



THE HOURGLASS

NORTHBOROUGH HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

CCCII

Northborough Historical Society
www.NorthboroughHistoricalSociety.org

February 2022



Next Meeting & Program: Friday, February 25, 2022

The Burnett - Garfield 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.

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. Masks must be worn and social distancing must be observed.



History Corner

by Kathy Pierce

All in a Long Day's Work

Hello, welcome to the Whitaker and Proctor Button and Shell Jewelry factory in Northborough. My name is Henrietta Martha Johnson, but everyone calls me Nettie.

So began my portion of a historical society program titled "Money, Money, Money: Making a Living in Northborough in the 19th Century." Ellen Racine, Cindy Atwood and I created the program and presented it to the society in 2014. As the title says it focused on the various means of making money here in the 1800s.

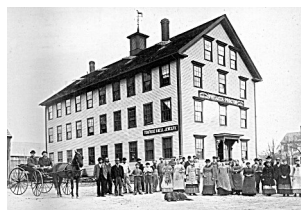
This month, the society's Facebook page featured a series of postings on the history of the Hudson / Allen streets industrial area. The program was originally presented to the society by member Brian Smith. It was adapted for Facebook by Brian, and Lois Vandekopple. The series brought to mind our 2014 program on what jobs actual townspeople had in those days and what some actually earned.

For our Making a Living program, I impersonated Nettie



Johnson, a worker at the button, comb and shell jewelry factory in the center of town, where the bowling alley is now. The society archive holds hundreds of payroll records of the Whitaker and Proctor factory. It is intriguing to go over them and realize they represent real people and the wages they took home after a month's labor.

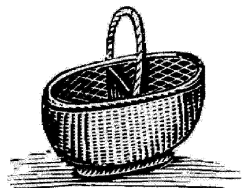
Nettie was born in Northborough in 1853 and attended the local high school. By 1881, she was 23 years old, single and working at the Whitaker and Proctor factory. Her job was tying buttons to the cards that held the fasteners for retail sale.



So, what did she make for her efforts? According to a payroll record from January 1881, Nettie earned 10 cents an hour and worked 16 3/4 hours that month. She took home \$1.67. For piecework on top of that, she earned \$16.69 carding 250 1/3 gross of buttons. A co-worker Lizzie Gates earned \$13.95 for 15 2/5 hours of work carding 206 5/6 gross of buttons.

Proctor records show 17 men also worked at the factory then, most putting in 10 to 15 hours a day, six days a week. One of them was 25-year-old Oliver Contois Jr. The young man lived in a house on Hudson Street with several family members who also worked in local mills. Proctor records

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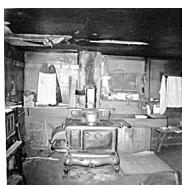
Curator's News

by Ellen Racine

There seem to be more photographs and slides than I ever thought existed! Phil Warren sent another batch of slides that his father, Leonard Warren, took of the 1966 Bicentennial parade and forty-five great photographs of the construction sites of Peaslee and Lincoln Street Schools from 1962-65. Two houses were moved or removed to make space.



The DeArmond house was said to be from 1759, pre-Revolution



era, had no electricity and questionable plumbing.

It appears that this Lincoln Street house was en route to a new location.



Another batch of some 50 slides in our Collection were taken by Herb Yankee who presented a program on Northborough barns in 1970.



660 Howard St Bennett Barn



101 Howard St Murray Barn



80 Colburn St Sparrow Farm



50 Cherry St Valentine Barn

Many, I'm sure have slid into the earth since then. I believe the Valentine barn on Cherry St. is still standing.

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

History Corner, continued

of August 1880 indicate that Oliver put in 269 hours that month, or about 67 hours a week. At a rate of 12.5 cents an hour, he earned a grand total of \$33.63.

Just as today, hourly wages among employees varied, most likely depending on their duties and the job they performed. For example, Oliver’s co-worker Solon Parmenter worked 116 hours that month for 17.5 cents an hour, bringing home \$20.30. An A. Yates made 25 cents an hour for 178 hours in December 1881, earning the tidy sum of \$44.50.

There were no Social Security or income tax deductions at that time, so workers got to keep all their wages. Even so, in today’s dollars, 13 cents an hour is worth \$2.88 so Oliver’s 269 hours of work would earn him roughly \$775. That’s hardly a living wage for a month’s labor. That’s why so many members of these working families and, perhaps boarders, lived together.

According to the 1850 U.S. census of industrial products, the three dominant manufacturing operations in Northborough were comb, cotton and brick making. In that year, the town population was 1,535 with those three industries employing 135 men and women - a good percentage of the working age residents.

In 1850, comb making was the largest industry in town. Six factories employed 75 men and 11 women. With the long hours noted on the Proctor time sheets, it is fair to say this labor was strenuous and tiring. In an 1860 diary entry,

Rosa Crosby Warren noted that her sister-in-law Abby had gone to work in a local comb shop and “had very sore fingers.”

The 1850 census reported the average wage in the comb factories was \$25 a month for men and from \$5 to \$15 a month for women. By 1860 at the Gallup & Hildreth comb factory, wages had risen to \$33 a month for men and \$19.50 a month for women. In 1870, Gallup & Hildreth listed \$35 a month in average total wages paid.

In comparison, the 1860 census shows the 38 men working at the L.S. Pratt cotton mill earned \$22.35 a month while the 35 women made \$15 a month. It seems the comb workers earned somewhat more, but there is no indication in the survey if the textile workers labored as many hours as the Whitaker & Proctor comb / button shop people did. With the standard 10-hour-a-day, six-day work week, they most likely did.

Textiles and shoe making prospered here for several decades, but comb manufacturing gradually dropped off. By 1870, just two such shops existed. In 1921, only the thriving Farwell shop on Hudson Street remained.

By that time, young Nettie Johnson had moved on. In March 1885, she married Robert Clarke, who managed the Brigham dairy farm, where Juniper Brook Golf Course is now. She and Robert moved to Marlborough in 1898 where she died in 1927.

**Next
Board of Directors
Meeting
Tuesday, March 8**

Donations

It is now easier than ever to make a donation to Northborough Historical Society

Donations can be made online at our website.

www.northboroughhistoricalsociety.org/donate.html


If there is a red dot in the address panel below, it is time to renew your membership.

Situations Vacant!


We are looking for some volunteers to help with two projects.

- We need a few people to join a work party to help prepare an appeal letter for mailing
- The Society is planning a presentation to be given in Northborough schools. More help is needed, especially with presenting the project at the schools.

To volunteer or for more information, call or email
Hilary Wilson
508-393-3869
hilarywilson@charter.net



Northborough
Historical Society



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