

Quaboag Historical Society Newsletter

April 2014

President's Message

Hello everyone and Happy Spring! April is finally here and that means the Annual Meeting is right around the corner. It should be a fun afternoon with good food, lively conversation and an interesting speaker so I hope many of you are planning on attending. It is always a nice opportunity to reconnect with people and to honor certain individuals in our community who have dedicated countless hours to volunteerism and making the Quaboag Plantation "a better place".

The Board has also been trying to make our community a better place by promoting history in the schools and around the Plantation. We have funded several History on the Road programs through OSV in the elementary schools this year and will continue to do that every year...the children really enjoy the hands-on history lessons that the OSV speakers bring to the classroom. The Society has also sponsored two historical talks at the West Brookfield library over the past few months and look forward to doing more of that at other libraries in the area. The Board is always looking for ways to promote history in our community and would love any input or ideas that Society members might have.

Well, I hope you enjoy the newsletter. Special thanks to Larry Lowenthal for contributing an article for this issue and to Ruth Lyon and Kirk Burnham for putting the whole newsletter together. I look forward to seeing many of you at the Annual Meeting on April 27th.

-Amy Dugas

QHS Museum summer schedule begins Saturday, June 7

The Quaboag Historical Society museum will resume Saturday openings on Saturday, June 7. Plan to come and bring your friends and your children; see where we've been and what we've done in the last 354 years.

The museum is open Saturdays between the hours of 11:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. All are welcome. Docents are always needed. If you have the interest and time to spend, please contact Amy Dugas at 508-867-5428.

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Most people in this area will be astonished to learn that Brookfield almost became a canal town, or that the cry "low bridge, everybody down" might have resounded in Warren.

The first third of the 19th century was the great age of canal building, sometimes reaching the level of "canal mania". In that era the U.S. economy was expanding rapidly, and coastal cities were competing to capture the business of a booming interior. Where nature had not been thoughtful enough to provide a navigable river, the only solution seemed to be to build an artificial waterway. The immediate and dazzling success of the Erie Canal in New York inspired many imitators.

Following the lead of the Middlesex Canal in eastern Massachusetts, commercial interests in Providence chartered the Blackstone Canal in 1823 and completed it to Worcester, some 45 miles, in 1828. The Quineboag Valley, extending north from the Thames River at Norwich, Connecticut, and entering Massachusetts in Dudley, had long been a satellite of the Blackstone Valley. Many of the textile mills in the Quineboag watershed were owned by Blackstone interests; it is not surprising that talk of a canal was soon heard along the banks of the Quineboag. In the customary way these things were done, meetings of leading citizens were held at locations such as Brooklyn, Connecticut, in 1825. The enthusiasm was sufficient to obtain a charter for a canal company in Connecticut in the following year, along with an associated bank.

As discussed at that time, the canal would have continued into MA to serve the factories in Dudley, Webster, and Southbridge. The ultimate goal was to reach the Chicopee River in Springfield (Springfield then included the present city of Chicopee). To do that, the projected canal would have had to swing overland to Brookfield and enter the Quaboag Valley. It would continue through Warren (then Western - that name was changed to eliminate confusion in the mails) and Palmer. It is recorded that on September 15, 1825, representatives from Southbridge, Sturbridge, Brookfield, and Western met with Connecticut backers at an inn in Southbridge.

It is not certain whether these canal supporters ever obtained a charter for a Quineboag Canal company in Massachusetts, but the state Board of Internal Improvements surveyed the proposed route and found it practicable. In fact, there was talk of building a branch to connect with the Blackstone Canal in Worcester, and beyond that to connect Worcester and Boston by water. Even that was not the most extravagant expression of canal mania, as the state seriously investigated building an artificial waterway from Boston to the Hudson River. This would have required a long tunnel, on the order of the later Hoosick Tunnel, which took 25 years to complete. If workers had started building such a tunnel with the tools of the 1820s, they would still be at it.

Despite the promising start, no work ever took place on the Quineboag Canal. The reasons for this failure are not entirely clear; apparently there were problems with the Connecticut charter, and it may have proved more difficult than anticipated to raise money.

Anyone who chose not to invest in the Quineboag Canal almost certainly made the right decision. At what appeared to be the high noon of the canal era, the shadow of the steam locomotive moved across the sun. In the Blackstone Valley, the Providence & Worcester Railroad was completed in 1847, and in the following year the canal, which had once seemed so promising, operated for the last time.

A railroad reached Worcester from Boston in 1835, and went on to Springfield in 1839. In the Quineboag Valley the Norwich and Worcester Railroad, which made use of the earlier canal surveys, went into service in 1840. The Providence & Worcester and the Norwich & Worcester lines both survive, now controlled by the modern P&W, which sometimes offers passenger excursions over its routes.

By 1850 it was clear that railroads had won the competition against canals. Inland waterways are still important in certain locations and for certain traffic, but there is no place in the modern world for long "overland" canals. Thus Quaboag towns never echoed to the imperious blast of a conch horn announcing to a restful lock tender that a canal boat was approaching.

The main source for this piece was *Connecticut's Canals* by Charles Rufus Harte.

The Quaboag Historical Society is pleased to announce the chosen recipients of awards to be presented to outstanding citizens of the Quaboag area at the society's annual luncheon. On that occasion, the recipients will be recognized by the society and by friends, family and neighbors for their voluntary contributions to the life of their community and beyond. The will be held luncheon on Sunday, April 27; cocktail hour at noon, luncheon to follow at 12:30 p.m. at Salem Cross Inn, West Brookfield.

The J. Irving and Jane England Award will be presented to Barbara (Jory) Smith, West Brookfield.

The Lucy Stone Award will be given to Charles "Bud" Fahey of East Brookfield.

According to society spokesman Marguerite M. Geis, nominations of persons from within the Quaboag area are sought early each year, naming a person who has contributed in a meaningful way to his or her community and has, in the words of Lucy Stone, "made the world better."

Barbara Smith has been a West Brookfield resident since childhood and has participated in and contributed time and effort to numerous church, school, town and charitable entities throughout her life here, as outlined by letters received by QHS in her behalf. The England award is presented to a resident of West Brookfield.

Bud Fahey, as he is known throughout the area, has been a lifelong resident of East Brookfield, and has also contributed to numerous aspects of life there over a span of more than fifty years. "His volunteerism deserves to be recognized by the entire Quaboag Plantation" said the writer of one nominating letter.

Following the luncheon and presentation of awards, the program, "Revisiting Wampum: A New View on an Old Subject", will be presented by James W. Bradley, author, archaeologist, and educator, with more than 40 years' experience in the public and private sectors. His fieldwork ranges from archaeological surveys in Alaska and Cape Cod to urban salvage in downtown Boston. He is nationally recognized as an expert on the archaeology and culture of the Native American people who lived in northeastern North America.

Dr. Bradley received his Ph.D. from the Maxwell School at Syracuse University in 1979. He served on the staff of the Massachusetts historical Commission from 1979 to 1990 and during that time, directed a statewide survey of the state's historic and archaeological resources. From 1990 to 2001 he was director of the Robert S. Peabody Museum of Archaeology in Andover MA. He and his wife, Peggy, now reside in Charlestown.

Those who attend the luncheon are invited to bring Native American artifacts for Dr. Bradley's identification and commentary; no appraisals will be provided, however.

Tickets, on a first-come basis, may be available until April 18. Those interested may call Ruth Lyon at 508 867 7316 for further information.



Barbara (Jory) Smith



Dr. James Bradley



Charles "Bud" Fahey

Senator Stephen M. Brewer to be

honored at annual luncheon

by Ruth Lyon

Massachusetts State Senator Stephen Brewer, each year, honors us with his presence at our society's annual luncheon at Salem Cross Inn. Invariably, he charms us with his witty and sincere commentary on what we've done and what we stand for. He makes us proud.

This year, we are pleased and proud to tender to him the Quaboag Historical Society's Distinguished Service Award, in recognition of his years of exemplary service to our communities.

Steve currently represents 28 Central and Western Massachusetts towns in his rural senate district. Amazingly, each of those 28 communities recognizes him, as do we, as the man who attends every occasion, responds to every call, and works diligently for their concerns - he knows and understands every one of those concerns and will gladly enumerate them for you as he makes the effort, takes the time to act upon them.

Steve knows us; he truly knows every recipient of the Lucy Stone and England awards. He knows their towns, their families, friends and neighbors. We've seen him when we have something to celebrate, and when we're needy, and he's there on both occasions. The Quaboag area towns, the towns from which this society has sprung, have much to thank him for - for the funding he has brought to numerous of our causes and institutions, for the close attention we receive whenever we reach out to him, and for his utter devotion to his constituents, his state, his country and the principles upon which it was founded.

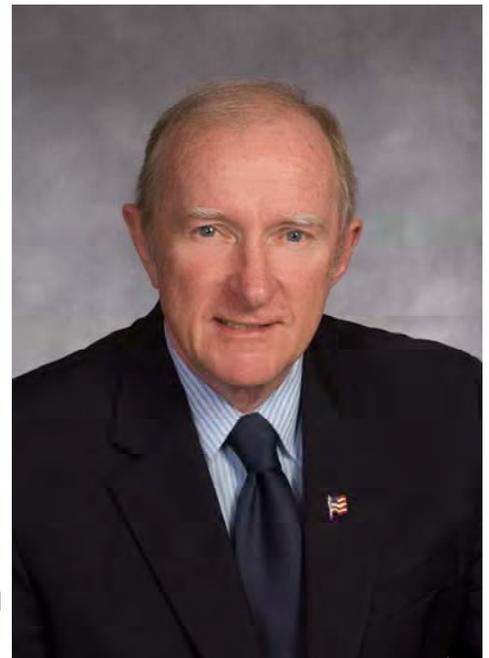
He has, in speaking of our stalwart and remarkable forbears, often remarked, "We stand on the shoulders of giants". Steve has announced his imminent retirement from his long-time position as Massachusetts State Senator. We wish him well; He will leave a giant pair of shoulders for future generations of legislators to attempt to stand upon.

Throughout his career, he has remained committed to protecting the citizens of the Commonwealth and serving them honorably. He is tireless advocate for veterans, sportsmen, and farmers. His position as Chair of the Senate Committee on Ways and Means has allowed him to work closely on the budget that provides funding to municipalities, state agencies, and some of the neediest residents of the Bay State. He also sits on the Senate committee on Ethics and Rules.

Every resident of every Quaboag area community can cite numerous examples of his effort in our behalf - remember the Quaboag 350th celebration?

Steve remains active in his home town of Barre, serving in a number of local and civic organizations.

We are delighted to welcome him and honor him on this occasion.



Senator Brewer

It goes without saying that Quaboag Historical Society takes pride in our heritage. We not only seek to preserve and understand our past through the preservation of artifacts, we love to make it come alive by presenting or sponsoring programs, free and open to all, here in the museum or in other venues.

Last month, we sponsored a program at Merriam-Gilbert library "Herstory" in which photographer Roger Kolb presented a slide show, with commentary, on some of New England's outstanding women, including our own Lucy Stone and Oxford's Clara Barton.

Throughout the year, and every year in the foreseeable future, we offer to schools and libraries in each of our six Quaboag area towns, a superb program "History on the Road", in conjunction with Old Sturbridge Village. In this lively and always popular program, a costumed educator visitor visits the classroom or library, bringing, for handling and examination, a selection of material-culture objects. The objects and the stories behind them are discussed; the children divide into groups for further activity in a fun-filled 45 minutes for groups of up to thirty students. There are six programs to choose from, so schools may choose to offer differing programs for suitable age -grade groups. Grandma's Attic, for grades 3-5, is the most popular one, as school trips to OSV are usually taken by fourth graders.



From time to time, we offer musical or other "spur of the moment" programs, just for fun. Last year, for example, we presented Rob Lyon's "Music in a Country Village," here in West Brookfield, and Movie Night, featuring Tyler Nickerson's film presentation featuring North Brookfield history, in New Braintree. Jeff Robbins and his friends sometimes perform their bluegrass magic on Saturdays at the museum. If you have an idea, we're always open to suggestion.

We're always happy to welcome visitors to our museum; Amy frequently arranges special visits for Scouts, senior citizen groups, or out of town visitors. And, during the summer months, the museum is open on Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Don't forget to spread the word - ***we have a museum in West Brookfield***; in it are artifacts, photos and other interesting items from all of the Brookfields, Warren and New Braintree. You are welcome to browse and to visit with people who love to share information on our joint history in the museum we cherish.

Roger Kolb and Librarian Holly Takorian

Stalking Diederick's Asparagus

By Ruth Lyon

West Brookfield - This story's beginning should be "Once upon a time," because we're still scouring local and horticultural history to discover the true facts of the matter.

In this town's Old Indian Cemetery, a large gravestone marks the grave of one Diederick Leertouwer. This we know. He came to this country in 1784, arriving in Boston, to promote trade between the Netherlands and New England. He lived with his wife and daughter in West Brookfield from 1794 until his death in 1798. Shortly thereafter, his wife, Christina and daughter Maria returned to Holland.

Local legend has it that Diederick Leertouwer imported asparagus from his homeland and was the first to plant it in this area or perhaps this country. This fact was forgotten until it was discovered in an old cookbook, or so the legend proclaims. Unfortunately, no one knows the whereabouts of that cookbook. Some believe it was an old Congregational Church cookbook.

Lending some credence to the tale is the fact that Diederick, with his friend and partner James Huyman, owned and operated more than one business on Foster's and later Greene's Wharf in Boston. Their company imported goods from The Netherlands and sold them at a business named The Dutch Store. He could have easily imported asparagus seeds or roots for himself and to sell. (cont'd page 6)

Stalking Diederick's asparagus (continued)

A dozen years ago, members of the Quaboag Historical Society and the West Brookfield Historical Commission determined to hold a springtime festival on the town common. (It might be noted that, in the manner of all small towns, many of those members served on both committees.) In a magic moment of inspiration, they determined to honor Diederick's legend by naming the festival for his contribution to gardens all over America. The famous green logo was adopted, word spread, and people came. Everybody smiled at everybody else. It was a happenin' event in a happenin' town, and it continues to happen.

Thus was born the West Brookfield Asparagus & Flower Heritage Festival, devoted to all things earthy and artisanal in a friendly, celebratory atmosphere that would also, in the spirit of Diederick Leertouwer, promote trade.

The festival has grown. Thousands of happy visitors now arrive at the junction of Rotes 9 and 67 on the third Saturday in May. Asparagus abounds, in every conceivable form. You'll meet a man who answers to the name of Diederick, and yes, there's a photo op. Some of the people you meet will inform you that they still have strains of the original asparagus growing wild in their yards.

Well, do they? We've been doing some serious investigation on the subject of Diederick and his favorite crop. We haven't all of the answers yet, but we know for certain where he lived, and a little bit about his life here - more about that later. But, about the asparagus -

Was it green? Most experts on the subject agree that asparagus, as enjoyed in Europe in the 1700s, was white. Gardeners all know that white asparagus is white because it is buried so deeply - the tips are never exposed to light at harvest time - thus photosynthesis does not take place, thus the tasty spears are white. Records indicate that most of the asparagus consumed in Europe in the 1700s was white - it was considered the proper manner in which to serve it. The preferred stalks were thick - sometimes as much as two inches in diameter - and were peeled prior to cooking. The sandy saline soils of Germany and Holland were considered ideal for asparagus - huge crops were raised, harvested, sold, and exported.

Did Diederick import it to this country? Very possibly, even likely. Lynne Oliver, editor of The Food Timeline (www.foodtimeline.org) responded to our query thusly: "Our food history sources confirm asparagus (*Asparagus Officinalis*) was introduced to the New World by Dutch settlers, but they do not pinpoint the exact varieties. Information

gleaned from artwork confirms there were several types/colors available". (It 's interesting to note that, since the time of the cavemen, art has been used to record, admire, and finally, research the culture of those who've gone before us.)

Was Diederick the first? Possibly he introduced it to New England, but probably it had already reached New York. According to Dutch food historian Peter G. Rose, New Netherlands foodways expert:

"Although Asparagus officially has many varieties, among them green, white and purple types - deep-planted white asparagus were far more frequently shown in Dutch paintings. The white variety, with its almost meaty flavor and steak-like price, is a primeur, a seasonal vegetable in the Netherlands in early spring...In the New World, Adrien van der Donk, in his Description of the New Netherlands of 1655, lists asparagus in the herb garden ...seeds for all sorts of plants were brought by the first Dutch settlers and also shipped back and forth between the colony and the homeland."



Will Earley stands at the grave of Diederick Leertouwer, who died at age 38 on August 24, 1798

Stalking Diederick's asparagus (continued)

Peter Rose, who is, incidentally a female, co-authored the book *Matters of Taste: Food and Drink in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Art and Life* with Donna R. Barnes (Syracuse University Press: Syracuse NY 2002) She is an artist as well as an historian. Her focus is on the early history of the Dutch in New Netherlands.

In her very friendly and interested response to my queries, she wrote, "I think your local legend could very well be accurate, and he wrote home to ask for seeds. I think definitely seeds, not roots. When I checked Dutch sources that is all they talked about - asparagus grown from seeds. Some sources emphasize that the large scale production of asparagus in the southern Netherlands began in the early 19th century, though as you saw in the paragraph of *Matters of Taste*, asparagus were brought to New York in the 17th century and were grown in the homeland as well."

In my query letter, I'd explained my interest, Diederick's legend here, and described our festival. In a later conversation, she inquired as to the date of the festival, then later commented that she'd have planned to attend, but had a speaking engagement on that day. (That was a pleasant surprise in a way, I hadn't even considered inviting so important a personage - from such a distance- to our modest little festival.)

I'd especially inquired about the seeds, as we all know that it takes years to raise asparagus from seeds, but she felt emphatically that was what Diederick would have done. Perhaps he never got to enjoy his crop - he only lived in West Brookfield for four years. Still, he may have raised it in Boston as well, and brought roots to his home here. All accounts I've discovered in our library and historical commission papers state that he imported roots, not seeds. However, all of those accounts are hearsay, written in the 20th century.



As local people all know, some folks who live near the location of his house on South Main Street (toward the "Y" end of the common) and in the Foster Hill area claim some of his asparagus still grows there. Perhaps.

Rick Giordano of All Hill Farms, gardening expert at Old Sturbridge Village, where he maintains the herb garden and other spots, says there's no telling as to that heritage. Every plant that grows in a garden or field differs to some degree from every other plant; in an uncontrolled environment, there are just too many variables, he says, to ever determine a particular plant's ancestry, especially over centuries.

Christy Higginbottom, gardener, plant historian, and gardener at OSV for many years, informs us that the variety of asparagus grown in the garden at the OSV parsonage is "Barr's Mammoth", which appears in 1865 seed catalogs. That's about as early as you'll find asparagus in any American seed catalog.

We'll continue to investigate. We've learned much about the Dutchman who lived among, did business with, and formed affectionate friendships with West Brookfield's leading citizens of his time. We'll share those stories with you in issues to come. His time here was short, but his green legacy lives on. Maybe.

See you at the festival.

It's spring! Think Asparagus!

Time to mark your calendar for West Brookfield's annual ode to spring, the Asparagus & Flower Heritage Festival. This truly special event will be held on West Brookfield town common on Saturday, May 17, 10a.m. to 4 pm.

Diederick Leertouwer will be there to greet friends old and new. Asparagus Alley will tempt you with the famous asparagus chowder, homemade pies (really homemade) and much more in the way of delectable food. Artists, artisans, animals, frog jumping contest, a bus full of clowns, one hundred vendors, music, free games for kids. Enjoy this very special day - and be sure to admire the freshly restored fountain. Indeed, the ladies are back! Free and open to the public.



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