

Old Schwamb Mill · Works in Progress · Fall 2020

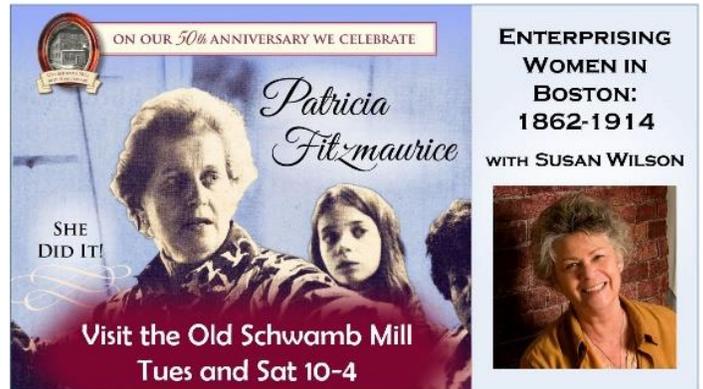
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Activity at the Mill in This Unusual Year

This 50th anniversary year of the Old Schwamb Mill started with high hopes. In January, we opened the exhibit **She Did It! Women Saving History**, illustrating the work of **Patricia Fitzmaurice** in preserving the Mill in 1969-1970 alongside women whose efforts gave life to Mount Vernon, the Saugus Iron Works, the Boston Athenæum and the Bunker Hill Monument

Like the rest of the museum world, we have had to make adjustments in response to Covid-19. Here is how the Old Schwamb Mill managed this year.

- From March to early September, the museum closed to the public in keeping with state recommendations. After creating a protocol that includes masking, sanitation, open windows, small group admission, and a visitor registry with contact information, we reopened in September. The She Did It! exhibit was extended through December 5.
- The Mill took exhibit-related public programs virtual, via Zoom or ACMi. These programs included **Richard Duffy** speaking on Arlington in 1970, **Susan Wilson** presenting a history of Boston's enterprising women 1862-1914, and a children's puppet show "The Badger and the Fairies" with **Margaret Moody** recorded at the Mill with live interaction.
- With a matching grant from **Freedom's Way National Heritage Area**, the Mill filmed virtual tour threads to make the museum and frame-making process accessible to those unable to visit in person. The tours are available on the Mill's website and YouTube channel. Thanks to **ACMi** for loan of equipment, and to **Tyler Vaillancourt** and **Reed Snyder** for film, sound, and editing expertise.
- We launched a blog series, Schwamb Shares. Every month, we share one or two articles of research relating to the Mill, its frame-making, its history as a business, the Schwamb family, and the many workers who made the factory productive for 104 years. With time for research, we've learned more about the Mill's history ourselves, and the Schwamb Shares have hundreds of views from friends on our 1500+ email list. Our authors include **Edward Gordon**, Director of Museum Programs, and directors **Doreen Stevens** and **Dermot Whittaker**. Special thanks to **Wayne Schwamb** for sharing family history and photographs for some of these blogs.
- Collections and archival work continues. Thanks to volunteers like **Margie Hilton**, in six months we have indexed Schwamb-era business correspondence, added new worker information to our database, and transcribed a 1901 travel journal written by Clinton W. Schwamb in a trip to visit relatives in Chicago and Denver.



- We have also photographed and identified many factory-era tools, patterns, signs, and even wooden storage boxes. Former Mill employee **Jim Roach** helped us identify a stash of custom-made moulding machine hold-down bars discovered in the Mill's barn.
- We've made upgrades to our public restroom, barn, and brook-side garden. Thanks to targeted donations from Mill supporters, the 1990s-era bathroom received a new coat of paint, a more versatile sink-and-faucet, and a badly needed new floor. For a new barn tenant, we took up the 1980s carpet on the barn's second floor and covered the existing plywood with inexpensive birch face underlayment, with two coats of polyurethane for durability. Thanks to directors **Grace Dingee** and **Robert Tanner** for taking the lead on these projects, and special thanks to landscaper and gardener **Eva Panszczyk** for her months of ongoing care of our back garden.



Tending to Business: Funding and Administration

The Schwamb Mill Preservation Trust, Inc., is fortunate to have had **Mark Spengler** as Treasurer since 2010. As a board member and officer of the 501(c)(3), Mark reports to his fellow directors at the board's monthly meetings, providing a written comparison report showing a breakdown income and expenses for the current year as compared to the same time the previous year. Investments of endowment are reviewed quarterly by Mark and the board. In addition to his full-time employment outside the Mill, Mark pays the bills, tends to the bank account, works with Mill's insurance broker and accountant, monitors deposits of donations, and records in-kind gifts. With Mark Spengler on the job, the directors are well informed and have each question answered as they plan for the Mill's present and future.

Donor outreach and response falls to President **Dermot Whittaker** with assistance on mailed outreach from Publicist and Museum Administrator **Lynette Aznavour Bennett**. Lynette manages our press releases, printing and non-profit status bulk postal mailings, along with our website and monthly e-newsletter, all vital parts of the Mill's communication.

With Covid-19 changing everyone's routine, the Mill has needed to rethink visitation more than once this year. Vice President **Janet O'Riordan** has attended Zoom meeting after meeting with town officials, Arlington Economic Task Force, Chamber of Commerce, and Arlington Heights business community to keep the Mill abreast of best practices for staying visible and connected. Janet and Lynette worked with directors **Ellen Cohen**, **Ann LeRoy**, **Doreen Stevens**, and others to develop the protocols under which the Mill has opened to the public since September. This has included plans to share exhibits online instead of in person as needed during the current pandemic.

One other mundane but important set of tasks is managed by director **Robert Tanner**: keeping the building and its systems in good repair. This includes the heating system, the entrance, smoke and fire alarms, and the dry fire system for the building itself, all of which call for work with professional vendors.

THE LARGEST FRAME THE SCHWAMB MILL EVER TURNED

Fourth in an occasional series of "Schwamb Shares"

In Jacob's Bitzer's "History of the Mills along Sucker Brook," read at a meeting of the Arlington Historical Society in 1924, he says that the Schwamb factory's business gradually shrank through the later nineteenth century. He adds that Clinton and Louis Schwamb, grandsons of the founder Charles Schwamb, rebuilt the business after taking over in November 1904. Bitzer's version of events is borne out by the account books, now in the Mill's archives. These show a steady increase in frame and moulding orders, employees, and investment in the plant and its equipment from 1904 to 1929. In 1908, Charles Schwamb and Son was incorporated as the Clinton W. Schwamb Company, and the name was added to the office safe.

Given these positive changes, it is not surprising that the following item – a demonstration of the Mill's new vigor — appears in a trade publication of the day, *The Wood-worker*.

Largest Circular Picture Frame Ever Made by Hand.

What is claimed to be the largest circular picture frame ever made by hand, was turned out recently at the Schwamb factory, Arlington, Mass. The big circle measures 83-in. diameter and was made on a special order. The frame took 39-ft. of lumber to make it. Other frames have been manufactured as large as this one, but they have been molded.

The frame is for a well-known Boston firm, and was taken to Boston via automobile to be hand-carved. The big circle is a fine sample of the wood-turner's art, and the outside is half-rounded to a bead on the inside and to a concaved bead on the back.

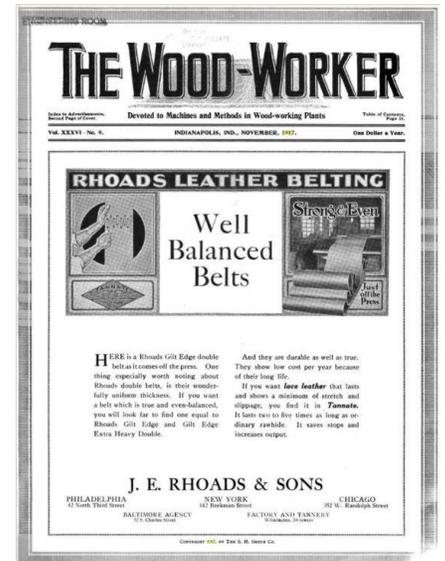
The Wood-worker, Volume 36 (S.H. Smith Co., 1917), page 47

Finding this article online via Google Books, we at the Mill asked ourselves: Who was this frame for and does it still exist?

We hope to find this frame for several reasons. A hand-carved round frame of this size and shape seems more likely to be a fixed architectural feature than a moveable picture frame. Whether the "well known Boston firm" was the customer or one of the many frame shops that ordered from the Schwambs, we suspect that the frame found its home in the Boston area. Plus...don't we have the order books in the archives?

We do – and have not yet found our answer. Two volunteers have read and re-read the orders from September 1916 to November 1917 without finding the frame. It should stand out: it was a circle, a distinct size, and a special order. We estimate the 1917 wholesale price to be between \$7.00 and \$9.00 — possibly more since it was a special order that would take a workman off the usual production.

Might there be other clues in the account books? Unlike the chronological entries in the order books, cash books, and transaction journals, the ledger shows transactions under their accounts (customer and supplier names, but also categories such as shipping and delivery). Thanks to a volunteer's indexing of the ledgers some years ago, we were able to quickly look up any categories that might have involved the giant frame's special transport by automobile described in the article. But nothing stands out under these accounts.



OK – could such a frame even be turned on the Mill’s basement lathe? Our current turner David Graf has produced 6 foot by 4 foot black walnut ovals on the downstairs lathe. But this circle was larger, nearly 7 feet in diameter. By our measurements, the basement lathe has enough clearance for a frame this size – have a look at the picture at right.

Nevertheless, at this point our search was at a standstill – until we remembered an item of graffiti near the lathes on the first floor.

Our best reading of this graffiti is:

The largest frame turned here to date June 12. 1917.



(81 1/2 outside 3 1/2 wide 2" thick by J. M. Sousa.)

This seems a very close match to the frame described in the article, despite a slight disagreement over its diameter (if we are reading the damaged message correctly). The June 1917 date leaves time for the news item to have been written and mailed (probably by a pleased Clinton or Louis Schwamb, who were subscribers to *The Wood-Worker*). However, even with that specific date as a point of reference, no account book entries near that date reveal the frame or activity that might relate to its manufacture or transport. (A rare COD delivery via Adams Express, a few days later in June, to frame shop owner who was also a wood carver appeared promising – but he was based in Providence, RI, and his purchases were consistently for mouldings and ovals).

We remain puzzled by our failure to find the order for this frame in the records – but we are eager to try other resources. The *Arlington Advocate* might have published a similar article, perhaps with more detail (we await the reopening of Robbins Library to have a look at the *Advocate* on microfilm). Electronic searches in the historic *Boston Globe* through the Boston Public Library have not yielded any news of the tremendous circle.

A few words about the man who turned the frame, Joe Sousa.

Joseph Marier Sousa worked at the Schwamb mill from 1910 to 1918 (his tenure is also written on the wall of the Mill, above his turning accomplishment). He started at 17-1/2 cents an hour but was soon raised to 21 cents an hour, bringing home \$10 to \$12 dollars on a typical week, working Monday to Saturday, 9-1/2 hours a day. This was the middle range of pay for Schwamb workers in the 1910s; less than the moulder operator, more than basic workmen hauling and stacking boards. A note in the time books says he lived at #43 Calvin St. Somerville, a triple decker which still stands. Like other employees at the time, Sousa was sometimes reimbursed for expenses in addition to his weekly pay, though we do not know what the expenses were – possibly deliveries, tools, or work supplies that he bought himself.

Sousa’s 1917-era draft records show that he was born in Terceira, the Azores, on June 3, 1891, making him 26 when he left the Schwambs. With black hair and hazel eyes, he was of medium build and height. Though married and listed as a citizen of Portugal, he may still have chosen to serve in the Great War. Like the giant frame that he turned, his story is to be continued!