

The South End Historical Society NEWSLETTER

532 Massachusetts Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02118-1402 — Vol. 25 No. 2, Spring 1996

Preserve Community

NATIONAL TRUST FOR
HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Preservation Week
May 12 - 18, 1996

*This is from an article written by
Richard Moe, president of National
Trust for Historic Preservation*

OURS IS A nation of communities. Wherever we live — city, suburb, small town or farm — we are part of a community. It's more than just buildings and streets, trees and fences. It's a complex network of environment and people, relationships and traditions. It shapes our daily lives and helps define who we are.

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Ball Committee Brings Garden Party to Boston Ballet

THROUGHOUT THE COLD and stormy winter season a very enthusiastic Ball Committee has been meeting to plan this year's gala event scheduled for May 4, 1996 at the Boston Ballet. Members of the committee are Conrad Agneta, Fred Bosco, Lee Dunn, Adrienne Kimball, Jeanne Pelletier and Mark Schwindenhammer. Despite the record snowfall, or maybe because of it, the committee has had very warm and springlike thoughts which have spawned this year's theme, "A Spring Garden Party." With the help of area florists the Boston Ballet building will be transformed into a lovely spring garden. Door prizes from Boston Tree Preservation and The Four Seasons Hotel will be an added treat for those in attendance at the Ball. A light buffet supper will be provided by East Meets West, with sumptuous desserts topping the fare. Back by popular demand will be Four Guys in Tuxes to provide dance music spanning the decades, truly something for everyone. So put on your dancing shoes, and plan to come and meet friends and neighbors at this year's annual black tie ball, "A Spring Garden Party."

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Members of the Spring Ball Committee at a recent meeting at the Boston Ballet Building. Seated, left to right: Jeanne Pelletier, Lee Dunn and Conrad Agneta. Back row, left to right: Fred Bosco and Mark Schwindenhammer. Adrienne Kimball is not pictured.

A New Life for an Old Mirror

BY JOHN NEALE

HISTORIAN, THE SOUTH END HISTORICAL SOCIETY

FOR DECADES THE mirror had sat, leaning against the wall of the abandoned townhouse at 50 Rutland Square. Covered in dust, its varnish blackened with age, it remained impressive in spite of its neglected state and damp, squalid surroundings. Eight and a half feet in height, its size alone commanded attention. It had once graced the mantle of a large Victorian house, but it was too large to fit over the mantles in the Rutland Square house without hitting the ceiling. Where did it come from, and what was to become of it?

The mirror and the house containing it belonged to the Tent City Corporation Properties, Inc. (TCC), and the house was for sale, along with the adjacent house at 52 Rutland Square. For many years the two houses had belonged to Lucille Banks, an elderly woman, now deceased, who had owned many of the houses in the neighborhood. She had run the two Rutland Square houses as one large lodging house, connected inside by two openings through the party wall. After her death they were sold to TCC, which planned to use the houses for a half-way house, but financing for the development did not materialize, and they were again on the market.

In the meantime, the interiors of the houses had been substantially demolished, and most of the interior detail removed. All that remained were the stairs, some mantles, and the enormous mirror. TCC had planned to hang the mirror on a hallway wall (which would have been tricky because of its great weight), but now it was just a small part of a much larger real estate offering. If a developer bought the buildings, the mirror would undoubtedly have ended up at an antique dealer's store.

At this critical point in the mirror's life, The South End Historical Society approached TCC with a rescue plan. The mirror, to be placed over a mantelpiece comfortably, required 13-foot ceilings, and only a small group of South End houses have parlor floor ceilings of such height. It had to be a Blackstone Square or Chester Square house to qualify, and fortunately The SEHS's own house was a perfect candidate, with an empty fireplace mantle to boot!

If TCC would donate the mirror, The SEHS would provide it with a good home and restore it in the process. TCC agreed that the mirror should stay in the South End and generously donated it with best wishes for its future. The mirror was immediately moved out of 50 Rutland Square, where water continued to drip on it until the very last day. It was sent to Master Finishing & Restoration in Needham, where the long process of bringing it back to life began.

In spite of its filthy condition, it turned out to need a good cleaning more than anything, and a few missing pieces were replicated. When the blackened finish was cleaned off, the mirror proved to be made of solid walnut, with beautiful burl walnut veneers. It is a splendid example of the



Stephen Greene, president of The South End Historical Society, on left, with David Price, executive director of the Tent City Corporation Properties, standing in front of the Renaissance Revival style mirror that TCC donated to The SEHS.

Renaissance Revival style that was so popular during the South End's halcyon years from 1860 to 1870. With its missing pieces perfectly replicated in new walnut, it was ready to begin its new life at The SEHS's headquarters in the Francis Dane house at 532 Massachusetts Avenue.

The mirror was installed over the ornate front parlor mantle just in time for the New Members Party on Thursday, January 4. It took four strong men to lift it, and once in place it proved to be a wonderful complement to the Renaissance Revival walnut mirror over the rear parlor mantle. David Price, executive director of TCC, attended the mirror's unveiling at the New Members Party, giving the members of the Society a chance to thank him personally for helping to bring a happy ending to the mirror's long and eventful life. ✦

Spring Ball Blooms at the Boston Ballet*(continued from page 1)*

We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to our contributing floral designers who are transforming the Boston Ballet into a spring garden:

THE EMPTY VASE FLOWERS
 FLORABUNDA
 FOLIAIRE INC.
 LOTUS DESIGNS
 WINSTON FLOWERS

We encourage you to call on them for all your floral and landscape needs.

Corporate sponsorships help underwrite the cost of the event and allow us to raise the funds necessary to continue the programs and outreach of The South End Historical Society. Our thanks to those businesses who have contributed to this event:

ATLANTIC PROPERTIES
 BANNON DESIGN & CONSTRUCTION
 BAYBANK
 BERKELEY TRUST
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 Copley Square Associates
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 A. E. Rondeau Real Estate
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 South End Realty Group
 St. Botolph Restaurant/Botolph's on Tremont
 The R. F. Walsh Company Inc.

In Kind Donations

Boston Tree Preservation
 East Meets West
 Four Seasons Hotel
 Table Toppers ♦

Preservation Week*(continued from page 1)*

The 1996 Preservation Week theme, "Preserve Community," calls on us to expand our preservation vision, to realize that our responsibility extends far beyond saving individual buildings. Beautifully restored landmarks, while important in their own right as reminders of significant events or personalities in our history, become even more meaningful when they are integrated into the daily life of the community. Our goal should be the creation and preservation of communities in which past and present are partners, reminding us of our heritage and enriching the places where we live and work.

"Preserve Community" is also a call to activism. Communities are fragile things, facing threats that can diminish or destroy them. To be successful in saving these special places, we can't be content merely to react to others' ideas. Our choices are clear: We can let others make the decisions for us, or we can take an active, informed role in determining the way our communities will grow and look — or even whether they will survive. ♦

Summer Festival Planned to Benefit Historical Cathedral of the Holy Cross

ACCORDING TO SOCIETY Member Father Frederick Murphy, rector of the 126-year-old Cathedral of The Holy Cross, the parish is planning its first annual Summer Festival for Saturday, June 22, 1996.

Members may know that this edifice has recently undergone many renovations, most notably a complete restoration of its Blessed Sacrament Chapel and the intricately designed stained glass windows of the Cathedral proper.

The Festival will feature ethnic and American cuisine, music, games and children's activities. Father Murphy requests that those interested in obtaining a table at the event to sell crafts, art or other suitable items contact Miss Kelly Clark at the Rectory: 617-542-5682. Please leave a message with your telephone number, and she will get back to you. ♦

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Receipt of *The SEHS Newsletter* is a privilege of membership in The Historical Society, an association of people interested in the recognition and preservation of historic resources in, and recording the history of, the South End of Boston. Individual membership is \$15 per year, family and dual memberships are \$25.

Officers: Stephen Greene, President E. Domurad, Editing & Design
 Susan Park, Treasurer Daniel Sugarman, Communications
 Barbara Anderson, Secretary & Publications Committee Chair

The Expression of Experience — An Interview with Kahlil Gibran

BY LEE DUNN

*The South End Historical Society has embarked upon a new project to preserve the rich historical fabric of the wonderful neighborhood we live in. We are going to be interviewing many of our older South End residents to capture their oral histories on tape. From time to time portions of these histories will appear in The South End Historical Society Newsletter. Kahlil Gibran, South End native, godchild and cousin of the author of *The Prophet* and award-winning sculptor, inventor, musical instrument maker and collector, is the first of our oral history interviews.*

"HE LOVED ME because I was born in a caul," said Kahlil, speaking of his cousin Kahlil Gibran, the author. "I had a skin over my face when I came out. It's called a caul birth. It's a gifted birth, and so he gave me his name." The caul refers to the inner fetal membrane when it covers the head at birth, and its apocryphal meaning is documented in many books. It certainly holds true in the case of Kahlil Gibran. As I sat in his living room one winter afternoon taking in all of the beautiful drawings and sculptural pieces that he has created, I knew that I was in the presence of a very gifted man.

Although Kahlil was only nine and a half when his cousin died in 1931, he has many vivid memories of the author. When asked about the influence Gibran had on his life, he replied with enthusiasm: "Oh, he was my horizon. I'm seventy-three; I started recognizing him at the age of three or four. He'd be writing, and I'd sneak up and pull the hair out of his leg, or I'd jump on his back, and he'd tell me in Arabic, 'You little devil.' He took Rorschach tests of me; I have them. He gave me things from his own hands. I still have them, and remember we're talking almost 70 years ago. He used to take a clock apart and say I'll give you a gold piece if you can put it together. That was an incentive for a poor little kid."

Born in Chinatown in an enclave of Lebanese immigrants, Kahlil Gibran has lived in the South End of Boston all his life. He attended the Quincy School, as did his cousin. Many of his teachers had also taught his cousin, specifically Miss Ward and Miss Devine, who he readily admits gave him preferential treatment because of it. He also attended Abraham Lincoln School on Fayette Street and the Boston English and Latin High School, where the Mckinley School now stands on Warren Avenue.

"I was sort of a special guy; I didn't play baseball or football with the kids, mostly because I was anemic. I was always making things and, in fact, I was a very heavy reader. I read all of Edgar Allen Poe and made miniature models of the pendulum and the guillotine, which they exhibited at the Tyler Street Library. I was a very competitive child but not in sports. I used to make up model planes — not from a kit; from raw balsa wood! I was known as the mad bomber. I had tons of chemicals in the house, and I knew that gun powder created



Artist and inventor, Kahlil Gibran has equipped his workshop with many which he made himself to do a particular task

its own oxygen, so I would take a cherry bomb, cover it with nail polish and go into the public garden at night, light it and throw it into the fish pool, because they had fish in those pools at that time, and I would blow them all up! I was mischievous."

Kahlil was the middle child of five children by Rose and Nicholas Gibran, both immigrants who came to this country through Cuba and Mexico respectively. When he was seven years old the family moved to Harrison Avenue from their home on Oak Street. "We lived on the second floor and the 'El' went right by our house about seven feet — a sidewalk width — away. We got used to it though. I remember early on when the politicians would all come down to the South End on the Fourth of July and hand out ice cream popsicles. They would throw them into the air and everybody would run; then they would have fireworks," said Kahlil recalling memories of the South End.

Kahlil's memories of growing up in the South End also include many hours spent with his father. "I remember my father taking me down to the Esplanade when they were widening the walkway there. They were filling it in, and we walked along one Sunday. My father would take me to the museums. We were very poor. Gibran had left all his money to charity. And the thirties were very tough for us. My father would never let us take welfare or even take the cabbages and sugar that they were handing out. My mother stitched all her life, since the age of 16. My father was a cabinetmaker, but there was no work"

Kahlil recalled another childhood memory of his father for me. "I remember distinctly standing on the corner and my father said to me, if the search lights go on, Roosevelt will be



h thousands of tools,
sk

elected, and if you don't see search lights in the sky, Hoover will be elected." Kahlil saw the searchlights in the sky that night.

In 1940 Kahlil left Harrison Avenue for art school at the Museum of Fine Arts. After completion he went to work for the Fogg Museum doing frame gilding, which he had studied at the museum school. He soon tired of that and did freelance work for the Boston Museum of Fine Arts restoring their stringed instruments. It was during this time that he began instrument making. "I've always built instruments; I wanted a lute once in 1942, so I built one. I theorized how they were made, and I built one. And Eugene Ormandy bought it from me. It was gorgeous."

His work with instruments led him to create his own process for making violins, which has won him acclaim from such organizations as the

Southern California Association of Violin Makers and renowned violinists worldwide. He has published a monograph on the subject and has distributed it to violin makers who are now making violins using his method.

After art school Kahlil lived in a studio in the Gainesborough Building across from the Boston Conservatory, then turned the studio over to composer/conductor Lucas Foss and moved to a studio building on Fayette Street. "The rent was very cheap. I remember Mr. Barlow was the landlord. He had an antique shop underneath. He said to me will you pay \$23 as is or \$27 with a shower? So I said, I'll take the \$27 with a shower."

Kahlil's life as a sculptor has earned him the art world's most prestigious awards including back-to-back Guggenheim Awards in 1959 and 1960 and the coveted Rome Prize. "I turned down the Rome Prize; greats have taken it and gone there, but I didn't want to go to Rome. I've never been to Rome. I've never been to Paris, and I don't feel its necessary. You know if you have a trajectory and somebody comes along and dangles something in front of you and it's not part of your odyssey, so to speak, then why be seduced? I didn't want to go to Rome. I may have made a big mistake, but I don't think so. I seem to have done very well without it."

He expressed his feelings about art and his work in this way. "I look at art as a catharsis. I feel that you eat and you respond biologically and most people feed themselves through their touch, their smell, their ears, their eyes and they do nothing with that information. They're sort of constipated. And I think most artists, musicians, dancers or anyone who expresses themselves has an outlet for themselves. That is why art is the expression of experience. That's the real definition of art."

If you have not seen Kahlil's work, a short walk through the South End will reveal one of his most recent public sculptures. The bronze statue in Hayes Park at the corner of West Canton and Warren Avenue was a gift to the Friends of Hayes Park from Kahlil to commemorate the redesign of the park in 1992. He has donated other works of significance to the city of Boston including the 10-foot figure of Our Lady of Cedars at the Our Lady of Cedars Church in Jamaica Plain. And probably his most familiar work is the bronze plaque set in stone on Dartmouth Street in Copley Square honoring his cousin. The city of Boston wanted to pay tribute to the author on the anniversary of the publishing of *The Prophet*, and Kahlil donated the stone and casting to the city.

In 1963 Kahlil and his wife Jean moved from Fayette Street to their current home on West Canton Street. Kahlil and Jean have been married for thirty-seven years and have a daughter, Nicole, a surgeon in Seattle, and two grandsons. Kahlil also has a son Timothy, by a previous marriage, who lives in Sweden. West Canton Street was much different in 1963 than it is today explained Kahlil. "First of all *continued on page 8*



Kahlil Gibran began making instruments in the 1940s after working with the Boston Museum of Fine Arts to restore their instruments.

In Memory Of

PETER TASSINARI, FORMER resident of Concord Square, died suddenly at his home in East Greenwich, Rhode Island on March 20. Peter was a former treasurer and fundraising committee chairman. He and his wife Melissa ran some of The South End Historical Society's most successful house tours. Peter is survived by his wife Melissa, his son Michael, and his two daughters Emily and Sara. ↪

Calendar

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

First Tuesday of every month

SOUTH END LANDMARKS COMMISSION

Room 801, Boston City Hall

4 p.m.

Public invited

For further information, call 635-3850

Second Thursday of every month:

THE SOUTH END HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Board of Directors Meeting

Francis Dane House

532 Massachusetts Avenue

7 p.m.

Saturday, May 4

THE SOUTH END

HISTORICAL SOCIETY

SPRING BALL

Boston Ballet Building,

19 Clarendon Street

8 p.m. – midnight

light supper

from 8 p.m. – 10 p.m.

Music by

FOUR GUYS IN TUXES

For more information, call 536-4445.

APRIL

THE VICTORIAN HOME

Codman Carriage House, Codman Road,

Lincoln, MA

sponsored by

Society for the Preservation of New

England Antiquities

Beginning with an overview of the period, this illustrated lecture series will explore architecture, interior furnishings, domestic technology and garden design between 1840 and 1915.



Tuesday, April 16
7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

Architecture

Earle Shettleworth,
director, Maine Historic
Preservation Commission

Tuesday, April 23
7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

*Technology in the Victorian
Kitchen*

Joyce K. Bibber, history professor
University of Southern Maine

Tuesday, April 30
7 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.

Textiles (includes tour of the
Codman House)

Richard Nylander, chief curator,
SPNEA

Directions: Route I-95/128 to Route 2 West. Left on Route 126 south and left onto Codman Road. Entrance is second left; parking at end of the driveway.

For more information, call 227-3956.

MAY

ANNUAL MEETING OF

THE SOUTH END HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Annual election of officers and directors

Members will be notified of date, time

and location

The SEHS Takes Action on Zoning and Open Lot Parking

IN JANUARY THE SEHS joined other plaintiffs in a suit against the Boston Zoning Board of Appeal on the grounds that zoning requirements for surface parking for a proposed Dunkin Donuts were not met by the Appeal Board's decision. The issues of using residential land for surface parking, diligently following zoning requirements and adhering to the South End Master Plan are all interwoven into this case. Since the matter is now in litigation, further details and discussion are not appropriate.

Help

OUR BOOKS ARE sprouting legs and leaving the premises. If they have walked to your house we need them to be returned. Two of the missing books are: *Boston's South End Squares* by Phebe Goodman, and *Landmaking and the Process of Urbanization: The Boston Landmaking Projects, 1630-1888*, by Nancy S. Seasholes.

NEWS • AND • EVENTS

The Music At Union Concert Series

presents a
SPRING CONCERT
featuring

Harvard University's A cappella Women's Group
Caribbean Steel Pan Side Tropical Harmony
New England Conservatory's Gospel Choir
New Covenant Church's Children's Choir
Morning Star Baptist Church Choir
Harpsichord Soloist Audley Green
Gitano
and others

Sunday, April 14, 1996
3:00 p.m.
at

Union United Methodist Church
485 Columbus Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts
Rev. Theodore L. Lockhart, pastor

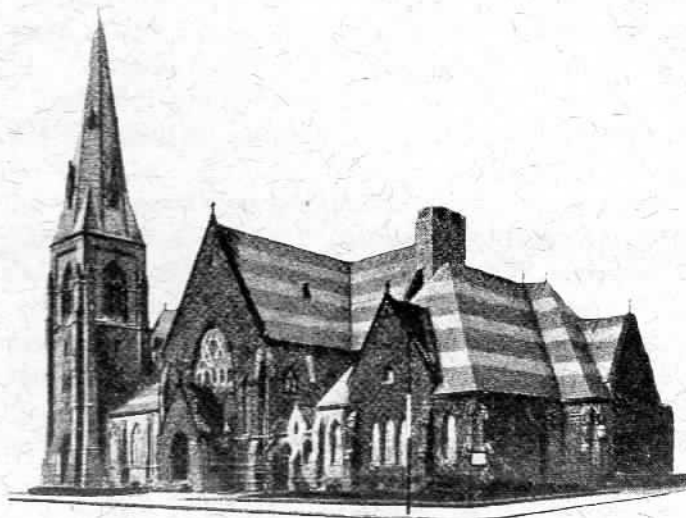
Tickets:
\$10 Adults, \$5 Seniors and 12 & under
Proceeds to go to our
Building Restoration Fund

for tickets and/or more information
please call the church office at:
617-536-0872

If the Baseball Season is Upon Us, Can Summer Be Far Behind?

FOR THE THIRD year The SEHS is sponsoring a Little League baseball team. This year, as last, our team is The South End Historical Society Athletics. We're looking forward to an exciting baseball season. The games are held in Peters Park, and members are invited to come out and root for their team.

PLAY BALL!



Union United Methodist Church, Columbus Avenue and
West Newton Street *photo: postcard view*

The SEHS's Matching Funds Soar Heavenward

THE SOUTH END Historical Society presented \$3,000 to the Union United Methodist as a matching payment in the church's fundraising program for work on the steeple. The church has done an outstanding job in raising funds for capital improvements, with the restoration of the steeple's masonry the first project to be done. The steeple is an important identifying element of the South End skyline.

↔New Members↔

John Brooks

John M. Clement & Peter Mione

Philip Gambone

Avcan Gencoglu

Toni Homs

John A. Mahler

Martha & J. Edward Roney

Schochet Associates Inc.

Kahlil Gibran

(continued from page 5)

when we moved here there were no cars on the street because it was all rooming houses and old people. The street ran in the opposite direction. I bought this house for \$9,000. Most of the houses on this street were in that price range.” According to Kahlil most of the buildings were rooming houses with twenty-five rooms all renting for about \$15-\$25 per room, per week.

Today his home reflects the creative environment he deliberately designed for himself. “I live in a world here that’s very different. When we bought this house I created sort of a haven. I equipped it with all the tools that I need, and it takes up all my time. I have a very creative head and not just in art; I’m an inventor. I invented a tripod and The Museum of Modern Art bought three. *Popular Photography* said you should be photographing it as well as with it.” In addition to his photographic tripod Kahlil also built his own telephoto lens and carrying case. And he has invented an energy furnace, which he has patented. His workshop is in the basement of his home, and it contains thousands of tools, many of which he made himself to do a particular task or function.

One of Kahlil’s dreams for the future is to create a museum for the artifacts and memorabilia of his cousin. He has an extensive collection that represents the author’s creative life, including the original manuscript of *The Prophet*. Fund-raising efforts within the greater Lebanese community of the United States have stalled at this time, but the museum continues to be a dream he would like to fulfill. Another

dream that is clearly on the road to reality is the movie that will be made about the life of his cousin based upon the biography *Kahlil Gibran — His Life and World*, written by Kahlil and Jean. Kahlil is currently negotiating with Columbia Pictures for the movie rights to their book and, coincidentally, he received a phone call concerning the ongoing negotiations during our interview.

Today Kahlil no longer competes in the art world because, in his own words, “I never felt it was really necessary.” He continues to create and invent, giving many of his works and ideas to the greater community at large because, as he said to me, “you’ve got to leave the world a little better place than you found it.” ✦



“Art is the expression of experience.”



The South End Historical Society

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