

Johnston Historical Society

Historical Notes

Vol. XXVIII, #1

Christopher Martin, Editor

April 2022

The Woodman's Fire

by S.B. Keach

Reprinted from the May 14, 1896 issue of
The Cultivator and Country Gentleman

Sometimes the tragedies of life occur when the tragic is unlooked for. The deadliest peril lurks where danger is least apparent. In the peaceful pursuits of agriculture, if anywhere, safety might seem to abide. Yet the farmer, about his daily work, may suddenly find that an undreamed-of danger has followed him from field to field, clinging about him as closely in his shadow.



This main incident in this article took place in the area that is now known as Snake Den State Park.

Photo by Christopher Martin (April 5, 2022).

Once, when a boy, I saw the terrible shape of such a danger, as it burst from its hiding and transfixed me with horror by his grim reality. An elderly man and a young man, with other helpers, were at work in the woods. The boy was at play. There was no thought but of safety in the environment of the quiet woodlands. Some heavy logs were to be loaded upon a wagon, for there was no snow on the ground. Surveys for a railroad had been made through the woods a year previous. A heavy cut was necessary, and several wells from forty to sixty feet deep had been sunk to test the character of the lower strata of soil. One of them was close by, but bushes had grown up and partly concealed its mouth. Nobody thought of it. A yoke of oxen, with a horse ahead, were to draw a great log up the skids. The young man was

at the horse's head, grasping the bridle, urging the animals to pull with all their strength, and walking backward -- backward straight toward the well, to its very edge. The older man saw the danger and shouted, while the lever he held fell from his trembling hands. The warning call was in time. The young man sprang away -- but another step, another second! The young man (young then) was my brother.

Once again a frightful danger flashed before my eyes for an instant, and the next instant was gone. It was in the meadow, just before sunset. The long day's work of haying was almost over. The last great load of hay was on the wagon, and the horses were ready to start for the barn. The reins were lying on the ground. Supposing the builder of the load would remain on the top of it and drive home, a young lad, ever ready to help when his help was not demanded, thought he would hand the lines up to him. He was just lifting the reins with a long-tined pitchfork, when the builder slid swiftly from the high load to the ground, striking his hands between the gleaming tines, and thrusting the fork aside -- but another instant, the swerving of a hand's breadth! The young lad (young then) was myself.

My readers may have often heard, as Hawthorne did, "airy footsteps of the strange things that almost happen." But it is the danger that does not pass by like an arrow wide of its mark, the event called accident, -- is which all things seem guided by the stern hand of fate to a horrible conclusion, -- that is told one day in the newspapers and forgotten the next.

Soldiers and sailors expect to encounter dangers, and say their farewells as if they were to be final; yet sometimes they survive all perils for years, while the graves of some left on the farm are marked by crumbling headstones.

A story of two young wood-choppers takes me back to the early [eighteen]-seventies. It is a sad tale, but indented to the exact truth for all its pathos. As a journalist, I learned the facts personally, otherwise I might have doubted their verity. On such a theme, fictitious embellishment would be as unpardonable as it is unnecessary.

The Gideon Brown farm, also called the William Waterman farm, and still more frequently "Fox Hunter Bill's" place, is situated in the town of Johnston, Rhode Island. It lies about a mile and a half from the village of Greenville, and midway upon a crossroad leading from the Bell school-house to the Hartford turnpike. The section is a lonely one, sparsely inhabited. In the

winter of 187-, Wm. H. Mathewson had charge of the farm, upon which was an extensive tract of woodland. In the woods were great ledges, known as "snake-den rocks."

Henry C. Smith applied to Mr. Mathewson for work. Almost simultaneously George H. Drew appeared and made a similar application. Both were engaged to chop wood by the cord, and they at once went to work in company in the woods near the "snake-den rocks."

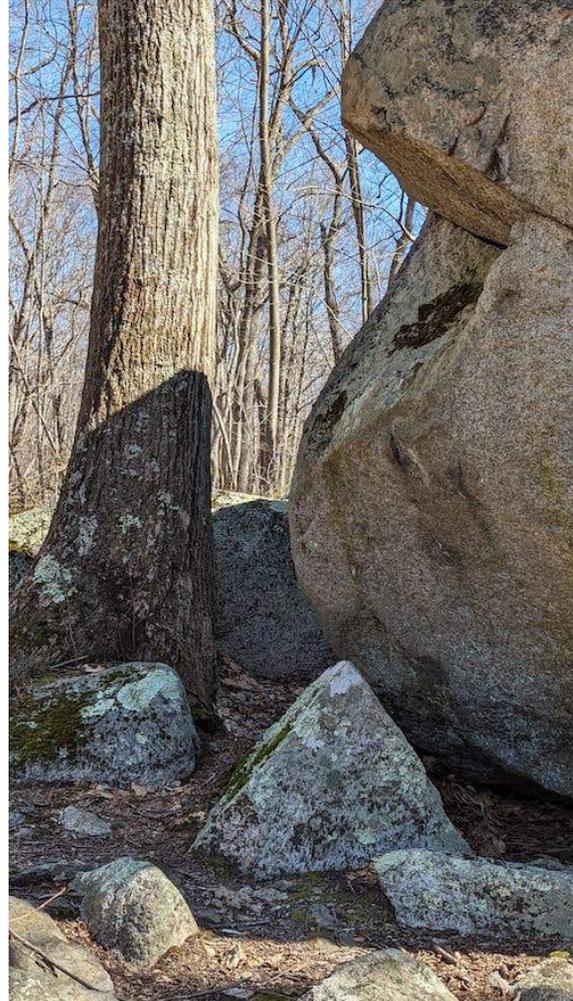
Both were from New Hampshire, where they had known each other, but neither was aware that the other was in Rhode Island. From the devious ways that had separated them since boyhood, their paths converged and brought them together, in this out-of-the-way place. Drew, thirty-five years old, having employment in Providence, started out manfully and got work of any kind. He had spoken to his employer about a tenement, and the first money he received for chopping wood was to be taken to bring his wife and child there from New Hampshire. Smith, only twenty-eight years old, was no stranger to ill luck. He was in the army, where he had both legs broken, three ribs crushed, and was dangerously wounded by a bullet. He had been employed as a jeweler in Boston, but the great fire of that year drove him out to seek such other work as he could find. Both men were good Templars; they were uncrowned heroes, real knights of labor, struggling against odds to earn an honest living. Such heroism deserves better recognition than a few prosaic lines in newspapers and nameless graves.

The men worked steadily, and made quite an opening in the woods with their axes. They boarded with Charles Tefft, so far away that they carried their dinners, and had a fire in the woods to keep the food from freezing. The Saturday that ended their first week of labor was bitterly cold. Within the clearing made by the choppers was an immense rock, some 20 feet across, and rising 8 or 9 feet from the ground. On the southerly side of this rock, where a slight depression made the position apparently a favorable one, they kept a comfortable fire that day. They were not warmly clad; the cloth boots that Drew wore were but a poor protection from the extreme cold. The knoll upon which they were, was exposed to the winds. As the biting blasts swept the leafless woods, no doubt the men were fain to shrink from their pitiless force to the warm shelter close at hand. No doubt they heaped on the deadwood and warmed themselves in the genial heat, while the ruddy flames mounted high against the rugged rock.

As late as the middle of the afternoon of that day, William Gallup, passing through the woods, saw the men at their work, and their fire burning brightly. His was the last human voice they heard.

Sunset of the brief winter's day. Their work is done. They have made the most of the week. They will warm themselves for a few minutes and have a friendly smoke together. One takes out his big pocket-knife and fills his pipe. The other brings his ax, cuts fresh material to replenish the fire, and lays the ax down at his feet. They sit close to the glowing flames, maybe retelling bright pictures they used to see in boyhood in "the hollow down by the ffute (?)" perhaps talking about absent wife, child, or sweetheart. The winds sob through the lonely woods, and whirl the dead

leaves over their heads, but no voice or sound brings to their ears a warning of hidden danger.



One possible candidate for the deadly boulder.
Photo by Elise Carlson (March 14, 2022).

Above them hangs the bald and frowning rock. A seam, narrow but deep, runs across the side beneath which the fire leaps and rears (?). The granite that has never yielded to the frosts of a thousand winters, fuels the power of the intense heat. Why do they linger here?

Suddenly a huge fragment of the rock, loosened by the heat, fell over upon them. Smith must have been killed instantly, crushed to a shapeless mass by the weight estimated at four tons. Drew was caught and crushed under the rock, leaving only his right hand at liberty. His ax lay within reach. He grasped it and cut the boot and stocking from his right foot, tearing the mangled limb from beneath the rock. But the terrible weight remained upon his body, pressing out his life, its heated surface roasting him alive. How long he endured such inconceivable torture can only be conjectured. At last, he cut his throat with the ax, and ended his agony.

The men did not come to their supper Saturday evening. Sunday -- and still they were absent. Mr. Tefft came to ask Mr. Brown if he had seen them. Mr. Brown had not seen them, neither had Mr. Matthewson. Among them they concluded the men had got tired

of their job and left. Being strangers, this was an accepted explanation. Monday they were found, and inquest held, and the horrible truth became known. Among the poor possessions of Smith were letters to and from "Maggie" -- mute and pitiful evidences of unrealized hopes.

The sufferings of the last surviving victim must have been dreadful beyond conception. How long they were borne no human being can tell. Did visions of wife and child flit before him then, adding bitterness to his full cup of anguish? As night descended upon that windswept knoll, every ray of light or hope for him went out. All around in distant, scattered farm houses, family circles are gathering around cheerful firesides. Every domestic animal is sheltered and cared for, while he, less valued than the least of them, is forgotten and left to perish. Through the long night hours there are no wakeful eyes, no listening ears to catch his faint cries for help. As well may he appeal to the inanimate rock, while his life is ebbing away under its terrible weight. Maybe he held out until the morning of the Sabbath, and the pealing of the far off church bells floated to him down the wintry wind in cruel mockery. Still, no human face appears save the white face of his dead companion. Imprisoned and utterly forsaken, still his right hand is free. Despair smote him to the heart. There was no avenue of escape but by the emancipation of death. At last, with his own hand, he freed himself from the bondage of pain and gained release.

This was more than a score of years ago, but time does not dim the vividness of the mental picture that rises before me of that forest tragedy by the woodman's fire.

Johnston Bulldog Wins Half-Hour Death Duel with 3 1/2-Foot Otter

March 26, 1949, unknown source
(possibly the *Providence Journal*)

[Please note: The following article is very much a product of its time, and may be disturbing to some readers. It is offered here as an historical artifact; we neither endorse nor condone its contents. Thankfully, river otters are still plentiful in Rhode Island's watersheds and coastal areas today. Shy and elusive, they are nevertheless important members of our natural environment. -- Ed.]

In a thrilling half-hour battle bringing to mind stories of the north woods an 18-month-old bulldog yesterday killed a male otter that stretched three and a half feet from the tip of his nose to the end of his tail.

The encounter, one of those seldom witnessed, took place on the farm of Johnston Highway Commissioner James Waterman.

Laban Waterman, 37, of 354 Cherry Hill Avenue, Johnston, who watched the wild fight take place on his father's farm shortly after sunrise yesterday, told the story.

Rex, the 100-pound dog, spotted the animal and chased it about 4000 feet, Waterman said, before the battle started. It was the first time Waterman had ever seen an otter and he stood watching

as the dog attempted to get a death grip on the aquatic animal's thick hard neck.

With the battle taking place on swampy ground instead of in the water where the otter would have been able to outswim even the fish, the dog was able to attack the otter. The latter, fighting silently, slunk back several times to lunge at Rex. Finally the dog was able to grab the otter's head, killing the animal and getting out of the battle with a number of bites and scratches.

The otter carcass attracted considerable interest yesterday afternoon as it hung on a spike outside Shaw's Garage at 405 Greenville Avenue, Johnston, where Waterman works. He said he planned to skin it and sell the hide.



Photo by Paul Topham from the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management Facebook page (December 19, 2018).

Older residents believed that the otter, which fed on fish, was probably traveling from a pond on Waterman's Farm to another feeding place off Atwood Avenue.

Old Thomas Brown Homestead on the Hartford Pike is Sold

April 9, 1939, *Providence Sunday Journal*

The old Thomas Brown homestead which has stood for more than a century on the Hartford pike and which at one time served as a toll house for travellers [*sic*] using that highway, was sold last week by Ralph S. Mohr, broker, for the owner, Evelyn F. Brown Stewart, to Mr. and Mrs. Preston Buffington, for occupancy.

The old house, in remarkably good condition, considering its age, contains 12 rooms and six fireplaces. The living room, originally the kitchen of the house, is distinguished by its old Colonial fireplace with Dutch oven. About two acres of land and a four-car garage are included in the sale.

Purchase of the property by Mr. and Mrs. Preston Buffington brings it back into possession of descendants of Roger Williams. Thomas Brown bought the house in 1873 and to it he took his bride, Phebe Williams, one of the fifth generation of Roger

Williams descendants. Mrs. Buffington traces her own ancestry back eight generations to the founder of the State.



Postcard image of the Thomas Brown homestead courtesy of the Providence Public Library. Circa 1910s.

[The Thomas Brown house was built by Thomas' grandfather, John Brown, who lived there until his death sometime around 1816. It is thought that the house was built around 1772. It was indeed a "road house" or hotel for travelers along the turnpike. Thomas once stated that he well remembered that there was a tavern room in the south east part of the house, on the first floor.

The last family to reside there were the Martones. The house was demolished to make way for the new West End Fire Station in 2009. -- Ed.]

Historical Advertising

This issue's historical ad hails from the May 14, 1998, issue of the *Johnston Sun Rise*. The restaurant was located in the 1417 Plaza, which currently houses the eateries Nuova Pizzeria and Home Fries.

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Society Doings

Not much to report as we continue to exercise caution about gathering in large groups. As ever, the Executive Board continues to meet periodically to oversee day-to-day operations.

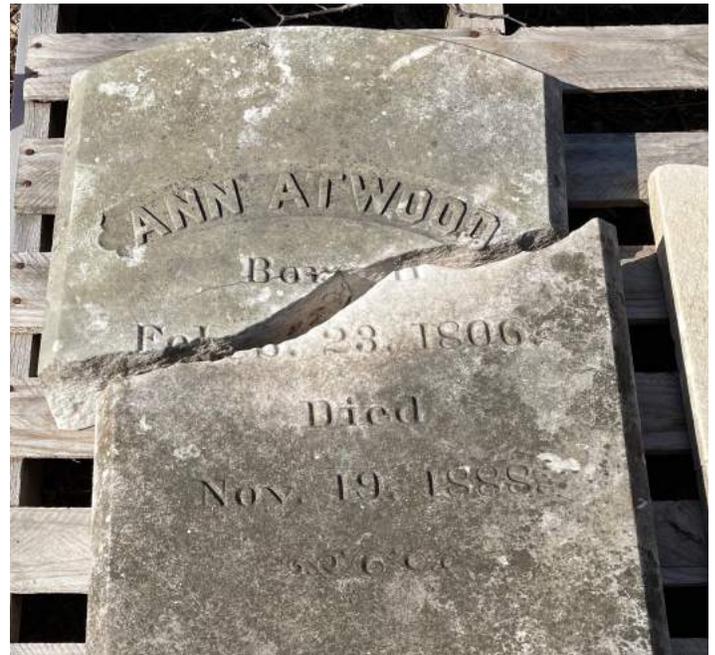
In February we helped Doug Stephens donate some 1970s photos he had of Narragansett Park and Lincoln Downs to the Rhode Island Historical Society. RHIS has a sizable collection of local horse racing memorabilia, so it's a good place for the photos to go.

Our Museum Barn is hosting in-person beginning yoga sessions, led by Satya Wellness, on Monday nights. It's \$15 per class (prepaid cards are available), and open to all. Details at www.Satya-wellness.com.

Cemetery Committee Report

by Steve Merolla

Our last Cemetery Committee report brought us up to the month of December 2021. Of course, with the onset of winter, the Committee took a well-deserved break. As reported in that newsletter, we spent much of last year cleaning and mowing cemeteries we have previously restored, and as mentioned many times, the more we restore, the more we must maintain. That leaves less time for restoration and repair projects.



Ann Atwood's stone patiently awaits restoration.
Photo by Christopher Martin (April 5, 2022).

Finally, however, we did begin a major restoration project at Cemetery #57, the Harris/Atwood Lot. There are three major rows of stones here, and surprisingly we were able to almost finish repairs on the first row before the work season ended. We began work at Cemetery #57 on September 23, with general clean-up that took a total of three work sessions. It should be noted that landowner Anthony Ricci really helped out in this regard by doing some heavy-duty cleaning with his mini-backhoe and cutting down several trees for us.

We began restoration work on October 10, and spent a total of six sessions in continuation of that work. In that time, we repaired three headstones and re-set in the ground or mortared into their bases thirteen headstones. In addition, we have either repaired, set into the ground or re-set into their bases seven footstones. Our last work session was on December 15. Again, more progress was made than was to be expected when we first started work on this particular burial ground. We are hoping to get back to work in this cemetery much sooner than was the case last year.

For the coming work season we will probably begin once again with maintenance work on previously restored cemeteries. April is also the time of the Committee's participation in the state-wide Cemetery Clean-up Day, sponsored every year by the Rhode Island Historical Cemetery Commission; this year, however, they are co-sponsoring with the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission. We will be getting word out on that event. If anyone wants to participate, please contact either the Society, Elise or Steve.

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.

More examples:

- 1) Help out on the cemetery committee, maintaining lots and repairing stones.
- 2) Someone familiar with excel to help keep track of membership dues.
- 3) Someone to transcribe old documents.
- 4) A "handy person" experienced in handling odd jobs and small repairs.
- 5) People willing to show the museum to visitors. Most of the exhibits are marked, so it doesn't require an in-depth knowledge of the town or its history.
- 6) Weeding our gardens.
- 7) Knowledgeable people who can help identify some of our old photographs.
- 8) Someone with design or layout experience who can help us revamp our tri-fold flyers.

Or, if you have a special talent that you think could help the JHS, let us know! Indoor tasks will be completed in small groups. Not all tasks are long-term, so you're not "on the hook" once you volunteer. We would like to establish a "who to call list" as needs arise. Interested parties should send an email to johnstonhistorical1825@gmail.com.

Our Properties

This spring we were invited by State Representative Deb Fellela to apply for a \$1000 "house grant" that will be used for repairs and maintenance of the Elijah Angell House. The application was submitted March 21st.

Our museum barn is open Tuesdays, 6-8pm, 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, 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.

Acquisitions

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

We were fortunate enough to be able to purchase four interesting pieces of historical ephemera from the Find On 6 in February. They include:

- A 1784 arrest warrant for Samuel Winsor of Johnston by Benjamin Waterman of Johnston, for payment of 3 pounds, 18 shillings, 6 pence, plus interest.
- A 1792 arrest warrant for Thomas Olney of North Providence to answer a complaint by Peter Briggs (blacksmith) of Johnston, for payment of 2 1/2 bushels of rye.
- A 1797 arrest warrant for Oliver Saunders of Smithfield to answer the complaint by Solomon Thornton of Johnston, for payment of \$2.50 for meals and liquor at the Solomon Thornton Inn in Johnston.
- An 1815 arrest warrant for Job Wilbur of Johnston to answer a complaint of debt (\$2.42 plus interest) owed to David Sprague of Johnston.

In April we received a donation of an 1873 Johnston tax book from the Burrillville Historical Society, via Nancy Greene, one of their volunteers.

Also in April, we received a number of photos related to the Johnston poor farm from Margaret Enderby of Warwick. She said that her grandmother's brother, Jim Nichols, was in charge of the farm for a time.

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 gas-powered leaf blower
- Fire extinguishers



Eight Ways You Can Help the Johnston Historical Society:

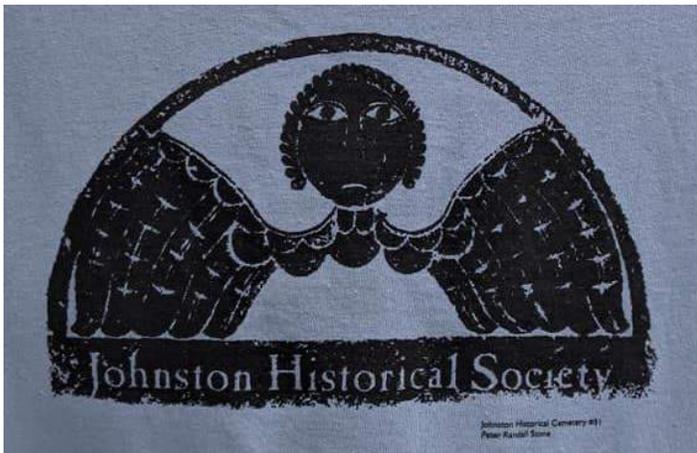
1) The Find on 6, 2953 Hartford Avenue, is now accepting consignment items on behalf of the JHS! That means you can donate some gently used white elephant items and, if they sell, JHS gets 60% of the proceeds! Each person may bring two boxes of goods at a time, Wednesday through Friday, 11am-4pm.

Appropriate items include antiques, collectibles, vintage clothing or handbags (in good condition), jewelry, kitchenware, furniture, etc. Nothing broken or soiled.

2) When purchasing items on Amazon, if you enter via smile.amazon.com, you can designate JHS to receive a small portion of the purchase price as a charitable donation!

3) Buy a book! We still have copies of *Images of America: Johnston I and II*. \$15 each, or two for \$25!

4) Buy a t-shirt! We still 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.



5) We very much appreciate everyone who has kept their membership up-to-date, despite the fact that we haven't been able to hold any in-person meetings in two years. Please keep it up!

6) Volunteer! (See above, "Volunteers Needed").

7) Advertise in this newsletter. Each issue of the newsletter costs about \$120 for 100 copies. We started carrying ads in 2018 with the goal of making the newsletter self-supporting. Do you have a local business that our members might want to know about? See our rate card on the next page.

8) And of course, we always welcome cash donations!

Upcoming Events

April 23, 2022

Cemetery Clean-Up Day
9am-12pm

Volunteers will convene at Johnston Historic Cemetery #7, the Cedar Lot, at the Putnam Pike end of George Waterman Road. Bring rakes and clippers and any other implements that might be useful for clearing ground cover and vegetation.

April 27, 2022

General Meeting

7pm

Richard Ring, Deputy Executive Director for Collections and Interpretation at the Rhode Island Historical Society, will give a talk on the early years of Rhode Island theatre.

May 14, 2022

JHS Tag Sale

8am-12pm

JHS Headquarters, 101 Putnam Pike, Johnston. Need some stuff? Come by our headquarters and see all the great stuff we have for sale. Have some stuff to sell? You can join us for \$25 a table. Call or email for details.

May 25, 2022

General Meeting

7pm

Speaker TBD

June 29, 2022

General Meeting

7pm

Our speaker will be author and historian Marty Podskoch, who will talk about his new travel book, *The Rhode Island 39 Club*, that encourages people to visit all thirty-nine towns and villages in Rhode Island.

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 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: July 15, 2022.



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Follow us on Instagram

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www.instagram.com/johnstonrihistoricalsociety

As of this month our Facebook and Instagram pages have 1,375 and 264 followers, respectively! Have you 'liked' us yet? To find us type these addresses into your computer browser:

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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, Anthony Ursillo,
and one vacant position.

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 2022 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 2022 dues. Send us a check today!

Name: _____

Address: _____

Renewal Single (\$20) _____
 Family (\$30) _____

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
101 PUTNAM PIKE
JOHNSTON, RHODE ISLAND 02919**