

Quaboag Historical Society Newsletter

November 2013



Quaboag Historical Society

******* Join Us For White Christmas*******

West Brookfield's White Christmas celebration will be held on Sunday, December 8, with the town alive with fun and excitement – all manner of entertainment, refreshments, special programs and shopping. Fliers are at all of the local stores and businesses, with listings of the many activities and presentations taking place on that day.

Here at Quaboag Historical Society we will welcome visitors from 1:00 until 4:00 p.m. All are invited to participate in the elf hunt, a raffle, and a special "bird in cage" activity for children of all ages. Author Jeff Fiske will be here for a book signing, and we hear there may be a banjo player to entertain as well.

Please stop by, and bring a friend, someone who enjoys history and the Quaboag area, or perhaps someone who has recently moved here, and would like to become acquainted with this special place. This might be a good time to become a member of QHS as well.

Bringing the Ladies Home

A Brief History of the fountains on the West Brookfield Common

By William Jenkins

The story of our town's focal piece, our splendid Common, will of necessity incorporate the story of the two fountains adorning it. Their conjoined histories might not have been possible without the forethought and generosity of some of West Brookfield's prominent citizens of the past. As our story proceeds from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, it is a pleasure to note that this town's citizens continue to preserve, protect and care for this precious heritage.

Our introduction to this story must be to examine the establishment of our Common and to understand how it became such a vital part of West Brookfield. Contrary to what occurred in many New England communities, our Common was not set apart by a grant during the original settlement to be used by everyone in the parish (community). What is now our Common had been owned, when the First Parish of Brookfield (now West Brookfield) was being established in the mid and late 1700's, by two important leaders.



Fountain Committee (Oct. 6)

Bringing the Ladies Home

David Hitchcock became the owner of the westerly portion of the Common from his father, Peletiah Hitchcock, sometime before 1760. In 1776, David built the original tavern at the location of the present Ye Olde Tavern. David's brother, Moses Hitchcock, was given 67 acres, mostly west of the current Central Street. He built what is currently the Country Bank building about 1794.

It is at this point we must make some assumptions because we lack adequate records for our research. David Hitchcock was a prominent leader and very likely a friend or at least an acquaintance of Dwight Foster, son of Jedediah Foster, another prominent leader in the community. Dwight Foster purchased, from the estate of James Nichols, three and one quarter acres abutting David Hitchcock's property (to the east) in May of 1791.

We do not know how or why Hitchcock and Foster arrived at what was evidently a mutual decision to make a gift of the Common to the "inhabitants of Brookfield, 1st Parish". What is clear and documented is that each (David and Dwight) signed identical documents on November 7th 1791, granting this parcel to the "Inhabitants of the First Parish in the Town of Brookfield aforesaid in their Corporate capacity by whatever name they are known".

There are restrictions on the deed and a short summary: "never to be sold or transferred, always remain open as a Common and unenclosed for public use, benefit and advantage, and shall not at any time here-after be appropriated for private use, benefit or emolument..."

I will leave the reasons for this to your own imagination; however, we must be forever grateful that these two community leaders provided such a beautiful parcel. It remains the focal point of our town some two hundred years later, and, due to their obvious forethought, promises to remain so for centuries to come.

At this point in our narrative, we have the Common given, as one parcel, by Foster and Hitchcock. Another generous benefactor, J. Henry Stickney, formerly of West Brookfield and later residing in Baltimore, established a generous fund that provided for the beautification of the Common. Grading, accompanied by the planting of trees and establishment of walkways around and through the Common, was accomplished with his gift of \$3,000, accepted at a Town Meeting in May, 1874. At that meeting the town also appropriated \$500 to improve the roads surrounding the Common.

Records are not available to indicate when George Rice began his conversations with the town fathers concerning the possibility of providing the fountains for the Common; however, the discussions certainly took place well before 1884. A study of the records suggests that the whole concept must have been discussed in detail, with specific fountains in mind. At the Annual Town Meeting of April 7, 1884, the Town voted to provide "a reservoir of sufficient capacity and elevation to supply the proposed Fountain on the Common". Incidentally, the Fountain is 23 feet above grade level.

In August of 1884, A.W. Smith was awarded the contract to construct the reservoir for \$500. Plans for the dam were provided by an engineer named Davis from Northampton. Plans called for the dam to be 150 feet long and 25 feet high, and to be completed by mid-October. This dam and the small pond it provides are still standing, in reasonably good condition. A visit to the site leaves one to marvel at the achievement - that this dam, of large, granite, random-shaped pieces could be completed in three and one-half months. This reservoir is located nearly one mile from the site of the fountain, North of the North Brookfield Road and East of Wigwam Road on a small stream called Colonel's Brook. George Rice directed that the work of laying water pipes from the reservoir to the Common be underway before the dam's completion. The fountain was erected and was operational on May 20, 1885.

Picture yourself as a resident then, seeing water flowing from the fountain, 23 feet above grade, by merely opening a valve - this at a time when not one home surrounding the Common was equipped with running water? The homes usually had a cistern in the basement, with water supplied by private companies; a hand-pump drew water only to the kitchen of the home.

Bringing the Ladies Home

In 1972 a Bandstand was erected on the former site of the West Brookfield Grammar School. Funds for this were furnished by a substantial gift from longtime resident and Librarian Helen Shackley.

We must be, all of us, forever aware and grateful that one of the greatest assets of our community, the beautiful Common with its many improvements, were gifts from former residents to the town they so deeply cherished.

We now turn our attention to the history of the two fountains that have adorned our Common since 1885. Both of the fountains were the products of the J.W. Fiske Company of New York City. Fiske had an excellent reputation as a manufacturer, and his products were admired as some of the finest available. It was surprising to me to learn that Fiske did not have his own zinc factory or iron foundry. Also interesting is the fact that Fiske was born in Chelmsford, MA, and graduated from Westford Academy. Records show that his initial business in this country was located in Boston, after a brief time spent in Melbourne, Australia. Further records suggest that he was, in 1864, conducting his business in New York City.

Our fountains have a cast iron base; however, the statues are of zinc, formed in many molds; up to 40 individual pieces were soldered together to form a completed statue.

Fiske subcontracted his zinc statues to Moritz J. Seelig & Company in Williamsburg, New York. The primary source of his cast iron products was Variety Iron Works, owned by E.G. Smyzer, in York, Pennsylvania.

Our drinking fountain with the statue "Apollo with Lyre" by Vernetto was illustrated in Fiske's Catalogue of 1874. While other catalogs (Mott and Seelig) have illustrations of "Apollo with Lyre," the figure is a youth, not Cupid. According to Carol Grissom, author of *Zinc Sculptures in America 1850-1950*, our figure of Cupid with wings is indeed unusual.

Our large two-pan cast iron fountain with the top Naiad (water nymph) and the two girls (Meditation) at the base was distributed from the mid 1870's to the turn of the century. The original model for the figure was cast in iron for a French fountain displayed by J. J. Ducell & Fils at the Paris Exhibition in 1867. This figure leans slightly forward and is more attenuated than a similar figure of Rebecca.

Grissom's book has listings of eleven fountains with the same water nymph atop. At the time she was preparing her book, she was unaware of the West Brookfield Fountains. Descriptions indicate that, of the eleven, one was replaced with a bandstand and another scrapped during WWII, for the metal. There are a few variations such as a single -pan or two- pan fountains, as well as at least one fountain with two Meditation statues, apparently the others have four Meditation figures. It does appear that three known Naiad figures by Fiske are in New England. They may be observed in St. Albans, VT, Clinton, MA, and West Brookfield, MA.

The fountains in Clinton and West Brookfield bear replacement statues cast in aluminum from the original Fiske molds by Robinson Iron Works of Alexander City, Alabama. This became necessary because the original zinc figures were beyond repair, or at least beyond any repair that would be likely to last beyond a few short years. The fountain in St. Albans will also be restored later this year at the Robinson Iron Works.

Over the many years of their existence our fountains have suffered the vicissitudes of age, weather and occasional vandalism. The hurricane of September 1938 was particularly devastating to New England; West Brookfield was among the many towns sustaining major damage. (The Congregational Church, across the street from the Common, lost its steeple. Finally, it was determined that the storm had caused such major damage to the building that re-design and new construction were necessitated.)

Bringing the Ladies Home

The severe wind blew the top statue off the large fountain, which had survived numerous storms in its fifty-three year history. The fountain in Clinton also lost the top figure in this same storm. Both statues were smashed into many pieces, making any repair impossible.

The ensuing years of wear caused additional deterioration, and the fountain stood for many years without a functioning water system. In 1965, the Selectmen established a fund to repair the fountain. In that year, the two statues at the base were repaired, the basin made more shallow and a re-circulating water system added. The fountain was operational, but lacking the top statue with which it had begun its time here.

In late 1982, vandalism caused considerable damage to both of the statues at the base of the fountain. The figures were smashed into many pieces, seemingly beyond repair. Mr. J. Irving England, owner and founder of Brookfield Machine, gathered the many pieces and had them reconstructed at his place of business. Employee Edward Takorian performed the work, with Irving England closely attending every aspect of the repair.

West Brookfield's Common Committee, a town-elected committee whose memberships changed regularly throughout these years, determined upon several occasions to restore the Fountain by having a new top figure created. The committees submitted numerous unsuccessful grant proposals seeking the necessary funding. In 1984, J. Irving England again came to the rescue and volunteered to finance the construction of a new top figure, "as close to the original as possible". Adio DiBiccari of Boston, a noted sculptor, was commissioned to create a new statue. The only available example at the time was a 1920 photograph. After the creation of a 26-inch prototype for approval, a larger-than-life size (6'3") fiberglass statue was completed and installed on November 15, 1985. Included with the new statue was a new water system, and for the first time in forty-seven years the Naiad statue poured water from her urn.

(Before Restoration)



Bringing the Ladies Home

The generous Mr. England was responsible for many repairs and improvements as time progressed, including several coats of paint. Those of you who remember Irving will also recall that his stationery and many personal items were of a light green color. Irving hired a paint company to mix this special pale green for the fountain. Many people doubtless do not recall the dark green which had been the color for many earlier years. It should also be noted that many people believe the 1985 replacement statue was a true image of the original 1885 statue. While the 1985 statue was very similar, we are reminded that it was sculpted from a photograph, and the present (2013) statue was cast using the original molds.

It is indeed fortunate that the original molds are currently available to provide the exact figures that were installed in the 1880's and the 1900's. The molds, as we have noted, number over 40 pieces that require welding together and finishing; the figures were of zinc, and soldered together.

(Old and New)



The small drinking fountain, presently located across from the Congregational Church, was originally located approximately 300 feet southeast of its present location directly on the supply pipe from the reservoir. One may assume that when the town water became available, it was moved to its present location to provide a more palatable drinking water.

Bringing the Ladies Home



This fountain was also a product of the Fiske Company, was purchased by George Rice and installed at the same time as the large fountain, and was supplied by the same source of water. The figure on the fountain has been a little more difficult to research, but we finally have traced its origin. Carol Grissom stated she thought she had not seen an image of the figure in a Fiske catalog, but when checking the most comprehensive statue catalog from 1874, she did indeed find the image with Cupid. In the catalog, it is listed as Apollo with Lyre. Moritz J. Seeling Co. issued catalogs with an Apollo with Lyre by Stutzel in 1876 ; additionally, two Mott catalogs in 1875 and 1890 list it. However, that figure is a youth, not a Cupid. Carol states that the West Brookfield statue is indeed unusual.

This statue was in extremely poor condition, and over the years had an internal concrete repair. Robinson Iron again responded to the challenge, and today we have the figure



of Apollo with Lyre with Cupid complete with wings.

New brick walks, landscaping, and benches will enhance these treasures for years to come.

The Common Committee, along with a few very dedicated volunteers and a long list of financial contributors, including a grant from the State of Massachusetts, have provided the residents of West Brookfield with two fountains completely restored to their original appearance. With proper maintenance, these fountains should last more than another hundred years.

The Common, one of the most-admired in the area, is once again adorned by its much admired "GIRLS." As I have stated many times, may we always have the wisdom and resources to protect and enhance this outstanding treasure.

(Getting It Together)

Honorable George Merrick Rice, Businessman and Benefactor



George Merrick Rice was born in West Brookfield, where his family had lived for several generations, on November 3, 1808. His parents were Samuel B. and Abigail (Bradish) Rice. Accounts of his life suggest that, from boyhood, George was an individual with ambition, drive, and enthusiasm for what life had to offer.

George was educated in West Brookfield's public schools and Leicester Academy. He then entered into an apprenticeship at a store in Leicester. (It is easy to form a mental picture of a young man from West Brookfield, eager to seek his fortune, working in a store such as the Asa Knight store at Old Sturbridge Village. His appearance, costume, and conduction of business would have been similar to that of today's costumed interpreter there.)

Honorable George Merrick Rice, Businessman and Benefactor

In 1829, at age 21, he moved to Worcester, where he became a partner in Andrew March & Company, a dry goods store on Goddard's Row. His father's death in April of the previous year may have prompted his move; he may have received an inheritance sufficient to invest in the partnership. Fire destroyed the store's interior in September of the following year. A newspaper account listed George's loss at \$6,000. Undeterred, he purchased the dry goods portion of the stock of Burt and Merrick, a Main Street concern. An ad of the time in the Worcester Spy lists among the store's offerings "French Paper Hangings" – wallpapers imported from France being, at that time, considered the height of fashion in home décor.

On January 23, 1832, Ruth J. White became George's bride. Their son, George Melage, was born March 29, 1833. Three daughters, Henrietta, Elizabeth, and Mary Louise were born in 1840, 1841, and 1848. The family home, described as "a fine residence on the corner of Elm and Ashland Streets", was built for them in 1854. This remained their home until after Ruth's death in 1891.

With the opening of the Worcester canal, George left Burt and Merrick, joining his brother-in-law, General Nathan Heard, in the flour and grain business on Central Street; they later moved that business to Washington Square. In 1846, according to the Worcester Spy, he "went into manufacturing," joining Isaac Goddard, the former partner of H. P. Howe to form the firm of Goddard and Rice, manufacturers of calico printing and bleaching machinery. In 1862, Goddard retired, and the new firm of Rice, Barton and Fales Machine and Iron Company was formed.

Records from that time indicate that, in every change in business partnerships, and indeed businesses, George improved and expanded the scope of the business, purchased property, and, in general gained the reputation of a highly capable and upwardly mobile person within the business community.

In 1868, he formed the Worcester Safe Deposit and Trust Company; he served as president throughout his life. He served also as president of Manufacturer's Mutual Fire Insurance Company from 1869 until his death on November 9, 1894.

In addition to his active business life, George was prominent in civic, social and political circles. He was honored politically by his fellow citizens, serving as president of the Common Council in 1855, 1856, and 1857. He served honorably as Massachusetts State Senator in 1869-70.

In 1881, at age 73, George Rice invested heavily in the Washburn Iron Company. (According to a Boston Journal account, "It was generally understood that he invested all of his money in it.") In 1882, he became president and sole owner of the company he had by then named Worcester Steel Works. The firm prospered under his leadership, becoming one of the largest businesses in the city. A Bessemer steel plant was installed; the company manufactured steel rails, ingots, and iron car wheels. It employed at one time, four hundred workers.

Finally, however, according to a Worcester Spy account, "In this enterprise Mr. Rice was not successful. The iron and steel industry has declined in New England owing to the competition of manufacturers near the coal and iron fields, and concerns in the East have gradually declined...the concern went into insolvency, and Mr. Rice retired from active business, having lost practically all of the large fortune he had amassed."

George, throughout his life, was known as a generous contributor to all causes, a generous father to his children, a man of kindly heart, wise head, and a humanitarian. He was active in the temperance movement, and was described in the Worcester Spy as "one of the original Republicans, but more latterly somewhat independent on public questions. In city matters he always favored independence of national politics."

He left the Elm Street home after his wife's death. He died, at the home of his daughter and her husband, Dr. David and Mary Louise Hunt in Boston, on November 9, 1894. He had, according to the Boston Journal obituary, "boarded out" following Ruth's death, as his home had been in the hands of an executor since the steel works' failure. His move to his daughter's home, shortly before his death, was prompted by ill health.

According to all known accounts, George and Ruth Rice lead a happy and harmonious life throughout the nearly sixty years of their marriage. To their sorrow, their only son, George, died at sea of yellow fever while a young man. Henrietta became the wife of James Vassar, Chief Coin Clerk in the United States Treasury in Boston. Elizabeth Frances Rice married William Holmes, at one time editor of the Boston Journal of Commerce. Mary Louise, as we know, married Dr. David Hunt.

In 1884, George Merrick Rice donated to the town of West Brookfield two fountains, in memory of his parents. The cost has been listed as the cost as \$10,000. At around the same time, he donated a clock to the newly built Congregational Church in time for its dedication on September 5, 1882. (The earlier church had been destroyed by fire.) That clock still presents its handsome face to an appreciative community from the steeple overlooking the Common.

With these gifts, he has provided more than a century of pleasure and pride to those of us who live here, to visitors, and to those who pass through and remember our beautiful Common and the Rice Memorial Fountains.

We are truly and humbly grateful.

Upcoming Event
White Christmas in
West Brookfield
Sunday, December 8, 2013
The Museum Will be Open
See Page 1 For More Information



Quaboag Historical Society
PO Box 635
West Brookfield, MA 01585