



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 23 Number 3

April 2000

Calendar of Events: Saturday, April 8th 12-3 PM

Luncheon at "The Olde Inn at West Dennis." Please see reservation form from March newsletter.

Wednesday, April 19th 9:30 AM

Docent Training at the Manse for anyone interested in hosting at the Manse this summer. A light lunch will be provided. Contact Nancy Howes 385-3528.

Saturday, May 20th 1-4 PM

Josiah Dennis Manse open in celebration of Maritime Week.

Saturday, June 3rd

Lady Slipper Walk. See next month's newsletter for details.

Sunday, June 11th 12-4 PM

Jericho Historic Center
Opening tea with interpretive flower arrangements. Public is welcome.

Saturday, June 17th 1-4 PM

Josiah Dennis Manse open for Heritage Cape Cod Week.

MISTRESS HOWES, THE HEALER

Nancy Thacher Reid

Mary Howes arrived in New England about 1637 and was one of the European pioneers who settled among the NobsCUSSET Indians in what is now Dennis in March, 1638/1639. She was in company of her husband, Thomas, and at least 2 sons, Thomas and Joseph. They traveled aboard a vessel named *Mayflower*, though not the famous *Mayflower* which brought the Pilgrims to Plymouth. A third son, Jeremiah, according to family tradition, was born during their Atlantic passage but if not, certainly was born soon after they arrived.



The Howes Chest

It is not known with certainty where Mary was born and raised, although it is believed that her maiden name was Mary Burr. Wherever it was in England that she lived before her marriage, she was trained, as were all young girls of that time, in the dozens of skills that were needed to manage a household in the 17th century. In addition to weaving, spinning, candle making, soap making, knitting, sewing, etc. young women were taught the cultivation and use of herbs in promoting health and curing illness. In England, as well as in the New World, the medical profession was barely developed, and folk medicine was the families' best protection. Of the many skills which she was taught, it appears that Mary excelled in the art of healing.

All of the necessities of life which the Howes family brought from England to the New World in 1637 were carried in a large oak chest, the Great Chest which today stands in the West Parlor of the Josiah Dennis Manse. Can you imagine packing up all you would need to sustain your life in an unsettled country into one chest, including enough clothing and equipment to last young children for a journey of upwards of three months? And yet Mary found room in the chest for seeds and roots of plants which she knew had value to protect health and alleviate illness. Among these she probably included such valuable plants as wild geraniums, the roots of which were antiseptic and astringent; cypress spurge, a cathartic and emetic; charlock, used to make a poultice to ease chest congestion; and sweet flag to be given for indigestion. These and

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MISTRESS HOWES, THE HEALER

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other helpful herbs and plants would be included in the “sallat garden” which the stalwart pioneer women of New England grew around the back dooryard of their homesteads.

Mary undoubtedly learned from the natives of this place about local plants which provided remedies for common ailments. Among these were the teaberry, used to combat rheumatism; bearberry, a diuretic; and sassafras tea made from the roots of the tree, and excellent for soothing sore throats.

Surely, Mary Howes was not the only goodwife in Nobscusset who had knowledge of home remedies for common ailments. But her skill and reputation in healing were great enough to be recognized in other parts of Plymouth Colony. Cape Cod historian Frederick Freeman relates that a young minister, name not recorded, was called to serve at Sandwich, but was suffering from “consumption,” which we now call tuberculosis. He was advised by the good people of Sandwich to go to Nobscusset to place himself under the care of Mistress Howes, which he did. He subsequently died, without returning to Sandwich. However, then, as now, the purpose of health care was not only to cure, but also to alleviate suffering and provide the nursing care which was necessary for the invalid.

After the death of her husband, Thomas, in 1655, Mary was married to Thomas Prence and removed to Plymouth with him when he served as governor of Plymouth Colony. It appears that she took her family chest – and perhaps some seeds and roots from her garden? - to Plymouth Town. The will of Thomas Prence returns the “Great Chist which she brought to me at our marriage” to his widow, who moved back to Nobscusset after his death to live with her son, Jeremiah.

There is no record of daughters born to Mary and Thomas Howes. We are left to wonder whether a neighbor, her daughters-in-law, or another woman skilled in healing continued to cultivate her herbs and carried on her good works. She died at the home of her son in 1695, a time when other aspects of healing and health care were developing on our peninsula about which I will tell you more another time.



Wild Geranium

MANSE VOLUNTEERS TACKLE WINTER PROJECTS

The Manse has been bustling every Wednesday morning, as our industrious group of volunteers was busy with winter projects. The group has shown its abilities sewing or repairing curtains for six rooms at the Manse. They planned and carefully cut the wonderful material, which Nancy Howes and Susan Kelley spent part of the early winter tracking down. Each seam was hand sewn, and then carefully pressed by Kathleen San Clemente. The sewers have varied from week to week, with Nancy Howes, Phyllis Horton, Ruth Derick, Jane Bacon, Marge Wheeler, Maureen Joyce and Susan Kelley all taking part. A new member, Chris Talbot, who is a talented needleworker, has joined us and has volunteered her time repairing the crewel curtains, which Mary Hood Hagler so generously worked many years ago. The curtains are up! The group is now busily cleaning and gardening, preparing for spring.



Susan Kelley, Chris Talbot and Nancy Howes work on curtains at the Manse.

WEST DENNIS PUBLIC LIBRARY

Almost eighty years ago, in November 1920, a public meeting was held to form a Free Public Library in the Village of West Dennis. The object of the Association recorded in the by-laws adopted at that time was “to establish, maintain and control a Free Public Library and Reading Room and such aids connected therewith as shall encourage a taste for wholesome reading and promote intellectual and moral growth in the Community.”

The Association met in a small building nearby the present library until they were able to purchase land and build the first one room structure on Route 28 in 1924. From a small one room library that cost \$4,200 with books and fixtures valued at \$1,000, it was expanded in 1961 and completely refurbished in the 1990’s to its current pleasing and functional building.

West Dennis Free Public Library stands today as a symbol of the generosity of the neighbors and friends in the village. We remember John Kahler, who died with no heir and left his home to the Library and the Community Church, to be divided 50-50. The Beatrix Potter figurines and display case were donated in memory of Joseph E. Crowell. The illuminated display case in memory of Arnold R. Smith holds a variety of local treasures throughout the year, and the ship models above it were made by Lester E. Bachman.

Upon entering the main room one may focus on the paintings hanging behind the desk, especially that of the ship *William G. Lewis* by Hacker. The ship had been build for Captain Edwin Baxter of West Dennis and was lost off Cape Hatteras in 1888 with all aboard. The painting hung in the home of Polly Baxter, his widow, and was passed on to Mrs. Vera Merrill, her niece, and ultimately to the library.

A complete set of Joseph C. Lincoln books, given by Miss Mildred Chase, is housed here as well as a three volume bibliography, the work of Mr. William Jeremiah Burke, which contains a list of books about Cape Cod and the libraries in which they can be found. Also given by Mr. Burke is his personal collection of books on Cape Cod.

Today, in keeping with the times, the library houses an extensive reference section for the personal investor as well as computers and a copier for general use. In the children’s section is a delightful doll house which pleases the second graders of Ezra Baker School who have frequented the library for many years. The library also participates in the State reading program with summer story hours to welcome all children to the library.

Greatly appreciated are the many gifts and memorial donations plus the special efforts of the West Dennis Garden Club for their weekly flower arrangements and Christmas decorations. The many volunteers, too numerous to personally acknowledge here, all of which contribute to the welcoming atmosphere of this Village Library, would make proud that small group of citizens who joined together back in 1920.

Thanks to Jacquie Lewis, Librarian



Photo of the West Dennis Public Library
Richard S. Howes

Dennis Historical Society

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THE WAY WE WERE

The Dennisport Mill

Burt Derick

Old-timers may remember the old Dennisport Mill, located on the east side of Depot Street, north of Chase Avenue, at what was later the Dennis Shores Cottage Colony. The photograph shows the mill, in very poor condition at this point in time, with the photo taken facing east, and with the Belmont Hotel in the background at the end of Chase Avenue.



The mill was known as Reuben Burgess' Mill. But it probably had a history much longer than Reuben's ownership. The mill had been moved to the beach area from the area of Upper County Road in Dennisport. That land had been Kelley land, and Reuben had married Hope Kelley. The style of the mill suggests it is old – much older than Reuben.

In 1795, the map of Dennis shows a mill on Old Chatham Road, on the land of Hattil Kelley, the miller. The records do not tell what happened to the mill after the demise of Hattil. Henry Kelley, the family historian, believes this mill in Dennisport may have been Hattil's old mill, and the style of the mill suggests that he may be right. The mill, if Hattil's not only had great longevity, but was one of the most traveled structures around.

The old mill met its end early in the last century, when the derelict was burned one night by persons unknown.

