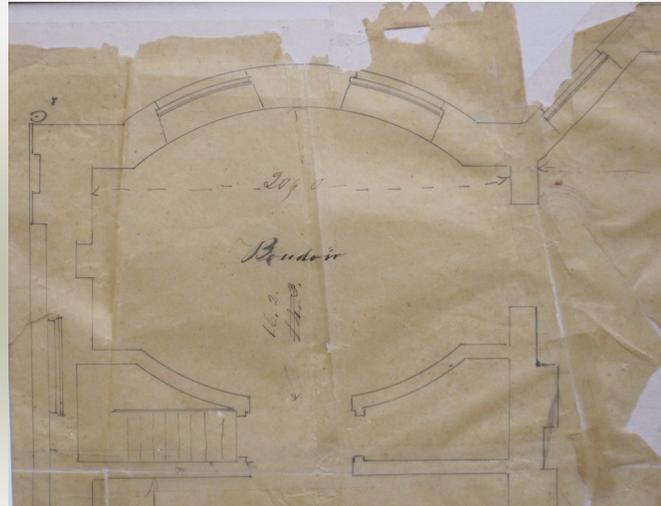




# South End Historical Society Newsletter

www.southendhistoricalsociety.org



*Left: Floor plan of the Deacon House.  
Above: Detail of the Boudoir.*

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## From our Collections: The Deacon House

On the north side of Washington Street between West Concord and Worcester Streets stood the Deacon House, the first house in America to feature a mansard roof. Designed in a French style for Edward Preble Deacon, the construction was finished in 1848.

Now the site of condos, the original building can only be seen by looking at old images, some of which are in our collections. Also in our collections is an original floor plan of the Deacon House. It was donated to the Society by John Neale, SEHS Historian, who acquired it from a member of the Deacon family. Written in French, the plan shows the amount of carpeting that was needed for each of the rooms on the first floor, including the Marie Antoinette Boudoir.

 /SouthEndHistory

 @SouthEndHistory

 @SouthEndHistSoc

Time has not been kind to this piece of South End history. As you can see, parts of the drawing have been damaged. What remains has been taped together and needs to be evaluated by a professional conservator.

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Editor: Jason Amos  
Contributors: Alison Barnet  
John Neale

The SEHS newsletter is a benefit of membership to the historical 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 \$30 per year, Family/Dual memberships are \$50, and opportunities to support the organization 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 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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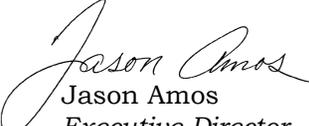
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## From the Executive Director

I want to begin my first newsletter by thanking everyone who has welcomed me to the neighborhood in the first six months that I have been in my new position. It has been greatly appreciated!

Some of you may not know that SEHS actively collects material other than photos. I hope to be able to use the newsletter to showcase some of the unique material that I find while working with our collections. For this issue, I have chosen a floor plan for the Deacon House.

You will also find an article about Francena Roberson from long-time South Ender, Alison Barnett. Additionally, there is an article from John Neale, SEHS Historian, about the history of the Hotel Alexandra. This is an article that we published almost 11 years ago, but it has been updated by John in light of the current efforts to redevelop this historic South End building.

  
Jason Amos  
Executive Director



Harriet Tubman Park, March 2019

# Francena Roberson: The South End's Unofficial Poet Laureate

*By Alison Barnet*

This is my favorite story about Francena Roberson. One afternoon after she gave a talk at BU's Afro-American Center, I saw her walking down Commonwealth Avenue, caught up with her, and asked if she'd like to go out for coffee. She stopped dead in her tracks, stared at me, and said brusquely, "How about a drink?" We went to Newbury's Steak House on Mass. Ave. and had a grand old time.

Born in South Carolina, Francena (1916-2005) moved to the South End from Columbus, Ohio with her two daughters in 1951, settling in the St. Botolph St./Mass. Ave. area. The very first person she met was Wally (Joseph Walcott) of Wally's Paradise—then across the street from where it is now—and soon became close to the Walcott family.

Francena got a bachelor's degree from UMass Boston, then in Park Square, in 1980 and a Master's in Liberal Arts from BU in 1984. She became known as the South End's unofficial poet laureate, later a two-time Golden Poet Awardee, an award given to new writers who publish on the internet. Francena was also a playwright, staging plays such as "Where the Crayfish Run" and the "Saga of Frankie Silva, Jr." at the Mass. College of Art. Founder of the Knights of the Rail Society, she was personally involved with the Pullman Porter exhibit at Back Bay Station. She was an



*Francena and Wally.  
Courtesy of Jamie Roberson.*

active member of Union United Methodist Church, a secretary at the NAACP on Mass. Ave., and later in life a substitute teacher at the Blackstone School—I remember seeing her walking home looking as tired as a person can get.

## **Volunteer Opportunities**

Want to be more involved with the South End Historical Society? We have opportunities for volunteers in the SEHS newsletter, the House Tour, collections, preservation, and history related projects.

For more information email us at:  
[admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org)

# History of the Hotel Alexandra

*By John Neale*

*Editors Note: This is an update to an article that was originally published in 2008*

The Hotel Alexandra, located at the busy corner of Massachusetts Avenue and Washington Street, is one of the South End's most prominent buildings, but it has also been one of the least understood and underappreciated. Boarded up for decades, recent events have put it back in the news and made a reexamination of its past overdue.

Years of neglect, failed businesses, a series of disastrous fires, a break-in by a group of advocates for the homeless, and more recently, the failure to begin development by the current owner, the Church of Scientology, have kept the former luxury apartment building in the news, but for all the wrong reasons. Now there is a possibility that the Hotel Alexandra and the empty lot adjacent to it on Washington Street might be sold to a developer for conversion to an actual hotel, with a modernist addition that would roughly double its height.

To pause and look closely at the Alexandra reveals it to be a very handsome building that is in dire need of cleaning and restoration. The beautiful red and buff-colored sandstone facade is blackened by more than a century of soot, although some recent spot cleaning has

revealed its true colors. The striking storefronts are made of cast-iron and are unique among surviving Victorian buildings in Boston. Their intricate neo-gothic detail is set off by painted bands of color that match the stonework above.

The site of the Alexandra was a lot on the original Boston Neck that was never developed while the South End grew up around it. By 1874 it was a conspicuously empty corner on a major intersection, the other three corners being occupied by elegant row houses. That block of Massachusetts Avenue was known during the nineteenth century as Chester Square (although the actual square was two blocks north of it), and had a pretty green mall with double rows of trees running down the center. Across the mall was the Samuel Bowman house, a very large and elaborate brownstone-faced house with a rooftop observatory. The history of the Hotel Alexandra itself, however, really begins with a family named Walworth, and their name is inextricably linked with it.

On April 17, 1872 the site of the Alexandra was purchased by Caleb Clark Walworth, a member of Boston's wealthy new class of businessmen who established their fortunes in manufacturing during the middle years of the nineteenth century. With his brother James J. Walworth, he controlled a series of corporations that produced the first steam-heating systems in the world, a revolutionary system that James had invented.

Caleb Walworth and his brother James were natives of Canaan, New Hampshire who had followed their fortunes to Boston. James was the first to come to Boston, arriving in 1828 at the age of 20, working in the hardware business. He married a Bostonian, Elizabeth



*Hotel Alexandra, ca. 1972.*

Chickering Nason, and in June of 1841 founded a new business with Elizabeth's brother Joseph. Starting in New York City, and almost immediately opening an office in Boston, Walworth & Nason expanded on the work of British inventor Angier M. Perkins, who had invented a hot water apparatus for the heating of buildings. James Walworth's

contribution was to adapt this wrought-iron tube apparatus to heat with steam, something that had never been done before.

In short order, Walworth also invented the first mechanical, steam-driven ventilating fan. This new combination of efficient, reliable heat and fresh air was an immediate success, and the first large-scale application was in 1846 at the magnificent new United States Custom House in Boston, designed in the Greek Revival style by noted architect Ammi B. Young.

Caleb Walworth had followed his brother to Boston in 1848, joining Walworth & Nason as a machinist. In 1852 Joseph Nason moved to New York, and Walworth & Nason was dissolved. Caleb joined his brother as a partner in J. J. Walworth & Co., which was formed with a capital of \$400,000. In that year they moved their factory from Devonshire Street to Blake's Court in the South End (the site of today's Cathedral High School). By the late 1850's they had grown so much they added a second plant in Cambridgeport, and in 1882 they consolidated their operations and moved to South Boston, where they employed 800 hands. By the 1890's the value of their production reached \$2,000,000 annually.

In 1867 Caleb and his wife Mary moved to the South End, purchasing the commodious Italianate brownstone-faced house at 38 West Newton Street on Blackstone Square. A few



Third Floor Plan

*Hotel Alexandra floor plan.  
Drawn by Eben Kunz, ca. 2004.*

years later, in 1872, a fascinating sidelight to the Walworth family story was added when a noteworthy new neighbor, the inventor Alexander Graham Bell, moved in a few doors down on Blackstone Square (to 35 West Newton Street, at the corner of Washington Street). He must have soon become acquainted with the Walworths, because in 1876 the world's first two-way telephone call was held between the Walworth Manufacturing Company's Kilby Street offices downtown, and their plant in Cambridgeport two miles away, utilizing their existing telegraph line.

The Walworth Manufacturing Company, which had been organized in 1872, survived

the great financial "Panic of 1873" due in large part to Caleb Walworth's guidance. By 1874 Caleb was in such a strong financial position he undertook to build on his recently purchased corner lot on Washington Street, and by September of 1875 the "Hotel Alexandra" was completed.

Why Caleb Walworth chose to build a residential "hotel" is not known today, but it must have appeared at the time to be a good investment in a form of housing that was just becoming popular. "French flats", as they were also known at the time, were still a fairly novel new form of urban housing. Living in an apartment that occupied all or part of only one floor of a building had been made

technologically possible by the recent invention of the elevator. The St. Cloud on Tremont Street, designed by Nathaniel J. Bradlee and completed in 1869 was one of the first of the South End's exclusively residential hotels, and by 1875 there were still only a small number in Boston. Some, like the very large Commonwealth Hotel on Washington Street (between West Springfield and Worcester Streets) also served as hotels in the modern sense, offering temporary lodging to out-of-town visitors.

The Alexandra was conceived, like the St. Cloud, as an exclusively residential hotel on a small scale. Like the St. Cloud, it had two commercial spaces at the street level that flanked the residential entrance. The similarity to the St. Cloud continued on the upper floors, where each of the four upper

***Why Caleb Walworth chose to build a residential "hotel" is not known today, but it must have appeared at the time to be a good investment in a form of housing that was just becoming popular.***

floors was divided into two apartments. The difference was that in the St. Cloud each apartment ran from front to back, while at

the Alexandra one apartment stretched across the front of the building, while the other occupied the entire rear.

In its exterior design the Alexandra was a forward-looking building designed in the new

polychromatic Ruskinian Gothic style, while the earlier St. Cloud reflected the more conservative French Second Empire tradition that was beginning to lose favor by 1875. Extensive research has not yet uncovered the architect of the Alexandra, but its Ruskinian Gothic style it is very similar to that of the Berwick Hotel built later on Columbus Avenue (on the site of the empty parking lot adjacent to "Charlie's Sandwich Shop" and Holyoke Street), and the Albemarle Hotel, which survives today at the corner of Columbus Avenue and Clarendon Streets as low-income housing.

Besides being an investment, the Alexandra may also have been created to provide an in-town home for principals of the Walworth Manufacturing Company. One of the original residents was James J. Walworth himself. He moved from his home in Newtonville to the Alexandra upon its completion in September of 1875, and he lived there until his death on April 28, 1896. Being in his late 60's at the time of his move, Walworth probably appreciated the convenience of living on one floor. The treasurer of the Walworth Manufacturing Company, Emil C. Hammer, also moved into the Alexandra with his wife Martha. By 1890 Hammer had become co-owner of the Alexandra with Walworth, and was also Denmark's Consul in Boston.

The original advertisement for the apartments in the Hotel Alexandra appeared in the Boston Transcript on September 15, 1875

(see below). The name "Alexandra" was emphasized in bold face type, and undoubtedly refers to Princess Alexandra of England, then the wife of the Prince of Wales, who was later to become King Edward VII after the death of his mother Queen Victoria in 1901. The Walworths were proud anglophiles who made it clear to all who knew them that they were descended from Sir William Walworth, lord mayor of London during the reign of King Richard II in the fourteenth century.

The name Alexandra was certainly meant to establish an aristocratic tone for the new building. The advertisement makes it clear that the Walworths backed this royal name up with the latest amenities, including their own steam heating system:

**"Alexandra"**

Corner Washington Street and Chester Square. Suites for families in the *new* and elegant building now being finished in the most thorough and first-class manner; eight rooms to each unit, with steam heat, bathing rooms, passenger elevator, etc., making it the most desirable for location and comfort in the city. Parties desiring this popular mode of housekeeping should apply at once, as several suites are already leased."

The elevator was actually not as convenient a feature as it first appeared. One had to ascend the marble stairs from the street level entrance to the second floor to reach it, but

from there it ran to the top floor. It had a handsome cab with glass and burled walnut panels, with a

***The Alexandra remained a prestigious address until the new elevated electric train was run past its front doors in 1900.***

bench across the back providing seating for the slow trip up, for it relied upon city water pressure driving an ingenious system of pulleys actuated by a cylinder in the basement that ran horizontally out to the city water main.

The eight suites found willing tenants quickly, and by November of 1875 the Alexandra was fully leased. The apartments were luxurious by today's standards, consisting of approximately 2,000 square feet each. They consisted of two drawing rooms connected by double doors, a formal dining room, two principal bedrooms, a kitchen, a bath, and a servant's bedroom. Ceilings were uniformly almost 12 feet in height, with plaster crown moldings. Marble-mantled coal grates provided additional heat and atmosphere, and glass transoms over the doors provided ventilation. A mechanical dumbwaiter was accessible from the kitchen of each unit, making the delivery of groceries less difficult for servants. Suites like these were designed to appeal to young couples and

"empty-nesters" in the language of today's real estate market, giving rise to the nineteenth century expression that residential hotels were built for "the newly wed and the nearly dead".

The Alexandra remained a prestigious address until the new elevated electric train was run past its front doors in 1900. This noisy and unattractive intrusion altered the character of Washington Street for the next eight decades, and so began the Alexandra's years of decline. Caleb Walworth had moved from his Blackstone Square house to Longwood (Brookline), where he died in 1894, at which point ownership of the Alexandra passed out of family hands. After James Walworth's death in 1896 his widowed second wife Lydia left the Alexandra, ending the

family's involvement with the building for all time.

The twentieth century was not kind to the Alexandra or its immediate environs, but the ongoing renewal of the Washington Street community around it bodes well for the future. Today, it remains a tarnished but wonderfully intact reminder of a time when people changed the way they lived in urban neighborhoods, shifting from the vertical life of the individual row house to the horizontal life and shared amenities of the modern apartment building. It also embodies the fortunes of a prominent South End family and its rise to success on the wave of nineteenth century technology and manufacturing that so characterized the builders of the South End.

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### **New Book Published About Charlotte Dempsey, Long-time Teacher at the Children's Art Centre**

On April 8, 2019, we had the pleasure of hosting Julia Glatfelter, a Baltimore-based artist and author, for a presentation about her research into Charlotte Dempsey's methods and practice.

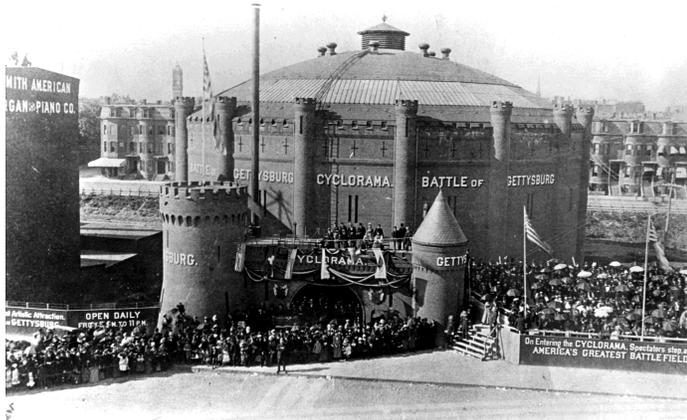
Not only was Julia able to provide insight into Charlotte's teaching, but a member was in attendance who knew Charlotte from his time at the Children's Art Centre and was able to provide his memories of Charlotte. If you would like to contribute to Julia's ongoing research about Charlotte Dempsey and the Children's Art Centre, email her at: [cactestimonials@gmail.com](mailto:cactestimonials@gmail.com).

Copies of Julia's book, *The Little Glass Treasure House*, are available for \$12 from SEHS.



*Jason Amos, SEHS Executive Director, and Julia Glatfelter after her presentation.*

# South End Then & Now



*Circa 1884: Gettysburg Cyclorama*

539 TREMONT STREET



*2019: Boston Center for the Arts*



*1913: Frank Janes Pharmacy*

CORNER OF COLUMBUS AVE.  
AND  
MASSACHUSETTS AVE.



*2019: Dunkin' Donuts*

## 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.



## 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



*Image from the 1972 Streets Survey Collection.*

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 successful application to place the South End on the National Register of Historic Places. 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 email us at [admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org) for more information about our image collection, fees and policies.

# South End Historical Society Newsletter • Spring 2019

## Canvas Tote Bags for Sale

Now that Boston has banned single-use plastic bags, it is a perfect opportunity to show your support for the South End Historical Society and help the environment. We have a limited quantity of canvas tote bags available for \$15 a bag. Bags measure approximately 16" x 13" x 3".

If you are interested in purchasing a bag or two, please email us at [admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:admin@southendhistoricalsociety.org) or call us at (617) 536-4445. Please note that the bags are only available for pick-up at our office as we are unable to ship them.



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