



AN ANCIENT OFFICE IS TERMINATED

With this annual town meeting in May of 1990, one of the town's oldest offices will be eliminated from our government--the office of Surveyor of Highways. Along with Constable, the job of surveyor was the first office which Plymouth Colony required its new towns to fill. It appears by the records that in Old Yarmouth, the surveyors were chosen by election. Although allowed in 1639, the first year that the office was filled was in March of 1641, when Emmanuel White and William Clark were appointed or elected by the men of Yarmouth and confirmed by the General Court at Plymouth. "Highways", "Hieways", or sometimes even "Heighways", seem to have a great deal of importance to the Governor and his assistants in Plymouth. Early laws refer to the necessity of every able bodied man spending time to keep the King's Highways open and wide enough for man and beast to pass. By the time the Cape towns and the towns to the southwest were established, it was of enough concern to require that someone in each plantation be held responsible. In many towns or plantations two or more men were required to keep the "heigh ways" in good condition.

The obsession with good roads continues in the records of the Plymouth Colony. Fines are levied for the surveyor who fails to superintend the good keeping of the roads, and those citizens who fail to do their share to keep the highways in good condition must also pay fines. But from the records we can infer that the men of the towns on that magical peninsular which we now call Cape Cod were not as interested in highways as they were in seaways. They are repeatedly reminded that their roads need attention, and just as often they disregard the suggestion. The office of Surveyor of Highways, almost always shared by two men in the 17th century, seems to be an office which suggests standards which the community that was old Yarmouth does not feel are necessary to meet. No serious repercussions are recorded, even though the town is often reminded of its duty. When the colony of Plymouth was merged with Massachusetts Bay, the whole subject of highways seems to have reverted to the local concern, and we see very little comment on the conduct of the office until after the Revolution. At or about that time, school districts are established in Yarmouth, including the East Precinct, soon to become Dennis. The responsibility of caring for the highways is divided among the men of the school neighborhood. At this stage of the town's political history there were as many as 14 Surveyors of Highways, one for each of the school districts that Dennis contained. The responsibilities that fell to each was not that different from those of their 17th century predecessors--to keep the various highways cleared enough so that man and beast could easily pass, and to clear the King's Highway, now the county way, to a breadth of 40 feet. Please note that there is no mention of paving, and certainly not of the care of the borders of the road, nor of the clearing of snow in winter. These are late additions to the duties of the Surveyors of Highways. The importance of the position seems to have declined in the nineteenth century, and sometimes the Board of Selectmen are found acting as Highway Surveyors, in addition to their duties as assessors and overseers of the poor. But with the advent of the automobile, once again the roads became an important subject. In 1910 there were 7 elected surveyors, in 1914 5, one in each village. In 1923, the town voted to abolish this traditional office and have a superintendent of streets, appointed by the Selectmen. Although the article passed at the town meeting it was not a popular change. Within a year, there was a motion to repeal the decision. That move was tabled, but the people prevailed. In 1932 the office of Surveyor was reinstated, and Edward E. Crowell was elected to serve with an annual salary of \$800. Due to the hard times, however, town meeting also voted to give all town officials a 10% reduction in pay. 20 years later, Robert E. Crowell, son of Edward, became Surveyor of Highways and he and the town have lived happily ever after. Now the town is once again changing the way our highways are cared for. A recent town meeting has abolished the elected office of Surveyor of Highways and established a Department of Public Works. Robert E. Crowell will go down in history as the last to hold that ancient office, and the person who held it longest, having been in office for 39 years. We will go far before we find as dedicated a public servant as Rob has been, nor as kind and cheerful a person to fill a sometimes frustrating job. Good luck and thanks to our old friend Robert E. Crowell, and perhaps a look back in gratitude to all of the men of Old Yarmouth and Dennis who have looked after our "hieways" for over 350 years.

OUR CHAMPION MARATHONER DID IT AGAIN!

But surely no one thought he wouldn't! Not if you know our honorary life member Johnny (Marathon) Kelley! Known around the world as Mr. Boston Marathon, Johnny finished this year in his 59th marathon at Boston, having won the race twice and finished creditably 56 times. And did I mention, Johnny is currently celebrating his 83rd birthday? Right on, John. You are an inspiration to us all. Maybe we can recruit some other members to help you carry on this remarkable tradition. Any volunteers? (In addition to Selectman Andy, that is.)

BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON RESERVATIONS

JUNE 24

LIGHTHOUSE INN--WEST DENNIS

Please make reservations for _____ people. I enclose a check for \$ _____ (\$11.50 per person)

Choice of entree: _____ Chicken Pot Pie _____ Broiled Scrod

Enclose a self-addressed stamped envelope and send to Mr. Joshua Crowell

Box 963, Dennis, MA 02638

CALENDAR

May 9 7:00 P.M. Board meets at home of Dick and Nancy Howes
June 2 9:00 and 10:30 A.M. Lady Slipper Walks on the Indian Lands. Please make a reservation if you plan to attend by calling Town Hall 394-8300 and ask for the Conservation Department.
June 1 and June 4-8 Ezra H. Baker School field trips to the two town historic centers. Volunteers will be appreciated.
June 24 12 noon TOWN OF DENNIS BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON 197 years old and counting to the BIG ONE in 1993!

POST CARDS--TO YOU, WITH LOVE, FROM DENNIS MASSACHUSETTS

A fine group of enthusiastic members and friends came to our Post Card meeting in April and added much to our collective remembrance of things passed. We want to particularly thank Helen Angell, Jean Dunham, Bob McMurtry, Margaret Adams, the Fosses, Joy Wingate, Edward Chase, and everyone else who was there and willing to share their cards and expertise, to Mattacheese Middle School for the use of their opaque projector, and to Richard Howes who took the time to learn to operate the machine. Also a special word of gratitude to those who provided refreshments. It was a delightful afternoon and one which we hope to repeat in the not too distant future.

BIRTHDAY LUNCHEON TIME ONCE AGAIN...JUNE 24, 1990

Don't the yars roll by quickly? It's once again time to meet and eat together, in honor of the anniversary of the incorporation of Dennis as a separate town from Yarmouth in 1793--the 197th anniversary, to be exact. And once again we are privileged to enjoy the fine cuisine and beautiful atmosphere--to say nothing of the view--at the Lighthouse Inn at West Dennis. As always RESERVATIONS MUST BE MADE and honored, and a reservation blank is contained in this issue. Please send it, with your check, and a stamped, self-addressed envelope to Joshua Crowell, PO Box 963, Dennis, MA 02638 as soon as possible. Josh always has a lot of late requests, and our last luncheon at Christine's was sold out. The menu is a choice of Chicken Pot Pie or Broiled Chatham Scrod. The cost will be \$11.50 per person, which includes tax and gratuity. Please note that, unlike dump stickers and golf fees, the cost of our luncheon this year is the same as last year. Definitely the buy of the season, so do plan to attend.

HOW DID YOU KNOW THAT?

It's a question I love to answer. Most of what I have learned about our town's history has been learned in bits and pieces which require study and perception before they can be put together. I have learned that much of the time of a researcher is spent not in the delightful pasttime of reading old diaries, town reports, and scrap books, but in the arduous task of making copious notes and indexing them by subject, person, and chronology. Of course, the place to start is with the town and county records. These list the decisions, vital records, property owned--all facts of events that have occurred. However, by putting only these facts together, we find that one or more pieces of the puzzle are likely to be missing. When these events took place, how did it affect the lives of the people? To me, the people are the important part of local history and town records tell us little about their daily lives. So I am always delighted to have an opportunity to read and study what I call "attic reflections"--old documents handed down for years, which give some insight to what former generations have experienced as they moved through the events we call history. Often an account book, a secretary's report, a souvenir, can supply the missing piece to our puzzle by telling us what the events of a period meant to the people. If you have any "attic reflections" in your possession which pertain to this town's past, will you share them with me? Of course, D.H.S. would welcome them as gifts, but I would be more than happy to study them at your home, or to make photocopies if you don't wish to part with them. (Jin Talin tells me that photocopies do not hasten the deterioration of old documents.) I may find in your old treasurer's reports or undated scrap books a missing piece to the puzzle, or at least a clue that will lead me to the source.

Dennis Historical Society
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South Dennis, MA 02660

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