

History of the North Andover Garden Club

By

Kate Hastings Stevens

A History of the North Andover Garden Club¹ would not be complete without a description of the background from which it developed. The first gardens of old Andover were dooryards enclosed by picket or rail fences. Their small area was filled with syringe and rose bushes and sweet-smelling flowers such as lavender and peonies. Usually there were two shade trees, one on either side of the gate. Of such a garden one catches a glimpse in Miss Bailey's history of Andover², where a photograph of the Phillips Manse (building 1752), taken before the dooryard fence was torn down and the piazza added, is reproduced. The remodeling of the house was done after the deaths of Miss Caroline and Miss Susan Phillips³ in 1883. In 1884 Bishop Brooks became its owner, and H. H. Richardson, architect of Trinity church in Boston, drew plans for the alterations which brought the house more nearly in keeping with current living demands.

When larger houses were built some distance back from the street, the dooryards expanded. There was a gate at the street which led to a pathway bordered with flowers by which one approached the front door. Such an entrance with its flower-bordered pathway may still be seen at the Kittredge house, built in 1784. I remember the path which led to the front door of the Parson Loring house, built in 1840. There was a fence in front of the house with a gate, smaller and without the urns of the Kittredge fence, but on the same lines. At the left of the fence was the face-wall of the back orchard, and at the right a beautiful old hawthorn hedge (still there) which concealed the front orchard from the street. There was a balm of Gilead tree in the front orchard and a superb horse-chestnut tree in front of the barn at the back. From the gate in the fence, a pathway led up to the front door with a border of flowers and shrubs. I remember the clumps of columbine and of peonies, with syringe and weigelia bushes, and at the top of the walk near the front door a fascinating smoke tree with a limb which was of a perfect height for small children to climb and swing on!

Sometime between 1860 and 1870, Mr. J. D. W. French of Roxbury bought the old Samuel Johnson house on the Haverhill road, and 129 acres of land on the Haverhill side of Great Pond Road. Mr. French was an amateur but scientific farmer and the author of valuable works on agriculture and stock-raising.⁴ He remodeled the old Johnson house for a summer residence and came there with his father and sister every summer until his death in 1900. Mr. French was a disciple of Professor Birdsey Grant Northrop of Clinton, Connecticut, who visited over forty states and territories and aided in organizing hundreds of societies for village improvement. "The movement for village improvement in North Andover was the idea of Mr. J. D. W. French and the fate of the Society during the early years of its existence depended in a large measure upon his personal efforts. He had to create a sentiment in favor of village improvement and at the same time take the initiative in carrying on the work in detail."⁵ A meeting was held North Andover, 1949

October 24, 1885, to consider the expediency of starting such a society. It was organized at a second meeting on November 9, 1885, and incorporated in 1893 under the name of the North Andover Improvement Society. Its first work was the observance of Arbor Day by the school children, the planting of trees by the society, and the encouragement of private individuals to do the same. In 1887, the trees planted by societies and individuals numbered 576. About the same time Mr. French planted a larch grove on his property to the left of Ray's Pond on Great Pond Road. The new road on the former property of Mr. French off of Great Pond Road cuts through the beautiful larch grove planted by him, which at one time was considered beautiful and important enough to be given a prize. In the sixty-four years of its existence, the North Andover Improvement Society has done valuable work, and one of its chief functions now would seem to be, as Mr. French used to stress, the guarding and keeping of beautiful trees. It seems sad that something could not have been done by the society to save that larch grove.

The work of the Improvement Society was varied. It graded the land and planted trees in front of the Historical Society and in the center of Phillips Square. It encouraged the formation of a young men's club at "the Parish" and also the hiring of a school nurse. It was the first to protest when the telephone company cut and disfigured trees. Perhaps, however, its best and greatest work was enlarging and beautifying the Common in the oldest part of the town, the Centre.

The present Common was originally the ox field of Dr. Thomas Kittredge. (In 1825, the North Parish Meeting House stood about 200 yards in front of the present church; town meetings were still held in the old building, and the town consisted of the North and South Parishes of Andover.) The records for 1825 show that "The training field north from Dr. Kittredge's containing about five acres was exchanged for four acres [the ox field] in front of the meeting house and opened for a Common, much for the improvement of the parish. The horse sheds were moved to the N. East side of the meeting house."⁶ The old Common in 1885 extended from the Airline (the original name of Massachusetts Avenue) to Osgood Street. The Hay Scales stood at one end, as did the old house belonging to Colonel Moody Bridges, deputy sheriff of the county for fifty years. It was a long house containing two tenements. At the opposite end, near the present Historical Society, stood the Cochichewick Engine House. This small building had a tower for its bell and housed the Cochichewick fire engine, worked by volunteer firemen. The engine occupied the lower floor of the building, while the second floor was a dance hall.⁷ In 1888, old buildings were not valued as they are today. The Improvement Society considered the quaint little Cochichewick Fire House disfiguring, and was instrumental in having it moved from the Common to the land between the Brick store and the old Swan house. Eventually the fire engine went to the new fire house in the parish and the old fire house was so enlarged and altered by the Masons that it completely lost its identity. The Improvement Society, which had been responsible for buying and tearing down the Moody Bridges house, considered moving

the Hay Scales, but fortunately the selectmen, when approached for permission, ruled that they had no authority to give it, so the little old Hay Scales still sits on the site where it was built in 1833.⁸

To Mrs. William Sutton we owe the many beautiful triangles in town. She made them her special interest, and those of us who knew her are reminded of her whenever we see them.

In 1920, Mr. and Mrs. John Gardner Coolidge returned from their war work in Paris, and came to make their summer home at Ashdale Farm, the oldest Stevens house in old Andover, and owned by Mrs. Coolidge's ancestors for eight generations. Mr. and Mrs. Coolidge at once interested themselves in the Improvement Society, and were so far-seeing as to realize that the village green – the Common – would lose much of its interest without beautiful surroundings. They thereupon enhanced the loveliness of the old Stevens farm with gardens, trees, and hedges. They bought the brick house adjoining their property and also the point of land running to Osgood Street where stood a very ugly filling station and an old harness shop, converted into a house. In their place is a field with some beautiful trees. They also bought the old Parker house, sometimes called the Nutting house, and the field on Andover Street at its back and front, as well as the parsonage lots on the left as one goes up Chestnut Street.

When they learned that the Berry house was to be sold and the land belonging with it was to be cut up and used for bungalow lots, Mr. and Mrs. Coolidge acted so quickly that within twenty-four hours the deed to both house and land was in their hands. The Berry house (now owned by Mr. and Mrs. Walter Muir Whitehill) is one of the three old houses on Andover Street facing the Common. In it used to live Hiram Berry, the town clerk for many years, who at one time kept a school in the Brick Store. In 1873, he was a representative in the Massachusetts legislature. His wife wrote poetry for *The Youth's Companion* under the name of "Aunt Clara," and in summer took to board Miss Hannah Stevenson and her sister Mrs. Charles Pelham Curtis.⁹ These two delightful Boston ladies, besides adding much to the social life of the town, took a lively interest in the project of planting trees on the Common. When Mr. and Mrs. Coolidge bought the Berry house, the accumulated odds and ends left in it were first disposed of by auction, then the barn was altered by paving its floor with old bricks, and by building two stairways leading to the haymows, which thereupon became galleries. So arranged it became a delightful place for Garden Club meetings and for flower shows, with one big door giving a view of the Common in front and the other looking out across the field and orchard at the back.

When the state proposed building a highway through Osgood and Andover Streets, Mr. and Mrs. Coolidge were the first to give an eighty-foot-wide right of way through their property. The Misses Brooks and Mr. Nathaniel Stevens followed with like gifts. It is to the generous co-operation of these people that we owe the present Chickering Road – the by-pass that saved the trees in front of the Bradstreet, the

Brooks and the Osgood houses, and also prevented traffic from roaring through the centre of our old town. Later Mrs. Coolidge brought and tore down the garage on Andover Street which was a discordant note in its surroundings.

We citizens of North Andover should be very grateful to Mr. J. D. W. French, Mrs. William Sutton, Mrs. Nathaniel Stevens and many others who worked to save and beautify the Common. Especial thanks are due Mr. and Mrs. John Gardner Coolidge for providing the background that best suits the former ox field that is now a well-kept and beautiful village green.

The history of the North Andover Garden Club really began when Mrs. Lewis S. Bigelow bought the Foster farm on Great Pond Road.¹⁰ The Foster house, which stood on what used to seem to me a high bank, in my childhood, had not a spear of grass around it, but plenty of chickens! When one thinks of the Bigelow house with all the charm it has today, the absence of grass and the presence of chickens seems very incongruous! Mrs. Bigelow and her sister, Mrs. John J. Chickering, could always be depended upon to join in doing anything for North Andover. Their father, the Hon. William A. Russell, owned the Russell farm (now belonging to Brooks School), and was the first person to import Holstein cattle in the United States. Mrs. Bigelow, who lived in New York in winter, was a member of the Garden Club of America. Being interested in starting a garden club in North Andover, she called a meeting at her house on August 5, 1920, at which she was chosen president and Miss Ruth Ely, secretary.

Unfortunately, Miss Ely has no notes about the early years of the club. The next meeting on record was the first of the season of 1923 and was held at Mrs. E. J. Prescott's house on Chestnut Street. Mr. Prescott was a well-known hybridizer of pansies whose seeds came from all over the world and included a beautiful range of colors. Again, there is a gap of three years during which no notes were preserved, until 1926 when three members of the club took charge of each meeting, and a vice-president and a corresponding secretary were appointed. A number of speakers addressed the club, and the matter of billboards came up for discussion. It was also decided to enter an exhibit at the 1927 Spring Flower Show in Boston. The committee appointed for this purpose consisted of Mrs. John G. Coolidge, chairman, Mrs. Lewis S. Bigelow, Mrs. William Sutton, Mrs. Nathaniel Stevens, and Mrs. Charles Belknap. Great was the rejoicing when the first prize for "A Window Arrangement in a Living Room" went to the North Andover Garden Club! In June of the same year, another first prize for another window arrangement was won by the club at the North Shore flower show.

The club likewise undertook to award prizes as well as to win them. In 1927, a prize was first offered to school children for a paper on wild flowers. Members of the club further showed their generosity by contributing to the maintenance of our old graveyards after a paper had been read at a meeting on the subject of "Old Burying Grounds."

It was in the eventful year of 1927 that plans were made for civic work at the centre. In front of the Brick Store was a forlorn oasis of a few rather neglected trees growing from a thin coating of soil that produced a green of ragged grass. The club members, as their civic work for the year, determined that to make over the oasis, and appointed Mrs. Coolidge to look into the possibilities, and afterwards, when she was away, chose Mrs. Scoville to be her assistant. The estimate for a facing of fieldstone eighteen inches high filled with loam, with stepping stones for a path to cross it, and for the removal of dead trees and the substitution of live ones came to nine hundred dollars. Six hundred was quickly raised; the club giving one hundred from its treasury and our president and vice-president, Mrs. Bigelow and Mrs. Coolidge, somehow producing the rest of the sum needed. The small park, then finished, was well kept by the Garden Club, under whose care the trees and grass flourished, until in 1931, the little space became the background for the Kittredge family memorial to its doctors. It then seemed logical that either the Kittredges or the Town of North Andover should take the responsibility for the park, and the club accordingly regretfully relinquished this project to the town.

In August, 1927, the North Andover Garden Club voted to join the Massachusetts Federation of Garden Clubs, and the federation's out-of-town activities brought broader interests to our members.

In 1928 and 1929, our civic work was the planting of vines at the Centre School, clearing and planting by the Brick Store, and keeping the centre plot in order. Two prizes were offered to the school children for essays on local shade trees. Prizes were taken by the club at the Spring Flower Show in Boston, the North Shore Flower Show and the Topsfield Fair.

When in 1930 Mrs. Coolidge opened the Berry House Tea Room, the beautiful old barn was made available for club flower shows. At the first of these, held on June 25, 1930, there were a hundred and thirty entries in the eleven classes of exhibits and more than four hundred visitors came in spite of very hot weather. The judges were Mrs. Ward Thoron of the North Shore Garden Club, Mrs. Samuel Cabot of the Noannett Club, and Mr. Joseph Everett Chandler. At the meeting on July 9, the president, Mrs. Bigelow, complimented the committee on the success of the show and proposed a vote of thanks for Mrs. Coolidge's "unstinted generosity in giving a place for the show to be held in the old barn and in lending her gardener and plants."

At the annual meeting on October 1, 1930, Mrs. Bigelow resigned as president of the club - a resignation that was regretfully accepted since she refused to reconsider it. After starting the club, Mrs. Bigelow as president encouraged civic work, and by her proposal to join the Massachusetts Federation gave our group interests outside of North Andover. By seconding Mrs. Coolidge (the chairman of our committee on entries in the Boston Flower Show), Mrs. Bigelow helped make a name for the club when in 1927 we took a first prize the first year we entered an exhibit at the Boston show.

She also encouraged the movement against billboards and contributed to wild flower preservation, to the Lowthorp School and to other worthwhile projects, and she was constantly on the alert for new channels of usefulness in which the club might join. We owe much to her leadership.

The new officers, proposed and elected in October, 1930, were Mrs. John G. Coolidge, president, Mrs. Samuel F. Rockwell, vice-president Miss Sarah M. Field, Treasurer, and Miss Kat H. Stevens, secretary. Mrs. Coolidge continued as president for four years having been unanimously petitioned by the club to serve one extra year after her three-year term was finished. She continued Mrs. Bigelow's civic work, caring for the training field and land near the Brick Store and adding two more triangles to the list of those made beautiful by Mrs. William Sutton. Through her kindness, a unique meeting place for the club was provided in the Berry house barn, which was used frequently by club members during her presidency, and which was the scene of an open meeting with a speaker once a month in summer while she held office. In these years, a flower show was held annually at the barn. The judges were always entertained at luncheon beforehand by the president, and outstanding judges they were, members of the Massachusetts Federation, well known for their taste.

Among the many interesting and delightful pilgrimages arranged by Mrs. Coolidge were expeditions to the Gloucester gardens, Mrs. Clement Houghton's spring garden, the garden of Lowthorp School, the North Shore gardens, the Rose Garden of Mrs. Webster at Quisset, several gardens in and about South Berwick, Maine, some in New Hampshire, and the Kelsey-Highlands Nurseries. Mr. Kelsey himself conducted the visiting group and pointed out specimens of evergreens, deciduous trees and shrubs, ivies, and perennials that he considered valuable for planting in our locality. Mr. Russell Tyson of North Andover entertained the club at tea, and was kind enough to arrange for his garden to be seen at any time by friends of the garden club, in return for which he, at Mrs. Coolidge's suggestion, was made an honorary member of the club.

It was not only by means of pilgrimages to nearby New England gardens that Mrs. Coolidge kept the club in touch with affairs outside North Andover, but by various other undertakings as well. Donations were made to the Massachusetts State Commission concerned with the removal of billboards, the National Forest Conservation Program was given attention; the problems of mosquito control were considered, and discussions were held on unemployment in Lawrence, as well as on the conservation of beauty spots in North Andover.

At the annual meeting of the Garden Club on October 17, 1934, Miss Ruth Ely offered the following resolution: "The North Andover Garden Club owes a great debt of gratitude to our retiring president for her unending devotion to the club, her efficient leadership, and for the delightful treats she has planned for us. I hope that she will never lose her interest in the North Andover Garden Club. I propose that the club give a rising vote of thanks."

The new president, elected at the same meeting, was Mrs. Charles Belknap, who served until June 1935, when she was obliged to resign on account of having to move to the West. Miss Kate H. Stevens was thereupon elected president to serve for the few months remaining before the next annual meeting. Miss Stevens, knowing that her gift was for chronicling rather than for leading, simply filled in the vacancy in order that the club might continue to function.

In October 1935, at the annual meeting, Mrs. Charles D. McDuffie was elected president. She served until October 1938. During her years as president, pilgrimages were made to Lowthorp School in Groton, to the Topsfield gardens, and to points of interest in Andover and Boxford. Guest speakers were Mrs. John C. Perkins, Mr. Harold C. Stevens, Mr. Donald Wyman, Mrs. Henry Wise Wood, and Mr. Charles Stockman, II. The latter gave four talks on botany during 1938. Each year a flower show was held and prizes were given for outstanding displays.

The club under Mrs. McDuffie's leadership showed continued interest in North Andover affairs. Particular attention was given to the maintenance of the Hay Scales and of Academy Road. Greater emphasis was given to the knowledge of botanical names, with frequent tests being held at the club meetings. A new departure was the purchase of books on horticultural subjects which were made available to club members at the Stevens Memorial Library; after a year these books were presented to the library.

In October, 1938, Miss Ruth Ely was elected president. Since by the end of her three-year term the country was in a state of preparation for war, she was asked to continue to serve, and remained president until 1944. At the time of her election in 1938, Miss Ely made the following suggestions: that the club should be reorganized so as to stand first for the exchange of horticultural experience and study, and second for civic work; that the North Andover gardens should be opened, and that there should be a plant sale.

Notable in regard to Miss Ely's presidency was the active part that the Garden Club took in supporting the war effort. The USO and the American Red Cross were given contributions. Garden Club members sent flowers to local hospitals, began victory gardens, and provided canned vegetables for school lunches. Since the gas rationing prevented the extensive pilgrimages of the 1930's, Miss Ely turned to flower shows given in her own barn. As before, various visiting speakers kept the club in touch with outside developments in the field of horticulture.

In October, 1944, Miss Ely having completed six years as president, a rising vote of thanks was given her in consideration of her years as president and in gratitude to her hard work and the enthusiasm she had inspired. At the annual meeting at which this occurred, Mrs. Abbot Stevens was elected president for the term 1944 – 1946.

As Mrs. Stevens' presidency coincided with the years when the country was actively engaged in World War II, the great interest of our club was in work supporting the national war effort. Flowers were sent to nearby hospitals, particularly to the Lovell General Hospital at Camp Devens, and contributions were made to the Women's Municipal League. The program of victory gardens and canning begun under Miss Ely was continued each summer of the war, and the donations of canned foods to the schools were considerable.

Along with this special wartime effort, our club still maintained its regular work. In each season a series of guest speakers addressed the meetings, and a flower show was held each year. Money was given towards the upkeep of the North Andover Common, and for spraying the roads near the school so that children should not be infected with poison ivy. On account of the gas rationing but one pilgrimage was possible; that was to Mrs. Frederick S. Moseley's garden at Newburyport on June 29, 1946.

In October 1946, Mrs. Everett W. Perere was elected president, to succeed Mrs. Stevens. Upon the cessation of hostilities, the victory gardens and the canning program were concluded, but the sending of flowers to the Lovell General Hospital has been continued as a worthwhile peacetime project.

During 1947, there was an unusually full program of guest speakers. Among them were Mrs. James D. Graham, Dr. John B. May, Mr. Allan McNeil, Mrs. Francis W. Mitchell, Miss Emily H. Bush, Mr. John L. Russell, and Mr. M. Lawrence Shields. The talks were of great interest and inspired new participation in the club's activities. An "Open House and Garden Day" held May 24, 1947, provided funds for the Lawrence General Hospital and The Children's Hospital in Boston. During 1948, there were also a number of speakers of interest. The Blue-Star Highway project received contributions from our club, and a hamper of flowers was sent fortnightly to the Benevolent Fraternity Fruit and Flower Mission. The end of 1948 found the North Andover Garden Club with a full membership and in a strong position financially.

The same happy condition prevails at the time of writing. As this account goes to press, our latest president, Mrs. A. Murray Howe, who was elected in October 1948, is about to conclude her first year as head of the club.

Notes

1. I am very much indebted to Mrs. John G. Coolidge for encouragement in preparing the manuscript, to Mr. and Mrs. Walter Muir Whitehill for editing and typing it. To Mr. John Peters Stevens, Jr. for his help both in analyzing the club's records and in paying for the publication and to Mr. Samuel F. Rockwell and others for valuable information. Without the assistance of these friends, this pamphlet could not have been published.
2. Sarah Loring Bailey, *Historical Sketches of Andover, Massachusetts* (Boston, 1880), facing p. 157
3. I remember the two delightful old ladies, Miss Caroline and Miss Susan Phillips, who lived in the Phillips house when the dooryard was part of the scene. They were the daughters of Colonel John Phillips and his wife, Lydia Gorham, two of the thirteen children brought up by Madame Phillips after the sudden death of her husband in 1820. (See p. 156 of Miss Bailey's *Historical Sketches of Andover*.) They both died in 1883. I quote from the letters of Phillips Brooks, written from Spain (Vol. III, p. 5), "If there were ever lives totally unselfish and finding their pleasure in making other people happy, these were they." – "Little Aunt Caroline with her quiet ways had something very touching and beautiful about her. Aunt Susan trying to do some little bit of good in her curious ways, with her queer little tracts, and her vague desire to exhort everybody to be good." Miss Caroline and Miss Susan called at our house once a year. Michael drove them up the hill in their quaint old carryall with its two large round windows curtained with green silk at either end of the back seat. He drew up to the side of our stone carriage block, folded back the narrow front seat, and helped the ladies out onto the block, from which they made their way slowly up the path to the door. I remember their visits well because my brothers, William Oliver Stevens and John Peters Stevens, and I were called in from our play, tidied by our little old Irish nurse, "Gidgy" Mahan, and sent in to shake hands with Miss Caroline and Miss Susan. Gidgy rightly felt that it was an occasion in which we should take part.
4. Sarah Loring Bailey, *Historical Sketches of Andover, Massachusetts*, p. 116
5. *Records of the North Andover Improvement Society*, p. 62
6. *Abiel Abbot, History of Andover (Andover, 1829)*, p. 82.

7. I remember a calico ball which took place there to which my father and mother went. What was called calico in those days is now known as print. The ladies wore calico dresses and their escorts wore calico ties to match. Two fiddlers provided the music.
8. Walter Muir Whitehill, "The North Andover Hay Scales," *Old-time New England*, xxxix (1948), 35-37.
9. Widow of Charles Pelham Curtis of the Harvard College class of 1811.
10. I remember that farm in the eighteen-seventies when, on Sunday afternoons, the great excitement was for the five of us children to be put with our nurse in the big old carryall behind a "span" of horses and driven round the pond. The house interested me because our tall clock belonged first to the Foster family.