



# THE HOURGLASS

## NORTHBOROUGH HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

CCXCVIII

Northborough Historical Society  
www.NorthboroughHistoricalSociety.org

September 2021



### Next Meeting & Program: Friday, September 24, 2021

**I Now Pronounce You Lucy Stone** performed by Judith Kalaora, a professional actor and the Director of History at Play. In 1847 Lucy Stone was the first woman from Massachusetts to earn a college degree. As a prominent U.S. orator, abolitionist, suffragist and a vocal advocate and organizer promoting rights for women, she inspired thousands to join the suffrage movement.

The meeting will be held at 7:30 p.m., at **Trinity Church, 23 Main Street, Northborough**. The church parking lot is accessed from Hudson St. The event is free and open to the public.

### Northborough Historical Society COVID–19 Accommodations

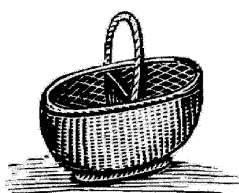
After conferring with Northborough's Health Department and following CDC guidelines, please note the Northborough Historical Society has decided to hold their fall meetings at the Trinity Church, 23 Main Street in Northborough.

Although the NHS building can accommodate our guests, the meeting room is not large enough to provide for social distancing and adequate ventilation. The Trinity Church's meeting room will provide a substantially larger space. In making this move, together with an enforced mask mandate, and no refreshments being served, we have made in-person meetings as safe as possible under the circumstances.

Watch for meeting notices on a monthly basis since we may adjust meeting plans due to changes in CDC guidelines.

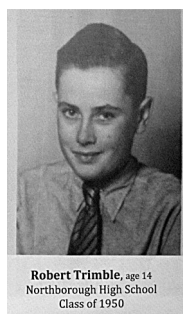


**Masks must be worn.**



### Curator's News by Ellen Racine

What did a 14-year-old boy do for fun in 1945? Baseball, fishing, mischief? Robert Trimble had other interests. When the Unitarian Church burned in December of 1945, Robert was at the scene two days later and collected the Church's clock hands and numerals from the wreckage. He then melted down the pewter into molds of WWI soldiers and cannons –

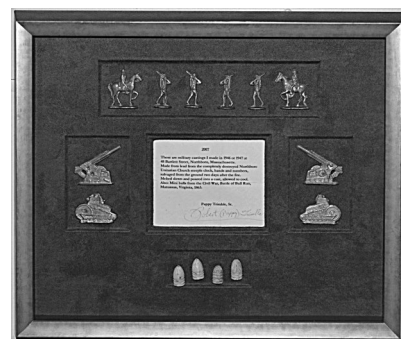


a wonderful framed display of which we now have in our collection. Robert's daughter, Brenda LaJeunesse recently donated these castings and generously donated funding for their shadow-box framing at Gaston Art & Frame. Mr. Trimble, who was owner of Everybody's Bicycle Shop in town for 50 years, collected vintage bicycles, and had previously donated his "Hi-Wheeler" that he rode in many parades, to the museum.

This framed collection is appropriately displayed in our museum's school room.



Other historical donations were photos donated over the summer from the Shrewsbury Historical Society. These include photos of several historical houses in town possibly taken by Hiram Harlow and are new to our collection. Also received were great photos of the Rich family and 25 Rutland Road.





## History Corner

by Kathy Pierce

### Shoddy: The Devil's Dust

Shoddy. Is the word an adjective or a noun? Or both? And did the adjective come from the noun or vice versa?

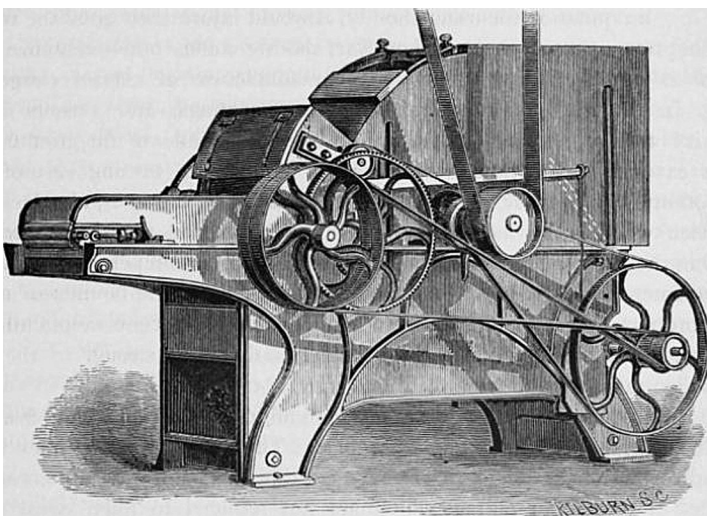
To most people today shoddy is an adjective meaning inferior workmanship or products. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, it was a noun well known to textile makers. Northborough, for example, had two cloth mills that produced shoddy. Just what was that curiously named material and what was its use?

The two local mills that made shoddy were the Chapin Mill and the David F. Wood Mill, both on Hudson Street. Caleb Chapin bought his cotton mill in 1865 from an L.S. Pratt. It burned in 1869. With his \$20,000 insurance coverage, Chapin built a larger brick factory, converting it to the manufacture of cloth from wool, *shoddy* and cotton, according to Kent's *Northborough History*.

David Wood actually ran two mills beginning in 1866 - one for satinet, the other for *shoddy*. The shoddy mill, located in an old corn mill, burned before the end of that year. "Fire was a feared hazard in shoddy mills", Kent wrote.

Getting now to just what the Chapin and Wood product was. The fabric that became known as shoddy was developed in Batley, England, around 1813 by woolen manufacturer Benjamin Law. At the time wool makers in England faced a shortage of yarn from which to weave their woolen cloth. Shoddy was the answer.

The process combined finely shredded woolen rags and tailors' clippings with virgin wool to produce the new material. Thus, the word shoddy first came into use as a noun. Because of the inferiority of the fabric, however, its name now denotes poor quality. The slur has long outlived the now scarcely made product.



Workers made shoddy by shredding wool rags in what were called "devils," large grinding machines with sharp teeth that also spewed woolen fibers into the air. This led to the term "devil's dust" which was the cause of the frequent fires in shoddy mills.

In the early 1800s, shoddy revolutionized the textile industry, becoming widely made in England, particularly in Batley. The recycled cloth was soon the main economy of the small village, converting it from a sleepy country hamlet to a bustling manufacturing center with mills, warehouses and fine homes.

Within a few short years, shoddy mills cropped up around the globe. Over the next century, shoddy was extensively used to make suits, army uniforms, slaves' clothing, carpet lining and mattress stuffing, reports the recent book *Shoddy: From Devil's Dust to the Renaissance of Rags* by Hanna Rose Shell.

Shoddy manufacturing eventually crossed the Atlantic to America and New England. According to the 1870 Massachusetts General Statistics of Manufacturers, there were 17 shoddy mills in the state. These employed 127 men, 44 women and 18 youths. Eleven of these mills were in Worcester County, and as we know from Kent's *History*, two were in Northborough.

David Wood's shoddy mill was the smaller of his businesses, employing four men with one picking machine. This turned 200,000 pounds of rags into 135,000 pounds of shoddy for use in Wood's satinet mill, which was very profitable. Satinet is a cheap cotton and wool blend made to resemble satin and often used to make trousers.

The adjective shoddy is aptly derived from the inferior fabric that bore the name. The loosely woven textile caused an ugly corruption scandal during the Civil War when it was used in poor quality uniforms for soldiers.

At the time, *Harpers Weekly* magazine defined shoddy as "a villainous compound, the refuse stuff and sweepings of the shop, pounded, rolled, glued and smoothed to the external form and gloss of cloth" quotes Ron Soodalter in his article *The Age of Shoddy*.

According to Soodalter, New York-based Brooks Brothers clothing factory filled orders for 36,000 uniforms in 1861 alone. "Facing a shortage of wool, the company glued together shredded, often decaying rags composed of various materials" and sewed the resulting cloth into uniforms. "Far from protecting the soldiers from inclement weather, these uniforms fell apart in the first rain," Soodalter wrote. Adding insult to injury, the New York Volunteers had to pay for these uniforms out of their clothing allowance. The New York Legislature ended up ordering that \$45,000 worth of uniforms be replaced.

Yet war profiteers continued to prosper by producing these shoddy goods. By the end of the war, what had been a few dozen millionaires in New York City now numbered in the hundreds. They lived in sumptuous brown-stones on Fifth Avenue and became known as the "shoddy aristocracy."

"From devil's dust they sprang, and unto devil's dusty they shall return," blared the New York Herald.

Since Northborough's two shoddy mills weren't operating during the war, they couldn't have figured in these scandals. That's good to know.

## Northborough Historical Society Programs 2021-2022

All programs begin at 7:30 pm

September 24, 2021

**I Now Pronounce You Lucy Stone** performed by Judith Kalaora, a professional actor and the Director of History at Play. In 1847 Lucy Stone was the first woman from Massachusetts to earn a college degree. As a prominent U.S. orator, abolitionist, suffragist and a vocal advocate and organizer promoting rights for women, she inspired thousands to join the suffrage movement. (Location: Trinity Church, 23 Main Street, Northborough, MA).

October 22, 2021

**1620: The First Year.** Christopher Daley, a local historian and author, will lecture on the Mayflower voyage, the settling of Plymouth Colony and the Pilgrim's encounter with the Wampanoag people. (Location: Trinity Church, 23 Main Street, Northborough, MA).

December 3, 2021

**The Vikings, an Icelandic Saga.** Dr. William R. Short, an internationally renowned author, filmmaker, and independent scholar, will present a fascinating talk of enduring tales and historical facts of the Viking people: a culture of combat, weaponry and feared warriors in Medieval times. (Location: Trinity Church, 23 Main Street, Northborough)

January 28, 2022

**Third Parties in America: 1860 to 2016.** John Northgraves, a professor of American History, will present the historical instances when third parties gained enough momentum to be on the ballot and either became a nuance to the two "regular" parties or changed the results of an election. (Location: TBA).

February 25, 2022

**The Garfield, Burnett House.** Deborah Costine, a member of "Preservation Massachusetts", will present an overview of the Burnett family history and the steps taken to preserve and restore this grand home in Southborough, MA. (Location: TBA)

March 25, 2022

**Bathsheba Spooner: A Revolutionary Murder Conspiracy.** Researched and written by Andrew Noone, a local author. He will tell the intriguing and scandalous history of Bathsheba Spooner, accused of murdering her husband and dubiously famous as the first woman hanged in the United States. This most sensational "true crime" tragedy of 1778 happened right here in Worcester County. (Location: TBA)

April 22 2022

**The Local Historic Districts of Northborough.** Norm Corbin, a Northborough Historical Society member and frequent lecturer on local history, will provide a visual "tour" and informative presentation of Northborough historic districts. (Location: TBA)

May 20, 2022

**Mark Fidrych.** Kevin Merchant, a lifelong friend of Mark, will present a fitting tribute to Northborough's Professional Baseball legend, sharing personal anecdotes, professional stats, memorabilia and career highlights. Be prepared to join in and share your own memories of the "The Bird". (Location: TBA)

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## New Membership / Dues Renewal

**Dues are Due September 2021**

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 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

**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 each September

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When you follow this link you will be able to select Northborough Historical Society as your charity of choice - just follow the instructions to start shopping. You will also be able to open an account with Amazon if you do not already have one.

For the Society to receive your contribution you must access Amazon via **<https://smile.amazon.com>** so add it to your bookmarks now!

0.5% of your purchase may not seem very much but when all of the purchases of all of our members and friends are aggregated, this donation from the AmazonSmile Foundation can be a significant contribution to our funding.

Questions? Email:

[northborough\\_historical\\_society@charter.net](mailto:northborough_historical_society@charter.net)**Next****Board of Directors Meeting  
Tuesday, October 12****Membership Dues Payments**

If you are planning to pay your membership dues at the September meeting, please put your check or cash (exact amount) in an envelope, along with a completed copy of the membership renewal form from this Hourglass, and place it in the container at the membership table when we meet at Trinity Church. This is to enable everyone to maintain social distancing and avoid the usual scrum around the table.

Thank you for your help in this matter.

