



WESTMINSTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

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(978) 874-5569

Winter 2020
facebook: Westminster Historical Society

Last year the Historical Society worked with the Wachusett Writers and Poets Club to sponsor a contest we called "Westminster Reflections." Everyone was invited to contribute something—either written or drawn—to be included in a booklet, which was published in time for the Cracker Festival in October.

We were delighted with the entries! They demonstrated a wonderful awareness and sensitivity to what people had experienced in our town. We thought you would enjoy reading and seeing some of the contributions to this book. (It's available in our Gift Shop for \$4.)

Thank you, Bruce Vieweg, for this story—a remarkable look into a piece of Westminster's past.

The Shack by the Side of the Road

"Sometimes, we need to remember our roots . . . in my case, those roots reach back to Westminster, Massachusetts, a small New England town . . . founded in 1759 . . . a true democratic community to this day, still holds annual town meetings. Conservative, yes . . . and caring about neighbor, absolutely.

When I was a youngster, I knew a hermit . . .

He lived in a one-room shack. It sat less than 100 feet from a gravel country road. In my memory, it did not have any windows, but a single door and a low-pitched roof. It would become black in the rain from the lack of any protection to the old untreated wood. There was no electricity, no plumbing, no central heat. He did have some sort of wood stove that would cook food, boil the coffee, always complete with eggshells, and heat the one room shack during the long, cold, and white New England winters.

Mr. Hakala lived there . . . I can remember to this day his walking past our family's farm, waving to my grandmother, who he referred to as "Missus". "Ah, Meesta", she would say in response, "where are you off to". "To the races", he would nearly always reply—always rolling his "Rs"

— he would wave a racing form as he walked spiritedly to the next city to catch the bus or train to the nearest race track - - - he did seem to love the horses. When he went to the races, or just about anywhere, he always wore a coat, tie, and hat.

Mr. Hakala was a man of Finnish extraction who lived in that shack by the side of the road . . . Bean Porridge Hill Road to be exact. As a youngster, I never knew a time when he didn't live there. I suspect he passed away many years ago, but there he lived all the time I was growing up in a different part of that same town. His livelihood was to grow cranberries behind his shack. Each fall, he would dam the nearby stream and "harvest" his fruit as the water flooded his patch of small, tart, crimson berries.

I really knew very little about this man . . . I didn't know how long he had lived in the shack by the side of the road; I didn't know if he was a squatter, or if he owned the land — come to find out, he did indeed own the land; I didn't know if he had family — come to find out, he did indeed have a family, back in his home country; I didn't know how long he had been away from his native Finland.

I did know that my father talked differently, with a sort of accent that I did not understand, when they chatted. My sense now is that my Dad was speaking a type of 'broken Finnish' while Mr. Hakala was speaking a kind of 'broken English' — somehow they understood each other. I knew that Mr. Hakala walked everywhere — he had no vehicle. He was a friendly mystery to me, and in many ways remains so these 70+ years later.

One recent summer, I rode past the shack that still sits about 100 feet from the north side of Bean Porridge Hill Road . . . the road though is now paved, I was more than a little surprised to see that the shack is still there. It actually now has a window, alas with glass broken. It appears totally

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**2016-2017
OFFICERS & BOARD MEMBERS**

| | |
|-----------------------------|---------------|
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| <i>Genealogy Researcher</i> | Darlene Johnson |
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| <i>Registrar</i> | |

MEETINGS

Meetings are held November through June
on the 2nd Tuesday at 7 pm
and are free and open to the public.

HOUSE & GIFT SHOP HOURS

The Historical Society House is open
Mondays 7-9 pm, Wednesdays 9:30-11 am,
Fridays 9-12 Noon
and other times by appointment.

MISSION

The Westminster Historical Society's mission is
to save and share Westminster's past.



LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

February 5, 2020

Dear Members,

For weeks I've been dealing with a skunk underneath my porch at home. After 40 years living in this house why did a skunk suddenly take up residence here? I had to figure out a way to find a happier hunting ground for this animal. Whiffs of its distinctive odor could be caught as you approached the garage doors!

Finally I resorted to getting help. To the yellow pages of the phone book (yes, I'm one of the few who still use one). After a few calls, I eventually found a "critter control expert" who actually answered the phone. He came to see me that very afternoon about my problem resident.

I thought it had been hibernating in a burrow and was disturbed by some carpentry work being done this month. He assured me that skunks were *active* now because this is their *mating season*. Who knew?

After much deliberation he suggested a plan to catch him and rid me of the very smelly nuisance—and when that's done, the next step will be to install a perimeter fence to prohibit future borrowing under the porch. So much time—and money—invested!

I am thinking about this situation as we look at the goals of the Historical Society. We all sometimes meet "skunks" which take us off track—cause us to focus on things that were not originally in our plans. They demand our attention and our resources, and we do them, knowing that it's just part of the unexpected situations that we all have to deal with. Then it's back to getting on track.

At the Historical Society, we have to replace the roof on the barn behind the house. It leaks during rainstorms, and we count on the barn for dry storage of donations for our sales, and even some large artifacts in our collections. Right now this is our problem "skunk." However, we're going to make something good happen out of this. We've signed up with a solar company to install solar panels on the barn after the roof is completed, and that will help pay for our electricity consumption in the future.

We have wonderful people on the Board of Directors who are dealing with all the unexpected issues we face. As I take on the role of president this year, I appreciate their energy and support! Please think about what you can do to help us as we move forward. Do you have a few hours a month to volunteer? We've got lots of opportunities and would love to talk to you about them! THANK YOU!

Sincerely,
Betsy
President

CURATOR'S CORNER

In our pursuit to collect and protect the history of Westminster, we have been pleased to receive the following items from those who are interested in helping us achieve this goal. They will be integral to understanding the people who lived in this town. We thank you!

Lawrence Hicks: A metal biscuit tin with a large collection of items from the service of Willard Gates in World War I.

James Roosevelt: a collection of Sargent family photos and a grandfather clock from Ann Sargent;

Nancy Fiske: Mattie Newton's 1904 diploma from Westminster High School;

Karen Gormley: Finnish cookbook Keittokirja.

Among the many items in Willard Gates memorabilia, are many pins and badges. For those of us without military experience, they're an interesting lot to look at but have little meaning for us. To anyone in the military, however, every pin and every badge has significance. And servicemen and women know at a glance what type of service was given by the kind of pin being worn.

ANNUAL MEETING



The Historical Society's Annual Meeting was held on November 1 at McNally's on Sargent Road. The program on the History of Wachusett Reservoir and Dam was presented by Rangers Keith and Kathryn Parent of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation, division of Water Supply Protection. Its history is not as well known as Quabbin's, so it was interesting to learn more about it.

UPTON SCHOOL UPDATE

abandoned, but oddly looks better than it did in my memory.

Then as we sat in the car right there in the middle of that country road I recalled a story that my father told me many years ago. He related to me that every once in a while, Mr. Hakala would remove himself and all of his belongings, such as they were, from that shack. The town fire department would then burn it down, and individuals from across the community would build a new shack for him. It appeared that at one of these times, that rebuild did indeed include the addition of a window.

I suspect there are few Westminster natives left who even remember “Hackie” as I heard him called. For me, I can still see him walking past my grandmother’s house, in a brown suit, racing form in hand, saying “Hello, Missus, going to the races”.

The men and women of this small community, a conservative, Yankee, rural town, in north central Massachusetts, didn’t judge, didn’t question, didn’t mock, and yet did support “the least among them” not through word alone but through deed as well.

A model for our times.”



*As it so happens, we have a photo of Mr. Hakala’s home on Bean Porridge Hill Rd. It will be part of the book being written about the History of the Finns in Westminster. It has indeed been abandoned for decades, but now with this story, his life has become real to many of us who had known **about** “Hackie” but never actually **knew** him. Such is the power of writing! Thank you Bruce, for making him come alive for us!*

UPCOMING PROGRAMS

March 21: Maple Syrup Making at the home of Adam and Sheri Bean on Saturday March 21.

March 10: The Legend of Lucy Keyes at 7 pm at the Historical Society. Lucy was a child taken by the Indians from her Princeton home in 1755 and never found. People can still hear her mother calling for her. This is a video presentation made of sights connected to this story and familiar to residents in Princeton and Westminster.

April 14: The King Philips War was a key factor in the creation of the town of Westminster, originally called Narragansett No. 2. Mark Dueger will tell us what he has learned about this war and how it was key to the creation of our town.

May 9: Once spring has begun, we’ll be holding our Annual Plant Swap and Sale.

WESTMINSTER CRACKER FESTIVAL

It was a gorgeous Fall day for the Cracker Festival this year. It's become a great event for the Historical Society to participate in. Lots of happy people and fun things to do at our place.



The fireplace was blazing inside the house where Claudia Ewing demonstrated cooking soup over the fire and cornbread made in the bake oven for visitors. A guessing game with Colonial artifacts kept visitors thinking when they entered the house.

HIKE TO GRAVE OF ABNER MILES, REVOLUTIONARY WAR SOLDIER



Tom Torrans and Mark Landry presented an excellent program on Abner Miles who fought during the Revolutionary War, and was lucky enough to return home. However, he contracted smallpox and was not allowed to be buried in the Woodside Cemetery so was buried on the family farm instead. That farm was purchased by the State for the State Hospital, which later became the prison.

Tom first gave a presentation on the two flags carried during these early battles, and then he and Mark led us on a half hour walk to see the site, which the Legion and the VFW maintain.



MEMBERSHIP

If you're not yet a member, please consider joining today. It's easy. Just fill out the form below and send it along with your check to the Historical Society. Or, you can now become a member by getting onto our website! Your membership support is essential to us.

Thank you if you have already renewed their membership this past year. If you are unsure of your status, just call Nadine at the office (978-874-5569). You will want to be a member in order to take advantage of the ten percent discount on all items in the Gift Shop. If you are 75 years of age, your membership is free!

WESTMINSTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP FORM

Name _____
Address _____
Phone _____ Fax _____
E-mail _____

| | |
|--------------------|------|
| Individual | \$30 |
| Family | 45 |
| Senior (over 65) | 20 |
| Contributing | 60 |
| Friend | 100 |
| Honorary (over 75) | 0 |

All members receive a 10% discount in the Gift Shop.
Please contact me about volunteering. These are some of my interests:

- Sorting, cleaning, and cataloging items.
- Putting data about items into a computer database.
- Helping with newsletters and brochures.

HISTORY OF BLACK POWDER GUNS



Andy Wells gave an interesting history of muzzle loaders—one of the most ancient types of guns still used today.



Michelle Wells demonstrated how to make the paper caps which held the powder. Patty Schmid and Ann Williams are learning here how to create their own.

CHRISTMAS OPEN HOUSE AND FLEA MARKET



The holiday season is a wonderful time to have visitors in the house. Opening up boxes of donations is like Christmas at the house, and setting them up is fun and watching visitors pick out something special for Christmas is fun too.

WISH LIST

- Computer with Windows 10
- Snowblower
- Lawn Mower

WESTMINSTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY GIFT SHOP

When looking for a unique gift for birthdays, anniversaries, and other holidays or special occasions, be sure to browse the WHS Gift Shop. Whether shopping for yourself or someone on your gift list, you may find the perfect gift for the person who loves Westminster. Members receive a 10% discount on all purchases. **You can now order items from the Gift Shop ONLINE! Just go to our website WestminsterHistoricalSociety.org.** Sales tax and shipping costs will apply.

Books

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| <u>Cemetery Inscriptions</u> | 35.00 |
| <u>History of Westminster, 1832</u> by Hudson | 5.00 |
| <u>History of Westminster, 1893</u> by Heywood. | .96.00 |
| <u>History of Westminster 2008</u> by WHS | .95.00 |
| <u>History of Westminster, 1961</u> , by Tolman | 20.00 |
| <u>Homestead Heritage of Westminster</u> , by WHS | .50.00 |
| <u>Images of America</u> , by WHS | 20.00 |
| <u>Olin Warner, Sculptor</u> , by Hyson | .4.50 |
| <u>200th Anniversary of Westminster</u> , | 5.00 |
| <u>Vintage Views of a New England Village—A</u> | |
| <u>Postcard Tour of Westminster, Massachusetts</u> | 25.00 |
| <u>Wajusett Gatherings</u> , by Sinclair (hardcover). | 30.00 |

Other

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| <i>Wachusett Mountain</i> charcoal print | .60.00 |
| Calligraphy sampler | 12.00 |
| <i>Cracker Factory</i> print by Dana Vickery, signed | 45.00 |
| Map of Westminster 1855. | 6.00 |
| <i>Downtown Westminster 1831</i> by Peckham | 30.00 |
| Postcards | .50 |
| Children's books | 4.95 |
| Westminster Tapestry wall hanging | 35.00 |
| Soup Mug with Spoon | 10.00 |
| Westminster Reflections booklet. | 4.00 |

Westminster Historical Society
110 Main St., P.O. Box 177
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DATES TO REMEMBER

**March 21: Visit a Sugar Shack at 10
Harrington Road!**
March 10: The Legend of Lucy Keyes
April

ICE OUT CONTEST IN FULL SWING!

Yes, the water in Westminster has now finally frozen and we have ice for our Ice Out Contest! If you go by Round Meadow Pond you can see the soup bowl and spoon with Westminster Crackers falling into it.



Whoever guesses the closest date and time that the ice melts enough for this structure to fall into the water will win \$300. Anyone can enter this contest, so no matter where you live you can go to our website and purchase a guess— \$5 for one guess, or \$20 for five guesses.

Winters can be long and we think this is a fun way to make some of the time pass, and a fun way for the Historical Society to raise funds for our operating expenses. In particular this year we're raising funds to put a new roof on the barn behind our house on Main Street!

All entries must be submitted by March 15, so don't miss being a part of the fun!