



CHAPIN IN THE FALL

A small but enthusiastic group met with Dennis Natural Resources Officer George McDonald at Chapin Beach for a nature walk. As usual, George was generous with his time and wealth of knowledge. Everyone came away refreshed by the salt air and stimulated by the new information they had learned.

DENNIS IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS

You all know Virginia VanVorst. She has been active in town affairs for some time, and was an organizer of the South Side Civic and Business Association. Virginia has done something for the town which I guarantee all will appreciate. With uncounted hours of delicate handwork, she has created a facsimile of an old map of Dennis and has presented it to the town. It is a beautiful and careful rendition, done with the assistance of Mahlon Chase, and based on a map drawn by Benjamin Matthews in 1831. Benjamin had surveyed the town and he drew the map at the behest of the Great and General Court of Massachusetts, which requested that all incorporated towns in the Commonwealth submit such a map to the state that year. The original drawing is in the collection of most of the maps at the Massachusetts State Archives. I have seen the collection and the map of our town is one of the nicest. You must not underestimate the charm of this particular drawing, which Virginia has reproduced. Mr. Matthews followed instructions to a "t". Each map was to show cleared land, woodland, mills, meeting houses, bridges, ferries and highways. That is exactly what this 1831 map shows. The boundaries of the town are essentially as they are today, and the natural features of the landscape have altered but little. To the west, the streams and ponds that make up the great Bass River, the largest tidal river on the east coast, wind their curvy way to the head of the river at Follins Pond. To the east, the carefully measured, almost straight boundary between this town and Harwich and Brewster is unaltered. The shorelines show as beach and meadow, with Chase Garden River a more imposing stream than it is today, with islands in its midst. The many ponds are shown, and the rocky ridge, Scargo Mill, and the hills which extend into Punkhorn and Brewster are clearly indicated. Mr. Matthews was not required to show dwellings, but cleared areas along the highways he has carefully drawn indicate where these homes of 1831 were located. The long route from the north to south side of town follows almost exactly the present day Old Bass River Road and Main Street in South Dennis. On every shore cartways are indicated, leading to the precious marshland and the salt works which were flourishing at that time. Many roads lead from east to west. The northernmost follows somewhat the course of Route 6A, but passes north of Scargo, along the present Scargo Mill Road. That is because the land north of Scargo Lake, earlier called Nobscussett Pond, then Flax Pond, as it is on this map, was reserved to the Indians, and so the main thoroughfare. The "Lower Road" passed on the other side of the lake. Parallel to this road is the present day Setucket Road, and running from that further south is the Old Chatham Road, now disconnected and fragmented. Even further to the south is what must have been Gage's Way, a road now so divided and segmented that its original path cannot be traced. A few other highways are indicated, and the cleared spots along the way show where homes were built. There are five mills shown on Matthews map. Two stand across the street from each other in Dennis Village, the oldest of them already 100 years old when the map was drawn. A mill also stood on a prominence in back of Worden Hall, near the highway, but also accessible from Center Village, a cluster of homes along Setucket Road and Old Chatham. Two more mills existed in South Dennis at that time. One was located atop the hill at the head of Pinefield Lane, belonging to Judah Baker. It was from this mill, so it is said, that the flag raised on Signal Hill in Dennis to warn of the arrival and departure of the packet from Boston could be seen. It hardly seems possible, but the story originates early in our history, so must be at least given a hearing. Besides the mills sites, Matthews shows the meeting houses. As with mills, there are two very close to each other in Dennis Village, one the Orthodox Trinitarian and one the Unitarian. A third meeting house is drawn on the knoll at South Dennis overlooking Grand Cove, exactly where the South Dennis Congregational Church stands today. It was a few years too soon to show the West Dennis Methodist Church or the church at East Dennis. There are three bridges— one on New Boston Road crossing the creek, one across Bass River, near the present Railroad Bridge, and one crossing Swan Pond River about where the Upper County Road crosses it today. One ferry crossing is indicated, at the town landing at the end of Ferry Street, West Dennis. And the Old Stone Pier is seen off the mouth of Bass River, between the flats and Dogfish Bar. We know quite a bit about the town when this map was drawn. A careful study of the census taken a few years later show that the population was 2,750. There were 664 heads of families listed in that census, but as fathers and sons, and sometimes brothers, often shared one house, we can conclude that there were somewhere in the neighborhood of 600 homes, or less. In this year of 1990, by the way, there are 13,152 dwellings in this town. All in all, it was a different Dennis that the town we know and love today. We are very grateful to Virginia VanVorst for the gift of her needlepoint copy of this antique map. It helps us to preserve a very important reminder of where we have been, in a beautiful and artistic way. Her work can be seen displayed on the walls of the town office building, opposite the assessors office. Be sure to look at it when you stop by to pay your tax bill. It is sure to brighten your day. Thank you, Virginia.

CALENDAR

Nov.	14	7:00 PM	Board meets at Gertrude's
Dec.	6	10:00 AM	Cape and Islands Historical Assn. meets at Cape Cod Community College in the Language Lab at the Library. The subject will be Disaster Planning given by New England Document Conservation Center
Dec.	8	2-4 PM	Harwich Historical Society Open House, Brooks Academy. All invited
Dec.	9	2-5 PM	Christmas Open House at Josiah Dennis Manse

CHRISTMAS AT THE MANSE

You are cordially invited to join us on December 9 from 2-5 PM at the Josiah Dennis Manse for our annual Christmas Open House. Susan Kelly & Co. will again put their decorative talents to work--transforming our old house into a Christmas delight. Dennis Girl Scouts, Troop 1515, will greet you at the door with carols and Stephen Russell, singer and songwriter, will entertain you with traditional songs. Our famous (or infamous) Col. Negus Punch will be served along with many other goodies to tempt you. Do come to celebrate the season with us--and bring a friend!

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO THANKSGIVING?

My spouse and I were in Boston just lately. It was one of those beautiful October days which we enjoyed this year, just before Hallowe'en. As we walked down Newbury Street towards the Public Gardens, the shops to our left were advertising all the necessities of clothing, make-up and wigs to create a costume for the holiday about to be observed. As a matter of fact, some of the young people we passed seemed to be trying out their costumes for effect a few days early! Be that as it may, we had no complaint with the orange and black streamers and pumpkins, nor of the passing crowds in their varied garb. But to our right, along the street there were crews of workers stringing Christmas lights in the little trees. The trees were not even bare. Many of them were still totally green,--and already, in early October, being dressed for December 25th. What happened to Thanksgiving? Don't I remember a holiday of that name, first celebrated by the Pilgrims in 1621, and held sacred, especially in New England, ever since? Well, not exactly ever since, for the feasting and family get-together we know as Thanksgiving did not become an annual event until modern times. A second season of Thanksgiving which was also a time of feasting as well as prayer was in July 1623. After that, and throughout the Colonial period Days of Thanksgiving were proclaimed by the governor, or the General Court for such things as military victories, the ending of a plague of sickness or insects and even for a refreshing rain following a period of drought. Then towards the middle of the 18th century a day of Thanksgiving appears almost annually, as a harvest celebration in the province of Massachusetts. It continued to be a local holiday proclaimed at different times in different states until President Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November, 1864, as a national day of Thanksgiving. It was celebrated on November's last Thursday until 1939 when Franklin Roosevelt moved it back a week to lengthen the Christmas shopping season. In 1941, Congress ruled that the holiday would fall on the fourth Thursday of November, and would be a federal holiday. A couple of trivia questions you might toss out as you gather around the festive board this year. Who was it who campaigned for twenty years to have the holiday nationalized? And on what day is Thanksgiving celebrated in Canada?

A WORD FROM ISABEL

The United States Postal Service has become very strict regarding delivery of non-profit permit mailings; i.e. third class postage--treating as "undeliverable" pieces not showing: Proper name and address, street number, P.O. Box number, or Zip Code. Temporarily away residents should notify DHS of their forwarding address and dates of departure and return. Also, changes in address, new P.O. Box number, or from box to street number delivery at home or for permanent change of residence address. To insure timely receipt of your newsletter please notify DHS, Box 607, South Dennis 02660, or by phone 385-2966 in advance of seasonal or other changes.

Isabel also announces some new members as of September: Mr. Thomas and Dr. Paulette Periera, Mr and Mrs. William T. Brown, Alice Chase, Mr. and Mrs. Seth Crowell, Mr. and Mrs. Harry Whitley, Joan Merz, Thomas E. Howes, Wilfred P. Ellis, and New Life Member Norma Dooley. Welcome aboard, one and all! Be sure to attend our Open House at the Manse, and introduce yourselves--we'd love to meet you!

Dennis Historical Society
P.O. Box 607
South Dennis, MA 02660

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