

Johnston Historical Society

Historical Notes

VOLUME V #1 SEPTEMBER 1989 CATHY LOBELLO, PRES LOU MCGOWAN, EDITOR

FALL OPEN HOUSE

We will be contacting you soon with details about a Fall Party. Come see what work has been done in the house and spend some time with old friends. Hope to see you there!

STATE OF THE JOHNSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

The past year has been a down period as far as member activities for us. After many months in 1987 of meetings that were attended by only 5 or 6 people, we decided to suspend monthly meetings for a time and concentrate on the restoration of the Farnum/Angel House. A number of causes for the lack of attendance at meetings could be pointed to. Within the space of a couple of years we lost a number of our most historically-minded individuals (one person died and three moved out of the town). An even greater number of our "social" members stopped attending. While this latter group was very valuable to our organization, it was inevitable that we would lose some of them because their interest was mostly in the social realm. Another reason for the drop in attendance is probably the lack of monthly programs or speakers which attract many of our members on those cold winter nights. We will try to address this problem in the future. There are many interesting speakers that love to come to local historical societies.

We should not get depressed about our present situation. In small groups such as ours, there are often periods of ebb and flow as far as membership is concerned. Losing 2 or 3 key members can greatly effect a small society. In Johnston we also lack a tradition of historical inquiry and preservation movements that characterize certain other towns. We also do not have the concentration of preserved older houses that are included in places such as Providence, Newport, and Wickford. Having a tradition of historical research, a long-standing preservation

movement, or a body of 18th century houses all help greatly in keeping historical and preservation societies running smoothly.

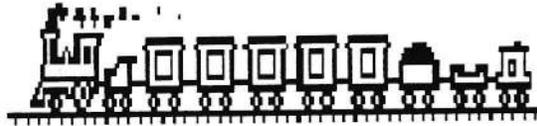
We are not without weapons though! We still have a small group of active, historically-minded members and a few dozen less-active, though very important, social members backing them up. We have 230 years of history in our town, which encompasses rich religious, cultural, ethnic, and social traditions, and a fascinating agricultural and industrial history. And, although our moves to modernize have robbed us of much of historical interest, we still have a wealth of important buildings and sites from the past.

There remains a tremendous amount of work to be done. Much of our town's early history needs to be gleaned from old town records at the Town Hall and the Providence City Hall Archives. Oral interviews need to be given to older residents so that our early 20th century history will not be lost. Farming is fast disappearing in our town. Dairying is just about dead and the ice industry is long gone. Who will tell the stories of these occupations?

Preservation of older structures is also sorely needed. Within the past few years in Graniteville alone we have lost an early 19th century, center-chimney house and the town's only grain elevator and train station. The three buildings all stood at the corner where George Waterman Road meets Route 44. Some older buildings are difficult to preserve— for example, what do you do with a grain elevator? But, the train station could have been saved. A small building, it could have been moved and used as a gift shop or the like.

(continued page five)

THE



CAR BAR L L N E

Buses and Carts

The end of the rail tracks at the intersection of Greenville Ave and George Waterman Road in the Manton Section of Johnston was the last stop on the Manton line for the United Electric Railways. It was the trolley line for passengers going to and from the city or anywhere else for that matter. This corner was called the 'car line' and for everybody, whenever you headed in that direction, you were going to the 'carline'. (evidently, at one time it was the end of the car line and was shortened to just 'car line' over a period of years). There was a pool hall, a barber shop, a grocery store, a gas station, a bar and a church at the end of the car line but for anyone to be asked where he was going, it was always the 'car line'. Probably the only change from that was when one went to the Our Lady of Grace Church. This is a shrine for many people from an old campagna in Italy and they came from hundreds of miles away to worship.

Here for almost a half century, one of the biggest festivals ever held in these parts takes place. Scores of buses, cars and trucks would arrive here on the last weekend in September and they lined every side street in the village. Out of state plates such as Pennsylvania, New York and Mass were very common sights in the area on those two days. It was really something to take a trip that long in those days. These were pioneer folk who brought food and drink from home and most of the trips were a day's journey for all. Vendors and cart people also lined the streets on the first day of the feast and some of the merchandise and goodies in the carts was as colorful as the bedecked, wheeled vehicles themselves. Next to the nut and candy old timer was one with a great variety of Italian cookies and pastries. Most were decorated with colored sugars in different designs and shapes. They were stacked in rows slanting from top to bottom, and rear to front, creating a beautiful display as you stood there waiting to buy and taste. As soon as he removed some to sell, he would reach in the numerous boxes under the cart and replace them with others that would change the scene slightly, as no two were ever the same. Most of the sweets he offered from the cart were the same as we could get at home but then there was nothing as store bought. (cart bought as it were).

The numerous other purveyors varied their wares from balloons, flags and pennants to picture taking, hats, religious items and noise makers. The photographer would walk around offering to snap a shot of any

person or group willing to part with their money. He sported a tripod with a large wooden box camera wrapped in a black cloth. After taking your money and your picture, he would do his magic under the black cloth. The revolving cylinder under the camera would soon deliver the photo which he kept washing and would then frame on the spot. Some of the images were as bad as today's passport photos but being able to walk away with a portrait in minutes in the past, and almost as fast as Polaroid does it today, was quite a feat. It seems also that once he started with his voodoo practice he would be kept busy for hours amid the oohs and aahs after each shot.

On the opposite corner of Lafayette Street and George Waterman Road was the balloon man with his tanks. Talk about wonders, a balloon that

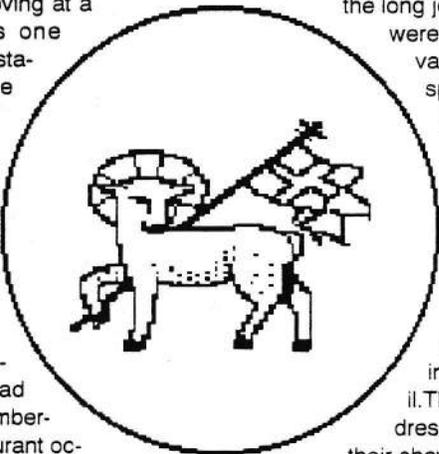


would rip out of your grasp and head for the Sun. Again, we're talking 1930 and about eight or nine year olds, who, after blowing air in a rubber sphere, in their back yard, saw them float around and not take off to the moon. Many of the youngsters would soon be looking up

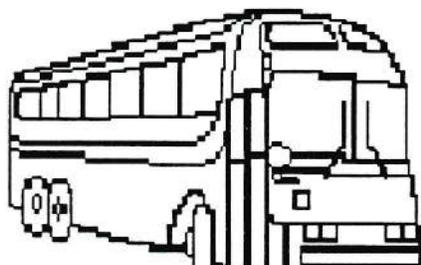
in the sky with teary eyes as their newly acquired possession streamed away to the heavens. Who then knew that the helium gas that made things float and suspend in air also had a bad habit that made little boys and girls sad. It seemed one could not look up and not see a balloon floating high above the crowds.

On the Saturday afternoon of the feast, the bands would start their longest trek down George Waterman Road to nearly the end of the road as their final troubadouring adventure. There weren't too many stops along this highway as it was

highly traveled and usually a police officer kept everyone and the traffic moving at a normal pace. There was one pause at Joe Corsi's gas station for a pit stop and here not only refreshments were dispensed but food that could be classified as gourmet. Joe Buck, as he was called, had the works including a pig roast with the proverbial apple intact. He would not let any one leave unless they sampled the goodies, including customers who had only stopped for fuel. A Cumberland Farm and wiener restaurant occupy the former service station site but still those treasured memories will always linger.

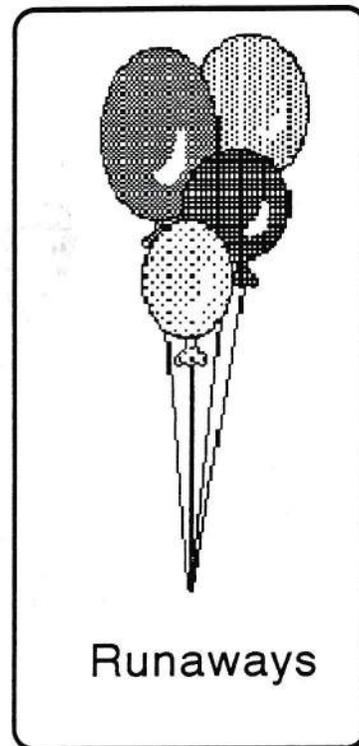


Meanwhile, in and about the church grounds, parishioners had started to congregate with acquaintances and friends who had not seen each other in the long year past. They would embrace and smile and gestures of warmth and respect lit up their faces as they would try to make up in minutes the separation of the past months. The children dressed in their Sunday and holiday best also would beam at each other and hand in hand would walk around looking for other partners. Now and then a relative or parent would reach into his pocket and come up with some change to give a youngster who then would run up to the nearest cart for some tasty tidbit. The bus people and out of staters had brought most of their food from their homes. Buckets of ice, picnic baskets and all kinds of dishes on the seats covered the inside of the vehicles. Outside, portable tables, folding chairs and stools in the open fields really made the atmosphere picnic like. Home made wines in jugs and bottles of beer were being chilled in the ice. Many of the worshippers, tired from the trip lay in the grass asleep. Soon they would be rested and then up and about to join in the celebration. The longest faces in the area belonged to the bus drivers as they were entrusted with the safety of the faithful and could not imbibe with the revelers. They had many offers to join in with the various groups but would always decline. Pausing only to taste the delicious foods that adorned the tables, they slowly and sorrowfully sipped the various sodas or sweet pop as it was called by the out of towners.

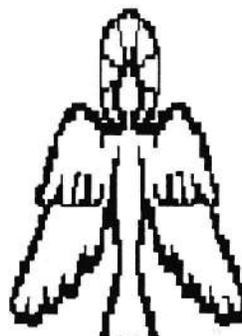


The real old timers that made the long journey that weekend were the most solemn. The vast majority of them spent the day in the vicinity of the church and at the shrine of the Madonna. With their rosary beads in their hands reciting prayers they had brought from the old country, they would admonish anyone who interrupted their vigil. They were usually dressed in black and with their shawls covering their head kneeled for the longest time at the memorial.

The church bell rang throughout the festivities and stopped after all the rituals and the Mass had ended. It would only chime with hand power and it was a long day for the ringer.



Runaways



This short sketch was urged by.
Lou McGowan.
Reviewed by
Bob Burford.

Written by
Louis Ullucci I

My parents had friends from Utica, New York and Lawrence, Mass. and one, or both families would arrive on the Saturday afternoon of the feast day. Others from around the state never failed to drop by on either day and our home would be filled with the best people on earth when we sat down for dinner that Sunday.

After all the solemn observance and ceremonies were done with and the procession had ended, the food feast would commence and it could and did last for hours. Partings and goodbyes were deeply emotional and sad faces became the norm as the company left.

CAPTAIN ARTHUR FENNER

History of the Fenner Family, compiled by Lucinda T. Fenner. Plainwell, Michigan: [privately printed], 1908.

Virginia had its wise and sagacious leader, John Smith, Plymouth its valiant Capt. Miles Standish, and Providence could boast of its brave and wise Capt. Arthur Fenner.

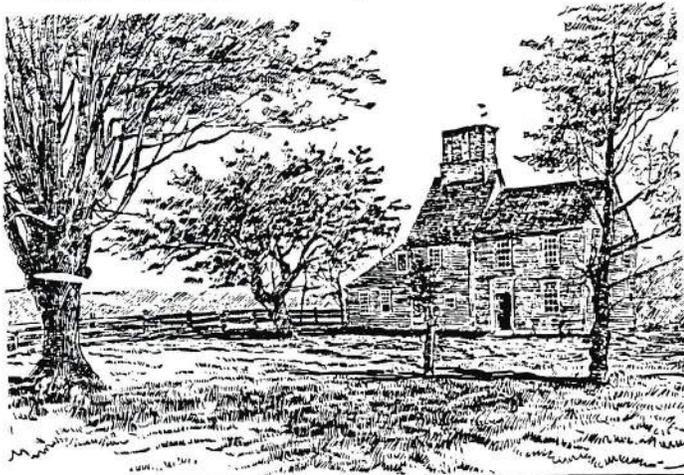
If the first two were noted for their military exploits, Captain Fenner was famous for his management of affairs in times of peace. Less hasty and impetuous than the Plymouth captain, he was not so quick to buckle on the sword, but now when nations settle their difficulties through The Hague Peace Tribunal, he may safely be forgiven and admired for having a peace-loving disposition.

Arthur Fenner was born in England in 1622. Before coming to this country he was a lieutenant in Cromwell's army. He came to Providence Feb. 27, 1649, and there is on record a receipt dated March 10, 1649, giving him full and equal rights in the plantations in consideration of the payment of 30 shillings. Three members of this Fenner family were among the early settlers of Providence, and bore their share of the labor, privations, and honors incident to the settlement of a new country.

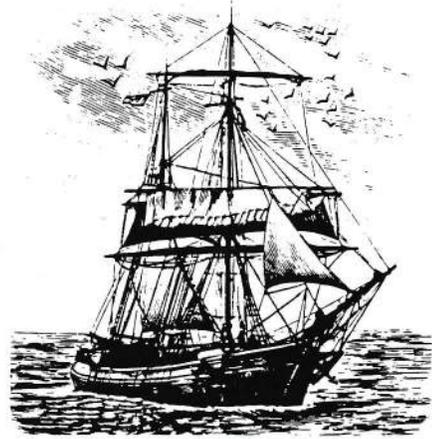
William and John Fenner came to Providence in 1646. After a residence of several years, William went to Newport in 1659, and from there to Saybrook, Conn., where he died, leaving no children.

Capt. John Fenner lived in Providence a few years, but finally exchanged his land in Providence for land in Saybrook, to which place he moved, and where he died in 1709, leaving his wife an estate of £500, the record says. He had one son who died unmarried, and four daughters [pg. 6] who married respectively into the Palmer, Starkey, Buell, and Hazelton families, so we see that the Fenner family are descended from Capt. Arthur Fenner.

It is estimated that he held the title to over 500 acres of land. In 1662 he built a house on a piece of land which he owned, about four miles from Providence. This was burned by the Indians in 1676, after which he built on the same site a house which was known for generations as Fenner Castle. Nothing is left of the



CAPT. ARTHUR FENNER'S "CASTLE."



house as originally built. The immense and well-built chimney was forty feet high, and fifteen feet broad at the base, and thanks to colonial masonry, it was in a good state of preservation until after the middle of the nineteenth century, but in 1886 it was deemed unsafe, and the chimney and the remaining portions of the decaying framework were torn down. The house was owned and occupied until 1861 by Fenners of the direct line of descent from Capt. Arthur Fenner. Captain Fenner was, for the greater part of fifty years, in public life, having been one of the principal magistrates of the Colonial Government of Rhode Island under the charter obtained from England in 1644, and afterwards from 1663 to 1689. He was commissioner for eight years; governor's assistant, nineteen years; deputy for nine years. At one time he was town treasurer, and frequently a member of the town council. When New Hampshire attempted to stretch her authority over a part of Rhode Island, he, with one Sanford, was appointed to go to England to lay the matter before the king. It does not appear that they went, and the interference of New Hampshire ceased. He was also an expert engineer and surveyor, and probably no man was better acquainted with the territory around Providence plantations and the adjoining towns. He was often empowered to treat with the Indians, and there is an account of his meeting them with a force of the colonists in open warfare, when the Indians were driven back and several of their numbers taken prisoner. That he was a close friend of Roger Williams we can not doubt, as a letter written by [pg. 7] Roger Williams is still preserved, in which he speaks of Captain Fenner as his dear friend and neighbor.

Captain Arthur Fenner was married to Mehitabel Waterman, and had six children--four daughters and two sons. His house-keeping experiences were the same as those of others of his time, and viewed from our standpoint, their accommodations were narrow, the diet plain and without much variety, and there was continuous toil indoors and out.

The inventory of his property, which is still on record, shows that he was well-to-do for that time.

It may interest coming generations to know what personal property a well-to-do

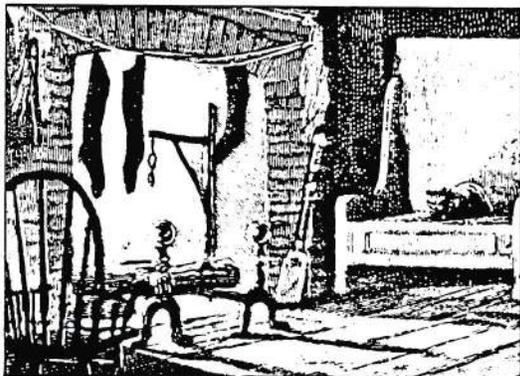
farmer had in 1703. The inventory shows him to have had 5 cows, 6 calves, 4 heifers, abundant farm utensils, while the house-keeping department was represented with 2 spinning wheels and cards, brass kettles, money scales, warming pan, 12 trenchers, and 5 spoons. One great Bible, a book called "statutes," and 7 small books. The cellar was stocked with 12 barrels of cider, 2 barrels of peach juice, and 5 barrels of beer, to say nothing of the 12 empty barrels. Temperance societies did not exist, hence the number of family cider barrels.

His wife died in 1682 or 1683, and Dec. 16, 1686, he was married to Mrs. Howlong Harris. Captain Arthur Fenner died Oct. 10, 1703. His children were (1) Freelove, who married Gideon Crawford, April 16, 1687; (2) Bethiah, who married Robert Kelton; (3) Phoebe, who married Joseph Latham; (4) Thomas, who was twice married, first to Alice Realp, and after her death to Dinah Borden; (5) Arthur, who married Mary Smith. Thomas Fenner had eleven children. The sixth was a son named Joseph, who was born in 1693. He married Wait Harris, who bore him six children. Their names were Mehitable, Thomas, Phoebe, Joseph, Wait, and Asahel.

Asahel Fenner, who was thus a great-grandson of Captain Arthur Fenner, was born Nov. 8, 1737. He was married to Rhobe Sarle. He died in 1777, leaving two sons-- James and Joseph.

[Page 8 and succeeding pages continue the saga with James L. Fenner (and his many prodigy), who was born in Rhode Island on May 20, 1777; worked on a Rhode Island ship in the coasting trade; rafted timber down from the upper reaches of the Connecticut River; on Feb. 22, 1801, married Betsy Perry (born Dighton, Mass. June 18, 1780), a relative of the famous Commodore Perry; and settled in 1801 at Manlius, Pompey, and later Lysander, in New York State, where he erected and ran grist and saw mills.

Arthur Fenner, patriarch of this family, had to have been a hardy human being to have succeeded in that time, even if you do not fully believe all of author Lucinda Fenner's bombast. The Captain was a prominent resident of western Providence, the area of his homestead later to become Cranston and Johnston. Much of the present village of Thornton was his farm, the Castle and another house of his son Thomas being located along the south side of Plainfield Street, one of the earliest of colonial highways. Also see the pamphlet "Fenner Castle" (dated March 30, 1931) in the Old Stone Bank series on Rhode Island history. -ed.]



(continued from page one)

We are also in real danger of losing many of our historical cemeteries. Some property owners are very careful of these properties, but others see only house lots when they look at them. A couple of swipes with the bulldozer and an old cemetery is gone. Within the last year or two, a cemetery has disappeared from the old B&B property on Atwood Avenue. We would like to locate all the old cemeteries and let the property-owners know that we are aware of their existence.

In summary, we need help! A few people can not do all the work that needs to be done. Once an older resident dies, all his memories are gone forever. Once a train station is torn down, it is gone forever. We will be contacting you about upcoming events. Come help us out.

RESTORATION OF OUR HEADQUARTERS

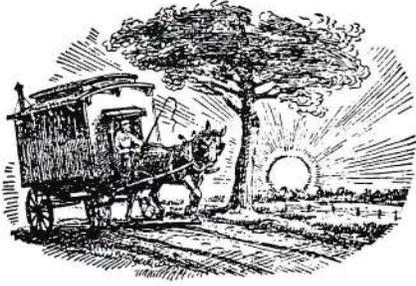
Restoration is continuing at the Farmum/Angell House. Robert Garofalo, our stonemason, finished the required work on the chimney. He completely sealed the inside of the chimney from the roofline up and re-pointed the exterior portion. It should be all set for many years thanks to his quality workmanship.

Warren Lanpher, our carpenter, has also done much work on the interior of the house. He built and installed the new front door, a reproduction of what would have been there 175 years ago. He built and installed three interior, 4-panel doors and donated four Norfolk latches which he will install for us. The front doorway was also strengthened greatly. There was some old water damage on the sill under the front door. Warren replaced the piece of damaged sill and tightened the whole frame. He repaired the hole in the parlor door that leads to the entryway and stripped the sheetrock from the kitchen walls. Thankfully, the original wainscoting is still in place. He also constructed and installed 2 six-over-six windows, one in the kitchen and one in the parlor.

Remaining work that Warren will do includes: reproducing a parlor fireplace surround; finishing the walls in the parlor and kitchen; and refinishing our kitchen fireplace surround.

We sustained some water damage on the first floor this past winter after our previous tenant, Norman Johnson, passed away. The damage was covered by our insurance and we will be restoring the damaged areas.

Join Now!



Our drivers are up at the crack of dawn delivering your newsletters. Pay your dues now and help us to feed the horses! Just send in the form below or else stop by at one of our monthly meetings (we will contact you with particulars).

Membership for:

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