

BROOKLINE HISTORICAL SOCIETY BROOKLINE, MASSACHUSETTS

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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.

We invite you to join our efforts on behalf of present and future generations. Membership dues and donations provide essential support for our free educational programs, including lectures, open houses, and walking tours, and for the care and maintenance of our collections.

As a member you will also receive the Society newsletter, advanced notice of events, and invitations to annual members-only presentations in historic homes and buildings.

The Edward Devotion House and the Devotion School Through the Years

The Edward Devotion House, which has stood in the same location for more than 270 years, has shared its corner of Brookline with its namesake, the Edward Devotion School, for nearly a century and a quarter.

School buildings have come and gone, and construction of a new and larger Devotion School is now underway. The Historical Society joined with others throughout the design and planning process

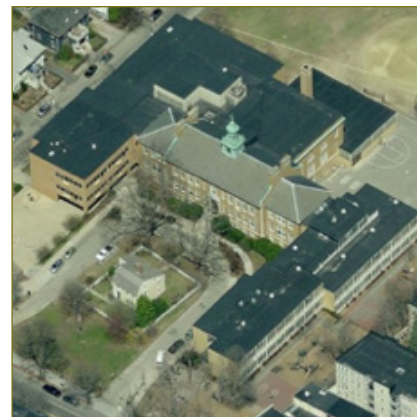
to ensure that the Devotion House remained in its original location. We also helped advocate successfully for adaptive reuse of the historic 1913 building located directly behind the house.



Devotion House and Devotion School students, 1905 and 1996.



The house with (l-r) the 1892, 1913, and 1898 buildings.



From the air 1974.



Architect's drawing of the new school with the Devotion House in the center.

Virginia Aiken, Teenage Dealer of Electric Cars



On Memorial Day in 1912 a parade of 125 electric cars and trucks made its way from Brookline Avenue through the Back Bay to downtown Boston. At the head of the parade, as she had been in a smaller procession the year before, was 17-year old Virginia E. Aiken of Brookline.

Aiken was the niece of Day Baker, the head of the Electric Vehicle Club of Boston, with whom she lived on Winthrop Road. But the former Runkle School student was no mere figurehead. She was New England representative of the Buffalo-based Babcock Electric Carriage Company,

responsible for sales throughout the six-state region. Aiken operated out of the Brandon Garage at 643 Washington Street, where she maintained an office, employed a stenographer and a bookkeeper, and kept several models of Babcock Electrics to demonstrate to prospective buyers.

How did a teenage Brookline girl arrive at such an unusual situation for her age and gender more than a century ago?

Virginia Elise Aiken was born in Philadelphia on April 10, 1895, the daughter of Frank E. and Ada (West) Aiken. Her father was a freight inspector and her mother was a stenographer. Her father's father, Frank Eugene Aiken Sr., was a well-known actor and theater owner active mostly in Chicago, but at other times in Philadelphia and New York.

Aiken spent most of her childhood in Chicago. In 1910 or 1911 she moved to Brookline to live with her father's sister Viola and Viola's husband Day Baker and to take advantage of better educational opportunities in the Boston area.

They lived at 145 Winthrop Road. Virginia enrolled at the Runkle School and later Miss Haskell's School for Girls on Marlborough Street.

Day Baker was New England agent for an electric truck manufacturer and a prominent advocate for electric vehicles. His efforts brought him into contact with Thomas Edison and he became New England representative of the Edison Storage Battery Company which made batteries for automobiles and trucks. (Edison's 22-year old son Charles was one of the ushers at an 18th birthday dance thrown for Aiken by her aunt and uncle at Brookline's Gardner Hall.)

A lengthy 1912 profile of Aiken in *The Automobile Journal* told how she obtained a license and drove thousands of miles, most of them in electrics. And as the *Boston Globe* reported:

"For some months she has been seen in her pearl gray Victoria around the congested streets of the city, driving in and out among carriages, wagons, street cars and great

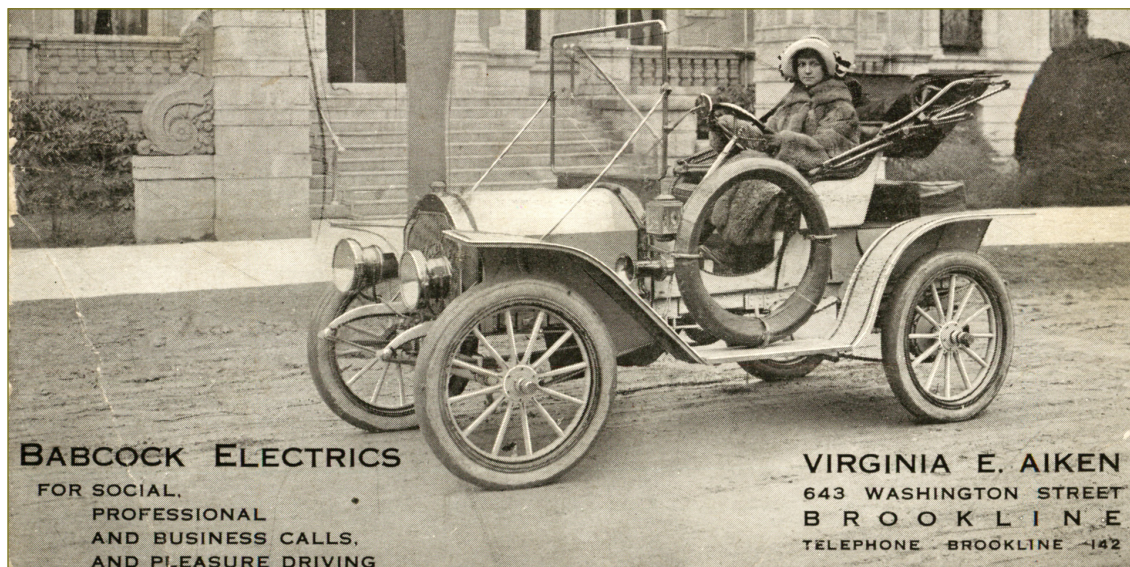
trucks, or on the streets and boulevards of the suburbs. People have stopped and wondered at the ease and grace with which she handled her automobile, but she always smilingly disclaims any especial skill and replies 'You know, it's no trouble to operate; you don't have to crank it, nor do you have a whole lot of levers about which to think: it is so simple to run—it's electric.'"

But her interest in cars, reported *The Automobile Journal*, went beyond driving.

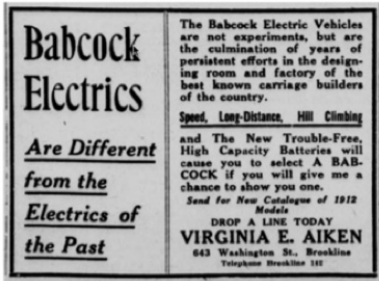
"Now, Miss Aiken is practical and she began to study the electric carriage with keen enthusiasm. Instead of merely giving attention to the maintenance and care she went back to rudiments and systematically acquired knowledge concerning the battery and the motor. She studied electrical subjects carefully and mastered each with its particular reference to vehicles. She was fortunate in having her uncle as an adviser and under his direction she was able to apply her knowledge to good advantage.

Constantly using the electric machines she met with all conditions that might be encountered and it was with extreme satisfaction that she solved all problems and successfully met every situation. The girl did not hesitate to work about the cars whenever necessary. She found delight in mechanical work and did it surprisingly well. "

When Francis Babcock, founder of the Babcock Electric Carriage Company, visited Boston and met Aiken he suggested she become



Virginia Aiken, Teenage Dealer of Electric Cars continued



Virginia Aiken placed ads for her dealership, including this one in the Boston Post.



The Brandon Garage, on Washington Street near Fairbanks Street, was her base.

his New England agent and helped set her up in business. Aiken told the Boston Globe she planned to use the profits from the business to pay for her education.

The budding entrepreneur also understood the value of good marketing. She put half of the profits of her first sale into promotion, including newspaper advertisements and engraved notes. "[T]his, and her energetic work, [reported The Automobile Journal] brought to her other customers."

Electric vehicles were sometimes marketed specifically to women — "The Runabout for Misses; The Victoria for Ladies" — and Aiken's unusual position as a female agent may have helped. She was interviewed by the Boston Post for a July 1912 article that ran under the headline "Miss Aiken's Advice to Women Motorists."

"Why, yes, [she told the reporter] I know it does you good to ride in an electric—it has done me good—don't I look the model healthy electric young woman? Seriously, I do believe that it gives one good health, a good appetite and good control of one's nerves to operate an electric vehicle."

I have in mind a Newton lady who has one of our cars—she drives it herself, charges it with a mercury arc rectifier in her own little garage and looks after her battery herself. She takes great enjoyment in looking after all these little details herself. The out-of-door air exercise that she gets in caring for her car and the long rides which she takes almost daily keep her in the best of health.

No, you newspaper men cannot too strongly urge the driving of electric automobiles by the ladies of Boston as a health-giving and enjoyable method of regaining and keeping health, but it does not end with the health question. The convenience of making calls, shopping, attending church and social functions are all points that are worthy of mention—but of course good health is always a strong argument.



Many articles about Aiken were published in 1912, in the Boston newspapers and in trade publications like The Automobile Journal, Motor Age, and Electrical World. But her dealership was apparently short-lived. A later article in The Automobile Journal about her Fall 1912 exhibit at the electrical show at Mechanics Hall in Boston, said

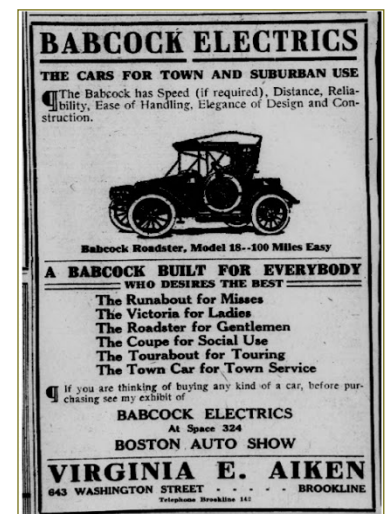
"While Miss Aiken will retain an interest in the Buffalo electric, it is her intention, after the electric show, to devote the most of her time to studies and music, believing that the proportions to which she has brought the business warrant placing it in the hands of a large automobile sales establishment. Full details of this move will be announced later."

I have not been able to find any such later announcement but there were no further mentions of her dealership after 1912.

In 1918, Aiken's engagement to a Harvard Medical School graduate named Lawrence Weld Smith was announced in a brief article in the Boston Post. The announcement noted that, in addition to Miss Haskell's School (a college preparatory school for girls in the Back Bay), she had attended the Farmer School of Cookery (founded by Fanny Farmer). By 1918, she was back in Chicago where, the article said, she was active in

Red Cross work.

The Aiken-Smith marriage never happened. Instead, on Christmas Eve 1919 in Chicago, Aiken married a Swiss immigrant named Robert (or Roberto) Tranquillo Pellandini. They had a daughter, born in Chicago in 1921, and lived for several years in Mexico where Robert Pellandini's family had business interests. (Virginia Pellandini took Swiss citizenship and had to reapply for U.S. citizenship when they returned in 1925.)



The Pellandinis were frequently on the move. They lived, at various times, in Chicago, Mexico City, Easton, Brockton, and Lincoln, Massachusetts, and Lorain, Ohio, before settling in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Robert had several jobs, as listed in directories and census records, including sales manager for a shovel and tool company and accountant with the Ford Motor Company. No further career information is listed for Virginia.

Robert Pellandini died in 1980. Virginia Aiken Pellandini died, at age 92, in Hot Springs in 1987.

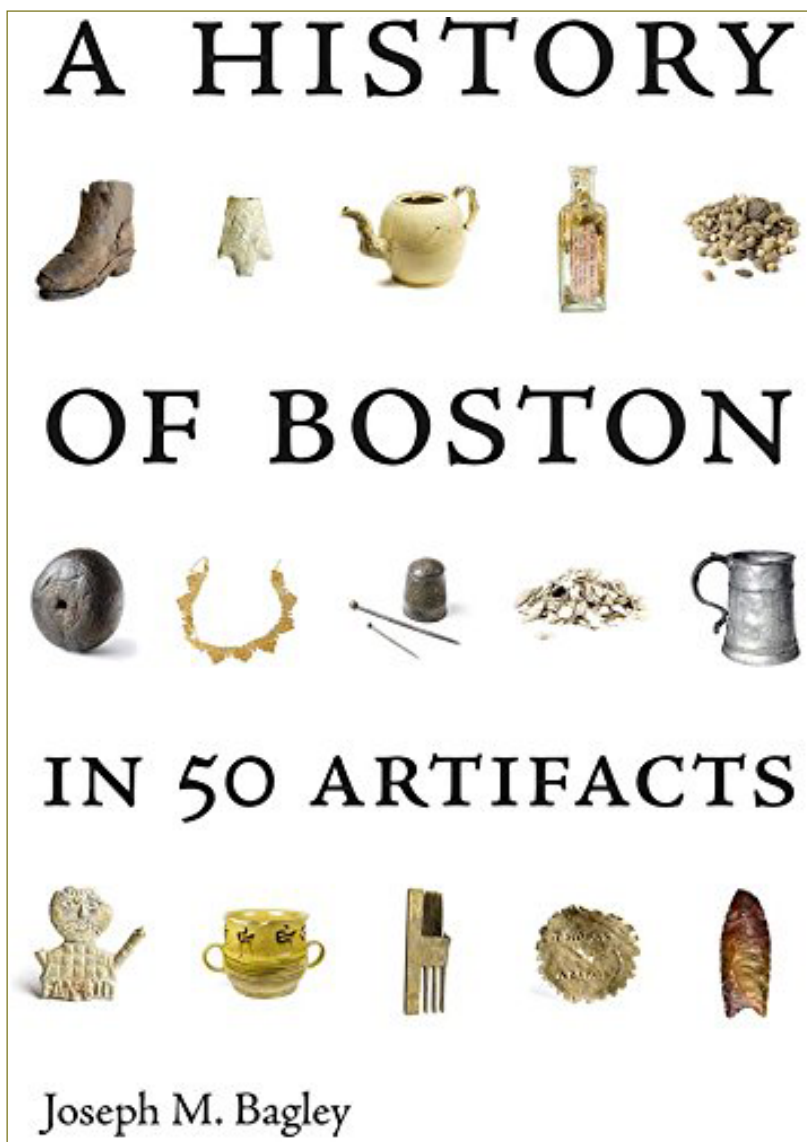
Fall Program of the Brookline Historical Society

A History of Boston in 50 Artifacts

Sunday, November 6, 2016 at 1:30 pm

Hunneman Hall, Brookline Public Library, 361 Washington Street

History is right under our feet; we just need to dig a little to find it. Though not the most popular construction project, Boston's Big Dig has contributed more to our understanding and appreciation of the city's archaeological history than any other recent event. Join Joseph M. Bagley, city archaeologist of Boston, and author of *A History of Boston in 50 Artifacts* for a look at Boston's fascinating hodgepodge of history—from ancient fishing grounds to Jazz Age red-light districts. From cannonballs to drinking cups and from ancient spears to chinaware, he will discuss a number of artifacts and their significance in the city's history. Refreshments will be served.



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