

G. Timothy Cranston 's

# **The View From Swamptown**

Volumes I and II

April 1999 to March 2001

# **The View From Swamptown**

## **The Mill Villages**

### **Library Note**

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100 Boone St.  
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[edonovan@nklibrary.org](mailto:edonovan@nklibrary.org)

## Table of Contents

Click on the article title or scroll down to read the entire contents.

### **The Mill Villages**

#### **Lafayette**

[The Wickford Junction Underpass \(Nov. 23 2000\)](#)

[The Rodman Mill Boarding Houses \(Oct. 5 2000\)](#)

[The Rodman Mansions \(Nov. 30 2000\)](#)

[The Huling/Cranston House \(Aug. 3 2000\)](#)

[The Advent Street Church \(Feb. 3 2000\)](#)

[The Hornbeam Chapel \(Dec. 30 1999\)](#)

[The Story Behind Those Sandpits](#)

[The Rodman Mill Store](#)

[The Vale of Pero](#)

[Liberty Hill](#)

#### **Davisville/Sand Hill Village**

[The Davis Family Homes \(Aug. 12 1999\)](#)

[Davisville \(Aug. 19 1999\)](#)

[That Mysterious Smokestack](#)

[The Davisville Library](#)

[Sand Hill Village](#)

#### **Belleville/Allenton**

[The Castle and the Treasure \(Apr. 22 1999\)](#)

[St. Bernard's Church \(Jun. 22 2000\)](#)

[The Sherman/Connor Farm and the Landfill \(Oct. 12 2000\)](#)

[Elm Grove Cemetery \(Dec. 21 2000\)](#)

[The GAR Monument](#)

[Lafreniere's Store](#)

[The Phillips Castle](#)

[Rodman Studio](#)

**Annaquatucket/Silver Spring/Shady Lea/Hamilton**

[The Mill Village at Silver Spring \(Dec. 7 2000\)](#)

[The Baker Estate-Cedar Spring Farm \(Aug. 17 2000\)](#)

[Duck Cove Farm \(May 11 2000\)](#)

[The Annaquatucket Mill Village \(Sep. 2 1999\)](#)

[The Other Rodman Mansion \(Aug. 10 2000\)](#)

[The Annaquatucket Mill Building](#)

[The Baker Estate](#)

[The Shady Lea Mill](#)

[Edgar Nock's Ramblewood](#)

[Rudy's Market](#)

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

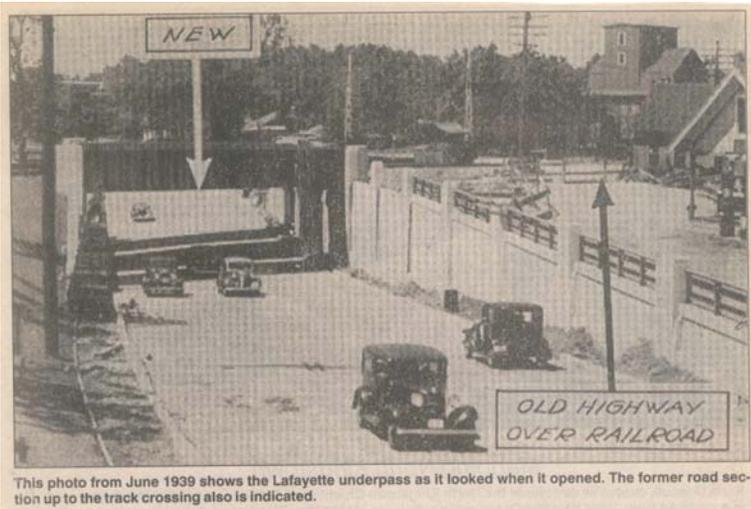
## The Wickford Junction Underpass

Back in the middle of the 1930's, the automobile was becoming pretty common place on the roads of our fair town. What was once, just a decade or so earlier, an unusual sight in a horse and buggy world was now so prevalent that it was causing unforeseen problems. One of the biggest problems in these parts occurred almost every time a long freight train (like the one in this photograph) roared through the road crossing at the track's intersection with Ten Rod Road. The automobiles on either side of the closed gates would back up before you knew it. By 1937, traffic jams on the northbound-side were regularly backing up all the way down beyond the Lafayette Mill. The southbound-side would dangerously back up into the Rotary at Route 2; this would essentially snarl up traffic, not only on Ten Rod Road, but also on Route 2, Old Baptist Rd., and Scrabbletown Road. In short it was a mess!



Finally, on May 16, 1938, good sense prevailed with the powers-that-be up in Providence and work was started on an underpass at this heavily travelled intersection. Thirteen months later, after the relocation or demolition of three general stores and twelve homes, the underpass was opened for business. The project had involved the excavation of a 1000 foot long, 52 foot wide, "dip" under the tracks. The rail bridge constructed was 120 feet long and contained 500 tons of steel. All this was done in a little over a year and with almost no interruption to auto or train traffic. The total cost was said to be around \$200,000. My how things have changed at R.I.D.O.T.!! The underpass was considered to be a huge success. Rush hour traffic soon after its opening was calculated at 1000 cars per hour. (that's a lot of Model-T's) It seemed

that even more people used the road after the threat of a massive traffic jam was removed. But I'm willing to bet, that even with that, people were still heard to mutter under their breath the same thing that they mutter now, some sixty years later - "Now, if they only could do something about that beach traffic!"



This photo from June 1939 shows the Lafayette underpass as it looked when it opened. The former road section up to the track crossing also is indicated.



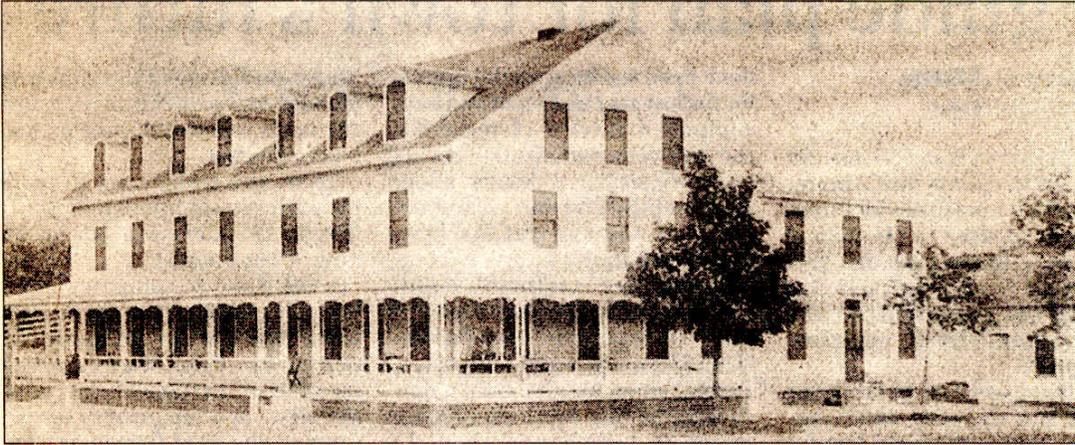
## The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

### The Rodman Mill Boarding Houses

One of the defining moments of Robert Rodman's life occurred in, of all places, Philadelphia in the summer of 1876, as he was attending, with his family in tow, The Centennial Exposition of Arts, Manufactures, and Agriculture. This event, a precursor to the World Fairs, was intended to be a showcase for the ingenuity of the American spirit, held on its one hundredth birthday, and it showcased the burgeoning advances of our country's entrepreneurship. Rodman Industries had an exhibit there, which won a Medal of Excellence, but that was not what held Rodman spellbound and sent his mind reeling with the possibilities of what could be. No, his imagination was transfixed by the exhibit of another of Rhode Island's heavy hitters of industry at the show. The Corliss Manufacturing Company had hauled down and set up a prototype of its new and mammoth Steam Engine and it and it alone was supplying the 1500 horsepower required to run all of the exhibits at the entire exhibition. Rodman's businesslike mind immediately grasped what this marvelous machine would mean to the textile industry as a whole and the Rodman Mill in particular and quickly placed his order. With that done, he returned to Lafayette and began the ambitious expansion of his already sizeable mill.

One of the myriad concerns of Robert Rodman, was providing adequate and sufficient housing for the hundreds of workers he required to run this larger mill on the Ten Rod Road in the now ever-expanding village of Lafayette. His existing boarding house for single male workers, which was right on the grounds of the mill would be far too small; besides, he would need that space to site his new office, the eventual command center of his entire empire (Now the Wickford Gourmet Outlet Shop). With that in mind, he did what he had already done in many instances and would do again, he simply moved the building across the street. Rodman, ever the frugal Yankee, was not one to demolish a perfectly good building, all he needed to move one was know-how and manpower, and he had sufficient supplies of both. So he did just that, and it now sits at 595 Ten Rod Road as a private home. Immediately adjacent to it he built his new, and substantially larger, boarding house. The two and one half story dormered building was completed in 1878 and was designed to house both male and female unmarried workers. It served its purpose well into the early twentieth century, changing hands a number of times. It then became a second-hand furniture store and antique shop.

Its present owners saved it from certain demolition by a very historically correct (as evidenced by the photographs accompanying this article, one dated 1889 and the other of a recent vintage) rehabilitation and conversion into individual apartments. It is obvious to this columnist that the buildings new owners share Robert Rodman's Yankee good sense and know it is sinful to waste such a fine building. I am certain that, in a quiet Swamp Yankee sort of way, he would applaud their efforts and be pleased with their results.



The second Rodman Boarding House is seen here as it appeared in 1889.



Above, the second Rodman Boarding House is seen as it appears today. Below, the first Rodman Boarding House, which was moved across the street, is seen as it appears today.



## The Rodman Mansions

This week we are going to take a look at the four homes, standing side by side on the south side of Ten Rod Road, known as the Rodman mansions.

The first of the mansions, chronologically, is the Robert Rodman house, built in 1863 by the founder of the Rodman empire, Robert Rodman. The large two-story hip-roofed mansion signaled Rodman's ascendancy to the pinnacle of mill owner social network in southern Rhode Island; a network within which all were interconnected through marriage. This house was home to four generations of Rodmans, until the last to live there, Caroline Rodman sold it to the local Masonic group, the Washington Lodge in the late 1940s. During the alterations to the house, by the Mason's, it lost its original dormers, eight-sided cupola, and several brick chimneys. The Robert Rodman mansion is now owned and occupied by McKay's Front Porch, a furniture store.

Just to the west of the Robert Rodman mansion is the home of his eldest daughter, Hortense. She married George Allen and the original portion of the home was built for them in 1865. A generous Queen Anne-style addition was added to the front of the house in 1882. This is the portion of the home most visible from the road. This beautiful home is the only Rodman mansion still used as a private home.

In 1879, Robert's youngest son Walter built the third of the Rodman Mansions. Walter, the accountant for the Rodman empire, was an artistic man and it is widely assumed that he played a major part in the design of his magnificent home. The house is a two and a half story L-shaped affair and originally was surrounded by elaborate and extensive gardens and greenhouses, which was Walter's passion. The grounds also include a superb two and a half story barn. The home also had a pottery kiln in the basement. Walter's daughter, Hope, married Edward J. Ryan of the Ryan's of Wickford, and the home was continuously occupied by the Ryan family until fairly recently. It, and its barn, have been converted into condo-styled apartments in a tasteful and accurate way which has retained its wonderful architectural character.

The last of the mansions was built in 1882 by son Franklin. He married Sarah Allen, the



PHOTOS: KRISTEN CYR

Robert Rodman's daughter, Hortense, married George Allen and this house on Ten Rod Road was built for them in 1865.



Above, patriarch Robert Rodman's house, built in 1863, now houses McKay's Front Porch. Below, the Franklin Rodman house, built in 1882, now houses the Lafayette Nursing Home. The brick front is not original to the house.



Another Rodman son, Walter, built this house in 1879. It, along with its barn, now has been converted to condominiums.

Photos courtesy of the [North East Independent](#)

## The Huling/Cranston House

This week's column is a sad and somber one; an obituary of sorts. Its purpose is to mourn the passing of another piece of our fair town's history; for while our backs were turned the dozers and wreckers came and tore down an historic home, one which, although it had fallen on hard times, always held a special place in my Swamp Yankee heart. You see, this was the final home of the man after whom I was named. He died in its front parlor and from its front yard began the largest funeral procession this town has yet to see. Some

5,000 mourners marched in file from there to Elm Grove Cemetery to honor an old soldier and valued friend. I always felt that while his home stood he lived on in a way; but now the house has gone the way of the man, its remains buried in the ground where it once stood.



George T. Cranston is shown in his mourning photograph.

George Tillinghast Cranston bought his house and the farm that went with it from the Huling family sometime around 1870. The Hulings had built the two story double-chimneyed farmhouse earlier in the century, sometime around 1840. Its location, at the intersection of Old Baptist, Scrabbletown, and Ten Rod Road, may now seem a little off the beaten path today, but in the middle 1800s its proximity to the busy Wickford Junction Train Station put it right where Cranston wanted to be, in the center of it all. For nearly ten years he ran his country store and trading post a few hundred feet down the road and across the street adjacent to the busy station. At the end of the 1870s, Cranston, sensing the inevitable migration of the town's business center away from the Junction and towards Wickford proper, moved his operation from Wickford Junction down to Collation Corners (the present-day intersection of Ten Rod Rd., Phillips St., and Tower Hill Road.) where he reopened his "Farmer's Exchange and General Variety Store" to much fanfare and local hullabaloo. While George may have moved his store, his home remained up in the farmhouse just north of the Junction. By this time, shop owner Cranston had also become Fire Chief Cranston, State G.A.R. Commander Cranston, and Senator Cranston. Always

active in veteran's affairs, the Civil War survivor erected a two story building behind the farmhouse, at his own expense, to house needy veterans until his pet project in the Senate, the State Veteran's Home in Bristol (still in service to this day) was completed. The remainder of the farm's outbuildings were used as livery stables for the teams of horses which he used at his store to deliver everything from coal to caskets.

Cranston died suddenly, in 1894 from a heart attack brought on by a blood clot which had travelled from his leg, where it caused him considerable pain and sent him to his bed, to his heart, which although considered by most to be as big as all outdoors, could not survive this transgression. The business which he had made into such a success went to his son, George Cyrus Cranston I, who had worked at his father's side from the moment he finished his schooling. Young George took his family and his grieving mother to live in Wickford. The house was left to George T.'s daughter and son-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Byron Greene. Lottie and her husband stayed in the home for a time, but eventually sold it and, like her brother, moved into Wickford.

So, the turn of the century saw the end of the Cranston family's connection to the big farmhouse at the end of Scrabbletown Road. Throughout the twentieth century the home was occupied and cared for by numerous people; until, in the last third of the century it and all the remaining farm outbuildings were chopped up into apartments. This is when the downward spiral of the noble house began; the place which once had housed struggling Civil War veterans now was, in the late 1970s, the site of a grisly murder; and the house, itself, met its inevitable end on Friday, July 28th, 2000. Like so many other old homes converted into apartments, and then allowed to decay unmaintained for years, it had outlived its economic usefulness in the eyes of its landlord; repairs to bring it up to code were too costly. So, a landlord came out a big winner; he got out from under an expensive unprofitable old apartment house; why, he can probably even turn a tidy profit by building new houses on the site of the old farmhouse. But where there's a winner, there is inevitably a loser, and that loser is all of us; because as each house falls, so goes a little piece of what makes North Kingstown a great place to live. I imagine old George Tillinghast Cranston, who was quoted by the Providence Journal upon his election to the Senate as saying "He was as proud as a feather on the tail of the American Eagle" to represent his community, winced just a little bit when the bulldozer's blade bit into his home.

1878

# GEORGE T. CRANSTON

THE SWAMPTOWN MERCHANT STILL LIVES  
AND CONTINUES AT  
THE FARMERS EXCHANGE & GENERAL

## VARIETY STORE

To keep his large storehouse filled with goods,  
wares & merchandize of every kind for prompt

HOUSE & FAMILY SUPPLY.

He will continue to serve his customers  
old and new from this large stock

**!AT BOTTOM PRICES!**

ORDER TEAMS RUN REGULARLY THROUGH LAFAYETTE,  
WICKFORD, ALLENTON, SHADY LEA & SILVER SPRING

WEST WICKFORD, R.I.

Groceries, dry goods, boots, shoes, grain & feed,  
crockery, tin & woodenware.

ALL ARTICLES FOUND IN A FIRST CLASS

## COUNTRY STORE

UNDERTAKING & EMBALMING

This copy of a "broadside," advertising the reopening of George T. Cranston's store, notes 'bottom prices.'

## **The Advent Street Church A Golden Opportunity**

In 1882, recently appointed pastor Elder Stewart, came to the conclusion that his burgeoning congregation; which regularly overflowed its small "Hornbeam Church" was in need of a new home. He met with his parish's senior members and planned a fund-raising campaign to attempt to meet this lofty goal. After a year's effort; and largely through the beneficence of Lafayette's "first" citizen, Robert Rodman, work was begun on the Lafayette Advent Christian Church. It was completed and dedicated, with much fanfare, in 1883.

The main body of the church is forty feet by seventy-six feet, with a height at the peak of its ceiling of forty-one feet. The graceful spire of its bell tower rises seventy-four feet into the air, rivaling the height of its lofty neighbor, the Rodman Mill smokestack. The church's architect is not known for certain, but its interior is so similar to St. Paul's in Wickford that it is probable to surmise that it is also a product of that church's designer, Tefft. The interior was originally finished completely in ash with the enormous open trusses of hard pine plainly visible. Later refurbishings in 1908 and 1942, largely funded by Walter Rodman, added the wonderful oak wainscoting and moldings which are still present today. The building's original cost, a princely sum in 1883, was a little more than \$10,000.

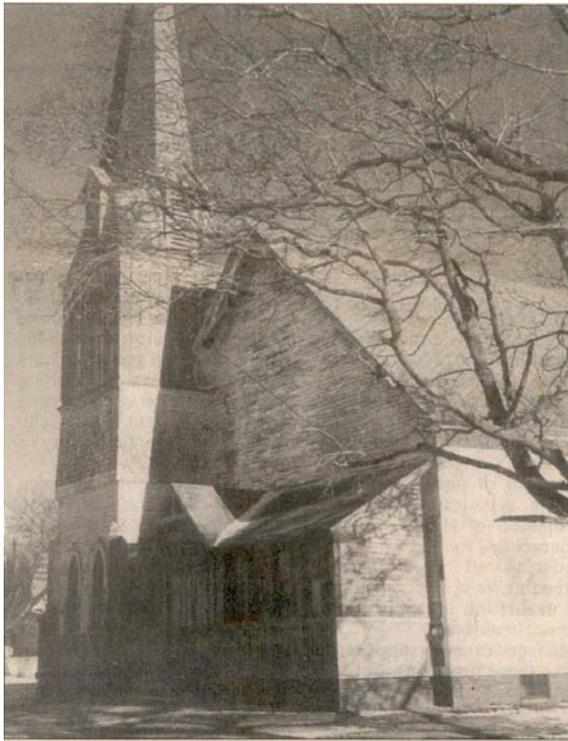
The congregation met continuously in its grand new church for nearly one hundred years. It was the site of the largest funeral in North Kingstown's long history; that being the service held for State G.A.R. Commander and local senator George Tillinghast Cranston, Swamptown's native son. More than five thousand citizens and Civil War veterans came to see the old soldier home. Its three hundred and thirty seats were filled more times than not until the early 1980's when a severely dwindling enrollment forced the Advent Christian congregation to return to the "Hornbeam" chapel and put the "big" church up for sale.

This big building on a fairly small lot, languished for a time on the real estate market. It

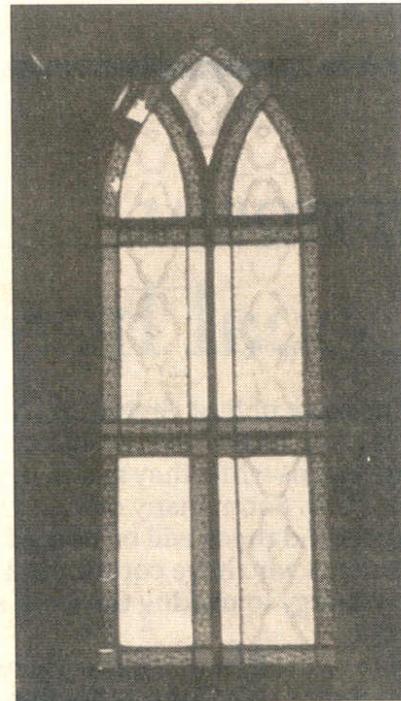
changed hands a few times, and was even, for a while, reused as a church. But all ventures for this grand edifice failed, until it was purchased by the McKay family (of McKay's Furniture fame), to be used as warehouse space. The McKay's, who along with the owners of the Rodman Mill Complex, have virtually rescued Lafayette from the fate of many other small mill villages, have been slowly and methodically waging a winning battle against the outcome of the ravages of time and are beginning to turn the corner in their efforts to restore this marvelous old church. But something is still missing; for if the Rodman Mill was the heart of Lafayette Village (and it truly was), then the Advent Street Church was its soul, and as the old song suggests heart and soul belong together. You see, it's this Swamp Yankee's opinion that a successful village is like a living organism; yes it needs a heart, and all that has recently transpired at the mill complex has, thankfully, given this village back its heart, but it won't reach its true potential without its soul. The powers-that-be in our fair town have gone on record as enthusiastically embracing the "village concept" as a model for this community's future. These same leaders now possess the opportunity to practice what they preach (An appropriate phrase, don't you think?) and take the vital step necessary to put Lafayette on the same playing field as Wickford. Abandon the ill-concieved concept of siting a recreational/community center in a concrete bunker in an industrial park. Don't sink a million plus dollars into an ugly concrete building in such a stark setting. Negotiate now with the McKay Family and utilize the more than six thousand square feet of wonderful space housed in this beautiful historic building. An appropriately trained architect with the gift of vision and imagination could transform this church into the perfect community center. Low interest loans could easily be acquired from RI Historic Preservation to do the job right and save the taxpayers some money. Adequate parking exists across the street at the Rodman Mill and would only require the installation of a pedestrian actuated stoplight. Step up to the plate, Al Southwick and all you Town Council members, for this is a golden opportunity. He who hesitates is lost.

You know, I feel certain that the twenty or so pastors who served in this sanctuary over the years are looking down from heaven now, pleased, to see their church slowly being restored by the McKays. They only need glance over at the old Rodman Mansion, now a beautifully restored place of business, to know that eventually the job will be done right. But, I'll bet you, it would truly gladden their hearts to see the sun

streaming through the stained glass windows again, warming a young child as she learns gymnastics or volleyball; they would smile at the sounds of many children eating pizza and watching a movie on a kid's night out, and I know it would please them to no end to see a group of their former parishioners heading down the steps into one of many meeting rooms in its cavernous basement to attend a town sponsored lecture on the history of Lafayette, the village the Rodmans built.



The Advent Christian Church.



One of the original stained glass windows.



The front view of the Advent Christian Church in Lafayette.

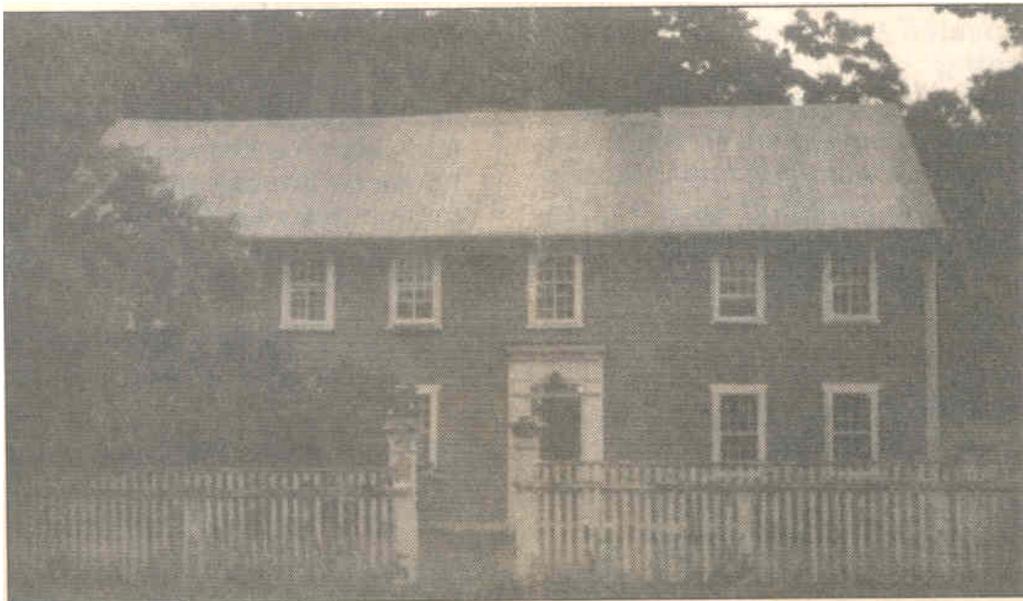
## The Hornbeam Chapel

The middle of the 1800's brought unprecedented growth to the small village of Lafayette. Before long it had everything a community would need to be self-sufficient; a large mill and its supporting businesses to supply all with a place to work, general stores and shops of every kind, and schools to educate the children of the workers. But, Lafayette had no church to call its own. The God-fearing members of the community would have to travel to Allenton, Wickford, or Stony Lane to attend services in a formal church setting. In the 1840's, a branch of the Baptist faith, The Free Will Baptists, became so popular in the village that services were held regularly, at first in local homes and then in the Lafayette schoolhouse. The popularity of the preacher, Elder Preserved Green, was so large that soon the school was found to be inadequate and a drive to build a permanent church building began. The result of this fund raising drive was the construction of the Lafayette Free Will Baptist Church which, was dedicated in 1848. It was eventually known as The Hornbeam Church due to the usage of this incredibly durable wood (also known as ironwood) for its main timbers. The timbers were cut and donated by Nathan Rathbun from trees grown upon his farm in nearby Swamptown. The church originally stood on the north side of Ten Rod Road, just east of the Robert Rodman house. In 1874, the Rodman family decided that they wished to build another fine mansion house for Robert's son on the property; so they donated the land on the corner of Swamptown Road (now Lafayette Road) and Ten Rod Road, financed the moving expenses, and paid for a large part of a small addition to the building and the Old Hornbeam Church made the leap to its present location on the south side of the road. Its new location right next to the mill pond where the church's baptisms were performed was an added convenience. The church by that time had become affiliated with the Adventist movement within the Baptist faith and was now known as the Lafayette Advent Christian Church. Services were held in the Hornbeam until 1882, when increased membership required the construction of a larger church down Ten Rod Road on Advent Street. The Hornbeam then became known as the Chapel and was used for Sunday School, baptisms, and as a meeting place for the church's various societies and organizations. Sadly, when the mill met its inevitable fate and closed later in the next century it also brought about the beginning of the end for the large church on Advent Street. It was finally closed, due to dwindling membership, and the congregation returned to where it began, The Hornbeam Chapel where services are held to this day, more than one hundred and fifty years after it all began.

**The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston**

## **The Davis Family Homes**

Sometime around 1700 Joshua Davis moved his family south from East Greenwich into a sparsely settled area on the Hunt's River just over the border in North Kingstown. Little did farmer Davis know then, but this area would forever be associated with his family's name and the mills that they would eventually found - Davisville. Three of the Davis homes still exist today and the oldest of them is farmer Joshua's home built in 1715 and known as "The Davis Homestead".



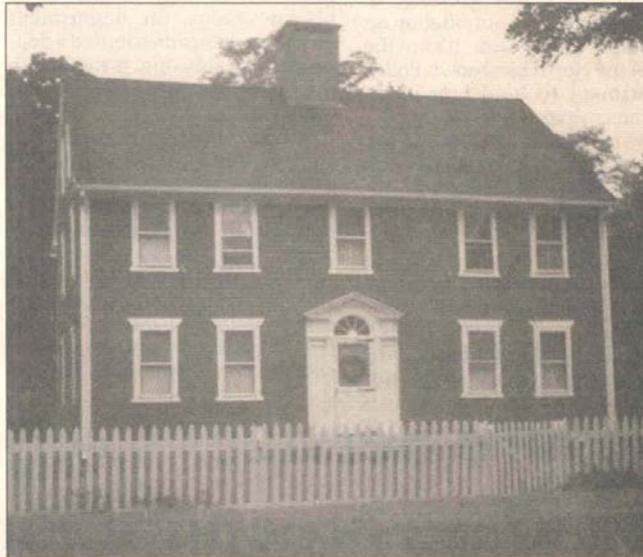
PHOTOS: LINDA LEE

**The "Davis Homestead" – Joshua Davis House.**

"The Davis Homestead" was constructed in 1715, possibly as a one-room "stone-ender"; an addition was added in the early eighteenth century, perhaps by son Jeffrey, and then again in 1820 by Joshua's grandson also named Joshua. The house, restored to its original splendor in 1948 by architects Norman Isham and John Cady, has six fireplaces on its two chimneys as well as two beehive ovens and an internal smokehouse. The home was occupied continuously by direct descendants of the first Joshua until 1903, a period of nearly two hundred years.



"Bellefield" - The James Davis House.



The Ezra Davis House.

The second Joshua's son Ezra built himself a large federal style farmhouse in 1805. The two and a half story central-chimneyed home with its ornate entryway rivaled that of his father's just across Davisville Road. Interestingly enough, the Ezra Davis House was originally built one house-length south of its present location. In 1856 it was moved to make room for the crowning glory of the Davis family's homes - Bellefield.

Bellefield was built in 1856 by, the then elder statesman of the Davis clan, James M. Davis. The substantial Victorian-style mansion, with its many outbuildings and circa 1883 barn, equaled the homes of his rivals the Rodmans in nearby Lafayette. Towards the end of the 1800's James Davis and the Rodman brothers were the top individual taxpayers in all of North Kingstown. Bellefield is certainly a home worthy of such a man.

Top photo courtesy of the [North East Independent](#)

## The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

### More on the Village of Davisville

Last week, we took a look at the homes of the founding fathers of this forgotten mill village. Today we will take a look at the important buildings which survived the many fires which ravaged the village from the late 1800's into the early part of this century.

First, a little background information on the village itself. The history of Davisville is really a story about two separate villages which centered around the two mill buildings which provided the impetus for the community's existence. Davisville's first incarnation centered around the original water-powered mill, which was on the Hunts River, just south of where Davisville Road meets Route 4. All that really remains of this version of Davisville is the Davis family homes and the ruins of the mill sluiceway, which can be found in the woods just off Davisville Rd. Davisville's rebirth occurred in the vicinity of the intersection of Davisville and Old Baptist Roads in the area surrounding the circa 1889 steam-powered mill which replaced the old mill. Not a trace of this mill remains, as its foundation is now buried under the rail overpass of Davisville Road. Davisville, as a viable village, began its slow death following the 1924 fire which closed the mill and ultimately ended the textile industry in this area.



The Pants Factory.



The Reynolds Company Store.

Although the mill itself is gone, two of the mill related buildings still remain to this day at the end of Old Baptist Road. They are the Reynolds Company Store and the Pants Factory. The Reynolds Company Store was built in 1889 by Lorenzo Vaughn. Mill workers could buy

whatever they needed at the store and have their purchases taken out of their weekly pay. The building is now part of a large antique business along with the building which once housed the Pants Factory. The Pants Factory was also constructed in 1889 and housed an operation where "Kentucky Jeans" were made. The bottom floor housed the cutting, sewing, and pressing machines and the upper floor was used for storage and office space. The building was later used for grain storage and also housed "Zeke's Exchange", a furniture outlet which was run by the wonderful local legend Zeke Harris.

Another integral part of life in the village of Davisville was "Pine Grove" or "Allen's Hall". It was built in 1901 by William Allen as a public hall for village activities. Concerts, dances, musicals, and dramatic presentations were held there. The villagers would walk there to see movies and listen to the Eddie Zack Band. The Grove Avenue building was later used as a warehouse and has now been partitioned up into apartments.



The Henry Sweet House.

The steam-powered mill was run by a partnership consisting of James Davis, his brother-in-law Henry Sweet, and their cousin by marriage Albert Reynolds. Henry Sweet and Albert Reynolds both built houses near their partner's estate "Bellefield". Henry built his house just south of "Bellefield" in 1855. Albert's house was across the road from his partners. Both houses still stand today.



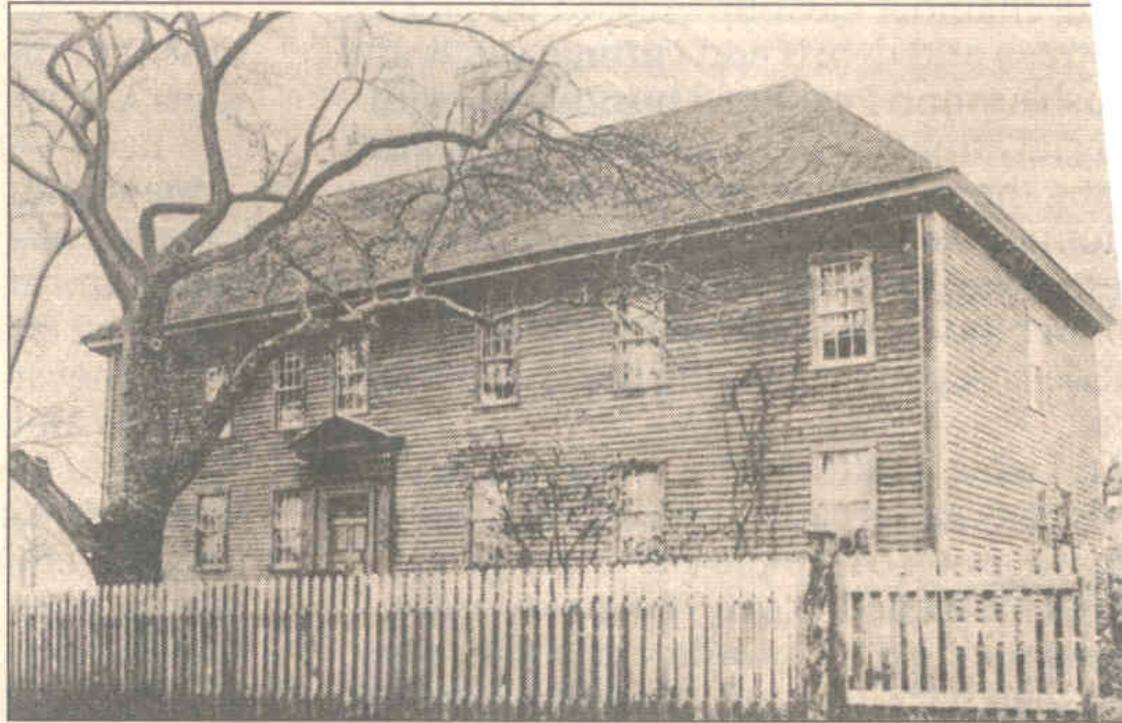
The Albert Reynolds House.

Henry Sweet, Albert Reynolds, and many of the other mill bosses and workers are now buried in the cemetery that they, along with the Davis family helped to create - Quidnessett Memorial Cemetery.

**The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston**

## **The Castle And The Treasure**

The decade of the sixties was a difficult time for historic buildings in North Kingstown. More important structures were lost in that turbulent time than in the three decades that succeeded it. One of the most important was the Phillips Castle.



**The Phillips Castle was located on Tower Hill Road near the site of the present day Belleville State Highway Garage. It was built around 1696 and was well into its third century when it was destroyed by fire in February, 1960.**

The Phillips Castle was located on Tower Hill Road near the site of the present day Belleville State Highway Garage. It was built around 1696 and was well into its third century when it was destroyed by fire in February of 1960. At that time it was the oldest home in the Wickford area; an honor which is now held by the George Thomas house, fondly known as "Old Yellow".

The castle's most compelling feature was easily its giant stone pilastered chimney and six foot high fireplace. Its base was said to be more than twenty square feet,

a normal-sized person could literally walk into the fireplace - it was that large.

After surviving more than 250 years, it succumbed to a force more powerful than the great blizzard of 1888 or the '38 hurricane. The great castle's walls were breached by greed. Convinced of the authenticity of an old legend, which claimed that a member of the Phillips clan had secreted away a treasure in the house, the last resident of Phillips Castle, over time, virtually disassembled its oldest portions rendering the house uninhabitable. Empty, and unguarded the house was consumed by a mysterious fire.

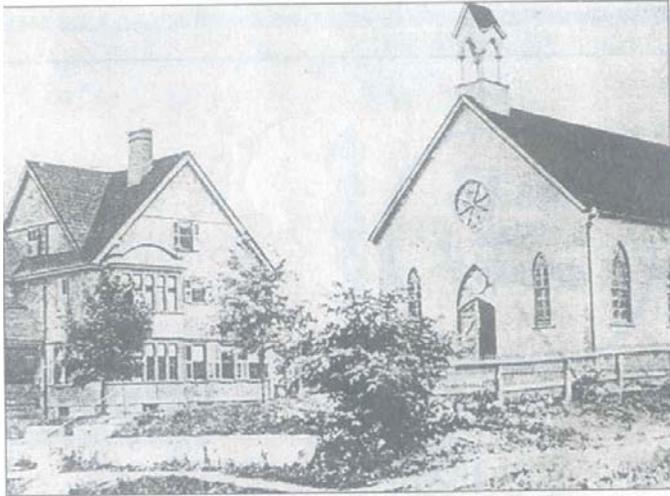
The truth of the matter is that Samuel Phillips, a man of considerable wealth, a member of the landed gentry; whose vast tract of land bounded on the east by Tower Hill Road, on the north by Ten Rod Road, on the south by the Shewatuck (Annaquatucket) River (which crosses under Tower Hill Rd. near the present day Daniel Dr.), and extending west to nearly the future site of the Rodman Mill had left his descendant a treasure of inestimable value. The irony of it all is that she destroyed it searching for something worth far less.

Post script: Samuel Phillips, one of the founders of North Kingstown as well as St. Paul's Church, died in 1736 at the age of 81. He is buried at the "Platform", the original site of "Old St Paul's Church". His descendants were prominent in the history of North Kingstown and Exeter.

If there is anyone out there with any memories and/or photographs of the Phillips Castle, I'd love to hear from you.

## The History of Saint Bernard's Roman Catholic Church

As we quickly approach the 125th anniversary of the dedication of this marvelous Church, on July 4, 2000, it seems appropriate to take a look back at its beginnings in the last half of the 19th century.



Above, a 1910 postcard shows a view of the church and rectory. Below is a view of the St. Bernard's Roman Catholic Mission in the late 1800s.



Saint Bernard's has its origins as a mission of the nearby "Our Lady Of Mercy" Parish in East Greenwich. Almost immediately after that Church's establishment in 1869 it was apparent that a growing Roman Catholic community in North Kingstown was in need of shepherding. The recent influx of Irish and French Catholic immigrants drawn by North Kingstown's numerous fabric mills had brought the traditionally Anglican and Baptist community to a point where a Catholic presence was required. Father William Halligan of "Our Lady", was the man chosen by the newly formed Diocese of Providence to establish a formal Catholic community in town. From

1869 to 1874 services were held in homes, as well as the Saunderstown schoolhouse and the N.K. Town Hall on West Main Street (now a part of the Cranston's of Wickford Funeral Home). In 1874, Father Halligan, on behalf of the Diocese of Providence, paid \$250 to the Holloway family of nearby Wickford for the land, in what was then known as Belleville, that the Church was built upon. The location chosen for the site of Saint Bernard's Mission, as it was then known, was no coincidence. Its proximity to the Belleville Station of the Newport to Wickford Rail Line allowed people from all over the region to attend Mass. Construction began that year and the Mission was

dedicated by Bishop Hendricken, the first Bishop of the Diocese, on July 4, 1875. Father Halligan, a truly busy man, went on to establish missions at St. Catherine's in Apponoag and St. Francis' in Wakefield.

In those early years of the parish, services were performed by whomever was available at "Our Lady" or anywhere else in the Diocese. The Pastor who was going to perform Mass would hop on the train in East Greenwich and would, prior to the Church building's construction in 1875, be met at Belleville Station by a parish member who would take him by horse and buggy to the location where the service was to be held. After 1875, he would simply walk across The Post Road and quickly be at the Mission. In 1904 all that changed when Father John McKenna was appointed as the first full time resident Pastor of Saint Bernard's. Father McKenna got right to work in his new Church (The installation of a full time pastor signaled the end of St Bernard's days as a mission). In 1906 he had the Church's Rectory constructed next door, just north of the Church building. It was designed by the same architectural firm, Murphy & Hindle, that designed the Church itself. In 1913, Father McKenna proudly presided over the installation of electricity to the Parish's buildings. He was also instrumental in having a portion of nearby Elm Grove Cemetery set aside for Catholics. By the time Father McKenna retired in 1915, his Church was on the way to becoming the vibrant community it is today. Other landmark dates in the Church's history include the construction of the Parish Hall, immediately behind the Church, in 1937, under the tutelage of Father John Cooney and the opening of a Parochial School in 1950 while Father Cornelius Collins was at the helm. The school began in the basement of the Parish Hall, but in 1956 Father Collins opened a new brick schoolhouse across the road on the property which he had recently purchased from the Denicourt Family. Father Collins invited nuns from the "Sisters of the Cross and Passion" to run the school and established a convent for them in the Denicourt house right next to the newly constructed school. St Bernard's school ran for some twenty years until 1970 when it was forced to close due to rising and prohibitive operational costs. The school prepared hundreds of young people for their continued education at either local Catholic high schools or at North Kingstown High School.

I'm sure that all of you in North Kingstown and East Greenwich join me in offering congratulations to the congregation of St. Bernard's as they reach this impressive milestone on their long journey of service to the community.

**The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston**

## **The Tale of the Sherman/Connor Farm**

The subject of this week's column has been gnawing at me; calling to me, for the last three years. It first caught my eye (and imagination) as I was perusing the R.I. Historic Preservation Commission's report on the town of North Kingstown, which was written in 1978. A short paragraph in the report detailed a list of historic homes which had been sold, disassembled, and removed from our little town, only to be rebuilt elsewhere. The Beriah Brown House and the Doctors Shaw House were mentioned, both of which I was already familiar with and whose stories I have already passed on to you, the curious reader. Mentioned as well were the escapades of Henry Ford as he made his ill-fated attempts to buy his own authentic New England town, piecemeal, and move it back to Michigan. This too, became the subject of a number of columns. The report's author also spoke of rumours of an authentic 17th century stone-ender which had stood on the site of the old Hamilton-Allenton Sanitary Landfill. This house, purported to have been constructed in the late 1600's, had been sold by the town to a party who had disassembled the oldest portion of the home and moved it Connecticut. Little else was mentioned about the Turner home, as it was called in the report, other than these few facts. I made a few cursory attempts to track the story down but always ran into a stone wall or a dead end. So I put the idea on one of my many mental backburners and moved on to other things. The funny thing is, the Turner House kept returning to the forefront; for some reason I couldn't let it go. So a few weeks ago, I gave it another try and hit paydirt. As I got into it, the story unfolded as if it was meant to be told. Long shots and last chances paid off, and what I was left with when the dust settled was an amazing story which works on many levels. It's the story of a remarkable old home and the farm that surrounded it, which spans three centuries, countless generations, and includes a cast of characters which read like a "Who's Who" of N. Kingstown history. It is also the story of a remarkable woman who did whatever it took to keep her family together; and if that's not enough, it also tells the tale of a well-intentioned, but poorly crafted, Federal program whose rules were followed but whose intent was misused.

Let's start at the beginning; the Sherman Farm, as it is known in the historical record, was

settled sometime in the late 1600's by, at this time, unknown members of the Sherman/Shearman family, one of the earliest families to put down roots in what was to become North Kingstown. The roughly 100 acre farm was bounded on the north by the Annaquatucket or Shewatuck River and on the south by the road which would one day be known as the Hamilton Allenton Road. Somewhere around 1690, the Shermans built a small gambrel-roofed stone-ender on the southern portion of the property, nearby the road. (For those of you who, like myself, are architecturally-challenged,- a stone-ender is a fairly rare and ancient colonial style of house whose one side wall consists entirely of a large fieldstone wall incorporating a fireplace and chimney.) It is believed that the Sherman family farmed and lived on the land for some 150 years, until the first fully identified owner, Oliver Sherman, sold or deeded his home to Hannah and James Arnold. It may be that Hannah was Oliver's daughter, but the historical record is not complete enough to say with certainty. By this time, the little stone-ender had been added on to many times and now resembled a more typical sprawling style of farmhouse. At some point or another, Hannah and James put up their farm as collateral on a loan, which they took out with a relative from the big city of Providence, a Mister Benjamin Arnold. Old "uncle" Ben was apparently a real "Snidley Whiplash" sort of fellow, because in 1885 he foreclosed on Hannah and James and took possession of the property. He quickly sold it to Caleb Cottrell.

Cottrell ran the farm for only a short while as he sold it in the late 1880's to George and Josephine Cook. The Cooks, it would appear, were also not able to make a go of it because they, in short order, sold it to a member of another of North Kingstown's first families, Zebulon Gardiner. At the time he purchased it Zebulon was already a fairly old man, and a wise man as well, as when he sold it to Samuel and Mercy Oatley in 1891, he had a provision included in the deed of transfer whereby Sam and Mercy had to allow Zebulon to live out his days on the farm; they had to feed and clothe him as well as pay for his burial. The Oatley's held true to their word, as the record of Zebulon's funeral in 1902 shows that they took care of him 'til the end. Throughout all of these changing of hands, the farm remained as it always was, a farm of 100 acres, always referred to in the record as the Sherman or Oliver Sherman farm, and so it was in November of 1907 when the Oatley's sold the Sherman Farm to James and Mary

Jane (Cherry) Connor, the parents of the woman whose life encompasses the second part of this story.

Catherine Connor, or Cate, as she was commonly known, was only eight years old when her parents purchased the Sherman Farm. It must have been an exciting time for the entire family as they moved in, almost ninety-three years ago. Little did Cate know that she would devote nearly her entire life to this small piece of North Kingstown and that her fate and future would be intertwined with its own. The Connor family prospered on the farm and, although it never made them wealthy, it did provide for them well enough to raise seven children to adulthood. James and Mary Jane cared deeply about the land and about their neighbors. Family tradition holds that in times of drought, when many of the surrounding shallower wells went dry, the Connor's would readily share the contents of the farm's amply supplied deeper wells, which were tied into the Annaquatucket's plentiful aquifer, with the adjacent families, including the closely knit small African-American community which also called the Hamilton-Allenton Road area home. As Cate's brothers grew to adulthood, they, one by one, went off into the world and made a life for themselves. Cate's surviving sisters, Lucy and Mildred, got married and moved away from the farm, although they did live close by. As a result of all this, when Cate's parents passed on, she and her husband, Emory Turner, were left as the owners of the family farm. Life continued on as before for the Turners, and their new son John, until fate dealt them a cruel blow and left Cate a widow with a farm to run and a son to raise. Sadly, one of the drawbacks of being a farmer in those early days of the newly inaugurated Social Security program was that you didn't have a portion of your wages going into it for you or your survivors to draw upon later, and Cate was left with no income other than what her now undermanned farm could produce. But, Cate was not one to give up and she simply did what she had to do to get by; with the help of her sister's families, who lived nearby, she ran a scaled down version of the farm, at the same time she also got work in one of the nearby mills. To supplement her family's income Cate got up early and went down to the waters off of Hamilton and gathered up oysters, which were abundant in the clean waters of the bay at that time, and sold them door-to-door. Many long time older residents of the area can still remember Cate going from house to house selling those oysters. Eventually, sister Lucy Leeming, too, became a widow and moved back in with Cate on the family farm. Son

John eventually enlisted in the service, married, and moved away, leaving the two sisters, Cate and Lucy, running the farm on their own. Things went on as before until Cate and Lucy, both of which had worked long enough in the town's mills to collect their own Social Security pensions, reached the ages where they could reap the rewards of their labors. They were able to slow down a little, although they still grew a garden large enough each year to feed themselves as well as run a farm stand on the side of Hamilton Allenton Road. They did what they had always done, they got by; that is until the taxes on their 100 acres became a burden which the two seventy plus year old women could not shoulder, and although it caused her heart to ache, Cate, and her sister Lucy, prepared to move in with sister Mildred Brittcliffe, now herself a widow, just down the road. The Connor Family Farm would have to be sold.

This is where the third part of our story begins. In 1969, along about the same time that Cate and Lucy were struggling with their decision to sell the farm which had been their life-long home, the town of North Kingstown was having a struggle of its own. The town's problem was about garbage, specifically its Oak Hill Road dump (now a part of Ryan Park.). The dump was an old style burn and bury affair and its neighbors and the state were pressuring the town to close it. But the first big question was, "What will N.K. do with their garbage?" A committee was formed, the problem was looked into, options were explored, and in the end the answer was - Buy the Connor Farm and operate a "state of the art" sanitary landfill there. An engineering study had been done and a promise of twenty-five years of operating life was bandied about. Assurances were made that the surrounding woodlands and the precious Annaquatucket River Aquifer and its associated wetlands would not be compromised. When word leaked out of the impending purchase of the new landfill site, not all of North Kingstown was so sure of wisdom of the decision. Petitions were circulated, and an outcry from the many concerned environmental-minded citizens was heard. For her part, Cate, who was now living with Lucy and Mildred within a stone's throw of her old home, was deeply saddened and concerned about the land and the river; but the town's offer was the only one she got and, with a heavy heart, she agreed to the sale. The town's next big concern was, "How do we pay for the purchase and up front operating/set up costs of our new landfill?" This is where the well intentioned, but poorly crafted "Green Acres"

program enters the picture. The Federally funded "Green Acres" program was intended to assist municipalities in purchasing and preserving open space for passive recreational use. But loopholes in the wording of the program gave the purchasing municipalities almost unlimited latitude over deciding what the end use for the purchased property would be. The Connor Farm certainly met the program's eligibility criteria for open space suitable for passive recreation and after some appropriate inquiries by the town's solicitor to see if any problems had arisen for towns or cities who had used the program in a similar way in the past the monies were applied for. Don't get me wrong, nothing illegal was done here, every "T" was crossed and every "I" was dotted, but I don't think that the original intent of the "Green Acres" program was considered. My concern now, and the concern of many people then, is that we, the town of North Kingstown, crossed that blurry line between what is legally right and what is morally right. Needless to say, the naysayers were quieted and the deal was done and a large portion of the money that Cate got for her farm was paid for in "Green Acres" money.

After gaining ownership of the land North Kingstown began the set up of its landfill. Our story now goes back to the final chapter on the ancient stone-ender which piqued my curiosity in the first place. The town, at the time, obviously, did not know what a gem they had in the Sherman farmhouse, for they put the purchase and removal of the house out to bid and sold the 280 year old structure for the princely sum of \$100. The successful bidders, Carlson and Foreman, of Wickford were knowledgeable in the ways of architecture and antiques and knew full well what the old house was all about. They bid on it solely because they fell in love with it and could not stand to see it demolished. They made every effort to keep the original gambrel-roofed portion in town, but were unsuccessful due to among other things, zoning considerations and requirements at their chosen site. They in turn, sold the house to "The Architectural Preservation Group", the firm which had successfully moved the Beriah Brown House to Newport for Doris Duke's Preservation program. The firm's principle, Steven Tyson, assured Carlson and Foreman that as much of the house as possible would be saved, and with that the house's structural members and interior architectural details were preserved and incorporated into a home in nearby Vermont. The Sanitary Landfill, for which the house and farm were

sacrificed, never did live up its expectations. Its useful life was considerably shorter than the twenty-five years mentioned in the engineering studies. The surrounding woods and wetlands were compromised and the long-closed landfill sits, like an angry scar, right in the middle of what was once a verdant and productive farm. Standing testimony to the whole affair, a graffiti covered sign graces the entrance to the site, and speaks of the wonderful "Green Acres" program.

I would like to close this tale by completing the story of Cate (Connor) Turner. She and Lucy did quite nicely with Mildred at her home on Hamilton Allenton Road. As a matter of fact they both out lasted the sanitary landfill, which never got near to its vaunted operating life of twenty-five years. She also out lived her sister Mildred, whom she cared for in her waning years. She and Lucy planted a sizeable garden at Mildred's place and tended to it well into their eighties. They also continued to operate their roadside vegetable stand for quite a time as well. Unfortunately, in March of 1989 Cate fell and broke her hip. Her son, John, came and scooped her and Lucy up and moved them down to a Nursing Home in Bay City Texas, near to where he then lived. His actions saddened the rest of Cate and Lucy's extended family who had hoped to see them end their days where they began them. Both Cate and Lucy died in Bay City in 1990 and are buried hundreds of miles away from the farm that they loved so much. When asked about Cate, her grand-niece Mary Jane Anthony, who now lives in



Sisters Mildred Brittcliffe, Cate Turner and Lucy Leeming (from left) pose with brothers John and William Conner near the east end of the farmhouse around 1945.

the Brittcliffe house, says that she was a "tough old yankee that did whatever she had to do." I'm afraid I must respectfully disagree, for it is my opinion that Cate Connor was a hero.

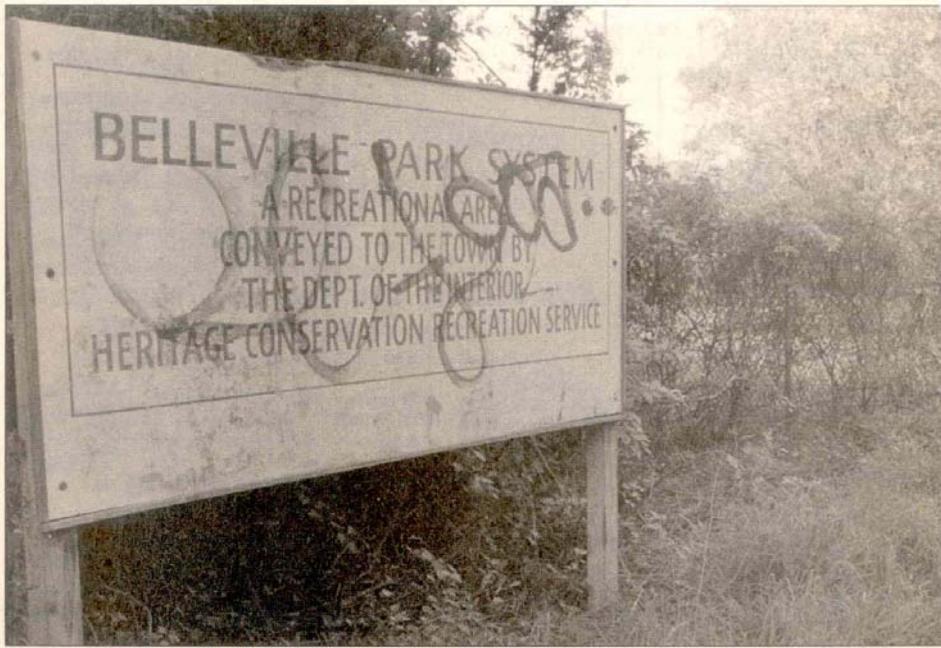


PHOTO: DAVID GOLDMAN

A sign outside the former farm property on Hamilton Allenton Road, later used as a landfill, tells the story of how the land ended up in the town's hands.



Cate Turner's niece, Arlene, and a goat friend are photographed in front of the farmhouse around 1945.

## Elmgrove Cemetery

The greatest single repository of North Kingstown history is not, as you might think, the N K. Library or the records vault at the town hall. It is not locked away in musty dusty ledgers at the state archives or contained among the vast holdings of the Rhode Island Historical Society; furthermore it certainly isn't contained within the fuzzy and somewhat confused area between this columnist's ears. No, the single greatest repository of local history exists beneath the spreading branches of the many trees which shade the thick grass on the more than 10,000 plots at Elmgrove Cemetery. For the history of this town is the history of her people; and the lion's share of the residents of the North Kingstown of long ago are right here in Elmgrove.

Elmgrove, in a way, does something which was already done, but does it in a more concrete fashion. It connects all of North Kingstown together. They are all here now; the young and the old, the rich and the poor, members of old New England families as well as first generation immigrants, those who died centuries ago and those who died just this month. Elmgrove is the great equalizer; here there is no difference between the town's most celebrated, people like empire builder Robert Rodman or Governor William Gregory, and her forgotten, people like 19th century wife and mother Cinderella Hoxsie or 95 year old "colored mute" and more than likely freed slave Thankful Union. They are all the same now - they are someone's son or daughter, husband or wife, father or mother. In sharing Elmgrove, they belong to each other now. An amazing fact about the old section of the cemetery is that, if you take genealogy to its ultimate convoluted conclusion, factoring in the notion that this was once an extremely close-knit community, it is proper to say that everyone there is some how related. This ties me, and countless others like me who trace their roots to this town, to them; and maybe, goes a long way towards explaining why Elmgrove is so special to so many people.

One of those people who hold Elmgrove Cemetery in high esteem is Wickford resident Althea McAleer. Althea, who already logged countless hours and innumerable briar scratches exploring and cataloging all of our fair town's small family cemeteries for her wonderful 1992 book on the historic cemeteries of North Kingstown, has just

completed the even more daunting task of recording, organizing, and verifying the records of the 10,000 souls who are buried here. Just published, after seven years of meticulous work, her book "Elmgrove Cemetery Inscriptions" is a "must have" for every serious student of local history and/or genealogy and goes right to the top of the list of "Swamptown Seal of Approval" Christmas gifts. A word to the wise, this book was printed in a limited run, and will be difficult to get before you know it. So don't wait too long. For anyone who is interested in getting a copy of Althea's first book on the many small family plots which are scattered through the woods and along the roadsides of our town contact me at the paper and I will pass on ordering instructions for that as well.



FILE PHOTO: DAVID GOLDMAN

Althea McAleer of North Kingstown, seen here last year in Elm Grove Cemetery, recently finished seven years of meticulous work to publish her latest book, "Elm Grove Cemetery Inscriptions."

Elmgrove was planned during a time when cemeteries were designed for the living as well as the dead. Its tree-lined avenues were then, and still are now, a place for contemplation and relaxation. I find it sad that contemporary attitudes have placed beautiful spots like Elmgrove or the town's other major cemetery, Quidnessett, on everyone's list of places to be shunned. On the contrary, they ought to be appreciated for what they are, well-tended gardens; oases in our hectic world, peaceful places which we all should take respectful advantage of; and if,

while you are there you see a small, but, determined woman studying the stones, if she appears to be attempting to literally wring the truth out of the very granite or marble in front of her, then you've come upon Althea McAleer beginning another seemingly impossible quest.

Photo courtesy of the [North East Independent](#)

**The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston**

## **The Mill Village at Silver Spring**

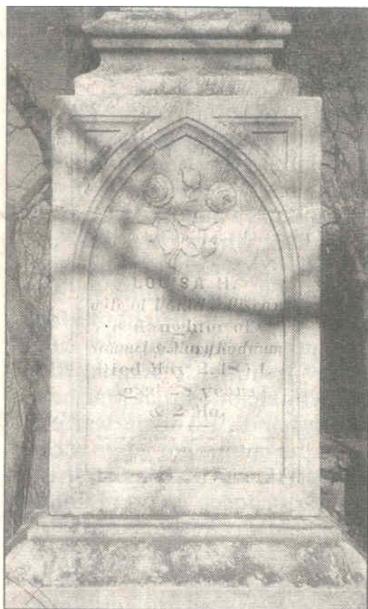
Back in 1762, entrepreneur Joseph Taylor decided to dam the Mettatuxet River in order to construct one of the area's first fulling and carding mills. In doing so, he set in motion an enterprise which existed on the shore of the mill pond he created, Silver Spring Pond, and lasted for nearly 200 years in one form or another. The pond was named for the peculiar habit of an existing natural spring which constantly threw up mica chips along with its cool clear water. His dam and its associated waterfall, having been rebuilt and reinforced many times, is still a joy for all to behold nearly 240 years later. The dam is a living artifact, testifying daily to one of the colonist's earliest attempts to harness the power of the area's many streams and rivers.

Loyal readers, if you are anything like your humble columnist, you don't have a clue what happens at a carding and fulling mill, so I'll take a little break from our tale to pass on what I found out about this mysterious and ancient enterprise. After a bit of head-scratching and a lot of research I have ascertained that the farm folk of the day would bring good Mr. Taylor the wool that they sheared from their sheep and he would clean, comb, and card it to prepare it for eventual spinning into yarn on the many family spinning wheels which existed at virtually every home in the region. After the yarn was spun and it was woven into cloth, it would be brought back to the mill for fulling. Fulling is the process of shrinking and thickening woolen cloth by a combination of moistening, heating, and pressing. This gives the cloth more body, insures that it retains its shape, and makes it thicker; and that's our lesson for the day. Now back to the story.

The Taylor's ran their mill at Silver Spring for many years. The accompanying photographs show two houses which are, by virtue of their estimated construction date, more than likely Taylor homes. The earliest and closest to the pond, 1401 Tower Hill Road, was built around the middle of the 1700's and may be the family home of Joseph Taylor. This unique and rambling colonial home is testimony to the fact that it is possible to install vinyl siding on a home and still retain and protect its valuable historical architectural features. Just to the north of this home stands the two

and a half story-central-chimneyed home which has been greeting passerbys on Tower Hill Road since its construction at the end of the 1700's. It still retains its enormous central chimney, as well as many 19th century 12 over 12 windows. The house's foundation is constructed from hand cut stones similar to the ones used to build the dam and sluice way at the nearby pond. It may be a later Taylor home. The Taylors, with extraordinary timing, sold their mill to J. D. Williams in 1823. I say this, because, in 1824, the mill was swept away by a massive flood which roared down the Mettatuxet River destroying all in its path. Williams rebuilt the mill and retooled it into a weaving mill where he manufactured coarse woolen goods. Williams, sold the mill to the Hazard family in 1832, who in turn sold it to Christopher Allen in 1835. In 1841, the mill became one of the earliest pieces of the Robert Rodman empire when he purchased it from Allen.

This is where the story gets interesting, for in 1845 Robert Rodman sold the Silver Spring Mill, pond, and all the surrounding lands and homes to the husband of his cousin, Louisa Rodman. Nineteen year old Louisa had just married forty year old Daniel Hiscox, a man of wealth who lived at the corner of present day Hamilton-Allenton and Boston Neck Roads. Louisa left her S. Kingstown home and moved onto the Hiscox Estate (as it was then known) with her new husband. Life went along well enough for the newlyweds, they were blessed with the birth of a daughter, Susan, in 1849, and the mill thrived under Daniel's guidance. At some point during this time



This monument marks the grave of Louisa Hiscox, who died in childbirth. The son she bore died three months later.

frame, Daniel also purchased the Narragansett Mill, which was located on the Annaquatucket River, in the vicinity of the present day Razee's Motorcycle establishment. But sadly, as it often does, tragedy struck the Hiscox family in 1854, when Louisa died giving birth to their second child, Daniel Jr. The grieving husband was struck again three short months later, when his namesake, too, joined his wife in death. The monument which the elder Daniel placed upon the grave of his wife and son can still be seen today farther down Hamilton-Allenton Road and is in my estimation, perhaps, the most beautiful in all of North Kingstown. Daniel was now left a widower with a five year old daughter to raise and two mills to run. How he

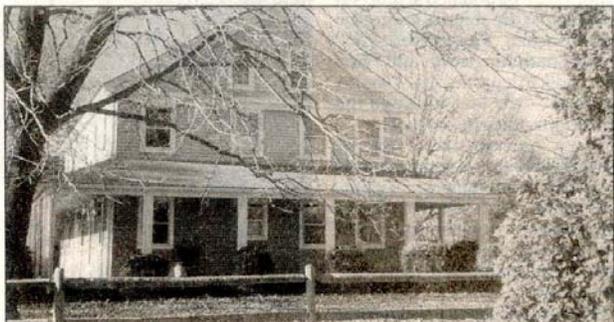
managed to do it we can only guess, but he carried on and continued to be successful. That is until 1861, when tragedy struck again and little Susan, now twelve years old, became an orphan. Daniel was dead at 56 years of age and was buried next to his young wife. Not only was Susan instantly an orphan, she was also instantly a mill owner, as her father's estate passed down to her, his only heir. This was truly an unusual situation, and presented a unique problem for Hiscox's many business partners. For in an age when women just didn't meddle in the affairs of business, these four men, Albert Pierce, Gideon Reynolds, Nicholas Spink, and Robert Rodman, were now contractually bound into partnerships with a little girl; and although the scene may have never played itself out in such a fashion it is almost irresistible to imagine these four captains of N.K.'s industry, sitting around in the library of Rodman's mansion, with cigars clenched in their teeth, discussing a solution to the vexing question of "what to do with the Hiscox girl?".

However they arrived at a solution, the historic record shows that it was as unique as the situation was. For two years later, in 1863, Pierce and Spink found themselves petitioning the Rhode Island General Assembly to have a bill passed declaring Nicholas Spink as Susan Hiscox's legal guardian. All went as planned and Spink dispersed the assets of Daniel Hiscox and sent Susan off into her future with the enormous sum of \$20,000; making her the equivalent of a millionaire by today's standards. Her fate beyond that is yet an unknown entity, the last document I have seen concerning her lists her as residing in New York. I only hope that fate dealt her a better hand for the remainder of her life.

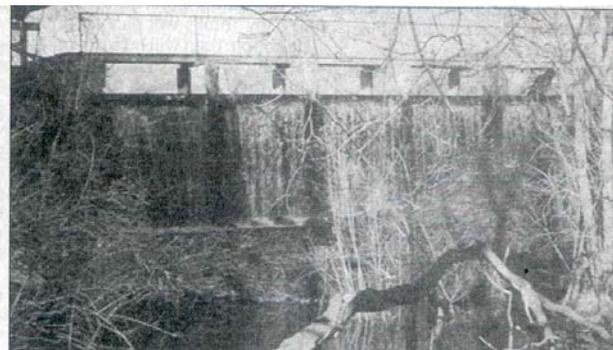
The mill itself eventually ended up back in the fold of the Rodman Empire, as he purchased it from Gideon Reynolds in 1868. Just prior to this transaction the mill building that Williams had constructed in 1824 burned. Rodman rebuilt it and retooled it again for the manufacture of a fabric known as doeskin. The mill remained a part of Rodman Manufacturing, operating well into the twentieth century. Even after the mills closure the Rodman family held on to the property until the disbandment of the company in 1954.

The mill building that Robert Rodman built, shown in the accompanying photograph, is long gone. The Hiscox Estate house survived the many years since Susan Hiscox, N.K.'s own

little rich girl, left it; it was restored and refurbished in the 1970's by popular URI biology professor Frank Heppner and now is as lovely as it must have been when Daniel brought his new bride home to it. Only the dam and the falls remain the same, and they continue to fascinate young and old alike. I expect they delighted the children of Joseph Taylor, way back in the 18th century, just as much as they do the children of the twenty first century.



Seen here is the Hiscox Estate house.



The falls at Silver Spring attract young and old each year.



This house may be the first Taylor house in the Silver Spring area.



The center-chimneyed Colonial house on Tower Hill Road features many 19th-century 12-over-12 windows.

## The Baker Estate - Cedar Spring Farm

About half way up the long winding hill at the start of Prospect Avenue just outside of Wickford village, are the vestiges of the David Baker Estate, one of the largest and certainly most impressive in the immediate area of the village. The estate consisted of two main homes, a barn, housing for hired hands, and the associated outbuildings needed to run the farm. The property itself ran from the nearby cove and included most of the land on the west side of Prospect Avenue, nearly down to Annaquatucket Road. We know quite a great deal about the goings on at Cedar Spring Farm, the home of the combined Baker and Candler families for many decades, due to the writings of the daughter of David Baker and Anita (Candler) Baker; Anita Hinkley. Mrs. Hinkley published her musings about life in Wickford during the late 1800's and early 1900's, in a book called "Wickford Memories", and it is largely from this book that this week's column is derived. I recommend it heartily to anyone interested in glimpsing a slice of life in those heady times. But, before we get into stories about Cedar Spring Farm, let's take a look at the two homes that remain.

According to Mrs. Hinkley's writings, the two houses were known simply as the house and the big house. As the big house is so impressive that it almost demands attention, lets look at that first. The big house, now known as the Annaquatucket Apartments, was built around 1881. Mr. Baker, a prominent lawyer of his time, the superintendent of North Kingstown's school department, and a state legislator, had the house built from plans designed by prominent Providence architect, E.S. Angell. The three story house, with its four story tower was, and still is, one of the largest and most impressive buildings in town, although it has sadly, like so many of the other grand homes of that age, fallen prey to being divvied up into apartments. The other home is somewhat older, and has, due to its more manageable size, remained a single family home. It appears, according to Mrs. Hinkley's book, that the original house and its adjacent barn pre-date the Civil War. The two story Late Victorian cottage, with its wonderful encircling veranda and intricate scrollwork trim, is just as beautiful as it must have been when the Bakers and Clanders were sitting in rockers on the porch enjoying a summer evening.



PHOTO: ERIC GRANSTON

The "big house" of the David Baker Estate on Prospect Avenue has since been divvied up and now is known as the Annaquatucket Apartments.

Cedar Spring Farm, as beautiful as it must have been, does retain the dubious distinction, according to Anita Hinkley, of being the place in Wickford where the most murders have occurred. She tells the tales of three separate incidents which, combined, cost the lives of four men. The first involved a clambake, too much hard cider, and the suspect toss of a single horseshoe in what had begun as a friendly match. The next incident concerns bootleggers and highjackers and a mysterious corpse. The final event involved a beloved, but drunk, hired hand and a wet-behind-the-ears State Police Officer, both of which ended up with a bullet in

their head. I won't tell you any more; go get this wonderful book from the library and find it all out for yourself. What I will say is that, for many years, residents of the Annaquatucket Apartments have complained of the ghost of a loyal hired hand who not only didn't know when to say when in the tavern, he also doesn't seem to be able to give up his duties out at Cedar Spring Farm.

## The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

### Duck Cove Farm

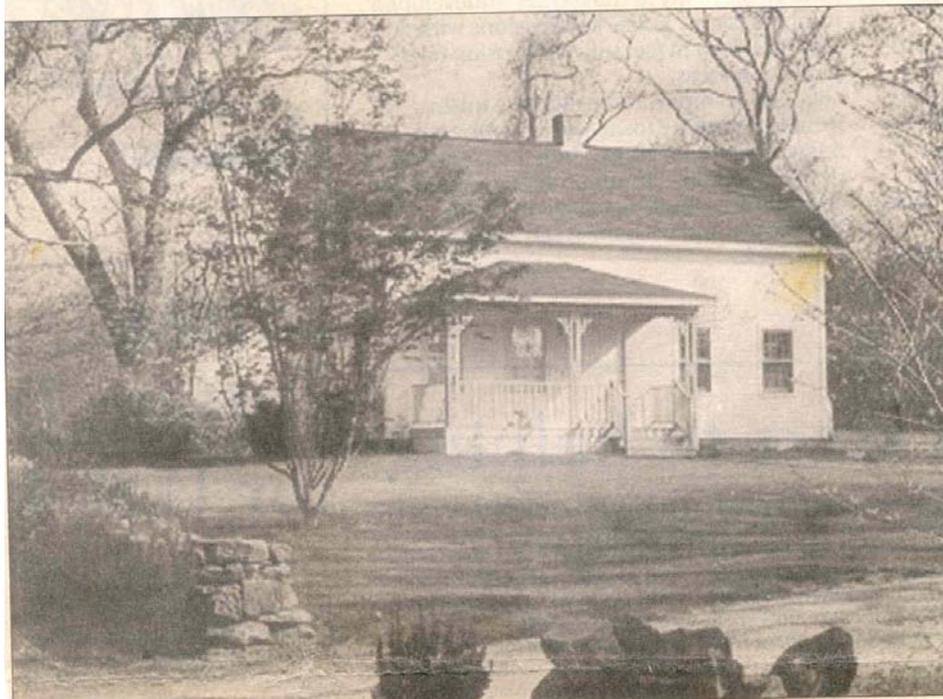
Last year around this time we took a look at some our area's most impressive historic gardens. This year, in that same spirit of spring, we'll take a gander at the summer estate/farm of Randall Holden Greene, a wealthy Brooklynite of the middle 1800's, and his extended clan, the interrelated Greene, Dyer, and Earle families - Duck Cove Farm.

The area we now know as Duck Cove has a long history, which dates back to the days of the Narragansetts, who are reputed to have used the cove as a ceremonial ground and summer home for the reigning tribal chieftain. It was known by the Narragansetts as Homogansett, an ancient name which will show up again later in this story. The land was included in the Pettasquamscutt Purchase, which was orchestrated by our old friend Roger Williams among others, and eventually, like so much of the surrounding area, ended up in the hands of the Updike Family of Smith's Castle fame. The Updike's held onto the land for generations, but they eventually sold it, in the early 1800's, to Rhode Island Supreme Court Justice John Pitman of Providence. Pitman was a rising star in the state, being, at that time, the youngest judge in the long history of the court. It is thought that a portion of "Cottage" at the end of Elm Drive, the main road through the area, dates back to this time frame. Pitman, in turn, sold the estate to Randall Holden Greene in 1852. Greene, in that same year, employed the famed Rhode Island architect Thomas Tefft to design and construct an elaborate and picturesque addition to the existing house. Greene's Duck Cove Farm extended from what is now Ramblewood, south to Waldron Avenue and included all the land from the Boston Neck Road to the shores of Duck Cove, Little Tree, and Wild Goose Points on the bay. In 1876, Greene married for a second time and in doing so, so expanded his extended family that he required a second "Cottage", which he had built just north of the first house. Randall Holden Greene was a gentleman farmer of sorts, and with the help of tenant farmers, for which he built wonderful living quarters, he ran an extensive agricultural enterprise which included cranberry bogs, state of the art high-yield livestock and vegetable production, and his pride and joy - The Homogansett Nurseries and Greenhouses, in which he cultivated ornamental plants and fruit trees. The greenhouses, which stood adjacent to the present day site of the Methodist Church on Boston Neck Road, are long gone, but the associated tenant house, known as Halfway House, as it stands half way between the villages of Wickford and Hamilton, still exists. Another

wonderful tenant house is also still with us; it stands closer to the two main cottages on Elm Drive along with the fantastic main barn which has been divided into apartments. All these surviving buildings of The Duck Cove Farm are architectural gems and stand proudly as monuments to the vision of latter-day Yeoman Randall Greene.



The main "cottage" at Randall Holden Greene's Duck Cove Farm.



The Halfway House – the tenant house associated with Greene's Homogansett greenhouses.

## The Annaquatucket Mill Village

At the end of the 1600's Stephen Northup settled along the southern bank of the Shewatuck, near the end of the river in an area known to the local Indians as Annaquatucket - "the end of the river". His central-chimneyed oft-added-to home remains there to this day, a full three hundred years later; the focal point of the village which once surrounded the Annaquatucket Mill of Captain Esbon Sanford at the intersection of the present day Annaquatucket Road and Featherbed Lane.

The Stephen Northup house has seen a lot in its three centuries of existence. Although it began its life as the home of Squire Northup, his wife, and their five children, it eventually became housing for a number of mill worker families during the middle 1800's. Thankfully, the house has been beautifully restored to its original splendor and is again a single family home. It is thought to be the second oldest home in North Kingstown.

Captain Esbon Sanford began cotton manufacturing at this site in 1832. He made red and blue flannel cloth as well as "Kentucky Jeans" in his mill located on Featherbed Lane. Sanford had dammed the river and formed the Annaquatucket Pond to use as a power source to run his mill. In 1858 he leased his mill to local mill baron Syria Vaughn, who at that time ran a number of mills in the area. Like so many other mills, the 1832 building burned in 1875 and was replaced by a new building forty feet wide by one hundred feet long. The mill operated into the early twentieth century, and ended its days as a part of the Hamilton Web Company. Little remains of the mill other than the foundations of the mill itself and ruins of the 1832 "Cotton Waste House". Another interesting feature of the mill site is the enormous stone which makes up the bridge over the river as it runs past the Cotton Waste House just below the dam. Originally a single piece of stone, one wonders how it was set in place using the technology of 1832.

Captain Sanford's circa 1832 home sits proudly front and center in Annaquatucket Village. An interesting feature of this attractive house is that the apparent central chimney actually

splits into two stacks around a central hallway. This house, too, is beautifully restored right down to the Victorian style granite-posted fence that surrounds it. Esbon would be pleased.

Captain Esbon Sanford died in 1864 and is buried in Elmgrove Cemetery.

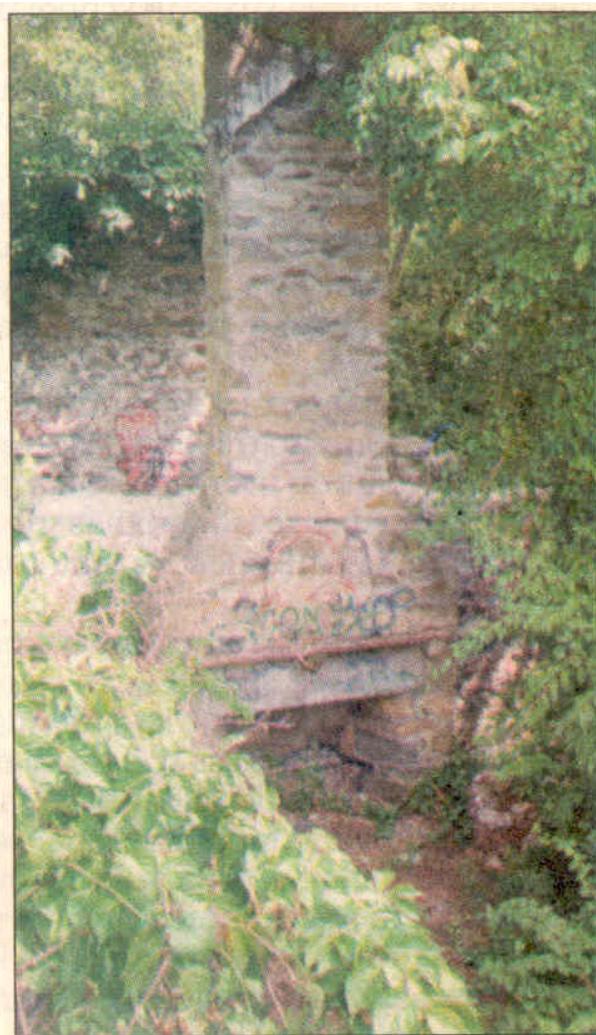


The Esbon Sanford Home.



PHOTOS: LINDA LEE

The Stephen Northup Home.



The ruins of the Cotton Waste House of the Annaquatucket Mill on Featherbed Lane.

## The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

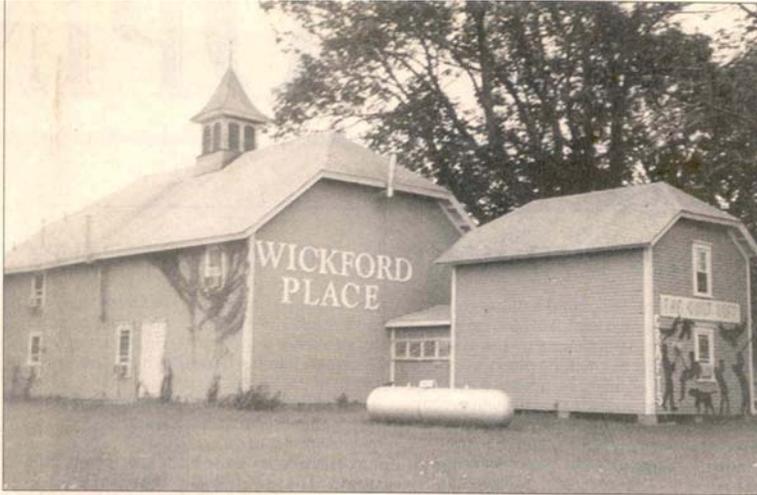
### The Other Rodman Mansion

The year 1841 was an auspicious one for young Robert Rodman. The twenty-three year old not only married his sweetheart Almira Taylor in April, he also signed a long term lease with his new father-in-law William Taylor to take over the Taylor-owned mill at Silver Spring. The marriage of Rodman to Taylor joined the three major mill-owning families in the area into one powerhouse which would dominate the industry locally. The faith that the elder Taylor and his wife, the former Mary Sanford, placed in Rodman was well rewarded, as Robert took the lease of this small mill and eventually turned it into an empire with which he was able to provide for his young wife's needs quite nicely.

It is thought that Rodman brought his young bride home to this fairly simple (by Rodman standards) home which he had built near the shore of the mill pond created for his enterprise. It is located on present day Pendar Road. It was built around the time of his wedding and is a simplified version of a house which was located next door to Rodman's childhood home in the Wakefield area. The house is now known as the Mill Superintendent's House as that is what it became as Rodman's empire grew and he moved into his first mansion house located nearby on Shady Lea Road.

Although exact dates are unknown, it is thought that the Rodman family moved into the Shady Lea Mansion sometime around the end of the 1850's to as late as 1860. His two and one half story mansard-roofed home, complete with bay windows and a wonderful veranda, as well as a splendid granite-posted picket fence which surrounded the meticulously landscaped yard was framed by splendid specimen trees; some of which still exist today. Robert Rodman's stay in his first mansion was short lived though; by 1863 he was building his new (and more well known) mansion near his now main place of business, the Rodman Mill on Ten Rod Road. His empire was expanding exponentially as the Civil War began. He had more war related orders than he could fill with the mills he had at hand. He began to expand the Lafayette Mill, as it was known, as fast as he could. He also increased operations at the Silver Spring Mill, which he eventually purchased outright from his in-laws. A little later he acquired the Shady Lea Mill from Walter Chapin, who had also done well during the war making blankets for the Union Army. Coincidentally,

operations at this mill had begun in the early part of the century by the family of Rodman's mother-in-law, the Sanfords, who had in turn sold it to Chapin.



The Rodman horse barn now holds the arts and crafts products of Wickford Place.



Above is the mill superintendent's house on Silver Spring Pond.

PHOTOS: LINDA L...

Robert Rodman needed someone he could trust to run his two mills in the southern part of town. That job fell to his third son Charles, who along with brother Albert, took charge of the mills around 1870. Charles moved into his father's former mansion, set conveniently between them, at about that same time. Charles and his family lived in the home until around the turn of the century and the house is known as the Charles Rodman House in honor of the man who spent his many years in it. Sometime soon after moving in and taking charge, Charles supervised the construction of the picturesque livestock barn which has been a landmark for generations of beachgoers and sightseers travelling Route 1. It is thought that the barn

was used to house the horses, mules, and other livestock necessary to operate the two mills, as well as the Rodman families personal horses and livestock. The barn and the mansion were a part of the Rodman Empire until its end in 1952.

**The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston**

## The Who, What, and Where For April

Greetings, Readers! This week's installment of local history comes in the form of a "who", "what", and a "where".

### WHO

In my opinion, the most intriguing name in all of Elmgrove Cemetery belongs to Cinderella Hoxsie. Cinderella was born on October 23, 1843 and lived here in the area until her death on March 31, 1925. She was the wife of Clark Hoxsie and before her marriage was known as Cinderella Knight. The story goes that Clark, like many of his relatives, worked on the railroad and met Cinderella somewhere south of here. Unfortunately, this storybook tale



Cinderella Hoxie's tombstone in Elmgrove Cemetery.

of a young man who goes off to make his fortune on the railroads and comes home with a real-life Cinderella includes a cruel twist of fate. The same railroad which brought home a wife and daughter-in-law for the Hoxsie family also took a son, when Crawford Hoxsie was killed in a freak railroad accident. According to his headstone, in the same Elmgrove family plot as Cinderella's and Clark's, Crawford hit a bridge while hanging on to the train.

### WHAT

Our "what" concerns the enterprises of the brothers Earnshaw and their fine drugstores. These were old-fashioned shops with soda fountains and roasted



Earnshaw's Drug Store on Main Street in East Greenwich (above) and on Brown Street in Wickford.



peanuts, as well as every item a well-stocked pharmacy ought to have. Every child within walking distance was very familiar with the contents of the comic book rack as well as the menu at the soda fountain. (I even conned my mother out of a cherry Coke and a Lime Rickey in both stores during the course of a single day.) Sadly, the East Greenwich store eventually closed, but they both live on in memory and on these two promotional postcards. Look closely at the Wickford card and you can see the penny scale that still sits in the corner of Earnshaw's today.

## WHERE

Our "where" today is really the solution to a mystery. You may have noticed as you drive to Wal-Mart or McKay's Furniture that this area, historically known as Lafayette, Scrabbletown, and Swamptown, is literally pockmarked with the remains of many abandoned sandpits and gravel banks. I had always wondered, even as a boy, where did all that sand and gravel go to? Well, according to George Gardiner's wonderful book on Lafayette it went to fill in what is now Quonset/Davisville. It seems that the U.S. government had a big hole to fill and a sizeable sum of money to spend and the enterprising inhabitants of the aforementioned areas had an awful lot of fill to sell. As a consequence we all ended up with a big empty place to put a Wal-Mart. Just something to contemplate as we debate spending a lot of money to fill up another big hole in the same location.

## The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

Today's column is our monthly installment of the "who", "what", and "where" of local history. This time it comes in the form of a murder mystery, a missed opportunity, and a building with a forgotten past.

### WHO

#### A Murder Mystery - The Eldred Holloway Story

Eldred Holloway was born on May 9, 1803 to William and Mary Holloway of Wickford. The Holloways were a seafaring family and a successful one at that. Captain William Holloway had his grand "Quality Hill" home (The name of the area we know as West Main St. at the time) built right around the time of Eldred's birth. Across the street was the shipyard where, in 1816, the Captain's famous 30-ton packet sloop the "Resolution" was constructed. The "Resolution" ran between Wickford and Newport for fifty-five years with Captain Holloway at the helm for much of that time.



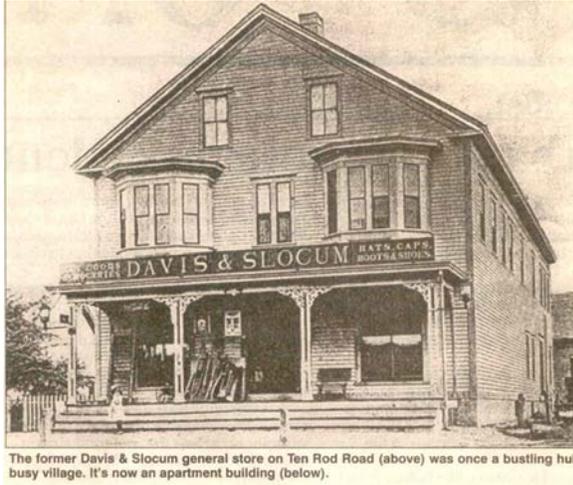
Holloway's grand "Quality Hill" home.

The Providence-registered brigantine "Crawford" set sail from its home port on April 3, 1827 bound for Havana, Cuba; on board was Eldred Holloway. When the ship returned to Providence on July the seventh, amongst its cargo was his body.

Little is known about the details of Eldred's demise other than what is etched on his gravestone in Elmgrove Cemetery - Fell a victim to the assassin on board the Brigantine "Crawford" near the island of Cuba June 1, 1827. If there is anyone out there with any information about the Holloway family please drop me a line at the paper.

## WHAT

Our "what" this week concerns a very unassuming apartment building on Ten Rod Road. As you can see by the postcard photo this building was once Lafayette's general store and post office. Although it doesn't look like much now, it was once the hub of a busy little village.



The former Davis & Slocum general store on Ten Rod Road (above) was once a bustling hub busy village. It's now an apartment building (below).



## WHERE

### **A Missed Opportunity - The University of North Kingstown?**

Around 1730 the renowned Anglican theologian from Ireland, Dean (later Bishop) George Berkeley arrived in Newport to attempt to raise additional funds for a college he was authorized to found in Bermuda. He was so taken with Rhode Island that he stayed here for several years hobnobbing with local religious and intellectual leaders like Rev. Dr. MacSparran and Colonel Daniel Updike of St. Paul's Anglican Church in Kingstowne. With the aforementioned gentlemen as guides Berkeley toured the area and decided to abandon his plan for a Bermuda college and instead build one here. He chose the area known as Hammond Hill (at the intersection of the present day Gilbert Stuart and Tower Hill Roads). Unfortunately for Berkeley (and North Kingstown) his detractors and enemies in Parliament used his vacillation over a site for his college to get his charter and funding rescinded. So, but for a disagreement in the House of Lords, North Kingstown almost had its own version of Harvard or Yale.

**The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston**

## The Who, What, and Where for June

This week's column is our monthly installment of the who, what, and where of local history; sort of a catch-all for interesting tidbits of local lore not large enough to warrant a full write-up. This time we learn of an empire-building home wrecker, a monument to the men who fought in the great war, and

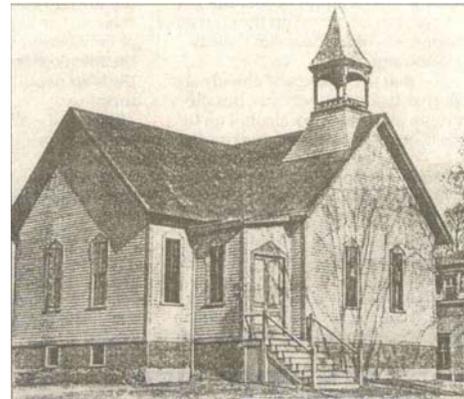
Our featured empire-building "who" is none other than Henry Ford. It seems that other than mass-producing reasonably priced automobiles his real love was preserving America's historic buildings. As a matter of fact in the early 1920's he attempted to set up a re-creation of a New England village on the Boston Post Road between Marlboro and Sudbury Massachusetts. Sort of an early Sturbridge Village as it were. So, in 1924 he purchased two ancient North Kingstown homes, loaded them on to trucks, and set off on his way to their new location in our neighboring state. Unfortunately, they were destroyed in transit. His museum village never really got off the ground either; although some of the buildings he successfully moved are there to this day.

Our "what" for this month is the Grand Army of the Republic monument in Elmgrove Cemetery. It was constructed in Westerly, RI in 1898, of light grey Westerly granite and was dedicated in a grand ceremony on Memorial Day of that same year. It stands over 25 feet tall and is composed of a base and 26 separate blocks of granite each engraved with the name of one of G.A.R. posts in the state. The highly polished black granite globe at the summit of the monument is said to weigh almost half a ton. The local G.A.R. is also responsible for the wonderful Civil War statue in front of the town hall. The final meeting of the G.A.R. occurred in August 1949 in



Indiana. The seventeen remaining members of an organization which once numbered nearly one half million gathered one last time more than eighty years after the war had ended.

Our "where" for the month is the former Methodist Church building at 31 West Main Street in Wickford. It was built in 1885 by the Sherman Brothers of Wickford and, as you can see by the postcard view, possessed at that time a small bell turret and steeple. For a time this building was the home of the North Kingstown Ambulance Association and then a museum housing firefighting memorabilia including the "Fearless and Faithful Washington #1", an antique fire engine which many times was a winner in her class at the New England Firemen's Muster. Its former home, the old Methodist Church, has now been converted into small shops.



Methodist Church building today (above) and circa 1900 (below).

## The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

### The Who, What, and Where for July

This week's column is our monthly installment of the who, what, and where of local history; sort of a catch-all for interesting tidbits of local lore not large enough to warrant a full write-up. This time we learn of a local doctor who forgot that horses, although not the intellectual giants of the animal kingdom, are smarter than those newfangled automobiles, a 165 year old mill with a storied history, and a North Kingstown to Scarsdale, NY connection.

Our "who" of the month is Dr. Harold Metcalf, a beloved local physician, who practiced in and around Wickford from the late 1800's through the early 1900's. After selling Governor William Gregory's former home on Brown Street, he followed many of the town's elite south over the predecessor to the Hussey Bridge to build a stately home on Boston Neck Rd. The house still stands today on the southern corner of Boston Neck Road and Beach Street. Shortly after moving into his new home, he purchased one of the town's first automobiles; presumably to make his rounds of house calls easier. All went well until he returned home and drove through the back wall of his barn. When asked about the problem, tradition has it that he replied that "The horses always knew when to stop."

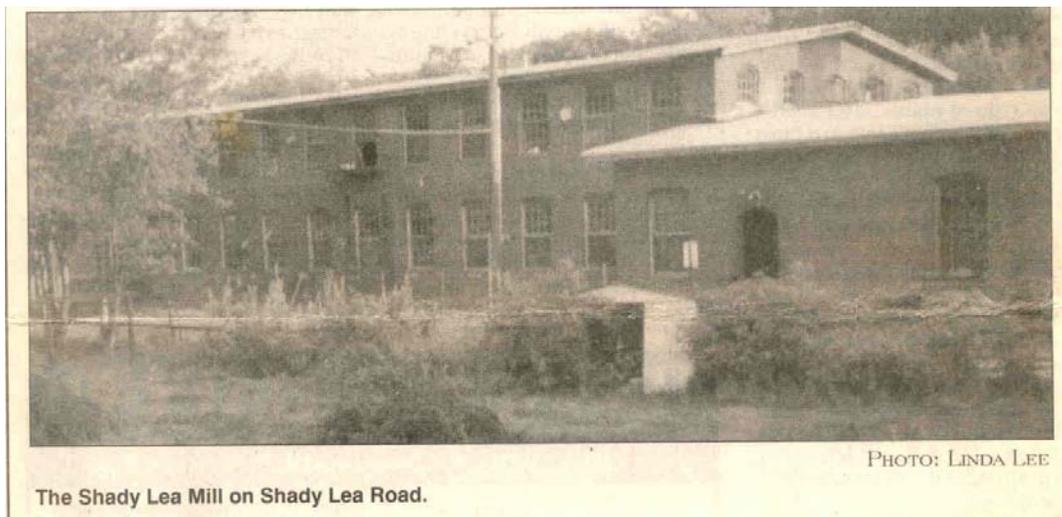


PHOTO: DAVID GOLDMAN  
This house on the corner of Boston Neck Road and Beach Street once belonged to Dr. Harold Metcalf, a beloved local physician.

Photos provided by the [North East Independent](#)

Our "what" for the month is the Shady Lea Mill on Shady Lea Road. The mill was originally built by Esbon Sanford in the late 1820's. Various cotton and woolen fabrics were made there up until the time of the Civil

War when the then owner, Walter Chapin, had the mill going full tilt making blankets for the Union Army. After the war, Chapin sold the mill to Robert Rodman; who used it to manufacture fabric for the latest fad in men's work wear; jeans. The mill stayed in the Rodman empire until the early 1950's. It has since been used for the manufacture of metal staples and now houses a variety of businesses. It still stands as a testimony to the durability of these marvelous old mill buildings.



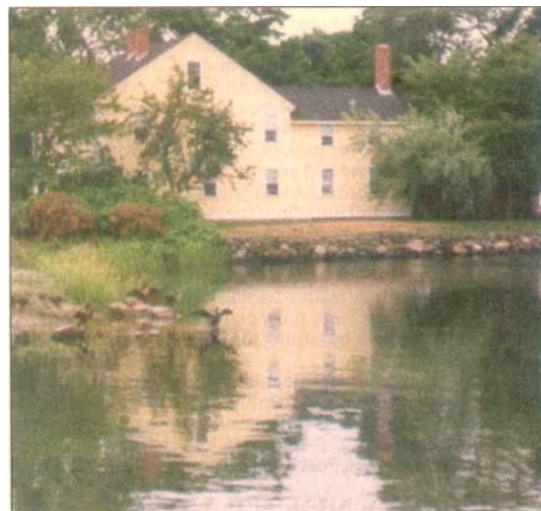
Finally, our "where" for July is Scarsdale, NY, which is where the 250 year old marbled, rose cedar-grained interior wall panels from the famed "Phillips Castle" (see the April 22nd column for more information on the Phillips Castle) now reside. It seems in the late 1940's a gentleman named Ralph Carpenter purchased all of the beautiful interior paneling from three rooms, which were added to the house in the middle 1700's by the Phillips family, and then had them installed in his colonial reproduction home being built in Scarsdale. The walls were of such distinctive quality that they were featured in an article in "Antiques" magazine which ran in June of 1952. The rooms are presumably still there to this day; a little bit of historic Wickford transplanted to New York.

## The Who, What, and Where for August

This week's column is our monthly installment of the who, what, and where of local history; sort of a catch-all for interesting tidbits of local lore not large enough to warrant a full write-up. Today we learn about a legendary hostess, a forgotten bridge, and a house with a disputed history.

Our "Who" for the month is none other than the famed hostess Mother Prentice. Ellen D. Prentice was born on February 29, 1856 to the family of Anton Lucas of Provincetown Mass, being a leap-year baby was just the first event of a remarkable life. She married quite young to George Prentice and in 1870 the Prentice's moved into the Wickford House on Main Street. In 1882 "Dad" and "Mother" Prentice opened up a small country hotel and restaurant which eventually became renowned throughout the country. Her cooking skills were such that members of the Vanderbilt and Astor families tried to hire her to no avail. The Prentices retired in 1921. "Mother" Prentice died on December 1, 1930.

Our "What" for the month is the long forgotten Elamsville bridge. The bridge, which predates the Brown Street bridge by four years, was built in 1808 and connected Elam Street (then known as Champlin Street) with West Main Street (then known as the Grand Highway). The hurricane of 1815 was probably responsible for the bridge's ultimate demise. For years the remnants of this bridge was known as "The Broken Bridge".



The site of the former "Champlin Street Bridge."

Our "Where" for this month is 15 West Main Street. This is the location of, depending on what you believe, the Stephen Cooper or the Samuel Brenton House. You see, in 1728 Stephen Cooper built a house on this lot; the problem is that the vast majority of historical architects do not feel that the present house is indeed that house. Most attribute a date of 1779 to the building, making this still one of Wickford's oldest homes, but if the 1728 date could ever be conclusively proven it would move ahead of "Old Yellow" and become the granddaddy of them all.



15 West Main St.

## The Who, What, and Where for September

This week's column is our monthly installment of the who, what, and where of local history; sort of a catch-all for interesting tidbits of local lore not large enough to warrant a full write-up. Today we learn about the founding father of the First Baptist movement in North Kingstown, another one-room schoolhouse, and a local village that exists only in the memories of a few.

Our "Who" for the month is "Elder" William Northup, the founder of the North Kingstown Baptist Church (formerly known as the Allenton Baptist Church). In turn, the Wickford and Quidnessett Baptist Churches are offshoots of Elder Northup's Allenton Church; therefore he is truly the father of the First Baptist movement here in North Kingstown. William Northup was born July 23, 1760. As a young man he learned of the Baptist faith from a slave of his grandfather's known as Benjamin Bump. After serving in the Revolutionary War and having a moment of heavenly conversion while atop the yard-arm of a ship at sea, William heeded the call and became a preacher of the Gospel. In 1782 William and a group of followers constituted the First Baptist Church at Allenton and the rest is, as they say, history. Elder William died in June of 1839 and is buried, within sight of his beloved church, in Elmgrove Cemetery. This swamp-yankee finds it interesting that, without the love, devotion, and schooling imparted by a kindly black slave, the Baptist faith in North Kingstown would have had a different history. Anyone interested in more information about the Allenton Baptist church, including a list of its founders can contact me at the paper.

Our "What" for this month is the second Belleville schoolhouse built in 1888. It is appropriate that we take a look at this old one-room school, not only because it is the beginning of a new school year, but also

because it had a second life as the North Kingstown town garage. As N.K. takes a hard look at replacing it, it is befitting that we remind the powers-that-be of this building's unique history.



Our "Where" for September is a mill village that nearly rivals my beloved Swamptown for being a forgotten community. Sand Hill Village, or what little remains of it, is located along Chadsey Road (once a portion of Post Road before it was straightened) adjacent to Sand Hill Pond. Manufacturing existed at this site from 1815 until the early part of the twentieth century. A wool carding plant, as well as a sash and blind factory operated there in the early 1800's. Later the Reynolds family of Davisville fame operated a fabric and rug mill at the same site. By the late 1800's two woolen mills were running full tilt. As is so often the case, major fires in the mill buildings brought about the end of the fabric industry and ultimately the village itself. It was said that the social life of Sand Hill was so attractive that the young people of Wickford would often walk there for a night of entertainment. Little remains of the village except a half dozen homes, the most significant being the Albert Reynolds house on Chadsey Road, and the remnants of the dam which formed the pond that powered the old mills. Also of interest is the magnificent stone bridge over the spillway at the east end of the pond, upon which the youth of the area walked on their way to a night of revelry so long ago.



## The Who, What, and Where for October

This week's column is our monthly installment of the who, what, and where of local history; sort of a catch-all for interesting tidbits of local lore not large enough to warrant a full write-up. Today we learn about a mystery man who may have had a hand in the beheading of King Charles I, a what's-it in the village of Davisville, and a little background information on the buildings in Wickford which house the village's two remaining banks, which will soon become involved in a great merger and divestiture.

Our "Who" for the month has, for as many years as can be remembered, been known as "The Regicide", a little used word which means "one involved in the killing of a king. His name was Theophilus Whaley and he came to North Kingstown around 1680. He settled on the east bank of the Narrow River, just south of the Gilbert Stuart Birthplace - a place which has since been known as "The Regicide's Hideout". It became obvious to the local populace that Whaley was a man of considerable wealth; a man who often entertained other wealthy colonists from places as far away as Boston. His visitors came and went quietly and stealthily as if they had something to hide. Eventually his name was connected, through local gossip, to Cromwell's revolution in England; it was said he was one of the judges who had sentenced Charles to death. Whaley, himself, was silent on the subject; he neither confirmed nor denied it. He took his secret to the grave, in 1720, when he died at the amazing age of 103. He left many descendants but no answers.

Our "What" for October can best be described as a chimney or smokestack and can be found in a yard on the corner of Center Street and Old Baptist Road. According to local-born George Loxton, now living in Wisconsin, and acknowledged by all as the authority on Davisville lore, this is all that remains of entrepreneur Lorenzo Vaughn's farm store and grain mill that existed on this

site around the turn of the century. The chimney was a part of the engine which powered the mill stones.

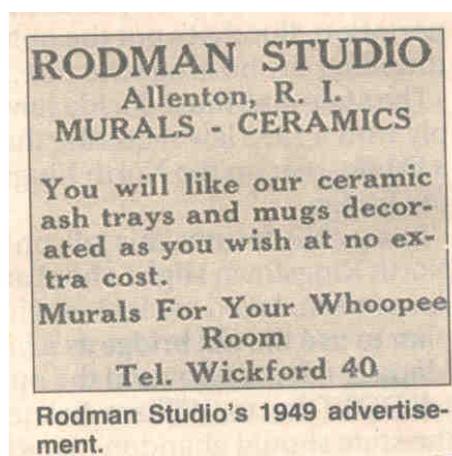
Our "Where" is actually two places this month, 30 Phillips Street and 27 Brown Street, the homes of, Fleet Bank and (for now) Bank Boston. The Fleet Bank building began its life in 1916 as the home of Bell Telephone's local office. It housed the operators and equipment necessary to run the telephone system in the area until 1959 when more modern equipment and more local phones necessitated a move up the street to 266 Phillips St. Soon after that, Fleet's predecessor, Industrial National Bank, took up residency and has remained ever since. The Wickford Savings Bank opened its doors at 27 Brown Street in June of 1855. It served the residents of Wickford and surrounding villages for nearly 110 years, at which point it was absorbed by the Rhode Island Hospital Trust National Bank which in turn became part of Bank Boston and now is poised to become the local branch of Sovereign Bank.

## The Who, What, and Where for November

This week's column is our monthly installment of the who, what, and where of local history; sort of a catch-all for interesting tidbits of local lore not large enough to warrant a full write-up. Today we learn about a famous man who keeps popping up in local history, a forgotten local arts and crafts establishment with a humorous twist, and a Wickford home which once housed, among other things, one of the village's first banks.

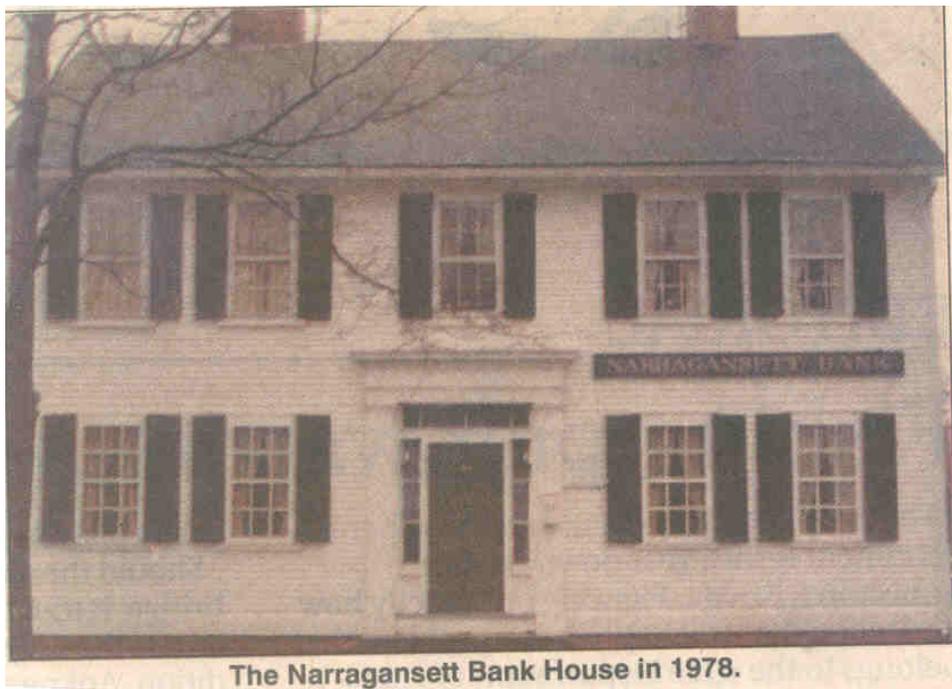
Our "Who" for the month has been featured in this column once before, but due to his voracious appetite for colonial structures he keeps turning up in my research. In the early 1930's two mysterious strangers turned up at the door of Canon Piper, the then rector of St. Paul's Wickford. It turned out that they were representatives of Henry Ford, who was interested in buying the Old Narragansett Church, disassembling it, and transporting it back to Michigan; where he intended to set it up in a colonial village recreation he had envisioned. Thankfully, he turned them down.

Our "What" for the month is the art and ceramic studio in Allenton known as "The Rodman Studio". As you can see by their advertisement from a 1949 paper, not only did they sell ceramic creations, they also painted murals on the walls of "Whoopee Rooms" all over town. The Walter Rodman home in nearby Lafayette was one of the only private homes in the region which had a commercial ceramic kiln in its basement.



Our "Where" for November is the "Olde Narragansett Bank House" on Main Street in Wickford. In 1768 Samuel Bissell built his home on this property

on the corner of Main and Fountain Streets. A portion of his original home is incorporated into the house that you see today. A subsequent owner, Deborah Whitford, ran a bakery there. In 1805, Benjamin Fowler, the president of the Narragansett Bank, built a combination banking house and private home on the lot using the 1768 house as the ell of his new home/bank. In 1837 Peleg Weeden purchased the living quarters section of the building for his daughter, Hannah. After the bank relocated the Weeden's took over the entire building. In 1853, Nicholas Spink, purchased the home and remodelled into its present configuration. This was also the home of local historian Col. Hunter C. White.



## The "Who", "What", and "Where" for January

This week's column is the January installment of the "Who", "What", and "Where" of local history, a collection of interesting facts which are too small to warrant a full write up. Today we will touch on the literary efforts of a Scrabbletown resident, and revisit, briefly, a mill and a mode of transportation from long ago.

Our "Who" for this month is Jamie Carter, a former "Scrabbletown" who has not forgotten her roots. Ms. Carter has recently written and published a wonderful new pictorial history of our fair town called, simply enough, "North Kingstown". It is organized, not unlike North Kingstown itself, into sections centered around villages; and pictorially documents what went on in them. Some of the photographs would not have seen the light of day without Ms. Carter's effort to search them out and organize them in such a delightful manner. The book's layout is thoroughly enjoyable and the text is accurate and (Bravo, Jamie!) well indexed. The bibliography, alone, is worth the purchase price. "North Kingstown" by Jamie Carter gets the Swamptown seal of approval and can be found locally in stores such as Ryan's Market and Earnshaw's Drug to name just a few.

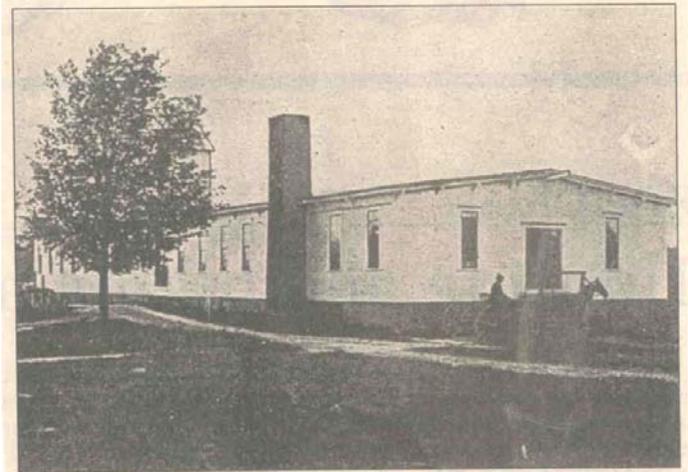
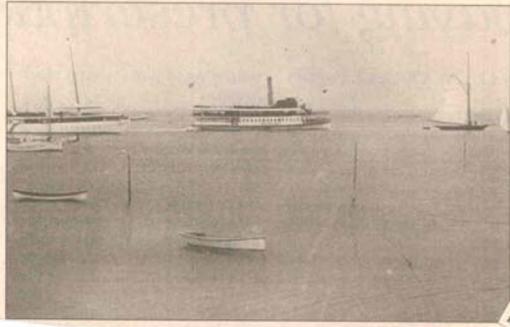
Our "What" this week is again the steamships which plied the waters of Wickford Harbor and the adjacent Narragansett Bay. The two photos shown here, of our old friend "The General" and the here-to-fore unseen "Lewiston" are courtesy of Howard Ericson, who manned the back counter of Earnshaw's Drug for many years. If I had a dime for every time Mr. Ericson assisted a worried mother with a sick child over these many years I'd be able to retire and write about RI history full time. Thank you, Mr. Ericson!

Our "What" for January is the Annaquatucket Mill formerly located off of Featherbed Lane. This rare photo of the mill, which was the center of life for the mill village of Annaquatucket, was taken from the vicinity of the "Stephen Northup

House". The outline of the elevated section of Featherbed Lane can just be made out in the background.



Above is the steamer *Lewiston*. Below, the steamer *General* exits Wickford Harbor.



Hamilton Web Co.'s Annaquatucket Mill.

## The "Who", "What", and "Where" for February

This week's column is the latest installment of the "Who", "What", and "Where" of local history, a collection of interesting facts which are too small to warrant a full write up. Today we will touch on the life of a real live war hero memorialized by a location in Quonset/Davisville, take a look at one of Swamptown's first businesses, and pay a visit to a forgotten landmark of long ago.

Our "Who" for this month is "Dixie" Keifer, the man for whom the Keifer Park section of Quonset/Davisville Industrial Park is named. Keifer, an Annapolis graduate, was the commanding officer of the aircraft carrier "Ticonderoga". The Ticonderoga, and Keifer, saw plenty of action in the Pacific during WWII. As a matter of fact, during one engagement the ship took a direct hit from one of Japan's most potent weapons, the Kamikaze



COURTESY: THE SEAN PAUL MULLIGAN COLLECTION  
Keifer announces the surrender of Japan over the Quonset Naval public address system on Aug. 14, 1945. He is still wearing a cast injuries suffered in a kamikaze attack on his former command, the Ticonderoga.

plane; these planes, piloted by young men who were martyrs the very moment they donned the traditional white silk scarf which signified the finality of their mission, were not even equipped to land on a traditional landing field, they were nothing more than a manned guided missile. When Keifer's command was hit, he was one of the casualties; he suffered in excess of one hundred shrapnel wounds and a broken arm. After a short convalescence, Keifer assumed command of Quonset Point Naval Air Station, where he remained through the end of the war. The accompanying photo shows him, still suffering from the effects of that Kamikaze attack, announcing the surrender of the Japanese war machine. In one of life's most bitter ironies, Keifer, a man who had stood up to everything the enemy could throw at him and survived, died in a small plane crash on November 10, 1945, returning from that year's Army-Navy football game. His life was forever remembered from then on when the Navy renamed a portion of the air base in his honor.

Our "What" for this month is probably Swamptown's first non-agricultural business, the Star Laundry, located on what is now known as Hatchery Road. The business, which dates back to before the turn of the century, was, like the mills in nearby Lafayette, Hamilton, and Belleville, located on the bank of the Shewatuck/Annaquatucket River system. It was there for the same obvious reason that the mills were, the need for a plentiful water supply.



COURTESY: DORIS M  
The Star Laundry is seen in the  
1900s.

The Star Laundry itself survived well into the middle of the 1900s, and the building still exists, in a somewhat altered form, as a private home, directly across from the new Hatchery Road extension, right on the bank of the Shewatuck just as it always was.

Our "Where" for February is a local landmark which has all but disappeared from the lexicon of local place names here in our fair town. But from a time beginning in the early 1800s and lasting through the first half of the twentieth century, just about every resident of Lafayette worth his salt could tell you where the "Vale of Pero" was located. Pero, a man who left only a faint mark on the permanent record of this world, was thought to be one of the region's first freed black men. The story goes that he was formerly the slave of the family of the author of the book "Old Wickford, the Venice of America". Having been freed by Mrs. Griswold's father he settled on a less than desirable piece of land along the Ten Rod Road. The swampy little valley or "vale" that this stableman's shack was located in has forever been known as the "Vale of Pero" and can now be found (in a much altered form) between the East Lafayette schoolhouse and what was until recently the Pickled Penguin antique shop. Griswold described Pero, who was thought to have died in the first half of the 1800's, as "short, square, grizzly-haired, and thoroughly African in appearance." This columnist would be very grateful if anyone out there could shed some more light on this intriguing character and his life.

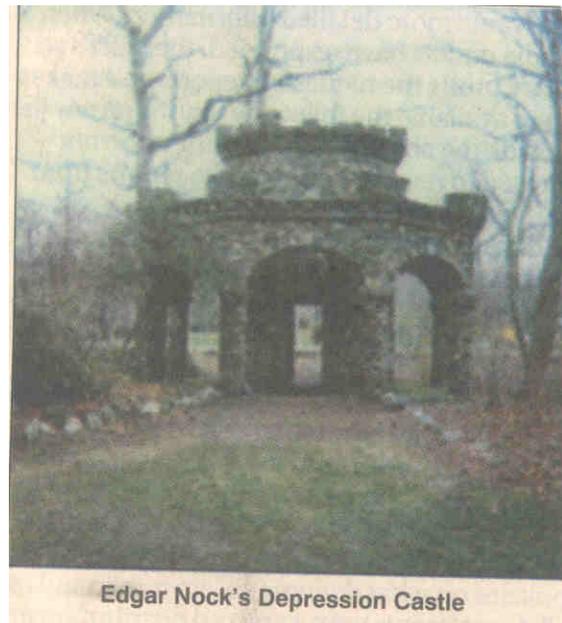
## Historic Gardens

With a tip of the hat to spring this week's column concerns some historically significant gardens in our fair town.

The only appropriate starting point for a discussion of this nature is the vast estate of Henry Collins and subsequently, George Rome. This country villa of 700 acres extended from the site of the present-day Hamilton Elementary School to the location of the Jamestown Bridge. Collins, a wealthy Newport merchant, purchased the land and built his luxurious home sometime in the middle 1700's. He lost it in a foreclosure to Rome in 1766. Little is known about the main house, which was approached by an avenue lined with buttonwood trees and surrounded by beautiful gardens filled with rare native and imported plants; we can only look at the country villa of their neighbor and contemporary Daniel Coggeshall, another wealthy Newporter, who built what we now know as Casey Farm at around the same time, for a glimpse of what it might have been like. In 1774, Rome, a notorious Tory sympathizer, high-tailed it out of North Kingstown and landed on a British man-of-war in Newport Harbor, he subsequently returned to England and exists now as the forgotten man for whom Rome Point is named. ...Something to think about the next time you're down there staring at seals.

The next stop on our garden tour occurs some 100 years later at a spot off of Ten Rod Road known as Liberty Hill. Liberty Hill was the public park and gardens constructed in 1864 by Robert Rodman behind his magnificent home. (Now known as McKay's Front Porch) He constructed and maintained the park for the local population of Lafayette, most of which worked for him at the mill and its associated businesses. Gardens were laid out at the foot of the hill, the trees were thinned out and brush removed along its sides, and a beautiful grove with benches and picnicking areas was provided at the top. The vestiges of Liberty Hill can still be seen behind the old mansion.

Last and certainly not least is my favorite, Ramblewood, designed and developed, starting in 1927, by the famed English-born local horticulturist Edgar L. Nock. Over the course of three decades Mr. Nock turned his twenty acre parcel of land into one of the most beautiful and extensive private gardens ever seen. He amassed a collection that included hundreds of varieties of azaleas and rhododendrons as well as literally thousands of Japanese lilies. The garden also contained countless varieties of Wisteria, lilacs, Iris, Japanese flowering cherries, and Oriental cut-leaf Maples. He watered this imposing garden with an even more imposing underground irrigation system consisting of miles of piping and several electric turbines. The centerpiece of the Nock estate was, surprisingly enough, his tool shed; known as the Depression Castle, it was built from the thousands of stones dug up while the gardens were being planted. Sadly, as too often is the case, this one-of-a-kind Eden was broken up into house lots in the 1950's. A portion of these majestic gardens, as well as the Depression Castle, still remain for us to enjoy to this day.



This swamp-yankee's vote for best present day garden goes to the one on the corner of Main and Fowler in Wickford. (Even this empty lot has a history. It was the site of the Benjamin Fowler house built in 1769 and demolished around 1950) It's a natural free-form type of garden and it offers up something different every time I see it. I'm sure that Edgar, Robert, and even old Tory George would approve.

## General Stores

This week's column concerns another fixture in the small villages which, at one time, made up North Kingstown. The "General Store", like the one-room schoolhouse, was a focal point of village life. Everything a person could possibly need, from a sack of flour to a casket, could be purchased there. It was where a villager would get his mail and catch up on local news and gossip. It was more than just a store; it was a community center, for these villages of old were communities in the purest sense of the word. So let's take a look at some of the surviving general store buildings in our fair town.

This building on The Ten Rod Road once housed the company store for the Rodman Mill. It was run by Ambrose Taylor the brother-in-law of mill founder Robert Rodman. It was in operation from around 1865 until 1882, when Taylor relocated to a larger building across the street. (featured in the May 27th edition) The Taylor family lived upstairs on the second floor. Beginning in 1873 this store was also the Lafayette Post Office.



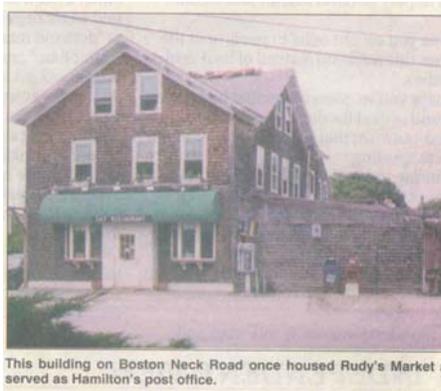
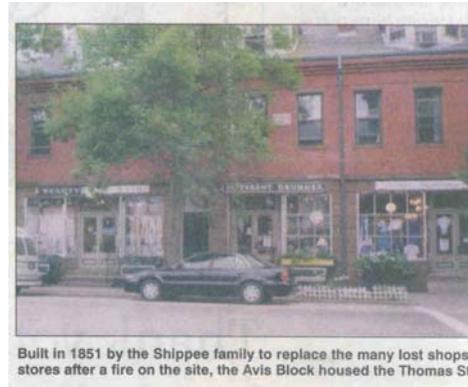
PHOTOS: LINDA  
This building on Ten Rod Road once housed the company store for Rodman Mill.

This building on Main Street in Wickford was the home of the Thomas store in the early 1800's. The store was located in the lower level of the western half of the building, the Thomas family lived above the store. At some time in the middle 1800's the store was relocated up the street to a building located where the Avis Block stands today. This building was destroyed in the great New Year's Eve fire of 1850.



This building, on Main Street in Wickford, was the home of the Thor Store in the early 1800s.

The Avis Block rose Phoenix-like from the ashes of the 1850 fire. Built in 1851 by the Shippee family to replace the many lost shops and stores, it housed the Thomas Store, which in 1898 became Peckham's Dry Goods until it eventually closed in the early 1960's.



This building on Boston Neck Road is still known to most locals as "Rudy's Market". There has been a store on this site to serve the villagers of Hamilton since 1862. This building dates from approximately 1877. This store also served as the Hamilton Post Office.

The Allenton and Belleville villagers had a number of choices for general stores and the Lafreniere Store was one of them. It operated from around the turn of the century until fairly recently.



Another store in the Allenton-Belleville area was The Lafreniere General Store also located on Tower Hill Road. It operated from around the turn of the century until fairly recently.

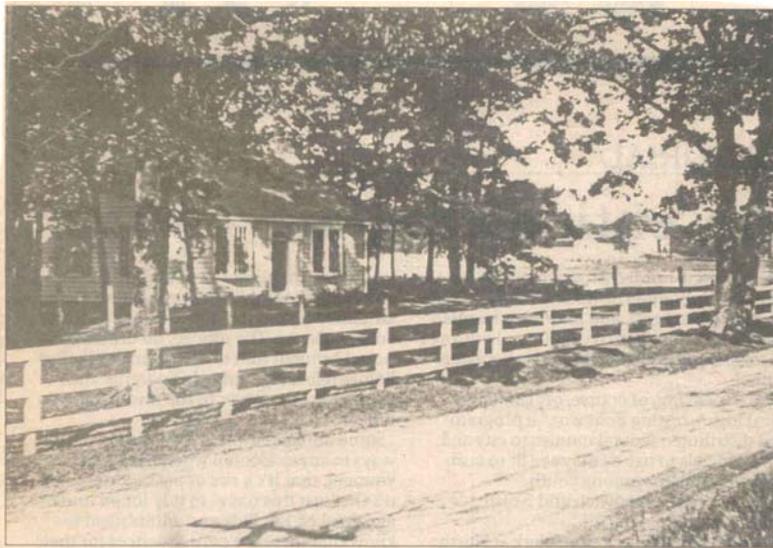
## North Kingstown's Other Libraries

Mention the word "library" to a North Kingstown resident and they will, more than likely, automatically think of the big wonderful library on the hill in Wickford. Rightly so, I might add, because it is one of the finest libraries in the state. But some of us perceptive locals are aware of two other smaller but equally valuable repositories of knowledge which are located, conveniently enough, on either end of town: The Willett Free Library on Ferry Road in Saunderstown and The Davisville Free Library on Davisville Road in (naturally) Davisville. These two libraries are not only beautiful to behold, staffed by wonderfully patient and helpful (these talents are a prerequisite for entrance into the field of Library Science) people, and up-to-date technologically, but are chock-full of great books. They are peaceful places; little oases in our busy world. They definitely rate a Swamp Yankee seal of approval.

The Willett Free Library, the older of the two, had its beginnings in November of 1885 when Stillman Saunders formed "The Circle for Mutual Improvement", an organization of forty Saunderstown residents who met periodically for "the improvement of literary and musical tastes and such light industries". At their December 21st meeting in the same year it was voted to attempt to raise money to establish a free library. This was accomplished by giving suppers and putting on shows. In May of 1886 their financial goals were met and the library opened in the home of Ruth Arnold, who also served as its first librarian. In 1902, land was donated by Laura and Mary Carpenter for the construction of a permanent library building. Funds were raised and the library opened on July 2, 1904. It has remained a viable and vital part of the local community for these last 114 years. In an amazing footnote, from its inception in 1886 until 1976 there were only two librarians, Ruth Arnold (1886-1925) and Susan Carpenter (1925-1976).

The Davisville Free Library began in March of 1918 when a group of local women

decided to form an association organized "for the purpose of promoting the moral, intellectual, and social improvement of the inhabitants of Davisville and the vicinity". The driving force behind its inception was a local school teacher named Isabelle Gillespie. The library's collection was initially housed on the bottom floor of Pine Grove Hall on Grove Avenue. Its first books were two farm manuals purchased for \$2.18. In June of 1921 the Dyer family donated land to the Library Association for the construction of its permanent home. The \$4000 needed for construction was raised by holding food sales, suppers, and putting on shows, as well as large donations from Hettie, Mary, and Jeffrey Davis in memory of James



Above, the Davisville Free Library in the 1920s – note the "busy" Davisville Road in the foreground. Below, a postcard view of the Willett Free Library around the time of its opening.



Davis. The Library opened at a dedication in 1924 when it was officially presented to the village residents by the Davis and Dyer families. This library, too, has been an integral part of its local community for more than 80 years. As was the case in Saunderstown this library has also had only two librarians for the better part of its existence, Lottie Straight (1919-1950) and Marion Barber (1951-1997).

These two libraries require the support of local people to survive.

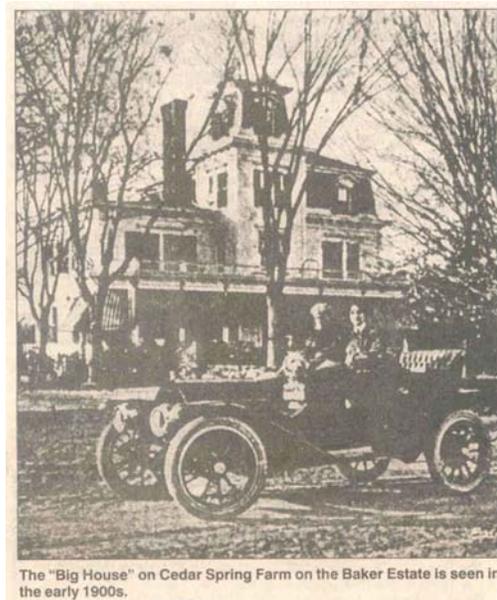
## The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

### The Readers Respond

This week's column is written by you, the readers; as some recent columns have elicited some interesting responses which just cry out to be shared with all. Many thanks go out to all who take the time to drop me a line or an E-mail. A number of column ideas have been a direct result of suggestions sent in by my knowledgeable and curious readers. At the risk of sounding cliché - "Keep those cards and letters (and E-mails) coming!"

The August 17th story about the Baker Estate on Prospect Street brought back a rush of memories to long time North Kingstown resident William Fuesz. Mr. Fuesz purchased the "Big House" in 1949 from the estate of a man named Mr. Hurley. This would seem perfectly normal except for the fact that Mr. Hurley had hanged himself in the house. So this adds another tragic death to the long list of losses associated with "Cedar Spring Farm".

Another loyal reader brought to my attention the wonderful picture of the Baker house which you see here. The occupants of that wonderful car in front of the house are the newly wed Hinkley's; Anita Hinkley eventually wrote the book "Wickford Memories" about her life on "Cedar Spring Farm". Thanks again Karen, for the great tip as well as all of your help.



The September 14<sup>th</sup> article on the "Westgate Watson" house at the end of Elam Street caused its present owner to contact me and pass on some interesting information about Wickford's most paintable landmark. It seems around the

middle of the 1800's the house was used as the town poor house and insane asylum. It was known in those pre-politically and socially correct times as "The Batty House". Quite a moniker if you ask this particular swamp yankee. Just as a point of information the town also, at one time or another, had a "town farm", as those sorts of places were called at the time, out at Indian Corner and at a later date on Quonset Point; but that's another story for another time

Finally, North Kingstown's premiere genealogist, Doris Moon, sent me this wonderful photograph of the Allenton School's (now the Montessori School) class photo of approximately 1900. I have been able to confirm that the teacher, at the top center, is Charles A. Crombe, a man who spent his life educating the young people of Allenton. The mischievous looking young lad with his arms folded in the front row has been identified as Arthur Cole, and the young man in the third row, third from the wall is known to be John Campbell; but the identity of the rest of these children is a mystery, so lend me a hand loyal readers and help me identify the rest of these exceptional students.



Allenton School class photo of approximately 1900 includes teacher Charles A. Crombe at top center. Can anyone out there identify any of the students?