

BUXTON - HOLLIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

100 Main Street, Route 4A, P. O. Box 34, Buxton, Maine 04093 FEB 2026

Incorporated 1970 www.BuxtonHollisHistorical.org (207) 929-1684

President's Message By Nancy Ponzetti

I sit here staring at my computer screen wondering what I should write. I keep hearing the lyrics from a Bob Dylan song.... *for the times they are a-changing*. How will this time in American history be recorded by future generations of historians? Will there be future generations of historians? Current and past historians have had paper records of diaries, letters, newspapers, obituaries, tax records, annual reports, and photographs when doing their research. How will future historians conduct their research when emails have replaced letters, photographs are digital, newspapers are on the web, and annual reports are electronically filed? This is why I believe that the Buxton Hollis Historical Society plays such a vital role in preserving what has made and continues to make the towns of Buxton and Hollis so unique.

I wonder how many residents of our two towns know their local history? Frequently, I pass Helen Bruce Park at Tory Hill. Who was Helen Bruce? What did she do to have a park named for her? Why is Tory Hill called Tory Hill? When you drive down Salmon Falls Road in Hollis, you see a mailbox with the word *Quillcote* on it. What's that about?

BHHS will continue to answer and research the history and genealogy of the two towns on the Saco River and provide answers when we can. We will be open for public hours again beginning on Thursday, April 9 from 4:00-8:00 pm. Special programs have been added for March; a tour of the historical society building and exhibits on Thursday, March 12th, with registration through Bonny Eagle Adult Education, and a *Watch Party* on Monday, March 30th with Pulitzer Prize winning historian Alan Taylor. Dr. Taylor has been seen on

Ken Burns' *American Revolution* series, and will help us begin the celebration of the 250th anniversary of the *Declaration of Independence*.

Please consider joining us for one or all of our upcoming programs held the third Tuesday of the month in April, May, June, and September. And a reminder: memberships coincide with the calendar year and can be renewed with the form at the back of this newsletter.

May 2026 bring you happiness and peace!



The American Revolution in Maine, by Alan Taylor

Monday, March 30th, 7:00 pm

BHHS and several other York County Museums and historical societies will jointly host a live Zoom interactive Question and Answer program with Professor Alan Taylor, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner. Please join us and bring your questions.

Dr. Taylor grew up in the historic Jose house on River Road, and graduated from Bonny Eagle High School. His many books include:

- *"Liberty Men and the Great Proprietors"*
about Maine settlement,
- *"The Divided Ground: Indians, Settlers, and the Northern Borderland of the American Revolution"* and
- *"American Colonies: The Settling of North America"*.

He is currently featured in Ken Burns' series *The American*, *Revolution* on PBS. Please come to talk to Dr. Taylor about our American Revolution history at 100 Main Street or call us at 929-1684 for one of the limited home connections to the meeting.



Above: Milton smith at the reins drove students to Hollis High School.

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Buxton and Hollis at the Time of the Declaration of Independence

By Brenton Hill

2026 is the 250th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the statement of our rights and grievances that led to the formation of our nation. As we attempt to keep those rights today, it is fitting to look back to 1776 to understand the people who cherished their rights while struggling to establish their farms and families in difficult conditions.

Compared to today, life was extremely isolated here—the area was wilderness. There was no local post office. Letters had to be carried to the few coastal villages that had a post office. Newspapers from Boston were rare and only available to the few who could both afford them, and were able to read. Yet somehow, perhaps due to our local Committee of Correspondence founded in 1774, the news from Lexington and Concord arrived here within a few days of the conflict. Volunteer militia then walked to the siege of Boston in response.

There were no good roads, and no road at all to Portland. The only overland access was by cart paths to Biddeford and Saco—often hauled by oxen. On October 20, 1775, Hugh and Elizabeth Moore arrived in Falmouth (now Portland) from New Hampshire with their young family. They intended to settle there, but found the British had burned the city the day before. The Moores continued on to the Chicopee area in Buxton by following blaze marks on trees as there was not even a good path. They built a cabin for the winter and farmed there the rest of their lives, except for Hugh's service as a Revolutionary War soldier.

In 1776, most of the homes in the area were small Danish style log cabins, built from the forest that covered the area. Logs were set on bare ground, bark was used for roof covering and the windows were small openings with oiled paper to let in a little dim light when the shutters were open.

The floor was dirt. A key feature was the smoky fireplace built of fieldstone, held together by clay within a log frame. It made a very inefficient fireplace, but there was plenty of wood. None of the log cabins survived for long as they rotted from the bottom and the top. Even the first church at Tory Hill was log cabin construction. The current church there dates to 1822.

Housing transitioned from the initial log cabins. There were a few post and beam houses being built with beams, clapboards, boards and wooden roof shingles, all processed by hand or by sawmills on local seasonal brooks. It would be almost another 20 years before the community could establish a sawmill on the Saco River. The Massachusetts government expected towns to build a church, a school, and a sawmill, but settlers put their priority on using the sawmill to build shelter.



Above: 2 men using a pit saw from a staging in 1865. Not everyone could afford mill-sawn lumber.

The 1763 Rev. Paul Coffin house is thought to be the oldest surviving home built here (an older house was moved from Portland). It fortunately still survives although the family barn is gone.

Even though settlers wanted a house as soon as possible, the second building they put up after the log cabin was their barn. Barns were essential to their farm livelihood, providing protection for their animals and storage for the hay the animals needed to get through the winter. First Americans had fled the area by 1759, but wolves were still a danger to livestock. The last wolf in the area was reported killed by Martha Elden Kimball in 1795 near Kimball's Corner in Chicopee.

Settlers were subsistence farmers in 1776. They had to grow almost all of their food and had to make most of the day to day items they needed through their own home industry. Some farm surplus was essential to obtain those few items they could not produce. Their main crops were wheat for bread and flax for oil and linen clothing. They grew new world crops of corn, beans and squash, a variety of other garden items, and also the wheat and flax of their Anglo-European heritage.

Early settlers had to do many skilled jobs to survive. They were part time lumbermen in the winter, sawmill operators in the spring, blacksmiths, charcoal makers, spinners of flax and wool, candle and butter makers, housewrights, barnwrights, and well diggers. Paul Coffin was the first minister in the area. He was paid 50 Pounds Sterling for his duties in 1776, and kept a large farm in Bar Mills to support his family. The Historical Society's headquarters at 100 Main Street sits on part of that farm.

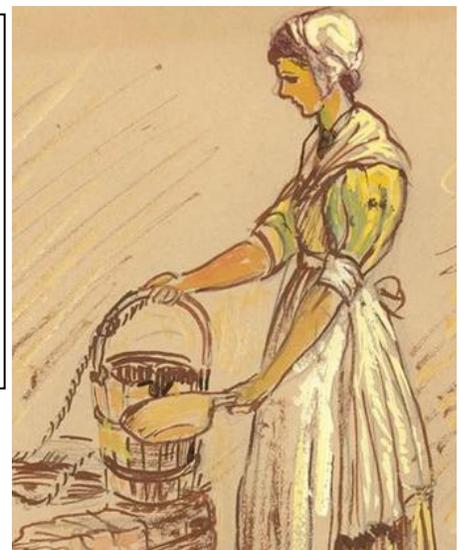
Local government was minimal. Little Falls (now Hollis and Dayton) was not incorporated as a Plantation until 1781, and as a town in 1798, so there were no town meetings for the small population there. Buxton was settled earlier and incorporated as a town in 1772 so it had selectmen and town meetings. Buxton did not have employees

or need for much taxation. The three selectmen and others were assigned duties as needed at town meetings. One action was to establish a Committee of Correspondence in 1774 to keep informed initially on the struggle for British rights, and finally for independence.

Buxton had an extra layer of government too. The town had been founded by a Proprietors committee. In 1776 the Proprietors managed the common and undistributed land, selling natural meadow hay, owning the minimal roads and taxing to support the meeting house. The Proprietors eventually disbanded around 1811 when all the land was sold.

Daily life was difficult. To get water you needed to live near the river, near a brook or dig a shallow well. However the small brooks and wells tended to dry up in August leading to a long walk for water. The advantage of early houses over log cabins was that they typically had brick cisterns in the basement to save roof water for the dry periods.

Water had to be hauled from a well or spring. A spring close to the house was a significant amenity in winter.



An outhouse also was essential when you could afford the time to build one. Cooking was done at the central fireplace. When resources allowed, an ell was often added to the back of the house, providing a cooler summer kitchen away from the large fireplace in the main living area.

Heat came from the many cords of wood cut to clear fields. Light came from beef and sheep tallow candles made at home. Candles took a lot of time and did not give much light, so life revolved around the daylight hours. Rev. Paul Coffin is believed to have had the first piece of window glass in the area as he needed it to read and to write his sermons.



Dipping wicks to make candles.

Little time was spent washing clothes as people could not afford to make or store many clothes. Wool and linen fiber had to be spun by hand, woven into cloth, and stitched by hand into garments. Ready-made clothes didn't exist. Daily work clothes, and if you could afford them, a good set of clothes for church were typical. Pins, buckles and



A flax wheel for spinning linen thread.

tableware were imported items. Local clay was used to make red ware that included milk pans, bean pots, and baking pans. BHHS has some of these artifacts of daily life from the excavation of the 1740s fort at Pleasant Point, and from other donations. The fort was used as a home for many years after 1759.

Entertainment was only what you could make for yourself. Toys were carved locally, mostly from wood. Marbles were made of clay; dolls were fashioned of bits of fabric or corn husks. Singing in church was the only public entertainment available.

Schooling was almost non-existent. The first school master in the area was Rev. Silas Moody in 1761, but few students could be spared from farm work, or could travel to a school master who taught in his own home. The first school building was not built until about 1800. Our settlers' revolutionary ideals prized education, but education came much later than 1776 in the wilderness.

On June 20, 1774 the citizens of Buxton resolved the following at town meeting (their spellings are used):

- ❖ to establish a Committee of Correspondence with Boston and neighboring towns "so far as they abide by constitutional Rights of america"
- ❖ "taxation without Representation is subversive to our Libertyes"
- ❖ closing of Boston harbour is "unconstitutional" and "subversive of American Liberty"
- ❖ the town "approve of Constitutional Exertion and struggles"
- ❖ "That a dread of being enslaved ourselves and of transmitting the chains to our Posterity is the Principle indusement to these measures"
- ❖ give "thanks to all the cities, towns and persons in ameraca and to Boston in particular who have at all times nobly exerted themselves in the cause of Liberty"

These were good words but they were backed by action. About 100 years later, Joel Marshall of

Salmon Falls compiled a list of 102 men from Buxton who served in the Revolutionary War. The Hollis Bi-Centennial Committee listed eight Revolutionary war veterans from the much smaller Hollis. It is hard to imagine leaving families in the wilderness to fight in a distant war. They must have had strong resolve and community support to hang together.

The people of Buxton and Hollis had few possessions or comforts in 1776. Life was hard. They did have their beliefs and hope. At great risk, they were willing to fight for what they thought was right. We need to remember that today.

A few more thoughts on earlier times....

Can there be any more fundamental desire than the pursuit of life, liberty, happiness, and the autonomy to control one’s individual destiny?

The fear of being enslaved themselves didn’t prevent white Americans from imposing said cruelty by enslaving black people until the Emancipation Act of June 19th, 1862. The more first-hand accounts you read, the more reprehensible slavery was.

The first antibiotic was arsphenamine, in 1911, followed by neosalvarsan in 1912, prontosil in 1935 and sulfa drugs in 1938, 1930, and 1940. The first penicillin became available in 1942. (Wikipedia) Until that time, medicine wasn’t dramatically better than it had been in the 1700s and 1800s.

Black men got the right to vote in 1870, white women in 1920, black women in 1965. There were some early exceptions, but abundant interference was used to block voting. Sue Schaller

*I pledge allegiance to the flag,
of the United States of America;
and to the Republic for which it stands;
One nation, under God, Indivisible
With Liberty, and Justice for All.*



Above: Ice Cutting – all in a winter day’s work.

Water Dowsing with Rita Anderson

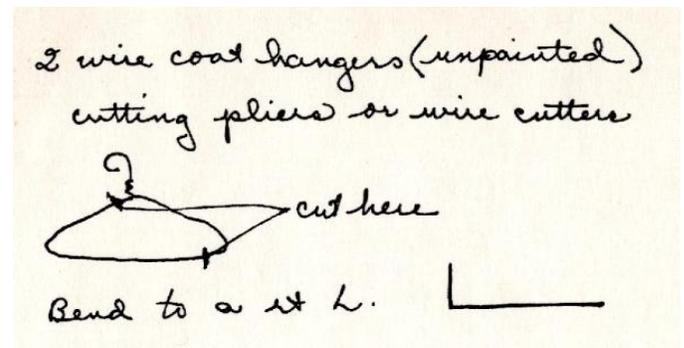
By Sue Schaller

Dowsing for water is something of a Yankee legend – we’ve heard of it, but maybe dismissed it as believe-it-when-I-see-it. So, when I needed to drill a new well, I asked Rita Anderson to dowse my property. Rita taught dowsing at the 4H Conservation Camp on Bryant Pond in years past, and as Ramona Snell told me, dowsing is a gift that not everyone gets.

Rita made me a pair of dowsing rods, and together we walked my property. Fairly quickly Rita declared it “lousy with water – like it’s sitting on a bubble”. We marked a perfect spot for the well driller. The well driller of course backed in his rig and drilled where it was convenient for him; he pronounced that dowsing never worked. Of course, if the well driller randomly drills where it’s easiest for his truck, we will never know if the site the dowser chose was better. The well driller makes money by the foot, and the homeowner is a captive buyer once the rig is on site, so the deeper the well, the more the driller makes (specifically, the driller, his father, and his son). On that basis, why would a well driller ever drill on a spot identified by a dowser as the best place to find water quickly?

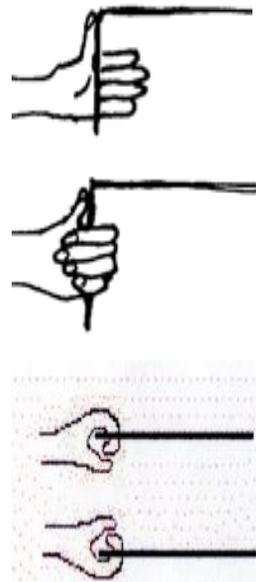
Author Kenneth Roberts became a believer in dowsing when wells on his Kennebunk property went dry and Henry Gross, a Maine game warden and dowser, happened to visit. Their conversation turned to the ongoing drought, which led Gross to dowse the site and identify a viable well location. Their relationship grew from that point, and a great article is reprinted on the last pages. For now, let’s focus on what can be most easily demonstrated.

Dowsing for water is also called water-witching. Dowsing rods might be made of the 2-branched end of freshly cut apple tree branch (or witch-hazel, or maple), or pieces of solid copper wire, or rods made from coat hangers – the unpainted wire ones. We used coat hangers. Rita cut a section that included



the longest side and one shorter side, then bent the wire to form a capital L; she made a second one to match the first.

Rita demonstrated holding the wires at waist height, in front of her, about 6” apart. She held the rods in her fists (think ski poles), with her thumbs in a thumbs-up position against the rod, but not over the 90 degree bend. Her elbows were held snugly against her waist in a compact stance. If water veins are present, the rods will spin from a parallel position to a crossed position. Sometimes they moved apart – which suggested we were standing directly over a vein of water.



Clasp a dowsing rod in each hand, held at waist height.

Close your fingers around the stem of the rod, without allowing the thumb to extend onto the vane.

Tuck your elbows snugly against your body at your waist.

As Rita walked slowly around the yard, the dowsing rods spun slowly in her hands. Rita is a straight-forward and honorable woman so I will state for the non-believers that: No, she wasn’t moving the

rods. In fact, held correctly, the holder cannot move the rods.

Rita says that if a person cannot dowse, she can stand behind the person, put her hands on the person's elbows, and the rods then become responsive to the underlying water.



Rita Anderson demonstrates dowsing – the rods swing around to form an X when the dowser is over a vein of water. February 2026

Once you start asking around, you will find that it's not uncommon to know someone who can do it. A friend in Harpswell could dowse and her daughter told me that if Barbara put her hand on your

wrist, the dowsing stick could twist down fast enough to peel the bark right off right off the stick.

If you need a well, *Maine.gov* maintains a page that identifies drilled wells in the State, their depths, and flow rates. Beware the unscrupulous well driller who insists you need a well, when in fact you did not. Call around, ask plumbers for recommendations, get 2 quotes, and double check with the Better Business Bureau. It's a big expense, and there is no guarantee at what depth they will find water, or the quality thereof. (Ask me how I found out....)

Wells periodically may need to be disinfected – even wonderful, clean, drilled wells. Drilling equipment is contaminated with soil and bacteria which can colonize the pipes. Bacteria can enter from improperly handling filters during installation, or from faucets—such as my garden hose that lies in the dirt. Consider testing your water every 5 years or so. After 25 years, my well needed some chlorination.

An engineer friend lent me his text on *Groundwater and Wells* (by Fletcher Driscoll) which has a chapter on Disinfecting Wells and Piping. There was a table that told how to calculate the volume of a well (depth x casing diameter) and what volume of disinfectant to use for per number of gallons. I settled on 5.25% sodium hypochlorite and began my search for specially marked Chlorox Disinfecting Bleach (at Walmart). There will be a few more calculations, but at this point I have the information. Additional filtration or treatment is necessary for chemicals such as manganese or arsenic which can affect neurological development in children.

It would take a hefty investment to run an experiment to answer whether dowsing provided better results than randomly drilling on a property.

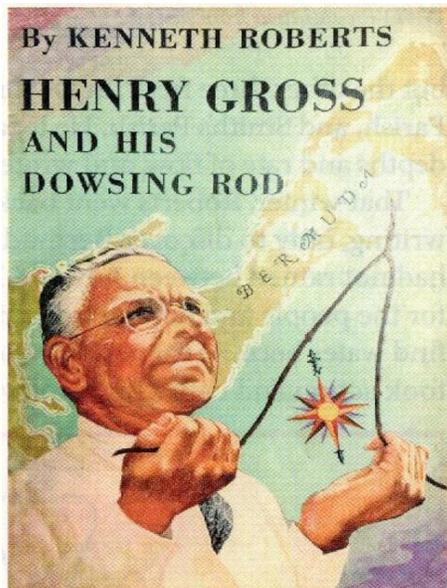
My curiosity is satisfied that dowsing is a real phenomenon, even if it cannot exactly be explained. . . And it's very entertaining-- Join us April 21st to try it yourself!



WATER WATER EVERYWHERE ... AND FROM ANYWHERE

By Elizabeth Bennett

Kenneth Roberts, after years of being a well-known journalist for the *Saturday Evening Post* and writing most of his novels, including his most famous, *The Northwest Passage* (1937), fell into league with a man named Henry Gross and began a very different kind of venture. Roberts had used dowsers before to locate the nine springs he was already using on his estate, Rocky Pasture, in Kennebunkport, Maine. But in the summer of 1947, all of these were drying up due to a drought. Worse yet, his property was being threatened by forest fires. So, when Henry Gross, a Maine game warden from Biddeford, visited his place, the subject of dowsing came up. To Roberts's surprise, Gross did not scoff. On the contrary, Gross said he had been dowsing for thirty years. He cut a y-shaped branch from a maple tree, and easily located a water source for Roberts.



In Roberts's estimation, Henry Gross was a dowser of a different caliber, and over the next months, they began to experiment. First, they sought a way to determine the depth of an underground water vein. Another dowser that Roberts knew could determine depth by walking backwards at right

angles from the vein. When he was as far away from the vein as the vein was deep, the dowsing rod would dip. Gross tried this and was amazed it worked. They also discovered if Gross touched the tip of his rod to a substance, he could divine for objects of the same substance, such as tourmaline and coins.



Furthermore, Gross learned that he could ask questions of his rod. He could stand over the vein and ask if one quart was flowing through it. If the rod dipped, that meant yes. Then he would ask if two quarts flowed through, and so forth. Roberts reported that, in fact, the rod would respond to any host of questions, even ones like, "Will it rain on Saturday?" and, "Will the Red Sox win?" but it was not accurate about such things. On the other hand, it could accurately answer if there was water within a certain distance, and as Gross turned in a circle, the rod would point in the direction of the water vein. It could tell Gross if the water was fit to drink.

Gross also discovered that he could dowse a property from a distance; he did not have to be physically present on the land. One of many stories was about Horace Levinson's Pond. The Levinson's Garden was also suffering from lack of rain, and they

wanted a pond by which to water it. From Rocky Pasture, Gross's rod told him there were five veins of water running under his property, from a source 800 feet from the Levinson front door, that put forth 137 gallons per minute. When they went to the Levinson's farm, Gross's readings were confirmed—and he discovered a place where the three veins converged, perfectly situated for a pond.

In an interview with Professor Ray Koon of the University of Massachusetts for the *Boston Herald-Traveler*, the professor said, "In every rural community you can find a 'diviner' who professes the power to locate underground water by means of witch-hazel twig. You can also find gullible who would never think of digging a well without having a water-finder first determine the spot." The editor of the *Traveler*, knowing Roberts to be opinionated on the matter, asked him to write a rebuttal.

Robert's article garnered a lot of interest as the drought continued into 1948. Many letters came, including one from Dr. Gardner Murphy of the American Society for Physical Research asking Roberts to gather some dowzers for experiments. The research, covered by *Life Magazine*, was conducted on Roberts's Rocky Pasture estate. To Roberts's dismay, the scientists were not interested in seeing the dowzers locate underground water, but rather wanted them to find coins in paper bags and water in jars. Roberts insisted that while Gross may have been able to do those things, it seemed pointless. Roberts left the affair in disgust and vowed not to fuss with skeptical scientists anymore.

All the same, Gross continued to dowse. Gross had helped Supervisor-Warden Vern Black before, once finding an outboard motor that had dropped into deep water, and another time finding a spring at his camp. At a meeting of Maine Wardens during the summer of 1949, while the state continued to be plagued by drought, Black asked Gross to find water for his neighbor Joe Ridlon, whose property was on Colcord Pond. Gross consulted his rod in the meeting house in Naples and found there was a vein 11-1/2 feet from the left front corner of Ridlon's cottage,

8-1/2 feet deep, running 7 gallons a minute. Ridlon dug the well there and found Gross to be correct.

County Commissioner Frank Lord asked Gross to find water for his neighbor's dairy farm, as the farmer's well had run dry. From the meeting house, Gross determined there was a vein, running 17 gallons a minute, 262 feet from the dairy barn, and only 5 1/2 feet underground. The wardens were thrilled and immediately went to the farm and dug the well. The dirt was as dry as dust, until water bubbled up at 6 feet. The produced an inexhaustible supply for the farm.

In October of 1949, Roberts, Gross, and a friend were visiting over dinner, and discussing the water situation at Robert's other house on the island of Bermuda. All Bermudians knew there were no potable wells on the island. Their wells were always brackish and used for irrigation, cooking, and bathing. Drinking water, however, came solely from rainwater. Gross was curious, and once Mrs. Robert had produced a map of the island; Gross asked his rod if there were any veins of fresh drinking water on the island. The rod said there were four springs of water, one polluted, but the other three fresh, in Devonshire Parish, St. George's Parish, and Smith's Parish. He located them, found their depths and rate of flow, and wrote it on the map.

That winter, Roberts went back to Bermuda to do more writing, only to discover Bermuda in a serious drought. It had not rained between July and November. Out of concern for the people and hoping to refute the claim that dowzers find water because there is water everywhere, Roberts took action and called Sir Stanley Spurling, a British businessman living in Bermuda and asked him to furnish drills and workmen to dig the wells that Gross had found. Gross flew down in early December and dowsed the three potable wells.

Roberts and Stanley spent the next months trying to get the wells drilled. Lack of workers, broke machines, and innumerable delays held them back as the drought became more severe, but in mid-February they finally struck water in St. George's, in

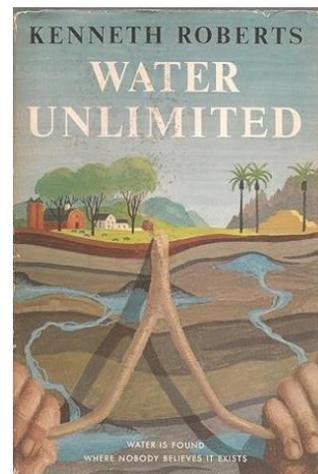
early March in Smith’s Parish, and in late April in Devonshire. The locals came from far and wide to collect water in an assortment of vessels, trucks hauled water all over the island, and one woman made repeated trips just so she could soak in her bathtub.

To Robert’s frustration, however, controversy broke out about whether the wells produced potable water or not. All the tests declared them to be good for drinking water, but the chief medical officer of Bermuda said that it could not be good because all Bermudians knew that there are no potable wells on the island. Irate at the Bermudians, enraged by perpetual skepticism about dowsing, and always up for a battle, Roberts wrote *Henry Gross and His Dowsing Rod* as a refutation. When skepticism continued, he went on to write *The Seventh Sense and Water Unlimited*, which was published three months after his death. Roberts was never able to convince everyone and said that *The Seventh Sense* should have been subtitled *How to Lose Friends & Alienate People*.

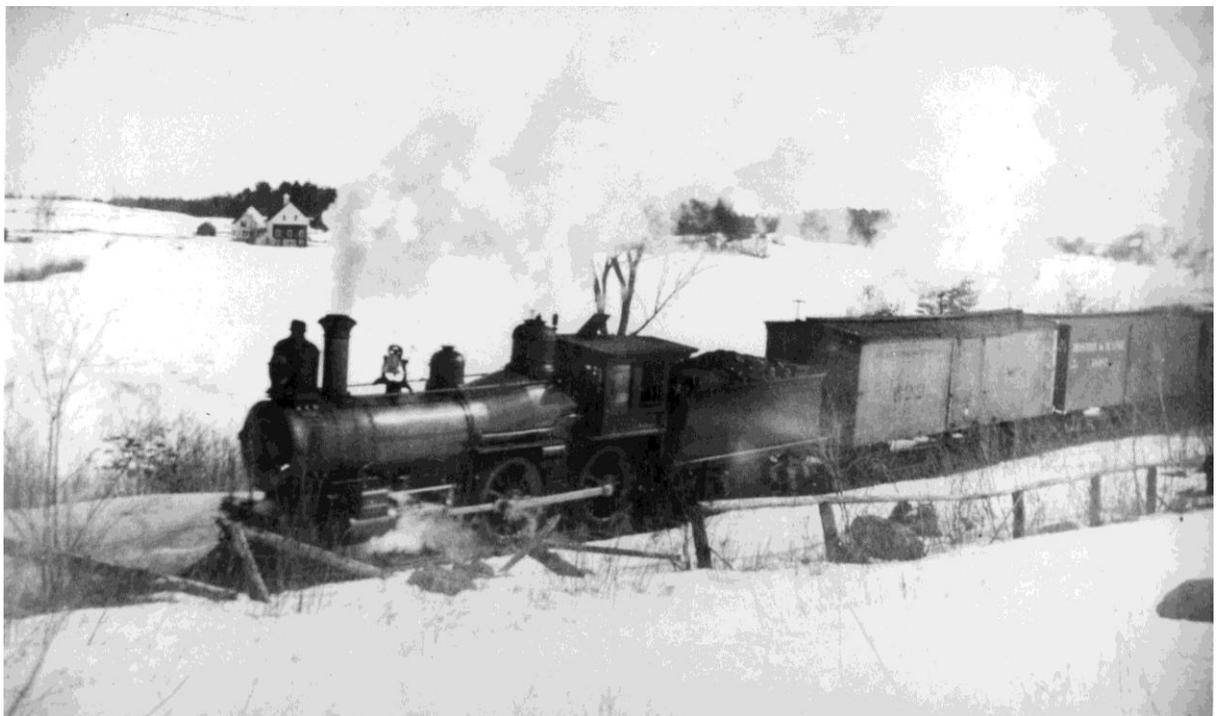
John Tebbel, a literary historian who had once interviewed Roberts said, while Roberts used to rave about the “goddamn Bermudians” who were “the pinheads of the universe,” Tebbel felt he and Henry

Gross had been vindicated after all. On a visit to Bermuda Tebbel related the story about the Bermudian wells to a taxi driver, and to his surprise, the taxi driver knew of one of those wells. He frequently went to the well after a long, hard day of work for a during the that excellent water. Excited, Tebble asked if his neighbors realized that he well was good for drinking. “Of course not,” the taxi driver replied, “They are Bermudians, and as all Bermudians know...”

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Buxton and Hollis had regular train service from Portland until 1961.



Membership Year 2026 (by Calendar Year)

Today's Date _____

Name(s) _____

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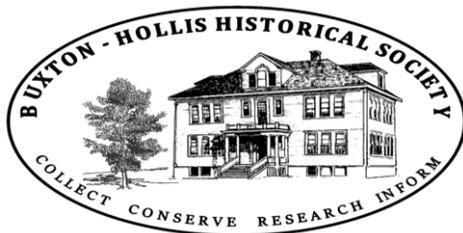
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Thank you for your support!



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P. O. BOX 34
BUXTON, ME 04093

March 12th Bonny Eagle Adult Ed Tour (pre-reg)
March 30th **Monday, Dr. Alan Taylor 7pm**
The American Revolution in Maine,
Opening Day: Thursday, April 9th 4-8 pm
April 21st **Learn to Water Dowse 6:30 pm**
With Rita Anderson – Note the early start time!
May 19th **Shoulder to Shoulder at War 7pm**
by Vana Carmona & Kathy Ostrander-Roberts
June 16th **Like Father, Like Sons to Battle 7pm**
by Linda Snow McLoon