

The Chronicle

Weston Historical Society

Fall 2012

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150 YEARS EMANCIPATION

By Cathryn Prince

There were 21 Westonites who fought and died during the Civil War. Ultimately the war ended slavery and preserved the Union.



Civil War Tombstone

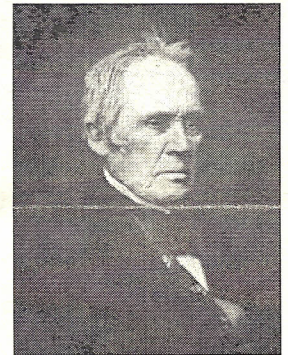
This year commemorates the 150th Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. It's an occasion that calls for a closer look at Connecticut's role in slavery and the Civil War. In 1774, the state had 5100 slaves, according to the US Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States.

Connecticut remained a slave state until it formally abolished slavery in 1848. For its own part the Connecticut Legislature rejected state-level emancipation bills in 1777, 1779 and 1780. In 1784 the Legislature passed a bill allowing for the gradual emancipation of slaves. As such the Nutmeg State was the last New England state to become slave free.

Why the slow release of slaves? Those who favored emancipation argued that while slavery was immoral, it damaged the character of slaves causing them to lose the capacity for self-government.

Throughout Fairfield, ministers, lawyers and public officials owned slaves. The Silliman family of Fairfield illustrates the town and state's changing attitudes toward slavery and emancipation. General Gold Selleck Silliman, a Revolutionary War hero, owned

slaves. His son, celebrated Yale professor Benjamin Silliman, freed the family's two remaining slaves. Silliman became an ardent abolitionist and sent Sharp's Rifles to Connecticut troops fighting Bloody Kansas in 1856. Silliman and Weston are linked because of the 1807 Weston Fall: the first recorded meteor in the United States.



Benjamin Silliman

And yet, Connecticut gave rise to abolitionists and those who helped slaves reach freedom along the Underground Railroad. Although the secrecy of sites makes it difficult to fully document which homes and buildings were used in the Underground Railroad it's believed there was a stop on Ladder Hill Road.



Abraham Lincoln reading the Emancipation Proclamation

ELECTION DAY CAKE

By Cathryn Prince

In New England, at a time when holidays were few and far between, people looked forward to Election Day with anticipatory glee. They were excited not only because they wanted to cast their vote, but also because Election Day was actually a three-day affair filled with militia training, parades, religious ceremonies, balls and cake. Yes, cake.



Election Day Cake, sometimes called Hartford Election Cake, was a staple item of the day (which used to be held in May). Similar to English fruit-cake, the cake was chock full of

molasses, spices, raisins and currents. It was so dense and rich people ate cake for days after-wards.

Various books and articles tell the story of the cake, which was usually baked in a Bundt form.

“Election Day was Connecticut’s one great holiday in colonial times and was looked forward to by young and old for months before it occurred. The busy housewife took time from her round of soap and candle making, weaving and spinning and knitting to heat the brick with unusual care, and to bake therein the delicious Election Cake...” 1902 History of the 1st Co. Governor Foot Guard.

According to J. Hammond Trumbell, a Connecticut historian, “..Election Day (the first Thursday in May), the reddest letter in our calendar, brightened the whole year. Good housekeepers were expected to have finished their spring cleaning long before... ‘lection cake was rising.”

One of the, if not the first, recipes comes from Amelia Simmons, considered America’s first cookbook author. It takes about three hours and 30 minutes. Her recipe appeared in her 1796 cookbook *American Cookery*:

Thirty quarts of flour
10 pound butter
14 pound sugar
12 pound raisins
3 doz eggs
one pint wine
one quart brandy
4 ounces cinnamon
4 ounces fine colander (as written,
probably coriander) seed
3 ounces ground allspice

Wet flour with milk to the consistence of bread over night, adding one quart yeast; the next morning work the butter and sugar together for half an hour, which will render the cake much lighter and whiter; when it has “rise light” work in every other ingredient except the plumbs, which work in when going into the oven.

ELECTION CAKE

Interestingly the state sometimes paid for the cost of the cake as noted in the history of the foot guard. In this book one notes that Ezekiel Williams, Esq. submitted a bill for making cake “for the election.”

EAGLE SCOUT - CHASE TROXELL

From *Weston Forum*

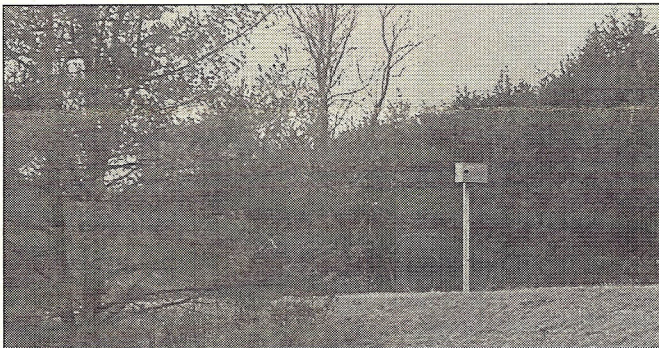
This past year we have been happily accepting ideas for Eagle Scout projects for our local Boy Scout troops. We have three projects underway, two completed and one to finish. How lucky we are to be the recipients of such enthusiasm and talents from these young men.

The following is an article by Chase Troxell who chose to make owl and bat houses for the Coley Homestead

as his project. His article which ran in a recent edition of the Weston Forum, reads as follows:

The Weston Historical Society, an organization devoted to the conservation of Weston's cultural and agricultural history, has recently launched an initiative to support sustainable, natural gardening on their Coley Farmstead. The project involves the creation of a working garden utilizing agricultural methods from the 17th and 18th centuries. In their effort to recreate a historical farm site, however, they've reached an impasse.

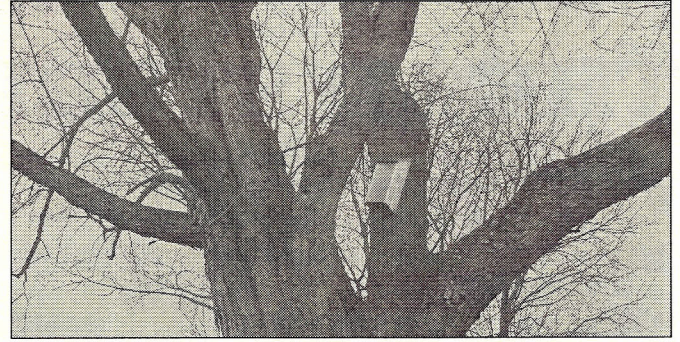
How can the Society control the insects and rodents that eat through the vegetables and nest in the barns without using modern pesticides? The Society has deliberately avoided contemporary methods (poisons) in order to achieve historical accuracy and to reduce risks to the environment and neighboring wildlife. This fall, The Society has enlisted the help of wild birds to solve the problem by installing owl and bat houses on the Coley property. These structures, though man made, provide a green effective, and natural form of pest control for the Historical Society, using methods that reflect the historical time period.



Owl house

The owl houses provide a home for a family of owls and proximity to enough prey to sustain themselves. A family of barn owls, which primarily preys upon mice, voles, and chipmunks, can consume two to three thousand rodents per year. The boxes are also used as nesting spaces for pairs of owls to raise their young, which typically number between five and eight per year.

The bat boxes provide a home for bats, which, contrary to the social stigma, are docile, useful creatures (even though many find them repellent). The little brown bat, which consumes mostly insects such as mayflies, moths, mosquitos and wasps, can eat its weight in bugs (1-2 thousand insects) each night. The box is subdivided into multiple "shelves" to maximize surface space for perching. A box can house bachelor colonies (smaller, all male groups) or nursing colonies (mother and baby bats).



Bat house

Eagle Scout candidate Chase Troxell has based his Eagle Scout project around addressing the Historical Society's challenge: leading the construction of nine bat and two owl houses. One of each of these houses has been installed at the Coley Farmstead; the remained are available for sale to benefit the Weston Historical Society. For more information, please contact Carol Baldwin through the Weston Historical Society at (203) 226-1804.

Our thanks to Chase for a great job with his project. We will share our other Eagle Scout projects with you in future issues. 🦇

Editor's Note

WESTON'S NEW TOWN HISTORIAN

Our congratulations to Lynne Barrelle of Weston who was recently named to replace Kathy Failla as Town Historian. We are very pleased to introduce Lynne to you as she has been a hard worker and a former trustee of the Weston Historical Society.

Lynne has lived in Weston for her entire life and has researched not only her own area of town, wanting to know what was there before she came, but has also researched many old homes in the area. Lynne is a tenacious and trusted researcher who digs to the bottom of the well for the information she wants to find.

Even though family obligations and work have kept Lynne from the Society of late, we are so delighted that she will be our Town Historian. She has some great ideas for sharing Weston's history with the community and would welcome any calls or emails concerning our past. Lynne can be reached at: **MAKING LOCAL HISTORY MATTER**, (203)544-8690, westonhistory@aol.com.

THE MYSTERIOUS CHIMNEY

Now that we have introduced you to Lynne Barrelle, we can tell you about some wonderful research that was done by Lynne and Carolyn Hess who is part of a new Facebook page called “Weston – a small town with a big heart.” Perhaps many of you have driven on Davis Hill Road at the intersection of Steep Hill and wondered about the proud little chimney that has no house.

On October 8, 2012, Lynne and Carolyn went to the site of the chimney and did a little searching. Here is some of the information that they gathered that day and through further research. “This is a free-standing chimney made of rough fieldstone. It is estimated to be between 20 and 25 feet tall, and the width at the bottom is about 80 inches. The chimney is fronted by a cement hearth about 4 or 5 inches thick and 74 inches wide. The depth is approximately 6 feet. The firebox is 4 feet wide by 3 feet high.

“There is an indentation for a mantel across the front of the chimney. The mantel, which was most likely composed of wood, probably tied into supporting posts at either side of the chimney, where wider, shallower indentations can be found running down the sides between the stonework. About a foot above the mantel is a round opening into the front of the chimney. This was probably to accommodate a metal stove-pipe. It was impossible to tell from the ground whether this hole was original to the chimney or had been cut into it after construction.” As Lynne pointed out in her research, there are terra cotta tiles used for the liner of the chimney. If she is able to locate an expert with this type of information, then she would be able to better date the chimney.

Further research into documenting the owners of the

land by title-searching in the land records was then performed. Lynne found that a Charles Jennings and his wife, Mary Esther Brown, were living there in the second half of the 19th century. They also discovered that Charles and Mary had several children who all predeceased them, except for the youngest, Edward, born about 1871. Lynne states: “Actually we are not

entirely sure that Edward was their biological child as we don’t have birth records. We are relying on census information which is inconsistent from one census year to the next at best, and totally faulty at worst. Being that Edward was born 13 years after the next youngest child, it is possible that Charles and Mary may have taken in a nephew or other relative, perhaps even an orphan. Additional information from the land records show that when Charles Jennings died in 1892, he left a will, and nothing was left to Edward. It all went to his widow Mary Esther.”

The story continues with Mary Jennings who died in 1893, a year after her husband. Lynne found that “thirteen years later, Edward sold the land, but first he had to show that he was Mary’s only legal devisee (another clue that he

may not have been their actual son.)” Unfortunately they have not had success in tracing some of the information, but they feel that there is a lot of “weird stuff” out there about Edward Jennings.

“In 1905 Edward Jennings sold the homestead, described as 63 ½ acres with buildings, to two men (possibly brothers) whose homes were in Westport. We still need to clear up a few details, but I think one of the brothers quit claimed his share to the other, who would then have been the sole owner. This man, Edmond C. Smith, passed away about 1929, but the property



remained in the Smith family until after his widow's death. In 1961 the property was sold to local developers by the estate of Mary A. Smith.

Lynne further states that "We don't know the exact boundaries of the Jennings homestead but some of it is probably now Hill Farm Road (off Davis Hill). Intensive and laborious research COULD determine the exact boundaries of the 60 plus acres, but there is not a pressing need at this time. The chimney is now part of a 2.37 acre lot which includes a house built about 1963. The current owner explained that the chimney was from a "hunting camp" that burned down in 1955. That would have been while the property was owned by the Smith family of Westport, as they held it from 1905 until 1961. We don't as yet know any other details of that time period."

"It is possible that the chimney really was part of the original Jennings house, which was used by the Smiths as a vacation retreat. In that case, the structure that burned in 1955 would have been the Jennings house. Alternatively, the Jennings house could have been gone even before the Smiths bought the place in 1905. It is also possible that the chimney was original to the Jennings house, but then something happened to the house and later a cabin was built around the same chimney.

The current owners of the property believe that the Jennings house was in the family since 1710. Lynne feels that this date is a little early for the occupation of this neighborhood, but if further documentation could actually be found, it would somewhat revise the general understanding of the early history of Weston.

In closing Lynne said "It may eventually prove impossible to determine the true provenance of the chimney. But in the meantime, the investigation will help us to learn a great deal about the history of the neighborhood, and also about some of the people who lived here before us. It may lead us to other areas of investigation (the possibilities are endless.) If you've read this far, you've already become part of the learning process. We hope you have enjoyed it, and that you will begin your own investigations into the past, or join us in ours in the future."

A complete copy of the research and article can be found on www.facebook.com/pages/Weston-History-or-The-Fellowship-of-the-Chimney/29455341724586. Our thanks to Lynne for all her research and we know that if the information is out there, she will find it. At least we now know a bit about the little chimney without a house, and our imaginations can still keep the stories alive. 🐾

UPCOMING EVENTS

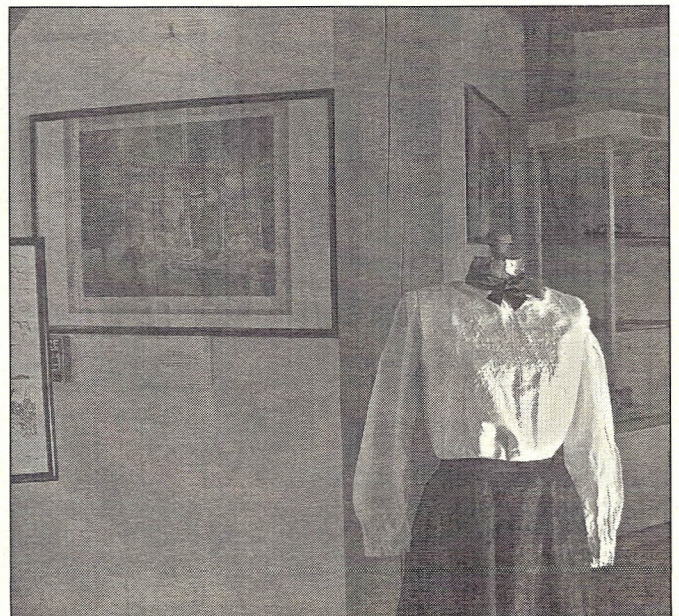
Weston "Yesterday" exhibit

Starting in January, 2013, we will open our newest photo exhibit for the public. We have photos of days gone by from the late eighteen hundreds to the early nineteen hundreds. We also have a wonderful display of items from the Jarvis Academy as well as clothing, a Victorian hair bouquet and our beloved phaeton carriage.



As a member, you will have the first viewing if you can join us for our annual Christmas party. If not, please watch for details in the local paper as well as online.

May you and your family have a wonderful holiday season and we thank you for your continued support of the Weston Historical Society. 🐾



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