



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 23 Number 10

Newsletter Committee: Lura Crowell, Susan Kelley, Joan Martin, Brendan Joyce, Beth Deck

November 2000

Calendar of Events

**Wednesday
November 8th
7:00 PM – Jeri-
cho
Board of Direc-
tors Meeting..All
interested mem-
bers are welcome
to attend.**

**Sunday
December 10th
Jericho Open
House**
Christmas open
house at Jericho.
Visit this charm-
ing 1801 sea cap-
tain's home to
sample some de-
licious holiday

History of the 1867 West Dennis Graded School

Phyllis R. Horton

This lovely old school house has a long and varied history. It was built in 1867 by Benjamin C. Sturgis for the grand sum of \$6,875. There was a similar school in each of the other four villages. Those five schools had replaced fourteen neighborhood one-room schools.

Imagine the excitement of the West Dennis children when they came into their brand new school. It was probably similar to the excitement we feel today with the restoration of this fine old building.

Primary and intermediate classes were held in two downstairs rooms and grammar school was upstairs. A water bucket and dipper served students and teachers alike and a high fence out back separated the boys and girls "facilities" - two ten-holer outhouses.

Everyone, including the teacher, walked to and from school and went home for dinner at noon. School was suspended during the cranberry harvest and some older students were also excused when a certain crop had to be planted and harvested. Rarely was there a snow day - only when it was too deep to wade through.

A highlight of the school year was at the end of the fall and spring terms when Exhibition Day was held. Each student had to stand up before parents, teachers, and friends *and* the school board to recite a piece - the longer, the better. My mother, at age 69, could recite pieces she had learned for Exhibition Day. Early Dennis education may not have been state-of-the-art, but it certainly made a lasting impression on the students.

As this school house moved into the 20th century some improvements made life easier. In the 1920's indoor plumbing was installed and some of the students were being bussed to school in barges - open air busses with two bench seats and roll down curtains in case of inclement weather.

A major change occurred in 1922 when the Dennis Town House in South Dennis sold and the annual town meetings were moved to this building. To accommodate that most of the classes were moved to the second floor. The divid-



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History of the 1867 West Dennis Graded School

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ing wall on the first floor was removed and a stage was erected. West Dennis school was excused when the daytime town meeting was held.

Marion Mugridge Eldredge, my sixth grade teacher at Dennis Consolidated School, told me that on town meeting day the Dennis Port teachers would come to West Dennis on the bus after school and run up the street to the school to see if they had received a \$50.00 raise – that was for the whole year!

On March 17, 1930 the Dennis Port school house burned to the ground. That event would have a profound effect on education in Dennis. Firstly, 102 children had to be relocated. This school accommodated grades 3, 4, 7 and 8. The town meeting room was remodeled into classroom space for the relocated students.

A special town meeting was held at the Dennis Playhouse and, amid some controversy, it was voted to build a consolidated school on land in South Dennis donated by Ezra Baker for all grade school children in Dennis. The last classes in this school ended in June 1931. High school students who had been attending school in South Dennis would now attend Yarmouth High School.

This building continued its use for town meetings and started use as a village meeting hall. The advent of World War II brought more activity in the form of Civil Defense classes, Red Cross life saving courses, and paper, aluminum and tin can drives.

In 1951 an auditorium was added to Ezra Baker School and in the 1952 Annual Town Meeting was held there. That was the last daytime town meeting. All subsequent ones have been held at night. That town meeting voted to keep this West Dennis school house as a meeting place with the name of the Dennis Community Hall.

Many community groups were already using the hall and in 1957 the kitchen ell was added.

A large number of people, some who are present today, fondly remember the Teen Town years. Record hops found loads of teenagers dressed to the nines – girls in poodle skirts and bee hive hairdos and the boys in the latest style from Hyannis. “Dan the Man” Serpico was the disc jockey. His first few offerings found the boys on the one side of the hall giggling and whispering behind their hands to their nearest and dearest friends. Finally Dan would announce “Ladies Choice.” The girls, bolstered by each others courage, would cross the floor and each would ask that special boy to dance. A few lifelong romances are still going strong because of “Ladies Choice.”

By 1972 the building was the victim of genteel overuse and neglect. It was suggested that it should be disposed of but a group of Dennis residents decided it should be restored. They worked diligently obtaining monies from town meetings and private sources. The community center was restored, renamed the West Dennis Community Building, and put back into use by large numbers of people.

Twenty-five years later history repeated itself. It was suggested the building should be demolished and new one erected. A hard-core group of Dennis preservationists said, “Over our dead bodies!” and tackled the job of restoring this 133 year old treasure. The end result is here for all to see. We hope you are pleased with our vision. With good stewardship it should still be here serving Dennis people for another 133 years.

This was given at the schoolhouse dedication, October 1, 2000.



Left to right: Peter Crowell, Dorothy Gill Royal, Adelia "Babe" Wixon West, Ernest "Pete" Eastman, Leo Babineau and Herbert "Red" Chase

The 1867 West Dennis Graded School recently underwent extensive renovations and was reopened to the public with a dedication ceremony on October 1, 2000.

Pictured left are some former students of the West Dennis School who attended the dedication. Are any of our readers former students? Does anyone have any memories to share? We'd love to hear from you!

The West Dennis Graded School House is on the National Register of Historic Places.

Remembering John Burton...

John Burton, a life member of the Dennis Historical Society and a Manse Committee Member since 1991 died in Florida on October 8th. He will be missed, not only because of his volunteering but for the skilled craftwork he produced.

In the summer of 1991 he helped finish off and winterize the attic at the Manse so our spinning and weaving display could be moved there. Later that year, he helped remodel and winterize our old summer kitchen. This was completed in April 1992 in time for our Maritime Exhibit to be set up there.

John hosted in this room for eight summers and contributed much knowledge about ships and their construction. His hobby was model shipbuilding and he produced the Shiverick Shipyard diorama now displayed in the Manse maritime room. He also built and presented to the society a model of a life-saving shallow, a half-hull model of the Belle of the West, and the Wild Hunter quarterboard.

His last gifts to the Manse were a model of the lightship Crossrip and some tools used in ship building.

Our deepest sympathy goes out to Alice Burton and her family. John was a good friend to all at the Manse, a willing volunteer and a consummate craftsman. His work in preserving Dennis' maritime history will not be forgotten.



Dennis Historical Society

P.O. Box 607

South Dennis, MA 02660-0607

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THE WAY WE WERE...

West Dennis School 1906

From the photo collection of Christine Chirokas comes this wonderful picture of the graduating class of 1906.

Pictured here are Ethel Kelley, Leon Darius Perry, Harry Roscoe Baker, Gladys Mae Smith, Edith Mildred Howard, Susie Baker Chase and Bessie May Cahoon with their teacher.

We can match some of the names to faces, but not all. Can you help?



