetour](http://www.southendhistoricalsociety.org/housetour)