
CHESTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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May 2002



An enthusiastic crew showed up on April 20 to clean in and around the old Methodist Church/Masonic Hall. Years of decayed leaves were raked away from the building along with the trimming back of brush and small trees. A dump truck worth of material was hauled out of the old church including old toilets, broken chairs and a rusted water heater.

After a morning of hard work the hungry volunteers were treated to sandwiches donated by Mary Gauthier of Carm's Restaurant. Aldo Bizzozero stopped by with a generous contribution to the restoration fund and talked about his memories of the building when it was used as a Masonic Hall. The Chester Historical Society continues to seek grants to save the old Methodist Church/Masonic Hall building and the cleanup day went a long way towards stabilizing the building until more serious restoration can occur with grants. Participating in the cleanup day were (L to R) front row: Ansel Garvey, Fay Piergiovanni, Marie Morrissey, Janice Brown, Grace Oppenheimer. Middle row: Dominic Piergiovanni, Jim Pease, Tino Cardarelli, Lora Carrington, John Garvey. Back row: Bill Morrissey, Ed Carrington. Missing from photo because he wouldn't stop working long enough for a picture: Lee Wheeler.

The Boston Post Cane returns to Chester

The Chester Historical Society recently purchased two replica Boston Post Canes to replace the original cane that was lost years ago.

The original Boston Post Canes were made in 1909 by the Boston Post newspaper and sent to 431 towns in New England with the intention that they be presented to the oldest male resident of the town (women may have gained the right to vote in 1920 but they were not eligible to receive the cane until 1930!).

The canes were supposed to be owned by the towns and only held by the oldest resident but over the years many towns lost their canes, including Chester. In 1986 the selectmen purchased another cane (though not a replica of the Boston Post cane) and since that date it has passed to five residents; Selma Matilda Soisalo, Maria Piergiovanni, Carolina Ryan, Jesse Smith, and the current holder, Peg Salvini, who will be 100 years old on September 13, 2002.

The two new canes are closer replicas of the original canes and are made available by a program begun in Peterborough, NH after a search in that town for their lost cane was fruitless. A local artisan makes the canes, which will only be made available to the 431 towns that received an original cane.

One Chester cane will be kept on display at the Old Jail while the other will be presented to the oldest resident. A plaque will also be displayed at the Old Jail containing the names of the cane recipients from 1986 onward.

General William Shepard of Westfield had Chester connections

An April 12, 2002 article in the Springfield Union-News tells of the deterioration of the General William Shepard statue on the Westfield green, and of the efforts in that city to restore the statue. General Shepard fought in the French and Indian Wars, served throughout the Revolutionary War and is perhaps best known for defending the Federal Arsenal at Springfield during Shays' Rebellion in 1787.

He had strong connections to Chester as two of his younger brothers, Enoch and David, were residents here.

David arrived in Chester in 1769 as our first physician and quickly became an integral part of the town, serving for many years as town clerk and selectman. In 1774 he was appointed to Chester's committee of correspondence, the group formed in each town to communicate and coordinate resistance to British rule. He answered the "Lexington alarm" in April 1775 and took part in the Battle of Bunker Hill with Colonel Seth Pomeroy's (Northampton) regiment, serving as surgeon. His older brother William, then a lieutenant colonel, also marched toward Boston and served under General Washington when he arrived to take command of the Continental Army.

Enoch first shows up in Chester on a 1773 tax list but possibly was here before then. He apparently did not march to Boston with his brothers because he was here in July of 1775 to be the first elected representative of Chester to the General Court, a position to which he was re-elected through 1779. Both David and Enoch were back in Chester in October 1776 when the call came for the reinforcement of Mount Independence on Lake Champlain in anticipation of a British invasion from Canada. They marched there with Colonel Mosley's (Westfield) regiment then returned to Chester for the winter when the British abandoned their plans for an invasion after seeing the heavily garrisoned fort.

The following summer, with the British on the move again, Enoch went with Mosley's regiment

to Bennington Vermont and there defeated the British trying to capture Continental supplies. William was only a short distance away helping General Gates defeat the British General Burgoyne at the Battles of Saratoga, so the two brothers participated in what many believe to be the turning point of the Revolutionary War.

By the time William returned to Westfield at the end of the war he had fought in 22 battles and could call George Washington and the Marquis de Lafayette friends.

That General Shepard was close to his Chester brothers is evidenced by the fact that David's son, David Jr., stayed with William's family in Westfield while David Jr. studied with the Reverend Noah Atwater. We know this because David Jr. kept a diary from 1795 to 1798 covering the time that he lived with the General's family and a few later years in Chester (the Chester portion of his diary will have to wait for another newsletter).

During the time that David Jr. was writing his diary his Uncle William was on the Governor's Council, was appointed to negotiate with the Penobscot Indians and the Six Nations, and was elected three times to the US House of Representatives.....yet David Jr. rarely mentions him.

Perhaps one explanation is that the General's many responsibilities kept him away from home frequently enough that David Jr. didn't see him much. But the most likely explanation for his uncles few appearances is that David Jr. is writing his diary between the ages of 19 and 22 and his concerns are typical of someone that age. The exploits of his famous uncle – confidante of George Washington, hero of the Revolution, defender of our young nation – are crowded out by David Jr's more immediate concerns; difficulties with his studies, annoyance at some of his chores, card and ball playing with friends, and most especially his feelings for his "little companion", young Elena Savage of Chester.

In honor of General William Shepard (and his Chester Minutemen friends and brothers) funds are being raised to restore his statue erected in 1919. Those wishing to help with the restoration can send their donation to:

Westfield Memorial Conservation Fund
c/o Westfield Parks and Recreation Dept.
4 Holcomb St.
Westfield, MA 01085

The Excommunication of Dr. Martin Phelps

In 1798 Dr. Martin Phelps of Belchertown published a pamphlet entitled “Controversial Letters Respecting the Principles of Church Communion and Discipline” containing a series of letters detailing a dispute between Phelps and the Reverend Justus Forward, pastor of the Congregational Church in Belchertown. The major disagreement concerned the process used by the Belchertown church for the discipline of church members, with Phelps arguing that too much power lay with the pastor and not enough with the congregation.

Phelps had graduated from Yale University in 1776 and moved to Haverhill, NH where he was a member in good standing of the Congregational Church, one that was apparently more in line with his principles. He moved to Belchertown in 1796 to practice medicine.

The correspondence between Dr. Phelps and Reverend Forward starts in 1797 and continues in many letters into 1798 when Phelps published the letters in a pamphlet that ran 132 pages. Phelps obviously had strong religious principles and he just as obviously enjoyed debating them.

Back here in Chester the Reverend Aaron Bascom read the “Controversial Letters” and began his own correspondence with Phelps and even visited him on one occasion to convince him to relocate to Chester. Bascom was successful and Dr. Phelps packed up his family and moved to Chester around 1798. One of the first things Phelps did, of course, was ask to see the church covenant.

“Before I was admitted to the communion of this Church, I enquired of the Pastor, whether this Church had adopted or established any particular rules for the government and discipline of its members. The Pastor then read a certain paper entitled “Articles of Agreement made and consented to by the Inhabitants of the town of Murrayfield. November 14, 1769”.

I then told Mr. Bascom that I did not think some of those articles were consistent with those rules, which Christ himself had given, for the government of his Church, and

therefore I should not consent to be bound by them. Mr. Bascom said ‘there would be no difficulty on that account’, and I then apprehended he did not consider them as important or really binding on the Church.”

Phelps was satisfied on that count and so presented himself to the congregation and was accepted as a member.

Everything seems to have gone well in the early years of their acquaintance but soon the politics that were dividing the nation came to Chester, and the two most prominent citizens chose opposite sides. Bascom was a member of John Adams’ Federalist party and Phelps was a member of Thomas Jefferson’s Democratic-Republican party.

Their dispute came out in the open in March 1805 when Phelps published an article in Northampton’s *Republican Spy* giving the reasons why he could not support Caleb Strong, the Federalist candidate for governor. Bascom and another Chester Federalist, Sylvester Emmons, immediately went to see Phelps and warned him that his anti-Federalist views “would prove hurtful to his reputation, interest, influence in society, and business in his profession.”

Phelps would write later, “that it has not proved totally ruinous to me and my family, is not, in the least, owing to the good will of either of those gentleman”.

Over the next few years the political differences deepened into religious divisions that would ultimately split the town into bitter factions whereby you could determine someone’s politics by what church they attended. Of the events that led directly to the excommunication of Phelps, the first occurred in May of 1808.

There was a Reverend McGeorge travelling in the area who was known to have Republican leanings and about 40 Chester residents requested that the selectmen ask Bascom to invite McGeorge to preach in the meetinghouse. The selectmen, all Republicans (including Martin’s brother, Seth Phelps), sent the request to Bascom. Here the accounts differ. The selectmen say that Bascom refused their request saying that he did not know McGeorge and that if the selectmen wanted him to preach they would have to invite him themselves. Bascom says that he never gave his permission to

invite McGeorge.

The selectman did invite McGeorge to preach the next Sunday and further state that they informed Bascom of the invitation. Whether Bascom knew about it or not, when he showed up at the meetinghouse the next Sunday he found McGeorge already in the pulpit. He went across the street to the schoolhouse and preached to the members who didn't want to listen to McGeorge. Afterwards he started telling everyone around town that "McGeorge had taken the pulpit by stealth" and that he (Bascom) "had been turned out of the pulpit".

About a month later the town appointed a committee, all Republicans, to coordinate the celebration of the 4th of July and they selected one of the church deacons with Republican sympathies to preach on that day instead of Bascom. It was reported that "Mr. Bascom discovered sinful anger and threw out some unreasonable invectives" upon learning that he was not asked to preach at the celebration that day.

The stage was set for a showdown. The Republicans were in control of the civil government and Phelps himself was elected to represent the town in the General Court for several years. Reverend Bascom and the Federalists still had a majority of voting church members supporting them.

In order to be an accepted member of the Congregational church at that time it was required that you have certificates of good standing from an established church. Phelps had them from the church in Haverhill of which he had been a member, but he had turned them over to Bascom when he was accepted into the Chester church. Phelps decided the best thing to do would be to try to get them returned. Bascom was intent on preventing their return since that would have allowed Phelps to start a rival church with another pastor.

On November 4, 1807 Phelps addressed Bascom and the Chester church and made the case for his removal from the church and the return of his certificates.

"It is well known that there is such a spirit of opposition

between myself and the Reverend Pastor that there is no prospect of either of us being benefited by the present connection.

It is well known that the leaders of the Federal party, both in this town and throughout the county have, for a few years past, unceasingly endeavoured to destroy my reputation and influence in society; and, to this end, have used all means to prevent my ability to maintain myself and family; and that the most influential members of this Church have been very active in thus endeavoring to reduce me, with my numerous family, to distress and want."

Bascom refused to consider the request on the grounds that it had not been made in writing. Phelps wrote Bascom the next day making his request official. After two months with no reply he sent another written request in December, and then another in April 1808. Still no reply came from Bascom.

Deciding that his appeals to Bascom were fruitless Phelps decided to take his request directly to the congregation and in June of 1808 wrote a letter that he began to circulate.

"Men and Brethren,

I am not any way surprised that you are uneasy on account of the manifest difference and opposition between Mr. Bascom and myself, and more especially that no apparent steps are taken to effect a reconciliation, or to remove the difficulty."

He goes on to state the reasons why the congregation should vote him out as a member and return his certificates. This attempt to go around Bascom directly to the congregation apparently goaded him into action.

In July of 1808 Bascom sent a letter to Phelps informing him that six charges had been brought against him by Deacon Stephen Lyman, a fellow Federalist, and that Phelps was required to appear before the pastor and church elders to answer the charges. A reading of just the first charge shows that this dispute was not strictly of a religious nature.

"1. Upon the sixteenth of February 1807, when at the court at Boston, our said Brother made out his account for one hundred and twenty-five miles travel. This account your Complainant states to be false, for according to the map in Boston court house, and according to the guide boards on the

road, the distance is represented to be but one hundred and twenty miles.”

Other charges brought were that Phelps had traveled between Westhampton and Westfield on the Sabbath unnecessarily, that he had neglected public worship and that he had spoken evil of some members of the church.

Phelps wrote back to Bascom, disputing that Bascom had any judicial power over him.

“To Mr. Aaron Bascom.

Sir, you are hereby certified that I have attentively perused the contents of that extraordinary paper which you put into my hands. I call it extraordinary because I cannot account for its contents on any principle which either the civil Law, or the Gospel will justify. You assume the importance of one vested with judicial power – authorized to receive complaints against others, and with some other judges, unknown to me in law or Gospel, have constituted a tribunal to whose bar you presume to summon me for trial and adjudication.”

He then proceeded to bring his own complaints, which follow the same tone as the complaints brought against him. One of them was that Bascom had used a “false measure” to measure a piece of ground that Isaac Smith was to mow. According to the complaint Bascom used a rod that measured seventeen feet two inches when a rod was supposed to be sixteen feet six inches, thus “the said Smith was exposed and liable to be defrauded and cheated, and doubtless would have been had he not discovered it to be a false one”.

Bascom called a church meeting in August of 1808 for the purpose of voting on the charges brought against Phelps. The Federalist group carried the day and found Phelps guilty on four of the six charges. Another meeting was called for October at which Bascom presented the case for the excommunication of Phelps. A vote was taken and it was in favor of excommunication; fifteen votes for, eleven against and three abstaining. The following notice was posted at the meetinghouse.

“Chester, October 12 –

We the Church of Christ in Chester do now in Conformity to the Examples and Commands of the Gospel and God’s holy word put from among us our abovesaid Brother who lives in censurable Violations of the divine Law, and reject

him from our Fellowship and Communion, considering ourselves under obligations to treat him as a Heathen Man and a Publican. In the name and by the vote of the Brethren of the Church of Chester at a Church meeting legally warned.

AARON BASCOM, Pastor”

In addition to the terrible division that this created in Chester, it also presented practical problems for both men. Bascom now did not have a doctor and Phelps did not have a church.

Bascom solved his problem by aligning himself with a younger doctor, Dr. Anson Boies (it’s very likely that Bascom recruited Boies to Chester just as he had recruited Phelps years earlier). The tie was strengthened when Boies married one of Bascom’s daughters, Charlotte. When Charlotte died young, Boies married Theodosia, another of Bascom’s daughters.

Phelps solved his problem by joining the Baptist Church in Hinsdale and shortly afterwards forming a Baptist Church in Chester.

Six months after he was excommunicated Phelps wrote one last letter to Bascom in which he bitterly accuses Bascom of attempting to destroy him and his family. In closing the last known communication between them, he turns the final judgement over to a higher power.

“I now submit to Christians in general, and finally to the awful and impartial bar of Christ, where you and I must shortly appear, and answer for our several conducts.

MARTIN PHELPS

Chester, April 1, 1809”

One Sunday in August 1814, as the Reverend Bascom was preaching he faltered in his sermon, then collapsed to the floor. He was carried to his house attended by Dr. Boies and died a few days later. He is buried in the Chester Hill cemetery.

Doctor Phelps spent his later years in the southern part of Chester (now Huntington). When he died in November of 1838, he was also buried in the Chester Hill cemetery.

There they have reclined these past 163 years, thirty feet from each other.

Comments on the newsletter? Contact the editor, John Garvey, care of the Chester Historical Society (see address on back page.

Upcoming Events

June 5	9:00am	Monthly meeting of the Chester Historical Society at the Old Jail
June 28	6:00pm	Chester High School Alumni Association Reunion and Dinner at Shaker Farms in Westfield. The Historical Society has a fine collection of school material available to you at the Old Jail. Call any member of the society to have the Old Jail opened for you or a group and stop in to relive memories.
July 3	9:00am	Monthly meeting of the Chester Historical Society at the Old Jail
August 7	9:00am	Monthly meeting of the Chester Historical Society at the Old Jail

Chester Historical Society contacts

Fay Piergiovanni	354-7820
Janice Brown	354-7778
Grace Oppenheimer	354-6395
Ed Carrington	354-7835
John Garvey	354-0234

Bibliography for this edition of the newsletter

NOTE: Many of these publications are available at the Chester Historical Society for your genealogical or local history research. Make an appointment with any member of the society to use the resources at the Old Jail (see names and numbers above).

Copeland, Alfred M. (1892), *A History of the Town of Murrayfield*, Springfield: Clark W. Bryan & Company.

Holland, Josiah Gilbert (1855), *History of Western Massachusetts*, Springfield: Samuel Bowles and Company.

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----- (1911), *Vital Records of Chester Massachusetts to the Year 1850*, Boston: Stanhope Press for the New England Historic Genealogical Society

----- (1962), *The First Congregational Church of Chester*, Privately published.

----- , *Chester and Westfield Diaries of David Shepard, Jr. 1795-1798*, Privately published.

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 Tote bags - Over 40 illustrations of Chester scenes	\$15.00			
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:
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 Town Hall
 15 Middlefield Street
 Chester, MA 01011

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