

# Spring Program of the Brookline Historical Society

## Life & Legacy of John Wilson

Sunday, March 24, 2019 at 2:00 pm

Hunneman Hall, Brookline Public Library, 361 Washington Street

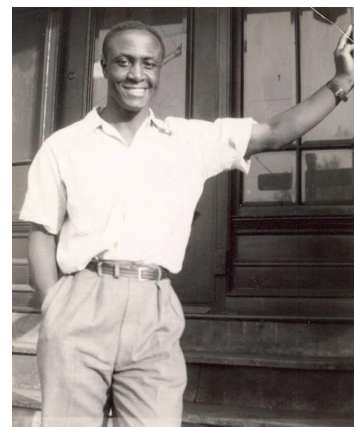
Edmund Barry Gaither, Executive Director of the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists and special consultant at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, will speak about the life and legacy of world-renowned Brookline artist John Wilson.

This BHS event is co-sponsored by the Committee to Commemorate John Wilson and the Town of Brookline Office of Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Relations.

Please note: All are invited to the dedication of John Wilson's sculpture of Martin Luther King, Jr. to be held in the lobby of Town Hall on Sunday, January 27, 2019, at 3 p.m.



John Wilson, Self-Portrait, courtesy Martha Richardson



John Wilson circa 1940, courtesy Martha Richardson

Brookline Historical Society  
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Brookline, MA 02446

Membership renewal form included

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### WINTER 2019

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The Brookline Historical Society is dedicated to the documentation and interpretation of Brookline's diverse history, to collecting, preserving, and maintaining artifacts of Brookline's past, and to sharing the story of the town and its people with residents and visitors alike.

The Society's headquarters are located in the heart of Coolidge Corner at the Edward Devotion House, one of Brookline's oldest Colonial Period structures.

The Society also maintains the circa 1780 Widow Harris House as well as the Putterham School located in Larz Anderson Park.

The Society's extensive collection of historic information, photographs, postcards, and atlases can be viewed on our website [BrooklineHistoricalSociety.org](http://BrooklineHistoricalSociety.org)

Our membership program is active and volunteers are always welcome.



BROOKLINE HISTORICAL SOCIETY BROOKLINE, MASSACHUSETTS

## The Widening of Beacon Street by Larry Barbaras



The heretofore unnoticed and still mysterious "Waldo of 1887" is revealed in this magnified area of a newly-digitized version from the end-to-end series of Beacon St. photos taken just prior to the widening. This is the house of Francis Hunnewell on the north side of Beacon Street, just west of Washington Square. (Digital Commonwealth (CC BY-NC-ND). Brookline Photograph Collection published by the Public Library of Brookline.)

The transformation of Brookline's Beacon Street from country road to grand European-style promenade was undertaken in 1887. The widening project incorporated a then radical electric trolley system that is now the oldest continuously-running system in the country. As a prelude to this newsletter, the Historical Society has curated and organized in geographical order the remarkable set of photographs documenting 1887 Beacon Street from end to end (<http://brooklinehistoricalsociety.org/1887>). With the ability to correct imbalances in contrast and brightness and to magnify areas of detail, the digitized versions of these historic photos are bringing new information to light.

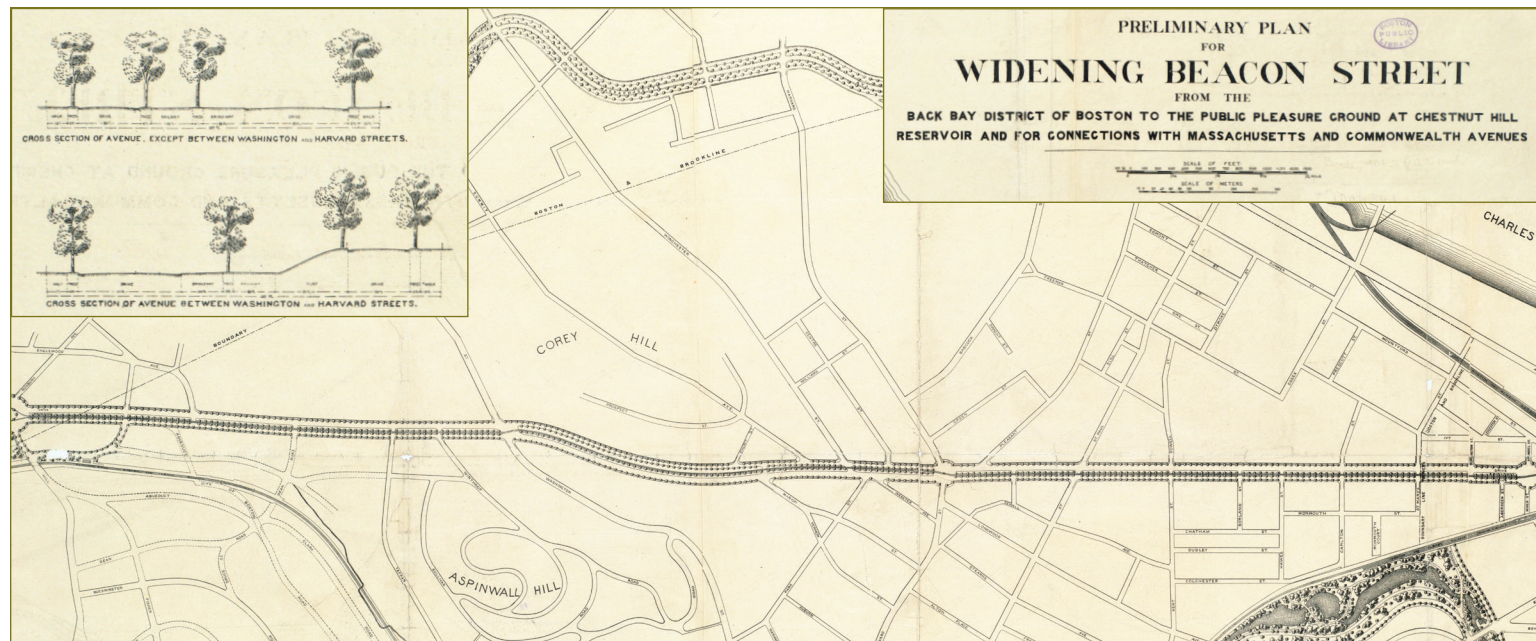
Which brings us to our Waldo. He has most likely remained unseen and unknown for over 130 years, little more than a smudge on the photos published in books. He has now been detected in six of the photos centered in the Washington Square area (see these on our web site under Photos / Beacon St., 1887 Series, Before the Widening). To date, we do not know his identity nor at whose behest the 1887 photographs were taken.

We begin the first chapter in the 1870s with Henry Melville Whitney who lived with his family at the corner of Pleasant Street and Beacon, steps from Coolidge Corner. His father, James Whitney, headed the Metropolitan Steamship Company which ran ships between Boston and

New York. After his father's death in 1878, Henry Whitney left the house on Pleasant St., moving to the corner of Chestnut & Walnut streets as he took over the reins of the business. The son was a risk-taking entrepreneur who saw great untapped potential in sleepy North Brookline's strategic location just south of Cambridge and just west of Boston. He had surely imagined the possibilities for Beacon Street as he looked out the windows of his family's Pleasant St. house. Harvard Street had been a primary north-south transportation route from Cambridge since 1662(!). Beacon Street, constructed in 1850-51 (the section west of Washington Square in 1850

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(Digital Commonwealth (CC BY-NC-ND). Brookline Photograph Collection published by the Public Library of Brookline.)

and the section east of Washington Square in 1851) was a straight shot west from downtown Boston. And yet, in the 1880s, it hosted but one business. The Coolidge & Brother store was located at the nexus of the two roads and Beacon Street itself remained a narrow dirt country road bordered by just a smattering of single-family houses.

Early references to the idea of widening Beacon Street appeared in 1884 when a "Petition of Citizens" for the widening was submitted to the County Commissioners. In September of that year, a hearing of the petition was held in Brookline Town Hall but so many obstacles and objections were put forth at that time that the idea was placed on the back burner. Whitney was a Brookline park commissioner and had

surely been aware of all this: he was buying up land along Beacon Street. In 1886, Whitney formed a syndicate called the West End Land Company to increase his purchases, as a gateway to realizing his vision of Beacon Street as a grand European-style boulevard. Such a transformation would bring with it, of course, a big climb in real estate values and Whitney's syndicate soon owned roughly half the acreage that would be involved in a widening.

Whitney engaged the firm of noted landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted to draw up plans and, by late 1886, he was ready to bring a formal proposal to the Brookline Selectmen. His proposal would certainly generate opposition: from town residents, and especially from land owners along

Beacon Street who would be required to give up frontage and, in some cases, even lose their houses. Additionally, other transit system operators, like the Metropolitan Street Railway in Boston, wanted in on the action. But Whitney had several gambits to deal with these problems. First, he would propose donating all West End's Beacon Street frontage to the project. Second, he would contribute \$150,000 to the project. And the competing operators? He formed another syndicate, the West End Street Railway Company, and bought them all out.

### An Electric Gamble

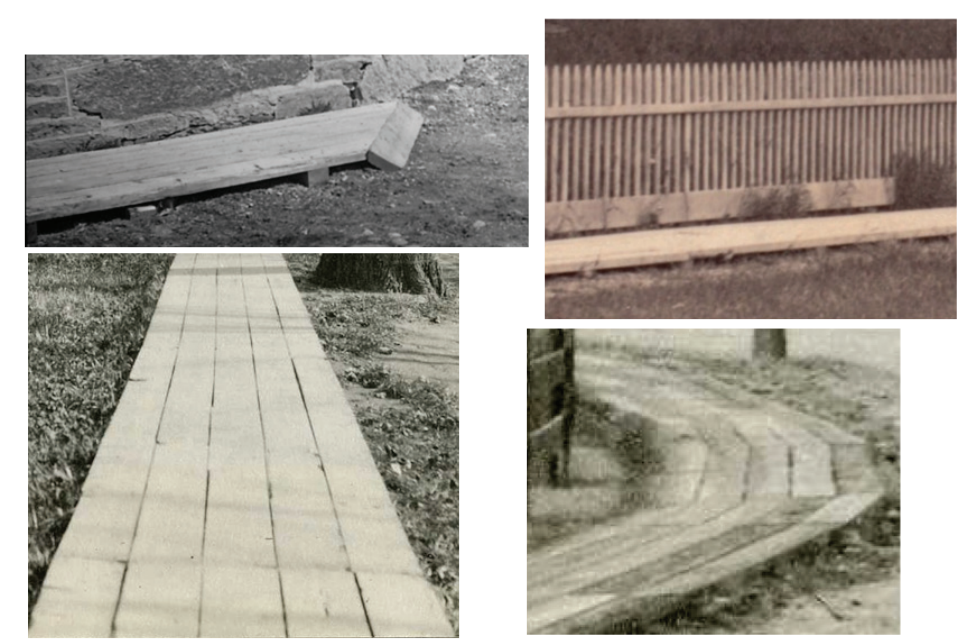
As part of the original plan, tracks would be laid down the center of the new street for the only feasible technologies at the time: either



Coolidge and Brother store, 1887. Henry Whitney's house is just off screen to the right. Beacon St. going west is to the left and Harvard St. looking north is mid right. (Digital Commonwealth (CC BY-NC-ND). Brookline Photograph Collection published by the Public Library of Brookline.)



News items like these about Brookline's wooden sidewalks appeared in newspapers across the country in 1942 and 1943. Clockwise from top left: Cullman Banner, Cullman, Alabama; Harrisburg Telegraph, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Boston Globe; and Poughkeepsie Journal, Poughkeepsie, New York.



Close-up views of some of the old plank sidewalks of Brookline

## New Caretaker for Widow Harris House & Putterham School



Lauren Johnston

The Historical Society is very pleased to welcome Lauren Johnston as the new caretaker of the Widow Harris House and the Putterham School at Larz Anderson Park. Lauren moved into the 18th century Widow Harris House in September. She presents tours of the Putterham School and help out with other activities of the Society. Lauren was raised around the corner from Larz Anderson Park and spent countless hours playing in the playground, walking the beautiful grounds, skating on the ice, and

sledding down the large hill as a child. So, when the opportunity was presented to care for these properties, it felt like coming home again. Lauren enjoys history, stories, photos, collections, and visiting old properties. Walking in the footsteps of others from days gone by is an instrumental way to learn, and she has been able to experience history firsthand throughout the United States, parts of Canada, the British and Emerald Isles, Europe East and West, the Middle East, and Asia. When her children were young, she took

them to Sturbridge Village often, and her daughter had the incredible experience of attending school in a one room schoolhouse dressed in period costume for a day in Rehoboth, MA.

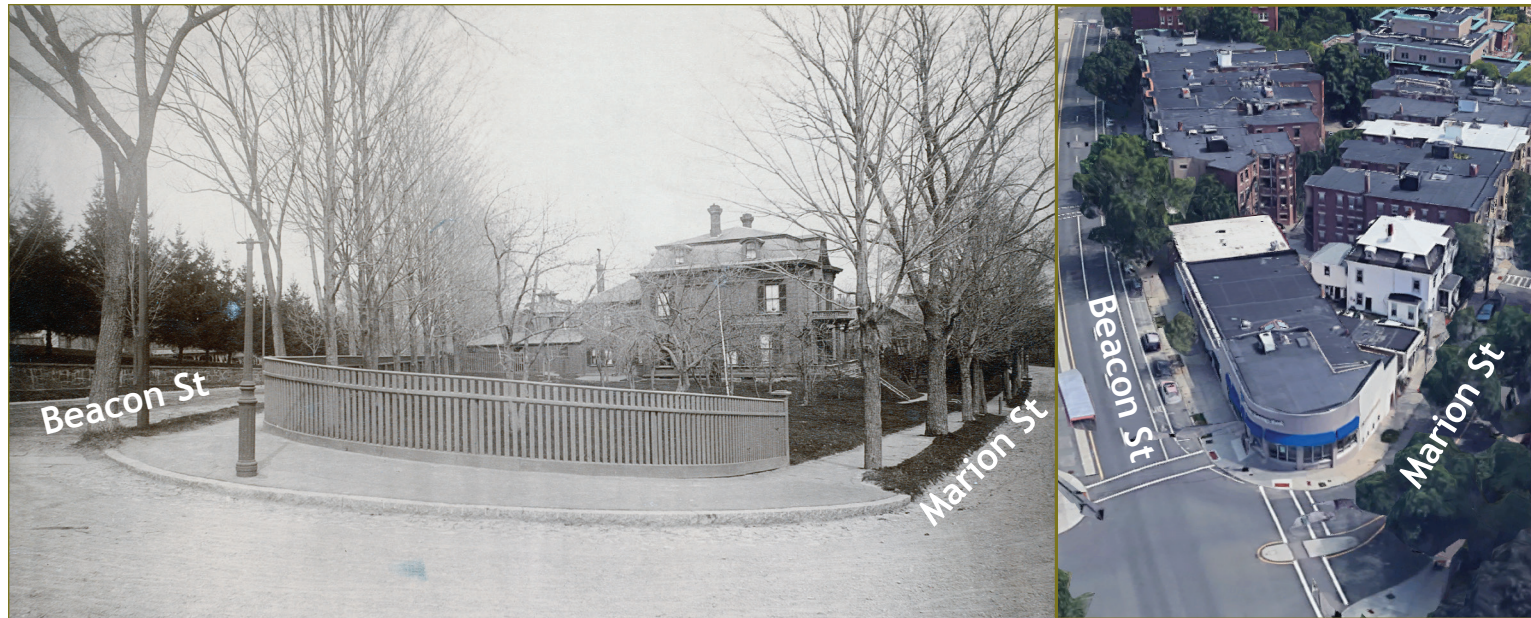
Lauren is pleased to have the opportunity to share the Putterham School with other children and adults alike. She has volunteered at an organic farm running the Children's Garden, been a peer educator, a mentor at a vocational/technical high school, an art director at a camp, and has given many educational talks.

Lauren has previously worked at a small graduate library, as an assistant manager of an herbal pharmacy, and has owned her own business with a background in Acupuncture and herbal medicine. After being home with her two children, Lauren has enjoyed working part-time with college-level students once again at Massachusetts Bay Community College in the Academic Achievement Center. She has both undergraduate and graduate degrees, and she looks forward to embarking on her next career after her children graduate high school.



# The Long History of Wooden Sidewalks in Brookline

by Ken Liss



[Left] This is the house of Austin W. Benton in 1887. It faces Marion Street on the right but an annex section at the rear butts up against Beacon Street. The removal of 110 feet of Beacon Street (on the left looking east) is about to take place. The house was apparently moved twice. It was first rotated ninety degrees clockwise, essentially in place, to face the apex of the two streets and to move the annex out of the way of the widening. With the advent of stores and apartment buildings all along Beacon Street, the house was later returned to its original orientation and moved further down Marion where it remains today. [Right]. (Left, Digital Commonwealth (CC BY-NC-ND). Brookline Photograph Collection published by the Public Library of Brookline. Right, Google)



Beacon Street, looking east from Englewood Avenue, 1887. This picture was taken not long before the widening of Beacon Street. (Public Library of Brookline via Digital Commonwealth)

mentioned, but it continued to be used extensively. (Well into the 1880s, more money was spent on plank sidewalks in some years than on any other kind.)

## A National Curiosity

As years went by, Brookline's remaining wooden walkways even drew national attention. In 1942, there were articles in two trade magazines: "City Clings to Wooden Walks" in *The American City* in May; and "70 Years of Wooden Sidewalks" in *Roads and Streets* in October. The continued presence of the plank sidewalks, according to the article in *The American City*, was due to "such a clamor from residents who wanted to retain the rustic beauty of their old walks" as well as to the use of new pressure-treated lumber that extended the life of the wood and cut maintenance costs by 54%.

The attention brought by the articles in the two trade publications led to news-wire items that were widely distributed and appeared in newspapers around the country. In November 1955 the *Boston Globe* ran a one-paragraph wire service item about the removal of the last wooden sidewalk in the old lumber town of Muskegon, Michigan. Ironically, they seemed unaware that nearby Brookline had only recently removed the last of its own plank sidewalks.

Where was the last wooden sidewalk in Brookline? We may never know. The Town Reports from 1950 to 1954 lists the streets from which they were removed. These included sections of: Warren Street, Cottage Street, and Heath Street (1950); Warren Street, Heath Street, Dudley Way, and Reservoir Road (1951); Heath Street, Colbourne Path, and Gardner Path (1952); Warren Street, Woodland Road, and Addington Path (1953); and Cottage Street and Hayden Road (1954). But the 1955 report simply says: "The work of removing plank sidewalks in the Town was completed this past year."

(continued next page)

planted, with red oaks planted in the Corey Hill section. Time was apparently of the essence: "we give the owners of land taken for the widening of said street two (2) months from the date of its acceptance by the town in which to remove all fences, trees and buildings from the land taken east of St. Paul Street, and four months from the said date in which to remove all fences, trees and buildings from the land taken west of St. Paul Street."

## Let's Make a Deal

Forty-two property owners were officially recognized as being affected by the widening. They were individually detailed in three schedules:

1. Square footage of land to be seized
2. Remuneration
3. Responsibility for a future assessment for "betterments"

Twenty-four received reimbursement for losses, twenty negotiated a release or reduction of their remuneration in return for being released from responsibility for any betterments. Eleven others decided to sue. These latter owners were primarily clustered in the St. Paul to Marion Street zone.

## An Impressive Finish

The widening project, with the exception of some minor planting near Cleveland Circle that was awaiting spring weather, was officially

declared by the town to be complete, on December 26, 1888. This was an impressive effort, completed astoundingly quickly, by Whitney. On January 1, 1889, early in the morning, Whitney successfully ran a test trolley from Allston to Coolidge Corner to downtown Boston. Brookline was about to become a streetcar suburb of Boston. In contrast to the relatively linear evolution of the Brookline Village area, then the center of commercial life in Brookline, the widening of Beacon Street would bring to a country road an immediate and almost unprecedented explosion of development. Scattered single family homes would give way, in short order, to European-style apartment buildings and stores, from St. Mary's Street to Cleveland Circle.



[Left] The District School, a few steps south of Beacon St. on the southeast corner with Harvard St., had to be taken down. (Digital Commonwealth (CC BY-NC-ND). Brookline Photograph Collection published by the Public Library of Brookline). [Right] The Cabot School, constructed in 1888 on nearby Marion St., initially absorbed the District School students before they moved to the first Devotion School building which opened on Harvard Street in 1892.

Whitney's electric streetcar line is now the oldest continuously-running line in the country.

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*Town Records and Reports of the Town Officers of Brookline, Massachusetts for the Year Ending January 31, 1886.* The Chronicle Press: C. A. W. Spencer. 1886  
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Mention wooden walkways and most people will probably think of boardwalks along the beach or over wetlands or other fragile environments. Some might picture scenes of raised platforms on dusty streets in the Old West as seen in movies and on TV.

But wood was once a common material for sidewalks even in urban areas of cities and towns. And Brookline probably had them longer - almost 100 years from the time the first one was laid to when the last was taken up - than any community of its size and/or proximity to a major city.

There were plank sidewalks (as they were called) at one time on major thoroughfares like Beacon, Washington, and Harvard Streets and Brookline Avenue, though those soon gave way to more durable materials. Even with the coming of newer materials plank sidewalks continued to be laid on some residential streets in Brookline as late as the 1920s and to be maintained for years after. The last one, in fact, was not removed until 1955!

## From a Necessity to a Nostalgic Anachronism

Why did Brookline have wooden sidewalks and why did they last so long?

In 1854 a committee was appointed to look into a proposal to install a gravel sidewalk and plant shade trees on a part of Beacon Street starting where it met the Mill Dam coming across the Back Bay from Boston. (Beacon Street, then a narrow country lane, had been laid out across Brookline in 1850-51.) The committee, in 1854, deemed that proposal premature in light of uncertainty about further plans for Beacon Street. Four years later, the town authorized plank sidewalks on Beacon Street from the Boston line as far as Kent Street.

In 1869 Town Meeting, responding to recommendations from another committee, approved \$8,000 to be spent on sidewalks. The committee's report, prepared after correspondence with the mayors of New York and other cities and visits to Cambridge and Lawrence and to Concord, New Hampshire, looked at several different materials for sidewalks. These included flagstone, brick, and two types of concrete. Wood was not



**Photos of Plank Sidewalks on Residential Streets**

More photos, including zoomable views, and a link to a longer version of this article, are on the Historical Society website at <http://www.brooklinehistoricalsociety.org/woodensidewalks>



Wooden sidewalk on the left at the intersection of Blake Road and Tappan Street, 1915 (Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site)



Wooden sidewalk on Rawson Road, 1915 (Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site)



Wooden sidewalk on Bowker Street, date unknown.



Plank sidewalk in front of the Widow Harris House on Newton Street, date unknown.



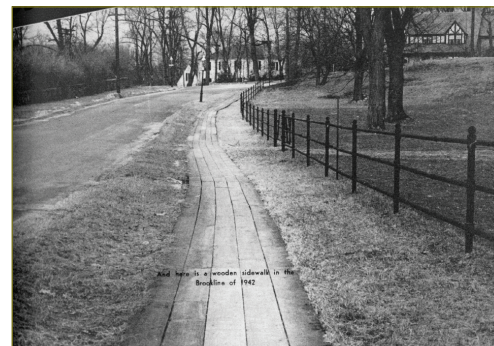
Wooden sidewalk, in foreground, on Winthrop Road, looking down on Washington Square, c1900. (Iowa State University Library Special Collections)

PLANK WALKS.					
STREETS.	Let. New Plank	Let. Old Plank	STREETS.	Let. New Plank	Let. Old Plank
Babcock street . .	355.0		Brought forward . .	1311.5	3675.0
Beacon street . .	725.0	256.0	Oakland road . . .	507.0	
Boylston street . .	409.0	629.0	Round lane . . . .		134.0
Cottage street . .	188.0	409.0	Rawson road . . . .	1545.0	
Dean road . . . .	200.0		Salisbury road . . .	73.0	
Fairbanks street .	300.0		St. Mary's street . .		113.0
Fisher avenue . .		324.0	Verndale street . .	130.0	
Goddard avenue . .		72.0	Vernon street . . . .		71.0
Greenough street .		52.0	Warren street . . . .		484.0
Hammond street . .		229.0	Washington street .	187.0	
Heath street . . . .		406.0	Wasbourne terrace		98.0
High street . . . .		90.0	Williston road . . .	223.0	
Kennard road . . .		211.0	Winchester street .		821.0
Kent street . . . .		265.0	Winthrop road . . .		282.0
Newton street . . .		457.0	York terrace . . . .		100.0
Carried forward .	1311.5	3675.0	Total . . . . .	3766.5	5881.0

This table from the 1907 Brookline Town Report shows where new plank walks were added and old ones replaced in town that year.



This 1888 photo shows Aspinwall Avenue at St. Paul Street with St. Paul's Church in the background. (Brookline Public Library via Digital Commonwealth)



This photo from the October 1942 issue of Roads and Streets magazine shows Woodland Road looking north toward Heath Street. The houses in the distance are 421 Heath on the left and 409 Heath on the right.



Town officials Daniel Lacey, left and Henry Smith, as shown in Roads and Streets.

**Help Keep Brookline History Alive! Renew Your Membership**

Do you enjoy stories like these, plus walking tours, local history presentations, and members-only programs in historic locations? Your membership dollars and donations make all of this possible. Please use the enclosed envelope and membership form to renew today.

You'll continue to receive newsletters like this one and invitations to special members events (like Anthony Sammarco's October talk on the history of S.S. Pierce in the S.S. Pierce Building in Coolidge Corner).

Thank you for your continuing support.

horse-pulled trolleys or cable cars. But Whitney had also been watching a bold inventor named Frank J. Sprague and his Sprague Electric Railway & Motor Company. Sprague was working feverishly to develop electric motors and transmission systems capable of powering a complete streetcar system. New York City was looking to upgrade its chaotic transit systems and he had had a recent demonstration for them fail in dramatic fashion. In an era when people were often terrified of electricity, the test train had been pressed too hard, a fuse blew, and a massive display of sparks started a mini panic among the reviewers. New York subsequently made the prudent-seeming choice of cable-pulled cars. Sprague badly needed an actual real-world transit system to convince cities and investors alike that his ideas were viable. Richmond, Virginia, which was low on cash at the time, needed a system and was willing to let him try with an outlandish all-or-nothing contract.

As Sprague and his team worked desperately against a looming contractual deadline to complete a working system in Richmond, Henry Whitney planned to come calling. On June 28, 1888, days before leaving for Richmond, Whitney, gambling that Sprague would ultimately be successful and understanding that electric trolleys would be vastly superior to other systems, had the West End Street Railway Company file a petition with the town of Brookline to erect poles that would carry the power wires for the trolley cars. The petition covered the length of Beacon St. in Brookline and also included Harvard St. from Allston to Longwood (the proposal to also wire Longwood Avenue itself was later rejected by the town).

Shortly after midnight, July 8, 1888, Sprague, after frantic last-minute preparations and anxious jury-rigged machinations, performed a now-famous, gutsy, do-or-die midnight demonstration for Whitney. The power limitations of these new-fangled systems were a big concern to investors so Sprague queued up twenty-two of his new electric streetcars, a huge number, at the base of one of Richmond's steep inclines. It worked. Whitney had a game-changing

alternative to the currently available systems and Sprague had the major client he needed.

**Threading the Needle**

The town meanwhile, had been proceeding. It was decided at the town meeting of December 20, 1886 to petition the state legislature to pass an official measure authorizing the town to widen Beacon Street and to take whatever ancillary measures would be necessary. The proposed act was drawn up by Brookline's representative in the state legislature, Moses Williams, and it became law in February 1887. The selectmen had Henry Whitney's proposal in hand and a lot of community support for the widening. The next step was assigning remuneration to those property owners along Beacon who would be losing property. The town constables—there were two—served legal notice to all the affected landowners of a hearing on March 11, 1887 to hear remarks and iron out, as best as possible, objections.

Little is known about how the Olmsted firm determined exactly where to excise the additional land for the widening. It had first been proposed to widen Beacon Street, then 50 feet in width, to 200 feet. This was reduced to 160 feet and the task became how to carve out an additional 110 feet. It can be surmised that they attempted to find the path with the smallest effect on existing

homes while creating the fewest possible deviations in the physical path of the roadway itself. While the ultimate changes to properties on the north side numbered roughly the same as those on the south side of Beacon, it was the south side of the area then called "Coolidge's Corner", that was the location of the most dramatic alterations. It was in the stretch between St. Paul Street and Marion Street that several houses would have to be moved or razed and where others which remained would lose much of their frontage.

A special town meeting was scheduled for March 29, 1887. On the docket for approval were the proposition to widen Beacon Street, Whitney's specific implementation of the project, the authorization to seize land, and the appropriation of funds. The crowd at the meeting was huge, estimated at six to seven hundred. Approval was overwhelming, with only 27 citizens objecting.

Numerous specifications for the physical layout were detailed and it was codified that the first \$150,000 of expenses were to be paid by Whitney himself. Olmsted originally specified English elms to be planted but there were a number of objections to these. Local tree experts were brought in and a compromise was reached: American elms would be *(continued next page)*



Workers removing the fence and trees of the Charles Cotting house, still standing on Hawes Street. (Digital Commonwealth [CC BY-NC-ND]. Brookline Photograph Collection published by the Public Library of Brookline)