

TOWN HISTORIAN

Requests for historical information continue to come to the attention of your Town Historian. While each and every telephone call or request would take up too much space in an annual report, I have listed some of the more interesting ones.

The year started with an inquiry from the Ipswich Historical Society whose headquarters is in the circa 1700 Heard House in Ipswich. While going through three centuries of papers, they came across a reference to Belmont. According to their genealogy, John Heard, the first son of the John Heard who built the Heard House, married Susan Oliver who died in Belmont in October of 1863. They were curious about the house in Belmont and if any of John Heard's papers had made it to Belmont.

My research found that an 1834 map of the Cushing Estate shows John Heard's Heirs as an abutter. Then the 1853 map of *The Proposed Town of Belmont* shows two houses on Belmont Street at the corner of School Street, one labeled "Wid Hurs"(sic) and the other "Wid Hurd's Cottage"(sic). Early tax records show this property as owned by Mrs. Susan Heard up until 1963 when she died. This 19-acre property, bounded by School, Belmont, Elm Streets and Payson Road, later (1894-1924) was the John Van Ness Stults Estate. This information including a picture of the Stults house was sent to the Ipswich Historical Society to be added to their Heard history.

A request from a man living in Billings, Montana was looking for a picture of the "Riverdale Hospital" in Belmont where he was born in 1927. After informing him that there never was such a hospital in Belmont, he checked his birth certificate and discovered that he was born in Boston, not Belmont as he thought.

Supplied history to the new owner of 34 Oak Avenue that his house was built in 1910 in the Prairie-style, and told him how he could find the original building permit in the Community Development Department.

Answered a request from Ron Gilberto, the owner of the cleaning business, Franettes of Belmont, at 399 Trapelo Road, looking for information on his building which he thought had at one time been a garage. I was able to find a circa 1935 picture of that building in the files of the Historical Society when it was called the Waverley Garage with a huge sign over the front door advertising Jenney gasoline. I also gave him ownership changes from 1922 to 1970.

Received a call from a man who said his father once worked on the Churchill estate on Belmont Hill, and he wanted to take his father to that site because of the memories his father had. I informed him that the property is now Habitat on Juniper Road and gave him directions on how to find it.

Received a call from Herman G. Getrost from Watertown, a life member of the Boston Sparks Association, the oldest fire buff club in the country, looking for information and dates of the three fire stations in Belmont for an article he was writing. Based on his interviews with your Editor and Captain John Pizzi of the fire department, his article, *The History – Belmont MA Fire Stations* appeared in the Boston Sparks Association November Newsletter featuring a brief history of the original three stations, staffing information on the two new stations and pictures of all five stations. Mr. Getrost refers to the Trapelo Road headquarters as, "The Big House".

A resident of Glendale Road asked where are the trees and plaques that were planted in a row at the former Orchard Street High School in memory of the World War I men killed in action. He thought they might be the trees on the empty Town lot opposite the school and behind his home. I informed him that there were nine oak trees dedicated on November 15, 1919 on the school property lining the entrance off Orchard Street and that they are no longer there. I believe they were cut down after the High School fire and alternations turning the building into the Wellington Elementary School.

Had a call from Belmont resident, Tom Filios, who was vacationing in Arizona saying he met a 70 year old woman from Michigan who said her father worked at "Deerfield Dairy" in Belmont and wondered if Tom could find out anything about it. I was sorry to inform him that there never was a dairy by that name in Belmont.

A request from Karen Dorfman looking for history on the house at 30 School Street that she could give to the new owner as a house-warming gift. This 1858 house, about to be torn down due to the Route 2 widening, was moved from Arlington in 1966 to the School Street site. I gave her four articles with pictures of the moving of this historic former Arlington home.

Had a call from a cousin living in Virginia looking for information on his grandfather, George Betts, who, with my father, operated the "Betts Brothers Builders Belmont" contracting business from about the early 1020's through the 1960's, and still operated by my nephew. Using the Internet, we were able to find the Manifest and passenger list of the ship he came over on from England and along with e-mails to family members all over the country, we were able to come up with a great deal of information.

A woman from California who grew up in Belmont was working on a history of her town for the *Images of America* series. When it was finished, the publisher offered her a copy of any book in that series. She said, I don't suppose you have one of Belmont, Mass., and when they said yes, she received a copy of our *Belmont – Now and Then*. She wrote to say she spent many hours looking at the pictures and recalling her early years in Belmont. Her one question was, does the fire station in Belmont Center still blow the horn at noontime. Growing up on School Street, she said she heard the horn every day. Your Editor checked with retired Fire Captain, David Frizzell, who supplied the history of the horn and its use over the years. It was used for sending out the box number during a second alarm fire, air raid warnings, and blackouts during WWII, and at 7:15 a.m. on snow days to announce no school. The horn did blow at noontime every day as a test to make certain it was working. Dave recalls watching people walking by the station at noontime when the horn blew, and watched them "jump out of their skin".

For Cornelius Kelly of Bright Road, a history of the Athlone which was given to a large part of the Waverley and Thomas Street area.

And finally, your Editor was interviewed by Channel 5 Chronicle as to what Belmont was like in the 60s as background to a program on Sebastian Junger's book, *A Murder in Belmont*. Unfortunately for my TV career, it ended upon the cutting room floor!

Your Town Historian recommends that a suitable plaque be placed on the former Town lot on Brighton Street where a new home is being built by Habitat for Humanity of Greater Boston. This lot has a long and interesting history. It was the site of the Brighton Street School and the home of the 1833 Howard No. 2 fire hand pumper. The school was built in 1842 by West Cambridge and it and the small firehouse came to Belmont in 1859 when that section of West Cambridge was incorporated into Belmont. From the school's belfry, the joyous pealing of the school bell announced that the Town of Belmont had come into existence. The 1833 Howard engine was lost in 1898 when its building caught fire from a major fire in the adjacent carriage factory and blacksmith's shop. The Brighton Street School closed in 1921 and was torn down in 1935.



Brighton Street School, 1842-1935

The above highlights, along with the many phone calls and inquiries on local historical subjects, make this position so interesting. I am honored to serve as your Town Historian.

Respectfully submitted,
Richard B. Betts, Town Historian