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The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Rodman Mill Complex

This week's column is about the buildings, the bricks and mortar, if you will, that made up the Rodman Mill Complex on Ten Rod Road in the Lafayette section of our fair town. But before I begin, I need to make a correction to a column which ran a couple of weeks ago and concerned itself with the history of the land which the town library now sits upon. Through an error, which was totally my own, I misstated the facts concerning the transfer of the land from Mr. Paul Wilson to the town of North Kingstown. The truth of the matter is that Mr. Wilson did receive compensation for the land. In my efforts to get the facts right about what happened in the distant past, I relied upon hearsay concerning events of the recent past and for that I apologize. That said, I stand behind both the truth of the remainder of the story, and every comment made about the true philanthropic nature of Paul Wilson. Well, enough of that, we have a new tale to tell.

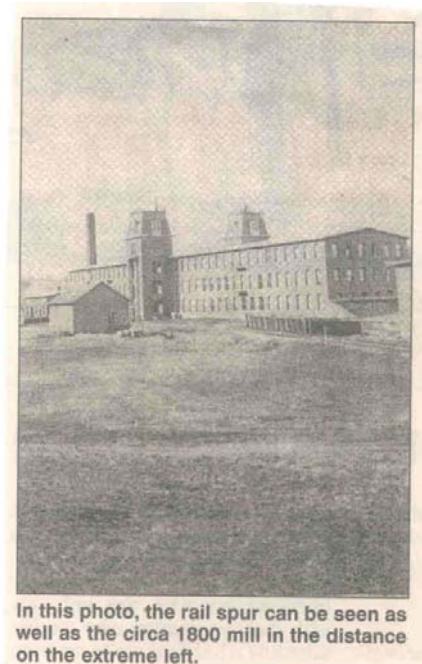
We have taken a look, piecemeal in a number of past columns, at the events that brought about the construction of the massive fabric mill along the bank of the Shewatuck River in Lafayette. Prior to Robert Rodman's eye-opening trip to the Century of Progress Fair in Philadelphia in the spring of 1876, the mill was a small affair, limited by the amount of power that could be supplied by the nearby mill pond dam. But after seeing the possibilities which the Corliss Steam engine possessed, Rodman experienced an epiphany of sorts, and returned to Lafayette determined to build a mill which would, not only keep pace with the larger operations in the metropolitan Providence area, but exceed them through the use of the newest technologies. With that in mind, he began construction of the new mill in early 1877. Thankfully, we, through both divine providence and the vision of a few brave locals, are still able to examine what Rodman's epiphany brought forth. Six of the mill complex's many buildings are here with us today nearly 125 years later.

The oldest of the buildings is the Dyehouse. It stands just south of the mill pond. Portions of the dyehouse date back to the original mill, a three story wooden building which was located on the opposite side of the mill race and dated to 1800. The Dyehouse was where Rodman's workers dyed the fabric they wove; it was located near the pond to take advantage of the water needed for the dying process. The Shewatuck, which once powered the entire operation, by then was just a source of water for this process.

The mill itself was the next building completed. It is three stories high and 316 feet long. The iron crested front tower is 50 feet high and the rear one is 70 feet high. The chimney, originally 92 feet tall was attached to the mill and exhausted the smoke and steam generated by the coal-powered steam boilers and the 125 horsepower Corliss Steam engine housed in the attached enginehouse. Fabric was processed from the upper floors down; the carding of wool occurred on the third floor, yarn spinning below, and cloth weaving on the ground level. The finished fabric would then be hauled to the Dyehouse.

Directly behind the mill stands the Barn. The barn housed, among other things, the many teams of horses used to haul loads of coal from the Rodman dock in Wickford. The coal was used to power the steam boilers. The barn was later used to house the vehicles and trucks used to run the mill.

In front of the mill stands the small President's Office. It was from here that Rodman ran his empire, which by the middle of the 1880's included four other mills in the southern part of town and Wakefield as well.



The Warehouse was located just to the east of the mill itself. It was used to

house both raw materials (wool) and finished products ready to be shipped out. The last major building to be constructed was the stockhouse. The stockhouse was built in concert with the construction of a railroad spur off the Wickford branch line. The spur ran right into the mill yard and the stockhouse was constructed at its terminus. The stockhouse was used for the storage and processing of supplies and raw materials which arrived by rail as well as the shipping of finished products out of the mill. The rail spur was also used to bring coal into the yard from the Wickford Docks. The addition of this rail access allowed Rodman to enter new markets and expand his business greatly.



PHOTOS: LINDA LEE

Seen here is the Dyehouse and millpond race.



Robert Rodman ran his empire from the small president's office.



This barn originally housed the mill's draft horses.



The stockhouse was located at the end of Rodman's rail spur and was used for processing rail receipts and shipments.

The Wickford Junction Train Station

Greetings Readers! I could not help but notice, on a recent trip to our local WalMart (the embodiment of the old descriptive phrase "a blessing and a curse") that a real live caboose has appeared there on a short run of track. After a little nosing around (nosiness being the driving force behind my explorations and ruminations) I have learned that this little caboose will be restored and joined by a hand car which will sit dead center in the scale model version of the Wickford Rotary (I'm showing my age with that reference) which is the entrance to the shopping plaza. This got me thinking about the Wickford Junction Railroad Station which existed diagonally across Ten Rod Road, in one form or another, for nearly 125 years.

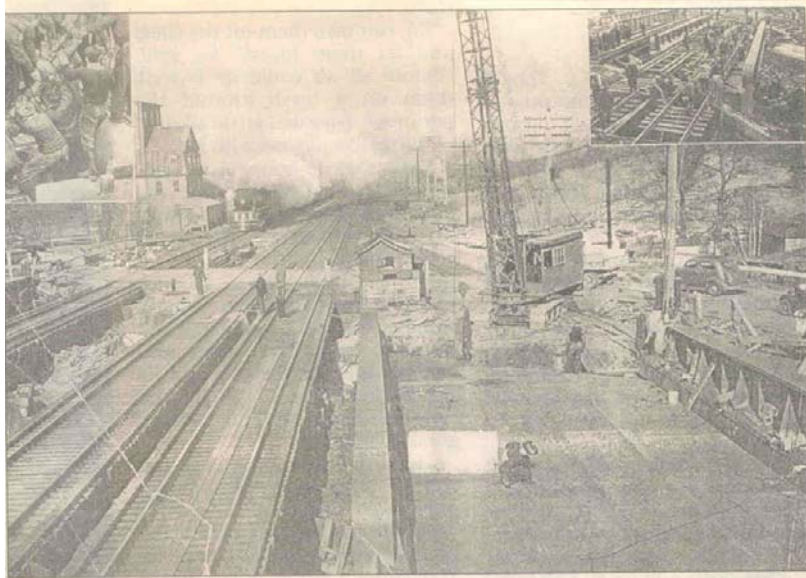
The first station at the site was constructed around 1844, just seven years after the New York, Providence, and Boston Railroad had made its inaugural run down the line. The station was known as the Wickford Depot and was little more than a one room building with a tiny platform. One of the first engines to make regular stops at the Depot was the Taunton, Ma. built Locomotive number 1, the "C. Vanderbilt" named after the president of the line, now known as the Stonington Railroad, Cornelius Vanderbilt. In 1859, Vanderbilt and his other investors realized their dream, when the first through train from Boston to New York ran down the line. These early engines were powered by wood, but with the advent of the Civil War and the subsequent increases in traffic on the line and advances in technology, the first coal burning locomotives chugged into the Wickford Depot. The War years and those following it were busy times for the Stonington Railroad; men, material, and equipment were moved from north to south and then back again. Shortly after the war, in 1871, the start up of the Newport & Wickford branch line necessitated the construction of a new, larger and more modern station, and the Wickford Junction Station was born.

The original Wickford Junction Station was constructed in 1871 at a cost of \$8000. By 1887 the station was so busy, yearly traffic on the whole line now

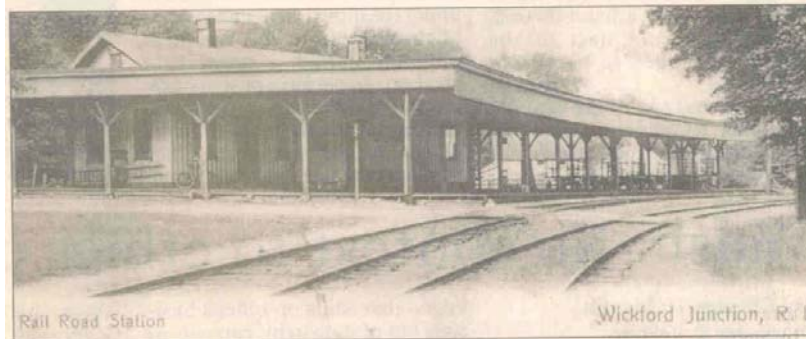
being measured in the millions, that an addition to the station was constructed for another \$3500. This larger station is shown in the accompanying photograph. By now traffic on the branch line to Newport was so busy that cars from the mainline trains were being switched off and added to the branch line. This allowed passengers from New York going to Newport to ride all the way to the Wickford Landing at Poplar Point without ever having to get off the train. Freight and mail for Wickford and Newport also was switched off here at the junction and sent on its appropriate way. All in all, Wickford Junction was a busy place by 1890, with 12 to 15 scheduled stops by trains per day.

Unfortunately, something else happened during this same time frame. The greatest fear of every owner of every wooden structure within a breeze's distance from the tracks, upon which these spark and smoke belching locomotives travelled each day, was realized by the station itself and a fire broke out. The ensuing blaze, described in Anita Hinkley's book "Wickford Memories" required that a new, but smaller station be built. It too, is shown in an accompanying photograph.

In 1892 a new company, The New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad Company bought out the Stonington. Little changed at Wickford Junction, though, other than the lettering on the many trains that stopped there. The real changes occurred in 1925, when the branch line to Wickford and Newport went "belly up" mostly due to competition from the automobile which was now poised to change the country forever. Wickford Junction began its slow slide into the history books. A few passenger trains a day stopped there and there was a respectable amount of freight business; one freight train a day even travelled down the Wickford Branch Line tracks which were now owned by New York, New Haven, and Hartford. But it was never to be the same again. The last real flurry of activity in the area occurred in 1939, when the grade crossing was replaced with an underpass. This is shown in this remarkable photo which was taken from the roof of the station and shows the 450 ton steel deck being readied for its eventual move under the existing tracks. The deck was then jacked up in place to support the tracks and the road cut was made underneath it. Even Robert Rodman, a man who thought nothing of moving schools, homes, churches, and warehouses



A 1939 photo shows what eventually became the Wickford Junction overpass being readied for placement under the tracks. The old Ten Rod Road grade crossing can be seen in the background.



A postcard (above) offers a view of the first Wickford Junction station. Below is the second Wickford Junction station.



would have been impressed by this one.

The site of the Wickford Junction Station is empty now. Trees grow up between the still existent rails of the Wickford Branch Line. All that remains of the station building, torn down in 1969, is the foundation filled with gravel. But the trains continue to roar by just as they did in 1844. Periodic talk of a new station fills this historian with hope. Some day soon, perhaps the trains will stop here again. Lets all hope so.

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6/07/01

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Turntable Stones

I first heard of the turntable stones a few years back. The idea of them piqued my curiosity and I parked my truck up at the end of the little dead-end just east of the rail line, behind what is now Freeborn's Garden Center. A short walk down the edge of the track, and there it was, abandoned in the woods; the site of the Newport and Wickford Branch line locomotive turntable. All that was left is a great circular hole in the earth and about one third of the marvelous massive and slightly curved Westerly granite stones which made up the foundation for the great turntable. The stones stand there, quiet and unmoving; but like ancient tombstones at an old graveyard, they tell a tale of many a man's life, a story peopled by strong men with a job to do and machines that belched steam and black smoke and consumed cord wood, coal, and water. They tell the tale to those who know the signs.

You see, one problem that confronted the operators of the many dead-end railroad branch lines that were spread across America during the nineteenth century was how do you turn your engine around to allow her to pull the cars back up to the main line. Due to the mechanical constraints of the engines, a great loop of track, circling back upon itself, would have had to be too big and would take up too much valuable real estate to be practical. Let's face it; you can't turn a locomotive "on a dime" as you can an automobile. In the early days, most lines solved the problem by using a double-ender, an engine which could be driven in either direction. This worked for a time, but if a line got too successful these double-enders, like the Wickford line's, showcased in an article last year, were unable to push the cars back up the track. Locomotives were designed for pulling and that is where they are most efficient. In the end a turntable somewhere on the line was deemed to be the best solution. The locomotive was unhitched from her cars, driven on to the table; a great huge contraption made of iron or steel and wood, and spun around to face the proper direction. In the big rail yards, like Boston, Providence, New York, or Chicago the mechanically-powered turntable was like the hub of a great wheel and could line up an engine to proceed on any number of tracks, but at the small yards, like Wickford Junction, its only use was to

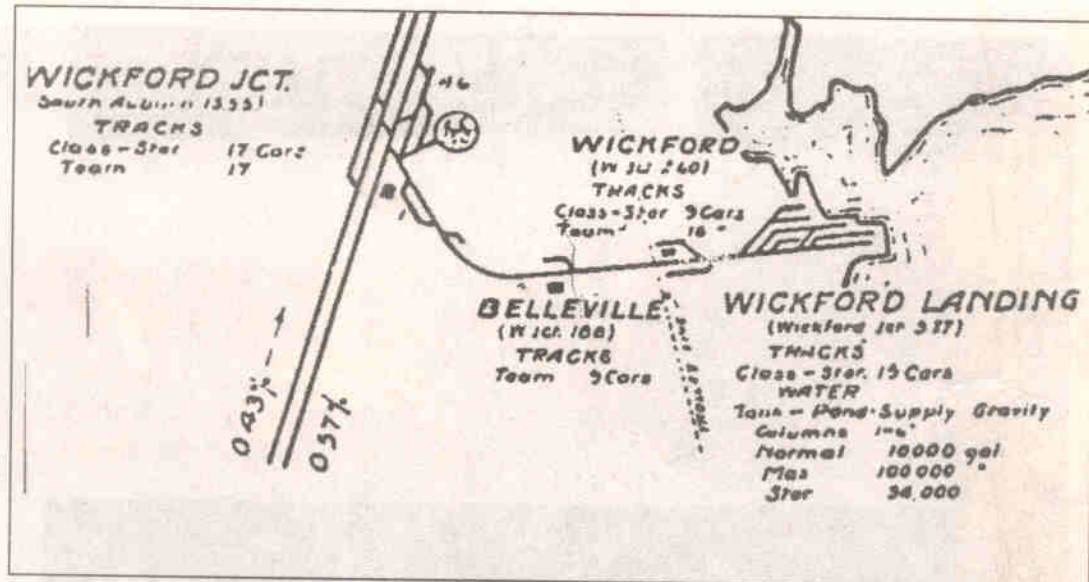
turn the locomotive around.

As I stood there admiring the old stones, I tried to imagine myself flung back in time into the fifty-year time frame, from around 1870 to 1920, when the turntable was running. If I were to walk up to one of the men who worked the turntable and ask them how it turned around he'd certainly look at me askew for a moment. Then with a wink, a nod, and a smirk to his fellow workers he'd reply, "Well, mister; this here turntable is "Armstrong" powered. They'd all laugh and chime in, as was the case when any rube asked such a foolish question, "Yeah, it's our "strong arms" that make her turn." I walk away from the turntable stones with that image in my mind. A gang of great burly men, assisted perhaps by a draft animal, leaning into the handles of the "Armstrong" powered turntable spinning around an idling locomotive. The great turntable's main bearing squeaking and squealing as the men groan their way around the half-circle they must walk each time they turn a train reverberates in my consciousness as I head back to my truck and pull out to the Ten Rod Road as she rolls under the tracks north towards the shopping center which now carries the name of the old station.



This old swamp-yankee would love to see those remaining stones, (rumor has it that the missing ones were used to repair a washed out pier in Narragansett and to reconstruct the Kingston turntable in our neighboring town of South Kingstown), used in the construction of the hopefully-to-be constructed new train station at

Wickford Junction. No more fitting memorial could be constructed to those men than that.



Above, the circle on this schematic of the Newport & Wickford Branch line designates the location of the Wickford Junction turntable. Pictured at right are the remaining Wickford Junction turntable stones.

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The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Sears Kit House

Believe it or not, loyal readers, this sad lithe house is a genuine piece of Americana. Built in 1928 by Charles A. and Dorothy Greene this little bungalow with it's distinctive decorative end gable is one of 100,000 Sears and Roebucks Kit Houses which were shipped by the retail giant between 1908 to 1940. Before we take a gander at the folks who took a risk on a mail order home, the Greene's, lets get some background information on those famous "Honorbilt Modern Homes" fabricated, marketed, and shipped by Messrs. Sears and Roebuck.

The whole thing began in 1908, when the powers-that-be in Sears Roebuck upper management decided that their unprofitable building materials mail-order division had to go. They assigned Frank Kushel, the successful manager of their household china division to do the dirty work. Instead of closing the operation down and taking a big loss, Kushel had the ingenious idea of taking the vast inventory that they already possessed, adding to it, and turning the division into a prefabricated pre-cut kit house whirlwind. The idea was an instant success and for good reason. You see in those days well before the advent of the handy affordable electric power tool, building a home was a major labor intensive undertaking requiring lots of hand cutting of lumber. Both homeowners and contractors alike appreciated the fact that every one of the approximately 30,000 individual pieces of the average home kit came cut and ready to nail and/or screw together; no backbreaking arm twisting hand sawing required. There were 450 different models to choose from and customizing within this selection was available. All this, and Mister Sears would finance the whole shootin' match as well. As a matter of fact, by the time the Greene's were selecting their custom home kit, Sears was one of the biggest mortgage holders in the world.

The kit would arrive via train in two full rail cars. One of the biggest tasks confronting the new homeowner was carting his 30,000 individually numbered pieces, 750 lbs of nails, and 22 gallons of paint and varnish to his building site. After that, all you did was

open up your leather-bound engraved custom instruction manual and start hammering. Within the first paragraph of each and every manual was this sage and time-tested advice, "Do not take anyone's advice as to how this building should be assembled." One can only imagine the myriad types of problems that brought about this ever-present warning.

One might wonder why this wonderful idea didn't last well into the 20th century or beyond. Well the answer to that is bound up in one phrase, "The Great Depression". You see by the middle of the 1930's a large number of the tens of thousands of mortgages Sears held were in default. Rather than look like a rapacious giant corporation putting thousands into the streets, Sears ate the loss. Saddled by this incredible debt the division was closed, except for the sales staff who marketed the remaining house kits. By 1940, it was all over.

Now that we know a little about the Sears Kit Houses in general, lets go back to Charles and Dorothy Greene and their individual piece of the "American Dream". I expect that Charles, unlike most Honorbilt Home buyers, didn't have too much trouble unloading his home from the rail cars parked down at the Wickford Junction railyard. You see, that's where Charles worked at his job as a railroad signal towerman. He hauled his home, piece by piece, to the lot he had purchased from the Gardiner family. Before long (with the help of an Allenton carpenter by the name of Cranston) he and Dorothy had a small 800 sq. foot home parked beside a quiet dirt road known to all as The Ten Rod Road. Quiet that is, until 1932 when the state of Rhode Island constructed the South County Trail (Route 2) and the fabled rotaries that went along with it. The Greene's lost a chunk of their front yard to the rotary, but adjusted to it none the less. Their lives went along quietly until the end: when Dorothy, and then Charles, joined their ancestors in the peaceful cemetery at the Chestnut Hill Baptist Church in Exeter.

The empty house sits there now forlornly waiting for either an ignoble end under the dozer's blade or rescue by a knight in shining armor. That's right loyal readers, she

must go one way or another. But there's a bright spot here. The home's present owner would love to see this little piece of Americana saved. He's willing to entertain any serious offer to relocate this "Honorbilt" home to another lot. Maybe you can own a little bit of American history. Contact me through the paper or at my e-mail address cranston@wickford.com and I'll put you in touch with him.

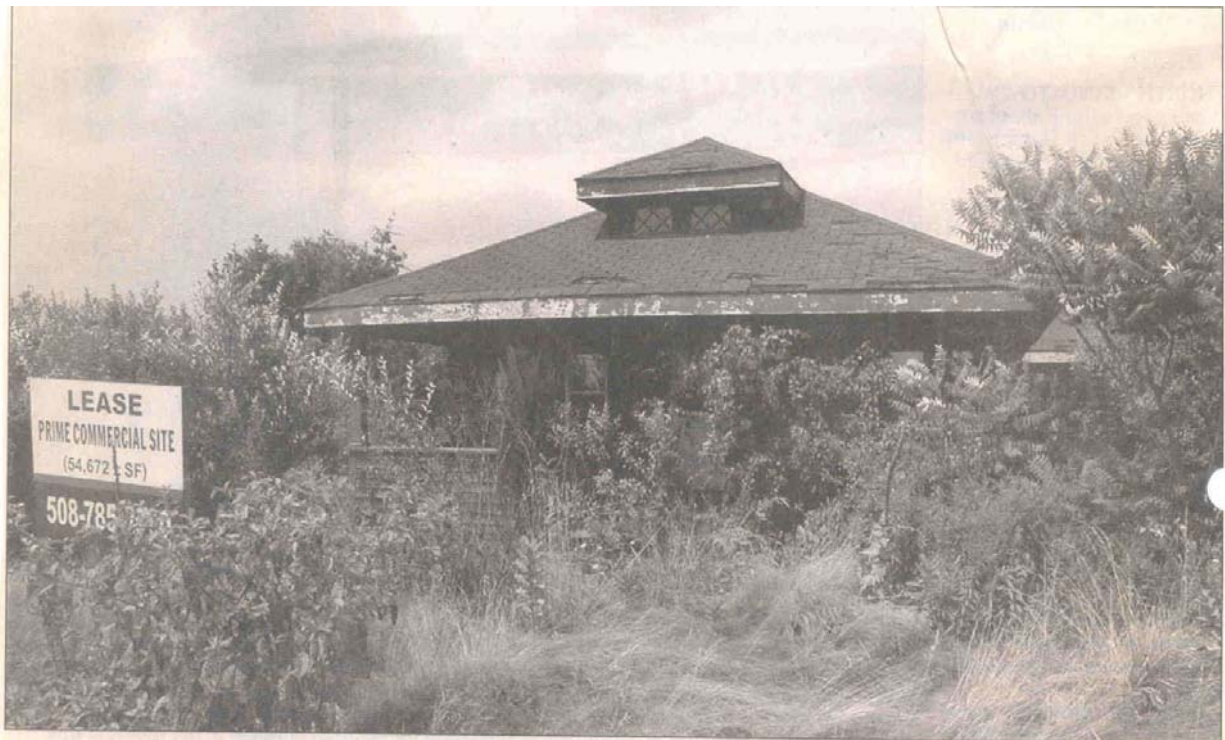


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

This bungalow on Ten Rod Road, across from Fiddlesticks, likely will be razed if no one steps forward to purchase and move it.

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The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

St. Gabriel's Episcopal Mission/ American Indian Federation Hall

By 1898, with the Rodman Mill humming along at near peak production, and all the associated support businesses and merchants doing well, Lafayette was a busy little place. So busy in fact, that the nearest Episcopal congregation, St. Paul's in Wickford, deemed it appropriate to establish an Episcopal mission in the village. They purchased a modest piece of land and built a small end-gabled, 1-story shingled chapel with yellow stained glass windows. Like all missions, the little Church shared priests with the larger Church in Wickford. Services were scheduled at times appropriate to allow a priest from St. Paul's to be there to officiate. The congregation, although faithful and enthusiastic, was never large. With the combination of the inevitable death of regular worshipers and the eventual ease of transportation brought on by the age of the automobile, attendance at the Mission dropped off to a point where it was closed and the members were transferred to the larger parish in Wickford.

The chapel sat empty for a few years, until 1944 when it was purchased by the American Indian Federation. The Federation is an organization of Native Americans, as well as non-Native Americans, who have joined together to practice, honor, and respect the traditions, principles, and values of the Native American culture. The Federation was formed in the early 1930's, and prior to the purchase of the chapel, held their annual meetings, or Pow Wow's, at varying sites including the grounds of the Allenton Social Club (Now the Knight's of Columbus Hall on Tower Hill Rd). But in 1944 they found a home and have held their Pow Wow's there ever since. This year is their 69th annual meeting.

Sadly, the 103 year old chapel is showing its years, and the never ending vandalization of the largely unoccupied building is hastening the process. The

Federation, which is not affiliated with any specific tribe and is a non-profit tax exempt organization, would love to be able to do some well-deserved restoration to their venerable and historic old hall. They would also like to be able to put up a fence and install a security system. But, as with most non-profits, there are just not enough funds to go around. I must say, loyal readers, that there aren't too many causes more noble than practicing and honoring the "earth-centric" values and principles which are the backbone of Native American culture. If there is anyone out there who wants to help, including the donation of appropriate gently used construction materials and/or labor, do contact them at:

The American Indian Federation
P.O. Box 9151
Warwick, RI 02999
401-732-0621

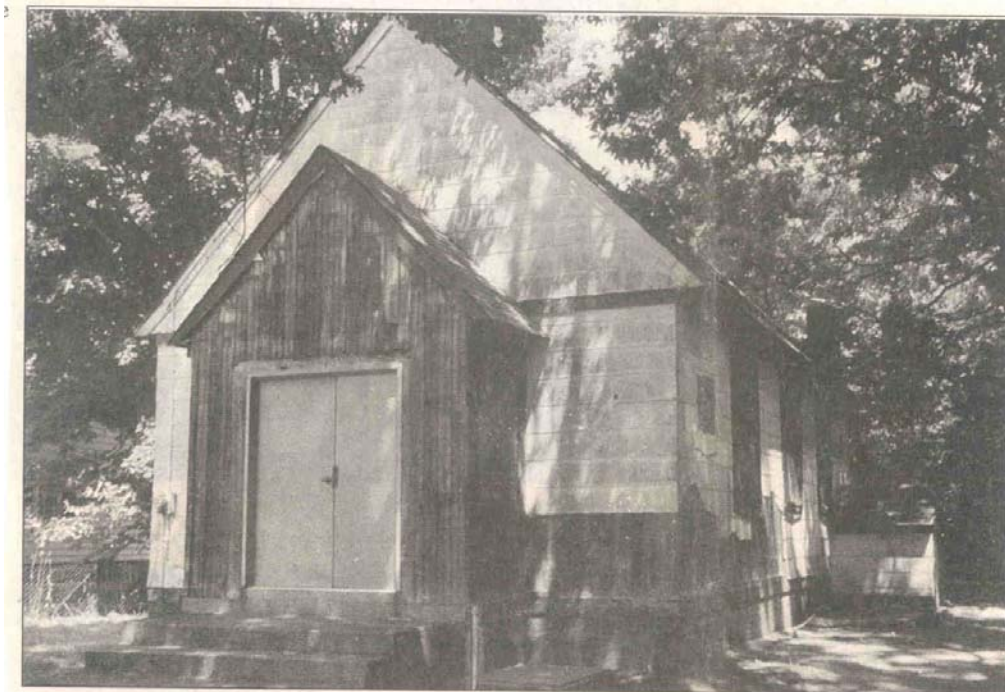


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

The American Indian Federation purchased the former St. Gabriel's Episcopal Mission building in Lafayette, seen above, in 1944.

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Ten Rod Road Town Pound

These days when we think of "The Pound" it brings to mind a vision of the place where you'll have to part with some of your hard-earned cash to spring your errant family pet. Or perhaps it's a place that you went to pick out a puppy or a kitten. Journey back just a couple of generations, and "The Pound" means something decidedly different. So let's take a "Swamptown gander" at the remains of the "Ten Rod" or as it was also known "Collation Corner's Town Pound".

The word "pound" as it is used in this instance, is just about the only thing in this story older than the pound itself. Its roots reach back to the archaic Old English word "pyndan" - to shut up or in. From there it became the Middle English "poonde", which was just a short leap to the present word. Pounds were found all across colonial America. Anywhere there were pesky stray farm animals grubbing around in your gardens, trampling through your yards, or harassing your younguns', there was a pound to pen them up in; a place to impound them until their rightful owners could come and get the "durned critter".

North Kingstown was no exception to this rule of thumb. The historical record mentions at least two pounds within the town's borders. One was located on the main livestock turnpike, The Ten Rod Road and the other near to the intersection of The Pequot Trail (present day Post Road) and Stony Lane. I expect that there were actually three, as I can't imagine a North Quidnessett farmer driving a stray razorback all the way down to Stony Lane. I'm willing to wager that at sometime one was located somewhere in Quidnessett. Well, be that as it may, the only one that can still be seen is the second version of the Ten Rod Road pound, known as the Collation Corners pound towards the end of its long existence. A picture of its grown-over and rundown remains accompanies this week's column.

The first version of this pound was probably constructed in the early 1700's and was

much larger than the one whose remains can be seen today. It was a part of the Ten Rod Road cattle driving system. The road, originally constructed to allow cattle and sheep to be driven from farms in western RI and eastern Connecticut, was named due to its enormous width of ten rods (about 165 feet). It was designed this way to allow for ample public pasturage for feeding the multitude of livestock driven to the docks of Wickford for eventual shipment all over the colonies. With that many animals passing through town, it was a cinch that a few would stray off and cause problems for local folks. Once caught, they would be placed in the pound and be tended by the Town Poundkeeper and his three drivers. These were local men appointed by the Town Council. If no one claimed the animals in a timely fashion, they would become the property of the aforementioned gentlemen. That was the incentive for holding this sometimes-thankless job. At that time, the big pound was located at the edge of the future "Davis Farm" (recently profiled in this column). Around 1900 Henry Girard, the then owner of the property, decided he wanted to build his big handsome home (the house that still sits there to this day) and had to move the simple farmhouse over to the Ten Rod Road edge of the property. He did, and the simple white farmhouse can still be seen a couple of houses up the road. Trouble was, the big town pound was right in the backyard of the relocated farmhouse and Henry wanted it moved. He petitioned the town council and was allowed to build a smaller replacement pound at its present position just to the west of the old farmhouse. Coincidentally, Henry Girard, eventually became one of the town's last poundkeepers. In 1919, with the death of poundkeeper James Brayman, Girard was appointed his replacement. He held the job until his own death in 1953. By then the largely ceremonial job was given to Napoleon I. Magnant, who was our last poundkeeper. The job was not filled upon his death in 1956. The last actual resident of the pound was said to have been a stray donkey "whose heinous braying awakened the entire neighborhood."

The remnants of the old pound sits there along the side of the former cattle trail unbeknownst to the average "Joe" who speeds by in his car on the road that once brought countless cattle and sheep down to the docks of "the olde quaint and historic". Filled up with weeds and trees rather than braying donkeys and grunting swine, it has a

story to tell us all about times long past and barely remembered.

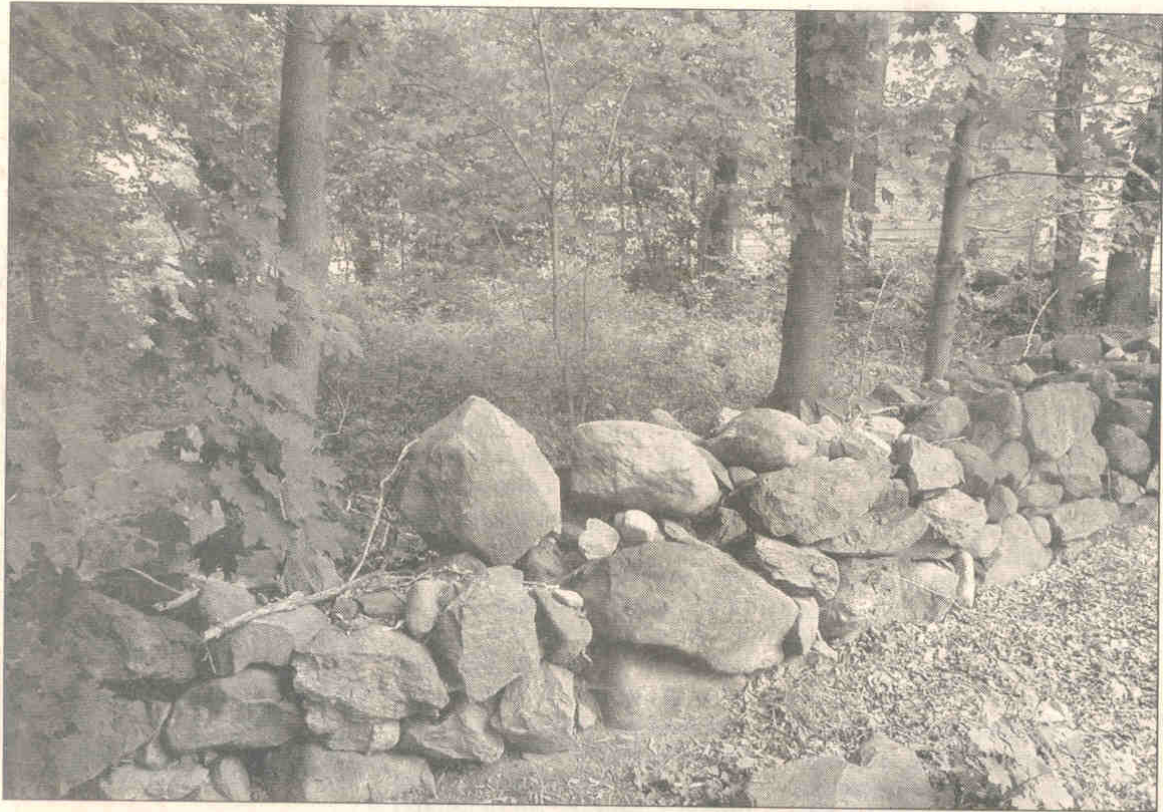


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

The old pound on Ten Rod Road is covered over with weeds now.

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The Franklin Rodman House

If, like me, you are an admirer of the mill village of Lafayette and an inherently nosy old Swamp Yankee; you would certainly have taken note of the fact that the Lafayette Nursing Home is now empty and "For Sale". Has been for a while as a matter of fact. You might also have noted that folks have been poking around the grand old lady as of late. These facts have gotten me thinking about Franklin's home; they've brought back dim memories of what she once looked like before the addition of that brick abomination to the front of what was once one of the most majestic of the four Rodman mansions. We took a quick look at her some two years ago in a column about all the Rodman mansions. Let's take a closer look at Franklin Rodman and his grand house now.

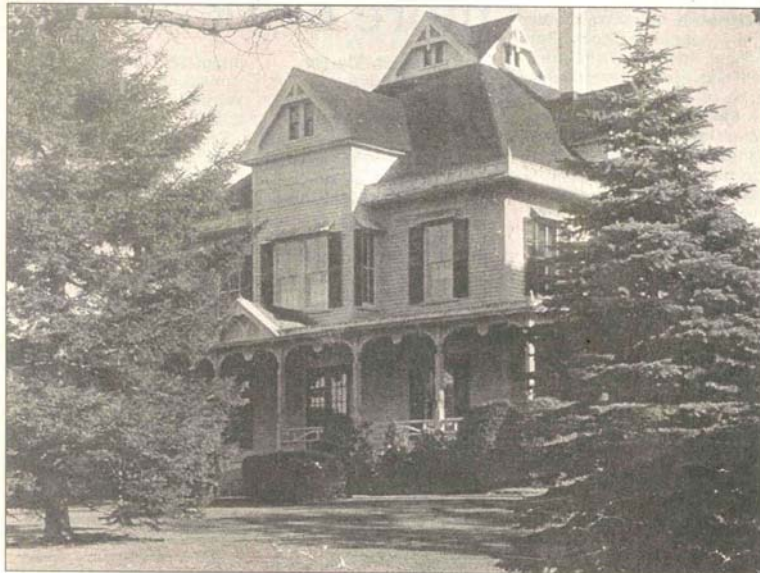
Franklin Rodman was born on January 29, 1842, the eldest of the six children of mill owner and village builder Robert Rodman. He was educated in the local district school system and upon graduation, immediately began his education, under the wing of his knowledgeable father, in the workings of a large scale fabric milling concern. He was by his father's side at the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876 when he saw the remarkable Corliss Steam Engine and realized the dramatic effect it could have on an industry which, at that time, was largely dependant upon water for power. Franklin was eventually named the Superintendent of the Lafayette Mill, a position he held until the moment of his death in October of 1906. On August 16, 1863 he was married to Sarah Allen, the sister of his brother-in-law George. They had five children together; Ernest Linwood (known by all as "Lin"), Irving, Robert F., (forever famous as Col. Robert Rodman the state highway engineer for whom a section of Route 4 is named) Fannie, and Albert (known as "Bert"). From 1863 until 1882 when his mansion house was constructed, the Franklin Rodman family lived in the home on the west corner of the Ten Rod Road and Advent Street. This house eventually became the home of Lin Rodman and is generally remembered as such.

1882 must have been a good year at the Rodman Mill. Not only did Robert commission the construction of Franklin's grand mansion house, he also had an elegant "Queen Anne" style addition placed on the front of the more modest (modest is a relative term when you are dealing with mill owner mansion houses.) home of his daughter and son-in-law, George and Hortense Allen. He hired the Westerly RI architectural firm of Maxon and Company to do the design work and construction oversight on both projects. Only the finest materials were used at both locations. No expense was spared and the homes were outfitted with the most modern of conveniences. Even in 1882, Robert was not going to have a Rodman trudging through a cold New England night to an icy outhouse. His family's homes were constructed with complete indoor plumbing supplied with water by large wooden water tanks in the attics. Water for these tanks was collected in the home's gutters and piped to the tank. This supply could be augmented during the drier months with well water from the property's private well. There was also an irrigation system for the estate's many gardens supplied by a pump which drew from a small pond behind the four Rodman homes. As you can imagine, having a large oak tank full of water in your attic required that your home was built plenty sturdy. Such was the case with all of these homes. Sills and corner posts were all 7 X 7 beams while the joists were all of 6 X 10 or 3 X 5 construction. As with brother Walter's house next door a great barn was built as well. These houses were built to last, and last they did. Franklin lived in the home from its construction in 1882 until his death in 1906. After Sarah's death the next year, son Albert moved in with his wife Mary Peirce and lived there until their passing in 1959.

It is because of Mary (known as Aunt Molly to all her Wickford relations) that we have these wonderful photographs which accompany this column. One shows the home just after its construction and the other shows the house just prior to it being turned into the nursing home that we all remember it as. Aunt Molly passed these photographs down to her favorite nephew Wickford's own Thomas Peirce and he graciously has allowed me to show them to all of you. My hope is that these pictures, which showcase the home in all its glory, will inspire someone out there with imagination to save and restore her to her former splendor. Nothing would make me happier than to see



The Franklin Rodman mansion is seen above as it appeared in the 1890s. Few homes in North Kingstown were grander than his. Below, a photo of the house in 1959 shows it just before its conversion to a nursing home.



Franklin's home restored in the same appropriate manner that the neighboring Walter Rodman home is. The two houses are not complete without each other. Franklin was the "nuts and bolts" manager that kept the empire running day to day. Walter, the precise and fastidious accountant managed the money in a way that allowed one company to support an entire village. Together, the two brothers kept their father's dream alive and brought it into the twentieth century. They did their part, now someone must return the favor and allow the two men's homes to enter the twenty first century together.

For a complete rundown of the history of the remarkably well preserved village of Lafayette won't you join me on Saturday at 2:00PM for a "Walking tour of Lafayette" to benefit the Allen/ Madison House. Call Sally Hilton at 294-4128 for details.

Printed in the North East Independent 10/17/02

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

William Noyes house is oldest in Venerable Lafayette village

In the past we have taken a look at a number of old homes in our fair town. We've looked at the 10 oldest buildings in North Kingstown on the whole, as well as the reigning champions in some of the town's villages that didn't make that particular top 10 list. Now it's time to shine the spotlight on the ancient homes of Lafayette to pick out a winner in this venerable village.

After dusting off the town's old ledgers and taking a close look at the leading candidates, it appears that the hands-down winner is the 1 1/2-story central chimneyed end gable house located on the south side of Ten Rod Road, just up a piece from its Lafayette Road intersection.

This house has been called the William Noyes house for as long as anyone can remember, but the style and materials used in its construction lead this historian and many others to suspect that Noyes, who was born in 1808, was not the home's first occupant.

The house, which has four original fireplaces with the main one including a bake oven in its rear wall, hand-hewn beams as well as actual logs for floor joists and a foundation made totally of stones, would seem to predate Noyes by 40 or 50 years. His father, Joshua or his grandfather, Joseph, may have built the home, but the historical record places these two gentlemen fairly clearly as residents of Westerly. It would seem that someone had a hand in the William Noyes house's original construction.

All this aside, the Noyes family is an interesting enough bunch of folks that, even if the identity of the home's original builder is never ascertained, it wouldn't hurt to continue to call this wonderful home by its present name. The Noyes clan can be traced back to a New London, Conn., minister/physician James Noyes. He

arrived in the Colonies in the late 17th century and practiced his two vocations throughout a territory that extended from New London to Newport and everything in between.

The Noyes were well known as able and effective educators through many generations and William Noyes styled himself as a schoolmaster in the 1850 census. It is an established fact that he ran a private school in his home in the years prior to the town's construction of District Schoolhouse No. 9 just up the road in 1866. One of Noyes' nephews, Edwin, later taught in that very schoolhouse prior to his career as one of the many editors of the Wickford Standard.



Shown is a farm outbuilding on the property of the William Noyes house.



Above is the front entrance to the William Noyes house, the oldest in Lafayette. Below is the rear of the house, as seen from Ten Rod Road.



William Noyes' son, George, had a quite different sort of a vocation in that he was known across Lafayette and Swamptown for his peculiar career as a man who dug up pond lily roots and sold them to landscape architects and gardeners from as far away as New York, Boston and Chicago. Nice work if you can get it.

As is so often the case, the Noyes story also includes an amazing and interesting coincidence. It seems that the occupant of the William Noyes house is a man by the name of DeRochambeau, the same as the general who came with Gen. Lafayette to help fight in Revolutionary War times. Now you tell me that he and I aren't the only ones who find it amusing to discover that the owner of the oldest home in Lafayette has a name such as this.

The Davisville Mill Site

To the unaware, the trip down the hill from busy Davisville Road to the little hollow next to the Hunt's River seems like a short one, but to those who know, its a journey that spans hundreds of years. You see, down there next to the river, unknown and unseen to the hundreds of folks who fly by in their cars and trucks on the busy road each day, lies the remains of the Davis, Reynolds, & Company Mill; built in 1847 and demolished in the 1950's. The site had already been in continuous use as a mill of on kind or another by the Davis family for 150 years when the mill building was constructed. Joshua Davis, the patriarch of the family, built a grist mill on the site in the late 1690's. The mill eventually evolved into a wool carding mill; where local folks would bring their wool in to be carded by machine instead of the laborious and time consuming "old-fashioned" hand carding method. Later Joshua's sons Ezra and Jeffrey expanded upon this by enlarging the mill and setting up a home spinning and weaving industry which ran concurrently with the mill. Local folks would bring their wool to the mill to be washed and carded and then take it back home and spin it into yarn. They would then bring it back to the mill to be dyed and then take it home again and weave it into fabric which they would then sell to the Davis Brothers. Things went along like that until the mill was destroyed by fire in the middle of the 1840's.

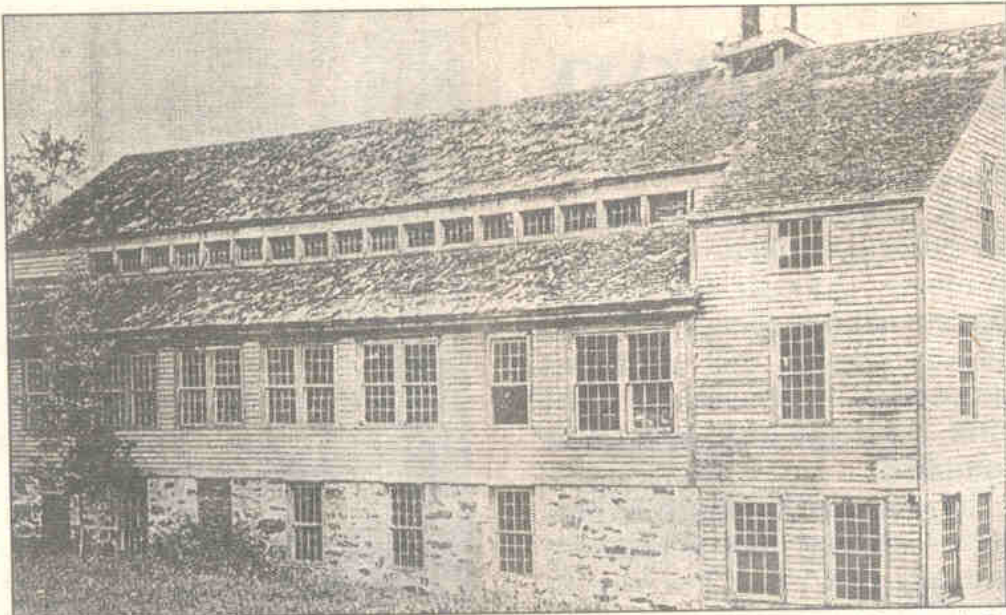
The new 1847 mill (seen in the accompanying circa 1910 post card view) was built by partners James Davis (Ezra's son), Henry Sweet (Ezra's son-in-law), and Albert Reynolds (Ezra's nephew). It was built to be a traditional mill where the process of fabric milling went from wool to cloth uninterrupted. Instead of working at home on hand looms, the partners hired the local folks to run the many machines they purchased for the mill. Workers were housed in a boarding house and various tenements which were constructed along Davisville Road. These many buildings were later demolished to make way for the magnificent homes of the three partners and their families,(see the August 12 & 19, 1999 columns for more on these homes.) as the milling operation later moved to the Old Baptist Road site. The Hunt River Mill site also included a company store as

well as the mill, soap house, and dye house. The mill operated continuously until 1873 when it was closed due to a nationwide economic panic. It reopened again in 1875 under the management of George Reynolds (Albert's uncle) who was at that time running the mill at Sand Hill (Chadsey Road Area). The partnership of Davis, Sweet, and Reynolds subsequently reopened operations at their new Old Baptist Road site. Eventually the mill became the property of William Davis Miller, a Davis descendant, who decided in the 1950's to dismantle the then abandoned mill building for safety reasons. He sold off the big hand-hewn beams and donated the main drive gear to Sturbridge Village for their mill machinery display.

As you stand there dead-center in the remains of the old mill you enter a time warp. It's easy to imagine Ezra walking down the hill from the Davis homestead ready to begin the day at the mill. If you listen hard enough the sound of the wind rustling through the trees almost sounds like the quiet clacking of a distant loom; and the river sounds now just as it did then, the one constant over the many centuries. The mill site is a place of spirits as well as a spiritual place. It is a memorial to the myraid souls who worked there over countless decades. It may be true that a trip to Slater Mill in Pawtucket can educate and inform a person about the mill experience, but a trip to the old Davis Mill site can connect you to the very heart and soul of what a mill was all about.



A view down the millrace channel is seen as the water returns to the Hunt River.



The Davis, Reynolds & Co. Mill is pictured circa 1910. For safety reasons, the abandoned building was demolished in the 1950s.



This photo shows ruins of the millrace and turbine housing.

Printed in the North East Independent
4/18/02

Sand Hill Village and the Hannon Triplets

In this the day and age of fertility drugs, sextuplets, and septuplets; the successful birth of a set of identical triplets hardly raises an eyebrow. But back in early 1896, when a woman was more than likely to give birth at home with only a relative or friend at her side, this was a rare and exciting event for a small community. Such was the case in February of 1896 when Mr. and Mrs. Patrick Hannon of the tiny N.K. mill village of Sand Hill (For the uninitiated, located on present day Chadsey Road around Sand Hill Pond) brought their three daughters, Annie, Catherine, and Agnes into the world.

Pat Hannon, as he was known to his friends, was a worker at the Kingston Woolen Mill, also known as the white mill due to its long history of being painted a bright white, located in Sand Hill. He and his wife lived in the village within walking distance of the mill in a second floor apartment. The birth of the Sand Hill Triplets, as the newspapermen called them was attended only by a neighbor and friend of the family, Mrs. Shaw. From start to finish the entire delivery took, according to the newspaper accounts, only 50 minutes. The babies, between them, weighed almost sixteen pounds.

Word spread fast around Rhode Island of the wondrous event. Before long the Hannon's were interviewed by a Providence Journal reporter. The story was picked up by the wire services and before you knew it, the Sand Hill Triplets were a regional event. Money even trickled in from folks who had read of the Hannons and realized the financial strain that three new mouths to feed would put on a family which already had two children. A mill owner from Maynard Massachusetts even sent the Hannon's the equivalent of a weeks wages to help them out. The hat was also passed at the woolen mill where Pat labored away for seven dollars a week as a finisher. Pat's coworkers suggested that he charge a dime apiece to the throngs of people who came to Sand Hill specifically to see

the triplets. But Pat would have none of that, a proud man by nature, who was prouder still at this turn of events, he allowed folks to see the little phenoms for free.

It's a good thing all these folks decided to lend a hand to the Hannons, because fate was not so easy on them. Just nine weeks after the girls were born the mill complex that Pat worked at burned to the ground. It was a devastating blow to both the Hannon family and Sand Hill Village. The owners never rebuilt, Pat was out of a job, and Sand Hill Village began its quick decline into oblivion.



It would appear that the Hannon's must have moved out of town, chasing after a new job and a new life, as I can find nothing else about them in the local record. I won't give up though, I'd like to find out what their fate was. Maybe someone out there knows the other half of this story. I'll pass it along to you once I have some answers.

For now though, the Sand Hill

Triplets live on in my imagination just as they were captured by an anonymous newspaper artist over 100 years ago.

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

Hitler Trains At Davisville

Probably no young seaman training at Davisville back in the summer of 1944 was dealt a tougher hand than young Willie was. If you wanted to talk about someone who had the odds stacked against him in an almost insurmountable fashion, Willie was your man. Why, it had taken him four years just to get accepted into the U.S. Navy; it had only come to pass after he had sent a letter to Roosevelt himself imploring the President to intercede in his favor. In exchange for the honor of serving his adopted country, he had to promise to change his name. You see, Willie's full name was William Patrick Hitler, and his uncle was a certain despicable despot over in Europe. Roosevelt, after conferring with J. Edgar Hoover, decided to give the lad his chance; Hoover having confirmed the fact that Willie was a loyal countryman who, although described by the FBI as "an extremely lazy sort", was not a subversive. That is how the nephew of the man that the whole world loved to hate ended up in our fair town learning the seaman's trade. But how he ended up in America is another matter.

Willie's father, Alois Hitler Jr., was Adolph Hitler's older half brother. You see, little Adolph's mom, Klara (Polzl), was Alois Senior's second wife. His first, Franziska (Matzelsberger), had died of T.B. shortly after giving birth to Alois Jr. and Angela, Adolph's half sister. As is so often the case, even in infamous families such as this one, Alois was not happy with his father's new family and he clashed violently with his father. Eventually he left home and ended up as a waiter in Dublin. There he met Brigid Dowling, with whom he eloped in 1910, settling in London. In 1911, William Patrick Hitler was born. Around the time of the First World War, Alois abandoned his wife and son, and moved back to Germany. It was there, in the summer of 1929, that eighteen-year-old Willie was reunited with his dad, who had remarried, and met his now famous Uncle Adolph. After the summer was over, Willie returned to England and began his way down a path, which would eventually infuriate Uncle Adolph to the point that he described Willie as "one of my most repulsive relatives." He began to give interviews and go on speaking tours describing himself, as the fuhrer's only legal descendant. By the fall of 1939, when his uncle was invading Poland, Willie was in America "cashing

in" on his birthright, on a William Morris Agency sponsored speaking tour. There was no going back to Germany after a "Look" magazine article entitled "Why I hate my Uncle". Willie was in America to stay. It was then that he decided to enlist, and began his four year odyssey to do just that.



PHOTO: GLOBE PHOTOS
William "Willie" Patrick Hitler went on a 1939 speaking tour.



PHOTO: CORBIS-BETTMAN
Seen here is William Patrick Hitler's father and Adolph Hitler's half-brother, Alois Hitler Jr.

So that's how Willie Hiller (that was the new name he chose) ended up in Davisville. He eventually served two years as a seaman first class and received an American Campaign medal and a Second World War Victory Medal. In February 1946, he was discharged from

the Navy at Fargo Barracks in Boston. Willie, understandably, fades from the scene after that. He had three sons, who still live on Long Island under another assumed name and they, again understandably, avoid publicity like the plague that their ancestor was. As Willie himself was often quoted as saying, "Hitler is a very uncomfortable name."

This has got to be in this your loyal local history hound's opinion, one of the most intriguing set of circumstances I've run across. It is made even more amazing when you take into consideration the fact that, as we explored last month, Winston Churchill's pedigree also leads back to North Kingstown. Truth is stranger than fiction, isn't it!

Many thanks to Fred Worden for bringing this amazing tale to my attention.

Printed in the North East Independent 9/13/01

The Train Station and the Lumber Store

Greetings Readers! One thing that saddens every aficionado of old trains and train stations here in our fair town is that, for the most part, every vestige of what was once a thriving local business, with two separate lines, The Seaview and the Newport E. Wickford, moving people, freight, and mail back and forth across the town, are gone. Only postcards, faded photos, and memories attest to their very existence. However, little do most folks know, that every time you step into our own "Wickford Lumber Store" to buy a gallon of paint or a piece of plywood, you are walking right into the old Belleville Station of the Newport and Wickford Line. You see, back in 1926, right after the line went "belly-up", a victim of the onslaught of the automobile, the station was purchased, moved diagonally across the street and refurbished and reopened as a lumber store. Buried within the walls of the present "Wickford Lumber" is that original store. Let's backtrack a hundred years or so and take a look at the Belleville Station.

The Belleville station building, a picture of which accompanies this article, was constructed in the spring of 1871, along with the Wickford Station and the Wickford Landing Station at the end of Poplar Point. At this same time the tracks were laid and two water tanks were built for the engines, one at the Wickford Landing and one just south of the Belleville Station. Most of these features can be seen on the plot plan which also accompanies this week's column. Passengers, freight, and mail destined for the nearby mill towns of Belleville, Allenton, Silver Spring, and Shady Lea would disembark here at the Belleville Station. This small, but busy waypoint on the Newport and Wickford Branch line served the community for more than fifty years, from 1871 till its closure in 1925.

Thankfully, the building was not empty for too long. After its little "jaunt" diagonally across the street, it became the showroom for the predecessor

to the Wickford Lumber that we now know today. It continues to do service to our fair town some 130 years after it was first constructed.

So, the next time you stop in to buy a hammer or some nails, take a moment to imagine a steam engine full of new immigrants arriving there at Belleville ready to begin a lifetime of labor in a nearby fabric mill. It will certainly add some perspective to the chore that you've been grumbling about doing.

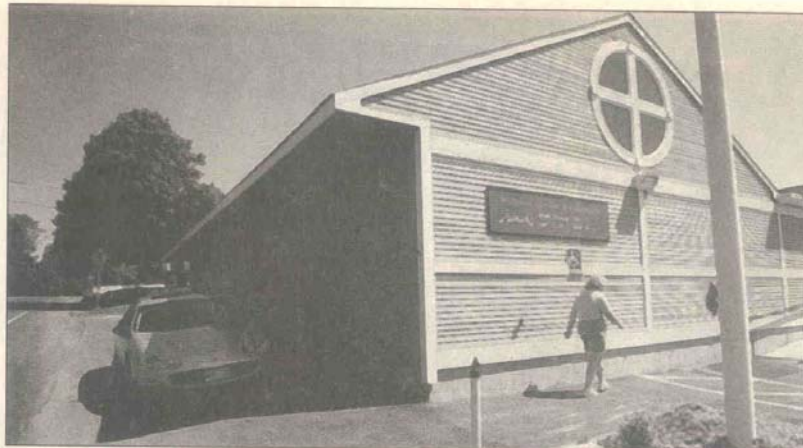
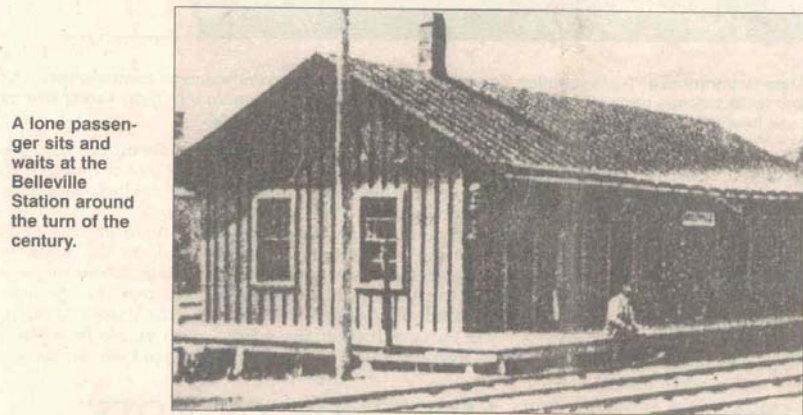
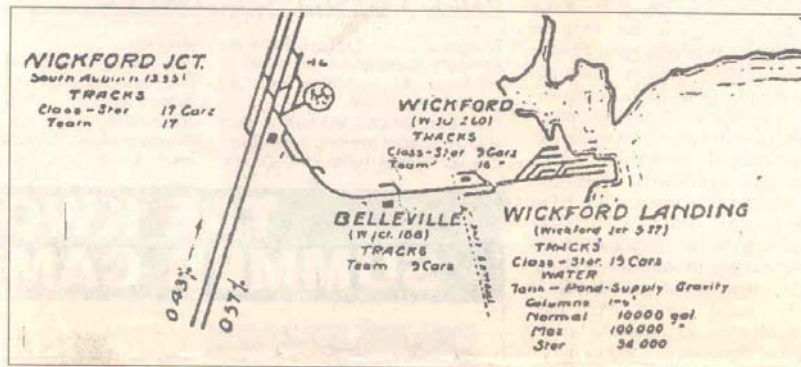


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

The above photo shows Wickford Lumber as it stands today, a portion of which is the old train station.



A lone passenger sits and waits at the Belleville Station around the turn of the century.



A simple plot plan of the Newport and Wickford Branch line shows sidings and spur tracks.

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Allenton Social Club

One of the many things that every one of the many distinct villages that make up our fair town had back about a hundred years or so ago was a meeting and entertainment hall. Lafayette had Rodman Hall on Advent Street, Wickford had the Odd Fellows Hall on Phillips St (now the Olde Theatre Store) and Davisville had Grove Hall on Grove Street, just to name a few. The closely connected villages of Allenton, Belleville, and Shady Lea were no exception; they had the circa 1910 Allenton Social Club on Tower Hill Road (now the Knight's of Columbus Hall.) Not only did the Allenton folks have their own meeting hall, they also had themselves a fine fairgrounds with a real live dancing pavilion (now the site of Mike's Autobody Shop and Tarbox Motors also on Tower Hill Rd.). And every year from 1913 to 1944, on the week of the 4th of July they had the biggest rootin' tootin' "Old Home Week" celebration in all of Rhode Island.

The concept of "Old Home Week" had its roots in that other bastion of "Yankee-hood", New Hampshire, near to the turn of the century. It was envisioned as an opportunity for everyone who had left the place of their birth, to come back and reconnect with their roots. The idea was an extremely popular one and villages all over New England held them. Few of them though, could stack up to the big goings-on at the Fairgrounds and Pavilion of the Allenton Social Club.

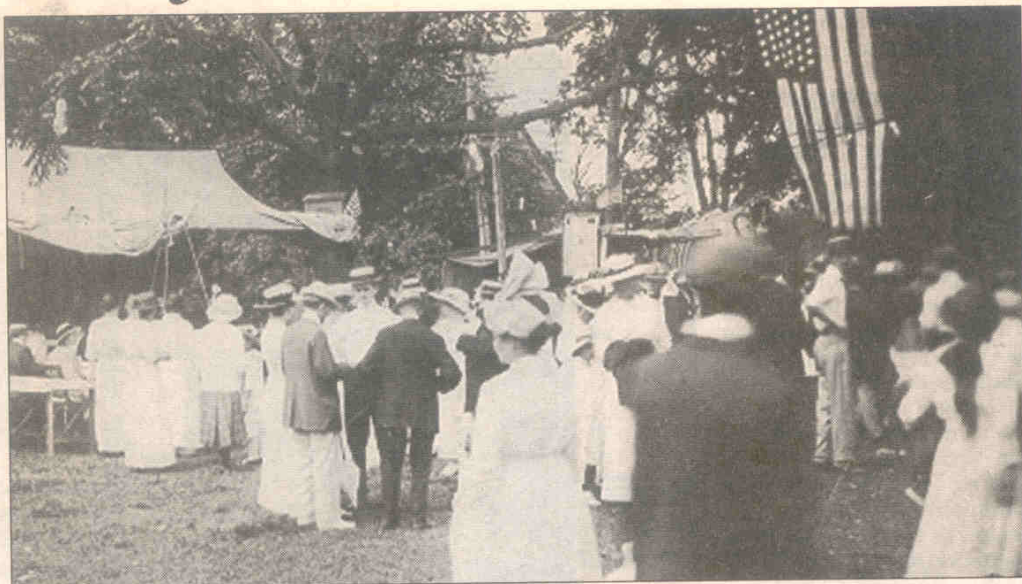
The weeklong festivities included fiddlin' contests, dances, wrestling matches, bicycle races, and the usual country fair attractions. But what brought folks from all over RI and every nearby state to the celebration was the giant holiday clambake that was the culmination of the whole week's activities. There was steamers, lobsters, fish, chowder, potatoes, and corn-on-the-cob enough for everyone and their brother. Pounds of cake and gallons of ice cream followed the feast. Needless to say, a good time was had by all.

The big celebration, although it was quite an undertaking, involving all 140 of the male members of the club and their wives and families, was far from all that these good

people undertook each year. The Social Club also hosted minstrel shows, concerts, plays, parties, and benefit dances and the like, as well. Sadly, the one-two punch of WWII and the advent of the affordable automobile did the Allenton Social Club in. The last "Old Home Week" was held in 1944 and by the late 1950's all that was left for the many Northups, Cambells, Burroughs, Gardiners, and Hazards that had manned the big clambake pits were memories and an occasional auction on the old dance pavilion. The pavilion itself, where bows once flew across the strings of many a fiddle, was demolished to make way for the original Tarbox building (now Mikes Auto Body) soon after.

Thankfully though, the Social Club itself lives on under the guise of the Knight's of Columbus Hall. The place that once housed benefit dances and retirement parties, the spot where millworkers held their monthly union meetings is still serving its community more than ninety years later. Stop a minute some day, close your eyes and you can darn near hear the sounds of fiddlers fiddlin', men wrestling, kids playing, and women swapping recipes. Old Home Week still lives on in the hearts of all who care.

Printed in the North East Independent 8/29/02



"Old Home Week" in Wickford, hosted by the Allenton Social Club, became a regular summer event around the turn of the century. Above, attendees mill about the fairgrounds and club pavilion on Tower Hill Road, now the site of Mike's Auto Body Shop, in this circa 1915 photo.

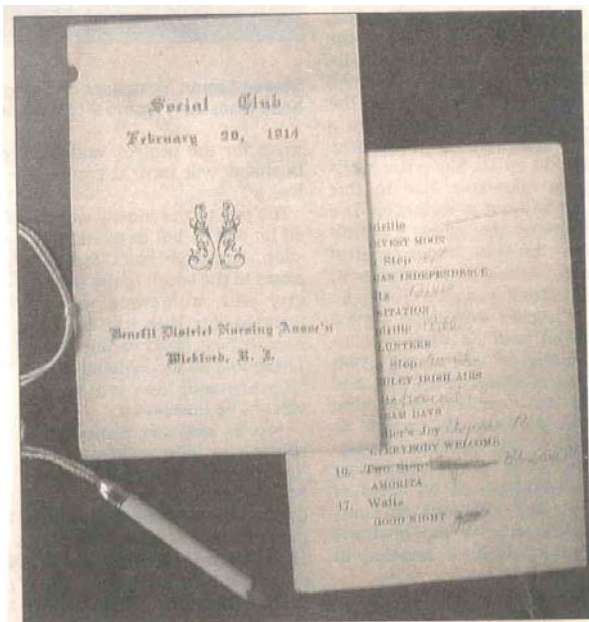


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

The Allenton Social Club hosted dances that offered a program of music including waltzes, quadrilles and two-steps. Those attending were offered use of dance cards such as this to plan their evening. The names of chosen partners could be written in over the course of the dance and afterward kept as mementos.



The booths and tents are set up on the fairgrounds and ready for the "Old Home Week" crowds in this circa 1915 photo.

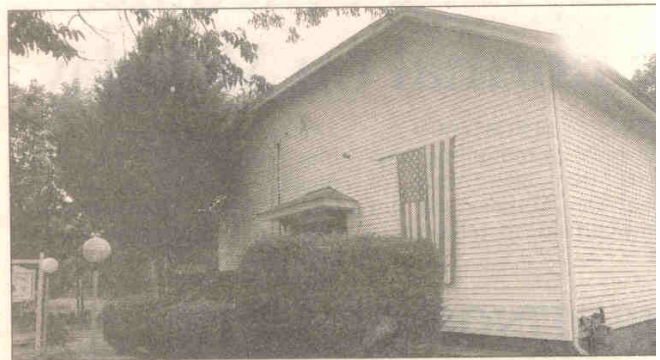


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

The former Allenton Social Club now houses the Knights of Columbus on Tower Hill Road.

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

A Gift from a Stranger

Greetings loyal readers; let me open this week's installment by welcoming you all to column number 200, a milestone by anyone's measure. I'm pleased to have made it this far and look forward to the future. Thanks to all of you who have made this such a pleasure.

In honor of the 200th column, and as a way to both thank the many that have generously donated information to folks like myself and to encourage more to do the same, we are going to take a gander at a recent donation to one of my favorite repositories of local history; the South County Room in the N.K. Free Library. Just recently, a generous soul donated an ancient and worn ledger to this institution. It seems the book turned up during a renovation of an old West Allenton homestead. It eventually, after a number of years, ended up in the hands of a gentleman who, although he had little idea of what it was, realized that it was a part of North Kingstown's history and belonged where it could be studied and appreciated. As a part of the initial cataloguing of this ledger, I took a cursory look at it for the library, and attempted to identify its source.

The book turns out to be the paybook and production ledger for the Narragansett Mill. The mill, destroyed in an 1889 fire, was built around 1820 by Joseph Sanford on a site with a history of milling going back to the early 18th century. Prior to Mr. Sanford's cotton yarn mill, the site was home to an early grist mill, as well as a saw mill. Sanford, who built his handsome mill owners home across the street in a style identical to his previous Wickford home (profiled in a previous column), sold the property, his millowner's home, and some associated mill housing to the local firm of Hiscox and Pierce in 1852. These gentlemen retooled the mill to the manufacture of woolen fabrics, ran it for a time and then leased the whole kit-and-kaboodle to local milling magnate Robert Rodman; and it is from this time frame that the ledger dates. Shortly after the ledger ends, Rodman ended his lease on the property so as to take on the

larger Shady Lea Mill. William Pierce then ran the mill on his own, in concert with a joint Hiscox and Pierce undertaking at the Silver Spring Mill. (Gets kind of complicated doesn't it.) It was Pierce who ran the mill at the time of the devastating fire.

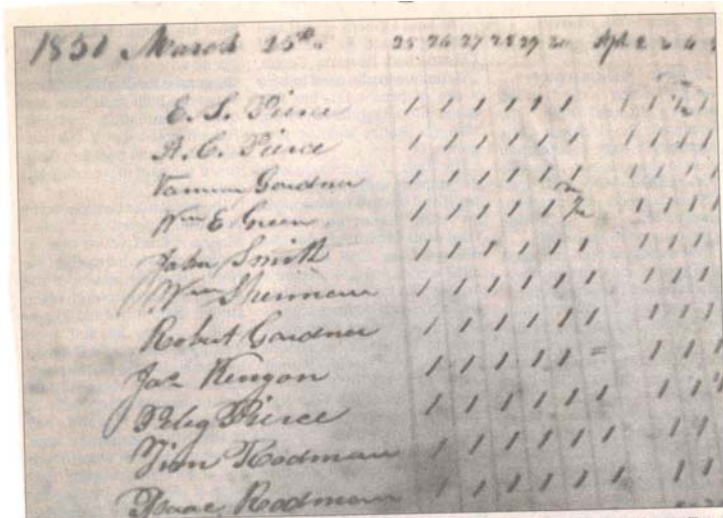


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH
 This paybook, which lists names and hours of employees at the old Narragansett Mill, was found during a renovation of a West Allenton home and later donated to the South County Room at North Kingstown Free Library.

All this said and done, all we have now of the old Narragansett Mill is the mill owner's home, a couple of millworkers houses, and the remains of the millpond located at the intersection of Tower Hill Road and Daniel Drive. The long forgotten mill building itself occupied the site now taken up by Raze's Motorcycles. No photographs of the mill are known to exist and little was known of

what went on there. Little, that is, until now. Now, thanks to one man's generosity, a researcher like myself can tell exactly how many souls labored there and even who they were. The ledger tells us in great detail how much cloth was produced in each quarter and what costs were associated with its manufacture. A cursory look at the names of the many men who toiled in this mill lead me to believe that local African Americans, the descendants of slaves from nearby plantations were employed here along side their neighbors. One can even calculate these folks hourly pay rates from the information presented in the ledger. All this from only an hour's examination. There is still much to be gleaned from this one ledger.

So therefore, I, the self-proclaimed spokesman for Swamp Yankees of every ilk, the self-appointed guardian of our fair town's history, on this the publication of my 200th column do hereby issue this edict; All of you out there who possess little pieces of what made North Kingstown what it is, please think about those photographs, scrapbooks, and letters, and ledgers in terms of what they really are. These artifacts are a legacy

left to us by those who have gone before us. They tell a story that those folks can not. Lets all come up with a way to share these precious gifts with our fellow citizens.

Printed in the North East Independent 2/13/03



PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

Covered in snow, the remnants of a millpond that once fed the old Narragansett Mill stands on the corner of Daniel Drive and Tower Hill Road.

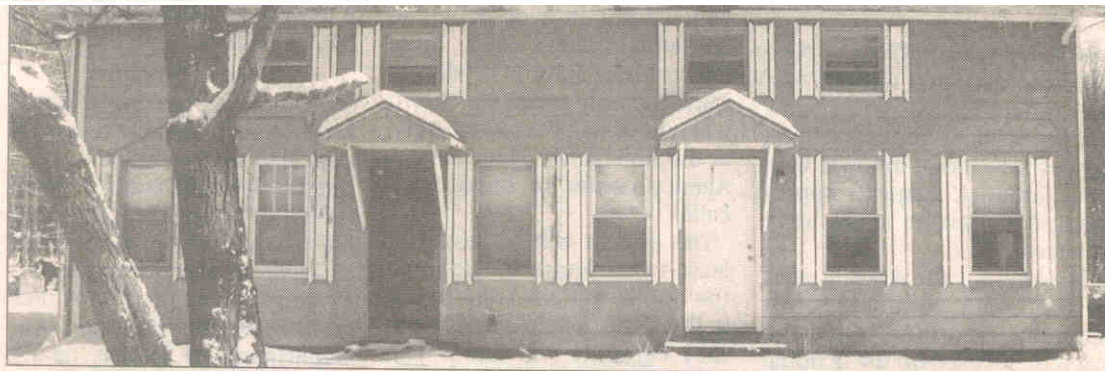


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

This duplex on Tower Hill Road likely once housed mill workers employed at the Narragansett Mill.

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Hamilton Web Company

The year 1978 marked the official end of the era of fabric milling in North Kingstown. What had begun nearly two hundred years earlier, in the late 1790's, upstream on the same Shewatuck/Annaquatucket River system, ended with the 1978 closure of the Hamilton Web Mill. The site of our fair town's last fabric mill, had a history going back well beyond Samuel Slater's innovative techniques born in Pawtucket and quickly utilized here in town. Milling of some sort or another occurred on this site from 1686 continuously through 1978. Few industrial sites can claim such a record. From the beginnings in the late 17th century through til around 1838 Bissell Cove hosted a series of grist, wheat, corn, snuff, iron, and fulling mills. In that year 1838, the first cotton yarn mill was constructed and run by John Slocum and Ezra Gardiner. This small 30' X 46' mill building is still extant on the site, which also includes 1850's, 1860's and 1888 era additions. By 1847 the mill was known as Bissell's Mills Estate and run by Joseph and Albert Sanford. The next owner in this line of "Who's Who" of local mill owners was the seemingly ever-present Syria Vaughn a man who had his hand in a little bit of everything and who is credited with creating the narrow web fabric industry in this area. He purchased the Bissell Mill in 1850 and renamed it, "The Hamilton Web Co." in honor of the family of his wife Louise Hamilton. Vaughn took on a partner, Joseph Warren Greene, in 1866 who purchased his half share in the business for his son James to run. In 1873 wheeler-dealer businessman Syria Vaughn sold out his share to the Greene family, and they took over complete control of the business. Joseph Warren Greene incorporated the business in 1885 keeping the name his former partner had come up with.

The Greene family's connection with the mill spanned four generations and 85 years. From the 1866 purchase until its sale in 1951 to the Sheinman Family and their Raycrest Mills group, the Greene's and Hamilton Web were inseparable. At its peak, before WWII, the mill ran 3,072 spinning spindles and 1,248 twister spindles for yarn manufacture as well as hundreds of narrow fabric looms. Along with the mill itself, the

nearby mill village of Hamilton was a completely self sustained community needing only the bales of raw cotton brought in on the company docks to survive. Neither two great wars nor the blizzard of 1938 stopped production at the mill. When the menfolk went off to fight the wars the women stepped in and kept the mills running. The accompanying photograph showing the workers of the mill is from that time frame. The 1951 sale of the business really marked the beginning of the end for fabric milling in North Kingstown. Shortly after this sale, the Rodman family milling empire was liquidated at auction. One by one, the other mills slowly closed, as the town lost the critical mass necessary to sustain a fabric industry. Many of the wonderful mill buildings themselves were either burned down or demolished. We are lucky that some survived including the mill complex named after Louise Hamilton, which is easily the most the most impressive of those that remain. It along with its sister buildings the Rodman Mill on Ten Rod Rd., the Shady Lea Mill down the coast, and the Gregory Mill in Wickford remind us of what our fair town once was and where our roots extend to.



Conspicuously absent from the above picture of Hamilton Web mill workers are the young and middle-aged men who entered the service during World War II and were replaced by these folks at the looms. Can anyone help identify these people? Below, the village of Hamilton and its mill complex are seen from the air in the 1940s.

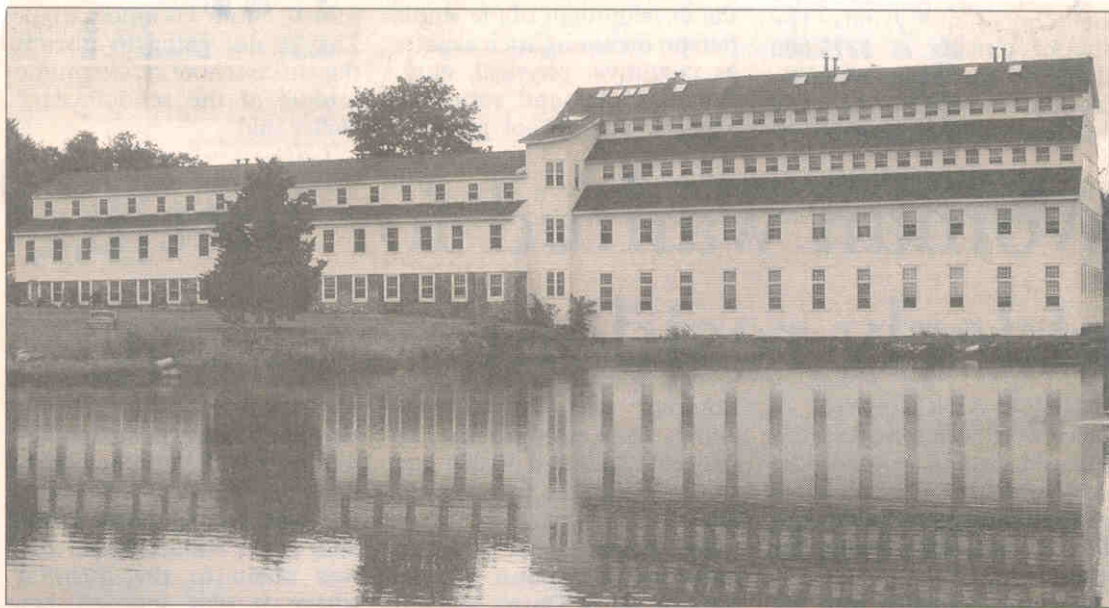


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

The old Hamilton Web Co. mill is seen as it stands today.

Printed in the North East Independent 9/05/02

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Rome Point Boxwood Tree

It's not often that a story about an ancient landscape planting with a long and storied North Kingstown history can lead us to a tale about powerful men, "Boss Politics", and corruption in our capitol city. But this is just the case with the story of the Rome Point Boxwood; and it's a tale I can't resist passing on

Our story begins, amazingly enough, back in the 1760's, when a London based business agent here in the Colonies collecting monies due his English employers bought the "Gentleman's Farm" of a financially desperate fellow English businessman Henry Collins. Collins' firm, a rope manufacturer called Collins and Flagg, had just gone "belly- up" after speculating in the often profitable but always dangerous trade of privateering. The savvy business agent's name was George Rome; he too, dabbled in other ventures, but his choice, the Whale-fishery industry had made him wealthy. The farm he purchased, at a fire sale price, from Collins, was a 900 acre spread along the shoreline of "The Narragansett country". He called it, his country estate, we all know it now as Rome Point.

The story of Rome's estate has already been described in a column written way back in 1999, so I won't go into great detail on it here; its enough to point out that the place was so remarkable that the story of it has passed over that shadowy line which separates simple stories from legends. Part and parcel of that legend is that Rome desired to have the finest gardens in all of New England, with this in mind he had many rare specimen-quality landscape plantings shipped over from England. Among these were a number of fine English Boxwood Trees.

These trees were planted in Rome's formal gardens sometime during the late 1760's. Presumably they flourished and prospered through a time when their owner did not. George Rome was an ardent Tory, a supporter of the King; and he was jailed, had his estate seized, and was expelled from the fledgling nation. His estate was purchased at auction by John Carter Brown and quickly resold to Judge Ezelcial Gardiner, a man who

was on his way to having the largest and most prosperous dairy farm complex in all of southern New England. By 1780, the gentleman's farm and its English Boxwoods were the centerpiece of the Gardiner family empire.

The Gardiners owned "Rome Farm" for generations, from 1780 to 1853. During that time, I expect, much of George Rome's original formal gardens faded into the more common landscape of a working farm. One of the boxwoods, however, survived and was approaching 100 years old when the farm was sold to another prominent North Kingstown family, that of David Greene and his son Reynolds.

Sometime towards the end of the lifetime of Reynolds Greene, a friend and neighbor of his, John Browning of Plum Beach, took an immense liking to the now 130- year-old Boxwood. Henry Collins and George Rome's manor house had recently been destroyed by fire, the Greene's had rebuilt elsewhere on the property and the venerable old boxwood was out of place adjacent to the ruins of the old homestead. Browning purchased the tree and had it moved to his Plum Beach home.

By 1905, the boxwood was 140 years old, and was still thriving on the Browning place in Plum Beach. The house was now the property of Frank Gardiner, and Mr. Gardiner had just had an interesting proposition floated his way. It seems that none other than the famed landscape architect Fredrick Olmstead knew of his boxwood, Olmstead had designed the landscaping for the US Capital among others, and even more amazing, the self-proclaimed "Boss of Rhode Island" Marsden Perry was the man who desired the fantastic old tree to grace the grounds of his new home, the palatial John Brown House on Power Street in Providence.

Now this is where the story gets real interesting. Marsden Perry was RI's ultimate power broker. No one before or since his reign over the Ocean State can compare. To get a feel for Perry take Buddy Cianci and multiply his drive and desire exponentially — then double that and you're, perhaps, half way to understanding the all-consuming passions that motivated Perry to literally consume the power base in "Little

Rhody". His life was rooted in humble origins in nearby Rehoboth Ma. He started out in the business world as an assistant at a pawnbrokers shop in Providence. A few decades later he owned a number of manufacturing concerns, The Union Trust Company in Providence (forerunner of Fleet Bank), Fall River Electric, Narragansett Electric, the forerunner of Providence Gas Co. and virtually every trolley and Electric Railway system in RI. He was also the Director and Chairman of the Board of Norfolk Southern Railroad, and a Director of General Electric, Nicholson File, and American Screw Company. He often boasted how he made sure that everyone banked with him by making certain that every trolley car stopped in front of his bank at the corner of Dorrance and Westminster Streets. He said he would bring all of RI to the Union Trust's doorstep. This is the basis for today's Kennedy Plaza in Providence. The "Boss of Rhode Island's" close friend and business partner was none other than U.S. Senator Nelson Aldrich who was dubbed the "General Manager of the U.S." and whose daughter was married into the Rockefeller family. With Perry virtually owning all local utilities and transportation and Aldrich running the U.S. Senate and being closely tied to Rockefeller big oil, these gentlemen **always got what they wanted.**

This brings us back to our humble but ancient North Kingstown boxwood tree. You see, the only place that Perry failed was in his attempts to fit into Providence and Newport high society. As you can imagine the refined blue-blood old moneyed folks of these cities thought Perry's rapacious personality and vast amounts of "new money" were crass and intolerable. Constantly snubbed by the Newport elite and the old-money Brown's of Providence, he sought to join their rarified group the only way he knew. He'd win them over by the sheer force of his will and an incredible ostentatious show of good taste. When the Brown Mansion came on the market in 1901 he beat the blue-bloods to the draw and scooped it up. He then filled it with the finest 18th century English furniture and fine porcelain money could buy. To showcase his culture Perry purchased every piece of Shakespeareana he could get his hands on and eventually became America's premier collector. He also hired Olmstead, the world's top landscape architect to design the grounds of his estate. He coveted every important landscape

planting in the area including the ancient boxwood, which had once coincidentally been owned for a short time by the very family he was so envious of, the Brown's of Providence. No expense was spared to procure the boxwood and move it from Plum Beach to Providence.

It took a crew of landscape specialists two days to excavate around the giant shrub, now 15 feet tall, 30 feet in circumference, and weighing upwards of seven tons root ball included. As seen on the enclosed photo from 1905, they placed it on a heavy-duty wagon and hauled it with a team of six horses to the dock at the end of Main Street in Wickford, where a special crane loaded it onto the deck of the steam lighter "Sagamore" which Perry hired specifically for the trip. The tree was off loaded the next day at the Dyer Wharf on South Main Street in Providence, where the same cart and crew picked it up and hauled it to Perry's Power Street mansion. The whole experience took four days and many tens of thousands of dollars, but it was a success. The old boxwood flourished in its new Providence home. The tree, which was once a symbol of George Rome's importance in the world, was now fulfilling that same function for Marsden Perry.

Perry's reign ended in the 1935 with his death at the age of 85. The boxwood, at 170 years old, had outlived and outlasted him. It survived another decade or so. You see Perry's empire was brought down eventually, by the great depression. In the end, Perry's greatest fears were realized, as his family lost the fantastic mansion, and the boxwood, at auction to, of all people, the Brown's of Providence. They in turn, turned the building over to the RI Historical Society for a museum home. In the middle 1940's, RI Historical decided that Perry's elaborate grounds were too expensive to maintain and it is thought that at that time the nearly 180-year-old boxwood met its end.

This story, although amazing in and of itself, is even more interesting for all the ironic coincidences that populate it. As mentioned, the Brown's owned the tree early in its life when they purchased it at auction in 1780. They owned it again in the same fashion, but a different location 160 years later. It's also interesting to point out that Perry's



PHOTO: COURTESY OF R.I. HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The John Brown mansion in Providence, now owned by the R.I. Historical Society, was the home of Marsden Perry in the early 1900s.

former company Narragansett Electric, eventually owned the Rome farm where the story began. And finally and perhaps most ironically, the only Providence building still formally associated with Marsden Perry, the Marsden Perry Carriage House, was once owned by a certain Providence Mayor, named Buddy, who had great aspirations of his own. Only in Rhode Island.

Printed in the North East Independent 12/12/02



On its way to Providence in 1905, the 7-ton English boxwood tree was transported from Plum Beach to the Wickford docks via a six-horse hitch wagon.

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

Apple Cider Time In Swamptown

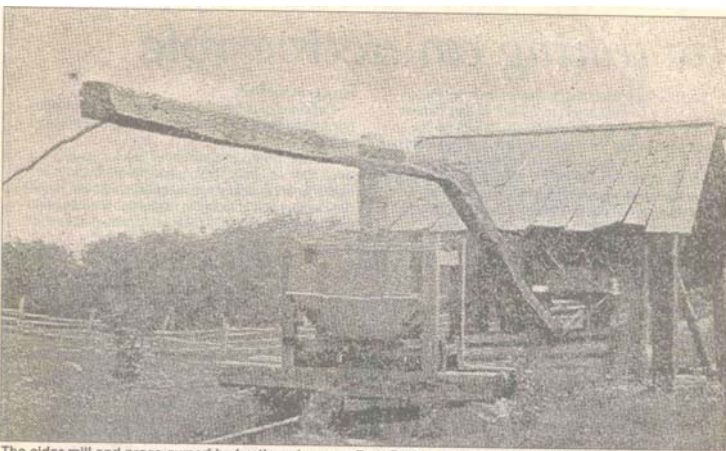
October is the month for apple picking, cider making, changing foliage, and ghosts and goblins. With this in mind, the majority of this month's columns are going to concern themselves with these sorts of topics. This week, we are going to take a look at cider-making out here in Swamptown some one hundred and fifty years ago.

Now, when you're talking about cider-making in Swamptown back in the 1850's, you were talking about "Dow" and "Van's" big cider mill and press, shown here in a picture taken around the late 1890's. Lorenzo Dow Rathbun and Martin Van Buren Rathbun were brothers who ran this cider press, which was situated behind the Rathbun homestead, shown in the accompanying photo, and very close to their respective homes. You see the Rathbun's were Swamptown born and raised, and the whole clan lived on Rathbun land which encircled the family homestead. As a matter of fact the road they all lived on (now Hatchery Rd.) was known simply as the Rathbun branch road off the Swamptown Highway.

Before a Swamptown family could press their apples into cider over at the Rathbun place, they'd be required to gather them all together. The vast majority of the apples used in cider-making are the ones that fell to the ground, known then and now as "drops". The gathering of the drops was a job which required the help of the entire family. Young and old alike would join in and load the drops into barrels or directly into the back of a wagon. This job was not only physically demanding, but also required a small modicum of caution; because as anyone who has had a fruit tree in their yard can tell you, the one thing that goes hand-in-hand with drops are bees and lots of them.

After you've picked up and loaded all your drops, it's off to the Rathbun place,

family in tow, to grind and press them into cider. Once you got there you'd be expected to help Van and Dow load the apples into the grinder, where they were ground into a coarse paste known as "pomace". The grinder, as well as the press, were horse or mule powered. That was where the Rathbun brothers were in control. They ran the animal, as well as gave advice and assisted with the heavy lifting. Once your apples were ground up into pomace they were layered into the big press with clean straw until it was full. One of the Rathbun boys would then hitch his horse or mule up to the bent end of the big beam which sat atop the big screw and slowly turn it around until the cider started flowing into the two troughs on either side of the press. From the troughs, the cider was drained off into tubs or pails and then transferred into jugs or barrels which you would have had to bring with you. All the while this was going on, bees would be buzzing around and the younguns would be sipping cider straight out of the troughs through long hollow lengths of straw as was the tradition. This process would be repeated again and again until all of the pomace made from your apples was pressed out. When all was said and done, you'd load your cider, minus a predetermined percentage called the "tole" which would belong to the Rathbuns, into your wagon and head home. Why, the sun would certainly be setting by now.

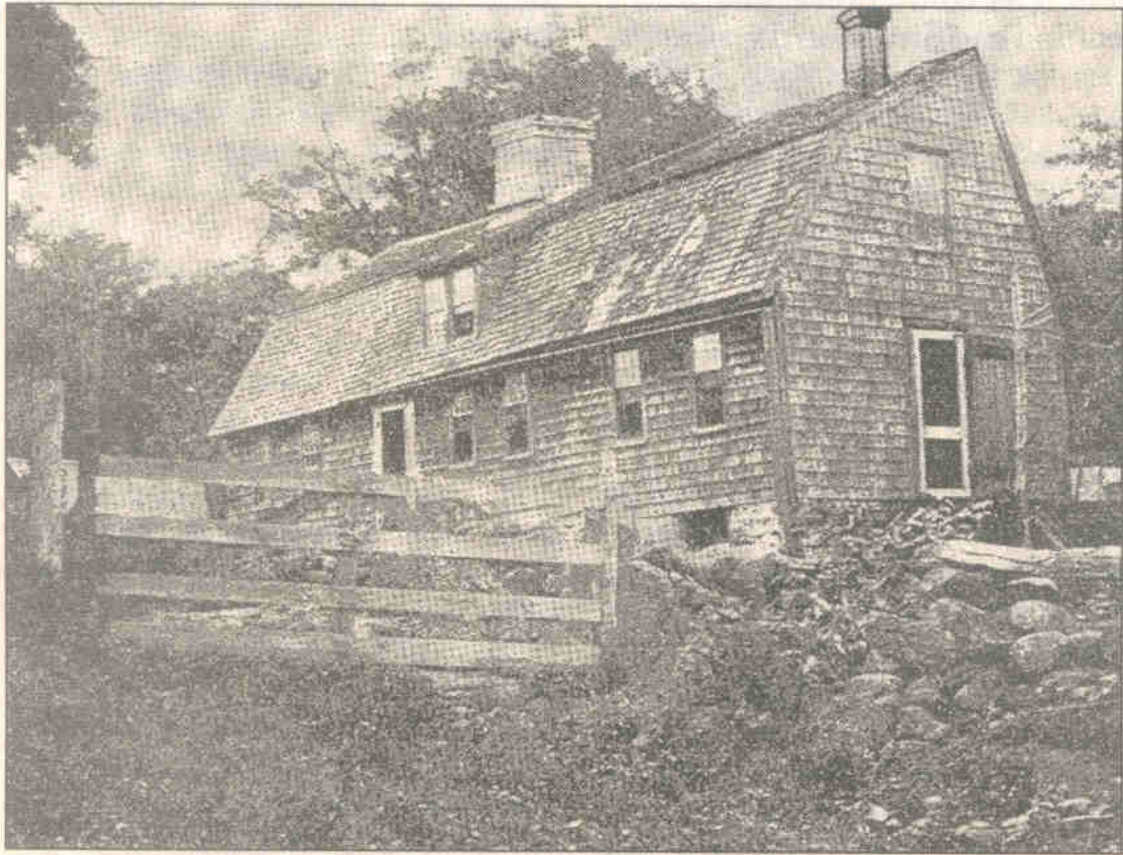


The cider mill and press owned by brothers Lorenzo Dow Rathbun and Martin Van Buren Rathbun was used by the whole community of Swamptown each fall. This picture was taken around 1900.

Cider was an important commodity back in those times. It, like cheese, smoked and dried meats and fish, and the many root crops "kept" well in the family root cellar. Without vital vittles like these, a family would have a hard

time lasting out a long cold Swamptown winter. Besides, once cider started to

turn, it would become "hard"; also known as apple jack, and that too, helped backwoods boys like Dow and Van make it through the long cold season to come. Printed in the North East Independent 10/04/01



The Rathbun homestead is the oldest of the Rathbun houses in Swamptown, dating to the early 1700s. This picture was taken around 1900 and the home burned to the ground in 1946.

The View Frow Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston
The Slocumville Baptist/Adventist Church

The good Baptist folk of the farming communities of Slocumville (now known simply as Slocum) and southern Exeter were in a bind by the late 1800s. They were determined to practice their faith as they saw fit, but were tired of having to make the time-consuming trek either south into Allenton or north into Exeter to attend services. In 1880 they banded together with their Baptist brethren in the nearby little community of Yawgoog to form the Yawgoog Union congregation and Sunday School. But by early 1886 this proved unfeasible and was disbanded. Undeterred, they continued to meet in the upstairs rooms of a tenement house owned by local Baptist stalwart William Tisdale. At about the same time they petitioned the predominant Baptist congregation of the region, the Allenton Baptist Church, for the assignment of permanent preacher and began construction of a Baptist Meetinghouse on Railroad Avenue. This Church, which was more centrally located than the Yawgoog venture, opened its doors at a dedication service in 1887 and was served by the Pastor of the Allenton Church, Rev. Francis Purvis. In the spring of 1888 Rev. Purvis was replaced at Allenton and became the full time preacher in Slocumville; although he also ministered to another small growing Baptist community at a meeting house in Narragansett.

By 1895, the little meeting house was deemed too small for the needs of the congregation in Slocumville. It was then sold to a Seventh Day Adventist Congregation which was beginning to stake out a foothold in the local community. The Baptist congregation, in turn, relocated to a new and larger meetinghouse near the site of the present day Slocum Grange Hall. Sadly, this Church building burned in recent years and was not rebuilt. Back at the old Meetinghouse, the growing Adventist community had put down roots that obviously ran deep, as the small, but vital group of Adventists used the Church for some sixty-five more years until they relocated to their present location

on Post Road, in 1960. The little meetinghouse was, for a time, used by the local community as a meeting place for Boy and Girl Scouts and the like, but it wasn't long before the doors closed for the last time and it ended its nearly one hundred years of service to the good people of Slocum.

The Church those good people of Slocumville dedicated on that autumn morning in 1887 is still standing today. It is a classic example of a traditional Baptist Meetinghouse and exhibits the clean simple lines which are so typical of this type of church. This same style is also evident in the design of the earlier Six-Principal Baptist Church at the intersections of Stony Lane and Old Baptist Road. Although it has been vacant for many years its structural integrity has been maintained by its present owners who eventually intend to incorporate it into their home, which is also on the existing it in Slocum. This, rather than demolition, is a much more fitting fate for this little building which served as a home for two different congregations of Slocum residents.

Printed in the North East Independent 5/03/01

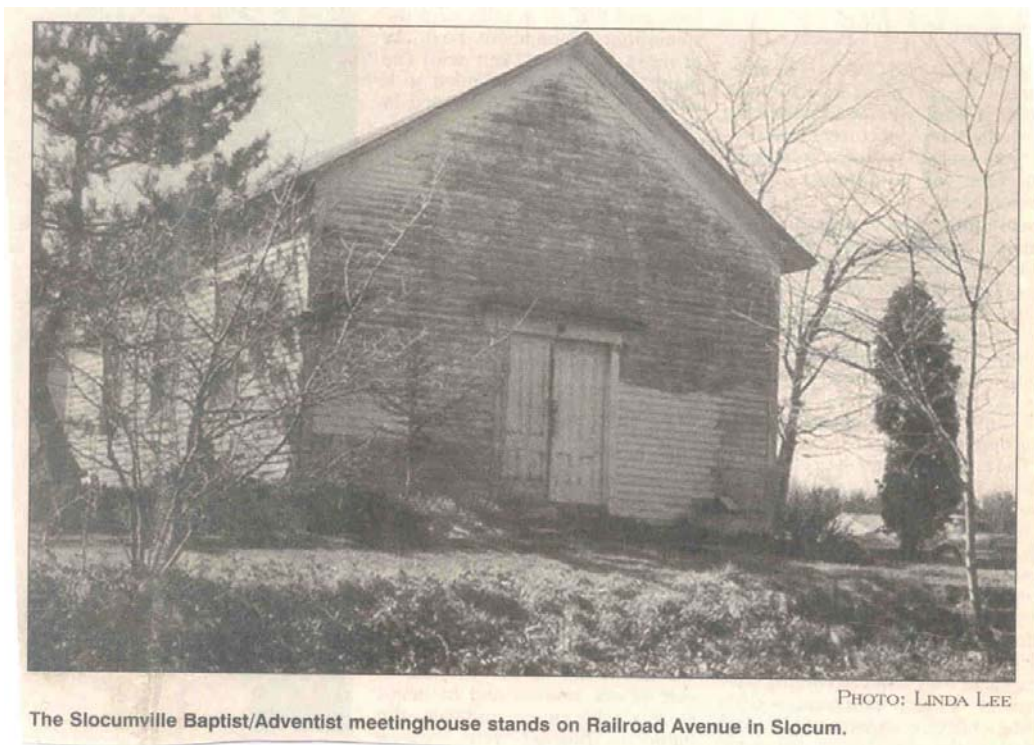


PHOTO: LINDA LEE

The Slocumville Baptist/Adventist meetinghouse stands on Railroad Avenue in Slocum.

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Governor Charles Jackson House

Out on the edge of Slocum, a stone's throw from Exeter, on the North Kingstown end of Liberty Road, sits the charming center-chimneyed farmhouse which is shown in the accompanying photograph. Although, seemingly unassuming, it played a part in one of the most dramatic episodes in Rhode Island history. For it was to here that Governor Charles Jackson retreated to escape the backlash brought upon him by his pardon of the then (depending upon which side you were on) both famous and notorious Thomas W. Dorr; the leader of the Dorr Rebellion in 1842.

Ah - the Dorr Rebellion, its one of those things that every Rhode Islander has heard of, but few really have an idea of what its all about and the extraordinary importance that it holds to the history of our little state. Here's the "Reader's Digest" version of the rebellion to bring us all up to speed. Prior to 1842, the government of RI was run under the auspices of the Royal Charter of 1663. This remarkable instrument of governance was unique in the wide range of personal, political, and religious freedoms it afforded the members of the colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations. It was also unique within colonial New England, in that it allowed Rhode Islanders to elect their own governor, rather than being ruled by a Royal appointee. Suffrage, or the right to vote" for that government was granted to unindentured white males who owned land worth the equivalent of \$134, a princely sum (and a pretty sizeable chunk of land) at that time. This worked out fairly well through the colonial period, but upon the advent of Industrial Revolution and the rapid, almost explosive expansion of the fabric milling industry in the state, there were too many people who worked hard in the mills, but rented a home or lived in mill housing and therefore by state law were denied the basic right to vote that common workers in most other states already enjoyed. To compound

this problem, due to the fairly large chunk of land needed to meet the minimum sum required it was even more difficult for a city dweller, where lots were small, to reach the voting threshold, and voting power was therefore slanted towards the more rural southern and western portions of the state. When all was said and done, approximately 1800 land owning voters, mostly concentrated in these rural areas, controlled the destiny of a state of 108,000 souls. These basic inequities were noted by, among others, young Providence lawyer and state legislator, Thomas Wilson Dorr. Dorr led the call for a Constitutional Convention, which was held in October of 1841; at that time a new constitution was framed and, later adopted in January of 1842. In April of the same year an "election" was held under the auspices of the new Constitution and with every man allotted one vote, whether he be a landowner or not, Thomas Dorr was elected in a landslide. The problem here was that all this was done without the approval or cooperation of the duly elected state legislators, as well as outside of the guidelines in the Royal Charter. So while the "Dorrites", as they were now known, were having their election, the landowning "Freeman" were having the real state sanctioned one and Dorr was not the winner. Re-elected Governor Samuel King was plenty ticked off when Dorr and his "Dorrites" attempted to seize the State House and the State Arsenal. With legislative approval, he declared martial law and set out to put down the rebellion and arrest their up-start leader, Thomas Dorr. The rebellion was quenched, with much violence and uproar, on Acote's Hill in Chepachet; and Dorr, who had fled to Connecticut in fear for his life, was arrested when he surrendered to state authorities upon his return. He was tried for treason and given a life sentence. Although he was indeed branded a traitor and cast into prison, his movement and the subsequent popular uprising had put the fear of God into the legislators and in that very same year, probably fearing for both their political and actual lives, a new Constitution was drafted and adopted at the State House in East Greenwich; it was remarkably similar to Dorr's own version. Finally, through the vision and sacrifice of Dorr, the common man in Rhode Island was guaranteed the right to vote.

This is where Charles Jackson enters the story. He was elected Governor in 1845 by the slimmest of margins (149 votes). He was a Providence native and had a fine home on Benefit Street. But through his marriage to his second wife, Pheobe Tisdale, he came into possession of the 100 acre Liberty Road farm; it was his retreat from the city. He would eventually need it more than he could imagine. Jackson, a lawyer, banker, and mill owner was known to be an honest man and a noteworthy orator. The Brown educated son of the first president of the Providence-Washington



Gov. Charles Jackson

Insurance Company knew what was right and what was wrong. He realized that to hold Dorr in jail for the "treasonable act" of bringing the vote to all Rhode Islanders was as wrong as it could be. He also knew that doing the "right" thing was political suicide, as the landowners still ran the show behind the scenes. But right was right and in 1845 Jackson gave Dorr a full pardon. He was not

re-elected and spent much of his remaining years on the Liberty Road farm contemplating his ultimate legacy. He died in his Benefit Street home in 1876, having outlived Dorr by 22 years.



PHOTOS: LINDA LEE

Above and below are two outbuildings on the Gov. Jackson Farm in Slocum.



So, if you ever have an opportunity to take a ride down scenic Liberty Road out in Slocum, peer through the trees and try to spy the Governor's old farmhouse. As I do, I can't help but stop and think about the momentous times that occurred way back then and I view this place as the "eye in the storm" for a brave and principled man.

Printed in the North East Independent 4/19/01

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Story Behind the Quidnessett Country Club and Scalabrini Villa

Somewhere around the middle of the 1800s, wealthy Providence mill owner and shipping magnate Crawford Allen, was looking for a "Gentleman's Farm" type of estate at which to spend his summer months and escape the steamy heat of the capital city. After a long search he settled upon the then 100 year old Wightman Farm on the shore of the Narragansett Bay in the North Quidnessett section of our fair town. The farm, which encompassed hundreds of acres and included a two-and-one-half story central chimneyed farmhouse, had been in the Wightman family from the very beginning. The original Wightman, George Wightman had settled in the Quidnessett region as early as 1660. He was the younger brother of a Wightman who worked as an Indian interpreter for Roger Williams. George had also married well. His wife was Elizabeth Updike of Wickford's Cocumscussoc. The Wightmans, on the whole, were successful farmers and businessmen and there are many historic homes all across Quidnessett to this day, with Wightman connections, to attest to this fact.

The large, but simple, farmhouse was a fixer-upper in Crawford Allen's eyes. To bring it up to snuff, he added a dynamic array of mansard roofs, towers, turrets, bays, and porches. The interior was completely redone in a style befitting Allen's station and wings were added for the entertaining of guests. This simple farmhouse, in the end, looked, not unlike a castle.

About a decade later, Crawford Allen's daughter, married John Carter Brown in a wedding which joined Providence's two first families together. The new Mrs. Brown evidently enjoyed her time in Quidnessett, because in 1872, her husband was building them their own summer home on a portion of the Allen estate just north of the home of her parents. The John Carter Brown Estate House was,

like his father-in-law's home, closer to a castle than a house. It is constructed of brick and is a three story affair with an interesting convex mansard roof and a sun porch which rivals anything in the state. The interior of the home was decorated in a Japanese inspired style and the estate included a carriage house which mirrored the main house in its exterior accoutrements.

The two houses have had interesting histories since they were originally "connected" by the marriage of the Allens and the Browns. The Allen Estate was later owned by Walter Hanley, the owner and president of the Narragansett Brewery. He purchased it because his passion (other than "Hi Neighbor, have a 'Gansett") was horses and here he had enough space to build a large riding stable and an indoor (yes, indoor) quarter mile horse track. Hanley sold the place to C. Prescott Knight, another big time mill owner and another horse lover. Knight's passion, though, was polo ponies and he had a number of buildings constructed to support that hobby, as well as a polo field. Knight hired famed local architect Norman Isham to redo the house to fit his needs in a world more modern than that of the Allens. By this time, the Allen/Hanley/Knight farm was considered the most impressive and important gentleman's farm in the region.

The Brown Estate has had a different sort of history. It stayed in the Brown family until 1907, when the ever beneficent and philanthropic Browns donated it and 100 acres to the Rhode Island Hospital to be used as a summer camp for crippled children. Fifty years later, it was acquired by a Catholic order of priests, the Society of Saint Charles, and transformed into a nursing home. Forty-five years later, it is still a part of the Scalabrini Villa Nursing Home Complex and is thankfully, still a wonder to behold. It stands as a testimony to a bygone time as well as a generous family. The condition of the main house would still bring a smile to the lips of Mrs. John Carter Brown could she see it today.

Sadly, the same cannot be said for Crawford Allen. If he could see his old

summer home he wouldn't even recognize it. After a tragic 1978 fire which decimated the stately home of many a Rhode Island powerbroker, the present owners, the Quidnessett Country Club elected to rebuild it in a way which took no consideration of its importance in a historic sense. The building, although big, is no longer grand. It will never take anyone's breath away again. And for men like Crawford Allen, Walter Hanley, and Prescott Knight that's the ultimate insult.



The main house of the Allen/Hanley/Knight Farm is seen above just before it was acquired by the Quidnessett Country Club. Below is the Quidnessett Country Club as it stands today, rebuilt after a fire.



Above, the John Carter Brown Estate today is best known as Scalabrini Villa. Below is the property's carriage house.



After a tragic 1978 fire that deci-

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Wightman Homestead

In my branch of the Cranston family the name George is so common it gets down right confusing. My oldest son, as a matter of fact, is the sixth George in succession dating back to the original George Tillinghast Cranston, the famed Swamptown Merchant, Civil War hero, and State Senator. But we Cranstons don't hold a candle to the Wightman family of our fair town's Quidnessett section; who have taken the use of name George to an almost religious level. In the Wightman family plot alone, adjacent to the Wightman Homestead, there is a memorial boulder detailing the life and death of ten generations of George Wightmans. If you thumb through the index of the three volume Wightman Genealogy you would find two full pages of George Wightmans listed there. The Wightmans are truly serious about their George's.

Ownership of the land that the Wightman Homestead sets upon can be traced all the way back to 1660, when Valentine Wightman, the older brother of the very first George, purchased the land from Sir Humphrey Atherton, Rhode Island's very first real estate mogul. Valentine had been in these parts for quite a time, as he is noted in the historic record as a Narragansett and Wampanoag interpreter who worked primarily with Roger Williams. In May of 1682 Valentine sold his Quidnessett holdings to younger brother George, who had recently married a young lass he had met through this same brother. George's marriage to Elizabeth Updike, granddaughter of Richard Smith of Smith's Castle fame, joined together two of the most prominent families in all of the colony. The Updike's owned 2000 acres or more centered around Cocumscussoc and George and his bride owned another 2000 acres spread between Quidnessett, Exeter, and Westerly. The Wightman Homestead was the centerpiece of this empire.

The house as it is seen today, is a sum of many parts. A small portion on the southeastern side of the building traces all the way back to the 1690's. The main portion of the house, with its period paneling, inverted Y-stacked chimney with chimney breasts and a built in corner cabinet, and narrow sash windows is typical of early

18th century construction, while the big addition appears to be middle 19th century in style and composition. The house remained in the Wightman family for more than two hundred years, but after this the land's record of ownership becomes complicated and convoluted with various portions of the farm often being encompassed in other large Quidnessett landholdings. For example, in 1905 a land division went right through the house itself, with Isaac Goff of the Mount View farm owning the western half and Nathan and Mary Waldron of nearby Waldron Farm owning the eastern side. In 1925 the whole parcel was reunited under one owner, Joseph Fletcher (for whom Fletcher Road was named) who ran it as Cedar Crest Farm. Cedar Crest Farm was styled as "the only harness horsebreeding operation in the region" and eventually was incorporated into the Knight Farm which was centered around the land that is now the Quidnessett Country Club. By the 1950's the land was owned by the Swanson family and was called Swanholme. The Swanson's ran it as a dairy farm until the middle 1980's, making it one of the few farms in the region in continuous agricultural production for more than three centuries.



PHOTO: DANIEL G. DUNN

The Wightman homestead in North Quidnessett saw several additions and changes over the years.

The old farm is now just another housing development centered around Capt. John Wightman Lane (why its not called George Wightman Lane is beyond me.). But once it was home to generation upon generation of Wightmans, a family whose roots extend back to a man named Valentine who had the marvelous ability to be able to talk with the native people of the Narragansett lands.

Printed in the North East Independent 7/18/02



PHOTO: DANIEL G. DUNN

This monument in the family cemetery lists 10 generations of George Wightmans.

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Reynolds Homestead

Out on Essex Road, up in the north end of town, there's a birthday going on. You see, the big two-and-one-half story, central-chimneyed Federal style farmhouse at 256 Essex is two hundred years old. William Reynolds built the big house, with its arched fanlight doorway, in 1802. It was not the first home on this spot though. The first was built before 1664 by the very first Reynolds family to call North Kingstown home. The Reynolds were among the most prominent and prolific families to ever call North Kingstown home. There are more Reynolds buried within the confines of our fair town than any other family. The progenitors of this remarkable clan, James and Deborah Reynolds, were early Quaker settlers of the Quidnessett area and were among the first folks to live in our fair town. That home did not survive long. It, like every other settler's home south of the settlement of Warwick, was burned by the Wampanoags and Narragansetts in retaliation for the massacre at the Great Swamp.

By 1676, the Reynolds had rebuilt their Quidnessett home, using the surviving timbers from the remains of the pre-King Philip War home. This supposition is supported by actual physical evidence gleaned from the still extant home; now known as the Jabez Reynolds House (named after one of the Tory sympathizer who betrayed old Judge John Allen to the British) and found on nearby Austin Road. The old homestead was moved to its Austin Road home by William Reynolds so he might build the big Federal farmhouse for his wife Elizabeth (Bowen) Reynolds. The Reynolds farm included much of the land north of what we know call Essex Road. One of the farm's barns can still be found behind the home. A Reynolds descendant lived on this parcel of land for more than 350 years continuously, a feat that is rarely accomplished.

So that brings us to the present and the 200th anniversary of the home that William built for his wife Elizabeth. It still stands there, silent and proud, having seen changes in its

two hundred years, the likes of which William and Elizabeth could have never imagined. I expect it, and its older Austin Road predecessor, will be there one hundred years from now as well; a monument to a family founded by a humble Quaker couple with a dream.



PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

Built in 1802 for William Reynolds' wife Elizabeth, the Reynolds homestead originally was part of the family farm that occupied much of the land north of Essex Road.



The Jabez Reynolds House on Austin Road, moved to this location around 1802, actually was the second home to sit on the site of the family's original homestead on nearby Essex Road. It contains timbers from the original house burned by Native Americans after the Great Swamp Massacre of 1675.

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Davisville/Quidnessett Grange

With the resurgence of the popularity of the Grange in our fair town (the Slocum Grange having become a vibrant and active community partner in that grand old farming village as well as the entire town), and the up-and-coming 115th anniversary of the "National Grange of the Patrons of Husbandry" (the organization's original official name) in "Little Rhody"; it's an opportune time to take a gander at RI's first Grange Hall.

Rhode Island's first Grange Hall was organized, chartered, and built by prominent members of the neighboring farming communities of Davisville and Quidnessett. The list of founding members reads like a "Who's Who" of local farming and includes members of the Reynolds, Mathewson, Sherman, Aylesworth, Young, Vaughn, Matteson, Essex, Pearce, Allen, Pierce, Bailey, Hart, and Johnson clans. These folks all got together at Allen Reynolds home on Devils Foot Rd. in October of 1887 and, after listening to a presentation from a Massachusetts Grange official, joined up and started a chapter. They met one month later at the home of William Allen and decided to build a hall. These folks, like farming people all across New England, didn't kid around; when they said they were going to do something they didn't have meetings and study on it a while, they just did it. By the middle of the next month, land had been donated by John Essex, just across from the Quidnessett Baptist Church where many were members, all wagon owning members had met and proceeded parade-style up to the lumberyard in E. Greenwich, loaded the needed materials and hauled them to the site. Finally, the place was put up barn-raisin' style in a few weeks at a total cost of \$1,422. The Davisville Grange was born.

The land itself; was leased to the Grange by Mr. Essex (The town would later name nearby Essex Rd. in honor of this family) for \$1.00 a year. This arrangement went on until 1909, when the land and the building itself were sold to William Essex. The deed of transfer forbade "intoxicating beverages dancing...or immoral,unlawful,or obnoxious games or business." Also around this time, the Grange reorganized (a nasty

feud was part and parcel to this event) and renamed itself "The Quidnessett Grange". Things went on uneventfully (with the exception of countless fairs, exhibits, clambakes, theatrical presentations {a rousing presentation of "Aaron Slick from Punkin' Crick" brought the house down from E. Greenwich to Shannock in 1923), speeches, dances, and spelling bees) until 1996 when the Quidnessett Grange closed its doors for good; transferring its still active members to the aforementioned Slocum Chapter. The building though, still serves the community that created it. It now belongs to the Quidnessett Baptist Church, the very organization that nurtured it through its early years, and functions as a Youth Center.

Many thanks to George Loxton who graciously allowed me to use information from his wonderful book "Davisville, RI in the writing of this column. The book gets the "Swamptown Seal of Approval" and ought to be on every serious student of local history's shelf.



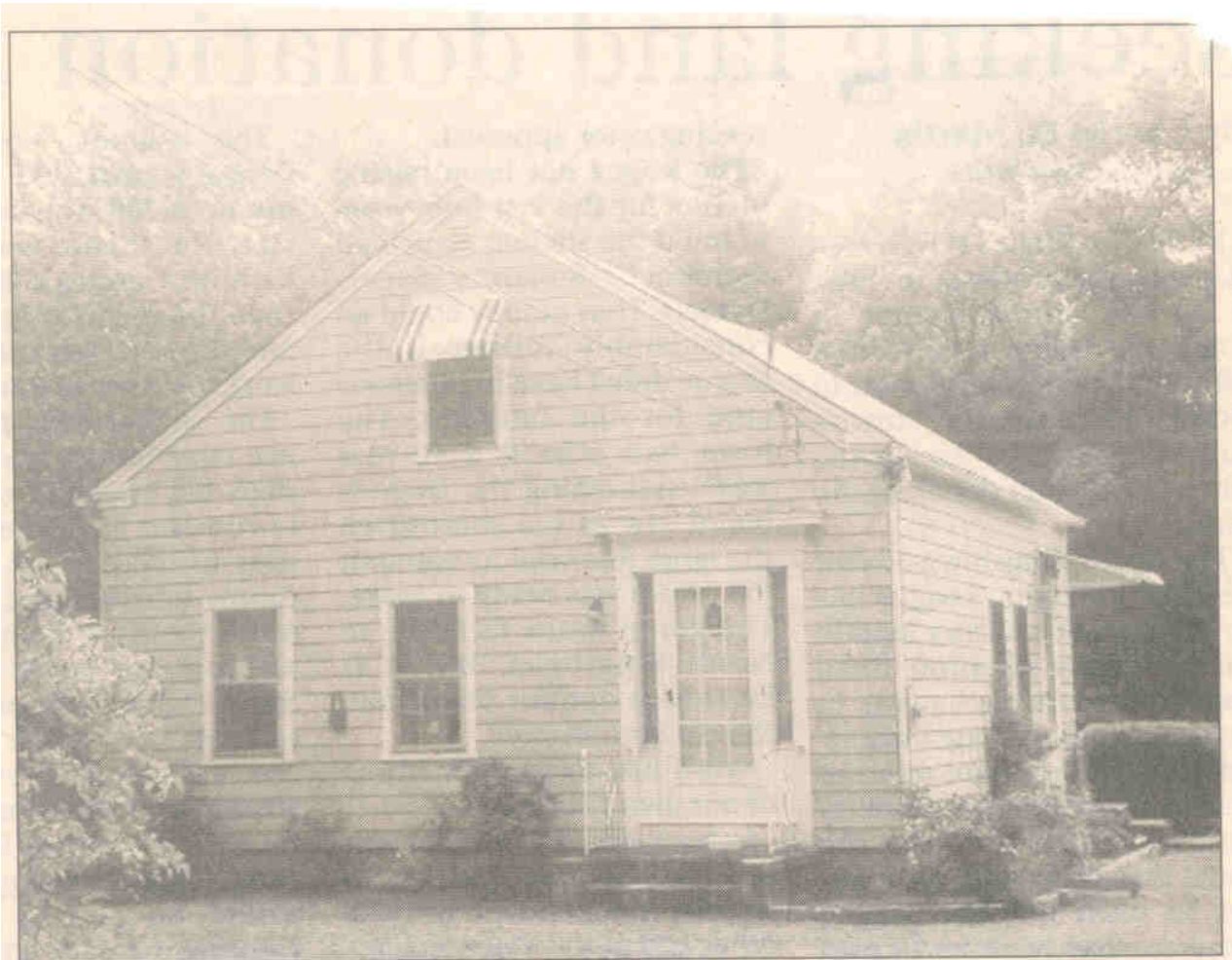
The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The First Baptist Church of Quidnessett Neck

Driving by the little end-gabled one story house at 772 Fletcher Road, you'd never imagine what an important part the little cottage played in the history of the area. There's nothing particularly fancy about it. It's Greek Revival doorway with attached sidelights might seem a tad out of place, but not enough to make anyone stop and take notice. If you were to take out a map of North Kingstown and note it's location you'd see it sits dead center in the middle of what was once the farming community of Quidnessett. That's not an accident, this little building was sited there for a very particular reason. For in 1830 when it was constructed it was not a private home, it was built to be a Baptist Meeting House. It was known as the Union Baptist Church, as well as the First Baptist Church of Quidnessett Neck. It served its fledgling congregation for twelve years, until its more famous (and much larger) replacement, the Quidnessett Baptist Church on Post Road, was constructed.

The congregation that used the little meeting house had officially been split off from the Allenton Baptist Church just two years earlier in 1828. Brother Joseph Allen was put in charge of the group by the patriarch of the Baptist community in southern Rhode Island, Elder William Northup, and for its first two years they met in Elder Allen's or James Allen's barn. A year or so later another Allen, Deacon George, donated a centrally located piece of land and construction of the meetinghouse was begun. It was finished early on in 1830 for a total cost of \$450. A closer look reveals that the style of the building is remarkably similar to its country cousins, The Stony Lane Six Principle Baptist Church on Stony Lane and The Slocumville Baptist Church on Railroad Avenue in Slocum. The congregation of the Quidnessett Neck Church would often attend communion services with their brethren back in Allenton. Elder Joseph Allen and Deacon George Allen often baptized members in the millponds of Davisville, Potowomut, and Sand Hill villages. As the congregation grew and its population center shifted westerly in a direction that included the community of Davisville, it became clear that a larger church centered between Quidnessett and Davisville, rather than North

Quidnessett and South Quidnessett was required. The donation of a parcel of land on Post Road to the congregation by Samuel Austin was key to the future of the little meeting house on Fletcher Road. Outgrown by her congregation, she has spent the last 160 years as an unassuming little cottage on a quiet country lane. A story just waiting to be told.



The former First Baptist Church of Quidnessett at 772 Fletcher Road is shown as it appears today. Built in 1830, the building became a private home just 12 years later when the growing congregation moved to a new location on Post Road.

Printed in the North East Independent 5/30/02

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Quidnessett Memorial Cemetery's 100th Anniversary

Back around the turn of the century, Mrs. Helen Gay Sweet was contemplated the recent passing of her husband Henry Sweet. She was continually drawn to a wooded area very near to the church where she and her husband, a member of the Sweet family associated with Davisville and the mill operation there, regularly attended. She was quoted to have said, "Very soon after Mr. Sweet's death I never passed a certain spot on my way to church that I did not wish could be the burial place of my husband.... Month by month I came to realize the fitness of the place and the propriety of his lying so near to the church he loved; and finally I never passed the place without wishing it were laid out as a cemetery."

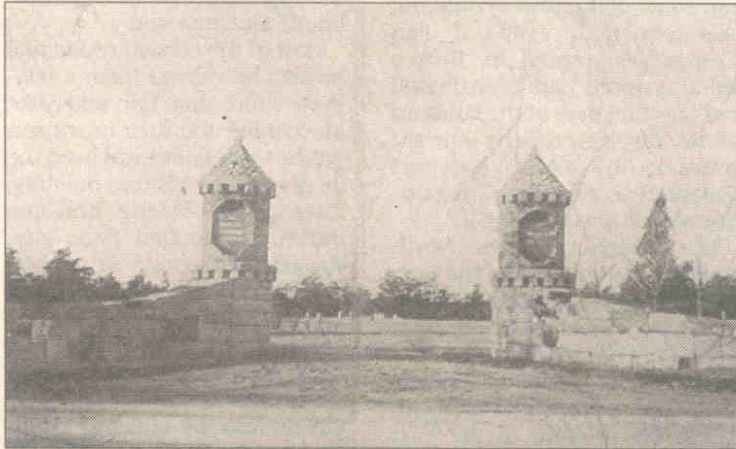
Mrs. Sweet's vision was realized when the Sweet family purchased that piece of land, built the impressive stone walls we see today, and donated it to a newly formed non-profit corporation, the Quidnessett Memorial Cemetery, on April 4, 1902. By 1903 six acres of the cemetery were cleared and platted out. Later that year Helen's second husband the Reverend Francis Bartlett of the nearby church performed the formal dedication ceremony. Nineteen years later, Helen Gay Sweet Bartlett joined Henry at his side in the cemetery she envisioned and brought into being. She was nearly eighty years old.

By 1930, the original six acres were full and the remainder of the Sweet land was carefully cleared and plotted out. In the late 1950's, the adjacent William Francis Farm was purchased and added to the cemetery grounds. The farmhouse has been retained, just north of the cemetery, and has become the home of the full-time caretaker. Bill Francis' Post Road farm stand has been replaced, however, by a continuation of the majestic stone wall which fronts the property. Two small family cemeteries from the colonial era and extant on the farm, The Henry Austin and William Hall lots have been appropriately incorporated into the modern cemetery.

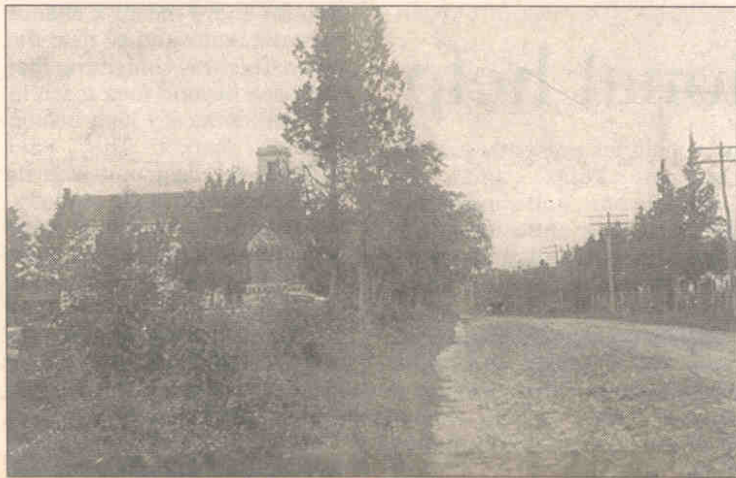


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

The stone pillars and walls of Quidnessett Memorial Cemetery were erected a century ago on land purchased by Helen Gay Sweet in honor of her late husband Henry. Both had attended and loved the nearby church.



Photos from 1905 shows the stone pillars as they looked shortly after they were erected (above) and a view looking north up a dirt Post Road (below).



The beautiful graceful grounds were visualized and developed by two different gentlemen. The first was Thomas Mathewson, who guided the land's development for its first 35 years. Wilber Reynolds who stood at the helm for another 30 years followed him. It is Mr. Reynolds who is given the lion's share of the credit for transforming the grounds from a place of pines, briars, and sweet ferns into the magnificent park-like place it is now.

Like its elder sister to the south Elm Grove, Quidnessett is the final resting place of many local folks of note in our fair town's history. The artist Paule Loring as well as one of his favorite subjects E.E. "Doc" Young shares this place for all eternity. It is also interesting to note that as the Navy developed Quonset/Davisville throughout the 1930's and 1940's all of the many family plots within the area were

removed and re-interred here in a special section. In this way, all the folks who once called the forgotten community of South Quidnessett home are reunited here at the cemetery. They'd like that I think.

As I mentioned in last year's column concerning Elm Grove, it's unfortunate that American culture has turned beautiful places like Quidnessett and Elm Grove into locations to be shunned. This place, Quidnessett Cemetery, must be considered to be N.K.'s most beautiful park. It was designed to be a place for quiet and respectful contemplation. I encourage you to take advantage of this beautiful spot. It would make Helen Sweet, as well as Wilber Reynolds awful happy.

Printed in the North East Independent 4/11/02

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Kingsley Avenue Quonset Huts

Down in Shore Acres, on a little dogleg of a dead end street called Kingsley Avenue, sits a little piece of history. You see, Kingsley Avenue is the home of the largest concentration of World War II era Quonset Huts (outside of the collection of the soon-to-be-opened Seabee Museum, nearby on the old base) to be found in the region. The amazing thing about these are that they weren't brought together in this particular location for a museum or a recreated military base, they've been there all along. Declared surplus, for one reason or another, they were purchased by the Albro family, a Shore Acres fixture for as long as folks can remember, and set up just where they are now way back in 1942. The Quonset Huts became a part of the local summer rental scene and have been rented out to just-plain-folks for over 60 years.

These huts began their life just a stone's throw away in West Davisville. Back in 1941, the Navy was wrestling with the problem of finding a way to house the rapidly burgeoning mass of servicemen who were being staged literally all over the world in anticipation of the Great War to end all Wars. They pulled together a team of experts, consisting of both enlisted and civilian men, to come up with a quick and practical solution. The civilians, Peter Dejongh, an engineer, and Otto Brandenberger, an architect, were employees of the G. A. Fuller Co., a big New York City construction firm. The military man was Captain Ray V. Miller and together these three gentlemen were tasked to come up with a practical design for a prefabricated, portable structure that could be shipped in pieces and then reassembled by just about anyone, at faraway military posts; and then build a factory to manufacture these structures.

Time was of the essence, so rather than start from scratch, Dejongh and Brandenberger took the design of British WWI engineer Lt. Col. Peter Nissen and tweaked it a bit. While this was going on the folks at G.A. Fuller were busy constructing a sprawling factory for the manufacture of the new "Quonset Huts". The Navy gave the three men the nearly impossible deadline of two months from idea conception to active manufacture. In

typical American "can-do" fashion they did the impossible and pulled it off. Less than two months after their impossible assignment was accepted, finished Quonset Hut kits began to roll out the factory door in West Davisville (off of present day Mike Street). Eventually the great success of the design spurred the construction of other Quonset Hut factories around the country, and by war's end 170,000 hut kits had been built; 32,000 right here at the hut first home; Quonset.

Not unlike the jeep, the Quonset Hut was an idea that outlasted the War for which it was designed. One of the main war time manufacturers, Stran-Steel of Detroit, continued to build them well after the War. They filled a peacetime niche as well, and many returning G.I.'s who went to college on the G.I. bill were taking their classes in hastily erected Quonset huts at campuses all across the nation. A Quonset Hut Department store went up in Dryden NY and a Quonset Hut grocery store appeared in Greenville Michigan. Quonset Hut movie theaters sprang up across the country and Quonset Hut hay barns and milk sheds made midwestern farmers lives a bit simpler. Finally, Quonset Hut houses were as common as dirt all across America, and at \$2700 each could be afforded by even a former "mustered-out" private and his blushing bride.

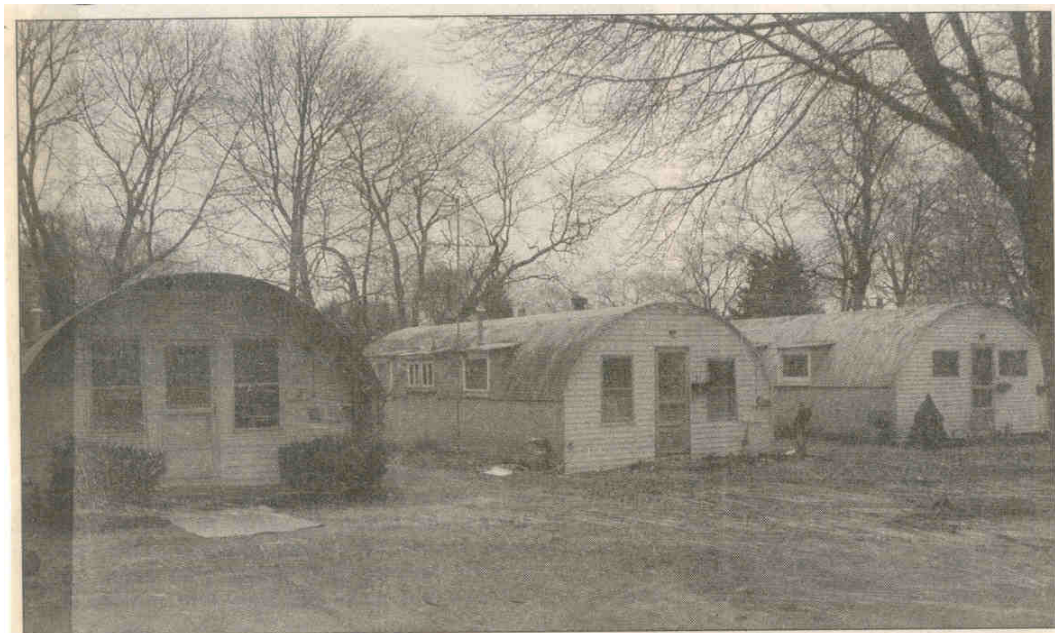


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

These Quonset huts on Kingsley Avenue in the Shore Acres section of North Kingstown now are rented out as year-round apartments.

But, as things often do, Quonset Huts, like the stripped-down military style jeep which accompanied the hut on its journey through time, fell out of favor with the general population. Inexorably, one by one, they were slowly demolished and faded from the American scene and psyche. Everywhere, the Quonset hut disappeared from the highways and byways of our country. Everywhere that is except Kingsley Avenue in the Shore Acres section of "our fair town". Here, the stubborn little Quonset Hut, a structure born out of necessity which survived all the Axis powers could throw at it, remains, and hopefully will for another 60 years or better.

Printed in the North East Independent 2/06/03

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Oldest Home in South Quidnessett

From time to time I like to stop and ruminate on the identity of the oldest home in each one of the many villages that make up our fair town. In the past, we've looked at Wickford, Lafayette, Swamptown, and North Quidnessett. Why, I even threw caution to the wind a couple of years back and took a stab at compiling a "top ten" list of the oldest structures in the town as a whole. This week, lets take a gander at the oft forgotten and greatly diminished (absorbed by the construction of Quonset/Davisville) farming village of South Quidnessett.

As mentioned, much of what was once South Quidnessett is now gone, the landscape changed so drastically that an area resident from even the early 1900's would not recognize it. All that really remains of the village from those days of long ago is the area surrounding Camp Avenue up from Post Road up to the entrance to Wickford Point (Ah Wickford Point, don't get me started on that; a developers idea of a village. Comparing Wickford Point to a real village is like comparing a mannequin to a living, breathing human. A village needs a heart and a soul), so it ought to be easy. But as is often the case when you are dealing with things ancient, it's not as cut and dried, as we might like. We end up with two worthy contenders; one, the gambrel-roofed farm house of the Sauga Farm on Fishing Cove Road near the entrance to Cedarhurst, and two, the miller's cottage on Camp Avenue. Both have had champion's in the past who have claimed construction dates in the area of 1700 or so; although this particular chronicler of days gone by feels more comfortable with construction timeframes closer to 1720-30. So, with no clear winner, I call it a draw and since the Sauga Farm, a portion of the vast holdings of the Updike Family of nearby Smith's Castle, is worthy of a future exploration in and of itself, lets concentrate on the miller's cottage this week.

The miller's cottage was built somewhere around 1720 or so by John Tennant, a recent arrival, and miller by trade, from jolly old England who purchased the nearby grist mill (destroyed by the 1938 hurricane and profiled in a column in Feb. 2000) from an unknown previous owner. He constructed the small "cape cod" style

cottage from hand-hewn oak timbers and joined them with wooden pegs as was the style at the time. At the time, it was constructed as a "half stone-ender" with the vast majority of one end being comprised of a great stone chimney and fireplace. This chimney was lost in a later remodeling; perhaps the 1804 addition that can be seen on the back of the cottage. Later owners of the cottage included generations of millers from the Pierce and Tourgee families. It is the Tourgee's that most folks associate with the cottage and the grist mill, as they were the owners when the two small buildings became locally famous as a tourist attraction of sorts in the early 1900's.

Sadly, by 1935 the little cottage and grist mill had fell on hard times; both were near collapse and were rescued by a Providence coal dealer who had more than a passing interest in preserving old buildings; William G. Anthony. Mr. Anthony restored both the cottage, which he utilized as a summer retreat, and the grist mill building. His restoration of the mill itself was to such a high standard that it caught the eye of none other than Henry Ford (yes, that Henry Ford!) who offered Mr. Anthony \$1,000 for the old grist mill. Henry had plans to disassemble it and move it to his planned reconstructed New England village right in the heart of Dearborn. William turned him down, wanting to hold on to the mill. Sadly he was not as lucky convincing the next



PHOTO: JAMES RUSH
The miller's cottage on Camp Avenue looks much as it did when it was restored 70 years ago.

caller who had designs on the building, the 1938 hurricane, who disassembled the building without plan or permission regardless of Mr. Anthony's desires. Lucky for us the stout little cottage survived and now remains in largely the same condition William Anthony restored it to nearly 70 years ago. With the exception of the more famous, and not quite as ancient, Gilbert Stuart Birthplace, this is

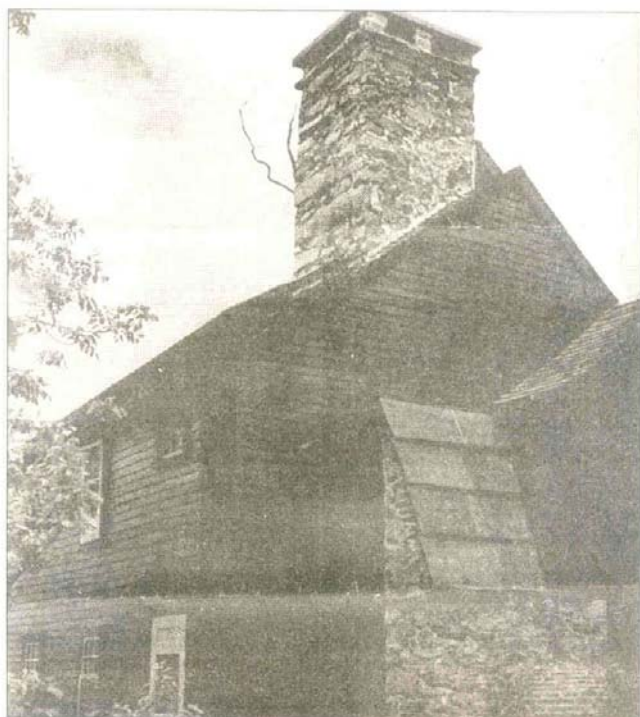
one of the last reminders of the days when grain and snuff were ground between two great granite stones tended by men of equivalent temperament.

Printed in the North East Independent 12/05/02

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

House's history still a mystery

All right, I admit it-I'm stumped on this one. The 264-year-old George Douglas House on the southeast corner of Tower Hill Road and Gilbert Stuart Road has got me stymied. This architecturally significant Colonial home with the unusual inside-end chimney configuration and the extraordinarily rare protruding fieldstone beehive bake oven just does not want to give up her story. Maybe one of this column's loyal and knowledgeable readers can help unlock the home's mysteries. Here's a list of clues that I have so far.



This 1960 photo of the George Douglas House shows the unique chimney and beehive oven.

The wonderful chimney comes complete not only with that great beehive oven, but also the date of 1783 and the mysterious initials "CPN."

Construction and interior details give credence to this date, but who was CPN? The home's location, smack dab in the middle of Hammond Hill, would tend to support a Hammond's hand in its construction, but which one? And. If that is so, then what does CP signify?

In 1945 the George Douglas House was purchased by Judge Ira Lett. He paid two local lads, Joseph Bullock of Wickford and John Northup of Allenton, to restore the by-then rundown and dilapidated old home to her current splendor. By 1960, the home was owned by the Tabor family, which continues to restore the structure. The whole tale begs the ultimate question of just who George Douglas is and how does he fit into this

equation?

So help me out, loyal readers. Somewhere out there are some answers to this mystery. Perhaps there's a Bullock, Northup or Tabor who can shed some light on the George Douglas House. Maybe a descendent of Judge Ira Lett will come forward and let us in on the secret or maybe even a representative of the mysterious George Douglas will reveal what he or he knows of this fine home. Whatever I learn, I'll be sure to pass it on to all. In the meantime, I'm just going to enjoy imagining what this house may some day tell us.

Printed in the North East Independent 1/31/02

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

Shift Marriages and Shift Corners

Well, Spring is here (although you couldn't tell by looking at the thermometer out here in Swamptown) and all across our fair town young folks are thinking about a spring tradition - weddings. And so it has been for hundreds of years here in North Kingstown. One location in particular here in town, the somewhat lonely corner at the intersection of Slocum and Stony Fort Roads out in what was once known as the "Dark Corners" district of North Kingstown has been forever tied to the tradition of marriage. But only to one somewhat obscure particular type of marriage. You see, it was here, where the three towns of North Kingstown, South Kingstown, and Exeter meet, that Shift Marriages were performed.

A shift marriage, a tradition particular to the first half of the 1700's, occurred when a widow woman with debts that were incurred by her late husband wished to remarry. In order to be absolved of these debts and not have them be brought upon her future husband, the widow was required to be married on a highway at the precise spot where three towns met, wearing nothing but a shift. During the ceremony, the bride and groom would cross the road travelling through each of the three towns. These marriages were performed generally under the light of the moon, presumably to afford the scantily clad bride some modicum of dignity that would not be possible under the glare of a bright sunny day. This intersection at Slocum and Stony Fort Roads was the site of at least three such weddings. The first to show up in the permanent record of our fair town occurred in 1717, the entry states; "On March 11, 1717 did Phillip Shearman take the widow Hannah Clarke in her shift, without any apparel and led her across the highway as the law directs in such cases and was then married according to law by me, William Hall, Justice." A few years later, "Thomas Calverwell was joyned in marriage to Abigail his wife the 22nd February 1719. He took her in marriage after she had gone four times across the highway in only her shift and hairlace and no other clothing. Joyned together in marriage by me. George Hazard, Justice". Finally, in 1730; "Then Rebecca

Downing being on the highway with no other clothing on but a shift, took Thomas Eldred for her husband and he took her for his wife and led her and were married before me. William Spencer, Justice."

This tradition dates back some years earlier to merry old England, where it was known as a smock wedding. Shift marriages have also been recorded in Hopkinton, Richmond, Westerly, and Warwick, as well as Vermont, New York, and Pennsylvania. They were a rare occurrence, but well documented enough to be considered as a fact. So the next time you're on a Sunday drive in the country, swing by the "Shift Corners" and pay your respects to the many good "widow women" who began a new life right there at that very spot.



PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

The intersection of Slocum and Stony Fort roads in what was once known as the "Dark Corners" district of North Kingstown was the site of "shift marriages," where widows remarried and had their debts forgiven, in the early 1700s.

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

Pierce's Turkey Farm

For more than thirty years, this was a very busy season for Charles Pierce. No, he wasn't a toy merchant or a greeting card salesman. Charles Pierce's business was turkeys and, from the late 1950's well into the 1980's and beyond, when someone from around southern RI wanted an exceptional holiday turkey it was to Pierce's Turkey Farm they'd travel, for there were none better in all of South County.

Charles Pierce started his business in 1957 on his family's farm located at the southern end of town on Tower Hill Road. Already a full time employee of the University of Rhode Island, where he eventually rose to a position in building maintenance management, Pierce took on turkey farming as a way to both raise extra money for his growing family and to keep his hand in the vocation he loved, farming. Eventually the farm grew to consist of a heated turkey coop where the young "peepers" spent their early days, a turkey run which included buildings with outside runs for the young toms and hens, and an open fenced range of more than a quarter acre where the adult birds spent their days before the inevitable holiday season.

This was a family business through and through; Pierce's wife ran the business end of the venture, while Charles and all his children took care of the birds. During the hectic season from Thanksgiving to Christmas everyone available helped out in the busy turkey store. (Now the Rose Shack) But it was hard work all the way from the early spring when the first batch of peepers were settled into the big coop through the very day before Christmas. Pierce bought his peepers in staggered batches of about 500 at a time. This way the birds matured throughout the fall and winter and he could maximize the use of his facility. You see, just as the first batch of mature birds were being released into the open range a new group of peepers was settling into the warmth of the heated coop. By the time it was all said and done, Charles and his "brood" would have a "crop" of more than 3000 turkeys ready for the holidays.

And what a time those holidays were! As a boy driving by with my parents, I remember many times seeing long lines waiting outside the door of the store to get one of those wonderful turkeys. Contrary to what you might think, standing in those lines was an event, not a chore. Back then everyone knew everyone and the holiday chatter from the folks on line at Pierce's often seemed to drown out the nervous "chatter" which emanated from the doomed residents of the turkey range. We kids, running around in the parking lot, used to marvel at the size of the big birds as they strutted around their domain. It was truly a busy place, for selling 1500 turkeys in the week before Thanksgiving was not uncommon. Things went on like this until the late 1970's when Charles, now reaching an age when most folks are contemplating retirement, scaled back a bit and became a turkey distributor rather a turkey farmer. Nevertheless, folks still flocked to Pierce's Turkey Farm and those delicious birds still flew out the door each and every holiday season for another fifteen years or so.

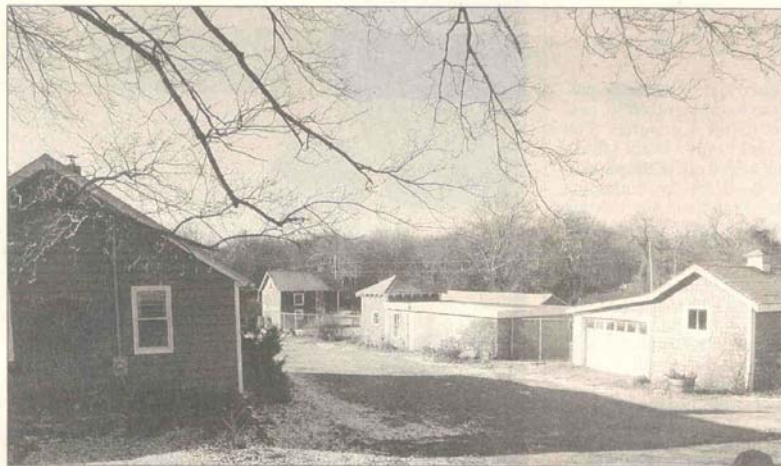


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH
Turkeys roam no more on the open range at the site of the former Pierce's Turkey Farm on Tower Hill Road.

Charles Pierce's Turkey Farm closed in 1994 a victim of a changing world and an aging owner. Yeah sure, you can get a serviceable frozen turkey at the big supermarket down the street. But it will never be quite as good as a Pierce's Turkey because it doesn't come with the whole Pierce's Turkey Farm

experience and that's a shame. It's another little bit of Americana gone by the wayside. Each time I pass by Pierce's on my way to Wakefield or parts beyond I can't help but remember the sounds that those many turkeys made as I passed by all those years ago. The farmer too, has gone on to a better place. I tip my proverbial hat to you Charles Pierce, you're forever a part of the holiday memories of so many.

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The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

The Saunderstown Chapel/Post Office

Along with a school and a Church, an 18th or 19th century village was defined by the presence of a post office. Among the many attributes which continue to contribute to the village feel of our fair town is the continued presence of the village post office in our community. We are lucky enough to still have village post offices in Saunderstown and Slocum. Until recently, we could also count the main post office in Wickford as a true village post office; a place to which folks could walk and post their mail. A place where the familiar person behind the counter knew your name. The Slocum post office is, like so many others, set up within the confines of a private home. Down in Saunderstown, the post office occupies a building that began its life as a Church. This may seem a little unusual to some, but not here in North Kingstown. Why, we have a former church that now lives as a dentist office (the corner of Boone & Phillips St) one in Lafayette that's used as a furniture warehouse, one in Wickford that is now a retail store, and one out in Quidnessett that is a private home. Some might think it sacrilegious, but I feel strongly that the Good Lord would, in reality, look in disfavor upon wasting a perfectly good building. Besides, no swamp yankee worth his salt would ever condone tearing down a perfectly serviceable building.

The structure we all know as the Saunderstown Post Office began its life as the Saunderstown Chapel of the South Ferry (or Narragansett) Baptist Church. It was built in 1902 by a group of Saunderstowners led by members of the Gould, Kelly, and Artist families. They were members of the picturesque old (founded in 1851) church on South Ferry Road which, besides being an integral part of the village of South Ferry, was a well known landmark to generations of mariners who could see the tall spire as they ventured up the Bay. As the population of South Ferry waned and folks began to make Saunderstown a busy little village, the need was there for a place of worship within walking distance of the local population hub. The Gould's, Kelly's, and Artist's, as agents of the South Ferry congregation, purchased the land for their chapel from Charles Arnold in 1901. The list of former owners of this parcel read like a Who's

Who of Saunderstown history and include members of the Gardiners, Saunders, and Carpenter clans. Things went well for a time, with services being held at both locations, until 1907 when the population shift from South Ferry towards Saunderstown reached a critical mass.

You see, by then, although most of the Church elders were still South Ferry residents, the vast majority of the congregation lived in Saunderstown. Things came to a head when the South Ferry-ites, rightly fearful for the death of their village should the Church close, refused to move "the flock" permanently up Boston Neck Road to the rapidly growing village. In the end though, against their wishes, the Church's records, bell, pulpit, and eventually even the Parsonage itself were taken up the road to Saunderstown. (The parsonage now exists as a lovely Bed & Breakfast just around the corner from the former Chapel.) The Saunderstown Group offered to sell the old South Ferry Church to the few locals who remained in that village, but the South Ferry-ites refused to buy, feeling that there was no need to buy something that they already owned. Adding to the already tense atmosphere between the two villages, the Saunderstown folks then turned around and sold the South Ferry building to Reverend J.H. McKenna a representative of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Providence for \$400. Father McKenna's intention was to move the building right out of South Ferry and reuse it in another location. Needless to say, the South Ferry folks were now in a panic. In the end, Mr. and Mrs. John McGowan approached Father McKenna and, with his cooperation, bought the building back for more than they would have had to pay had they purchased it from the Saunderstowners in the first place. As you can imagine there was some serious hard feelings between those that called South Ferry and Saunderstown home. The folks in South Ferry could never get over the feeling that the very lifeblood of their village had been literally "spirited" away from them.

In the end the whole affair did nothing more than prove the old adage that "The whole is always greater than the sum of its parts", as both congregations eventually folded where together they might have survived. The South Ferry group never recovered. The church

remained largely empty for fifteen years except for a period of time during WWI when it was used as a YMCA Hut. It fell into disrepair and might have been demolished had it not been for the generosity of Mrs John McGowan who again came to its aid and funded its repair in memory of her departed husband. The old South Ferry Church survived another great war as well as the '38 hurricane and is still a landmark and finally again an active church. Up in Saunderstown they fared a little better, but they too, eventually folded up in the late 1940's. The former chapel, like its parent church lay fallow for years until early 1962, when the building's owner began to rent it out to the US Postal Service who then vacated the country store across the road where it had been for years.



This former church in Saunderstown now houses the U.S. Post Office.

I guess things all worked out in the end though. The former chapel, once a cornerstone of the Village of Saunderstown is now, once again, fulfilling that position; albeit in a different form. Down the road in South Ferry the old church has come to life once again. Through all the controversy and all the many decades, it remained an important landmark for all to see, including a new generation of mariners sailing up the Bay. So as one building celebrates its 100th anniversary and the other cruises past 150; let's all of us stop and contemplate the curious set of circumstances that brought both places into the 21st century.

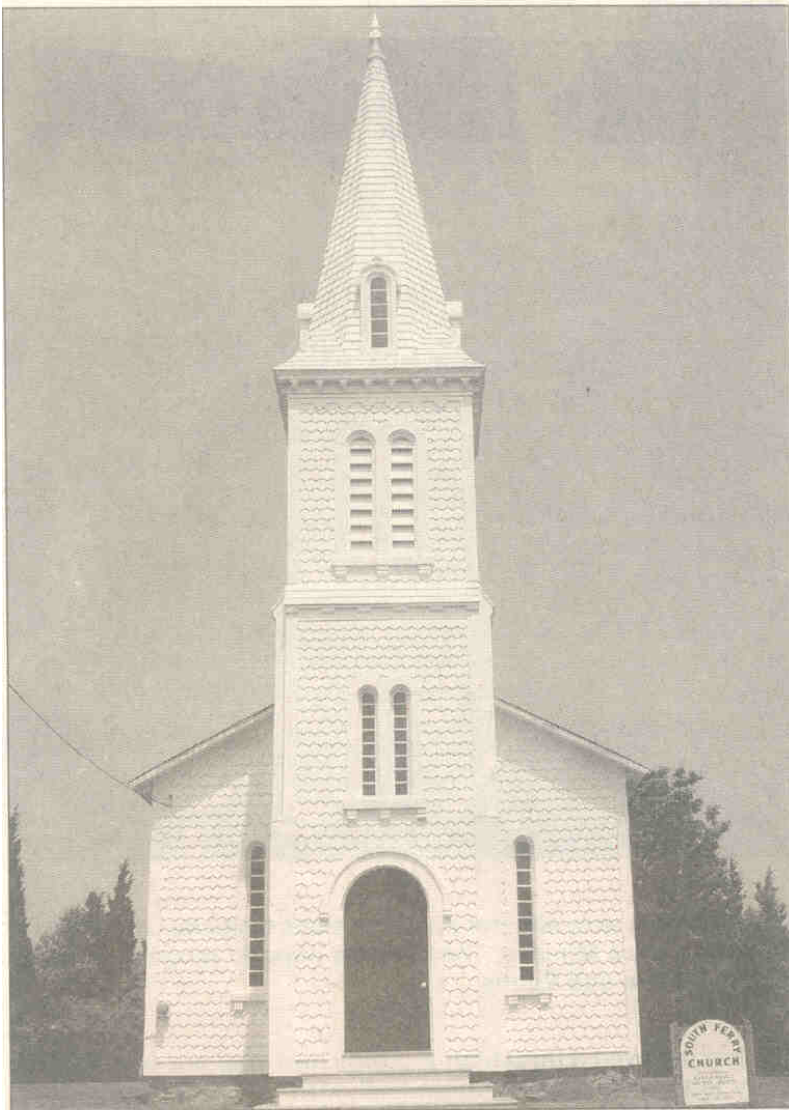


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

The view up South Ferry Road in Narragansett to the South Ferry Church is one of the most scenic in South County.

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