



THE HOUR GLASS

NORTHBOROUGH HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

CCXXXIV

Northborough Historical Society

November 2014

www.northboroughhistoricalsociety.org

The next meeting of the Northborough Historical Society will take place at 7:30 p.m.

Friday, December 5 at the Society Building at 52 Main Street. Kevin Stavely and Kathleen Fitzgerald, authors of *America's Founding Food: The Story of New England Cooking and Northern Hospitality: Cooking by the Book in New England* will serve up a delicious feast of information and interesting recipes from our colonial ancestors.

It's not too late to get tickets for "An Evening at White Cliffs," a members' reception at the historic mansion on Sunday, November 23, from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. The program will include information on this town landmark, which is currently up for sale. Tickets are \$30 for members and their guests. Visit WCD Garage, 44 West Main Street, 508-393-2493, or mail a check to: 192 Whitney St., Northborough, 508-393-8672. **The deadline for registration has been extended to Sunday, November 16.**

Dues are Due: If you have not yet renewed your membership for the 2014-15 season, please stop by the welcome table at the next meeting, or mail a check to: *Membership Secretary, Northborough Historical Society, PO Box 661, Northborough, MA 01532.*

The Board of Directors will meet at **7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 11.**

History Corner

by Bob Ellis, Historian

The Northborough Almshouse

For much of its history, Northborough had what was officially called an almshouse, often referred to as the “poor house” or “poor farm.” It was located on Ball Street near the Boylston line. An undated but certainly nineteenth-century document establishing it reflects two contrasting American attitudes toward the care of the poor. David Wagner in *The Poorhouse: America’s Forgotten Institution* expresses the contrast thus: was it to be “an institution of discipline and moral correction or simply a place for the poor to gain comfort and a place to stay”?

The regulations of the Northborough almshouse seem to lean toward the former. It begins: “The establishment will be under the superintendence of a Warden and Overseer, and all persons therein are required to submit to their direction and control.” Such persons needed permission to leave, and visitors seeking “to render them dissatisfied towards the doing of the Town or the regulations of the establishment” were banned.

Rules about cleanliness, employment, and dining habits follow. At mealtime, for instance, the inhabitants “will immediately . . . take such seats as are assigned to them by the Warden,” and they may not eat at other times, although “small children, the sick, or infirm” are exceptions. Fortunately, such benevolent exceptions appear once in a while. Those who waste food or commit other violations of the rules “will be punished by solitary confinement without any food than bread or water or in some other way at the discretion of the Overseer.”

Overseers expected able-bodied inmates

Membership

Annual Dues:

Single - \$20

Student/Senior - \$15

Family - \$45

Lifetime - \$250

Send dues to:

Northborough Historical
Soc.

Membership Secretary

P.O. Box 661

Northborough, MA 01532

*Please make checks payable
to Northborough Historical
Society*

Curator’s News

by Ellen Racine, Curator

Bob Trimble, who ran Everybody's Bicycle Shop in Northborough for many years, has donated a collection of Shirley Temple dishes which he gave out to Historical Society members at our last two meetings. They are donated in memory of his wife Joyce Flynn Trimble. We'd like to thank Bob for his generosity and continuing interest in Northborough.

We also have received a generous donation from one of our members of the software package, PastPerfect. This program is widely used by museums for tracking inventory and information of their collections. Bob Marchetta has volunteered to install this onto

to work. "Employment will be provided daily with reasonable service and those who perform it cheerfully and faithfully will be suitably rewarded with indulgences while the slothful and refractory will receive examples of punishment."

Senior citizens in the nineteenth century seldom had any income. The more fortunate lived with willing younger family members, but opportunities for others were bleaker. Because opportunities to find work were often seasonal, attendance in the almshouse was often seasonal. Many of the poor spent relatively short terms at the poorhouse, but some returned frequently. There are fifty-two entries in the records for Lambert W. Green, perhaps the most long-lasting chronically poor man in town. Many of the prosperous people of Northborough had surnames like Allen, Ball, Brigham, and Maynard but the same names can be found in the list of paupers.

How many people lived in the poorhouse? At times only three or four people might be lodged there. At one time all six inmates were members of the Bishop family. Numbers of inmates do not seem to have reached into double figures very often.

Like other poor farms, Northborough's sought, but did not achieve, a balance between the workers' earnings in produce and the cost of supporting them. Northborough's 1905 *Annual Report*, for instance, noted that the farm produced \$422.12 in income, while expenses ran to \$751.77. Other external expenses totaled more than one thousand dollars, the outlay somewhat diminished by the Gale Fund, established by Captain Cyrus Gale and maintained later by his son Cyrus to assist the poor.

At that time the town disposed of the poor farm and sought to board the poor with townspeople who would receive between four and six dollars apiece each week, but only three hosts could be found. The report urged the town to consider "that the poor can be boarded at the Almshouse in

a laptop computer and we will begin the time-consuming process of entering our collection onto it.

Our period costume sewing group will meet again on Monday, Nov. 10 at 1:00. Please feel free to join our informal group for ideas, reference material, patterns and advice to help you plan your costume for Northborough's celebration in 2016.

Accessions:

Northborough High School class photos from 1936 by Barbara Hogan
Photos from early 1900s from Carol Bostock

Our Newest Members

Joan Collard
Nancy and David Harlan
Maureen Sargent
Eric Stinehelfer

Worcester at two dollars and eighty cents a week per inmate . . . a saving of five dollars and sixty cents of the price we are paying now on board alone.”

Subsequently Northborough placed its poor in several other area towns that continued to maintain their poorhouses.

By 1927 attitudes were changing. The town *Annual Report* began to use terms like “welfare” and “assistance” rather than refer to the poor as such. The federal establishment of social security in 1935 implied that older people, at least, had a right to be poor, but younger people began facing the duty of contributing to the fund that would eventually benefit them.

In 2005 David Wagner concluded his book thus: “We in America are not far from the days of the poorhouse and, in fact, probably much closer than we were fifty or sixty years ago. With the economic, political, and social trends as they currently are, it is hard to envision positive changes in America’s treatment of the poor.” The gap between rich and poor in our society having widened in the past decade, Wagner probably would maintain the same conclusion today.