

The Wintonbury Drummer



Newsletter of the Wintonbury Historical Society

Bloomfield, Connecticut — November 2013

HESKETH TO SPEAK AT NOVEMBER PROGRAM

On **WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 7:00 PM AT PROSSER LIBRARY**, Fred Hesketh will present his program on Brown Drums.

In Bloomfield's 1976 celebration of our nation's Bicentennial, Bloomfield officials erected a bronze colonial "Drummer Boy" on the Town Green; and guest speaker Homer D. Babbage commented, "The people of Bloomfield do not all march to the same drummer. And the sounds and meaning of the drum have differing significance in the rich cultural mosaic created here [in Bloomfield]."

Town officials proudly proclaimed the Drummer Boy was beating on a replica of a Brown Drum made in Bloomfield (then Wintonbury) and proudly carried by colonial drummers in the American Revolution.

Wintonbury Historical Society Historian, Frederick A. Hesketh, who has researched for more than a decade the "Browns of Wintonbury" and their drum manufacturing activities, will relate his findings at a Prosser presentation on November 6. Hesketh has learned that the many 200-year-old Brown drums which exist today are instruments treasured in a manner akin to a valuable Stradivarius violin.

While many are housed in museums with "no touch" signs, other drums are proudly beat in celebratory parades throughout Connecticut and the northeast. Don't miss this hometown program.

(Prosser appreciates your calling 860-243-9621 to register your planned attendance.)



*Thank
You*

OUR BUSINESS MEMBERS

Bloomfield Garage, 689 Park Avenue

Simsbury Free Library, 749 Hopmeadow Street, Simsbury

Geissler's Supermarket, 40 Tunxis Avenue

Sir Speedy Printing, 21 Old Windsor Road

Williams Service Center, 56 Tunxis Avenue

SOCIETY DIRECTORY

President

Richard Pierce

Vice-president

Douglas Barnard

Treasurer

Judy Dahlgren-Dechand

Assistant Treasurer

Winifred Granger

Secretary

Ronald Marchetti

Assistant Secretary

Marilyn Stockton

Past President/Curator

Fannie Gabriel

Historian

Fred Hesketh

Board of Directors

2014

Homer Guilmartin

Ralph Schmoll

Shirley Thompson

2015

Gregory Babal

Robert Berman

Elizabeth Merrow

Gail Tinto

2016

Selena Brooks

Winifred Granger

Ruthanne Marchetti

Nicholas Panke

SPECIAL DECEMBER DRAMATIC PROGRAM



William Gillette

On Wednesday, December 4, at 6:30 PM, the Wintonbury Historical Society and the Prosser Public Library will present a special performance of Sherlock Holmes' *The Adventure of the Speckled Band* in Prosser's meeting room.

The East Haddam Stage Company has been producing this play outdoors at Gillette Castle State Park all summer and is now taking it on a limited tour. With Bloomfield's connection to the Gillette family, it is appropriate that our town be one of the venues.

William Hooker Gillette (thanks to Luke Williams I now know his middle name, which he never used), the son of Francis Gillette and Elizabeth Hooker, made a career out of performing the role of Sherlock Holmes. It wasn't unusual in those days for an actor to perform the same role over and over again for years at a time (somewhat like Hal Holbrook has done with Mark Twain). William may or may not have remembered Bloomfield, but we can still claim him as one of "our boys."

If you're a Holmes fan or remember the old days of radio shows, or you're a lover of Gillette Castle, you won't want to miss this.

TAKE A LOOK AT THESE!

Old Farm School video: Ralph Schmoll has created a sixteen-minute video of the Old Farm School. To watch it, go to www.youtube.com and type Old Farm School into the search bar. You'll then be able to click on the link to the video.

Railroad Stations: Dennis Hubbs has posted some great photographs of old railroad stations in Bloomfield. Go to www.ddtvl.com/bfrail.htm.

The Drummer is published five times a year by

Wintonbury Historical Society, Inc.

151-153 School Street, P.O. Box 7454, Bloomfield, CT 06002

Tel. 860-243-1531

Email: Wintonbursociety@att.net

Web: www.bloomfieldcthistory.org

DECEMBER 4

WEDNESDAY

6:30 PM

PROSSER

NOTES FROM MY READING

Bloomfield's famous Francis Gillette is often described as active in both the abolitionist and temperance movements. Apparently, **temperance** was an urgent cause in his day. According to an article in *Wikipedia*, the first temperance association was formed in Connecticut in 1789. In 1825 Lyman Beecher lectured against all use of liquor, and in 1826 the American Temperance Society was formed. Gillette was in the midst of all this.

Michael Pollan writes, "In the early years of the nineteenth century, Americans began drinking more than they ever had before or since, embarking on a collective bender that confronted the young republic with its first major public health crisis—the obesity epidemic of its day. Corn whiskey, suddenly superabundant and cheap, became the drink of choice, and in 1820 the typical American was putting away half a pint of the stuff every day. That comes to more than five gallons of spirits a year for every man, woman, and child in America. The figure today is less than one.



"As the historian W. J. Rorabaugh tells the story in *The Alcoholic Republic*, we drank the hard stuff at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, before work and after and very often during. Employers were expected to supply spirits over the course of the workday; in fact, the modern coffee break began as a late-morning whiskey break called "the elevenses." Except for a brief respite Sunday morning in church, Americans simply did not gather—whether for a barn raising or quilting bee, corn husking or political rally—without passing the whiskey jug. [. . .]

"The results of all this toping were entirely predictable: a rising tide of public drunkenness, violence, and family abandonment, and a spike in alcohol-related diseases."

From Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (Penguin, 2006), Pp. 100-101. Submitted by Dick Pierce.



Please submit notes from your own reading for use in these pages.

TIDBITS

In May 1943 a group of Bloomfield people began publishing *The Messenger*, a newsletter to send to our young people serving in the armed forces. In the first issue, on a page entitled "Roadside Chatter," we find some interesting items:

- Gas is so short in supply that even a trip to the dentist is a treat.
- Mrs. Mabel Mann, our popular music teacher, is also quite a fisherwoman. We hear she caught a few ten-inch trout in the Tumble Brook Golf Brook.
- The Christian Petersen Dairy Farm on Terry Plains Road has been sold to the Imperial Agricultural Corporation of Hartford for a reported price of \$75,000. [It is now the Wintonbury Hills Golf Course]
- Town Manager and Mrs. John P. Ramsey have returned from a vacation trip to Charleston, S.C. and Sea Island, Georgia.

Get Yourself Published!

The Wintonbury Drummer solicits articles, personal reminiscences, book reviews, photographs, etc. from its readers. Materials for publication in the February issue should be received by January 8, 2014. (Or better yet—do it now!) Send directly to the President at 14 Julie Lane in Bloomfield or email in MSWord format to:

Wintonbursociety@att.net.



ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO: BIG FARM FIRE

(from the *Hartford Courant* November 9, 1913)

A loss of \$15,000 or more was caused last evening by a fire in Bloomfield, which burned the main buildings on the Capen farm, now owned by Robert G. Miller and situated on Maple avenue about three-quarters of a mile southwest of the center of the town. The Hartford fire department sent a steamer company, which worked several hours at the blaze.

Mr. Miller cannot account for the fire. His young son, Robert Jr., was the first to see it and when he called his father's attention to it, the fire was in the upper part of the main barn, at the east end. The barn was full of hay and Mr. Miller says no one had been in that particular part of the building since last July. It could only be reached by entering at the West end and crawling over the top of the haymow.

Mr. Miller employs 106 men and forty of them were at supper at the time in the farm boarding house. He called them out and they got out fifty cows in the lower part of the burning building. Eight horses in an adjoining barn were also saved, no live stock being burned as far as Mr. Miller know.



Unspecified barn photo from
myfirefighternation.com

The main building was 120 by 40 feet with eighteen-foot posts and held 125 tons of hay. The horse barn was at one side of it while between it and the house was a milkroom and workshop and a shed used for a garage. These sheds and other small buildings near the house were torn down and the rear of the house kept wet with buckets of water. A small hand pump was used to protect long wagon sheds, the boarding house and farm foreman's house. When it appeared that the Miller house was likely to go, all the neighbors turned to and removed everything moveable. There wasn't a thing left in the house except the wall paper and the kitchen stove. After the fire was out the neighbors turned to just as willingly and carted things back again. Mr. Miller was very thankful for the help afforded him.

Mr. Miller was unable to give the detailed figures of loss or insurance, but thought the loss would be \$15,000 on property destroyed, only partially covered by insurance. There is about \$2,000 insurance on the hay and about \$3,500 on the buildings. The loss will be felt by Mr. Miller in others ways besides. He is a road contractor and farmer both, and lost much equipment. He has had an income from his milk business of \$650 a month and was planning to double his herd of cows, but instead fears he will have to sell off what he has in which case that income stops. The farm buildings were in good condition. In the two years he has owned the place Mr. Miller has put new roofs on all of them. He had two silos, one just completed yesterday. One was full and the new one half full. Both were burned. A large supply of oats and all the farm produce stored in the buildings were destroyed.

Soon after the fire started, which was about 6:15, Mr. Miller called up Fire Chief John C. Moran and asked for help. Chief Moran reached President H. R. Clark of the fire board by telephone, secured authority to send No. 14 company from Blue Hills avenue and also sent Master Mechanic C. A. Cutler in his auto. The road to the Miller farm is being macadamized almost all the way from the Bloomfield highway to the house and the apparatus was pulled through only with the aid of extra horses sent to meet it by Mr. Miller. The lighter hose wagon made better time than the engine, but when the hose was laid from the nearest water supply, a brook at the foot of the hill on which the farm is located, the line, though 1,400 feet long, didn't reach

Continued on next page —>

even to the house and a telephone message was sent to the Britton garage to load up an auto with hose and rush it out. Master Mechanic Cutter's car was also sent back for more hose and half an hour later a sufficient supply was available. Meantime the firemen used chemicals and when the engine could go to work tried to [draw] on a small stream by hitching chemical hose and fire hose together in one long line, but even then just fell short of reaching the rear of the house where the heat was most severe. When the extra hose did reach the scene, however, two streams were put on and the fire deadened enough so that the apparatus could leave late in the evening.



timesunion.com photo

PRESIDENT'S LETTER

At our September program, I was reminded of the importance of being an audience. The first time I realized this was a few years ago when I was playing my cello with the Joza Karas String Ensemble at the Hartt School. Joza was an awesome person with a deep knowledge of music, and he helped our group of beginners to produce some (we thought) pretty good music. Once a year we gave a public performance, and each member of the ensemble tried to get as many friends and relatives to attend as possible. It was a thrill to come out on stage and see an audience there waiting to hear our music! After all, we were rank amateurs who had taken up an instrument or returned to an instrument later in life. Would anyone really want to listen to us play? It just impressed me that some people were willing to make up an audience for us, willing to come and listen—to say, in effect, that they appreciated our efforts, our long hours of preparation, our love for the music we played.



All of this feeds into the answer to this question: What does it mean to be a member of the Wintonbury Historical Society? The first and obvious answer, of course, is that it means to provide financial support. The Society depends on membership fees to fund about one-third of its annual budget. This is vital. With membership, you show an organization that you value its work, its newsletters, and the chance to keep up with what it's doing. Dues-paying members are the lifeblood of any non-profit like ours, and our Society needs more of them.

But for some of us, at least, membership also means being an audience. Attendance at programs and meetings takes more time than writing a check for dues, so not everyone becomes part of an audience. But, at least for the time being, our programs are free with free refreshments. And we've made an effort to schedule quality programs which have something to offer the listener. Granted, not everyone is interested in every topic; but so far our audiences have been appreciative.

You'll notice elsewhere in this issue that the Society has programs scheduled for both November and December. Won't you be part of the audience?

Dick Pierce



CURATOR'S CORNER

Recently genealogical assistance was given in reference to the Bloomfield Pinney property, Goodman Street, and ongoing William Gillette material to a New York State author writing a biography of William. (See the December Gillette program announcement on page 2.)



In the Small World department: The WHS Collections Committee was meeting, and this curator was sorting out material from a 1973 Old Farm School folder when I heard discussion about old records from Mrs Duke.

Society minutes from 1973 say, "Mrs. Woodford went over to Mrs. Duke's and found in the attic a bag of old records, the Clerk's Book dating from 1796 to 1870 (two books) for the Old Farms District. She loaned these to the Society."

Well, the committee members were going over some books which had recently been donated to WHS from the attic of a house being restored, and there I was reading about them coming to the Society from Mrs. Duke and given by Edna Woodford. Talk about coincidence!

--Fannie Gabriel

BOARD OF DIRECTORS HIGHLIGHTS

At its meeting on October 16, the Board of Directors learned that the Financial Policy Writing Committee met the week previous and will be drafting an Investment Policy for the Society. A meeting is scheduled for October 30 of a Website Enhancement Committee, and an Emergency Response Plan Committee will be meeting in November. All interested persons are welcome.

The Treasurer reported income for July 1 through September 30 of \$1,461 and expenses of \$2,851 (including the painting of the Old Farm School for \$950). Utilities for the three-month period were \$686, and printing costs were \$241. Our assets, including investments, totaled almost \$79,000. At the Society's annual meeting in June, no annual budget was available for adoption, so the Board of Directors approved a budget for 7/1/13 through 6/30/14. It anticipates \$8,725 in expenses and challenges members to provide an equal amount of income.

Upcoming 2013 programs are featured on pages 1 and 2 above. For February we are currently negotiating with a group called Nzinga's Daughters which sings songs of the Underground Railroad. Carmen Arace Middle School may co-sponsor this event and host it in its auditorium.

Curator Fannie Gabriel reported that twenty-one volunteers put in a total of 203 hours of work in June through September. Vice-president Doug Barnard reported fifty-seven visitors to the Old Farm School over a span of twenty-two Sundays.

Greg Babal has ready to go a fund-raising project in which we sell signs for historical houses, giving the date of construction. With further discussion, we decided to offer these signs to homeowners along with a brief history of each house, drawn from *Over Tunxis Trails*.

Selena Brooks led a group on October 12 removing excess plants from the Old Farm School flower garden and taking away non-period plants. The volunteers were from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints on Mountain Road, and the professional expertise was donated by Kevin Wilcox, owner of Silver Spring Nursery at Bloom Hill Farm on Cottage Grove Road.