



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter November 2025

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**The next Board Meeting will be held on Tuesday, November 11th, 2:00 pm at the Dennis Memorial Library
1020 Old Bass River Road, Dennis Village
Members Welcome**

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

What can AI do for you when researching history?

Recently, when visiting the Dennis Historical Society Website, the picture displayed on the Home Page was of the Dennis Almshouse. It is one of what are known as *hero-images*, large attention grabbing graphics which change from time to time on the website.



Dennis Almshouse, DHS Digital Archive & Chatgpt

The image to the left was created by superimposing a photo colorized using the AI program *Chatgpt* onto the black and white *hero-image* from the *DHS Digital Archive*. Other than a slight change in proportions to fit the original, it is just as *Chatgpt* generated it. Imagine the possibilities!

There have been two newsletters with information about this structure. One by Phyllis Horton in January 2009, and one by me in February 2024. (Both issues are available by clicking on the Newsletter tab on our website). After rereading the articles in both back issues, I decided to do a Google search to see if AI in the search engine provided any new information. Here is what I found - *The former Dennis, Massachusetts, almshouse was built in 1837 and housed poor and infirm residents for nearly a century before being dismantled in 1928.*

History and location

- *Construction: The town voted to build the almshouse in 1837, funded by a portion of a federal government surplus.*
- *Purpose: It provided care for residents who had no family to support them, including widows, children of lost seamen, and the elderly. Residents who were able were expected to work, often by tending a town garden.*
- *Overseers of the Poor: The Board of Selectmen, who acted as the Overseers of the Poor, hired a keeper to operate the house.*
- *Location: The almshouse was located in the center of Dennis, in a settlement called Middletown, near the eastern end of present-day Jay's Drive. Ed note – it's at the west end. The Dennis Historical Commission has placed a marker at the corner of Old Bass River Road and Jay's Drive to note its former location.*
- *Demise: By the early 1900s, some felt that the almshouse was a demeaning form of care. In 1921, the town voted to substitute the term "town home" for "almshouse" and created the Board of Public Welfare to replace the Overseers of the Poor. The building was ultimately sold at auction and dismantled in 1928*

Interestingly, AI generated questions on its own initiative, which I kept clicking on. Next up was - *What did the Dennis almshouse grounds include besides the building?*

Beyond the main building, the Dennis almshouse grounds included a garden, a barn, and an area for livestock, all of which were managed by residents.

On-site resources and responsibilities

- *Town garden: Residents who were able to work were expected to tend the nearby "town garden" to help defray the costs of their stay.*
- *Livestock: In addition to working in the garden, residents looked after chickens, collected eggs, and cared for other livestock. Any extra eggs were sold to earn money to help operate the facility.*
- *Barn: The property featured a barn where tools and equipment were stored.*
- *Resident furnishings: Items brought by residents upon their arrival, which sometimes included antiques, were used to furnish the rooms. Any tools were stored in the barn.*
- *Burial ground: Like many almshouses, the Dennis facility likely included an on-site burial ground for residents who had no family to claim their remains. While the burial site is largely unmarked today, the stone boundaries of an old burial ground in Dennis, near where the almshouse was located, have been identified.*

AI and I were on a roll! The next question it generated was - *Did the almshouse have a cemetery? Where?*

Yes, the Dennis almshouse had its own cemetery, which served as a burial ground for indigent residents. While the site is largely unmarked today, the location of the cemetery has been identified.

Ed. note - at this point, AI got way off the track and erred big time!

Location and status

The almshouse cemetery is situated in the Mill Pond area, northwest of the present-day Town Forest.

It is located off an abandoned road that leads from Archelaus Place to Main Street.

The original stone boundaries of the burial ground have been located.

The Dennis Historical Commission has plans to add the cemetery to the town's trail maps and install a sign to mark the location.

History of the site

The cemetery was intended for residents who could not afford a funeral or had no family to claim their remains.

The graves were likely marked with rough fieldstones, but these are no longer in place to mark individual graves.

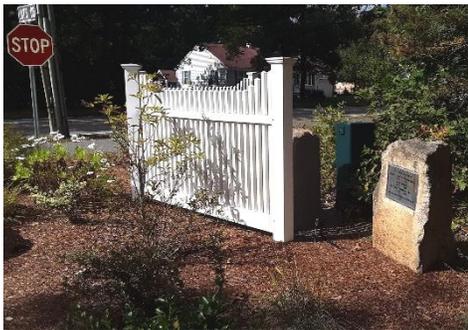
The names of those buried there have been lost over time, but research is ongoing.

An Eagle Scout project undertaken in 2021 helped clean up the historic site, with assistance from the Dennis Historical Commission.

Suspecting the inaccuracies and seeing that the Dennis Historical Commission was mentioned twice, I contacted the DHC Chair Diane Rochelle. Before I did, however I decided to cross check the AI generated information with my own online search.

Here is what I sent in my email to Diane based on what I found - *What can you tell me about the (in)accuracy of the information? I can find nothing online about a Town Forest in Dennis, and the only mention I can find of Archelaus Place is in West Newbury, MA. Also, there is a Mill Pond area, but it's in Yarmouth Port. I'm hoping you can unscramble this! I believe AI got its wires crossed and would not have bothered you if the DHC hadn't been mentioned.*

Fortunately, her response contained this important piece of information - *I can tell you for sure that the Eagle Scout project happened in 2008 at Old South Dennis Cemetery, 485 Main Street. The scouts surveyed the cemetery, listing each grave, the info including epitaphs and photographing head stones & foot stones and cleaned stones. It was a project of Cem. Adv. Com. Funded by CPC. Part of the funding was paid to BSC group to do an engineering survey and make a cemetery map in a map stand. I haven't found anything about a Town Forest yet.*



To check on the accuracy of the initial AI information I drove to the corner of Old Bass River Road and Jay's Drive in South Dennis. There was the marker and, as AI indicated, right in the center of Dennis in an area once known as Middletown.

Photos by Dave Talbott



So, what can one take away from this? AI is in its early stages of development. It is already showing huge potential! Using it for research makes one thing definitely clear. Make sure to cross check any information gleaned from AI with other, reliable sources.

Passing the Torch

Peter D. (Pete) Howes was President of the Dennis Historical Society from 2009 to 2016, and he was editor of the DHS newsletters for over 100 issues. After he passed away in 2017, his wife June gave me some of Pete's papers in the hope that they would be of future value to me. She learned that I had accepted the job of editor at a board meeting in late summer. Amongst these papers were a couple of articles that he had intended to use. I published one in the November 2019 issue entitled *A World War II Tale*, and I am pleased to present this one, slightly edited to fit the page.

The Feather Merchant Mystery

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.

Economic conditions in the early years of the republic were far from stable, and industry was limited, especially on the Cape. Depending on the source, it has been viewed either as an ignoble occupation or just one of those ways to make a living. It depends on your viewpoint, I guess, or on your understanding of what it took to keep body and soul together in the early 1800s.

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 1819 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? 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. 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. One, a Barnabas Jr. headed a second Wixon family that contained only one person over sixteen and one family member in commerce. Both families had men old enough to go to sea, but this limited information is no help in solving the mystery. Neither is there any help in the records of who sailed in the Sloop Phoebe. Perhaps one of today's Wixon family descendants has the answer. Ed. note – Ruth, what can you tell us?

Who was this Ezra Howes? In 1820, there were two men by that name living in Dennis. One Ezra Howes was born in May of 1793 who was twenty-seven in 1820 -clearly old enough to go to sea. The other was born in July of 1787 and was 33 in 1820. He's also old enough! So, here's the question that I pose to you readers of Howes heritage - only one of these Ezra Howes families had a member in commerce -but which??

Thank you Pete!

If you know the answer to either question - Wixon or Howes, please email me at info@dennishistoricalsociety.org

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

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DHS Digital Archive – colorized by Chatgpt

"This Unknown House"

This image from the Digital Archives is from a glass plate photo from Album 03\36-2001-07-17, Richard Howes\Wigginton\Photo 12. Nothing is known about this picture except that the house is/was probably in Dennis

If anyone can identify the house, or provide any other information about this picture, please email me at: info@dennishistoricalsociety.

PS – Back in 2019, I didn't know where this house was, but I think that I do now!



Happy Thanksgiving Everyone
Wishing you a wonderful day!

