



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

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SAVE THIS DATE: April 8th

We will meet at noon at the Olde Inn in West Dennis for luncheon and to hear Arthur Katz of Lexington speak on "What Really Happened on April 19th."

More details in our next newsletter!



1st Wesleyan Methodist Church of East Dennis

In our December Newsletter we had a picture of a Christmas Pageant held in 1952. This pageant was held in what was then the 1st Wesleyan Methodist Church, later known as the East Dennis Community Church.

We also misnamed Herb Pennington as "Chuck" Pennington. Sorry, Herb!

CARING FOR THE SICK

Nancy Thacher Reid

Well, Washington is very busy arguing whether doctors, insurance companies, the government or us lowly individuals should be making the choices about our health care. In the "good old days," when our ancestors first settled on this golden peninsula, there were not as many choices. In 1639, when the first English settlers erected their simple homes, health care, both preventative and therapeutic, was pretty much the responsibility of the woman of the house. Among the many skills which a young woman must master before she was ready to become the mistress of a family was how to promote health and remedy illness.

Packed into the limited luggage as a family emigrated from England were seeds and plants of herbs and flowers which were believed to have the medicinal qualities. As soon as a homestead was established, a space in the garden was set aside for these precious plants.

The people who settled at Yarmouth, however, had another health care provider of sorts in their midst. He was Thomas Starr, termed a "chirurgeon," a term which comes from two Greek words; cheir, meaning "hands" and eigon, meaning "work." You can see how this term has become our word "surgeon." However, the procedures which Dr. Starr was prepared to perform were very limited. Modern surgery would only develop when the three problems of control of bleeding, pain and infection were solved. The "Chirurgeon" of Colonial days specialized in treating injuries. He would apply poultices, lance boils, bandage, stitch, set bones and dislocated joints and, if necessary, amputate digits or limbs so damaged that they could not heal.

Dr. Thomas Starr had arrived in New England with his family in 1634 on the ship Hercules. One of his biographers states that he came to Yarmouth when he was awarded a homestead here as a reward for his service in the Pequot War, 1637. His experience during that bloody war doubtless had honed his skills to his trade. And there were plenty of injuries in a farming community like Yarmouth, where primitive tools were in use. But I suspect that Dr. Starr was not called upon to treat many patients. In a Puritan community, Dr. Starr remained loyal to his Anglican church roots. He was cited at the Court at Plymouth as a "Jeerer and Scoffer of religion." He was also a part of a movement to form a second church in Yarmouth in 1644. In this community of conformists, Dr. Starr was an outsider.

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CARING FOR THE SICK

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In time, Thomas Starr appears to have taken up farming. In 1645, he was granted 50 acres of upland in “Sesshuit,” 6 acres of meadow of Nobscuset, and 4 more acres on the south side of town, near the South Sea (Nantucket Sound). The meadow he had at the South Sea provides a reminder of this early chirurgeon, for through it runs a creek. At the time of the annual herring run, Dr. Starr set nets, or weirs, in this creek, presumably to catch fish to fertilize his fields. It was designated in early records as “the Doctor’s Weir Creek.” Today it is called simply Weir Creek, a stream that runs inland from the Old Field Channel to Uncle Stephen’s Pond in West Dennis. Over the past years, two new bridges have been built across Weir Creek, one on Lighthouse Road, dedicated to Innkeepers Robert and Mary Stone, and one recently opened which crosses the creek on Loring Avenue.

Thomas Starr’s name appears in the records as being of Yarmouth until 1648. However, in 1663, Thomas Starr once again appears in our records. Probably this was the son of Dr. Starr, but it could be it was the good doctor himself. Whoever it was, his behavior was such as would not endear him to his Puritan neighbors. he was accused of stealing timber, of threatening the constable, Joseph Howes, and, in June 1668 he was fined for being “distempered with drink.” What became of Thomas, or the Thomases, I know not. However, the earliest documented health care giver in our town did not set a very high example of behavior, as later care givers did. More another time.

NTR

Nancy C. Garfield shared a memory of another Dennis physician... “Dr. Ginn, who lived where the Gingerbread House is on the Dennis-Harwich line, delivered my dad (Edward P. Chase) for one dollar. Imagine!”

*Edward P. Chase will celebrate his 100th birthday in February.
HAPPY BIRTHDAY!*



Dr. Ginn’s Block – Dennisport

Good News! The Dennis Historical Society has had the great honor of receiving a \$500 grant from the Education Foundation for Dennis and Yarmouth, Inc. for the development of a children’s web page on the Dennis Historical Society web site which we expect to be in operation in the Spring. The children’s web page will contain information concerning the history of Dennis from a child’s perspective, including information on the one-room 1770 Old West School, now located at the Josiah Dennis Manse, the West Dennis School 1867 – 1931, the Ezra Baker School and the Nathaniel Wixon School, as well as the history of the people of Dennis. We express our sincere appreciation to the Education Foundation for this grant.

Second in a series of articles about our Town's libraries

The Jacob Sears Memorial Library, East Dennis

The early history of the East Dennis Library reveals a great interest in books and the value of reading by the citizens of East Dennis. In 1866 William Howes originated and developed a plan for a library association. The library was housed in private homes until 1870 when Nathaniel Myrick donated \$500 to the association which gave them a broader base of operation. They reformed the association and the library moved into a small room in Worden Hall. Captain Prince S. Crowell also left \$500 in his will to the library association. These were very substantial gifts in the 1870's. When the library was housed in Worden Hall, it has 1200 volumes. The library association charged 50 cents a year dues and only members had borrowing privileges. By the late 1800's there was great interest in establishing a permanent library building. Fortunately for East Dennis, Jacob Sears generously provided the means.

He was born May 5, 1823 on Quivet Neck, in a house built by his father. He grew up in East Dennis and attended the East Dennis public school, located on School Street. He became a successful farmer and cranberry grower, and had interests in shipping and railroads.

In the 1850's, there was a move to consolidate the local school with the Dennis village school and a new school was built in 1860 next to Worden Hall. Concerned that the integrated school system might not provide a comprehensive course of instruction, Mr. Sears stipulated in his will that, after the death of his wife Olive, all the remainder of his estate be used for educational purposes to "...benefit the inhabitants of East Dennis and vicinity..." He died on May 4, 1871 and in 1895, after the estate was settled, construction of a building in the style of a modified French chateau was begun.

On July 10, 1896, the building was dedicated and a grand affair it was! There was a 12 piece orchestra, an address by Samuel Powers, Esq. of Newton (son-in-law of Captain Prince S. Crowell), a vocal solo by Minnie Sears, a reading, more singing, music and a prayer. On July 14, 1996 the library celebrated its 100th anniversary with another grand affair, which included a brass band, a children's chorus, an original poem written by Jane Pomeroy for the occasion, an exhibition of paintings by local artists, speeches by local dignitaries, and an old-fashioned sing-a-long.

The library and community building over the years has been used as a venue for plays, community suppers, lectures, minstrel shows, classes in art and music, exhibitions, a voting hall, and of course, a library. Legend has it that Bette Davis trod the boards of the library stage during the summer when she was an intern at the Cape Playhouse.

Jacob Sears' vision is being fulfilled in the way the 103 year old library integrates with today's modern technologies of video and audio tapes, computers and the internet. The building continues to ring with the laughter and pleasure of new young readers and the voices of friends meeting to discuss new books and community news. He would be delighted to see how important his gift has been not only to the village of East Dennis, but for all Dennis residents and visitors as well.



Jacob Sears Memorial Hall, c. 1909

Thanks to Nancy E. Symington, Librarian

Dennis Historical Society

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**THE WAY WE
WERE**

(Below) Ice farming on Scargo Lake,
from the Anson and Esther Howes
collection.



(Above) This picture, from a collection of photographs taken by B. Evelyn Crowell, shows ice-boating on Scargo Lake in 1939.

Were winters really colder then?

If you have a memory or a photo to share, please contact the Newsletter Committee, Dennis Historical Society, P.O. Box 607, South Dennis, MA 02660. Pictures will be returned!

