



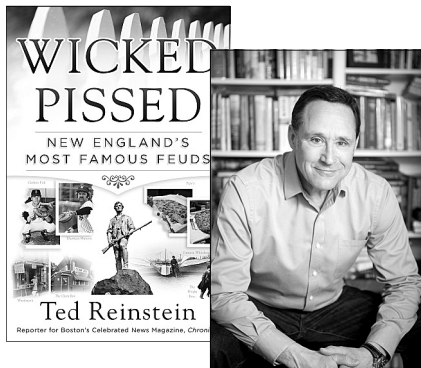
# THE HOURGLASS

## NORTHBOROUGH HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

CCLXXXI

Northborough Historical Society  
www.NorthboroughHistoricalSociety.org

October 2019



### Next Meeting & Program: Friday, October 25, 2019

**Wicked Pissed: New England's Most Famous Feuds.** Ted Reinstein, a reporter for Boston's WCVB-TV's Chronicle, will offer fun and fascinating facts about historical feuds in New England. His stories include everything from sports to politics, food to finance, aviation to engineering, or simple boundary disputes.

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.



## History Corner

by Kathy Pierce

### The Tithingman Cometh

So it's Sunday. What are your plans? A stroll with a sweetheart, a ballgame, yard work? Well, if it were 17th or 18th century New England, you would be heading to church in the morning and in the evening. Otherwise you could be in big trouble with the tithingmen.

A tithingman was a parish officer elected annually to preserve good order in the church during the divine service, to make complaint of any disorderly conduct and to enforce the observance of the Sabbath. Parishioners were only allowed to travel to and from church on Sunday, or to visit the sick and do charitable deeds.

Tithingmen first appeared in Massachusetts in 1679 under order of the Great and General Court. Under the court's direction, each town was to elect tithingmen to collect the taxes that townspeople had to pay for the support of the church and the minister. Their duties also were to inspect licensed entertainment spots and taverns, enforce observance of Sabbath Laws (later Blue Laws) and to control drinking, swearing and entertainment of "out-of-town

guests". Given the strict morals of the Puritans, these were major concerns of the populace.

The Historical Society's archives have lists of elected officials from 1775 through 1783 for which two new tithingmen were chosen each year. In 1783, Sylvanus Billings, a former Loyalist, was one of the two chosen that year. Because of his political leanings, Billings was among several men loyal to the Crown who were confined to their farms in 1777. Not happy with this punishment after a year or two, Billings confessed his faults to town officials in 1780 and asked to be restored to "friendship again" and promised "in future to be a good member of society."

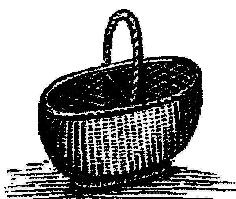
After considerable deliberation and a vote of the town, Billings' petition was accepted. Evidence that the town restored him to its good graces is the fact that he was named to the important office of tithingman in 1783.

This is somewhat odd as tithingmen were a sort of "religious police" and generally considered to be among the most respectable men in town. Was this position meant to be a test for Billings to prove his patriotism and change of political heart?

A special duty of the tithingman was to see that the Sabbath was properly observed and that all churchgoers behaved well at religious meetings.

"They were frequently so posted in the meeting houses as to have the whole congregation in view, in order to detect

*(continued on page 2)*



## Curator's News

by Ellen Racine

The Museum has done well with six to eight visitors each Sunday and 138 for the Applefest weekend. Members from neighboring historical societies, Boylston, West Boylston and Southborough, have also stopped in. Our new policy of having 3 or 4 hosts is working well and is good training for new members.

Carol Bostock and Claire Swan have also been working on identifying members in the slides from Dave Benton. They have had much fun in sharing stories about the old time members.

The Archive's "Open Wednesdays" from 1pm to 5pm has been well received. We have had several repeat visitors and a special visit by three descendants of the Richardson and Corey families. One woman came in from California and joined her two cousins from Woburn. I gave them information and directions to the old family homestead, and to the Howard Street Cemetery.

The American Legion Post is celebrating their 100th Anniversary on November 2nd from 10am to 4pm. We have been asked to help with a showcase exhibit and also lend mannequins to display their uniforms. Please stop by and enjoy their activities and thank them for their past 100 years of serving and remembering our veterans.

### New Accessions:

Product catalog from Machinery Electrification on Hudson Street, from Fred Mueller

Girl Scout history from 1920 to present from Jo-Ann Sullivan.

Welcome New Member!

Neil Schutzman

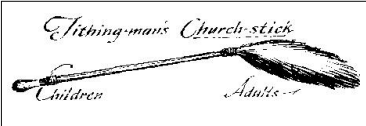
Next Board of Directors Meeting  
Tuesday, November 12

**History Corner, continued**

any indecorum," according to Charles Hudson in his 1862 "*History of Marlborough.*" Especially was it required of them to see that there was no impropriety at noon time, by the young people who remained about the place of worship."

As part of their means of keeping order at worship they were issued long poles to "rap the craniums" of disorderly young boys and sleepy congregants, wrote Rev. William Houghton in the "History of Berlin, Mass."

One end of the tithingmen's pole was rounded or sharp. The other end sported something softer such as a deer's tail or rabbit's foot.



This milder weapon was used for women who dozed off. Often, however, because their bonnets shielded their faces, women got away with a little nap during the long services as the tithingman couldn't see their closed eyes.

As an example of the power of the tithingmen, George Washington reportedly told the story of how he was traveling through Connecticut on a tour of New England in November 1789. Suddenly a man stepped out of his house and demanded Washington explain why he was traveling on Sunday.

According to the story, Washington said he was slowed down in his travels by rough roads. He was forced to travel on Sunday to reach the town where he meant to spend the Sabbath Day. After Washington offered his explanation for being on the road on Sunday, the tithingman let him proceed.

His journal entry for November 8, 1789, reads: "It being contrary to Law & disagreeable to the People of this state to travel on the Sabbath day, and my horses after passing through such intolerable roads wanting rest, I stayed at Perkins's Tavern (which by the bye is not a good one) all day \_ and a Meeting House being within a few rods of the door, I attended Morning & evening service..."

So even the Father of Our Country could run afoul of the ultra powerful Tithingmen. In her book, *The Sabbath in Puritan New England*, Alice Morse Earle wrote that the wisest course was to simply apologize when the tithingman corrected one's behavior as they had the power to arrest an errant citizen ...or even put them in the stocks if they were unruly.

Finally after many decades of keeping order on Sundays in early New England, the mighty tithingmen disappeared in the 1830s and the churches ceased to be part of the town government.

**Applefest 2019**

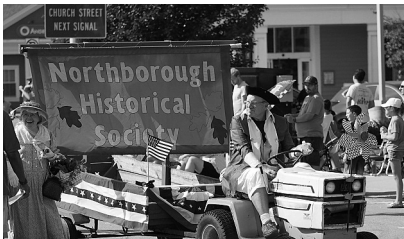
Thanks go to all who participated in making Applefest such a success for the Society.

To Ken Bennett, Rick Ferenchick, and Bob Van Buren for their generous donations of the cost of the Blake St. booth, and items for sale.

To Arlene Marshall and her team of volunteers who made the Ice Cream Social an outstanding success.

To the Museum Trustees and the volunteers who manned the Museum and entertained 138 visitors during the 8 hours that it was open.

Finally, to Ken Bennett, Jo-Ann Sullivan and Ellen Racine who donned costumes on a hot day and participated in the parade



**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*

**Dues are due September 2019**

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