

## **Six Forest Avenue, Salem**

**According to available evidence, this house was built for Martha O. Howes, secretary, and Martha L. Roberts, lawyer, in 1905.**

On 7 July 1900 the executors and trustees of the will of James F. Almy sold some of the Almy property, on Forest Avenue, at public auction for \$902.85 to Martha L. Roberts and Martha O. Howes of Salem (ED 1617:260, copy attached). The lot then sold was bounded southerly 58.1' on Forest Avenue, easterly 80' on Wisteria Street, northerly 57.7' by Lot 15, and westerly 80' by Lot 17. The lot was shown as Lot 16 on a Plan of Lots made by Charles A. Putnam, C.E., in May, 1896, to illustrate a large subdivision of former farmland. The lot was conveyed subject to various restrictions, including no liability to the grantors for the cost of fences, and no structure to be built within 10' of Wisteria Street.

Miss Roberts and Miss Howes did not build on the lot right away. They resided in 1900 at then-253 Bridge Street, along with Miss Howes' father, Capt. William Howes, a retired shipmaster. The Bridge Street house belonged to Miss Roberts, whose father, Jacob K. Roberts, a bookkeeper originally from Essex, had bought it in 1866 (ED 708:282). The house, no longer extant, stood near North Street; it was removed when the grounds of the Essex South Registry of Deeds (Federal Street) were expanded. Captain Howes and his daughter Martha and Martha Roberts lived together on Bridge Street until 1904, when the Misses Roberts and Howes had the house at 6 Forest Avenue built as their residence in 1905 (per Salem Naumkeag Directories, 1904 and 1905 and 1905 Salem valuation). At that time, Capt. William Howes took an apartment at 6 Cedar Street evidently; and by 1907 he was residing at the Bertram Home for Aged Men, next to the Custom House on Derby Street.

The new house of the Misses Roberts and Howes was evidently the first one built on Forest Avenue, which had been laid out in 1896 when the surrounding tract of land was first subdivided. The Naumkeag Directory for 1905 (based mainly on data from 1904) lists no other houses on Forest Avenue.

The owners, Martha Roberts and Martha Howes, were notable citizens of Salem, and no doubt somewhat controversial. Miss Howes, 37 in 1905, was a clerk in the office of the City Clerk. Her co-owner, Miss Roberts, forty, was a lawyer, the first woman ever admitted to the Essex Bar (1897). Both women had no siblings, and both never married. Both grew up in Salem in the late 1860s and the 1870s, a period during which Salem prospered as a manufacturing center.

Martha Howes evidently spent her girlhood as a resident of 6 Upham Street in North Salem, which was the home of her parents, Capt. William Howes and

Martha (Butman) Howes. Her mother was a native of Salem, and her father was a well-known Salem shipmaster born and raised in Chatham on Cape Cod (information about him comes largely from his obituary in *Salem Evening News*, 21 July 1913). He began his career at sea at the age of twelve, as a cabin boy with his shipmaster father, who commanded a packet between Boston and New York City. He made many voyages and had many adventures a deckhand and a mate on ships sailing to every ocean of the world. In 1860, aged thirty, he settled in Salem and married Martha Butman. He was, at that time, a steamship captain for the South American Steamship Company (of Chile) in the Pacific. During his seafaring life he commanded several sailing ships (*Hesper*, *Inez*, *Confidence*, *Nerfed*, and *Xulia*) sailing from Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City to overseas ports. In all, he made seven voyages around the Cape of Good Hope (South America), ten voyages around Cape Horn (Africa), two voyages from California to Asia across the Pacific, and 72 voyages across the Atlantic to Europe and back. When he finally retired from the sea, he doubtless had many interesting tales to tell his only child, Martha. He survived his wife, Martha; and father and daughter resided at 6 Buffum Street throughout the 1800s and into the first years of the new century. Martha O. Howes was employed as a clerk by 1889 (per directory), perhaps in the City Clerk's office at the outset, and certainly there by 1896 (per Directory).

Salem's industrial ascendancy had begun in the late 1840s; and into the 1850s, as business and industries expanded, the population swelled, new churches (e.g. Immaculate Conception, 1857) were started, new working-class neighborhoods were developed (especially in North Salem and South Salem, off Boston Street, and along the Mill Pond behind the Broad Street graveyard), and new schools, factories, and stores were built. The Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company, the largest such factory in the U.S., began in 1846-7, and a second factory building was added in 1859, down at Stage Point, where a new Methodist Church went up, and many neat homes, boarding-houses, and stores were erected along the streets between Lafayette and Congress.

The leather-tanning business boomed, as better and larger tanneries were built along Boston Street and Mason Street; and subsidiary industries sprang up as well, most notably the J.M. Anderson glue-works on the Turnpike (Highland Avenue). Through the 1860s, Salem pursued manufacturing of leather and shoes and textiles. The managers and capitalists tended to build their new, grand houses along Lafayette Street (these houses may still be seen, south of Roslyn Street; many are in the French Second Empire style, with mansard roofs). A third factory building for the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company went up in 1865.

It was at this time that Jacob Roberts, his wife, Ann (Porter) Roberts, and their little daughter, Martha, moved from Essex to Salem. Mr. Roberts worked as a bookkeeper, and saw the last of Salem's much-faded overseas commerce. In

1870 Salem received its last cargo from Zanzibar, thus ending a once-important trade. By then, a new Salem & New York freight steamboat line was in operation. Seven years later, with the arrival of a vessel from Cayenne, Salem's foreign trade came to an end. After that, "the merchandise warehouses on the wharves no longer contained silks from India, tea from China, pepper from Sumatra, coffee from Arabia, spices from Batavia, gum-copal from Zanzibar, hides from Africa, and the various other products of far-away countries. The boys have ceased to watch on the Neck for the incoming vessels, hoping to earn a reward by being the first to announce to the expectant merchant the safe return of his looked-for vessel. The foreign commerce of Salem, once her pride and glory, has spread its white wings and sailed away forever" (per Rev. George Bachelder in *History of Essex County*, II: 65).

Salem was so densely built-up that a general conflagration was always a possibility, as in Boston, when, on Nov. 9, 1872, the financial and manufacturing district burned up. Salem continued to prosper in the 1870s, carried forward by the leather-making business. In 1874 the city was visited by a tornado and shaken by a minor earthquake. In the following year, the large Pennsylvania Pier (site of the present coal-fired harborside electrical generating plant) was completed to begin receiving large shipments of coal. Beyond it, at Juniper Point, a new owner began subdividing the old Allen farmlands into a development called Salem Willows and Juniper Point. In the U.S. centennial year, 1876, A.G. Bell of Salem announced that he had discovered a way to transmit voices over telegraph wires.

In this decade, French-Canadian families began coming to work in Salem's mills and factories, and more houses and tenements were built. The better-off workers bought portions of older houses or built small homes for their families in the outlying sections of the city; and by 1879 the Naumkeag Steam Cotton mills would employ 1200 people and produce annually nearly 15 million yards of cloth. Shoe-manufacturing businesses expanded in the 1870s, and 40 shoe factories were employing 600-plus operatives. Tanning, in both Salem and Peabody, remained a very important industry, and employed hundreds of breadwinners. On Boston Street in 1879, the Arnold tannery caught fire and burned down.

From her home on Bridge Street, Martha Roberts attended local schools and developed a love of learning and an ambition to make her mark on the world. In the 1870s, as a young girl, she attended the private school of Miss Foye, and then the Bowditch School, and Salem High School, where she was graduated in 1881 with highest honors. She was accepted at Boston University, and received her A.B. in 1886, whereupon she began teaching at Salem High School, where she was responsible for the college preparatory program and served as principal of the Broad Street Annex.

In the 1880s and 1890s, Salem kept building infrastructure; and new businesses arose, and established businesses expanded. Retail stores prospered; horse-drawn trolleys ran every which-way; and machinists, carpenters, millwrights, and other specialists all thrived. In 1880, Salem's manufactured goods were valued at about \$8.4 million, of which leather accounted for nearly half. In the summer of 1886, the Knights of Labor brought a strike against the manufacturers for a ten-hour day and other concessions; but the manufacturers imported labor from Maine and Canada, and kept going. The strikers held out, and there was violence in the streets, and even rioting; but the owners prevailed, and many of the defeated workers lost their jobs and suffered, with their families, through a bitter winter.

By the mid-1880s, Salem's cotton-cloth mills at the Point employed 1400 people who produced about 19 million yards annually, worth about \$1.5 million. The city's large shoe factories stood downtown behind the stone depot and on Dodge and Lafayette Streets. A jute bagging company prospered with plants on Skerry Street and English Street; its products were sent south to be used in cotton-baling. Salem factories also produced lead, paint, and oil. At the Eastern Railroad yard on Bridge Street, cars were repaired and even built new. In 1887 the streets were first lit with electricity, replacing gas-light.

Martha L. Roberts, high school teacher and administrator, continued to study specialized education topics; and from Boston University she received her A.M. degree in 1893 and her Ph.D. degree in 1896. Evidently she was the only woman to hold a Doctor of Philosophy in all of New England. She wished to become a lawyer. After a short period studying the law, she was admitted as the first woman member of the Essex Bar in May, 1897. In 1898 she resigned as a high school teacher, but remained an evening school instructor for a while as she began her practice as a counselor at law, with an office at 35 Church Street. She was a success as a lawyer. By 1902 she had inherited the family residence on Bridge Street; and she invited her friend Martha O. Howes (and her widowed father Captain Howes) to come live with her. As has been mentioned, the two Marthas had Six Forest Avenue built as their residence in 1905. The 1905 Salem real estate valuation (taken before the house was built) credited Martha L. Roberts et al with Forest Avenue Lot 16, land containing 4,640 square feet worth \$500.

The subdivision of the land around Forest Avenue was an example of Salem's continued prosperity and expansion. More factories and more people required more space for buildings, more roads, and more storage areas. This space was created by filling in rivers, harbors, and ponds. The once-broad North River was filled from both shores, and became a canal along Bridge Street above the North Bridge. The large and beautiful Mill Pond, whose waters were not far from Forest Avenue, occupied the whole area between the present Jefferson Avenue, Canal Street, and Loring Avenue. It finally vanished beneath streets,

storage areas, junk-yards, rail-yards, and parking lots. The South River, too, with its epicenter at Central Street (that's why there was a Custom House built there in 1805) disappeared under the pavement of Riley Plaza and New Derby Street, and some of its old wharves were joined together with much in-fill and turned into coal-yards and lumber-yards. Only a canal was left, running in from Derby and Central Wharves to Lafayette Street.

Martha O. Howes became the Secretary of the School Committee by 1907, and continued to work at City Hall. Martha L. Roberts had a successful law practice in the Federal Street courts, and also was active in the movement from women's suffrage and other politics of the day. In 1914 she would be elected the first woman member of the Salem School Committee, as a write-in candidate. In 1910, the census-taker noted that Six Forest Avenue was the residence of Martha L. Roberts, 45, general practice lawyer, and of Martha O. Howe, 40 "companion" and Secretary of the School Board. They shared the house with a widow, Mrs. May B. Tracy, 51, born in Wales, who worked as their house keeper (see 1910 census, ward 5, precinct 10). Martha Howes' aged father, Capt. William Howes, who had resided at the Bertram Home on Derby Street, died in July, 1913, leaving his daughter as his sole heir.

Salem kept growing. The Canadians were followed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by large numbers of Polish and Ukrainian families, who settled primarily in the Derby Street neighborhood. By the eve of World War One, Salem was a bustling, polyglot city that supported large department stores and large factories of every description. People from the surrounding towns, and Marblehead in particular, came to Salem to do their shopping; and its handsome government buildings, as befit the county seat, were busy with conveyances of land, lawsuits, and probate proceedings. The city's politics were lively, and its economy was strong.

Martha Roberts and Martha Howes were probably at work on the breezy morning of June 25, 1914, but Mrs. Tracy may have been at Six Forest Avenue. No doubt the two Marthas heard the alarms sounding, and the fire engines rushing off toward Blubber Hollow (Boston Street opposite Federal), where a fire had started in one of Salem's wooden tanneries. This fire soon raced out of control, for the west wind was high and the season had been dry. The next building caught fire, and the next, and out of Blubber Hollow the fire roared easterly, a monstrous front of flame and smoke, wiping out the houses of Boston Street, Essex Street, and upper Broad Street, and then sweeping through Hathorne, Winthrop, Endicott, and the other residential streets of the "Broadfield" neighborhood.

By this time, Miss Roberts and Miss Howes had no doubt made their way home to assess his situation. It was not good, for the fire was growing across a wide front, and was coming their way. Men and machines could not stop it: the enormous fire spread into South Salem and destroyed the neighborhoods

west of Lafayette Street—but a shifting wind began to drive the fire northwardly, away from Forest Avenue. Perhaps the women had removed their most valuable possessions from the house. With the wind-shift, their home was spared. From Roslyn Street to New Derby Street, the mansions of Lafayette Street were consumed, and the Fire raged onward into the tenement district. Despite the combined efforts of heroic crews from many towns and cities, the Fire overwhelmed everything in its path: it smashed into the large factory buildings of the Naumkeag Steam Cotton Company (Congress Street), which exploded in an inferno; and it rolled down Lafayette Street and across the water to Derby Street. There, just beyond Union Street, on the doorstep of the old Richard Derby house, after a 13-hour rampage, the monster died, having consumed 250 acres, 1600 houses, and 41 factories. Three people had died, and thousands were left homeless. Some had insurance, some did not; all received much support and generous donations from all over the country and the world. It was one of the greatest urban disasters in the history of the United States, and the people of Salem would take years to recover from it.

In 1919, the U.S. Constitution was amended to give women the vote—a measure that was no doubt celebrated by the Misses Howes and Roberts, who had worked hard for women's suffrage for years. They would continue to reside here at Six Forest Avenue for the rest of their very long lives, right into the 1950s.

By the 1920s, Salem was once again a thriving city; and its tercentenary in 1926 was a time of great celebration. The Depression hit in 1929, and continued through the 1930s. Salem, the county seat and regional retail center, gradually rebounded. In December, 1931, the two Marthas changed the form of ownership of their homestead, and became joint tenants, with the survivor to inherit (ED 2907:561).

Salem prospered after World War II and into the 1950s. General Electric, Sylvania, Parker Brothers, Pequot Mills (formerly Naumkeag Steam Cotton Co.), Almy's department store, various other large-scale retailers, and Beverly's United Shoe Machinery Company were all major local employers. Martha O. Howes, who suffered from a heart condition, died on Jan. 23, 1951, in her 84<sup>th</sup> year. She devised all of her property to her friend Martha L. Roberts (#236219). Miss Roberts survived her by two years, and died on Jan. 15, 1953, in her 89<sup>th</sup> year. By her will, her second cousin, Madeleine H. Porter, of 55 Dearborn Street, Salem, was her principle heir. Miss Roberts was widely recognized for her extraordinary attainments, and the Salem *Evening News* ran a prominent and interesting obituary (appended). Her homestead was valued at \$13,500 and her personal estate came to another \$5,467 (#240015).

In the 1960s, with the arrival of suburban shopping malls and the relocation of manufacturing businesses, Salem lost its importance as a retailer and

manufacturer. However, Salem has navigated its way forward into the present with success, trading on its share of notoriety arising from the witch trials, but also from its history as a great seaport and as the home of Bowditch, McIntire, Bentley, Story, and Hawthorne. It remains a city where the old homes and neighborhoods are honored as a large part of what makes Salem different from any other place.

--Robert Booth for Historic Salem, Inc., 30 Oct. 2004