

# Old Stone News

*The Newsletter of  
The West Boylston  
Historical Society  
Fall 2017  
Volume 20, Number 2*

## MEMBERSHIP

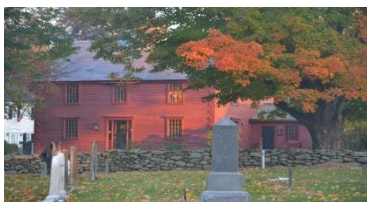
The dues for the calendar year 2018 are now due. If you have received a due's envelope with this newsletter, it means that we have not received your dues. The Society needs and would very much appreciate your continued support.

## CONTACT INFORMATION

[www.wbhistory.org](http://www.wbhistory.org)  
[bigelow@wbhistory.org](mailto:bigelow@wbhistory.org)

We would very much like to have everyone's email address so as to notify you of changes when we need to reach you quickly and efficiently. It also saves us time and money. We promise not to share them.

## BUILDING AND GROUNDS



The buildings and grounds committee hired a painter, Mark Trembley. He has power-washed, scraped, repaired, primed and painted the main building.

## MISSION STATEMENT

"The West Boylston Historical Society collects, preserves and honors the history of the Town through programs, exhibitions, publications and maintenance of the historic Bigelow Tavern as its headquarters and museum."

## From the President

Welcome to another year for the West Boylston Historical Society, a year of growth and learning about history. Our officers will continue in their positions while we bid farewell to David Lindberg and Norman Goodale from our board and welcome Carol Parker. We are looking to fill two positions on the Board of Directors, if this is of interest to you, please contact me at: [neilnorum@charter.net](mailto:neilnorum@charter.net)

Our 2018 goals are: 1. Grow membership – outreach to the next generation. 2. Maintain a vibrant historical society and 3. Continue inventory/database of historical artifacts. The Bigelow Tavern was painted in September as we continue to maintain our home. Outreach to the next generation continued with a visit by the third graders from Edwards to learn about the Bigelow Tavern and Mount Vernon. We had a successful yard sale in June raising \$793 thanks to sale donations by friends of the society.

Our programs for the coming year begin Oct. 4 with "Chappaquiddick – Pulling Back the Cloak of Coverup" presented by Donald Nelson, retired research physicist and WPI professor. Nelson wrote a book about the tragedy and Kennedy's second passenger. The Nov. 1 program will feature Bill Ballou, sports reporter for the Worcester Telegram & Gazette, informing us about "Worcester's Place in Early Baseball." We welcome back Patricia Perry, historical re-enactor, who will present "Past Christmases at the White House on Sunday, Dec. 3 (3 p.m.) at our Open House. Lighting of the Christmas Tree and Carols follow on the Town Common. On March 7 Thea Aschkenase, Holocaust survivor, will share "Stories of Survival." Jan Parent of Preservation Worcester will give an illustrated talk on "God's Acre, Deed Rock, and The Hermitage" on April 4. We will learn what a pious Millerit, a hermit, and the owner of Denholm's Department Store had in common. And finally, our annual meeting at the Wachusett Country Club on May 2 will have Robert Smith show us the changes of the Wachusett Reservoir with "Google Earth – Wachusett Reservoir – Then and Now."

Don't forget our Annual Yard Sale on Saturday, June 2 (June 9 – rain date) From 9 to 2. We will begin accepting items for the sale in April /May.

A final reminder to everyone – Anyone can attend our programs but we encourage all to become members.

Neil Norum, President

## Historical Happenings

**Wednesday, Oct. 4 2017 - 7:00 p.m. at the Bigelow Tavern**

*"Chappaquiddick - Pulling Back the Cloak of Cover-up" - Donald Nelson, retired Research Physicist/WPI Professor*

**Wednesday, Nov. 1, 2017 - 7:00 p.m. at the Bigelow Tavern**

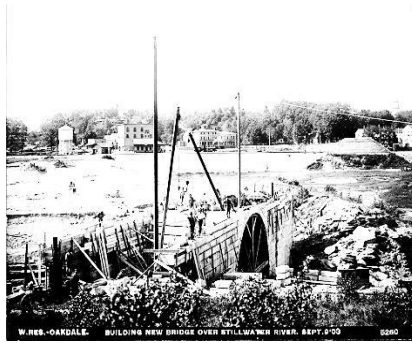
*"Worcester's Place in Early Baseball" - Bill Ballou, Sports Reporter, Worcester Telegram & Gazette*

**Sunday, Dec. 3, 2017 - 3:00 pm - 5:00 p.m. Holiday Open House at the Bigelow Tavern** - *"Past Christmases at the White House Over the Years" - Patricia Perry, Historical Re-enactor*

***Lighting of Christmas Tree on the Common immediately following open house***

## HISTORY BY THE INCH

### Valley of Ruin and Old Cellar Holes



By the end of March in the year 1900, the residents of West Boylston had started to see a small army of laborers in their midst. The company of Nawn and Brock had placed in their employment up to 1200 men at work stripping the soil as soon as the first frost was out of the ground. The Metropolitan Water Board had continued taking land by eminent domain in all reaches of the town, by the

end of March; land was taken as far as Beaman Street and included the property of Mrs. Helen C. Harlow, owner of the Beaman farm.

The houses from Sawyers Mills in Boylston to the Clarendon Mill village in West Boylston were fast being filled with laborers. The overall majority of these laborers were from Italy with whom Nawn and Brock Company promised employment and new beginnings in a new country.

The empty houses left behind during the construction of the reservoir were quickly filled up with laborers; those that did not occupy an empty house set up their own camps in make shift dwellings. The Michael Doyle house, which was left in perfect condition had been taken by laborers and stripped of its moveable contents and carried away to piles of scrap wood or sold off. The well of the Doyle house, which was famous in town for its excellent drinking water, had been dismantled and its bucket and chain went missing. Items that were once important began to disappear altogether, carried off by someone who could use them elsewhere or to sell and make a profit themselves.

The farms of George Lamson, Silas Cutting, Herbert Newton, James Ball, Charles Lougee and A. Bennell had all filled up with laborers. The Julia Pratt house, also known as the Daggert place had been filled with hens and chickens. The Davenport place, one of the oldest places in the valley, had been filled with laborers. The original Davenport Farm, contained 640 acres of land granted by the General Court of Massachusetts in 1630 to Captain Richard Davenport, commander of the fort in Castle Island in Boston harbor. William E. Davenport, secretary of the Metropolitan Water Board, was a member of the family and his childhood home was within a few feet of the Davenport estate. William Davenport had a difficult job at hand, it was very personal for him, not only did he have his job to do for the water board, but it also involved him in destroying his family homestead and childhood home.

The Samuel A. Hallock and Ephaim Neely homes were also occupied by laborers and the Levi Sturtevant home was occupied as an Italian grocery, its windows being filled with canned goods.

The stripping of the soil began at Sawyers Mill and continued into the lower common area and was completed in just a few months, no time was wasted and the landscape of the town changed forever.

During the previous year of 1899 many pieces of property had passed into the hands of the state. Negotiations for various pieces of property were pending in West Boylston, Oakdale, Boylston, Sterling, Southboro, Marlboro, Berlin, Northboro, Westboro, Clinton and Lancaster. A few examples of the real estate price paid by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to property owners are as followed. Sally J. Brewer \$1800.00, Lucius Brigham \$1800.00, John Gammell \$4450.00, L.M. Harris Co. \$194,000.00, Angelina Sawyer \$2100.00, Arthur Scarlett \$40.00, Ellen Warren \$7000.00, and Willie Wood \$2900.00.

All of the property lying directly in the basin or within 200 feet of the basin was taken by the Metropolitan Water Board. Throughout the years, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts eventually bought up many parcels of property outside the limits of the reservoir basin, as is very evident in town today, to keep our watershed clean and healthy for future generations.

Steven Carlson, Historical Society Historian

## **CURATORS CORNER**

All summer long Nancy and Janet have worked tirelessly organizing, inventorying and recording in the computer the contents of the vault. The end goal is to make all this information easier to locate. Thank you.

In June, three 3rd grade classes, along with teachers and parents, walked from Major Edwards Elementary School to the center of town to learn about West Boylston and its history. Highlights were the Bigelow Tavern and the Jacob Winn Barn, the Chapel and the Cemetery, The Masonic Temple and the Beaman Memorial Public Library plus the many other historic buildings and landmarks along the way. It was a beautiful day and all enjoyed a picnic lunch at the tavern.

We were delighted to have this tour again and hope it continues.

.....Con't on Page 3

Be sure to check the Historical Society website for up to date information at:

[www.wbhistory.org](http://www.wbhistory.org).



## **CURATOR'S CORNER** ..... Con't from Page 2

It is so important that our children learn about their heritage and history. You have to know where you have been before making decisions for the future. I think Winston Churchill said it best, "**A nation that forgets its past has no future**". Thank you to Norman, Dwight, Don, Nancy, Barbara, Sandy and Janet for manning the historical society. Lorraine Goodale played the organ at the Chapel, much to the delight of all. Thank you. I took the group on a brief tour of the Mount Vernon Cemetery noting some of our more memorable gravesites and, of course, the Beaman Cemetery. I would like to thank 3rd grade teacher Christine Stratton for leading the effort to bring this event about. You will find a sampling in this newsletter of some of the thank you notes that we received from the students. I wish that we could have printed them all.

As a side note, many of you may know that in 2020 our state will be celebrating the 400th Anniversary of the arrival of the Pilgrims in America. Many great activities are being planned to celebrate this historic event. If you would like more information I would be happy to talk with you. Also, if you think that you may be a direct descendant of a pilgrim and would like to find out how to prove that, I can help point you in the right direction.

*Bev Goodale, Curator*

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### **LOOKING BACK**

*Excerpts taken from the Mary Cook scrapbook collection*

*November 6, 1906*

#### **FISH KILLING EXPEDITION PROVES DANGEROUS**

Lookarelli Cotella, a laborer for Walter E. Chapman & Co., had his hand blown off by a stick of dynamite which also lacerated his eyes, cut his face and his body was covered with contusions.

The 28 year old resident of North Main St. was employed by Chapman for 18 months and was considered a careful and efficient employee. However; he decided not to go to work that day and it was thought that he chose to go for a walk towards Holden and found a dynamite stick near the road. When he picked it up to examine it, the stick exploded causing his hand to be blown off. He collapsed near the road side and was found later by a passerby who took him to Dr. Trask. The wound was too much for Dr. Trask to tend to so he was taken to Clinton Hospital where his hand was amputated and it was doubtful that he would survive his injury.

New facts, some of them sinister, arose when Deputy Sheriff Frank Baldwin began to investigate the cause of

the ghastly accident. It was supposed and understood that Cotella was alone at the time of the accident and was fooling around with the dynamite stick that he found.

Today the deputy found a finger bone with missing flesh, a knuckle with some flesh on it and a fleshy part of the hand. Further investigation found that Cotella left home with 2 Italian speaking companions and the three of them were heading towards a river near Holden.

Two and a half sticks of dynamite were found by the officers at the scene where the accident occurred and where they thought the men were fishing. It is assumed that the men were throwing the dynamite in the water to kill or stun the fish so it would be easier to catch them.

The two men fled the scene when Cotella was injured and Cotella is still hospitalized in critical condition.

*Barbara Deschenes*

**ROBERT B. THOMAS**

**BY**

**JANET BUCK**

The West Boylston Historical Society is full of artifacts, maps, photos and printed material about almost anyone, anyplace or anything that contributed to the rich and varied history of this town. A question, a little research or just a visit will reveal some very interesting facts...for instance, did you know that the Old Farmer's Almanac had its beginning, here, 225 years ago.

**1718**

Way back, about 1718, a man named William Thomas came to New England from Wales. A well educated and wealthy man, he, and some of his brothers, first settled in Stonington, Connecticut.

**1720**

In 1720 he was living in Marlborough, Ma. Where he met and married Lydia Eager of Shrewsbury, Ma. In 1725 their first son, William, was born. At that time people raised much of their own food on small farms and children helped at home during the summer growing season and attended school only in the winter months, William Sr. had an excellent library and continued their education in the summer. Reading was young William's greatest pleasure and he was considered to be a great scholar.

**1744**

At 19 years of age, William started teaching in Brookfield, then later that same year in Hardwick. Not neglecting his own education, he made good use of his father's fine library while teaching and working at other occupations. His teaching career lasted about 40 years.

**1747**

In April of 1747, William traveled to Wales to obtain an inheritance for his father, but in May he was taken by a French privateer out of Dunkirk and all his goods were stolen. He was ransomed and was able to return to Boston in October. Another attempt to retrieve his father's inheritance in 1749 was unsuccessful.

**1764**

In 1764, William was living in Grafton, Ma. and bought a small farm in Shrewsbury. In 1765, William married Azubah Goodale, the daughter of Joseph Goodale who owned a farm in Grafton and this is where their son, Robert Bailey Thomas, was born on April 24, 1766.

**1767**

William, Azubah, Robert and their second son, Aaron moved to the farm in West Boylston, actually, North Main Street in Oakdale, known then as the Shrewsbury Legg. As they grew, the boys helped out on the farm and were schooled by their father and attended winter school. Robert, like his father, loved to read, especially scientific works. Ferguson's Astronomy captured his interest and sparked his idea of composing an almanac. Dr. I. Allen of Spencer was known for his superior and beautiful handwriting throughout the country. Robert and two of Major Ezra Beaman's sons were enrolled in his school to improve their handwriting.

**1786**

Robert began his teaching career when he accepted a request to teach at the Fairbanks district and the following year he held school in Princeton, Ma. where he boarded at the home of Richard Baxter. His next position was in Sterling in a schoolhouse located on the road from Sterling to Lancaster. Here he boarded at the home of D.H. Barnard. Each summer between school, he returned to the farm and studied astronomy and did book binding of manuscripts and account books and book repairs for neighbors.

**1789**

Robert was lacking in practical knowledge of calculating an almanac, so he went to consult with Dr. S. Sterner who had calculated the Isaiah Thomas Almanac, but did not locate him. Teaching now in West Boylston, then Boylston, he boarded with Joseph Bigelow. After Boylston, he opened a large school in Sterling with many adult students in in a district called Squareshire. This was of short duration due to a measles outbreak. The schoolbook commonly used was the Perry Spelling Book. Robert bought 1,000 of these from a Boston printer and binding them with other books, became a bookseller. He was refused when he tried to buy 1,000 sheets of Isaiah Thomas’ Almanac which made him more determined to produce his own almanac.

**1790**

After another teaching position in Sterling where he boarded with Thomas Keyes, and another in Princeton, where he boarded with Captain E. Allen, he decided to put all his efforts into bookbinding. He and his brother, Aaron, built a bookbindery and store by adding onto their father’s house. The idea of his own almanac prompted him to go to Osgood Coulton in Boston to learn astronomy.

**1793**

In 1793, the first number of the Old Farmer’s Almanac was printed.

**1803**

Hannah Beaman, a girl he met while teaching in Princeton, became Mrs. Robert B. Thomas on November 17, 1803 at the Beaman home in Princeton. Robert B. Thomas was the first Town Clerk after West Boylston’s Incorporation in 1808. He served the town in many ways, more than once, as chairman of the Selectmen, was a representative at the State Convention to revise the Constitution and By-Laws in 1820, a Justice of the Peace, and also acting , in a legal sense, in behalf of many townspeople

**1846**

Typhus Fever claimed his life at age 80 and he is buried in the Leg Cemetery in Sterling beside his wife who died in 1848. In holding town office positions along with generous donations of land, buildings and money, the Thomas family was instrumental in the development of West Boylston. Much has disappeared with the construction of the reservoir, but the house that Robert B. Thomas grew up in remains, Thomas Street is named after the family and of course the Old Farmer’s Almanac continues as his legacy.

*In the 2017 issue of the Old Farmer’s Almanac, the 225th edition, you will find a more complete account of his life and works.*



The following pages are a sampling of thank you notes received after our third grade walk.  
We wish we could have included them all.