

PANORAMA OF THE PAST

By Marie Coady

Did you ever wish you could turn the clock back a hundred years and wander unseen through the streets and fields of Woburn? Well. You can do just that and in the comfort and privacy of your own home too.

Thanks to the Library of Congress' web site, the past is only as far away as your computer mouse. I discovered this surreal experience quite by accident and must admit I'm hooked. My trips into the past become more frequent and my stays more protracted.

This experience is not the result of a magic spell or a journey through some fantastic time tunnel. It's made possible by the creative work of Lucien Burleigh, a civil engineer from Troy, NY, who in the late nineteenth century founded a profitable business in creating panoramic maps at the request of cities and towns who wished to advertise their city's commercial and residential potential.

Panoramic maps were all the rage from 1847 to 1929, and fortunately for the City of Woburn, some public spirited citizen hired Burleigh to create one of his cartographic maps depicting the streets and fields of Woburn as they were in 1883.

The preparations for creating a panoramic map were painstaking. Burleigh first had to construct a frame in his workroom and lay out the streets of Woburn in grid form. Then, Lucien Burleigh himself walked the streets, climbed the hills and strolled the fields of Woburn sketching houses, trees, factories, waterways, orchards, etc.. Taking these sketches back to his workroom, he placed them on the grid along the streets he had mapped out. What resulted was an accurate and complete depiction of the landscape of Woburn seen as if from the crest of Horn Pond Mountain.

A framed and matted copy of Burleigh's panoramic map hangs in the office of Bill McGowan, Woburn's purchasing agent. There are other copies in the possession of private individuals as well as two valued copies safely locked in the vault of the library's museum.

But if you can't make it to McGowan's office or convince the library archives to unseal the vault and let you have a peek, just dial up the Library of Congress' web site and do a search for Woburn, MA. What pops up is an adventure through time.

The web site has a feature that allows you to look at the complete panorama, then zoom in with the pointer of your mouse, click and view, up close and personal, the houses, streets, farms and tanneries of Woburn. What appears

on the screen is magnified so you can see, in intricate detail, sections of the panorama that draw you in to the city's neighborhoods and countryside.

Wander along Sturgis Street to where it meets Water Street. There the old icehouse sits waiting to be explored. There you will be joined by three visitors gazing out at Horn Pond, enjoying a pleasant summer afternoon. Look to your right and, what appear to be tiny summer cottages, line the shore of the pond.

At the corner of Warren Avenue and Pleasant Street there are no traffic lights, because there is no traffic. The lawns are larger and lush, but some of the buildings remain intact. The fourth house in from where Pet's Choice is now still sports its mansard roof and gabled windows.

Further down the street, the library can be seen from an unusual angle no longer possible because of the addition, since 1883, of houses clustered close together.

In the South End, Tanneries belch their sooty, black smoke from smokestacks that loom over the houses where tannery workers dwell. Knowing what we do today, it's hard to believe the neighbors of these polluting tanneries tolerated such an excess of choking smoke and soot.

In his memoir, entitled *Early Life*, Dr. Thomas Glennon's words bring the moment alive. Glennon grew up in the South End, the son of a tannery worker. He went on to become a respected and admired dentist who loved the city and walked the back paths of Horn Pond well into his nineties.

I remember the first time I met him nearly 25 years ago. He was skating circles around everyone at the O'Brien Ice Rink in a pair of ancient racing skates. As a child growing up on John Street in the South End, Glennon remembers that the rear wall of his kitchen "...stood no more than twenty feet from the liquor pits...foul-smelling, dim-windowed and bleak. A high fence afforded the only barrier between kitchen and the refuse from the vats, which was dumped in the intervening space. The result was a large pool of brown liquid, soft and slimy at first, but soon becoming solid..." in winter.

As your eyes begin to take in the detail of the South End neighborhood, you can see "...newly tanned half hides, brown and wet, were draped on racks for drying, exuding the characteristic obnoxious tannery odor", and the smoke from the looming smokestacks "...belched forth constantly huge volumes of black smoke, the waste from the burning of soft coal. Soot spread over the neighborhood, befouling the clothes, newly washed and strung on a line which stretched from the fence to a hook near the kitchen door."

When you can drag yourself away from the South End, click on Rag Rock and see it as it was 115 years ago, its craggy rock face dangerously pointing toward the sky. At its base, simple frame houses seem to spring up from the

barren rock. These simple homes all sport outhouses a few yards distance from their back doors. Some have a simple side porch and small garden plots, fenced off from their neighbors.

Horn Pond dominates the foreground of the panorama. Without the Parkway and paved paths, it looks rural and rustic. But click on the what seem to be tiny black dots on the surface of the water and discover; sailboats skimming along in an invisible, stiff breeze; a sole fisherman standing in his flat-bottomed boat perhaps angling for his dinner; and couples out for a romantic row, ladies delicately holding parasols over their heads to protect their fair complexion and the gentlemen paddling smoothly enough to impress his paramour.

The best trip is down Main Street. You will recognize the buildings, especially the churches, but there are no fast food restaurants or pizza shops. Or journey along Lowell and Wyman Streets and see farms clustered by the edges of narrow roads and a lone schoolhouse, waiting for the summer to end.

All this is yours to enjoy and peruse at will. But beware. You too will be enchanted and tempted to stay a little too long in the unremembered past. Take your child there to experience bygone days and learn how their great-grandparents lived and worked in Woburn.

To go directly into Woburn's past, and bypass the Library of Congress web site, type in: <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/pmhtml/panhome.html>, and go straightaway to the Woburn of 1883.

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