



1990 FESTIVAL DAYS

This year's Dennis Festival Days seem to have been a huge success, and our portion of it was very well attended. The Bike Tour of West Dennis, planned by Isabel and Bill Flynn and led by Bill Flynn and Sarah Kruger (on Isabel's new Helmet bicycle) was lots of fun. Eighteen people participated in an informative spin through our village that is surrounded on almost all four sides by water. (Look it up on your Dennis map.) Special thanks to Reef Realty for parking; Ferd Baxter and his granddaughter for their talk, with pictures, at the West Dennis Community Church--and for her leading the group down to the Cove; to Mary, Bob, and Jonathan Stone for their talk at Lighthouse Inn; to Pauline Derick at the West Dennis Cemetery, and to Henry Kelley II at the ferry landing. It was quite apropos for Henry to be there--his ancestor was the original ferryman....Our "Dennis" slide show played to a full house at the Dennis Senior Center. Thanks to Paula Bacon for sponsoring the show and, as always, our thanks to Bill Scofield and Josh Crowell for putting the show on....At the Josiah Dennis Manse the Village Garden Club held their annual Flower Show--well attended on Tuesday and Thursday by over 175 people....On Wednesday and Friday the Jericho Historical Center, Barn Museum and Driftwood Zoo was open....and on Friday our own Nancy Thacher Reid manned the microphone for a sell-out bus tour of Dennis. Those lucky people now have a new awareness of what an interesting town we live in! Our thanks to all.

AN INSTRUMENT FOR SUSAN

Historical research is fun, but it takes a lot of time. The first segment of the time spent I call "digging time", when the search is on at library or archives to locate the desired information. That's the fun time. Then comes the somewhat tedious job of going over the notes made or the photocopies of the information found and indexing by subject, people, and chronology. Sometimes an hour of "digging time" results in two or more hours indexing, but in the long run, it pays off in matching small bits of information with other small bits and coming up with a new and interesting story. I can best illustrate the process with the tale of Susan's Instrument. A long time ago, while searching ancient records of Dennis Town Meetings for an entirely different bit of information, I found this rather cryptic entry. Voted: To pay for the instrument which Susan, the daughter of David Baker, now has, it to revert to the town when she has no need for it. "Digging time" is so valuable, that I make it a practice to note as much as possible, even if it does not pertain to what I am seeking, so I duly noted this strange entry, and when indexing, placed it under "Baker, Susan", but what subject? What sort of an instrument would the town be buying for young Susan? Probably not a musical instrument, with the possible exception of one used in the church, but I felt I should really index it under "Music: Instruments" just in case. Being a nurse, I considered the possibility of a surgical instrument of some sort. Perhaps Susan was a mid-wife, or nurse and the town wished to help her in the pursuit of her profession. So, under "Medical: Instruments", I filed a card, then forgot the mysterious item and went on to other "diggings". Some months, perhaps even a year later, I was searching the microfilms of old Yarmouth Registers, looking for a shipwreck, I think, and as usual, taking advantage of a few hours of "digging time" to note anything which pertained to Dennis in the issue I was reading. An advertisement a lecture by three sisters from South Dennis, on how the blind could read with their fingers. Very interesting, thought I, but when I had an opportunity to index what I had found in that search, a surprise awaited me. One of the sisters was Susan Baker--and I found under her name the town meeting vote concerning her "instrument". Could this have been the same Susan Baker, and did the instrument have something to do with blindness? A little genealogical research proved that the three sisters were all the daughters of David Baker. Perhaps the instrument was a braille machine or similar device? Well, in 1850, which was the year of the Town Meeting vote, there was only one place where the blind were taught to use machines to read and write--it was the New England Asylum for the Blind, now known as Perkins Institute. So I called them, to find out if Susan or any of her sisters had been teachers or pupils there. They had--Susan, Maria, and Rebecca were all listed as pupils at various times, and the archivist there also provided me with some valuable suggestions. She told me that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts provided help for families with blind children, and that those records could be found at the Massachusetts Archives. She also said that the girls had attended the Asylum when Samuel Howe was director and probably learned to read on a machine called the Boston Line Type, or the Howe Line Type, invented by the Asylum's director. At the first opportunity I visited the State Archives and found the records of the three blind sisters from Dennis. When admitted to the Institute, they were described as totally without education, hardly able to cope with their own personal care. When finished with their education there, they were sufficiently educated to perform in public and give exhibitions which were a credit to the fine school which they had attended. So I believe this research has shed some light on the purchase which the Town of Dennis made for Susan, the daughter of David Baker. But in the process of solving one mystery, other questions have arisen. David Baker died in Bakersfield, CA in 1851. Was he a mariner, or was he prospecting for gold? When his widow Sally died in 1861, who cared for her three blind daughters? How did they come to be blind in the first place? And what has become of Susan's instrument? Did it revert to the Town, as intended? If so, was it used by other disabled citizens? Or is it hidden in the dust of a Dennis attic, as are so many artifacts and records of our town's past?

CALENDAR

- Sept. 12 7:30 P.M. DHS Annual Meeting and Election of Officers. A video, "Cape Cod--The Sands of Time" from the Cape Cod National Seashore will be shown after our brief business meeting. Refreshments will be served. Carleton Hall, Dennis. Bring your friends to this interesting show.
- Sept. 23 1:55 A.M. Autumn Begins! Nature begins to put on her spectacular display. Watch those swamp maples turn to a glorious red and yellow.
- Oct. 7,8,9 2-4 P.M. The Embroiderer's Guild Exhibit at the Manse.
Coming in October A nature walk with Natural Resources Officer George MacDonald.
See next month's newsletter for a date.

CURIOUS FORMS OF COLONIAL PUNISHMENT

You may recall reading in the local weekly newspaper of several weeks ago a report of a selectman's meeting at which the subject of the repair of an exhibit at the town's police station was discussed. The discussion was noteworthy because of the mis-reporting of the type of exhibit. The article called the exhibit a "War Memorial" and stated that it featured a mounted howitzer--pointed, no doubt, at Patriot Square in case the tourists get rowdy! I keep this article pasted to my notebook, as a reminder that newspaper accounts are not necessarily accurate historical sources. The exhibit is, in fact, entitled, "Curious Forms of Colonial Punishment" and it was set up by the Bicentennial Commission of 1976, chaired by Ann Treat Reynolds. It consists of a platform on which are displayed stocks, pillory, and whipping post which were used by our ancestors to administer justice to their fellow citizens who were convicted of a crime. (No howitzers,--honest!) As a reminder of the early beginnings of social order in these parts, our exhibit is unique, but such instruments of punishment were by no means curious or unusual in the days of the Old Plymouth Colony. One of the first officers which new towns were obliged to elect was the constable. The Constable's first act, as required by the General Court, was to see to the construction of stocks. The magistrates of Plymouth Colony were very careful that law and order be kept. The rules were plain, justice swift, and punishment public, and often corporal. Law was based first on the Mosaic Law--the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament--secondly on the common law of England, and thirdly on laws passed by the court to fit situations in the new world. Neighbors who suspected neighbors of not obeying all of these "Thou shalt nots" reported supposed transgressors to the Constable. The process of law in Plymouth Colony was remarkably like the process in Massachusetts today. The accused was "presented" to the General Court, and his alleged crime described. He was then bound over by his own personal pledge and usually that of another citizen, to appear at the next session of the Court to present his defense. This bond also included a pledge to keep the King's peace in the meantime, and not to leave the government. At the next Court the case was heard and the magistrates ruled and determined punishment. If the accused thought he had not received justice, he could request a trial by a jury of his peers. The crimes ranged in severity from stealing milk from someone else's cow, to assault and battery, and many in between. Punishment could be as severe as hanging, but usually it involved a fine or making the transgressors physically uncomfortable and embarrassed. Among other duties, such as collecting taxes and posting warrants for town meetings, it was the job of the Constable to see that the punishment decided upon by the Court was carried out. He was not paid a salary, but received a certain amount for each task he performed--so many shillings for posting a warrant, so many for serving a summons,--these fees paid by the town or colony--and set amounts for administering punishment--so much for placing someone in the stocks, a bit more for a whipping--these paid by the person receiving the punishment. Talk about fees for services! Our exhibit on Colonial punishment is in need of repair, and the town hopes we can do it with contributions. If you would like to help in this restoration project will you please send a Post Card with your name, address, and phone number to: Building Department, Town Hall, South Dennis, MA 02639.

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