



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 31 Number 2 Send letters & stories to Dennis Historical Society, Box 607, S. Dennis 02660 or to pjhowes@verizon.net April 2008

Calendar

*Saturday, April 12,
10:30 a.m.*

“Colonial Marriage Customs”

*Mary Aseftine will
provide an
entertaining and
informative
presentation of our
ancestors’ customs in
the time honored
and often-delicate
mating rituals of the
past ages.*

*Refreshments will be
served*

*Dennis Public Library,
5 Hall Street, Dennis
Port*

Growing “old” – a Colonial Garden

If your love of history ties into your love of gardening – as it does for me – you realize how lucky we are here in Dennis to have the Colonial garden at the Josiah Dennis Manse. Over the years, the Manse’s flower, herb and vegetable gardens have been developed with loving attention to detail into a valuable exhibit, illustrating our early history with living plants.

When you consider the number of plants in a Colonial garden, it is surprising how many varieties were available in those early days. Of course, for many people of that early time, plants were the means of basic survival. They also practiced horticulture for medicinal purposes. But, they did not ignore the use of plants to beautify their homes, both inside and outside.

It is well known that along with their household goods, farm tools and personal items, the first settlers came to this country with cuttings, bulbs and seeds of their favorite plants. Here, they added these to the rich native flora they found available. As the years went by, they also planted interesting specimens that came to these shores along with trade goods from many different parts of the world.

For the very first settlers, though, gardens were absolutely essential to their survival in the New World. It has always amazed me that any of those who arrived on the Mayflower in the fall survived the winter of 1620-21.

Though the losses were great that first winter, some members of the Plimoth colony did survive and when spring finally came planted food crops for themselves and their farm animals. Each summer provided the means to survive another winter.

According to research by Plimoth Plantation, the Pilgrims by 1627 had vegetable gardens that included radishes, cabbages, carrots, onions, parsnips, turnips, lettuce -- and especially for drying for preserving -- peas, beans and corn. Wheat and barley were also grown.

Herbs in the early gardens included rosemary, parsley, savory, sage, thyme, endive, cress and mint. In what we might think of as a flower garden – but they considered necessary as a resource for medicinal and cosmetic needs – they grew borage, pot marigold, lavender and roses. The wild forest

and wetlands around their early settlement supplied, in season, wild strawberry, blueberry, huckleberry, gooseberry, raspberry and cranberry.

The earliest permanent, white settlers to come to what we know as Cape Cod came in 1639 and surely they brought many of the same plants that the Pilgrims had in Plimoth. And when new settlers arrived from Europe with new plants, these soon appeared in Cape Cod gardens as neighbors and friends exchanged seeds and cuttings.

Our beloved common lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*) was among the shrubs that arrived early on the Cape. It had been cultivated in Europe since the mid-1500s, according to Raymond L. Taylor in his book “Plants of Colonial Days.” Lilacs were in England as early as 1597. The first record of lilac in the American colonies was in 1652, though it was likely that lilacs were here, unrecorded, before that date.

Today, when you hike some of the conservation areas of Dennis, you may find a lilac bush nestled against a hollow spot in a wooded area, a sign that at one time, some sort of dwelling probably existed there. I’ve often wondered how old such a shrub would be. It is hard to tell. But some of the lilac bushes among the trees along the upper reaches of Bass River (near the railroad bridge seen from Route 6) were old when I first saw them in the 1940s.

The tawny daylily, (*Hemerocallis fulva*) was once found in every field, along the edges of woodlands and along the borders of almost every back road on Cape Cod. This hardy member of the lily family is native to Siberia and was brought here from England sometime before the year 1700, according to the book “Gardens of Colony and State.” Since this lily arrived on these shores, its coppery-orange blossoms have been highly prized as garden flowers. Over the years it has made itself at home in North America. It has escaped from cultivated gardens and spread north into southern Canada and south to Virginia.

Roses, of course, are always associated with Colonial gardens, and probably the old-fashioned rose we know best is the Cabbage Rose (*Rosa centifolia*). This lovely rose came to England in 1596 from the eastern Caucasus region and is thought possibly to be the “many-petaled rose” of Homer. You can be sure it was a much-desired choice for New World gardeners well into the 19th century, and some rose bushes are claimed to be 18th of 19th century survivors.

Lastly, though not as ubiquitous as it is on Cape Cod today, the daffodil – or narcissus – was also present in very early gardens. Native to Europe and England, daffodils have long been a welcome harbinger of spring. They arrived here with the first settlers, which is not a surprise, since nothing travels much easier than a daffodil bulb, and no flower gives more hope than the daffodil in bloom after the winter cold. I cannot imagine spring without daffodils.

Our choice of plants and new hybrids in this modern age may be much greater than our ancestors ever dreamed possible, but a well-tended garden of Colonial varieties still holds a perennial charm and fascination for us.

— Peggy Eastman

Dennis Sandpounders

Growing up in Dennis Port in the 1930s and 40s it was a common thing to tell someone to “go pound sand” if you wanted them to go away. I don’t recall ever questioning the phrase I just knew that many people used it. They also called certain men in the community by the nickname of “Old Sandpounder”. We never questioned that either. Years later I learned that was the name of great respect given to men who served in the U.S. Life Saving Service.

The Cape Cod Life Saving Service was established in 1872 to address the terrible loss of lives and ships along the Cape’s outer shore. Shipwrecks had occurred from shortly after the Mayflower dropped anchor in Provincetown Harbor and were little noted except by the locals who might see a ship breaking up on the outer bars or find bodies washed up on the shore. In that case the incident was noted in the town records, the bodies were buried in local cemeteries as “unknown seamen” and it faded from memory. However, that was only the tip of the iceberg. Thousands of men lost their lives and an untold number of ships went down and were just ‘gone to the fishes’. In time the ship owner would call the insurance company or other shareholders and announce that the ship was lost. The men’s families would mourn the fact that the man of the house had not returned and life went on.

Shipping increased in the 17 and 1800s, keeping pace with the growing population. Sending goods over land for any appreciable distance was not done due to the cost and time consumed. It was much more cost effective to send it by water, and by the mid-1800s the Atlantic Ocean east of the Cape was like a superhighway.

In 1786 the Massachusetts Humane Society erected a few huts along the coast that were stocked with food and blankets available for a seaman who managed to get ashore alive and able to find the hut. Men who stumbled ashore in a blizzard were more apt to freeze to death before he found the hut, but some were lucky and lives were saved. By 1845 the Society had eighteen huts on the Massachusetts coast equipped with boats and mortars for throwing lines to stranded vessels, including a number of them on the outer Cape. Volunteers would come to the hut and work towards saving the survivors when word got around of a ship in trouble.

Finally, in 1850, the Federal Government appropriated \$10,000.00 to build and equip some lifeboat stations to be manned by volunteers. Keepers were appointed to the stations in 1854 at an annual salary of \$200.00. They would call in some untrained volunteers if a ship was in distress, but the aid they were able provide was ineffectual. Surfmen, still untrained, were hired and the station was expanded to hold them and some new equipment designed to save life and property. During the winter of 1870-71 a number of maritime disasters occurred that had the public demanding that the government do something.

In 1872 the Life Saving Service was reorganized. As a result of the reorganization not one life was lost in the following year on the East Coast. Thirteen Life Saving Stations were built from Monomoy Point to Wood End in Provincetown. They were manned by Cape men.

Dennis men are known to have manned stations from Monomoy to High Head. They commuted from Dennis on the Cape Cod Central Railroad to the stop nearest their station, and then reached the station by walking or hiring a carriage ride. The Keeper was on duty year round. His salary was \$900 per year. The crew was hired from August 1st to the following June 1st. They had one day off a week to visit their home. They could be away from the station from sunrise to sunset. Their salary was \$65 a month. Every day of the week was scheduled. Monday was for setting the station in good order (housekeeping). Saturday was wash day. Sunday was set aside for religious purposes or going home. The rest of the week was spent practicing the skills needed to perform their duties. Each surfman, in rotation, pulled cook duty for a week.

The surfmen were primarily seasoned mariners who had retired from going to sea and preferred a job nearer home. It is difficult to see how this shore duty was any easier than being at sea.

Each surfman was known by a number that denoted his skill level. No. 1 Surfman was the most capable and would be in charge of the station if the Captain was absent. When a surfman was on patrol he would carry a small brass check with his number on it.

During the day someone was stationed in the tower searching to see if a ship was in trouble. At dusk, or in thick daytime weather, two men from each station set out on foot, one going north and the other south, to walk the beach (pound sand) to a half-way house between their station and the next one on either side. Normally they would walk as near to the surf as possible

looking for anything out of the ordinary. On a stormy night this was indeed hazardous duty. The raging seas would carve out whole portions of the shore that had been there during the day. They could be walking along on the top of a bluff that was there that day and now had disappeared. With only a lantern for light they often would walk right off into space and end up in the surf below. If they were lucky they would be able to save themselves and get back on the bluff to continue the route.

When the surfman reached the half-way hut he would exchange his brass check with the other man, chat for a moment and then each one would return to his station. The other man's check would prove to the station that the surfman had indeed walked the whole route and returned. If he reached the half-way house, waited a reasonable amount of time and the other man did not arrive he would continue on to the other station. If he found the other man injured he would assist to make him comfortable and go on to the station to report the trouble. If the man was missing, all hands would turn out to locate him. In later years it would be telephoned back to his home station and men from both places would search for the missing man.

If they spotted a ship too close to shore they lit a brilliant red Coston signal to warn them of their danger. If it had already struck bottom it told the crew they had been seen and help was on the way. The signal also alerted the station that there was trouble.

The rigors of achieving a rescue were incredible. They launched a surf boat through the raging surf, sometimes taking numerous tries and being upset into the surf, before getting past the breakers. Sometimes they made several trips back and forth to rescue everyone on board. In cases where it was impossible to launch the boat they used the Lyle gun to shoot a line to the ship. A breeches buoy system was set up to bring the endangered crew to shore one at a time. All this was achieved in terrible weather with the sand plus, snow or rain, being propelled at them horizontally, often at 50 – 60 miles per hour. Staying on their feet under those conditions must have been a challenge.

In 1898, during the Spanish-American War, the Station Keepers along the northeast coast were ordered to retain four members of each crew on duty during June and July to patrol the coast and watch for the approach of hostile ships.

We know of eleven Dennis men who were on duty in 1902 and suspect there are a number more that we do not know about. On our list are: Capt. James H. Charles and Surfmen Obed Shiverick of Dennis Village, Reuben W. Eldredge of South Dennis, Benjamin Kelley and his son H. H. Kelley of West Dennis, and Wilton Berry, Albert Chase, Richard S. Gage, Alton J. Baker, Walter F. Wixon and Timothy F. Murray, all of Dennis Port.

Timothy Murray was my great-grandfather. His early years were spent in coastal trading with his schooner. He joined the Life Saving Service 1895 and spent his whole service at the Orleans Station. When it was his turn to cook my grandmother, Phebe Chase Murray, walked to the North Harwich Depot, took the train to Orleans and cooked for the station. One week of his cooking was more than the crew could stand, but he was a strong, courageous life saver with a "good eye for aiming the Lyle gun", and Gram had sympathy for the other men!

If you know of any other Dennis Life Savers, please call me at 508-394-0017 or contact any DHS board member. The Maritime Exhibit at the 1736 Josiah Dennis Manse this year will be about those men. We would like to acknowledge every Dennis man that served in the U.S.L.S.S.

– Phyllis Horton

The Way We Were

April 10, 1897....At the meeting of the East Dennis Cycle Club, Lulie Chapman was elected lieutenant and Nathan Crowell, color bearer. First regular run, April 19, will be from East Dennis village to the house of Fred Sherman in Yarmouth, thence to Nobsusset House and return.

From *The Register*.



Dennis Historical Society
P.O. Box 607
South Dennis, MA 02990-0607

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A Lovely Letter To DHS

Dear Members,

Thank you, thank you, thank you for honoring Joe for his portrayal of the Rev. Josiah Dennis at the Manse and for the children of the Ezra Baker School, for over twenty years. It was such a surprise that it brought Joe to tears. He was however, not at a loss for words in telling of two youngsters and their reaction to his presence there. Gail and Paul did a lovely job and our good neighbors and we were so pleased to dine at their new restaurant which is a really super addition to our Town of Dennis. It was a perfectly lovely day and we will cherish the memory along with the lovely framed picture, to enjoy forever.

Love and hugs, Gloria and Joe Solarz

Ed. Note – This presentation was made at the 2007 Annual Luncheon held at the SeaView Restaurant.



Newsy Tidbits!!! - Continue to send your thoughts, ideas, stories, jokes, etc. so that we can include all of our readers in the happenings of past and present Dennis.

Saturday, May 17, 1:00- 4:00 p.m.
“Dennis Lifesavers”

Maritime Days Exhibit by Historian Phyllis Horton at the 1736 Josiah Dennis Manse Museum. This Exhibition features the lives and times of those who risked their lives in violent storms and angry seas to rescue the mariners of Dennis and Cape Cod. Refreshments will be served.