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Law Library Blog (June 2019): Legal Beagle's Blog Archive

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Legal Beagle's Post

June 6, 2019

Elleanor Eldridge: A Woman Before Her Time



Image courtesy of Library Company of Philadelphia.

June 6, 2019

Today's blog post is about Elleanor Eldridge, a woman of color born in Warwick who owned property on Spring Street in Providence. In 1827. Wow!

The life of Elleanor Eldridge is amazing. She was likely born in 1784, her father was a freed slave and her mother was part Narragansett Indian. Elleanor's mother died when Elleanor was only 10. Elleanor went to live as a servant for a local [family and learned spinning, weaving, and cheese making](#). From these humble beginnings, she worked to become a domestic entrepreneur by doing laundry, painting, wallpapering, boiling soap, and weaving cloth. She saved money and purchased property on [Spring Street in Providence](#). She borrowed a sum of money to purchase

additional lots in the city. When a cholera epidemic broke out in Providence, Elleanor fell behind on the loan payments.

The [Rhode Island Historical Society](#) describes what happened next as “a confusing array of manipulations, culminating in the seizure and sale of her biggest house. The circumstances of the sale remain suspicious: The creditors could have easily sold her smaller house or one of her plots of land to pay off her debt. Instead, they seized the largest, never legally advertised it, and sold what was likely a \$4,000 home for \$1,500. It was a case of collusion, an abuse of power directed at a woman they believed couldn’t defend herself.”

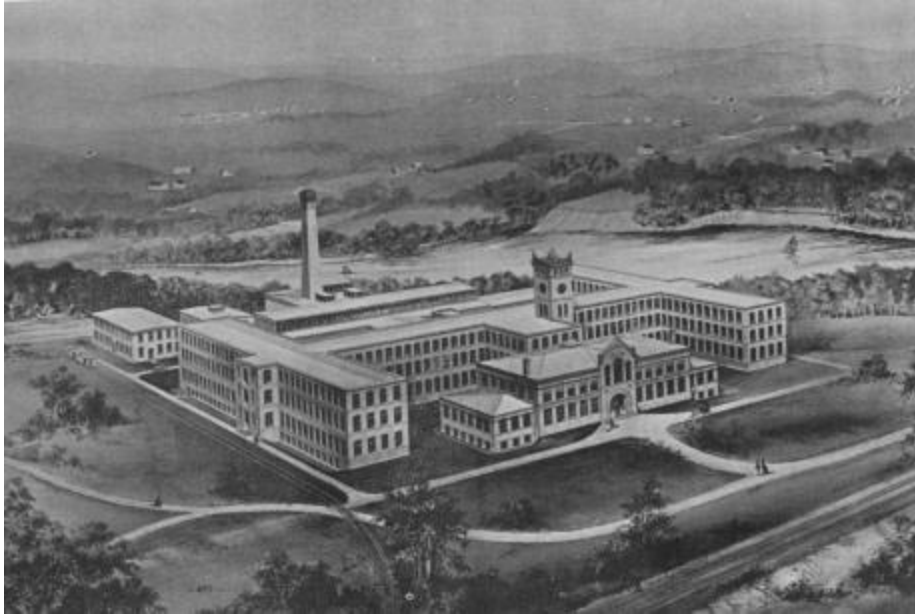
Elleanor, however, fought back in the courts and got creative. With [Frances Harriet Whipple, a prominent Rhode Island woman dedicated to radical causes](#), Elleanor published two memoirs about her life that brought attention to the injustice she faced and raised funds to support her fight. Ultimately, the case settled and she was able to buy back her wrongly taken property. The first volume of the memoirs called the [Memoirs of Elleanor Eldridge](#) can be found online. The memoir, [republished by the West Virginia Press](#), “because of Eldridge’s exceptional life as a freeborn woman of color entrepreneur...constitutes a counter-narrative to slave narratives of early nineteenth-century New England, changing the literary landscape of conventional American Renaissance studies and interpretations of American Transcendentalism.”

Sadly, Spring Street in Providence no longer exists. It was about a block from where [Classical High School](#) is currently located.

Image courtesy of [Library Company of Philadelphia](#).

June 21, 2019

The Complicated Legacy of the Gorham Manufacturing Company



June 21, 2019

Did you know that Rhode Island was at one time the birthplace of the largest silver manufacturer in the world?

The Gorham Manufacturing Company was founded in Providence in 1831 by Jabez Gorham. With Jabez's retirement, his son, John Gorham succeeded him in 1847 and this would usher in the company's era of prominence from 1850-1970. In addition to their chief product, silver spoons, Gorham artisans crafted beautiful pieces with special significance. Gorham silver could be found in the White House as Mary Todd Lincoln purchased [a tea and flatware service](#). Gorham artisans also had their hands in the famous *Independent Man* that sits atop the Rhode Island State House.

The largest collection of Gorham items, now resides at the [RISD museum](#). From now until December 1st, RISD has put many of these items on display in their [Gorham Silver: Designing Brilliance 1850-1970](#) exhibit. This exhibit is a must see for those curious about the history and beauty of this company and their impact on RI history.

Tragically, the legacy of the Gorham Manufacturing Company is not all positive. The Adelaide Avenue facility in Providence's Reservoir Triangle neighborhood operated for nearly 100 years during a time where there were few restrictions on what materials were allowed to be used. As a result the soil, groundwater and the [Mashapaug Pond](#) on the site of the old facility were contaminated.

While the effects of Gorham facility are still felt in the pond and neighborhood, extensive cleanup efforts and water testing and remediation work have started to revive the site. In 2006, the site of the Gorham facility became home to [Alvarez High School](#). Events like the [Urban Pond Procession](#) brought awareness for ten years straight years to the health of Mashapaug Pond. An [audio tour](#) as produced in 2013 to tell the stories of the residents in their words.

Lastly, today(June 21st) marks the opening of a [Mashapaug Park](#) behind Alvarez High on the banks of the Mashapaug Pond.

The Legacy of the Gorham Manufacturing Company is complicated but its place in Rhode Island history needs to be remembered.