



# Dorchester Historical Society

## NEWSLETTER

Dorchester Historical Society, 195 Boston Street, Dorchester, Massachusetts 02125-1613  
[www.historic.org/dorchester](http://www.historic.org/dorchester)

Volume XVI, No. 1

(617) 265-7802

Winter 2005

## If Walls Could Speak: A new look at the Blake House's past, present and future

*In August 2004, the Dorchester Historical Society hired preservation architect John Goff of Historic Preservation and Design in Salem to prepare a new Historic Structure Report (HSR) of the James Blake House (ca. 1650). He prepared this report for the DHS Newsletter.*

**T**his English colonial timber framed house, individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places and a certified Boston Landmark, is generally thought to be the oldest surviving building in Boston as well as a rare and excellent example of West Country English construction. The purpose of the Historic Structures Report (HSR), scheduled to be completed this year, is to fully document the history and evolution of the house, as well as to determine the age of most major components before making new recommendations to better preserve, interpret and use the landmark to enhance the society's educational programs.

The kinds of research and investigation required in an HSR begins with standard written history and archival research and combines that with oral history research, photographic analysis, architectural analysis and material cultural study to achieve a fuller understanding of how a specific place changed and evolved over several centuries.

The integrated research approach has already provided these surprising discoveries:

- Documented architectural similarity of the Blake House as first built with the pre-1575 birthplace home of Rev. John White of Dorchester, Dorset, England, the home of the original settlers who arrived in 1630

- Documented 1650s Clap family associations and probable joint 17th century property use with Claps Tide Mill, a mid-17th century Dorchester tidal grist mill that formerly operated nearby on South Bay

- Justification for the house to be called Blake-Clap House, as well as Blake House



- Discovered that the house was originally the centerpiece of a 91 acre Dorchester farm, with orchards, barns, cows, sheep and horses

- Discovered that the house was used as a military barracks during the Revolutionary War

- Discovered that one barn associated with the house was converted into a bark mill for Elisha Clapp's tanning business in the 1770s. (Elisha Clapp was a brother of Lemuel Clap, for whom the Dorchester Historical Society's 1760 Lemuel Clapp House was built

- Discovered that the house was first endangered on its old site in the 1890s, when a street widening was proposed to extend Frederick Law Olmsted's famed "Emerald Necklace" park system through Dorchester to connect with new parks in South Boston; Richardson Park, where the Blake House stands, was then developed as an Olmstead Park

- Discovered the house was first saved in the 1890s by Dr. Clarence John Blake, a Massachusetts aural surgeon and descendant of Elizabeth Clap Blake and Elder James Blake; Dr. Blake

(Continued on page 2)

## President's Message

By the time you receive this newsletter, we will be planning our February program, a talk about Roswell Gleason who was a silver and pewter manufacturer on Washington Street in the 19th century. Please come to see examples of his work and hear about his life on February 27th. As usual we will send out invitations.

Thanks go out to all our volunteers working with our Victorian clothing collection including Malinda Blustain, Elaine Croce-Happnie, Patricia Foley, Sofia Knowles, Jennie Perito, and Mary Ungerman. I hope I have included everyone.

Volunteers also plug away at cataloging our manuscripts, books and artifacts every few weeks. We always need volunteers to help with this project. Right now we need someone who has an interest in entering information into a computer cataloging system. Please come to our February 19th meeting at 10:00 am at 195 Boston Street.

Thanks go to the Bricklayers and Allied Craftsmen Union, Local 3, located at 64 Mt. Vernon Street for spending a couple of weeks re-pointing the foundation to our carriage house. The carriage house sits between the William Clapp House and the barn. We appreciate this contribution to the Society for a project that couldn't have been accomplished otherwise.

The Boston Carpenters' Apprenticeship & Training Fund has agreed in principle to help us with framing and siding repairs to the Carriage House. This, too, will be a wonderful contribution toward our efforts to make this building useful again.

Thank you all for making the holiday party a tremendous success.

*Earl Taylor*  
*DHS Board of Directors*

## *In Memoriam:* *Patricia Busacker*

Patricia Busacker, former caretaker of the William Clapp House, died Dec. 1, 2004 after a long battle with breast cancer. She was 59.



Patricia was born in St. Louis and raised in Nebraska. She worked as editor and writer for the Lahey Clinic Health Letter and the Lahey Clinic Magazine.

As caretaker, she represented the society during house tours and meetings and will be most fondly remembered for her welcoming smile and gentle laughter. She and her husband, Jim Cooke, lived on Ashmont Hill and became caretakers of the William Clapp House in 1995. In 2001 they bought a house and moved to Quincy.

Patricia also served on the board of directors of Gang Peace, a Dorchester youth organization for which she produced a promotional video in 1998. As a mentor with the program Pathways, she helped to develop a writing seminar that resulted in the book "Growing Minds: Writing Through the Blues." She wrote poetry, children's stories and sang with the Quincy Choral Society.

Last June, Ms. Busacker received awards from the New England chapter of the American Medical Writers Association for two articles she wrote for the magazine in 2002 about breast cancer and strokes.

A memorial service will be held at 3 p.m. on March 20 at the Sons of Italy Hall, 120 Quarry St., Quincy. Contact Jim Cooke at 617-472-5587.

## *Blake House; past, present and future*

*(Continued from page 1)*

played a key role in the 1870s development of the telephone by Alexander Graham Bell

■ Discovered the architect for the restoration of the house in the 1890s was Charles Hodgdon (1866-1953) an accomplished Colonial Revival and Gothic Revival architect and follower of H.H. Richardson in Massachusetts, New York, Illinois, Kansas, Nebraska, California and other states

■ Discovered that the first caretakers of the Blake House museum in the 1890s were Mr. and Mrs. Vaughan Dennett. J. Vaughan Dennett was a noted Colonial house restorer in Massachusetts as well as reproducer of 17th century Colonial furniture in his native Saco, Maine. The Dennetts also had ties to the Society of Arts and Crafts in Boston

As a consequence of these new findings, it is anticipated that the new HSR will not only work to improve and restore major architectural elements, such as the roof and windows of the house, but also to better link the house to other Clap family and First

2 Period resources in the area and throughout Dorchester.

Determining that the 1890s restoration of the house now possesses historic significance in its own right, the HSR will likely also work to better highlight this restoration.

If you know of any additional Blake House history, have information or old photographs, please contact Goff at Historic Preservation and Design, P.O. Box 8655, Salem 01971 or email at [jgovv@salempreservation.org](mailto:jgovv@salempreservation.org)

*John Goff*  
*Historic Preservation and Design*



COPY EDITING & DESIGN:  
Peggy Mullen

EDITOR:  
Earl Taylor  
CONTRIBUTORS:  
ROSEANN FOLEY  
JOHN GOFF  
ELAINE HAPPNIE  
ROBERT SEVERY

# Preservation Committee makes an impact

In May 2004, the society established the Architectural Preservation Committee and created a list of the top ten endangered properties in Dorchester. Since then, the status of some of the properties on the list has changed.

The ca. 1800 Luther Spear House at 606 Freeport St. has connections to Quincy's nationally famous Adams family. The current owner has gutted the house and is in process of moving the house to a new foundation on Nahant St. Unfortunately, almost all existing original details were destroyed.

The 1855 Stoughton School (Knights of Columbus Hall) 36 River St is Boston's oldest surviving wooden schoolhouse. The owner has agreed to preserve the building, incorporating it into their condo project.

Other properties that have been the subject of intense preservation efforts by neighbors include the 1881 George Milliken House, 44 Virginia Street, Upham's Corner. It is owned by the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston who planned to raze the house for a wider driveway access into their extensive property that fronts Columbia Road. A Boston Landmarks Commission study report has recognized the house as having architectural and historical significance and recommended the house to be designated as a Boston Landmark.

Around the time of World War II, the trend was to reuse large turn-of-the-century mansions as nursing homes or funeral parlors. Now the trend is to demolish these structures for the large

developable lots. The 1893 Captain George Frost mansion (Mulry Funeral Home) at 223 Neponset Avenue, Pope's Hill, has been purchased by developers who want to demolish it to build three separate two-condo buildings. A temporary 90-day demolition delay is in place, during which the city and residents hope to work with the developers to creatively reuse the structure.

The 1822 Robert Pierce Tolman House (Dolan Funeral Home) at the intersection of Washington and River Streets in Lower Mills has been purchased for demolition with plans to replace it with a Walgreen's store.

The ca. 1890 Mt. Pleasant Home for Aged Men and Women, (Nelson Manor) at 3 Aspinwall Road, Codman Square, was slated in May 2004 for demolition to build nine condominiums, but is now back on the market,. It is still considered a "tear-down."

Currently under threat is the ca. 1750 Clark Farm (Epstein property) on Norfolk Street in Mattapan, now listed in the real estate market as five developable lots.

The status of the remaining structures on the May 2004 endangered list, Putnam Nail Factory/Lawley Shipyard, 12 Ericsson Street; First Parish Church; Second Church, Catholic Churches; 19th century carriage houses Calf Pasture Pumping Station and Baker Mills Power House, remain the same. Representatives of the society are working to meet with the owner of 24 Grampian Way, also on the original list, to discuss preservation measures.

*Roseann Foley*

*DHS Board of Directors*

## Dorchester's City Architects

Dorchester architect George A. Clough (1843-1923) became the first city architect of Boston in 1875. This position was created to reform the chaotic and expensive building practices in the city.

Born in Maine, Clough studied under his father who was a shipbuilder. He learned drafting and from 1863 to 1869 worked for Snell and Gregerson in Boston. Specializing in schoolhouses, he designed the old English High School and Latin School building on Montgomery Street, according to what was the "German system" of massing the buildings several parts around open courts to let in light and air. He was the first architect in this country to utilize the system.

Clough designed the calf pasture pumping station on Columbia Point in 1883. The brick and stone structure incorporates Queen Anne and Romanesque styles. This was Boston's first sewage pumping station, created to eliminate unhealthy conditions in crowded neighborhoods. Calf Pasture Station handled all of Boston's sewage until the city built a new treatment plant on Deer Island in Boston Harbor in 1968.

His best known work is the Pemberton Square Court House in Boston. Clough's design was accepted after a contest for the best entries. His design, however, was changed by the commission responsible for the construction. The biggest change was the canceling of a proposed dome, similar to that of the U. S. Capitol. Clough later designed the 1910 addition of the fourth and fifth floors as a large mansard roof. Fourteen buildings

designed by Clough are currently listed on the National Register of Historic Places, including the court house.

In 1874 he designed the Municipal Building at Adams and Arcadia Streets, and in 1875, the Prince School at Newbury and Exeter streets, which is now shops and condominiums.

Clough remained in office until 1884. He served for 10 years.

In 1890, architect Arthur Vinal (1854-1923) became city architect, a position he held until 1900. Vinal was born in Quincy. He married Ada Louis Gates of Dorchester and they had a daughter and a son. They lived at 35 Melville Avenue, a house he designed and built in 1882.

He worked for Peabody and Sterns, then opened his own business in the early 1920s in Pemberton Square in Boston.

Between 1899 and 1901 he built 27 homes on Bay State Road and designed the Roxbury High School as well as the fire house on Boylston Street, (next to the Institute of Contemporary Art) in 1887. This Richardson Romanesque-style building had a turret tower that was used for drying hoses and the central bay lead to the stable yards.

He also designed two Dorchester houses at 29 and 37 Melville Avenue, a showplace of Queen Anne detached style houses.

In addition to being Dorchester residents and city architects, Clough and Vinal had another thing in common: neither of their designs were accepted for the Boston Public Library. That commission went to Charles Follen McKim.

## Severy Family donates Weston Family papers

In March, DHS historian Robert Bayard Severy and his brother Donald Phelps Severy of Manomet, donated scores of Weston Family papers to the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society. They came from the estate of Helen Parker Baker Weston, who lived at 16 Glenarm Street and later at 600 Blue Hill Avenue in Dorchester, and were acquired by the Severy's grandmother, Arabella Severy after Mrs. Weston passed away.

Mrs. Weston's husband was Civil War veteran Alden Bradford Weston, whose father was abolitionist Gershom Bradford Weston, who represented at the State House.

Gershom's father, Ezra Weston II, and grandfather Ezra Weston I were in their day the largest ship builders and ship owners in America, with their business operation on Duxbury Bay. The 1808 home of the Westons is now owned by the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society.

The DRHS had very few Weston family documents and the donated materials included, in Alden Westons' hand, a list of Weston built ships, which included about 20 that were not known to have been built in Duxbury. There are Weston family Duxbury deeds with small maps of the property included, a floor plan of a house, a poem of when a cat died, a small piece of E. Weston and Sons advertising, a deed to a church pew, an

abolitionist notebook kept by Gershom Weston with a quote of Daniel Webster who lived in Dorchester in 1822 and a list of Civil War dead from Duxbury.

Mrs. Helen Weston was descended from the Winsor family of Duxbury and a letter with a map of Cape Horn at the tip of South America written by Albert Winsor now belongs to the society. The Duxbury society owns the Nathaniel Winsor Jr. House and did not have any Winsor family papers. Alden Weston's journal of his trip to Africa in the late 1860s was also given.

The following is a quote from one of the Civil War letters donated:

*May 20, 1864*

*Dear father, I am now where I do not know what Minute I may loose my life and it is hard to tell whether I shall ever see the place of my birth and dear friends and associates of my youth but father if I do die in my country's defence you may feel that I died doing my duty to the best of my ability and when you speak of your dear son Alden you can speak of him without being ashamed but father I hope and trust that God will spare my life and returned me to my parents and friends.*

*Alden*

Alden Bradford Weston, 1844-1919, to his father Gershom Bradford Weston 1799-1869



**Dorchester Historical Society**  
195 Boston Street  
Dorchester, Massachusetts 02125-1613