

# Johnston Historical Society

## Historical Notes

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### District Schooling in Johnston

By Louis McGowan

Few references to education or schools are to be found in the early records of the town. We know that there were schools in the town as far back as the 1790s, when the first Belknap School was built. Other schools were present, including the schoolhouse in the Bell District, which was erected about 1807. Charles Carroll's 1918 book, *Public Education in Rhode Island*, states there were seven schools in Johnston in 1819.

Public education in Rhode Island lagged behind other states in New England during much of the nineteenth century. A major cause of this problem was the fact that Rhode Island mill owners continued to employ child workers long after the practice was discontinued in much of America. Public opinion in Rhode Island (Johnston seemed to follow suit in this area) did not seem to be against children spending their youth in factories. Families needed the wages that their children brought in, no matter how low the pay was. Even in rural areas of Johnston, it is not recorded that there was an outcry in the early days by parents for their children to be educated.



The 1921 graduating class of Manton Grammar School, Greenville Avenue. Of course this was long after the district system had been abolished. The building no longer stands.

The first time town records referred to any school committee, though, was in 1828. This committee was formed in reaction to the passage of the Rhode Island Free School Law of 1828. Twelve members of the first committee met at Resolved Waterman's Inn in June of that year. No reference was made to any school district or any schools supported by the town. So, the likelihood is that the early schools up to that point were

private, subscriber schools, where only children of direct supporters of the school were permitted to attend. We know that this was the case with the Belknap School. When the school committee met again in August 1828, they divided the town into ten districts. By September, the schoolhouses were located and established. This was the time when free public schooling came to our town. It was decided that teacher's wages would be from twenty to seventy cents per day. Three members of the committee were appointed to visit each school. In the beginning, the school committee selected teachers for the districts, but later, trustees in each district hired teachers and inspected the schools.



One of two "portable" schools in town, Pocasset School, pictured here in 1925, was a wood frame building resting on cinder block legs. At that time it served the children in the area centered on the Hartford Pike at Atwood Avenue. It is long gone. *Photograph courtesy of Lora Clemence.*

In 1828, there were nine schools in the town. By 1831, there were eleven schools with 400 students attending classes. The #11 District was added in 1832 and was called the Simonsville District. It later became the Thornton District. At this time teacher salaries were increased. Women would thereafter receive \$1.25 per week and men would receive \$2.50 per week.

In the early district system days, funding for the schools came from the town and from the state. In 1833, the town gave \$355 to the schools while the state contributed \$241.98. Appropriations increased from then into the 1840s, but the addition of new districts meant that the amount each school received remained small. In 1841, District #12 (Graniteville) and District #13 (Dry Brook, later called Hughesdale) were

added, and in 1844 District #14 was added in the western part of town. Adding these three new districts meant that the town only had money to let each school run for up to three months throughout the year. The town said that this was necessary because so much of the funding had to go for rents. Few of the districts had suitable houses of their own that could be used for schooling.

By 1843, there were fourteen schools, 560 students and twenty teachers in the town. Fourteen of the twenty teachers were men. During the 1840s, some of the districts were pushing for increased periods of schooling for their children. In 1844 the taxing power was allowed in the individual districts, so the Manton District taxed each student one dollar for every three months of school that they attended. This enabled that district to run for more than three months of school per year. A few years later, the same district was granted their request to assess a district tax of \$1,200 in order to build a new schoolhouse. In 1850, they had a new schoolhouse and increased periods of schooling.

We can see at this point one of the problems of the district system of schooling, though. A progressive-thinking, wealthy district, like Manton, was able to get more schooling for their students and a brand new school building. Poorer, agricultural districts were stuck with fewer days of school in often inferior buildings with inadequate supplies. Other cases in point are: in 1852, Simonsville built a new school and in 1853 Hughesdale added one. These two districts were both industrial villages, which generated more wealth than the agricultural districts, meaning more money was usually available for school purposes.



The interior of the 1880 Graniteville School is pictured here in 1925. It was the second school in the village, the first being a little further west on Serrel Sweet Road. The school was heated with wood-burning stoves and featured his and hers outhouses.

As set down in the 1857 School Report, the town was taking into account the average attendance for each district in figuring out appropriations from the town and the state. This tended to equalize the funding from government sources, but of course, the amount that wealthier districts could raise was always greater. The school committee in this report also requested parents to make a greater effort to send their children to school, because absenteeism was very high. They also urged parents to show more interest by visiting their schools as often as they

could so they could observe what was going on in the classroom!

A lot was happening in certain districts, especially in the more built-up areas near Providence. Immigration was strong here because of the job opportunities in the rapidly expanding textile industry. Residents of the Olneyville District petitioned for change. In 1867, the Plain Farm District (#15) was set off from the Olneyville District. Plain Farm, in turn, was divided in 1869 when the Merino District (#16) was set off from its bounds. District #13, Hughesdale, built a new schoolhouse in 1868. The building still stands today, although much changed.

The 1871-'72 school year saw the appointment of the first Superintendent of Johnston Schools. William A. Philips filled that post and served as Superintendent until 1883. His position was part-time. He showed progressive views in that he was opposed to the districts running the schools and pushed for the abandonment of the district system from the beginning of his tenure.

Funding for the District #5 School, the Waterman District, was stopped in 1871, but it was not until 1877 that they were able to build and open a new schoolhouse for their children.

During Philips' time in office, the school population continued to grow rapidly. The Olneyville District School expanded to four rooms in 1874. The adjoining district, the Plain Farm District, also expanded that year. In 1879, District #12, Graniteville, voted to condemn their school building and to build a new one. The new one opened in 1880. During this same year, District #14 in western Johnston expanded their facilities to house thirty additional students.

At this time, money to run the schools still came from the town and from the state. The cost of erecting new buildings, expanding existing ones and purchasing of equipment was left up to the particular districts.

In 1881, all the schools were one-room buildings except for District #1, Olneyville, which had three rooms, District #15, the Plain Farm District, which had four rooms and probably District #14, which had expanded the previous year. It is not known, though, if District #14 expanded into additional rooms or just increased the size of the one room they had.

Another problem with the district system can be seen when looking at the 1881 Johnston School Report. Town appropriations for District #14, Merino, were the same as for District #4, Antioch. Merino, though, had forty-eight students on the average, while Antioch averaged eight students. This problem with the funding was one of the reasons why Superintendent Philips pushed to abolish the district system.

Curriculum and equipment improvements were also frequently made during this period. In 1874, globes were placed in all the classrooms in the town. In 1880, physiology and hygiene were added to the curriculum, while in 1882, dictionaries, encyclopedias and gazetteers were placed in all classrooms. At this time, the curriculum consisted of: reading, spelling, writing, history, arithmetic, geography and physiology.

The second superintendent of schools, J. Erastus Lester, took over in 1884. From then until 1895, when the district system was abolished, there were six different superintendents in the town. This constant turnover at the top of the school's administration, coupled with the steady increase in the number of students in town and the inherent problems with the district system, made for a relatively unstable system. An additional problem for town education was a loss of teachers in the latter years of the nineteenth century. Many of the town's best teachers left the system to teach in Providence, where average salaries were 60% higher than in Johnston.

The number of school age children increased from 1,287 in 1883 to 2,187 in 1895. In order to keep up with this great increase in the number of students, the various districts went on a vigorous expansion program. In 1885, the Olneyville and Plain Farm Districts enlarged their schools, and Olneyville added a new primary school. The town's first high school also opened in 1885, although it did not have its own building until 1891. The Manton District in 1886 added a room to their existing school, making it a two-room building, and in that same year, the Franklin District (#14) built a new schoolhouse. In 1890, Merino and Thornton had schools in the planning stage.

During the 1888-'89 school year two adjoining districts, District #2, Viall, and District #11, Thornton, decided to combine. The new district was called Thornton and was designated as District #2. The Merino District became District #11.

In 1892, the town opened a grammar school in one of the rooms of the new high school building. Up to this point, the larger districts in town had grammar schools, but the smaller districts had none. Students from these smaller districts had to travel to a larger district to attend grammar school. If there was not room, though, the grammar school was under no obligation to take in students from other districts. So, the grammar school in the new high school building meant that no student in town could be refused a grammar school education if they wanted one. This school was under the complete jurisdiction of the school committee. Having a town grammar school showed that the town was moving closing to the town system of administering the schools.

Expansion of the school system continued in the 1890s. A four-room Thornton School opened in October 1892, the Belknap District opened a new school in January 1893, and the same year Olneyville added two rooms to their new school. The Merino District opened a new school in September 1893, and the Plain Farm District opened theirs in February 1894.

Before 1893, students had to supply their own textbooks. This was a problem for the school system because many students came to school without books, and others came with books that were not recommended by the school committee. Teachers had a difficult time providing a satisfactory course of study with the inconsistency of the textbook situation. In 1893, though, the State General Assembly mandated that public schools would be truly free by requiring school committees to furnish free

textbooks and supplies for all students at the expense of the towns. In Johnston, the school committee and the superintendent spent the summer of 1893 studying the textbook situation. Money for purchasing books was allocated, and bookcases were purchased for nearly all the schools in the town. In the same year, town-wide monthly exams were instituted. At least in theory, the uniform textbooks and the monthly exams meant that students from all the schools in the town would have the same educational background and could enter the town's grammar school and high school on an equal footing.



The Hughesdale School was a typical country school. In use by 1862, it is still standing on Central Avenue and now houses Little Angel's Academy Child Care Center. Since this 1984 photograph was taken, showing that the building's cupola had been removed, an addition was added to the left side. This was the school for the Dry Brook District #13.

By 1894, there were eighteen schools and forty-three teachers in the town. The town's school system was rapidly growing, and the time was ripe for moving to the town system of schooling. William A. Phillips, the town's first superintendent of schools, had advocated for abolishing the district system as far back as 1873. A state law in 1884 permitted the towns to abolish school districts, but a vote to do this in town meetings in Johnston did not pass. The 1884 state law was amended in 1894 to permit the vote on school districts to be taken by referendum instead of in town meetings. This did the trick, and in 1895 Johnston voters approved the abolishment of the district system of schooling. A new school committee was appointed at that time, and in the following year the Rhode Island Supreme Court appointed a three person committee to appraise the schools in the districts. This committee met with district officers of the town and then reported their findings to the Supreme Court. The valuations ranged from \$328 for the Dam District #6 School to \$37,912 for the Concord Street School in the Plain Farm District #15.

Many repairs had to be made to the schools already in existence and more space had to be provided for those areas with rapidly increasing population. This problem seems to have been taken care of and the new town system was off and running. The creaky district system was quickly a distant memory.

## Evolution of Johnston School Districts, 1857-1894

District	1857	1881	1888	1890
1	Olneyville	Olneyville	Olneyville	Olneyville
2	Vial	Vial	Viall	Thornton (Thornton & Vial combined in 1888-'89)
3	Simmons' Old Mill	Simmons' Upper Village	Simmons	Simmons ville
4	Antioch	Antioch	Antioch	Antioch
5	Waterman	Waterman	Pocasset	Pocasset
6	Arnold	Dam	Dam	Dam
7	Tripptown	Manton	Manton	Manton
8	Belknap	Belknap	Belknap	Belknap
9	Bell	Bell	Bell	Bell
10	Winsor	Winsor	Winsor	Winsor
11	Simmons ville (formed in 1832)	Simmons' Lower Village	Thornton	Merino (became #11 in 1888-'89)
12	Graniteville (formed in 1841)	Graniteville	Graniteville	Graniteville
13	Dry Brook (formed in 1841)	Hughesdale	Hughesdale	Hughesdale
14	(formed in 1844 and consolidated into District 6 in 1873)	Merino (formed in 1881 or 1882)	Franklin	Franklin
15	Plain Farm (formed in 1867 out of District 1)	Plain Farm	Plain Farm	Plain Farm
16	Merino (formed in 1869, divided from District 1)	(No District 16 from this time on; see also Districts 14 and 11)		

**Notes:** School Districts #1-10 were the original school districts. The district system was abandoned in 1895 in favor of the town system of schooling. It was felt that the latter system would more readily equalize education for all children in town, and also that it would help to settle disputes concerning questions of authority.

### Lydia Waterman Knight, Governor's Wife

By Louis McGowan

On August 5, 2010, Dan Brown and I took a little road trip, visiting a few Providence cemeteries. One of the ones that we went to was The Grace Church Cemetery located at the point where Broad Street and Elmwood Avenue meet. While there we saw the gravestone for Governor Nehemiah Knight and his wife, Lydia Waterman.



Many of us know that Samuel Ward King was the only person from Johnston who was elected governor of Rhode Island. He was elected to office in 1839 and served until 1843. This was during the period that Thomas Wilson Dorr led the fight in Rhode Island to secure a constitution. We did not have one at that time because we were still operating under a charter from King Charles II of England dating back to the seventeenth century.

No one else from our town ever served as governor, but we did have a person who lived in the same house as another governor of our state. That person was Lydia Waterman, who was married to the aforementioned Nehemiah Knight, Governor of Rhode Island from 1817 to 1821 and United States Senator from Rhode Island from 1821 until 1841. Lydia was born in Johnston on August 21, 1780. Her parents were Job Waterman

and Margaret Saunders. Lydia and the future Governor Knight were married in Johnston on July 21, 1799.

### The Story of the Stones

by Steve Merolla

Following is some background information on the cemeteries worked on by the Cemetery Committee over the past few months [see page 7, this issue, for details]:

Cemetery #59 exclusively contains the remains of the family of Solomon and Eunice Thornton. Solomon was born in 1736, the son of Joseph Thornton; he married Eunice Lake in 1762. Solomon (a blacksmith) began acquiring land on the southern slope of Neutaconcanut Hill from his father and others starting in 1759, amassing an estate of some sixty acres. The Thornton house, no longer in existence, was probably located on Thornton Street, a small stretch of road across from the entrance to the Morgan Condos. Many of the children (most dying in their early 20s) and grandchildren of Solomon and Eunice are buried here. These Thornton stones were almost exclusively carved by their relative, Johnston gravestone carver Borden Thornton. Solomon died in 1811. After his wife's death in 1816, the estate was divided amongst the surviving heirs, who all sold off their shares to people outside the family. The Thorntons were probably gone from the area by the 1850s.

Cemetery #60, which adjoins #59 to the north, was more of a community burial ground, containing the remains of several families. An 1850 map of Johnston depicts at least ten houses stretching from the site of the former 1025 Club to the fork of road at School Street and Morgan Avenue, quite a heavy

concentration of residences for the time. The 1870 map of Johnston names some of the families along this stretch, including Fenners, Crothers, and Millers, members of whom are buried in #60. The cemetery itself was located on land once owned by the Crothers family. Society member Evelyn Beaumier is a Crothers descendant; she remembers the area of the condo complex as being pastureland and recalls visiting a Crothers house on Morgan Avenue, near the entrance of the complex. The house still stands, but in a greatly altered state. The Crothers emigrated to America in the 1840s during the great Irish Potato Famine; brothers William and James eventually took up residence in Johnston. William's burial site was intact, but those of his wife, Ann, and children Thomas and Mary Jane were among those disturbed when the complex was built. As a note of interest, the 1870 Census states that son Thomas Crothers was living in Providence at the time, his occupation being that of an "express wagon driver"; he must have lived in a tenement, for he is listed as living with another expressman, a carriage painter, and a machinist, all unrelated to each other. There are also nine members of the Fenner family in #60, and they were interring people in this cemetery into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Those of the later Fenner burials are the granite stones mentioned in the opening report. There are also four members of the Rounds family interred close by the Fenners. There must have been some sort of relationship between the two families; the 1870 Census lists Seth Rounds as living in Providence's Ninth Ward, occupation "working on Farm", and living in the household of Russell Fenner, whose occupation is listed simply as "restaurant." Further defining Cemetery #60 as more of a community burial ground is the fact that there are members of four other families here.

Cemetery #16 is another Thornton cemetery, the resting place of the family of Daniel (1734-1793) and Susannah Thornton. Daniel Thornton, the son of John Thornton, originally lived on his father's homestead along present-day Central Avenue, about 3/4 of a mile down from Atwood Avenue, going towards Providence. In 1760, Daniel purchased 187 acres of land in the area of Memorial Avenue and northwards, including the area of the high school and the hill about it (Sekesecut Hill). The Thornton house, built around 1760, once stood at the corner of Atwood and Memorial Avenues, just above the Mohr Library. In 1985, the house was disassembled and two years later was re-erected in Greenville, Ohio, where it was beautifully restored. Another Thornton house, that of son Solomon, was located about 1/4 mile down the road, closer to Memorial Park, but it caught fire several years ago and was demolished. Cemetery #16 is almost exclusively a burial ground for the Thornton's. There is, however, an extensive section of crude, uninscribed stones to the rear of the lot, the names of the people under them unknown. When James Arnold visited this cemetery in the 1890s, the burial sites of Daniel and Susannah were marked only by crude, uninscribed stones, but at some point afterwards the family replaced them with beautiful inscribed slate stones. Of the twenty-six marked stones here, twenty are Thorntons, but there are indications that some family members were removed elsewhere at some time in the past.



Some of the repaired and reset stones in Cemetery #60. *Photo by Christopher Martin.*

Cemetery #38 was originally a Fenner family burial ground; the Fenners first came to the area in the very beginning days of the colony, their progenitor being Captain Arthur Fenner, one of the original founders of Providence. The Fenners owned hundreds of acres of land throughout Johnston and Cranston, along an axis formed by Plainfield Street (Pike). The cemetery is named after Pardon Fenner (1753-1837), who once owned about 200 acres in this area. There are seven inscribed Fenner stones here, but there is a much larger section of uninscribed crude stones that are undoubtedly Fenner graves; in fact there is among them one crude stone with the initials "AF" carved into it. As so often happens in heavily populated areas, once the Fenners moved on, this became a community burial ground. There are stones representing over fifteen other families here. In addition, there is a small section set off with granite posts and iron rails that belongs to the Kimball family, some of whom were moved here from Cemetery #80, off Belfield Drive. An interesting point with this cemetery is that it seems as if many burials were removed from here throughout the years as families moved on to other places. James Arnold noted about six removals when he visited in 1891, and Clarence I. Brown, in 1907, stated that he was told that the Wilcox family was removed, though their stones were still left lying about. Also, he relates that members of the Williams and Simmons family were removed from the very front of the cemetery. These Simmons' are almost surely relatives of James F. Simmons, the wealthy mill owner and U.S. Senator who built the great cloumned mansion barely a quarter mile away; these and the rest of the family are now in North Burial Ground. This cemetery has been difficult to restore because both gravestones and bases have been dug up and thrown about, sure signs of grave removals, this situation occurring mostly towards the back of the cemetery. There are many children's stones strewn about, and it is likely that they are removals, the clue being that none of their parents are buried with them in this lot. It seems that once the parents moved from the area, they took their children's remains at some point. It could be that these people were more transients, working in the many mills in the area. Through research, some of these children have been located in other cemeteries with their parents, though they also have a set of stones here. This situation could involve about half a dozen child burials. Curiously, in this and other cemeteries, the families usually left the gravestones behind after removing their loved ones, thereby confounding those coming along at a later date trying to restore these burial grounds.





Many of the floors in Mabel Sprague's house were covered with decorative, but very worn, oilcloth sheets instead of rugs. When Anthony Ricci began cleaning out Mabel's house he found, hidden under the oilcloths, dozens and dozens of pages from local newspapers. The ad above comes from the November 23, 1963, *Providence Evening Bulletin*. The location of the Carillion Supper Club is now occupied by Johnston Fire Station #1.

### Alburta D. Sweet Found Dead in Barn.

*Transcribed by Beth Hurd from a circa December 1905 Providence Journal clipping found in the Mohr Library.*

Alburta D. Sweet, one of the best known milk dealers in the Olneyville section, was found dead yesterday afternoon in his barn near his home at 223 Lowell avenue. He left the house to fire his automobile and some time later Mrs. Sweet called to him and then visited the barn and at that time the man was seemingly lifeless. A hurry call was sent for physicians and in short order there were two in attendance, but he was beyond all help. The police were notified and Medical Examiner Perkins summoned.

Mr. Sweet appeared in the best of health and the news of his sudden death was a shock to the entire community, where he was so well known. For many years he was in the milk business and for some years lived on Wallace street. It had been his intention to ride in his automobile yesterday and from the position of the body it is believed he was stricken while attending to the machine.

Mr. Sweet was 42 years of age and had one daughter. His brother, Otis Sweet, died some months ago. When the news of the sudden death was communicated to the police Capt. Howe sent an officer to care for the body until the arrival of the Medical Examiner, who later pronounced death due to heart failure. The deceased at the death of his brother came in for a fortune estimated \$40,000.

### Society Doings

#### Annual Picnic

On September 12, 2010, we had our annual picnic on the grounds of the Elijah Angell House. Thirty members and family attended the event. We had the usual hot dogs and hamburgers as well as some delicious homemade pastries, salads and finger foods. A good time was had by all as we spent an enjoyable few hours talking and eating.

### Rhody Award Given to Johnston Historical Society

On Thursday, October 21, 2010, our society was presented with a 2010 Rhody Award for Excellence in Preservation Work for our Belknap School Restoration. President Louis McGowan, Vice-President Daniel Brown and Restoration Contractor Warren Lanpher attended the event along with their wives, Belmira, Nancy and Ellen. The presentation took place at the International Tennis Hall of Fame in Newport. Following a silent auction and some wonderful hors-d'oeuvres, the crowd gathered in the newly restored Stanford White Theater in the back of the complex. All the movers and shakers in the preservation world seemed to be there. Louis, Danny and Warren sat on the stage with other award winners. In our category, the awards were given out to the Beavertail Lighthouse, Salve Regina University, the Breakers and us, so we were in pretty good company. While the awards program was running, a slide show of the projects was projected onto the stage. It was a thrill to see our little school up there with the gates of the Breakers and the other worthy projects.

The awards are given out yearly by Preserve Rhode Island and the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission. The commission, of course, processed the State Preservation Grant which gave us the money to restore the interior of the school. The exterior of the school was restored a few years back with a Champlin Foundations Grant.

#### 2010 Harvest Tea

On November 6, 2010, we held a Harvest Tea at the Smith/Appleby House. It was a rousing success. The house was beautifully decorated by our group, and the fire in the keeping room kept us nice and toasty. There were plenty of appetizers, scones, sandwiches, desserts, and, of course, tea.

Pat Perry was our guest speaker for the event. She looked wonderful in her Victorian outfit as she went from room to room educating us about tea etiquette and the meaning of flowers. Everyone loved her presentation. She also told us that she felt that this was the best-run and best-organized tea that she could remember, and that we had the most food for the guests of any that she had ever been to.



Pat Perry (left) demonstrates proper tea etiquette. *Photo by Christopher Martin.*

A huge thank you goes to Bel McGowan, who worked flat out for one week getting this event together (the following day she slept for fourteen hours). But as with any event like this, it could not have happened without the hard work of a lot of other people. Bel's sister, Ida Silva, made a bunch of desserts. Other people who made food items were: Ellen Lanpher, Liz Burch, Alice Lombardi, Pauline Rameiri, Elise Carlson and Lori Lemoi. Flower arrangements were made by Liz Burch and Pauline Ramieri. John Barratini made the very professional looking invitations. Lori Lemoi and Anthony Ricci generously donated items to the raffle and the silent auction. Sharon and Rick Rogers kindly made a financial contribution. Working in the kitchen and serving that day were: Bel, Ida, Ida's daughter Janet and her boyfriend Dave, Pauline, Lori and her daughter Stephanie and her friend Kristen; Liz, Elise Carlson and her son Eric, Joe Jamroz and Louis McGowan.

Many thanks to all who attended the event, bought raffle tickets and bid in the silent auction. And, of course, thank you to Maggie Botelho and the Historical Society of Smithfield who let us have their wonder building for the afternoon.

### **Our Properties**

In October 2010 Warren Lanpher installed a ca. 1810 mantel in the bedroom on the first floor of the Elijah Angell House. The mantel was rescued from the T. Brown House on Hartford Avenue across from Reservoir Avenue. The State D.E.M. tore down the house to make way for the new fire station, but a couple of years ago they let us take the mantel for our headquarters. It was the only old mantel in the house, which underwent many changes over the years during its use first as a residence and later as a commercial tourist home. The mantel was painted the same blue as the rest of the woodwork in the room, and it looks great in its "new" home.

We're sad to report that we had to have the tree taken down that stood on the west side of the Belknap School for many years. We had two tree companies look at the tree, and they both reported that it was 60% dead. We could see there was a problem, because during the last wind storm many branches fell to the ground. Liability was an issue because many of the tree branches were hanging over the adjoining property where the owner had vintage cars parked. The contractor is going to come back and spread wood chips around the north and east sides of the building. We spread chips around most of the building this past spring, and it really cut down on the weeds.

Our museum and Elijah Angell House continue to be open by appointment, and we always welcome visits by interested individuals or groups. Just shoot us an email at [info@johnstonhistorical.org](mailto: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.

### **Cemetery Committee Report**

by Steve Merolla

The story this past summer for the Cemetery Committee was double cemeteries #59/60, located next to the Morgan Avenue Condos complex. This double burial ground was quite overgrown, so the Committee spent much of June clearing brush, cleaning, and locating fallen stones. Cemetery #59 contains the remains of the Thornton family, chiefly Solomon Thornton and his descendants. Since most of the stones here were from the late 18th and early nineteenth centuries, all but two were made of slate, the final tally being twenty-three slates and two marbles. None of the slates needed to be repaired; in fact slates rarely break unless vandalized. We did however straighten and raise many of these early stones, since slates have no bases and tend to sink into the ground and tip. We did repair one marble stone and its pass-through base.

Cemetery #60 required much more work. All the stones were marbles, many were broken, and many were also displaced far from where they originally stood. We speculate that when the condo complex was built, the northern part of this cemetery was infringed upon. It is possible that up to six burials are now under the lawn of the complex. The stones that once marked the burials were tossed into the main part of the cemetery and the original burial sites covered up. However, we did in fact erect these stones in the main part of the cemetery even though they are no longer over the actual burials.

The Committee worked on these two cemeteries (mostly #60) from the beginning of June until the first week of October, sometimes even toiling there on weekdays. In all, a total of eighteen visits were made. In #60 we repaired five headstones and mortared into their bases twenty-two headstones and eleven footstones. Two items of note: Three large granite headstones had been toppled over and were propped against their tall bases for many years; each one probably weighed about 1/4 ton apiece. How we were going to get these heavy granites on top of their bases again was a problem that was always in the back of our minds. The solution was an engine hoist that was kindly lent to us by Steve's neighbor, Steve Scoco. With a little bit of trial and error, and no one getting hurt, the job was done. We all felt that this was the crowning achievement of the work done here. In this cemetery we also tackled for the first time the issue of missing bases. The larger marble headstones almost always had brownstone bases that had keyways or slots cut into them into which the stone was placed and mortared. Five of the large marble stones were missing their bases (both headstone and footstone). This was another indication that these burials had been disturbed. Even though gravestones may topple and break, the heavy bases, buried in the ground, almost always remain in their original locations. In fact, we use the bases as locators for stones that have been displaced. The fact that these bases could never be located was further proof that burials were disturbed and covered over with fill. We could have simply dug the displaced headstones into the ground but this would have been unsatisfactory because it would have meant that parts of the inscriptions would have been buried. Instead, we made bases out of concrete, even making keyways to set the stones into. The result was quite satisfactory. Finally, the signs for these

two cemeteries were removed from a nearby tree and mounted on signposts. A special thanks to condo residents Dan and Agatha Ford, who supplied us with bottled water and moral support during the hot summer months. Dan always used to say that he liked the location of his dwelling because the neighbors in the cemetery were so quiet.

The Committee next moved to Cemetery #16, another Thornton lot, this located on Atwood Avenue, just above the new soccer complex near the high school. The crew made three visits here, all in October, and repaired two headstones, mortaring into their bases a total of twelve headstones and eight footstones.



The next stop was Cemetery #38, the Pardon Fenner Cemetery, also located on Atwood Avenue, but further south towards St. Rocco's Church. It is situated on a hill at the corner of Atwood and Shaw Avenues. In five visits beginning in late October and finishing up just before Thanksgiving, the Committee repaired two headstones and mortared into their bases fifteen headstones and nine footstones. In addition, a further three headstones and two footstones were buried into the ground, as they originally were. In addition, most of the slate stones were raised and straightened.

As usual a word of thanks and appreciation to the members of the Committee, who have donated their time every Sunday morning for months on end: Pat Macari, Doug Stephens, Anthony Ricci, Anthony Ursillo, Tim Kee and Steve Merolla, along with new member Billy Rotondo and returning old-time member Everett "stonedog" Cogswell.

[Please see also Steve's article on the stories behind these cemeteries on page 4 of this issue.]

It's never too late to adopt one of Johnston's one-hundred or so historical cemeteries. 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 the Johnston Historical Society at (401) 231-3380 or [info@johnstonhistorical.org](mailto:info@johnstonhistorical.org), or Steve Merolla at (401) 944-3412.

### Speakers

Thirty five members and guests attended our September meeting, kicking off our Fall schedule. The meeting was held at the Belknap School, and the evening went very well. We sat in our new chairs, purchased with a grant from The Harvard Pilgrim Foundation, courtesy of Christopher Martin. Warren Lanpher was our guest speaker, and he did a great job taking us through the restoration of both the exterior of the school and the recently finished interior restoration. It feels good being in the restored space, and it took us aback a little to see the views of the school as it was before the restoration began.

In the future we hope to hold general meetings at the school at least twice a year.

Dave O'Brien, of Picture This Framing, was our guest speaker at our October 2010 general meeting. He entertained us with an interesting and informative talk on historic maps. Part of his talk focused on details of historic local maps, but he also told us about care of maps and purchasing maps. It was a great talk.

### Acquisitions

- Three desks and two chairs for the school, purchased by Louis from Putnam Antiques Center and Vinny's Antiques in Seekonk.
- A selection of local history books, received from the Marian Mohr Library in September. The library will be moving into new quarters soon and it was decided that these particular books would be more appropriately housed with our society.
- An older bureau, re-habbed by Rolf Johnson.
- A new folding table to be used at the school, donated by Dan and Nancy Brown.
- A Crandall's Dairy milkman's order form pad (probably from the 1950s), a program for a performance at Dyer's Opera House in Olneyville Square, an 1874 broadside advertising a concert by the Brown University Quartette [*sic*] at Irons Hall in Olneyville Square (Johnston at that time), a photograph of Johnston's own "Paladin," Victor DeCosta, one trade card for the Samuel Fitch Manufacturing Company (textile manufacturing) from Thornton, one 1850s business letter from Edward Hopkins to A.B. Sweet, and two matchbook covers from Johnston (Thornton Pharmacy and Ferri's Tavern), all purchased online by Louis.

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

### Donation

A \$200 donation was given to our group by the Color Reflections Compaby from Philadelphia. It was for work done by Louis McGowan in helping them to construct a mural for the new TD Bank that just opened on Atwood Avenue. The mural, based on one of the photographs of the Our Lady of Grace Feast from our collection, now hangs in the bank.

### Wish List

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

- A small cube refrigerator
- Display cases
- 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.

### December 1, 2010

General Meeting

7pm

Our speaker will be Thomas D'Agostino, author of numerous books on the paranormal, including *Haunted Rhode Island* and *Ghost Stories Of New England*. He'll be discussing Rhode Island legends and haunts, including the ghost of Ramtail Factory, local vampires, Nine Men's Misery, Hannah Robinson Rock, and the bones of William Blackstone.

### December 4, 2010

Belknap School Open House

Our historic 1892 one-room schoolhouse will be open to the public one last day before being secured for the winter. Come on down and see displays on Johnston school history...

### December 10, 2010

Christmas Open House

7-9pm

Elijah Angell House, 101 Putnam Pike. Come in from the cold, traveler, and join the Johnston Historical Society for candlelight, yuletide music, and refreshments in their restored 1824 farmhouse. The adjacent Johnston History Museum, housed in a replica post-and-beam barn, will also be open. Free.

### January 26, 2011

General Meeting

7pm

Society president Louis McGowan will give a presentation on "Treasures from our Archives."

### February 23, 2011

General Meeting

7pm

Society vice-president Danny Brown will give another presentation on presidential trivia.

### March 30, 2011

General Meeting

7pm

Raymond A. Wolf, author of *Lost Villages of Scituate* and *The Scituate Reservoir* will be our speaker.

### April 9, 2011

The 2nd Great Johnston Scavenger Hunt -- rescheduled from August

11:30am-5pm

Elijah Angell House, 101 Putnam Pike. Think you know Johnston well? Test your knowledge against that of other teams and individuals in the second annual town-wide scavenger hunt! Use digital cameras and cell phones to capture images of items from our extensive list of common and not-so-common objects. Prizes will be awarded and refreshments will be served. \$8 donation per team, payable on day of the event. Rain date: April 10. Call (401) 943-6961 or email [cscm@toast.net](mailto:cscm@toast.net) for more information.

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](mailto:info@johnstonhistorical.org) or leave a message at (401) 231-3380.

### Open House Days at the Museum

Beginning Sunday, October 17, 2010, the JHS museum barn will be open on the third Sunday of every month from 2 to 4pm. The museum is also open every Monday evening from 6:30 to 8:30pm.

### 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: March 15, 2011.**

**Our Executive Board**

President: Louis McGowan  
Vice-President: Dan Brown  
Treasurer: Joe Jamroz  
Recording Secretary: Evelyn Beaumier  
Corresponding Secretary: Christopher Martin  
Trustee: Bel McGowan  
Trustee: Rolf Johnson  
Trustee: John Barattini  
Trustee: Kit Rhodes

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 Building.

Our phone number is: (401) 231-3380  
Our website address is: [www.JohnstonHistorical.org](http://www.JohnstonHistorical.org)  
Our email address is: [Info@JohnstonHistorical.org](mailto:Info@JohnstonHistorical.org)

**Annual Dues**

Have you paid your 2010 dues yet? It's that time again. 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 2010 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.

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