

THE WESTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY BULLETIN

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Piano made by Babcock when he was connected with John MacKay. *Nearer My God to Thee* was composed on this piano. It is quite possible that the ivory keys were bleached on the MacKay Farm in Weston. (See *The House That Traveled*).

ADVANCE ANNOUNCEMENT: SAVE APRIL THIRTEENTH

Edward Rowe Snow has been engaged by Mrs. Marshall Dwinnell, Chairman of the Program Committee, to address our Charter Anniversary Dinner on Tuesday evening, April thirteenth, in the Senior High School. In view of the speaker's widespread popularity, we wish to give our members maximum advance notice. Again this year, Mrs. George Pink will be in charge of arrangements and, as usual, it will be an evening of festive fellowship and fine food. Further details will follow in our next bulletin but meanwhile, mark the date and plan to be with us.

A HOUSE THAT TRAVELED

(Continued)

As mentioned in the last installment, the Elisha Jones homestead, or West house, came into the possession of Mrs. Ruth MacKay in 1808. She had a son, John MacKay, a well-to-do businessman in Boston who was associated with Alpheus Babcock in the manufacture of pianos. These pianos were marked "A Babcock for MacKay." One is in the Essex Institute in Salem and it is particularly interesting because it belonged to Lowell Mason who composed the well-known hymn *Nearer My God to Thee* on it.

About 1829 Babcock moved to Philadelphia and MacKay became a partner of Jonas Chickering, a young man whose hand-made pianos had gained a reputation for their superior tonal quality; but production was on a strictly limited basis due to lack of funds. MacKay supplied capital and the firm of Chickering and MacKay was founded. During this association and very possibly earlier, ivory was taken to the MacKay farm in Weston and put on frames in the yard to bleach. In those days there were no chemicals to attain the desired whiteness — only pure spring water and sunshine. It has been said that the water in the MacKay spring had certain properties that enhanced the bleaching process but there is no proof of its having had anything other than purity — a property that nineteenth century Boston water certainly lacked. For years the supply of water in the city wells had been diminishing and what was left was badly contaminated. A proponent of an aqueduct for a new supply from up country wrote, ". . . one specimen which gave three per cent animal and vegetable putrescent matter, was publicly sold as a mineral water; it was believed that water having such a remarkable fetid odor and nauseous taste could be no other than that of a sulfur spring; but its medicinal powers vanished with the discovery that the spring arose from a neighboring drain."

John MacKay inherited the farm when his mother died and he sold it in 1838 with certain restrictions — reserving the right to enter the property and use "the glass house and the land whereon it stands . . . and the right also of erecting another glass house twelve feet square for the bleaching of ivory and the right to rebuild said glass house whenever it may become necessary and reserving the right also . . . of entering upon the premises and using a spring at the southeasterly part of the granary and glass house for the purpose of bleaching ivory." No other person except by MacKay's or his heirs' consent could bleach ivory in the spring and no horses or cattle could drink there except in times of drought.

Philip Mayer, a well-known Boston confectioner who furnished the best families with candy, owned the property for many years after MacKay left and when he sold it, it was with the same restrictions mentioned in the MacKay deed; but in subsequent transfers no such mention is made nor is there any evidence of the spring's being used for bleaching after MacKay's ownership.

MacKay made frequent voyages to South American ports carrying down shiploads of pianos and bringing back mahogany and rosewood for new cases. On the 1841 voyage the ship was lost and apparently MacKay went down with it as he was never heard from again. Chickering bought out the MacKay interest in the firm and it became *Chickering & Son* and continued for many years as an important piano manufacturer.

William Roberts was the next owner of the Elisha Jones property after Philip Mayer and soon after acquiring it he sold it to General Charles J. Paine whose heirs

still own the land but not the old homstead. In the 1880s General Paine decided the house was too small for his needs and he offered it to Charles H. Fiske Esq. who wrote: "he made a free gift of it (the house) to me provided I would move it, which offer I gladly accepted and it then started on its pilgrimage across the fields to the Main road now called Central Avenue; and along this road until it was placed for a short time on land belonging to the heirs of Isaac Fiske." This location was between the present Nichols house and Fiske Lane. Mr. Fiske was dissatisfied with this location and moved it on to Church Street where it stands today. Two piazzas and an ell were added, the chimneys newly built and inside floorings and partitions changed somewhat, but "in general, with these exceptions, the house stands in its grandeur, as it did when I first knew it many years ago."

EDITORIAL

Resources of the Weston Historical Society are both human and financial. The more actively our members pursue our goals, the greater heritage will we leave to oncoming generations. Presently thirty members are surveying the houses, buildings, and sites that lie along the Post Road from Wayland to Waltham. After processing by our local Commission, salient extracts will be submitted to the Massachusetts Historical Commission under whose protection landmarks will be better shielded from destruction. These contributions in talent and time are appreciated as fully as money.

It has often been said of Weston that its greatness springs from the fusion of doers and workers with the generous giving of money by others. The comraderie, naturalness, and smoothness that attend this merging of the town's resources, are as apparent today as in days of yore. Now that there are so many more of us, it is more important than ever that we maintain this tradition of working together. Opportunities are boundless in the townwide scope of our Society's activities. We need and welcome the support of every member and indeed of every family in this exceptional town of ours.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Recent anonymous donations of one hundred and three hundred dollars respectively enabled us to install natural gas heat in our Law Office headquarters. The balance of two hundred dollars came from our treasury. Any member who wishes to contribute to the heating fund may send check to us at Box 343, Weston. Greater use of the law office is now planned, including the gathering of small groups to explore the stories that lie latent in our library there. Their findings should form the basis of discussions that could last for years. Three additional bookcases have been made by Roy L. Dickson and are in use in the upstairs display room.

The endowment fund which recently came only from life memberships has been augmented by the generous bequest of our late director, Mrs. Homer N. Sweet, and by contributions from various members in memory of the late Mrs. Charles P. Gorely, Jr.

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The Weston Historical Society



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