
CHESTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Volume 1, Issue 1

March 2002

Ongoing Projects

Chester Veterans

The Historical Society would like to update its records of those who entered the military service as Chester residents, especially those that have entered the service since 1973. If you haven't given the names (and pictures if available) of veterans to the Historical Society please contact Fay at 354-7820.

Methodist Church/Masonic Hall Restoration

The preservation and restoration of the former Methodist Church and Masonic Hall is a continuing goal. The Historical Society is in the process of applying for a Turnpike tourism grant with assistance from the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission.

Recent Acquisitions

The Historical Society has recently acquired three items relating to some of the earliest settlers of Chester, and we will explore each of them in the next three issues.

The first is a sermon preached by the Reverend Aaron Bascom, our first minister, at the hanging of a Chester woman for the murder of her infant in 1788.

In the next issue we'll look at documents concerning the excommunication of Dr. Martin Phelps, one of our first physicians, from Rev. Bascom's church in 1809.

And lastly we'll have excerpts from the sermon delivered by Rev. Jonathan Nash on the death of Rev. Aaron Bascom in 1814.

Upcoming Events

Historical Society Meetings

The Historical Society meets the first Wednesday of every month at 9:00am in the Old Jail building. All are welcome.

Saturday, April 20 9:00am - noon

Methodist Church/Masonic Hall Cleanup Day

Join the Historical Society for a cleanup day in and around the old Methodist Church/Masonic Hall located directly across from the Old Jail. We'll meet at 9:00am and be done by noon, at which time we will go over to the Old Jail for a free lunch! We'll be clearing up brush around the building and some trash from inside the building so bring your gloves and work clothes. If you are able to attend please call ahead so that we know how many lunches to prepare. Please call Fay at 354-7820 or John at 354-0234.

Saturday, May 4 7:00pm

Penny Social

The Historical Society will be holding a Penny Social at the Railroad Station starting at 7:00pm. Donations are welcome.

Saturday, May 18 Chester on Track

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**The Excommunication of
Dr. Martin Phelps**

The Hanging of Abiel Converse

With excerpts taken from "A Sermon Preached at the Execution of Abiel Converse, Who was executed at Northampton for the Murder of her Infant Bastard Child, July 17th, 1788. By Aaron Bascom, A.M. Pastor of the Church in Chester. Published by request of the first religious society in Chester, of which the late Rev. Mr. Bascom was minister."

Printed by Thomas Dickman, Springfield, 1814

"Through the exceeding deceitfulness of sin, wicked people are insensible of what they are doing against God, and the dreadful mischief they are bringing upon themselves."

So begins the Reverend Aaron Bascom's sermon he preached at the hanging of Abiel Converse of Chester for the murder of her child.

At the time that Reverend Bascom was called to the "arduous task of addressing you, upon this awful occasion", he had been pastor at Chester for 20 years. He was born in Warren Massachusetts on December 1, 1746, already the fifth generation Bascom to be born in America. The patriarch of the American lineage, Thomas Bascom, emigrated from Dorset England to Connecticut sometime before 1641, and in Windsor the first American generation of Bascom was born. The next three generations were all born in Northampton before Aaron's father, Samuel, moved to Warren.

Aaron graduated from Harvard University in 1768 and on December 20, 1769 was installed as the first minister of Chester (then Murrayfield). The town at that time covered a large area, consisting of today's Chester plus Huntington and parts of Montgomery and Middlefield, so until the District of Norwich was partitioned out in 1773 Bascom would preach part of the time in the meetinghouse in Chester Center and part of the time at Isaac Mixer's tavern in what is today Huntington.

He married Theodosia Ashley in 1770 and between 1773 and 1786 they had six healthy children, but on April 6, 1788 they had a child die at birth. The death of this child, occurring only 8 days after Abiel Converse had given birth to and then murdered her child must have made his sermon at her hanging an even more "arduous task".

We return now to his own words in the following excerpts from his sermon on that day. His entire sermon was about an hour but we pick it up where he addresses Abiel directly.

"I must close with one or two addresses generally expected on such an occasion. Therefore, to the prisoner before us:

Unhappy woman. As time is just about to leave you, and eternity to receive you; what shall I say? Who is sufficient for the arduous task of addressing you upon this awful occasion? For the horrid wickedness of murder, you are condemned to die by the law of God and man. You are verily guilty concerning your infant child, in that you saw him, a helpless defenseless babe; who had neither injured you nor any of your fellow creatures

- your own child, born of your own body, whom you had been wickedly instrumental of bringing into the world; yet you hardened your heart against him, and determined that you would not exercise so much compassion towards him as the sea monsters, who draw out their breasts and give suck to their young ones, but with violent hands you put him to death.

Be astonished O earth at the wickedness of your heart. You are guilty of a most horrid, monstrous, and unnatural crime.

I am sensible that persons in your situation need a more skillful hand than I am to deal with them; yet as you are one of the precious souls committed to my charge, and desired that I should speak to you upon this occasion, I must be allowed to speak the truth to you. Therefore when I plainly set your sins before you, believe that I mean not to reproach you, but seek your eternal good. My earnest desire is now in this last important hour that you may be truly sensible of your sins, brought to true repentance, and through the merits of Christ obtain forgiveness.

You have been exceedingly fond of profane, wicked company, and rejected God. You have hardened your heart against the Lord Jesus, who has given you repeated calls and warnings; urged you by the calls of the gospel, ministers, friends, and providences; to turn from your evil ways and not die.

What abominable uncleanness and whoredom have you been guilty of? And to hide this awful wickedness, what horrid lies have you told in denying repeatedly that you was in a state of pregnancy, just before the birth of your child? But the horrid wickedness of whoredom and lying were not sufficient for you; to these you have added the crying sin of murder.

Your sins are not too great to be forgiven.

Although you have lived in dreadful wickedness, yet the door of mercy is not shut against you; for God now calls upon you to come to Him that you may have life. O then let not a moment be lost! Lay aside your enmity against God immediately - be reconciled to Him - fight against Him no longer - lift your soul to

him in humble penitent groans.

Leaving you in the hands of God, who will do you no injustice - I must bid you a long and mournful farewell. A few words to this great assembly shall conclude the discourse.

What a melancholy scene is now opened before you. Let me entreat you all to take warning by the awful spectacle presented before you. Be afraid of sin and a life of ungodliness. 'Twas this sin that led the poor prisoner before us to murder, and now she must die. She is not alone, for many others have been ruined by this kind of wickedness. Within about a week after the unhappy prisoner before us committed the sin of murder; in the same town an unclean and whorish woman was led on by this abominable wickedness to murder herself; deliberately, designedly, without hope of any mercy, and without desiring the good wishes or prayers of any friend whatever.

The practice of young people of both sexes keeping company together with no view of entering into a family state and living like rational creatures, I think is a detestable practice. It is carried on in many instances, no doubt, to gratify lust.

Let all parents take warning from the example before them, and see that they are faithful in holding up light and truth before their children. Who can describe the feelings which you who are parents would have if a child of yours was in the melancholy situation of the prisoner now before us? Let all young persons, and especially young women, take warning from the present spectacle, and see that they don't consent when sinners entice them.

Let us all remember that we must die as certain as the prisoner and go to judgment as well as she, and all meet at God's tribunal. Let us all remember that we need an interest in the pardoning mercy of God as well as the prisoner.

Then if we have any bowels of compassion and our hearts are not harder than a rock; let us lift up our souls to him who hears prayer, and pour out our hearts before him - humbly begging that in his great mercy he would pour grace into the heart of the prisoner. May the God of all grace and consolation give us a spirit of grace and supplication for ourselves and for her, and in his great compassion - hear, forgive, and prepare us all for the solemn hour of death hastening upon us; that we may die in the Lord and be admitted to eternal rest with the Saints in light. AMEN."

Nothing is known of Abiel's life in Chester except what is told to us by the Reverend Bascom, that she was "exceedingly fond of profane, wicked company". The only other Converse mentioned in Chester at that time was an Abraham Converse who was "killed in battle in the latter part of October 1780".

A Converse family genealogy shows an Abiel (born 3/26/1756) and Abraham (born 12/31/1757) as the daughter and son of Benjamin Converse (born 5/20/1732) of Leicester, Mass., but the genealogy loses track of them and doesn't list any other information about them.

Back in these parts, a 1762 deed lists a Benjamin Converse as buying land in what would later become Murrayfield (then later Chester). In a Murrayfield town meeting on May 2, 1780, Benjamin Converse was appointed to a committee to review the new Massachusetts constitution, and at a March 3, 1783 town meeting he was elected constable "for the south end of town".

In 1780 an Abraham Converse entered the war from Murrayfield and later that year was "killed in battle in the latter part of October".

In Middlefield on November 20, 1813 a Benjamin Converse died "supposed to be about 82" years old.

Is this the same family? The ages don't contradict that possibility; Abiel would have been 32 when she was executed, Abraham would have been 23 when he was killed in battle and Benjamin would have been 81 when he died.

Did Benjamin Converse bring his family to Chester and then move to Middlefield after his son was killed in the Revolutionary War and his daughter hanged for murder? If this is the same family then Abiel can trace back along a distinguished lineage to Edward Converse who emigrated to America in 1630 with Governor John Winthrop. Edward Converse held the royal charter to run the ferry between Charlestown and Boston and later helped found Woburn.

If you have comments on this newsletter, or would like future issues mailed to you, please write:

Chester Historical Society
Town Hall
15 Middlefield Street
Chester, MA 01011

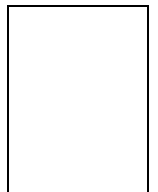
Are you a member of the Chester Historical Society? Join today for \$5.00 annual dues or a lifetime membership of \$25.00.

Use this form to purchase the following items available from the Chester Historical Society:

Item	Price	Size	Qty	Total
"Chester Folks - The Founders of the Town, Their Ancestors and Descendants" by William Mills	\$18.00			
"Memories of the Boston and Albany Railroad" by Norvel Parker	\$15.00			
"Gravestone Inscriptions for Chester" by Francis O'Leary	\$18.00			
"Gateway District Towns - A Pictorial History"	\$16.99			
"Chester Cookbook" - A reproduction of a 1960's-era Chester PTA cookbook	\$8.50			
"Entering Chester" magnets - A miniature version of the state highway signs	\$1.00			
Chester T-Shirts - Over 40 illustrations of Chester scenes (S - XXL)	\$10.00			
Chester Sweatshirts - Over 40 illustrations of Chester scenes (S - XXL)	\$20.00			
	Shipping + handling			\$2.00
	SUBTOTAL			
Annual Membership in the Chester Historical Society (fully tax deductible)	\$5.00			
Lifetime Membership in the Chester Historical Society (fully tax deductible)	\$25.00			
Additional tax deductible contribution				
	TOTAL			

Make check payable to the "Chester Historical Society" and send to:
 Chester Historical Society
 Town Hall
 15 Middlefield Street
 Chester, MA 01011

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