

The Wintonbury Historical Society



Newsletter, January 2000

**Regular Meeting -- February 2, 2000, 7:30 p.m.
Methodist Church (corner School & Wintonbury)
Speaker: Robert Silliman, Former Director of Windsor
Historical Society
Topic: History of Windsor and its Historical Society**

The Southwest District Schoolhouse – Grant Funds Approved!

The roof of the Southwest District School, locally known as the 'stone school' on Simsbury Road, has been granted a stay of execution. Listed on the National Historic Register since 1992, the 1858 fieldstone building has been used for storage of historic artifacts. We can make it more useful!

The owners of the property, the Town of Bloomfield, and the lessees, the Wintonbury Historical Society, banded together in making a successful grant application to the Connecticut Historical Commission, Historic Restoration Fund for the immediate repair and restoration of the dilapidated roof.

Costs for the proposed Phase I exterior work are projected to be about \$36,000. Grant funds of \$18,000 were requested and approved by the Commission! The work will be done this year, completion December 2000.

Phase II of the project is critical: The Wintonbury Historical Society budgeted \$6,000.00 in its Capital Improvement for stabilization and restoration purposes; the Town of Bloomfield budgeted \$6,000.00 for the stabilization work. The balance, \$6,000.00, must be raised through fundraising/private donations/or

a loan.

Please talk to Ed Stanley or Fannie Gabriel about how you can help make this project possible.

Judi Sitkin

Capt. Oliver Filley House Update....

Thanks once again to a very dedicated and loyal crew of volunteers, our work on the restoration of the Filley House is both ongoing and fruitful. "Hats off" to Bruce Hale, Sr., Bruce Hale, Jr., Janis Langston, Sharon Steinberg, Bob Stiles, Judi Sitkin and Rich Dudenhofer for their incredible work - especially in the cold weather - during the last three months.

Since your last update, more discoveries have been made at the old stone house. Original wide floorboards continue to be uncovered on both the first and second floors. Recent removal of plaster in several locations has uncovered sections of old split lath - an early building material indicative of areas which haven't undergone major renovation through the years.

In early December the results of our extensive paint analysis came back from our consultant in Boston, Historic Paint and Architectural Services, Inc. The results themselves will need further analysis, but we now have a good "take" on original paint colors as well as later ones in the house. We now know, for example, that exterior windows and trim were originally painted in an off-white color. Inter-

estingly, paint analysis from the old kitchen area in the east wing shows that this section of the house at one time (probably mid- to late-nineteenth century) had a decorative faux grain paint finish on the woodwork. This would indicate a much more formal use than a kitchen, such as a fancy parlor, and this is evidenced in the original floor-length windows to this room, since shortened in the last century.

Within a few weeks, Phase II of the restoration process will begin on the Filley House.

This will involve demolition and removal of all deteriorated plaster as well as removal of large amounts of interior woodwork. We will accomplish this task with a combination of volunteer labor and professional carpentry assistance. The woodwork, including trim, windows and doors will have to be stored off-site, and currently we are looking for a possible location. If you have any space available or know of any leads on this most urgent need please contact me at 726-9189. And, as always, if you need any additional information on the Filley House or would like to volunteer, please give me a call.

Ed Stanley

Silk at the Filley House?

Our research on the Filley House for the National Register application has uncovered a link to a curious chapter in New England's agricultural history - the silk craze. Letters to Jay Filley, the first resident in the Filley House (and Capt. Oliver Filley's son), show that he was involved in buying and selling, and perhaps raising, Chinese mulberry trees (*Morus multicaulis*). The letters were found among the Filley Papers at the Connecticut Historical Society and show Jay buying several hundred mulberry trees in 1837 from Arnold Cheney of Manchester and then selling trees in 1839 to George Cowles of Farmington. These Filley transactions were just a small part of an extensive silk craze and mulberry tree mania which swept through New England in the 1830's. Countless farmers, such as Jay Filley, succumbed to this speculative movement which crashed in the early 1840's due to several severely cold winters (killing the mulberry trees) and the depression caused by the banking crisis of 1837.

Julia Ann Newberry Filley - Her Gift of Diaries

By Sharon Y. Steinberg

The Capt. Oliver Filley house, the startling and dramatic stone farmhouse set high on a hill on 148 acres on Mountain Avenue, was built in 1834 by Mr. Filley for his son, Jay Humphrey (1810-1883), and Jay's wife, Julia Ann Newberry Filley (1808-1881). Julia wrote in her diaries for many years. The diaries that we know of were written from 1852 to 1878 and are owned by the Connecticut Historical Society. At the end of 1861, Julia wrote:

And so the old year is gone - gone forever and all that is left us is the record of its deeds. Our country's history for the past year has in some respects been a sad one - A terrible rebellion has broken out - which has caused [our] nation great expense - and much bloodshed - and still has it developed our country's resources - as well as the strong and abiding love our people have for free institutions - and a terrible hatred of slavery - which has been the curse of the nation and the cause of our troubles. I believe God is just and that our cause - the sacred cause of human freedom will eventually triumph.

Julia was a homemaker, a devoted mother of three boys (Marcus, Louis, and Albert), a loyal wife, a poet, gardener, herbal healer, quilter spinner, knitter, baker of breads and pies, a strong supporter of temperance, a religious, spiritual woman. She had a sweet, pretty face that held up against enormous odds. She was surrounded by smallpox, dysentery, and lung fever. She experienced the death of her beloved 3-year-old, Marcus, whom she remembered in her diary 18 years later as if it had happened the day before. Her son, Louis, who had been imprisoned in the notorious Andersonville jail, committed suicide.

!O Freedom! A Fine Fundraiser!

!O Freedom!, the fund raiser for the Oliver Filley House held on November 14, 1999, was an unqualified success. Jack Waddell's portrayal of John Wilson, the fugitive slave, was captivating. He held the audience in the palm of his hand from the moment he stepped on stage until his final song, "O Freedom." It was an evening that the Historical Society can be justly proud. Paul Pelletier and his committee who were responsible for this event would like to thank all society and non-society members for their generous support which raised \$7,000 for the Capt. Oliver Filley Restoration Fund which will be matched by the Town of Bloomfield. Paul would also like to take this opportunity to publicly thank the First Congregational Church for allowing us to use the Meeting Room without cost, Browns Greenhouse for the greenery, David Tolley for playing pre-performance music, Larry Wild and John Bigley for lending their expert technical expertise which gave the performance a truly professional touch, Celeste Bancroft for designing the program, Virginia Bell of ACP Associates who was there at the eleventh hour and Mike and Jane Harrison of Sir Speedy who not only did all the printing but gave us a "break." Thank you a!!!

Paul Pelletier

A Letter from John Larson, November 14, 1999

Ladies, gentlemen and members of the Wintonbury Historical Society: I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the kind invitation extended to me from you and Ms Virginia Hallisey and Paul Pelletier to attend this evening's event. [!O Freedom!] Although I cannot be with you due to family commitments, this is indeed a most important night in theater. Having

been a history teacher myself, I am acutely aware of how critical it is to preserve our struggles, the struggles and perseverance of the spirit of John W. Jones and present them to the next generation so they can learn from our past. Some of the most talented people in CT and this area are here tonight to do just that. So again, thank you, and best wishes for a most entertaining and informative evening as you view this recounting of John W. Jones' flight for freedom.

Sincerely, signed/ John B. Larson -
Member of Congress

Message from Fannie Gabriel, President:

The energy which is being offered, on all levels, in the name of the Society, is amazing. As has been true since April, there has been a Saturday morning crew hard at work at Phase I of the restoration as the Filley House moves into Phase II. Some of our new members are already doing yeoman service. I must mention the time and effort being expended by Ed for the Stone School House and the Filley House. After our great program in November by Fred on the Brown Drums, his brain is whirling with more ideas for programs.

My thanks to Sharon Steinberg for "doing this newsletter."

Fannie Gabriel, President

It is with deep regret that we note the passing of two of Bloomfield's solid citizens - Dr. McCrann and Rev. Metzger.

**New members (some have already been giving volunteer service):
Richard Dudenhofer, Sharon Steinberg, Robert and Toni Stiles, William and Elizabeth Treiber, Sarah Butler, Anita Guyton, Alfred and Marion Thacher, Elizabeth Brooks, Elizabeth Manternach, Donald Engley - Welcome All!**

The 25 books from 1852 to 1878 reveal a farm wife who lived through the Civil War, dealt with snowstorms, rode by sleigh (which she loved), witnessed the sicknesses of friends (whom she often healed with her potions), and juggled family, housework and religious obligations, always writing every day in her diary.

She relates to us some of her winter days, harsher than ours:

February 8, 1861

This morning thermometer marked 18 degrees below zero. I've found everything (almost) frozin [sic] up this morning, although we took uncommon precautions to prevent it – my plants froze in the sitting room by a coal fire

January 24, 1857

The coldest day we have had for twenty years or more. Thermometer this morning stood at 23 degrees below zero. Have hard work to keep warm, and prevent everything from freezing up. But I trust I am thankful for food, fire, & shelter.

Her culinary skills and household responsibilities shine through her descriptions of daily activities:

January 19, 1861

Baking bread – mince pies – cooking dough nuts &c – with getting dinner – altogether have kept me busy – with my hands – and my head with contriving. Twelve mouths to fill – besides washing – ironing and making clothes – I wonder how I do it.

Her diaries are filled with herbal remedies for smallpox, cholera, and other diseases, as well as pressings of many flowers and plants:

January 22, 1861

Very cold – Busy ironing all the morning, this P.M. hope to sew a little. Called to see Mrs. Hibbard who is unwell and gave her some medicine.

Scarlet Fever is about and am fearful it will spread. May heaven preserve us from this scourge of children.

February 5, 1861

Mr. Filley and I went to Windsor Locks in a sleigh – the best sleigh ride I have had in a long time – although in coming home across the plains we wandered out of the way – as there was no track....

With a poet's eye, Julia recorded winter beauty:

February 1, 1857

The trees are sparkling with countless diamonds and the snow is crusted beautifully....

Julia Ann Newberry Filley wanted to be remembered in this way, in her words:

February 6, 1861

...Happy will it be for me – if at last it may be said of me, "she hath done what she could." "Tis sweet to toil for those we love."

We are fortunate indeed for her gift of diaries, of her daily writing, and we ask her forgiveness if we intrude on her private thoughts. We give her a bit of immortality in return.

Julia's diaries are being transcribed by Sharon Steinberg, member of the Wintonbury Historical Society, and retain their original spellings and punctuations. This is the first in a series of articles about the diaries and Filley family histories. You are invited to submit an article. Excerpts of the diaries are reprinted with the kind permission of The Connecticut Historical Society.