



Boylston Philanthropist

Sarah Holland Lamson Stearns

by Patricia Kelleher Bartram

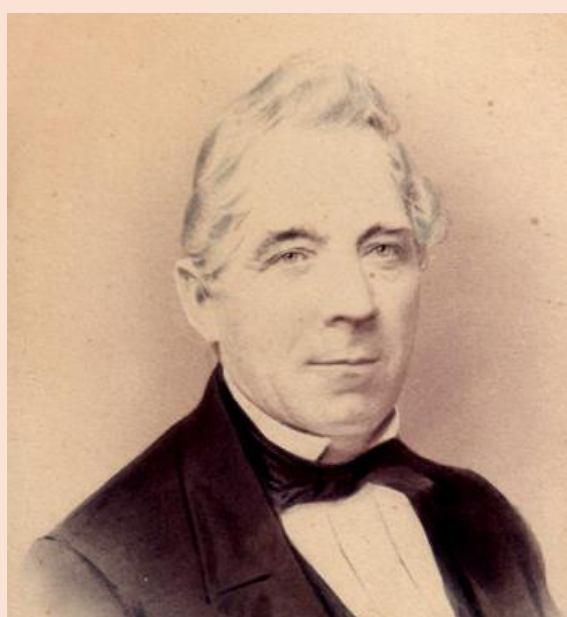
For a small town, Boylston has over time produced its share of philanthropists including today's George F. and Sybil H. Fuller Foundation and the individuals who have been so very generous to many Boylston organizations and programs – including the Boylston Historical Society and Museum, Inc. An earlier philanthropist who hailed from Boylston, is the subject of this article: Sarah Holland Lamson Stearns.

This article is part of a periodic series of “portraits” of some of Boylston’s early families and key figures.

Lamsons: Among Boylston’s Early Families

Sarah Lamson descended from one of the early settlers of Boylston, Nathaniel Lamson Jr. (1777-1817) and his wife, Tamar Howe (1779-1861), who were her paternal grandparents. They farmed on land that was then in Lancaster and later in Shrewsbury’s North Precinct (which became the Town of Boylston in 1786). The Lamson farm continued in the family until the turn of the 20th century, with the building of the Clinton Dam and the Wachusett Reservoir.

Sarah’s father, Eli Brigham Lamson (1802-1865), was the eldest of Nathaniel and Tamar’s children. He was born in Boylston on 3 February 1802. Eli was active in Boylston town affairs, including serving over time as Selectman, Justice of the Peace, Assessor, Town Treasurer and as an Overseer of the Poor. He was also appointed U.S. Postmaster on 2 May 1828 and he ran the store in Sawyer’s Mills from 1828-1832. Eli lost his first wife, Elizabeth Gibbs, in 1830 as a result of typhoid fever. They had married in 1826 in Berlin and no children were born of their union. He produced a family, however, with his second wife, the widowed Deadamia (sometimes seen as “Diadamia”) Prouty Smith (1802-1868). This couple married in Holden on 19 July 1838 and went on over the next five years to have three children, the youngest of whom was Sarah Holland Lamson, born in Boylston on 10 June 1843.



Eli Brigham Lamson
Father of Sarah Holland Lamson Stearns
BHSM Photograph Collection



Sawyers Mills Post Office and Store
Eli Lamson, Postmaster and Store Operator
BHSM Photograph Collection



Metropolitan Water Works used Lamson Farm’s fertile land to grow trees for the Wachusett Watershed
Photograph taken November 13, 1900
Digital Commonwealth Photograph

The Lamsons moved to Worcester about 1858 when Sarah was in her mid-teens. Her father became a well-recognized and successful auctioneer there, as evidenced by his then having a personal estate valued at \$10,000.

Marriage

At the age of 23 years, Sarah married a 32-year-old widower Charles Hudson Stearns (1833-1909), who was a baker. They married in Worcester on 4 December 1866. Her husband brought with him a 6-year-old daughter named Addie from his first marriage.

By 1870, the Stearns were living on Crown Street in Worcester. He was a successful bread and cracker manufacturer with 22 employees. Sarah managed the household, assisted by a domestic servant, while Addie attended school. Sadly, Addie was not to have a long life. She died in 1879 at the age of 19 years, 6 months from an abscess on the lungs.

A Successful Business and Property

In 1888, Charles started a bakery at 166 Pleasant Street, Worcester. He began the manufacture of crackers and the business grew, becoming the very successful Stearns Cracker Company. In the 1890s, crackers were delivered by the barrel to practically every farmhouse and the Stearns Cracker Company's delivery wagons were well-known in the farming community.

By 1894, Sarah's husband owned three properties: their home at 2 Crown Street, a building at 3 Cottage Street and a building at 132 Pleasant Street. They were valued, in total (buildings, furnishings and equipment) at \$16,700.

Death and Burial

Sarah and Charles had no children of their own. He died from in 1909 at the age of 71 years, 6 months and 13 days and was buried in Worcester's Rural Cemetery.

Sarah outlived him by 17 years, passing away at home at 11 Monadnock Road, Worcester. She was buried from the Plymouth Congregational Church and interred with her late husband in the Stearns family plot in Rural Cemetery.

Major Philanthropy: Front Page News!

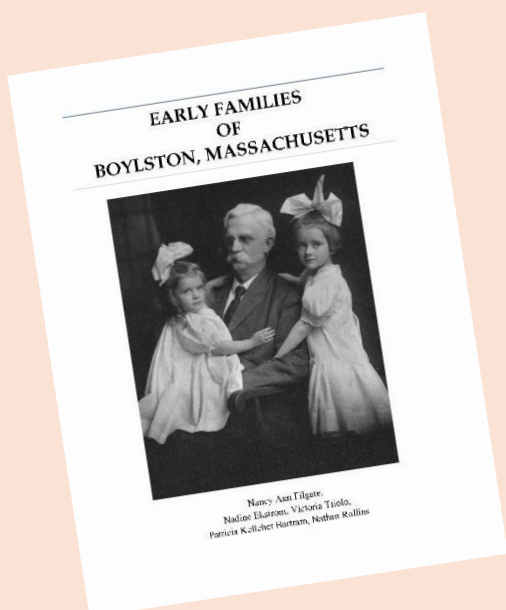
Sarah's will was filed in Probate Court on 30 June 1926 and was reported in that afternoon's Worcester Evening Gazette. However, it was front page news in the newspaper the next day. Her estate totaled more than \$460,000, from which she made many bequests to local organizations. The largest bequest was \$50,000 to Memorial Hospital to establish the Sarah H. Stearns Memorial Fund. Other sizeable bequests included: \$40,000 to the Worcester YWCA; \$20,000 to Hahnemann Hospital; \$10,000 to the Home for Aged Women; as well as \$5,000 to the City of Worcester to be used toward the care of needy girls and women at City Hospital.

Sarah also left \$20,000 to establish the Sarah Stearns Fund at Merchants National Bank, the annual income from which was to be split between the Plymouth Congregational Society and the Plymouth Congregational Church for benevolences. She made many other, small, bequests, ranging in size from \$5,000 to \$500. One such bequest was \$200 to the Town of Boylston for the care of the E. B. Lamson family cemetery plot. Most of the smaller bequests went to community organizations, although she left some to relatives and employees. Any residue was to be given to the Worcester County Branch of Foreign Missions and the Massachusetts Home Missionary Society.

Including bequests made earlier by her husband upon his death, the posthumous giving of Sarah and Charles Stearns totaled more than \$550,000 – quite a sum in 1926!



Stearns' Monument
Burial Site of Sarah and Charles Stearns
Worcester Rural Cemetery
Photograph Courtesy of Merry Hill



More can be learned about Sarah Lamson Stearns and many other of Boylston's early – and very interesting – families in Early Families of Boylston, Massachusetts, a 2022 book available for purchase from the Boylston Historical Society and Museum, Inc.

The BHSM is open for research: Sundays, 2:00-4:00pm; Tuesdays, 9:00am-12:00pm; and Saturdays, 9:00am-12:00pm, as well as by appointment by calling (508) 869-2720 or emailing info@boylstonhistory.org. Assistance with genealogical research is also available by appointment.

Acknowledgements:

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