

Johnston Historical Society

Historical Notes

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A trip down Memory Lane

The following article by Smokey Ullucci is one of a series on Our Lady of Grace Church in Manton.

OLD TIME FEAST CONTINUES. Much to the dismay of the parents, the fathers and planners of the gala occasion always ordained that the firework extravaganza be held in the evening of the last day. Being a child did not help because the following day was a school day and it meant being in bed by nine and missing the display. The noise generated by the fireworks would undoubtedly awaken the entire town but our lot was not to leave the bedroom for any reason whatever.

There were many activities going on during the daylight hours though and the one most popular for the children was climbing the greasy or slippery pole. The shaft was a little thinner than an ordinary telephone or electric pole, splinter free and practically

polished but about as high. At the top of the column there were nailed a couple of cross-timbers with hooks and nails attached. Hanging from the 2x4s were Italian hams, salamies, cheeses and various dried out goodies that looked very appealing and glistening in the sunlight. Also dangling at the top of the pole were some greenbacks waving around in the breeze. The money was of various amounts and this array also would be the prize of whoever reached the top of the pole first. The whole idea of the greasy pole was for anyone to shimmy up to the very top and for his effort would collect all the bounty that was at the end of the climb. This sounds easy enough but trying to even get started from ground level was a marvel in

gravity defying antics.

Globs of grease had been rubbed and spread all over and around the pole from top to bottom and starting a couple feet above the dirt. Usually, the youth of the neighborhood had the upper hand in getting to the top because of their agility and light weight. But it never was the early starters who won, because most of the oily substance had to be removed either by the climb itself, the clothes of the youngster or their torsos. Some would commence with complete attire and would shed most or all on the way up. One particular youth, who we called 'Happy Mike' I believe, got to the pinnacle more times than any other. Once up to the top, he would snatch the rewards and toss them down to waiting

friends and relatives.

He also would attempt to stuff the loot in the last remaining piece of clothing on his body. He then would slide down and run around embracing any and all who didn't manage to evade his grasp and who then would be as greased-up as Mike was himself.

Happy Mike was a character in himself. Always smiling and excited, he was a very good automotive mechanic and willing to offer a helping hand without a thought of getting paid. Not a big fellow but had muscled arms that evidently helped Mike in straddling and gripping the slippery pole without sliding down. He stands out in my memory to this day and I've often wished that it was I who reached the top of the greasy pole first. As a youngster I dreamt about and

did all the things that 'Happy Mike' did when on top of the pole. Being a lot younger than the climbers of the day, I never had the chance to prove myself and was sent on my way when I begged to participate. The biggest irony of it all was that the slippery pole event was eliminated just as I grew big and old enough (I thought) to chance the venture. One other happening highlighted the afternoon on the field across from the church and that was the catching of the greased piglet. The poor animal was led out in the crowd and it went bananas as it was scrambled for, slipping out of grasps, squealing as it ran from one crowd to another. Many a suit and skirt was ruined as it was being chased and hounded around the area until it was cornered and caught. It wasn't a very big thing and that made it all the harder to snag and hold. Not being too lucky, it always got collared and probably made some folks quite happy when it became the featured attraction at a future banquet.

The bands were always the main fascination for most of the patrons at the feast and always lived up to their expectation. Two

large stands were erected side by side and the bands competed with each other. First the Silver Lake musicians played for the crowd and had their big guns doing solo pieces.

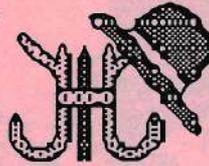
Whether opera or martial strands, listening to live performers is always a great treat and the applause that followed each set told the bands they were on the right track. Next, the Columbus National Band from Federal Hill sitting in their band area would raise

the listener to a higher pitch and do its utmost to eclipse the performance of the competition. Seeing and hearing a marching band playing Jazz made the crowd swing and away and brought cheers, plaudits and praise from the gathering. It made the music-makers give their best as the band with the greater applause would end up with more loot.

The concert would last right up to fireworks time when the bands would leave the stands and lead the people down Lafayette Street to the fireworks site

down to the end of the street next to the railroad tracks. Again the bands would lead the folks in song and would play 'The National Anthem' when the pyrotechnics displayed 'Old Glory'.

Another interesting duel also was shaping up with the barrage of fire. Two concerns had contracts for the



fireworks presentation and the better of the two would end up with a bonus as would the winning band.

Nuts And Carts

Other memories stand out about the old feast and one in particular. Bright and early on the Saturday, the first day of the festivities, after the booming of the first of the fireworks that were to continue

for the two days, we would run up to the church and watch the push carts being set up along the sidewalk. There were a variety of the old timers who had pushed their carts from all over the state. Those who arrived first had the choicest spots around the area. Best of all was the corner of Lafayette Street and George Waterman Road across from the front door of the church. An elderly old timer practically owned the location because for as long as I remember, he was thereat that corner for years.

His cart was loaded with exotic nuts and sweet candies.

The filberts were strung on a string and hanging from the makeshift canopy that protected the goodies from the weather and sun. The Torrone, a nougat candy, of course with nuts, was probably his best seller. It was individually boxed in various flavors and for a nickel, it was the best buy in the world. Next, came my second favorite, the strung filbert nuts, without shells and I was so reluctant to cut the knot at the end of the string because once cut, the nuts were history! Another good trip down memory lane.

ANSWERS TO JOHNSTON QUESTIONS FROM LAST ISSUE

1) The only resident of Johnston to serve in the U.S. House of Representatives was William A. Pirce, Republican member of the 49th Congress, seated from 1885 until January 25, 1887.

William Almy Pirce was born in Hope village, town of Scituate, Providence County, Rhode Island, on February 29, 1824. He was son of Benjamin Pirce (sometimes given as Pierce) and Abigail (Johnson) Pirce. Benjamin was a Scituate farmer before becoming the co-owner with Benjamin Randall of the "Old Mill estate" making cotton cloth in Simmon's Upper Village (Johnston), and still later the holder of several public offices including Representative to the General Assembly before his death February 13, 1868. Benjamin's house still stands, on the west side of Simmonsville Avenue adjacent to the farmland that was also his, now the picturesque Ruotolo Farm.

William attended the Smithville Seminary, later called the Lapham Institute, a private school near North Scituate village. The account of the 1842 Simmonsville flood in Richard Bayles' History of Providence County (v.I pages 805-06) recounts that William was an eyewitness and helped warn the residents of danger: William would have been 18 years old. After serving as a district school teacher for several years, he worked as manager of the store and counting room at his father's Simmonsville mill. Between 1854 and 1863 he manufactured cotton goods "on his own account"; the 1860 U.S. Census lists William as "twine maker", the Johnston 1861 Tax Book lists him as "assignee" of the mill rights of O.Hendrick, and the 1864 Providence Directory lists him as manufacturer of "carpet warp and twine" at the Randall Mill, Simmonsville (See map v.III page 26, Johnston Historic Notes). During this period he began to take on civic leadership roles. William was appointed Justice of the Peace as early as 1852 and later was elected from Johnston to the state Senate (1855) and state House of Representatives (1858, 1862).

In 1863 he was appointed Assessor of Internal Revenue for R.I.'s Second District, which post he held until it was abolished in May 1873; also in 1863 (during the Civil War) he accepted the post of Paymaster for State Militia with the rank of major. He married Asenath S. Aldrich of Scituate, January 1st, 1865. Tax records in this period have William paying taxes on two parcels of farm property. Beers 1870 atlas shows his farm on the Cranston side (south) of Plainfield pike near Simmon's Lower Village (erroneously labeled "W A Price"); the Cranston and Rhode Island historical societies own copies of a photograph of this farm.

In the 1876 Presidential election, William A. Pirce was the official messenger who carried the Rhode Island electoral vote to Washington DC. He was chairman of the R.I. delegation to the Republican National Convention in Chicago in 1880 and served on the Republican National Committee in 1880 and 1884. He again served in the state House of Representatives in 1879, 1880, and 1881, and state Senate for 1882. And in November 1884, William A. Pirce was elected to Congress from R.I.'s 2nd District, drawing 7,746 votes to Democrat Charles H. Page's 5,995 votes. But the 7,746 Pirce votes, though a clear plurality of the 15,476 total votes cast, was ruled by the U.S House of Representatives in January 1887 insufficient to win the election and his seat was declared vacant.

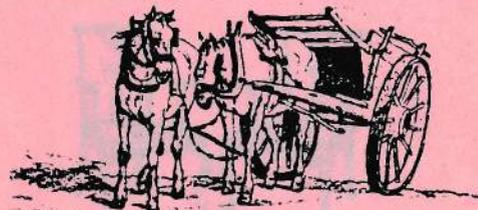
The Honorable William Almy Pirce died in Johnston, March 5, 1891, and was buried in Swan Point Cemetery.

SEE: Who Was Who In America: Historical Volume 1607-1896, revised edition (Marquis Press, 1967), page 485; Biographical Cyclopedia of Representative Men...(1881), pages 488-89; and old issues of the Rhode Island Manual.

2). In partial answer to where Pocasset Falls was located, we present the following quotation from Munro's Picturesque Rhode Island (1881): "About five miles from Providence, in the town of Johnston, is a romantic spot on the Pocasset Brook which is worth a visit. The brook flows into a deep ravine, the banks of which are thirty or forty feet in height, at the upper end falling over a series of cascades. When the water is abundant, or during a freshet, the effect is picturesque, —much more so than that of many spots tourists go hundreds of miles to visit. The bottom and sides of the ravine below the falls are well wooded with tall, straight trees, whose tops rise as high as those of their brethren of the surrounding forest."

The falls were located along the Pocasset River just about a half mile north-west of the present Memorial Drive (formerly part of Pocasset Avenue). It appears that the site was obliterated when U.S. Route 295 was constructed. The falls (or more properly cascades according to Sidney S. Rider) were eight feet high with massive walls of rock on either side of them. They were described in 1902 as, "... one of the prettiest cascades in nature and is the mecca of the artist of repute and the photographer of amateur abilities." Unfortunately, progress has stripped us of another site of natural beauty and we are left with only a photograph of the falls in Rider's book and a few words of description.

See: Rider, S.S. Lands of R.I. as the Great Sachems Knew Them, (Prov., 1904); "In the Path of the Beautiful Pocasset River...", Telegram, 6/15/1902; Munro, W.H. Picturesque R. I., (Prov., 1881); Richards, L.J. Atlas of the City of Prov., 1917.



3) Winsor's Ice Cream opened in 1975. The store was built on Greenville Avenue across from the Manton Hose Company firehouse after the Winsor family house which had occupied the location for several generations was moved and resituated on the back of the lot. It had been Ralph Winsor's dream to have a local ice cream parlor. What Ralph Edward Winsor and wife Barbara got started is now run by Ralph's son, James "Jim" Steere Winsor and wife Paula (Guinn) Winsor and youngsters. The store sells rich, homemade ice cream in numerous flavors made right on the premises of milk from S. B. Winsor Dairy. The dairy, which bears the name of its founder, Sidney Brown Winsor, is owned and operated by Albert Winsor, Ralph's brother.

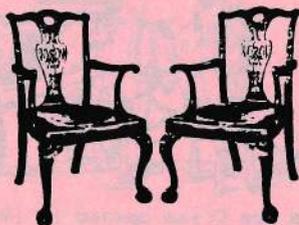
PASSING OF A FRIEND

The following remembrance of Pearl Steppo was written because, as the priest at her funeral said, she was more than just a person who made meals and folded clothes:

The Johnston Historical Society regrets the loss of one of our members, Exilda Steppo, or "Pearl" as she was known to friend and family. Pearl passed away this past February 18th. She belonged to our society for the last four years and often commented on how she enjoyed reading our newsletter to keep up on the history of the town she lived in for over 40 years.

I first met Pearl in 1954 when my family moved next door to her on Walnut Street in Thornton. Her eldest son, Butch, and I were the same age and we hung around together for many years. Her husband, Mel, put up a basketball hoop for us in their driveway and later added a spotlight for night use. Well, we thought that we were in heaven after using a peach basket on the old maple tree in the street for many months. Pearl was asked why she put up with all the noise that we made playing in her yard to all hours. She said that she would rather have us there enjoying ourselves than off getting into trouble because we had nowhere to play. We were never chased from her yard, even after we broke a window or two with an errant jump shot.

The years slipped by with many happy moments spent in Pearl's yard or ours, playing hide-and-seek, "outs" against the stairs, high-low-jack on the back steps on lazy, summer days, or doing chemistry experiments down Pearl's cellar on cold, winter evenings. Pearl was a good friend, in a neighborhood that was much closer than any



I have experienced since. Neighbors that had moved away years ago would stop back to see her and she always greeted them with a smile and a cup of tea. Conversation often focused on the Pocasset Village and what had happened to old neighborhood chums. Frequently Pearl showed us photographs of family and friends which she loved to "snap."

When Judy and I were just starting our family and were in need of a bigger apartment, we moved back to Thornton after we were offered the back half of Pearl's duplex on Walnut Street. We spent five good years there. After moving back to Providence, Judy and I came to see Pearl and Mel from time to time. We often chatted about the old days in Johnston. Both of them joined us on our society bus tour of the town and we talked of how much fun another tour would be. Mel passed away a few years ago and, now, Pearl is gone. But, their memory will last. Whenever I drive down Walnut Street, I will remember those times on our "basketball court." I will remember seeing Pearl's collection of spoons of which she was so proud. I will remember Mel's Christmas village that he set up so carefully every year. Good-bye, old friends.



LOUIS MACCARONE

Louis McGowan

Our society also regrets the passing of Louis R. Maccarone, who died February 18th. He was formerly a member of our society and lived most of his life on Maple Avenue in Thornton.



NEW LOOK AT FARNUM/ANGELL HOUSE

Robert Garofalo, 17th & 18th century housewright, has completed his first assignment at the Farnum/Angell House. He has constructed a wonderful new bake oven in the downstairs kitchen to replace the one that was removed in earlier modernizing. After looking at his work, it is hard to believe that the brickwork is not original to the house. He also installed a brick hearth in the kitchen and replaced the dampers in the kitchen and parlor fireplaces. A surround has also been located (an authentic 19th century R. I. one!) for the kitchen fireplace and it will be installed soon. All this work is very exciting and we will soon have a room to be proud of.

Work will begin commence shortly on re-pointing the chimney from the roofline up to the top of that structure. The old mortar has completely dried out. The chimney will be plastered on the inside and re-pointed on the outside.

Our carpenter will also begin his work soon on some needed repairs, including the front doorway.

18th CENTURY JOHNSTON HOUSE ERECTED IN
GREENVILLE, DARKE COUNTY, OHIO

[Excerpts from newspaper clippings and photos furnished by new owner, Tom Stone, tell the story. Tom must think we are awfully slow since he mailed the parcel to us back in September. Thank you, Tom and Myrna, T.R. and Molra, for sharing with us the continuing saga of Daniel Thornton's house; we hope you are safely and happily moved. Readers are advised to find the first portion of the story in our Historical Notes, v.II, pages 15,16.]

A HOME REVIVAL. ...by Kim Passon, photos by John Wehr. The Daily Advocate (Tuesday August 4, 1987)

Tom and Myrna Stone have been collecting antique furniture for 15 years and decided that they needed the appropriate setting for their colonial style pieces. There weren't any houses old enough in Ohio, so they purchased a 1760 New England home and had it moved here.

Stone said that the idea of purchasing an antique home generated from their great interest in collecting antique furniture. "As we got more into it, learning about antiques, it led us to this," Stone said. "We've got a big antique to go with the little antiques."

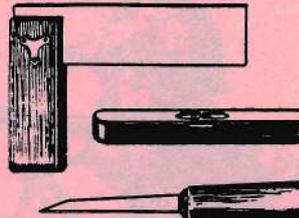
The 10-room house built by Daniel Thornton in 1760, was brought from Johnston, RI, piece by piece, starting with the interior. Stone transferred the original doors, floors, molding, and paneling last August, and the beams and outside structures were brought over in April and stored.

The first beam was set on Saturday, and Sunday was celebrated as official "Frame Raising" day. "It was exciting to see it go up," Stone said, "to see a tangible reality to it, something taking shape."

The Stones purchased the house from Stephan P. Mack Associates, out of Ashaway, RI, an architectural design and consulting firm that specializes in the disassembly and reconstruction of 18th century houses and barns that are threatened by demolition. Tom and Myrna saw an ad for Mack's services in a weekly antique newspaper "Antiques and Arts Weekly" and through this ad, they got the necessary information to make the initial contact. That initial contact was two and a half years ago, according to Mrs. Stone. Most of the time has been spent finding the right house, one that went with the Stones' requirements for size and cost, and they finally purchased this house a year ago.

The Stones want to keep the 18th century atmosphere of their new house as original as possible, both inside and out. The original brick will be used for the five fireplaces and the chimney stack, reproductions of hand forged nails and wooden pegs will hold the posts together, narrow clapboard siding in white cedar will retain the New England style, and light fixtures will be reproductions of the style of that period.

The Thornton-Stone house is located behind



Woodbriar Lane, in the woods off of Jaysville-St. John Road, and is completely surrounded by trees away from neighboring houses, adding to its New England atmosphere.

Mack, who has been in this business for 11 years, was on hand this weekend to assist in the frame raising and will act as a consultant to local contractor Dale Rismiller, who will finish the reconstruction. Mack has furnished a detailed blueprint and photographs and has specified what materials must be used. "You can't guess when you are putting back together an 18th century house," Mack said.

The project is scheduled to be completed by January, and the Stones and their two children, T.R. and Molra, will move in immediately. "We'll have to live a different lifestyle," Stone said, but it is something they are all willing to try. "The whole idea is creating an atmosphere for the antiques and preserving a piece of history," Stone said.

OLD HOUSE FINDS HOME IN OHIO, Collectors purchase 'ultimate antique', by Pam Davidson. [excerpts]

Collectors of colonial antiques for the past 12 years, Thomas and Myrna Stone have wanted an old home for their collection. There just weren't any houses in Ohio quite old enough. As a result the ...couple had a colonial house sent in.

Interior pieces of their 10-room home began arriving last September [1986] as it was being dismantled in Johnston [sic] R.I., where it was built about 1765. ...The house will have modern amenities carefully added so as not to disturb the 18th-century atmosphere. The back door of the house will lead to a modern portion that will hold the kitchen, half-bath and pantry.

The homes Mack sells range in price from \$200,000 for do-it-yourself construction, to more than \$1 million. He said the major expense of the homes is not in the shipping or in buying the original house, but the craftsmanship involved in dismantling the house and reproducing needed parts.

Tom Stone's letter: "We have only made one change to the original house and one addition. The change ...was the raising of the pitch of the roof to provide for more headroom on the third floor. The addition was an ell off the back of the house--24' long by 13' wide to house a kitchen, laundry area, and rear stairway."

Greenville, Ohio

Sept. 1987



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FURTHER NOTES RELATED TO COL. CHRISTOPHER HARRIS:

"Nine Muster Rolls of Rhode Island Troops Enlisted During the Old French War, to which is added the Journal of Captain William Rice in the Expedition of 1746", (Society of Colonial Wars, 1915)

(1) The first document shows payments between December 1756 and March 1757 for service of the "Company" during the year 1756. Col. Christopher Harris (#38 in list) was paid £ 882-5-0 ("Old Tenor"?). Only 44 soldiers were paid, out of nearly 800 enlisted in 8 companies?! Eighty soldiers remained behind to garrison Fort William Henry but each of the original 4 companies was 100 men, so even if this was only the Colonel's company (and muster rolls for the other companies are not extant) there still seems to be a problem of numbers of soldiers in the expedition. (2) In the 1760 roster, 151 people were paid for service in January-February 1761, titled "Col. Christopher Harris Comp 1760". Usual payments to soldiers was £ 8 to 15; the Colonel (#136 on the list) received £ 83-14-9. The lower payments may be because the money had been "devalued" (many notations in this document and others of the time note "old tenor" or "real money"), or duty in 1760 may have been considerably lighter than in 1755-56. (3) Notation of April 22nd 1760, "To Samuel Harris advanced £ 1-16-1 before marching had a furlough & deserted & was taken up and hangd at Albany".

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