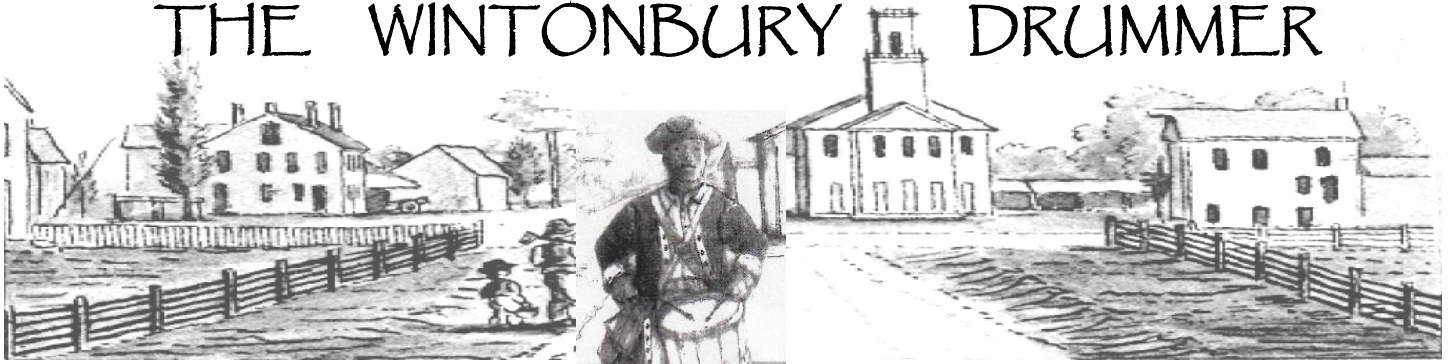


THE WINTONBURY DRUMMER



NEWSLETTER OF THE WINTONBURY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
BLOOMFIELD, CONNECTICUT • APRIL 2025

McMAHON WINTONBURY BRANCH LIBRARY OPENS

This the Year of The Library! The long process of building and renovating is finally starting to show results. On Monday, March 17, the McMahon Wintonbury Branch opened the doors of its renovated building at 1015 Blue Hills Avenue, at the corner of Rockwell Avenue. This is considered a “soft” opening, but that does not mean limited hours. The library will be open 10-6 Monday and Tuesday, 10-8 Wednesday and Thursday, 10-5 Friday and Saturday, and 1-5 on Sunday. Prosser Library is expected to open this summer.



The renovated McMahon Wintonbury Branch
R. Pierce photo

FILLEY PARK REOPENING ANNOUNCED



The new Filley Park
Town of Bloomfield photo

The Grand Reopening of Filley Park will take place on Saturday, May 3, at 11:00 A.M. The long-awaited (and long-delayed) project is complete and ready to be enjoyed by townspeople. The Society’s video of the park will be accessible by scanning a QR code. As part of the Grand Opening, the citizens of Bloomfield, both past and present, are invited to send in their memories of Bloomfield to be installed in a time capsule telling future residents what Bloomfield was like in the 50’s, 60’s, 70’s and beyond. ► Send your submissions to

Filley Park Time Capsule 2025, ATT: Strategic Communications & Government Affairs,
Bloomfield Town Hall, 800 Park Avenue, Bloomfield, CT 6002.

IN THIS ISSUE: **Page 2:** Board of Directors Highlights. **Page 3:** Where There’s a Willis, There’s a Way. **Pages 4-5:** Bartlett, Brainard, Eacott, and Bloomfield. **Page 5:** Ground Broken by Conn. General. **Page 6:** Town Name Change; Historical Buildings; New Directors. **Pages 7-8:** Stone House Stalemate, Part 4.

DIRECTORY**President**

John Cappadona

Past President

William Weissenburger

Vice-presidentsElizabeth Merrow
Ruthanne Marchetti**Treasurer**

Susan Vancour

Secretary

Marilyn Johnston

Curator

Vacant

GenealogistsJanis Langston
Jean Perreault**Prosser Liaison**

Allison Wilkos

Board of Directors**Class of 2025**Paula Baram
Rickford Kirton
Mary Laiuppa
Wendy Wolcott**Class of 2026**Tobie Katz
Ron Marchetti
David Roones
Richard Pierce**Class of 2027**Cheryl Fox
Richard Hughes
Mara Whitman
Khalid Williams**Advisory**Bonnie Bercowetz
Daniel Uitti
Donna Wnuck
Fiona Vernal**BOARD HIGHLIGHTS**

The Board met by Zoom on February 3 with nineteen people present. The treasurer reported that \$12,644.72 has been raised so far towards our \$75,000 goal for Old Farm School repairs. The Fund-Raising Committee met three times in January and has received from The Bloomfield Chamber of Commerce a long list of town businesses to whom we might appeal for funds. Cheryl Fox was elected a Director, term expiring in 2027. We have made arrangements with Comcast so that the WHS phone can be answered at anyone's home. Various people volunteered to take a month when they will check for messages at least twice a week.

The Board of Directors met again on March 3 with eighteen people present. The treasurer reported that the Old Farm School Fund balance has risen to over \$17,000. The success of last month's Laura Helton program was noted (over 50 attending). John Cappadona reported that Proulx Building and Remodeling LLC of Stafford has been selected to make the needed repairs on the Old Farm School. The project should be finished by Memorial Day. The work by Proulx has been approved by the State Historic Preservation Office. To fill a vacant director's position, Rickford Kirton was elected by the Board as a Director, Class of 2025. John Cappadona then explained that he has been overburdened and must resign as president of the Society. According to the by-laws, the Board has the authority to "fill any vacancies that occur between annual meetings." John nominated David Roones to fill out his term as president (2024-2026). The Board decided to vote on the nomination at its April meeting.

**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 5, 2025. Thank you.

The Wintonbury Drummer

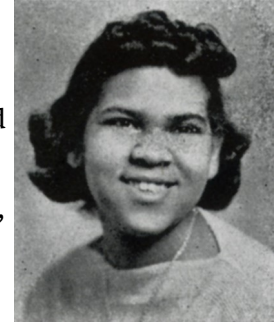
is published five times a year by
Wintonbury Historical Society, Inc.
151-153 School Street, P.O. Box 7454
Bloomfield, CT 06002
Tel. 860-243-1531
Editor: Richard Pierce
Email: wintonburyhistory@gmail.com
Web: www.bloomfieldcthistory.org

WHERE THERE'S A WILLIS, THERE'S A WAY

The Story of a Bloomfield Family

Editor's note: The following was researched using ancestry.com and newspapers.com to read obituaries, census records, etc. A briefer treatment of the Willis family appeared in The Wintonbury Drummer of February 2021. Thanks to Janis Langston, who supplied the Bloomfield High School yearbook photographs. See Janis' entries for the Willis sisters on Instagram at https://www.instagram.com/p/CpLdlOqp6w_/?img_index=1 and https://www.instagram.com/p/ConhITPJ1-v/?img_index=1.

When Frances Willis was named salutatorian of her 1939 graduating class at Bloomfield High School, it was a high point in the Willis family history. Frances was to go on to college, nursing school, and a long career in the health care field. The first black student to win academic honors at Bloomfield High, Frances came from a family that had persevered over many years.



Fran

Frances' grandfather, John H. Willis, was born in 1845 in Essex County, Virginia, about ninety miles south of Alexandria. There is no indication in the records that he was a slave, but obviously he lived through the Civil War, Emancipation, and the aftermath. Reconstruction after the war was well-intentioned but soon undone by the spurt of Jim Crow laws. John Willis, his wife, and their children were there in the midst of it. Then they heard the news. On the night of April 22, 1897, black teenager Joseph H. McCoy was arrested in Alexandria, Virginia, charged with assaulting three white women, dragged out of jail, and hanged from a lamp-post. The Willis family headed north.

In 1897, the year they moved to Hartford, John Willis and his wife had six children. James was 21, John 20, Nettie 17, Scipio 15, Julia 13, and Peter 10. John aimed not to lose any of them.

John died in 1910 and was buried in Old North Cemetery on Main Street in Hartford. John's son James was Frances Willis' father. In 1920 James, 42, and his wife Nellie, 34, lived in Hartford on Martin Street. By 1930, however, they owned their own home on Central Avenue in Bloomfield (off Cottage Grove Road). By 1940, they had moved one block east to Gorham Avenue. From here, their three children traveled to Bloomfield High School on Park Avenue.



Flo

Florence ("Flo") was the oldest of the three, born on April 23, 1920. She married John Sutton, Jr., and died on February 15, 1993, in a local convalescent home. Florence was an active member of Faith Seventh Day Adventist Church in Hartford. She founded the Stowe Village Co-op Store and was employed by Greater Hartford Elderly Services. She and John had three children: John W., Shirley, and Elizabeth; eleven grandchildren; and seven great-grandchildren. Burial was in Northwood Cemetery, Wilson.

Frances ("Fran") was born in 1922. She married Leon A. Cornwall on August 30, 1952, and lived at 38 Brookline Avenue in Bloomfield until her death at age 80 on July 4, 2002. She was predeceased by her husband and their son Noel, who was tragically cut down by gunfire at age 21 in December 1974. Frances was a head nurse at St. Francis Hospital and then worked for the state Department of Health Services. She was a lifelong member of St. Monica's Episcopal Church, Hartford.

The youngest of the three siblings was James, born on December 29, 1924. He married Carol Asnip on October 30, 1964, and died of liver failure in Vermont on February 26, 1993. A memorial service was held at St. Monica's.

The Willis family's move to Bloomfield was the culmination of years of effort. They left 19th century Virginia, established themselves in Hartford and Bloomfield, raised their children, and persevered. They found a way.

Business History

BARTLETT, BRAINARD, EACOTT, AND BLOOMFIELD

by Wendy Wolcott



Ana Grace Academy 2025
R. Pierce photo

You may have driven past, or been fortunate enough to visit, the CREC Ana Grace Academy of Arts Elementary School on Griffin Road North. Opened in 2022, the school's name and unique facade underline its importance to Bloomfield and the Greater Hartford area. One of the town's newest structures, it was built by one of Bloomfield's oldest businesses, Bartlett Brainard Eacott, Inc. BBE is a construction management/general contracting business which celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2021. In addition to its award-winning construction projects, it has a history of community involvement working with Habitat for Humanity, Boys and Girls Club of America and the Greater Hartford YMCA to name just a few.

Founded in Hartford as Bartlett Brainard Co. by engineering graduates Normand D. Brainard and Burton Bartlett, the firm was joined by James H. Eacott, Sr in 1925. Thirty-four years later when the Eacott family acquired a managing interest, the company name changed to its current title. Bartlett and Brainard retired and James Eacott, Jr. became president, the second generation of what today totals four generations of family management of this employee-owned business.

In 1963, BBE moved from Hartford into a building they had recently constructed on Tobey Road in Bloomfield. The company continued there until 1997 when BBE completed work on their current office on Griffin Road South. As stated on its website, the company "is a diverse, technical builder focused on large, complex projects." Over the years BBE has built or enhanced a variety of structures in Bloomfield which reflect the range and scope of its projects throughout Connecticut. The company's work has also taken it to Maryland, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and Rhode Island.



Bartlett, Brainard, and Eacott, 2025
R. Pierce photo

Bloomfield projects of interest include the original development of Seabury: the main building, natatorium/fitness center, congregate living, assisted living and cottages. At Duncaster, work includes dining room renovations, the natatorium, memory care facility and apartment additions. The Stop and Shop which opened in 2000 at COPACO is another Bloomfield project, as well as the Bloomfield Fire Department training tower renovations and repairs. At Cigna, work ongoing for the past ten years includes site improvements, mechanical and electrical systems improvements, dining facilities and office and roof renovations. Rounding out the list of notable projects in Bloomfield is another CREC school, the Museum Academy on Turkey Hill Road. If you haven't seen (continued -->)

it, it's another building worth walking or driving by. (In a nod to the J.P. Vincent Elementary School, which once occupied this site, the Museum School library was named after Joseph Vincent who served on the Bloomfield Board of Education in the 1940s.) You may also be familiar with the results of some of BBE's other regional projects including Gampel Pavilion at UConn, restoration of Temple Beth Israel and the Gallaudet-Clerc Education Center at the American School for the Deaf, both in West Hartford.



Museum Academy 2025
R. Pierce photo

Author's note: *My father, Ellsworth Wolcott, worked for BBE in the 1970s, rounding out his career in the building trades as general superintendent. We lived on Duncaster Lane in one of four family houses built by my grandfather's company after WW II. My grandfather, Allyn Wadhams, had purchased the land from his father, William Wadhams, dairy farmer.*

70 Years Ago

Ground Broken By Conn. General For New Home Office

Reprinted from *The Hartford Courant*, Friday, October 1, 1954, page 28.

Excavation for the Connecticut General Life Insurance Company's new home office in Blomfield has been started, Frazar B. Wilde, president, announced Thursday. The multi million dollar plant will be completed some time in 1956, it is now expected.



The Wilde Building, West Side, 2025
R. Pierce photo

Mr. Wilde said that, in addition, rough grading and the stripping of top soil has begun and that an interior roadway on the property, nearly two miles long, is being graded.

The American Construction Company, Inc., of 100 Airport Road is handling the work under a subcontract agreement with the Turner Construction Company of New York, general contractors for Connecticut General's new building.

The contractor has moved five tractor-scraper units, a backhoe, a power shovel and other heavy equipment on to the Bloomfield site.

Mr. Wilde also announced that on November 4, all Connecticut General employees have been invited to attend a "Foundation Day" ceremony at which time the first concrete footing for the \$10 million building will be poured. The site of the new home office building is located on a 268-acre tract bounded by Bloomfield Avenue, Cottage Grove Road, Hall Boulevard and the West Hartford line. The new office will be a low horizontal structure providing more than one half million square feet of space. It will replace Connecticut General's present home office building at 55 Elm Street, which the company has occupied 28 years.

FIFTY YEARS AGO

Town Name Change Proposed

In 1835, when Wintonbury Parish, a section of the town of Windsor, became incorporated as a town in its own right, the new town was named “Bloomfield.” Local legend attributes this name to Francis Gillette, a prominent local citizen whose support was needed. Over the years, a few townspeople expressed dissatisfaction with his choice. There are twelve cities and towns in the United States named Bloomfield, and two in Canada, so it’s too common a name. In 1931 and 1947, citizens rejected attempts to change the town’s name back to Wintonbury. Then in the summer of 1975, fifty years ago, State Senator Lewis B. Rome called for a referendum to rename the town as Wintonbury, a distinctive name found nowhere else. Charlotte Goodrich of the Wintonbury Historical Society commented, “I’d love to see it. I don’t think there’s anything better we can do for the [U. S.] bicentennial.” Town manager Clifford R. Vermilya, however, countered that it would be a huge headache, requiring numerous changes for individuals, businesses, and the town government. Senator Rome’s proposal stirred up a lot of debate in the community, but it never went any further. (See the story in *The Hartford Courant*, July 20, 1975, page 1A.)

Bloomfield Historic Buildings/Houses

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places:

- Captain Oliver Filley House (1834), 130 Mountain Avenue
- Francis Gillette House (1834), 545 Bloomfield Avenue
- Old Farm School (1796), 151 School Street
- Southwest District School, 430 Simsbury Road

Listed on the Connecticut Register of Historic Places:

- Auer Farm, 158 Auer Farm Road
- Captain Abel Adams House (1801), 61 Hoskins Road
- CIGNA, Wilde Building (1957), 900 Cottage Grove Road
- Elija Filley House (1800), 85 Filley Street
- First Congregational Church (1858), 10 Wintonbury Avenue
- Old Farm School (1796), 151 School Street



Francis Gillette House
File photo



Southwest District
School
R. Pierce photo, 2013



NEW DIRECTORS: Cheryl Fox and Rickford Kirton have joined the Society’s Board of Directors. Cheryl, a thirty-year Bloomfield resident, is retired from a career at the CT State Library. Rickford (photo at left) is an accountant and former town council member. He and his wife have children in the Bloomfield Public Schools.

STONE HOUSE STALEMATE, PART 4

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

by Richard N. Pierce

(Note: The following history derives from a study of the minutes of Board of Directors meetings, as found in the Gabriel History Center. Any quotations are from those minutes. The photos were taken by the author. Part 1 was published in the September 2024 Drummer, Part 2 appeared in November 2024, and Part 3 was included in the February 2025 issue.)

In previous installments, we have seen that the Historical Society got involved with the restoration of the 1834 Filley House as early as 1992. We looked at those intrepid members who were leading the project at that time and at the ups and downs of town involvement. Most recently we looked at the Society's tortuous experience with employing an architect. In this final installment, we tackle the basic question of what the Society expected to do with the renovated house.



Front Door 2011

How to use the house

Society members actively debated the goals of renovating the Filley House and what degree of historic authenticity should be maintained. Could it house the tools from Bloomfield's Farm Implement Museum? Would there be office space, a history museum, displays, a store, a meeting room? In February 1997 Roberta Kania said the first item to be completed should be an apartment at the Filley House. "We have a specific person in Brad Benson, who is a carpenter. He is interested. He and his wife and small child would like to live there for a few years." She emphasized that having a person on the premises boosted security, for the "building is way back and attracts vandals." However, on May 17, 2000, the Building Committee recommended that the apartment originally discussed for the Filley House be eliminated from the plans because the space was needed for storage and exhibits.

In January 2001, Jerry Wagner, reflecting on nine years of work, cogently summarized the Society's thinking about the purpose of the restoration project:

>To provide a home and office for the Wintonbury Historical Society, including appropriate space for a library, archive storage, display area, and meeting room, all to serve as a center for (a) historical research and (b) program assistance for Bloomfield's school children.

>To preserve in an authentic manner one of the best remaining handset stone exterior homes in New England, built by Oliver Filley, a prominent pioneer of the hand-painted tinware industry.

>To serve as the centerpiece of a future historical district, consonant with the dedicated recreational purposes for which the Town acquired

(continued —>)

the acreage and building, which may include the old Simsbury Road Schoolhouse and a farm implements museum.

>The goals stated in paragraph 1 are primary and are the basic reason why the society undertook the restoration. Their achievement within a reasonable time and attainable funding, may require some compromises in the details and authenticity of the restoration.



Exterior view, 2021

After carefully differentiating the meanings of *historic restoration* and *historic renovation*, Wagner and Judith Sitkin recommended these statements of intent and scope: (1) To preserve the House so as to provide the following usable space: Resource Library (historical research and writing facility); Archive and artifact repository; Administrative office for the Society; Multi-purpose room for educational and community gatherings; Museum display room (fixed and rotating exhibits). (2) To historically restore the external structure of the house to the 1885 photograph, including the re-pointing of

the stonework, the addition of the third (unused) chimney, the restoration of the front porch, the restoration of the archways, the restoration of the shutters and shutter dogs, the replacement of the windows, the repair/restoration (if possible) of the roof framework. (3) to historically renovate (modernize, yet look like period) the public use spaces—second floor library and research room, first floor multi-purpose room, and exhibit display room. (4) to gut rehabilitate (change the use and materials; re-build as desired) the administrative space, bathrooms, kitchen area and elevator. Also to add ramp access to the first floor and between the second-floor levels. Clearly, Wagner, Sitkin, and other Society members were knowledgeable and tackled the project with pragmatic and detailed goals. After more delays, eight years later in March 2003, Libbie and George Merrow asked that WHS not waste more time on authentic restoration because what was needed was a place for files, a research area, storage for artifacts, and a display area.

The final closure

As we have seen, in 2006 the Town Council voted to spend the grant money already received to stabilize the house. This basically shut the Historical Society out, but three years passed by. Then on August 26, 2009, Fannie Gabriel read a report about the Society's request to the town to be divorced from continuing with the Filley House project. Louie Chapman agreed that the request should be granted. Chapman said he hoped that, after the stabilization, the Society might act in relationship with the town in outfitting the House. He also hoped the Farm Museum might become a part of the complex. Fred Hesketh was pleased with one positive outcome, that the 55-acre property would now be owned by the town.

A year later, at the Board meeting in the newly-built history center on August 18, 2010, new President Dick Pierce announced that two important legal agreements with the Town of Bloomfield had been completed. Ownership of the new library building, the History Center, had been transferred to the town; and our lease agreement for the Filley House had been terminated. The Society's involvement was now in the past, and it was time to look forward to new initiatives.

