



# MEDFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

FALL, 2011

## Presidents' Overview Building Project Update



We're all excited to be wrapping up our major building

improvement project which includes:

- replacing the ceiling in the main hall and upgrading the underlying insulation
- isolating the iron beam high in the ceiling to prevent condensation
- improving lighting in the main hall, entrance hall, and second floor workroom
- repainting the main hall
- bringing the loose wiring in the entrance hall up to code

We selected local firms, Compass Contracting and Silvestro Electric, to do the bulk of the work, and so far everything has been smooth with no surprises. Before selecting these guys, we contacted five different firms, then selected from a final three after checking references.

We were forced to take action because of the ongoing mold problem in the building. Most likely, the building was originally uninsulated, probably without plumbing, and heated only by the fireplace and possibly a coal stove or furnace. Over the years, there have been many improvements, including an oil furnace, electricity, air conditioning, and insulation. I believe the current mold problems started a decade or so ago when the old, drafty

*continued page 6*

### Society Officers

*Co-Presidents* John Anderson and Kyna Hamill

*Recording Secretary* Maura McEnaney

*Corresponding Secretary* Donna Laquidara Carr

*Treasurer* Ruth Roper

*Director of Collections* Barbara Kerr

### Directors at Large

Stanley Eckstein      Jay Hurd

Jim Kiely              Luke Pomorski

Fred Schlicher



*Medford's first public art installation, a mural called "Golden Triangle of Trade" by artist Henry Billings, was dedicated in 1939.*

## New Insights into the Medford Post Office Mural

*By Kyna Hamill*

If you have stood in line at the Medford Post Office on Forest Street, and looked up, you have seen the peculiar mural entitled the "Golden Triangle of Trade." Medford's first public art installation includes a landscape spread across three panels above the service windows and attempts to portray the city's history in ship-building, rum and brick making and the slave trade. But the mural has a unique history of its own that has at times been mired in controversy. It was dedicated in 1939 and by the 1960s was covered up by wood panels. In 1993, it was restored and cleaned, and in 1999, an unsuccessful campaign was ignited to get the mural taken down due to its subject matter.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, C.S. Manegold's book *Ten Hills Farm: The Forgotten History of Slavery in the North* (2010) indicts the painter and the eighteenth-century history of Medford itself for the "fantasy" that the mural depicts. I suggest that this important artifact resides

not in the eighteenth-century history of Medford, but rather in the twentieth-century aspirations of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal Works Progress Administration.

The post office on Forest Street was the first federally owned building in the city. It was built in 1937 as part of the Works Progress Administration at a cost of \$149,500 and dedicated on September 15, 1937. The design of the building was prepared by Arthur L. Blakeslee, a Medford native, and chief of the Procurement Division of the U.S. Treasury Department.<sup>2</sup> The contractor, Edmund J. Rappoli, was also from Medford, and Arthur D. Healy (Massachusetts 8<sup>th</sup> Congressional District from 1933-41) secured the appropriations for the building project. Medford was proudly represented in many aspects of the building's construction. However, the art work was done by Henry Billings, a Long Island native and the grandson of Civil War Surgeon

<sup>1</sup> See "A stark reminder: Post Office mural depicts slavery and offends some." *Boston Globe*, 02 Nov 1999, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Medford Historic Register* (40:3), 1937, pp 43-45.

*continued page 2*



The Post Office mural depicts the historically celebrated industrial achievements of Medford including shipbuilding, brickmaking and rum. (center) An enslaved African in the West Indies hauls sugar cane which will be made into molasses and shipped to Medford for rum making.

John Shaw Billings, the first director of the New York Public Library.

The Federal Arts Project (FAP) was sponsored by the Federal Government between 1935 and 1943 in order to employ artists in a wide range of activities including mural and easel painting, sculpture, photography, graphic arts and stage and costume design in the post-depression era. While making work for artists was the primary reason for the project, another mission was to promote American art and culture at the federal, regional and local levels. Much of the art work served to celebrate and promote a sense of national and local industrial identity and yield art that would be familiar and optimistic to a community in the post-depression years. Hundreds of artists were commissioned to carry out this mission, including some would-be famous alums like Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Max Kahn, Mark Rothko and Arshile Gorky.

Henry Billings (1901-1987) received the commission to do the Medford Post Office mural which was financed by the Treasury Section of Fine Arts in the Treasury department. Artwork was installed in over 1,100 post offices across the country through the project, with Billings working on four locations for the FAP. He was likely paid \$700-\$900 for each commission. Billings was a moderately successful artist before and after the commission. He is described as morose in many of the sources I came across including a *TIME*

article from 1931. One certainly gets this impression of him in an interview he gave in 1964 about the FAP commissions when he practically forgot that he even painted the mural in Medford. In fact, the regional subjects he painted for the FAP seemed to be situated outside of his artistic comfort zone which usually included machinery and surrealistic experimentation. In a successful solo exhibition in 1933, Billings' painting entitled "Marine" depicted a "dreamlike combat between a seashell and a claw of a lobster."<sup>3</sup> By 1938, Billings' critics called his easel painting "in decline" on account of the attention paid to the murals he had been working on.<sup>4</sup> Billings' FAP murals which are all still on display include: "Five Scenes of Winter Sports" in Lake Placid, NY (1937); the "Maury County Landscape" in Columbia, TN (1942); "First Mill on Wappinger's Creek 1780" in Wappinger's Falls, NY (1940); and of course the "Golden Triangle of Trade" in Medford, MA (1939).<sup>5</sup>

That Billings knew very little about the community which he represented in the mural was not uncommon for the artists of the FAP. Artists who were not familiar with the community would research the highlights of the city's industrial history to try to understand the local color. According to the *Medford Mercury*, Billings researched the history of Medford "in cooperation with the Medford Public Library and the Medford Historical Society. His three colorful panels are the result of this intensive study." In most of the communities artists

<sup>3</sup> *New York Times*, 22 Jan 1933, p N3.

<sup>4</sup> *New York Times*, 8 Apr 1938, p 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ladies only can see another Billings mural on the third mezzanine level of the women's washroom at Radio City Music Hall called the "Crouching Panther."

## Post Office Mural *continued*

visited, local committees were organized to help inform the visiting artist and this could sometimes have been mired in disputes at the local level as to how the identity of the city should be represented.<sup>7</sup> Keep in mind that this mural was commissioned to an outsider, and no matter how much Billings researched the history of Medford, his finished product was an idealistic and not a realistic impression of Medford's history. A significant clue to this approach can be seen in the overly symmetrical organizing of Medford's history across the three panels. Even the *Medford Mercury* reports that Billings "chose to portray in vivid symbolism Medford's three great activities of the past."<sup>8</sup> These were the celebrated industrial achievements of historical Medford including shipbuilding as well as rum and brick making. While the industries of Medford are positioned on the left panel and the industry of refining molasses is on the right panel, the center panel includes the veritable haunted past of the town, the "Triangle of Trade" which allowed the industries of Medford to be successful. Billings' "Triangle" mural was not meant to celebrate this aspect of Medford's past, but rather emphasize the centrality of the trade in Medford's history. This included the fact that slave owning was documented in Medford since the eighteenth century when the Royall family brought 27 enslaved Africans from their sugar plantation on Antigua to run their new estate.

The nameless enslaved African who Billings locates in the West Indies (not Medford) hauls the sugar cane to be used in the making of molasses which would then be traded to enable rum-making in Medford. The sharp point of the golden triangle pointing to West Africa continues on to direct the viewer's eye to the enslaved individual. The sailor on the left does nothing but lean against the post (with a hand in his pocket!) to observe the working slave. Thus, all attention, including ours, is directed toward the enslaved African man. In turn, he looks intently at the symbolically open shackles placed in front of him, and our eyes are drawn to them as well. Why did Billings include the shackles? Are they meant to suggest that they will be soon closed around his ankles or to represent the freedom he will have some day according to history? Waiting in line at the post office, I often have a hard time taking my eyes off them.

C.S. Manegold calls this gesture of freedom a "lie", and it is, but not because Billings is trying to trick us into thinking that this part of Medford's history ended positively. Rather, the lie is situated throughout the entire painting in that Billings conflates 300 years of Medford's history into the whole mural. Chronologically, rum was made as early as 1715, and was

part of the triangle trade, but although small ships were built in Medford before 1802, the peak of the industry was in the nineteenth century, after slavery was abolished. Bricks represented by the kiln were made in Medford from around 1660 to the beginning of the twentieth century.

It must also be considered that, as an artist in the 1930s, Billings was strongly influenced by the stylistic trends of his time. Public murals funded by the Federal Arts Project were informed by other artistic movements in the 1930s including the Mexican muralist tradition of Diego Rivera, the Regionalist movement celebrating local history and American themes, and the "New Negro" artists like Aaron Douglas involved in the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>9</sup> All of these stylistic trends can be seen in Billings' "Golden Triangle of Trade," and thus the Medford represented here should be seen through the lens of a New York artist's commission of mural art at the height of its popularity.<sup>10</sup>

One thing Billings does not do in his mural is distort or caricature the enslaved man like other artists often did and for which they were criticized.<sup>11</sup> True, the slave is depicted with no shirt, but his dignity is preserved in the mural. Both the slave and the sailor stand on equal ground, there is no hierarchy of scale in regards to their size. The enslaved individual is the one at work here, while the sailor does nothing but linger. Post-depression era paintings almost universally celebrated the working man regardless of his race. Shirtless, muscular bodies of anonymous workers helped to heroize and mythologize the worker and according to Erika Doss, "deflect Depression era anxieties about unemployment."<sup>12</sup> And what about that eagle? The bald eagle was chosen as the national bird of the United States in 1782. It is commonly found on government documents, coins, stamps and currency, and this emblem was carved into all American merchant ships. Although the geometric golden triangle represents the trade route, the triangulation of the sailor, the enslaved African and the overarching emblem of the United States, reinforces the industrial power of the United States and the people who made it happen.

None of this should suspend the uncomfortable fact that slavery, the industry of human trafficking, was part of the foundation of America and those shackles remind us that this fact hovers in the history of Medford as well. In the end, isn't that what public art is meant to do? To make us think about the best and worst of human achievements? Billings tried to encapsulate the history of a town he barely knew into three painted canvases. Medford citizens today should continue to remember the whole history in context and tell the story to the next generations.

<sup>6</sup> *Medford Evening Mercury*, 2 Feb 1939.

<sup>7</sup> See Amanda Lahikainen's essay on this here: <http://www.brown.edu/Courses/HA0293/muralism.html>

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> See: <http://www.brown.edu/Courses/HA0293/racializedbodies.html>

<sup>10</sup> For more information on African slaves in mural art see <http://www.brown.edu/Courses/HA0293/newdeal.html>

<sup>11</sup> See for example the Thomas Hart Benton's "Arts of the South" (1932)

<sup>12</sup> See Erika Doss. "Toward an iconography of American Labor: Work, Workers, and the Work Ethic in American Art 1930-45. *Design Issues* (13:1) Spring 1997, p 55.

## For Members and Friends of Medford Historical Society

### Volunteer Opportunities Available – There's Something for Everyone

For over 100 years the Medford Historical Society has been working to capture, preserve and celebrate the history of one of New England's oldest cities. From Pre-Columbian America, through the Civil War and on to the present day, MHS's collection of artifacts, art work, books and documents is continuously expanded and preserved by volunteers. History is today, and we welcome your participation! Volunteering at MHS is a great chance for you to:

- learn more about our city's complex evolution
- acquire new skills
- use your creativity
- meet new and interesting people
- help a public organization flourish

Below is a sampling of volunteer opportunities. Please don't hesitate to contact us if you would like to participate or if you have new ideas.

#### **Sunday Staff – Barbara Kerr at [bkerr@minlib.net](mailto:bkerr@minlib.net)**

Join our expanding group of core staffers who help ensure that MHS headquarters is open to the public each Sunday afternoon from noon-4:00 pm. Volunteers greet visitors, sell books and other items, and help with reference and general information questions. Volunteers will be trained in the Sunday procedures and introduced to the basic books, indexes, files, photos, and other resources most commonly used in Medford research.

*Time: A commitment of at least two hours on Sunday from noon to 4:00 pm. at least four Sundays per year. Training time would be one Sunday afternoon lasting two to three hours.*

#### **Garden Committee Chair – John Anderson at [jwa02155@yahoo.com](mailto:jwa02155@yahoo.com)**

The Society has a small, narrow garden in the front of the building which needs an interested gardener to develop a plan for the landscaping, work with the Volunteer Coordinator to organize work parties to develop and maintain the garden, and ensure that during the growing season proper weeding and watering are provided. This project is a creative opportunity that can be expanded or modified to fit your vision and availability.

*Time: Estimated 60 hours a year over the Spring, Summer and early Fall.*

#### **House Committee – John Anderson at [jwa02155@yahoo.com](mailto:jwa02155@yahoo.com)**

1) Additional Committee Members - Help us assess the maintenance needs of MHS headquarters and the historic Peter Tufts House as well as develop long-range maintenance and energy-efficiency plans. Participation is open to everyone, particularly those who have construction, electrical, or facilities man-

agement background. Our primary goals are to oversee energy audits, make interior repairs and work with the MHS Garden Committee to improve and maintain the grounds of our headquarters.

*Time: The committee meets four evenings a year for two to three hours. Any other time commitment would depend on the nature of a project.*

2) Light Housekeeping Brigade – The exhibition area of MHS headquarters needs regular, light cleaning. We are looking for a volunteer or volunteers to come in once a month to vacuum, dust and tidy up a bit. On occasion, we also need help setting up and taking down exhibitions at the headquarters.

*Time: Once a month for one to two hours.*

3) Snow Shovel Staff – When the snow flies we need a healthy soul to come by MHS headquarters with a shovel and broom to clear and sweep its front entryway and adjacent sidewalk.

*Time: An average of four times a snow season. If a snow accumulation is less than a foot, the effort should take around 30 minutes. The volunteer must be in good general health and fit for the task as well as have access to a snow shovel and broom.*

#### **Website Committee – Fred Schlicher at [fredschlicher@comcast.net](mailto:fredschlicher@comcast.net)**

Join this committee to help plan the future development of the website and to work with the Society webmaster to keep the website up-to-date and relevant to members and the general public. As a committee member, you will work closely with the Board and Committee Chairs to collect and develop the copy necessary for updating the website. We are particularly interested in volunteers who have internet, marketing and/or writing skills.

*Time: Estimated 40 to 60 hours a year.*

#### **Event Committee – Kyna Hamill at [kynahamill@yahoo.com](mailto:kynahamill@yahoo.com)**

Join our committee to help plan programs, lectures, member events and educational activities. The sky's the limit when it comes to innovation, diversity and good cheer. As a committee member, you would help formulate a calendar of events, establish a "road show" of displays, help out with event tables, and arrange for refreshments at MHS programs.

*Time: The committee meets four evenings a year for two to three hours. Other time commitments would depend on the nature of a special event.*

#### **Fundraising Committee – John Anderson at [jwa02155@yahoo.com](mailto:jwa02155@yahoo.com)**

Join this committee to help plan fundraising events and develop outreach campaigns so MHS can pursue projects and keep its operations going. Participation is open to everyone, particularly those who have marketing and fundraising experience. The committee's primary focus is on formulating fundraising strategies and events, identifying external grant opportunities and

working with MHS's Historic House Marker Committee (see below).

*Time: The Committee meets five evenings a year for two to three hours. Other time commitments would depend on the nature of a campaign or special event.*

**Historic House Marker Committee – Susan Gerould at [gerould@comcast.net](mailto:gerould@comcast.net)**

Working with the fundraising committee, members will generate and manage publicity materials to inform Medford homeowners about the program and encourage their participation. We are particularly interested in volunteers who have marketing experience and/or writing skills to promote this growing program. Volunteers will receive layout and design support as needed.

*Time: Estimated 40 to 60 hours a year.*

**Historical and Genealogical Research Projects – Gerry Hershkowitz at [gjer\\_com@comcast.net](mailto:gjer_com@comcast.net)**

Develop “Medford Historical Overview” display poster. Create a poster or set of flip charts to orient visitors to MHS headquarters with the collection and the basics of Medford history. This project is a creative opportunity that could be expanded or modified to fit your vision. It will involve several volunteers with basic visual-communication skills such as research, writing, layout and production.

*Time: Estimated 30 to 50 hours over several months.*

## Medford Historical Society Programming for Fall 2011

**September 10:** Free hike with MHS and Friends of the Middlesex Fells. Based on the book *Round About the Middlesex Fells* published in 1935. (See below.)

**September 11:** New volunteer orientation at MHS from 1:00 pm-3:00 pm.

**September 24:** Historic Bike Tour: “The Great Women of Medford”; refreshments at 10:00 am at Whole Foods; tour leaves at 10:30 am. Donations appreciated. (See page 7.)

**October 1:** Fall Cleanup of MHS, 10:00 am. Details will follow as an email.

**October 1:** Revolutionary War Encampment at Riverbend Park.

**October 13:** Poems on the River: Enjoy a poetry reading at MHS from 7:00 pm – 9:00 pm and see the newly painted main hall. Refreshments provided.

**October 22:** Mystic River Celebration at the Condon Shell, 11:00 am – 4:00 pm.

**November 5:** Second Annual MHS Fundraising Gala. Medford City Hall; more info TBA.

**November 6:** History of the Congregational Church of West Medford, 400 High Street, West Medford, 3:00 pm.

## Hiking History in the Middlesex Fells!



The Medford Historical Society and the Friends of the Middlesex Fells present a guided walk to historical Fells locations as depicted in *Round About Middlesex Fells* (1935) and “A Lecture on the Middlesex Fells” (1893). This free tour will be led by Mike Ryan, Walter Kittredge & Bryan Hamlin, Friends of the Middlesex Fells Reservation.

**When:** Saturday, September 10

**Time:** 10:00 am - 12:00 pm

**Meet:** Bear Hill — Dark Hollow Pond Trail Historical Hike Meet at Gate 21, Bear Hill parking area, Fallon Road, Stoneham (GPS: 42.4688, -71.1083)

The hike will begin on the path to Bear Hill, extolled in *Round About Middlesex Fells* by Ruth Dame Coolidge for its views in all directions, thanks in large part to the ‘Observatory,’ originally built by the Appalachian Mountain Club, replaced in 1910 by the Metropolitan District Commission. We will discuss the distinctive topography of the Fells including its many fresh water reservoirs as well as the whereabouts of nearby Cheese Rock, immortalized by Governor Winthrop’s famous 1632 visit to the Fells. From Bear Hill, the hike will connect to the Dark Hollow Pond Nature Trail. In his “Lecture on the Middlesex Fells,” George Davenport describes this area as the location of ‘some of the wildest scenes, the grandest and most pleasing,” including the site of what once was a much visited natural spring. Along the trail we will encounter many of the more than a dozen different habitats described in the Dark Hollow Pond Nature Trail Guide, written by Walter Kittredge.

The hike will include much historical and botanical discussion along the way!

## President's Overview *continued*

windows were replaced with tighter windows, saving on energy costs but reducing fresh air flow. In addition, decades ago, when the ceiling was insulated, a fiberboard type of product (rather than plaster) was used as the finish ceiling. This product can hold a lot of moisture. A large section of this ceiling eventually showed mold growth. This was puzzling because the roof was relatively new and showed no signs of leaks. Over the years, the ceiling has been cleaned, painted over, and cleaned again to no avail. It became clear that we needed to understand the problem and then replace the ceiling.

Finally, about a year ago, when I was in the building on a Spring day, I saw the source of the water. You may recall the massive iron beam which runs the length of the main hall at the very top of the ceiling. It had been very warm and humid for a number of days, followed by a



*Main Hall of MHS with beams exposed (above) , and with replaced ceiling (left).*



cold snap. I could see trickles of water running from the beam down the ceiling, right over the moldy area. At first I thought the roof was leaking, but the water was clear. Water that leaks through a roof leaves a dirty trail and obvious stains when it dries. This water was clear because it was condensing on the beam and then running down the ceiling. The beam was cold because it contacted the roof and masonry wall directly but the air in the room was still warm and moist enough to condense on the surface of the beam, trickle down the ceiling and feed the mold! So, as part of the project we insulated the beam and dropped the ceiling just far enough so that the beam is now above the finished ceiling.

As plans for the project progressed, the Board had to evaluate carefully suggestions for additional work. It's always tempting to add to the project and often makes sense to do so "while the car is in the shop." We added the electrical work to improve the lighting and address safety and code issues with the wiring. We considered removing the fiberboard walls in the main hall, upgrading the insulation, and then plastering. However, the cost for this extra work was just too much, so we decided to only paint the walls instead. Kyna Hamill and Sue Gerould came up with a great color scheme!

The completion of the project opens new challenges and opportunities for the Society. As part of the project, we had to remove almost everything from the main hall. This gives us the opportunity to rethink how we envision using the room and what we want to display there. It's all part of how we present ourselves to the public. In

addition, this project is not the end of our work in and on the building! We did a major cleaning and reorganization of the building in 2006, concentrating on the basement and second floor archival room. While the construction workers were neat and clean, there's always a certain amount of dust and disarray to deal with when the project is over. We'll be organizing a fall cleanup shortly and look forward to continued support from our members in the cleanup as well as all the other endeavors for which your volunteer efforts make all the difference.

*—John Anderson*



## 100 Years Ago Today!

*From the Medford Historical Register Volume XIV, issue 4 (October 1911, p. 102-103)*

### Samuel Crocker Lawrence

The tolling of bells on Sunday evening, September 24, 1911, announced to the community the passing of its leading citizen, Gen. Samuel C. Lawrence.

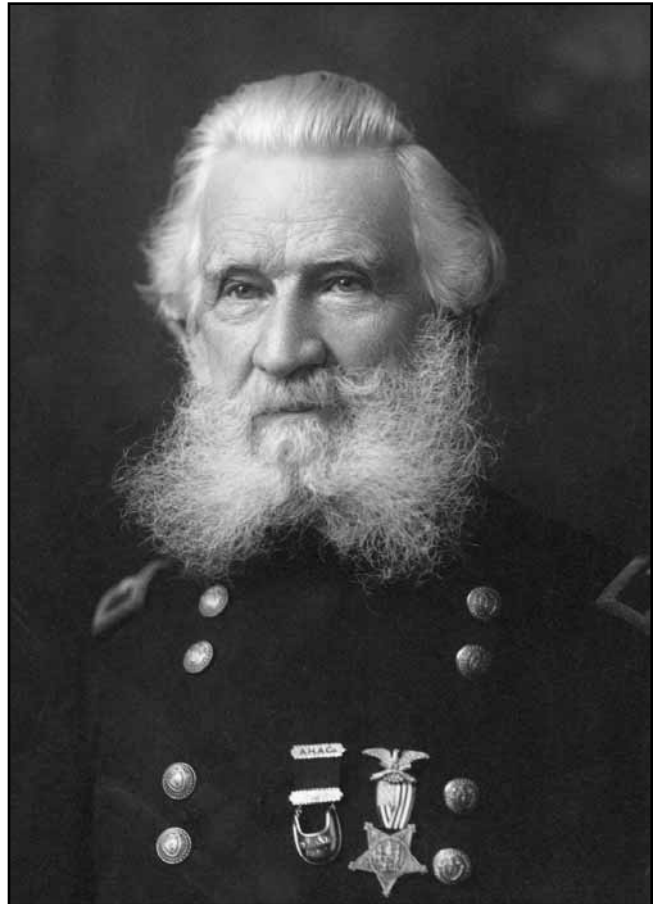
General Lawrence was born in Medford, November 22, 1832, and with the exception of two years spent in the west, after his graduation from Harvard College in 1855, was a life-long resident of his native place, which he loved and to which he was ever loyal.

General Lawrence was prominent in financial, military, Masonic, and charitable circles. His record as a soldier was honorable; he held the highest offices in the Masonic Order, and his ability as a financier brought him large returns. A man of wealth, he lived modestly, and his charities were generous and widely extended.

He was the first Mayor of Medford, yielding against his personal inclinations, to the imperative call of his fellow citizens to take office.

He was a charter member and a life member of the Medford Historical Society and aided it by his financial contributions.

His death was a marked loss to every circle in which he moved. —Charles H. Loomis



## Annual History Bike Ride

Join the Medford Historical Society and Green Medford for two great biking events on Saturday, September 24. Ride with us in the morning, the afternoon, or both!

Learn about Medford's distinguished women from history and share an easy bike ride featuring stories about Lydia Marie Child, Amelia Earhart, Fannie Merritt Farmer, Muriel (Earhart) Morrissey, Susanna Rowson, Belinda Royall & more.

Enjoy refreshments at Whole Foods at 10:00 am; tour begins at 10:30 am lasting about 2 hours. All cycling levels welcome. Donations to the Medford Historical Society are appreciated.

People interested in the Moving Planet bike rally in Boston can join a group heading there at 1:30 pm after the tour.

*A Medford man with his high wheel bicycle, circa 1884-1890. Around this time Medford had it's own active bicycle club. Wheelmen and women organized social rides with clubs in other nearby communities.*



## Poems on the River

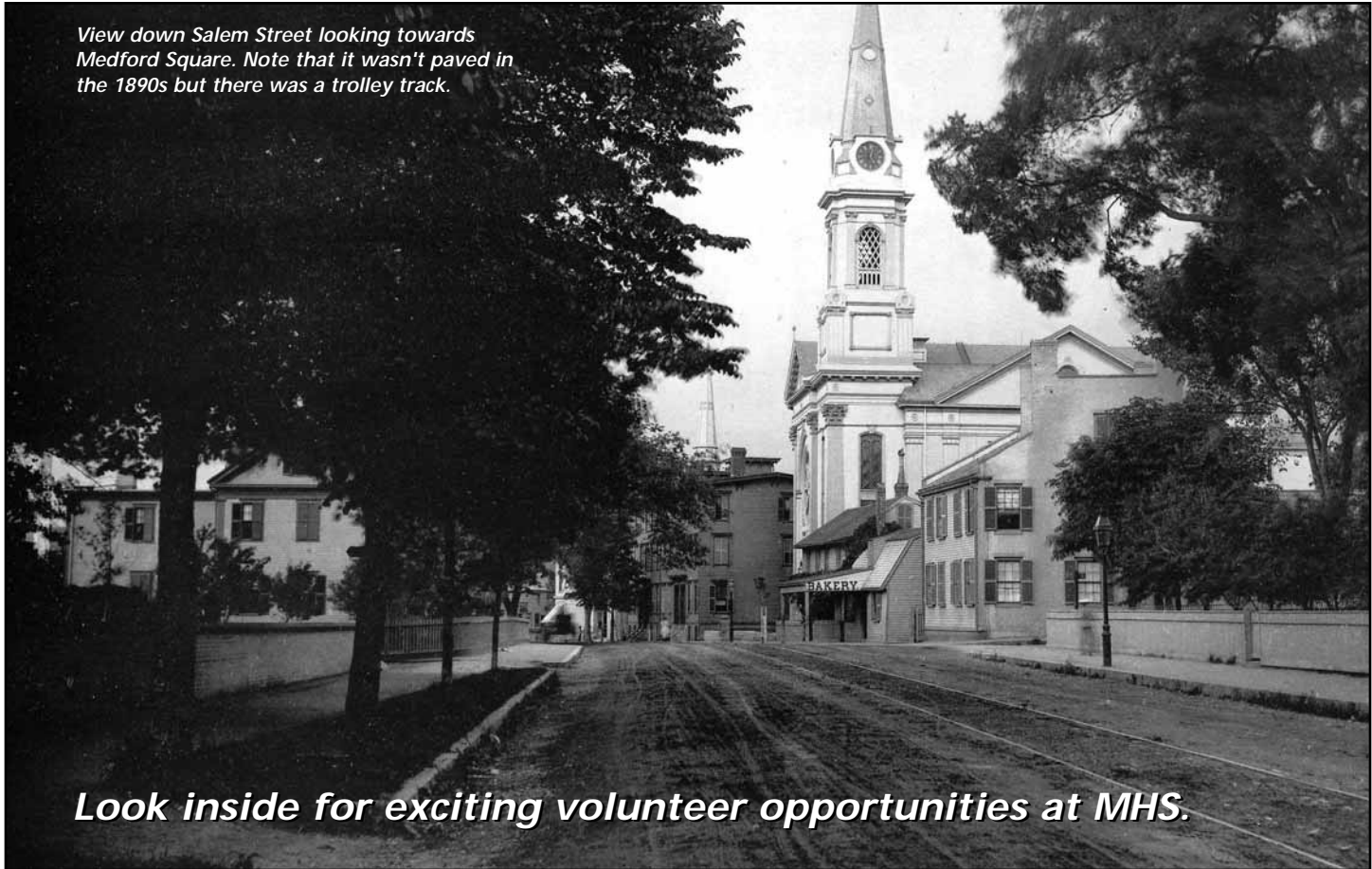
*"The river is within us, the sea is all about us" - T.S. Eliot*

To celebrate the Medford on the Mystic Arts Festival in October and show off the newly refurbished main hall of the Medford Historical Society, please join us for a poetry reading on Thursday, October 13 from 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm. Meet new people and enjoy voices from all over Medford celebrating poetry on the theme of "the river." This event is free and open to the public. Refreshments will be available.

The Medford  
Historical Society is  
now on Facebook!

facebook

*View down Salem Street looking towards  
Medford Square. Note that it wasn't paved in  
the 1890s but there was a trolley track.*



***Look inside for exciting volunteer opportunities at MHS.***

*Your Medford Historical Society Newsletter*

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



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