



BROOKLINE HISTORICAL SOCIETY BROOKLINE, MASSACHUSETTS

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Boundaries Set in Stone by Ken Liss

Cast your eyes downward while walking the streets of Brookline – or any other city or town – and you’ll see countless reminders, embedded in the sidewalk, of the infrastructure that lies beneath the ground.

There are metal markers in the pavement, round or rectangular, from a few inches to a few feet across. Most have words on them

indicating what they’re for: the type of service (e.g. “Gas” or “Water” or “Sewer”) or the name or initials of the municipal agency, utility company, or commercial business that put them in (e.g. “Brookline Lighting”, “EEL [Edison Electric Illuminating] Co.”, “RCN”).

The designs may be simple or intricate, but they are

certainly varied. But equally ubiquitous, at least in Brookline, are some more mysterious markers whose origin and purpose are not so clearly discerned.

These markers are made of stone (usually granite), not metal. They are consistent in size, about eight inches square (though some have partially eroded). Each has a small hole in the center. Most

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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.

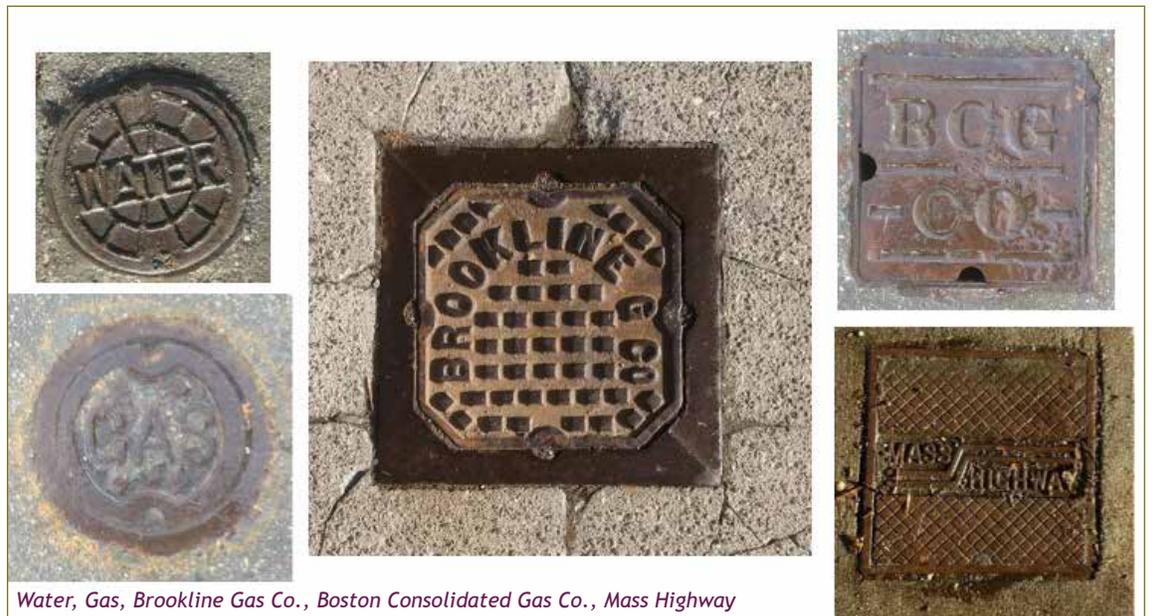
The Society also maintains the circa 1780 Widow Harris House as well as the Putterham School located in Larz Anderson Park.

The Society’s extensive collection of historic information, photographs, postcards, and atlases can be viewed on our website BrooklineHistoricalSociety.org

Our membership program is active and volunteers are always welcome.



Brookline Lighting, Edison Electric Illuminating Co., RCN



Water, Gas, Brookline Gas Co., Boston Consolidated Gas Co., Mass Highway



Stones with holes in the center embedded in sidewalks. Left to right: Station Street, around the corner from the Post Office; Northeast corner of Harvard and Beacon Streets, Coolidge Corner; Southwest corner of Essex and Dummer Streets, looking toward Commonwealth Avenue and the BU Bridge.

are flush with the pavement, though some stick out above it. They have no intricate designs; in fact, with a few exceptions, they have no markings on them at all.

Once you've been made aware of them, you can't help noticing them all over town. But what are they?

Borders, Boundaries, and Corners

The stones, unlike their metallic cousins, are not connected to anything underground. They don't indicate the location of a utility system like a gas, water, sewer, or electric line. Their location itself is what they are there to mark.

A small number of these mark Brookline's border with Boston or Newton. These may have letters and lines marking which city or town is on which side.

But most of the Brookline stones are *within* the borders of the town and have



The stone on the left, sticking a few inches above the pavement at the southeast corner of Beacon Street and St. Mary's Street, is marked with the letters BR (facing west) and BO (facing east) to mark the border between Brookline and Boston. The BR and BO markings are also on the stone on the right marking the Brookline-Boston border on Englewood Avenue a little bit north of Beacon Street.

(continued next page)



More stones embedded in the sidewalk. Left to right: southeast corner of Harvard Street and Naples Road; Washington Street near the entrance to the Library driveway; southwest corner of Winthrop Square (St. Paul Street and Still Street).

no markings (other than the hole in the center.)

When and why were these stones set in place? Why are there holes in the middle? How and why do they remain long after the sidewalks around them have been redone?

An Accurate Topographical Survey

In December 1853 a committee was appointed by Town Meeting to look into “a plan and the probable expense of an accurate topographical survey of the town by a skillful engineer.” Among the aims of such a survey and plan was to show “where and at what grades streets and sidewalks can most advantageously be made and public squares or parks reserved.”

The committee’s report, presented to Town Meeting on March 20, 1854, laid out more specific reasons for marking these internal boundaries: “The increased demand for land for building-lots and improvements in the estates in the town, occasion the removal of the old walls and fences which have for many years formed the boundary line between the roads and the lands of private owners. In this manner the highway is liable to be encroached upon when new walls and fences are erected,

and without a correct plan of the streets showing the actual present side lines, it is always difficult and in many instances will soon be impossible to determine what were the original limits of the ways.”

A proper plan, the report went on to say “might check the disposition, if any such exists, or remove the temptation to eke out one’s scanty acres by protruding fences and walls into the highways.”

The committee, which had already commissioned some sample surveys around town, estimated that it would cost from \$2,000 to \$2,500 “to have all the streets, public and private, surveyed, and plans and profiles made.” That sum, they thought, “will cover the *expense also of placing stone monuments in the angles in the roads* and of striking off five hundred copies of the corrected map of the town.” Their proposal was

(continued next page)



*A modern ranging rod (left) and a late 19th century version being held by a surveyor in the same Englewood Avenue stone shown above that marks the border between Brookline and Boston. This image is from the 1896 publication *Book of Maps and Photographs Showing Position of Boundary Marks Between the City of Boston and Adjoining Cities and Towns* (Courtesy of Boston City Archives)*

approved by Town Meeting in April, and a total of \$1,700 was allocated for its completion over the next two years.

This, then, would appear to be the origin of the ubiquitous survey stones making some of them 165 years old (although others were undoubtedly added later.)

Survey Stones in Use, Then and Now

Surveyors working on the new town map would place the pointed ends of long poles known as ranging rods into the holes in the survey stones. These rods, two to three meters in length with bands in alternating colors, could then be sighted using surveying equipment (and a knowledge of geometry) to plot points and create the map.

Not all of the original survey stones are still in place, but the survival of so many of them is likely due to the sturdy material of which they are made and the fact that they actually extend three to four feet under the ground.



The stone shown above, inside the fence near the southeast end of Cypress Field, is more exposed than most, giving a better sense of the depth of the survey stones. The stone once marked the intersection of Tappan and Cypress Street before that end of Tappan was straightened to make a more perpendicular intersection.

The stone also bears pink paint and numerical markings. These are recent additions, most likely from measurements taken during the current construction of the Brookline High School addition being built just across the train tracks on Brington Road

Indeed, the survival of many of these long-standing markers means they are not just connections to the past, but useful touchstones for surveyors today many decades after they were first put in the ground.

For a map showing a selection of Brookline survey stones, with photos, see <https://bit.ly/brooklinesurveystones>. And see how many more you can spot on your own.

Mystery Photos



We cannot identify these locations. Can you?

These photos are all labeled as locations in Brookline, part of a small collection associated with a woman named Dorothy Elizabeth Wadman (standing on the right in the park photo).

We know that she was born August 8, 1896 in Boston; that she was once a bookkeeper in a bank; and that the 1920 census lists her in Allston living with a sister. She died in Wakefield on February 4, 1927, before she reached the age of 30.

The timeline of these photos appears to be circa 1920. Zoomable versions can be viewed on the Photos section of our web site under “Unidentified Photos”. Send your guesses—educated or otherwise—to brooklinehistory@gmail.com

Curating Brookline Images and Publications From Other Sources by Larry Barbaras

In recent years, a number of online digital photo archives have cropped up which include historical images of Brookline. These range from but a few images to the very large selection on The Digital Commonwealth. These images generally have titles but remain for the most part undated, undescribed, and unorganized. The Brookline Historical Society (BHS) is working to curate all significant online images of Brookline into a single unified “one-stop shopping” resource.



Brookline Village, Washington St. Looking West toward Link With Boylston St. Lantern Slide Collection #62

How We Curate

In this modern-day era of digital imaging, with ordinary home computers and even phones that have impressive display powers, the technology of the Web allows us to organize and host the images from multiple online sources into a single virtual collection. This sharing and hosting the images of others is run under the auspices of the Creative Commons system. This allows copyright holders to define the restrictions and level of use of their images by others, thus obviating any legal consequences for those who do not hold the copyright.

What We Curate

When BHS began, in 2006, digitizing its own collection of historical Brookline photos and hosting them online, we were trailblazers. In recent years, the Digital Commonwealth project has been digitizing and posting thousands of images from collections throughout Massa-

chusetts, including the large collection held by the Brookline Public Library. Much smaller in scale, are the Brookline collections of Historic New England and the National Park Service: Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site. We have also discovered small groups of Brookline photos nestled among the collections of the Smithsonian’s Horace McFarland Collection, Archives of American Gardens, and the Iowa State University Library Special Collections.



*Washington St., North Side, December 23, 1915
Courtesy of the National Park Service, Frederick Law Olmsted National Historic Site*

How We Curate, a Deeper Dive

The BHS site has organized photos into groups most likely to be helpful to researchers, historians, genealogists, or just everyday explorers. The groups appear as single ordered lists and you may not immediately realize that they have been populated from multiple independent sources. BHS researches individual photos, adds descriptive data (i.e. metadata), assigns them to their respective groups in sorted order, and then links to the original online photo for visual display.



Hose #1 House, Lower Washington St., Brookline Village, circa 1905

There are four primary sorted groups: Streets, Area, People, and Subject. Start at the Boston border, go back in time 120 years, and take a virtual walk along Washington Street and explore the shops of the Village in our “Streets” group. In our “People” group, follow the young adults of early 1880s Brookline, and their often still-standing houses, with the tintype photos they shared with each other. Research the history of schools in Brookline in our “Subject” group. Visualize the rapid progression from a single store and watering trough to a bustling Coolidge Corner in our “Area” group.



Good Intent Hose Company, Lower Washington St., Brookline Village. Gift of Natick Historical Society.

Last But Not Least

We continue to expand this photo archive by searching other sites, adding to our own collection, and digitizing photos held by individuals. Do you have old photos – especially locations and slice-of-life scenes from before 1950 – that you would like to donate to the Historical Society and/or have digitized? Let us know at brooklinehistory@gmail.com.

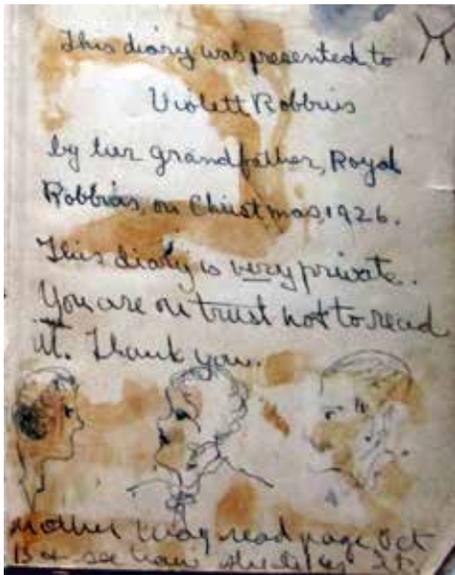


Good Intent Hose Company, Lower Washington St., Brookline Village. Gift of Natick Historical Society.

“A Recent Acquisition” by Camille Arbogast and Jesus MacLean

So began an email sent to the Brookline Historical Society from an unlikely location: Boulder, Colorado. Inside the cover of the diary, said the correspondent, was written:

This diary was presented to Violet Robbins by her grandfather, Royal Robbins, on Christmas, 1926. This diary is very private. You are on trust not to read it. Thank you



“Further reading (I know, I shouldn’t have),” continued the email, “reveals that Ms. Robbins was born January 27, 1914, she lived at 104 Pleasant Street in Brookline, she attended Miss Lee’s school at 107 Marlborough Street in Boston, she had one brother, Royal E.”

The email was followed by a package containing the diary. A short time later a second package arrived. Inside we found Violett’s 1928 and 1930 diaries, as well as a poetry scrapbook, and two handwritten collections of stories written by Violett’s younger brother Royal, found when the donor returned to the Boulder book recycling bin where he made his initial discovery.

Violett’s diaries and Royal’s fiction offer a glimpse into the lives of well-to-do

North Brookline teenagers in the early 20th century.

Violett Robbins was born at 61 Monmouth Street, the daughter of Eugenia (Greenough) and Royal Elisha Robbins. Her father appears to have been in poor health and he died of pneumonia in Brookline at age 29 in 1920. Violett and Royal’s paternal grandfather, a chief stockholder in the Waltham Watch Company, also lived in Brookline at 22 Carlton Street. At the time of the diaries, Violett, Royal, and their mother lived at 104 Pleasant Street.



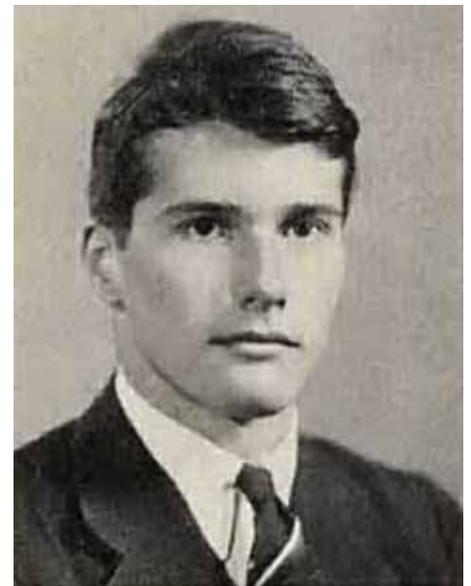
Miss Violett Robbins

Violett appears to have been an enthusiastic young woman, interested in literature and drama. In 1926 she wrote to a children’s magazine, Saint Nicholas, signing herself a “devoted reader.” Her poetry scrapbook is comprised of favorite poems, illustrated with images cut from magazines, along with a few she drew and painted herself. While a student at Miss Lee’s school, Violett per-

formed in a production staged to raise money for French orphans.

After attending Smith College, in 1934 she married Robert Lincoln C. Rein’l, a Harvard student and later a philosophy professor. They divorced and in 1941 Violett married John M. Sawhill, a salesman. She had three children over her two marriages. By 1949 Violett and John resided in Boulder, Colorado, where she died in 1982, perhaps explaining how her diaries ended up there.

Royal, the short story writer, was born in 1917 and attended Milton Academy. One collection of stories written in 1927 features the character Harold Akroyd of Medicine Hat, Quebec, who survives all kinds of dangers-- submarine torpedo attack, a train accident, and ghostly hauntings among them-- before meeting his end in a house fire; Royal, perhaps, was ready to be rid of his defining creation, like fellow mystery writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle with Sherlock Holmes. Royal later attended Harvard College and Harvard Law School. He died in 1942.



Royal E. Robbins Jr.

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 Ferris Hall's October talk on the history of Cottage Farm in an historic Amory Street home).

Thank you for your continuing support.

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