

# Heating Our Homes

By Inga Milbauer



**Coal Shovel**  
*BHSM Collection*

Donated to the Boylston Historical Society and Museum in 1974, this antique coal shovel was part of the estate of Mrs. Lillian Vickery. She was the daughter of James S. Bruncker and Effie P. Allen, born on February 5th, 1877 in Boston, Massachusetts. She married George Albert Vickery on November 26, 1902 in Boston and moved to Boylston, Massachusetts. Mrs. Lillian Vickery became the first telephone operator in Boylston in 1905, and served the town of Boylston in different capacities for more than 30 years. Mrs. Vickery has been featured in two of our previously published Friday's Fascinating Finds: "*A Mystery Tin Bottle*" by Judy Haynes and "*Ice Cream, Anyone?*" by Inga Milbauer.<sup>1,2</sup> Lillian received the Boston Post Cane, an honor given to the town's eldest citizen, at the age of 94 and lived to be 100 years old.<sup>3</sup>



**Coal Shovel - backside**  
*BHSM Collection*

This type of antique shovel was a common tool in Boylston's homes during the 1800s and early 1900s. The handheld metal shovel has a wooden handle with a small metal hook at the end. Attached to the handle is a metal collar which is fastened to the blade with a rivet. The total length is 17 inches. The blade is wide and flat, with upturned sides, it is 7.5 inches long, the narrowest part is 5 inches wide, and the tip measures 5.5 inches. This shovel for domestic use was designed to scoop coals and remove ash from the stove. As no markings are visible the exact date and manufacturer are unknown.

**Coal Shovel – detail of backside**  
*BHSM Collection*



In "*Home Fires: How Americans Kept Warm in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*", Sean Patrick Adams describes how coal became the main fuel for home heating. The English settlers in America used wood-burning fireplaces to heat their homes. The winters here were much harsher than in England and the fireplaces quickly proved inefficient. Open fireplaces are ineffective as the majority of the heat

goes up and out of the chimney, and the remaining heat in the room is concentrated in front of the fireplace.

In contrast, settlers from Germany and northern European countries were used to stoves in their homes. These iron stoves were more efficient and were manufactured on a small scale, but were not widely used. “Despite North America’s more severe swings in temperature, the cultural preference for open fireplaces and against closed stoves seemed to hold sway in most American households through the Revolutionary era and into the decades of the Early Republic.”<sup>4</sup> Over time, stove manufacturers continued to make more efficient and affordable iron stoves and after the 1820s stoves burning wood or coal gained in popularity. In part because of the shortages in fire wood during the 1820s and 1830s in urban areas, many stoves burned anthracite or bituminous coal instead of firewood by the 1840s and 1850s. In post-Civil War America coal became the dominant fuel for home heating. Wealthy households would have burned coal in basement furnaces, while poorer families might have used small stoves in individual rooms in their homes.

The main areas for coal mining in the eastern United States were Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia. However, small mines and quarries in Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island supplied coal for local needs for many years. Coal resources in Massachusetts were found in Braintree, Mansfield, Quincy and Wrentham. An old coal mine shaft can even be found in Worcester, Massachusetts!

In 1829 the Worcester Coal Company was incorporated under Amos Binney. A mine shaft was to be built to mine the coal found in an area near Lake Quinsigamond which is now part of the East Side Trail.<sup>5</sup> As David Dubois writes in his article “*Worcester Lessons: Digging the City’s Past on the East Side Trail*”, initially, the quantity and quality of the coal seemed to be promising. “The *Massachusetts Spy* received a quantity of the coal to test, and found “it to ignite readily, and to produce great heat.” According to the *Spy*’s analysis, the Worcester coal compared favorably to coal from Rhode Island. It ignited easier and burned longer, but left a great ‘residuum’.”<sup>6</sup> The majority of the coal was used in local industries, such as the Trumbull & Ward brewery and to heat homes in the city. The mine produced, however, only an estimated couple of hundred tons of coal at the most. By 1834 production at the mine had mostly halted and the mine was eventually abandoned.

Further developments in home heating changed the type of heating that would become most commonly used in Massachusetts in the twentieth century: from wood and coal burning stoves to central heating with fuel-oil and natural gas furnaces.

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*Acknowledgements:*

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Milk\\_Can/c186](https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Milk_Can/c186)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Ice\\_Cream\\_Sign/c185](https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Ice_Cream_Sign/c185)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Boston\\_Post\\_Cane/c155](https://www.boylstonhistory.org/category/Boston_Post_Cane/c155)

<sup>4</sup> Home Fires: How Americans Kept Warm in the Nineteenth Century by Sean Patrick Adams, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014, page 26

<sup>5</sup> <https://worcester.ma/2016/04/worcester-lesson-digging-citys-past-on-east-side-trail/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://worcester.ma/2016/04/worcester-lesson-digging-citys-past-on-east-side-trail/>

Editor, Nancy A. Filgate, Director, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, Inc., Boylston, Massachusetts

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Photography by Inga Milbauer, Boylston, Massachusetts

Worcester Lessons: Digging the City’s Past on the East Side Trail by David Dubois, Worcester Sun, April 10, 2016