

Collecting Weston History: Committee, Society, Commission

What's in a name? In the case of the Weston Historical Committee (1931-1968), Weston Historical Society (1963-present), and Weston Historical Commission (1968-present), the one-word difference connotes totally separate organizations, albeit with similar purposes.

Founding of the Weston Historical Committee

The Weston Historical Committee was founded in 1931 as a town committee by a vote of Town Meeting. The original members were Gertrude Fiske, Chairman, Alice E. Jones, Secretary, and Edward P. Ripley. All were members of old Weston families. Fiske was a noted artist and Ripley was the brother of local historian Emma Ripley. The initial purpose of the committee was to arrange for an historical program in Weston to mark the dedication of the Massachusetts George Washington Memorial Highway. These exercises were held June 10, 1932, at the Burgoyne Elm.

Beginnings of the Weston Historical Committee Collection

In the 1932 *Town Report*, the committee noted that “The Historical Committee will be glad to take charge of any articles or papers of historic interest that may be sent to them, and are hoping eventually to have a permanent place for exhibiting such things.” At a meeting of the committee in 1933, it was suggested that a collection be made of pictures or photographs of the old houses of Weston. The committee offered to make photographic reproductions if the owner of the photograph did not wish to donate it. By 1934, collecting efforts had expanded to include taking photographs, receiving “gifts of historic interest” with “the promise of some choice articles” and encouraging donations of old documents. The committee searched for a safe and suitable place for storing and exhibiting these items. The 1935 report notes that “It has been suggested that there be formed a Town Historical Society and it is hoped that enough interest in this will develop in the town to make this possible in the near future.”

Weston Historical Committee and the Fiske Law Office

The 1936 *Town Report* discusses the prospect of using the original rooms of the town-owned Fiske Law Office, since the Cemetery Commission was using only the ell. The committee expected to ask the town for \$500 to repair the building and purchase display cases. By 1937, the Fiske Law Office had become the committee's headquarters, serving as a place to keep and exhibit a small but growing collection.

Town reports from 1938 to 1950 often include descriptions of gifts to the committee: a “priceless” manuscript diary by Judith Greenleaf, wife of Enoch Greenleaf, (donated in 1938); a safe formerly owned by Charles A. Cutting of Wayland (1939); a photograph of Hanna Gowen taken from a daguerreotype (1940); a manuscript diary written in 1845 by Mrs. Frederick Bush of Wes



The Fiske Law Office has been adopted at different times by both the Weston Historical Committee and Weston Historical Society as a place to exhibit and store historical materials. The Committee occupied the two original rooms (shown at left) from 1937 to 1952, when it moved to the Jones House/JST. The Society restored the law office between 1966 and 1969, using largely volunteer labor, but gave up custody of the building in the 1990s. (Photo by Pamela W. Fox)

ton; a model of the old Unitarian Church (1941); a framed assessor's notice of 1777 (1942); three framed crayon portraits of three generation of the Hastings family (1943); 1887 Weston-Wayland directory (1944); history of "Rocklawn" by M.R. Case (1945); and original letters and papers from Col. D.S. Lamson (1947). It is unclear what happened to many of these items.

Miss Alice Jones, one of the three original members of the committee, died on December 22, 1947. She was replaced by Henry Patterson, described as the "recently appointed Town Historian." In 1949, the committee reported that they had put all the collections in storage "as we have had to leave the Isaac Fiske Office," adding "We hope to have a permanent place some day as we have many articles of great interest and of value." The committee continued to accept items into the collection. The 1950 *Town Report* notes that the collection was in storage at the Case house.

Weston Historical Committee Moves to the Jones House

Miss Ellen Jones, Alice's sister, died in 1950. The sisters bequeathed their house to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA, now Historic New England). For the next 32 years, the building was leased back to the town. Beginning in 1953, the Weston Historical Committee was housed in the Jones House (occasionally referred to by its appropriate historical name, the Josiah Smith Tavern), where its collections were displayed in several rooms. Before the Historical Committee occupied the building, they recommended the sale of furniture and other contents not wanted by either the committee or other prospective users. An auction was held on May 16, 1953 and proceeds were added to the SPNEA endowment fund for the property.

Town reports from 1956 to 1967 do not include information on the historical committee. Membership in the three-person committee slowly changed as Gertrude Fiske, the long-time chairman, died in 1961 and Emma Ripley (who had replaced her brother Edward) died in 1962. From

1963 to 1967, the three members of the Weston Historical Committee were Henry W. Patterson, Chairman, J. Kenneth Bennett, and Elizabeth C. Kenney. Brenton H. Dickson III replaced Patterson in 1968.

Founding of the Weston Historical Society

1963 marked the 250th Anniversary of Weston's incorporation. A special town committee worked from mid-1962 through the actual celebration, which took place from May 30 to June 2, 1963. They planned or coordinated more than 60 events and prepared special maps and printed programs. As a direct outgrowth, the Weston Historical Society (WHS) was incorporated in December 1963 as a private non-profit organization. The three-member Weston Historical Committee continued as an official town body; however, the lack of information in town reports suggests that they were not active. Three historical committee members or former members, Ken Bennett, Henry W. Patterson,

Pictured at a Weston Historical Society open house at the Josiah Smith Tavern in 1964 are, (l-r), Mrs. Edmund U. Ritter; Mrs. Henry W. Patterson; Mrs. James Fraser (Alice), curator; Harold G. Travis, president of the society; and Mrs. F. Leslie Ford. In the early 1970s, the Weston Historical Commission asked the Selectmen to change the sign to read Josiah Smith Tavern.



and Brenton H. Dickson III, were also on the first board of directors of the Weston Historical Society. Alice Fraser held the post of curator.

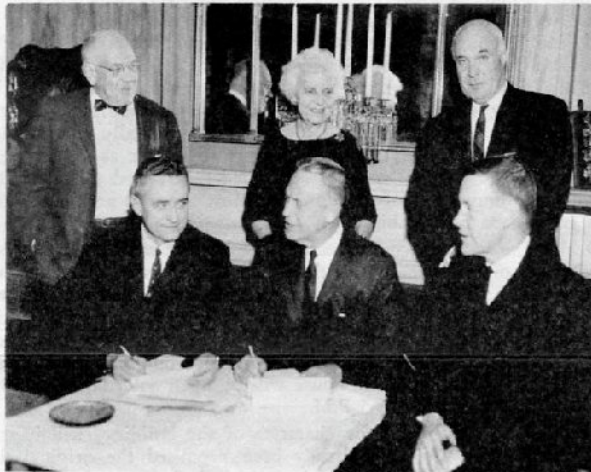
From the beginning, the headquarters of the historical society was the Jones House/Josiah Smith Tavern. *The Weston Historical Society Bulletin* of October, 1964, reported that “Visitors are received from 2 to 4 pm [on Wednesdays] by hostesses, who are glad to supply information about the objects of historical interest displayed in this building....”

Weston Historical Society and the Fiske Law Office

In the January, 1966 issue of *The Weston Historical Society Bulletin*, Harold G. "Red" Travis, the society's first president, reported that the board of selectmen had reached an informal agreement to give care and custody of the Isaac Fiske Law Office to the society. Travis noted that the law office would be the "official headquarters" of the society and "records will be set up as a reference library, and displays of papers, pictures and other items of historic value are contemplated in this charming setting," while the "priceless heirlooms of Weston" would continue to be on display at the Jones House. The WHS and selectmen signed an agreement that April giving the society official care of the law office. In addition to making building repairs and improvements, the society acquired furniture that is still part of the WHS collection; for example, two hand-carved oak chairs reportedly from the study of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

THE WESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

MAY, 1966, VOL. II, NO. 3



The Pact is Signed – The House is Ours!

Shown above are, l. to r. seated: Herman Koester, Jr., Chairman of Selectmen; Harold G. Travis, President of the Weston Historical Society; John G. Brooks, Clerk; standing: Philip F. Coburn, Mrs. Homer N. Sweet, and J. Kenneth Bennett, Directors. This picture was taken April 26, 1966 at the historic signing of an agreement whereby the Society, for its headquarters, acquired the old Isaac Fiske Law Office.

Nestled under the famous Burgoyne Elm at 626 Boston Post Road, this "little house by the side of the road" was built in 1800 and is in excellent condition. Prior to World War II it fittingly was used as an office for the Weston Historical Committee. For a detailed description and history of the building, see the January 1966 issue of the Bulletin.

Meanwhile, curator Alice Fraser and other volunteers kept the Jones House/Josiah Smith Tavern open on Wednesday afternoons. In October 1966, they installed a costume display in three of the rooms. In 1967, Mrs. Fraser organized a display of members' china and pewter collections.

Restoration of the Isaac Fiske Law Office was completed by 1970. Subsequent bulletins mention Wednesday open hours at the Jones House/JST but not at the law office, although the law office is still referred to occasionally as the society's headquarters. Bulletins from the 1980's refer to the need to maintain the Fiske Law Office garden,

Officers of the Weston Historical Society sign an agreement whereby the society acquires the Fiske Law Office as its headquarters. (l-r, seated) Herman Koester, Jr., chairman of the Selectmen, Harold G. Travis, president of the society; John G. Brooks, clerk. (Standing) Philip Coburn, Mrs. Homer Sweet, and J. Kenneth Bennett, directors. April, 1966.



1987 photographs shows the woodshed at the southwest corner of the Josiah Smith Tavern, where a piece of the Burgoyne Elm was stored for many years (left) and the southwest room of the Josiah Smith Tavern, headquarters of the Weston Historical Society (below). (Courtesy of Historic New England, photographs by David Bohl)

but interest appears to have fallen off after the death in 1981 of Harold Travis. In the 1990s, the society requested that the town re-

sume responsibility for the law office. All remaining contents were moved back to the Jones House/JST.

Establishment of the Weston Historical Commission

At a Special Town Meeting in December 1968, the town voted to abolish the Weston Historical Committee, which had existed since 1931, and establish a five-member Weston Historical Commission to serve as the town's official body for administration of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. From its inception, the commission focused on historic buildings of the town. The Town Meeting vote included a provision to "transfer to the custody of the historical commission . . . all property of the Town now in the custody of the historical committee." Four of the five original members of the commission were also

actively involved with the Weston Historical Society: Brenton H. Dickson III, Erlund Field, Vera Laska, and Homer C. Lucas.



SPNEA sells the Josiah Smith Tavern to the Town

In 1983, the town purchased the Josiah Smith Tavern from SPNEA, with strict exterior and interior preservation restrictions. The town paid \$48,542, and SPNEA transferred \$97,084 in endowment funds. The Weston Historical Commission wrote in the *1984 Town Report* that it had its first quarters, a second floor room in the Josiah Smith Tavern, and that “The Historical Society has kindly lent us old chairs and pictures.” The society continued to use two first-floor rooms for its displays and archives. By the 1990s if not before, it was using one of the second floor rooms as well as the attic for storage. In recent years, the society has received permission to expand into the former Park and Cemetery office and to use additional rooms on a temporary basis during this period of transition, as the town studies future uses for the building.

by Pamela W. Fox

2007: A Year of Frustration and Accomplishment at the Weston Historical Society

The following is an excerpt from the Annual Report delivered by Pamela W. Fox, president of the Weston Historical Society, at the WHS Annual Meeting on November 6, 2007.

My theme tonight is the Chinese proverb ‘a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step.’ I would like to take you back in time to January 2007. Members of the board had spent the previous six months painting and cleaning the former Park and Cemetery Office, which we now had permission to use. We had purchased file cabinets and set up a functioning room in which to process the many boxes of materials that the society owns but still needs to organize and catalogue. We had taken one step forward.

But after conferring with members of the Josiah Smith Tavern Committee, who were making plans for the exterior restoration of the tavern, we realized with dismay that we had a problem. The work was about to begin. What should we do about the objects in our collection? Would they be inadvertently damaged in the construction process or be vulnerable from a security point of view, with workmen in and out of the building for months?

Our board of directors rose to the challenge. During several Saturday workdays, under the leadership of Carol Snow, we cleared out the attic, where objects were vulnerable to water damage during re-roofing. An amazing hodgepodge of objects— spinning wheels, manikins, fake rifles, picture frames, and trunks, etc, along with heavy boxes of unsold books, town reports, and old historical society bulletins—were moved to the lower floors. Furniture in all rooms was pushed against the inside walls, covered, and surrounded by boxes packed with small objects from the collections. Exterior walls had to be kept open because almost every window sash in the building

was eventually removed, restored, and reinstalled. It seemed like we had taken two giant steps back.

All this work turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Our board had a bonding experience moving furniture down two flights of stairs on those Saturday workdays. Also, since everything was packed up and under wraps, this proved to be an excellent time to paint walls and ceilings, which were gray and even black with dirt and grime. We patched holes in the plaster, touched up woodwork, and cleaned. Many board members participated in monthly work days through the spring, but I would particularly like to mention Greg Barison, Tom Friedlander, Carlie Friedlander, Mary Gregory, Beth and Tony Nolan, and Carol Snow.

Also last spring, the board adopted a comprehensive collections policy to help define what we should be collecting. Our new policy, modeled after that of the Newton Historical Society at the Jackson Homestead, will allow us to make better decisions about what to accept and how to responsibly deaccession objects that do not relate to the history of Weston.

Months went by and finally the exterior work was finished. I know you have all admired the results. Again, it was time for our board of directors to mobilize for action. We looked at our space and decided to use the large and sunny room across the rear of the house for books and archival materials, with two large tables for processing. Two rooms will be devoted to care and management of objects and one room has been outfitted with shelves for storage. In addition, we have received temporary permission to use the ballroom to organize large objects and to use two additional first floor rooms for temporary displays. Those who come to the Holiday House Tour on December 8, sponsored by the Women's Community League Juniors, will see displays of Josiah Smith Tavern photographs as well as treasures from the Weston Historical Society collections and conceptual plans for future use of the tavern as a restaurant.

The recent restoration did not include the interior. The tavern has had no running water



During the recent exterior restoration of the tavern, objects in the collection of the Weston Historical Society had to be moved out of the attic and woodshed to the first floor. This moving has forced the society to take a hard look at what we have and ask the question, "What is it that we should be collecting?" (Photo by Carol Snow)

or toilet facilities since a pipe burst in 2003. But we do have heat now, after several years without.

While we have spent time creating a functional working environment, the society is aware that we occupy space in the tavern on a temporary basis at the discretion of the selectmen. The newly reconstituted Josiah Smith Tavern/Old Library Committee is working on a proposal that would adapt the tavern, barn, and connector into a restaurant. They are working with an architect and restaurant consultant and hope to have a plan ready for the May Town Meeting. For this plan to go forward, voters will have to allow a full liquor license and be willing to allocate CPA funds. As part of the proposal, the Women's Community League, which has a long-term lease on the barn, would move to the main floor of the Old Library and the historical society would move into the former children's library area and storage rooms on the lower level. There we would join our collections with those of the historical commission and town hall to form what we are calling the Weston History Center and Archives. The work we are doing now to evaluate and organize the society's collections will make this transition easier, if indeed this proposal is adopted by the town.



Photograph of the entry hall at the Josiah Smith Tavern in the winter of 2006-07, showing snow that blew in under the door. (Photo by Sarah Gilman)

Anyone who could like to check out our headquarters, do some research, or volunteer to help is invited to come to the Josiah Smith Tavern any Wednesday morning between 10 and 12 noon. I would like to thank the following board members who have been coming regularly on Wednesday mornings: Carol Snow, Mary Gregory, Nonnie Mullin, Sally Gilman, and Tania Deary.

In early summer, 2007, we took two giant steps forward with the receipt of a grant for \$4375 from the Sunfield Foundation for the purchase of a computer, printer/scanner/copier, and the software program PastPerfect. The latter was developed to help small museums and historical societies manage their collections, membership lists, and other functions. I am happy to announce that, with the help of board member Tom Friedlander, the computer is up and running.

But of course, this is only the beginning. Except for the membership list, nothing at the society has ever been computerized. We now have the capability to make a record for each object, with photographs, history, and location information, for example, but photographs must be taken and information entered. While we are not in a position to afford paid staff, we will have a student intern with archival experience working with us for a few weeks this winter. Otherwise we rely on the volunteer work of our board and welcome the help of interested members.

The Sunfield Foundation grant also provided money for a map case and archival supplies, including boxes and buffered tissue, so that objects can be safely stored. Along with identification of objects and cataloging, a key part of our mission is proper conservation and storage.

A great deal of effort was spent this year in getting a handle on collections management. But we are very aware that, in order to win the support of the community, we need outreach and educational programs as well. To that end, we sponsor spring and fall programs each year. Last November, we hosted Bruce Schwoegler, who gave a fascinating report on the Hurricane of 1938 and the Blizzard of 1978. In the spring, we sponsored a program on the history of Field School, an important subject, since the future of the school is now being studied, and the community needs to take history and architectural values into account when making this decision. We publish two issues per year of *The Weston Historical Society Bulletin*. The last two issues, both 36 pages, concentrated on the Case Estates, another example where the history of the property is not just of academic interest but can have a real effect in increasing enthusiasm and support for preservation today. People have asked me whether I am writing another book. The answer is no, but I am the editor of the *Bulletin* and write most of the articles. I regard the *Bulletin* as an opportunity to disseminate serious research on Weston history. We welcome your feedback.

Another small step the society took last year was to set up a display case at the library near the card catalogue computer terminal. We have used the case for displays on Field School, the Josiah Smith Tavern, the Sears collection of bills and invoices from the early 20th century, and a look at Town Reports over the years. These displays will continue every few months. As I mentioned, we will be preparing an exhibit at the Josiah Smith Tavern for the Holiday House Tour and hopefully will receive permission from the selectmen to make it available at other times as well. And our top priority this year will be development of a website, which will offer the opportunity to connect with much wider audiences. I would like to thank Miller Blew for leading the effort to get us onto the Internet.

As you heard from our treasurer, Arnold Crowley, our budget is small. With the exception of this year, when we received the Sunfield Foundation grant, our annual revenue comes from two sources, interest on the endowment and membership dues and gifts. Since 2004, we have seen the endowment increase from \$55,000 to over \$70,500 today, in part due to a \$10,000 bequest from the estate of Vera Laska. The endowment yields approximately \$3500 a year. Increasing the size of the endowment is critical, as is increasing membership. My last thank you is to all of you who are members of the Weston Historical Society. Your support is essential to our ability to preserve the history of our community.