



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter October 2021

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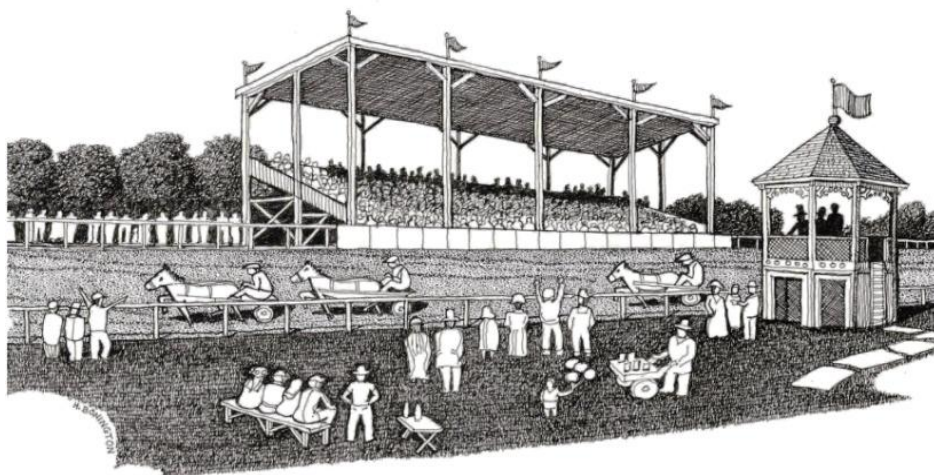
**The 2021 Annual Meeting will be held on Tuesday, October 12th, 2:00 pm at the Dennis Memorial Library
1020 Old Bass River Road, Dennis Village
Members Welcome**

Please send information & stories for the newsletter to Dave Talbott at the DHS Website email address: info@dennishistoricalsociety.org

Imagining the Past-3

DHS recently received an email from one of its members seeking information – “Would love to find out more about the "fact and fiction" surrounding "Trotters Lane" and the horse racing (trotters, of course...) that took place here? Is that actually true? Any assistance would be greatly appreciated.” I responded with the following, “Trotters Lane, an oval off of Trotting Park Road, was the location of a race track for horses (*trotters, of course...*). It was a 1/2 mile oval with a grandstand for 200 spectators built in 1890. At the time, this area of West Dennis was known as South Village. There was a windmill to pump water to a 1,200 gallon storage tank which served the stables and the horse stalls. This information comes from the *Gazetteer of Dennis*, available in our website Bookstore. The book is full of interesting snippets about why places in Dennis have the names they do.” A book order soon followed with a request for information about a specific property on Trotters Lane. I contacted Diane Rochelle, Chair of the Dennis Historical Commission, to help with the request. In her responding email, Diane bemoaned the lack of photographs and images of the race track.

Now, for an amazing coincidence - continuing with his incredible series, *Imagining the Past*, within the last week, Howard Bonington sent me the latest of his wonderful images accompanied by the following write-up!



Original Pen & Ink Drawing by Howard Bonington

track. Trotting races were popular, just 25 cents admission. Where was the Dennis track?

One of the main access routes to West Dennis Beach and the Lighthouse Inn is via Trotting Park Road. In my early days of residence in Dennis, I learned that there was once a trotting park in the vicinity, which established the naming of the road. Would there be remains, like the Roman Circus Maximus? I could find none. After studying a map, I could see that there was indeed a large oval on the ground, but it is now a street identified as Trotters Lane, occupied by many fine houses. Alas, I could find no evidence of what the track itself was like. It was the source of so much entertainment in former years, but now the only remains of it is a street in the form of a very large oval configuration.

What was it like? I could find no graphic records. My only source is my Imagination.

While reading NTR's (Nancy Thatcher Reid's) great book (Dennis, Cape Cod) I found a brief reference to Riverside Trotting Park.

In the 1880's it seems to have been a place for great enjoyment by Dennis residents, especially those who owned horses and reveled in the sport of racing them.

There is also reference to it in the August 1980 issue of the DHS newsletter. It was a place of great amusement, especially on Saturday afternoons. From other sources I learned that it was usual for every village in Barnstable to have its own

Thank you once again Howard – from all of us!

The Rest of the Story

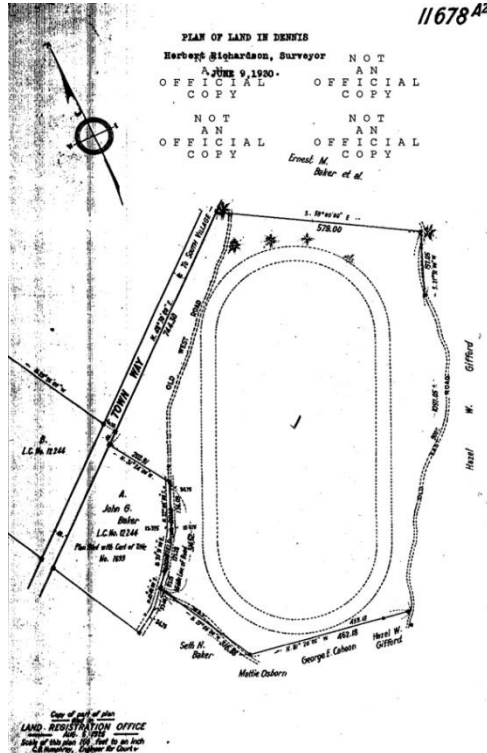
There is so much fascinating information to be gleaned from Diane's research about **Riverside Trotting Park** that I couldn't wait to share some of it!

Diane Rochelle Research Sturgis Library Newspaper Collections

Yarmouth Register 12/13/1890 – Riverside Trotting Park Association was duly organized; capital stock is \$5,000 in shares of \$5 each; president, Hon David Fisk; secretary John A Casey; Treasurer Capt Edwin Baxter; superintendant of the park David Fisk; work on the track commenced Monday.

Yarmouth Register 6/20/1891 – Inauguration of the Riverside Trotting Park at West Dennis – Grand Display of Horse Flesh and Spring Fashion – The inauguration of Riverside Trotting Park, West Dennis, occurred on Wednesday, June 17, when a large attendance of prominent personages from the several Cape towns were ushered into the arena of the park to the martial music of the West Dennis coronet band, Harvey Jenks, leader. There were many fashionable parties present in gaudy rigs and turnouts representing the upper crust of Cape Cod society. Everybody seemed to have his favorite horse except the fellow who was using his finger for a stomach pump and the chap "around the corner" who got so he could cheer the steeds on to victory with loud and enthusiastic shouts of triumph in the closing heats.

This recap of the history of Riverside Trotting Park appeared in the *Yarmouth Register* more than sixty years later.



11678^{A2} Yarmouth Register 03/07/1957 - Riverside Trotting Park, started in 1891, was built by a syndicate of retired sea captains headed by the late Captain David Fisk and including Captain Uriah Fisk, Captain O K Baker, Captain Henry Fisk, Captain James T Baxter, George Baker, Colonel Henry Winship, Hiram Crowell, Captain Luther Child and Captain Luther Fisk, West Dennis, William N Stetson, South Yarmouth, Captain Ulysses Hull, Cotuit and Captain James Hinckley, South Dennis.

Captain David Fisk selected a piece of sandy land not over a quarter of a mile from the open waters of Nantucket sound at the east end of West Dennis, off the main highway. It was wooded spot with a thick, bushy growth of Norway pine and scrub oaks. Captain Fisk had been to race courses and knew something of their turns and how they should be put in and graded. With the help of a boy he ran a straight line through the woods and laid out the home stretch; then he measured across and laid out the back stretch, and then began to figure out the turns. The only instruments he had were a steel tape 100 feet long and an ax.

He supervised and helped build this regulation track and came within a very few feet of the exact half mile. The track was covered with clay to a depth of six inches. It was made in exactly the same manner as the roads of Cape Cod at the time. The clay came from North Harwich and the vicinity of Lower County Road, West Dennis and Dennis Port.

The grounds were enclosed with a hemlock board fence 6 feet high and tight.

Image provided by the Dennis Historical Commission At the time the track fence was as good as any in New England. It cost approximately \$1,000. Caleb Crowell and J Freeman Crowell, West Dennis, built it. The trotting park is eligibly situated in a picturesque neighborhood, the track is well made, the view from every point is unobstructed, the facilities for driving accommodation are the best and many of the lovers of the turf will revel in the pleasure to be derived from the new trotting park, the only one on the Cape out of Barnstable. The grounds inside the course will be set off into a baseball ground and a lively game is expected for the Fourth. Other attractions are also anticipated. The posts were taken from nearby wood land and cut by Jim Hinckley. There was a grand stand which accommodated 200, a wind mill pump and a tank holding 1,200 gallons of water and a judge's seat and ticket office.

At first there were 12 large and well ventilated stalls. Later more were added and when the track closed there were several good stables and 27 stalls. According to old timers, the trotting park was the scene of gala days. It was a miniature fair ground. Four or five big races a season were held. Average attendance was 300 and the cost of admission was fifty cents. Entry fee was \$30 per horse and the entire purse was about \$1,000. Classes were from three minutes down. A 2:20 horse was considered good at the time.

Horses and their owners and riders began to arrive the day before an event, coming from Fall River, New Bedford, West Newton, Plymouth and from all Cape Cod towns.

The horsemen were mostly sea captains from about the Cape who had “stopped ashore” and were enjoying their retirement from sea life with trotters. They loved a race and all were anxious to own a winner. If they were beaten they did not lay down any fault at the winner’s door but accepted defeat with the same spirit they manifested when another vessel beat them in a cruise or took “high line”. The story goes that these old mariners never bet. They loved trotting for the sport and not for speculation.

The actual race track outline is preserved today in the form of a sub-division off of Trotting Park Road called Trotters Lane. It’s almost to a point where I could say as the late radio commentator, Paul Harvey, used to conclude his broadcasts – **and now you know the rest of the story**, well, almost. I have provided some highlights and history from Diane’s delving into our past. Anyone wishing the full pdf file can contact me at info@dennishistoricalsociety.org and I will email it to you.

Thank you Diane for this amazing piece of research!

Witch One is Yours

We are so fortunate that many articles in this newsletter are coming to us through the contributions of *born & bred* Dennis residents. With Halloween coming up at the end of the month, it is a fun look back at *the way we were* in this reminiscence by longtime DHS member and previous contributor Carole Bell.

Halloween, 1965

Our gang of friends was too old for Trick or Treat, but we did have our driver’s licenses. So for a few years, the challenge was to drive around the north side of town and scope out who had pumpkins on their front porches.

On Halloween night, a couple of cars were designated the getaway vehicles, and the back seats were removed to make room for the ‘runners’ who would bring back the bounty. I was usually riding shotgun in a ’46 Ford. The intent was good clean fun, and to see how many pumpkins we could pack into the back seats along with the occupants, who were crammed in trying to keep their balance, while lying on top of the shifting cargo. We were careful not to have a trail of broken pumpkins all over the roads.

One of the biggest challenges and hard to ignore, was to steal the very large specimen from Peter Nyberg’s front porch at 489 Main Street. Rumor had it that he sat there in the dark every Halloween with his shotgun waiting for anyone daring enough to attempt the theft. I quizzed some of my fellow thieves trying to confirm this for the story, but no one could recall if we ever ended up with Nyberg’s pumpkin. I do remember hearing the strategy and the pros and cons of who had the best chance of stealing it.



1965 Photo Provided by Carole Bell

On Halloween night, after making our rounds, we formed a bucket brigade to get as many pumpkins as possible up on to the roof of the Dennis Post Office without dropping any. The next morning the newspaper came and snapped a similar photo. In this photo, Clark Potter who had the insurance office in the same building is pointing to the roof. Gertrude Clowry, ‘Gert’ was about 4 ft 5’ tall arrived sputtering like a wet hen and demanded that Post Master Fred Maher retrieve her pumpkin. “I know that one on the end is mine. I would recognize it anywhere. Get that down for me!” To which Fred replied, “Gert if you want it, go up and get it yourself.” End of story.

The sign covering U.S. POST OFFICE DENNIS, MASS. reads -
“Witch One is Yours”

Wishing Everyone a Safe & Happy Halloween!



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P.O. Box 607
South Dennis, MA 02660-0607

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Enter now
for a chance
to win this
year's
Dennis
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Society

FIFTH
ANNUAL
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PIE
CONTEST

Saturday, October 9, 1-4pm
THIS YEAR AT THE WEST DENNIS
SCHOOLHOUSE, 67 SCHOOL STREET

DEADLINE TO REGISTER: OCTOBER 4

Contact Dawn Dellner at 508.237.6954
or at dawn.dellner@gmail.com

Coming in November-

An article written by Katherine Thacher Peace, the *Fate of a Schooner*. Katherine, a long time DHS member, is also the daughter of our beloved author Nancy Thacher Reid. As you read her article, you will see that the acorn didn't fall far from the tree!

A quick recap of the 2021 Annual Meeting including the results of the elections, and more!

The Return to Normal Is Still Very Elusive!

Much to the great disappointment of everyone, for the second year in a row, your Board has made the very difficult decision to cancel the 2021 Annual Meeting/Luncheon. Of great concern and instrumental in the decision was the real worry that because of the delta variant of the coronavirus, members would, very understandably, be reluctant to attend.

Instead of two separate meetings in October, this year's Annual Meeting will be held concurrently with the Board Meeting on the 12th.

The Board wishes to thank the owners and staff of *The Sea View* for allowing us to rebook our reservation for October 29, 2022, and Jim Coogan who has again agreed to be our speaker!