

The Great Horticulturalists of the Oak Square Neighborhood

By William P. Marchione

**A slide/ lecture and Walking Tour given at the Faneuil
Branch Library on Saturday, October 21, 2000**

Massachusetts Horticultural Society The Executive Director of the Massachusetts Horticultural spoke before the Brighton-Allston Historical Society---and surprised us by declaring that 19th century Brighton was one of the two most important horticultural centers in the Boston area (the other being Roxbury). I knew that horticulture had played an important part in the town's history, I just hadn't realized until that moment how important a role it had played.

Looking at Brighton today, a town that is starved for open space, it's hard to visualize a day when hundreds of acres of the community was devoted to the raising of flowers, plants, and trees. That Brightonians of the 19th century understood the importance of the industry to their town is shown, however, by the choice of a greenhouse as the central motif of the town seal.

The local horticultural industry was centered here in the western part of the Brighton. Four of the five chief horticulturalists of Brighton owned and operated nurseries on Nonantum Hill on the south side of Oak Square. The exception, Captain Jonathan Winship, who was also the

pioneer Brighton horticulturalist, owned a nursery located in North Brighton, on a 40-acre parcel of land overlooking the Charles River. We should first of all ask, why were so many nurseries concentrated here? I'm not sure I can answer that question. It may have had something to do with the prior existence on the Newton end of Nonantum Hill of the oldest commercial nursery in New England---the Kenrick Nursery, which was founded back in 1790. Or it may have been a function of the quality of the soil or other climatic conditions on the hill.

J.L.L.F. Warren (1805-96), Father of California

Agriculture The first nursery to be established in this vicinity was founded in 1829 by James Lloyd LaFayette Warren---this being the second oldest Brighton horticultural business, after Winship's. So we begin with J.L.L. F. Warren, who like Captain Winship was born here in Brighton.

James Warren was born on August 12, 1805, the son of Captain Joseph Warren, carpenter, farmer, and a long-time Brighton Town Clerk. When James was born, Brighton was still called Little Cambridge---and was a part of Cambridge. But when he was two years old it became its own town under the name, Brighton. James was the youngest son in a family of eight children and his childhood residence stood atop the eastern slope of Nonantum Hill, on the site of the present EF Language Institute at 200 Lake Street. Members of the Warren family, originally from Waltham, had settled in Brighton early in the 1700s, and were very active in the community.

Later James Warren resided in a house that is still standing at 222 Lake Street, that stood just to the north of his birthplace and that still stands. This is the home of community activist Toni Rossi, who some of you may know, and it's a building on which the Historical Society plans to put a historical marker at some point. There is nothing in the historical record with respect to the education of James Warren. It is perhaps safe to assume that he attended one of the local district schools - probably the one that stood next to the First Church in Brighton Center---and possibly one of the excellent private schools that then existed in the town. Warren was a man of some culture. But there is no evidence that he attended college.

The historical record tells us that Warren apprenticed as a clerk in a Boston dry goods establishment from 1818 or 1819 to about 1824 or 1825.

We also know that in 1826 he established his own dry goods business in the downtown, and that he continued to operate that business for the next twenty years; he later established a second retail outlet in the downtown which specialized in silk cloth; thus, throughout the period in which he operated his nursery in Brighton, he was also the proprietor of two businesses not related to horticulture in the downtown. His dry goods emporium was located in the Joy Building which stood in the alleyway (then part of Cornhill) that now connects State Street with City Hall Plaza. Here we see an 1830 engraving of the Joy Building showing several dry goods establishments as then

occupying the building. While none of the signs contains the name Warren---there is a dry goods establishment called the American Goods Commission Store, which was situated on the second story at the extreme right-hand side of the building.

Warren also had a great interest in history--especially that of the Revolutionary Period. Several Warrens had fought at Bunker Hill. Brighton's 19th century historian J. P. C. Winship tells us that in 1823, he dug a cannon ball out of the ground at Bunker Hill- -something that the National Park Service would never allow today---and in 1825, when the Marquis de Lafayette visited Boston to lay the cornerstone of the Bunker Hill Monument, James Warren was a member of Lafayette's Guard of Honor. Warren had developed an interest and a high degree of skill in horticulture at a very young age---Winship telling us that he won a number of medals of honor and certificates from the Massachusetts State Board of Agriculture while still a boy.

His success as a dry goods merchant gave him the financial wherewithal to acquire the house at 222 Lake Street and to begin surrounding it with extensive nurseries and gardens. This establishment bore the name Nonantum Vale Nursery and occupied---as nearly as we can judge---the land that extended from his residence to the corner of Lake and Washington Streets. It may also have included land on the opposite side of Lake Street (in what is now Roger's Park). A spring, the Dana Brook, ran through this property, which provided an all important

source of water for his various plantings. Unfortunately, no map exists showing the extent or the features of the Nonantum Vale Nursery. Warren was 24 years of age at the time of its founding and had been in business as a dry goods merchant for three years at that point, so I think it safe to assume that he did very well in the dry goods trade.

Lake Street, incidentally, would have been a minor lane back then- there being as yet no pond in the neighborhood (Chandler's Pond, a man-made body of water, was not excavated until 1855). The roadway was then called simply "The Road to the Poor House"- since the local almshouse stood at its upper end, on what is now Undine Road.

You may wonder why a Boston businessman would establish a second enterprise at such a great distance from the first (public transportation being virtually non-existent back then). Warren was certainly one of Brighton's earliest Boston commuters. In 1826, Warren would likely have reached the downtown by means of a private horse-drawn carriage via Mill Dam which had been opened in 1821- along the top of which ran Beacon Street. The Back Bay otherwise still under water. The railroad did not come to Brighton until 1834.

What kinds of plants, trees, and flowers were raised at the Nonantum Vale Nursery? The Brighton Allston Historical Society owns a copy of an 1844 catalog of the catalog of Warren's Brighton establishment. The title page of that

catalog provides a fairly complete answer: It reads "Annual Descriptive Catalog of Fruit and Ornamental Trees, Grape Vines, Shrubs, and Herbaceous Plants, Roses, Dalias, Green House Plants, etc., etc. Cultivated at Warren's Gardens and Nurseries, Nonantum Vale, Brighton" It then goes on to add: "Also Catalogue of Flowers, Fruit Trees, Vegetables and Field Seeds, with Brief Directions for Cultivating Most of the Sorts Named."

The catalog also tells us that Warren sold botanical and horticultural books at his Brighton establishment. One category of fruit that Warren took particular pride in were his strawberries. In the introduction to his catalog, he notes proudly: "It is needless to call particular attention to the collection of Strawberries offered, as, from the long experience of the public, it is almost universally conceded, that the plants furnished from this establishment are unrivaled, both for their quality, healthfulness and variety." Other varieties of fruits available at the Nonantum Vale establishment included apples, peaches, plums, nectarines, grapes, quinces, raspberries, and gooseberries.

Tomatoes, which the 1844 catalog does not list, were apparently another feature, for Winship tells us that in 1838 Warren won an award from the Boston Horticultural Society for raising the first tomatoes ever grown commercially in Massachusetts.

As to his floral output, he is also credited with having propagated several new varieties of the camellia, which he

later introduced into Britain and California.

The 1844 catalog also tells us that he sold bouquets of cut flowers at his Brighton nursery. On May Day of every year Bostonians were in the habit of driving out to Brighton in their horse-drawn conveyances to buy bouquets of flowers at the local nurseries.

Warren's business activities continued to be focused on the downtown even after the establishment of his Brighton nursery. The owners of the nurseries needed commercial outlets for what they produced--so in the early 19th century having marketing outlets in Boston was often essential to their survival. Warren eventually opened up Warren's Floral Saloon, an exhibition hall and sales room, in this building, the Tremont Temple building on Tremont Street opposite the Old Granary Burial Ground. He inaugurated this downtown outlet in 1844 with an exhibit of a bed of tulips (which were then still a rarity in the United States) that was 9 feet wide by 100 feet long---so we can add tulip to his output. Here he also sold a variety of gardening implements.

Warren's Brighton nursery and downtown "floral saloon" attracted many distinguished visitors over the years, including such political and literary luminaries as Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, Wendell Philips, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Nathaniel P. Willis, William Cullen Bryant, John Greenleaf Whittier, and (H. W. Longfellow] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, to name but a few. As I walk from my home on Kenrick Street to the bus stop at

the corner of Lake Street, I sometimes think of the great figures in American history, including the historic triumvirate---the three great U.S. Senators Clay, Calhoun and Webster, who debated and shaped the destiny federal union in the 1830 to 1850 period---as having trod the same roadway.

But in dealing with Warren life and career we have only scratched the surface in this brief account. The great horticulturalist's career also had its journalistic, educational, political, diplomatic, and philanthropic dimensions. The common denominator of virtually all his activities was human and societal improvement.

Warren's commitment to reform included a leadership role in the Massachusetts branch of the Liberty Party, a radical anti-slavery political movement that his close friend, the poet William Cullen Bryant, helped found in 1839.

In 1846 Warren, who was at the point of sailing for Europe, was enlisted by the State Department to carry dispatches to George Bancroft, then U. S. Minister to Great Britain (possibly relating to the Oregon dispute which was then troubling Anglo-American relations). He remained in Europe for two years, traveling extensively in the British Isles, France, and the Low Countries. He also toured Ireland, then in the grips of the devastating Potato Famine.

Upon his return to the United States, Warren, called attention to the "intense suffering [and] the absolute

starvation of thousands" in Ireland, joining others, including the great Irish temperance lecturer Father Theobald Mathew and the so-called "Learned Blacksmith"* Elihu Burritt, in proposing a plan for Irish famine relief. The U. S. government became interested in their proposal, and soon after supplied the U.S. frigate Jamestown to transport food to the famine victims.

U.S. acquisition of California in 1848 and the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in the same year led to large-scale migration of easterners, the so-called "Forty Niners," to the gold fields. One of these was Warren, who was destined to spend the second half of his life in the west. While most of the "Forty-Niners," were young, unmarried men, at the time of his migration Warren was a mature 44, a married man, and the father of several children.

Moreover, his decision to go west was a carefully thought out business decision. Warren had accepted an offer from a group of Boston and New York investors to act as business manager of the recently- organized Sweden Mining Company. In exchange for their passage to California, the participants agreed to work in the gold fields under company auspices for an established period of time.

Warren set out on March 2, 1849 for the western El Dorado, temporarily leaving his family behind in Boston. The members of the Sweden Mining Company were transported to the gold fields aboard a company-owned vessel, the Sweden, a 650 ton ship of recent construction which sailed by way of Cape Horn, a voyage that

consumed five months.

Warren had scant opportunity to demonstrate his skills as a mining company manager, however, for the employees of the Sweden Company quickly reneged on their agreements, scattering to the various gold fields on an individual basis.

Never easily discouraged, he saw other business opportunities in California and proceeded to take advantage of them. In November 1849, a mere three months after his arrival, founded a general provisioning firm, Warren & Company, in California's capital city of Sacramento.

The frequency of scurvy in the mining camps, and his own deep interest in horticulture, led Warren to orient his provisioning business toward the acquisition and sale of fruit trees, seeds, and agricultural implements. By 1852 Warren's store had become so important to the state's expanding agricultural economy, that it served as the site of the first California State Fair, the rooms above it being dubbed "Agricultural Hall."