



April 2013

Newsletter

NORWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY

P.O. Box 693

NORWELL, MASSACHUSETTS 02061

WWW.NORWELLHISTORICALSOCIETY.ORG

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P.O. Box 693
Norwell, MA 02061
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www.norwellhistoricalsociety.org

MUSEUM & LIBRARY HOURS

The Jacobs Farmhouse is open by appointment only. Please call the Society for further information or to schedule a tour.

The Norwell Historical Society Library at the Norwell Middle School (328 Main Street) is open on Wednesdays and Thursdays from 2:00 to 3:00 pm during the school year, and from 10:00 to 11:00 am during the summer.

The Norwell Historical Society Archives Center on the 3rd floor of the Sparrell School is open by appointment only.

The purpose of this Society shall be: a.) to plan and arrange for the promotion of knowledge about the Town of Norwell by discussion, research, meetings and publications; b.) to collect, solicit and preserve documents, manuscripts, charts, maps, records, photographs, relics, and items of local interest; c.) to arrange, index, catalog and file/maintain such material for use by the members of the Norwell Historical Society and other interested parties; d.) to work with and cooperate with other entities, groups, organizations, and individuals directly and indirectly.

MRS. JACK--LA DAME ISABELLA-- QUEEN OF THE BACK BAY

By Sam Olson

Most of the material for this article came from Louise Hall Tharp's Mrs. Jack, published in 1965 by Little, Brown & Company and the 2013 "Norwell Reads" selection The Gardner Heist by Ulrich Boser.

From the day in 1860 when John (Jack) Lowell Gardner brought his New York bride Isabella Stewart to Brahmin Boston until her death on July 14, 1924, Belle Gardner provided fodder for the social pages and the gossip columns.

Mrs. Jack possessed a pretty figure but not a particularly comely face. Never denying that she liked men better than women, she was constantly surrounded by a bevy of young men known as the "Isabella Club." All the while Belle laughed at the oftentimes salacious innuendo that followed her, denied nothing and did exactly as she pleased. But her lasting legacy would be the Venetian palace that she built on the Fenway--a place where people could come to admire and enjoy one of the best private art collections that could be found anywhere.

Belle was born in New York City in 1840, the cherished only daughter of a father who had made a more than modest fortune in the iron business. While attending a finishing school in Paris, she met Jack Gardner who was touring Europe at the time. It was love at first sight for both with their nuptials soon following on April 10, 1860, in New York City's Grace Episcopal Church.

Most Boston young men with Gardner's pedigree made comfortable alliances

with distant cousins and went on to pursue productive lives in finance or in the professions. Jack worked with his father, an importer who owned a fleet of merchant ships. With his marriage to Belle, Jack had broken the mold for proper young Bostonians. It was poet/physician Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. who first used the term Brahmin to describe Boston's social elite. A well known quatrain illustrates this exclusiveness:

*Here's to good old Boston
The home of the bean and the cod.
Where the Lowells speak only to Cabots
And the Cabots speak only to God.*

From the outset, Belle gathered around her a group of young musicians, artists and writers. They were wonderful dance partners for the wife of a reserved husband who didn't like to dance. The New York gossip magazine *Town Topics* implied that the relationship with one of these, Frank Marian Crawford, the author nephew of Julia Ward Howe, was more than a flirtation.

The Gardners, like many of Boston's business leaders, were "Cotton Whigs," opposed to the clamoring abolitionists who were threatening the supply of cotton upon which the looms of Lowell, Lawrence, and Waltham were dependent. Jack voted against Lincoln in both 1860 and 1864, and when drafted to fight in the Civil War hired a substitute for \$300.

After living for a time with the senior Gardners, Jack and Belle built a house numbered 152 on the "water side of Beacon." Their joy on the birth of

continued on page 2

MRS. JACK, CONT'D.

continued from page 1

a son turned to sorrow when John (Jackie) died of pneumonia at the age of two. Adding to their affliction, Belle was told she could bear no more children.

To assuage their grief the Gardners took the first of many trips to Europe and other places around the globe which would continue until Jack's death in 1898. Their trips usually included a sojourn at their beloved Palazzo Barbaro in Venice. This phase of their lives encompassed the years from 1875 to 1900, known as the "marvelous quarter century," a time in which the United States doubled its population and trebled its wealth.

Trips to Paris would include a visit to the House of Worth. Charles Frederick Worth loved to fashion gowns for Belle as she allowed him to drape the fabric accenting her figure in a daring way. This was a time when ladies' legs were referred to as "limbs." On one occasion, a young Boston admirer asked, "Who undressed you?" Belle's reply: "Worth, and didn't he do a marvelous job?"

During these post Civil War years, the Gardners began collecting paintings, porcelains, rare books, and all manner of antiquities for their Beacon Street home. At first they bought only what they liked but gradually began seeking advice from art experts such as Bernard Berenson. He steered them toward Italian High Renaissance, German Gothic and Dutch art from the Rembrandt period. Now they were competing with newly minted millionaires and near billionaires seeking to purchase status in the same way they sought titled Europeans for their daughters.

Among major purchases in this early stage of serious collecting were "Europa" by Titian, Rembrandt's "Christ in the Storm on the Sea of Galilee" and "Christ Carrying the Cross" by Giovanni Bellini.

In 1886, Belle sat for the portrait that became one of the most sensational of the age. As was true for many of his portraits, John Singer Sargent emphasized the pose of his subject rather than the expression of the mouth and the eyes. The portrait with what was then considered a plunging neckline and her famous pearls draped below her waist was considered sensuous and caused a sensation (see page 4 of this newsletter). It now hangs in the Gothic Room of the Gardner Museum.

As the art collection grew, Jack and Belle had an ongoing disagreement. Belle wanted to add a wing to 152 Beacon to accommodate their collection while Jack wanted to build a new home on the Fenway, little more than a fetid swamp which was then just being filled in with gravel from Needham. Jack died suddenly in 1898, and Belle immediately hired architect William T. Sears to build a replica of a Venetian palace at the Fenway thus acceding to Jack's wishes posthumously. There would be many times in the following years that

Sears wished he had never met Mrs. Gardner. She was constantly altering plans, tearing down what had already been put in place.

Between what she inherited from both her father and husband, Belle possessed a fortune in the tens of millions. But many of her competitors in bidding wars measured their wealth in the hundreds of millions.

After Jack's death, Belle continued to add to her collection more judiciously acquiring more Raphaels, Botticellis and Degases. She particularly treasured her purchase of a 16th century marble fireplace and four antique columns of peach marble. Berenson remarked that after Jack's death, Belle made a great discovery-- that things cost money.

The gala opening of Isabella Stewart Gardner's Fenway Court occurred on January 1, 1903. Belle stood majestically on the landing at the top of a double stairway as she received 150 of her oldest friends. Music was furnished by fifty musicians from the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Refreshments, however, were unconventional: champagne and doughnuts!

Mrs. Gardner lived on the fourth floor of the mansion. The conservatory courtyard with hanging plants according to the season was more than extraordinary. At the end of the long gallery was her private chapel. On the third floor "Europa" was set off in the Titian Room accented by rich brocades on the walls. The Dutch Room on the second floor contained the Rembrandt self portraits.

During these years Belle would open the palace for private groups of students from various universities. On public days, a corps of Harvard students would serve as guides. On these days Belle would reign as a grand duchess.

Town Topics continued to report on her eccentricities such as traveling through the city in her touring car with lion cubs on her lap. When the Red Sox won the World Series in 1912, Belle appeared at the Symphony with a white scarf wrapped around her head emblazoned with the words, "Oh, you Red Sox!"

As her life drew to a close, Belle selected trustees for the mansion now officially called the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. These trustees pledged in accordance with Belle's wishes that every painting, tapestry, architectural item and so forth would remain perpetually where Belle had placed them. That is why thirteen empty frames that contained priceless Vermeers, Rembrandts, Manets and Degases remain where Belle placed them despite the masterpieces having been torn out by robbers on that tragic night of March 18, 1990. On the 23rd anniversary of the heist, FBI agents and art lovers remain hopeful that the greatest art theft in history might yet be solved.

NORWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY
MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

DATE _____ NAME _____

MAILING ADDRESS _____

TOWN _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

TELEPHONE _____ E-MAIL _____

MEMBERSHIP

Individual (\$15) _____ Business (\$40) _____

Family (\$25) _____ Life (\$200) _____

Benefactor (\$500) _____

Please make checks payable to the *Norwell Historical Society* and mail to: NHS,
P.O. Box 693, Norwell, MA 02061

AREAS OF INTEREST

Newsletter _____ Public Relations _____

Hospitality _____ Program Planning _____

Library Volunteer _____ Historical Research _____

Photo Cataloging _____ Process Archival _____
Material

Other: _____

**APRIL 10TH MUSEUM TALK
AT THE SPARRELL SCHOOL**

The Norwell Historical Society is sponsoring a talk by Dr. Stephen Kenney, Director of the Commonwealth Museum--the Museum of Massachusetts History. Dr. Kenney will make a presentation to both the Norwell and Hanover Historical Societies on April 10th at 7:00 pm on the 3rd floor of the Sparrell School on Main Street in Norwell--the location of the Historical Society Archives collection.

Dr. Kenney will introduce us to this important Boston museum and discuss some of the various exhibits now on display, including one on Acadians and another on Massachusetts blacks in the Civil War.



One of the many interactive galleries at the Commonwealth Museum in Boston.

While the Museum is mostly known for its "treasures gallery" that holds the great

historic documents of the Commonwealth, it also brings the story of Massachusetts to life with state of the art interactive exhibits. Learn about the museum and meet fellow historians from the Hanover Historical Society as well.

No RSVP is necessary. To easily access the elevator to the 3rd floor of the Sparrell School, park in the rear of the building and use the back door at the top of the ramp.

 **STRAWBERRY FESTIVAL**
SUNDAY, JUNE 9TH
AT THE JACOBS FARMHOUSE
3:00 - 5:00 pm
Tours of the Farmhouse
Garden & Farm Tours
Strawberry Shortcake & Lemonade
Baked Goods Sale
Children's Games



Mary Knapp was a longtime member of the Norwell Historical Society and donated many items to our archives and Library. She will be greatly missed by many.

changes are being proposed to the Norwell Historical Society by-laws, and it is important that all members read through the changes and be prepared to vote at our April meeting/presentation (see below). Please read the new wording at the link on our website or call the Society at 781-659-1888 and we will mail you a copy of the proposed changes. Thank you.





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**NOTE YOUR EXPIRATION DATE...
IS IT TIME TO RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP?**



The Life & Legacy

of

*Isabella
Stewart
Gardner*

Presented by Maureen Cotton

Wednesday, April 24th
7:00 pm

The James Library

Join us for an entertaining
program about this
fearless woman, her
accomplishments, and her
lasting legacy.
Free. Donations welcome.

A Norwell Reads Event
sponsored by the
Norwell Historical Society

NORWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS (AN ABBREVIATED LIST...)

THE ABCS OF NORWELL _____ \$10

by Gertrude Daneau

This coloring book is perfect for children (of all ages!). This illustrated book can be used as a text for teaching budding historians, or as a quick guide to Norwell's many famous personalities and historical features.

HISTORIC HOMESTEADS OF NORWELL _____ \$15

Learn more about our stately houses and the people who lived in them. This book, well-illustrated with drawings, discusses architectural features and includes genealogical information.

A NARRATIVE OF SOUTH SCITUATE-NORWELL _____ \$20

by Samuel H. Olson
This book chronicles the life and times of our town from 1845-1963 through a collection of articles previously published in *The Norwell Mariner*.

HISTORY OF SOUTH SCITUATE-NORWELL _____ \$25

by Joseph Foster Merritt
A recently re-published history of the town to 1938. A unique narrative considered to be an invaluable account of Norwell prior to WWII.

All the above items are available at the NHS Library in the Middle School on Wed. & Thur. (2:00-3:00 p.m.) or you may call Gert Daneau at 781-659-2226, or you may request a publication using this form and enclosing a check (made payable to NHS). Mail to: NHS, P.O. Box 693, Norwell, MA 02061.