

Johnston Historical Society

Historical Notes

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www.JohnstonHistorical.org

November 2019

The Borden Houses on Neutaconkanut Hill by Steve Merolla

In our last newsletter the story of one branch of the Borden family on Neutaconkanut Hill was related in some detail. This branch of the family occupied the southern and southeastern edge of the Hill, an area stretching from the site of the former 1025 Club, along Plainfield Street and over to the bottom of Central/Sunset Avenue. The Borden family occupied the area for about 170 years, from 1659 to 1829.

When the Borden's left the locale, what did they leave behind? They obviously built dwellings and other outbuildings associated with farmsteads. There are three actual depictions of houses on maps dating from the early- to mid-nineteenth century. One house is depicted (c.1830 map) as lying along that short stretch of Killingly Street below Central/Sunset Avenue that meanders to Plainfield Street, on the south side of the street and near to the fenced Little League field along the road. That house is gone.



The Borden family houses. The gambrel attached to the barn at left may have been the oldest remaining house in the City of Providence at the time.

Two other houses depicted on maps from the nineteenth century did however survive into the twentieth century. These were located close together at the bend in Plainfield Street just across from Silver Lake Avenue. These houses were built by the Borden family, but for many years they were associated with the King family and the King Estate. The last member of the Borden family to own the property sold it off to John King in 1829. From that point onwards and on into the twentieth century the Kings would own the houses in question. The last member of the King family to occupy the estate was Abbie Allen King, who died in 1915. Miss King was single and thus had no direct heirs, so she left the two houses and three acres of land around them to Louise

E. Blankenburg, as a life estate. Miss Blankenburg was a close friend of the family, and it is said that there may have also been some blood ties to the Kings. A *Providence Journal* article of March 22, 1953, titled "Vandalism Threatens Rhode Island Landmark" tells part of the story of the fate of the structures on the property. The article stated that Miss Blankenburg was then 79 years of age and in failing health; the structures were in a state of decline also. Miss Blankenburg's companion was her niece, Miss Esther Blankenburg, and at that time she was appealing for help from the City of Providence because of consistent brush fires on the Hill and problems with vandalism. The Blankenburgs obtained verbal support at least from Providence historian and architect John Hutchinson Cady and Miss Antoinette Downing.

As stated, there were two houses on the property. William Borden, who died in 1824, was said to have been built the larger of the two between 1785 and 1800. The probate map (drawn in 1827) for Huldah Borden, wife of William, describes this structure as "the new house," but that description must be taken into the context of the age of the older house nearby. The *Journal* story of 1953 states that this "newer" house was built in 1793, but while providing no supporting evidence for that build date, it is possible it is a fairly accurate statement. The two Blankenburg women were living in this particular house, which was said to be in a "good state of preservation." The greatest amount of interest however was generated by the smaller, older of the two houses. John Hutchinson Cady felt that it was constructed between 1705 and 1740. The house was a small gambrel that consisted of one room on the first floor and one room on the second floor, with no running water or electricity. A barn was attached to the west end of the house but with the original side of the house still in place. The *Journal* article stated that various scholars studied the building and felt that it should be preserved as an example of early Rhode Island architecture. At the time, the little gambrel was likely the oldest dwelling house still in existence in the City of Providence. If the build date proposed by Cady is correct, then the house most likely would have been built by Richard Borden (b. 1687, d. 1768) or possibly even his father, also named Richard (b. 1663, d. 1724).

A *Providence Journal* article was written about two years later, on January 28, 1955, entitled "Urge Mayor save King House from its Impending Demolition, Historical Sites Group, Architect in plea for the Oldest Building in Providence." The article indicates that the situation had become critical, and in fact the decision may have already been made to demolish the structures. The article stated that the R.I. Development Council, John Hutchinson Cady, and Clarkson A. Collins 3rd (secretary of the

Historical Sites Committee and R.I. Historical Society librarian) urged Providence Mayor Reynolds to at least save the small gambrel. Mr. Cady had visited the site just a day before the article was published, along with members of the city administration, and determined that the gambrel had deteriorated very badly in the last year. Cady felt that it would be acceptable to demolish all the other structures on the site, except for the gambrel, and that wood from the other buildings could be used to restore the old house. Mr. Cady also proposed that the gambrel could be used as a park shelter or museum. Unfortunately, as with many similar cases concerning historical buildings and historical sites, it seemed to boil down to a question of money. Mayor Reynolds stated that the cost to restore and maintain the gambrel was too costly during tight financial times. The mayor also mentioned that over the past couple of years proposals were made to save the buildings from demolition, but that these plans never came with an offer of funding for the project. He also stated that restrictions in the deed prohibited any of the structures from being rented or moved.



The ill-fated gambrel. *Providence Journal* photo.

The mayor's argument may or may not have been accurate; all of us in the historical community have experienced similar situations. It is usually rare for state, city, or town governments to step forward in order to save historical structures and sites. Most of the time they are unwilling/unable to provide the funding necessary for preservation and maintenance. Not knowing the true financial situation in Providence at the time, perhaps a judgment can't be made, but one aspect of the story is troubling, and that has to do with the supposed deed restriction stating that the structures could neither be rented nor moved. Perhaps this roadblock could have been overcome if the political will was there; if an entity were willing to move the old gambrel, it would not have cost the city any money. Considering that the old gambrel was thought to be the oldest structure in the city, and the significance of that fact alone, it seems the deed restriction could have been overcome. I should think that Abbie Allen King would have been in agreement with that outcome, rather than the demolition of the whole site.

The sad end of this story was related in a *Providence Journal* article of March 11, 1955, only about a month and a half after the last efforts to save the buildings on the estate. Titled "King Homestead Demolished; May Have Been City's Oldest," the story reads in part: "Despite the pleas of the Historical Sites Committee of the R.I. Development Council and a Providence architect to save and restore the place as a tourist attraction, the city, present owner of the estate, went through with its plans to demolish the five wooden structures that sat unassumingly on the Plainfield Street side of Neutaconkanut Hill." It was further related that the buildings were burned or buried, but most of the work was done with a concrete wrecking ball. In just 3 1/2 hours there was just a heap of rubble remaining, most of it trucked off to a pit somewhere along Killingly Street. The article also mentioned that the only vestiges left of the estate were the wrought iron gates along the street, but sadly these too are now gone.

As disappointing as this final outcome was, just as deflating is the fact that it seems as if no comprehensive architectural drawings or photographs were made of the old gambrel, especially considering many architects and preservationists were involved in the story. Perhaps such was done and these records have gone missing over time, but if not so, it was a glaring oversight on the part of nearly all involved. Though much of the estate was a part of Providence at the time these events occurred, from 1759 until the late nineteenth century, this area and its inhabitants were a part of the town of Johnston and woven into the fabric of our town's history.

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### Town of Johnston Timeline: 1700s

March 15, 1759 (or March 6, 1759)  
Following a 1758 petition to the General Assembly, Johnston (named in honor of Augustus Johnston, Esquire, the attorney-general of Rhode Island) was taken from Providence and incorporated as a town.

April 18, 1759  
Abraham Belknap was appointed as the town's first Town Sergeant at the first Town Meeting, held at Benjamin Belknap's house on Greenville Avenue in Belknap.

1771  
The Baptist Meeting House in Belknap opened. It is thought to be the first place of worship in Johnston.

1776  
The only powder mill ever erected in Rhode Island was completed in Graniteville. It blew up in 1779.

March 29, 1779  
On the occasion of his departure for New York, Major General John Sullivan was given a public dinner in Johnston by his companions in arms.

May 22, 1786  
Future governor Samuel Ward King was born in Johnston, the son of William Borden King and Welthian Walton.

1788

Christopher Olney built an iron mill (rolling and slitting) in the Olneyville section of Johnston.

1790

The Belknap School, thought to be the first school in Johnston, opened.

1794

The Providence and Norwich Turnpike (today's Plainfield Pike) was chartered.

September 10, 1795

James Fowler Simmons, future United States Senator for whom the Johnston village of Simmonsville would be named, was born in Little Compton.

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### Society Doings

#### New Computer

A new computer was delivered to the Society on September 13. A \$1,500 2019 Rhode Island House Grant sponsored by State Representative Deb Felella paid for the system. We'll use the computer to document and organize our archives and collections.

#### Anthony Ursillo Birthday Fundraiser

On September 15 and 22, 2019, Anthony Ursillo and Tim Kee opened their home, the historic circa 1798/1833 Shang Bailey Roadhouse, also known as the former Log Gift Shoppe, for an open house fundraiser. Visitors were able to tour the first floor (extensively renovated by JHS member and restoration carpenter Warren Lanpher of Circa 1700 Inc.), as well as the second floor. 125 people attended on the first date, and 115 on the second. Donations amounted to about \$5,000, and Anthony reported that additional checks were still being received as of our October 30th general meeting.

#### New Intern

Lisa Bianco, an intern from the Rhode Island College History Department public history course, started working with us the third week in September. She's been transcribing old town records.

#### JHS Yard Sale

We held another yard sale at our headquarters on October 12, 2019. It was well attended and we made \$709. Some of the better items that didn't sell will be offered online. Thank you to all who donated stuff to sell (including Arthur Ianelli, who donated many household items), and those who came out to help with set-up. Thank you especially to Danny Brown for spearheading the effort.

#### Blood Drive

We're attempting to put together a blood drive. Not only would it benefit public health, but it could also increase our visibility in the community, bringing in folks who may not be aware that Johnston even has a historical society. The Rhode Island Blood Center requires us to have at least fifteen people signed up before

they will even come out to evaluate our site. Presuming we pass muster, the blood drive would then be held at our headquarters about three months later. So if you live locally and are interested in donating blood at our site, please contact us by phone or email so we can add you to the list. Thanks!

#### 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

The Graniteville War Memorial Association had a gathering at the memorial on August 17th. Our museum barn was opened to them afterwards for "coffee and" at their request.

#### Angell House on TV

On August 23, 2019, a production crew from the Travel Channel used Elijah Angell House as a filming location for the show "Most Terrifying Places in America." No, Angell House isn't on that list, but a few of its rooms doubled nicely for the Burrillville farmhouse known as "The Conjuring" House, upon which the 2013 film of the same name was based. The Society received a \$150 donation for use of the house, and the show aired Halloween night. Did you see it?



The spooky cast of Most Terrifying Places in America posed in front of our Museum barn. Photo by Elise Carlson.

The Mohr Library Genealogy Club toured Elijah Angell House and the Museum on November 13.

**NEW HOURS:** Our museum barn is open Tuesdays, 6:30-8:30pm; 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

Patrick Donovan from Varnum Armory was our speaker for September. He told us interesting stories about various objects held in the Armory's collection.

In October Slater Mill docent Carl Johnson gave a talk titled "Lovecraft: Rhode Island's (In?) Famous Son," focusing on the horror writer's relationship with his home state.

One change instituted by new Society President Elise Carlson has been to switch the order of the meetings. Previously we started with the business meeting, then a break of about fifteen minutes for socializing and refreshments, then our speaker. While folks enjoy the speaking portion of the evening very much, it was sometimes difficult to gather and settle everyone after the break. So the change, putting the speaking program directly after the business meeting, is to allow people to socialize as long as they want at the end of the evening. The switch has been well received so far, and will continue for the foreseeable future.

### Acquisitions

- Christopher Martin donated a clothes hanger from Lanzi Furs, a Johnston business founded in 1966.
- A 1775 tavern license was purchased on eBay.
- Christopher Martin donated a brass etching of Clemence Irons House.

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 J.H.S. Cemetery Committee basically wrapped up a huge effort in Cemetery #7, as was related in our last newsletter, the group moved on to another burial lot, that being #69, on the premises of the new Citizens Bank campus. This particular lot is the burying ground of the Belknap family. It was at the house of Benjamin Belknap that the first Town Meeting of the newly incorporated town of Johnston was held, in 1759. The house once

stood at the corner of Pine Hill Road and Greenville Avenue but was torn down in 1999. It may seem a bit odd that the family dwelling house was located so far away from the cemetery, but it must be taken into consideration that the Belknap farm encompassed about 500 acres.



Some of the stones in JN069 were knocked down so long ago, they'd sunk deep into the ground. *Photo by Steve Merolla.*

Many generations of the Belknap family are buried in this cemetery, and there is an odd quirk to its layout. In every other older historical cemetery in town, and indeed throughout the state, the burials are laid out in an east-west orientation; however, in the Belknap lot the graves are oriented in a north-south manner. At this point in time we have no explanation as to this discrepancy.



The same stone uncovered; it turns out to belong to Aldana Lyon, who passed away in 1897. *Photo by Steve Merolla.*

The Committee really began work here at the beginning of July with a regimen of cleaning and brush clearing. With just a few exceptions all of our work outings were spent in this cemetery up until the middle of November, when our work was basically completed. In that four month span the Committee made twenty visits to this cemetery; in the course of those visits we repaired five headstones and re-set twenty-two headstones. As for footstones, two were repaired and eight were re-set. The very back (or southern end) of the cemetery is the oldest section and



**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

Speaker TBD.

**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.

**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, 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 7pm in the Museum building, 101 Putnam Pike, on the second to the last Wednesday of each month, September through June (except December). All are welcome to attend.

General Meetings are held at 7pm the last Wednesday of each month, September through June (no December meeting. We hold our Holiday Party that month). The meetings are held in the Museum Barn.

Phone: (401) 231-3380  
Website: www.JohnstonHistorical.org  
Email: johnstonhistorical1825@gmail.com  
Facebook: www.facebook.com/johnstonhistorical

**Annual Dues**

Have you paid your 2019 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 2019 dues. Send us a check today!

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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.

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