

The Wintonbury Drummer



Newsletter of the Wintonbury Historical Society

Bloomfield, Connecticut

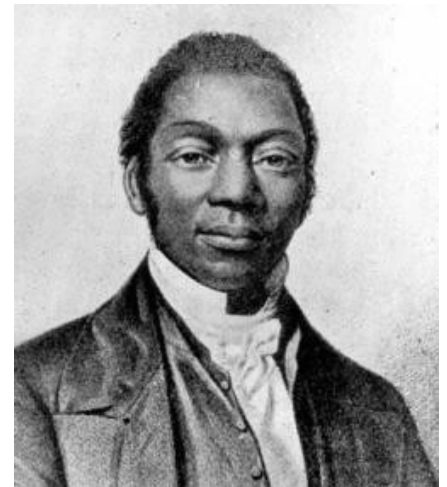
February 2023

ESCAPED SLAVE SUCCEEDS IN HARTFORD

If you had ancestors living in Hartford in the mid-1800s, they probably knew James W. C. Pennington. Pennington was born a slave in Maryland in 1809. He was trained as a blacksmith and continued in that trade until, at nineteen, he escaped from his master and fled to Pennsylvania, where he was taken in by a Quaker family. They taught him to read and write. He then moved to New York, found work, and continued his education, attending school at night. He became a teacher and a minister and eventually came to Hartford, where he served as pastor of the Talcott Street Congregational Church (now Faith Congregational) in the 1840s. In 1850 he published an account of his early life, *The Fugitive Blacksmith*, from which the following is excerpted.

Passing as quietly and rapidly as possible, ... I heard a course stern voice cry, "Halloo!" ... He sprang forward and seized me by the collar. ...

If you ask me if I expected when I left home to gain my liberty by fabrications and untruths, I answer, no! My parents, slaves as they were, had always taught me, when they could, that "truth may be blamed but cannot be ashamed." So far as their example was concerned, I had no habits of untruth. I was arrested [while making my escape], and the demand made upon me, "Who do you belong to?" Knowing the fatal use these men would make of *my* truth, I at once concluded that they had no more right to it than a highwayman has to a traveler's purse. Whatever my readers may think, therefore, of the history of events of the day, do not admire in it the fabrications, but see in it the impediments that often fall into the pathway of the flying bondman. See how when he would do good, evil is thrust upon him.



James Pennington
Wikipedia photo

See: <https://connecticuthistory.org/reverend-james-pennington-a-voice-for-freedom>

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Past President

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David Roones

Richard Pierce

2024

Homer Guilmartin

Richard Hughes

Mara Whitman

Vacancy

2025

Paula Baram

Halesteen Graham Days

Mary Laiuppa

Wendy Wolcott

BOARD OF DIRECTORS HIGHLIGHTS

The Board met on November 21, December 12, and January 9, with an average of sixteen people present. Libbie Merrow has found someone at Seabury who can audit our books without charge. Dick Pierce reported that we have applied for a Connecticut Cultural Fund Operating Support Grant for 2023 and will soon be wrapping up our report to CT Humanities for our 2022 grant. David Roones reported that the West Hartford Historical Society, thanks to a grant it got, will be able to offer Witness Stones training next year at a cost to WHS of about \$400 for three workshops. Advance donations of \$200 have already been received to cover the workshop cost. The Board discussed improving WHS publicity, particularly online, and endorsed sending more informational email messages to our membership.

A motion to work with Prof. Fiona Vernal on oral history training was approved. A training session with Prof. Vernal was scheduled for January 12 at 330 Park Avenue, with fourteen signed up. After discussion of the Witness Stones Project, the Board authorized David Roones to make our application. In December, special guests from the Bloomfield Humanities Committee's Mosaic Project explained their vision and how we might collaborate.

The Board asked Libbie Merrow and Halesteen Graham Days to complete and submit our application for a Museum Makeovers grant (from Conservation Connection @ CT State Library).

Halesteen Graham Days and Ron Marchetti met with Superintendent of Schools James Thompson and his cabinet and discussed teaching local history in Bloomfield schools. Past third grade efforts in this area were mentioned. School personnel will take the lead on developing this idea, possibly leading even to a half-credit course at the high school.

**OUR BUSINESS MEMBERS**

Many Rivers Community Acupuncture, 3 Barnard Lane
Printmark Services, 21 Old Windsor Road
Wade's Farms, 498 Simsbury Road

**ATTENTION!!!**

The Wintonbury Drummer invites readers to contribute articles, personal reminiscences, book reviews, photographs, etc. Material for publication in the April issue should be received by March 15, 2023.

The Wintonbury Drummer

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HONOR ROLL OF YEAR-END DONORS

Gifts received: \$3,975

Albert, Dori-Ann and Roger
 Baram, David and Paula
 Beeching, Barbara J.
 Berman, Robert and Phyllis
 Bernstein, Sara, and Joseph Shortall
 Cappadona, John and Rise
 Dahlgren-Dechand, Judith
 Dworin, Judy, and William Lambert
 Fox, Cheryl B.
 Graham Days, Halesteen
 Grisevich, George W.
 Guilmartin, Homer F.
 Hagar, David and Lois
 Hendrickson, Alice
 Hubbs, Dennis and Donna
 Isaacson, Jaqueline, and Louis Blumenfeld
 Katz, Tobie E.
 Laiuppa, Mary K.
 Lauretti, David G.
 Marchetti, Ron and Ruthanne
 McKay, Elaine and Paul
 Merrow, Elizabeth
 Mitchell, Andrew and Joanne
 Nielsen, Donna L.
 Pepin, Catherine
 Pierce, Richard and Jean
 Schmoll, Ralph and Louise
 Schulman, Sydney T.
 Smith, Robert and Sharon
 Stone, Jonathan, and Thomas Flanigan
 Stout, John and Elizabeth
 Thompson, Shirley and William
 Weissenburger, William and Lois Ann
 Whalen, Robert and Penny
 Wolcott, Wendy, and Jeffrey Small

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD: Sources to Start With

Visit the Connecticut State Library, History and Genealogy dept., and the Connecticut Historical Society to ask about the Underground Railroad in Connecticut. Ask for information on Connecticut's Freedom Trail, with sites associated with the Underground RR.

Look for a biography of Francis Gillette or a collection of his papers. (Continued at right—>)



Officers, Directors and others, December 5, 2022

Photo by Janis Langston

L to R: Homer Guilmartin, Marilyn Johnston, Mary Laiuppa (in front), Christian Wolliston, John Cappadona, Allison Wilkos, David Roones, Halesteen Graham Days, Mara Whitman, Paula Baram, Louise Schmoll, Richard Pierce

Missing: Elizabeth Merrow, Ruthanne and Ron Marchetti, Susan Vancour, Ralph Schmoll, Tobie Katz,

Books

Blight, David W. *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory*. Washington: Smithsonian Books, in association with the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. 2004.

Bordewich, Fergus M. *Bound for Canaan. The Underground Railroad and the War for the Soul of America*. New York: Amistad Imprint, New York Harper Collins 2005.

Still, William. *The Underground Rail Road*. 1872. Has been reissued by Plexus Press and is available online, University of Illinois and also in Gutenberg.

Strother, Horatio. *The Underground Railroad in Connecticut*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1962

Examples in:

Smith, James L. *Autobiography of James L. Smith*, in Bontemps, Arna, ed., *Five Black Lives*, Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 1971.

Pennington, J.W.C. *The Fugitive Blacksmith or Events in the History of James W. C. Pennington*. In Arna Bontemps. *Great Slave Narratives*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969. (Also in William Katz, *Five Slave Narratives*. New York: Arno Press, 1968.)

Also: a letter by Pennington, dated 17 November, 1847, states that he kept a "depot of the great Underground R.R. See Swift, David, *Black Prophets of Justice: Activist Clergy Before the Civil War*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989, 238-239.

SALUTE TO AN EDUCATOR

By Halesteen Graham Days

The Wintonbury Historical Society is honored to salute and pay homage to one of our own, Shirley Anne Washington Thompson, member of the Historical Society since 1998 and a member of the Board of Directors for six years; 57-year resident of Bloomfield; member of the Bloomfield Board of Education for eighteen years of which she was Chair for ten years; former co-chair of the Bloomfield Democratic Town Committee; she served twenty years on the Bloomfield Commission on Aging and Friends of the Bloomfield Library; and throughout her career a dedicated and humble educator to many.



Shirley Thompson
Courtesy photo

Shirley was born April 14, 1935, in Williamsburg, Virginia, a quiet, rural college town located on the Virginia Peninsula in the northern part of Hampton Roads, 51 miles southeast of Richmond, Virginia. She is the sixth of ten children of Theodore and Blanch R. Washington. She was born and raised in the rural south during an era when America would soon transition from an agricultural to an industrial society. As in most large southern African American families, her parents believed in hard work, plenty of family love, and strongly encouraged their children to pursue their dreams through education or developing a skill as a means of upward mobility.

Shirley was educated, grades 1-12 in a one-building schoolhouse in the segregated public school system of Williamsburg. During her formative years, she served in many leadership roles, including President of her senior class. One of Shirley's teachers, Mrs. Ruby Carter, along with Shirley's parents, recognized her academic potential and encouraged her to attend college. Shirley attended West Virginia State College, a historically black college in Institute, West Virginia from 1953 to 1957, majoring in political science. While in college, Shirley worked three jobs to pay her way through college and pledged Delta Sigma Theta Sorority where she served as Secretary and later President. She remains a Delta sorority member to this day. While attending West Virginia State, she met the love of her life, soulmate, partner and future husband, William (Bill) Thompson, where both majored in political science.

Shirley and Bill would take different paths from West Virginia State. Armed with a bachelor's degree, Shirley journeyed to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to pursue work. As the saying goes, "You can take the girl out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the girl." Shirley missed the rural setting in which she was raised. Philadelphia was too urban; she yearned the small town, rural life. In 1958, three of her college classmates living in

Hartford encouraged her to move to Connecticut. Here, Shirley would plant her roots.

Shirley and Bill eventually married in 1960 and had their first child, William Thompson, Jr. in 1961. They remained in Hartford until 1966 when they moved to Bloomfield. Their second child Cynthia was born in 1965. Both children were raised and attended schools in Bloomfield.

After working in insurance for a few years, Shirley began her career as an educator in the Hartford Public School System working as a substitute teacher. In 1967, she obtained a Master's in Education from the University of Hartford. Early in her career she met Alvin and Beatrice Wood, who would have a profound impact on Shirley's life. Alvin Wood was the first African American principal in Hartford Public Schools, and his wife Beatrice Wood was Supervisor of the Hartford Public Schools Reading Department. They became very close friends, and mentored Shirley both professionally and politically throughout their friendship. Beatrice Wood appointed Shirley to the Reading Team at Wish Elementary School, where Alvin Wood was Principal, and encouraged her to go to the University of Hartford to obtain a reading certificate. She would remain in the Hartford Public School system for 36 years, serving as a teacher for sixteen years and then a Reading Consultant for twenty years.

When Bill and Shirley moved to Bloomfield in 1966, the population was about 13,000. It was a small, beautiful New England town with dairy farms such as A.C. Petersen, Maple Hill Farm, Auer Farm, and LaSalette dotting the landscape. The center of town included the First Congregational Church, and the U. S. Post Office was where the Wintonbury Mall now stands. In the winter, Filley Pond froze over and was used by children to ice skate. A. C. Peterson's restaurant, located where Walgreen's now stands, was where families would go for ice cream, burgers, and fries. The Farmer's Exchange stood near the railroad tracks on the corner of Wintonbury and Jerome Avenues, and there was a hardware store. Bloomfield reminded Shirley of Williamsburg and was the perfect community to raise her family.

Shirley is a member of St. Monica's Episcopal Church in Hartford. She served on the Board of Trustees and taught Sunday school for sixteen years. She enjoyed working in the church and sharing herself with young people so that they might learn from her experiences.

Shirley's life experiences have played a major part in shaping who she is today. Through her leadership roles in political and social organizations, she made tough decisions on issues that shaped the lives of children in the Bloomfield schools and, through her role in local politics, affected the lives of Bloomfield citizens. As a result of her life's work, her impact has been broad and far reaching.

When I asked Shirley what advice she would give the younger generations, she replied "Stay in school, whether it's college or a trade school, just get a skill or trade so you can support yourself and your family. Mind your business and get involved in your community. Be a good person and look for the good in others, and always put your best foot forward."

DRUMMER INDEX FOR CALENDAR 2022

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Bloomfield High School	April	8
Campbell, Susan	February	1
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Cohen, Lawrence	June	7
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Dunne, Mary	November	1
Editorial on relationship	February	6
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Filley, Elijah	February	7
Financial report, annual	November	3
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Goetjen, Joan	November	4-5
Goldenthal, Albert	June	7
Goodman Street	September	7-8
Graham Days, Halesteen	February	3-6
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Ivoryton piano keys	February	1
King, Martin Luther, Jr.	April	1
Labadia, Catherine	April	1
LeFebvre, Alfred	June	6
Lightner, Penny	November	8
Manion, Mae	June	3
Mann, Mabel	November	6-7
Mural on Park Avenue	February	3
Noble, Harold	June	7
Oppenheimer, Mark	June	1
Park Avenue Shopping Ctr	June	7
Prosser Library dedication	April	3-5
Prosser Library history	June	4-6
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Rose, Anika Noni	February	3-4, 6
Schoolhouse, Duncaster	November	4-5
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Squirrel Hill synagogue	June	1
Tattler anniversary	April	8
Taylor, Vera	September	3-4
Wilcox, Emily	June	4-6
Wintonbury Mall opening	June	8
Wirsul, Lucy	April	5
Witness Stones Project	September	5-6
Wood, Ella Roberts	April	3-5

UPDATE ON ORAL HISTORY

On November 29, assisted by Bloomfield Public Library, twelve people met via Zoom with Prof. Fiona Vernal of the UConn History Department to learn about her work with oral histories in Connecticut towns. The attendees included Meredith Johnson and Donna Wnuck of the Bloomfield Humanities Committee.

Prof. Vernal is extensively experienced in oral history. She has worked with Manchester and Hartford and is completing a project in Windsor. (See windsorhistoricalsociety.org) She can provide a three-hour training session for Bloomfield volunteers and a “lending kit” including a recorder—all at no cost to WHS.



Fiona Vernal, Ph.D
Twitter photo

At a minimum, we would interview Bloomfield people and record their oral histories, which—with permission—could be uploaded to the CT Digital Archive, where they would be available to the public. Links could be provided on the WHS website to lead to individual stories. Our old DVD oral histories could be updated and included with the newer ones. If desired, these interviews could also lead to an exhibit with 24 X 36 panels featuring our interviewees. Such exhibits cost at least \$5,000 for graphic designer, printer, materials, etc.

Prof. Vernal has already put Bloomfield into her next grant request at CT Humanities. She has UConn interns ready to assist. The town may be asked to contribute a small amount, but Mayor Danielle Wong has said she supports the project. Prof. Vernal hopes, by interviewing Bloomfield citizens, to use the lens of ethnicity and culture to illuminate the town’s history.



THE STONE SCHOOL HOUSE

by Alice Capen, about 1960

(from WHS files. See also the *Drummer* for September 2021, pages 4-7, and November 2022, pages 4-5)

In 1858, when this stone school house was built, there were nine school districts in Bloomfield, each with its own one or two-room schoolhouse. Each school district had its own school committee, raised its own funds within the district, hired its own teachers. The Southwest District included part of Simsbury Road and extended west to the town line.

This stone school house was built in 1858, replacing one just south of it which had burned down. It was built on land formerly owned by William Cadwell at a cost of \$288.15. David Grant of Maple Avenue was the builder. Grant ran the town poor farm, and some of the town's poor worked on the construction of the school.

At the time the wooden school burned down, Miss Elizabeth Cadwell was the teacher. She held classes in her father's home across the street until the stone school was completed.

A typical week's pay for a teacher was \$2.00, and the teacher was "boarded around" at the homes of the various pupils. Until 1868, pupils were required to make contributions toward their tuition such as a portion of firewood.

Anyone who had completed "common school" was considered qualified to teach. Often young men taught only one year or so until they could find a better job, or young women taught for a short period until they married. Sometimes a male teacher was employed for the winter term, and a female teacher for the summer term. Sometimes older children attended the winter session and the younger children attended in the summertime.

In 1921, the town started using school busses. Young children from this district were bussed to the Duncaster school, and older children were bussed to the Center.

While this building was being used as a school, it also served as a library for the neighborhood. Prayer meetings and Salvation Army revival meetings, Temperance Society and Red Cross meetings were all held here. Between 1924 and 1929 the school served as a branch of the Prosser Library. The Thursday Afternoon Club continues to meet here, and for a while the Wintonbury Historical Society met here. The building has not been actively used for some time now.



Southwest District School
430 Simsbury Road
R. Pierce photo

Thanks to *New York Times* columnist David Brooks for the following: "Last week I saw a young Black woman wearing a T-shirt that read, 'I am my ancestors' wildest dreams.'" What a great idea! A knowledge of history can be a great affirmation not only of who I am but also of how far my family has come." (*Hartford Courant*, July 25, 2021)

FASCINATING FAMILY HISTORY PROJECTS, #2

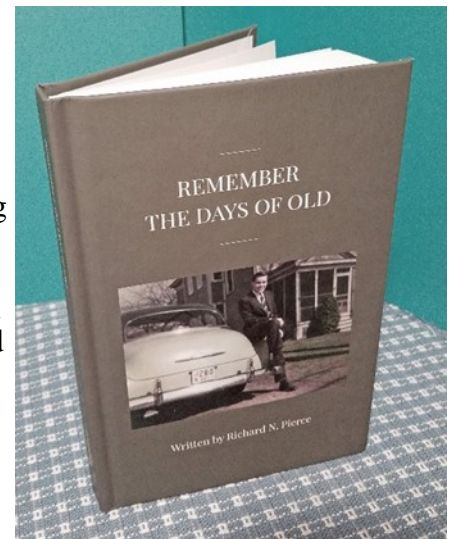
By Richard Pierce

For my birthday in July 2021, my daughter Sarah gave me a one-year subscription to Storyworth, and it turned out to be a very nice gift. Storyworth is an online service that helps you to write your memoirs. Each week or so for a year, Storyworth sent me a question designed to trigger my memories. Storyworth has a long list of suggested questions; but, in this case, Sarah herself had written many of the questions and had Storyworth send them to me. During the year, I responded to thirty-eight questions. I've never had a good memory, but this project seemed to bring into focus a lot of vague remembrances. My wife helped me with some memories, and I was able to use some material from previous memoirs and logs I've kept of our camping trips over the years. I also have digitized a great many family photographs, a few of which I could include.

Each week I wrote a chapter in Microsoft Word and uploaded it to Storyworth after saving it on my computer. I wound up with 280 pages for the year, including photographs that I added to most chapters and an eight-page index that I made up and submitted. Storyworth adds a table of contents to the front of the book. During the year, you can view your chapters or the whole book at any time and edit your material or add pictures as you wish. Storyworth's software is moderately user-friendly, and with experience you get used to it. There's not much formatting it can do—no bold, italics, or underlining, for example. The resulting book, however, is quite good-looking. A year's subscription costs \$99. You retain the rights to your material.

Black and white copies of the book cost \$39, and color is \$79. When I received my color book, I was pleased with its appearance. There is a hard cover, and the text is well-spaced and large enough to be easily readable. The photos in my copy were smaller than I expected. When during the year I had previewed the book online, I had put captions under the photos and judged photo size as large enough. But it wasn't. If you ever do this, keep your photos as large as you can, for the online image is deceptive. You might consider ordering only one book, and then you can go back and edit as needed before you order more. Books are 6 X 9 inches. The pages are secured with glue, which hopefully will last a long time.

I entitled my book, *Remember the Days of Old*, a biblical quotation (Deut. 32:7). Here are a few of the questions that I responded to: What did you learn from your parents? What childhood memories do you still carry? How has your life turned out differently than you imagined it would? What proverb, adage, or Bible verse is essential and insightful for you? Did you have a car in high school? What are your favorite songs? How would you describe yourself? What do you remember about the World War II era?



Storyworth may not be congenial for everyone, as it does involve writing and computer use. New online alternatives have come up such as LifeArk, Family Search Memories, Saga Voice Journal, and No Story Lost, some of which help you to record and save videos that you make yourself. Whatever method works best for you, get busy and save your memories.

Obviously, such a project makes use of a computer. But a lot can be done without one, too. Oral histories are done by telling your stories to someone else. (Examples of this are available at the Gabriel History Center.) Typing services and copying machines are available. (Ask your reference librarian.) Simply collecting materials, labeling them, and storing them safely will keep your family history safe.



Have you ever done a family history project? Would you be willing to share it with *The Wintonbury Drummer*? Or who knows? Maybe you'll see one that gives you an idea! Your Historical Society can help. We'd love to print more. Please let us know. (Contact info on page 2.)