

Johnston Historical Society

Historical Notes

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Growing Up in Thornton (Part 3)

by Louis McGowan

There were other interesting places in our local area that we visited as kids. On Morgan Avenue was the "stone crusher." It was a few hundred feet north of School Street and was an outcropping of rock that was worked earlier in the twentieth century. The name "stone crusher" stems from the mechanical device that once stood near the stone outcropping. The crusher was used to pulverize rock for use on roads and such. Mel Steppo, Sr., told me that he remembered it back when he was a child in the 1920s. As kids we, of course, had much more fanciful ideas of what went on there, including people being tossed off the rocks to their deaths. Such delightful children we were!

Across Morgan Avenue from the stone crusher was a good-sized piece of land that in the 1950s was still farmed. I remember the farmer driving his tractor, plowing the field. Today, there are new houses on the site of the plowed fields.

There was a Native American presence in the area for many, many generations, up to very recent times, in fact. This was their land before the white man came. Their most famous site nearby was the Hipses Rock, or Indian Rock as we called it. It is a large, glacial erratic that is located a few hundred yards in from Morgan Avenue and School Street. It is pock-mocked with "caves," some big enough to crawl into. We loved to play around it as children, but it has enormous historical value because it was one of the boundary markers for Roger Williams' purchase of land from the Indians.

An important local happening was the series of pow-wows held in the 1930s on the property of Colonel Frank Tillinghast (more recently, the Crandall property). Local Native Americans took part in these important cultural happenings. Among them were members of the Walmsley/Onsley family. I knew the

family in the 1950s, and I remember seeing wonderful, authentic artifacts such as a chief's headdress and a princess' dress that were worn by earlier members of their family. I still see members of the family occasionally.

I went to elementary school in Providence at St. Anthony's School on Plainfield Street. Sometimes I used to walk home from school, and in 1954 or 1955 I remember seeing the ruins of the King home at the Johnston/Providence line. It was around that time that the City of Providence tore down the King homestead. The last King descendent died in the second decade of the twentieth century, and she willed the King estate to the City. She did stipulate, however, that her caretaker could live there until she died. The caretaker died in 1954, I think. Today it is hard to find evidence of the homestead. A wall that fronts on Plainfield Street is still standing but the bronze gateway that proclaimed "King Estate" is present no more, having been hauled away to who knows where about ten years ago. A few plantings on the hill date from the time when the house was still standing.

I remember the State widening or re-surfacing Plainfield Street in the late '50s or early '60s and uncovering trolley tracks. At the time we thought they were railroad tracks. When Charles Fletcher was building mills in Thornton in the 1880s and 1890s, he realized that he would need to tap into the reservoir of workers in Olneyville in order to find enough help. The section of Plainfield Street that now runs between School Street and Morgan Avenue did not exist then. If trolleys were to run to Thornton from Olneyville, they would have to go up Morgan Avenue at one end and travel down School Street at the other end. (Incidentally, that stretch of road, which includes the present day School Street and the lower stretch of present day Morgan Avenue, was then just part of Plainfield Street.) The grade of that stretch of road was too steep for trolleys to navigate, though. Fletcher petitioned to have a new stretch (the

present layout) of Plainfield Street laid out between Morgan Avenue and School Street. He was successful in getting this done, and the trolley line was built running all the way from Olneyville to Hughesdale. What I saw in my youth were the last remains of that line. If my memory is correct, they tore the tracks out.

At the Plainfield Street end of Morgan Avenue, as you turn on to Morgan from Plainfield Street, there was an old dilapidated house immediately on the right. I don't recall anyone living there, and when I walked by the house, I could hear and see water running from the side of the house. Many years later, I read in a book about ghosts in Rhode Island that this very spot was supposed to be inhabited by ghosts. I have a vague recollection of a young child, from a family that lived there, dying in an accident. I can't verify that, but if true, maybe it led to the ghost story.

One of the events that all the neighborhood children attended was the feast at St. Rocco's Church on Atwood Avenue. The splendid building was new (completed in 1951), and it was then and is now a showpiece for the town. The tradition of the local saint's day feast goes back to Italy and had its origin in Thornton in the early twentieth century on the Cranston side of the village where the old St. Rocco's Church was located on Clemence Street. The feast held a great deal of religious significance for the local Italian-American community, but for many of the non-Italian local children the feast was just a good time. We would all buy a doughboy, sample a few rides, and try our luck at the games, including throwing balls at stacked milk bottles, shooting rifles at targets, and the games of chance. No one seemed to mind children playing the different games. As we got a little older, we were looking out for the pretty girls. The field in back of the Church was Ferri's Field and in earlier times cricket was played here. Later baseball replaced cricket.

I remember there being two pool parlors in the village, Curly's and Frank's. Frank's was located not far from the Victoria Mill in Frog City (the area immediately west of Atwood Avenue and on the east side of Plainfield Street). Curly's was located in the block of stores at the corner of Plainfield Street and Atwood Avenue (across from Ricci's Gas Station). The local boys would hang out there, sometimes on the sidewalk, and it caused some trouble with the church-goers across the street on Sunday mornings.

The Johnston Theater was located a couple of doors down from Curly's and it seemed that every child in

the village would be there on Saturday afternoon. Mario and his wife Ann Votolato ran the business, and we all loved to go there and see two movies, shorts, etc.

Society Doings

Several society members put in some time at the Angell House property on April 15, raking out and weeding the flower and vegetable beds, dethatching the lawn, and picking up fallen tree branches and trash. We filled about twenty bags with debris, and Louis McGowan said he's never seen so much done on the yard in such a short amount of time.

The 2006 Town-wide Historical Cemetery Clean-up took place on April 22 (postponed from the 8th because of rain). The folks who showed up were few, but dedicated. We very much appreciate their help. We'd also like to thank Rhode Island Resource Recovery which provided a truck and pledged to clean up five cemeteries near the landfill.

Captain Phil DiMaria and Corporal Arthur Iannelli of Battery B, First Rhode Island Light Artillery, gave a presentation on Civil War Artillery Ammunition at our April 26 general meeting.

The speaker at our May 31 meeting was none other than our own Rolf Johnson. Rolf spoke about -- what else -- Rhode Island railroads, this time taking us on a pictorial journey along some of the state's abandoned rail lines.

On Sunday, June 25, we had a very successful ice cream social at Paul and Nancy Nadeau's house on Winsor Avenue. It was a very rainy day, so we moved things inside. Twenty-five people showed up, and we all had fun making our own ice cream treats inside the Nadeau's lovely home. Bel Peters and Alice Lombardi exhibited samples from their collections. Bel showed various textiles and Alice showed Victorian items of clothing. A raffle of donated items ended the day on a fun note. Many thanks to the Nadeaus and to all who helped make the day a great success.



Photo by Beth Hurd

Our Properties

Museum

Our museum space is available (on a limited basis) for meetings of small groups of adults at a reasonable price. In April, for instance, the museum hosted a meeting of the Southern New England Antiques Dealers Association. If you know of a local group or organization that is looking for a meeting space, and might be interested in using our museum, please have them contact us.

Belknap School

We'll soon be applying for a matching grant from the Rhode Island Historical Heritage and Preservation Commission. If approved, the money will be used to restore the interior of the Belknap School.

On June 17 a number of Boy Scouts, led by Eagle Scout candidate Brent Arnold, performed some cleanup work at the Belknap School property. Not only was the back of the property littered with old wine and beer bottles from its days as a VFW hall, but there was also a lot of brush to be cleared (including more poison ivy than you could shake a stick at!). The yard looks a lot better now, thanks to Brent, the scouts, and their parents. Thanks are due also to Dan Meurnier for suggesting to a local scout master that the yard would make a great Eagle Scout project.

Brown Avenue Property

Our initiative to sell the Brown Avenue property, (former site of the Chapel of the Good Shepherd), has hit a legal snag. We hope this will only be a minor bump along the way, but we have to wait while the lawyers sort it out.

Grant Activity

There are a number of grants that we've applied for or are planning to apply for:

- By the time this newsletter goes to press we will have applied for a \$45,000 matching grant from the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission to go toward the restoration of the interior of the Belknap School.
- Jen Perreira is working on securing a \$699 grant through PreserveRI, with a matching grant of \$700 from the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council, to cover printing costs associated with advertising materials for our upcoming fundraiser for the aforementioned restoration.

At our June meeting, we offered a walking tour of Graniteville. Nine society members trekked around the village listening to Louis McGowan and Dan Brown relate stories of the old days in the local area. We viewed and talked about a number of period houses, two of Graniteville's schools, the Graniteville Baptist Church, the War Memorial, and the Collins/Sweet Cemetery on Mathewson Street. Tours of other villages will follow in the future.

Acquisitions

- A small promotional jackknife labeled with "Mayor Ralph aRusso" on one side, and "I Love Johnston R.I." on the other, was donated by Danny Brown.
- A small copper lusterware creamer, possibly brought over by English immigrants in the 1800s, was donated by Kit Rhodes.
- A large television set was donated to us by Warren and Ellen Lanpher for use in slide presentations.
- A period flax wheel was donated to us by Warren and Ellen Lanpher for display in the Elijah Angell House.
- An inventory of burials in the North Burial Ground in Providence by John Sterling was recently purchased.
- An answering machine was donated by Christopher Martin for use in our headquarters.

Our sincere thanks to all who have donated items for our collections. Keep it coming!

- We also anticipate receiving a \$2,500 grant from the Narragansett Bay Commission.
- In mid-June we received word that our application for a \$500 mini-grant from the Harvard Pilgrim Foundation was approved. The money will go to purchase a digital camera and printer/copier which we will use to document and inventory the society's collections. Our thanks go out to Christopher Martin for alerting us to this resource, and to the Harvard Pilgrim Foundation for their generosity.

Cemeteries

As noted above, April 22 was the 2006 Town-wide Historical Cemetery Clean-up. Only a handful of our ninety-two-odd historical cemeteries received a sprucing up, leaving many in need of a helping hand. We can't clean them all ourselves, so we'd like to invite interested persons -- neighbors, boy scout and girl scout troops, local companies -- to adopt a cemetery.

What does it mean to adopt a cemetery? Well, all you need to do is pick up trash, weed whack grass and undergrowth, and cut and clear brush at least once a year. Not only will you be helping to make your town more attractive, you'll also be helping to preserve our heritage.

If you are interested, or know of someone who might be, please contact us at (401) 231-3380 or info@johnstonhistorical.org.

House Plaquing

A new Johnston house plaquing program was begun by Steve Merolla about six years ago, building on the work of an earlier program. Below are the houses that have been plaqued in the last six years. Those marked with an asterisk were originally plaqued in the early 1980s, and were replaqued under the current program.

1. Daniel Thornton House, Greenville, Ohio, (c.1760)
2. Greystone Mill House, 10 Mathewson Street, (c.1815)
3. Paris Winsor House, 29 Winsor Avenue, (c.1760/1796)
4. Hiram Atwood House, 281 Morgan Avenue, (c.1849)
5. *Shang Bailey Tavern, 2737 Hartford Avenue, (c.1825)
6. *Graniteville Baptist Church, 82 Serrel Sweet Road, (c.1859)

7. *Emor J. Angell House, 138 Putnam Pike, (c.1846)
8. Cassius Mathewson House, 6 Mathewson Street, (c.1896)
9. Elder Ira Williams House, 44 Dean Avenue, (c.1841)
10. Dean Kimball House, Hopkins Avenue, (c.1741)



Photo by Christopher Martin

11. Reverend Daniel A. Sweet House, 89 Putnam Avenue (c.1836)
12. *Elijah Angell House, 101 Putnam Pike, (c.1825)
13. Mercy Borden House, 823 Hartford Avenue, (c.1717)
14. Charles H. Coffin House, 157 Borden Avenue (c.1876)
15. John Farnum House, 2543 Hartford Avenue (c.1817)
16. Belknap School, Greenville Avenue, (c.1892)
17. John Sweet House, 595 Greenville Avenue, (c.1746)
18. Reverend Samuel Winsor Homestead, 29 Winsor Avenue, (c.1650)
19. *Daniel Angell House, 15 Dean Avenue, (c.1767)
20. *William Mathewson House, 544 Greenville Avenue, (c.1770)

Steve does an amazing job researching and writing up the histories of these houses -- each of the above plaques represents thirty to forty hours worth of effort. Our society is very lucky to count such a dedicated and talented individual among its members.

Johnston Sunrise

Our local newspaper, the *Johnston Sunrise*, was purchased at the beginning of this year by the *Warwick Beacon*. The new owner is very interested in working with us, and as a result we've had several

historical articles and photographs published in recent issues. So pick up a copy, learn about Johnston history, and support the *Sunrise*!

Johnston's 250th Birthday

Johnston's 250th birthday is fast approaching. In 1759, residents of the western part of Providence broke off from their mother town and formed a new town -- Johnston. The people living out this way did not like traveling big distances to attend the town meetings in Providence, so in March of 1759 they petitioned the state General Assembly to have their own town. They proposed to name their town after Augustus Johnston, the popular state Attorney General at that time. The petition was accepted and our town was formed.

Well, here we are 247 years later, and it is time to start planning a birthday celebration. We have a proud history, and we should celebrate it. There are many things that could be done, and it would be nice to get as many people involved as possible. A committee needs to be formed to plan activities. It is not too soon to be kicking off this celebration -- it is less than three years away now.

Some possible events are: historical essay contests for school children, a ball/dinner, a parade with historical floats (and a contest for the best float), a photograph contest with prizes for the best photo of a historical nature (maybe one for adults and one for children), tour(s) of historical sites in town, recordings of oral history, and an exhibit of historical items.

Additionally, we think it's high time a definitive history of the Town of Johnston was written. Our own society president, Louis McGowan, has already begun giving this some thought and hopes to have an outline completed soon. If you have an interest in helping to put this important historical document together, please let us know!

If you have other ideas, or if you are interested in getting involved in any way with the birthday celebration, contact us through the mail or come to one of our meetings.

September Picnic

Mark your calendars! We plan to hold a members' picnic on September 10, 2006. The details have not yet been nailed down, but we'll keep you informed.

Book On Providence

A book on Providence, co-authored by Louis McGowan and Dan Brown was recently published by Arcadia Publishing. The work, titled simply *Providence*, is a look at the city through old postcards. No historical society funds were used in the production of the book, but part of the royalties paid to the authors will be donated to our historical society. The book is available at local bookstores and through Amazon.com.

Contribute To Our Newsletter!

We are always looking for articles for our newsletter. Naturally, we would like pieces that have to do with the town's history, but if you have an interest that ties in with history somehow, why not share it with us? Maybe you collect old snuffboxes or old railroad material. Maybe you have done some of your family history that others might be interested in. Maybe you would like to talk about the old days in Johnston. Wouldn't it be fun to share your knowledge! You do not have to be a great writer to put together an article. None of us are great literary figures. If you need help though, one of us would be glad to assist you.

We think that it will make for a much better newsletter if others contribute pieces that they have written. Remember, your reminiscences about the old days in Johnston will become valuable pieces of our town's history. But if you do not get them down on paper, they will be lost forever. We should make sure that future generations know what went on in times past.



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.
Our website address is: www.JohnstonHistorical.org.

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. Still a bargain!

Name: _____
Address: _____

Renewal Single (\$15) _____
 Family (\$20) _____

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.

**JOHNSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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