

The Wintonbury Drummer



Newsletter of the Wintonbury Historical Society

Bloomfield, Connecticut

April 2023

SLAVERY IN WINTONBURY: A STORY UNCOVERED

Wednesday, April 26, 2023, 3:00 PM on Zoom

In his book, *Hezekiah's Children* (1989), Roscoe Metzger wrote, "The Rev. Hezekiah Bissell, first pastor of our church, lists two young people as his property; their names were Lucy and Caesar, and they were baptized by their 'owner.'" Indeed, according to Metzger, "There may have been as many as a dozen men and women, boys and girls who were held as slaves in Wintonbury/Bloomfield during the eighteenth century." (See page 55)



Bloomfield Congregational Church
1738 Meetinghouse
From a painting by Dr. Henry Gray about 1850

On Wednesday, April 26, 3:00 PM, David Roones will present a Zoom program on slavery in Wintonbury Parish as seen through the stories of Jenny, Caesar, and Peter, three people enslaved by the Bissell family. Primary documents will help tell the stories that have been lost to history.

With the aid of funding from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, this program will address the legacies of discrimination and place slavery and freedom as integral parts of the local colonial story.



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 OF DIRECTORS HIGHLIGHTS

The Board met on February 27 with nineteen people present. The treasurer reported receipts in January of \$7,527 and expenditures of \$4,554. Donations and membership dues accounted for about half of the income. Also, the balance of \$1,425 on our 2022 Operating Support Grant was received in January.

- Marilyn Johnston took a stack of our brochures to Duncaster's library, and in April Duncaster residents will be able to take a guided tour of Bloomfield led by Marilyn Stockton.
- Four WHS members met on January 23 at Noah Webster House in West Hartford to begin Witness Stones training. Each was given the name of one local slave to research and report on.
- Oral History training is ongoing, and that group will next learn how to use recording devices. Actual interviews with older residents may begin as soon as April.
- Mara Whitman was at the Old State House on March 11 and learned how to be a judge for History Day, an annual high school competition.
- The Board also discussed improving our website.
- On March 1, a few people met with architect Robert Hurd at the Old Farm School to begin steps towards a grant application to make improvements to the building.



Go to ctvisit.com and search for "Wintonbury" to find WHS publicity placed on this tourism website by Janis Langston.

**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 15, 2023.

OUR BUSINESS MEMBERS

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Bloomfield Farm Bought From Indians

Reprinted from the *Hartford Courant*, December 1, 1935, page B1 (via ProQuest Historical Newspapers)

The Filley farm on Brown Street, Bloomfield, which was bought by Captain Oliver Filley five generations ago from the Mas-saco tribe of Indians, was sold last week to the Highland Dairy Company by Oliver Dwight Filley, a direct descendant of Captain Filley. The sale was negotiated by A. Stroh, realtor.

When the farm was purchased by the first Filley, the consideration was Mexican half-dollars, but the exact number that were given is not known now. However, the stone where the coin was counted out was preserved for many years. The date of the purchase could not be learned, but it was some time prior to 1817, when the homestead was built.

It is the purpose of the Highland Dairy Company to produce its own Grade A milk on the premises, and an addition to the present large cow barn will be built. The present barn has a capacity of 60 cows. The addition will house 100 cows. This new building will be one of the most modern dairy barns in Connecticut. Construction of the new barn will be started soon.

The farm contains about 136 acres, about 100 acres of which is tillable, and the remainder devoted to pasture. The buildings include the large homestead, a 60-cow barn, and two other houses.

The homestead contains 27 rooms, three baths, and nine fireplaces, some of which are in bedrooms. The building is of frame, and is of the Colonial farmhouse style. Another house is of 10 rooms and is the most modern of the several buildings. Across from the homestead is a seven-room house, which was formerly used as a tin shop and later converted into a residence. This latter building is probably more than 100 years old.

On the top of a hill there is a beautiful grove of hickory trees with a brook running through it. This is to be made into a recreation grounds for the employees and customers of the dairy company.

The buildings on the farm will be used to house the farm help who will work on the place. It is possible that Alfred Acker, treasurer of the Highland Dairy Company, will live in the homestead.

Attorney Charles Stroh represented Mr. Filley and Attorneys Freedman and Rosenblum the High Dairy Company in the transaction.



Three Highland Dairy silos on Thistlepond Drive, off Brown Street, once held enough corn for a large herd of cows.
—R. Pierce photo

A LETTER TO MY NEIGHBOR, JULIA NEWBERRY FILLEY (1808-1869)

by Marilyn Johnston

Dear Julia:

In January 1985, my husband and I moved to our dream house on Duncaster Road. Moving in, every day we passed the large stone house on Mountain Ave. (opposite Duncaster retirement facility). For a long time, we wondered who had lived in that impressive antique house. Over time, through involvement with our town's Wintonbury Historical Society, I was to find out—it was your house, Julia.

Made with local trap rock, it was built in 1834 by your father-in-law, the prominent tin-ware manufacturer and entrepreneur Capt. Oliver Filley as a wedding gift for his son, Jay and you, Julia Ann Newberry. You were a local girl of proud ancestry, born one year before Abraham Lincoln and raised on Filley Street in Wintonbury parish village. At age 25, you first stepped into the stone house which you were to live in for thirteen years. Wintonbury parish village changed into the Town of Bloomfield in 1835. You and Jay had three children (losing the firstborn, a girl, under two years old) and, later, you sent your two sons as Union soldiers to the Civil War.



Julia Filley
From photo on display at
Gabriel History Center

As a 19th century farm wife, your life exemplified ideals of the womanhood of your era, economic level, and locale. Your days were filled with farm work, including slaughtering hogs, housekeeping, soap and candle making, sewing, attending spiritual worship, gardening, serving extended family, festivals, jam making, reading, cooking, and healing. But you also had interests outside the farm: lectures and sermons, social causes (abolition in your case), a deep love of country, diary-keeping, music. You sang and played the seraphine, an early type of piano, in your parlor. You attended a Congregationalist Church (sometimes visited the Baptist church), heard sermons on sin, redemption, salvation, election, resurrection, heavenly glory, and plumbed your own conscience in the pages of your diary.

Eventually, you and Jay left the stone house to live in your in-laws' big house on Brown Street to help care for Jay's widowed mother and a tribe of relatives. You had two Irish maids and a gardener with whom you worked side by side. Later, when Jay's fortunes rose from farming to tobacco broker, you left for a Victorian house on Sumner Street in Hartford. There, you explored city life and even opened your Hartford home to a motherless Chinese boy and his father in the 1860s.

I love to imagine you at the end of a hard day or in the early morning, gazing out at the fields that surround your stone house. You'd marvel at the same wondrous mountain view, the same vast sky we enjoy today walking the LaSalette Open Space in which your house is now set. How I admire your strong will that enabled you to face hardships, overcome limits, plumb texts, endure the grief of sickness and family losses. Through it all, you grew your mind and explored self-expression in writing poems.

In 1869, age 61, you wrote this: "Think if I had cultivated what little talent I have—I might have written decent poetry—but it is too late now—for cultivation or inspiration—for both are necessary to be a true poet." You wrote very fine poems, deftly using the British tradition of measured accents and rhymes learned from your eighth-grade education. Universal themes drew you, like childhood, family, war, patriotism, loss, grief, and faith. Luckily, your writings were preserved and donated by your grand-daughter and are on file and may be accessed at the Wintonbury Historical Society. Readers are encouraged to sustain membership in WHS and to keep on learning about our town's history. Visit the WHS website today: bloomfieldcthistory.org.

—Marilyn Johnston, WHS Secretary, is a published poet with two books from Antrim House Books and a chapbook from Redgreene Press. She co-founded and directed for twenty years the on-going Wintonbury Poetry Series at Bloomfield Public Library. Her books are available through marilynjohnston2003@yahoo.com.



The Filley House, 130 Mountain Avenue, 2021
Courtesy of M. Johnston

Poems by Julia Newberry Filley

My Mother

Oh! Wake her not, she rests in peace,
Rejoicing in her sweet release
From toil and pain.
The weary pilgrim has lain down,
Awaiting the eternal crown,
She fought to gain.

Oh! Let her sleep, the last long sleep,
From which she cannot "wake to weep,"
Or suffer more,
Nor wake again until above
She meets the Savior of her love
Who's gone before.

- September 28, 1859

from "God forbid! our young Republic..."

1.

God forbid! our young Republic,
Should go down in sadness now.
God forbid! that we to traitors
Should as humble suppliants bow.

2.

What? Shall all the blood be wasted
Which our sons and brothers shed?
Shall we no in-might arouse us,
To avenge our noble dead?

3.

Fallen heroes! for their country,
Cheerfully they gave up all.
Laid themselves upon its altars,
Shrank not from its urgent call.

4.

Is there a soul so craven,
Chicken-hearted, mean, and base,
So far lost to all that's noble,
As to bear the foul disgrace

5.

Of a man born in New England,
Cradled midst her rocks and hills,
Nursed among her oaks to manhood,
Trained to love her rinding rills?

6.

His to shrink when duty calls him
To stand boldly for the right,
Cower before the rebel foeman,
Nor a blow for freedom strike?...

10.

Sister in whose loyal bosom
Love of country holds its sway,
Urge your brother on to duty.
Bid him all its calls obey.

- 1862



Mara Whitman
Courtesy photo

CONNECTICUT HISTORY DAY is one of 58 affiliate programs of National History Day (NHD). CHD annually engages thousands of middle- and high-school students in historical research, interpretation, and creative expression through project-based learning. The program seeks to bring students, teachers, museums, and scholars together to support young people as they engage in history. Led by the Connecticut Democracy Center, CHD is presented with major funding and partnership support from CT Humanities.

Regional contests were held in March, and the state-level contest is scheduled for May 6. One of the judges this year will be WHS director Mara Whitman.

NINETEEN YEARS AS A SCHOOL NURSE

By Mae Manion

Editor's note: Our June 2022 issue featured a "Portrait of Auntie Mae" from 1982. The following, transcribed by Roberta Kania from a taped interview and published in *The Bloomfield Journal*, provides Mae Manion's own memories of life in Bloomfield. I found this as a yellowed, undated newspaper clipping; Mrs. Kania, in her note, says it was published as part of Bloomfield's 250th anniversary in 1985. An additional Manion memoir is found in the Society's *The Good Old Days*, pages 25-26, available for sale at the Gabriel History Center.

When Mrs. Boutelle, school nurse in Bloomfield, Farmington and Newington, resigned in 1934, I became Bloomfield's first full-time school nurse. I served the eight grades of Blue Hills School, the Center School, and the High School, which included Junior High, also grades one through six in the two-room Mitchelson School.¹ One of the requirements for school nurse was that you had to own a car, in order to get from school to school.

I did all of the vision testing, kept track of the communicable diseases, visited the homes when needed, and reported to Dr. Murphy, who at that time was the Health Officer for Bloomfield and Simsbury and the other towns that he covered.²

About 1937, Dr. Bestor came to me and said, "I think we should do physicals on all the boys who are going to participate in competitive sports."³ Up until that time no physicals were being done, although some of the old reports showed that at one time Dr. Thompson did do physicals for the students who played basketball, baseball, and soccer. So Dr. Bestor came in each fall and checked all the boys who were signed up for soccer, basketball or baseball.

Later on we had some dentists come in. They checked the teeth of the children, and even one time we had a dental set-up where they did examining and cleaning of the teeth and even x-rayed the children's teeth in the basement of the Blue Hills School.

Before the end of May 1934, the month I started, there was an operetta by the Center Grammar School, performed on the stage of the high school. The night of the performance one girl was taken sick. The next morning her parents called the doctor in and he diagnosed it as scarlet fever. On the following Monday we learned that not only she, but two other children in that vicinity had developed scarlet fever. So they had a doctor come into the school and check the children's throats and temperatures.

Anyone with a red throat or fever had to go home. I spent the biggest part of the afternoon transporting children home and telling parents to keep their children home until the symptoms disappeared. There was one little boy in the first or second grade. He was in one of the earlier groups to be tested. He got tired of waiting to go home and he said, "I can walk home. I just live at the corner here." Naturally, having started to work less than a month before, I assumed he meant the corner of Jerome and Bloomfield avenues. That night his mother called and said, "Why did you let my son walk home from school?" Then I found out he had to walk more than one and a half miles. From then on I never let a sick child walk home from school. I took them home.

I even had one parent who sent her children to school on the bus, with 30 or 40 children, and have the child come in to school and say "My mother thinks I have measles. If I have, you can take me back home." That mother was a former teacher who should have known better than that. But I really enjoyed the work.



Mae Manion
1952 Tattler photo

If they got hurt, we had no doctor practicing in Bloomfield at that time. If a child got hurt on the playground, I would call the parent and get permission to take the child to Dr. Murphy. We had more accidents on the swinging ladder! After one child got hurt, that weekend they took the swinging ladders down.

When I started with the Bloomfield schools, it was depression time. I found that Bloomfield children could use the Hartford dispensary for dental care and eyeglasses, etc. Sometimes I would make three trips a week taking a carload of children each time. Families had to be screened to see if they were eligible. Many times, if the family didn't have the 50 cents for the visit, I paid for it.

I didn't get paid for gas or mileage or car insurance, or anything, until about four or five years before I resigned. Even when I was in training, I had said I hoped I could do something to improve the health of the children in the Bloomfield schools. This was my contribution. They were my family. One time I remember I took ten children from the Mitchelson School to the dispensary. I left the first group and went back for the second. When I returned, the workers at the dispensary said, "Where do you find children who are so well behaved when they are left alone?" I said those children are so appreciative of anything that was done for them.

Mitchelson School closed in 1941 when they finally paved Blue Hills Avenue, Filley Street and Woodland Avenue all the way through so they could get the school buses through in the winter and the springtime. I used to go there at least once a week. On Blue Hills Avenue, beyond where the church is, it was a dirt road full of mud ruts. Woodland Avenue was the same. I used to drive up and park at the Windsor town line and walk in.

When they had movies at the other schools, I would try to take the projector and the movies to that school. If I opened the back door of my car, the boys would come running out to help because they knew I had movies for them.

When the school system bought the stellar binoculars for testing vision, I used to carry that heavy equipment from school to school. At one time the state brought us an audiometer for testing hearing, and I carried that from one school to another.

When I was in high school, I used to go to basketball games played in the old Town Hall, upstairs. When Blue Hills School was built, the games were played there. The girls' teams played the preliminary games, and the boys played the second game. When I became school nurse, I never missed a basketball game unless I was flat on my back, sick. In the late 50s, I came into the high school one day and Coach Paterno called me up to the stage and said, "You haven't missed a game in over 15 years; I think you have earned your school letter." And he gave it to me.

The first year I stopped working I went to all the games, at home or away. At one game we had in South Windsor, Ellsworth High School, one of the boys sprained his ankle very badly. Coach [John] Paterno looked over to where I sat. He beckoned to me said, "What can you do about this boy's ankle?" I said, "I'm taking him to the hospital for x-rays." Then he said, "But you don't work for Bloomfield anymore." And I said, "But they're still my boys." So I took him in and had him x-rayed and took him home. They are still my boys. Many of them are married and have grown children today.

Notes:

1. See *The Wintonbury Drummer*, September 2021, for an article on Bloomfield schools. The article says that the Mitchelson School was built in 1919 on land donated by George Mitchelson on the west side of Blue Hills Avenue near its intersection with Woodland Avenue.
2. This is probably Dr. Owen L. Murphy, M.D. (1898-1981), who practiced for fifty years in Simsbury and was health officer for several towns and schools. The Owen L. Murphy Apartments on Hopmeadow Street in Simsbury are named in his honor.
3. The reference is to Eugene L. Bestor, M.D., chairman of Bloomfield's Board of Finance until 1945 and a founder in 1949 of the Wintonbury Historical Society.



Mitchelson School, 1957
WHS Archives

Editorial



Clipart Library

As a baseball fan, I was interested to read Matthew Roberson’s recent commentary entitled “Hall of Fame’s character clause was a mistake.”¹ It seems that some professional baseball players are not being elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame because of their bad behavior. Barry Bonds, “the greatest player in the history of the sport” according to Roberson, has been bypassed because he took performance-enhancing drugs. Others have been excluded because of domestic violence and drunk driving. The Hall of Fame does tell Hall voters to take into consideration “a player’s record, playing ability, integrity, sportsmanship, character, and contributions to the team.” But Roberson says we should forget character as a criterion. It’s impossible to morally police every man on the ballot, and the criteria are applied inconsistently. “In a

sport littered with people that you’d love to watch on the diamond but would never want to hang out with, the only way to build a museum that truly preserves its history is to do so warts and all.” Is the same thing true in writing other sorts of history?

The same issue has come up frequently in music and the arts. Many artists have had character deficiencies. One source cites artist Pablo Picasso as an example, and a lot of musicians could be cited, too.² The movie “Amadeus,” for example, portrayed Mozart as a crude brat lacking in manners and kindness. Yet most people seem to think we can appreciate a work of art or music despite the character of its creator or performer. Well, isn’t the same true of an athletic performance? Maybe Roberson is right.

But what about the history of our nation, state, and town? What about family histories? Do we omit the scalawags, the contentious, the corrupt and cruel? In one genealogy I researched, I discovered an ancestor who was arrested in Vermont for abandoning his wife and child. Should that be hushed up? Or is it unvarnished human history that is worth preserving for its own sake and as a lesson to later generations?

History has no shortage of reprehensible people. We’d sooner not be reminded of it, but we can profit immensely by remembering. Those were real people back there, and they have much to teach us. Whether it’s a tainted politician, an imperfect Picasso, a scoundrel in the baseball Hall of Fame, or the black sheep of the family, we can acknowledge people in spite of their vices and resolve never to make the same mistakes ourselves.

RNP

1. *Hartford Courant*, January 23, 2023, Sports section

2. See “Conflicted art: how to approach works by morally bad artists” — *Art Aesthetics Magazine*
A thoughtful essay. Uses Picasso as an example. Go to artaesthetics.net/publications/2019/5/26.

