

Johnston Historical Society

Historical Notes

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Louis McGowan and Christopher Martin, Co-Editors

March 2006

English Immigrants to Turn-of-the-Twentieth Century Rhode Island

(The following was excerpted from a talk given by Louis McGowan in 2002)

Introduction:

The English have been in R.I. since the first decades of the 17th century. By the middle of the 19th century, other groups had surpassed the English in numbers entering this country. Around the turn of the 20th century, though, another small migration of English people took place.

We will look briefly at two of the groups that came over during this later migration: the British Hosiery Company, which in 1884 opened shop in Thornton, a village in Johnston, and the Joseph Benn Company, which moved here in 1904 to Greystone, a village in North Providence.

Why did they leave England?

Both textile companies moved to this country to avoid U.S. imposed protective tariffs. Locating in this country enabled them to avoid the tariffs. Their workers must have particularly valued the companies they worked for and their jobs because they left their native land to stay with their employers.

What work skills did the workers bring with them?

The two companies came over, each with their own workforce. They produced products which were unusual or unique. The workers were skilled in operating the machinery and, thus, their employers desired to keep them on the payroll and to keep them happy. The companies brought their own machinery with them, and set up production in Rhode Island, making the same products that they had made in England. The workers were able to do the exact work

that they had performed in England. They did not have to learn new skills.

Where did the Emigrants come from?

The British Hosiery Company's workforce came from Nottingham, England, and the Joseph Benn Company's workers came from the Bradford area of Yorkshire, England, both major textile areas.

Were these two villages unique?

In at least one other village in Rhode Island, an English company moved here during that time and brought over their own workforce. This was the Bradford Dyeing Association. in Westerly. There were other villages with a large English-American population such as Darlington in Pawtucket, but I do not know the particulars of how they got here. We see evidence of these English-American villages in early newspapers which printed stories of the cricket leagues and English soccer leagues.

What was home life like?

Since the companies brought over their own skilled workers, the owners felt it necessary to set up model mill villages to keep these workers happy. The villages contained roomy, inexpensive housing, churches on the property or nearby, all kinds of recreational outlets, and the institutions necessary to take care of their social needs.

How many people lived in these two villages?

Up to 500 workers and their families lived in the British Hosiery village, while the Benn village housed up to 1300 workers and their families.

What was the background of these workers?

All of these English immigrants were textile workers in the old country. Other emigrants in this period, including the Irish, the Canadians, and the southern and eastern Europeans were primarily from agricultural backgrounds. This meant that the English were much more prepared for the rigors of factory life, that is, the long monotonous hours, the mill discipline, and the rule of the factory clock. There was also added security for the English workers because both mills made unique or unusual goods. Since the workers were skilled in producing those goods, it would have been difficult to replace them.

Self-image and education

The English mill hands saw themselves as workers and expected their children to follow in their footsteps. England was a very class-conscious society. There also was a prejudice against education because it took wage earners away from the family. Children were expected to work when they could and turn their whole earnings over to the father. They did this until they were married. The percentage of working 14, 15, and 16 year olds was very high.

The ethnic composition of the workforce was very homogeneous. Over 90% of the workers in both villages were born in England or had one of their parents born there.

Women and families in the Villages

There was a walkout at the Benn Mill over women replacing men on heavy looms. It was a typical situation found in many area mills, both to increase profits and to divide the workforce -- women were used in jobs that were traditionally kept for men because they could be paid less and also because it was felt that they were more easily controlled. As in mills all over the country, women were treated differently.

Women worked primarily as homemakers, though, in these two villages. Less than a third of the women did work, and over 90% of the households had a husband present. This meant that the potential was at least there for a stable home life. Crime was said to be non-existent in the village, a far cry from the rough and tumble neighborhood of nearby working-class Olneyville, for example. Family size was also small, which meant less pressure on all concerned. Apartments were not crowded and privacy was more readily available. From what information can be

gathered, family life was strong. Women were able to take part in neighborhood activities. There were women's organizations to join such as the Odd-Ladies, choral groups, and dance groups.

Money

Wages were good, and housing was roomy, attractive, and inexpensive. The workers in both villages could buy their necessities at co-operative stores where goods were much cheaper. So money did not seem to be a major problem in either village

Spare-time Activities

All houses had space for gardens. There were ball-fields on company land. There were all kinds of company-sponsored activities ranging from literary groups to soccer teams. A social club was provided for the use of the workers in the village.

All these activities helped to keep the village functioning smoothly. The children also had many healthful activities to engage in.

Religion

Churches were readily available and supported fully by the management of both mills. In Greystone, the company donated the land where the church was built and company administrators served as officers of the church. The churches in both villages helped to keep strong the social fabric of the villages.

Positive factors for the English Immigrants

1. All spoke English which made the transition to life here easier.
2. They landed here with a job, the skills to perform that job, and much job security after that.
3. The English culture carried over with them helped to make life here easier.
4. Living in villages that were mostly English meant they did not have to face prejudice that other immigrant groups faced.

Problems in the English Villages

1. There was little encouragement to their children for education.
2. Their strong sense of English community worked against the assimilation of the workers into American culture. It was said

the English-Americans had a chip on their shoulder.

3. Lacking the diversity present in other communities, there was less chance to grow by learning from others.
4. As for all immigrants, they faced loss of family and friends by leaving their homeland.



Society Doings

The society has not been idle since our last newsletter went out in September 2003. Here are some of the highlights from the last thirty months:

April 3, 2004, was Johnston historical cemetery cleanup day. We had a good turnout of volunteers, and the day was well-organized by Matt LaFazia, Vin Jackvony, and Dan Mazullo. Also in April 2004 five members toured the James Mitchell Varnum House (1773) in East Greenwich.

At the September 2004 general meeting, Gregory Burr was appointed to the vacant trustee position by the president.

A fundraising tea was held at the home of Warren and Ellen Lanpher on November 7, 2004, at which we cleared about \$290.

In December 2004, a student intern from the University of Rhode Island, Sara Cronin, completed an inventory of all the society's map holdings. Thanks Sara!

Johnston historical cemetery cleanup day came around again on April 9, 2005. Fifteen to twenty cemeteries were cleaned by many volunteers, including boy and girl scout troops and 4-H groups. Pat, Steve, and Lou attended.

The society held a yard sale at Angell House on April 16, 2005, netting \$210 which was put toward a vegetable garden in the yard.

An election of officers was held at our general meeting on June 29, 2005, with the following results:

President: Louis McGowan
Vice President: Bel Peters
Treasurer: Dan Brown
Recording Secretary: Evelyn Beaumier
Corresponding Secretary: Christopher Martin
Trustees: Gregory Burr, John Barattini, and Rolf Johnson.

November 6, 2005, was the date of a fall tea event held at the Winsor Avenue home of Nancy and Paul Nadeau (see photo below). A good number attended and we raised \$500.



Photo by Christopher Martin

On December 2, 2005, Lou, Christopher, and Steve visited the historic home of Mr. and Mrs. Lombardi on Dean Avenue. We admired both the home and Mr. Lombardi's extensive collection of Hot Wheel cars!

Lastly, a Christmas open house at Angell House on December 4, 2005, was attended by a good number of visitors who enjoyed seeing the house decorated for the season.

Our Properties

A lot of work has been done on our properties over the last two-and-a-half years. One of the most important projects, from a biological perspective, was the completion in June 2003 of a bathroom addition for our museum barn. Warren Lanpher spent two months building the addition, which was funded by the Champlin Foundations. It blends in nicely with the existing building and will be of great help to our members, for whom walking across a snowy barnyard to the house in January was not a pleasant prospect. Now we can drink as much coffee as we please during our meetings!

The museum itself has grown significantly with the addition of many new items (see Acquisitions, below), including a pair of really nice display cases. In February 2004 Lou and Danny created a display of old tools on the inside of the big barn doors.

Much gratitude goes to Warren Lanpher for his extensive work on the exterior of the Belknap School. He rebuilt the chimney, replicated the original bell tower (based on a 1930s photograph), repaired a good-sized hole in the exterior wall, replaced two doors, sided the ell, replaced some of the exterior boards, painted the entire structure, and shingled the roof. The photo below shows how great the school looks today.



Photo by Christopher Martin

A new tenant moved into the second floor of Angell House in September 2004, bringing the society some much-needed revenue. The rent helps to cover a lot of the "lights-on" expenses of the society. The roof of Angell House was reboarded and reshingled in March 2005, thanks to a \$9,600 grant from the Champlin Foundations for that purpose. In June of the same year, Louis and Bel installed vegetable and flower gardens in the yard. In December part of our front yard fence was knocked down by a traffic accident on Putnam Pike. Warren quickly repaired it, and made us a new house sign (paid for by insurance money), too! Thanks Warren!

We are currently in the process of selling our Brown Avenue property to the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, which has been using part of it as a parking lot for Snake Den State Park. The property, which includes the footprint of the Brown Avenue Chapel which burned down in the 1970s, was given to the society by Jean Dexter, whose husband was married in the chapel to his first wife. As it is far too small to be a buildable lot, the decision was made to sell it to DEM.

Lastly, considering the regulatory and pricing environment in the wake of the Station Nightclub tragedy in 2004, and after much research and price comparison, we feel lucky to have been able to secure insurance for all three of our properties. We'll be able to continue to host open houses and give tours, as well as rent out the barn to other organizations and groups.

Grant Activity

In March, 2004, Senator Joseph A. Polisena delivered to a \$1000 check, which was our 2003 Senate Grant. The money will be used to buy artifacts for the Belknap School. We thank Senator Polisena for his efforts in securing us this grant.

As noted above, we were very grateful to the Champlin Foundations for their help in repairing the roof of Angell House in 2005, but at the same time we were disappointed in having our grant applications to restore the interior of Belknap School and repair the chimney of Angell house turned down two years in a row. However, we are working with the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission to put together a matching grant. Please look for information in future newsletters on how you can help.

New Website

Christopher Martin has been working on a new website for the society where we plan to host a whole lot of interesting historical information about the town of Johnston. The address, which should be active by the time you receive this newsletter, is

www.johnstonhistorical.org

Many thanks are due to Vail Clemence, who created our old website; Fred Mikklesen, who contributed photographs; and Beth Hurd, who contributed photographs and transcribed articles for the new site.

Acquisitions

Here are just a few of the items donated or purchased for the society's collections since September 2003:

- An early glass ink well donated by Albert Allard of Foster, a former Johnstonian.
- Original insets cut from the 1862 Wallings Map of Rhode Island, donated by Thomas E. Greene.
- Peter Randall papers, donated by David Halpin.

- School items and a diploma belonging to a member of the Luther family, donated by Tom Hartshorn.
- An 1877 *Providence Journal* newspaper donated by Beth Hurd.
- A VCR and a metal stock holder that would have been used in a machine shop, donated by Rolf Johnson.
- An 1800s blanket chest, donated by Ellen and Warren Lanpher.
- A 1909 Johnston Public School Report, donated by Mayor William Macera and Mrs. Paine.
- A circa 1835 coin-silver serving spoon made by the Gorham & Webster shop of Providence; a photo of William Carroll who was town constable from 1880-1890; a roster of members of the town Green Party dated 1878; a photo of Searle Homestead; a Man of the Year medal, presented to Ralph aRusso in 1993 by the Italo American Club; and a Providence and Springfield Railroad logbook dated 1890, all purchased and/or donated by Louis McGowan.
- A Rose Beverage Company bottle, a photographic re-print of an early Johnston policeman, and old school books donated by Dan Mernier.
- A 100th anniversary pamphlet, dating to the 1940s, of St. Peter's Episcopal Church; a photo of Manton Grammar School; and a framed picture of the Newman Dairy Farm on Greenville Avenue, donated by Herbie Newman.
- A World War I Navy uniform, basic training photo, and medals, donated by Mrs. Peland.
- Mathewson family papers and a couple of period textbooks donated by Elaine Pereira.
- Twelve children's chairs from Thornton Grammar School, donated by Larry Pezza.
- A fine-toothed comb and purse, and a Rhode Island flag, donated by Kit Rhoads.
- A ladies medal from the Grand Army of the Republic, donated by Gert Rice.
- An ornately decorated door latch from Pocasset Mill, donated by Michael Salvadore.
- A paper weight, donated by Richard Siembab.

Alan Iemma has generously donated a number of items from the Calef School. They were declared surplus a few years ago, and Alan has protected them until now. The items are all in our museum.

- An oak desk and chair which were used by the principals at Calef School at least through the 1950s. The two items probably date to the opening of the school in 1923.
- A student desk and chair bolted to boards.
- A finely detailed speaker box which was mounted on a wall of the school for making announcements to the students.

Alan also gave us a bar stool from the Village Rendezvous in Thornton, which was recently razed; two old brass keys from the Belknap School; and an old primary book, probably from Belknap School. He has also promised us the original wooden flagpole from Thornton School, which will be erected at Belknap School. We thank Alan for his vision in saving us these items.

Alan has additionally done the people of Johnston a great service by saving many boxes of 19th and 20th-century Johnston school attendance reports. These are the original reports that were filled out by the teachers in the classrooms. Some of the reports go back to the 1880s. Alan personally transported the many boxes to us after securing permission to move the records to our museum. Our heartfelt thanks go out to him.

Thomas E. Greene, North Providence Town Historian, has generously donated a number of items from his personal collection. The items came from an 1895 Warwick schoolhouse and will be used inside the Belknap School. A warm thank you goes out to Mr. Greene.

- Two turn of the century ceiling lamp fixtures.
- A number of pieces of slate blackboard.
- Rails with coat-hooks for use in the students' coatrooms.

Pat Costellese, a Johnston policeman for many years and the first K-9 officer in the town, has graciously donated a collection of vintage Johnston police items. We sincerely thank him for these items.

- His complete K-9 uniform, including hat, boots, pants, and jacket.
- A riot helmet, given out as part of training for more turbulent times.
- A finger-printing kit, circa 1940s or '50s.
- A collection of Johnston Police badges.
- His personal holster and belt.
- A small collection of police photos.

We also acquired a circa 1890 carte de visite of William Carroll in his Johnston police uniform (purchased with money from the society and through

donations from Dan Brown and Louis McGowan); an 1825 receipt for payment of penmanship lessons for members of the Devereux family of Johnston (purchased); A small printed sheet listing the National Greenback Party candidates from Johnston for 1878 (purchased); An 1898 Annexation Directory of the area annexed to Providence from Johnston in that year (purchased); An original photograph of a Providence & Danielson Railroad car (purchased); A Providence Air Raid Warden's pamphlet (purchase); a plastic and metal advertising piece from Wilder's Apiaries with 2 real bees imbedded in the plastic (purchased).; *Italo-Americans of Rhode Island* (1940), by Pisaturo, which includes a number of Johnston biographical pieces (purchased); an original key to Belknap School; a tie clip with a picture of town hall, souvenir from a concert and ball sponsored by Johnston Police department in 1958; a railroad pass from the Providence and Springfield Railroad dated 1889; two display cabinets that were purchased from an antiques store going out of business in Centerdale; and an aerial photo of the Graniteville area.

If we missed anyone or left anything out, please be assured we appreciate every item we receive. Keep 'em coming!

Speakers

The society has enjoyed a number of interesting presentations over the last few years. It's great to hear from folks who are so knowledgeable and enthusiastic about their subjects, and we always learn something new.

- 9/2003 Cindy Turner spoke about decorating with antiques.
- 10/2003 Dan Brown told us about distinctive headstones in the Boston Area.
- 12/2003 Show and tell.
- 2/2004 Warren Lanpher gave a video slide show on the progress of restoration at Belknap School.
- 3/2004 Louis McGowan gave a slide show on Rhode Island amusement parks as depicted on post cards.
- 4/2004 Scott Molloy, professor of History at the University of Rhode Island, gave a talk on the life of Joseph Bannigan.
- 5/2004 Antique show and tell.
- 10/2004 Danny Brown gave a slide presentation on interesting New England gravestones.
- 3/2005 Louis McGowan gave a slide show of old hotels, motels, and bars in the Johnston and Providence area.

- 4/2005 Rolf Johnson gave a talk about old railroads of Rhode Island.
- 5/2005 Show and tell.
- 6/2005 Louis McGowan read an article from Quahog.org on how Chopmist Hill was almost the site for the United Nations.
- 9/2005 Louis McGowan gave a slide show of postcards of military installations and encampments.
- 12/2005 Michael Bell, the Rhode Island State Folklorist, gave a talk and slideshow on Rhode Island folklore.
- 1/2006 Warren Lanpher gave a video slide show on historic house restoration.
- 2/2006 Danny Brown quizzed us all on Presidential Trivia.
- 3/2006 Christopher Martin gave a PowerPoint presentation entitled What the Heck is That?: A Different Way of Looking at Johnston.

Cemeteries

It was reported during the December 2003 general meeting that Cemetery #51 (the Peter Randall lot) on Chrysante Drive was adopted by an adjoining new neighbor, and that Cemetery #62 (the Waterman-Sheldon lot) on Atwood Avenue was spared when a new Home Depot was constructed. An additional six cemeteries near the landfill were reported adopted at the April 2004 meeting.

A database of Johnston historical cemetery headstone data, including basic information like name, dates of birth and death, and family relationships, was completed around the end of 2004.

The Blanchard cemetery on Plainfield Pike was reported at the March 2005 general meeting to be in danger. The property was recently purchased by a company that wished to put up storage buildings. In the course of excavation, a heavy equipment operator unearthed what looked like evidence of human burials. It soon came out that that the Blanchard Cemetery had been illegally covered over a number of years before when a flower business structure was erected on its site, so no one knew it was there when the property was sold. The work was stopped immediately and authorities from the town and state were called in. Family members were notified and over the next few months town council meetings were held to determine what to do. It was finally decided to move the cemetery as no intact gravestones were left. The Public Archeology Lab was called in to do the work, and the remains were

removed and re-interred at Highland Memorial Cemetery next to two other historic cemeteries there. Christopher Martin, with the help of Danny and Lou, has begun collecting GPS coordinates for all of the town's historic cemeteries. A database of these coordinates will help us to keep track of cemeteries and prevent them from being lost to nature or man. In the future, no developer will be able to say he didn't know he was bulldozing a historic cemetery in Johnston.

Contribute To Our Newsletters!

We're always looking for interesting historical material on Johnston families, businesses, buildings, people, organizations, and events with which to fill out our newsletters. If you've ever called Johnston home, and you have a story about it, please consider sharing it with us and our readers.

Our Executive Board

President: Louis McGowan
Vice-President: Bel Peters
Treasurer: Dan Brown
Recording Secretary: Evelyn Beaumier
Corresponding Secretary: Christopher Martin
Trustee: Gregory Burr
Trustee: John Barratini
Trustee: Rolf Johnson

Our Executive Board meets at 7:00 p.m. in the Museum building, 101 Putnam Pike, on the second to the last Wednesday of each month, September through June (except December). All are welcome to attend.

General Meetings are held at 7:00 p.m. the last Wednesday of each month, September through June (no December meeting. We hold our Holiday Party that month). The meetings are held in the Museum Building.

Our phone number is: (401) 231-3380.

Annual Dues

We haven't had to raise the price of memberships since 1998, but because of rising postage and printing costs, it's that time again. The Executive Board voted at the March meeting to raise the price of a single membership from \$10 to \$15, and of a family membership from \$12 to \$20.

However, if you are an existing member, and you have not yet paid your 2006 dues, it's not too late to renew at the old price. So don't let another month pass -- renew today!

For those of you thinking of becoming a new member, you shouldn't wait around either, because if you join now, your membership will be paid up through the end of 2007! So send us a check today!

Name: _____

Address: _____

Renewal Single (\$10) _____

Family (\$12) _____

New Single (\$15) _____

Family (\$20) _____

Don't forget -- your donations to the Johnston Historical Society can be deducted from your taxes. We are registered with the Federal Government as a non-profit organization.



Belknap School, pre-restoration in March 2004. Left to right, Fred Mikkleson, Dan Brown, Herb Newman, Louis McGowan, Warren Lanpher, Everett Cogswell, and Joe Silliman. Photo by Beth Hurd.

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