The Newburyport Art Association Story, 1948-2008

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First published in the 2008 Sketch Pads to commemorate the 60th anniversary of NAA

THE EARLY YEARS: 1948 - 1960

At 8:48 on Wednesday evening, March 10, 1948, Sam Sargent convened a meeting of twenty persons in an “enthusiastic gathering” in Corliss Hall at the Newburyport YMCA on State Street and launched the Newburyport Art Association, to “bring together people of common interest ... to bring art to the public.” The core of the founding members was students from Sargent’s art school. Sargent was the association’s first president. The other first officers were Effie Knapp, vice president; Harlan Randall, treasurer; Dorothy Winchester, corresponding secretary; and Mildred Twomey, corresponding secretary. John (Jack) Farrell was the secretary Pro Tem at the founding meeting.

Postwar Newburyport, once a prominent maritime and manufacturing center, was in economic decline. Sargent, who was a life-long resident, had a vision “that someday a group...would be formed...to restore the cultural splendor in a city rich with a tradition in the appreciation of the arts.” Arthur Rose, a participant in the March meeting observed that “the community, dormant for a long time, could be revived by the creativeness of such a group.” The editor of the Daily News wrote that Sargent ”may be starting something which will grow into a great Newburyport asset.”

Sam Sargent

Sam Sargent — Sam, not Samuel, and no middle name — was a successful painter and popular art teacher in the first half of the twentieth century in Newburyport. He was “the city’s best-known artist, second only to the universally-famed Laura Coombs Hills.”

Sargent was born in Newburyport on January 11, 1889, the son of Charles Henry and Lucy E. (Gooch) Sargent. He descended from William Sargent (1602?-1675), who emigrated from London, England to Ipswich Massachusetts in 1632 and lived in Newbury, Hampton, Salisbury and Amesbury. This Sargent line is not related to John Singer Sargent, the famous nineteenth-century American painter.

Sam Sargent spent some of his childhood in Vermont where he lost sight in one eye in an accident. He graduated in 1912 from the Massachusetts Normal Art School in Boston (later Massachusetts College of Art) where he majored in portrait painting and became a qualified art teacher. He married Beulah Louise Frost of Newburyport in 1917. They had two surviving children, Warren born 1918 and Robert, born 1924. In 1926 the Sargent family moved to the 1803 Clark Currier house at 43 Green Street in Newburyport where he setup his studio on the second floor of the carriage barn. To supplement his art income he worked as a wood-heeler at the Dodge Shoe factory during the depression and later he established an interior and exterior decorating business. He also built handcrafted wooden toys. He had a range of talents. He served for five years on the Newburyport City Council. Sam and Beulah possessed outstanding musical ability, he a baritone and she a soprano. They performed in light opera and musical comedies. For over two decades he was a soloist and choir director at the Unitarian Church, and Beulah was choir director at the Baptist Church.
Sargent was a successful portrait and landscape painter. He received many portrait commissions including one for the portrait of President Harry Truman in 1951 from a Washington, D.C., photographer. His paintings were exhibited at the London Museum, Museo Historico Provincial in Argentina, the Copley Gallery, Boston, the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Currier Museum, Manchester, NH, and the Historical Society of Old Newbury. Sargent’s painting of Mount Chocorua, NH hung in Grand Central Station in New York City for 14 years. His works are found in many Newburyport area collections and in collections throughout the United States. From 1938 to 1950 Sargent held outdoor art shows at Florence Bushee’s barn on Route 1A in Newbury.

Sargent founded the Sargent School of Painting in 1942 in his barn studio on Green Street. The Newburyport Daily News wrote that “this new movement to bring Newburyport to the fore in the art world marks the first time a school of painting has been established here.” His "pride and joy" was his school of painting, wrote his son, Robert, "Which led directly to the founding of the art association." In failing health, Sargent and Beulah, his wife of forty-one years, moved to Howard County, Maryland in 1958 to be
close to their son Warren. It was a difficult move, Newburyport meant everything to him. With tears in his eyes, he told Bill Plante, editor of the Daily News, “It’s terrible, you haven’t any idea.” He died in Maryland July 5, 1959.

His school of painting did not continue after he left, but the art association did. Sargent had developed a sound organizational structure with leadership to succeed him. The association honored him by naming the main gallery after him in 1987, and held a retrospective of his work in 1998 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of its founding.

Art Association’s First Exhibition

Aida Tedford chaired the activities committee that planned the first year’s program: speakers for May and June, a paper by a member in July, an outdoor art exhibit, a “work picnic” in August, an inside exhibit in September, and a beaux arts ball in October. The association in these early years was a closely knit group of artists drawn largely from Newburyport. Mildred Twomey described the August work picnic: “A showery but delightful “work picnic” was held at Moseley Pines. Quite a bit of painting was done between drops and occasionally the sun consented to shine on us. A short business meeting (run by Sam Sargent) was held in the pavilion with about 25 present. After a picnic supper, members gathered in the pavilion to look at the painting produced.” Mildred Pearson held bridge card parties at members’ homes, 50 cents per player, and raised $27.

Sargent obtained permission for use of the courthouse on Bartlett mall, and the newly formed NAA held its first annual exhibition there in July 1948 — over 3,000 persons signed the guest register. The Daily News wrote that it was "another chapter into the illustrious history of our city in almost astounding fashion...It solved a long-felt problem in cultural efforts of the entire area. For a rebirth of the arts, an amazingly successful social, civic, and cultural enterprise was launched. Because of the efforts of the [art association], the city itself stands on an equal footing with Ogunquit, Rockport and similar renowned centers... of artistic activity." The association had seventy-two members by the end of 1948 and in December leased three rooms for $10 a month above Mildred Pearson’s florist shop at 1 Threadneedle Alley in downtown Newburyport. Initially membership was restricted to Newburyport and bordering towns. The annual summer exhibitions at the courthouse on Bartlet Mall, the holiday shows, art classes, award of an annual high school scholarship, costume balls and monthly demonstrations and lectures continued through the 1950's. Sargent felt that “we have done a great deal towards uplifting of the arts in Newburyport.”

SEARCHING FOR “OUR NEW HOME,” 1960-1969

By 1960 the association had over one-hundred members and was evolving from an art club into an art association. It sought to be a "strong factor in this community, deserving of recognition and support...We must get away from the idea that the summer exhibition [on Bartlett Mall] is the sole purpose of the club."

With growing space needs, a search committee in 1961 investigated buildings for purchase. One was a two-story, brick waterfront building at 65 Water Street — “interesting building; fine location; open to the river in the rear; parking OK; large two story interior; but very dirty and oily upstairs and much work needed downstairs.” But NAA deferred purchase until a building fund could be established, and instead leased space in May 1961 in the old Marine Society building at 12 State Street, then known as Scott’s Market.
However, one conclusion from the building search was the need to incorporate the association. On April 5, 1965, the Secretary of the Commonwealth certified that Catherine Coffin, Frances Randall, Jean Davies, Dorothy H. Brown, Persis A. Hall, Harold Melanson and J. Clifford Ronan, their associates and successors “are legally organized and established...and made...an existing corporation under the name The Newburyport Art Association, Inc.”

The initial plan for Newburyport urban renewal called for demolition of most of the historic, but deteriorated, downtown buildings, and the association had to vacate the Marine Society building in February 1968. The building search for a “new home” was on once again.

G. Michael Elwell, NAA president from 1967 to 1970, recounted in a 1989 letter about the purchase of the NAA building at 65 Water Street, which, once again, was for sale: “Knowing that we were about to be evicted by urban renewal from our rented store stall in the Marine Society Building on State St., [we] began a search for a place we might buy – property values were still depressed. We looked at a house on State St., but that was suddenly sold out from under us. Another place on Merrimac Street in front of the old Caldwell’s Rum plant was accepted by the Board, when it was withdrawn from the market.

Stasia Cassellini then learned from the realtor that the old Yerxa’s Grocery building at 65 Water St. was for sale again and the search committee investigated the property. “Their report was favorable,” wrote secretary Alice Schoepflin, “though the price was considered a little steep, but we agreed we could manage it. The report was given to the membership meeting and they enthusiastically gave the permission to do anything necessary to bring about the purchase of the property. The members...gave the board full responsibility.”

There were many meetings leading up to the decision to buy the building. Some board members strongly disagreed with the purchase: not affordable and too much risk. Harry Swanson argued that NAA had to do it to have a presence in the community with their own building. The board finally voted to buy. The building was purchased in October 1969 for $14,400, financed by an $11,900, twenty-year term mortgage. A $500 donation from Mildred and Ralph Hartson helped with the down payment.

The building was sound but needed substantial interior renovation. In 1970 the association understood that it must turn to the community for sustained financial support. Nonprofit status was needed to provide tax exemption for donations. The Internal Revenue Service granted tax exemption in 1971 under the Internal Revenue Code section 501(c)(3).

NAA had raised $4,000 for basic renovation of the first floor of the building, changing it from the Idle Hours pool hall to an art gallery – the second floor was still unusable. The money came from member donations, special events and the sale of a member’s directory and cookbook.

Harry Swanson, a professional artist and board member, created a brochure with graphics portraying the “New Image” of the interior and exterior of the building. Swanson, his wife Marian, Dale Schoepflin, and Rosemary Sloane were key individuals in the initial renovation of the building over the next six months.

**First Exhibition**

The association still held the 1970 Summer Show at the Bartlet Mall courthouse, since the upstairs was unusable and the board was uneasy about public recognition at the new location too soon.
The first exhibition in the new building was a fall juried show in the partially renovated downstairs gallery in September, 1970 with art selection and awards by three jurors invited from outside the association. A gala grand opening for NAA’s “new home” took place on September 19.

By 1972 the association had grown to 400 members.

The summer exhibition at the courthouse on Bartlet Mall reached its twenty-fifth anniversary in 1973. The Daily News observed “that unlike some associations, which seem to polarize toward one particular school [of artist style], NAA is a melting pot of nearly all the contemporary media and approaches to the visual arts.”

In 1975 the association requested urban renewal funding of $25,000 for full interior and exterior renovation. The request was denied – the building was outside the urban renewal district.

Also in 1975, NAA applied to the city for real estate tax abatement based on its nonprofit status. An interim reduction was granted, but permanent abatement was denied on the grounds that the building was used primarily for social functions and for the sale of members’ art. An appeal was withdrawn on advice of an attorney with the observation that “if the town was wealthier than Newburyport, or more art oriented than Newburyport, such as Rockport, a different status would be guaranteed. The art association should give serious consideration to the possibility of selling the 65 Water Street building.”

Cultural development during this period was not a city priority. A vibrant cultural core built around a flourishing Newburyport Art Association, Firehouse Center for the Arts and Custom House Maritime Museum was decades away.

The NAA board of directors stubbornly sustained the association’s ownership of the building, but full renovation would dominate management of the association for decades.

TIPPING POINT

From 1968 to 1972 NAA doubled its membership from 200 to 400 members – but it took its toll. G. Michael Elwell wrote in September 1970, “After five years of long hard work for NAA (four of them as president and acting president) a labor of love despite all, your president needs a break. And NAA needs a fresh hand on the wheel.” The March 1971 newsletter echoed the same thought: “We have all felt a degree of demoralization due to the lack of participation .... A few members have gallantly borne our burden....”

In 1972 NAA reached a “tipping point”– the point at which the volunteer run organization could no longer sustain that level of growth without staff and the administrative infrastructure to support financial, marketing and membership services. With a 1972 operating budget of only $6,000 —75% going for mortgage, insurance, taxes and building operating cost—there was no prospect of employing staff.

The Superior Court house on Bartlet Mall was bombed on the morning of July 2, 1976 ending NAA’s signature event held there since 1948. Membership began a slow, steady twenty-year decline.

Newburyport’s Artist Community

NAA benefitted from an influx of artists drawn to Newburyport by low rents and available studio space in the 1970’s. In 1977 the Newburyport Arts Council was formed as a locally based organization for the
development and promotion of the arts. A 1980 Newburyport Portfolio of Artist, published by the group with federal funding, listed fifty-one resident artists chosen on the basis of professional commitment and excellence of work. Of the artists listed, 20% were NAA members, including Joyce Pigeon, Audrey Bechler, then president of NAA, Margette Leanna, a future president, and Mary Whiting, a long time NAA board member. The council estimated the Newburyport arts community at about 350 artists in all disciplines.

Newburyport’s economic recovery in the late 1980’s resulted in rising property values and rents, and development of spaces previously used for artists studios, forcing many artists to leave the area. Newburyport was losing its vibrant artist community.
Slow Decline

Members of the NAA board of directors recognized the problems facing them. By 1987 membership had declined from the high of 400 members to 230 members. Susan Kapuscinski Gaylord, a board member with previous nonprofit management experience, assessed NAA’s strengths: service to the community through exhibitions, monthly demonstrations and lectures; art classes at reasonable rates; a regional high school art show; support to artists through low art sales commissions; large number of annual exhibitions; and the opportunity to rent the gallery for a reasonable fee. Problems were the cost burden of the building; operating income barely meeting expenses; and decline in NAA’s public reputation. She recommended improving the association’s image by naming the main gallery the “Sam Sargent Gallery”. She also concluded that an executive director was essential. It was a concept not totally accepted by board members, who were reluctant to relinquish the authority of running NAA. It was not affordable in any case.

NAA received a Massachusetts Council on the Arts grant in 1988 for organizational assessment and planning. The final report concluded that: “Unfortunately, during the 1980’s [NAA] has gone through a period of stagnation and disinterest. It has lost touch with the community of artists. Membership has dropped. It is harder to identify and motivate volunteers and there is poor visibility in the community. There is endless debate at board meetings over day-to-day issues and an inability to make long term decisions.” There was a lack of shared vision: “Does [NAA] exist as a ‘social club’ to serve the needs of a small number of artist-members …? Or does it exist to provide a forum for …visual artist to exchange ideas, grow artistically, network and connect with the community?” The consultant saw a potential for NAA to transition into a “vital and lively organization that will survive and thrive into the next century.”

There were positive developments. In 1982, a major remodeling of the 1st and 2nd floors of the building was carried out by Margette and Robert Leanna, using an eight-man crew of students from Whittier Regional Vocational Technical High School, under a “Satellite Program,” for the labor. NAA received an unsolicited, $10,000 grant from the Mary Alice Arakelian Foundation in 1988 for building improvements, and the mortgage was paid off in 1989.

Low Point

The decline of membership continued. The board expressed concerns in a October 1991 newsletter: “We hope that some of you...have the skills, energy and desire to keep the Art Association functioning...We are concerned about the survival of the organization.” John Raleigh, who, as president in 1992-93, oversaw a brief period of recovery, felt in 1991 that NAA “was one heartbeat away from total collapse.” By 1994 membership reached a low point of 114 members. There was poor participation in art shows, the board was plagued with resignations and low attendance, and felt that “NAA was falling apart.” Joe Graf, 1994 president of NAA, wrote in the September newsletter that “We may be reaching a crisis. Imagine closing down...NAA”

But, Newburyport was changing. The city was drawing higher income, higher educated people into the city — a demographic favorable to the arts. In the Water Street neighborhood, the closed tanning company’s facility — “a wet, cold, industrial hulk” — was purchased by Hall and Moskow Corporation, renovated and opened as the Tannery Mall shopping center in 1984. These demographic changes would help sustain renewed growth for the art association.
Susan Spellman, a professional children’s book illustrator, was president in 1997 and 1998. Those two years saw the start of dynamic growth for the association. Susan wrote the following account.

“As I contemplated taking on the presidency in 1997, I became excited about what a few of us saw as a tremendous opportunity we had for improvement in the NAA. Jean Snow had agreed to become vice president, and she and I, and Skip and Marge Motes, among others, turned our attention initially to the improvement of the building. We painted the trim, installed an awning and window boxes on the front of the building, and Jean and I painted a mural of Sam Sargent above the main entrance.”

“In May, we had a membership meeting that was lead by my then sister-in-law, Susan Swanson Spellman, who had led creative corporate workshops. She led us in an exercise to imagine what we all would like to see NAA become — to develop a shared vision. During this meeting, we also worked on our mission statement, and developed the first one which would lead to what we currently have. We used ideas to develop a plan for the future. At the end of this meeting, a member came up to me and offered a $5,000 gift for a regional juried show in which we would offer cash awards. This was one of the ideas floated at the meeting — we were not offering cash awards at the time in any of our exhibits. This funding was the beginning of the successful Annual Regional Juried Shows, first held in June 1998.”

Susan Spellman organized Working Art, an exhibition for professional commercial artists, started the Budding Artist children’s exhibitions, and ArtLink, a cooperative at program with the public schools. These were important NAA community outreach programs.

50th Anniversary

The highlight of NAA’s 50th anniversary was the Sam Sargent Retrospective Exhibition held in 1998. Jean Snow had curatorial responsibility and assembled a show of thirty-four works. The opening was attended by Sargent’s sons, family members, many past students of Sargent’s, and Newburyport Mayor Mary Carrier. Sargent’s son Warren wrote that “My deep, personal emotional reaction was indescribable.”

Raymond Liddell wrote a review in the March 1998 North Shore Magazine: “What distinguishes NAA is its openness. It exhibits art of varying esthetics, it is accepting of alternative media, and has made a commitment to market member’s work...The Association is also known for its commitment to photography...Since some local art groups do not share this view. [NAA] has attracted an active, accomplished group of photographers.”

Membership grew to 275 by 1998. NAA was still a largely volunteer run association, but was able to hire two part-time gallery attendants.

Break-through Years, 1999-2001

Susan Spellman was ending her term in 1998 without a successor. The role of president combined board responsibilities with that equivalent to an executive director, and candidates were difficult to find. Skip Motes agreed to take the position. Al Moskowitz became vice president, Susan Spellman continued with education and children’s programs, Marge Motes served as exhibition and membership chair, Jane von Bosse continued as treasurer, and Sue Hammer was secretary.
Motes served as president for three years, 1999-2001. NAA made important improvements over those years, building on the momentum started by Susan Spellman in the 1997 "Shared Vision." The association added a professional bookkeeper, installed computers, added software to manage membership, buyers and donors, started an annual appeal, created the NAA website, expanded exhibitions and started the Featured Artists program. But two critical issues remained: adding professional staff and expanding gallery space.

The board decided in 1999 to incrementally add paid staff in anticipation that revenue would increase to cover the cost—revenue growth did follow. The first two part-time employees hired in 1998 saw their work hours double in 1999, and a part-time bookkeeper was added. Susan Spellman became interim executive director in 2002 and the first permanent executive director, Dorothy Givner, was hired in 2003, succeeded by Dean Wills in 2005.

Expansion

The NAA building did not meet the needs of a growing staff and rapidly increasing membership. A building committee was formed in 1999 to develop a master space plan. Serving on the committee were Skip Motes, Al Moskowitz, Warren Moskowitz, Susan Hammer and Kent Miller. The committee retained local architect Linda Miller, who laid out plans for the first staff office (that replaced the corner gift shop and the small sitter’s kiosk), a handicap accessible first-floor bathroom and a new gift shop. In an intense, three week period during the January 2000 shut-down, the building committee took on these renovations. It became clear there was neither time nor enough hands to do the first floor bathroom. Garry Doyle, a building contractor, was hired and he completed the bathroom the night before receiving for the Winter Juried Show. He attended the opening reception, and a month later, died after a long battle with cancer.

NAA membership reached 444 members in 2000, exceeding the previous high of 400 members in 1972.

Laura Coombs Hills Gallery

In 2001 John Raleigh and Bob Currier joined the building committee, replacing Susan Hammer and Kent Miller. The committee with architect Linda Miller worked on two priorities. The first was to develop feasibility plans to build a two story addition on the back of the NAA building. A second, near-term objective was to add a handicapped accessible entrance to the first floor of the NAA building.

A $13,000 Community Development Block Grant was awarded in 1999 by the city for a ramp in the Sargent Gallery, but the final handicapped accessible design through the main Sargent Gallery was not feasible, and the approach and grant were abandoned. An alternative was to enter the gallery on the building’s south facade from an exterior handicapped accessible ramp through an enlarged cargo door opening.

A handicapped accessible entrance through the south facade required access across land owned by Hall and Moskow. In a fortunate coincident, David Hall was planning to place the small, old coal weigh station next to the NAA side of his property. The building was badly dilapidated. Hall was planning to renovate the weigh station for retail space. Sharing a common exterior handicap ramp with NAA made sense. The 1890 building was once a part of Cashman Brothers Company’s office and later part of the Theater of Newburyport.

It quickly occurred to the building committee that the fastest way for NAA to get needed space was to rent the weigh station as a gallery annex. David Hall accepted the idea immediately. He offered NAA an affordable long-term lease. The board approved the plan, but some members remained skeptical of how NAA would ever use that small, deteriorated “shack.”
The renovated weigh station was one piece of a much larger project by David Hall to constructed Tannery Mill #5 on the property. The property was on filled tideland and required a state permit for non-marine use. NAA’s cultural use of the weigh station under its nonprofit status as a gallery for exhibition and educational purposes, and with open public access, provided Hall with additional supporting rational to gain license approval. The license formally acknowledged these functions of the weigh station annex.

The annex in the initial plan was to be a stand-alone building with a shared ramp with the main NAA building. Both parties agreed to a plan that enclosed the ramp between the two buildings. The next decision was to eliminate the adjoining annex wall that opened the entrance space within the annex. Linda Miler designed the gallery with a roof-high ceiling, surrounded by sconce lighting and suspended gallery lights. Robert Motes, a professional sculptor, designed a hand wrought steel railing interpreting the industrial background of both buildings. The gallery annex was named in honor of Laura Coombs Hills, Newburyport’s most illustrious artist, and an honorary founding member of NAA. The gallery opened in July 2002. The first exhibition was installation art by Chris Enos, a professional artist, teacher and nationally recognized photographer. In addition to the Hills Gallery, the project included an automatic fire detection, alarm and sprinkler systems in both buildings.

By the end of 2002, NAA membership reached 700 and 825 in 2004 and sustained through the 60th anniversary year.

These facility improvements were key factors in the growth of NAA. They were made possible by support from the Mary Alice Arakelian Charitable Foundation, The H. Paterson Hale Jr. Charitable Foundation, Institution for Savings Charitable Foundation, Newburyport Area Industrial Development Foundation, Newburyport Community Preservation Act Committee, Newburyport Five Cent Savings Bank Charitable Foundation, IBM Corporation, and generous support by members of NAA and the community.

In 1948, the editor of the Daily News wrote about the founding of NAA that Sam Sargent “may be starting something that will grow into a great Newburyport asset.” Sixty years later, that prophesy was fulfilled.