

The Robbins Family 959.12.15 read 1930 E. Winn

What a flood of memories this name conveys to the people of Arlington!

Misses Robbins – Ida, Eliza, Caira – and their brother Mr. Olney were born in Philadelphia – the children of Mr. and Mrs. Orin Robbins. On the death of their father the children with their mother were brought by their grandfather Mr. Nathan Robbins here to West Cambridge to live in a house on the avenue besides his own house which in those days stood where the library now stands.

Mrs. Robbins lived but a short time and then Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Robbins took their four grandchildren into their own home. Soon after Mr. Robbins lost his wife so that the children were brought up their grandfather which resulted in a beautiful relation between the man and the children. They were devoted to him and he to them, eventually leaving the home which meant so much to him, to them. My father likes to tell of how Mr. Nathan Robbins when he was a boy, came one day to sell berries and was told if he wanted to sell berries he should take them around to the back door. He took around to the back door, but he was terribly mortified and as he went away from the house he made up his mind that he was going to work hard and save his money so that when he was grown up he could buy that house. Then any little boys that wanted to sell berries could come to the front door! His dream came true. He worked hard, saved his money, made his fortune in the poultry business in Fanieul Hall Market where he had his own stall, and bought the house – our fine old Robbins Mansion which for so long was the center of culture and hospitality. How many of us look back to our visits there – perhaps for a meal of a cup of afternoon tea – as something to be remembered. Mr. Robbins was also president of the Fanieul Hall Bank and from a poor boy came to be one of the town's most well to do citizens. He had a greenhouse and for years provided the flowers each Sunday for the service in the First Parish Unitarian Church with which that family has been so closely identified. Mr. Robbins when Olney was old enough was accustomed to take him to his stall to assist in the work. He used to go to Boston on the earliest train, and for a long period was driven to West Medford to catch an earlier train than he could get in Arlington. When Olney came down very early in the morning, he would find a bird of some kind nicely cooked by his grandfather waiting for him so he could go to Boston with him. I love the picture of the old gentleman being so thoughtful of his young grandson who was not too strong.

Mr. Nathan Robbins and his brothers Amos and Eli all made their fortunes in the poultry business, Nathan in Boston and his brothers in New York. When Mrs. Eli Robbins wanted to build a beautiful commodious library in memory of her husband, she put in charge of her nephew Mr. Winfield Robbins who came to live with his cousins, the Misses Robbins in Arlington. They all worked together, making excursions to most of the fine libraries in the state to get the latest improvements, to give Arlington as fine a library as money could build. They moved their home further back on the Robbins land to its present location so that the library could be built on the avenue where the house had stood. It is interesting to note that the family lived in the house while it was being moved. At the same time Mrs. Eli Robbins gave \$10,000 to the Unitarian Church on condition that should build and other building on the common between the library and their church. She wished to keep the broad common always open.

What a blessing for us the people of Arlington that the Misses Robbins made such a happy home for their Cousin Winfield as they affectionately called him. It was he who gave the collection of prints to the library and left Miss Caira in charge of them.

Later when he died Mr. Winfield Robbins left money for the building of our most beautiful town hall in memory of his father Amos Robbins, the Misses Robbins to be in charge of the project. I well remember as a child how proud IU was at the dedication of the town hall to see Aunt Ida turn over the keys to the building. The three sisters were on the platform, but she it was who was always the spokesman for the family. Many of you will remember how graciously she presided as president of the Women's Alliance of her church or as president of the Arlington Woman's Club and how efficiently she served as a member of the School Committee. Also how interesting she and Miss Caira made it for their pupils in Sunday School and the result of having been around the world and of their long sojourns abroad.

After the completion of the Town Hall, hearing that people missed the short cut from Academy Street to their train or shopping district, the Misses Robbins put in at their own expense the brick walk behind the Town Hall. They gave also Cyrus Dallin's beautiful statue of an Indian lapping water – commonly known as the Menotomy Indian with its woods and lagoon in memory of their cousin Mr. Winfield Robbins and at the same time they gave a very fine drinking fountain for people, horses and dogs which now is at the foot of the Rocks in memory of their brother Mr. Olney Robbins.

We all know of their deep interest in our own Arlington Historical Society – their many gifts give testimony to that.

During the 1<sup>st</sup> World War Miss Ida and Miss Caira were together in charge of making bandages for the Red Cross, Miss Ida being president. Their work filled the old Town Hall, many men coming evenings. It was customary for the bandages to be inspected in Boston before being sent overseas, but the bandages from Arlington under their careful inspection were found to be so perfect that they would allow them to go directly to the front without further inspection.

Less known perhaps to the general public Miss Eliza was the home body of the family and the nurse in case of sickness. Her devotion to her home and family left her sisters more free to do things on the outside. To our childish eyes she was a veritable queen crowned with her beautiful grey hair and dressed in her exquisite low necked blouse as she sat in her parlor with its rich red hangings, heavy rich red rug brought back from India on the other side of the world, beautifully carved furniture – a table with greyhounds for legs from Italy – elaborately carved teakwood furniture from China – treasures from all over the world brought back from their extensive travels all about her as well as book cases of fine old books, elaborately carved chests in one of which was kept a poisoned dagger which occasionally she would show to the wonder of us children. A case of stuffed birds and a sofa which had belonged to Parson Cooke. Dear Aunt Eliza – always ready to share with us children in our childish joys and full of tales of her experiences on her travels to enthrall us. She was dear to the hearts of the children and old people. Each Sunday my two brothers and I would rush over from church to the Robbins to see her – always ready for us even though she had been to church. She always went to the Episcopal Church. We used to wonder how she managed to be there ahead of us all dressed ready to receive us. Years after I learned from Mrs. Hall, the minister's wife that Aunt Eliza left church each Sunday before the close of the service. It was true to her character to do that to be ready to receive us children and make it for us a never to be forgotten experience.

Before leaving for Europe the last time, the Misses Ida and Caira Robbins laid the plans for the development of our most beautiful Town Hall Park leaving their life long loyal friend Mr. Henry Hornblower in charge. At the same time they gave their own beloved home that had also been the

home of their grandfather Mr. Nathan Robbins to the town to be used for offices for which there no room in the Town Hall building – thus completing the civic center such as few towns are blessed with comprising the Town Hall with its park, the library, and the fine old Robbins House.

It is fitting that we the members of the Arlington Historical Society should remind our fellow citizens from time to time of the generous gifts which this family have bestowed on our town so that they and their children and their children's children shall forever cherish the memory of the Robbins Family!

Elizabeth Abbot Smith

Read by Edith A. Winn at regular meeting of the Society Oct. 30, 1950.