



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 32 Number 1 Send letters & stories to Dennis Historical Society, Box 607, S. Dennis 02660 or to pmrhorton@aol.com Jan/Feb 2009

Calendar

Wednesday, February 11
3:00 p.m.

DHS Board Meeting
At the Jericho Historical Center
All are welcome to attend!!!!

Sunday, March 15, 2:00 p.m.
**"Story of the Shiverick
Shipyard"**

Join our historian Brendan Joyce
and learn the history of
Dennis's historic shipyard.
Jacob Sears Library
23 Center St., East Dennis

Tuesday, March 17

10:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Antique Appraisal Day
At Eldred's

Eldred's appraisers will provide
verbal evaluations of your treasures
to benefit the Historical Societies of
Dennis and Old Yarmouth.
Consignment of items for future
auction is encouraged.
Donation: \$5 an item, or \$10
for three (maximum)
Eldred's Auction Gallery
1483 Rt. 6A
East Dennis

Saturday, April 18

1:00 - 3:00 p.m.

**"What The Ladies Wore
1830-1940"**

Exhibit by Barbara Kennedy of
ladies authentic period clothing
ranging from daytime wear to
special occasions.
West Dennis Graded School
67 School Street, West Dennis

The Poorhouse at Middletown Village

"Over the hill to the poorhouse I'm trudging my weary way
I, a woman of seventy, and only a trifle gray..."

Poem by Will M. Carleton

In the 1800s, the words poorhouse or almshouse was met with dismay, resignation and sadness by quite a few of our residents. There were no Social Security funds, social services or retirement pensions to fall back on when old age or other disastrous times occurred.

Dennis, and all of Cape Cod, was not a prosperous area. The majority of able-bodied men were in the maritime trade but few of the profits returned to Dennis. That largess was spread upon the shores of Boston, New York and a few other coastal cities where wealthy ship owners, merchants and investors used those profits to expand their business and build magnificent homes.

None of the money trickled down to the small home of a Dennis seaman beyond his modest pay. After a short while ashore he would need to find another ship before the money ran out. If the seaman died on a voyage, his salary, up to the day he died, would be sent to his family. How his widow and her children would fare after that was no concern for the company. If she was lucky, some of her or her husband's families could take them in. Often they could not. Many times when a woman found herself in that dilemma, she was overwhelmed and could not cope with her situation. The Selectmen would step in and find someone in town who could care for her and her children, or she would be forced to give her children, one by one, to other families.

In 1836 the Federal Government found a surplus in its Treasury. Congress voted to distribute it to towns based on their population. The 1837 Annual Town Meeting voted to use their allotment to build a Town Meeting house as the meetings could no longer be held in the churches. They also voted to build an Almshouse for the care of the poor.

These two buildings were erected in the center of Dennis at a small settlement called Middletown. The meetinghouse was built near the bike path along Old Bass River Road at present day Jay's Drive. The Almshouse was located at the east end of Jay's Drive. The Dennis Historical Commission has placed a marker on the Old Bass River/Jay's Drive corner.

The Almshouse opened in 1837. It was a large building with many rooms. Over the years, it housed a variety of people, sometimes whole families. Primarily it was home to older people who were no longer able, by age or infirmity, to make their own way. Usually, in those years, an older person would be taken in by a relative, but often they might find themselves as the last of their line and nowhere else to

turn. They would arrive at the Almshouse with all their worldly goods. The furniture (some of it was valuable antiques from Colonial times) would be used to furnish the rooms, the dishes went into the kitchen for daily use and tools went into the barn out back. The Almshouse residents worked to the best of their ability to pay for their keep. They tended the chickens and collected eggs. The Almshouse sold any extra eggs and earned money to help run the place. They planted and tended gardens, helped with the laundry and mended household linens among the many chores it takes to keep a place in running order. Without a doubt, they were able to maintain a shred of dignity by performing some small chore.

The town provided whatever else the residents and Keeper could not, which included shoes for children (if there were no hand-me-downs), flour, sugar and other staples, doctor's visits and burial expenses. In 1876 the "Expenses of the Poor in the Almshouse" were \$1,119.33, and that included \$18.00 to Dr. Hurlburt for medical attendance and \$170.00 to James Booth for keeping the Almshouse.

In the same year, the town spent \$3,245.37 for "Expenses of Poor in Town Out of Almshouse". Many people were able to get by with a little occasional help when the town paid a grocery bill, doctor's bill or other necessities. Some people in town boarded people in need and were paid by the town, --"Data Nickerson for care of Rebecca Howland's son--\$50.00, Walter K. Hall for care of Rebecca Howland's daughter--\$50.00"



One hundred years after it was built the town decided to rid itself of the Almshouse. It was the last building standing in Middletown Village. The early settlers there had died and their descendants had moved away. The houses had been torn down or moved away and the Almshouse stood alone in the woods at the end of a dusty grass-grown road. Mrs. Rosetta Chase, 70, had been the only resident for several years cared for by Mr. And Mrs. Leander

Baker. Article 26 of the 1927 Annual Town Meeting voted to sell the property and that the selectmen "could refuse all offers if they were too low and for Mr. and Mrs. Baker to stay on until the place was sold."

Mrs. Chase was transferred to the Eastham Almshouse with the town paying for her keep, Mr. and Mrs. Baker would soon be out of a job and the house, furnishings and 56 acres were to be auctioned off. This event caused more activity at the Almshouse than had been seen since it was built. The pre-auction viewing brought antique-hunters from Boston and beyond. Mrs. Baker asked, "What does anyone want with this place or this old furniture?" The antique collectors smiled knowingly and continued to jot figures in their notebooks.

On August 6th, 1927, the auction brought them back eager to bid along with real estate men bidding on the 56 acres with development in mind and wealthy summer residents looking for a suitable summer home. The antiques sold well. Spirited bidding from an enthusiastic crowd brought in \$1,340.70. The house did not sell and later the Selectmen had it torn down. The 1927 Town Report listed \$1,500.00 "from the sale of Town Home Real Estate". If that was for the entire 56 acres someone certainly got a bargain at \$26.79 per acre.

Mr. and Mrs. Baker oversaw the cleaning out of the Almshouse and moved to South Yarmouth. They returned occasionally in their Model T Ford to visit the old neighbors on Mayfair Road and check out their old home place. One part of the garden continued to produce. Every June for years afterward the neighbors walked over to pick strawberries.

Phyllis Horton

Raw Milk

If you have ever made a trip along Theophilus Smith Road to the Town (don't call it dump) Transfer Station, you've probably heard stories about the long-time keeper of the town dump in whose honor the road was named.

Thoff, as most folks called him, was our next-door neighbor when my parents and I moved from Dennisport to South Dennis in 1945. He lived on the corner of Main Street and what is now called Upper County Road (at one time known as East Street).

Most likely the stories you've heard about Thoff were about his faithfully riding his bicycle every day from his home to the dump, where he reigned supreme like a king in his kingdom. The town dump in those days was located approximately opposite to where the Agway of Dennis gardening center is located today.

But for us, Thoff, who kept a small farm on his property, was a good neighbor and also a source for fresh milk – the kind that comes directly from a cow to the table. Yes, indeed, he sold genuine raw milk. Not pasteurized, not homogenized, rich and creamy.

Raw milk has a flavor that once you have tasted it, you will always recognize it: thick on the tongue, cloying, earthy, even sensual. And, undoubtedly it was dangerous to health in more than one way. My mother recognized at least the disease potential of using raw milk, but she came from a family of northern New England dairy farmers and “milk fever” was considered a worry mainly for folks who lived in crowded cities.

She was, however, careful. Even a casual glance – or getting windward of Thoff – would alert you to the fact that he had little regard for conscientious, personal hygiene. So, she washed her own milk bottles and always insisted that Thoff fill them directly from the milking pail. It was often my job to go across to Thoff's barn and wait until he finished milking so I could collect the milk then and there.

Thoff would mutter about my mother being “too fussy,” but he went along with it cheerfully, as he did with most of what he saw as the vagaries of people from off-Cape. And, it did, of course, save him some time and trouble.

No one I know of ever became ill from drinking the raw milk from Thoff's cow, though I did know a few people who considered us to be courting fate by doing so. Perhaps we were, but drinking raw milk was probably the least among the things we did courting fate as we grew up in the 1940s in South Dennis.

Let me tell you . . .

Peggy Eastman

2008 Gifts to Dennis Historical Society

- Phillip Symon of North Royalton, Ohio loaned his extensive Dennis post card collection to copy and return
- "A History of Hart Farm and Its Roadside Stand" from Arch D. Hart of Vista, CA.
- A 3-piece 1903 wedding dress from Faith Hallett and Frances Webb worn by their grandmother
- Post card of Scargo Lake and hill from Richard Zaffino
- "The Landing of the Pilgrims" from Leslie E. Worden
- "Cape Cod Through A Lighthouse Window" from Irene Tibbits Dumican
- Records of the Knights of Pythias, Cape Cod Lodge No. 128, West Dennis, 1896 to 1998 from Melford Hamilton
- Framed reproduction of the Map of Town of Dennis and East Dennis from 1880 Barnstable County Atlas from Bill McCarthy
- Three-volume set of Dennis Vital Records from Ray Combs.
- "Antique medical instruments" book from Mary Aselstine.
- Large collection of ephemera and artifacts from the estates of Prince S. Crowell and Joshua Sears from Barbara Durst
- Booklet "A History Of The Red Cottage" from Edmund Rhodes Nickerson
- Photograph collection of West Dennis people and places from Betty Mullen
- Newspaper photo featuring Dennis and Harwich young
- Ship model glass case from Virginia Devine
- Antique clothes collection from Mary C. Ryder
- Punch Ladle from Joan Martin

Dennis Historical Society
P.O. Box 607
South Dennis, MA 02660-0607

**Non-profit
Organization
US POSTAGE
PAID
Permit No. 2
South Dennis,**

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

2008 Gifts (Con't.)

- Record “Love Me Tender” by Elvis Presley with dust jacket advertising for Louis Dean Record Store in Hyannis from Carole Bell
- Receipts for registered mail from the Dennis Post Office, 1894, 1895 and 1896 from David Rodriguez
- Book, “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”, 1896, from Nancy C. Garfield
- Dutch oven from Nancy Paslaski
- Book, “Colonial Architecture of Cape Cod, Nantucket & Martha’s Vineyard” from Joshua L. Crowell
- More additions to the Gertrude “Geta” Crowell Collection from Nancy Kellogg
- Throughout the year Burt and Ruth Derick have donated many books, other ephemera and artifacts including fragments of an airplane that crashed in Denis Port in 1932, killing pilot Tom Skeyhill
-

Just a reminder – gifts to the Dennis Historical Society or the Manse Repair Fund are tax-deductable!!

In Memoriam

- **Admont G. Clark**, noted Cape Cod Author and historian, professor emeritus of Cape Cod Community College.
- **Helen Thacher Crowell Angell** - Her ancestors were among the first settlers of Dennis and Yarmouth, including John Crowe, Thomas Howes, and Anthony Thacher.
- **Charles E. Chamberlain Jr.**, lifelong Dennis community leader, a Mayflower descendant, and a descendant of several of the Cape's earliest settlers

We apologize for any inadvertent omissions.
We would appreciate notification of the passing of any members.