

Johnston Historical Society

Historical Notes

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Christopher Martin, Editor
www.JohnstonHistorical.org

March 2020

The Hiram Atwood House (c. 1849) by Steve Merolla

Turning east onto Morgan Avenue from Atwood Avenue one soon reaches the bridge over the Pocasset River. Just over the bridge, on the left or north side of the road are two white houses, the second of which is perched on a knoll with a fine stone wall in front at the roadway. The location is 281 Morgan Avenue and the house is the Hiram Atwood house, a fine example of Greek-Revival style.



Hiram Atwood House, undated.

Photo from Images of America: Johnston (1997), courtesy of Harold Beaudoin.

The story of the property can be traced back to the early eighteenth century. Thomas Thornton owned about ninety acres of land in this area, the southern boundary of which was present-day Morgan Avenue. When he died in 1712, he left the farm to his son Thomas Thornton Jr. The farm roughly encompassed an area bounded by present-day Central Avenue on the north, Downing Drive (formerly Borden Avenue) on the east, the Pocasset River on the west, and Morgan Avenue on the south. On April 17, 1724, Thomas sold a twenty-acre parcel of land from the very southwest corner of the farm to Joseph Sheldon (Providence Deeds 6/68), right at the junction of the Pocasset River and Morgan Avenue. On March 4, 1733/4, Sheldon sold the same parcel to Thomas Harris Jr. (P9/318). This Thomas Harris Jr. was the son of Captain Thomas Harris, and the Captain had on January 29, 1732/3, just previously purchased the remaining seventy acres of the Thomas Thornton farm (P 9/205).

Captain Thomas Harris died in 1741, leaving the whole of the farm to his son. When Thomas Harris Jr. himself passed away on

December 4, 1782, this ninety-acre farm eventually ended up in the possession of two of his daughters, Phebe and Lydia. Phebe (married to Edward Smith) received the northern forty-five acres, the area bounding on the south side of Central Avenue, where today the vicinity is occupied by AIPSO Insurance and the entrance to the new FM Global complex. Lydia, who had married William Alverson, received the southern forty-five-acre portion along the north side of Morgan Avenue. Though Lydia had inherited this parcel of land, she and William did not reside there, instead living in a house and property they had purchased of Josiah Thornton in 1755. This same house still stands today at 167 Morgan Avenue. William Alverson died on May 27, 1767; his widow Lydia lived another fifty-six years. They had five children: Caleb, John, William, Joseph, and Catherine. Lydia died on June 28, 1823. On January 25, 1825, John Alverson, administrator on his mother's estate, sold off a nine-acre and 150-rod portion of this land to cotton manufacturer William Almy (Johnston Deeds 12/301). On March 12, 1825, the remaining thirty-four acres was divided amongst the five Alverson heirs (J 6/376).

It was on the land that William Almy purchased in 1825 that the subject house now stands. William Almy was a wealthy manufacturer who owned hundreds of acres of land throughout Johnston and surrounding towns. It is possible that he bought this parcel of land because it bordered the Pocasset River; in those days mill owners were indeed very conscious of securing water rights to power their factories. After William Almy died in 1836, his vast estate was inherited by his daughter Anna Almy Jenkins. On May 18, 1846, Anna Jenkins sold the property to Zenas Bliss, who himself was involved in manufacturing (J 13/147). Bliss held on to the parcel for less than a year, selling it to Samuel Randall on December 26, 1846 (J 13/326). Samuel Randall in turn sold the nine-acre and 150-rod property to Hiram Atwood for \$1,100 on December 19, 1848 (J 14/7). Significantly, there is no mention of a dwelling house being present on the land, and this was confirmed by Mabel Atwood Sprague, who was the great granddaughter of Hiram Atwood. She stated many years ago in an interview that Hiram in fact had built the house at 281 Morgan Avenue. Considering that the lot was purchased in late December of 1848, it seems likely that the house was completed by the end of 1849. A mortgage deed of April 11, 1850, states for the first time that there are now "buildings & improvements" on the property (J 14/88). This again supports the supposition that the house was built by the end of 1849.

Hiram Atwood was the son of Abraham C. Atwood. He was born in 1819 and died in 1876. His first wife, Mearcy Ann, died on

November 13, 1857. On December 25, 1863, he married his second wife, Clarissa Cargill of Providence. At the time of this marriage she was thirty-one years old and he forty-four years of age. It is probable that the children of Mearcy Ann were Jeremiah, Lyman, Hiram C., and Netheniah; the children of Clarissa were John A. (who may have died young), John Cargill (Mabel Sprague's father), and Benjamin F. Atwood. Hiram's occupation was a millwright; he and his family lived in the house at 281 Morgan Avenue for twenty-six years. On July 12, 1875, Hiram and Clarissa sold the house and part of the property to Susan F. Lincoln of Providence (J 30/243). Hiram and family did not move too far, next taking up residence at 216 Morgan Avenue, his father's house, the place where Hiram in fact had grown up (Mabel Sprague lived here and it is now in the ownership of Mr. Anthony Ricci). The deed to Susan Lincoln states that he was selling to her just "part of the same tract of land I purchased of Samuel Randall by deed in the year 1848." In fact, only about six acres and the house were sold to Ms. Lincoln; the other four acres stayed in the ownership of the Atwood family well into the twentieth century.



Joseph Webb (pictured here) ran a small store across the street from his home at 251 Morgan Avenue. The store was torn down in the early 1930s. Photo from Images of America: Johnston (1997), courtesy of Earl Blamires.

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### “Whose Death was Caused by Lightning” by Elise Carlson

Arnold Fenner's headstone reads "whose death was caused by lightning." The Johnston Historical Society Cemetery Committee took on the task of restoring Cemetery #43 in the summer of 2016. The lot was in poor shape and had been encroached upon by years of farming tools and animals. This burial ground, located on present-day Salisbury farm, contains principally members of the Fenner family. Arnold died at age thirty-nine on August 9, 1796. Usually, gravestones will be inscribed only with the name of the deceased, date of death (and sometimes date of birth), and family relations. While working with the cemetery committee on many family burial grounds over the years, I often think about the people buried there, how they lived and how they died. This stone answered the question of how he died, but it made one wonder about the details.



The Hiram Atwood House as it looks today. Photo by Christopher Martin (March 14, 2020).

On December 1, 1883, Ms. Lincoln sold the house and land to her brother Otis Lincoln (J 36/404). He in turn resold the property only four months later to Joseph Webb (J 38/276). Webb was associated with the Morgan Mills; he ran a dry goods store that was located in what is now the driveway of 274 Morgan Avenue, diagonally across the street from our subject house. On November 16, 1923, Joseph Webb sold the estate to his daughter Gertrude E. Webb (Joseph died around 1925). Gertrude was married to Jacob B.W. Wilder. Jacob and Gertrude had two children, Webb Westcott (born July 6, 1895) and Magel (born February 16, 1898). Magel died in 1947, and her father Jacob in 1954. After Gertrude died in 1962, the house and land was left to the only surviving heir, Webb Wilder. In 1973, Webb sold the estate to the Beaudoin Real Estate Company but was granted a life estate in the property (J 126/1183). Webb W. Wilder died in New Mexico in 1988. The Beaudoin family, who were in fact relatives of the Wilders, still own the house at 281 Morgan Avenue to this day, maintaining it as a rental property.



Photo by Elise Carlson (May 22, 2016).

The Fenners first arrived in the western part of what would become Johnston in the year 1745, when Richard Fenner first began purchasing property in the area. He eventually amassed a farm of over 100 acres. Though the family cemetery is located on Salisbury Farm, the Fenner house was situated on the location of present-day Pezza Farm, adjacent to Salisbury's. The location of the house may have been where the present Pezza house now stands. That the Fenner farm encompassed these two modern day farms is an indication of the great size it once attained. On the

Pezza Farm is an old barn, the foundation of which may or may not in fact date back to the Fenners.

On a whim, in the fall of 2019, I typed “Arnold Fenner killed by lightning” into Google. Perhaps a Fenner family history would be online and would make mention of this incident. The result was fantastic! Google Books has copies of a periodical entitled *The New York Magazine, or, Literary Repository*. The original is at Oxford University. The following article is dated August 13, 1796. I find it fascinating that this occurrence on a small farm in Johnston, Rhode Island, was noted in a New York magazine!

*standing in the alley, near the door, sitting there some time; his son left the floor, coming out through the alley; the passage being narrow, the father rose from his seat and stood up, the son pressing against him to pass by. At the instant, when the father and son were close together, a flash of lightning struck the roof, at the western gable end, parting all the planks from the rafters, and striking the son lifeless in an instant, leaving no other mark than a little hair burnt on the top of his head. His father caught him in his arms, having himself received no injury. His horse, standing in the stable, about three feet from him, was also struck dead at the same instant; some other horses that were in the barn were not hurt. The barn was left on fire and consumed, together with about twelve tons of hay and oats, some flax, about twenty bushels of rye, and all the farming utensils.*

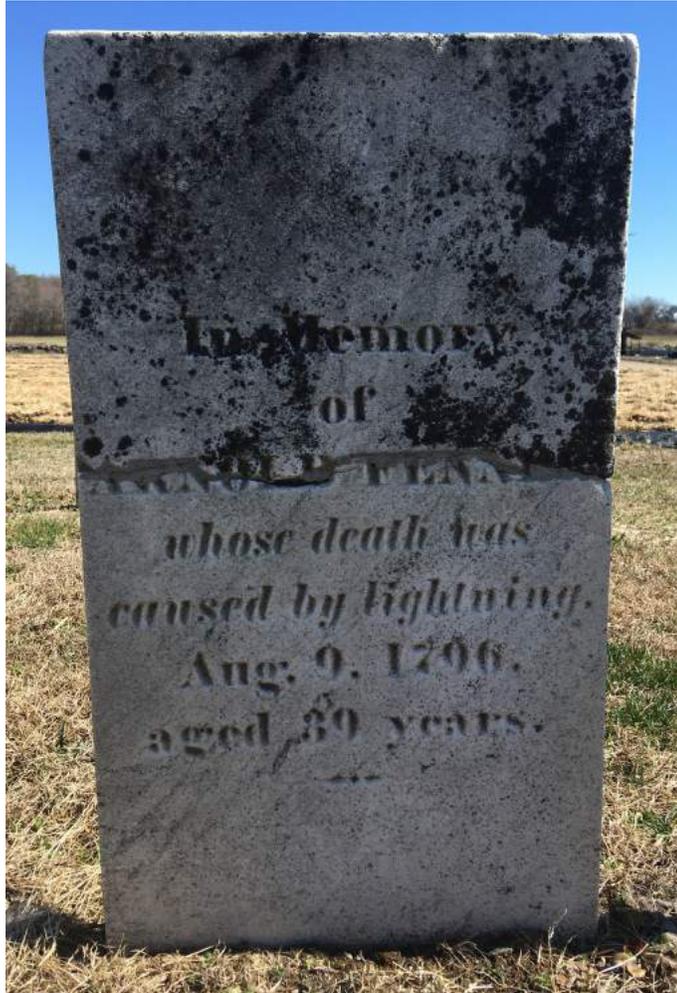


Photo by Christopher Martin (March 14, 2020).

I've transcribed the article as written. It describes in detail what happened that day. I suppose one of the four witnesses was interviewed for the information. It must have been a terrible thing to see!

*Providence, August 13. A remarkable instance of the destructive effects of lightning happened at Johnstown on Thursday last, about 4 o'clock, PM. Mr. Arnold Fenner, of that town, being at work in his field, near his barn, entered it, accompanied by his father, two children, and a young man that lived with him, to shelter themselves from a shower of rain. They seated themselves on the floor; the wind rising, they shut all the doors except one, which opened to an alley that led by the stable, at the west end. The father rose from the floor, and took a seat on a cask*

### A Handy Resource

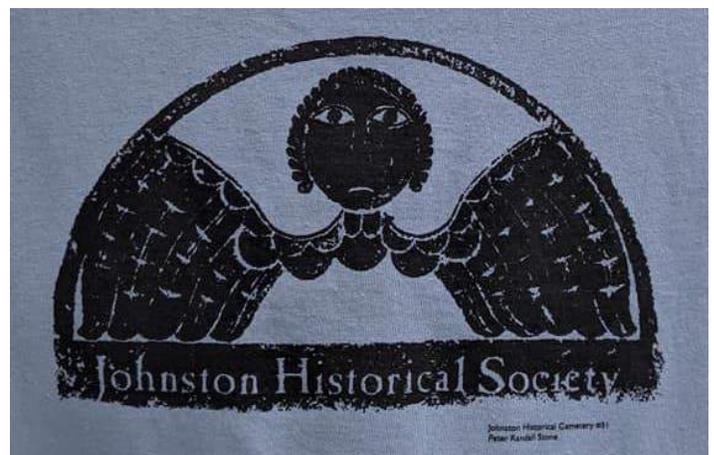
Ever wish you had an easy online reference you could check to see what Rhode Island looked like back in the day? Well, here's one: RI Maps and Aerial Photos. It features aerial photos of Rhode Island dating back to 1939. You can zoom in to a specific address and compare how things change through various points in time. Sometimes the photo quality can be challenging, but even a blurry photo can tell you if a building did or did not exist in a particular year. Try it out at [tinyurl.com/RIMapper](http://tinyurl.com/RIMapper).

### Society Doings

The Mohr Library Genealogy Club visited in mid-November and toured the Elijah Angell House and Museum barn.

We held a Holiday Open House on December 8, 2019. About forty people attended. Thank you to Alyce Lombardi for decorating the inside of the House, and to Phil Lemoi for decorating the outside.

We have new t-shirts for sale in slate blue and khaki, and we have a few left in sage green. S/M/L or XL. \$15 each. Pick one up at an upcoming general meeting, or drop us a line and we'll arrange to deliver one to you.



## **Volunteers Needed!**

Retirees, Scouts, students! We always need volunteers to perform various duties to ensure the smooth operation of the society. For instance, we could use a Properties Committee to oversee the maintenance of our properties. Or volunteers to serve as docents in the Elijah Angell House during open hours. Or someone to help on meeting nights, setting up coffee, setting up the room, etc. The president would like to see many people doing small jobs. If you'd like to help out, please approach a board member at the next meeting.

## **Our Properties**

We held our fall JHS yard cleanup day on December 5, 2019. Thank you to Carl Johnson, Rolf Johnson, Anthony Ursillo, Tim Kee, Joe Jamroz, Steve Merolla, Doug Stevens, and Elise Carlson for lending their brawn to the effort. County Landscaping, a Johnston business, helped us by picking up the leaves.

In December Elise bought a couple of small fire extinguishers for the museum, after noticing we didn't have any! While we have the fire department right next door, it's good to have that extra bit of insurance close to hand.

In December, the town installed four "No Parking" signs along the sidewalk on the Norris Street side of our property. We hope this will deter people, mostly patrons of Emmily's Restaurant, from parking on that sidewalk.

In December, Vaughn Oil Company made two visits to the JHS Barn and replaced the boiler's igniter. Heating has been an issue; the boiler dates to 1999 when the structure was built, and the meeting room addition constructed in 2014 adds to the load on the old equipment.

In January we took steps to deal with a nascent rodent problem in the Elijah Angell House. Traps were placed in the basement. We'll be keeping a close eye on the situation, not only to protect our property and collections, but also the health, safety, and comfort of our upstairs tenant.

On Monday, January 20th, Elise, Steve, Doug, Joe, and Carl met at JHS HQ and re-organized boxed records from Johnston Public Schools and tools which are stored in the basement. The plastic shelving had been warping due to the weight of those archival boxes. We certainly thank them for devoting a couple of hours to clearing spaces and consolidating materials.

**NEW HOURS:** Our museum barn is open Tuesdays, 5-8pm; and Thursdays, 9am-12pm, for those who would like to visit the museum or examine the society's collection of printed materials. 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 [johnstonhistorical1825@gmail.com](mailto:johnstonhistorical1825@gmail.com), 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.

## **Speakers**

On December 4, 2019, our speaker was Kim Clark, who gave an informative and interesting talk and slide show about Colonial Rhode Island Governor Stephen Hopkins and the Governor Stephen Hopkins House.

January 26, 2020, was a special Sunday meeting. Gerald Carbone gave a presentation based on his 2017 book *Brown & Sharpe and the Measure of American Industry: Making the Precision Machine Tools That Enabled Manufacturing, 1833-2001*.

February 23, 2020, was another special Sunday meeting. JHS Vice President Steve Merolla presented a follow-up to last year's "The Borden of Neutaconkanut Hill."

We are gratified that people have come out for these special Sunday meetings. We think it's a good alternative to our regular nighttime meetings at a time of year when the days are short and the weather unpredictable.

The March 25, 2020, meeting was cancelled because of the coronavirus, and the speaker was rescheduled to May (see Upcoming Events, below).

## **Acquisitions**

- Joe purchased two new snow shovels for JHS use.
- Anthony Ricci (via Joe Jamroz) donated a hay trolley from Crandall's Farm.

Many donated objects may be seen in the "Acquisitions and Items from our Collections" photo album on our Facebook page ([www.facebook.com/johnstonhistorical](http://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
- Old photos, slides, or home movies of Johnston
- Any Johnston-related ephemera or memorabilia
- A leaf blower
- Fire extinguishers

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## **Cemetery Committee Report**

by Steve Merolla

After the big task of restoring Cemetery #69 on the Citizens Bank campus (as recounted in our last newsletter), the Cemetery Committee took on the more mundane job of cleaning previously restored burial lots.

Before the snow started falling in mid-December, the Committee cleaned lots #2, 76, and 77. It seemed that with the rather early snowfall we would really fall behind in our maintenance work, but as we know, there really hasn't been a winter this year. As a result, the Committee has been able to get into the field nearly every week since the turn of the new year. Thus, cemeteries #16, 28, 29, 36, 38, 39, 40, 41, 44, 58, 66, and 71 were all given their yearly clean-ups. There are still about a dozen more to be taken

care of before we begin again with repairs in the late Spring, but a very good start has been made.

Doug Stephens continues his task of replacing old cemetery signs with new models supplied by the state DOT. Since our last newsletter he has replaced signs in #16, 23, 29, 36, 39, 41, 42, and 66. It is really amazing how many rocks, stones and roots Doug has hit when digging the post holes, just an indication of how difficult it really was to farm in much of New England.

The last newsletter also mentioned fallen trees and limbs in a few of our cemeteries. Since then, some kind soul, unknown to us, has cut up a split tree in Cemetery #7. We would really like to know who that person is so that we could extend our thanks. Dave Morrocco cut up a large limb in #38, and Arnie Vecchione of the Highway Department has promised to clear up a tough situation in #33, just off Simonsville Avenue.

This coming Spring will be held the annual statewide Historical Cemetery Clean-up Day. As of now the Johnston Historical Society is planning to take on Cemetery #21, the large Governor King Cemetery, along Hartford Avenue. The tentative date is April 11 (check [www.facebook.com/RIHistoricCemeteries](http://www.facebook.com/RIHistoricCemeteries) for up-to-date details). Anyone interested in participating can contact any member of the Cemetery Committee for more details. We would appreciate any help during the course of the year, either as part of the Committee, or on your own in adopting and maintaining a cemetery over the course of the year. Whatever you may choose, you will find the work very rewarding.

As always, many thanks to our members Elise, Marie, Shar, Eric, George, Carl, Doug, Dave, and Steve. Also a call-out to those adopting cemeteries on their own: Dan and Mitchell Parillo, Robert Aubin, and Kevin Sarli.

### Upcoming Events

#### April 11, 2020

Historical Cemetery Restoration and Awareness Day  
The Historic Cemetery Advisory Commission invites members of the public to participate in Rhode Island Historic Cemetery Day. With over 3,200 historical cemeteries in the state, there's definitely one near you that needs a little TLC. Join hundreds of volunteers in raking, mowing, cutting brush, and preserving history! Contact your local historical society to learn how you can help. [www.facebook.com/RIHistoricCemeteries](http://www.facebook.com/RIHistoricCemeteries).

#### April 29, 2020

General Meeting  
7pm  
Food historian David Stone will talk about his recent books, *Lost Restaurants of Providence* and *Lost Restaurants of Newport*.

#### May 27, 2020

General Meeting  
7pm  
Tony Carlino, an Adjunct Professor of History at Rhode Island College, will speak on the topic of "Sugar, Stamps, and Tea,"

issues that drove American colonists to Revolution. Rescheduled from March.

#### June 24, 2020

General Meeting  
7pm  
Arthur Ianelli will tell us about Ramstail Factory, Rhode Island's only "official" haunted place. (Rescheduled from January).

#### July and August

Summer Hiatus -- Executive Board meetings and General meetings are suspended for the summer. Have fun everyone!

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 [johnstonhistorical1825@gmail.com](mailto:johnstonhistorical1825@gmail.com) or leave a message at (401) 231-3380.

### Historical Advertising

Here's another old ad from the Historical Advertising photo album on our Facebook page. This one is from The Observer, August 28, 1984. The address is now an empty lot. Using RI Maps and Aerial Photos (referenced above), shows the building was demolished sometime between 1985 and 2003.

**Joseph's Pub**  
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| Fried Clams . . . . .      | 4.95 | Clams Francesco . . . . . | 3.25 |
| Broiled Fish . . . . .     | 3.95 | Steamers . . . . .        | 3.50 |
| Tuna Salad                 |      | Clam Chowder              |      |
| Sandwich . . . . .         | 1.95 | cup .75/bowl              | 1.25 |
| Broiled Scallops . . . . . | 5.95 | Clam Cakes                |      |
| Joseph's Seafood           |      | 1/2 doz. 1.25/doz.        | 2.40 |
| Delite . . . . .           | 5.50 | Smelts . . . . .          | 2.75 |

**CLOSED FOR VACATION  
 JULY 2 THROUGH JULY 14  
 WILL REOPEN SUNDAY  
 JULY 15, 1984**

### 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, 2020.



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**Our Executive Board**

President: Elise Carlson  
Vice-President: Steve Merolla  
Treasurer: Joe Jamroz  
Recording Secretary: Carl Johnson  
Corresponding Secretary: Christopher Martin  
Trustees: Dan Brown, Doug Stephens, Marie Thierfelder,  
and Anthony Ursillo.

Our Executive Board meets at 6:30pm 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: johnstonhistorical1825@gmail.com  
Facebook: www.facebook.com/johnstonhistorical

**Annual Dues**

Have you paid your 2020 dues yet? Your dues help us to operate. The price of a single membership is only \$20; a family membership is only \$30. Wotta bargain! So once more, please pay your 2020 dues. Send us a check today!

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New         Single (\$20) \_\_\_\_\_  
              Family (\$30) \_\_\_\_\_

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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JOHNSTON, RHODE ISLAND 02919**