



THE HOURGLASS

NORTHBOROUGH HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

CCCXXV

Northborough Historical Society
www.NorthboroughHistoricalSociety.org

March 2025



Next Meeting & Program: Friday, March 28, 2025. White Cliffs, an Architectural Marvel. Norm Corbin and Tom Reardon share a historical account of the architectural detail and construction of White Cliffs. They will highlight the recent unearthing of architectural documents that shed new light on the construction of this iconic structure.

The meeting will be held at 7 p.m. at the Society building, 52 Main St., Northborough, MA. The event is free and open to the public. Masks will be optional.



History Corner

by Norm Corbin, Historian

White Cliffs Estate

The White Cliffs property has been getting a lot of attention in the news recently. In addition to three articles in Massachusetts papers, there has been one in the New York Post and even one from the U.K! Website links to these news articles can be found at the end of this Hourglass. The reason for the recent interest is that the April Northborough Town Meeting will have several warrant articles regarding the future of the property. Because of this attention, I've decided to update my previous 2016 Community Advocate articles for this Hourglass. As a reminder, Tom Reardon and I will present "*White Cliffs, an Architectural Marvel*" on March 28 at the Historical Society.

Landscape - The estate, originally called "The Cliffs", was built on about 32 acres of land on both sides of Main Street. The mansion was built at the height of a knoll which is 100 feet above the Assabet River and 30 feet above Main Street. Mr. and Mrs. Wesson would have had a magnificent westward view of the town center and the distant hills. The landscape designer was Justin Sackett. Mr. Sackett was famous for his landscape designs for public parks, cemeteries and private properties in the Springfield, Massachusetts vicinity. The landscaping included open fields to the West and South, several man-made ponds, a bridge, fountains, carriage ways, and stone walls along the property lines. The only remaining landscape features are the stone walls, which can be seen on Main Street and Maple Street, and the large purple beech tree just to the south of the mansion.

Mansion Exterior Architecture - Built in the mid-1880s, "The Cliffs" mansion is a "Shingle Style" architectural masterpiece. This style was developed in New England between 1875 and

1900. It borrowed liberally from Queen Anne, eclectic, and picturesque styles. Architects handled proportion and details as if they were sculptural compositions. Exterior design elements included wood construction built atop first floors made of stone. Porches, balconies, and large windows encouraged an interaction with the out-of-doors. The design promoted informality and eclecticism as a clear expression of American individualism. Original construction photographs reveal porches, towers, a balcony, asymmetric windows, ornate chimney brickwork, and various shingle patterns that are all typical of this style. Much of the original exterior 1880s architecture still remains. The architect was Benjamin Hammett Seabury of the firm Richmond & Seabury. Mr. Seabury had a prolific career in the Springfield, Massachusetts area with as many as 55 buildings listed as historic assets by the Massachusetts Historical Commission.

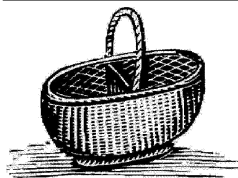
Mansion Interior Architecture - The interior of the building was designed and built by the Herter Brothers, a very prominent firm out of New York City. Herter Brother's customers included William Vanderbilt, J.P. Morgan and Ulysses S. Grant. The design elements are of the "Aesthetic Movement". This movement championed the visual and sensual qualities of art and design over practical considerations.

For "The Cliffs" the "Aesthetic Movement" design included a prominent, large, great hall with a grand staircase, ornate fireplace, and built-in staircase benches, a floor plan that is open with formal areas off the main lobby, and raised wood paneling

(continued on page 2)



West Facade shortly after construction
(Photo: Northborough Historical Society)

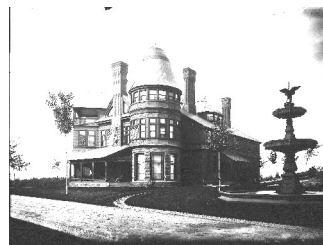


Curator's News

by Ellen Racine

The building of an extravagant mansion must have been quite an attraction during the summer months of 1882 as the start of the Wesson's barn and house began. By 1885 Masters Temple, Gohusan and Smith of New York were completing the finish work on the Mansion. These three men became good friends of Northborough's young adults and were included in many of their escapades. Mary Mack lived at 94 Main Street, her father being

Cornelius J. Mack who operated a livery stable there. She and her friends often walked to the Wesson house to witness the progress. Mary was an energetic and social young lady who would often create fun if there was none to be found - book groups, church events, sleigh rides, plays, musicals, dances, card games and skating on Bush's Pond, but..... in August? Yes a roller skating rink at Solomon Pond in 1882. Her diaries also mentioned a rink in Westboro when two barge loads of young adults headed there in November of 1882. Mary Mack Mentzer kept her diaries for 61 years. Thanks to Carolyn Squillante for transcribing them over the past several years.



The Wesson Estate, c. 1886

Mary Mack Mentzer
in costume, 1916



History Corner, continued

in the formal rooms. The millwork and metal working are very detailed. It was said that each room was made of wood from a different part of the world with furniture to match. The mansion contained many stained glass windows, gas lit chandeliers, 17 elaborate fireplaces, ornate ceilings, and 32 rooms. The many stained glass windows have been removed and are in storage for safekeeping, including the famous spider window.



Spider and Fly Window (Photo: Geoff Wilson)

Please consider lending your support for White Cliffs at the April Town Meeting.

Recent News Articles about White Cliffs:

Boston Globe: [After eight years, Northborough has no purpose for historic White Cliffs estate - The Boston Globe](#)

Worcester T&G: [Millions spent, but White Cliffs estate remains empty](#)

New York Post: [Mass. town paid \\$1.7M for Smith & Wesson founder's home — but still doesn't know what to do with it](#)

UK Daily Mail: [Tiny Massachusetts town spent \\$2million to save iconic historic mansion... but has no idea what to do with it | Daily Mail Online](#)

Community Advocate: [With funding application, next steps for White Cliffs weighed](#)

Membership

Annual Dues:

Single — \$30
Student/Senior — \$25
Family — \$55
Lifetime — \$500

Mail 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 in September each year

News from the Board of Directors

The following items have been discussed and / or adopted at recent Board meetings.

- The purchase of new chairs for the meeting room
- A new rental agreement and reservation system
- Window replacement / restoration
- New accounting software
- Changes to the by-laws

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

Reminder: Dues are now overdue!

Please mail your check to the address above, or bring your payment, cash or check, to the membership table at the March 28 meeting. To ensure that your contact information is up to date, please complete a membership form (link below) and submit it with your dues.

<https://www.northboroughhistoricalsociety.org/pdf/Membership.pdf>

Volunteers Needed!

We are looking for a few members who would be willing to print out a small flyer each month containing information about each program, and post it in a location around Northborough or the surrounding towns. If you can help us with this please email: northborough_historical_society@charter.net

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



Custodian Needed

The Property Committee is looking for a custodian. If you are interested in the position, or if you would like more information, please contact Paul Derosier at stude38paul@yahoo.com or phone 508-361-7321.

Information about future programs and more is available on our website.
www.NorthboroughHistoricalSociety.org

Scan QR code
to donate via
PayPal



► 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