



Dennis Historical Society

Newsletter

July 2018

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There will be no Board Meeting in July

Please send information & stories for the newsletter to Dave Talbott at the DHS Website email address: info@dennishistoricalsociety.org

The Josiah Dennis Manse Museum School Program for the Third Grade Students of the Ezra H. Baker School

Just over forty years ago, in the mid-1970s, the first classes from the Ezra H. Baker School toured two historic homes, the Josiah Dennis Manse and the Captain Baker "Jericho" House. These third grade *field trips* were added to the school curriculum for the children to learn about the history of their town, Dennis. The Captain Baker Museum school program will be featured next month.

In the early days of the tour, the Manse was set up quite differently than it is today. The upstairs bedrooms were not available to visitors, and the present Maritime Room was a summer kitchen and store. This left the keeping room, both parlors, and the West Schoolhouse, newly moved to the Manse grounds, as places for costumed docents to interact with the children--And for the children to interact with history. For a few years they learned a little about the Nobscusset Indians in the makeshift upstairs library, presently the children's bedroom. As the years progressed, so did the program, to become the gem it is today.

Depending on the year, there are five or six third grade classes in the Ezra H. Baker School, and over a week, or two, each class tours the Manse on its assigned day. Each class is split into five groups of five or six children making for a very nice number of students for interaction with the docents. The first thing that happens when the children arrive on the bus is to put on articles of clothing meant to help them fit into the spirit of the 1700s time period. The girls don paper caps and cloth aprons, while the boys get vests. Every student gets a sticker with an old fashioned name to use throughout the visit--Zebadiah and Mehitable are not the favorites. Once dressed, they gather outside the front door, or if it's raining in the East Parlor, and are greeted by a costumed docent who gives them a brief account of the Rev. Dennis, his house and the fact that they are British, not Americans. It was always fun to listen to Joe Solarz play the role of Rev. Dennis. Some of the children believed he was real, and they had stepped back in time. After the greeting, they proceed in their small groups to their assigned rooms. For many years, Nancy Howes ran the program and did an incredible job of coordinating the timing and the movement of the children and their chaperones from room to room.



(Photo courtesy of Dick and Nancy Howes)

In the Maritime Room they learn about the history of ship building in Dennis, the different types of ships and their rigging, dangers at sea and the possibility that a boy as young as ten could find himself working on a ship as a lowly cabin boy. There is also some local lore, such as the loss of the lightship "Cross Rip" and her crew one hundred years ago, after the crew had been ordered to stay at their posts despite conditions which forecast impending doom. John Burton's diorama of the Shiverick shipyard shows, in intricate scale detail, the construction of one of the world renowned clipper ships, the *Belle of the West*. These, along with antique nautical instruments intricate ship models and prints and paintings of ships at sea serve as perfect teaching tools.



(Photo courtesy of Bob McMurtry)

The next stop is the Keeping Room, the "heart of the home." Here they learn that children had many, many jobs: tending the fire, bringing in water from the well, feeding the chickens, milking the cow, knitting socks, tending to the younger siblings, and on and on. While learning about life in this room in the 1700s, they are put to work making butter. The children take turns shaking a jar with heavy cream in it which after fifteen to twenty minutes separates into butter and buttermilk. They are fascinated to see what they accomplished, and better yet, they get to actually eat their own butter on freshly baked bread, before they board the bus to return to school. Off the Keeping Room are the Borning Room, which has prompted questions that only their parents should answer, and the Pantry with its mysterious trap door leading to the root cellar.

Upstairs, in the Spinning and Weaving Room, there is a demonstration of spinning, and the students actually card fleece as part of the process preparing it to be spun. Then, it's time for the fun part. After watching the docent weave, they are given the hands on opportunity of working the loom themselves. Over the years, Susan Kelley has had third graders weave immeasurable yards of rugs using wool yarn, spun and the fleece which they carded. All of those children have loved and taken pride in every minute and every inch of it. The time in that room is never long enough.



(Photo courtesy of Bob McMurtry)

On to the bedrooms. In the Master Bedroom, amongst the 18th century furnishings, the children see a four poster bed. The "springs" on this bed were crisscrossed ropes, tightened by a special tool from time to time to take out the sag. The rope springs were topped with a mattress of straw, or feathers. Not only could they see what such a bed looks like, but also find out the various ways to keep warm in the winter. Year after year, class after class, one of the best reactions of the day is to the explanation of the chamber pot underneath the bed. They have been told that there is no bathroom in the house, but until they see that chamber pot, it doesn't really register. In the Children's Room, they see the samplers on the wall, made by children not much older than they, and play with very simple, old fashioned toys which they actually enjoy using.

Stepping back in time into the Schoolhouse is a real eye opener. For anyone, trying to write with ink using a quill pen is very difficult. For a third grader, having to sit still on an uncomfortable seat is cause to wiggle. Wiggling in one's seat in colonial times was, in turn, a cause for punishment. Pretending to sit in the corner wearing a dunce cap is cause for much laughter. Since the West School House is presently unavailable to use in the program, Terri Fox did a wonderful job of creating a school room in the West Parlor for this year's program, though it's not the same as the real thing.



(Photo courtesy of Dick and Nancy Howes)

During the years the Manse was undergoing renovations, the Manse Committee took the show on the road to the Ezra Baker School and set up makeshift "rooms" in the gymnasium. The children enjoyed it, but it wasn't the same hands on experience they get when visiting the Manse itself. The house has a definite ambiance, which on more than one occasion, has caused a third grader to ask if the docents actually live in it.

The children seem to get a lot out of their visit each year. They truly appear to enjoy stepping back into history and pretending what it might have been like to live over 250 years ago. Their teachers do an excellent job of preparing them for the tour. We get some very knowledgeable and thoughtful questions. When asked if they think they would like to have lived back in the 1700's, their opinions are very varied, but each and every one has an opinion, which makes it all worthwhile. Some of them bring their parents back for a tour in the summer, especially on Colonial Day. One of the very best things, however, is to have one of the parent/chaperones tell us that they can remember coming to the Manse when they were in third grade. What a tradition!

Thanks from Third Graders

(An excerpt from the *July 2002 Newsletter*)


Every year we receive letters from the school children who visit the Manse and Jericho, and they make our job worthwhile! They also help us see what the children see, and how they translate what they hear. Mrs. Hoppen's class sent us a pop-up book with pictures and a write-up for each room. In Mrs. Evan's room the children wrote individual notes stressing what they liked best, and from "Mistress Howard's" class we received a wonderful summary of the day's experience. If there were room, we'd print them all, but for this newsletter, here's just a sampling of some of the things the children wrote.

"My favorite room was the keeping room because it has all the food." And "It was my favorite room because it smelled good." (We had bread baking in the oven.)

"My favorite room was the weaving room. Weaving was fun with a loom. When we brushed the sheep's hair, it was hard."

"My favorite room was the school house because we got to write with gull feathers, we got to learn how you would have to bow if you were a boy and curtsy if you were a girl that's what you had to do to talk. If you were bad you'd sit in a corner. The reason is because we got to learn."

Chris Talbott, Josiah Dennis Manse Committee

Editor's Note: The "Unknown" House feature will return in August. There were no replies identifying the picture in the June Newsletter. However, thanks to Bo Durst's perusing of a scrapbook which belonged to Josh and Mary Ann Sears, there is a partial answer to Scott and Robin Walker's questions regarding the picture in the May Newsletter. In a March 1955, article in the *Register* about the new East Dennis PO, the move from its former location, in a structure on the James S. Howes property constructed after the fire, allowed the property owner, one Paul Bauman to begin the expansion which included the house, and what later became the present condominiums. **HAPPY INDEPENDENCE DAY!** 

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**West
Dennis
Cemetery
Walk**

**Friday,
July 13th,
at 10am**

Rain date:
Sunday, July 15th, at 2pm

FREE ADMISSION
West Dennis Cemetery
at the intersection of Fisk & Pond streets
(No parking in the cemetery itself)



MEET MOTHER GOOSE
A delightful presentation of
your favorite nursery rhymes

SATURDAY, JULY 21, 1-4PM

JOSIAH DENNIS MANSE
Corner of Whig Street and Nobscussett Road
Free Admission (donations gladly accepted)

Upcoming July Events, Mark your Calenders!