

Johnston Historical Society

Historical Notes

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Christopher Martin, Editor Louis McGowan, Assistant
www.JohnstonHistorical.org

March 2012

The Taxable Rate Documents

By Steve Merolla

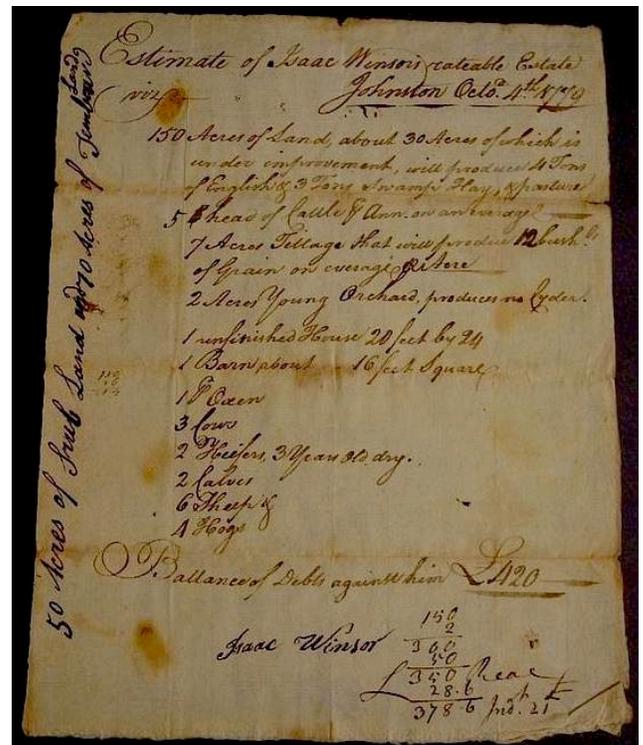
Through years of doing research on the families and farms of Johnston, one comes across a wide range of acreage owned by the different landowners. However, knowledge of the size of any farm doesn't give an indication of just how that land was used. In general, estates back then were much larger than today, basically because population was much less and the fact that people had to live off the land back then. Sizes could range from a few acres to 50, 75, 100, 150 or more acres. But just how was the land utilized?

Probate inventories of an estate after the death of the landowner can list the amount and number of animals owned, but usually there is nothing stated as to how the land was farmed or pastured. Recently, a set of documents came up for sale on eBay that may present some answers. There were many Johnston documents in the lot and three in particular were of great interest. These documents were basically inventories of estates (rating of estates) taken in order to calculate each landowner's tax bill. The documents are from the year 1779; I would assume that these were taken every year. I can't tell for sure if the document was taken by the landowner or a town official, but I suspect that an official tallied the report, which was then signed by the landowner as confirmation. In fact, there was an official position in town called the "Prizer of Estates," and almost assuredly this was the person who rated the estates. (I have recorded these documents basically as written, bad grammar and all; some phrases I can't quite understand).

The first estate was Abraham Belknap's. He was the son of Benjamin Belknap, and the Town Meeting creating the Town of Johnston in 1759 was held in his house. The house, torn down in 1759, was located at the corner of Greenville Avenue and Pine Hill Avenue, and this is where this particular farm was located:

Abraham Belknap's ratable estate in the Town of Johnston. To wit near 130 acres of land 16 acres of which is plain English Meddow, produces about 5 tons of hay yearly, about 13 acres of Swamp [hay] ditto, produces about 12 tons yearly, 5 acres of Tillage produces about 80 bushels of corn yearly, a Scattering orchard produces yearly 8 barrels of Cyder. 4 oxen, 6 cows, one two year old heifer, one yearling Bull, one Calff, 12 Sheep, 2 Hoggs & 2 Shoats [neutered hog], one old horse. One Dwelling House, Two very Old Barns out of repair, one Saw mill in pretty good repair, one Grist mill much out of repair. The small stream that attends said Mills with water continues (?) about three months in a year. Pasturage about 30 acres, the major part Bushes. I believe will feed about 5 cows per season. The residue of my land is mostly pine Scrubby land, the Timber cheafly cut off. Eleven small silver Tea Spoons & 4 Silver Dollars. NB: I am in debt 45 Pounds, besides Doctor's Bills. Octo. 4th. 1779.

The second estate was that of Isaac Winsor, who was the son of the Reverend Samuel Winsor. This estate was located off present-day Winsor Ave. I am quite sure that this parcel of land and the house mentioned are part of Hill's Orchard, upon which the house still stands:



Estimate of Isaac Winsor's rateable estate - Johnston, Octo. 4th 1779

150 acres of land about 30 acres of which is under improvement, will produce 4 Tons of English & 3 Tons Swamp Hay & pasture. 5 head of cattle per annum on average. 7 acres Tillage that will produce 12 bushels of grain per acre. 2 acres young orchard, produces no cyder. 1 unfinished House 20 feet by 24 feet 1 Barn about 16 feet square 1 pair Oxen 3 Cows 2 Heifers, three years old. 2 Calves 6 Sheep & 4 Hoggs 50 acres of Scrub Land and 70 acres of Timber Land. Balance of Debts against him 420 Pounds.

The third estate was that of William Borden, which was located on Neutaconkanut Hill. The Borden house, which was probably built in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, was situated on a flat area of land just off Plainfield Street, and almost directly below the King Monument on top of the hill;

The following contains a true list of all the rateable Estate that I have in the town of Johnston according to the best of my knowledge. One dwelling House, one small Barn, one Cooper's shop, one poor old Corn Crib, about 38 acres of land. Can plant 2 1/2 acres one year with another that yealds about 16 bushels per acre; can cut about 1 1/2 tons of upland Hay; about 18 acres of my land is Timber Land and the remainder pasturing. Pasture will pasture about 3 cows one year with another; can plant about half an acre with Tobacco one year with another that yealds about 500 hundred weight of Tobacco. Make about 8 Barrils Cyder one year. Livestock: 1 Mare, 2 Cows, one heifer three years old last Spring, one ditto two years old last Spring, one Steer one year old last Spring, one Last Spring calf, 7 Sheep & 2 Hogs & 4 Shoats. Cash 105 Pounds.

According to the 1774 Census, the family of Abraham Belknap comprised twelve people, that of Isaac Winsor is not known because at the time of the Census he was still living in his father's house, though by 1779 there probably were no more than four or five individuals living in the household. The William Borden family comprised five people. What is readily apparent is that the three landowners had about the same proportion of livestock on hand, with Abraham Belknap having a bit more than the others in each category (except hogs) on account of his larger family. (Belknap: Beef (all types) 9 - Sheep 12 - Hogs 4; Winsor: 7 - 6 - 4; Borden: 7 - 6 - 7). The numbers show that a relatively small amount of acreage was actually given over to the planting of crops or pasturing. The reason for this of course was that these were subsistence farmers -- they only planted and raised what they could eat over the course of one year. Anything extra was potentially wasteful, though there was surely a barter economy in place at the time. The only indication of a specific cash or barter crop was the tobacco grown on the Borden farm, though it must be noted that this was not a food crop. It is also notable that much of the land in use was given over to the production of hay (and corn) to feed the livestock. Almost certainly each household also had a vegetable garden to provide produce but for some reason no information is provided for these small plots; perhaps it was felt that their value was so low that they were not worth mentioning. It can be assumed that the same situation was in play for farms throughout the town as regards land use practices. Even on a farm of over 100 acres there were no large herds of cattle or other livestock, and neither was even half of the land used for pasture or cultivation. In fact, it seems that the greater part of the land was unused timberland or lying fallow. When you consider that the land had been settled already for over 100 years this is a bit surprising. No matter how big the estate, the landowners just grew or raised what they could consume during the course of the year. There was little waste or unnecessary labor.

Hipses Rock, Whence Came Its Name?

By Louis McGowan

Growing up in Thornton in the 1950s, I and everyone else seemed to know of Indian Rock. It was a huge boulder with openings that you could climb into, and I doubt if any of the kids thought of it as anything more than another fun thing to play on. I know that I had never heard of Hipses Rock.

In later years, I read of the importance of this gift from the ice age (a glacial erratic is the correct geologic term for the rock) and learned that the boulder had an official name, Hipses Rock. An old, unsourced

newspaper account tells us that the rock "Shows Indian Head Distinctly." I have never looked for the likeness, but this would seem to be the reason that locals called it Indian Rock.. As for why it acquired the name of Hipses, there is no definitive answer. One story passed down through time is that an old Indian woman was named Hipsie or Hipsabeth by the early English settlers. She was said to have built a lean-to next to the rock that she lived in. She was also said to be a skilled woman doctor that was trusted by the English pioneers. Her fame caused her to be remembered after her death in the name Hipses Rock.



Hipses Rock in the 1890s. Photo courtesy of Mabel Sprague.

The newspaper article describes stories of ghosts associated with the rock. It was asserted that "sighs and groans and other weird noises" could be heard in the vicinity. The author of the article did say that the wind blowing through the trees, running water falling over the rocks, and the hooting of an owl helped out the story.

Another possible meaning of Hipses that can be found in the literature is that it is a corruption of the Latin word, "Hesperus," one meaning of which is "to the west." Sidney Rider, in his *Book Notes*, has a picture of Hipses Rock that is sub-captioned: "Hesperus, the Most Western Bound." The rock was the most western bound of the lands conveyed from Miantinomi and Canonicus to Roger Williams. In trying to back up his claim that Hipses came from Hesperus, Rider gives two other examples of place names in the area that are taken from Latin or from early English literature. Not conclusive evidence, though!

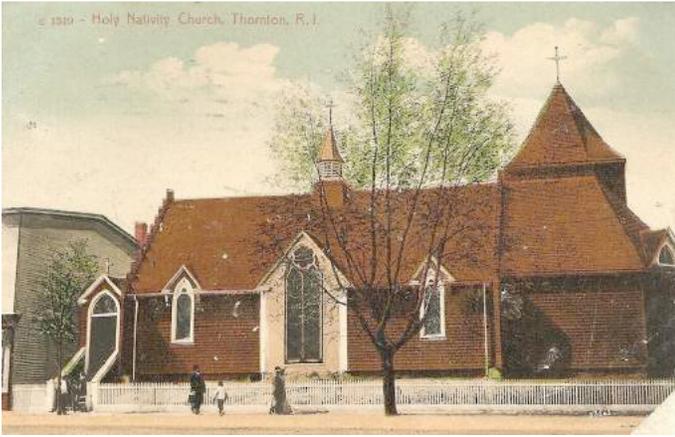
Rider said that he searched all the records of early families dwelling near the place, and he found no evidence of any name resembling Hepsy or Hephzibah. Therefore, he said, you must look elsewhere for derivation of the name Hipse or Hipses. This, of course, does not mean that there was no person in the area that the rock was named after. There is probably no way of knowing now if there was such a person. All we do know is that Rider found no evidence of them.

So, in conclusion, this is a short article because there is not a lot of information out there on the derivation of the name. As with the earlier authors, we can only speculate on why this wonderful piece of history is called Hipses Rock.

More Notes on the Church of the Holy Nativity

by Louis McGowan

(In our last issue, November 2011, I wrote a short piece on what we knew about the Church of the Holy Nativity. A few more facts have come to light since then).



Postcard view of the Church of the Holy Nativity, circa 1900. Postcard courtesy of George Daigneault.

In a small book published in 1954, entitled: Rhode Island Episcopalians 1635-1953 by Dudley Tyng, we find a little more information about the Church of the Holy Nativity, which we lost this past October. This small church was at first a missionary enterprise of Thomas H. Cocroft of the Church of the Messiah in Olneyville Square. As was mentioned in our previous article, Holy Nativity was after that for many years under the care of St. Stephen's parish in Providence. Tyng tells us that in 1917, Frank H. Hallett, a former teacher at Brown, became priest-in-charge. Father Hallett was said to be a man of intense evangelistic and pastoral zeal, and he roamed all over western Rhode Island making calls. Evelyn Beaumier, one of our members, remembers Father Hallett and his sister living in an apartment in the tower part of the building (this part of the building still stands and is being fixed up for housing once again).

Father Hallett preached at more than one church at a time. Christine Fairley Coupe remembers going with her brother Donald, their mother and father, Father Hallett, and his sister Miss Hallett to Sunday afternoon services at another mission church, St. Timothy's, in Scituate at the corner of Plainfield Pike and Westcott Road. Father Hallett did not drive, so his sister drove the group. Father Hallett had set up this mission in a portable chapel in the 1930s. Their little chapel still stands, although it is no longer used as a church.

Tyng mentions that Thornton once swarmed with English working folk, but in later years many of them were displaced by Italian immigrants. He says that the Englishmen played cricket and soccer on Saturdays, but the Italians played Sunday soccer and baseball (his tone is definitely a little anti-Italian, I think, leaving the reader with the feeling that the Italians in the area should have not been engaging in sports on Sundays). Tyng tells us that there used to be 150 children in Church School (Sunday School, I presume), but in 1954 there were only 25 left. Also the number of parishioners had dropped from 150 to 100.

The Church of the Holy Nativity was linked up with St. David's in Meshanticut Park from 1947 to 1953 and in 1954, it was part, once again, of the Church of the Messiah.

At this point, we do not know if the Church of the Holy Nativity ever achieved parish status, but it does not seem likely. From the writings that I have found on the church, it appears that it always remained a mission church. If it did become a parish it would have been in the 1917 to 1947 period.



Karen (Smith) Sullivan

Our society mourns the loss of member Karen (Smith) Sullivan, who passed away much too early in February. She was a wonderful person, a true giver, who helped everyone around her. She will be missed by her husband, David, her three children, Fiona, Amelia and Declan and her three siblings: Michael Smith, Monica Moone and Christine Smith Beaman. Of course, she will also be missed by all who knew her, whether they be fellow church members, people she knew from the Winsor Hill School PTO, people in our society, or just her many friends.

Many of you may remember her and her two daughters attending our teas. I have a fond memory of the three of them, all dressed up, enjoying a nice mother/daughter time together.

If anyone would like to donate to her children's college fund or to the Graniteville Church in her memory, you can send a check to the church, to us or directly to the college fund at: Karen E. Sullivan's Children's College Fund, c/o Michael E. Smith, P.O. Box 19001, Johnston, RI 02919.

Society Doings

Holiday Party

On December 2, 2011, we had our annual holiday get-together at Jim and Alice Lombardi's house. Thirty-six members and guests showed up for a wonderful party. Jim and Alice were wonderful hosts, making everyone feel right at home with wonderful seasonal furnishings, a cozy fire and delicious food. We all had a great time, and I would like to thank the Lombardi's for getting the holiday season off to a wonderful start for all of us.

Our Properties

In January 2012, Warren Lanpher finished work on a wooden hood over the entryway to our museum building. It looks great and functions very nicely. We have long had a problem in bad weather with the entryway. Since old buildings (and reproductions of them like ours) had no gutters, the rain poured off the roof and saturated people coming into the building. Also, in winter, ice would build up on the granite stairs because of thawing and freezing of snow and ice on and around the building. The dangerous situation has now been taken care of.



Our museum barn is open Monday nights (except holidays), 6:30-8:30pm; and on the third Sunday of each month, 2-4pm, for those who would like to visit the museum or examine the society's collection of printed materials. Also, the Belknap School, corner of Atwood and Greenville Avenues, is open 2-4pm the first Saturday of each month, April to October. Both the museum and Elijah Angell House continue to be open by appointment -- we always welcome visits by interested individuals or groups. Just shoot us an email at info@johnstonhistorical.org, or leave a message at (401) 231-3380 to set one up.

Our museum space is also available (on a limited basis) for meetings of small groups of adults at a reasonable price. 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.

Grant Activity

We recently received a \$1,000 2011 Rhode Island Legislative Grant. The money was spent in January on a laptop computer and a copier/printer/fax/scanner. We thank Representative John Carnevale for his efforts in securing us this grant.

We also received a \$500 Harvard Pilgrim Foundation grant courtesy of Christopher Martin. The money will be spent on supplies for our archive which is growing all the time.

Cemetery Committee Report

by Steve Merolla

As noted in our last report, the Cemetery Committee spent most of the 2011 season at Cemetery #72, our final day there being November 13. From there we returned to Cemetery #33, located just off Simmonsville Avenue. We spent three Sundays there completing two tough headstone repairs; in addition, we had to fabricate a concrete base for one of the stones. Our work seems to have been appreciated, for the Society received a letter of thanks from a couple who live on Simmonsville Avenue.

Contrary to the tough winter we had last year, this year's mild and largely snowless winter allowed us to continue our work. On December 4, we made our way to Cemetery #17, the Irons Lot, located on Diaz Street, which is just off Irons Avenue. Many of the people interred here are associated with the well-known Clemence-Irons House, located a short distance away on George Waterman Road. We spent six work days here during which time we re-set seven headstones onto their bases, either with mortar or epoxy, and we repaired (drilled and epoxied) a further two headstones. We used the tripod that Everett made to raise four heavy stones. On account of the now colder weather we were no longer able to work with either the epoxy or the mortar, so we decided to pre-drill some stones and cut down some trees, work that took up two work days.



Doug Stephens, Pat Macari, Tim Kee, Billy Rotondo, Anthony Ursillo, and Steve Merolla pause a moment before installing a new historical cemetery sign at the Colonel Daniel Manton Lot (#18) on March 25th. Photo by Beth Hurd.

When we finished with that job we moved on to Cemetery #18, the Manton Lot, on January 18. This large cemetery is located across the street from #72, and is directly behind Silvio's Restaurant. We have spent most of February and March here. All of our time so far has been spent cleaning, clearing and cutting down trees. Many thanks to Arnie Vecchione and the Public Works Department for picking up the

large brush piles we have been leaving behind. Once the weather turns warm enough, we will return to Cemetery #17 to continue our stone repair efforts. When that is complete we will return to #18 and tackle what will be another big job. Once again many thanks to our Committee: Pat, Doug, Anthony U., Tim, Shar, Billy, Everett, Anthony R., and Steve. Also a special shout out to Dan Meunier and his crew (Jason, Adam and Kevin) for their tree cutting work.

Speakers

Our guest speaker at our January, 2012 meeting was Louis McGowan, who presented a slide show that was a short overview of our town's history.

At our February, 2012 meeting, Dan Brown talked to us about the deaths and burial places of a selected group of U. S. presidents.

North Kingstown historian G. Timothy Cranston spoke in March on the topic of "Setting the Record Straight." He described what New England and its inhabitants were like prior to contact with Europeans, what conditions led to the success of European settlement, the nature of relations between the natives and the newcomers over the next handful of decades, and the factors that led to King Philip's War. It was an informative presentation that highlighted many of the falsehoods, distortions, and omissions in what we were all taught in school about much of our country's earliest history.

Acquisitions

- Anthony Ricci donated a microwave oven.
- The Kaye family donated the original supply cabinet from the Belknap School. Thanks to them, it is now back home. They also donated an old key to the school.
- Glenn and Elise Carlson donated five metal supply cabinets to our museum.
- Skippy Burch, son of Everett Burch, donated his father's 1962 Graniteville Hose 2 Fire Company jacket to our museum.
- Dan Ford donated a gavel given to his father, Daniel H. Ford, when he was Johnston Town Moderator from 1963 to 1965.
- John McNiff and Anthony Ricci donated a framed print showing the Providence settlement, as it would have appeared in 1650. One of the stone-enders in the scene is clearly modeled after Clemence-Irons House.
- Dodie Falvo donated a 1979 Graduation Program from Johnston High School.
- Louis McGowan donated a lot of Johnston matchbook covers that he purchased on eBay.
- Colonial Motor Inn postcard, donated by Anthony Ursillo.
- Barbra Votolato McGuirl donated a photo of the Holy Nativity Church and a 1949 St. Rocco's Church Bulletin.
- George Daigneault donated postcards of the Holy Nativity Church and the Pocasset Worsted Company Mill.
- Anthony and Ellie Panishas donated several glass inkwells, along with pens and nibs.

Correction: In our last newsletter we incorrectly stated that Anthony Ricci donated a cube refrigerator for the Belknap School. The correct donor was Anthony Ursillo.

Many of these objects may be seen in the Acquisitions photo album on our Facebook page (www.facebook.com/johnstonhistorical). As always, our sincere thanks to all who have donated items for our collections. Keep it coming!

Wish List

Following are a number of items we could make good use of:

- Display mannequins
- Any Johnston-related memorabilia

Upcoming Events

Unless otherwise noted, all events take place at the Johnston Historical Society Museum Barn, 101 Putnam Pike, Johnston, and are free and open to the public.

April 14, 2012

The 3rd Annual Great Johnston Scavenger Hunt

9am-5pm

Elijah Angell House, 101 Putnam Pike. Think you know Johnston well? Test your knowledge against that of other teams and individuals in the third annual town-wide scavenger hunt! Teams will scour the town to locate and complete a series of tasks. At the end of the day, a point system will help determine which team reigns supreme! Prizes will be awarded and refreshments will be served. \$8 donation per team, payable on day of the event. Rain date: April 15. Volunteers, please meet us at the barn at 8am to help set up.

April 25, 2012

General Meeting

7pm

Conley's Wharf, 200 Allen's Avenue, Providence. Local historian Patrick Conley will speak about the history of the Fabre Line of steamships that brought many immigrants to Rhode Island in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Mr. Conley will illustrate his talk with examples of Fabre Line memorabilia from his personal collection.

Note: Anyone wishing to carpool to Providence should meet at the JHS Museum Barn, 101 Putnam Pike, Johnston, at 6:15pm.

April 27, 2012

JHS House Painting Day

12pm-whenever

The Elisha Angell house needs a new paint job! We'd like to at least get one outside wall painted today, so the help of anyone who can spare the time will be much appreciated.

April 28, 2012

Clean Day on the Greenway

8:30am-2pm

Riverside Mills Park, Providence. CDGW, now in its tenth year, brings over 300 volunteers together to clean and beautify the Woonasquatucket River and the Fred Lippitt Woonasquatucket River Greenway Bike Path from the Providence Place Mall into Johnston. Our efforts this year will include a community mural, weeding and mulching tree wells and plant beds, touching up paint on benches, signs and fences, pulling debris from in and near the river, and more! Visit www.wrwc.org for more information or to register.

April 29, 2012

Pastry Social

2-4pm

Belknap School, 509 Greenville Avenue. There will be many delicious, fresh-baked things to eat, beverages to wash them down, and interesting folks with whom to chat. Free to JHS members and their guests.

May 5, 2012

JHS Yard Cleanup Day

9am-11am

Many hands make light work, so they say. Please lend your hands and help spruce up the yard around the Elijah Angell House and our museum barn.

May 30, 2012

General Meeting

7pm

Roger Williams National Memorial park ranger John McNiff will be our speaker. We're not sure what the topic will be yet, but Mr. McNiff is a very entertaining speaker with a deep knowledge of Roger Williams, William Blackstone, local Indian tribes, and the founding of Providence.

June 27, 2012

General Meeting

7pm

Kim Calcagno, wildlife refuge manager at the Audubon Society of Rhode Island headquarters in Smithfield will be our speaker. She'll tell us about local hawks, and will probably bring a live hawk to show off.

Note: Our museum barn is open Monday nights (except holidays), 6:30-8:30pm; and on the third Sunday of each month, 2-4pm, for those who would like to visit the museum or examine the society's collection of printed materials. Also, the Belknap School, corner of Atwood and Greenville Avenues, is open 2-4pm the first Saturday of each month, April to October.

Do you have a suggestion for a future speaker? Or do you yourself have a topic you'd like to present at one of our meetings? Please drop us a line at info@johnstonhistorical.org or leave a message at (401) 231-3380.



We have our own Facebook page! To find us type this address into your computer browser:

www.facebook.com/johnstonhistorical

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.

Next newsletter deadline: July 15, 2012.

Our Executive Board

President: Louis McGowan
Vice-President: Dan Brown
Treasurer: Joe Jamroz
Recording Secretary: Elise Carlson
Corresponding Secretary: Christopher Martin
Trustees: Belmira McGowan, Rolf Johnson, Doug Stephens and Evelyn Beaumier.

Our Executive Board meets at 7pm 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 7pm 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 Barn.

Phone: (401) 231-3380
Website: www.JohnstonHistorical.org
Email: Info@JohnstonHistorical.org
Facebook: www.facebook.com/johnstonhistorical

Have you paid your 2012 dues yet? Your dues help us to operate. The price of a single membership is only \$15; a family membership is only \$20. Wotta bargain! So once more, please pay your 2012 dues. Send us a check today!

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.

Annual Dues

**JOHNSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY
101 PUTNAM PIKE
JOHNSTON, RHODE ISLAND 02919**