

The Wintonbury Drummer



Newsletter of the Wintonbury Historical Society

Bloomfield, Connecticut

April 2022

Wintonbury Historical Society and the Bloomfield Public Library
present via Zoom

>>Friday, April 29, 3:00 pm<<

Dr. Martin Luther King Junior's Summers in Connecticut Tobacco Fields

Catherine Labadia will discuss the trials and victories of working together with one town's citizens and other government agencies. Together, they saved a tobacco field where Dr. King worked during his college summers from being turned into another Simsbury subdivision.

Attendees will learn more about this particular story and more about how the State Office of Historic Preservation can help people and agencies who care about preservation, a subject very relevant to Bloomfield.

Catherine Labadia is Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer and Staff Archaeologist at the State Historic Preservation Office of the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development.



Ms. Labadia
Twitter photo



This is a Zoom program. To attend, please register ahead of time at <https://bplct.org>. Click on Event Calendar and register. The library will send you the necessary link.

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BOARD HIGHLIGHTS

The Board of Directors met virtually on Wednesday, March 9, 2022, with seventeen people present. Program chair Ruthanne Marchetti reviewed the March and April programs and said that a program is planned for Tuesday, June 21, 3:00 PM with Mark Oppenheimer, author of a book about a 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue massacre. Plans are pending for the annual meeting in September.

Allison Wilkos showed everyone the pictures of the proposed new library building with particular attention to the history room and its adjacent conference room. (Go to bplct.org, click on "Library Building Committee," then "TSKP Studio Project Update") The plans may still be modified.

The Society has received from Connecticut Humanities a grant of \$5,700, of which 75% (\$4,275) has been deposited to the WHS account, with the remainder to come at the end of the year. The Board will be discussing how best to use these funds.

There was discussion about using the 200th anniversary of the Roberts House (across Mountain Avenue from Prosser) for a fund-raising event. Owner Paul Butler has expressed his support of this. A committee is forming to make plans.

Doug Barnard reported that WHS fire extinguishers have been recharged, and an estimate of \$2,250 has been given for upgrading our dehumidification system.

Janis Langston has registered the Society with Instagram. To view our pages, go to https://www.instagram.com/wintonbury_historical_society.

Board meetings are scheduled for Wednesday, April 20, 3:00 PM and Wednesday, May 11, 3:00 PM, both to be hybrid Zoom/live at the Gabriel History Center. If you're not on the Board and would like to attend, send a message to Marilyn Johnston at the email address shown below.

OUR BUSINESS MEMBERS

Many Rivers Community Acupuncture, 3 Barnard Lane

Printmark Services, 21 Old Windsor Road

ATTENTION!

The Wintonbury Drummer invites readers to contribute articles, personal reminiscences, book reviews, photographs, etc. Material for publication in the June issue should be received by May 1, 2022

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DEDICATION OF THE PROSSER LIBRARY, 1903

[Editor's note: The following is a transcript of an article found in WHS archives concerning the opening of the Prosser Library in 1903 in the old Town Hall building at the corner of Tunxis and Mountain Avenues, the site of the present library building. The article appeared in an unnamed, undated newspaper. Due to space limitations, I have shortened the article, but I have tried to keep the original style intact. As the current library building is slated for demolition, with the construction of a new, larger building to follow, it is an appropriate time to remember the library's past. Another brief history can be found on the Bloomfield Public Library website. See <https://bplct.org/>.]

Bloomfield 1903: As an event which marks another and all-important step in the line of progress in this vicinity, the dedicatory exercises of the Prosser Public library, the institution endowed by the late Levi E. Prosser of Boston, on Tuesday afternoon [May 19], were attended with much success.

The day was extremely hot, otherwise everything was all that could be desired. The audience completely filled the assembly hall, and included many out-of-town visitors. The library presented a handsome appearance and was charmingly decorated with plants and flowers. It opens with about 700 volumes selected so as to cover the various branches of fiction, science and history and reference, while thirty-three of the leading periodicals will be found in the reading room. The directors hope that the library will become the depository of documents and data of all kinds bearing on the history of the town as well as the county and state, and contributions of such matter will be thankfully received.



The exercises included some very interesting papers, and the music by the Emmons' orchestra was especially fine. In acknowledging the gift of the library for the board of directors, President A. N. Filley also expressed thanks for gifts such as portraits, books, and a clock.

Secretary Charles D. Hine spoke on "The Place of the Public Library in Town Life." He explained the attitude of the state toward the libraries, of the desire to aid them, and said there are 70 libraries organized under the state law. From books and books alone, from libraries rightly used and from them alone, we can gain the quickening of the intelligence, the waking up of drowsy thoughts and slumbering impulses. He spoke of the munificence of the donor [L. Prosser] in providing such an ample fund to supply the library with all that the people of the community can use, of the wise provisions of the endowment. No other library in the state, he said, is so generously endowed or has such a large income with which to purchase books, and congratulated the town upon this remarkable cause for pride. The spirit of the community may be moved to a higher plane by its acquaintance with books.

The principal address of the occasion was given by Mrs. Ella Roberts Wood, the subject being "The Old Libraries of Wintonbury and Bloomfield," and it was as follows:

Dear friends of Bloomfield and the Prosser library: I think we have come to congratulate each other to-day on this event. There has been much working on the part of some of us and long waiting on the part of others, till at last we come up to this dedication day.

Charles Kingsley tells us that "except a living man, there is nothing more wonderful than a book—a message to us from the dead, from human souls whom we never saw, who lived perhaps thousands of miles away, and yet these little sheets of paper speak to us, amuse us, comfort us, open their hearts to us as brother!" I have been asked to speak to you this afternoon of the old libraries of Wintonbury and Bloomfield. I have found it exceedingly difficult to find any facts or dates regarding them and thought at first I would not try to say anything, but when I (continued—>)

realized that in all probability not twenty persons living in our town to-day ever heard of the old libraries, I concluded to tell you the little I know about them.

There have been three libraries established in this place, showing that we have been and are a book-loving people. The first library in the parish of Wintonbury was called "The Wintonbury Society Library" and was a church library. The old record book bears the date of 1793, and the first record was made September 2nd of that year. Evidently the value of this book was not realized, for many pages have been utilized as a scrap book, making it difficult to decipher the writing, and much of it is covered up entirely so we cannot find the name of any librarian till the years 1795 to 1797, when Jonathan Palmer held the office of treasurer and librarian from 1797 to 1800. Mr. Zadock Brown was also librarian, and in 1800 Luther Fitch came into office, his last reckoning with the society being in 1814. At stated times, they had what they called a "reckoning" with the librarian, what we would call a settlement of accounts.

The sum of 12 shillings was paid for a right in the library, and on payment of this amount they became proprietors. They must have had strict rules and regulations regarding fines, and they were carefully kept by the librarians. We find such records as these: "Received of Rev. Wm. F. Miller for not returning, 1 shilling and 6 pence. Mary New fined for not returning. Received of Caleb Hitchcock for tearing a leaf in Edward's on The Affections, page 131, 4 pence." The fine for soiling a book was 2 pence; and for turning down a leaf, one penny. More were fined for greasing the books than anything else. Here is a sample: "Received of Jonathan Bidwell for greasing Dod on Death, p. 157, 2 pence." Sometimes several pages would be greased; then the fine would be much larger. Deacons and ministers, laymen and widows were often fined for greasing.

You may wonder how so many books were greased. I suppose the men weary from the labor of the day would sit down in the candlelight to read, and holding the candle between their eyes and the printed page, the sand man would come along unawares, and while they were nodding the tallow would be dripping on to the book. But whatever happened to the book the name of the offender, the offence, title, and page of book were given, also amount of fine.

The record says they bid for books, which seems to have been a very old custom. In 1805 they began to keep the records in dollars and cents. The last date that relates to the library is an account with Hiram Roberts, December 1824. His name is not signed as librarian.

The second library was called the Wintonbury Union Library. We have no dates and no records of this library. Several books have been found that belonged to it, a proof that it once existed. One is "Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress." On the old book-plate is the number 324; and it also says they then held annual meetings the first Tuesday in January, books to be returned the first Tuesday of January, March, July, September, and November. Another book was entitled "Travels in Various Countries of Europe, Asia and Africa," published in 1817. Then we have two volumes with the date of 1810. Evidently, they were much read. "A General View of the Manners, Customs and Curiosities of Nations," illustrated by maps and engravings, the engravings are certainly a study. Ruskin says: "No book is worth little that is not worth much. Nor is it serviceable until it has been read and re-read and loved and loved again, and marked so that you can refer to the passages you want in it as a soldier can seize the weapons he needs in an armory." You see this has not only been read and reread, but served up and again.

An interesting volume is "An Epitome of the Arts and Sciences,"—adapted to the use of schools. It certainly treats of everything that had ever been heard of up to that (continued—>)



time, and is a veritable encyclopedia in 324 pages, date 1811. Two volumes of “Knox’s Essays,” date 1782. These books have the old-fashioned S and came down from the first library. These 10 books are from my attic. The last of my collections and the oldest is entitled “West on the Resurrection,” and bears the date 1747. This also belonged to the “Wintonbury Library.” The only date I have found connected with this Wintonbury library is on the fly-leaf of one of the old books, name E. D. Hudson, Wintonbury Librarian, March 19, 1818.

And now we come to the third library, called the “Bloomfield Library Company,” kept by Mr. Samuel Buckingham. No record can be found of this library, yet we know it was running in 1851, as I have several bound volumes of the magazine of that year, and we have the word of one man who drew books from the library in 1864. So between these dates the representative men of the town might have been seen wending their way to Mr. Buckingham’s home on alternate Monday evenings, for the library was kept in his shoe shop and when the patrons had assembled an auctioneer was chosen and the assembled company bid off their choice of books offered by the auctioneer, paying for the privilege of keeping them two weeks, as much as the demand for the book or magazine would bring—anywhere from one cent to twenty-five.

There may be some in the audience who were members of this library. Mr. Tudor Whiton was a member and joined, he thinks, about 1856. This, like the others, was a subscription library, and at the breaking up the books were divided among the members. And so the third of the old libraries had its day and ceased to be.

Mrs. Wood then read from a letter written by Mr. W. H. H. Ely of Tarrytown, N. Y., who spent the years from 1862 to 1864 in Bloomfield, and as he expressed it, had read nearly all of the 300 books in the library, although quite a young boy. Speaking of the influence in the earlier days of the little country libraries and the academy, cannot be overrated. Many of the readers in these libraries and attendants of these academies were unable to take a college training and thus obtain a degree, so received their instruction solely through the county library and academy.

Many of the greatest men of this country, men who have been able to do great things for their fellow men, who have attained prominence in science, literature and arts, the foremost men of commerce, the great inventors, leaders in the ministry, the bar and in medicine, drew their first inspirations from some book handed out to them from a little country library.

Photo credits: WHS archives

IN MEMORIAM

Lucy Woodford Wirsul died on March 2 at age 91. Lucy grew up in the large Woodford homestead on School Street on the farm her family had owned and farmed continuously since colonial days. One of her family was an early teacher in the Old Farm School. For generations they were pillars of the Congregational Church. She and her husband, Walt Wirsul (BHS, ‘48), built a smaller house on the 109-acre farm, and Walt helped her father with the farming. It saddened Lucy when the big old house burned and when the Town bought the farmland for Samuel Reed Park.



Lucy Wirsul
Htfd Courant photo

Lucy was well known by generations of Bloomfield parents and children as the founder and director (for 29 years) of the Bloomfield Congregational Church Nursery School. A longtime member of the Historical Society, she wrote the book *Not Lost ... Gone Before: A History of Latimer Hill Cemetery* (where her parents, Harold and Gertrude, are buried). The pictorial book *Images of America: Bloomfield* was compiled by Lucy, along with Roberta Kania, Eileen Phelps, and Elizabeth Merrow. Lucy Wirsul was a major contributor to the growth of the Wintonbury Historical Society, and she will be long remembered.

Great Drain Has Ecological Significance

By Mary Haslinger

Reprinted from the *Bloomfield Journal*, June 17, 1994



Wood Duck



White-tailed deer fawn



Cardinal Flower
Terry Plains Road



Great Blue Heron
Julie Lane

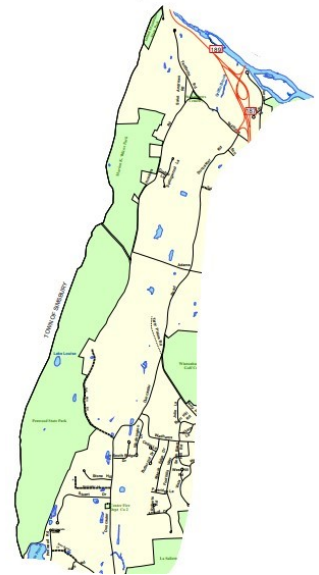
One of the most ecologically significant regions in Bloomfield is the Great Drain. More accurately known as the Griffin Brook watershed, it is located west of Duncaster Road and flows northwards from its headwaters near Gun Mill Road to the Farmington River on Bloomfield's northern border.

The Great Drain lies in a long natural geological depression between the Talcott Mountain ridge and Duncaster Road, which runs on a lower ridge. Both of these ridges are basalt bedrock that rose to the surface millions of years ago when the world's continents drifted and the earth buckled.

The Great Drain is a red maple swamp. Swamps are protected under state inland wetlands laws, not only as wetlands, but also as watercourses. The state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) recognizes several classifications of red maple swamps. The Great Drain falls into the most ecologically superior class. The reason is that the water running into it off the Talcott Mountain ridge carries dissolved calcium that has leached out of the rock. The calcium, a valuable nutrient, enriches further the already nutritious character of the wetland soil in the swamp itself. Calcium enriched red maple swamps, such as the Great Drain, are uncommon in central Connecticut.

Wetland soil rich in nutrients in the appropriate degree supports the growth of lush, diverse vegetation. "Wetlands in general are among the most highly productive plant communities in the ecosystem," according to the DEP, and the Great Drain in particular is an "area of concern." The lush plant life of the Great Drain consists of an abundance of sensitive fern, as well as royal, marsh and cinnamon ferns growing on the swamp floor. Marsh marigolds and arums are among the wildflowers which add color to this carpet.

The "understory" vegetation, or shrub layer, includes silky dogwood, spice bush, winterberry, high bush blueberry and common alder. The mature or climax tree growth (continued—>)



The Great Drain between Duncaster Road and Penwood State Park. Farmington River at the top.



Black Bears
Julie Lane



Purple Loosestrife and
Joe Pye Weed
Terry Plains road



Ring-necked pheasant
Terry Plains road

Photo credits: Top of page 3,
first two from internet. Re-
mainder by R. Pierce

consists of red ash, white oak, tulip poplar, cottonwood, and silver maple, as well as red maple. The various heights of vegetation described are critically important to the Great Drain's overall ecological integrity. This complete vertical stratification provides shelter for many breeding animals, protection for the species that winter over, and cover for songbirds.

Lush, diverse vegetation supports diverse wildlife. The Great Drain is absolutely teeming with wildlife of all sorts. Wildlife is attracted not only by the quantity of plant food and the vegetation cover, but also by the constant supply of water. In addition, the Talcott Mountain ridge, which rises along the entire western perimeter, provides shelter from storms and, because it is predominantly parkland, buffer from human habitation.

Talcott Mountain is an "upland" (versus wetland) ecosystem and so serves to complement the Great Drain, as many animal species require both Habitat types in their life cycle. Examples of amphibians living in the Great Drain are spotted, painted, and snapping turtles; green, wood, pickerel, and bull frogs; and dusky, two-lined, red-backed, marbled, spotted, and blue-spotted salamanders. The many mammals that call the Great Drain home include red and grey squirrels, raccoon, skunk, weasel, mink, red fox, and of course white-tailed deer. More than one hundred species of birds can be sighted in the Great Drain. More than forty are known to nest or breed there. Nesting birds include swamp sparrow, white-eyed vireo, black-billed cuckoo, ruby-throated hummingbird, green heron, wood duck, red-tailed hawk, broad-winged hawk, and barred owl.

The Great Drain is clearly a precious resource as a wildlife habitat. But it serves humans as well.

Of the wetland systems in town, it is one of the most important in its ability to perform flood control. During heavy spring rain it literally traps the water runoff from Talcott Mountain and holds it like a sponge. Only gradually does it release the water into the Farmington River, and when it does the water is pure and clean—because wetlands are Mother Nature's pollution control, as well as flood control, devices. In the future, the Farmington River may have to become part of the drinking water supply of the Metropolitan District.

Many Bloomfield naturalists include in the definition "Great Drain" the wetlands system running parallel to the Griffin Brook watershed but located on the east side of Duncaster Road. This wetlands area is a separate watershed and a different ecological unit but, like Talcott Mountain ridge, it buffers and complements the Great Drain proper. It is a grassy or meadow wetlands, versus the wooded swamp wetlands, versus the Talcott uplands. The three habitat types lying contiguous to one another may be said to form a biosphere.

LETTERS FROM SOCIETY MEMBERS

From Halesteen Graham Days:

There are two corrections to make on page 5 of my article in the February Issue of *Wintonbury Drummer*: Dwight Freeney graduated from Syracuse University in 2002, instead of 2001, and he went to the Super Bowl three times, once as the Super Bowl champion.

From Libbie Merrow:

I remember Anika Noni Rose as a child. She got her start in school in my class at Lucy Wir-sul's nursery school at the Congregational Church. I can't remember who my co-teacher was that year, probably Evelyn Fox or Virginia Bain.

From Nancy Kline and Jim Trail:

Congratulations to the Wintonbury Historical Society for all you have accomplished this year. The garden tour was a huge success. Your communications continue to keep us current and add to our knowledge of Bloomfield history. Thank you!

From Alice Hendrickson:

Enclosed is a check. Wish I could do more. I really wish I could get to a meeting or two but, living in New Hampshire, I don't get down when you have meetings or activities, especially as I'm almost 94. Good luck. Sounds like things are going well.

One Hundred Years Ago

From the *Hartford Courant*, 9 June 1922, page 5:

The first edition of the "Tattler," the school paper of the local high school, has made its appearance. The editor in chief is John Wurdig, and the business manager is Robert McCormick. They were ably assisted and should be given much praise and commendation. In it are the reports of all the activities of the high school during the past year and on the inside cover is a paragraph which speaks in glowing terms of A. Clark Hall, chairman of the school board of Bloomfield for many years. The high standard in which the Bloomfield High School has attained has been mostly through the efforts of Mr. Hall during the first years of the high school in Bloomfield. Copies of the "Tatler" are on sale by members of the high school and also in the stores.

MORE DONORS THANKED

The *Drummer* thanked 45 year-end donors in its February issue and is happy to add the names of five more generous members.

Barbara Beeching
Diana P. Hughes
Paul McCormick
Dorothy McCormick Shalev
Doris T. Watkins



2017 photo by R. Pierce
Bloomfield High School