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## LOWELL HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2024, Volume 57, Number 2

The mission of the [Lowell Historical Society](http://LowellHistoricalSociety.org) is to collect, preserve, and publish materials related to Lowell and to encourage and promote the study of the city's history.

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Happy Spring!

The Spring issue of the newsletter features the theme of "Lost Lowell."

A lot of us have memories of buildings and other institutions that, for various reasons, are not with us anymore.

Whether it was "demolition by neglect," "urban renewal," or other reasons, here LHS members help us remember and appreciate important buildings and institutions from Lowell's history that we have lost.

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"Our greatest responsibility is to be good ancestors."

- Jonas Salk

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### **LHS Supports the Preservation of the Smith Baker Center for Future Use**

The Lowell Historical Society's Board of Directors voted to support the preservation of the Smith Baker Center, an important landmark that holds significant cultural and architectural value. In an effort to prevent the unnecessary loss of this historic building [the board sent a letter](#) on February 29 from LHS President, Phil Belanger, to the City Manager requesting a thorough exploration of all federal, state, local, and private initiatives before any action is taken on the property.

As an organization dedicated to preserving the rich history of Lowell, the Lowell Historical Society recognizes the importance of protecting and restoring important landmarks like the

Smith Baker Center. While the building may be in need of significant repairs, there are numerous examples of buildings in similar or worse condition being successfully restored to their former glory.

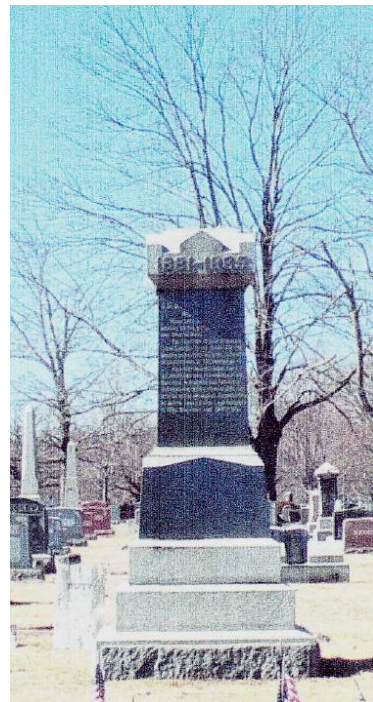
An earlier First Congregational Church building was on this site from 1827 to 1883. The "new" church, built in 1884-1885, is an impressive structure inside and out. It was designed by [Otis A. Merrill](#) and [Arthur S. Cutler](#), who also designed City Hall, the Central Firehouse, the Howe Building, and other buildings in Lowell, other parts on Massachusetts, and New Hampshire.

Rev. Smith Baker (1836 - 1917) had been minister to the congregation since 1870 and was the first minister in the new church building. For decades, Rev. Baker was one of the best-known ministers in New England. [Rev. Baker and his wife, Isabella, are buried in the Lowell Cemetery](#). He was followed in the pulpit by the young Rev. George F. Kenngott, who gained renown as the author of *The Record of a City: A Social Survey of Lowell, Massachusetts*, published in 1912.

After the church's congregation merged with the congregation of Christ Church United, the building was sold to the city of Lowell in 1968 and repurposed as a community center and senior center. The building was then named after Rev. Smith Baker. The building hosted many important civic and cultural events during this period, and many people have memories of ceremonies and performances in the hall, which has near-perfect acoustics,

Recently the Lowell City Council approved a motion, by an 11 - 0 vote, requesting that the City Manager engage the services of a qualified structural engineer to assess the structural condition of the Smith Baker Center. This is an important step in determining the feasibility of stabilizing the building and thus providing the city with more time to interest a developer in rehabilitating and preserving this signature historic building in Lowell's Historic District.

We believe that with the right resources and support, the Smith Baker Center can be preserved for future generations to enjoy and appreciate. We urge the City Manager and the City Council to consider all options before making any decisions that could result in the loss of this important piece of Lowell's history.



The Statue atop the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument at Edson Cemetery  
(1905 - ?)

Contributor: Walter V. Hickey

Dedicated September 2, 1905 in memory of the veterans of the Civil and Spanish-American

Wars, the creation of the monument was the result of efforts of women connected with the veterans' organizations.

The lot was set aside as a burial lot for soldiers and sailors in 1902. It was purchased from the City of Lowell by the Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Association in 1905 for one dollar.

The entire memorial currently consists of a large granite monument, cannons, anchors, and a flag pole all around the final resting places of veterans of the two wars. For five decades or more, there was a bronze statue of a Civil War soldier on the granite pedestal. The soldier was six feet tall holding a rifle in a parade rest position. The overall height of the monument was 17 feet.

The last documentation we have of the soldier being atop the monument was when Colmer Monument Works cleaned it in 1952.

**Where did he go?**

**What happened to him?**

**No one seems to know.**



### A Family Tradition Lost to Time The Franco-American Male Chorus

Contributor: Joe Jussaume

LHS member and Governing Board member, Joe Jussaume fondly reminisces about his Franco-American heritage, deeply rooted in the traditions upheld by his father and grandfather. His personal connection to the Franco-American Chorus, where family members actively participated, allowed him to experience the rich camaraderie and cultural pride that defined the community.

[Please click here to read more about Joe's story and the chorus](#)

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### A Forgotten Part of Back Central

#### Contributors:

Gray Fitzsimons, Research Associate, Saab Center for Portuguese Studies, UMass Lowell  
Marie Frank, Associate Professor and Director, Architectural Studies, UMass Lowell

Although overshadowed by the demolition of tenements and commercial blocks in the Acre neighborhood in the 1940s and in "Little Canada" in the 1960s, two major urban renewal projects that the City of Lowell initiated in the 1950s, Bishop Markham Village, followed by the Church Street redevelopment (later called Central Plaza), took out a swath of the Back Central neighborhood. These two projects differed markedly from each other, with Bishop Markham Village planned as a major public housing facility, while the Church Street redevelopment aimed to generate commercial growth.

[Click here for more of the story and pictures of this important but forgotten neighborhood](#)



### The Hackberry Tree

James B. Francis was a man whose appreciation for natural beauty was as profound as his engineering prowess.

In 1875, when a majestic hackberry tree faced removal, Francis intervened. With his guidance, Locks and Canals



Photo credit: Gray Fitzsimons

**The Keyes Building**  
(aka Joel Davis House, Bull Block,  
Cosmopolitan Café, Cosmo Club)  
(1834 - 2016)

employees relocated the tree to its location in the photo at the corner of Pawtucket and Cheever Streets.

While neither the tree nor Cheever Street survive, the enduring image, attributed to fellow English immigrant Annie Powell, immortalizes the tree and the area.

How does a building go from being “an important contributor to the current streetscape” with a “relatively intact historic fabric” to an “eyesore” worthy only of total demolition?

In New England, all you have to do is . . . nothing.

The story of the Keyes Building is a textbook case of [demolition by neglect](#).

[Click here for more about this tree and the details in this fascinating photograph](#)

[Click here for more about this historic and lost building](#)



St. Patrick School Complex  
Adams Street

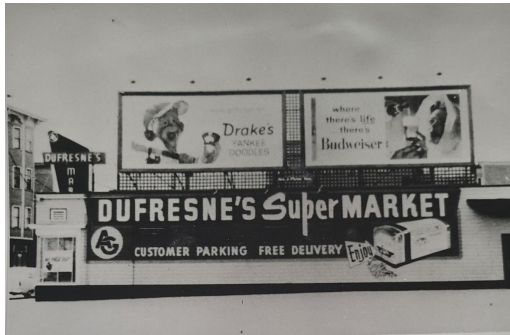
Contributor: Walter V. Hickey

From its humble beginning in the mid-1850s the land between Fenwick Terrace on the east and Adams street on the west developed into a substantial educational and religious complex.

For more than a century, these impressive buildings dominated the landscape of Adams Street.

The schools, convent and chapel were demolished in 1958 to be replaced by a new two-story brick school.

[Click here for more history, historical pictures, and historical maps of the St.](#)



### DuFresne's Supermarket

Contributor: Janine Whitcomb

Leo Dufresne and his dad owned Dufresne's Market on Aiken Street in Little Canada.

Business was very good, and there was always a strong sense of family and friendships.

Times were changing though.

The "Northern Canal Project," which was part of "Urban Renewal" took over.

The project took 96 acres and 325 residential and commercial buildings by eminent domain, and displaced 2500 people.

[Click for more about Leo DuFresne and DuFresne's Supermarket](#)



### Matthews Memorial Church (1902 - 1994)

The church, built at 799 Gorham Street in 1902, would be an important center for two communities of faith in Lowell for almost a century; first for Primitive Methodists, many of whom were from England or descendants of English immigrants, and later for Latino Catholics from Puerto Rico. However, there was no third life for this historic and significant building.

[Click for more about Matthews Memorial and the Spanish American Center](#)



## Lost Lowell Photo Gallery

LHS member and photographer Kevin Harkins has graciously dug into his archives of Lowell photographs and digitized some of them for us to enjoy.

Click here to see the photo gallery



Photo: Center for Lowell History

### The Grist Mill (1857 - 1966)

When most of us think of Grist Mills, we think of a rustic building in a bucolic setting. But did you know Lowell had its own Grist Mill tucked in among the textile behemoths?

The idea for the grist mill came from none other than James B. Francis.

And the power came not from a vertical



### The Lowell State Armory (1889 - 1977)

The Lowell State Armory on Westford Street had a rich history dating back to its construction in 1889.

Initially serving as a military training facility, the Armory also became a hub for basketball games, boxing matches, and other events including a ["Pure Food Fair" in 1912](#).

After the National Guard moved out in 1973, various proposals were



waterwheel on the side of the building, but a horizontal turbine in [the building's basement](#).

Francis said that it was simply a mill for grinding corn, but there has been a great deal of speculation about the reasons for building "one of the handsomest structures in Lowell" (Malone, 2009)

considered for repurposing the space, including low-income housing and a cultural center. However, the cost of repairs was deemed too high and the Armory was demolished in 1977.

The site was eventually transformed into a park, with a monument dedicated to National Guardsmen, in 1985.

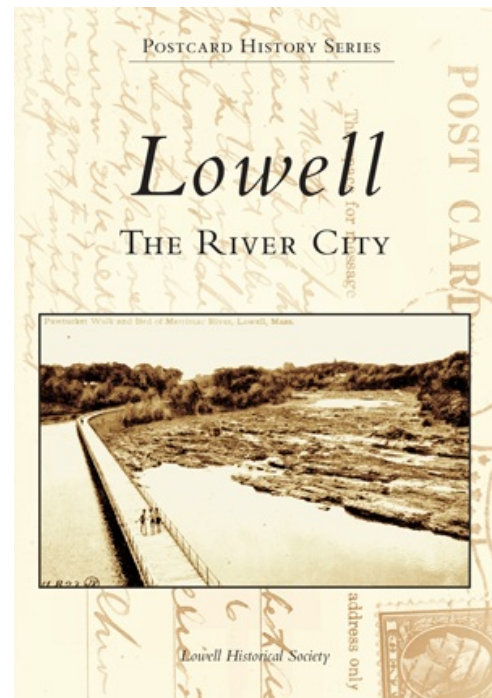
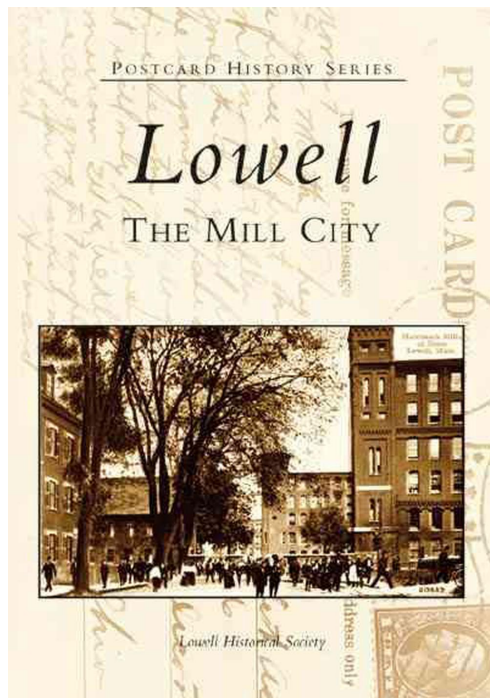
Click here for photos, articles, and plans of Lowell's Grist Mill

Click here for more about the Lowell State Armory including newspaper articles and photos

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## FROM THE BOOKSHELF

By Pauline M. Golec



It is a pleasure to review and recommend two books written by the Publication Committee of the Lowell Historical Society and published by Arcadia.

LOWELL: THE MILL CITY and LOWELL: THE RIVER CITY are not new books but their appeal is both timeless and timely (some citizens are now trying to save the historic Smith Baker Center from the wrecking ball). Both books, part of the Arcadia Postcard History Series, feature postcards issued between 1890-1940. These images are complemented by informative and interesting captions.

LOWELL: THE MILL CITY highlights postcards illustrating the growth of an industrial city - its brick mills, businesses, community services, streetscapes, organizations, disasters, and leisure activities.

LOWELL: THE RIVER CITY emphasizes an industrial city with a soul; a city of


cultural and physical beauty. Waterways, bridges, schools, churches, residences, parks, cemeteries, monuments, and neighboring environs are richly depicted.

These books illustrate slices of Lowell history and help preserve images of lost or altered locales. I'm struck by the postcard of the Immaculate Conception Church before the Memorial Auditorium was built. Some of the depicted postcards, including both of Lowell's Holy Trinity Churches, are rare.

LOWELL: THE MILL CITY and LOWELL: THE RIVER CITY are available at [lala books](#) in downtown Lowell or online at [lalabookstore.com](#) and, to my recent pleasant surprise, at my local CVS store.

**THE SAD, CURIOUS DEATH OF  
MARY ANN BIRMINGHAM**

SUNDAY, APRIL 14  
2:00 PM  
TALBOT CHAPEL, LOWELL CEMETERY



*Sponsored by the Lowell Historical Society, Lowell Cemetery, and Pollard Memorial Library  
Limited seating.*

Join us at this event to learn more,  
and visit the Birmingham family burial plot in the historic Lowell Cemetery

There are still a few seats left for this free event,  
but space is limited,

**[so register TODAY!](#)**



[Survey of Merrimack River from Wicassee Locks to Town Landing \(1822\)](#)

January 16, 2024

In September, 1822, James F. Baldwin, the agent of the Middlesex Canal, hired surveyors William Taylor and John G. Hales to conduct a survey and... [Read More](#)



**Are you, a family member, or a**

### [Lowell's Streetscapes where Annie Powell hid in plain sight \(LHS May 2023\)](#)

January 4, 2024

Annie Powell (1859-1952) is a recently discovered street photographer who is likely responsible for 3,000 "anonymous" photos of Lowell, MA ... [Read More](#)

### [Lowell Squares in 1914](#)

November 13, 2023

Board of Parks – Board of Commissioners – Lowell, Massachusetts – 1914 Middlesex Square – Corner of Middlesex & Baldwin Streets in Middlesex Village ... [Read More](#)

### [List of Lowell Mayors with Burial Locations](#)

June 1, 2023

Have you ever wondered where the Mayors of Lowell were buried? Early in Lowell history, Lowell Cemetery was the popular place. Over time as the... [Read More](#)

### [Did Lowell Mill Girls' Writings Inspire Charles Dickens to write A Christmas Carol?](#)

December 23, 2022

It is often mentioned that Charles Dickens valued his visit to Lowell in February 1842 more than... [Read More](#)

### [80th Anniversary of the Cocoanut Grove Fire and its ties to Lowell](#)

November 28, 2022

November 28th is the 80th anniversary of the Cocoanut Grove Fire at 17 Piedmont Street, Boston. Four hundred and ninety people were killed and many... [Read More](#)

### [Lowell's ties to "Jolly" Jane, Massachusetts' Female Serial Killer](#)

October 29, 2022

Many say that the links to Lowell through the people, places, and things that we encounter in the larger world are a regular occurrence. In some cases... [Read More](#)

Click here to visit the LHS Blog page for more

## friend looking to promote a business while supporting a noble cause?

The Lowell Historical Society offers an exciting opportunity for **Corporate Sponsorships**.

By becoming a corporate sponsor, the company's name and logo will be featured in our quarterly newsletters, on posters at our events, and on our popular website.

A sponsorship can be established with a contribution of \$100 or more can be made conveniently [through our website with PayPal or Debit/Credit Card](#), or by [printing out this form](#) and mailing it with a check to the Lowell Historical Society.

## Two new categories of membership - High School Students and College students.

We are excited to announce the addition of two new membership categories - High School Students and College Students.

As part of our commitment to fostering a lifelong love of history and encouraging the next generation of historians and history enthusiasts, we are inviting high school students to join our society at a reduced membership fee of just \$5, and college students to join for \$10.

By becoming a member, students will have access to exclusive resources and opportunities to engage with like-minded individuals and experts in the field. [Join us today and be a part of our mission to celebrate and learn from the past.](#)

Please click here for more information about membership opportunities

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## OUR CORPORATE SPONSORS

We would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to our corporate sponsors for their support in helping us achieve our mission at the Lowell Historical Society. Their generosity has been instrumental in enabling us to preserve and promote the rich history of Lowell, and we are honored to have them as part of our community.



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**Read the past newsletters -**

The 2005 - 2023 [newsletters of the Lowell Historical Society](http://www.lowellhistoricalsociety.org/newsletters/) are available online!

[www.lowellhistoricalsociety.org/newsletters/](http://www.lowellhistoricalsociety.org/newsletters/)

[Click here to see the past newsletters](#)

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