



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 31 Number 11 Send letters & stories to Dennis Historical Society, Box 607, S. Dennis 02660 or to pmrhorton@aol.com December 2008

Calendar

Wednesday, December 10
3:00 p.m.
DHS Board Meeting
At the Josiah Dennis Manse
All are welcome to attend!!!!



Sunday, December 14
12:00-4:00
Christmas Open House
at the Manse
Dennis Village



Sunday, December 21
1:00-4:00
Dennis Historical Society
Christmas Open House
Jericho Historical Center
West Dennis



CHRISTMAS PAST

The economic downturn we are experiencing is causing many people to change their annual customs of celebrating Christmas in grand fashion with expensive presents for all, a decorated home and grounds that looks as if it should be in Macy's windows in New York City and entertaining to match.

A few families have already started the transition to simpler celebrations and say the whole season has become more meaningful. Let us hope the ones scaling back from necessity can find the same pleasure as the ones who did it from choice.

Cape Cod and Dennis in particular has run the full gamut on Christmas. The Pilgrims landed at Plymouth on December 25, 1620. Thomas Jones, master of the Mayflower wrote in his logbook that it was Christmas Day, but not observed by these colonists as they were opposed to all saint's days. In 1659 the Puritans in Boston passed a law declaring the celebration of Christmas to be illegal. Any person found celebrating would be fined five shillings for each offense.

Christmas 1856 was declared a holiday in New England. In fact, it had been celebrated in homes along the eastern seaboard starting in the 1700s. Mariners who had visited other countries and even our South where most plantations hosted groups of visitors with music, dancing and endless amounts of food and drink for two weeks brought the custom home. Many plantations nearly went bankrupt because of the owner's excesses in entertaining.

The early Cape celebration consisted of gift giving—usually items the father had brought home from a voyage. The custom of a decorated Christmas tree was common in Europe and it began in England in 1840 when Queen Victoria placed one in the palace to please her husband, Albert, who was German. It came to Virginia in 1842 and no doubt spread up the east coast. We have no record of when the first one was set up in a Dennis parlor, but it must have been very exciting. Chances are pretty good that a sea captain introduced the first one. Quite a few captains were hard taskmasters on the deck of his ship but real pushovers in the bosom of their family.

In the Victorian years Christmas became a very important holiday in church and at home. All but the very poorest among us decorated a tree even if the decorations were homemade and the children would receive presents, also homemade. People of any means at all had lovely decorations hung on the tree, primarily made in Germany, and later stored away in the attic.... just check out the prices now on Antiques Road Show!

Many old records show December 25th as a regular workday into the late 1800s. It seems some of the old timers didn't believe in all that folderol. It sounds like Scrooge moved over here from England. It also appears that Christmas weddings were popular. They were held at home, preferably starting at 8:00 P.M. with a sumptuous supper to follow.

Santa Claus became a vital part of Christmas due to the influx of European immigrants. Their lovely stories and customs were eagerly adopted by young America, especially after, "T'was the Night Before Christmas" and "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus"

The Crash of 1929 affected many people around the country, but not many on Cape Cod. The old saying was, "Cape Codders were always poor, they just didn't know it." The majority in Dennis fell into that category. They lived off the land and sea and made the most of what they had. Somehow, in the poorest of families the kids would wake up to find their stocking filled with an orange (a rare treat) or an apple and a scarf, mittens or warm stockings and always a shiny new penny in the toe of the stocking which promised, hopefully, better days in the year to come. Mother spent many evenings pulling old sweaters apart to knit them into something useful for her children. Often the gift under the tree was a new winter coat which had been cut down from great-grandfather's coat stored away in a trunk in the attic. Dad or Grandfather did their part by carving wooden toys or making wagons from scrap lumber for the boys and doll cradles for the girls. Everyone had a Christmas tree. They went out in the fields or into the cedar swamp to cut it, bring it home

As the Depression deepened Dennis people were still able to be well fed. They grew their food in the back yard, had some fruit trees, kept a few chickens and relied on the sea for fish and shellfish. They never went hungry.

By the late 1930s mothers had a wonderful new fabric waiting for their needle. Chicken feed sacks! They had always been made of cotton, now they were printed in colorful patterns. Mother's palette for Christmas was greatly expanded. New dresses, blouses, skirts and shirts were proudly worn and Mother was pleased that her gift had not cost anything but her time.

World War II brought a whole new prosperity to Dennis. Work at Camp Edwards gave an infusion of cash money. Suddenly, Estey's and Maloney's Drug Stores, Zebina Small's Dry Goods Store and Charley Smith's Hardware Store in Dennis Port were full of gifts to go under the tree, and the occasional trip to Grant's or Woolworth's 5 & 10 in Hyannis could provide anything else you might wish for.

It's 1945--and the war is over. Dennis men came home from around the world. They married, bought houses, had families and vowed their children would always have more than they had, and it would never be hand-me-downs. Each succeeding generation has tried to give their children more--sometimes so much the kids needed to be coaxed to finish opening their gifts. This year may be different.

We wish you a lovely Christmas filled with family, fun, and appreciation for all you have and looking forward with hope for a better year ahead. Happy Holidays to all!

Phyllis Horton

A Note From The President

I am proud and honored to have been selected by you to preside over this organization that has been the curator and promoter of Dennis History for so many years. I thought that I'd best take this opportunity to let you all know a bit about my background.

Despite my Dennis-heritage name, I mainly grew up in Taunton through college, went on to earn a degree in Physics, spend some time in the Navy and while working, earned an MBA. My work was involved in R&D, manufacturing, marketing and management. I probably should add travel to the list for these all required extensive travel and once living in the Marshall Islands for two years. Mergers, acquisitions and new adventures changed the name of the company where I worked from time to time, and several of the company changes only resulted in new stationary and business cards!

June and I moved to Dennis from Sudbury after I retired, although I had a small place in South Chatham since 1980. However, I actually had been visiting Dennis from my very earliest years as my great grandfather was a Dennis Port tern schooner Captain, and my grandparents summered and then lived in the family home at 435 Main Street in Dennis Port, a building now occupied by a restaurant. The waving fields, then behind the house, were once farmlands and now sprout condominiums. Houses have replaced the beach plum bushes on Scargo Hill that was my grandmother's favorite picking place, and Benny's parking lot has replaced other family homes.

But enough about me. What would I like to see DHS accomplish in the next two years? Here's a few things to think about – and hopefully you can help with the answers. Increasing our membership, especially with the 'next generation' is a major challenge. We're not alone in this need, as all organizations such as ours have the same problem. How can we, as an organization, be more exciting and attractive? Next, I'd like to see Jericho and its wonderful barn become a key town museum. Do we have some men out there who would like to be our "Barn Masters"? More folks to be docents? The Jericho House and Barn have a lot to offer! And how about more general participation from our members – ideas, tales & stories for the newsletter, ideas and helpers for future DHS "Events" (the things that are found in our calendar) for folks to attend, members dropping in at our monthly meetings, etc.

We all have so much to offer! Please help DHS preserve yesterday's history for tomorrow's generations.

Peter D. Howes



Forty-one kindergarten through second grade students from the Holy Trinity School in Harwich visited the Josiah Dennis Manse Museum on November 10 to learn how life today differs from the 1700's. They made butter, paper quilts and sailboat pictures, saw how food was gathered and prepared and wool was spun and woven into cloth. In the 1745 one-room schoolhouse they were shown how they would have written on blackboards and with quill pens and learned to read from hornbooks. All were well behaved and it was a pleasure to have them here.

Nancy Howes

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Artwork to Benefit The Manse Repair Fund

Artist Lin Schenkelberger Webber grew up in Dennis before settling in Pennsylvania as an adult. She spends summers in Dennis as well as visiting frequently during the quiet months. The paintings of the “Josiah Dennis Manse” and the “Manse Door” were inspired by time spent helping with the Manse Christmas decorations each December.

Lin is a well-known watercolor painter in Pennsylvania. She paints scenes of New England, waterfront and wooden boats, rural farm country, birds and other wildlife and still life compositions of quilts and antiques.

All profits from the sale of Giclee prints of the Manse, signed and numbered by the artist and ready for framing, as well as note cards of Manse and front door and postcards of Manse will benefit the repair fund.

The limited edition prints of Manse are available in two sizes: 11 x 17 or 8½ x 11 before matting.

Note cards of door are also available with a winter view with wreath for holidays greetings.

All items will be ready at the Manse on Dec. 14th. Print orders may be placed earlier by phoning: 508-385-9308.

