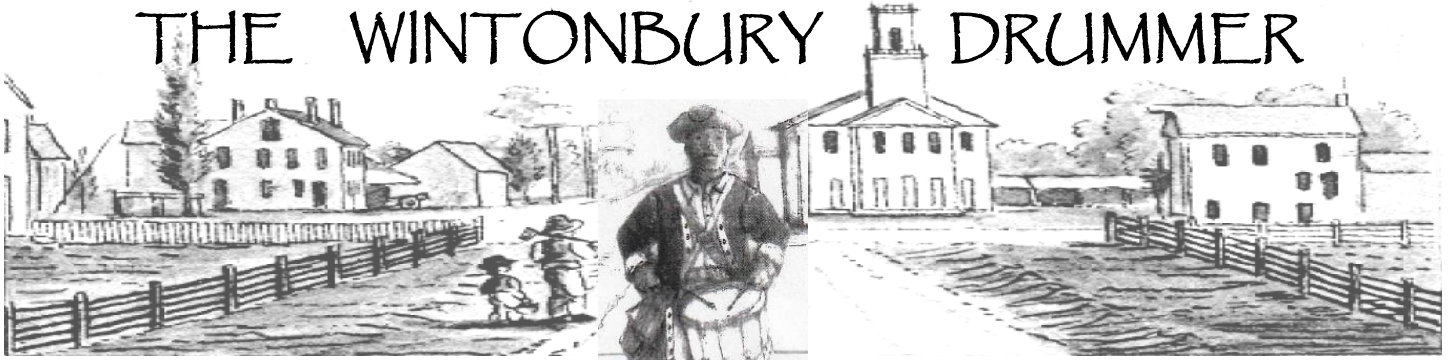


# THE WINTONBURY DRUMMER



NEWSLETTER OF THE WINTONBURY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
BLOOMFIELD, CONNECTICUT • APRIL 2024



**1949-2024**

## **SOCIETY CELEBRATES 75TH ANNIVERSARY!**



Old Town Hall and Prosser Library at 1 Tunxis Avenue, where people met to establish the historical society



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**BOARD OF DIRECTORS HIGHLIGHTS**

The Board of Directors met via Zoom on Monday, February 12, 2024, with nineteen people present. President John Cappadona announced that the Society has received a matching grant for up to \$75,000 for repairs to the Old Farm School, and perhaps another \$12,000 Survey and Planning grant.

The Old Farm School roof needs caulking to stop leaks, and the Board voted \$11,000 to hire contractor Tony Indino to do the work. Indino has also provided estimates for the Southwest District School roof, but that work will be put off pending decisions on roofing material and financing.

The Board voted to hire Deb Spearot, a Master Gardener, to maintain the gardens at the history campus. She will be paid about \$1,800 for the season.

The Lemuel Haynes program on February 1 was attended by 38 people and is now available through the Library on YouTube. A Women's History Month program on March 18 featured Mary Korpi talking about a woman lighthouse keeper.

**Where do WHS members live?** This newsletter is sent to fourteen states plus the District of Columbia: California (3), Connecticut (117), District of Columbia (1), Florida (1), Kansas (1), Massachusetts (6), Michigan (1), New Hampshire (2), New York (2), Pennsylvania (1), South Carolina (1), Texas (4), Virginia (1), Vermont (2), and West Virginia (1).

Business member: Many Rivers Community

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**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 8, 2024. Thank you.

***The Wintonbury Drummer***

is published five times a year by  
Wintonbury Historical Society, Inc.  
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## SOCIETY FOUNDED 75 YEARS AGO

In 2024, the Wintonbury Historical Society is celebrating its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The history of the Society begins within the Prosser Public Library (today's Bloomfield Public Library). In 1910, Levi Latimer, a Bloomfield resident, left the sum of \$720 to the Prosser Library for the express purpose of forming a historical society. In January 1944 about a dozen people met at the Town Hall with Frederic H. Bidwell to discuss using the Latimer bequest to establish a historical society.\* For unknown reasons, their efforts were unsuccessful. Finally, in 1949, the library invited residents to a "Preliminary Organization Meeting for the Proposed Historical Society in Bloomfield." Following the guest speaker's remarks, Mrs. Homer Reid of the library solicited ideas and opinions on whether or not to form a historical society in town. Later that year, after formal organization had taken place, Mrs. Thomas H. Gabb of the library was named as an ex-officio member of the Board of Directors, cementing a library connection that continues to be invaluable today.



Eugene L. Bestor  
File photo

According to the minutes of that first meeting on Tuesday, February 8, 1949, Dr. Eugene L. Bester opened the meeting by welcoming thirty-two attendees and introducing Mr. Daniel Howard of Windsor, who spoke about Windsor history and how the Windsor Historical Society was organized. Following this, the group elected Mr. Jack O. Hoover as temporary chairman and Mrs. Leslie M. Bingham as temporary secretary. Apparently, there was unanimous agreement that Bloomfield should have a historical society, for an organizational committee was then elected and given the task of preparing a Constitution and By-laws to present to the next meeting.

The "Organization Meeting of the Wintonbury Historical Society" was held on March 2, 1949, at Town Hall. Jack (continued—>)

### WHO WAS WHO IN 1949?

**Dr. Eugene Bestor**, a Hartford surgeon, had a home on Mountain Avenue at the top of Whirlwind Hill, opposite Mountain View Cemetery. The woodland gardens on his property were widely admired. Today the trees are gone, and the site has become an extension of the cemetery. Bestor was born in Norwich, CT, in 1882, married Louise Loveland in 1917, and died in 1973 at the Pierce Memorial Baptist Home in Brooklyn, CT. (Full disclosure: your editor's birthplace)

**Jack O. Hoover** (1885-1963) lived at 510 Bloomfield Avenue and was active in town, chairing a school building committee in the 1940s. He retired in 1950 after a career with The Travelers Insurance Company. He died in November 1963, one month after the passing of his wife, Grace Rogers Hoover (1890-1963). Burial was in Mt. View Cemetery.

**Charles Bierkan** (1912-2003), a graduate of Trinity College, taught History in the Hartford Public Schools for 35 years. He was curator of the Old State House in Hartford and a member of the Connecticut Historical Society. He served in the Air Force during World War II and was Director of Civil Defense for Bloomfield in the 1950s. A photographer and lecturer, he traveled widely. He was a communicant of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church. He married Margaret Fuss (1912-2002), who was from an old Bloomfield family. They were buried in Old St. Andrews Cemetery.

**H. Ward Pinney** (1907-1981) owned an insurance agency with offices on Park Avenue and was active in town affairs. He and his wife Marguerite (1911-2002) are buried alongside his parents in Mt. View Cemetery.

Hoover presented the report of the by-laws committee, and the group unanimously voted to adopt the new Articles of Association and By-laws. The next business was electing officers. A nominating committee composed of Dr. Bestor, Thomas H. Gabb, and Mrs. T. Blake Uteley was appointed by Mr. Hoover. During a short recess those present signed the original copy of the By-laws and paid their dues. The nominating committee then presented its report: for president, Jack O. Hoover; for vice-president Harold F. Bidwell; for secretary, Mrs. Leslie M. Bingham; for treasurer, Mrs. Charles O. Bierkan; and as directors, H. Ward Pinney and Robert S. Capen.

“On the motion of Mr. H. Ward Pinney, seconded by Mr. William C. Hubbard, it was unanimously voted that all persons present, plus those who attended the meeting of February 8, should be considered, and always designated as charter members of the society.” Later in the meeting, it was voted to hold the charter membership open until the next meeting on June 1.



Jack O. Hoover, 1950

File photo

“The secretary was instructed to notify the Board of Directors of the Prosser Public Library that the Wintonbury Historical Society had been organized and that they were to elect a member of their board to serve on the Board of Directors of the Society.” And so, in this way, with impetus from the Prosser Library, the Historical Society got its start.

*\*From The Hartford Courant, January 16, 1944: “Members of the group which met Saturday evening to consider plans for the new society, in addition to Mr. Bidwell, were Mrs. T. Bernard Corrigan, secretary; Mrs. Thomas H. Gabb, Arthur W. Burrows, Attorney Morris J. Cutler, Lewis T. Finch, Mrs. Robert S. Capen, Mrs. Edith G. Dean, William C. Hubbard, Herbert F. Stiles, Miss Emily J. Wilcox, Miss Marion L. Pinney and J. Senior Washington.”*

## **POETRY READING BY MARILYN JOHNSTON AND TOM NICOTERA**

### **Celebrating WHS' 75th anniversary: April 18, 7 PM**

The layers of Bloomfield's history go deep in time and wide among its diverse cultures. This history can go hand in hand with poetry. Bloomfield poets Marilyn Johnston and Tom Nicotera will read their poetry in a new edition of the Wintonbury Poetry Series, sponsored by Bloomfield Public Library on April 18, 2024, at 7 PM via Zoom. This reading will be in honor of the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Wintonbury Historical Society. The theme of Marilyn's reading will be Memory, individual and collective. She will touch on townspeople, too, from 19<sup>th</sup> century Julia Filley to the late Fannie Gabriel.

Tom Nicotera is also a widely published poet. As library co-workers, Marilyn and Tom co-founded the popular Wintonbury Poetry Series in 1996. To register for this reading: go to [bplct.org](http://bplct.org) and click on Event Calendar. The program's Zoom link will be emailed to you.

## CHARTER MEMBERS OF WHS

The WHS website (“65 Year History”) and the minutes of meetings on February 8 and March 2, 1949, yield the following 28 names. Attendance was thirty-two on February 8 and twenty-four on March 2, so it is likely that there are other names that should be recognized besides these. Readers are asked to send additions and corrections to the editor.

Note: From the March 2 minutes: “All persons present, plus those who attended the meeting of February 8, should be considered and always designated as charter members of the society.” Unanimously voted. It was also voted to hold the charter membership open until the next meeting on June 1. The June 1 minutes are missing.

Barnard, Cynthia\*  
 Barnard, Mrs. Carlton  
 Bestor, Eugene L.  
 Bidwell, Elma\*  
 Bidwell, F. H.  
 Bidwell, Harold F. (first vice-president)  
 Bierkan, Mr. and Mrs. Charles O. (Margaret F. Bierkan, first treasurer)  
 Bingham, Mr. and Mrs. Leslie M. (Dora P. Bingham, first secretary)  
 Burnham, Harriet Barnard\*  
 Capen, Mr. and Mrs. Robert S. (Mr. Capen, Board of Directors)  
 Cyr, Dorothy Barnard\*  
 Gabb, Thomas H.  
 Hoover, Jack O. (first president)  
 Hubbard, William C.  
 Metzger, Roscoe F.  
 Oliver, Phyllis Bidwell\*  
 Peck, Mrs. E. Newton  
 Pinney, H. Ward (Board of Directors)  
 Pinney, Miss Marion L.  
 Rathbun, Charles E.  
 Reid, Mrs. Homer  
 Snyder, Martha Barnard\*  
 Utley, Mrs. T. Blake  
 Wiley, Mrs. Ralph C.  
 Woodford, Harold L.  
 \*=Named in website article but not in minutes.

### Honor Roll of Year-end Donors Names added since February

Godard, Barbara  
 Hager, Lois and David  
 Hunt, Kimball and Dorothy  
 Johnson, Nancy and Theodore  
 Merrow, Libbie  
 Miller, Robert and Susan  
 Perreault, Jean and Stephen  
 Robert, Charlie and Jennifer  
 Stone, Jonathan, and Thomas  
 Flanagan  
 Wright, Claudia and Richard

There was a total of \$4,085 received from 40 donors. This is 88% of expected donations for the fiscal year and 26% of the 2023-2024 budgeted income. In the ten years the Society has solicited year-end donations, this is the second highest total, trailing by only \$5 the donations of 2019, when 59 donors contributed. The average donation of \$102 ranked second to the \$119 average of 2022. All Society members surely appreciate those who were able to donate such an important part of the WHS annual funding. Please contact the editor if you find any errors or omissions in the list.

### Erratum

On page 2 of the February issue, the \$5,000 grant should have been credited to Seabury, not Duncaster.

## JAMAICANS IN BLOOMFIELD'S HISTORY

Surprising as it may seem, Bloomfield, with some help from Hartford, holds a national record. The Blue Hills neighborhood is first in the nation with the highest percentage of Jamaicans within its population.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, it is appropriate for the *Wintombury Drummer* to take a look at Jamaican history in Bloomfield.

That history leads us back to the settlement of the Blue Hills neighborhood. In its November 2018 issue, the *Drummer* described the early development of southeast Bloomfield.<sup>2</sup> The Blue Hills neighborhood started to extend from Hartford into Bloomfield in 1897 when the trolley line was built as far north as Mount St. Benedict Cemetery and enterprising contractors took the opportunity to build homes for sale. Today there are about 3,000 residents on the Bloomfield side of the city line and about 7,000 on the Hartford side. Together they make up Blue Hills.

Residents of this Bloomfield/Hartford area have long felt they belong to a neighborhood. When the telephone company created exchanges years ago, it recognized a certain interconnection when it grouped Bloomfield and northwest Hartford together as the Chapel (later 242, 243) exchange.<sup>3</sup> Eastern Bloomfield is served by its own fire company, the Blue Hills Fire Department (which covers the history campus on School Street). The McMahan Wintombury Library at the corner of Blue Hills and Rockwell Avenues, embodies the common recognition of Blue Hills as a community—distinct from but part of the town as a whole.<sup>4</sup>

### THE HISTORY

A significant wave of immigration to the United States from the West Indies began in the 1940s, spurred by labor shortages during World War II. Many immigrants were drawn to the Hartford region by the surplus of available jobs in the tobacco fields along the Connecticut River Valley. Men worked in agriculture while women often found work as housekeepers, teachers, nurses, and health aides. Local community organizations helped newcomers settle by offering friendship, housing, and economic opportunities.

Today, Connecticut's West Indian community includes immigrants from all the Caribbean Islands. They have established significant sports, cultural, and social clubs. The community sponsors dance and music groups, and produces an annual week-long festival that attracts audiences from all over the Northeast. With Greater Hartford now being home to the third largest West Indian community in the nation, beloved traditions like Carnival have been transplanted and sustained here.

—*The above first appeared as a panel in the Connecticut Cultural Heritage Arts Program's "Mas: Carnival Costumes from Hartford's Caribbean Community" exhibit at the Connecticut Historical Society. The entire exhibit can be viewed at [www.flickr.com/photos/cthistoricalsociety/albums/72157714924239008](http://www.flickr.com/photos/cthistoricalsociety/albums/72157714924239008)*

With this history of moving from Hartford to Bloomfield, it was natural for Jamaicans and other West Indians to better themselves by moving to Bloomfield and making homes throughout the town.

One of the earlier West Indian residents was Wentworth T. Phillips (1926-2004), who founded the Bloomfield Farm Implement Museum on Tunxis Avenue Extension. Phillips came to Hartford from St. Kitts in 1952 to work on tobacco. He moved to Bloomfield in 1954 to (continued—>)



R. Pierce photo

work at the Copaco slaughterhouse. In 1980 he founded the museum to house his collection of about 3,900 antique tools and farm machines. A New York Times article by Sharon Bass (March 5, 1989) said, “Mr. Phillips leases the land at the museum from the Culbro Land Development Company for \$1 a year. But he owns the thousands of farm implements dating back 200 years – wagons, harvesters, feeders, potato cutters, butter churns, cream separators, chicken incubators, ploughs, and hand tools. Mr. Phillips said he had spent decades going to estate and farm sales around New England to collect the pieces.” (see [www.ctmq.org](http://www.ctmq.org) [CT Museum Quest])

Dr. Leslie Perry, a Bloomfield resident with Jamaican roots, was interviewed by Prof. Fiona Vernal for the Society’s Oral History Project. In that interview Perry observes that in the 1960s and 1970s many black teachers lived in Hartford, but “as things went on, they moved out and moved to Bloomfield.” This was true for people in other occupations, too. Kenneth and Eva Bennett, for example, moved to Bloomfield with their nine children in 1970. Kenneth worked at Stanadyne in Windsor for many years. Currently age 101, he still lives in the same house on Park Avenue. As a second example, Amos and Vera Taylor moved to Bloomfield in about 1972. Vera continues to live in their home on School Street, near the Old Farm School.<sup>5</sup> Amos was born in Clarendon, Jamaica, in 1919 and came to Hartford in about 1950 to work in tobacco. He was employed by Culbro Tobacco Corporation for over forty years. He died on November 27, 2002 at age 83.<sup>6</sup>



Vera R. Taylor  
WHS file photo

In the past fifty years, many people of West Indian descent have made Bloomfield their home. Recent years even saw the town elect its first Jamaican mayor, Suzette DeBeatham Brown. Many more examples can be cited, and the *Drummer* will acknowledge more longtime West Indian residents as readers send in suggestions.

1. From Wikipedia, citing the 2020 U. S. Census. See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue\\_Hills\\_Connecticut](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_Hills_Connecticut). See also Fiona Vernal, June 16, 2018 Grating the Nutmeg podcast on Greater Hartford’s West Indian Diaspora. (<https://gratingthenutmeg.libsync.com/size/5/?search=fiona+vernal>)
2. See “Oakland Terrace 1897: House Lots for Sale!” on pages 6-7 of the November 2018 issue. See also “Bloomfield’s Blue Hills Origins” in the November 2020 issue, pages 3-5, which cites Bloomfield’s origins in the purchase of land in 1661 by Edward Messenger in the area where Blue Hills Avenue intersects with Park Avenue.
3. The WHS number back then would have been CHapel 3-1531 or simply CH3-1531—only seven letters/digits being dialed. In the late 1950s numbers changed to all digits, thus 243-1531.
4. Having villages within towns is very common in Connecticut. Simsbury has its Weatogue, and Windsor has Poquonock, Rainbow, Wilson, and more.
5. See the September 2022 *Drummer* for an article on Mrs. Taylor during her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday year.
6. Amos Taylor’s obituary appeared in *The Hartford Courant* on December 1, 2002.

The editor wishes to thank the following for help with this article: Kenneth Bennett, Jr., Suzette DeBeatham Brown, Hugh Freaney, and Leslie Perry.

## GOODBYE, OLD TAVERN

On March 16, 2023, the 277-year-old Joseph Goodwin Tavern at 24 Duncaster Road, which had recently come under new ownership, was destroyed by fire. Built in 1746, its remains were demolished in February 2024. (See more on this house in *Over Tunxis Trails*, page 71, on sale at the Gabriel History Center.)



Fire photo from smugmug.com



Demolition photos by Society member Cheryl Fox, whose 154-year-old home is nearby.

### IN MEMORIAM

Society member Margaret Cunnane died on January 4. She and her husband John moved to Bloomfield in 1959, and she had lived in the same Tunxis Avenue house ever since. Active in town, she served on the Board of Education and the Town Council. She was on the building committees for the Wintonbury Hills Golf Course and the Bloomfield Police Department. She was a Justice of the Peace and a faithful member of Sacred Heart Church. She taught at Bulkeley High School in Hartford for twenty-two years. Margaret leaves two daughters, Eileen Kirschbaum of Suffield and Deirdre Cunnane of Boston. (obituary photo)

