



# Dennis Historical Society Newsletter November 2020

## Volume 43, No11

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**The next Board Meeting will be conducted by email on Tuesday, November 10th**

Please send information & stories for the newsletter to Dave Talbott at the DHS Website email address: [info@dennishistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@dennishistoricalsociety.org)

## *A Very Special Edition*

It was a closely guarded secret, so closely guarded that only a few members of the Dennis Historical Society Board knew. The 2020 Annual Meeting/Luncheon, planned for October 14th at The Sea View in Dennis Port, was to include a big surprise. Phyllis Horton was to have been feted as the very special guest of honor in recognition of her myriad contributions to the Society and her limitless love of Dennis history.

When it became evident that the coronavirus was destined to wipe out virtually all of Dennis Historical Society's 2020 calendar of events, including the Annual Meeting/Luncheon, Kevin Keegan, our Publicity Director, was asked if he would write an article to honor Phyllis. Thankfully, he embraced the idea. The November Newsletter is dedicated to Phyllis, and here is Kevin's article.

### ***MODERN HISTORY, REVISITED***

#### *The Enduring Legacy of a Hometown Hero*

When asked to think of the truly priceless aspects of Dennis, longtime locals might suggest Scargo Tower... or the Josiah Dennis Manse... or the South Dennis Historic District... or the Bass and Swan rivers... or the ancient cemeteries... or the beautiful beaches north and south.

And while all of those would surely be fine choices, an even better answer might just be one of the greatest local treasures of all: Phyllis Robbins Horton, who for nearly four decades has been the heart and soul and historian of the town in general and the Dennis Historical Society in specific. Phyllis served DHS with devotion and determination from the early 1980s until this year, when she unexpectedly announced—as she approached her 93rd birthday—that she is stepping away from what her colleagues and friends call her myriad and indefatigable efforts in bringing the fabric of Dennis's rich and celebrated history to life.

Hyperbole, you might ask?

Actually, anything but. This is, indeed, the end of an era: call it the enduring and captivating Phyllis Robbins Horton chapter of Dennis history. And what a meaningful and wonderful story it has been.

Consider this:

Phyllis has been a mainstay and leader in the Dennis Historical Society for nearly 40 years. She has trained docents and junior docents and served with distinction on the Josiah Dennis Manse Committee from 1987 to 2005, including those last 15 years as Manse Committee Chair. After an inspirational visit to Colonial Williamsburg, she returned home and established the local precedent—now central to the mission of the Manse and the 1801 Theophilus Baker House at Jericho Historical Center—of having volunteers dress in period appropriate clothing as a way to enhance museum-goers' experiences and to evoke the world of centuries past. She also instituted the always-anticipated and mouth-watering Manse Committee's Annual Summer Pie Sale, initially on the Village Green and later as one of the highlights of Colonial Day each August at Josiah Dennis's homestead. Phyllis first envisioned and then created the Maritime Museum at West Dennis Graded School and curated some remarkable exhibits there, including a recent roll call of over 600 Dennis sea



*Two true Dennis natives,  
Phyllis Horton & Carole Bell*

## BLUE WATER WIVES AND MOTHERS



Dennis women who went to sea

**EXHIBITION OPENING**  
Rescheduled: new date TBA

DENNIS MARITIME MUSEUM  
at the West Dennis Graded School House  
67 School Street/ Second Floor

FREE ADMISSION/ WHEELCHAIR ACCESSIBLE

captains from the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as another exhibit—postponed for now due to the pandemic—that will pay homage to adventurous early Dennis women who themselves went to sea with their husbands. She also installed at WDGS a permanent and fascinating room dedicated to the history of the NobsCUSset Native Americans who lived in the mid-Cape before and after the first European settlers arrived in the late 1630s.

But wait, there's more. Much more.

Phyllis helped Nancy Thatcher Reid with researching and editing for the voluminous and exhaustively documented book *Dennis, Cape Cod: From Firstcomers to Newcomers, 1639-1993*, the definitive and epic work on local history still available on the DHS website. With fellow DHS Board member Dawn Dellner and others, Phyllis helped catalogue and itemize every item in the Manse as the historic 1736 property was emptied before undergoing its extensive restoration a decade ago. She helped to develop the walking tours of Dennis's historic cemeteries and chaired the committee that oversaw the

conversion of the Dennis Village Cemetery Receiving Tomb into the Dennis Cemetery Educational Center. She wrote well over 100 articles for the DHS Newsletter, first as a contributing historian and later as the publication's revered co-editor and editor. She also served as the longtime Curator of DHS as she chaired the Acquisitions Committee in seeking out documents, paintings, furniture, and other artifacts of local historical significance and in creating a remarkable and extensive collection of all things Dennis—including notable and important recent accessions like the circa 1822 Hannah Kelley (1802-1897) coverlet woven in South Dennis and the period portraits by Giddings Hyde Ballou of 19th century *Starlight* sea captain Levi Howes (1812-1874) of Quivet Neck and his wife Myra (maiden name also Howes: 1818-1851). Phyllis's final public appearance on behalf of DHS was this past February, as she regaled her audience with stories and examples in explaining the processes she used to select items for the ever-growing DHS collection of local Americana.

And we are still not finished.

In 2007, Phyllis was co-chair of the much-acclaimed "Maritime Treasures of Dennis and Yarmouth" exhibit at the West Dennis Yacht Club in partnership with the Historic Society of Old Yarmouth. Phyllis met often with other local historical societies and helped found the Cape and Islands Historic Association. She was a member of the Dennis Historical Commission—tasked with identifying and preserving the town's rich architectural and archaeological history—from 1985 to 2017 (and remains an emeritus member to this day). She was a Trustee from 2003 to 2019 of the Caleb Chase Fund, which was established locally in 1909 to help those most in need, and she served as that committee's Chair over her last seven years of service. She has been a member of the South Side Historic Committee since 1984 and was a member of the Dennis Bicentennial Committee from 1991 to 1993 as the town went all in to recognize the anniversary of its founding in 1793. She also worked with the Arts and Culture Council to find and display local and important artwork on the walls of Town Hall.

As you might imagine, Phyllis's decades-long efforts have not gone without recognition.

In April 2000, for example, the Cape Cod Maritime Historical Association presented Phyllis with its fourth annual Lifetime Achievement Award "for her steadfast devotion and undying stewardship" in researching the seafaring history of Dennis. In 2007, the town's annual report was dedicated to Phyllis Robbins Horton, "a Dennis treasure, for all of her years of service and Town spirit." In May 2016, Phyllis's endeavors on behalf of Dennis and her love of her hometown were recognized as a conference room in the new Town Hall was named for her— "a well-deserved recognition for her many years of tireless work preserving the history of Dennis," noted Betsy Harrison of the DHS Board of Directors at the time. Later that year, Dennis Historical Commission Chair Diane Rochelle presented Phyllis with a bouquet of roses and considerable and effusive praise as Phyllis was recognized by the Historical Commission at a Board of Selectmen's meeting for her 31 years of service to the DHC and to the preservation of the history of Dennis.

In February 2017, Phyllis was honored with a citation from the Massachusetts Statehouse for her years of service to the South Side Civic Association and for her role as town historian. But don't just take our word for it. Here is what some of her friends and colleagues and admirers—those who know her well—have to say:



*Phyllis after receiving the fourth annual Lifetime Achievement Award from the Cape Cod Maritime Historical Association*



*At work inventorying & researching*

Phyllis didn't miss a beat. Finding her crowbar and hammer, she opened the crate, which was almost as tall as she was. Over the next month we cataloged the items inside, but Phyllis wasn't finished. With traditional Cape Cod thrift, she took the crate apart, pulled out the nails and stored the 'perfectly good wood' away for some future need.

*Dawn Dellner, DHS Board member and Chair of the Jericho Committee:* "Mostly I remember working with Phyllis during the summer in 2009 as we inventoried the collection in the Manse before the movers emptied it for the restoration. We worked most weekdays researching the provenance of the pieces, measuring and cataloging them. Phyllis was persistent and tireless, stopping for a brief lunch of yogurt and tea only when I reminded her of the time. I learned so much about the history and people of Dennis from her as we worked, and we became fast friends. I am still amazed at her energy and the flow of ideas she has."

"In 2017 a large wooden crate full of tools and charts originally belonging to Captain Ahira Kelley [1844-1930] of West Dennis arrived at the WDGs. After the delivery men had wedged it in the elevator, they deposited it inside the door to the Maritime Museum upstairs. Phyllis didn't miss a beat. Finding her crowbar and hammer, she opened the crate, which was almost as tall as she was. Over the next month we cataloged the items inside, but Phyllis wasn't finished. With traditional Cape Cod thrift, she took the crate apart, pulled out the nails and stored the 'perfectly good wood' away for some future need."

"Her knowledge of the town of Dennis, its history and people [is encyclopedic]. Over the years she grew to know so many people who respected her and counted on her to know the stories she learned from her friends and relatives growing up in Dennis. She was always ready to tell one..... She is a proud Cape Cod native, who has devoted countless hours to sharing and preserving Dennis history."

*Diane Rochelle, past President of the Dennis Historical Society and current Chair of the Dennis Historical Commission:* "I met Phyllis, an elegant lady with curly silver hair, a warm smile and a twinkle in her eye, when she invited me to attend a Manse Committee meeting. I joined the next year and have been immersed in Dennis history ever since."

"Phyllis embodies the heritage of Dennis and the goals of DHS. Phyllis was born in Dennis Port, and her roots go back to several first settlers. She traveled as a military spouse, later returning to live in a historic home and fully committing herself and her family to preservation. Her historical knowledge is amazing. Phyllis has boundless enthusiasm and determination—combined with a unique ability to narrate local history, weaving facts with personal knowledge—that instills pride in our town of Dennis."



*Silver hair, warm smile & an eye twinkle*

"She has protected our diverse Dennis history, creating museums that pay tribute to cemetery education, local sea captains, and Native American NobsCUSset Indians.... I would say to people that they should find an opportunity to meet Phyllis because it would be a most memorable experience. They would enjoy her memories and stories that bring life to Dennis past."

*Ruth Derick, DHS Board member and DHS Librarian:* "I had great fun working up displays with Phyllis, i.e. going to an East Dennis Beach to take pictures of an ongoing storm (high winds, waves crashing in) to use as a backdrop for a display in the Maritime Room at the Manse."

"Phyllis approaches new projects with enthusiasm. She has a creative mind, thoughtful and caring. Phyllis genuinely enjoys interacting with people and sharing her discoveries. She created exhibits for Jericho Historical Center, the Josiah Dennis Manse, the 1867 West Dennis Graded School, and even created a revolving exhibit about Dennis villages for display at each of the five town libraries. She was an engaging speaker for the Dennis Historical Society at an Annual Meeting and for their programs throughout the years, spoke at the Dennis Union Church's Women's Club, and at a Nickerson Family Reunion."



*Ruth Derick, Dawn Dellner & Phyllis at the Dennis Memorial Library*

"When Phyllis became chair of the Manse, she transitioned the volunteers from faithful workers in hostess skirts to docents wearing white caps and costumes, similar to colonial dress, equipped with descriptive booklets for each room and the items therein. The booklets changed as some items were moved to other locations and new items were added. There were different stories as new information became available."

“Phyllis has been a regular contributor to the Dennis Historical Society Newsletter, sharing her knowledge of people and events. She gave countless talks and was a volunteer at Jericho up until our open house this last December. She also volunteered at the West Dennis Maritime/School exhibits at WDGS. She is our go-to person to answer questions about Dennis.”

*Reverend Joshua Crowell, member of the Dennis Historical Commission and longtime family friend:* Phyllis has been very committed to Dennis history: to having it preserved and to having stories told well. For Phyllis, Dennis history is alive, and she wanted it to be alive for other people. I have great respect for her dogged determination and vigor for historical research. She has a real feel for characters... and she had a genuine sense for what we should be saving and preserving. Phyllis has a big heart and a great capacity to care for people.

“She had a wonderful relationship with two generations of Eldreds [the owners of Eldred’s Auction House in East Dennis] and was given early notice when items of interest to Dennis history were coming up so she could be down there to bid on behalf of the Society.... She was also a great recruiter in bringing people in—and often young people—to DHS, the Old Kings Highway Historic District Committee, the Dennis Historical Commission, and the Caleb Chase Fund.



*No license, but ready to deliver*

“Phyllis represents an earlier generation of the Cape when Dennis was really still a very small town. My favorite Phyllis story? As a young girl, she was driving a car by age 8 or 9—without a license, of course—and delivering milk for her dairy farmer father [Linwood Robbins, 1903-1981] in Dennis Port before heading off to school. By the time Phyllis was 13 or so, she and her Dad would take separate trucks to the North Side—to the area where the Nuthatch Condominiums are today just east of route 134 off 6A—to get hay. Once, as she was leaving with the truck filled to overflowing, she was having trouble navigating an opening in a stone wall and was approached by Dennis resident Earl Whittemore [1895-1974]—who saw what was happening and who also just happened to be the head of the Registry of Motor Vehicle office in Hyannis. He asked Phyllis how old she was, and she admitted to “Mr. Whittemore” that she was the same age as his son, who was in her class. He nodded and said, “I thought so,” and proceeded to guide her through the posts... and then to warn her to head down to the South Side by the back roads to avoid the state cops and the local police. Before she left, Whittemore also told Phyllis to come to his office in Hyannis when she was 16... and he would issue her a license. And she did. And he did, without a road test, since she had passed her test for him that day years earlier.”

*Dave Talbott, current President of DHS:* “It will be 50 years in January since I moved to Dennis. Never did I imagine that my life would become so involved in its history. That involvement began with and continues with one of the most amazing people I have been fortunate enough to know: Phyllis Horton.

“I first met Phyllis about twenty years ago when I joined the Josiah Dennis Manse Committee, and she was the Committee's Chair. It was at our monthly meetings in the East Parlor of the Manse that I first became aware of the depth of Phyllis's knowledge of the history of our town. On occasion, our meetings ran longer than the intended hour. Those were the good ones! Sometimes it was a name, sometimes a place, or sometimes an event that would be the catalyst for Phyllis to share a bit of history. If it was not history that she had learned from books and others, it was history she had culled from ship logs, diaries, and records of our town, or better still, history that she had lived herself!

“One day, about fifteen years ago, my phone rang. It was Dennis Historical Society President Jinny Devine, who asked me if I would be willing to be on the Society's Board. By saying “yes,” I was about to meet Phyllis on a whole new level. I knew that Phyllis was a longtime member of the DHS. I soon learned that she was its Curator/Archivist, had edited and co-edited its newsletter (as well as being a frequent contributor), was active in the programs of all the town museums, and had an incredible passion for our maritime history. One need only visit the Dennis Maritime Museum at the West Dennis Graded School to begin to realize how much she has created, preserved, and presented. Her decades-long project of researching and chronicling the sea captains of Dennis is a remarkable achievement! The collection of maritime art, much of which was acquired by her as she bid at auction in DHS's name, and artifacts presented in displays, which she designed and created, are a tribute both to the men who sailed the seas... and to the depth of Phyllis's passion for telling their story.

“Ah, telling stories, that is what Phyllis does best. Sit her down and ask about her recollections of the 1944 hurricane, whose effect on the Cape was greater than the infamous one of 1938. Go to the DHS website and peruse back issues of the newsletters and read the articles she has written. They range from the factually fascinating to the tender and touching. I am waiting for the one she is presently writing in her head—the one I hope she will send me for the

newsletter—about standing on the beach in Dennis Port, as a young girl of 9, and waving as the zeppelin Hindenburg flew over on its way to New York. Thank you in advance for that one, Phyllis!

“One cannot begin to define the depth, the scope, or the degree with which Phyllis has contributed to preserving—and through sharing—to bringing the history of Dennis to life. I am very lucky and very grateful that I know her!”

By now, you must be asking yourself... well... where are the lengthy quotes from Phyllis herself? In truth, their omission is explained simply enough, as this article is intended as a surprise—meant to be the Dennis Historical Society’s heartfelt gift to Phyllis for all she has done for us. We are pleased and honored for the chance to tell some of Phyllis’s remarkable story—so much of it the history of our organization and our town—and to share with you a life well spent in service to the people of Dennis. Thank you, Phyllis, for embodying everything that is wonderful about DHS and for setting an example for innovation and work ethic and dedication to local lore that the rest of us will try our best to live up to in the months and years ahead.

Our successes then will be because of the indelible legacy of hometown hero Phyllis Robbins Horton. Any shortcomings... will be our own.

*Submitted October 2020 by Kevin N. Keegan, Newcomer.*

The Dennis Historical Society Board of Directors Annual Meeting was conducted via email on October 13, 2020. The minutes are on file with Clerk/Recording Secretary Bonnie Hempel. The most important item on the agenda was the election of Officers and Directors. Here are the results of the election.

### **2021 EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

**PRESIDENT.....Betsy Harrison**  
**TRANSITIONING PRESIDENT.....Dave Talbott**  
**VICE PRESIDENTS.....Terri Fox, Phil Catchings**  
**TREASURER.....Larry Symington**  
**ASSISTANT TREASURER.....June Howes**  
**CLERK/RECORDING SECRETARY.....Bonnie Hempel**  
**CORRESPONDING SECRETARY.....Ruth Derick**

### **ELECTED DIRECTORS**

**Bill Collins, *Dee Collins\**, Pat Corcoran, Ann Croston, Bo Durst,  
Kevin Keegan, Mary Khurtz, Bob Poskitt, Diane Rochelle, Jan Ward**  
**(Candidates for Election\* or Re-election Italicized)**

### **VERY SPECIAL DIRECTORS**

**CURATOR/ARCHIVIST EMERITUS....Phyllis Horton**  
**DENNIS MARITIME MUSEUM DIRECTOR EMERITUS....Phyllis Horton**

### **APPOINTED DIRECTORS**

**HISTORICAL COMMISSION....Bob Poskitt**  
**JERICO HISTORICAL CENTER.....Dawn Dellner**  
**MEMBERSHIP.....Jan Ward**  
**JOSIAH DENNIS MANSE.....Terri Fox**  
**MARITIME MUSEUM at WDGS....Pat Corcoran**  
**CURATOR/ARCHIVIST.....Dawn Dellner**  
**LIBRARIAN.....Ruth Derick**  
**ASSISTANT LIBRARIAN.....Paul Lapense**  
**PROGRAMS.....Betsy Harrison**  
**PUBLICITY.....Kevin Keegan**  
**TECHNOLOGY.....Jan Ward**  
**DIRECTOR AT LARGE.....Patty Sakellis**

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

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02664**

### *Image from our Past*



*Image from the DHS Digital Archives*

labeled image of the ice house, complete with the cow! Thank you Dick for sharing this wonderful information.

We are so fortunate to have DHS members whose memories are still sharp and who are willing to share their recollections with all of us. The day the September Newsletter arrived in his post office box, I received a call from lifelong Dennis resident Dick Howes. Dick has recently celebrated his 91st birthday... HAPPY BIRTHDAY, Dick! He was calling about the picture on the last page of the newsletter purporting to show the ice house on Scargo Lake. The building in the image, which was from a glass plate negative taken by his maternal grandfather, Warren T. Waddington, was actually the boat house for "*Bleak House*." The ice house, a much larger structure, stood almost on the spot from which the picture of the boat house was taken. A further search of the DHS Digital Archives not only revealed that Dick was correct, but yielded a properly