
CHESTER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Volume 3, Issue 2 A Publication of the Chester Historical Society Editor: John Garvey September 2004

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.

Sunday, October 10 - 2:00pm - Town Hall

A Tale of Two Pastors

The public is invited to a special meeting of the Historical Society featuring a talk on two pastors from Chester's history; Reverend Reuben Tinker and Reverend Daniel Foster.

Reuben Tinker was born and raised in Chester, then worked his way through Amherst College and Auburn Seminary to become ordained at the First Congregational Church on Chester Hill. He would leave Chester the day after his marriage to local girl Mary Wood in 1830 to become one of the first missionaries to the Sandwich Islands (now Hawaii). He preached in the native language and was the first non-native to visit some of the remote islands.

Daniel Foster was a lifelong abolitionist, a friend of Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Brown, and briefly the pastor of the Congregational Church in Littleville. His willingness to go to almost any lengths to end the practice of slavery involved him in controversy throughout his life, including his stay here in Chester.

He was a "Free-Stater" in Kansas before joining the Massachusetts 33rd Volunteers when the Civil War broke out. He became known as the "Fighting Chaplain" of the Massachusetts 33rd Volunteers.

Learn more about the life and times of these two men from Chester and enjoy seasonal refreshments with the Chester Historical Society on Sunday, October 10th at 2:00pm (Town Hall).



Bob Oppenheimer 1914 – 2004

The Chester Historical Society lost one of its founding members and tireless workers with the passing of Bob Oppenheimer on March 15, 2004. Bob could always be counted on to help with anything that needed to be done for the Historical Society, from building cabinets and framing pictures to helping his wife Grace with historical research on early Chester families and buildings. Grace and Bob, married for 65 years, were the driving force behind the research to add many of Chester's oldest buildings to the National Registry of Historic Places.

Bob lived on Gibraltar Farm on Skyline Trail since 1941. Historical Society member Ed Carrington recalls working at the farm as a student and the many trips to New York City to sell farm produce, which always ended with a stop for ice cream.

His favorite chair by the door of The Old Jail - from which he encouraged everyone to sign the guest book - is empty, but our hearts are full with the memory of his ready smile and the kind words he always had for everyone.

Chester Awaits Work on Three Historic Bridges

Maple Street Bridge

Readers of the *Country Journal* have seen the recent articles about the long delayed project to rehabilitate the Maple Street Bridge in Chester Factories.

Threatened with demolition by MassHighway in 1994, the Chester Historical Commission began a campaign to save the bridge, culminating in the granting of Federal Highway funds (to be administered by the state) for both the engineering plans and the rehabilitation work.

The engineering plan done at that time proposed that the bridge be rehabilitated as a pedestrian bridge but with adequate weight tolerance to be opened to emergency vehicles when necessary. Since the completion of the engineering work, the project has been stalled for almost 10 years. Recent meetings between the town, the Historical Commission and the state MassHighway department have resulted in a promise to get the project back on track.

It was in the 1890's that the town decided that they needed another route into the downtown area, and chose the connection of Maple Street to Huntington Road (Route 20) as the most appropriate solution. In 1895 the town purchased land from the two landowners on each side of present day Maple Street in order to get the bridge project started. Lucy Wing, then owner of the "Toll House", sold the town 30 feet and the Trustees of the Chester Methodist Church sold 13 feet (the Methodist Church owned the house now occupied by Jim Pease and used it as their parsonage). The church records indicate that the town paid them \$25 for their 13 feet of land. The bridge was erected in 1900 and is known as a "Pratt Through Truss" design. The Pratt design was patented in 1844 and was a popular bridge because it could be assembled on-site with pre-fabricated materials and was extremely strong. Its strength was clearly shown in the Flood of 1927 in which hundreds of Massachusetts bridges were lost, but the Maple Street bridge survived intact. Another feature that made the Pratt bridge popular was its flexibility, as is shown by the conversion of the deck of the Maple Street bridge from wood to steel with the advent of heavier vehicles.

The Maple Street bridge was finished with a cantilevered pedestrian walkway on one side that was cited in the 1988 Massachusetts Historic Bridge

Inventory for its "wonderful Lattice/Gothic arch sidewalk guardrail." Of the nine surviving Pratt bridges found in the 1988 Massachusetts survey, the Maple Street bridge is the oldest but one. The Chester Historical Commission/Society will continue to push for the release of the rehabilitation money already promised to ensure the preservation of this historic bridge.

Old State Road Bridge

The second bridge scheduled for extensive work is the concrete bridge over the West Branch of the Westfield River on Old State Road. This bridge was started in 1910 and officially opened on May 15, 1911. When it was completed it represented the last portion of the "Jacob's Ladder Trail" to be brought up to new state standards.

An article in the Westfield newspaper described the materials used in the construction of the bridge as "1300 barrels of Portland cement and 31½ tons of corrugated steel." The same article also described the opening ceremony.

"The first vehicle to cross over the new bridge after it was opened was an automobile party going in the direction of Springfield. The car, a Pierce-Arrow touring car, No. 20303, was occupied by three persons, E. L. Swan, the owner of the car, his wife, Mrs. Swan, and the chauffeur. Mrs. Samuel B. Horton, wife of S. B. Horton, foreman for Coleman Bros., who built the new bridge, drove from Huntington with her husband Monday morning to the bridge to be present at the opening. When Mrs. Horton caught a glimpse of the automobile party approaching, she took a position at the west approach to the bridge, standing directly in front of the approaching car, and halting the party, insisted that they give their names before crossing the bridge as their car was to be the first vehicle to cross. Mr. Swan gladly complied with Mrs. Horton's request and the party then proceeded on their journey."

The new bridge replaced the last wooden covered bridge on the state road. The so-called "Johnny Sisk" wooden bridge was built in the early 1850's. Prior to the opening of the concrete bridge the wooden bridge had been stripped of all of its useable lumber. On the very afternoon that the new bridge opened holes were drilled in the wooden girders of the old bridge, dynamite was placed in the holes and detonated, thus sending the remaining structure of the wooden bridge into the

river. The stone foundations of the original wooden bridge are still visible next to the concrete bridge that replaced it.

Smith Road Bridge

We have run out of space in this edition of the newsletter so the story and pictures of the oldest

bridge awaiting work in Chester will have to wait until our next newsletter in December. The Smith Road Bridge, located in North Chester, was built in 1887 by Hawkins Iron Works of Springfield, and is the second oldest such bridge surviving in the state.



The “Johnny Sisk” wooden covered bridge over the West Branch of the Westfield River on Old State Road (photo from the 1991 Chester Historical Calendar, courtesy of Art Wilander)



Maple Street & Railroad Bridge, Chester, Mass.

The “Pratt Through Truss” Maple Street Bridge circa 1910

The Strike of 1932

CHESTER STRIKEBREAKERS FILE HOME UNDER BARRAGE OF EGGS AND JEERS



In March of 1932, deep in the midst of the Great Depression, forty employees of the Chester Granite Quarry Company went on strike over a wage dispute. The management of the company, citing a reduction in orders, had already cut back operating hours, were attempting to reduce wages, and had stated their intention of operating the company on an “open shop” basis, ignoring any prior union contracts. The members of the Granite Cutters Union voted to strike, followed quickly by members of the Quarry Workers Union, thus putting all employees of the company on strike. Since purchasing the company in 1930, the Tait Brothers of Springfield had already been through one strike of the Quarry Workers Union that

was settled within a week, and the strikers probably expected a similar response. This time, however, the company quickly brought in skilled workers from another finishing plant they owned in Barre, Vermont, and as the strike stretched into weeks the frustration of the strikers grew. The company rented the entire Riverside Inn and each day the strikebreakers would walk between the granite sheds and the Inn, through an increasingly hostile crowd that would gather at closing time on Main Street. Word spread throughout the area and union sympathizers came from other towns to swell the ranks of the crowd, requiring three state troopers to be assigned to assist Constable Arthur Burleigh and one other local officer. By April 27 the crowd exceeded 200 people and on that day the inevitable

scuffle broke out between the strikers and strikebreakers.

The accounts differ as to who struck first but the only person arrested by Constable Arthur Burleigh was James LaPresto, not one of the striking workers but a sympathizer with them. The Springfield Daily News described the scene as the workers filed down Main Street towards the Riverside Inn. "The crowd hooted and jeered as they approached, and a considerable quantity of rotten eggs was tossed at the marchers. Several of the eggs hit their marks, and the strikebreakers started to jostle their way through the densely packed onlookers." At LaPresto's arraignment the next day it was pointed out that he had been arrested five times in the last nine years, mostly for Prohibition Law violations.

The day after violence broke out the local manager of the granite company, Fred Wagner of Chester, requested DeWitt C. DeWolf, the Executive Secretary to Governor Ely, to authorize more state troopers to contain the crowds. DeWitt C. DeWolf was himself a Chester man, the son of Dr. Thaddeus K. DeWolf, the longtime doctor on Chester Hill, and so the granite company had a ready ear in Boston.

The disruption in business and the negative image the publicity was giving Chester prompted some local businessmen to form a citizen's committee to mediate the dispute. The committee was made up of the three selectmen – Thomas Rose, Thomas Haley and Leon Kelso – along with some businessmen of the town, including Lester Simmons, Samuel Donnelly, Charles Pease and Frank Fay. The first meeting with representatives of the unions and the granite company was called for May 3rd and DeWitt DeWolf telegraphed from Boston that he would attend. Despite DeWolf's attendance, and his message from Gov. Ely desiring an amicable solution, the meeting was termed a complete failure.

Things had quieted down in the days leading up to the meeting and for a few days after, but the crowds began to gather again and on May 7 another barrage of eggs greeted the workers. After the workers had made it safely back to the Riverside Inn, five members of the crowd were arrested, including Alexander Fabrizio, an 18 year old junior at Chester High School, along

with Ralph Philbrook, Hugo Hutlanan, Alexander Niskanen and William Laitinen.

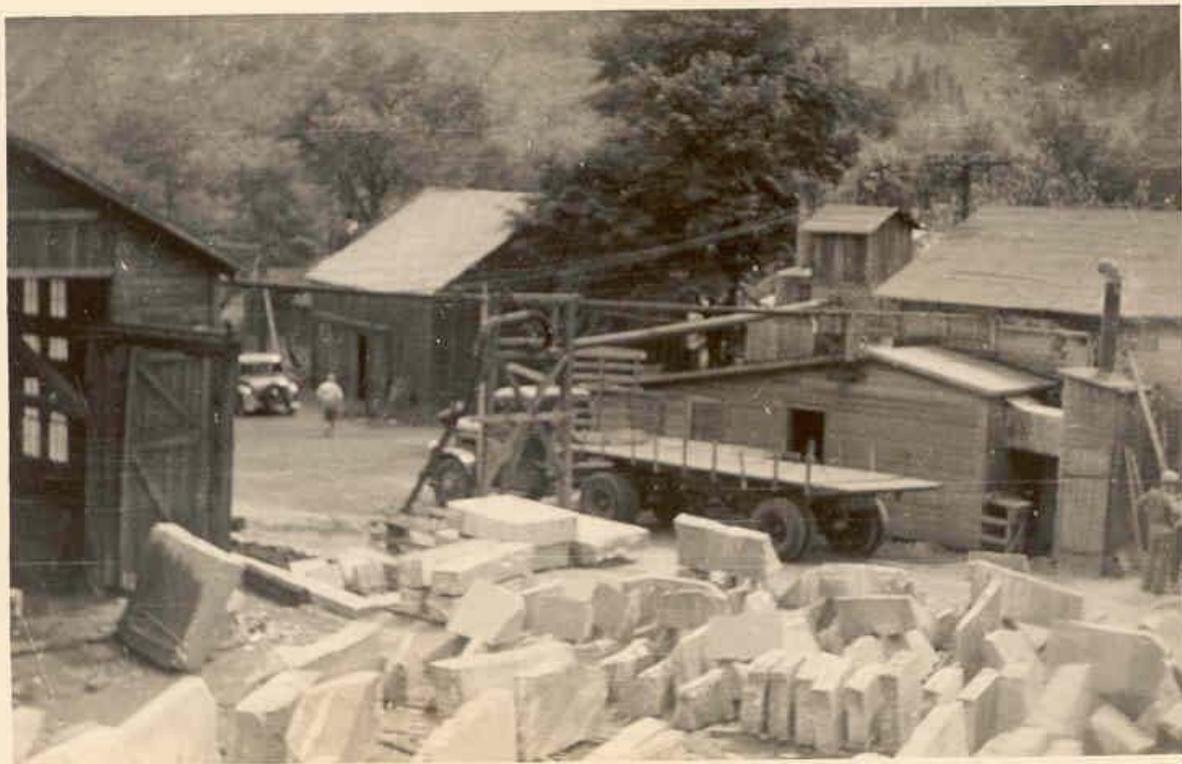
The charges against the five men were dismissed on May 26, but five days later Philbrook was arrested again after a fight on the town bridge on one of the few nights that any of the granite workers had dared leave the Riverside Inn. Charges were also brought against two of the granite workers involved in the fight that night, but at the trial Philbrook was sentenced to 30 days in jail while charges against the granite workers were dismissed.

It was reported that the courtroom was crowded with Chester people and the judge took the opportunity to send a message to all parties. From the Springfield Daily News:

"Associate Justice Burke, in summarizing the salient points presented at the testimony stated that he considered the case in a way as a challenge to the District Court of Western Hampden in maintaining law and order within its jurisdiction. He further added that it must be made clear to the residents of Chester, both townspeople and granite company employees that in their relations and activities it must be remembered that this is a government of law and not ideas of an individual or of a group, and consequently differences of opinion must not be settled by fights but by proper lawful methods." Justice Burke's admonition might have had some effect on easing tensions, the 30-day sentence given to Philbrook probably had a greater impact, but the biggest reason for things quieting down was that the owners of the granite company soon found it necessary to shut down the entire operation due to a further decrease in business.

In March of 1933, the granite company announced that business had improved enough for them to start operations again, and they were looking for 25 men. The 25 men they hired included many former workers, and manager Fred Wagner "expressed a willingness to employ other town workmen if they would come to him and ask for it." It would be most interesting to include the reactions from some of the striking workers when they read Wagner's comment, but unfortunately they were not recorded. Early in 1934 the company and union agreed to wages of \$1 an hour for stone cutters and 87½ cents per hour for less skilled positions. A fire that swept through the complex in the mid-1940's completely destroyed the main building along with all the machinery, thus ending the granite operations in Chester. There were 30 men employed there at the time of the fire.

The pictures on the following pages were recently donated to the Historical Society by Ruth Boldini. The pictures were taken in July 1937, a few years after the strike.









Past and Present Uses for the Chester Grammar School building

A New York City-based gentleman, who summers in Chester, sees the potential of the Chester Grammar School as a cultural center. His representatives tour the school and deem it perfect for their plans.

Are we describing William Ivey Long, the New York City-based costume designer and summer resident of Chester, who purchased the Grammar School this year and plans a cultural center along with space for his costume design business?

No, the gentleman is Frank Alvah Parsons, president of the New York School of Fine Arts and Applied Arts, and the year is 1910.

The paint was hardly dry on the walls of the new classrooms when Parsons, who summered in Chester at Ventura Lodge, decided that Chester should be the summer location of the art school, and the Grammar School was the ideal spot. An agreement was soon reached with the town to rent the school for July and August and Parson's wife Sara visited Chester in March to arrange for the lodging of 100 students with local families. An April 1910 article in the Westfield News described the school as offering "courses that shall meet the needs of artists, students, teachers, the trade and the art appreciator." The courses would include studio and landscape painting, the theory of color and design, interior decorating and furnishing, and clay modeling. One course of study was to be designed particularly for public school art teachers.

The students began to arrive in late June and the school formally opened on July 1 with 60 students. On July 25 the students and faculty held a reception for town residents at the Town Hall, which was attended by over 300 people. Frank Parsons spoke first, "expressing the appreciation of the school for the cordial welcome accorded them by the townspeople." This was followed by entertainment given by the students and faculty. Mrs. Frances Slack of Utica, N.Y., Miss Ella Roberts, also of Utica, and Mademoiselle Kasanir Dviejkonska of Poland performed solo piano recitals. Peter Schombocker of New York City performed a violin solo, followed by Miss Kathryn Bissell, a "director of vocal culture at Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.", reciting Kipling's "L'Envoie" and James Whitcomb Riley's "Knee Deep in June". Rae

Bredin, a member of the faculty in charge of landscape painting, next spoke and "surprised the townspeople by a vivid verbal picture of what he found in the local scenery and undoubtedly awakened many to a new sense of beauty of their home surroundings."

The audience then broke up into an informal gathering as the students and townspeople introduced themselves, and "when the orchestra started a waltz everyone seemed to take for a partner the person nearest them. Dancing was not intended as a feature of the entertainment and was only indulged in for a brief period. Taking the program as rendered it was one of the best ever given in Chester."

The school returned for the next summer with over 100 students but that would be the last year. One of the new courses added the second summer was costume design, an interesting connection from 1911 to 2004 and William Ivey Long's future plans for the Chester Grammar School.



This postcard of the new Grammar School was mailed on August 2, 1910 by Grace Buck, a student of the art school, and reads in part, "I am working hard but enjoying the work. There are about 60 students in the school, almost all art students. I hope you are painting some this summer. Yours, Grace M. Buck"



Ventura Lodge, built around 1747 and still standing on Blandford Road, was the summer home of the Parsons family from 1905 to 1917.

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Coming in the December edition of the newsletter

- ❖ A Brief History of the Smith Road Bridge of North Chester
- ❖ 100 Years of the Hamilton Emery & Corundum Company
- ❖ School Days in the Chester Center School, a special reminiscence by Harriet Gilman

If you have comments on this newsletter please contact the editor, John Garvey, at:
Chester Historical Society
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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			
"Gravestone Inscriptions for Huntington" by Francis O'Leary	\$20.00			
"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			
"The Mystery of the Old Mine" a mystery for children by Gertrude Whitcher	\$10.00			
Chester Historical Society pens	\$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			\$3.00
	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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Chester, MA 01011

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