



MEDFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

WINTER, 2013

Presidents' Overview



As it seems to happen every year, it has been a busy fall for the

Society. Our public programs included a hike with "Mr. Thoreau", and a bike tour exploring the oldest trees in Medford. We participated in CACHE's exciting programs including Circle the Square and the Medford on the Mystic Arts Festival, which featured a talk by author Eric Jay Dolin. Our third annual gala featured Medford in the 50s, 60s, and 70s and gave people a good excuse to resurrect some old outfits and dance the night away, fueled by memories, music, and exotic cocktails. Who can forget the kick from Luke's Moscow Mule? Or the panels and slideshow that Will and Sue assembled from our archives of three important Medford events of those decades? Thanks to everyone who worked so hard to make this a big success! Look inside to see the diverse programs for Spring 2013.

We passed a major milestone this year by completing the cataloging of our Civil War photo collection and starting our experiment with having a new part-time paid staffer, Allison Andrews; you'll read more about that inside.

Of course, success only makes us look forward to all that still needs to be done. In particular, now that the photos have been cataloged we want to develop a plan to raise funds to

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Recording Secretary Jay Hurd

Corresponding Secretary Donna Laquidara Carr

Treasurer Ruth Roper

Assistant Treasurer Mike Oliver

Director of Collections Barbara Kerr

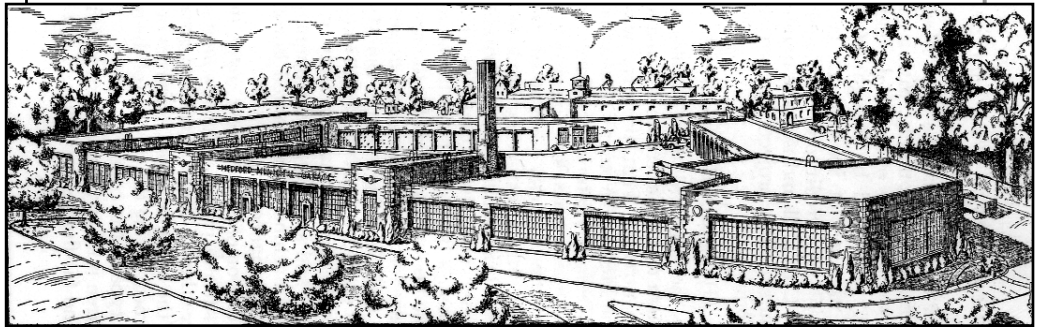
Directors at Large

Stanley Eckstein Fred Schlicher

Luke Pomorski Ryan Wheeler

A Tale of Three Buildings from 1937

John Anderson



As those of you familiar with our archives know, *The Medford Historical Register*, published by the Society quarterly from 1898 to 1943 is a real treasure and a wealth of information for historical research. But what I find even more interesting is the window it provides into people's thoughts and values decades before most of us were born.

Turning for a moment to the present day, Ken Krause writes in an article for *Inside Medford*:

Mostly condemned and all but abandoned, the Medford Department of Public Works yard on James Street is facing an inglorious end as the city prepares to raze it this spring and construct a 21st century facility. Windows broken, doors padlocked and walls overgrown with ivy, the building's state not only belies its more useful days but also conceals its rightful place in Medford history as one the edifices that helped usher the city out of the throes of the Great Depression.

Like many residents, I have driven by the building many times, usually trying to look the other way without thinking about its history. Thanks go to Dee Morris, however, who discovered an article in the September, 1937 edition of the *Register* titled "Medford's Three New Public Buildings" which made me take another look.

The first two weeks of September, 1937 were marked by the dedication of three of the most important buildings erected in Medford over a period of many years.

The first dedication brought to fulfillment a desire of the progressive citizens for adequate provision for housing the officers of the municipal government under one roof, wherebefore the offices had been widely scattered and inconvenient.

It brought to the city a building which is a source of pride, and that is acknowledged to be one of the finest structures of its kind in the United States (for a city of its size), a long sought for and much needed City Hall, erected on the historic Medford Common. This new building was dedicated September 11, lacking six days of the 307th anniversary of the founding of the Town of Medford, September 17, 1630.

Previous to the dedication of the City Hall, another monument to Medford's progress, in the form of a city garage and public works plant, was dedicated on September 1 in the presence of officials of the Federal Works Progress Administration, ...city officials...with appropriate exercises.

These two buildings were municipal projects made possible by grants approved by officials of the Public Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration at

continued page 2

3 Buildings from 1937 *continued*

Washington. Both created work for skilled artisans and aided in relieving the unemployment situation, as had been planned. All work on the city garage was done by W.P.A. labor.

The third dedication was that of the new Post Office on Forest Street, which was entirely a Federal project. Elaborate ceremonies, speeches, and a banquet, marked this event. Medford now has a Post Office which was much needed and that is well adapted to a community such as Medford.

The 1937 article goes on to discuss City Hall in great detail. There are a number of pictures of the interior which show that the building has changed little in the last 75 years. The most obvious changes are in the "Aldermanic Chamber" which was reconfigured at some point to accommodate seven City Councilors instead of 21 Aldermen. I could go on, but the history of City Hall and its predecessors deserves its own article!

After discussing the new post office, our current Medford Square Post Office, the 1937 article finishes with the focus of today's article, THE MUNICIPAL GARAGE:

For years the Medford town stables were located on land through which Governors Avenue now extends, just off High Street. That property was developed for homes, the Medford Women's Clubhouse, the building of the Medford Historical Society, the telephone exchange, and apartments, and the street maintenance department was moved to land on James Street, extending back to the Mystic River. A large brick administration building was built for water, sewer, and street department offices, with the city engineer's business offices in the second story. Stables for the horses, and sheds for the array of equipment necessary for use of the allied departments, surrounded the main building. Later, the Mystic Valley Parkway was extended from Cradock Bridge to Mystic Avenue through the marshes, the city yard was encroached upon, and speedily, as the municipality grew, and motorized machinery supplanted horsepower, the facilities became inadequate.

The "large brick administration building" mentioned above was still in use until a few years ago when it was demolished after a major fire.

The article makes it clear that the City attaches considerable pride to the new building.

On the afternoon of September 1, 1937, the city dedicated with a suitable program the new municipal garage, which replaces the old-time stables and greatly expands the area for the administration activities of the departments concerned, giving the city one of the most modern plants of its type in the country.

The land area is 69,405 square feet and the plan area of the new and far-flung structure is 31,471 square feet. The building stands around the edges of the city yard, which is permanently surfaced, and covers 37,934 square feet. The entrance is from James Street, through wrought iron gates, and the building encloses the entire area.

The wrought iron gates are gone as well as the arch that spanned the entrance, leaving only the ragged supports on each side and a chain link gate.



This is what the Municipal garage entrance looks like today.

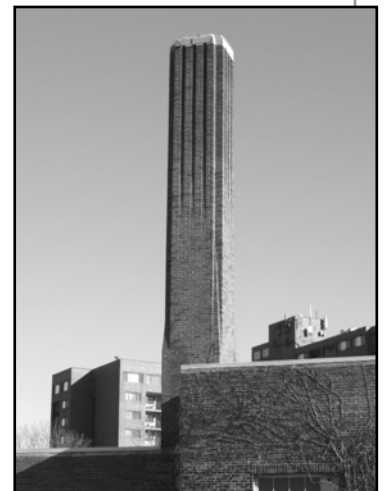
The article goes on to describe the effort to design and build a well engineered, modern efficient structure:

Work was begun in the winter of 1935-36, and for three months much time was used in a battle with the elements, the frozen soil, which had to be cut with compressor drills, the tidal waters, which had to be kept from the excavations by constant pumping, and the removal of peat, which was necessary to gain proper foundations. The building was to have been constructed of cinder blocks and stucco, but brick was substituted. *[Note: This was probably an upgrade, as stucco was the inexpensive exterior treatment of the day, akin to aluminum siding a few decades ago.]* Work progressed, and in February, 1937, the highway department was able to give up renting garage space, after a period of twelve years, and to occupy a part of the uncompleted building.

Abutting the property lines made the problem of laying out the garage a unique one in many ways...the plans were developed so that general supervision of the yard is centered at one point, and protection of equipment from vandalism is secured by having a single entrance....

At one side of the administration unit are repair shops.... Opposite are unit stalls for the storage of seasonal equipment.

Steel sash was used throughout the building. Vacuum steam heat supplies the seasonal requirements; the plumbing facilities include showers; the roofs drain into an underground



The newly constructed DPW building had an Art Deco chimney. Attractive corner quoins also provided visual interest.



3 Buildings from 1937 *continued*

system; backwater valves guard from tidewater which reaches the lower levels of the drainage mechanism under certain weather conditions. All electrical work is of the latest type...the plant is floodlighted for emergency service.

All floors are of reinforced concrete, sloped to drains. The roofs are of heavy plank, protected with standard tar and gravel.

Some details are still visible today which show the effort put into the building. Note the corner quoins, as you also see at the Royall House.

But the general look of the building today is a neglected wreck. Recent newspaper articles have described internal damage as well, leading to abandonment of many parts of the building.

While it's way too late to talk about saving this building, it's interesting to contrast it with the other two buildings built at the same time with similar attention to design and detail, namely City Hall and the Post Office. Both of these buildings are in regular use today and in good condition.

Buildings are almost always lost for one of three causes: a) disaster, usually fire; b) neglect which causes serious damage eventually resulting in cost of repair exceeding replacement cost; or c) functional obsolescence, for example a firehouse too small for modern equipment, or a post office that has lost its customer base.

In the case of City Hall and the Post Office, both seem to be totally adequate for their original purpose and, having been well maintained, continue in regular use. Since Medford's population is about the same today as it was 75 years ago, this is not surprising. (Medford's population peaked about 1950 at 64,971 and declined to 56,173 by 2010.)

Once the new DPW garage is designed, it will be interesting to see if it is functionally different, to any significant degree, from the 1937 garage. If not, it will be clear that the main problem with the current garage was deferred maintenance, which should be a lesson for us. It will also be interesting to see if it's a design in which we can take the same pride that our predecessors did in 1937. Good public buildings show respect for ourselves and for our city workers.



Interior and exterior views of the location today show overgrown, leaky, delapidated buildings which are no longer serviceable to garage the City's vehicles. (above:) Frozen water, leaking from the ceiling, now fills the pedestal sinks in the washroom. (below:) Most of the garage bays, with their "roofs of heavy plank" are fenced off as unsafe. (bottom:) Many of the large glass windows on the front are filled in. Others are broken.





Annual Fall Gala

The third annual MHS Gala was another success, socially and financially. Thanks to Fred Schlicher and Larry Brown for the many volunteer hours they put into organizing the event. This year we took the theme “Blast from Medford’s Past: the 50s, 60s and 70s”. We dug up some great photos and maps of the era and invited attendees to have some fun in dressing up. Thanks to Sue Gerould, Will Tenney and Leslie Spieth for help with the displays; what follows is the text which accompanied the exhibit, for those who were not able to attend.

“A Blast from Medford’s Past”: A Highway, a Fire and a Bicentennial

By Kyna Hamill, Co-President, MHS

It could be argued that—with industrial and urban development, the re-mapping of the Mystic River and the influx of immigration—the twentieth century has seen the most dramatic changes to Medford since it was first settled in 1630. Resulting shifts in the city’s landscape, population and industry have been extremely dynamic and sometimes unsettling. With a focus on the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, we decided to draw attention to events in each decade that helped change the city and shed light on some specific historic moments that occurred, specifically due to the highway, the fire and the bicentennial.

The Highway: 1950s

The motivation for building I-93 began when the Highway Revenue Act of 1956 proposed an increase of the gas tax from



two to three cents per gallon in order to help pay for 41,000 miles of roads to accommodate the forecast of traffic use by 1975. After it passed in the House by a vote of 388 to 19 and the Senate by a vote of 89 to 1, President Eisenhower signed the Federal Highway Act into law, allowing for \$25 billion in highway construction between 1957 and 1969. Because the federal government promised to cover 90% of all costs, the state could not refuse the offer.

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The Northern Expressway (I-93N) construction from Medford to the New Hampshire border began right after the Highway Act was passed. Between 1956 and 1963, the Massachusetts Department of Public Works (Mass DPW) —now MassDOT—constructed more than 24 miles of road at a cost of \$47 million. In order to accommodate eight lanes and minimize the building of bridges, MassDPW relocated, straightened and filled in sections of the Mystic River, which snaked from Winchester through Medford Square to Chelsea. Also, the construction required the Cross Street Cemetery, which allowed burials on the west side of Cross Street between 1816 and the early 1900s, to be moved to a fenced off section of Oak Grove Cemetery in 1958. Did you know that you drive by the old Cross Street Cemetery location every time you drive off Exit 32 heading north?

There is no doubt that I-93 changed the city of Medford. As you can see in the before and after aerial photos of Medford, the highway literally split the city into two parts. While access to Boston and New Hampshire became easier, traffic in the square was and still is extremely congested. Furthermore, the route of the Northern Expressway extended straight through the Middlesex Fells reservation.

According to MassDOT, the I-93 N now carries approximately 180,000 vehicles per day between Boston and I-95 / MA 128. In 2011, MassDOT set out to replace fourteen bridges in Medford over ten weekends between June and August after many structural deficiencies were discovered in 2010. At a cost of 98 million dollars, (80% paid by the Federal Government), the project boasts the fewest construction related impacts on traffic, businesses, residents and tourism. Do you agree?

The Fire: 1960s

“Majestic, now, you stand serene, As in the days of old, Still holding firm your standards bright, for those within your fold.” (From “Old Medford High” by Bessie Neill, class of 1904, written for the 100th anniversary of the High School in Medford , 1835-1935)

Medford’s High School on Forest Street grew as the city grew. The school was constructed between 1894 and 1896 by Cutting, Bardwell & Co. at a cost of \$175,000. Because of



Medford's growth as a suburb of Boston, the original brick building nearly doubled in size in 1914 with the addition of a rear wing which contained many classrooms, a

gymnasium and an auditorium. By 1929, population growth required construction of a north wing, and in 1939, a south wing was added. Along with classrooms and a new gymnasium, the south wing also included the Chevalier Theatre, the largest of its kind at that time in Massachusetts.

On the night of November 1, 1965, the back center block of Medford High School caught fire causing \$4.5 million of damage and destroying 35 classrooms. It was determined later that the fire was due to a defective smoke pipe located in the basement of the back of the building. The two outer wings were untouched by the fire, but they suffered water and smoke damage. Surprisingly, local elections slated for November 2, 1965 still took place in the salvaged areas of the school. Could you imagine voting for the School Committee after a fire like that?

Due to the damage, all 2,100 students went on a "fire-forced" two-week vacation. When they returned, the students moved to the reclaimed areas of the school and began an abbreviated class schedule between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m.. The business and commercial pupils came to school from 8:15 am to 12 pm, and the college prep students came to class from 12:45-5 pm. The remaining north and south wings remained in use until 1971 when the new high school on Winthrop Street was completed. After temporary use for municipal offices, what was now "Old Medford High" became abandoned by the late 1970s. Fortunately, it was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983, and shortly afterward, the city sold the building to developers to turn into condominiums.

The Bicentennial: 1970s

The U.S. Bicentennial in 1975/6 was a succession of celebrations that paid tribute to the events that initiated the establish-



ment of the U.S. as an independent republic. The federal plans for the Bicentennial began when Congress created the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission on July 4, 1966.

Although the celebration was initially to be held in either Philadelphia or Boston, it was eventually decided that there should not be a single event and communities should become involved by coordinating locally sponsored events. The

Bicentennial committee of Medford, chaired by Thomas E. Convery between 1972 and 1976, organized a series of programs and events in 1975/6 to look back on important historical moments of the city and help its citizens reflect on the many changes that took place in the city in the last 200 years. The whole city enthusiastically gathered for many celebrations and programs, and many community initiatives were carried out.

In a final report published by the committee, we learn that with a budget of \$34,000, over 115 events occurred to celebrate the Bicentennial. Other than many other public celebrations, the work of the committee reminded Medford of the need to preserve its history through the reprinting of historic books, maps and photographs. With the momentum of the anniversary, the committee was also able to refurbish two bronze plaques at the Salem Street Burial Grounds, promote the construction of display cases and new lighting at City Hall and encourage the preservation of historic sites throughout the city. Many historic books were distributed to local school libraries and Paul Revere route signs were placed on the path he took through Medford. Commemorative objects were also produced including bottles, medals, calendars and photographs, many of which still appear occasionally on EBay.

New Position



MHS is happy to announce that after many years as an entirely volunteer-based organization, we have been able to raise enough money to hire an office manager for six months. Allison Andrews has taken the job of Office Manager for ten hours per week in order to help us move ahead in our efforts to organize and catalog

everything on the second floor as well as consolidate Society records and create a procedures manual. Allison's experience cataloging the Civil War Collection and her previous volunteer efforts on the grade 3 school tours make her an excellent candidate. We are happy to have her on board for this temporary assignment. In the future, we hope to be able to extend this position beyond six months depending on funding.

President's Overview *continued from page 1*

professionally digitize the Civil War photographs and determine how best to make them available for research. We also need to continue cataloging the rest of the society's collection and improve our climate control system which is nearly a historic relic!

To further our goals, we sent out our Annual Appeal in December. Thanks to everyone who has participated already and to those who are planning to do so.

Happy New Year!

—John Anderson and Kyna Hamill

Programs

Join Us at Upcoming Medford Historical Society Events this Spring!



"House History Workshop with Ryan Hayward"
Wednesday, February 13, 7:00 p.m.

Are you interested in exploring the history of your house? Ryan Hayward of The Preservation Collaborative will guide participants through the details of researching your house's history.

Co-sponsored with the Friends of the Medford Public Library. Medford Public Library, 111 High Street. Free to all.

"Mabray "Doc" Kountze: The First Black Journalist Issued a Press Pass by the Boston Red Sox"
Thursday, February 21, 2013, 7:00 p.m.

Mabray "Doc" Kountze, born in West Medford in 1910, became the first African-American journalist to be given a press pass by the Boston Red Sox. On February 21, join us as Jay Hurd, MHS Board member and baseball researcher, speaks about this remarkable man and his little known contributions to sports journalism, the Black press, the integration of major league baseball, and his connection with the Medford community.

Medford Historical Society, 10 Governors Avenue. Free to all.

The U.S.S. Quincy in the Pacific in 1942
Thursday, March 28, 7:00 p.m.

Bob Begin will narrate the history of the U.S.S. Quincy and its WWII crew from Medford, Everett, Chelsea and Cambridge. They traveled from the Atlantic to the South Pacific and sank in a fierce night engagement with the Japanese in August 1942.

Co-sponsored by the Medford Historical Society and the Friends of the Medford Public Library. Medford Public Library, 111 High Street. Free to all.

The annual fall bike tour explored some of the oldest trees in Medford. The group stopped at MHS headquarters to see some relics of old trees and visited and planted a tree in Oak Grove Cemetery among other stops. A free lunch was provided by Whole Foods at our last stop at the Royall House and Slave Quarters

"The Middlesex Fells Through the Lens of George E. Davenport."

Thursday, April 11, 2013, 7:00 p.m.

Learn about the history of how the Middlesex Fells came to be and meet one of Medford's unsung heroes, George E. Davenport, who not only worked tirelessly for the preservation of the Fells, but also, as a photographer, documented many images of the nineteenth-century Fells and the city of Medford now in the Society's Collection. Presented by Kyna Hamill (Co-President, MHS) & Mike Ryan (Executive Director, Friends of the Middlesex Fells)

Medford Historical Society, 10 Governors Avenue. Free to all.

"A Taste of France"

Friday, May 3, 2013 – 7:00-9:00 p.m.

Joint Fundraiser with Medford Historical Society and the Medford Public Library Community Read. MHS joins up again this year with the friends of the Medford Public Library to present a feast of food celebrating Julia Child and French Cuisine. Part of the MPL Community Read lineup of programs.

Tickets are \$15. email BKerr@minlib.net

Annual Members Meeting and Reception

Friday, May 17, 10 Governors Avenue

Reception at 6:30 p.m., election will begin at 7:00 p.m. at the Medford Historical Society Headquarters.

Please check our website for a listing of future events: www.medfordhistorical.org, or follow us on Facebook!

A New Look Inside A Long-Ago Medford Shop

by Ruth Roper

Several months ago, a box arrived at the Historical Society, containing three bulky scrapbooks along with some letters and photographs. I'd recently curated an exhibit about Medford Hillside and thought I'd tracked down every photograph of Medford Hillside in our collection, but this package contained what every local historian hopes for: fresh materials from a new source. I opened one of the books, and immediately recognized the house pictured in the first pages; it was right around the corner from me. It emerged that the woman who had lived in that house until 1962 was a well-known Medford dance instructor, who had saved photos, programmes, and newspaper clippings from her long and successful career, as well as a charming six-page handwritten autobiography which helps set her life in context.

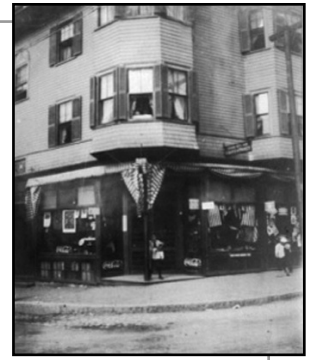
A letter came with the donation. "Audrey Gilman Benson was a distant cousin of my mother. She operated a dance school in Medford for many years before retiring to NH. She died in 2000 at age 97. I found these scrapbooks of clippings and pictures that Audrey and her mother, Mary Phelps Gilman saved. Rather than throw them away, I am sending them to you in the hopes that someone might find them interesting and perhaps useful."

I told this story recently to a woman who grew up in the Hillside, who with great excitement said "I took dance lessons from her! The Gilman School of Dance, in the hall of the Universalist Church!" She shared fond memories of a warm, talented, driven teacher. I am sure there are others reading this who must remember her.

The photos of the Gilman home are wonderful, and the current owners are thrilled to find photographs pre-dating the current aluminum siding. But one picture is especially fascinating: a photograph of the interior of the shop which her parents owned at the corner of Winthrop St. and Boston Ave., in

the building which stood on the site of what is now Hillside Cleaners. I had seen photos of the exterior, but this newly discovered shot is marvelous in its detail, a time-capsule from the very beginning of the last century.

The story of a life well-lived emerges from the pages of these scrapbooks: memories of her family, childhood, the Universalist Church, dance and theater happenings around town, and more --a reminder of the value of journaling and archiving, and of depositing these records in your local historical society when the time comes.



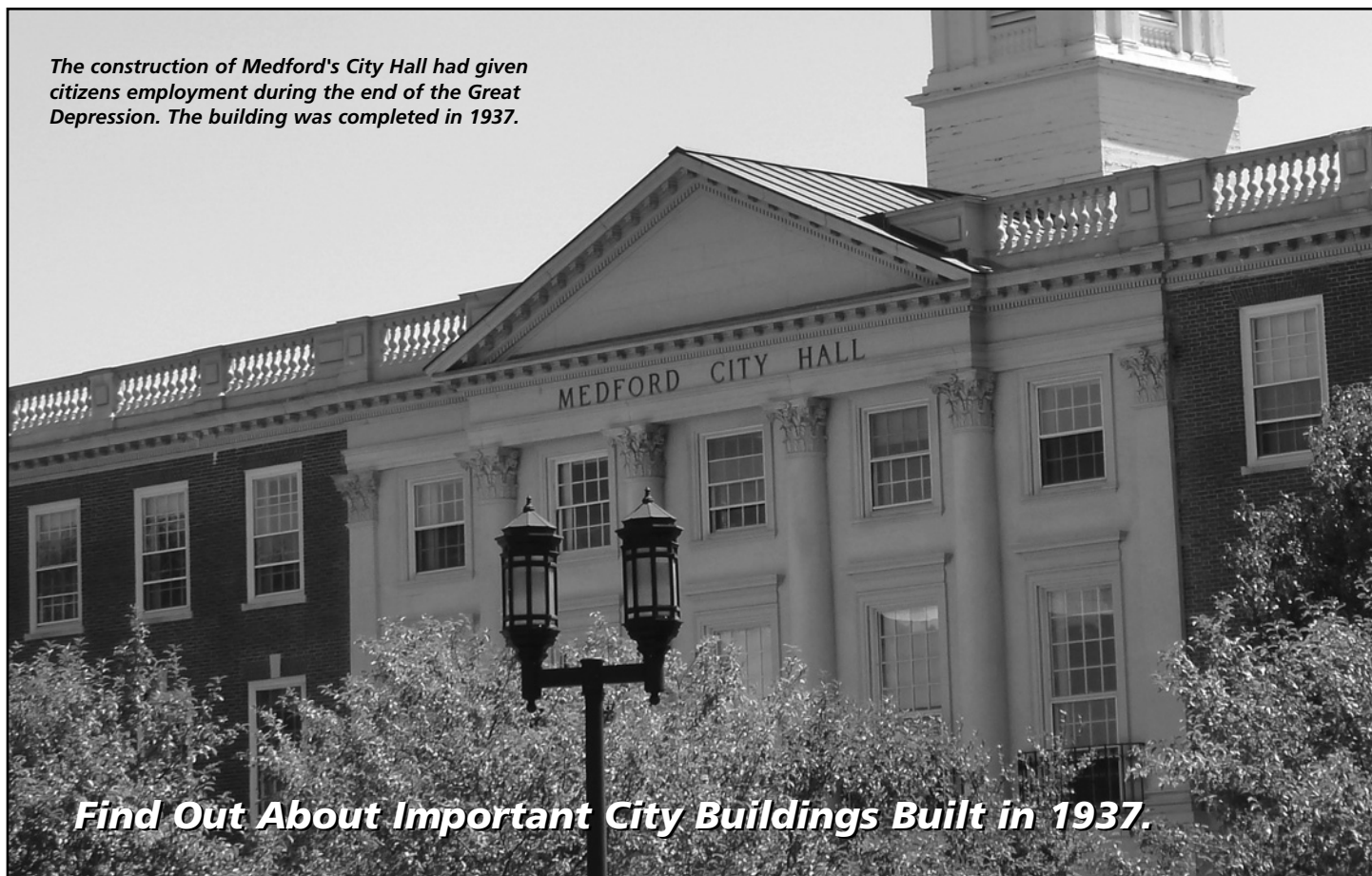
My father owned what was called a "Periodical Store," agency for leading newspapers, sold ice cream, candy, tobacco, and other items. My mother helped him, served over the counter, did the bookkeeping, and buying, keeping long hours but always had time to take me to a lesson or watch me practice. In the cellar of the store, there was a stove to cook on and noon meals ate at the same time, studying a geography or history lesson before school hours. I don't ever recall missing a day of school unless too sick to attend. I had a paper route and received my pay envelope of fifty cents each week along with the newspapers.

Gilman's letter describes her parents' periodical shop where besides newspapers they sold ice cream, candy, tobacco and other items. Note the hanging row of light-bulb samples, top left.



Mr. and Mrs. Gilman sit regally behind the counters of their cluttered store, full of the stuff of early-20th century daily life.

The construction of Medford's City Hall had given citizens employment during the end of the Great Depression. The building was completed in 1937.



Find Out About Important City Buildings Built in 1937.

Your Medford Historical Society Newsletter

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