



# THE HOURGLASS

## NORTHBOROUGH HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

CCLXXXIX

Northborough Historical Society  
www.NorthboroughHistoricalSociety.org

September 2020

### COVID-19 Information

At this time there are no Friday meetings planned at the Society. The museum and archive will remain closed until further notice. Enquiries regarding the museum and archive should be directed to Historian Kathy Pierce and Curator Ellen Racine. They can be reached by e-mail:

Kathy: [Historian@NorthboroughHistoricalSociety.org](mailto:Historian@NorthboroughHistoricalSociety.org)

Ellen: [Info@NorthboroughHistoricalSociety.org](mailto:Info@NorthboroughHistoricalSociety.org)

**Stay safe and well!**



### History Corner

by Kathy Pierce

#### Off to School Again...Today and Yesterday

What to do, what to do? That is the question, and the lament, of parents and school authorities around the country this fall as they struggle with how to safely educate the kids in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Should they open the schools on a full- or part-time basis? Should classes be strictly online or partly so? In Northborough, school officials have decided on a hybrid model for now - some days in school and some online at home.

Epidemics and how to handle them are not new to school officials. In 1920, town schools closed for a month because of the deadly worldwide flu epidemic. An 1870-71 report by the School Committee noted there was "small attendance at the High School in the

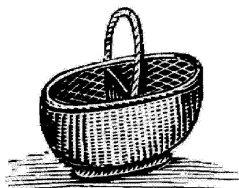
spring due to the epidemic which sickened some and made others reluctant to attend school." The report didn't name the illness, but online research of that era seemed to point to a scarlet fever epidemic. That was long before antibiotics, and scarlet fever outbreaks were particularly deadly for children ages 5 to 15.

In his May 1839 diary entries, Samuel Fisher, a local businessman, recorded that two of his children were sick with a "canker rash," a particularly fatal form of scarlet fever. Jane Fisher survived. Two-year-old Elen did not, despite home visits by five different doctors. Fisher tells the gruesome details of Elen's battle with the disease, which I will not repeat. He also writes of the deaths of two other town children by the same "rash" that month.

It is easy to imagine then how parents feared the spread of these diseases and labored over whether to let their children attend school, just as they are today.

These days schools run for about 10 months of the

*(continued on page 4)*



### Curator's News

by Ellen Racine

Joe Fontaine, Texas, who grew up across from the Wesson mansion, sent along a 1937 Auction Booklet with room by room listings of articles and furniture from "The Cliffs".

Early this summer Pam Baldelli donated a large travel trunk from 1914 with fifty articles of clothing from 1790 to the 1950s. These items were part of the Jewett, Hatch, Proctor and Gray families, consisting of infants clothing, to an 1870 silk outfit, to sheer fabrics of the 1950s, and period shoes. Several men's vests, a derby hat, and a wool frock coat were also included. All have been labeled and photographed and will be on display when the museum opens again.

Marla Collins, owner of 137 E. Main Street, invited Kathy Pierce and me to tour the 1760 house and photograph the interior. We had a lovely visit and learned much of the history of the Collins family who have owned the house since 1890. Marla donated letters, photographs and many property deeds from 1885 to 1944. The new owners plan to restore the house.

Dudley Darling dropped off three vintage farm items found in the Brigham barn at the Juniper Hill Golf Course: 2 Whipple Trees and an iron hoe blade.

Philip Warren mailed us many items from his parents, including N. Grange ribbons from 1905, Northborough High School photos of 1942-1943 and alumni photos. Seventy photos of the town from the 1920-30s were also included. We have very few photos from these decades (other than the 1938 hurricane), so they are quite a welcome gift.

We received an unusual request from the Marlboro Dept. of Public Works, Engineering Division to help them identify original farm boundaries that evolved from the Marlboro Plantation of 1660.

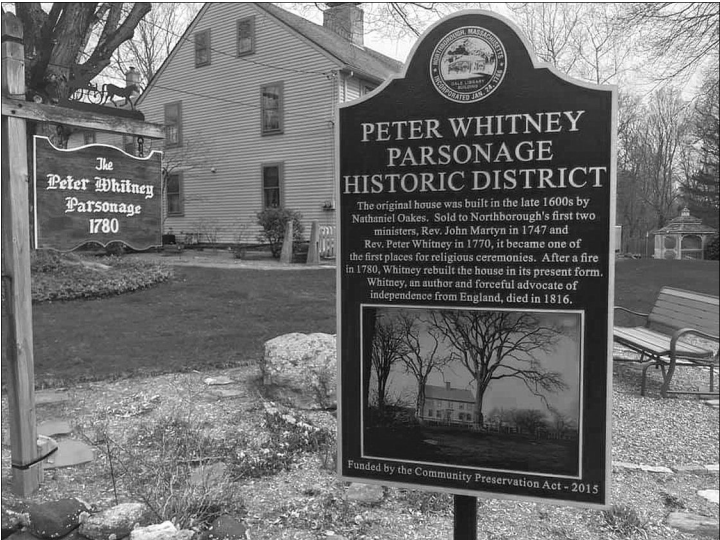
We are grateful for all the work that Lois Smith has done in posting historic house photos and histories on our Face-book page. These will continue but at a more relaxed pace. They have created quite a following and generated many conversations and questions. Thanks also to Laura Ziton and Ken Bennett for generating interest in the Northborough Historical Society during the past six months.

Despite the lock-down, it was an educational summer.

**Welcome New Members!**

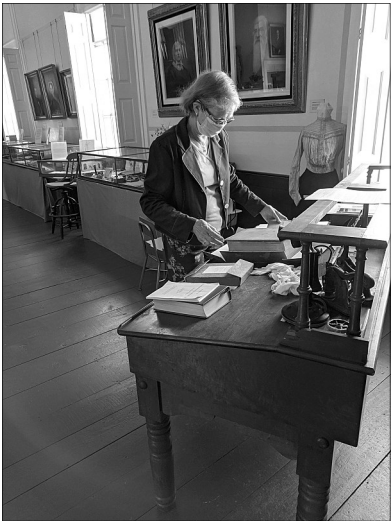
Larry Schafer  
Burton Tupper

# The Whitney Parsonage: A Spirited House?



Is there a spirit living in the historic Rev. Peter Whitney house in town? That is what "Kindred Spirits," a Travel Channel show on paranormal phenomena, was hoping to learn when the crew visited and filmed the former parsonage for a couple of days last month and this.

As part of the show's research on Whitney and the venerable house, the show hosts, Amy Bruni and Adam Berry, with their crew came by the museum on September 1.



They spoke with Ellen Racine, curator, and Kathleen Pierce, historian, who provided a bit of history on the reverend and showed them some Whitney artifacts in the museum's collection. These included his 1783 Bible and his impressive London-made grandfather clock, which survived the disastrous fire that destroyed the original parsonage in April 1780. The current Whitney house was built soon after that fire.

It remains to be seen what the show learned when it airs, most likely sometime early next year, according to the crew. Check your TV guides!



### News from the Board of Directors

The Board met in person on September 15. The main topic of discussion was the restoration and painting of the building. It was decided to apply for Community Preservation Act funding on the basis that this is considered preservation and restoration rather than routine maintenance.

There was discussion surrounding:

- The scope of the work
- When to enter into a contract with the painting company
- Alternative funding for the project should CPA funds not be available, or not for the full amount. Suggestions included various fundraising ideas, and withdrawal of funds from our long-term investments.

The Board voted to go ahead with this project

### In case you're missing us.....

At the moment, there are no plans to hold any Friday evening programs.

Fortunately, there are other sources for our Historical Society content. The following programs are available at [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). President Ken Bennett suggests watching one each month!

September: **Building the Wachusett Aqueduct**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aAPDSF7mQ4>

October: **Ghosts In The Graveyard** at Northborough's Howard Street Cemetery

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NX\\_ztuZe6sY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NX_ztuZe6sY)

November / December: **The White Cliffs: Victorian Splendor in Northborough at the Turn of the Century**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xobrVe8N5FA>

Recordings of some Historical Society programs and events are also shown regularly on Northborough's Public Access TV Channel. Check out the daily schedule here:

<https://www.town.northborough.ma.us/cable-access-television/pages/programming-schedule-public-access-government-and-education-channels>

### Did you know that you could support Northborough Historical Society while shopping at Amazon?

When you shop through this link the Society will receive 0.5% of your eligible purchases made at Amazon. This costs you nothing - the program is funded through the AmazonSmile Foundation . You access the same pages and pay the same prices - the only difference is that you will see a small banner if the item is Amazon Smile eligible.

<https://smile.amazon.com/ch/04-6156604>

## New Membership / Dues Renewal

**Dues are due September 2020**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

☐ I am interested in volunteer opportunities

Areas of special interest \_\_\_\_\_

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 mail this completed form along with your check, made payable to *Northborough Historical Society*, to:

Northborough Historical Society, Membership Secretary,

P.O. Box 661, Northborough, MA 01532

## History Corner, continued

year. A look back over local school history shows much less time than that was spent in the classroom in the 18th and 19th centuries. Indeed, when Northborough was one of three sections of Westborough, one school master taught each section's children for two months of the year in private homes. The teacher usually boarded with a family during his stay in the area.

So what did the children do the rest of the year? Certainly there were no online or Zoom classes to keep them occupied with learning. Did the hardworking mothers and fathers of the day have time to teach their children as well? Most likely not.

In 1766 Northborough became a separate town and soon hired a prominent town resident, 57-year-old Thomas Goodenow, as its own schoolmaster. There still being no schoolhouses in town, Goodenow also traveled from house to house, teaching groups of children a few weeks at a time in each house. That school year ran for 27 weeks.

In 1770, the town was divided into four "squadrons," or districts - north, south, east and west - so that each section could receive an equal share of the school year. In his "Northborough History", Rev. Josiah Kent wrote that this was more convenient as families would know to which district they belonged and when school in their district would be kept. The schoolmaster continued to board with a family in each district being taught at the time. Still obviously just a few weeks in each district.



*The North School, now a home at the corner of Whitney Street and Bearfoot Road*

By 1780 the number of children in town had grown to such a number that they could no longer be schooled in private homes. Thus it was voted to build the town's first schoolhouses. Money was

appropriated to build a one-room house measuring 18 by 18 feet in each squadron. Two more districts, the Center, and Ball Hill, were added later. The first permanent high school wasn't established until 1866 so the education of most students ended with grammar school although some students in those one-room classes were still attending in their upper teens. One district school in 1851 lists students ranging in age from 4 to 19!

As for length of the school week, a town regulation adopted in 1847 required that it be six hours a day for five and a half days with one recess of 10 minutes or two of five minutes each, morning and afternoon. This apparently rankled some teachers.

According to the School Committee report of 1856-57, some teachers had decided "for themselves that no more than five days' service could be reasonably expected of them." As we now know, that was done and the five-day week became the norm.

Eventually the school year was divided into two terms - winter and summer, as they were called. Occasionally an autumn term ran in a district. The school committee report for 1865-66 lists varying lengths in each district for their terms. Summer ranged from 10 and a half to 13 weeks and winter from 10 to 12. In that year the South district had no winter term, but did have an autumn term of 13 weeks. This was often determined by whether a teacher could be found for a district or whether a teacher stuck it out to the end of the term. It couldn't have been easy teaching up to 50 students or more of varying ages in a single room, especially when some of the teachers were little more than teenagers themselves with no formal training.

For many years, the school committee visited each district school at the end of a term to observe as the students were examined on their progress. The performance of the teacher was also judged and noted in the committee reports.

Regarding the duration of the school year, the School Committee stated in its 1852-53 report that "our district schools last about as long as most parents are willing to dispense with the services of their children at home...and about as long as most children are willing to apply themselves to their studies."

So it appears that when children were not in class back then, they weren't idling away their days at fun and games or even with schoolwork. Many did needed work in their homes, on the farm or even at local factories. Fortunately for today's kids, times have changed.



*The West School, now a home at the corner of Church and Brewer streets*