

LIBRARY MYSTERIES

by Jane Dodd Rouillion Boyer, Former President of the Gunn Memorial Library & Museum 1992-1994

On the main floor of the original Gunn Memorial Library there are some wonderful pieces of art that, for many years, were shrouded in mystery. We know that H. Siddons Mowbray created the magnificent ceiling mural. But who were the artists who carved the bas-relief of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick W. Gunn on the front of the Library, the ones of Mary Brinsmade and U.S. Senator Orville Platt and created the spectacular stained glass window?

There is nothing about them in any Library records but they are only fleetingly mentioned in the June, 1908 copy of Gunnery's magazine, The Stray Shot, in which twenty pages are given to the Library dedication. "The frame and timber of this building grew in Washington and even if the art memorials of so great beauty came from outside, from London and New York..."But, a little history is needed to set the background behind these mysteries.

Washington's first library started in about 1850, when Mr. Frederick Gunn, headmaster of his newly founded school, started an informal book club. Books, purchased by a group of friends, were kept in the Gunn's house, and money was deposited in a box for rental of each book. In 1852, the Washington Library Association was formed as a stock company and was housed in the old Judea Academy on Washington Green.

By 1887, with an inventory of some 1,200 books, the Association became The Washington Reading Room and Circulating Library Association. In 1889, it became a free institution and open to everyone.

Shortly after the turn of the century, with U.S. Senator Orville Platt at the helm and the support from Dr. Ford and Mr. W.L. Van Sinderen, a campaign to raise funds for the Association to have a permanent home was begun. The lead gift came from Mr. E.H. Van Ingen and his phrasing is fascinating when you realize that this gift was dated, September 20, 1902 - over a hundred years ago.

Dear Senator Platt:

If the name 'Gunn Memorial Library' shall be adopted, and if a fund of at least \$25,000 can be raised, at least one-half of it to be invested for a maintenance fund, I will contribute \$10,000 towards it.

Further, if the land north of Mrs. Galpin's house shall be thought suitable for the purpose, I will give the land as a library building site.

Yours truly, E.H. Van Ingen

(From Gunnery's magazine, The Stray Shot, June 1908)

So here is a donation of \$10,000 (which was calculated by Benedict Silverman at the time of the 1994 addition to be equivalent to approximately one million dollars) providing the new building is named the way Mr. Van Ingen wants it, that his challenge grant is met, and that half of the challenge monies are placed in an endowment! And Mrs. Galpin's house, by the way, houses the current Gunn Historical Museum. This was followed shortly by a second donation, a sum of \$5,000, by Mr. Richard S. Barnes who said that his gift was restricted exactly as Mr. Van Ingen's was. He did ask, however, that if \$500 from his gift was left over, that he would like to have a stained glass window put in the new library in memory of his son, Goodrich, who died in 1899 at the age of 12. With these substantial gifts, the work on funding and constructing a permanent home for the Gunn Memorial Library began.

The library has had two internal expansions since its dedication in 1908. The non-fiction books were moved into the old furnace room, and the museum collection was moved to June Willis's house (which had been Mrs. Galpin's house) in 1965. Under the tutelage of Dorothy Richards, the first true Children's section was formed.

In this small town there are many, many connections. The first librarian of the Junior Library was Susan Eanes, wife of a Gunnery faculty member who became the Headmaster of the school!

But as the town grew and use of the library increased, it became evident that an addition was imperative, and in 1990 a multi-million-dollar campaign began. I was President of the Library during this period and became fascinated about the history of the institution, especially about the artwork. I was determined to find out who the artists were.

Luck was with me one day in the fall of 1992. An architect visiting the Library asked if I knew that the bas-relief of Mr. and Mrs. Gunn outside was signed - Bertram Pegram S. (the S standing for "Sculpture")! I didn't know, but quickly looked in the reference room at the Library and the Washington Art Association - nothing. I then called Alexander Purves, a Washington home owner and a faculty member of the Yale School of Architecture. He found nothing but only because in my excitement I had given him the wrong spelling - I'd given him Pigram!

I took up the quest again with ardor after the first of the year. A call to the National Academy of Design in N.Y.C. resulted in the fact that Pegram was not a member and had never exhibited there, but it was suggested that I call the Archives of American Art. Here the first light came on! His name was A. Bertram Pegram and he was listed in the Directory of British Artists from 1906 to 1950. But they only had the first volume and his name was in the second one! Their suggestion sent me to the Inventory of American Sculptors in Washington, D.C.

And here I lucked out again. There was one piece, a bronze, done in 1911 of "General Samuel Chapman Armstrong". I raced to my family published 1930 Encyclopedia. Samuel Chapman Armstrong (1839-1893). Born in Hawaii, father a missionary. Graduated from Williams College, 1862. Entered the Union Army and rose to rank of Brigadier General while commanding the Eighth United States colored regiment. Founded and became principal of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute -a college for black students -1868.

I contacted the director of the Hampton Museum and all she had was one piece of information. It was a 1920 obituary about a gentleman who was very generous to Hampton. He had also gone to London to commission a bronze statue of General Armstrong and his name was... E.H. Van Ingen!!! Just before the opening of the new addition, Nancy Lauriat, another Trustee, was cleaning the Brinsmade and Platt plaques and we discovered that they were both signed by Pegram. So Mr. Van Ingen had been more generous than we had ever realized!

As I researched and passed on this information, the connections grew like a spider web. The Rev. Herbert B. Turner left the First Congregational Church in 1892 and went to become the chaplain at Hampton. In the summers he would return to Litchfield County to raise money for Hampton scholarships.

Helen Wersebe, long-time Washington resident, remembered, in about 1915, the Hampton Quartet coming to sing at the Congregational Church and the Club Hall. She added that students from Hampton would come to be summer maids and butlers for the more affluent Washington residents. My aunt, Roxana Scoville Dodd Hammond, grew up at Hampton because her father was the treasurer of the Hampton Institute. Alec Purves, (who gave me more information about Pegram), had spent the first six or seven years of his life at Hampton as his father worked there.

Alfred Van Sinderen, another former Washington resident, related that his grandfather, Alfred A. White, was another of Hampton's great financial supporters, and Katherine House at Hampton was given in memory of his daughter who married Harry Van Sinderen. Harry was the uncle of Alfred, owner of the Mayflower Inn, and a Chairman of the Board of the Gunnery School.

And at my Aunt Roxana Scoville Dodd Hammond's funeral just a few years ago, an amazing and final piece of this puzzle came to me. General Samuel Chapman Armstrong was my aunt's grandfather!!!

This left the mystery of the stained glass window. I had been told that often stained glass artists signed their works somewhere along the lead strips between the pieces of glass, and often they were very obscure. As a result, I spent fruitless hours looking. Finally, it was obvious that a different tact needed to be taken.

I asked Benedict Silverman, a resident who had had a great Tiffany collection, whether he knew of anyone who could come and possibly identify the window. He invited Alistair Duncan, a Tiffany expert, to meet us at the Library. Alistair said that the window was neither Tiffany nor John La Farge. He suggested we look at the microfiche records of local newspapers from June of 1908. If this brought nothing, he said that often stained glass could be identified by the technique used in painting the faces.

My search in 1908 newspapers produced fascinating reading but little information of the opening of the Gunn Memorial Library, and absolutely nothing about the stained glass window. It was not until 1997 that a new potential source appeared.

The Museum had a wonderful exhibit on Ehrick K. Rossiter. One of the items displayed was Rossiter's guest book. Amanda Austin, who was very involved in the exhibit, pointed out to me that the Charles and Frederick Lamb, who were listed as guests in his book, were stained glass artisans. A quick trip to my computer not only gave me history of J&R Lamb Studios, founded in 1857, but it also gave me a current email address! To find a business still in business a hundred and forty years later absolutely amazed me.

I immediately sent off an email and shortly received a reply from Mr. Donald Samik, president and historian of the Lamb Studios. He wrote that they really didn't have records from that era, but if I could send him some photographs of the window, he could tell me if it was made in their studio. Another period of time passed, and finally I got pen, paper and the photographs together. Towards the end of August, 2005, I received a letter from Mr. Samik.

"Thank you for the photographs of the lovely stained glass window. There is no doubt that it is a J&R Lamb Studios window, designed by Frederick Stymetz Lamb. The style of the window and the painting of the flesh is identical to work done by him. The Lambs' never signed their work and that is why there is no signature."

Thus, my second artistic mystery of the Gunn Memorial Library was solved. My final investigation was not really a mystery but more a question. What does the "H" in H. Siddons Mowbray stand for? This was easy to solve. Outside the old front door to the library there is a plaque inscribed Henry Siddons Mowbray. Many years ago his daughter-in-law, Peg Mowbray Jones, told me his first name was Harry not Henry. With excellent directions from Peg Addicks, who knows where absolutely everybody rests in the cemetery next to St. Johns, I went to his gravestone. His first name was Harry.

So, my mysteries about the Gunn Memorial Library have been solved. The journey was fascinating and personally I wish there were more puzzles. As you uncover one little piece it inevitably leads you to something else quite surprising and your curiosity makes you want to uncover more. Although you are looking for the answer, there is a piece of you, at least of me, that never wants it to end.