



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 28 Number 4

April 2005

Calendar of Events

Board meetings are open
to all interested members
of the DHS. Next meeting

**Wednesday, April 13
7:00 PM**

Josiah Dennis Manse

Save this date:

April 27, 7:30 P.M.

Jim Perry will speak on
how salt has effected our
history.

"Salt of the Earth"

**Dennis Senior Center
Refreshments**

Spring really is coming!

We plan to celebrate the
opening of this year's
Maritime Exhibit
**Dennis Maritime
Disasters of the 1800s**
with a **members-only re-
ception** at the Manse on
Friday, May 20 at 5:30.
Hors d'oeuvres.

**Maritime Disasters
opens to the public
Saturday, May 21**

1-4 P.M.

Refreshments

**Josiah Dennis Manse
Nobscusset Road
Dennis**

The Feather Merchant Mystery

Peter D. Howes

This is a tale of a moneymaking occupation that engaged early Dennis maritime folks, bringing their names into the history books and linking them with an occupation that passed into the common vocabulary of a generation past. Depending on the source, it has been viewed either as an ignoble occupation or just one of those ways to make a living. Depends on your viewpoint, I guess, or on your understanding of what it took to keep body and soul together in the early 1800's.

Economic conditions in the early years of the republic were far from stable and industry was limited, especially on the Cape. In 1816, after the end of War of 1812, James Monroe had been elected president. Foreign trade reopened after the war creating substantial foreign competition amidst the declining demand for war materials. This was one of the factors behind the financial panic of 1819. The general economic depression had begun for manufacturing and commerce as early as 1816, and with the 1919 panic, the nation suffered a widespread depression. Banks throughout the country failed; mortgages were foreclosed, forcing people out of their homes and off their farms. Falling prices triggered widespread unemployment, and all regions of the country were impacted. It was not until 1824, during Monroe's second term, that prosperity began to return. During this depression, people across the nation turned to any method possible to support their families.

In the 1820's it has been noted that Ezra Howes and Barnabas Wixon of Dennis made their fortunes through feather voyages on the sloop *Phoebe*. They were far from alone in this enterprise, just some of the many participants in this occupation that passed into the lore of the times. This successful enterprise brought back duck feathers from the Labrador Coast and the Bay de Chaleur, which lies between New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Feathers were in high demand in Boston for bedding, especially for something known as 'piller-bears' which were feather beds that were so deep that the children had to 'rig up a jury mast and rattle down the shrouds' to climb on board.

(Makes me wonder if the old deep feather mattresses on which I slept in my grandparent's house on Main Street, Dennisport were 'piller-bears'. Certainly they were soft enough. My cousins and I would sink deep into those old mattresses up in the second-floor bedrooms to hide from the sea-wind that often moaned around the eaves, evoking childish fears of voices from the past.)

These 'feather voyages' became highly popular once the haunts of the enormous supply of ducks and other seabirds were located. Grand Bankers also

took up the trade, especially after a poor catch. Such collection voyages could be accomplished in smaller ships than those needed to face the rugged oceans far out on the Grand Banks. Being a feather merchant, as these people were called, was a way of making a living for many maritime folks in this period, long before the building of the great fleets of schooners, brigs and ships (square riggers) that became so prevalent later in time and would provide widespread sources of employment.

Who were these Dennis folks—Ezra Howes and Barnabas Wixon—that sailed on the Sloop *Phoebe* and into the history books? Let's look at the town of Dennis in 1820 as a possible source of answers.

There were sixty-two Howes families in Dennis in 1820, having three hundred and thirty three members. One hundred and fifty-nine of these good folks, almost half of the Howes clan, were under sixteen years of age showing that it was a very young family. The Howes family was the largest of the sixty-five surnames in the town. (The Baker surname was next, with forty-two families.) Eighty-two members of these Howes families were employed, twenty-seven in agriculture, forty-five in commerce and ten in manufacturing. No further breakdown is available in the census records.

There were thirteen Wixon families in Dennis in 1820, one headed by a Barnabas that had four males over sixteen and three family members engaged in Commerce. A Barnabas Jr. headed a second Wixon family that contained only one person over sixteen and one family member in Commerce. No help in solving the mystery with this limited set of information. Both families had men old enough to go to sea. Then again, I doubt that the fine point of a "Jr." after a name made it into the limited literature of the voyage. There's no solution as to which family went on the Sloop *Phoebe*. Perhaps one of today's Wixon family descendants has the answer.

Now let's address the Howes family question. Who was this Ezra Howes? In 1820, there were two men by that name living in Dennis whom we need to investigate. Both of these gentlemen were descended from second-generation Joseph Howes who married Elizabeth Mayo. One Ezra Howes descended from his son Thomas and the other from his son Amos. Skipping forward to the fifth generation, we have Thomas' grandson Capt. David Howes (and my lineage) who had a son Ezra born in May of 1793 who was twenty-seven in 1820 – clearly old enough to go to sea. On the other side we have Amos' grandson John, whose son Ezra was born in July of 1787 and was 33 in 1820. He's also old enough! Only one of these Ezra Howes families had a member in Commerce – but which??

So here's the question that I pose to you readers of Howes heritage:

Was my ancestor a feather merchant or was yours??

When Bob and Kitty McNamara first came to stay in Dennis they had an unexpected visitor who knocked on their door. It was a young boy who had come on his bicycle and who was soliciting subscriptions for the *Cape Cod Times*. Being new to the area Kitty asked, "Is it a morning or an evening paper?" To which the boy, looking slightly puzzled, replied, "I think it's an all day paper."

Please don't forget us if you come across items of Dennis history, whether they're stories or old ledgers, whether they're period clothing or old diaries and records. The Historical Society is now collecting items from the 20th Century which some of you might not consider to be "old", but which we regret to inform you are history. Do you have stories about World War I or II? Letters home from Korea? If they pertain to Dennis, they're part of our history. Do you still have your "poodle skirt" or one of those wonderful nylon shirts from the 70s? See, it's history! And were you someone who kept a diary which can tell us about the teen dances of the 50s and roller skating at the West Dennis Community Center? Remember the first TVs? Telephone operators and party lines? Then you have stories to tell. If you're unsure about something you have, you may call members of the acquisitions committee: Susan Kelley (508) 385-3300; Phyllis Horton (508) 394-0017; or Mary Kuhrtz (508) 385-4978.

A Letter from Ann...

*Dear Phyllis & Members of the Dennis Historical Society & the Jericho Committee & Friends,
Thank you all very much for honoring me at the Jericho House tea in December 2004.*

Being on the Board of the Jericho House Committee was a labor of love for me. I was asked to be on the Jericho Committee when it was brought to the attention of the Board that they could only have five members according to the deed. Parmele Fitch who had been Chairman had passed away and there was confusion as to who would take over his place. The first two replacements were disappointed in what they were expected to do and resigned. However, Marion Low, Lilla Smith, Mary Lou Tarbell and Mrs. Charles Chamberlain, members of the Committee, stayed on and Mary Lou asked me to join them. I accepted. I never expected to be made Chairman, but that is how it happened.

I have laughed and enjoyed it when all went well and cried when the Friday paper arrived and my news release was not in it. But I did make all the papers with the announcements for the 200th birthday of the Baker House.

When anyone said it was a lot of work for me to do I questioned their thinking. I said many times Jericho was a labor of love for me. I will miss it, but it is time for some other member to enjoy.

I will remember all of the Board members and the Friends of Jericho as wonderful friends for the rest of my life—they were generous and always willing and never failed to come through when called upon to clean the house and barn, to be a docent, to bake for our teas, or to make flower arrangements.

Thank you ladies—you were wonderful and my term at Jericho was a delightful experience.

God Bless you all.

Ann C. Chalmers

There will be different days ahead for Jericho and for the many people who have come to love the old house and barn. If Ann could have written all of her memories, we would know about the many men who enjoyed sharing their knowledge of the old tools in the barn and how they were used. The guys were also at home with the driftwood museum and blacksmith shop tools in the barn cellar. We'd learn about the program for the school children from Ezra Baker and about Lilla Smith's magic as, dressed in the costume of the day, she took them with eyes closed back into the 1800s by the ringing of a bell. I wonder how many readers remember making ice cream by hand or visiting the old store. If you have fond memories of visiting Jericho in the past, we hope you will fill out a green card at Town Hall and join the Committee as it looks ahead for this wonderful old house which once belonged to the Bakers and now belongs to the people of Dennis.

We were saddened to learn of the recent death of Lilla Fries Smith, noted teacher, dancer, library board member, docent, and Jericho Committee Member. She and her husband Mark E. Smith, Jr. lived in West Dennis for more than 45 years. Many of our school children were influenced by her magic and her charm.

We have fond memories of other school programs which are sponsored by the Dennis Historical Society for the children of Dennis and neighboring towns. One little fellow was so happy with his visit to the 1745 schoolhouse at the Manse that he declared, "If I had an apple, I'd give it to you!" Another enterprising student thought that writing his name and the date with a quill pen was not using his talents to best advantage and so drew an outline map of Cape Cod. That was a first! This year's visit from the third graders from Ezra Baker to the Manse will be scheduled during the first two weeks in May. We look forward to having some new stories to share.

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The Way We Were

The wooden model below, which was built by Hughson Hawley and H. Freeman Bullard of West Dennis in January 1985, is of a salt works. The windmill was used to pump sea water into the vats. Each vat is connected by wooden pipes. The sun evaporated the water leaving the salt which was then shoveled out. The shed covers were rolled over the vats to protect them from rain and foul weather. This model is on permanent exhibit at the 1736 Josiah Dennis Manse Museum.

Did you know there are 14,000 documented uses of salt? No wonder this common compound is mentioned so often in literature and even has religious significance. Be sure to join us on April 27 at 7:30 for Jim Perry's talk Salt of the Earth when Jim will tell us how salt was important to Cape Cod's economy and how it has effected people and history, including Capt. "Sleepy John" Sears of East Dennis.

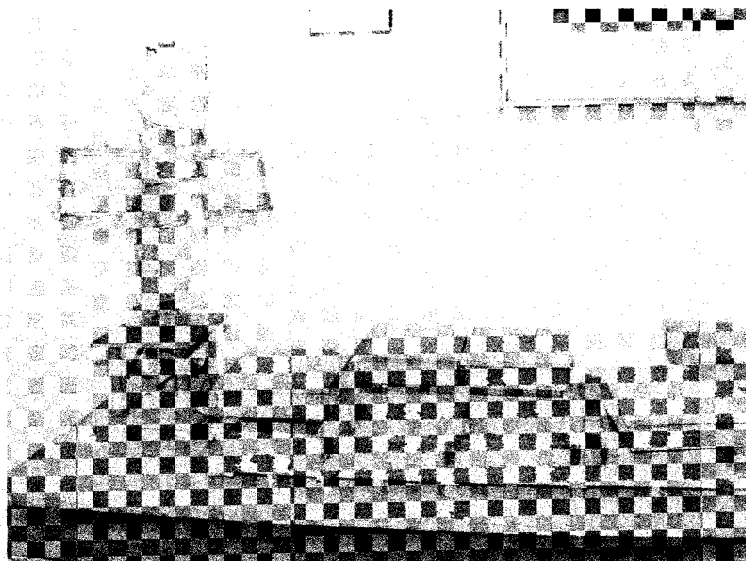


Photo and text by Peter D. Howes