

THE WINTONBURY DRUMMER



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

CELEBRATING “SCHOOLBOY” JOHNNY TAYLOR HARTFORD’S FIRST PROFESSIONAL BLACK ATHLETE

Monday, June 16, 6:30 P.M. at 330 Park Avenue

With Lynette Taylor Grande

Johnny Taylor is widely considered one of the greatest baseball players to come out of Connecticut, despite the racial discrimination that kept him out of the Major Leagues. His daughter, Lynette Grande, a retired teacher and long-time Bloomfield resident, will present this program full of memories, adventures, and local history.

John Arthur Taylor, Jr. (1916-1987) played baseball as a boy in the sandlots around Hartford, and was a track and field athlete before joining the Bulkeley High School baseball team for his senior year. In his last ever high school game, he set a Connecticut state record with 25 strikeouts against New Britain High School.

Taylor signed a professional contract as a 19-year-old pitcher in 1935 with the New York Cubans, and had a great first season in the Negro National League. “Schoolboy” was named to the Negro League All-Star team in 1938. He became the first black athlete to play professional baseball in Hartford, playing for the Hartford Chiefs in 1949. (See also page 8.)



Johnny Taylor, file photo

IN THIS ISSUE: **Page 2:** Board of Directors Highlights. **Page 3:** Homing in to Bloomfield, a poem. **Pages 4-5:** Gillette on the Podium. **Page 5:** Book Review: *A Man on Fire*. **Page 6:** Remembrances from 1939. **Page 7:** Snapshots: Roscoe Metzger. *Drummer Anniversary*. **Page 8:** Estelle Taylor: A Life Well Lived. In Memoriam. The Drummer Seeks Help.

DIRECTORY**President**

David Roones

Past President

John Cappadona

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
vacancy
Richard Pierce**Class of 2027**Cheryl Fox
Richard Hughes
Mara Whitman
Khalid Williams**Advisory**Bonnie Bercowetz
Daniel Uitti
Donna Wnuck
Fiona Vernal**Board of Directors Highlights**

The Board met on April 7 with twenty people present. Members expressed appreciation to John Cappadona for his leadership over the past three years and then elected as president David Roones, who conducted the rest of the meeting. The treasurer's report showed income as of February 28 of \$6,150, which includes \$5,150 for Old Farm School repairs. Expenses totaled \$1,914 for the same period. Diana Barnard announced a gift of purported Filley tinware. John received from Proulx builders an updated estimate of \$97,400 for Old Farm School repairs. Plans were discussed for the Society's participation in the Memorial Day Parade and the Juneteenth Celebration. Deborah Spearot was again hired to tend the history campus gardens this season.

The Board met again on May 5 with nineteen people present. Ruthanne and John contacted the Chamber of Commerce and met with businesspeople at a May 21 gathering. Marilyn represented WHS at the Grand Re-opening of Filley Park on May 3. She read a Julia Filley poem and spoke about Julia's life. Marilyn, John, and others were docents at the Michael Borders art exhibit at the Filley House during May. Construction has begun on the Old Farm School. Sunday Open Houses will begin with only the History Center open until work is completed on the school.



L: Filley Park Reopening
May 3



Contractor's trucks at OFS
J. Langston photo

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 1, 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

Homing in to Bloomfield

by Marilyn Johnston

Driving back from the Carolinas: we see
urban sprawl, DC to New Jersey to New York,
teeming repetition, barely an open space,
uniform straggle of pine, chock-a-block
shopping malls, parking lots, gas
stations, corporate steel, gated condos, poured concrete,
the same sameness five towns across Greater Hartford—
until one finds oneself in the breathing space—
Bloomfield.

Travel shows the difference: No There
There—in the drabness of the uni-state
around us, no individual fields
or small farmhouse tucked into
a foothill, no grove of apple, cul-de-sac of
glen twisted along a brook, nothing
human-scale showing its context: Nature, holding us up—.
Nature, the heart of the heart of a town

Bloomfield has
a Hereness
here—in scalloped hill, welcoming meadow,
open space stretches and above all—fields and trees

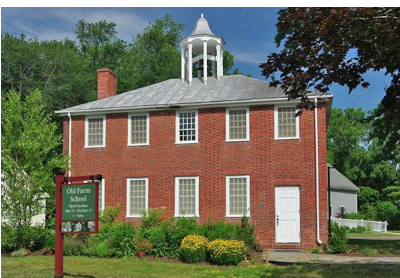
Bloomfield--a place
where one can feel the trees breathe, feel
a part of vista sky, low mountain blur,
and a high moon with its single star
lingering into the future (please, Fates!)
—if Bloomfield can remain Bloomfield—

a touch-place of the sacred wild
the only was
and the always only
will be.



April Daffodils, Filley Park
R. Pierce photo

Long-time resident and WHS member, Marilyn Johnston, wrote this poem inspired by Bloomfield's unique and precious natural beauty. She shares it here in honor of the renovated Filley Park which opened in May 2025. Filley Park is a gem of natural beauty on land gifted by Filley family in two parcels, beginning in 1910. Now this beautifully restored and enhanced park graces our town center once more, for all of us to enjoy for years to come. Marilyn is a poet and co-founder of the Library's Wintonbury Poetry Series and also Secretary of the Wintonbury Historical Society. Her third book of poetry, Downward Dreaming, was published by Grayson Books in 2023.



OLD FARM SCHOOL OPENING DELAYED

Due to repairs being made on the Old Farm School, it will not open in mid-May as usual. It is expected that the school will open again on Sunday afternoons, 1-4 P.M., beginning in June. Check for announcements at bloomfieldcthistory.org or on social media.

Gillette on the Podium

By Richard N. Pierce

In Bloomfield, we've all heard that Francis Gillette's home was a stop on the Underground Railroad. But his actions spoke no louder than his words as he mounted platforms near and far to advocate for abolitionism. In his excellent 2011 book, *Connecticut in the American Civil War: Slavery, Sacrifice, and Survival*. Matthew Warshauer explains how, at one point in the year 1854, the Connecticut Whig party denounced the Democrat party's softness on slavery. Gillette, Bloomfield's Whig Senator at the time, stood up in Congress and "thanked God that Connecticut was finally washing her hands of blood and the 'diabolical work of enslaving and imbruting man,' and he thundered that it is time to 'discard the vile and contemptible dogma that the Constitution of the United States is a shield of slavery.' This was shocking [Warshauer says], precisely because for so many years both parties had recognized that the Constitution protected the peculiar institution."¹



Francis Gillette
WHS archives

To modern ears, even that short quotation from one of Gillette's speeches sounds stilted, melodramatic, and long-winded; but that was accepted style back then. "In 19th-century America, oratory, or the art of eloquent public speaking, was highly valued and played a significant role in various aspects of American life." Often called the "Golden Age of American Oratory," this period "saw a strong emphasis on mastering the art of public speaking, with figures like Henry Clay and Daniel Webster becoming known for their oratorical prowess." Mastering oratory was seen as an important aspect of education, with schools and institutions providing training in elocution and public speaking. Orators drew inspiration from classical rhetoric and philosophy, incorporating elements of Greek and Roman oratory and delivered their speeches in a dramatic, florid, and persuasive style. In a world without many forms of entertainment, people flocked into lecture halls and theaters to hear popular speakers.²

Francis Gillette (1807-1879) graduated from Yale in 1829 and began the study of law with Governor William Ellsworth. Before too long, however, he ended his studies and settled in Wintonbury Parish as a farmer. "In 1832 [at age 25!] and again in 1836 he was sent to the state legislature, where he gained notice in 1838 by his anti-slavery speech advocating the striking out of the word 'white' from the state constitution." In 1854, he was elected to fill a vacancy in the U.S. Senate, where he served about nine months, from May 25, 1854, to March 3, 1855. Back home, he became active in the formation of the Republican party. He was active in the cause of education throughout his life, was a coadjutor of Dr. Henry Barnard from 1838 till 1842, one of the first trustees of the State normal school [now Central Connecticut State University], and for many years its president. Besides abolitionism, Gillette took interest in agricultural matters, was an advocate of total abstinence, and delivered lectures and addresses on these subjects.³ (continued on next page)

On August 6, 1867, Gillette spoke to “colored citizens” in Hartford on the 29th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies. The Civil War and emancipation, of course, were fresh in everyone’s memory. Imagine Gillette on the podium, in coat and tie, a large crowd around him, no amplification, as he proclaims:

“And when the war came, and the nation, by a series of disasters for the first two years, was brought to the brink of destruction, just about to fall, at that awful moment it stretched out its trembling hands to its bondsmen for help—to its colored men all over the country, crying, as the terrified Caesar did in the Tyber, “Help me, Cassius, or I sink!” Men whom it had scorned bitterly, spurned from its army and navy, driven from its camps, and betrayed back into the hands of their rebel masters, it implored for help, in the dark day of its sore calamity. And nobly forgetful of past injuries and insults, with a sublime magnanimity, they rushed, one hundred and eighty thousands strong, to the fight, and left fifty thousands dead on the field. And this they did to save a government which had done nothing to them but crush them, a government whose tender mercies toward them had been cruelties. From all the states, even from Connecticut, where they were not thought good enough to have the ballot, they rallied to the rescue of the government. In proportion to their number, more volunteered from this state than of the white population. And they were good soldiers, loyal and true to the flag, and bore it bravely on many a bloody field. Port Hudson, Fort Pulaski, Pillow and Wagner; Jacksonville and Milliken’s Bend, attest their valor. Their commanding officers were enthusiastic in their praise, and their enemies, even, were brought to admire their soldierly virtues. So it had been in all our national wars; they are the worthy sons of worthy sires, who fought bravely in the two wars with Great Britain.”⁴

Thank you, Francis Gillette, for speaking up!

Notes:

1. Warshauer, Matthew. *Connecticut in the American Civil War: Slavery, Sacrifice, and Survival*. (Wesleyan Univ. Press, 2011), page 22.
2. Information on 19th Century oratory is drawn from a google.com search and was AI generated.
3. Details of Gillette’s life are easily obtainable on the internet. See also Ralph Schmoll’s informative article on the WHS website: [www.bloomfieldchistory.org/Resources/Local History Articles/Gillette or Gillett or Gillette](http://www.bloomfieldchistory.org/Resources/Local%20History%20Articles/Gillette%20or%20Gillett%20or%20Gillette).
4. “Emancipation and impartial suffrage: a speech to the colored citizens of Hartford,” August 1, 1867... Hartford Daily Courant (1840-1887); Aug 6, 1867; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Hartford Courant pg. 2. One of the commanding officers mentioned in the article was Col. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, himself a popular orator during peacetime. See below.

BOOK REVIEW: A major new biography in 2024 was Douglas R. Egerton’s *A Man on Fire: The Worlds of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*. It is a fascinating and readable account.

T. W. Higginson (1823-1911), though not well known today, was famous all over the United States in the 19th century. A reformer who embraced abolitionism, women’s suffrage, temperance, and other causes, he interacted repeatedly with everyone from John Brown to Emily Dickinson, from Harriet Beecher Stowe and Samuel Clemens to Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. He was a talented author and orator who, during the Civil War, commanded the first black regiment, the Massachusetts 54th. After Higginson’s death at age 88, the *Washington Evening Star* commented, “Americans of the older generation do not forget that in the early days of the Civil War this polished gentleman and fine scholar forsook his studies and willingly underwent the hardships of the camp and the march.” (page 293) Higginson was a Unitarian minister, traveled extensively in Europe, and, grasping a fourteen-foot wooden beam along with J. W. C. Pennington, smashed the Boston courthouse door in an effort to free fugitive slave Anthony Burns. (page 78) Readers who love American history will love this book.

REMEMBRANCES

by Frances Willis Cornwall, BHS Class of 1939

Written for the 50th Class Reunion in 1989

Published in *Bloomfield!* Newsletter published by the Town of Bloomfield, Fall 1989, page 4

When I was a girl in 1939, trolley cars ran down the middle of Blue Hills Avenue. The fare was ten cents, and three tokens could be purchased for 25 cents. The trolleys ran on a single track with a “switch” (double track) at the cemetery and at Rockwell’s Corner, just about where the Wintonbury Branch Library is today. Mr. Rockwell had beehives, so he sold honey.

Cottage Grove Road was a mixture of mud and stones, mostly mud! We went to high school from the Blue Hills side of town on one of three school buses. None of them was the traditional yellow that school buses are today. Each ride on the school bus was five cents, paid for on a pre-purchased ticket. Not one of the students came to school in his own car. Most families did not own a car in 1939.

Bloomfield did not have a bank, a restaurant or a movie theater, and there were no malls or shopping plazas. You couldn’t buy a dress or even a pair of stockings in Bloomfield in 1939. There were about 4,000 people in town, and I think everyone in town knew everyone else’s family.

My father, “Jim” Willis, drove the town truck during the Depression. In winter, of course, a plow was attached, so he plowed many of Bloomfield’s streets and knew everyone. He used to say, “Some day there is going to be a street that starts in Hartford and goes through all the fields, passes Weickers’ house clean up to Cottage Grove Road.” In those days, as a girl of nine or ten, I could not imagine it, but now every time I drive on Granby Street, I think of him.

There were very few black students in the high school, and we had no black teachers in those days. Our role models were our parents, and they were very proud of our academic achievements. My father bought nine copies of *The Hartford Courant* when my picture was printed as the student with the second-highest rank in the class of 1939.

Basketball was a great source of recreation during our high school days. In 1938 Bloomfield won the C-D championship, and Principal Bernard J. Lee bought the team 29 pounds of bananas!

Back then we did not have a Police Force, but we had constables. I don’t think they had much to do—I never heard of anyone being arrested in those days. The Fire Department was voluntary, and the Blue Hills Volunteer Fire Department carnival was an annual event filled with fun and recreation for everyone.

Before I started school in 1927, I can remember Mr. Israel Grody. He was tall, bald-headed, and had a big friendly smile. He was more than just a local grocer who had a store at Blue Hills and Merriam avenues. I remember one time when we were all snowed in, and Mr. Grody came down with his horse and wagon to bring us the things we needed. I wondered how he knew we liked milk crackers (of course, Daddy bought them from him every week). Mr. Grody was one of the first to sell gasoline on Blue Hills Avenue. He saw the signs of the times, and early on he became an automobile dealer—founding the famous Grody Chevrolet dealership.

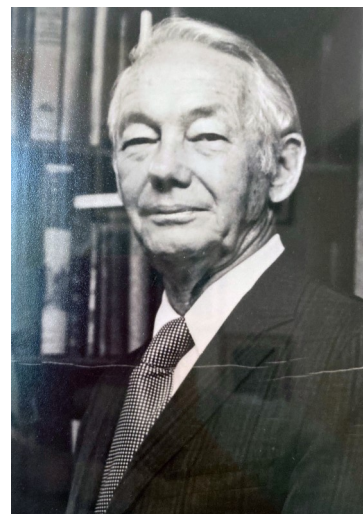


Florence Willis
BHS Yearbook photo

Snapshots of Charter Members: Roscoe Metzger

As part of our 75th Anniversary observance, The Drummer has published some brief snapshots of those who were charter members of WHS. The April 2024 issue contained a list (certainly incomplete) of twenty-eight charter members, and the June issue that year highlighted three of them. The September issue provided snapshots of eleven more. Information on others is proving hard to find, but that is certainly not true of the Rev. Roscoe Metzger, whom we highlight here. Thanks to Libbie Merrow for her help.

Roscoe “Ross” Metzger was pastor of the Bloomfield Federated Church from 1946-1977. In 1922, the Congregationalists and Methodists, who had a large, white church building where the Town Hall is now, merged to form the Federated Church. Although he never preached about politics (or money), Ross and his wife, Jonie, were always enthusiastic activists. He was active in the civil rights movement, the peace movement, welfare rights, in youth and campus ministry, and in helping to settle refugees from Central Europe, Cuba, and Viet Nam. He was instrumental in founding Interfaith Homes, which provides affordable retirement housing, and also served on the founding board of directors of Duncaster, a retirement community.



Roscoe Metzger
Photo from Libbie Merrow

A graduate of Rutgers University and Union Theological Seminary, Ross was ordained in 1935 and served churches in Ellington, CT, and Dover, DE before spending three years in the Army Air Corps in India and the South Pacific during World War II. His thirty-one years in the Bloomfield church coincided with rapid growth in Bloomfield’s population and the accompanying expansion of his congregation. After retirement, in 1989, to honor his church’s 250th anniversary, Metzger published the 92-page *Hezekiah’s Children: A History of the First Congregational Church in Bloomfield, Connecticut* (still available for sale at the Fannie Gabriel History Center).

Metzger was predeceased by his wife of sixty years, Jonie. They had three children: Johanna, Ross F. (“Rock”), and David.

DRUMMER ANNIVERSARY

In June 2000, the WHS newsletter was named *The Wintonbury Drummer* by vote of the Board of Directors. That makes this issue the 25th Anniversary issue! Thanks to Diana Barnard for uncovering this tidbit in Board of Directors minutes.

ESTELLE TAYLOR: A LIFE WELL LIVED



Lynette Grande
throwing out the
first pitch at Dunkin
Donuts Park, 2017

Our speaker on June 16 is Lynette Taylor Grande, and her parents were John and Estelle Taylor. While our program is all about Johnny and his baseball career, Estelle also led an exemplary life. She was born in 1920 in Sumter, SC, and passed away in 2014 at Seabury Retirement Community.

According to her *Hartford Courant* obituary, Estelle graduated from New Britain High School class of 1938 and went on to receive her RN from Lincoln School of Nursing in New York City. Her longest tenure was attending to mothers and newborns at Hartford Hospital where she served as head nurse and began the family-centered nursing program. Estelle earned post graduate credits at The University of Hartford along with insights learned from educational travel to Puerto Rico, Nova Scotia, Bermuda and other locales to better understand and serve her patients. She embraced her leadership role in the Nurses' Association of the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology. Estelle's dedication to the tenets of excellence in nursing benefited the Greater Hartford community well into her retirement when she was recruited to work at the Hartford Hospital Clinic.

Estelle was an avid traveler and particularly loved the seashore. She joyfully participated in The Wintonbury Historical Society, Red Hatters and Seabury library committee and book club.

Estelle and John raised four children, John III, Lynette, Maureen, and Kathie. At the time of her passing, she had eight grandchildren and three great grandchildren.



Estelle Taylor
Courant obit photo 2014

IN MEMORIAM

Society member **David Mann** passed away on April 27. He was a model citizen, involved in community service—volunteer and elected—and resided in town for fifty-six years. He served on the Town Council and was a long-time member of the Community Awareness Task Force and of the Inland Wetlands and Watercourses Commission. He was Deputy Planning Director for the City of Hartford and later, with his wife Sharon, ran Designs of Mann Garden Artisans. Bloomfield is more beautiful today, with trees and flowers, because of David and Sharon's work. David leaves his wife of 58 years, two children, Kelly and Michael, and two grandsons.

THE DRUMMER SEEKS HELP

The Society's newsletter, *The Wintonbury Drummer*, which has been issued five times a year for twenty-five years, needs help. If *The Drummer* is to continue, it is vital that new volunteers take it over, whether in its present format or a different one. So here's an opportunity for one or more persons to get involved in this creative activity and help further the cause of local history here in Bloomfield. Your current editor is willing to train volunteers. We have a detailed job description ready to send to anyone who is interested. Telephone 860-242-7639 or email wintonburyhistory@gmail.com.