



Will Tenney and Sue Gerould

I am sorry to report that Will Tenney, long-time MHSM volunteer and member of our Board, passed away peacefully on Labor Day. He and his wife, Sue Gerould, who passed away in 2025, were mainstays of the organization for the last 20 years and contributed in so many ways. Will contributed countless articles to our Newsletter, and Sue did the graphics and layout. After her passing, Will took over that responsibility as well. For years, Will has done the House Histories which are the foundation of our House Marker Program. He recently trained two new volunteers, Lucy Foulston and Karen Ramon, who will carry on his work. Will has made Medford history come alive for so many residents. The House Histories and his Newsletter articles included many stories of immigrant families who came to Boston, slowly established themselves, eventually moved to Medford, and made their mark on the city.

Will spent hours with a scanner he donated to MHSM digitizing city records which our Sunday volunteers use week-in and week-out to answer questions from Medford residents.

One Board member summed it up by pointing out "his unlimited devotion to important work that many will benefit from for years to come."

Thank you, Amanda Schuler, for volunteering to carry on the work of Sue and Will in producing this newsletter, the first since he passed away. □

Medford's Short-Lived Silent Film Industry

by Kyna Hamill

Between 1914-1921, Medford became home to an ambitious collection of characters keen to enter the booming moving pictures industry. During this period, at least three production companies utilized film studios in Medford, each with their own dramatic set of figures worthy of a film itself. The first, the Humanology Film Producing Company headed by "Baldy" Jack Rose, an underworld figure from New York, was also the first organized film production company in Massachusetts. In 1917, The Society Players Film Corporation emerged run by F. Eugene Farnsworth, with a goal of dramatizing the novels of Thomas Dixon whose *Clansman* had been made into the successful, but controversial *Birth of A Nation* in 1915. It eventually became The Mastercraft Photoplay Corporation, and it was under this auspice that the Film Land City Studios were built at Wright's Pond, although interrupted by the First World War.



Film Land Studios showing Wright's Pond in Medford, MA

Finally, in 1920, Broadwell Productions took over the studios to film episodes from the popular Nick Carter novels starring Tom Carrigan. In 1915, The Dyer Theatre opened on Salem Street, able to seat 1500 people and in 1921, this movie house screened many of the Nick Carter films shot in and around the city with personal appearances by the stars. However, in 1922 production quickly stopped as financial interests collapsed and it became clear that Hollywood would be the center of the movie industry. The Film Land City Studios burned down in 1938 and all we have

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Will Tenney and Sue Gerould

President's Overview

Update on Elizabeth Short, aka "Black Dahlia"



If you're not familiar with the "Black Dahlia," (real name Elizabeth Short or "Bette"), an

internet search will give you as much information and speculation as you have time to read. The quick version is that the horribly mutilated body of this attractive 22 year-old woman from Medford was found in Los Angeles on January 15, 1947. She had recently moved to L.A. in hopes of a career in the movie business. The gruesome murder attracted national attention, especially in Medford. There were suspects, but the murder was never solved. Movies and books have advanced conflicting theories. Elizabeth had a devoted younger friend from their Medford neighborhood, Mary Pacios.

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President's Overview *continued*

When Mary grew up, she became an artist and a freelance graphic designer. Between gigs she devoted over twenty years locating original sources, interviewing investigators, and writing a book of her own *Childhood Shadows: The Hidden Story of the Black Dahlia Murder*. She reviewed the entire list of suspects and although she had no proof, she identified the most likely suspect. Because of advancing years, Mary donated all of her files to MHSM. We probably have the largest private archive of Black Dahlia materials, only outdone by public agencies such as the FBI and the LA police department.

Around 2021, a video production company got in touch with Mary asking for her assistance in creating a documentary film about Bette Short. They interviewed her extensively and she recommended they get in touch with MHSM to review our archives.

I agreed to the request. I soon learned a lot about independent film production! Jeff Thomas, the director, drove through a snowstorm from Michigan in February 2022 with a truck full of video equipment. He was joined by a freelance camera operator, a gentleman who appeared to be the money guy, and an "investigator" named Lennie DePaul. Lennie introduced himself as a former Secret Service agent and US Marshall. They set up shop at 10 Governors Avenue, conducted interviews with people who had memories of Bette Short, and examined our files. I took them to sites around Medford where Bette and Mary had hung out, including the former Medford Square movie theater, a restaurant in Medford Square, and the site of Bette's home. Her family's home, very near the Route 93 Medford Square traffic circle is long gone, but a plaque marks the spot.



Plaque located at rotary near where 115 Salem Street would have been— Short's home in Medford.

The facades of the Medford Square buildings are still there, but the interiors and signage have totally changed over the last 80 years. I was quite impressed by the resourcefulness of this very small team, very different from a Hollywood movie shoot. There were no "grips," caterers, drivers, or any other support staff except occasionally me. Everybody, especially Jeff, the director, pitched in.

Originally, the documentary was to be released in the Fall of 2022 on a cable channel. Later, I learned they were working with a different cable company. I was losing hope for the project, except Mary Pacios told me that things were progressing, including some new interviews.

Suddenly, very recently, I learned about "influencers!" Out of the blue, I got an email announcing that the Black Dahlia case was "solved" and inviting me to a webinar to learn more. I assume the production team is starting their own promotion with the help of the "influencer" who wrote: What's being built here is not just a



Lurid coverage of her death included the made up name, the "Black Dahlia."

documentary project. It's something much bigger: a movement centered around truth, transparency, restoring humanity, and ensuring Elizabeth Short's story is no longer buried beneath decades of myth, sensationalism, misinformation, and noise.

This event will serve as:

- the public introduction to the movement
- a behind-the-scenes look into the investigation and upcoming docuseries
- an opportunity to establish credibility and transparency
- a chance to mobilize support surrounding the petition and community
- and a meaningful moment leading into the approaching 80th anniversary of the case

The webinar is no longer available on the web, but an article covering the same material appeared in the online version of People magazine. The MHSM website has a link to the article.

The article claims:

"We believe we know who the killer is," [Director] Thomas tells PEOPLE. "We believe we know where the murder was committed. We believe we know what the murder weapon was." The investigation, which included interviews with dozens of witnesses and files that have never been made available to the public, is chronicled in the upcoming docuseries *Deconstructing Dahlia*, which does not yet have a release date. "This is not a documentary about Elizabeth's murder," says Thomas, its director. "It's an investigation into what happened to deconstruct it starting off with that one [new] piece of information that we had."

This is very exciting because, by pure chance, there's a new book *Black Dahlia: Murder, Monsters, and Madness in Midcentury Hollywood* and the author William J. Mann will speak on his new book on September 30 at 7:00 PM. (See the Events section of this newsletter for details on how to register.)

And, thanks to another coincidence, Bette's childhood friend Mary Pacios, who lives in Portland Oregon, will be visiting family in Massachusetts at the same time and will also attend. I can hardly wait! □

Time Capsule

by Liz Ammons

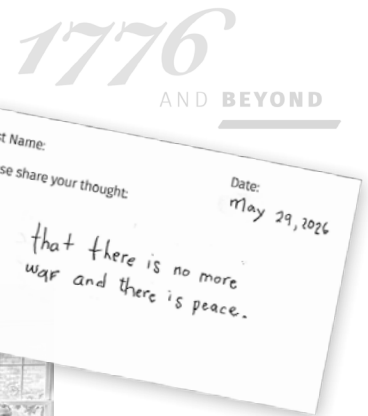
"Can I keep this?" the eight-year-old clutching a wallet-sized copy of the Declaration of Independence asked on her class visit to our current exhibit celebrating the Declaration of Independence, "1776 & Beyond."

Told yes, she dashed over to her friends and exclaimed in a loud voice: "She said yes! We can keep it!"

Divided into two groups, the entire Roberts School third grade—ninety children accompanied by a dozen adults—visited the museum in May, with half coming one day, the other half the next day. They learned about three important 1776 Medford residents: Isaac Hall, Captain of the Medford Minute Men; Belinda Sutton, an enslaved woman on the Royall estate who petitioned for reparations in 1783; and Sarah Bradlee Fulton who carried a secret message through enemy lines during the Revolutionary War. To remember their trip and share what they learned with their families, each took home a page to color showing the three figures.

The children then played "Museum Hunt," scurrying from display case to display case looking for specific items: a cannon ball, a green glass rum bottle, a bead necklace, a black "No Kings!" tee-shirt, and three powder horns. They theorized how each was used, worn, or produced. The cannon ball? Easy. The powder horns? Sort of easy. But the Indigenous bead necklace found many years ago in West Medford by someone named E. E. Stevens? That baffled them. Most read the signage accompanying the necklace and decided Stevens wore the necklace, the concept of provenance being new to them. Asked when the "No Kings!" tee-shirt was worn, most said 1776, although one group declared "yesterday" and another offered with obvious conviction: "when people don't want a king." A third group determined it was worn by "people who want a free country."

The children's visit ended with the exhibit's "Time Capsule" activity. As each small group filled out a card that will go in a time capsule to be opened at the Historical Society 50 years from now, it became clear that third graders, even if sometimes confused, are aware of the state of the world. Asked to share a major hope or fear for the nation as we look ahead to July 4, 2026, many wrote that they feared war. One group hoped "that there is no more war and there is peace." Another not only named their fear. They pushed on to present their solution. "We are worried," they wrote, "about how ICE is taking people off the streets. We want to solve it by making a program called FIRE." Some were wildly ambitious. They hoped "everyone in the world would be fairys [sic] and we will never die."



Above: Time capsule card from the 1776 and Beyond exhibit.

Below: 3rd graders visiting MHS&M from The Roberts School.

Others wandered off into their eight-year-old headscapes. Robots, President Trump, cats, dogs, turtles, and aliens all got mentioned, along with best friends' names and the hope that "the Celtics win a championship."

We are worried about how ICE is taking people off the streets.

We want to solve it by making a program called FIRE.

In their hour at the museum, the children fully engaged. They were eager learners, curious researchers, and inventive theorists. Our own hope for the future is that some of these budding peacemakers and creative historians will be present in Medford in 2076 to celebrate the opening of the Time Capsule—and that they will recall their exciting visit, a first-time experience for all of them, to a history museum.

(The Roberts School could visit because they are within walking distance. The Historical Society's goal, with the help of members and others, is to be able to pay for buses so that 3rd graders at the other elementary schools, Brooks, McGlynn, and Missituk, can also make an annual field trip to the museum.) □



Displayed time capsule cards hang from the mantel inside MHS&M.



Medford Historical Society & Museum

NEWSLETTER

Medford's Short-Lived Silent Film Industry *continued*

are news clippings, and as far as this author could find, one film to show the vestige of this distinctive industry in Medford.

It is helpful to parse out some of the language of the moving pictures industry between 1914-1921. A production company was responsible for fronting money, sourcing talent (crafts people and actors), and coming up with the stories to be filmed. Imagine this industry as a speculative business – like early content creators for a flourishing new kind of entertainment. Everyone was rushing to be a part of it, find new stories, and expeditiously make films that could be sold to distributors and shown in theatres across the United States. Emphasis here is on speculation, as the outcomes of the films were inconsistent in quality; just because something was made, did not mean it made it to a theatre.

The first moving pictures company in Medford was called the Humanology Film Producing Company run by “Baldy” Jack Rose, a notorious bootlegger and underworld figure from New York who was a star witness in the Becker-Rosenthal trial in 1912. His testimony implicated Lieut. Charles Becker, a member of the force’s “strong arm” squad, who was eventually sent to the electric chair for the Rosenthal killing. The Humanology Film Production Co. operated out of Medford at the Malden line in make-shift and found spaces since the larger Film Land City Studio had not yet been built. The Medford Mercury reported in 1915 that Rose was the President and “active manager.” The production company seemed to specialize in films with a redemptive story line including one called “Are they Born or Made” based on Jack Rose’s own life: a bullied child because of his hairlessness who turned into a delinquent teen and entered the underworld as a bootlegger and gambler. Jack Rose ultimately found redemption by lecturing about his life to teach others what not to do.

A movie studio was a location that could be rented by producing companies to utilize equipment including cameras, lighting, and stage properties. There would be editing and screening facilities and offices available for use. In the journal *Motion Picture News* (July 1920), the Mastercraft Photoplay Corporation announced the unique Mastercraft Studios nestled in a park of 58 acres to feature the natural scenery of New England, this is the Wright’s Pond that we know of today. You can see the completed glasshouse studio in the accompanying image from the cover.

Within a short ride from Boston, producers could find complete facilities for indoor and outdoor work, lighting equipment, scene docks, properties, a carpenter shop, dressing rooms, cutting rooms, a projection room, and a large administration building with spacious offices to use. “Everything necessary for the wide awake producer to make, cut and complete his picture right on the spot.” However, this studio only lasted for about two more years.

This period in the moving pictures industry followed the success of the controversial film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) directed by D. W. Griffith and starring Lillian Gish. With sweeping battle sequences, close ups and fadeouts, it was technically ahead of its time. Story wise, however, it looked

backwards in its chronicling of two families during the American Civil War and reconstruction era that followed since it was also released the year of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Civil War when many commemorative events were re-writing history. It was even screened inside the White House for President Woodrow Wilson. However, the film upheld extremely racist stereotypes and was denounced for its racist depiction of African Americans who were played by white actors in blackface. Originally titled “*The Clansmen*”, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a white supremacist hate group, was represented as a heroic force necessary to protect white supremacy in the United States. Many African American groups tried to have the film banned, however *The Birth of a Nation* was a huge commercial success and greatly influenced the direction of the film industry in America.

Aside from capitalizing on the success of the industry, Medford had a direct connection to the author of the *Clansman*, Thomas Dixon, on whose novel the film is based. According to the *Exhibitor’s Herald* of January 1918, the Mastercraft Photoplay Corporation was formed to film other Thomas Dixon’s novels. They utilized a studio in California and were working on building the Medford site. Dixon had been holding out on many other offers, but chose to work with F. Eugene Farnsworth’s company to film his novels. In the end, only one film was completed, *The One Woman* filmed in California, not Medford. Farnsworth was a polarizing figure who would go on to become the King Kleagle of the KKK in Maine.

By 1921, Broadwell Productions utilized the Film Land City Studios to make the Nick Carter dime novels into films. These were popular detective stories published as early as 1891 featuring an American detective type like Sherlock Holmes. Films featuring this admired character were made in Hollywood as early as 1908. We can document fifteen Nick Carter serial films made at the Film Land City Studio in Medford in 1921. “Among the Counterfeiters” is the only extant one I have been able to find.

By 1924, as documented in a book entitled *The Truth About the Movies from the Stars*, it is clear that Hollywood drove the movie industry with over fifty motion picture studios employing 15,000 to 30,000 persons with an annual payroll of \$50 million dollars and \$156 million spent on productions.¹ “Movies are to Hollywood as are the steel mills are to Pennsylvania” the book stated. “For the camera’s dependence on the sun makes the talk futile of moving the studios even towards the sea coast beyond Hollywood, where the fog would shorten the day’s work to four o’clock.”²

Comprehensive articles explaining the history and downfall of the Film Land City Studio have been documented over the century in the *Medford Mercury* newspaper that have been helpful for this research by Paul Kneeland (July 1941), Wade Hervey (June 1955), and Ethel Eddy (July 1978). □

¹ The Truth About the Movies (1924), p. 17.

² The Truth About the Movies (1924), p. 27.

REGISTER NOW—SPACE IS LIMITED!

Registration for these events is free at
www.medfordhistorical.org/events

CALENDAR of EVENTS

SEPTEMBER



Black Dahlia: Murder, Monsters, and Madness in Midcentury Hollywood

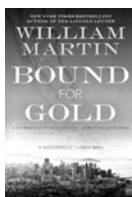
Speaker: William J. Mann, Author and Adjunct Professor of History, Central Connecticut State University
Date: September 30, 2026
Time: 7:00 PM
Location: Charlotte and William Bloomberg Medford Public Library

William J. Mann's *Black Dahlia: Murder, Monsters, and Madness in Midcentury Hollywood* has been praised by reviewers for offering the first account of the notorious crime that's more focused on the victim than her killer. Critics lauded Mann's ability to reconstruct the life of Elizabeth Short without exploiting her tragic death. The Wall Street Journal highlighted his skill in capturing the "historical environment that surrounded the crime... Mr. Mann conveys the era's disillusionment and its rising tide of violence and misogyny." Such context, the Journal noted, "is crucial to an understanding of Short's life—which [Mann] reconstructs with compassionate acuity." The Washington Post wrote, "Mann deftly sifts through the sensationalized journalism, preconceived notions, myths, and misunderstandings surrounding the case to uncover the truth about Elizabeth Short like no book before." The Los Angeles Times focused on Mann's effort to dismantle the pop-culture mythos surrounding Short, quoting the author: "Elizabeth is very, very different from the Black Dahlia." They're separate entities, and we need to acknowledge that to comprehend what happened both before and after the murder."

Previous chroniclers have been more interested in the killer than the victim, boasting of solving the case but putting forward unsatisfying or unsupported evidence. Mann suggests a couple possible solutions to the crime and presents compelling evidence to support his theories. "But solving the crime wasn't my goal," Mann says. "Understanding it, and understanding Elizabeth, was my goal." Short's death was gruesome and sensational and her short life ordinary and unremarkable. "But her life," Mann says, "is still more important than her death."

William J. Mann will discuss his process in researching and writing his book and provide a portrait of the young Medford woman at the heart of one of America's most notorious unsolved crimes.

OCTOBER



MHSM Historical Book Group: *Bound for Gold*

Book Club Leader: Jay Stott, Medford Historical Society & Museum Board Member
Date: October 15, 2026
Time: 7:00 PM
Location: MHS&M, 10 Governors Ave., Medford

Would you have joined the greatest migration in US history, leaving family and friends to travel thousands of miles to Gold Mountain (Gum Saan), where gold was said to be free for the taking? The next MHSM Book Club will focus on the history that underlies William Martin's spell-binding novel of the 1848 California Gold Rush: *Bound for Gold*. Whether you have read the book, are thinking of doing so,

or are just interested in learning about an event that transformed our country (and Medford's shipbuilding industry), please join us!



John Hancock's Middlesex Canal and Medford

Speaker: J. Jeremiah Breen, president, Middlesex Canal Association
Date: October 31, 2026
Time: 1:00 PM
Location: Charlotte and William Bloomberg Medford Public Library

J. Breen, president of the Middlesex Canal Association, will talk on the significance of the canal as part of an interstate water highway essential to the Industrial Revolution in Massachusetts.

The Corporation was chartered in 1793 to build a 27-mile canal between the Charles River at Boston and the Merrimack River at what became Lowell. It was built 30' wide, 3½' deep minimum, had 8 aqueducts, 20 locks, and 50 bridges. The Secretary of the Treasury described it as the greatest work of its kind in the United States in an 1808 report to the Senate. The Corporation was liquidated in 1853 after the one-horse canal boat lost the competition with the railroad. The first locomotive of the Boston & Lowell was rated 30 horsepower.

NOVEMBER



Abraham Lincoln: Life, Law, and Leadership

Speaker: Hon. Dennis J. Curran, Justice, Massachusetts Superior Court (Ret.)
Date: November 12, 2026
Time: 7:00 PM
Location: Charlotte and William Bloomberg Medford Public Library

Where have all the great leaders gone?

In today's sharply polarized America, we can take comfort in looking at Abraham Lincoln, a man who left an enduring legacy of leadership.

We will examine how, as a politician, Lincoln mastered the art of communication and compromise; and as a leader, envisioned a goal and attained it by tempering responsibility and determination with compassion and hope.

At moments of great challenge, Lincoln was able to summon his "better angels" to enlarge the opportunities and lives of others. The test of a true leader can be found in a man who continues to inspire a country long after his own voice has faded to the echoes of time.

This is Lincoln.

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Medford Historical Society & Museum

NEWSLETTER

Hearthfest

Member Holiday Party & Toy Drive

Dec 3rd at 7pm



Performances by:

MAX HEINEGG

Medford's Poet Laureate, singer,
songwriter, recording artist

&

LEMON QUEENS

Featuring Laura Lacombe &
fellow band members

10 Governors Avenue • Medford • **REGISTER NOW—SPACE IS LIMITED!**

Members register for this free event at: www.medfordhistorical.org/events

medfordhistorical.org

Return Service Requested

Medford Historical Society & Museum
10 Governor's Avenue
Medford, MA 02155

