

THE WINTONBURY DRUMMER



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

75th Anniversary Special

THE SONGS OF 1949

Sunday, November 17, 2024, 3:00 PM
First Congregational Church

As part of the 75th anniversary celebration of the Society's founding in 1949, Gregory Babal and his students will present a program of music from the 1940s era. A member of the Wintonbury Historical Society, Mr. Babal lives in the historic Samuel Eggleston House on Park Avenue and is a neighbor to the history campus.

Mr. Babal is a member of the piano faculty at The Hartt School, University of Hartford, where he is the coordinator of the Piano-Keyboard area. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Music Education from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where he majored in both piano and violin. He later received a Master of Music degree in piano performance from The Hartt School, University of Hartford. Mr. Babal has performed and given clinics in Pennsylvania, Iowa, Massachusetts, and Connecticut, as well as in Poland and the Slovak Republic.



Greg Babal
University of Hartford photo

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BOARD HIGHLIGHTS

The Board met on September 9 with seventeen people present. The treasurer reported recently receiving a grant of \$1,300 from Connecticut Humanities. Board members all agreed to make personal contributions to the Old Farm School Fund. Receipts so far this fiscal year total \$11,792, including an \$8,000 grant for OFS repair. Renovations may not take place until spring. The Southwest District School's new roof, however, has been completed at a cost of \$7,000.

The Board met again on October 7 with twenty-one people present. Notice of this meeting had been sent to the general membership. Since elections had not been held at the annual meeting on September 16, members had the opportunity to vote at this October meeting. The needed quorum of twelve was easily attained. The Directors Class of 2027 was elected, along with the president, vice-presidents, and treasurer, as named in the box on the left side of this page.

A report on the September 16 annual meeting and program at the Wood Human Services Center remarked on how successful it was. About sixty people attended to hear the panel tell of memories of Bloomfield, and several in the audience shared their recollections. The food was delicious.



Business member: Many Rivers Community
Acupuncture, 3 Barnard Lane

ATTENTION!!!

The Wintonbury Drummer invites readers to contribute articles, personal reminiscences, book reviews, photographs, etc. Material for publication in the February issue should be received at least by January 11, 2025. Thank you.

The Wintonbury Drummer

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\$75,000 GOAL FOR 75TH ANNIVERSARY REPAIR FUND

To most Bloomfield people the town's Old Farm School is a familiar sight. Built of brick in 1796, it is the oldest building in town. This year the Historical Society plans to make needed repairs to the school and is seeking contributions from individuals and businesses.

The building was used continuously as a school until 1922. During this time-period it did not have running water or electricity. The upper story was opened as additional classroom space in 1829, and some original desks remain. During the time the building was used as a school, it was also used for community activities, for meetings, and for neighborhood gatherings. When the Old Farm School no longer served as a school, it continued to provide a public gathering space. The American Legion and the Legion Auxiliary met there from 1931 to 1971. While the building was still at its original site, the Legion added a small kitchen at the back.



Moving the School, 1976
File photos

The Old Farm School was moved from the east to the west side of School Street in the 1970s. Town of Windsor records show that the original triangle of land on which the school was located was deeded to be set aside forever for the use of the community. When the State wanted to realign the intersection where School Street crossed Park Avenue, arrangements were made to exchange this triangle for land across the street just to the west. The Wintonbury Historical Society raised money to have the building restored at the new site. Since that time, the Society has leased the school from the

town for the sum of a dollar per year with the understanding that the Society would cover the cost of the building's upkeep and maintenance.

Looking to the future, in 1979 the Society worked to have The Old Farm School listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

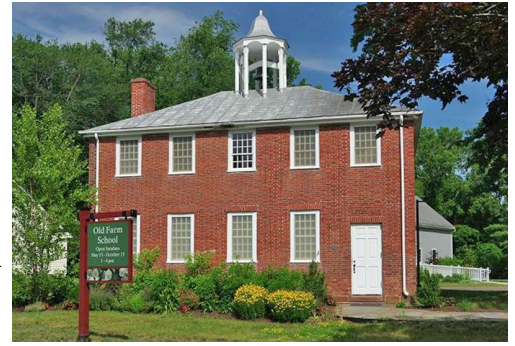
Understandably, a 1796 building demands constant stewardship. Some of the building now needs repair and restoration. In June 2019, the Society hired Robert Hurd, AIA architect, to assess the property. Last year the Society applied for and was awarded a grant from Connecticut's State Historic Preservation Office. This is a matching grant to restore the windows, fascia and gutters. SHPO will provide up to \$75,000 in allowable expenses which the Society must match. We have also received a grant from the Bloomfield Community Fund of the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving in the amount of \$7,000 for repairs to the school's roof and second floor ceiling.

The Wintonbury Historical Society has accomplished much in this its 75th year toward preserving our buildings and collections and enhancing the visitor experience at our School Street campus.

Our Collections Committee continues to review, catalogue and (continued —>)



create exhibits of the many interesting items that have been entrusted to us. This group was awarded a \$650 Conservation ConneCTion grant in 2023 supported through a partnership between the Connecticut Heritage Foundation and Connecticut Humanities. Be on the lookout for the announcement of a special 75th Anniversary Display which will be available at the Fannie Gabriel History Center for all to enjoy.



Old Farm School, 2022
File photo

As we continue to celebrate the Wintonbury Historical Society's 75th Anniversary, we are working to raise the \$75,000 match needed for essential repairs to our Old Farm School. Our successful 2021 garden tour launched this project, and we recently received commitments for donations from each member of our Board of Directors. We are now looking to the general membership and the Bloomfield community in our fundraising efforts.



Please help us meet our goal of raising 75 in celebration of 75! Send your appropriately marked contributions to P. O. Box 7454 or go to the Society website at bloomfieldcthistory.org and click on the "Donate" button. Every member's help is needed!

Thanks to Wendy Wolcott and Ruthanne Marchetti for submitting this article.

IN MEMORIAM

Ralph D. Schmoll died on August 31 at the age of 93. He served on the Board of Directors for many years. He and his wife Louise were the Society's Curators and did extensive work cataloguing its collections, assembling its photo archives, and setting up displays. Ralph created seven Bloomfield history videos, basic historical resources which can be accessed through the Society website and are still being watched today. On September 16, the Society presented an Award of Appreciation to the Schmolls for all their contributions. Ralph was a well-loved physician in town for thirty-three years. He leaves a son and daughter and two grandchildren.

Ronald F. Wade passed away on August 25 at the age of 91. A lifelong Bloomfield resident, he owned and operated Wade's Farm Fresh, which was started by his parents, Edward and Elizabeth (Burnham) Wade. Wade's retail business, at the corner of Simsbury Road and West Street, has been a fixture in town for as long as current residents can remember; and people flocked to it for fresh fruits, vegetables, flowers, and other good things. Wade was a member of the Bloomfield Fish and Game Club and of Sacred Heart Church. He and his late wife Claire (Newbery) leave five children, ten grandchildren, and fourteen great-grandchildren. Burial was in Mountain View Cemetery.

Dorothy Barnard Cyr passed away on September 14 at age 94 at Seabury. She grew up on Wintonbury Farm in town. Dorothy was a member of the Bloomfield Congregational Church and the Noank Baptist Church. For sixty years, she was married to Cyprien Cyr, who predeceased her in 2016; and they raised six children. As noted in the September *Drummer*, she may have been the Society's last living charter member.

Solomon Cushman, resident of Seabury and WHS member, died in June at age 96.

JAMAICANS IN BLOOMFIELD'S HISTORY: FINDING A NEW HOMETOWN

- *In its September issue, the Drummer noted the opening of an exhibit (subsequently postponed) at the Wood Human Services Center entitled "Bloomfield Mosaic," the culmination of the months-long WHS Oral Histories Project. Many of those oral histories have been transcribed, and this issue selects material from a long interview Ruthanne Marchetti had with Oswald Beckford of Bloomfield. Thanks to UCONN Prof. Fiona Vernal for supplying the transcript. Photos, except as noted, were graciously supplied by Chris Beckford.*
- *In its June issue the Drummer published an article on Kenneth Bennett, who emigrated from Jamaica in the 1940s. The sidebar on page 8, "Four Thousand Recruits," provides historical background .*

Oswald "Ozzie" Beckford came to the United States over seventy years ago in 1951. As he tells it, there was a shortage of farm workers in the United States. Business leaders reached out to the Caribbean islands and worked out a deal with island managers to help supply the labor. Each island would provide a certain amount of young, healthy men willing to work. Each one was interviewed and had a medical examination; and those who passed provided such information as full name, birthplace, number of people in the family, and so on. Beckford was twenty-two when he went through this process.



Ozzie Beckford
Photo by Ruthanne Marchetti

When asked if he would like to go to America, Beckford said yes, he was ready to go. He got his picture taken and joined the group of men due to leave. As he told his interviewer, "We were called together in a group that they selected. I was in that group. They advised us that day to go home, talk to your family, and they will send us a notice that we are going to be going to the United States." The young men were given paper to write down the things they needed to take with them. "This is why you have to have a suitcase," Beckford said. In addition to their clothes, the men had to have two pair of shoes, a dress pair and a working pair. The working pair had to be working boots. The island managers told Beckford and the other young men to return to their island homes and what date to "come back to that special place in Kingston, Jamaica" where they would depart for the United States.



Ozzie Beckford, 1950

Beckford remembers that the men rode from their towns and villages to Kingston in an open truck. "The body had no cab. It's just an open truck with seats," he said. The truck took them to the airport in Kingston, where they boarded a U. S. Air Force plane and flew to Florida. Beckford recalls, "It seems to me it was a very short flight, maybe half an hour, 45 minutes, and when the plane get ready to land, somebody said, 'Sit and make sure you have your strap buckle up, pull it as tight as you can get it' because that thing is going down and I'm telling you it went down. I was scared to death." (continued —>)

After working at jobs in Wisconsin and Illinois, Beckford was offered an opportunity to move to Connecticut. Two school buses carried the workers from Illinois to an Army camp at Bradley Field. From there they went to Hazardville to work for the Hartman Tobacco Company. Beckford says, “In all those camps, you learn things. You learn behavior. You learn to control. You learn about people. And each time that I go through this, I always say, it helped me to grow up.”



Ozzie Beckford, 1951

It happened that Beckford’s brother George was living in near-by Springfield, and the two connected. They had an uncle in Providence, RI, and in the winter of 1953, the uncle invited them to eat dinner at his house. As

Ozzie tells it, “We drove to East Providence to see my uncle and his wife, who we called Aunt Frances. And this young lady walks out of the kitchen, and Aunt Frances, after she met me, said “This is my niece.” This was how Ozzie met Gloria, who would eventually become his wife in 1958. The newlyweds moved to Springfield, MA.



Gloria Beckford

After 10 years in Springfield, Ozzie and Gloria were ready to move their family to a place their children could enjoy. The husband of a family that lived in Springfield knew a lot about Bloomfield and told Ozzie one day, “You know, you guys should move to Bloomfield. I have a couple of friends there and go there all the time. It’s a growing town and the schools are great.” This idea appealed to Ozzie and Gloria, who had school-age children and were dissatisfied with the local schools. They were ready to buy a house, anyway, and in 1969 found a suitable home for sale on Kelsey Place (off Blue Hills Avenue) in Bloomfield. Gloria, who died in 2018, and Ozzie have four children: Lisa, Kerry, Christopher, and Kimberly Beckford. Chris was four when they moved. He says, “Growing up in Springfield, there really wasn't any yard or anything. It was just a little patch of grass in front of the two-family houses. So, when we did get to Bloomfield, all I remember seeing is green, and I remember running through the grass.” Although Bloomfield did not resemble the paradise of Jamaica, that did not bother Ozzie at all. The Beckford family had found a new hometown.



Ozzie Beckford, in his garden

Upcoming Programs

Sunday, December 8, 3:00 PM: First Congregational Church: Music of the season with the Bloomfield High School Gospel Choir.

February 24, 7:00: Laura Helton: The Harlem Renaissance Librarians Who Changed American History. (Zoom)

March 26: The Black Angels: The Untold Story of the Nurses Who Helped Cure Tuberculosis. (Zoom)

April: Remembering Bloomfield’s Farms, a panel discussion with photos.

STONE HOUSE STALEMATE, PART 2

The Society's involvement with the Capt. Oliver Filley House, 1992-2010

by Richard N. Pierce

(Note: The following history derives from and quotes from the minutes of Board of Directors meetings, as found in the Gabriel History Center. For some years, there are no minutes. Except as noted, the photos were taken by the author in 2011. Part 1 was published in the September 2024 issue.)

As we saw in Part 1, Society members worked assiduously on the Filley House project for fifteen years without tangible results. When Sharon Steinberg, who had sparked renewed enthusiasm for the Oliver Filley House, succumbed to cancer at age 61 in December 2007, her death seemed to accentuate the demise of the Society's hopes for its own building. Yet, as previously noted, in March of that same year Fannie Gabriel had suggested that members look in a different direction—towards constructing a new home on the Old Farm School campus.



2021 photo by the author

Had the Filley project been feasible to begin with? Did committee members bring adequate knowledge and effort? Did the town staff help or hinder? Did the architect offer practical plans? Let us look more deeply at the Society's experience.

Who was involved



Lintel showing 1834 date

Leaders came and went. Past President Martin Bush was an early chairman of the Filley Fund Raising Committee, but in November 1995, after his election as chair of the Bloomfield Board of Education, Bush felt it necessary to relinquish his WHS post. In early 1998, the building committee was composed of Past President Lee Comar, chair, Brad Benson, Roberta Kania, Donald Moore, Eileen Phelps, Ed Stanley, and Charles Walker. The report of a fund-raising meeting held on September 18, 1999, at the Filley House ruefully concluded: "No one anxious to chair the drive."

Then on May 17, 2000, Ed Stanley announced that he was moving away to pursue a master's program at Boston University in historical restoration. Committee members left to pick up the pieces were Judi and Marc Sitkin, Tom Ciccarillo, Virginia Hallissey, Ed Stanley, Jerry Wagner, Fannie Gabriel, Doris Jordan, Jeanne Hunciker, Janis Langston, Sharon Steinberg, Eileen Phelps, Bea Llewellyn, Helen Cross, and Winnie Granger.

On January 12, 2004, Fred Hesketh was asked to chair the Building Committee. He declined because the architect, Eloise Marinos, "cannot or will not provide the detailed proposal that I indicated was necessary for me to consider assuming the position of Chairperson of the Filley House Building Committee."

In October, 2004, Joe Caldeira was chair of the Building (continued ->)

Committee and Robert Cook was project manager. In January 2005, a new committee composed of Al Taylor, Robert Cook, Fannie Gabriel, Joe Caldeira, Sharon Steinberg, Charlie Regini, and George Merrow was tasked with finding a new architect.

Town help

Society directors sought help from the town of Bloomfield. On August 20, 1997, Town Manager Louie Chapman wrote to Jerry Wagner saying that the Town was willing to provide \$7,500 to the Society. In return, Society members would serve as hosts at the Town Hall entrance and use the reception area to showcase the Society. The Board voted to accept this offer. The town also offered more immediately practical help. The minutes of January 21, 1998, say the town will work with the Society in landscaping, clearing a parking area, and tying into utilities. On August 19, 1998, Mayor Faith McMahon and Public Works' Dave Gofstein attended a WHS meeting. It was decided to mow the Filley House grass towards Mountain Road to increase security. Gofstein would try to get a streetlight installed near the house. But money remained an issue. In a letter Fannie Gabriel wrote to Louie Chapman the following year, on June 18, 1998, she understood that the town stood ready to provide \$25,000. The amount was to be retained by the town as collateral for work being done at the Filley House.



Unfinished interior wall



New heating system ducts

But not much happened. Three years later, the January 2001 minutes affirm that the town was to maintain fire, extended coverage and public liability insurance on buildings and grounds. Again, we learn that the town would mow grass, trim and remove trees and bushes upon request of WHS. The town would install a reasonable parking area, maintain the driveway, and provide underground electrical and telephone wires.

As noted above, the town received a \$200,000 grant from the Department of Economic and Community Development. This is the money that the town eventually used to stabilize the house. A good roof was put on. New windows were put in place. A concrete floor was poured in the basement, and a new hot air furnace and ductwork installed. Central air conditioning was provided. The stage was set for interior renovations such as wiring, plumbing, plastering, and papering; but these never took place.

—To be continued in the next issue—

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES: In the Greater Hartford area, writes Ken Engelman, we are fortunate to have a wide array of nonprofit organizations. These organizations, he says, “rely on the generosity of the local community, not just in financial contributions, but in the invaluable gift of time.” It’s a matter of “leveraging your unique talents and skills for the greater good.” (See *Hartford Courant*, October 13, 2024, Section 3, page 2) The Wintonbury Historical Society provides a variety of opportunities which can enrich the lives of volunteers. Call 860-243-1531 or email wintonburyhistory@gmail.com and say you’d like to help.