

The Portrait of Emma Allen

By Richard A. Duffy

A compelling 19th-century crayon portrait, a recent gift from local businessman Alan Asadorian, will be a special feature of the 2002 season at the Jason Russell House and Smith Museum.

The 1882 drawing, by Arlington artist Henry W. Berthrong depicts 11-year-old Emma W. Allen. An only child, Emma lived her entire life in the family homestead (which has since been razed) of her father, Andrew F. Allen, at 333 Massachusetts Ave. In 1891, she married J. Edwin Kimball, who would later become president of Cambridge Ice Co. Emma died in 1955; Edwin in 1957.

The Allen farm was located east of Arlington Center, bounded on the north by Broadway, on the south by Mass Ave., and roughly between Tufts and Wyman Streets, heading east to west. It was the oldest farm in town to be considered a "market garden," that is, an agricultural enterprise devoted to supplying Boston's produce markets, as opposed to commodity farming.

In 1880, the Allens prolonged their growing season with the construction of eight large greenhouses and substantially boosted production on the same piece of land. In the days before speedy refrigerated transportation from southern states was feasible, Boston's reliance on suburban market gardens for "early and late" fresh vegetables cannot be overstated. Andrew Allen was among the most prominent market gardeners in the region at the time of his death in 1888, after which his brother William operated the business alone.

In 1920, during Arlington's great residential boom, the Allen heirs turned the market garden into a strictly-residential subdivision. On the nearly 13-acre Mass Ave. parcel, house lots appeared practically overnight along four new streets. "Andrew" and "Allen" streets were named for obvious reasons. Foster Street bears the surname of Andrew's maternal grandfather, who founded the market garden, while Adams Street takes its name from another past owner of the land.

Andrew Allen's financial success is suggested by the fact that he was able to commission a large-scale portrait of his young daughter in the latest fashion of the day. The artist, Henry W. Berthrong, had achieved particular fame for a portrait of Ulysses S. Grant, as well as for his other lifelike portrait commissions.

Born in Mumford, N.Y., in 1844, Berthrong served in the Civil War until 1865. In 1871, he played for the Washington Olympics, a team in the National Association, a predecessor of sorts to the modern majors' National League.

He married Hannah Boutwell, the daughter of former Massachusetts Gov. George S. Boutwell, when the latter was serving as President Grant's secretary of the Treasury. Berthrong held a variety of official positions at the Boston Customs House and undertook a long assignment to Cuba after the Spanish-American War. Surprisingly, he pursued art only in his spare time. He lived on Park Avenue for many

years and later moved to Arlington Center. Berthrong died at the Chelsea Soldiers' Home in 1928.

The portrait technique used by Berthrong is a source of curiosity, as Emma Allen's face appears to have been drawn with the aid of some optical device. Although it was not uncommon for photographs to be faintly printed on paper and then touched-up with crayon or paints, the portrait of Emma Allen does not reveal evidence of this oftentimes clumsy method. It is possible that a "camera lucida" was employed, or more likely that a negative of a photograph was projected onto the paper. Either technique enabled the face to be traced in different ways. Properly executed, the result would be a startling lifelike effect attributable to the accurate placement features on the face.

While the camera lucida or other optical devices might at first sound like unsophisticated tracing tools, they in fact required tremendous artistic skill to achieve precise realism. Renowned British artist David Hockney, who revived the camera lucida technique for a millennium exhibition at London's National Portrait Gallery, surmises that the camera lucida's prism "helped artists capture the essential characteristics of subjects they didn't know well."

In 1896, The Arlington Advocate visited Berthrong at his temporary studio in Union Hall (a building that is home to Arlington Coal & Lumber today), where the artist was busy working on the latest series of commissioned presidential campaign portraits.

The reporter observed, "the rapidity with which Mr. Berthrong executes his work is a marvel even when the secret of his skill is revealed. The portraits he paints are much more than the outline of a familiar face, as all who have seen his artistic work can testify. There is no 'machine work' about his pictures; they are honestly the work of his hand in outline and in face making. Only the clothing and such minor details being entrusted to his assistants." Unfortunately, the Advocate never gave away the "secret" of Berthrong's skill. It is hoped that future conservation of this special piece of Arlington will reveal the precise technique that was used.

The portrait of Emma Allen came to the Arlington Historical Society last autumn as the gift of Alan Asadorian, of Dorian Color Lab in Arlington. Asadorian purchased it in 1973 from Mrs. Lindvall of Winchester, who was Emma's daughter. Due to his professional background, Asadorian recalls "the photographic quality attracted me greatly when I first saw the portrait. The eyes have an almost eerie intensity about them." Asadorian's mother, Elizabeth, recorded her preliminary research about Emma Allen as a little girl that provided the basis to current discoveries about both the subject and the artist. Asadorian added, "The local historical background of the drawing intrigued me when I bought it, and I enjoyed having the portrait for many years in my home. Later, I felt that the Arlington Historical Society could make good use of it for future generations to appreciate."