Dennis Historical Society Newsletter

dennishs@cape.com www.dennishistsoc.org

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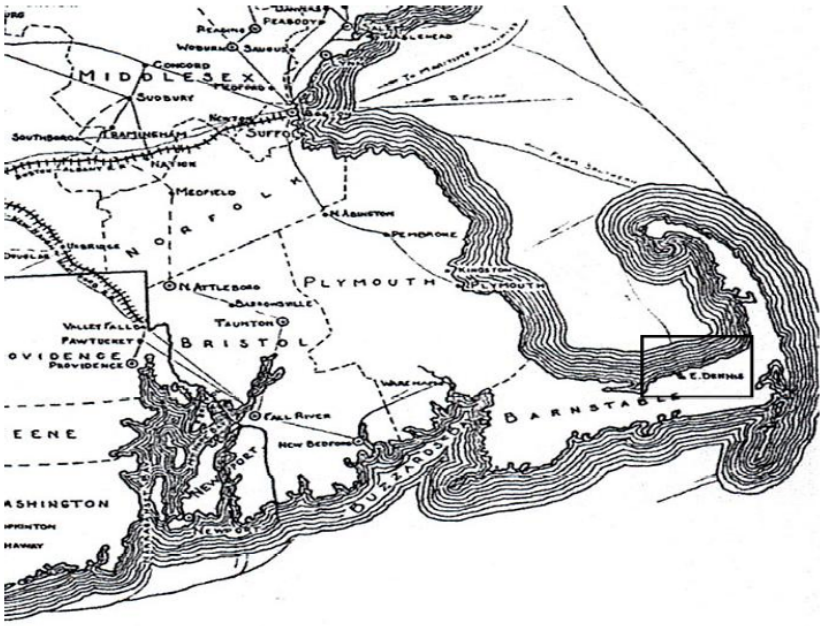
The Underground Railroad

One of the most idealized chapters of American history in the years preceding the Civil War was the Underground Railroad. Most of the activities were undocumented because they were illegal and few people were willing to advertise they were involved in illegal activities. This has made it easy for suppositions and fabrication to take the place of hard facts.

The Fugitive Slave Law enacted by Congress in 1798 enabled owners of slaves to recover their property by showing proof of ownership. Usually it was a bill of sale. The owners advertised with posters far and wide offering a reward for the capture of their slave. However, by the 1820s the movement to abolish slavery had become strong in the northern states and many people, especially already freed blacks, began actively assisting the escapees. Unfortunately the Compromise of 1850 made this activity dangerous as it imposed a fine of $1,000.00 and six months in prison if caught.

The activists were strong in New England, Pennsylvania and Ohio. Worcester, Massachusetts had a group of Quakers, clergy and others who worked openly and with great zeal to spread the message of abolishing slavery. One of the most outspoken was a woman, Abby Kelley, who never hesitated when given the opportunity to speak. The American Antiquarian Society, based in Worcester, has a large collection of Abolition material available for study.

Bounty hunters were very active in the southern states and made long searches into the northern states if they believed they were on the trail of an escaped slave, even as far north as Boston. When caught the slave would not be harmed too much as he was worth a reward, but the person aiding his escape was fair game and many were killed because of their humanitarianism. Free black citizens of the south and north were known targets of the bounty hunters. Because of the new law many of the free blacks felt compelled to leave the States and relocate in Canada. England had abolished slavery in 1833, so Canada was a safe haven.



The Underground Railroad had nothing to do with railroads but referred to the swift, mysterious way in which slaves seemed to move north. Most of them traveled at night following the "drinking gourd"—the North Star in the Big Dipper. In time certain routes became established with people along those routes committed to helping a slave reach freedom.

Major New England routes went through Connecticut and Rhode Island into Massachusetts and then Vermont and New Hampshire into Canada. A route went from Worcester to Boston and then north by sea to Maine or the Maritime Provinces. A minor route was established on Cape Cod primarily by mariners who found it rather easy to move slaves to the Cape and then on to Maine or Nova Scotia. A map developed by the American Antiquarian Society in 1937 showed East Dennis (in box) as a known location.

In Dennis, both south side and north side, it is believed from family folklore and village tales that a number of sea captains were staunch Abolitionists. One story is that many of them formed a pact to not shave until slavery was abolished. This may very well be true as 1850 and 60s photos show some rather shaggy sea captains but later into the 1880s and 90s the beards are tamed and trimmed.

Most of the people involved here were known only to each other as some feelings ran high for Abolition and some others equally high for staying out of it and letting the southern states manage their own affairs. Some men were quite vocal in their stand against slavery, especially Capt. Prince S. Crowell. He was a good friend of Parker Pillsbury who moved about the northern states trying to influence people to take a stand and support the cause. Capt. Crowell called meetings and attended meetings, he drew up petitions and did everything he could to defeat slavery. One story that is not verified but has been passed along through the generations is that he made arrangements for a freed black man to speak to the congregation of the East Dennis Methodist Church. When the time arrived for the man to speak the minister would not let him speak from the podium. Capt. Crowell became so incensed that he removed his pew (which he had bought by subscription) with a hammer and crowbar. He never again returned to that church although he remained a God-fearing man all his life.

Many owners of 1800s houses believe their homes were built with hiding places for runaway slaves. However, most of these nooks and crannies were created over the years by succeeding generations making changes to the floor plan to suit their family life style at the time. It seems likely most slaves were hidden locally in attics, barns, cellars and outbuildings and moved on with the first participating boat leaving a Dennis/Harwich/Yarmouth harbor.

It would have been most helpful if one of the participants had left a diary telling us what really happened. As one has not yet come to light it is best to remember that a story is just a story—or as TV's Jack Webb said—"Just the facts, Ma'am."

Phyllis Horton

Miss Dora & Miss Sarah



Miss Sarah" Jane Wixon on left, with the slipper and shoe, and "Miss Dora" (Medora) Nickerson. Photo taken in the summer of 1939

Two unforgettable characters from my earliest childhood in Dennis Port were two old ladies, "Miss Dora" and "Miss Sarah". Miss Dora was actually Mrs. Medora (Long) Nickerson, wife of Daniel Nickerson, and they lived diagonally NW across Lower County Road from my grandparents, Nathaniel & Marion Wixon. Next door, to the NE from the same spot was the home of Mrs. Sarah Jane (Wixon) Wixon, wife of Capt. John Wixon. Their husbands were gone by the time my memories began of the ladies.

"Miss Dora" was a little hunched-up lady who got around with a cane, but get around she did. She would come to visit by first tightly closing her door, and then carefully placing the key in her dress pocket. With a needle and thread she held in her mouth, she would then stitch the pocket closed so that she wouldn't lose the key. She would come to grandma's to visit of an afternoon, and would spend the time gossiping and discussing the affairs of the day.

"Miss Sarah" was a tall lady who "enjoyed poor health" all her life, which lasted to the age of 91, and she was always being treated by the local doctors. She always wore a slipper on one foot and a shoe on the other because of a bad case of bunions. She always seemed a little odd and distant, but she would not be outdone by "Miss Dora", and when Dora would

go visiting, Sarah was close behind, having kept watch out the windows for the neighborhood activities, lest she should miss anything.

"Miss Sarah" had a large house, with an outhouse that sat facing Lower County Road, but back in the yard a ways. She was so interested in the village goings-on that she would always keep the outhouse door open. One could walk by and see her sitting there doing her business, and she would wave and shout out greetings to passers by. When Ensign Baker, called "Tiney B.," the local grocer on Pleasant Street, went walk-about to get orders for groceries from the neighborhood ladies, Sarah would sit there in the outhouse while Tiney B. stood in the road and wrote down the order that she would shout out to him.

When Miss Sarah passed away in 1940, the house stood for some time before it was moved away and a motel built on the site. When the move took place, we all discovered why Miss Sarah was always a little odd and distant – the crawlspace under her bedroom floor was filled with hundreds and hundreds of patent-medicine bottles, all of which were mostly alcohol. We then knew that Miss Sarah wasn't odd or distant – she was flat-out inebriated!!! And nobody knew!!!

As mentioned above, Miss Dora was a little shaky on her feet. So when it was time for her to go home, my aunt, Adelia "Babe" (Wixon) West, then a little girl, was given the chore to guide her home. Actually, the guide wasn't so necessary as having someone to undo threads of her pocket so she could get the key out, her eyesight being poor. Aunt Babe tells the story of one time, after walking Miss Dora home, into her kitchen, she asked for a drink of water. Miss Dora told her to help herself – and Babe found a glass on the soapstone sink and proceeded to pump herself a glass of water from the old hand-pump. After she had finished the water, Miss Dora announced that the glass Babe had used was the one in which she kept her teeth at night. Aunt Babe's appetite disappeared immediately, and she made sure to never get another drink of water at Miss Dora's.

Burt Derick

DHS Library

Congratulations to Burt Derick and the Grand Opening of the Pauline Wixon Derick Library on the second floor of the West Dennis Library. We look forward to a long and successful association between our two organizations.

1736 Josiah Dennis Manse Museum Update

The repairs have started. A chain link fence for site security now surrounds the Manse and the contractor is hard at work in the initial phases. An independent clerk of the works who reports to the Town is overseeing the effort daily and provides a weekly report. The contractor, clerk, architect, Manse and town representatives attend weekly progress meetings for which the architect prepares the minutes. Thankfully, no 'surprises' have been found as the work progresses.

New Members

We are pleased to welcome the following folks into the Dennis Historical Society:

Kathleen G. Powers
Rosann M. Conran
Nancy Crowell
Mr. & Mrs. Chris Delaney
Mr. & Mrs. Chris Koehler

PLEASE NOTE – THE NEWSLETTER CANNOT BE FORWARDED

If you move or are temporarily away, the post office will not forward your newsletter. Before leaving, notify us and we will change your address for four months or more. If your newsletter is returned we have to pay extra postage, and we will remove you from the mailing list until notified.

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P.O. Box 607
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RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

Mark Your Calendars – Upcoming DHS Program

"Story of the Shiverick Shipyard"

Sunday
April 18, 2:00 pm
Jacob Sears Library
23 Center St.
East Dennis



Historian Brendan Joyce
Presents
The Clipper Ships of
East Dennis

The wind and rains of March have taken their toll,
but the thoughts of April 'gold' lifts the spirit:

"Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the Milky Way,
They stretched in never-ending line
Along the margin of a bay;
Ten thousand saw I, at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance."

Taken from the poem "DAFFODILS"
By William Wordsworth (1770 – 1850)

Please save the enclosed ***DHS 2010 Calendar***.

If you are among our members who live 'off-Cape', and are considering a visit to Dennis this year, let us know and we'll be sure you won't miss out on viewing our wonderful museums and the new home of the DHS Library at the West Dennis Public Library. Send us an e-mail at: dennishs@cape.com and we'll "leave the light on!" for you.