



# The Wintonbury Drummer

Newsletter of the Wintonbury Historical Society

Bloomfield, Connecticut

November 2015

## NOVEMBER PROGRAM FEATURES BLOOMFIELD POET

*Under the Blue Hills: Bloomfield, Connecticut*

On Wednesday, November 4, prize-winning poet Marilyn Johnston will read her poems concerning the people, places, sights and sounds of beautiful Bloomfield, her chosen hometown, where she has worked and lived and written for thirty years. The program will begin at 7:00 PM at the Bloomfield History Center, 153 School Street.

Marilyn Johnston left a long-time communications career at Cigna for a writer's life, inspired by the beauty of the people and land of Bloomfield. Her poetry has received six Pushcart Prize nominations. Her first chapbook, *Against Disappearance*, was published as Finalist for the 2001 Poetry Prize of Redgreen Press (Pittsburgh) and she is author of two full collections, *Silk Fist Songs* and *Weight of the Angel*, published by Antrim House Books. She works for the Bloomfield Public Libraries and lives on an old farm under the blue hills, with her husband Ray.



Editor's note: *The Drummer* was privileged to print one of Johnston's poems, "Sanctuary: Kelly's Barn, Dun-caster Road," in its February 2014 issue.

### Memorial Service Planned

Chaplain Robert Bergner of Seabury has told the Society that a memorial service for Fannie Gabriel will be held in Heritage Hall at Seabury in December. The date and time will be announced later. All of Fannie's friends will be welcome at this occasion.

**Program: Wednesday, November 4, 7:00 PM at the Bloomfield History Center.**

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**BOARD OF DIRECTORS HIGHLIGHTS**

The Board met on October 14 with twelve people present. Everyone felt keenly the absence of Fannie Gabriel. The Board tried to identify at least some of the jobs she did and make sure there is someone to cover them as we go forward.

There was discussion of the Bicycle Tour brochures, which need updating and reprinting. The brochures were originally produced through a financial grant. Someone who is a bicyclist would be best able to do the revision, but there doesn't appear to be a bicyclist within the Society at present. For this reason, and because of the cost of reprinting and of the limited call for the brochure, it was decided not to pursue the matter further at this time.

Austin White introduced the Society's new Instagram account, on which he has begun to make entries. From your computer's browser, go to [www.instagram.com/wintonburyhistoricalsociety](http://www.instagram.com/wintonburyhistoricalsociety). The password is Filley1835.

The president asked Board members to consider changing the dues structure effective next year. He proposed seven categories: Student, \$10; Sponsor, \$15; Booster, \$25; Patron, \$40; Advocate, \$100; Benefactor, \$150; Champion, \$200. Business memberships would remain at \$50. This structure compares favorably with other area historical societies, and we will make no decision until at least January.

Finally, the Board discussed how we can best honor Fannie Gabriel's memory. The consensus was to name the History Center after her, but we will think about it and examine the idea carefully before reaching a decision.

**PROGRAM DATES 2016**

February 3

April 6

June 1 or 8

September 7

November 2

**BOARD OF DIRECTORS 2016**

January 13

March 16

May 11

August 17

October 12

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## IN MEMORIAM: FANNIE R. GABRIEL

Fannie R. Gabriel died on September 16, 2015, at the age of 93. A resident of the Seabury Retirement Community, she had been president of the Wintonbury Historical Society from 2000 to 2010 and was still serving as the curator of its museum and library at 153 School Street, Bloomfield.

Fannie will be remembered for her hospitality, her inquiring mind, and her many activities. She was a book-lover. She had a passion for history and read widely in it. For her, history revolved around real people. One friend commented, "Fannie was always interested in what you had to say and would take time to listen. She always remembered everything you said!" Fannie enjoyed bringing people together, introducing one person to another with a hint of what they had in common. She held annual January open houses for many years, both in her home at 43 Prospect Street and later at Seabury.

Fannie was an amazing woman. She and her brother grew up in a household with no father. Life was difficult when they were young. An avid reader of history and non-fiction, she remembered everything and was an amazing story teller. She played bridge & traveled extensively using the elder hostel program with one of her friends. She was interested in so many things, places and people. No matter whom she met, she made a connection. Long before networking was the "thing to do," Fannie was bringing people together. For everyone she met, she would find something they had in common, a college, a home town, genealogy, the Civil War or just that she was interested, because something was interesting to you.

Fannie was an Angel in so many lives. Whether driving others to appointments, holding her New Year's Open Houses, or any of the myriad public or private things she did, the world was so much better because Fannie Gabriel was here. She led by example, treating everyone equally, because everyone was important and special to her.

Fannie was born in Vermont in 1922, but she and her brother Philip Rockefeller grew up in Torrington and attended local public schools. She then went to the Junior College of Connecticut (now the University of Bridgeport). In an interview in *U B Knightlines*, Spring 2011, Fannie said: "It wasn't a big school, but we came from all over. My first roommate came from New York State, and my second roommate, Alma Neiman, was from Pennsylvania. We lived in a dorm on Fairfield Avenue. There was property behind it with a tennis court, and I used to get up at 6 A.M. to play. We also walked downtown to shop. It was no problem. We used to walk all over creation."



R. Schmoll photo

After earning her Associate's Degree in Bridgeport, Fannie completed her Bachelor of Arts Degree at Beaver College, a small women's college (now Arcadia University) outside Philadelphia. She had a great time there, reveling in the cultural offerings of the city, and the academic challenges of the college. She loved the freedom and the friendships. Early ambitions to be an archaeologist faded and she "was derailed" into history and social studies. For three years after college, she taught history, commuting in the summers to Hartford to work for the National Fire Insurance Company, which eventually led to a full time job there for over ten years. Then she became a "Girl Friday" for an independent Aetna agent for twenty-two years. (>>)

Fannie always was involved in clubs and community organizations. A 1958 clipping from an unknown newspaper said: “Miss Fannie Rockefeller of Torrington Junior Woman’s Club, honorary state director of the Connecticut Federation of Junior Women’s Clubs and senior extension chairman, is attending the 67<sup>th</sup> annual convention of General Federation of Woman’s Clubs, in session through Friday at the Sheridan-Cadillac Hotel, Detroit, Mich.” Fannie recalled how, about that time, “As Director of the Connecticut Juniors, I was to go to the organizational meeting of the Bloomfield Junior Women’s Club at Vincent School. I asked a nice man at work who came from Bloomfield where that was. He said it was right near his house on Prospect Street, gave me the directions and an invitation to supper.” That, of course, was George Gabriel, a gentle gentleman, and they were married at Christmas time in 1958. Her wedding invitation read: “Mrs. Jessie S. Rockefeller requests the honour of your presence at the marriage of her daughter Fannie Griffith to Mr. George Evans Gabriel on Saturday, the twenty-seventh of December, Nineteen hundred and fifty-eight at two o’clock in the afternoon, Center Congregational Church, Torrington, Connecticut.”

George Gabriel had his first heart attack only a month after the wedding and, in spite of a cautious lifestyle, died ten years later at his college reunion in Florida. In a 2011 presentation at Seabury, Fannie wrote: “I really have always been thankful for my being able to fall back on this volunteering, since my George had his first heart attack a month after we were married, and since it was recommended that I stop working to stay home, the opportunity, if only by phone, to assist where possible, was a real boon. By the time he passed on in 1968, I had become rather immersed in what I could do in Bloomfield.”



Fannie and Ralph Schmolli at Prosser

When it came to volunteering in her town, Fannie followed in the footsteps of her mother, Jessie, who was a member of the Torrington Women’s club, the Torrington Republican Committee and the Torrington Historical Society. From her youth, then, Fannie actively promoted community involvement. In the 1990s, she was a writer for *Our Town*, a local Bloomfield newspaper, writing a column entitled “Gabriel’s Horn: Heralding Volunteerism.” Her byline was “Fannie R. Gabriel, Professional Volunteer,” and the reader is told that “Gabriel blows her horn in every issue of ‘Our Town.’” In each column she highlighted someone or some organization that exemplified volunteer efforts in town. Each column ended by saying, “Volunteerism is a gift of service to Bloomfield.”

The list of Fannie’s own volunteer activities is long. Over the years, she was active in the Bloomfield Women’s Club, Bloomfield Junior Women’s Club, Bloomfield Garden Club, Friends of the Bloomfield Public Libraries, the Bloomfield Scholarship Foundation, and First Congregational Church. In 1994 she was named Civitan Citizen of the Year.

On the state level, Gabriel was an officer of the Connecticut Federation of Women’s Clubs and the Service Bureau of Women’s Organizations. On the national level, she was active in the General Federation of Women’s Clubs based in Washington, D.C., and contributed to its Women’s Resource Center.

She lectured about women extensively, not only in Bloomfield but throughout the state, on the contributions of women to society. One of her favorite subjects was the late Ella T. Grasso. “She embodies everything as a woman you can aim for,” Gabriel said about the former governor. Regardless of the information she had compiled, Gabriel was always looking for new ideas. “I still tear things out of the newspaper,” she said. Asked some years ago why she was so active in the community and its politics, she said she considered it important, because everyone is affected by laws. “Working together on committees you understand that people in town, no matter from what background, are interested in working for the good of the town.” It is a heritage that Fannie Gabriel modeled all her life, and it is now up to others to carry it forward.

*(This article was written by Richard Pierce utilizing materials that Fannie saved in a folder at the Bloomfield History Center. Thanks to Janis Langston, Fred Hesketh and Libbie Merrow, whose research and writing were also utilized.)*



## CATALOG OF CONGREGATIONS, #3 of a series

### Wintonbury Church, 54 Maple Avenue

On April 13, 1958, nine people from Bethel Baptist Church of Hartford began planning to start a new church in Bloomfield. Bethel, which has since disbanded, was at that time located on Kenyon Street, just north of Fern, in Hartford's West End. It was a congregation belonging to a denomination that had grown out of the older Swedish Baptist General Conference organized in 1879. By 1945 American Swedes had become well assimilated into American society and the churches were no longer primarily ethnic, so the name was shortened to Baptist General Conference (BGC). Originally having ties with the Northern Baptist Convention (since 1950 called American Baptist Churches), the BGC developed in a more conservative direction, pulling back from the growing liberalism of the Northern Baptists and by 1945 attaining an independent existence. In 2008 the BGC adopted a new name, Converge Worldwide. It has over a thousand churches in the U. S. and Canada.

The group from Bethel Baptist surveyed the town of Bloomfield and found four hundred people who said they were willing to come and visit a new Baptist church in town. Encouraged by that response, the group made plans for a church start. On September 7, 1958, the first public worship service was held in the Masonic Hall on Tunxis Avenue with seventeen in attendance. The name Wintonbury Baptist Church was adopted.

In 1960 the property at 54 Maple Avenue was purchased, and in 1961 the church hired Pastor Olsen. A house was built, and services were held in its large basement. Wintonbury grew slowly but then began to experience sagging attendance and financial support in the early 70s.

Holding to its original vision, the church took the bold step of hiring a newly graduated, 25-year-old pastor from Dallas Theological Seminary, Richard Ainsworth. Believing in a divine call to the northeast, Rich and his wife Kathy accepted a salary of \$100 per week and moved from Texas to Bloomfield. They lived in an apartment in the all-purpose building on Maple Avenue.



Wintonbury Church

R. Pierce photo

Wintonbury grew steadily under Rich's leadership. As the congregation grew, additional staff, including Associate Pastor Andre Riendeau, were added over the years. The building was modernized and enlarged, and the house next door at 24 Maple Avenue was purchased to provide offices, meeting rooms, and additional parking space.

In 2012 Andre Riendeau assumed the role of Wintonbury's Lead Pastor, and in 2013, after forty years of service, Rich Ainsworth retired. Andre's many years of prior service together with the supportive relationship between him and Rich made the pastoral transition a smooth one.

The church continues to prosper today. It has two services each Sunday, at 9:00 and 11:00 with a combined attendance of about 400. There are educational and relational programs for children and youth as well as men's and women's ministries. The church offers marriage mentoring, the Wintonbury School of Ministry, and Refugee Care Ministry, as well as spear-heading the state-wide anti-human trafficking organization, The Underground. On the third Saturday of each month, The Clothes Closet offers free clothing in all sizes and is open to all. (Continued on next page —>)

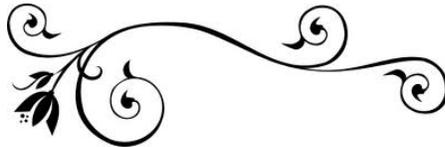
The church supports programs well beyond its walls. In fact, 20% of its budget supports local, regional, and international ministries. Through Converge Worldwide, Students International and various other organizations, Wintonbury supports twenty-five international, regional and local missionaries who serve in areas ranging from Asia, the Middle-East, the Dominican Republic, and Europe to New England.

Locally, the church supports Hartford City Mission, The Hartford Project, Coram Deo, Youth Challenge, and others. In 2014 Wintonbury actively participated in the planting of a new congregation, Christ Proclamation Church in Windsor.

In its more than half century of existence, Wintonbury has sent a number of its people out into full-time Christian work. Steve and Carol Smith work with churches in the Ivory Coast. Brian Doyle founded a national men's ministry now known as Iron Sharpens Iron. Bloomfield native Dan Eddy serves with the U. S. Center for World Missions (Pasadena, CA). Dave Sargent has a ministry in Moldova (in Eastern Europe), Rich Fulton is doing regional evangelism ministry in Rhode Island, Dave Ambrose serves with Hartford City Mission, and Rebecca Burger has a worship and prayer ministry in the Middle East. The church is currently working on sending a couple to the Middle East to do Syrian refugee work full time.

More information may be secured by visiting the church's website, [www.wintonbury.org](http://www.wintonbury.org), or by calling the church office at 860-242-8996.

*(Thanks to Nichole Perreault, Communications Director, for supplying material for this article. Some information came from the church's website. The denominational history is mostly from Wikipedia.)*



## Bottles Rescued from Miller House

The "old" bottles passersby may have seen in the front window of the 1762 Miller House at the corner of Maple and Mountain Avenues in Bloomfield—recently demolished—have been saved. Society member Dennis Hubbs contacted Haz Pros, Inc., the folks charged with tearing down the historic home. He was granted permission to remove the bottles by Chris Stefanowicz, Director of Demolition Services, who also obtained the owner's permission. Hubbs, armed with a ladder and hammer, removed the bottles on September 2<sup>nd</sup>. They have been washed and will be cataloged and given to the Wintonbury Historical Society for preservation. According to Hubbs, who is also a bottle collector, "The 50+ colorful bottles are more collectible than antique, which we did not know until they were retrieved, but still they are mementos of the once stately colonial home. Most are of a presidential and famous person series and one bottle even had an old G. Fox & Co. tag on it.

*(Thanks to Dennis Hubbs for this article.)*



The Miller House as it once looked

WHS archives photo

*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 6, 2016. (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](mailto:Wintonbursociety@att.net).

## MEMORIES OF LAGAN'S FARM by Barbara Long

“The James G. Lagan house, Maple Avenue was built in 1785 by Oliver Hubbard; demolished in 1982.” (Caption under photo, taken 1935, formerly in The Prosser Library, Bloomfield, CT”)

I close my eyes and it is a summer morning 60 years ago. I am standing barefoot on the gravel driveway of 72 Maple Avenue admiring the strings of pale blue morning glories covering the screened porch. Two steps more and I am through the kitchen door. My aunts in their house dresses and aprons look up from their chores with a smile. The farm was the heart of my mother's family, a place to which we all returned. It was my second home, a place I knew as well as my own. In my mind I can walk through every room, remembering. Years ago there were summer picnics on the lawn with cold fried chicken, fresh corn, and homemade root beer, served on sawhorse-and-plank tables. Christmas night suppers for all the family featured scalloped oysters, Indian pudding, and homemade fruitcake. Every occasion was a time for the men to light up their favorite cigars, so the air was blue with smoke. Year after year we were drawn to the farm, to celebrate and to mourn.

When the last child of James G. Lagan, Sr. died, the farm was sold and the house was razed. For a number of years the property stood vacant, a giant maple tree the only landmark. Roy Lagan planted that as a boy, and it still stands in the yard of a large new home. Once the farm passed out of the family, nobody's home was large enough for reunions. The younger generation dispersed, and stories about the early days ended.

James G. Lagan bought the property at 72 Maple Avenue “early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.” He first rented another farm at 696 Cottage Grove Road. The landlord wanted the family out before the crops they planted were harvested, but James refused. Once they were gone, the landlord accused the family of stealing the toilet. (He had not noticed they had relocated it to the ell of the house.) A family photo (undated) taken on the front porch of the new home shows adolescent and young adult children. Of the twelve, ten settled in Bloomfield. Two brothers, Jim and Frank, served as minor town officers. Five siblings spent their entire lives running the farm.

My brother Leslie and I spent most of our childhood where our mother had grown up. When the corn was growing we skirted the field from our house and followed the stone wall that penned in the cows. This area was known as “the lane.” At one time there was a stile to cross the fence. In some seasons we could hike right across the field onto the farmhouse driveway. At least several of the great-aunts were always at home and glad to see us. During afternoons the kitchen was quiet. In winter the black and chrome oil stove “Magee Grand” radiated warmth. On the far wall a large white electric stove on legs stood underneath a giant map of the world. When news came over the radio the family could pinpoint its location. In the south corner of the room was a big oval table with claw feet, painted gray. Dark linoleum covered the floor, always polished, and terrific for sliding across in socks.

The only bathroom was off the kitchen and had an ancient claw foot tub. The sun room next door had a big bay window full of geraniums all winter long. In summer it looked out over a long bed (Continued—>)



Lagan family

Upper left: Albert, 1888; James Jr., 1875; Rose, 1880; Frances, 1886; William, 1882; Helen, 1890. Upper right: Charles, 1884; John, 1872; Mary, 1878; Katherine, 1873; Francis, 1876. Center: James G., Sr., 1846; Mary Jane (Cavanagh), 1850. Lower center: Martha, 1893; unknown dog.

of perennials. Fanny (“Sissy”) Lagan was an avid gardener. She passed her love of plants on to my mother, Betty Lagan, who founded Bloomfield’s “Hometown Garden Club” in the late fifties. She did her newspaper crosswords nearly every day, sitting in a chair right by the sunny window. Her knowledge of words was amazing, especially since she had to leave school before 7<sup>th</sup> grade to help at home.

The front parlor was used for home wakes. The body was displayed in open casket and relatives kept watch all night. The priest came to the house, and we all said the rosary on our knees on the hard floor. Aunt Molly keened, a high pitched wail from the old country, reserved for mourning. I was scared and did not want to be there. Even when there was not a wake, I did not want to go near that room. Past the parlor was a long dining room used for big gatherings. Several china closets and servers held Depression glass, and hand painted German plates. A long pantry held the refrigerator, everyday dishes, pots, and pans. There was a huge flour barrel. The aunts once ran a home bakery with regular customers coming from Hartford. Aunt Mamie’s loaf cake was a particular favorite. It was a dense and white, made in a deep pan, laced with raisins and citron and glazed with a white frosting. Aunts Fanny and Mamie produced trays of wonderful cookies: oatmeal; icebox; hermits; and sugar.

Up the narrow, steep stairs were four bedrooms. The large sunny southwest room with a spooled double bed belonged to Aunt Mamie. When I was a girl it had a spotless white chenille bedspread, several old dressers, and a holy water font at the door. After her death it remained untouched. I looked at it from the doorway, not wanting to enter the shrine. Down the hall were other bedrooms for some of the uncles. Up in the attic was a sleeping space for a hired man. The entire house was always immaculate, with any remnant of the barns left by the back door. The men washed at a sink in a stone floored room below the kitchen upon coming in from the fields.



Lagan home on Maple Avenue

Photos courtesy of Barbara Long

The 1935 photo of the house shows an open wrap-around porch which was later screened. On summer evenings, rocking in chairs covered with striped oil cloth provided respite from days of hard work. A sign on the front lawn usually announced fruit or vegetables for sale in season. A big round flower bed was always planted with bright red salvia. Aunt Sissy watched over the gardens, from the long perennial bed with its peonies and lilac bush to the green wooden window boxes overflowing with petunias.

We spent as much time outside the farmhouse as inside. The barns were a great place for kids to explore. In our earliest years there were two huge draft horses in their own barn with their collars and harnesses hanging on the wall. Occasionally we were allowed to ride on their backs while Al plowed. The horses drew the “stone boat,” a sledge used for hauling rocks dug out of the fields. Every year Indian arrowheads were unearthed and saved in a cigar box by Frank Lagan. I was school age when the uncles sold the horses and got a red Farmall tractor. They were probably in their 70s when life in the fields got a bit easier. I can still see Al, big straw hat and overalls, sitting proudly up on that new machine, ready to plant corn.

Nearby a dairy barn housed a dozen or more cows. The uncles got no days off from milking. Les and I would watch the cows as they fed. In addition to grass, and hay in the winter, they got a mash of grains with citrus peel, plus ground up corn stalks. In early fall corn grown for fodder was cut down, chopped up by machine, then sprayed up into a hole at the top of the silo. The silage had a sweet, slightly fermented smell. When the level in the silo got down low enough we could stand inside and look up to the sky through the hole in the roof. Out in back of the barn was a rising manure pile, a source of organic fertilizer for spring planting.

Lagan’s pastures ran north along Maple Avenue to Burr Road then headed east, making a large rectangle, with our house on the south edge. The richness of farm life was woven into our childhood, from calving, to strawberry picking, to riding to market with the uncles. In fall I would stand on the newly cut corn at sunset, looking up towards Grant Hill at birds on their migratory flight. Even then I sensed that the beauty of the place might not last. Today it is all gone. Only the trees my father planted over fifty years ago remain to mark our family’s Bloomfield life. Despite an absence of forty years, I retain a deep love for my hometown.