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

## **The Fox Family and The Cocumscussoc Dairy Farm**

I expect that when most of us think about Smith's Castle, the vision that comes to mind is one of colonial folks living in a fine blockhouse, or maybe a scene which includes soldiers mustering into formation, ready to march off into the Great Swamp and ultimately into the history books. Probably few people bring to mind the image of a large and fairly modern dairy industry, which included not only an impressive farm with a large herd of prize winning cattle, but also a local door-to-door milk delivery route and a popular dairy and ice cream restaurant; which beat Howard Johnson's and The Newport Creamery to the punch by decades. This all may sound difficult to imagine within our idea of what Smith's Castle is today, but it is an important part of the long and fabled history of this venerable local landmark.

This part of the Smith's Castle story begins back in 1880 when the property was acquired by the Babbit family. The Babbits owned the property for some forty years and, although little is known of what transpired on the Babbit Farm, it is thought that they may have ran it as a poultry farm. When family matriarch, Anna Babbit died in 1919, Cocumscussoc passed into the hands of her only daughter; Alice. Alice was married to a retired New York City lawyer named Austen Fox. Fox was born and raised on Manhattan, as a matter of fact he was known to have boasted that his childhood playground was located on the lot where the Empire State Building now stands. After graduating from Harvard Law in 1871, he returned to the city of his birth and became known as a man who fought against graft and corruption in the city's government. He was on numerous investigating committees including ones that rooted out corruption within the city police department. After a long and illustrious career as an attorney, and after turning down judgeships and cabinet positions, he retired to the life of a gentleman farmer on his wife's Wickford property.

Although he was nearly seventy years old, Austen Fox went at farming with the same level of energy and enthusiasm he used as an attorney. He did his homework well and invested his capital in a herd of purebred Ayrshire cattle imported from Scotland. He expanded the existing barn, which was located northeast of the blockhouse, into an elaborate layout

of interconnecting barns and service buildings which can be seen in the accompanying photograph. He then hired plenty of local hands and an experienced dairyman to manage his farm. As always, Austen Fox's new enterprise was a hands-down success. He registered his herd as "Cocumcussoc Ayrshires" and before you knew it their average milk production per cow was the highest in New England and third highest in the entire nation. His champion milker "Cocumcussoc Jean Star" was regularly delivering an amazing record-breaking sixty pounds of milk each day. Fox, who kept his herd at around 145 head, was selling his excess cattle for a pretty penny, as their fame spread across the region. The Fox's were also quite active in the Ayrshire Breeder's Assoc. of America, and from 1926 to 1935 "Summer Field Day at Cocumcussoc" was one of the organizations most popular events. Mr. Fox, an avid golfer, was also instrumental in the formation and construction of the Annaquatucket Golf Club just south of the village of Wickford (now the site of the high school on Fairway Dr.).

With his dairy farm an unqualified success, Fox began to branch out, first developing a door-to-door home delivery service of milk and dairy products within the North Kingstown area. An occasional milk bottle with the "Cocumcussoc Dairy" moniker imprinted on it still turns up from time to time. Fox's son, and namesake Austen Jr., another Harvard graduate and classmate of young FDR, opened the Cocumcussoc Milk Bar in 1933, at the corner of Post Road and West Main Street (now the location of Wickford Appliance), where he sold milk (both regular and chocolate) and ice cream. He ran the place for nearly a decade, and then sold it to the new kids on the block, Howard Johnson's who in turn ran it as one of their orange-roofed establishments for another twenty years or so until it was destroyed in an impressive fire in the early 1960's.

With Austen Sr.'s death in May of 1937 the Fox dairy dynasty began its decline. The family sold off parcels of land, one across the street from the blockhouse went from being a pasture to becoming the location of a new RI State Police barracks, and one of the farm's largest grazing pastures was sold to the government to be used for a site for a new housing project for the nearby Ouonset/Davisville navy base (now Wilson Park and Intrepid Drive). Austen Jr. ran the farm for a time, but in 1939 the assets of the farm, including the prized cattle, were auctioned off to the highest bidder. Austen Jr. died in the castle in July of 1946 and with that closed another chapter in the amazing story of Smith's Castle.

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Above, the Fox family relaxes at home. Below, an aerial view shows the buildings of the Fox Dairy Farm.

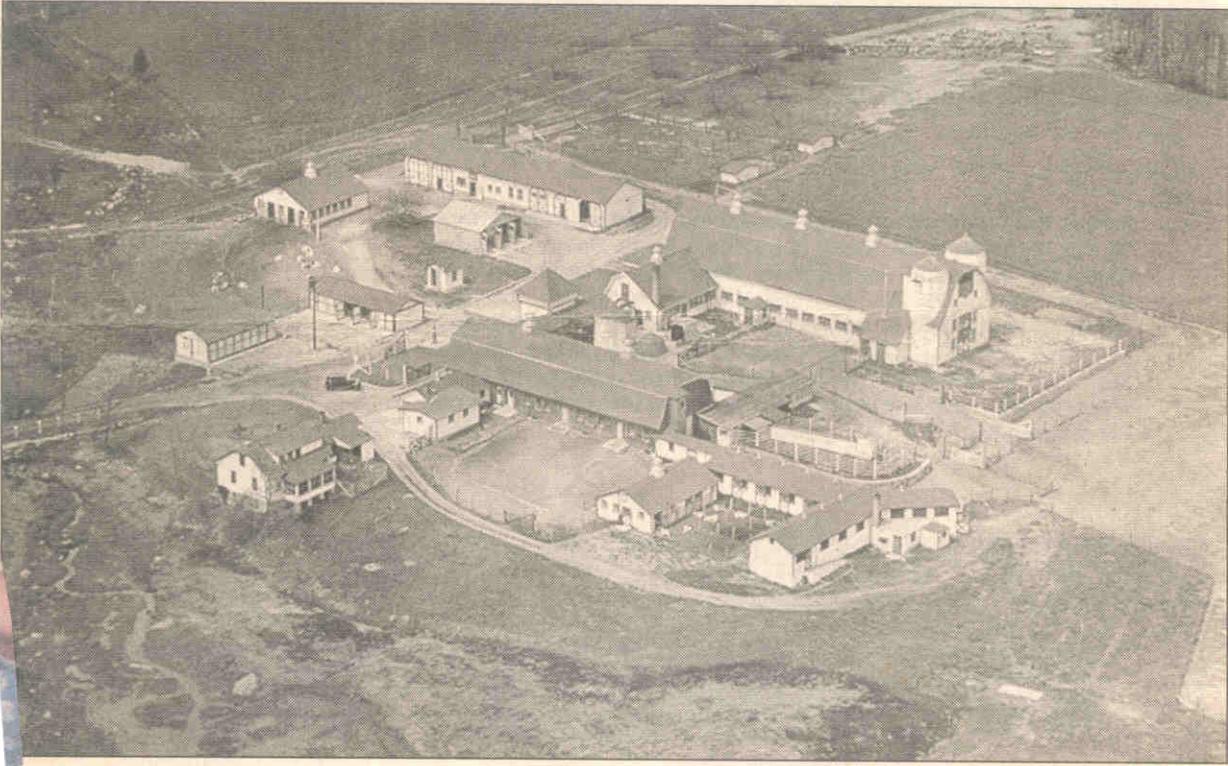


PHOTO: A. ROSSI

## More on the Fox Dairy Farm at Smith's Castle

Back in August, we took a journey back about seventy years to a time when, what we now know as Smith's Castle, was known as the Fox Dairy Farm. Run by retired New York City Barrister, Austen Fox Sr., and his wife, Alice (Hoppin) Fox and their son Austen Jr., it was one of the area's most successful and modern dairy enterprises. When I wrote the column, I privately lamented over the dearth of photographs of the wonderful old farm. Now, thanks to the gracious charity of Mr. Fox's grandson, Dr. John Gerster, a retired surgeon who lives in Connecticut, we can all visually take that journey as well.

Although, the photographs largely speak for themselves, let me take a moment to comment on each of them. The first, a magnificent panoramic view of the farm, taken from across the cove on Rabbit Island, is the photo I dreamed of as I wrote the first column. It not only shows the Blockhouse, surrounded by those wonderful grand elms, it also gives us, the unenlightened 21st century time travelers, an idea of how the dairy farm complex was positioned in relation to the main house. The picture, taken in the dead of winter, also shows the attached "chateau", as it was then called, which is now known as "The Annex" and, relocated up the lane a piece, houses the Carey's, who have stewarded the castle from the 20th into the 21st century. This photo viewed in concert with the aerial photo of the barn complex allows us to see the farm as it was during its glory days of the 1920's through the early 40's. An additional picture shows the "Chateau", which served as a guesthouse, and a portion of the drive-through breezeway that connected it to the main house. Finally, we have a photo of Austen Sr. and Jr., along with Mrs. Fox, sitting in the house in front of the main fireplace, below a banner advertising an upcoming "Tea"; I'm sure it was one of the area's grand social events.

In his letters to me concerning life at the farm, an experience he relished for each of his

first sixteen or seventeen summers, Dr. Gerster writes eloquently of a time we can only imagine. He reminisces about summer afternoons spent on the back porch watching masses of hummingbirds flit through the ancient trumpet vines which shaded the back of the house. He speaks of youthful days spent battling mosquitoes and learning the art of driving in an old Chevrolet Truck on the farm's miles of dirt roads and farm trails. It is very obviously a cherished part of his youth and I think I speak for all of us in our fair town when I say "Thank you for sharing it with us good doctor!" In doing so, he has preserved those memories for generations to come.

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The farm is shown as seen from Rabbit Island.



The farm's guest house was known as "The Chateau."

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

### **Lost and Found - The Swamptown District Schoolhouse**

Every once in a while, you get a pleasant surprise that just makes your day. This week I was lucky enough to be the recipient of two such surprises. The first, we'll take a look at today and the second, we will examine next week.

Back in May of 1999, we took a look at the surviving handful of buildings that were once one-room district schoolhouses here in our fair town. The one-room schoolhouse reigned supreme here in North Kingstown from 1828 until around 1909. In that column we took a gander at the eight buildings which, at that time, I thought, were the last of their kind. In May of 2000 we took a turn at searching out the sites of the remaining seven schools and attempted to surmise what those "lost" schools were all about.

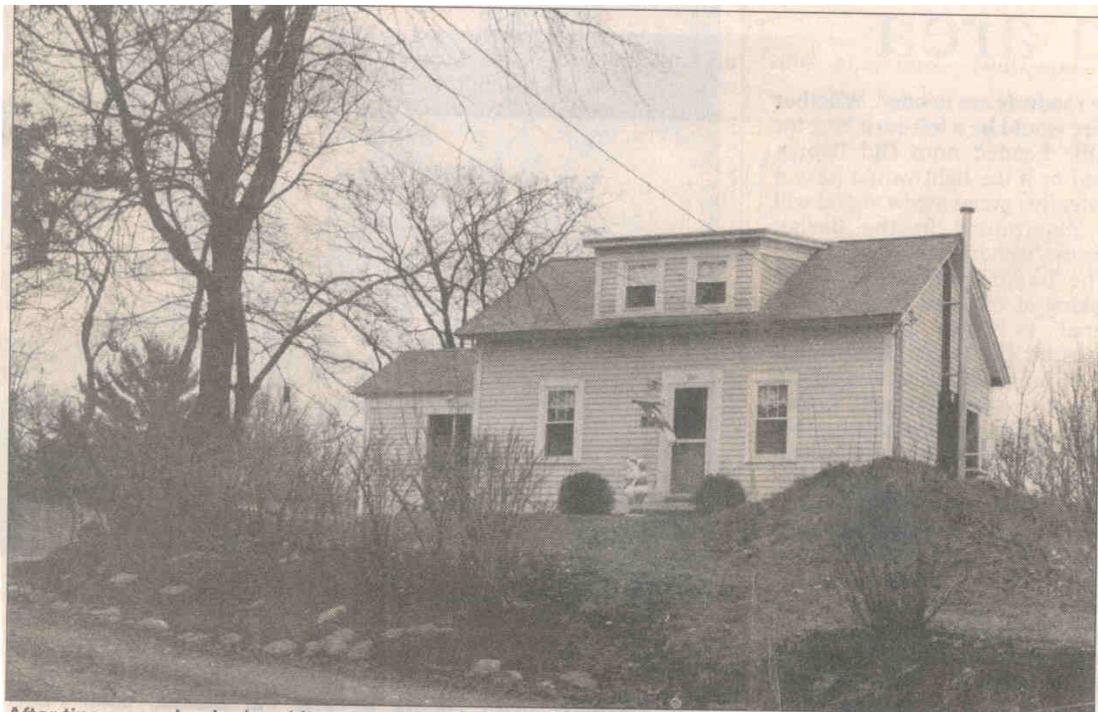
Well, here it is the end of 2001 and I'm happy to report that one of our "lost" schoolhouses have been found; and it was perched, literally, right under my nose here in Swamptown. You see, the little yellow house, which is featured, in the accompanying photograph sits, pretty as a picture, at 900 Lafayette Road where it has been since it was built as the second Swamptown District Schoolhouse back in 1875. A hot tip from the daughter of one of those mischievous Campbell boys who went to school here in the 1890's and sonic confirmatory digging in the musty-dusty ledgers of the town hail vault cinches it in this swamp- yankee's humble opinion. This is the Swamptown Schoolhouse which served this farming community from 1875 to 1909.

First, a little background information. The first Swamptown Schoolhouse was built in 1842 on land donated to the town by the land-wealthy Phillips family; whose real estate holdings not only included much of what we now know as Wickford, but also a 1200 acre parcel of land bounded by the present-day Tower Hill Rd, Ten Rod Road, Lafayette Rd, and Oak Hill Rd. That school was constructed at a location just down the Lafayette Road a piece, at the site of the former "King of Clubs" (or Ace of Clubs, if your oh I enough to remember that) Tavern as reported in my May 2000 column. It was my

understanding at the time that the 1875 replacement building was constructed there as well. It appears that this was untrue, as real estate records prove that the house at 900 Lafayette is indeed the second school. After the school's 1909 closing, the Campbell, Northup, Thomas, and Rathbun children, among others, who had attended the Swamptown School for generations, went to either the Lafayette or Allenton Schools, depending on which was closer. A local fanner Isaac Smith, who quickly resold it to another nearby farm family, the Almonds, purchased the building from the town. It has since been owned by members of the Kay, Chamberlain, Matteson, and Phaneuf families.

The little schoolhouse turned home had fallen unto hard times. The present owners have carefully restored it to its past glory, and in a unique little bit of irony, after my son boards the bus, I watch their child, standing in the driveway of what used to be a school climbing aboard as well. Only in Swamptown!!

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After tips were checked and its past was researched at Town Hall, this house on Lafayette Road is thought to be the old Swamptown schoolhouse.

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

## **The History of the High School**

As we approach the auspicious day when our fair town opens its wonderful new high school, I think it's appropriate that we take a look back down the long road to the very beginnings of "higher" education in North Kingstown.

From the very beginnings of organized public education in town in 1850, to the school year that began on September 16, 1901, a student's educational experience was generally over after graduating from eighth grade. Unless a family had the financial wherewithal and a student had the inclination, that was as far as most scholars progressed; for beyond that required enrollment in a private school like Washington or East Greenwich Academy. All that changed at the turn of the century, when the town fathers decided to join the statewide growing trend to provide a full education to the young people of the community.

This was, of course, easier said than done. The biggest problem confronting the school committee and the administration at that time was no different than it is now; space - where would the high school students actually be educated. No permanent solution was immediately forthcoming, so a temporary one was chosen. For that first year, the twenty-nine students who had elected to attend, would be educated in the North Kingstown Free Library Building on Brown Street in Wickford. Students who lived within a few miles of the village were expected to walk, while anyone from farther away than that would be provided with passes to the Sea View Trolley and were expected to walk to the closest station. With those details ironed out North Kingstown's first high school opened its doors on September 16, 1901. The first year was an unqualified success. Then Superintendent of Schools, F B. Cole pronounced it as such in his report to the school committee early that summer. He said that the second class was to be larger still and that he was even fielding inquiries from the residents of neighboring towns without a high school program concerning out of town tuitions. This success, of

course, came with a price. Again the ever present question of space - where do we educate these additional students? The library can not contain them all and still function as it was intended. Another temporary solution was decided upon. The upper floor of the Gregory Building in Wickford was rented out and the rooms used as classrooms. This was enough additional space to house the growing student population, which had more than doubled since the previous year.

The lucky students who attended high school in those first years were originally expected to stick out a program which was scheduled for a full five years. They were expected to enroll within one of three programs offered; Classical, Latin, or English Scientific, and follow a fairly rigid schedule of courses within that particular program. By the time these first students were to graduate however, the curriculum had attained its now traditional length of four years. As you can see by the accompanying course schedule there was no room for any elective courses.

The 1903-04 school year went off with out much of a hitch, the third group of students began their education, new teachers were hired, as they had been each of the previous years, and everyone squeezed into the Gregory Building's top floor. However, by the next year, space was again a problem. Another stopgap temporary solution was proposed and accepted; the town, in addition to renting the Gregory Building space, signed a lease for the use of Mathewson Hall, formerly called the GAR Hall, and located on the other side of the Brown Street bridge (since demolished, and located on the site of the present day Ryan's parking lot). This hall, which had once housed the meetings and social events of the local Civil War Veterans group, now became a part of the ever growing, but temporary, North Kingstown High School physical plant. But still this was not enough, just a couple of years later, the town began to use the vacant "Old Town Hall" up in the Quality Hill section of West Main Street (still extant and part of the Cranston's of Wickford Funeral Home) as classroom space. This temporary solution was the last straw for the administration, school committee, parents, and students of our fair town. It was quite a bit distant from the rest of the high school's "campus" and didn't sit well with anyone. The 1907 school year was marked by many discussions of what to do about the vexing problem without any enormous financial expenditure. In the end, it

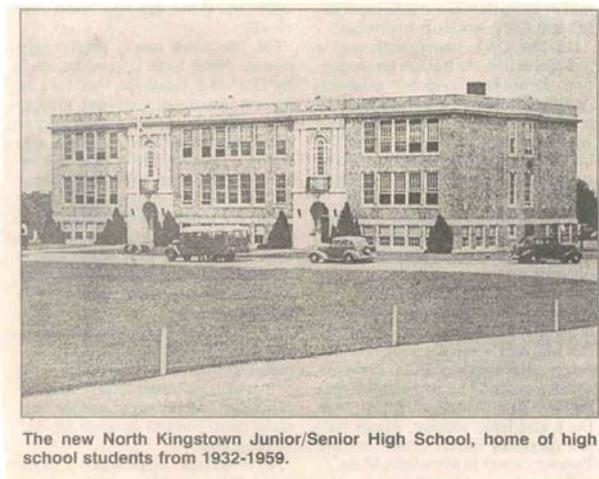
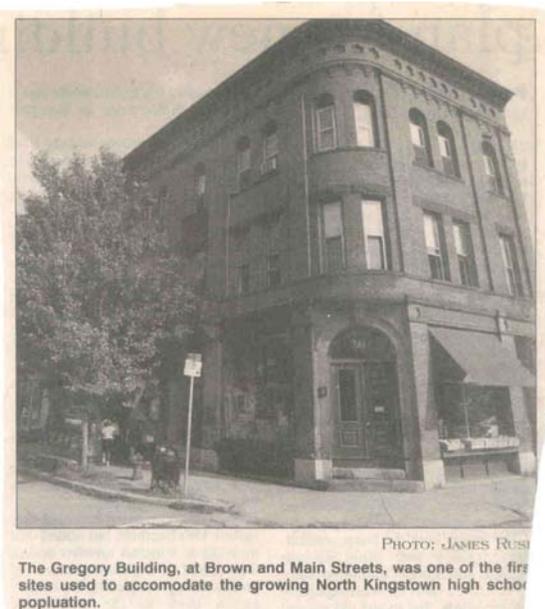
was decided, much against the wishes of the folks in Lafayette, to consolidate the two grammar schools that served the extended Lafayette community into one and physically move the East Lafayette school (located on the hill next to the Rodman Mill Complex) down Ten Rod Road and Phillips Street and place it next to the Wickford Grammar school. This relocated schoolhouse would then become the High School. All, except for the folks in Lafayette whose children would be crammed into the ancient Lafayette School (now an antique store on Ten Rod Rd. just below the rail overpass) now thought that a solution had finally been found whereby the high school students would actually get their own school building.

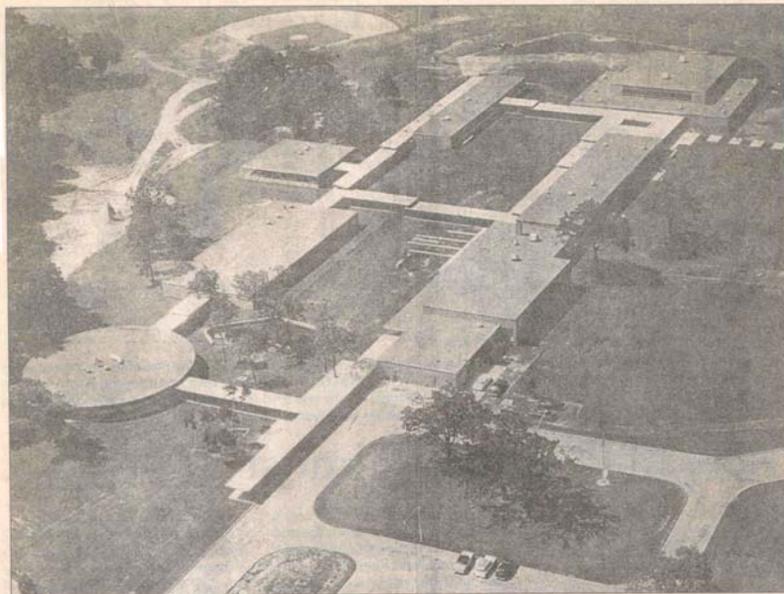
As the saying goes, "The best made plans of mice and men oft go astray" and this case was no exception. You see, on the night of February 16, 1907, the Wickford Grammar School burned to the ground and those great plans went out the window. In the end though, it worked out for the best. The folks in Lafayette got to keep their schoolhouse and eventually closed the older one and expanded the "high school that got away" into the exceptional building you see today. Down in Wickford, a more modest financial outlay plus some insurance money paid for a brand new school building, which housed not only the original eight grades that attended there, but the high school as well. This arrangement worked just fine from the 1908 school year until the 1931 school year. In September of 1932, grades 7 through 12 were moved up Phillips Street to the new Junior/Senior High School, which had been built there, in what was once a pasture. I'm sure the consensus at the time was that this new arrangement was going to hold the town in good stead for many decades. There was just one factor that the town fathers could not foresee then, and what a factor it was. Just a few years later, the massive construction project that was to become Quonset/Davisville rolled into town like a steamroller and laid waste to all future enrollment projections. Before long the town was playing catch-up again, and were required to construct a number of additions to the building as well as numerous interior realignments to keep up with the rapidly expanding student population. Finally, in the late 1950s, the decision was made to construct a brand new high school. The Jr/Sr High School became just a Junior High with the 1960 opening of that new school.

The town purchased the old Annaquatucket Golf course as a site for their new state of the art high school. It was designed to mimic a college campus in order to help prepare students for their further education. The old golf course site was spacious enough for extensive expansion and that advantage was pursued fully as the years passed. But now it seems the school's campus-like design, which was praised at the time within the greater educational community, was part and parcel to her downfall. No one, in 1959 when the school's initial design work was completed, could ever imagine how much it would cost to heat so many separate buildings, some thirty or forty years later.

So now we have come to the opening of a new chapter in this continuing story. I find it interesting to note that the freshmen who begin their educational journey in this new building, do it almost exactly 100 years after those very first serious students began their own odyssey, and they will graduate in 2005 as the 100th graduating class of North Kingstown High School. I must say, with that in mind, you are truly a blessed group of young people. Good Luck.

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The Fairway Drive high school (1960-2000), pictured as it appeared during its opening year, cost a lot to heat with its individual buildings.

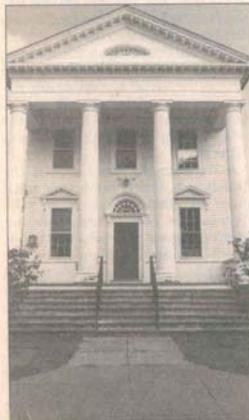


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

The North Kingstown Free Library Building on Brown Street was home to the high school students in the beginning.



PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

The "Old Town Hall," now part of the Cranston's of Wickford Funeral Home property, served as classroom space for high school students around 1907.

CLASSICAL	LATIN	ENGLISH SCIENTIFIC
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Arithmetic—Algebra.</li> <li>2. English—Selected Lessons.</li> <li>3. History—English and General.</li> <li>4. Latin—Beginners' book.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Arithmetic—Algebra.</li> <li>2. English—Selected Lessons.</li> <li>3. History—English and General.</li> <li>4. Latin—Beginners' book.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Arithmetic—Algebra.</li> <li>2. English—Selected Lessons.</li> <li>3. History—English and General.</li> <li>4. Bookkeeping—Business Form.</li> </ol>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Algebra—Geometry, Plane.</li> <li>2. Historic—Outlines.</li> <li>3. History—Greece and Rome.</li> <li>4. Latin—Caesar and Cicero.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Algebra—Geometry, Plane.</li> <li>2. Historic—Outlines.</li> <li>3. History—Greece and Rome.</li> <li>4. Latin—Caesar and Cicero.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Algebra—Geometry, Plane.</li> <li>2. Rhetoric—Outlines.</li> <li>3. History—Greece and Rome.</li> <li>4. a. Physical Geography—b. Geology.</li> </ol>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Geometry—Plane and Solid.</li> <li>2. American Literature.</li> <li>3. Latin—Caesar, Sallust, Ovid.</li> <li>4. Greek—Xenophon.</li> <li>5. Civil Government.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Geometry—Plane and Solid.</li> <li>2. American Literature.</li> <li>3. Latin—Caesar, Sallust, Ovid.</li> <li>4. Physics.</li> <li>5. Civil Government.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Geometry—Plane and Solid.</li> <li>2. American Literature.</li> <li>3. Botany.</li> <li>4. Physics.</li> <li>5. Civil Government.</li> </ol>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Geometry—Solid and Spherical.</li> <li>2. English Literature.</li> <li>3. Latin—Virgil.</li> <li>4. Greek—Xenophon.</li> <li>5. French or German.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Geometry—Solid and Spherical.</li> <li>2. English Literature.</li> <li>3. Latin—Virgil.</li> <li>4. Chemistry.</li> <li>5. French or German.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Geometry—Solid and Spherical.</li> <li>2. English Literature.</li> <li>3. Zoology.</li> <li>4. Chemistry.</li> <li>5. French or German.</li> </ol>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mathematical Reviews.</li> <li>2. English—College Readings.</li> <li>3. Latin—Virgil.</li> <li>4. Greek—Homer.</li> <li>5. French or German.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mathematical Reviews.</li> <li>2. English—College Readings.</li> <li>3. Latin—Virgil.</li> <li>4. Historical Reviews—Economic Probs.</li> <li>5. French or German.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Mathematical Reviews.</li> <li>2. English—College Readings.</li> <li>3. Astronomy.</li> <li>4. Trigonometry, or 4 in Latin Course.</li> <li>5. French or German.</li> </ol>

The proposed course load was a heavy one for a 1901 North Kingstown High School student.

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

### **Helen Hoyt Sherman Griffith**

Perhaps no woman who has called North Kingstown home had a more amazing life than Saunderstown's Helen Griffith. Helen was born in Des Moines, Iowa in February of 1873. Her father, Hoyt Sherman, was the President of The First National Bank of Des Moines; and had just finished a stint as the Paymaster General for the Army during the Civil War. Helen's uncle, too, had played a part in the great war. As a matter of fact, few men played a larger role than uncle William Tecumseh Sherman. As Helen was entering her early twenties, her family left Des Moines for Washington,DC; where her father was to take part in the administration of President McKinley under his younger brother John Sherman, who was McKinley's Secretary of State. While there she met all the powerful people of the day, including McKinley's young Under Secretary of the Navy Teddy Roosevelt, a man she would meet again during her days in Saunderstown. During that same time she and her sister departed on an around the world cruise; on which she met her future husband, William Griffith; the son of a rich and powerful Pennsylvania cotton broker, who like RI's own Parley Mathewson, made his fortune during and after the Civil War. Helen and William were married in "Blair House" back in Washington in a ceremony arranged by her parents and Uncle John, the Secretary of State. After the wedding the newlyweds settled in the exclusive "Chestnut Hill" section of Philadelphia.

Now, Helen was not the kind of woman to be content with sitting patiently doing needlepoint and entertaining the other socialite wives at teas. She had a dream to be a writer and had written prolifically for years. At first her father had found her passion amusing and had tolerated it, but when young Helen broached the subject of publishing her work her father put his foot down; it was not befitting of a young lady of her stature and he would

have none of it. Unperturbed, Helen countered by threatening to run away and enter an even more lurid occupation, acting, if she was not allowed to publish her work. Father, Hoyt, acquiesced when faced with this alternative and let her follow her dream. Helen was also fascinated with that newfangled invention, the automobile, and after her marriage to William, became the first woman in Pennsylvania with a driver's license. In 1909, she took some of her "book money" and bought a brand new Pierce Arrow automobile. She drove it everywhere, including shipping it by freighter to England and Europe and driving it around the British Isles and the "continent". In the beginning Helen wrote plays, but was not very successful with it. She then turned her attention to novels, writing three novels; "Rosemary for Remembrance", "Her Wilful Ways", and "The Lane", the latter of which became a minor bestseller in the 1920's. Helen really made her mark in the literary world as the writer of serial novels for young girls. Her "Letty", "Virginia", and "Louise Maude" series were the predecessors to the more recent serial novels like Nancy Drew and The Hardy Boys and were wildly successful. The more than twenty novels that the three series encompassed brought in enough income that husband William was able to retire from his position as an Engineer for Bell Telephone at an early age. Her success also brought them into a whole new social circle of commercially successful young writers for whom summers on the Jersey shore were just not apropos. The Wister's, Wharton's, LaFarges', and other writers of the day preferred the peaceful tranquility of Saunderstown, RI; and in 1912 the Griffith's, too, summered in a rented home on Ferry Road. They, like the rest, fell in love with it and bought a piece of property where they built their home, "The Clearing" in 1916. Summers at The Clearing" consisted of lazy days writing and entertaining, or a trip on their sloop over to Newport for concerts and teas. Helen eventually became fascinated with the new media of film and radio and tried her hand at writing for these.

Life changed suddenly for Helen in 1936, when 69 year old William died of an apparent heart attack. She sold her Chestnut Hill home and moved into

an apartment in Philadelphia. She continued to summer at "The Clearing" in Saunderstown, but sadly, never wrote again. After a time she left Pennsylvania all together and lived with her son John and his wife Barbara in Saunderstown. She died there in 1967 at the age of eighty-four; eighty-four very full and remarkable years.

The large two story L-shaped shingle style home which the Griffith's built in Saunderstown and called "The Clearing", fronts the Narragansett Bay and is just as remarkable as it was when William and Helen entertained the likes of Owen Wister, Christopher Lafarge, Edith Wharton and T.R. himself. The idyllic setting is diminished though, by the absence of Helen Griffith, a woman who went from bouncing on the knee of General (and uncle) William Tecumseh Sherman to turning the world upside down all on her own.

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The Clearing in Saunderstown was the summer home of William and Helen Griffith.

## The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

### A Mother's Day Story

Each year around this time, I like to shine the spotlight on a woman from this town's past, who through her unselfish personal sacrifices, made a difference in the life of her children. Such a woman was Emeline Weeden, and this is her story.

Emeline was born in 1940, into a farming family which lived along the border of the Swamptown and Allenton districts of our fair town. She was the middle child of five, born into, and quite accustomed to, the "hard-scrabble" existence of the farming life. More than likely, she received some formal schooling, when the busy schedule of planting and harvesting permitted; but its a safe bet that she never progressed much beyond the elementary level of reading, writing and arithmetic. Around the same time that Emeline was growing up, working in and playing on the fields and woods of her family's farm, something else was coming into its own in North Kingstown. That something was the fabric industry, and as hard as it is to imagine in this day and age, the advent of the fabric mill and the subsequent availability of regular paying jobs for anyone willing to work and old enough to reach the machines, was a godsend for countless struggling farming families just like Emeline's.

The way it played out in family after family was like this; the father, in this case, Cyrus, and the eldest son, Emeline's big brother, Pardon, stayed home to work the fields. Mother (or eldest sister if the mother has died), Sally, in this instance, would also stay home to tend to the house and young ones. All other children, as soon as they were able to stand up to the rigors of the job, in a family such as Emeline's, would go off and work in the mill. This was not done out of meanness and greed on the parent's part. Nor did it only happen here; on the contrary, it was going on from Lowell, Mass. to Westerly, RI, from Central Falls to Fall River, from Nashua, NH to New Haven, CT, anywhere that

there was a river to power a mill and a labor force to run the machines, children were making fabric. It was a fact of life, driven by the complex interaction of a family's desire to get ahead in life and a mill owner's opportunity to become wealthy, fueled by an American economy and political establishment which protected its manufacturing interests by establishing a system of exorbitant tariffs (import taxes) that virtually guaranteed a lack of overseas competition. None of this would have mattered a whit to young Emeline, her older sister Sarah, and her younger brother George, as they trudged off each day, not to school, but to a mill to do their part to help their family survive.

Emeline and her siblings, probably worked in either the Oak Hill Mill near the crest of Oak Hill (no longer standing, demolished circa 1920) or the Narragansett Mill (profiled in a recent column), the Silver Spring Mill, or perhaps even the Belleville Mill which was located on the edge of what we now call Secret Lake. Family tradition is not clear on that point; however, there is one thing that family tradition is clear on - Emeline vowed, as she and the other "mill girls" spent their ten or twelve hour days swapping out spindles of yarn to keep the machines running without ceasing, "That no child of hers would ever have to work in a mill!". I'm sure she also passed on the same oath to brother George as he hauled warps of cotton and bolts of fabric from one end of the mill to the other. Family tradition also holds that Emeline, who was a slender girl and small in stature as seen in the enclosed picture, had to stand for hours on a wooden box in order to reach the machine she was assigned to. No matter what happened Emeline, Sarah, and George, did what all folks did back then, they persevered, they did what had to be done. In 1857, Sarah married, and presumably left the world of the "mill girls" behind. A few years later, younger brother George, did what tens of thousands of restless young men across the north were doing, he enlisted in the Union Army and set off to fight in the "Great War Between the States". Although patriotism was also a factor in the mass enlistments of young men, you can be assured that escape and adventure played as significant a role in their decision making process. This left Emeline to

labor at the mill alone, but in July of 1862 she too, married and left that world, for a time at least, behind. Her betrothed was William Weeden, a machinist she had met in the mill.

A couple of years prior to her marriage, Emeline's father, Cyrus had succumbed to a bout of meningitis leaving his wife Sally, along with Emeline and youngest child Lyman, alone to run the farm. It was to this home that William and Emeline returned after their wedding. They would now become the heads of the household and they allowed Sally and Lyman to stay on in the only home they knew. William left the mill and became a farmer, although he had to supplement his income occasionally as both a machinist and a stone mason. Emeline, with her mother's help, ran the house. It was she who read the letters from the front that George wrote back to his family as he fought for four years in the Civil War. In 1864, she gave birth to a son, whom she named George in honor of her beloved brother. Sadly the boy died, as many did in those days, before reaching the age of two. But then in 1867, Emeline bore a daughter whom she named Lillie Belle. Lillie Belle Weeden was to be their only child and Emeline was not about to forget her pledge all those years before. Lillie went to school, as Emeline was determined that her daughter was going to amount to something special. She did so well, in fact, that upon graduation from the North Kingstown school system she was accepted as a student at the Rhode Island Normal School (the predecessor to RI College) to begin training as a teacher. Emeline's dream for her child was about to become a reality, that is with the exception of one small hitch - How would the Weedens pay for Lillie's college? Emeline only knew one way to make that kind of money, she only had one marketable skill, and although she most certainly dreaded the prospect, she knew what she had to do. Emeline, a woman by now in her forties, old by the standard of the day, went back to work in the mill to pay for her daughter's schooling. A promise made; a promise kept no matter the cost. A mother does that for her child; then and now.

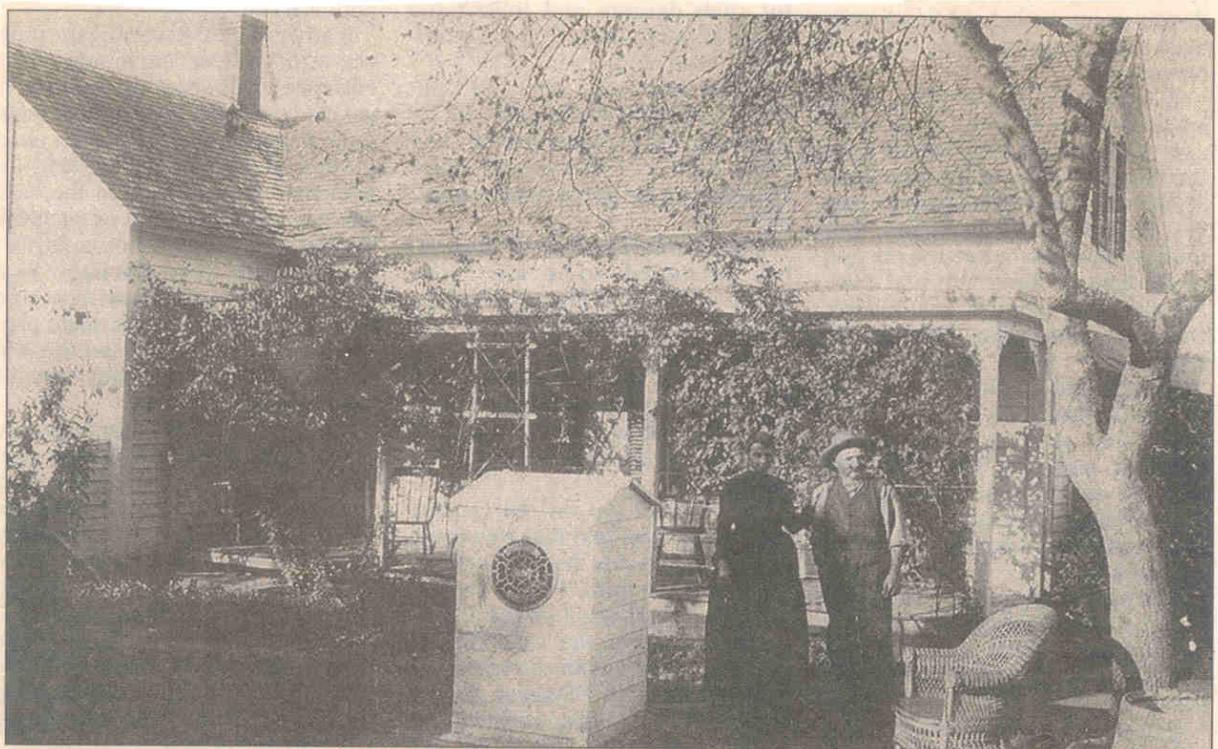
Lillie didn't let her Mom down. She finished school and came back to North

Kingstown to teach. The accompanying photo shows her with a class of students at the Hamilton District School (now a doctor's office on Weaver Rd directly across from the present day Hamilton Elementary School.). After leaving the profession for a time, to marry and have children of her own, Mrs. Lillie Belle Brown returned to teaching at the Allenton School (now the Montessori School) for another dozen years or so. As for Emeline, she, the very proud mother of a professional woman, finished out her life on the farm with her husband. They are shown here together on the farm, in their latter years. She died in June of 1899 and was buried in Elm Grove Cemetery right next to her parents. She outlived her little brother by just a couple of years. Where she is buried, she and her parents have a perfect view of the monument which the GAR erected in the memory of that old soldier, George T. Cranston. But I being connected to him in ways more than name only, know what he knew; that the frail little girl who vowed a vow and kept it, is as much a hero as he was.

Printed in the North East Independent 5/17/01



Lillie Belle Weeden, daughter of Emeline and William Weeden, is seen with her class at Hamilton District School.



Emeline and William Weeden are seen in front of their farmhouse, formerly at the intersection of West Allenton Road and Col. Rodman Highway.



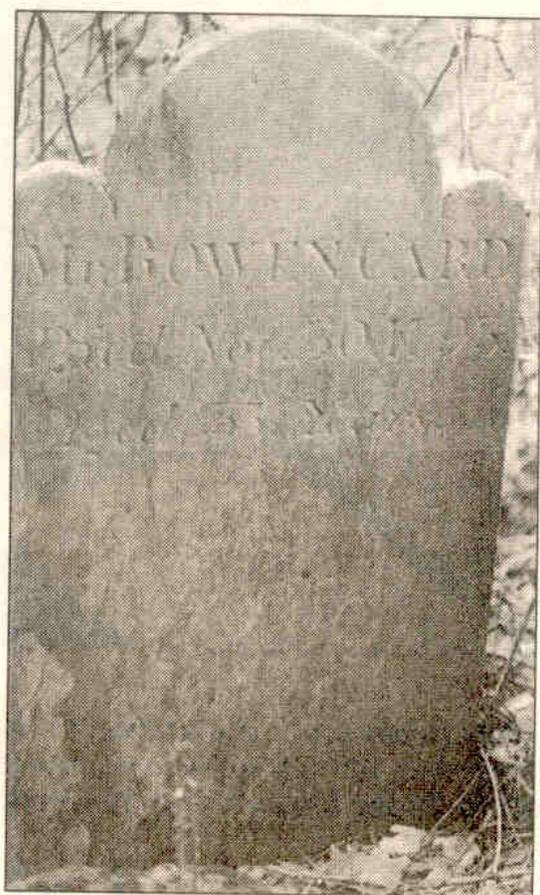
Emeline Weeden is pictured here around the time of her marriage.

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

## North Kingstown & the Ratification of the Constitution

I guess it's common knowledge that Rhode Island was the last of the original thirteen colonies to ratify the Constitution of the fledgling democracy which George Washington and his compatriots were attempting to form, but I don't believe everyone is aware of how close a vote it truly was. The final tally on the third convention on the subject was 34 to 32 in favor of adoption, and that was only after much arm-twisting, hand-wringing and gnashing of teeth by the powers-that-be in both Providence, where the majority of the pro-Constitution folks were centered, and Congress itself. Every time a vote was taken, North Kingstown, like most of the other southern agriculturally based communities, voted against ratification. The responsibility to cast those dissenting votes fell into the hands of two able locals, Bowen Card and William Congdon.

Card and Congdon were North Kingstown born and bred. They were men of importance in the community; Bowen Card was the collector of excise tax for the county in 1787, the surveyor for the port of North Kingstown in 1789, a Justice of the Peace, and a ranking member of the local militia, William Congdon was a respected man of law. They were most certainly busy men in those heady days of 1789 and 1790. The state, at first, refused to even hold a convention to vote on the constitution. Frustrated, the Congress struck back by saying that once nine states ratified it, it would become the law of the land and those not under its umbrella were on their own. Finally the General Assembly voted to refer the question to each individual town, and after much heated discussion, it was summarily rejected. Rhode Islander's on the whole were against the idea of a united federal government having the ability to tax the people of the state. George Washington called it "scandalous", James Madison spoke of the "wickedness and folly that reigned". The ever



COURTESY:  
ALTHEA MACALEER

**Bowen Card's grave can be found adjacent to the "Fire Platform" on Shermantown Road. The Platform is the original site of the old Narragansett Church.**

envious colony of Massachusetts, who had always coveted Narragansett Bay, as expected called for Rhode Island to be divided up between herself and Connecticut. The folks in Congress struck again with Tariff restrictions which hit the businessmen in Providence and the metropolitan communities that surround it hard. They started to come around, but still the townsfolk in the rural west and the swamp-yankees of southern RI held out saying no to taxes. (Not much has changed when you think about it.) Card and Congdon were certainly in the thick of it as North Kingstown's representatives. Another Convention was called for and held in South Kingstown and still the results were the same - no Constitution without weaker Federal Powers and stronger State's rights.

Congress, and Providence, had had enough. Finally, in the month of May in 1790, after Providence, with the backing of federal Congress, threatened to break away from the agricultural western and southern portions of the state and form its own independent commonwealth, the little colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, rather than become two separate states, voted, with a plurality of two, to ratify the Constitution. Card and Congdon, independent to the bitter end, voted against it.

Printed in the North East Independent 3/29/01

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

## **The Story of Mary (Chase) Thomas**

This is a story that's been a long time coming. It's a tale that's long overdue. You see, on March 6, 1985, the whole of Rhode Island should have held its collective breath for a moment. Wickford should have observed a moment of silence. The community of souls that makes up our world should have taken notice. For on that day, a woman who was well into her 109th year drew her last breath. A Wickford girl, born of slave parents, who lived out her whole life in this, the village of her birth was no more. The state of Rhode Island lost its oldest citizen and its African American community lost a hero. Mary Thomas, "Old Yellow's" (6 Bay Street) long-time resident was dead.

To understand Mary Thomas, it is necessary to take a look at her parents and the life they led before their migration to Wickford. In order to fathom her life, you've got to know of James Alexander Chase and his bride, Christina White. Theirs is a story worthy of a Hollywood movie or a PBS documentary; it's a tale of determination and perseverance bound up in love of country and each other. It is both unique to them and typical of the type of experience encountered by countless people in their situation; slaves who were now free, but not; men and women deservedly ecstatic about their freedom, but with little idea of how they will make it in the rapidly changing world swirling around them.

Jim Chase was born a slave in Prince George's County, Maryland in 1841 of Alexander and Elizabeth Chase. Nothing is known at this time of his early years. He next turns up in the historical record when he, upon his emancipation from slavery, immediately enlists in the 23rd Maryland regiment, Company F, of the U.S. Colored troops to fight for his country and the President who had just freed him, during the long bloody Civil War. He served continuously from his initial enlistment until the very end of the war. After the war, Jim turned up in New York City, working as a laborer, where he met his bride-to-be Christina White.

Christina White was born a slave in Richmond, Virginia in 1843. Even less is known of her early years, other than that she too, migrated to New York City where she met up with Jim Chase. At the time she met her husband-to-be she already had two children; Cornelia born in 1864 and William born in 1873. Although no concrete evidence exists, long standing family tradition holds that Cornelia and William were fathered by their mother's master.

Whatever the circumstances, it did not appear to matter to Jim Chase. Soon after they met, Jim took Christina and her children with him on his journey to New England. For reasons that may never be known, Jim and Christina finally settled on Wickford RI as the place they chose to call home. The first thing they did upon their arrival in the village was to marry. On January 7, 1875 Jim and Christina were married in Wickford. Their new life together had begun.

At the time of his marriage to Christina and at the birth of his daughter in 1876, Jim Chase listed his occupation as laborer. Again in 1880 when Christina gave birth to another child who died shortly after delivery, Jim called himself a laborer. But by the time of the 1885 census, Jim and Christina's life had begun to change. They had just purchased a home and Jim was now listing his occupation as a teamster. (For the uninitiated a teamster during the 1800's was not a burly truck driver but a man who is in charge of a "team" of draft animals {i.e.\_horses, oxen, or mules) and handled them as they hauled their loads.) Their home was the Thomas house (No relation) on Bay Street in Wickford. Even then it was the oldest home in Wickford. I can only imagine how proud they must have felt.

By now, the Chase family had lived in Wickford for ten years and were a well liked and respected part of the community. Mary, their daughter, attended school at the Wickford Academy, where she was the only African-American student in her grade. A class photo from around this time accompanies the article. Jim was a member of the Charles Baker Chapter of the G.A.R., a group very similar to today's VFW but solely for Civil War Veterans, which met at the G.A.R. Hall in Wickford. Although not solely

without precedent, the fact that Jim, a black man in a world that was still very white, was a respected and accepted member of the local G.A.R. chapter speaks volumes about his place in the community.

Some time shortly after the time of the 1885 census, Jim came up with an idea which not only allowed him to provide a good life for his family, but also made him a regional celebrity of sorts. Jim Chase became Jim Chase "The Yeast Man", as he began to grow and market baker's and brewer's yeast out of his Bay Street home. Jim eventually became known throughout the region as the man to see for yeast.

About the same time that Jim was making his mark as "The Yeast Man", his daughter Mary, was getting married to Charles Thomas of East Greenwich. They lived in the spacious "Old Yellow" with Jim and Christina and, in 1895, had a daughter which they named Florence Elizabeth Thomas. Sadly, for reasons unknown to this writer, things did not work out between Mary and Charles and, very atypically for the time, they were divorced. Charles moved on and was no longer a part of Mary or Florence's life.

Life went on for the extended Chase family after Charles left. Florence followed her mother and went to school at the Wickford Academy. Mary began a decades long career as a midwife and childcare provider. Jim just went on being the Yeast Man and Christina kept the whole household running. Florence eventually married a young "doughboy" named Clarence VanHagen and waited out WWI while he served out his time in the trenches. Clarence survived the "Great War", but tragedy struck the Chase family none the less when Jim Chase, the slave turned respected veteran and highly regarded local businessman died at the age of seventy-five. He was buried with military honors in one of the graves which surround the big G.A.R. monument at Elm Grove Cemetery. Christina lived for another nine years and then joined her husband at age eighty-two. She too, is buried in Elm Grove.

Again, the Chase family persevered. Mary, her sister Cornelia - known by all as Neelie, and daughter and son-in-law the VanHagen's filled "Old Yellow" with the sounds of a happy family. Ownership of the big house had been handed down to Mary upon the

death of her parents. In 1931 the family's joy was doubled when Clarence and Florence were able to purchase the 1785 gambrel-roofed Peck-Freeborn House on Main Street just in front of Mary's "Old Yellow". By then the family had already owned "Old Yellow" for forty-six years.

Their life went on in the usual way until 1954 when ninety year old Neelie, the daughter of a slave and a slave owner joined her parents and brother on their final journey to God. In 1965, Mary lost another when Clarence, too, went on to the next world. He, like his father-in-law, was seventy-five. Mary, 90 and Florence, 70 were all that was left. They realized that two houses made no sense, and in 1966 after eighty-one years of continuous ownership they reluctantly sold "Old Yellow". Mary moved in with her daughter into the smaller Peck-Freeborn House.

At this time in Mary's life, I was lucky enough to cross paths with her. Not only did she appear like clockwork each Sunday at St. Paul's Church where I also attended, but I saw either her or Florence each Saturday when I collected for the newspapers I threw into their shrubs each evening. They were as gracious with their errant paperboy as they were with everything else in their life.

Mary and Florence continued to live on their own for nearly ten more years. Just prior to Mary's 100th birthday they were set up in a room together in the Lafayette Nursing Home. In 1976, ninety-one years after they bought their first home on the corner of Main and Bay Streets the little house was sold to help pay for their care. The Chase/Thomas era was over.

Sadly, shortly after Mary and Florence were set up as roommates at the nursing home, Mary suffered a tragic loss. Her daughter, and companion for some eighty years took a quick turn for the worse and died. Mary was now alone after outliving all of her relations. Florence's obituary poignantly said it all with its last sentence, "Her 100 year old mother is her only survivor".

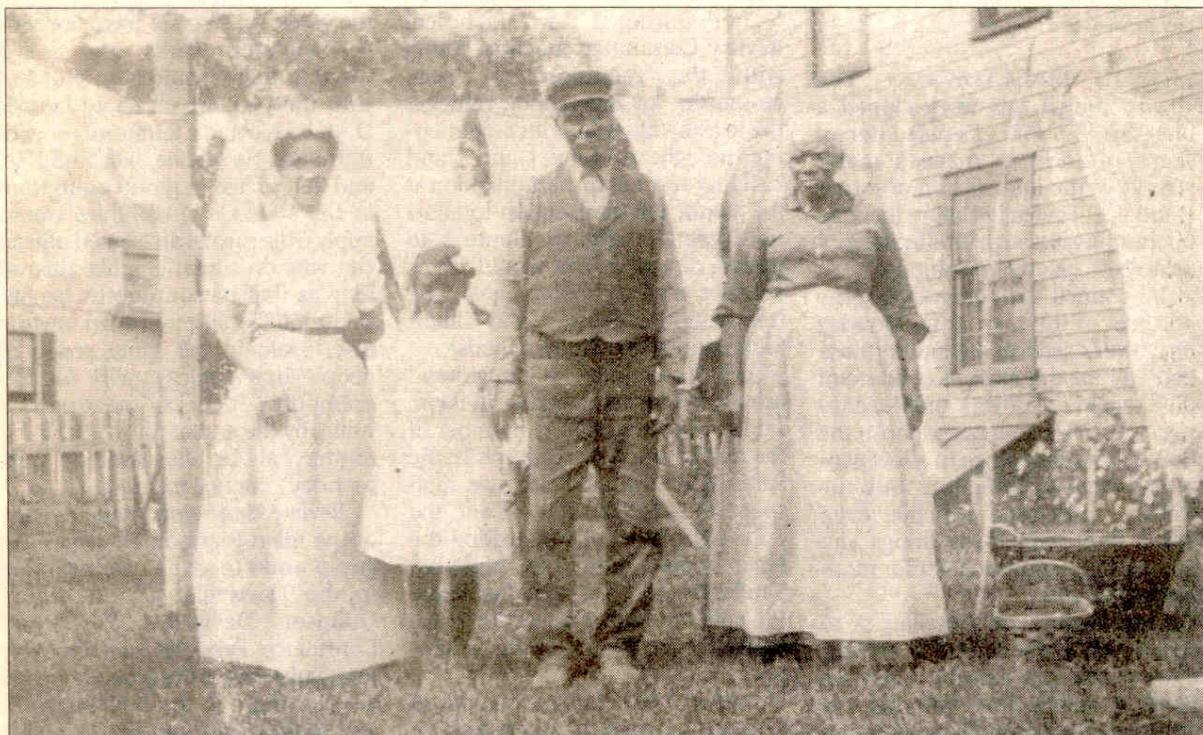
A few years later, Mary not only outlived all her family, but her money as well,

and she was forced to move out of the town she loved so much. Those who knew her feared that this above all other things would finally break her heart. She lived out her last years at The Bannister House in Providence. When she finally left this world on that early spring day in 1985, she was Rhode Island's oldest citizen and a symbol of local African American pride. This last distinction, according to all who knew her, made her somewhat uncomfortable. You see, in her eyes she was just a Wickford girl, nothing more than that.

Mary's obituary ends with a sentence very similar to that of her daughter's. "There are no immediate survivors". But I must differ. She was survived by a village that loved her and counted her as one of their own for more than 100 years. She was survived by a state-wide community of Black Americans who saw her life as an example of what can be accomplished. She was survived by a retired banker and close friend and neighbor who took care of her affairs for years and still speaks wistfully of the time he spent with her. And she was survived by a young paperboy who grew up marveling at the very notion of what it must be like to live so long and experience so much.

As I did my research for this story I decided to see if Mary was one of America's oldest citizens, as well as Rhode Island's, at the time of her death. I learned two things with this exercise. First, although Mary was not America's oldest citizen when she passed on, you could count those older than her at that time and not run out of fingers. Secondly, and most profoundly, I was struck by the undeniable fact that the large majority of the country's oldest citizens at that juncture in history were, like Mary, the children of slaves. This includes the two oldest, 115 year old Willie Duberry of South Carolina and 114 year old Susie Brunson of North Carolina. After much thought I've decided that the reason for this must be that no one could possibly appreciate freedom as much as the child of a slave. And they clung stubbornly to it refusing to let go of what their parents had worked so hard for. Rest in Peace, Mary, Rest in Peace.

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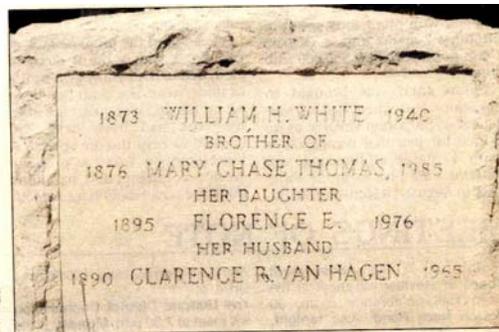
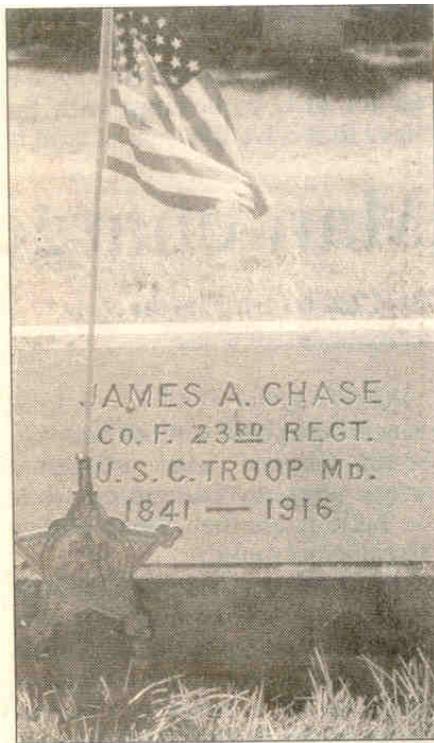
The Chase/Thomas family is pictured in the yard of "Old Yellow" around 1905. From left are Mary Thomas and her daughter Florence and Mary's parents, Jim and Christina Chase.



This circa 1883 class picture of Mary Chase was taken on the steps of the Wickford Academy. Chase can be seen at the bottom right. Any readers interested in the names of other students may contact Tim Cranston at the paper.



Jim Chase (upper right corner) is seen with his fellow G.A.R. members of the Charles Baker Post at Wickford around 1900.



The grave of James Chase (top photo) and the Thomas-VanHagen stone both can be found in Elm Grove Cemetery.



The Peck-Freeborn house (above) was bought by Clarence and Florence VanHagen in 1931. Below, "Old Yellow" was the home owned by Jim and Christina Chase and later their daughter, Mary Thomas.



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

### **Christiana Bannister**

1819 was a memorable year for a hard working African-American/Narragansett Indian couple named John and Mary Babcock. They lived in the southwest corner of North Kingstown. Out past Slocumville, even out past Shermantown, in an area that was always known as "Dark Corners". Dark Corners nestled up against Stony Fort, and although Stony Fort was officially part of South Kingstown, everyone knew it to be Narragansett tribal land. It was the land of John and Mary's ancestor's and, although dark and foreboding to some, it probably felt like home to the Babcock's and their kin. 1819 was the year that Mary gave John a daughter. They named her Christiana. Little did they know then, but their daughter would one day leave her mark on the world in a most extraordinary way.

Nothing is known of Christiana's early life. What education she received she probably got at home, as the Dark Corners District Schoolhouse would not open until she was too old to take advantage of it. Somehow though, she learned what she needed to in order to succeed in life, because she next shows up in the historic record around 1850 as Madame Carteaux, the owner of a chain of upscale hair salons in Boston and Providence. These salons featured a line of cosmetics and skin and hair care products that she had invented. Perhaps they were the ancient secrets of the Narragansett Indian women, or maybe she came up with them all on her own; whatever the case they were wildly popular and had made her a prominent and successful black businesswoman in a time when such a thing was unusual. Even more unusual still was the fact that the majority of her clientele were the wealthy and prominent white women of the two cities. She was so successful in fact, that the abolitionist newspaper "The Liberator" profiled her in an issue from January of 1854. She had dropped her family name by then and went by the much more exotic sounding name of Christiana Carteaux. She may have let go of her Babcock roots, but she never lost touch with who she was and where she came from. You see, besides being a successful businesswoman, Christiana was an activist. She worked fervently for a number of

causes, chiefly, as you would expect freedom for her people - the abolition of slavery.

Around the end of the 1840's, another talented and inspired young African- American was making his way from New Brunswick, Canada to Boston. Edward Bannister, along with his brother William, had decided to head to America to pursue his life-long dream of becoming an artist. He had a natural talent as a barber, and eventually ended up working in one of Madame Carteaux's hair salons, in order to put food on his table and to finance his quest to become a painter. Edward, too, was an activist, and he eventually became acquainted with his famous (not to mention attractive) boss. They .traveled in the same social circles and became friends. They fell in love and were married on June 10, 1857. They continued to work for causes they both cared about as a couple. They championed the cause of equal pay for Black soldiers who fought in the Civil War, and held fundraisers to assist the widows and orphans of slain African- American soldiers. They were prominent and well-respected members of the Boston African American community. They made a difference.

With his marriage to Christiana in 1857, Edward was finally financially sound enough to devote his entire attention to his passion for painting. Christiana's faith in him began to pay off soon after, as he began to get commissions and receive accolades for his talent. In later years, when speaking of this time and his wife's contributions to his success he said, "I would have made out very poorly had it not been for her, and my greatest successes have come through her."

By 1869, the atmosphere in Boston had changed to such a degree that the Bannister's decided to relocate to Christiana's home state to the south. The city's reputation as a center for abolitionist activity and its relative benign acceptance of African-Americans had caused an influx of migration of former slaves. The resultant backlash from white residents who feared a loss of jobs and majority status forever changed the way the black man was viewed in the city. In October of that year they took up residence in Providence. They would spend the rest of their lives there.

The move did little to change the lifestyle that the Bannister's were accustomed to.

Christiana's hair salon empire was equally successful in Providence and they quickly became a part of not only the city's black community, but the growing art community as well. Edward and Christiana were instrumental in the founding of the Providence Art Club, as well as the now prestigious Rhode Island School of Design. But even with all that Edward was still only renowned as a regional artist. His big break came in 1876 at the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, when his painting "Under The Oaks" took First Prize. With this he became an artist of national renown.

All the while this was going on Madame Carteaux continued to run her hair and cosmetic business as well as pursue noble causes. In Providence she took up the cause of the fate of the city's elderly black community and help found the institution which is now named for her "Bannister House", a nursing home. She and Edward endowed the facility with a number of his paintings, including his portrait of her. They are presently on long term loan to the Newport Art Museum.

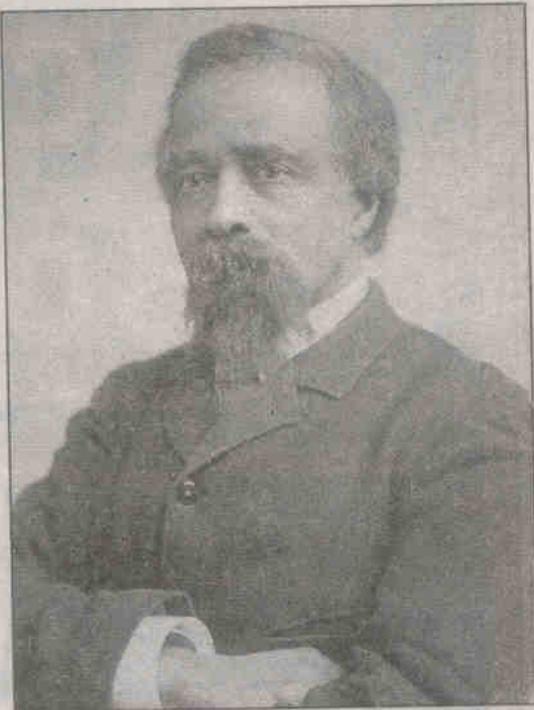
Edward's Gold Medal at the Centennial Exposition brought him fame and continued success. He was now among the most successful of black artists and continued to win awards and accolades. In spite of it all, he could never escape the shadow of prejudice that tainted his many successes. It has been said that Bannister's career was motivated by a desire to disprove a comment in the New York Herald which had incensed him, it stated, "The Negro seems to have an appreciation of art, while being manifestly unable to produce it." Edward Bannister's life, as well as his work, emphatically denounces this stereotypical comment, and then some. He died at a prayer meeting at the Elmwood Street Baptist Church on January 9, 1901 of a massive heart attack. His last words were, "Jesus, help me.

Christiana's life took a rapid downward spiral from that point on. As they were childless, there was no one to look after her and she died penniless and alone at the State Hospital for the Insane in December of 1902. She was eighty-three.

The life of Christiana and Edward Bannister is still one of many mysteries. How did a

backwoods girl like Christiana Babcock manage to transform herself into the sophisticated Madame Carteaux? What happened to the substantial fortune that they had amassed; how could someone so successful die penniless? Also amazing is the fact that the majority of Bannister's most important works have disappeared from the art scene, including "Under The Oaks" his masterpiece. Where are they now? One thing though is certain. A little girl born in the backwoods of North Kingstown had grown up to change her world. And Bannister House along with RISD itself, stands to this day as a testament to a life lived well.

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**Edward M. Bannister**



This portrait of Christiana (Babcock) Bannister, painted by her husband Edward, is owned by the Bannister House and on loan to the Newport Art Museum.

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

## The Legend of Hannah Robinson

Greetings, faithful readers. This week we are going to take a look at one of the regions most enduring stories, the tale of Hannah Robinson. Although most of the existing landmarks that populate this story are just south of our fair town's border in neighboring South Kingstown and Narragansett, the tale is one that belongs to all of what used to be the Kings County (North and South Kingstown, Narragansett, and Exeter). Hannah's story of love gone awry has lasted so long because it has touched all who have heard it. I'm sure that a small amount of embellishment has occurred in the telling over the centuries, however, as far as your loyal columnist has been able to ascertain the basic facts of the story are on the money. So on with the tale.

In 1746, the Rowland Robinson family of Saunderstown rejoiced in the birth of their first child. Young Hannah had been born into one of the most influential plantation families of the Narragansett Country. She and her family lived in one of the finest and most beautiful homes in all of the colonies. As she grew she was sent to the best schools in nearby Newport. At one of these schools young Hannah, by now a woman of great beauty, met and fell in love with the man who would be her ultimate downfall, for Hannah would truly love him till parted by death.

Hannah met her beloved, Pierre Simond, at Madame Osborne's School for Young Ladies in Newport. He taught both French and dancing there. Their relationship began at the school and then continued after Hannah returned home. At one point they were nearly found out by her suspicious father, but Pierre hid in one of the enormous house's many cupboards until he could make his escape. Finally, they tempted fate one too many times and Pierre was apprehended hiding in a lilac under Hannah's window. He escaped, but not before receiving a thrashing from Rowland's stout cane. Hannah knew it to be true that her father, gentleman farmer and County Sheriff Rowland Robinson, would never approve of a marriage to a dancing instructor. But her heart would not listen to her head and on a trip to her

aunt and uncle Lodowick Updike's Cocumcussoc home for a grand ball, she stole away and met with him at a prearranged location. The young lovers ran north to Providence, where they were married and began a life together. Sadly, Hannah's wedded bliss was short lived. Once Pierre realized that Hannah was to be cut out of her father's will, thereby depriving them of a portion of Rowland Robinson's vast wealth, he showed his true colors and abandoned her. As is so often the case, father did know best, but Hannah was too proud to return, with her head down, to her home and pined away for her lost love at the home they formerly shared together in Providence. Back in the Narragansett County, Rowland was still fuming over his daughter's disobedience. When William, Hannah's brother, informed their father of her plight, he said that he would allow her to return only if she would reveal the names of all who had in any way helped her to elope with the cad Simond. Do this, he said, and she would be his daughter again. Hannah refused. Robinson's reply was "Then let the foolish thing die where she is!" One wonders how many times Rowland Robinson wished he could take those words back. As time went by Hannah's condition worsened. Seeing this, William spoke to all involved in the concealment of the elopement and had them send word to Hannah that it would be alright with them if she acquiesced to her father's demands. Anything to save young Hannah's life. Hannah, in turn, sent for her father, whose heart, it has been said, melted when he saw his daughter's condition. He no longer cared about her co-conspirators; his only concern was the welfare of his child. He immediately sent for four strong men and a litter to carry her back to the Robinson Home. Along the way, Hannah asked to stop at the spot now known as Hannah's Rock so she could gaze out upon the land she loved so much. The next day, Hannah died, with her family around her and her hand in the hand of her father. Simond was never heard from again.

The Rowland Robinson house is located on the Old Boston Neck Road on the North Kingstown/Narragansett border. It is still a private home. It is this writer's opinion that it is the finest colonial home in all of Rhode Island, if not New England, and is worth a drive by. Hannah Robinson's Rock can be found almost beneath the Fire

Tower on Tower Hill Road. While you are there, take your family up the tower.

No child, young or old, (this columnist included) doesn't enjoy the climb up this, one of the last fire towers in the area. From the top you can, literally, see for miles. The view is particularly breathtaking as the foliage changes in the fall. It doesn't take much time on the tower to understand why this vista was one of the last things Hannah Robinson wished to behold.

Printed in the North East Independent 7/05/01



PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

**Rowland Robinson's grand house now is a private residence on Old Boston Neck Road, just over the Narragansett line.**

## **Ezra Thomas of North Kingstown- Man of the Sea**

Ezra Thomas was the kind of man that people compose poetry about. A “Rime of the Ancient Mariner” sort of man, an “old Man and the Sea” type of man, a man so loved and respected by the community that all who knew him called him Captain, regardless of the fact that he was only a second mate. Ezra Thomas sailed on the clipper ships, the “thoroughbreds” of the sea. I expect Ezra reeked of the sea, salt water flowed through his veins and owned his heart. Ezra did what other men only dared dream of; he sailed around the Horn on the way to San Francisco. He battled killer storms off the Cape of Good Hope, climbing the mizzenmast in seventy foot seas to take in sail before the wind and sea slammed him violently into “Davey Jones’s locker”. He stood by his Captain and faced down sixteen mutinous shipmates off the coast of Melbourne. He raced another clipper ship from Boston to Australia to collect a \$500 purse for the first ship in port. As you’d expect from a man like Ezra, his clipper “The Live Yankee” beat “The Samuel Russell” and her crew. As a former sailor myself, I expect Ezra and his shipmates hoisted many a cold brew and toasted the "Sam Russell" and her crew.

Before we continue with Ezra's story lets take a look at "Clipper Ships" and what they were exactly. A ship must satisfy three criterions in order to be called a "Clipper. She must be sharp-lined, very long in proportion to beam; built for speed. She must be tall-masted and carry the maximum possible spread of sail. Finally, she must use that sail day and night. Fair weather and foul, without let-up, without ceasing. Clippers were uneconomical ships in most trades; they were expensive to build and required many hands. The pounding they took as they raced across the sea caused them to have inordinately short lives. They only made sense when used to carry premium and/or perishable cargoes long distances where speed meant the difference between financial success and total failure. Only the best and most durable sailors crewed these "racehorses of the sea".

Ezra Thomas was born in a little house on the Boston Post Road (at the

location of the big sign in Dave's Market parking lot on present day Tower Hill Road) on August 7, 1836. He first went to sea in 1852 at the age of 15 and continued sailing until 1884. His first ship was the "Matamora", a coastal schooner that sailed back and forth between New England ports and St. John's, New Brunswick. Coastwise sailing was not enough for Ezra though; the deep sea was calling him and soon after he signed on to the Clipper "Live Yankee" which ran between New York and New England ports and the Far East - China, Japan, and Australia. His voyages would last as long as 22 months and, although it sounds wildly exciting, every deep sea sailor will tell you, boredom is your worst enemy. To fight this long battle Ezra made things from twine and other small line, today we call it macrame' but I'm sure Ezra had a more "sea-worthy" name for his craft. Pieces of Ezra's remarkable handiwork can be found in Wickford homes to this day. After a long stint on the "Live Yankee", Ezra sailed on other "Tall Ships" with names like "Endeavor" a clipper ship that ran miners and supplies around the "Horn" to San Francisco and returned with the fruits of their "gold rush" labors, and the "Hail Columbia" a brig out of Mystic which ran a route in the South American and West Indie trade. He finished his remarkable deep-sea career on the "Casco" another brig-rigged ship (for an explanation on ship types see last years column on Wickford's shipyards) which sailed a similar route to the "Hail Columbia". The Casco had a regular stop in Wickford Harbor; as a matter of fact, it was the very last "Tall Ship" to stop here, and when she pulled into town in 1883, Ezra left her, never to return to the deep sea again. He was nearly forty-five and had spent the better part of thirty years sailing the oceans blue.

That's not to say that he was done with the sea though. For nearly the next two years Ezra sailed on the big mackeralman "The Flying Cloud" out of Boston, a fishing boat which in Ezra's own words was "the most disreputable mackeralman he'd ever laid eyes upon" but owing to the fact that the boat was known to be lucky he sailed her anyway. It was on the "Flying Cloud" that Ezra saw

a school of mackeral "Of twenty acres and ten feet thick the biggest school of fish ever seen on the Banks". It was a story he'd tell over and over again to an always eager audience. For that was Ezra's fame, folks loved to hear him tell a tale and owing to his remarkable life he never ran out of subjects.

Finally at the end of 1884 Ezra left the sea and began to farm his ancestral home with his little brother Samuel. The two old bachelors live in their small farm house surrounded by a museum-like quantity of mementos and artifacts from Ezra's life at sea. Things went on like that, a farmer's life punctuated by countless rounds of sea stories to tell until 1916 when Samuel died at the age of 65. Ezra was then alone with his memories having outlived his parents as well as his four sisters and brother.



In this picture taken around the turn of the century, Ezra Thomas tells tales of the sea from a hammock slung on the porch of "Doc" Young's Pleasant Street home.



Pictured above is a clipper ship similar to the ones Ezra Thomas sailed on all over the world during the 1800s.

Sadly, Ezra's life ended tragically on December 7, 1917. He was overcome by a fire which destroyed his home and all his possessions. The cause of the blaze was never ascertained and is controversial among old-timers to this day. Some say he was murdered, but the truth will never be known. Ezra was buried alongside his parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters in the Thomas family plot out in the corner

of the old farm. An interesting end to the story concerns the fact that Ezra had always been adamant about wanting to be buried at sea but his surviving kin wished him buried in the family plot. All involved felt bad about not carrying out his wishes in this regard. Ezra, though, as he had always done, had the last on this as well. The night before his funeral, a torrential winter rain storm passed through town, not unlike, in intensity, a squall off the "Horn" from Ezra's past. The ground, being frozen solid, could not absorb the incredible amount of water and it filled Ezra's open grave to the very top. As his pallbearers lowered his coffin into this "watery grave" all involved felt a great sense of relief. Ezra had gotten his wish.

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The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

## Joseph Reynolds, Stained Glass Artist

As part of our continuing effort to eventually tell the story of all the historic homes in our fair town's central village of Wickford, today we'll take a gander at the Straight-Reynolds house on Pleasant Street.



PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

This house at 26 Pleasant St. in Wickford built by Stephen R. Straight later was the childhood home of stained glass master Joseph Reynolds Jr.

This impressive two- story, L- shaped, mansard-roofed home has seen its share of history in the 120 years it has graced the scene at 26 Pleasant St. The home was built by Stephen R. Straight in 1880. Straight was a local lad who made a mark for himself as a merchant who ran a large variety store in the Gregory building at the corner of Brown and Main Streets. He chose the Pleasant Street location because it was central to all

that was important to the Straight family; the store, the Wickford Baptist Church, and the school where his two daughters received their education. The Straights lived there until the early 1890's, when Stephen decided to relocate his store to the hustle and bustle of downtown Providence. It was there that he finished out his life, only to return to North Kingstown as a permanent resident of Elm Grove Cemetery.

Before Straight left Wickford, he sold his big home to the treasurer of Wickford Savings Bank, Joseph Gardiner Reynolds. Reynolds was the son of Capt. Stephen Reynolds, a seafaring man who, at the urging of his wife, family, and friends, eventually gave up his life at sea and took his earnings and invested them in the startup of a new local bank, The Wickford Savings Bank. It was good advice. Capt. Reynolds and his partners were a huge success and they all became prominent men in the community.

His son Joseph went to school here in town and, upon completion of his education, took an apprenticeship in Providence to learn the jewelers' trade. He eventually ran his own pearl and stone setting concern in Providence, but returned to Wickford in the late 1880's to take over for his ailing father at the bank. Upon Capt. Reynolds death in 1887, Joseph assumed the treasurer's position and eventually purchased the grand Straight house as a home for himself, his wife Rebecca (Tillinghast), and their five children.

It was Reynolds youngest son Joseph Jr., born in 1886, who really left his mark upon the world. He grew up to become one of the world's foremost stained glass artisans. He, like his father before him, was educated in the local school system and it was there that his natural abilities were noted. The Reynold's sent young Joseph off to The Rhode Island School of Design in Providence and his daily trips north on the Seaview Trolley, which he could pick up just up the Street on West Main, paid off. He graduated from RISD in 1907 and, after further studies of medieval stained glass in England, France, Italy, and Spain, he opened his own stained glass studio in Boston in 1920.

His inspiring and majestic works of art now can be seen in, to name just a few, the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City, the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., the American Church in Paris, the American Memorial Cemetery

Chapel in Belleau Woods, France, at Princeton University, Wellesley College, and, closer to home, St. Georges School Chapel in Newport.

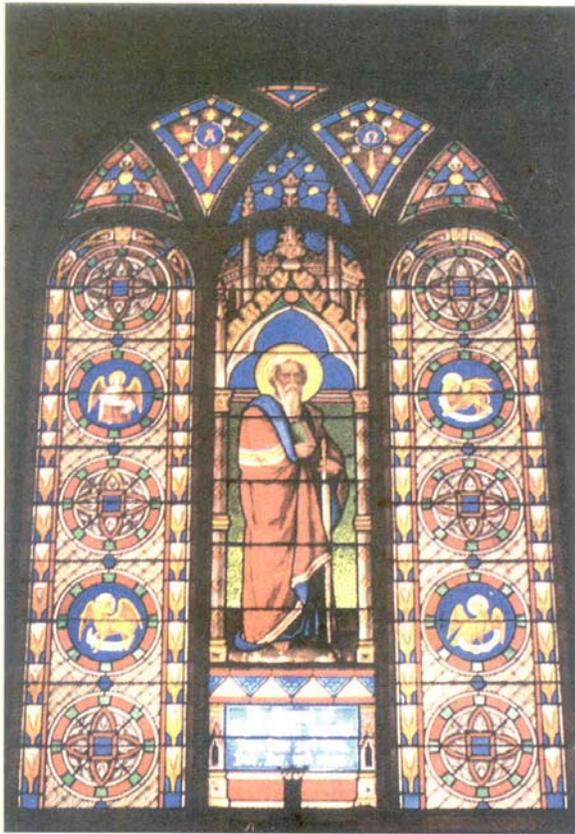


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

One of Joseph Reynolds Jr.'s earliest works captures the image of St. Paul above the altar at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Wickford.

My personal favorite, however, although I can't claim to have seen them all, is one of his earliest, perhaps even his first major commission. It is the imposing and majestic figure of St. Paul - as seen through the eyes of a man who, as a boy, played on the same streets I eventually would play on - that stares out solemnly from above the altar at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Wickford. It was commissioned to commemorate the life of a Reynolds relation, Abigail Updike Reynolds, and held my boyhood attention for years as I fidgeted my way through church services. I look at it now as an adult in a different light and realize that it not only memorializes the life of Abigail Reynolds, but also that of her relative, the artist Joseph Reynolds.

Printed in the North East Independent 1/10/02

## The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

### Ellen Jecoy

If you had listened very carefully, last month, you might have heard the quiet rustling of pages turning. For, you see citizens of North Kingstown, a chapter in the history of our fair town closed for good with the July death of 100 year old Ellen Jecoy. As far as I can tell, Ellen was the last of North Kingstown's "mill girls" and with her death a living link to the past was severed forever.

As a way of putting Ellen's life in perspective, I like to think of my Middle School-aged son and where he is in his life as he enters the 8th grade. Little Ellen Matteson never got the chance to go to 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Instead of skipping off to the nearby Hamilton District School with the other children (Ellen's last school class picture accompanies this column), Ellen trudged off to the Hamilton Web Mill with the other working children and adults at the beginning of a working life that spanned four decades, the great depression, and two world wars.

Along the way Ellen met Alfred Jecoy (nicknamed "High" due to his imposing size), fell in love, and married. "High" Jecoy rose through the ranks at the mill and eventually was promoted to foreman. They both worked at Hamilton Web until 1953, when 51 year old Ellen retired after nearly 38 years behind the looms. "High" Jecoy continued at the mill until his death in 1962. Sixty year old Ellen was now alone and had to adjust to a new life without her husband.

Ellen was the kind of person that could adjust to just about anything. When asked some thirty years later, as she approached 100 years old, how she was able to continue to live on her own and deal with the changes that the advancing years presented her she replied simply "I will only give up one thing at a time." That was how she managed, whether it be driving, going up to the second floor of her Hamilton Allenton Road home, or losing her beloved husband she only relinquished one thing at a time. She held on tenaciously to what she still could do and what she still had. In this way Ellen was able to continue to live on her own until she was past 100 years of age. She spent the vast

majority of her latter years in the same house she spent her childhood in.

Ellen's life ended in the same way she lived it. Quietly, but in complete control of her own destiny, she left us at the age of 100 years and six months. She is now happily reunited with "High" and I expect is smiling just as she is in the circa 1940 photo that accompanies this column. She wanted no big ceremonies, no elaborate funerals, and no flowery eulogies. She wrote her own obituary and left very specific instructions about her arrangements. She didn't want to be a burden to anyone even in death.

I knew Ellen only for a few short years; only the blink of an eye really, relative to her long life. She constantly amazed me with her energy and enthusiasm, with her genuine love of life. She truly loved to talk about "the old days", those times of mills and mill workers, of horses and buggies and dirt roads. She was a valuable resource as well as a friend to all like me who were curious about times past. She'd hate the big fuss, but I must say "Ellen, you are sorely missed."

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For all of their adult lives, Ellen and her husband Alfred "High" Jecoy were employed at the Hamilton Webb Mill where Ellen worked the looms and "High" served as foreman.



Ellen (Matteson) Jecoy's last school class photo was taken at the Hamilton District school, now the office of Dr. Trivett on Weaver Road. Like many others of her generation, Jecoy spent the remainder of her youthful years working at the mill where she would be employed until retirement at age 51.

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

## **Darius C. Allen — The Weather Prophet**

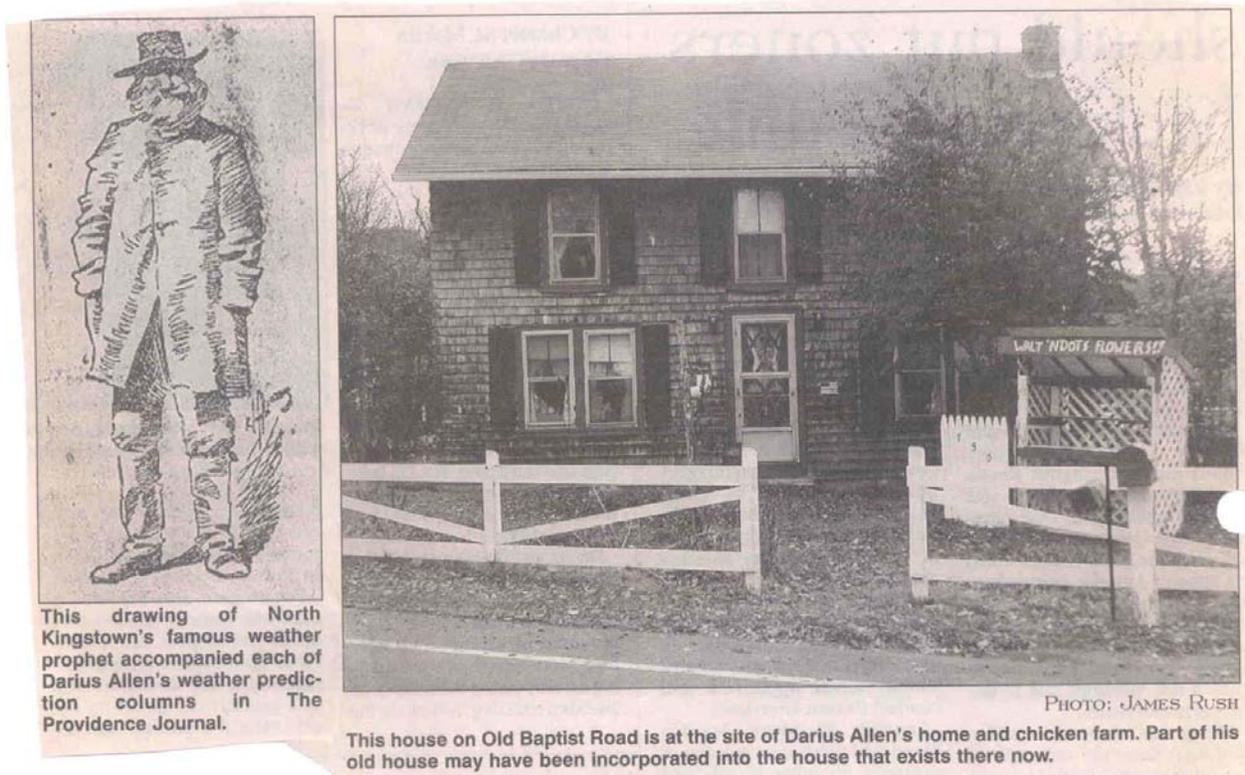
Back in the late 1800's getting a reliable weather forecast was not much more than a dream to the average resident of "our fair town". Beyond the "Farmer's Almanac" there just wasn't any way for a farmer or a sailor to have much of a clue about what Mother Nature had to offer. But out on Old Baptist Road right at the edge of Scrabbletown lived a tried and true Swamp Yankee who changed all that. Just a little past the Stony Lane intersection, on an 18- acre chicken farm that he ran all on his own, lived Darius C. Allen, a near hermit of a man renowned across the length and breadth of southern New England as the Great Weather Prophet of North Kingstown.

Darius Allen eventually achieved such fame that none other than the boys from Providence Journal would venture "down state" every six months or so and pick the brain of "The Weather Prophet" for a long-range forecast. His columns ran off and on through out the course of the 1890's. Those few brave (or foolish) souls like myself, who scroll through the countless reels of ProJo microfilm will sooner or later, come across the pen and ink drawing of Darius that accompanied each forecast. Darius took great pride in his amazing abilities and took the secrets which allowed him to, as the Journal was proud to brag "beat the Washington Weather Bureau boys at their own game" to his grave. His coup de grace came in 1898 when he accurately predicted the Great Blizzard of that year down to the week it would occur in. He then went on, without even breaking stride, to proudly describe how well he did with his chickens that year. He started with 59 hens and one rooster and ended up with 605 chickens, or so he claimed.

Darius died of pneumonia in May of 1902 at the age of 67. He is buried in the little graveyard behind the Stony Lane Six-Principle Baptist Church, one of the few places for which he would leave the confines of his chicken farm. His farm, like so many others, has been divided up into many individual house lots. But, as luck would have it, the site of the "canary-tinted cottage" to which the Providence Journal boys would

trudge each Fall and Spring is now occupied by the home of Walt and Dot Taylor the undisputed king and queen of Dahlia farming. As a matter of fact, Darius' old home may be incorporated into the Taylor House as their kitchen ell.

I expect every time that a TV weatherman blows a forecast, Darius, wherever he might be, smiles and tugs on his great beard as he saunters off to tend his chickens and craft his next prognostication.



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The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

## A Republican's Republican — Fred B. Lawton

In this the political season, it seems only appropriate to take a gander at, in this humble historian's opinion, our fair town's quirkiest politician; Fred Burnside Lawton, truly a Republican's Republican.

Fred Lawton was born on February 8, 1866 in the Benedict Brown house in "Ye Olde Quaint and Historic" (Wickford to the uninitiated). He was educated in the town's public schools and immediately after graduation got in on the ground floor of an industry that was riding the wave of the construction tide that was sweeping through America. Fred was involved in the gypsum plaster industry and was the head of his own company before you know it. He lived in the lovely red and white home that sets, to this day, right next to the Town Hall. This, of course, is not why Fred Lawton is remembered. His claim to fame lies in his political career.

Fred was always an ardent local Republican. His first foray into State Politics occurred when he used his connections with North Kingstown's only Governor, William Gregory, to secure for himself the plum position of "Inspector Of Scythe Stones". If there has ever been a more obscure State Office than this one, well, this Swamp Yankee would love to hear of it. Fred, though, took this largely ceremonial job, as he did with everything else, very seriously. He posted a \$500 bond against the veracity of his performance and demanded that his assistant (Obviously this is a position begging for an assistant) Deputy Inspector of Scythe Stones Erskine Crumbe do the same. He surveyed the state and found out where all the big scythe stone manufacturing plants were (add your own sarcasm here) and set up an inspection schedule. Fred must have impressed everyone associated with the thriving scythe stone industry because he held this job for four years. Fred was out of state politics until 1909, when another Republican took over the reins. He was involved in the staff of Governor Arum Pothier, off and on for eight years, although none of his titles could ever stand toe-to-toe with Inspector of Scythe Stones job.

You might think this would be enough to secure Fred's position in the RI Hall of Fame, but you'd be wrong. Fred upped the ante in 1933, when, incensed over FDR's New Deal politics, he decided to petition the US Government to allow him to take his Wickford property along with his summer home on Beavertail in Jamestown and secede from the United States. You want to talk about "The Grand Gesture"; well no one was grander at it than Fred Lawton. I imagine that this petition made it all the way to Franklin's desk itself. You can bet your bottom dollar that even FDR took notice when he realized that this was coming from a certified bonded "Inspector of Scythe Stones." If this isn't the "poster child" story for "Only in Rhode Island" well I don't know what is.



PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

At one point, Fred Burnside Lawton wanted to take his Wickford house, shown above, and his summer place on Jamestown and secede from the union.



Fred Burnside Lawton

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

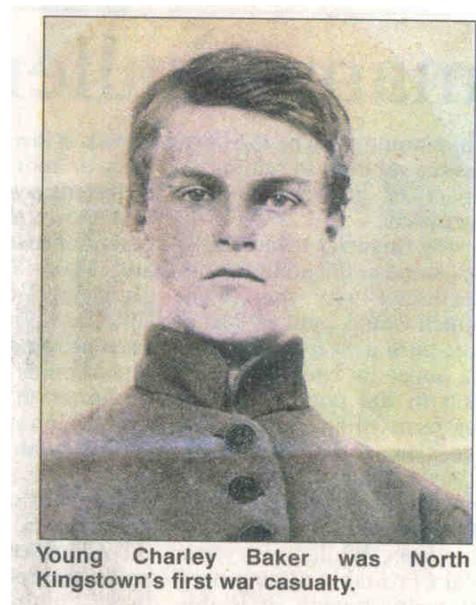
## Charley Baker and the Town Civil War Monument

Perhaps you've stopped and taken note of our "fair town's" Civil War Statue as you're strolling up the sidewalk into the town hall on Boston Neck Road. Certainly if you have a young child you must have fielded questions on the details of this noble monument to our nation's most difficult hour. In this week's column we are going to take a closer look at the story behind this stoic gentleman perched out there on the front lawn and the younger innocent lad for whom this monument was, in part, dedicated to; Charles C. Baker.

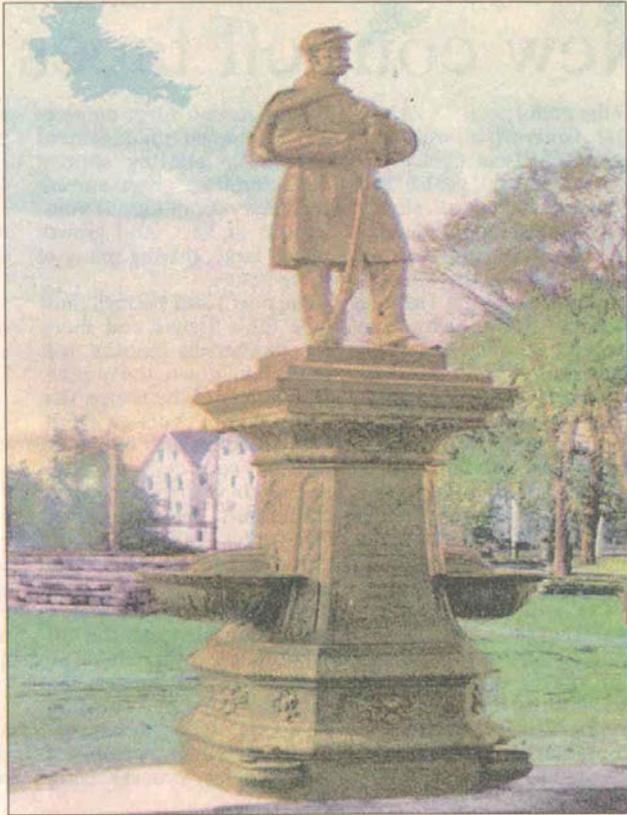
Charley Baker was born in the early 1840's to Captain and Mrs. David S. Baker of Pleasant Street in Wickford. He was the third of seven children and his father was a well-respected packet master (ship's captain) of the packet boats that plied the waters of Narragansett Bay on a daily run between Wickford and Providence. The Baker home was a large gambrel-roofed house that sat right on the corner of Pleasant and Friend Streets. It is still there to this day and can be seen in the accompanying photograph. Charley was educated in the local schools and like most young men of his age, he heeded the call of his Country and joined the "Grand Army of the Republic" to fight the good fight to save the Union. At the end of the summer of 1861 Charley, son of a packet master from Wickford, along with many other local lads, including George T. Cranston, son of a farmer from Swamptown, climbed upon a train at the Wickford Junction station as a part of the Rhode Island Regiment, and headed off on the long journey to Camp Sprague just outside of Washington, D.C. Charley was a part of Company H, while George belong to Company E. Apart from their obvious stations in life, there was little difference between them. Neither had an inkling of what lay ahead for them. The big difference between the two was that George, some four years later, returned alive to his family. Charley, died in his first battle, at New Berne, only a short while after climbing on board that local train. He was the first local boy to die in the War to save the Republic. As you can see by his last photo, a boy is what he truly was. His family and his community mourned their loss.

As a by-product of that mourning process, the local chapter of the GAR named its Post after Charley. The C.C. Baker Post was a support and fraternal group for returning veterans; think of it as the 1860's version of the American Legion or the VFW. Eventually George T. would become it's leader; I expect he often thought of his comrade Charley and that fateful day they boarded the train together and headed off to their separate fates. As the 1800's drew to a close the membership of the Post dwindled, as veteran after veteran died and was buried with honor by his comrades. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century began, there were only a handful of remaining members; all "long in the tooth" they, like countless of other Posts across our nation, began to think of a way to close things out; to provide a permanent and appropriate way for future generations to always remember the ultimate sacrifice that good folks such as Charley had made for their nation. They emptied their Post's coffers for the final time and made their selection. Many of these groups made the same choice that the C.C. Baker Post made, there are countless numbers of these "made-to-order" statues across America.

North Kingstown's Memorial, as can be seen by the accompanying colorized postcard, was originally placed across the street from it's present location (the two tenement houses that still exist on Updike Ave. can be seen in the background). That spot, in front of the Wickford Station, was appropriate for obvious reasons. When the station building was demolished in the 1930's the statue was moved across the road, albeit in a less elaborate form, to its present spot in front of the town hall. There it quietly sits, still performing the function that those old soldiers envisioned it doing; reminding us all of what was required to insure our nations greatness, enormous sacrifices by boys who were barely men, boys like Charley Baker.



Young Charley Baker was North Kingstown's first war casualty.



A colorized, circa 1920s postcard shows the GAR statue designated here as the Grand Army Public Drinking Fountain. The two tenement houses in the background can be seen today on Updike Avenue.



PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

The home of the Baker family is found on the corner of Pleasant and Friend streets in Wickford.

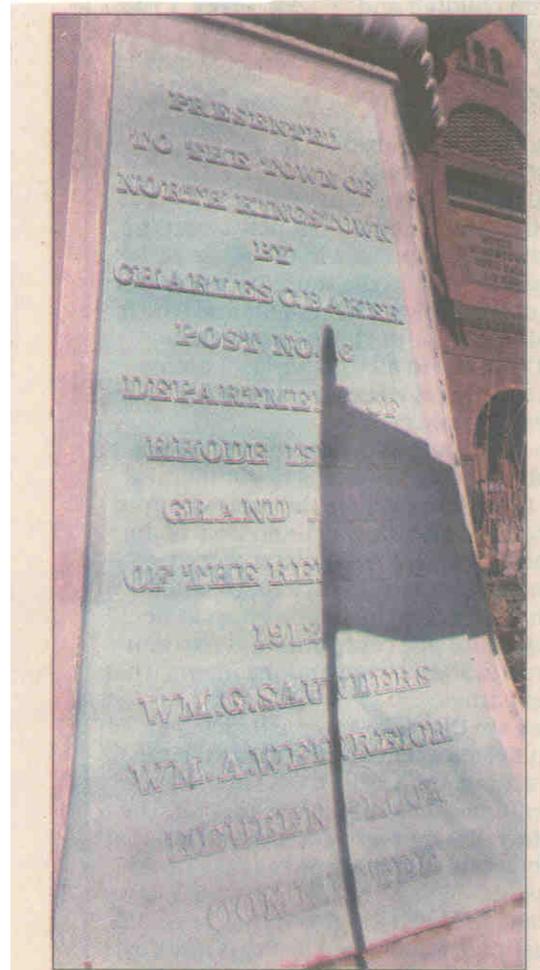


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

The plaque on the base of the statue indicates it was dedicated in 1912.

## The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

### George Anthony and the "O.K."

It's not often that this particular Swamp Yankee gets excited over the seventieth anniversary of a local home. I mean, let's face it, seventy years is no big deal in a town that boasts of homes that have survived three centuries. That is unless the home in question is the 30-foot fishing boat and local scenic focal point the "O.K."

The story of the "O.K." can not be told without telling the tale of her builder, George Anthony, Wickford's own version of "The Old Man and the Sea" and a local character, cut from Swamp Yankee whole cloth if there ever was one. George was born in Providence on February 19, 1877 into a family of fisherfolk. He often recalled, "I came to the sea straight out of Grammer School in 1893 and haven't ever left." He and his brother, William, lived on Rock Island in the bay and made their living providing shellfish to the dinner halls of Fields Point and Rocky Point. They'd spend the fair weather months living on the island or a small catboat they owned together, and then take a room ashore for the coldest winter months. Neither man ever married, choosing instead to remain loyal to their first love, the Narragansett Bay. As George would explain, "My grandfather was married five times, I guess we boys profited from his example."

By the time the 1930's rolled around, George and William decided to leave the "landlubber's" life behind for good. They pooled their resources and their talents, and constructed for themselves the "O.K.", to the exact specifications that their 30 some years of seafaring experience led them to desire. She was built at Pawtuxet in the spring and summer of 1932. Soon after, she, and the Anthony brothers, were tied up to a mooring in Wickford, the same mooring at which she sits to this day. The Anthony boys continued to make their living from the bounty of the Narragansett Bay raking up her quahogs, digging her steamers, dredging out her scallops, and catching the many types of fish that could be found there. They spent their evenings warm in the cabin and cooked their "Block Island Stew" (codfish chowder to us shoreside folks) on

the little Marine Household stove that also kept the boat cozy and warm throughout the winter. Life was good in the 18 foot long cabin of the O.K.

The great hurricane of '38 took the O.K. and her residents as much by surprise as it did the rest of the state. When the boys saw that this "big blow" wasn't letting up, they left their mooring in Wickford Cove and headed up the bay apiece to ride it out. They set three anchors but still managed to end up beached in the eelgrass near Smith's Castle. George recollected that they "made out better than most Wickford folks" and remembered seeing the bottom rail on the Hussey Bridge completely under water as they were pulling out. They managed to get their craft off the beach on the next high tide and were back to their normal mooring and regular life long prior to the residents on Main Street.

Sadly, the '38 storm was the last that George would face with his older brother by his side. William died in 1942, and George like the tough old fisherman he was, just carried on as best he could. That's not to say that he spent the rest of his days alone. You see, George's life didn't end with the death of his brother, it just changed. This began the period of time where the "O.K." became a popular place for the young people of Wickford to visit. They'd stop by after school and visit for a time, listenint to George tell his many tales of a life at sea, frying up a snack or warming up some cocoa on the old ship's stove, and feeling all the while, quite grown up and special for the experience of it all. Among those young folks, as George liked to call them, were my parents Cy Cranston and "little" Jean St. Pierre, whose photo on the O.K. as an inquisitive 15 year old, graces this column.

Such was the life that George Anthony led throughout the 40's and 50's, warm months at the mooring next to the Hussey Bridge, days filld with fishing and quahogging, and nights under the stars with the company of friends and neighbors. During the winter months the O.K. would be tied up at a nearby dock (as she is right now coincidentally) and George would spend a little more time ashore testing his land legs and palling around with his friends, folks like John Ward, Paule Loring, and his good buddy the local

shoemaker who plied his craft out of the tiny shoe repair shop nearby (now the Wickford Candy store). By the 1960's George gave in a little and took a local room for the winter, after all, as he would say, "I'm in my 80's it's a little tough climbing up and down the ladder to the O.K. at low tide." George went on like that throughout the 60's and into the winter of 1970. I expect he instinctively knew his time was short and so did the rest of the town. Often as not, each day someone, a policeman or a neighbor, would make the trip out to the O.K. to check on him. There are even reports of brave officers walking over on the ice to see how he was doing. Finally on Thursday December 3, 1970 local bank manager and long time friend Tom Peirce knew George was not well. The North Kingstown Rescue Squad took the old fisherman off his boat and to the hospital, he joined his brother in heaven the very next day. George had lived his life just as he pleased, ending it where he knew he belonged. He was 93 and had lived on the little fishing boat in Wickford Cove for 38 years.

In his will, George left the O.K. to one of those "young people" who had made his many years so special. Joan Additon — Joan Schlegel during those O.K. years, held on to it for a time but then sold it. The boat changed hands, and names, and moorings, many times but still stayed in Wickford. Finally she ended up in the hands of another one of George's "young people", Mike Suvari and his wife Trish. Mike has not only lovingly restored her to her George Anthony glory, but has also gone the many extra miles to do the extraordinary and get the O.K. placed on the National Historic Register, the first boat in RI to be so honored. Suvari has done all this because he knows instinctively, that Wickford would not be Wickford without her. Really he has done this as a public service and we all owe him a debt of gratitude.

It's my feeling, that the O.K. works as a Wickford landmark on two levels. First, its natural place in the order of things is undeniable, the view from the bridge looking across the deck of the O.K. to the village with the St Paul's spire in the background is among the most painted and sketched in all of RI. No one, local born or not, can deny that. Secondly, and most importantly to long time residents like myself and Mike Suvari, is the idea of the O.K. as sort of a time capsule. I can look at her and imagine all that

has transpired on her little deck. When the light and the mood is just so, I can almost see my mother as a 15 year old girl, looking over her shoulder at me; her whole life ahead of her. I must echo the sentiments of all the budding artists who have contacted Mike Suvari and asked him to never sell her. She belongs just where she is, just as she is.



This photograph of George Anthony was taken some time during the 1950s.



Fifteen-year-old Jean St. Pierre, who would one day become the mother of a certain Swamptown columnist, was one of the many "young people" who called on George Anthony in the harbor.



One of George Anthony's friends was artist Paule Loring, whose sketches of Wickford captured many of the scenes of the day including Anthony's boat, the O.K. (Reprinted with permission of the Loring family.)



PHOTO: JAMES RUSSELL

The O.K., seen as she looks today in Wickford Harbor, has been lovingly restored by longtime North Kingstown resident Mike Suvari.

Printed in the North East Independent 11/21/02

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

### **Thomas E. & T. Morton Curry**

No history of our fair town would be complete without the mention of mill owner and operator T. Morton Curry, a figure still widely remembered and genuinely admired by many of the town's residents. And to get a true measure of the son, one must also take a gander at his father Thomas Edward Curry. Between them, they ran a fabric milling concern that rivaled those of their contemporaries, the Rodmans, Davises and Reynolds. But there was so much to Morton Curry than just mill owner. But first, before we delve into his life, let's investigate the life of his father, Thomas.

Thomas E. Curry was born in New York near the town of Cahoes in 1858. His was a hard life at first. He began his career in the fabric industry at the age of eight years old, one of countless mill boys that could be found up and down the East Coast. Before he was done though, he was the president of a NYC Wool Brokerage known as Thomas E. Curry & Co. Through his business connections in that industry he evidently heard about the availability of the Davisville mills in Davisville RI, and purchased them for his son Mort to operate when he returned from his hitch in the navy during the great war, WWI. Although he had little formal education, Thomas was truly a "man of letters" as adept with words as he was with wool. He is remembered by his granddaughter, Wickford's own Louise Gardiner (the best Sunday School teacher this or any other cantankerous old history columnist could ever ask for), as a poet and storyteller who could turn a phrase with the best of them. Although Tom Curry never actually lived in North Kingstown, through his son and their business dealings he made his mark here just as sure as he did in his hometown of Englewood, NJ and his place of business, New York City.

T. Morton Curry, on the other hand, lived most of his life here in our fair town. His first year here he ran the two Davisville mills (seen in the accompanying photographs) his father had purchased for him upon his release from the U.S. Navy's ship "Von Steuben" where he was an intelligence officer. He used his education at the University of Pennsylvania and The Pennsylvania Textile School to his advantage

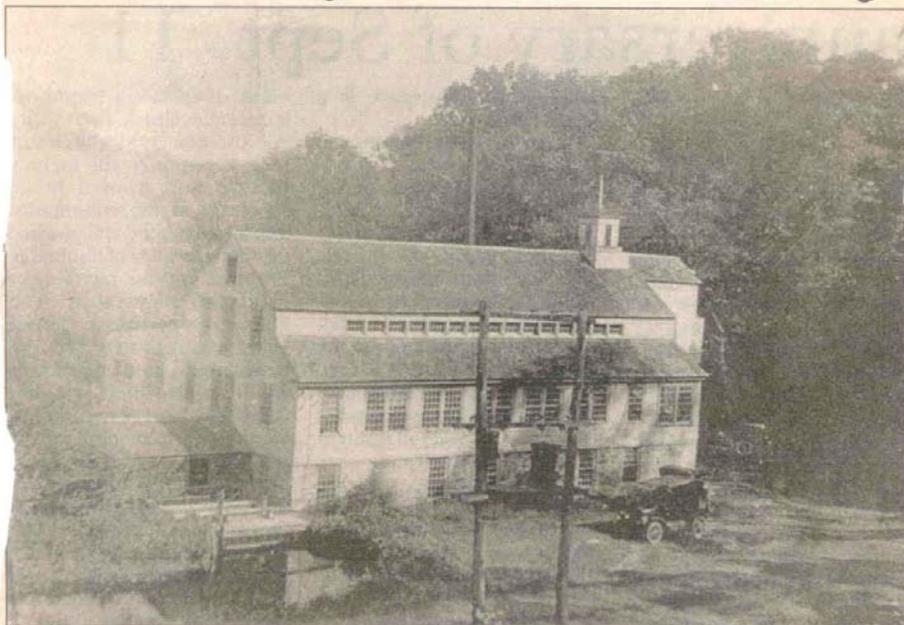
as, before a year was up, he had done well enough with the mills to purchase them outright from his father. Mill workers remember a nearly seamless transition from mill superintendent to mill owner during that time. I say nearly, because stories do survive of how, when he was running his father's mills, Mort, a die-hard athlete and sportsman, was always ready to pull workers off the line for a quick game of baseball. A worker recalled "there we were getting paid good money by his father to play baseball." The same gentleman also remembers, "after he became the owner there wasn't quite so much baseball being played." Baseball or not, sadly the good times didn't last long for Morton Curry at the Davisville Mills. Two years after buying them, the big mill on Old Baptist Road burned to the ground. Unshaken by this tragedy which may have crushed a lesser man, he turned around and quickly sold the remaining mill building on the shore of the Hunt River along with the remains of the Old Baptist Mill site and turned around and purchased the Belleville Woolen Mill on Oak Hill Road in the village of Belleville. Many of his Davisville workers gladly followed their old boss and took jobs at the Belleville Mill. T. Morton Curry ran the Belleville Mill for thirty years from 1920 to 1950, making woolen and worsted fabrics that he marketed through his father's brokerage in NYC.

When he left the textile industry in 1950, T.Morton Curry was nearly 60 years old. Many men would have simply retired at this point in their life, but not Mort Curry. He was quoted as saying "When you stop working, you start dying." He obviously took this statement to heart, as his "golden years" included a 2 year stint as the Director of Administration for RI Governor Notte, holding the presidency of the board of trustees for RI's Osteopathic General Hospital, founding the North Kingstown Ambulance Corps, and serving as president and guiding light for the Rhode Island Golf Assoc. As a matter of fact, Mort Curry is known as the father of public links golf here in the Ocean State; something to think about the next time you tee off.

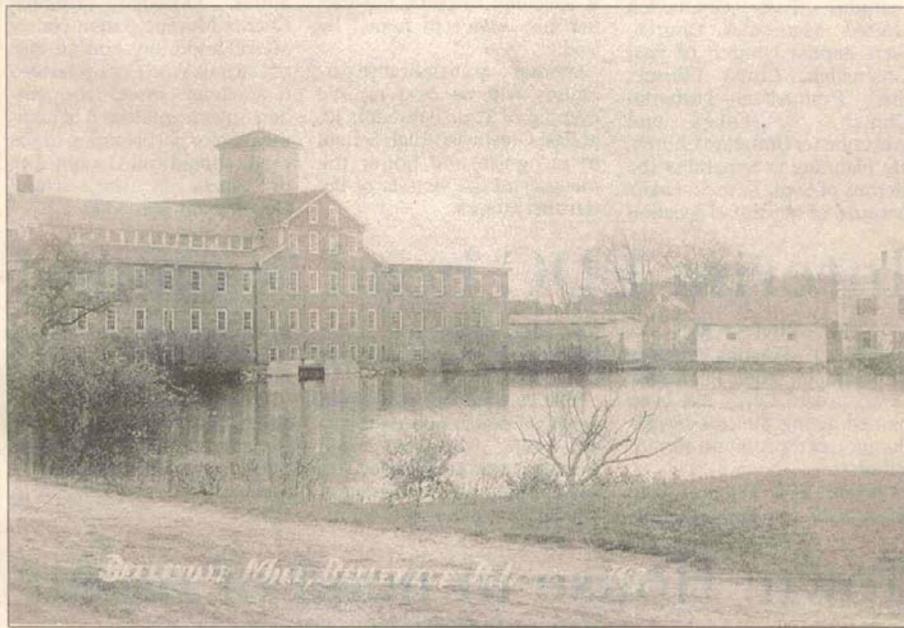
Sadly, the three mill buildings that might have stood as a lasting testimony to the father and son Curry team are all gone. The Belleville mill burned to the ground in a horrific blaze in 1969. All that is left of that beautiful great brick building are memories and postcard views like the one you see here. The Hunt's River Davisville Mill too, is gone

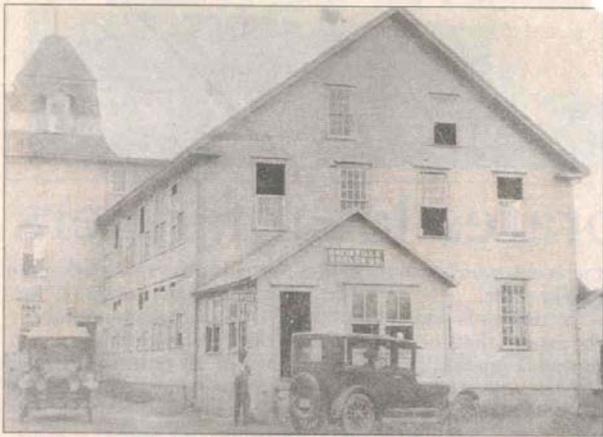
and was recently featured in a past column. Luckily we still have the Curry's wonderful home which sits at the end of Old Baptist Rd and is as lovely as it was when they lived there. Both Tom and Morton I think, would prefer it that way. They were men who valued family and all it stands for far more than they valued their mills.

Printed in the North East Independent 8/08/02



Above, this rare photo shows the Davisville Hunt's River Mill. Below, a postcard shows T. Morton Curry's Belleville Mill on Oak Hill Road. Built in 1861 and 1888, it burned in 1969. The building to the far right is still intact.





T. Morton Curry's Davisville Mill was located on present-day Old Baptist Road.



PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

T. Morton Curry's North Kingstown home still stands today on Old Baptist Road.



T. Morton Curry



Thomas E. Curry

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

## **The Charles J. Davol Estate**

This week, as promised in a column a few months ago, we are going to take a closer look at "Wildacres", the former estate of the president and general manager of one of Rhode Island's leading industrial concerns, the Davol Rubber Company. The main house of the estate, the Davol mansion, also known for many a year as "The Admiral's House" in honor of its later life as the traditional home of the Admiral who held the reins over the whole of Quonset/Davisville, was once listed on my "Five Most Endangered Historic Properties" list, that is until my greatest fears were realized and the house was engulfed in the flames created by the act of an arson.

But before I begin I need to "tip my hat" to the good people within the "Historic Wickford " organization. My challenge to them in a recent column about the Captain Daniel Fones House on Main Street has not gone unanswered, on the contrary, this group of concerned and involved folk have taken the challenge and are going to install a plaque on the front of the home. My thanks go out to them as well as the building's owner.

Now then, back to Charles Davol. Mr Davol was born in 1868 to Joseph and Mary (Turner) Davol. He was educated in the finest schools in Providence, and upon his graduation from Mowry's & Goff's English and Classical School in that city, joined his father in the family business, Davol Rubber. He started from the bottom and familiarized himself with every facet of the business. In 1899 he was made general manager of the company, whereupon he set it on the path which would make it the industry leader that it became. Charles Davol was a savvy businessman who realized that if he wanted to take his father's business to the top of the heap, he would need to find a specialized niche in the rubber industry, one with limitless possibilities for expansion, and dominate it. After much consideration, Davol chose the new and

exciting area of medical rubber goods and set out to become the benchmark leader in that arena. He was wildly successful and Davol Rubber's surgical, dental, medical, and druggist's rubber goods not only made his company famous; it made him a wealthy man.

If there was one thing that Charles Davol enjoyed more than running his empire, it was sailing. With that hobby in mind he set out in the early 1900's to purchase an estate worthy of the kind of man he was. By this time, due to his father's recent death, he was both the general manager and president of the company that bore his name. He was also an active member of the New York, Rhode Island, Larchmont, and Eastern Yacht Clubs, as well as a charter member of the Circumnavigators Club of New York and the Navy League of the U.S.. Yachting was his passion and the summer community of Quonset Point had caught his eye. From the time of his father's death in 1909 until the early 1920's Charles began purchasing property at Quonset. When he was done, he had bought nine farms and countless small lots which totaled nearly 1000 (yes 1000) acres of land. On this remarkable piece of property, he constructed his mansion house (shown in the accompanying photographs), a huge dairy barn, and an enormous pier at which he berthed his sailing yacht "Paragon". Davol not only lived here and yachted from here, he also ran a true "Gentleman's Farm" in the time honored tradition of the Updikes of old. He had under his employ at "Wildacres" some thirty men whose job it was to maintain the grounds and take care of his horses and dairy herd. They were also responsible for maintaining the many miles of roads on the property, all of them constructed of crushed stone or oyster shells, and upkeep on the countless miles of fencing which encircled the entire 1000 acres. Within that great tract, Davol also had a lake for fishing, Wild Acres Lake (now smaller and known as Davol Pond), and large parcels of land reserved for hunting. As a final recreational facility Mr. Davol's estate also included 1700 feet of prime beachfront property on the shore of Narragansett Bay. (Think of the tax bill on that!) All in all, it was an

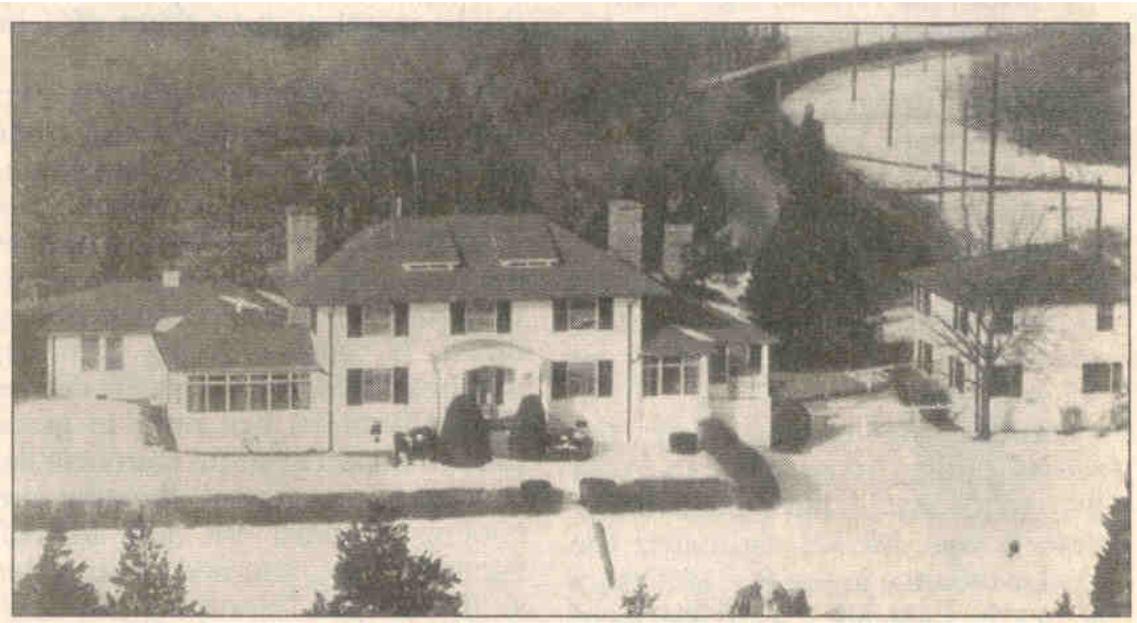
estate fit for the captain of industry that Charles Davol was. I'll bet he was as proud of it as he was of his company. One can only imagine the type of people he entertained there.



All that changed in April of 1937 when the 69 year old business tycoon died of an unexpected illness. His estate offered the land for sale to the state of Rhode Island and they purchased it. It was incorporated into the state militia's training ground, Camp Endicott, but only for a short while. For as you all know, only two years later the Federal government came in and began the construction of the enormous naval facility Quonset Point/ Davisville and the Davol estate became a part of that.

Much of what we now call Quonset Point was once Davol land, although I'm certain Charles would not recognize it as such. Most of his gentleman's farm is now a busy airport. His fishing lake is smaller and no longer surrounded by "fertile farmlands and abundant shade trees", and his home, which was moved by the Navy so as to get it out of the vicinity of the runways, and then used as the O.O. 's home for decades, is no more than memories, photographs, and ashes. Some of the real old timers can recall training at Wildacres in the days before the Navy came. Now we too, can remember what used to be at Quonset Point.

Printed in the North East Independent 6/14/01



Above and below are two views of the Davol mansion, also sometimes referred to as the Admiral's House. The snow-blanketed mansion is seen below in 1950 while the other photograph shows the mansion just prior to its destruction by an arsonist.

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

## **Sir Winston Churchill and his North Kingstown Connection**

I think I can say with complete certainty, that when the name of Winston Churchill comes to mind, it's London not North Kingstown that we connect him with. But amazingly enough, there is a connection between this incredible figure of twentieth century history and our fair town. But, you've got to be a genealogy nut to know of it. Fear not loyal readers, for this is one of the titles that I proudly wear, and I'll be happy to pass this story on to you, so as to avoid your ultimate descent into the addictive insanity that the study of genealogy can become.

The first, and most important, piece of information that you need to make this connection is the fact that Winston's mother was an American. You see, young Winnie's dad, Lord Randolph Henry Spencer-Churchill met, fell madly in love with, and married a young lady from the "colonies", Brooklyn-born Jeanette Jerome and brought her back to his "modest" home Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, England. The next step in the chain to North Kingstown is the knowledge that Jeanie's (that's what Lord Randolph and her close friends called her) paternal grandmother was Clarisse Wilcox of Palmyra, New York. From Clarisse all you have to do is follow an unbroken chain of six generations of Wilcox fathers and sons until you get to the birth of little Daniel Wilcox on March 4th of either 1641 or 1642, depending on who you believe, in what is now North Kingstown. You see, little Daniel's dad, Edward Wilcox, was an associate of Roger Williams and according to tradition the Wilcox family were with Williams at his trading post at Cocumscussoc somewhere near the site of the present day Smith's Castle when Daniel entered this world.

You may wonder how I came to know of all this. Well, Daniel Wilcox eventually married a young lady from Plymouth, Massachusetts named

Elizabeth Cooke; it seems Elizabeth's father, John, came to Plymouth on a little sailing ship called the "Mayflower". A few hundred years later an organization of people who can claim a genealogical connection to those brave souls was formed. The "Mayflower Society" is the granddaddy of all genealogical organizations and has members from literally all over. One of those people who were eligible to join was Winston Churchill. All because of a fortuitous marriage between a Plymouth girl and a "Kingstowne" boy, or is it because of a marriage between a Brooklyn girl and a lad from Oxfordshire. Well you get the idea anyway. Although the facts supporting it all are few (people didn't have the time or inclination to register and record births, deaths, and marriages in the 1600's like they do now) it is an interesting exercise to trace the thread that ties one of the giants of the twentieth century from England across the Atlantic to the little ship that changed the world "The Mayflower", with a stop in our fair town along the way, and then, ironically, back to England again. Lends credence to the old saying "It's a small world" doesn't it.



TRUMAN LIBRARY PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PRNEWSFOTO

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (seated, from left) meets with President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Soviet Premier Josef Stalin at the Yalta Conference in February 1945. His American mother's ancestry traces back to North Kingstown's Wilcox family.

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

## **Paule Loring's North Kingstown Notables**

In last week's column on the Swamptown schoolhouse I made mention of the fact that I had received two pleasant and unexpected surprises that week. The first was the confirmation of the existence of the old school and the second was to be the subject of this week's column. Well, here we are, and the exciting news is that, due to the gracious largess of the Loring family, I will now be able to include Paule Loring illustrations with my columns when appropriate.

In celebration of this exciting turn of events, I have decided to make a rarely seen piece of Loring artwork the focus of this week's column So lets take a look Paule Loring's North Kingstown Notables circa 1925.

But before we start, maybe we better spend a moment answering the question which is undoubtedly on some of your lips, "Who is Paule Loring?"

Before there was Don Bosquet, there was Paule Loring. With that sentence I can go a long way towards explaining what Paule was about. But that only skims the surface of his life and work. Sure he was a gifted and successful cartoonist and political satirist, spending some 36 years working for the Providence Journal, National Fisherman Magazine, and Yankee Magazine; to name a few. With his creation "Dud Sinker" a crusty fisherman who was part Maine lobsterman and part RI fisherman, he was able to capture the essence of what it was to be a Yankee. Sounds like Bosquet doesn't it. But there was more to Paule than that. He was also a muralist. His piece de le resistance on the walls of the Bristol RI Almacs delighted young and old alike for decades. Its fifteen panels which ran the all the way around the store, totaling over 110 feet depicted the history of Rhode Island, the east bay area in particular, in a humorous style only he could pull off. Sadly, the mural, like the store chain that commissioned it is gone. But it lives on in the memories of countless Rhode-Islanders who can't help but smile when they think of it. And there's still more, Paule was also a highly respected Marine Illustrator.

Always a stickler for accuracy, his work is so highly regarded that the Smithsonian in Washington holds a collection of his work on Block Island Schooners. He alone has preserved the details of the seamen's world and the ship's they sailed upon so many years ago. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for our fair town, he along with a core of artist friends, was responsible for the place that Wickford holds in the art world. Without Paule and Virginia Loring, there would be no Wickford art community and no Wickford Art Festival. Well, enough said, on with the N.K. Notables.

This circa 1925 Loring illustration depicts eleven men who were important folks in the community at the time. They are all introduced by another Loring creation, Nehi, a little fellow who shows up often in his work. My challenge was to find out who these gentlemen were and why they mattered to our fair town in 1925.

First, we have George Sherman. Now George was the town council president at that time and was also the manager of the People's Supply Company at Wickford Junction. He also spent a piece of time as the town highway commissioner. He died in 1950 at the age of 81.

Next up, we have the tandem of Harry Parkis and Herb Slocum. Mr Slocum was the owner of the Davis and Slocum General Store in Lafayette. He was also the postmaster for that same village, a fact not lost on Nehi, who obviously doesn't get much mail. Harry was Herb's clerk and bookkeeper. They worked side-by-side for nearly twenty years.

Captain Frank Smith, a colorful Wickford sea-dog if there ever was one, can be seen regaling Nehi with one of his salty sea tales. In his later years he was the captain of the Fleischmann (those rich yeast people) family yacht "Vixen" which he sailed between Wickford, Newport, and points unknown. His house on Pleasant Street was famous for its two dog statues, which were in the front yard and can be seen in this drawing. There are a few old photo's floating around town with someone's child astride one of these remarkable statues.

Charles Weeden was an engineer on The Newport and Wickford Line Train which ran

through town a number of times each day bringing folks like the Flieschmanns over to the "City by the Sea". He was retired by the time this drawing was done, but obviously not forgotten.

Next comes Elmer Hussey. Elmer was the superintendent of schools during that time frame and presided over the department as it transitioned from a system of "one-roomers" into a modern school system. This fact made him popular with some and not with others.

E.E. "Doc" Young seems intent upon listening to Nehi as he eats up some of Young's popular ice cream. It was this sketch which motivated me to contact the Loring's and see about bringing Paule's work back on the newspaper's pages where it belongs.

Thaddeus Hunt, the manager of the Industrial Trust Bank in town, seems to be patiently listening to Nehi's bank robbery joke. Hunt started out as a teller for the Wickford National Bank and after its absorption by Industrial worked his way up to manager. He was so well-loved in town that upon his death in 1934 at the age of 87 all flags in town were ordered to half-mast. His home on West Main Street (now a Chiropractors office) just above the old Post Office is still one of the grandest in town.

Byron Greene was another railroad man. Shown here in his conductor's outfit, I expect Loring was having fun with his obvious resemblance to Stan Laurel of Laurel and Hardy fame.

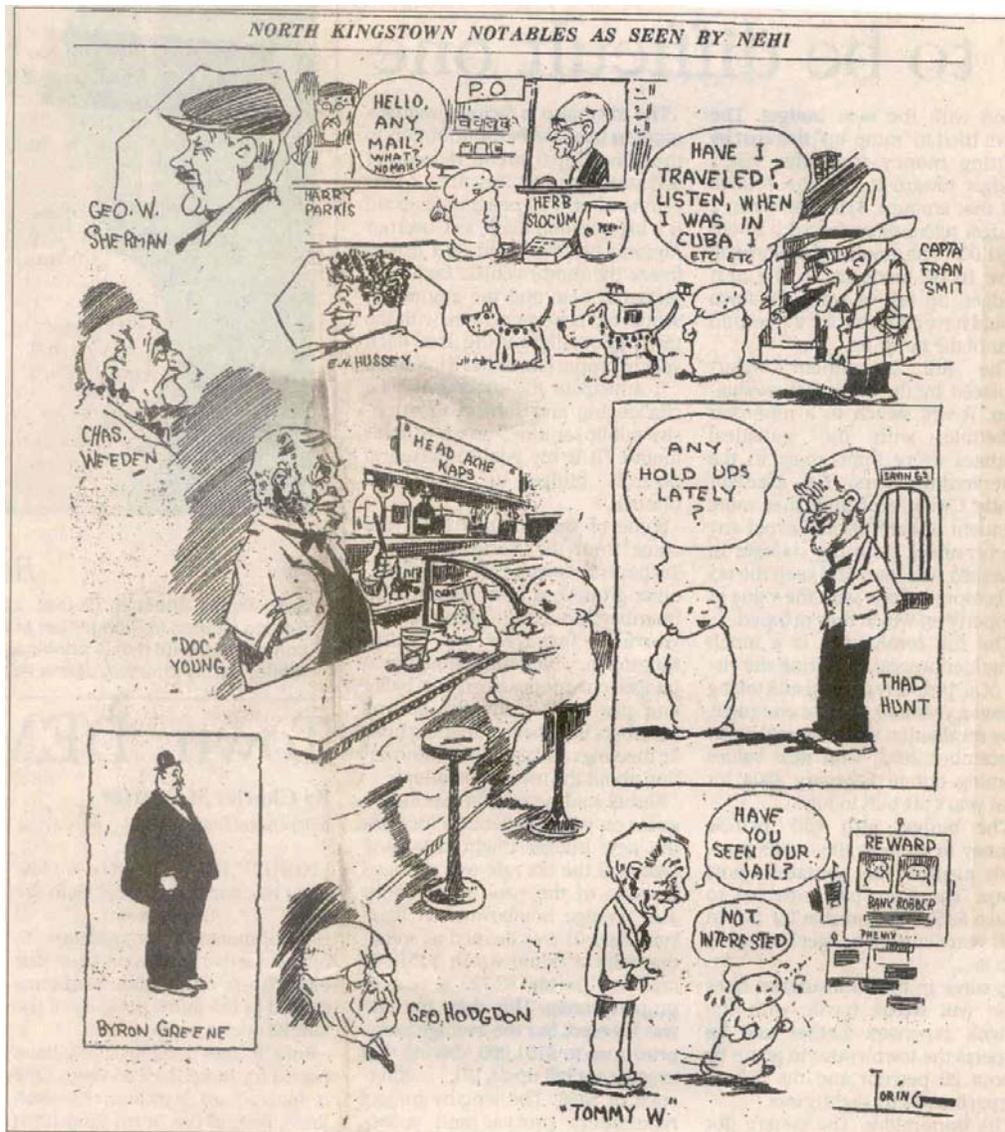
Tommy W. Peirce was the law in North Kingstown, a fact not lost on Nehi. He is the only man to hold simultaneously the positions of Police Chief; Town Sergeant, and County Deputy Sheriff. He also held positions on the town council and school committees at one time or another. He was known as Tommy W. to distinguish himself from his dad Tommy C. another prominent member of the N.K. community.

This leaves us with only George Hodgdon. Sadly I must admit that I was not able to find

out much about him. I only know that he died sometime in 1944 and had family in town. Perhaps someone out there can tell us all why he, too, was a North Kingstown Notable.

In my letter to Loring's wife, Virginia, I wrote that her late husband's work was just too important to North Kingstown to allow it to be forgotten by her citizenry. Now, thanks to the generosity of Mrs. Loring and her two sons, Ron and Bruce, there's no way this Swamp Yankee is going to allow that to happen. I look forward to sharing the work of Paule Loring with all of you as the weeks go by.

Printed in the North East Independent 12/28/01



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

## **The Clerk and The Coffin**

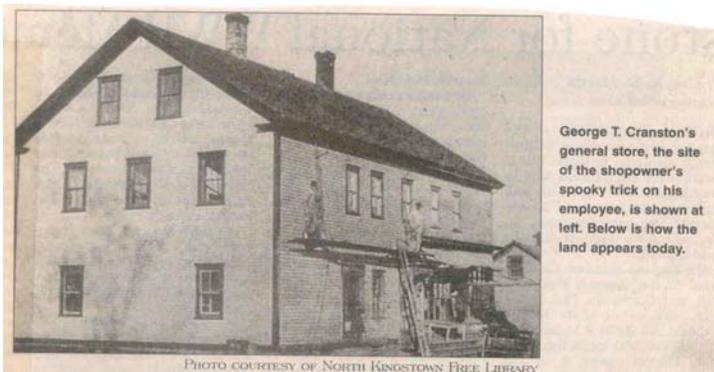
Greetings Readers! To close out our month of autumn-themed columns I have decided to regale you with a true story from the Cranston family history, which seems quite appropriate for this Halloween season. The star of this story is none other than the gentleman after whom I was named George Tillinghast Cranston and the setting was his famed general store and trading post, which stood for decades at the corner of Phillips Street and Tower Hill Road. The site now, right next door to a recently opened physical therapy establishment, is occupied only by a few trees planted amid the small hills on the property which correspond to the buried foundations of the long-demolished store.

Back in the 1880's, George T. had a clerk working for him by the name of Dewey. Now I expect Dewey, who's boss was known town wide as a man who enjoyed a good practical joke, just figured he was being funny, or maybe he just didn't take much of a shine to men of the cloth. Whatever the reason, each time a clergyman or his wife or housekeeper came in and placed an order, Dewey would pour all the grains, beans, and dried fruit into one bag. A pound of beans, five pounds of rice, raisins, nuts, and even tea would all be scooped from the store's barrels and bins, all into one large cloth bag. Clergy folk are not a complaining bunch, so nothing was said for a time. But those housekeepers, the poor souls who had to sort out those mixed up bags of dried goods, were not so patient. Eventually, word got back to George and he decided he would have to teach Dewey a lesson he wouldn't soon forget.

On the appointed day, George told Dewey he would be leaving an hour earlier than usual, as he needed to get himself a haircut. He instructed his clerk in the necessary details required to close up the store for the night at that time. One of the things that Dewey would have to do was to go into the room adjacent to the store, a room which was serving as a funeral parlor, as George T. also ran his undertaking establishment out of this same building, and ice down the dearly departed soul who was in repose there. Now Dewey was not too keen to this last task, but he reluctantly agreed to do it. As a matter of fact, Dewey absolutely hated just even going into that room but he feared

losing his job if he didn't.

George then bid farewell to his clerk and left the store. While Dewey was busy with the task at hand, George slipped unseen into the funeral parlor and switched the coffin holding the dearly departed soul with an empty one and climbed in, closed the lid, and waited for his wise guy clerk. After nearly an hour he heard Dewey coming into the dimly lit room. Dewey opened the door a crack, and slowly and fearfully peered into the room, kerosene lamp in hand. He walked in tentatively and placed the lamp on the small table near the coffin. He left and quickly returned with a large wooden bucket of chopped ice. Just as Dewey was about to place his trembling hand upon the lid of the coffin, George sprang out, raising himself to his full imposing height and howled, "You white-livered cockroach, you! You would cheat the clergy, would you!! I'll haunt you 'til the very end of your days!!!"



Dewey let out an ungodly scream and ran from the store. The story goes that he's running still. So, while you're out there trick-or-treating be aware. You might just catch a glimpse of something out of the corner of your eye, or you might hear something strange that you're not quite sure about. Well its probably just Dewey, white as a ghost, bathed in perpetual sweat, running still from a specter that exists only in his haunted imagination. Listen close again

and I bet the wind in the trees sounds like a great bear of a man laughing at his latest prank. That would be my great great grandfather still living life to the hilt even after death.

Printed in the North East Independent 10/25/01

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

### **Norman M. Isham**

No serious study of the history of our fair town would be complete without taking a hard look at one of the folks most responsible for preserving the most important artifacts of that history; the colonial era homes and structures which make North Kingstown the special place that it is. No one man has done more to preserve and document these buildings than Norman Isham.

Isham was born in Hartford Connecticut on November 12, 1864. His formative years were spent in Providence, attending the prestigious Mowry and Goff Preparatory School and then Brown University from which he graduated with a Master of Arts degree in Architecture in 1890. For two years, Isham worked in a Providence architectural firm, but in 1892 he left that firm and opened his own office. He supplanted this income as an instructor at Brown University until 1912, when he became the department head at RISD's famed architectural school.

Around the same time he was beginning his career at RISD, Isham was beginning the design and construction of his dream home just south of Wickford, on what was then known as Hamilton Ave (now Boston Neck Road). The house at 240 Boston Neck is befitting of an architect of Isham's stature. The two-story, shingle-style Colonial Revival home with its high Georgian Revival interior was at first just a summer home for Isham, his wife, and parents. But after the sudden and untimely death of his young wife in the early 1920's Isham left Providence and it's many memories and settled into the Wickford house on a full-time basis. In 1922, he added an architecture studio to the property.

It was during his Wickford years that Isham engaged himself in his real passion; the exacting and precise restoration of colonial buildings. Among his many triumphs were: Old City Hall, The Colony House, and Whitehall in Newport, Gilbert Stuart Birthplace, Smith's Castle, The John Updike House, and the Bullock-Thomas House in North Kingstown, and the Thomas Clemence and Stephen Hopkins Houses in

Providence. Isham also wrote extensively on the subject of colonial architecture as well as period furniture. He somehow found time to supervise the archaeological excavation of the Jireh Bull Garrison House in South Kingstown and to design the American Wing Of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art and most of Delaware's state buildings.

Isham left this world in January of 1943. His funeral drew the cream of the architectural crop to "the olde quaint and historic", and in an ironic and tragic incident a prominent Providence architect Harry Slocomb had a massive heart attack and died while waiting for a bus in Seavey's Drug Store in the village (now the Brown Street Deli) after the service. He is buried, with his wife and parents, out at Elm Grove Cemetery side by side with the folks whose homes he worked so hard to preserve.

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PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

The house at 240 Boston Neck Road was designed by Norman Isham, who first used it as a summer home and later as a permanent residence following the death of his wife.

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

## **The Crypts of North Kingstown**

If you ask my two sons, it's never too early to start thinking about the spooky details of the Halloween season. As soon as the leaves begin to change and the calendar page turns from September to October every young imagination (even the ones residing in old fogies like me) conjures up images of ghosts, goblins, witches, and jack-o--lanterns. What better topic for this week's column than one that deals with crypts and coffins, graves and grave diggers. Gives you the willies; doesn't it.

The practical details of running a cemetery back in the 1800's, in a time before backhoes and tractors, were considerably different than they are in today's mechanized age. During many winters, there was a spell of a month or two, and sometimes even three, where the ground was frozen too deeply to even attempt the laborious process of hand digging a grave. This problem was compounded by the undeniable fact that, the dead of winter is exactly when the largest number of folks would pass on. Although this probably brought a sigh of relief to those unfortunate grave diggers who had to go out there in February, shovel and pickax in hand, to hack away at the frozen ground, it surely didn't please the many bereaved families who were forced to keep their dearly departed relative out in the barn or root cellar until a thaw occurred. To deal with this problem many public cemeteries, and a few larger family burial grounds, constructed a temporary holding tomb, or crypt, where coffins could be securely stored until the ground became workable again.

Here in our little town we have two of these long abandoned slightly spooky, winter crypts. Out at Elm Grove, the primary public burial ground of the period, a fairly large brick and granite holding crypt was constructed around 1851, at the same time the earliest part of the cemetery was platted out. It could hold a large number of stacked up coffins, befitting the proposed size of the newly opened cemetery. Although details of this sort are not available, I'm sure that there were many a winter when the big vaulted tomb behind the great iron door was filled to capacity. Once warmer weather arrived, the grave diggers would have had to work overtime to get their

work done before too much thawing occurred. (More willies!!!) The crypt still stands there to this day, dead center in the old portion of the cemetery, empty and sadly graffiti-covered, a monument to days gone by.

Up at the other end of town, in North Quidnessett, stands our little burg's other example of a winter crypt. It is built into the wall which surrounds the Hill family burial ground. Made completely of dry-laid field stone, with a monolithic slab stone roof, it is a testimony to the artistry of some unnamed stone mason. Although its iron door is missing, the hinge pins built into the wall show that it was very similar in construction to the one at Elm Grove. Covered over with vines and briars, it remains much as it was when it was constructed more than two hundred years ago.

The age of gravediggers and crypt keepers only exist now in our seasonal imaginations. But these two stone repositories of the dead stand in silent testimony to those days gone by. I guess, that since I have appointed myself as the guide and guardian of those ancient times, that makes me the crypt keeper in a sense. Boy, my kids are going to like that.

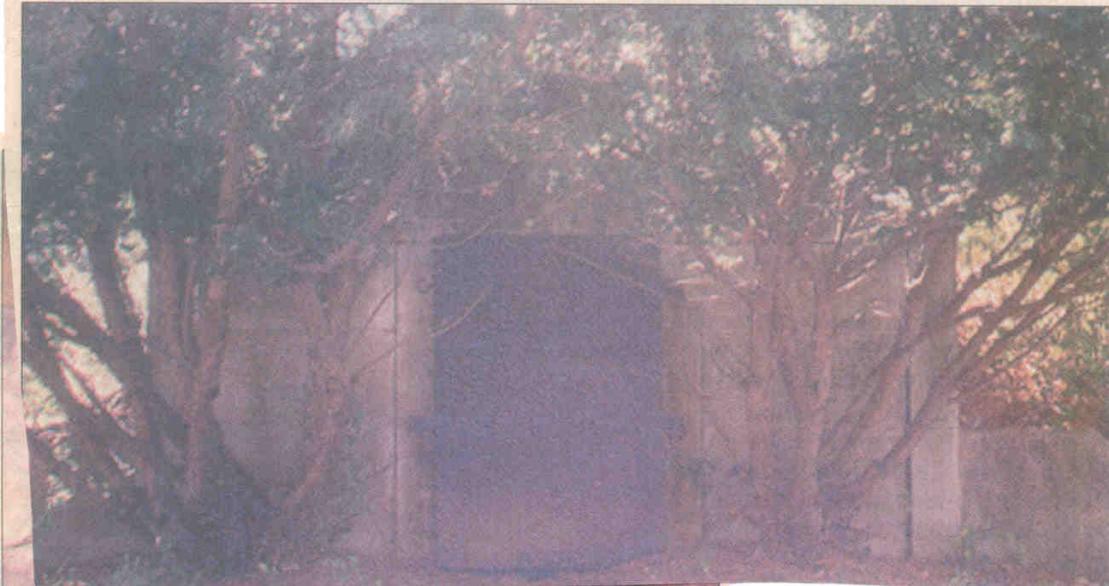
Printed in the North East Independent 10/11/01



The intricate stonework continues inside the Hill/Allen family crypt.



Above, the crypt at the Hill/Allen family cemetery in Quidnessett dates to the late 1700s. It is entirely constructed of field stones and is missing its cast iron door. Below, the Elm Grove crypt was constructed in the mid-1800s and could hold a number of coffins awaiting the spring thaw.



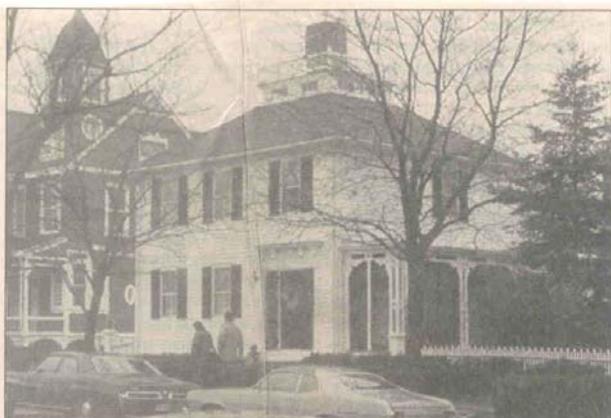
The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

## The Joseph Sanford Houses

If one takes a close look at the photos of the two central-chimneyed hip roofed Federal style homes that accompany this week's installment of the history of our fair town, one can not help but be amazed at the incredible similarities of their, almost, mirror images. This is due to the fact that they were both built for the same man, Joseph C. Sanford; and Mr. Sanford obviously liked the Federal style which, although rare in N. Kingstown, these being the only period examples in the whole town, was fairly common among the affluent folk up in the capitol city of Providence.

Joseph Sanford was the eldest of the twelve children of state Judge Ezbon Sanford. Little is known of his early years. He began his adult life as a ship owner and captain; his sloop, the "Lucy Emeline" plied the waters of the Narragansett Bay for a number of years. As a mariner, it only made sense for him to build his home in the busy port town of Wickford, and in 1824 he and his wife moved into their home on Bridge Street (now, 50 Brown Street). Shortly after this though, Joseph and his younger brother, Ezbon Jr., decided to get into the locally booming fabric manufacturing trade. Joseph purchased the grist/saw mills located at the Kettle Hole and at the point where the Shewatuck River crossed the Boston Post Road (just north of the present day Raze's Motorcycle establishment) and converted them both to fabric mills. Younger brother Ezbon purchased the site just downstream on the Shewatuck, but at this juncture known as the Annaquatucket River, where it crosses what we now call Featherbed Lane, and dammed the stream to build a fabric mill there as well. The Annaquatucket Mill, as Ezbon called his enterprise, and the Narragansett Mill, as Joseph named his Post Road establishment were connected by a cart path through the woods, that paralleled the Shewatuck/Annaquatucket River on the south bank, and which still partially exists today as the road off of Featherbed now called Woodward Road.

In 1828, in order to be closer to his busy Narragansett Mill, which by this time was running over 500 spindles manufacturing cotton and woolen goods, Joseph had his duplicate house built across the street from the mill, just north of the Oak Hill Road intersection. Along with the home, he had a fine barn built out back to house his horses and carriages.



PHOTOS: LINDA LEE

The 1824 Joseph Sanford house at 50 Brown St. in Wickford is seen in a circa 1978 view.



The 1828 Joseph Sanford mill owner's home is on Tower Hill Road on the outskirts of Allenton. Compare the identical porch trim and the door and window layout to the house on Brown Street.



The mill owner's barn located behind the Tower Hill Road house is seen from Oak Hill Road.

By 1852, Joseph was ready to retire from the mill owner business, so he sold the Narragansett Mill and the fine mill-owner's home to his brother-in-law, William Pierce. Pierce had just began a partnership with Daniel Hiscox who ran the Silver Spring Mill just to the south of him. Loyal readers will remember Messrs. Hiscox and Pierce from the intriguing story of the Silver Spring Mill; the only mill in town to ever be owned by a young girl. During the difficult time when Pierce was partnered with his late associate's young daughter, he lived in the home, but leased the mill to Robert Rodman, of Lafayette fame. Finally, in 1863, after the resolution of the "Hiscox girl" problem, William Pierce purchased the mill outright and began again to run it. Sadly, in 1889, the mill was destroyed by fire and not rebuilt. All that remains to testify to

its existence are a few mill workers cottages and, of course, Joseph Sanford's magnificent mill owner's home.

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

## **The Allen Family Stone Barns**

It is no surprise to me, that the only stone barns in this neck of the woods were built by members of the North Kingstown "Allen" family. Going all the way back to our old friend Judge John Allen of the Allen-Madison House on Quonset/Davisville, the Allen family has been involved in the stone mason trade. The Allen's for generations were stone traders and homebuilders. They were a proud family and probably thought of these two grand and unusual barns as a way of leaving their mark on the communities that their families had had a hand in founding.

Down in the Allenton, the village named after his ancestors, Charles Allen built his stone barn sometime during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was a part of his impressive homestead, which was surrounded by a fence, cornered by the massive granite gateposts that still exist to this day. Charles' center-chimneyed colonial eventually was transformed into the locally famous "Old Acres" restaurant. Sadly, the 18<sup>th</sup> century home, turned restaurant, burned to the ground in 1957. The big stone barn, understandably, survived the blaze, and was eventually resurrected as another restaurant; the equally famous Carriage Inn, now Hoofmfeathers Carriage Inn. Take a look at the accompanying photograph and you can see the old barn right at the core of the building.

Up in North Quidnessett, about the same time that relation Charles was building his barn, Deacon George Allen, a founding father of the Quidnessett Baptist Church, was building one of his own. The Deacon's Fletcher Rd, stone barn was even more impressive than "cousin" Charles'. Sadly the barn is nothing more than a great stone shell today. But it doesn't take much imagination to envision what an extraordinary site the good Deacon's barn must have been. I have not yet been able to find a photo or artistic rendition of this magnificent monument to agriculture, but hope that someone out there will share one with us all if such a thing exists. I'll keep you posted.

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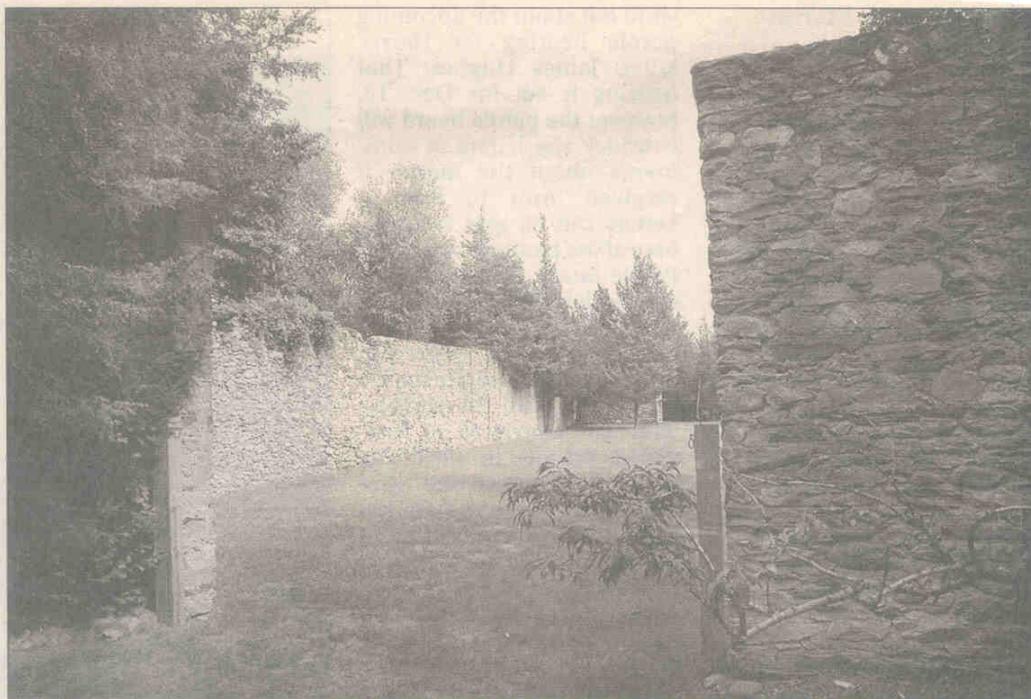


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

George Allen, a founding father of the Quidnessett Baptist Church, built this stone barn on what is now the corner of Fletcher Road and Quail Drive. Only its shell has survived the years.

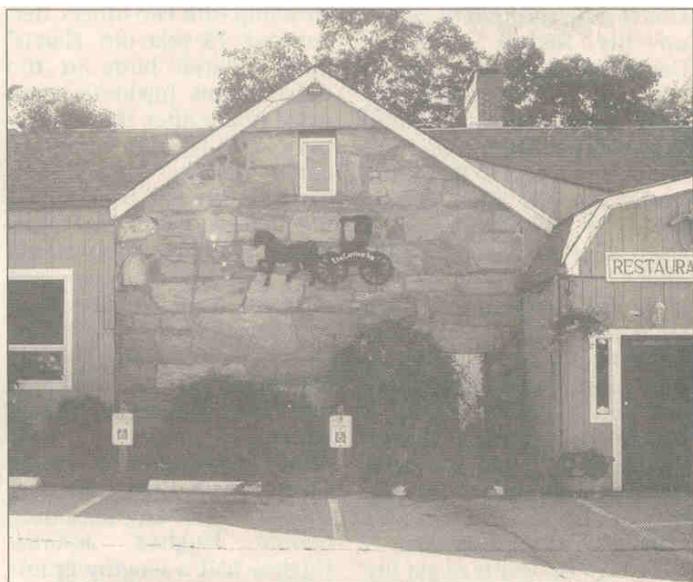


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

Some of Charles Allen's handiwork can be seen in the core of the HoofFinFeathers Carriage Inn on Tower Hill Road. Allen's home, which later was a restaurant, burned but the stone barn survived the blaze and was incorporated into the new building there.

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

## **The Boston Post Cane**

Back in August of 1909, the Town Council of "Our Fair Town" received a unique item in the mail. As a matter of fact, every Council or Board of Selectman in each of 431 towns in New England (cities were not included in this mailing) were receiving the same amazing package. In this package, mailed out by Edwin Grozier, the owner and publisher of the Boston Post Newspaper, was an ebony cane with an inscribed 14-carat gold head and a ferruled tip. Written on the head of this cane was the inscription "Presented by the Boston Post to the oldest citizen of North Kingstown — To be Transmitted." These wonderful canes were made in New York by J.F. Fradley and Co. out of ebony grown in the Congo in Africa. Instructions sent out with the cane indicated that the North Kingstown Town Council were to be the trustees of this cane and ought to keep it always in the hands of the town's oldest citizen. As was the case all across New England, the town siezed upon the idea with enthusiasm and a new tradition rooted in the values that helped to make the region what it was was begun. Grozier had single-handedly devised the newspaper world's cleverest and most effective publicity campaign and it was a great success. Following an earlier and equally clever campaign involving a pair of engraved Rocking Chairs presented to New England's oldest couple, Mr and Mrs Barnabas Bourne of Waquoit, Ma whose aggregate age of 171 bested the rest in the region, the name of the Boston Post and its publisher Ed Grozier was on everyone's lips.

Eventually Edwin Grozier's "Boston Post" became one of the nation's leading newspapers and by his death in 1924 he too, was considered to be one of the nation's best; best marketer, that is. Unfortunately his son Richard, who took the reins at his father's demise, did not share the elder Grozier's talents and by the late 1950's the paper was largely forgotten. It would have faded into obscurity if it weren't for it's founder's ingenious marketing ploy. For even now folks all across

New England remember the canes; the Boston Post canes, Grozier's claim on immortality.

Sadly, times are quite a bit different than they were in the early 1900's. Towns all across New England are having a hard time carrying on the Boston Post Cane tradition. Many of the canes are lost, stolen, or destroyed. You see, tradition does not carry the same weight in this century as it had in the previous one. Elders relation's are loathe to return the cane when they pass on to the next world. Or perhaps they just don't understand what it represents. Many towns, including North Kingstown, if they are lucky enough to still possess the cane, had not been giving it out for fear that they may never see this archetype of New England tradition forever. Add this to the fact that, in this the age of a transient society, it's not an easy task to even select the proper person to present it to, and you've got a uniquely New England tradition, that speaks to the old adage "Respect your Elders", that's, sadly, not being carried out.

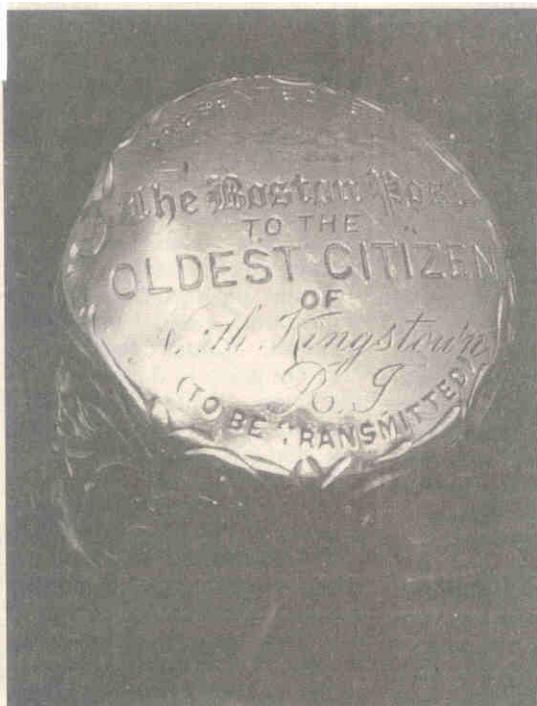


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

North Kingstown received a Boston Post cane in 1909 to be transferred to the oldest resident in town. Because of concern it will be lost or stolen, it now sits safely in Town Hall.

What's a self-respecting Swamp Yankee to do about this you might ask? Well, the answer's already out there and being applied in a few towns as we speak. The communities who are intent upon carrying on this noble tradition having taken to having a less valuable reproduction cane made and handing it out to the town's oldest citizen for they and their heirs to keep forever. The original cane can be displayed in an appropriate and secure public place adjacent to a plaque with all the recipients names forever inscribed on it.

Well, I don't know about you, but I would hate to see one of Rhode Island's oldest community's give up on such a noble tradition as this. I just can't help it; I just love tradition. Traditions help to remind us all of what is really important. To me, the Boston Post Cane symbolizes the respect rightfully due a person who has had the unmitigated tenacity to survive all that life throws at them. They deserve the right to grab a hold of that cane and shake it at the world as if to say, "I've taken all you can give me and, with God's help, I'm still here!" Let's give our fair town's oldest citizen that opportunity again. Call or write the NK Senior Association and the Senior Center (whose Director, by the way, is enthusiastically behind the idea.) and let them know how important this is to you, and if any of you out there know anything about a former possessor of this wonderful walking stick, won't you let me know about it. They too, deserve to be honored on any eventual plaque. I'm also looking for a generous community business that might be interested in sponsoring a part of all of this. I'm proud to live in a town that values it's senior citizens. Why without their help, much of what I pass on to all of you would be lost. So lets continue to honor them in this uniquely New England way. It may have started as a gimmick to sell newspapers, but its evolved into so much more.

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The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

## Blacksmithing and Bootscrapers

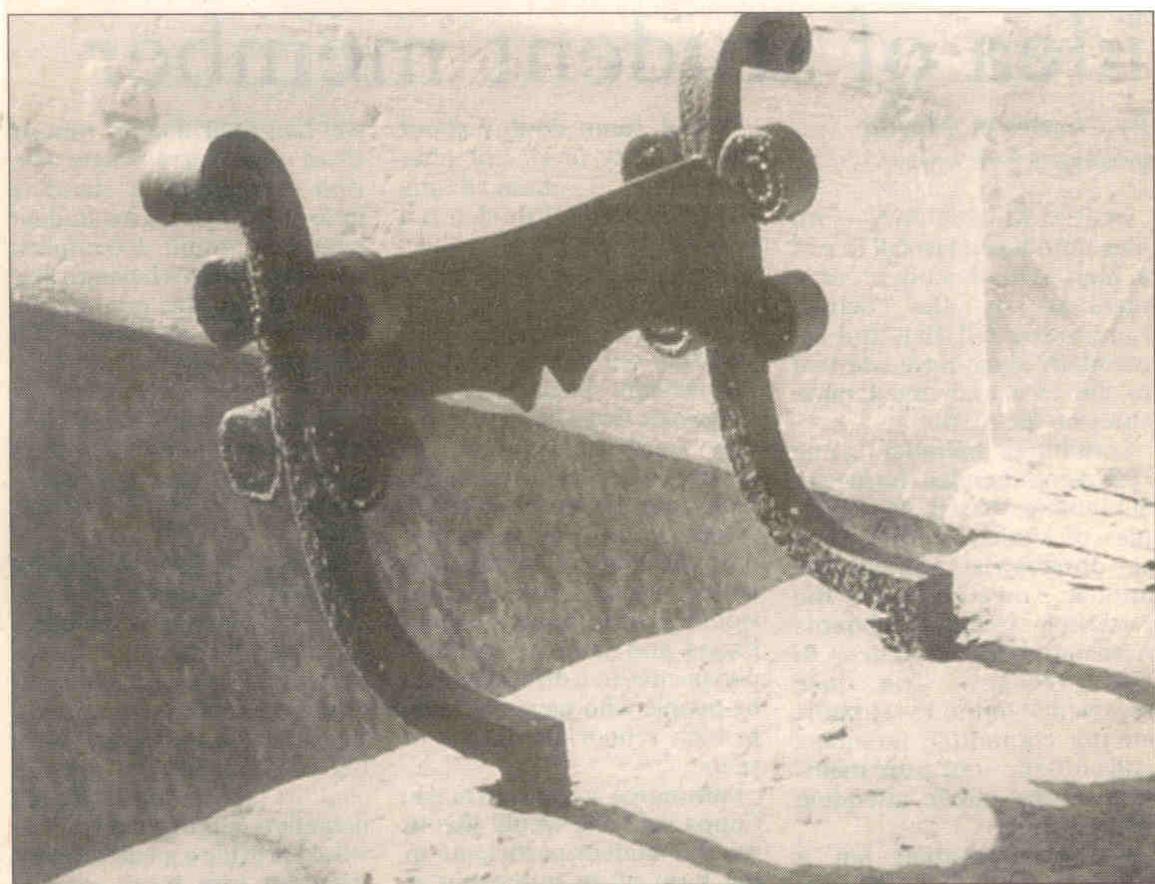
Last week we took a look at what might have been our fair town's smallest dwelling house. With this column we are going to delve into one of the little details that make an 18<sup>th</sup> century house the unique structure that it is; the lowly bootscrapper.

Back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a bootscrapper was a necessity. You see, even in the most advanced and settled communities, muddy streets were a fact of life. Spring thaws and heavy rainfalls would turn even the best of gravel roads into a soupy quagmire. Add this to the fact that horses do what horses do no matter where they are and you've got a mess of mud. One thing though, has not changed over the centuries, no matter how humble the dwelling, wives and mothers did not then, or now, want mud tracked into their clean home. Bootscrapers were a necessity that kept many a husband and child out of trouble with the lady of the house.

For these reasons, most early homes had a bootscrapper set into the stone of its front door. In the instances where one is not evident, a close examination of the granite will show the twin holes where it once sat. As evidenced by the accompanying photograph of the bootscrapper on the front of the Sanford House on Brown Street, bootscrapers were often an opportunity for a "smithy" to show off a little bit. He would construct his creation back at his blacksmith's shop and bring it with a small portable forge to the home at which it was to be affixed. The iron toes of his creation would be set into the pre-drilled holes. Then hot molten lead would be poured around them, and when it cooled, the scrapper was imbedded for all eternity.

This particular scrapper, an early 19<sup>th</sup> century creation perhaps made by Main Street blacksmith Abraham Rathbun, is a perfect marriage of form, function, and art. It would make a 21<sup>st</sup> century industrial engineer green with envy. The tops of the posts are widened and gracefully turned so they do not tear anyone's valuable boots. At the lower edge of the scrapper a double wedge has been added to the design. When a boot heel is hooked under these wedges the boot can be levered off without getting mud all

over your hands. The offset curve of the posts themselves cushions the sockets from shock so that, even after 200 years, they haven't loosened a bit.



The lowly boot scraper as art: This particular example belongs to the Sanford House on Brown Street.

The blacksmith was always an integral and respected member of the community. Abe Rathbun's predecessor's, those that practiced their craft prior to the Revolution, were also rebels and outlaws; in King George's eyes anyway. You see the purchase of native raw materials needed by the colonial smithies was outlawed. They were required to procure them, at great expense, from England. This was just one portion of the early protectionist laws that eventually brought about the Revolution itself. There was a lot more than "tea" separating the Crown from it's Colonies. As you can imagine, Swamp Yankee blacksmiths would have none of that (remember we prefer frugal to cheap), but, face it, its not easy to hide a full scale iron mine from the powers that be. Luckily, the English and European practitioners of this ancient art knew of a solution to this problem. They turned, as the ancients had before them, to bog iron as a source for their raw

materials. All you needed to "mine" bog iron was a bog sled, some peat knives, and an active peat bog. Sled yourself out into the middle of the murky peat bog, slice up a great chunk of peat, and there in and among the peat, you'll find the pea-sized nodules of bog iron that had precipitated out of the iron-rich waters of the average New England (or New Jersey, Newfoundland, Scandinavian, or English) bog. It took an awful lot of bog iron pellets to make a bootscraper; but heck it was preferable to paying a hefty duty to those "durned Redcoats".

So our lowly bootscraper can tell us a tale about the craft of the blacksmith, the ingenuity of the colonists, and the greed of the British taskmasters that eventually spawned a revolution which changed the world. And you thought they were just about mud.

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The sign at Abraham Rathbun's former Main Street home in Wickford identifies him as the village blacksmith.

**The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston**  
**North Kingstown and The Spanish Lady —**  
**The Influenza Outbreak of 1918**

You know, it seems like even the hardiest of Swamp Yankee's can't escape being sick this winter. Everywhere I go I hear the sound of coughing and sneezing, sniffing and wheezing. It's so pervasive, It's like the "Muzak" of the winter of 2003; the elevator music that accompanies us all as we march towards Spring. As I sat in my own sick bed swallowing aspirin and cursing the season of the flu, I started thinking about The Great Flu Outbreak of 1918. Figured it would give me some perspective on how easily we have gotten away year after year.

What, you have never heard of the Great Flu of 1918. The third largest pandemic (world-wide epidemic) to hit mankind in recorded history. Known then as the Spanish Lady or the Spanish Influence (Influenza in Spanish, hence the long standing moniker of Flu), she stands only behind the Black Plague of the Middle Ages, which killed an estimated 62 million souls, and the Plague of Justinian which took an estimated 100 million people over a span of fifty years during the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Don't feel bad for the Spanish Lady though, she herself consumed the life's blood of as many as 40 million people in a span of months, not decades like her two bubonic sisters. She was an awesome and terrible force to be reckoned with. Amazingly though, few remember a pestilence of this magnitude after only 85 years. Even after she took the lives of almost 700,000 Americans in four months.

Before we see how our fair town held up to this rapacious stealer of souls, lets take a closer look at this flu and flu viruses in general. Interestingly enough, a flu virus is normally an avian dweller. Common as feathers within every bird that flies or floats, it's harmless to their regular hosts. In order to become a menace to mankind, it requires an additional host, usually of the porcine variety (hence the name Swine Flu) within which it can mutate to a lethal form. From there, all that is needed is for the duck, pig, and human, if you will, to cross paths and voila' you have the makings of a flu outbreak. The Spanish Influenza of 1918 started just like that, except it really began in March in Fort

Riley, Kansas in or near the sprawling overcrowded military base which was splitting at the seams with "doughboys" ready to be sent off to battle the Kaiser and the Hun. At the onset she was no more than a nuisance ,a typical flu that sent folks to bed but did not generally kill them. Somewhere, on its trip over with the boys who were off to save Europe it mutated again into something lethal, something unlike any other case of the grippe (the malady's name prior to this outbreak) that anyone had ever experienced. It began to decimate the population of Europe; hammering Spain and Great Britain particularly hard. Then she danced her way back to America on the same troop ships that she had arrived on and hit Boston, Massachusetts like the very angel of death. No one was prepared for it. Health officials who knew of the flu's affects in Europe pooh-poohed it and blamed the high fatality rate on "poor European hygiene". It's a call they quickly regretted. Eventually Boston was the host to round the clock funerals and caskets piling up under makeshift tents in the graveyards; as the gravediggers could not keep up. Coffins were in such short supply that they eventually became ceremonial only, after the services the bodies were dumped out, buried, and the boxes reused for the next waiting victim. The path of the flu closely followed the rail lines across America and spread out like a black widows web from there; soon every city and town in the country was afflicted. Death by this flu was, prior to this, unimaginable. People inflicted with the Spanish Flu literally drowned in their own body fluids. As lungs filled with mucus, wrenching coughs produced pints of greenish phlegm; and temperatures soared to 104 or 105, oxygen starved skin turned blue, purple, and deep mahogany. The "purple death" as folks began calling it, took young strong victims and took them fast. From health to death in 36 hours was not uncommon. Atypical for a flu, The Spanish Lady took more people from between the ages of 15 and 40 than any other age group. It's a sad fact, that the truth is, Black Jack Pershing did not win the war in Europe, the Spanish Lady, who decimated the ranks of the German Army far more effectively than trench warfare, did. But she was an equal opportunity killer, she tore through the ranks of the Allies as well. When she had run her course, The Spanish Influenza had killed more Americans than all the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century combined. As quickly as she had come, by late spring 1919, she was gone without a trace; like a horrible tornado she just vanished.

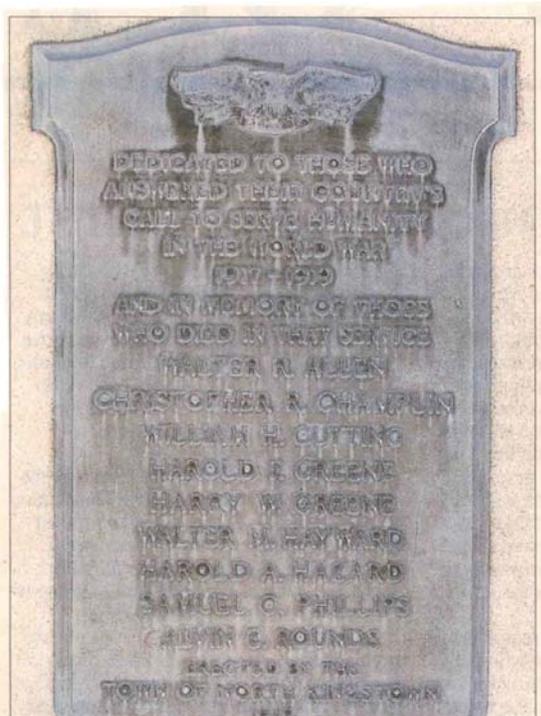


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

The majority of these men were killed by influenza, not the German war machine.

That all said, how did North Kingstown fare through all this? Well, we were luckier than most. With no major military base nearby (Quonset/Davisville was 20 years away, thank goodness) and no major rail stations in town we were merely sideswiped relative to what happened 75 miles north. Even so, in the gruesome month of October 1918, when 195,000 Americans died, nearly 30% of our citizens were sick as could be, All schools were closed for weeks on end, Doc Metcalf, our health official ordered all movie halls and public places closed. The mills shut down due to worker shortages, the Seaview and Newport Railroads nearly shut down for the same

reason. We suffered the effects of a nationwide coal shortage due to the ravages of this same flu. And people died; of the 35 locals who died in those 3 months, 21 were claimed by the Spanish Flu. Not too bad you say, well if you expand that death toll to today's population we would lose an equivalent of 136 good citizens to a malady that's only supposed to give you a few days in bed. More North Kingstown doughboys were claimed by the Spanish Lady than by the Kaiser's Armies. If you take the same mathematical logic and apply it to the whole nation, we would have to lose 14 million Americans to reach the same percentage of the population lost in that terrible season. A sobering statistic in a time when we take our nations general good health for granted.

So, I bemoan my illness a little less forcefully after studying up on the Spanish Lady. I like almost every American lost an ancestor in that terrible time. I remember her and appreciate the hardships that those that survived endured.

Printed in the North East Independent 2/27/03

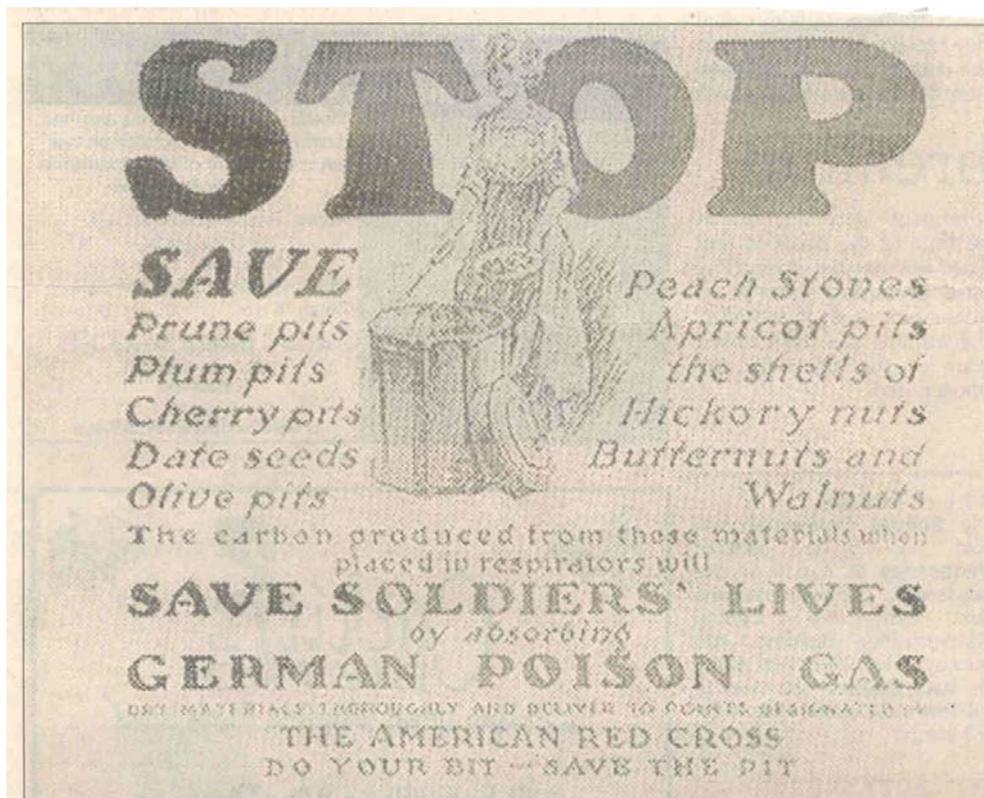
**The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston**

## **The Peach Pit and WWI**

A few weeks ago we took a look at something as innocuous and unassuming as the lowly bootscraper and tried to see what it might tell us about history on both a local and larger scale. This week we tell the tale the seemingly inconsequential peach pit and its equally unimportant companion the discarded nut shell and see what historic part they played in World War I.

"Peach pits and nut shells", you say, "This Swamptown Guy is going to prattle on about peach pits and nut shells. Maybe he's a few peaches short of a bushel himself" Scoff if you will, but this common bits of food waste saved many an American Doughboy during the Big War. You see, the first great global conflict caused problems here-to-fore unthought-of. One of the most demanding was dealing with shortages of critical raw materials. If your enemy had control of the territories where certain crucial raw materials were found or produced; well you were soon going to either be in trouble, or get creative and come up with an alternate source or material. The rubber shortage of WWII is a classic example. The Axis powers controlled virtually the entire rubber growing world and the Allies had to get creative; after a lot of recycling, a short period of head scratching and pondering, and a little American ingenuity — Voila, plastics are born and the rest is history. WWI's problems included dealing with the fairly new and very potent threat of German gas attacks. Gas masks were the answer and the problem was their main component — activated carbon and its limited availability. Again, after some heady pondering and some serious head scratching American and British scientists and engineers found the solution right under their noses. Fruit stones and nut shells, burned slowly in a controlled fashion was the perfect source for activated carbon. Now the problem was getting enough of these common everyday items together to do the job. After all it took 200 peach pits or 2 pounds of nut shells to produce enough carbon to outfit one gas mask.

This is where small town America (and Britain) came in. All across these two nations the call went out to save and stock pile these items. The lead was taken by none other than the International Red Cross and the US Department of Agriculture. Schools, Churches, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts all got involved. Post Offices were used as collection points. The big "Do you Bit — Save the Pit" campaign was off and running. In the end literally millions of pounds of these unusual commodities were collected and processed. Little girls in Girl Scout uniforms rightly took pride in the fact that they had done their part to fight the "Hun Menace". Boy Scout troops scoured the local forests collecting Pignut Hickory and Pig Walnuts as a way to actively help to save Europe from the German Invaders. Why it is even said that the state of Georgia changed from "The Land of Cotton" to the "Peach Tree State" as a direct result of the need for carbon to fill those Allied Gas Masks.



This Red Cross "Do Your Bit - Save the Pit" national campaign poster appeared across the nation during World War II.

Here in North Kingstown we were right in the thick of it. Local schools competed to see which could collect the most pits and shells. As evidenced by the accompanying local hand bill/poster, Post offices, and local stores (including Wickford's venerable Ryan's Market) did their part as well. So you see, I'm not as "nutty" as you might think. Peach pits and nut shells, and the local children and housewives who took the time to collect them, really did help win the Great War to end all Wars.

Printed in the North East Independent 3/06/03

**—Remember—**  
**That Every Little Helps**

Mill owner Walter Rodman of Lafayette made sure North Kingstown residents were aware they could help American soldiers win the war overseas. He directed the local branches of the Red Cross to advertise the need for nutshells, fruit pits and tin with handbills, posters and newspaper bulletins like this one.

**The Housewife and the War**

(Special Information Service, United States Department of Agriculture.)  
**UNCLE SAM NEEDS FRUIT PITS AND NUT SHELLS.**



This advertisement found in newspapers and magazines of the time appealed to women to do their part to help the war effort.

**Save Your Fruit Stones  
 And Nut Shells**

The Following are Wanted and No Others Can Be Used

Peach Stones	Date Seeds
Apricot Pits	Cherry Pits
Prune Pits	Butter nut Shells
Plum Pits	Brazil nut Shells
Beach Plum Pits	Walnut Shells
Olive Pits	Hickory nut Shells
Pig Walnut	need not be cracked

The War Department has asked the Red Cross to assume charge of the campaign for the conservation of Fruit Stones and Nut Shells to be used in the making of Tin Macks, and every pound of these articles that can be obtained is urgently needed.

**TIN**

**Tin Foil, Collapsible Tubes and Pewter**

The Country is in great need of these articles and collect all you can. No tin cans are wanted. Give them to your Grocer and he will get them to the Red Cross.

**School Children of North Kingstown and Exeter**

Through the cooperation of the Superintendent of Public Schools the children will be asked to save and collect nuts and bring them to school houses. Clubs will be formed in each school and searching parties organized to scour the woods and country about. Other towns have already collected bushels of nuts and the school children we know can be depended upon to keep up their good work and reputation.

Teachers should see to it that every pupil does his or her part in the work of protecting the soldiers.

Two pounds of shells will make canteen for one soldier's gash.

This is a privilege and patriotic duty that each school child can do. Bring your nuts and tin to school.

**Give Them To Your Grocer**

Post Office	Hamilton
Samuel J. Kelley	Saunderstown
Post Office	Saunderstown
H. F. Briggs	Saunderstown
A. A. Wilbur	Attenton
E. L. Lafraniere	Attenton
N. H. Lafraniere	Bellville
C. F. Carpenter	Bellville
Post Office	Stoanna
Post Office	Liberty
Post Office	Tinehill
Post Office	Exeter
Post Office	Daviesville
C. I. Shappes	Daviesville
Variety Store	Daviesville
Davis and Stoanna	Lafayette
E. E. Ball	Lafayette
Workroom, North Kingstown Exeter Branch, A. R. C.	Lafayette
People's Supply Co.	Wickford Junction
G. E. Franklin	Wickford Junction
W. C. Tingley	West Wickford
Charles Sumner	West Wickford
J. F. Sealy	Wickford
Post Office	Wickford
M. J. Ryan	Wickford
A. & P. Store	Wickford
War Relief Aux., N. K. & Exeter Branch	Wickford
Farnham's Drug Store	Wickford
E. E. Young's Drug Store	Wickford

**THE AMERICAN RED CROSS**  
 North Kingstown and Exeter Branch  
 PROVIDENCE CHAPTER  
 Bureau of Conservation  
 WALTER RODMAN, Director, LAFAYETTE, R. I.

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

## The Pettasquamscutt Rock

Continuing with this month's autumn theme, today we are going to take a gander at our area's best place to take in, not only the best of Rhode Island's colorful fall foliage, but also a little dose of history as well. As a matter of fact, Pettasquamscutt Rock joins the Queen's Fort and the Lafayette Fish Hatchery on the Swamptown Seal of Approval list of best family historic sites in the area. For those of you who aren't ardent readers of this column, in order for a site to make my list it has to meet three stringent criteria: 1) It must be a family friendly place which both stirs the imagination and serves as a catalyst for questions and conversation. 2) It should be a place where children can feel free to run, jump, climb, and explore without fear of disturbing someone or breaking something, 3) The cost should not be such that it requires a parent to take out a small personal loan or possess a credit card with a substantial credit limit. (Remember, we swamp yankees prefer the word frugal - not cheap.) The Pettasquamscutt Rock meets these criteria with flying colors.

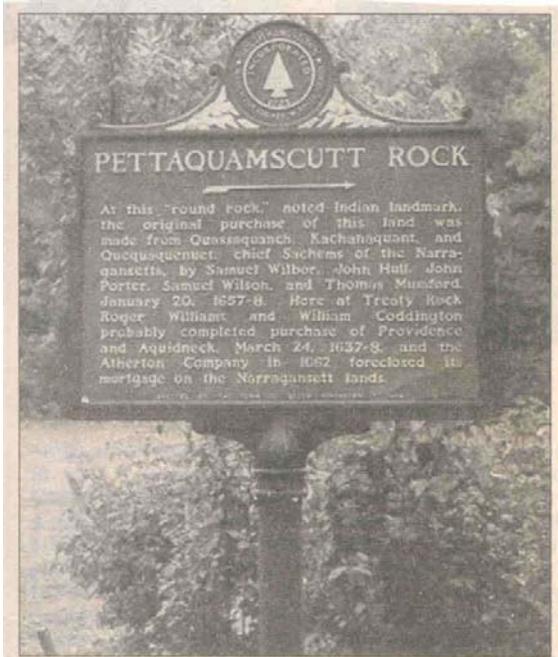
So let's take a look at the history behind this wonderful place. One of the most ancient landmarks in all of the Indian lands of the Narragansetts was the "puttuckqui-omosk" or great round rock. This Indian name was anglicized through more than a half dozen variations, until it became the present day version "Pettasquamscutt". This great rock, located just a "stone's throw" across the N. Kingstown/S. Kingstown border off of Middlebridge Road a half a mile or so past its intersection with Bridgetown Road, has been the site of many of the major land transactions between the Narragansetts and the settlers. The Atherton purchase was transacted from this spot in the middle part of the seventeenth century, as was the Pettasquamscutt purchase and the purchase of all the remaining Indian lands in the "Narragansett Lands" by the King's Commissioners. It was also used as a major reference point for property line delineation throughout history. It was here that Roger Williams and

Canonicus were said to often meet to discuss what the future held for their two peoples. Other historic folks who have stood on this great mass of granite include Canonchet and Massasoit as well as pioneering traders Richard Smith and Edward Wilcox. Knowing what I do, I feel pretty certain that Teddy Roosevelt would have found the site irresistible as well. The Rock is now a State park of sorts and can be readily climbed by all. The view of the Narrow River valley is exceptional, especially during these autumn months when the trees are ablaze with color. As you stand there, it is easy to imagine yourself as Canonicus, the great Narragansett Sachem, a wise man whose cultural reverence for the land caused him to realize that although he was the master he was not the owner of all that he could see from this lofty perch.

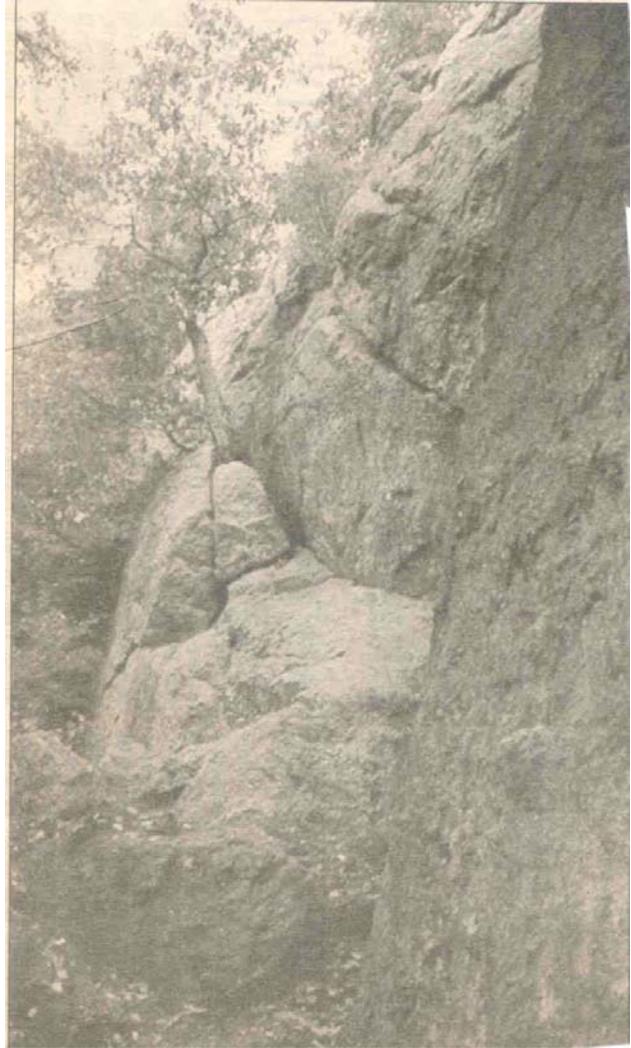


The colorful fall view of the Narrow River valley can be seen from the top of Pettaquamscutt Rock. The photo below shows the front of the rock.

To reach the top of the rock, follow the gravel trail behind the basketball court as it winds through the woods which are full of ancient apple trees, up to the summit. Remember, sensible shoes are a must as is common sense while near the edge of this great rock. Grab your kids and your camera and go while the trees are at there best.



The entrance to Pettaquamscutt Rock off Middlebridge Road is just across the town line in South Kingstown.



## The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

### Christmas 1964

Hi, that's right, it's me again. That Swamptown guy asked me if I could write a story about Christmas in Wickford and I said, "Sure, why not." I figured I kind of owed him a story anyway, seeing as all I did last summer when he asked was give him a report I had already written for Mrs. Benson, my fifth grade teacher. Heck, it was summer and I was busy. Besides, he seemed to like it fine.

I thought about it for a while and decided I'll tell him about Christmas a couple of years ago, back when we still lived in the funeral home before my dad died. That's when we really lived in Wickford (remember, I told you last time that we moved up to Annaquatucket Road, none of the old-timers would ever call that Wickford) and besides, that was the best Christmas we ever had.

Probably the first thing you are thinking is, "How can you have a great Christmas when you live in a funeral home?" Well' I've heard that sort of thing a million times before from the guys. It used to bug me a little but I don't let it anymore. Jeff Ryan's dad always comes home smelling like meat, why I think he even has meat under his fingernails, and Jim Wilson's dad makes him wear plaid pants. Davey Champlin's dad smells like dead fish. Heck, even his truck smells like fish. Tommy Bender's dad spends his whole day doing math at the bank. How boring can that be? Everyone's dad around here does something in town that other people need him to do (unless of course they work on the base and help win the war — that's surely important too). So we're all about the same, I guess, at least that's what my Grandma Cranston said. She said, "Everyone dies someday, and someone's got to take care of them. That's what we Cranstons do and we do it well."

So you see, it's not so bad living in a funeral home. Besides, Christmas is one of the few days you can make as much noise as you want. Even if someone dies, they never have the funeral or calling hours at Christmas so there's never anyone shushing you. That makes me think of something else Grandma Cranston told me, she

said, "You're the third generation of Cranston boys to grow up here and every one of you had as your first sentence, "Shh, it's calling hours!" I asked my mom and she said it's true. They all think that's such a great story. I just don't know.

Well, back to Christmas. That year was great for many reasons. First off, Julie (my little sister) and I got to buy mom a present all by ourselves. We walked down to the jewelry store in town on Brown Street and picked something out. She got mom a little pin with her money, but I asked Mrs. Sharp for something big. She got out this huge pin, made out of paper mache or something that looked just like a flower. She had to brush a little dust off of it, but I thought it was just perfect. Julie said it was too big, but what did she know — she's a girl. I figured Mom would love it.

Then we went across the street and put the rest of our money together to get a card at Earnshaw's. Julie picked it out. She's better at that. Besides, I had to check out all the comic books on the big shelf by the front window — that is until Mrs. Earnshaw came over and said, "Now Timmy, you know this isn't a library." My Mom says that too, so I figured I'd better go help Julie with the card. Not to mention, (like I told you last time) no matter what Julie and I do there in the village, by the time we get home, Mom already knows about it. It happens to all the kids in town. We think someone spies on us and calls our moms. A kid can't get away with anything in Wickford.

When we got back home, we hid our gifts under our beds and then had to go shopping with Mom. Some last minute presents she said. I figured we'd be going back into town, but we got in the car and drove up to Post Road on toward East Greenwich. It was then that I knew that we were going to two of the stores I hated the most: The Little Tot Shoppe and Brownings. All guys, even Dads, hate these stores. The Tot Shoppe is full of clothes for little kids and babies (mostly girls) and Brownings is full of breakable stuff.

The minute we walk in the door, Mom said, "Put your arms by your sides and don't touch a thing." So you just stand there like some kind of toy soldier, afraid to move until you leave. What kind of fun is that?

My Dad hated the place, too. "Cranstons are clumsy," he would say. I don't know why we had to go up on Post Road anyway, you could get anything you wanted in Wickford. The only good stores on Post Road are The Bird Cage Candy Store, where Mrs. Ward would give us free samples, and Western Auto where they sold bikes. I always ask my Mom, "Why is it called Western Auto? This is the east." She says, "Don't worry about such things."

On Christmas Eve we always go to church down at St. Paul's and the weather was nice that Christmas, so we walked. We passed lots of people on the way and they all seemed to know my parents and grandmother. "Everyone in Wickford knows everyone else." That's what Mom says and I guess she's right.

The service was packed with people. We sang all the best Christmas songs and it made me feel good. One other thing about Cranstons is that they sing loud. Aunt Gail and Uncle Dave and my Dad could really belt it out. Luckily they all sounded nice, so it was OK.

On the way out of church, Mr. Harris (everyone calls him Zeke, but we've got to call him Mr. Harris) was handing out giant oranges to all the kids. They were the biggest I had ever seen. Zeke is a nice man who always has time for us kids, especially now since dad died. Mom says Zeke knows something about not having a father — that's why. I told Mom that I noticed he had hair in his ears. Mom said, "Why do you notice such yhings, young man?" I just can't help it. After we got the oranges we got a hug from Mrs. Belden and a handshake from Canon Belden. They are just as good as having another set of grandparents, if you ask me. Canon Belden always wears red socks (it's his trademark, I guess) and when he shakes your hand, he squeezes the life out of it. Dad used to say it's because he thinks of me as a young man. That's how men shake hands.

After church, it was back home and off to bed. Julie and I share a room. I really don't mind, you know. It's sort of nice to have someone to whisper with at night, but I'll never tell her that. If we aren't quiet, we'll wake up our baby sister Linda and there would be trouble. It took us awhile, but eventually we fell asleep and morning finally came.

What a morning it was. First, just like we always do, we looked in our stockings. I got some candy, some Matchbox cars, and a whole bunch of caps, the kind you use in toy guns. Julie got a bunch of girl junk and she got a mess of caps too. Neither one of us could figure it out; we didn't have any cap guns. Then it dawned on us.

We tore into our presents like a tornado (that's what Mom called it, anyway) and when we were done we both had great cowboy outfits: boots, hats, shirts, vests, guns ...the whole get-up. We couldn't have been happier. We wore them while we ate our big oranges from the night before and we had some little pastry things too. They were from the bakery truck that comes around to all the houses every week. Cushman's, I think its called. They were delicious, like having dessert for breakfast.

Mom made us take the cowboy stuff off before we went downstairs to Grandma Cranston's. We spent the whole morning and half the afternoon there. People were coming and going. Aunt Louise, who lives here at the funeral home with us, always lets both of us sit on the couch with her and look at magazine pictures. She tells us stories about the pictures that are quite amazing. They don't have much to do with the magazine article, but they're great stories just the same. Aunt Louise is a nurse in Providence and one of the biggest ladies I've ever seen. Not fat, just big; she's taller than some guys' dads. She plays golf a lot and can beat some of the men. I believe it.

Men who worked for my grandfather (he just had died, you know) like Mr. Bowen and Mr. Moffett bring their families by with them. Mr. Moffett has the best penmanship in the world. He does fancy writing for all sorts of people in town, baptism papers and stuff like that. He has a son named Jeff who's one of my best friends. He was pretty impressed with my cowboy outfit. Of course, we opened more presents.

Before long it was time to go off and make the rounds, as my Dad called it. That meant we stopped by at a lot of friend's houses before going on to my other grandparents house that is only just across the street; I guess that's why he called it the rounds. One we stopped at sometimes was Grandma Fletcher's. She's not really my grandma, she's actually Davey Champlin's and Tom Bender's grandma, but she

liked us to call her that so what the heck. My parents and Davey's were close friends since high school and we stopped there in the summer sometimes as well. Actually, my mom says that Mr. Champlin and Dad were detention pals at school. Grandma Cranston would make a noise every time she heard that.

The last stop before we went on to Grandma and Grandpa St.Pierre's house was next door at the Metz-Ross Guest House. Mrs. Metz and Miss Ross are really old ladies (even my Dad said they were old) who run a sort of little hotel in their house. Grandpa St. Pierre says they've been doing it since the time when trains were running in town and that they'll probably outlive us all. Lots of people in town call them spinsters. Now I don't know what a spinster is, but I do know that they are nice ladies and that's good enough for me.

Christmas Day ended, just like always, at Grandma and Grandpa St.Pierre's house. We had another great meal and opened a few more gifts. While Mom and Dad and Grandma sat and talked, Julie and I convinced Grandpa to show us some of his Indian stuff in the basement. His basement was sort of like a museum, I guess. Dad said, "Paul St.Pierre hasn't thrown out one thing he's come across in his entire life." By the look of the basement I would say he was right, but how could anyone be expected to throw out any of that neat stuff.

Before long it was night and it was time to go across the street to the funeral home. Julie and I put on our cowboy stuff instead of our pajamas and before Mom made us take it off, Dad took a picture. I've given it to the Swamptown guy so that he can put it in the newspaper with this story.

The Swamptown guy reminds me of Aunt Louise. He says that this picture is like a time machine that allows him to travel back to a better time when simple things mattered so much.

I told him, "That's silly, it's just a picture of a near-perfect Christmas."

"Exactly!", he said.

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Tim and Julie Cranston weren't too tired after "the best Christmas" they ever had to model their brand new cowboy outfits for their parents.

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

## **A Halloween Tale**

Yes, its me again! That Swamptown guy asked me to write another story; this time about Halloween. I wasn't going to do it, I mean, a guy my age is busy, I've got things to do. But, I figured I better; Mom says "I'm treading on thin ice" after that stunt with the three helium ballons I got from the Warwick Shoppers World grand opening (Why do they call it that? Its not in Warwick.) {site of present-day Ames Plaza} and my sister's Barbie doll. Heck how was I supposed to know it would work so good! I did get it before it ended up in the river behind the Tingley's old field (Now Lantern Lane East). That's got to count for something; Right. Well anyway I'm going to do the story for that guy; hopefully it'll get me some brownie points with mom.

I thought about it a while and then it came to me! There's no better story to tell at Halloween than the one about the haunted house up on the hill behind the Wickford Grammar School. (The present day site of the NK Town Library) I mean it's a true story and everything. Everybody who lives in town knows it's haunted, you can ask any of the guys; they'll tell you. I know its true because Mrs. Mary Thomas told me. She's a really old lady who lives in town and goes to our church. She's the second oldest person I know. Only my great-grandma St. Pierre is older. Great-grandma was born in 1875 and Mrs. Thomas was born in 1876. Last year when Grandpa brought her to church with him she met Mrs. Thomas, and they both started talking about old stuff. They are so old that they even get all weepy when they talk about President Lincoln. They're so old they call Canon Belden 'a nice young man". Well anyway, Mrs. Thomas told me the real story behind all this. It seems when she was real little the old cellar hole (now the present day Sunken Garden) was actually the basement of a big barn owned by someone named Reverend Fischer, this guy's brother-in-law was named Joseph Reynolds. Joseph Reynolds dad was real important and rich and he lived in Wickford. I think he was the Lt. Governor or something. Well anyway, on April 14, 1880 he just snapped or something! This Joseph Reynolds guy just walked into Rev. Fischer's barn, pulled a revolver out of his pocket and shot himself in the head. He fell dead right there in the middle of the barn and the blood just spilled out of him. I know it sounds yeuchy, But hey, that's the way Mrs Thomas told it; honest!

I know what you're thinking, but the story is true. The last time I was at the cemetery (when you grow up in a funeral home you go to the cemetery a lot) I asked the man there to show me Joe Reynolds grave. Its really there and I don't mind saying it gave me the creeps a little bit. Mrs Thomas remembers being a youg girl and walking past the barn on the way from the school to West Main Street and seeing the big stain on the barn floor. She said, no matter how hard they tried they just could never get rid of that stain. All the kids, even way back then, knew it was haunted. It wasn't long after that, that the barn mysteriously burned down. None of the grownups knew what caused it, but the kids did! Mrs Thomas said they knew it was the ghost of Joeseph Reynolds that burned it down. Funny things always happened up there. Why, eventually the house ended up empty. Empty it is except for the ghost!! Again the grownups all say, "Well, I just don't have a clue why no one's ever moved into that old place." They won't say it, but we kids know why; The ghost of Joe Reynolds, what else. Why, just last summer Jimmy and I were up there at our underground fort and we lost track of time. Before we knew it, the street lights were on and it was getting dark. We had to walk right past the haunted house and when we looked up we both saw a pair of eyes staring out the upstairs window. Jimmy's older sister said it was probably a cat. Yeah right, Jimmy and I both knew what it was. It was the ghost, what else!! My grandfather's friend John Ward says that the fire department is going to burn the old place down for practice some day. They're fire men, what do they need practice for? I know why they're gonna burn it down and so does Jimmy. The ghost, what else. Mrs. Thomas says "it doesn't matter what they put up there, Old Joe Reynolds will still come around." I bet she's right.

Well, I gotta go. I'm going over to my friend Peter Crooker's house. He's been on restriction since we accidentally lit his backyard on fire when we were making a lifelike reinactment of a war scene with our models. We never thought it would happen, honest. We just stood there kind of in shock and watched it burn. Luckily Peter snapped out of it and said "I better go get the hose!" and we put it out. When Pete's mom got home, boy was she mad. Peter didn't know what to say for a minute, then he comes up with the genius idea of, "I think that the sun did it." No wonder he's on restriction.

Printed in the North East Independent 10/31/02

## The Origins of Some Well Known Words & Phrases

The study of the origins of some of our well-used phrases and expressions can be much more fascinating than you might think. Many of these time-tested idioms have their roots in the experiences of colonial days similar to what occurred here, in our fair town, as the 17<sup>th</sup> century drew to a close. This is not an exact science, by any means, but these explanations sound plausible to me. Let me know what you think? This being the time when folks traditionally think about getting married, let's start with the tradition of the June wedding.

Back in the 1600's when North Kingstown was first being settled, most folks decided to get married in June because they had taken their yearly bath in May and still smelled fairly palatable by the time June wore around. In spite of this fact, though, they were starting to smell a bit, so the **bride** generally carried a **bouquet** of fragrant flowers to hide the pungent nature of a person who hadn't seen a tub in a month or so.

Baths, back then, consisted of a big tub filled with hot water, laboriously warmed at the fire kettle-full by kettle-full. The man of the house had the privilege of the nice clean water, then all the other adult sons, then the women-folk and finally the children and babies. By then the water was so murky you could actually lose someone in it. Hence the saying, "**Don't throw the baby out with the bath water.**"

Houses back then often had thatched roofs; thick straw piled high on a loose framework of branches underneath. It was a prime place for animals to get warm in the winter, so all the dogs, cats, and other small animals (rodents and insects included) lived in the roof. When it rained it became slick and wet up there and many of the little critters would fall off the roof. You had to take care as you stepped out the door into the downpour worried that "Fido" might land on your head as you walked out the door. This condition was described as "**raining cats and dogs**".

The open thatched roof was the cause of other problems as well. There was nothing to stop things from falling into your humble home. This was truly problematic in the bedroom, where bugs, loose straw, and various "droppings" could really mess up your clean bed. Having a bed with big posts and a sheet hung over the top afforded some much appreciated protection. That's how **canopy beds** came into existence.

Your bedroom floor, not to mention all the rest, was probably composed of nothing but dirt. Only the truly wealthy had anything other than a dirt floor. The rest of the common folk were, therefore known as "**dirt poor**". The floor would obviously get pretty messy during the rainy and snowy seasons of the year. To help alleviate this problem, folks would spread the thresh (wheat sheaves after the grains were threshed out) on the floor to absorb the moisture and aid in keeping their footing. As the winter wore on more thresh was added. When the door was opened often the thresh would slip or blow outside. This required the labor of adding still more thresh on the floor. Eventually someone came up with the idea of placing a raised board in the door to keep the thresh in. This "**threshold**" made everyone's life a little easier.

In those olden days, they cooked in the kitchen with a great kettle that always hung by the fire. Food was scarce and all leftovers were generally added to the pot. Each day the kettle of food was added to and changed a little to add a modicum of variety, but still, sometimes food, known as a stew or porridge, would be in there for quite a time. It was around this fact that the children's rhyme "**Peas porridge hot, peas porridge cold, peas porridge in the pot nine days old**" was created.

Sometimes, towards the end of the winter when their own foodstocks were quite low, a family could obtain a piece of salted pork, which would rightly make them feel pretty special. When a visitor came a calling they would hang up this bacon to, sort of, show off. It was a sign of wealth when a man could "**bring home the bacon**". They would often cut off a chunk of this highly cured meat to share with these special guests. Then they would all sit around and "**chew the fat**".

Those folks with money had real plates made of pewter. Sadly, unbeknownst to them,

food with high acid content would react with the plates and leach some lead out of them. This often caused lead poisoning and even death. This happened most often with tomatoes. So for many centuries' folks thought that it was the tomatoes that were poisoning them and refused to eat them. The vast majority of folks back then didn't have much in the way of silverware. They would supplement this shortage by using a hollowed out piece of wood or even stale bread, which was called a trencher. Favorite trenchers were often kept for quite a time and weren't washed out as thoroughly as you might think. Sometimes after eating with an old wooden or bread trencher one might get an infection which was known by all as "**trench mouth**". Bread was an important commodity and was divided up according to status. Indentured servants, slaves, and the like got the often burnt bottom of the loaf, the family got the middle, and guests, if any, got the top, or "**upper crust**".

Pewter cups were often used to drink ale or whiskey. The combination of the lead leachate and the liquor often knocked a reveler out for days. Someone coming upon such a poor soul might easily take him for dead and begin to bury the poor soul. Folks were often laid out on a table, as the family would gather round to see if they might come to, or wake. This is thought to be the origin of holding a "wake".

Sometimes, in spite of all this, a poor soul occasionally got buried before their time. Back in jolly old England, where most of the local colonists came from, graveyard space was at a premium and the somewhat gruesome custom of reusing graves was in practice. As some of the coffins were being exhumed, gravediggers were finding clear evidence of scratch marks on the inner lids. This horrible realization caused many of the more wealthy in England and back in the colonies to insist upon having a string installed in their coffin which led through the ground and up to the surface where it attached to a bell. Some one would be hired to sit all night in the cemetery on the "**grave yard shift**" and listen for the first night after a burial for the sound of that bell ringing. Thus, someone could be "**saved by the bell**" for real. This lucky soul was from then on, known as a "**dead ringer**". This certainly goes a long way towards dispelling that old high school myth that "History is so boring."

Printed in the North East Independent 6/27/02

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

## **Reflections on Negro Cloth, North Kingstown, and Slavery**

Lately, I've been spending some time pondering the institution of slavery; my ancestor's connection to it, and the part our fair town played in it. I've known for some time, that a large portion of my Newport, RI ancestors owned household slaves. It's easy enough to rationalize it away, to say to yourself, "All wealthy and prominent Rhode Islanders of the 1600 and 1700's owned household slaves. They weren't doing anything wrong in the context of the times." Or, you can rationalize it away by taking into consideration the relative scale of your ancestor's transgressions. "Thomas Jefferson owned a multitude of slaves, and he is considered to be a great man, your relations only had a few, maybe a dozen at the most so how can they be any worse than a man like Jefferson." But, I'm unwilling to let myself off the hook that easily. The fact of the matter is, that the man for whom Cranston, RI is named after is no better or worse than the man for whom Jefferson, Missouri has been named after. A slave owner is a slave owner, the scale of the transgression makes no difference. So it's always out there, like the ache you experience from an old injury, it doesn't stop you from living your life, but you feel it just the same.

Our fair town's part in the institution of slavery is a little more complicated, but equally troubling. To start with, as you may or may not know, the colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations was the undisputed champion of slaving within colonial America. And although the total numbers pale into insignificance compared to the vast scale of the slaving operations controlled by British and European interests, the hundreds of thousands of souls brought to the New World on Rhode Island owned merchant ships is something that we all must deal with in our own ways. North Kingstown's part in this aspect of slaving is, in turn, insignificant compared with RI's big three of slaving; Bristol, Newport, and Warren. There was only one slave trader who called North Kingstown home and his dealings were nothing like the massive operations run by people like the DeWolfe family of Bristol; the undisputed kings of RI slaving.

However, Gilbert Updike, of Smith's Castle fame, did turn a pretty penny with his slaving ventures on the 100-ton ship "Mary" captained by George Lawton. He, like all the other RI slavers, loaded up his ship with RI rum purchased in Newport and Providence, sent it off to the west coast of Africa where the rum was traded or sold for slaves which would then be loaded on his ship and sailed off to either a Caribbean or southern US port where the slaves would be sold and molasses would be purchased. The molasses was then brought back to RI where it was made back into rum. This is the basis for the infamous triangle trade of which you may or may not have heard. Each leg of the journey brought an opportunity for profit as slaves, rum, and, molasses were traded like the commodities they were at that time. Sort of the colonial version of money laundering and commodity trading all rolled up into one painfully human tragedy.

A more common North Kingstown connection to this slave trade was the fact that the town was a fairly important source of crew members for the merchant ships involved in this sorted business. A scholarly search of the available crew manifests turns up many names that have a North Kingstown "ring" to them. In a painfully ironic coincidence it has come to my attention that a name which has already graced one of my favorite columns has turned up on these lists. It seems that Nathaniel Gardiner, a young man who until he reached the age of majority, was known around 19th century Wickford as Nathaniel Onion met his end on a slaving ship off the coast of Zanzibar. He was buried at sea and never again saw his cousin Thankful Union of whom I wrote last year. I'm sure that the idea of a free black man working on a slaving ship seems as amazing to all of you readers as it did to me when I first discovered it. But it turns out that it was not altogether that uncommon. I guess work was work no matter how distasteful. Whatever the case it was work done for many years by many North Kingstownites, both white and black alike.

All this aside, our town's, as well as our sister community South Kingstown's, greatest connection to the institution of slavery was not made by ships or the men that sailed them or financed them. It was, surprisingly enough made by the countless souls who worked in the fabric mills owned by the scions of the region, the Hazards and the Rodmans. You see, these giants of local industry made their fortunes within a niche of

the fabric trade known as Negro Goods. Negro Goods was the general name given to a whole class of fabric made specifically for the southern slave-owning market. The most well-known of these has been given the sanitized name of Negro Cloth, but the sad fact of the matter is that it was really known universally as nigger cloth. I must say that I cringe as I type this even though the word is used in its historical context, it still pains me to concretely acknowledge the facts of the matter. Negro cloth was made from a combination of hemp (the material used to make twine, rope, and burlap) and coarse cotton or wool. It was the lowest quality material that any mill ever made. It was cheap to produce and had the added benefit of being a profitable place to dispose of all unsuitable yarn and mill waste material. It had to be uncomfortable to wear. It was amazingly profitable and there was a ready market for as much as could be turned out by the mills of southern RI. Other Negro Goods turned out by local mills included: Osnaburg - a coarse cotton wool product one step up from Negro cloth, Linsey-Woolsey - a linen wool combination which was also of a coarse quality, Nankeen - a slightly better quality plain woven yellowish cotton cloth named after Nanking province in China where it was first made, and, the cream of the crop used for "Sunday-to-Meeting clothes, calico - a coarse, but printed all-cotton fabric.

So, you see, the mortar that holds the underpinnings of the villages of Peacedale and Lafayette together is comprised of Negro Cloth. The same Negro cloth that was stretched across the backs of countless slaves as they labored endlessly in the fields of the southern United States. It's a fact loyal readers, one that we all must confront. Again, it would be easy to rationalize it away. "The Rodmans and the Hazards were just responding to a market need. Negro cloth is as American as free enterprise and apple pie." But this particular swamp yankee can't quite swallow that line of logic and I hope that the rest of North and South Kingstown can't either.

Correction: In a recent column about "Doc" Young I misnamed the lovable old coot. (Gosh, I hate it when I screw up.) Doc's name was Elwin Edgar Young, I unfortunately assumed that he was named after an apothecary predecessor who was named Eliphelet. I apologize for my error.

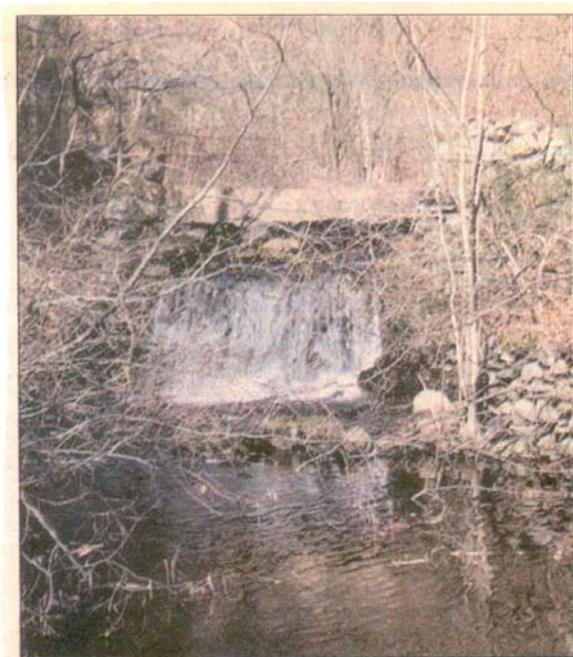
I'll close this week's column by letting all interested parties know that the collection of "The View From Swamptown Vol. 1 & 2" can now be purchased at Eamshaw's Drug in the village of Wickford.

Printed in the North East Independent 12/06/01

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

## The 2002 Five Most Endangered Historic Sites

That's right loyal readers, it is that time of the year again. Time to take a gander at this swamp yankee's choices for our fair town's most at risk historic places. This year, we've got one returning site plus four new choices. So let's all get a good case of righteous indignation going and let the powers-that-be know that we aren't going to stand for the destruction and/or appropriation of North Kingstown's history. I only hope I can raise your hackles a little.



The Scrabbletown Brook rolls over the old mill pond dam.

Coming in at number five this year is the Scrabbletown Brook and Mill site at the sadly truncated western piece of Pleasant Valley Road just off of Stony Lane after it passes under Route 4. Both the town's of North Kingstown and East Greenwich are under pressure from a developer who wants to construct yet another upscale neighborhood (we don't have enough of those in these two town's yet?) on the large parcel of land that straddles the border at this location. The main entry to the development would pass right through this bucolic location and more than likely compromise it. What you say; you thought this scenic vista was protected by its designation as National Historic Register site. Well, although true to a certain extent, the unfortunately toothless designation only protects a site from being compromised by a project that involves federal dollars. So all that work, some twenty-five years ago, to save the site from the scourge of the Route 4 extension project may go for naught, if the developers have their way. As Henry Ward Beecher was quoted to have said, The folks who lived on lands such as this "committed burglary upon nature to eke a living out of its

soil". Those long dead souls deserve better than this. Get on the phone residents of N.K. and E. G. and let your town council members know what you think of this one.

Number four on the list is what was once the Annaquatucket Reservoir off of Annaquatucket Road just past the High School. This back-up holding pond was constructed in the middle 1800's to assure a continuous supply of water to the nearby mill during dry times. Who knows how many men Messrs. Sanford and Vaughn employed to construct the earthen wall that held back the waters for 150 years. Sadly, that unmonitored and unmaintained earthworks was breached a couple of years back and has not yet been repaired. This site served double duty as not only a place chock full of history, but also one of the town's most popular passive recreational areas. It has delighted not only little boys who grew up to be ornery columnists, but little boys who grew up to be cantankerous town council presidents as well. It is now a sad mud hole held hostage by lawyers and the like. Step up to the plate town council and repair the dam. The finger pointing and legal shenanigans are only aiding the developers who are (call me cynical if you will) patiently waiting for the pond to dry up completely so they can slap up four more homes. Speak up on this one N.K.

At number three is the circa 1786 Immanuel Case House on Main Street in the "Olde Quaint and Historic", as I like to call Wickford. Just twenty-five years ago this impressive double-chimneyed Georgian styled home was a showcase for appropriate historic restoration. The last quarter century has been hard on the old home. It too, is tangled in a legal morass that threatens to engulf it. A sad fate for a home that was selected by the US government in 1934 as a representative home for the Historic American Building Survey.

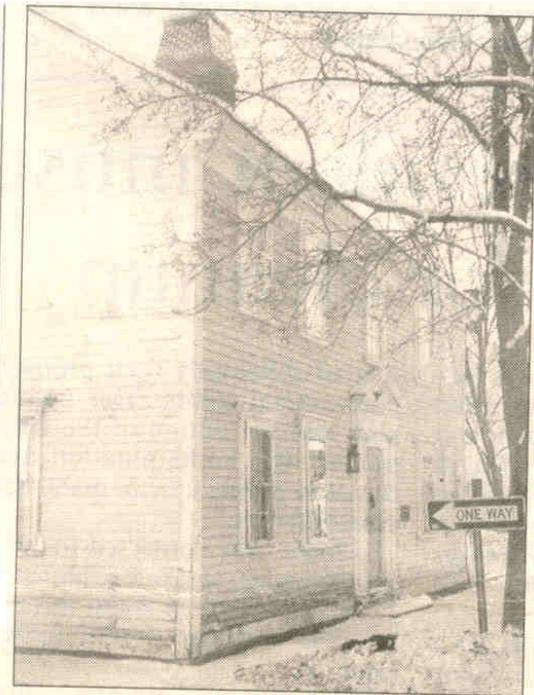
Number two on our list is our returning entry The Allen-Madison House on the grounds of Quonset/Davisville. We've often spoken of this great home so I won't ramble on over her history. She's still in the clutches of EDC, who, sadly despite their pronouncements only appear to be paying lip service to historic preservation. Knock the old girl down and put up a nice shiny corrugated metal warehouse; right guys. Not on my watch you won't.

If there was ever a subject deserving of an angry phone call, this is it. Give them a call and tell them Rhode Island's heritage matters. I'll continue to keep you updated on the fate of this one.

Finally, at number one on the list of most endangered historic sites, is the mother of them all; the Narragansett Bay herself. Again the good folks over at EDC hold the key to the bay's future. At least they think they do. Of course, the folks who wanted to build an oil refinery on the northern end of Jamestown in the early 1960's, or a nuclear power plant at Rome Point later in that decade, or a garbage incinerator on the base in the 1980's, or a prison at that same location in the 1990's, thought the same thing, and none of those albatrosses ever ended up hanging around the collective necks of the residents of South County did they. Again we are called to action; this is the year that will make the difference. Don't sit idly by and let someone else take up this banner North Kingstown! Almost exactly three hundred years ago my ancestor Governor Samuel Cranston thwarted the ultimate land grab, which was being carried out by the colonial governors of Connecticut and Massachusetts. They had got together and decided they'd try to convince the crown that the colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations ought to be disbanded and the land divided up between their two respective colonies. Cranston knew what they were after. It was the bay not the land which enthralled them. He knew then that the Narragansett Bay was the heart and soul of the colony; just as it is now the heart and soul of the state. He took action and beat the other colonies to the punch, getting Rhode Island's Charter reaffirmed before the Massachusetts and Connecticut delegations arrived in London. Now we find our own Governor ready to literally disembowel the Bay. Don't let anyone tell you that cutting a fifty three foot deep swath through the bay's heart and then piloting giant ships with invasive species clinging to their sides and lurking in their bilge water up that swath won't do any harm. Guess again Governor Almond. Let me close with this thought. In my other life I have worked for over twenty years in marine related industries. It's a risky way to make a living, you're always at the mercy of the sea, as well as the economy. Knowing what I know, I'm certain that no one in their right mind within that industry is as taken by this "pie-in-the sky" "If we build it they will come" mentality that

seems to have clouded the minds of our Governor and his EDC friends. Stand firm Rhode Island and count me in on the battle.

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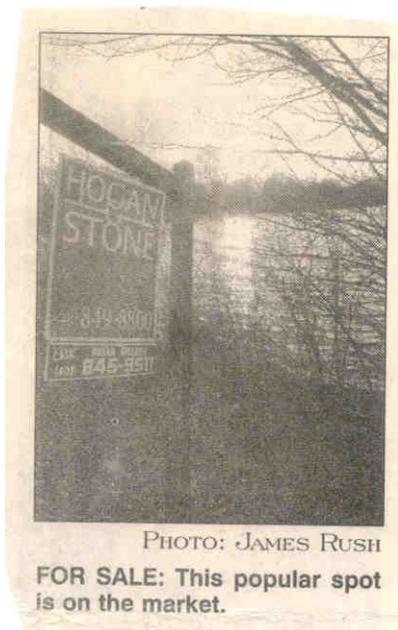
### *Correction*

A photo that accompanied last week's column pictured the Jabez Bullock House, built in 1825, on Main Street in Wickford, not the "pink house" at the corner of Gold and Main streets (pictured above) whose condition was described in the column. The Independent regrets the error.

The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston

## The Five Most Endangered Historic Sites For 2003

Well, here we are again loyal readers; its time to take another gander at this cantankerous old Swamp Yankee's choices for our fair town's most at risk historic places. This year we have got two returning sites plus three new selections; so, crank your righteous indignation up a notch or two, pick up the phone or put together an E-mail, and let the "powers-that-be" know that here in North Kingstown we just aren't going to stand for this.



Coming in at Number 5 we've got an unusual choice. Perhaps some of you, like me, have noticed the peculiar "For Sale" sign perched at the intersection of Annaquatucket and Boston Neck Roads. Being born nosey, I just had to find out what this could possibly be all about. Well, it seems that the Hamilton Mill Pond as well as the site of the old Annaquatucket Mill on Featherbed Lane are up for sale. Talk about history on the auction block, there could be no clearer example. Maybe the next time you stop with your young children to visit the swans and ducks that populate this, one of our fair town's most

scenic vistas, you'll find a fence or a "No Trespassing" sign. Or perhaps the next time you stop on Featherbed Lane to contemplate the old mill site and enjoy the water as it falls over the ancient dam, someone will tell you to move along. Something ought to be done about this one, don't you think?

Number 4 on our list is a building that's been in the news of late. The former Belleville School, built in 1888 by local builders, the Sherman Brothers, has now finished the second chapter in its long life. No longer needed as the Town's Highway Garage, the building sits empty awaiting its next assignment in service of

the local community. Recent events cause me to feel cautiously hopeful about this classic building's future. We must all keep our fingers crossed and hope that RI Historic Preservation buys into the Town Council's recently announced plans (My hat is off to you good folks for having this type of vision) . With diligence, perseverance and a little bit of luck, perhaps this building, described at its opening 115 years ago as "a gem of architecture that adds much to the village of Belleville" will again contribute to its community.

At number 3 on this list is one of our returning sites, the circa 1786 Immanuel Case House on Main Street in "Ye Olde Quaint & Historic". I expect everyone is familiar with the story of "the pink house" (as she is often named) so I won't belabor it here. Bravo again to the Town Fathers who finally said "enough is enough" and tried to get the owners to do the right thing by this classic double chimneyed Georgian styled home. Unfortunately though, all that really got fixed was the fence, so the home must spend another long hard winter waiting for much needed repairs. Lets not let our guard down on this home, she'll slip into a ruinous state if things are let go too much longer.

This, appropriately brings us to number two on the list. Sadly this site has been a part of this ignominious tally every year that I've made one. The Allen/Madison House out in Davisville is now, in my opinion, at a crisis point. If something is not done soon, this important historic site will join the long list of places that exist only on postcards and in the memories of folks like me. Where's the righteous indignation North Kingstown? Do we really want one of the region's only Revolutionary War sites to house a corrugated metal warehouse? EDC has had its way to long, get on the phone and let them know how you feel. Remember, future Governor Carcieri, this is an outrage going on right in your backyard and in the home town of much of your leadership staff. Stopping the container port was only half the battle. Getting this industrial park on the right track is the natural next step, and the Allen/Madison House deserves a place in that future.

This brings us to the number 1 site on the 2003 list of North Kingstown's most endangered historic sites. The Franklin Rodman House on Ten Rod Road is, at this point, sadly a white elephant of sorts. It's really much too large to exist as a single family home and is sitting on a lot which, under present zoning, is much too small to support the type of development which might save it. On top of all this, it has that tumor of a brick addition stuck on the front of it, hiding the natural graceful lines given to it by the Westerly RI architectural firm of Maxon and Co back in 1882. The village of Lafayette would be significantly diminished by its demolition. It belongs there, next to the other three Rodman Mansions, and has its own important story to tell. Its going to take both a developer or owner with real vision, and a town government with imagination and steadfast desire to save this grand home. Don't sit silently by and allow Franklin Rodman's mansion house to suffer the fate of so many similar edifices. One just has to look next door at the Walter Rodman home to see all the possibilities.

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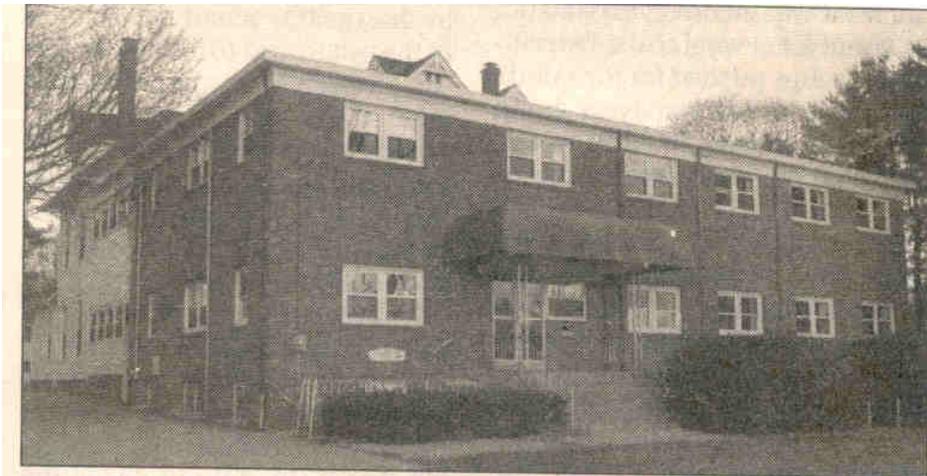
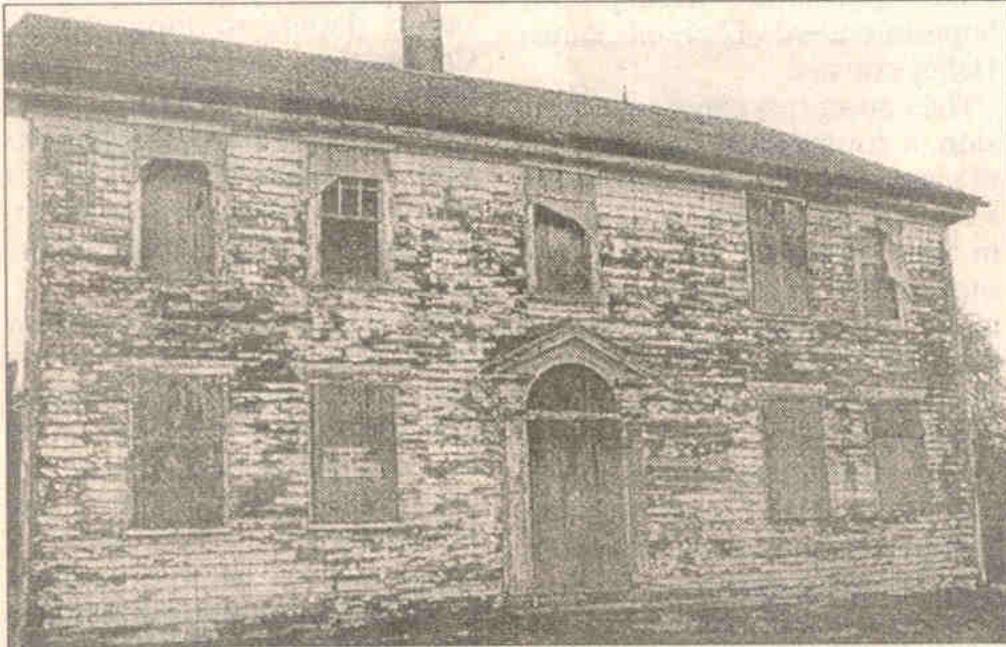


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

**ON THE MARKET:** The former Lafayette Nursing Home on Ten Rod Road could be restored to the glory its sister mansions enjoy.



**FATE UP IN THE AIR:** The Allen/Madison house in the Quonset Davisville Port and Commerce Park has languished despite the Friends group's efforts to preserve it.

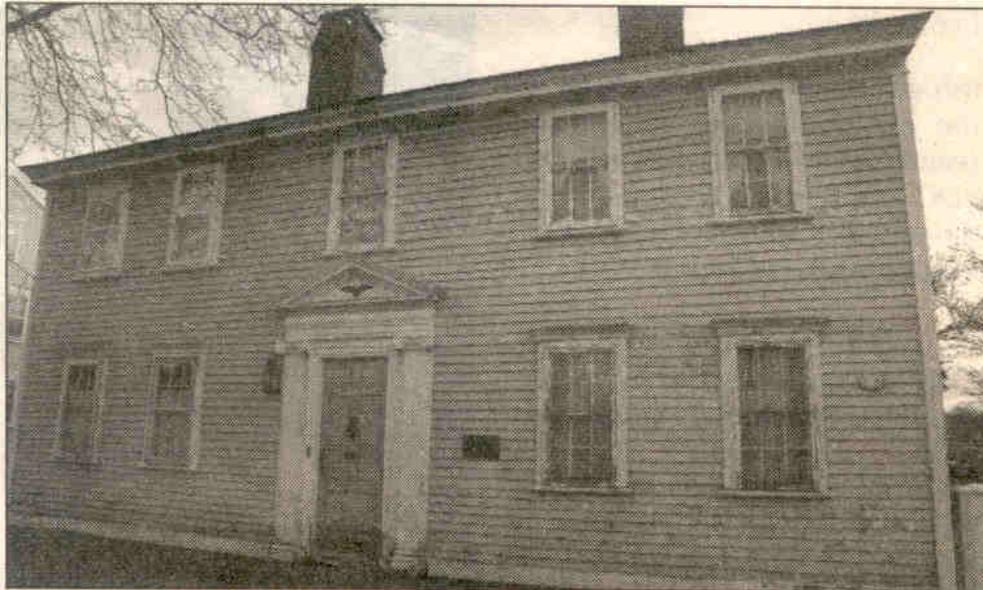


PHOTO: JAMES RUSH

**NEEDS IMPROVEMENTS:** The town is demanding owners of this Wickford property, known as "the pink house," submit their schedule for making repairs.

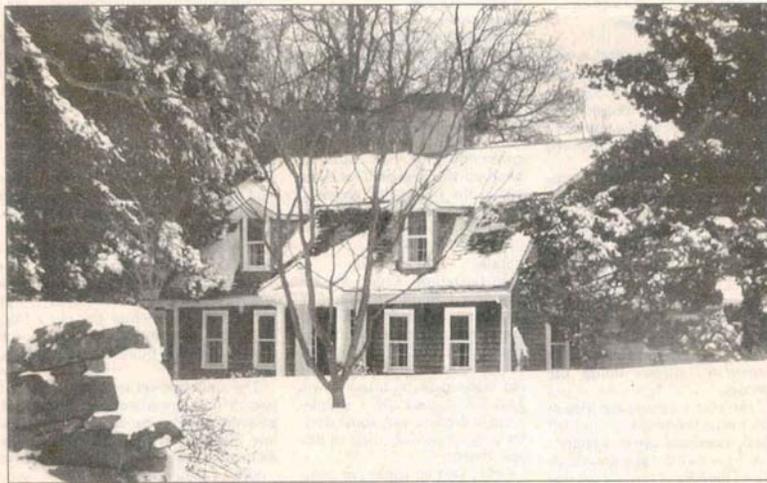
**The View From Swamptown by G. Timothy Cranston**

## **A Preservation Project Update**

The snow is deep out here in Swamptown as it is all over our fair town. This week, lets take a gander at the progress of a couple of on-going preservation activities in North Kingstown. Something to ponder as you curl up in front of a warm fireplace during this very "traditionally" cold and snowy winter.

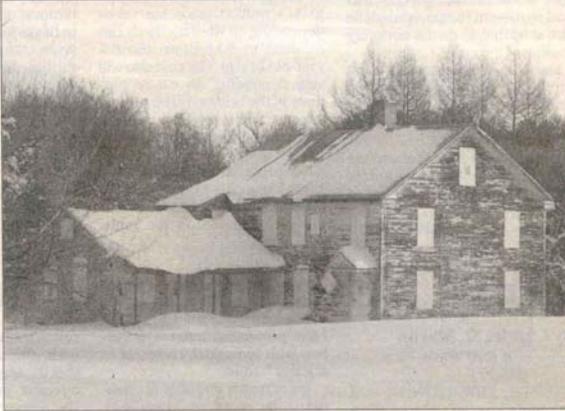
First on the preservation project update list is our old friend, the Allen-Madison House, now stuck, both literally and figuratively, in the deep freeze out on the Economic Development Corporation's Quonset/Davisville Industrial Park. Sadly, I must report that not too much has changed in regards to the immediate future of this grand old farmhouse. The EDC is now, not only mired in negotiations with the Friends Of The Allen-Madison House and the Town of North Kingstown over the National Register building, but with the RI Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission as well. Rick Greenwood, an official of that State watchdog organization, has come to the conclusion that EDC is in violation of their agreement in regards to the house and is attempting to help them to see the light, to correct the error of their ways. Good luck, Rick. I expect it would be easier to get a backwoods Swamp Yankee to trade in his hunting dog for a Pekinese, than to teach that old dog a new trick. Speaking of The Friends of The Allen-Madison House, they haven't given up yet. They're still hopefully about a collaboration with the Saratoga Foundation whereby the house becomes the home base for those folks and is saved from certain demolition or collapse. They are also planning a "Descendants Day" sometime in the spring. This will be an opportunity for anyone interested in the old house or descended from any former residents to get together and rally behind her. More on that as it gets closer. They are always looking for enthusiastic volunteers in this noble fight and can be reached at either 294-3392 or 294-4128.

Next on the list is my old friend the Ezekial Gardiner House which spent nearly 300 years on farmland now consumed by the ever-sprawling Quail Hollow development. The gambrel-roofed farmhouse was deemed "not in the character of Quail Hollow" and was



PHOTOS: JAMES RUSH

Wondering what the Ezekial Gardiner House, now disassembled and awaiting a new owner, might look like if properly rebuilt? This gambrel-roofed Gardiner farmhouse, at the corner of Pendar and Shermantown roads, is nearly identical. The fate of the Allen-Madison House, at right, in the Quonset Davisville Port and Commerce Park is stalled as a friends group and the R.I. Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission try to work with the R.I. Economic Development Corp. for its protection and reuse.



marked for destruction, and would have gone had it not been for the intercession of Robin Porter. Mr. Porter was able to obtain permission to have the ancient farmhouse disassembled and stored, and that's where it still sits. Efforts to find an in-town site for the house's reconstruction have, so far, been fruitless; although many offers to take her out of state have been fielded. Somewhere out there is a person with the vision to see that this wonderful old home has great potential and

belongs here in town. I challenge our local contractors and developers to take a chance on this important Nationally Listed home. She would make a stunning centerpiece to an appropriately planned development. I expect that the aforementioned RI Historic Preservation folks would be willing to help out as well. If anyone would like an idea of what a properly restored Ezekial Gardiner House might look like; they need look no farther than just down the road where she once stood. Right at the intersection of Shermantown and Pendar Roads sits another gambrel-roofed Gardiner farmhouse which is nearly identical to Old Judge Gardiner's. If you're even remotely interested contact me at the paper.

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

## **A Kid Loves His Dog**

December 8, 1975 was a sad day for kids and dogs all across our fair town. For it was on this day that a new amendment to the three year old "town leash law" went into effect giving it the financial teeth necessary to make moms and dads from Saunderstown, Wickford, Slocum, North Quiddnessett and every point in between sit up and take notice. With the addition of a sliding system of fines which began at \$25 and marched inexorably up to a then staggering \$100; virtually every dog in town was tied up or left inside. Without completely realizing it, we baby boomers were witnesses to and participants in the end of an era.

Before that day, the sight of a dog and a child or a group of children cavorting around town was as common as a sunny summer day. A kid could count on few things during those turbulent times that existed between "duck and cover" drills in Grammar School and Viet Nam war scenes on the local news; one of those was his dog. Your dog didn't care how dirty you got, your dog never refused to follow you into a forbidding briar patch in search of adventure, he never gave you a "look" when you ignored the oft spoken rule of "Hold that ice cream cone level or you're likely to lose it!" Heck he relished the chance to clean up the sidewalk for you. Your dog would protect and defend you and offer you the one thing that every kid needed, no matter how tough he or she pretended to be; unconditional love and devotion. And for the most part we kids, as kids always have and always will, returned the favor. Heck, a kid loves his dog! Its just that simple.

This week we are going to take a short walk down memory lane and peek at the life of two of the dogs of this era. Two dogs who, believe it or not, are still remembered fondly by many folks in town. The first was always known during the late 1950's and early 1960's, as the unofficial "Mayor of Wickford" and may be the only dog to have a real obituary printed in the local paper to memorialize his passing. The second, who lived a decade later, became the unofficial mascot and ruling canine of the North Kingstown High School campus. He eventually hit the big time when he was forever memorialized

on the frontpiece of the 1975 high school yearbook.

Champion Jonathon Edmond, as he was officially labelled by the AKC, was born in Brattleboro Vt., in the early 1950's. He was somewhat of a cosmopolitan canine, as he spent his youth living on Park Ave. in New York City before permanently settling here in "Ye Olde Quaint and Historic" in 1956. He was the guardian of the Alexander Grant family of 24 Washington Street in the village and by virtue of his worldliness and gregarious nature was quickly adopted by all he came in contact with. A day in Jonathon's life went something like this: Get up and eat. Go outside and run around Wickford visiting with your many friends. Stop at Diner - beg for food, go to Ryan's Market — coerce Dave Ryan into giving out a bone, saunter over to Grammar School and clean up after messy lunch-eating children, find a cool spot in one of the school hallways to nap, Repeat process on the way back to 24 Washington Street. In this way, Jonathon ruled his village. He was an equal opportunity affection giver; no child was too young, no senior was too old to warrant his attention. As dogs do, he cared with an unbridled energy (a relative term when you are dealing with Bassett Hounds) for all. I, like all first graders he came in contact with, happily shared my bologna sandwich with him when asked. He passed out of this world on March 26, 1965 and was forever memorialized with an obituary in the local paper on April 1'.

Our second famous pooch had a mysterious past. He was a stray as a young pup and just showed up out of the blue one day in the summer of 1970. The 13 year old boy he decided to adopt had no clue what his name might be and took to just calling him "Dog". This seemed to suit our hero and the name stuck. Soon Dog was a local fixture, never leaving his charge's side. Many folks often commented on Dog's unusual habit of walking every step of the way with his boy as he mowed the many lawns that provided him with a portion of their joint spending money. Dog would never leave his side, following up and down each and every row as it was mowed. Dog was also unswaying in his decision to go to high school with his boy. As a matter of fact, Dog seemingly loved high school more than all the other students combined. He took it as his duty to eat anything not wanted by the many students he also adopted. He was obviously a frugal canine who hated to see anything go to waste. He eventually had a diet which

was unsuitable for all, with the exception of dogs and a select group of high school and college students. Jonathon would have been proud. By virtue of his adoptive home's proximity to the High School, Dog attended nearly every event over the course of the next four years. Even when his boy chose to stay home, Dog fulfilled his self-appointed duty and attended all functions. His unwavering devotion to his duty continued right up until the spring of 1975. When those yearbooks came out, Dog took it in stride, heck he had been in other yearbooks! His human friends, none-the-less, were impressed, and although Dog did not take part in the annual yearbook signing ritual, he congratulated each and every one of the graduates in his own way. He was proud of his friends.

Dog was quite confused soon after the start of the next school year when it became apparent he was not going to be allowed out of the yard anymore. I know, because I was the lucky boy adopted by that champion mutt. All across town, the same type of thing was happening; dogs and kids, not knowing how to adjust to the new order of things, were at a loss. Yeah sure, life went on; kids still had adventures, got dirty, lost the ice cream off their cones, and forgot to come home when the street lights came on. But they did it all without the reassuring company of their dogs. Something changed on that December day in 1975; by arming the leash law with financial teeth, North Kingstown joined much of the rest of New England and signaled its desire to leave that small town "Mayberry RFD" world behind. Some might call that progress but this Swamp Yankee will take the days of Jonathon and Dog any time.

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