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Did You Know? Local Businessman Elisha Converse Established The Malden Public Library



December 11, 2025 News Jim Mitchell

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Thanks to this Special Gift, the MPL Costs Taxpayers Less

While Providing the Same Essential Services

Businessman and philanthropist Elisha Converse was instrumental to the city of Malden. During the Industrial Revolution, the entrepreneur founded the Boston Rubber Shoe Company in Malden, which employed 3,500 employees and produced the most popular shoe of its time.

Elisha, also Malden's first mayor, invested his own money in local parks, buildings and services. Even as he enjoyed tremendous professional success, he faced a huge personal tragedy. Elisha's eldest son, 17-year-old Frank Eugene Converse, was shot and killed during the robbery of First National Bank of Malden on December 15, 1863. It marked the first time a person was killed in a U.S. bank robbery.

Frank's murder went unsolved for many months. Finally, William Shiloh, a local Black barbershop owner, gave Elisha a list of men who had been in the bank on the day of the murder, including the postmaster, Edward Green. While Green was not immediately arrested, some of the stolen cash was eventually traced to him and he confessed to the crime. To thank William Shiloh for his help, Elisha built him a house on Walnut Street, an area later known as Shiloh's Hill.

A Memorial for His Son

Grief-stricken, Elisha and Mary Converse vowed to memorialize their son in a special and meaningful way, establishing the Malden Public Library as a tribute to Frank.

The Malden Public Library, housed in the historic Converse Memorial building, was designed by famous architect Henry Hobson Richardson. Elisha donated money for the building's construction and artwork for its decoration. The building was given to the trustees of the Malden Public Library, "for the benefit of the inhabitants of the city of Malden." The Library opened in October 1885.

As part of his efforts, Elisha set up a generous trust for the Library's upkeep, renovations, and other expenses, and a Board of Trustees was appointed to oversee the trust. Today, more than a century later, the Library's nine Trustees work tirelessly upholding Elisha's wishes, vision and legacy. They are not paid for their work.

In addition to establishing the Library, Elisha and his wife, Mary Diana, earmarked a separate trust specifically to fund the Library's art collection. The stunning collection, which is displayed in the Library's five galleries, features artwork from world-famous artists, including Albion Bicknell, Perle Fine, Katsushika Hokusai, Frank Stella, JMW Turner, and James Abbott McNeill Whistler. The art gallery is free and open to the public.

"The Malden Public Library is so much more than a brick-and-mortar building – there's a powerful story behind it. Not everyone realizes its unique circumstances and fascinating history, including that Elisha established the Library as a tribute to his eldest son, whose death was untimely and tragic. At the time, the bank robbery – and Frank's death – rocked the community, especially considering that the robber and murderer was the local postman," explained John Tramonozzi, President of the Trustees of the Malden Public Library. "This story shows how a grieving family honored their murdered child in a special, long-lasting way – giving back to their beloved Malden community for generations."

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"Elisha had the forethought to set up a trust to fund the Library's upkeep and renovations, as well as its art and book collections. These expenses are still funded by the historic trust, combined with generous donations from individuals and private foundations. It's an honor for us, as Trustees, to take on the epic responsibility of fulfilling Elisha's wishes," said Trustee Jayne E. Brown. "Some of the Library's expenses – the cost of employees' salaries, utilities and some books – are paid for by the taxpayers of Malden. Compared to other Massachusetts libraries, the Malden Public Library costs taxpayers less while providing the same essential services."

At the Forefront of Philanthropy

As one of the first major philanthropists in the country, Elisha Converse was committed to giving back to the Malden community. As a successful businessman, Elisha vowed to contribute financially to a variety of local causes.

In addition to establishing the Library, Elisha's philanthropic deeds included the establishment and construction of Malden Hospital, Malden City Hall, Malden YMCA, Malden Historical Society, and the Malden Auditorium – one of the finest theaters around Boston during that time period. Elisha vowed to improve Malden's healthcare system, providing monetary and land donations for the construction of Malden Hospital, and serving as its President for many years. Elisha also founded the Malden Home for Aged Persons and Day Nursery, plus donated money and land for the Maternity Hospital and the School of Nursing. Also notable: he helped create the Malden city water supply system (Spot Pond Water) and Reservoir, and donated 107.5 acres of land for the establishment of **Pine Banks Park**. Elisha cared deeply about his employees, providing them with basic education and proper healthcare.

Robust Programming, Resources & More

Today, the Malden Public Library offers much more than books. It provides robust programming, including children's story time, crafts, and games, plus free events, concerts, lectures, movies, crafts, receptions, and more for adults. In December, programming is holiday-themed, with movies, receptions, and other events to celebrate the magic of the season.

A special exhibit – "A Walk through Malden History: From Rubber Boots to Converse Sneakers" – is on display from December 1 through January 30, in honor of Elisha's January 5 birthday. Come learn about the Malden's early shoe history and how one young shoe factory worker became Governor of Massachusetts. The exhibition also features information and artifacts related to Elisha's other contributions to Malden, including the Day Nursery, Malden Hospital and parks. Gallery Hours are Wednesday & Saturdays 2-4 p.m. or by appointment.

To learn more about the Malden Public Library and its valuable resources, exhibits and programming, visit <https://maldenpubliclibrary.org/>.

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