

The Wintonbury Drummer



Newsletter of the Wintonbury Historical Society

Bloomfield, Connecticut

June 2023

VISIBLE REMINDERS OF TOWN HISTORY

A Zoom Program presented by Ron Marchetti on Wednesday, June 7, 3:00 PM

► To receive your link, please register at <https://bplct.org/event-calendar>

The town of Bloomfield encompasses more than 26 square miles and boasts around a hundred structures and sites of historic interest that date prior to 1900. In this presentation, Ron Marchetti will look at examples of primarily domestic architecture in Wintonbury Parish, with a focus on 18th and 19th century structures up until the Civil War.

Most of the information contained in this presentation comes from two publications of the Wintonbury Historical Society, *Over Tunxis Trails* and *Images of America: Bloomfield*. Invaluable background and detail have also been provided by Ralph and Louise Schmoll, whose articles appear on the Society's website and whose exhibit about this subject is currently on display at the History Center.

The connection between the basic layouts and decorative elements of these buildings suggests insight into the lifestyles of the houses' builders and early occupants. One can imagine the outline of the development of the town. Historical and anecdotal references to various inhabitants of these houses provide a bit of local color that serves to enliven the images we can see every day.

It is the hope of this program to provide a bit of insight into our town's past and to enhance our awareness of the relevance of our past to our present and future.



Sanford House, Maple Avenue, 1780
WHS Archives photo

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BOARD OF DIRECTORS HIGHLIGHTS

The Board met via Zoom on April 24 with eighteen people present, joined later by Prof. Fiona Vernal.

The April 26 program on slaves in Wintonbury/Bloomfield was part of an ongoing research effort. Further training will be offered during May.

The Oral History Project volunteers completed the first round of interviews in March. Prof. Vernal has supplied fifteen interview kits, shared between WHS and the Bloomfield Humanities Committee. More people can be trained at any time; just contact John Cappadona. We provide ongoing information about this project to the town's Office of Strategic Communications and Government Affairs. The oral histories we create are uploaded to the CT State Archives.

The Membership Committee (Marilyn Johnston, chair) reported that twenty new Duncaster residents were taken on a tour of the town by Marilyn Stockton and Libbie Merrow. A similar tour for Seabury residents is planned for the fall.

Halesteen Graham Days and Ron Marchetti report that the Board of Education has agreed to develop a half credit high school course in local history. WHS will continue to help by suggesting course content.

Work continues on seeking a Historic Restoration Fund grant for the Old Farm School. Architect Bob Hurd has provided new information, and we have found documents from the 1972 moving of the building.

Mary Laiuppa will be scheduling docents to cover our Sunday afternoons starting May 21. Any member may sign up to cover one or more dates.

**ATTENTION!!!**

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

OUR BUSINESS MEMBERS

Many Rivers Community Acupuncture, 3 Barnard Lane

Printmark Services, 21 Old Windsor Road
Wade's Farms, 498 Simsbury Road

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Wintonbury Historical Society, Inc.
151-153 School Street, P.O. Box 7454
Bloomfield, CT 06002
Tel. 860-243-1531
Editor: Richard Pierce
Email: wintonburyhistory@gmail.com
Web: www.bloomfieldcthistory.org

HISTORY OF THE BLOOMFIELD HIGH SCHOOL, 1922

Editor's note: Prior to 1917 those Bloomfield young people who wished to go to high school had to go out of town, to schools such as Hartford Public High School. This often meant boarding with a Hartford family and coming home only on weekends. In the following, Olive Capen, an articulate member of the first graduating class, 1922, sums up the history she lived through. Her essay was published in the very first issue of the high school yearbook, *The Tattler*, in 1922. Thanks to Janis Langston for finding this.

Bloomfield High School was established in September, 1917, in the assembly hall of the grammar school building [on Jerome Avenue]. Thirty-three pupils enrolled, constituting the freshman and the sophomore classes. Two courses were offered, the college preparatory and the general, and two teachers employed. Mr. Philip H. Dow of Bates College as principal and Miss Emelyn G. Nickson of Wellesley College as his assistant. During the year Mr. Frederick L. Tapley, State Supervisor of the Bloomfield schools, resigned to accept a position in the Hartford High School and was succeeded by Mr. William H. Mandrey, our present supervisor.

In May when the new high school was visited by the State Inspector, he refused his approval on the ground of inadequate housing and equipment. As the townspeople had not yet become deeply interested in the new project, there were many who questioned the wisdom of attempting to continue the high school. Nevertheless with the steadfast support of Mr. A. Clark Hall, Chairman of the School Committee, Mr. Mandrey succeeded in meeting the requirements of the State Board of Education. Two partitions were erected in the Assembly Hall, a class room being thus provided at either end. More scientific apparatus was bought and also a small case of well-selected books for reference.



Center Grammar School
34 Jerome Avenue
where high school classes were first held
WHS Archives photo

The second year of our high school opened in 1918 with an enrollment of thirty pupils in three classes, and the course was extended to three years. State inspectors visited the school twice during the year, and in May, 1919, it was approved by the State Board as a three-year high school.

Again the summer brought new developments. A room in the basement was fitted up for a laboratory, additions being made at the same time to the apparatus; and Miss Florence M. Edwards of Connecticut College was engaged as teacher of Science. In September the school numbered forty-eight pupils. This year more attention was given to athletics, the town hall being used for basket ball. Mr. Dow coached both the boys' and the girls' teams. In the spring the boys also formed a baseball team. The State Board approved us as a full-fledged high school. In June our first high school graduation exercises were held in Bloomfield.

Much to the regret of both students and townspeople, Mr. Dow and Miss Nickerson did not return to Bloomfield another year. Both teachers had worked faithfully for the school not only in the class room but also in its social activities. In September, when fifty-nine pupils assembled, the absence of Mr. Dow and Miss Nickson was felt. Mr. Bernard J. Lee of Tufts college took Mr. Dow's place as principal, while Miss Isabelle J. Kelly of New Rochelle College took Miss Nickerson's place. The students soon found, however, that their new teachers also were interested in their work and play.

In September 1921 the seventh and eighth grades were joined with us forming a junior-senior high school. Russell D. Noyes of Worcester Polytechnic Institute and Mary L. Hall of Yale School of Education took charge of the junior classes.

Plans for the future include commercial and normal preparatory courses. The commercial course is to be introduced next September.



HUMANITIES COMMITTEE HAS A HISTORY IN TOWN

Editor's note: When I came across the origins of the Community Awareness Task Force in copies of a thirty-year old town newsletter, I immediately thought of the Historical Society's collaboration with the Task Force's successor, the Humanities Committee, on the current Oral History Project (see Board Highlights, page 2). Here is the story behind the story.

The Bloomfield Humanities Committee is in its fifth decade of service to the town. Today's committee is made up of Meredith Johnson, chair, Donna Wnuck, vice-chair, and members Damon Coachman, Lorraine DeBeatham, Stephen Dombrowski, Tollie Miller, David Roones, and Barbara Williams. It is an ad-hoc committee appointed by Mayor Danielle Wong. It works to "increase cultural awareness, understanding, and positive relationships [in town], all the while fostering civic engagement." Building on Bloomfield history, the committee's goal is "to ensure that Bloomfield continues to offer an inclusive experience to everyone within our community, both long-standing residents and those who have just arrived."

The committee was founded in 1977 by town manager Cliff Vermilya as the Community Awareness Task Force (CATF). In a 1990 article, Carl H. Shuster, the first chairman of the group, recalled that Bloomfield was at that time experiencing racial changes in its population, and there was some disquiet among the residents. "Mainly, people felt that they couldn't discuss their apprehensions in public," he remembered, "and the town administration was unsure of what the official response should be."

As a result of this uncertainty, the Task Force was formed and given the responsibility of inventorying the town to find out if there indeed was a problem. After months of getting facts from schools, police, housing, and a host of other sources, the general conclusion was that the problem lay in communications. "By any standard," said Shuster, "we were an incredibly healthy community, but some of the perceptions of our town were negative." Based on this discovery, the Task Force launched a public information effort to close the gap between preconceptions and fact. "We had to rally the support of the town and get the positive facets of Bloomfield out to people."

The Task Force sought to encourage Bloomfield residents to continue their commitment to integration and to increase their participation in the life of the community. Its secondary goal was to inform people from other areas that Bloomfield is an attractive town in which to live because it provides its residents with an excellent public education, services, [and] recreational and cultural opportunities.

It happened that Cigna and Bloomfield had just started monthly meetings at that time, and Shuster was invited to attend one, representing CATF. One result was the Sunset Sounds concert series held annually on the Cigna campus starting in 1978. In this way, the town made a good impression on the thousands of people in attendance.

Attorney Carl Shuster served as CATF chair for eight years before turning leadership over to Lois Hager. She served for about two years before moving on to chair the Town Plan and Zoning Committee. Joel Neuwirth and Althea Jenkins then became co-chairs, bringing new energy to the task of cultivating Bloomfield's integration.

In 1988, one of the Task Force's projects was the encouragement of parental involvement in the schools. Superintendent of Schools Paul Copes was invited to the November meeting to discuss this issue, and many innovative ideas and programs were proposed during the round-table discussion which developed. "We will pinpoint several of these suggestions and adopt methods for carrying them out," observed Althea Jenkins, committee co-chair, "because increased parental involvement in our schools is absolutely vital for the health of our educational system."



Joel Neuwirth and Althea Jenkins
Town newsletter photo, 1990

(continued —>)

But the list of Task Force projects doesn't stop with education. In the 1980s, they coordinated Bloomfield's hosting of the Oak Park Congress, a national association of multiracial communities. They vigorously opposed the locating of a prison on the Windsor-Bloomfield border and marshalled a campaign to lobby the state to reconsider its plans—with gratifying results! A series of community gatherings introduced the new school superintendent to the residents and provided an informational forum for the discussion of educational principles. Future plans involved producing informational brochures and materials on aspects of Bloomfield life to promote the town to realtors and prospective home buyers.

By 1989, CATF's mission had been refined to read, "CATF is composed of residents appointed by the town manager to handle the special issues of communication and information which face multi-racial communities such as Bloomfield. In addition to advocating [for] the community's continuing commitment to integration, it seeks to increase residents' participation in the life of the community."

In 1994, CATF was a sponsor of the Memorial Day parade and road race. It provided seed money for a student art show. Task Force member Fannie Gabriel, later president of the Historical Society, was named Civitan Citizen of the Year.

During the 1990s the Task Force provided funds to subsidize activities such as speakers at the high school, a trip for the Carmen Arace Middle School band, a dance/drama program run by the Recreation Department, and a Special Olympics event. A coffeehouse at Prosser Library was sponsored, and a Holocaust lecture at the high school.

Former mayors Faith McMahon and Suzette DeBeatham Brown were leaders of CATF before moving on to town council service.

In 2017, the Community Awareness Task force was the first cohort class to complete the Bloomfield Citizens Academy. This academy was designed to ensure that citizens were formally educated about each department's functionality.

In 2022, when the council decided to revitalize the Task Force, it was renamed Bloomfield Humanities Committee. The council may have had two meanings in mind. First, traditionally the word "humanities" refers to the study of subjects such as literature, language, history, and philosophy. Second, some synonyms listed by Merriam-Webster for "humanity" are compassion, kindheartedness, charity, and sympathy. Both emphases find echoes in the goals set forth in the Committee Charge of 2022, which are as follows:

- Encourage sharing of historical information about Bloomfield's development as a diverse community
- Build upon opportunities by reviewing town-administered programs and communications in light of needs of different groups
- Identify additional needs, opportunities, and challenges experienced by diverse populations
- Encourage participation across diverse populations to foster civic involvement
- Engage youth participation in BHC activities to model and encourage civic participation
- Potential: Work collaboratively with the Town on completing a Diversity and Inclusion Needs Assessment and drawing recommendations and conclusions



The Wintonbury Drummer thanks Meredith Johnson and the Bloomfield Humanities Committee for reviewing and improving this article prior to publication.

Sources: "Bloomfield Humanities Committee Charge," town website, accessed April 2023

Bloomfield! Newsletter published by the Town of Bloomfield, Winter 1988

Bloomfield! Newsletter published by Bloomfield's Community Awareness Task Force, Summer 1990

The Hartford Courant, various articles, 1994-2017, accessed at ResearchIT CT

Cambridge Advanced Learners Dictionary (2003); Merriam-Webster dictionary app, accessed April 30, 2023



Spectators watching parade
Memorial Day 2001
Susan Vancour, far left
R. Pierce photo

JOHNNY TAYLOR REMEMBERED

By Frederick A. Hesketh

Editor's note: On June 23, 2023, the Hartford Yard Goats will honor Johnny Taylor at their game with a specially designed uniform, and for one game will change their name to the "Hartford Schoolboys," as part of the Negro League Celebration that evening. The Schoolboys logo features an oversized "H" which was created from an "H" on a uniform in an old photo and the full logo features a silhouette of Johnny pitching. The following article on Taylor is reprinted from *The Bloomfield Journal*, from an undated clipping in WHS files,

It is hard to find a Bloomfield sport fan that does not know of Nykesha Sales and/or her brother Brooks. Likewise, Colts defensive end Dwight Freeney's name is often heard in Bloomfield sports discussions. But there is a Bloomfield connection to another sports great whose name is heard less often.

Such was not the case on Thursday, February 9, when his name was prominent in discussions at the Prosser Library. Estelle Taylor, with ample help from her children and a grandson, regaled the full house in the Prosser audience with the full story of her late husband John's athletic prowess and his well-remembered career.

Estelle was newly widowed and nearing the time when she would be soon called a senior citizen when her children arranged for her move to a newly constructed condominium off Woodland Avenue in Bloomfield some two decades ago.

Fifty-some years earlier, her athletic husband John "Johnny" Taylor was a Hartford native and an outstanding track star finishing his junior year at Bulkeley High School when he decided he would also like to try baseball.

Boy, did he like it!

Taylor became a front-page item on Hartford-area sport pages before his 1934 graduation, an unusual billing for a high school athlete's achievement. His senior year record was 8 to 1 as a pitcher with a .438 batting average. His year-book citation, included the words ". . . we will never forget that circuit clout over the fence in the game against Weaver." Years later, a Hartford sportswriter wrote that the feat was perhaps ". . . the longest home run ever hit at old Bulkeley Stadium."

Johnny was also a pitcher who, some thought, "had the greatest stuff I ever saw." His "stuff" was enough to strike out 25 batters in a single game against New Britain High. Estelle said that record still stands for a Connecticut high school pitcher. As a pitcher with Bill Savitt's Gems in the 1937 Hartford twilight league, Taylor struck out 22 batters. That may not be a record for a 4½ hour game that the Gems won 6-5 in the 20th inning. But Taylor's issuance of a single base on ball over that stretch certainly is.

His reputation spread, and Estelle reported, "That was enough to get the attention of the (Major League) scouts, and the Philadelphia A's and the Yankees were interested in him and were prepared to sign him until they learned that he was colored." Then she added, "They asked him to change his heritage to Cuban—and, of course, he refused.

John Taylor III, who assisted his mother in the Prosser presentation of a video and a display of award plaques and newspaper and magazine clippings, added, "I think he was offered (continued—>)"



a chance to play before Jackie Robinson, but rather than compromise who he was he decided to play Black Baseball.”

Black athletes were banned in the growing American and National leagues, but, by the 1920s, black baseball had become a popular recreational activity for urban black populations throughout the United States, resulting in the formation of an organized Negro League. The Depression wiped out that first league, but a new post-depression Negro National League was formed with successful black baseball from 1933 through 1949.

The color barrier kept Taylor playing in the Twilight League and the Negro National League where he excelled. In two years with the New York Cubans, he struck out more than 800 and achieved a win-loss record of 55 wins and only five losses.

Taylor rubbed elbows with some great players. Luis Tiant Sr. was a teammate on the Jacksonville Flames in 1936 and again in Mexico in 1944. Taylor also pitched against Babe Ruth and once beat Dizzy Dean in exhibition games. He never pitched against Lou Gehrig or Hank Greenberg, but Negro baseball historian John B. Holway reported that Taylor used their bats and balls. Both of those Hall of Fame players appeared in minor league games in Hartford, where Holway said Taylor collected broken bats and foul balls to outfit his own team.

One of Taylor’s greatest victories came in a 1937 “All-Star” contest against the Satchel Paige’s “All-Stars.” Taylor’s team not only won, but he pitched a no-hitter to the everlasting chagrin of Paige and the 22,500 fans in New York’s Polo Grounds. A Chicago newspaper reported: “Satchel Paige, until today at least, America’s number one pitcher, met his Waterloo Sunday and the result skied one Johnny Taylor to the Baseball Hall of Fame.” That did not happen, but Estelle is still hopeful. She has visited Cooperstown, and she reported that the National Baseball Hall of Fame has the data on Taylor’s career and a number of statistics from the Negro leagues, and she looks forward to the day when new exhibits at Cooperstown will feature the Negro League and its players.



In 1948, Paige was sold to Cleveland on his 42nd birthday, becoming the oldest player to make his major league debut, while helping the Indians win the pennant. In the next five years, 46-year-old Paige retired with a 28-31 win-loss record.

Taylor’s 10-year career was winding down at that time as he was ending a career that saw him play with the New York Cubans and Pittsburgh Crawfords in addition to the twilight league and team in Mexico, Cuba, and Puerto Rico. He detailed stats are not in the public records.

Records do indicate that Satchel Paige was brought back to pitch a single inning with the Kansas City Chiefs in 1965 at age 58. He threw 10 pitches, striking out one batter and allowing one hit,

John Taylor never got that chance. He ended his career on 1949 as a relief pitcher with the Hartford Chiefs, a farm team of the Boston Braves. He never threw a single pitch or hit a single ball in the major leagues. He was elected to the Hartford Twilight League Hall of Fame. He died in 1981 at the age of 71.

Hartford sportswriter Owen Canfield wrote at the time of death, “Taylor is up there with Satchel Paige, Slim Jones, Quing Troup, Cool Papa Bell, John Gibson and a slew of other great players whose skin shades kept them chained up in the obscurity of the Negro League.”

Taylor’s son John told the Prosser listeners, “Greatness is like a blessing and a curse. He wanted to throw a strike on every pitch and to strike out every batter he ever faced.” (continued —>)

Estelle said she and Johnny grew up in a time of prejudice. Johnny experienced it in baseball, and she saw it in her nursing career. “That’s the way it was then,” she said. When asked if her husband regretted that, Estelle related that he once said, “What can you do about it? You can’t live in the past. I’ve always taken things as they come. I like to think we did pave the way for the next generation.”

And old friend, Spencer Shaw, was at Prosser Library to remember Johnny. Shaw felt he did in fact pave the way. He read from a letter he had sent the family upon learning of John’s death: “We rejoice in the legacy that he has given us, reflecting on the inheritance that John has left. We remember vivid scenes from his life.”

The Prosser audience seemed moved by the man, his memory and his family’s pride in their husband and father.

Postscript: John Arthur Taylor, Jr., son of John and Etta Taylor, was born on February 4, 1916, and died on June 15, 1987. He married Estelle Singleton in October 1944, and they had four children: John III, Lynette, Maureen, and Kathie. Estelle Taylor was a nurse at New Britain General Hospital and later at Hartford Hospital, where she served as head nurse. An active resident of Seabury Retirement Community, she died at age 93 on April 2, 2014. Daughter Lynette Taylor Grande and her husband Robert continue to live in Bloomfield.

Photo credits:

johnnyschoolboytaylor.com

Youtube.com

Today in Connecticut History, September 19, 2022



Johnny Taylor, 1936 photo

In Brief

- Year-end contributions not previously acknowledged: Thanks to Kevin Gough and Paula Jones and to Alice Hendrickson.
- David Roones’ April 26 program on “Slavery in Wintonbury: A Story Uncovered” saw 73 Zoom logins, some with more than one person watching, a very large attendance for a WHS program and a tribute to community interest in the topic.
- On May 11, WHS and the Bloomfield Public Library cosponsored a Zoom program on the “Flood of 1955.” You may have noticed dikes and flood control reservoirs around Bloomfield and wondered when they were built. It was after August 1955 when the eastern U.S. was hit by successive hurricanes. An incredible 25 inches of rain fell in parts of Connecticut, where streams and rivers were unprepared for the deluge. This presentation explored the worst flood in Connecticut history: the contributing factors, impacts, and aftermath, including the ongoing role of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in flood risk management. James Jylkka, Natural Resource Specialist, United States Army Corps of Engineers (based at Colebrook Dam), did a virtual presentation and answered questions. There were 51 Zoom logins.
- Believe it or not! Bloomfield is a “nationally recognized outdoor recreation hotspot,” according to Eric Hammerling, Executive Director of the CT Parks and Forest Association, in a program presented by the Bloomfield Public Library on May 16, 2023. There are **three** state parks in Bloomfield. Can you name them? Connecticut Trails Day takes place June 3 and 4. Time to get outside!