



From The Harrison House

The Branford Historical Society Newsletter

Spring 2006, Volume 11, Issue 2

From the President's Desk...

Spring brings the busiest time of year for the Society. We have our annual meeting the third Thursday of May. It's a great opportunity to enjoy a great dinner with entertainment, at a good price in the wonderful seaside setting of the Owenego Inn. Spring also means the opening of the Harrison House, and Strawberry Festival on Saturday June 17th, Father's Day weekend.

All these activities present wonderful opportunities for members to help the work of the society. We are always in need of guides for the Harrison House. Please, contact Anton Wohler at 481-4665 if you are interested. We are also in need of a replacement for Anton, who is retiring as Chair of the Guides. The primary duties of this position include training and scheduling the guides and participating as a member of the Board of Directors. We are also

in need of a hospitality chair. This person is also a member of the Board of Directors, and helps the program director with refreshments at program events, as well as organizing the Christmas Party at Harrison House. Anyone interested in the position should call me at 483-6470.

The Strawberry Festival also presents a great opportunity to participate in the work of the Society while meeting many of your friends from about town. Strong hands are wanted for set-up and break down of the tent used for the festival. Contact George Goeben at 481-9200 if you can help.

I hope to see you at the Annual Meeting, Thursday May 18th, at which time we will be voting on the changes in the Society's By-Laws.

Peter Black, President



By-Law Amendments

The Society's Board will propose several amendments to the By-Laws for adoption by the membership at its annual meeting. These amendments are generally intended to bring the By-Laws into conformance with actual practice.

The most substantive is increasing the number of consecutive terms an officer may serve from two to three. Another change is to eliminate the Ways and Means Committee, which has not been filled in recent memory, and to add the Preservation Committee, currently chaired by Martha Bradshaw. Also, the board is recommending that the provision for distribution of the Society's assets in the case of its dissolution be amended to provide that, in the case of the dissolution of the Society, its assets will be distributed to a non-profit organization with a mission that is as close as possible to that of the Society. Other amendments are primarily technical, such as providing for SPNEA's name change.

A full text of the proposed changes to the By-Laws is available at the Blackstone Library. At the Annual meeting on May 18th, held at the Owenego, the membership will vote on the changes in the By-Laws.

Peter Black, President

From the Harrison House

is a publication of the
Branford Historical Society
124 Main Street, P.O. Box 504
Branford, Connecticut 06405
(203) 488-4828

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Preservation of Historic Structures & Landmarks

Martha Bradshaw 481-9980

Programs

Mary Boyle 481-2996

Publicity

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Join Us for our 27th Annual Strawberry Festival!



The Society's biggest and most popular event of the year, the Strawberry Festival, will be held on Saturday, June 17th from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. during the Branford Festival. Look for our tent on the back of the Green.

The traditional homemade shortcake will be topped with fresh strawberries and real whipped cream. Included in the price of the presale ticket of \$4.50 per person will be coffee or lemonade. Tickets sold at the time of the event are \$5.00. Presale tickets will be sent to all members and others. For additional tickets contact Richmond Browne at 315-1237.

Other Festival committee chairs are Winnifred Judge (488-8755) strawberry hulling, Sandra Browne (315-1237) whippers, Pete Peterson (488-0450) set-up and clean-up, John Ifkovic (413-572-9892) ticket takers, Albert Paulsen (481-5699) beverages, Eva Peterson, kitchen & paper goods (488-0405) and Marjorene Ainley (481-3556) servers. George Goeben (481-9200) has



Volunteers enjoy time together while preparing for the Strawberry Festival.

coordinated and organized the event.

Volunteers are always welcome. If you would like to help out in any of the areas mentioned, please contact the Chair listed above.

Our popular strawberry shortcakes often sell out quickly, so the event lasts as long as the berries hold out. In case of rain, our Strawberry Festival will be held in Trinity's basement.

Across from the Strawberry Festival tent the Historical Society will have the following publications available: Early History of Branford, Thimble Island Book by Archie Hanna, and Reprint of Malachi Linsley's Diary. There will be Post Card Prints of Early Branford, which include Downtown, Stony Creek/Pine Orchard, Short Beach and Indian Neck/Pawson Park. The DVD of the Montowese Program and wooden miniatures by Cat's Meow of buildings on the Branford Green will also be sold. If your home is over 50 years old, the Society provides research and house plaques to identify historic landmarks and structures. You may place your order at the Publications table.

Thank you in advance to all the volunteers who help make the Strawberry Festival a success. We look forward to seeing you there!

Membership Update

Our Society membership has increased to 239 families and individuals. New members are Richard Young, John and Janet Cullen and Kendra Martin. Please welcome them if you see them at any of our coming events. I am continually trying to find new ways to encourage Branford residents to become members. You can help by recommending a friend or family member.

Your dues not only allows the Society to maintain Harrison House, its museum and barn, it supports the programs that are held four times a year at the Blackstone Library. School groups are encouraged to visit Harrison House and learn about our local history. During the summer month's members volunteer as Guides at Harrison House. For the hours see www.branfordhistory.org.

The Society maintains a large collection of photographs. Contact Jane Bouley, 488-6531 for copies or if you have historic photos to add to our collection. If your home is over 50 years old, the Society provides research and sells house plaques to identify historic landmarks and structures. See the last page of this newsletter for a list of publications, post cards, posters of the local area, note cards and the Montowese Program DVD.

Thank you to all who have renewed their 2006 membership. There are still 9 members who will see an "R" on their mailing label. This indicates that your membership needs to be renewed.

 *Jeanne McParland,*

Taxes Are Nothing New!


Property taxes have often made the news in recent years. In the archives of the Branford Historical Society is the 1799 tax assessment.

The 1799 assessment included the First, Second and Third Societies which were the present day towns of Branford, North Branford and Northford the latter two were still part of Branford. The men in town were grouped by occupations and each taxed depending upon the prosperity of the business. Second to farming, shoemaking was by far the most common trade in Branford and included 27 men all taxed at 17 dollars per year. Blacksmiths, joiners, carpenters, coopers, tailors and clothiers were also taxed at that rate.

The 7 gristmills in town appear to have been thriving in 1799 and were taxed between 36 and 65 dollars; however sawmills were only assessed at 5 dollars. Tavern keepers numbering ten were assessed at 50 dollars and merchants at 84. Charles Butler was the most successful merchant in Branford with an assessment of 140 dollars. William Gould, Orchard Gould, Jared Foot, Heman P. Brooks and Reuben Linsley were the area's physicians and were taxed at 34 dollars per year. The only attorney at law in the three societies was Joel T. Benedict with by far the highest assessment of 167 dollars.

Farmers were taxed separately and each man was taxed according to his age and the amount of land he owned both pasture and meadow. Livestock was also taxed depending upon the type and age of the animal. Families owning luxury items such as carriages, clocks, watches and silver were also taxed. In 1799 there were 21 carriages, 53 watches and 20 clocks in Branford.

The assessors (called listers) for the 1799 Town of Branford Tax Assessment were Caleb Finch, Bille Evarts and Pitman Pond. Total town assessment was \$62,993.17.

 *Jane Peterson Bouley, Vice President*



Accessions Report

Last summer, Jeanette Oppel, a current resident of Lindenhurst, IL, and a descendant of Samuel Pond, who settled in Branford in the 1660s, presented the Historical Society with what may be its oldest treasure: a seventeenth-century turned armchair.

Not only has it been passed down through generations from these early roots, but it was probably crafted at a turner's shop in Branford. Commonly known as a Carver chair to furniture specialists, named after the first governor of Plymouth Colony, it was called the Governor Winthrop chair within the Oppel family after the first governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony or his son, the first governor of Connecticut Colony.

The Branford turner's style can be

recognized by the drumstick-shaped spindles with ball ends on the back of the chair and ogee, or vase-shaped, turnings on the upright stiles and posts. A very similar chair, which once stood in the house at the corner of Mill Pond Road and the Boston Post Road, is on display at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, TX, today.

Mrs. Oppel also donated two painted chairs, a slat-back chair (1820-40) and a Windsor high chair (1840-60). We are deeply grateful to Mrs. Oppel and her family for this spectacular and historically meaningful addition to our collection.

*Amy Prescher,
Accessions Chair*



Colonial Chair Display

The new display at the Branford Historical Society's Harrison House for the 2006 season is a collection of the major chair styles during our Colonial period. This display was inspired by the donation of a Governor Carver chair explained in the Accessions Report. The other chairs in the collection, in chronological order, are the slat back, William and Mary, baluster back, Queen Anne, Windsor, and Chippendale chairs.

The Harrison House Museum is open for tours on Saturdays from 2:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. from June through September, and by appointment.

*Anton Wohlert, Director,
Harrison House Museum*



Harrison House Museum

124 MAIN STREET, BRANFORD

Open Saturdays from 2:00 to 5:00 p.m.
and by appointment, June - September.

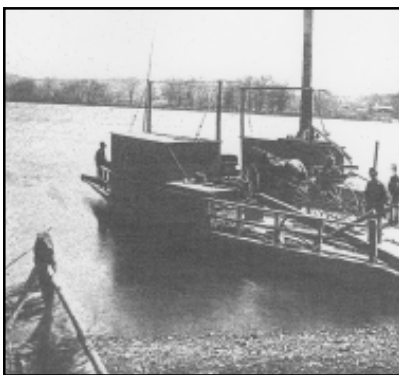
From the Archives

Branford's Big Decision

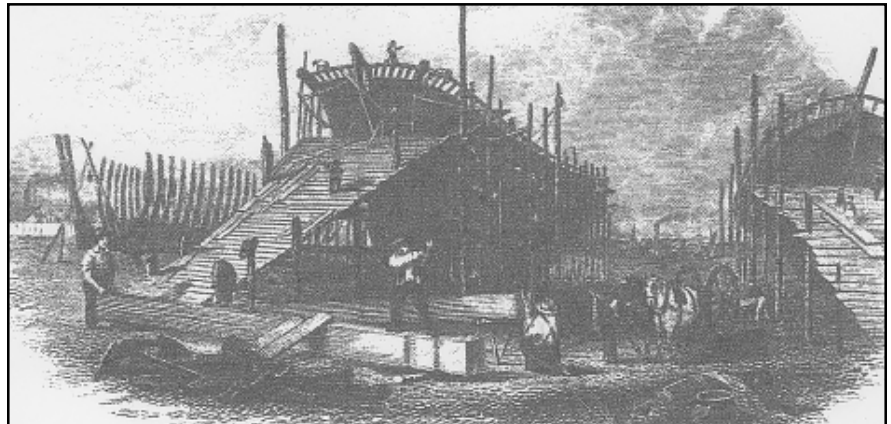
by Nancy Hendricks

The Revolutionary War ended and left a young country with a very doubtful future, particularly in the rural areas of Branford, Guilford, Madison and North Branford. At this time this area of Connecticut contained less than 200,000 people. They had only a relatively small external trade, small deposits of copper and iron ore, poor roads, but a rich and fertile soil.

The importance of the Connecticut River, the Thames, and the Housatonic, to these people who lived in or near them must be recognized. The mighty Connecticut River was the only river which flowed some 400 miles the full length of New England to Long Island Sound at Old Saybrook. This great river had been called by the Indians "the long tidal river" and had been described by Timothy Dwight as "everywhere pure, potable and perfectly salubrious



Rocky Hill steam ferry.



Shipbuilding on the river.

and inferior to none other in the world for the use of seamen on long voyages." The area had been the hunting and fishing grounds of the peaceful Algonquin Indians who came to trade their furs and animal skins.

For over 200 years those who sought their personal calling afloat depended upon the rivers and seaports and the most important business was shipbuilding. In Branford, this had been centered around Dutch Wharf on the small Branford River. The young men of Branford were hard-drinking seamen who had regarded old "kill devil" rum as one of life's necessities for their survival. A thriving business in Branford had accordingly been the town's many bars and taverns. I might add that rum was by far the leading import. By 1750, river shipbuilding had

reached its peak and continued for another century despite the introduction of competing forms of transporting. From the earliest times, tiny river-built sloops made regular trips to the Caribbean, livestock on deck, cruised from island to island, bartering farm produce, and then returned to river wharves such as Dutch Wharf in Branford. Here they became floating stores.

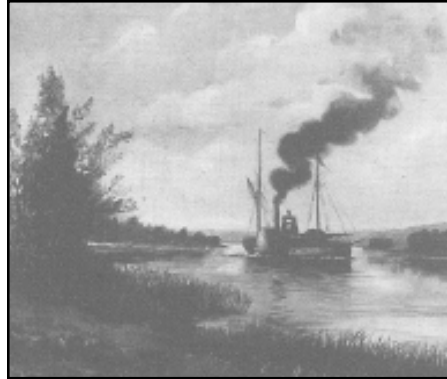
Now I have read about many of these same fishermen and seamen, particularly a Captain Townsend, who had sailed from East Haddam, a small port located just up the Long Island Sound from Branford. This daring man had sailed with a limited cargo and a few gold coins for emergency use on the vessel Neptune. He had started his adventure from the East

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From the Archives: Branford's Big Decision, continued...

Indies traveling south to Rio de Jenario around Cape Horn to the Southern Seas. Here he had even traded a cargo of "Dragon's Blood" (blood drawn from an East Indian arboreal lizard). Captain Townsend had arrived home with his cargo of tea, silk, ivory, lacquer work, and sandalwood. I only mention this voyage because it was this ship which had sailed from the small port of East Haddam and had managed to bring home a cargo valued at \$200,000 and his gold still unspent. Captain Townsend's trip was also the first trip to be made by a Yankee ship to reach China and circumnavigate the world. Another ship, the "Lorena" out of Essex, weighed 527 tons, costing \$28,000 to build and yet returned in 17 years with a profit of \$100,000!

Most of the ship Captains owned their wharves. Nearly 200 vessels



Oliver Ellsworth

sailed along the coast carrying their lumber, corn, grain, dairy products and ropes of red onions. This had brought great earnings which later became the source of the wealth of some of the old families of New England. The fishermen had decided to be the "Peddlers Afloat" and there would have been no reason to change this way of earning a living as it was

the only way they had ever know.

Now that is why I feel that these farmers and fishermen had made the right choice and the only choice they could have had at that time after the Revolutionary War. Heavy manufacturing was beginning to grow throughout New England but it was Branford's decision to be an agricultural society and not an industrial nation.



Poling a barge upriver through the Windsor Locks Canal

2006 Annual Dinner Reservation Form

MAY 18, 2006

**5:30 p.m. at the Owenego
Inn, Indian Neck**

**Cost: \$28.00 per person
Guests & Public Welcome**

Cash Bar will be open
at 5:30 p.m. with selected hors
d'oeuvres followed by a buffet
dinner at 6:30 p.m.

R.S.V.P. BY MAY 11TH

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Telephone #: _____

Number Attending: _____ @ \$28.00 per person

AMOUNT ENCLOSED: _____

RETURN RESERVATION FORM WITH CHECK TO:

**Winnifred Judge,
31 Pawson Park Rd.
Branford, CT 06405**

Make checks payable to
Branford Historical Society
Phone: (203) 488-8755

Join Us for the Branford Historical Society's
Annual Dinner Meeting

THURSDAY, MAY 18 at 5:30 p.m.

at The Owenego Inn, Branford

Cash Bar with Selected Hors D'Oeuvres followed by Buffet Dinner at 6:30 p.m.

FEATURING



“Songs of the Civil War Era” with ShoreGrass

Enjoy bluegrass-style interpretations of great old songs from the “War Between the States” including familiar soldier songs, sentimental ballads, hymns and popular songs of the past and present. ShoreGrass is comprised of Barbara and Frank Shaw, Paul Pozzi, Stacy Phillips and Dave Aston. Their music is a lively mix of traditional bluegrass, old-time, early country, gospel and folk songs as well as original pieces reflecting their roots in contemporary music. All five members of ShoreGrass sing, giving the group that unique bluegrass blend of guitar, banjo, mandolin, fiddle and bass while alternating leads on 3 and 4-part vocal harmonies. Their musicianship gives the audience an ensemble experience that demonstrates the range and uniqueness of each instrument as well as an unusually rich vocal blend, all delivered with the special sense of humor that marks all ShoreGrass performances.

Historical Society Members and the Branford Community are welcome to attend.

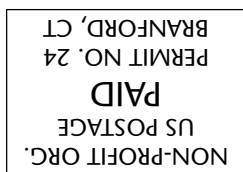
COST: \$28.00 PER PERSON.

*Please make your reservations by May 11th. Fill out the form
on the opposite page and return to Winnifred Judge, 488-8775.*

Historical Society Publications & Prints

The following publications and prints are available through the Society. Contact Winnifred Judge, 488-8755 for details.

<i>The History of Damascus Cemetery</i> , by Jane Bouley and Martha Bradshaw	\$25.00
Reprint of <i>Malachi Linsley's Diary</i> , by Betty Linsley and Elizabeth Radulski	\$25.00
<i>Early History of Branford</i>	\$5.00
<i>Thimble Islands Book</i> , by Archie Hanna	\$7.00
Bird's Eye View of Branford w/Historic Buildings (Print)	\$5.00
Post Card Prints of Early Branford (Downtown, Stony Creek/Pine Orchard, Short Beach, Indian Neck/Pawson Park)	\$3.00 Each
Montowese Program DVD	\$20.00



Branford Historical Society
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