



The Thompson Historical Society Newsletter

www.thompsonhistorical.org

Summer 2005

Calendar of Events

Membership meetings or events for the Society.

Membership Meeting: Monday, October 3, 2005 – 7 PM – Old Town Hall, Thompson Hill.

VERY SPECIAL EVENT!!!

Rick Lynch, an expert on New England stone or 'lithic' structures, will give a talk on ancient aligned stone piles, perched boulders, standing stones and underground chambers built without mortar found in New England. Mr. Lynch is the President of NEARA, the New England Antiquities Research Association.

Thompson is blessed with a number of these mysterious stone structures, and because of their unknown or distant unwritten origins, some structures have been destroyed by people unaware of their historical significance. Mr. Lynch's talk will review the type of structures that can be found in New England and discuss their possible origins. This is a rare opportunity to hear the latest information from one of the world's experts. We expect a strong turnout and seating is limited. For more information on NEARA, visit www.neara.org.

Board of Director Meeting Dates:

ELM Buiding; 7 PM

(2005) 9/26; 11/21; (2006) 1/16; 3/6; 4/24,6/5

Village Improvement Society News

The Village Improvement Society of Thompson is pleased to announce the receipt of a grant in the amount of \$4340 from the Quinebaug-Shetucket Heritage Corridor in support of the Society's Thompson Common Heritage Tree Preservation Project.

Thompson Common is one of the last green areas in New England where large old American Elm trees still survive. These magnificent specimens urgently need attention to slow the ravages of Dutch Elm disease and to restore them to good health. Other trees on the Common need attention as well and sadly, a few of these are too far gone and must be removed.

Work on the pruning and cabling of healthy trees; replacement of dead ones with new plantings; fertilization and treatment for disease and insects is underway.

This grant award is contingent upon the Village Improvement Society matching the grant amount. Fundraising activities are planned throughout the year for this purpose.

- Paul Giguere – Secretary (860 935 9160)

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Officers / Contact Info:

President: Joe Iamartino

Vice President: Sue Vincent

Treasurer: Barbara Weaver

Secretary: John Lengel

Curator: Mark Savolis

Collections: Judy Rondeau

Photos: Alice Biesiadecki

Museum Shop: Lucille Barrette, Helen Flood, Carol Holowa, Val Iamartino, Henrietta Panu, Jane Provost, June Schoppe, Sue Vincent, Sandra Warner

Website: Barbara Loy, Blair Cole

Grant Coordinator: Lynne Lengel

Administrator: Blair Cole

www.thompsonhistorical.org

or call us at 860-923-3200

Membership Information

We ask existing members to think of someone who might appreciate membership in the Society. An existing member can sign up a new member for \$5.00, good for the first year. Members receive the Fall, Winter, Spring and Summer newsletters with our calendar of events, stories of local historical interest and the popular Ask the Society column. Please encourage others to support our Society.

A good gift anytime.....

Membership dues are:

\$10.00 Individual Membership

\$15.00 Family Membership

\$25.00 Contributing Membership

\$5.00 Student/Gift Membership

• Dues to be paid by July 1, 2005 for July 1, 2005 – June 30, 2006 year

- 1st reminder: Summer newsletter

- 2nd reminder: Fall newsletter

The President's Quill

by Joe Iamartino

60 members joined us June 6th for the Society's annual meeting and picnic. The Vincent's barns easily held our members and provided a wonderful, historic setting for the proceedings. Having our annual meeting in the restored Alice Ramsdell barn capped the day. To Rob and Sue Vincent, thank you for being so generous to the Society. Thank you also for saving Alice Ramsdell's old barn from her West Thompson farm.

At the annual meeting, while in that same barn, another person from West Thompson, Alice Biesiadecki pointed out that this year is the 50th anniversary of the 1955 storm and flood in Thompson. The '55 storm hit not long after the big textile mill in North Grosvenordale shut down. Tough times. Let's examine the consequences of that storm.....

Townfolk pulled together to help each other. Rowing down the middle of the street to deliver food to stranded villagers. Carpenters patching roofs all across town for days at a time. Every hand saw in use to clear trees from the roads. Homes freely opened for shelter. Stories everywhere about generosity, faith, friendship and hope. Out of catastrophe, came a new beginning for some villages but spelled the end of the village center of West Thompson. There were many changes....

The 1955 floods, the third major flood in 20 years to hit the area, pushed the government to act. West Thompson Lake was created in 1964, behind a massive dam, part of a regional flood control project. Thompson gained a beautiful lake and scenic woods. People and homes were relocated. New jobs were found. Life went on. And the very last thing to change? The barn. The Ramsdell barn. It is now on the Vincent's farm and looks wonderful in its setting. A

Administrator's Corner

by Blair Cole

The next time you drive through Thompson Common, take a moment to view the repaired roof on the Ellen Larned Museum and the newly painted Old Town Hall. Jane & Ray Austin, Jordan Elliott and I spent a very warm summer afternoon or two painting the south side and balusters of the Old Town Hall in June. More painting remains to be done and the windows need to be re-glazed. If you enjoy this type of work, don't hesitate to volunteer! We'll be doing more painting when the weather cools.

At the Ellen Larned Museum, Judith Rondeau, our new Curator, has been very busy organizing our collection room. She has made the time to go through piles of materials that have been donated to the Society in recent months and found some real treasures, several of which may appear in the upcoming book, 'Echoes of Old Thompson, Volume II'.

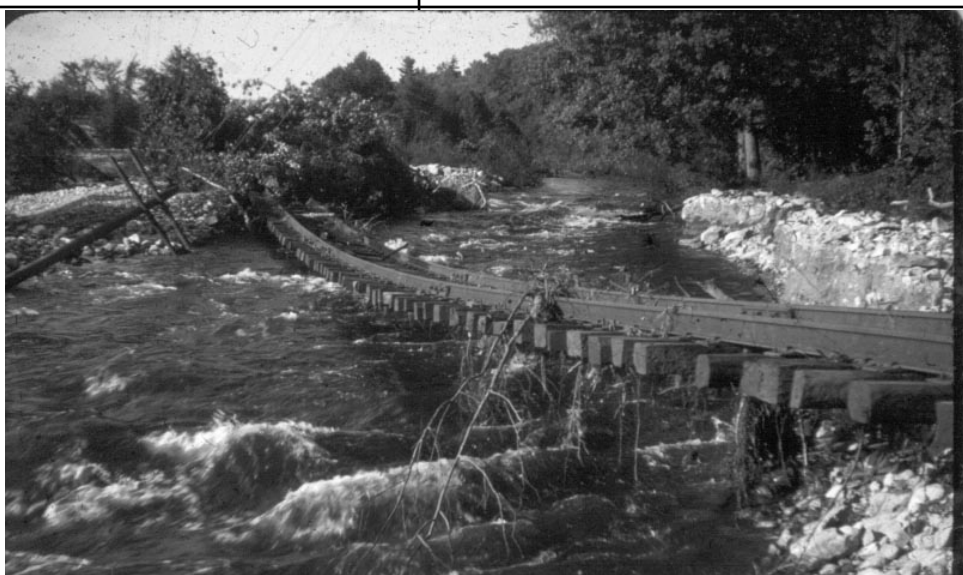
Special thanks to Jean

Cole and Betty Whitehead for the plantings in the urns at the entrance to the ELM. Our work computerizing the collection with PastPerfect continues. We are hoping to be able to make a complete inventory of the collection this fall prior to the installation of the next exhibit. A list of volunteer opportunities is posted on the website (www.thompsonhistorical.org). If you would like to support the Thompson Historical Society with a donation of your time, please contact me at 923-3200.

Society News:

Barbara Weaver continues to work through the long and different transcription process, converting video interviews into text ready for printing. Thanks Barbara for your efforts. We still need help in transcription, so if you like to type, and want to help us get old audio or video tape interviews into text, call Joe at 860 923 0151

To remember the 1936, 1938 and 1955 floods that spawned the massive West Thompson Dam / Lake and other flood control projects in the region, the Thompson Library will have display boards explaining the impact on the historic village of West Thompson. The boards should be in place for the 50th Anniversary of the 1955 storm, August 19/20. Thanks for the idea Alice.....



1955 Flood Damage in No. Grosvenordale
— Photo courtesy of Mary Fatsi

Bus Tour of Town: Many thanks to Jane Johnson for coordinating a series of field trips and in-class sessions for 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade classes of the Mary R. Fisher Elementary School. Tour Guides Dave Babbitt, Sue Vincent, Ruth Barks, Alice Biesiadecki and Jane Provost enjoyed the fine weather and the inquisitive youngsters. Some students learned to write with authentic quill pens while others tested a butter churn, sat in an old wash tub or dressed in period clothes. Classes visited the Thompson Common, the new Museum at the Ellen Larned Building and the Old Town Hall while others stopped to look at Three Rows, West Thompson Lake, Fort Hill, and Grey-stone Farm on Rt. 21.

Afterwards, we received a letter from one of the teachers. She wrote, *"Thank you very much for taking the time to teach my class about the town of Thompson. They all enjoyed the trip! In fact, they came into school the next day talking about the farm, the machinery, the dam, the mills, the Common and the beautiful house. The generosity of your time surely made a lifelong impact on these young learners.This was a wonderful opportunity for all and I hope we can repeat it next year. Thanks again.....Mrs. Ellen Pratt, 2nd grade teacher."*

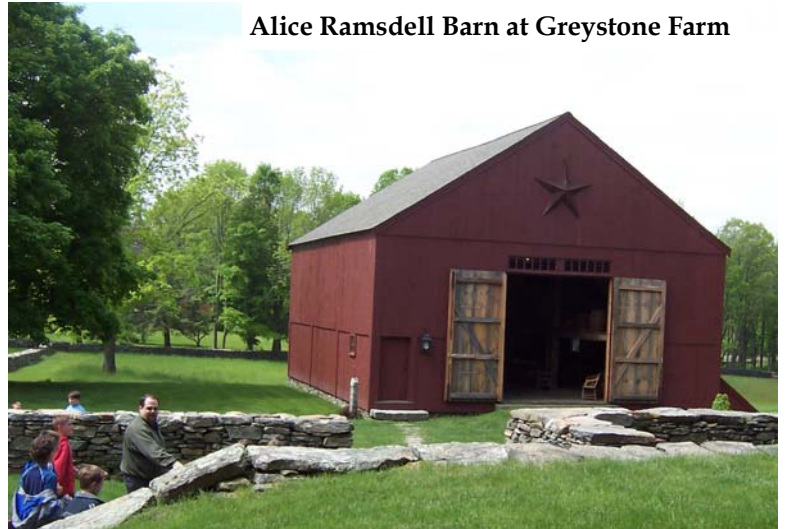
Thank you to our Society tour guides, parent chaperones, teachers, bus drivers and school administrators for their support. Thanks Mrs. Pratt for the photos too.....see page 4.

Photo below: This rare photo c1938 shows the town garage before the 2nd floor was added and the conversion to the Thompson Town Hall. To the right is the Teacherage building, housing for unmarried Tourtelotte teachers. Note the stone pillars that once graced the entrance and exit to the school. Photo from Jim & Jeanne Sali



Photos above: Rachael LaFleur Johnston sent photos of the Main St. section of No. Grosvenordale from the 1955 flood, found when cleaning out her parents' home. Jim Rice is the man behind the row boat in the middle picture. Difficult to recognize No. Grosvenordale from these photos. In the next newsletter, I am looking for 'before and after' photos. The photos have to be taken from the same vantage point. Call 923 0151 to submit.





Alice Ramsdell Barn at Greystone Farm



Compare the Fire Marker, found in Thompson, Connecticut (above right) with Fire Marker on display in The Governor Sprague Museum in Cranston, Rhode Island (above left)

Read Ron Tillen's story on page 5

Society tour guides hard at work teaching Thompson students about local history and traditions. Bottom Right – Ron Tillen pointing towards Three Rows; Bottom left – Jane Johnson at Greystone Farm; Middle left – Sue Vincent cooking in the oversized fireplace at her home; Sue Vincent and Jane Provost at Greystone Farm.



Thompson Fire Marker: Recently the Thompson Fire Engine Company was given a cast iron metal fire marker (see photos on page 4) about 11.5 inches in diameter and weighing 7.6 lb. depicting a manual fire engine of the type used about 175 years ago with the raised initials "F.I.Co" as the insignia of the "Fire Insurance Company". Alwin Bulau's classic book on the subject shows the mark¹ to be identical to those made in 1835 for the Firemen's Insurance Company of Baltimore, which existed, from 1815 to 1904. This Company was associated with the Firemen's Insurance Company of the District of Columbia and both were formed by five volunteer fire companies in Washington and Baltimore. This marker was found in the area where the Thompson Fire Engine Company used to hold their meetings in a "little wooden building"² and where they used to store their engine³, "the tub", now on display in the old Town Hall.

In the 18th and 19th century fire markers were prominently displayed on buildings to indicate that a fire insurance premium had been paid. *"Though volunteer fire brigades responded to all fires, they had more compelling reason to fight fires at buildings bearing an insurance company mark. These fire marks served several functions. They indicated to fire companies that [the insurance company] would reward them for a job well done. Often, firefighters [were insured members]. The less damage to a building, the less deducted from their own premiums. However, if a house was uninsured, the fire would be put out regardless, despite what some modern historians and interpreters may claim. In any case, fire brigades would usually bill the uninsured householder or an insurance company with properties nearby to seek payment for their fine work in battling the blaze."*⁴

In New York City rival departments would rush to the scene to claim the mark and fight the fire. There are even stories of fights over the marks and who got to fight the fire and departments stealing others' marks. It is not known precisely how or when Baltimore Company's marker came to be in Thompson. In 1832 at the Thompson Center, as Thompson Hill was once known, the all-volunteer Thompson Fire Engine Company was organized and its volunteer members would have fought all the fires without regard to any prior monetary arrangement. There are accounts of fires in Thompson that show all the neighbors were involved in helping members of the Company to control the blaze and save property. It is possible that the Company saved a building sometime between 1835 and 1837 and that marker was used to claim a reward from the Fire Insurance Company but there are no records to substantiate this. The Company's detailed minutes start in 1837 when the Company was granted a charter. It is recorded that in 1852 the Company received a \$25.00 reward for saving two barns from fire but the payment came from the local Windham Mutual Fire Insurance Company not from the Baltimore Company. Incidentally, this money was used to buy books and start a library in 1855. Later, Ellen Larned⁵ wrote that in 1880 the Company received a \$25.00 reward from a "grateful" insurance company for saving the Scarborough property. This is most likely the occasion when the old marker was used to claim the payment. Fire marks were used right up to the end of the 19th century when municipal fire departments became predominant, rendering the use of fire markers unnecessary.

In its original state the marker would have been brightly painted⁶. The engine would have been red, the wheel rims red or a golden yellow and the background a deep black-blue. The state of the marker seems to indicate it has either been exposed to the weather over a long period or at least stored in such a manner that allowed the surface to go rusty. However there are remnants of the red paint on the engine. In 2007, when the Company celebrates the 175th anniversary of its organization, displaying the fire marker will be yet another reminder of the Company's long and honorable history of service to the community.

¹ Bulau, Alwin, *Footprints of Assurance*, New York: MacMillan, 1953.

² Lincoln, Allen B., *A Modern History of Windham County*, Page 294 Volume I, The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, Chicago, 1920.

³ There is an old photograph in the Thompson Library archives of the fire engine which is labeled "1827 engine". It is now believed that the American Hydraulic Company of Windsor, Vermont made the engine to a design patented in July 16, 1827 by John Cooper but it closely resembles engines made by his bitter rival Asahel Hubbard who patented his engine April 28, 1828. It is possible that the engine might have been purchased by local businessmen in Thompson prior to the Fire Company's formal organization in 1832.

⁴ Wainwright, Nicholas B. *A Philadelphia story - The Philadelphia contributionship for the insurance of houses by loss from fire.*

⁵ Larned, Ellen *Thompson Fires & Fire Engine*, unpublished notes in the Connecticut State Archives

⁶ The Sprague Museum marker (Cranston, RI) shows more of the original color

Ask The Society

Q. What is the oldest cemetery in Thompson?

A. Society member Johney Larned (correct spelling) - from New Braunsfels, Texas – recently donated a very interesting 1918 dedication pamphlet concerning the creation of the Memorial Tablet to Revolutionary War soldiers at the West Thompson Burying Yard. The dedication committee consisted of Mrs. George H. Nichols and Mrs. George A. Vaughan. One of them wrote, and I am using excerpts *"In early times, there were three Killingly Burying Grounds. The Oldest Killingly Yard in Putnam, this second oldest yard (JI note – meaning in West Thompson) and the third yard between Dayville and Danielson. Contrary to the times, none of these yards were adjacent to meeting houses.*

This second oldest Killingly yard (was in West Thompson) 1735....it was on this date that Daniel Shapley gave 'a piece of land near the French River a mile or more southwest of the meeting house.' There were burials here of an early date. ... I have found stones bearing a date of 1720.....The earliest recorded interment was that of Capt. Sampson Howe, who died in 1736 and was buried with honors.

Unrelated to the question above, but correcting a note written in the newsletter a year or two ago, there was another General from Thompson that we neglected to mention. The 1918 pamphlet mentions that Daniel Larned was promoted to Brigadier General of the 5th Brigade, 11th Regiment following the Revolutionary War. Thanks Johney for the pamphlet donation and adding a Larned General to Thompson's other two generals (John Tourtellotte and George Davis). It is nice to get a plug in for a distant family member whenever possible too.

Q. When were Thompson's roads first tarred?

A. We know that Rt. 12 had a concrete road between Grosvenordale and North Grosvenordale, completed in 1914, supposedly one of the first in Connecticut. However the topic of tarring is interesting as the use of tar was a step between the asphalt paved roads of today and the old country dirt roads as shown in the photo below.

Roads were tarred at different periods. Examples.....Charlie Seney reported that Pompeo Road and Quaddick Town Farm Rd. were tarred for the first time in the mid 1930s. He should know because he was there doing the work. Charlie's words... *"A day or two before tarring, a town truck would dump piles of sand or small gravel in piles every 25 feet or so. Then, when all of the day workers were there, the tar truck would drop hot liquid tar on the dirt road. The workers would spread the sand and gravel all over the tarred road. The workers would go from 6 am to 4 pm. It was very hot, hard work. About a week later, another truck with big brushes would clean the loose sand of the road."*

Adrienne Coderre, born in 1907, remembers this story. ... *I was thirteen or fourteen. We were in the Brick Houses (in North*

Grosvenordale). And they were the dirt roads, ... And when we went to school my mother used to say, "I want you to make sure you don't have to cross the street to go to school" because it was ... that day they laid down tar. It wasn't hardtop, it was tar. That hot tar, you know. They had just put it down. So we have to come home for dinner. It was from 11:30 to 1:00. And when we went back at one o'clock my mother said "Now, I want you to make sure you don't cross the road". Because, you know, tar... it stuck – so we took off for school, and me being so bright, I said well I'm just going to walk tiptoes. And the first two tiptoes I did I went flat in the tar, so I came back in the house. I was covered. I couldn't go to school in the afternoon.

Clarence Ballard: *"Our particular highway – Ballard Road – wasn't paved until somewhere around 1960. That was one of the requirements that they had for this movie location, Man in the Net... They sent a crew here east to locate a possible location for a movie, ... They were looking for an old farm on a dirt road, and they talked to Otto Graf, ...and Otto said "Oh, I know just the place – Ballard Farm."*



White family home, c 1910, located on East Thompson Road (once part of the Boston to Hartford Turnpike). You can find the home today just past the Speedway and cemetery on the left hand side as you head east). One of several valuable techniques in dating old photos is to examine the roads against paving or tarring records. Photo courtesy of Sally White.