

Theodore Voelckers

A Picturesque Public Hall for a New Town

Roger G. Reed
Brookline Preservation Commission

Theodore Voelckers, who designed the Lyceum Hall in Winchester, Massachusetts, in 1851, was one of a number of architects practicing in Boston in the mid-19th century who were regularly working on projects in the developing suburban towns (figure 1). Although little is known about Voelckers' work in Boston, buildings by him have been identified in Andover, Dedham, Newton, Winchester, Lawrence, and Wellesley.¹ Residents of these outlying communities wanted to erect buildings

which would project sophisticated images. Trained architects like Voelckers were able to provide such designs.

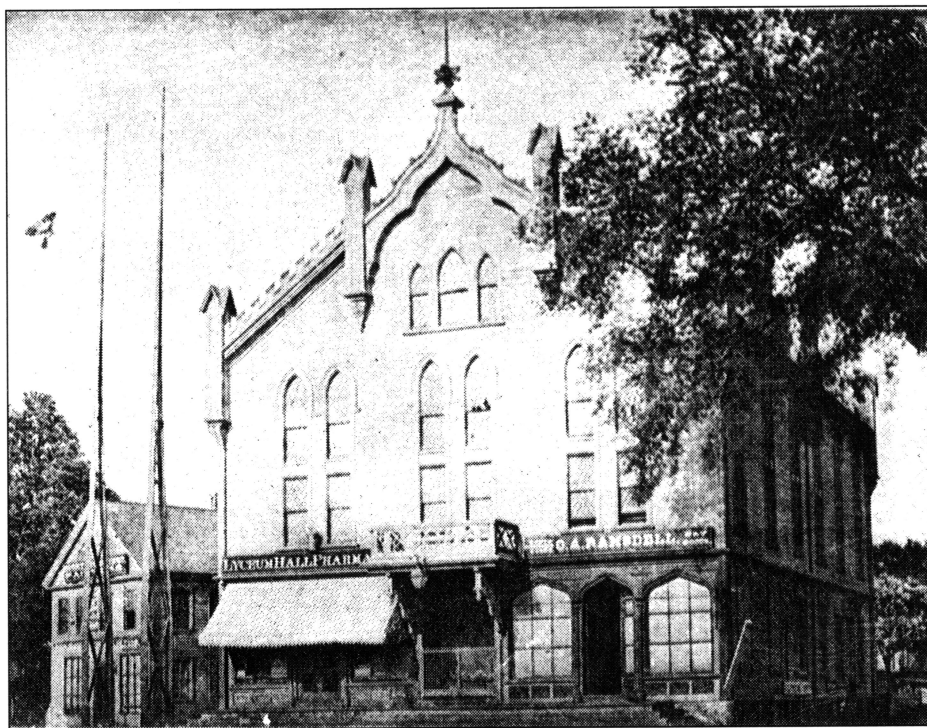
Like other architects of his generation, Voelckers began his career by training in the office of an established firm rather than by working in the building trades. Before starting his own firm in 1843, Voelckers worked for Isaiah Rogers, one of the leading architects in the country.

Voelckers had emigrated from Germany, arriving in New York City on 9 May 1836

at age twenty-one. He had been born in Holstein, northern Germany, on 24 March 1815.² Although Voelckers' name does not appear in the New York City directories of the late 1830s, he was working there in November of 1840, when he was hired by Rogers and moved to Boston.³ Information about this period of Voelckers' life may be found in Rogers' diaries, which are owned by the Avery Library, Columbia University.⁴

Rogers was directing a national practice. His reputation had been established with the design of the Tremont House in Boston (1828-29), the first palatial hotel built in America. By 1836, Rogers had opened an office in New York to work on major projects such as the Astor House hotel (1835-39) and the Merchants' Exchange (1836-41). These projects would have required a large number of drawings, and Rogers may have employed Voelckers as a draftsman. Whatever the case, Voelckers' first work for Rogers in his Boston office, located at 54 State Street, was as a draftsman. By 1841, Voelckers joined the small group of individuals who listed themselves as "architect" in the Boston directory.

The Rogers diaries provide information about Voelckers' early years in Boston. The first reference to Voelckers records that, while in New York in November of 1840, Rogers "called on Mr. Voelckers and made an engagement to have him for \$14 per week as long as I should like him and have anything for him to do."⁵ This opportunity apparently offered enough



Winchester, Mass., Archival Center

FIGURE 1. Lyceum Hall, built in Winchester in 1851, contained both commercial space and public meeting rooms.

incentive for Voelckers to relocate to Boston. By December 5, he was working on Boston's new Merchants' Exchange Building and was paid \$15 for a drawing of the front elevation. In January, however, his rate was reduced to \$10 per week.⁶ Throughout 1841 and 1842, Voelckers worked in Rogers' office, preparing plans for a variety of projects. He seems to have been especially involved in the design of the Merchants' Exchange, an imposing Greek Revival style edifice in Boston's financial district. In April 1841, Voelckers and Rogers participated in the cornerstone ceremony for the Merchants' Exchange.⁷

One of Voelckers' lasting accomplishments was a rendering of the block of State Street which included the newly completed Merchants' Exchange.⁸ This drawing, which was lithographed by B. W. Thayer & Company, is an outstanding early 19th-century view of Boston and displays Voelckers' skills in architectural rendering.

On May 29, shortly after work on the Merchants' Exchange was begun, one of the Rogers diaries contains an entry that provides the first evidence of the difficulties which would overshadow the career of the young draftsman: "Signed a bond for appearance to court of Mr. Voelckers."⁹

During the next six months, Rogers lent Voelckers money, and in August of 1842, Rogers signed another bail bond for him.¹⁰ According to Denys Peter Myers, the leading authority on the architect, Rogers was a generous and kindly man.¹¹ The diaries reveal that he tried to help Voelckers with his problems, which may have been caused by debt, alcohol, or both. Apparently Voelckers avoided prison, for in the same month as his second court appearance, he was working on plans for a gateway to Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge.

Before the end of the year, Voelckers experienced two personal tragedies. On September 28, his 18-month-old daughter Georgiana died of consumption, and on December 29, Voelckers' wife Sarah died of brain cancer.¹² Voelckers is mentioned for the last time in the diaries on 16 March 1843. Because a gap exists in the surviving material for the period when Voelckers left Rogers, we do not know under what conditions they parted company.



Andover, Mass., Historical Society

FIGURE 2. Voelckers designed an elaborate Gothic Revival house for John Dove in Andover, Mass., in 1847.

Voelckers was not listed in the Boston directory for 1842, when he was working for Rogers. By 1843, the Boston directory records that he and Rogers both had offices in the new Merchants' Exchange, but in different rooms. The following year, according to the directory, Voelckers had moved to 4 Devonshire Street.

Early in 1843, Voelckers prepared plans for a small shop and residence on West Canton Street in Boston. Although the building no longer survives, it is documented by a contract between the architect and the builder, recorded in the Suffolk County Registry of Deeds.¹³ The cost of construction was \$600, and the client was a cordwainer named Conrad Ruby. According to the contract, the building was frame and had a flat roof. The street-level elevation included the store, which had large multi-pane windows, and a doorway which led to the second-story residence. To the extent that the building had an architectural style, the features appear to have been Greek Revival. While this project is relatively minor, it is of interest in that it establishes the extent to which architects were involved in the design of small buildings by this time in Boston.

In the same year, Voelckers designed a block of four brick row houses in Boston's South End for Joshua C. Dodge. The houses, which no longer exist, are also

documented by a contract at the Suffolk County Registry of Deeds.¹⁴

Voelckers' first major commission for which a record survives is the country house of John Dove (figure 2), built in Andover in 1847.¹⁵ Dove was a mill owner who, like Voelckers, was an immigrant and a self-made man. It is likely that he was the type of client with whom Voelckers found affinity. Dove's estate, called "Arden," included a Gothic Revival house and a greenhouse, which still remain in a well-preserved condition. The Dove house is an excellent example of the type of picturesque architecture then coming into popularity in the prospering towns around Boston. In its complexity and detail, the house was clearly the work of an architect rather than a local builder.

During the same year, Voelckers also was the architect for the Charles Shaw house in Dedham.¹⁶ This residence, which still stands, was Italianate in style. Its plan was traditional, with a central hall. Its exterior, however, was consistent with contemporary Italianate designs. It had wide overhanging eaves, supported by brackets, round-arched windows, a round-arched entry, and a portico supported by clustered columns. Sited on a hill overlooking the town, the house has been converted into a school administration office building.

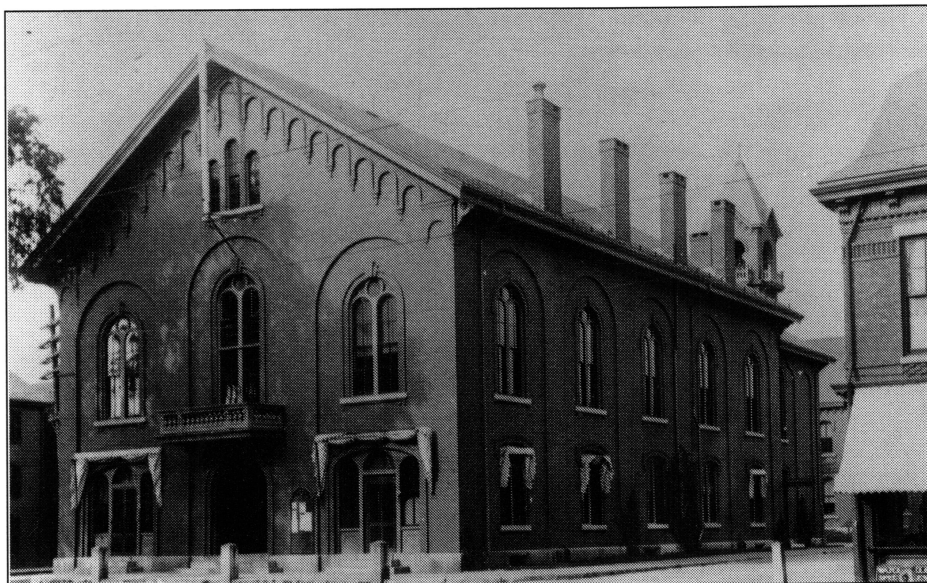
In 1849, the Auburndale Educational Association in Newton hired Voelckers to

design a public hall.¹⁷ The erection of such public halls was part of a nationwide adult education movement. In many instances, the sponsoring groups were affiliated with the National American Lyceum Organization. Often, as was the case with the Auburndale building, the public hall also was used by a religious congregation prior to their constructing a church. Both the Dove estate and the Auburndale hall make clear that Voelckers had achieved a degree of success as an architect by the time he secured the commission to design the Lyceum building in the new town of Winchester.

When Winchester was incorporated in April 1850, municipal gatherings took place in the Congregational Church. As the construction of a town hall was not yet feasible, several prominent citizens, including Charles McIntier, Josiah Hovey and J. A. Bolles, organized the Lyceum Corporation to construct a building that would contain a hall for public meetings.¹⁸ Incorporation took place in March 1851, and Voelckers was selected as the architect that June. Although Voelckers was then in partnership with Elisha M. Hall, no evidence suggests that Hall was involved in this project.¹⁹

The building was constructed on a site located at the intersection of streets that today are called Mount Vernon Street and Shore Road. Lyceum Hall (figure 1) had three stories and a basement. In addition to several public rooms, it contained commercial space to provide income for the corporation. In the basement were four shops and six cellars, reflecting the common practice during the 19th century of making use of the area below grade with access from the sidewalk. The first story contained two stores and a hall with folding doors to partition the space. The second story included four offices and the main hall, which could seat 450 people. The third floor was designed with two committee rooms and another hall.

Voelckers was responsible for the plan and the exterior of the hall, which was Gothic Revival in style. He apparently was not involved with interior decorations of the main hall, as the moldings were said to have been designed by Berry & Rogers, and the fresco paintings were by two young Germans, Mayer and Fisher. The choice of



Andover, Mass., Historical Society

FIGURE 3. Like the Lyceum Hall in Winchester, Andover Town Hall, 1858, was built with shops on the ground floor and public spaces above.

this style, with its elaborate ornamentation, suggests that the men who financed the enterprise were willing to commit a relatively substantial sum for a building that exhibited the latest fashions.

The newspaper at the time claimed the building was constructed with frugality.²⁰ As an example, the newspaper noted that the shop front windows were designed with small panes, as opposed to plate glass. However, multi-paned lights, which were colored, were typical of the Gothic Revival buildings of the period. Moreover, the lancet and ogee-shaped windows as well as the matchboarding on the principal facade required expensive joinery. Ornate wood finials, vergeboard, and cresting embellished the roofline, creating a Lyceum Hall of considerable splendor for Winchester.

The architecture of the mid-19th century was not viewed favorably by later generations of architects. By the 1880s, architectural critics in America were scornful of much of what was built during the middle years of the century. George Rand, Winchester's most influential 19th-century architect, wrote in an unpublished manuscript, "... with few exceptions the architects of that time in this country were very insufficiently trained and their work ... was extremely crude. Unfortunately, the architect of Lyceum Hall attempted to make a gothic building. It is needless to say

the attempt was a failure. It could not have been otherwise. His knowledge of the style was probably limited to the debased forms of German gothic, and he was quite unaware that gothic is a style that even a master can not handle in wood."²¹

Such criticisms, which were commonly held until relatively recently, assumed that historic architectural styles should follow precedent in their materials and uses. A more recent interpretation of buildings such as Winchester's Lyceum Hall is that they express a vigorous and fanciful break from traditional classical architecture. They are appreciated for boldness and originality of treatment. Today Lyceum Hall would be a local architectural treasure if it were to have survived. Unfortunately, several remodelings and a fire have destroyed the original design.

After completion of Winchester's Lyceum Hall, Voelckers was hired to design an elaborate well-house for Mt. Auburn Cemetery in 1852.²² Within the next few years, according to the *Maine Register* for 1855, Voelckers took on a partner, James A. Thomas. The firm of Voelckers & Thomas also acted as local agents for the Eastern Bricks and Lumber Company. How long the partnership between Voelckers and Thomas lasted is unknown, as Voelckers is not listed in the Boston directory for the years 1855-56 and 1856-57.²³



Collection of Ken Skulski

FIGURE 4. The Pemberton Mill, still a major landmark in Lawrence, Mass., was designed by Voelckers after an earlier mill building burned in 1860.

The 1858 directory shows that Voelckers had an office in the Phoenix Building and a house in East Cambridge. That year, he also designed the town hall in Andover (figure 3), a brick Italianate structure still standing on Main Street.²⁴ Like the Lyceum Hall in Winchester, the Andover Town Hall was built with shops on the ground floor and public spaces above. Each elevation has blind arcading, which extends a full two stories. Set within the arches on the upper story are pairs of large, round-arched windows. Below the eaves is round-arched corbeling.

In January 1860, one of the most notorious industrial tragedies of the 19th century occurred in Lawrence, with the collapse of the Pemberton Mill. A number of workers were killed or injured. The incident was well-publicized around the nation, and the Essex Corporation, owner of the mill, must have been conscious of the need to rebuild with state of the art engineering and design. Voelckers was hired by the Essex Corporation to design a new Pemberton Mill (figure 4). Built in an Italianate style, the mill was similar to the

Andover Town Hall. Voelckers moved to Lawrence for two years as an employee of the Essex Corporation, and his son Frederick worked as a machinist in the mills. The Pemberton still stands, largely unaltered, a major landmark in Lawrence.²⁵

When Voelckers returned to Boston and resumed his private practice, in 1862, he was hired by another prominent client. Henry Durant, the founder of Wellesley College, asked the architect to prepare plans for improvements to his gentleman's farm in Wellesley (then Needham). This project was undertaken ten years prior to Durant's establishment of the famous school for young women. The farm was later incorporated into the Wellesley campus. Surviving plans show the arrangement of agricultural buildings in a courtyard plan which is more suggestive of Voelckers' native Germany than of New England. Voelckers also may have been responsible for the remodeling of the farmhouse, which features a variety of picturesque architectural details.²⁶

Soon after the end of the Civil War, in 1866, Voelckers developed plans for low-

budget housing. He presented these plans before a meeting of the Social Science Association in Boston.²⁷ The topic of the program was "Homes for the Middling and Poorer Classes." An article about the meeting appeared in the *Boston Transcript*, with Voelckers' plans discussed in some detail. He proposed relatively large buildings, which would contain a number of rental units. In remarks at the meeting, he projected the cost of such buildings and income from rent, demonstrating that his proposal was economically viable.

Little is known about Voelckers' relations with other architects, but records of his brief involvement with the founding members of the Boston Society of Architects in 1867 indicate that he did not get along with his peers. On May 16, several leading Boston architects issued a call to form a professional organization. An organizational meeting was held on May 22, and Voelckers was among the twenty-seven architects attending. According to an unpublished manuscript on the history of the Boston Society of Architects, written in 1942, "Remarks were made by

Mr. Voelckers upon the want of sympathy among the architects of Boston with incidents illustrating the inconveniences arising from the want of cooperation and common interests in the profession.”²⁸ Edward C. Cabot, who was temporary chairman of the new group, appointed Voelckers to serve on a committee to prepare a constitution and by-laws for the society. Also appointed to the committee were Henry Van Brunt, Nathaniel Bradlee, and Charles Cummings, three well-known architects.

A report was issued by the committee on 5 June 1867; Voelckers alone did not sign it. After this incident, Voelckers did not participate in the Boston Society of Architects. He appears to have felt that, despite his having more than twenty years of experience as an architect, he had not received the respect that he deserved.²⁹

In 1870, Andover’s selectmen asked Voelckers to rebuild the Punchard School, which had been gutted by fire.³⁰ His reputation among the citizens of Andover was such that he was chosen over the school’s original architect, John Stevens. Voelckers’ drawings still survive, although the Punchard School is no longer standing.

Voelckers’ career appears to have declined in the final decade of his life. His last project which has been identified is the small German Reformed Church on Shawmut Street in Boston, built in 1872 in the High Victorian Gothic style.³¹ It still stands but has been substantially altered.

The architect’s personal life was troubled. After enduring the death of his first wife, Voelckers was left by his second wife, Olivia Stacey, who later married a Mr. Brockway and moved to Sullivan County, New Hampshire.³² As there is no record of a marriage between her and Voelckers in Massachusetts, she may have been his common-law wife. In his will, however, he left his estate to Olivia Brockway “for her faithful support”.³³ The mystery of Voelckers’ private life is compounded by another provision in the will stating that should Olivia Brockway die first, the estate would go to his son, Frederick Voelckers, excepting one-fourth to Abigail Griffin or her daughter, Sarah A. Thomas.

The picturesque styles which character-

ized Voelckers’ work and, in general, the work of the architects of his generation were no longer in fashion in Voelckers’ later years. He died at age 64, virtually unnoticed, on 17 August 1879. He was buried in Gloucester.³⁴ Although Lyceum Hall in Winchester has been rebuilt beyond recognition, the Dove house and Town Hall in Andover and the Pemberton Mill in Lawrence survive as major examples of the work of this once successful mid-19th-century Boston architect.

NOTES

1. Only three projects by Voelckers have been found in Boston. Yet an obituary for a one-time partner alludes to other Boston projects. See James A. Thomas obituary, *Malden (Mass.) Mirror*, 12 Jan. 1884. The obituary notes that Thomas “entered into partnership with Theodore Voelckers, Esq., one of the finest architects in the city. Many of the beautiful designs, now so much admired in Boston, are the product of their united genius . . .”

2. See Naturalization Records, Suffolk County, Mass., at the National Archives, Waltham, Mass. Holstein was in the duchy of Oldenburg. No records have come to light regarding Voelckers’ parents or their backgrounds.

3. I have checked the city directories for New York and Brooklyn for the years 1836–1842; Voelckers is not listed.

4. Isaiah Rogers Diaries, Avery Library, Columbia University, New York, N.Y. My thanks to Stephen Jerome, curator of the Brookline, Mass., Historical Society, for alerting me to the fact that Voelckers is mentioned in the diaries, and to Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., for providing me with transcripts of the diary entries. For background information on this important early 19th-century document, see Denys Peter Myers, “The Recently Discovered Diaries of Isaiah Rogers,” *Columbia Library Columns*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1966.

5. Rogers Diaries, 30 Nov. 1840.

6. *Ibid.*, 21 Jan. 1841.

7. *Ibid.*, 17 Apr. 1841.

8. *View of the Merchants’ Exchange, State St., and the Proposed Post Office on Congress St.*, Prints and Photographs Dept., Boston Athenaeum, Boston, Mass.

9. Rogers Diaries, 29 May 1841.

10. *Ibid.*, 22 Aug. 1842.

11. Myers, “Recently Discovered Diaries.”

12. Death records, City of Cambridge, Mass. Where they were buried is not recorded.

13. Suffolk County Registry of Deeds, Boston, Mass. Book 495, 262–64. The date of the contract with John L. Hanson is 30 Jan. 1843. This information was provided by Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., who has been documenting the building contracts in the Suffolk County Registry of Deeds.

14. Suffolk County Registry of Deeds, Boston, Mass. Book 513, 206. An agreement was signed between Dodge and John H. Braynard, a mason, on 1 July 1843. The houses were located on Albany Street.

15. Jacob Chickering Papers, North Andover Historical Society Archives, North Andover, Mass. Thanks to Stephen Jerome and Barbara Thibault, director of the Andover Historical Society, for their help in identifying this project.

16. Stephen Jerome told me about this house, which is documented in *Building Dedham: Celebrating 350 Years of History*, ed. Electa Kane Tritsch, Dedham, Mass., 1986, 57. The Charles Shaw house was attributed to Voelckers based on information on the back of an historic photograph, which included the name of the architect, names of the builders, and cost of construction. I have not located the photograph but assume that the attribution to Voelckers would not have been provided without some basis of fact.

17. Records of the United Parish Church of Auburndale (Newton), Mass. No view survives of this building, which burned in 1865. Barbara Thibault shared this information with me.

18. *Woburn (Mass.) Journal*, 17 Jan. 1852.

19. The firm of Voelckers & Hall is listed only twice in the Boston city directory, for the years 1850 and 1851. I have found no other record of Elisha Hall.

20. *Woburn (Mass.) Journal*, 17 Jan. 1852.

21. “Winchester Houses and Other Buildings. Illustrated and Described by George Dutton Rand,” unpublished manuscript in the Rollins College Archives, Winter Park, Fla. Rand lived in Winchester between 1875 and 1886, so the manuscript may be dated from this period. Thanks to Maureen Meister for sharing this citation with me.

22. *Cambridge (Mass.) Chronicle*, 11 Sept. 1852. This structure no longer survives. Ann Clifford, from the Cambridge Historical Commission, provided me with complete documentation on the well-house.

23. See George Adams, *Maine Register for the Year 1855*, Portland, 1855. The location of the Eastern Bricks and Lumber Company has not been identified, but it may have been Maine. James A. Thomas began as an architect in his native Belfast, Maine, where he was credited with introducing the new picturesque styles of archi-

ecture to that town. See the *Belfast (Maine) Republican Journal*, 10 Jan. 1884. Thomas worked in Galveston, Tex., and New Orleans in the years before the Civil War. It is possible that Voelckers went south with him during the years when Voelckers was not in Boston. Thomas returned to Massachusetts when the Civil War broke out and settled in Malden, where he worked as an architect-builder. A long obituary for him was published in the *Malden (Mass.) Mirror*, 12 Jan. 1884.

24. *Andover (Mass.) Advertiser*, 29 May 1858, 24 July 1858, and 1 Jan. 1859. The Andover Historical Society has specifications written by Voelckers in 1863 to add a cupola to the town hall. This project was never executed.

25. See Clarisse A. Poirier, "Pemberton Mills, 1852-1938: A Case Study of the Industrial and Labor History of Lawrence, Massachusetts," Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1978. Ken Skulski of the Immigrant City Archives in Lawrence was helpful in my research on Voelckers.

26. The plans by Voelckers are in the Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, Mass.

27. *Boston Transcript*, 13 Apr. 1866. Stephen Jerome brought this article to my attention. In it, Voelckers is described as "a well-known architect."

The president of the Boston Social Science Association was George B. Emerson, a leader in education and a naturalist. The members of the Social Science Association were liberal, but not radical, in outlook. For further information on this organization, see Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority*, Urbana, Ill., 1977.

28. See William D. Austin, F.A.I.A., "A History of the Boston Society of Architects in the Nineteenth Century (From 1867 to January 4, 1901)," 1942, Archives, Boston Society of Architects, Boston, chapt. 1, 7.

29. *Ibid.*, chapt. 1, 6-13.

30. The Voelckers plans for the reconstruction are in the collections of the Andover Historical Society, Andover, Mass.

31. "Report of the Inspector of Buildings for the Year 1873," Boston, 1874, 28.

32. This information is contained in the will of Theodore Voelckers, Suffolk County Registry of Wills, Boston, Mass.

33. *Ibid.*

34. He was buried in Oak Grove cemetery in Gloucester. I have been unable to discover any connection that may have existed between Voelckers and this community. See *Cape Ann (Gloucester, Mass.) Bulletin*, 27 Aug. 1879.

Number 3, 1996

THE ARCHITECTS OF WINCHESTER,
MASSACHUSETTS

Published by the



WINCHESTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

15 High Street
P.O. Box 127
Winchester, MA 01890

EDITOR
Maureen Meister

GRAPHICS
LMY Studio, Inc.