



THE HOURGLASS

NORTHBOROUGH HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

CCLXII

Northborough Historical Society
www.NorthboroughHistoricalSociety.org

September 2017

Next Meeting & Program

September 22, 2017

50 Years on the Rails as a Conductor on a Steam

Train. Ken Ethier presents an interview with the late John Boudreau who was a conductor on a steam train on the New York-New Haven-Hartford Railroad. At its peak, the NYNH&H sprawled its way across the heart of New England, and was the only direct service between New York and Boston. The meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m., at the Society building, 52 Main Street, Northborough. The event is free and open to the public.

The meeting will be preceded by a Pot Luck Supper beginning at 6:30 p.m.



History Corner

by Bob Ellis

Elmer Valentine and the Art of Handwriting

It may seem odd today for a school or teacher to specialize in handwriting. One movement in modern education questions the need for handwriting. People do not write today except to do something like sign a check, and if you examine such signatures you will often be hard-pressed to determine whether they contain any recognizable letters. It is entirely possible that people will not learn to write but merely to print on a computer keyboard; inevitably they will then lose their capacity to read handwriting. Thousands of docu-

ments in our archive will become unreadable. People will have to study cursive writing in graduate school to enable them to do historical research.

Beginning about a year after an early career teaching handwriting in Boston, where his students had included future Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner and Samuel F. Smith, who composed *America* ("My country 'tis of thee . . ."), Elmer Valentine, whose family had settled in Northborough in 1804, moved his school to the family household (the present 50 Cherry Street) about 1830. He had just completed a small book, *Writing Simplified*. He would continue to emphasize writing in the boarding school he conducted there until his death in 1863.

Handwriting became a paramount need in this middle third of the nineteenth century. The first writing manual published in the United States in 1791 as-

(continued on page 2)

Dues Renewal

Dues are Due September 2017

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ Email: _____

☐ I am interested in volunteer opportunities

Rates: ☐Single--\$20 ☐Senior / Student--\$15 ☐Family--\$45 ☐Life Membership--\$250

☐ An additional donation is enclosed \$_____ Thank you!

The Northborough Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, donations to which are tax deductible to the fullest extent allowed by law.

Please give this completed form along with payment (cash, or check made payable to Northborough Historical Society) to any Society officer, or mail to:

Northborough Historical Society, Membership Secretary, P.O. Box 661, Northborough, MA 01532

sumed that “the pen would easily follow the mind’s commands,” but by Valentine’s time, teachers regarded penmanship as an important means of self-expression and invested enormous attention in the physical act of writing. Muscularity was a guiding precept. Your historian, by the way, never learned to swing his arm to suit his teachers. Many of you can remember your early teachers’ insistence on sitting and holding a pen properly; Valentine insisted on these matters in the preface of his book.

He taught writing in Italic or Germanic characters but noted that the former must be “thoroughly acquired,” while the latter would be learnt “by those who have a good taste for ornamental writing.” The Germanic characters being extremely elaborate, probably few of his students ever mastered them.

His book emphasizes eight characters in the first lesson. Valentine implied that attention to these four characters provided the guidance that could be applied to all the others. The measure letter was n, whose width was to be half its height; it was regarded as the width of a common space. First the student learned the “large hand,” then moved to the “small.” Instruction in capital letters followed. Italic letters should be slanted at 53 degrees—quite a slant. A Germanic text, on the other hand, stood upright.

This little book, two copies of which are in the American Antiquarian Society collection in Worcester, is not at all theoretical. It takes for granted the value of penmanship. Letter writing became an important activity for Americans in the nineteenth century after having been practiced by only a small minority in the previous century. Good writing reflected good taste, and experts in handwriting claimed that it helped produce “men of character,” a concept which may have included women, who probably wrote more letters than men did.

The letters in our collection by children are chiefly those of the seven sons and daughters of the longtime Unitarian minister, Dr. Joseph Allen and his wife, who maintained their own boarding school, so they certainly did not study with Elmer Valentine. Their writing was dutifully and faithfully performed. My experience with reading these letters suggests that over the years women tended to continue the hand they learned when young, while men more often de-

veloped idiosyncratic habits. It is true, however, that the habit of collecting autographs, very popular in the later part of the century, seemed to stress individuality. If handwriting reflected character in some way, an individualistic style must also have seemed important. Presumably one strove for balance between a recognizably conventional style and interesting independent characteristics.

Although members of Elmer Valentine’s large family assisted him in his school, the institution closed two years after his death. For decades thereafter, however, educators emphasized penmanship in the teaching of young children. It was after all, a practical skill as well as an ornamental one. As Tamara Thornton expressed it in her book *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (1996), “In molding Americans into models of industry, thrift, and sobriety, that ideal [i.e. good handwriting] suited the requirements and goals of a producer economy.”

Membership

Annual Dues:

- Single — \$20
- Student/Senior — \$15
- Family — \$45
- Lifetime — \$250

Send dues to:
Northborough Historical Society
Membership Secretary
P.O. Box 661
Northborough, MA 01532

*Please make checks payable to
Northborough Historical Society*



Northborough Historical Society Programs 2017 – 2018
www.northboroughhistoricalsociety.org **Programs begin at 7:30 p.m.**

- September 22 2017** **50 Years on the Rails as a Conductor on a Steam Train** – Ken Ethier presents an interview with the late John Boudreau who was a conductor on a steam train on the New York-New Haven-Hartford Railroad.
Pot Luck Supper 6:30 p.m.
- October 27, 2017** **Rounders to Baseball: History of America's Favorite Game** – by Anne Barrett. Tracing baseball's game evolution from the 19th century's local "townball" teams to the formation of professional leagues and the emergence of early baseball's greats, with a focus on New England's own home team.
- December 1, 2017** **A Victorian Christmas** – Diane Taraz presents beloved carols and the fascinating stories behind their origins, performing in a hand-sewn 1850s dress and playing dulcimer and parlor guitar.
- January 26, 2018** **"Across the Great Divide"** – The story of Augusta and Adeline Van Buren, two intrepid sisters who rode cross-country on motorcycles in 1916 presented by Bob Van Buren.
- February 23, 2018** **30 Main Street Northborough, The Home of Many Doctors** – presented by Jo-Ann Sullivan, who will introduce us to the doctors who have lived in this beautiful house.
- March 23, 2018** **An Evening with General and Mrs. Ulysses S. Grant** – After a brief introduction of Grant's life by Mrs. Julia D. Grant, the engagements, habits and contributions of U.S. Grant are explored by Sam Grant through the use of lively and often humorous anecdotes, letters and his impressions of the times.
- April 27, 2018** **The Cuban Missile Crisis: 13 Days at the Brink of Nuclear Warfare** – presented by Mark Bashour with the program centered around the day-by day response and measures taken by President Kennedy and his cabinet.
- May 18, 2018** **Northborough Gas Stations, Then and Now** – presented by Paul Derosier showing old time gas stations and what they are today.
Pot Luck Supper 6:30 p.m.

Don't forget the Pot Luck Suppers before the September and May meetings!

Come along and enjoy sharing a meal with your fellow members and our guests.

Not been to a Society supper before? Bring a dish to share, a plate and silverware, and you'll be all set.

Tip: Paper plates and plastic cutlery mean nobody has to do dishes!

What kind of food? Your choice.

No time to cook? Store bought is fine.

What time? We eat at 6:30 p.m.

Desserts, fruit punch and coffee will be provided by the Board of Trustees and Hospitality Committee in September, and by the Board of Directors and the Program Committee in May.

Get Involved Stay Involved

Be an integral part of the Historical Society by offering your time and talent to one of our committees. New to the Society? Joining a committee is a great way to meet people, and find out more about Northborough's history. There are vacancies on the following committees.

Board of Directors

The Board of Directors is responsible for conducting the routine business of the Society. The Board exercises its powers through the standing committees, and through special committees which may be appointed from time to time by the Board.

Hospitality Committee

The Hospitality Committee is responsible for recruiting hosts to provide refreshments at regular Member meetings.

Program Committee

The Program Committee, in cooperation with the Historian, arranges programs for monthly meetings for the coming year. The finalized program schedule is given to the Newsletter Editor in time for printing and mailing to members prior to the September meeting.

Legislative Committee

The Legislative Committee is responsible for reviewing the Society by-laws each year and making any necessary recommendations to the Board of Directors. The Committee also acts as the interpretive and advisory authority on all questions concerning the by-laws.

Kitchen Committee

The Kitchen Committee is responsible for ensuring that the kitchen is kept in a clean and sanitary condition, and that it is stocked with necessary equipment and supplies.

Nominating Committee

The Nominating Committee is responsible for preparing a slate of candidates for board and committee vacancies as laid down in the Society by-laws.

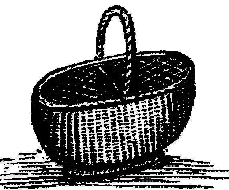
Interested? Please email Hilary Wilson at hilarywilson@charter.net

For full committee descriptions please go to www.northboroughhistoricalsociety.org or call Hilary Wilson at 508-393-3869.

Save time. Save money. Save space. Save a tree.

Would you like to receive the Hourglass by email?

Please email your request to northborough_historical_society@charter.net



Curator's News by Ellen Racine

This has been a busy summer. Jen Gronowski, a senior at Colorado State University volunteered twice a week in the Archive. She has photocopied WWII scrapbook news clippings and filed them away; typed the Holon Maynard farm ledger and has started on a Rosa Warren diary. She has entered data on our old daguerotypes,

ambrotypes, tin-types and early photo albums – some 600 entries – on an Excel spreadsheet which has been transferred into our PastPerfect museum software package, along with other previously entered objects. She has also accessioned a large lot from June Corey French and Debbie Emery from the property at 222 West Main Street.

Another weekly gathering has included Cindy Atwood, Cheryl Charest, Kathy Pierce and Jo-Ann Sullivan. They have been sifting through a huge lot of letters from former teacher and librarian, Elizabeth Hil-

liard donated by Jim Laurence. This is a slow process and their patience is admirable.

Zeh School third graders visited the museum in June and my thanks to tour guides Ernie Racine, Jo-Ann Sullivan, Jane Fletcher and Bill Webster. Allyn Phelps III (their music teacher) introduced our pipe organ to the children and played our home-town favorite, *I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles*.

Also, thanks to Ernie Racine for researching and Paul Derosier for installing a new de-humidifier in the archive.