

MEDAL A WINDOW TO HISTORY

Memento documents gala London evening in 1896, historic visit of American military unit

BY RON CHEEK | SPECIAL TO COIN WORLD

MEDALS SOMETIMES DOCUMENT PEOPLE AND EVENTS THAT WOULD OTHERWISE BE LOST IN THE OBSCURE FOOTNOTES OF HISTORY. LOST, THAT IS, BUT FOR THE CURIOSITY OF COLLECTORS WHO FIND AND TREASURE SUCH MEMENTOS.

One such large bronze medal recalls a gala evening in the summer of 1896 during the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts' celebrated visit to England. The medal is a memento presented by the proprietors of London's prestigious Holborn Restaurant to one of the American guests, "Hon. Nahum Chapin," whose name and the date of the visit, July 9, 1896, are engraved on the reverse.

The medal

The medal measures 69 millimeters in diameter and weighs 223.5 grams. It is cast, not struck, and the edge and rim have been carefully machine-polished. It has a remarkable 10-millimeter thickness at

the rim, but inside the rim it is much thinner, about 6 millimeters.

Christopher Eimer, the British medal specialist, has cataloged this Holborn Restaurant medal as No. 1640 in his *British Commemorative Medals and Their Values*.

The high relief designs on each side are well

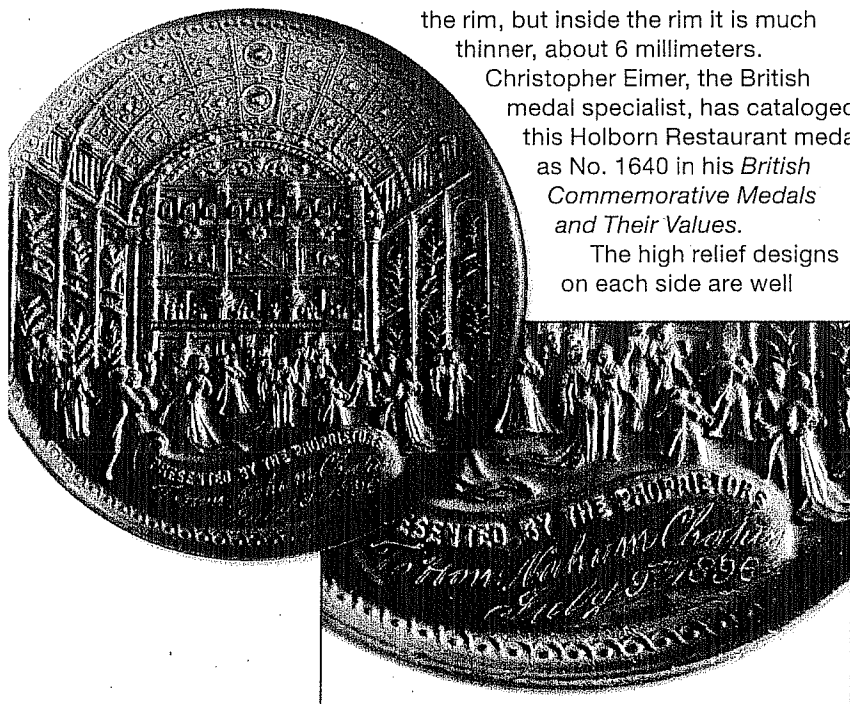
defined and ornate. The obverse has a scene in the restaurant entrance hall with a gathering of formally dressed ladies and gentlemen standing and seated before an elegant hallway, bounded by two large columns. Figures descend formal staircases on either side. (Above the columned entrance is HOLBORN. In the exergue below is RESTAURANT / ESTD. 1874. The reverse design is a scene of figures dancing in a lavish ballroom with a high arched ceiling, and walls decorated with potted palms. In a scroll at the bottom is the inscription PRESENTED BY THE PROPRIETORS, below which is engraved, in scripted lettering: TO HON. NAHUM CHAPIN / JULY 9TH 1896.

The Holborn Restaurant

In its day, the Holborn Restaurant was the grandest establishment of its kind in London. According to its brochure, the restaurant held "a unique position in London social life, adding a spice of poetry to the dull prose of every day life." Various of its facilities were available for private hire, depending upon the size and nature of the event. The King's Hall could

Images show obverse, above right, and reverse, left, of the Holborn Restaurant medal. Close-up image of the inscription on the reverse shows engraved name of Hon. Nahum Chapin and the date July 9, 1896.

Images courtesy of Ron Cheek.



Holborn Restaurant, High Holborn, London, is shown in its heyday.

Image courtesy of Matthew Lloyd.

accommodate 500 diners and be cleared for dancing in 20 minutes. The Venetian Hall, with tables joined in a circuit around the room, is described as “the home of Golf, Hockey and Tennis Clubs holding Annual Reunions.” The restaurant is unabashedly described as one “whose fame has traveled with the flag to the four corners of the earth.” Established in 1874, the Holborn Restaurant operated until 1954. It was demolished in 1955.

On the evening of July 9, 1896, Nahum Chapin was among a group of prominent American visitors, the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts. The AHAC hosted a grand banquet for its English counterpart, the Honourable Artillery Company of London. Many distinguished guests were present, chief among them, the Prince of Wales. The prince (later King Edward VII) was captain-general and colonel of the Honourable Artillery Company. He was also an honorary member of the Massachusetts company.

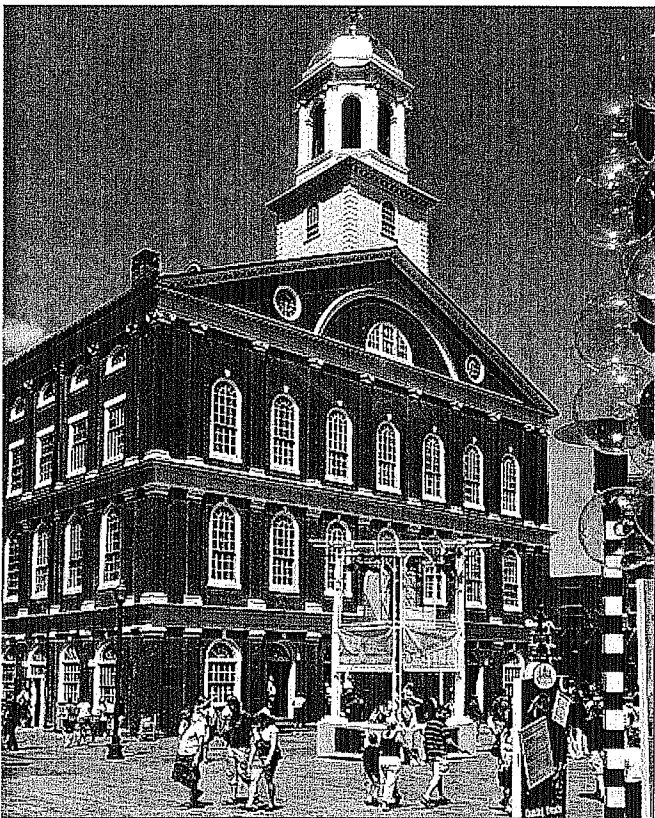


HAC and AHAC

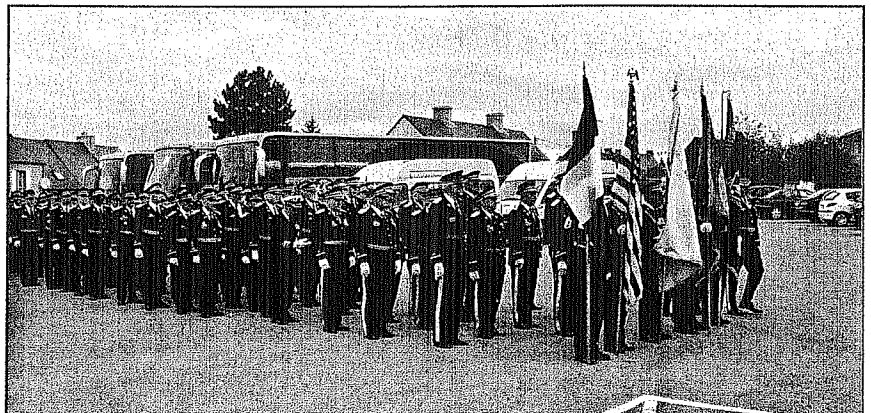
The Honourable Artillery Company of London dates from 1537 when it received its charter from King Henry VIII. It is the oldest unit in the British Army and the only one to be incorporated and entitled to its own coat of arms. Its motto is “Arma Pacis Fleva” (Armed Strength for Peace). At the time of incorporation, the word “artillery” was used to describe archery and other missile weapons. But for its first 250 years the unit was, in fact, an infantry company. The HAC has continued and modernized over the centuries, as both a military and a ceremonial unit.

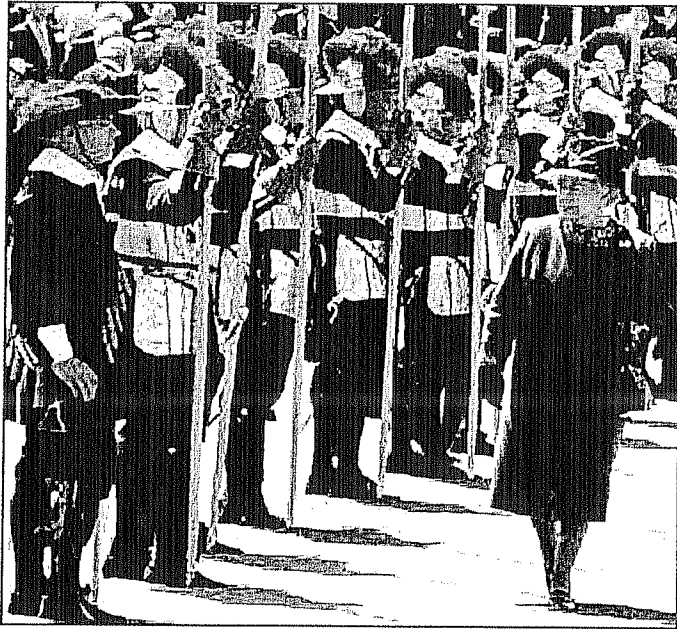
The Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts is the oldest (1638) chartered military organization in North America and the third oldest in the world. Shortly after settlements became established in Massachusetts, colonists recognized the need for an organized citizen militia on active duty to protect the new British territories. Many settlers of Boston had been members of the HAC of London, and had military training.

Today’s Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts on parade.



Faneuil Hall in Boston is the headquarters of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts.





Queen Elizabeth II inspects the HAC in London in 2007.

They established a similar organization in the New World. Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts' founder and first captain was Robert Keayne, an Englishman who had been active in the Honourable Artillery Company before settling in Boston. By the mid-19th century the AHAC no longer played a role as an active militia and had evolved into a fraternal and patriotic organization. Military traditions continued, however, with the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts becoming an honor guard that turned out on festive and patriotic occasions. Membership was a distinction among the "gentry" of New England, particularly among men with military backgrounds. The motto of the AHAC is "Facta Non Verba" (Deeds Not Words). From its beginning, the AHAC has followed a practice of electing its officers at an annual gathering on Boston Common. This tradition continues today.

The common roots of the Honourable Artillery Company and the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts were either ignored or forgotten for more than 200 years, until the mid-19th century. This is not surprising considering the feelings between Britain and the United States arising first from the American Revolution and later, the War of 1812 to 1814. But by 1857, relations between the two organizations were re-established, bonds of friendship were forged, and the common roots of the HAC and the AHAC were celebrated.

Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert, who was captain-general and colonel of the HAC, was elected an honorary member of the AHAC. In 1878, the AHAC accorded the same honor to his son, the Prince of Wales, who by then was captain-general and

colonel of the HAC. Visits involving a few members were exchanged. Then, in 1896, the entire AHAC visited England. It was an occasion the American visitors would remember for the rest of their lives.

G. Gould describes it in *The Honourable Artillery Company 1537 – 1987*: "... the Company seized the opportunity to arrange a suitable reception for the first American military body to set foot in the Old country ..."

"The A. & H. A. C., 170 strong, were warmly welcomed and suitably entertained by the Regiment. This was only as it should be, but a far more extended programme had been arranged. The American unit was received by Queen Victoria at Windsor and by the Prince and Princess of Wales at Marlborough House; a review at Aldershot was arranged for their benefit; and they were entertained at the Royal Artillery Mess at Woolwich. Quite apart from the courtesies, the reception accorded to the Americans by the public and the publicity it evoked in both countries could hardly have failed to exercise a beneficial effect on the frayed international relationship."

The "frayed international relationship" referred to the 1895 Venezuelan crisis in which the United States intervened in a boundary dispute between Britain and Venezuela, invoking the Monroe Doctrine.

An evening to remember

On the evening of July 9, 1896, the Americans complimented their English hosts by holding a banquet in their honor. Newspaper accounts describe the festive occasion in King's Hall at the famous Holborn Restaurant. The 500-person capacity of the room was surely tested with the 170 members of the AHAC and "their ladies," the HAC, and the many distinguished guests. AHAC

Commander-in-Chief Col. Henry Walker, proposed an eloquent toast to the queen. As the cheers subsided, the Prince of Wales rose to

respond with a toast to the president of the United States, mentioning also the kind reception he had received from President Buchanan during his visit to Washington some 36 years previously. Kind words of friendship and fraternity were expressed and, amid cheers, more toasts were drunk. And sometime during the evening, members of the AHAC must have been presented with Holborn Restaurant medals with their names engraved on them. The AHAC Archives holds several of these medals. I have the one given to "Hon. Nahum Chapin."

Some 160 more medals exist, each with its own name and story.



Portrait of Nahum Chapin

Image source: Men of Progress.

Hon. Nahum Chapin

In researching this medal I first attempted to determine who "Hon. Nahum Chapin"

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Pikemen and Musketeers of the Honourable Artillery Company of London march in the Lord Mayor's show in 2009.

was. As a first line of inquiry, this proved ineffective. The title "Hon" led down many blind alleys. "Honourable" is a title used for British and Commonwealth members of Parliament. Judges also use it, and (with the American spelling) so do many ranks of politicians and public office-holders in the United States. I found several Internet references to a prominent Nahum Chapin of Boston, but I could not connect him to the London restaurant. At the same time, however, I discovered a website (www.arthurlloyd.co.uk/EmbassyTheatreHolborn.htm) dedicated to the history of the Embassy Theatre and the Holborn Restaurant, which occupied the same large building in High Holborn. The webmaster, Matthew Lloyd, kindly posted images of my medal on the site and asked for help from readers. A keen fellow in New Zealand unlocked the mystery — from a newspaper account of a July 9, 1896, banquet at the Holborn. Based on the newspaper article, it is clear that Chapin was among either the hosts or guests that evening.

A call to the AHAC Museum curator in Boston confirmed that a Nahum Chapin had indeed been a member of the AHAC and had participated in the 1896 visit to England. As a member of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts, his medal was engraved "Hon. Nahum Chapin." Thus, the "Honorable" was explained. The AHAC Museum curator consulted membership records and provided Nahum Chapin's birthplace and date, and related that he had been a prominent Bostonian in the distillery business. I found Nahum Chapin's biography and portrait in *Men of Progress, One thousand Biographical Sketches and Portraits of Leaders in Business and Professional Life in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts 1896*.

According to the biographical information, Chapin was born July 16, 1820, in Jamaica, Vt. He grew up and received his education in Waltham, Mass. After leaving Smith's Academy in Waltham, he apprenticed as a machinist at the Boston Manufacturing Co. in Waltham, and soon became overseer of the works. A few years later, he moved to Charlestown, near Boston, and established a successful provision and produce business, in which he was engaged for 20 years. In 1860, Chapin formed the firm Richardson and Chapin, and entered the distillery business, setting up extensive works in Charlestown. The firm later became Chapin, Trull & Co.

Chapin spent years involved in local affairs and government,



becoming a prominent and influential citizen. As a Charlestown Alderman, he occupied positions of responsibility during the annexation of Charlestown by Boston. For more than a quarter century he was active on local school boards during which time he effected many improvements. Chapin was also a director of the local horse railroad and later served on the board of the Boston Consolidated Street Railway.

AHAC records show he joined in January 1885. During the 1896 visit to England he would have celebrated his 76th birthday. Barely a year after the memorable evening at the Holborn Restaurant, Chapin died, on Aug 12, 1897.

HAC and the AHAC today

The HAC continues today as a prestigious social and ceremonial organization, but it also maintains a regiment of the Territorial Army, one that has been on active and demanding duty in Iraq for several years. As a registered charity, the HAC supports its regiment along with many associated social and sporting activities. Ceremonial roles of the HAC include acting as guard of honor for the royal family and visiting heads of state, participation in the Lord Mayor of London's annual Procession, and firing royal salutes from the Tower of London on royal occasions. Continuing with centuries of tradition, Queen Elizabeth II is the HAC's

*HAC continues as a prestigious social and ceremonial organization in the U.K.
AHAC remains a prestigious patriotic and social organization in the U.S.*

captain-general and colonel.

The AHAC remains a prestigious patriotic and social organization in the United States. Its military traditions are expressed through the pomp and pageantry it displays on the Fourth of July and other special occasions. It regularly participates in international tours of goodwill and friendship. The AHAC is dedicated to the support of the United States' military establishment, the

preservation of its historical traditions and records, and the pursuit of charitable activities. The AHAC proudly boasts nine past members who have been awarded the Medal of Honor, and four who went on to become president of the United States. The last was John F. Kennedy.

The AHAC and the HAC still exchange formal visits every 10 years to celebrate their common roots. The long-forgotten Holborn Restaurant medals engraved with the date July 9, 1896, represent an important milestone during the warm friendship between the two organizations, kindled more than 150 years ago.

An few hundred Holborn Restaurant medals are believed to exist, each engraved with a name or an event. They were issued over three or four decades.

A recent Internet search turned up four for sale. Each was engraved with a name or an occasion. Dates ranged from 1894 to 1925. With some research, each can tell us its own story. ■

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