

# MHS Miscellany

Number 114 / Spring 2018

## ISAAC VOSE, CABINETMAKER *Restored*

THIS SPRING, THE MHS IS VENTURING into the field of furniture restoration—or, more accurately, into restoring the lost reputation of Boston entrepreneur Isaac Vose (1767–1823), once among the young nation’s premier furniture makers. A contemporary of New York’s Duncan Phyfe, who is celebrated as the leading American cabinetmaker of the generation, Vose started a South End-based shop in 1789 that grew to serve the needs of Boston’s wealthiest and most

demanding families. He provided the kind of solid craftsmanship and superb design usually associated with European work. He partook of the overall desire in republican America for classical designs—borrowed largely from ancient Greece and Rome—adapting them to the more conservative values of his New England customers. Eschewing the “gaudy” styles favored in other eastern cities, they wished their houses to be rich but never “showy.”



Massachusetts  
Historical Society  
*Founded 1791*

Vose was so successful in his endeavors—running from 1790 to 1823 several variously eponymous shops (Vose & Coates; Vose, Coates & Company; Vose & Son)—that the name was a household word among style-conscious Bostonians, and furniture produced in the Vose shop, a highly coveted household adornment. The families that acquired Vose furniture, such as the Eliots, the Parkmans, and the Appletons, came from the mercantile and intellectual elite of their day. In the 1820s, as David and Miriam Sears moved into their new Beacon Street home, they set about purchasing furniture—demanding a level of quality and sophistication informed by their years abroad in England and Paris. The extant Sears pieces now attributed to Vose demonstrate the exquisite skill of the craftsmen he employed, including cabinetmaker Thomas Seymour and carver Thomas Wightman.

Within a year of Isaac Vose's death, the Vose & Son business still dominated the area's cabinetmaking trade, and its reputation earned it a role in one of the city's biggest celebrations commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Revolution: the 1824 visit of the Marquis de Lafayette. In the preparations for the stay of this beloved luminary, a house just off the Common was fully outfitted to serve as the general's residence and receiving station. (That building, known as the Amory-Ticknor House, still stands at the corner of Beacon and Park Streets.) To furnish the rooms, the City of Boston contracted with Isaac Vose & Son, ordering nearly 80 pieces of Boston-made furniture, as well as lighting, carpets, silk draperies, and more that the business imported from Europe.

Even two decades after Vose's death in 1823, his name continued to be synonymous with the best in workmanship and advanced French- and English-derived design. Nonetheless, that recognition faded in subsequent decades, and as American antiquarians, collectors, and curators began cultivating an interest in their ancestors' furnishings, they never invoked the Vose shops. Well into the 20th century, heirs of Boston's great families had largely relegated these pieces to storage areas and summer homes. Deeming the style heavy, ugly, and uniformly brown, they were no longer attuned to its superb but subtle craftsmanship, including spectacularly figured mahogany veneers and artful interpretations of ancient design. The scholarly perspective did not help: no published article in American decorative arts literature even mentions Vose until the 1970s.

This spring, thanks to the research done since the early 1970s, all that is changing. And the MHS, in collaboration with Robert Mussey and Clark Pearce, trains the spotlight on Isaac Vose again. The new exhibition *Entrepreneurship and Classical Design in Boston's South End: The Furniture of Isaac Vose and Thomas Seymour, 1815–1825*, curated by Robert and Clark, opened in our galleries in May, featuring selected examples of furniture produced in the Vose shop, including a couch made for Lafayette's visit. Their accompanying book, *Rather Elegant Than Showy: The Classical Furniture of Isaac Vose*, is the first comprehensive study of Vose's life and work. And thus begins his restoration from relative obscurity to a rightful position as one of Boston's most important craftsmen.

The Massachusetts Historical Society is a center of research and learning dedicated to a deeper understanding of the American experience. Through its collections, scholarly pursuits, and public programs, the Society seeks to nurture a greater appreciation for American history and for the ideas, values, successes, and failures that bind us together as a nation.

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Masthead illustration:  
"Plan & Elevation of the Tontine  
Crescent, now erecting in Boston."  
From the *Massachusetts Magazine*,  
1794. The MHS occupied the Tontine  
Crescent from 1794 until 1833.

Front: Dining or breakfast table,  
attributed to Isaac Vose & Son, with  
Thomas Wightman, carver, Boston,  
1824. Mahogany, Honduras mahog-  
any, white ash, brass; H 28½, Dia.  
47". National Park Service, Adams  
National Historic Park (Adams 130);  
photo, David Bohl, courtesy of the  
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*Hours:*  
The MHS reading room is open to  
the public free of charge, 9 AM to  
4:45 PM Monday through Friday and  
9 AM to 4 PM on Saturday.

*For more information:*  
Please call ahead or check the web-  
site for directions, information about  
collections, reading room policies,  
holiday hours, and special events.







Couch, Isaac Vose & Son, with Thomas Wightman, carver, Boston, 1824. Historic New England; photo, David Bohl. The couch was one of 78 pieces made by Vose & Son to furnish General Lafayette's lodgings when he visited Boston in 1824. | Center table, attributed to Thomas Seymour, working either for James Barker or for Isaac Vose & Son, Boston, 1818–20. Deveikis and Barkentin Collection; photo, David Bohl, courtesy of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts. | Bookcase, attributed to Isaac Vose & Son, Boston, 1822–24. Colonial Society of Massachusetts; photo, David Bohl, courtesy of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts. | Pier table, attributed to Thomas Seymour, working either for James Barker or for Isaac Vose & Son, with Thomas Wightman, carver, Boston, 1818–20. Private collection; photo, David Bohl.

## FROM THE PRESIDENT



Happy Spring! As your still-new president, I am thrilled to be penning my inaugural entry for *Miscellany*. As a Member and a Fellow, I always enjoyed getting my copy in the mail. The stories of the collections—what they were, how we got them—were always fascinating reading.

Recently, in a discussion of public history, a museum director reminded us, “It’s all about the people.” As a major repository of family papers, no one knows that better than we do.

For instance, thanks to a gift of papers and photographs from the Allen School and House Preservation Corporation and, subsequently, the generous supporters who provided financial assistance, Vice President for Collections Brenda Lawson and her team can introduce us to a most compelling and historically significant family. The newly processed Nathaniel T. Allen collection focuses on the Allen family as leading educational reformers who valued equal rights for African Americans and women. While they and their institution, affectionately known as “the Allen School,” are indisputable fixtures on the local scene, their reach was truly international. As you will see in the story about the Allens in the following pages, the material we have includes not just manuscript pages but photographs as well. Next time you are in the building, have a look!

As I settle in over here on Boylston Street, people ask me my favorite part of my job. Following the lead of the aforementioned museum director, my answer is swift and sure. “It’s the people”—the historical characters represented in our always-astonishing collections, the colleagues and collaborators who bring these collections to our community, and all of you, supporters of the Society who have given me so much of your time and attention to welcome me, yes, and also to ensure that I understand how special a place this is. Thank you to everyone! I look forward to discovering more stories and getting to know more of you.

—Catherine Allgor, President

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## PLANNING A DIGITAL PUBLISHING COOPERATIVE

Jeremy Belknap and the other founding members of the MHS considered publishing a key tenet of this institution, insisting that “multiplying the copies” would be the only “sure way of preserving historical records.” Thus he invoked the practice of documentary editing: the meticulous transcription of manuscript sources, then annotation,

for print publication. Over the ensuing centuries, the Society has mined its holdings for editions small and large, such as the Adams Papers, the Winthrop Papers, and the Papers of Robert Treat Paine. But the documentary editing field is global, of course, and even as it represents the history of the United States, it is by no means limited to efforts undertaken at the MHS: other founding fathers editions abound, as do printed editions of colonial manuscripts and the primary sources produced by 19th- and 20th-century Americans.

As the digital publishing revolution has progressed, both longstanding and nascent documentary editions have found themselves challenged to “publish” in the electronic environment. The MHS, once again, has blazed a trail in this area, preparing digital editions of its work for delivery at its website for more than a decade. Consequently, when the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) circulated a request for proposals to develop plans for digital publishing cooperatives, we pounced. Last December the Society was awarded a \$62,000 planning grant for 2018—work that is well underway.

The cooperative comprises editions of the diaries of statesman John Quincy Adams and the correspondence of jurist Roger Brooke Taney, author Catharine Maria Sedgwick, and chemist Ellen Swallow Richards. Sharing content that demonstrates shifts in American thought and culture from 1789 to 1914, the resulting cooperative has the potential to bridge the period’s two historically significant ages of protest and reform, thereby affording an opportunity for fresh interpretations of the long 19th century.

During the planning year, representatives from each of the four projects are working with MHS staff from the Adams Papers, the Publications Department, and Collections Services to negotiate the implementation and sustainability of an MHS-based cooperative. The partner projects will work together to develop policies designed to facilitate coexistence of all the editions on the Society’s website and universal searching across the edition cluster. The discussions include the adoption of project-wide standards for editorial practices and guidelines for “marking up” the online content. This grant gives the Society an opportunity to take a leading role in developing workflows that can provide interoperability and improved access and value for a new generation of historical editions.

“There is no sure way of preserving historical records and materials, but by multiplying the copies. The art of printing affords a mode of preservation more effectual than Corinthian brass or Egyptian marble.”

Jeremy Belknap, “Introductory Address,” *Collections of the MHS*, 1:3

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## THE ALLEN SCHOOL

Massachusetts has a long and rich history of promoting accessible primary and secondary education. The evidence of this commitment, as well as its connections to Boston-based reform movements, appears in many MHS collections, such as the papers of Horace Mann and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. We are pleased to announce the availability of an addition to that roster: the papers and photographs of educator Nathaniel Topliff Allen (1823–1903) and his family, now fully processed by the Collections Services staff and described in collection guides posted online ([www.masshist.org/collection-guides/view/fa0439](http://www.masshist.org/collection-guides/view/fa0439) and [www.masshist.org/collection-guides/view/fap055](http://www.masshist.org/collection-guides/view/fap055)). Like many manuscript accessions, the Nathaniel T. Allen collection—a gift of the Allen School and House Preservation Corporation—arrived at the MHS and needed to be arranged and described by collections staff, whose work would prepare it for researchers to access and for internal use. Generous gifts and grants from private supporters made this essential step, a.k.a. processing, possible.

In their work, Nathaniel and his wife, Caroline Bassett Allen, and their three daughters, as well as members of their extended family, exemplified the overlap of Boston-area beliefs about schooling and 19th-century reform movements. Mentored by Horace Mann, a leading advocate of free public education, Nathaniel Allen served as principal of the West Newton English and Classical School (famously known as “the Allen School”) from its beginning in 1854 until his retirement in 1900. The Allen family populated the school’s teaching and administrative staff and took into their homes hundreds of the school’s boarding students. Of the school’s more than 5,000 alumni, many came from outside the Boston area, not just from throughout the United States but also from Europe, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Central and South America, Cuba, and Hawaii. In the 1870s, the school enrolled the first Japanese students to study in the United States, including a nephew of the emperor. Among the school records in the collection, researchers will find student diaries, kept as part of class assignments, describing daily lessons, school activities, and educational progress.

Well ahead of its time in many respects, the school conducted co-educational classes and enrolled African American students. It was one of the first to include physical education as part of its curriculum and, in 1863, opened one of the first formal kindergartens in the United States. The Allens’ expansive interest in reform is well documented in the papers, particularly in portions of Nathaniel’s personal correspondence that show his involvement with abolitionism, educational reform, and women’s suffrage; the collection includes letters from William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Horace Mann, Charles Sumner,

Wendell Phillips, and Lucy Stone. The papers of Caroline Allen and her daughters, Fanny Bassett Allen, Sarah Allen Cooney, and Lucy Ellis Allen, reflect their advocacy for women’s education and suffrage. School records encompass not just those of the Allen School but also the Misses Allen School for Girls, where Lucy served as principal from 1904 to 1942.

The Nathaniel T. Allen photograph collection, stored apart from the manuscript collection, consists of 1,030 photographs, primarily individual and group portraits of Allen family members and students of both Allen schools. Included are daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes, cartes-de-visite, cabinet cards, engravings, negatives, oversize prints, and other photographs taken over a span of almost 100 years. While the most frequent subjects are Nathaniel, Caroline, Fanny, Sarah, and Lucy, about half of the collection



*Above: Cabinet card of the Allen family: Nathaniel Topliff Allen, Lucy Ellis Allen, Sarah Caroline Allen (later Cooney), Caroline Swift Bassett Allen, and Fanny Bassett Allen, December 1882. Taken by McCormick (Boston, Mass.). Photo. #247.311.*

*Next page: Students and teachers in front of Nathaniel T. Allen’s house, June 1886. Taken by A. H. Folsom (Boston, Mass.). Photo. #247.874.*



is made up of individual and group portraits of students, including African American and international students. As processed and described in the collection guide, the subjects are frequently identified by name, and among them researchers will find future writers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, activists, soldiers, at least one actor, and a Supreme Court justice. While only a fraction of the student body is represented, the photographs are a fascinating record of a groundbreaking family of educators and its far-reaching influence on several generations of boys and girls.

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## A SUCCESS BY ANY MEASURE

### *2017 Gomes Book Prize Awarded to Tamara Plakins Thornton*

The evening of January 25, 2018, the night of the annual Gomes Book Prize ceremony, was a success by any measure. Mathematician Nathaniel Bowditch, the subject of the prize-winning publication, doubtless would have appreciated the numbers: even a frigid evening in the port of Boston (roughly 28 degrees, by Daniel Fahrenheit's scale) could not deter more than 80 MHS Members, Fellows, and other friends from making their way to 1154 Boylston

Street to honor author Tamara Plakins Thornton on her achievement.

*Nathaniel Bowditch and the Power of Numbers: How a Nineteenth-Century Man of Business, Science, and the Sea Changed American Life* is more than a brilliant biography. As Prof. Thornton shows us, Bowditch wielded “the power of numbers” in ways that complicate familiar narratives of democratic achievement and scientific progress following the Revolution. Among his many computational endeavors, Bowditch undertook, over the course of several sea voyages, extensive corrections for the most-used navigational work of the late 18th century. His changes became so substantial in 1802 that the American publisher of that text deemed it appropriate to release a new book under Bowditch's name, *The New American Practical Navigator* (a.k.a. Bowditch). Prof. Thornton conveys the wonder of his achievement: the thousands of calculations that Bowditch performed in order to correct the earlier work.

Yet it was his innovations on land in the area of marine insurance—systematically gathering navigational intelligence and organizing logbooks—that set the stage for his reorganization of financial and educational institutions, from the Massachusetts Hospital Life Insurance Company to the Harvard Corporation and the Boston Athenæum. In



his innovative practices, we witness the birth of the modern bureaucracy in which we live today.

A professor of history at the State University of New York at Buffalo, Prof. Thornton is also the author of *Cultivating Gentlemen: The Meaning of Country Life among the Boston Elite, 1785–1860* (1989), and *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (1996). She has conducted research on all of her books here at the Society.

The program for the evening was a departure from our previous award ceremonies. Following the prize presentation, Prof. Thornton and MHS president Catherine Allgor sat down for a conversation on how historians turn from writing monographs to writing biography; Catherine's book on Dolley Madison followed her work *Parlor Politics*, on the founding women of the early republic. She and Prof. Thornton discussed this transition and especially how exploring their subjects' worlds, in writing those earlier books, benefited the ensuing biographies.

Both authors also shared examples of their efforts to connect with their subjects while keeping in mind that the past remains a foreign country. Catherine enjoyed taking a fresh look at Washington politics in its infancy through Dolley Madison's eyes, while considering how politics today are contingent on the 19th-century choices that Dolley, and others like her, made. Prof. Thornton described the loosely organized society that Bowditch transformed into the world we live in today. The audience also engaged in this lively conversation with numerous questions. If you were unable to be a part of that audience, you can enjoy it on the Society's YouTube channel at <https://youtu.be/2s3CV9S-yoA>.

The Peter J. Gomes Memorial Book Prize honors the memory of Reverend Gomes, a respected Harvard scholar and a beloved Fellow of the MHS. The selection committee received submissions that interpret the history of Massachusetts through an exciting range of subjects, from colonial history to political biography and 20th-century environmentalism. These came from nearly a dozen academic, trade, and specialty publishers. And the next cycle has begun, with submissions already entered for consideration for the 2019 award. Keep an eye out for next year's announcement at [www.masshist.org/gomesprize](http://www.masshist.org/gomesprize).

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## A KICK FOR FASHION

This year, the MHS had its own take on Fashion February, brightening up the sometimes drowsy depths of a New England winter. A webpage featuring clothing and related accessories from the Society's collections revealed a new item for each of the 28 days. The feature had several purposes, the primary one of which was to direct our friends to a Kickstarter campaign, run for the same 28 days, to raise the funds that would make it possible to publish a compan-

ion volume for our fall 2018 exhibition, *Fashioning the New England Family*.

And of course we are telling you about this now because the Kickstarter campaign was a success! Launched on February 1 with a goal of \$15,000, the drive closed on February 28, with a cohort of 253 participants who had pledged a total of \$17,510.

The support generated through this initiative is financial—it covers the baseline cost of producing the necessary print-run of a full-color, ca. 128 page book—but it also goes beyond that. Like an old-fashioned “subscription” publication, it gives us a glimpse of the enthusiasm for this project, and it has also alerted a broad and new audience of people—even those who may not have pledged—to the many interesting aspects of the Society's collections. This book will feature the fruit of a dynamic collaboration between MHS curator Anne Bentley and clothing historian Kimberly Alexander, the co-curator of the fall exhibition. Together, they teased out the richness of that resource.

Along the way, as they literally uncovered the many garments and accessories and fabric samples that had once arrived with family papers, they began to piece back together the relationship between the textiles and the manuscripts—many long ago divorced due to their different storage requirements. *Fashioning the New England Family*, both the exhibition and the companion volume, will reunite the textiles with the associated stories carried in the family papers.

The book will be generously illustrated with color photographs of all manner of garments, and remnants of garments, as well as accessories, including exquisite detail shots, providing a lasting overview of the exhibition. The text will delve into the historical context in greater depth, covering a swath of more than 300 years that traces the history of New England clothing from the colonial 17th century, through the Revolutionary 18th century, and into the national 19th.

In these pages, readers will find a fragment of *Mayflower* passenger Priscilla Mullins Alden's dress; Gov. John Leverett's bloodstained buff coat, which saw battle in the English Civil War; and the luxurious Spitalfields green silk damask wedding dress and shoes that Rebecca Tailer Byles wore for her 1747 nuptials in Boston. Across these and many more examples, Dr. Alexander traces patterns of global production and local consumption and reuse, all demonstrating

### What Is Kickstarter?

Kickstarter is an online crowd-funding platform. Run as “campaigns,” each project has a funding goal with a strict deadline. Anyone with an account can pledge to support the project; usually different “perks” are offered at different pledge levels. The outcome of each campaign is essentially pass/fail. If the goal is not met by the end date, the project is not funded.

how New Englanders used costume to establish their situation, especially in terms of class and gender, and also to express their political affiliations. Patriots and loyalists—Hancocks, Adamses, Dawses, and Olivers—make many appearances, as they are so well represented in the Society’s rich holdings. Manuscripts drawn from the collections—receipts, daybooks, account books, diaries—further amplify the historical insights, even at times making it possible to recreate how a specific garment embodied one individual’s sense of identity.

Although it is time to celebrate spring and summer now, please make a note to include *Fashioning the New England Family* in your autumn activities.

*Right: Spitalfields green silk dress worn by Rebecca Tailer Byles at her 1747 wedding and a pale green silk dress made circa 1830 and remade circa 1840. Below: Fragment of woven linen damask from a dress belonging to “Mayflower” passenger Priscilla Mullins Alden.*



## LATE-BREAKING SUMMER PROGRAM NEWS

Sat June 23 The All-American Girls  
@ 4 pm Women in Professional Baseball

Sat June 30 Martin Luther King in Boston Walking Tour  
@ 3 pm (rain date July 14)

Wed July 11 Boston Historical Reception  
@ 6 pm Hosted by Anita Walker, MCC

Wed July 25 Blood and Ivy: The 1849 Murder That Scandalized  
@ 6 pm Harvard | Paul Collins, Portland State University

### BROWN-BAG LUNCHES

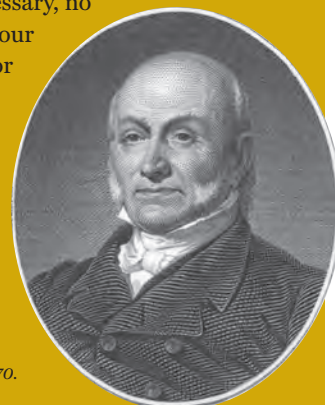
This summer, join us for a series of brown-bag lunch talks about research taking place at the MHS! There is a talk from noon to 1pm on the first Wednesday of every month, and in the summer on many other days as well. For details on all the topics and dates, check the calendar listing at [www.masshist.org/calendar/brown-bags](http://www.masshist.org/calendar/brown-bags).

### JOHN QUINCY ADAMS TRANSCRIBE-A-THON

Celebrate John Quincy Adams’s birthday at the second annual transcribe-a-thon! Immerse yourself in JQA’s diary and help the Adams Papers Editorial Project make more of his 15,000-page diary available online.

While the ability to read handwriting is necessary, no transcription experience is required. Bring your laptop or use one of ours. Come for the day or pop in for a little while. All are welcome!

Lunch and light refreshments will be provided. Registration is free and open to the public. For more information, or to register, contact Gwen Fries: [gfries@masshist.org](mailto:gfries@masshist.org); 617-646-0556.



Engraving by Charles Kennedy Burt, 1870.





*Right: This crimson cloak was worn by Peter Oliver, Massachusetts chief justice (1771) and mandamus councilor (1774). It features a double collar. The top collar is able to fold upright and button at neck while the lower collar is scalloped, ending in a point at center back. The material and workmanship are probably English, from about 1770.*

*Back cover: Wedding shoes manufactured by Viault-Este in France and worn by Sarah D. (Leverett) Tuttle; and wedding shoes worn by Elizabeth Dennison in 1859.*



YANKEES IN THE WEST  
EXHIBITION PREVIEW  
AND RECEPTION |  
OCTOBER 5, 2017



*Member Jeffrey Cronin views the exhibition while MHS staff members Sara Martin and Sara Georgini catch up with Fellow Gregg Lint.*



More than 100 MHS Fellows and Members joined us on October 5 as we celebrated the arrival of Catherine Allgor, incoming President of the MHS, and opened *Yankees in the West*. Guests were welcomed by Paul Sandman, Chair, Board of Trustees, and listened to remarks by Pres. Allgor. Then Sara Martin, editor in chief of the Adams Papers, presented “Where the sunset beckons’: Henry Adams in the West.” Following the presentations, guests were able to preview the exhibition and enjoy the reception.

*Clockwise from bottom left: Member Ralph Copper and guest Laurie Coleman-Sneed discuss materials on display. Stephen T. Riley Librarian Peter Drumme speaks to guests during the reception. New president Catherine Allgor.*



## MHS FELLOWS AND MEMBERS HOLIDAY PARTY | DECEMBER 6, 2017



Decked out in holiday attire, 150 MHS Fellows and Members attended the Society's annual holiday party. Guests enjoyed an evening of holiday cheer with seasonal music provided by the Figgy Puddin' Carolers and listened to Stephen T. Riley Librarian Peter Drummey's reading of the anti-Christmas proclamation, now an annual tradition. As part of the festivities, a happy retirement was wished to MHS president emeritus Dennis Fiori.

*Above, right: Stephen T. Riley Librarian Peter Drummey reads the anti-Christmas laws, attended by Fellow and Overseer Tom Paine, who holds a halberd from the Society's collection.*

*Bottom, left: The Figgy Puddin' Carolers provide a musical backdrop for the festivities.*

*Photographs by Laura Wulf.*

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THE MHS & KICKSTARTER? SEE INSIDE.