

THE WESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BULLETIN

MARCH 1970, VOL. VI, No. 3



Hour after hour of scraping!

Traditional Charter Anniversary Dinner
Thursday Evening, April Sixteenth
at New Junior High School

This is your only notice

The outstanding event of the Society's program is always its charter anniversary dinner. It will be held on Thursday evening, April 16th, 6:45 p.m. in the dining hall of the new Junior High School. Now is the time to sign up your friends and neighbors. Also we urge you to bring your grown children. History is never ending and as each old timer passes, one by one, our younger citizens will pick up the baton.

Send checks at \$4 per person to Weston Historical Society, Box 343, Weston, Massachusetts 02193 at once to help the committee plan. The deadline is April 9th. This is your *only* notice, so act *now*.

Following the dinner and with no delay, we shall move to the new auditorium across the hall where Mr. David B. Little, noted director of Essex Institute, Salem, will address us on an even more famous anniversary: "AMERICA'S FIRST CENTENNIAL CELEBRATION." Our speaker will be introduced by our fellow member, Stephen J. Riley, who has known him as a contemporary for many years.

In Memoriam

Nov. 21, 1969, Raymond Brewer Bidwell, Charter Member and Donor.

Dec. 27, 1969, Mrs. David M. Kellogg, Sr., Charter Member.

Feb. 8, 1970, Elizabeth Snow Sweet, Director and Charter Life Member.

Feb. 15, 1970, Helen Patterson Wheeler, Charter Member, co-author with Henry W. Patterson of "Around The Cracker Barrel": willing helper on the Isaac Fiske Law Office Restoration.

Feb. 22, 1970, Adelaide Philbrick Sumner, Charter Member and generous donor of many precious photographs and records.

Mar. 7, 1970, Parker Harrison, Charter Member.

At its meeting on Sunday afternoon, February 15th, the Society adopted the following resolution by rising vote and a moment of silence:

Elizabeth Snow Sweet: 1883-1970

"One of Weston's greatest ladies, Elizabeth Snow Sweet, died at the age of eighty-six last Sunday in the home she loved. Her genuine concern for people old and young, and her enthusiasm for beauty in every form, will be cherished and revered by all of us who were privileged to know her. "She reflected a charm that can neither be surpassed nor forgotten. Her enthusiasm for the Town of Weston, — the countless and extensive ways in which she generously contributed to its natural beauty, its friendliness, and its traditions brought her to the highest point of leadership in the hearts and minds of her fellow townsmen.

"We of the Weston Historical Society, herein assembled on this fifteenth day of February in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and seventy, are particularly grateful to this great lady, — a charter life member and director since its inception. The beauty and the fervor and the radiance of her spirit have been an inspiration to us. Her memory will be with us always."

New Members

Since our last Bulletin, we have been pleased to welcome into our membership Mrs. William Albert Gallup, Sr. of 751 Boston Post Road, Mr. and Mrs. Robert F. Norton and Family, 802 Boston Post Road, Mr. and Mrs. John P. Roche of 15 Bay State Road, and Mr. and Mrs. Allard N. Valentine, 396 Glen Road.

Isaac Fiske's Law Office: A Significant Restoration

At the very outset of the nineteenth century, the Isaac Fiske Law Office was built for Mr. Artemus Ward, noted citizen of Weston, a few feet east of Central Cemetery and a few feet west of the historic Burgoyne Elm as pictured in our May 1967 issue and on the front cover of the 1967 Weston Town Report. A number of similar small law offices were erected in Massachusetts at about the same time, but very few remain. Of simple design, this one had a small entrance hall opposite a large central chimney with a single room and fireplace on each side.

Artemus Ward shared his office briefly with Alpheus Bigelow until the latter built a prototype of his own at the Wayland line on the same Boston Post Road. It is now owned and preserved by our fellow members, Miss Joan Simpson and her family. Mr. Ward then took as his partner Mr. Isaac Fiske, fresh from Law School, and when the former left Weston, Fiske became sole proprietor. In the next century and a quarter, it remained in the Fiske family. On June 8, 1928, Mr. Charles H. Fiske, one of Isaac's descendants, sold it to the Town of Weston with a buy-back provision in case no appropriate use by the Town could be found.

Early in the present century, Isaac Fiske's barn had been moved across the street to a point some two hundred feet east of the Law Office where it still houses an upholstery shop and other commercial services. In the same move, the barn's ancient shed became an addition to the law office, doubling the size of the original building. As the ground fell away sharply, it provided an extra room upstairs and down, each with the same southern exposure enjoyed by the rest of the structure.

Being adjacent to the burial ground where Mr. Fiske and his two wives are interred, it served as an office for the Town's Cemetery Department and as a repository for many historical records and relics under the devoted supervision of Miss Gertrude Fiske and Miss Emma Ripley, both members of the Weston Historical Committee for many years. When the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities acquired the Josiah Smith Tavern, the Historical Committee moved its treasures there. Almost simultaneously a temporary housing shortage for veterans returning from World War II was partially relieved by the conversion of the Law Office into living quarters. Plumbing was simple and adequate, but insulation was conspicuous by its absence, and tenants had quite a job keeping warm and healthy.

When in 1965 the last tenant, a widower, died and there was no further call for it by Town veterans or employees, The Weston Historical Society offered to restore and maintain it as its headquarters. On April 27, 1966 a lease was signed at the home of the late Mrs. Homer N. Sweet by Herman Koester, Jr., Chairman of the Selectmen, and Harold G. Travis, President of the Society. Subsequently Mr. F. Leslie Ford was appointed Chairman of Restoration with Mrs. Ford and Mrs. Travis in charge of furnishing it in the character of an early nineteenth century law office.

Where it's a good idea for people to keep their feet on the ground, as the saying goes, this precept doesn't apply to buildings. While the exterior of the Law Office had been kept neatly painted in its original white color and new shingles had made the roof rain-proof, the structure itself, as was true of so many buildings erected in olden times, rested merely on stones that were only "skin deep." Thus, like the rise and ebb of the tide, our little gem annually heaved up and down with the frost. Mr. Ford's early examination filled us all with consternation, for in his report he said:

"The east wall at the front is in very bad shape. Pulling up a board at the first floor level, I discovered a bad case of dry rot in the sill. Also there was serious deterioration in the west wall where the stone wall had been placed directly against the wood siding. With such threatening signs of fundamental seriousness, I have advised that absolutely no work be done until new sills are installed and any other structural repairs that may be exposed as a result are made to make a solid and sound building."

Faced with this situation, the Selectmen promptly arranged with one of our charter members, Mr. Henry F. Wile, to put the building into primary sound condition. It was

fortunate for us and the future that he was available to guide and direct this vital first step in reenforcement, reconstruction, and restoration.

First of all, a four foot trench to guard against frost had to be dug under the entire front perimeter and parts of each side for the installation of a solid cinderblock wall on which the sills were to rest. Most of the clapboards on the front and sides had to be replaced. The old front door has been temporarily stored elsewhere in the hope that some day, despite its deterioration, it too can be restored. Meanwhile a new custom made door, replete with 1805 hinges and the original inside latch, makes a most suitable replacement. The wobbly old wooden steps, thoroughly rotten and actually unsafe, gave way to traditional granite, and flagstones were laid to the street. The lawn was re-sloped and re-seeded and as operations proceeded, we were kept constantly mindful of the factors that relate to authenticity. For example, our landscape advisor kept admonishing the workmen: — "Don't disturb those lilacs: — they're appropriate: — they belong: — they stay." Slowly, steadily, and surely we were learning how big are little things.

Such visible signs of activity at 626 Boston Post Road in Weston created much interest and whetted the appetites of those particularly who wanted to lend a hand to the fascinating undertaking. "Let me know when you're ready for me to go to work" meant a whole lot to those of us who had committed the Society to a project whose scope and size we would not know until we actually got into it. Meanwhile noting that the three century old Burgoyne Elm disclosed symptoms of the dread Dutch Elm disease, we planted two healthy scions of the parent tree alongside of it as a gesture toward its immortality.

It was not until September 1, 1966 that many of us had been inside for more than just a peek. As had our fellow townsmen, we often had admired the quaint compactness of this landmark as we drove along. What a shock we had when we finally started on the long and frustrating road of recovery and restoration!

An empty house, no matter how old, seldom looks attractive, and this indeed was no exception, for what greeted our eyes was pretty grim. Wide gaps of open air could be seen at the baseboards and around the windows. Layers of tin foil that had been tacked on doors and walls gave silent testimony to the struggle to keep warm that had been waged by the occupant. Ugly, well worn linoleum stuck to the floors. The fireplace in the waiting room had been closed with a strip of Masonite. A huge gas heater took up most, it seemed, of the room. When he saw the exposed wires running about the room and into the wall, the Town inspector ripped them out without a second's hesitation.

Ceilings were yellowed and sagging. Window sashes and sills, all painted and repainted in gloomy brown were damp and rotted. The door leading into Isaac's office was partly unhinged. The old wall paper was badly stained. "Before looking at the ell," we said, "we'll see what we can do with these two rooms. They are the original building." Shuddering bravely, we set out to see what a few hours of scraping and sanding could do. At best we hoped to get down far enough to establish a surface smooth enough to apply light tones of paint to brighten up the place. A peek under the linoleum which we decided to retain for the floor's temporary protection, revealed many signs of ants at work through past years. In our cramped quarters we got in each other's way so much that finally we fell into the habit of removing a window frame or inside door and taking it home for work down cellar or in the garage. With each room only ten by eleven feet in floor space, can't you imagine the congestion and confusion? Happily it was accomplished by congenialty and above the din, shouts of "Who took the sandpaper or where's my paint remover?" would rend the air.

Our resolve to leave the rest of the house to the future didn't last long, because the number of volunteers frequently exceeded the capacity of the two main rooms. When such an excess labor supply developed, the extras were pushed into what we called "Step No. 2."

Our next issue will carry a scrape by scrape description of what we found downstairs and what we did about it.

Reminder:

If you are one of those who have not yet paid your annual dues, will you please take care of the matter promptly? The annual statement was mailed to you in October. If you have mislaid it, call Mr. Roy L. Dickson at 899-2450 and he will tell you the amount you owe. Checks should be made payable to Weston Historical Society, Inc. and mailed to P. O. Box 343, Weston, Massachusetts 02193. Payment for the Charter Anniversary Dinner, for annual dues, and for any additional voluntary contributions for the Law Office Restoration, may all be included in one check, indicating in a separate note, the amount for each. Dues and contributions are tax-deductible.

With many of the old guard passing, it is steadily necessary to swell our ranks with new members, so your cooperation will help us keep the Society strong. If you have a new member, phone Mrs. Joseph Stubbs at 899-4245, Membership Chairman, or have check sent to Box 343, Weston. Annual rates are as you know, \$3 single and \$5 family.

"Old-Time New England"

We would like to complete the Society's file of copies of "Old-Time New England," the bulletin of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

If you can help us by supplying old copies of this interesting bulletin, please call Mrs. James E. Fraser at 894-2872.



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Annual Dues: \$3.00 per person, \$5.00 per family

Gift Memberships are suggested

Life Memberships (\$200) are also available

Contributions to the Society are always welcome

Checks should be made payable to Weston Historical Society, Inc.
and sent to P.O. Box 343, Weston 02193

President

Mr. Harold G. Travis

899-4515

Extra copies of the "Bulletin" are available for 25c. Please contact Mrs. Frederick D. Bonner, 893-4346.