

Hingham Agricultural and Horticultural Society Collection, 1818-1964

Repository:	Hingham Public Library
Manuscript Number:	MSC #1
Creator:	Hingham Agricultural and Horticultural Society
Processed By:	Natalie Johnson. Finding aid completed November 6, 2013.
Quantity:	9 Document Boxes
Access:	Open for research with the exception of two bound volumes in poor condition.
Related Material:	The Bicentennial Collection, held at the Hingham Public Library, also contains information about this society.

Provenance

This is an artificial collection, meaning the line of ownership is unknown. However, the bulk of the collection was most likely donated by John R. Brewer, one of the founders and original directors of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society. Some materials were also donated by Winston Hall.

Historical Note

The Hingham Agricultural and Horticultural Society was organized on November 10, 1858. The first president and chief sponsor of the society was Albert Fearing. Fearing was a well-known philanthropist in the town of Hingham and was involved in a number of organizations. Fearing lived in Boston for part of his life, but just before the Civil War he sold his small farm to buy a large piece of land in his home town of Hingham. After helping to establish the Agricultural and Horticultural Society in Hingham, he remained the president of the society for 17 years.

The vice presidents at the time the society was established were Solomon Lincoln, Charles W. Cushing, and David Whiton. Edmund Hersey was the recording secretary, Thomas T. Bouvé the corresponding secretary, and Joseph H. French the treasurer. The directors included Albert Whiton, Seth Sprague, Henry Cushing, John Stephenson, Elijah Leavitt, Henry Ripley, Morris Fearing, Amos Bates, John Lincoln, Warren A. Hersey, John R. Brewer, and Thomas Whiton. Many of these officers were gentleman farmers with enough money to acquire large quantities of land, experiment with innovative farming methods, and hire laborers to work the land; they also had plenty of time to continue working in their chosen occupation as well as attend society meetings.

The Agricultural and Horticultural Society had scientific, economic, social, moral, and educational goals. Of particular importance to the society was “encouraging and improving the Science and Practice of Agriculture and Horticulture [and] of promoting the amelioration of the various species of animals, grain, fruits, and vegetables.” They were also striving for the physical and social improvements of the town, a restoration of self-reliance, and a revitalization of domestic arts, especially with the younger generation.

Meetings for the Agricultural and Horticultural Society were held at least once a month. Meetings were held at the Lincoln Light Infantry until the Agricultural Hall was built in 1867. During that

same year the society acquired about 16 acres of land and erected a building approximately 100 feet long and 60 feet wide. The new Agricultural Hall included a cook room in the basement, an exhibition space on the first floor, and a dining room for six hundred people on the second floor. Albert Fearing provided beautiful dishes for the dining room. A fireproof room was added in the northwest corner of the building to house the town's books. The Hall became the social center of the town.

In addition to monthly meetings, the society hosted lectures and discussions regularly on a variety of agriculture-related topics in order to facilitate discussion about new strategies and to encourage the development of new skills. Furthermore, the society held a fair and exhibition every year which gave local farmers the opportunity to showcase their handiwork and win prizes in a number of categories.

The first annual fair was held September 28-29, 1859. Cattle were on exhibition at two local farms while fruits, vegetables, and flowers were exhibited in the town hall. In addition to livestock and produce, annual exhibitions usually included arts and crafts and other industrial products. There were specific categories in which children could compete; whereas adults paid a small fee to enter an exhibition, children could enter for free. Anyone who entered an exhibition could win cash prizes for their products. Annual exhibitions became enormously popular and were instrumental in bringing local and neighboring communities together. As trends and technologies developed through the years, the exhibitions reflected their implementation. Later, the attractions at the annual fair multiplied into elaborate productions that had little to do with agriculture or horticulture, which eventually became problematic for the society's sponsors. The simple exhibitions were quickly overshadowed by an explosion of performances, refreshment stands, sideshows, carousels, fire engine musters, parades, band concerts, bicycle races, balloon demonstrations, and baseball games.

These annual fairs were of great value to the community. Although some argued that the fair's lack of focus on agricultural and horticultural exhibitions and activities was inappropriate, many members of the community believed that the society's most valuable benefit was a social one, making the broader scope perfectly acceptable. Governor John D. Long said of the annual fairs, "Its true results are to be found in its unseen, unmeasured, undemonstrative contributions to the character of the public sentiment of the community . . . It has been general in its influence for the refinement of our people and home surroundings . . . the betterment of taste in living. . . Its annual festivals have brought us together, harmonizing our relations, and softening our differences."¹

The Agricultural and Horticultural Society dominated Hingham in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Alfred C. Hersey is reported as saying that a man couldn't win political office in Hingham unless he was a member of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society or belonged to the Old Ship (Puritan Church). New societies, such as the Natural History and Historical Society and the Hingham Institute tried to make a comparable impact on the community but quickly failed. Unfortunately, farming soon became an unprofitable occupation, and the rising cost of crops, wages, and taxes eventually put farmers out of business, although some larger-scale farmers able to export their products were successful for a while longer. When the society's success started to decline, it attempted to recapture focus and control by holding Farmers' Institutes where people could share their ideas regarding agriculture.

¹ George Lincoln, et al., *History of the Town of Hingham, Massachusetts Vol. I, Part 1* (Hingham, Mass: 1893).

The deterioration of the once-thriving Agricultural and Horticultural Society was due to a number of factors: railroad networks allowed products to be imported more cheaply from areas outside the northeast, overworking pastures, wasting resources, and a changing work ethic and different value placed on education for the upcoming generation. John Richardson said “We have treated our agricultural resources as if they were totally expendable . . . Our lives are now dependent upon fragile lifelines that pump in our energy and food . . . The party appears to be over.”²

The Agricultural and Horticultural Society was disbanded in the summer of 1962 after influencing the culture and economy in Hingham for over one hundred years.

Scope and Content

The collection includes a variety of materials including administrative information and financial records, committee reports on annual exhibitions, and such ephemera as programs for the annual fair and ribbons for committee members and prize winners. Administrative and financial information includes annual published transaction reports, some membership information, and bank statements. The committee reports are quite extensive, covering topics from cows and root crops to small fruits and bread; they include reports from committees regarding the overall output or success of each category, in addition to the exhibition winners of the annual fair.

Organization and Arrangement

This collection is organized into the following three series:

- Series I. Administrative Records, 1819-1964
 - Subseries I. Membership and Administrative Information, 1819-1962
 - Subseries II. Financial Records, 1859-1964
 - Subseries III. Transactions, 1858-1917
- Series II. Committee Reports, 1818-1929
 - Subseries I. Agriculture, 1818-1929 (bulk 1818-1893)
 - Subseries II. Children’s Departments, 1862-1893
 - Subseries III. Livestock, 1860-1893
 - Subseries IV. Products (Food), 1860-1893
 - Subseries V. Products (Other), 1865-1893
 - Subseries VI. Miscellaneous, 1855-1880
- Series III. Ephemera, 1819-1952
 - Subseries I. General, 1858-1926
 - Subseries II. Premium Lists, 1917, 1928-1952
 - Subseries III. Ribbons, dates unknown
 - Subseries IV. Vignette, 1867

² Lorena Laing Hart and Francis Russel Hart, *Not All is Changed* (Hingham, Mass: 1993).

Series I. Administrative Records, 1819-1964

Subseries I. Membership and Administrative Information, 1819-1962

Box 1; Box 2, Unfolded Volume

This subseries is comprised of lists of society members, membership cards, letters of resignation from officers and other members, donations by the society, legal documents, and minutes from directors' meetings and member meetings, which include information about exhibition winners, society elections, and new policies. Minimal correspondence regarding the society's dissolution in 1962 is also included.

Subseries II. Financial Records, 1859-1964

Box 2, Folders 1-5; Box 3

Financial records include deposit slips, checkbooks, bank statements, checks, receipts, treasurer's books, and other financial information. Folders 4 and 5 contain deposit slips, record books, and checkbooks from 1934-1963. All other records are arranged chronologically.

Subseries III. Transactions, 1858-1917

Boxes 4 & 5

This subseries is comprised of transaction reports published by the society once a year. The publications include information about society meetings, detailed descriptions of the annual fairs and exhibitions, names of officers and members, upcoming events such as lectures and discussions, rules and regulations, and a report from the president. The first pamphlet includes a brief history of the organization of the society as well as the preamble, by-laws, and amendments set by the society. The last pamphlet in this collection, 1917, contains an emotive president's report referring to the sacrifices and contributions of Hingham to the war effort. These transaction reports include most (if not all) of the committee reports found in Series II. Publications are ordered chronologically. Any years that seem to be missing among the individual transaction publications can be found in the bound volumes.

Series II. Committee Reports, 1818-1929

Subseries I. Agriculture, 1818-1929 (bulk 1818-1893)

Box 6; Box 7, Folder 1

This subseries contains handwritten annual reports submitted by various committees. Submissions include reports on the exhibition itself, and the success of each crop or product; for example, the Committee on Apples reports on the output and quality of apples. Reports of annual exhibition winners are included, which record the name of the winner paired with the winning product and the amount of money awarded. The contents of this subseries are arranged chronologically.

Subseries II. Children's Departments, 1862-1893

Box 7, Folders 2-3

Children were allowed to enter into exhibitions on agricultural improvement, bread and cake, agriculture and horticulture, gardens, useful and fancy articles, penmanship, drawing, sewing, and domestic sciences. This subseries consists of reports on exhibition

winner in these categories open exclusively to competitors under the age of 18. Contents are ordered chronologically.

Subseries III. Livestock, 1860-1893

Box 7, Folders 4-8; Box 8, Folders 1-3

This subseries includes reports on livestock as well as annual exhibition winners. Categories include poultry, cows, sheep, horses, and swine. Reports discuss the number of animals exhibited, how winners were chosen, and how winners should be chosen in the future; criteria includes breed, pedigree, quantity and quality of the product (i.e. wool, milk, meat), weight, and overall appearance. Also discussed are ways to increase interest and improve marketing for their particular category in the annual exhibition. Contents are arranged chronologically.

Subseries IV. Products (Food), 1860-1893

Box 8, Folders 4-5

This subseries consists of reports and annual exhibition winners in the categories of bread and cakes; butter and cheese; and pickles, jams, and jellies. The contents of these folders are first ordered alphabetically by type of product, then chronologically within each product type.

Subseries V. Products (Other), 1865-1893

Box 8, Folders 6-7

This subseries consists of reports and exhibition winners in fancy and useful products, manufactures, penmanship, and fine arts. The contents of these two folders are first ordered alphabetically by type of product, then chronologically.

Subseries VI. Miscellaneous, 1855-1880

Box 8, Folder 8

Reports from a variety of committees make up this subseries. Committees include entertainment, rural sports, the hall, and spading; the report of the librarian is also included. Reports are ordered chronologically.

Series III. Ephemera, 1819-1952

Subseries I. General, 1858-1926

Box 9, Folder 1

This subseries contains cards awarded to exhibition prize winners, and advertisements, tickets, and programs for festivals, balls, exhibitions, and concerts hosted by the society. Also included are pamphlets on agricultural experiments and an *Old Farmer's Almanac* from 1868.

Subseries II. Premium Lists, 1917, 1928-1952

Box 9, Folder 2

This subseries is comprised of Premium Lists, or programs, put out by the society annually. These programs were used to advertise and guide the community in the annual exhibition. The time period covered in this subseries is in the early- to mid-twentieth

century, when the society began its decline; note the more prominent role of the Garden Club of Hingham in hosting these exhibitions.

Subseries III. Ribbons, dates unknown

Box 9, Folders 3-5

This subseries contains ribbons from the society's annual exhibitions. Ribbons from various committees are included, such as the Committee on Apples, on Vegetables, on Grapes, on Children's Department, on Hall, on Dinner, and on Horses. Additionally, special, first premium, and second premium ribbons for poultry; general second premium ribbons; and a general honorable mention ribbon are included.

Subseries IV. Vignette, 1867

Box 9, Folder 6

This subseries contains one small vignette (sketch) of the Hingham Agricultural and Horticultural Society's logo. This vignette was the design on the dishes given by Albert Fearing upon completion of the Agricultural Hall in 1867.

Items separated:

Two bound volumes of transaction reports in poor condition have been restricted and stored elsewhere. Some books on agriculture that were gifted with this collection are intermixed with the existing Historical Collection at the Hingham Public Library.