

THE WESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

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The Isaac Fiske Law Office 'Neath The Elm!

RESTORATION: PERSPIRATION: CONSUMMATION!

OUR NEW HEADQUARTERS

On Monday morning, May 1st, two experienced men, skilled in restoration, started to repair the deteriorated underpinnings of this 170 year old landmark that stands along the Boston Post Road underneath the venerable Burgoyne Elm in Weston. Three Friday afternoons later their work was done, the lawn re-seeded, and two manly scions of the parent elm were brought from their nursery on the Case Estates of the Arnold Arboretum where they had been raised from the sacred seed, and replanted a few feet west of their proud and majestic mother. So "There'll always be a Burgoyne Elm", and it will be interesting to watch the two babies start in our lifetime to emulate the noble example of their mother. May they too for three centuries spread their graceful arms above this historic road.

Now that the exterior of the Law Office has been restored, we members have the exciting and rewarding task of refinishing the interior ourselves and of furnishing it in the character of the early 19th Century office that for so many eventful years witnessed many a transaction between his clients and Mr. Isaac Fiske, great, great grandfather of two of our directors, Brenton Dickson and Harold B. Willis, Jr., seventh generation descendants of one of Weston's oldest families.

Under the supervision of Mr. F. Leslie Ford, a series of consecutive Volunteer Saturdays commencing September 9th will enlist hundreds of our members in the task of refinishing the interior. In each room a card will be displayed to indicate what jobs are required, such as removing wall paper, paint, and stain, refinishing floors and woodwork, applying new wall paper and paint, and certain carpentry and fixture work. While this is happening at the hands of happy volunteers, assignments on the projected bulb garden and grounds will occupy others. The Hospitality Committee promises to supply coffee and doughnuts for the restoration and preservation of energy and enthusiasm.

By Saturday October 1st, a handsome sign reading "Weston Historical Society Headquarters" in old lettering will have been erected in front of the building on the lawn that was seeded May 22nd, and Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Harold G. Travis, co-chairmen of the Refurnishing Committee, will set out with volunteer assistance from the membership to decorate and furnish the interior. A list will be posted of articles that are desired. Already we have a portrait of Isaac Fiske, his original, stand-up desk, a Deacon's Bench for the waiting room, the two Conan Doyle pre-1750 carved oak chairs, an ancient bottle found underneath the chimney recently, and other relics of the restored house's under-pinnings.

A number of small country law offices were erected in Massachusetts during the latter part of the 18th Century, and very few remain. Of similar and simple design, each had a small entrance hall opposite a large central chimney with a single room and fireplace on each side. The Isaac Fiske Law Office was built about 1797 by Artemus Ward who shared it briefly with Alpheus Bigelow who later built his own, a prototype, just across the line in Wayland. Ward took Isaac Fiske, fresh from Law School, as a partner, and when the former left Weston, Fiske became sole proprietor and practised law in Weston for over thirty years. He served as Town Clerk from 1805 to 1826 and was Register of Probate of Middlesex County for a number of years.

Welcome To New Members

It is a pleasure to welcome the following residents of Weston into the Society: Mr. and Mrs. Dick Simms, 17 Loring Road and Mr. and Mrs. Edward W. Coburn, 171 Church Street.

Demand for back copies of "THE BULLETIN", particularly the January and May 1966 issues, has depleted our supply. Please call Mrs. H. Eugene Jones, 899-0177, if you can help us locate extra copies.

It was not until the 22nd of October that General Glover sent a letter from Albany advising his officers "I shall come tomorrow with Gen'l Burgoyne. Expect to be in Worcester in ten days." General Whipple of New Hampshire had been assigned the job of escorting Burgoyne to Boston and there was really no need for General Glover to remain behind. But the glamour of it all went to his head. Burgoyne was entertained at all the fine houses along the way and this appealed greatly to the American General. Although a wit and a brilliant conversationalist, Burgoyne also had his weak moments. Baroness Riedesel, somewhat disgusted with his irresponsibility, writes of an earlier experience when "Burgoyne caroused half the night, . . . hilarious with champagne and caressing the wife of a commissary who was his mistress . . . While (he) was enjoying his champagne and choice food the army suffered the keenest want." All of this seems to be characteristic not only of the military but of certain people in high office to this very day.

On November 4th, Glover in company with Generals Burgoyne and Phillips, overtook Baron Riedesel in Worcester. The Baron had left the Schuyler festivities early and rejoined his German troops at Kinderhook to accompany them on the remainder of the march. They all arrived at "West-town" on the 6th. The British officers went to the Golden Ball Tavern and the Americans to Baldwin's Tavern while the troops and prisoners bivouacked where best they could — many of them in the shelter of the Burgoyne Elm but certainly not all as they numbered in the thousands. Several days elapsed before order and cleanliness could be restored in Weston.

The march from Weston to Cambridge was most unpleasant as it rained incessantly. The wife of a Harvard professor wrote when they arrived "I never had the least idea that creation produced such a sordid set of creatures in human figure. Poor, dirty, emaciated men, great numbers of women who seemed to be the beasts of burthen, having a bushel basket on their back by which they were bent double. The contents seemed to be pots and kettles, various sorts of furniture, children peeping through gridirons and other utensils . . . (and) some very young infants who were born on the road."

What lay behind them was grim — what lay ahead of them hardly any better. Suddenly providing food and quarters for over 3500 prisoners posed a problem of considerable magnitude. The inadequate barracks were dilapidated, unclean and poor protection against the approaching New England winter. Some of the higher officers were given rooms in private houses, but, with sentiment what it was, their life proved to be no bed of roses. Other officers went to Bradish's Tavern and the privates trudged on to their miserable, unfurnished barracks in Somerville where there was a "prodigious scarcity of fuel, insomuch that we were obliged to cut down the rafters of our roof to dry ourselves." As many as six officers were sharing rooms less than twelve feet square with only a pile of straw for a bed, and, said General Burgoyne, "without Distinction of Rank", infinitely more disturbing to his way of thinking than lack of blankets and firewood which he didn't mention in his complaint.

In contrast to these squalid conditions, an elegant dinner was given by General Heath for Burgoyne and some of his officers the day after their arrival in Cambridge. "Before the dinner was done," General Heath wrote, "so great was the curiosity of the citizens of both sexes and all ages and descriptions to get a peep at General Burgoyne, that the streets were filled,

the doors, windows, the tops of houses and fences were crowded." With the population suddenly doubled, the town became overloaded and shortages acute. Even without this extra burden, the food situation was substandard. The streets swarmed with humanity demanding better accommodations and worrying the citizenry no end.

Weston, though it had felt the bad effects of a temporary surge in population during the single night's bivouack, got off easily compared with Cambridge and Somerville where bedlam prevailed for some time.

Brenton H. Dickson

IN MEMORIAM

Until her death on March 15, 1967, Rebecca McKenna, charter member and Archivist of our Society, gave "the last full measure of devotion" to the entire Weston community. Her articulate memories of the good old days, blended with contagious enthusiasm for the preservation of the Town's inherent beauty and history. Her contributions were constant and below we gratefully print the last article she wrote for "The Bulletin" shortly before her death.

Fire-Fighters, circa 1900

At forty cents an hour, the high school boys of more than fifty years ago ably served in the Weston Fire Department. Three young men, John Guthrie and Edward S. Coburn of Kendal Green and Edward C. Green, Jr. of the present Post Road, were among those faithful and intrepid fire fighters, and when, one morning the fire alarm rang, they were at the ready.

Studying in the main room of the High School, they each shot a glance at the principal, Charles M. Eaton, seated on the platform, and at his nod of approval, out they rushed. As soon as the fire was put out the youths trooped back to school, one of them to deep dismay. Up to that day Ed Coburn had had perfect high school attendance, to the boy a matter of pride, and he was hopeful that his temporary absence would not affect his record.

He and Mr. Eaton pondered long, counting the minutes Ed had been present, even squeezing the seconds, and for a fleeting moment it seemed that he was safe, but a final careful count revealed that he had not been present the full half day required, and had to take defeat.

On another occasion he was attending church when the alarm rang once, then twice. He was sitting in the choir loft of the church which had a stairway leading to the street, but, ignoring the stairs, Ed ran to a window beside the organ and, with a push from the boy who pumped the organ, he jumped through the window and leaped to the ground.

When his mother gently chided him for leaving a church service, he said, "But Mother, it was the second alarm and that meant that a dwelling house was on fire, and it might have been our own."

Rebecca McKenna

Ed. Note: Mr. Coburn and Mr. Green are present members of the Weston Historical Society. Mr. Guthrie is no longer living.

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Furnishings for New Headquarters Urgently Needed

As our activity steadily accelerates, many articles that our modest Treasury cannot afford, are sorely needed. Priceless records and valuables should be kept safe and in good condition. We already have a safe generously donated by Merton H. Williams. One other great immediate need is a 4 drawer steel, fireproof file cabinet that can be locked. Does anyone feel inclined and able to contribute at least one? The value of all gifts to the Society is "tax-deductible"! Come fall, we'll have a larger list for the Law Office, but begin thinking now about more display cases, an old fashioned foot scraper for the granite front steps, and anything appropriate for an early 19th Century law office such as quill pens, map of the then current United States of America "West of Dedham", etc., etc., etc. Quickly now, who was President in 1800 and who has a portrait of him?

Extra copies of "THE BULLETIN" are available for 15c. Please contact Mrs. H. Eugene Jones, Editor.