

TOWERING ACHIEVEMENTS

THE TOWER FAMILY AND THE TOWER ESTATE

By Heather Aveson

It's hard to move around Lexington without bumping into something of historical significance. Historical elements are so common that we can sometimes forget to stop and wonder about their significance—especially if they fall outside the revolutionary war period.



Left, Portrait of William A. Tower courtesy of the Lexington Historical Society.

But Lexington has a rich history that extends far beyond the revolution. Now, As the town looks forward to enjoying the benefits of its new acquisition of the 10 acres at 39 Marrett Rd., it seems like a good time to take a look back at the history of the property and the buildings that the town will put to use in the coming years to serve its seniors, families and youth as a community center.

This piece is in no way a definitive narrative of the land and its owners. As with all New England real estate, boundaries were somewhat fluid, laid out according to the 'cowshed on the northwest corner' or 'the stone wall running east' and land changed hands through a trade of prime pasture land for a patch of level ground on which to build a henhouse.

Here you'll find a walk back to the mid 1850s when Lexington's fresh air and natural beauty, now made accessible by train, caught the eye of wealthy Bostonians. These families came to summer in Lexington and later to permanently reside here. Many were prominent businessmen in Boston and they brought their wealth and prestige to what had previously been a rural farm community.

One of these Bostonians, William Augustus Tower came to Lexington in 1855. The story of his family carries us right into the front door of the new Lexington Community Center.

WILLIAM AUGUSTUS TOWER

William Augustus Tower was the son of Oren Tower. He was born in Petersham, Worcester County according to a volume entitled *Genealogical and Personal Memoirs*

"A forceful, progressive man, stern but kindly withal. A natural leader, although modest, and even shy. A good citizen and neighbor who made the world better for his having lived in it."

Genealogical and Personal Memoirs Relating to the Families of Boston and Eastern Massachusetts, Volume IV, by William Richard Cutter

Relating to the Families of Boston and Eastern Massachusetts, Volume IV, written by William Richard Cutter and published in 1908 by the Lewis Historical Publishing Company.

He was the eldest of eleven children and according to this account he was required to live by his wits with no family fortune to speak of. He gained employment at the age of fifteen in a country store in Lancaster, Massachusetts where he became a partner. In 1850 he moved to Boston and gained success as a flour and grain trader with Rice, Tower and Co. and then Tower, Davis and Co. According to Cutter's account this was the first firm of its kind to directly trade in cereal commodities

with the west. Five years later Tower bought a large parcel of land that included a home that sat along what is now Pelham Road. At first, the family summered in Lexington, spending the winter in their comfortable Commonwealth Avenue residence. Hoping to recover from poor health he developed as a result of his demanding business, Tower "retired" for a bit to the Lexington estate before recommencing his business interests.

Tower wanted to turn his summer property into a suitable estate for his family. He built a magnificent mansion sited on land just east of the pond located in

front of what is now Youville Place on Pelham Road and the family moved to Lexington permanently around 1873 (see drawing left). Charles Hudson describes the house and grounds in his book, *History of the Town of Lexington*:

A stately building, situated on the high land south of Main Street (Massachusetts Avenue), it makes a fine appearance, and its cupola commands a prospect of great extent, variety and beauty...This dwelling, with all its surroundings, has no superior in the township.

Tower threw himself into Lexington life. On April 19, 1875 he served as Chief Marshall of Lexington's Centennial Celebration and according to the *Historical Guide to Open Space in Lexington* by Thomas P. Sileo, he entertained General U. S. Grant at his home.

Tower's business interests continued to expand. In the years 1870-1873 he was president of the Concord Railroad in New Hampshire and later the Nashua & Lowell Railroad. He became involved with many banks including the National Bank of the Commonwealth, the Shawmut National Bank, Boston Safe & Deposit Company, Boston Five Cents Savings Bank and the New England Trust Company. He also played an active role in several insurance companies including the Equitable Life Insurance Company of New York and the Guaranty Company of North America.

Tower was originally a Whig but became a Republican. He was active in politics preceding the Civil War serving in the House of Representatives in 1863. He concurrently served as aide-de-camp for Governor Alexander H. Rice, the 30th Governor of Massachusetts, with the rank of colonel. Tower was a member of the Follen Unitarian Church of Lexington. Of his life in Lexington, Cutter writes:

Mr. Tower was a man who entered heartily into the interests of any



Photo by Jim Shaw



Portrait of Ellen Tower above courtesy of the Lexington Historical Society.

community where he made his home, and at Lexington his abilities as a leader were recognized. He was of genial temperament, though his almost courtly manner might have given another impression to one meeting him for the first time; he was a great admirer of the beauties of nature, and he loved animals. The horse was to him a source of delight, and touring about this section with tally-ho or drag [types of coaches popular at the time] was one of his chief enjoyments, while driving over the road from his home in Lexington to business in Boston was the habit of his life, winter and summer, going this way much oftener than by public conveyance. He never neglected business, but he frequently pushed important affairs aside that he might enjoy his ride and spend a few hours of daylight on the estate he had developed with intelligent foresight.

Tower died at home in Lexington November 21, 1904. The Reverend L.D. Cochrane of Follen Church officiated the funeral. He was buried in the family plot in Lexington. At the time of his death in 1904, Tower had amassed a 127 acre estate which ran from Middle Street, now Marrett Road, over the hill to Pelham Road and across Main Street, now Massachusetts Ave, to include the 12 acres that are now Tower Park (see map right). The original William Tower mansion was torn down in 1939.

ELLEN TOWER AND TOWER PARK

Ellen Tower and her younger brother Richard inherited William's entire 127 acre estate after their father's death in 1904. When Richard died in 1921, Ellen became the sole heir to the estate and guardian of Richard's three sons. She moved the children from the Richard Tower

house (pictured on the left above) into the grand William Tower mansion and raised them from ages 8, 13 and 14.

Ellen Tower, the eldest daughter of William Augustus Tower was a pioneering advocate of school playgrounds and an undaunted supporter of child welfare. She is also the benefactor of the 12 acres of rolling hills, woods and plantings that make up Tower Park, formally known as William Augustus Tower Park in honor of her father.

Ms. Tower was known across the country for her work in child advocacy. She became known nationally as the Mother of the American Playground.

A *Lexington Minuteman* article from August 14, 1969 by Marcia S. Dane states:

Miss Tower was one of three women who in 1885 organized and supervised playgrounds and sand garden work for smaller children in and about thirty school yards. It was Miss Tower, who to a large extent, carried on these playgrounds, purchasing the toys, getting the sand boxes and shelters made, distributing the toys, engaging the teachers and going about herself to see that all was working well.

She continued her hands on activities until the school committee took over supervision of the playgrounds in 1908.

As an advocate for children she supported the Boston Floating Hospital, she was the honorary Vice – President of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, worked with others in town to bring a district nurse to Lexington, became chairman of the Child Welfare Committee and finally a director of the Public Health Association.



Map 4- 1906 Sheet 37 East Lexington map shows Richard Tower house, William Tower House and land that would later become Tower Park.

Ms. Tower felt the technological and industrial advances of the early 20th century were putting stress on members of the local community and wanted to offer a place of rest and refuge. And so in 1928 she donated the 12 acres and a \$10,000 maintenance fund for the park in honor of her father. In offering the gift to the town she stated:

"It seems important that we, of this generation should secure for those who come after us, open spaces in our town, that a bit of the country may be preserved in the midst of buildings and rushing traffic. If we do not do this our children will find themselves living in a crowded, noisy world, with no touch of nature and little beauty."

It seems Miss Ellen's words ring true as much today as they did almost ninety years ago. Lexington remains indebted to her as children, families and individuals continue to enjoy the beauty and open spaces of William Augustus Tower Memorial Park.

Richard Tower House, the Masons and the Lexington Community Center



Richard Tower was the youngest of William Augustus Tower's children. As the only surviving son he became a partner in his father's firm in 1885 when he was 28 years old. Richard married

in 1905 and built a notable mansion for himself and his new bride. The impressive Colonial Revival mansion was sited on a knoll along Middle Street, now Marrett Rd., with a view down an avenue

of trees across Main Street, now Massachusetts Ave., to the Tower Park land. The Richard Tower House forms the foundation of what will be the new Lexington Community Center.

It was designed by well known Boston architects, Carl Fehmer and Samuel Page. According to the *Lexington MA Historical Survey* of 33 Marrett Rd., Fehmer "performed all of the architectural work for the Massachusetts General Hospital," and "later designed a number of buildings for the McLean Hospital as well as a number of Back Bay Houses."

Fehmer and Page created a residence that attracted attention from the very beginning. Historian William R. Cutter referred to the house as "one of the most imposing and beautiful in the state." In 1906, the *Lexington Minuteman* devoted an entire article to the house. It included flowery descriptions of the interior:

"Out of the room just alluded to is the library, of splendid proportions. The mantel is of much dignity and the end of the room opens on to a rear veranda by long windows. The dining room is entered directly from the foot of the hall and the graceful sweep of the staircase is so placed that the uniform lines of the hall are not broken."

...and the exterior:

"The lines of the house are square and severe, the only ornamentation being a high Grecian portico, supported by white pillars at the northerly front of the house, which gives the entrance portal a rotunda effect, and with the arched open window spaces the façade has a certain distinction and is relieved of any undue severity."

The Colonial Revival Style in which the house was built gave Fehmer and Page broad freedom to combine elements. At a recent meeting of the Lexington Community Center Task Force,



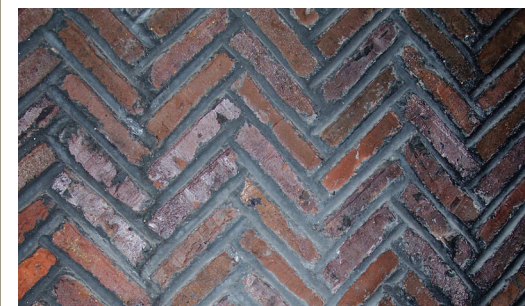
Palladium inspired tile work above multiple windows is representative of Colonial Revival architecture.



Interior detail of main entrance.



Fireplace with herringbone brickwork.



Herringbone fireplace detail.



Window detail between old and new buildings.



The transition from old to new building preserving architectural window detail.

architect Teresa Wilson of Steffian Bradley Architects who are consulting on the project noted that the revival style allowed the architects "to freely take from different styles and periods."

A Field Guide to American Houses, by Virginia and Lee McAlester suggests several common elements of the Colonial Revival that are evident in the Richard Tower House: the accentuated front door with a decorative crown and slender columns mentioned in the Lexington Minuteman article of 1906, a hip roof, palladium window references which in this case were often designed using tile work, symmetrically balanced windows often in pairs, dormers with pediments, and one story wings with elaborate metal balustrades.

According to historicnewengland.org, Colonial Revival homes often feature "interior floor plans are not symmetrical and are more open than historic examples." Although the interior of the house was altered to accommodate use by the Scottish Rite, the original asymmetrical layout is still visible. So are the many distinctive architectural details that inspired awe when the house was originally built. Built-in niches feature shell motif caps, each of the


eight original fireplaces has a unique enclosure and mantel, even the brick work within the fireplaces show unique craftsmanship. The rooms are richly detailed with various moulding treatments.

In 1968 the Masons purchased 22 acres of property, which included the Richard Tower House and the former Nunn estate where the National Heritage Museum was built.

The Tower house was used as the Supreme

Council Headquarters. In 1999 the Scottish Rite applied to the Town of Lexington Board of Appeals to build "an addition to the main building to consolidate staff and provide a learning center for children with dyslexia." The Board gave its approval citing that the addition would be approximately the same height as the existing building, the building would not be highly visible from Marrett Rd., exterior architectural features and construction materials were in keeping with the existing building and the landscaping would be preserved.

The addition was completed in 2000. The buildings complement each other in scale and design. The atrium entrance of the new building tips its hat to the portico entrance of the original mansion. Window placements and pairings tie together. And inside, the old mansion flows into the addition without losing architectural detail or integrity.

The two buildings work together, old and new and should provide enjoyment for Lexington families for years to come as the Lexington Community Center. 



Detail of shell motif.

Built in cabinet niches with shell motif.



Atrium of new building (right) reflects curve of mansion's main entrance (left).

Photos by Heather Aveson