



Volume 30

Winter Newsletter

February 2010

CITY HALL, MEMORIAL HALL

by Pauline M. Golec

The Lowell Historical Society has a proud record of writing and publishing. The Society is also a responsible collector of Lowell material, some in published form.

A recent acquisition, donated by Patricia Hornby in memory of her husband Bill Hornby, is a somewhat rare attractively bound book entitled *CITY HALL, MEMORIAL HALL*. This 1894 publication, edited by Prentiss Webster, tells "The Story of the City Hall Commission including the exercises at the Laying of the Corner Stones and the Dedication of the City Hall and Memorial Hall." And tell the story it does.

There are lists of officials during whose terms these grand edifices were planned and built (1888-1893). Photos, drawings, and floor plans of the buildings abound. We're treated to brief biographies of Lowell Mayors, Chairs *Ex Officio*, of the Commission whose members planned the construction of City Hall and Memorial Hall, a monument to Lowell's Civil War dead and the site of the public library. This book details the history of Old City Hall, and tells of the materials, architects, contractors, furnishings, costs, and issues (clock tower, illuminated or not) involved with building the new City Hall and Memorial Hall. Included are programs of related ceremonies complete with unabridged speeches. Language in the book is rather formal with some charming asides - when corrections were made to the deemed "too Teutonic" faces of Civil War soldiers carved in the bay of Memorial Hall, the new ones had "familiar features, about which there was considerable merriment in the Commission."

I found the biographies of the Commission members of particular interest. Portraits of serious dignified gentlemen, leaders of the time, accompany their impressive stories. Perhaps best known is James Bichno Francis, English-born in 1815, who came to Lowell, worked under and with early Lowell engineers and

pioneers, and won international renown for his engineering acumen. His "Francis Gate" twice saved the downtown area from serious flooding. A fellow commissioner, Dr. Francis C. Plunkett, born and educated in Ireland, came to the USA in 1864, joined the Union Army, and later settled in Lowell. Plunkett was on the original medical staff at St. John's Hospital and eventually became its president. Lowell-born commissioners included Prentiss Webster (his mother was a Hildreth). With partner Gen. Butler, Webster practiced law. Other commissioners included Col. Albert Haggett, a paymaster in the Middlesex Company and later Lowell's Postmaster. George Runels was born in New Hampshire in 1823. This was the same year the first mill was built in what would later become Lowell. Runels came to this city in 1840 and later established a successful stone-cutting business. The Lowell Jail (later Keith Academy) is one of his works.

The four other commissioners were also accomplished men and all of the commissioners, with the lone exception of Prentiss Webster, had served as aldermen and other public offices.

The above reviewed book can be found at the UML Center for Lowell History at the Mogan Center.

Lowell Trivia

By Martha Mayo

1. What well known artist was born on Worthen Street?
2. Where were the American Automobile Association races held?
3. Who built the Northern Canal and "Francis Folly"?
4. What well known actress was born in Lowell?

Answers are on the Page 6.

Growing Up In Lowell XI

Sylvia Contover – Growing Up Greek

[In October 1985, Pat Cobel interviewed Sylvia Contover as part of the Oral History Collection created as a joint project between the University of Massachusetts Lowell, and the Lowell National Historical Park. The following article represents a small segment of the information on Sylvia Contover as edited by Cliff Hoyt. The full text is on the website for the Center for Lowell History, University of Massachusetts (<http://library.uml.edu/clh>). It can be found under "Oral History" then "Working People of Lowell."]

My parents were born in Greece. At the age of 18 my father saw a painting of an icon, and he made up his mind that he was gonna learn how to paint. To accomplish this goal my father became a monk and for two years he was a temporary Abbott at Mount Athos Monastery in Greece. During this time, his brother had gone to Medical School in Turkey, Greece and finally the University of New York and was a surgeon in New York City. Around 1911, the doctor wrote his brother saying: "This is the place for us. If you'd like to leave the monastery come here." When my father arrived in America, he could not find work as a painter. He read advertising in the Greek papers that they wanted help in the mills in Lowell. So he came to Lowell. While in Lowell he met a man who was connected with the Greek Church here. This man said, "My wife and my two children will be coming from Greece, and they have a young lady who's a neighbor and would like to bring her over. Do you think you'd be interested meeting her?" An agreement was made. My mother came to America with her neighbors.

My mother's trip to America was against Greek tradition. At this time, my grandmother was a widow and my mother had five younger brothers. The custom in Greece was that the brothers (because her father was dead at the time) should work and have a dowry for their sister. The only brother old enough to work fell in love and eloped. The mother felt that her daughter (my mother) would not have a chance to get married in Greece without a dowry. But if she left it would be an insult to her brothers; that they were not capable of marrying their sister off. So my mother left without notifying them.

In those days, in the American Greek community, there were not many eligible women for marriage. So if any girl came over, like my mother, there were many bachelors who were looking for them. But since she had been talked about with this man in Lowell, she was waiting to meet him first. They liked each other, and were married.

The only job my father could get in Lowell was in a leather factory. This company reasoned that since he was an artist he should work to dye the leather.

My parents had six children. The first was born at Lowell General Hospital. This child died and my mother blamed the nurses at the hospital. All her other children were born at home with a Greek midwife. I was the second oldest child in the family. [Born circa 1917-1918, Editor] I had an older brother than myself and then a brother, sister, brother. I was six years old when my youngest brother was born. My father died at the age of forty-two soon after that. He died of cancer, probably from chemicals he used as a dyer in the leather factory. His previous life as a sheltered monk and artist for ten years, did not lend itself to the vats in a leather factory.

At the time of my father's death, my mother didn't know the language. She hadn't been out working because she's been having babies right along. So it was very difficult for her but the Greek Community helped support her. They were very good that way. Also with four children under the age of seven she was able to receive "Mothers' Aid" from the state and did not have to find a job outside the home. But, she couldn't get Mother's Aid until she sold our house. Today they allow you at least to keep the house. But the house had to be sold, and it was highly mortgaged. So there wasn't too much money from that.

I grew up in the Acre section of Lowell. Our neighborhood was mostly Irish but we lived on the periphery of the Greek community with some Greeks on our street. But still we really grew up in the Greek community because we went to church a lot. My mother liked to go to church at every opportunity. There were frequent services and we had Greek School from four-six in the afternoon, as well as on Saturday. In Greek School we learned how to read and write in Greek. We spoke Greek at home too, because my mother's English was never too good.

I also went to regular public schools – Cross Street School for first through third. When I went into the first grade I didn't know very much English. They kept me back in the first grade. then for fourth to ninth grade I went to the Bartlett School. Most of my teachers at the Bartlett School were English I would say, maybe Protestant, I call them Yankees. A few were Irish. The teachers in those days could not be married and teach. There was a mother and daughter teaching there, but the mother was a widow and therefore she was allowed to teach. Finally I went to Lowell High School. In those days, there weren't too many Greek girls going to high school. Greeks believed in educating the boys. They wanted the boys to go to college, but the girls would stop after they graduated from the Bartlett School and go to work. After ninth grade. I was fortunate to go on to high school. [Graduated in 1936? Editor]

My friends growing up were mostly Greek. Greek girls were kind of sheltered. We were not let out of the house too much as we were growing up. We had to stay home and were not allowed the same freedom as the boys. My brothers were allowed to roam all over the city. But my sister and I were not allowed to roam. Although by the time we got to Greek School, we had friends there. We got to have friends later in Junior High School. You know, as we got older we made friends with other nationalities. Even so, there weren't many Irish kids at our public schools, they went to parochial schools. It was the same for the French too. Besides the Greeks there were Yankee [Protestant] kids that lived in that area and went to Bartlett School. There were a few Polish, but not too many because they had their own communities in Centralville and Lowell, Belvidere.

I remember we didn't even have electricity. We had gas light in our house.. There were some homes that still had kerosene lamps in those days. Also the streets were lit by gas, I remember the lamp lighters would come around. On each corner there was a lamp post, and the lamp lighter would carry his little ladder, and climb up the lamp post, and turn on the light at dusk.

We had toilets in the house. We had running water but it was cold water in my house. Other people may have had hot water, but we didn't have hot water. On a Saturday night we'd all take our turns taking a bath in the kitchen. The stove would be stoked up, the only heat we had in the house was the kitchen stove. We had to heat water in a big galvanized pan on the big black stove. When we moved after my father died we had a real bathtub but we still had to heat the water on the stove.

Our daily food was bean soup. We had a lot of bean soup. We had varieties of bean soup with nice crisp Greek bread. I still like the Greek bread. I had too much bean soup in the early years but now I like the bean soup. We couldn't afford meat. So we would have meat on Sundays, and it would be stews. The meat was occasionally beef, but it was mostly lamb, lamb with vegetables. Oh talking about vegetables, my mother had a friend whose family did farming out in Dracut. He used to raise all kinds of vegetables. The whole family use to go out there when it was the harvest season. We'd help pick the beans, we picked out our vegetables, whatever was ripe at the time. Now he had a wagon, a team and a horse, and he would put these bushels of beans, and squash, and turnips, or whatever he was growing, on his cart and he would bring it into Lowell everyday. He would go to each neighborhood and call out, "the vegetable man is here." And oh, the women would go down with their cans or baskets or whatever they had, and select whatever fresh vegetables he had for the day. We use to bring home a lot of vegetables. When we didn't have beans we had greens and feta

cheese and bread. We always had the bread because the Greek baker delivered the bread in those days. We'd tell him what kind of bread we wanted. They had hand-kneaded bread and they had machine-kneaded bread, or white bread or whole wheat bread. So we'd select whatever type we wanted. Most of us kids didn't want the whole wheat bread, we wanted the white bread. Now the white bread was always fresh, and we had to slice it ourselves. You couldn't cut it into thin small slices to take to school. For instance, when I'd go to high school I wouldn't take a sandwich, because I'd be embarrassed to take the thick slices of bread. Today I think it's great!

The milkman delivered also. We had all kinds of food delivered. Eggs and butter, whatever was needed. Or even if we went to the store, the grocery store, there would be delivery. Our neighborhood grocery store was the A&P. It was a small store, run by one manager and maybe one assistant. There were no supermarkets in those days. If mom wanted to buy something in the Greek line of food she would go to Dummer Street, or Market Street, which was the center of the Greek community and she would buy her Greek types of food there. For instance, lamb and the type of vegetables that they would eat. All kinds of vegetables and, greens, we ate a lot of greens.

Oh there was also delivery of ice in those days for our ice box to keep our food fresh. The ice man came by every day. We had an oblong card that we put out in the window to let the iceman know we wanted ice. If we put it in the window the long way, that meant we wanted a twenty cent piece of ice. And if the card was standing up, that meant the fifteen cent piece of ice. So he would cart it in.

The Greek bakers, milkman and the grocery man, were very good to the Greek community, to their customers. Because during the depression many people could not pay their bills, but food was still delivered. And some of those bills were never paid, but there was never any retribution. Our priest taught, not only of religion, but everyday life. Most of the people were not very well educated and would learn about living when the priest would give a sermon. One of the things I remember him saying was that we should support the Greek merchants. Buy from the Greek merchants. We've got to support them. And you know it paid off in the end, because many of the people were helped out when they didn't have the money.

Christmas and exchanging gifts was not one of the big Greek traditions. They had a Christmas tree in the church, and they had Christmas parties for the kids, and they had a Christmas celebration in the church. And there was an exchange of gifts but not big gifts. We had a Christmas tree and I remember we used to hang stockings up for Santa Claus. But these traditions were American customs, not Greek.

The big Greek holiday is on Easter, because on Easter Christ was risen – a joyful occasion. The traditional way of celebrating Easter is that you fast forty days from meat and dairy products. Most of the old timers would do it. But it came down to only one week for most people just before Easter. Saturday before Easter you'd go to Communion. And all Easter week there were services, special services, prayers, and events going on in the church. Sort of the life of Christ was being played out. On the Thursday before Easter the church services would show how Christ was taken down from the cross. They had a big wooden cross, and a wooden Christ upon a cross. The priest would get up on the ladder and take it down reverently, and say all these prayers. On Friday, Good Friday, they had a bier that was all in flowers and the altar boys, the priests, and the choir would go out and parade. Sometimes they'd hire a band. We Greek school kids would march along, and the whole Congregation would march along. There were years where all four churches got together and also the Syrian Church, because they're Orthodox Greeks, Orthodox Christians. Each church bringing their own bier that would be decorated with flowers. We would march to the North Common because all these churches are around the North Common. And then they'd parade back to their churches. At end of the service, everybody would be given a flower. On Saturday night they would have the services. Everybody comes in with their new clothes, their Easter clothes. When the clock struck 12:00 all the lights would go out. And then the priest would come out in the dark and say, "Receive the light." and all the parishioners would light their candles and start singing, "Christ has risen." It's a joyful occasion. Everybody's happy. Everybody goes home after midnight services and they have a big meal.

The big thing in this meal was the Easter Soup. It's made with meat, and scallions, and dill, and it's made with egg and lemon sauce. Oh it's delicious. And that was the way you break your fast. And then everybody had the red hard boiled eggs. The eggs had to be red because that shows joy. Not colored eggs as we had in the other religions. Everybody takes a red egg and then you try to crack the other person's egg, the point of the egg. And whoever ends up with the egg that's unbroken is the lucky person.

I had very little social life outside of the home, church, and school. Greek girls weren't supposed to date at all, but if we dated our mother didn't know about it. I was not allowed to go to movies with my friends. I remember our Greek priest took my Greek School class to see the first talkie movie, which was Al Jolson. The priest thought it was an historic event that we should see. I remember it was very exciting to go and see the movies. To a talkie movie. My brothers could go to the movies. If they did chores around the house they got a nickel, but we girls never did. The boys were brought up differently than the girls, because in the Greek system

the boys were supposed to take care of the women in the family. They're the ones that are going to go out and work and take care of the family. And the women would stay in and take care of their needs at home. It didn't always work out. But the people who had come over from Greece tried to instill that in us.

Late in the depression, I got a job at the Parachute Factory because the U.S. was beginning to support the war in England but hadn't got into the war yet. My youngest brother could not find work because the mills were going out at that time. They were moving south and there were not many jobs. So he left and went into the army. He thought it was glamorous. He was going to be stationed in Hawaii. And my middle brother went into the Reserves, the National Guards. It just happened that my brother Arthur, who was in Hawaii, was there at the time that they bombed Pearl Harbor. My brother Stan, who was in the National Guard was also sent overseas. Both of my brothers' outfits went to Guadalcanal. My brother Arthur was coming out of the battle, and my brother Stan knew that Arthur's outfit was there so he was trying to locate him. They met as Arthur was coming off the battle ground with his outfit, and my brother Stan was going in. And Arthur said, "Oh, I'll never see him again." But fortunately they both came back. They did win silver medals, and bronze medals. So they were heroes. In those days everybody was going into the service if possible. My sister and I wanted to go in, but we still had my mother at home. So it was decided that my sister needed to get away more than I did. So she went in the service. She was in the WACs. And my oldest brother who was married and had two children, also joined the Navy towards the end of the war, because it was the patriotic thing to do. I also wanted to go but didn't. Maybe it was the only way of getting out of our environment. We wanted a change and the military was one way to force a change. Another was to go to college. I wanted to go to college when I graduated from high school, but I knew I had to get a job. I had to help support my mother while the others were away. They sent stipends home to my mother, we all supported her. Family was close knit. That's the way my family handled the war situation. We all did our patriotic duty. It was a war that everybody supported.

Help The Lowell Historical Society

Much of the Lowell Historical Society's mission such as programs, preservation, and this newsletter, is accomplished using the funds provided by membership dues. If you have sent in your dues for 2010, thank you. If not, please take a moment right now to write that check and make a difference in your community.

LHS Corporate Memberships

The Lowell Historical Society proudly acknowledge our 2009 Corporate members who demonstrated their organizations's commitment to the preservation of Lowell's past and the dissemination of information to keep Lowell's heritage alive in the future. The following organizations have made this commitment:

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We would like to add the listing of your company here in the future.

2010 Corporate Membership

Enclosed is a \$100 tax deductible gift for a Lowell Historical Society Corporate Membership.

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Send to Lowell Historical Society, PO Box 1826,
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EBAY Auctions of Lowell Interest

Greek Band Photograph: A 7.5" X 10" photograph of a Greek Band. Image shows men, and children with their mandolins and guitars. The image is identified as coming from Lowell and is dated 1917. The image has some spotting, and slight crease on upper middle. The image sold for \$28.68 plus \$3.00 shipping.



Harvard Beer Tray: This tray measures 12" diameter and reads "The Finest Bottled Beer in The World, Harvard Brew. Co. Lowell, Mass., U.S.A." There is some minor wear on the edges of this tray and some scratching to the back. There also is a very light, faint drip traveling across the young lady's legs, but that's it! The tray sold for \$591 plus \$10.53 shipping.



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The preservation of Lowell history depends heavily on your membership. If you have not yet sent in your membership renewal for 2010, please do so as soon as possible.

Lowell Historical Society

The Lowell Historical Society's Mission is to collect, preserve and publish materials related to Lowell and to promote the study of the history of the City. We are located at the Boott Cotton Mills Museum, 115 John Street, Fourth Floor, Downtown Lowell Massachusetts 01852.

The office is open 9:00 am to 12:00 Noon on Monday and Wednesday. The site telephone number is 978- 970-5180 or on the Web at:

<http://ecommunity.uml.edu/lhs>.

Center for Lowell History Hours Increased

Due the fiscal cutbacks at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, hours for the Center for Lowell History, 40 French Street have been significantly reduced. The Center for Lowell History currently will be open on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday from 9 am to 5 pm and Saturdays from 10 am to 3 pm, or by appointment. To arrange an appointment outside of these scheduled hours, please contact:

Martha Mayo, 978-934-4997 or

Patricia Noreau, Director of Libraries, 978-934-4556.

Trace Your Greek Family Roots

The Hellenic Heritage and Culture Society is hosting: "Trace Your Greek Family Roots" on Tuesday, March 23, 2010, 6:30pm at the Pollard Memorial Library. The speakers include Steve Nigzus and Walter Hickey, the Society's genealogist. Attendees will learn how to research their ancestors both here in the U.S. and in Greece.

Answers to Trivia Questions

1) James McNeil Whistler, 2) The Boulevard,
3) James B. Francis, 4) Bette Davis.