

MEDFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



SPRING, 2010

President's Overview



I hope everyone has had a good Winter. We can be thankful we were spared from the ravages of season that afflicted our more southerly friends.

As the MHS year starts to draw to a close, we are looking forward to a number of events, including the annual members' reception and meeting on Friday, May 21. See inside for more details. The remaining events cap what has marked another step forward in our programming as we continue to add variety to the traditional fare of lectures at 10 Governors Avenue. Venues have included Springstep, the Royall House, and all around town on the bike tour. And by addressing energy conservation in your older home, we're helping preserve history, not just remembering it.

The Civil War digitization project continues. As a mostly volunteer effort, progress is slow but steady. As a member remarked, "The collection has been here nearly 150 years, mostly languishing, so it's more important to get it done correctly than to get it done a couple of months earlier." There's an article inside from our Project Manager, Allison Andrews.

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Society Officers

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Kyna Hamill

Maura McEnaney

Medford's Romantic Poet

Although Jane Austen gets all the attention these days, she was by no means the only woman author active in the late 18th century. In fact, Medford produced several famous female authors in the period after the American Revolution. One was the poet Maria Gowen Brooks, born Abigail Gowen in Medford between 1794 and 1796.

Abigail came from a prosperous family of Welsh background who had settled in Charlestown before the Revolution. Her father William, was well educated and passed education on to his daughter who had a reputation as a child for being very well-spoken and well read. Unfortunately, William, died bankrupt in 1809, and Abigail was left in the guardianship of a Boston merchant named John Brooks who was the widower of her older sister Lucretia. Within the year, Abigail was married to Brooks who was more than 30 years her senior. According to Charles Brooks' *History of the Town of Medford*, this was "a union which proved to be an unhappy one."¹ Although the couple lived affluently for a while and had three sons, Abigail's husband also lost much of his money and the family relocated to Portland, Maine.

According to her biographers it was life in Portland that turned Abigail into a poet. "In retreat partly from provincial Portland and partly from an infatuation with a young Canadian officer, she turned to poetry, and in 1820 she published anonymously a small volume called *Judith, Esther, and Other Poems*."² Portland also turned her into Maria – in 1819 she legally changed her name to Mary, and over the following years adopted the form Maria.



Things changed drastically again for Maria in 1823 when her husband died, leaving her with three children and no money. In a really interesting move, she packed up her family and moved to Matanzas, Cuba where her uncle had a coffee plantation. When the uncle died not long afterward, she inherited the plantation, which brought some much-needed financial security, but also much more drama. A short time later she went to Canada, where she became engaged to and then estranged from the officer who had inspired her first book of poems, and twice attempted suicide. Eventually, she returned to the Cuban plantation, which she had inherited, and began work on a verse romance, *Zóphiël; or, The Bride of Seven*.

Zóphiël is based on a story from the apocryphal Bible book of Tobit. It tells the story of the love of a fallen angel for a Hebrew maiden, and the first volume of the poem was published in Boston in 1825. In 1826, Maria's life veered

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Medford's Romantic Poet *continued*

into yet another interesting turn when she began a correspondence with the British poet Robert Southey who admired her poem. Along with Wordsworth and Coleridge, Southey was one of the "Lake poets" of the British Romantic Movement, and he was the poet laureate of England from 1813 to 1843. Southey was also the force behind Maria's adoption of yet another name! Southey christened her with the pseudonym "Maria Del Occidente" (Maria of the West) which she used in her later published works.

Southey became one of Maria's biggest fans and supporters. In his book *The Doctor*, a series of essays on poetry and literature, Southey refers to his friend, as "Maria Del Occidente, the most impassioned and imaginative of all poetesses."³ It is because of this relationship with Southey that *Zóphiël* achieved some fame among the reigning literary lights of England. According to Charles Brooks' *History*,⁴ "Charles Lamb rose from reading it with these words: Southey says it is by some Yankee woman; as if there had even been a woman capable of any thing so great." (Brooks, p.479) In 1831, Maria went to England to visit Southey, and to oversee the British publication of *Zóphiël*.

In the years that followed her travels to Europe, Maria's life calmed down quite a bit. She returned to the United States and lived in New England and New York while her son Horace was attending West Point. In 1843, she published her next work of poetry in

serial form in the Boston *Saturday Evening Gazette* newspaper. This volume, *Idomen; or, the Vale of Yumuri*, was autobiographical, and one wonders what she had to say about Medford! The poem was published as a book in a private edition and there is currently no copy available in Medford for us to consult. Sadly, Brooks' promising literary career was cut short when she returned to Cuba in 1843 and began work on a third poem which was never finished as she died of a tropical fever in 1845.

Because of her early death and small body of work, Brooks' work is not well known either in the canon of American literature or indeed in Medford. When Charles Brooks wrote his history of Medford in 1855, he included a section on Brooks that includes some rather apologetic reminiscences. "I have a dim recollection of a lady walking out at odd hours," recounts Lucy Osgood. "being told that she was Mrs. Brooks and a poetess...and afterwards found, that we had had a flower of genius among us, and, in our stupidity, knew it not."⁵

¹ Brooks, Charles *History of the Town of Medford*, Boston: Rand, Avery, 1886 p.479

² "Maria Gowen Brooks." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2010. *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. 10 Mar. 2010 <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/81279/Maria-Gowen-Brooks>.

³ Southey, Robert, *The Doctor* New York : Harper and Brothers, 1872 p.222

⁴ Brooks, p.479

⁵ Brooks, p.479

Citizens enjoy the recreational pleasures of skating on the frozen Mystic River.



Programming Updates

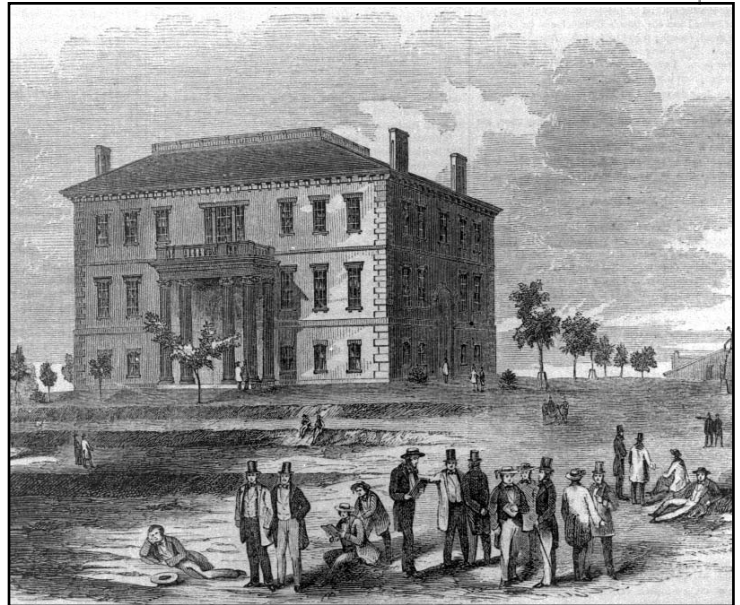
*Kyna Hamill, Board Member at Large
and Co-chair of the Programming Committee*

The 2009/2010 programming calendar is well under-way. Members have enjoyed a number of diverse programs this year including a historic bike tour, workshops devoted to older homes, a lecture on the history of Temple Shalom in Medford, and a lecture on historic pottery and brick making in Medford. All the programs, so far, have enjoyed record numbers of attendance with standing room only for most events. We loved seeing over 100 people at the History of Temple Shalom to hear from so many people on the important history of Medford's Jewish community.

Over 70 people gathered at Springstep for the workshop on "Greening the Older Home" which featured Sally Zimmerman, Preservation Specialist, Historic New England, Rebecca Williams, National Trust for Historic Preservation, Northeast Office and Christopher Skelly, Massachusetts Historical Commission. We learned about preserving older windows rather than replacing them and how to "green" up your older home without damaging its historic fabric.

Finally, it was a treat to have Rick Hamelin of Pied Potter Hamelin Redware in Warren, MA, speak to a packed audience at the MHS headquarters. As a Massachusetts Cultural Council "Keeper of Tradition" and Early American Life Magazine's "Traditional Artisan" award recipient, Rick enlightened us with many anecdotal stories of the brick and clay making industries in Medford and Charlestown. For instance, did you know that the bricks of the Old North Church came from Medford?

Two upcoming programs are a lecture on the history of Tufts College in Medford on April 14 as well as the annual Members' Reception on May 21. So mark your calendars and come early! Also, we are now in the planning stages for next year's calendar, so if you have any ideas for programs, please email kynahamill@yahoo.com. A full announcement of the programming calendar for 2010/2011 will be in the next newsletter.



View of Tufts University circa 1850's

Upcoming Events

Wednesday, April 14, 2010:

A History of Tufts University in Medford

Anne Sauer, Director of the Digital Collections and Archives, Tufts University will begin her presentation at 7:00 p.m. in Barnum 104 on the Tufts campus. For directions, please go to www.tufts.edu.

An optional historic walking tour of the Tufts campus, led by Kyna Hamill (G2006), will precede the lecture at 6:00 p.m. beginning in front of Tisch Library. [The walking tour will be weather permitting, i.e., not in heavy rain, but the lecture will go on.]

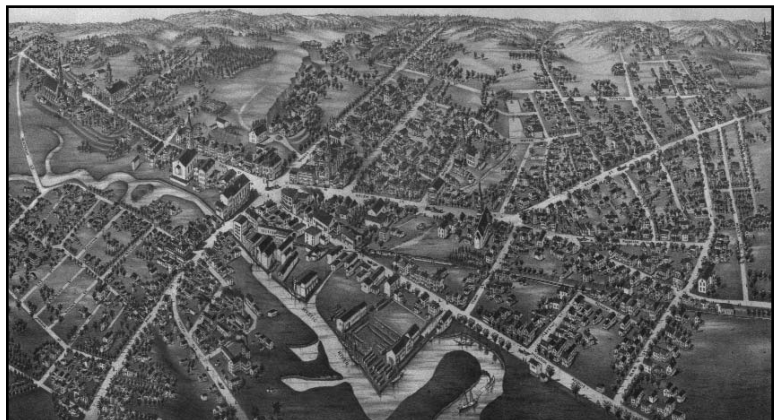
Friday, May 21, 2010:

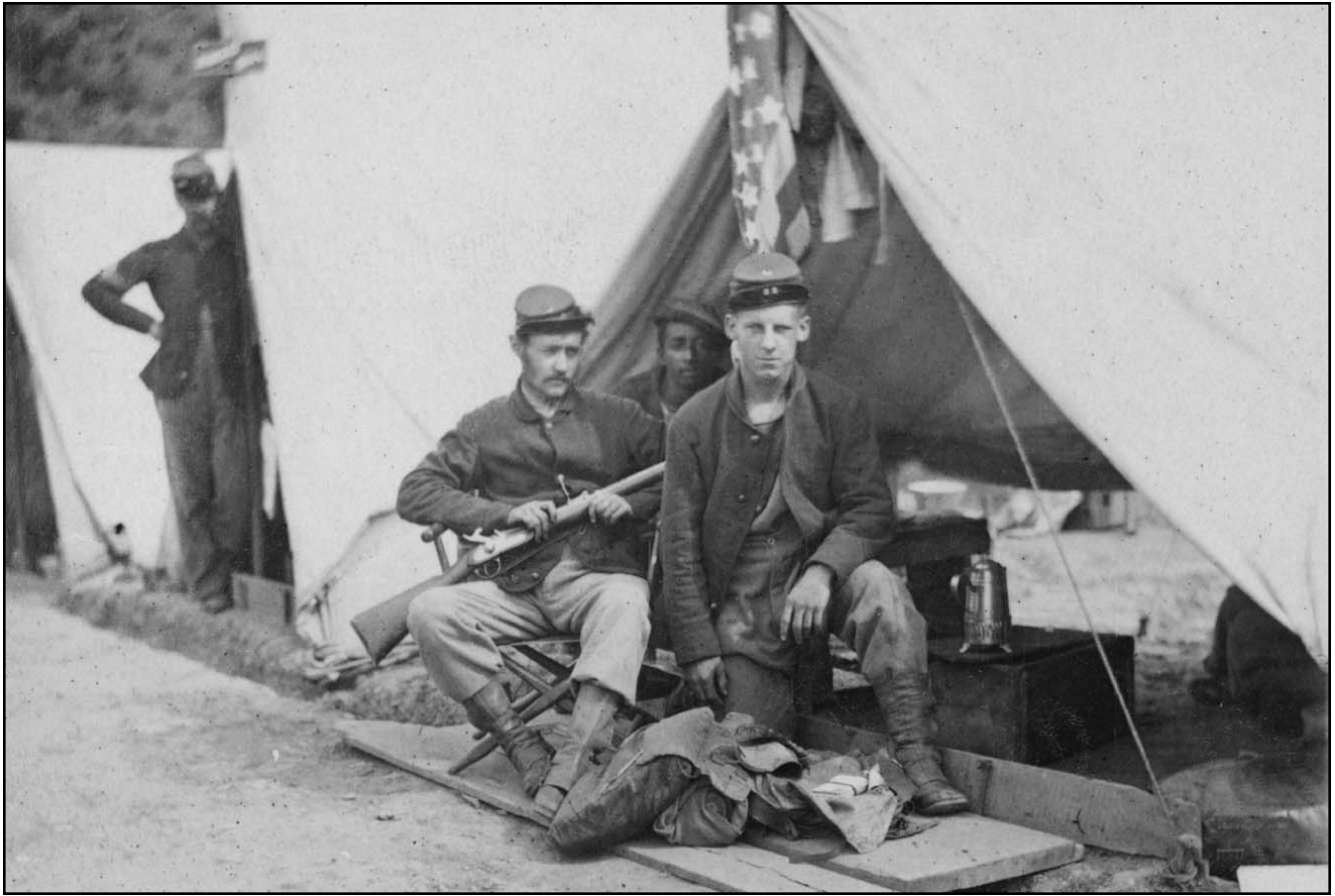
2010 Annual Meeting, Election of Officers and Reception

Wine and cheese reception begins at 7:00 p.m.; election will begin at 8:00 p.m. at the Medford Historical Society headquarters located at 10 Governors Avenue.

New Map Links on the MHS Website

Check out the "Educational Resources" section of the MHS web page for our new map links page. A number of historical maps of Medford are available online. The links include the 1855 Walling map of Medford which is the first Medford map as well as links to maps of Medford from 1875, 1889, and 1900. Medford maps can also be found online at the Norman B. Leventhal Map Center at the Boston Public Library. Go to <http://maps.bpl.org/> and search for Medford.





Union Soldiers of the 22nd New York State Militia relax in front of their tent. A black servant is behind them.

Civil War Photographs Cataloging and Digitization Project An Update

Allison Andrews

As many people interested in Medford history know, the MHS owns a significant collection of Civil War photographs which were donated to the Society in 1948 and rediscovered in our building in the 1990s. Since that discovery, the photos have been shared with the public at various times in various ways – a book called *Landscapes of the Civil War* was published in 1995 and presentations have been offered in Medford, Winchester and at Tufts.

There will be more opportunities to share this collection with the public for exhibition and research. However the photographs, while stored safely, are not organized for safe handling and ease of access. Before more plans can be made for their use, a thorough inventory is needed to identify and organize everything in the collection. The current count estimate is between 3,000 and 5,000 items.

This cataloging project is underway. Member Jay Hurd got the process running this past Fall and, with volunteer help, several hundred photographs were entered into the database. The project now has been taken on by Allison Andrews. The number of interested volunteers is growing, and we are fortunate that

many of them have experience in the preservation of old things (thank you to Jay for bringing along his colleagues from the conservation department at Harvard's Widener Library).

The news of the MHS photographs attracted the interest of an established Civil War organization, the Blue and Gray Educational Society of Chatham, Virginia. They visited Medford to see the collection and were well impressed that it is unique and worth preserving. As a result, they are generously subsidizing this effort by supplying necessities such as computer equipment and professional cataloging software.

Once the inventory and cataloging are complete, two more phases for the project are planned: digitizing (scanning) the images and refining the descriptions of the photographs for completeness and accuracy to enable efficient end-user searches.

A special mention of thanks goes to volunteer and Civil War expert, Peter Escott, who was able to identify for us what is going on in the photographs, and to Paul Lewan, branch manager at the Brookline Bank, in whose vault we store the photographs.

President's Message *continued*

We are continuing to improve the information available on our website. We're excited that you can now link to historic maps of Medford. Ultimately, we want scholars and other interested parties to be able to access our amazing Civil War photo collection without having to come to the building and physically handle the fragile photographs.

I'd like to use some of my space in this column to honor a long-time Society life member, veteran, and business leader, Tom Convery. His many contributions to the community over the years would fill volumes, so I'd like to focus just on his interest in Medford history. In addition to writing a monthly column for the *Medford Transcript* "When I Was a Kid," he has published five books, *When I Was a Kid*, *I Remember When*, *That's the Way it Was*, *Time Flies*, and, most recently, *I Wish I Could Remember*. All the proceeds from sales of the books benefit local charities which, over the years, have included N.E. Shelter for Homeless Veterans, Special Olympics, Visiting Nurses, Friends of Francis Food Pantry, and Medford Community Family – The Buddy Coholan Center. To date, he has raised \$29,400 for these organizations while providing written records of significant people and events in Medford. The most recent book, as the title suggests, is dedicated to family members and friends who have suffered from Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia. In addition, the book includes sections on the history of the Friends of Francis Food Pantry, November 11 (now known as Veteran's Day, formerly Armistice Day), living and growing up during the 1929 Depression, the traditional weekly Saturday bath and many other stories and topics of historical and general interest.

If you'd like to purchase his book and support local charities, call Tom Convery at 781-396-8129.

I commend to your attention Barbara Kerr's excellent article on a Medford-born Romantic Poet, Maria Gowen. I've recently become a fan of the Romantic Period, a very short period from about 1785 to 1830. Like most people, I associated the Romantic Period with flowery poetry, but actually the period seems to mirror our own history in the late 1960s and early 70s. Inspired by the American and French revolutions, political and social movements questioned established institutions and social customs, including marriage, gender roles, and class. In America, it must have been a time when anything seemed possible. After all, the country doubled in size with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and we, a fledgling country, had the incredible nerve to declare war on the world's leading power, Great Britain, in 1812. A century earlier, Maria's remarkable life would have been impossible.

Finally, if you know a college-bound senior at Medford High or Vocational High, see the information inside on our \$500 stipend to support his or her further education.

We hope to see you at Society events, especially the Members' Reception and Annual Meeting on May 21.

–John Anderson, President

Joseph V. Valeriani Scholarship – 2010 Application

Deadline: May 15, 2010

The Joseph V. Valeriani Scholarship is given to Medford High School or Medford Vocational Technical High School Seniors who best exemplify the legacy of Dr. Joseph V. Valeriani, former MHS teacher and past President of the Medford Historical Society. The award seeks students with a demonstrated interest in Medford history, an intellectual or hands-on interest in historic preservation and a desire to pursue the study of history in a college or university, or to apply construction or horticultural skills to the preservation of historic properties.

This year, the Joseph V. Valeriani Scholarship Committee will award a \$500 book gift certificate or \$500 cash to the student with the winning essay. The essay may also be selected to be published in the summer 2010 newsletter of the Medford Historical Society.

Application Process: Students who are interested in applying for this scholarship should submit their name, address, and an 800-word essay considering the following question:

- * Explain why you are interested in history and what could be done by the High School and the Medford Historical Society to promote an interest in Medford history among today's students.
- * Note that statements from teachers or guidance counselors familiar with a student's qualifications are also welcome, although they are not required.

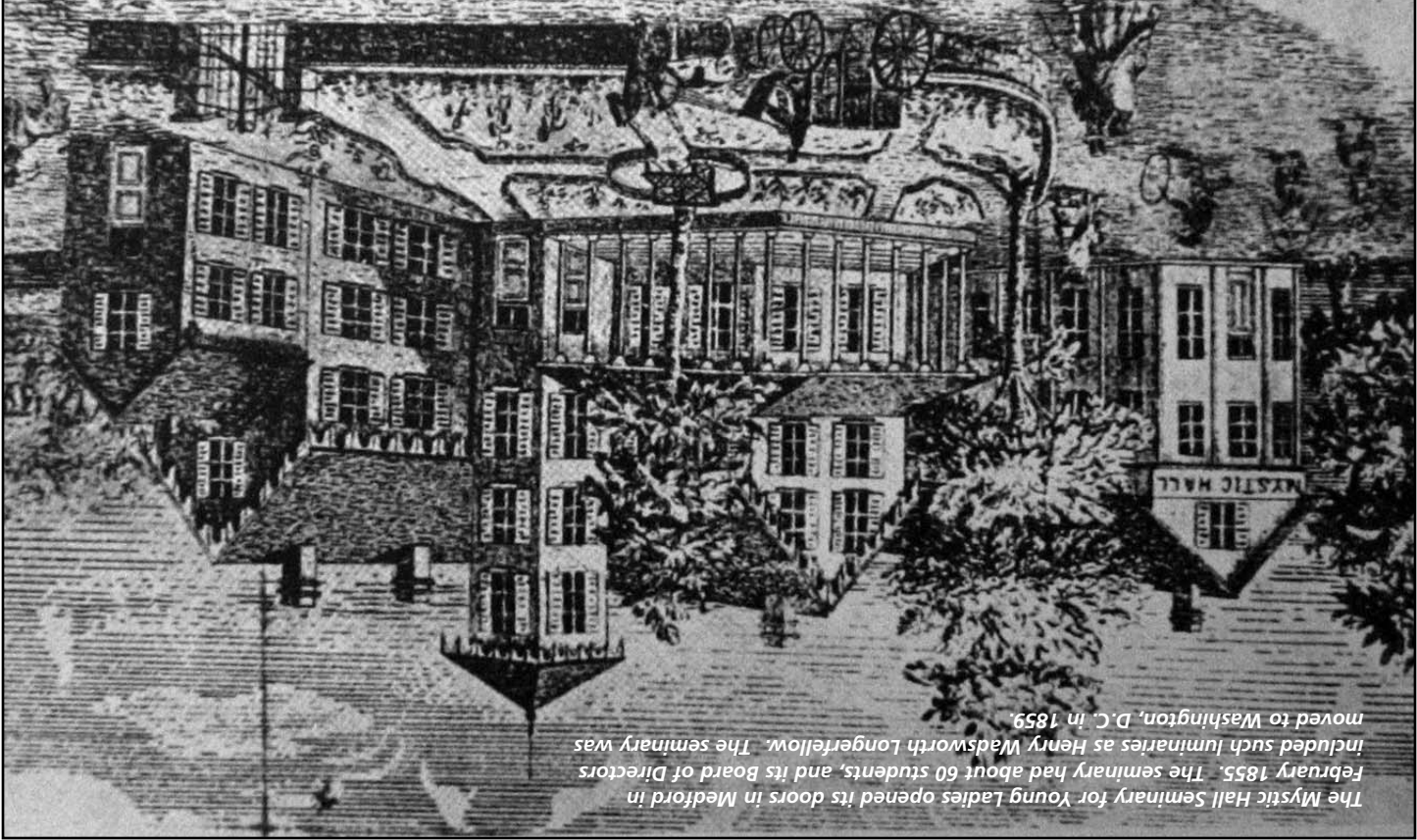
Selection Process: All essays will be reviewed by the Historical Society's Joseph V. Valeriani Scholarship Committee. The Committee reserves the right not to award the scholarship or to split the award among two or more applicants. The Committee's decision is final.

Essays and application should be mailed to:
Joseph V. Valeriani Scholarship Committee
Medford Historical Society
10 Governors Avenue
Medford, MA 02155

Newsletter Submissions

The MHS newsletter is published quarterly. We are looking for submissions for future issues. If you would like to submit an article about a topic of Medford history or a reminiscence about your personal Medford history, please send it to vickihh@verizon.net.

Spring Events Calendar and Valeriani Scholarship Information Inside



The Mystic Hall Seminary for Young Ladies opened its doors in Medford in February 1855. The seminary had about 60 students, and its Board of Directors included such luminaries as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The seminary was moved to Washington, D.C. in 1859.



Medford Historical Society
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